

# the other side of hope

Home Masthead Submissions Print magazine Online magazine  
Contact

## The Magic Chrysler Matias Travieso-Diaz

*You can overcome your obstacles, just use them as your magic carpet and ride to success.*  
— Hopal Green

Consuelo's escape plan was desperate but she felt she had little choice. In March 1979 she was directed by the Education Ministry to recommend ten students from the High School of which she was Principal to be conscripted and shipped to Angola to fight in the series of wars between the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola ('MPLA') and right-wing groups backed by the United States, South Africa and Zaire. Cuba had been militarily involved in Angola in support of the MPLA since 1975 and, starting in 1978, had begun suffering serious losses at the hands of South African mercenaries. Fresh bodies were needed at the front, and Consuelo and other school administrators had been commanded to help round up cannon fodder in support of the operations.

Consuelo could not bring herself to single out school children for possible death in Cuba's foreign ventures, and declined to obey the order. After a series of increasingly contentious exchanges with her superiors, Consuelo was informed that she would be dismissed from her job as soon as a replacement could be found.

Consuelo realized that she would be arrested and would join the thousands of political prisoners in Cuba's notorious jails. She knew that she could expect the worst from her captors. She had to escape.

Armando, one of Consuelo's cousins, was a manager at a collective farm in Pinar del Rio, Cuba's westernmost province. Because of his high rank, Armando knew a lot of people who lived on the northern coast, including fishermen who plied the waters of the Straits of Florida in search of commercially valuable fish. Consuelo made a desperate plea to her cousin to help her get a boat in which to escape the island and travel to Florida. Armando rebuffed her at first, for he was not keen on risking his neck to help his relative but at the end – when Consuelo turned all her possessions into illegal foreign currency and offered him a cut in the venture – Armando agreed to start making inquiries.

A couple of weeks later he had identified the owner of a small wooden boat who was willing to take Consuelo

# the other side of hope

[Home](#)   [Masthead](#)   [Submissions](#)   [Print magazine](#)   [Online magazine](#)  
[Contact](#)

very dangerous situation. Besides, they are old enough at 12 and 14 to have their own views. They are socialists like their father and would not go voluntarily to live in the land of the imperialists. They stay with me.'

Consuelo tried all arguments she could think of to move her husband. She cried, cajoled, begged, threatened, invoked love, fidelity and marital harmony. Nothing worked: Ricardo accused her of being self-centered and not caring for her family, and forbade the kids to accompany her.

Past midnight, Consuelo reached a grim decision. She would be of no use to anybody if she was sent to prison. She would leave now, go to the United States, and would somehow try to rescue her children from there. She told herself she was not being egotistical, but was acting only out of self-preservation.

She finished loading her suitcases onto her most prized possession – a 1954 two-toned (lemon with black top) Chrysler New Yorker convertible. She figured that, if she drove fast but not so fast as to draw attention to herself, she would make it to Palma Rubia, a village on the north coast of Pinar del Rio, just before sunrise. She would have to locate the fisherman based on the information that Armando had provided her. There was no way for her to contact the fisherman in advance, so she was putting all her hopes on his being around and willing to take her.

She drove the Chrysler along the Malecón and headed for Fifth Avenue, the main roadway in the Miramar district where the moneyed people lived and foreign dignitaries had their mansions. She was set to drive all the way west on Fifth, which turned into a major highway just outside the city limits, and then take side roads after the village of Mariel until she hit Palma Rubia. She had studied thoroughly her vintage Esso highway map and hoped roads had not changed much in the last twenty years.

As she crossed the bridge over the Almendares River and entered Fifth Avenue, she noted that an unmarked boxy car (a Soviet Lada, she figured) pulled out of a parking space and started following her, attracted perhaps by the showy American vehicle she was driving. The Lada was moving slowly at first, and then with increasing speed.

Consuelo was terrified: only the Secret Police had Ladas, which were used for raids against citizens thought to be counterrevolutionaries. If they stopped her and found the luggage, the water jugs, and other trip necessities that she carried in the trunk of the Chrysler, she would surely be arrested.

She got in the left lane, looking for a place to cross the broad avenue and get away from the Lada. She suddenly veered at full speed onto 20th Street. The Chrysler's tires screeched savagely, but the car unerringly made the turn. She then went down a block to Seventh Avenue, made another sudden left turn, and drove back towards the city, hoping that her faster, more powerful car would eventually leave her pursuer behind. When she reached 14th Street, however, she found that Seventh Avenue was closed for street repairs. She had no alternative but to make another wild turn onto 14th Street, with the Lada less than a block away and approaching fast.

As she raced on 14th Street towards Fifth Avenue, out of the corner of her eye she noticed a building complex

# the other side of hope

Home Masthead Submissions Print magazine Online magazine  
Contact

The Laaa stopped on the side of the road and two men, armed with Kalashnikov machine guns, emerged and moved briskly towards the Chrysler. However, when they started to proceed beyond the demolished fence, they were stopped by a peremptory cry: 'Halt! You are in the territory of the Republic of Colombia! You have no right to enter here! Step out!'

The cry belonged to a disheveled middle-aged woman in a nightgown, who came out of the front door of the building and approached the Chrysler, whose front end was a wreck from which a plume of steam rose into the night sky. The Cuban security agents, who had been joined by another soldier who had emerged from the guard post, stared angrily at the woman, made as if to proceed with their invasion, thought better of it, and retreated to the sidewalk. One of the security agents asked the soldier: 'What is this place?'

'This is the Colombian Embassy.'

'Shit,' grunted the agent, and spat on the ground.



Consuelo sat stunned at the wheel of the Chrysler, bleeding from a gash on her forehead. She stared unfocusedly up at the approaching woman, who was now joined by two men who appeared to be embassy personnel. 'Am very sorry' she started, in a shaky voice.

'Who are you, and why have you done this?' asked the woman sharply.

'I am very sorry,' repeated Consuelo haltingly. 'My name is Consuelo Vivanco, and I am... or was, the Principal of the Eduardo Chibás Senior High School. I was on my way to the coast to get on a boat to leave Cuba when these government agents started chasing my car. I crashed into your mansion because it looked like a foreign place where perhaps I could hide.'

'You were right. This is a foreign place, the Colombian Embassy. But you have caused physical damage to our property and are likely to cause an international incident, which our government would like to avoid. I am not sure we can, or want to, offer you a place to hide.'

'Oh, please, please!' implored Consuelo.

'We'll see,' replied the woman. 'Let's step inside and have someone take a look at that wound!'

While the hastily awakened embassy doctor was tending to Consuelo's wound – not serious, but requiring nearly a dozen stitches – the lady brought her up to speed on the situation. 'I am Ileana Ruiz, Secretary to the Embassy. Our Ambassador, Dr. Rueda, is back in Bogotá for consultations. I'm in charge of the day to day affairs of the Embassy, but have no authority to decide on what to do with you.' She paused for a moment to collect her

# the other side of hope

Home Masthead Submissions Print magazine Online magazine  
Contact

RUIZ. We of course will not relinquish you to the Cuban government, but your future will remain undecided until Ambassador Rueda returns.'

Consuelo wrung her hands with extreme distress. 'I didn't plan on this. Risking death on the high seas was scary but at least involved only me. I fear other people may be affected by my rashness.'

'There's nothing to be done at the moment. Alfonso will show you to a room where you can get some rest. If you give me your car keys, we will get your suitcase from the trunk.'

'What's going to happen to the car? It is almost like a member of my family.'

'We'll put it in our garage and see if it can be repaired. That's a problem that can wait.'



Consuelo slept long but fitfully. She finally looked at the clock on the night table: 2:35 p.m. She had been asleep for almost twelve hours.

Suddenly she realized that she had woken up by sounds coming from the outside. Her guest room overlooked the street and she went to the window to see what was the cause of the commotion was. There were several Ladas and a truck parked in front of the mansion. The sound was that of raised voices from Cuban officials, Embassy personnel, and a couple of civilians she could not identify. She felt woozy from the injury, but managed to walk gingerly downstairs.

The embassy building was large and the path from the stairs to the offices below was not clear. Consuelo ambled at random for a few moments until she was intercepted by an employee who escorted her to a meeting room and sat her down. 'Please wait here. I will get Mrs. Ruiz.'

Mrs. Ruiz, now fully dressed in a severe gray business suit, came in right away. She was unsmiling, but greeted Consuelo politely. 'Good afternoon, Mrs. Vivanco. Did you sleep well?'

'On and off, thank you,' replied Consuelo. 'What's going on out there?'

Mrs. Ruiz smiled ruefully. 'You have become famous overnight.'

'How so?'

'First, agents from the Interior Ministry showed up this morning and started trying to intimidate our staff into turning you over to them. I was advised and put an end to that, at least for the time being. Later, two reporters – from the BBC and France Press – arrived, heavens know how they found out. They also have asked to come in and interview you. I said no, but I am glad they are here, because the Ministry boys will not attempt anything while the foreign press is around. So, there is a lot of shouting and screaming going on, but nothing will happen. I have put in

# the other side of hope

[Home](#)   [Masthead](#)   [Submissions](#)   [Print magazine](#)   [Online magazine](#)  
[Contact](#)



As it turned out, Ambassador Rueda was unable to return to Havana because she had to stay in Bogotá for a series of meetings on drug traffic issues. Two days after Consuelo's abrupt crashing of the Embassy gates, the Ambassador sent Secretary Ruiz a telex giving her authority and responsibility to decide whether to grant political asylum to Consuelo, and handle any fallout with the Cubans should she decide that asylum be granted.

Mrs. Ruiz was not happy, but she was a career diplomat accustomed to dealing with sticky situations. She prepared a carefully drafted message to the Cuban Foreign Ministry advising of Colombia's decision to approve Consuelo's request for asylum and asking that Cuba issue a safe-conduct pass that would enable Consuelo to travel abroad.

The Cuban Foreign Minister at the time, one Isidoro Malmierca, immediately called the Embassy and bellowed at Mrs. Ruiz, complaining that the BBC had published a news item reporting that a dissident, and a woman at that, had managed to elude the Revolutionary security forces and taken refuge by crashing into Colombia's embassy, all of which was 'clearly calculated to embarrass the People's government and undercut the Revolution.' He then announced forcefully: 'That woman is a spy and a CIA agent. She injured a guard with her vehicle and thus committed a criminal act. We will never, ever, give permission for her to leave the country! She will die in your home, if you insist on keeping her there, or will come out and face the Revolutionary justice, as she deserves!'

Secretary Ruiz replied with all the *sang froid* she could muster: 'Mr. Minister, I understand your position. The Colombian Government will continue to endeavor to work with Cuba to resolve this issue in a manner satisfactory to all.' She then hung up.



Malmierca did not stop there. Two days after his exchange with Secretary Ruiz, he sent a note to Colombia's Foreign Minister, threatening with unspecified reprisals if Colombia did not 'face up to its obligations' and had that 'damnable Vivanco woman' turned over to the Cuban Government.

The note was undiplomatic in its demanding and bellicose tone. It was unfortunately leaked to *El Nuevo Siglo*, a conservative newspaper, which published it accompanied by an editorial criticizing the cowardice of the Liberals now in charge of the government.

Colombia had elected as President the previous year Julio César Turbay, a Liberal who had promised to institute a number of social reforms. Much as he wanted to avoid confrontations with Cuba, he and his party could not

# the other side of hope

Home   Masthead   Submissions   Print magazine   Online magazine  
Contact

adapt to her new situation. All her life she had kept a low profile – even her position as Principal of a high school had come to her in a series of almost imperceptible steps, with her saying as little as possible and being as agreeable with her superiors as she could. Now, she saw her picture in the foreign TV programs that were available thanks to the powerful antennas on the roof of the embassy. She had become famous overnight and, sooner or later, her notoriety would rub off on her family: her children and her husband could become victims of the government's attempts to wreak revenge on her. She now lived in a state of constant panic.

Ten days after her break-in, a school bus arrived in front of the embassy and two dozen teenagers, boys and girls, were escorted out by a couple of adults and formed a line in front of the embassy fence, which had just been repaired. From the window of her room on the upper floor, Consuelo could not see too well the features of the children, but with some effort she was able to identify one girl and two boys as students in the High School of which she had been Principal. At a signal from one of the adults, the children began singing patriotic songs, crying out political slogans, and shouting insults at her. As the tempo and volume of the screams increased, some of the boys began throwing rocks at the embassy grounds, aiming for the windows but not quite reaching them. After an hour or so, the adult blew a whistle and the children filed back into the bus and left.

The same demonstration was repeated every day for the next two weeks. Secretary Ruiz called Malmierca to protest the hostile acts of the government-organized mobs, but he refused to talk to her. Instead, an underling conveyed the message that these children were exercising their democratic right to freely express their views, and the Revolution could not prevent them.

At the end of the two weeks, the school bus stopped coming. Consuelo hoped the regime might have grown tired of harassing her, but soon found out better. One morning, a single Lada came to station itself in front of the embassy. From the car emerged two officials, Consuelo's husband Ricardo, and their children. They approached the locked fence and Ricardo pressed a buzzer to summon an Embassy employee. Ricardo then asked to be allowed to speak to Consuelo. The children were to stay behind, visible but out of reach, in the custody of the Cuban officials. This was to ensure that Ricardo would not try to join Consuelo in seeking asylum.

Husband and wife were mutually shocked when they met in the embassy's library. Consuelo was drawn and pale, and her lustrous black hair hung limp and greasy, as if she had not cared for her looks in the last three weeks. Ricardo had lost weight and sported more white hairs than she remembered. He kissed her on the cheek and ran his hand caressingly over her shoulder and back. She remained there, unmoving.

'Consuelo, I have come to ask a big favor of you. Please, for yourself and your children, give yourself up. I have assurances from the Government that if you end your asylum voluntarily you will face only token charges and many not even have to serve time.'



# the other side of hope

Home Masthead Submissions Print magazine Online magazine  
Contact

school. She became agitated and started tapping her fingers rapidly on the arms of her chair.

'Well, no, it's not only that. We are actually concerned that something bad may happen to you. This government doesn't forgive, you know. Even if you somehow get out of Cuba, your life will be at risk no matter where you go.'

'Let me worry about that. Look, you do what you need to do, and have the children do the same. I'm living in a nightmare and nothing you guys do will make things different for me.'

'You have changed,' noted Ricardo bitterly.

'Maybe. But it may be that I have realized that I don't mean much to anybody, least of all my family, so I must protect myself. Leave now, and tell your superiors that I don't intend to leave this Embassy unless granted permission to live free somewhere that is not Cuba.'



Three months later, Consuelo was still a forced guest of the Colombian government. The Western press – from the New York Times to Le Monde, and particularly the British tabloids – had reported extensively on her plight and the unsuccessful efforts of the Cuban Government to dislodge her. The Cuban authorities continued to organize protests at the Colombian Embassy; these proved ineffective and only served to raise the temperature of Cuban-Colombian relations to near the boiling point.

A torrid morning in early July, Consuelo found herself having an informal breakfast with Secretary Ruiz in the embassy's kitchen. Among gulps of strong Colombian coffee, the Secretary made her guest aware of a new problem arising in the diplomatic front. The administration of U.S. President Jimmy Carter was seeking to improve relations between the United States and Cuba. In furtherance of the efforts to bring the two countries closer together, U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance had contacted the Colombian Foreign Minister to suggest that hemispheric peace might be helped if Colombia could find a way to settle with Cuba the problem of Mrs. Vivanco's asylum.

Consuelo was paralyzed with terror by the dire news. 'I feel like a leaf floating in a river, at the mercy of the current, thrown this way and that by forces over which I have no control. What are you going to do? Feed me to the lions? Show me the door?'

Mrs. Ruiz had become friendly with Consuelo during the four months since her surprising arrival at the embassy. Ambassador Rueda still remained in Colombia, so it was Ruiz who had to face the 'Vivanco headache.' In the process, she had come to pity Consuelo's predicament and her frightened loneliness. Giving her up would be an unacceptable betrayal that would haunt her the rest of her days. She gave a thin smile and replied mysteriously:

# the other side of hope

Home Masthead Submissions Print magazine Online magazine  
Contact

I have come up with a potential little miracle to solve your situation, noperetully without betraying you. Listen.

'Colombia bought this mansion from its previous owner, a sugar baron. He made extensive renovations to an older house that dated back to the eighteenth century, built by some Spanish aristocrats. At the time, there was fear that the city would be occupied by foreigners – as it happened in 1762, when the British took Havana during a war with Spain. So, the builders of the original house dug a secret tunnel from it to an exit on a vacant lot a couple of blocks away, in what is now 12th Street. The sugar baron discovered the tunnel and mentioned it to the Colombian Government agent. After we bought the property, we also acquired the lot on 12th Street to make sure that the secret exit remained available should it ever need to be used. We also built a small shack to hide the tunnel's exit.'

'What good does that do me?' interrupted Consuelo, disconsolate.

'We have also been working on fixing the car that you drove onto our property. The damage caused by the multiple collisions has only been repaired to the extent possible, given the unavailability of American spare parts. We also fixed up the body damage as well as it could be done, and tried to disguise the bumps by painting the car black, so it now looks like it is carrying a hearse in a funeral procession. The car is parked on 12th Street by the vacant lot where the tunnel exits.'

'Am I going to be able to drive my Chrysler in that condition?'

'The car may be drivable, at least for a while. The engine block is cracked and the car may overheat due to an oil leak. I'm told that if you see gray or black fumes coming from under the hood, you should stop the car immediately and let it rest and try to restart it again.'

'Am I taking a big chance with my life? Is this a risk or a gamble?'

'Call it what you will. I think you should go back to your original trip. In any case, I recommend you make your escape two days from today, this coming Sunday, after midnight so it will be dark and traffic will be light.'

'Why have you gone through all that trouble for me?'

'Well, Consuelo, you are not as worthless and unlovable as you think. Many people, in this building and outside, care for you and wish you well.'

At this, Consuelo no longer tried to hide her tears and she encircled the diplomat on a tight hug. 'Thank you... thank you... a thousand times thank you!'



The Chrysler made it out of Havana without incident but overheated about twenty miles away from Palma Rubia. It



# the other side of hope

[Home](#)   [Masthead](#)   [Submissions](#)   [Print magazine](#)   [Online magazine](#)  
[Contact](#)

seeker lodging at the Colombian Embassy in Havana, had disappeared and was believed to be hiding somewhere on the island. Ricardo strenuously denied knowledge of his wife's whereabouts. After a while, interest in the case waned, and she was largely forgotten. Several months later, six dissidents driving a city bus were successful in crashing it into the grounds of the Peruvian embassy, a copycat attempt patterned after Consuelo's wild ride. The dissidents were given asylum by the Peruvian officials, and the ensuing crisis eventually led to a boatlift in which almost 125,000 Cubans were allowed to migrate to the United States through the port of Mariel. Some, who remembered her picture from the papers, believed they recognized Consuelo among the exiles greeting the new arrivals upon their landing in Key West. This was never confirmed.

**Matias Travieso-Diaz was born in Cuba and migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. He retired and turned his attention to creative writing. His stories have been published or accepted for publication or use in over fifty paying short story anthologies, magazines, audio books and podcasts, most recently the Grantville Gazette, After Dinner Conversation, Red Room Press (Year's Best Hardcore Horror vol.6), and The Copperfield Review. Some of his stories have also received 'honorable mentions' from a number of publications.**

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# the other side of hope

[Home](#)   [Masthead](#)   [Submissions](#)   [Print magazine](#)   [Online magazine](#)  
[Contact](#)