

. . . It was while (Castro) was still in Oriente leading his guerilla forces that there was an attack on the presidential palace in Havana by another revolutionary faction, not responsible to Castro.

That afternoon, March 13, 1957, I was with my father in a doctor's office only a few blocks from the Presidential Palace and we were in the waiting room when the shooting started and chaos erupted. Airplanes were flying overhead; we could hear shots resounding from every caliber of gun. Troops poured out of the government barracks to surround the Presidential Palace while soldiers appeared on the roofs of the buildings in the area. Knowing of his proximity to the palace, the doctor's patients began calling to ask if it were safe to come.

"Oh, there's some shooting," he said, "but come anyway."

Despite the doctor's sanguine view of affairs, we were in his office for hours waiting for the shooting to subside. The attack on the palace started around one thirty in the afternoon and it was not until five that the shooting became more sporadic. My father and I considered spending the night there, but then reconsidered and decided to try to get home. We returned to our car at O'Reilly and Monserrate. I started the engine and we began to inch our way across Monserrate, a broad avenue leading directly north past the Presidential Palace, barely four blocks away. Monserrate was filled with thousands of people so I literally had to push them along with the bumper of my car. People were everywhere—children, old ladies, everyone was out as if it were a fiesta in spite of the fact that several dozen from among the attacking and defending forces—as we learned later—had been killed. (Cubans are "lookers," they will go anywhere to look at anything. They would look into the crater of a volcano while the lava is coming out given the opportunity.) We were progressing slowly and were less than half way across the avenue when I suddenly saw a huge Sherman tank swing into Monserrate from Neptuno Street and head directly toward our car.

I was petrified as my eyes took in, first the tank, and then the sea of people occupying every square inch of space between the huge armed monster and my car. "My God!" I said. "We're done for. Where are we going to go?"

The crowd between the tank and us began to run in our direction, away from the battle-ready Sherman. Men, women and children were jumping over the car or colliding with it as they looked over their shoulders to check on the tank's progress. I was unable to do anything, I couldn't go or stay, and the tank was hauling ass toward us with its gun pointing in our direction. But the crowd moved and we moved with it and somehow the tank and I never ended up in the same place at the same time. It seemed an interminable time until we reached the other side of the street.

We left Monserrate behind, and progressed relatively faster but still slowly toward home. We encountered caravans of military vehicles—troop trucks and small armored trucks that were less fierce looking than the tank but just as deadly. Away from Monserrate people moved more freely—men, women and children ran through the streets. It was unclear whether they were running toward the violence or away from it or whether they knew the difference. Police vans careened around corners and frenzied officers attempted to move crowds out of the way of danger. Ambulance sirens screamed unnervingly. We could not see them but couldn't help being aware of the busy drone of aircraft overhead—the American B-26s and British Sea Furies that were the backbone of the Cuban Air Force. My father and I exchanged tense glances but said nothing more

until we reached the unnatural quiet of our neighborhood where absolutely no one was on the street.

I gripped the wheel less tightly and drove as fast as I could. All I wanted was to feel the security of home. My father had other ideas.

“This may be the beginning of something big, Roberto. Let’s go and buy supplies just in case.”

Almost every business was closed by then and El Carmelo, a restaurant and bakery just down the street from our house, was in the process of shutting its doors when we got there, but my father ran in to buy what he could in the few minutes available.

“Let’s go, Roberto,” he said, when he returned, a considerable quantity of paper bags in hand. “We’ll have something in case things don’t settle down for a few days.”

He needn’t have worried. We already had a supply of emergency rations at home. In Cuba, hurricanes seldom lasted more than a few hours but there was often rain for days before and days after; cables might snap and there would be no electricity, the aqueduct could be muddied, and the water undrinkable. My father prepared for these natural disasters by buying cans of condensed milk (by the box of 48), Nestle powdered chocolate, asparagus soup, and other canned goods. He wanted to know that his family would be provided for, at least temporarily, should the worst happen.

This time, the revolution ended quickly enough. More than 30 of those who attacked the Presidential Palace were killed and 15 of the defenders. That night Pelayo Cuervo, a former Senator and opposition leader, was apprehended. His body was found the following morning near a small lake at the Havana Country Club. Another loss was the death of José Antonio Echevarría, a widely popular and respected student leader. He was killed while leading a group attempting to commandeer a leading news station, Radio Reloj.

But we knew none of this at the time. When we reached home, I had barely parked the car till my father was out of his seat. He bustled into the house ahead of me, dropped his bags from the bakery on the floor, and reached for the telephone. He began calling everyone in our very large family, one by one, to make sure they were safe.

“Estrella!” His voice boomed out, “Thank God, you’re there! Are all of you safe? Isabela? Emmita? Good! What about the others? Have you heard from Alberto? Rolando?”