

BURIED

A GREAT OLD CEIBA TREE IN THE MOUNTAINS OF SOUTH-CENTRAL CUBA HOLDS
A REVELATION INTO THE ISLAND'S HISTORY, HUMOR AND PEOPLE.

BY MICHAEL KELLY

The sun sparkled off the flat surface of the Florida Straits as Cuba fell from view. It was a situation I thought I had grown accustomed to in 30 years as a diplomat — sitting in an airplane as my latest home receded into the distance. Each time, I left a small part of me behind, unwittingly exchanged for some aspect of the local culture or a friendship destined to wane through time and distance. Perhaps this time I had left behind too much, because my heart ached and I fought back tears.

I turned my gaze from the window and let my memories overwhelm me. Like the frames on an old movie reel, the images of my time on the forlorn island clattered through my mind in sepia tones and blurred lines. But then some images of a day spent in the mountains of south-central Cuba several months earlier came into focus in vivid technicolor splendor, and I let myself get lost in the memory and the revelation that the day had held for me.

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The morning sun had not yet crested the surrounding mountains, but already its light and the promise of a clear day reflected off the straggling remnants of rain clouds that scuttled low across the land in their retreat. I had awakened early, as usual, and took my coffee in the hotel dining room by the big picture window that looked out over the lake. Drops from the night's rain still dotted the glass and dripped from the overhanging branches of the flame trees that framed the view; the grounds were littered with the last of the crimson blossoms knocked free during the passing storm.

Ignacio, my guide, found me there, and we walked down to the boat together in silence. We rarely spoke before we were settled out on the water, and this day was no exception. Once on board, we sat hunched with our heads bowed into the cool morning wind as we moved across the water, propelled by the small but efficient outboard on Ignacio's aluminum skiff.

Ignacio knew where to take me without asking. It was the same place he took me every morning that I fished on this lake. We always started at the submerged cemetery of the long-forgotten town of Guannacanoa. As Ignacio told it, the town had been a thriving seat of local color on the shores of the Río Negro long before the river was damned to create the lake. The old town had a rich history, even boasting a casino. I pictured it as Cuba's version of a Wild West Sodom. After the flooding, little was left of the town except the cemetery. During the long, dry summers, when the

water level in the lake dropped, the shadowy outlines of the tombs could be seen in the murky deep. Few fished the cemetery. Fear and superstition kept them away, which was fine with me. I enjoyed the solitude.

Later, when the sun sat fat and heavy on top of the lake, we drifted into the sheltered bays and lingered in the shadows of the tall mountains. I paused, put my fishing rod down and took in the spectacular view around me. It was a view that I had captured countless times on my little pocket camera and now had etched in my memory.



The mountains, part of the Escambray range in southern Cuba, jutted up from the water, sometimes in gentle slopes but more often in steep inclines. They were lush and draped with a verdant tropical tangle. Springs fed a handful of waterfalls, and in places the mountainsides were scarred by deep crevasses formed by the runoff of torrential rains. Wild orchids clung to the creases and folds of the trees. Countless birds peered down from their high perches but rarely took wing in the heat of the day. Deer — tiny, delicate things — and wild turkeys ranged the lakeside, every now and then offering a glimpse of themselves as they came down to take water.

In places where the terrain was gentler and the incline not so steep, small pockets of trees had been cleared and wooden shacks built. There, farmers raised pigs and grew the starchy white root called malanga that was served most nights.

I had often stayed out late on the lake with Ignacio. Both of us would stretch back in our seats and look up at an unrivaled sky that was so clear it made the heavens seem impossibly bright and perfect. On nights like that, when the wind idled low, the surface of the lake glowed and the dark mountains crowded in on us like slumbering giants. Ignacio knew no other sky. He didn't know how city lights could drown out and diminish a star's beauty. But I knew enough to cherish this vista.

I had known Ignacio for going on two years. He was perhaps the Cuban I had grown closest to during my time on the island, yet I still didn't know how much of the friendship that he returned was sincere or state-mandated. We were close in age, but leagues apart in the experiences of our lives; I carried most of mine safely arranged and labeled in file cabinets and stacks of photo albums, while Ignacio wore his

in the lines of his face and the stoop of his back. Nor were we freshwater incarnations of Ernest Hemingway and his trusted captain and guide, Gregorio Fuentes. While Ignacio could have fit the bill as Fuentes, I, for all my want and desire, was only a diplomat — literate, but not literary.



We drifted a while at the slow mercy of the wind that was channeled through the mountains. The wind was hot but, thankfully, it kept the thick tropical air from resting too heavily on my shoulders. Despite knowing that the fish wouldn't begin to bite again for several hours, I kept casting my lure into the water and retrieving it in a slow, methodical manner. Fishing wasn't always about catching fish.

With a final gust before dropping away, the wind pushed us deep into a shallow bay. Before us rose a grassy slope that was not choked by the usual tangle of bushes and vines, and perched midway up the slope was an immense tree. The gray trunk was massive and seemed to swell at the middle, and hardly a leaf adorned its outstretched branches. I had probably fished this bay and seen the tree countless times, but never took notice of it until that day.

"What type of tree is that?" I asked Ignacio.

"That one up there?" He pointed. "That is a ceiba."

That meant nothing to me, and he must have seen that on my face, so he continued.

"In Santería, the people believe spirits inhabit these trees."

I rolled my eyes and curled the corner of my mouth. Santería, voodoo, juju. In three decades of making my home in different corners of the world, I had decided they were all the same hocus-pocus, just in different wrappers.

"This one in particular," he said, pointing up to the tree again. "They say a witch lives there."

"A witch?" My reaction came out as a question, although I had already lost interest in the tree and had turned my attention back to my fishing line.

But Ignacio was inspired. "Yes," he said. Then he leaned forward, a mischievous gleam shone in his eyes. "A virgin witch ... they say she lives there with her children." He waited for the irony of the fable to sink in, and when it did I laughed out loud. Ignacio joined in my mirth as he reached into the cooler and pulled out two cold drinks, tossing one my way.

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That was the way with Cuban humor. It was subtle and kind of snuck up on you. I was reminded of a joke about a diplomat leaving the exclusive “diplo-mercado” in Havana with a trunk full of groceries. As he pulled out of the parking lot, he reentered a bus stopped in front of a long line of hopeful passengers. His trunk popped open and his groceries flew through the air and were strewn across the street. Immediately the people broke from the line as they traded their quest for a rare berth on the bus for the even rarer opportunity to lay hands on some groceries.

A little egg that had survived the crash jumped up, dusted himself off and, upon seeing the crowd bearing down on him, broke into a sprint down the street. As he neared the corner, he saw a fillet steak that he recognized from one of the shopping bags. The steak was calmly sunning itself on the curb. The egg paused long enough in his flight to yell a warning: “Hey, steak! Get up and run! The crowd is coming. They’re gonna get you!” The steak glanced over at the approaching crowd, then turned to the egg and said casually, “You hurry up and run, little egg. They don’t know *me*.”

The humor is buried in the reality of the Cuban situation: buses are rare, lines are long, groceries are scarce, and a little egg has more to fear than does a fillet.



“The virgin and her children,” I repeated, shaking my head in amusement. But my laughter died away as I stared up at the tree. There was something about it that made me pause. It stood huge and imposing in the center of the grassy slope, an image that was just too perfect, too manufactured. The more I looked, the more I realized that somebody tended the green swath of grass and the solitary tree.

“Ignacio, who owns this land?”

He shrugged and shielded his eyes to look through the glare of the sun to the far side of the lake at nothing in particular.

It was obvious that somebody took care of the site. It wasn’t farmland; it hadn’t been tilled. There was no shelter or indication that animals were kept there. It had the distinct feel of a special place set aside for a special purpose. The tree, I realized, was a monument.

“I want to go up there,” I said to Ignacio, not taking my eyes off the tree, intrigued.

“What?”

“I want to go up to the tree. I want to see where the virgin’s children live.”

Ignacio let out a low whistle and then reached for the cord on the outboard to bring the small motor to life and begin moving us across the lake again. Before he could start the engine, I continued more insistently, my curiosity overcoming me.

“No, take me there.”

A shadow of fear darkened Ignacio’s face. He glanced over a shoulder, his normally easygoing manner replaced by apprehension, as if my request bordered on conspiracy. Then he looked into my eyes as he swallowed a deep breath and then, just as quickly as it had come, the shadow vanished. Ignacio turned his attention back to the tree and considered it for a long moment before standing up.

The bottom of the shallow bay was clearly visible. Silently, he reached down for the long pole that lay propped along the side of the boat and began to push us the short distance to shore. Ignacio nudged the bow of the boat gently between the rocks at the edge of the water, then sprang forward to secure the craft with a frayed piece of rope.

Without exchanging a word, we began up the side of the hill, Ignacio in the lead. I followed, feeling all of

my years weighing heavily on my bones and mind. Sweat poured from my body, and I craved a cold drink of water.

The climb that looked to be easy from the lake was much longer and steeper than I had imagined, but eventually we arrived at the base of the immense tree and collapsed in what little shade its bare limbs offered. The lake spread out before us as blue as the sky it mirrored.



After catching my breath, I turned to Ignacio and asked where it was that the virgin and her children lived.

“Under the tree, of course,” he said, but he wasn’t smiling. He was clearly uncomfortable.

I stood and took a close look at the tree. I decided that if an old elephant could be a tree, then this is what it would look like — huge, grey, leathery and tired.

“What’s under the tree?”

“Nothing ...,” Ignacio paused and wiped a tattered rag across his brow. “Just some old bones.”

“Old bones? What, animal bones?”

“No,” Ignacio hesitated before continuing. “Human.”

“The witch and her children?” I asked. Ignacio did not answer. “Whose bones are they?”

Ignacio sighed then squinted up at me. “Just the bones of some old patriots,” he answered.

“Patriots? You mean revolutionaries?” I asked as I continued to scan the base of the tree.

“No ... I mean patriots ... *counter-revolutionaries*.”

I could tell Ignacio was growing impatient with this little adventure and wanted to get back to the boat. It was then that I spied faint marks — scratches at the base of the trunk that only a human hand could have made. I knelt and ran a finger over the old scars. The year 1960 was etched

there, and below it a series of letters that I took to be initials: PPR PRR JPC SWR ARS.

Behind me, Ignacio began reciting the names of the fallen heroes — Prieto, Ramberto, Palomino, Walsh, Rodriguez — all commanders in Castro's rebel army who later turned on him when they realized that his revolution was taking a turn toward communism. They had taken refuge in these mountains, fought and eventually died here, heroes to a people who had believed in the original dream of the virgin — a pure and unspoiled country — and her children, the patriots who wanted to liberate her.

I turned to address Ignacio. I had questions that were still seeking answers, but found that he was already making his way slowly down to the boat.



I returned to the lake twice more before my departure from the island. Both times I requested Ignacio as my fishing guide, but he was not available. I never did see him again. I asked about him at the front desk of the hotel, and I asked the other guides. Everybody just lowered their heads and muttered something about him or his wife having taken ill. So I fished and chatted with the replacement guides, and from the middle of the lake I sought out and sometimes spotted that great old ceiba tree that reminded me of how much of the island — its people, its humor, its history — lay buried.

Suddenly my reverie was interrupted by the flight attendant. She asked if she could get me anything. I couldn't find the words to answer her, so I just shook my head and offered a weak smile. When I looked out the window, all sight of Cuba was gone, buried in a bank of clouds. ■

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