A COUP IN HAVANA

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I arrive at a hand-pushed cake cart having rehearsed my order in beginner's Spanish, but, before I can actually speak, the mother-daughter team takes off across the street, cakes in tow. Around me, parents are grabbing children's hands, old men are picking themselves up off benches; everyone in Havana is sprinting for cover.

I understand as the first raindrops hit my face. Within seconds, I find myself jammed in a cafe's entrance with six other people, pressed between a young man with a messenger bag and a besuited man's oversized stomach.

In Cuba, a country where segregation between visitors and locals is essentially institutionalized, I've quickly discovered that this kind of unregulated contact with Cubans is both rare and highly unlikely. Police vigilantly watch for street harassers—not the kind who whistle and kiss at women, but rather the ones who might con you into giving them money for milk. (This trick, by the way, only works on the uneducated capitalist who doesn't know that free milk for babies is a subsidized perk of Castro's government.) Tourists and locals rarely even travel on the same long-distance buses. And, for Americans, U.S. government-sanctioned person-to-person tours—intended to give visitors a cultural perspective rather than a beach trip—only permit visits to Cuban government-approved schools, hospitals, and restaurants.

Even just wandering through Havana's crumbling streets—my preferred method of blending in or, at least, getting a picture of daily life while traveling—Americans and other foreigners stand out. Many of Cuba's tourists come from Spanish-speaking countries. But they, too, are still held at arm's length because of the currency gulf. No matter how flawless one's Cuban accent, a foreigner will still be outed at any street cart or cafe upon offering up convertible Cuban pesos, called CUCs (pronounced "kooks"), the currency created by the Cuban government just for visitors. So segregated have CUCs been that, up until a few years ago, Cubans could be arrested for having them, putting yet another damper on interactions between locals and visitors. The real question in all of this segregation is who is being protected, and from whom.

One day, perusing the stalls at the daily used book market in the Plaza de Armas, bordered by picturesque, dilapidated colonial buildings, touristy coffeehouses, and restaurants, my travel companion and I begin chatting with a young vendor. We start by asking about the books—a mix of Cuban literary classics, works in translation, and Revolutionary hero-aggrandizing graphic novels. But the conversation rapidly turns to him asking questions about us, how we came to be in Cuba as Americans, what we think of his country so far. Exchanging a look with my friend, we realize we have found our first chance at a real conversation with a Cuban—our first chance at a Cuban friend, even—and turn the tables. A law student by night, he tells us that he taught himself English and that his father fought with Castro in the mountains. He answers all our questions, offering insightful commentary both supportive and critical of the government.

The three of us chat for a good half hour, before he spots his boss approaching across the plaza, and we quickly make a few purchases so his neglect of other customers will not be noticed. Before we can even make plans to continue the conversation over a *cafecito* at one of the city's many cafes (our treat, of course, as most Cubans can't afford them), our new friend tells us that we'll have come back to the book stall if we want to chat further. His hesitance, he explains, is a result of once having been arrested for walking down the street with an American friend, accused by overzealous police of harassing tourists. His American friend protested, but to no avail, and ultimately had to come bail him out of jail. ▶▶▶


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It is my frustration with these barriers as much as my desire for a snack that prompts me to seek out a street cart as I cross the bustling Paseo del Prado, with its steady stream of brightly colored 1950s Fords and Buicks. All day, I have picked my way around the muddy puddles that dot the unpaved streets as scenes of Havana life happened around me. I watched children playing baseball in empty lots and middle-aged men displaying their rounded guts as they chatted on neighboring benches, and wished I could involve myself in the city's daily life.

At this point, in the midst of Havana's busiest plaza, I decide to make my move, spotting the hand-pushed cart with its homemade snacks of honey-soaked cakes and deep-fried dough covered in sugar. The two proprietors—they look like mother and daughter—are casually chatting with a little boy and his father, and I move to be the next customer. But I never get my chance, as I join the prescient Habaneros in running for cover, bewildered at how they can have been a step ahead of the rain.

Under the cafe's overhang, no one speaks. No Cuban men kiss or whistle or stare or even talk to me, a break in the constant attention that comes with being a woman here. There is none of the boisterous chatter that would normally fill this cafe. We all just stand together, waiting, hoping for a break in the heat that we know will not come.

Peering through the sheets of water down the uncharacteristically empty Calle Obispo, Habana Vieja's main boulevard, I make out several other pockets like ours, where random groups of strangers huddle together. A triumphant smile forces its way onto my face. Despite the government's best efforts, here I am, sharing a sense of camaraderie with a group of Cubans—at a cafe, no less. And who knows how many other foreigners are doing the same thing in those other groups down Obispo, and elsewhere in the city? It's barely significant, but, after days of frustration, it feels like my own little coup.

In a matter of minutes, almost as suddenly as it started, the rain stops. The young man with the messenger bag leaps forward and down the street, and I step out so the besuited man can hurry off toward some meeting in one of the plaza's impressive baroque buildings. The muddy streets quickly fill up again, the sky continues to rumble, and life in Havana returns to normal.

It would be a lie to say that I had a revelatory moment crammed in that cafe doorway with a handful of locals. I learned more in the conversation with the bookseller than I did in my few minutes on that cafe's step. When we scatter, I am still wary of those who approach on the street, wanting to chat about life in the U.S. up until the moment they ask for money. Cubans can still barely afford to dine at the *paladares* (that is, privately run eateries) we visit, much less at state-run restaurants or cafes. I still cannot join in the lively conversations I witness at the cafe tables around me as I sip a coffee in a place that ought to encourage such connections.

And yet, something has happened. Frustrating and insurmountable as the institutionalized segregation has been, and will continue to be, I have spent five minutes like anyone else in Havana: ignored, anonymous, banding together with others to be simply another person hiding from the rain.

But there is also something else. That same afternoon, a few hours later, after I have finally gotten that cake and coffee, something in the growling sky out over the Malecón, the city's serpentine seafront walk, strikes me as different. Before a single drop hits me, I immediately make for an overhang where an old man looks out, judging the clouds. Seconds later, the rain begins to pelt down. ■