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The Story Behind the Story of *Game Seven*

The seeds of **Game Seven** started with an empty doorstep. Our new newspaper delivery person had decided that getting up early in the morning wasn't his calling in life. After several weeks of near-10 a.m. late deliveries, I angrily cancelled my subscription. That pushed my wife to order the newspaper online to take its place—guaranteed to be on your computer screen by 6 a.m. That was great for my wife and daughter but bad for me, considering I liked to clip the newspaper for bits and pieces I might use in future novels.

After a few months of these electronic deliveries, I woke up one morning with the outline of a photo burned into my brain. I had probably seen it for only a brief second while scrolling through the newspaper on a tablet, but, suddenly, I couldn't shake the somewhat fuzzy image from my memory. It was a photo of a green car on the water. That's all I knew. I couldn't recall if it was caught in a flash-flood, rolled down an incline while launching a boat lakeside, or accidentally driven into somebody's swimming pool. All I knew for sure was that I needed to see it again. Nearly an hour later, after entering dozens of combinations of key search words on Google Images, I finally found it.

It was an amazing photo of a green 1959 Buick, which had been transformed into a car-boat (fitted with a pointed bow to slice through the sea waves), and was sailing off the shore of Key West, Florida, with several Cuban refugees aboard. I sat mesmerized by it, trying to decipher the facial expressions of the refugees resting on the roof of the floating car as the U.S. Coast Guard approached them. One thing was crystal clear to me, however—I needed to write their story—not exactly *their* story, but *my* vision of how they arrived at that moment.

I had long been moved by the stories behind Cuban baseball players in Major League Baseball—players such as the Hernandez brothers (Livan and Orlando, both pitchers and the subjects of a fascinating ESPN documentary entitled *Brothers in Exile*); Rey Ordóñez; Luis “El Tianté” Tiant; Tony Oliva; and current superstar players Yasiel Puig (Los Angeles Dodgers), Jose Abreu (Chicago White Sox), and Yoenis Cespedes (Detroit Tigers). Most of these players were forced to leave their loved ones behind when they defected, with family members often facing retribution from the authorities in Cuba. In the case of Yasiel

Puig, brought to the U.S./Mexico border by cutthroat smugglers who then held him for ransom and physically threatened his well-being for days, the flight for freedom was terrifying from both sides of the equation.

Though most of my sports-related novels have been about basketball (**Black and White**, **The Final Four**, and **Rucker Park Setup**), baseball was the first sport that captured my heart. I

played catcher. As a kid, I used to go down to the diamond alone with a bucket of baseballs, throwing out of a crouch from home plate to an invisible shortstop covering second base. That was until I realized I could throw from second base to the backstop behind home plate instead, without having to chase those balls into the outfield.

Surprisingly, as the plot of **Game Seven** started to take shape in my mind, it wasn't about who defected from Cuba, but rather who was left behind—sixteen-year-old Julio Ramirez Jr., Cuba's best young shortstop. Six years prior, Julio's father was praised as Cuba's greatest pitcher. That was until Julio Sr. defected to the U.S. while the Cuban National team was playing an exhibition tournament here.

“Every kid I knew was jealous of me. That's because baseball is practically a religion in my country. And Papi walked through the streets of our hometown, Matanzas, like a god, with me trailing behind him. Fans called him El Fuego—for his blazing fastball, which no batter could touch. The only way Papi could have been more respected was if he'd been a general in the military or a high-ranking government official. But most of that respect would have come out of fear.”—Julio Jr.

Papi has now signed a multi-million dollar contract to pitch for the Miami Marlins, while Julio, his mother, and younger sister are plunged into poverty. Julio is also being blackballed from the Cuban National team by the government, believing he would undoubtedly defect as well. Julio has been robbed of both his father (with whom he is angry for leaving) and the opportunity to play the game that he loves at the highest level.

Now, exactly how is a novelist from New York City going to write a book about a teenager from Cuba? It's funny how fate



THE INSPIRATION FOR **GAME SEVEN**, THIS 1959 BUICK WAS CONVERTED INTO A CAR/BOAT AND SAILED THE 90 MILES FROM CUBA TO THE U.S. BY ELEVEN REFUGEES.

PHOTO CREDIT: CNN/AP

helps things fall into place. My mother was suffering from the onset of dementia. She would sometimes disappear early in the mornings and I would comb the streets looking for her. I began to find my mother sitting in a Cuban coffee shop. I became friends with the owner who would help look after her when I wasn't around. That marked the beginning of our many conversations about daily life in Cuba, both present and past.

With that spark lit inside of me, I went on a mission to find as many people as I could who could talk to me about their own personal odyssey. I also discovered several detailed online accounts of the 90-mile journey on the open ocean. Then I stumbled across Cuban baseball fans and recent tourists to the island who had sat in the rowdy and raucous stands during baseball games there. Almost right from the start, the research and writing never felt like a chore; it seemed more like a privilege to represent these brave and passionate people on the pages that were taking shape before me.

No matter how much love and joy the Cubans I encountered had shining inside of them, they all seemed to display a bit of a hard edge, having dealt with the reality of their harsh home government. That's why I chose to begin **Game Seven** with this preamble recited in the first-person by Julio Jr.

There are 108 stitches on a baseball. I should know. I've run my fingers over every one. The first and last stitches are hidden beneath the surface. But believe me; I've felt those, too.

When I was thirteen years old, I had a Cuban baseball coach named Hugo, who headed up the local traveling team. More than a dozen of us would pile into his beat-up station wagon, weighing down the shock absorbers until the tail end almost scraped the ground. Hugo always had a cigar rolling between his lips. He was also extremely competitive, even when he was driving or looking for a parking space with that oversized wagon.

During one of my at-bats, the opposing pitcher fired a fastball inside at my ribcage. I barely jumped out of the way. The umpire signaled that I was hit and should proceed to first base. When I arrived there, Hugo asked if I was injured and I whispered to him, "The ball never hit me." He put a huge grin on his face. After the game, he pulled all of our players together for a private speech.

Hugo said, "I go down to first base thinking I might need to drive Paul to the hospital with broken ribs. But that sneaky SOB never even got hit. That's how I want the rest of you to play ball, cutthroat, like it means everything in the world to you to win."

Actually, what Hugo had ascribed to me wasn't any part of



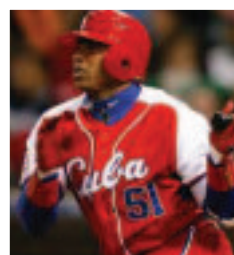
FORMER MLB PITCHERS LIVAN (L) AND ORLANDO (R) HERNANDEZ ARE THE SUBJECT OF AN ESPN DOCUMENTARY **BROTHERS IN EXILE**.

PHOTO CREDIT: COURTESY MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL



LUIS "EL TIANTE" TIANT SERVED IN PART AS AN INSPIRATION FOR THE CHARACTER PAPI IN **GAME SEVEN**.

PHOTO CREDIT: COURTESY MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL



JOSE ABREU DEFECTED FROM CUBA AND IS AN MLB ALL-STAR WITH THE CHICAGO WHITE SOX.

PHOTO CREDIT: COURTESY MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL



YASIEL PUIG, A CURRENT MLB ALL-STAR, WAS HELD CAPTIVE AND FOR RANSOM BY THE SMUGGLERS WHO GOT HIM OUT OF CUBA.

PHOTO CREDIT: COURTESY MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL



THE MATANZAS CROCODILES ARE THE REAL-LIFE CUBAN TEAM FOR WHICH **GAME SEVEN'S** PROTAGONIST JULIO JR. PLAYS SHORTSTOP.

PHOTO CREDIT: WIKIPEDIA

my motivation or thinking. I accepted his colorful praise all the same, and he treated me to lemon ices for the rest of the season. In **Game Seven**, I modeled the evil and manipulating Moyano, who dictates the roster of Cuba's Junior National team, upon what I remembered of Hugo's many mannerisms.

Here's Moyano addressing Julio Jr. alone in the locker room:

Moyano took a long pull on his cigar, causing the tip to glow a bright orange. Then, for the first time, I saw him take it from his lips. He held the cigar out in front of him, tapping it with a finger. The ashes silently fell to the floor and flickered out.

"So, speak for yourself," demanded Moyano, acting as my judge and jury . . .

"I'm a baseball player, not a public speaker," I said.

"No, you're a busboy," said Moyano, with smoke billowing from his lips. "You're only a baseball player if I say you are."

In one surprisingly swift move, Moyano snatched a buzzing fly out of mid-air. He shook it inside of a closed fist, like he was getting ready to roll dice. After he threw it to the floor, that fly's wings quivered at my feet and then went still.

At its roots, Cuba is predominantly a Christian country. That's why the character Gabriel plays an important role in this novel. Gabriel is a longtime fisherman who knows the ocean currents surrounding the island like the back of his own calloused hands. He is the one

who converts the 1959 Buick auto into a seaworthy vessel, and operates on a good amount of faith that the car/boat will not sink or be capsized. Gabriel is based on the Biblical (both the Old and New Testament) angel Gabriel, a messenger who blows his horn. In **Game Seven**, Gabriel's famed horn is found on the steering wheel of the Buick, and it signals the group's departure from oppression.

That's when I [Julio Jr.] reached my arm over Gabriel's shoulder. I hit the horn in the center of the steering wheel, and it let out a long beeeeeep! I swear it was like music to my ears—better than any salsa, merengue, reggae, or rock. So I punched the horn again. And this time when I did, I hollered out "Freedom!"

Then Gabriel said, "Everyone together: one, two, three."

The four of us [in that car/boat] screamed, "Freedom!" until his hand lifted from the horn.

There was also a need for a bus driver in the novel, someone to drive Julio Jr.'s teammates on the Matanzas Crocodiles to the baseball tournament in Cardenas. I named that bus driver Paolo (Paul in Spanish), because, after all, I am the one at the wheel of this story, choosing a direction and driving it forward.

As a kid, I was a staunch fan of the World Champion 1969 "Miracle" Mets and the 1973 "You Gotta Believe" version of the New York Mets. Through both of those summer pennant



PAUL VOLPONI TEACHING A CREATIVE WRITING CLASS IN NEW YORK CITY.

drives and October World Series appearances, I usually had my transistor radio to my ear, listening to all of the action. The transistor radio, which first found popularity in the mid-1950s, saw approximately 1 billion units manufactured by the 1970s, using a 9-volt battery as a power source.

Julio Jr. had hidden such a transistor radio to hear his father pitch for the Miami Marlins in the World Series against the New York Yankees. Unlike myself, Julio wasn't worried about his teachers discovering the radio during a math lesson. Instead, he needed to be concerned about the Cuban government finding out that he was using it to gain information from the outside world.

I sat alone on a dark staircase in our apartment building with a small transistor radio pressed against my ear, listening to every pitch thrown by the great El Fuego—something the police could have punished me for.

Of course, I did learn something about modern U.S. teens and the transistor radio while I was in the midst of writing **Game Seven**. My wife and I had the car radio on when Van Morrison's "Brown-Eyed Girl" jumped out of the speakers. There are some lines in the song: "Whatever happened? Tuesdays were so slow. Going down the old mine with a transistor radio." That's when our sixteen-year-old daughter, Sabrina, asked from the backseat, "What's a transistor radio?" It hadn't initially occurred to me that today's teens wouldn't know about them. I guess that iPods and MP3 players have put them far into the rearview mirror. I went back to the novel's text and made sure to describe the transistor radio in much greater detail.

There needed to be a substantial link between Julio Jr. and Papi. That important family connection comes in the form of Julio's two traveling companions on the ocean voyage from Cuba—his

fun-loving cousin Luis and his uncle Ramon, who is Papi's brother and his former catcher. Luis's only real interest in the sport lies in the potential girls, parties, and popularity that a teen wearing a baseball uniform might be accorded. He serves as the perfect counter-balance to the ultra-serious Julio, who is trapped inside an intense pressure cooker of emotion and circumstance.

My cousin Luis raced in from center field, jumping on my shoulders to celebrate. I carried his weight for a few steps before we both tumbled onto the infield grass, laughing and smiling like little kids. "Now we'll show those teams going to Cardenas [for the big tournament] what hungry crocodiles can do—take a bite out of their behinds," said Luis, chomping at the grass with a big grin.

Uncle Ramon, however, is a coach and a former hardcore baseball player.

"An umpire from Havana was squeezing the strike zone on him really bad, calling all of El Fuego's pitches on the corner of the plate balls . . . The next pitch, I called for one high and outside, just above my right shoulder where that umpire was squatting. Your papi put that pitch exactly where I asked for it—his best fastball. Then I lowered my mitt a few inches. That pitch hit that (umpire) in the middle of his mask—ping!" said Uncle Ramon. "Knocked him out cold."

Of course, Uncle Ramon passionately believes that his brother still loves his family, despite abandoning them.

"It's been six hard years [of separation]. Perhaps you feel like you don't know (your papi) now," said Uncle Ramon.

"I don't know him," I said with some gas to my voice. "Neither do you."

"I know he's not a stranger. He's my brother, my blood, just like you."

Crafting the character of Papi—the great El Fuego—was probably the most difficult thing I ever had to do as a novelist. He only appears in name, backstories, and remembrances for more than the first two-thirds of the book. He needed to be imposing on the pitcher's mound and in life—the kind of competitor who would put a 100 mph fastball into your ribs for smiling too much in the batter's box. Still, he'd have to be a compassionate and loving father in his own way. The character of Papi is partially based on several real-life pitchers who carried this ultra-competitive mantle through their lives. Among them are Cuban great Luis Tiant, aka El Tiante, as well as American Hall of Famers Bob Gibson (St. Louis Cardinals 1959-75) and Don Drysdale (Brooklyn and Los Angeles Dodgers 1956-69).

The first time the pair are together in the novel is when Julio Jr. is smuggled into the Miami Marlins' locker room prior to the electrically charged atmosphere of Game Seven of the World Series.

The instant I saw him, it was like ice water had suddenly filled my veins. Chills shot up my spine. He was sitting, alone in front of his locker, tightening the laces on his cleats. I took a hesitant step forward. Maybe he sensed me coming, because he suddenly looked up and his dark eyes zeroed onto mine. Papi rushed across the room. With my legs suddenly weak, I managed just another half step forward. "Junior," he said, as his chest thumped against mine. He was holding me so close I could feel his breath and smell the soap he must have used to shave. Then he took a step back, with his arms extended, holding me by the shoulder blades. In Spanish, he asked, "How did you get inside here?" His voice was like a weight bearing down on me. My mouth had gone bone dry. And even if I had an answer on my tongue, I wasn't sure I could have gotten the words out. I couldn't believe I was actually seeing Papi in the flesh, not being described on the radio. I'd never been this tall before, standing beside him. The pores on his face looked huge, and there was a blemish beneath his right eyebrow.

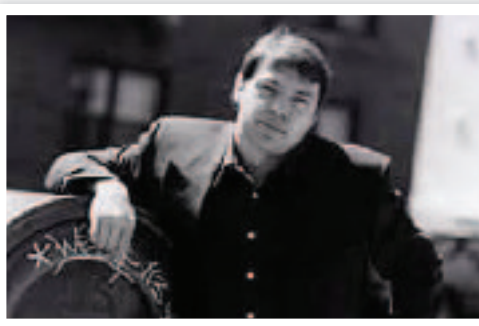
Throughout the writing of this novel, I kept myself insulated from the real story of any of the refugees in that inspiring photo of the 1959 Buick car-boat sailing into Key West, Florida. But once **Game Seven** was published, I was more than eager to discover what I could about those brave freedom-seekers.

It turns out that eleven refugees were jammed in that car-boat. It was a vessel that cost \$4,000 to make seaworthy, a staggering amount for poor Cubans. Among the passengers was a family of three—Luis Gras Rodriguez; his wife, Isora; and their son, Angel. The U.S. Coast Guard intercepted the Buick at sea and stopped all involved from coming ashore. If the refugees had actually reached U.S. soil, however, the refugees would have most likely been granted opportunity to stay.

There was a public outcry about the pending fate of Luis Gras Rodriguez and his family. Two years prior, Luis had tried to get his loved ones to the U.S. in a floating truck-boat without



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PAUL VOLPONI ON A NEW YORK CITY STREET CORNER.

success, before they were sent back to Cuba. Many people, including relatives back on the island, believed that the trio would suffer severe punishment from the Cuban government for this second attempt.

A U.S. District Judge then stepped in, sending the family to the U.S.-controlled Guantanamo Bay facility in Cuba, instead. The family remained there for some ten months, with Luis even participating in a brief hunger strike in protest of their captivity. Eventually, the family was granted refugee status in Costa Rica.

I knew how important it is for refugees to actually reach the shore. In **Game Seven**, Julio Jr. is presented with that very situation.

A voice came over the ship's loudspeaker in Spanish. "This is the United States Coast Guard!" it bellowed, with an echo. "You are in U.S. waters! Shut off your engine! Put your hands on top of your head!"

"Have we made it far enough to stay? Not to get sent back?" I asked my uncle. "How could it be better?"

"If we were standing on U.S. soil," he

answered.

The voice on the loudspeaker repeated its demands. Then that ship launched a smaller, faster boat, full of uniformed men.

"I'm not taking any chances. I'm swimming for the beach," I said, an instant before I dove into the water.

I was swimming in a straight line, as fast as I could, riding every wave to pick up speed. I glanced back. The smaller boat had reached the Buick, and now a second one was motoring after me. I was kicking my legs harder, reaching with every stroke. I was already exhausted. But there was no way I was going to stop . . . My arms felt like limp rubber bands, and my lungs ached until I thought they were going to explode. Then, about 50 yards out, I heard cheers from the people on the beach. And that sound gave me an added surge of strength.

I heard the motor of that boat getting closer. So I turned my head to see where it was. That's when a wave broke overtop of me and I swallowed a mouthful of seawater. I was closer to the shore than that boat was to me . . . Before I knew it my chest was out of the water, and then my waist. I staggered onto the dry sand, falling to my knees. I touched the ground like it was home plate, and I'd been rounding the bases. Only I wasn't safe. I was free.

I feel privileged to have had that news photo seemingly choose me—for it to jump inside my brain and take root there until I could give birth to this novel. I know that this novel's publication comes at a very important time, with the U.S.'s renewed interest in starting conversations with the Cuban government. I hope that **Game Seven** will serve teachers, library media specialists, and most importantly, young adult readers in considering the value of family, loyalty, and freedom. ■

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