

FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY

A Life in Travel



ELIZABETH J. HAYNES

Thistledown
Press

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

The background of the entire page is a repeating pattern of stylized fruit and leaves in a light gray color. The pattern includes whole pears, whole oranges, and cross-sections of oranges showing the segments. The leaves are small and pointed, interspersed among the fruit.

ALMUERZO

(lunch)

PREVIEW

RIDING THROUGH REVOLUTION

IT IS THIRTY-TWO DEGREES and windless. My cycling *compañeros* are nowhere in sight. I'm grinding up the hill to Puerto Boniato in eastern Cuba, trailing laughing kids in red school uniforms and trying like hell to remember the Spanish word for top so I can ask if it is close. My legs strain the pedals of my twenty-one-speed, my granny gear is engaged, I can't go any lower.

My sister Melissa and our guide, Reg, are waiting at the top, apparently sweat-free, talking of *termos*, cold beer trucks where you can fill up your water bottle for three pesos, or twenty cents. Reg is a former Torontonian, a bike and motorcycle racer now married to Leo (Leonor), a Cuban. Mel is raring to go but Reg suggests they wait until I've had a drink. Then they take off, and I cautiously start down several kilometres of switchbacks. Thank God my bike, unlike many of the Chinese Forever one-speeds ridden by the Cubans, has brakes.

My sister is trying to extricate herself from a verbally abusive relationship with a guy I like to call Jerko. She is skittish, hypervigilant, as if someone's going to lecture her for some minor infraction—incorrectly loading the dishwasher, not closing the window properly. If someone speaks to her in Spanish, she immediately calls me over to help her.

Our younger sisters, Jocelyn and Leslie, were the athletes in our family, played basketball, baseball, soccer. We all played tennis because our dad insisted, because he cut off wooden John McEnroe and Rod Laver racket handles so they would fit our small hands, sat patiently with a bucket of balls across the net from us, hitting to our forehand, backhand, lob, coaching us for hours on our serve. Joc had a killer forehand and backhand.

Mel and I just played tennis. In high school, I used to be able to beat her because she had grown so fast and was a bit uncoordinated. In her twenties, she joined a club and could soon beat me handily.

The only good thing Jerko did for Mel was introduce her to cycling. Now, a couple of hundred kilometres daily is a cinch for her. In a day, she can blast through several Gulf Islands, ride to Hope and back. Once when I was visiting we decided to cycle to Galiano Island. We rode from her house in Surrey to the Tsawwassen ferry. On the island we rode to our B and B, me on my heavy, second-hand mountain bike, she on her light, custom-made Marinoni. When we finally reached our destination, I cursed the hilliness of islands. She proposed an evening ride. The next day she convinced me to circumnavigate Galiano in the pouring rain. We found ourselves on a mucky dirt path that billed itself as a road. She kept spinning out on her skinny tires. I had the mountain bike and for once was ahead.

We are staying in Santiago de Cuba, the eastern city Fidel Castro called “rebellious yesterday, hospitable today, heroic always.” It is the capital of the province of the same name, which contains 70 percent of Cuba’s Sierra Maestra. Fidel and his men, aided by peasants and farmers in the poor

and sparsely populated countryside, fought much of the revolution here. I am here to write a story for an outdoor magazine, and to indulge my interest in all things Cuban, a passion I developed after a trip here two years ago. I invited my sister to join me on this trip, thinking she'd never come, that her partner would sabotage it somehow. Miraculously, she came.

Seven weeks of cycling around flat and temperate Havana, where I was studying Spanish and Cuban culture, have not prepared me for the thirty-five-degree heat and rugged terrain of Santiago de Cuba province. My sister has no problem, though she is unaccustomed to the catcalls of the men we pass. Men, singly or in pairs, walking by the side of the road, men watching from benches in parks, carrying machetes or bags of fruit, stop and watch us go by. "*Muchachas bonitas*," one calls (our beauty presumably being readily apparent under helmet, sunglasses, and rivers of sweat). "*Novias*," cries another, opening his arms to potential girlfriends, "*Buenas ciclistas*," and, my favourite, an old man who calls "Hi friend, it's nice." Men throw us kisses, men hiss at us (a popular way to get someone's attention here). A Japanese fellow student at my Havana school, the Instituto Superior de Arte, grew weary of hearing "*China linda*" (beautiful Chinese girl) and "*Me matas*" (you kill me) whenever she passed. I've heard that if a woman goes out and gets no *piropos*, she thinks she must look bad and goes home to fix herself up. But it is all in fun, I think, not mean-spirited, not a throwback to another era, as North Americans tourists might think.



ELIZABETH HAYNES is a retired speech-language pathologist, a traveller, and writer. Her writing has appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies, most recently *You Look Good for Your Age* (University of Alberta Press). Her short fiction collection, *Speak Mandarin not Dialect* (Thistle-down Press), was an Alberta Book Award finalist. She has won the Jon Whyte Memorial Essay Award, a Western Magazine Award, and the American Heart Award for fiction. Her first novel, *The Errant Husband*, was published in 2021 (Radiant Press).

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