

## The Bici-Taxi

By Frank Jousen

Pedro got up too late, even for a Saturday morning when his wife did not hassle him that much with her “early too rise ...” refrain. He knew it but couldn’t summon his usual bad conscience. Despite the summer heat and lack of rain this morning felt special, as if he could do something he hadn’t done in ages. For example, go and see his sister Paula in Havana, walk down the Malecon with her, turn right into El Prado and then ...

And then this lovely reverie was interrupted by his wife, Maria, loud voice, “I can surely clear the breakfast table, no? As you are not going to work why should you want to eat?”

Pedro, still immune to her bad mood, approached her from the back, tried to hug her and whisper something sweet into her ear. Maria would have nothing of the kind and shrugged him off, not violently, rather like the fly that has to be chased away in the kitchen a dozen times an hour.

He gave up his attempt and started eating in silence. Talking wasn’t much good these days, either. - In the beginning of their marriage, when the love making was still sweet and the conversation flowed easily, she used to like listening to him well enough, or so he thought. He talked a lot in those days, he remembered now over his lukewarm cup of coffee. It came naturally as he was full of fervor – for their new life together, for the revolution. She didn’t contribute much, and her punch line always was, “it’s good that you’re in love with Fidel, too. Just make sure the right comrades take notice and give you a good job.”

A good job for him and a child, these had always been her major concerns. But for him all that materialized from it was a blue-collar job at the nitrogen fertilizer factory in her native Cienfuegos. Then, after nine and a half years of sweat, toil and low but regular pay he had his accident. - Pedro rubbed the new sweat out of his eyes. - His workmates covered it up for him pretty well, but no way should that acid have ever come near his face, let alone his eyes, which would never be the same, especially in times of stress.

He’d received a small, a very small state pension ever since. Maria liked it well enough for she could give the money to her parents in compensation for letting them live in their neat but small house but the job had been history, of course. His wife never tired of pointing out that “it was my father who later made sure you got the old bicycle taxi when my uncle died. - But for the bici-taxi you complain so much about you’d be one of those bums begging from the gringos in front of the cathedral.” – She knew those bums inside out as she went to church almost every

day, to pray for “my precious baby daughter”, who never came. That at least was entirely her fault, the doctors used to say, but although Pedro’s thoughts had darkened his bright mood from earlier on he didn’t feel bitter enough to derive any satisfaction from it.

“You’re not going to work at all?”

It was not a question, of course.

“Sure, sure, almost on my way.”

Finally woken from his daydreams, Pedro quickly finished his tasteless bread with honey and his cold coffee. Absent-mindedly he planted his obligatory kiss on her half averted right cheek and was almost through the door when she piped up: “It’s best to wait at the Parque Jose Marti! Lots of tourists go see the parliament, the cathedral or the Teatro. One of their CUCs will get us twenty-five national pesos, don’t you forget that. But they will not give one, they’ll give plenty!”

“Yes, yes”, was his key to get him through the door and into the glare outside. Tourists had somehow become indispensable, he knew, but he had his problems with them. It was probably his fault again. Not young and attractive any more and not old enough to arouse pity they seemed to avoid him. With his chest like a barrel, short hairy legs and thick arms he didn’t exactly look attractive either. And as he sometimes squinted at them they probably found him a bit queer. On the other hand, well, he shrugged off all these thoughts for he had other plans than his wife, and he was sure they weren’t half bad. – There was only one bank open in town on a Saturday where the shopping- and Mojito-craving tourists could change their money into CUCs, Cuban Convertible pesos, which had recently become Cuba’s second currency – reserved for foreigners and those working with them officially. Maria was right on this one score: that money was like gold nuggets compared to the peanuts ordinary people earned on their wonderful tropical island. And with hundreds of those nuggets newly pocketed in their expensive shorts, why, the gringos would be only too high-spirited and willing to spend a few on a bici-taxi ride in this relentless heat.

Ha, sure enough. There was the long queue and he could have identified the tourists with closed eyes, they were the ones who started complaining immediately, moaning about the terrible heat they had crossed an ocean to feel on their skins in the first place. Although he didn’t have his eyes closed, he didn’t look at them directly, feigning a mild kind of indifference. After all he was the only bici-taxi driver who had thought of this source of income. After only twenty minutes he could watch out of the corner of his eyes how three all-too white youths started to approach his old vehicle, shouting “taxi, taxi” as if this was the greatest joke on earth.

His face remained expressionless as all of them squeezed onto the back seat without further communication. The obviously knew not a single word of Spanish for they handed him a little card.

“How much, this address?”

“Tres pesos per cabeza. Nueve pesos!”

He almost shouted at the young man who had asked the question, not believing his luck. In the end they'd most probably give him ten, which would make ...

“Ok, vamos, amigo!”

The unexpected order in Spanish sat Pedro's feet in motion.

Cycling these three slim young gringos was no real challenge. Especially since Cienfuegos was flat and the casa particular they'd pointed out to him wasn't far away. What was a challenge was the risk Pedro was taking. Lately, he didn't have the stomach for it any more, not after getting two fines and a last warning from the police. His wife's and, yes, his own lust for the Convertible pesos hadn't brought them much luck so far and one more time ...

He refused to finish this logical train of thought and kept on pedaling. His face turned red, but not so much from the heat, but from outrage. What kind of communism was that – to have two currencies? Ok, yeah, the drivers of the big taxis in Havana, up and down the Malecon, they could afford to pay their taxes in Convertibles, which made driving tourists legal. But how could he ever manage to do that? He wouldn't be able to raise the money for the taxes, let alone eke out a living from the whole affair.

Anyway, he thought he knew a way. He took all the small byways and cobblestone streets. It even silenced the youths as they obviously didn't know where they were. But only for so long. Now they were louder than ever, laughing and joking, just when he had to break cover. - He had to cycle down the rest of El Prado and a little stretch of Cienfuegos' very own Malecon, the extension of the prado along the bay.

But what did that concern the youths? They were eating sugared peanuts, but not enjoying them. The one on the left was throwing some of them at a stray dog on the green in the middle of El Prado while the one on the right ... Pedro turned around to see him make eyes at a young girl before cockily tossing her the little paper bag.

'Don't lose your concentration. It's dangerous!' Pedro thought and stopped himself getting all worked up by these gringo brats. There was a car up ahead, standing in the right lane at the beginning of the Malecon. He couldn't see it all that clearly. Sweat was streaming down his face by now, there was the sun, all on top of his bad eyesight.

Still, even in this glare he seemed to be able to make out a Lada, not very old. Or was it a new and shining Nissan? With the sun in his eyes he couldn't quite tell, he could only hope that it had a yellow and black license plate, not a brown and white government one.

Despite his own sweat and the youths' antics he increased the speed and drew level with the parked car.

'Two more blocks and I'm almost there, in this new 'residential area'. 'Residential area' for sure, with its posh casas particulares for the CUC tourists.'

But that was the last clear thought he had for a while because all of a sudden time seemed to stand still, very much like the omnipotent sun shining into his face. The glare of the sun today, the bright light in the factory long ago and the sting of the acid in his eyes intermingled. He could even hear the siren and the shouts coming from his comrades again, or so he thought.

In a flash he saw the road ahead and realized that he'd overtaken a car. What car? A standing car? Or was that an engine? He couldn't hear the youths or the usual Prado noises any more but had the distinct feeling of the power of a strong engine, which dominated his very existence, forcing him to his knees.

The slow motion stopped. The car was overtaking him effortlessly, was in front of him, its door was open, an angry policeman was waving at him. He couldn't run. Even if his free will had still been intact, he wouldn't have run. His strong legs were useless.

With great difficulty he got off his seat, involuntarily looking into the suddenly speechless faces of the three youths. He rubbed his eyes and shook his head as if he had great problems making out who they were and what was going on.

It was no problem to anticipate what was about to follow. – Shouted at, dragged to the passenger side of the police car, interrogated, fined 250 national pesos, handed his own copy plus the official document stating that further investigations into his illegal activities were pending.

As he finally turned away from the police car he saw the three youths standing beside his vehicle. They looked shamefaced, conscience-stricken even. They probably thought it was all their fault. They waited till the police car had left. Then the one who'd bombarded the stray dog with peanuts walked up to him and awkwardly pressed a small bundle of ten CUC notes into his hand.

"Disculpa, amigo."

"Non, non."

But as he started to explain the youths ran across the street. They obviously wanted to cover the last five minutes or so to their bed and breakfast on foot.

There, in the midday heat in the middle of Cienfuegos's version of the Malecon Pedro and his bici-taxi were standing quite forlorn. No old American cars, no Ladas, new Nissans or Chinese buses, no horse carts or bici-colleagues were coming his way.

Pedro gave the old vehicle a half-sad, half-amused look. Then he raised his leg to kick it for good measure. But he thought better of it, rubbed his eyes again, turned around and headed in the direction of the bus station.

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