

Dream's Journey

Franklin R. Chang Díaz

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No one gets anywhere without
someone else's help

Foreword

Dream's Journey is the second in a series of memoirs about my life, a life I have lived with great intensity and passion since I was very young. The narrative picks up where my first book, *Los Primeros Años*, ends. It is now August of 1968 and, as an 18 year old immigrant, I board a US-bound jet with fifty dollars in my pocket and a one-way ticket to The Land of Opportunity.

I arrived in the US in pursuit of my childhood dream: becoming a rocket scientist and an astronaut. In doing so, I began an extraordinary journey of adventure and discovery. But in my American Journey I discovered much more than science. Over these years, life has proven to be far richer, intricate and personally fulfilling than I could have imagined. While far from exhaustive, I have tried to present in this book the major events, critical choices and decisions that shaped my adult life as a human being, husband, father, and my early career as a scientist. This book is primarily intended as a personal statement for my children and their descendants, though I am happy to share these stories with anyone who finds them useful.

I have chosen to write my memoirs in the language in which I lived them. Therefore, *Dream's Journey* is written in English, my second language. On that task, despite a fair degree of comfort with my adoptive tongue, I could not have succeeded without the generous help of Dr. Janet L. Vondra, who, over several months, dedicated many long hours of her personal time to editing the original manuscript. To her and to others who reviewed the early drafts I am forever indebted.

In my personal journey through the Land of Opportunity and despite the perennial debate over immigration, I have come to appreciate Americans' unique generosity to those who come to its shores to realize their

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“American Dream.” Indeed I had my share of good Samaritans who helped me along the way and to all of them I am honored to dedicate this book.

Franklin Chang Díaz

Houston, Nov. 2014

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Chapter One.

Coming to America

It was the 23rd of August, 1968, the day before my father's 49th birthday, and, on this day, the time had come to put action to my words – to make good on my promise to embark on this new adventure that was to take me far away from home. Though I had mentally prepared myself all my life for this day, it had always been a dream, distant enough to not threaten my personal security or disrupt the comfort of my existence. But the day had finally arrived, and I was not so sure I could actually go through with it. I felt scared, uncomfortable, and uncertain about this next step, a step that seemed much too big and irreversible.

But, as with so many things in my life, I had set myself up. Over many years, I had set forces in motion, both internal and external, that would carry me during my many moments of self-doubt. Throughout my childhood and adolescence, I had become convinced that space exploration was my calling. I had seen many of my childhood friends who, by my side, had cherished similar longings; all had abandoned such dreams for the practicalities of the day, for the concrete and relative security of the beaten path. I had repeatedly announced to audiences of friends and family that I would, when the time came, go to the United States and become a rocket scientist

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and, someday, become an astronaut and fly in space like my childhood heroes. Most of those around me dismissed such dreams with disguised, though benevolent chuckles, expecting that sooner or later I would “grow up” and join the real world.

I had reached my 18th birthday endowed with a first class secondary education, thanks to the generosity, sacrifice, and good planning of my parents. At this juncture, however, it was clear in everyone's mind – including mine – that their job was essentially done. Now, it was up to me to “fly” on my own and, dreams notwithstanding, I had to first make a living and cease to be a burden on them. I had already achieved that goal as a young employee of the National Bank of Costa Rica. I had embraced the working class with a rather comfortable starting weekly salary of ₡110.60 Costa Rican colones (about \$66/month in 1968 dollars.) I was no longer a financial burden to anyone and, albeit only temporarily, I had joined the real world and managed to alleviate the not-so-subtle concerns of many of my family and friends regarding my “space delusions.”

This period of relative tranquility, however, had been short-lived, and on that August day in 1968 a sense of seriousness and deliverance had replaced the dismissive half-smiles of those around me. In the last few days, leading to this cold and damp early morning, many had finally begun to take me seriously. It was clear that I was setting the gears in motion to leave Costa Rica. I had taken steps that culminated in the events of this day. I had spoken to so many about my plans to immigrate to the United States, to make an attempt to fulfill my dream of space flight and, with a one-way ticket to the Land of Opportunity in hand, I was taking the first major step on that journey.

It was early in the morning when I woke myself up after only a couple of hours of sleep. I had spent my last

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night in Costa Rica walking through the streets of San José with my good friend Martin Yin, son of Taiwan's Ambassador to Costa Rica and a constant partner in my youthful bouts of mischief. I wanted to say good-bye to all the familiar places and to get a last dose of that town that had been my home through childhood and adolescence. We stayed out till early dawn and arrived at my home in Escazú, a middle-class suburb about 10 km west of the capital, just a couple of hours before I was to leave for the airport. My mother had announced that she would not be accompanying me to the airport. She was not one for sad good-byes and, besides, there was really not enough room in the three-person, grey Peugeot pick-up truck, our family's only vehicle. So it was my father and my sister María Eugenia, "Maru," who delivered me to the airport, along with my little brother, Ronald, who, in an age of no seat belts or car seats, sat on her lap. At three years of age, he could not really comprehend the significance of the moment. It was a somber feeling as I proceeded to check my suitcase at the counter, a rather oversize bag for my definitely undersize set of belongings. My father did not say much to me, nor did my sister. They had come to deliver me to the last point in my life journey under the care and protection of the immediate family. From here on out, I was to literally set flight on my own.

I walked down the open ramp, looking back and waving to my family as I boarded a brand new Pan American World Airways Boeing 727 jet aircraft, a smaller model that had recently replaced the older and more majestic 707, which I had flown in my earlier childhood. Unlike those trips, flying with my sister back and forth to Venezuela, I was truly alone. I searched for my assigned seat, a window on the left side of the plane, and sat pensively trying to weigh all the familiar things I was giving up by going after that hardheaded and fantastic dream. I was fighting a sense of panic that had begun to take hold of my body as I mulled over those thoughts. "I must be

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crazy,” I thought, “fool enough to have talked myself into such an impossible plan.” My gaze wandered through the thick window at the ground crew busily working on the ramp below, as the fear of what was to come nearly overcame me. I wanted to call it off, to get up suddenly and tell everyone that I was not serious, that it was all a fantasy, an impossible dream. But it was too late. There was no turning back now. As the plane raced down the runway at Costa Rica’s “El Coco” (today: Juan Santamaria) International Airport, a knot formed in my throat as I saw for a last time the tiny figures of my father, my sister, and my little brother still perched among many waving strangers on the airport balcony. I pinned my face to the thick window and strained my eyes as their images faded rapidly behind me, distorted by the edge of the glass. I would not see them again for a very long time.

My fears faded quickly. With the receding of the familiar sights, my brain engaged fully in the adventure before me. It was time to face forward, to live the moment and to see what would come next. I sat next to an older, friendly gentleman of distinguished presence who spoke to me in Spanish. I don’t remember where he was from, but his accent had the beautiful musical tone of the Caribbean basin. He asked about the nature of my trip, and, for the first time, I avoided voicing my real plan, choosing instead to say that I was going to study engineering in the United States. He was a business traveller and had made the trip many times. His destination was Miami where he would spend a few days on business before returning home. I wondered then what his life would be like. Our conversation provided me with some important details on the process of entering the United States. My greatest concern was the language. I had started to learn a few key phrases in English so I would be able to communicate. With a broad smile, however, my new friend indicated that in Miami, our immediate destination, everyone spoke Spanish.

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His assertion was correct. When we arrived, the expected impact of the foreign language never materialized. The customs official spoke to me in Spanish without even asking my preference. His heavy Cuban accent gave me the clear signal that the US I had arrived in was very different from the one my grandfather had spoken to me about in my youth. I handed him my brand new passport and he looked at it half attentively. His one comment, “In the US we don’t use two last names and you will have to choose *Chang* or *Díaz*” to which he jokingly added, “...Consider this your first lesson in American culture.”

I managed to get through the immigration process with no delay and quickly found my way to the gate where I waited for my connecting flight to the city of Hartford, Connecticut where familiar faces would undoubtedly await me. This leg of the trip was more sobering. The emotions of the family farewells at home in Escazú and at the El Coco Airport seemed already old and distant and had been quickly replaced by the powerful sensations of the adventure that was unfolding with every minute of my journey. All I could think about was what awaited me ahead: the new climate, new customs, and a new language. These would, sooner or later, hit me like a ton of bricks. At this point, none of the passengers appeared to speak Spanish and neither did the flight attendants who addressed me in English. The culture shock had begun.

The three-hour flight seemed endless. I sat by the window, anticipating what would happen upon my arrival. In my brief pass through the city of Miami, I had experienced the last vestiges of Latin America, the natural warmth of its people, the almost musical effusiveness and outgoing expressions and the perennial confusion and disorganization. Such had been my environment and my culture until that moment. These sensations gave way, with every mile in the northward route, to a much quieter, private, and reserved mood – almost sad and a bit fearful.

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The view out the window was beginning to look more like a foreign land, a monotonous landscape devoid of the tall mountains and the lush forests and volcanoes that I had grown accustomed to. Every once in a while, a tall smoke stack, with a white plume perched at its top, would break the regularity of the land. So this was the United States! I felt I was beginning to sense its pulse and, in a fleeting moment of self-indulgence, I felt it too would soon be sensing mine. I had big plans to set in motion in this Land of Opportunity and, after imagining for years how it would be, its doors were finally opening to let me in.

I arrived at Bradley Field Airport in Windsor Locks, Connecticut on the “Yellowbird” jet of the now defunct Northeast Airlines. With my face glued to the window during the descent, I tried to get a glimpse of the ultra-modern metropolis that my Aunt Betty had referred to in her letters, but nothing resembling such an advanced city came into view. Instead, I was surprised with a rather traditional agricultural landscape with large expanses of land covered with what appeared to be gigantic mosquito nets – tobacco plantations, as I later found out. Bradley Field was a small domestic airport serving a small New England state. I exited the plane down the traditional metallic stairs that were quickly rolled up to the aircraft and entered the terminal where I could immediately see the gleaming smiles of my cousins and my grandmother Lydia through glass partitions. There were many who had come to meet me at the airport, many more than had come to say good-bye in the early morning four thousand miles away.

I recognized my cousin Alberto “Beto” first, followed by my grandmother. I took an admiring glance at Myriam, whom I had seen many years earlier as a little girl. She was now a beautiful young lady. There was Lino Arturo, the second Zúñiga brother, whom I had briefly met once in Costa Rica but could not remember. There was Lino Sr.

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and, of course, my Aunt Betty, the kingpin of the whole family. There were three others, Ballardo, the youngest brother, and Mercedes and Alba, the two younger sisters. I had never met them before. It was a big family including Tia Caridad or “Cari” for short, who was Betty’s mother. She had been too frail and blind to make the trip to the airport. All in all, there were nine people who had driven nearly one hour to come to meet me. I felt totally welcome.

All of a sudden, the small and quietly efficient airport terminal at Bradley Field was engulfed in the warm and chaotic Latin American welcome party with endless supplies of bear hugs, kisses, and laughs – a sea of Latin behavior, contrasting with the reserved New England propriety. By the time our family greetings subsided, the rest of the passengers had long departed. Not since our trips to Venezuela as a youngster had I had such a large reception. We proceeded to the baggage claim area where my suitcase stood alone riding in circles on the conveyor belt.

I rode in Beto’s car, a light blue Chevrolet Impala. It was getting late and the sun was setting. I began, nevertheless, to feel the pace of the modern society almost immediately. As we entered Interstate Highway 91, I was amazed by the speed of the cars. It had been many years since I had travelled the relatively modern roads of Venezuela, but these roads were no comparison. I glanced at Beto’s speedometer and was surprised at seeing the needle steady at sixty five; I felt we were flying! With a warm smile, Beto pointed out that we were reading miles, not kilometers. “Ah, yes,” I exclaimed with amusement, “the English system.” I was already discovering America and savoring it in small and delightful doses.

It was a relatively mild day in the early New England autumn and the roads were immaculately clean. Along the route were small “ginger bread” single family homes of brick and wood which I had seen before in movies and

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postcards. I could see no ostentatious mansions and the humility of the country homes seemed incongruous with my image of the super-rich society of this mighty country. My perception was quickly recalibrated as we approached the city and I began to see the awesome glass towers of the downtown area. This was more like it! Even with my experiences as a traveller in Venezuela, the city of Hartford, capital of the state of Connecticut, was a bustling metropolis with a downtown lined by tall skyscrapers and intertwining superhighways. There was clear affluence here, and, as we entered the city streets, I saw a picture of organization. Wide avenues with well-marked intersections radiated in all directions and allowed cars and pedestrians to coexist in apparent harmony. There was no evidence of the congested and outdated city infrastructure I had left behind in my beloved homeland. Gone were the narrow, pothole-lined streets choked with overflowing buses and jay-walking street vendors. This was what a modern city was supposed to be like, my new home. Expecting nothing less, I was impressed yet not surprised. It was all coming together just the way I imagined. I had arrived!

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As newlyweds, my parents, Ramón Ángel Chang Morales and María Eugenia Díaz Romero emigrated from Costa Rica to Venezuela in early 1947 and settled in the coastal town of Macuto, about 13 km north of the capital city of Caracas. My oldest sister, also named María Eugenia, was born there a year later.

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My parents later returned to Costa Rica and the family settled in the capital city of San José in the country's Central Valley. This photo was taken at a family gathering at our home in the early 1960s. Seven children (six surviving) were born from their union between 1948 and 1970. I am the third one and the first surviving son.