

I N D E C I S I O N

Short Story by:  
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To my wife and children, who endured it all.

It was almost 7:30 in the morning of Saturday April 4th, and I was already a half hour late for work. However, something kept me wandering quietly around the house. I kept inventing one excuse after another, making time for the 7:30 *am* short wave newscast.

Since the night before there was a rumor going on about the guard been removed from the Peruvian Embassy in Havana. I had the feeling that something crucial was about to happen.

Finally, here it was: the Cuban government had officially withdrawn the Cuban guards and 300 persons had already peacefully occupied the Embassy's gardens. Moreover, the Peruvian government had announced that it would grant assylum to all who entered. That was it.

I turned off the radio and left, very quietly, for work.

All morning long I kept turning the same idea in my mind: Should I or shouldn't I take advantage of this opportunity? Something like this happens only once in a lifetime, I repeated to myself. But then, I had 3 children and who knows what dangers my decision would entail. My eldest almost lost his eyesight after I decided to apply for migratory status. It wasn't really my fault, but... it wouldn't have occurred if I hadn't applied!

This certainly was the golden opportunity for all those who didn't have any other way out. We had migratory status. A passport. A visa. We could keep on waiting for the government to grant us an exit permit. Or could we? These others couldn't.

As a matter of fact, we had been waiting for such permit for the last 18 months. It had been delayed, and delayed, without legal motive. Finally that last problem I had had... That was a problem!

When it occurred I became terrified. I faced the fact of being permanently separated from my family... and I already knew what that meant. I had seen it happen among my people. I had seen little children being raised without a father. Being brought up with a social stigma upon themselves. I had suffered it myself. I couldn't let mine go through such an experience! Entering the Embassy might mean our way out.

But then, if I was thinking of my small kids, *was* I really considering how much would they have to endure, to suffer in the Embassy? And for how long? I knew that sooner or later the Cuban government would have to give in and grant assylum status to those in the Embassy. The international pressure would be too strong. How long would that take? One month? Perhaps two? Three? Who knows? Would my kids endure it? I have an asthmatic child, you know? No, that solution would be out of the question. I couldn't even consider that possibility.

Besides, we had all our exit documents. If the government wanted to avoid further international embarassement they would have to let us legal emigrants go. Otherwise, it would yield a permanent invitation to break into every Embassy in Havana! With respect to my particular problem, the government wouldn't bring it up again. They could have crushed me 8 months before when it had occurred... They, they; always them: the government! We had always been in their hands. Now, for the first time in our lives, we had the chance to choose, and without their interference! This, they would never forgive!

No. I should remain calm. (How difficult this was). I had to think. There was too much at stake! I couldn't act hastily. Yes, my best bet was to wait and remain calm.

That morning I didn't do much in the office. There was something strange in the air. Everyone was so quiet and self-minded... When work ended there

were no invitations to the usual end-of-the-week drinks and gossip. I went directly home.

When I arrived my two cousins were already there. They had just come from the Embassy where they had escorted in a mutual friend. They had also done some inquiring and were bustling with excitement. And so were we.

"How did you find out?" I asked them.

"It's on the government radio!"

Yes, Radio Reloj is broadcasting the news every hour. The government had withdrawn the guards and is holding the Peruvian authorities responsible for whatever situation arises. It's practically an invitation.

"The Peruvian government announced it will grant assylum to all who enter", I said.

"How do you know that?" they asked.

"It was in the Voice of America this morning."

Yes, indeed! We were all very interested. We all wanted to leave the country and had asked for migratory status more than a year ago. However, to obtain this status wasn't easy. With trivial excuses, people were delayed until finally they were laid off work. This policy discouraged many potential emigres. Besides, up to that moment only a handful could leave: Spanish citizens and their immediate family, political and ex-political prisoners and their immediate family and the immediate family of residents abroad were officially permitted to apply. This was the official "emigration policy". It left out a lot of people because the government restricted immediate family to parents and children. Finally, visits by relatives who had left in the past induced an increasing number of people to consider very seriously the possibility of emigrating.

"Did you actually get near the Embassy?" I asked my cousins.

"Yes, we reached the gate. People climb a small stone fence and surrender their identity documents to an Embassy functionary sitting at a desk in the middle of the garden. He writes their names down in a list and keeps their documents in a drawer."

I nodded.

"Do you think there's a catch?" they asked me.

"I never trust them "I said." The government, I mean. Is it very difficult to get there?"

"No, not at all! There are dozens of policemen but only to maintain order. People just walk in... No body bothers them. If you come in a car, they ask you if you are entering so they may tow it away and make room for more newcomers!"

I nodded again.

"Oh, you are always so distrustful!" complained my wife.

"They have never been this good before."

"Do you think this is for us?"

"Are you crazy?" I replied sharply. "With three kids? Besides, we don't know what kinds of people are going in".

"All kinds," answered my cousins. "White, Black, young, married, single. Even whole families! Principally young people."

"Of course! This is their chance. The government would legally retain them because of the military laws. If I were in their shoes I'd do the same," I said. "But our case is different. We have a visa. And if the government

is going to let these people leave they'll have to let us out first. It's a matter of saving face!"

"But we've been delayed for so long! Maybe we ought to..." said my wife.

"Yes", added my youngest cousin. "That's why we came here right away! To tell you how things were. May be we should all go..."

"May be... Yes... Who knows? How about the kids? Besides, what are you going to do with grandma? Are you going to drag a ninety year old ailing woman into that ordeal?"

"Other people are going in with children and elderly folks" interrupted my oldest cousin. "I saw them with my own eyes. Why couldn't we?"

"May be they can't do otherwise. You too have a visa. Thousands don't even have the hope of being granted an exit permit, let alone a visa. That's why!"

"Then what do you think?" he asked again.

"I think, this is not for us", I said slowly. "May be it is for you. May be we should split: the young people go in and the..."

"No!" interrupted abruptly my wife. "No splitting! Either all go in or all stay." Her eyes were wide open.

"But that's wrong!" said I pointing to my cousins. "They are also having trouble getting out. They are out of work. If some can leave, then they can pull out the rest... Otherwise, everyone would have to stay. And you know perfectly how bad things are for them now."

"Yes... Perhaps he is right." Replied my cousin. "If we can't all go at a time, may be some should go first... I think it would be wise to discuss it. Don't you?"

We all looked at each other. It was too difficult and too important a decision to give advise on. Everyone had to decide for himself.

My cousins went home and we sat alone. My wife and I searched each other's face but wouldn't dare say a word. We decided to kill time. I turned on the short wave radio... It was our only source of non-official information. May be if we were better informed... If we knew more about how this thing was developing...

At five thirty my cousins were back. They were, again, very excited, and sweating with the afternoon heat.

"We just came from there", they said, talking both at the same time. There's a flock of people going in! By the hundreds! Whole families with bundles. All kinds of people! All colors! All ages! But again, principally young". They kept interrupting each other, adding facts. "You'd have to see how many Blacks! And how the cops insult them. What names they call them!"

"But why pick on the Blacks?"

"Who's they? Who shouts?" asked my wife coming out of the kitchen.

"The group of government people. They shout slogans, and whistle, and yell. Like the Porra of President Machado (1), mother says."

"But why insult especially the Blacks?"

Oh, they can accept a white "gusano" (2) but not a Black one. They believe Blacks must support the government!" said my cousin.

"But that's racism," said my wife. "Can't Blacks have the right to conform their own political opinion as we do?"

"Let's not go into that. You know how the government feels about it. They feel they own blacks because they think they have bettered their

conditions. As if blacks hadn't worked hard enough for it themselves! Where is all this yelling taking place? At the gate?"

"Oh, about one block away from the Embassy. In every direction. Like a circle", my cousin explained. "And sometimes they also throw rocks and threaten with the use of force. However, they haven't done anything yet and the people still keep pouring in."

"Do you know how many people Radio Austria announced at 4 o'clock, were already in the Embassy?" I asked. "Between 3 and 5 thousand!"

"I believe that", said my oldest cousin. This time we didn't dare come so near, but from a block away it looked like a whole lot of people. Thousands!"

"And do you know who called a while ago?" added my wife. "Santiago! I think he wanted to know what we were planning. He said 'How are things around there? Nothing new?' Bet you that was kind of a fare-well because if there is someone anxious to get out of the country it is he."

"Yes, if he were to ask for migratory status, being a University professor as he is, that would mean real trouble for him!"

"They would hang him by his feet!" said my oldest cousin. "Look, don't you think you should go with us and look around? To see how many people are going in? Even Santiago now... Then you could decide..."

"Are you kidding?" I said. "After what happened to me? If I ever go near that Embassy it is to get in as fast as my feet can take me."

"But may be you should reconsider... Think about the kids. Precisely because of the problem you had..."

"Yes, it's the kids I'm thinking about! If we stay and anything happens, it's going to happen to me, not to my kids! They will stay at home. They will have a clean bed every night. A toilet. Cold water to drink. Three meals a day!" The tone of my voice was increasing by the minute. "Why don't

you leave me in peace! If you want to go in, by God, go in by yourselves! I don't have to carry you in, do I?"

Only now can I realize how they meant to help me. At that time no one knew what was right and wrong. What to do? It was too much in too little time for us...

They left and we went back to the children. All day long we had tried to keep them busy and unaware of what was happening. They were too young to understand or to worry about our problem. They would follow us and abide by our decision. That was the most painful thing!

That night we fed them and put them to bed as soon as possible. Then we sat and listened to the short wave programs. My wife showed great understanding and self restraint: she didn't push me. I knew she was terrified, but she didn't say a word. When my problem occurred she had stayed alone, in our house, with our 3 children, facing an uncertain future with great courage. Since then, she couldn't bear the thought that, as long as we remained in the country, she could face a similar situation again. I knew that, even though she had never told me. But I could only think about the children and what they would have to go through if we were to go into the Embassy. I could only think of those 10 terrible days in the hospital when we all thought our child would go blind. The anti-variolic vaccine had infected his eyes. The vaccine I had given him because I couldn't keep on living under the political conditions that exist in my country and had decided to leave.

It was a very long wait, that night. We sat and listened to every broadcasting station I could find: London, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, Canada, Switzerland. Even radio Moscow. I tuned each and everyone of them to hear what they said or what they did not say. We looked at each other, in silence, listening, until it was really very late... But still, we couldn't decide anything...

And then the doorbell rang.



It was past 1:30 AM. It was already Sunday! There were my two cousins again, standing at the door, white as sheets, with their sister and mother, all of them panicky.

I knew that something was wrong; very wrong.

My wife opened her mouth but couldn't say a word. Her hands trembled and when I caught them, they were dead cold.

"What's wrong?" I heard myself asking.

My aunt embraced me and started crying.

"Oh, for God's sake, go into the Embassy" she said. "Go! Go! Right now! You can't waste a minute!"

She took my wife's hands between her own, and filled them with tears while she continued "Oh, convince him! He's so stubborn! You must all go in right away! You must not waste another minute!"

My cousins were also trying to convince me and to explain something to me. There was such a confusion that all I could deduct was that something terrible had happened.

"All right! All right!" I shouted, trying to bring order into the room. "Calm down. One at a time. Let's talk!"

My youngest cousin closed the livingroom windows and started explaining:

"Do you remember Horacio, the mechanic who lives across the street from Juanita's?"

I couldn't remember a damned thing about him but asserted anyway.

"Well" he continued, "the police came for him a while ago. They searched the house, wrecked everything, they were in such a hurry, and took him away

for questioning. There's a rumor that they'll pick up everyone who has been arrested in the past year, for questioning!"

That changed everything. It was really getting hot!

Everyone looked at me and became silent.

"If they pick me up again", I reasoned slowly, "I'll have it pretty rough, I know it. But the children will still be at home. Cared for. Can you imagine all they will have to go through inside the Embassy? Just because I want to avoid being arrested again?"

"Listen", spoke my wife with a low, calm, voice, "you don't know what it means staying alone, at home, knowing that your husband is in prison. Having to manage by yourself with 3 small children; without any help! I wouldn't know which is harder, if being in prison or waiting outside! You also know about being the son of a political prisoner; of being poor, isolated, rejected, discriminated against by every official institution. What do you think would be a greater sacrifice for them: a handful of weeks, perhaps months of hardships and then freedom, or what you went through for the rest of their lives?"

She couldn't have spoken more clearly or wisely.

"Let's go;" I said. "Did you bring the car?"

"Yes" they replied with a smile.

In a minute, while we prepared a small bag with some clothes for the children, the women woke them up and dressed them. We took some cans of condensed milk, some money, and we were ready.

"Take the key", I said. "When you leave us there, come back and clean the house."

"Aren't you going to leave anything at all to the government?" my cousin said and smiled.

"Don't bullshit me! Let's go!"

On the way to the Embassy we crossed many groups and heard a lot of slogan shouting by the government mobs. We lived only a mile away. After a few blocks we had to leave the car; too many people on the streets. We parked. The two women stayed behind. My two cousins continued with us on foot.

There were dozens of people running in every direction. Some groups waved long sticks pieces of pipes and chains while shouting pro-government slogans. Others, with bags and bundles, were marching, like us, towards the Embassy.

We made our way through the waves and arrived at a human wall. This wall of people stretched as far as we could see and blocked the avenue we had to cross. Police cars and police wagons moved back and forth. One wagon would arrive, the police would fill it up with our people, and it would swiftly go. Immediately, two of three wagons would replace it.

On our side of the street, opposite to the Embassy zone, we stood with the rest of the people who were trying to get in... A human serpent that would swell, trying to cross.

On the other side, the government mobs, with their sticks and pipes, were ready. Every time a group tried to cross the street and march towards the Embassy, they would charge. Then, the police would appear, loading everyone they could lay their hands on, into a police wagon.

At the same time they would repeat through the loudspeakers: 'The Embassy is temporarily closed. The government will not permit any more people in until those who are now inside are evacuated. Return to your homes. We will not be responsible for the safety of those who try to force their way through!'"

There was a last attempt by the people on our side. The crowd on the other sidewalk started at us as soon as they saw us move ahead. They hit and kicked and threw stones at those in the first rows. The police started loading the wagons again...

That was it! I knew we had lost. We had lost too much time!

Some people retreated to nearby streets and alleys. Others stayed there, moving around. The crowds began to dwindle.

We started walking back; back home. There would be no more chance of getting in the Embassy at all. We all knew that. We knew the government.

We went back while the night kept marching on. Marching on on us.

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- (1) "Porra" was a government paid gang, during Dictator Gerardo Machado (1925 - 1933), that would attack government opposicionists.
- (2) Gusano = worm - name given to non-sympatizers with the communist system. Today it carries only a political connotation.