

# The Black Pen - Matias Travieso-Diaz

*"When you die, others who think they know you, will concoct things about you... Better pick up a pen and write it yourself, for you know yourself best." **Sholom Aleichem***

Since the Castro regime came into power in Cuba, thousands upon thousands of its citizens decamped the island. It is no secret why so many people left: within weeks of assuming power, the new government embarked on a course destined to control every aspect of life in the island. By doing so, the regime made life in Cuba intolerable.

I was one of those who managed to leave. This is the story of the circuitous way in which I made my departure to join the ranks of the Cuban expatriate community.

## 1

On April 17, 1961, an anti-Castro Cuban assault force that called itself the "2506 Brigade" landed on the southern coast of the island at a beachhead known as Playa Girón, in the swampy Bay of Pigs area. Within seventy-two hours Cuban armed forces decisively defeated the invaders, killing several and capturing the rest. The prisoners were jailed and held for ransom by the government. At the time of the failed invasion, I was eighteen, a freshman studying on a scholarship at a private university. Students and faculty at that university and in other private schools were looked upon with suspicion by the government as wealthy "counter-revolutionaries" and risked imprisonment at any time.

We were hardly typical of the rich and middle-class families that had been streaming out of Cuba since the Revolution came into power. We were blue collar, living hand to mouth in a modest home in one of the poor neighborhoods that ring the center of Havana. My father drove an ancient Chevy taxicab and worked sixteen hours a day to support us. My brother was fourteen and a high school sophomore. My mother was a typical Cuban housewife, devoted to her family and having no significant outside interests.

We were politically inert and under normal circumstances we would never have considered leaving Cuba. However, after the defeat of the 2506 Brigade an atmosphere of near panic

surrounded those not belonging to the ranks of the government. There was a rumor that the Government would round up all underage children and move them to internment camps, where they would be re-educated and molded into the Marxist system. It was also rumored that the Government would institute a compulsory military system and keep young men like me from leaving the country. It was a maelstrom of fears that added to the day to day struggle to survive in the increasing penury of the government-controlled economy.

## 2

In late 1961, my parents reached the painful decision that the family, and we children in particular, had to leave for the United States as soon as possible. Getting out was a lengthy, difficult, and expensive process involving multiple steps. One of my mother's sisters had left early and had settled in Miami. Her family could afford the fees involved in the process and provided money to pay for things like airline tickets, which had to be purchased in dollars. The main obstacle to our departure, though, was bureaucratic. The United States had broken diplomatic relations with Cuba in early 1961, so there were no consular offices where one could apply for a visa to travel to the United States. Instead, a way in which some could come to this country from Cuba involved the use of "visa waivers." Such waivers could be issued automatically to children under sixteen years of age; older minors needed clearance from the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the FBI. In either case, once minors entered the United States, they could bring in their parents by applying to the State Department for their visa waivers.

Thus, our plan was to apply for visa waivers that would allow my younger brother and I to travel to the United States. Once there, I would apply for a visa waiver for my parents.

Although my brother and I applied for visa waivers at the same time, he obtained his in June 1962 and was approved for departure the next month. Because I was older, the processing of my visa waiver application took much longer, so that when my brother was given a departure date my application was still pending. That was the first wrenching decision my family faced: whether to keep my brother with us until we both could leave, potentially forfeiting future travel opportunities for him; or send him to the United States alone and have him wait there for my arrival. There was no way we would have agreed to send him alone, but my aunt in Miami told

us that she would take care of my brother pending my departure. On that basis, he left in July 1962.

It was never clear to us why my aunt would not have my brother live with her. Instead, he was turned over to a program run by the Catholic Welfare Bureau, which had established shelters for unaccompanied Cuban minors. My brother was placed in one of those shelters, called Camp Matecumbe, where he remained cut off from all except for occasional visits by my aunt. He was traumatized by the experience.

### 3

Finally, in mid-October, we were notified that my visa waiver had been approved and my departure from Cuba was impending. I had mixed feelings about leaving my family behind under such a precarious state of affairs, but was prevailed upon by my parents, who insisted that my first and greatest duty was to go to Miami and rescue my brother. I bowed to their pressure, but also was somewhat egotistically glad to leave Cuba's hellhole behind. On Saturday, October 20, 1962 I received a telegram (the government official notices to departing citizens came by telegram, frequently in the dead of night) setting my departure for a week hence, on October 27. I was to present myself at the office of Pan American Airways and purchase a ticket for the flight.

### 4

On Monday October 22 I arrived at the Pan Am ticket office and found it in turmoil, with literally dozens of people roaming around, begging and arguing in increasing loud voices as they tried to get on a flight out of Cuba, although in most cases they were not authorized to travel and Pan Am was unable to honor their requests. It took a couple of hours for me to clear past the mob and reach the window. Five minutes later, I was on my way home, airline ticket in my pocket and a deep feeling of relief in my heart. I arrived home in time to listen to the evening newscast from the Voice of America on the short-wave radio that we hid in the kitchen. The news came on: its first item was the voice of President Kennedy announcing that the United States was imposing a naval blockade on Cuba to prevent the arrival of Russian ships, now in the middle of

the ocean, that carried nuclear warheads with the intent of deploying them on the missiles already in place in Cuba, aimed at the United States.

The following morning the Cuban government cancelled all commercial flights in and out of Cuba. The Pan Am office where I had just purchased my ticket was closed.

## 5

As the gravest military confrontation the world had seen unfolded, my family experienced a crisis of its own. Like all Cubans, we feared that if there was open warfare between the United States and the U.S.S.R., Cuba would certainly be wiped off the face of the earth. But I faced an additional, personal threat. I was marooned in Cuba and everybody in government knew that I was a traitor that had been trying to leave the country. If there was any military action, I would be one of the first people to be rounded up and jailed, as had happened in 1961 during the Playa Girón invasion, when thousands of disaffected Cubans throughout the island were rounded up and caged for several days under threat of execution. We hardly slept those terrible days, as brinkmanship between the two top world powers brought the planet to the verge of ruin.

## 6

Finally, the Russian ships turned around and the international crisis was defused. But in Cuba things did not go back to normal. All people like myself that had been in the process of leaving Cuba, plus many others that had been prompted to try to escape by the “missile crisis,” began looking for alternative ways of getting out. People lined up by the hundreds, day and night, at foreign country consulates, anxiously seeking nearly impossible to obtain visas to travel to those countries. I went to the Mexican consulate once and left in deep despair. People who could not claim a direct link to that country were being turned away, thus my chances of being able to leave in that manner were non-existent. My future life prospects were dim. I could not try to go back to school, for admission to the State universities would have required me to become a member of the Communist Party. So, I entertained myself by studying French and German at schools sponsored by the respective embassies, and read a lot, but tried to keep as low a profile as possible, always under the watchful eye of our block’s Comité de Defensa de la Revolución,

the vigilante group that spied on us and our neighbors to ensure we did nothing proscribed by the state.

## 7

In the meantime, the United States and Cuba had been negotiating a resolution of the problem posed by the imprisoned 2506 Brigade members. Talks had been going on for a year and a half when, in the aftermath of the missile crisis, a deal was finally struck. In an effort financed by the U.S. Government and some private enterprises and fronted by Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, Cuba agreed to release the prisoners and allow them and their immediate families to be transported to the United States in exchange for fifty-three million dollars' worth of food, medical supplies, and tractors, which Castro touted as great benefits to Cuba from the deal. Ferries were engaged to bring the food, the tractors, and other supplies to Cuba. On their return, the same ferries would take the released prisoners and their families to Miami. The ferries, however, had more capacity than what was needed to take the prisoners back, and an addition was made to the deal. There were several thousand unaccompanied minors in U.S. government facilities, at great cost to this country and considerable pain to the children and their parents in Cuba. Space would be provided in the ferries for the children's parents and underage siblings to come to the United States, under what became called the "family reunification program." The Castro government agreed to this expansion of the deal, for it cost Cuba nothing and allowed it to get rid of a large number of undesirables.

My brother was among the unfortunate children that now were going to be instrumental in rescuing their parents, a surprising twist in the Cuban exodus saga.

## 8

For many months, my parents had been burdened by guilt at leaving their youngest child alone in a strange land. The news that they might be able to finally rejoin him brought immeasurable relief to their conscience, but as the days came and went and the ferry trips approached their end their relief was replaced by anxiety. Why were they not being contacted? There were rumors that people had been able to bribe their way into the ferries, despite having no right to do so. Were they stealing our place? My father went to the former U.S. embassy, now being staffed by Swiss

embassy personnel, and tried to get an explanation. He was told politely that the process was ongoing and was sent away. My father was never a patient person and being brushed off that way made him angry and disconsolate but there was nothing for us to do but wait.

Finally, we received a telegram from the Swiss embassy addressed to my parents asking them to appear on Friday, May 17, 1963 at the U.S. embassy building for processing. We were concerned because I was not included among those summoned for the interview with the Swiss officials. What were we going to do?

My father was as decisive as I ever had seen him: “All three of us will show up and we’ll see what happens.”

## 9

The U.S. Embassy building sits on the waterfront in the wealthy section of Havana. The building itself is large but unimpressive: a concrete and glass box without great architectural appeal. For those of us who were desperate to leave Cuba, it was the symbol of a freedom that only a few months earlier had appeared unattainable and now seemed within reach. Entrance to the building was guarded by Cuban soldiers as well as Swiss diplomats. As always, there was an inevitable line of people with and without appointments trying to get in to confirm their good fortune or plead for help. It was a warm May morning, and a pleasant breeze blew in from the sea. As I stood in line, however, I was shivering.

My fears were reinforced when my father showed the appointment telegram to the Cuban guard at the entrance. He reviewed it, nodded at my parents and demanded: “And who’s he?” pointing to me. “It’s my son” declared my father, adding in a firm voice: “He’s coming with us.” The guard was about to protest, but the Swiss clerk intervened: “That is OK. Let them through.”

We sat in an auditorium, in the company of about a hundred other men, women, and small children. As we waited, we witnessed scenes of human distress and anguish. The couple sitting behind us had a minor daughter alone in Miami. They were set to rejoin her, but the wife had a conflict: her other, older daughter had cerebral palsy and had nobody to care for her. They were trying to decide whether they would go together to the States, or the mother would stay behind. The wife wavered, once and again changing her mind, wringing her hands, and crying

desperately. Finally, the exasperated husband turned to her and almost bellowed: “Listen, a horse has four legs and all go on the same road. Either we all go together or we stay here and pray that God protects our Felisa.”

We never knew how the unfortunate couple dealt with their dilemma, because my father’s name was called and we were taken to a small office adjacent to the auditorium. There, behind a desk, sat the blondest man I had ever seen. He was in his forties, pale as chalk, and immaculately dressed in a grey suit and a matching silk tie. He wore in his lapel a carefully stenciled name tag that read: “Klaus Spenhauer, First Secretary.” He spoke gently, but with great authority.

“So, you are the parents of [my brother]. Do you wish to travel to America to reunite with him?” My mother almost didn’t let him finish. “More than anything else!” she exclaimed.

“Well, you are in luck. The ferry trips are over, but there have also been flights that came to bring perishable medications and took people back to the United States. The next to last of these flights leaves on Wednesday, May 22, five days from today. Can you be ready by that day?” My mother replied impetuously: “Yes, yes!!”

My father placed a restraining hand on her shoulder. “Mr. Spenhauer, Sir, there is a problem.”

“What’s that?”

My father pointed to me and said firmly: “This is our other son [...]. He needs to come with us, but is not on the list.”

The Swiss turned to me: “Son, how old are you?”

I gulped and answered truthfully: “Twenty.”

Mr. Spenhauer turned to my father and shook his head in sympathy. “I’m truly sorry. The program under which you are to travel is available only to the parents of unaccompanied minors in the United States and their minor children. Your son is not a minor. I cannot authorize his travel.”

I felt as if a bolt of lightning had struck me and rendered me insensate. I fought the numb feeling and addressed the man for the first time: “Sir, I am still a minor under Cuban law.”

Mr. Spenhauer looked at me appraisingly. I held his gaze. There was a pause. The only sound in the room was the whirring of the window air conditioning unit.

Finally, the Swiss reached into his coat pocket and extracted the most beautiful artifact that I have ever seen: A black Montblanc fountain pen. He unscrewed the top and carefully entered my name on the telegram that advised of our parents’ authorization to travel. He then opened a drawer, took out a sheet of paper and added the same name to a typewritten list. He got up and waved us goodbye, and shook my hand as we left. “Good luck in America,” he said.

## 10

That weekend we alternated between frantic activity putting our affairs in order and waiting fretfully for the final days of our stay in Cuba to end. Sunday afternoon we received the fateful telegram from the Ministerio del Interior advising that the three of us had been granted a permit to leave the country and were scheduled to depart on Wednesday. The same night we received the departure telegram, we were visited by four female members of our block’s Comité, the vigilante group that spied on us and our neighbors to ensure we did nothing prescribed by the state. They came to draw a detailed inventory of our household possessions, which were to become government property upon our departure. They took note of everything we owned, from my mother’s frying pans to my father’s two dress suits (one of which he would be allowed to wear the day we left). The leader of the group, a Socialist firebrand by the name of Crispina Vázquez, even opened the bookcase in the living room and entered in her notebook the titles of all my books, from the high school textbooks to the few comic books that I had kept since early childhood. Somehow, that felt like a particularly stinging violation and I had to restrain myself from crying out my anger at the vultures.

## 11

Monday flew by in a blur of activity. We spent very little time packing, for we would be allowed to take with us only one change of clothes per person, our shaving gear, and my mother’s modest cosmetics bag. We would not be permitted to take an extra pair of shoes, for there was a great



scarcity of footwear in Havana and our other scuffed and worn shoes and sneakers would benefit worthier members of society. Apart from packing, each of us went out to visit close friends and neighbors to say our goodbyes, and my father took a long bus ride to see his cousin Pablo, who had a truck and agreed to drive us to the airport the following morning. I went with my father to turn over his taxicab at a government depot, several miles away from home. It was a blood curdling drive: the ten-year old Chevy had three hundred thousand kilometers in its odometer and was on its very last legs. It coughed and sputtered and stalled on us twice as we made our slow way to the depot. It stalled one final time, and died, right in front of the depot; fortunately, the entrance to the lot went slightly downhill and we were able to shift the car into neutral and gently push it into an empty parking space. We got a receipt and left as quickly as our legs would take us, for it was virtually certain that the car would never start again.

## 12

The last requirement before departure was the inspection of our home Tuesday morning by the Comité women, who were to ascertain that we are leaving everything on their list behind and had not tried to give anything away. They promptly showed up at seven-thirty and went over the entire house with a fine tooth comb. Then a problem arose when Crispina Valdés, looking at the contents of my bookcase, noted acidly: "There's a book missing." "What's that?" I replied, torn between anger and fear. "Fortunata y Jacinta by Benito Pérez Galdós" replied the dragon lady, reading from her list. There followed a few moments of panic, while I went over the contents of the bookcase, and mother opened and closed drawers in all rooms. I couldn't make sense of the loss of that book. My mother seldom read anything besides the papers, and I loathe the work of Pérez Galdós and would not have given that book even to my worst enemy; the book had belonged to my grandmother and had come into my possession after she passed away.

Things were starting to get testy when my father cleared his throat and confessed sheepishly: "I know where the book is." He led a procession to our small bathroom, opened the door, and pointed to the top of the toilet. "It's there."

I went over and picked the large paperback tome, whose pages were yellow with age. "Dad" I exclaimed, "I didn't know you liked Spanish literature." He cleared his throat again and

explained: “With all the excitement, I have been constipated for several days. I took the book to the can to pass the time while nature took its course.”

He handed the book to Crispina, who opened it and let out a tiny scream: “But this book has been mutilated. The first 78 pages are missing!”

My father turned crimson and went on to explain: “This is not the first time I take this book to the bathroom. I like it because the pages are thin and brittle with age and crumple easily.”

I could not repress a chuckle. “Señora Vázquez, I am very sorry, but this is all we can give you. The rest of the book is no longer available.” In my mind, I added: “Dad found a perfect use for Pérez Galdós.”

### 13

On Wednesday morning cousin Pablo drove us to the Havana International Airport and dropped us and our bags at the entrance. Unlike an earlier era, the airport was mostly deserted – except for a side corridor where a trio of Interior Ministry officials, in full uniform, sat at a wooden desk inspecting the documentation of the hundred-plus passengers that were to depart that day for the United States. They made no effort to conceal their disdain for us worms seeking to leave for the land of the imperialists. They looked at all our documents in meticulous detail, trying to find something that would justify keeping us from getting away. The leader of the three looked at the pen-inscribed entry that had me on the approved departure list. He frowned: “This is very irregular. How come you were approved to travel? You don’t look like a child.” I tried to remain calm and replied icily: “Don’t ask us. You need to take this up with the Swiss.” I thought he was going to strike me; he turned red and replied: “I most certainly will. In the meantime, you can proceed with your family to the examination room for the physical inspection.”

The physical inspection was a humiliating full body exam to make sure we were not trying to smuggle jewelry or other valuables in our bodies. My mother wept from embarrassment. I could see from my father’s clenched fists that he was at the verge of exploding and ruining our chances of escape. Luckily, he was able to control himself.

The next step was to move to the departure lounge (colloquially dubbed the “fish bowl”), a glass enclosed cubicle next to the tarmac where a solitary Pan Am propeller plane sat. All the prospective travelers sat in full view of the plane while, outside the fish bowl, friends and relatives of the soon to depart passengers carried conversations among themselves and, by gestures, with their loved ones who they might never see again. There was profuse crying on both sides of the walls.

I was oblivious to the tumult around me. The threat of the Cuban official still resonated in my ears; I expected to be dragged out at any minute and be separated from my parents, perhaps forever.

They began calling the departing families, one by one, and after a last look at each voyager’s papers, they were escorted through the side door of the lounge and on the pavement for the walk to the plane. A Swiss official stood at the plane’s stairway and shook the hands of each one as they mounted the final steps towards freedom.

The families were called in alphabetical order and, since we were near the end, I shook uncontrollably, wishing for the first time in my life that my surname had been Aguilar or Alvarez. But nobody came to arrest me. My guess is that either the Cuban official gave up on his quest or was countermanded by his superiors, for nobody dared risk antagonizing the Swiss diplomats.

We boarded the plane, were seated, and were greeted by a pretty stewardess in Pan Am uniform with a Red Cross armband as an insignia. She quickly distributed ham and cheese mini sandwiches, cups of Coke, and small packs of Chesterfield cigarettes. She apologized in heavily accented Spanish: “Today’s flight will be short. We will land in Miami in about thirty minutes after takeoff. Please enjoy your flight and welcome to the United States.”

I sank into my seat and closed my eyes as the engines were started and the plane slid on the strip and after a few seconds climbed onto the skies. I missed my chance to take a last look at the country of my birth. At the moment, I did not feel sorry for the loss. Now I do.

I never found out what happened to the unsung hero of this story, Carl Spenhauer. Presumably, as a member of Switzerland's diplomatic corps, he led a successful professional life and died, perhaps in the company of his family, somewhere in his beautiful homeland. I made it a habit of buying Montblanc pens, and the last one is still in a drawer in my office. I don't use it; who pens letters any more? Still, I take it out occasionally, look at it, and remember my Swiss benefactor with undying gratitude.



*Matias Travieso-Diaz is a Cuban-American engineer and attorney, retired after half a century of professional practice in Washington, D.C. Following retirement, he has taken up creative writing and authored many short stories of various lengths and genres. His stories have appeared in over two dozen publications in the United States, the U.K., Canada, Australia and New Zealand.*