

# 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 V: A Fatuous Light on the Way

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Many of us Cubans remember the intensely festive days we had in the summer of 1978, on account of the celebration of the Eleventh World Youth and Student Festival, from July 28-August 5. About two thousand young people from dozens of countries came together in Cuba to experience a varied program of cultural, sporting and political activities—all with the unmistakable stamp of the revolutionary and anti-imperialist ideology of the Cold War era—that drew millions of Cubans to the streets, theaters and plazas to enjoy the revolutionary carnival. They never imagined that many families were experiencing pain and powerlessness because of arbitrary and unpunished repression by the authorities.

Havana's leadership had the brilliant idea of guaranteeing order and tranquility for the festivities by filling prisons with thousands of young people—mostly black—who were picked up without ever even having com-

mitted a crime. The dragnet focused on those citizens who due to their behavior might darken the scene and create a negative image during the festival. Thus, with no further legal argument or justification, the victims of this new crime of revolutionary indolence and impunity were stuffed into the wards and cells of Cuban prisons for months. This gave rise to the terrible *Ley de Peligrosidad* (a preemptive, racial profiling law that tends to target blacks), which has sown so much pain and frustration in Cuban families.

I was a special witness of what I am describing. I was awaiting trial for theft, something of which I was accused a year earlier, when the very same arbitrariness that took my freedom and shattered my adolescent dreams. New victims arrived at that desolate place; many of them seemed not to believe what was happening to them just yet. It seemed impossible to me that I was watching what amounted to unimaginable treatment of human beings.

Hunger reigned at that place; infectious diseases ran rampant. The only solution was to constantly fumigate ourselves with pesticides. Meanwhile, we continued to be jammed into putrid, humid cells where we had to coexist amongst all the indolence and silence that characterized that system.

Days seemed eternal in those infernal wards at the La Cabaña prison in Havana (it was a fortress built in the eighteenth century). Daily homosexual rapes and aggression sowed anguish and terror in the souls of those of us who never imagined we'd have to face so horrible a challenge. Those unjustly incarcerated, young men had to learn to be humiliated on a daily basis by prison authorities that shattered their dignity as human beings with total impunity. We victims were mired in hopelessness and silenced our desire for freedom. We found no answers or even encouragement from the law or inoperative and deceitful structures.

The prisoners were total victims of an arbitrariness that was accompanied by impunity. The uncertainty of knowing when we would be freed was worsened by a cruel practice of being released only to then find military guards who would then capture us, as they were posted outside our prisons. Then they'd punish us by applying a sentence according to the preemptive profiling law; this was always more than 180 days and could reach up to four years of imprisonment.

Dietary experiments were so common there. On myriad occasions we called something that was supposed to be rice birdseed. So were absurd prison measures in response to an act of violence or bloody incident. These got one 21 days in solitary, living in a cell under the worse conditions imaginable. It also got one a series of slogans and nicknames meant to turn an ordinary human into a wreck that had to endure vileness and forced abuse.

I saw thousands of men accept having their bodies and minds prostituted, after being sexually assaulted. I, myself, endured and also witnessed many men having their souls hopelessly lacerated, with no recourse but to watch their one and only persecutor/tormentor/executioner show off while talking about justice, as if he, himself, were not the only one responsible for one's personal tragedy. Many mentally ill people silently roam our city; they are the victims and product of a past experience such as this, and have no way out. There were so many nights when they were unsure they'd ever return to their homes or if they would once again be raped.

The reeducation system—with all its semi-literate guards and military men—was faced with a highly compromising situation. For the benefit of the world's socialist youth, the government ordered the silencing of a group of young people who were beginning to see the world in a different way, from a different perspective. The level of sacrifice that would entail did not concern it; hundreds and thousands of us were sacrificed. There was no limit to the prison crowding: more than 300 men ended up living in cells with only 120 cots.

As an option, one could not appeal; the authorities could send one to a *patera* (cell blocks designated for confessed homosexuals), a way to isolate and humiliate one, and cause them to lose their credibility. In that place, one was subject to worse discrimination, because there was the rejection of the homosexuals themselves to contend with as well.

Another alternative they had was to constantly resort to violence, thus turning one into a semi-savage being and object of manipulation by those who indeed knew how to run this world. There were also the incredible beatings we would get from the military per-

sonnel, who used machetes, whose blades were covered by bandages, to force us into submission.

On many occasions, one had to lash out and hurt someone, just to avoid some other imminent situation. Yet, the punishment was no less severe, and there was no way to avoid these situations, which often caused unnecessary deaths, even though the authorities knew this beforehand. This caused the environment to become increasingly violent; the measures taken as a result were extreme and inconceivable. At the Combinado del Este prison, Detachment 47, better known as Pizzería or Eiffel Castle, was created. There have been hundreds of dead, crazy, tubercular men, some with skin problems, including cancer at that place, as a result of the humidity they endured for years. Beatings, putrid but scarce food, and arbitrary decisions to beat us were the norm. It all depended on the mood of the officer in charge at any particular moment. There was rampant munge at this facility, due to our poor health and sanitation.

All this explains my unswerving desire and commitment to provide this testimony. These silenced acts need to be voiced, so the ghost tormentors of the past can be seen publicly, and the silence of so much pain can stop increasing, and saving the image of naïveté with which this so-called, Cuban revolution, projects itself to the unwary.

Those who opt to believe in the goodness of this absurd and tyrannical system should remember that this government was responsible for unleashing the darkest and cruelest of exiles—right in the twentieth century. It was responsible for forcing so many people to leave the country via the Port of Mariel, in spring, 1980, using fratricidal violence. Simultaneously, it branded these very same people dregs and trash.

Fidel Castro cynically labeled patriots who had resisted and challenged the threat of punishment in the form of sentences exceeding twenty years lumpen if we refused to accept forced exile. Thousands of men and women were relegated to a life of marginality, all because of an absurd festival for some young people who never knew the human cost of their sojourn in Cuba. The price they'd never know was that a large part of our island's youth. The image these sojourners and official Cuba transmitted to the world did not reveal that the behind-the-scenes reality was destroying whole families because of the whims of a indolent, self-promoting, false messiah who needed to sit well with the world and show it the improbable greatness of totalitarian socialism. The truth lies hidden in the souls of the sacrificed.