

***Real Life In Castro's Cuba***, by Catherine Moses, SR Books. Wilmington. Delaware, 2000 (54 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

*Introduction*

### **1. Cuban Proverb**

*No hay mal que dura den an os ni cuerpo que to resiste.* There is nothing bad that lasts a hundred years, nor is there a body that can resist that long. -Cuban proverb [Page 1]

### **2. Cubans Are Very Resourceful**

Cuba has many voices, and they are often contradictory. The nation is educated but starving for information, proud but prostituting its daughters, revolutionary but suffocating. The island faces a dearth of basic material necessities yet holds a treasure of spiritual wealth. Confronted with an unrelenting scarcity of food, fuel, clothing, and medicine, Cubans spend long hours obtaining the most basic goods. They have had to become tremendously creative with making do with what little they have. Bits of wire and string and carefully reworked cans are used by inventive mechanics to keep ancient cars running even though no parts are available. Inspired cooks make candy from banana peels. [page 3]

### **3. Cuban Minds Are Held Captive.**

While Fidel's guarantee of education has meant that the people have learned to read, write, and think, political restrictions create a fear that ties their hands and gags their mouths, so they can neither read about new ideas nor write or speak about their own. The minds of thinking people are held captive. [page 3]

### **4. A Sense of Community**

Cubans have a greater humanity and concern for one another than most of us can imagine. In spite of all the sadness and the daily suffering, Cuba is terribly alive, pulsing with the activity and passion of life. On the streets, people talk and gossip with friends and neighbors, sharing pains and triumphs, while salsa music blares from radios. There is an energy on the streets, a sense of community. If you are seeing your neighbors, you are part of life. [Pages 3-4]

*Part I. The Cuban Reality*

*Chapter 1. Loyalty to the Revolution*

## **5. Socialism Is a Major Precept**

*Sodalismo o muerte. Patria o muerte. Venceremos!* (Socialism or death. Fatherland or death. We shall overcome!) -closing to all of Fidel's speeches

Socialism or death? Why don't we all just die now and get it over with? -an intellectual's response [Page 7]

## **6. Castro's Interest Is His Own Power**

Fidel, however, is now over seventy. Though he can still electrify an audience, his rhetoric has not fundamentally changed in over thirty-five years and his promises are ringing hollow. While most of the world has abandoned the socialist path he pursues, at this point he cannot change his ways, for doing so would be to admit he had taken the wrong path or had made poor decisions. In an interview with Bernard Shaw of Cable News Network (CNN) on October 22, 1995, Fidel said that what happens to Cuba after he dies is not his problem. He continued, "That is the problem for the ones who come after me." For the rest of his life, Fidel's sole interest is his own power. [Page 8]

## **7. The State Provides What One Needs**

There is an important link in Cuba, as there was in the former Soviet Union, between economic and political survival. The State is responsible for providing for all of life's basic needs, but it requires the loyalty and consent of the citizens to maintain its power. The people need housing, food, and health care, and they know the only way to obtain them under the system is to toe the line. The State provides these basic necessities, and the people provide their loyalty, even if that loyalty is superficial and merely the formality of going through the motions. In turn, Cubans never have to worry about house payments or college tuition costs. Although it may not be much food, or good food, there is food. By remaining participants in the system, Cubans retain the safety net of food, shelter, and health care. Dissenting or being seen as counterrevolutionary in any way can result in the loss of some or all privileges and may lead to imprisonment. [page 10]

## **8. Silent Communication**

As a result of the State's vigilance, Cubans have developed hand gestures and other subtle communication techniques to express words that they cannot speak in a critical tone. The hand gesture for State Security, for example, is tapping the first two fingers of the hand on the opposite shoulder. The most common signal for Fidel is made by

pulling the fingers and thumb down from the chin as if stroking an imaginary beard.  
[page 11]

## **9. The US Is the Source for All Problems**

If the threat of impending invasion were not enough to rouse the specter of the United States as the enemy, there is the U.S. embargo of the island, an economic measure that has done little more to affect the Castro regime in thirty-five years than to give it a scapegoat. The State refers to the U.S. embargo as the *bloqueo* (blockade), as if the United States had ships surrounding the island. The regime blames all of Cuba's economic ills on the embargo, even though most problems are the result of socialist mismanagement. [page 13]

## **10. Foreigners Bring Foreign Ideas**

While it may be possible for the State to control the physical actions of the people, it has been increasingly difficult for the Revolution to retain intellectual loyalty. In a speech at the Fifth Party Plenum on March 23, 1996, Raul Castro, Fidel's younger brother, noted that tourists, foreign businessmen, and diplomats were potentially dangerous to Cuba because they bring foreign ideas. [Page 14]

## **11. Three Political Categories**

Cubans fall politically into three categories: the Party faithful and true believers, those outside the system, and those within the system who no longer believe [Page 14]

## **12. Supporters of the Revolution**

Candido, a thirty-four-year-old mulatto\* with short dark hair and cinnamon-colored skin who works long hours to support his wife and two children said, "Do you know who supports the Revolution? The people who don't work. They know that if things change, they will have to work for a living. Now they do not have to do anything." There are a great many people on the island who do not work because they can get by without having a job; they live off the provisions of the State. Cubans who work do not think much of those who do not.

\* Mulatto is used here the way people in Cuba use it. It refers to a person of mixed European and African heritage. It does not have a negative connotation; it is merely descriptive. [page 15]

### **13. Crimes against the State**

The fear of losing position or livelihood is usually enough to persuade people to comply with political demands. When that fear is not sufficient and individuals fail to observe the requirements of the regime, the State can detain them and potentially charge them with a political crime. Detention can last from a few hours to months on end. A detained Cuban may simply be instructed to sit in a chair for hours and wait, without even being given a glass of water. A person may also be detained and interrogated. Others are held for weeks or months in small cells without ever being formally charged with a crime. Three crimes that constitute a threat to the Cuban Revolution are *peligrosidad* (dangerousness), *desacato* (irreverence or defiance), and *propaganda enemiga* (enemy propaganda). [Page 20]

### **14. Younger Cubans Less Enamored with Revolution**

Cubans in their twenties and thirties have experienced nothing but the Revolution, and they are less than enamored of it. These young people see no future in Cuba because they see no way to make a living under the current system, and they cannot imagine political or economic change occurring. They do not really have a sense of what being Cuban means besides what the Soviets and Fidel have force-fed them. For them, Cuba, the *patria* (fatherland), has been linked to socialism, and socialism to Fidel. Disillusionment with anyone of these elements leads to a lower regard for the others [pages 23-24]

### **15. Celebrations Are Forced**

Even though disenchantment with the Revolution is widespread, the State is still able to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people for May Day celebrations and anti-American marches down the Malecon. On the day of a parade, usually a holiday, all the employees of an enterprise show up to work or at another central location, where they might receive a new t-shirt, and then are transported by bus to the site of the march. Public transportation shuts down for the duration of the event because all resources are dedicated to transporting the masses to and from the demonstration. The streets are eerily quiet. Groups of people are funneled onto the main street of the march and they walk. Many leave as soon as they are allowed. A Cuban government march is a manifestation of the *doble moral* on a massive scale. Thousands act the part of good revolutionaries, all the time knowing that they would rather be spending their time

securing necessities for their families. Instead, they serve the political necessity of feigned loyalty to an aging Revolution-and get a t-shirt. [Page 24]

### *Chapter 2 No Es Facil Food and Daily Life*

#### **16. The Pope's Visit to Cuba**

Have you heard the two reasons the pope wants to visit Cuba? He wants to meet the devil in person and see a people living off miracles. -joke from a devout Catholic [page 25]

#### **17. Low Earnings**

The average educated person earns a monthly salary of about 300 Cuban pesos, the equivalent of 15 U.S. dollars. Pensions run between 150 and 200 pesos. [page 27]

#### **18. Low Birth Weights**

In the era of Soviet subsidies, Cubans did not have to worry about food. People raised during that time are tall, strong, and healthy. Today, however, birth weights are down. Parents of an American two-year old were regularly asked if the child was four. Children learning to walk seem doll-sized, as few get the nutrition necessary to develop as they should. [page 28]

#### **19. The Black Market**

The black market will continue to survive as long as basic goods are beyond the resources of many and as long as items can be bought on the street for half the price charged in stores. Trading on the black market and stealing goods to sell are economic crimes because they threaten the socialist economy. However, without the black market goods, most Cubans would be much worse off. So, warehouses and stockrooms are pilfered, the items are sold, and Cuban consumers get what they need while the middlemen earn some profit. The only loser is the State. But then again, if this black marketing is keeping people fed, is it not also contributing to the economy and helping maintain political stability for the State? [Page 34]

### *Chapter 3 Hay Que Resolver Working for Pesos and Dollars*

#### **20. Westerners Don't Understand**

It is hard for Westerners to understand their daily struggle for survival, because most of us have never known hunger. Our lives are filled with electronic gadgets, while

Cubans scrounge for candles to bum during the unscheduled and often lengthy electrical blackouts. [Page 35]

## **21. Cuba Sent Troops Overseas**

In support of international revolution, Cuba has sent troops to countries in Latin America and Africa, including many troops sent to Angola. [page 36]

## **22. Work Is Discouraging**

Working for pesos is discouraging, because the few pesos one receives for long hours of work purchase almost nothing. Jorge, twenty-year-old auto mechanic who lives with his father in Santiago de Cuba, told me, "I make 148 pesos a month [\$7.50 U.S.] a full-time job. I like to work, I want to work. But I also want to see the fruits of my labor. [Page 38]

## **23. Why Study? There is no living.**

Alicia, a tall woman in her fifties with large brown eyes and black hair, has three grown children who have professional jobs. All three live with her and depend on her dollar salary. She told me, "The one who is a doctor makes 340 pesos [\$17 U.S.] a month, a very good salary, but she cannot live on that. I am supporting them. They are all so frustrated. What did they study for? They cannot make a living." [page 38]

## **24. The Government Becomes Suspicious with Repairs**

Most smaller homes are also in need of repair. The problem is that few building materials are available except on the black market, and the State has cracked down on the illegal sales. David, who receives money from relatives in the United States, explained, "I need to repair the house, and I have the money to do it. The only problem is, everything comes off the black market. These days, if you fix up your house, State Security comes and asks you where you got the money and then asks you to show receipts for anything you bought. It is no wonder no one is fixing up their houses and everything looks like this." So, while he could resolve the repairs, David knew the government would be suspicious: "They do not want anyone to start improving his lot in life." [Page 42]

## **25. Joint-venture Operations**

The jobs in the dollar sector are found in joint-venture firms, embassies, and the tourism industry. Since the State is trying to attract foreign investment, it has allowed

foreign firms to establish joint-venture operations. These are ventures in which the foreign partner provides some capital and management expertise and the Cuban partner supplies labor, land, and the facility. [Page 42]

## **26. Speaking English Is a Key**

A good command of English is one key to these jobs in the dollar sector; another is either a well-connected parent or a spotless record as a Revolutionary. Because English is seen as a way to potentially access dollars, there has been a surge in the number of people who want to learn to speak it. At the same time, the number of English teachers is dropping, since many of the best English speakers on the island, who had been teachers, have left their positions in academia to seek their fortunes in tourism. The promise of earning dollars draws people out of their chosen fields into the service sector. A waiter in the newly restored Casa Granda Hotel in Santiago de Cuba is actually trained as a mechanical engineer. A bartender is an English teacher. The taxi driver is a doctor. [Page 44]

### *Chapter 4 Varadero Life for Tourists*

## **27. Fake Tourist Hotels**

Tourism is Fidel Castro's latest interest, and he has optimistic plans for attracting foreigners to his jewel of a Caribbean island. The national television news gives regular reports of new tourist establishments being built and speaks of the amenities to be offered to visitors. Unfortunately, few Cubans will ever see the inside of any of these hotels. All of this investment is for foreigners; it is being made to attract foreign currency. Cuban pesos cannot buy a cup of coffee at any of the hotels. Even if they have money, Cubans, except for prostitutes, are barred from entry by hotel doormen. [Page 56]

### *Chapter 5 Triumphs of the Revolution Health Care and Education*

## **28. Odd Health Care Environment**

It is not just prescription drugs that are hard to come by; even a bottle of aspirin is a rare commodity. Most Cubans who have aspirin received it from family visiting from the States. In this strange health care environment, a visiting foreigner can have specialized surgery and care, but a Cuban cannot get an aspirin for a headache. [Page 68]

## **29. Thinking People Are a Threat**

Unfortunately, education in a society that does not have the basic freedom of expression is a double-edged sword. One of the saddest elements of life in Cuba today is that there are thousands of educated thinkers held prisoner in their own minds—a hellish internal prison. What value is knowing how to write if one's hands are tied? What use is knowing how to read if every word is filtered by the government before it is seen? What use is thinking when there is no outlet for new ideas? Cubans know that free expression of ideas 'leads down a narrow path to prison or exile'. There is no place for intellectuals on this island. Thinking people are a threat to any intolerant regime. The Castro government would prefer to minimize the influence of new ideas by exposing its people only to the views it promulgates. [Pages 71-72]

### *Chapter 6. Civil Society*

## **30. No Group Meetings**

The government still does not want independent organizations to exist, because they would threaten the State. Cubans are not allowed to meet in groups without the blessing of the regime, and they can be charged with illegal association if they do. If people were permitted 'to meet in groups', they might be able to organize and create a real opposition to Fidel Castro. [Page 75]

### *Chapter 7. Why Don't They Rise Up?*

## **31. Always Someone Watching or Listening**

Teresa, a dark-haired woman in her late fifties who as a university student had fought in the streets against then-President Batista, said, "I thought life under Batista was bad, but that is nothing compared to this. You cannot move in this country." This "inability to move" is the result of the stranglehold State Security has on the Cuban people. Because of the sense that someone is always watching or listening, individuals are afraid to say or do anything that might be considered counterrevolutionary. [Page 81]

## **32. No Competition**

Over the years, Fidel has removed anyone who could develop a following. He does not want an internal opposition. He wants no voices save his own. He will brook no competition. He never has. He can elevate Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos to high status, because there is nothing like a dead hero. [Page 82]

### **33. Feelings Things Will Be Worse without Castro**

Years of indoctrination have made Cubans anxious about their future. Even though they are beaten down and suffering, they have been convinced that everything will be worse if they throw Fidel out. [Page 82]

### **34. The Box of Cuba Status Quo Is Safe**

Maritza, a lively professor with short red hair, explained the situation like this: "People realize they are in a box they cannot leave. There is no way out. So they convince themselves that the box is a really nice place to be. They tell themselves the world outside the box is a bad place. The box is safe and good. This message is drilled into their heads every day as they watch the news and television programs. The news from Cuba is good. The news from the rest of the world is almost uniformly bad. If someone dares to say life in the box is not good, the person is rebuffed and ridiculed. Life in the box has to be protected and preserved because there is too much at stake for the box to be damaged." The Cubans are afraid of losing what they have. They may not have much, but they know food, education, and health care are guaranteed. They do not know what change will bring. So they wait. They wait for an opportunity or for Fidel's death. [Page 83]

### **35. Children Have Nothing to Hope For**

It is hard to think about politics when one is worried about survival. Now, despite the ongoing difficulties, people are a little better off, thanks to either money from relatives or a slightly healthier local economy. With a little food in their stomachs, they can think about the situation in their country. Outbreaks of leptospirosis, the lack of garbage pickup, and the unavailability of school uniforms are more pieces of kindling on a fire that is set to burn. People are angry, and that anger is manifesting itself within families; people are fighting with one another at home-the one place where it has always been essential to stand together for survival. At times, it seems that all it would take for violence to flare is a match.

With tears in her eyes, a woman who works for the State declared, "I don't know why Fidel hates us so much. Why does he just keep trying to crush us? We believed in the Revolution. We supported him and brought him to power. Now what do we have? *No es facil. No es facil.* My children have nothing to hope for. They deserve better than this. They just want to leave. Why does he keep going back on his word? This cannot go on, or we will have a civil war." Even a loyal member of the Party admitted, "I have never

felt this way before, despite all we have been through. I believe we are heading toward chaos. God willing, let it not be violent." [page 84]

### *Chapter 9 America!*

#### **36. Affection for America**

For all of the State's efforts to cast the United States as the enemy, most Cubans hold a great affection for America. This affinity persists because many people either have personal experience in the United States or have relatives living there. [page 93]

#### **37. Similar Manners**

At a formal dinner one evening with guests from both nations, I noticed that we were all using similar table manners. Most Latin Americans eat like Europeans, keeping both hands on the table. In this group-whether it was representative I do not know-the Cubans, like the Americans, had one hand in their laps and one on the table. [Page 97]

### *Chapter 10 Migration*

#### **38. Leave Cuba**

Young Cubans have studied hard and earned degrees only to find they cannot make a living. The only way out that most of them see is leaving the country. [Page 102]

#### **39. There Has to Be a Change**

While many do see leaving as a panacea, there are others who made a conscious decision to stay. Their resolve derives from a mixture of defiance and hope. One professor who decided long ago to remain on the island said to me, "As long as I am here, this country cannot belong to them [the State]. This is my country. As long I am here, they cannot have it all because they do not have me." The commitment and patriotism of a young mulatto father were evident when he explained, "I had a chance to leave. My parents and brothers are all in the United States. I am staying. Someone has to change this place." [Page 104]

### *Chapter 11. The Migration Accords*

#### **40. Very Hard to Leave Emotionally**

Watching the faces of those who obtain immigration papers from the Americans and then the *tarjeta blanca*, or permission to leave Cuba, is like watching a metamorphosis.

The drawn faces are suddenly animated, and eyes begin to sparkle with a new light. Every departure is bittersweet, though, because those emigrating leave behind family and friends. They never know when they will see one another again. The airport is a tremendously emotional place because so many of the departures are permanent. Family and friends gather at the chain-link fence near the tarmac to wave and to cry. It is not easy to decide to leave the island. It is home, and it is Cuba. [Pages 114-115]

## *Part II The Cuban Spirit*

### *Chapter 16. Soy Cuba I Am Cuba*

#### **41. Facing the Terror of Life**

Great men, great nations, have not been boasters and buffoons, but perceivers of the terror of life, and have manned themselves to face it. -Ralph Waldo Emerson [Page 145]

#### **42. Reality Is Painful**

The Cuban reality is painful. The constant struggle to get by economically drains people of energy. The political situation, with its constraints on expression and action, prevents individuals from changing their lives. [page 145]

#### **43. Friends and Family Make Things Bearable**

Despite tremendous adversity, or because of it, the spirit of Cuba has survived and grown strong. The people of the island are bound together in a web of life. Friends and family make life bearable. People nurture and care for one another. Because material goods are scarce, most have learned that human niceties, such as a kind word or touch, are what is truly essential. These people have not merely survived; they continue to give one another love and have not lost their joy for life. This humanity and willingness to help one another have kept the society from falling apart. [pages 145-146]

#### **44. Cubans Care for One Another**

A U. S. Coast Guard captain in charge of one of the cutters that repatriated rafters told me he respected Cubans because of his experiences rescuing them on the high seas during the rafter crisis of August 1994. In the early morning darkness he could make out a few rafts. As the dawn broke, he realized that there were literally hundreds of rafts floating on the waves. He had rescued people leaving other islands and had noticed that often the strongest would scramble out of the boats first. With the Cubans,

he said, it was different. "The raft could be sinking, but they would lift out the women and children first, then the old men, and then the young men would come. There was a sense of responsibility. They took care of each other." [Page 146]

#### **45. Cubans Give of Themselves**

Everyday occurrences are laced with affection. In Cuba, the personal is very important. The first courtesy is to ask how someone is and not expect a one-word answer. Individuals ask each other about their families and offer cups of coffee. Perhaps because there are no goods to buy and there are shortages of everything, people have learned to give of themselves. Cubans visit one another. They just drop in. Meals are shared. Those who may not have food are welcomed at others' tables. The favor is repaid somehow. They are part of one another's lives. Everyone knows if someone is sick or in need or in love. Relationships with family and friends are the basic elements of life. These connections make Havana seem like a small town. People went to school together, are in-laws, or worked together. The community is a tightly knit network. [Page 147]

#### **46. Life Is Outside**

Cubans spend a lot of time outside, sitting on their front steps or balconies, walking to school or work, or just standing in line for rationed items. Not only do they enjoy the fresh air, but they see their neighbors and chat with one another. Signs of life are everywhere in Havana's neighborhoods. The early morning hours are quiet, but as the rising sun hits the tops of the trees, life begins. A Lada rambles by, then two bicycles pass by as I walk my dog. A rooster crows. Down the block, a thin elderly black man is already on his streetside stool, ready to watch the world go by. I wave; he returns the wave and smiles. Soon the neighborhood is wide awake with children going to school and adults going to work on bicycles. Music with a pulsing Latin beat is almost always playing, either at the bar next door or on a radio in one of the apartment buildings, giving an underlying rhythm to life. The evenings contain a mixture of sounds that reflect the life all around me: a baby crying, birds singing, the voice of a father with his toddler, an impromptu baseball game on the street, a truck rumbling by, a rooster crowing. The cacophony is pleasant and most definitely alive. [Page 148]

#### **47. Release in Music and Dancing**

Cubans seek release from their worries, and though alcoholism may be increasing, there is a more popular outlet in music and dancing. When there is a party, everyone

contributes. It is almost as if food magically appears. The parable of the loaves and fishes seems to occur daily in this land of scarcity where people who have almost nothing are somehow able to produce enough to share. [Page 149]

### *Chapter 17. Spirit and Soul*

#### **48. The Sea – A Source of Peace**

The sea, and its seemingly infinite expanse, draws Cubans. While it is a source of food and fun, the sea is also a place of contemplation and peace. Along the seawall of the Malecon, there are always people gazing out to sea. They might be just passing time, but it might be something more. One evening my friend Carlos said, "Could you do me a favor? Could we go to the Malecon? I need to see the sea. I need to find some peace." When individuals are facing problems and cannot seem to find a solution, others will advise them to go to the sea. [Page 154]

#### **49. No Survival without God**

During my time in Cuba, I never heard anyone say that God had forsaken the island. Instead, I heard many references to the fact that the survival of the Cuban people was a miracle. Cubans admit they could not have survived without God. This admission is remarkable considering that until this decade, religious faith was a black mark on one's Revolutionary credentials. Party members could not be religious. In 1991, the Communist Party Congress opened the Party to believers, probably because the growth in Catholicism and Santeria was already evident. For years, the only religion had been Revolution. But as people realized that the socialist dream they had believed in and sacrificed for was only an illusion, they needed something to believe in—some greater power or greater good. With people finding strength in the traditional institutions of the Catholic and Protestant churches or in the more mystical pursuits of *espiritismo* (spiritualism) and Afro-Cuban religions, faith came back with a fervor. Catholicism, *espiritismo*, and Santeria are intimately linked with the island's history and culture. So, while finding religious fulfillment, Cubans are finding their heritage as well. [pages 154-155]

#### **50. Survival Is a Miracle**

Cubans are not often just Catholic or Protestant or Espiritista or Santero. These paths are entwined. Most people mix Catholicism or Protestantism with one of the mystical traditions. This way, they have both the promise of a better life in the next world and

contact in the present with the "*mas alili*"(the other side). No matter what path of belief individual Cubans choose, they pursue it with a tremendous faith-a faith that helps them find a solution to the seemingly hopeless situation they face. The strength found in faith is the source of the Cuban capacity to withstand adversity. Just as Americans might pray for health believing in God's ability to work miracles, Cubans also pray for miracles. They have, after all, already seen one. They have survived. [Page 156]

### **51. Difficult Position for the Intelligentsia**

The talented and intellectual people are in a difficult position, not permitted to work and think freely and are also not compensated for the work they do. [page 158]

### **52. Faith Is the Rock**

Whatever role the church chooses to play, religious faith-not the Party or the State-has become the rock to which most Cubans cling. [Page162]

### **53. Slavery Brought West African Religion**

When Africans were taken to Cuba as slaves, they brought their religion with them. Most of the slaves came from West Africa. [Page 166]

### **54. Catholic Saints and African Deities Are Linked**

When the Africans arrived in Cuba, they were divided up and sold, but they carried with them their religion. It was usually not quite the same as that of the other slaves they lived with, but it was similar. The slave owners, as good Catholics of their time, felt the need to convert the slaves to Christianity and so introduced them to their God and the saints. The slaves, with their pantheon of African deities already in place, accepted these new "deities" -the saints-into their beliefs. To blend the two spiritual traditions, the slave: linked the saints to the African deities with similar stories or powers. [Page 166]