

Havana Dreams Cuba notes: sex, virtual reality, and the pope.

By Willy Lizárraga

Havana here I am. Havana where are you? It's so dark outside. The waves calmly splash against the Malecón, the famous boardwalk. Dark and bleak buildings make the night even darker to our right.

Groups of young women stand proud and provocative along the Malecón, all beautifully dressed, waiting for something or someone. Are they waiting for the pope? My girlfriend looks at me. No. They can't be whores. What are they, then? It's only my (our) first night in Havana, and it happens to be Christmas Eve. It's Havana by night and by foot. I'm determined to get somewhere. To a bar. To a discotheque. I'm high, so high, flying on Havana dreams. Because, as you know, Havana doesn't belong to this world. It doesn't even belong to the present. Maybe it can only belong to utopia. Or to the past. Plenty of old American cars seem to confirm the latter.

The songs coming out of the houses seem to point that way, too. Nino Bravo, my god, the cheesiest Spaniard singer from the '70s, lives in Havana like in no other place. Frank Sinatra. Nat King Cole sings en español. The city gets even darker. The whiteness of the waves' crest keeps us company. The stars shine so brightly it's as if we were on a deserted island. For a few blocks you would think you were in a ghost town.

Then, finally, after I don't know how many miles, a neon sign indicates the existence of a bar. We go in. It's also a hotel. There are only blond women and not too many men having drinks. A tiny Christmas tree inside the hotel tells the world it's Christmas time. We sit down. I'm trying to figure out where I am.

Fidel has made an exception this year, because of the pope's visit, of course, and Christmas is an official holiday. When I planned this trip, I was ready for an atheist, totally materialistic-dialectical oblivion of Christmas. Oh, well.

A funky stereo system plays disco music in the terrace of this bar surrounded by taxi drivers, all waiting. Are they waiting for the pope too? The waiter keeps ignoring us. I'm beginning to suspect that in order to be helped you have to sit down with a blond. I ask my girlfriend if she's brought anything to change the color of her hair. My girlfriend looks at me as though she's wondering what the hell has happened to me. I'm sorry, I tell her. I'm just in culture shock. I didn't come all the way down here to dance to the Bee Gees.

Fortunately, the music changes. Merengue time. Men and blonds get up to dance. It feels as if only the rich and tourists remain in Havana. The rest have gone to war. The waiter finally comes to our table. There is coke and 7up. And you pay in dollars. Where am I?

Papaya and politics

Somehow the sense of experiencing a virtual reality grows thinner, louder as the days in Havana proceed. That's why, as a part of my morning routine, I dutifully engage in a wide-ranging political dialogue with Jose, my Cuban host and most likeable breakfast provider.

I try not to sound too lost, and he tries his best to explain the unexplainable. Sometimes other "gringos" from the Bay Area join us for breakfast. Jose is the Havana-San Francisco connection. As I eat my papaya I think about this: I've heard that men come here from Italy to have sex with the gorgeous black women, and that the women from the Bay Area come looking for rhythm and dance.

The papaya tastes like heaven.

"So tell me, Jose, how do people make it?"

"For example,"—Jose truly wants me to understand what's going on—"the man who sells me the bread your eating right now, well, he sells me this first-rate bread at half price. The reason he's able to do that is because he steals a little bit from each loaf of bread he's supposed to make for the government. Needless to say, if he didn't do that, he wouldn't be able to make it to the end of the month. For he, like the rest of Cubans, has a salary that averages \$18 a month. A salary that, by the way, hasn't been raised in 38 years. Quite a record, ah."

"So everybody has something under the table going on?"

"Well, some members of the government claim to live in a state of total revolutionary purity"

Yes, educational breakfasts with Jose, who used to work as an engineer for the Cuban government for \$24 a month. Now he rents rooms to foreigners.

"As you can see, only one thing is happening in Havana: tourism. And we are all trying to get a piece of it. Nowadays, to be

bartender in a hotel is the most sought-after job in the country. We're all jineteros (hustlers). This is a city of jineteros. This is not socialism. This is sociolism (a socio is a business partner)."

On the streets there are many posters of Fidel embracing the pope. But Fidel's image is clearly not as popular as Che's. Life in Havana unfolds under Che's unbending and altruistic gaze. Like a patron saint, he's ubiquitous. He's unquestionably the most unpolluted icon the revolution has.

One rainy night I turn on the TV. Fidel is giving a speech. I've never had the experience before of seeing him live in his own tribune, full of himself, in absolute command of his audience, ageless, commercial-free. According to the papers, he spoke for over three hours—a short speech for Fidel. He spoke of the endless war against American imperialism and about the importance of the coming elections for the National Assembly.

"Oh, yeah, we have elections in Cuba, although we only have one party," a taxi driver perfunctorily tells me the next day as he pockets three dollars for the ride.

New Year's Eve

Since the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, Cuba has entered into what is officially called a "periodo especial." "Which is the Cuban way of saying that the shit hit the fan," Efraín Rodríguez Santana tells me. He's one of Cuba's most renowned and respected writers. Four years ago he "abandoned" his post as editor in chief of *Union*, the writers union literary magazine, because of ideological differences.

"The funny thing is that I can't really say that I'm censored. I simply have a very hard time publishing here. In theory, unless you write something blatantly against Fidel and the government, you can get published. In practice, it is a different story. A book of mine can easily take ten years to come out.

"But this is nothing compared to the '70s. Those were really dark and ugly times for literature. The only hope, however, is to get published outside Cuba. How can you make a living as a writer when brand new books are sold for ten cents of a dollar?"

New Years Eve party. A penthouse in an apartment complex built by its inhabitants during the late '60s. Julio Maracén, a young and upcoming playwright, and an Italian woman visiting Havana are talking about the peculiar bond between Italy and Cuba. I mentioned how strangely refreshing it is to meet an Italian woman for a change in Cuba. "Yes, I know, Italian men are simply conquering Cuba. And they are crazy about the Cuban woman. I guess the next generation of nouveau-riche Cubans will be half-Italians. How odd."

Moracen laughs out loud; he himself is married to an Italian woman. And if it weren't for her, he would have a hard time surviving on the \$9-a-month salary he gets from the government he gets for being a theater specialist. So the Italians have their own way of conquering. Is the pope Italian even though he's Polish?

Midnight. 1998 has come to Havana, and all the Cubans in the party sing the national anthem. Walking along Paseo Avenue, we see a grandiloquent sign on top of a grandiose building (unpainted of course, in the Havana-in-crisis style) that reads "Faltan 19 Dias." Though it refers to the remaining 19 days until the pope's arrival, its out-of-place urgency makes it seem as if it were talking about the coming of Christ. Which is something very different in a Latin American country wherein organized religion has not been monopolized by the Catholic church and wherein a majority doesn't believe in anything ulterior. Do they believe in dialectical materialism or anything of that sort?

"1989 was not only the fall of the Eastern-bloc countries but the year of the executions of two top generals in the Cuban army convicted of corruption and drug trafficking. It's the year most of us stopped believing in the system. I guess you can say that were still in a period of disenchantment," Leonardo Padura, nowadays the most successful novelist living in Cuba, says in a disenchanted tone that somehow doesn't quite fall into cynicism.

"Cuba is changing by the minute. The question is not if the system will fall. It's falling as we speak. Meanwhile, we all have to live a dual reality. One imposed by the dollar and the other one by Fidel. And who knows. Fidel might win. Everything is possible here."

Breakfast time with Jose. He has news for us. A functionary from the Immigration Department has just stopped by to inform him the all Americans must leave Cuba by the 5th of January or ask for a special permit to remain on the island. The pope is coming on the 21st, and security measures are toughening in Havana. Another Jose, Jose's friend, dressed in Nike clothing and Nike shoes, has a joke theory: The most popular soap opera—and the only soap opera that is transmitted by the state owned channel, called *La próxima víctima* (the next victim)—has just reached its end. And everybody is specu-

lating that Fidel's "next victim" is the pope. "I guess Fidel doesn't want to take any chances with the Americans here." Now everyone in Jose's house-hold is arguing about the pope. The biggest source of conflict seems to be whether Fidel will attend the pope's mass. It's difficult to tell who could be right. "Pero cómo no, coño, Fidel will attend and pray and the whole shebang. He's a politician. It doesn't matter if he believes in Christ or not. He plays the game and makes the pope happy and bye-bye. He'll get the pope's blessing and the support he needs to get more money from Europe and that's it." "Are you out of your fucking mind? How can he loose face kneeling himself in front of something he doesn't believe in?" The discussion gets really hot. Then comes the music. Everybody dances. Then the rice, the black beans, and the pork. Cuba, the last bastion of socialism in the Western world. As my airplane takes off from Havana to Cancun, what remains in my mind is the unique mix of decay and elegance that reigns in most of Havana—houses falling apart in a most astonishingly grandiose way. Then the houses become just the background for a beautiful black woman, dressed in fluorescent Lycra, probably college educated, obliged to hustle by the circumstances. Her eyes reveal distain and boredom rather than desperation and craziness. I wonder if that's the boredom so many Easter-bloc writers talked about before the collapse of the so called Communism. I wonder if I will recognize Havana on my next trip back.

