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Operation Peter Pan offered Cuban refugee kids a home in Colorado, but life was no fairy tale

Matthew Schniper

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Hector Diaz wears reading glasses over his soft greenish-brown eyes to prepare *café con leche* in his kitchen, as salsa music pulses in from the dining area. Medium-framed with short salt-and-pepper hair and a mustache, the 64-year-old boasts that he's been drinking coffee since age 5.

He energetically whisks three teaspoons of sugar into the first muddy froth of Café Bustelo crema to rise from a stovetop Moka pot. Once the remainder percolates, he aerates warmed evaporated milk with the mesh plunger of a French press, combining the ingredients. The resulting *cortadito*, just a bit larger than an espresso shot, drinks thick, sweet and strong, embodying the stereotypical Latin-American persona.

Seated in front of a small service bar decorated with a joint display of mini U.S. and Cuban flags, he's eager to hear about my recent travels to Cuba, where I bounced from the crumbling-but-still-scenic façades of Havana to the largely unmechanized tobacco-growing countryside and a gorgeous coastal colonial Spanish port.

But I'm here to learn more about Hector's story and his Cuba, which he began telling me about a few days prior, when I phoned him to learn more about his family's food truck, called Lucy I'm Home. Our conversation quickly turned from talk of his *mojo* recipe and a baker who custom makes his Cuban-style bread, to Hector fleeing Cuba as a boy.

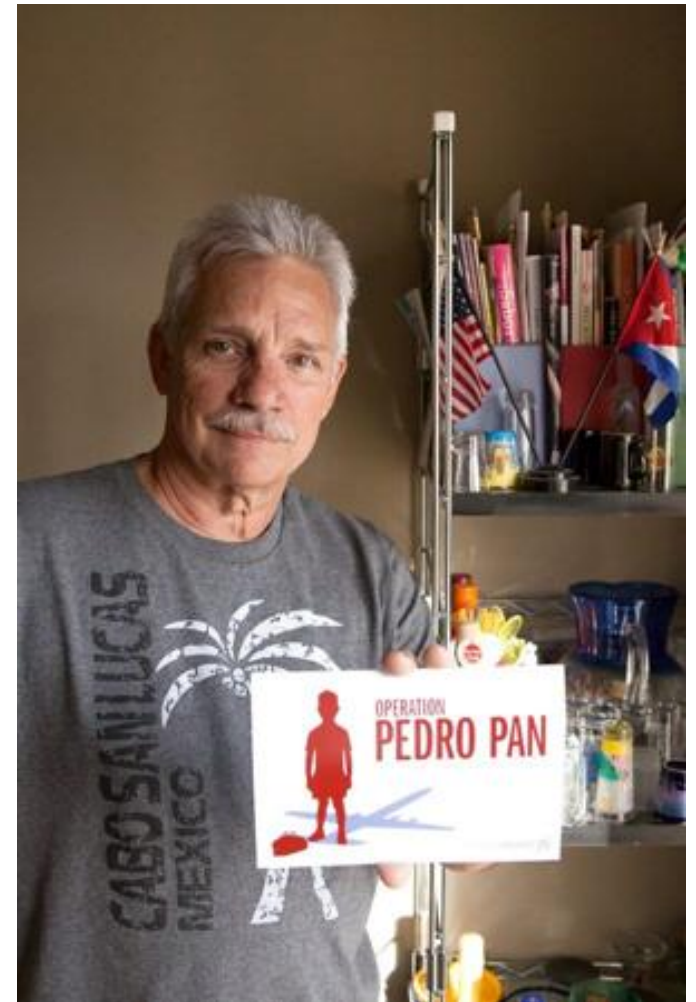
I haven't stopped thinking about him since, wrestling with one particular question he posed during that conversation: "It's post-revolution Cuba and children are being brainwashed, indoctrinated and conscripted into a brutal regime. Would you send your kids away to a safe haven with the possibility you may never see them again? Or do you keep them with you to live a life of misery?"

Hector's parents were forced to make that decision, turning him and his sister, Ada, into refugees at the young ages of 10 and 11, respectively. His question weighed on me as a recent witness to the clash of communism and consumerism resulting from the thaw in U.S.-Cuba relations.

Like many Cuban-Americans, Hector and Ada blame the Castro regime for tearing apart their family and their homeland, causing irreparable harm that haunts them still. As the island opens to American tourism and international business, the fact remains that many of those dollars will end up in the hands of the same dictatorship Hector and Ada fled — one that continues to imprison dissidents and ignore many human rights. Even for those travelers who attempt to leave the lightest footprint, the moral ambiguity remains unavoidable.

For his part, Hector isn't looking to ruin anyone's vacation. He simply wants people to understand that history before they're overwhelmed with Che Guevara iconography and communist propaganda.

From Paris Hilton's visit last year to the Rolling Stones and President Obama's more recent trips, the new chapter of Cuban-American history is being written right now, as the embargo weakens.



Hector Diaz displays a postcard from the Miami museum exhibit in which he was featured.

Matthew Schniper



Propaganda inside Havana's Museum of the Revolution.

Matthew Schniper

The covert operation that delivered Hector and Ada to the U.S. at the height of the Cold War figures into a less-publicized chapter of that history, far from the beach paradise many Americans daydream of today, both figuratively and literally. It's also a chapter of local history, and how dozens of Cuban refugees like Hector and Ada came to claim Colorado as their new home.

It turned out, being smuggled to a "better" place wasn't without its own misery.

Hector Diaz Jr. was born in 1951, to 51-year-old Hector Sr. and 33-year-old Hilda, a policeman's daughter who had to abandon her education as a young teenager to help support herself and her 10 siblings. She was "beautiful and voluptuous," says Ada, and her father was a socialite and a playboy. Born into affluence, Hector Sr. worked in banking and real estate with his brother. He owned a ferry boat called the Juragua, which toured Cienfuegos Bay, connected to the southern-coast port city of Cienfuegos, where the Diaz family lived.

"Anyone that grew up in Cuba in that era knew my dad's boat," says Hector Jr., fondly recalling how he'd steer its giant wheel and tug a rope that made the steam engine's horn blast.

Despite the dictatorship of President Fulgencio Batista, Ada says the 1950s in Cuba were "great days; for us kids it was like heaven. Dad was well known; all we had to do was go in a restaurant and say, 'Put it on my dad's tab.'"



Hector and Ada with Hector Sr., in Cuba.
Courtesy Hector Diaz



Ada and Hector with their mother, pre-departure.

Courtesy Hector Diaz



Hector the jokester (right) goes as Fidel Castro one Halloween.

Courtesy Hector Diaz



A boy's life at Pueblo's Sacred Heart Orphanage.

Courtesy Ada Diaz



Eulalio, Ada and Hector today — still inseparable.

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Hector helps his daughter Elyse with the food truck.

Matthew Schniper

Soon after Hector Jr. was born, Hector Sr. and Hilda divorced, and the Diaz children went to live with Hilda. She remarried another much-older man named Eulalio, an engineer in a sugarcane factory, and at age 41, she gave birth to another son, named for his father but called by his nickname, "Lallito."

Like many fed up with Batista's corrupt, American-mafia-connected regime, Hector Sr. initially supported Fidel Castro's revolutionaries, believing in their promises to support "the people."

After the revolution, in 1959, Castro shunned elections and instead appointed himself president. His communist government seized Hector Sr.'s boat, land and business assets. He still had his home, though he was told he may have to share it with others, who would be chosen by the government. Castro's regime also changed the currency, rendering cash savings worthless, and issued monthly ration cards for food.

Neighbors turned into informants, reporting to Cuba's G2 spy agency.

One day at a bus stop, 10-year-old Ada and 9-year-old Hector were approached by a young man who engaged her in conversation about the revolution, which her father had warned them never to discuss with anyone. Just a child, she couldn't resist, even when he inquired specifically about her father.

Soon after, Hector Sr. disappeared. For days, Ada believed she'd gotten him killed, as she and Hector frantically searched the streets and inquired with police. He finally surfaced: He had been briefly incarcerated after his loyalty to Castro's government was called into question.

In order to avoid the new communist schools, the kids attended classes in secret in the house of a former teacher, where they had to avoid being followed. Even back then, Hector and Ada were protective of each other. When Ada got her first kiss from a 13-year-old militia boy named Birgilio, who carried a rifle, Hector promptly hit him over the head with a stick.

Hector Sr. did not want his children to grow up in such an environment. Ever since the *barbudos* (bearded men) had rolled into Cienfuegos on tanks, he and Hilda had seen their children exposed to too much turbulence and danger. Hector and his friends collected bullet shells off the streets, gambling with them in games of marbles. They couldn't help but be excited by the occasional clatter of gunfire.

In April 1961, Cuban exiles backed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency aimed to overthrow Castro, bombing Cuban airfields in the Bay of Pigs invasion.

Hector and Ada were living in a suburb called Tulipán, close to the airport. Hector recalls biking back from a friend's house, suddenly falling off as the first blast concussions reached him.

At home, Hilda put the children in a closet, covering the door with a mattress. They escaped to a window to watch planes rumble over and bombs rain just over the horizon. Hilda, known as the neighborhood healer (her Catholicism was spiked with superstitious bits of Santería), was so unnerved, she risked running out to her garden to pick calming herbs for tea as the ground trembled and windows shattered nearby. Eulalio screamed at her to come back inside.

Cuba's situation further deteriorated. Since early 1959, as many as 200 Cuban refugees began arriving daily in Miami. They initially included the wealthy and former government affiliates fearing reprisals. But starting in late December 1960, unaccompanied children also began to flee — some were the children of resistance members, who feared their kids would be used as hostages or spies against them.

Parents heard their kids parrot propaganda from the radio and saw them join government youth groups like the Rebel Pioneers. The parents were afraid of what indoctrination would bring, recalling personal memories from the Spanish Civil War a few decades prior, when fascist ideologies were thrust upon the youth.

Also, rumors were circulating regarding *patria potestad*, the loss of parental rights. Ostensibly, they were to be sent to state day care centers after age 3. Rumors persisted that orphanages had been emptied, with kids sent to Russia, and that mothers elsewhere had signed "kill pacts" rather than turn their children over to the revolutionaries. Castro called

all of it disinformation spread by the underground and the CIA in an attempt to discredit him.

Parents were not assuaged, so they forced themselves to do the unthinkable. They would have left with their kids if they could have, but many lacked visas. Others hoped not to forfeit land and homes, or were caring for an aging or sick family member. Some waited for the release of relatives being held as political prisoners. Eulalio wouldn't permit Hilda and their son to leave. Still hopeful for the regime's reforms, and a communist since his youth, he "didn't live long enough to see it fail," says Lallito, who at age 6 lost his 75-year-old father.

Hector Sr.'s high-profile status and outspoken nature prevented him from obtaining a visa. But through his contacts, he discovered a way to get Ada and Hector out.

Hector and Ada were just two of the 14,000 unaccompanied minors who fled Cuba between Dec. 26, 1960, and the Cuban Missile Crisis, in October 1962. This particular migration, organized largely by Miami's Catholic Welfare Bureau (CWB), involved aid agencies across 35 states plus intervention from the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations. Hundreds of people in the U.S. and Cuba, but also Jamaica and elsewhere, colluded to help these children.

The clandestine operation was called *Operación Pedro Pan*, or Operation Peter Pan, and executive director of the CWB, Monsignor Bryan O. Walsh, played the key facilitating roll. Not unlike some of the scenes playing out today with Syrians arriving on Greece's shores, Walsh in his day witnessed an increasing humanitarian crisis on Miami's streets.

He was moved to act in mid-November 1960, when a Cuban man introduced him to a 15-year-old boy, Pedro. The boy had been passed hopelessly between relatives unable to care for him because of their own plight, and he'd lost 20 pounds within his first month in the U.S. It reminded Walsh of 1930s Europe, when Jewish children were smuggled out of Nazi Germany to foster care in England and elsewhere. And he knew, as he wrote in a retrospective in 1971, those children "were going into a new adult world where almost everything would be strange and new, including the language."

A month later, Walsh met James Baker, who served as headmaster at an American school in Havana. Brought into the fold, Baker became the point person in Cuba to help get children out, while Walsh quickly scrambled to build a network of residential facilities, schoolhouses and ultimately foster homes for the children who arrived. The CWB, after accumulating nearly \$100,000 in debt, eventually received promised government funds. But the actual transport of Pedro Pans was financed by private donations, some from American companies who'd been kicked out of Cuba.

In order to shield the surreptitious activity from Castro's government, the CWB turned donations into private checks to Miami citizens, who then wrote personal checks for airline fares to the W. Henry Smith Travel Agency in Havana, run by the executive secretary of the American Chamber of Commerce of Cuba. The American Embassy in Havana issued student visas and allowed Walsh and Baker to correspond in diplomatic pouches for security.

At the time, Walsh thought the operation might help 200 children. A multitude of complicating factors posed problems at every turn. Walsh had reached out to Miami-Dade County for vacant buildings, including one formerly used for "dependent and delinquent negro children" (a reminder of that era's Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. — that some of its own children lacked full freedoms).

Walsh persuaded Catholic boarding schools to help with short-term lodging, and summer camps donated beds and equipment not in use. International crisis aside, the health, fire, zoning and building departments all had to be satisfied. "We knew that we could fall back on the more than 130 Catholic Charities agencies throughout the rest of the country, Walsh wrote, "without which it would have been utmost folly to attempt what we did."

In mid-October 1961, Hector Sr. received a telegram from Havana giving him three days' notice to shuttle his kids there for a flight to the U.S. The children knew they were leaving, but felt a sense of adventure, Ada says, more than fear. When Hector's friends talked about him going to the U.S., he didn't really know where it was. "To me, it was just somewhere out in the world," he says.

Readying for their departure, Hilda took them shopping for duffel bags, commonly called *gusanos* because of their long shape, which also became the derogatory name for the refugees and anyone anti-Castro. Being called a *gusano* was like being called a worm or a traitor. The kids were allowed to pack only clothes.

The morning Hector Sr. arrived to make the 150-mile drive north, Hilda dressed Hector in a suit, scolding him not to dirty it. Ada put on one of her nice dresses, with her name embroidered at the collarbone, and waited at a window overlooking the street. Her dad always parked several houses away and honked, as he and Eulalio weren't friendly.

When they finally heard that horn, Ada says Hilda "clung to Hector for dear life, sobbing and screaming. My stepfather had to pull her off of him. She was very attached to him." At that moment, the reality of the situation finally dawned on the children.

In Havana they stayed at what's now called the Hotel Habana Libre, the former Habana Hilton seized by the government a year prior. Famously, Fidel made a top-level suite there his headquarters after first seizing control. (The hotel's mid-century-modern furnishings still look the same today, giving Cuba part of its "stuck in time" vibe along with all the old classic Ford and Chevy cars.)

Once at the airport, Hector pulled each child aside separately, instructing Hector to take care of his older sister — that he was the man now. He told Ada to make sure not to get separated once they arrived in the U.S. and also to keep Hector from crying.

The children were ushered into *la pecera*, the fishbowl, a processing room enclosed on all sides by glass. Hector was commanded to silence in the fishbowl, where the two languished for eight hours before being released toward a Pan American flight. (Years later, as a grown man, Hector will see a replica of this room at a museum exhibition in Miami and be so moved he cannot speak.) Authorities rifled through their bags, searching for valuables. Their hair was combed through, as women had previously tried to hide jewelry inside braids. Some resorted to swallowing their wedding rings. Militiamen interrogated the children, one asking, "What do your parents say about Fidel?" Ada replied, "nothing," as instructed by her father. She had learned her lesson about keeping quiet.

Most of the other children cried, but Hector held out until the very end, angering Ada because she thought her dad would be mad at her for it. Those lucky enough to find paper scribbled notes and held them to the glass. Mothers, sons, fathers and daughters matched hands on both sides of the windows. Hector Sr. assured his children the family would be reunited in a matter of months. He believed the regime would fall in a short time.

The American and Cuban operatives corresponded as little as possible throughout 1961 and '62 to protect Operación Pedro Pan, so CWB never knew how many, if any, children were to arrive in Miami on a given day. A calculated trickle turned into more than a dozen daily, some routed through Catholic social services in Kingston, Jamaica. Those kids traveled on British-issued visas after the U.S. severed diplomatic ties with Cuba and abandoned its embassy in January 1961. Before Baker fled Cuba, believing he was under secret police surveillance, he headed to the U.S. embassy, as the staff scrambled to burn documents. They allowed Baker to stamp the last 25 Pedro Pan visas ever issued.

"No longer were we simply a social agency concerned about a community program," wrote Walsh. "We were now sharing the worries of families we did not even know, hundreds of miles away in a life and death struggle in the Cold War. ... We were beginning to feel that we were really involved in an international intrigue."

Cubans had no way to obtain American visas, so the State Department made a special visa-waiver allowance for Pedro Pans between ages 6 and 16. Baker left behind a trusted network to facilitate the children's departures, and presumably it is some member of this group who eventually spoke with Hector Sr., though those details remain vague to Hector and Ada today.

That furtiveness, inherent to the operation, made it difficult initially to elicit support Stateside from other welfare agencies without potentially compromising the effort. Walsh opted not to speak of it publicly at a national resettlement conference he hosted a month after the Pedros began arriving; instead he spoke with Catholic diocese directors one-on-one. He also managed to keep the press from reporting about Pedro Pans until March 1962, indicating "the less that was said, the better."

Other states began receiving Pedros and sharing the burden, and the kids continued to arrive daily from Cuba, as predicted. But even Walsh was surprised that the program endured nearly two more years: "We were pretty sure that sooner or later the Cuban authorities would discover what was going on, and put a stop to the exodus."

The Cuban Missile Crisis eventually forced a conclusion to *Operación Pedro Pan*, "but the work of caring for Cuban children was to go on for many years," wrote Walsh. Freedom Flights organized between the U.S. and Cuba in late 1965 reunited a majority of Pedros with their parents within the first six months of that program — the flight allowances were partly in response to the perilous boat journeys to Miami many Cubans were attempting. And children continued to arrive in Miami via other methods of transport, even as Walsh was writing in 1971, with 165 Pedros still in CWB's care.

When Ada and Hector arrived in Miami, nobody greeted them at the gate, so they wandered a terminal until a security guard noticed them, eventually connecting them with a CWB employee named Jorge, who was late arriving due to car trouble. The siblings stayed in Miami for three months before flying to Colorado, to the Catholic Charities-run Sacred Heart Orphanage in Pueblo. Boys and girls were separated, roughly 40 on each side of the facility, and Hector and Ada were allowed only brief weekly visits, though sometimes they caught one another in a hallway or the recess yard.

"It was just like *Lord of the Flies*," Hector says, noting tensions with the Mexican-American and Anglo children. Walsh knew that would be "where our first cultural clash would occur," having discussed at length with Baker "rules and discipline, Cuban customs of child-rearing, and the type and use of punishments and sanctions."

Hector learned that comedy can often divert a fight, but the jokester more frequently got in trouble with the overseers, consequently. Hector was smaller and needed protection. Luckily the Cubans had a couple bigger kids, including twin brothers who knew how to box. (They were the older brothers of Guillermo "Bill" Vidal, who served as mayor of Denver after John Hickenlooper became governor in 2011. Hector and Ada are mentioned in his 2007 book, *Boxing for Cuba*, in a scene where the Pedro Pans meet Robert F. Kennedy en route to Pueblo from Miami.)

Sometimes when a big fight broke out at Sacred Heart, a caretaker and woodworker named Jim, who carried a belt in his hands and custom-made paddles for the nuns, brought out boxing gloves to let the kids work it out. One night, Hector and a boy named Herbert were caught fighting before bedtime. Jim severely lashed them, even across their faces, before locking them overnight, pants-less, in a coat closet so cramped they could not sit down. "He said, 'If you guys wanna fight you can fight it out in there,'" says Hector. "So, obviously, we became friends."

Ada didn't have it any easier. If she made a mistake on a math problem at the blackboard, she was slapped across the legs with a stick. At one point she was beaten on her back with a ping pong paddle.

Not only were the Pedro Pans unable to speak English, but they were prohibited from speaking Spanish, forcing assimilation. The hardships felt all the more traumatic because many of them came from comfortable backgrounds, and knew loving homes, compassion and tolerance.

"We were brought up to be free spirits," says Ada. "The orphanage was more difficult for us because we were a little defiant; we challenged authority — especially Hector."

Capturing a cruel irony, Hector asks, "Who could we complain to? As Cubans, we had nobody to seek asylum with from these people." They were refugees unable to find a secondary refuge, and they didn't have the heart to tell their parents about the treatment in their letters home, which were screened anyway. While the fictional Peter Pan lives on in pop culture as an eternally youthful boy adventuring on an island, Pedro Pan kids were by contrast shipped off their island and forced to grow up quickly.

[image-6] **Four-and-a-half years ticked** by painfully slow at Sacred Heart. Hector sometimes ventured to the chapel alone, praying for his parents to come. "After time," he says, "I lost faith in God. It has never been restored."

He recalls walking in a nightly procession down a hallway between the lavatory and dormitory, stealing glances out of overhead windows, searching for the moon. Often it shined between a cluster of tall pines and Dutch elms planted in the cemetery, beyond the rectory.

He'd wonder if his parents were looking at it too: "As well as an impressionable mind can figure, if I did this every night, looking at the moon at the same time from Cuba and the United States would be the only connection a boy could have with his mother and father, which he thought he would probably never see again."

After those four-and-a-half years at Sacred Heart, Ada and Hector moved through a series of boys-and-girls' and foster homes along the Front Range. For two years, they lived in Center, in the San Luis Valley. Their host parents told Hector to go by the name Mark, saying he wouldn't be discriminated against as much because it sounded less Hispanic.

Outside of school hours, in order to pay for their own toiletries and clothing, the children worked in the fields, alongside Mexican immigrants, who called them gringos because of their lighter skin. Later, when Hector tried to date Anglo girls, their parents said no because they assumed him to be Mexican. "I'm thinking, 'What the hell am I?'" he says.

Ada had an easier time passing between the segregated town's divide, dating both white and Hispanic (though later in her professional career in Denver she experienced discrimination, being told her accent was "unprofessional.")

Though a momma's boy as a smaller child, Hector most regretted the absence of his father during this period of his adolescence. His friends' dads took them fishing and to sports games, and taught them about car engines, and proffered advice. "I just wanted my dad to be here, to be like everybody else," he says.

As they moved through the system, the two mostly managed to stay together until Hector was moved to Denver. He'd hitchhike down to Pueblo until his social worker would drag him back to his foster home. "We were like magnets," Ada says. "Wherever you put us, we'd figure out how to come together."

[image-7] When Ada was a senior in high school in Pueblo, she abandoned her final foster home, sleeping in the back of her boyfriend's '57 Chevy before finding an unheated basement room to rent with a friend. She slept with her shampoo and toothpaste under her pillow so it wouldn't freeze. She made rent shoveling snow and collecting pop bottles.

Back in Cuba, the Cuban government continuously denied Hector Sr.'s requests to leave. After Eulalio Sr.'s death in August 1966, Hilda applied to leave the country. Like most Cubans, she struggled to get by, but she learned to be resourceful in the black market, says Ada. As five years ticked by, Hilda found a new love interest who helped take care of her and Lallito. She told the man not to get attached, however. She would break his heart once she was allowed to leave.

When she was finally granted that permission, government officials seized her possessions and played games, telling her to report to Havana for processing, only to send her back home after standing in line all day. Once, they told her it was because her nylons weren't presentable, with rips in the fabric.

Hilda and Lallito spent days in government barracks, "like a boot camp," he says, waking each day at 5 a.m. to see if their names would be called.

Finally, in fall 1971, Hilda and Lallito reached Pueblo with nothing but clothes to their names. Hilda had last seen Ada, now 21, and Hector, 20, as children 10 years prior. They'd heard their mom's voice only twice, by phone briefly, during that entire decade apart.

"I remember having conflicting feelings," says Hector. "Here was the person who nurtured me the first 10 years of my life, but was absent for the next 10. I was worried I wouldn't recognize her. We hugged tightly. Although I could feel the bond of mother and son, it was like she was a stranger. But, as time passed, it was like we were never separated."

Ada says Hilda wished to pick up right where they all left off, but she and Hector had grown so independent — they didn't really need their mother in the same way. Plus, they'd largely lost their fluency in Spanish, finding it difficult at times to speak with Hilda. They learned that she'd had a nervous breakdown as soon as they'd left, preceding a depression. That sadness shifted once she experienced her own culture shock in the U.S., missing all of her friends and the positive aspects of the only country she'd ever known.

"She's only here for us," Hector would say.

Lallito, who has no memories of his sister carrying him around like a doll, says the reunion "wasn't like meeting new people; it was as if I'd known them all along. I never felt like an outsider. They do have something I can't share ... the fact that I had my mom was pretty much all I needed. I can't imagine what they went through without having that."

Together again, Ada helped support Hilda and Lallito, moving them into a rental apartment. She found her mom work cleaning houses and sewing, and for a time welfare checks filled in the gaps. Ada acted as Lallito's father and disciplinarian. He struggled to learn English, but because he was ahead of his American classmates in math, he was able to focus on the language more. Despite "getting the revolution beat into your mind, with limited history before 1959," Lallito says he received a good early education. As for the propaganda, "I knew it was bullshit, even as a kid."

With Hilda now reunited, a despondent Hector Sr. wrote a letter to his son in winter 1971. It read: "Never have I lived worse than now. I worked to better myself in my youth so when I reached this age I could live restfully in the company of my family and my children, but what happened, happened, and now I am old, sick and I don't have any possessions. I live totally alone and they don't allow me to be reunited with my family. I have had to allow myself a renewed patience and endurance so I will not perish. It is inexplicable that as of this date they have not allowed me to leave here, but I have not lost faith. Everything arrives in due time. ... Give my love to everyone there and I send you a bone breaking hug with all of the affection of your father who will never forget you."

In 1973, 12 years after he'd left his children in the fishbowl, Hector Sr. finally left Cuba, bound for the U.S. To this day it's not clear why the government allowed him to leave after all that time. But all of his longing and love wouldn't be enough to prevent him from feeling some amount of scorn upon his own arrival in Pueblo. He was proud of his daughter, but his son hadn't grown into a man as respectable as he himself was, before the revolution.

Hector, by his own account, was "caught up" in the peace-love-and-drugs hippie era, dropping out in his first year at the University of Northern Colorado. He was working odd jobs, abandoning early plans to be a Spanish teacher and coach. "My dad was disappointed in me, and made it well known. I knew I'd failed him."

The two Hectors made attempts to resolve the coldness between them, but when Hector Jr. would visit, his father would lecture him about finishing his education and force unsolicited advice. "It was a status thing for my dad," says Ada. "All of his friends' kids became engineers and doctors and he didn't quite get it. We'd raised ourselves. I don't think he gave us a lot of credit for that."

Even then, Hector and Ada opted not to tell their parents about all the abuse in the orphanage. Ada says they might have started to tell them at one point, but recalls them not being open to hearing it. "He and my mom were so deep in their own struggles, they thought they'd done right by us, and were convinced we were well-off in the U.S., that we were well taken care of. It's what they needed to believe. And in the end, we were taken care of. They did make the right decision."

Ada moved Hector Sr. into a one-room garage apartment behind Hilda's house; he often came into the main house for coffee and convivial conversation. Hilda adjusted to her new life, but remained "highly emotional," says Ada. When she'd run into women with children in public, she'd begin crying. Even time spent with her own grandkids later would make her anxious, all of it reminding her of the time lost with Ada and Hector.

The year after Hector Sr. arrived, Hilda, then in her 60s, she fell in love with a decorated Mexican-American World War II veteran named Ysmel Valenzuela, who lifted the family out of poverty. "He's the greatest thing that ever happened to us," says Lallito.

It wasn't until nearly five years after Hector Sr. arrived that Hector Jr. found firmer footing and felt finally able to speak to his father with a sense of pride. He was working as a counselor in a boy's home in Denver, one in which he formerly lived as a Pedro Pan. He was married with his first child, a little boy. The ice broke, but a full thaw took more time.

One day Jr. called Sr., appealing for a fresh start, citing his recent successes. Sr. said, "Yes, I see what you're doing, I'm eager to do that," and he planned to visit his son for a couple weeks in Denver. Hector Sr. spent Christmas in Colorado Springs, where Ada was now living with her husband, Gene. The day after Christmas, when Sr. was due to board a bus north, he suffered a heart attack in Ada's arms. She called to tell Hector their father had died.

Hector never found resolution with his father, feeling robbed by all those years apart and situations far beyond the control of a boy. His hatred of the Castro regime couldn't help but include elements of self-loathing and regret, a sense of disenfranchisement. "That part of it is the only thing in my whole life that's been a shadow," he says, otherwise saying all the hardships taught him to be "resilient and let things flow off my back."

[image-8] **Reflecting today, sipping** that *cortadito* in his dining room, Hector eschews self-pity, opting for the grace of rationalization: "In my defense, given what we had to endure, I did what I did. I've got a goddamn Cuban food truck now, for cryin' out loud," he says with an awkward laugh, showing the humor that became his survival tool.

Hector spent 33 years as a lineman with US West, Qwest's progenitor, where Ada rose to a high-level executive position. In this much, neither failed their father: They managed to stick together, still inseparable today. "I breathe in and she breathes out," he says.

"That we struggled and were challenged helped make us successful later in life," says Ada, who also served on the board of directors for the Cuban-American National Council, aiding other refugees. At one meeting she was able to thank Monsignor Walsh personally: "He was like a saint to us," she says. Other Pedro Pans also rose to prominent positions, and include a U.S. Senator, musicians and artists. Carlos Eire won the National Book Award in 2003 for his memoir, *Waiting for Snow in Havana*.

Hilda remained happily married for 30 years, passing away in 2008 at age 92. Ada now splits time between her homes in Denver, Colorado Springs and the San Luis Valley. Lallito, who works with Denver's International Union of Elevator Constructors, lives in Castle Rock with his three sons. He, Ada and Hector regularly make time for dinners together.

At a recent meal, Lallito pokes the two, saying "Sure, you two had it easy, you left me behind." It's a frequent joke, just like Hector telling Ada, "Dad told you to take care of me," whenever he wants something from her. She's always been the leader of the group, says Lallito, who "took such great care of us."

Hector and Ada still attend Pedro Pan reunions, where everyone refers to one another as brother and sister. "That's one good thing that came out of it all," says Ada. "We protected each other at the orphanage, and we share the same story. We were in the same boat together."

As with many of those who escaped, her gratitude extends into strong patriotism today — a notable contrast to most Cubans' forced nationalism on the island.

"I came to this country with nothing but a small bag of clothes," she says. "We were here alone for 10 years. I brought my parents and helped support them, I put myself through college, made it to an executive level at a corporation, and became an entrepreneur, starting a high-tech company. Only in the U.S. can someone do that. We're living proof that this is the best country in the world."

It's the grasp of this freedom, Hector knows, that helped his parents make that impossible decision to send him and Ada away. Today, as a father of four, he says he truly doesn't know whether he'd have the same courage. He's grateful he's never had to find out.