

Cuba 2014

The Journey that Matters in the End.





"It is good to have an end to journey toward, but it is the journey that matters in the end."

Ernest Hemingway

October 24, 1962 - Arcola, Saskatchewan

The October Crisis

My Grade 2 classmates and I listen intently as Miss Husband tells us we are going to have an air raid drill. At about 11:00 AM, teacher says, the school alarm bells will ring; we are to stop what we are doing immediately, put pencils and other sharp objects aside and crouch under our desks until we are told we can come out.

Miss Husband¹ says that a war might be starting. It is in a faraway place called Cuba, but it



is possible that bombs could be dropped anywhere, even in Arcola, and we must be prepared.

It is kind of scary under my desk, yet boring at the same time. There are a few colourful bits of dry gum stuck to the bottom of the desk, but they don't hold my attention for long. The desk looks pretty strong, iron legs and a hard wood top, but I am not convinced that it will protect me from a nuclear bomb. If the USSR drops a nuke in Arcola, I expect that this desk, the bubble gum, and I are all going to be one big fiery blob, headed for Cuba.

¹ Miss Husband (far Right) got married during the year she taught us Grade 2 and changed her name to Mrs. Haddow; making her the only person I know who got married and lost her *Husband* the same day. (Russell Paton – fourth from the left, front row).

M.A.D.

We practiced Air Raid Drill a few more times but the Cuban Missile Crisis never escalated to a full-out nuclear war. Somebody in the USA and/or the USSR decided that Mutually Assured Destruction was a bad idea so Arcola, and the rest of the world, never came under nuclear attack.

The world felt safer; but Cuba continued to be in the news. Throughout the 1960's it became a haven for terrorists seeking asylum. We heard countless reports of aircraft and boats being hijacked and commandeered to Cuba.

Riding home on the school bus one day, with an ageing Norman Hislop as our driver, Elmer Olsen, sitting in the front row, cocked his right hand into the shape of a pistol, stuck it in Norm's neck and, in his best Spanish accent, hollered: "*Take me to Habana!*" (Hilarious stuff when you are 9 years old, - you really had to be there.)



The Sexiest Man in the World

Cuba and the USA continued a frosty relationship for decades after the Cuban Missile Crisis. Canada and Cuba, on the other hand, were getting along quite well. In 1976 Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and his wife Margaret met with Fidel Castro in Havana for a three-day, diplomatic visit.



At one point Castro turned to Margaret and said, "*You know, my eyes are not very strong, so every day to make them stronger I force myself to look at the sun. I find it very hard. But do you know what I find harder? That is to look into the blue of your eyes.*"

On her return to Canada, Margaret told the international press that she considered Fidel Castro "The Sexiest Man in the World".

A handsome, powerful man with a spiffy uniform and pick-up lines like that; I bet Fidel never spent many nights alone.

"Lucy! You gotta lotta explainin to do!"



Before Castro came into the picture, the most prominent Cuban was Desi Arnaz, on the *I Love Lucy*² show. Arnaz's bumbling straight-man character, Ricky Ricardo was, for better or worse, the stereotypical Cuban in most North American households throughout the 1950's.

So, is Cuba scary, funny, sexy.....? We are going to find out.

Take me to Havana!



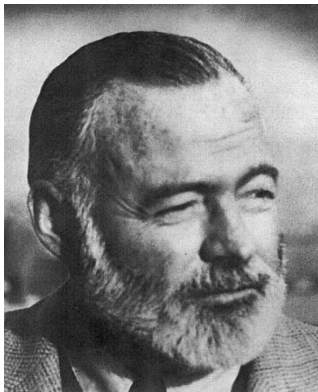
Manly Men

In the weeks leading up to our trip I read two excellent books to get a feel for the history and culture of this Caribbean Island Nation:

The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway and

Three Nights in Havana: Pierre Trudeau, Fidel Castro, and the Cold War World by Robert Wright

I don't know if it is just a coincidence, or indicative of Cuban influence, but all the male characters, in both books, were charismatic, larger-than-life personalities.



"But man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated" - Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man and the Sea*.

"Just watch me." - Pierre Trudeau in response to a journalist's question about how far Trudeau would go in the suspension of civil liberties to maintain order during Canada's October Crisis.



"I am Fidel Castro. My companions and I have come to liberate Cuba".

What is it about this island that inspires such dauntless bravado?

Thursday January 30, 2014 - Calgary Airport

Crayons and Lamborghini

Travel is a comparison of cultures. In all of our globe-trotting I have never been to a destination more distant, politically, than Cuba is from Canada³.

My first comparative observation is unsettling:

We have heard that Cuban schools are lacking some basic items, so we packed pencils, paper, toothpaste, and crayons, which we hope to distribute to children while we are there.

vs:

On our way to the airport, we listened to a radio report about Canadian music sensation, Justin Bieber, who was arrested this week for racing his Lamborghini in Los Angeles while under the influence of drugs and alcohol. 19-year-old Bieber is reported to have a personal fortune in the \$150,000,000 range.

I am not sure which system is more screwed up.



³ Canada has been a stable Democratic Constitutional Monarchy for about 150 years.

Cuba has been a Spanish colony, a (pseudo) Democracy, a military dictatorship, a Revolutionary Provisional Government, a Socialist Republic and is currently a Marxist-Leninist single party Communist state in transition to a Who Knows Whatist political system.

Friday January 31, 2014 – En-route Calgary to Havana

The Sound of the Cross

The word "travel" comes from the Old English word "travail", meaning to toil or labour - a fact I found somewhat confusing before this trip.

Today, we endured two long air travel legs, from Calgary to Cuba, via Toronto. Upon arrival in Havana, we missed our hotel shuttle and participated in a harrowing late evening cab ride through Havana's dark side.

We caught blurred images, careening past our open taxi windows, of a world that has neglected to move on since the Cuban Revolution. Narrow lanes, crumbling buildings and dimly lit spaces blew by in a sepia-toned kaleidoscope; our driver slowing only for potholes, not people.

Our Spanish speaking cabbie had insisted on taking two fares from the airport so we shared our terrifying ride with a young German lady. The sound that emanates from a person when a pedestrian steps in front of a taxi attempting to break the sound barrier is the same in any language; a fast intake of breath followed by a guttural Aaawhhh! when the impact doesn't happen.



The reason for the origin of the word "travel" is now clear. This trip has been hard work so far.



*"Ay," he said aloud. There is no translation for this word and perhaps it is just a noise such as a man might make, involuntarily, feeling the nail go through his hands and into the wood. - Ernest Hemingway from *The Old Man and the Sea**

Saturday, February 1, 2014 - Havana Centro, Cuba

Sensory Overload

I bought Bear a map of the world for Christmas. We mounted it on cork board so she can stick pins in the places we have traveled and dream about destinations yet to come.

There are a lot of pins on the map already; in America, Europe, Australia, Mexico and the Caribbean, with many more on the horizon.

The first few times we traveled anywhere exotic we both felt a tremendous sense of awe; the landscapes and people we experienced were exciting and the cultures were extraordinary. We still love to travel and experience new cultures, but the sense of wonder we felt on our early treks hasn't been as profound on more recent trips.

Until Havana!

What we experienced today ranks up there with riding camels in central Australia, being locked in an Amsterdam dungeon and watching a castle appear at sunrise in the misty hills of Germany.

The history and politics of this island nation have conspired to detour Cuba's evolutionary progress along an entirely unique cultural phylum. Cuba is the missing link, the croca-duck of civilization. To experience Cuba is like finding a lost world.



This Caribbean melting pot has a unique heritage with influences as diverse as: Spanish Colonist, African Slave, Buccaneer, American Industrialist, Gangster, and Soviet Communist, with influences from a long line of domestic Idealists and Rebels.

Mere words and pictures fail to describe the salsa mix that is Cuba.

Bear and I sat on a park bench in central Havana and recorded the wondrous things we saw in just five minutes:

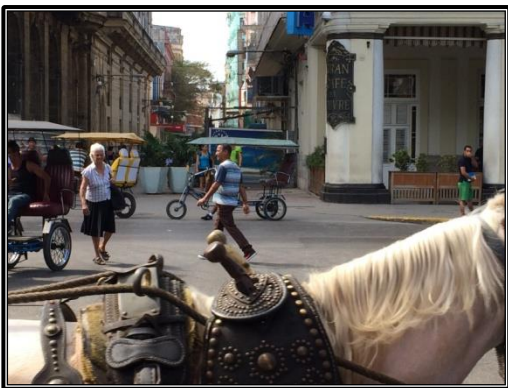
- a beautiful black woman in a brilliant yellow dress,
- a 1958 Ford station wagon carrying a dozen passengers,
- a workman transporting a mattress down the street on a cart,
- A horse, parked beside a Mercedes Benz
- a stray dog⁴,
- a man jumping out of the back of a moving jeep,
- disadvantaged people - lots of them,
- a proud Mom with a basketball playing daughter,
- a grandpa, and a granddaughter with a red lolly pop,
- a hippy couple with a guitar,
- blue smoke from 100 jalopy cars,
- ladies hanging laundry on balconies,
- a Studebaker Lark in "like new" condition,
- the smell of fresh and rotting fruit, simultaneously.



That was in 5 minutes! Our day lasted until we went into sensory overload.

⁴ Cats and dogs follow Communist doctrine in Cuba; they are communal property, not private. There was a cute cat sitting on a car, Bear asked the driver if it was his cat and could she take a picture. The man responded in Spanish, but we got the jist of it: "It is not my cat, it is everybody's cat, but you can have it – take it home!"

Havana is crumbling and confused, smelly and loud, colourful, and kind, lush and impoverished, boisterous and old, and absolutely wonderful.

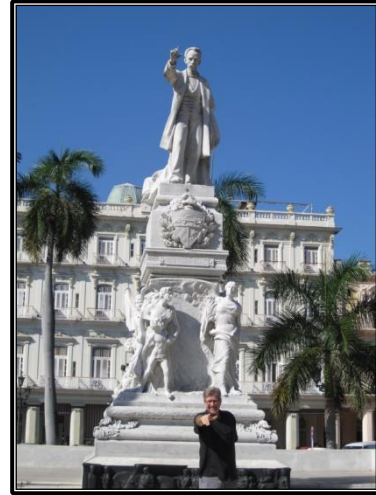


Everything in Havana works, except when it doesn't, but especially not on weekdays, or weekends.



We visited the statue of Jose Marti in Havana's busy Parque Central. Marti, Cuba's national hero, has been described as "an activist, a great Politician and a sensitive interpreter of the impulses of the human soul".

Bear's impression was slightly less romantic. Marti's statue has one arm outstretched. Bear said that she expected him to bend over and say "Can I offer you a taxi, Sir?", like every other hustler in the Parque.



El hombre araña - Spiderman

Everything in Havana is crumbling. Brave construction specialists, like the one in the photo, make a vain attempt to postpone total collapse; but corrosion works fast in Havana.

In 1970, during Canada's October Crisis, several Federation du Liberation de Quebec (FLQ) terrorists fled to Cuba and were given exile in Havana. Pierre Trudeau's friend Fidel Castro put the five defectors up at the Deauville Hotel, a once elegant waterfront hotel, but well past it's prime.

The five would-be revolutionaries stayed at the Deauville for 4 years. In 1974 they were given the option of staying in Cuba or returning to Canada and facing charges related to their terrorist activities in Quebec. They opted to return to Canada and spent several years in jail.



Bear and I toured the Deauville. I think the terrorists made the right choice.

Shocking!

I'd have to ask my friend Rodger, an electrician, but I think that some of this Cuban wiring might not be to Code:



Sunday February 2, 2014 - Havana Vieja, Cuba

Kissed by an Angel

Bear and I stuffed our suitcases full to bursting with surplus items from home; unused school supplies, pencil crayons, colour markers and paper, stuffed animals and some ancient unused wallets that showed up after one of the grandpas passed on. This morning we put a couple of coins in each wallet, filled our day packs with school supplies and ventured out onto the Sunday morning streets of Havana.

Sunday mornings are gentle almost everywhere. I remember walking through the streets of Paris on a Sunday; church bells ringing, children playing in the street and people gossiping with neighbours. In England everyone ambles down to the pub on Sunday morning, to have brunch and a pint and discuss the past week's football games.

Sunday morning in Old Havana is also gentle, with distinct Cuban variations. People venture onto their front steps to watch kids playing stick ball or marbles in the street; they may sweep the litter from their area, fix a bicycle, or cut each other's hair while socializing with their neighbours. Nobody is in a rush; nobody has any need to go very far.



Bear and I ventured into this fragile microcosm, trying not to disturb as we infiltrated their world. Our mission was to find kids that might appreciate our surplus items. We had decided that four to seven was about the right age, preferably with at least one of their parents in tow and without too many other children in the vicinity, to ensure that our gifts would be personal, special and not misinterpreted.

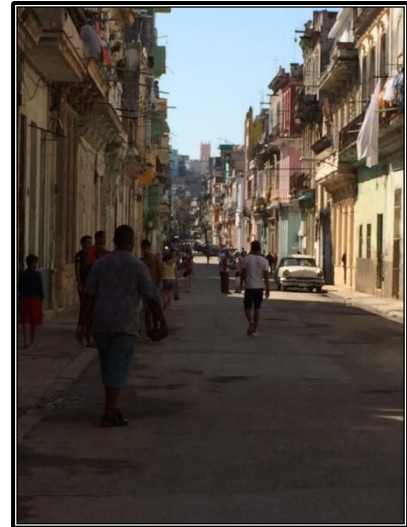
The couple of hours we spent interacting with Cuban children this morning, is possibly my best Sunday experience anywhere. The need is so great in Cuba that a few coloured pencils and bits of paper can bring a child to tears (and a full-grown Bear too, as it turns out).

One lady, trying to run a flower cart with two rambunctious, squabbling youngsters, was visibly relieved to have a diversion for her boys.

An old man scrounging bottles out of a garbage cart was shocked when I retrieved the wallet he had "dropped". There were gaps where three of every four of his teeth should have been, but his smile lit up the ally.

A set of twins, a boy with an injury and a shuffling senior all crossed our paths this Sunday morning and we brightened each other's day.

News travels fast on the street and it wasn't long before we were approached by four boys wondering if we had more crayons. Three of the four were quite a bit older than the demographic we were looking for, but we decided that we would split two bundles of pencils among them. We made sure the little guy got his share, and most of our remaining paper.



As we approached the end of one of the more derelict streets a tiny, dark spark of a girl darted out of a doorway, saw us coming and took flight back through the door. Her mother emerged as we passed, and we saw the face of this little corn-braided angel peering from behind her mother's skirts. We presented the Mom with some crayons and paper, which she passed on to the girl. Bear and I each received a hug and a kiss on the cheek and more gratitude than we thought possible from a single source.

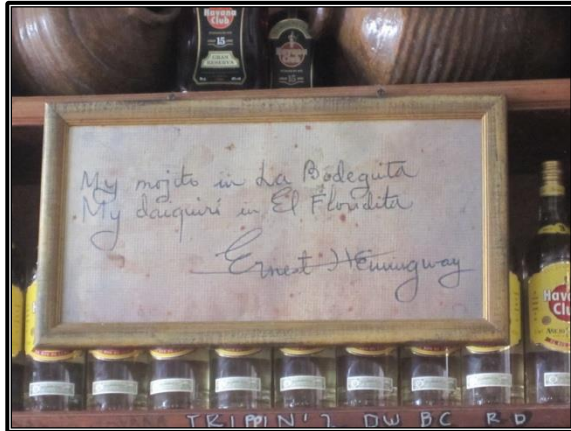
I wish we had brought more stuff.



"My mojito in La Bodeguita, My daiquiri in El Floridita"

- sign above the bar in La Bodeguita, hand-written by Ernest Hemingway

Ernest Hemingway lived in Havana in the 1950's. He was inspired to write some of his most critically acclaimed work in the very neighbourhood we ambled through this morning. Much of Hemingway's inspiration must have come from the energy of the people living around



him; he is also known to have drawn significant illumination from alcohol.

We stopped in at El Floridita yesterday and today we found his favourite bar, La Bodeguita. It was only noon when we arrived, but the rum was flowing and the place was with alive with salsa music.

I bought a souvenir cigar cutter, and we took a few pictures.

I have lined these pages with Hemingway quotes. While the one written above the bar of La Bodeguita may lack Hemingway's usual depth, it was probably the best he could do with a dozen mojitos under his belt.



We are all apprentices in a craft where no one ever becomes a master.

- Ernest Hemingway

Real Cuban Superstore

Last year a Canadian meat-packing plant was shut down for several months because authorities suspected that some of the meat might be contaminated with listeria. Nobody died, or even became ill, as a result of the suspected contamination, but thousands of pounds of beef were destroyed, just in case.

Let me try and describe a Cuban meat processing operation:

We ran across several of these facilities as we wandered the streets of Havana. They are open-air stalls on market streets with retail sale of raw meat, agricultural produce and flowers going on at one end, and meat processing happening in adjacent booths.

Slabs of raw meat (mostly pork) are placed on plywood or cardboard sheets situated on tables or the floor. The butcher, working with bare hands, hauls a slab onto his cutting board and skillfully separates fist-sized chunks of flesh from the bone. The chunks are placed on a tray and moved to the retail side of the stall where people line up to take the meat home in plastic bags they have brought with them.

I am not sure where the unfortunate animals are slaughtered but I suspect it is not far away as there is no refrigeration involved.



The smell of meat production is one that takes some getting used to. It is nauseating at the best of times but, in sub-tropical heat, the aroma boiling out of the butcher's stall is positively foul. Stray cats, dogs and the wretchedly poor seem to be attracted to it. They wait at the back door of the stall for viscera tossed in their direction by the butcher's knife.

The butcher's stall is blackened by years of accumulated blood and animal fat, flies hover and land in living sheets, the floor is a Pitrie dish. I never saw a water tap or hose in any of the stalls so it must fall to the dogs to clean up after the butcher goes home.

Listeria Superstore.

Guidebook - The Missing Pages

We went looking for a church this afternoon for no reason other than I wanted a picture of Christ on the Cross for one of my previous pieces. We had a rudimentary map of Havana, a pretty good idea which way was "up" and an over abundance of time on our hands so we pointed our noses in the general direction we I thought a church might be and headed out.

We never found a church, but we did come across a gaming house for cock fights. There was a dead rooster on the sidewalk out front, partially wrapped in a plastic bag (obviously not the winner).

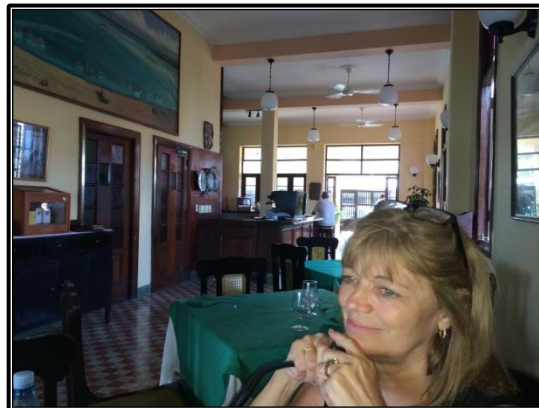
And THAT is the difference between a *vacation* and *travel*.

I don't know how Bear puts up with me.



Never go on trips with anyone you do not love.

- Ernest Hemingway



Monday February 3, 2014 - Havana, Cuba

Idilio

We made some musician friends today.

We stopped at a sidewalk cafe for lunch while a Son band was setting up. The band leader, a 60ish fellow with a warm demeanour, dropped by our table and struck up a conversation. He spoke no English but we got by in Pigeon. Leo introduced us to his band and indicated which instrument they each played. For some reason he had a crescent wrench in his CD basket, so I asked which of the band members played the wrench. We were in.



I showed him my birdhouse picture - solidly reinforcing the Cuban preconception that Canada is a frozen wasteland. We bought a CD (which I am sure was the objective of our "friendship", solidly reinforcing the Canadian preconception that Cuba is a land of petty hustlers).

Leo and the Sones y Boleros de Cuba dedicated their song *Idilio*⁵ to us. It is a catchy tune and one I intend to replay often.

We weren't gone from the restaurant five minutes when we made yet another bunch of musical friends. We stopped on a bench to check the map and were approached by a tiny old local with a guitar bigger than he was. He used the familiar pick-up line: "Happy Holiday! Where are you from?"

If you dare to answer this question, or even acknowledge their existence, a tourist is dead meat.



⁵ *Idilio* – Romantic, Idyllic.

I not only told him we were from Canada, I even shook his hand - Tiny and I instantly became BFF!

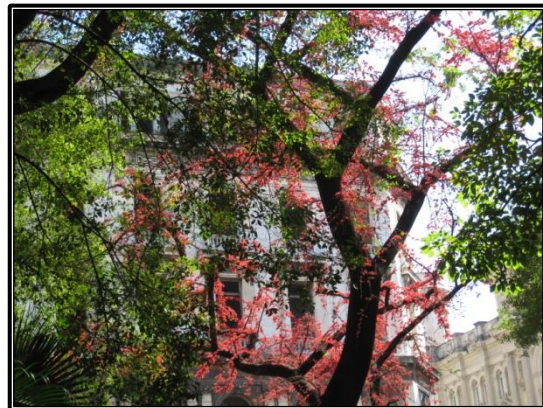
Before you know it, Tiny knew Terri's name and two other "band" members had joined the circus. One had two plastic pop bottles half-filled with gravel and the other had a chunk of hardwood and a stick - obviously the percussion section of this orchestra.

As quick as you can say "Jose Marti" Tiny had composed a song called *Terri Canada!*

The lyrics went something like this: *Terri Canada, Terri Canada, Terri O'Canada, La la la!* and the music was worse.

We gave the trio 5 Cuban bucks and offered to host a recording session if the band ever tours in Canada.

So many musical friends, so little time.....

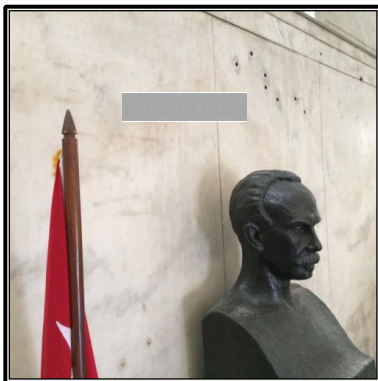


Granma comes to the Party

I read several books and articles on Cuban history before we left. I won't bore anyone by regurgitating much of it but a few words about the Cuban Revolution (the second one) have to make it onto these pages, if only for context.

I will skip the first 500 years of Cuba's history and begin the year I was born, 1955.

Cuba in the early 1950's was a loosely democratic country with ties to American political, industrial and mafia influences. The Cuban President, Fulgencio Batista, had been democratically elected but, seeing his popularity diminish, staged a coup and continued to govern as a dictator.



Batista's brutal regime became increasingly unpopular with the Cuban people; he militarily repressed insurgence and sold off Cuban land to American and British firms, pocketing most of the money for himself. Batista got rich, the population got poor, and the gangsters got what was left. Fertile ground for a Revolution.

One of the insurgents Batista had been working hard to suppress was a young lawyer named Fidel Castro. Castro had been jailed for his role in an unsuccessful rebellion but, on May 15, 1955, Batista made the grave mistake of granting amnesty to Castro and setting him free.

Castro moved to Mexico in exile and set about organizing a revolutionary force to overthrow the Batista regime.



In December 1956, Fidel Castro, his brother Raul, a young doctor named Che Guevara, Camilo Cienfuegos a courageous military commander, and 78 other rebels loaded a leaky yacht⁶ with munitions and headed to Cuba.

⁶ The dilapidated yacht was purchased from an American who had named it after his Grandmother. Originally designed for 12 passengers, it broke down several times and nearly foundered on the crossing from Mexico.

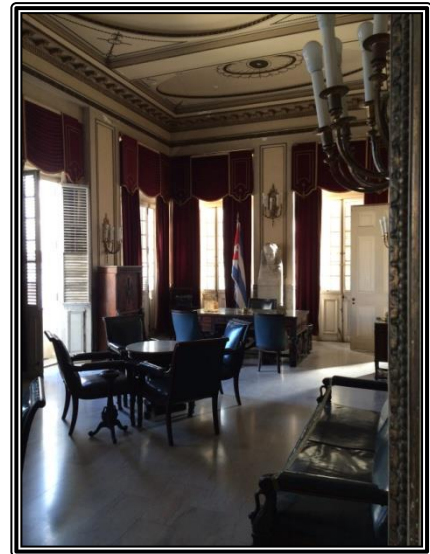
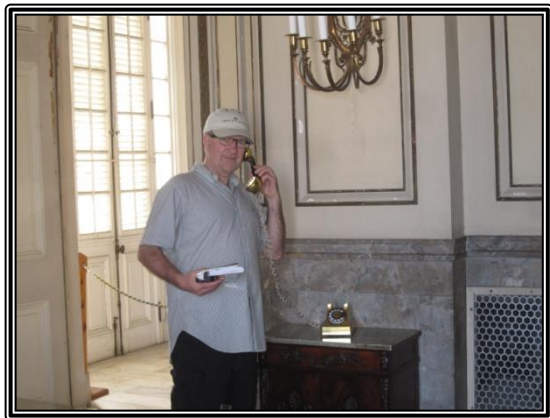
What happened over the next 3 years is the stuff of legend in Cuba. It would take more pages than I care to write but I highly recommend that history geeks, such as me, take a closer look.

In a nutshell, the Cuban people welcomed Castro and his friends. The peasants rose up and followed soldiers into battle. Castro and his handsome Barbudos (bearded ones) were chick magnets; hundreds of young women joined the Revolutionary forces. Batista's soldiers defected to Castro's army in droves.



On New Years Day 1959 Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos took Santa Clara - President Fulgencio Batista fled the country (with about \$70 million US in his pocket - but left behind the golden telephone IT&T had given him). Fidel Castro took over the capital building in Havana on January 8, 1959 and established a provisional socialist government.

OK, enough with the history lesson. Bear and I toured the Museum of the Revolution for half a day. Fortunately for Bear, most of the commentary in the museum is in Spanish or I might still be in there.



The Granma eventually carried the rebels to their homeland. It currently sits in reverent dry dock at the Museum of the Revolution in Havana. In deference to the Revolutionaries and the boat that brought them back to Cuba, the Cuban Communist newspaper is also called *The Granma*.

Tuesday February 4, 2014 - San Francisco de Paula, Cuba

I am the Walrus:

Bear, pointing over the water at a Castle: "Look, there is the wall, Russ!"

Me, looking into the water: "What walrus, there's no walrus."

Bear: "You're an idiot."

Me: "Oh, that wall."

I am the walrus, goo goo g'joob. - The Beatles



"Excuse me, Mr. Hemingway, do you need a taxi?"

I wish the cabbie had referred to me as "Mr. Costner" or "Mr. Clooney", but I will take what I can get.



Cuban Taxi Socialism

We had a first-hand experience with Cuban Socialism today.

We took a taxi from our hotel to San Francisco de Paula early in the day to see Hemingway's villa, Finca La Vigia. Our entrepreneurial driver, Jorge, charged \$20 to take us there. He asked if we wanted a round trip but we opted to return at our own pace.



When we finished touring, we went looking for a cab to get us back downtown, but things are very different outside the touristy area of central Havana. Downtown, everybody wants to take you for a ride (literally and figuratively). Taxis are everywhere and the drivers are aggressive about getting your business.

Transportation operates on a very different level out where the real Cubans live. There are overcrowded busses lumbering along the main streets but there is no information about routes to be found and, if there was, I am sure it would be in Spanish. There were lots of dilapidated taxis going by, but they all had as many passengers as there were seats. We found one empty cab, but the driver refused to take us to "Centro" - not sure why, but he was a surly bastard anyway, so we didn't press the issue.



The process of figuring out the system and looking for a taxi had taken about an hour but the next empty car to come along agreed to take us downtown. I asked the driver how much it would cost, but I couldn't understand his answer. We jumped in anyway, glad to have a ride.



We weren't expecting to have company but two blocks down the road the driver pulled over and picked up a local guy. He got off a short distance later and four more people piled in with us.

They were all nice enough people but seven in a 1957 Chevrolet Biscayne is about as "up close and personal" as I care to get with strangers. Fortunately, the little princess beside me was

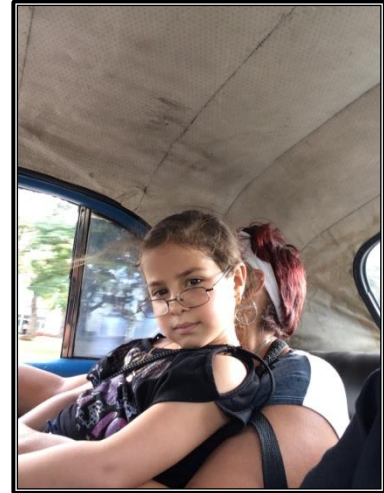
adorable. I put my cell phone camera on "selfie" mode, showed her her own picture, and my snowy birdhouse, for which I got a sparkly smile.

We bounced and jostled communally all the way into central Havana, the Biscayne billowing blue smoke the entire distance.

When we landed the driver collected what looked like about 50 cents from each of the other passengers. He asked us for \$2, which I happily doubled.

So, that is how capitalism compares with socialism,

- in the capitalist system you ride independently, go directly to your destination and the entrepreneurial driver gets rich.
- In the socialist system you ride communally, and nobody gets rich.



Socialism is a philosophy of failure, the creed of ignorance, and the gospel of envy, its inherent virtue is the equal sharing of misery. - Winston Churchill



Cojimar



Havana Street Sign

Philosophy of Failure

I read an article in National Geographic⁷ that described how 80% of Cuban workers are employed by state owned enterprises. The salary range is between 250 and 900 Pesos (\$10 - \$36US) per month, plus the ration card all Cubans receive for basic food items.

An emergency room physician, earning at the high end of the pay scale, drives a 30-year-old Russian taxi on his days off in order to afford deodorant or a toy for his child (both considered "non-essential" items).

"They pretend to pay us, while we pretend to work." - Common Cuban Idiom.



Caption Reads: "Thank you cretin for helping us make Socialism irrevocable."



⁷ National Geographic November 2012 – *Cuba's New Now* by Cynthia Gorney

Wednesday February 5, 2014 - Havana, Cuba

Top 10 things we saw in Havana that Canada no longer has:

- 10 - Lolly pops
- 9 - TV antennae
- 8 - People smoking while they prepare your food
- 7 - Women's hair in curlers and scarves
- 6 - Kids playing street ball, hopscotch and marbles
- 5 - Tricycles
- 4 - Mom and Pop Diners - no McDonalds or KFC
- 3 - People sitting on their front doorstep, socializing
- 2 - Telephone booths with people lined up to use them

And the # 1 thing we don't have any more:

1950's American-made cars.



Contraband

By a happy coincidence we ran into our friendly taxi driver Jorge from yesterday (the rich, entrepreneurial one). He drove by us while we were walking from our hotel to the Tropicana. Jorge got our attention by blaring his horn, waving an arm out the window, and hollering a Cuban greeting at the top of his lungs. He had a load of passengers, but I was pretty sure he would come back for us.



Jorge must have dumped his locals at the next intersection because he was back in no time looking for round two of the *Fleece the Foreigner* game all Cuban taxi drivers play. We didn't mind; the Tropicana is about 40 blocks from our hotel and we were only at the half-way point. All ten of Bear's toes were screaming "taxi!", so we hopped in and got reacquainted.

Jorge was intent on selling us cigars today. We had refused yesterday, but I wanted to take some home for Aaron and Marshall, and the guys at the office. Jorge's plan was to drive us downtown to meet his brother who is in the retail cigar business and would give us a "very good deal".

I was born at night, but it wasn't last night; I was pretty sure that if we went downtown with Jorge, it was going to cost me a lot of \$. But I did need cigars, and this was our last full day in Cuba. I told Jorge that I wasn't interested in going downtown but, if he wanted to run down to his brother's place and pick up a box of 25 Cohibas while we toured the Tropicana, I would buy them from him. We negotiated a price that was roughly 50% of what the hotel cigar store wanted, and we agreed to meet back at the Tropicana entrance in an hour.



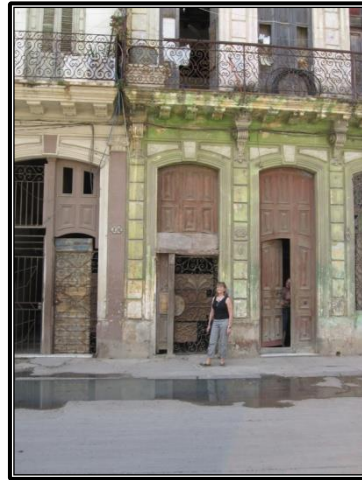
Jorge took off in his old yellow Chevy Wagon, and we headed for the entrance of the historic Tropicana Cabaret. A security guard promptly arrested our progress and, in no uncertain terms, told us the Tropicana was "cerrado" (closed). No worries, there was a park adjacent, so we decided to kill some time wandering around.

Jorge was back in just over 30 minutes with his brother in tow. His brother was a different colour than Jorge, so I assume he meant a brutha from anutha mutha.



For some reason Jorge and his bro insisted on concluding our transaction around the corner from the Tropicana. We all hopped in the Chevy beater and exchanged cash for cigars in an alley.

It was all very clandestine and there is some doubt that I got authentic government-issue cigars but buying contraband from a couple of miss-matched brothers in the backseat of a rough-running car, in front of a mafia-controlled nightclub, is a lot more fun than buying cigars in the hotel lobby.

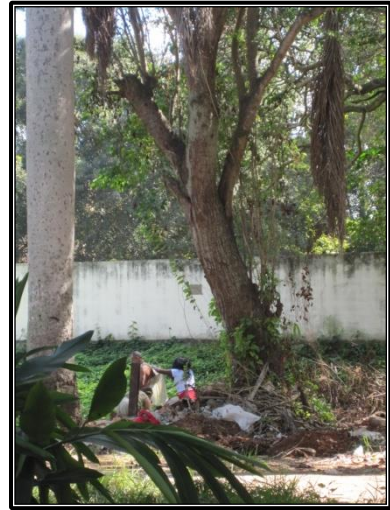


Loco

There is one segue to the cigar story that has got to be told.

While we were sitting in the park waiting for our contraband agent to return, we witnessed what could be the strangest ritual I have ever seen, in Cuba or anywhere else.

There were a few people milling around the park, nothing out of the ordinary, just the usual old folks, bottle pickers and a couple of kids. But, over on the far side, near a ditch, there was a colourfully dressed black lady. I noticed her picking bunches of fronds from plants growing by the ditch and stuffing them into a bag; I didn't think much of it. Then, a middle-aged man approached her and stood, facing the opposite direction, in front of her. The woman started waving the fronds over the man's head and shoulders and down his back. The ritual seemed a little weird, but it turned bat-shit crazy when she started doing the same thing with a dead chicken - I kid you not! The woman started shaking a cadaverous white bird over the guy's head and down his back while chanting some incoherent babble.



The chicken disappeared back into her sack and the woman set about ripping the man's shirt off, which she accomplished, with his help.

Bear and I were sitting some distance away, but not far enough that we could have been mistaken. We took a couple of surreptitious pictures as evidence, but the chicken was back in the bag before we could capture that part of whatever had transpired across the park.

I was glad to see Jorge's car back at the curb. When I described to him what we had seen in the park he made the international sign for "loco".



Later on February 5, 2014 - Back at the hotel

Santería is a syncretic religion of West African and Caribbean origin influenced by and syncretized with Roman Catholicism." - Wikipedia

I did some research later in the day and was fascinated to learn that what we witnessed in the park is an actual ceremony in the Santería religion.

The ritual sacrifice we witnessed was described on the internet - in recipe format!

"To get a better job:

Ingredients:

Five diamond chips

A chicken

When you want to get a better job, or improve your work situation in any way, take the five diamond chips (if your budget allows. If not, one will do.) and place them in Oshun's tureen. Sacrifice the chicken and allow the blood to drip over the diamond chips while you Moyuba Oshun. Perform this Ebo on a Saturday or on the fifth day of the month. If you don't have a tureen, petition Oshun at a river's edge."

For more information on the Santería religion, go to www.bat-shitcrazy.com.



Thursday February 6, 2014 - Melia Havana Hotel

The Revolution Starts Now

The history of Cuba leading up to the Revolution is fascinating but what came after is positively the most colourful and complex set of historical circumstances possible.

Again, I don't want to impose a history lesson on anybody but reading Cuban history, from 1959 to the present, is like reading the ultimate action novel. There are rebels and revolutionaries, spies, CIA orchestrated murder, an attempted military coup, Cold War drama and political scandals, enough to fill a library.

And, the real beauty of it is that Cuban history is still in the making. Che Guevara was killed by the CIA years ago, but Commandante Fidel Castro, is alive and his brother Raul is currently President. The Revolutionary Heroes are still revered, and Americans are generally loathed, by the great majority of Cubans.

Support from eastern European communists has disappeared and the economy has crumbled. Cubans are confused about their place in the world; their future is unpredictable.

I look out my hotel window and, from a tourist's point of view; I see wondrous natural beauty and abysmal infrastructure.

If I look again, with a pair of Canadian democratic socialist's glasses on, I see a world of opportunity. I see a highly educated and motivated workforce, I see a country that wants to rebuild and I see methodology that could improve the Cuban economy without abandoning the principals the Revolutionary Heroes envisioned.

If I was 30 years younger, I would brush up on my Spanish and help make Cuban Revolution #3 happen.



"!Viva cuba y el pueblo cubano! !Viva el Primer Ministro Fidel Castro! !Viva la amistad cubano-canadiense!⁸

⁸ Long live the Cuban people! Long live Prime Minister Fidel Castro! Long Live Cuban-Canadian friendship - Pierre Trudeau in a speech made January 26, 1976 at Cato Largo, Cienfuegos, Cuba



Our flight leaves at 7:30AM, so you would think that the confusion that is Cuba would be almost complete for us. Not so, we had arranged for a 4:30AM wake-up call to catch a pre-arranged 5:00AM taxi. At 4:00AM the telephone rang, and a very excited taxi driver told us he was waiting in the lobby. I tried to explain that he was an hour early, but he was quite adamant that his taxi was the only way to the airport, and he was leaving in about 15 minutes.

We scrambled to shower and dress and were in the lobby by 4:15. There were about a dozen cabs outside the door, so I am pretty sure Hyper, our chauffeur du jour, was pulling our leg.

My interpretation is that Hyper, seeing a 5:00AM pickup posted on the board, decided to make a pre-emptive strike and out-manoeuvre his colleagues by taking the trip an hour early. It worked; Hyper got the fare and tip while his counterparts languished.

If I decide to join the third Cuban Revolution, I am going to want entrepreneurial soldiers like Hyper and Jorge in my camp.



“Every day is a new day. It is better to be lucky. But I would rather be exact.
Then when luck comes you are ready.”

— Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man and the Sea*

Thursday Afternoon February 6, 2014 - A&W Restaurant Toronto Airport

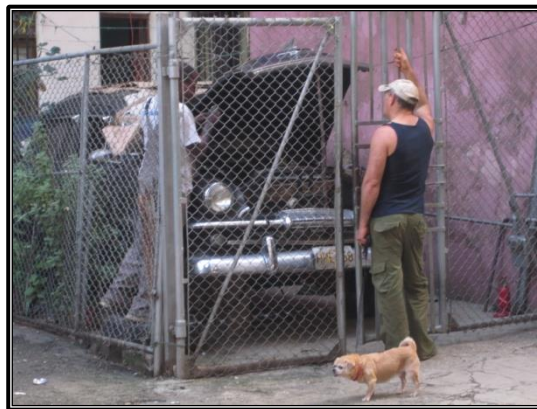
A Beautiful Dream

We are only five hours out of Cuba and already setting into our familiar world of Fast Food, Cell Phones and things that Work.

The feeling is not unlike waking from a beautiful dream.



Barber Shop



Cuban Tire

The things of the night cannot be explained in the day because they do not then exist.

Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*

"Cuba is flawed, like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. If set straight it would lose its charm".

- Russ Paton (attempting to write like Ernest Hemingway)

