



Video Story Transcript

MY FATHER THE WHIZ: A CUBAN REFUGEE'S RESPONSE TO JIM CROW

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://youtu.be/QK1X89CFw1o>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

My Father the Whiz: A Cuban Refugee's Response to Jim Crow

Hi, my name is Carmen Agra Deedy. The story I'm going to tell you is called, "My Father the Whiz."

I grew up hearing stories everywhere I went. It was inevitable, really. I grew up a Cuban refugee in a small southern town. My family came to this country when I was three years old and the little town that embraced us was called, and is called, Decatur, Georgia. Now, back then you couldn't go three steps without stumbling into a story. You see, turned out, Cubans and Southerners were not all that different. They worship their ancestors, they gathered around food and they were unrepentant, chronic talkers. And so, the stories that I learned told me more about the people than anything I was ever taught. One of my favorite stories ever is about my own father. Now by the time I was 16 or 17 years old, I thought I'd heard every story my father had to tell. Oh, the hubris of the young. But one afternoon my mother called me to the kitchen and said, "Carmita, take this cafecito to the men outside. They're playing Dominoes; they're gonna be out there for the next five hundred years. And then come back inside 'cause you gotta help me with the dishes." Which insured I was staying out with the men. Well, I walked out, (screech), opened the screen door, and saw all these Cuban men in their crisp guayaberas, tightly gathered in a circle around an old folding table littered with domino tiles. They were not under a banyan tree or a mango tree but a Southern Magnolia. Life is just weird when you're a refugee.

I started to walk towards them through the miasma of cigar smoke, when I heard my father begin a story. Like I said, I thought I knew every story my papá had ever told. But you see, stories are funny. Stories are like, well, sometimes, they are like a fine wine. You don't uncork them until the person who's going to drink, is going to be able to really savor it and know how good it is. My dad must have decided I was ready. But first he called out, "Do I smell coffee or would it be that I am so light-headed from thirst that I am hallucinating?" Now, the Irish may have saved civilization but I assure you the Cuban gave you irony and sarcasm. I plunge towards the men and then they all said, Niña, cómo estás?" And I kissed everyone, it is the way of my people. And as the coffee was passed around, my father continued his story, as though I was not there. I wasn't going anywhere.

I leaned into the tree, and he said, "And so you know, we had only been here for a few weeks," less than a month, it turned out before my father finally found work. His English was cursory. He had been an accountant in Cuba. Now he came here with little understanding of the language. He was so grateful to have found work. Well, the first job he found was at a steel manufacturing plant. He was so eager the first day of work that he showed up an hour early and so nervous he drank nearly an entire carafe of coffee before he walked in. Now he was coupled with a man who was supposed to teach him welding—basic welding. (Google, figure it out. It's a verb.) As he was learning to weld, Big D, a big African-American man, and my father found a way of communicating. Using hand signals and a few words my father knew in English. My father knew, like I said, not only little English, he knew almost no Southern black English. Big D didn't speak Spanish. And yet, they soldiered on...or soldered on. In any event, within a small space of time, an hour or two, my father said he was starting to get the hang of things, And then, BAM! Like a hammer on an anvil, his bladder just felt like it was gonna burst—all that Cuban coffee he had! Well, he tried to ask Big D...well...This is how he said it went. "Ah, por favor, uh, please, Mr. Big D....ay....ti, ti ti...Cómo se dice? Dónde está baño?"

"What's that you say, Mr. Carlos?"

"Ay, ay, ay...El baño?...Ah...," my father unscrewed his thermos, and then he tipped it upside down to show it was empty now. Big D seemed relieved, "Hold on, Mr. Carlos." And then disappeared around the corner. When he came back, he brought his own large, green thermos, which he unscrewed, and he began to pour my father another cup. "No, no, no!" My father looked like he had just been offered a live rattlesnake. And Big D, thinking that it was he that had offended him, "Well, if you don't want to drink from my cup..." "No, Señor, no, no, no!" My father also increasingly frustrated being thus misunderstood, said, "No, eh, Señor, por favor,...Cómo se dice?" And then he realized, he knew just what to do. He unzipped, an imaginary zipper, fly, and then he made the international symbol, um...for emptying the male bladder. And Big D started to laugh out loud. And then he stopped. And he cocked his head, sort of like the RCA Victor dog and mumbled something to himself. Which my father said to this day that he's not sure of the words. But it sounded something like, "not my problem, not my problem." And finally said to my father, pulling him by the shirt, pointing, "Right there." And he pointed down a long row of men, machinists at work at their stations. At the very end of the corridor, there was what looked like a hallway or corridor. My father thanked Big D and he gunned it. He started, at a clip, down that line of men and as he passed them,..now remember this is the first Latin man in this all black and white factory, the year was 1964, the men started shutting down their machines. And it got quieter and quieter except for the footsteps of the men behind him. Now, my poor father had only been in this country for a short amount of time. He was learning the customs. He wasn't sure. This thing was uniformly odd. Where he came from men took care of this sort of business by themselves without spectators. When he reached the hallway, however, the crowd began to swell. And it looked like they were everything from laborers to two supervisors, black men, white men. And then he found himself confronted with a conundrum. A puzzlement. At the end of the hallway were two doors. Some of you know where this story is going. One said white and one said colored. And though his own tragic and troubled country had had many problems, this was not one that my father was familiar with, not in this way and he didn't know what to do. And at this point he heard in the back, someone begin to laugh. And a man called out, "Hey, Mr. New Man,

you pick whichever one you want but when you pick one, you stick with it.” My father looked at the men, looked at the doors. And he caught sight of Big D’s face in the very back watching him curiously, studying him. Now this the point in the story where I interrupted. Remember the tree...me leaning against it. I couldn’t stay there anymore. “Papi, what did you do?! I mean, did you quit, did you...”

“Carmen, just a moment, when you have to go you have to go. But, you know, I had come from a country where I had learned sometimes you have to follow your conscience. You cannot go left, you cannot go right. You have to find your own way.”

“Pop what does that mean...”

“Uno momento!” Now the men had leaned forward too.

“Carlos, what you did you do?”

“Can I please finish my story?” And he said, “I did the only thing a decent man with a full bladder could do. I push my way through that crowd of men, I go outside and I whiz in the woods!”... Si!