

Farewell to Cuba (1961)

Most of those who left Cuba in the first few years after the triumph of Castro's Revolution on January 1, 1959, traveled by air, and their departure was anything but memorable. I am told that at the airport they were placed in a room, separated from relatives and friends, together with people they didn't know, strangers for whom, under the circumstances, they did not care, and of whom they were afraid. They could be informants, waiting for them to let down their guard and say something that might be used against them as a way of instilling terror in their victims, and most likely as an excuse for an arrest, thwarting their only chance to escape the nightmare that the revolution, which had promised so much, had become.

So they waited, frightened, nervous, over long hours that seemed interminable, eventually boarding a plane with small windows that allowed a view as limited as it was significant. They needed to see those on the ground, the family and friends of whom they hoped to have at least a glimpse before the plane departed. This was perhaps the last opportunity for them to do so, maybe for the last time in their lives. They had to work hard to get some tears going under these pedestrian circumstances and to feel appropriately sad rather than merely frustrated, afraid, and exhausted.

My departure, in contrast, was intensely dramatic and very different, except for the fear that gripped me, allowing plenty of opportunity for regret, suffering, tears, and even guilt for leaving my loved ones behind. I left by sea, on the last ferry that sailed from Havana to West Palm

Beach—a ship formerly used by wealthy vacationers who went to the beach to play and that had now become a way to escape from Cuba. The farewell was prolonged and emotional, extending for a whole day, and symbolically ending at dusk, just before night enveloped us in its indecipherable intent.

Passengers had to report to the ferry terminal early in the morning and thus spent the entire day there, ill prepared to face the reality of their state of mind after a sleepless night. Preparations for my trip had taken some time and considerable effort. Although I was not a seminarian and had no visa to enter the United States, ecclesiastic or otherwise, I was included in a group of seminarians who were leaving for Miami to join their associates. Shortly after, Castro placed the foreign-born priests and members of religious orders onto a ship and sent them to Spain. Only Cuban-born clergy and members of religious orders were allowed to remain in Cuba, at least for the moment.

Some Cuban-born seminarians also remained, but even before I left, rumors circulated about the imminent closing of the Seminary El Buen Pastor, where most of them were studying for a religious life. The exodus of members of the Catholic establishment had begun, and only increased as time went by. Not enough teachers were available to train seminarians and the Archdiocese of Havana was looking for ways to send them to other countries to continue their training, graduate, and eventually return to Cuba when conditions permitted it.

The situation was increasingly pressing, and the Catholic hierarchy was particularly intent on sending seminarians to the United States because of its proximity to Cuba and the support, particularly financial, on which they could count from the Church hierarchy in Florida. The program, known as Operación Pedro Pan (Operation Peter Pan), had been in effect since 1960 and would last until 1962. Overall, it was able to send more than fourteen thousand Cuban children to the United States with the help of the Archdiocese of Miami. The program began after rumors circulated to the effect that the Cuban government was planning to take children away from their parents and put them under government control, as had happened in the Soviet Union. Unfortunately for me, this program applied only to children, excluding young adults such as myself. I was eighteen years old.

Leaving the country was not easy. The revolutionary authorities had to be persuaded that those departing had what they considered legitimate reasons to leave, and that they were not needed in the island. Those

whose profession or trade was considered essential to the well-being of the nation also encountered difficulties in trying to leave Cuba.

In the first two years of the revolution (1959 and 1960) a very large number of professionals had left, and this resulted in critical needs in practically every professional and scientific field, especially in medicine and technology. In addition, the authorities required evidence that those intending to leave had not engaged in antirevolutionary activities and would not join counterrevolutionaries in Miami. In the summer of 1961, the government's success at the Bay of Pigs was still quite fresh in everyone's mind.

One of the most difficult hurdles for those who wanted to leave the island was the cost of the fare, which had to be paid in dollars originating from outside Cuba. One could not buy tickets to travel overseas with Cuban pesos, nor could one use dollars that had been stashed away and hidden under mattresses before the revolution. This posed a problem for almost everyone who wanted to leave Cuba, and particularly for the archdiocese, which did not have the needed resources to pay for the fare of so many seminarians. The trip to the United States or Spain, the two primary destinations available, was expensive, and other countries were not generally willing to accept Cubans. Some, like Mexico, because they had good relations with the Cuban revolutionary government, and others, like Argentina, because they did not want the added burden of refugees. Paradoxically, this created an unexpected opportunity for me. Indeed, "No hay mal que por bien no venga," as we say in Spanish, or, "Every cloud has a silver lining," as we say in English.

I had friends outside Cuba who had sent me money to buy a ticket to leave Cuba through Spain. And I had friends at the Seminary El Buen Pastor, in Havana, who had been schoolmates of mine at the Colegio Champagnat in La Víbora, commonly known as Los Maristas, which I had attended for the last year of primary school and the first three years of prep school. The seminarians who wanted to leave Cuba and I hatched a plan that would help us all to leave. We would visit Monsignor Eduardo Boza Masvidal, explain our situation, and hope that he would give me a letter similar to the one he had been giving to seminarians so that they could travel to the United States.

The monsignor was a rising star in the Cuban Catholic hierarchy and a known opponent of Castro's intention to turn Cuba into a Marxist state. Cardinal Arteaga was old and feeble, and Boza Masvidal had been named assistant bishop of Havana after the Universidad de Villanueva,

of which he was rector, had been closed by the government. With his letter I could go to the Cuban authorities and get a permit to join the seminarians in their exodus, a relatively easy matter because the government was anxious to get rid of as many members of the clergy as possible.

The letter would also serve to secure entrance to the United States. The payback to the seminarians for this favor to me was that I would buy the ferry tickets of several seminarians who otherwise might not be able to leave the island for lack of funds. This was possible for me to do because the cost of the ferry fare was a fraction of that for the airplane to Madrid, the only other way to escape that was open to me, insofar as some of my Spanish friends had secured visas for me.

That's what we did. Together with one of the seminarians who knew Boza Masvidal well and was a leader of the group, we went to his office on Calle Reina—coincidentally the street where my paternal grandparents had resided, and where the birth of my father was registered. (In fact, my father was born in the Canary Islands, where my grandparents were spending a year away from Cuba, hoping the change of air would help one of my great-aunts recover her failing health.)

My first impression of the bishop's office was that it was rather shabby. With the political crisis of the Church in Cuba, the hierarchy had more important things to worry about than keeping up physical appearances in an important colonial street. The building had been an impressive structure, but at the time it was, like most areas of downtown Havana, dirty and in disrepair. The office was furnished with dark mahogany pieces, heavy, old, and badly maintained, although at some point they had been carefully and elaborately carved. Bookcases lined some walls, filled with dusty volumes written in Latin that appeared not to have been picked up and opened for decades and whose originally gilded decorations on the bindings had lost their light. A sour smell of mildew permeated the air, and the windows suffocated the minimal light that entered the room. The gloom was overpowering and I had to work hard not to read it as a bad omen.

When we entered the bishop's office, he was sitting at his desk. He was a relatively young man for the exalted office he held and for the cardinal's hat he was supposed eventually to receive. He seemed out of place in this decadent environment, although he had already adopted the ecclesiastical manner so common among clerics: a kind, gentle attitude that inspired confidence.

I had been terrified of the visit, well aware that my future hung on the success of this interview, and that if I failed I had very little hope of leaving Cuba for the foreseeable future, if ever. If circulating rumors were true, fairly soon I might be drafted to serve in the military and once that happened it would be years before I could apply to leave, let alone be granted permission to emigrate. These rumors turned out to be true; compulsory military service was instituted, beginning at seventeen years of age, in 1963.

Other hurdles remained. Indeed, it took my sister, Nena, and her family nine long years, years of frustration and pain to finally be allowed to leave the island, and it took my mother fifteen. If I had to wait that long I would be much older, perhaps with a family of my own and corresponding obligations, and the future would be even more uncertain than if I left now, when I was young, unattached, and full of energy.

Besides, what could I do in Cuba if I stayed? Private property had been abolished in the country, all jobs were government jobs, and they were apportioned according to the level of enthusiasm for the revolution demonstrated by candidates. A university education was also out of the question, for a tight ideological filter let pass only those committed to the revolutionary ideals that had been put in place after the Bay of Pigs fiasco.

Getting into the ferry appeared to be my last chance for a future, which at this moment depended on this man. My hands were sweaty and I felt a storm brewing in the pit of my stomach, but the bishop's manner soothed me and I was able to present my case with a reasonable degree of equanimity. Still, *la procesión iba por dentro*. It was essential that I say the right things, that I did not lie, and yet it was also essential that I did not tell the crude truth: that I was desperate to leave Cuba, I was willing to pose as a seminarian when I was not and never had been one, and I was willing to pay to get some others out in exchange for my freedom. That would not do. The church was not for sale. My task was nearly impossible. Only a fine use of casuistry would ensure success.

After presenting my case, the bishop looked thoughtful, and for a moment I thought I was doomed and he was going to tell me that he regretted not being able to help me. What could I do if he did? What would I say? I had no alternative plan of action. His rejection would crush me. I could not go back and pick up my life at the point I had left it. The doors of the university were closed to me after the Bay of

Pigs invasion, and so was every other door in Cuba. Of course I would kneel and beg him for my life, but what would that do? It might be counterproductive, and, in fact, it seemed to me to be in bad taste.

To my surprise and without further ado, however, Boza Masvidal asked me whether I had brought a document that he could sign. Fortunately, we had drafted a letter and translated it into English so that it could also be presented to the American authorities when I arrived in the United States. The bishop took the letter and after reading it he opened a drawer in his desk and took out a letterhead that he passed on to his secretary, asking him to type on his stationery a copy of the text of the letter we had brought in.

He had decided in my favor! I could hardly contain myself when I realized the significance of what had happened, but I remained silent and so did the bishop and my friend. It was also possible that he would edit the text, making it useless. We heard typing in the adjacent room and then the secretary came back into the office and handed the letter to the bishop, who read it, signed it, and gave it to me to read. My seminarian friend and I were silent, aware of the significance of the moment.

On reflection, however, what else could he do, considering the circumstances? He was trapped as I was, and he knew it. And, after all, he was not doing it for me, I am sure, but for the church. The situation of seminarians had become critical and time was of the essence since the ferry to West Palm Beach was scheduled to make only one more trip. Indeed, in the fall of 1961, just shortly after this interview, the bishop and many others were forced to leave the island.

And although I was not a seminarian, and I had said nothing about being or becoming one, how would he know how I would end up? After all, I had come to his office with a letter signed by seminarians whom he trusted and wanted to protect. Who knew God's plans for me? Only I was aware of my intentions, but even I could not fathom God's intentions, which were the only ones that mattered in the cleric's mind. The only thing I was sure of was that the only necessary condition of my future well-being was to leave Cuba. And the bishop was a generous man familiar with human nature.

Having signed the letter, the bishop exchanged some pleasantries with me. He inquired where I went to school and when I said that I had been going to the University of Havana until the Bay of Pigs catastrophe, but had graduated a year earlier from St. Thomas Military Academy, he inquired whether I had known a young relative of his, who it turns out

was one of my classmates and friends at the school, and whose family had already left Cuba. This bit of pleasantry made all the difference to me. I took it as a sign of things to come.

All of a sudden, the gloomy building looked beautiful, the sun was shining outside, and I felt as if my life were beginning. Hope was transforming itself into reality! It surely became a thing with feathers, ready to fly. I wanted to run, in case the bishop changed his mind, but controlled myself. My friend was as happy as I was, for he was one of the seminarians who would benefit from our arrangement. My emotions were so strong and mixed that my eyes became moist and I had difficulty controlling myself. I could not speak, but I managed to receive the bishop's blessing and kiss his ring.

With the letter in hand I got my permit from the Cuban authorities and bought my ferry ticket and those of as many seminarians as possible. To make matters appear authentic in the eyes of the Cuban authorities, my friends got me a soutane to wear on the day of departure, July 17, 1961. I still have it. It is a memento I shall keep while I live, just in case I should need it again. You never know when you have to leave a country in a hurry and in disguise. It hangs in a coat closet in my daughter Leticia's home in Toronto.

Many other preparations were required. I needed winter clothes, but where could they be bought? Because of the Cuban climate, it was difficult under normal circumstances to buy warm clothes, but after 1959 the exodus to the north had been steady and the stock of warm clothing had been exhausted. Eventually, Mother and I were able to find some appropriate material in Calle Zanja, and a tailor made me an overcoat that I wore throughout my college years in the United States. To make it serve its purpose, it had three layers: an outer layer for looks, a middle layer for warmth, and an interior layer for comfort. It did the trick beautifully. When I wore the coat with an astrakhan hat and a cashmere scarf I bought in Chicago, it looked quite sharp, and it disguised my current poverty.

More difficult still than winter clothing was the matter of money. But there was not much we could do about it. The Cuban government allowed each traveler to take only five dollars out of Cuba. No jewelry or valuables of any kind, except for personal clothing, were permitted. One could wear a watch provided it did not have a gold band, so I left my own watch with my family and took instead what had been Father's because it was gold but had a leather band. To leave one's country with

only five dollars in one's pocket, going into the unknown, was frightening. What would I find when I got to my destination? Five dollars would not last long, even for sidewalk food. And what about transportation? How would I get from the ferry terminal in West Palm Beach to Jacksonville, where the friends lived who had sent me the ticket money and where I intended to go?

I tried not to dwell on these thoughts. Providence would provide. But I did take one minor precaution apart from taking Father's watch. I made a hole in the heel of one of my shoes and put in it a diamond ring that belonged to Mother, then nailed and glued the shoe heel back on. The watch and the ring were meant as insurance. I could sell them in case of extreme need. It turns out that I sold neither, although I did inquire once about the cash value of the ring at a pawn shop when I was strapped for funds and hungry. My daughter Leticia has the watch and I gave the ring to my wife, Norma, when we became engaged in 1966, which will go to our other daughter, Clarisa, when my wife passes.

Of course, I would never sell or pawn the diamond, for its significance grew with the future. At first it had represented some financial security, but it soon began to develop a different, deeper character, becoming a symbol of Cuba, my family, friends, and what they meant to



The diamond in my shoe. Photograph courtesy of the author.

me. It became a talisman that I always kept near as a source of strength in moments of doubts and fear. It was always there, quietly speaking to me about my past. And it was an object of beauty, something I needed after all the ugliness that the prior three years in Cuba had meant. And there would be more beauty as my life developed in the United States.

The wait at the ferry terminal seemed endless; it was exhausting and worrisome. And my anxiety grew with the passage of time. The discovery of the ring would be fatal. It would result not only in its confiscation but in serious charges and penalties. I certainly would not have been permitted to leave Cuba and likely would end up in jail, in the company of the prisoners from the Bay of Pigs, who were kept in the ubiquitous El Morro, the fortress that guards Havana's harbor and is visible from every vantage point of the Cuban capital.

When I reached my turn on the luggage inspection line I tried to keep a steady demeanor, but I was so nervous that at certain moments I feared I would unintentionally reveal the location of the ring with the diamond. During the process, which seemed to take an eternity, I never dared look at my feet while trying to appear concerned with the contents of my two duffel bags. That helped me, for the inspectors paid detailed attention to the bags, asking many questions while ignoring the shoes and soutane I was wearing.

Choosing what to pack in the two duffel bags had been difficult. What would be necessary or useful? What would I need? What mementos should I take to remind me of my dear ones? My family and I tried to think about possibilities, but we had no guidance. I did not know where I would live or the kind of climate I would face. Who would be my friends, and what kind of clothing would be appropriate for me to wear? But these were not the more agonizing moments. Those had to do with photographs of my family, and of course, the diamond that was intended to be sold but which I vowed to keep, come what may. And there were the books that had been my friends throughout my life, as I returned to them again and again. It seemed clear that I should take my credentials, records from prep school, and samples of my work at the University of Havana, where I had been studying architecture.

I should also take copies of the prizes I had received in school. I was planning to get back to my studies as soon as possible, so I thought hard about anything that I might need to apply to schools. But I had no guidance about what I needed at the moment of departure. I was worried about some of the things I took, which might be compromising. There

were all kinds of stories circulating about the authorities confiscating all sorts of odds and ends. And I kept thinking about the things I would forget to include and need afterward.

The wait and the bureaucratic procedures, the checking of documents and permits, appeared to go on and on. The process continued for hours in a suffocating small space full of people who shared the anxiety and fear I felt. In fact, some were prevented from leaving because they were trying to smuggle something forbidden out of Cuba or because their papers were not in order. A woman in a corner was so distraught that she vomited before she could get to the ladies' room. Some people were crying, others prayed, and still others begged. And there were some who quarreled with the officers. The smart ones kept quiet and were obliging, although they did not humiliate themselves by being servile. It was a question of pride and honor even in extreme circumstances. I stuck closely to the seminarians, wearing my soutane and looking pious, while my stomach churned and felt weak and tight.

To repeat, it was the last day of my eighteenth year and I was embarking all alone on a life-shattering adventure for the first time in my life, in a country where I did not know the language or customs, without money or family support. The greatest fear I had was that something would prevent my departure. Those who have never lived in a country where it is not the law that rules, but rather the whims of those in power, cannot understand the fear of those who have. Indeed, what they experience is not fear but terror. A terror that goes down to the gut and knees. At certain moments you think you are going to die, that you are facing a firing squad, as many Cubans had in fact faced since the revolution had won. You can imagine the pain of the bullets tearing up part of your chest, your belly, and your face. At certain moments you anticipate humiliations, insults, while you feel the hatred of those who have power over you and who blame you for crimes you have not committed.

What can compare with being at the mercy of others, of people who detest you and mean you ill? After all, we are social beings who prize and value company and fellowship. There is no recourse in such circumstances. The rulers decide, their passions are the last word, so there is nothing anyone can do to overcome their will. After the infamous Bay of Pigs invasion, the situation in Cuba had deteriorated considerably. The government had complete control of the country and challenged anyone to disagree with its plans for the island. Indeed, in the eyes of

the government, disagreement meant treason. It was that understanding that had convinced me that the only thing to do was to get out of Cuba, at whatever cost.

Finally, after what seemed endless hours of bureaucratic harassment at the terminal—what seemed to be an infinite number of documents to fill out, irrelevant questions to answer, fruitless luggage searches, and hateful treatment (after all, we were what the Cuban government would come to call “worms” (*gusanos*), a term used by revolutionaries to refer to those leaving Cuba because of the kind of duffel bags we took with us, but which had a much more deprecatory connotation)—we boarded the ferry. Still, it took two more hours for the boat to begin its slow passage out of Havana harbor. The ferry terminal was set quite a bit back into the bay, and the family and friends of those departing lined the promenade extending along the bay. They continued to accompany the slow-moving ship until it entered open sea. The passengers were gathered on the deck, looking at them, waving and crying. This was to be a day of tears.

The significance of the moment became evident when the ferry started moving. There had been rumblings coming from within its belly, and all of a sudden, at about six, subsequent to a general tremor, it began to inch ahead. This was the instant when I realized the full impact of what was happening. Until then I had focused only on the goal of departing, forgetting what departure meant.

Now I realized it was a unique circumstance that I would never encounter again, a moment that would change my life forever and define my future for better or worse. It was the end of my life as I had known it—of my life as I had lived it and of my very identity—and the beginning of something else, a new existence about which I knew nothing. Until this moment I had lived in my native land, but soon I would arrive at a country that would consider me a refugee, the lowest legal status in the country. Refugees have limited rights; they can be deported or confined to areas or camps. They are not citizens or legal immigrants; they are accepted under strict conditions. Often they are accepted but not sought. And in many cases, they are hated. Being a refugee is a temporary status granted as an act of kindness. But refugees not only feel, but are, at a disadvantage in the societies in which they live.

For me, becoming a refugee meant that I had escaped the Castro regime, that I had been granted a reprieve, a temporary break, but the status was unstable and those who have it feel vulnerable. Traveling

outside the receiving country is difficult if not impossible. To leave the country without permission is considered a surrender of the status, making it impossible to return. It is a status that responds to charity and not to the will of all the citizens of the receiving country. Fortunately for me and other Cubans, the United States is, at least on paper, a country of laws in which everyone has basic protections regardless of their status. Nonetheless, there is always a fear associated with it, for to be a refugee is very different than being a citizen or a permanent resident. Refugees lack the confidence of residents and citizens.

At any moment the winds of politics can change and refugees may find themselves in camps, isolated and semi-abandoned if not exactly jailed, although that has also happened in the best of countries. We need only remember what happened to the Japanese in the United States during World War II, even to those Japanese who were citizens. Xenophobia is never very far and does not discriminate by country. Then it was the Japanese; now it is so-called undocumented Mexicans. Demagogues have always used scapegoats to excite fear in a population that is ignorant of the facts, and unscrupulous politicians exploit those fears for political profit.

On the one hand, the movement of the ferry indicated a liberation from and negation of all that had happened in Cuba since the triumph of the revolution, the abuses of the government and its bureaucracy, the fear that had increasingly permeated my life. In a few moments I would be free of block committees and informers, of being at the mercy of those who ruled by ideology, self-interest, or both. On the other hand, it meant a drastic change from the known to the unknown, a change of life and future. Indeed, a change of identity. What would happen to me? Where would I end up? Who would I become? Surely I would change, but what I would become was a mystery. After all, most likely I had a long life ahead of me and the possibilities appeared to be many.

While these thoughts repeated themselves in my mind, the ground seemed to be giving way under my feet and I thought I was going to faint. Was I doing the right thing? Maybe I should jump into the dirty waters of the bay, embrace the Cuban revolutionary ideology and join its agenda. After all, others had done it. But the temptation lasted only a moment, and it fell away when I looked at the members of my family.

My mother, sister, nephews, maternal grandmother, and dear Aunt Maruca were all perched on the pier, walking its length as the boat moved slowly, deliberately, as if unsure it wanted to go, making groans that suggested it felt a pain similar to that experienced by its passengers. When would I see my relatives again?

Perhaps never. Now they were waving, and I was waving back, drowning in agony. Thoughts crowded my mind as I fought to get a hold of the instant, to grasp its sense and relevance. I wanted to fix the moment in some way so its image would survive and endure. I could not afford to forget this moment; it was the last link to my previous life.

Tears flowed freely as I gazed upon a slowly disappearing Havana, its monuments and promenades, El Prado, El Malecón. How many times had I walked these parks and avenues, how many times had I admired the monuments? When would I see any of them again? As we went along, the sun was setting. By the time we reached the mouth of the bay it was growing dark, and as we entered the strait that separates Cuba from Florida, I could still see the fortress of El Morro, forbidding, imposing in its various shades of gray at dusk, moving away in the distance. As a symbol of Cuba it was both comforting and painful. Comforting because it seemed to defy change, and painful because inside it were the Cuban prisoners who had fought the revolutionary forces at the Bay of Pigs.

One part of my life was over and another lay ahead. I looked ahead and saw only a vague horizon of shadows. An ominous night was closing on me. All of a sudden it was cold and I shivered. It felt like death, a passing on to another world. The month before I'd had a dream that I feared was a premonition. A very heavy weight was crushing my chest, just like the one that accidentally had crushed and killed my older brother, Ignacito, when he was twenty-two years old at our sugarcane plantation. I was sure it was the moment of my death. I tried to speak, to appeal to others for help, but no sound came out of my mouth and no one helped, no one responded to my plight. Death was inevitable and I had to face it alone. I now relived that dread, but a new hope sprung from it. Because it had only been a dream, a nightmare that passed when I awoke, so I hoped this also would pass.

At that moment I remembered the diamond, with its beauty, light, and strength. Yes, this could be a light to guide me, the link between the old me and the new me. The diamond was a symbol of what I brought with me and what the revolutionary government could not

take away—memories of the past, what I had learned from my family, the values that I carried with me everywhere, and a love of justice, beauty, and rationality. Slowly, I caressed the shoe where I had hidden it. Yes, it was there, and the hard consistency associated with diamonds suddenly seemed to give me strength. Yes, I would do the best I could and I would succeed, in spite of the many obstacles that I would surely face.

Years later, I met a Cuban artist, Alberto Rey, who had painted exactly the last image I had of Cuba, a portrait of El Morro seen from the ocean, in grays, at dusk. That painting now hangs above the fireplace of my daughter Leticia’s living room in Toronto, and whenever I look at it, it brings me back to that moment of departure and the two years packed with events that had led me to it.



Appropriated Memories: Havana Harbor, Cuba (view from behind El Morro), by Alberto Rey, oils on plaster. Photograph courtesy of the author.