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Ernesto*



*The names have been altered in this series, but
the dialogue and opinions are reconstructed from
real conversations.



I saw another friend, Ernesto Sola, for the last time that night as well. Like Hebert, Sola (everyone called him by his last name) was a member of the History Department, a lecturer in Art History who taught graduate students three times a week. But there the similarities ended. Quiet instead of gregarious, highly strung with a touch of cynicism, Sola was anything but easygoing and idealistic. I thought it interesting though, that the two of them--Hebert and Sola--were good friends, perhaps because both liked to share their rum. Both were also generous and ready for a good time, the sort of companions who never wear thin.

I was introduced to Sola because Hebert knew we both were interested in Santeria, an Afro-Cuban cult that had preserved, in an intricately complex form, an ancient African religion called Yoruba. The Yoruba were a people who, 500 years before the Portuguese even discovered Africa, had developed a highly advanced civilization in southwestern Nigeria. The capital of Yoruba land was Ife, founded according to tradition by Obatala, Yoruba's second most illustrious Orisha or deity. Obatala, after descending from the skies on a golden chain, created land from water. Olorum, owner of the sky and the supreme Orisha, directed Obatala in this work. Other Orishas include Ogun, god of iron and patron of all smiths, warriors, and hunters; Eshu, god of chance, accidents and the carrier of messages; and Chango, god of potency or hurler of the lightning bolt.

This religion was carried in the hearts of the slaves from Africa to the Caribbean when the Portuguese traded Africans for gold and sugar. Thus in Trinidad, Haiti and Cuba today, Anangos, Shango and Lucumi practice the religion of their Yoruba ancestors despite the efforts of the French, Spanish and English missionaries to baptize them for Holy Mother the Church. The key to this preservation is Santeria, a clever device of substitution, adaptation, or non-sectarianism--whatever you want to call it--in which each Yoruba Orisha was shrewdly identified with a particular Christian saint. Chango, whose colors are red and white, for example, was juxtaposed to Saint Barbara, curiously enough because her dress was painted red and white. Obatala

became Saint Lazaro and so on until the pantheon was filled out and preserved intact along with a complex set of rites, beliefs, music, dances, myths and symbols. So that when a Santero is found praying to St. Barbara, in actuality and secretly he is praying or paying homage to Chango. And if one looks closely enough, around his neck, the devotee wears a string of red and white glass beads as a sign for his patron.

The point is that Ernesto Sola knew all about this. And as I wanted to learn about Yoruba, I called him. For me, Yoruba is important not because I am in search of a patron Orisha, but because I am convinced that one cannot have a feeling for Caribbean or Cuban culture without an understanding of the myths, music and ritual of Santeria. For Sola, who did have an understanding and much more knowledge of Santeria than I, Chango and Obatala and Eshu represent creative turf from which he can draw themes for his poems and plays.

Indeed, the first thing about Sola wasn't that he was from and really remained middle class, though he alone of his entire family still supports the Cuban Revolution; nor that he was recently divorced after nine years of marriage; nor that he often dreamed about seeing Madrid "just one more time." The thing about Sola is that he's a poet; and not only that, a poet who is published in Cuba, which is something else again.

After our initial meeting, we arranged to take a bus to the little town of Guanabacoa, the second place the original Spanish settlers founded in 1525. Located an hour's drive east of Havana, the town contains a beautiful square with grass, trees, a wooden cathedral and colonnades that remain from the time of Gonzalo Perez, one of the earlier governors of the island. Our search was for the Museum of History where, since 1964, the Revolution has exhibited an ethnographic display of Santeria.

On entering the town, Sola noticed that a public vendor was selling coffee. "Hurry," he told me, "if you want to get a cup, we'll have to get there before the line gets too long." It was a hot morning but the breeze cooled a square where we had formed a "cola" and everyone in line was in a happy mood, particularly the man standing directly in front of me. I could tell he was curious about us, for it was obvious that I wasn't Cuban and that Sola was not from Guanabacoa. Finally, his curiosity compelled him to inquire. Pulling a packet of "Suaves," cigarettes made from mild tobacco, he offered us one. I declined but Sola eagerly accepted the courtesy.

"Gracias,"

"De nada."

Sola anticipated the question. "We're from Havana, here to see the city's Museum of History. Know where it is?"

"Certainly. But I don't know if it's open this morning. Sometimes it is and sometimes it isn't. It depends on the curator, whether he's in town or not. It's just down the street past the shoe repair shop about three blocks. And you. . .?" he said, looking in my direction. "You're not Cuban are you?"

"No, I'm North American. Here visiting for a while."

"Ah! North American," he nodded. "My name is Alonso. I live a few miles outside of Guanabacoa."

We shook hands. "Felicidad."

We didn't stay in line long--just long enough to have a small cup of coffee. But before we left, Alonso had become our friend. He explained to me that the Cubans are fond of Americans, though not the American government. They are, he said, also better baseball players than Americans are. Finally he told us that his daughter was getting married the following Saturday. Beaming with pride, he pulled a packet of white envelopes from his hip pocket. "Here," he said, handing us both an envelope, "I'd like very much for you both to come to the wedding. There will be plenty of rum and dancing. You see the address of my house on the inside. And you'll both be very welcome."

Returning to the park after our visit to the museum, Sola and I decided to visit the old cathedral. There we luxuriated in the carved ceilings of the church and though he couldn't believe how anyone in Cuba could still have faith in the little red light burning in the sanctuary, Sola couldn't help but admire the beauty of the place. Then we walked to the edge of town where we came across a cemetery overgrown with weeds and grass. I decided to sit on the edge of the stone wall while Sola checked the graves.

Suddenly he waved and called me to join him. He was standing beside a gravestone on which his own name had been carved out. "How about that," he quipped. "There are many Solas in Cuba, but it's the first Ernesto I've ever met." Then bending down, he picked up a little piece of wood, a stick painted red and white on one end, yellow on the other. "See this? It's been placed here by a Santero, a symbol of companionship with the dead. The colors are of Yemaja, the wife of Ogun. Why don't you take a picture of me with it."

I had my camera with me, and as Sola held the little stick into the air, nonchalantly posing as I focused on his sensitive tanned face, his bald head and gold-rimmed glasses, I thought how strange it was to be standing in a graveyard, taking a picture of a man playing with the dead. That's how I shall always remember him, smiling in front of that grave, holding up a small stick placed there by the Santero.

I took the picture, then suggested we go, feeling uneasy about taking pictures in a graveyard. Sola pocketed the small stick and proceeded ahead of me through the overgrown weeds and grass to the entrance gate. "Aren't you going to leave the stick, Sola? I mean he might miss it. Or whoever left it there."

"Of course not. I have many of these. I collect them. When we get home I'll show you, feathers, small dolls made of sticks, all kinds of things." That's the way he was. Sola would take a half day to go to Guanabacoa and back, write a Yoruba play that he knew would never be published, read everything he could get his hands on about Santeria, and yet, with no qualms he would walk off with that religious artefact.

Sola evidenced the same kind of complexities when it came to the Revolution. He had worked the first three years of the Revolution as an accountant for INRA (Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria) distributing millions of pesos to campesinos who were the direct beneficiaries of the Land Reform decree of May 17, 1959. The next three years he taught Marxist-Leninism in the schools formed to prepare cadre for the party, after which, he entered the University of Havana, and took a degree in the History of Art. After several years of teaching stagnation had set in. Sola worked but he didn't really believe. Not that he was disillusioned with the Revolution or soured by it. If anything, he could be described as a "hard-liner," who took positions against those who openly criticized the Revolution like Padilla or other poets who have been publicly chastened by the Revolution for their "intellectual elitism." "I believe the writer has to actively support the Revolution, not just be neutral. To criticize constructively is acceptable, but not the kind of insidious criticisms Padilla was writing. A writer's work is not to demoralize the people but to ennoble them. On the other hand, I can't stand a writer who won't defend his work. Take Pablo Armando (one of the poets publicly accused by Padilla of counter revolutionary tendencies)--no guts! The only writer who has is Fuentes." Now Pablo calls

*When Padilla made his auto criticism before an assembly of writers and artists at UNEAC, he named almost a dozen other Cuban writers, including his wife, of committing the same kind of errors he had. Only Norberto Fuentes stood and said he could not agree and that he, Fuentes, would defend what he had written in front of anyone.

and asks why no one wants to see him. I used to be his friend, but I can't tell him that I can't stand him because he didn't defend himself when he had a chance. I don't have respect for him."

Sola also viewed Che Guevara's guerrilla campaign in Bolivia as very noble but ineffective. "I respect Che or any man who would die for what he really believes in. But going to Bolivia! That was suicide. The Soviets were right, and thank goodness we're beginning to listen to them. Revolutions are not made by individuals but by the people when they are ready. Fidel sees that, and that's why we support leftist coalitions rather than proposing armed struggle as the only route to revolution."

Hard liner he may have been, but Sola was also tired, no longer able to sustain an emotional or psychic commitment to the revolutionary life. When someone reaches this point, this state of mind, Cubans say he is "quemada," burned out. "For twelve years I've devoted myself to the Revolution. My life has been totally integrated with it. But now I'm tired, I need to look into myself and devote time to my own work and writing. Teaching is fine; but I want to contribute, or maybe a better word is create, something of my own. Inside, I feel empty."

Nor at this point did Sola care about joining the Party. Every six months new membership is solicited from the ranks of advanced workers. But the process is long and demanding. Each candidate must first be nominated by his peers. He is then obliged to give an auto-critical analysis of his personal and professional life. Then the workers themselves devote several public sessions to reviewing the nominee's work habits, political attitudes, ability to get along with his or her co-workers and, where relevant, the individual's personal relationships. After this, a summary is made for the Investigatory Commission staffed by members of the Party whose task is to establish the authenticity of the nominee's statements and prepare what we would call a security check. All this completed, a report is handed back to the work center either accepting or rejecting the candidacy for the Party. If the nominee has been accepted by the Party, a vote is taken by the assembled workers as ratification of his membership. If the Party is opposed to the nominee, there are two options: the work center can re-submit the nomination and demand a reason for the rejection, or the work center may let the matter die there. (Very few candidates are ever rejected by the Party once the workers decide in favor of his nomination.)

All this public scrutiny wasn't the reason for Sola's reluctance to place his name before his colleagues in the

department, however. "I just don't feel that I could devote myself to the work I would have to do if I were a militant (member of the P.C.C.). The time and effort are too demanding. Now take Hebert. He could do it. And some day he will become a party member. Not me, though. I need more time for myself."

There were other things that were preoccupying Sola as well. It was a time of transition for him in other ways. He was preparing to move out of his wife's apartment into his sister's house temporarily until he could find his own place. To do this, he had to "trade" his little cottage in Varadero, a seaside resort, for an apartment in Havana. In Cuba, there are no real estate agents, no buying or selling of houses or apartments. One is allowed living space in the city, say an apartment or a house, and one other residence in the countryside or by the sea for vacations. Because Sola had left his city residence to his wife and two little children, he was obliged to post notice detailing his hopes to trade on some appropriate bulletin board:

"To trade, four-room cottage in Varadero for equivalent sized apartments in central Havana. Prefer location near university."

We were talking about his family life seated on the thick wall running along the Malecon. It was late, perhaps nearing midnight and around us, several couples had found a spot to be alone for a few hours, watching the lights of the city, refreshed by the breezes blowing off of the sea. We had walked from Sola's apartment carrying with us a bottle of "Anejo," an aged dark rum that has no equal in the Caribbean. Not even "Mount Gay," made in St. Lucy's Parish in Barbados can rival it. Sipping from the bottle, we were both high. ". . . always a problem. . . (Sola was referring to women). . . Now take my wife, I mean my ex-wife. I didn't mind her working. In fact she's a very fine pediatrician. But the burden of the boy was too much for us both to be working at the same time. I blame the Revolution for that. The boy would have been normal had Margo not left him alone so much when he was younger."

"Why blame the Revolution?" I asked. "I mean she could have stayed with him. She didn't have to work."

"Yes, I know that. But she wanted to because she felt a moral obligation to practice since doctors were in such short supply then. Most had left for Madrid or Miami. She was one of the few who remained. And look what it cost us. Now we have Danilo, cut off from us and autistic. There is nothing we can do." Sola looked around at me. The rum wasn't a high for him anymore. "What do you know about it anyway," he said, his tone

accusatory. "You can't understand. You're here just to listen, to watch, and to write your book. When you've seen enough, you'll leave, board a plane and fly away. You can't understand."

Quiet then, he reached into his shirt pocket for a cigarette. Taking them out, he eyed the packet and poked his finger into it, discovering that he had none left. He crumpled the remnants into a ball and threw it into the sea. "Cono! Have you got a cigarette?"

Frank McDonald



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