

The cigar man

By

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The cigar man

A taxi brought me directly from the airport to my hotel in Panama City. It was my first visit there and it was a pleasant change from Chicago. It was warm and sunny with a right amount of humidity, just what I liked. The balcony of my room on sixth floor of the hotel faced a vast expanse of the city below. It was congested with tall buildings and low houses with terracotta roofs. Narrow streets snaked between them, interrupted by two wide roads. I asked for a room facing the Pacific Ocean but the woman on the desk insisted that I take the room assigned to me. She said that I would see a beautiful sunset from balcony of my room. It was late afternoon and I was hungry. I took the room with no further fuss. Once in the room, I unpacked my suitcase and went down to eat something nearby town. I found a small restaurant about half a mile from the hotel where I had a bowl of black bean soup and avocado salad. After eating, I walked back to the hotel hoping to watch the sunset.

Inside the lobby, there was a sweet and distinct odor of tobacco, which was not there earlier. The smell evoked my childhood memory of my father smoking a hookah. At an early age, I learnt to make fermented tobacco for his smoke, which he enjoyed. For a good fermentation, one needed a mature dried tobacco, raw molasses and over-ripe fruits. Variations in proportions of ingredients gave distinct

flavors to a smoke. It was a long and tedious process. However, it not only made me appreciate tobaccos but also gave me a taste for good cigars. This tobacco smell was unfamiliar to me.

I looked around for source of this smell and my eyes fell on a man sitting on a stool at a wooden table. He held a cigar in his hands, which he gently rolled between his fingers, occasionally, smelling it before finally putting it in a rectangular box nearby. A bundle of long dried tobacco leaves sat in front of him on the table. Besides these, there was also a pile of dry finely cut tobacco. The man looked athletic with a square jaw on a broad face. He wore silver hair on his head and a well-trimmed Uncle Jack beard. His thick, bushy eyebrows shaded his eyes. A pair of half-moon glasses rested low on his sharp straight nose. He was completely absorbed in his work, making cigars. I walked up to the man and stood several feet from him. He paid no attention to me and continued to roll cigars. It was relatively quiet in this part of the lobby.

"Did you enjoy your walk? It should be warmer than in Chicago."

He said without looking up at me. He spoke in clear English, which had a slight southern drawl. I wondered if he had been spying on me. How did he know that I was from Chicago and that I had gone for a walk?

I remained quiet and watched him make cigars. He stored the handmade cigars in an open koa wood box nearby. Its lid had a carved image of an eagle with gracefully spread wings. He seemed to know much about me, I thought. I suspected that the hotel employees might have told him about me or he probably played similar tricks on the hotel guests to impress them to sell cigars. .

"You want to watch the sunset, right? Go ahead; watch it before it disappears. Come and see me later, I will still be here." He said with an assured voice. He knew of my intention to see the sunset, it felt weird that he knew.

There was still time to sunset and so, I took the elevator, went to my room, and opened the sliding door to the balcony. Many hotel guests had already gathered in their respective balconies to watch the sight. There on the northwestern sky was a large round bright golden ball, surrounded by shimmering colors of orange in the sky. It was sinking, changing into bright colors of deep red and yellow. Finally, it went down behind the tall buildings and disappeared. The entire sky above turned deep yellow, orange, and bright red. I stood there enchanted by the scene. The sky finally turned dark black as if a curtain had fallen after a grand show. Night had arrived! Then, I noticed the bright city lights turn on suddenly and it seemed that someone had thrown a handful of sparkling jewels on the ground. I stood there admiring the scene when I thought that I should go

visit the cigar man. I walked down the stairs. As I approached the fifth floor, I smelled tobacco again. It became stronger as I descended further. In the lobby, the smell of tobacco was strong and persistent. The cigar man was there, exactly as I had left him. He saw me and carefully closed the box, now full of his handmade cigars. He gestured for me to sit down on a chair in front, brought his two hands together and cracked his knuckles. Slowly, he put his elbows on the table in front and cupped his face with his two hands.

I asked him about the tobacco and he told me that it came from Cuba.

"I get it directly from Havana; the communists now control the tobacco market and so it is almost impossible to get Cuban tobacco here. I get it from my own sources."

I had no experience of Cuban tobacco and so, its smell was unfamiliar to me. I asked if he could make me a little cigar, about three to four inches long. He gave me a teasing look,

"You cannot appreciate quality of a tobacco from a tiny cigar; you have to feel its draw effect; the longer and thicker a cigar is cooler and smoother it tastes. I will make you a full size cigar but you do not have to smoke it to the end."

He said as he picked up a thin medium brown tobacco leaf and carefully laid it flat in groove of his left palm, partly folding and holding it there. With his free

right hand, he picked up small pieces of dark, dried tobacco from the pile nearby and laid them carefully in the groove. He then filled the empty spaces with more tobacco and held the half-rolled cigar with both hands, checking for any sign of flaw or gap in the fill. Finally, he brought the two sides of tobacco leaf together, keeping the contents firmly inside. Using his forefingers, he wet the joint with water to ensure a tight seal. He held the finished product, a tobacco sausage, close to his nose to smell his creation, smiled at himself and cut the two ends with a sharp round knife and presented it to me, a handmade cigar!.

He charged me five US dollars for the cigar and I gave it to him gladly. He took out a gold painted thin paper tape to ring the cigar with it. I took it from his hand and looked at it: On it was printed "***Juliet Havana***" in bold italicized letters around a longhaired face of a young woman. On the other side of the tape had an image of an eagle with spread wings. I asked him how he chose the insignia. He smiled and told me to light the cigar and enjoy it. I thanked him and sat down in middle of a long empty sofa nearby, holding the cigar in my hand. I felt it; it was soft, tender, and spongy like a baby's cheek. I rolled it between my fingers, felt its soft, pliable, supple, and gentle body. I was careful not to squeeze it too hard, lest I damage it. It had a warm and medium brown body with lighter and darker shades of undulating lines like waves in a muddy water. It had a soft leather like texture. I

held it to my nose and sniffed its spicy and sweet fruity aroma. Its effect was lingering and felt similar to a smooth dark coffee I once had in Malaga on my visit to Spain. I struck a matchstick, put the flame to the front end of the cigar, and gently inhaled. Immediately, I experienced a smooth sweet taste, completely new to me. Its sweetness took me to a time when I had made that *khameer* of a home grown tobacco leaves from my father's garden by mixing it with molasses and ripe apricots. The smoke filled the lobby; a woman walked by, looked around and saw me with the cigar, came back and complemented me for the aroma.

I took a last puff of the cigar and reluctantly put it down on the nearby ashtray and sat back on the sofa to enjoy the aftertaste of a fine cigar. I could still feel its sweet and smoky flavor in my mouth when I decided to return to my room. It had been a great day and I was pleased. It was now time for me to get ready for a good night's rest. When I tried to get up, I felt dizzy and sat down. The tobacco had affected me! I tried to rise again but I failed. The giddiness made it hard to steady myself. I slumped on the sofa and not knowing what to do next, I closed my eyes. Soon, I felt a gentle tug on my shoulder. I looked up; it was the cigar man. He steadied me with his strong arms, helped me to stand up, and guided me to the elevator. He admonished me for not being careful about smoking the whole cigar so fast. He said that it was the nicotine effect while he guided me

to my room; he knew my room number. I handed the door key to him. He unlocked the door, led me to my bed, and told me to lie down. He took my shoes and socks off and covered me with a bedsheet. I fell asleep immediately; when I opened my eyes it was four in the morning; the dim light next to my bed was on. Under it was a hand written note which read,

"Sleep well, my friend. See you tomorrow. Your friend and the cigar man, Miguel".

Since then, I visited Miguel daily, mostly after my evening walks and dinner. Every evening he made me a fresh cigar to smoke. I found out that his name was Miguel Garcia-Garret. He spoke English and Spanish fluently. He worked hard making cigars and hardly ever took rest. He was popular among the people. He was also kind and helpful to them. One Friday evening, as I enjoyed my evening cigar, Miguel came and sat down next to me. He told me that he was happy that I had settled down to a routine and thanked me for smoking his cigars. I explained to him that my stay at the hotel was temporary and I would return home to Chicago after completion of my assignment. He asked me if I could spend a Sunday with him at his guest. I agreed and we decided to meet him at his home on coming Sunday afternoon.

That Sunday morning, as always, I opened my eyes to a bright sunshine and a cloudless blue sky. It was early and so I decided to go down to the pool and take a dip in the water. I got into my swimming trunks, put on a loose T- shirt, and went down to the poolside. The poolside was completely empty. I took off my shirt and jumped in the water. After several quick laps, I got out of water, dried myself and ran around the pool several times. Then, I found a nice place to sit down, still enjoying the feeling when I saw a waiter approach me. I felt hungry and so, ordered my favorite breakfast, a Spanish omelet, toast, fresh papaya, large glass of orange juice and black Costa Rican coffee. I finished my breakfast, poured more coffee in my cup, and settled down on my lounge chair to soak the sun. Soon I dozed off; it was past eleven when I awoke from my nap. While still laying there, I saw a man in his middle forties and dressed in office clothes at the other end of the pool. He was slowly walking in my direction. When he came close, he greeted me and shook my hand. He introduced himself as Roger Wilk, the manager of that hotel. He wanted to know, if my stay has been pleasant. He handed me his business card to keep it and call him if I needed anything to make my stay more comfortable there. He was a retired marine and had been the manager of the hotel for seven years. I told him about Miguel and his invitation. He said that he knew him well and I would enjoy my day with him. He told me that Miguel lived in an older section of

town. He took out a blank paper from his coat-pocket and wrote down instructions to Miguel's home on it.

I changed into a white T-shirt and tan Dockers cargo shorts. At around two in the afternoon, I set out to Miguel's neighborhood. With Wilk's instructions, it was easy to find it. The streets in the old city were narrow and paved with red bricks and cobblestones. A row of low roofed attached homes lined both sides of a narrow street. I checked the instructions in my hand and turned into a narrower street. After about twenty paces, the street opened to a large, bright central square with a full-size bronze of Virgin Mary, holding baby Jesus in her arms and looking tenderly down at it. The place was crowded with tourists and locals, engaged in social and commercial activities. Several cafes were open and were busy with customers. On one corner of the square, a man with a long graying mustache in a yellow Panama hat hawked bright colored paintings, mostly of local scenes. When he saw me, he began pestering me to buy one of the artworks. Just then, I saw Miguel standing right behind me. He had waited for me at the corner of the square.

"I did not want you to get lost," He told me as we shook hands. I asked me to follow him. He was in white shirt and blue denims. In his hand, he had a plain straw hat. He put it on and began to walk slightly in front of me leading me through the crowd. He appeared slimmer in his jeans. I followed him in silence until we were out

of the crowded square. He turned right, walked about two small blocks and stopped in front of a plain light brown wooden front door of an attached house, situated in middle of a long row of double story buildings, painted in various colors of yellow, blue, pink and green. This one was light green. He stopped for a few seconds in front of the door and pushed it open. Inside, the sun shone from above in a spacious roofless courtyard surrounded on three sides by a narrow verandah. There were three doors, which seemed to open in separate rooms. An open kitchen with a breakfast nook was on the right end of the verandah. There was also a small cream-colored refrigerator next to the sink. A small gas oven and a cooking range stood on its own.

Miguel opened the middle door in front and led me to a mid-size room. The room had enough light inside from a large back wall window. It had a concrete floor with no carpet. A long dark brown wooden sofa was set against the back wall and below the only window. It had a long deep red cushion on it. A matching chair with its own side table stood at each end of the sofa. In the center was an oval wooden table. It held several old English and Spanish language magazines. Each side tabletop held an ashtray, each full of cigar butts and spilled ash. A white Princess telephone with long wire sat on bare ground below the table on the left. The place smelled of stale tobacco. Miguel asked me to sit down and offered me a cup of

coffee. I declined the offer and sat down at one end of the sofa. My eyes immediately fell on a large framed picture of a young woman's face hung neatly on the front wall. She was attractive! Her large brown eyes below black bushy eyebrows and thick eyelashes looked directly at me. In the picture, she had combed her dense brown hair back, which made her olive complexion arresting. She had parted full lips slightly below a sharp straight nose, revealing a row of sparkling white front teeth.

"That's Juliet, she died some years ago". Miguel said in a flat voice as he sat down on the side chair next to me. I turned to look at Miguel who had an impassive face. I hesitated to ask him about the woman and instead, I asked him about his cigar business.

He did not hear me and sat there expressionless. I waited. Several minutes passed, and then he asked, breaking the silence

"Ever thought of speaking to the dead?"

I looked at him, not sure, if I heard him right; his head was down as if looking down on his folded hands resting on his lap.

"You mean you talk to the dead?" I asked.

"Yes, I talk to them as I am talking to you right now; they are as much alive as we are!"

"Hmm! That is interesting." is all I could say. I was intrigued, to say the least. He said that he regularly invited souls of the dead. In fact, he had a room next door for the purpose. People came to him, wanting to know about their relatives and friends. He took me to a room next door to show me where he did this mysterious activity. It was small and dark inside. Against the back wall was a small low four-legged wooden table, no more than eighteen inches square. On top of this table was a little triangular golden-brown planchette, sitting on two back casters and an attached pencil acting as its third leg. It was very mysterious. Quietly, he led me out of the room and locked it behind us, saying nothing. We returned to our place in the living room and took our seats.

Miguel confessed that he had difficulty sleeping and woke up often in the night. He would then get up, walk to the beach, and wait for the sunrise. There, he would stand facing the dark sky with closed eyes. In a quiet meditation, he would feel the gentle warmth of an early sun and then, see floating spirits of the dead in front. In those moments, he talked to them until the hot sunshine made it difficult to do so and he had to open his eyes.

"Vibrant red and orange images of the dead flicker and stir me." His eyes fixed on the front wall, absorbed in his own thought; he spoke in a soft voice, to himself.

He turned his head and looked at me, as if; he had just noticed me sitting there. He collected himself; put his hand over my shoulder, and told me that he was happy to be my friend.

"Let us go and hang out at the beach and visit the town later". He suggested. He wanted to get fresh fish for our evening meal.

"You will like my grilled fish and black bean soup." He said as he got up, took my arm in his hand, and gently guided me to the front door.

Outside, it was hot and humid; the sun blazed in a cloudless blue sky! I put my sunglasses on to beat the glare, as we headed towards the beach. The plaza was crowded with festive tourists in bright clothes.

"I come here early, when the tourists are still in bed and the place is quiet. Now, it is crowded with people from the North; they have found a paradise here! It is good for the economy but it makes life difficult for the rest of us." He complained.

On the beach, the air was heavy, made unbearable by large crowd. We decided to go, sit in a bar across the street. We entered one. A man with broad face and a short mustache greeted us at the door. He was a friend of Miguel and the owner of the pub. He had thick eyebrows and yellowing wide front teeth behind a pair of thick lips. He seemed friendly. Miguel told him that I was a writer from

Chicago and was on an assignment. The owner bowed to me with a smile and asked us to go upstairs in the balcony. We walked up the narrow staircase to the second floor and sat down on two narrow wooden chairs at a small table. The balcony was more like a small open verandah facing the sea. There were no one else besides us. In front, the vast ocean was deep blue against a cloudless bright sky. A sharp horizon at far distance separated the two. There were a couple of cruise ships at a distance, each moving slowly in opposite direction. A gentle breeze from the ocean entered the balcony keeping it cool. The long white sandy beach seemed quiet and less crowded from our position. A flock of red-billed seagulls sat on the sandy beach while tens of small sandpipers ran around, riding the low ocean waves. Every so often, one or the other would suddenly stop; put its head down to pick a small grain of food on a wet sand with its beak. It made a funny scene! Up in the sky, an osprey or a hawk flew by looking for a prey.

A young waiter dressed in a colorful Polara dress walked in with a smile and greeted us. She was young, slim and wore a long blue skirt on a white full-sleeved shirt. Large red, yellow and blue cotton flowers decorated her two long black braids. Miguel greeted her by her name and asked for two beers on the tap and a bowl of salted peanuts. We watched her to go down the stairs and after she had gone, I asked him about his journey from Cuba to this city.

"It is a long story; I am a lucky to be here, it has not been easy." He said in a quiet voice, his eyes fixed at the ocean in front. He was born in 1943, in Havana. His grandfather owned a large tobacco farm there and was financially well off. He was also a nationalist. He strongly believed that the Americans exploited Cuba and the Cubans without giving anything in return. They actually treated Cuba as their colony.

"My father, Carlos was the only son of my grandparents. They sent him to the Duke University in North Carolina to study. There in college, my dad met and married my mother, a beautiful woman with a fair skin, blond hair and deep blue eyes." He said.

"After my grandparents' passed away, my parents inherited the large tobacco farm. Later, they added a cigar factory to their business. They were very successful. I was their only child and so, they indulged me a lot! My mom, being a full-blooded American wanted me to be an American and act like one. She conversed with me in English and told me to be proud of my heritage. That is how I learnt to speak English," He continued.

That meant, Miguel was close to forty-nine years old and had been out of Cuba for at least two decades. His parents made plenty of money during Batista's rule and led a wealthy life. Batista later became a dictator, got involved with the

mafia. He was close to many American corporations, selling them Cuban businesses. This caused a rebellion in the country. Batista brutally cracked down on his opposition, which led to a communist takeover under Fidel Castro. The communists nationalized all private businesses and farms. Miguel's parents lost their farm, cigar business and even their home.

"Many Cubans left the country but my parents stayed in Havana, hoping for the political turmoil to subside. They wanted to go back to rebuilding their lives in their old business". He said taking a sip from his beer.

"They were very wrong! The communists controlled an army of thugs; it went around killing any one, it thought, was an enemy of the state. One night, while my parents slept at a friend's home, the soldiers broke open the front door and killed them and their friends. I was then nineteen years old. At the time, my four close friends and I had formed a small group and secretly planned our escape from the island. We went underground but kept an eye on activities of secret police, its movements and its potential targets. Each night, we slept at a different place; living and hiding at different beach. We were certain that sooner than later, the police would find us. We planned our escape and waited for a dark moonless night. We decided against going to Florida; it was too dangerous with Castro's guards watching that route closely. We decided to take a direct route to Mexico. It was

about hundred and fifty miles or so by boat and the communists were not as vigilant on this one as on the route to Florida. We acquired a medium size fishing motor boat and hid it under a large dense bush on a lonely beach and waited for a dark moonless night to escape."

"One dark night in April of 1962, we went to the beach and put our boat in the water. Its tank was full and we had enough gas to take us to Mexico. Hours went by paddling the boat and we were tired".

"Finally, when it was quiet and we felt safe, we started the engine and raced in the direction of Mexico. Suddenly, we heard sound of a motor boat at a far distance. We immediately turned the engine off and let the boat drift quietly. We saw a dim light far away to our left. We were unsure if they were Castro's people or the pirates who were after people like us. We stopped paddling and let the boat drift in dark. Suddenly and without warning, we heard gunshots and a blast near us. Our boat took a hit and overturned. I was now in water. I tried to look for the boat and my friends but received no response. I lost sight of the boat. Being a strong swimmer in those days, I was unafraid of swimming long distances. I was only afraid that someone would see me and catch me. In pitch dark, I could only hear lapping sound of water waves. At a far distance, I saw a motorboat pass by making several circles with strong searchlight. I immediately went under water as

silently as I could. I lost a sense of time. Hours went by and finally, I saw flickering lights at a far distance. It gave me hope. I was determined to continue and kept my spirits up. I hoped that my friends would do the same, although I had no idea of their whereabouts."

"I stayed under water, coming out only to take air and waited for the sky to lighten. As the sky lightened before the daybreak, I saw a thin line of solid land at the far edge in front. As the dawn finally broke and I swam further and looked in front, I thought for a moment, I had returned to Cuba; that would be a disaster! Determined, I kept swimming towards the shore; soon I felt soft sandy earth under my feet. I quickened my pace and began to walk when I felt solid land under my feet. I was ashore! I looked around and saw people at a far distance. I was unsure if they were Mexicans. I tried to stand up but fell down. I dragged myself out of water with difficulty, fell on wet sand, and went blank!

I opened my eyes to a hot sun on a warm sand under my body. My skin had wrinkled and I had suffered cuts and bruises over my body. The seawater had dried up leaving a thin layer of white salt-crystals on my clothes and exposed body. I tried to speak but I could only whisper. I remember thinking about my friends; then everything went blank again. When I opened my eyes, I was in a small room of a hospital in a Mexican town. A middle-aged nun stood by my bed. She touched me

tenderly and told me that a couple of local villagers brought me there three days ago. I was dehydrated and badly bruised and swollen. There were bandages over several areas of my body. I closed my eyes and went back to my sleep. I had little energy to do anything. The hospital kept me for several weeks. The nuns did tell me that I was one of several Cubans, they had rescued; a few of them even had gunshot wounds. Later, I came to know that a local church had been running an active rescue effort for the refugees from Cuba. When I felt better, I stayed with church as a volunteer. "

"I stayed in Mexico for several months regaining my strength and health and avoiding the authorities. I never knew what happened to my friends. From Mexico, I travelled to Honduras, Nicaragua and finally arrived in Panama City. In between, I had many adventures, good and bad times. Most interesting thing was that due to my English, people took me for an American hippie. I took full advantage of it; even the American tourists believed that was one of them. It was quite an experience! Now, I have settled here to a peaceful life." He took last sip of his beer, looked at me, and smiled.

He told me that he had lost much of his memory of past events. I asked him about his interest in séance".

He mentioned about a night, he stayed awake in that hospital bed in Mexico, recovering from his wounds,

"On that bed, with my eyes closed, I prayed and prayed because everything looked bleak and hopeless. At one moment during my prayer, I had a strange experience, I felt completely calm without confusion; I knew then, there was hope for me and I was at peace once again; I felt a new energy entering my body. My mind cleared. I was not afraid anymore. At that moment, my friends appeared and spoke to me. It was a real experience! They told me that they were happy. I knew then, they had died."

He was still, his eyes blank and distant, focused at the deep blue ocean. The sea waves lashed against the sandy shore, seagulls flew above and sandpipers ran on it. It was busy on the beach and the street was noisy. He was oblivious to it all. I took another sip of beer from the bottle, picked a peanut from the bowl, and popped it in my mouth, waiting for Miguel to say something. He just sat there! After several uncomfortable moments, he turned his attention to me and suggested that we should now go and buy groceries for our dinner. He acted as if nothing had happened. I wanted to know more. I wanted to know about that woman on the wall, who was she?

He ignored me; instead, he got up and took me by my arm, and gently guided me down the stairs. Once downstairs, he asked the owner to put the beers on his account and said good-bye to him, with a friendly pat on his shoulder. It was mid-afternoon, the sun was hot, but the breeze was cool. I was hungry; the beers on an empty stomach made me tipsy and I wanted to eat something before his grocery shopping. We stopped at a corner restaurant and ate a small lunch. I insisted on paying for the meal and he let me.

It was evening when we returned to his place. I was tired and he let me rest on his long sofa while he sorted out his groceries for the evening meal. When I woke up, it was already six o'clock; I heard noises from direction of the kitchen; Miguel was busy cooking. I left him to himself; I got up to relook at the woman's photo on the wall. Her gentle smile, a confident and expressive look captivated me. Why did she die at a young age?

After a good meal, and great time with Miguel, I returned to the hotel alone. There was no doubt that he was a good cook. I saw Miguel almost daily at the hotel; He also indulged me with a fresh cigars. It was obvious that he was popular with the hotel guests and its employees. It also seemed to me that people came to him for advice and he gave it freely. Yet, he kept himself busy making cigars at his table.

I had completed my assignment and looked forward to returning home in Chicago. Miguel, when he found out, was saddened but he understood. I assured him that I would return soon, just for a holiday. He was delighted and made me promise him to stay with him at his home as a paying guest. That would be wonderful, I thought.

Next few days went by fast; I did not see Miguel for several days. He was not at his usual place in the lobby. Several days passed without Miguel at the hotel. No one knew his whereabouts. As the time for my departure neared, I worried about him. One evening I walked to his neighborhood. The town square was still busy with people, the beach was crowded as usual and the restaurants and bars were busy with happy customers. I crossed the narrow street and arrived in front of Miguel's house. There was a lock on the door with a notice pinned on it that read "**For rent**" and an unfamiliar phone number for contact. The neighbors too had not seen or heard from him. I was disappointed that he left without saying goodbye to me.

Next day, I was to fly back to Chicago. I missed Miguel and his cigars! I decided to visit his neighborhood one last time before my departure. I took my last walk to the city square, hoping that I might run into Miguel. I had no such luck! The square was still busy with people and his house locked. I walked to the beach for a

walk. There, I took my shoes and socks off and walked bare feet. The sand was soft and warm. The sun had already set on the other side behind the city, leaving a large area of bright glowing red sky above. I stood there to admire the scene. Several minutes passed when I saw a familiar face walking towards me. It was Roger Wilk. He greeted me with a smile and shook my hand.

"I saw you from a distance and thought that I should say hello to you. I hope your stay with us was pleasant." He said. We decided to walk back to the hotel together.

During the walk, I asked him about Miguel and his disappearance. Roger showed no surprise and told me that he already knew about his plans to travel. He had asked Roger to help him rent his home for a few months. Apparently, he travelled often. Roger had no idea of his whereabouts. I told him that I found him very mysterious. Roger looked at me with disbelief.

"There is no mystery about Miguel. No doubt, he has had a difficult life. Ask a refugee in any part of this world; you will hear a similar story of a sudden flight, danger, often death and with luck, an escape and a survival. Miguel was a refugee of a political upheaval in Cuba! In his younger days, he had a carefree comfortable life at home. Suddenly, his life took a horrible turn; survival became tough; everything was lost. Yet he survived and succeeded." Roger said.

He said.

"What about telepathy, he practices?" I asked.

"That depends; most of us like to know our future. Miguel believes in telepathy. He has convinced people here about his ability to predict future. They believe in him. He also understands human psychology. That is just my guess because I have never discussed the subject with him." He spoke calmly as we neared the hotel.

"What about talking to the dead?" I asked him. I felt that Roger knew more about Miguel than he let out.

"Let me tell you about Miguel. The local population here loves him and believes in him. He is not a fraud. He is a good man and I like him. He has had a rough life. He has found a place for himself in this community and it has accepted him. Since you asked me about him, I will tell you a little about his personal life." Roger said.

"Miguel Garcia has lived here for the last twenty years. He earned his living by making and selling cigars. He did well because many Americans liked his cigars. He was not a citizen of Panama. He led an underground life. The people here considered him an American. His activities helped him make friends and provide him with local gossip and information that helped him to survive his illegal

status. Some years ago, he met and fell in love with a young woman. She worked and lived at the American military base Panama. They saw each other often, always in secret because the girl did not want her family to know about the relationship. One day, someone found naked body of a young woman in a warehouse near the canal. The examination showed that she was raped and later strangled. During investigation, the police found cocaine in her handbag. The investigation also exposed her relations with Miguel. They arrested him on suspicion of her murder; the trial also exposed his citizenship status. The case went on for four years and finally the judge had to let him go free for lack of evidence. Miguel vehemently denied the charges. Later, Miguel applied for citizenship and became a citizen. The affair left him heartbroken and poor. He applied for a job at the hotel. Because of high recommendation from local people, his good nature and proficiency in English, the hotel hired him in public relations department. He disliked the job as being too interfering with his personality and so, he asked to rent a small space at the hotel to make and sell cigars. That is how landed up at the hotel."

Wilkes suddenly stopped for a few seconds, looked at me, a little annoyed, and said,

"I know you are still unconvinced but I tell you that is the story I know. He is a good man and since he has been working at the hotel, our business has increased; tourists come to buy his cigars. " He continued.

"Was the dead woman, Juliet?" I asked.

"Yes she was, a very good looking woman, I met her only once. That was a tragedy. According to Miguel, she never touched any drugs and he thinks that she was a victim of a vicious plot."

As we entered the lobby, the smell of tobacco was gone, replaced by fresh air fragrance!

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