

[About](#)   [The Magazine](#)   [Latinx Best Sellers](#)   [Submissions](#)   [Our Recommendations](#)   [FAQs](#)   [Book Reviews](#)



# Green

## Matias Travieso-Diaz

[Back to Magazine](#)

Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over one hundred and forty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in a wide range of anthologies and magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. A first collection of his stories, "The Satchel and Other Terrors" is available on Amazon and other book outlets; additional anthologies of his work are scheduled for publication in 2025.

*A gambler never makes the same mistake twice. It's usually three or more times.*  
Terrence Murphy

**Macario no longer** noticed that he was hungry. More precisely, he—like millions of other Cubans—*knew* his stomach was half empty or worse, but that was a fact of life about which he could do relatively little, so he tried not to think about it. The last time he had eaten to full satisfaction had probably been eight or nine years before when his neighbor Ortelio had decided to sacrifice his pet pig and have a decent Christmas meal like the ones people used to have way back when. Three or four neighbors had pooled their resources – the foodstuffs or condiments they had saved from the meager *libreta* (ratio card) allotments, or bought from farmers, or on the black market—to make a nice communal meal that was still being talked about by those who remembered the event.

Nowadays, in the blazing heat of the summer of 1993, those Cubans that remained on the island were experiencing in-full what the government euphemistically called the "Special Period in Times of Peace," a time where everything was lacking in the country and the amount of food available to most people outside the government was just not enough. Macario, like everyone else, spent a disproportionate portion of each day in pursuit of things to eat. Macario's wife had passed away some time before and he remained single. Now, in his mid-fifties, he only had to worry about meeting his own needs.

Macario was a low-salaried clerk at a local health clinic in his hometown of Colón, 200 km. east of La Habana. Since he did not have to attend to patients directly, he was able to sneak out often to secure food. He would walk for over half an hour to the closest market on the outskirts of town, buy what he could find and afford, return to the clinic, work for a while, and then take off again to wait for a horse-drawn carriage that would transport him to the other market, further out of town--an ordeal that would always take well over an hour. Outside both markets, individuals stood around offering food for sale on the black market, and he would buy what he could afford from them.

He was also an active participant in the food trade – his cousin had a small farm not too far from Colón and would send him produce by truck, which he would sell on the black market or trade for other food and household necessities.

That day had gone about the same as all others and Macario was back in his shack in the poor section of town, where most black people like him lived. He was getting ready to fix himself a small serving of rice and black beans when there was a knock at his door.

Three members of the municipal police were demanding access to his home to conduct a search. "What do you want from me? I'm a law-abiding citizen, my revolutionary credentials are well known not only here in Colón but throughout the entire province of Matanzas. You have no reason to "

promises of materialism. You have no reason to...

He was interrupted by the leader of the group who recited in a practiced monotone: "Citizen, a charge has been made against you of having committed the crime of *acaparamiento* (hoarding) of food items, in violation of Article 230 of the Penal Code, under which it is illegal to purchase or obtain products in quantities beyond those normally needed for the purpose of consumption, and then resell them illegally. If found guilty of such a crime, you would be subject to imprisonment for a period of three months to a year, a fine of up to fifteen thousand pesos, or both. Authorized by the law, we are here to conduct a search of your home."

*"Damn neighbors!"* thought Macario. *"It must have been Eulalia, that harlot across the street who ratted on me! Why doesn't she mind her own business?"*

The guards pushed Macario aside and walked to the kitchen area in the back of the shack. There, in prominent view, were three bulging burlap sacks. One of them was open, displaying large tomatoes in varying stages of ripeness.

"How did you get these?" asked the team leader sharply.

"My cousin Nicanor has a farm in Los Arabos, and when the harvest is in, he sends some produce to me," allowed Macario.

"And what do you do with the produce?"

"Well, I'll eat it..."

"ALL OF IT?" barked the policeman.

Macario stuttered, "No, no, no. I give some away to family and friends..."

"AND THE REST?"

Macario was dark skinned; otherwise his blushing would have been quite noticeable. "I take some produce to the farmers' markets here in Colón and, when I can, take stuff to Jovellanos and other points nearby."

"Do you have a permit to sell on the markets?"

Macario shook his head in negation.

"Sir, you are under arrest. Let's go to the police station."

Macario was out of money so he could not bribe the policeman. However, as he was being carried away, he made a final, desperate plea to the guard: "Listen, Sir. I can pay you! As soon as today's Venezuelan lottery results come in, I will collect my winnings and will share them with you!"

"Ha!" replied the policeman derisively. "How do you know you will win the lottery?"

"I had a dream last night, and my dreams always come true!"

"What was your dream like?"

"I dreamt I was in a dark forest, couldn't see a thing, and was feeling lost, hungry, and desperate. All of a sudden, a bright light shone on a small corner of the darkness and there it was--a green something, a body that moved back and forth, like an animal getting ready to jump at me. I cowered in my dream and became so scared that I woke up with a start."

"And what do you make out of that dream?"

"... .."

"It was a spirit talking to me. Perhaps my dead wife Micaela was trying to help me from beyond the grave."

"So, she was sending you a message?"

"Yes, but I wish she would have been clearer. But you know how dreams are."

"What was the message?"

"I've been playing the numbers for many years, everyone knows that. I've never won anything, but this time I really needed to get more money somehow."

"And your wife was suggesting a number for you to bet on."

"Yes."

"I see" replied the policeman, barely concealing sarcasm in his voice. "Did you figure out what number she was telling you to play?"

"Yes. It wasn't that hard. You know how in the *charada china* gambling game all numbers have an animal, or a type of person associated with them? Like one is a horse, two is a butterfly, three is a sailor, four is a cat, and so on..."

"Of course. Cubans have been gambling on *charada china* since we were a colony. But the Revolution has made all gambling illegal."

"I know that, but everyone in Cuba still plays it. Anyway, in the *charada china*, the green animal I dreamt about has a number: Number 22, *sapo* (toad). So, I dreamt of a *sapo* and put a bet of one hundred pesos, all the money I had left until payday, on number 22. When you play based on the Venezuelan lottery, the pay you get if you win on the *fijo* is seventy-five pesos to one, so I would get seventy-five hundred pesos. If you let me go, once I collect on my bet, I'll give you a thousand."

"You are dreaming. Do you think I would break the law for a few pesos?"

"Alright. How about two thousand?"

"Forget it."

Macario became increasingly desperate: "Let's go half and half. Please! It's three thousand, seven hundred and fifty pesos!"

"No."

"Final offer! I'll give you four thousand! Please!"

The policeman said nothing.

"*Quien calla, otorga*" (he who says nothing, agrees) thought Macario, recalling the old Spanish saying.

\*\*\*

Macario was dozing in his holding cell at the police station when the arresting officer came in, visibly in a nasty mood. "Wake up, you bum. I'm taking you to the judge to be arraigned."

"Why are you doing this? Didn't we agree that I would collect on my bet and give you four thousand pesos so you would let me go?"

"I didn't agree to anything. Anyhow, your number did not win."

"What do you mean?"

"Yeah, you bet on 22, and the number that won was 21."

"That's not possible!"

"It is. I asked my neighbor, who is an *apuntador* (bet collector). He told me that 21 was yesterday's winning number."

"But that cannot be!" insisted Macario. My wife's message on the dream was clear!"

"I don't know. Anyhow, what's 21 in the charada china?"

"It's *majá*, a type of snake."

"What color is a *majá*?"

"I saw one, years ago, at a zoo. I think it may have been green and brown."

"There you have it. Your dream didn't lie. You just don't know your animals!" replied the guard acidly.

"But..."

"No more buts. Let's get going. The court is open now."

\*\*\*

As a first-time offender, Macario was found guilty of *acaparamiento* and fined five hundred pesos, but let go free with just a stiff warning. He had to borrow the money from his cousin Nicanor to pay the fine.

Macario felt he had learned a lesson or two from the misadventure. All things having been equal, he would have refrained from ever hoarding and selling foodstuffs, and would have never played the numbers again.

But his stomach still growled with hunger, and the Special Period went on for quite a few years. So, he kept at it.

END

[Back to Magazine](#)

