



writers and words

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GUAVA PASTRIES

“How many things did I not get to experience, and consequently do not miss, on account of leaving Cuba at a relatively early age?” When a bite of a pastry initiates a bittersweet reverie of youth...

by: Matias Travieso-Diaz



The true paradises are the paradises that we have lost.

— Marcel Proust

Recently, I had to get together with an American friend for a short business meeting and we decided to have breakfast at a Latin restaurant in Arlington, Virginia. I have an invariable breakfast routine which consists of yogurt, granola, blueberries, orange juice, and coffee brewed in my Keurig. However, that morning I found myself looking at the menu in search of something different. My eyes surveyed the options and I did a double take upon reading “Pastelitos de Guayaba” (guava pastries). I had not tasted those in decades. I placed an order for two of them and black coffee.

Guava pastries are a staple of the diet of every Cuban and I had many of them growing up in La Habana. My aunt Maria, who was a lousy cook but an eminent pastry chef, would bake them occasionally, although her forte was a flan to die for. Most of the time we would get our pastelitos at the corner grocery store, where they arrived daily from a bakery in our blue-collar neighborhood in the outskirts of the city.

When my order was delivered, I cut through the puff pastry of a pastelito and speared a mouthful, making sure it included some of the guava paste that is the only ingredient in the pastry’s filling. I had a bite, closed my eyes, and was transported.

I had a Proustian madeleine moment. Biting into the pastelito brought back a flood of memories of my childhood: images of the family gathered for lunch as my younger brother and I came back from school for our mid-day break; sampling pastelitos at coffee stands and during birthday parties, weddings, and meetings of all sorts. I saw myself as a nine-year old fourth grader wearing a blue-striped shirt, black tricot tie, and khaki *bombaches* (baggy trousers gathered at the ankle), eating a pastelito at school between classes, and later on, as a teenager sporting square-frame glasses, munching at my grandfather's all-night wake in 1960. Three years later I could be found hurriedly swallowing my last pastelito before entering the departing passengers lounge at the airport, minutes before boarding the plane that brought me and my parents to the United States.

The flow of memories was interrupted as I attempted to fully savor the pastelito. It was tasty, but somehow lacked *Cubanness*. I am no food expert — my palate is unsophisticated and usually insensitive to the subtleties of food — but the memory of my Cuban pastelitos did not match the flavor of the mass now in my mouth. The crusts of my remembered pastelitos were so thin and crisp as to be almost non-existent, ethereal envelopes destined to just hold the wonderful prize inside. Also, the filling in this pastelito was commercial guava paste, sweet but undistinguished. In Cuba, they often made the guava paste from scratch, using ripe guavas, lemon juice, and sugar, cooking everything together to achieve an unforgettable mix of sweet and tangy flavors.



I was grateful for the memories that this pastelito evoked, but it was not the same thing as the delicacies I recalled. And this led me to a deeper, bittersweet musing about my years as a youth in Cuba and the way things changed through my coming to the States.

As many of my fellow Cubans in exile, I have done well since arriving in America. I completed my education (several times), became a professional, met and married a wonderful woman who was part of my life for over forty years. I adopted a loving daughter and made enough money to hopefully last the rest of my days. I have escaped most of the misfortunes that often come along with aging, and am keeping busy in retirement writing little stories that some people find enjoyable.

And yet, like a sturdy plant that can survive being taken out of one container and placed in another, I and other of my compatriots have done well as *transplanted Cubans*, but this condition will never be the same as if we had been able to stay in our homeland and do our living there. Miami, New York, and Washington, D.C. have their charms, but the wonderful memories of walking the streets of La Habana will stay with me, paining my heart, until they disappear through decrepitude or death.

My friend interrupted this nostalgic chain of thoughts to ask me a question. “How come you ordered American coffee with your pastelitos instead of espresso? Wouldn’t a stronger coffee go better with the taste of these Latin pastries?”

That question surprised me and revealed a yet unexplored avenue of nostalgia. I never had coffee growing up in Cuba. My mother did not like coffee and never made it. My father brewed coffee, but only for himself, and enjoyed it in solitude, not inflicting it on the rest of the family. As a result, I had my first cup of coffee when I was in law school in 1973, at age thirty. I did not miss espresso, for I never had it in Cuba.

How many things did I not get to experience, and consequently do not miss, on account of leaving Cuba at a relatively early age? The Proustian analogy breaks down when you realize that there is a more recondite nostalgia in *not* being able to remember things that you were never able to experience. Leaving the island to become a transplanted Cuban inflicted a double loss in my spirit. First, grieving in remembering the times – sometimes bad, but mostly good – of the first twenty years of my life spent in my country of birth. And then, not being able to recall the non-existing memories of a life there that never took place.

I answered truthfully to my friend. “I’m used to weak American coffee.” For, as a practical matter, one must make accommodations and allowances to the circumstances that life imposes on us, and keep memories and regrets deep within our souls.

I went on to finish the Arlington pastelitos de guayaba, down to the last crumbs. They were actually good, in their own way.

Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Well over one hundred of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in paying anthologies, magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. A first collection of his stories, “The Satchel and Other Terrors” is available on Amazon and other book outlets.