Eminent Maricones

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Early in December 1990 the literary agent Thomas Colchie called to say that the exiled Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas—who lived around the corner from me, in Hell’s Kitchen—was in what looked like the final stages of AIDS and that he had expressed a desire to hear from me.

I told Tom that I’d be happy to call on Reinaldo Arenas. I had known for some time that he was sick, but I had respected his decision not to discuss his illness with me. However, that year it became increasingly more difficult for me to run into him at the post office or the supermarket and to pretend that I didn’t notice his emaciation and the Kaposi’s sarcoma lesions that now gashed his visage. Although Reinaldo applied makeup to the spots on his face, I found it more disturbing to imagine what the lesions looked like than to see them.

I had met Reinaldo Arenas in 1981, when he arrived in New York from Miami after he left Cuba during what became known as the Mariel exodus to Florida. Colchie introduced us. I was thirty then, had returned to New York to settle down after a decade in which I commuted from Colombia to the States. I was then under contract with an American publisher to write a novel. Because I had an American lover, the painter Bill Sullivan, and because I had been educated in this country and felt myself part of New York’s art world and writing scene, the differences between Reinaldo and me were huge.

Although he was an internationally known writer, he had lived in Cuba all his life. His parents were peasants, and he grew up as one. He was im-
mensely well read and spoke other languages, but he didn’t try to disguise his Goajiro origins. His teeth were crooked and full of cavities, and some were missing. He hadn’t yet acquired, as most writers transplanted to New York eventually do, a sense of fashion and slickness. So Reinaldo didn’t cut a glittering figure in the image-conscious gay scene. But my mother’s family was a peasant family, and I spent time during my formative years living in the countryside, so I felt comfortable with him. Conversely, he must have sensed that I had managed to create an image of myself that was full of artifice and this probably amused him. That we were both openly homosexual Latin American writers was a bond much stronger than all the outward differences.

Something else brought us together: unlike most Latin American authors, I had never been a member of the leftist intelligentsia. When I was an adolescent in Colombia in the 1960s, it was unthinkable for a young intellectual to be unsympathetic to the Cuban Revolution and to the forces that advocated radical changes in countries like Colombia, semifeudal states run with an iron hand by a small group of despotic families. But in 1966 my mother, sister, and I emigrated to Florida. For the first time I came in contact with the Cuban refugees who had fled the island: those who Fidel Castro, and leftists all over the world, labeled gusanos—worms. I was torn in my allegiance toward the Cubans I met. On the one hand, many of them provided for us (we settled in Tampa, where few Colombians were living) the vast amount of support that recent immigrants need in order to survive in their new home. Still, I despised their values. They defended American policy in Vietnam, saw John F. Kennedy and the Democrats as communist sympathizers, and, because of their business ingenuity, placed undue emphasis on material success. They were openly racist. A large number of these south Florida Cubans were reactionary, and I, as a sympathizer with the humanistic ideals of socialism, felt alienated by their politics. Yet I was bewitched by their personal warmth, gift for laughter, gaiety, and open and giving nature when they bestowed their friendship upon you. I loved many of them as human beings, although I abhorred them as political symbols.

When Reinaldo Arenas arrived in New York in 1981, I was older, less dogmatic, more understanding of peoples’ shortcomings. Also, I had had ample opportunities to become disenchanted with the Stalinist Latin American left. Besides, it was clear that Fidel Castro was no friend of homosexuals—he had persecuted, tortured, and killed many. Cuba no longer appeared to me as an island of hope for a new and more just Latin America. Instead, it seemed an island-jail where nonconformity was punished and where human rights violations were common.

Thus it was with mixed feelings that I entered my friendship with
Reinaldo Arenas. Soon after Arenas's arrival my friend, the poet Tim Dlugos, asked me if I could arrange a meeting between the two of them. Tim wanted to interview Reinaldo for *Christopher Street* magazine. Reinaldo agreed to meet him at my apartment. On the appointed day Tim showed up with a tape recorder, and we sat around having drinks and a chat while we waited for Reinaldo. When he was a half hour late, I called to remind him, but there was no answer. Reinaldo had already devised a system for reaching him by phone: you called, waited for the phone to ring three times, and hung up. You called back right away, and then he knew it was someone he wanted to talk to and would pick up. At first I dismissed this and other peculiarities of his social behavior as Latin American eccentricities. I was reminded, for example, of heterosexual poet friends who never answered the phone themselves—the women in their households did. Much later, when I understood Reinaldo better, I realized his behavior was just an extension of the paranoia that exists in the Cuban émigré world. In Castro's Cuba dissidents had to devise elaborate systems of communication to avoid being spied upon; they had transplanted those attitudes to this country, as if here too they felt constantly under surveillance.

Tim Dlugos and I were hurt and disappointed that Reinaldo stood us up. Nonetheless, I made up my mind not to let this incident sour our incipient friendship. Reinaldo gave his first reading in Manhattan in a bookstore in the Village. He read in Spanish, and then his translator read in English. Reinaldo was a dramatic reader: he used his hands expressively and lowered and raised the volume of his voice to underscore key passages. At one startling moment in the reading he boomed a few sentences, letting each word hammer the air like an exclamation point. Before performance art became fashionable, he was doing it.

One memorable evening in 1981 the noted Cuban writer Severo Sarduy called me. (Sarduy died of AIDS several years later.) Because Sarduy lived in Paris, where he was the Latin American editor at Seuil Éditions, I assumed he was the person responsible for bringing Reinaldo's books out in French while Reinaldo was a prisoner in Cuba and his books had to be smuggled out of the country. Sarduy suggested we meet at a Cuban-Chinese restaurant on Eighth Avenue and 50th Street. He had never met Reinaldo. That night my lover and I went with Reinaldo to the restaurant to meet Severo and his French lover. For me it was an exciting moment, two prominent homosexual Cuban writers, who already had an important literary relationship, meeting for the first time. Yet the dinner was anticlimactic: Reinaldo was formal, almost stiff, betraying no emotions. I was disappointed. When the awkward meal was over, we returned to my apartment for drinks and talk. Later that night we went to the now defunct Hay-
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market, a notorious hustlers’ bar on Eighth Avenue and 46th Street. Even there I felt that Reinaldo treated Sarduy strictly as a business acquaintance.

In 1983 my novel Colombian Gold was published, and it was met by mostly hostile reviews. Reinaldo’s fortunes, on the other hand, rose. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a Cintas Fellowship, which is given to distinguished Cuban artists. His epic poem El Central and the novels Farewell to the Sea (which Castro’s police had destroyed in manuscript a few times) and Old Rosa appeared in English. Several other titles came out in Spanish and in many other languages. Reinaldo acquired a set of beautiful new teeth, started working out, and developed an impressive armor of well-defined muscles. With his movie-star smile his handsomeness was irresistible. After a lifetime of persecution and misery, in which he was jailed and witnessed suicides, rapes, cold-blooded murders, and torture, Reinaldo was enjoying success. I was, of course, jealous, but it was hard to resent him because we kept running into each other at the post office and the supermarket and he was unwaveringly friendly and kind. He encouraged me to apply for a Guggenheim and asked me to submit poems to Mariel, the Spanish magazine he edited during those years. Yet we stopped hanging out together, and our friendship now had a cautious edge. His all-consuming hatred of Fidel Castro—and of García Márquez for supporting the Cuban Revolution—combined with the searing intensity of his passions, terrified me. He could be nurturing, but there was, I learned, a truly Dostoyevskian side to his nature. Edmundo Desnoes, author of the celebrated novel Memories of Underdevelopment and a supporter of the Cuban Revolution, gave a talk at New York University to an almost exclusively leftist audience. Reinaldo attended and, incensed by Desnoes’s favorable report of the revolution, called him a lying s.o.b. A fracas ensued: Reinaldo was thrown in the air and later pinned against a wall where he was hit by some men in the audience. Desnoes was unable to finish his talk. The Latino intellectual community was appalled and from that time on treated Reinaldo as an outcast.

By the mideighties so many of my friends had died of AIDS that I wasn’t surprised when I realized Reinaldo was ill. His sexual appetite was voracious. Coming home late at night I would see him prowling Times Square or walking out of the sleaziest sex joints.

Reinaldo lived on 44th Street between 8th and 9th Avenues. He had visited my apartment many times yet had never invited me into his home. So when Thomas Colchie phoned in December 1990 and asked me to check on Reinaldo, I thought I’d better get in touch with him right away. Too many friends had died before we had a chance to say things we wanted to say. I called him, and we made plans for me to stop by late that afternoon.
I climbed the steps of Reinaldo’s building and rang his buzzer. The building was a walk-up, and Reinaldo’s apartment was on the top floor, the sixth. At the top of the steep stairs I knocked on his door. I heard what sounded like a long fumbling with locks and chains, which even in Times Square seemed excessive. The door opened, and I almost gasped. Reinaldo’s attractive features were hideously deformed: half his face looked swollen, purple, almost charred, as if it were about to fall off. He was in pajamas and slippers. I can’t remember whether we shook hands or not or what we said at that moment. All I remember is that, once I was inside the apartment, he started putting on the chains and locks, as if he were afraid someone was going to break down the door.

We went through the kitchen into a small living room. Besides an old-fashioned sound system and a television set, I remember a primitive painting of the Cuban countryside. A table, two chairs, and a worn-out sofa completed the decor. Reinaldo sat on the sofa and I took a chair. I felt that if I sat too close to him, I would not be able to look him in the eye. Stacks of manuscripts lay on the table—thousands and thousands of sheets, and Reinaldo seemed like a shipwreck disappearing in a sea of paper. When I asked if they were copies of a manuscript he had just finished, he informed me that the three manuscripts on the table were a novel, a book of poems, and his autobiography, Before Night Falls.

Reinaldo spoke with enormous difficulty, his voice a frail rasp. “The novel, El color del verano, concludes my Pentagony. It’s an irreverent book that makes fun of everything,” he mused. “Leprosorio is a volume of poems. And Antes que anochezca,” he pointed to the third pile, “is my autobiography. I dictated it into a tape recorder and an amanuensis transcribed it. It’s going to make a lot of people mad.”

It seemed to me absolutely protean the amount of writing he had managed to do, considering what a debilitating disease AIDS is. I said so. “Writing those books kept me alive,” he whispered. “Especially the autobiography. I didn’t want to die until I had put the final touches. It’s my revenge.” He explained, “I have a sarcoma in my throat. It makes it hard for me to swallow solid foods or to speak. It’s very painful.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t talk. I’ll do the talking,” I offered, moving to the sofa.

“But I want to talk,” he said curtly. “I need to talk.”

I said, “Reinaldo, if there is anything you need, please don’t hesitate to let me know. Whatever it is... cooking your meals, getting your medicines, going with you to the doctor, anything.” I mentioned that the PEN American Center had a fund for writers and editors with AIDS and offered to contact them.
“Thanks so much, cariño,” he said in the plaintive singsong in which he spoke. It was a sweet, caressing tone: melodious like a lazy samba but also mournful, weary, accepting of the hardships of life. This was a typically peasant trait. “There is a woman who comes to help three days a week. She does all my errands. Besides, Lázaro [Lázaro Carriles, his ex-lover who had remained his closest friend] comes by every day.”

Just in case he wasn’t aware, I mentioned other sources where he could go for help.

He snapped, “I don’t like those men who serve as volunteers. I can’t stand all that humility.”

From where I sat I could see a bleached wintry sunset over the Hudson. “But if you contact the PEN Club that would be good,” he conceded. “I would like to get away from here before winter comes. My dream is to go to Puerto Rico and get a place at the beach so I can die by the sea.”

To encourage him I said, “Perhaps your health will improve. People sometimes . . .”

“Jaime,” he cut me off, “I want to die. I don’t want my health to improve . . . and then deteriorate again. I’ve been through too many hospitalizations already. After I was diagnosed with PCP [AIDS pneumonia], I asked Saint Virgilio Piñera,” he said, referring to the deceased homosexual Cuban writer, “to give me three years to live so that I could complete my body of work.” Reinaldo smiled, and his monstrous face showed some of his former handsomeness. “Saint Virgilio granted me my request. I’m happy. I do wish, though, that I had lived to see Fidel kicked out of Cuba, but I guess it won’t happen during my lifetime. Soon, I hope, his tyranny will end. I feel certain of that.”

I knew better than to disagree with him when it came to discussing Fidel Castro. Once, in the mideighties, I had tried to tell him to put behind him his years of imprisonment and persecution, to forget Cuba, to accept this country as his new home and to live in the present. “You just don’t understand, do you?” he had shouted, shaking with anger. “I feel like one of those Jews who were branded with a number by the Nazis; like a concentration camp survivor. There is no way on earth I can forget what I went through. It’s my duty to remember. This,” he roared, hitting his chest, “will not be over until Castro is dead. Or I am dead.”

We talked for a while about the collapse of the communist states. The last thing I wanted was to upset him in any way, yet I had to defend my belief in socialism as the most humanistic form of government. So I spoke to that effect.

“On paper socialism is the ideal form of government,” he said, not altogether surprising me. “It’s just that it’s never worked anywhere. Perhaps
some day.” Becoming thoughtful, almost as if talking to himself, he added, “Jaime, what a life I’ve had. Even before the revolution, it was bad enough the agony of being an intellectual queen in Cuba. What a sad and hypocritical world that was,” he paused. “Finally, I leave that hell, and come here full of hopes. And this turns out to be another hell; the worship of money is as bad as the worst in Cuba. All these years, I’ve felt Manhattan was just another island-jail. A bigger jail with more distractions but a jail nonetheless. It just goes to show that there are more than two hells. I left one kind of hell behind and fell into another kind. I never thought I would live to see us plunge again into the dark ages. This plague—AIDS—is but a symptom of the sickness of our age.”

As night fell, the neon of the billboards of midtown Manhattan and the lights of the skyscrapers provided the only illumination. We chatted in hushed tones, more intimately than we ever had before. I was aware of how precious the moment was to me, how I wanted to engrave it forever in my memory. When I got up to leave, Reinaldo had difficulty finding his slippers in the darkness, so I knelt on the floor and put them on his calloused, swollen, plum-colored feet. We went again through the kitchen, where he mentioned he would have broiled fish for dinner. Then he unchained the numerous locks, slowly, one by one. We didn’t hug or shake hands as we parted—as if neither of those gestures was appropriate.

“Call me any time, if you need anything,” I said.

“You’re such a dear,” he said.

As I was about to take the first step down, I turned around. The door to the apartment was still open. In the rectangular darkness Reinaldo’s shadowy shape was like a ghost who couldn’t make up its mind whether to materialize or to vanish.

The following day Reinaldo called to ask me if I could get him some grass. He said he had heard it helped to control nausea after meals. I told him that I would try to get some. I called a couple of friends and mentioned Reinaldo’s request. Bill Sullivan suggested that I contact the Gay Men’s Health Crisis because he thought Reinaldo sounded suicidal. I dismissed this possibility. Because his wish was to die by the sea, I thought he would try to make it to Puerto Rico if he received the grant from PEN. The next day, around noon, Tom Colchie called to say that Reinaldo had taken his life the night before; that he had used pills and had washed them down with shots of Chivas Regal; that he had left letters—one of them for the police, clarifying the circumstances of his death—and another one for the Cuban exiles, urging them to continue their fight against Castro’s rule. Reinaldo had died in the early hours of December 7, and his body had been found by the woman who came by to help with his chores. He was forty-seven.
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On December 19, at a Catholic church in Manhattan, a handful of Reinaldo’s friends attended a mass in his honor. A couple of people eulogized him. His friend, the Barnard professor Perla Rozencvaig, talked about how even though Reinaldo did not attend church, he was very religious. The next orator was Lázaro Carriles, who recited one of Reinaldo’s poems, celebrating death in the tradition of Góngora and St. John of the Cross. He finished with a poem also about the triumph of death, by Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, a nineteenth-century Mexican poet, a poem that, he informed us, Reinaldo loved:

I want to die as the day declines
In the open sea and facing the sky
Where agony will seem like a dream
And the soul a bird taking flight.

Not to listen in the last instants
—Now alone with the sea and the sky—
To other voices or tearful prayers
Than the majestic tumble of the waves.

To die when the sad light withdraws
Its gilded nets from the green sea
And to be like the sun that slowly sinks
Something very luminous going under.

To die, and young: before treacherous
Time withers the graceful crown;
When life still says I am all yours
although we know it will betray us.

A man in a dark suit and carrying a briefcase sat in front of me; he seemed to be seething with anger and quite determined to hold back his tears. After Lázaro Carriles finished the poem, the priest tried as best as he could to rationalize Reinaldo’s suicide, implying that perhaps Reinaldo was not aware of the enormity of this action for a believer. But all of us present knew perfectly well that in the last terrible act of his life Reinaldo Arenas had been fully aware of what he was doing.