

COMING TO AMERICA

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They left upon a raft constructed from wooden doors, inner tubes, canvas, and oil drums, held together with bits of twine and wire and plastic. Friends and family stood on the shore, blessing them with prayers to the Virgin of the Sea, while watching them, the brave (perhaps foolish) balseros paddle away at dusk, with the intention to make it to America. They were leaving their island nation behind—a country torn apart by politics and poverty, where they had lived in slums, in trash (in fear!), where they had been regarded as mere dogs. There were eight adults aboard the raft—men and women—along with two small children. (It was forbidden to take children on the dangerous journey, but their parents had no intention of leaving them behind. Not even with relatives. The pain of separation would be too much for parent and child, alike.)

They drifted across the Florida Straits, being tossed about by waves whipped up by high winds, and when it wasn't stormy, there was the threat of the sun during the day, beating down upon their bodies, drying out their skin. They had taken few provisions. There was no room on a raft to store many items. Besides, it was only a three day's journey by raft from Havana to Miami. What little food they had, they rationed, and what little they ate often came back up, as their stomachs could not take the jostling motion of their watercraft upon the waves, the continual undulation, a perpetual cycle with no apparent end. They wept. They cursed the government of their homeland. They cursed the elements and the Divine. They cursed one another. They wept again.

What will it be like to live in America? (It was a question asked by one of the children, interrupting the adults' lament.) One had to wonder. Somebody spoke up and answered, and then others added their opinions. In America, they would have beautiful homes with rooms for each family member and friend, and there would be pantries filled with food, and they would have green lawns and gardens overflowing with colorful flowers. In America, all of the adults would have jobs, owning their own businesses, restaurants, salons, and clothing stores, attracting patrons from all around. In America, their children would grow up to be movie stars, professional soccer players, and government leaders, maybe even *El Presidente de los Estados Unidos*. In America, they would all drive big automobiles with the wind blowing through their hair as pedestrians smiled and waved at them, calling out greetings. In America, they would each have a telephone, and they would be able to look up the names and numbers of former friends and neighbors who had preceded them across the sea. (Surely they had made it safely across. No?) In America, they would be able to sleep peacefully at night, not worrying about the next day. Such was life in America; such

would life be for them, as well. These were the thoughts that filled their minds and poured out as speech upon their lips, encouraging one another as they clung to the sides of their raft, watching dolphins break the surface of the water and seabirds swoop and call overhead.

On the sixth night, they spotted a luxury cruise ship brilliantly lit up, moving across the horizon, and, not knowing at first what they were seeing (for it was far off, and they were weak from hunger), they began to formulate theories, saying that it was the shoreline of Miami, or the ancient lost city of Atlantis, floating upon the surface like a ghost civilization, or a vision of Heaven opening its gates to collect their souls. Eventually they realized that it was a ship, but it was too far off to rescue them.

The following day, the raft failed. Its fastenings came undone upon the choppy sea, causing it to break apart and dump bodies into the water. Everyone panicked and splashed about in the water. Two of the men could not swim and immediately sank into the depths. One of the children floated away, appearing like a doll riding up and down the waves, screaming for its mother.

In the end, a remnant survived, pulled from the sea by the U.S. Coast Guard, upon whose boat they huddled together—wet, dehydrated, frightened, and safe—speaking frantically in their native language to anyone who would listen of their plight, how the waves divided them, and how they witnessed loved ones either drift away or become torn apart by sharks, as if they were nothing but refuse borne upon the waves.



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