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The Bridwell Quill. Issues 57-59: An Island Without Butter

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The Bridwell Quill

a note from the director



May–July 2023

Spring break came and went quickly this year and I learned a few new things that I never thought I'd ever imagine: that Cuba has no butter and the Indian Embassy in Havana offers free daily lessons in Hindi and Yoga. Since I was forced to give up my beloved churned milk product for 10 days, I resorted to my virgin attempt at the Indic arts to give me strength and resolve at surviving a butterless exile. Somewhere between the downward dogs and the trikanasana pose, I planted my chin into the most scratchy *Zoysia* grass of the Embassy lawn surrounded by thirty Colombian guest workers, a handful of Cubans, and three men in tracksuits. The yogi wore a pale grey Lamborghini sport shirt, dark mustard cargo pants and stood barefoot while happily shouting orders like a midnight diner cook—except with the idiosyncratic evocations to twist our arms “clock and anti-clock!” in his sweet Punjabi patois. Interestingly, the Embassy’s gate and front door were wide open, without a guard or other personnel. Clearly, the sense of safety in the city seemed quite high.



I went to the Caribbean communist country with the Perkins School of Theology’s immersion group on a religious visa, which ostensibly allowed greater access to more interesting places and communities across the island than your typical tourist visa. In many ways, Cuba is still the geopolitical *bête noire* of

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Kennedys and capitalists, a confounding spirit of socialist actions and narratives caught in the Gulf Stream waters like a coveted snagged lure. Landing at the Havana Airport was like flying into 1955. The landscape was noticeably absent of development or modern roads, and in that moment I caught sight of a plume of raw sienna dust rising behind a 1947 Ford station wagon, cruising along a rural drive adjacent to the airport and unattended squash fields. A scene from Redford’s movie *Havana*. On the ground now: cue Coppola’s men Michael Corleone and Hyman Roth.

A courageous rush of visitors merged into a chaotic space and invisible queue where non-locals had to have their names registered in a physical book, followed by a delicate dance with fixers, beyond the customs and immigration corrals, who called officials to bring out typewriter-made visas, followed by an entry-photo shot of every person entering the country. It is, also, the only place I’ve ever seen a security line and metal detector coming into a country.

It was warm and humid, even though it was still the dry season. Internet and wireless services ceased for nearly everyone almost immediately after exiting the Southwest flight and its onboard WiFi. For the next week or so, there’d be almost no connections to the outside world for most of us, save for an occasional message

on WhatsApp when within range of a hotspot or WiFi router. But most things were inaccessible. The internet came in shortly after Fidel went to the heavenly Comintern about a decade ago; cell phones were only somewhat available around 2019. The flow of global information in and around the island is a mysterious thing, moderated by a network of VPNs and black market communities.



Surrounded by thousands of 70-year-old Chevys, Fords, and Plymouths, we chugged along in a brightly colored school bus to the city of Matanzas, two hours to the east of the capital. We drove through a magnificent countryside that hugged the Atlantic coast, something that was mostly undeveloped, save for a few small towns that drew in locals for vacations or visiting families. As darkness settled, we passed by scores of youngsters playing soccer in every open space with makeshift goals, followed by a passage through what appeared to be Dante's Inferno: a half dozen unrefined crude-burning plants that belched the thickest dark grey smoke across the island (above) as a means of generating electricity. Silver towers tipped with 30-foot flames flared mercilessly into the night, like Vietnam era incendiary weapons. The greatest surprise of the visit was how much smog and pollution choked the place. Most of us would wake up to the smell of wet ashes and an acrid cocktail of chemical-scented fumes lingering into valleys, along the coast, throughout cities, and over forests and fields.

We pulled in late to the institution we were to stay at for some days, situated across from the un-ironically named *Abraham Lincoln Theater*, where dance parties murmured till the late hours in Matanzas. Sleep and chemical dreams were fugitive those first days. A paper shortage forced us to carry proper toiletries as well. This, I later realized, extended to the newspaper business and publishing industry, which would have a significant impact and serendipitous outcome on my visit. Two days into the trip, I met a 90-year-old Cuban theologian and historian, who had studied with the famous Swiss theologian Karl Barth, and perhaps even more surprisingly, had a step-father who was an American Rough Rider and friend of Teddy Roosevelt. The math was right: the step-dad died in the 1950s, while the venerable professor was born in the 1930s. By the end of my time with him, I agreed to publish three of his books at Bridwell Press—in part, because very little is able to be



published since the pandemic and the ongoing paper shortage compounded the dilemma into scholarly circles and academic livelihood: no paper, no books. This also allowed me to connect with other writers, who were also seeking ways to get their manuscripts published under these conditions. Sadly, too, many Cubans with connections to the US, either through family or work, have lost access to their American pensions due to the nuances of the embargo and blockade; a harsh situation,

with little recourse or way forward at this moment. I met many other scholars, journalists, and writers—a newspaper man on the street gave me an impromptu tour of Havana, to which I gave him some cash in thanks, though he paused and asked instead if I could buy him cooking oil. Despite these



realities, despite the average monthly wage of \$27 USD, despite the shortages, or that there is no butter and mostly only powdered or condensed milk, the island is full of hope, vibrant with communal life, and almost whimsical seriousness, a paradox as great as Cuba itself. The one time we went to a designated tourist area, it was at the Varadero beach resort east of Matanzas (above, sign near beach)—a spit of land turned into state-run condos and unfinished beachfront hotels. The signs are in English, Spanish, and Russian, and you more often hear Russian, German, and French than even Spanish or English. Muscovites, Berliners, and Parisians wandered in sausage-tight speedos and Gucci sunglasses, swigging cocktails and smoking cohibas. The beach was a fine powder sand with lapping crystalline blue water. And an awkward balance of shops populated a few beach-side streets—some that take dollars, some that take one of the two Cuban currencies, and some that won't take anything from a foreigner.

Back in Matanzas and the theological school situated above the city, I'd gone to two private concerts, where our group had hired out both a jazz band and the city's famous chamber

choir, conducted for the last forty years by a venerable, though physically diminutive maestro José Antonio Méndez—their choral performance in a colonial-era church was some of the most exquisite classical music I've ever heard. At the end, the conductor and I ended up speaking to one another in German, because it was our mutually most fluent language.

I managed around Old Town Havana the last few days, visiting Hemingway's home east of the port, which was a more isolated writing retreat three-quarters-of-a-century ago, but today is surrounded by a smog-choked suburb, where children still play the baseball he introduced on his property's sports diamond; while cougar heads, antelope mounts, and an authentic Picasso terracotta piece adorn the walls of his now touristy museum home. This is where he penned *The Old Man and the Sea*, traded war stories, and enjoyed rum and cigars. The Old Town itself is magnificent: historic with a tinge of tourism. The scarcity of the country is still obvious, though, when you consider the paucity of shops in Cuba. With few or no incentives for competition, one might only see coffee shops or small eateries for tourists. There are no billboards, save ones with slogans, images of the last three presidents, or some historical Cuban figures. There are thousands of busts or statues of José Julián Martí, the de facto "father of Cuba," but none of Castro. They are on every corner, it seems, in every school or government building, on every roadside. Gardens have a bust of Martí next to the few things that grow in abundance. For a nearly thousand-mile long island, there are shockingly few vegetables, and almost no fruits to speak of, unless they are in season—only softball-size pineapples, which are very tart and often left to ferment. I saw no bananas, and mostly ate fried green plantains or sugar-deprived watermelons. Most countries I've visited in the global south have some sort of roadside economies with produce stands: Cuba appeared limited to

vegetable oil vendors or an occasional truck selling strands of onion and garlic. Food is rationed and stations give out a bag or two of rice, some sugar, and five eggs a month per person. At the Hotel Nacional de Cuba (below), which entertained the likes of Jean-Paul Sartre and Winston Churchill, I gathered with friends, and partook in the requisite local culture. It was a grand and elegant establishment, perched on a stone bluff above the old USS Maine memorial. The place hadn't changed in 80 years, with a nightly band pulsing with Caribbean rhythms and lounge singers; and the adjacent emerald green dining room with Art Deco mosaics, stuffed marlins, and an out-of-tune Steinway. Perhaps the most engaging place I visited was a "museum of denunciation" (*Memorial de la Denuncia*) often described as the "anti-CIA museum." It was replete with an exhibit of Fidel's personal guns from early in the revolution (which officially is *still* ongoing), a glass floor under which there were thousands of spent shell casings, a series of bloodied shirts worn by Cuban heroes assassinated by the US, and a handmade oil barrel raft used by refugees attempting (but failing) to go to Miami. The winding central staircase of the museum ascends up a lonely white column, decorated with hundreds of black crosses symbolizing those who died in the fight against the US and its government agencies.



The trip ended with a surprising cultural event—an evening at the national theater with a performance of the state ballet company. The high value placed on the arts is apparent from there being more "culture centers" than gas stations (for which the average wait was 53 cars long and around six hours, depending on the availability of gas). Culture centers are on every corner and artists, musicians, and dancers

tend to choose those careers, since such talents are both lauded and paid the same as doctors, lawyers, or mechanics. The ballet performance was exceptional, a mix of classical and avant-garde, stories of female empowerment and community with an array of music for piano and orchestra. The evening ended with a stellar performance of a ballet choreographed to the music of an emblematic Soviet composer, Schostakovich. Top seat tickets for tourists were \$25 each; for locals: 32 cents. A good lesson in economics and subsidies.

Out into the Havana night, the air still pungent, and the streets somewhat alive with youngsters, the regular evening public concerts pounded rhythms by the Atlantic promenade till 1AM. We all headed to the hotel and made it out the next morning for our 8AM flights to Fort Lauderdale. I stuffed 75 books by Cuban writers into my carry-on luggage and one flip drive with the manuscripts of a nonagenarian with ties to Teddy Roosevelt. That was a good first visit. Cuba is a staggeringly beautiful country with untold complexity, a place never to be forgotten. More stories abound than what I've shared, but I'm sure that I'll be back and will have more stories to tell. I encourage others to visit as well. In the meantime, I'll keep the memories of kind and hopeful people and the beautifully contrasting island in the retreat of my soul.

Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

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