

# Nightmare in Cojímar

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I was arbitrarily detained Wednesday, March 11<sup>th</sup>, without being told the reason why. The only thing the officer in charge said was that I should accompany him—nothing more. The time? Ten o'clock at night, an illegal time for the police patrol. Where to? To the Cojímar police station, in eastern Havana, a place known for writer Ernest Hemingway's maritime jaunts.

As soon as I got there, I began to perceive the bad scene around me. The guard at the door said: "So, the lazy black guy is finally here." When I approached the front desk to ask the reason for my detention, all I got was silence. Six or eight minutes later, the second in command at the station ordered me to present myself to a particular office, where I discovered that the reason for my detention was that I was considered "socially dangerous."

They immediately scared me into signing some papers that I of course didn't even take the time to read. Then they got my fingerprints and even took a picture of me: their attitude throughout all this was haughty and lacked professionalism, which is typical for those with the power to arrest in Cuba. "You are a black clown," said the officer who was fingerprinting me, right in front of the second in command, and the neigh-

borhood substation's chief was nowhere to be seen. It seemed to me that something was mighty wrong.

Once this process was all over, which looked more like the detention of an Al-Qaeda member than anything else, they locked me up in one of the four dungeons at the rear of the station. It was a narrow, humid and pestilent place, with peeling whitewash and a bar-decorated hole that posed as or pretended to be a window. It was terribly cold, and there was a pipe offering ice-cold showers protruding from one wall. No more than two and half meters away, right across from it, there was another hole for human waste. The floor was strewn with paper for this purpose. Four rectangular cement blocks posed as bunks, facing each other at the entrance to the cell. That was my home for the next six days. No international observers ever visit these temporary detention cells. That may explain their subhuman conditions, including not having access to even a piece of paper or pencil with which to write a poem.

When I went in, I saw the four fake bunks with 8 people in them (only one of them was not black). There were four more or less well-positioned guys; one slept on a thin little foam mattress (two inches thick) in the

hallway. The other three curled up in the corners without mattresses.

Those mattresses were distributed at 10PM and picked back up at 6AM. Three of the four cells with the four block-beds were for men; the other, with two block-beds, was for women. There were 14 mattresses in total. So, clearly, anyone who got there after 10PM...well...you know.

"So, where do I get to sleep?" I asked the guard, a bit irritated. "Wherever you want, the other cells are full," he answered, obviously annoyed.

During my six days there, I learned of people who were charged with ridiculous crimes like selling two strings of garlic; I was also able to confirm that most of the people there were black.

Being black was the first reason for my detention, according to the common criminal profiling employed by Cuban authorities. As soon as I became a member of the Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration (CIR), the substation chief and other public functionaries, such as members of so-called "neighborhood entities" like CDRs (Committees for the Defense of the Revolution), the PCC (Cuban Communist Party), and the FMC (Federation of Cuban Women) increased their harassment against me. This was not only because I was working independently of the State but because my work with the black community constituted a threat. As unknown as I am, it seemed relatively easy for them to "disappear" me by stalling declaring me a "social danger."

Those six days allowed me to appreciate the worry the race problem was causing in

certain limited spaces. One commentary I heard by certain but invisible officers, all the way from my cell, was more than enough to prove this: "They say he's from a black dissident group, those who favor Obama."

I am not an Obama supporter, although I admire his worth and what he signifies. I just belong to an association whose only goal is to contribute to the elimination of racist laws, decrees and measures that harm our lives because they cause us to linger in a society chock full of obscured racist feelings and hidden racist truths. It was only thanks to everyone, who selflessly helped me and my family, particularly the CIR, the Progressive Arc Party, and my friend, human rights activist Juan Governa, that I did not serve the whole sentence, one to four years, for being "socially dangerous."

The constant support and diligence of a woman lawyer devoted to working on legally lost cases and winning them for justice kept them from taking me to trial. All that solidary work, which brought together the noblest feelings, cornered the police and other hidden forces, and forced them to reconsider their outrageous act. I was returned home, but not entirely free: there are still people who regardless their race have limited rights. That is why many of us will keep on fighting.

Now that I'm out on the street, I once again ask myself the same old question: "What will become of all those young folks, mostly blacks and mestizos, who are unjustly suffering the injustice of powerlessness and oblivion?" The CIR has a challenge before it, and I, my work cut out for me.