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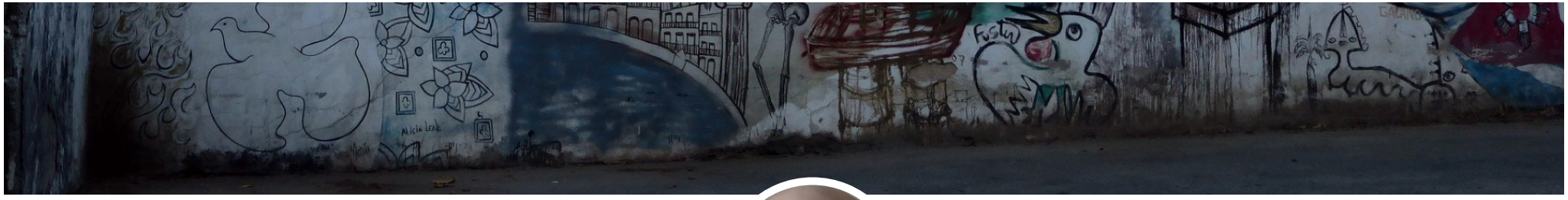

The Land of Lost Time

Peter Korchnak

“ Pico Iyer has called Cuba “the island of waiting”: Cubans wait for Fidel Castro to die,

The check-in line for the 8:45 a.m. flight from Mexico City to Havana wends around large suitcases, shrink-wrapped luggage bales, and a lectern where a handling agent sells Cuban tourist cards and informs passengers the departure is delayed. She is uncertain until when, but probably around nine o’clock—this evening.

“What happened?”

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for an exit visa to leave the country, for goods to arrive to stores.

"Operational reasons." She motions for the next in line. I shuffle forward with nostalgia in tow: growing up in the 1980's socialist Czechoslovakia I must have heard such non-explanations daily. But only now, a quarter-century on, do I register the absurdity. Cubana de Aviación's check-in attendant confirms the flight will depart at "twenty-one sero-sero."

Twelve hours later, the waiting area at Gate 30 resembles a town square on a summer's eve: passengers lounge, stroll along shuttered storefronts, or drink soda at a late café. I gape at the screen behind the service counter: CUB131 to La Habana is departing at 21:30 and is A Tiempo (On Time).

At nine thirty-seven there is an announcement in fast-clipped Spanish. I glance over my shoulder at the new information: 22:30 and Demorado (Delayed).

Now I wait.

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Pico Iyer has called Cuba “the island of waiting”: Cubans wait for Fidel Castro to die, for an exit visa to leave the country, for goods to arrive to stores. “Waiting is ingrained in society,” concludes Theo Zierock, who has photographed Cubans at bus stops, echoing Julia Cooke’s observation that it’s “the Cuban national sport.”

There is no wait at an air-conditioned café in Old Havana where I sit with a glass of guava juice among several Westerners willing to pay extra for a reprieve from the soup of June weather. Sweat has been pouring in impossible quantities out of places I never thought existed.

Across the narrow street a queue outside a meat store recedes beneath an image from circa spring 1988, in which the 12-year old me stands in line outside the Baikal Fruit-Vegetables store in Košice for three hours to buy five kilos of potatoes. “One is always at home in one’s past,” writes Vladimir Nabokov, and across eternity I see the boy I once was. And whenever I slip between observing the present version of the past I experienced and superimpose shards of my childhood upon this city’s unfamiliar background, I both lose and reclaim something.

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The queuers lean against a peeling wall, clutching ration books and white plastic bags that sag like flags at their knees. Then the line stirs and one by one the customers duck in and out of the store. When everyone's gone, a butcher boy fills the entryway. He nods at a driver of a tricycle bici taxi with AUDI hand-painted across the canopy visor, wipes his face with a soiled apron, and pulls the rolling gate shut.

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According to the anthropologist Katherine Verdery, the failure of Communist Party-led economies in the former Eastern Bloc to efficiently allocate resources created shortages that put their citizens in queues. “Not knowing when food would appear in stores, bodies were transfixed, suspended in a void,” Verdery

“ One evening I settle in the back seat of

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writes. By forcing people to wait for everything, the socialist State expropriated their time and violated their identity. “The experience of humiliation, of a destruction of dignity, was common for those who had waited for hours to accomplish some basic task. Being immobilized for some meager return, during which time one could not do anything else one might find rewarding, was the ultimate experience of impotence.”

a blue 2103 with the excitement I felt in my uncle’s red one when I was eight.

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An even more common description captures a country frozen in time. Sara Wheeler calls Cuba’s “a society fossilized at a certain moment in history.” Iyer gets here a sense of “a life arrested mid-breath.” A 2007 Time Out Havana guide opens with the line, “A common first impression of Havana is that of a time warp. Wherever you look, you see relics of a bygone era, plodding faithfully on.”

The list of relics begins with the country’s geriatric leadership. Next, all over the city, 17th to mid-20th century buildings stand indignant in their decay. And 1950’s American cars have become the island’s most iconic image. A few best-preserved specimens serve as luxury taxi cabs for tourists. The locals

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operate the majority of the rest as collective taxis running along set, unmarked routes, keeping them running with creative mechanical work—I ride a Buick with a Lada steering wheel and a JVC radio, another time a Plymouth with reupholstered seats and Moskvich hubcaps. The recent American citizen in me wishes for fumes of knowledge about the makes and models of these behemoths, called simply máquinas. Instead, it is the Soviet/Russian Ladas and Moskvichs that remind me of the things I used to know.

Yellow-and-black Ladas comprise the fleet of the government-run Cuba Taxi, and I encounter a segment of Cuban men who make side income with their Ladas as private drivers for expats and visitors. One evening I settle in the back seat of a blue 2103 with the excitement I felt in my uncle's red one when I was eight. Over the characteristic whinny sound of the engine, the driver, Xandre, asks me to fasten my seat belt. When I find none, he bursts out laughing.

"No seat belts, my friend," he says. "Made in Soviet Union in year 1984!"

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For his next set up, he asks how much I think the car is worth. Before I can reply, he says, “I could sell it today for ten thousand dollars!” (The embargo and a shortage of permits have rendered cars prohibitively expensive here.) In the U.S., he adds for an encore, they would pay him fifty bucks just to haul it off the street.

As Xandre speeds along the Malecón toward downtown, the stereo blasts the big reggaeton hit of summer 2014, “El Taxi,” and the draft that slaps me through the open window fills my head with the smell of the sea and the blur of the city.

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Images by Peter Korchnak

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> **Now the villas sit abandoned, with untrimmed lawns peppered with weeds and gouged window holes gaping at a ghost town.**

At a seafood restaurant in Miramar, an upscale residential area housing embassies and mansions, I meet up with Sylvia, an expat who has lived in Havana for a decade. She advises me to forsake a rational approach to the place. “You have to feel Cuba.” She takes a sip of warm verdejo, then another, and concludes, “Cuba takes time.”

It takes less than that to forget what date it is. At a beach on Havana’s eastern outskirts, kids splash in the lukewarm water that barely bothers to lap at the shore while their mothers stare at me from beneath shirts stretched over sticks stuck in the sand. Couples canoodle, teens dance to boom-boxes, men with beer bellies and straw fedoras drown cans of Cristal lager. I walk toward to Tarará, a pre-Revolution gated resort development that, over my lifetime, housed Ukrainian children convalescing from the Chernobyl disaster, foreign businessmen, visually impaired Venezuelans recovering from surgeries their government exchanged for subsidized oil, and Chinese students training to become Spanish teachers and translators. Now the villas sit abandoned, with untrimmed lawns peppered with weeds and gouged window holes gaping at a ghost town.

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I watch a storm from the patio of Hotel Nacional towering over near-deserted four lanes of blacktop on the Malecón seaside esplanade. In the vestiges of sunset beneath the roiling indigo clouds I see the ghosts of men tending to fishing lines; tourists shuffling through the heat past kids jumping off muro, the low seawall lining the promenade; bands serenading women with classic hits and upturned hats; groups of partiers with bagfuls of Cristals and small cartons of rum; and lovers that find privacy here away from homes crowded with relatives. I sip a weak mojito while lightning shreds the faraway sky in three different places, creating yellow and white and orange splotches like bruises past where Florida must lie. Later in the evening, waves that crash against the muro send walls of spray into the halogen flood from Chinese-made street lamps.

“ Blackouts come and go like bouts of fever.

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Underneath it all, an absence so intense permeates Cuba that it flips into an inverse presence. Thousands of Cubans left vacant

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space in their stead after they emigrated. Posters promise the return of the Cuban Five, a quintet of spies jailed in the U.S. Cats roam around a man practicing a saxophone outside a disused polyfunctional center on Avenida de la Independencia. Eclectic villas in Vedado, a modern urban district, stare with blank windows at ramshackle apartment blocks. In Playa, a broken cross leans over the narthex. Empty store shelves force people to buy what's available, not necessarily what they need. Boulevards see little traffic, even during rush hours. There are no billboards except for surprisingly sparse propaganda (murals and banners with slogans prevail). Blackouts come and go like bouts of fever. Young women with distant looks wait in tiny dresses outside night clubs on La Rampa avenue for foreigners to rent their bodies, turning sideways to disappear when they spot a police foot patrol. On a hill in Regla, across the harbor from Havana, ghastly white statues reach for the bronze relief portrait of V. I. Lenin appended to the rock face. Vultures circle the rusting skeleton of a former Hershey chocolate factory some 40 kilometers outside of Havana. Nearby, two sky-blue dump trucks have been deposited on the second-floor wraparound balcony of a gutted building. A man with a missing tooth wears a sleeveless tee that urges REVOT NOW.

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> **“ Below them, day after day, Havanans sit on steps, stairs, stoops, benches, nooks, and retaining walls,**

When the setting sun descends far enough for shade to cover the claustrophobic streets of the central city, windows and doors fly open and, like water released from a dam, the residents gush outdoors. Some lean from windows or balconies of multi-story 19th century buildings crammed together and crumbling from overuse, elements, and neglect; others straddle window sills and dangle their feet in the air gooey from heat. Below them, day after day, Havanans sit on steps, stairs, stoops, benches, nooks, and retaining walls, chatting or watching daylight expire on the other side of life. “Time doesn’t fly if you don’t dream,” writes Orhan Pamuk. There are no dreams in these eyes.

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chatting or watching daylight expire on the other side of life.

I share my observation with Diana, who makes more in an hour moonlighting as a Spanish teacher for foreigners than in a week as a university professor. Street din rises through window blinds into her modest apartment in Centro, a high-density municipio outside Old Havana. She shrugs.

“We just survive here.” I hear this said many times over my three weeks here. “I’m tired of living in this country.”

Yet she makes no plans to leave. In fact, not once during our thrice-weekly lessons do I hear her mention what she desires —only that which she rejects.

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John Jeremiah Sullivan's recent visit to Cuba begins with a peculiar episode. "On the plane, something odd but also vaguely magical-seeming happened," he writes in the New York Times Magazine. "Nobody knew what time it was." Flight attendants announced, then corrected, and then corrected again the current time on the island. For Cooke, Havana is a place "where everyday existence is rooted in the present moment, yet thought exists primarily in past or future tenses." Iyer spots from afar the reality I entered before I even got here when he concludes that Cuba "has been left behind by history."

The absence that defines Cuba is that of Time, which has leached out of here like the color of buildings beaten down by the searing sun. This is why a plane delayed twelve hours was on time and flight attendants didn't know the correct time.

> **"Cuba is an island in the shadow of history's greatest capitalist empire whose embargo provides a convenient rallying cry and a**

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This is why rational analysis, which requires a linear process, can be futile here. This is why Cooke sees in Havana "a blending of tomorrow and yesterday in today." When nothing changes and people become stuck waiting and surviving, the very substance of history disappears, observes Pavel Campeanu in a description of Stalinist societies. History loses the quality of duration and becomes atemporal—that is, devoid of Time.

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The survival of Cuba's totalitarian regime has many causes: the country's socialism is homegrown; Cuba is an island in the shadow of history's greatest capitalist empire whose embargo provides a convenient rallying cry and a distraction from the inherent economic problems; and the regime permeates the social structure from the bottom up. Counting every Cuban as a nominal member, the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution, or CDRs, monitor the conduct and manage the personal dossiers of residents in areas comprising no more than a few blocks. One day I ask Diana whether she could get in trouble for having a foreigner visit every few days. "Certainly," she says and closes the topic with her signature resigned shrug. The money must be worth the risk. Later we discuss our

distraction from the inherent economic problems; and the regime permeates the social structure from the bottom up.

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favorite movies, and when I tell her mine is The Lives of Others, because it reminds me of how things used to be in Czechoslovakia, she says, “Yes I know it, La Vida de los Otros. Here we call it La Vida de Nosotros (The Lives of Ours).”

At school, I had to celebrate anniversaries of the Great October Socialist Revolution, which in 1917 had provided the departure point in Russia for the journey toward communism. Five- year plans mapped our progress, slogans extolled the development of the socialist society, and peace doves flew into the bright future where a superior world awaited. The CDRs suggest the opposite: the triumph in 1959 of an armed revolt, in which a gang of armed idealist led by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara overthrew the U.S.-backed regime of Fulgencio Batista, constituted both a starting and an end point. Having already been attained, la Revolución “continues unchanged without compromises,” exhorts Raúl Castro from a billboard in Miramar. There is no progress to be made toward a better day because the job today is to defend the yesterday that recedes further and further into the calendar past.

The Revolution’s greatest accomplishment is the banishment of Time.

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> **“She says her watch is broken. ‘It’s just for decoration now.’**

The Colón Cemetery tour guide points from his blue coveralls points at a white-clad Catholic priest reading the Communist Party’s newspaper *Granma*, named after the originally American- owned yacht, in which the revolutionaries arrived from Mexico. “Here we have a priest of this church.” When he adds the clergyman is waiting for a funeral I recall that the Spanish word for “to wait,” esperar, also means “to hope.” In a far corner of the vast property, the guide halts at a rusting metal box. “Here we have people who could no longer pay for their plots.” He yanks the lid open and I flinch at piles of brown, weathered bones and skulls.

An afternoon downpour, which is common this time of year, sends me under an overhang of a grocery store where I join a handful of locals in staring at the rain and at cars plowing through the water. Soon after the storm, kids resume hitting a fraying baseball with bats fashioned from broomsticks, and men surround tables over dominoes. At a puddle on the corner of Soledad and San Miguel, I mutter, “Here we have five tarot cards.”

Salsa music plays at a hole-in-the-wall fruit stand where the vendor dances with herself, her black hair spilling over her

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striped top like notes. I think of salsa dancers immersing themselves in the rhythms and of entranced smiles that steal across their faces when they leave the dance floor.

At the Capitolio terminus of taxi colectivos a small crowd gathers to laugh at a yapping mutt chasing its own tail. Inside a Studebaker reeking of burning fuel and paint, I tap my wrist and ask the woman next to me for time.

She says her watch is broken. “It’s just for decoration now.”

I ask to borrow the *Granma* sticking out of her purse. “To read,” I add, but that only compounds her bewilderment. During a toilet paper shortage, goes a joke of the kind so familiar to me from another life, Cubans wiped with cut-up newspapers. As a result, they had the world’s most ilustrados, meaning both illustrated and learned, butts. On page three I learn that yesterday’s lightning storm was the 2014 hurricane season’s first entrant, Arthur; on the back page, Belgium beat Team USA in World Cup’s round of 16 two to one in overtime. When the woman exits, she tells me to keep the paper.

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At Sylvia's, a nanny named Yoanna makes profound announcements without realizing it. She exhorts the gardener dozing off in an armchair in front of a soccer match. "Pablo, you aren't watching the TV, the TV is watching you!" She scoffs at the newspaper in my hand. The news only talks about the bad stuff happening in the United States and the West, she says. "Why are there no real news of Cuba?" To prove her point, she tells me a story, unreported in the media, of a recent mass murder of Cubans fleeing the island on a boat by criminals masquerading as smugglers. She shakes her fist in the air, says, "Why are we only talking about the violence and murders and catastrophes in the outside world?" and heads upstairs to check on the children.

My friend Teresa, a reporter on a temporary assignment, reacts to the story with a knowing smirk. Her next report involves Soviet limousines, some of which used to transport Fidel Castro, repurposed into novelty taxi cabs. She says, "Nothing happens here, so we create stories ourselves."

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The Museo de la Revolución is the only place where images of the Bearded One abound. The exhibit documenting the events up to the revolutionaries' victory takes me past photograph reproductions, document facsimiles, maps of troop movement, and objects like pistols, clothes, radios, and phones arranged in

" The grandparents'

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display cases that appear to have been untouched for years. Within a few steps of entering the post-revolutionary exhibit, which celebrates the new regime's successes and accomplishments, I get disoriented: whereas the revolution proceeded counterclockwise, I now must move with the clock. Meanwhile, behind each propaganda poster, photograph, newspaper clipping, and banner I gaze at the same paraphernalia in my elementary school's Room of Revolutionary Traditions, except here the colors have long faded and muggy dust fills my nostrils.

In the yard, armed guards watch over an eternal flame and the actual Granma ship, encased in a glass structure. "They're afraid someone would steal it and escape to America," the story goes.

Across Trocadero, the Museum of Fine Arts is closed for maintenance. The notice on the door gives no dates for the works' duration or when the museum will reopen.

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and parents' ways, represented by the Castro brothers, have become obsolete—they no longer work and people no longer care for them.

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Almost as an afterthought—it's tougher to see what is not there—I notice there are no street clocks in Havana. After the 1989 Velvet Revolution—"Our Revolution," I call it—church clocks got repaired and four-faced street clocks appeared in various strategic locations, including my hometown's main square. Now we'll always know the time without having to check our watches, I recall thinking as I admired the new contraption. We also bought new, digital watches.

*

At a restaurant Ricardo rants over a lechón about the many things that don't work in Cuba. I look around in concern that someone would overhear him. For a couple of years now Cubans have been speaking up more freely, he assures me. The system doesn't work, so there is no point in hiding your opinions because nothing will change anyway. When I mention this to Diana, she says that, while she wouldn't shout her views from a street corner, she's no longer afraid to speak up. If she gets in trouble, at least something would be happening. "But the real reason is we just don't care anymore."

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In a historical interpretation, interregnum is an interval between the reign of one monarch and the next one. In the 1930's the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci philosophized that interregnum is a period in which the old is disappearing while the new is yet to emerge. The place without Time that is Cuba exemplifies interregnum. The grandparents' and parents' ways, represented by the Castro brothers, have become obsolete—they no longer work and people no longer care for them. But today's new generation has not put a new set of ways in place. The people who might be of the same age as the students that launched the Velvet Revolution never revolted because, as reality failed to catch up to their accelerated expectations and ambitions, Cooke writes, they "detached from the country's fate in some deep and meaningful way."

No lesser a radical than Lenin provides me with some hope: the state of affairs, in which the rulers no longer can rule while the ruled no longer wish to be ruled, constitutes a revolutionary situation. And so, like Cubans themselves, I brace myself for their new revolution.

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I recapture the calendar on my penultimate night when I join a group of new friends, all foreigners, at an outdoor concert of Havana d'Primera, a timba band. Partygoers pack the arena of Salón Rosado de la Tropical and Cristal flows in the swelter of a summer afternoon while the announced start—"probably four"—comes and goes. For hours we try to avoid checking the time every few minutes with the reassuring refrain: "This is Cuba." At 8:30 all the bars run out of beer but no one minds because we're already drunk, the sun's gone down, and the band arrives on stage.

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My 6:00 a.m. return flight to Mexico is due to depart on time—real, clock time. Though this was my first time in Cuba, I feel as I were leaving home. But there's something else, too, as there was when I, no longer a boy, left my parents' house to go to college on the other side of Slovakia.

Through my reflection in the glass wall I gaze at the Ilyushin plane. I leave the same way I arrived: in the dark. And in that brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness that, according to Nabokov, constitutes life, I dreamed.

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Author's Note: Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the identity of the individuals concerned.

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About Peter Korchnak

Peter Korchnak is a Slovak-born writer and a retired yardwork guerrilla in Portland, Oregon, where he brews a decent Cascadian Dark Ale and pots garbage goals in an ice hockey rec league. His nonfiction has appeared or is forthcoming in Compass Cultura, Gravel, Narratively, Star 82 Review as well as THAT Magazine (Istanbul) and Týždeň (Bratislava). In 2014 he won Oregon Quarterly magazine's Northwest Perspectives Essay Contest. Find him online at PeterKorchnak.com and on Twitter @peterkorchnak.

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