

ourworld

My Cuban Heart

It's the eve of my trip to Cuba, the homeland I've never seen and a place that has taken on mythic, often contradictory, dimensions in my life. I am sitting in my parents' Miami kitchen asking my mother about the 1912 massacre of 6,000 members of Cuba's Independents of Color, the first Black political party outside Haiti. "I don't know much about it," she admits.

"It was called *la guerra entre las razas* [the war between the races]. I had a relative who fought on the White side." To me, the massacre represented an inhuman tragedy. To my mother, the tragedy seemed to rest in the fact that her forebear had taken a *machetazo*, or machete wound, in the stomach.

My parents were from the privileged classes of pre-Castro Cuba. They, like me, are White. I come from an illustrious line of businessmen, doctors, patriots and writers (my great aunt, Dulce Maria Loynaz, was the country's poet laureate; her father fought the Spanish for Cuba's independence). They lived charmed, comfortable lives—society balls, country-club functions, weekends at the lovely and exclusive beaches of Varadero. I was born in Mexico

on January 6, 1959, three days after Fidel took Havana. My parents returned to Cuba to visit relatives when I was a few months old, saw what was happening and decided to settle in Mexico, where my father had a job. Many of my relatives came out later, penniless and traumatized. I grew up with horror stories about Castro's prisons, where citizens who had been arrested on trumped-up charges of sedition were forced to bail chest-high human waste from a septic tank using buckets. If a prisoner in the cell block rebelled, he

was not allowed to shower, sometimes for days.

I cannot understand the cruelty in Castro's prisons, about which I've heard so often, any more than I can the 1912 massacre my parents say they know little about. It's clear to me that the "White side" was the wrong side in 1912. Yet Fidel didn't behave benevolently toward intellectuals and writers with dissident views. He sentenced homosexuals to months of hard labor. Friends of my family who were taken prisoner during the Bay of Pigs invasion suffocated to death in airless trucks as they were being transported to detention. Human-rights violations, whoever they are perpetrated by, are about corruption and power; it's simplistic to think of them as dealing solely with race or class.

A few days after I visit my parents in Miami, I sit in a *paladar* in Havana, one of the private homes allowed by the Cuban government to operate as small restaurants, having lunch with Reny Martinez. Reny is a stringer for Reuters. He is a cultured man who is a veritable walking encyclopedia of Havana history. He tells me he and his colleagues at Reuters like to say that Cuba has its propagandist newspaper, *Granma*, and exiled Miami Cubans have their own *Granma*, *El Nuevo Herald* (the Spanish version of the *Miami Herald*). "They do themselves a disservice by being so reactionary," he says of the exiles. Yet it's that reactionary community that shaped my skewed knowledge of the Castro Revolution, that made me believe the homes of wealthy families were wrested from them to accommodate the proletariat, as they were in *Dr. Zhivago*, Boris Pasternak's novel of Russia's socialist revolution. But, says Reny, who is now looking at me incredulously, "No one who stayed lost their home. Only those who abandoned Cuba lost their homes."

After a few days here, it becomes apparent to me that neither *Granma's* view nor *El Nuevo Herald's* represents the reality of Cuba today. These viewpoints are poles apart—formed by very specific eras and very particular mind-sets—and, as usual, the truth is far more complicated, resting somewhere in the middle. As I walk through the Vedado, [CONTINUED ON PAGE 70]



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where much of my family once lived—especially up Calle Linea, which is flanked by one grandiose mansion after another—I can see why the 1959 Revolution *had* to happen. That kind of opulence attests to an inequitable, unworkable social structure, where wealth belongs to the very few, while the majority of Cubans, most of them Black, are left wanting. But in accepting the necessity of the revolution, must we also judge these beautiful structures as the products of a decadent feudal system and so negate the fact that they also represent an extraordinary level of human creativity? For all their symbolism in

today's world, they are marvelous, ingeniously engineered structures.

Today there is almost no illiteracy in Cuba. Medical training and research in Havana are among the most advanced in the world. Artists and architects live better here than in many other places in Latin America; they are encouraged and nurtured. No one is denied an education because they are poor. These are all wonderful accomplishments of the revolution.

Yet one artist I spoke with told me a painting of his was taken down from an exhibit because it displeased the government. Regular Cubans aren't allowed to enjoy the beach at what used to be the old Biltmore Country Club because it is reserved for government officials. The revolution, it seems, is imperfect.

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It's odd that what attracts the world to Cuba nowadays is its frozen-in-time quality, for which the American economic embargo is largely responsible. We come to photograph old Chevys, crumbling buildings, peeling paint. Would we be so fascinated if the cars were late-model BMWs and the buildings didn't show their history of neglect? Would our time here feel as soulful and poignant?

All these things are hard for me to reconcile. What I take away from Cuba is something I think I may always have known: that Cubans, Black and White, are blessed with a resourcefulness and humor that keep us not only alive, but also joyous. Politics aside, whether we are the exile starting over in a new land like Miami (as most of my relatives did), or the man in Havana mixing oil, shampoo and soap to use as brake fluid for a 1947 Pontiac, we're able to laugh at life's absurdities and impossible contradictions. We love, we make music, we go on. □

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