

CUBA: VIGNETTES AND REFLECTIONS--Summer 1991

Our first evening in Cuba. At our dinner table, in the restaurant of our hotel (Habana Libre, formerly, Havana Hilton), there is an intense political discussion--about Cuba, Nicaragua, Eastern Europe, the fate of humanity, etc. All are members of our delegation, but the only person I know (having just met him an hour before) is Jim Lawler, a philosopher from SUNY Buffalo, who will be my roommate for the duration.

Gradually, the group dissipates, but I remain behind to talk with Allan Isaksen. Allan identifies himself as a 70-year-old real estate developer from Berkeley. He talks of being in Cuba once before, in 1960. The threat of U.S. invasion was in the air, was being predicted in all the papers. (The invasion occurred the following year at the Bay of Pigs.) Allan recalled being in Plaza de la Revolucion, one of a million or so people listening to the magnetic oratory of Fidel Castro. He harkened back and recalled a single moment, recalled the exact words he had heard. Fidel (as he is usually called here) was speaking passionately of the impending invasion:

"We will defend our buildings from the rooftops to the basements!" he shouted to the crowd. Then he paused. A long pause, and the crowd fell silent. A million people, says Allan, and not a sound. Fidel broke the silence: "And then we'll come out and we'll fight for the ruins."

It wasn't applause that followed, says Allan. It was an explosion. It was like nothing he had ever heard in his life. It was a transforming moment, he says. He's never been the same since.

Allan speaks of his own life, before and after. He's a capitalist now, has put together million dollar deals. But in his heart he's a socialist, has been since he was ten.

It was during the Depression (1931 by my calculations). His family owned a one-acre raspberry farm in East Palo Alto, California. The bank foreclosed.

I look at Allan. His voice has thickened, and there are tears swelling his eyes. A memory of six decades past. "My father and I were in the field, and heard the muffled screams. We ran to the garage, where we crated our berries, and found my mother. She had hanged herself.

"Later, my father sat down with me and explained. My father was a socialist. He explained to me that that's the way capitalism works. It wasn't the bankers' fault really; they were doing what they had to do. That's the way the system works. Some people just can't take it. Your mother couldn't; she tried, but she just couldn't."

It's late, but I decide to take a walk. My first night in Havana. Across the street from the hotel is the Coppelia Ice Cream Parlor, famous all over Cuba. It's a park, with numerous ice cream stands, one of which is an out-door sit-down counter, another (the most popular it seems, judging from the line) on the second floor of a small building in the center of the park. It's 11 o'clock at night, and the park is filled with people, all ages, but mostly teenagers. Most people are waiting

in one of the many lines for ice cream. I'm struck by the racial make-up. I guess I had known, but it hadn't fully registered, that Cuba has a large black population, Afro-Cubans, descendants of the slaves brought to work the sugar plantations. It feels not unlike my neighborhood in Chicago (Rogers Park), lots of black and hispanic people, though far fewer whites. I'm struck by how nice everyone seems--young people talking, kidding around, but nothing rowdy or unruly--rather like Disney World, lines and all, but with far fewer parents, and far more color.

I leave the park and begin walking down La Rampa toward the sea a half-mile or so away. I'm spoken to several times. "No hablo espagnol," is the limit of my vocabulary. Several people try their English. A number want to change money. The official rate is one-to-one, but I'm offered four-to-one (pesos per dollar), five-to-one, sometimes ten-to-one. I'm always asked how long I've been in Cuba--an important question I later realize. There's virtually no incentive on the part of a tourist to change money, since, despite the attractive rates, there's little to buy with pesos. Virtually all the stores and restaurants to which a tourist would want to go take only dollars. Doubtless a few tourists just off the plane fail to realize this, and so a would-be money changer has a small chance. The changers more-or-less readily take no for an answer, and are never rude. It seems to be a bit of a game, rather like the lottery--the odds are against you, but you might get lucky.

A young man introduces me to his girlfriend. Am I being solicited? I have no idea. No hablo espagnol.

On my return to the hotel I linger in front of the movie theater across the street. The films now playing seem to be mostly Argentine, Russian and Cuban (so far as I can tell). Then I see advertised--unmistakably--E.T. (At another theater, later, I see that Fatal Attraction is playing. One night, in the hotel, I watch the tail end of Crimes and Misdemeanors.)

Then suddenly people begin to congregate outside the theater. I look up, and see that the side of our hotel across the street is serving as a screen. Cinema Paradiso! Speakers have come on, and a film is being projected from a small window in the movie theater onto our hotel--an artistic dance film, free high culture for the masses (in this case mostly teenagers), many of whom sit on the retaining wall in front of the theater to watch.

I was rather depressed about Cuba earlier on--the long wait at the airport, the long, inefficient check-in at the hotel, our luggage piled high in the hotel lobby, unattended, so far as I could tell, for hours. I feel better now.

Milton, Alice and I peel off from the guided tour of the Old City. We explore for awhile on our own, then Milton and Alice head back to the hotel. I keep walking and looking, quite amazed at how utterly beautiful the city is, above all the parks and the baroque Spanish buildings.

At six I'm almost back to the hotel when I notice a park, filled with ten-foot-high angled slabs of rock or concrete, rising vertically from the ground--clearly some sort of modern art work. As I approach for a closer look, I notice that there are lots of young (late teens, early twenties) black men, and a few women standing around or sitting on the rocks, talking and drinking. I'm from the United States, from Chicago, so my immediate impulse is to retreat quickly. But I catch myself, and think, "This is Cuba, not the U.S. It doesn't feel dangerous here, menacing, explosive, like it does at home."

So I walk casually into the park, look at the rocks, self-consciously conspicuous, and not a little nervous, thinking again about the \$50 in my pocket. As I complete the circle and start back, a voice calls out to me in Spanish. I turn and see that I'm being approached by a young black man, early twenties. He smiles in response to my standard "no hablo," and tries in English, "Where are you from?"

"The United States," I reply.

"The Unites States!" he says in amazement. Canadian and Western Europeans a common here, but because of the travel ban, not United Statesers [I can't bring myself to write 'Americans'--aren't Cubans and Canadians 'Americans'?] "Where in the United States?" I'm asked.

"Chicago," I reply.

"Chicago!" he exclaims. A friend of his joins us, somewhat younger, and offers me a glass of rum. "Havana Club," they tell me (pronouncing it "Cloob"). Before the Revolution, they tell me, it was called "Bacardi."

I accept the offer, sip an excellent dark rum. We talk a bit, haltingly. It's Saturday night, they tell me. They're hanging out, drinking. Later they'll go to a party. Would I like to join them?

I demur. It's after seven, and dinner is being served at the hotel. Then the older youth, who has identified himself as a second-year engineering student at the University of Havana, asks me if I would consider changing ten dollars for twenty pesos. "I'd really like a new pair of jeans," he tells me, "and I could get them for \$10."

The jeans he's wearing don't look bad to me, but he's very nice, and I'd been thinking of getting some pesos, at least as souvenirs. So I say I'd like a ten, a five, a three and a one, and I'll give him \$10 for that. He's very happy, and sends his younger friend off for the pesos. The friend--a mechanic--returns shortly, gives me the bills, and an extra 20 peso note.

He looks at me beseechingly. "I'd really like a pair of jeans too." What the hell, it's only \$20, and I might need a few pesos, so I agree.

We talk some about clothes, and they gently inquire if I have anything I'd like to trade. It occurs to me that I do have something. "I have a tee shirt back at the hotel," I say.

"Does it have any writing on it?" one asks.

I'm thinking of the shirt my daughter gave me a year ago, now well worn. "It's a John Lennon tee shirt."

"John Lennon!! The Beatles??" High excitement.

"Look," I say to the engineering student, "I don't need any more pesos, but I'll give you the shirt."
"For Cuba," I add.

So I'm plied with more rum, and we head back to the hotel. I explain that I may not be able to get into my room. Cuban hotels, very careful about room keys, give out only one per room, and Jim has ours. I tell my friends that I may not be able to get the shirt, but I'll take a look.

As we walk, the younger man reaches in his pocket and takes out several packages of condoms. He offers me some. I say no, but he insists. "Who know?" he says. So I accept. Made in China, I notice.

When we're two blocks from the hotel, they stop. They tell me it's best if they wait here. When I reach the hotel lobby, I'm struck by a sudden realization. These young men have given me 39 pesos--but I didn't give them anything. All my money is still in my pocket. They either forgot, or were too polite, to remind me.

The thought flashes through my head that if I were a true American, I'd just go to the bar and forget about them. It might even be good for them, teach them not to trust Yankees--who, God knows, should not be trusted. But of course I can't do that.

I search the hotel, can't find Jim, so, forty-five minutes or so later, I return to my rendezvous point, give them the \$20, explain about the key. On the way there, I've been thinking about something else. "Is the offer of party still on?" I ask.

"Sure. No problem. You want to dance? Rumba?"

I explain that it would be quite interesting to me to attend a party with them. Just for a little while. If they wouldn't find it strange. I also add that I have all the pesos I want, so I wouldn't want to have to keep saying no to people. I tell them that I still haven't eaten, and I'm not completely sure about this, but if they're willing, I'll think about it some more, and try again to get the tee shirt. It's nine o'clock now. I say that if I'm still interested, I'll be back at this spot at ten. "Bring your friend, too, if he wants to come," they say.

In the dining room I join the table where Lisa and Cliff (the organizers of our trip) are eating, along with Alice and Milton. I tell them about my invitation. "Should I go?," I ask. "Is it safe?" I'm very curious, but I'm not crazy.

Lisa and Cliff are pretty sure that it would be safe. They might want trade more money, or sell me something, but there's little danger of robbery or violence. My main concern now is getting stranded somewhere in Havana, unable to speak any Spanish and completely lost. I ask if anyone would like to come with me, and Milton says yes. That settles it. Milton speaks Spanish. We're on.

A few minutes before ten, we pick up four Heinekens from the bar (our contribution to the party), and head out. The two young men I'd met are waiting for us as arranged, and with them are two others. I'd managed to get into my room, and now had the tee shirt. My friend (whose name I never did get--he told me, but my ear for Spanish was still non-functional) is delighted with the shirt. We're offered more rum, we open two beers and pass them around. Milton begins talking with them. A quarter of an hour or so passes, then Milton says to me, "I'm not sure there's any party; you may have misunderstood."

So I ask the engineering student directly, "What about the party? Is it still on?"

"You want to go to a party? Dance? No problem."

I reiterate, and Milton does too, that we can't stay long, and we can't go very far. We're leaving for Varadero early in the morning and still need to pack. "No problem."

So we set off. I can't help thinking, "two fifty-year old white Americans, pockets full of dollars, slightly high on rum and beer, heading out into the night with four young black men that we don't know at all--are we really doing this? Did we slip through some time/space warp? Are we now on a different planet?"

We walk and we walk; we talk and we talk. In very short order I have no idea where we are. We come to a small park, somewhere in the city. The street is lit, but the park is completely dark. The men we are with begin to consult among themselves, then the engineering student (is he really an engineering student?) says, "there's a problem."

"What kind of problem?"

"Well, we were taking you to a cabaret up there," (he gestures up the street, but I don't see anything), "but we've realized that we can't go in like this. Groups of men, by themselves, can't go in. You have to be with a woman. Couples only."

"But if you'd like," he says, "if you just want to talk, we can sit in the park and talk for awhile."

Well, it's getting late, so that sounds like the right idea. Milton agrees "We'll need some more rum," the student says.

"Here," says Milton, reaching into his pocket for some money. "Let me chip in."

"No, no," comes the reply. "We'll get the rum. You wait here."

So three of the young men go off, the fourth, the mechanic, stays with us, and we go into the park and sit on a bench. A young woman joins us, I think his girlfriend, but I don't really know. She sits with us, but doesn't say anything.

Milton begins talking to the young man in Spanish, and translating for my benefit. As all other Cubans have told us, times are very, very difficult now. Everything is scarce. He has a job, he tells us, but it's not enough.

"Where do you get your money," I ask. I'd noticed that he has a large roll of pesos in his pocket, from which he had contributed to the rum fund.

"I change money," he says. "Sometimes I sell some drugs."

We change the subject. We talk some more--then suddenly there's a figure behind us. The young man and young woman jump to their feet. I realize that it's a policeman. Our friend tells us not to worry, that it doesn't concern us. He shows his papers, as does the girl. The three of them disappear into the darkness.

Milton looks at me. "I think it's time to split," he says. "I think the party's over." Milton, fortunately, has a sense of direction. Twenty minutes or so later, we are in the hotel lobby.

What had happened? I still don't know for sure. Had veiled offers been made for women and drugs? Were the two people with us at the end arrested? Were they suspected of illegal activities? Of harassing tourists? Of talking too intimately with foreigners? All I can say for certain that no direct offer had been made to us for anything illegal (apart from the early change of money), nor had anyone done anything that even hinted of menace or danger. Maybe we had passed into a different universe.

I've never seen a Caribbean beach before. Perhaps Varadero is less impressive to others than it is to me: white sand as far as one can see; crystal clear water; pale, sparkling blue, indicating shallows, extending out a hundred yards or so. Rent an umbrella for a dollar, a beach chair for a dollar, a towel for 50 cents. I rent a towel. Please bring it back, I'm asked. No numbers or receipts. I can't give a hotel room, since we're there only for the day. An honor system, it seems.

I walk/float 50 yards from shore, down the coast. I've decided to keep my glasses on. I'd rather see than swim.

I pass near a small group also far from shore--an alabaster woman on an air mattress, a young Hispanic man, maybe twenty, a young girl, early teens, with African features. I'm no longer surprised to be asked, "Where are you from?" Nor am I surprised that they are eager to talk when I say "United States."

The woman, I learn, is Russian, the young girl is her daughter, the young man is a neighbor. The woman had married an Afro-Cuban, and has been in Cuba for twelve years, serving as a translator. The young man has a university degree, is living in Matanzas, his home town, not far away. We talk for awhile, then I'm invited to their umbrella on the beach. I hesitate, but only briefly. The water is wonderful, but it's my third day Cuba, and here's a chance to talk to someone who speaks good English.

At the umbrella I'm offered rum, which I do not hesitate to accept. We talk and talk and talk. Three hours later they have to leave. They give me their names, addresses, telephone numbers. If I come back to Varadero, I'm to look them up.

What did we talk about? Maya, the Russian woman, said to me, via Raul, that she could tell that I was an honest person. She would like to ask me an important question. She has relatives in Los Angeles. They own a small store, a bakery (I think). She can go there. (Legally or illegally? I didn't ask.) She's heard a lot about racism in the United States. So has her daughter, who is terrified of the idea of going to the States. What would I recommend?

I'd been in Cuba barely two full days. Many people, including Raul, had told me how very hard it is now, how the trade with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe has collapsed, how there's nothing in the stores anymore, how everything is rationed. In Raul's judgment, things can only get worse. There are no prospects for them to get better.

I was certainly in no position to challenge this judgment. But I had to affirm that what Maya had heard about racism in the United States was true. And what she had heard about the crime, the drugs, the spiraling cycle of violence. And about unemployment, and lack of guaranteed health care. "If you are rich enough," I told her, "you can shelter yourself from most of the worst aspects of U.S. society. And if you are an immigrant, and if you are lucky, you might get rich. Some people do. Every immigrant knows someone who has. It's easier if you are white, but even then, you need luck and support. If you are black, it is much more difficult--in every respect."

She thanked me. Her relatives, she said, say the same thing.

Raul is also thinking of leaving. He confided to me, while the others are talking of something else, that his best friend has just left. He's sick with worry. His friend didn't tell him he was leaving, but the last time they were together, his friend began embracing him with uncharacteristic intensity. Then he noticed his friend had collected fishing gear. "But my friend doesn't like to fish," said Raul. "He never fishes. I asked him what is going on, but he wouldn't tell me. The next day, when I went to his house, he was gone."

"I'm a Catholic," said Raul. "All that night I stayed on my knees, praying for my friend. The next day I had to see a doctor. They had to give me medication for my blood pressure."

There's so much wrong with Cuba, he said. I told him that there were many things wrong with the United States too, and recited the usual litany. "I know all that," said Raul. "I know all that. But I'm not happy here." (I didn't say, though the thought went through my mind, that you will never find in the United States a friend who will pray for you on his knees all night. Maybe Cuban-Americans are different.)

"Look," he said, "before the Revolution, people were poor, very poor, but they didn't know any better. Like my grandfather, who was a peasant, working on a rice farm. He still works like that, and I often help him. Had there not been the Revolution, I would be like him. But I have a university degree now. Education is free. There's a contradiction in this revolution. It educated us, it created in us new needs--but it can't satisfy those needs.

"I'm young. I want to travel. I don't really want to leave my country; I love my country. What I would like to do is go to the United States for a month--to see for myself, to see which is better. But I'm not allowed to do that.

"The government has done many things that are wrong. We should not have sent troops to Angola."

I protested that those troops had saved Angola. Angola was under attack by a very nasty group funded by the United States and South Africa. The Cuban troops had defeated a direct attack by South Africa, a stunning victory.

"I don't care," said Raul. "We have too many problems here. We should not have spent all that money on Angola. And I'm not the only one who says that. All my friends from school say that."

"What would you do, if you were in a position to change things.?" I asked.

"I'm not interested in politics," said Raul.

"No, no, I'm asking you a hypothetical question. If you were Fidel Castro, what would you do? To improve things for the Cuban people."

"If I were Fidel??" Raul laughed softly, as if he couldn't quite comprehend the question. "I don't know what I would do."

The reception is hosted by the Cuban faculty for the North Americans at the Hotel Machurrucutu, on the outskirts of Havana where the conference is being held. The night before, back from the beach, we'd checked in.

"What a dump!" said ever-pleasant John Gerrassi.

"Think of it as camp," I said.

No air conditioning (but a ceiling fan over each bed--making for very comfortable sleeping). No hot water--but its the tropics: no need for hot showers. In our room, not even a shower head, only a hose. Beds were simple plywood frames, on which were laid foam pads. One of the window screens in our room had pulled away from the window, promising a mosquito plague at night--but if you maneuvered the disconnected refrigerator standing oddly in the corner against it, voila! problem solved. We soon learned to brush our teeth before 11, when the water is turned off.

At the reception I speak for a while with Tania, a lovely young Cuban student who had tried her hand briefly at translating the other day on the tour of Old Havana. She's a second student of English at the University of Havana. She looks younger than her twenty years, and she is so, so sweet, so idealistic; she has an air about her of an innocence that cannot be true, that I must be fabricating. Tania is optimistic about Cuban youth. Many turn out to do volunteer labor, she says. Not everyone. Some young people are cynical, but not the majority. That's her opinion.

I ask her about safety in the streets for a woman. She says she never worries about it, that she often walks home from the university at night, by herself. She's never worried.

Later that evening, after a fair number of drinks, I sit with a Cuban colleague. He's unhappy. "I feel like a stranger in my own country," he says. He tells me that they've had to fight with the hotel management, so that they could buy beer. Most of the beer is reserved for dollar sales. Once the limited amount of peso beer is sold, the Cubans can't buy any more--even if there's plenty of dollar beer remaining. "It's ridiculous--I can't buy you a beer, and you are my guest."

As he is talking, I remember lunch, our first at the conference center. The North Americans eat in the restaurant, and the food is plentiful and quite delicious. But the Cuban participants eat outside, beans and rice, very simple, and they pay for their meals. I've detected no resentment of us. The reason for the policy is well understood by the participants, Cuba's desperate need to sell the short supplies of valuable commodities for dollars. But perhaps this discrepancy is a factor in the clear defensiveness the participants have about our (usually implied, rather than direct) criticisms of Cuban society. I'm told later that Cubans disagree much more among themselves than they will do in public, in front of foreigners.

We have Reynaldo, the chief translator, and a van at our disposal for the afternoon, so a group of us go into the city. The weather, unfortunately, turns bad. We're dropped off near the harbor, take the ferry across, then walk in the rain through the muddy streets on the other side. Rey tells us that this section of Havana is famous for the large numbers of Santeria practitioners that live here--the African-based religion. It used to be practiced only among blacks, says Rey, but now whites practice also.

The rain won't quit, so we decide to look for a restaurant. We ask to be taken to a Cuban restaurant. Rey takes us to Mirimar, a newer section of the city, filled with beautiful old mansions, most of them now embassies. He checks one place, comes back, tells us it's a tourist trap. We go to another. Rey checks it out, says it's good. We go in and find ourselves in a small, very nice Italian restaurant--too nice, clearly for tourists only. But the driver has gone, has to see his family about something, won't be back until later. Rey explains that it would be very difficult to go to an "authentic" Cuban restaurant. It would be very crowded, and the food would not be good.

We have a couple of drinks in the foyer, discuss at length the morality and politics of staying, take a vote, sit down for dinner. It's an excellent meal, which, complete with wine, two before-dinner drinks, tip and chipping in for Rey's dinner, comes to \$20 apiece.

The driver has returned, so we pile in the van and head for Botequita del Medio, one of Hemingway's favorite bars in Old Havana, off Cathedral Square. I stand at the bar, sip a Mojito, talk with Rey. "You shouldn't see things here through rose-colored glasses," he warns. "Things are very, very difficult. We don't live or eat the way tourists do.

"We would like to go to the kind of restaurant we just ate at, but we can't."

I suggest that the price, in pesos, would be too high, but Rey disagrees. "I know my people," he says. "We would go to such a place, even if it meant saving for a long, long time. I guarantee it."

Rey talks about his problem. He and his wife have both been accepted at the University of Vancouver, to study for a couple of years, and have been offered financial aid. "It was all set," he says, "but now the government (the Cuban government) says we can't take our children."

He has two young children, a son and a daughter. "I am very close to my children," he tells me. "I own my own house, but it is very small. It has a thatched roof. We have only one bedroom, so we all sleep there. In the morning, when the kids wake up, they jump into bed with us."

Could he leave them with his parents or his wife's parents for the duration, I ask?

"We could," he says, "but I can't do that. It would be too hard for my children. They are very attached to us. They would feel abandoned. I can't do that. I just can't."

Rey is hopeful that he can still work things out, but he is anxious.

We've been sitting in the lobby of the Ingleterra Hotel for two hours now. The conference is over. We're back in the city for the weekend. It's a beautiful old hotel in the heart of Old Havana, right next of the National Theater, facing Central Park. But our reservations have been screwed up; we'll have to go elsewhere. At this point nobody knows where.

I decide to take a short walk. I circle the block and am almost back to the hotel, when I'm motioned to by several young men, Hispanic, standing in a doorway. I come over, expecting to be asked about changing money, but they begin speaking of something else. By now I know the word "cambio," but they are saying "puro." No one speaks English, but one man brings his hand to his mouth, puts his fingertips together, then, keeping them together, withdraws them slowly, in a straight line, to about ten inches.

"Puro," he says.

"Cigar!" I exclaim.

"Si, cigar, puro," comes the reply.

He begins tugging at the outside corner of his right eye with his index finger, saying something I don't understand. Then I get it: "Cigars," I say, "do I want to look at them?"

"Si, si," and the men gesture rapidly for me to follow them. Just an hour earlier I had purchased two Havana cigars in the hotel lobby, souvenirs, for \$5 each. I don't need any more cigars. But I'm curious, so I smile and follow.

We cross the street, and enter into a building. There's a small elevator twenty feet or so inside the doorway, operated by a grandmotherly woman who looks at me and the young men with what seems to me an air of disapproval. The men speak with her, urge me to get into the elevator. I hesitate. But I've long been wondering what these beautiful buildings are like on the inside. So I get in, the door closes, and we're taken up to the fifth floor, the top. We get out, the door closes and the elevator disappears. I'm standing with these four men in a dark corridor, shrouded by stained, paint-peeled walls. They point to the far end, and motion for me to follow.

Again I hesitate. I'm definitely feeling nervous. But then I notice a young child playing in the hall, outside an open door. So I follow.

As I pass the child, I glance through the open door, and see that a family is living there. I see other open doors, and feel relieved.

We enter a small room, roughly twelve-foot square. A woman in her mid-thirties is sitting there watching television, along with a young girl (who I later learn is her 14 year old daughter). The

woman looks up, but without evident enthusiasm. One of the men goes to the closet, and appears with cigar box carefully wrapped in white tissue paper. He removes the paper. He shows me that the box is sealed. Then he takes out a knife, and carefully cuts the seal. Inside are twenty-five cigars, each individually wrapped in cellophane.

Conversation is difficult, but I ascertain that they are willing to sell the box for \$20. I ask about buying just a couple of cigars, but they say no. It must be the whole box. I think about it, about who I know that would appreciate a box of Havana cigars. The only person I can think of is my brother Gary. But Gary died a year ago January. Still, I keep thinking of him.

I say no to the young men. I don't need any cigars. But they seem so disappointed that I tell them that I have a friend back in the hotel ("un amigo," I say, "hotel," and gesture). They understand, lead me out of the room, down the corridor, down the elevator, and back to the street. They tell me to bring the friend to where I had met them before.

I walk into the hotel lobby, wondering who might want some cigars, and see Bob Ware. As a matter of fact he does want to buy some cigars. "What brand were they?" he asks. I haven't the slightest idea. It hadn't occurred to me to pay attention to that. Bob tells me that a friend of his had asked him to bring him back some cigars, and had given him a list of preferred brands.

"You want an adventure?" I say to Bob. "Let's go see."

Bob agrees. We walk out to where the men said they would be. They are there. The steps are retraced--across the street, into the building, into the elevator (past the disapproving stare of the operator), up to the fifth floor, then down the dark corridor. Bob examines the cigars. Cohibas. Not one of the brands on Bob's list. We are told that they have eight boxes.

While Bob is negotiating, I step out onto the balcony, off the room. The view is spectacular: the park below, the Capitol dome rising just a block or so away. (The Cuban Capitol was modeled on the U.S. Capitol; the building now houses the Academy of Sciences.)

Bob decides he doesn't want the cigars. To save face, I propose "un altro amigo" (hoping the Italian for "another" is close enough to the Spanish). They get what I am saying, and escort us out. Instead of waiting for the elevator, Bob and I decide to take the stairs. On each floor we glance around, see the same long, dark corridors. On the wall of one floor is a picture of Fidel--the first (I'm startled to realize) that I've seen in Cuba. Busts of Jose Marti are everywhere, and pictures of Che fairly common. But Fidel is absent, except for an occasional billboard with a patriotic slogan, sometimes, though not always, accompanied by a stylized likeness. I'm reminded of an earlier realization: that Fidel was rarely mentioned at the conference, and when mentioned at all, only in passing. Whatever is going on in Cuba with Fidel, the traditional picture of "cult of personality" does not apply. When you are in Cuba, you forget about Fidel--at least that has been my experience.

Back in the hotel lobby I see George Abaunza, a student at Florida State, a Nicaraguan who, of course, speaks perfect Spanish. George is interested in the cigars. Fantastic.

We decide to do some comparison shopping first, in the hotel tourist store. There they are, prominently displayed: Cohiba Cigars. \$115/box. We ask to look at them. Same label, same cellophane wrapping. "Best cigars in Cuba," says the salesperson. "These are the ones Fidel smokes."

Back to street, building, elevator, corridor, room. George wants two boxes, unopened. They have eight--but not here. They have only one here, the one they opened for me. But wait, have a seat, they'll be right back.

The men disappear. George and I sit. George begins talking to the woman. I begin to look around.

The room is small, and the ceiling is quite low. I realize that the room had had a high ceiling, but that a sleeping loft has been added. The woman confirms that she has had that done. She and her brother and her daughter live here. The woman is a school teacher. She was born in this building, on the first floor, but now she is on the top. The rent is very, very low.

As I look around, I suddenly realize that this room is full of stuff. Above the large black and white television is a boom box. To my left is a full-size refrigerator and a washing machine. On the sink is a blender and gas cooker. There's also a sewing machine. I deduce that quite a few cigars (etc.?) have been sold here.

The woman is complaining about how hard life is in Cuba. I tell her that her view is spectacular. She waves her hand dismissively. "You look a couple of times," she says, "then it's nothing."

I tell her that to have an apartment in the States with this kind of view, you'd pay one, two thousand dollars rent a month, likely more. I, a university professor, could not afford such a place; certainly no single-parent schoolteacher could. She's not impressed. She'd gladly trade places with me, she says.

Forty-five minutes or so later, one of the men returns, out of breath, with two boxes of cigars. He's run all the way from the Malacon, he says. George takes both, offers one to me. "I didn't want any cigars," I say.

"What? I thought you did," says George. "I only wanted one box."

It would be too embarrassing to take only one now, so I assent. (Later I'll sell it to Bob, who had changed his mind.) On the way down I talk to George about the morality of our transaction. George had asked where the cigars had come from, had been given an evasive answer. They have to have been stolen, we reluctantly concede. "You're making me feel guilty," says George.

I do feel a bit guilty--but we decide to think of the experience as an investigation into another aspect of Cuban life. Now we feel better.

It's difficult to describe the effect that Juan Antonio Blanco and Carlos Tablata have had on me. A small group of us had dinner Saturday evening with Blanco; we talked non-stop until one in the morning. The next day Tablata met with the large group, and fielded questions for two hours. The following day we sat in the seats where normally sit the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba, and asked everything we could think to ask of Blanco, Fernando Garcia and a woman whose name I didn't get, all high-ranking members of the Central Committee staff. (Blanco would seem to occupy a position roughly equivalent to the Undersecretary of State for Latin American Affairs.) Following that session Blanco returned with me to the hotel, and he and I, with Jim Lawler and Bob Ware, talked for another two hours over dinner--which had to be our treat, since Blanco has no dollars. (When the Dean of the Faculty of History and Philosophy went with us to the beach, we had to pay for his meal also.)

They are saying all the right things: the need for educational reform, for more critical and creative thinking, for studying ways to address Cuban machismo and homophobia, for making the Party more democratic, for reaching out to Left academics, to the international Left community. They have broken with the Soviet/Eastern European models, and are talking about constructing a true socialism in accordance with genuine Marxian ideals. For the first time I've begun to think it possible that the Cuban Revolution might succeed.

During the long dinner conversation our first evening in Havana, I was asked what I thought. I couldn't at the time see any way out of the Cuban impasse. All I could say was that I hoped the Cubans could come up with something--some unexpected, creative solution. "So you are reduced to that," said Jill, "to bare hope?" I had to say yes.

It's still unclear to me how they're going to do it. Nor can I say with any confidence that they will succeed. But if I had to place a bet right now, I'd bet on Cuba. Ten days ago I wouldn't have. I've changed my mind for three reasons.

One very strong card in Cuba's hand is the comparison card. I hadn't thought of that before. Eastern Europeans looked West, saw Communism as the force that blocked their achieving what West Germany or Austria or Italy or Sweden had achieved. They were white Europeans too. Why couldn't they have what other white Europeans had?

Lots of Cubans are discontent. Many would like to leave; some are planning to do so, legally or otherwise. But no one in Cuba, so far as I can tell, thinks that a move to an open, market economy, a privatized, capitalist economy, will solve their problems, will transform Cuba into Florida. The Cuban people are not stupid. Their neighbors with open, privatized, capitalist economies are Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, etc., etc., countries whose crises are even more acute than their own. Nor, so far as I can tell, do people want the Miami Cubans back--for

if they came back, they would want their stuff back--all those beautiful old buildings now filled with poor people, all that land now filled with cooperative or state farms. Individual Cubans may well want to leave what they feel to be a sinking ship, but no one thinks that capitalism will save that ship.

My second reason for (guarded) optimism is the creative thinking now going on in Cuba. It's hard for me to judge how deep or wide this runs, but it's quite clear that there are some very competent people thinking innovative thoughts.

The last reason is the least tangible, but perhaps the most important. I've been profoundly impressed by the moral tenor of Cuban life. I've interacted with many people: party officials, academics, translators, money changers, people wanting to leave, people selling stolen goods. Not once have I encountered the kind of deep cynicism and corruption that we in the United States now take for granted. In all my conversations, no one ever complained to me about the level of corruption here. I, personally, was never threatened in Cuba, or robbed in Cuba, or even cheated in Cuba. (By way of contrast, within two hours of my arrival in Miami, I was robbed. I had left my briefcase unattended for ten minutes. Miraculously, it was not stolen--but the \$150 concealed in a soap dish was.)

Of course, there must be corruption in Cuba. I'm still enough of a Catholic to believe that human beings are human beings, and hence prone to all sorts of evil and depravity. But I'm also mathematician enough to think that probability, relative frequency, etc., are vital concepts. The Cuban society, for all its ills, seems to me immeasurably less corrupt than Eastern Europe before the fall--to say nothing of our own.

God know, the good guys don't always win--particularly when confronted with truly massive evil (as in the case of U.S. policy toward Cuba). But in moments of great crisis, morality counts. So it seems to me.

It's one-thirty in the morning. Mala, Jim and I have been talking in the hotel lobby about various schemes to help Cuba. Jim and I have been drinking Cuban beer, and are now too wired to go to bed, so we decide to go for a walk--one last walk along the Malacon.

The Malacon is the wide, graceful street that curves along the coast from the Old City west. On the far side of the street is a ten-foot wide sidewalk and then a three-foot high retaining wall, below which are rocks and then the sea. When we reach the Malacon, we look left and right. As far as the eye can see, Cuban young people sitting on the wall, some in small groups but most in pairs, holding hands, embracing, kissing, occasionally in horizontal position, but not often.

Jim and I walk along the sidewalk, oblivious to all this romance, deeply engaged in political discussion. Suddenly several young men are talking to us: where are we from? do we want to change money? They're more insistent than usual. Perhaps they've been drinking also (as we

have been). Jim grows irritated, and says to me, "let's go back." So we wheel abruptly, and begin walking quickly in the opposite direction. The young men disappear.

We then realize that we are walking behind a large group of teenagers. They are mostly black, their arms are linked, and they are singing. Marching up the Malacon, arms linked, laughing and singing.

We overtake them quickly, pass them (stepping out into the street to do so), and stride on, still deep in discussion. Then it hits me, what we have just seen. Poor teenagers. A racially mixed group. Two o'clock in the morning. Arms linked. Marching up the Malacon. Laughing and singing.

Have we died and gone to heaven?

We're checking out of the hotel, putting bags on the airport bus; it's time to go. I see Samuel standing near the elevator. I've not had a chance to talk with him, one of the young translators, who always stands so straight, who is so polite, who seems so shy. I thank him for all the work he has done, for all the help he has given us. I say that he must be glad to see us go; now he can get some rest.

"It's been hard," he says. "I've had a cold, and my voice has been hoarse." Then he adds softly, "But this has been the most meaningful week of my life."

On the bus to the airport I sit by myself and stare out the window. I think of the Philippines. My wife and daughter are there right now, celebrating the 50th Wedding Anniversary of my mother-in-law and father-in-law. If Patsy were here, I wonder, what she would think. Cuba feels a lot like the Philippines--same climate, same Spanish influence, same rich land, same legacy of colonialism and neo-colonialism. But where are the interminable traffic snarls, the thick pollution, the beggars, the squatters, the open sewers, the wealthy compounds walled off and protected by armed guards, the death squads, the swaggering American sailors and airmen?

The Cubans have done this. It's possible. It can be done. Yet it seems so fragile now, and the bull, charged up from his rampage in the Gulf, is looking for another china shop.

David Schweickart

June, 1991