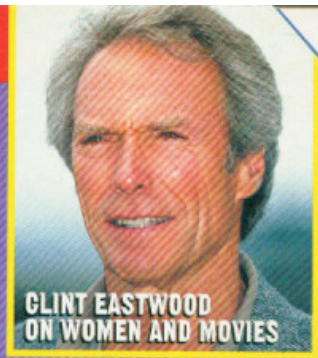


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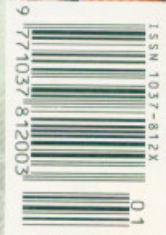
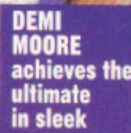
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Thought you'd like a
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FLEEING FIDEL

One of Castro's most bitter critics—his daughter Alina Fernández—defects to the US ■ by Ron Arias



UP FRONT

ON THE DAY BEFORE CHRISTMAS, FIDEL CASTRO'S ONLY daughter lies curled up on a four-poster bed in a palatial penthouse in Columbus, Georgia. Newly arrived in the United States from Spain after a daring escape from Cuba, Alina Fernández Revuelta, 37, is enjoying the plush surroundings and kind attentions of her hostess, Elena Amos, the wealthy Cuban-born widow who helped arrange her defection. "But I didn't come here for luxuries," Fernández says. "I came here to have choices in life—and to get my daughter out of Cuba." Just then, a visitor accidentally brushes a purple pansy off the nightstand onto the floor. Fernández bolts off the bed to retrieve the flower, which she had plucked when she arrived in Columbus. "This was the first flower I saw with a snowflake on it," she explains. "I have it here to give to my daughter."

◀ "In Cuba, the government calls people like me deserters," says Fernández (in Columbus, Georgia). "But I don't like the word. I just escaped a bad situation."

► Beset by economic and political problems, Castro quickly offered Alina's daughter a visa to follow her mother to America.



Fernández took a desperate gamble in her bid for freedom: She left her 16-year-old daughter, Alina Maria, in Cuba, hoping that once she was abroad the teenager would be allowed to join her. For now, the strategy appears to have worked. Two days after Christmas, civil rights activist the Rev Jesse Jackson, visiting Havana, announced that Fidel Castro had assured him Alina Maria could leave as long as her grandmother and father consented. "I think there will be no difficulties from either the father or me," said Natalia Revuelta, the girl's maternal grandmother. "She is very close to her mother and has been missing her a lot."

"It was wonderful news," says Fernández. "But I'm disappointed she could not leave immediately. I want her with me." The mother, who left Havana on Dec. 19 on a Madrid-bound plane with only a suitcase, is unconcerned that she will have little more than a flower with which to welcome her daughter. "We will have each other, and this is the way it was planned," she says. At first Fernández did not tell her daughter about the escape plot, which was hatched by the Valladares Foundation, a US-based human-rights group that works with Cuban exiles and dissidents. "Eventually I told her," Fernández adds. "She was brave and kept the secret. We slept together in the same bed all the week before I left."

Photographs by Ann States/SABA

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Fernández slathered on make-up, donned a wig and even gained 4.5kg to resemble the woman pictured on the Spanish passport provided by her Valadares contacts. "I made my mouth big with lots of lipstick," she says, "then walked by the officials real casual, like all the other European tourists." On her arrival in Madrid, US consular officials granted her asylum.

Fernández says she first felt the urge to leave Cuba 16 years ago when she was giving birth to her daughter, nicknamed Mumin. "I realised I was bringing a child into the wrong kind of world," she explains, her voice weak after days of tense travelling followed by a media blitz in Columbus. "So, depending on how desperate I got, my plans to leave would come and go," she adds in halting English. "Actually, this last time it was Mumin who pushed me. The only chance to get her out was for me to escape first. So I escaped. I did it because of my love for her." As Fernández explains, she and Alina Maria were living like most Cubans—"without purpose, just shuffling ahead, impotent. I was like a vegetable, and she was beginning to be one too. We had to get out."

Fernández was born out of wedlock in 1956 to Natalia (Nati) Fernández Revuelta, a rebellious Cuban socialite married to a prominent Havana surgeon who left for the United States shortly after Castro came to power. Natalia had met Castro, then a guerrilla leader, early in the Cuban revolution and had given him the keys to one of her husband's apartments. The luxury flat soon became a refuge for their trysts. As a child, Alina Fernández called Castro Daddy during his occasional visits to her mother's home, when he would pat the girl affectionately on the head. But in the mid-1960s, after a two-year stay in Paris while her mother worked in a diplomatic post at the Cuban embassy, Fernández saw less and less of Castro. By then, he had begun a relationship with another woman, his de facto wife, Delia Soto del Valle, who eventually bore him five sons. The first real break with her father came at age 15, when Alina refused his offer to allow her to take the Castro name legally. As "Fidel's daughter", she was already the target of hostility and envy from others. "I had enough problems already without



NICOLAS REYNARDI/ANNA LITVINSON/GETTY IMAGES



▲ "I loved modelling," says Fernández (on a shoot in Havana in 1988). "But here I'm looking for new opportunities."

◀ Anticlockwise from right in a 1987 photo: Fernández, her mother Nati, daughter Mumin holding a portrait of great-grandmother Tati, and grandmother Natalia.

▶ With the support of new friends such as Pam Baker, Fernández (left) waits in Georgia to be reunited with her daughter.

adopting his last name," she says.

Stubborn and independent by nature, Fernández first studied medicine, later switched to diplomacy, then began a modelling career in Cuba's tiny, barely tolerated fashion world. But her desire to be thin nearly led her to anorexia. "I've had health problems," she says. "Some were psychosomatic, but I survived them all because I used to be a naturally strong girl." Over the years, authorities repeatedly denied her requests to leave, which only sharpened her criticism of Castro, whom she has called a tyrant, and his regime, a "dead-end street".

Fernández was married three times, but her father only attended her first wedding. Her second husband, Francisco Salgado, a retired dancer of the Cuban National Ballet, is Alina Maria's father. A third marriage, to a Mexican businessman, prompted a falling-out between father and daughter because government authorities would not permit Alina to accompany her husband to his native country, presumably to avoid the political embarrassment of Castro's daughter leaving Cuba. After waiting a year, he returned alone to Mexico and the marriage ended. "In Cuba, marriage is a sport," Alina explains. "The system



obliges you to marry so you can buy more with your ration card." But she now speaks fondly of her last husband. "I would like to see him," she says. "But I don't know if he wants to see me again. I liked him a lot. He's a gorgeous person and one of the most sensitive, intelligent men I know."

Even for the elite in Cuba, life is hard and becoming harder. Although Alina's daughter attended the National School of Arts, thought to be the finest in Cuba, the institution is in shambles, and she dropped out this year.

Because of US trade sanctions against Cuba and the economic collapse of the Eastern bloc, there is no

fuel even for school buses, and both students and teachers were often absent. Fernández, who gave up modelling several years ago, says she spent most of her time at her modest, two-bedroom flat with her daughter, relatives and friends. "My daily routine was listening to everybody else's problems, and I would read a lot," she says. "I grew up surrounded by books. But I was reading the same books over and over because books are hard to get in Cuba. I read Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* three times." She laments having only recently discovered Saul Bellow—"Many of his characters are outcasts,

which I'm drawn to"—and sees a parallel between life in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and the "absurd world" of Castro's Cuba.

As she awaits word of her daughter's possible arrival, Fernández keeps a watchful eye on her pansy. She believes it is "too soon" to think about her future plans in her new country. "I'm certain there will be opportunities," she says. "What's important is not to give up hope, because to give up hope is to give up spirit. And to give up spirit is to give up the will to live. So every day brings new hope, and the thoughts of my daughter bring about the will to live." ■

