

AND HIS BEARD

It was the summer of 1963, the summer I went with a bunch of students to break the travel ban to Cuba. After we'd been in Havana for a week and were buzzing with our reception as heroes, we were treated to a day at the beach. Varadero was a recently finished tourist spot near Havana where it was hoped international vacationers would start to come. We didn't anticipate much, just a day of enjoying a break from the more intense meetings at high schools and cigar factories, or with some minister. It was a beautiful Caribbean beach with pleasant buildings and plenty of rum & coke...*Cuba Libres*. A grizzled old guitarist played for us, improvising in a folk-style in which the news of the day is turned into verses. He delighted everyone by playing off our celebrity and making fun of the Yanqui government for not being able to control us.

Then there was a rumor that something important was up. The leaders of our trip disappeared, there was a great commotion in the Hotel staff...and then we were told that Fidel had just driven up unannounced to visit with us. A shiver of excitement went thru everyone, Cubans included. It was said that Fidel was just dropping by, he didn't want a formal meeting where he made speeches and answered questions. Then he showed up at the ping-pong table on the beach-side of the hotel. He was in his usual military dress, fatigues without rank designation, and that almost comical cap they wore. There were some bodyguards, but they were discreet. It's hard to believe it now, but what I saw as I walked up was just...Fidel Castro and some army buddies & the star-struck hotel staff...standing around a ping-pong table while Fidel challenged one of the Cubans to a game. It was just a ping-pong game. No one asked Fidel anything. He joked in Spanish with the guy he played, made side remarks, was obviously just intent on having a good time. All 58 of us Norteamericanos crowded in close waiting for cues about what we were supposed to do.

After the Cuban lost, one of our guys was invited to play. It was a pretty tight game, but Fidel pulled away at the end. Then another of our people played and lost. We began to realize that Fidel meant it to be just this. A game. I was starting to feel up to the situation, thinking I was a pretty good pongist myself. So I volunteered after the third game. Fidel looked at me and we hit a couple of practice volleys. Then he pretended to be worried. Said something about the exhausting games he had just played. Sat on the edge of the table and took off his shirt. Everyone was tittering and oohing at the complete disregard of protocol. He looked at me, and I suddenly realized how playful the guy was, and just went with it. I too sat down and took off my shirt. Then he pretended to be scared. In fact I was a very lean hairless nineteen-year-old kid while he looked more like a bear. But we had leaped into a mime that everyone was digging and laughing about with each smirk or worried glance. When I finished with the shirt and stood ready to play, he stopped me, gestured to his feet, and sat down to take off his shoes. I immediately did the same so that we were at either end of the table darting glances over shoulders at one another in our socks. Then he grimaced, glared at me, and took off his socks, which I mimicked while darting threatening looks back at him. We threw each sock down like a gauntlet. *All right for you buddy, now I'm going to have to take off the other sock!*

We were primed. There was a mirthful generous look on Fidel as he now for the first time spoke to me in Spanish. One of the Cuban guides behind me called out in English to be sure I understood. He was saying that he could see it was going to be a titanic struggle and that it might make sense to make a bet that gave the event its full power. I said that would be fine: *"How about: If I win, I become Premier of Cuba?"* His eyes popped open for an instant but then he caught me up with this rejoinder: *"All right, you're on...but if you win, I get to go to San Francisco and take your place in the college."* Everyone went nuts. It was such a preposterous image, Fidel Castro knocking on my Dad's door, *"excuse me sir, your son has won my job in Cuba and now I have to be a student at State"*

With that, the game had to begin. At first I was playing him even. He looked pretty intense, slamming when possible and dancing around as I was, trying to make an athletic event of it. After a seven to seven

tie, I started to lose my easy confidence. Something was happening on his side which I hadn't thought of. The humorous wager was nothing to me, just a piece of wit with no consequence. But it dawned on me that Fidel did not want to lose his job. Even in jest. It just would be a little awkward, even in our good mood. And he started to pull away, running six straight points on me. I stopped when the serve came back to me and mustered one more light-hearted moment: "*What you are doing to me is some kind of Bay of Pigs!*" To which Fidel shot back: "*Be careful, when this is over, we may trade you for medicines!*". The recent battle of the Bay of Pigs was of course an overwhelming defeat for the invaders, and the captured mercenaries were offered back to the US in exchange for needed medical supplies.

To make it short, I lost that game....although I think it was a tie in the realm of wit. After a few more impromptu sallies around the hotel and grounds, Fidel suddenly departed and we were left in his nimbus. It was an astounding encounter in every way. This was after all the head of the Cuban State. And one of the most famed people on the planet. Yet he had just breezed in amongst us, played some games, made some witty remarks and clowned around a little...then split. In 1963, and for that matter in 2004, I defy you to name such another head of state. Even the security was remarkably low-key. It turned out that there were at least three people on our trip who had police or FBI connections and were spying. And there had been several attempts on Fidel's life by Mafiosi, CIA, Cuban exiles. No one searched any of us. I was right next to him for half an hour and I still don't remember any armed bodyguard around. It doesn't show in the photos I have. For a bunch of radical-minded and beatnik artists and students in that summer, you couldn't have done a more impressive thing than what Fidel did. It was as if all the pretense and masquerade and stiffness of political life had dropped away in a sort of hallucinatory clarity. We didn't need any stinking badges. The new life was going to be jazz & pachanga, made up right on the spot. I remember afterward heading out for a swim with twenty or so fellow travelers, looking at the warm waves and the yellow light of the lowering sun...and feeling that the world was shimmering with what had just happened. That I was right on the wave I had always wanted to catch.