

En febrero de 1952, el mar saltó el Malecón, subió por Prado y llegó hasta Trocadero. Apenas retiradas las aguas, empezó el carnaval al son de la guaracha “Deja que suba la marea”. Batista aprovechó el desorden y dio su golpe del 10 de marzo, con el cuento de que pondría fin a los horrores del gangsterismo durante el mandato del Presidente Prío Socarrás. La historia de aquellos años es harto conocida. Bobby Linares, chofer, tenorio y *man about town*, los vivió en carne propia. En el fragmento que sigue de su testimonio, *Bobby’s Cuba. Prelude to a Revolution*, Bobby recuerda su ronda carnavalera y la secuela batistiana.

The rain kept on, almost a hurricane though we don’t call it that in February. A storm that time of year is called “un norte,” coming from the north, nothing new but this was a big one. At noon it looked like dusk. From the Malecón, you could see a spider web of lights on the horizon and barely a sound. Then the sound went from a distant rumble to a roar over your head. Waves swallowed El Morro Lighthouse and kept coming over the Malecón all the way to Trocadero Street. In fancy Miramar neighborhood, people took their boats out and rescued others stranded in their homes. A storm like that does more than clean the city and clear the air. It puts the city in its place, makes it smaller, easier to face but not for long.

After the rain, after the killings, carnival came in with a roar of its own. After blood and rain, there was dancing in the streets. Every jukebox was playing the latest hit, the guaracha “Deja que suba la marea,” ‘Let the tide rise.’ That silly song has a play on words about the water rising up to your knees and then north of that. A good man gets his teeth shot out of his head. The elected president is run out of the country at gunpoint, chased off by an army sergeant with a loud mouth and a wink from the American Embassy. The

Atlantic roars over the Malecón, and people are dancing to a guaracha about the water coming up to your ass: “Yo me llamo Pepe Angulo y cuando me meto a la mar....”

Carnival started and Ray was in town, ready to party. I called my friends, and we were in business, Ray, Deisi, Ondina and yours truly at the wheel of his Studebaker. Deisi used to dance with Tita at the Bambú Club. I found out her real name and never stopped teasing her: Casiana Ramona. Call me that, she used to say, and I’ll tell your Mami you’re a pimp, comebola. I appreciated her sense of humor, and Deisi and I became good friends. All right, we survived a short romance and then became good friends, a rare and precious turn of events in my book. She was short and dark, built like Tongolele, with a smile that could stop a bus in its tracks when she crossed Infanta. If you went out with Deisi, you could depend on a good time, whatever might have ailed you that day. My other friend was Ondina, Deisi’s best friend, inseparable those two. Ondina was at the other end of the spectrum, thin and pale. I used to tell her that she had the right name because an ondina is a mysterious water nymph. She would say, “Mi cielo, I can’t swim and the wrathful gods have banished me to this island. My sign is Aquarius not Pisces.” She lived with her mother and wrote poetry. Ondina could be somber, and kept you at arm’s length, sizing you up like prey. Women were afraid of her. Men fell in love with her, including me as it turned out.

Carnival was not for me: too loud, too many drunks and those tacky floats. I was happy to make the rounds and drive out to Marianao later in the evening. But Ray wanted that and then some. He insisted we all dress up and join a conga line. So we humored him, our patron of the arts. Deisi had a friend who worked at a costume shop, and he let us borrow whatever we wanted. She dressed like a little black man, a character from our old vaudeville, a joker, always something up his sleeve. Ondina wrapped herself in yards of rainbow colored tulle, put on a Venetian mask and pronounced herself the Cuban Titania, Queen of the Fairies. I dressed like Liborio, our national icon, a typical guajiro in a

guayabera, red bandana at the neck, straw hat and a machete hanging from my belt. Deisi finished me off with a skull mask. So I was the Cuban Liborio by the Mexican Posada. At one of the dances, I won second prize. The first prize went to Ray, who with the help of the girls turned himself into a bigger and better Sophie Tucker. So off we went, not just dancing, “arrollando” they used to say, swept by a syncopated tide of exotic birds, dwarfs on stilts, infantas with stube, debutantes in breeches, whites in black face, blacks in white face, a Grim Reaper and crews of horny sailors. Too drunk to drive all the way to Mariano, we ended up at a waterfront bar, where we left Sophie surrounded by a chorus of admirers.

On March 10, 1952, like a sequel to carnival, Fulgencio Batista took over Cuba. He knew that there was no way to win the elections that summer, so he just moved into the Presidential Palace at gunpoint. No more elections in Cuba ever again except for a charade he put together a few years later, right before the Revolution of 1959. During Batista’s coup, radio stations were forced to play classical music, news blacked out. The shoeshine parlor on Reina street had all the news I needed. Useless armored cars ran around the city. People gathered on street corners, confused and indifferent. Batista’s allies in the army took over all the key spots in Havana. Outside the capital, there was support for President Prío, but nothing came of it. The student groups met with him, offering to fight against Batista. Prío promised to give them weapons, but never delivered them. Batista’s soldiers stormed the Palace, where Prío huddled with what was left of his cabinet. Two guards were killed outside, but there was no armed opposition. Prío just drove himself out and checked into the Mexican Embassy. Not long after, he flew to Miami with his family. Batista spoke on the radio later that day, a lame call to unity read with the emphasis in all the wrong places, a speech some lackey wrote for him. It took a mere two weeks for the United States to recognize him as Cuba’s new leader. Two weeks. Done deal. Batista overthrew Cuba’s elected president on the eve of elections to become dictator-in-chief with a seal of approval from the United States, world famous defender of democracy.

In April, just over a month after he overthrew Prío and wiped his ass with our Constitution, Batista was on the cover of *Time* magazine. Elpidio showed me a copy of it, Batista beaming in front of a Cuban flag flying from a prehistoric club. He was a caveman all right, with a nice smile and a strong hand, just right for the job. Washington anointed Batista as their “strong man” and gave him a green light to do whatever it took to make Cuba a safe, profitable Tropical Paradise, spelled out in turquoise neon. Gambling became legal. But relax: everybody gets a cut. No more gangsters dipping into Cuba’s gambling pot and killing each other in cold blood. No more crooked casinos ripping off American visitors to our glamorous city. From now on, my fellow citizens, gambling is straight, with businessmen running the show and elegant folks at the roulette tables. Don’t call me gangster, you commie punk, or else.

The pro-Batista press said that what Havana needed was paved roads, airports, modern buildings and comfort for our distinguished visitors. The rest of the island could manage as it always had or just go to hell. People said, “We are going to be eating March 10 and avocado,” meaning that with Batista in power things would get worse. An avocado cost a penny or just fell from the tree for nothing. In Cruces, we got deliveries from “the water man,” who came by with a tank pulled by a mule, then we put the water through a stone filter, so we could drink it. In Old Havana, sometimes there was no water at all. You could buy a bucket of it for a quarter, highway robbery. Water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink: Sounds like the lyrics to a guaracha, no? Still, people were moving to Havana in anything that moved, trains, buses, ancient station wagons, and their own two feet.

Once in power, Batista got himself a new wardrobe and improved his English. He rehashed old political slogans, but his real calling card was “mano dura,” a tough grip on the situation. He was rough around the edges, which worked in his favor. They said he was part Spanish, part African, maybe Taíno with a Chinese ancestor or two, in other words, a

real Cuban, banned from Havana's Yacht Club by its thoroughbred members. His handlers sold Batista as a man of the people, all smiles, easy prey for comedians, who imitated his stiff manner and his favorite saying, "Salud, salud," with a pat on the back for everybody he met. Everybody knew it was all a farce. Batista's allies in the press called him "The Man," with enough cojones to get things done. Prío had been elected president, but the papers said that crooks and thugs had taken over the country under his watch. It was time for a new breed of crooks and thugs. The whole stinking mess smelled like an overcooked plot to put Batista in power because that's what the United States wanted for Cuba. They were afraid that elections in the summer of 1952 would put someone in power that might be harder to control, someone in line with the ideas of Chibás. He was dead, but his party was still strong. Anyhow, Prío was history. By March 10, 1952 carnival was over, and Batista was in charge. A new show was about to begin-- to a new tune that anybody could dance to, the chachachá. We heard its first beats in our rounds during carnival, the four of us, a little black man, a fairy princess in rainbow tulle, a queer linebacker as Sophie Tucker, and Liborio in a death mask.

