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Scarlet



*O, we don't give a damn for the whole state of Michigan
The whole state of Michigan, the whole state of Michigan,
We don't give a damn for the whole state of Michigan,
we're from Ohio!*

Chant often heard at Ohio Stadium

I was born into a poor family in La Habana, Cuba. I was always an accomplished student, and was able to receive a solid primary and secondary school education thanks to getting a scholarship to attend, tuition-free, one of the best private schools in Cuba. As I negotiated high school, the questions that my parents and I faced regarding life after graduation included whether I should attend college and, if so, what course of studies should I pursue.

I graduated from high school in 1960, at the time when Fidel Castro was turning Cuba into a totalitarian state. The worsening political situation in the island affected, among other things, my professional plans. I could have entered the free University of Havana and pursued there an Engineering course, but incoming university students were required to join the Communist Party, which I was loath to do.

I was rescued from my predicament by a friend of the family, who suggested I should apply for a scholarship at the Universidad de Villanueva, a private university run by the Augustinian Priests, like Villanova University in Pennsylvania. There was an opening for a scholarship to study engineering at Villanueva sponsored by Bacardi, the rum manufacturer. I applied, went through tests and interviews, and was awarded the scholarship, the last one that was ever granted by Bacardi in Cuba. It was the autumn of 1960.

I planned on majoring in Chemical Engineering, and Villanueva had a great program in that discipline; it even had built a small sugar mill in one of the school buildings, so students could get hands-on experience in industrial chemical processes.

I attended Villanueva through the first one and a half semesters of the 1960-61 academic year, did well and was enjoying myself. Then Fate intervened and forced me to make a drastic career change.

The doomed "Bay of Pigs" invasion of Cuba took place on April 17, 1961, whereupon my university was closed by the government; I was later told it was turned into a warehouse, and all the facilities of the institution went to waste.

That was the end of my education in Cuba. Had matters been otherwise, perhaps I would have become a chemical engineer, and maybe would have stayed in Cuba and enjoyed my professional life there. It was not meant to be.

My parents and I left Cuba and came to the United States in 1963, among thousands of Cubans reaching these shores to escape the oppression of a tyrannical government. Shortly after arrival, I began to look for a way to continue my education. I had a constraint: I could not go away from Miami, for I did not want to leave my family alone so soon after coming to a foreign country. I enrolled at the University of Miami, but Chemical Engineering,

my preferred choice, was not one the programs they offered. I had to settle for switching to Electrical Engineering, a discipline that I had never considered before and did not interest me.

I was able to attend school in Miami through a generous loan program developed by the Kennedy Administration for Cuban refugees. Cuban Loan Program funds paid for the four years it took me to get a Bachelor's and later a Master's Degree in Electrical Engineering at the University of Miami. After receiving my Bachelor's Degree, I went to work for an electric utility in its planning department. While that was probably the most interesting job I could get at a utility, the work bored me to tears.

It was out of boredom that I decided to apply for a program at Ohio State University that would allow me to work at an engineering laboratory while taking courses part-time towards a PhD. Thus, in early September, 1967 I made a sharp transition from Cuba (via the four-year stay in Miami, Florida) to the U.S. Midwest.

As I arrived in Columbus to start studies at Ohio State, I realized that the move entailed a complete change in my personal circumstances. I went from living in a Latin ghetto that was a coarse replica of my homeland to a wholly American environment; traded my family home for a small room in a school dorm; ended my employment as an engineer for a power company to become a lowly research assistant at an Engineering lab; and left behind my relatives, friends, and colleagues to become a stranger in a truly strange land.

Everything was different in Ohio from the things I used to know. I had my first taste of midwestern food: chili, beer brats, meat loaf, shredded chicken sandwich. It was tasty, but heavier and plainer than I was used to in Cuba or Miami; the food was pleasant, but lacking in the flavor and zest to which I was accustomed.

The living environment was also unlike what I regarded as normal. Unlike the exuberant Latins, people were polite, low-keyed, and reticent about expressing their emotions. Traffic in Columbus was slower and more orderly than in Florida, and the weather soon turned colder than anything I had ever experienced. I watched the first snowfall of my life in early October, and as fall led to winter it got much colder than I had known. Unlike sunny Florida (and Cuba), Ohio became dark and gloomy after the summer, and the sun disappeared, not to return until mid-April.

I was lodged in a room in a dorm next door to the law school, and discovered that my roommate and many of my other neighbors were law students who spent an inordinate amount of time playing cards and drinking cheap beer, neither of which had been a previous activity of mine. My school courses and work at the lab were difficult and tedious, and gave me no joy.

By Christmas, when I was able to catch a flight to Miami, I was seriously wondering if I had made a big mistake, but decided to persevere, at least until the end of the 1967-68 academic year. Upon returning to Columbus, I made a couple of friends among the residents of my dorm, and was lucky to run, almost by accident, into a Cuban kid I used to know in Miami. Carlos and I became, and remained, close friends, and he introduced me to other members of the miniscule Cuban population of Columbus, so my social circle expanded somewhat. As I got used to the various work and school routines, life became more tolerable, and by the time I returned to my folks in Miami for the summer I had decided to try to stick it out for the next few years until I got my degree.

There were marked improvements in my situation when I returned to Columbus for the 1968-69 academic year. Carlos, another Cuban student, and I rented an apartment off campus, within walking distance of school and the shuttle to the laboratory. I met two more young Cubans – Eloy and Jake – who were to remain my close friends in the years to come. I started auditing a Latin American literature graduate course, a pastime that would eventually steer me towards trying my hand as a writer. And I started following the games of the school's varsity football team, the Ohio State Buckeyes.

In the five years since my arrival in the United States I had totally ignored football. The only sport I cared for was baseball – Cuba's national pastime – and I was a devoted fan of the St. Louis Cardinals. Football was unknown to me and held no interest, for it seemed a game of brute force and little sophistication. My disinterest in football continued during my first year in Columbus, since the 1967 season had been a disappointment for Ohio State fans because the Buckeyes had a mediocre team that finished fourth in the Big Ten conference and went unranked in the postseason polls.

Things changed the following year. In 1968, the team became filled with talented sophomores, and began winning one game after another. As excitement grew around the Ohio State campus and the entire Columbus population, I started paying attention to the team's season, without really getting involved in what I still regarded as a local amusement that did not concern me.

Then came the last game of the season, on Saturday, November 23, 1968. I was not planning on attending the game, but a friend insisted that he and I should take advantage of the ability, as students, to get reasonably good seats for what could be a historical event: Ohio State's scarlet and gray Buckeyes would play their archrivals, the maize and blue Wolverines of the University of Michigan. Ohio State was 8-0, ranked second nationally, and was one victory away from a Rose Bowl invitation and a potential national collegiate championship. Michigan, ranked fourth nationally, was also vying for the same opportunity.

I had walked near Ohio Stadium, a gigantic oval that sat over eighty thousand spectators, but never gone in. That afternoon people were streaming into the facility from all directions, many wearing winter coats although the weather was warm for a Thanksgiving weekend in Ohio. I had on just a light jacket, and as the game progressed, I got increasingly chilled. Around me, men were extracting hidden flasks from their coat pockets and taking swigs of whiskey or other contraband. I had nothing to keep me warm.

During the first half of the game, I became increasingly uncomfortable and began formulating plans to leave at halftime. The two teams battled it out on the ground (there was little passing in that game; Ohio State's quarterback was a mediocre passer but a gifted runner, and so was his Michigan counterpart) and, shortly before the halftime mark, the teams were tied 14-14. I was getting my jacket on in preparation for departure when an Ohio State running back took the ball in from the six-yard line to break the tie. I then made a momentous decision: I would stick it out for the rest of the game, even at the risk of catching a cold.

I never learned what Coach Woody Hayes told his players at halftime, but the team that returned to the playing field after the break was energized and proceeded to completely dominate its opponents. Every time Ohio State scored, the crowd (which was the largest ever to attend a game at Ohio Stadium) erupted in ecstatic cheers, whose volume and frenzy only increased as the lead widened. I found myself cheering as loud as

everyone else, and by the time the Buckeyes scored the fourth touchdown of the second half and took a final lead of 50-14 I was shaking with emotion, as perhaps were many other spectators.

When I drifted out of the stadium, I was a changed man. I had become one with the crowd that surrounded me, in a manner I had never experienced before. I realized that what separated me from the inhabitants of this northern city were matters of culture and detail, not substance; my basic values were the same as those of an Ohioan, and I could fit, perhaps not perfectly but sufficiently well, with my fellow citizens.

I no longer felt like an outsider, a foreign piece that did not belong in the American crossword puzzle. I remained a Cuban at heart, but also felt like I belonged in this country as much as the blond, husky Midwesterners that walked by my side. It had taken me five years to really start integrating into the land that had welcomed me, but after that moment I started to feel that I belonged.

For the next fifty-odd years I have followed the fortunes and misfortunes of the scarlet and gray Buckeyes, watching virtually every game they played. I have enjoyed their frequent victories and lamented their occasional losses; but, more importantly, I have felt they are *my team*, and this country is *my second home*, where I was fortunate to land after I had to abandon my birthplace.

Matias F. Travieso-Diaz is a Cuban American engineer and lawyer who, having retired from the practice of law, rediscovered the pleasures of creative writing. In addition to fiction in both English and Spanish, he has written papers on issues relating to Cuba and miscellaneous other topics. You can find him at matiastraviesodiaz.com.