

Wednesday, December 6, 2007

Irish Michael, Austrian Ana, Lindsey, Rocio and Marisol were walking out to my barrio to head to the Pavo Real pub next to the Rio Almendari for draft beer, C\$1 per pint and spit roasted chicken C\$5 each.

I told Michael to phone right on four p.m. as Medico Raphael and wife nap in the afternoon. I sat by the phone at 3:50 studying. Just before 4 o'clock the phone rang and I quickly picked it up. I answered "Hola, Lance aqui."

A very gravelly older voice asked, "Hola, con Medico Zerquera por favor?"

As I thought it was going to be Michael and didn't know if I should wake the doctor, I said, "Uhhhh, no hablo español muy bien, momentico, por favor" and put the phone down on the table. Just then my ama de casa, Dinia the Dr's wife, came from her nap on the couch and said "Quién es ése?" Who is that?

I said, "No se! Un hombre viejo." I don't know, an old man, and went to my room to study.

I heard her laugh and say the name Fidel a few times. There are a few old guys named Fidel who have come by to visit and their son's name is Fidel, so I took little notice. Dinia passed the phone on to the Medico in the bedroom next to mine. I heard him laugh and bark and speak as he generally does but paid little other attention.

An hour later Michael phoned and said they were on their way, then I went to get some juice in the kitchen. Dinia was making dinner and we spoke in Spanish. She said, "Fidel thought it was funny you called him an old man. He asked who you were and I told him a Canadian studying Spanish at your old University. He said not to let the old bear scare you away, because we need as many Canadians coming here as we can get."

I asked what this Fidel did and she answered, "Fidel! Comandante en jefe!"

I asked, "Comandante en jefe de que" - of what?

She looked at me like I was stunned and said "de Cuba! Fidel! Comandante en jefe de Cuba!"

I looked at her and said "Noooooo!" She repeated "Si! Fidel".

It was after this that I learned he had phoned to wish Medico Raphael a happy birthday and to thank him for such a good medical system, which he has been making personal use of for the first time in his life. Raphael was Chief of Medicine at the Calixtos Garcia hospital and one of the founding architects of Cuba's Modern School of Medicine. I knew he was a friend of Che's but not that he was a buddy of Fidel's.

Thank god Fidel has a sense of humour, but it just serves to reinforce the type of man of the people he is. So that was the day I spoke with Fidel Castro Ruz of Cuba.

The gang arrived shortly after and Lindsey a huge fan of Fidel's was so jealous when Dinia told her I had spoken with Fidel. A few days later when she and I went to the market across the road the banana lady asked if I had been talking with the "hombre viejo" again that day. Everyone knows me as the Canadian guy in the red Crocs... and they were all smiling at her question. The cake store guy asked me to ask "the old man" for more powdered sugar. Hahah. Obviously Dinia had shared the comical story in the barrio.