

PRISONERS OF COLOR

In this section, *ISLAS* will offer its readers exceptional testimonies of the victims of Cuba's prison system. These pages have included the stories of many black Cubans who have had to endure the Cuban prison system's disdain for dignity, human integrity and justice. Now they will include new details and characteristics of a tragedy, often silenced, that has scarred thousands of Cuban families with pain and trauma—in the words of those who have actually undergone the experience.

Grievous Abyss II

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My young years in Castro's prisons, after a while, became an indelible mark on my spirit and memory. Memory is not a place someone goes to have the best of visits. Returning without rancor to places where the emptiness and silence numbs one's hands and wounds one's soul with pure pain is necessary, if one is to be able to forgive one's self.

There were months in those yellowing wards, but the stench of the place no longer tortures our senses. We can't shake the habit, and we can't keep from feeling strange. Anything commonplace that happens is still difficult for men whose actions stemmed from despair taken to absurd heights within an asphyxiating environment that looks like no other place in the world.

First Lieutenant Argota was a reeducator who carried out his duty by sending men to the "patera" [a isolated place for homosexuals]. I don't know how many of us in my position had to endure the sacrifice of being sent there, because life in the prison wards was unbearable.

Looking back is like seeing a hole so dark that it seems impossible to have escaped it at any time. My childish mind envisioned so many things, but it never imagined seeing people turned into miserable sacks, who in their despair, ceased being dignified humans and became simple objects of everyday abuse. Sadder yet, they became servants, handed over to homosexuals for years of service to them in prison. Most homosexuals are imprisoned at different times of the year only because of their sexual preference, and the only place where they can find the freedom to find satisfaction is behind prison walls, in that horrible place, in the underworld the Revolution conceded them, whether they were intellectuals or not. They were all undernourished puppets reduced to a state to which they surely never wanted to descend.

I have a vivid image of a prisoner nicknamed 'Blanca Palidez' [White Paleness], who was said to have arrived as a heterosexual at the prison in Havana and, after years of multiple rapes, was turned into a passive, dark homosexual serving Officer Eleuterio Sánchez

Reina. He would inform on a lot of what went on in each corner of the prison, and about new prisoners who became homosexuals either as a result of rape or by conviction. Old, run down, wrinkled Blanca Palidez, with his sorrowful walk through the La Vibora neighborhood of Havana, plagued by a real or simulated, total and justifiable dementia, living from others' cast offs, and collecting raw materials, drags around only God knows how much pain in his soul, which was so often beaten by the men behind the prison's walls.

The sad way we must look need not envy the look of those ragged, mangy sore-ridden, souls trapped in the *Divine Comedy*. They would wake us up at five in the morning, with a Russian loudspeaker that announced the arrival of a new day with a song by traditional music duo Los Compadres. What followed was the outrage of having to sing hymns of praise to the Revolution, march in place and, often enough, act as though we were stomping on a Yankee. To refuse to comply with this ritual of political fidelity caused one to be declared a traitor, and brought with it grave consequences for rebels. Those who did not ingratiate themselves with the prison authorities were also forced to endure this sort of humiliation.

All this took place before and after a barebones breakfast which was often nothing more than a few grams of boiled sugar water, or something that was supposed to be powdered milk, although it was very clear, and a small piece of bread that weighed no more than 4 grams. All this took place in the fetid wards where sewage ran along the walls, and on the floor upon which we slept.

At nine in the morning they served lunch, which for days upon days consisted of the same thing: corn meal, either sweet or spiced, that contained black headed, white worms that were either rotten or nearly putrid; wa-

tercross or some other vegetable with chunks of the soil in which it had been cultivated still attached; and, on rare occasions, a miniscule portion of rice. We should be asking God how it is that we are still alive. When they gave us canned meat or chicken, also in tiny portions, it was because they were in poor condition, and it was likely they would give us *jalapa* (an quick-acting laxative that literally dehydrated us).

Our dinner was between one and three o'clock. We would get tense because there was a head count at five, when the real, long litany of unimaginably corrupt and abusive activity began. We were always at the mercy of some prisoner who was able to control all the spaces, with help from whichever jailer was on duty. We were subject to the mood not only of the officers, most of whom were alcoholics, but also of the aforementioned prisoner, who was usually under the effects of one drug or another.

Sergeant Fermín, a forty-something year-old *mestizo* with a Herculean build, always carried a sharp but cloth covered machete which hung from a braided rope fastened to his wrist. He used it to threaten us and subject us to his will. This is how they got us settled down when he thought things were not going his way. He was constantly angry, and send us to the punishment cell for 21 days—whether or not we deserved it. The amount of food they served in this cell was sometimes twice that what they served in the wards; other times, it was half as much. It was a dungeon infected with rats and roaches. We were so awfully tormented by the cold there that it was sometimes impossible to fall asleep.

One of the victims was a prisoner nicknamed "El Kilo," who after many years in prison, and close to his release date (the second Sunday of May 1978, Mother's Day) was

sent by Sergeant Fermín to the cell in Patio 2 because of a riot in ward 7, where there were prisoners who were under 21 years of age. Upon arriving, “El Kilo” told the officer about his hatred for Raúl Carrazana, “El Güinero,” who in turn warned the Sergeant not to let “El Kilo” stay there because he would kill him. The sergeant-jailer answered it was not his problem. Two hours later “El Kilo” was dead. He received more than 25 stab wounds to the thorax and face. Whoever committed the crime never paid for it. The gurney upon which his cadaver was moved remained in the patio, in the sun, for more than two weeks, in plain view of all the wards, and alongside the dining room. Its blood stains served as a symbol to be engraved in everyone’s memory.

In 1978, all Cuba celebrated the Eleventh World Youth and Student Festival. Its theme was solidarity, and official propaganda scarred thousands of Cuban families by making them watch their children being torn from their homes only for revealing to the world that the nation was not in a position to truly pull it off. There were no crimes or justification for these traumatic events. The prison population expanded to incomprehensible levels: wards for 65 prisoners now held more than 100; those designed for 125, 300. Violence, unhealthy conditions and uncertainty surrounding seemingly uncontrolled transfers to prisons in other provinces exacerbated the already existing shortcomings. Regarding the transfers, the authorities would suddenly suspend family visits, and prisoners’ families were thrown and kept in the dark, because their incarcerated relatives had no communication

with the outside world. Jailers would use their correspondence for contraband they could later use with grateful prisoners.

Nothing I remember about 1978 is pleasant. Inhumane measures were extreme; “revolutionary justice” unleashed its destructive capacity and I saw many men return as prisoners the very same night they had completed their punishment. The jailers would wait, like slave hunters, outside the prison, after which they would re-incarcerate those who had gotten out with release papers. Tribunals were created right within the prison to punish crimes provoked by the prison system itself, and others as arbitrary as the one for which I was punished for nine months: reading Solomon’s psalms. This resulted in my being accused of belonging to a group of Jehovah’s Witnesses (which was prohibited by the Revolution). All these absurdities were meant to guarantee an image of tranquility during that festival. None of them has been documented anywhere as part of historical memory—but we victims cannot forget them.

These pages lack resonance for those of us who wrote them and carry their contents within us, those of us with whom the torturers have never made amends. It is a deep pain that many men and women keep inside; they will not allow it to be silenced, or lies to be told about it. This is the hidden truth of the very same prison system that dared to praise the Cuban delegation at the Justice and Rights symposium. This is a testimony regarding a tragedy that is still being repeated in many corners of our island, which is filled with prisons.