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Exile: The Constant Grief

After just over a year abroad, I am only now beginning to feel at peace saying it out loud: I am in exile. And even so, I am still learning how to process it. It is not a milestone that one overcomes overnight, but a constant process that breathes with me, that moves forward and backward depending on the weeks, the memories, and the new challenges I have to face.

I did not say it before because, honestly, I did not know how to organize it within myself. Moreover, in my case, I left with many advantages: friends who welcomed me, cities that opened their doors, jobs that allowed me to grow and maintain a stable life. I have had important opportunities, and I am aware of that privilege.

But none of that changes a simple truth: exile is hard, even when you are accompanied, even when things are going well. Because it was not a decision made out of liking or pleasure, but out of necessity.

On January 8, I felt that everything changed. When I was once again accused of being a terrorist —something that had already happened in 2017, but this time felt different, definitive— I unders-

tood that I could not remain in Venezuela. That day marked a before and after, even if I did not say it publicly.

And that is where one of the first realities of exile begins: the initial shock. This mixes with another truth that does not change, no matter how grateful you are: it never feels like home.

No matter how well you are treated, how much you adapt, or how comfortable you are, nothing compares to home. And there is not a single day that goes by without you thinking —even if just for a second— about returning.

Meanwhile, life for everyone else goes on. In the first months, many people check in on you, but later everyone moves on with their own lives. And you have to do the same. In that process, without realizing it, you begin to put up barriers: to avoid worrying your parents, to avoid repeating the same story over and over, to protect yourself while you try to understand what you are going through.

I remember that during my first three months, I cried many nights. Not because of what I was experiencing abroad, but because of what it meant to have left. It was coming to terms with the fact that I could no longer return home whenever I wanted; that I could no longer "steal" Tupperware from my mom with the excuse of being an only child; that I could no longer go to the stadium with my dad, or eat empanadas, or go down to the beach, or go out partying with my friends.

And among those core memories that exile takes away from you, there are two that weigh on me especially.

The first: not being there with my dad when he threw the first pitch at the game between Tiburones and Águilas. That was a moment I had dreamed of keeping forever, and I missed it.

And the second: not being able to be with my mom when her best friend passed away, because I knew I would have been a source of support for her at that moment.

That day I understood something that is hard to accept: exile is not only carried by the one who leaves; it is also suffered by those who stay. My absence was not only mine; it was also hers, my family's, the life we left behind.

These are memories that hurt in a place you did not know you had.

As the days go by, another part of exile begins to reveal itself: the confrontation with yourself. With your decisions, your doubts, your demons.

You begin to think about all the paths you could have taken, all the versions of your life that might have existed. You enter the multiverses of what might have happened if you had done or said something differently. That wears you down. That weighs on you. That exhausts you.

It is confronting guilt, regret, and questions that have no answers. It is carrying the doubt of whether you could have avoided something, of whether your life would look different today. These are moments in which the emotional weight feels greater than yourself.

And to all of this is added something fundamental about exile: you have to reinvent yourself. Not from a motivational cliché, but

from a real stripping away. Because even if one says that a position, a role, a title, or a political space does not define you, they really are part of your identity. In exile, you are forced to let go of that previous version of yourself. You have to release the image others had of you —and even the one you had built for yourself.

It becomes a labyrinth of questions: Who am I now? What do I want? How do I redirect my purpose in the midst of so much adversity?

Reinventing yourself externally is difficult; reinventing yourself internally is even harder.

And all of this happens while you discover another uncomfortable truth: you do not start from zero —you begin at a deficit.

You do not have your network of contacts, you do not have anyone to reach out to, no one to recommend you. You do not have the social capital that once felt natural in your country. Growing professionally abroad is like climbing a steep slope with empty hands.

And when you think you have seen it all, something quieter appears: survivor's guilt.

That inexplicable feeling of discomfort for being happy, for enjoying a moment, for having a good day. You ask yourself, "Why me?" while others you care about remain there.

And then comes the judgment:
—those inside say that it is easier to speak from abroad;
—and some outside say that you should no longer have a voice because you do not live there anymore.

All of this adds weight to the grief and the daily burden.

In the midst of everything, there is also my mother's voice: "Maybe we raised you too well?"

She said it from love, from pride, from concern. But it still shakes you. Because it reminds you that your decisions do not only affect you —they also affect those who stay behind, those who experience their own grief as they watch you leave.

Added to that weight is a fear shared by all exiles: that something might happen to your parents and you will not be able to be there. It does not paralyze you, but it is always present.

Then comes the practical side.

How do you regularize your status? How do you obtain documents? How do you get hired? How do you prove your value in a place where no one knows you? And as an immigrant —and sometimes undocumented— you often have to prove three times over:

- that you are worth hiring despite your age;
- that you are worth hiring despite your nationality;
- and that your greatest enemy is not yourself: not allowing fear, noise, or the pain of what you left behind to consume you.

Because no matter how much Venezuela hurts, you have to learn to live despite what is happening there. And, at the same time, accept that no one will fully understand what you are going through. Everyone has their own urgencies, rhythms, and priorities. And no one will give you a formal space to "grieve," because you still have to produce, work, and adapt.

All of this happens while you try to share —even if only a little— your process, without making "the exile" your sole identity.

I write all of this because, in the end, we write to make sense of the noise inside. To give language to what we feel. To understand ourselves a little more. And because, when we dare to tell our story, we open a door for others to dare as well.

Today I can say that I am doing well. That I have grown, that I have reinvented myself, that I keep moving forward. And I can also say that I am still learning how to process it.

Exile is not easy, but it does teach something fundamental: even far away, even with everything it carries, life goes on.

And so do you.

And if you are reading this and have lived through something similar —if exile took a life away from you, if a relationship ended because of uncertainty, if you miss your loved ones, if you dream of embracing those who are not there— I want to tell you something simple: you are not alone.

I hope this virtual embrace, however small, makes your grief just a little more bearable today.