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2910 words

A Stay in Mayami

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*The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high
and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it.
Michelangelo*

Eufemio Pérez Pérez was very unhappy with his name. As a youth growing up in Cuba in the nineteen forties, he rankled every time someone referred to him – whether in jest or seriously – as “*un Pérez cualquiera*,” a derogatory phrase that branded him a member of the lower classes, a pariah of society. The multiple “Pérez” in his surname tainted him even more – twice as common, cheapest among the cheap. Eufemio reacted to his perceived stigma by making his purpose in life to become a somebody, a man of fame, stature and accomplishment.

In High School Eufemio exhibited a decided lack of distinction. He flunked more courses than he passed, and ultimately dropped out without ever graduating. He was unemployed for a while until he was able to enroll in a trade school where he received training as a draftsman. He was hired by an engineering firm to help prepare technical drawings for a number of projects, and his performance was barely adequate. He was kept on the job mainly

because he had learned to be obsequious with his superiors. Nonetheless, he saw no possibilities of advancement and bemoaned how his vulgar name kept holding him back.

Things took a turn for the better in January 1959. The country's ruling gang fled and a new team of bearded rebels came to power. Soon, drastic changes to the Cuban society began to take place, and industries and commercial concerns were seized by the government.

Nationalized enterprises were put in the hands of apparatchiks with no qualifications other than loyalty to the Revolution. The engineering offices that employed Eufemio were seized and a minor "comandante" was put in charge.

Eufemio saw the changes as an opportunity to advance himself. He proclaimed: "I've been a true revolutionary from day one," and formed one of Havana's first "Committees for the Defense of the Revolution" (a network of vigilantes whose function was to spy on other citizens and foil potential anti-government activities). He marched in all the parades, attended all mass rallies, and went to the countryside on weekends to cut cane and help with the sugar harvest. He spied on his co-workers for potential counterrevolutionary infractions, and reported several people to the Interior Ministry for prosecution and incarceration. He was secretly branded by his co-workers as a "*chivato*" (informant) and universally despised. He defended his snitching on others by arguing: "It's their fault for not getting in step with the Revolution. *Al camarón que se duerme se lo lleva la corriente*" (The shrimp that falls asleep is carried away by the current).

By late 1961 he was well connected within the government and had become a promising low-level member of the ruling class. He was then offered a position as personal assistant to the manager of the Matahambre copper mines in the western province of Pinar del Río. The job required him to move to the village of Santa Lucía, a hamlet ten kilometers from Matahambre.

Santa Lucía was nowhere: a shabby village of under a thousand inhabitants, mostly mine workers.

The town's main attraction was a little harbor built for mined ore transport. When he was not busy helping the manager ride herd on the miners, Eufemio sat on the harbor's pier to do a little fishing and coordinate contraband deliveries of copper ore to Mexican smugglers who resold the mineral in the American markets. He also went frequently to the only bar in Santa Lucía; there he met Cecilia, a buxom, good natured country girl who waited on tables and fraternized with the miners. Eufemio courted Cecilia and soon turned her into his common-law wife. He did not love Cecilia, who he felt was beneath him in every respect, but availed himself of her favors. He felt women were weak creatures whose only virtues lay in their orifices capable of receiving a male's attentions.

In October 1962 a new face was seen in Santa Lucía. The man, one Miguel Angel Orozco, identified himself as a researcher from Oriente University, come to Matahambre to study the varieties of copper ore found at the mine for comparison with those from the El Cobre mine near Santiago de Cuba. Eufemio met Orozco by chance at the bar, and after a few beers concluded that Orozco's knowledge of copper mining was not much greater than his own. Eufemio found it hard to believe that the government would allow someone so ignorant of mining matters to travel from one end of Cuba to the other analyzing ore.

As he had done to his some of his neighbors years before, Eufemio felt no compunction about turning the stranger in. He made a quick call to the security police to report potential counter-revolutionary activity. Agents arrested Orozco and another man, Pedro Vera Ortiz, who was Orozco's accomplice. A large quantity of weapons and explosives was discovered in Orozco's rented quarters.

The government said the captures smashed a plot to blow up the Matahambre and Nicaro mines in the Pinar del Rio and Oriente provinces. Under interrogation, Orozco admitted that he and Vera had landed clandestinely in Cuba, sent by the CIA to carry out acts of sabotage. For starters, they planned to destroy the aerial transport system at the Matahambre mine. Four hundred miners could have lost their lives if workers operating the aerial link cars had not seen the explosives that Orozco intended to detonate at the base of the towers anchoring the cable railway.

Eufemio was interviewed many times by the Cuban and foreign press and did not miss the chance to play up his alertness and revolutionary zeal. In the interviews, he proclaimed himself a revolutionary hero and stated for the record that his name was “Eufemio del Cerro,” a name under which he had chosen to be known in the future. His change in name was noticed by the state security but acquiesced to – it was not the first time that a revolutionary figure had found it desirable to adopt a new name to improve his image.

Thanks to his unmasking of the Yankee saboteurs, Eufemio del Cerro was promoted to assistant general manager of the Matahambre mine, and helped preside over an operation that, at its peak, produced 50,000 tons of ore a year and gave employment to more than 1,000 workers. Eufemio pocketed the proceeds of selling 1,000 additional tons to the Mexicans on the black market, an activity for which he grossed – after sharing with his partners in the enterprise – \$100,000 a year. Half of this he had to kick back to his superiors at three levels of government to be allowed to continue with his scheme but the balance, \$50,000 a year, allowed him to live as a prince in a country where misery ruled most of the population.

The good times at Matahambre came to an end in 1997 when the regime, citing increased costs of production and the drop of the price of copper in the international market, closed the

mine and laid off all the workers. Eufemio was forced to return to Havana, but given his rank he was given the opportunity to move into a nice apartment in a building that had been the mansion of a now-exiled sugar baron. He left Santa Lucía one night, without saying goodbye to Cecilia. She was three months pregnant and the child was probably his; he never contacted her again.

Once in Havana, Eufemio was appointed secretary to one of the Vice-Ministers of the Ministry of Basic Industry, which oversaw the mining enterprises in the island. Since Matahambre was shut down, Eufemio was switched to support the nickel industry, one of the most important sources of foreign income for the country.

Eufemio was still working at the Ministry of Basic Industry when a negotiation was started in 2010 for the expansion of a major nickel and cobalt processing plant in eastern Cuba, the Pedro Soto Alba nickel facility—a joint venture between the state-owned nickel company Cubaniquel and Canadian mining company Sherritt International Corporation. Soon, several Government officials, including Eufemio's boss, arranged to receive bribes in exchange for the timely deployment of qualified personnel and other project support. In a related scheme, the officials demanded kickbacks from contractors supplying equipment for the project. Eufemio received under-the-table payments from his boss for his help in carrying out these illegal transactions.

It was all fine and dandy until the government launched a corruption investigation in 2011, leading to the conviction a year later of three Vice Ministers and nine other defendants. Eufemio's boss was among those given jail terms. Eufemio pretended he was not involved in the criminal enterprise of his superiors, and gave critical testimony at the trial about their “secret meetings” and “commercially unjustified actions.” This testimony was instrumental in the convictions of his boss and some of the other defendants. His cooperation with the investigation

saved him from the same fate, and it was conveniently determined that there was no concrete evidence of his involvement in the corrupt schemes. But a file on Eufemio del Cerro (aka Eufemio Pérez Pérez) was nonetheless opened in the Interior Ministry. The Revolution welcomes Judases but does not trust them.

Given the Ministry of Basic Industry's involvement in the Pedro Soto Alba plant scandal, the Castro government disbanded the Ministry and replaced it with a new agency, the Ministry of Energy and Mines. Eufemio del Cerro became an employee of the new Ministry and tried to keep a low profile, for he feared that sooner or later he would be called in to account for his past misdeeds.

The Canadian head of one of the companies involved in the supply kickbacks had been in prison without charges since 2011, but three years later he was brought to trial and convicted of bribery, fraud, and tax evasion. Among the documents in the massive dossier used to convict him was a receipt for a payment in 2010 to Eufemio's former boss, which was actually signed by Eufemio because his boss was on vacation.

Eufemio learned of the existence of this incriminating document from a contact in the office of the prosecuting attorney (who was a friend of Eufemio's imprisoned boss), and was told that the prosecutor intended to initiate a new criminal proceeding directed at Eufemio, among others. Eufemio was irate at being "singled out" for punishment, decided he had no friends left in power, and felt things were becoming too hot for him. He had to get out of Cuba.

Finding a boat to take him out of the country was not difficult; several of the people he knew in the government had yachts moored at the newly refurbished Marina Hemingway, which they took on fishing and pleasure trips to Mexico and the Bahamas. However, he could not find anyone who was willing to risk prison to help him escape. Finally, one of his acquaintances,

while refusing to transport him, offered to put Eufemio in contact with a fisherman who might be willing to take him to Florida. Eufemio contacted the man, who demanded an outrageous sum of money for the job, but Eufemio was not in a position to haggle. He emptied his bank account and turned most of the proceeds over to the man. The fisherman picked him up outside his building, drove him west to Pinar del Río, boarded him on an ancient shrimping boat, and carried him away in the dead of night. Just before dawn the following day, Eufemio was dropped at Smathers Beach, near the center of the city of Key West.

He had left Cuba not a moment too soon: he later learned that a squad from the Intelligence Directorate (the dreaded G2) had been to his apartment seeking to arrest him the day after his departure. “That will teach them” he told himself. “I’m too smart for those amateurs.”

* * *

Eufemio was reluctant to seek political asylum in the United States, for he was certain that the CIA was aware of his involvement in quashing the Matahambre operation. He decided to drop out of sight for a while and lose himself in the amorphous Latino community in Miami. As most Cuban government officials of rank, he had spirited thousands of dollars away from the country and deposited them in a Miami bank, with the account under his birth name to better hide the assets. Ironically, he had to become again a Pérez Pérez in order to retrieve his money. “I’ll get my good name back as soon as I am legit” he promised himself.

Eufemio was already in his mid-seventies and had intended to keep a low profile for the rest of his life. However, his need to restore his public image made him become involved with the Cuban Republicans in southern Florida, a motley group that included among its members individuals once associated with the pre-Castro Batista regime, former businessmen and property owners who had been dispossessed by the Communists, and people who still resented the failure

of the Democrats under John F. Kennedy to provide military support to the Cuban expeditionary force that was decimated in the 1961 Bay of Pigs disaster. Joining this group represented a complete reversal of Eufemio's political allegiances, but he was never much of an ideologue and was able to adapt easily to the beliefs of his new friends.

In the presidential election of 2016, Eufemio did some campaigning for Donald Trump among the Cuban expatriate community and welcomed Trump's victory. He was hoping to get tapped for some work in the new administration, but his being an undocumented alien was a major obstacle that had to be overcome.

He sought to enlist the help of the Florida Republican Party to regularize his legal status. He bragged: "I'm an expert on Cuban politics. If you can get me admitted legally into the United States, I'll give you the Cuban vote, which is wobbly these days."

The party leaders offered him a trade: they would get him political asylum and maybe even a "green card" if he would campaign widely among the general Latin population in South Florida, not just the Cubans. He would extol the virtues of the President and his administration and excoriate the deep state, the lying press, the corrupt intelligence agencies, the illegal aliens, and the liberals that wanted to keep the country on its knees.

In early 2018 Eufemio was invited to give an address to a group of non-committed Latinos in the social hall of a Catholic church in Little Havana. His remarks were intended to sway the audience and bring them into the Republican fold. He defended the President, which "every patriot should do, no matter what who he is or where he comes from." He acknowledged the man's faults, but pointed out that the country had been brought down by his predecessors, and "he is the only one who can get us out of this mess."

Eufemio had just finished giving his speech when there was a disturbance in the back of the room. A dozen burly men wearing black jackets that displayed the initials “ICE” (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) burst into the gathering and ordered: “Everyone remain where you are. You are all under arrest!” The organizer of the meeting cried out in protest: “What’s this? Why are you breaking into a lawful meeting?” An agent responded curtly: “This church is known to give sanctuary to illegal immigrants. Anyone who is a U.S. citizen or a legal resident will be released as soon as his status is confirmed.”

Two buses were parked outside the church. Eufemio and several dozen people were herded into the buses, taken to a police station, and interrogated. Most detainees were released after several anxious hours; Eufemio and half a dozen Guatemalans and Salvadorians were kept in custody due to their inability to demonstrate their lawful presence in the country.

Efforts by Republican Party officials to free Eufemio were thwarted by the intelligence agencies. They leaked to the press Eufemio’s true identity and his role in defeating a covert U.S. operation to overthrow Castro. The attendant notoriety made Eufemio’s release a difficult public relations task for the politicians, who had little interest in protecting a tainted Latino.

At his deportation hearing, an FBI agent confirmed that the man who called himself Eufemio Pérez Pérez was in fact Eufemio del Cerro, a member of the Cuban Communist Party who had foiled efforts to restore democracy in the island and had infiltrated the United States for nefarious purposes. He was a prime candidate for deportation.

Eufemio was flown back to Havana on a cold February morning. Police and Cuban intelligence agents were waiting for him as he deplaned, for his deportation had been well covered in the media on both sides of the Florida Straits.

Three months after his arrest he was found guilty of corruption and multiple acts of theft of public property dating back to the sixties. He was given a thirty-year sentence and sent to a prison farm in a remote area of eastern Cuba. His enfeebled condition spared him the back-breaking work on the fields, but he was assigned to carry out sanitation duties throughout the camp. Watching his figure, bent with age and humiliation, as he mopped around urinals and cleaned filthy toilets, some of the inmates would question who the wretch was. The invariable response, accompanied by a shrug, was “*bah, es un Pérez cualquiera.*”

THE END