

'I'm a Terrible Cuban' – One Author's Powerful Journey to His Past

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I'm a terrible Cuban. One of the worst. I spent seventeen years without setting foot on the island where I was born, I avoid the unending debates about Cuba and I'm aware of what's happening in that part of world only when New York newspapers or newscasts mention it, which is almost never. From the time I left in 1991, Cuba has been a terrible nightmare for me.

So, when Cevin Bryerman, vice president and editor of *Publishers Weekly*, told me last summer he was organising a historic trip to Cuba – the first visit by editors and distributors of books and magazines from the US – and that he wanted *People en Español* to be the only Hispanic publication to be part of that group, I was somewhat skeptical. His idea was that I prepare a presentation about the power of the US Hispanic market and the strength of our publication in that marketplace.

First, we had to see if the Cuban government would agree to host a group that is involved with publications and magazines, one that stands for the free dissemination of information. Secondly, as a Cuban exile who is now a US citizen, I needed a special permit to enter Cuba, which for the past twenty years has required people like me to get not only this permit but also a Cuban passport – a process that costs a small fortune.

As the trip's date neared and we all started to receive flight confirmations, my heart began to race. I wondered whether I would be allowed to go. I've always told my three children – who in a way feel Cuban though they have no idea what their parents' country is like – that we

would visit Cuba when the US Embassy in Havana was once again operational (this happened in 2015), when my cell phone had reception there (it now does), when we could use our credit cards there (still not the case) and I would not need a Cuban passport to return (still a long way from happening).

So, feeling something between fear and paranoia – an emotion difficult to explain to someone who did not grow up in Cuba at a time when all phones conversations were monitored, when your neighbour reported you to the authorities if you stepped inside a church or if you accepted a call from a family member in Miami, which would brand you a CIA agent – I got on a plane from Miami to Cuba. There, I would meet part of the group that I would share this odyssey with. The flight is only forty minutes but the process of getting there can last an entire day.

In what felt like the blink of an eye, the captain announced we were making our descent into Havana and from my window I saw a darkened city. When I stepped off the plane onto the tarmac that led to the terminal at José Martí International Airport, I was slapped with a smell of jet fuel that awoke many memories. I reached the window where an immigration official took my photo (the airport has gone digital) and he scanned his computer after going through my Cuban passport, page by page. I took a deep breath and thought: *they're not sending me back this time*. I kept saying that to myself, again and again. In 1995, when I was a reporter for *El Nuevo Herald* – the Spanish-language edition of the *Miami Herald* – the Cuban authorities granted me a special permit to see my father in Havana but, once I arrived, they turned me around and sent me back to Miami on the same plane I had just arrived on.

This time, I mentally repeated *they're not sending me back this time* so often that I almost blurted it out to the immigration official who now held my destiny in his hands. Those minutes

with him were the longest of my life, until I heard the click that indicated he had stamped my passport so I could go through. ‘Welcome, Armando,’ he said without looking at me. I immediately texted my family and friends, all of whom were expecting news of my trip.

Now I had to get through customs. I saw one female inspector didn’t take her eyes off me and was walking towards me, somewhat bewildered. My legs began to shake; I clung to my carry-on and looked away until I felt someone touch my shoulder. ‘Oh my God, I can’t believe you’re the editor of *People en Español!*’ she said, giving me a hug. ‘Chico, why didn’t you vote for the Cuban girl?’

I had no clue what she was talking about, but I took a picture with her. She then explained that she saw me on Univision’s *Nuestra Belleza Latina* reality show, where a winner is chosen by popular vote every season. In Cuba, television shows like this, as well as movies from the US, are recorded and circulated through USBs, which people connect to computers or the sixty-five inch screens I had seen coming from Miami. Often, these shows can be up to four years behind what we’re seeing in the US.

When this customs officer noticed I only had carry-on luggage, she took me to the exit. I was about to step outside when I heard my name called. *Now what?* I thought. The photo was blurry and the official wanted us to take a new one.

When I exited with the group onto a bus that would take us to dinner in one of the most exclusive restaurants in the city (under private ownership), I didn’t recognise the city. People in Havana truly live in darkness.

The next day, I did my presentation at the International Book Fair in La Cabaña, a fort from the Spanish colonial era that had been used as a prison after Fidel Castro came to power. There, Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara personally oversaw the execution of hundreds of people who were against the new government. Photos of Che could be seen around the fair, in different parts of La Cabaña.

The number of people who lined up to buy books amazed the group of editors and publishers visiting Cuba. A long line of young people filled the hallways of the old jail.

The final scene in my novel *The German Girl* takes place in the same place I was now in. I started to see the city as it would have been seen by my characters: the 937 German passengers, most of them Jewish, who set sail on the St. Louis with Cuban visas from Hamburg on 13 May 1939, trying to escape the Nazis – only to be returned to Europe after they weren’t allowed to disembark in the port of Havana. In fact, only twenty-eight passengers were allowed to stay in Havana. Many who returned to Europe perished in Nazi concentration camps. I spent hours contemplating Havana as a distant and unreachable city, not unlike the characters in my novel.

I consumed the city with insatiable hunger. I discovered restored colonial ruins, cafés for tourists, revived imperial architecture. The winter breeze in the tropics, a forgiving sun and different accents from tourists from all over the world made it almost impossible to tell if I was in Havana or in an alley in Paris or Milan. I retraced the steps of my characters, which was actually an exercise in retracing the steps of my youth. I went to the Colón Cemetery, the University of Havana, the Beth Shalom Synagogue and I discreetly took a picture in front of my childhood home in the Vedado neighbourhood. Just as I was doing this, someone came out of the house, smiling, and approached me. I explained who I was and she said

she still remembered my family. I told her about my novel, that the main character in it had spent her last years in that house and she invited me inside. I went to my bedroom, my mother's and grandmother's rooms, the corner where my sister and I would play. This enormous house that had once seemed like a palace to me was now small yet perfectly preserved in time and, for an instant, I was even able to smell the lost scent of home.

I also went to Central Havana, crossing destroyed streets and crumbling buildings propped up by pieces of wood and metal, to surprise my father. I was able to hug him as if no time had passed.

When it was time to say goodbye and once again face the long process of customs and immigration at José Martí International Airport, I wasn't nervous. When they started going through my luggage, a woman dressed in military attire unwrapped several plaster religious statues I had bought at the Church of Our Lady of Regla as gifts. The woman, with a serious expression, warned me that they 'served no purpose'. Alarmed, I was transported to 1980s Cuba where believing in God could send you to jail. Surely, I was simply in front of an obstinate atheist. 'They're decorative items; I'm taking them as gifts,' I said. Taking my hand, she said, 'Look, people place their faith on that piece of plaster and think that life will be better, but the only saviour'—(I thought she was going to say Fidel Castro)—'is Jesus Christ. He is the saviour; you should put your faith in Him.' I almost laughed in her face. I had just realised that indeed, I had left Cuba in the 20th century and returned in the 21st.

Havana has definitely changed. It isn't more democratic, there are still no free elections, but you're no longer jailed if you step inside a church, own a private bookstore,

or attend an embassy party where artists and intellectuals now find refuge. An actor told me that laws are still not applied or respected. ‘Anybody can come into your house or default on a contract and the police do nothing,’ he said. ‘But if anyone on the street yells “Down with Fidel!” they throw them in jail.’

Seeing Havana from the window of the plane that would take me home, I wondered if I would ever return to Cuba again. Yes, I would return with my three children some day. But as a tourist? I don’t think so.

After another never-ending day at the airport in Havana – we had to wait six hours to board the plane – we arrived in Miami in only a few minutes and I ran to catch my connection to New York. Arriving home in Manhattan, I heard my 10-year-old’s voice: ‘Daddy!’ I was home.

I went to bed but could not sleep and started to cry. A moment later, I felt utter joy. I was happy. I finally understood I wasn’t such a terrible Cuban. But Cuba still hurts.