ESSAY

Goodbye, For a While

by Marcus Narvaez



"Little Red Barns" by Timothy F Phillips

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September 2011 was a time in my life where I finally understood what my family had been going through. My parents immigrated to the United States in 1996, and over the next few years two of my dad's sisters, their husbands, and my younger cousin all followed and moved to Alabama.

The majority of the family was together again, but the unity only lasted a little over a decade. That decade holds some of my favorite memories; Christmas with my cousins, birthdays, holidays. These were some of my favorite moments in life, but I was unaware of the constant anxiety my family lived in.

I did not know this until after they left, but my aunts, Aida and Lili, and their husbands Alejandro and Juan, and my cousin Maxi were all living in the United States illegally. Juan, Lili, and their two children who were born in the United States, Sol and Bryan, left in 2010. I thought it was because they were homesick, which they were, but it was also the crippling anxiety of getting arrested and deported. The deportation would separate them from their children for possibly years. This horror was too much for them, so they left Alabama and went back to Buenos Aires where they could live a normal life.

With them gone, only my aunt Aida, her husband, Alejandro, and their two children, my cousins, Maxi and Juan Cruz were left in Alabama. Juan Cruz was the only one of the four to be in the United States legally as he was born here. Since Lili and Juan left Aida and Alejandro had many conversations about if going back to Buenos Aires was the good thing to do. They could live there without fear, and they could be back with their friends and family. In the end, the decision was made for them.

In 2011, HB 56 came into effect in Alabama. HB 56 was an anti-immigration law that essentially allowed police to stop anyone who they thought looked like an illegal immigrant. This means basically any person who appeared to be Latino could get stopped and be asked to present identification. If said person was unable to provide the proper documentation, then an arrest and deportation would soon follow.

The night before the law went into effect was the going away party for Aida, Alejandro, Maxi, and Juan Cruz. It wasn't an actual party; the mood was somber. It was what we call in Spanish, a "despedida," a farewell.

Their despedida was at my dad's cousin's apartment in Homewood. It was a few days before my fourteenth birthday. I went with my dad, and my mom stayed home with my younger brother. I remember walking up to the apartment with my dad, and it had not hit me yet that this would be the last time I would see my cousins for who knows how long.

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We went inside and all the adults were sitting around the dining table; the mood completely different than any of the get-togethers we'd had in the past. In the past I would have walked inside and been greeted with the sound of music and laughter which would soon be followed by a customary hug and cheek-to-cheek kiss. That night I was greeted with silence. Nobody was laughing, and all I wanted was the familiar feeling of joy that my family always brought.

I looked around and the gloom hit me hard. I needed to be reminded of the happiness my family brought me.

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I'm eight years old, and it's Christmas Eve. Every year we switch whose house we celebrate Christmas at. This year it's our turn. We get to host the party.

My dad's in the backyard getting everything ready for the asado. An asado is a traditional Argentine barbecue cooked on an open fire or a grill known as a parrilla. When we moved into our house one of the first things my dad did was build a parrilla made of stone and brick in the backyard.

While my dad is outside my mom was in the kitchen making empanadas. The house was unbearable as she cut onions. I couldn't escape the burning in my eyes. My little brother Vint goes into the kitchen, "Mommmm."

My mom looks over at him. Her eyes aren't watering from the onions, she responds, "Let me guess... you're bored?"

Vint rubs his eyes, "No... well yes, but my eyes burn that was what I was going to say."

I hear Vint say that and I run into the kitchen, "mine do too! And I'm bored too when is everyone coming over?"

"No se, Hijo. If your eyes burn go outside and get away from the onions." Vint and I go outside while my mom continues to cut onions.

Then, finally, at 7:00 pm, the doorbells rings. I run full speed and look out the window. It's them. The party's finally starting. I swing the door open and one by one my aunts, Aida and Lili, uncles, Alejandro, Juan, and Vicente, and cousins, Maxi, Juan Cruz, and Sol walk in and each one of them gets a cheek-to-cheek kiss and a "Feliz Navidad!"

My aunts all go to the kitchen to help my mom get dinner ready, my uncles go to the backyard and give my dad company as he prepares the asado. I thought all of my uncles were in the backyard until Tio Juan's unmistakable deep, yet childish voice comes from our garage, "Marcus!! Come into the garage!"

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He only called for me, but all my cousins and my brother run behind me to see why he's yelling for me. I make it to the garage first, and Juan's standing in there with a brand-new soccer ball, the ball was blue and white like the Argentine flag.

Juan looked straight into my eyes, "Jugamos? O tenes miedo?"

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I was in the awkward stage in my life where I was going from child to teenager, and as a result I wanted others to see me as more mature. I wanted to go sit at the table with the adults, but the adults didn't want me there. After a quick hello to everyone my dad led me to the room where all the kids were.

I was the oldest in that room, but I didn't mind. I was getting to spend time with my cousins. Nobody in the kid's room seemed to fully grasp why the adults were so sad. We thought it would be like the other get-togethers. We tried to treat it as such. First, we all sat around the tv where the PlayStation 2 was plugged in. My dad's cousin's son, Bruno, was in charge of deciding who got to play and what we got to play. It was his PlayStation after all.

We tried to enjoy the videogames, but the energy coming from the dining table was having an effect on all of us. Juan Cruz got tired of playing video games and stood up, "Bruno, where's your ball?"

"What ball?"

Juan Cruz was looking under the bed and yelled from under it, "the one I got you for your birthday!"

Bruno's blue eyes glanced over to the closet and said, "I don't know. I don't remember where I put it."

I wasn't the only one that saw his eyes shift to the closet though. Maxi ran over to the closet and still in its box was the soccer ball.

"Que hijo de puta!"

"MAXIMILIANO! LA BOCA!" came from the dining table, clearly Tia Aida heard Maxi's foul mouth.

Maxi looked at Bruno, "I can't believe you haven't used our gift yet. Come on, we're going to play outside." He led the way out the door.

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I look at Juan straight in the eyes, "I'm not scared of you, you're terrible at soccer."

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He let out a clearly sarcastic laugh, but it sounded more like a scream than a laugh. The next thing I know Tia Lili, is running into the garage, “What’s happening? Why are you screaming?”

Without taking his eyes off of me Juan replies, “Nada Lili. He said I’m terrible at soccer. Can you believe him?”

Lili went back inside without a word.

“See even she thinks your terrible she doesn’t want to watch you lose!” My cousins laugh at my insult. Even Juan chuckled.

“Ah si? Is that how you’re going to be? Alright let’s go play, and to make it fair you can even let your brother be on your team and I’ll still beat you!”

Vint and I went outside. Juan’s right behind us, followed by my cousins. Vint passes the ball to me and Juan runs full speed at us trying to take the ball away, but he made it too easy and I passed it back to Vint who scored in front of the open goal.

Over the course of the next twenty minutes someone new would join, first it was my Tio Alejandro who said, “Te estan matando Juan! You need some help!” Then Maxi and Juan Cruz joined my team and soon enough it was all the kids against Juan and Alejandro.

The evening went on and the food was ready soon enough.

There wasn’t a table for kids and a table for adults. We all sat together. On the kitchen counter was all the food, and one by one we all got up and filled our plates once, then twice, and maybe even three times.

The hours went by quickly as we waited for midnight to open gifts. The kitchen rang with laughter as different stories were told. A story about how bad Juan is at soccer, a story about the time my dog tore down a tree, all kinds of stories. Stories that live in my memory of beautiful nights like this. A night that ended with my dad dressed as Santa happily handing gifts out to everyone.

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In the back of my mind I was worried for Maxi and Juan Cruz. All I knew about Argentina was what my parents had told me, and what they told me were the reasons why they left. I was worried for their safety, and I was even more worried because I knew they would struggle there. Maxi was born there but moved to Alabama before he was a year old. Neither of them were very good at speaking Spanish, so I could only imagine how much they would hate it.

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With those thoughts in my head I turned to Maxi and I asked, “Do you want to move back to Argentina?”

It seemed as if he was waiting for someone to ask this question. He responded, “No. I like living here. I don’t want to leave my house.”

That was all I needed to hear. Without another word I stood up and walked over to where the adults were. I was going to tell my uncle that he couldn’t force them to leave. They wanted to stay so they had to stay; there was no other choice.

As I walked towards the adults I heard my uncle say what ultimately made me understand why they were leaving.

He said, “Nos tenemos que ir,” he continued in Spanish, “I don’t know why we would stay in a country that does not want us. I don’t want to stay in a country where I have to worry about the possibility of them stopping my son in the street and taking him away from me because he does not have his papers.”

That made me realize why they were leaving, and it made me realize the danger my family had been in all along. They risked their freedom to try to give all of us a better life in the United States. Life in the United States wasn’t worth it though. The constant fear of being separated from their family was not worth it, so they left.

HB 56 came into effect the next day. I was called to the front office at school the next day, as did all the other Latinos in school. All of us were already aware of the law, but the principle and guidance counselor explained to us that we may or may not be asked to present certain paperwork and documents in the near future. I remember the most infuriating thing about that was the clear ignorance held by the school administration. They called all of the Latinos due to their skin color, not due to their immigration status. They called a girl from Puerto Rico into the office, an American citizen born in an American territory to American parents.

HB 56 did not last very long. It was soon deemed to be unconstitutional as it was a law that discriminated against Latino people and those who may appear to be of Latino descent. However, the short time it was in effect was enough to get many Latinos to leave the state, and many left to return to their native countries. Including my aunts, uncles, and cousins. I did not get to see them again until I went finally got to visit Buenos Aires five years later.

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