

## “More than Mojitos”

Flavia Cuervo

Please don't tell me about your Spring Break trip to Cuba—I don't want to hear it. I don't want to hear about all the mojitos you are going to drink in *Varadero*, Cuba's premiere resort. Or the pictures you're going to take of '56 Chevy Bel-Airs on *El Malecón*, Havana's main boulevard. I don't want to hear how my country is now open to you and how excited you are about seeing it before it changes.

I know that in the last two years, Cuba has been in the news more than any other time in recent memory. In 2014, President Obama announced his intention to reestablish diplomatic relations with Cuba. In 2016, the Obamas visited the island and met with government officials, making headlines everywhere. In that same year, Fidel Castro died.

And, for many of you, this is all you know about my tiny island. But, in 2015, my paternal grandparents asked when I would visit them again, hoping Obama's announcement meant it would be easier for me to visit. In 2016, my family didn't know Fidel had died until I called them because there was such a lack of information on the island. And in 2017, while my friends post pictures on Instagram of a vibrant Havana, I still can't visit the home I grew up in.

When I left, I did not renounce my Cuban citizenship, which means Cuba does not recognize my American passport. I am still a Cuban citizen. Now that I am old enough to visit without my mom, who refuses to go on principle, I've been trying to get my passport for over a year.

I cannot get an American tourist visa. Instead, I must pay \$400 for a Cuban passport, \$200 for an entry visa into a country I'm still a citizen of, and \$150 every two years to "renew" my passport. This has been the case since the 1970s when Cuba began allowing exiles to travel back into the country—unfairly taxing those who want to visit home.

It's not fair, I know, to be upset at you. You want to travel and experience new cultures just like I do. But this is different. While my classmates and professors are now free to travel, and admire my island, Cuba has not opened up to me.

Instead, the only thing that has opened is people's willingness to ask me questions which often feel like the wrong ones.

"Didn't Fidel do some good for the Cuban people?"

"Didn't he create successful social policies?"

"Can't Cuban citizens travel out of the island?"

Even Justin Trudeau, the Canadian Prime Minister whom we so admire, failed to condemn Fidel's atrocities, instead praising the "larger than life leader" for his "dedication" to the Cuban people. The same dedication that tore families like mine apart.

In *Pinar del Rio*, my grandfather refused to cooperate with the communist party, refused to allow his young daughters to participate in the public egging of so-called counterrevolutionaries. He was jailed, taken away from his family and denied visiting rights. Years later, when Miami had become our new home, my grandfather vowed he would never return to the island. Even when his father grew frail and weak, it took a concerted family effort to convince him to visit his father before he died. And that visit, as an eight-year-old, to a dying great-grandfather I didn't remember is the only memory I now have of my homeland.

My connection to this place lives in the Cubans that surround me. In the exiles and immigrants—those who haven't set foot on the island in 50 years and those who only yesterday arrived on the beaches of downtown Miami. It is the only way I know how to stay in touch with the place that is so far and foreign to me, but at the same time so central to my identity.

With its renewed place in the spotlight, it's easy to forget that Cuba has a face, and it's not just Castro, it's me and it's my mom and it's all of us who—for the last 50 years—have had personal ties to the island when political ties were non-existent.

So, go and have a mojito or two for me and maybe take some salsa lessons; but remember that the island is not just crumbling buildings and colorful cars, it's not just an intellectual curiosity, it's a place with a history of hurt and sacrifice.