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REPORT FROM A CUBAN PRISON: II  
The Department of State Security

Jorge drove slowly through Havana's deserted streets, still dark and wet with an early morning rain. "I telephoned last night at nine, Professor. I wanted to let you know it would be me that was going to drive you the airport".

"Thanks, Jorge. I didn't get your message. It must have been because it was late when I returned from my friend's Christmas Eve dinner".

Jorge said nothing more. He seemed unusually quiet, even uneasy and stiff. As always he was cleanly shaven and his hair, tapered in the back, was just long enough to touch his shirt collar. He wore it in that Clark Kent style standard fashion for men in Cuba today just as it was during the pre-revolutionary fifties.

We began to pass through the Plaza de la Revolucion. It was floodlit and beautiful, a reminder of the half dozen times I'd massed with hundreds of thousands of cheering Cubans to hear Fidel deliver a speech. I didn't know about those Cubans who stayed at home, but the ones in the Plaza certainly idolized their bearded Jefe who could speak to them for hours without a note of any kind, always teaching, always cajoling.

I turned my attention to the radio, tuning it for music. "After the lecture in Oriente this evening, I'm going to see a friend, Jorge. She's an architect and mui linda, very pretty".

"Bien". Jorge's reponse showed no interest.

"What time is the flight this morning? It seems very early to leave the hotel".

"At five thirty. But we must be there an hour before, Professor".

Strange, I thought. Jorge's so formal. It's Professor now, not my name or companero anymore. I glanced at him and had the horrible premonition that I wasn't going to make that plane, Jorge was role-playing and that suspicions I had been repressing for more than two weeks were, in reality, justified.

I mentioned such fears-- concern about the strange behaviour and even sudden disappearance of some of my other friends-- to an English girl I'd come to know and trust at the Riviera. I even joked to her the day before that if I didn't return from Oriente

she'd know that I was with the Department of State Security. We'd laughed then; but now I was beginning to put the pieces together: an early morning trip away from the hotel; my guide, Delia, not going with me; a close friend at the Ministry of External Affairs suddenly leaving Havana to be with a "delegation in the interior", an euphemism for arrest by the Ministry of Interior; the arrest of another friend, this one an ICAP guide who, I knew, had been charged with treason. And now Jorge had closed himself off to me.

Indeed, things had changed since the 13th of December when, during our trip to Las Villas, Jorge, Delia and I had celebrated my birthday together drinking daiquiris at the bar of Cienfuegos'Hotel Jaragua. We had enjoyed dinner and then ended the evening watching a three hour cabaret. Most of the jokes delivered by the comedians were about the newlyweds staying at the hotel, and Jorge took great delight in explaining them to me, especially with Delia there.

During the same trip, I had also spent hours in more serious conversation with Jorge, listening to him recount his days in the Sierra mountains where, with Fidel and Camilo Cienfuegos, he had been part of the one of the main columns that marched to Havana in January, 1959. His guerilla exploits in the Sierra apparently served him well today, for being a chauffeur to one of the higher officials of the Revolution required very good political credentials.

This morning's drive, however, was turning into a very different sort of trip. I was becoming increasingly tense and nervous. Jorge must have sensed this because he tried to make conversation. He said something about the rain and the roads being slippery, but I wasn't listening.

We were in open countryside. On my right, across the fields of planted cane, a train moved parallel with our Alfa, its engine's front light-beam refracting through the rain drops on my side window. I was scrutinizing the side of the road, watching for and even expecting the sudden appearance of a car. I was not to wait long.

Suddenly, as we passed two parked cars sitting on the right side of the highway, Jorge reached to his left and dipped the front lights of the Alfa. At the same time, I was able to see that there were several men sitting in the stationary cars. Clearly they had been waiting for us--and Jorge for them. My stomach tightened as I turned to look back down the highway, knowing what was about to

happen. Both cars already had switched on their lights and were pulling out after us. This can't be real, I thought. How can they do this?

Jorge was pulling over, not even waiting for the lead car moving upon us to come even. He knew what to do. As we came to a stop, Jorge turned off the engine, pulled the keys from the ignition and lept from his side of the car. Then my own door suddenly opened and a hand reached down for me. "Come with us," a voice said.

I was led from our red Alfa to a black one waiting behind, its rear door already opened. Someone pushed me down into the back seat where other hands took my arms, raised them over my head and began moving over me thoroughly, carefully searching for non-existent weapons. Images of films I'd seen reeled through my mind. Then the same hands, brown they were, folded my wrists across my knees and patted them in place. I was told not to move them. Then the guard in the back seat motioned with his hand to the front and the motor revved.

There were four of us in the black Alfa: the driver, two heavy-set guards dressed in patterned sports shirts, and me. No one spoke. As we began to pull away onto the highway, we passed alongside Jorge standing beside the Alfa. He was watching us. The guard in the front seat rolled down his window and shouted out: "If anyone asks, he's with the Department of State Security".

Jorge said nothing. But he caught my numb gaze through the rain-flecked window. No expression. His eyes only shifted to look back along the highway, the same the black Alfa now traveled, only in the opposite direction away from the airport toward Havana.

It was still dark as we left the main highway for one of the side roads leading to San Miguel, a small suburb south-west of Havana. These streets, lined with small but well-spaced homes, were unfamiliar to me. I went over reports circulating in Havana about the arrest of the Cuban poet, Heberto Padilla, how friends had thought he had been taken to a small apartment after he had been picked up by the State Security policy in April, 1971. I speculated that perhaps these DSE men might be following the same pattern with me. Everyone was wrong, however. Padilla was detained in the very same prison complex to which I was, at that moment, being driven.

No more than ten minutes had passed since the highway pickup when suddenly the driver down-shifted to take a sharp corner into the entrance of a large walled compound. This was the Department of State Security's maximum security interrogation center, a prison devoted to the detention and investigation of political prisoners. To the left of the entrance, under a large, umbrella-like canopy, a guard in military uniform stood partially obscured in the darkness. The lights of the Alfa reflected off his helmet while his rifle and bayonet were held high at port arms.

We raced across what appeared to be a parking area and came to a fast stop before a dimly lit doorway. I decided to test the seriousness of my guard's instruction not to move and tried to unlock my door. Immediately his left hand covered the lock while his right placed my hand back over my knees. Then he unlocked the door and waited with me until the heavy-set guard from the front seat decided to open my door from the outside.

I was led from the Alfa to the reception center of the prison. There, behind a long, chest-high desk a soldier dressed in olive green officiated. He told me to empty my pockets and then pointed to my watch. "That too". Meanwhile my suitcase and typewriter were brought to the desk by the Alfa's driver, who afterward left with his two colleagues. I could hear the car doors slam shut, the motor rev and the gears go into reverse. The roll bars at the entrance of the compound clanked and my three escorts were gone.

The plain clothesmen were replaced by soldiers in olive green. My new guard, a boyish looking soldier, pointed in the direction of a door to my right and led me through it to a small, freshly painted room that bolted from the outside. Although he couldn't have been more than 20, he had a confident air and presence of command that I soon noticed in almost every guard in the prison. It struck me too that neither he nor the soldier behind the reception desk were armed. As yet I hadn't seen a gun.

Cold and alone, I sat down raising my feet to the top of a desk in an effort to relax. I was beginning to get over the initial numbness I had felt and found myself becoming angry and defensive. What am I doing here, I thought. Why doesn't someone tell me what this is about? They all seem to know what they're doing but no one is enlightening me. What right have they to do this? I've done nothing that would cause them to arrest me!

I was still arguing my case to myself when the young soldier came back into the room. He glanced at my feet on the desk: "That's not correct here! It is not allowed!"

"I'm tired," I replied, giving out the most nonchalant air that I could muster. I didn't want him to see my fear. "Why have I been brought here?"

"You'll be told soon. Right now you are to take off all your clothing. First your jacket".

"But it's cold here". I complained.

"After, you may put them back on. First I want the jacket".

I took off my jacket and then the rest of my clothes as he asked for each garment. He carefully inspected the pockets and linings, even turning each sock inside out to insure nothing was hidden in them. Cold, angry and embarrassed, I waited. He looked at me and then told me to get dressed.

Clothed, I was led from the room through another doorway to the other side of the reception center. In the room was a desk with a typewriter on it and two chairs. The soldier told me to take one and then seated himself behind the typewriter.

"Name", he said.

This began the formalities of my arrest: name, birthplace, description, address, occupation, the names of my parents, brothers and sisters. The sound of my voice repeating this data, especially the names of my family, made me feel more alone and helpless. I sat hunched over in my chair, arms folded as the young soldier continued typing each answer onto a long, legal sized sheet of paper. He look up at me and said, "sit correctly". I stayed hunched over, watching him and didn't move. He went back to his typing, deciding I suppose not to make an issue of my posture. My small sense of victory over him wasn't to last long, however.

Looking up from this typewriter, he jolted me with a final question: "When you are brought before the Revolutionary Tribunal, do you plead guilty or not guilty to espionage against the Cuban Revolution?"

"What is this for?" I said, practically shouting,  
"What are you talking about?"

"This is for the Tribunal that will hear your case.  
Do you plead guilty or not guilty?"

I knew what the Revolutionary Tribunals were. In Cuba, there are three courts, assigned different powers and different responsibilities. The Civil courts, hearing cases involving offences punishable up to 120 days, are called the Popular Tribunals. These courts are presided over by three judges elected by neighbourhood committees and are open to the public. I'd attended many sessions of these open courts and been impressed by their fairness, especially by the degree of popular participation in judging fellow citizens.

The Military Tribunals have jurisdiction over the offences committed by the Military or police (Ministry of Interior). One of my friends had recently been brought before such a tribunal and given four years on a prison farm for being indiscreet (in his case "counter revolutionary") because he had an affair with a foreigner he was supposed to be guiding. Guides often work for the Ministry of Interior and as such are forbidden to develop a deeply personal relationship with a member of their delegation.

The Revolutionary Tribunals hear cases involving political crimes, including espionage. They are usually closed to the public and presided over by three judges selected by the Ministry of Justice. It's understood that once brought before these Tribunals one is unlikely to be found innocent. The prosecutor is always right. I began to tighten up again.

"I'm not guilty, absolutely not guilty", I shouted.

The young soldier saw there was no point to argue and without saying anything else, he went back to the typewriter. I wondered at how he could be so unconcerned. Finishing his report he pulled the sheet from the typewriter, scanned it and then asked me to review it.

I picked up the paper from the desk. It was a formal declaration detailing the personal data I had given the typist followed by a page-long statement that, in short, said I was being charged with

espionage and that I was to be brought before a Revolutionary Tribunal. I declared myself "not guilty".

I noticed that the charge of espionage had been brought against me by an investigating officer from the DSE, a sub-lieutenant named Lazaro Diaz Martin. For some reason I felt offended that only a sub-lieutenant had been responsible for putting my life in jeopardy. "Only a sub-lieutenant?", I queried.

He balked and looked surprised. "What do you want?" he said, "A commandante?"

I handed the sheet back across the desk, "I'm not going to sign it", I said. "I'm not certain what it says. It's written in Spanish and besides, I'm not going to sign anything".

"Bien", he said, taking the piece of paper and coming around the desk. He told me to follow him into an adjacent room where I was placed in charge of a civilian who weighed, finger-printed and photographed me. Then the soldier, who had been standing in the doorway as I was processed, indicated that I was to leave by another door leading into a very long, dimly-lit corridor. I went ahead of him, walking slowly and calculating that I was headed away from the front of the compound, deeper into the prison. Two hundred feet further, at the end of the passage, we stopped before an iron grate that sealed off the induction center from the cell block. There the soldier reached for the padlock and rattled it, a signal for the guards to come and open the gate.

Moments later, a guard descended the stairs, unlocked the padlock and took charge of me. The first disappeared back along the corridor.

The guard from within the detention center, dressed in the same olive green uniform, directed me up one flight of stairs where the main cell block was located. He led me into a room and handed me a pair of prison fatigues. There were a sleeveless, collarless pair of Khaki-colored overalls that buttoned up the center from the waist to the neckline. I was already cold in my jeans, jacket and shirt and I thought that I'd certainly freeze in those overalls. Moreover, I realised unconsciously that putting them on made me an official prisoner and would in effect deprive me of my identity. I told the guard that I wanted more than the overalls to wear, something to put underneath them, pointing to my wrists and saying "mangas largas", long sleeves. Otherwise I wouldn't change my clothes.

He didn't know how to react. He only continued to repeat his previous instruction to change. After arguing a few minutes he shrugged, instructed another guard to take charge of me and then disappeared around the corner. Three minutes later he returned with a higher ranking official, the lieutenant in charge of the clothing of the prisoners. He was the quartermaster, a gruff man about 45 years of age who later proved to be the most surly of all the wardens I encountered in the compound.

He told me to change into the overalls. I went through my demands again, arguing that it was too cold for sleeveless overalls and that I preferred my own clothing. At that, he stepped up to me and started undoing the buttons of my jacket. I thought to grab his hand but as quickly forgot it. My response was only a stiff and blustery retort: "Force, uh!"

"Bien", I said I'll undress myself". Better, I thought, to do as he says than to start a struggle over this! Follow the rules and behave correctly and there might be a chance of getting out of here, I told myself.

After changing my clothes, the same lieutenant handed me two sheets, a thin mattress and pillow. Subsequently I learned that the quota was one sheet per prisoner, so that I presume the gruff man compromised a bit. The argument at least provided me an extra sheet. Around the doorway, a group of five or six guards had collected to watch the small confrontation between me and the quartermaster. There were neither signs of approval nor hostility in their faces, only blank expressions as though they'd seen it all before.

As I left the changing room, a short, quite friendly guard handed me my new identity stamped on a white card. "This is your tarjeta. You must keep it with you at all times and show it when asked". On it was my prison number: 206473. From that moment I was never called anything else other than this number, often "73" for short.

I looked at the small card as two guards conducted me to my cell. We passed six iron doors. In all there were 33 in this wing of the prison, each no more than fifteen feet apart. They were made of heavy iron, painted green and solid except for a peep hole four inches in diameter. The peep holes locked from the outside so that a man had no way of seeing what was outside his cell. One became adept in time at hearing what was going on instead.

We stopped at number 8. Here was my cell. I was instructed to face the wall as the warden came down from the other end of the cell block. He pulled a bunch of keys off his belt and found the one to number 8. The sound of the key in the large black padlock and the slipping of the bolt from the iron door echoed through-out the cell block. For every prisoner, it became a hatefully familiar sound. The cell door swung back and with a wave of his hand, the guard nearest me motioned me in. The door clanged shut, the bolt rammed home, and the padlock snapped. No more than an hour had passed since I'd left the hotel and yet it seemed a lifetime.