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La Habana, Cuba

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THE CUBA-AMERICA JEWISH MISSION is a non-profit organization dedicated to assisting with the revitalization of Jewish life in Cuba and to working to improve the physical and spiritual well-being of the Jews of Cuba.

“Bienvenidos a la Habana” the sign read as we exited the small Cubana airlines plane and entered the busy, humid airport.

After clearing passport control and receiving quite a few confused stares at our American passports, our next task was to claim our luggage. Ordinarily this would not have been much of a challenge: however, since we were also bringing in humanitarian medical supplies, our suitcase count was nearly double our head count and it felt like hours before all the bags finally arrived in front of us.

Once all the bags had been claimed and stacked neatly on four luggage carts, one per each member of our family, we continued on to the last of the numerous security check points. We made our way through the airport with my dad and brother leading the way and my mom following them closely; as usual, I was lagging a bit behind the rest of the group. When I reached the guard at the front of the line I handed him my ticket stub and prepared to cross through the glass doors separating us from the rest of the terminal, just as I had seen the rest of my family do before me.

With a pleasant smile on his face the man carefully examined the piece of paper I had handed him, and then proceeded to inspect the suitcase that lay face down on the metal cart. As he moved clumsily around the large blue and black duffle bag, I noticed his eyes narrow and his smile begin to fade. I silently slid an inch or two closer to him in an attempt to find out what had caught his attention when I noticed that my suitcase had been stamped with a large red “X”. I did not remember seeing this “X” on anyone else’s suitcase tag and I began to panic as I realized my whole family now stood waiting for me on the other side of the glass doors, unable to come back through to help me.

The man asked me in a thick accent if I could “come with him, por favor” as he escorted me and my bags over to a partitioned off area in the corner. While following him, I noticed his robotic movements and his large hand gun secured on his hip—both clear signs that this was definitely a trained military man and not a young boy working for minimum wage with TSA. As it turns out, I was the lucky member of our family who happened to grab the suitcase filled with inhalers (for asthma) and syringes (for diabetes patients), which apparently the Cuban government was not very happy about.

On the flight over my dad warned my brother and me that if we were to get stopped and questioned by airport security, then we should pretend not to speak Spanish. The logic, he said, was that if you act...
as if you do not understand then they will ask fewer questions. He had been to Cuba five years ago, with the help of the same program, and had learned this lesson the hard way. Unaware of the strict and unusual security protocols, he ended up being detained for over three hours by camouflage-wearing security officers as he tried to explain that his GPS and satellite phone were just for safety and not some type of “top secret” American spy equipment.

So, even though I probably could have told them exactly what they wanted to know in perfect Spanish, I pretended not to understand a single word. I found this to be much easier said than done, however, especially when the two young male soldiers began to discuss under their breath all the dirty things they would love to do to “la gringa rubia” (the blonde American). Finally, after about fifteen minutes and ten questions to which I responded either “I don't speak Spanish” or “I don't understand”, they let me return to my family. Surprisingly, they let also me keep my suitcase full of inhalers and needles that had caused the whole dilemma in the first place.

After a slightly overdramatic reunion with my family, we piled into a cab and headed to our hotel. As we drove through the rain-soaked city I couldn't help but notice Havana was unlike any metropolitan area I had ever seen. There were no McDonald’s drive-thrus, Abercrombie billboards, or Starbucks stores on every corner. Instead the landscape was full of crumbling buildings, signs that read Viva Fidel 80 más (Long live Fidel), and a wide array of gorgeous 1950's classic American cars.

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At 8 am the next morning my brother and I sat half awake on the couch in the lobby of our hotel, Melia Cohiba, as we waited patiently to meet our tour guide, Tatiana. Tatiana worked sometimes with the Cuba-America Jewish Mission and would be the one who would take us to deliver the medicine we had brought as well show us around Havana. Her “real job” was as an anesthesiologist in a local hospital; however, in the four days she spent playing our tour guide at the reasonable price of $30 a day, she made the same amount of money that she made in four months at her job in the hospital.

“La familia Elefant?” asked a bright-eyed and smiling, middle-aged woman as she approached.

“Si. Mucho gusto,” my dad responded enthusiastically in a wannabe Mexican accent, giving my brother and me a slight chuckle.

We always found it funny when our dad acted as if he could speak Spanish when in reality his comprehension was quite limited and he could really only speak a few choice phrases such as “mucho gusto” (nice to meet you), “albondegas” (meatballs), and “donde esta la biblioteca?” (where is the library?).

Since our first stop of the day was at the apartment of Dr. Rosa Behar, a retired gastroenterologist who ran the pharmacy for the Jewish Community, my brother and I were forced to march back upstairs to our rooms to bring down the suitcases filled with medical supplies that were headed for the pharmacy. Our parents stayed
five Minutes to Madalyn
WHY DO YOU HAVE A LANTERN?

downstairs and chatted with Tatiana a little more, since—in keeping with Cuban law—she could not actually come upstairs with us. She later explained to us that according to their law, no Cubans are allowed to stay in hotels or even enter the room of a foreign guest. Their access to hotels is strictly limited to the lobby area.

Driving from our hotel to Rosa’s apartment we were met with our first real glimpse of La Habana (Havana). As we drove through the downtown area I became aware of the large number of red, white, and blue flags hanging off telephone wires, outside of stores, and above almost every single government building. I couldn’t help but laugh out loud at the unmistakable similarities between the American and Cuban flags. Not only did the two flags share the same color scheme, but also they were both made up of a combination of stars of stripes.

This rainbow of colors created by the numerous flying flags was complemented by the antique cars in a variety of shapes and sizes that lined the street in front of us. Some of the cars looked old and run down, barely being held together by their meek, remaining pieces of metal. Although their pale colors still shined ever so slightly, the combination of rusting doors and missing bumpers demonstrated years of hard service to their owners. And while they didn’t look like much now, it was clear that they were the type of cars that were breathtaking in their prime. There were a few cars, however, that were in mint condition. With no such thing as car dealerships and T.V. commercials offering “2.5% APR financing through July,” Cuban car owners were forced to keep their cars in top shape in order to ensure that they would get maximum use out of them. My favorite of these cars was a beautiful purple and white 1955 Chrysler Imperial.

About thirty minutes later we arrived in front of a decaying beige concrete apartment building with a set of matching dilapidated Fords parked outside. We hiked the five flights of stairs to Rosa’s apartment, each one of us lugging one of the suitcases full of various medicines that had provided us with our golden tickets into Cuba. With a warm and welcoming smile, which I found common among almost of Cubans, Rosa invited us in for some tea. We entered the small, two-bedroom apartment and followed Rosa outside to the patio, carefully navigating through the dolls and books scattered all over the floor.

“Please excuse the mess,” she said in correct but heavily accented English. “The toys belong to my granddaughter.”

As she poured the tea, Rosa told us that her daughter, son in-law, and 6 year old granddaughter also live in the apartment with her. In Cuba, she said, you cannot buy or sell houses. Each family lives in a house, which is technically owned by the government and never the occupants, and this house gets passed on from generation to generation.

Our family continued to visit with Rosa for nearly two hours, talking almost as though we were family instead of strangers. She thanked us sincerely for all the medicine we had brought with us and made sure we knew how much our little mitzvah (good deed in
Hebrew) affected their lives. She explained that, in Cuba, they only had access to old medicine; items such as inhalers and children's Tylenol did not exist unless brought in by outsiders. Also, all medicines sold in Cuba were only offered in limited quantities and were sometimes very difficult to find when necessary.

After almost two-and-a-half hours and many cups of tea, we said goodbye to our new friend and continued with our day. Since we had now spent a large amount of time sitting, we decided to walk for a little while instead of taking the air-conditioned mini bus we had been driving around in before. As we walked down the crowded cobblestone alleyways, only accessible by foot, I was struck by the relentless amount of revolution propaganda that lined the streets.

We continued to wander the winding narrow streets for almost an hour, exploring the wide variety of sights, smells, and tastes that the gorgeous old city provided its many guests and inhabitants. When we finally turned the corner back on to one of the main streets we found ourselves facing an extremely large, palatial building with a plaque that read “Museo de la Revolución” (Museum of the Revolution). Tatiana said that she believed it was important for all visitors of Cuba to know the extensive history that comes along with this small island. The museum presents substantial tributes to Fidel and Ché, focusing mostly on their outstanding moral character and phenomenal leadership skills. It also offers a slightly skewed account of the 1959 revolution in which the unbelievably oppressive and corrupt government of Batista was overthrown by the brave and triumphant government of Castro. We roamed the many levels of the museum for almost an hour, gazing at the many exhibits that covered the walls. While Tatiana and the rest of the family stood discussing an amusing caricature of Ronald Reagan, I found myself drawn to the fresh air streaming into the hot room through the large open window.

As I looked out of the second story window of the museum my eyes were met with a giant white star painted on the wall below me. Next to the star, in simple black lettering and underlined in red and blue, were the words “…la moral de la Revolución está tan alta como las estrellas…—Fidel” (…the moral of the Revolution is as high as the stars…—Fidel). I stared directly at these powerful words for almost a minute before extending my glance upwards to take in the rest of the scene before me. Above this mural was a crumbling rooftop on which a tired woman stood, hanging a set of orange sheets on a clothesline. Dressed in simple jean shorts and a bright yellow tank top, she worked solemnly next to piles of fallen brick and broken pipe, baking in the same hot afternoon sun that was undoubtedly at least partly to blame for her dark and worn looking skin. As I stood and watched, strangely mesmerized by this woman, I could not help but notice the unbelievable irony in the scene before me. Was this life everything the people had fought for in the Revolution? I somehow doubted it.

1 http://www.thecajm.org/index.html