

The story below is my attempt to find out about life in Cuba:

**A Glimpse of Cuba by Johnny Verdad (Contact: email Aldridge56@aol.com)**

*These vignettes are a glimpse of my experiences and the people met while visiting Cuba to see relatives this October 2002. All of the names have been changed to protect these contacts. Cubans shared their thoughts and stories at the personal risk of harassment, detention and even years in prison. I feel obligated to share what they told me with friends and perhaps the press as well. Any comments and criticisms are welcome.*

**Ay Cuba!** Finally, after years of curiosity, Havana came into sight under my plane's window. Cuba is the largest island in the Greater Antilles, a long extended claw that is home to Fidel Castro as well as about 11 million other Cubans. At 21-23 degrees north, Cuba lies on the same latitudes as Algeria, Egypt, India, Mauritania, Oman, Vietnam and Hawaii. My stated purpose necessary for the US to grant me a general license to travel to Cuba--was to visit my mother's cousin whom no one from the Cuban side of my family had seen since the beginning of the Revolution (1959). But what I really wanted was to explore the land of Rum, Rumba and Revolution for the next three weeks.

While in Cuba, I would come to fall in love with the graciousness and humor of its people, the beauty of its land and climate and the charm of its architecture. But I would leave grieving over the poverty in the country, the grinding oppression, the lack of any semblance of human and civil rights, and the pervasive fear by Cubans of their own government. Though many Cubans would greet me with a smile, their disaffection and dwindling faith in the Revolution shocked me. I learned that the Revolution was for sale.

Ever since my father died five years ago, I have had a passion to learn more about my family's roots. My father, an American, met my mother in Havana while on a business trip. It was love at first sight. They wed in 1954, years before the takeover by Castro in 1959. All but two of my mother's relatives left Cuba by 1960 after their businesses and freedoms had been confiscated. My mother neither spoke of Cuba nor of her relatives still there. She even

declined to visit her former friends from Havana who had settled in Miami. Not being a sentimental woman, she refused to reminisce about the past, especially a tragic past. She felt that Castro had laid waste to Cuba. She had moved on with her life.

I had pestered her with questions about her childhood. What she remembered most were the parties in Havana. She came of age in the early 1950s, the belle epoch, of Havana. My father used to joke that that is why the Revolution occurred--the rich were oblivious to the problems in the country. My Mom partied while the sugar cane burned.

I also begged my Cuban Aunts and Uncles for their remembrances of Cuba. Though I forget the details of their stories, I remembered their loathing of Fidel Castro's lies and oppression, their sadness over losing their country and how they didn't think my traveling to Cuba was such a bright idea. They worried that Castro's thugs would hurl me into one of his island Gulags for some imaginary offense. One friend thought that my incessant curiosity would cause me to ask impertinent questions resulting in a stay behind bars. Later I would learn that tourists were almost a special, protected class. As one Cuban told me, "We have less rights than a dog while foreigners are treated like royalty."

For my first night in Havana I chose to stay in an upscale hotel. The prices were as expensive as a hotel in the Cayman Islands or Bermuda, but the services and food were miserable. Maybe the only reason Fidel was letting me onto his island was so my dollars could help bail out his plunging economy.

That evening I couldn't help but notice the dozens of hermetically sealed tourist buses waiting outside to take the package tourists to their next destination. State security agents in their black pants, white Guayabera shirts and walkie-talkies were everywhere. My hotel was safe from being stormed by hungry Cubans. Or perhaps the guards were necessary to protect some government dignitary. Anyway, I felt oppressed.

Most Cuban tours are highly structured and controlled by the government which doesn't want to reveal too much of the Cuban reality. Most tourists come to the island on two-week packages. Few have direct contact with Cubans outside the tourist centers, much to the satisfaction of the Communist government. To Castro, tourism is a necessary evil and tourists

are no more than dollar signs. “It’s out of necessity,” he would say apologetically. “Tourism is a sacrifice we must make. There is no choice.” Besides, if tourists can be herded from government owned hotels to tourist resorts, less dollars slip out of its control and onto the black market or other non-governmental entities like casa particulars (small bed & breakfast homes) or paladares (private restaurants). This is why upon arrival, custom agents often require bookings for three nights at a hotel by tourists entering the country.

I asked a young Cuban outside the hotel who was waiting to guide tourists why he was not allowed into a hotel in his own country. He replied, “There are places Cubans are not allowed to go. They (the government) don’t want Cuban people to mix with foreigners, they don’t want us to trouble you, to steal from you, or tell you the problems of our lives. We are all humiliated. “It must be difficult,” I said. “No, it is inconceivable,” he said.

After a night in a Cuban hotel, an experience I vowed never to repeat, I wanted to look up my relatives. I had obtained the address from my Aunt Tona, who told me the house had been in the family for generations. October is still a hot month in Havana. The sun blistered and my shirt became soaked from walking the 12 blocks from the hotel to my cousin’s house. When I stood in front of the door, I thought it might be condemned or abandoned. The house number was painted with whitewash in large scrawling letters by the door, the shutters were closed and the floorboards on the porch were cracked. The wooden doors seemed to be from the time of the Spanish Conquistadors. I went over to the next house to ask a neighbor if my cousin still lived there. “Si, claro, si” (yes, of course) came the reply.

I then knocked on the door. Immediately two barking dogs lunged against it. A commotion ensued, as the dogs were dragged back and a slat in the door opened. “Who is there?” a voice called out. “It is a relative of Garcia’s from New York, Juan,” I replied. The door opened and I stepped into a large foyer with high 14-foot ceilings. The home is a row house with two stories and windows facing the Malecon and the sea. It has an open-air interior garden at the center of the house. A row house indicated that my family had been rich enough to have a two-story house on a block with two to four story buildings throughout the neighborhood.

My second cousin, Garcia, certainly looked like one of my Grandfather’s nephews. He was tall, rail thin with white hair and a quiet English air about

him. I had brought a photo album including a family tree with pictures of all my Cuban relatives. I pointed out that my mother, Elena, had been named after his mother, the sister of my Grandfather. We embraced, and he introduced me to his two daughters, three grandchildren, a daughter-in-law, and the mother of his deceased wife. Typical of many Cuban families, three generations were living under one roof. His grandson and daughter-in-law were living there since they could neither find nor afford other housing.

I was led through the house where my mother, aunt and uncle had grown up. It was where my Grandparents had raised their family and lived most of their lives. Most of the house now seemed in disrepair and decay. The walls had crumbling plaster, almost all paint had peeled away from doors, window frames and floors, and the shutters were cracked and missing slats. Forty years of salty air, sun and rainstorms had beaten the house into crumbling submission. My cousin could read my mind because he said that it had been difficult to maintain the house with the lack of paint, wood and other materials due to rationing and the economy. Though I thought the house was in similar condition to a deteriorating tenement, I would learn later that my family lived better than most Havana residents.

My mood was darkening. Any hope of bringing my mother back to Cuba was gone. She would be aghast to see her family home. And, thank the Lord, my Grandfather couldn't see it either. Finally, Fredrico took me to where a pig was housed -- kept for food. The pig's vocal cords had been cut, since a squealing pig would alert neighbors to an illegal possession. The government prohibits livestock in Havana homes.

I sat with my cousin asking questions in my broken Spanish. Was he happy living in Cuba? What was most difficult about the current situation? What had the Revolution achieved? Garcia, 78, had lived all his life in Cuba working as a civil engineer. He was now retired, supplementing his \$8 a month pension with a small business of selling ice water to vendors at the market behind his house. He was a cuenta propista, a small entrepreneur. Yes, he was happy because Cuba is peaceful with little crime. All children can go to school and, when they graduate, find work. He told me Castro fought for the liberty and sovereignty of Cuba after years of domination by the Spanish and the Americans. Castro had followed in the footsteps of Jose Marti. Yes, the economy was weak, but the embargo was the main reason. Cuba couldn't buy needed supplies from the U.S. I was taken aback by my cousin's answers, but I wasn't going to probe any further. I accepted his

beliefs at face value, but I promised myself to ask the same of other Cubans. I would revisit him after my travels through Cuba.

Then I walked over to the Malecon and sat with my back to the sea and Miami, 90 miles away. My emotions were conflicted. My cousin sat in a crumbling house with no new paint or plaster available to improve conditions, he had a pittance of a pension, and his house was jammed with relatives and even livestock, yet he was happy. Why? I would try to find out through my travels. Well, if he was content, who am I to judge, I thought.

My thoughts turned to Papa and Mama, my grandparents, and to my uncle and aunts who fled from Cuba during the Revolution. Did they have to leave in the middle of the night with police at their door? Did they think they would return? After spending 70 years of his life raising his family, building a business, working honestly, what was my Grandfather feeling and thinking as he packed his small suitcase while being exiled from his own country? His freedoms had been denied, his property stolen in the name of the State and his business confiscated. Was he fearful for his life? I couldn't imagine how painful it must have been leaving for the airport and closing the door behind him; the same door I had entered ten minutes ago.

Ernesto Che had scribbled a warning in his notebook that revolution is impersonal, that it consumes the innocent and guilty together, and then manipulates the memory of the dead as an instrument of control. Perhaps my Grandfather and his family and millions more were consumed by the revolution, but for what purpose and at what price? Did the Cuban Revolution liberate Cuba from foreign domination or did the Cuban people just trade one dictator, Batista, for another, Castro? It was time to go ask the Cuban people.

It's another hot, steamy night in Centro Habana as I am met on the street corner by Carlos, a jinitero or hustler, who asks me, "Quieres una chica, cigar o rum?" I politely decline his offer of a woman, cigar or rum, but we hang out and talk. So what is life like in Castro's Cuba, I ask? Glancing left and right, he says, Sin Libertad (without freedom). Next to us, four of his neighborhood buddies are playing dominoes for a bottle of rum while across the street several young men and women gyrate to disco music booming from a cassette player. I feel like it's a block party.

“What do you mean?” I ask. “All is illegal here,” he answers, “The government can’t provide for the people, so we must break the law to survive. There is a huge conflict between reality and rhetoric here, between what Castro says to the wider world and what he actually permits inside the country. Castro is an aging megalomaniac who doesn’t know his time is past,” he said.

Carlos, 33, is a Havana University Physics professor who moonlights hustling tourists or, more appropriately, procuring services for them. He can make potentially more money in one night through earning dollars than being paid in Cuban pesos for one month’s teaching. Cubans joke that, “We’re paid in pesos, but life is lived in dollars.” Cubans face a daily struggle to supplement their ration cards and meager peso salaries. To survive they must break the law and operate in the black market; they face the abyss of starvation on one side and imprisonment on the other.

Carlos continued to speak in a low voice. He did not want our neighbors to hear, “The government doesn’t provide adequate rations of rice, yet it is illegal to buy rice on the black market. This is the contradictory chasm that disgusts us. Castro profits on the dollars, yet punishes those who try to earn dollars outside the system. The average Cuban is paid 220 pesos (\$8.00) per month, which is impossible to live on, so the rest of the time is spent in line trying to obtain rationed items where they can be found on the black market. Some say it is the way the government prevents Cubans from organizing. We are all too exhausted from standing in line or going hungry to protest. To get by we pretend to go along. We wear a mask and say that all is fine. But people are tired of living a lie.”

I was lucky to have found an articulate observer, so I asked, “So what happened to the Revolution?” Carlos smirked and said, “It was hijacked by one person and turned into a tool for personal power. Castro’s vision has turned it into a nightmare for 11 million people. The original social contract between the State and people exchanged free education, healthcare and security for allegiance to the Party/State/Revolution. It worked at first because of the support of the eastern block and the redistribution of accumulated wealth from before the Revolution.

“Then,” he continued, “After 1990, during Castro’s “Special Period” when the government here couldn’t deliver, things changed. There have been

developments in the last decade such as an increase in tourism and small businesses and the liberation of the dollar. But these things weakened the original social contract. If the people could provide for themselves, what happened to their absolute allegiance and dependence on the State? Now, of course, it is too late to roll back the socialist system, but Castro is trying, in small ways, to do just that while constantly pointing to the failings of capitalism in the outside world. As a result, people are confused, disillusioned and very frustrated, especially the young. Any protests to voice opinions are met with--Carlos moved his finger across his throat like a knife cutting flesh.

“What happens if someone is brave or foolish enough to speak out?” I interjected. Carlos answered, “The huge police and military presence is meant as a deterrent to crime and as a reminder of State power. And if you push against all that? Well, the first response is to ignore you, to isolate and make you seem irrelevant, powerless. The State has almost a total monopoly on jobs, of course, which is a powerful weapon, and then there are the CDRs, Comites para Defensa La Revolucion (similar to a neighborhood watch), which make about 90% of us collaborators in the repression and control of dissidents. The second response would be to crush you. Our jails are full of political prisoners.”

“Then who does support Castro and the “Revolution?” I asked. Carlos replied, “Cuba is split three ways. There is the sixty-plus generation who remember the years before Castro, who probably fought in the war and who retain some of the youthful ideals. To them, Castro is still a hero. But this group is dying off or becoming undone by all the sacrifices. Then there is the lost generation, people of my age, who, being on the periphery, suffered the most and perhaps understood the least, having neither the ideals nor the advantages. Then there are the under-thirties who have never known anything else, who are bewildered and blankly angry because none of the propaganda about the revolution had any personal relevance.

What about the praises for free education and health care? I pleaded. Carlos sighed, You can give people education of course, but what is it worth if you don't allow freedom of thought or action? An educated person here can't think independently. Even obtaining books from outside Cuba is difficult. No one here really knows what the outside world is like. We have Granma, the State published newspaper, which we use for toilet paper.

During my stay in Cuba I had read Granma, the Communist party newspaper. It would be a stretch to call it a newspaper, for it is free of any news. Articles are monologues by party officials fleshing out truisms, such as The quality of education is important for our society.

Carlos continued, “The young question the value of an education. They say, ‘Why study to become a slave of the State and earn \$8.00 a month when by trading cigars on the black market, I can make five times that?’ Also, education is not completely free. Parents have to buy books, paper and pencils for their children. The schools have nothing.

And free healthcare? I asked, “Yes,” Carlos agreed, “Healthcare is free, but the reality is different depending if you have dollars to buy medicine. I have heard that even doctors have not been able to help their own mothers obtain needed care since they lacked dollars for medicines. The excuse is the American blockade, but, of course, anyone knows Cuba could buy cheaper medicines from Mexico. So, where is the medicine? We are broke or Castro steals the money, I don’t know, but I suspect. Propaganda tells us that we are building a biotechnology industry, that we are building more and more hotels for the tourists, yet we Cubans can’t even buy an aspirin. A disgrace!

(Cubans with dollars usually asked me to purchase medicine for them since they could not enter international pharmacies. These medicines were first reserved for the Communist Party Elite and foreign tourists.)

“Why do people accept such frustrations?” I asked. Carlos answered, “Many Cubans outside the country, particularly in Florida, who feel sentimental about their homeland, send large sums of money to their families. It is a paradox, but our government is supported by its enemies in Miami. The money (the biggest source, one-fifth, of foreign exchange) contains what would otherwise be a very difficult situation. Then there are four classes of people in Cuba. The majority consists of the lowest class, the *comemierdas*, the “shit-eaters,” the people who work for around 250 pesos or roughly \$10 dollars per month. Then there are the people who work at the bottom of the tourist market. They have some problems, pay expensive licenses, get into trouble over nothing, get shut down. But mostly they survive. Then there are the top people who work for the government, maybe in tourism or other businesses. These people travel abroad, they have holidays in Varadero, they are very comfortable. The top of the heap is the army, the *chupadores*, the

“bloodsuckers,” “the exploiters who own everything and have everything in their control. Finally, Castro exiles many of the troublemakers, so you have the more passive people left who are just waiting and surviving.”

“Carlos, I read that for Castro the revolution seems bent on creating financial and living equality for Cuba’s 11 million people. To Castro, the ideology suffers when the elements of a free market appear. These are the seeds of capitalism and if allowed to grow, mass corruption will follow and things will return to their pre-1959 state overnight,” I prodded. Carlos sarcastically replied, “The alienation between the government and the people stems from this attitude because Castro doesn’t trust the Cuban people to care for and maintain the “Revolution’s integrity”. It’s a “People’s Revolution” that the people have no say or part in.

I thanked Carlos for his insights and he offered to take me to visit his family the following night. He then invited me to accompany him to a Cuban disco. I was depressed at what I had heard, but whenever my gloom crept in, cheerfulness in Cuba always seemed to erupt. The situation was sad, even desperate, but Cubans levy most things with jokes: “Cuba has all the ingredients for a paradise, but Castro doesn’t know how to cook.” Eager to experience the music and dance of Cuba, I set off with Carlos.

We enter a Casa de Trova (a music house) where the walls pulse with Rhumba. The crowd dances side by side or in tight pairs, putting on a spontaneous, erotic display. Women swivel their hips in a maneuver appropriately referred to as la batidora (the blender) or do el tembleque (the shake), punching the air and rippling their torsos as if they have just received electroshock. I stand with mouth agape and stare.

Cuban women are striking. Tan muy Linda! (So very beautiful!) Centuries of mingling Spanish, indigenous, and African blood have created skin colors that range from creamy white to dark chocolate. Noses are aquiline; cheekbones are well-defined. Eyes are almond-shaped and framed with long, black lashes. Cuban men worship las nalgas cubanas-the Cuban Ass. Excess flesh is no sin. They celebrate it in all of its glory. I noticed that Cubanas sway, they don’t walk. To my right is a large Mulatta gyrating her ample endowments in a glistening, sweaty fury. She has swaddled her galactic ass in pink spandex and stuffed her papaya-shaped breasts into polka dot halter-

tops. A bouffant of Afro-mermaid hair spills across her body. Now I know that sensuality is a state of mind, not body.

In Communist Cuba, I found shortages of everything except ironies. The Bay of Pigs is a beach resort now. The Isle of Youth, long the most famous Alcatraz of the Caribbean, now entices visitors with its International Scuba Center. Havana has the ramshackle glamour of an abandoned stage set. That sense of wistfulness, of a life arrested in mid-breath, is everywhere in Cuba: the boarded up stores, Hemingway's house left exactly as he had left it, the unread Field and Sports Illustrated scattered across the bed. The buildings all around, unpainted and unrepaired, speak of departed hopes. I often thought, "Why ask the time when time has stopped here?" But I knew there were changes, conditions in Cuba that were causing people to question themselves, their government and their faith.

I was going to meet Carlos' family. I strolled from the decaying mansions of Vedado towards the teeming tenements of Centro Havana. Havana has a fascinating mix of architecture, which includes churches from the 16th century to the art deco of the 1950's. I wish I could spend three months photographing the buildings of this city.

As I dodge a rickshaw, I hear a tremendous rumble, like an avalanche or landslide. Derrumbe! Derrumbe! I hear people scream. Where a four-story building used to stand is now a heap of cinders, splintered wood and dust. A crowd is rapidly gathering. "Oh no," I think, "Could it be?" Through the haze of dust, I glimpse what could be a hand sticking up through the rubble. I am snapping pictures when a policeman yells, "Prohibido! Prohibido!" The policeman knows that it is against the law to take photos of these catastrophes. Castro doesn't want the foreign press to make negative propaganda of Cuba's collapsing buildings. Or is it because Castro can't see the irony symbolized in his crumbling "Revolution?" I duck into the crowd, ashamed at my voyeurism. "Why didn't I jump in and heave the bricks off of that poor soul?" I pondered. My eyes sting from the dust, but I notice former occupants of the building huddled to my left holding each other, crying, wondering who of their family, friends and neighbors had been killed.

These people had next to nothing and had now lost the rest of their possessions to the elements of erosion, time, lack of maintenance, rain and the salty, corrosive sea air. I asked a man at the edge of the crowd what would happen to the families. He replied, "When the buildings collapse, the

families are moved to the suburbs in Guanabacoa and Habana del Este. They will be promised a new home, but that will never happen, perhaps in ten years. Now when they go to work, they must pay a peso to park their bicycles and cars at the empty lot where their homes used to be. Havana is becoming one big parqueo (parking lot).”

The government’s own study estimates that nearly 25% of the buildings housing the 2.2 million Havana residents, or more than 20% of Cuba’s population, are in poor condition. If a minor earthquake ever shakes Havana, many of the city’s buildings would be leveled within seconds. Foreign investment is helping to restore a few of the oldest buildings at the center of tourist areas, but this is only a tiny portion. Havana would need billions of new investment to restore itself to its pre-revolutionary glory.

Shaken by my experience, I hurried towards my meeting with Carlos’ family. Cecilia met me at the door. She was 65, the mother of Carlos, and behind her were her sister, Juanita, her nephew, Juan and her aunt, Marsala. Carlos was not there, because the police had arrested him. No one knew what for.

I was there to learn what the older generations thought of Cuba and the Revolution. Cecilia, a light colored mulatto, had come of age when the Revolution began in 1959; she had lived most of her adult life during Castro’s reign. She graduated from Havana University and became an Economics Professor until she quit to sell coffee and rent out a room in her apartment.

“La vida esta un poco deficil, verdad?” (Life is a bit difficult?) I ventured.

“La Lucha” (the struggle), she said. “The people are tired. The embargo is used as an excuse, but that is an excuse for everything. We have been made to feel that we are at war for forty years and we are tired. What kind of war continues for forty years? You, foreigners, can never really know what it is like since you are always free to leave, to return to your own country. Cubans have no other country. This is home.”

“Why is Fidel always mentioned and no one else?” I ask. Cecilia responds, “Fidel has an iron lock on control as President of the Republic of Cuba, the first secretary of the PCC’s Central Committee, chairman of the Council of Ministers, and the commander-in-chief of the Cuban Armed Forces. That is why he is called “El Lider Maximo” (the maximum leader). His only threat

is the wavering faith of the people. Castro has turned Cuba into a Fidelista state, one where Marxist-Leninism has been loosely grafted onto Cuban nationalism, then used as an instrument of control by one man. Fidel once promised free elections as a stalling tactic while he consolidated his power. He will lie, betray, and kill to remain in power. His megalomania and obduracy in following a failed system is leading us to ruin. Whether every Cuban starves, every monument crumbles doesn't concern him. He is totally out of touch with the Cuban reality." "How?" I asked. Cecilia answers, "By refusing to allow the free expressions of Cubans to create, trade, buy and sell with one another and with foreigners, he hinders Cubans from empowering and sustaining themselves. Castro's Revolution is bankrupt because he refuses to cede power to his own people. In trying to control everything, he has ended up disenfranchising his support.

"His failed experiments have devastated the economy. For example, when la zafra--the sugar harvest-- failed, the people lost faith in Castro's ability to run the economy. Now the State is closing many Centrales, (Sugar Refineries) due to the high cost of inefficient production caused by lack of capital investment leaving many unemployed in the countryside. Rural poverty throughout Cuba is increasing because sugar is on the decline and without dollar commodity crops to replace it, the campesinos (farmers) have no alternatives for making a living. And ironically those poor, unemployed workers are prevented by law from moving to where they could get work.

"Isn't Castro liberating the economy slightly by allowing some private businesses?" I asked. Cecilia laughed, "Oh, you mean capitalism frio, or cold capitalism. That has been a result of a battle between reformers and hardliners in Castro's ruling class." "Ruling Class?" I interrupt. Cecilia continued, "Yes, Castro has built a privileged ruling class based on top government officials, the security apparatus and the military. Who do you think rides around Havana in black Mercedes? Obviously, with Cuba having two unequal currencies, the peso and the dollar, there will be huge differences between those who have dollars and those who don't.

"Reformers think that Cuba will become so poor that there will be little left to steal so they have pushed for some openings in the economy. Before 1993, Cubans caught with even one dollar were sentenced to four years in prison while now dollars keep Cuba afloat. But if the people are too successful like

the farmer's markets in the early 1980's, Castro stamps them out. Currently, private businesses like casa particulars (Bed & Breakfast lodging) or private restaurants face ruinously high taxation and cumbersome licensing regulations to protect inefficient State hotels. (Casa particular owners told me that they had to pay their taxes \$200 to \$300 per month up front to the government whether they earned revenues or not). Advertising is restricted so we as business owners have to pay middlemen like Jiniteros to find customers while the government tries to arrest them. We suffer the indignity of contradictions upon contradictions."

Cecila continued, "The government wants you out of business so you can work for them at 200 pesos a month. When I worked at the university I saw that the harder I worked, every year, I am in the same place. Why should I be a slave for the government? So, I quit and began in the black market. This is the Cuban black market reality. It is a web and the entire population operates in it. It is a matter of survival. In Cuba, everything is illegal. Everybody is committing a crime to survive. Not all the laws are enforced, but when the State wishes to, it only has to find out which crime is being committed. For example, without paying absurdly high license fees, any making of dollars is considered "illegal enrichment." Farmers can't sell excess milk to poor neighbors. Selling privately is against the law and butchering a steer will lead to 7 years in prison for "illegal slaughter." The real crime is competing against the State. All dollars belong to Castro's elite; nobody is allowed to make any money here. They want every dollar for themselves."

I mentioned that I had met a man who was serving 12 months for selling lobster on the black market. It was another case of a Cuban being punished for interfering with the State's monopoly.

"Yeah," Cecelia's nephew piped up, "Here you can be arrested for anything. Or nothing." "Well then, why doesn't Fidel confiscate everything and have everyone work for the State?" I countered. Cecila replied, "Castro already tried that in 1970 with government controlled taxis. Then the transportation system collapsed. Think about it. As a driver, whenever there was a mechanical breakdown or flat tire, why fix it? The drivers left it to the government mechanics while they sat home to collect 200 pesos a month. Every taxi was in the shop.

“Don’t think of Cuba in terms of capitalism, socialism, or communism. Those are just words. Cuba is the perfect laboratory to observe the destruction of wealth and lives--a country--because people lack freedom to think, speak, and create for themselves. Nor can we exchange our goods and services with each other or foreigners. Cuba suffers under the rule of an aging tyrant, bereft of any consideration over the agonies of his long-suffering people. If only we had a rule of law and human and civil rights.”

“At least you have the libreta,” I offered. The libreta, a ration card for food and basics, was created in 1962 to provide a safety net for the population. These ration cards typically had enough food to last a family of four about 7 to 10 days. Meat, fish and vegetables were not included on the libretas, so Cubans had to find other sources of food.

Cecila shot me a withering glare. Now the words came tumbling out of her, “But we don’t want to be given anything. We only wish to be free to find for ourselves what we need. We want freedom and independence to make our own lives. We are sick of being treated like children who don’t know what is best for ourselves. You can’t imagine a life without freedom!”

Juan joins in, “Have you ever seen Castro clutching his libreta while waiting 4 hours in line for a bowl of watered down soup? Where’s Fidel?”

Juanita turned to her sister, “Please -- the neighbors might hear us.” “I don’t care. What difference if I am in prison or not. We are all waiting, waiting for something to change, for Fidel to die. We are living lost lives,” Cecila yelled.

I braced for storm troopers. Surely by now the neighborhood watch, the CDR or Comites para Defensa La Revolucion, had filed their report. In 1991, Rapid Response Detachments were formed under the Ministry of the Interior to deal with public expressions of dissent. These brigades were there to beat square pegs into round holes. These pogroms were camouflaged under the guise of spontaneous reaction of outraged Cubans. Would I be dragged into a waiting van and then to interrogation? Or would I be flung into prison with not even a show trial to present a vague charge of “dangerousness” against me. Would I be able to appeal?

“Are there many political prisoners in jail? What happens if you are accused of a crime?” I asked. My nervousness had me glancing for exits.

“Courts are not independent. There is no concept of individual rights or due process. The private practice of the law is not permitted, and the accused can’t choose their own defense. In Cuba, the judge reads you your sentence and punishment and then the court presents the evidence!” said Cecilia. My research concurred that according to Article 121 of the Cuban Constitution the judiciary is charged with “maintaining and strengthening socialist legality, not protecting individual rights.” There goes my defense, I thought.

(Four Cubans told me of their friends who had been jailed and tortured for various offenses such as “disrespect, dangerousness, and unjust enrichment.”)

“Why are there so many jiniteras (prostitutes) in Havana,” I wondered out loud.

Juanita exclaimed, “Havana is one big garbage can. Jiniteras are a national disgrace (Spanish for “jockeys” or Cuban for prostitutes), but Castro is turning the island into a brothel. Women are selling what foreigners want-- their bodies. The women are desperate for money to buy things that they need like underwear, cosmetics, and shoes, and for that they need dollars. The government knows this. The police exploit and beat up the girls. They arrest girls who won’t give them money and sex. Yes, Cuban women enjoy sex, but women with the freedom to choose wouldn’t risk disease, injury or arrest to sleep with drunk, fat, middle-aged tourists flocking to the island. There are girls under 12 years of age selling themselves. These girls are trying to survive. This crazy system is impoverishing the country. Castro and his henchmen are driving the people to desperation.”

(Later, an English tourist boasted to me that Cuba had the world’s cheapest prostitutes. The women that I saw on the street ranged from professionals to a college professor moonlighting for a date. I asked one jinitera why foreigners were more interesting to her than Cuban men. “Cuban men are boring,” she said. “Why?” I probed. “They don’t have money; you do,” she leered. The attraction wasn’t my scraggly-toothed smile, but the dollars in my pocket. I was a walking dollar sign.

When I entered a Havana disco, I saw dozens of beautiful women looking to pounce. To my left two mulattas squirmed in the laps of two pasty white Germans, one of which looked like he needed a C-section to relieve his bursting gut, while to my right several cologne drenched Italians attempted to keep up with their “dates” on the dance floor. For the women there, their goal was to extract presents, dinner and perhaps even develop a husband to get them off the island. Economic necessity--not love--seemed to be the driving force behind the trysts.

(During a foray down to the docks of Havana, I met three young girls who were trolling for tourists. I traded a glance at one of the girl’s ID cards for a coke. She was 11 years old. For a country that prides itself on protecting and educating its children, child prostitution indicated a new low for the “Revolution.

I asked Cecilia, “Why doesn’t Fidel know what is going on? After all, he stamped out prostitution during the beginning of the Revolution. “Cecilia threw down two clippings from a 1992 Castro speech about Prostitution. The quotes read, “There are no women forced to sell themselves to a man, to a foreigner, to a tourist. Those who do so, do it on their own, voluntarily, without any need for it. We can say that they are highly educated hookers and quite healthy, because we are a country with the lowest number of AIDs cases...Therefore, there is truly no tourism healthier than Cuba’s “Women become jiniteras because they like sex.”- Fidel Castro’s 1992 speech to the National Assembly.

(Leave it to Castro to turn any social disaster into propaganda for his sick Revolution, I thought. Castro was either deeply cynical or completely delusional).

I was near the end of my rope. Every question brought a further pummeling of the Revolution. I turned towards Aunt Marsala to ask, “What was life before the Revolution?” Marsala said, “We had little money but there was always plenty of cheap food. Socially it was chaos: Mafia and corruption everywhere. Batista was a butcher. The whole country wanted him out. There was no honesty in the government or in the country; no law. If you did something wrong and you were rich, you bought yourself out of the problem, even if it was murder. Now it is much better in that respect, but not in any other.”

“Those that fought to overthrow Batista and who wanted democracy were betrayed early. Those people have all been exiled, jailed or killed. Those that stayed and believed in the Revolution are paying the price now. We are starving on this island prison. We live a lie to survive. Castro has betrayed everyone. Oh God, what will become of us?”

“One more thing,” I asked. “Is Internet access available?” “Ordinary Cubans are denied access to the Internet. It is just another liberty that is denied without reason or discussion,” replied Cecilia.

I gratefully thanked Carlos’ family for their hospitality and the risks taken to share their thoughts. With only a few days before boarding a plane back to New York, I planned an excursion to Pinar del Rio, the finest tobacco-growing region in the world.

The warm sea air blew against my face as I held a cold beer and listened to thumping salsa music while driving west along the coastal road. Three giggling Cuban women, nurses picked up hitchhiking, sat in the back of my rented Fiat mocking my singing in broken Spanish while palm trees breezed by. The tropical colors of the blue sea, the green forests and white beaches were spectacular. “Could this be paradise?” I wondered. But my conversations with Cubans about the reality of their lives kept interrupting my thoughts.

Along the highway, there were Cubans of all ages sitting or standing under bridges and walking along the road hoping to catch a ride to their destination. Despite the long distances between major towns, public transport was next to nil. Some old women held children under the broiling sun while hundreds of Cubans lined the highway. Since Cubans were prohibited from buying cars without a special license and the government was not providing more bus service, Cubans had to walk, pedal bikes or hitch rides from tourists or State vehicles again, more contradictions upon contradictions. The lack of transport caused economic chaos. Crops were left to rot in fields, workers couldn’t reach jobs, and supplies couldn’t find markets. My car was always packed with Cubans of all ages.

I drove by numerous abandoned sugar refineries and commercial trucks were scarce. Cuba seemed on the verge of bankruptcy. Only a paranoid would bother to look both ways before crossing the highway since there were few, if any, cars on the road. Back in the States, I had read that Cuba

was billions of dollars in debt to Russia and other trading partners. Cuba has reneged on paying for goods from Canadian, Italian and Spanish companies in order to cough up the cash needed to buy American grain and chicken. Castro knows that food riots in the streets of Havana and Santiago de Cuba would topple tourism and dent his propaganda machine.

During my travels, I spoke with farmers, college professors, students, policemen, military, clerks, doctors, and housewives. Everyone complained about the economy. “If only there were jobs that paid more money; if only life were not so hard,” they said. Though many did not know the cause of such an economic mess, they wanted more freedoms and less interference from government. But, likewise, few seemed to desire an abandonment of free healthcare or schooling.

Driving towards Pinar del Rio, I gave two black soldiers a lift. I wondered why Castro, who had ordered the end of racism early in his revolution, had top leadership as white as the Ku Klux Klan. These two men said that blacks were hassled much more by the police than whites. While I often saw police ask darker skinned Cubans for their identification papers, I did not witness tension between races.

While in the town of Vinales, I met a man who took me to a house formally lived in by a political prisoner. I took a picture of the prisoner’s house because he had written with black letters on the outside wall about his ordeal. He had suffered electroshock torture in a psychiatric hospital for telling the truth about Cuba. “Cuba is ruled by fascists, Castro and Che,” he had scrawled. When I asked neighbors where I might find this man, they said the police had taken him to the hospital for more “therapy.” This was one Cuban who objected to being part of Cuba’s “free” health care system.

I encountered the first cases of malnutrition when I helped a young Cuban woman carry her sick child back to her village outside Jaguey Grande, a center for citrus growing. Three black children had the orange tinged hair of malnourishment. Their mother said that the family ate mostly rice and beans without fruit, vegetables and meat. Their shacks lacked running water, electricity or sewage systems. Her husband was unemployed and had left months ago in search of work. Life was grim; not even the crumbs of the revolution were reaching this village. Perhaps this was what Cecilia was talking about when she mentioned rural poverty. Bleached, blubbery

Europeans on their package tours would never cross paths with these children.

On my drive back to Havana, I couldn't resist stopping to photograph faded, torn and broken billboards proclaiming propaganda such as "Socialismo o Muerte!" (Socialism or Death!) or "Hasta La Victoria Siempre" (Always onward towards victory). One brave graffiti artist had crossed out the o and written Socialismo e Muerte (Socialism is Death!). The irony was delicious. The contradictions and ironies assaulted you every day while living in Cuba.

Back in Havana a day before my flight home, I revisited my cousin, Garcia. He asked me what I thought of Cuba. I didn't have the heart to reply that while I loved Cuba and Cubans, I loathed the hunger of people living on reduced rations, the lack of transport, the collapsing buildings, Cubans held in prison for the crime of selling an onion to their neighbors, the huge investment in a security apparatus designed to crush dissent, and the total denial of property rights, free expression, due process and individual rights. Or that Jose Marti would roll in his grave being associated with Castro since Jose Marti sought democratic rights for Cubans and national sovereignty for Cuba, not a tyrannical despot like Castro. I could have piled on, but I thanked him for his hospitality and wished him well.

After three weeks of travel, I was appalled by the deprivation Cubans battled daily. I was amazed at their ability to resolve, to survive through ingenuity, resourcefulness and the help of family and friends. Cuba's salvation lies in its people's ability to create and be resourceful. Cubans had suffered confiscation of their properties and freedoms in exchange for some equality-free schools and hospitals. But as the subsidies of the Soviet Union evaporated and Castro's choking regulations throttled the economy, Cuba struggled to fund these services. Cubans are now paying a terrible price in constantly dwindling privileges while being ruled by Fidel and his party elite. Cubans must break laws to survive, thus tearing the moral grounds of the society. They live in a tropical gulag on a financially bankrupt island.

If power is fun, then absolute power must be absolute fun for Castro as he manipulates his levers of control. As a pragmatist, Castro has loosened slightly the State's total control of the economy to allow farmers' markets and limited self-employment. But when the private market economy shows more vigor than the official, socialist economy, he halts reforms abruptly.

Any entrepreneur caught being too successful is purged of their goods and profits through Castro's "unjust enrichment" law.

Yet, Castro can only distribute and consume what has been produced. His dictatorship discourages, reduces and disrupts production while, by contrast, capitalism tends to maximize production. Declining production destroys Cuba's dwindling capital base, which in turn reduces production further. Cuba is in an economic death spiral, but Castro is too arrogant to face the truth of his failed social experiment.

Many Cubans have voted on the success of Castro's revolution by leaving Cuba through exile or death. More than 15% of Cubans today live outside the island, and Cuba ranks second in the Western Hemisphere in suicide behind one of the Scandinavian countries.

I met young Cubans who were either waiting for Castro to take his biological exit or seeking a way out of Cuba. No one mentioned a possible democratic transition, not while Fidel still breathes. I asked, "What happens after Fidel dies?" Some feared a civil war while others did not know since they have never lived under any ruler but El Lider. The young do not see a viable alternative as Castro ruthlessly stomps out any opposition. Currently, confusion and anomie has filled the vacuum left by the collapse of the egalitarian promise.

I believe Castro has no intentions of relinquishing his power to micromanage the lives of Cubans and of holding free and fair elections. As one Cuban waiter told me, "We are all puppets on a string."

Castro's tyranny can be camouflaged in the name of a revolution for the people, yet Fidel is accountable to no one. Does building schools or a limited healthcare system justify the imprisonment, murder, exile and torture of tens of thousands of Cubans? Though Castro has not made it to the big leagues of tyrants such as Hitler, Stalin or Pol Pot. Castro is too subtle to have skulls piling up on his beaches. Castro has inflicted these crimes for 44 years and outlasted 9 U.S. Presidents while sitting 90 miles from our shores. The international press focuses more on the hardships of the US embargo against Cuba and Castro's next meeting with a foreign dignitary than on the prisoners rotting in Castro's jails or the difficult lives of ordinary Cubans. That is wrong.

What hope is there for the future? While I know that while neither lifting nor keeping the embargo will remove Castro, Cuba is changing under the surface. The older generation such as my cousin, Garcia, who still believe, are dying, while the young grow in disillusionment and frustration, longing for more freedom. Each day brings Castro closer to his end while a political demographic time bomb ticks away. Cuba will change, but how?

I pray for a peaceful transition.

Note: Carlos still had not been released from jail by the time I left Cuba. Neither his family nor I know why and where he is being held.

Posted by Val Prieto at January 26, 2005 09:14 AM

### ***Comments***

What an article! I am forwarding the link to my list -- especially the scoffers and unbelievers. Thanks for another great post, Val! Invaluable!

Posted by: [George L. Moneo](#) at January 26, 2005 05:46 PM

Tremendous article, impact is like thunder. A must read for those who are ignorant about what Cuba is going through and the reasons and reality of the tyrants posse. Wow! Lots of explanations of the reasons and results of the failed revolution. Loved the details!

LP

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