

DEAREST NEPHEW 2

TÍA FELICITA

Santiago de Cuba
September 11, 2005

Dearest Nephew,

After all these months, you don't know what a relief it was to get a letter from you. Now it seems you were too busy preparing to move to your own home after that unfortunate burglary at the Cortez Arms. I'm sure you will be much happier and secure in your new building overlooking Humboldt Park. It sounds magnificent. You must have taken great pains to furnish the expansive space of your new residence. From what you tell me Humboldt Park is one of Chicago's oldest parks and has quite an interesting history.

But you did not speak of anything I wrote in my letters to you. Were not my letters forwarded to you? Strange if they weren't. The Cuban post office, though they might steam open letters from abroad, is meticulous in making sure they make it to their intended party. Isn't this true for the US post office as well?

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How unfortunate that you lost all of your documents in the burglary. I have made inquiries into obtaining a copy of your birth certificate as you asked. My old comrade, I'll call him A.H., in the Ministry of Records in Guantanamo gave me the forms to fill out and information on the fees required, one-hundred eight dollars, US. It wasn't long ago that an acquaintance like A.H. would have simply provided me with the papers you need. But the recent campaign against favoritism keeps all of the bureaucrats looking over their shoulder. I have enclosed the form. From everything you've told me I'm sure the fee will be insignificant for you.

I have nothing new to tell you of Maritza, Miriam, and Juan. It seems they don't want anything to do with your mother's only sister. But I do have news, obtained in a roundabout way, of your father.

My friend at the ministry verified to me that your records were on file at the Guantanamo office. While looking over them, he recognized your father's name and recalled recently reencountering him at the Hospital General Saturnino Lora in Santiago. Your father is in a ward for the chronically ill, where the wife of A.H. was also assigned. Your father's lungs are diseased from his many years of smoking Vegas Robaina Cigarettes. I imagine you remember those are the non-filter variety. His prognosis is not good.

I could not bring myself to visit him for what he did to your dear, departed mother. I know you too hold him responsible for the breakup of your family, but perhaps you can find it in your heart to write him. The address of the hospital is: Carretera Central, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba.

Now I must tell you my news, and this is difficult for me to tell and I'm sure for you to hear. I too am in deteriorating health. I have been diagnosed with lymphoma, a type of cancer. For too many years I sensed something wrong, but I was afraid to visit

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even the neighborhood health center. Here I am, the wife of a doctor, and yet I would not put my life into another's hands, until the pain became more than I could bear. I am sorry to burden you with this news.

I am resigned to my fate. I have lived a long and good life. I married my love and closest comrade, and together we had more than 40 years together. We served the people during the birth of the Revolution, providing healthcare, teaching those who could not read. But we also grew old and perhaps stale with the Revolution and its leaders.

The world is much different than it was at the time of the Revolution. We have each seen and experienced many changes, you in North America, I here in Cuba. Who would have predicted the fall of the Soviet Union? We here did not see it as the fall of Socialism. We *Cubanos* knew they were using us, no matter what the official line. And four years ago this day our hearts were with the people of your adopted country, no matter the stance of the two governments.

Please thank your friend Memo for typing your letter in Spanish. Also tell him I enjoyed his dream poems and look forward to the one he is writing about you. He says he is still working on it.

I do not believe we will ever see each other again. But I will hold you in my heart until my end.

Tu Tía Siempre,
Felicita

RAZING CANE

GEORGE 2006

Gato's request was ridiculous. Shortly after he received the letter from his *Tía Felicita*, he visited Alexia at about eleven in the morning, knowing that I would not be home. According to Alexia, he was pretty drunk and pretty pitiful, practically crying, lamenting, "Why me, why me, why am I all alone?"

Alexia was facing a work deadline and when this was the case, at times like these, she'd call me at the office, telling me, "I don't have time for him and his interruptions. You have to tell him to leave me alone during the day." When she called this time, the conversation was very different.

What changed her mind this time was the letter. She told me how she turned her back on Gato to go back up our stairs when he pleaded, "Mami, please look at this letter from *mi tía*." Until this point, we hadn't heard of *Tía Felicita*, let alone seen any of her letters.

Alexia read the letter, handwritten in beautiful Catholic school script, as best she could in Spanish. On the phone Alexia described to me the roller coaster of the letter, its comedic description of Ga-

to's studio as his "expansive residence," leading up to her revelation of her deteriorating health, and thoughts exposing some of her political consciousness.

Despite her pending deadline and Gato's drunken self-pity, Alexia opened her heart to him as she was apt to do. She invited him upstairs and offered him freshly cooked red lentil soup. As the nourishment countered the liquor and loathing, Gato became more lucid. He talked of his aunt, how he had spent summers with her and her husband. It was the husband, a doctor, who taught him chess. But before long his lucidity turned to absurdity.

"Mami, I have an idea. Mami, I want you and Dadi to visit my aunt, maybe even my father in Cuba."

Alexia could not believe what he was proposing. "Do you have any idea how much it would cost just to get there?"

"I know. I found out from Hector; he from my town. It cost \$700. Don't worry, I pay."

No wonder he didn't want me home. I couldn't have held my laughter the way Alexia claimed she did. That night we didn't have to, and we didn't. "Let's see, he'll work three months straight at the tire shop. On a good day he'll make \$32, drink and eat \$20 of that, and pay a cab \$6 to get home," I calculated. "Maybe that will pay the bus fare from Havana to Santiago."

"No, he's going to collect it all in cans that he'll have to haul to the recycling station," Alexia countered. "Except they closed the one on North Avenue, so he'll have to pay a friend to drive him to another recycling lot. With what he has left over, we'll be able to afford a cab to the airport."

But there was reason to Gato's madness. He knew we were Greek and liked to travel to Greece to spend time with family there. He also knew my sympathies toward Cuba. We had our discussions, playing chess in the yard, sipping lemonade.

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“So Gato, you ever think you’d be better off in Cuba?”

“What, you crazy?”

“Well, you’re not doing so well here. You live on barely \$600 a month, you’re homeless every time they sell the building where you live.”

“I have my freedom.”

“Some freedom, being broke three weeks every month.”

“That’s my fault. I spend what I don’t need to.”

“In Cuba, you’d have free healthcare.”

“I don’t pay nothing here.”

“Yeah, that’s because taxpayers like us are footing the bill.” But my argument went over his head.

“I go back, Castro put me in jail.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

He didn’t have to answer. The look on his face said it all. It was I who didn’t know what he was talking about.

But what Gato didn’t know was that I had been to Cuba in 1970, as a member of the *Venceremos* Brigade. I was in the second contingent of the brigade, made up of North Americans who broke the ban on travel to Cuba, not as tourists but as participants in the historic sugar cane harvest, or *Zafra*, of 1970. We were mostly young, college-age kids, open to the ideas of socialism, having soured on the US system because of the war in Vietnam and the racism exposed by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the ’50s and ’60s. I fit that description, but my Greek heritage gave me another reason.

At the very time the Vietnam War was at its height, a right-wing military junta seized power in the birthplace of democracy. The dictatorship of the generals was backed by the United States. The letters my father received from his village in the mountains of Arcadia stopped coming. Papa hoped his relatives were just being cautious, but he remembered the letters had stopped during World

War II, when German and Italian forces occupied Greece, and for a few years afterward when Greece imploded into a bloody civil war between Communists and the British-backed government. In the fifties, the letters resumed but weren't frequent. Family members had died resisting the Germans, in the famine created by the Nazis, and on both sides of the Civil War.

By the time I became interested in this history, my father and I weren't talking much. I remember a conversation we had sometime during my freshman year of college. I told him, "Socialism seems like a better system than we have with our meaningless materialism."

Papa shook his head. "Sounds good in the book. Too bad you no can ask you dead cousins about it." And then he walked away, sat in our worn armchair, and buried his head in his Greek language weekly, signaling the world to leave him alone.

When I left the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 1968 without a degree, again he wasn't too happy. "Why you no stay in school? You want to wind up like me, a cook in someone else's restaurant? You could become a doctor, instead you go to work at a factory." Soon after that encounter, he died.

When I heard about the *Venceremos* Brigade from activists I knew at the university, I applied. I think they accepted me because they liked my "working class" background and my essay, which included references to the military regime in Greece. As our departure for Cuba approached, I gave my notice at Brice Foundry and promised to write to some of my coworkers.

Gato's idea that Alexia and I travel to Cuba prompted me to think back to my days there and to dig up and read a copy of the letter I sent to the "Brothers at Brice Foundry" about my experiences. I began to wonder whether I would talk myself into returning to Cuba on behalf of Gato.

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Brigada Venceremos
Aguacate, Cuba
March 20, 1970

To my Brothers at Brice Foundry,

My impressions of Cuba are changing every day and so much is happening that if I tried to write about everything it would be more like a book. So I'll try to give you a few of my thoughts—especially about working in Cuba.

I am seeing Cuba as the people here see it—with a machete in hand and a mass of sugar cane in front of me, to the right and to the left. The *Venceremos* Brigade is no pleasure trip. We came to Cuba to work, to cut cane, to participate in the *Zafra*, the harvest of 10 million tons. Fidel (Castro), everyone calls him Fidel as if they knew him personally, says it better than I can.

This leads us to the conviction that work is the most important thing in this Revolution, that the duty of the worker is the most sacred duty of the Revolution, and that to be called a worker is to have the most honorable title in this society. It is the worker who creates the wealth, the bread for all. Our society has become more and more a society of workers, a society of those who produce, a society in which there are fewer parasites.¹

I can't believe it. I was a pretty lazy dude at BF (who isn't), but here I work harder every day. And let me tell you, the work is hard as hell. Although I've never worked the welding line or a

¹From a speech given by Fidel Castro to a rally in Havana on April 19, 1962, commemorating the first anniversary of the victory over the US-backed invasion at the Bay of Pigs.

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punch press eight hours a day, I'm sure it is harder and hotter.

Like I said, the cane is all around you 12 to 15 feet high, kind of like bamboo. Grab one or two in the middle with your left hand, swipe it with your machete above where you are holding it. Damn it, one cut, but the other only went halfway through. Cut again, turn the stalks down, cut off the green leafy tops and toss them to the pile a few feet away. Clear away the straw from dried-out leaves that is everywhere at your feet. Bend down to cut the cane close to the ground. Sometimes you have to hit and hit and curse and hit to cut through the stalks. Pick it up, toss it, grab the next cane to cut. Now it is coming directly at you at a 30 degree angle, almost striking you in the gut, impossible to get to the root. But never do I ask, "What am I killing myself for?"

Cuba, like the cane, is all around us. Life to the fullest, whether it is the constant chopping sound of the machetes hitting cane or the conga drums heard nightly. The Cuban people have an amazing drive to make their country and their Revolution a model for the rest of the underdeveloped world. Even now it is late Saturday night, and off in the distance, when the conga drums are soft, you can hear the tractors and the spider-like cane-hauling machines doing their work. Tomorrow, on Sunday, volunteer cane-cutters will be in the fields, factory workers, bank tellers, and teachers will be in the fields, while the *macheteros* who cut cane six days a weeks will be running the sugar mills, which run 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Can you get the idea that Cuba is a country dedicated to work? The national hero is the best *machatero*. Movies are about working people. The Communist Party of Cuba is made up of the most outstanding workers, elected by their fellow workers. More and more it is the ordinary people, the workers, who are running the society—who else in a society where no individuals make huge

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profits off the sweat of others, while the children of these same people breaking their backs are starving?

How things differ with what we read in the newspapers where we are told that workers labor with a gun at their back, rather than in their own hands. How different from the tales of constant indoctrination. The people of Cuba can never be indoctrinated as long as the speeches they hear and newspapers they read tell of their own accomplishments that they know of firsthand.

In finishing this letter, I'll tell of an experience I had in the fields yesterday. My cutting partner, instead of being another North American, was a Cuban student. Although only about 5'7", Omar is a very fast and smooth cutter, and a cat who really knows where things are at. I had never cut faster myself than I did trying to keep up with him. And as I thought, what can he be thinking to make him work so hard, I started singing to myself a song I first heard on the boat to Cuba.

Cuba qué linda es Cuba . . .

Cuba how beautiful is Cuba . . .

Power to the People,
George Demas