

Secrets in Cuba

by Benjamin Gayle

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Cuba was south of town, figuratively. It wasn't on any map, just a place where the road ended in a pile of gravel. I wasn't aware of its island-nation namesake until years later. Rural Appalachia was isolated like that. Back then, it was my best example of somewhere that was *nowhere*.

A block away from the courthouse, Court Street dipped sharply past Bobby's house on the right and Darrell and Andy's house on the left. There were a few more houses on either side, none with kids living in them, before the road disappeared around a curve to the left and ceased to be Court Street. It had a number for a name beyond that; I don't remember what it was. That wasn't an Important Thing to know, like which house had a mean dog, or when my favorite program would come through the radio, or how to fix a flat tire on a bicycle. It was the way to Cuba, and that was all I needed to remember. ROAD ENDS 0.86 MILES the number-name sign read, more than a kilometer now though we didn't have kilometers back then. Kilometers didn't show up until high school when the cross-country races were 5k.

Past the junkyard on the left that used to be a gas station, then a sharp right to the bridge across

Meadow Creek. That was our usual fishing spot, a convenient place to drop a line without getting our feet wet. I don't remember ever catching anything there. I do remember the rusty bicycle that someone had thrown off of the bridge. We talked about fishing it out but never did. I don't know what we would have done with it. After years underwater it would be junk. Past the creek, there were no more houses, no connecting roads, just a half-mile of twisting asphalt that ended in a pile of gravel.

I didn't usually go down there alone. There were stories about the place that scared me, and bravery increased with numbers. (I used to think that *stupidity* increased with numbers, but no, it just increased with Jim Tucker. That's another story.) I couldn't think of anywhere else that might be safe enough to hide something, where nobody would think to look, or *dare* to look.

Past the end of the road, over the hill and through what we called the Indian Graveyard, a collection of rocks that were supposedly gravestones poking up out of the shallow slope. I don't think that any of us really believed that Indians (or anyone else) were buried there, but there was no sense in taking chances. The place was haunted.

Beyond that was a wide spread of brambles that was as good as razor-wire for stopping anybody. There wasn't much reason to come this far except for the berries in the summer. I didn't find the way around until I had crawled through and mostly under.

You couldn't see the cave from the Indian Graveyard. The opening was over another hill, hidden in rocks on the downslope. It probably didn't qualify as a cave, little more than a crack in the rocks that I could squeeze into. I had marked it as a potential hiding spot in case

of emergency and this was as close as I had come to a situation that qualified as such.

What emergency could a kid in rural Appalachia find himself in that required hiding something? That all started with the modem I got for Christmas. I had just turned eleven and was on holiday break from school, so there was nothing to stop me from staying up all night. Mom limited my use of the phone line during normal waking hours, and Katie would complain if the line was busy when she 'needed' to use it, but after-hours, I was free to connect for as long as I wanted – as long as it was a local call.

The only bulletin board in the local exchange was run by the school librarian and thus unconditionally approved by my mother. It was not associated with the school. The machine was located at Mr. Lambert's house and had two lines. Everyone, knowing Mr. Lambert, assumed it would be safe. That was when I learned about freedom of information and the world suddenly became an impossibly large scary place.

My computer class at school was once per week. The four machines were shared by all of the students from grades four through twelve, and Mr. Lambert taught the classes. He also had to manage the library, a classroom with bookshelves along the walls and tables and chairs in the center. Computer free-time was during the weekly library period. The machines usually sat idle during that time, at least during my class's turn. I had the computer at home that I could use whenever I wanted, and it wasn't like there was anything interesting to do with them. There was no software. We were learning programming – to do anything, we had to create a program and, worse, type it in. And the school didn't have disk drives, only one shared cassette tape deck. That

meant I couldn't just bring a program from home and load it. That also meant that a lot of computer class time was spent typing. Books were more interesting.

I was the only kid who had a computer. Bobby had an Atari. That would have made him popular, but his parents would not tolerate the gangs of kids that would camp out in the living room if they could get in the door. Living in rural Appalachia, resources were scarce. Everyone had bicycles and most had guns, but those were treated as tools, not toys. The one basketball goal in town drew a crowd because the next closest one was at the one school in the county, six miles away. The only way to avoid sharing something was to keep it a secret. Fortunately for me, nobody else was interested in computers, and the four computers at school were generally regarded as curiosities.

My computer was a TRS-80, little more than a toy, that I had purchased with my savings the year before. Mom paid for the floppy disk drive. That cost as much as the computer itself. Now that Mr. Lambert had set up his bulletin board, she wanted me to have access – *opportunity* she called it. Thus the modem. Something that I had missed back then, being self-centered and self-ish, was my sister's lack of *opportunity*, or maybe motivation. She seemed to know everything, and even was in the advanced computer class at school, nearly fourteen and keeping up with the best high school students. She expressed no interest in my computer except when I was struggling with a new problem. She always knew how to solve it but wouldn't always tell me, just give hints.

I spent the first few nights cautiously exploring, learning the structure of the interface. Public message area, text files, e-books, source code snippets, and even a game. The text files under the heading *Freedom of*

Information seemed the most interesting. They were only listed by filename, eight characters with cryptic descriptions that didn't tell much about the contents. I had to sample, a slow process at three-hundred baud, close to reading speed. A large file could take hours to transfer. It took a few transfers before I realised that I could store them locally for future reference on the disk drive and have near-instant access. I began building up my own electronic library, skimming the contents as the text scrolled up the screen. I didn't understand everything. Electronic circuits, devices, code.

After the first few files, I didn't look at the contents as closely. My motivation changed from reading interesting things to getting more free stuff, whatever it was. That was a mistake. I read the Ham Radio newsletters first, having built a crystal radio for the school science fair and wanting to learn more. Then I started in on the HOWTO files with descriptions that sounded like they explained how telephones worked. They did, in a way. Then I opened *CRC Magazine*, an e-zine. The first article detailed how to make a bomb using a peanut butter jar and various household chemicals, then suggested what to do with it. That scared me. I didn't know if having a file with that information was illegal, but it felt wrong. Why would Mr. Lambert have such things, and worse, let others see them? I should have asked Katie, but I was afraid that I would get into trouble. And she was older then, well, still is, but it doesn't matter now like it did then. Even one grade up or down was a different generation.

It should have been obvious. I had been using the disk drive for more than a year and it never occurred to me that I could erase a file from a disk. I couldn't imagine filling a disk up and needing to free

space because everything on it up to now I had to type in. Three-hundred sixty kilobytes seemed infinite. So, here was this unexpected burden and I didn't know anyone I could talk to about it. I did the one thing I knew how to do: hide the disk.

Thursday of the week after Christmas, I made a plan. The next morning, after Mom had left for work, I implemented it. Katie was staying at Laura's house, so she wouldn't be in the way.

I took the disk to the kitchen and got the roll of plastic film out of a drawer, the stuff Mom used to cover dishes of leftover food. I tore off a rectangle of plastic and laid it out on the counter, then put the roll back into the drawer. I set the disk down on top of the film, carefully aligned with its edges, and wrapped it like a Christmas present. That looked good, but I wasn't sure it would be enough, so I got out the roll of aluminum foil and repeated the process. Still unsure, I added another layer of film and another layer of foil. That seemed sufficient, but now I had a bright silvery-metallic package. I worried that would attract attention. I had also heard stories of birds stealing and hoarding shiny objects. I wasn't sure that was a real thing, but it wasn't worth taking the chance. I got out the roll of waxed paper that Mom used when making cookies and spread out a length on the counter without tearing it off. Then I put down the packaged disk and folded it end-over-end until it wasn't shiny anymore, tore off from the roll, folded the ends under, and secured them with magic tape. That's what it said on the package. I was dubious because it didn't stick very well, but the job was done. Now I had to deliver the package to the intended hiding place.

The first challenge was to get there unseen. It wasn't unusual for me to be out by myself, but going to

Cuba was a different matter. Someone would notice and there would be questions. The middle of the night seemed like the best time to avoid notice, but I wasn't sure I could find the cave in the dark, in the snow, and I *was* sure that either Katie or Mom would notice that I was gone, and certainly notice my wet clothes when I got back.

Did I mention snow? The dim December sky had dropped nearly two feet the week before and most of it was still on the ground. Some of the roads had been cleared, but the plow had stopped at the Meadow Creek bridge. There was nothing past it that anyone needed to drive to. Then I realised that I would make tracks in the snow, another complication. I would have to go off-road, find a way through that nobody else would take. I would still have to go across the Meadow Creek bridge. That was the only way to get across dry. It hadn't been cold enough for the creek to freeze over. There was no way around making tracks across the bridge, but I had to get at least that far without being seen. I figured that Bobby or Andy would see me if I went down Court Street, or a parent would mention that they had seen me. I would have to go cross-country.

I bundled up and slipped the wrapped disk through a hole in the lining of my jacket where the stitches had come loose. I knew that needed to be fixed, but now was glad that it wasn't. The package was too big to fit in any of my pockets.

I peeked through the curtain on the back door. Nobody in sight. Out the door, down the steps, and along the driveway past the car that had not moved since the snow. Mom worked at the telephone company, two blocks away, so she hadn't needed to drive. The sidewalk still hadn't been cleared so I walked in the

street, turning right onto Middle Street.

Just past the printing plant, I went off-road. I followed the side of the building around to the back where a hilly field connected to Court Street. I could see Bobby's house, but figured it was too far for them to notice or recognise me. (That reminds me of the time Bobby got hurt during a lawn-dart battle in that field. He wasn't fast enough and got hit in the foot. But that's another story.)

I quickly put a hill between me and his house, then followed a small stream that flowed into Meadow Creek near the bridge. Overgrown brush between there and the bridge slowed me down.

At the bridge, I stopped and looked around. No people in sight, no sounds above the light breeze, but here was a single set of tracks in the snow heading across the bridge. I couldn't tell how fresh they were, but I guessed it couldn't have been more than a day.

Now who would be going out to Cuba alone? I thought, other than me of course. I considered abandoning my plan, but was too curious to stop. I did my best to step in the existing tracks instead of making my own. That would have made walking a little easier except that the tracks were too far apart, obviously made by someone taller than me, and with larger shoes. I had to stretch for each step.

Before I could see the end of the road, the tracks veered left and into the woods. I stopped, unsure about following. I didn't want to go in there, especially alone, and didn't want to make my own tracks in the road. I compromised by following the tracks to the tree-line, then continuing parallel to the road. Approaching the hill where the cave was, from the far side, I stopped to look and consider where it might be under all of that snow.

Without my noise of shuffle-crunching through the snow, I heard a sound, a hissing that seemed to come from the other side of the hill. I froze, not recognising it as a natural sound. It wasn't very loud. I was scared but had to know what was going on over there.

After listening for a few minutes, I made a plan then screwed up my courage to do it. Bare rock poked up out of the snow most of the way up the slope. Slowly, carefully, I climbed up on the rocks until I could just see over the top. What I saw made me wish I had brought my notebook.

(This was before I started the newspaper, when I was obsessed with recording everything and reporting on it. That's another story.)

Below me was an improvised camp. The sound came from a green gas-fueled cookstove balanced on some rocks with a kettle on top. A silver tarp hung from the trees. I supposed that the occupant must be under there because I couldn't see anyone. The only other non-natural thing I could see was the disturbed snow tamped flat. I had never known anyone to camp out here, especially in the uncomfortable cold of winter and snow. Camping was a warm-weather thing. That made me think that anyone who would willingly camp in the snow must have a strong reason, maybe nowhere else to go, or maybe running from something.

That thought brought my fear back up in line with my curiosity. The details were conflicting. The cookstove and the tarp belied a certain amount of planning, but not to hide. Not knowing what was under that tarp left it open. I could imagine a scientist with equipment stacked up, but not what they might be studying. Then again, a scientist would have better shelter than that, and transport. Now I had the dilemma of staying to

watch for this unknown person or fleeing the unknown danger. An impact to the back of my head that nearly dislodged my stocking cap relieved me of that dilemma.

I rolled to my right just enough to look back down the hill to where the snowball had come from. There stood Katie with her arms folded across her chest, and Laura right behind her. I hurriedly put a finger to my lips, hoping they would understand to stay quiet. Katie motioned for me to come down the hill. Staying on the rocks, climbing down proved more difficult than climbing up. When I got to the bottom, Katie reached inside her jacket and pulled out a flat package wrapped in waxed paper – *my disk*.

“You dropped something back there,” she said in a low voice. I reflexively patted my jacket to check and confirm that my disk was missing.

“Yeah, guilty. I don't know of what, but I'll find out. Unless you want to tell me?”

“Not here,” I whispered, pointing a thumb over my shoulder. “Something's going on over there, a camp-site, I don't know who. Those tracks that I followed lead there.”

“That,” Katie said, nodding toward the hill, “is more important than this,” waving the package with the disk.

“At the moment, yes.” I pointed a thumb back over my shoulder and was about to elaborate on the camp when Katie cut in and said, “That's just Wayne Dressler. His wife kicked him out again and nobody else will take him in.

Oh. I didn't know the Dresslers beyond knowing that they existed. They didn't have kids.

“Out here is private enough that the whole town won't see him,” she continued. “If it was you, you'd

want to be left alone too.”

That made sense to me. I didn't understand why his wife would or could kick him out into the cold, but it didn't seem like an appropriate time to ask.

“Come on,” Katie said. “Let's go home and leave Mister Dressler alone.” She turned and started back toward the road. Laura stood still, watching me, waiting for me to follow Katie, then fell in line behind me. We held that formation all the way back to the Meadow Creek bridge, tramping down the single-track to a more walkable path. I followed those two back, up the Court Street hill and across to the other side of town, all of three blocks. Laura came inside with us.

I had been so preoccupied with the Dressler incident that I had forgotten about the disk until Katie sat down at the kitchen table and set the package down in front of her.

“Now,” she said, “court's in session. Sit down and start talking.”

I explained about the modem and files and disk, and how I worried that having those files would get me into trouble. Then I wondered aloud about Mr. Lambert and what trouble he could get into.

Katie shook her head and said, “Freedom of information. There's nothing illegal about having any of that information. It's only a problem if you use it to do something, like make a bomb or steal service from the phone company.” It was obvious that she knew more than I did.

She still hadn't asked me why I had wrapped the disk and carried it to Cuba. Maybe it was obvious. Now I wondered if she knew about the cave.

“If you were so worried about it, why didn't you just erase the files?” she asked.

“Erase?” I replied, not sure what she was referring to. “Make them disappear like erasing something written in pencil? Or covering up a typewriter mistake with correction fluid?”

Katie sighed. Laura was no longer paying attention. She had already figured out that there wasn't anything interesting going on here.

“Hasn't Mister Lambert taught you anything?” Katie said. “The files on the disk are just groups of bits that are turned on. Turn them off and they are gone, as if they were never there.”

(I later learned that while this was how the process appeared to work, it wasn't technically correct. The data of files were really made up of blocks of locations on the disk that were magnetised or not in patterns. Other blocks held meta-data such as filenames, locations, sizes, and checksums. Erasing files meant unlinking by erasing the meta-data, not clearing the data blocks themselves. Without overwriting the data blocks, the files could still be retrieved. Katie didn't know that and probably didn't care.)

I know Mr. Lambert used a pair of pucks that looked like the things doctors used to jump-start people on television. He rubbed them in circles with the tape in-between to erase them. I didn't have those and wasn't sure how they worked, only that there was electricity and magnetic fields involved.

Laura obviously wanted for this to be over so she could go do something more interesting. When Katie unwrapped the disk and said, “Let's go look at this on your computer,” Laura went into the living room and turned the television on. I could hear a soap opera playing on the one channel that we could pick up. Laura's family had a special antenna that got them *three* chan-

nels, a collection of metal rods mounted on a tower high above the roof of their house. She flipped through the rest of the VHF channels, all static, returned to the soap opera, then turned the television off. She came into my room as the computer was booting and watched as Katie showed me how to erase a file from the disk.

Then Laura asked a question that surprised me. “How do you connect to this place where you got those files?” she said. “Can you show me?” She had taken the same computer classes as my sister, but the computers at school didn't have modems.

I connected and made a quick tour through the bulletin board interface and menus and activities. She seemed particularly interested in the message area. At the time, I couldn't see the value of typing messages that someone might or might not see today or next week, considering the complication of connecting to the bulletin board, especially when that someone was only a few blocks or a phone call away. And there wasn't much traffic. Few people had computers, and most of them didn't have modems. That was about to change.

Katie hasn't mentioned the incident with the disk since then. I guess it wasn't as important as it seemed at the time. Actually, most things I remember happening or causing back then look insignificant now. Like the fight I got into my first week in town . . .

[to be continued]