

By Kenny Logan

LA BALSA (THE RAFT)

I never knew that I could love something I'd never seen. I never thought I could live an entire life, fake to the world, but all too real in my thoughts and my dreams. I never imagined that freedom would be so close. Although, it's not. It wasn't then, it isn't now, and truthfully, it never will be. Our people don't get freedom. We get sold an idea when our hope has run out, our desperation is unbearable, and the price is just right. We get lulled into this illusion, like fat little pigs chasing carrots on a stick. Except we're starving.

But before all the jade and cynicism, before I had a taste of the bitter, disappointing, corrupt, malfeasant, rotting, and perpetually unjust thing we call the world— or perhaps society, if we're being precise— I was a boy on an island.

Familiar laughter woke me up. It seeped through the colorful, crumbling walls; filled the small, humid rooms, and drowned out the whir of the yellowed fan sitting next to my bed. It's funny, that fan had been in my family longer than me— but then again, that's the case for most things we owned. Once upon a time, it was bought new, in a time of “prosperity”, a time when foreigners flooded our beaches and happily forgot our struggles which were present even then. It was a time right before we had placed our faith in a silver-tongued tyrant, who we hoped would bring us freedom. After the fan, we

bought his lies. He promised utopia and delivered propaganda. He proclaimed that our island would finally be equal, then stole fortunes in “defense of the motherland”. When the stores were abandoned, our stomachs were filled with dust and dreams, and the electricity was permanently off, that yellowed fan sat dormant in the corner. When the walls collapsed in one of our neighboring *solares*– the colonial buildings which have remained the same since they were built by the Spanish, which the Americans call beautiful and historic, which our neighbors call what crushed their child– that fan kept going. It didn’t have a choice; it couldn’t just stop because of tragedy, or because it was sad, or because its weekly food rations decreased yet again. It kept its head down and somehow found joy in the overwhelming pain until it was unplugged or broken.

I turned the fan off as I got out of bed, careful not to wake my brother sleeping next to me; single rooms were a lie we heard about on *telenovelas*. “Look who finally woke up!” laughed my *tío* as I joined my family in the next room over. Two generations and our neighbors sat around a worn table, drinking *cafe con leche*– espresso with milk–, eating *pan planchado*– buttered toast–, and playing dominos. I gave everyone a hug and a kiss, a “Good morning. *Buenos dias.*”, then I took my spot at the table, complete with a chipped cup and a matching plate. The tone shifted slightly as everyone continued with their previous conversation.

“How long until you’re done José?” My mom whispered, instinctually looking over her shoulder like what they said was true: like they were always watching.

“I just need to put in the fishing rods, and we’re set. Can’t go on vacation like this and not go fishing.” There was a glint in my neighbor’s eyes as he spoke. His sun-worn skin wrinkled to form his contagious smile, and once again the tension was momentarily cut. They were always so serious when they talked about it as if we weren’t about to win the lottery. I never understood. I was just excited about McDonald’s and Disneyworld.

“It should be another couple of days,” my dad said. Speaking to the group, he continued, “Remember guys, there’s no going back. Ever. It’s a one-way trip.”

My *tia* spoke up this time. “You sure? I was planning on swimming back and forth a couple of times. You know, fix my backstroke.” The table chuckled again, but I still sat in confusion. Why would they even want to go back? Sure, I would miss my friends but, in America, we could do anything. We could start a new life, buy as much food as we wanted, and if the president wasn’t good, we could just *vote* him out.

“So... we leave tonight?” asked José’s wife, Benita. Her voice trembled slightly, and the whole table paused for a moment. I swear I could hear everyone's hearts pounding away in their chests.

“Yeah! Let's go to America!” I laughed. The table smiled back at me, but only with their lips; everyone's eyes were still clouded with fear, desperation, and maybe an ounce of hope.

My mom made eye contact with me. Her face softened again, and with anguish, she said, “*Mijo*, my son, I don’t think you’ll be able to bring *Píchi*.”

I felt like the *solares* in my neighborhood: crumbling, forgotten, lost. I was sure she was joking, but why would she make such a cruel joke? And where was the smile that teases normally came with? My ears got hot as blood rushed to my head. “*Mamá, ¿eso es un chiste verda?* You’re joking right?”

Píchi was more than my dog, she was my best friend. I had found her with her tail tucked between her legs, limping down a dirty street. She was sniffing around trash cans, black fur matted to her skin, bones like they were ready to break through the surface. I don’t know if puppies feel emotions like us, but her soft brown eyes told a tragic story. She looked broken and abused— like all she wanted was to find a home. I couldn’t just leave her. It took most of my lunch, which admittedly wasn’t much to start with, but soon *Píchi* started trusting me. She would find me on my walk to school, following me all the way to the front doors. When my last class dismissed me, she would be patiently waiting, tail wagging, tongue lashing about. It wasn’t long before we became inseparable.

It was my dad’s turn to break the news. He spoke softly, as if the quieter he spoke, the less it would hurt. “It’s too dangerous for *Píchi*. We won’t have the food or the water to spare. If *Píchi* comes, she probably won’t make it. I’m sorry.”

Perspective is a fascinating concept. In the span of a moment, the time it took for my breath to become shallow and my eyes wet, the time it took for reality to rear its ugly head, my perspective snapped. This wasn't a *vacation*. This wasn't a light-hearted trip to the beach, nor a winning lottery ticket. This was a gamble, and the stakes were our lives. If *Píchi* might not make it... will I?

The low clouds and humid night air covered us like a thick blanket. Having memorized the plan, nobody had to say a word. My brother grabbed one corner of the raft, helping my dad, José, and my uncle. Benita and aunt walked ahead, looking out for people; my mom and I walked behind with the food and tanks of water.

The journey was supposed to take two days— ninety miles was a lot for the little motor to cover— and we had just enough food to make it. The water would be harder to ration, but my dad and José thought we would have enough.

Everything felt monotonous. Fear made our movements rigid, almost robotic, and a sharp, painful silence permeated the air. My thoughts were blank; my eyes were bloodshot. I couldn't say bye to my friends, they couldn't know we were leaving, and the thought of *Píchi* burned like a match, blown out before it ever got a chance to shine.

The raft was lowered into the ocean, our bags were loaded, and we left. Just like that. Almost carelessly, we threw our lives into the sea, hoping that our course would stay true, praying that everything went well. Really, there was no other option. It's crazy what you're willing to do when you are desperate, what you're willing to risk. Looking back, I don't think I ever realized how my parents felt. I was tormented about losing my pet; they could have lost their children.

We paddled for an hour, putting as much distance as we could from the shore, then José turned on the motor. My *tía* smiled for the first time that night, "We're going to America."

Three hours later, the motor died. Four days later, we died.

At least I thought we did. That's how the story ends for most people— we were lucky. After the second day, ocean winds blew off the tarp that protected us from the sun's lethal glare. On the third day, my brother and I split the last sip of water. We were dead— I was sure we were, I've heard the stories. There was no reason somebody would save us. We were floating, stranded in the middle of an ocean, out of food and water, with no protection and nobody coming to the rescue. Ironically enough, stepping on that boat barely changed our circumstances. Until it did. On the fourth day, my hazy, sun-stroke-induced sleep was interrupted by a faint grumbling. It sounded like a boat, somewhere far off in the distance. I looked up. "*¿Oyen eso?* Do you guys hear that?" It

came out as a croak, my throat raw from dehydration, but a couple of people looked up. After a few minutes, the noise got louder.

Like the incoming tide, a wave of hope washed over us. Maybe, just maybe, we were going to make it.

The rescue was a blur, and the months after felt like days. I'm not even sure when I started speaking English, probably at some point between starting middle school and my parents getting hired as janitors. Or maybe it was when they picked up second, then third jobs. All I know is they never learned English. It was always, "*Sorri, no espeak.*" followed by "*¿Que dijeron?* What did they say?" The worst part was I didn't really know either. They would hand me mail: bills and report cards, asking what they had to do. I had to learn words like "Late Payment" and "Your son is struggling in his classes". We also never went to Disneyworld, though we did go to McDonald's when our fridge was empty. I had all these grandiose aspirations of what life would be like on the other side, of American apple pie and always having power; I used to dream of living like those famous movie stars we always heard about. Instead, we lived in poverty. It got to the point where my parents' jobs weren't enough. When my brother and I got jobs too, it wasn't enough either, at least not for my mom and dad. "School is the most important thing," they would say, "Work, but get A's."

Honestly, it didn't seem fair. We had risked so much to have so little. It constantly felt like we were treading water, a breath away from drowning— barely afloat. It was better than having our heads held under the waves of our beautiful beaches, hands tied behind our backs by tyranny and despair, but neither felt *good*. Our parents worked so much that I barely saw them, and even math was so much harder in English, but we had to keep kicking. If we stopped, we would sink.

One day, my parents forced me to see our reality. I had yelled, frustrated that I couldn't help more. I felt useless watching them work so hard, while I wasted my time on word problems and the history of World War II. The least I could do was drop out of high school. It took a breakdown for me to see the truth. It took seeing my parents cry because they were scared— because their only purpose was to support their kids yet time and time again the sacrifices they made just didn't feel like enough. We cried together; I didn't understand the American dream. I just wondered whether it was worth it.

It's crazy, looking back years later. I started writing this story as a much younger man, one bitter that his perception of lady liberty was not met. I put that draft on a shelf and watched it collect dust, unsure of where the world would take me or what course I would plot. When I first put pen to paper, I was convinced that the product I bought was flawed, propaganda like what we got back home. Our youth can often be blinding. I didn't know I could change the world if I just worked hard enough— where I was raised,

that was never a possibility. I didn't understand the wonders of college or khan academy. More importantly, I was confused; it's hard to make sense of colliding worlds.

Now, when I can't sleep, when nobody is awake but the owls and the immigrant parents supporting their kids, and the only thing keeping me company is the drone of my AC unit, I think about how fortunate I was to step on that raft. We could have lost it all. I left behind my friends, who will never feel the weightlessness of freedom; I left behind *Pichi*, who deserved the world; and I traded our family's heirloom, a whirring, yellowed fan for a brand-new air conditioner. Honestly, there were times when it *did* feel like we lost it all. But we didn't. We always had each other. I'll always miss the humid summer mornings when our only respite came from that yellowed fan; the nights when the whir of the blades and the buzz of the mosquitos became one. But these memories have been tinted rosy by time. Nobody *really* misses it.

It's funny, when I bought a window ac unit for my dorm, I actually felt guilty. I wonder how my old fan would've felt among the shiny, new air conditioners. Maybe it would've felt useless— like it would never belong. I'd like to think it would have been happy to always have power, relieved that our neighbors are finally safe and that our food ration cards turned into little stamps. But I don't think it would've let America change it. It wouldn't let itself grow complacent among the endless commodities. If anything, it would've worked harder.

I think people misunderstand the American dream. For a long time, I misunderstood it. I started this race ninety miles behind, had to outwork everybody except maybe my parents, and still, it didn't feel like enough. It never felt fair. But in the end, I did it. I made my parents proud. Seeing the tears of joy that stained my acceptance letters, the realization that we had finally made it, that it was all worth it— *That* is the truth about the American dream. Of course, nothing is equal here. Nobody starts on the same track. Some kids have the brand-new Nikes while we run barefoot. But *anybody* can win this race; that is the magic of America. When all is said and done, Nikes can only take you so far, and us immigrants know what it takes. We've fought our whole lives for this chance, and we'll be damned if we let anything stop us.

We came from borrowed dollars and broken streets. We came from “dinner tonight is sleep” and “I don't think we'll have power for a week”. We were raised with nothing, and now, suddenly, the world is at our fingertips. Nobody can stop us if we just *reach*.