

Waiting for Snow in Havana

Confessions of a Cuban Boy

Carlos Eire

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For John-Carlos, Grace, and Bruno

Waiting for Snow in Havana

I spit on fools who fail to include breasts in their metaphysics, Star-gazers who have not enumerated them among the moons of the earth

—CHARLES SIMIC, “Breasts”

Preámbulo

This is not a work of fiction.
But the author would like it to be.
We improve when we become fiction,
each and every one of us,
and when the past becomes a novel our memories are sharpened.

Memory is the most potent truth.
Show me history untouched by memories
and you show me lies.
Show me lies not based on memories
and you show me the worst lies of all.

If all the characters in this book are fictional, none of them knows it yet.

All resemblances to actual persons
were preordained before the creation of the world.
It matters little that the names don't always match.

All the incidents and dialogue come straight from God's imagination.
As does the author himself.
And the reader.

Still, all of us are responsible for our own actions.
Not even Fidel is exempt from all this.
Nor Che, nor his chauffeurs, nor his mansion.
Nor the many Cubans who soiled their pants
before they were shot to death.
Nor the fourteen thousand children who flew away from their parents.
Nor the love and desperation that caused them to fly.





Uno

The world changed while I slept, and much to my surprise, no one had consulted me. That's how it would always be from that day forward. Of course, that's the way it had been all along. I just didn't know it until that morning. Surprise upon surprise: some good, some evil, most somewhere in between. And always without my consent.

I was barely eight years old, and I had spent hours dreaming of childish things, as children do. My father, who vividly remembered his prior incarnation as King Louis XVI of France, probably dreamt of costume balls, mobs, and guillotines. My mother, who had no memory of having been Marie Antoinette, couldn't have shared in his dreams. Maybe she dreamt of hibiscus blossoms and fine silk. Maybe she dreamt of angels, as she always encouraged me to do. "*Sueña con los angelitos*, she would say: Dream of little angels. The fact that they were little meant they were too cute to be fallen angels.

Devils can never be cute.

The tropical sun knifed through the gaps in the wooden shutters, as always, extending in narrow shafts of light above my bed, revealing entire galaxies of swirling dust specks. I stared at the dust, as always, rapt. I don't remember getting out of bed. But I do remember walking into my parents' bedroom. Their shutters were open and the room was flooded with light. As always, my father was putting on his trousers over his shoes. He always put on his socks and shoes first, and then his trousers. For years I tried to duplicate that nearly magical feat, with little success. The cuffs of my pants would always get stuck on my shoes and no amount of tugging could free them. More than once I risked an eternity in hell and spit out swear words. I had no idea that if your pants are baggy enough you can slide them over anything, even snowshoes. All I knew then was that I couldn't be like my father.

As he slid his baggy trousers over his brown wingtip shoes, effortlessly, Louis XVI broke the news to me: "Batista is gone. He flew out of Havana early this morning. It looks like the rebels have won."

"You lie," I said.

"No, I swear, it's true," he replied.

Marie Antoinette, my mother, assured me it was true as she applied lipstick, seated at her vanity table. It was a beautiful piece of mahogany furniture with three mirrors: one flat against the wall and

two on either side of that, hinged so that their angles could be changed at will. I used to turn the side mirrors so they would face each other and create infinite regressions of one another. Sometimes I would peer in and plunge into infinity.

“You’d better stay indoors today,” my mother said. “God knows what could happen. Don’t even stick your head out the door.” Maybe she, too, had dreamt of guillotines after all? Or maybe it was just sensible, motherly advice. Perhaps she knew that the heads of the elites don’t usually fare well on the street when revolutions triumph, not even when the heads belong to children.

That day was the first of January 1959.

The night before, we had all gone to a wedding at a church in the heart of old Havana. On the way home, we had the streets to ourselves. Not another moving car in sight. Not a soul on the Malecón, the broad avenue along the waterfront. Not even a lone prostitute. Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette kept talking about the eerie emptiness of the city. Havana was much too quiet for a New Year’s Eve.

I can’t remember what my older brother, Tony, was doing that morning or for the rest of the day. Maybe he was wrapping lizards in thin copper wire and hooking them up to our Lionel train transformer. He liked to electrocute them. He liked it a lot. He was also fond of saying: “Shock therapy, ha! That should cure them of their lizard delusion.” I don’t want to remember what my adopted brother, Ernesto, was doing. Probably something more monstrous than electrocuting lizards.

My older brother and my adopted brother had both been Bourbon princes in a former life. My adopted brother had been the Dauphin, the heir to the French throne. My father had recognized him on the street one day, selling lottery tickets, and brought him to our house immediately. I was the outsider. I alone was not a former Bourbon. My father wouldn’t tell me who I had been. “You’re not ready to hear it,” he would say. “But you were very special.”

My father’s sister, Lucía, who lived with us, spent that day being as invisible as she always was. She, too, had once been a Bourbon princess. But now, in this life, she was a spinster: a lady of leisure with plenty of time on her hands and no friends at all. She had been protected so thoroughly from the corrupt culture of Cuba and the advances of the young men who reeked of it as to have been left stranded, high and dry, on the lonely island that was our house. Our island within the island. Our safe haven from poor taste and all unseemly acts, such as dancing to drumbeats. She had lived her entire life as a grown woman in the company of her mother and her maiden aunt, who, like her, had remained a virgin without vows. When her mother and aunt died, she moved to a room at the rear of our house and hardly ever emerged. Whether she had any desires, I’ll never know. She seemed not to have any. I don’t remember her expressing any opinion that day on the ouster of Batista and the triumph of Fidel Castro and his rebels. But a few days later she did say that those men who came down from the mountains needed haircuts and a shave.

Our maid worked for us that day, as always. Her name was Inocencia, and her skin was a purple shade of black. She cooked, cleaned the house, and did the laundry. She was always there. She seemed to have no family of her own. She lived in a room that was attached to the rear of the house but had no door leading directly into it. To enter our house she had to exit her small room and walk a few steps across the patio and through the back-door, which led to the kitchen. She had a small bathroom of her own too, which I sometimes used when I was playing outdoors.

Once, long before that day when the world changed, I opened the door to that bathroom and found her standing inside, naked. I still remember her shriek, and my shock. I stood there frozen, a child of four, staring at her mountainous African breasts. A few days later, at the market with my mother, I pointed to a shelf full of eggplants and shouted “*Tetas de negra!*” Black women’s tits! Marie Antoinette placed her hand over my mouth and led me away quickly as the grocers laughed and made lewd remarks. I couldn’t understand what I had done wrong. Those eggplants did look just like Inocencia’s breasts, right down to the fact that both had aureolas and nipples. The only difference was

that while Inocencia's were bluish black, those of the eggplants were green. Later in life I would search for evidence of God's presence. That resemblance was my first proof for the existence of God. And eggplants would forever remind me of our nakedness and shame.

A few months after that New Year's Day, Inocencia quit working for us. She was replaced by a thin, wiry woman named Caridad, or Charity, who was angry and a thief. My parents would eventually fire her for stealing. She loved Fidel, and she listened to the radio in the kitchen all day long. It was the only Cuban music I ever heard. My father, the former Louis XVI, would not allow anything but classical music to be played in the main part of the house. He remembered meeting some of the composers whose music he played, and he pined for those concerts at Versailles. Cuban music was restricted to the kitchen and the maid's room.

Caridad loved to taunt me when my parents weren't around. "Pretty soon you're going to lose all this." "Pretty soon you'll be sweeping my floor." "Pretty soon I'll be seeing you at your fancy beach club, and you'll be cleaning out the trash cans while I swim." With menacing smirks, she threatened that if I ever told my parents about her taunts, she would put a curse on me.

"I know all sorts of curses. Changó listens to me; I offer him the best cigars, and plenty of firewater. I'll hex you and your whole family. Changó and I will set a whole army of devils upon you."

My father had warned me about the evil powers of Changó and the African gods. He spoke to me of men struck dead in the prime of life, of housewives driven mad with love for their gardeners, of children horribly disfigured. So I kept quiet. But I think she put a curse on me anyway, and on my whole family, for not allowing her to steal and taunt until that day, "pretty soon," when she could take over the house. Her devils swooped down on all of us, with the same speed as the rebels that swept across the whole island on that day.

The lizards remained oblivious to the news that day, as always. Contrary to what my brother Tony liked to say as he administered shock treatments to them, the lizards were not deluded in the least. They knew exactly what they were and always would be. Nothing had changed for them. Nothing would ever change. The world already belonged to them whole, free of vice and virtue. They scurried up and down the walls of the patio, and along its brightly colored floor tiles. They lounged on tree branches, sunned themselves on rocks. They clung to the ceilings inside our house, waiting for bugs to eat. They never fell in love, or sinned, or suffered broken hearts. They knew nothing of betrayal or humiliation. They needed no revolutions. Dreaming of guillotines was unnecessary for them, and impossible. They feared neither death nor torture at the hands of children. They worried not about curses, or proof of God's existence, or nakedness. Their limbs looked an awful lot like our own, in the same way that eggplants resembled breasts. Lizards were ugly, to be sure—or so I thought back then. They made me question the goodness of creation.

I could never kiss a lizard, I thought. Never.

Perhaps I envied them. Their place on earth was more secure than ours. We would lose our place, lose our world. They are still basking in the sun. Same way. Day in, day out.

Dos

I shouldn't have been surprised that New Year's morning. There had been plenty of signs of trouble brewing, of changes to come. Even a sheltered child should have known something was about to snap. Later in life I would think back to that morning and try to link it to earlier events, just to make sense of what had gone wrong with all our lives.

Quite often, my wondering would come back to the day we almost died.

We were only a few blocks from my grandmother's house when the shooting started. It was near the botanical gardens of the Quinta de los Molinos. At first it sounded like a few firecrackers going off in the distance, *pop, pop, pop*. But within one minute, the pops were joined by *bangs* and *rattat-tats*, a mounting crescendo. And the noise kept getting closer and closer. And louder.

My mother began to scream. "A shoot-out, a shoot-out! Oh my God, we're all going to get killed! Stop the car, Antonio, stop the car right here."

Antonio was my father's name in this life. Antonio Juan Francisco Nieto Cortadellas. This time around, my mother was called Maria Azucena Eiré González. Quite a comedown from Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, but still quite high on the food chain. Marie Antoinette had been stricken by polio just before her first birthday in this lifetime, and her right leg was totally useless. Apparently being imprisoned in the Bastille and losing her head in 1793 had not been enough to settle her Karmic debt.

"If I stop the car now, we'll be killed for sure," said my father. "Stop shouting, you're frightening the kids."

It didn't seem to occur to him that the gunfire might be scary enough.

"Stop, stop, I beg you stop...we can get out of the car right here. I know the family that lives in that house right there," said Marie Antoinette, pointing a little ways down the street. In this neighborhood the buildings were all very close together, flush with the sidewalk. No front or side

yards. Jumping out of the car and making a mad dash into a house was not too bad an idea.

"What if your friends aren't home?" Louis XVI asked. *Pop, pop, rat-tat-tat, bang!*

"They're not friends; I just know who they are," Marie Antoinette replied. "They're friends of friends of my sister." *Bang, pop, bang, rat-tat-tat, bang!* "And where else would they be on a Sunday evening?" *Pop, ka-pop, bang!* "My God, we're all going to die!" *Pop, bang, ka-blam!*

My brother Tony and I looked at each other in disbelief. This was just like a war movie! Finally we were lucky enough to be involved in real gun-play. We had heard it in films, and often far in the

distance, especially around bedtime, but never this close. It was so much louder! I thought of Audie Murphy in *To Hell and Back*, shooting dead all those evil Nazis and blowing up their tanks. My brother and I must have seen that movie at least a dozen times. Both of us wanted to be Audie Murphy, the most highly decorated American soldier in World War II. Since our father was a judge, we could go to any movie theater in Havana for free, and we went often.

“There are very good shows on television tonight,” my brother chimed in. *Rat-tat-tat, bang, pop, pop, ka-blam!* “They’re probably watching *Rin Tin Tin*.”

KA-BLAM! KA-BLAM! KA-BLAM!

“But grown-ups don’t watch *Rin Tin Tin*. Grown-ups don’t like shows about dogs,” I said.

KA-BLAM! BOOM! BANG! RAT-TAT-TAT!

“Oh my God, Oh my God, Oh Mary Mother of God in Heaven. Oh Virgin of Charity! Stop the car! Stop the car! STOP!” Mom shouted even louder, over the sound of gunfire.

Maybe it was my overactive imagination, but I could have sworn I also heard a *Ka-ping*. A ricochet. The sound of a bullet bouncing off buildings, just like a war movie. Impressive. Then I heard a dull *thud*. Bullets penetrating buildings. Even more impressive.

Antonio Nieto Cortadellas swung the car over to the curb and stopped abruptly in front of the house my mother had pointed out. My brother and I were thrown forward against the front seat of the car. No one had seatbelts back in those days.

Maria Azucena Eiré González opened her door first.

Then it happened. Before she could swing out her good leg, a man bolted from the shadows. He grabbed my mother by both arms, crouching so low to the ground that his face was lower than hers.

“Save me! Hide me, please! They’re after me! They’re going to kill me!” The man’s voice was shaky.

He started to push Mom back into the car.

“I beg you. For the love of God, hide me. Hide me, please, I beg you! *Por favor, se lo ruego!*”

I popped my head up above the front seat and got a good look at him. He had a round face and dark curly hair, and he was very sweaty. His shirt was open to mid-chest. He must have been in his thirties. I couldn’t tell, though. All grown-ups looked the same age until they turned into old people.

The gunfire became ever louder. It made my hair stand on end, for the first time in my life. I heard more dull thuds and *ka-pings*, followed by sirens. Marie Antoinette gave a bloodcurdling shriek just like the ones in horror films.

In the meantime, Tony had jumped out of the car, without having seen the man. As he rounded the car, the man grabbed him and held him tightly with one arm.

“For the sake of this boy, hide me!” he said through clenched teeth.

Louis XVI shouted: “Get away from us! You’re going to get us killed! Can’t you see my wife is crippled and that I’m trying to save my kids’ lives? Go away! There’s nothing we can do for you! Let go of my boy, now! Go! Run!”

The man looked straight at me. I had seen eyes like that before, on paintings and statues of Jesus Christ.

I had also seen them in my dreams. Very often, I used to dream that Jesus would appear at the dining room window, carrying his cross while we were eating dinner. He would just stand there and stare at me, blood trickling down his face. And only I could see him. He didn’t have to speak. I knew what he wanted and it frightened me to death. The rest of the family kept eating, oblivious. Then he would simply vanish.

And this man’s eyes stared at me exactly the same way.

I ducked back down to avoid the man’s gaze.

Then the man took a look at my mother’s leg, released my brother, and ran away. As quickly as

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