Some Things

“Why is everybody crying and yelling at me?”

My first thoughts as I stepped into Cuba were not exactly profound. I was exhausted, sweaty, and startled as I walked out of the airport and into a crowd of excited and agitated Cubans. I was immediately self-conscious. Everybody was looking at me. They knew I was American. They knew I was a tourist. They knew I was different.

My thoughts were interrupted by an increase in the shouting. A woman sprinted past me and threw herself into the crowd, sobbing. The man she was hugging held her tightly and cried deeply. Suddenly, I realized that nobody was looking at me. They were looking for their relatives. This was the first time that this family had been together in decades. Without knowing why, I, too, began to cry.

Many Cubans have relatives that live in the United States. However, it isn’t easy to travel back and forth between the two countries. The governments impose restrictions and acquiring visas and airline tickets is expensive. It is rare for relatives to see each other much. But I was lucky enough to witness a few of these emotional reunions.

My ten day study abroad in Havana was an eye opening experience. I was worried beforehand that I would be harshly judged for being an American. I knew that the relationship between our countries was strained, so wouldn’t that mean that Cubans would dislike me automatically?

But I was proved very wrong. I met so many wonderful people. But most importantly, I met Netti. She was a beautiful old woman that worked at a museum in Old Havana. I walked in
and asked several questions about Cuban culture. She spoke no English. I spoke some Spanish. We understood each other perfectly.

We discussed the history of Cuba and the impact of the Revolution on the country. We talked about young people and their thoughts on the Castro brothers and Che Guevara. I told her about my life in the United States and my family. Netti and I were fast friends.

Each day that I talked to her, Netti treated me like a granddaughter. She smoothed my hair and commented on my dimples. She held my hand and told me I was pretty. She was half my height, but she made me bend over so she could kiss my forehead. She gave me a hug and told me to be safe on my way home. Netti reminded me of my own grandmother, and her warmth and sweetness.

On the final day of our trip, I told Netti that I was leaving, and likely never returning. Her eyes filled with tears, and so did mine. She handed me posters of Fidel Castro and a few pins. She held my hand tightly and told me that she was glad we met and that she loved me.

In my time in Cuba, I met dozens of kind, intelligent, wonderful people. I loved talking to street vendors and university professors about their daily lives and the political and social issues of Cuba. But I didn’t connect with anybody quite the way I connected with Netti. I’m positive that in those ten days, I formed a beautiful, unforgettable bond.

I arrived home on Christmas Eve Eve. I bounced through O’Hare International Airport, incredibly excited to see my family and tell them about all of my adventures. As I slowly rolled down the escalators, I could see their bodies and faces emerge. They held up a homemade sign with my old nickname, “Laire,” in case I didn’t remember what they looked like. I ran toward them and collapsed into their embrace. It had been three weeks since I had last seen them.
As we walked toward the baggage claim, I thought back ten days to my arrival in Cuba. I had witnessed the reunion of families who spent years apart. They were yelling and crying with joy that they were finally able to transcend the strife between the United States and Cuba and hug their family members. All I had done was study abroad.

But then my mother grabbed my hand, smoothed my hair, and commented on my dimples. It reminded me of Netti. I thought about the way she treated me, as if I, a random American student, were her daughter, her granddaughter, her niece. In that moment, I realized some things are universal. My life in the United States may be very different from Netti’s life in Cuba. Our governments may not like each other. Our social and political systems might be radically different. Our tastes in food and music might be total opposites. But we all love to make new friends and celebrate our reunions with old ones.