



Video Story Transcript

Remembering and Celebrating Cuba

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mkSMPgTL54E>

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.

When I was younger I would ask my Cuban father what it was like in Cuba. What was it like there? Why did he leave? What does he miss about it? And every question I had about Cuba was met by silence.

And my Father's family- huge celebrations in Miami around the table with food piled high. I would listen to them tell stories about each other and tell stories about Miami and how they built it from the swamp and what it was like when I was a baby. And every now and then I would pull one of my uncles or aunts to the side and try to ask them about Cuba and any question- any query about Cuba was met with silence. I soon learned to know that any question would bring the conversation, the laughter to a halt. So I stopped asking about Cuba- at all.

When I got older I became a storyteller. I began to tell stories in English and in Spanish. And I mostly worked with a lot of people from Mexico, so I began to learn everything I could about Mexico. And this took me down to Mexico where I traveled all through Mexico. And I ended up one time at the Yucatan right at a travel agency where there were flights to Cuba- \$79. And I realized that I'd spent all this time learning about the land and culture and food in Mexico, but I'd done none of that in Cuba where my father's family was from.

Here it was, a bilingual storyteller with a wealth of information about Mexico but nothing about Cuba. So I got one of those phone cards and I called my dad from a payphone on the street in front of that travel agency. "Yo Puerto era Kuba I viie" I told my dad I wanted to go to Cuba, I wanted to go to the places where he lived and worked. The beaches at Cojimar, where he studied and went to school. Where he played baseball. And he said "Mijo, you're a man and your profession is storytelling. If you want to go to Cuba you can do it. It's my dream is to take you to Cuba someday by myself." never heard that my dad had that dream for me and I almost cried there in the corner. He said "Well when we can go mijo, we can't go until Castro is gone. You know I never want to go back there with him and all he did, you know" but I remember my grandmother telling me that Castro would outlive everybody and now his brother's in power and

who knows when that is going to end. For my dad Raul and Fidel are the same and so I don't know when I'll ever go with my dad. Maybe someday. Maybe.

A few months ago, I got called by National Public Radio to write a story about celebrations tied to the land and Latino cultures and they specifically wanted a Cuban perspective. And on the phone as I was talking with them I said, "Well actually you know I've got a really great lot of stories about Mexico-"

"No no no, we already have Mexico covered. We'd love to get Cuba."

And I sort of stammered and hemmed and hawed and said "Well you know..."

They said, "Well could you try?"

I said, "I could ask my dad."

They said, "That's great- perfect. We'll talk to you soon."

I didn't tell them that every attempt to ask about Cuba from my dad in all the years prior amounted to silence so I called my dad and told him that it was for my work and we made an appointment to talk about it. My dad's a very busy man and so at 9am on Tuesday morning a week later, I called my dad. He said "Demon, tell me what do you want to know?"

I said "Pa- tell me about the celebrations tied to the land in Cuba." And he thought for a second and he said, "Oh yeah Mijo, there's the cutting down of the sugar cane. You know that all the men would come and have a great big festival." I couldn't believe it. A celebration tied to the land in Cuba. I said "Pa! Did you ever go to one?"

"No Mijo, that was for the campesinos. I was a city boy and I lived in Havana, you know?"

"Was there anything else?"

"No Mijo, a lot of those things are tied to the Indians in Cuba, you know? But the Spaniards killed all of them, you know? So they couldn't survive, you know? Not like in Mexico and South America where they could hide in the mountains, you know? In Cuba all the Indians were gone, you know"

And we had this uncomfortable silence. I know my dad wanted to help me and I wanted to hear something, but we didn't have anything and so we're about ready to hang up. It seemed until he said. "Mijo, wait a minute you know we had the big religious festivals, you know? We had the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. You know? We had the San Juan de los Lagos. We had a La Noche Buena."

"Papa slow down! What are you saying?"

"Mijo- sometimes we would have the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. You know there's a great procession that leaves the church- you know- and it would be the whole church- you know? The men would be carrying the statue of the Virgin; four strong men carrying this huge statue. You know? Walking through the streets- you know? And I was too small, so I would be on the porch and with a Virgin Mary walking along with these four men carrying it and my mother- tu Abuela, would put her hand on my head and say the prayers- you know? As the Virgin walked by."

And I could hear that laughter in his voice and I knew the crinkle in his eye when he smiled, I touched my eyes- it was the same crinkle that my dad had.

He said, "Mijo! Then, we had the summer celebrations of San Juan- eh, how you call him? Eh, John the Baptist, you know? And the fisherman who had fished for the pargo como si pero- a snapper. That's not for the snapper fish we will go down to the beaches- the fishermen were there with their nets- you know? We'd have a great big party or a big bonfire, you know. We'd be praying for the fish to come and the fish came we went 'Oooh!' and if the fish didn't come we'd still have a big party, you know? It's just an excuse for a party, you know? But we loved it, you know?"

Oh yeah! And the best festival was the La Noche Buena- Christmas Eve.”

I said, “Pa, what was the Christmas Eve festival like?”

“Ah Mijo! Your Uncle TT- no my uncle TT- your great-uncle TT. He’s in Cuba. Anyway anyway. Uncle TT would raise the pig all year long, you know? And then, the women, your grandmother, your aunties and my primas. They would all make the adobo de marinade. You know- and we pour the marinade on the pig, you know and then it came to kill the pig. This was a big macho thing, you know the men’s would do it- you know? The kill the pig- the blood everywhere I know it sounds a little disgusting, but Mimi would say, your grandmother, would say that ‘You Americans don’t see the animals before you kill them. That’s why you have less respect for the land and the animals’. Anyway we’d have the pig, we cooked a pig, you know, there’d be a huge celebration- the pig on the table. You know, sometimes your uncle would take it - say ‘Oh yeah how are you doing?’ you know? And we would have this huge toast and Aublea would take it and she’d say ‘I’d like to give a toast to all those who have died and all those who are alive. And we missed the ones that have died and we love the ones that are here and we are so happy that Jesus will be born this Christmas Eve and we’re so sad that he will die in Easter, and we are very happy that he will raise up afterwards and we are thankful for the laughter and thankful for the food.’ And we would pick mangoes from the trees and eat them right there on the table. And then the meal would be finished and it would be the best party of the year. We’d go to La Mesa del Gallo, the rooster midnight mass and the mass would go on for hours and afterwards, more dancing and celebrating and eating the leftovers and we’d sleep all through Christmas.”

And my dad stopped, and I said, “Pa, did you ever do those celebrations here in the United States?”

“Mijo no. That ended in Cuba, you know, you know, before Cuba, before Batista- it was a great party in Cuba. Then Batista’s government came and wrecked Cuba and then Castro came and promised different but then he wrecked Cuba even worse and we came here with nothing- so we didn’t have any money or language or ways to buy pigs, we barely had food and clothes, you know? We didn’t have the language, you know, so that I don’t end up in Cuba and I hate to be reminded of this, but I love you- I hope you do very well on the radio thing- whatever it is. You know? And if you need anything else, call me. Okay? Bye bye.”

And that moment came, and someday maybe my dad and I will go to Cuba, maybe with my young son. And maybe we’ll watch the fisherman pull the snappers in and have a big party. Maybe we’ll watch the huge Christmas Eve celebration. Maybe we’ll watch the Virgin Mary process through the streets of Havana near where my father used to live, and my father will put his hand on my young son’s head and bless him as the Virgin Mary goes by.

Maybe.

Maybe.