



A MIAMI MEMOIR

A FLOAT FOR THE COLONEL

By Steve LaCheen

“So what made you want to become a lawyer?” That is, without doubt, the second most-frequently asked question put to me by non-attorneys during my half-century at the bar; the first being, of course, “How can you represent someone when you know they did it?”

The answer to that most-frequently asked question is generally the same, no matter to which criminal defense attorney it is posed. We all know how to explain how essential we are to the criminal justice system, that even the guilty deserve a fair trial and a just sentence; and so on and so forth. The answer to the second most-frequently asked question begets a much more individualized response; and in my case, several. I have at different times attributed my decision to become an attorney to one (or more) of the following “first causes:”

1. I was bad at math and hated science;
2. My artistic efforts were derivative; they lacked originality;
3. I wanted never to work for anyone else; I was a lousy employee; and
4. My father insisted that I become a doctor.

So, I went to law school.

I will spare the reader the mundane details of daily life in the classrooms of professors who railed at our failures as well as those who celebrated our classroom epiphanies. Likewise, out of bounds of this brief anecdote are the idiosyncrasies of my personal life at the time; they would not

hold anyone’s interest but my own. What I will relate are an incident or two, more for the purpose of creating a written memoir for my children than for anyone else, but, not without the hope that the stories will prove worthy of the time it takes to read them.

Prior to the start of my first term, September 1954, I worked as an “artist,” (please forgive the exaggeration), painting figures on women’s clear plastic belts, mostly females in Spanish folk costume in various dance-related poses. Four figures to a belt, for \$1. It was tedious work and so time-consuming that I could manage to complete only about five belts at a sitting; so I made about \$20 per week, which at that time paid for dorm food for the week.

The only problem was that the “studio” was in Miami Beach, Fla. I didn’t have a car, and it took forever to get to and from the University of Miami campus in Coral Gables.

Fortunately, my roommate had a local friend who had a



friend who knew of a restaurant in Coral Gables that was looking for two waiters to work the dinner shift. It was for me a better job, closer to school, with hours that accommodated our schedules. The restaurant, which featured an ersatz French menu, but was incongruously named Barcelona Gardens, was owned by a Canadian couple who insisted that we speak French, or at least only broken English, to the customers. Pretending we only spoke French was a hoot, because the customers often talked freely about matters that otherwise would have been considered inappropriate for eavesdropping wait staff. Most of all, however, it gave the waitresses, two French Canadians, great cause for ribald hilarity. The tips were good, and the food wasn't bad.

Unfortunately, the restaurant closed its doors over the summer, and, when I returned to Miami in August 1955, I had to find new employment.

The second year, 1955-56, I was hired to work after school and on Saturdays at Food Fair Supermarket, first as a cashier, and then - after an altercation with a customer who thought, mistakenly, that I had charged 27 cents for an item she thought was only 25 - as a "freezer man," that is, the person responsible for restocking the frozen food department. The pay was better and allowed me to eat as many Sara Lee frozen cheesecakes as I wanted. In addition, I received an employee discount, and was no longer subject to having my pay docked for register shortages. It was a good job, and available when the next school year started; but by then I had moved into Miami, and the commute proved to be too time-consuming. So, during my third year, 1956-57, I found other work. And that job was the best yet. I made and sold soft ice cream.

I was living on S.W. 4th Street in Miami, in the "Spanish Section," which at that time, was mostly Puerto Rican, with a very small percentage of Cubans. It was an exciting time; neighbors huddled on street corners at night listening to the "bolita" (lottery) results and news broadcasts of the revolutionary forays being conducted by Dr. Castro and his "guerilleros" in the provinces, in their battle to overthrow the reputed "bloody butcher," Col. Fulgencio Batista.

I was hired by a woman named Mrs. Felber who owned a soft ice-cream business on S.W. 8th Street (not yet called Calle

Ocho). The business was located in a very small storefront shop, with no tables, in which the ice cream was made fresh every day and sold to customers through a walk-up window fronting on the sidewalk.

The place was small, with room for almost nothing other than the very large stainless steel monstrosity in which the ice cream was made. In memory, it calls to mind nothing so much as the Planetarium. It was large, and left almost no space for anything but supplies and a service counter abutting the walk-up window.

The minutiae of the manufacturing process, which I learned on the job, are buried in the dim, misty vista of antiquity, but they were of little interest compared to the way in which the sign outside Felber's Soft Ice Cream listed several dozen

flavors of ice cream when, in fact, the only flavors we actually made were vanilla and chocolate. This is how, in 1957, Mrs. Felber contrived to parlay those two basic flavors into two dozen.

Arrayed in stainless-steel compartments were a variety of frozen fruits, several kinds of nuts, marshmallow, chocolate chips and various other additives. When a customer requested a cone or dish of cherry-vanilla ice cream, for example, I would take a large scoop of the defrosted frozen cherries, drop it directly into the vat of vanilla ice cream, swirl it around and scoop into a cup or onto a cone a large helping of soft vanilla ice cream laced with the defrosted fruit. Ditto, with chocolate

marshmallow and two-dozen other hybrid treats. Everybody loved Felber's Soft Ice Cream, I no less than anyone else; and my most difficult moments each night were when I had to decide whether to substitute chocolate for vanilla as the orange ice pairing for my final treat of the evening before cleaning the machine and closing up shop.

It was a great job; it carried me through my third year, and accounted, no doubt, for a goodly percentage of my weight gain of about 10 pounds, right up to the time I started studying for the bar and hunger gave way to fear-induced focus.

Speaking of fear, I never experienced any during the entire time I worked at Felber's, even though I was alone at the job during the entire evening; but I did have one very strange experience, which was memorable, to say the least.

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One night, in the spring of 1957, a particularly slow night at the window, I was reading one of my class assignments for the following day, when a black limousine pulled up alongside the curb in front of the window and stopped. A second similar vehicle, and then a third, pulled up directly behind the first. Three black limousines, which would have been appropriate, I thought, for a funeral cortege.

Five uniformed men exited the first limousine and formed a line from the curb right up to the wall on the left side of the window. Then, five more uniformed men exited the third limousine and formed a line from the curb right up to the wall on the right side of the window. They were obviously foreign, but I did not recognize the country of their origin. Finally, the driver of the second limousine got out and opened the rear door of the car, and out stepped a short round man in full military regalia. As he approached the window, I saw a chest full of medals. He appeared to me to be Hispanic. He looked familiar, but I wasn't sure until I heard one of the other men address him as "Excellency," and said something in Spanish. At that moment, I knew who my customer was, and understood why he traveled with so much security. He was Fulgencio Batista, the dictator of Cuba, one of the most feared and most despised heads of state in that part of the world.

I made the mistake of using my limited knowledge of Spanish to ask my notorious customer what he wanted.

"Buena Noches, Senor General," I said, being very, very careful to avoid using the familiar pronoun, while nervously raising his rank.

"Tardes," he said, "Para mi, es tardes."

"Que quiero Usted?" I asked, instantly realizing that I had carelessly blundered into a grammatical thicket.

"Yo Quiero," he said, politely, overlooking what might have sounded sufficiently brusque to be considered rude, "Yo quiero yeenyerayla e baneeya."

"Sorry," I said, dropping my pretense at Spanish like a hot potato. "I'm not sure what you want."

"Yeenyerayla e baneeya," he said, smiling.

That failed attempt to communicate was repeated, verbatim.

I still didn't get it, but I didn't know how to say, "No comprendo," without embarrassing the dictator who was by

then obviously impatient, and definitely not smiling. He tried a third time, his voice rising about ten decibels, but I still didn't get it. What on earth was "Yeenyerayla e baneeya," anyway?

It was like the proverbial comedy of miscommunication, although neither of us was laughing, and one of us had half an army at his beck and call; and he was no longer smiling.

"Mon Heneral," I said, nervously mixing French with my Spanish pronunciation of his elevated rank, "I am sorry, but I am having a little trouble hearing," pointing to my ear to illustrate the point. The general looked over at his driver and signaled him to approach the window.

The dictator said something to the driver, and the driver looked at me and said, very slowly and very loudly, in English, "The colonel would like A. Vanilla. Ice. Cream. Float. With. Ginger. Ale!"

I made it quickly. The dictator took it, and drank, smiling broadly from time to time. "Muy delicioso," he said. Then, nodding to his driver, he turned and returned to his car, carrying the drink. The driver approached and said, "Gracias. Thank you" and put a \$5 bill on the window ledge, pointing to the register, and handed me another bill, folded. I turned to make change, but they were already on their way back to their cars and were gone in a trice. The folded bill was a twenty.

It was late. I closed up, and returned home, anxious to tell the tale of my encounter with El Dictador; but when I walked into the apartment, my roommates were abuzz with the news of bloody battles that had broken

out that day after anti-Batista demonstrations in Cuba. What, I wondered, was he doing drinking a vanilla float in Miami when his country was erupting in revolution? How long, I wondered, could that situation continue without resolution.

That rhetorical question was answered the following year when, on New Year's Eve 1958, El Dictador packed up and left Cuba for good, as Castro, Guevara and their victorious compatriots marched into Havana. But by then, I was already back in Philadelphia, building a solo law practice and a repertoire of answers to those pesky FAQs. ■

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