

# Alone, not Lonesome

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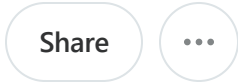


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*I celebrate myself, and sing myself,*

*And what I assume you shall assume,*

*For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

**- Walt Whitman, Song of Myself**

To every end, there must be a beginning. The story of the end of my life has yet to be written, but someone may someday want to know the tale of my beginnings. Here it goes.

I was born in La Habana, Cuba, at 2 AM on Sunday, February 21, 1943, in a maternity hospital for working-class families in a poor section of the city. I was a Pisces born in the Year of the Goat. A few days earlier, the Soviet Union had announced that the 163-day Battle of Stalingrad had ended after the last of the German Sixth Army forces surrendered. Was my birth a transcendental event on the heels of another? I very much doubt it.

According to my mother, it was the coldest day that had been registered in quite some time in Havana; weather records indicate that the temperature at the time of my birth was about 55° F, quite cold by Cuban standards. I must have shivered as I emerged from my mother's womb. Was I ready for what the world had in store for me?

My mother was. She had been in labor for three days, waiting for a stubborn child who was reluctant to come out. And, more importantly, she had been awaiting anxiously for months, hoping for the best but fearing the worst.

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Her anxiety was not without foundation. Shortly after my parent's wedding, my mother had become pregnant. She had an uneventful pregnancy and I am told that she was bursting with excitement in anticipation of her first child's arrival.

Alas, only a few weeks before the delivery date, a chair on which she was rocking herself collapsed, flinging her violently onto the floor. She was injured and the unborn baby was lost.

For many weeks following the miscarriage, my mother struggled with the physical and emotional consequences of the accident. She was devastated, for her lost child was a

perfect, beautiful boy that would have been her pride and joy.

It took her two years to recover enough to be ready for another attempt at motherhood, and this time she was taking no chances. When told that I was on my way, she announced: “This one is mine, and I’ll make sure he grows up healthy and is raised properly.” My father, fearing for her mental health, obeyed my mother’s commands and stood back. He was a good provider but he and I always remained distant and did not become close until my mother passed away more than forty years later. So, for most intents and purposes, I was a single-parent child.

My mother dedicated her life to ensuring I was given every advantage and protected from every harm. My mother, who had been meticulously careful with all her actions during my gestation, continued her vigilance after I entered the world.

Since the very first day, she sheltered me from any potential adversity. In the early years of my infancy, when boys learned to master themselves through rough and tumble interactions with the world and each other, my mother held me back to save me from injury. She was not aware, perhaps, that the non-injuries I was sustaining could be more severe than a few cuts and bruises. I never broke a leg, fell from a tree, or got a black eye from a schoolyard scuffle. Also, I never played ball, flew a kite, or went fishing. I only learned to swim and ride a bike when I was well into my teens. I grew up carrying the heavy weight of my mother’s solicitude.

I thus grew up alone. A younger brother was born when I was four years old, but he and I were never close. The age difference kept us apart, and our temperaments and views of the world were quite different. Plus, I think my brother noticed and resented my getting more attention than he did and doing better than him academically, for he was an average student. He would go on to lead a troubled life.

I cannot lay blame for my upbringing solely on my mother, who meant well and acted out of love. My own nature conspired to render me a loner. I was more interested in nurturing the mind than cultivating the body. I enjoyed learning. I began reading for pleasure while in elementary school. I was going through adventure novels (like *Treasure Island*) at an age in which most kids read if anything, comic books.

I spent the first four years of my education attending a small elementary school a few blocks from our home. There I was doted on by my teachers, particularly Miss Leonor, a beautiful brunette in her twenties. She loved me and I loved her back.

When I went into the third grade, Miss Leonor brought me to the attention of her boss, Mr. Herrera, a successful businessman who was the owner of the school I attended. Mr. Herrera had my mother and I over one Saturday for a visit, I think for the purpose of evaluating me. He had gone to high school in a very good, and quite expensive, Catholic school and was planning to perhaps recommend me for a scholarship at that school, for we were too poor to afford the tuition they charged and the idea of enrolling me in a public school was “unthinkable” due to the poor quality of Cuba’s government-run educational institutions.

I must digress to describe briefly my living conditions growing up. My father was a taxicab driver and made just enough for us to eke out a living. We all lived in a house owned by an unmarried aunt on my father’s side, who bought it with a small inheritance she had received. The house had three bedrooms, but was quite crowded, holding our family unit plus three unmarried aunts and my paternal grandmother, who lived until I was a teenager. As a result, I never had a room of my own growing up. I slept on a Murphy Bed in a corridor and had a desk set against one of the walls of the living room, where I did my homework, kept my books, and stored a few valuables. In summary, I lived in isolation, a single boy in a house full of women.

I remember to this day my visit to Mr. Herrera’s home, for he owned a house in the far suburbs of La Habana that was the total opposite of my own. There was a large flower and vegetable garden and separate enclosures where Mr. Herrera raised chickens and pigs. The house had many rooms, but the one that I liked the best was a den that featured a TV set, a rarity in 1949 among people of modest means like us. I was very impressed with Mr. Herrera (an unprepossessing middle-aged man who sported a graying beard) and his house, and he may have been satisfied with my potential because he told my mother that he indeed was going to recommend to his Alma Mater that I be admitted as a non-tuition-paying student.

So it was that, a few days later, Miss Leonor informed my mother that Mr. Herrera had arranged for me to interview with the priest in charge of finances at the Pious School in

Guanabacoa, a town half an hour by bus from our home. The Piarist priests, whose order got started in Spain in the 17th century by St. Joseph Calasanz, are dedicated to evangelize through education the children of the poor, and to this end have established unique schools throughout the world.

The Piarists had five schools in Cuba, the one in Guanabacoa being the oldest and largest. The Guanabacoa school was part of an impressive complex that included a three-story main building featuring cells for the priests, housing for the out-of-town pupils who resided on campus, a huge kitchen and dining room, ample classroom space on the lower two floors, and a very large backyard which served as a playground as well as an exercise arena and was the site of outdoors school events. The most eye-catching part of the complex, however, was a cloister containing a lovely indoor garden, which held numerous specimens of domestic and foreign plants of all kinds. (The cloister was featured in a series of postal stamps issued by the Cuban government in 1957, to commemorate the school's centennial). Adjacent to the main building were a church, parking lots, and (later) a seminary.

I was immediately enthralled by the place. Once it became my school, it remained one of my favorite places, even after I graduated.

On my first visit, I was to meet with the priest in charge of the school's financial matters, including tuition assistance. According to their charter, Pious schools have two kinds of students: those whose parents can afford to pay tuition and those who are admitted for free. There was inequality, however, built into the arrangement that I found in Guanabacoa: the paying students received a better education, had the best teachers and facilities. The tuition-free students were located on the bottom floor, with only a couple of teachers responsible for everything. The paying students were trained to attend college upon graduation; the tuition-free students were expected to proceed to a trade school or get blue-collar jobs.

We anticipated that Mr. Herrera would have recommended that I be admitted to the tuition-free school, for which available spaces were limited. However, after a very pleasant conversation, the priest with whom I met (an energetic, yet affable short man in his forties) related to my mother that Mr. Herrera was advocating that I receive a merit scholarship that would admit me, tuition-free, to the same high-quality schooling the

children of the rich received, and that he concurred with Herrera's recommendation and approved that I start attending the Pious School next September, as a fourth-grade student. He added a clarification: my status as a student on a scholarship was not to be disclosed to the teachers, staff, or other students. I would be on par with the children of the wealthy who could afford one of the most expensive private schools in Cuba.

I was only eight years old at the time, but I still remember how astonished and elated my mother and I were at the news. I have always interviewed well, a gift that has helped me time and again throughout my life, so I presume that my conversations with Father Manich, and previously Mr. Herrera, must have impressed them favorably.

That was the beginning of the most important formative period of my life. I attended the Pious School all the way from fourth grade to my graduation from high school and loved every minute of it. I learned much and greatly appreciated the skill and devotion of all my teachers, priests, and laymen alike.

I graduated with top honors in 1960. I do not take particular pride in being the top student in my class, or getting "As" on every course I ever took (except physical education, where I barely passed). Studying came easy for me and doing the homework and preparing for exams were just chores to be carried out without putting much thought into them.

Being a gifted student, however, had downsides. I was already a loner by nature, and an invisible barrier was created between me and my classmates, which only a few of them would get through. I was not aloof, or standoffish, or vain. It was just that I found many of my fellow students uninteresting because the things that attracted them (like baseball, action movies, and comic books) meant little to me. Likewise, what I liked (literature, history, music, the fine arts) was considered arcane by most of them.

Music, in particular, was an important dividing line. I began listening to music while I was doing my homework, sitting at my desk in the living room of our house. With all the women coming and going, it was always very noisy at home, so I started listening to music on the radio to drown out the chit-chat. At first, I would listen to popular songs, but I quickly found those vulgar and distracting. I then landed on a station, CMBF, that

played only classical music, and I became hooked. I did not quite understand what I heard, but soon was addicted.

And this is how I got to know my best childhood friend, one whose passing decades ago I still lament. Angelo was the son of a high executive who oversaw some of Texaco's operations in Cuba. The family lived in a large house on a hilltop with a view of Havana Bay. They were affluent and well-educated.

Angelo was the top student in the class that followed mine. We became acquainted during the school bus trips that took us back and forth twice a day between home and the Pious School. I learned that we had similar tastes and, particularly, were both quite fond of classical music. One day, Angelo told me his parents had bought him a nice new record player console on which to listen to his growing collection of classical records. Would I want to come to his home some afternoon and listen to some Brahms (his favorite composer). I jumped at the opportunity and, for the next ten years or so, he and I became inseparable. I would come to his house, where we were often joined by a classmate of his, Vicente, who was also very bright and a lover of music. We would listen to one record after another, talk politics and other current affairs, have an excellent lunch prepared by Angelo's mother, and argue to no end over whether Toscanini or Karajan was a better conductor. It was perhaps effete, but those afternoons at Angelo's house were very important in rounding up my education in ways beyond what the school could provide.

I graduated in June 1960. I was the Valedictorian of my class and delivered the last commencement address given at the Pious Schools, which were taken over and closed by the government right after the end of the school year.

I could have started at the University of Havana the following year. However, the school was now requiring that all new students join the Communist Party. I was determined to get a job rather than sign up with the Party but was saved by the intervention of another benefactor, this time a good friend of one of my aunts. The lady was well-connected in Catholic and academic circles, and when she learned of my predicament she came up with an idea: I should apply for a scholarship to be admitted as a freshman at the Universidad de Villanueva, a private university run by the Augustinian Priests, sister of Villanova University in Pennsylvania. Villanueva did not have any scholarships of its

own available, but there was an opening for a scholarship to study engineering sponsored by Bacardi, the rum manufacturer. The time to apply for such a scholarship was almost closed, so my aunt's friend undertook to help me secure and file an application.

I applied, took an exam, had another personal interview, and was awarded the scholarship, the last one (to my knowledge) that was ever granted by Bacardi in Cuba. It was the autumn of 1960.

The Villanueva campus was in Miramar, an exclusive neighborhood on the waterfront south and west of the center of Havana. Miramar boasted wide avenues and old palatial mansions and was the site of many foreign consulates and embassies. Thus, Villanueva had a beautiful campus in a lovely area, but attending it presented a difficulty for me: to get there from home, I had to travel on three buses and then proceed on foot for nearly a mile. It was an hour and a half each way, but I was glad to do it because the quality of the school more than made up for the inconvenience. I had 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. It was ideal for me.

Sadly, my dream was truncated by external events. In the second semester of my freshman year at Villanueva, the doomed "Bay of Pigs" invasion of Cuba took place. On April 17, 1961, the school was closed by the government and never reopened; I was later told it had been turned into a warehouse, and all the facilities and academic wealth of the institution had gone to waste.

That was the end of my formal education in Cuba. Not being willing to take a Communist Party oath, I stayed home for a full year, during which I took French lessons at the Alliance Française, and started taking after-hours German lessons. I read, went to the movies, or to the National Library to listen to its excellent classical music collection (there I became acquainted for the first time with opera, one of the few benefits of my months of forced inaction).

It was not until 1960 that I met a girl that I really liked, one that would have become my wife had I not left Cuba. Mercan was a beautiful brunette who had been courted



unsuccessfully by over a dozen boys by the time we met. She, like me, was an intellectual and had no patience for things like soap operas, sewing, and home economics. Her father had fought on the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War and had been forced to migrate to Cuba, where he and his late wife raised Mercan, her sister Alicia, and their younger brother Julio (Julito).

Julito was who brought us together. He was a little devil of a boy, always making mischief and getting away with it because he was one of the funniest people I ever met. I met Julito through my brother, and Julito adopted me because I was serious and businesslike, all the opposite of him. Julito introduced me to his eldest sister, and the three of us spent many a pleasant hour together in their apartment, downing Cuban soft drinks, talking politics (we were all strong opponents of the Castro regime), and watching comedy shows on TV. Mercan captivated me with her beauty and quick wit, and I found myself falling in love with her.

But it was not to last. An opportunity to leave the country presented itself two years later and it was too good to pass up. Mercan and I wept profusely as we said our goodbyes; we corresponded a couple of times after my arrival in the United States, and then silence. I hope she has had a good life, and still remember her as my first true love.

As 1962 started, nothing was happening that appeared to change the dismal future that lay in store for us in Cuba. My parents started getting together the mounds of paperwork required to leave the country. One of my aunts on my mother's side was in Miami and helped us with the application and provided the dollar fees required for their processing. The plan was that my brother and I would come to the United States together, I would get a job and support us, and later help my parents make the trip. The two of us filed simultaneous applications to depart Cuba in the spring of 1962.

My brother, who at 15 was able to travel out of Cuba without needing a U.S. visa, received a telegram from the government authorizing his departure in July 1962, while I, who was 19, was still awaiting my visa. He left, and upon arrival in Miami, was sent to a camp ("Camp Matecumbe") south of the city where unaccompanied Cuban children were kept, waiting for their parents to arrive from Cuba, or pending their resettlement elsewhere in foster homes across the country.

I was left behind, waiting for my visa, which finally arrived in mid-October 1962. The fateful telegram came days afterward, and I was directed to proceed to the offices of Pan American Airways to get a ticket for a departure for Miami on October 27. I went to Pan Am's offices on the afternoon of October 22 and got my plane ticket. Upon returning home I turned on the illegal short-wave radio that had been bequeathed to us by earlier departing relatives. We all gathered around the radio, and listened, as it was our custom, to the evening broadcasts of the Voice of America. That evening's broadcast was to be different, though. At 7 PM, President John F. Kennedy went on the air, announcing the establishment of a quarantine against the Soviet Union activities in Cuba. He said:

"...[A] strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba is being initiated. All ships of any kind bound for Cuba, from whatever nation or port, will, if found to contain cargoes of offensive weapons, be turned back. This quarantine will be extended, if needed, to other types of cargo and carriers." The Cuban Missile Crisis had started.

The following day, commercial airline operations between Cuba and the United States were suspended, and the Pan Am flights were stopped, never to resume. I was left holding a worthless ticket for a flight that never took place. My future seemed glum.

I was able, however, to leave Cuba with my parents seven months later, as detailed in "*The Black Pen*." But that is another story.

END

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 of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies and paying magazines, blogs, audiobooks, and podcasts. Some of his unpublished works have also received "honorable mentions" from a number of paying publications. The first collection of his stories, "The Satchel and Other Terrors" was released in February 2023 and is available through Amazon and other retailers.

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