

My Meandering Literary Path

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May your choices reflect your hopes, not your fears.

Nelson Mandela



Part 1: Blame John G.

I was born into a poor family in La Habana, Cuba in February 1943. My father had to go to work as a laborer in the cane fields at the age of seven to support his widowed mother and sisters, and never got a formal education; he ended up making a meager living as a taxicab driver. My mother, one of six children of a grocery store owner, was a housewife who only got the sketchy schooling that middle-class girls received in the early part of the twentieth century. Both of my parents, therefore, viewed going to school as a way

out of poverty and were determined to see I got as good an education as it could be managed.

I was a gifted student and was able to receive a solid 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.

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Here the calculus involved, not what my academic preferences were but what professions were perceived as being most lucrative. At the time (it was the 1950s) there was a glut of teachers, lawyers, and physicians in Cuba, so those careers were disfavored and my family steered me away from them. On the other hand, holders of technical degrees, particularly engineers, had no trouble getting good jobs, since the supply of such professionals was limited and demand was high.

A career decision was thus thrust upon me when I was in tenth grade. When I graduated from high school I would enroll in the university and get an engineering degree. The next step was simple: I enjoyed organic chemistry, which I found akin to voodoo magic, and had an excellent Chemistry teacher, who made learning a difficult subject almost a game. For those reasons, I opted for becoming a chemical engineer.

I graduated from high school in 1960, at the time when Fidel Castro was already in power and well on his way to turning Cuba into a totalitarian state. The political situation on the island affected my professional plans. I could have entered the free

University of Havana and pursued there an Engineering course, but incoming university students would be required to join the Communist Party, which I was loath to do.

I was rescued from my predicament by a friend of my aunts, who suggested I should apply for a scholarship at the Universidad de Villanueva, a private university run by the Augustinian Priests, a sister school to 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, to my knowledge, 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 on campus, 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 the school was closed by the government; I was later told it was turned into a warehouse.

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

My parents and I came to the United States in 1963, among the many thousand destitute 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 so soon after coming to a strange country. I enrolled at the University of Miami, but Chemical Engineering, my preferred choice, was not among 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, and later in Ohio and New York, 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 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 allowed me to work at a school engineering laboratory while taking courses part-time toward getting a PhD. I moved to Columbus, Ohio in the Fall of 1967, the first time away from my family, leaving the relative comfort (for a Cuban) of the Miami environment.

The nature of the research I did at Ohio State was somewhat more interesting than transmission line planning. At the end of four years, I received a PhD in Electrical Engineering with very little practical knowledge of the subject and no great desire to expand it.

I worked in Columbus for a year after graduation and then moved back to Orlando, Florida in 1972 to take a position with an aerospace company helping design guidance systems for a new missile being developed by the U.S. Navy. The work was challenging and interesting, but Fate intervened again to steer me, this time in the person of my office mate John G.

John was in his mid-fifties, twenty years older than I. He was a very nice, skinny man who was going through a streak of bad luck. His wife had divorced him and her lawyer had secured a property settlement that took away his home and forced him to pay alimony, leaving him penniless. John became a chain-smoking bundle of nerves who could hardly concentrate at work and coughed frequently. I felt sorry for the fellow.

I became even sorer for John when the company decided to lay him off. There were at least two reasons for this. First, after being employed at the company for two decades, his salary was high for someone in his position as a line engineer. Second, he had learned his Electrical Engineering skills in the nineteen fifties, and never quite mastered

the use of computer-aided design tools, so he was becoming technically obsolete. In addition, his productivity had declined because of his personal situation.

The company may have been justified in getting rid of John. However, the dismissal rendered him unemployable, an overqualified fifty-something, at a time when keeping employed was crucial. I was not thirty years old yet, but I pictured myself in a similar situation twenty years hence and got scared. For the first time, it dawned on me that being an engineer in the U.S. forced one, in most cases, to remain an employee of a corporation with no assurances of long-term employment. I could work for many years and then find myself thrown on the street.

What could I do to improve my chances of steady, secure employment? I spent some time examining the job market and came to realize that it was the total opposite of what I had seen in Cuba, and the strategy that my parents and I had selected – and to which I had adhered since coming to the States – was erroneous. In fact, in America, doctors and lawyers made top money, were highly respected by society, and were far more secure in their long-term professional outlook than engineers.

That realization made me focus on the professional switch that my friend and former roommate Paul was making. He had started his life as a physicist and, after securing a job with Bell Labs, had been sent to get a Master's Degree at MIT and had graduated with honors from that institution. Despite these successes, he had decided to switch careers and was now a first-year student at Harvard Law School. Was he doing the right thing?

I never had paid much attention to the law as a profession. I knew it involved a lot of writing (something I enjoyed and did well; I had been the editor of my high school's magazine for two years), arguing (which did not come natural to me), and appearing in public (of which I had no experience), so on the whole it was a dubious field into which to cast my fortune, but I was ready to make a major career decision and did not stop to consider whether I would actually enjoy the work. It had to be better than engineering.

I decided to make a gamble: I would apply to the top five ranked law schools in the country and, unless I was accepted to one of them, would give up switching to law as a

profession. My rationale was that getting a law degree from one of those five schools was likely to lead to a successful practice; going to a lesser school might be a disastrous professional change and leave me worse off than staying with my current employment.

I sent out the five applications. One of the schools, Yale, rejected me outright. Another, Stanford, rejected me after a long delay. Harvard placed me on a waiting list and ultimately also found no place for me. Berkeley and Columbia, however, admitted me to their upcoming entering classes, with an expected 1976 graduation date.

I was pleased with the results because they signaled a good chance of future professional success. I chose to go to Columbia because Berkeley was on the other side of the country, far from family and friends. Columbia, on the other hand, is in New York, two hours by plane, a day and a half by car, from my family in Florida.

So, I spent three years in Manhattan, living in dorms, cooking for myself or eating out, enjoying for the most part the law school courses and the cultural life of the metropolis, but developing an aversion to living in dirty, expensive, unsafe, crowded New York City. That aversion prevented me from seeking a job with a New York law firm.

My academic course of studies at Columbia went well. I graduated in May 1976, became an associate at a medium-sized Washington, D.C. firm, made partner after seven years as an associate, and went on to practice for almost forty years before retiring in 2015. In that period, I made several discoveries. I learned that practicing law was less intellectually demanding than doing engineering work; I found out that I had what it took to succeed as a lawyer; and realized that I would never love my new profession but was content with having made the switch.

Part 2: I like It

Since I learned to read (my aunt Maria said that I was two at the time) I had a passion for the printed word and devoured everything that was placed before me. My aunt Laudelina, who had received an education, read every night before going to sleep, and she let me read her castoffs. Not everything she read was appropriate for me (she spent

weeks going through “*Gone with the Wind*” and never gave it to me – not that I would have enjoyed it), but some of her stuff was fine.

I recall reading one of her castoffs, an adventure novel called “*Rupert of Hentzau*,” when I was only seven years old and thinking it was a lot of fun, as were a number of other stories to which I became exposed. Since those early years, the quality of the material I read or listen to in audiobooks has improved, but my appetite for reading fiction has remained unabated but is now bounded by the time now available to me; anything in print that is available for me to read must be great if I am to give it any of my remaining time. I have dropped reading newspapers and magazines altogether.

I cannot recall the first time I actually *wrote* something that was not an assignment from school. I became the editor of the student newspaper at my high school when I was in the tenth grade, and I wrote editorials, articles, and even gossip columns for every monthly issue for two years until my graduation. I thought writing was easy and enjoyable but did not take it seriously.

I did no writing whatsoever during those dreary years when I was trying to leave Cuba, or in the period I spent getting a college education. I did, however, remain aware of the new wave of Latin American writers that were becoming famous and got familiar with the works of Borges, Fuentes, Vargas Llosa, García Márquez, and Cortázar, and their Cuban counterparts, particularly Alejo Carpentier, Severo Sarduy, Reinaldo Arenas and José Lezama Lima.

My interest in literature reawakened around 1968 or 69, when I was living in Columbus, Ohio, attending Ohio State and working on my PhD in Electrical Engineering. There, I met a fellow Cuban who quickly became one of my closest friends and an important influence on my future life as a writer. His name is Eloy and, at the time, he was pursuing a doctorate in Romance Languages at Ohio State. Eloy and I discussed often our shared love for Latin American fiction and he encouraged me to audit a class he was taking under an excellent Argentinian professor who was going over the works of many contemporary Latin American writers up to then unknown to me. In particular, the course covered the section “*Informe Sobre Ciegos*” (Report on Blind Men) of Ernesto Sábato’s novel “*Sobre Hombres y Tumbas*.” The *Informe* blew me away by the hallucinating, surrealistic quality of its prose. I did not sympathize with Sábato’s twisted

protagonist but his brilliant depiction in the novel made me think, for the first time: “I wish I could write like that.”

Out of my auditing of that course came the writing of my first short story, “*The Black Cat*,” now mercifully lost. I do not remember the details of the story, but when I showed it to the professor, she delicately suggested that it needed more work. I am sure it did. I did some other writing while in Columbus, but virtually nothing is left of it except snippets, now incorporated in a couple of my stories.

More years passed. Engineering, law, marriage, and family life occupied my time until March 2015, when I retired. For the first couple of years, I did little but become increasingly bored with life after full employment. Then, in 2017, I had a dream.

In the dream, which I vividly recalled when I woke up, human life on Earth was being threatened by a subtle invasion by extra-terrestrials who were planning to extinguish humanity by “poisoning the wells” with a substance that, when ingested by pregnant women in their drinking water, prevented them from giving birth to females. Through that ploy, the invaders expected, that human life would come to an end after a generation or two without having to fire a shot.

I turned my dream into my first short story, “*Something in the Water*.” I wrote the story as the transcript of the police interview of an Indian youth who had learned of the aliens’ plot and sought to destroy the invaders by setting afire the tavern in which he worked and where the invaders gathered to hatch their plot. In an added touch, I left the ending indefinite, suggesting that the aliens might or might not have succeeded in their plot.

After writing “*Something in the Water*” and editing the draft several times (something I have always done with my work since the days I was a lawyer) I sent it to Eloy for his comments; Eloy, at the time, was a full professor and Chair of the Department of Foreign Languages at a Western university. He liked the story and sent it to a colleague, who dismissed it as the type of writing that serves as therapy for some pensioners. Undaunted, Eloy had the students in a class he was teaching read the story and comment on it. The students’ response was enthusiastic. Eloy concluded: “Your writing shows promise. Keep at it and don’t be discouraged if there are negative reactions.

Writing is a difficult field to get into.” He has continued to serve as the main critical reviewer and mentor of my literary efforts.

The bug had bitten me and I began writing short stories and sending them out to magazines in the hope of getting them published. After many rejections (they are the daily bread of writers, regardless of talent) I scored my first hit a year and a half later, when in early 2019 another short story of mine, “*The Blue Pearls*,” was accepted and published. “*Something in the Water*” was accepted for publication in 2020, becoming my fifteenth published story.

A question I keep getting asked is, “How do you get the ideas for your stories?” The simple, but unilluminating answer, is “from everywhere.” Many, like “*Something in the Water*” arise from recalled events or nightmares. Others are prompted by items in the news, like a story (perhaps apocryphal) that I once read about a hush-hush research project funded by the religious right to find the location of the soul in the human body. I turned that into one of my scariest stories, “*Pineal Split*,” published at the end of 2020, my thirty-fifth story.

Other stories come out of real-life incidents like the winter night my daughter drew my attention to a large slug that was seeking warmth, pasted to the door leading to the backyard. That sight was the genesis of “*Slug*,” one of my favorite tales. I am an opera fan, and nearly a dozen of my stories have plots that relate to operas that I admire: *Tristan und Isolde*, *Turandot*, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *Tales of Hoffman*, *La Boheme*, and others. Still, a few others reflect my personal background and life experiences; “*The Magic Chrysler*,” for example, is based on reminiscences of the desperate plight of people trying to escape from Cuba in the late 1970s. Still others arise from classical mythology and fairy tales, like “*The Yellow Butterfly*” and “*Scheherazade’s Last Tale*.” Others are based on historical events, like “*The Last Tsar*.” And so on.

Given the great variety of their sources, my stories tend to be very different from each other. I take pride in never repeating myself and have not needed to do so because the world is like an immense summer meadow, full of diverse stories ready to be plucked. As of this writing, I have authored numerous short stories, and have been lucky enough to have gotten over a hundred of them published. I love all my literary children, though I

recognize that some of them have turned out better than others. The list of rejections of my stories runs over thirty single-spaced pages.

I have completed two novels. The first, *The Taíno Women*, is based on the first century of colonization of Cuba by the Spanish Conquistadores; the second, *The Travels of Lázaro Serrano*, takes place two centuries later. I have started writing a third, which occurs in the second half of the Nineteenth Century, but do not know if I will live long enough to finish it. I am impatient by nature, and the research and writing of a three-hundred-page manuscript requires a concentrated effort that is alien to me. When I get an idea for a three-thousand-word short story, I finish it in three days or less. Writing a chapter of a novel seems to take much longer, and calls for more time and effort than I can typically muster.

“How about your writing style?” I have never tried to do a post-mortem on one of my works, but I believe my fiction is terse and economical, like the writings of one of my heroes, Ernest Hemingway. My writing reflects over forty years of practice as a lawyer, where clarity and conciseness are at a premium. That is perhaps why I never have tried to write poetry.

Some have asked me: “Why do you keep writing? Haven’t you had enough?” The honest answer is that I write because I cannot help it. I enjoy too much taking an idea, a concept, and turning it into an interesting story that may not always have literary merit but will (hopefully) be appealing to readers now and some years into the future.

Perhaps a future scholar will do an analysis of my work and pinpoint the recesses of my subconscious that hold the key to why and how I write. My answer to that future scholar, apart from wishing him or her good luck, is to paraphrase Mick Jagger and note “It’s only cheap fiction, but I like it.” And I will keep writing it as long as my brain cells function and my arthritic fingers can tap on the keys of my laptop.

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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