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EMPTY HEARTS, EMPTY ROOMS

For exiles, the pain of what they left behind stays with them forever.

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The polarization and distress in Miami answer the question; what good are parables? Stories told about others, from another time and place, provide distance to reflect on the meaning of words and events that capture them.

It is slowly becoming clear to most people that our upheaval in Miami has very little to do with Elián, the boy, as it does with Elián, the symbol of suffering endured by hundreds of thousands of Miamians born in Cuba. As a symbol, he is not yet a parable because his story is not yet told.

I will tell you a parable, a true story. As a young man, I did business in communist China, frequently entering China through Hong Kong, then a British protectorate. This was in the mid-1970s when the eastern version of the Iron Curtain was solid: We saw very little of what went on in China because very little escaped. I lived in Hong Kong at the time, a Western city shut off from the rest of Red China by barbed wire, machine-gun emplacements and a world of mutual suspicion and hostility. There, a Shanghai-born woman asked a favor of me that turned into a remarkable test.

The woman was from a Mainland Chinese family that, before the communist revolution, had been very wealthy. I knew that the communists seized everything before she and her family escaped in the early 1950s. While her side of the family became exiles, the other side decided to stay in Shanghai. For a year or two, the ones who stayed in Shanghai were left alone, then they were

dispassionately sucked into the revolution's whirlpool of persecution that destroyed millions of lives.

My contact made it clear that her family in Hong Kong had managed to rebuild its wealth, but was helpless to assist the Shanghai relatives. The test she put to me was this: Would I take money into China—because neither mail nor travel were then available to exiles—and buy her 14-year-old cousin a bicycle?

There was a further complication: Because her relations in Shanghai were considered to be enemies of the state, any money I brought they could not themselves spend. I would have to buy a bicycle in a state-sponsored store and deliver it to people I had never met, all under the scrutiny of secret police. I succeeded in the test. And this is where the story begins.

When I returned to Hong Kong, a message awaited me. Would I have dinner with the patriarch of the family? I agreed and soon was escorted to their penthouse home in the most deluxe building in the wealthiest neighborhood in Hong Kong. I was greeted at their door by a butler who asked me to follow him into a vast room, walled with rare woods, but without a single partition and no furnishings except cheap lawn furniture made of plastic. Although the exterior walls were intact, exquisitely crafted, and the space commanded the most breathtaking views of Hong Kong and its famous harbor, the interior was barren.

At one corner, the family gathered at a large round table. My contact rose to greet me and, interpreting, introduced her father, mother and the rest of her family. We sat down together. Ever so briefly, her father thanked me for helping his family. He then dove into his meal, and we ate in silence punctuated occasionally by unintelligible dialogue.

I was astounded. Wasn't anyone interested in the story I had to tell, how the secret police in Shanghai had questioned me, confused by a young American

who refused to say on whose behalf he was performing an act of charity? After several courses, the dinner ended unceremoniously. As though on command, the family members rose to leave; all except for the patriarch, his daughter and me. I was too young at the time to know the long silences, the food and discomfort had been staged for this moment, quite necessary to the conclusion of the parable.

The patriarch spoke, and the daughter translated. He told me the story of his brother, father of the young boy I had visited in Shanghai. In the years of the Cultural Revolution, he said, the communists had imprisoned the boy's father in a wooden cage the size of a cardboard box. He had spent four years there, fed daily, crouched in his own waste, hosed off like an animal. When he was released his bones had fused so that for the rest of his life he lived in a fetal position.

"Do you have any questions for me," my host asked? All of my questions and discomfort had congealed into a solid block. My host, the patriarch, began without a response from me. He explained that his textile factories in Hong Kong made him worth close to a billion dollars. "I imagine," he said, "that you wonder why a man as wealthy as I am lives in a place that looks like this"—and he cast his hand toward the empty reaches of his penthouse, worth millions, filled with plastic lawn furniture.

Of course I wondered, of course that was my first question hours ago, the question that had been buried by strangeness of the meal, my alienation as a foreigner and a guest at the same time and the growing sense that my act of charity was not a gift but the price for being allowed to see into this family's pain and suffering.

The old man's eyes welled with tears he held back. "Once," he said, "I had everything, but I lost my nation. I lost my family. I lost my wealth. Though I have millions today, I keep my home empty, with nothing but plastic furniture to

remind me of what I lost.”

And with that, the patriarch stood up and bid me well. My visit was over.

Sad to say, I neither heard nor saw any of them, again. The story and its worth as a parable did not surface until 25 years later when Miami, my adopted home, pushed it forward. So much pain is connected to it. The pain of my friend, Gus Garcia, whose grandfather was shot in 1959 by Castro’s army. Gus, who slept every night in front of Elián’s house, a Democrat among the first tear-gassed at 5 in the morning, passionate and unmovable in his pain.

One story, hundreds of thousands more. The parable of my story is that reason and logic and all our tangible wealth are poor cousins to memory: Sierra Leone, Bosnia, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, the Hutu, the Tutsi—and in the United States, the pain of African Americans and native Americans reverberates across centuries. Fidel Castro will die. His passing will be celebrated, to be sure, but it will not be anyone’s triumph. The wrongs of the past will not be righted. There can be no retribution for so much pain, even the death of a man singly responsible.

Our recent upheaval did not create the divide between ethnicities and races in Miami; it was a collective sob of suffering that was volcanic and affected us all. What would we not be capable of, if we could be the fathers and mothers to that pain and not the child? The answers for our community today lie within the souls and imagination of those whose hearts have been broken. What will the inside of our mansion look like?