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## Reading Article G2

### **Article #13: Common Threads**

by Ana Veciana-Suarez

On a sweltering summer day, we head north from the southernmost tip of America in a caravan of cars loaded with all the accouterments needed for a family outing into the unknown. Somebody has brought a big thermos of *café con leche*, someone else several bakery boxes of guava pastries. In the cooler, cans of Coca-Cola and Materva grow cold. We are aiming for Parris Island, a spit of land in South Carolina where our country's few and proud are trained.

My nephew Juan Andres is graduating from Marine basic training. Seventeen and

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we are of him. I have to admit, though, this clamoring crowd of *tías* and *tíos* chattering in Spanish does have the potential for embarrassment from a teenage recruit's point of view.

We've been told to dress casually and to wear red, the color of his battalion. Days before we left, I scrambled to make sure all of us would display a bright proclamation of this hue. Inspired by renewed patriotic fervor, we also brought little American flags.

The morning of the ceremony dawns hot and humid. In the motel lobby we gather for breakfast and discuss the day's strategy. Can we clap during the ceremony? Should we cheer? Shout out his name? Boost the younger children on our shoulders so they can admire their brave cousin as he marches by?

Heaven knows we don't want to do the wrong thing. Already, we have drawn attention during our overnight stay in the quaint little city of Beaufort. It was impossible to ignore the hard popping sound of our Cuban Spanish against the smooth, sweet Southern drawl that surrounded it.

In the midst of our discussion, I look across the lobby and spot my father. He squints into the distance, looking lost. He is wearing—oh, my God! No!—black nylon socks and inexpensive black rubber sandals with white Bermuda shorts and a paisley jersey shirt buttoned snugly against his ample belly. His legs are whiter than a Canadian tourist's. Tacky, and not even a touch of red.

"Is he in his underwear?" my husband whispers as he follows my stare. I'm speechless. I nudge my sister, who elbows my other sister, a chain reaction through my generation's stronghold.

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"But your mother picked out the clothes." He stares at us, perplexed. "They're brand-new. And they weren't cheap either."

I detect a whiff of aftershave, and something tightens hard across my chest. Suffering the embarrassment of parents is a verity of childhood, as inevitable as scraped knees and bent bicycles. It is doubly uncomfortable, however, when you are the child of immigrants, the prized possession of a well-meaning but clueless Mami and Papi who just don't get it, and maybe never will.

I see my father in his ridiculous outfit and cringe, for this and all the mortifications of the past: The chaperons of my dating years. The hand-packed school lunches that smelled funny. The out-of-date haircuts given at home. The frilly dresses when I wanted jeans instead.

I'm forced out of my wallow by the need to rush off to grab seats in the bleachers for the big event. I watch as the old man who is my father struggles to get into the front seat of the rented van. I think I can hear his joints creak. He winces when my nephew Mikey shuts his door, but manages to pull himself up and straighten his shoulders. He pats down his hair, fiddles with his collar.

This is the same man who, many years earlier, fled Communist Cuba in the dark of night on a 14-foot boat, a man who gave up a stellar business career to start anew in freedom. A man who, long past retirement, still works seven days a week in the family marine business. A man who has always managed to soldier on bravely, no matter how alien or difficult the circumstances.

At the ceremony, the viewing stands undulate in Marine red and yellow. Though we strain to search for my nephew as the platoons file in, we can't spot him in the perfectly starched and straight rows.

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conformity is more than two generations.

It is a long story of sacrifice and risk told countless times in our history, that of the immigrant and exile, the stranger in a strange land whose children and grandchildren become as American as frijoles. As American as Marines.