



Video Story Transcript

A VOTING BOOTH BUILT FOR TWO: ELECTION ENTHUSIASM FROM A CUBAN AMERICAN MOM

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://youtu.be/o1K1UOaAiw8>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, my name's Carmen Agra Deedy. And this story is called "A Voting Booth Built for Two."

The morning did not get off to a promising start. The phone rang and I answered it. Sleepy, almost knocking it off the dresser, "Hello." "Carmita, it's your mother." Oh my goodness! Nobody calls me before seven o'clock in the morning! Not if they have a well-refined sense of survival ... anyone except Esther, my mother.

"Mami, what's going on? Is everything ok?"

"Everything is ok. I just want to remind you that today is voting day!" Today is voting day. How could I not know? She put it on my calendar, she called me the evening before, she sent smoke signals up like at dusk. The only thing I didn't have were carrier pigeons!

"Mami, I know. Nine o'clock."

"No, listen! 9 o'clock is no good for me." And before I could say another word, my husband, (sigh) who lay beside me chuckling, plucked the phone from my hand and saved me from something I or my mother might regret. By saying, "Mami," (oh, you should've heard him cooing into the phone), "No...everything...she'll be there... no, everything's fine...I'm making her coffee right now." I elbowed him. "No, no...Oh...Of course...I

will tell her. Love you too, Mami.” He hung up and grinned. “She said 9 o’clock no work for her. She’s going to be ready in 20 minutes. You better get moving.”

I sat bolt upright, “Twenty minutes! I haven’t even showered!”

“Come on, Sleeping Beauty, get up and save us both a heap of misery. I’ll make the coffee. Nineteen minutes.” (She snarls.)

By the time I picked up my mother, I was in a lather. They were on the front porch looking freshly washed. There’s something about that generation that just always looks so dapper. My father was wearing his best shirt, starched. I gave him a kiss on the cheek and he smelled like Ammen’s, it’s a deodorant powder, and the cologne of my childhood - Old Spice. Ah, still makes me shudder. My mother, of course, looks at me and says, “You are late. You don’t got no kiss for your mama?”

“I don’t kiss people who wake me up before seven o’clock in the morning!” And then I leaned over and gave her a buss on the cheek. I can’t help it. I’m like a sucker for old ladies in polyester. Well, I walked them to the car. We made it over to their voting station, which was a local elementary school. (Sigh) And she was right. She was saying all along the drive that the line would be around the block. And, dad gummit, wasn’t she right! It was snaking along the side of the building and disappeared.

“What I say to you?”

It is not easy being the daughter of Cassandra, a Cuban Cassandra. In case you don’t remember, children, that would be the Greek goddess of myth who told the truth and no one believed her. Boy, I believed her now.

“Ay, mami, por favor. We’re gonna be here all day.”

“It does not matter. Today is voting day.”

Let me tell you something. You don’t know someone until you know their backstory. You know when you read a book, and you’re reading about a character and reading about a character and they don’t make any sense and then suddenly you get to chapter 17 and you learn the rest of the story? Well, Esther and Carlos, they were in Cuba from the time they were born, of course.

1931, 1924. They lived through Fulgencio Batista. President Batista, when faced with the re-election that he knew he was going to lose, pulled a coup. Cancelled elections indefinitely. The Cuban Revolution was not about literacy. In fact, by the 50’s, Cuba had the sixth largest literacy rate in Central and South America. It wasn’t about socialized medicine. Batista figured out that one of the things he could pacify, do anyway, to pacify people was to pass socialized medicine. It was brilliant. It worked beautifully but still no elections. And then Fidel came. Fidel Castro. A young revolutionary and he promised democracy. He promised an end to brutality and he promised elections. The country swept him into Havana on their shoulders. And the streets were strewn with flowers, many tossed by my own mother and about 90% of Cubans. Four years of brutality and no elections later, my parents decided maybe it was time to try another place. They were heart-broken when they left their country behind. But when my mother arrived here, the first thing she wanted to know was how she could vote. Well, she wasn’t a citizen. When she became a citizen, the first thing she did was vote!

This may seem very sweet. It isn’t! She drives us nuts! Any, any election, it doesn’t matter how inconsequential, the woman is there. I mean, we’re talking, we’re going through K-Mart and they want you to

figure out, they want to vote on something that has nothing to do with any of us. This particular election, this day, this wasn't a national election. She didn't wake me up at 6:45 to vote in the president. It was some lousy, dodgy water project and a new superintendent. (Ok, maybe that was important.) She even, I'm telling you, she even worked over our postmaster.

We had a young postmaster at the time, who innocently told her that he didn't really vote, that he hadn't voted in years. And he became her mission. She, I'm tell'n ya, she would make trips to the post office with nothing to post.

"Oye, Frankie come here. No, we are not finished. Look you an official, ay, you work for the government and you no going to vote, honey? What's the matter with you? Don't... well, you see the post office, you see how few peoples are here? Nobody write letters no more. When they shut this place down, you got nothing to complain about, ok."

He would look at me and I'm like, "You're on your own, pal!"

Imagine the day when we walked in and old Frankie was waving, I mean from the door we saw him, waving his absentee ballot. Because one of the reasons he didn't vote was because he usually couldn't get away.

I tell you that so you understand what she is like but why it mattered. And as we stood in that line, that snaking line, my father with his cane because he wouldn't bring his walker. I had given him a walker. He turned it into a tomato trellis. That's another story; we don't have the time. A young poll worker saw us, and among all the septuagenarians and octogenarians, my mother and father were clearly the oldest and the most frail. And she offered to walk us ahead of the line. And this group of people (almost all of them old, by the way) 'cause I wondered, who comes to these dinky elections that nobody ever hears about. Ah... Tom Brokaw's Greatest Generation. That's who goes... because they know what it means. And as they inched along, most of them waved or smiled as we went to the front of the line.

We got to the room, the voting room, and there were new machines. That's all we needed! Throw something new at Esther. She adapts at glacial speed. "What is this? Where are the little paper things?"

I said, "Ma, give me five seconds; they're gonna teach me how to use them. You and Dad just sit, just, just for a minute. I found two chairs. You know those plastic chairs, those ergonomically made chairs made for maximum... discomfort, I think would be the word. And then they explained how to use the machines. It was really fairly simple. It was a sliding mechanism so I left my father, figuring that my mother would be the diciest, and walked her to the little, you know, sorta, little booth with the curtains, took her inside. And she's a quick study; in five seconds, she was confident and she shooed me out. I sat next to my pop who seemed to be enjoying the blessed silence. And then... the silence was broken. And we're not the only ones in this room, mind you; people are voting all around us.

When we hear, "Carlos, Carmita, come here; it's your turn!" The woman could punch a hole in an eardrum at 20 paces.

My father looked at me, "Do something!"

I jumped up (whispering), "Mami, por favor. Please, shhhh. Other people are voting."

"What and you cannot talk?"

“Please, I’m begging you.” I hooked her by the arm and nearly took her...made her airborne as I propelled her across the room. Sat her gently down next to my father and said, “Please just stay here for like two minutes. Let me explain it to Pop, I’ll come back and sit with you.

I walked my dad across the room. I opened the curtains, I took him through the same tutorial. He looked at me and he, again, is quick as can be. He’s got a mind like a Cuban machete, it can cut through anything. He said, “I have it.” I stepped outside but to my, well, confusion, someone passed me. As I was going out, someone was pushing their way into the voting booth to join my father. I whipped around to see my mother’s face for a split second before (swish) she closed the curtains. Now other people had noticed too and were turning to look.

And the next thing we heard was, “Ok, Carlos, listen! This water project, here, we don’t like that, ok? And this superintendent we no voting for him. Better say, no. He’s a Philistine. Remember what he...”

On the word Philistine, the most remarkable and beautiful thing happened. The curtain went “swish!” My father, a little Cuban man, was bringing my mother, a little Cuban woman, who was resisting every step, out of the voting booth. He leaned over, everyone (I mean you couldn’t hear anyone breathe) watched riveted as if they were passing an incredible car accident that you want to look away from but you just can’t tear yourself from. And he said, “Estercita, I love you but I did not leave communist Cuba to come to the United States of America to have you follow me into a voting booth and tell me how to vote!” And the room broke into thunderous applause.

I love this story!