

In search of the light

Ramón Alberto Cruz-Lima

Idalía rubs her hand over the concrete kitchen counter, and feels that it needs a good scrub down with detergent, something she has stopped being concerned about for a long time now. What really matters now is what she is going to cook for her husband when he gets home from work. "Squash", is what comes to her mind. There is half a squash, some scallion and a small bunch of cilantro. Get to work, she resigns herself, it's the same thing they have eaten day after day since the squash season started. And thank God for that, she thinks in consolation.

Through the window she hears the sounds of a radio come in with the morning breeze. Every so often they announce the time, and transmit an emotional tirade about a parade in Pinar del Rio for the return of the boy, Elián González. Instinctively Idalia turns over toward the window where the intrusive noise is coming in and furiously shuts it closed. But, the only thing she manages to do is for four more boards to drop off the half rotted blinds.

"Ten o'clock in the morning," the announcer says. "Holy God!" Idalia thinks, "at 11:30 Ramón will arrive here and I have not even brushed my teeth yet." The anxiety she feels knocks her down onto one of the living room chairs and she starts crying. Ramón arrives close to 12 and finds her glassy-eyed lying on the bed. Concerned, he put his face next to hers, he feels she is breathing and breathes a sigh of relief himself. Idalia had already tried to kill herself before and the psychiatrist suggested that they take all medication out of the house for fear that she might overdose. That was done. But, one never knows what other ideas a person to whom life made no sense anymore might get.

Idalia's depression began a while back, by around the 60s when the government confiscated her husband's prosperous tiny grocery store which he had built to serve the greatest clientele in the area around the hospital. The humanitarian revolutionary government had coyly waited for the monthly supply of food to be delivered, and for Ramon to make the cash payment, to expropriate everything without any right to claim a single cent. It was to no avail to show the inspectors his July 26th bonds and the papers about his detention by the Batista police in 1958. When they needed money for the Sierra Maestra they came to see him, now they were calling him petit bourgeois and would send him to the fields to work. Ramon cried in frustration and so did Idalia. They also cried of pure sadness those afternoons when he would stagger home in exhaustion with a few stolen cucumbers from the furrows, hidden in his stinking clothes smelling of sweat.

So their children could go to school decently dressed Idalia spent her nights in front of her sewing machine taking apart those enormous khaki pants her sister would steal from the warehouse where she worked. The new spare sheets were also transformed into school clothes until there was none left. Everything she had saved for years was slowly disappearing until the time came to sell what for pride or perhaps due to Idalia's stubbornness had remained untouched: Ramon's automobile. The afternoon they came to take it away, Idalia locked herself up in the bathroom and bit her forearms until she drew her own blood, so as to drown all other pain.

A few more years passed and the time came for her children to be torn away from the home to start the indoctrination program at the state boarding schools out in the country. Idalia and her husband, as did many Cuban parents, had opted for keeping the hatred and dissatisfaction they felt to themselves to spare their children the martyrdom the rebellious children were put through, while at the same time insuring paving the way for a professional education that would be of help to them later in life. So it was that their two boys finished their pre university courses and made it to the University. In fact one of them was sent to the USSR and returned with academic honors and a direct appointment as professor in the local university.

The sensation of anguish and anxiety seemed to fade into the past for Idalia, although Ramón continued working like a forced laborer (now as a school bus driver), the prestige and the stability of their children gave her some peace. Maybe the hatred would have been put aside had it not been that the insatiable beast hit again with one of its gestures. Their private home, their confidant, where the couple had lived most of their life, and with a bountiful yard filled with fruits where her children had grown up, would be snatched from them by a Communist Party decree to expand the provincial hospital. Nothing was offered to the owners by way of an option. They gave them a small three-bedroom apartment whose total area would not come close to even half of the property that has been obtained from them. The older son, the university professor, was excused from work for a few days and traveled to the capital city looking for justice. Nobody listened to him. It was a plan that had been approved from above and did not allow room for any discussion. The move looked more like a funeral.

Idalia did everything she could to adapt to the new circumstances, but the ghosts from the past began to haunt her. When the CDR [Committee in Defense of the Revolution] showed up to give her their identification card again showing her as a new member in the zone, she threw the door at her face. The prodigal son was called to the president of the university's office and was given a warning about how inconven-

ient his family's attitude was for his career. Other calamities befell them at the same time. Ramon's diabetes began to create havoc. First, it was an amputated foot, almost immediately after, the total loss of his eyesight that forced him into retirement with a miserable pension. The several months that Idalia spent at her husband's bedside in hospital rooms without any hygiene, filled with gangrene patients without medication or adequate bandaging continued to undermine Idalia's mental health.

Then there came the Special Period of the 90s with its onslaught of hunger, blackouts, mosquitoes and despair. The country was convulsed. There was the maleconazo [huge protests by Havana's sea wall], the sinking of the tugboat, quick response brigades, anti-Castro signs, dissidence, repression. Idalia has premonitions, fear paralyzes her. Her son, the one at the university, their pride and joy, gets into trouble. A trip to Mexico planned for his doctoral thesis begins to get complicated, something is happening, the minister's approval is delayed and there is a verbal confrontation with the authorities at the university.

She doesn't understand what is going on. Everything is happening very quickly. One day they expel her son from the university, but the following day he goes back to work in protest and they take him out of the classroom in front of all his students escorted by the police. They detain him, she does not know where, she screams, she wants to get this hatred out, the hatred she has repressed for more than 30 years, but they sedate her. The son appeals, he demands an explanation, he threatens to return to the classroom, but the answers come back in the form of new arrests and warnings.

At home there is no longer any money, not even for aspirin. The professor finally accepts his fate and is resigned to look for another job, but the state machinery is unforgiving. The State Security got ahead of him and mined his field. The plan is clear; not to leave him any other option but the cane fields, so he can curse the moment he began to badmouth the system. But, the boy, besides studies, also has a temper and makes the decision to join the opposition in order to tell the world the dirt about Castroism.

Idalia admires him, but is paralyzed with terror. Ramón, meanwhile, defies his blindness as well as the amputated foot. He sets up a shoe repair shop on the first floor of the building. The youngest son helps out as best he can, but his financial situation is not an easy one either, he has two children to feed and a sick wife who has suddenly been diagnosed with a probable brain tumor. Idalia cannot handle the news very well. That same night she attempts to take her own life with an overdose of medication; only her family's the quick reaction rescues her from death. The doctors prescribed the kind of medication that can only be given to patients in a Psychiatric Hospital. It hurt them deeply to have to leave her there, among all those strangers wondering about in the hallways, in rags, and with an absent look in their eyes.

Taking advantage of the lack of supervision on the part of the hospital personnel and making a show of an amazing clarity of mind, Idalia has accumulated all the medication they had given her for an entire week by taking it out of her mouth when the nurses turned their back, and makes another suicide attempt. The family accuses to the hospital of negligence once Idalia is revived, but their claim is lost in the judicial labyrinths of the tyranny.

Idalia doesn't return to the hospital. Ramón puts away his leather apron to care for her at home. The older son requests international aid to get her the medicines the government refuses to give his mother for home care. After weeks of administrative red tape, they finally hear from Puerto Rico that the pills are under way, and they give them an address in Cienfuegos where they can pick them up. Happiness and hope fill their hearts, but Idalia had plans of her own. The night before the hopeful trip, she made her third and definitive attempt. We will never know for sure how that flask of Amitriptiline ended up in her hands. It is certain it came from someone outside the house. Somebody slipped it in through the window. No doubt about that, because every inch of that apartment has been meticulously searched and even the last aspirin had been taken out. God will judge the culprit, and will, after all these years shed some light on the mystery someday.

Idalia was a Cuban. A Cuban of fearless patriotic [Mambi] heart and fragile soul broke under the weight of the despair in the darkness of Castroism.

Idalia was my mother. And not a single day goes by that I don't pray for peace for her soul, and for the freedom of Cuba.

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