

MY UNCLE IS COMING

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He was the son of my grandmother, that is to say, my uncle. But he was no ordinary uncle he was unlike the others. I remember him always dressed up in a suit and tie during all hours of the day. It was a habit which made him stand out in a very tropical country. He was bald and elegant and looked like a businessman. It didn't seem like it, but he really was, because during these times the value of peso, the local currency, was higher than the dollar. The peso had value, and he who had 100 was like a millionaire because a complete dinner which included steak, French fries, rice and beans, and garden salad cost just 25 cents and nobody died of hunger. I remember this well because this was when we were at the Fonda de Javier across from the Plaza de Mercado Municipal, because dad did not want to have lunch at home with mom because he had been arguing with her.

My uncle was very wise. I always had respect and admiration for him. I came to think he was a bit of a psychic because one day he told me, a year after the triumph of the revolution, "This is going to get real bad!" At this time my grandmother was still alive and as one says the house was still flooded with joy and tears which came from the family who were celebrating the victory and the promises of Fidel. "Take advantage and eat now because later you won't be able to".

When one is a child everything has an impression on us. For that reason I can never forget the tears of my grandmother when they confiscated her houses and boarding houses by the Law of Urban Reform. In the end there were tears indeed, but not the same tears of joy which celebrated Fidel's arrival. "Fidel is a son of a bitch!" She would say later with her accentuated Spanish. She arrived here married to my grandfather from Mount Lebanon, very young, to make a fortune in this country. Then the island was a kind of Promised Land.

I couldn't say the same about my uncle. He always showed indifference in the face of the revolutionary process and already he smelt a rat and he had made plans accordingly. He was like this with everything. I used to go to my grandmother's house every afternoon where he was living as well, less than one block from my house to eat a piece of cake even though I had to suffer with every force-fed spoon. Dad gave me a blow on the head – on my "Hard head" with the spoon to make me swallow. "Eat or the worms will eat you!" He repeated and repeated this in front of my mother's distressed face. That's why I was very happy when I vomited and shit them out in pieces, fat pieces – but pieces nonetheless, after taking a purgative, mix of wild piñita with magnesium which almost cost me my life. I remember my grandmother when she walked with the pee-pot packed giving hysterical screams for the entire neighbourhood to hear. "Look at what was killing my grandson!" she yelled repeatedly in front of the disgusted and surprised expressions.

Also engraved in my memory forever was the time that he put a hundred dollar bill in my hands to play with, “without breaking it” he told me. But one is a mischievous youngster and moreover has a little brother who always wanted everything and wants to grab everything you have, so in that moment – during the struggle, the bill was torn to shreds. I can still see the look on my mother’s face when she left the bathroom, still wet, roaring at us like a lion and slapping us with both hands. “Are you crazy Jorge? How did you allow this to happen?” And my uncle answered again with the aura of a psychic that it doesn’t matter, that every day the money was losing value and this was to bring him good luck. And it seemed that this was true because I saw him with his pockets full while the stores were empty – every time they were emptier and emptier, without anything for us to buy. They didn’t even have the cake that we were used to.

Surely my uncle won’t remember this. Maybe when he comes I will remind him, because some say he wrote a letter saying that he was going to come soon. I will also tell him the story of when he sat me down in his lap and cracked my knuckles and told me, “If you say that it hurts I will crack them harder, but if you say it doesn’t hurt I will release them.” And he always confused me and acted as if he was confused as he always pressed and cracked my knuckles harder, while he laughed and then later he would give me five pesos.

My mother said “don’t be an abuser”. But I don’t know why, but I always wanted him to crack my knuckles. “I am a magician” he was telling me while pulling out the five peso bill from behind my ear as if it had been inside me.

My mother said that he was a magician not only for that reason, but also because he knew how to make money and this was a skill my dad lacked. “Learn from my brother, money is in the street and you just need to pick it up.” That was the time that my father made himself sad because they took his business which was selling clothes and fabrics by credit all over the countryside despite the fact that he helped the rebels of the sierra mountains to victory, delivering medicine, cigars, and secret messages – putting his life and mine on the line. Later I knew that they almost shot us down the last time when we went to the countryside in his red motorcycle and Batista’s planes started to drop bombs in the mountains which surrounded the city.

He also was sad and disappointed, he said, because communism was already here since they told him that they were going to pay him while they never gave him a cent. My uncle is going to come – I really love my uncle and it seemed that he was a magician there too, because some say that he had so much money that he already was a millionaire. Some say that he doesn’t know what he will do with so much money, without family, without children, and without nieces and nephews. He didn’t have kids, not because he didn’t want them, rather because he couldn’t have them. Some say that when he was young he caught syphilis because he had the habit of fucking girls from the brothel, while he was wearing his white Dril Cien suits. Some say that he is very rich but I don’t know whether to believe this or not, because here some say that those who go there are made to wash plates and spend their lives just washing plates to put food on the table. Moreover it’s a lie that they have cars and beautiful houses, rather the photos that they send are of borrowed cars and houses of others.

Good, when he comes, if he's really coming I will ask him this. Even though some say that they aren't sure if they will allow him to come to our community, because any Cuban in exile will not be able to enter.

My uncle is coming, he says that he's going to come, that he always missed his brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews that I remember that he used to say uncle to the nephews. I don't know why but this was his style. "Come here, uncle, come in and have a piece of cake," I remember that he always said this as if he was our nephew and not really our uncle. He is a good man because he sent medicine to my grandmother to help her control her blood sugar level and also sent medicine to my aunt Josefa for her asthma – as she remained single her whole life after her boyfriend who was a railroad worker got run over by a train on their wedding day. He changed the line switch, without knowing the line switch had already been changed – thus the train took the line he was working on and ran him over.

Still he is sending medicine and sending money, because he had real dollar bills and not just pictures of them. He left thanks to a friend who was selling handmade clothes and coloured cloths on Baracones St. very close to the prostitution district that was close to the city docks

But I don't know what to ask him first, because there are so many things I need to ask. Some say he made money because he brought a diamond that he had swallowed before leaving and when he got to the US, he shit it out, after having to fight the urge to shit during the entire flight. Some say that with this diamond he bought a jewellery store and started to do magic with the gold and silver because those that leave the country can't take anything with them because they steal everything from you. "For those who betray the homeland" as they say here. Then my uncle is a traitor who doesn't deserve neither forgiveness nor the right to return. What thanks that they let him go without anything other than "the shirt on his back," as the saying goes. "What thieves these communists are!" as mom says, with evil eyes, and saying bad words.

Maybe when I see him appear I won't recognize him. In the latest photos he was like a new man because he had cosmetic facial surgery to make him look younger and he was going to have a second surgery before coming. Maybe when I see him appear it will make me happy. I love him and I want to see him. But no, maybe I won't go to see him. I don't know. I must think twice because this can damage my image and can get me in trouble in this society, like how it happened to Miguel, because it is very bad to have an uncle in the community in exile, because "They are worms, those who leave", that I was a pioneer who wanted to be like Che and now I was an "Outstanding young man" and I was only one step from being distinguished with the "Member of Communist Youth Card" – and I could not lose this. Even though I love my family and believe in God, I will say not that I only believe in Lenin and Karl Marx, because I want to study, because I don't want them to close the doors to university on me.

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(Mi tío va a venir, del libro **Vivir lo soñado, España, 2002**)