

BIG BROTHER

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I thought that when I went to Cuba I would find Castro. Instead, I found someone reading *1984*. I found Winston Smith on the steps of the Bacardi museum in Santiago de Cuba. He was a middle-aged Cuban man. His tightly curled hair was sprinkled with streaks of grey, and his light brown skin looked leathered in the hot sun. He was sitting a few steps below me, resting in the glaring sunlight in a way that only the Cubans know how to do, and when he caught me staring at the book in his hands, I blushed.

I don't know what it was about that title, *1984*, that caught my full attention. Perhaps it was the surprise at seeing this particular book in socialist Cuba. When I wandered the streets of Santiago and came across vendors selling books, the titles reflected Cuba's complete devotion to Hemingway, Che, or Fidel Castro. Sometimes the titles were obviously anti-American, such as *Why Guantanamo Bay Belongs to Cuba*, and I snapped a picture for my friends back home. A novel by George Orwell seemed out of place.

Uncomfortable with being caught in my rude stare, I offered an explanation.

"I love that book," I stammered, struggling to meet his piercing gaze.

"I just started it," he replied in English. I immediately left my place in the shade and joined him on the step.

This particular Winston Smith told me that he had recently finished his education at the local university, and he was planning on becoming a professor. He had received Orwell's novel as a gift. I pondered this, comparing what I had learned about totalitarian states in my classrooms an ocean away to the information this teacher offered.

“Can I ask you a question?” I ventured, forgoing social niceties in lieu of quenching my Cuban curiosities. Still, I paused. I was often nervous that the real questions that I had about Cuba were not appropriate to ask, that they would be received as offensive rather than inquisitive. When he nodded his consent I closed my eyes for a brief moment, rolling words and phrases around in my mind until I found the right one.

“What is the most difficult part about living in Cuba?” I asked, expecting a response concerning the gripping chains of Communism.

“The economy.” Winston Smith answered without hesitation.

“Can you tell me why?”

“Life right now is difficult,” he stated. “The salary I currently have, it is not enough to feed my wife and kids. I don’t know what to do.” Sweat fell like tears around his tired eyes. His confession made me uncomfortable, and I looked away. I couldn’t help but think about the hundreds of Cuban dollars I had sitting in the bag that rested between us. A small fraction of what I carried would feed his family for a year.

“I am not looking for money,” he continued, as if he had read my mind. “I just want you to understand what life in Cuba is like.” I had heard this story of economic struggle before. The health care may be cheap, the schooling free, but the government-issued salaries are not enough to support a Cuban family. Many Cubans have two or three jobs—the one guaranteed to them by the government and the several other, illegal jobs that they have to pursue on their own. One man I talked to worked as an academic, a tour guide, and a street performer. My host father, when he wasn’t scheduling my meals and advising me through the streets of Cuba, worked in the foreign affairs department. Private businesses that competed with the government were illegal in Cuba, but the entrepreneurial spirit was vibrant. It made me wonder where Big Brother was.

When I first arrived on the island I thought I knew exactly where he was. Che Guevara screamed “Hasta la victoria siempre,” from sides of buildings, t-shirts, and cigar cases, and the revolution was praised on every billboard in the country. Newspapers were difficult to find, and the government controlled the only news station on

TV. Ciego Montero, a Cuban drink company, boasted to offer the best bottled water in Cuba. It also offered the only bottled water in Cuba. Still, Castro's presence felt oddly lacking. I continued to expect the dictator to lead our next tour through the revolution museum, or invite us to the capital building for a lecture on the perfect Cuban cigar. I felt his absence like a communist void in my chest, as if I wouldn't be able to say that I had truly gone to Cuba without having a mojito in Havana, riding in a classic 1950's car, or shaking Fidel's hand. José Martí had academic buildings, Che had peach pits carved into the likeness of his face, but Castro failed to make his grand entrance in the same demonstrative manner.

I asked many Cubans about what they wanted to change in Cuba, but I never got the answer I was looking for. No one told me that they wanted freedom, or more options, or even better Wi-Fi.

You may argue that they don't know what they're missing, that the Cuban people are stifled by Communism. But what if I told you that, while some Cubans do long for the freedoms of a Western world, others do not. Many Cuban people pitied us because we are too spread out, we move too fast, we don't sit on our front steps all evening calling to neighbors. The locals often bragged that Cuba was the third safest country in the world. My group of American students could not say the same about our native land.

"I just want you to understand what life in Cuba is like." Winston Smith's words rang in my ears long after I shook his hand goodbye and wandered off to the next museum. I never caught his real name, never asked him why his English was so perfect, never found out if he read and enjoyed *1984*. I never found out where Castro was either, why his presence was so subdued compared to his ruling counterparts in China or the former Soviet Union. Castro's name is one of the first associations that come to mind when the word *Cuba* is mentioned in America, but while I was visiting the island I never discovered where Big Brother was.