

A Point of View © 1996

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“Regarding Benito’s Mart- A touch of nostalgia”

Once upon a time, before the Internet was the Internet, when we lived in a simpler world of consumption, there were country stores. In many parts of the world, ours included, still there are. Cuba, the country of my birth was no different. I still remember “La Armonía,” the farmstead near Havana where my paternal grandparents and one of their daughters and grandchildren used to live. My parents and I spent many a pleasant holiday visiting with them.

The place was not large, only two “caballerías” in size. This measure of land is confusing, in Spain is 95 acres, in Cuba it was 33 and in Puerto Rico 194, (source Simon and Schuster’s International Dictionary) so be careful when someone tries to sell them to you. Make sure you know what you buy and where you are. The land in this farm was covered from border to border with cultivated fields of tobacco, corn and other vegetables that my grandfather, my uncle and some hired hands planted with pride.

There were cows in the farm with abundant fresh milk in their udders, !no skim or lactose free please!; some pigs always roaming around in their pigpens being fattened with royal palm tree nut for the eventual sacrifice during Christmas or any other special family celebration. You would not want a royal palm nut diet for yourself or your next cholesterol check will fly to the roof. If you want to have yourself some fun, ask the butchers of your local supermarket you visit if their pork is royal-palm-nut fed. Shhh ... don’t tell them I sent you. There were also enough chickens, hens and roosters in the farm to wake you up early in the morning with their cackling. One always awoke with the impression that their crowing was some kind of unresolved eternal evolutionary dispute we were unable to figure out. We still aren’t.

Of course, my grandparents and their children did not produce all they ate, but they could eat all they produced if things got tough economically. They also enjoyed the benefits of Benito’s mobile store visit. Benito, the subject of this story, was a horse-ridden old peddler who visited the farm occasionally. By looking at the wrinkled face under his straw hat we had the feeling that Benito was very old, but never knew how much and never asked. He was hard of hearing, and had to assist his audible range with a

hearing device that looked like a funnel stuck in his ear that hung from his neck and acted like a megaphone.

Benito could not hear all you said, but he could hear enough and much of what he wanted. Sometimes we wondered if he heard just what was convenient. He could always bring with him the simple news of the area that most newspapers or radio stations could not bring to the farm even if they were able to: Births, deaths, marriages, separations, new neighbors, all of those life events would be material for his stories. He always had a bit of candy for the kids, the famous “lollipops”, and could get you whatever you wanted but he wasn’t carrying in the knapsack hanging behind the saddlebag and you were patient enough to wait until his next visit. Back orders we call them these days. If you were an ambitious gambler, he carried lottery tickets in his knapsack.

His cookies were delightful and bulky, his pastries tantalizing. He used to bring with him “matahambres” y “matagallegos,” the latter the syrupy guava sponge cake whose name would make you crack laughing if you knew what it means in Spanish (“killing Galicians”) and could make anyone suspect of ethnic prejudice in today’s politically correct world. If you visit <http://www.ListinDiario.com.do> from the Dominican Republic you will be able to confirm its accuracy.

There were also “polvorones,” what we know as “shortbread,” a sweet that dissolves itself in the mouth as you eat it and, of course, “galletas” (crackers), big crackers. For the Christmas season Benito would make sure he had enough “turrone” (nougat.) No self-respecting Latino would go a Holiday season without nougat. No low Carb requests please; that has not even come yet. And if you had a temporary liquidity problem Benito would arrange credit on the spot, no credit bureau check required, just his wrinkled notebook.

Today things are different. We live in a world of bar codes, ATM cards, Facebook and pin numbers. It is probably a better world, more efficient. One day Benito, who had trouble noticing people getting close to him unless he saw them clearly, was carelessly standing on his horse when one of my cousins, part of a mischievous group of kids, without Benito’s awareness, placed a bit of carbon disulfide under the horse’s saddle. Carbon disulfide was used as fumigant in those days.

The horse started to move, uneasily at first, and sat on the ground shaking Benito with him, who having no idea of what was happening to him and why, was quite upset. The kids had quite a laugh that day.

Did I say that today is a better world? Perhaps it is, but it was a more tranquil world then, the news was not horrifying or did not come so fast, people lived simpler lives and worried less about conspiracies and hate and more about the messages that the Benitos of the world would bring in their next visit. You got your news from an authorized source, the horse's mouth, or was it from the horseman's mouth perhaps? No fake news then.

After my grandfather died and my uncle and aunt moved, I grew up, became a man, and never saw Benito again. I am sure he is gone by now. The memories are not. They will always live as long as I do. I was not sure this past November whether I should write an article about the national elections or something else instead. I decided to go for the something else. Benito would've thanked me. And that is my Point of view today.