

My Father Vanished When I Was 7. The Mystery Made Me Who I Am.

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[Original Article](#), June 15, 2021, The New York Times Magazine. (40 minutes)

Somehow it was always my mother who answered the phone when he called. I remember his voice on the other end of the line, muffled in the receiver against her ear. Her eyes, just starting to show their wrinkles in those days, would fill with the memories that she shared with this man. She would put out her cigarette, grab a sheet of paper and scribble down the address. She would put down the receiver and look up at me. “It’s your dad,” she would say.

I slept in a twin bed in the living room, and I would start jumping on it, seeing if I could reach the ceiling of our mobile home with my tiny fingers. My mother would put on some makeup and fish out a pair of earrings from a tangle in the basket next to the bathroom sink. Moments later, we would be racing down the highway with the windows rolled down. I remember the salty air coming across San Francisco Bay, the endless cables of the suspension bridges in the heat. There would be a meeting point somewhere outside a dockyard or in a parking lot near a pier.

And then there would be my dad.

He would be visiting again from some faraway place where the ships on which he worked had taken him. It might have been Alaska; sometimes it was Seoul or Manila. His stories were endless, his voice booming. But I just wanted to see him, wanted him to pick me up with his big, thickset hands that were callused from all the years in the engine room and put me on his shoulders where I could look out over the water with him. From that height, I could work my fingers through his hair, black and curly like mine. He had the beard that I would grow one day. There was the smell of sweat and cologne on his dark skin.

I remember one day when we met him at the dockyard in Oakland. He got into our old Volkswagen Bug, and soon we were heading back down the highway to our home. He was rummaging through his bag, pulling something out — a tiny glass bottle.

“What’s that?” I asked him.

“It’s my medicine, kid,” he said.

“Don’t listen to him, Nico,” my mother said. “That’s not his medicine.”

She smiled. Things felt right that day.

My father never stayed for more than a few days. Before long, I would start to miss him, and it seemed to me that my mother did, too. To her, he represented an entire life she had given up to raise me. She would step on my mattress and reach onto a shelf to pull down a yellow spiral photo album that had pictures of when she worked on ships, too. It told the story of how they met.

The book began with a postcard of a satellite image taken from miles above an inky sea. There were wisps of clouds and long trails of ships heading toward something large at the center. My mom told me this was called an atoll, a kind of island made of coral. “Diego Garcia,” she said. “The place where we made you.”

By 1983, when my mom reached Diego Garcia, she had lived many lives already. She had been married for a couple of years — “the only thing I kept from that marriage was my last name,” she said — worked on an assembly line, sold oil paintings, spent time as an accountant and tended bar in places including Puerto Rico, where she lived for a while in the 1970s. Then on a lark, she decided to go to sea. She joined the National Maritime Union, which represented cargo-ship workers. Eventually she signed on for a six-month stint as an ordinary seaman on a ship called the Bay, which was destined for Diego Garcia, an island in the Indian Ocean with a large military base.

The next picture in the album shows her on the deck of the Bay not long before she met my father. She’s 37, with freckled white skin, a seaman’s cap and a large fish she has pulled out of the water. There are rows of bent palm trees, tropical birds swimming across the waves. That watery landscape was just the kind of place you would picture for a whirlwind romance. But it turned out my parents spent only one night together, not exactly intending to. My father had been working on another ship moored off the island. One afternoon before my mother was set to head home, they were both ashore when a storm hit. They were ferried to his ship, but the sea was too choppy for her to continue on to the Bay. She spent the night with him.



When the job on the island was up, my mom took her flight back to the United States. My father headed for the Philippines. Nine months later, when I was born, he was still at sea. She put a birth announcement into an envelope and sent it to the union hall in San Pedro, asking them to hold it for him. One day three months later, the phone rang. His ship had just docked in the Port of Oakland.

The way my mom tells the story, he got to the restaurant before her and ordered some coffee. Then he turned around and saw her clutching me, and it dawned on him that he was my father. It seemed he hadn't picked up the envelope at the union hall in Southern California yet. He was holding a mug. His eyes got wide and his hands began to tremble and the hot coffee went all over the floor. "I have never seen a Black man turn that white," she would say to me.

She told him that she'd named her son Nicholas, after him, and even added his unusual middle name, Wimberley, to mine. Then she handed me over to him and went looking for the restroom. She remembers that when she reappeared, my father had stripped me naked. He said he was looking for a birthmark that he claimed all his children had. There it was, a tiny blue one near my tailbone.

It's hard to explain the feeling of seeing this man to people whose fathers were a fixture of their daily lives. I hardly knew what a "father" was. But whenever he came, it felt like Christmas. He and my mother were suddenly a couple again. I would sit in the back seat of our old VW watching their silhouettes, feeling complete.

Yet the presence of this man also came with moments of fear. Each visit there seemed to be more to him than I hadn't seen before. I remember one of his visits when I was 5 or 6 and we headed to the creek behind the trailer, the place where many afternoons of my childhood were spent hunting for crawdads and duck feathers and minnows. It was warm and almost summer, and the wild fennel had grown taller than me and was blooming with big yellow clusters, my father's head up where the blooms were, mine several feet below, as I led the way through stalks. I remember having hopped into the creek first when a large, blue crawdad appeared, its pincers raised to fight.

I froze. My father yelled: "You're a sissy, boy! You scared?"

His words cut through me; I forgot the crawdad. There was an anger in his voice that I'd never heard in my mother's. I started to run away, beating a trail back through the fennel as his voice got louder. He tried to catch me, but stumbled. A furious look of pain took control of his face — I was terrified then — and I left him behind, running for my mother.

When he made it to the trailer, his foot was gashed open from a piece of glass he'd stepped on. But strangely, his face was calm. I asked if he was going to die. He laughed. He told my mom to find a sewing kit, then pulled out a piece of string and what looked like the longest needle I had ever seen. I will never forget watching my father patiently sew his foot back together, stitch after stitch, and the words he said after: "A man stitches his own foot."

When he was done, he smiled and asked for his medicine. He took a big swig from his bottle before he turned back to his foot and washed it clean with the remaining rum.

Then he was gone again. That longing was back in my mother, and I had started to see it wasn't exactly for him but for the life she'd had. On the shelf above my bed sat a basket of coins that she collected on her travels. We would set them out on a table together: the

Japanese 5-yen coins that had holes in the middle; a silver Australian half dollar with a kangaroo and an emu standing next to a shield. The Canadian money had the queen's profile.

Soon after my 7th birthday, the phone rang again, and we went to the port. We could tell something was off from the start. My father took us out to eat and began to explain. He had shot someone. The man was dead. He was going to be put on trial. It sounded bad, he said, but was not a "big deal." He didn't want to talk much more about it but said he was sure he could get a plea deal. My mom and I stared at each other across the table. Something told us that, like his rum, this situation was not what he said it was.

I got into the back seat of the VW, my parents into the front. We drove north to San Francisco, and then over the water and finally to the Port of Crockett.

"Thirty days and I'll be back," he told us several times. Fog was coming in over the docks like in one of those old movies. "I love you, kid," he said.

He disappeared into the mist, and then it broke for a moment, and I could see his silhouette again walking toward the ship. I thought I could hear him humming something to himself.

Thirty days passed, and the phone didn't ring. It was a hot autumn in California, and I kept on the hunt for wildlife in the creek, while my mom was busy in the trailer crocheting the blankets she liked to make before the temperature started to drop. It had always been months between my father's visits, so when a year passed, we figured he had just gone back to sea after jail. When two years passed, my mom revised the theory: He was still incarcerated, just for longer than he'd expected.

But my mom seemed determined that he would make his mark on my childhood whether he was with us or not. On one of his last visits, he asked to see where I was going to school. She brought down a class picture taken in front of the playground. "There are no Black kids in this photo except for Nicholas," he said and put the photo down. "If you send him here, to this la-di-da school, he'll forget who he is and be afraid of his own people."

My mother reminded him that she was the one who had chosen to raise me while he spent his time in places like Papua New Guinea and Manila. But another part of her thought he might be right. While I'd been raised by a white woman and attended a white school, in the eyes of America I would never be white. That afternoon, his words seemed to have put a tiny crack in her motherly confidence. One day, not long after her sister

died of a drug overdose, my mother announced she was taking me out of the school for good.



We approached my next school in the VW that day to find it flanked by a high chain-link fence. Like me, the students were Black, and so were the teachers. But the school came with the harsh realities of what it meant to be Black in America: It was in a district based in East Palo Alto, Calif., a town that made headlines across the country that year — 1992 — for having the highest per-capita murder rate in the United States. A skinny fourth grader with a big grin came up to us and said his name was Princeton. “Don’t worry, we’ll take care of him,” he said. My mom gave me a kiss and walked away.

Many of the other students had missing fathers, ones they had long ago given up on finding. It was my mother’s presence that marked me as different from my classmates. One child, repeating a phrase she learned at home, told me my mother had “jungle fever,” because she was one of the white ladies who liked Black men. “Why do you talk like a white boy?” I was asked. These might seem like no more than skirmishes on a playground, but they felt like endless battles then, and my constant retreats were determining the borders of who I was about to become. At the white school, I loved to

play soccer and was a good athlete. But there were only basketball courts now, and I didn't know how to shoot. The few times I tried brought howls, and once again, I was told I was "too white." I never played sports again in my life. Labeled a nerd, I withdrew into a world of books.

It certainly didn't help the day it came out that my middle name was Wimberley. "That's a stupid-ass name," said an older bully, whose parents beat him. "Who the hell would call someone that?" Wimberley came from my father's family, and strange as the name might have been, my mother wanted me to have it as well. But where was he now? He hadn't even written to us. If he could come visit, just pick me up one day from school one afternoon, I thought, maybe the other kids could see that I was like them and not some impostor.

One day when I was trying to pick up an astronomy book that had slipped out of my backpack, the bully banged my head against the tiles in a bathroom. My mother got very quiet when I told her and asked me to point out who he was. The next day she found him next to a drinking fountain, pulled him into a secluded corner and told him if he touched me again she would find him again and beat him when no one was looking, so there would be no bruises and no adult would believe she'd touched him. From then on the bully left me alone.

But the image of a white woman threatening a Black child who didn't belong to her wasn't lost on anyone, not least my classmates, who now kept their distance, too. A Catholic nun who ran a program at the school saw that things weren't working. I had spent so much time alone reading the math and history textbooks from the grade above me that the school made me skip a year. Now the teachers were talking about having me skip another grade, which would put me in high school. I was just 12. Sister Georgi had a different solution: a private school named Menlo, where she thought I would be able to get a scholarship. She warned that it might be hard to fit in; and from the sound of things the school would be even whiter and wealthier than the one my mother had taken me from. But I didn't care: At that point, I couldn't imagine much worse than this failed experiment to teach me what it meant to be Black.

It had been five years since my father's departure. In the mid-1990s, California had passed a "three strikes" law, which swept up people across the state with life sentences for a third felony conviction. My mom, who had retrained in computerized accounting, started using her free time to search for his name in prison databases.

It was the first time I saw her refer to him by a full name, Nicholas Wimberley-Ortega. Ortega, I knew, was a Hispanic name. I usually saw it on TV ads, where it was

emblazoned on a brand of Mexican salsa. It seemed to have little to do with me. But my mother had also dropped hints that I might be Latino. She called me Nico for short and had taken, to the surprise of the Mexican family in the trailer next to us, to also calling me *mijo* — the Spanish contraction of “my son.” One day I asked her about it. She explained that she missed her days in Puerto Rico when she was in her 30s. But there was also my father’s family, which she remembered him telling her came to the United States from Cuba. In Cuba, she said, you could be both Latino and Black.

Menlo School became my first intellectual refuge, where I was suddenly reading Shakespeare and carrying a viola to school that I was learning to play. Four foreign languages were on offer, but there was no question which one I would take — I signed up for Spanish my freshman year, based on the revelation about my father’s background. We spent afternoons in class captivated by unwieldy irregular verbs like *tener* (“to have”) or how the language considered every object in the universe either masculine or feminine. A friend introduced me to the poems of Pablo Neruda.

One day, a rumor started to spread on campus that the Menlo chorus had received permission to fly to Cuba to sing a series of concerts that spring. Not long afterward, the choral director, Mrs. Jordan, called me into her office. I’d taken her music-theory class and had been learning to write chamber music with her and a small group of students. At recitals that year, she helped record some of the pieces I composed. I thought her summons had to do with that.

“Are you a tenor?” she asked. I told her I couldn’t sing. Everyone could sing, she said. There was a pause. I thought only my closest friends knew anything about my father; everyone’s family at this school seemed close to perfect, so I rarely mentioned mine. Mrs. Jordan looked up. She noted that I had Cuban ancestry and spoke Spanish; I deserved to go on the trip. With the United States embargo against Cuba still in effect, who knew when I might get another chance? “And you don’t need to worry about the cost of the trip,” she said. “You can be our translator.”

We traveled from Havana to the Bay of Pigs and then to Trinidad, an old colonial town at the foot of a mountain range, with cobblestones and a bell tower. I sat in the front of a bus, humming along to a CD of Beethoven string quartets that I had brought and watching the landscape fly by, while the chorus rehearsed in the back.

My Spanish was halting in those days, just words and phrases stitched together out of a textbook, and the Cuban accent could just as well have been French to me then. But the crowds that the chorus sang for roared when they found out that one of the Americans would be introducing the group in Spanish. The concert hall in the city of Cienfuegos

was packed with Cubans and humid air. I stepped out and greeted everyone. “He is one of us!” yelled someone in Spanish. “Just look at this boy!”



In the days after I returned home, it began to hit me just how much I had lost with the disappearance of my father. On the streets of Havana, there were men as Black as my father, teenagers with the same light-brown skin as me. They could be distant relatives for all I knew, yet with no trace of my father besides a last name, I would never be able to tell them apart from any other stranger in the Caribbean. My mother said my father had once looked for a birthmark on me that “all his children had.” So where were these siblings? How old were they now?

“How old is my father even?” I asked.

My mother said she wasn’t sure. He was older than she was.

How had she been searching for this man in prison records without a birth date? I pushed for more details. But the childhood wonder of the days when I would hear about his adventures had drained off long ago: I was 16, and the man had now been gone for half my life.

My mother tried her best to tell me the things she remembered his mentioning about himself during his visits. It all seemed to pour out at once, hurried and unreliable, and it was no help that the details that she recalled first were the ones that were the hardest to believe. He grew up somewhere in Arizona, she said, but was raised on Navajo land. He got mixed up with a gang. I had heard many of these stories before, and I accepted them mostly on faith. But now I thought I could distinguish fact from fiction. And the facts were that he had gone missing, and my mother had no answers. Was I the only one who didn’t take this casually? My mother started to say something else, and I stopped her.

“Do you even know his name?” I asked.

“Nicholas Wimberley-Ortega.” She was almost crying.

“Wimberley?” I said, pronouncing the name slow and angry. “I wonder if it even is. I’ve never known someone who had a name that ridiculous other than me.”

I know it wasn’t fair to take out my anger on the woman who raised me and not the man who disappeared. But soon a kind of chance came to confront my father too. His life at sea rarely crossed my thoughts anymore, but by the time I was in college, sailing had entered into my own life in a different way. My third year at Stanford, I attended a lecture by an anthropologist on Polynesian wayfinding. Nearly every island in the Pacific, the professor explained, had been discovered without the use of compasses by men in canoes who navigated by the stars. The professor put up an image of the

Hokule'a, a modern canoe modeled off the ancient ones. He said there were still Polynesians who knew the ancient ways.

Within months of the lecture, I read everything I could find about them. The search led me to major in anthropology and then to the Pacific — to Guam and to a group of islands called Yap — where I had a research grant; I was working on an honors thesis about living navigators. The men used wooden canoes with outriggers for their journeys and traded large stone coins as money. But their jokes and drinking reminded me instantly of my father.



One night after I was back from the research trip, I fell asleep in my college dorm room, which I shared with two other roommates. I almost never saw my father in dreams, but I'd vowed that the next time I did, I would tell him off right there in the dream. And there he was suddenly that night. I don't remember what I said to him, but I woke up shaken. I remember he had no face. I wasn't able to recall it after all these years. I was yelling at a faceless man.

When I graduated, I decided to work as a reporter. I'm not sure it was a choice my mother saw coming: The only newspapers I remember seeing as a child were Sunday editions of The San Francisco Chronicle, which she bought for the TV listings and to harvest coupons. But newspapers had international pages and foreign correspondents who wrote for them. It seemed like a way to start knowing the world. She understood

that I needed to leave. But she also knew that it meant she would no longer just be waiting by the phone to hear my father's voice on the other end of the line. She would now be waiting to hear mine.

I was hired by The Wall Street Journal when I was 23, and two years later I was sent to the Mexico City office. By that point, Latin America wasn't just the place that spoke my second language — after classical music, the region was becoming an obsession for me. The Caribbean was part of the bureau's purview, and I took whatever excuse I could to work there. It was at the Mexico bureau that I also got to know a Cuban American for the first time, a veteran reporter named José de Córdoba, whose desk sat opposite mine in the attic where our offices were. De Córdoba was a legend at the paper, a kind of Latino Graham Greene who grew up on the streets of New York. As a child, he fled Cuba with his family after the revolution.

I had only a single name that connected me to the island, but that didn't seem to matter to him, or to anyone else for that matter. In the United States, where your identity was always in your skin, I had never fully fit in as a white or a Black man. But here I was starting to feel at home.

I had always struggled to tell my own story to others, embarrassed by the poverty or the absent dad or the fact that none of it seemed to have a through line or conclusion. Telling the stories of others came more easily. I loved the rainy season when the thunderclouds would pile up above Mexico City and pour down in the afternoons, washing the capital clean. I sat in the attic, trying to condense someone's life into a newspaper profile. De Córdoba would be working on his Fidel Castro obituary, a labor of love he had first drafted in the 1990s, filling it with every manner of anecdote over the years.

I hung a big National Geographic map of the Caribbean above my desk and looked up at it, Cuba near the center. The mapmaker hadn't just marked bays and capital cities but also some of the events that had taken place in the sea, like where the Apollo 9 capsule had splashed down and where Columbus had sighted land. I liked that. The romantic in me wanted to see that poster as a map of the events of my own life, too. There was Haiti, where I covered an earthquake that leveled much of the country, and Jamaica, where I saw the government lay siege on a part of Kingston while trying to capture a drug boss. On Vieques, a Puerto Rican island, I spent a long afternoon in the waves with three friends sharing a warm bottle of rum.

The rum reminded me of my father. The beach was near where my mother tended bar in the years before she met him. During my visit, I called her up, half drunk, to tell her

where I was. There was barely enough signal for a cellphone call, and it cut off several times. But I could hear a nostalgia welling up in her for that part of her youth. It was all of a sudden decades away now. She was nearly 70, and both of us recognized the time that had passed.



By the time my stint in Mexico was up, I had saved enough money to buy my mother a house. We both knew she couldn't spend the rest of her life in the trailer. My grandmother died the year before. The only family either of us had left were two nieces and a nephew that my mother had largely lost touch with after her sister died.

We found a place for sale near the town where my cousins lived in the Sierra Nevada foothills. It was a green-and-white home with three bedrooms and a wraparound porch, and the owner said it was built after the Gold Rush. Part of me wished that up there in the mountains, my mother and cousins might find some kind of family life that I'd never

known. We sold the trailer for \$16,000 to a family of four who had been living in a van across the street from her. We packed her life's possessions into a U-Haul and headed across the bay and toward the mountains.

Our telephone number had always been the same. We had always lived in the same mobile-home park, alongside the same highway, at the same slot behind the creek, No. 35. We had waited there for 20 years.

"You know if he comes, he won't know where to find us anymore," she said.

By the time I was in my 30s, I was the Andes bureau chief for The New York Times, covering a wide swath of South America. One March I traveled to a guerrilla camp in the Colombian jungle to interview a group of rebels waging war against the government. It was a hot, dry day. Some fighters in fatigues had slaughtered a cow and were butchering it for lunch.

Teófilo Panclasta, one of the older guerrillas, had been talking to me for about an hour, but it wasn't until I told him that my father was Cuban that his eyes lit up. He pointed to the red star on his beret and tried to recall a song from the Cuban Revolution.

"Where is your father now?" Panclasta asked.

The answer surprised me when I said it.

"I'm almost sure that he's dead."

I knew my father was older than my mother, maybe a decade older, but I'd never actually said what I assumed to be true for many years. I figured no man could have made it through the prison system to that age, and if he had made it out of there, he would have tracked us down years ago.

The realization he was not coming back left my relationship with my mother strained, even as she started her new life. I watched as friends posted pictures of new nieces and nephews. They went to family reunions. It seemed as if my mother didn't understand why these things upset me. She would just sit there knitting. A large part of me blamed her for my father's absence and felt it was she who needed to bring him back.

On my 33rd birthday, the phone rang. It was my mother, wishing me a happy birthday. She'd thought about my gift and decided on an ancestry test and was sending one to my address in Colombia. She was sorry she didn't know more about what happened to my father. But this would at least give me some information about who I was.

The test sat on my desk for a while. I wasn't sure that a report saying I was half Black and half white was going to tell me anything I didn't already know. But my mom kept calling me, asking if I'd sent my "genes off to the Mormons yet" — the company is based in Lehi, Utah — and finally I relented, swabbed my mouth and sent the plastic test tube on its way.

The map that came back had no surprises. There were pinpricks across Europe, where possible great-great-grandmothers might have been born. West Africa was part of my ancestry, too.

The surprise was the section below the map.

At the bottom of the screen, the page listed one "potential relative." It was a woman named Kynra who was in her 30s. The only family I had ever known was white, all from my mother's side. But Kynra, I could see from her picture, was Black.

I clicked, and a screen popped up for me to write a message.

I didn't need to think about what to say to this person: I told her that my father had been gone for most of my life and I had mostly given up on ever finding him. But this test said we were related, and she looked like she might be from his side of the family. I didn't know if he was alive anymore, I wrote. He used to be a sailor. I was sorry to have bothered her, I knew it was a long shot, but the test said she might be my cousin, and if she wanted to write, here was my email address.

I hit send. A message arrived.

"Do you know your dad's name at all?" she wrote. "My dad is a Wimberly."

It wasn't spelled the same as we spelled it, but there was no mistaking that name. Kynra told me to wait — she wanted to look into things and write back when she knew more.

Then came another message: "OK so after reading your email and doing simple math, I'd assume you are the uncle I was told about," she wrote.

I was someone's uncle.

"Nick Wimberly — "

I stopped reading at the sight of my father's name. A few seconds went by.

“Nick Wimberly is my grandfather (Papo as we call him),” she wrote. “My dad (Chris) has 1 full brother (Rod) and 1 full sister (Teri). Nick is pretty old. Late 70s to early 80s. Do you know if he would be that old? Earlier this year I saw Papo (Nick) and he said he planned on moving to Guam by the end of the year.”

My father was alive.

Kynra wrote that, if I wanted, she would send a few text messages and see if she could get me in touch with him.

The battery was running out on the laptop, and I went stumbling around the house looking for a cord, then sat on the couch. I thought about how strangely simple the detective work turned out to be in the end: These questions had haunted me for most of my life, and yet here I was idly sitting at home, and the names of brothers and sisters were suddenly appearing.

My phone buzzed with a text message.

“This is your brother Chris,” it said. “I’m here with your dad, and he wants to talk.”

The sun had set a few minutes before, but in the tropics, there is no twilight, and day turns to night like someone has flipped a light switch. I picked up the phone in Colombia and dialed a number in Los Angeles. It was Chris I heard first on the other end of the line, then there was some rustling in the background, and I could hear another voice approaching the receiver.

I spoke first: “Dad.”

I didn’t ask it as a question. I knew he was there. I had just wanted to say “Dad.”

“Kid!” he said.

His voice broke through the line lower and more gravely than I remembered it. At times I had trouble making out what he was saying; there seemed to be so much of it and no pauses between the ideas. I was trying to write them down, record anything I could. I had played this scene over in my mind so many times in my life — as a child, as a teenager, as an adult — and each time the gravity of that imagined moment seemed to grow deeper. Yet now there was a casualness in his words that I instantly remembered: He spoke as if only a few months had passed since I last saw him.

“I said, kid, one of these days, everything was gonna hook up, and you’d find me. It’s that last name Wimberly. You can outrun the law — but you can’t outrun that name,” he said.

“Wimberly is real then?” I asked. Yes, he said, Wimberly is real.

“What about Nicholas?” I asked. Nicholas was not his name, he said, but he’d always gone by Nick. His real name was Novert.

“And Ortega?”

He laughed when I said Ortega. That was mostly a made-up name, he said. In the 1970s he started using it “because it sounded cool.”

He told his story from the beginning.

He was born in Oklahoma City in 1940. He never met another Novert other than this father, whom he’d been named for, but thought it might be a Choctaw name. His last name, Wimberly, also came from his father, who had died of an illness in 1944, when my father was 4. He was raised by two women: his mother, Connie, and his grandmother, the imperious anchor of the family who went by Honey Mom. The women wanted out of Oklahoma, and my father said even he saw it was no safe place for a Black child. With the end of World War II came the chance — “the whole world was like a matrix, everything moving in every direction,” he said — with a wave of Black families moving west to put distance between themselves and the ghosts of slavery.

There are times when a father cannot explain why he abandoned his son.

The train ride to Phoenix was his first trip. They settled into the home of Honey Mom’s aunt. My father came of age on the streets of Arizona, among kids speaking Spanish, Navajo and Pima, all of which he said he could defend himself in still. At 16, he joined the Marine Corps, lying about his age. “I always had this wanderlust thing in my soul,” he said.

Yes, I had a lot more family, he said; he'd had what he proudly called a busy "baby-making life," fathering six children who had four different mothers. My eldest brother Chris came in 1960, when my father was barely 20. My sister Teri was born in 1965, Tosha in 1966, Rodrigo in 1967. Before me was Dakota in 1983. I was the youngest. He had many grandchildren — more than a dozen, he said. The whole family — all the half-siblings, the nephews and the nieces — they all knew one another, he said, everyone got along. "Everyone knows everyone except Nick," he said. "We couldn't find Nick."

I was right here, I thought.

He must have sensed the silence on my end of the line, because he turned his story back to that night at the Port of Crockett, the last we had seen of him. The trouble had come a few months before, he said, when he was between jobs on the ships. A woman outside his apartment asked him if he had a cigarette, then suddenly ran away. A man appeared — an estranged husband or lover, my father suspected, who thought there was something between her and my father — and now came after him. My father drew a gun he had. The man backed away, and my father closed the door, but the man tried to break it down. "I said, 'If you hit this door again, I'm going to blow your ass away,'" my father recalled. Then he pulled the trigger.

My father said he took a manslaughter plea bargain and served 30 days behind bars and three years on probation.

"And then?" I asked.

He'd had so many answers until that point, but now he grew quiet. He said he'd come our way several times on the ships and had even driven down to the row of mobile-home parks beside the highway. But he couldn't remember which one was ours, he said. He felt he'd made a mess of things. He didn't want the fact that my father had killed someone to follow me around. My mother hadn't really wanted him to be around, he said. He grew quiet. He seemed to have run out of reasons.

"I never really knew my dad," he said.

There are times when a father cannot explain why he abandoned his son. It felt too late to confront him. It was getting close to midnight. He was 77 years old.

"I'll never forget, Nicholas, the last night I saw you, kid," he said. "It was a foggy night when we came back, and I had to walk back to the ship. And I gave you a big hug, and I

gave your mom a big hug. And it was a foggy night, and I was walking back, and I could barely see the traces of you and your mother.”

He and I said goodbye, and I hung up the phone. I was suddenly aware of how alone I was in the apartment, of the sound of the clock ticking on the wall.

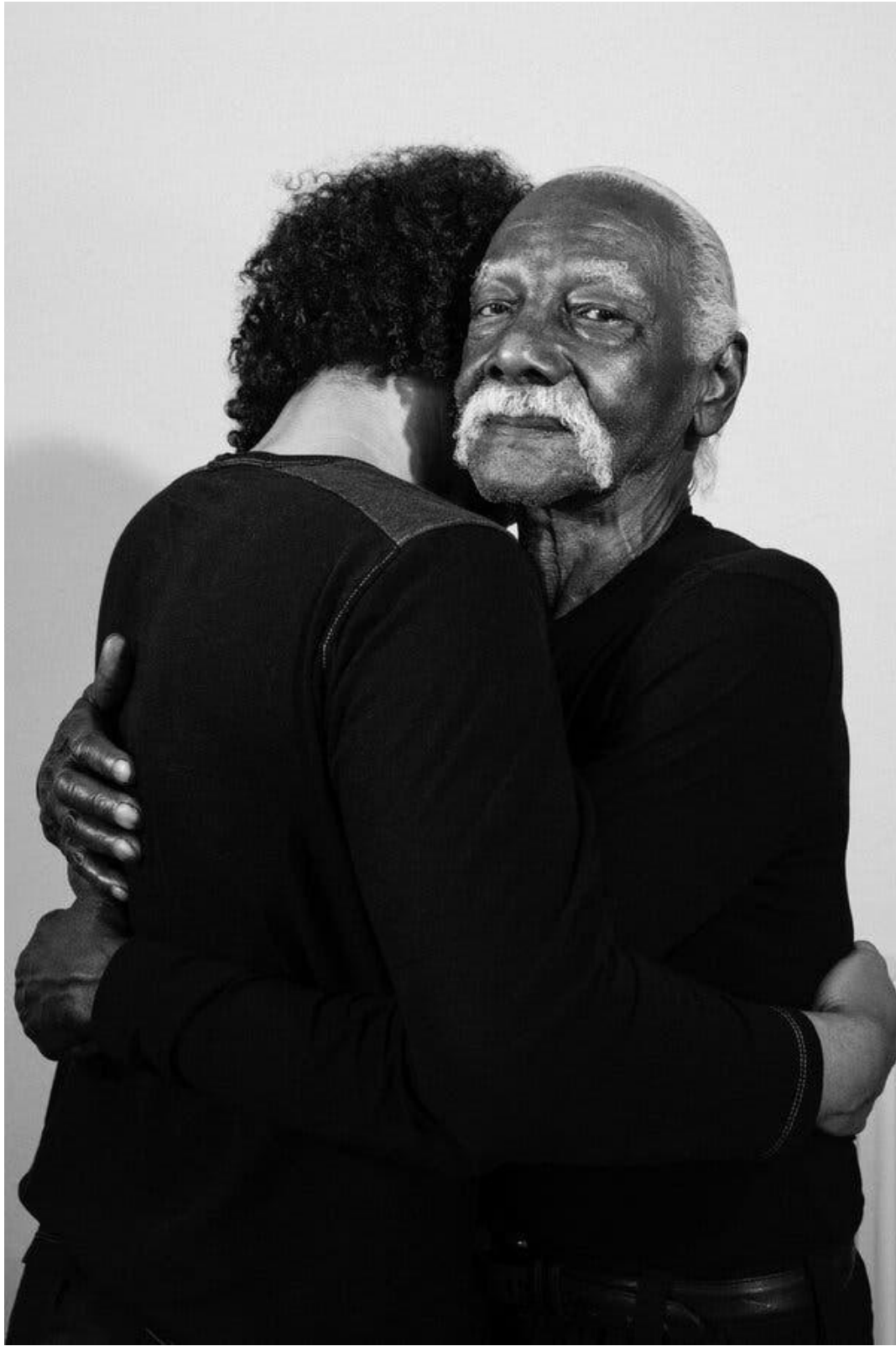
I got up from the desk and for a few minutes just stood there. I couldn’t believe how fast it had all happened. For decades, this man had been the great mystery of my life. I had spent years trying to solve the riddle, then spent years trying to accept that the riddle could not be solved. And now, with what felt like nearly no effort at all, I’d conjured him on a phone call. I was looking at the notes I’d taken, repeating a few of the things out loud. A vague outline of this man’s life starting in 1940, a half-dozen dates and cities, a few street names. My father had killed someone, I’d written. That part was true. He said he came looking for our home. But there was something about the tone in his voice that made me doubt this.

And then there was the name Ortega, which I had underlined several times. Ortega was not his name. I took a moment to sit with that. I had followed that name to Havana as a teenager and into a guerrilla camp in the mountains of Colombia as an adult. I had told old girlfriends that the reason I danced salsa was because I was Latino, and if they believed it, then it was because I did, too. In the end, fate had a sense of humor: I had finally followed the Ortega name back to its origin — not Cuba at all, but the whim of a young man, in the 1970s, who just wanted to seem cool.

Four weeks after that call, I was outside Los Angeles, waiting to see my father. Our meeting point was a Jack in the Box parking lot. There had been no rush to a port this time, and it was I, not he, who came from overseas, on a bumpy Avianca flight out of Medellín. It had been 26 years since I last saw him.

A four-door car pulled up, a window rolled down. And suddenly my father became real again, squeezed into the front seat of the car with one long arm stretched out of the window holding a cigarillo. Someone honked, trying to get into the drive-through lane. I barely registered the horn. My father’s face, which I’d forgotten years ago, was restored. He had a stubby nose and big ears. He had wiry, white hair, which he relaxed and combed back until it turned up again at the back of his neck. The years had made him incredibly lean. He had dentures now.

“Get on in, kid,” he shouted as he came out and put his arms around me.



We got in the car, and Chris, my brother, drove us to his home, where my dad had been living for the last few weeks, planning his next journey to Guam. The next morning, I found my father on Chris's couch. His time at sea made him dislike regular beds, he explained. Next to him, in two unzipped suitcases, were what seemed to be the sum total of his possessions, which included a kimono from Japan, two sperm-whale teeth he bought in Singapore and a photo album that included pictures of his travels over the last 40 years and ended in a run to McMurdo Station in Antarctica in the years before he retired in 2009. He was putting on the kimono; he handed the album to me. He went into a closet near the couch and pulled out a bottle of rum, took a long swig and shook it off. It was 9 a.m.

"Good morning, kid," he said.

He had pulled out a stack of old birth certificates from our ancestors, family pictures and logs he kept from the ports he visited that he wanted to show me. We spent the morning in the backyard together, leafing through this family history he'd been carrying around in his suitcase.

My father and I now talk every week or two, as I expect most fathers and sons do. The calls haven't always been easy. There are times when I see his number appear on my phone and I just don't answer. I know I should. But there were so many moments as a child when I picked up the phone hoping it would be my father. Not long ago, his number flashed on my screen. It suddenly hit me that the area code was the same as a number I used to have when I lived in Los Angeles after college. He'd been there those years, too, he said. He had no idea how devastated I was to know this: For two years, his home was only a half-hour's drive from me.

And if I am truly honest, I'm not sure what to make of the fact that this man was present in the lives of his five other children but not mine. Part of me would really like to confront him about it, to have a big showdown with the old man like the one I tried to have in my dream years ago.

But I also don't know quite what would come of confronting him. "He's a modern-day pirate," my brother Chris likes to say, which has the ring of one of those lines that has been repeated for decades in a family. Once, after I met my sister Tosha for dinner with my father, he stepped out for a smoke, and she began to tell me about what she remembered of him growing up.

He appeared time and again at her mother's house between his adventures at sea. She remembered magical little walks with him in the parks in Pasadena, where they looked for eucalyptus seed pods that he told her fairies liked to hide in. Then one day he said he

was going on a ship but didn't come back. It sounded a lot like the story of my childhood, with one big difference: Tosha learned a few years later that he had been living at the home of Chris's mother, to whom he was still married. He never went on a ship after all — or he did but didn't bother to return to Tosha afterward. The truth surprised her at first, but then she realized it shouldn't have: It fit with what she had come to expect from him.

I spent much of my life imagining who I was — and then becoming that person — through vague clues about who my father was. These impressions led me to high school Spanish classes and to that class trip to Cuba; they had sent me traveling to Latin America and making a life and career there. For a while after learning the truth about who my father was — a Black man from Oklahoma — I wondered whether that changed something essential about me.

Part of me wants to think that it shouldn't. It's the part of me that secretly liked being an only child because I thought it made me unique in the world. And even though I have five siblings now, that part of me still likes to believe we each determine who we are by the decisions we make and the lives we choose to live.

But what if we don't? Now I often wonder whether this long journey that has led me to so many corners of the world wasn't because I was searching for him, but because I *am* him — whether the part of my father that compelled him to spend his life at sea is the part of me that led me to an itinerant life as a foreign correspondent.

It is strange to hear my father's voice over the phone, because it can sound like an older version of mine — and not just in the tone, but in the pauses and the way he leaps from one story to another with no warning. We spent a lifetime apart, and yet somehow our tastes have converged on pastrami sandwiches and fried shrimp, foods we've never eaten together before now.

He shocked me one night when he mentioned the Hokule'a, the canoe built in Hawaii, which had figured in my college honors thesis about modern navigators. I'd considered it an obscure, absolutely solitary obsession of mine. And yet he appeared to know as much about it as I did.

"Keep your log," he often says at the end of our calls, reminding me to write down where my travels have taken me.

These days, I live in Spain, as the New York Times Madrid bureau chief. But in May, I returned to California to see my father. He had gone to live in Guam, then moved to the

Bahamas and Florida and now was back in California on Chris's couch. His wanderlust seemed to have no limits even now that he was in his 80s.

We were driving down the highway in a rented car when I turned on Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto on Spotify. I started to hum the orchestra part; I've listened to the piece for years. Then I noticed my dad was humming along, too, recreating the famous crescendo in the slow movement with his fingers on the dashboard. When the music stopped, I put on another old favorite of mine, a sinfonia concertante.

"Mozart," he said, humming the viola line.

I then found a piece of music I kept on my phone that I knew he couldn't name.

"Can you tell me who composed this one, Dad?" I asked.

He listened to the cello line, then to the piano.

"I cannot," he said. "But I can tell you the composer had a melancholy soul. Who wrote this?"

"You're looking at him," I said, smiling.

I wrote the music in Mrs. Jordan's music-theory class in high school. My father seemed genuinely impressed by this. And here I was, 36 years old, trying to impress my father.

We got to the end of the highway at the Port of San Pedro, the dockyards where he had spent so much time over his 43-year career. Since retiring, he likes to go out there and watch the ships heading out. We stopped and walked up to a lighthouse that sits in a grove of fig trees on a bluff above the harbor. A line of oil tankers could be seen disappearing out into the horizon. I thought about my memories of that ocean. He thought about his. ❖