

## My Men in Havana

I arrive in Havana, Cuba, at the end of 2010 together with a guide book and several men including *Our Man in Havana*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, and Paul, my partner. I am wondering in whose footsteps to follow, but after one night in Havana it soon becomes clear that Hemingway's have been well and truly trampled. Hemingway = Cuba = CUC (the Cuban peso that is tied to the dollar and which everyone needs to buy anything other than peppers and potatoes at the market). Hemingway is big business. Every bar, every restaurant that Hemingway went to cashes in on, well, Hemingway – and he went to a lot of bars which means that I probably can't afford to follow in his footsteps. Graeme Greene, on the other hand, is lower down the stakes which makes him more attractive – financially, at least. *Our Man in Havana* was also written in 1958, a year before the Revolution. I'm intrigued to discover how much the city and, indeed, Cuba has changed since the fifties. To Paul's dismay, I opt for him.

I read around the Cuba of 1958 and discover that pre-revolutionary Cuba is a decadent rich man's playground in which anything is possible. With a booming sugar industry, US companies own two-thirds of Cuba's farmland by the 1920s. Al Capone and the mafia have moved into the Hotel Sevilla-Biltmore and set up a tourist industry based on drink, sex and gambling. On the other side of the coin, there is extreme poverty. Cuba has suffered from serial corrupt leaders since becoming independent in 1902. Batista is the last and although he began as an elected and enlightened president, he ended by enacting a military coup in 1952 and suspending the right to strike. Fidel Castro and his brother, Raul, decide that something urgently needs to be done. Fidel is imprisoned but revolutionaries are being born by the minute and, with the arrival of the charismatic Che Guevara from Argentina via Mexico, it is only a matter of time before the Revolution. Graham Greene's 1958 Cuba is a dizzying cocktail of rum, gambling, prostitution, American mafia, a ruthless military dictator and cigar-smoking revolutionaries set against the international backdrop of the Cold War, rapidly freezing.

Hawthorne, when recruiting Wormold (the protagonist of the novel who sells vacuum cleaners in Havana) to spy for the British government, says:

'We must have our man in Havana, you know. Submarines need fuel. Dictators drift together.'

At a glance, apart from the absence of US citizens and MI6, the Cuba of 1958 according to Graham Greene and the Cuba at the end of 2010 are not dissimilar. The same American vintage Chevrolets, Cadillacs and Buicks grumble through the streets, coughing out blue plumes of carbon monoxide. Hundreds of tourists swarm around the city drinking Daiquirís and smoking Cohibas, while hundreds more Cubans swarm around the tourists offering various services from cigars to taxi rides in horse-drawn carriages. Not unlike the opening of the novel a man limps by us as we cross Prado and a woman dressed in a patchworked skirt begs us for clothes. No *és fácil*' becomes one of the first things we learn about life for many in Cuba. I get the impression that Dr Hasselbacher's words still echo through the country:

'You should dream more... Reality in our century is not something to be faced.'

We search for the evocative settings of the novel. The Hotel Sevilla (where Wormold meets with both Dr Hasselbacher and Hawthorne), the Hotel Inglaterra (where Beatrice stays) and the Nacional (where the dog is poisoned instead of Wormold) still exist and are just as grand and resplendent as in the novel, their huge lobbies and bars where guests hover, talking and smoking, evoke a bygone era. The Wonder Bar (where Wormold takes his morning Daiquirí with Dr Hasselbacher) and Sloppy Joe's (where he is recruited into the Secret Service in the toilets) no longer exist and the strip clubs, the Shanghai and seedy Esperanto, were closed down, but the famous Tropicana, where Wormold, Dr Hasselbacher and the young Milly go on her seventeenth birthday, is still thriving – on a staggering 80 CUC entrance fee. Even Hemingway seems cheap after that, I think, as I read about it instead:

'It was a more innocent establishment than the Nacional in spite of the roulette-rooms, through which visitors passed before they reached the cabaret. Stage and dance-floor were open to the sky. Chorus-girls paraded twenty feet up among the great palm-trees, while pink and mauve searchlights swept the floor.'

'Can't we go?' Paul asks counting out his CUC.

I console him with a Daiquiri in El Floridita, a Hemingway hangout but it is also where Wormold met his wife and her family. A life-size statue of Hemingway is slouched in the corner listening to some Germans so we sit further along the bar. On the other side, the Havana Club rum bottle sprints over the glasses as the barmen make Daiquiris and Mojitos en masse. The place is loud, full of mainly well-off tourists, smoking cigars or cigarettes and sucking at straws from dainty cocktail glasses, while two brash, beautiful Cuban women, dressed in red and black, rumba and salsa and an elderly man in a cap plucks at a bass. I imagine little has changed in the last fifty-odd years – except that Hemingway is no longer real and Daiquiris cost 7 CUC.

But drinking and smoking seem to have been a constant in Havana. All the characters drink vast quantities of rum and whisky. And they all smoke cigars and cigarettes – in those days, of course, it had more glamorous associations. Even Milly has smoked cheroots and Beatrice is offered a Marijuana cigarette in the Shanghai. Today, as then – despite the anti-smoking Westerners – a haze of Cuban tobacco still drifts through the intoxicating streets.

Despite Fidel's best efforts, prostitution also refuses to disappear. Wormold believes that '...the sexual exchange was not only the chief commerce of the city, but the whole *raison d'être* of a man's life. One sold sex or one bought it – immaterial which, but it was never given away.' We see stunning Cuban women cruise around with older western men, and handsome Cuban men escort older western women – everyone drinks another Mojito or Cuba Libre, lights a cigarette and smiles contentedly.

Outside El Floridita, the streets of Havana pulse with life. At every corner, like in the novel, people call out 'Taxi?' A red stretched Lada and a Cadillac pass us when we get into a bici-taxi. As we are thumped along the streets for 3 CUC I wish we had opted even for the Lada as the cyclist tries to avoid the many potholes. The old Spanish, Moorish and French buildings bounce by us, with their jaded beauty, pockmarked and hungover, semi-veiled by the dark. Once outside the main squares the streets become even darker. Cuba suffers from severe energy shortages and in a bid to declare Cuba the most ecological country in the world Castro switched the country over to energy efficient lighting so, despite the four-litre gas guzzlers, Cuba, I would imagine, is, out of necessity, the most ecological country in the world. Unfortunately that means that beyond the central squares and main streets, much of the country remains in darkness, or glows like a ghost.

Even in this darkness there are similarities. Wormold writes to his sister that vacuum cleaners are not selling too well as the 'electric current is too uncertain in these troubled days.' When in Santiago, he also mentions '... the night was hot and humid, and the greenery hung dark and heavy in the pallid light of half-strength lamps.'

Neither light nor scenery appears to have changed much. As we sit on the sea wall along the elegant curve of Malécon (Avenida de Maceo) under the blue sky with the sea pounding on one side and the pink and grey crumbling pillars of abandoned buildings on the other, I am reminded of Wormold describing his walk back from the Consulate.

'The long city lay spread along the open Atlantic; waves broke over the Avenida de Maceo and misted the windscreens of cars. The pink, grey, yellow pillars of what had once been the aristocratic quarter were eroded like rocks; an ancient coat of arms, smudged and featureless, was set over the doorway of a shabby hotel, and the shutters of a night-club were varnished in bright crude colours to protect them from the wet and salt of the sea. In the west the steel skyscrapers of the new town rose higher than lighthouses into the clear February sky.'

But there are differences between Cuba then and Cuba now. Obispo, one of the central drags of Havana, is described as busy; it takes Wormold half an hour to get through the traffic. Now it would take two minutes. When Wormold goes to Santiago to visit his retailers, his car breaks down and he catches a bus to the southern dissident city. This would be unlikely today – catching a bus, that is. Every vehicle is bursting at its seams with squashed limbs and hundreds more people wait by every junction on every road to get from A to B.

On our way to Santiago we stop to ask directions and find ourselves with two fishermen in the car. When we break down with a flat tyre they suggest that we get the tyre repaired at one of their cousin's for which we are subsequently charged 40 CUC – even without Hemingway.

‘No és fácil,’ we are told.

But the Cuba of today is not a violent world. There are no gunshots in the city, there are no stabbings, no tourists or locals are shot dead. There is no suspicion or fear within the country. The policemen do not beat us up. The fishermen do not rob us at knife point. Today, it is the sounds of Buena Vista Social Club and the harmless if annoying touts, rather than the voices of the revolutionaries or spies that fill the bars, squares, restaurants and streets against the background of the fading Communist slogans, *Revolucion es Libertad! Igualdad! Justicia!* The novel talks of the fear the West has of Communism because it does away with class distinctions. Captain Segura, the Chief of Police with a cigarette case made of human skin, tells Wormold about the existence of a torturable class and a non-torturable class – Segura’s father had belonged to the torturable class and the skin of the cigarette case is made from the police officer who tortured his father to death. Life was cheap and poor people could disappear or be tortured at will. Communism gave the people equality at least.

Back in El Floridita we perch at the bar, this time next to Hemingway, and order a last Mojito.

Cuba today is a dizzying cocktail of rum, prostitution, a fairly benign dictator, touts and cigar-smoking tourists set against an international backdrop of globalisation, I conclude. Many things the Revolution strived to get rid of have come back like a determined virus and there is a new divide between those who have CUCS and those who don’t. But the cars and the washing machines and the property developers, having been kept at bay for more than half a century, are now visible from the island. Cubans and foreigners are talking and Cubans are dreaming.

‘Things will change soon,’ I say. ‘Cuba will change.’

Paul, puffing on a Montecristo, nods, and begins talking to a man next to him in a baseball cap with ‘Yankees’ about Chevrolets.

‘What do you think of Cuba today?’ I ask Hemingway.

He replies that Cuba is Cuba is Cuba – but then again maybe that was Graham Greene. Or Gertrude Stein. But he definitely smiles when I offer him my Mojito.