

## Notes on a Trip to Cuba

Michael Uhl

*Dec. 29, 1993 – Jan. 5, 1994*

What follows is a verbatim transcript from my notes on a visit to Havana, along with my then partner Carol Brightman and our thirteen year old son, Simon, as members of an American delegation, primarily writers and, for the most part, Cuban sympathizers, over the New Year's holiday of 1994. Additional comments, recalled from memory and signaled as such, are interspersed as appropriate.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc communist regimes, Cuba had lost both her financial patron and her major export markets. An eerie calm prevailed on the streets of Havana which were virtually empty of motor vehicles, as hard cash for importing petroleum for gasoline had equally vanished. In the place of private cars, and only the rarest sightings of a bus or flatbed truck, and a small fleet of state licensed taxis - bicycles now predominated on both the grand boulevards and throughout the lanes winding away from the waterfront into the dank interior residential quarters. A few street urchins glided along on skate boards assembled from salvaged scraps.

My mission beyond the brazen act of revolutionary solidarity was journalistic, like many others in our delegation, which at the time was sanctioned by the U.S. government. I was a travel writer, and a writer of guidebooks, Frommer's Brazil, for example. My Portuguese was excellent; my Spanish serviceable. This was a *déjà vu* moment for the Cuban leadership, as tourism, which had helped fuel the sin-soaked economy in the bad old days, now loomed on the near horizon as the one viable spark to jump start the Cuban economy on an international course, and abandon the block house isolation of the past three decades. As an activist, I was loosely involved with a network which opposed the embargo; as a writer, I might get in on the ground floor, write a guidebook for the waves of tourists who were soon to follow.

### *Part One*

*Some First Impressions:* Flight from Miami. Once the chaos of group travel was finally smoothed and channeled, flight was a mere puddle jump. It's the getting out and getting in that soaks up the hours. Every obstacle an individual may face when traveling is magnified exponentially with the group. Late arrivals, special considerations for many individuals which must be resolved *en masse*: no one advances unless the group advances. Any experienced, self-sufficient traveler would have to find group travel a hindrance. Getting in was also unnecessarily inefficient. Screening – if required at all – should take place at an early stage of organization [of the delegation]; formalities at Customs should be eliminated.

Jose Marti airport, small facility, couldn't handle a great flow of tourists.

Crowd twenty deep outside the terminal entrance. Many Cubans greeting visiting relatives, various service types, urchins, idle teens, whores.

Half-hour drive to center. Hotel Sevilla. Reminds me of drive in from Salvador [Bahia, Brazil]. Huts, shabby housing. No surplus for maintenance or building materials. Infrastructure in poor shape. No "landscaping" in open spaces. Scale becomes exurban, then formal. Shades of old grandeur.

Tropical gardens, palm lined avenues, tall modern buildings, generously spaced and Old Havana, grand and *baroque*.

*Hotel*: stunning renovation, spacious, airy, old world elegance. 4 stars. Training hotel. Means a trade-off. A great desire to please without the capacity always to deliver the goods. Buffet food plentiful but lukewarm.

*Currency* thing not worked out. Official exchange is not even close to being realistic. 1.5 pesos to the dollar. Were told you could get as much as 60 on the street. But pesos seem next to valueless unless you make a connection to buy cigars, rum or folk arts and crafts. And then the question is, how much can you take with you anyway?

We were bused to the Academy of Sciences building, a fine monumental cavern, seat of the government of the *ancien regime*. In one wing today the National Assembly sits, trying to steer a course for Cuba through some of the roughest seas of its history, trying to preserve the most precious achievements of its Revolution, the dignity of its relative independence under the shadow of US hemispheric hegemony, trying to preserve something of the narrow gap which separates one class from another, city dweller from *campesino*, worker from entrepreneur, bureaucrat from average citizen.

We occupied the very seats in the Assembly used by the representatives [where they would sit] late into the night or early into the morning of the next day. This was a surreal experience. On the podium sat the four leaders and *responsables*, including [Roberto] Alacon, President of the National Assembly and former Cuban Ambassador to the United Nations [See the boat people crisis]. A political meeting full of ‘what ifs?’ and “why nots?” – Alacon, a master of dialectical monologues, an appealing man with the air of a rumpled economics professor. Rumored he’s on track to succeed Fidel.

I spoke with vendors in the hall outside the Assembly, selling maps, t-shirts, cigars, rum by the bottle or by the drink with Coke (from Venezuela), sweet black coffee and fresh orange juice. The cigar vendor had a box of 50 Cohiba panatelas for \$67. He had a relative in West Islip, the village next to mine where I grew up on Long Island. There since 1954.

I walked back to the hotel along the wide boulevard, the Prado – hustled two or three times by men selling cigars, children begging for ‘chicles,’ a prostitute or two. The street walkers didn’t look hard core, rather girls who saw turning a few tricks as the path of least resistance to acquiring a few precious dollars. Without dollars, one buys nothing. Food is rationed – people look healthy – well fed. But the youngsters especially want things – the way our children always have their hands out, demanding this or that thing they just have to have. We tell the Cuban children, “No,” the same way we say “No” to our own children who pester us. The difference is that the Cuban children seldom hear “Yes.”

Alacon comes back to the hotel and a group continues its discussion with him on an outdoor patio [over cigars and tumblers of scotch; he drapes his jacket over his shoulders, continental style]. He expounds, easy listening if you can hear and understand the heavily accented, relatively fluent English. He speaks softly, analytically, but without rhetoric.

About seven we break for dinner. Food, buffet style is plentiful, well prepared and lukewarm. Every beverage we order is paid out of pocket, in dollars with change in useless pesos. After dinner C and I walk up the Prado to the only lighted side street, a pedestrian “mall.” I want to mingle with the

night crowd, look into shops. No one seems threatening, but C is nervous – feels vulnerable because she can't communicate.

As we head back to the hotel along the paseo, three boys latch onto us. One Ulysses, is animated, dark skinned. He studies at the music school, drums. Ulysses chats us up for several blocks. He speaks a kind of gentle bitterness about terrible times. The Revolution which had promised so much is now failing him. The reality of socialism is the world you see around you, he tells us. He feels the best jobs are in the hotel and that only whites are hired. There are in fact black faces on the staff of the Sevilla, but they are few, and so to some extent he is right. After we talk for a while, he hits us up for money, five dollars for him and his two friends to go to the disco. We decide to give them the money, but have to go back to the hotel to get the change. The three boys enter the lobby with us. Security personnel apparently don't hassle or try to keep out anyone accompanied by a guest or tourist. They flirt with two women in our group like gigolos. We scratch up \$4.70 and they go their way. The process to me had become tedious and I began to feel like I had been hustled – but with a considerable amount of well-tuned foreplay. [C and I are, in fact, poor as church mice; we traveled on money Carol recently inherited through her mother; my attitude about being hustled is compounded by years of experience traveling throughout Brazil where poverty is also constantly in your face, and impossible to mitigate with small acts of charity.]

Friday began with an early breakfast in the Sevilla dining room. Again, most of the hot food wasn't. Sat initially with an older guy from our group, a painter who lives in Mexico and is a political activist involved with Central America, now Cuba. A light eater which makes me feel foolish and a bit gluttonous considering the amount of food I'd piled on my plate. I mumbled something about [his way] probably being "healthier."

A man from Galicia, Spain joined us. We exchanged pleasantries, the conversation falling off once those were exhausted.

Carol Cina [a close friend of Carol Brightman's, who had worked with her on Viet-Report, and now directed the Clearwater project which had commissioned a Hudson River sloop of the same name – built and launched coincidentally from a boat yard where I now live in Maine – under the leadership of Pete and Toshi Seeger aimed at cleaning up the river their home overlooked in Beacon, N.Y.] and her roommate Julie [Landau?] sat down at the next table and I joined them. Carol Cina talked her usual doom and gloom mitigated as always by the deep humanism at the core of her spirit. Julie talked about Latin dancing and had apparently been to the Tropicana doing some fairly acrobatic Latin swing numbers which involved being swept around by her partner so that her hair touched the floor.

The group – the politicians – finally trickled down out to the waiting buses and off to a day of pol-chat at the Assembly. My time was hardly better spent, waiting for two hours in the lobby to be briefed on the tourism situation by Carlos Amat. He never showed. [Carlos Amat Fores was one of Cuba's revolutionary elites. Apparently he held the tourism portfolio at that time, or something similar around economic development; I was too small a fry for him to worry about.]

After going over to the Assembly to consult with C about taking a walk in the afternoon along the Malecon, I walked back toward the Sevilla and became momentarily disoriented, stumbling on a local barber shop. How much for a shave I asked? "Que se puede" [was what I apparently heard and jotted down in my notes, being invited into his chair].

After lunch C and I went off to the Vedado. Simon was on with the Landaus [Saul and his family] to visit a friend of theirs. The scene along the waterside was discouraging; many beautiful old buildings in states of decay almost beyond repair. People – as in every part of the city – were out and about, strolling in the cooling breeze that blows in steadily off the water – a promenade for young lovers. Traffic was heavier along the *beira mar* [I wrote seashore in Portuguese] – many bicycles, a man with his family aboard driving a horse cart. The twin towers of the [hotel] *Nacional* our objective.

Arriving there, we ran into Ulysses on the street. “Don’t you recognize me?” he says a bit wounded. I had already begun to shut my face to all the false salutations, the insistent “amigo, amigo,” of the hustlers. And I found it hard to recover my aplomb – ended up blowing him off with the excuse I had to get into the hotel to use the john, which was true but not with the urgency I suggested.

The *Nacional* was impressive, a bit cold, sepulchral. The old man attending the men’s room was reading a pulp detective novel. My fantasy was that the book was a Cuban classic of some sort. He had an interesting face, like one of those grumps in the Muppets who sit on the sideline and make snide remarks about whatever is taking place on the main stage. Behind the hotel, facing the seawall, fifty feet above the roadway are roughly three acres of formal gardens.

The doorman, a well-made and friendly mulatto, gave us directions to La Colina, where Carol’s friend was staying. The streets were lined with boxy fifties buildings alternating with *fin de siècle* palazzi in an eclectic array of shapes and forms – all from the idiom of the Beaux Arts tradition, some in fairly good shape, others not.

The *Colina* is a one star hotel, about \$15 a night - adequate. The desk staff not particularly attentive, signs of resentment service people exhibit in marginal enterprises when dealing with tourists who want to economize.

The *Havana Libre*, formally the Hilton, is a typical knock-off of the Miesian paradigm, architectural mass functionalism posing as a statement of modernism, the aesthetic ideal. This is Cuba’s current depot of mass tourism – the cut-rate groups who stay in a four star hotel.

By this time we were several blocks in from the Malecon and trying to figure out how to walk back by way of interior streets... In a somewhat spare concrete plaza made interesting by a modern sculpture – a composition of stones of various sizes, arranged asymmetrically at angles – I turned behind me and spotted a grey haired woman and asked directions: Rosa.

She spoke English fairly well and directed us to San Lazaro Street, accompanying us, and finally inviting us to her home for coffee. We again wove through the inner streets of old Havana *centro* and came to her building on *Neptuno*. The apartment was relatively large – a railway flat off an open air corridor running the length of the space, from the living room to the kitchen. Her son Oliver and elderly mother were there. Oliver is a direct, appealing, handsome boy of 18. A student at the School of Design, *pre-universitario*. He showed us two drawings, studies [the subjects of which I neglected to record]. The mother sitting before her walker, next to the radio she listened to all day - tuned to the news. She pulled us toward her for a kiss when we greeted her, a warm and exuberant woman, thrilled to hear of C’s former involvement with the Brigada, being herself a firm supporter of the Revolution, someone who had lived in poverty in the days of neo-colonial power. We drank demitasses of coffee and left, inviting Rosa and Oliver to the Sevilla for drinks at 6 the following evening.

When we left Rosa escorted us to the Lincoln Hotel where C says she was conceived [her parents having their honeymoon there, and delivered her in term thereafter]. We went up to a room on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor where the Argentine race car driver, Fangio, had stayed – which they were turning into a museum. [I can only imagine we visited this shrine out of politeness to an accommodating clerk, and for C to get a look at the interior of the hotel]. Suddenly Rosa remembers she had an appointment at 5, and it was already after 6. We rushed out of the Lincoln and walked quickly in the direction of the Prado to the Plaza Hotel where she asked us to go in with her, thinking she might not be permitted to enter.

Simon had gone off to visit a friend of the Landaus and C and I headed off for the Bodeguita Del Medio, a bar Hemingway - along with scores of other arty types – had frequented. Our reservation had been for 7, but there were plenty of open tables when we arrived at 7:30. The waiter brought two mojitos and we ordered our meal off the placemat menu, mostly pork dishes, rice, black beans and simple salads. The food was better than average for this fare. Midway through the meal, Simon slipped into a chair beside us. He had returned to the hotel and Saul had put him in a cab. The driver came into the restaurant with him to make sure he was deposited safely. We had walked [to the Bodeguita] much to the consternation of the hotel staff who sent a desk clerk with us to show us the way. It was “a very dangerous” area at night he said. “Are you afraid,” I asked him? “No,” he said, “not me.” “Neither am I,” I told him. Bill came to \$46 with tip.

There had been talk the night before about getting a basketball game going with Sebastian, Julia Simon and me. Saul said he’d like to play too. Things finally started moving into gear around noon. Till then, most of us were hanging around the pool. It was New Year’s Eve day. Around noon Saul said Sebastian [somehow connected to Saul; Julia, perhaps Saul’s daughter] had found a place for us to play and that his friend Marco was coming too. That gave us six, enough for a good three on three game. The court was just across the street in some Arab club, but when we got there, the concierge informed us that there was no administrator on hand to authorize letting us in, and besides there was no ball in any event.

I had been looking for some kind of urban adventure and things began to look up when Sebastian suggested we go to the Havana Hilton where there was a store that sold sports equipment. We piled into two cabs, drove off toward the Hilton. I waited with Saul and Julia outside, while the others went in to look for a ball. Simon came out to announce there had been a “girl’s” ball, some slick “industrial” number that was flat. We debated buying it, but without a [inflating] pin, it was pointless. So we headed off to Sebastian’s home court [he apparently lived in Havana]. We walked the mile or so deeper into the Vedado Barrio.

A half dozen boys were playing on a broken down two hoop court. Sebastian knew some of them. We chose up sides and played four on four. Half the Cuban boys, lean, bronzed and on the small side, played barefooted. Like Simon, they all played well enough, most were good shooters. Sebastian himself an excellent young prospect. A weird thing occurred. I took off my shirt, placed it on the ground not ten feet from the backboard at the edge of the court. A moment after I placed it there it was gone. Someone snatched it without anyone having noticed. [This series of entries ends abruptly with a lazy ellipsis]: This was a positive experience.

## *Part Two*

*Comment:* Opening the flip side of my steno pad another set of notes begins. It was here I recorded technical details on the tourist industry and on meetings with tourism officials. My briefings produced information like the following, “Revenues depend on the quality of service to obtain the maximum dollar per tourist.” “Tourism is growing here at 30% per year.” “Depenalization of dollar holdings is a compromise with reality. The peso has no purchasing power on international markets, so the exchange has become utopian. The population is holding back hard currencies, [obtained through remittances from relatives in the US and elsewhere] thus the depenalization.” And the like. So I have decided to not wade through all the techno-chat on the political economy of tourism – which now flourishes - in Cuba, the unknown prospects for which in early 1994 were still an open question, and to skip to a final set of wandering entries that I clearly intended as a story in its own terms. It is headed:

### *A Mystery Visit*

After the meeting at UFO [a government entity related to tourism], which was a bust, I walked hurriedly back to the Sevilla along the Malecon. Hurriedly because I had lost all patience with the relentless hustling, the “hello friend,” the “what time is it” come-ons. Put on my street face – urban patrol – long purposeful strides, tight lipped, slightly menacing look – walking straight for the midst of any clustered group who viewed me as the prey – forcing them to give way and throwing them into confusion until I had gone by. A kind of performance made credible by someone New York City street-wise with a level of manageable paranoia common to Vietnam vets among others.

Waves crashed over the seawall along the Malecon, often the case I was told, when the wind blew from the north – or was it the tides or the cold front, as some others suggested. Every man (sic) his own meteorologist. In places the wide avenue was partially flooded. In the fall the water had risen “30 meters,” flooding ground floor apartments in Vedado neighborhood several blocks in from the sea.

Reaching the Prado, I kept walking toward the narrow streets of old Havana and entered the Naval Museum. After checking my bags, I climbed the stairs to the second floor and walked past busts of historical figures revered by the Cubans, Marti, Bolivar, Juarez and old honest Abe himself, the good gringo, our backwoods’ Che.

Out on the balcony where you could feel the shadows of the caudillos who once stood here in stoic Iberian poses, reviewing the troops and saluting the masses from a safe distance. I was told I needed a ticket when I walked into the exhibit room and decided to return to the hotel.

A few minutes after 1, Simon and I grabbed a cab and headed for the Estadio Latino Americano to catch some baseball. We stopped before an entrance and walked right down to the reserved seats behind home plate. The games are free. People seem to sit wherever they choose. The game had begun, but it was still the top of the first. Two loud teens sit near us so I feel like we’re being cased for our caps. We’ve learned to apply the Cuban dictum [which applied as well in Brooklyn where we lived], *Disconfiamos* – we are vigilant. Simon removes his cap and holds it in his lap.

The lefty on the mound gets out of a jam. Men on first and third, one out, his infield turns a double play. A man walks down the gangway holding a large thermos. Twenty people rush to his side

and buy a shot of coffee only slightly larger than a thimble, placing a coin or two in the man's hand. There is nothing else to buy or sell except some homemade concoction in a cone that we couldn't identify.

The game degenerates, becomes a laughter, too many errors, bad base running and lack of hustle up the first base line on routine groundouts and pop flies. Too many players with beer bellies and fat behinds – semi-pro ball stuff, not the cream of Cuban baseball. But an afternoon at the ballpark, the way I figure, is an afternoon at the ballpark in any language.

After the game I wasn't about to be walking around the neighborhood looking for a cab, especially with Simon in tow. There was a police station in the stadium. In my fractured Spanish I asked the cop on duty to call one of the tourism taxis. It took about twenty minutes for the car to arrive, so we had a chance to observe the scene around the main entrance, where the officer in charge of that detail, who had served two years in Angola and another in Ethiopia with the Cuban Army, had stationed us under the watchful eye of a female stadium employee. To be clear, we were being helped, not spied upon. The lieutenant knew we didn't know our way around. I don't think he thought we were in any danger. Making small talk I told him about our group and the number of people who had been mugged. He shrugged and said the people were taking advantage of the situation. This was not approval but stated in the tone of an objective sociological observation. The real cause, he said, was a decline in morals, perhaps a euphemism for the anticipated result of legalizing dollar holdings.

We had left the game in the top of the 6<sup>th</sup>, but soon after we were standing outside, a steady flow of people began to emerge, followed thereafter by the visiting team who boarded a modern bus at what was clearly the entrance for the players, coaches, press, and various levels of stadium workers and hangers' on. One player for the Metros, one of two Havana home teams in this league, rode by on a bike, still in uniform. A man who functioned as a kind of gate keeper told me the players got no salaries, but have jobs they are dispensed from working at as long as they remain on the team.

### *Denouement*

Back at the Hotel Sevilla, someone from the group we ran into in the lobby said there was an important meeting scheduled for six, an hour from then. We were going to be taken on a mystery trip. People we hadn't seen for days showed up for the meeting, most of them dressed for an occasion. Sandy, our leader, interpreted for a Cuban official, who said we'd be getting on our buses at 7:50 and would be taken to the Council of Ministers. Everyone knew what this meant. On the night before our departure, after having already been briefed and lectured by three of the most important men in the government, we were going to see the man himself.

It was like prom night for the Old and New Lefties, the liberals and the do-gooders, the dilettantes and the bonafide activists. For the first time in a week, no one was late for the bus. There were no stragglers. In ten minutes we arrived at the government building. Someone had described it to me as Soviet architecture. To me it seemed like typical post-modern, in the tradition of Oscar Niemeyer's Brasilia, but constructed with better, more durable materials. Inside the great foyer, those with bags and cameras had to check them. "En seguida," the Cubans assured us, they would be returned. We would have a chance to use our cameras later. One American journalist living in Havana for fifteen years, and employed by a variety of Cuban media, said that in many cases people are ushered

into a closed room and a little dog is brought in. He is trained presumably to sniff out such explosives as *plastique*, and only responds to commands in Russian.

Cuban security guards dressed in slacks and loose fitting *Guayabera* shirts were distributed strategically throughout the space, scanning the crowd methodically, their heads sweeping from side to side like searchlights. A major domo gestured for us to enter a corridor which led to a large reception room. As we approached the door, a line began to form, a reception line. Twenty feet from the entrance, above the crowd of bobbing heads, I could make out a scalp line of smooth grey hair combed back from the forehead.

Fidel, now 70, seemed possessed of an inner calm as he shook hands with the passing parade of eager faces. Someone said he had a touch of the flu, and it's true he looked a bit flushed. But the overall impression he projected was patience, dignity and an unusually robust constitution.

Like the others, I was thrilled to have the opportunity to shake the hand of this important man. There were also mixed feelings inside me. This event was a dog and pony show, staged to gratify what was essentially a bunch of political tourists from the U.S., most of whom had journalistic credentials of one sort or another, who would have been disappointed had they not had a chance to meet Fidel. Naturally the Cubans hoped we would return home and contribute to an atmosphere that would ultimately lead to the end of the embargo. We did have numbers, and there is some power in numbers to be sure. But from any objective measure we were a group with little real influence. To the extent that most of us were Cuba sympathizers with leftist leanings, we were members of a latent and marginalized opposition in our own country. Our views, spoken before the converted, or even written in the mainstream media to which many of us had access, would be viewed as predictable and easily dismissed.

The one or two representatives of the straight press among us seemed unlikely candidates to break with the typical American knee jerk view that Cuba was a Stalinist state with Fidel as its dictator. At best they would have to put more energy like most liberals into covering their left flank so as not to appear to have been "taken in." They must censor themselves, for if they don't, they know they will surely be censored. In Cuba, too, the press is censored. The views we are hearing from the top level officials, the mea culpas, the self-criticisms, in general did not appear in the Cuban press. Fidel, we were told on good authority from Carol's friend, a former Ambassador, had put out the word that during the "special period" the press must be positive, reflect optimism. But Cuba in this respect as in many other undemocratic practices is no better or worse than the U.S. where through intuition or cynical awareness, the members of our working press know just how far they can go before some editor begins to clip their wings. [The former Ambassador had been a contact person at the UN when Carol and Sandy Levinson were organizing the Venceremos Brigades; having fallen out with Fidel who he had known from the days they attended the same prep school, he now looked to work in Cuba's private sector].

Another source of my ambivalence was my own self-pride and distaste for the part of me which might yet fawn before some famous celebrity. To guard against the cult of personality, a more seductive temptation for Americans perhaps than any other people, is not just left rhetoric. The cult of personality is a metaphor for everything that runs counter to the ideal of genuine participatory democracy.

If we are sheep, as Cassius said to Brutus, the fault is in ourselves, not in our stars. Or maybe history has simply decreed that at this stage of human evolution, no higher form of democracy is

achievable. But no one could convince me that the US with all its freedoms is more genuinely democratic in its distribution of power and decision making than Cuba.

The Cubans criticize themselves for their paternalism toward the workers, describing a relationship which is inherently paternalistic as long as power flows from the top down. In the same spirit. American politicians and managers talk about “doing” things for the people or the workers.

When my moment came to greet Fidel I wanted to stand before him as a modest nobody who was still his equal on a fundamental level of human existence. I also wanted to relate to him as someone who understood the difference between a politics of passivity – that which is manipulated by the paternalism of those in power – and a politics of engagement. I did not rehearse a speech, other than the words, “*mucho gusto, comandante,*” which I had resolved was the appropriate form of address. Saying that, after making eye contact to communicate a silent message of good will and admiration, I assumed I would quickly move on. But Sandy stood by Fidel’s side and was providing brief introductions for each guest. She told him I was a writer and that I had been an organizer of veterans and GIs during the Vietnam War. His face brightened and those wonderful eyebrows of his arched involuntarily, the expression conveyed a mixture of approval and skepticism. “But you are much too young to have been involved with Vietnam,” he said. “*Tengo cincuenta,* I’m fifty, I said, smiling in a reflection of the sympathetic smile on his own face. As he nodded, as if to say, well, good for you, I slipped away making place for the person behind me. I guess those Nautilus workouts had been worth the tedium and toil.

I crossed behind the security group and stayed toward the front among those who had already gone through the line, taking up a position from where I would be able to see Carol and Simon when their turns came to shake Fidel’s hand. Carol came first and Sandy’s spiel elicited a warm and respectful reaction toward a person El Jefe clearly viewed as a true friend of Cuba for her role in organizing the sugar cutting brigades, and now as a successful, critically acclaimed writer. The formula he used to express himself was archaic or classical, commenting that Carol had brought “much glory” on herself. There was still an echo of the *hidalgo* in Fidel, as with so many Latino men who possess a certain level of polish.

Simon, on the other hand, Fidel treated with a great deal of informality. Simon told him that he had been to a Cuban baseball game that afternoon. “Well, try to find a television around here, Fidel answered in a jocular way, “there’s another game tonight.” Maybe that’s how Fidel himself, a devoted baseball fanatic, would have preferred to spend the evening.

Soon after Simon, some self-inflated putz from LA, a young guy in his early thirties, moved into the breach and made a complete ass of himself, speaking to Fidel in a loud and self-conscious voice and calling him “my friend,” and a lot of other nonsense. “Where is this guy’s head,” I thought, resorting to the kind of lingo much in circulation during the Movement days. Another kook, a matron in her sixties, lectured our illustrious host, telling him he should “be home in bed taking Vitamin C. I wonder who sets out his food,” she commented. “Men just don’t know how to take care of themselves.” She was not the only woman to act that night as if Fidel was a matinee idol, and therefore a fair target for their flirtation and fantasies, something the poor guy must be subjected to endlessly as the result of his power, good looks and magnetic charm.

Fidel was the ultimate straight man under the circumstances. He rose to every introduction attentively, suffered every fool with equanimity. It was an impressive performance. From time to time,

someone would come in for a word of true praise, or would genuinely engage his curiosity – the former CIA agent, the aging but exceedingly dynamic actor [John Randolph] who had been blacklisted during the McCarthy era.

The intros completed, we moved into the banquet hall where long tables were set with platters of food. Waiters circulated among us offering mojitos, frozen daiquiris, gin martinis, beer by the glass, and tumblers filled three fingers deep with anejo, aged rum which substituted admirably as sipping whiskey.

Fidel moved off to the far end of the hall, surrounded by about thirty people who seemed attached to him like spokes to a wheel. He stopped before a wall length mosaic mural and launched into a long anecdote about the artist and the installation, though when I approached to listen, I could not get close enough to hear the details his interpreter was simultaneously rendering to English. Fidel was being the perfect host, keeping things light and delighting his audience.

Sandy suggested that Simon should ask Fidel to autograph his St. Louis Cardinal's baseball cap, and the *comandante* graciously obliged. But this led to a rash of autograph seekers and again Fidel took the demands in stride, suggesting to me that he had trodden this path many times and could play this role seamlessly, without the slightest hint of staleness or ennui.

There was an investment being made here – the sheep and goats were treated as one and the great symbol of the Cuban Revolution and of Cuban sovereignty stood before us as the most convincing evidence we could require that the embargo was wrongheaded and that interference in the internal affairs of the island – for those who thought in terms of a quid pro quo, an exchange of food for democratic reforms - was not only unreasonable, but frivolous in this show of Castro's benevolence.

But if this was a snow job, most of us didn't need convincing that the US had no right to demand conditions for lifting the embargo. Whatever the limitations of Cuban socialism, they were less the by-product of local dictatorship than of the economic terrorism practiced in the hemisphere by the US which has no right to point a self-righteous finger at any other nation.

*Comment:* With that tame polemic, my notes had ended and my narrative trailed off. Later that same evening the group was taken to the small formal room where the Presidium met, and with Fidel, Alacon and the long haired young Minister of Culture on the dais, we endured a stem-winder till near dawn, not unlike the speeches the Cuban people had been treated to over the many decades since Fidel has led them. At one point a man from LA in a Dodgers' jacket tossed Fidel a hard ball, which he caught and gamely threw back. Simon captured the moment on his camera. I snoozed for the most part, the rhetoric had become too thick to digest. As we marched through Customs in Miami that same afternoon, I proudly flashed the entry stamp from Cuba in my passport. It was a small act of defiance, but worth the dyspeptic look from the Customs agent who was powerless to do anything about it.