

**ESCAPE from the book THE KILLER FLIES OF LUXOR**

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I gave a kiss to my mother, to my father, to my aunt and to my uncle. Just a quick kiss and a quick good by to all in a low voice, amidst nervous chatter, before entering the gate. What I wanted to do was to go back to them, to stop that painful moment and go back to the security of the past.

I shed a single tear, so did my mother as she watched me leave. Her face pressed against the cold glass that separates the world of the people who had to stay from the world of lucky ones who might get to leave.

After many hours of sitting in the gate waiting room, the authorities moved us to another room called "the exit door". From there, we would not move again until it was time to board the plane. From that room, I was able to see my parents, aunt and uncle in the distance. Their eyes were locked on me.

We, the group of lucky ones who may get to leave that island, sat in "the exit door" without knowing what would happen next. What unusual documents would the authorities demand at the last minute in to order to cancel our trip, in order to humiliate us more, and to make us feel even more at their mercy?

The time passed at an agonizingly slow pace. I was getting more and more nervous. My diaphragm was trembling uncontrollably. I tried to comfort myself by thinking: Why be nervous? My situation is different from the rest of the people in this room. They are the hated "worms", as the revolution had classified them. The authorities know who they all are. They know that they are leaving, never to return. Officially I am not like them. I am leaving because I am going to study abroad. I am the recipient of two scholarships with all of the documents to prove it. I am even allowed to carry more belongings than these people. Why should I be nervous?

So, I kept trying to appear relaxed and without any worries, which was the same thing the others were trying to do. However, the authorities should not suspect that what I really wanted was to leave the country for good as badly and for the same reasons as the others.

The situation in the room was tense. The silence was excruciating. You worried that the deafening sound of your heartbeat could be heard by everyone in the room. Everyone was trying very hard to look relaxed, so as not to call attention of the authorities. Any unusual or suspicious behavior could be fatal for our plans to escape that hell.

Suddenly, from behind a counter, one of the officials in charge began calling out our names, one by one. The tension increased even more. Now I could hear the nervous heavy breathing of the people around me. Like them, I was dying inside, but like them, I forced a serene smile on the tense muscles of my face. The young woman sitting on my right was called and I inconspicuously followed her with my eyes. After she arrived at the counter, the official asked her for something. She opened her purse and started searching. I could not hear what they asked from her. I dare not move and risk attracting the attention of the other officials in the room.

Time seemed to stretch and stretch. The minutes on my watch took forever, while in reality, only two hours and fifteen minutes had passed since I entered "the exit door". The young woman returned to her seat beside me. Without looking at her, I whispered, "What did they call you for?" There was silence. Then, pretending to scratch the tip of her nose, her hand covering her lips, she whispered back to me, "He wanted the inventory of my jewelry for verification."

Well, that problem won't happen to me, I thought, comforting myself. I have an "official permission" document.

The old lady sitting on my left whispered to me, "Are you traveling alone?" "Yes," I replied. I then remembered the warnings that the authorities place secret police on these flights, so, I elaborated, "I will be in transit in Madrid for a very short time and then will continue to Prague. I have a scholarship there and official permission."

The old lady appeared to be alarmed by my answer and became speechless. I then realized that she was not with the secret police. In volunteering so much information and mentioning Prague, my answer gave her the impression that I was a proud communist. I felt relief she was just another ordinary person who wanted to leave for the same reasons I did, but I then realized that I had made a terrible mistake. I shouldn't have elaborated and mentioned Prague. I was not going to Prague. That was not my destination and the authorities knew it. Inconsistencies like this could call attention to me and I could be questioned. I cautioned myself to be more careful.

Finally, the official called my name and I walked to the counter. I showed him my passport, my official exit permission, and an official letter requesting considerate treatment from the authorities since I was a scholarship recipient. The official quickly glanced through the letter and gave me a look of complete disbelief. My mouth went completely dry and I was frozen with fear. He then shoved the letter into a drawer and told me to sit and wait.

I had entered the gate at six in the morning; it was now nine in the evening and I was still sitting and waiting. I had not eaten anything. I couldn't remember if I had been to the bathroom or if I was too afraid to leave my seat even for that. I had no idea what would happen next or when it would happen. I was physically and psychologically very tired.

Then, another official, who had replaced the one at the counter, called my name. I promptly went to him. This time it was to verify the inventory of the jewelry I was carrying with me, with the inventory the authorities had performed in my house a week ago. I was not expecting this since I was leaving with a special permission, but I did not say anything to upset the official. I was carrying a Sterling silver identification bracelet I had purchased with my first pay check, a Russian watch my mother gave me and a pair of cuff links made in China I had purchased. He double-checked and found that everything was in order. He told me to go back to my seat and wait.

At 10:25 PM, three officials rapidly entered the room. They looked around counting us as if we were cattle. Hatred and suspicion radiated from their eyes. They were smoking cigars that they kept frantically moving around with their lips, filling the room with a putrid stench as they swaggered about looking over each one of us. The mood in the room changed to one of doom. I had heard that they sometimes cancelled flights at the last minute. I started trembling with the thought. I hoped they wouldn't notice. Then I noticed others waiting were trembling as well. The room was completely silent except for the sound of the officials' boots on the tile floor. Suddenly one of the three stepped out from the group. He was short and fat, and he said in a very loud authoritarian voice, "You people on this flight are carrying a lot of weight in your suitcases. It is necessary that each of you give up half of your luggage. If not, half of you will have to stay behind."

With the choices given, everyone immediately agreed to the confiscation of half of their belongings. The three officials smiled cynically and left the room, very satisfied.

Later we could see the authorities opening individual suitcases and deciding which pieces of clothing were going to be left behind. One more incident of humiliation and inhumanity toward "the worms." These people were leaving everything, their loved ones, their businesses, their houses, their cars, their money and all of their belongings. What they were carrying in their suitcases was nothing in comparison with what they were leaving behind. The only things the state permitted them were one coat, two suits or dresses, one pair of shoes, three shirts or blouses, two changes of underwear and two pairs of socks or stockings. And now the authorities were confiscating half of that misery. But most of us didn't care. We had already lost everything. For only a chance at freedom, we would leave our country naked, if necessary. Freedom is vital for the human spirit. It was not there in the suitcases at the state's mercy. But, we were not free yet; we all watched through the glass in silence at the looting.

Just at 11:00 PM, the same three officials erupted into the room. The same short, fat one with the authoritarian voice announced, "In spite of the reduction in weight, the plane is still overloaded. Therefore, it is necessary some people stay behind". They turned and left the room.

We all felt the air had been removed from our lungs. We were paralyzed. The faces in the room grew paler. Some of us looked at each other. The atmosphere was charged with anxiety. All of that horrible tension and now this. It was almost unbearable. After 17 agonizing hours waiting in that room, no one knew for sure who was finally going to leave! I just wanted it over, to disappear or die.

After a while the same official decisively entered the room holding a sheet of paper in his hand. He called the first ones to be left behind. It was an elderly couple. The second ones, a family of three. And then he called my name. That's the end. That's it. I took my coat, my camera and my documents, got up and walked in the same direction as the others to be left behind. I could see my mother and father in the distance, still waiting behind the glass nervously wondering what was going on. One of the authorities called me to an adjacent room where I was told to sit and wait. I automatically did it without question or hesitation, as a good robot in that society. I sat alone, with only misery for company in the middle of the room. Sad, I no longer had any hope left.

Another official entered the room, walking directly to me. He stood just in front of me. Gathering all of the strength and courage I had left, probably produced by my panic-stricken glands, I decided to play my last card. I had nothing to lose. What could be worse than staying alive in that hell?

I acted very upset about the whole situation. I choose my words carefully using revolutionary jargon in order to stress my status as one of them sharing the same ideals, "Comrade, I am a scholarship recipient. I have to be at my destination without delay to attend classes. Comrade, I do not think it is in the best interests of the Revolution for me to lose this scholarship."

"Comrade", he replied quickly, "don't be upset. We have another flight next week."

"Comrade, you don't seem to understand," I said. "I have to be at my destination no later than this week. If not, the scholarship will be lost. Comrade, I have to be on this flight. You must to put me on this flight."

"Can you spare some of your belongings?" he asked.

"If it is necessary to leave half of my belongings, that is acceptable with me," I replied, "But Comrade, at the same time, I think that is wrong. Comrade, I am going to a very cold country. Everything I am carrying is absolutely vital."

He was silent after my speech. Desperate but trying to appear calm I added, "Of course, Comrade, if you still think it is necessary, it won't be any problem."

He was still silent. I had never felt more alone and lost in my entire life. I should have kept my mouth shut about the damned suitcase and let him keep everything! I saw myself in my mind going back home to my bed, to my books, to my paintings. I couldn't go back to an uncertain future of oppression, repression, depression. He broke into my thoughts by ending his silence. "Don't worry, Comrade," he said. "You will be on this flight."

"Thank you, Comrade," I said in the most grave and conscientious tone I could muster, suppressing the jubilant feelings of joy I was having inside. "The Revolution will benefit forever because of your wise decision."

I took my documents again, got up and walked back to the waiting room, but this time in triumph. I couldn't believe it! It worked! I was convincing! I had succeeded once more in lying to the authorities! I was able to breathe again. All of this agony will be over soon! I was elated and with a victorious smile surfacing on my lips, I kept walking toward the waiting room. I saw my mother and father in the distance, and I made a discrete gesture with my head indicating "it was nothing". I sat in the same seat as before but more assured of my release.

Half an hour later, the same official who spoke to me came in and announced that the plane was leaving. Everyone should form a line and, in his most authoritarian voice said "The women and children will leave first."

But then, he called me first. I was number one on his passenger list! I got up and finally stepped out "the exit door". The official took my passport and stamped the exit seal. I turned around for a last look at my mother and father in the distance, still standing against the glass 18 long hours later.

I saw the plane about a block away and walked over to it. The night was clear and cool. I could see most of the stars. I felt relaxed but empty. I walked automatically, knowing deep in my heart that as soon as the plane took off, some sort of window in space would open up and I would be flown to sanctuary.

I reached the plane. It was all like a dream. I went inside the cabin. I was afraid I would wake up. No, no, I am quite awake. This is happening. This is happening. I kept repeating that to myself while walking to my assigned seat. I am living the reality. This is not a dream. I sat down. It was hot inside the plane. Then I became worried that something might go wrong. The authorities might find out I was hungry for freedom and wanted to escape. No, no, no! I repeated to myself over and over. Nothing will happen. Everything will be all right. The worst is over. In a matter of hours I will be free! I will have control of my life, of my future. I will not be at the mercy of any government or any oppressive political doctrine. I will not be sent to any concentration camp. Everything will be fine. I will be free.

Finally, everyone was inside the plane and in their seats. Everyone was very still, petrified that something will happen in the last minutes and the escape will be cancelled. The fear and anxiety of the past hours was reflected in the faces all around me. The silence inside the cabin was eerie.

The door of the plane was closed with a deep bang. Well, that's it. This is it. This is for real. One by one the motors started. The propellers accelerated rapidly and the whole plane was vibrating. I put my face against the window, putting my hands beside my eyes in order to see out. I was trying to see the terminal building in the distance. Trying to pinpoint my mother and father against the glass of the building for one last glance. But, I couldn't find them. It was too far and there were more than one hundred faces there pressed against the long airport windows, trying in vain to see us.

The airplane started moving slowly. My heart was beating rapidly and I felt a lump in my throat. "Good bye" I said in my mind, and that was my only thought. I felt still completely empty. The plane turned and I was no longer able to see the terminal building. I reclined the seat and closed my eyes. I realized then that I hardly saw my mother and father today. It was a very quick good bye. I'll never see them again, I thought. Memories of my family, my home, my life went through my mind. But now I am safe. I was surprised when I began to relax. I was leaving all the past, both my family which I loved and suffering and fear of persecution.

"How do you fasten the seat belt?" whispered the old lady sitting beside me. I told her how to do it while fastening mine. It was still very hot in the cabin. The plane reached the end of the runway and turned again. The propellers began maximum acceleration. I felt the plane wanted to go. The signal to go had not been given yet and the plane was impatient, wanting badly to go and fly away like all of its passengers. The signal was finally given and the plane began to move rapidly picking up speed and we took off! I felt elated, liberated, as if a heavy weight had been removed from my shoulders.

As I looked out of the window, I saw the lights of the airport getting smaller and smaller. I saw the millions of lights of the city of "La Habana". I thought: down below there is a country full of people, trapped in a prison without walls, slaves of new kind of oppressive order, who are not living, but existing. People who would leave because their country was no longer theirs. They would leave only because redemption cannot be seen in any direction. It is finished. Yes, they would leave sadly, like me, leaving a part of my soul behind knowing Cubans live only in Cuba.

END

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