

A Mistake in Class

by [Armando Simón](#) (March 2020)



The Magical Reunion, Ramon Carulla

I could a tale unfold, whose lightest word
Would harrow up your soul.

– *Macbeth*, William Shakespeare

The young boy stared at the cartoon, perplexed. His name was Eduardo and he had an issue of *Bohemia* in his hand. Only, it was not the same *Bohemia* that it used to be. Not really. Although it had the same look and the same name, it was now . . . different. The words were different, somehow. The stories were certainly different. Even the usual cartoons in the last page of Cuba's national magazine were different.

For one thing, they weren't funny.

Or were they?

Maybe he just didn't get it.

Like this one, for example, it showed the Líder Máximo, the Maximum Leader, in a boxing ring with Uncle Sam, who was covered with bruises and had black eyes. The caption was the slogan that was nowadays going around, "Fidel, seguro! A los Yankees dale duro!" which translated something to the effect that Fidel should hit the Yankees hard.

In the past year, comic books had suddenly disappeared—you couldn't find The Lone Ranger, Donald Duck and His Nephews, Batman, or Superman anywhere. The television programs with animated cartoons had likewise vanished, replaced by government shows, which Eduardo's father called "imbecilic" and "grotesque" and Eduardo himself disliked.

Movies were no good, either. They were all Russian and had no story whatsoever; they were really stupid and a theater was lucky if there were three people seated in the vast audience hall; usually they were empty; even a Soviet version of Don Quixote, the Spanish language's most beloved work,

turned out to be pure garbage. Even the mice ran out of the theater.

Even so, out of habit, and in sheer desperation, Eduardo checked the television each day at four in the afternoon for the cartoon shows that used to come on at that time and would never return again. He had searched all the stores for the nonexistent comic books, read the *Bohemia* cartoons and even in desperation, occasionally went to an empty movie theater—only to exit half an hour later in disappointment and boredom.

The boy concluded that the cartoon he was reading was funny. It had to be funny. After all, it was a cartoon. He just didn't get it.

He would have asked his parents to explain the joke, except that his parents didn't want him to read that magazine any more. They said that it was part of something called "brainwashing." Brainwashing was supposed to change you in some way.

And now, another idea popped into his head, one that had lately been recurring with more frequency: maybe his parents were wrong. Maybe they were mistaken. Just like he didn't get the humor in the cartoon.

They certainly didn't like The Revolution. Or its Maximum Leader. Behind shut doors and windows, they talked with some of their trusted friends and said bad things about the situation in the country. They also told Eduardo not to breathe a word of what he might overhear, for God's sake!

Eduardo kept quiet.

Except that, now and then, he had his doubts.

Maybe it was they who were in the wrong.

Maybe it was better if it was out in the open and it

could all be straightened out.

Eduardo was in school now.

“All right, close your eyes now. Are they closed? No peeking now.” None of the students in the classroom were peeking. “All right! Now ask for God to bring you a toy right now.” A few seconds passed.

“Open your eyes!” The children did so, and, of course there were no toys on their desks.

“All right! Close your eyes again! Don’t look! I don’t want to catch anyone peeking. Now ask for the Communist Party to bring you a toy. No peeking I said, Reynaldo! I mean it! I’m going to go around to make sure that nobody’s peeking.” A minute passed. “Open your eyes now!” And behold, in front of each child was a little, cheap toy. The children were delighted.

After they had played with the toys for about ten minutes, or so, the teacher spoke up again.

“Now, then, let’s try this again. Close your eyes and wish for Santa Claus, or the Three Magi, whichever one you want, to bring you a toy. Close your eyes!” Half a minute passed. “Open your eyes!” The pupils saw no toys in front of them.

“Now, close your eyes again. Keep them closed and no peeking, or you’ll get punished! I’m coming around to check. All right, let me see, all right, I don’t see anyone peeking. Now, kids, again silently ask Fidel and Che to bring you a toy!” Another minute passed.

“Open!”

Another toy!

The teacher let the kids play with their tiny toys for a few minutes, then told them to put them away, so the class could resume.

His teacher then began talking about all the wonderful things that The Revolution was accomplishing. Now, vaccinations were in ice cream instead of painful injections, wasn't that nice? And a comrade nurse brought in those ice creams at just that moment for every student to eat. They didn't taste good at all, but it had been over a year since anyone had had ice cream (or milk or sugar in Cuba!!), so it brought back memories.

The teacher—who was an amazingly fat woman in spite of the shortage of food—was going on and on with her praises of the Communist regime.

Later, Eduardo would not be able to say why, exactly, it came about that he just blurted out, "My parents don't like Fidel. They don't like The Revolution, either."

Everyone had looked at him. The teacher, in particular, had looked at him strangely.

"Well, can you tell us more why not?"

"They just don't."

"Do you remember what they've said?"

Eduardo barely restrained himself. "No, not really." Then, "I'm not getting them into trouble, am I?"

"Oh, no! You see, Eduardo, perhaps what your parents need is to go to a Re-Education Camp."

"What's that?"

"Like school. But for grownups. Where they can realize the error of their ways. Then, they'll be able to appreciate

the benefits that Fidel and The Party have brought about through The Revolution.”

“Oh. I see.”

The teacher suddenly dropped the matter and they were assigned some complicated math problems. She left the classroom a while later for a few minutes and returned afterwards. After the math problems, they went straight into history—the new, revised history, that is.

Half an hour before the bell rang for the end of the day’s classes and they could all go home, the teacher asked Eduardo to come with her. He accompanied her into the hall, walking towards the principal’s office and little Eduardo became worried that he was going to be punished for what he had said earlier in class.

“Oh, no, chico! Get that out of your head!” she reassured him. “You were very good in mentioning that in class and letting us know.”

“Then, why are we going there? To see the principal?”

“Well, there’s some people there that want to talk to you,” she said, smiling, while opening the principal’s office.

Inside the room, along with the principal, there were two men in uniforms. Eduardo had never before seen the uniform of the dreaded secret police, nor had his parents, but the expressions on their faces said it all and he suddenly, and without warning, burst out crying, thinking of his father and his mother and his sister and realizing, with a sinking feeling, that he had made a horrible, ghastly, mistake.

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