

# DYING IN THE NEW COUNTRY

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**B**efore the great Cold War diaspora wrenched millions of Latin Americans from their homelands and thrust them to the fortunes — and misfortunes — of foreign lands, most of us from the region had assumed that the land of our birth would naturally also be the land of our death. Cemetery plots confirmed the passing of the generations, but they also confirmed our expectations that one day we too would join our ancestors in that same sacred family space. Visits to these plots formed part of family life: to mark birthdays, Mother's and Father's Days, and other special anniversaries. Sadness mingled with a deep sense of belonging on those occasions, as young children, parents and grandparents pilgrimaged as one in this time-honoured ritual of remembrance and solidarity with our dead. Family plots were an extension of our family homes, they completed the circle of life and death.

In the case of my own family, when the unthinkable happened, and my parents' ageing generation of Cuban American exiles found themselves marooned indefinitely on foreign shores, the spectre of death in someone else's land seemed the cruellest blow of their long years of exile. They were not the first Cuban exiles to die so near, yet so far from

their beloved island. Exile movements had always been part of Cuban history.<sup>1</sup> But they were our parents. That the writing had been on the wall for a long time made little difference when the time came. That, at least in part, they had conspired in the culture of denial that prevented them from preparing themselves for this eventuality, also made no difference. These were our dead and something perverse seemed to overtake the natural order of things.

Cuban American exile has a history of over two centuries. Since the nineteenth century, Cubans have turned to the Big Brother to the North for political stability and economic opportunity. The wars of independence (1868–1878, 1895–1898), the struggles of the young republic and the frequent, often sudden changes in the political life of the country of the first half of the twentieth century all contributed to Cuban emigration to the United States.<sup>2</sup>

The most recent wave of migration is the Cold War diaspora that began on 1 January 1959 with the overthrow of the government of Fulgencio Batista by Fidel Castro's revolutionary forces. By far the most lengthy of waves — forty-three years and still counting — it also dwarfs all previous ones in numbers. By April 1961, when the Bay of Pigs invasion took place, there were 135 000 Cubans in Miami; five

years later, that figure was 210 000. By 1973 more than half a million Cubans had left the island, most of them settling in Miami. The figures continued to rise. One in every eleven Cubans now reside outside the island, and of these one-and-a-quarter million Cuban exiles, the majority reside in the United States, mainly in or around Dade County, which houses the city of Miami.<sup>3</sup>

The majority of the Cubans who arrived after 1959 came during three distinct periods: immediately after the Revolution, from 1959–1962; during the ‘freedom flights’ of 1965–1973; and during the ‘Mariel boatlife’ of 1980. Typically, the first to bear the impact of the revolution and thus to leave Cuba were the middle and upper classes. Later migrants have increasingly been more representative of Cuban society, not just in socio-economic terms but also in racial, ethnic and geographic terms.<sup>4</sup>

The focus of this paper is on that first generation of Cuban exiles who fled in the period immediately following the Revolution: 1959–1962. Many were literally fleeing for their lives, implicated in the crimes committed during the regime of Fulgencio Batista. Many were not.<sup>5</sup> Some fled the island not out of fear of political persecution, but out of concern for ‘the radicalisation of Cuban society’.<sup>6</sup> My father was one. But whatever their political backgrounds and loyalties, this group shared a ‘moment of departure’ that would set them apart from later arrivals.

Around this moment would develop a peculiar culture of exile — a culture of denial — resonances of which can be heard and felt to this day: in Miami’s family living rooms, in cafés and restaurants in Calle Ocho, in the press and even in the official pronouncements of

United States leaders, including President George W. Bush. Three myths, I would argue, grow from this moment of crisis: three myths that together underpin the culture and rhetoric of denial that is the legacy of that first generation of Cuban American exiles.

First, the myth of a forced departure: they did not leave Cuba voluntarily; they were forced to leave. “‘We never chose to come here to the United States. Fidel Castro expelled us, and we were forced to go into exile, forced to go to Miami.’”<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, the myth of a quick return, by courtesy, it was hoped — and urged — on successive US presidents, of yet another North American intervention in Cuba’s internal affairs. For decades, my father stood ready to join ‘the Marines’ when, as he expected, the American government would finally ‘come to its senses’ and liberate Cuba from communism. The reasons went beyond the ideological. The Castro government’s nationalisation of American property would surely, the logic went, prompt US intervention in the island.<sup>8</sup> The dismal failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961, an operation sponsored and financed by the US Government, may have sparked the first major wave of internal migration of Cuban exiles from Miami to other American cities, but it did little to undermine the myth of a quick return.

Thirdly, the myth of *La Cuba de Ayer* (The Cuba of Yesterday). Unlike those who followed them in the ‘freedom flights’ of only a few years later, the departure of that early group of exiles had been typically sudden and thus unprepared. They had no time to experience and assimilate the ‘new’ Cuba that was unfolding and continues to unfold. The Cuba they took with them

into exile was frozen in time. This Cuba — La Cuba de Ayer — would remain stubbornly and tragically their version of the ‘real’ Cuba, one that would grow into mythical proportions as the years and decades of exile dragged on and on. Concrete manifestations of pre-revolutionary Cuban society alive and well in Miami — in the form of schools, businesses and organisations that shut down in Cuba and reopened in exile<sup>9</sup> — helped sustain the myth.

The new Cuban émigrés perceived themselves as exiles, not immigrants, and least of all fully fledged citizens in the new land.

They had no intention of beginning life anew as *norteamericanos*. They fervently believed they would return to their homeland once a more tolerable government replaced Fidel Castro’s. In this faith, they were sustained by the long history of American intervention in Cuba’s internal affairs, from the time of our wars of independence onwards.<sup>10</sup>

As they waited to return to the homeland, these early exiles ‘focused their energies on survival’.<sup>11</sup> Theirs was the case of creating, out of what was then only a vacuum, a life for themselves and their families, and maybe a future colony for fellow exiles. My father and others like him — professional, well-to-do, with political links with previous Cuban governments — had it, in a sense, the roughest. Many had been caught by surprise by the swiftness with which the situation had changed. Unprepared for exile, some had not thought to transfer their accounts overseas. Nonetheless, it was they who built the nests that swarms of relatives and friends later made their first stop in exile. It was their newfound

businesses that would later employ new arrivals. It also fell on them to establish semi-official relations with the American Government: setting themselves up as the conscience and the voice of free Cuba. In short, it was they who set up the foundations for the infrastructure — familial, economic, political, moral — on which the Cuban exile stands today. Most importantly, they set the tone for what was to follow. Money might be scarce and the future uncertain, but there was plenty of hope and fire here. It was only, after all, a matter of time before the situation was resolved through American intervention.

This kind of confidence in a brighter future helped to ease what was proving, for many of these exiles, a difficult transition. For the head of family, it meant setting aside questions of dignity and long-term financial security and getting on with whatever job he could find. For his wife, the idea that this was only a temporary arrangement helped to ease her loss of status and of that infrastructure which had in Cuba typically provided her (in the case of my mother, for example) with a cook, laundress cum ironing lady, general cleaning woman, chauffeur and gardener. Our house in Cuba stood exactly as we’d left it for years after: ready to receive us at any time. Most of the staff had remained, all our belongings were still in place: awaiting our return. As odd as it may seem to have maintained two homes — one in Cuba, one in Miami — and two identities — one of citizen, one of exile — these arrangements helped many to come to terms slowly, gradually, with what was happening to their lives.

This blend of the practical and the idealistic — of Cuban get-up-and-go, on the one hand, and blind faith in an

American solution to the crisis, on the other — informs the history of today's Cuban exile community. The practical impulse ensures that life goes on, and makes the best of it. The idealistic impulse maintains the fantasy of a return home, courtesy of the knight in shining armour who once before helped rid Cuba of a foreign power. Despite barriers of language and culture, the bulk of that 135 000-odd contingent integrated quickly and seamlessly into Miami's workforce, creating a vibrant business community that lifted the local economy and drew other immigrants to the area. In practical terms, in other words, they survived admirably well.

But they never assimilated. For some forty years now, these exiles have lived lives of 'triumphant ambiguity'.<sup>12</sup> They have 'camped' and they have thrived — both at the same time.<sup>13</sup> As one exile explained:

{We are} pro-American, but we are not Americans, not yet anyway. We won't even know what we are until things actually change in Cuba, until we have the possibility of going back. Once the exile is over, things will change, because we Cubans will finally have the freedom to make up our own minds about whether we want to be immigrants or go home.<sup>14</sup>

That such an ambiguity could persist for over four decades has in large part to do with the fact that for this special generation of exiles — the wealthy classes of pre-Castro Cuban society — the country where they 'camped' had always been part of their mental map of 'home'. In pre-Castro days, the Cuban and the American had increasingly been indistinguishable in the fabric of Cuban life; such had been the insinuation of

American culture — tastes, values, assumptions, expectations — into the native culture. And not only in popular culture. The fact that we grew to think of entertainers like Nat King Cole, and movie stars like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers as our own was one thing. But more important still were the institutions that shaped our minds and our values from childhood onwards. Here Americans had, if not a monopoly, then their fair share of two of the country's most powerful forces — religion and education, church and school — which, in turn, formed the basis of the country's educational system. There were also the personal exchanges going on all the time between individuals of the two countries. Usually invisible and unrecorded, this kind of contact was immensely important in shaping the Cuban-American relationship at grassroots level. The endless flow of Americans to Cuba — on business or pleasure, to study, to visit friends, even to live there for a time — made our Big Brother to the North accessible and real.

This had been a two-way relationship. Before the Revolution, these exiles had travelled to the US regularly and sometimes for long periods, for business and for pleasure. As Cuba had been the playground of rich Americans, so had the United States been the playground of rich Cubans. But the US was not just a fair-weather friend. And this is an important point. As well as the site of fun, frivolous times, it had also been the main comfort and refuge in times of trouble. It had been home-in-exile for generations of Cubans fleeing from the latest dictator, or the latest coup. Indeed, the first Cuban to seek political refuge in the United States did so in 1823, the priest Felix Varela y Morales who sought refuge in Saint

Augustine, Florida, after being condemned to death by the Spanish authorities for demanding autonomy for certain provinces in the island. Fellow rebels eventually joined him, and they established there the first real focus of Cuban opposition to Spanish rule. By the second half of the nineteenth century, their numbers had grown to some 2000 Cubans, who were now scattered in the region between Tampa and Key West. They were mainly tobacco growers and their contributions helped to finance the war of independence.

The second major wave of Cuban migration to the States was sparked by Fulgencio Batista's *coup d'état* in 1952, and it continued until 1959 when the right-wing dictator himself fled Cuba for Spain. By then some 15 000 of his political opponents had congregated in the States, largely around the Miami area. Plain facts and statistics only tell part of the story of Cuban-American relations. For every individual making that crossing, brief or lengthy as it may have been, there lies a tissue of human connectedness between the two cultures. Exile by definition is a negation of home. But the close links between the two peoples went a long way towards mitigating the worst of the exilic condition.

My own family had sought political refuge in Miami for a time in the early 1950s. For over two years we lived in 'Mr Billy's House'. My sisters attended the local school, and my parents carried on with the business of life. When many years later we passed the street of 'Mr Billy's House' and found it gone, it was as if something of ours had gone too. Miami and 'Mr Billy's House' and the friends we made then may have been American, but they were also part of our family world. Indeed, if one were to draw

my parents' generation of exiles' mental maps of 'home', one would find not simply the shape of the island of Cuba, but one that looped dramatically to embrace the Florida Peninsula.

Ironically, it was this close familiarity with the country and culture of exile that both softened the extremes of the exile experience and encouraged the 'triumphant ambiguity' of which Rieff speaks. Cuban exiles may have been turning to the United States for political refuge for over two centuries. But there had always been an eventual return to the island. Until now. Thus, despite the prosperity of these exiles, they continued to live — metaphorically at least — with their bags packed and a strong fantasy alive in their hearts of a return to the island. The fact that, with the passage of time, such ideas 'became increasingly chimerical did little to lessen their authority'. Over the decades, 'the facts of exile' had become all but inseparable from 'the wound of exile': a wound that would only heal when they returned to the island.<sup>15</sup>

Few of that first wave of exiles contemplated — or if they did, they did not dare articulate to their families and friends — the idea of 'return' before the fall of Castro. A visit to Castro's Cuba would have been savagely condemned as a betrayal. Not only to 'the cause', but to the motherland herself. Throughout the first decade of exile, the 1960s:

it was, in any event, forbidden to the Cuban Americans ... to visit the island. For the revolutionaries, and, for that matter, in the eyes of many ordinary Cubans who had chosen to remain, the Miami community were traitors, people to be excoriated as *gusanos*, 'worms', and shunned if ever they were encountered.

Though Cubans continued to go into exile in Miami, 'once they had left there was no question of their ever returning even in the most extraordinary of circumstances'.<sup>16</sup> By the time a radical shift in Washington's policy towards Castro's Cuba in the late 1970s opened for a brief time the possibility of return visits to the island, as the Carter administration attempted a policy of détente, the cement had long settled in Miami's exile community's political stance on such visits.<sup>17</sup> Even though in that short interlude and subsequently, the possibilities for return visits have existed, and many later arrivals have embraced the opportunity to visit their relatives in the island, the rigidly set position of that first wave of exiles on the matter continues to prevail in the dominant political culture of Miami exile.

Beneath the political rhetoric of rejection of such options, there lay larger issues. To return to Cuba, even if only for a brief visit, would have been to confront impossible realities: that they could of their own will return to the beloved island, that they could of their own free will leave her again, and that perhaps after the pain of such a visit they had discovered there was no Cuba del Ayer to nurture in their old age. Thus the emotional grip of the illusion of a 'quick return' that no amount of disappointments — the Bay of Pigs, the behind-the-scenes negotiations after the missile crisis that left Castro more firmly implanted on the island than ever before, the collapse of the Soviet Camp that did not bring about the expected collapse of Soviet Cuba — could dispel. Forty years and three major setbacks later, the rhetoric of denial remains. For these exiles, 'dying in a new country' was never the issue. That would be the by-product

of a larger issue — a larger tragedy — of not dying in the old country: a country they could not bear to admit they had left voluntarily, a country they insisted lay waiting for their return, a country which their collective imaginations had fashioned into a veritable paradise lost.

The peculiarities of Cuban American exile and exile politics have prompted some to ponder on the underlying causes. Long before the advent of Castro's revolution — as the writer of the book *Exile: Cuba in the heart of Miami* (1994) argues — the sense that one did not willingly leave the island to settle elsewhere was already well entrenched in the Cuban psyche. Those who could afford it, would travel widely and often. They might send their children to school in the United States. But they would always return. Rieff quotes from one inside that culture:

To leave Cuba was an admission of failure. And that took on a moral dimension as well. The person who left was somehow lessened morally, rather like an Israeli nowadays who chooses not to remain in that country. Actually, I think that one of the reasons that Cubans in Miami have been so traumatised by their exile — after all, ours is not the only exile in the history of the world; we haven't suffered more than anyone else has ever suffered — is that this sanction against leaving Cuba was already present in the Cuban psyche before the revolution.<sup>18</sup>

La Cuba del Ayer — their paradise lost — would always dwarf the realities of life in the United States. As one of countless success stories of Cuban American exiles, an entrepreneur famous for having directed the first Cuban-owned bank in the US, the Republic

National Bank, declared:

It will always be difficult for Americans to understand the realities as we Cubans in Miami see them. Immigrants want to assimilate because, by and large, they have brought with them unhappy memories of their native countries. But we don't have bad memories of Cuba. Before 1959, we did not think the US was better. We thought Cuba was better. And most of us still do. It isn't that I'm not grateful to the United States, or that I don't love the United States. I do. But even though this country has been very good to me, even after thirty-three years I don't feel comfortable here. And the reason is simple. I would rather be in Cuba.<sup>19</sup>

One might ask: which Cuba? And the answer would predictably be: *la Cuba del Ayer*.

So much for the rhetoric. What of the reality? This is as varied and complex as the individuals who compose Cuban-American exile at any given time. This is why I would like to share with you a personal anecdote of the new country: one that reflects the greater complexities and ironies of the realities of Cuban American exile: past and present.

In my own family, an earlier political exile in the early 1950s had, as I mentioned earlier, taken us to Miami. There my paternal grandmother died and was buried. This was to be her temporary resting place, awaiting the time when things in Cuba 'improved' and we could transport her remains to their rightful place at the family plot at *Cementerio Colón* in Havana. It was never a question of 'if' but of 'when'. As it happened, we returned and she stayed. Before too long another exile had overtaken our plans to re-settle in Cuba and, in 1959, we found

ourselves once again living 'temporarily' in Florida. Meanwhile my grandmother remained in her temporary resting place at *Woodlawn Cemetery* in Miami. Pilgrimages to her grave-in-exile were a regular part of family life. And for many decades, it was understood that she — and we — were living on borrowed soil and borrowed time. The day would soon come when we both — the dead and the living exiles — would return to the land of our birth. It was only with the death of my father in the early 1990s that we realised that my grandmother's temporary grave had now become her final resting place: my father's grave in the same cemetery ironically conferring permanence on hers.

The gravestones in *Colón* and in *Woodlawn* are witnesses to the long diaspora of Cuban dead. *Woodlawn Cemetery* in Miami and *Cementerio Colón* in Havana — two pillars of one Cuban cemetery stretching across the treacherous tides of the Florida Straits — hold in their collective tombs and mausoleums a continuum of names and dates that allow us to trace faithfully the personal and political fortunes and misfortunes of generations of Cubans. Where the dates in the gravestone 'there' stop, they begin 'here'. Often — and sadly — so does their level of care and maintenance. Many of what were once the well-tended suburbs of the dead in *Colón*, are now grown sloppy and weedy. The reason is obvious. In Miami's *Woodlawn*, on the other hand, a veritable garden blooms in the tombs of dead Cuban exiles. Families visit regularly and tend to the graves of their dead with the same care and devotion they shower on their living.

The conundrum goes to the heart of the Cuban American diaspora: with heavy hearts we bury our dead in a new

country, yet we know that, for the moment at least, here is where we want them, safe and cared for in exile. The rituals of caring for our dead run deep in the psyche and imagination of Latin Americans all over the world. Abandoning our dead in the old country and burying our dead in the new: both are part of the diaspora of mourning and grief that is life in exile.

- 16 Rieff, *The Exile*, p. 14.
- 17 Rieff, pp. 14–15.
- 18 Rieff, *The Exile*, p. 18.
- 19 Rieff, *The Exile*, pp. 30–31.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Maria Cristina García, *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959–1994*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. 14.
- 2 García, *Havana USA*, p. 1.
- 3 García, *Havana USA*, p. 13.
- 4 García, *Havana USA*, p. 1.
- 5 García, *Havana USA*, p. 2.
- 6 García, *Havana USA*, p. 6.
- 7 David Rieff, *The Exile: Cuba in the heart of Miami*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993) p. 28.
- 8 García, *Havana USA*, p. 14.
- 9 García, *Havana USA*, p. 4.
- 10 García, *Havana USA*, pp. 1–2.
- 11 García, *Havana USA*, p. 2.
- 12 Rieff, *The Exile*, p. 26.
- 13 Rieff, *The Exile*, p. 26.
- 14 Rieff, *The Exile*, p. 28.
- 15 Rieff, *The Exile*, p. 27.