Crime without Punishment (I)

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"No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment."

Article 5, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

It had only been a few hours since I'd arrived at this forced labor camp [1]. I never asked to be brought to this place, nor did I believe they would, just only two years after being sentenced to five and half years of incarceration, and imprisoned, for the poorly labeled crime of Oral Enemy Propaganda (Case No. 4, 1990, Criminal Court versus State Security, Provincial Court of Villa Clara).

I arrived at Las Grimas from the infirmary at La Pendiente, which is today a Provincial Prison in Santa Clara. While there and in the company of valiant brothers, we went on a difficult and lengthy hunger strike that almost killed us. I was still quite visibly affected. My weak physical condition and compromised health were extreme. Despite the fact I did not agree to carry out the humiliating slave labor common to that place, I did think it possible that the authorities might let me visit my dying mother. None of my earlier pleas had managed to bring this about, and now I naïvely thought that because I was just seven kilometers from my home they'd take me there for humanitarian reasons.

I was anxious to see her. After all, I knew she had very few days left, maybe only hours. The political police watched her closely, not just because of my repeated pleas but also on account of the iron-fisted control and surveillance there is over political prisoners' family members in this country.

At twenty-seven years of age, and lacking real political maturity, I could not imagine that they—the political police—could want to deny me so sacred a right; to visit, or rather, say goodbye to my mother. This is why I was so surprised by the fact that two days after my arrival at the aforementioned labor camp, when Yánez, captain and leader of the nefarious G-2 in Placetas, visited me, he gave the matter of my mother so little importance. He did, however, severely reprimand and threaten me for refusing to work and for what he labeled "inciting work stoppages and mini campaigns at the labor camp."

I intuited my mother's critical state despite the fact my family members and friends hid it from me. The fact her letters were not coming and her visits became fewer and farther between created a palpable sense of emptiness in me. Only a few days after arriving at the camp I decided to escape, my one and only reason being to see her, if only from afar.

Within me, I could feel her life slipping away, like sand in an hourglass, and I would have gladly given my life to be with her at so difficult a time. But I had committed a heinous

Labor activist "Antúnez" at work

crime for which I should imprisoned and separated from her forever: I had publicly declared myself a political dissident and advocated political, social and economic reforms in a country that punished free speech.

The scant twelve hours of my escape were the hardest I had ever known up till then. Just the act of approaching the block on which my house stood was more than suicidal. Only in movies had I seen the likes of the police action that was unleashed to prevent me from getting there. Uniformed and plainclothes agents patrolled not just my street but also the whole block. An informer told them I was around and what my intentions were. They increased their vigilance by adding a disproportionate number of armed soldiers to their force; together they formed an oversized and over armed group of pursuers who watched the unwieldy events unfold from a well-hidden and not too distant position.

Back then, the railroad tracks ran along the rear of the property where my family home stood. That is where they, too, hid out, pistols in hand and with precise orders to shoot without warning. Inside the house, on a bed, lay my sick mother, terrorized by the events transpiring outside. Should I draw nearer? Try to see her? That would mean she'd hear the gunshots, noise and scuffle of a "communist-style" capture. There was no longer anything I could do, so I withdrew from my hiding place, where I was producing numerous anti-government pamphlets.

As I withdrew, the wheels of a G-2, Lada patrol car screeched to a halt right in front of my house. Out jumped three officers of the island's fearsome political police force. They were captains Raúl Fernández, of the current crime-fighting unit who later became assistant chief of the political police in the province of Villa Clara; the aforementioned Yánez, head of the local municipality's G-2; and, Lieutenant Boris Arriba, who with one swift thrust kicked opened the rickety frontdoor. They entered furiously, guns in hand, tearing through and searching everything, deaf to my sick mothers cries and laments.

Instead, they just spoke to her in a threatening tone: "Ma'am, turn in your son," said Fernández, as he pointed his gun at her. "If you don't, you'll never see him again; we have orders to shoot him in the head. And if he jumps into the ocean, the Border Patrol was ordered to turn the sea red with his blood." After a desperate cry, my mother lost consciousness and fainted. This was my mother's response to the cruel and aggressive words of these henchmen.

It was quite late, nearly morning, when I decided to use my time to distribute the anti-communist pamphlets I had prepared around the outskirts of the city, on factory fronts,

schools, bus stops and other public places. Those I didn't distribute, because I had not yet finished writing them, I stored in a small bag that also contained a box of matches and a rustic table knife, which I used to cut cane or some fruit along the way, the only nourishment I had during my twelve hour escape. That little bag would constitute the evidence they could use to accuse me of Bearing Arms and Explosives.

Even though I could see the dragnet around my house, I could not have imagined the magnitude of the manhunt they had going to find me. All my friends and family were caught up in it in some way or another. I'm sure that the mercenaries who were mobilized to so efficiently hunt me down just a few hours after my escape could not imagine that I was distributing anti-government pamphlets practically under their noses.

Around six o'clock in the morning, as I was hiding out in a friend's house, I was surprised by the arrival of a unit headed up by the three aforementioned thugs. I barely had time to hide in an armoire thanks to which I am now telling you this story. Fernández, Yánez y Arriba broke violently into the home toting guns and shouting commands to a huge dog, in a strange language, to pick up my trail.

Hiding inside the armoire, I couldn't tell if it was the dog or them barking, but the beast finally found me. They opened the closet door and I felt a cylindrical metal object hit my face: it was the shaft of a pistol. I thought it might be the end, so I screamed: "Down with Fidel and communism!"

—"So! You're still a tough guy," I heard Captain Yánez say. That's exactly what all those leaflets said that he spread throughout Placetas last night.

— "Don't take him out yet," ordered Captain Fernández. "Let's see if he is so tough with this guy," mentioning the dog's name.

—"Take off his muzzle," said Arriba.

No sooner had the terrible order been carried out, they urged the dog into the armoire. Closing its door, they left the dog and me inside. Since the dog was trained to destroy, he let into me furiously with his teeth. Meanwhile, I could hear bursts of laughter from the men on the other side of the door. I thought of strangling the dog by prying open its jaws but the darkness and my uncomfortable position made it impossible.

I did all I could to protect my testicles. The wounds to my thigh and left gluteus, scars I still have, were not too bad because I had on pants made of a thick material. I finally felt the armoire door open and I rolled out onto the floor. I felt kicks and other blows from the police. There was blood flowing from my wounds (bites). They pulled my hands behind me and cuffed them.

—"Son of a bitch, counterrevolutionary nigger," yells Captain Yánez, as he gets sadistically abusive with me. "We'll show you what happens when you go around distributing enemy propaganda."

—"The only enemies in Cuba are you!" I shouted. "Enemies of your own people, of justice and of human rights."

—"This is what human rights are to us," said Captain Raúl Fernández, as he kicked me in the ribs.

By this time, I hardly felt anything. Noises and voices seemed to come from afar and I was hoarse from yelling things like 'assassins' and other anti-Castro slogans at them. The more they heard them, the more they came after me. Captain Yánez kept egging on the dog to bite me while the other three men kept kicking me. They finally put me into the special-plated Lada and took off for the political police's provincial station, on the outskirts of Santa Clara.

— "Nigger, you should have run so we could shoot you in the head," Fernández said to me as the car sped along. "We came out to kill you, and if you'd tried to leave the country, the border patrol had orders to turn the sea red with your blood."

They confined me at a detention center known as Operations, in a filthy and solitary cell. Except for dealing with my superficial wounds at the military hospital at Santa Clara, they offered me no medical attention whatsoever. I would start a new police 'educational' program at Operations: they would accuse me of not only Written Enemy Propaganda but also of attempted Sabotage because the night of my escape someone tried to burn cane fields in Placetas. They also accused me of Possessing Arms and Explosives because of the box of matches and table knife I had in the little bag.

— "You damned counterrevolutionary nigger. You were already in prison for Enemy Propaganda and you ran away, and now you're back again for Enemy Propaganda and for burning sugar cane. We're going to have you shot," Arteaga, a police instructor who is now dead, pronounced.

My mother's situation, my own bloody and tortured state, the circumstances of my capture, and the particular conviction that I was hurting no one, led me to respond in a manner that ended up being used as the only evidence of a confession from me.

— "Give me enough time and I'd have filled all of Placetas with propaganda, and burned all the municipality's cane fields.

The prosecutor would question me in a cunning and humiliating manner at the oral proceedings: "Does the accused feel any remorse for his deeds?"

— "Me? Remorse? I responded assuredly. "The only thing I'm sorry about is that I didn't start this struggle against those who oppress my country sooner."

All the answers I gave the police instructor during the investigation and the prosecutor during the trial resulted in the severe and unjust ruling that kept me incarcerated for what are now nearly two decades. Even so, the Penal Procedure Law holds that all crimes must be proven independently of what the accused says. A person's confession does not constitute proof.

This story speaks for itself. It is just one of a thousand tales of the atrocities that have been committed against prisoners during the past fifty years of communist tyranny. Its author is not motivated by revenge or hate: he just wants justice to be served. A democratic transition in Cuba and the Rule of Law, the most efficient way to bring about justice, will prevent any repetition of these grotesque episodes. What do I want for these henchmen and thugs? For their countrymen to disdain them, and for national and international public opinion to judge their crimes. There is no more efficient and relentless court than one's own conscience. To be morally sanctioned is like facing a gallows of collective condemnation.

1. These are stories from October 1992, when "Antúnez" managed to escape from the Las Grimas Municipal Prison, on the Central Highway to Cabaiguán, 7 kilometers from Placetas (Province of Villa Clara).