



CHAPTER ONE

Take Responsibility

I'm an entrepreneur, and all entrepreneurs are alike in certain ways. I can think of four: We're risk takers, we're big thinkers, we're creative, and we're resourceful. Perhaps there's another: We can't sit still; we're a little bit impatient. But I'm going to put these ideas to one side for a minute (be patient!) and talk about one thing I think we don't all share.

What not all entrepreneurs have is a sense of responsibility, whether it's for themselves, the project at hand, or the people who work for them. One of my most deeply held beliefs is that responsibility is a vital feature in the makeup of an entrepreneur. And it's not just important for people who want to get ahead in business. Anyone who wants to achieve anything at all has to stand up, make decisions, and be accountable for them.

When we're young we're responsible for only ourselves. Childhood should be carefree and full of joy. As we grow up, more is added to our plates until they're full to bursting. As part of a family you share at least some responsibility for the well-being of everyone. For a kid that may just mean doing chores and helping out around the house. Then when you get a job you have duties people are relying on you to do properly. By the time you've started your own family there's serious pressure to provide for your loved ones. I've always had a very strong sense of re-





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sponsibility. I think it first hit me that day I stood outside my parents' door and heard them talk about our future. I made a decision—that I'd have to be the one who would get my family out of the country—and I stood by my decision until I had finished the task. That's taking responsibility.

I was forced to make this decision and behave like a grown-up at an early age because I knew my father wasn't going to act. I loved my father to death—he taught me so much—but he wasn't a man who took responsibility like that. He was a professional gambler who lived life minute by minute. He made no plans for the future because he thought the future would take care of itself, which it does if you leave everything to chance. He was an extraordinarily generous man, and he taught me that giving was better than receiving. All his life, if my father ever had any money, he'd give it away. Even when we were down and out, if he had two dollars, he would give one away. Years later, when we were together in Miami, I'd give him things—fancy watches, expensive cars—and I'd never see them again. He'd hand them over to someone he thought needed it more than he did. My dad wanted to die with one pair of shoes and one suit to his name, and he did, despite my best efforts.

As young as I was, I was already aware of how oppressive Cuba had become. People were afraid. For a long time, there were no real business transactions because of the communist system; there was no enterprise, and legal businesses were being confiscated by the government. Before the revolution, my parents had started a business from the house, sewing underwear for a shop owned by one of my father's brothers. After the revolution, we dedicated more time to the business until it too was confiscated by the communist regime.

It seemed that more and more people's livelihoods were being taken from them. Entrepreneurs—people like my grandfather, who had always worked for himself—found it hard, if not impossible, to work for people who didn't have a clue about how to run a business. Most businesses simply began to fail. The economic disaster and getting out of the country became topics of daily conversation at my grandmother Julia's house.





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The currency was changed from dollars to Cuban pesos, and those who had dollars had to convert them to pesos. It was illegal to possess U.S. dollars, or any other kind of foreign currency for that matter. When heavily armed soldiers entered our house I was shocked by the way they acted—they were so rough and aggressive. I didn't understand what was going on. They went into my parents' room. There was a painting on the wall, and behind the painting was a wall safe. When the soldiers knocked the painting off the wall, they found the safe. Of course, they automatically assumed that my parents were hoarding dollars and that my father must have been doing something illegal.

The soldier shoved all of us outside onto the patio behind the house. These guys weren't in a mood to hear arguments—not that any of us felt much like arguing. After we were outside for a few minutes, the soldiers called my father back inside. We were all very tense by this point when I heard my father arguing with one of the soldiers. My father had forgotten the combination to the safe. He hadn't used it in years, so why would he remember it? This just made things worse. The soldiers forced us all to sit down. Then they put a charge of dynamite on the safe and blew it open. All they found inside was some of my mother's old jewelry and a bunch of papers—nothing of any value, and certainly nothing illegal.

It seemed that the government's eyes were now on my father. My family had been shaken not long before by the arrest of one of my cousins, who'd gone to a foreign embassy in Havana, trying to get a visa. My aunt, who had helped my cousin, wound up spending twenty years in jail because of it. With each passing month the stakes were getting higher.

Many schoolmates and friends of mine had already left. Seeing this only strengthened my resolve to leave. Many children left Cuba on their own. Between 1960 and 1962, fourteen thousand children left Cuba under Operation Pedro Pan, the largest exodus of unaccompanied minors ever to take place in the Western Hemisphere. About half of them were reunited with relatives in the United States, while the rest were placed with American foster families who took care of them until their own parents or family members could leave. Most didn't see their families for years on end. Some families were separated forever.





I know my parents especially were terrified by that possibility. In any case, travel to the United States became impossible for three years after the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. All travel between the two countries was suspended until late 1965, when both governments agreed to an airlift of Cubans who wished to relocate to the United States. But it wasn't that easy; even though the Freedom Flights lasted into the 1970s, not everyone who wanted to go could leave, like my brother, for instance.

My brother, Papo, was almost a Pedro Pan. At the start of the program, he applied for his passport and the family prepared for his departure. He was fourteen years old. The government didn't allow young men between the ages of sixteen and thirty to leave the country, because they might be needed to serve in the military, so Papo's time was running out. But when he got his passport, his last name was misspelled and so the passport wasn't valid. He turned sixteen before a new passport could be issued, so Papo couldn't go. It would be another twenty years before he could get out of Cuba.

It took a long time for my family to get used to the idea of anyone leaving the country. Perhaps it was because both sides of my family had already come to Cuba from other countries; they were more reluctant to leave too quickly. They had come looking for a better life and had built it through hard work. Both my mother's and father's parents had come to Cuba when it was still a very young country. My mother's father did not want to be an immigrant yet again.

Cuba achieved independence from Spain barely half a century prior to the revolution. I believe my grandparents and even my parents thought that this was the kind of thing a fledgling country went through—growing pains, if you will. Many people in our circle, people who stayed on those first years, believed either that Castro wasn't as bad as some thought or that he'd eventually be overthrown. Not everyone saw the revolution as an immediate threat to their way of life.

For my mother, leaving was out of the question because her own parents didn't want to go and my brother couldn't. Some members of my own family started to leave. Many of my father's relatives, his brothers and nephews, were in business for themselves, and they began to feel





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pressure from the communist government, believing their own businesses would be confiscated.

The first person to leave was my father's older sister, Isabel—known to everyone as Javivi (like *habibi*—Arabic for “my love”) and her husband, my uncle Pepe Medina. He had a car dealership and they lived a life of relative ease. My uncle's political activities—he wrote articles and spoke out against the Castro regime—made it imperative for them to leave. They were the first to go, and they spent many years working extremely hard at menial jobs in Miami to make money to get as many of us out as possible.

All this was in the background when I overheard my parents that fateful day. I went to my mother and I told her that I had to get out so I could get all of us out. My mother could see I was absolutely determined to leave Cuba, and so the family decided that we would try to get me out, along with my father. Someone in the family realized that my father and I could probably make it to Spain. My grandparents had been born in Spain, which meant my mother was eligible for a visa, and that would allow my father and me to get a visa to travel there. Once we decided on Spain, we heard of other Cubans doing the same.

My parents began getting the paperwork to the Spanish Embassy in Havana, and my aunt Javivi began sending us money for our tickets. It was a long process, and success was never assured. During that uncertain time, my senses were more acute than I ever remembered them being before. I didn't want to sleep—I would just lie in my bed studying the ceiling. I would concentrate on trying to remember every inch of my house. And I would long after remember its smell. I was already beginning to miss my grandfather and I was still with him.

The day finally arrived—our visas were granted. It was time to go.

My brother accompanied my father and me to Havana, where the two of us would catch the flight to Spain. It was February 1967, a few weeks before my fourteenth birthday, and it would be the last time we'd all be together for another thirteen years. If I'd known that at the time, I'm not sure I'd have had the courage to get on the plane. I guess it's a good thing I didn't know.





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The night before my father and I left, Papo and I walked and talked for hours. My brother was already married with two children. His desire to get out of Cuba was as strong as ever. I realized listening to him that I couldn't view leaving Cuba in a selfish way; I couldn't worry too much about my own feelings; I had to see the larger purpose to all of this. But leaving was so hard for me. I felt a weight on my soul.

My father and I left with nothing but the clothes on our backs. We really didn't have a lot of clothes to begin with, and Cuba was already suffering a lot of shortages. Most people who left took almost nothing with them.

I remember everything about leaving Cuba. I remember holding my father's hand as we walked up the stairs to the plane. I remember the smell of the plane. Most of all—worst of all—I remember looking out the window of the plane and seeing my mother and brother outside. When the plane began to move, I began to cry. And I cried. And I cried. And I cried all the way to Spain. It was as if my soul had left my body, I swear to God.

It was then that I realized in the most painful way possible that taking responsibility has a high cost. I didn't know the details of what might lie ahead in my life and in the lives of my family members, but in my heart of hearts I knew that this was the right thing. And I was resolute. I'd made my decision and taken on the responsibility and I stuck to it. This has been the guiding principle in all areas of my life since then.

With this decision, our family regained control over our destiny, something all of us want. But, of all the hard lessons I learned at an early age, this was the toughest and probably the most important: Taking responsibility might be painful; it might have a very high cost. Not taking responsibility could have an even higher cost.

