

**FID**

# WAKES ME EVERY MORNING

**A Cuban Update:  
Life after  
and during socialism—  
both at once.**

**BY STAN FOGEL**

# "Da, da, los niños, ba ba, ba, da dum."

Peering out between the slats of my bedroom window around 8:30 a.m. I see about fifteen four-year-olds shrieking what I've since been told is a patriotic hymn to Fidel. They're in a semi-circle around a smiling but strict woman, who, my friends say, has been leading children such as these in this song for about thirty years. The performance isn't for me — it's not as if, a North American, I am assumed to be with the CIA and am being assaulted with a deliberate display of socialist devoutness. It just so happens that my bedroom wall doubles as a day care's boundary.

During some months in Havana, my eyes and ears haven't registered anything else nearly as celebratory of Fidel. It's not that things aren't appreciably better than they were even two years ago when I last

lived in Cuba. Then, blackouts occurred four or five nights per week, reminding everyone that Soviet Hydro, or whatever the name was, had pulled the plug here in order to light the post-communist way there. Now, the lights only go out once a week...or whenever the wind wallops the aging electrical equipment.

Then, cars — storied fifties' vehicles mainly — were a rare sight, like the spotting of a Japanese soldier from World War II wandering out of hiding into the future imperfect. Now twenty-four hour gas stations are scattered throughout Havana; the mandate, though, is still, "fill 'er up...and push." My recent return to Marti Airport was a classic: a classic '48 Chevy was waiting for me and waiting for me to push it, by-passing a starter that only occasionally helped start the car.

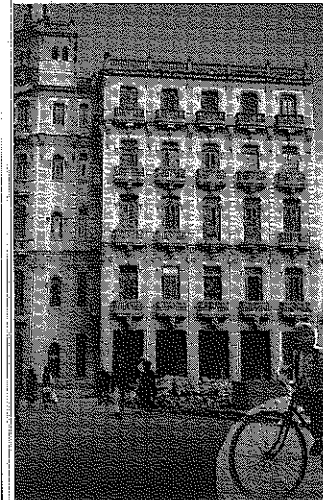
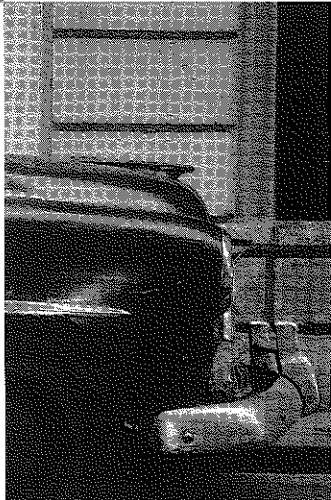
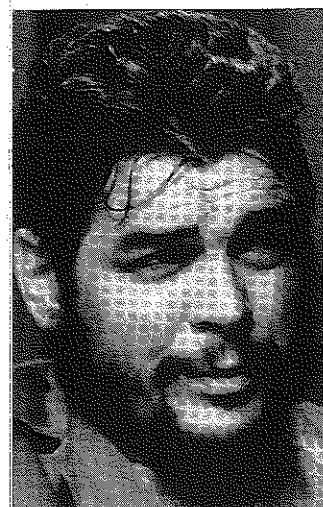
Then the only green to go with beans and rice was...envy — and some okra, in Spanish "kim-bobo," which to some signified Fidel, green (military suit) on the outside, a white saliva-like substance (recalling his propensity for speech-making) within. Now, cucumbers, lettuce, tomatoes and onions are

being sold in farmers' markets that have sprung up all over the island. Not incidentally, Fidel's saliva still circulates: a few nights ago both Cuban TV channels broadcast his complete two-and-one half hour address to a science convention. If you by chance missed it, it was repeated in full in *Granma*, the communist party's daily dispenser of all the good news — about the harvests — fit to print. (The North American version of this — a tribute to our accelerated pace — is to view the same, brief executive sound-bite over and over on CNN or CBC Newsworld.)

Then, the only restaurants one could go to (and find food — lots of restaurant facades still existed in '93 with nada on the menu and ditto in the fridge) were official tourist ones, complete with haute cuisine lists and cafeteria presentations. Now, paladares (a neo-logism from the Spanish word for palates) have been legalized — to a maximum of twelve seats so that no one gets rich and exchanges a chef's hat for a green Commander-in-Chief's cap. My favourite paladar — hereby producing the first Cuban restaurant review since former dictator and American lackey, Batista, feasted on Cuba's then sizable underclass — is "El Pescador" in Santa Fe, the old fishing village, now suburb, just west of Havana. Mom grills what her locally famous fisherman son, nicknamed "Barracuda," catches. For \$2 U.S. you can, if that day "Barracuda" was luckier than Santiago, Hemingway's old man of *The Old Man and the Sea* fame, eat shark snatched, as it were, from the jaws of one-week package tourists consigned to eat at hotels just down the road. (I'll bet neither R.O.M. chef, Jamie Kennedy, nor any member of his family has ever fished for shark.)

Interestingly, one of the hotels close by is called "The Old Man and the Sea" (and is managed by a Canadian firm). The Hemingway industry in Havana, like Toronto's movie industry, has produced a celebrity signature on just about every bar stool in town. Thieves, evidently less sentimental than ersatz big-game/big fish hunters, have become a nuisance at the Hemingway finca (farm), purse-snatching from the bushes that grow up around it, then melting like the snows of Kilimanjaro into the wilderness. Papa wouldn't have noticed; evidently, he kept his nose in a daiquiri while being chauffeured from the finca to the coast, so his view wouldn't be burdened by the locals.

Havana, though, is a safe place to wander in — women I have spoken to say they hitch-hike and/or bicycle safely throughout the day and night. The city is also sophisticated, showing up the Florida mall culture in which most Cubans seem bent on window-shopping or minimum-wage working. The desire to "get out" is exemplified by the following: last year a Canadian who fell in love with a Cuban woman arranged to meet her just offshore on his yacht. When others on the specified beach saw the woman and her family swimming to the boat, they too spitzed out, one might say, hoping to be included in the extended family. Mayhem ensued, one of the yacht's propellers sliced someone to death and the police, alerted by the fuss, carted the



Canadian off to jail. Despite the urge of Cubans to go "thataway," lots of tourists are coming "thisaway." Think of the stock joy of fleeing winter, another (for some) stock joy of not encountering many Americans and the burgeoning (for many, I hope) pleasure of ducking our own Canadian version of the Bay of Pigs, a.k.a. the Ontario Cabinet as it grunts and snuffles its despicable way to Ging-riches. Momentarily, I would think, the tourism industry and the laws of the state, which try, for the most part, to keep tourists drinking officially produced daiquiris and otherwise out of private spaces (which drain the public purse), have made it difficult for hookers to ply their trade. The prostitutes have been bounced from the streets, discos, etc., on the whim, one hears, of Raul Castro's wife.

Whim, it seems, can generate policy as easily as "scientific socialism" does. This year, Christmas trees were decreed not to be flagrant violations of socialism, until a senior bureaucrat ordered them taken down from the one or two public places in which they stood. When Fidel returned from Vancouver, among other places, he is reported to have said "What happened to the Christmas trees?" One particularly large tree was purportedly raised, lowered and then raised again as quickly as ads rotate on billboards at Toronto Blue Jay ball games.

Curiously, the life one leads here passes in a kind of Commie Disneyland. If you're tired of — or even more astutely, never could stomach — polyester have-a-nice-days in middle America's notion of fun, Orlando's official and capitalist Disneyland, then this fantasyland should stimulate you (as much as it does me). With "socialismo o muerte" [socialism or death] painted hugely at your back, you can engage in some face-to-face bargaining for food, companionship, lodging, etc. To give the commerce added piquancy, the money that talks is Uncle Sam's — who only metaphorically, then, gets the boot as he does on one conspicuous billboard in Havana.

The richness of Cuban cultural and intellectual life — it should be noted — can be traced to state funding, a state Ontarians can only remember nostalgically as their own cultural life turns to Mush(inski, Ontario's misappropriated minister of, among other things, culture).

I have been giving lectures at the Instituto Superior de Arte, once the exclusive Havana Country Club. (It is ironic to contemplate the beauty of a university that has grown — and grown over — magnificently from a golf course, while "sub-par" Mike Harris bogeys on Ontario's publicly printed green(back)s.) The finest and most creative young artists — musicians, painters, writers, dancers, actors — in Cuba take classes at ISA; afterwards, instead of flipping burgers to pay their inflated tuitions the way Canadian kids must, ISA's progeny, whose tuition is free, can flip pages...or disperse onto the lush campus, née fairways, to practice their instruments, steps or gestures. From my shared office, a few doors down from what once was Richard Nixon's bedroom and is now the Rector's office, I can hear Cuban conga drummers, a cappella singers, flautists. As far as I'm concerned, it is the most beautiful university in the world, as far away from Sterile U., otherwise known as the purposeful,

earnest Canadian university factory, as the lush red flowers that fleck the campus are from footnotes.

Sadly but inevitably, anger has accrued here from a few years of shortages and many more of top-down direction. Lack of toilet paper forces most Cubans to reach for *Granma* as a substitute. The paper's dogma, though, may have done more damage than deprivation has, producing disbelief upon reading before relief upon wiping. The state's giving to the arts, for instance, is undercut by its taking away: a student art exhibition at ISA had its display suddenly reduced by one, when one piece, it was felt, transgressed on the sanctity of the state's ruling party.

Disgruntlement was even evident on December 30, 1995, the anniversary of the Revolution. Just a few years earlier I had gone to the Plaza of the Revolution along with a few hundred thousand others to celebrate Fidel's victory over Batista. On this thirty-seventh anniversary, maybe five or ten thousand people were on hand — mostly young people drawn by the hip music being performed onstage. The crowd contained only one flag-waver.

Nonetheless, no one that I know, even the friends who are adamant that the rhetoric of socialism and revolution should be abandoned, want an invasion by burger-franchising Americans to solve Cuba's problems. None wants Fidel displaced by Mas Canosa, the right-wing Cuban American lobby's big cheese(burger). The bicycle-riding, vegetarian lifestyle that appeals to a North American of a certain temperament, such as myself, grates on a population for which it is for the most part, insisted upon. Regardless, Fidel, the "sign," still holds sway and is still exciting. One night around 2 a.m. some visiting Canadian friends, some Cuban friends and I were in that good of '48 Chevy on our sleepy-inebriated way home. At a spotlight we were suddenly waved on and into another lane by a policeman. One of the Cubans said this signalled one thing: Fidel's flotilla of black Mercedes-Benzes. Sure enough, soon after three such cars zipped by. All of us were immediately awake — including the '48 Chevy whose driver floored it so that we could, for a moment, inhale Fidel's leaded fumes. Amazingly, after all these years, he can get anyone's attention, benignly or not, day or night.

*Hasta luego,*

