

Rcd 15/4/99

14 Jan 1999

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Dear Phillee:

It's odd writing a date with three straight nines. It's like your car is getting to the end of its mileage, or like it's a discount year, "on sale". Any way, I guess this is going to be the long long letter I've been meaning to write to you ever since you left. I hope it will get to you via Clara Pulido, who will be travelling to southern Africa, so that she might post it from the nearest stopover she makes. She should be leaving on the charter flight of the 17th, or somewhere around that date.

But first, some accounting. On Christmas eve I received your package with a tape for Walter, a bunch of photos mainly for the people at the hotel - and yes, a letter for me instructing how to deliver each and every photo. That I did, in the two following weeks, under wind and rain. A few days before, or a few days after, I received a letter from you, with a photo of your room in CT; by the way, you did not enclose the photo of the luxurious toilet seat that you promised - probably so that I would not see another photograph of mine, plastered to the toilet cover. I've always thought that toilets are much revealing of a culture's level of civilization. Take the Frogs, for instance: they would die if they had to go to the toilet and not enjoy a videt afterwards. I knew a Cuban intellectual who is now long dead, but who was one of the first to tour Eastern Europe after 1959. When he came back, he said that (since he had been both in the GDR & the FRG) he had returned with material proof of the difference between capitalism & socialism. On the spot, he would produce two pieces of toilet paper, ~~each of them~~ collected on opposite sides of the Berlin wall. No articulate explanations needed. You just had to gently touch the Eastern manufacture to perceive the sandpaper quality. Well, enough with scatological commentaries for now.

I hope you had a joyous Christmas & New Year, Shona style. I confess that I never tried to E-mail you there: I know Mango only too well. But from your recently aborted call I gather that your customary catastrophic premonitions again did not come true, and that you were safely back in Durban when you called. ~~But~~ I fear that you never got my last E-mail before leaving for Harare. Anyway, the best news is that CEAMO NOW HAS ITS OWN E-MAIL! This means that we can get away easier with our trivial gossip, and that we won't have to bother Mundo Latino or other

research centres with our chatter. All we need now is for you to install your own modem so we don't have to abuse Carol. I think our E-mail address is ceamo.ceniai.inf.cu, or something like that.

Now some comments on your age-old letters: first of all, congratulations for your appointment, or rather for your decision to accept it. I'm sure that it will allow you, first of all, to help people, which is what makes you tick, and second, it will surely provide you with real true-life stories you can write about, so that you don't have to resort to all that slyly self-centered, egotistic Hemingway style like you're trapped at the pit of your bathtub for ideas. If you don't get a Nobel (emphasis on the second syllable when pronouncing) then, it will only be because the Swedes don't dare choose two non-Black women in South Africa in a row, before awarding a Black man (Tutu doesn't count: his was a Peace award). Speaking of Tutu, I could use all that you might send about the conclusion of the Truth Commission. I want to compare with Latin American cases (see what's happening with Pinochet) and limitations of "reconciliations". Not urgent; just pile up articles & documents & try to send to us via Buena-ventura, so it shouldn't be bulky either.

It was a hectic end-of-year after you left. No time to think too much. Just enough to go to the hotel once a week to comfort Miguel, Tamara, Lili, Amparo & others. Should have seen them when I gave them their photos. Everybody wanted to write. I told them to do so, thinking that I would be going to pick up their letters sometime this week to send them to you with Clara, but I haven't been to CEAMO in a week - it's a long story, I'll get into that. Anyway, I gave Miguel one of your Che post cards, then put his Jamaican to English, and he sent it through the mail - hope it gets to you before the next millenium. Walter is mad about his tape, which he hasn't shared with me, because he hears it at work. Luis Britain, I was over to his place to take him his photo, but he was working; his wife complained that he's not taking care of himself.

Well, today is 15 January, and yesterday I talked to Clara on the phone and she says yes, she's leaving on the 17th and yes, she can take this letter. So let me organize a bit my thoughts to see if I can finish this. After you left we had our big seminar, and two successive visitors, each of them staying 10 days. I was thoroughly run over by that time, so I decided to take a few days off in mid-December. But then two separate things turn up: first, our superiors

ask for an urgent report - that, of course, I had to draft; second, ⁽³⁾ we are informed that another visitor will be coming, with his wife, from 23 December to 3 January. We were too tired to panic. So I organized the team the best I could: Zelmays (after all, it's the guy who baby-sat on her when she went to Jordan) and I. Everybody else is on leave. Norma is not feeling well, and her Mexican boy friend is visiting her for a month. Domingo's mother is dying. So there are not many people to choose from. Carmelina's sister is going better, but she can't walk ~~besides~~ without help. Besides, her sister-in-law was stabbed by her ex-husband, and that gave us an additional scare - fortunately, she's going OK after surgery.

So you can imagine how our Christmas & New Year went, while you were gobbling away goodies and singing atheistic Christmas songs in Harare. On the 31st, Carmelina & I had to go & entertain the visitor until sometime after 10 p.m. On Sunday 31, I was on duty at CEAMO, to which I pedalled under a heavy winter rainstorm. From Monday 4 to Friday 8 conditions were more or less the same: rain, car broke down definitely, etc. Ah! I forgot to tell you that on December 24 we had a big voluntary work at CEAMO: we painted walls & ceiling of conference room & most of 3d floor. In the middle of the painting, there's a Mexican friend of some of my Mexican friends who's phoning me because he's in Cuba and he'd like to know where he can go dance and almost extinct Cuban rhythm. Fortunately, I'm able to give him some directions, but have to apologize for not being able to accompany him. Geeee!! What a Christmas holiday!! Foreigners have the delusion that there are actually holidays for Cubans!!

Like I was saying, by Friday, Jan 8, I'm almost extinct myself. I drop out of work. Walk the 13 kms. to St. Fe. When I get home, go to the doctor & get my tension taken: of course, much too high. I decide to (finally, to the great joy of my family, friends & doctors) start treating my hypertension. I stay home all week, and only today have I recorded a minimum of barely under 100 (in fact, 95). Tomorrow I will be having a chest X-Ray (I quit smoking since last year) and on Tuesday I'll be seeing the cardiologist for an electro-whatever. If I ever go back to work at CEAMO, it will be, I think, some time from now: I still have to get a pair of glasses before that!

It was about January 6 that Domingo's mother finally died. It was very sad, because everyone was aware of the fact that the sooner she

died, the better. Domingo's father, who's into his eighties, was very affected. They're all still trying to reorganize their lives. And I couldn't even give poor Domingo a break: I was out of work before he returned, so he had to face the whole "management" or "gearing" of CEAMO, God knows for how long, and emotionally unprepared. (4)

My letter is beginning to sound as neochronological as yours. Now let's review some lighter news. Abel has been offered a post at the University (the previous holder just defected, the biggar) and he's quite glad. I did advise him not to abandon his present job, but to take up teaching as a voluntary "extra", while he studies for his Master's degree. So he's OK & happy, except when you touch the religious belt-ton: then he sounds like an apostle. The rest of the time, he behaves like a normal, average kid his age. I avoid all spiritual topics when talking to him. During November & December, Walter very successfully worked his arse off on a video serial about the history of the Revolution which has just been passed on TV. So he was awarded a well-deserved brand new TV set in front of which he's been spending his spare time ever since. It's impossible to see him, unless you go to his living room. And when you talk, he can't listen because he's following something on TV. He even sleeps in the oddest position in front of the set. I was there on December 30, for his 50th birthday, and promised I wouldn't visit him again until his set ~~breaks~~ breaks down. He & his wife visited me on the 31st, and we've been cut off ever since.

The rest of the gang is more or less loose: Zelmys as difficult as ever, or perhaps a pinch worse, as the passage of time would have it. That's essentially how we all get, if allowed enough time. I also suspect that it's also the reason why we all have to die.

Well, darling, as you can see, it hasn't been the best of New Years for me, but then it could also have been much worse. For everyone around me, in particular Mother, the New Year is fairly OK. So it can't be that bad. Hope yours is as good as you want.

Keep me posted about yourself. Just don't spend any more money on calls or packages. I'll also get Norma to write to you as soon as her boyfriend returns to Mexico (if he ever does). Have you had any news from Peter and Betty-what's-her-name? Tell me all that you did in Zimbabwe (exclude only gory details, if any!). It's been over 12 weeks that you left us, and we can still feel the vacuum. At least I do. Call me arse-hole or whatever you want. Sticks & stones may break my bones... Explain to your relatives that ours is just another of your "political" flirts.

P.S. I promise some wittier letters once my tension is back to normal & my stomach stops craving for nicotine, & I definitely get CEAMO off my mind, &...