

CUBA, I REMEMBER YOU / CUBA, TE RECUERDO

by OSCAR M. RAMÍREZ-ORBEA, Ph.D

A NOTA subscriber, Oscar M. Ramírez-Orbea has recently published a collection of 14 short stories, all in Spanish and English, based on the author's experiences of childhood in Cuba in the late 1950's and early 1960's. They explore themes of family life, childhood friendships, school, Catholic culture, the passing of loved ones, and the effects of the dramatic political events that forever changed Cuba in 1959.

For those who lived in Cuba, the collection will evoke bittersweet memories of their own

families and lives on the island. Others will see, through the eyes of a native, what everyday life in Cuba was like before and after the Revolution.

Dr. Ramírez-Orbea has given permission for NOTA to reproduce here Chapter 14 of his book, entitled "The Return," in which he relives his childhood experience of the traditional Latin Mass in Cuba. Presented in a flowing stream of consciousness style, his reflections will be familiar to many non-Cuban readers who grew up in this period.



Asperges me domine hyssopo et mundabor
lavabis me et super nivem dealbabor thou
shalt sprinkle me o lord with hyssop and I
shall be cleansed thou shalt wash me and
I shall become whiter than snow the
words will trip over each other in your
head as you will hurry to the church dark
imposing the sky you will see by then
shall be of purple of gray of red the lenten
sun will be setting before you the wind
will pick up and send a chill all through

your woolen coat heavy and gray you will
race up the few steps that separate the
street from the entrance you will hear the
heels of your oxfords on the wet and
muddy marble this will be the only latin
mass of the day memories of once being
very young you will race to it directly after
work by yourself you will wish not to run
into anyone from your work anyone who
knows you in your hurry awkwardly you
will reach for holy water and try to bless

yourself as you step from the vestibule into the temple the water basin will be empty no water ashes you will have forgotten that it is lent *asperges me domine* you will seek purity innocence a return childhood clear waters warmth blue skies *et super nivem dealdabor* and yes you will hope this will make you whiter than snow you will find a pew any will do you will hear in your heart just in time the familiar opening promise *introibo ad altare dei ad deum qui laetificat*

juventutem meam and you will long for the first time truly to enter the altar of god you will remember him many years ago and in a place now far away a place of light he was indeed the source of your joy innocence you will struggle to comprehend but still will not understand what happened you stopped being young you will

tell yourself with a shrug the altar closed key of light clear waters warmth life you will enter again the altar of god for he can still bring joy to you *sicut erat in principio et nunc et semper et in saecula saeculorum* you will settle in your pew and close your eyes you will feel your hands open and firmly pressed one against the other right thumb over left thumb like you were



taught firmly pressed sheltering a hope that it will all be true that indeed it can now be the way it was and that it will always be not only in this world but in all the ages hope crouched between your hands will ebb wax wane waves of faith a beach of sand whiter than snow despite that you will cling to the hope to recover an encounter you will clear your mind of everything but light you will exclaim from the deepest part of your heart *domine exaudi orationem meam* and then your

heart will open itself it will release your prayer in flight that god indeed will listen to you wings of hope from darkness into light you will try to convince yourself like a child on easter morning god is more indulgent more giving he will listen with a more compassionate disposition to you but as you will listen to the word gnawing doubts

will remind you *quam incomprehensibilia sunt judicia ejus* defeated you will surrender neither you nor anyone will truly comprehend the ways of the lord the mind of god he may take your prayer tonight and grant it he may listen to it and set it aside until the appropriate time he may look down upon you but respond with silence and you will praise him and

you will adore him out of your thoughts
the powerful words of the greatest
promise will awaken you *et expecto*
resurrectionem mortuorum that will be
why you have come that will be why you
always come you will look for the

resurrection of the
dead not just of the
past of another place
another time but the
resurrection of your
beloved dead of your
youth and you will
also look for the you
that is dead and you
will search for a little
church painted
yellow and white its



polished pews its scent of lilies and of
incense you will seek out your
grandmothers lilac perfume the aroma of
your grandfathers cigar so many others
all now gone but then warm vibrant in the
pews with you with joy before the altar of
the lord awaiting his return the lord who
brings joy to your youth clear waters you
shall enter the blue skies and shall rejoice
on strands of sand whiter than snow and
when you do you will also exclaim
benedictus sit deus quia fecit nobiscum
misericordiam suam for then he will
indeed have shown you his mercy and in
that joyful place when you will be again
surrounded by the scent of lilies and the
arms of love you will joyfully hear the
irresistible invitation *sursum corda* and

you will respond with a heart full of
nothing but gratitude *habemus ad*
dominum for this time you will have
indeed lifted your heart to the lord and
given him your thanks as you do you will
feel the temple growing warmer the scent

of lilies stronger you
will open your eyes
from your prayer for
the first time and the
church will be of
yellow and white the
doors will be open
and yet you will feel
no cold voices
outside will rise from
your native soil
accents and words

like you have not heard in forty years the
desert they will bring you back as you
hear *omni benedictione caelesti et gratia*
repleamur you will feel yourself truly filled
with every blessing with every grace the
lord tonight will respond to your prayer
he will take you he will lay you in a place
of refreshment light and peace *locum*
refrigerii lucis et pacis he will take
everything in you and outside of you and
he will raise it tonight from death into life
the woolen coat heavy and gray will be no
more now pants of white linen and short
your legs will dangle from the polished
pew and your feet will not touch the
ground by your side a familiar dress of
blue the scent of lilacs will embrace you
and will wrap you with love with warmth

et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum and the promise will be fulfilled no more for you sunsets of purple and of gray and of red or a city cold with chilling winds winds that pierce the side of your woolen coat your prayer *intra quorum nos consortium* will be heard granted and time and place and death and separation shall hold no more sway and you will hear and receive from the altar the greatest gift *pax domini sit semper vobiscum* and from now on the peace of the lord will surely be always with you with a heart filled with gratitude for graces granted at the end you will ask yourself *quid retribuam domino pro omnibus quae retribuit mihi* for truly you will not find the way to thank god for all the gifts he will give you by the end you will then hear the familiar exhortation *ite missa est* and as the mass will end you will go you will go out and go forth in white linen pants through the scent of lilies and incense a hand made of

lilacs and love holding yours lost in its smallness in hers making sure you step down safely on the marble steps of a little church of yellow and white now a dress of blue beside you blending like a kiss with the blue of the sky she will dip your hand in holy water and teach you to bless yourself and this will make you giggle and then a soft bosom a dress of blue and lilacs a loving hug to keep you from laughing in church outside warmth light clear waters sandy strands whiter than snow and you will not know this but you will sense it *vita erat lux hominum et lux in tenebris lucet et tenebrae eam non comprehenderunt* for once you were surrounded by darkness but the darkness did not overtake you the promise will become real as the word becomes flesh *verbum caro factum est* and as you will come to the end you will have nothing more heartfelt to say except *deo gratias* thanks indeed be to god



Cuba, I Remember You is for the general reader, especially one who enjoys plenty of humor, a little history, and stories of family life. Includes Appendix for educators wishing to use the book in Spanish or English foreign language classes. It is available from Airleaf Publishing (www.Airleaf.com), or from your local bookstore.



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