

# Notes from the Quarantine



Written by Alessandro Elena in Vedado, La Habana, between March 13<sup>th</sup> and July 2<sup>nd</sup>

All Photos by Alessandro Elena

Here we go...plowing through the invisible enemy.  
Playing a lottery you haven't bought a ticket for.  
You fart...and scare yourself.  
You cough and cause panic.  
With my mind in Italy, one toe in California and the rest of me in Havana I feel happily disjointed and a true citizen of the world.  
I am planning the greatest escape.  
While "life happens as you are busy making plans (John Lennon said that)" I make sure to always follow my guts, occasionally skipping the planning part.  
Whether my decisions or choices will turn out to be good or bad it keeps me moving and learning new things, adding a few more unpredictable chapters to the book of my life.  
The uncertainty of the future keeps you glued to a TV show filmed and edited entirely in your own head.  
I froze for about two weeks with next to nothing creative coming out of me. I observed my own stupidity and the stupidity of the world.  
Breathe in... Breathe out...now go.

I left the U.S. to come and join my wife on the tiny island.  
If I have to quarantine for a long period of time I rather do it here in Cuba.  
If we survive this crazy imprisonment we are going to be absolutely inseparable and unbreakable.  
Breathe in ...breathe out...  
Stay healthy...put that cigarette out...Keep your lungs full of oxygen.  
As the oxygen reaches your brain you'll think more clearly, or so they say.  
Starting over again.  
Starting is always the hardest part. Once you get going, you keep going. Sail until the wind stops...then turn the engine on and continue till you run out of gas... Rest assures the wind is bound to start blowing again and your journey will continue.  
For now I'll just float on this ocean of still water till further notice...

The journey from LAX to Havana was most likely the craziest trip I have ever taken.  
A feeling of total detachment from your body as you look down at what's unfolding in front of your own eyes.  
The ones supposed to make people follow the rules (you get a ticket for Jaywalking in LA) are ignoring the basic guidelines...but this time it gets people killed.  
And so you go through an eerie and deserted LAX terminal to the crowded passport control area where everybody is crammed on top of each other.  
You can turn back and run home to the safety of your walls.  
Once you get on the flying metal bullet there is no coming back.  
I am no quitter so let's roll the dice.  
And so I did....

## **Lax to Panama City**

Empty comfortable flight...plenty of room...everybody sitting as far away from each other as possible...  
Red Label on the rocks and plenty of water. No sleep.

## **Panama City.**

As soon as I get off the tin can the situation turns into pure chaos.

I have been to this airport countless times and know it inside out. The air conditioning is not working and you can smell and feel the sticky humid heat.

The flight to Havana gets cancelled but I still manage to change my reservation to another one departing 45 minutes later. All of this done in record time, running around an overcrowded terminal full of people, that like me, were freaking out because of the cancellations and the slight fear of not reaching their loved ones.

I got onto the last Copa Airlines flight into Havana before the airport shuts down indefinitely.

The aircraft is Jam-packed.

Everybody is agitated...nervously squeezing their belongings into the overhead compartments  
...coughing, breathing heavily, sweating...

As I walk down the aisle, I keep a luggage in front and one in the back trying to stop people from getting too close to me.

I find my seat and dive in. Scarf wrapped around my face, sunglasses, hand sanitizer...gloves...

I keep looking at everybody just moving around like nothing is happening.

I wish I could have held my breath all the way.

As soon as the flight takes off there is a slight sense of relief. My clothes drenched in sweat from running a marathon around the terminal freeze onto my skin as the air conditioning kicks in.

Two Red Label on the rocks and no water apart from the ice cubes resting at the bottom of the empty glass. Very little sleep.

## **Havana.**

The airport is quiet. I was only able to get through customs because I am legally married to a Cuban on Cuban soil.

Everyone seems relaxed and wearing the protective gear. No questions asked. They loosely search my luggage going through my stash of Pancetta, Pecorino, Parmigiano, dog food and other goodies.

Will the situation spin out of control here just like anywhere else in the world?

Why do I feel a strong sense of safety on this Island?

Maybe it is simply because of the impeccable reputation of the Cuban medical system versus what I left behind in the US.

I now get to quarantine, within the comfort of my own home, with my wife and my dog.

A nurse knocks at my door every morning around 9 am.

She comes in smiling under her surgical mask holding a notepad under her left arm and a pen sits in her white coat pocket. She asks me how I feel.

I have been feeling real good for the past 2 days.

Back in Los Angeles the quick planning of my escape and everything else I had to deal with in such a short period of time drained me deeply. My accountant went crazy and left me with a bunch of unresolved issues with the IRS. I got sued by Chase Bank over a credit card bill and so on...

"You know... life in the States..."

My body and mind got exhausted. Only now I am starting to feel human again.

She sits down on the couch and hands me a thermometer to check my temperature. This has become my morning routine.

36.4.... 36.6.... 36.3.... all good...no cough no other symptoms. On her way out I give her a few pair of surgical gloves out of my box of 100. She thanks me and shuts the huge wooden door behind her.



I live in very colorful neighborhood called Vedado. A big blue building with a massive arch marking the entrance and a private little street dividing the construction into two separate parts is where I will be spending at least the next four months of my life. There is a Policlínico (local medical facility) every 10 blocks or so. They are able to monitor every family in every building to prevent the infection from spreading by sending doctors knocking at every door, once a day, to inspect the situation.



Time passes rather fast.  
I don't mind having to stay in. Our apartment is big enough for us not to feel claustrophobic.

The sun shines through the living room window as the tropical birds fill the air with pleasant sounds replacing the background noise of helicopters and sirens back in Los Angeles.



L.A. The concrete Jungle with nothing left but selfishness and greed.

Occasionally you see an act of kindness.

Occasionally you feel a smile.

The total lack of a sense of community leaves people estranged from each other with not much to say unless it's work or career related. The sidewalks are empty, the streets full of cars and the cars full of people. The word of the day is, and will always be, "I am busy".

"You are busy killing yourself" I silently think in my own head.

This is the place where the sun shines 300 days a year and planted palm trees are supposed to give you the illusion The American Dream is still alive.

The American Dream is dead.

A sudden headache knocks me right out...

A jackhammer drilling right in between my eyes, with no signs of stopping, keeps me up for two days I decide to tell the nurse and she calls a doctor who comes in twenty minutes later all dressed up like a Biohazard Controller Chief. They sit on the couch, and start asking me questions. They both take notes. She grabs our house phone to place a call...

She talks for a while then decides I have to go to the Hospital to get checked and possibly tested.

“Ok”, I reply.

“An ambulance will come for you... pack a bag,” she says.

The ambulance transforms itself into a taxi with two strange French looking Cuban guys in it. One in the passenger seat, the other, the driver. The front seats are all plastered with plastic bags while the back is left naked.

“Here we go again” I think in my own head remembering the flight from Panama City to Havana...

Before I climb in I spray the backseat real good with my last bottle of Lysol then we take off.

Down on 23<sup>rd</sup> to the Malecon to the old Fortress, Havana is completely deserted and quiet. We enter the tunnel out of Old Town and drive up a hill to the Naval Hospital, a military facility from the Fidel glory days.

I immediately feel like I stepped back in time to Italy in the late 70's. My grandfather is holding my tiny hand on the way to the, much scary at the time, blood test clinic...

The Hospital is on top of a hill overlooking the Ocean.

The Ambulance Taxi stops and one of the French looking Cuban guys accompanies me inside with my paperwork.

I sit and wait for about 20 minutes until a doctor takes me to his office for a check up.

The window is open and the breeze creates a strong wind that makes the paperwork fly around.

There are no computers in his office. Everything is written down therefore everything takes longer than usual.

I don't mind, since I have nothing better to do, and I quite enjoy the doctor's presence and calmness.

After asking a lot of questions he looks at me, pauses for a while then says: “Blood test.”

He takes me to another room where a super tall Viking looking girl takes my blood with no mercy.

“Come back in an hour to get the results then take them back to the doctor”.

“Ok”, I said.

I go outside and sit on a bench quite far from the main entrance of the building.

Two decaying cement benches facing each other.

I pick one. The other stays empty.



The breeze from the Ocean makes my facemask taste salty. Birds are chirping and flying on and off a big bush behind the bench opposite mine.

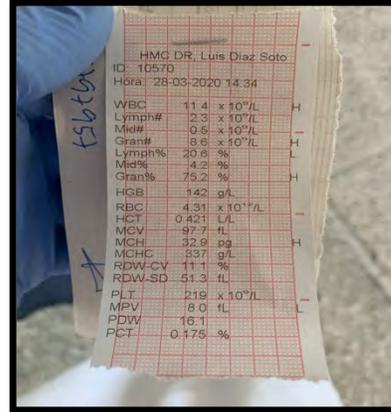
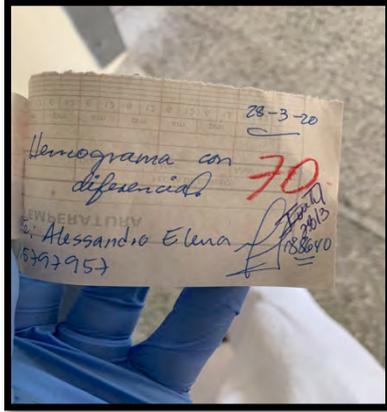
An old song titled La Maza is playing from the beat up speakers outside the Hospital making this moment very pleasant and peaceful.

I smoke one of wife Karla's minty cigarettes.... then another... enjoying every drag.

Now my mask smells like salt and cigarette smoke...

It's time to go back to the Viking to get the results for my blood work.

I knocked at the door and she hands me a piece of paper with some scribbles.



I take it back to the doctor who, at the moment, is finishing up with a desperate looking patient.

The door to his office is open and the cool breeze cruises through the hospital's corridors and rooms.



I go inside and sit down. The doctor looks at the scribbles and orders some X-Rays to my chest.

"Ok" I say.

I walk into the X-Ray room and curiously look around.

"The X-Ray machine looks totally vintage delivering a far greater amount of radiation than the modern ones" ...I think. Not true.

A very large dark skinned nurse gently positions my chest on the cold plate then runs off inside the other room to pull the trigger.

I go right back to the doctor's office.

At this point we just click. We talk about what a piece of shit Trump is, I show him a photo of people standing in line to buy weapons at the gun store in Culver City, we both like the sugar free Ricolas I offer him, and he thinks the Cov-19 is entirely man made. "It's too specific of a target," he says.

He glances at some papers then at me, saying my blood looks like its fighting an infection or just finished fighting one.

My lungs are fine, and, besides the headache and the fatigue, I have no symptoms (yet) of the Cov-19. He wants to send me back home to finish my quarantine but first he has to consult with the head doctor. We walk into a very big yet empty room and he is sitting behind a gigantic desk going through a huge pile of paperwork since his office also lacks the omnipresence of a computer.... He is a stalky Russian looking guy with cold eyes and a commanding voice. He asks the same questions everyone has been asking me a million times then does some math. He decides they will keep me under observation for about 3 days, test me for Cov-19 and, if clear, I can go home as soon as Tuesday or Wednesday.

“Fuck yeah” I say. He looks at me funny for a second then dismisses me.

The other doctor walks me to the admission room, hands me some paperwork then asks me to wait in line until my name is called. One thing you learn right away in Cuba is that nothing happens fast. There is a line for everything and sometimes it can last for hours...

Standing in line has become part of my new life.

The room is overcrowded and people are either sitting on some chairs or standing way too close to each other, charging their phones on the wall outlets... resting them on the floor. I later find out, from one of the doctors, that most of them don't even own a TV set to watch the news to fully grasp and understand the gravity of the situation. It's always the poor that become the most vulnerable targets.

Always.

I ask who the last person in line is and then go back outside where I can feel the ocean breeze again.

I can see the action through the large glass window of the Admission hall.

It is 4.30 in the afternoon of Saturday March 28<sup>th</sup>.

I would be waiting outside for exactly 8 hours before being admitted into a room.

It's all new to me, so, apart from the danger of catching the invisible monster, I am enjoying the way my day is unfolding.

After about 4 hours my turn comes to go and talk to the admitting officer in charge.

Scenario: Small room with no windows open or A.C.

Stuffy...hot.

A young doctor sitting behind a tiny desk and a computer asks me to sit down.

“No thanks” I say, as I spray my “kill all germs” spray all over the room.

He smiles, thanks me, then proceeds to ask the same old questions over and over again.

When done I am back outside.

The sun is setting and the temperature drops a little but still very pleasant. The breeze from the ocean dies down completely and a sense of stillness fills the air.

A pack of wild dogs run around the main entrance of the building chasing a cat they will never catch.

Taxis and ambulances keep dropping people off every 2 or three minutes. Some like me with suspicious symptoms, others clearly sick.



A taxi stops behind an ambulance blasting reggaeton music...the taxi is blasting the same garbage. Out of the yellow car a frail, tall, beautiful old lady slowly comes out. She must have been at least 80 years old. Her silver hair neatly kept in a ponytail, carrying a small plastic bag containing her belongings. Her husband follows right behind her.

I run out of cigarettes but it's ok.

We all run out of cigarettes at some point in our lives.

They distribute some sandwiches out of a container to people inside the waiting room. The nurse is very careful handing them out. The ones who are truly hungry grab them and take off their masks to eat.

Not me.

A nurse shows up with a rectangular container full of Refresco, with a flimsy top, an oversized spoon looking thing from 1952, and a bunch of plastic cups. Refresco is a super sugary concentrated drink that you mix with water. Everything in Cuba tastes very sweet. Sugar is the drug of choice especially since it was produced and exported in massive quantities until the collapse of the U.S.S.R.

They finally call my name: "The Italian?"

"Over here" I say with a sign of relief and excitement.

They called every single person by their name apart from me, The Italian.

We follow a Nurse to an elevator, then a corridor, then another elevator to another very long walkway leading to a sealed off unit.

A strange old looking German guy wearing Nazi looking suspenders with iron crosses keeps getting too close to me and won't stop talking. He speaks English badly. I just look at him and firmly said, "Stop." He did stop. Before we walk into the isolation unit we were given some green cotton shoe covers to put around our feet. I pray to every God I am not rooming with the German.

They walk me into a large L shaped room with 3 empty beds. The nurse assigns me to the bed number 17.

"Thank you," I say then proceed to the bathroom to wash my "everything".

The bathroom is not only broken but there is no water and a massive shit lies in the toilet un-flushed.

"Great..." The plumbing broke the same day and they couldn't fix it fast enough.

I tell the nurse and she looked like she was going to personally kill whoever was responsible for that mess. She mops and sterilizes everything then lets me use the sink in her office to wash my face, hands and arms.

I finally lay on my bed happy thinking at least I am alone as the door suddenly swings opens and a couple enters the room, escorted by a new nurse.

Thinking back now I don't know what any of the nurses and doctors look like since they were always covered from head to toe in protective gear. So I started telling them apart from their size, body language and sound of their voice.

The couple and I look at each other nervously....

Why are they placing me with other people?

They clearly had the same thought.

We then realized we were totally on the same boat. They had been in contact with a coworker who has the virus and both showed no symptoms. They sent them here to make sure all was good.

The beauty of a working Health Care System.

They were just recently married. The wife is flipping out, as I am, about the bathroom situation and the fact we can't wash our hands unless we go to another restroom everybody uses, until they move us to another room the morning after. The nurse hands us a bottle of Chlorine each and some white and green cotton hospital pajamas.

We turn the neon lights off and finally go to sleep.

**Breakfast:**

One boiled egg  
One bread roll  
One cup of extra sweet café con leche.

**One hour later:**

Very sweet Yogurt

**Lunch:**

Pollo Asado  
3 small potatoes  
3 slices of tomatoes  
Chopped Parsley salad (very good!)  
White rice and black beans

**Two hours later**

A slice of very good watermelon with gigantic seeds.

A new doctor comes in and asks me the same old questions.

I wish I could still smell the salty ocean instead of the unmistakable hospital scent.

The big fat bossy African looking head nurse comes in and says I can finally have my own room.

“Pack your stuff Italian...we are moving you”

“Ok” I say.

I get my bag and move down the corridor to a smaller room with a big window, green tiles that go up halfway from the floor, a rubber knitted red rocking chair with a metal silver frame, a side table/small drawer to put some of my things in.



There is a fan on the ceiling that works after I bang on it repeatedly with one of my flip-flops. The door doesn't shut off properly and keeps opening and closing as the wind blows through the corridor. There is a sign on it that reads:



The view from my window, that takes over the entire wall, isn't spectacular but it is a view and I can see and smell a little bit of that the ocean to my left, and a sliver to the right.



The main picture is dominated by the building in front. It was once new and shiny. Now it looks old but still functioning like everything else in Cuba.



Most hospitals tend to look bad (to Americans) from the outside (and sometimes on the inside too) because the buildings can be up to 100 plus years old, like, for example the ones in my country. It is not a fancy new building that makes a hospital great. It's the work of the Medical personnel that counts. How can doctors in the USA feel morally up to part knowing the corrupted world of insurance companies they work for?

I am in Cuba.... I am sick.... I go to a hospital and get treated.

Free healthcare is a right for all.

Below the big building you can see the intensive care unit for very sick Cov-19 patients. Entirely built out of plastic sheets with long sci-fi looking corridors that, during the day, dance like waves under the ever-present ocean wind.

There is tall skinny nurse mopping the corridor outside my room and another one making my bed.

I tell her I can make it myself since I don't have much to do.

She smiles from under the mask and says she is happy to do it, and that's her job. I ask what her name is and forget instantly...I also ask if I could make a phone call to my wife since I don't have a Cuban phone.

Without hesitating she dials the number and puts her phone on speaker mode so I don't have to hold it near my face. I chat to my lady and tell her all will be ok, than she gets to speak to the nurse herself to add some detective work and find out what is really going on.

I thank the nurse and try to give her 5 CUC for the call (and future calls) but also as a special thank to her sweetness. She kindly refuses which made me incredibly proud of her.

An act of kindness does not need to be rewarded with money. Mind you the average salary in Cuba is around 30 dollars a month and a recharge for a cellphone isn't cheap.

And so I am in my new little tiny half green room. The light doesn't work so when the sun goes down the only thing illuminating my room is the screen from my laptop as I write.



Tomorrow is the big day. They will test me to see if I have the evil bug.

Am I nervous? Yes.

Am I scared? No I am not. I know I am in good hands.

*"It is what it is"* as my Bosnian brother Nirvan always says.

### **Dinner**

Some sort of left over shredded chicken from today.

3 slices of tomatoes

Arroz Moro

They came to test me at around 11pm. I was already asleep. One doctor and 3 nurses walked in and woke me up. One was struggling with the light switch asking the other nurse why the light didn't work and when they were going to fix it. I turned the flashlight from my phone on and they proceeded with the test while laughing and joking.

I went back to sleep with a smile on my face.

### **Breakfast**

One boiled egg

One bread roll with a hot dog

No coffee because I forgot to wash my mug.

10.37am... feeling good but lethargic since I slept so much.

I start marching around my room. It takes exactly six steps, taken diagonally, from one corner to the other. I strolled for 45 minutes. It was epic.

### **Lunch**

White rice with very little black beans

Pork shank (yummy)

I must have spoken 4 words all day.

Isolation can be therapeutic.

A few more days like this and I won't remember the sound of my own voice.

Also.... day 2 with no nicotine and without the slightest withdrawal symptoms. That won't last for long.

I walked again around my tiny room for about 30 minutes. I have never been so still as far as I can remember. My legs feel like cement.

You never see people's faces. I haven't yet. You only see the eyes and sometimes even those are covered with goggles so they look distorted...

It's crazy that ETECSA (the Cuban internet provider) hasn't yet set up a Wi-Fi spot here at the hospital.

They would make a fortune.

I have sent a message to Karla and one to my mom today from my American phone. I have reached a 200-dollar bill with Sprint. They charge me 2.99 per megabyte because of the embargo. This is an emergency situation. I am getting free medical assistance and paying 200 dollars to have sent 8 text messages. No comment.

## **Dinner**

Yellow rice with pork and gravy  
2 potatoes  
8 slices of tomatoes with onions  
Cucumber salad  
Cabbage salad  
Pork shank  
Sweetbread  
Cuba Cola to drink

It's dark and I still have no light in my room. The laptop is on as I am writing some more.

The super very nice nurse just walked in and told me she spoke to my wife.

She came back shortly with her phone in hand for me to call her but no connection on the other side.

All we can do is wait.

I think if I spent 2 weeks here in total isolation I would maybe go a little insane. Still, we humans, have the power to adapt to pretty much everything and anything. Time would pass and maybe, when all over, I would even miss the friendly masked nurses and doctors.

I started calling them by nicknames. There is Zorro, Batman, Wonder Woman, and Captain America....

The Invisible Man lives in my room...I can't see him but I know he's there!!!!

Day 3 with no shower... I wash myself bit by bit with wet towels. A sweet tall skinny old nurse keeps the bathroom adjacent to my room spotless. She would meticulously clean it every 45 minutes.

Her name is Yolanda.

I am also afraid of taking a shit since I will not sit on the toilet and the height makes the poop splash water on your ass.... But there is always a solution to every problem.

Here's how you do it. First you put toilet paper in the water to prevent some splashing, then you position yourself... you unload and move real fast out of the way to prevent water from hitting your private parts.... It works great...you keep repeating till you are done.

If you have the runs that's another story...

In that case you just have to unload and pray the possibly contaminated water doesn't get you!!!!

Amen...

Spoke to my wife Karla.

It's good to hear her voice.

Back to sleep.

## **Breakfast**

One boiled egg

One bread roll with a hot dog

No coffee again because I unsuccessfully tried to wash my mug in cold water and couldn't get the crusted sugar off.

The temperature is not as hot as yesterday. Good.

Big fat loud funny nurse comes in with a doctor and tells me I tested Negative to the virus.

"Fuck yeah," I say out loud.

They smile and laugh from under their masks. I feel relieved.

Now it's just going to be a waiting game. If it took 8 hours to be admitted, how long will it take to get discharged? To be revealed.

### Lunch

Sopa de pollo  
Pollo Asado  
Arroz Moro  
Many tomatoes  
Cabbage  
Lettuce  
2 yuccas



There are 3 dudes hanging from ropes painting the building in front of the isolation unit, moving like funny spiders with 4 legs!!!



I am now officially bored and ready to take a walk!  
I march around my room again.

**7.31pm.**

A doctor walks in and tells me they are still waiting for my final results.

I don't understand.

I am a little confused and a feeling of claustrophobia passes through my entire body.

I can't use international data on my phone since the service has been interrupted and can't communicate with my family anymore. I feel cut off from the rest of the planet. It is what it is. I am officially powerless.

I have another 30 minutes of daylight left then darkness again.

My life is definitely not boring.

They come again to run a second test to make sure I didn't catch anything after the first one, which now, definitely came out negative.

They poke a hole in my fuck off finger, take some blood, and then disappear.

Ok.

Now I am in bed and literally going to sleep out of boredom.

As I am about to close my eyes a doctor comes into my room and for the first time I get called by my name.

"Alessandro... Vamos... You are all good.... get out of here."

"Siiiiii" I say out loud.

I start packing my stuff in the dark then wait out in the corridor for 5 minutes.

Yolanda the nurse is still working and resting her tired body on a wheelchair strategically positioned by an open window that lets the cool night breeze in. I wish I could have given her a hug. "Gracias Yolanda," I say, and walk out from the isolation unit with my paperwork in hand following a doctor showing me the way.

Leaving the premises was another adventure in itself. We walked for about 15 minutes through the most deserted corridors of the building. Once you are clear of the virus they don't want you to have any contact with anybody. Some sections of the hospital were totally dark. Pictures of Che and Fidel strategically placed here and there watching over my path. There was something very nostalgic about it. Whether you agree with their actions or not, you have to admit they achieved the impossible. Fidel stood up to, and against, the USA with valid arguments until his dying breath. You have to respect that.

Now I am out.

I walk through a military checkpoint where my bags get searched.

I don't know where I am and my phone doesn't work.

I see a guy sitting with a woman on a ledge of what looks like a dilapidated bus stop.

"Hi...I need a taxi to get back home".

He looks at me and asks where home was.

"Vedado" I say, 23<sup>rd</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>.

"You'll never find a taxi at this hour," he says.

He pauses for a little bit scratching his green mask loosely placed over his face. "I'll take you".

"10 CUC?" I say.

"15 non negotiable" he replies smiling from under the mask.

"Brilliant...let's go!"

We hop in his green 1948 piece of vintage car that makes that wild sound of steel hitting steel when you shut the door behind you.

The engine turns on right away roaring loudly like a monster suddenly woken up from his sleep. In no time I can smell the familiar aroma of Diesel.

We start cruising.

**1 AM.**

Havana is dreamy and peaceful.

Deserted, beautiful, and picture perfect.

The ocean waves hit the walls of the embankment splashing drops of salty water over my face making me feel alive again. Here and now.

Rinaldo and I talk. The engine is so loud I understand a word out of 8. Enough to have a laugh.

We take a left on 23<sup>rd</sup> and start going uphill towards Vedado. On the corner of every 4 blocks a cop or the military, guards the streets. I counted them.

He drops me off in front of my blue building with the big arch.

My footsteps echo as I walk towards my home.

My wife is tipsy from drinking cheap sweet wine and, both, her and Rumba (my dog), are immensely happy to see me.

Me, looking all scruffy and hospital stinky. Business as usual.

I call my parents in Rome and a few friends back in LA.

I disconnect from the Wi-Fi and life continues as beautiful, unpredictable, and exciting as always.

It is what it is.

People visiting this island tend to always miss the point.

Infatuated by the old cars and cigars, hypnotized by the music and seduced by the fire of its people they have an experience that, as great as it might be, it's not the real deal.

This is usually the postcard that people fall in love with.

The Old American Cars (Almendrones) forever freeze the idea of romanticism and beauty that the U.S.A. doesn't possess anymore. Old Havana, in its entire splendor, it's like a gigantic spider web trapping tourists like mosquitoes. With their organized tours they end up at the cigar factory, the Rum brewery then dinner at a great restaurant, and later, sipping on a few Mojitos at the club listening to the same "Buena Vista Social Club" tunes they fell in love with at their countries of origin.

You will not understand this island in a week or two. You need to live here. When you do you will discover a side of it that will make you fall in love with the simplicity of life over and over again.

I can only describe it as: **"The feeling of never feeling alone"**.

The doctors still come to check on us every day. They even gave us a homeopathic medicine to boost the immune system and calm you down at the same time. We all know the more stressed you are the weaker your immune system gets.

My visa has expired and the immigration office is closed. We are still in quarantine and going out is only allowed to get provisions, and in my case, to walk the dog.

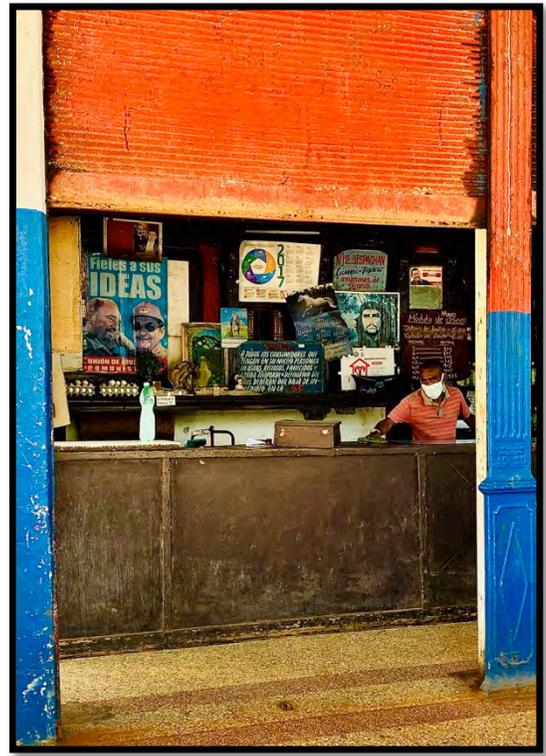
Food is running real low at the grocery stores. The lines get longer and longer every day and the scorching heat, along with wearing a mask, makes it difficult to breathe. I still find beauty in all this. For the past 60 years this country has been going through very hard times and shortage of food is nothing new.

With the fall of the U.S.S.R. in 1989 the security blanket that kept Cuba from sinking suddenly disappeared marking the beginning of the "Periodo Especial" that lasted for about 5 years.

During that time the food shortage was so extreme you couldn't see a cat in the streets. It got so bad that there are stories of people melting condoms to replace cheese on homemade pizzas.

We eat what we find. We get creative with the very little we all have and still manage to keep a smile on our faces. We found a group on WhatsApp named Kambalache, where we are able to swap a can of tuna for some chicken, a bar of soap for detergent and so on.

As I was standing in line at the Agro (Local fruit and vegetable store) for about 2 hours, the owner was blasting traditional Cuban music. Some people were singing, some dancing as I was conversing with an older guy. His name was Raul. He spoke English to me and I, Spanish to him so we could both practice. He had a degree in Media Communication and spent many years working abroad. We finally got our veggies and fruit and he offered me a ride home in his white Lada. He showed me where he lived and said to stop by any time for coffee or just a chat.



Every day I have an interesting conversation, very often involving a group of people standing in line, very curious to hear what really happens in the U.S.A. Last week I had a soldier borrowing my phone to show his captain the photo of a huge crowd purchasing guns and ammunition near my recording studio back in LA. The officer looked at me in disbelief.

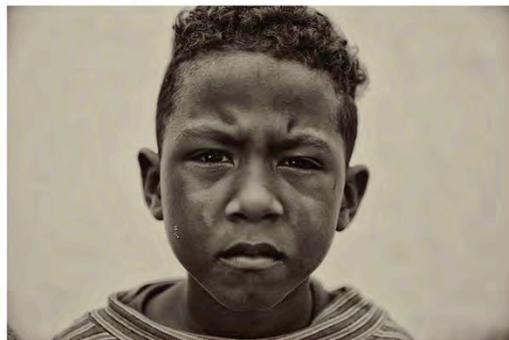
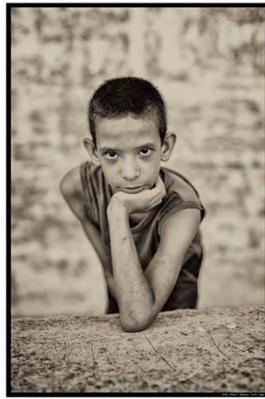
The other day I showed a series of photos I took on Skid Row (a neighborhood with the highest concentration of homeless people located in downtown Los Angeles) and people had a hard time believing what they were seeing was happening in the richest country in the world. The idea of thousands of homeless people living in tents in the middle of the financial district was very hard for them to grasp. And they kept asking “WHY?”

The fact that here anybody can walk the streets at any time of the day or night without the fear of being attacked or killed, regardless of their skin color or gender, is marvelous. That’s why people talk to each other, or strangers, all the time. There isn’t a culture of fear here. At least not that kind of fear that the US media feeds his people with on a daily bases.

There are more kids roaming the streets of Havana then fish in the ocean!



I find myself exploring every corner of my neighborhood and admiring the different kinds of architecture blending in with the tropical evergreens and blossoming flowers. Cats, dogs, and chickens live together peacefully on street corners and alleyways. Just like there is no discrimination amongst the different ethnic groups that populate the streets of this colorful country.



There is poetry in the air.  
It feels like being trapped in one of Pier Paolo Pasolini's books with a dash of Garcia Marquez.



Last Friday we went to a small party, or let's say, a gathering. Our neighbors invited us. Ricardo is a poet and a writer and Arianne teaches Cuban history. They live in the same building as us and we got real close very quickly. The other guests were writers, economists, teachers'... intellectuals without pretentiousness. We all brought something to drink or eat. As the booze run out we had a cocktail with hospital alcohol and a slice of lemon...Tastes like vodka. At around 3 am Karla and I decided to head back home dodging the curfew and the police against everyone else's advice. We took the little side streets and Havana was so quiet it felt like it was wrapped up in a fluffy blanket. "When you have nothing you have everything."

I am finishing up a record I started almost a year ago with my Cuban brother Charlie Mucharrima. To me he is a poet before being a rapper. He is one of the founders of Cuban Hip Hop. His words dance around analogies and metaphors to always show there is light at the end of the tunnel. Dylan and Lennon would probably really enjoy a glass of wine with him. We come up with a concept for a song then walk the streets to get inspired by the thousands of real life movies happening around us. By the time we get back to my home studio Charlie is sitting at the table sipping on a glass of ice-cold Havana Club writing lyrics.

I love making records this way.

Spending time together, bonding, discussing ideas without feeling pressured by studio time or recording budgets. We have a little home studio with the essentials and we are creating everything we always wanted to create. When you make music in such an organic way it immediately feels real. You are not doing it to please a market but simply because it is part of your own exploration as an artist. He is telling stories from the streets of Cuba that people worldwide will be able to relate to. Remember, we are all one. We all live, love, shit and die.

I also started a series of photo portraying the new characters that are now my new brothers and sisters. Alejandro the writer and teacher bounces around the room with ideas and stories to die for. He could have been Che's little brother with his dark long black hair, beard, and intense bright eyes. His girlfriend Chabellis who is an economist, gave me an explanation of how things work here in Cuba for me to fully understand the impact of the embargo and the fact that if the world suddenly stopped this country wouldn't be able to provide for his citizens and probably implode.

Gabriel with his Middle Eastern look and an ever-painted smile on his face, Ernesto the photographer, Gabo the genius graphic designer and so on...

We have been getting together every night to drink, chat, and share the very little food we all have. Alejandro, Ricardo and Mucharrima will write a short story or a poem inspired by each one of the portraits I have been shooting making this book truly special and politically correct.

## **June 9**

Western Union is about to terminate its operations in Cuba.

I was standing in line at the Agro and started to talk to a few ladies that were almost in tears because they will not be able to get the, much needed, financial help from their relatives living abroad.

I am in the same situation at the moment since my flight back to Italy got cancelled and I have very little money left.

From Friday the 12<sup>th</sup> life in Cuba will become even harder.

I asked my friend Melisa Riviere who is an anthropologist living in Havana to explain to me (and to you) how the new sanctions imposed by the US work and will affect the citizens of the island.

*It is an election year in the United States, and the republicans are performing their anti-Castro procedures to gain Florida votes. They are exploiting the already dire conditions of the embargo exacerbated by the pandemic to try to create revolts in Cuba with the same antiquated operative method of asphyxiating the people in the hope that they will rebel against their government. It is a failed*

*after the fall of Cuba's sole trading partner, the Soviet Union. The process did not result in implementing a U.S. philosophy of governance, rather it has only furthered the rift between nations.*

*In November of 2017, the Trump Administration was the first of twelve U.S. presidential administrations since the inception of the U.S. economic embargo against Cuba to delineate a list of 230 entities that are off limits to the American people. Although the major part of the list refers to hotels, other aspects identify arbitrary products and services we are obligated to refrain from, such as nationwide holding or distribution companies, certain brands of beverages, any goods from specific hardware stores, or the use of particular transportation agencies.*

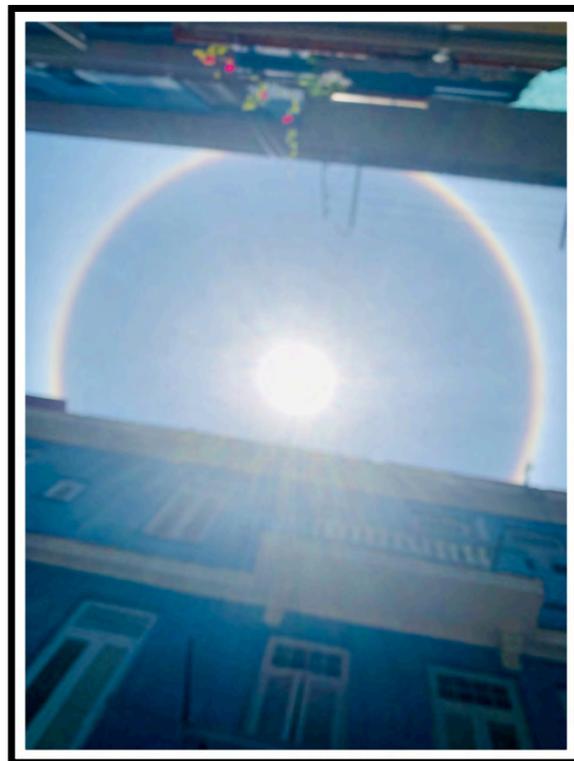
*The already-complicated nearly sixty-year-old economic embargo limits Cuba's imports and exports to the United States, as well as the ability to engage economically with third countries who engage with the U.S. Today, under a global pandemic, the Trump Administration's tactics is to increase the entities on the restricted list so that US companies, such as Western Union, who go through a national financial chain called FINCIMEX, can no longer operate in Cuba. Cutting off access to the only remaining avenue from the U.S. of remittances and fiscal transfers in an election year is not coincidental. It targets Florida exile communities as having a hard hand against Cuba, it limits much needed economic stimulus for small businesses or families on the island in the hopes of creating even more dire conditions, and it justifies keeping a large sum of their own political funding towards "accelerating political change in Cuba" (of which the U.S. State Department designates \$20 million annually) in Florida, where it needs to buy votes.*

Politics is a strange game.

We went to the moon and back, discovered the atom and produced nuclear energy, computers, heart transplants and so on... We haven't found a smarter way to make money than rage wars and exploit people. I feel sorry for the stupidity of mankind.

In the past few days we experienced a sand storm from the Sahara desert, heavy tropical rains, rainbows and a halo around the sun twice. An explosion of colors.

I open my front door and I see this.



Then this...



And this...



Life continues.

I live every second of it creating, sharing and learning.

I finally managed to get a flight to Italy for July fourth. I will spend some time with my family then return to Los Angeles to pack my stuff and plan my move back to the old continent for good.

From then on, I'll go back and forth between Havana and Rome.

I am done with the illusion of the American Dream. I have learned what I needed to learn and I am thankful for it.

Thank you for reading...

I hope you too will always follow your dreams and never settle for a lifestyle that will keep you chained to a system not built for the people.

Alessandro Elena