

Experiences of a sixth grader in 1949-1950 Havana, Cuba.

Acceptance to Depart and Preparations to Leave Cuba

Dr. Edward P. Pita: M.B.A. (U.T. Austin) & Ed.D (U of H Central)

Monday

I had to be at the corner of *Obrapia y Compostela*, which was right outside our apartment in old Havana at quarter to eight to wait for the schoolbus, which we called a *guagua*. Otherwise, I would have to take two *guaguas* and I would be an hour late to class. I had to be up by six thirty. Then I ran to the nearby bakery, *panadería*, for a loaf of the *flauta*, a delicious Cuban French style bread that cost ten *centavos*. If my father, who I called Pipo, gave me twenty-five *centavos* I would also be able to purchase one eighth of a pound of butter. Oh, how I enjoyed that smell of fresh bread in the *panadería* and the wonders of all the different pastries they displayed. Some mornings my mother, who I called Mima, did not have the money and neither did Pipo, so I could not go. My family's cook and cleaning lady, Elvira, an Afro-Cuban woman, had always arrived by the time I came back with the *flauta*. If I had not gone, she always made and served wonderful Cuban hot coffee in those clear glass demitasse cups that I loved so much. I sensed; however, she was not the same woman she had been in the past. But I was only ten years old, there was nothing I could do. I sensed that soon I too would experience a loss that would change my life.

Our school bus was a type of minibus that was no-doubt built in Cuba. It was painted solid green with a white side trim that read *Colegio De La Salle*. There were about fourteen of us and I was the last to be picked-up before we headed to the *Malecón*, the road that took us to the

wealthy areas of Havana where most of the students lived, including *El Vedado* the neighborhood where our large school was. It was always a beautiful and mesmerizing drive on the *Malecón* along the seawall as the waves came over it and sprayed the bus. Our voices were only silenced when a large wave hit the bus. When we arrived at *Colegio De La Salle*, which was as big as a fortress and took up a whole city block, we lined up with our classmates. Promptly we were escorted to our classes by our *hermano*, our teacher, and we said our prayers before beginning our lessons. *Colegio De La Salle* was a Catholic school run by the Christian Brothers, a religious order that educated boys around the world.

Our classroom had no air conditioner. It had three arched windows from floor to ceiling which allowed for a very pleasant breeze to be felt, as there were similar windows on the opposite side of the hall. From the windows we could see the Gulf of Mexico as our school was built on a hill. Our classes in the sixth grade were Religion, Mathematics, Spanish Grammar, and History of Cuba. We had a long lunch in order to allow students to go home, after which we had English lessons and a sort of study hall. During lunch recess, sometimes we visited the school's botanical and animal museum. Seeing such a variety of indigenous animals and fish from Cuba's six provinces was an experience in itself. If you did not go to the little zoo at recess, you could go to the athletic yard and use the exercise equipment. Activities like rope climbing and pole climbing were popular. I was not interested in any of that. Me and my friends from the early morning *guagua*, the ones who were not from the wealthiest part of town, pretty much stuck together walking around the school during recess. There were no decorations in our classes. We were exposed to the books and religious texts our *hermanos* assigned. We read and memorized passages. That is all we did. It was a very rigid environment tightly controlled by the Order of the Christian Brothers de La Salle.

Tuesday

There was no money this morning. I got the feeling that this would be a day unlike any other. Mima told me that I would be late to school today as I had to go to the American Embassy on Obispo Street. Elvira had already arrived and brought a *flauta* and butter, so we had a great breakfast. Pipo said we could not be late. I asked why we were going to the American Embassy. There was no answer.

Soon we left the apartment on foot, and within a few minutes we were in the U.S. Embassy. We waited in the lobby. There was no security. You simply gave your name and the reason for your visit. In a few minutes, a serious looking Anglo-American man ushered us into his office. He was dressed in a tropical white suit and he looked very distinguished. He asked Pipo for the photos which were promptly produced. I assumed these were the photos of me that had been taken a few weeks ago at a studio. Then the gentleman left, and we just sat there. It was an exceptionally clean and beautiful office. The room had prominently displayed American and Cuban flags, and signs, and framed photos of American leaders. Soon, the gentleman came back with an official looking document and asked me to sign it, indicating the spot. It was a small gray card with my picture on it and my signature. He gave it to Pipo, and I did not see it again until I was in my early forties. I do not remember saying anything to the gentleman. The card seemed to me to be important, but it was never discussed. However, American citizenship was a constant topic of conversation in those years; Pipo and his two brothers had been born in the U.S. but not their youngest sister. They said it was certain that I was an American by *jus sanguinis* and not a Cuban. They did not say I was a Cuban citizen or an American citizen. They referred

to me from then on as *el es americano, punto*. I did not feel any different. I liked Cuba a lot. It was all I knew. I had not been to Miami or Key West like my rich classmates.

Pipo left me to go to work and I took the two *guaguas* to school, they took longer because they were city buses, not school buses. He also gave me lunch money. Lunch at school was available for forty *centavos*, normally I brought lunch from home, I was only given money because the embassy visit took most of the morning. *Colegio De La Salle* was a school for the children of the rich and of high government officials. You felt the discrimination when your schoolmates became aware that you lived in old Havana, in an apartment, and your family were store merchants. That is why those fourteen of us who took the minibus *guaga* stuck together. The rich kids thought a little better of me and another friend, whose parents owned a parking garage near the Havana Cathedral because our families catered to the tourists and we spoke English, which was sort of a mark of distinction. While there was only one minibus that brought students from old Havana, many buses, and limousines with *guarda-espaldas*, bodyguards, brought kids from wealthy districts. The extraordinarily rich were chauffeured in the largest cars. These *compañeros* also spoke of their *fin-de semana* trips to Miami or Key West for the weekend. They travelled on yachts or private airplanes. I do not recall ever being invited to any home where classmates sat next to me or played with me. No school friend ever came to our apartment. I only visited the “office” of the one friend whose parents owned a parking garage next to the Cathedral to play with his toy cars in the garage. But I never went inside their adjacent home in old Havana. In all the years I lived in Havana and went to school, I never met a single Cuban girl except my first cousin. The private schools in Havana were run by Catholic orders, brothers and nuns, and the schools offered single-sex education, schools for girls and schools for boys. I was, however, always in the top tier of the student rankings at *Colegio De La*

Salle. My family sent me to this school even though we could barely afford it because jobs were extremely scarce in Cuba, and it was thought that only the private schools prepared their students for the future. Yet, after the fall of the American backed government in Cuba several of the parents of the rich *compañeros* who had escaped and came to Dallas for a new life sought Pipo's help finding a job and a roof to put over their heads. We had purchased in the Lakewood district of Dallas, now a very desirable area. I knew nearly all of them as they had found my parents through contacts from *Colegio De La Salle*. Pipo always told these classmate's parents that I was a graduate of a *Bachillerato Jesuita en Los Estados Unidos* because the Jesuits were in competition with the Christian Brothers who ran *Colegio De La Salle*. Their own children had been forced to drop out due to the *revolución*. It seemed to me he said this to quickly gain the respect of his former countrymen who had looked down on him in Cuba and were now in need of his help. After all, Pipo would tell me frequently *Yo, si soy un americano, nací aquí !*

In Pipo's store, which was called Eddy's, he had framed three large portraits for all to see: Franklin Roosevelt, José Martí and Abraham Lincoln. I could tell that the American tourists liked Pipo's portraits. During WWII he was a supplier of Cuban knick-knacks to the U.S. Navy base in Guantánamo. His happiest days were spent eating American style pancakes that he made at home with lots of syrup.

Wednesday

We had left-over butter and we had ten *centavos*, so I quickly went to the *panadería* and bought one *flauta* for breakfast. I was running somewhat late for the *guagua* but made it on time. It was a rainy day, as the *guagua* veered towards the *Malecón*, waves began cresting over the seawall and we felt the warm water on our faces. We passed the monument to the victims of the USS

Maine and the *Hotel Nacional*: the monument with its white marble columns and the *Hotel Nacional* with its pink stones made a beautiful contrast. After passing the *Nacional* we were at the school within five minutes and lined up in the courtyard with our classmates.

Wednesday afternoons were different. My *tía* Carmen, who we also called Cano, was married to Mima's brother, Manolo. She would pick me up at *Colegio De La Salle* and we would take a *Tranvía*, a streetcar, to her brother's house. It was a fun ride because it dropped us off near the Sears store. If we were not late for Carmen's meetings, we would go in and I could go up and down the moving electric escalator. After the ride, we would walk to her brother's house. On the porch a neighborhood *amiguito* waited for me. We were provided an English version of a Monopoly game and we both enjoyed the plate of Oreo chocolate cookies Carmen served us out there. Every week the same *amiguito* waited for me on the porch. I was only allowed to go inside the house to use the bathroom and was told to be quick.

The house was a shotgun bungalow, like the traditional craftsman style homes of New Orleans. All the rooms in the house faced a long corridor. I walked quickly past the living room, and doors onto the bedrooms which were also open. Each room had three or four people in them who were talking seriously. I was surprised by the number of men and women who came and went, apparently to meet Carmen and mingle with other *señores y señoras* at her brother's house. I often heard applause coming from inside and sometimes yelling. Not all the participants in the meetings were white. Normally, the only Black person I saw was Elvira but here there were quite a few in the meetings and my Monopoly *amiguito* was also Black. It seemed to me that I lived in a very white society. My family did not have any Black people in our extended family, and Blacks were not allowed to attend *Colegio De La Salle*. Later in life, I visited neighborhoods and countries throughout Latin America that were completely segregated. As the months and years

passed, Black people were seeking a way out of poverty and segregation. I believe Carmen was having a socialist-communist cell meeting with her brother, to provide Blacks and the working classes a new life. This was not a dangerous place, but a political meeting like any other, the dire poverty in Cuba and the way the elite flaunted their vast wealth made the social-communist party appealing to some, at least in Havana. The way Pipo packed up his whole life in his prime and had the courage to move to his native country, showed his resilience, and his clear understanding of capitalism for his family. Mima was also brave, moving to a country where she did not speak the language, and did not ever understand the lack of a filial culture or the language as she had but little formal education.

Thursday

It was a beautiful morning and the bus arrived on time. I knew I would return with Pipo tonight as we came by this area every Thursday. As we drove fast on the *Malecón* heading West, the Caribbean was calm and a dark blue. In this part of Havana, the water was not clear like it was at the beach, but it was still comforting to look at the sea. Some young kids were playing on the giant rocks used to protect the sea wall and the *Malecón* from erosion. I wondered in those days where those kids in baggy bathing suits came from. No one on the bus ever talked about them and they certainly did not seem to belong to the well-kept apartments and homes that faced the Caribbean. Once I asked *Pipo* and he gave the same answer he gave to so many of my questions, *son pobres*. I guess being poor meant no school, breakfast, or clothing. As we drove down the *Malecón*, I wondered why no one helped them when there was all this wealth. I would find out later that it can be done, but at great social and economic costs.

On Thursdays I was fortunate enough to come home for lunch. The bus took about twenty minutes each way; so, I had about fifty minutes for lunch. It was on these days that

Mima stayed home and she and Elvira prepared a sumptuous lunch for Pipo, my *tio* Evelio, and me. Evelio always pitched in with a *peso* so it was special: bread, fresh fish, fried bananas, fresh rice and choice of fruits or a flan. Elvira usually went to the fish market and selected a *pargo*, or red snapper that was cooked on a grill in the courtyard of the apartment. After lunch, Elvira made sure I washed my hands and that I looked presentable again for school. After saying goodbye and kissing everyone, she walked with me to the bus stop and waited until we were picked up. Her husband, a Cuban Military Soldier, was sometimes there and he always shook my hand. He was nice to me and he looked *brillante* in his Cuban uniform with his pistol by his side.

School lessons in the afternoon were easier than in the mornings. I was not very athletic and there were not any coaches at school. However, some of the boys were very agile. None of the athletes were from old Havana, most likely the *El Vedado* kids had trainers at home. The Christian Brothers De la salle focused on our minds and our spirits.

Colegio De La Salle had about twelve hundred students from grade one to twelve. It was very well organized, and the collection of tuition was strictly enforced. As payments were made, the student's name was written on a list and posted on the board. You wanted to avoid the embarrassment of being financially delinquent, which meant you might not be coming back to the school. My tuition, unfortunately, was usually the last to be posted. Mima often had to come and negotiate a payment plan so that my name could be on the list. Wealth was strictly measured in Havana. There were two schools which all the affluent kids attended, my school *Colegio De La Salle* and *Belén*, a Jesuit run school. The rumor was that *Belén* was richer.

On Thursdays, Dad came home from the store around six thirty. I was waiting for him to take me to the *Malecón*. I had been looking forward to it all day. As soon as possible we left and stopped at a *frutería*, where for about twenty *centavos* you purchased a plate of slices of fruits.

My usual selection was pineapple, mango, *guanábana* (soursop), *anón* (sugar-apples), mamey (indigenous to Cuba), and *frutabomba* (papaya). The smell of the Cuban fruits was always overwhelming. After the visit to the *frutería* we got started. Pipo was very entrepreneurial. This stroll down the *Malecón* was to collect money from customers who had purchased clothing from a store where Pipo had credit in the *Manzana Gómez*, the finest shopping mall in Cuba. Poverty was so widespread that very few people had cash on hand or credit. So, Pipo allowed his customers to buy up to one hundred *pesos* worth of clothing. Customers would then pay him back for the purchase in monthly installments, plus interest. I understood that well – about the interest. He often told me he was not a *garrotero*, an enforcer, the man who intimidated those who had stopped paying what they owed.

We were heading to a beautiful seaside restaurant located between the wharves and the start of the *Malecón*. The owner was always very friendly to Pipo and me, but he owed over two hundred dollars. His business usually picked up around ten p.m. and we arrived around eight. I loved going there as he always had one or two Harley-Davidsons parked at the entrance of the restaurant. He knew how much I liked them. He had one of the attendants pick me up and sit me on the red one, so that I could play with the stick shift. Pipo explained to him that he could not just go on buying bikes and suits and not paying up. He also reminded him that my uncle Emilio, the family's *garrotero*, was not far away. We left happy, so I assume that money was exchanged.

Friday

No money for butter today but the *flauta* was warm and Elvira had saved a bit from Thursday, so we had a great breakfast. The ride on the *Malecón* was uneventful. Later, when I went back and I thought of those rides on the *guaga*, I remembered that I had never seen any girls walking

around. If Elvira went downstairs with you to wait for the bus, that was the last female you would see that day.

Fridays were one of the more interesting days as we went to Mass and Communion. After returning to class, your *hermano* gave you a grade for the week and assessed your behavior. At that time, you have had to show that you had been to Mass the previous Sunday at *Colegio De La Salle* or at a neighborhood Church. As I worked every Sunday at the store, I obtained a signed receipt of attendance from the vicar at the Cathedral in old Havana. Not going to Church would cause you to miss the Movie of the week, you went to detention instead of watching *Iwo Jima* starring John Wayne. Our *hermanos*, the teachers who were all De La Salle Brothers, awarded us diplomas for good work, but the greatest honor was to be one of the top five students in each class who had their school picture taken for the class yearbook.

If you did not do your work or misbehaved, you were sent out into the hallway by your *hermano*. Punishments were handed out by the prefect, the brother who was the supervisor of all the *hermanos*. I was sent out once and told to kneel on the tile floor. I had not finished my homework. As the prefect came by, he pulled you by your ear or by your hair. Then you were made to grovel and told to go back to class. If the prefect did not feel you were sorry enough, you were made to stand outside in the hot sun until he felt you had been punished enough.

On Fridays after the last bell rang at the end of the day, we all went to our designated spot to wait for permission to board our assigned bus. Over the loudspeaker system the order came to sing the Cuban National Anthem, *La bayamesa*. I do not remember seeing my classmates display any patriotism during this ritual. But I suspect most of us were planning a busy weekend.

Saturday

Breakfast was different on Saturdays since there was no money for *flauta*. My seventeen-year-old cousin Yolanda, *mi prima*, came over around eight. For as far back as I can remember, we spent our Saturdays together. Our breakfast was coffee and corn flakes, then we would leave promptly for our outing. To get to the private swim and tennis club *Cubanaleco*, which was similar to the private clubs you find across America, we took a *guagua*. We were going to meet my *primo* Manolito who was also seventeen. He was the son of my *tío* Manolo and his wife Carmen, my *tía* who brought me to her socialist-communist cell meetings covering her time as a “babysitter”. At the club, Manolito liked to show-off when he was diving. The last time he dove in that day he did not come up. My *prima* Yolanda went into a panic and asked a chubby young already in the pool man to fish him out.

Manolito was a little disoriented but *Gordo* was there for him as they came out of the pool. For the rest of her life, Yolanda would call him *Gordo*, but his real name was Federico. For the two of them it was love at first sight. He introduced himself as Federico and immediately took care of Manolito, offering him drinks, a snack, and anything he might need. We could tell immediately that *Gordo* was not one of us: his heavy gold chain with the dangling cross, his *anillo* or school ring that he wore on his soft and manicured hands, his fancy belt and his matching leather moccasins, these were the marks of the Cuban elite. After a while Manolito, Yolanda and I had to leave, so I could make it to my English class with “*La Doctora García*.” At that time, I did not think it was odd that we spent Saturdays at a club no one in our family would have been able to afford. I suspect that it was to give Manolito’s mother, my *tía* Carmen, the time she needed time to manage other socialist-communist cell meetings. At that time, I would never have guessed the swims were arranged by one of the cell members who had the means to

pay the dues and expenses. Federico asked if he could walk us to the bus stop. Manolito's stop came first and he said goodbye. Federico waited at the stop with Yolanda and I, and then asked if he could ride with us. Yes, I said. She just looked at me. He gave me a peso and I paid the bus driver; obviously, he did not know how much it cost, the fare was much less than that, and I gave him back the change.

We promptly arrived at the corner of Dra. García's apartment building and I went up for my one-hour class. My mother told me that she was a graduate of an American University and had been highly recommended. She had been my teacher for at least two years. Her apartment was spare and tasteful, overlooking the harbor. Her lessons were simple. I learned ten to fifteen new nouns and then three or four new verbs, which I had to conjugate. Then I had to write a sentence using the new verbs and nouns. After that, I conversed with her in English about what I had been up to that week, using the new words. Lessons were quick and you were not allowed a bathroom break. She was not married and her brother, a famous Cuban surgeon, supported her. She was certified to teach in Cuban Public Schools, but she was getting old and had some health issues. If I did not do my work, she called Mima and it passed to my *tío* Manolo the family *garrotero* to punish me. When I arrived in the U.S., I had the basic grammatical structure and the rest came fast. I will never forget her, or the view from her apartment.

I went downstairs with the expectation of going to Pipo's store with my *prima* Yolanda but to my surprise something dramatic happened. Next to Doctora García's building was the Spanish Delicatessen *Botín*. I understood it was expensive and only well-dressed customers were allowed in. Yolanda was radiant when she informed me that we would be going to a movie with Federico. I assumed that it would be discussed by the family with great jubilation.

It was lunch time, so we stopped at a local food take-out place a Cuban *Kiosk*, and Federico ordered some *fritas* (Cuban hamburgers) and *papas fritas*, Cuban french fries which were thin and crispy. Once we entered the theater Federico gave me twenty-five cents and Yolanda implied by her looks that I could go sit by myself and enjoy a Butterfinger, a coveted American chocolate bar, and a drink. However, when I met them in the lobby after the movie was over, she separated from Federico, grabbed my hand and the two of us quickly left the theater. I said to myself, no, my free movies and American candies are over! It would be years before I understood that wealthier girls were allowed to flirt more than poor girls like Yolanda. *Gordo* was surprised she had rejected his advances so primly as girls in Yolanda's economic status could not just have "fun" if they wanted to one day to get married.

At the store, there were several boxes of goods that had to be priced and shelved. We also had to clean for Sunday's tourists who arrived at the port from Key West around eleven a.m. My *tío* Evelio came by and took his usual ten dollars from the cash register. He was an investor in the store and that was his way of showing he was part of the business. I never saw *tío* Evelio outside the store but his mannerly wife, *tía* Pilar, was often in the store and at our apartment. She was from Spain and they had two children.

Our family's store was in an extremely popular area of Old Havana. Next to it was the Cuban Association of *Reporteros*, so there were always lots of people coming and going. Nearby was the Havana's main fire station, the *Hotel Mundo*, the *Plaza Gomez* and the *Floridita*, Hemingway's favorite bar. Our apartment was only a few blocks away. After Yolanda dropped me off at the store, she went to *tía* Carmen's where she worked with her and *tía* Pilar making wedding dresses.

Manolo, my *tío* and godfather, was always at work with his brothers and their father at the customs house where they worked clearing ships for entry into Cuba. Yolanda told me it was difficult and extremely dangerous work, but it provided for the family.

Eddy's store had credit and cash customers with tourists mostly paying cash and locals mostly credit. Pipo kept the *libros* as he called the books. Another member of the *familia*, Mima's stepbrother Ernesto, did the heavy lifting. He would also become an important part of my life over the next few years. At nine in the evening, Pipo closed the store and we walked to the apartment. Yolanda left with Ernesto. *Tío* Evelio had stayed at the store talking to some of his reporter friends and he left with his wife Pilar. On the way back we took the beautiful walk by *Manzana Gomez*, *Floridita*, *Calle Obispo*, and on to the apartment. Elvira had left dinner for us and after I went to bed, looking forward to Sunday.

Sunday

Always a wonderful day for Pipo. And I was happy to be able to sleep until seven a.m. After doing my chores, I went to the kitchen where pastries and fruits had been laid out. Mima demanded her morning kiss and we enjoyed the goodies. Mima asked about the English class. How did the "Doctora García" look? They were worried anytime she was unwell, as she was the best teacher I had ever had. I told Mima that she looked well, and that the class had also gone well. Mima told me to practice my English today at the store and to speak it, not just listen. She told me Pipo was going to be watching me. Because Ernesto would be there, all the physical work could be done by him and I could just practice my English. After work, she told me she wanted to see in writing any questions.

Pipo and I left around eight and arrived at the store around eight thirty. During these walks on Sunday, he would talk to me about the store, about his business helping people buy suits and shirts on installment plans, as well as a venture he had with Ernesto that helped people get airline tickets. Pipo was always an entrepreneur, it was in his blood. Upon arriving at the store, we cleaned some more, making sure the pórtico and even the street was spotless. Sunday was the day the Key West ferry to Havana would come in at about nine a.m., barring a storm. The tourists would be in Havana the rest of the day. Pipo and Ernesto had already given the *muchachos* who offered shoeshines an Eddy's flyer that promised a free "frasquito of pure Chanel No. 5 by visiting Eddy's store across from "Sloppy's Joes". Pipo wrote a symbol on the flyers he gave to each of the shoeshine *muchachos* who handed out the flyers to tourists. This confirmed their commission. The flyers usually brought in about twenty to thirty customers with most buying Kodak film, picture cards, perfume and alligator wallets or bags.

I loved Sundays because I was able to converse with American tourists about their needs. Some purchased high end goods from me like a wallet, or a purse, or shoes. It was so much fun. At quarter to noon, however, I had to leave and run to *Iglesia Del Santo Angel* for Mass or the Cathedral and after the Mass, I would present my *Colegio De La Salle* church attendance pass for to the priest to sign for my teacher. After running back to the store, most of the tourists were no longer shopping but were going for lunch. It had been a good day, Pipo told me we made almost four hundred dollars in sales. He gave Ernesto five dollars and one for me. A few minutes later, Mima came and told us she had made reservations at her favorite restaurant for lunch.

A few more customers came in, all Americans, but they were just looking to purchase Kodak brand film products. They also bought some inexpensive souvenirs which were unique to Cuba. Pipo paid his bills promptly as he was always receiving new inventory to sell from local

artisans. After closing, we walked to an old restaurant near the *Parque Central* where they had reserved a table for the three of us. Those were good times. We talked about the business and leaving for the U.S. My parents decided to leave in mid-spring and leave me with my uncle to finish my sixth grade at De La Salle. Thus, we would capture the good winter sales and give Pepo and Mima time to settle in America. We would have a liquidation sale. I was afraid my life would never be the same. I would miss having *flauta* for breakfast, the daily ride on the *guaga* along the Malecón, *Colegio De La Salle*, the few friends I had, and our family here. Would I be able to cope with it? I would find out soon enough. However, I would have completed the sixth grade and be more cognizant of the English language before I left for the unknown but ready to take the challenges of the United States as a citizen.

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