

# Miami Chico!

## I- Learning the Stop in Stop

I am aware that I should not... but still I feel tempted to move according to my background. I imagine myself solving this stuff fast and cheap like at home. Legal circumstances never worried me too much until these days. I barely care to know my own national law; now I am urged to know Yankee law. I want to know mostly what I should not do because American Congressmen seem to write laws in negative sentences, which strategically are effective to collect more money. America scares me, but this police car behind me scares me even more.

It was April 24: the last day of spring semester. It was Saturday night around 10 pm and I was on the FIU campus to pick up my friends who live in the Park Towers. We were going to celebrate in Coconut Grove until dawn. The roads and parking lots were empty. It was like a paradise to FIU students (or teachers) in a hurry to get to class on Monday at eleven in the morning. Suddenly beside the Football parking lot a *perseguidora* was behind my car with the blue and red lights going dizzy. I foolishly turned around in all directions to find the other car the police officer was going after. I did not see it anywhere. I just kept driving slowly so the policeman would pass me. Strangely he did not. I got a little suspicious that he was following me but he neither sounded the siren nor said anything with the speaker. It was time to make a left to park inside the parking lot in front of Park Towers and Everglades. I stuck my head out of my window and gave the policeman a sign that I was going to stop inside the parking lot. I could not see if he understood because the siren's lights blinded me. He did not say anything with the speaker but he did turn left. "Oh boy, I think he is after me!" I exclaimed to myself.

I thought to park close to the park towers at the end of the parking lot and then I would ask the policeman if I could help him out with anything. I did not have a chance to park where I wanted. When the policeman saw I was still driving he spoke on the speaker which I was expecting him to do from the beginning: "Whenever you want to park, I can wait." Froom. I stopped at once. At that moment two other police cars surrounded me like in the movies. "It was me, it was me" I thought. I unlocked my seat belt and opened my door. I walked toward the first policemen to ask if I could help him with anything. "Stay in your car and get your documents" he shouted at me. It was like a fair. Too many lights and people dressed up. To me what they did was really exaggerated; I think they were bored that night and they wanted some action even if they had to use their imagination to transform me into a runaway bank robber.

I do not know why he spoke to me in English but he was really "pissed off." I would be too, because I did not obey what I was supposed to do, but I was not sure what he wanted from

me. The Moreno officer with the tight blue uniform with many collars around his neck without doubt was Latino. He came to me and asked for my information. I gave everything but one thing. I could not find the plate registration.

The second policeman also was Cuban. He was a strong bald officer and also wearing tight uniforms. I think he would have forgiven my transgression but it was too late for me. Maybe we would have understood each other better, well, that is what I think. The third cop was an American. He was white with blue eyes, with a donut tummy and was not wearing a tight uniform. To my surprise, each one went to their car and started writing.

The pissed off one called me to sign the report. He was now calmer. My ability to dissolve the tension and my willingness to listen worked out well but did not keep me from receiving the main ticket. They told me I passed the intersection of the road which goes to the football course without stopping in the four way stop. They said I passed like hell in front of two police cars. Yeah right, as if I would not have spotted a police car where there is nothing else. He started to speak in Spanish now, very friendly, but never gave me a chance to negotiate the ticket. Well, at least he said: "Listen, I will forget about the registration plate. Have it in your car next time."

The policemen have stopped me three times in Mexico and I resolved the problem as I said: fast and cheap. The Mexican cops only pull you over and talk nice to you. They warn you and tell you what the transgression was. Then the famous phrases of a cop to finish the incident are: "so... how are we going to solve this," or "you tell me what to do," and the worst: "give me something for my breakfast (sometimes they vary in the afternoon for drinks)."

The first time I was stopped in Mexico cost me 50 American cents because we did not have any money with us and the motorcycle police was kind of drunk. The police told us to return next time and look after him, so we invited him for some Coronas. He became our friend. The second time I was stopped twice the same day for speeding. They had these special speeding barricades those days. My best friend was driving my car and he handled the first *mordida* with 20 pesos which is around two dollars. Three hours later we were pulled over again and we only had 10 pesos left. These cops were upset that their partners caught us first. Traffic law does not go any further than that in Mexico.

In America my fine did not end that night. I earned three points on my license. They are accumulative and they hurt your pocket because points increase the insurance payment. It is highly recommended to take the traffic school to erase those points from the license.

I believe Miami is the only place where traffic school is called *La escuela*. I am being serious when I say that *La escuela* has the most hilarious classes that I ever had in my life. The class is in Spanish and the teacher is Cuban. The place is just a room with a blackboard, a teacher desk and a bunch of uncomfortable chairs. The classroom is divided into two sides: those

that are going to get their license for first time and those who have it and need a reminder to not get more tickets.

There are many previous graduates in that classes like the Dominican taxi driver who was ticketed for the third time for speeding. I heard that he was only going 60 m/h in a road of maximum 30 m/h. The scariest student for me was an old man in his 60s who was also a graduate of that class. When the instructor started greeting everybody he was interrupted by the deep snore of the sleepy student.

"Hey! Hey! What is this? Are you already sleeping? We have not even started! Wait a couple minutes at least," the teacher shouted to the old fella. I had to push him to wake him up.

"I... I'm sorry. I have a heart problem" and he hit his chest pointing to the problem. "I get sleepy sometimes Sir. Sorry."

"Oh, ok. Only, please Sir, don't snore too loud," the teacher smiled, showing us a funny face that said he could not believe it.

The old fella was a trailer driver. Imagine having him beside you on the turnpike. There was another lady that I do not want to find on the street.

"Well," the lady explained, "I only made a U turn in an intersection that I was not supposed to do... but the other car was driving too fast."

"Did you have a red light?" the instructor asked.

"Yes, that too... but that car was driving too fast!"

Actually she made a U turn in a crowded intersection with a red light and crossed the yellow line in front of a bunch of traffic coming from the highway.

The two things I learned from that class are to be careful with these maniac drivers in Miami and that if you get caught with a blood alcohol percentage of .08 while driving you are screwed. The D.U.I law would cost you up to 12,000 dollars which I do not want to explain in detail. Take the class. It is fun.

No drinking, no carefree driving, no easygoing cops... I miss corruption. I think corruption is healthy to some extent. It avoids exaggerating legal procedures and it also keeps the law from becoming a financial organization.

"What? Pass me if you can!" I yelled to the cars that beep me since that day. Today I stopped at every single red sign that demanded: stop. Who would believe it?

## II. Learning Reggueton

I could not believe my eyes seeing those fancy mini-skirts walking toward the wooden dance floor. Three incredibly sexy girls barely 19 started dancing salsa with their skilled young dancers accompanying. They looked so professional and confident which reminded me of my salsa teachers. The music was salsa, the people looked Latin American, and the environment was very Latino, very Caribbean. My enthusiasm increased as much as my insecurity did to dare to dance inside this carnival. I desired to be part of the picture... but I could not. I was still *fresco* (inexperienced).

The place was crowded and I could not decide which girl to ask first to dance. "All are beautiful" I told my friend who invited me over. "I know. Let's dance with my friends over there," he screamed at me as we moved between couples doing turn around and the "adios con la hermana" salsa step. He introduced me quickly and asked his friend to dance with me. He just grabbed another girl and he started moving so smoothly on the floor. My girl did not seem to want to talk even though she answered my several questions. So, I went to dance salsa. Dancing salsa in Miami was as I expected it to be. In Mexico I was an excellent dancer. My friends loved to dance with me because I was the only one that would dance salsa with them "correctly." Of course, my friends did not know how to dance so I was really good with my easy beginner steps but I knew Miami would be a different tale. "I am lost," the girl told me. "Oh, I am sorry," I apologized. Later on she told me again "I am still lost." I felt embarrassed and I decided, "You know what? I can not do this" and I left. She started dancing with another friend of hers and they both danced awesome. "I must take classes right away otherwise I will never be able to dance as well as I did at home" I thought.

I could not dance any more that night until they played hip hop and dance music. That music is easier to dance to and is the same back in Mexico because is only yourself and no steps with any partner. Everything was great until the music changed to a strong beat like drums and a Spanish rap. People screamed with joy. More people came to dance. Girls became really excited and filled the floor. The movement of the dancers was not as nice as salsa or as respectful as dancing hip hop or dance music. These new movements were beastly, savage, and ... horny. The guys turned around the girls and they closed the gap between them. The girls lie down on them and move their behind rubbing into their partner. The guys just stayed there enjoying the song and obviously how the girls behaved. A Colombian with a red skirt was shaking her waist and bending her legs at the same time up and down. The girls next to her did the same but facing each other and that was perversely hot. A Puerto Rican guy introduced his right leg in between his girlfriend's legs and she was on him. This is an example of a strip club just before the women take their clothes off.

If I say everybody was dancing excitedly I would be lying, because I was the only one there standing still, amazed. "Hey man, just take her and rub it" my friend told me who was

dancing with another girl. "But I do not know her." I made my point that it would be disrespectful. "It does not matter. They do not care. I myself do not know this one." I tried to obey him but I felt stupid. My friend's friend started rubbing her ass on the front of my jeans. I did move quite as expected but I still felt wrong about it and I just let her go. My culture was stronger to myself in the beginning. This dance was like a taboo to this innocent Mexican. By the way, the music was reggeton.

It is funny that I was nervous about Salsa and it was not as bad as when reggeton started. I made a fool of myself in those people's eyes. "I can not do this. This is not as we dance in my country. This is ... bad!" I could only excuse myself that day. I felt awful about the dancing but I felt worse about not flirting with any sexy girl from that club. "How I am supposed to get girls here?" I thought. I went to three more clubs in the next three weekends and I just stared at the people and the girls. I felt so stupid and so dumb not being able either to dance or to get "chicks." I tried to ask girls to dance and they either ignored me or made me feel weird asking them. "What is wrong here? People do not ask girls to dance first? How I am supposed to do it then?"

Yuli is a friend from my economic class. She is Cuban and she had lived in Miami ten years. She was the answer to my prayers because her favorite music is reggeton. "No, no, no. You only need to get close. And no asking!" Yuli was teaching me. She was having a great time seeing me struggling with the reggeton.

We were in "Sundays on the Bay" club and this place was full of little beautiful creatures. "But I have to ask her first. How is she going to find out that I want to dance with her," I said that when I saw a mulatto Dominican hug the girl I was looking at and started to dance reggeton. "You see? That is the way. Just get closer and dance, Papito. You already lost a good one." Yuli was just laughing and looking at me with her green eyes. "Look at that one. Go, hurry. Just start dancing with her." Yuli pushed me toward a skinny Peruvian. She was OK, not that cute but worth a try. She was wearing a white outfit; her underwear could be seen from where I was standing. I got closer. I shut my mouth and just walked, slowly dancing.

If I were in Mexico, I would be seen as a perverse maniac but here in Miami I was a normal guy getting a girl to dance. When I could see her freckles, she looked at me. I looked her right in her eyes. I was nervous but I just smiled and kept dancing. To my surprise she moved closer to me so I could take her. We started dancing and this time I was perversely good doing the reggeton thing. Yuli was looking at me really happy and laughing. "Well done Loco" she screamed with a deaf sound. I was happy too because I dominated reggeton and I surely had conquered a nice girl that night.

Even though I still think it is wrong not asking girls to dance first and that reggeton is much too perverse, Miami thinks this is the way to do it. The good news is that my girlfriends, who are more now, think I am a good reggeton dancer.

### III- Learning Cortadito

Mainly on corners and certainly in every shopping mall, the Cuban Cafeterias bring flavor to Miami mornings. Surrounded by beautiful waitresses and among others that believe they are beautiful waitresses too, the Cortaditos and Coladas are made. The beverage spread the aroma of strong coffee in the office, schools, streets, and highways. Glazing through the half open window of a kitchen corner the cooking is witnessed. The chicken soup is boiling in the greasy pot, the palomilla steak is cooking for the afternoon, the bananas are being cut to prepare salty tostones, the yucca is being dressed with mojito (garlic, oil, and something secret), and the ever-present "moros y cristianos," rice colored black by beans. The sandwiches are piled up in the glass counter. Medianoche, Pan con bistec (steak with bread), Pan con lechon (pork), and below other appetizers are found like croquetas, empanadas of chicken or meat, frita cubana and viruta of fish. Delicious desserts are on a different counter. They are called cake, but I call them bread. Dulce of guava is very good. It is sweet bread filled with guava and it can have Philadelphia cream cheese which makes it better. Masorreal is worth a try. It is soft sweet bread in a big rectangle with guava as a sandwich. There are more which I have not the opportunity to experience.

In these places Miami can be summoned. They are loud places, all nationalities get together with Cubans as the majority. People enjoy the place and the place amuses the people. Beautiful women can be found and a lot of fun is going on around the cafeteria. The radio plays salsa 98.5 or another Spanish station and everybody speaks Spanish with some English words. As I see it, it is a social amusement park that is a necessity of every day life. Miami people need a place where sharing stories and talking with people occurs. They want to talk out loud and want to be heard. It is a strangely comic social distraction during the day.

If you happen to want a coffee in Miami... beware. You may get a shock. I did not know that Cuban Cafeterias are more than only a simple cafeteria. I do not know where to start advising because there are many important things you should know. First of all, the service sucks but remember that is not just what is it about. Second, the people will say stuff to you. Nothing bad, only they want to talk. Third, do not mention any word ending with "ing." What I mean is you must speak in Spanish or you will experience a hard time in castellano. I will just throw in some other tips later. This is how I discovered them.

Even though I never visited a Cafeteria before, now I do a lot. In Mexico I never drank coffee. I hated the taste. During the three months when working with my uncle's moving company, we had to stop every day to put some gas in the truck and put some coffee in the movers. I had a Gatorade or a chocolate yoo-hoo instead and never let the coffee convince me. "Do you want coffee, Guayo?" the movers asked me. "No" I replied. "I don't drink that." On one occasion they bought an extra cortadito. "Take it" my uncle demanded. I just grabbed it and placed it inside my Cherokee's drink holder. While driving I thought to give it a chance. I just

tipped it a little bit. "Ah! It's hot!" I yelled. My tongue burned painfully. A couple miles later I tried it again. "Well, it is coffee with milk and very sweet" I remember thinking. I did not like it but I finished all. Next thing I knew, I was drinking Cortadito every morning before working on the weekends.

Having the Cortadito pretext to visit the cafeterias more often, I was able to discover the worst service in my life. The service quality depends a lot on your own luck. If the place is clear, you will receive a warm welcome with handsome words thrown to you from the clerk. If the place happens to be crowded, you must have broken 7 mirrors on your way in. The clerks are incredible because they can decide your order for you, talk back to you, and hurry you. Sometimes they yell at you. It is not a relationship between clerk-customers. It is more like landlord-serf. They hate to wait and to be hurried. The problem is in their point of view. They think they are doing you a favor; otherwise they would not be there. That is the truth in the minds of everyone in these Cafeterias. I believe is a consequence of a system where everyone has the same thing whether you worked hard or not.

The first time I went to a cafeteria I was swept out. I waited and waited until they attended me. I was shy, and I was expecting them to attend me. I think I waited five minutes for a stupid small cortadito. Older people came in and ordered out loud. They were attended to while talking with somebody else. "I was before him," I thought. Fortunately there are many gentlemen who help you out. "The boy is next Martita" a Cuban man with really white teeth in his big smile helped me out.

"I want... mmm... a Coffee with milk but not too much coffee and..."

"Cortadito claro you mean?" the woman interrupted me and did not look very nice. I think I was testing her patience.

"Yes..." I said.

She turned to the table. Put some sugar in the white cup, milk and some coffee. She handed it to me and extended her hand. "Err... how much is it?" I asked really polite this time.

She looked at me with those eyes and shoulders down "60 cents. Anything else?" she just said.

"No, thank you." I gave her two quarters and a dime. I suffered a lot to get a small cup of coffee. I think in her mind she was expecting me to know the full name with the characteristics of my order and also to know the cost. "Blimey, next time I will serve it myself." In that moment I went for just a coffee. I think I should have talked a little more and wasted some time enjoying the place.

Other day at 7:30 in the morning I stopped in Rosery Bakery on Flagler Street. I went to get a Cortadito. I did not see any black cat on my way, but the place was full of people. I just waited inside among many Cubans drinking coffee or waiting for it. The mood of the conversation was like comrades having a good time. I do not remember what they were talking about, nothing good to remember anyway.

Suddenly the old Cuban beside me, in his sixties, turned to me and laughed. His laugh came in response to a loud declaration from another Cuban in front of us and my coffee-drinking neighbor wanted me to laugh along with him. Then he just spoke to me. He explained me his point of view joking around. "Is this guy talking to me?" I told myself. I absently repeated his laugh. I made a sound like a laugh with my throat. I shouted my Cortadito out loud to the lady clerk. She just looked at me with out mentioning anything and started preparing the coffee. People started to leave the small Bakery. The talking Cuban turned again to me on his way out:

"OK son. Take care. I love you" and tapped my shoulder three times.

"Son... care... I love you?" Wow. What did I do? I do not know why he said that, but I felt more integrated with these people. They treat me like a son, they want me safe, and I am important for them. I drank that Cortadito a little confused but certainly as a family with Miami. It is not me, but any young man is seen as their own son in this society. Every one of those old fellas has lived my age, and just for that reason they know me.

I have not run into my "dad" again but I listen more often to the comrades' conversations. I am still not active, but I love laughing about the stupid, ironic and clever stories of the Old Cuban dwellers. I wish I could flirt with women on the streets as they do.

There is a true saying: you cannot teach new tricks to an old dog. Cubans are the smartest guys to catch up with any task. From a circus bear trainer (my dad) to an entrepreneur transforming Ford buses into boats. It is a shame that learning the language does not apply. A supermarket clerk scolded my ecology teacher, who is from Massachusetts, because she spoke in English. "Don't you know this is Miami? You must speak Spanish here" the Cuban lady told her with bad English pronunciation. Cubans feel so rooted in Miami that they forget they are one star in the white and red stripes. They feel weird when one starts speaking English because in every place in Miami, Latin Americans can feel safe with the language. Latin Americans go to Latin American places, and Cuban Cafeterias have their doors opens to these customers.

Not Mexico, not Canada, but Miami is the closest country to the United States. I heard this from my American friend from Boston. I realized he was correct because Miami is not similar to Illinois or Ohio, where I have traveled before. It is also different from Cuba and Mexico. My Venezuelan and Colombian friends agree the same way from their countries. Miami has a new type of flavor. It is the craziest experiment of an Anglo-Saxon system with Latin dwellers. The



system is trying to control the society and the society is trying to break the system. How many illegal immigrants are working in restaurants, Cafeterias, or Malls? Alcohol is running on the dolphin expressway at the night. South beach is full of teenagers. I thought I would not adapt to the society. I was always amazed by any circumstance in which I was involved. Anybody from outside can share these differences with me and relate to my experiences. Time and patience paid off for me. A lot of observation helped me to figure Miami out. I recall the saying of Luis from Mexico: Where ever you go, treat the person as they treat you. This is so true because you can not force things to be as you want them. I had a hard time trying to solve my problems like I do in Mexico. One has to adapt to the environment, as the animals do, to achieve results. I discovered that a place changes the person. For example, I knew the girl was from Peru but she was in Miami and she had to dance as in Miami. The cop was latino but the system does not play with corruption like I know it. Finally, I can not demand full service as a king. I have to enjoy the way Cuban cafeterias work and yell at them as they yell at me.

Miami is famous. Its hot beaches, its hot women and its hot parties make Miami a hedonistic place. All this is true but it is not all that Miami has. It is a new society where the whole continent is participating. It is just too many cultures... too many surprises.