


The book cover features a large, bright yellow sun in the upper center, partially obscured by a red and orange brushstroke at the top. Below the sun, a grey, stormy sea is depicted with a small boat filled with people. The background shows a grey, cloudy sky with several birds in flight. The overall color palette is dominated by reds, oranges, yellows, and greys, creating a somber and dramatic atmosphere.

Stormy Seas

STORIES OF YOUNG BOAT REFUGEES

MARY BETH LEATHERDALE
and ELEANOR SHAKESPEARE



**To Madzia and Shia, who taught me what it is to be in the crosshairs of history — Mary Beth
To my grandfathers, whose lives served as great examples of compassion and justice — Eleanor**

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Illustrated and designed by Eleanor Shakespeare

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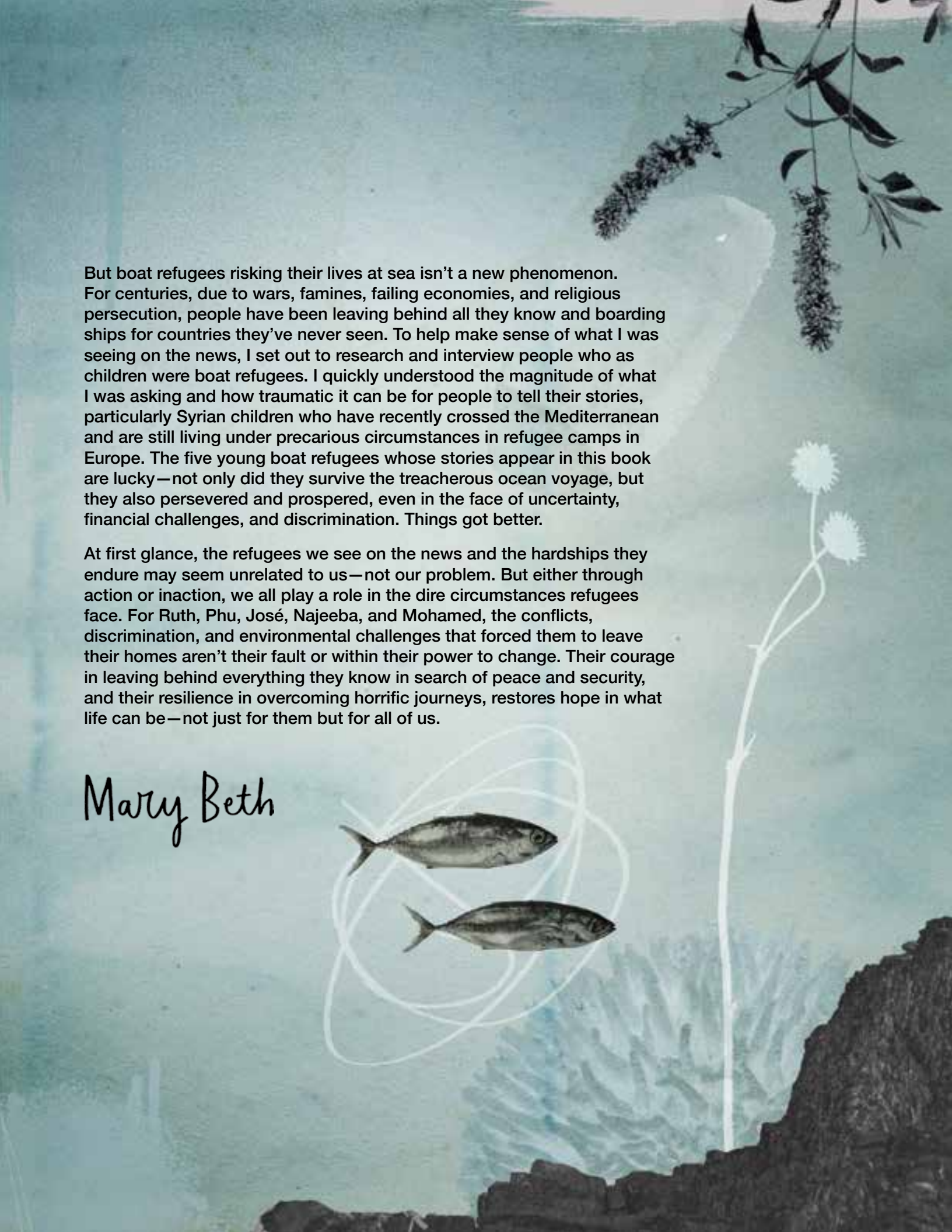
INTRODUCTION

If you're reading this, you—like me—have probably won the lottery. Not the giant-check, instant-millionaire kind of lottery. The other lottery win—the really valuable one. That random, lucky break that means you were born in or immigrated to a relatively peaceful and prosperous place in the world. Along with all the other amazing things about you, that makes you pretty extraordinary.

Sixty-five million of the world's seven billion people aren't so lucky. They have been forced to leave their homes because of war, persecution, or natural disasters. Nineteen million of these displaced people have no hope of ever returning home safely and are seeking asylum in another country. More than half of these refugees are children and teenagers; many are orphans or “unaccompanied minors” traveling alone.

News reports in 2015 and 2016 have been full of stories of Syrian refugees who are risking their lives to cross the Mediterranean Sea. The civil war that has been raging there for years has forced more than half of the country's population to flee. That's more than 11 million people in need of shelter, food, water, and medical care. And thousands of others, escaping wars, persecution, and drought in the Middle East and in North and sub-Saharan Africa, are also trying to find refuge in Europe.

The influx of refugees has caused divisions across the European Union. Countless individuals and organizations have rallied to provide support to the refugees, and countries such as Germany, Hungary, and Sweden have welcomed thousands of asylum seekers. Yet many countries in Europe and North America are hostile to refugees and migrants. Anti-refugee and anti-immigrant policies are increasing around the world, depriving refugees of the right to asylum guaranteed under international law. And, hundreds of thousands of refugees are forced to pay criminal smugglers for passage across the Mediterranean on overcrowded, unseaworthy boats.



But boat refugees risking their lives at sea isn't a new phenomenon. For centuries, due to wars, famines, failing economies, and religious persecution, people have been leaving behind all they know and boarding ships for countries they've never seen. To help make sense of what I was seeing on the news, I set out to research and interview people who as children were boat refugees. I quickly understood the magnitude of what I was asking and how traumatic it can be for people to tell their stories, particularly Syrian children who have recently crossed the Mediterranean and are still living under precarious circumstances in refugee camps in Europe. The five young boat refugees whose stories appear in this book are lucky—not only did they survive the treacherous ocean voyage, but they also persevered and prospered, even in the face of uncertainty, financial challenges, and discrimination. Things got better.

At first glance, the refugees we see on the news and the hardships they endure may seem unrelated to us—not our problem. But either through action or inaction, we all play a role in the dire circumstances refugees face. For Ruth, Phu, José, Najeeba, and Mohamed, the conflicts, discrimination, and environmental challenges that forced them to leave their homes aren't their fault or within their power to change. Their courage in leaving behind everything they know in search of peace and security, and their resilience in overcoming horrific journeys, restores hope in what life can be—not just for them but for all of us.

Mary Beth

THEY CAME BY BOAT: A BRIEF HISTORY

For hundreds of years, wars, famines, failing economies, and religious persecution have forced people to leave their family, friends, and all they know behind in hope of a better life. Here are just some of the people who boarded boats seeking asylum before our stories begin.

1670

Huguenots leave France for England seeking refuge from religious persecution

1677

Mennonites sail to Pennsylvania to escape religious persecution in Germany and Switzerland

1763

Filipino sailors forced into service in their Spanish-ruled homeland jump ship and find refuge in Louisiana

1770

Facing religious and political oppression, thousands of Roman Catholics leave Ireland for North America

1809

Refugees from Saint Domingue escape fighting in the Caribbean French colony to seek asylum in New Orleans



1830

Jews leave Germany and Austria-Hungary to escape anti-Semitism

1845

Irish Potato Famine will force millions of starving Irish Catholics to immigrate to North America

1865

Crop failures force Norwegians to immigrate to North America

1868

Swedes immigrate to North America mainly due to famine

1850

Danes who converted to Mormonism immigrate to United States for the freedom to practice their religion

1914

Sikh passengers on the *Komagata Maru* arrive in British Columbia, Canada, in search of jobs. They are denied entry and forced to sail back to India, where World War I has started. Although they are British citizens, the British government distrusts them and kills 19 passengers and imprisons many others





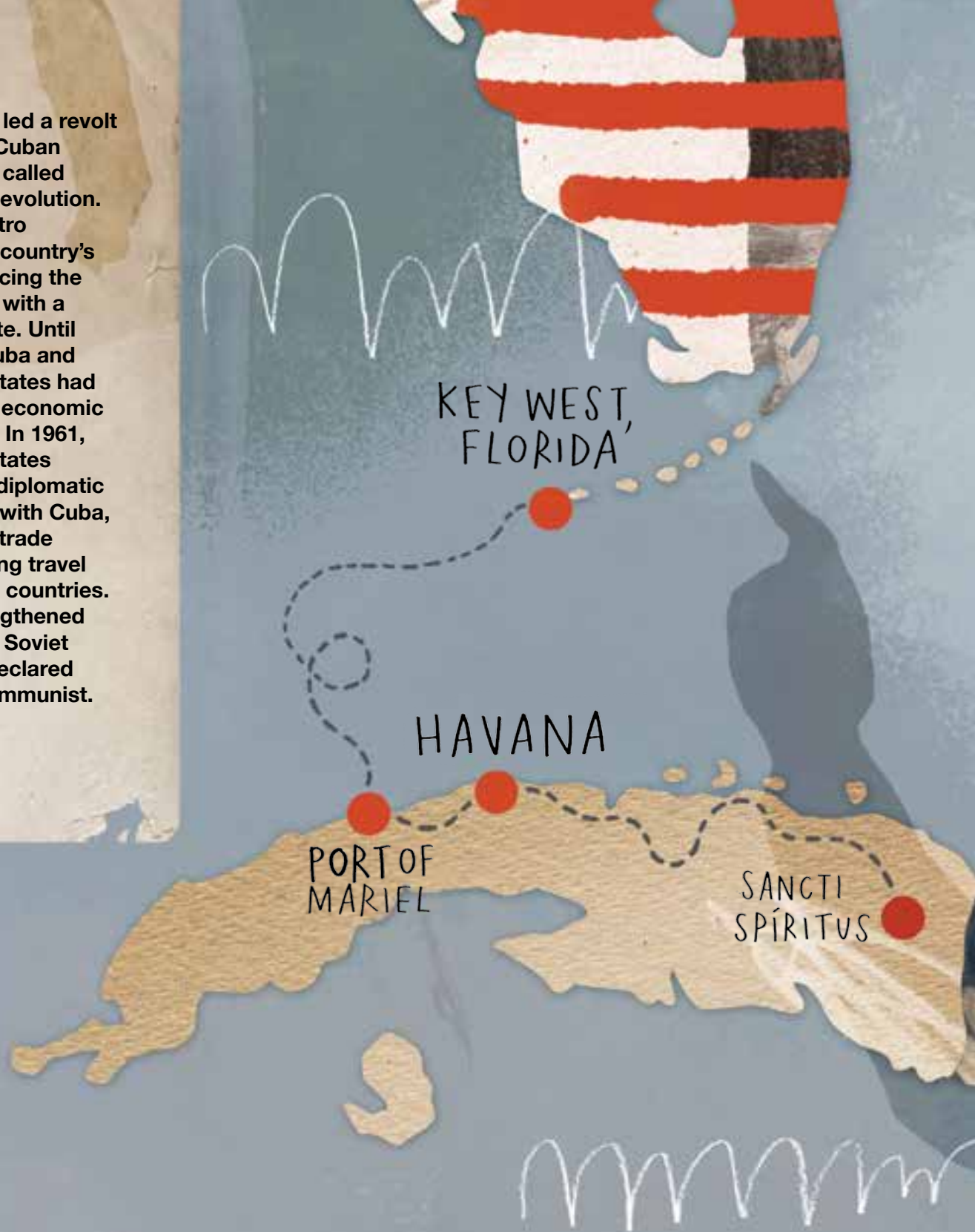
Stormy Seas

José

13 YEARS OLD
SANCTI SPIRITUS, CUBA
1980

“For the first time in my life, I feel that death is a real possibility.”

Fidel Castro led a revolt against the Cuban government called the Cuban Revolution. In 1959, Castro became the country's leader, replacing the government with a socialist state. Until that time, Cuba and the United States had a very close economic relationship. In 1961, the United States ended their diplomatic relationship with Cuba, stopping all trade and restricting travel between the countries. Castro strengthened ties with the Soviet Union and declared himself a communist.



ASYLUM:
OFFERING PROTECTION
TO THE PERSECUTED

"José, if you want to get off this boat

you can stay in Cuba." José froze as the Cuban officer walked away from the *Dulce II*. The small, two-story recreation boat was filled with thirty people—more than twice its capacity—and the captain was worried that it would not be safe to sail. Of the thousands of boats crowded into Port of Mariel harbor, this was the one an officer had ordered José and his family to board. José wasn't moving.

For decades, José's parents had wanted to leave Cuba; they didn't support the country's Communist leader, Fidel Castro, and were tired of the government controlling the food, clothing, and other goods they could buy. José's father, and thousands of other Cubans suspected of working with the United States to overthrow the government, were arrested and taken to a detention center. Almost twenty years later, they were still seen as suspicious outsiders by the government.

Since 1961, when the United States and Cuba had broken diplomatic ties, it had been almost impossible to get a visa to leave. That changed six weeks ago, after more than ten thousand people crowded onto the Peruvian embassy grounds seeking asylum. To avoid further unrest and embarrassment about Cubans' dissatisfaction with his system, Castro said anyone who wanted to immigrate to the United States could, as long as there was a boat in the Port of Mariel to take them.

Now thirteen-year-old José, his father, mother, and little sister, Leticia, were on a boat to the United States and that's where they were staying. All that stood between José and the life he dreamed of was a seven-hour boat trip. But stormy seas were ahead.



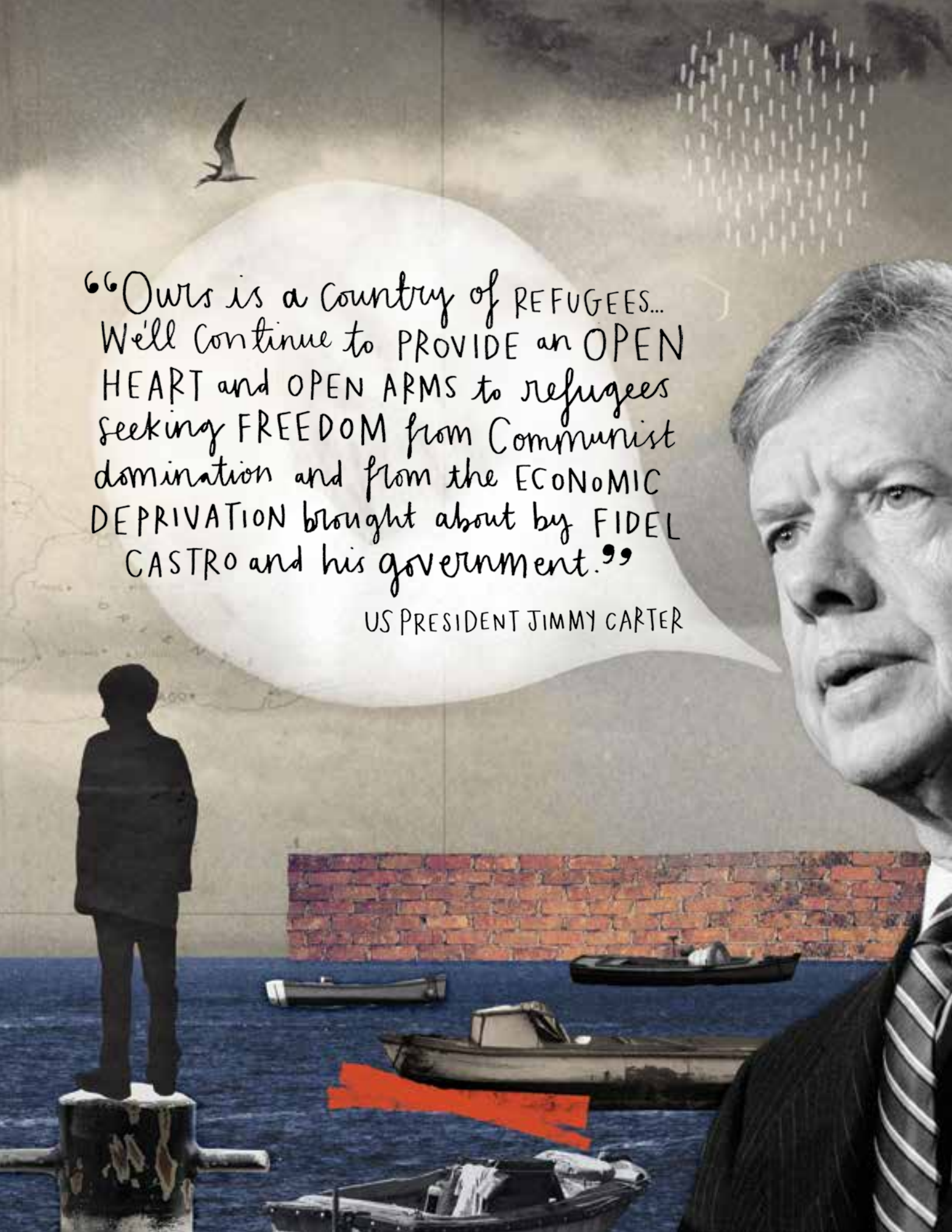
“Will we ever leave Cuba? We're stuck in Port of Mariel. A big thunderstorm hit the Gulf and it's not safe for us to sail. Even worse, the guards order us not to leave the boat. I am so bored. All day long, we sit huddled together on the deck in the hot, bright sun. People are getting desperate. We're hungry. The only thing to eat is the cold scrambled eggs and rice that the guards bring. Each day, there's even less of that. Kids are getting sick from the heat and hunger. My mother says I need to eat and gives me her eggs. But the smell of sweat and vomit on the boat is so disgusting, I can barely swallow.

When we finally set sail for Florida, the sea is completely calm. An hour into our journey, the joy on my father's face turns to concern. The engine has died! As the captain tries to restart the motor, the calm sea turns choppy. In a flash, high waves surround the boat. The water is pouring in ... Everyone grabs whatever they can find to bail it out. It's no use. The water is already up to my ankles. All around me people are screaming 'I don't want to die!'”

“He... who has no
REVOLUTIONARY
blood, he who does not have
a MIND that adapts to
the IDEA of a REVOLUTION, ...
We do not WANT them;
We do not NEED them.”

CUBAN PRESIDENT FIDEL CASTRO





“Ours is a country of REFUGEES...
We'll continue to PROVIDE an OPEN
HEART and OPEN ARMS to refugees
seeking FREEDOM from Communist
domination and from the ECONOMIC
DEPRIVATION brought about by FIDEL
CASTRO and his government.”

US PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER

“We’re saved! A shrimp boat pulls up beside us and we pile onto it, leaving behind the few belongings we still have. The boat is already crowded with two hundred dirty, scruffy-looking men. We avoid their eyes and try to find a place to sit. When I turn around, I see the *Dulce II* sink into the sea.

A wall of water hits. Huge gusts of wind rip across the deck. We’re in the tail of a storm. Waves taller than a house rock the boat. When one hits, the captain yells at us to slide to the other side to keep the boat from capsizing. Back and forth we go. One minute, it feels like we are on the top of a mountain and the next it’s like we’re crashing down the cliff. When night comes, it gets worse. It’s impossible to sleep. Everyone is crammed together on the cold, wet, metal floor. People are so hungry and dehydrated it’s like being surrounded by the dead. Everyone is just urinating and vomiting right there. The smell is overwhelming. Although I haven’t gone to church in years, I begin to pray. Hour after hour after hour, I stare at the horizon looking for land. It feels like we are the only boat in the ocean.”

THE MARIEL BOATLIFT 1980

APRIL 1

Cubans drive bus into Peruvian Embassy

APRIL 4

Castro withdraws guards from the Embassy

APRIL 6

10,000 Cubans crowd into the Embassy seeking asylum

APRIL 20

Castro announces Cubans free to immigrate to United States

APRIL 21

Boats start picking up refugees

OCTOBER 31

Cuba and the United States agree to end the boatlift

“One minute, it feels like
we are on the TOP of a MOUNTAIN
and the next it's like we're
CRASHING down the CLIFF.”





WHAT HAPPENED TO JOSÉ?

After eighteen hours at sea, José's boat was rescued by the US Coast Guard and towed into Key West, Florida. José's sister was severely dehydrated and needed medical treatment, but recovered quickly. After a few days in Miami Beach, José and his family moved to New York City, where his grandmother lived. José was shocked by the poverty and drugs in their US neighborhood and questioned why they'd left Cuba at all. He worked hard to learn English and to do well in school. After a couple of years, the family moved to the suburbs of New Jersey. For José it was like moving to another country again. He had a hard time fitting in but focused on his studies and got accepted to college. He worked at a supermarket and saved up for graduate school. Today, José is an associate professor at Florida Southern College. He returned to Cuba for the first time in 2010 to make a documentary about the Mariel Boatlift called *Voices from Mariel*.

Cuban refugees like José faced a great deal of prejudice. They were known as the "Marielitos." President Fidel Castro called the refugees *scoria* ("trash"), saying he used the Mariel Boatlift to deport Cuba's criminals and mental patients to the United States. Only about 10 percent of the people who came to the United States had a criminal record or mental health issues. Still, Americans were afraid that Cubans were untrustworthy and would take jobs from US citizens. In fact, the influx of Cuban refugees did not drive down wages or raise unemployment among Miami residents—it actually brought more jobs and businesses to the area. In 2015, Cuba and the United States restored diplomatic relationships. Travel rules have been loosened to allow Americans to travel to Cuba, but US trade to Cuba is still restricted, hurting the Cuban economy.



“When we got to the UNITED STATES I felt like I was in a MOVIE. All the colors were so much BRIGHTER, the grass greener. It was SURREAL. I couldn't believe we had SURVIVED.”

CUBAN REFUGEES, 1980

- 125,000 Cubans transported to the United States
- 1,700 boats
- \$1,000-per-person fee
- 90 miles (145 kilometers) from Cuba to the United States
- 27 Cubans died at sea