

## A Step Back in Time

By Rebecca Garcia-Pons

When I was in high school, my late father took us on a sentimental trip back to his home in Havana, Cuba. It was a sometimes painful journey for him, since his native land had changed so drastically in the 30 years since he fled Castro's revolution. For my mother and me, it was an eye-opening look at a country living under Communism, where people spent a great deal of time trying to find basic things such as eggs or milk through the black market.

But my mother and I also fell in love with that tropical island, and we could imagine what it must have been like when my father was growing up there. Indeed, he took me to see his old high school, which was built in a Spanish style around a gigantic courtyard, and to the Tropicana nightclub where he spent many a night in his youth dancing to Latin rhythms and drinking rum.



My favorite part of the trip was seeing his former home, where he grew up with his parents, his grandmother, two maiden aunts, a cook, a housekeeper, and a nanny. Even he would admit that all these women spoiled him! I was enchanted with the objects in his bedroom, which remained just the way he had left it. It was filled with books in both Spanish and English, and I even found his old baseball glove in a drawer of his nightstand.

In his parents' bedroom, everything had been left exactly the way it was when they departed for the States back in 1961. My mom joked that it was like walking into King Tut's tomb. There was an issue of Life magazine on the dresser, next to a bottle of Bacardi rum. My father speculated that my grandfather had taken a swig out of that bottle right before he closed the door on his old life and began the journey to a new one that took him to Miami and New York.

My grandfather, Cesar, died before I was born, and my grandmother, Margarita Francisca Garcia-Pons (everybody called her Margot) passed away when I was just a toddler. So, I have no personal memories of this couple who had left behind their linen suits, satin lingerie, French perfume, and Havana cigars. I felt intrusive touching these things, but I also knew it was my one and only opportunity to know them in any personal sense.

It was in a mahogany armoire that I came across the real treasures—certificates honoring my grandfather for various civic services. Dr. Cesar Garcia-Pons held a law degree, but never practiced, instead running a medical clinic, publishing biographies and histories, penning a column for a Havana newspaper. He was an accomplished, well-read and traveled, urbane gentleman. They tell me that he and Margot used to win dance contests at the various clubs in Havana, gracefully circling the floor in a *pase doble* or tango.

In that armoire were report cards belonging to my father, and newspaper clippings, and a society magazine in which I found a photo and account of my grandmother's wedding. It took place in 1934, and she wore a slim, satin gown, with a cloche headpiece and flowing veil. Underneath a dusty box on the bottom of the armoire, I found a copy of the photo in the magazine, along with another head and shoulders portrait.

I could not bring much back from that trip to Havana, other than memories to last a lifetime. But I smuggled the magazine and the two large photos in the bottom of my suitcase. My mom had the pictures framed, and they have hung in our den every since. I can never know that beautiful woman in the photos. People who did know Margot tell me that she was elegant and kind, that she did exquisite embroidery (that was what women of a certain era and class did), and that she loved Coca Cola and diamonds. She made an excellent egg custard, even though she had a cook, and though she lived into her late 70s, her black hair never turned gray.

But the way I will always know my grandmother is as a bride, frozen in time in her classic black and white portraits