Crime Without Punishment (II)

Jorge Luis García Pérez "Antúnez"
Former political prisoner and prisoner of conscience
National Coordinator, Pedro Luis Boitel Political Prison
Placetas, Villa Clara, Cuba

"*No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.*"
Article 5. *International Declaration of Human Rights*

It was November 4th, in 1992, and I was in the La Pendiente provisional prison in Santa Clara. They called me for a fifteen-minute family visit or "cleansing time," as they call it, because it is for recently arrived convicts, and their visitors are not permitted to bring bags of supplies from the outside. I wonder who it is, I asked myself, as I was taken to the small room. I was surprised when I got there: it was my mother, or rather, what was left of her. She had unexpectedly and precariously recovered, but seemed quite bad off to me, her body bent over and shoulders drooping. Her thinness contrasted sharply with her obviously inflamed chest, abdomen and legs.

— "How are you, son?" she asked me after I hugged and kissed her. "Is it true they sic the dogs on you? Come on, slide down your pants so I can see the wounds."

— "What dogs are you talking about, Mom?" I answered, hiding the truth from her. "I wasn't the one they sicced the dogs on. It was someone else who escaped the very same day."

— "So, it wasn't you, Jorge Luis? What a relief!" she answered in a much calmer voice. "Thank God. Boy, do people talk trash. That's all the talk in Placetas, that they sicced the dogs on you, and that the security people almost beat you to death."

— "That's a lie, Mom." I kept on hiding the truth. "They caught me at Filo, the taxi driver's house. They handcuffed me and took me to Operations, in Santa Clara. Mom, were the Security people at the house the night I escaped?"

— ¿So, how is it you're here?" she said, avoiding the subject.

— Mom, I'm asking you if the Security people were at the house the night of my escape."

— "Who, in my house? No. Oh! Yes (she tried to hide what I already knew). Yes. They were there, but I didn't see them because I was asleep, and they left."

— "So, you didn't see them?"

— "Son, is it true they are once more accusing you of Enemy Propaganda? And that they want to slap a charge of sabotage on you?"

— "No, Mom," I answered, understanding she was making an effort to create a diversion, and lying to her once more, I said, "That was a mistake and it's been straightened out."

— "Thank goodness, Jorge Luis," she retorted somewhat calmly, "because you've got to get out of prison." Then she added, "I wouldn't want you to lose all your youth in prison. "I want you to get out so you can go on with your studies, get married, have children, and then see how much you suffer on their account."

— "Ok, Mom," I said. We were both a bit more enthusiastic. Fighting back tears that struggled to come out, I added, "I only have three plus years left, and then I can go home again."

"Antúnez" on a hunger strike

After an uncomfortable silence, I tried to bring up a different subject: "Mom, you need to take care of yourself so that when I get out you are fattened up and strong."

She looked into my eyes with what seemed a deep and distant look, and evasively answered:

— "When are they letting you out of this prison?"

— "I don't know. They might soon take me Manacas" [a prison in a town of the same name, in the Municipality of Santo Domingo, separated from it by a long and dusty embankment several kilometers long].

— "Son, to Manacas?" she said almost scared. "You know I'm always here to visit you, that sooner or later, whether I have something to bring you or not, I always come. But I don't know if I have enough strength to go so far to see you."

My mother suffered from serious heart problems (a murmur, myocardial growth, and high blood pressure) and chronic asthma. I tried to console her.

— "Don't worry, Mom. I'll write you every week. It is important for you to get well, and soon."

She looked at me in silence. This time I avoided her gaze. It made her nervous when I talked to her about recovering. She felt her end was near.

— "Look, Jorge Luis," she answered me with her eyes full of tears, "my legs are swelling too much and I get exhausted from walking. But, I'll try to go. Don't worry. I'd have to be dead to abandon you."

In reality, she was right

The fifteen minutes for the visit were over and I felt a knot in my throat. I told myself: "I have to be strong. She can't see my tears. I have to pretend to be happy, which I noticed she, too, was thinking and doing."

— "Well, Jorge Luis. I feel really bad for not having been able to at least bring you lunch, but things are very bad at home with this Special Period going on. I'm alone at home and haven't eaten in almost three days. All I've had are snacks."

— "But, Mom…"

— "No, son. Don't worry. There are hungry people everywhere, all over the place. Every once in a while I go to Sagua la Grande, to my sister Julia's house, and spend a few days with

her. I always bring something back with me from her place. Don't you worry yourself. Things on the street, no matter how bad they are, are always better than they are in here."

She was pretty much right, but that didn't make me feel any better.

"Don't worry about me," I continued my ruse. "They feed us good food in here."

—"Good food?" she asked, incredulously. "So, why are you so thin?"

—"It's the exercises, Mom. I run a lot every day when I go out into the sun."

"Ok, ok, visitors. Visiting time is over!"

When I hugged and kissed her, I noticed how nervous and fatigued she was. She asked me about her next visit and I answered:

—"Mom, you know this prison is transitional and they're just holding me here. So long as I am in here, I can have a visit every fifteen days. Come not this Thursday but the next, on the nineteenth."

As I walked away, I felt her tugging at my arm. She hugged me once more, kissed me on both cheeks, and on my forehead, something that she didn't do very often. So, it moved me tremendously.

— 'Take care of yourself, son," she said with tears in her eyes. "You are the most loving of my children and the closest to me. I really miss and need you at home."

— Mom, I have to go. They're calling me," I said, kissing her and pulling away from her arms. I didn't want this to go on any longer.

I almost ran out, without looking back. I went back to my cell with my soul all in tatters and full of memories. I felt awful knowing the suffering and abandonment my mother had to endure, and that I was unable to do anything for her. I was in prison and had to bravely face the unjust punishment I was receiving. I thought about the hundreds and hundreds of other mothers who were going through this very same thing and suffering just like mine, and that those children did not lose their courage. I was convinced that my struggle was for her, too, and for all Cubans who suffered from marginalization and oppression. That kept me going. Although it pained me to know that she didn't understand the reason for my struggle, she did accept that the ideas that moved me were just and humane. Above all, she knew I was a good son, and that I always tried to help and support her.

I was supposed to have a new visit on the nineteenth, and as was normal for any convict, I was happy. They called a huge group of us in the morning, but I had to wait among those whose turn would be in the afternoon. Then they called all the others but didn't mention my name. I was now sure she would not come that day, but tried to console myself with the clichéd adage that bad news travels fast.

I went to bed early that night. How could I ever know that on this day that I waited to see my mother, that at that very moment, her corpse was being buried in the Sitiecito Cemetery in the Sagua la Grande neighborhood where her sister, nieces and nephews, who had always rejected me on account of my political ideas, lived.

I slept very poorly that night. I became aware of the fact that my friends were looking at me inquisitively. They all redoubled their efforts to see to me, to be solicitous with me, which really made me sit up and take notice. They were all trying to hide the horrible and sad news from me. Meanwhile, the guards, as always, seemed not to feel anything at all, despite the fact they too knew what had happened, due to the many phone calls from my relatives, pleading with them to take me to the funeral, which Cuban penal law establishes as the right of every prisoner.

I remained in the dark about her death. Fifteen days later, I was dressed for her visit and visibly worried. I was not on the morning list but waited till the afternoon. "Surely Mom would come during the afternoon," I thought,

trying to calm myself. "That way she doesn't have to get up so early."

Two hours later, those who had had visitors came back. They were all noisy and talkative. Some of them, my friends, invited me to share some of the food their visitors had brought them. I didn't accept and told them that I planned to come back in the afternoon. They insisted, but so did I. Many of them talked to me and greeted me. I found so much effort and insistence on their part strange. It made me uncomfortable. The prisoners with afternoon visits were called; many of them bumped into each other as they tried to exit the door simultaneously. The list was re-read but I am not on it. I said nothing at all.

—"Antúnez," a friend asks me. "Why didn't they call you for your visit?"

—"I don't know," I answer. "Probably my mother is ill and couldn't come."

—"But someone came to see you," he insisted.

—"How do you know? Did you see my mother out there?"

—"No, no," he quips. "All I know is that your family is out there."

I lie on my bed fully clothed. I put the pillow over my face. I don't want to talk or anyone to talk to me.

—"Antúnez. Call Antúnez to come here," I hear Héctor Morales, the "re-educator," one of the province's now retired yet most famous henchmen.

I run out and when I get to the door, he cynically asks me:

—"Why such a rush, Antúnez?"

—"Why? This is no time to be calling someone for a visit."

—"A visit? Didn't you go for one this morning?"

—"You know all too well that I have not had a visit today."

—"That's true. You're right," he answers, uselessly trying to change his expression.

— What is your mother's name, Antúnez?"

—"Alejandra García Pérez."

—"So, you don't have your father's surnames. Why is that?"

—"I don't know, Héctor. Have you asked Fidel why only one of his children bears his surname?"

—"Ok. Ok. Don't go overboard. Go on. You're mother is right outside."

— "Damn! This is hard!" I heard someone say behind me who was walking down the hall. "These people are really bad! Why don't they talk straight to the kid?"

I didn't know to whom or what the con outside was referring.

Some guards watched me curiously, and when I got to the room, there was an unusually large number of them present. I looked at them all but did not see my mother. I got closer to the entrance wall, to look through the jalousies and watch what family members came in. I didn't see her.

—"Don't panic guys. There are still some family members in the waiting room. "It seems they're letting them through little by little", said a voice behind me.

—"Yeah, as usual," I responded, as I kept looking through the jalousies, thinking about how awful it is that the time goes by and the last ones to come in have not even one hour for their visitation.

— "That's how it is, guy. You know," he says pointing outside. "That girl out there lost her mother a few days ago."

—"Which one?"

—"That dark one at the foot of the stairs."

—"Which one?" I ask again, pained at what I saw.

— "You know, the one who is talking to Stanislao" [then the unit leader and later the Lieutenant Coronel of the Provincial Ministry of Jails and Prisons].

— "But, that's my sister!" I answered him, no longer myself. "She's my sister!"

The man could say no more. He felt so bad and didn't know what to do or say. Other family members and prisoners got closer. That man was so moved he put his hand on my shoulder and tried to cheer me up.

—"Take it easy. It might be a mistake."

—"No. That's my sister. So, my mother died?"

This painful question emerged from the depths of my heart. No one was able or even wanted to answer me. I took that silence as an obvious affirmation. The look on that man's face, on the faces of the other family members and so many other prisoners said only one thing. Every time someone tried to encourage me, I saw condolences on their faces. That room, with its prison bars, seemed enormous to me, and the people in it, very small. I felt hypnotized. I saw my sister outside talking to the unit chief and noticed they were arguing. When she finally walked towards the room, it seemed she took forever. Meanwhile, my friend, Samuel's mother, consoled me.

My sister knew what was going on as soon as she walked in. She must have seen the inquisitive look on my face. All she managed to say to me was: "Yes, Jorge Luis. Alejandra died."

I was overwhelmed by a deep and unspeakable feeling, and didn't know what to do: cry or scream. I did neither. I found the strength to remain in control, although not settled. The pain was terrible and all I could do was say to myself, very softly, "Mother, why did you go? Why are you abandoning me now, when we most need each other?"

I don't think it is necessary for me to document everything I said and screamed. Through words, I unloaded all my repressed ire. Right in front of all those shocked guards who watched the room, I blamed Castro's government and its salaried henchmen for my mother's death. In an impassioned voice, I told my relatives and fellow prisoners everything that happened the night of my escape.

Then came the vulgar justifications. They didn't take me to the funeral because they didn't get the news from the family; then, once they realized we all knew the truth, they said it was on account of my recalcitrant, rebellious attitude.

After knowing all the regrettable and unforgettable facts, I also learned that while my mother was dying, she kept saying she had to go buy mortadella that they were offering at the ration book store, so she could bring some to me in prison. And that it wasn't right that her son was in prison on account of his ideas. Every time the family called the prison, the authorities would tell them that I was already on my way to the funeral home.

Just a few days ago, the Cuban dictator had the nerve to try to deny on television, before the official press, what he called imperialism's calumnious lies. He dared anyone to produce evidence of just one case of torture or mistreatment of a prisoner in Cuba.

This story speaks and answers for itself. In it is only one of thousands atrocities that have been committed against prisoners in nearly half a century of communist tyranny. The author does not ask for vengeance, nor is he motivated by hate. He only wants justice to be done. The transition to democracy and the creation of a state of law in Cuba will prevent these grotesque episodes from happening again. That would be the most effective way to bring about justice. What do I want for the henchmen? For the Cuban people to disdain them, and for their crimes to be tried by national and international public opinion. No court could be as efficient or unyielding as one's own conscience. Moral sanction leads to the gallows of collective condemnation.