

III. People

'Entre Col y Col...Una Lechuga'

He's laughing so hard he's shaking and I can see the black, pitted holes where teeth once rooted. Peering into the rot, I wonder how he eats carrots or the gooey slabs of peanut brittle hawked at bus stops around town. The moon is still high and bright as trucks peel off the *Autopista*, catching the laughing man in their headlights before trundling on to market. In these pre-coffee, pre-dawn hours, the laughing man is not alone. No matter the time, place, or circumstance, somewhere there's a Cuban burdened with a sack of potatoes, stranded by the side of the road, or simply hungry who's also laughing. Troubles are smoothed here with this tonic for the soul.

There are the two girls sent running, giggling, into the street when an unexpected wave crashes over the Malecón. Darting from the path of a '46 Plymouth, they find each other's hand again as they leap back onto the sidewalk. Their eyes are dancing, delighted, while salt water drips from the hems of their school uniforms. A student on lunch break whistles his approval in the direction of their strong, but still spindly legs. Under his confident gaze, with eyes like agates working up towards their chests and faces, the friends break into gales of laughter and saunter on hand in hand.

Joyful and energetic, Cuban laughter is infectious, instinctive. It smoothes troubles, but also creates fellowship. Every hug, favor and joke unifies, helping keep it –

and us –together. Cuban solidarity protects the island like chain mail, functioning as ingrained and sacred scripture. Neighbors arrive at my door unannounced proffering limes and honeyed squash fritters, young men guide octogenarians across the street, and public phones with money remaining are handed to the person next in line. Stoked by Cold War fires extinguished almost everywhere else and against all odds, the human spirit thrives. Like family in the ideal, Cubans stick together, watching each other's back, lending a hand or leg up, and pitching in; it's no coincidence that Cuban immigrants have had such success in the US. Through squabbles and dark, hard-kept secrets, Cubans stand as a unit, ready, willing, and able to circle the wagons.

As dysfunctional as it is sacrosanct, Cuban society-cum-kin is forever battling internal demons. Here, indolence and inertia are the norm as 'hurry up and wait' mixes with 'what next?' to paralyze the island. Like an ant trapped in amber, we're frozen in our languor. Soap operas, gossip, church, salsa, manicures, hair dying, baseball, dominoes, and kite-flying are all passionate pastimes. They're how we save ourselves from being bored to tears. *Entre col y col, una lechuga* – literally between all that cabbage, some lettuce – is the Cuban way of saying variety is the spice of life. Here, going to the movies becomes an act of self-preservation, while that hushed conversation about Ramón's new underage girlfriend breaks the work-cook-clean grind.

Intellectual release and freedom, meanwhile, are found in humor, that particularly impassioned and Cuban show of mental acuity and creativity, cleverness, self-effacement, and irony. When not eclipsed by a healthy dose of denial, Cubans recognize that their revolutionary experiment has led them up the proverbial creek without a paddle – brilliantly evidenced by their jokes. The revolutionary slogan 'Socialism or Death!' for

instance, is bastardized to 'Socialism or Socialism!' and Fidel is (was) sometimes referred to as The Onion because each time he talks, you cry.

Entire nights are passed sharing jokes, and as the rum bottle empties, the crowd gets rowdier, the jokes raunchier, and the laughter louder. Cubans are known as '*gritones*,' prone to *gritería*, which means they shout, yell, cry, hoot, holler, and scream. Loud music and laughter bridge the sorrowful waters all Cubans have tread. With these same melodies and humor, they sail into the deep sea of their future.

Until then, the clackety racket of shuffling dominoes sets a backbeat to the '*¡Oye! ¡Oye!*' one friend shouts amiably to another. Charanga Habanera blasts from an upstairs window and a young girl sings along, bumping and grinding to the beat when a car pulls up. The driver lays on his horn. "*¡¡¡CLAUDIA!!!*" a neighbor bellows from below, once, twice, the third time the loudest until Claudia yells back "*¡YA VOY!*" from five flights up. Next door, the baby is crying uncontrollably as his mother steps out to work the night shift. Meanwhile, his dad turns to his cousin and booms "have you heard the one about Fidel and the campesino?"

The buses start rolling up at around five. Birds are already chirping though night's darkness has yet to lift, and I can smell my neighbor's coffee brewing. Honking horns and gleeful singsong reach us from the street as truck after truck after truck rumbles past, their flatbeds a sea of straw hats. They've been pouring into Havana for the big show since before three this morning and the clamor, combined with anticipation, make sleep elusive.

After so many years of this, our routine is rote: half-awake we dress, make coffee, butter crackers, and take our rock hard water bottles from the freezer. Mechanically, we grab hats and slather on sun block, throwing our supplies in a knapsack - it promises to be a long morning under the punishing Cuban sun.

The night sky has already bled purple, then pink and orange into dawn by the time we're on the street angling for a bus. All my neighbors look different from their workaday selves: Grandma Sylvia is sporty in her sneakers and jeans and even Tania - famous for her spiked heels and micro-minis courtesy of one Italian lover or another - wears sensible shoes and a sun hat. The street teems with groups of factory workers in matching t-shirts, moms with babies strapped to their chests, and young boys excited to be sprung from school for the rally.

Lanky, whistle-blowing cops usher dangerously-crowded buses to the curb, convinced that a few more people can still squeeze on. Today, few private cars ply the main highway leading to Havana, now choked with long lines of trucks and buses boisterous with the faithful, making their way towards Vedado. It is after six and already the morning heat is steaming off the pavement when we finally get on a bus. The bumper to bumper traffic goes from a crawl to a standstill and the stagnant air inside the bus hangs heavy with cheap cologne. My neighbor works her fan, wafting ripples of perfumed soap my way.

After twenty minutes we've only gone three blocks and our tolerance erodes towards impatience. No one can remember the last time Havana saw this type of traffic and the bus chatter quickly turns to reminiscing of marches past. Tens of thousands for Elian and the Pope, many more to protest the Helms-Burton legislation. Cubans mobilize

proudly, enthusiastically: 45 years experience protesting US policies designed to choke or change you will do that. Still, each rally feels different from those that came before and it's especially true today since George W Bush is viewed as even more cruel than his father.

Nearly an hour later and only a mile or so along, we decide to get off and walk, even though it will add two miles to an already laboriously long parade route. We wade into an ocean of people heading north and west to the Malecón. The pulsating crowd waves small Cuban flags on wooden sticks or big placards depicting Bush as a Nazi, complete with an em dash moustache and SS uniform. We grab flags from a man handing them out in the middle of the street, the river of people flowing around him, and stop for one peso coffee shots on a street corner.

"Hey Chino!" I call out, catching sight of our neighbor leaning against a chipped pillar.

"How's it going?" he asks, kissing my cheek and clapping my husband on the back.

"It's hot, eh?!" I comment in that Cuban way that says 'Damn! I love this infernal place.'

We take pulls of icy fruit drink from Chino's thermos before melting away into the burgeoning crowd. All around us people are dancing to coronet blasts fattened by a *cajón* backbeat and laughing despite the heat, long walk, and little sleep the night before. It's just past 8 o'clock when we're near enough to the Malecón to smell the sea. Helicopters whoop overhead, drawing our collective gaze to a black man joyously two-stepping on a rooftop overlooking the millions.

The sun is already punishing the crowd by the time we push as close to the parade route as possible, alongside the fancy ice cream parlor facing the Malecón. Mothers console their children with rationed sips of water from old plastic soda bottles wrapped in newspapers to keep it coldish. "Hang in there," they tell the kids as they hop from swollen foot to swollen foot. More people are arriving all the time, packing us in to a tight, motionless mass.

We can't see anything beyond the backs and heads in front of us and that nauseating flutter of claustrophobia threatens. I look around to shake the trapped feeling. Fat beads of sweat tremble on the neck folds of the woman to my left. Just in front of her a devilishly handsome young man with hazel eyes and *café con leche* skin rearranges his arms around his girlfriend. His thinning red t-shirt from marches past reads 'En Defensa del Socialismo,' but the only thing he's defending right now is his girlfriend's ass from the feral stares of men in the growing, surging crowd. Reedy but round in the right places, with hip bones poking out between low rider jeans and a tight pink camisole, she might be a model somewhere else. She's laughing in her boyfriend's ear, showing bright, white teeth. The sweat bead finally drops into the folds of the woman's neck nearby. I fight the urge to look at her watch or mine. The wait feels interminable.

Nearly three hours have passed since we staked our claim in front of the ice cream parlor and we're no closer to the official parade route. It's as if a million of us showed up at the DMV together. Though we're weary, anticipation mixes with the salt breeze to create an emotional cocktail that carries us through. My gaze wanders to a shrinking old lady on my right and I almost burst out laughing, punch drunk from the wait, heat, and hunger. She's wearing cushy orthopedic shoes and a polyester wash 'n wear housecoat –

the uniform for women of a certain age here. But what tickles me is her vintage Diane Von Furstenberg headscarf, tastefully festooned with mauve grapes and muted green leaves. Surreal and odd is the little old lady in classic couture waiting for Fidel. She is looking faint as her husband guides her crepey elbow to the curb. When she sits, a pissy smell rises from the gutter. My nose is wrinkling from the stink when the loudspeakers boom, "*¡¡Compañeros! y Compañeras!!*"

The crowd falls silent. The Diane Von Furstenberg lady stands to attention and the girlfriend breaks from her lover's embrace. Rapt faces point towards the voice, half a mile off at the "*Protestodromo*," but coming in loud and clear over the monitors at our corner.

It is a rousing speech, reverberating with that ardent conviction I'd only heard about despite witnessing hours of Fidelista discourse over the years. Styled as an open letter to President Bush, the personalized rhetoric is enormously persuasive – much more so in its way than the laundry list of statistics usually issuing forth. The atmosphere is electric, the crowd around me conducting the energy in silent exaltation. In under 45 minutes, the legendary orator transforms an impossibly bored multitude into a riveted crowd, going wild in its condemnation of US policy. When he tells Bush "you cannot mention the word democracy...everyone knows you became President of the United States through fraud," a roar rises from the crowd, along with a million little Cuban flags. The Malecón is transformed into a rippling sea of red, white and blue. Chants of "Fidel! Fidel! Fidel!" erupt when he bellows, "Cuba fights on the side of life in the world; you fight on the side of death." Then he brings down the hammer, giving me a glimpse of those heady days in the early 60's: "Since you have decided that the die is cast, I have the

pleasure of saying farewell like the Roman gladiators poised to fight in the arena: Hail Caesar! Those who are about to die salute you!" The cheers are deafening and the crowd waves their flags ecstatically as the municipal band strikes up. In these parts, Bush is still known as Caesar.

Suddenly, after more than four hours, we're moving towards the Malecón. It only takes a few minutes for our small crowd of thousands to feed into the tens of thousands streaming along the waterfront. The breeze tempers the unrelenting sun as we pass the Hotel Nacional and the turreted mansions that were once the seaside refuges of the rich. Finally, our goal is in sight: concrete and sterile, the US Interests Section looks like a high security prison, incongruous among the dowdy, chipped paint abodes of today's rank and file. Members of the Young (and Not So) Communists line this part of the route, keeping the crowd compacted for full visual effect, encouraging us to wave our flags high. On the Malecón wall, the international press angles for that elusive best shot: the crowd is so enormous, undulating several miles from Vedado to Havana Vieja, it's hard to capture. A helicopter buzzes the seawall and journalists hanging out the doorless maw capture the spectacle for world viewing, should any network choose to air it.

The crowd is spreading out and breaking up, heading home for a nap or to a cafeteria for cheap, watery beer and burning shots of rum. There is always a fiesta somewhere after rallies, when people get together to tell jokes, analyze events, share a meal, and get shitfaced.

"Do you want to go to Caridad's party?" I ask my husband as we pass the famous billboard: 'Señor Imperialists: We are Fearless!'

"Sure," he responds.

Caridad lives in Vedado, Havana's historic suburb that was once the playground of American mobsters. An intellectual and socialite, she loves to hold court for all her activist and artist cohorts in her grand home on a tree-lined block. We rock on her porch gossiping over plastic plates laden with starchy croquettes and macaroni salad studded with ham and pineapple. I have learned never to arrive at a Cuban party hungry.

Everyone is abuzz about the speech.

"*Tiró duro*," Enrique says and we agree it was hard hitting.

"*Fue genial*," offers Omar, who is not prone to praise, and even less likely to say that something is genius.

Everyone is rapt as my husband describes our three-hour bottleneck near the ice cream parlor. Marta, meanwhile, relates her smooth sail – 30 minutes – from start to finish.

"You have to go straight to 23rd Street and hook up with the electrician's union or the women's federation. Attach yourself to them and you can march right on down," she tells me with a wink.

As the rum flows, outlasting the cola mixers by far, the women start cleaning up. Guests fill plastic "doggie" bags with croquettes, cake and macaroni salad – a Cuban party tradition dating back to colonial times – and a few couples dance to Van Van coming from the boom box.

"Hey!" Humberto says. "Have you heard the one about the Cuban and St Peter?"

Even those who already know the punch line begin dragging chairs closer in...

Juan Carlos is greeted by St Peter at the pearly gates.

"Welcome my son. You are being granted the choice. Would you prefer to spend eternity in Heaven or Hell?"

"What's the difference?" JC asks.

"I'll show you," offers St Peter, waving his arm before JC.

A placid lake dotted with angel-filled gondolas magically appears. Harp music tinkles about as the boats cut gracefully across the water. The sun is shining and blond, cherub children are romping on grassy slopes nearby.

St Peter waves his arm again and the heavenly scene is replaced by a fiery, red womb, writhing with sexy mulattas in G-strings. Gesturing erotically with bottles of rum, they're surrounded by men of every hue, including a few of JC's neighbors. Young studs beat out a rumba on congas and bongos, infusing the scene with hot energy.

"I'll take that one!" shouts Juan Carlos, pointing to the steaming party down below.

He is zapped to hell.

After a week of drinking, dancing and humping the mulattas to the thumping rumba, JC begins having doubts. After a second week of debauchery, he pleads for an audience with St Peter.

"Back so soon?" he asks when JC arrives at the gates. "What's the matter, my son?"

"I've changed my mind. I want to come up here. Down there is too much like Cuba: a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there."

"¡Está buenísimo!" crows Omar, already in his cups.

"How about the one where Bush and Fidel meet?" I venture.

"Yes! Tell that one," my husband encourages.

President Bush and Fidel are making history in an unprecedented meeting at Camp David.

Fidel: Tell me, Señor Bush. When are you going to give me back Guantánamo?

Bush: When you give me back Florida.

"How about Fidel and the thirsty campesino?" Pedrito asks.

"Oh, that's a great one," says María Elena with those endearing, mischievous eyes that have conquered many.

With his customary hospitable and equitable manner, Fidel receives into his offices a very humble campesino from the remote countryside. He has traveled days to arrive in these hallowed Havana halls.

"Comandante," he says, "I am very hungry."

Fidel responds, "I understand, compañero. Here, drink some water." The hunched farmer takes the glass offered to him and drinks.

"Thank you Comandante, but I am very hungry."

Fidel responds, "I understand, my friend. Here, drink some water," and he extends another full glass of water to the campesino, who gulps it down.

"Jefe, I am very, very hungry," the man says.

"Yes compañero," Fidel responds kindly. "Here, drink this water," and the campesino obeys.

"Tell me, my friend. Would you like something to eat?" Fidel asks.

"No," says the campesino, his bladder ready to burst.

"See!" Fidel exclaims. "You were thirsty, not hungry!"

Note: The event referred to in this post occurred on May 14, 2004; Castro's speech was entitled "Proclamation by an Adversary of the US Government" (Proclama de un adversario al gobierno de los Estados Unidos).