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There But For Fortune

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*Show me a prison, show me a jail
Show me a prisoner whose face has gone pale
And I'll show you a young man with many reasons why
And there but for fortune, may go you or I.*

Phil Ochs

On May 22, 1963, a friend drove me and my parents to the Havana International Airport and dropped us at the entrance. Inside, a trio of Interior Ministry officials inspected the documentation of the hundred-plus passengers who were to depart that day for the United States. The leader looked at the pen-inscribed entry that

had me on the approved departure list. He frowned: "This is irregular. Why were you approved to travel? You don't look like a child."

I tried to remain calm and replied icily: "You need to take that up with the Swiss."

He turned red and replied: "I certainly will. In the meantime, you can proceed with your family for the physical inspection."

At the departure lounge, I shuddered with apprehension as they began calling the departing families, who were escorted onto the pavement for the walk to the plane. A Swiss official stood at the plane's stairway and shook the hands of all passengers as they mounted the final steps towards freedom.

The families were called in alphabetical order. They were approaching our name when the official who had questioned my credentials returned, accompanied by two armed guards. He addressed me, a sardonic smile on his face: "I checked with the Foreign Minister's office. The Swiss official who entered your name by hand in the passengers' list exceeded his authority. Please accompany me."

My mother broke into a disconsolate wail and grabbed my arm, refusing to relinquish me. My father squared off, ready to pounce on the armed guards. I gulped and, with the serenity of a condemned man facing a firing squad, told my parents: "Please let go of me. You must get on that plane and rescue my little brother, who is alone in Miami and needs his parents much more than I do."

As the guards began to draw me away, I turned to my parents and told them, with a conviction that I did not feel, "I will see you soon. Have a safe flight! Give my love to Mayito." I was peeing in my pants as I said this.

I was escorted out of the airport and loaded into a military jeep that took me back to my aunts' home, which I had left early that morning not expecting to ever see it again. When I was able to explain to my aunts what had transpired, they embraced me warmly, but with mounting concern about my future. The three of them, spinsters in their fifties, were not a threat to the Castro regime; I, an unemployed twenty-year old male who had just failed in his attempt to escape from the island, was a prime target for retribution from the authorities.

I had arrived back at home with no possessions other than the clothes I was wearing; my wallet was empty, as all my cash had been confiscated at the airport. I was destitute and my aunts had nothing to give me but their love and some leftover rice and beans.

I walked to the home of my closest friend Angelo to ask for help. He was able to collect some old clothing from his relatives, a used razor and some shaving cream, and made a bundle of these meager things for me. He promised to take me to the center of La Habana the following day to see what else he could get me.

Early the following morning I made my way to the apartment where my girlfriend Mercan lived. Our farewell meeting two nights before had been melancholic. We had never become formally engaged, since she and her family were unable to leave Cuba and I was in the process of going abroad. Our separation seemed inevitable and the notice of my impending departure was again confirmation of what we both expected. Our love was doomed.

When I knocked and Mercan's sister opened the door, a pandemonium of surprised and excited shouts filled the apartment; a few seconds later Mercan, still in her pajamas, came out of the bedroom and greeted me unenthusiastically: "You are back!"

These three words dropped like a bucket of icy water on my spirit. In a second, I realized the hopelessness of our situation. I had abandoned Mercan, placing family obligations and a desire for a better life ahead of the love that united us. Neither of us had mentioned that fact and she had uttered no recriminations about my planned abandonment. It was not that I did not care for her; I just had better things to do.

I ran over and hugged Mercan; she met my embrace and returned my kisses, but the warmth was gone. Some things, once broken, can never be mended.

Mercan and I remained friends but she was soon dating other young men and, within a year, was married and out of my life for good.

That would be the end of my romantic life.

Most of my relatives had either left Cuba or lived away from the capital. The one exception was cousin Pepe, fifteen years older than I, who had been a clerk at the offices of one of the U.S. oil companies and had managed to become one of the managers of the company once it was taken over by the government. I went to see him to explain my situation and my need to get a job that fed me and, more importantly, kept me out of jail – I was afraid that, if I remained unemployed, I would be imprisoned on charges of vagrancy or sedition.

Pepe went over the occupational possibilities with me. Finally, he said: I can get you a clerical job here, but it would be a misuse of your talents. You were a top student and should not be filling forms and filing documents. I stopped him: “I’ll take any job, as long as I don’t have to kiss the ring of any Party member.” Three days later, I started to work as a filing clerk, under Pepe’s supervision.

On November 26, 1963, the Cuban Government issued Law 1129, which established a system of compulsory military service. The law required male Cuban

citizens — ages 16 to 44 — to register and report for military service when called.

Under the system, males were subject to an active service obligation of typically

2–3 years, followed by a reserve obligation extending to age 45.

As it developed, compulsory military service was used as a slave labor system.

Many inducted service men were redirected into Military Units to Aid Production

(UMAPs) — forced labor camps — and were detailed to cut cane and perform

other physical labor in agricultural facilities.

I received a draft call in March 1965. Upon reporting for induction, I was

transported halfway across Cuba to a rural agricultural zone in a faraway province.

There, the Army had occupied an existing sugar plantation and turned it into a

penal colony. I and other inductees received no military training but were ordered

to carry out farming work in support of the ongoing sugar cane *zafra*: cutting cane

with machetes, clearing fields, loading cut cane onto transport trucks, burning

plant remnants, and replanting. We endured long (10–12 hours) workdays,

inadequate food rations, minimal medical care, and confinement under guard. It

was not a military training camp but a *gulag* like those they had in the Soviet

Union.

It was hell on earth. I was not physically strong, and after a couple of weeks of

back-breaking labor I came down with a severe respiratory infection. I lost forty

pounds and was finally given a medical release in 1966 in the expectation that I would be dead soon.

I could very well have died, and the story would have ended there. But let us assume that, somehow, I survived. I was only twenty-three but looked and felt like a man of seventy. My aunts took turns at taking care of me to the limited extent they were able. I saw only a few faithful friends including Angelo, who had escaped the draft so far but was in line for a similar ordeal.

Meanwhile, in the United States, my parents and my brother Mayito sought to make a living as penniless immigrants. Neither my parents nor any of our family's friends could do anything to extricate me from Cuba: they lacked financial means and my efforts to find a way to emigrate were blocked by Law 1129 travel prohibitions.

By the summer of 1967, I had sufficiently recovered to go for a swim at Guanabo, a beach near La Habana. I was in a shack getting into my swimming trunks when I ran into Plácido, who had been one of my Chemical Engineering fellow students during my year at Villanueva University in 1960-61.

After greetings and an exchange of school memories, Plácido asked: “What are you doing these days?” I replied: “I’m between jobs, looking for employment. How about you?” His reply surprised me:

“You know, Villanueva never reopened, but they moved all the engineering equipment to the new Technological University of Havana (CUJAE) they opened in 1964 near the airport. They started Chemical Engineering courses in ’65 and I joined, so I am now about to start my third year. The faculty is not as good as our professors at Villanueva, but they are competent enough.”

When I returned home, I realized that, since I had to stay in Cuba, I might as well become a professional. I would get better pay and might be able to do interesting work; but I drew a line: I would do no work that would support Cuba’s regime and, particularly, its military adventures throughout the world.

A week later, I took the bus ride to the CUJAE campus and applied for a place in the entering Chemical Engineering class. Thanks to my academic record, I expected I would be admitted despite my anti-government history. I was admitted on the spot into the sophomore class, though I would have to make up courses I never completed.

I decided to specialize in an activity with no possible military applications: making paper from the cellulose drawn from sugar cane bagasse. It was a well understood

industrial process; however, making it efficient and achieving the transformation with the expenditure of a minimum amount of energy was a challenging engineering task.

I graduated in 1970 and was hired by the Sugar Ministry and assigned to work at its research facility located outside the city limits, the *Instituto Cubano de Investigaciones de los Derivados de la Caña de Azúcar*, (ICIDCA). I began doing research on the use of the cellulose drawn from bagasse in the paper-making industry.

In 1975 the ICIDCA sponsored me as a candidate for graduate training at an industrial institute in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia I had visited years earlier. I went on to have various periods of residence in Bratislava, the last one in 1979, when I defended my dissertation and got my PhD in Chemical Engineering.

In late 1979 the ICIDCA started construction of a model plant that would be attached to an existing sugar mill such that the conversion from bagasse to paper could occur continuously. I was the leader of that project, and chief advisor to another project that was developing a variety of sugar cane that contained twice the fiber of traditional varieties and had enormous potential for the production of paper from bagasse fiber.

I continued to work and live in Cuba, where existence was always hard, even for a relatively highly placed worker. I did not support the government, but did not actively oppose it either. Miraculously, they left me alone, though at any point I could have been rounded up and imprisoned as a known dissident. But, for the sake of the story, let us assume this did not happen.

I ended up housed in a modest apartment not far from the site for my project. To live more or less adequately I needed to receive a salary of at least 1000 pesos a month, plus have access to hard currency remittances from my relatives abroad to be able to get soap, toothpaste, after shave lotion, clothes washing detergent, and other “luxuries,” which were only available in hard (foreign) currency. Food was only available under a ration book, and there was another ration book for clothing, although all that was ever available were boots and coarse work shirts and pants. So, living was tight and miserable.

I could have retired when I turned 70 in 2013, but I did not do so for several reasons: first, I could not afford it. As a retiree, my pension would not be enough to make a living in Cuba. Second, I would die of boredom sitting in my living room watching *telenovelas* (soap operas) and government harangues on TV. Third, the folks at work had been very kind to me, for they (like most Cubans) are good people, despite living in a totalitarian state. Someone from the office would visit

me often to bring me homemade pastries and share the current gossip. I felt I lived surrounded by friends.

Lastly, I believed that retirement was just a step away from death. I was arthritic, weak, with poor balance, overweight, hard of hearing, sometimes incontinent, often forgetful, full of aches and pains. If I stopped working altogether and really retired, I might be dead within six months. I would choose life, gray and empty as it was.

I would die alone in La Habana, in 2017, a forgotten non-entity, lucky (perhaps) to have made it thus far.

THE END

Author's note: In reality, on May 22, 1963, I was able to board the plane with my family and came to the United States to start a new life. See Chapter 5 of my autobiography, *Cuban Transplant*.