

An Odd Job

A short story by Mary Ann Ronconi, April 2012

It was no bigger than a closet. And since the only weather to fear was a tropical rainstorm, its doors were shutters, ancient ones with their paint coming off in thick grey chips. If you picked at them as customers often did as they waited their turn, you could tell by the underside that the shutters had once been a brilliant teal green. There was no sign on the street. Such a thing would have been very unwise. Private enterprise in Cuba? Certainly not any you could tout. People knew about the shop or they didn't. If the wrong people came checking, word would go up and down the street at the speed of light. Over the years since the Revolution, Alonso Audencio had learned to close the shutters on his hole in the wall of illicit commerce quickly and silently.

Such a warning had circulated minutes ago. Now old Alonso sat in the penumbra waiting for a neighborhood child to walk by and casually run a stick down the louvers, the all clear signal for the various unsanctioned enterprises on this dingy backstreet of Old Havana. Closed up, the space was getting hot and stuffy. He hoped the signal would come soon. If his hands started to sweat, he wouldn't be able to get back to work till he cooled off. Instead there was a sharp rap on his shutters. Dread filled his soul. Of course they knew he was here. They just hadn't gotten around to him – until now.

“Alonso Audencio, open up! I know you are there. Open up. I have a job for you.”

His heart was still thumping so hard inside his thin chest he thought it would show through his threadbare smock as he moved his work table to make room for the heavy set man in a tight, ill-fitting brown suit. The man placed a box on the table with such care it might have been a new born babe instead of a shabby old shoe box with grey corners worn round and edges taped to hold them together. This was understandable as shoeboxes were yet another bourgeois excess no longer imported after the Revolution. The ones still around were as precious as gold to his customers.

“Senor Audencio,” he announced, “this will be the most important job you have ever,” (he looked the old man hard in the eyes) “I repeat, the most important job you have ever, undertaken. It must be done immediately.”

The man had not given his name. He didn't wear a uniform though the brown suit said he was of an upper class in classless Cuban society. Alonso seeing the chance to earn a little more than usual was overwhelmed by a giddy recklessness. Brown Suit might even pay in dollars. He moved his Soviet issue spectacles down toward the end of his long nose to a spot just above three white, bristly hairs and responded slowly.

“Who, my friend, says I am going to accept this job? I cannot work as fast as I once could when there was electricity every night. I have many jobs backed up waiting. Look at these shelves.” He turned and pointed to rows of boxes similar to the one on the table. “They belong to regular customers. Men I have been serving for years.”

Brown Suit leaned toward the shadowy rear of the shop inspecting the boxes. Each one had a piece of paper coming from under the lid with a name and a date on it.

“Ha! They are nobodies, these regular customers of yours,” he sneered. “Just men from the barrio, bums of no consequence. Do you realize who this box belongs to?” He paused for effect before adding, “No, of course not.”

Alonso was not unused to demands for immediate service. Customers came up with the damndest reasons why their job should be done right away: Fulfilling the last wishes of a grandfather on his deathbed. The only amusement a son going to prison tomorrow could take with him. A gift for a man threatening to put his daughter, the love of the customer’s life, on the next raft to Florida. There was no end to them.

“Excuse me, señor, but why does the person owning this box deserve to go ahead of these. Is it not a principle of the Revolution that we are all equal and should not push ahead of others as ruthless capitalists do?” Alonso realized he had been much too open with this stranger who could easily be from a plainclothes unit of the PNR. He had always heard it was a good idea to dump on capitalists when you might be taken in by the PNR.

“Listen, you little termite, this box belongs to *el jefe* himself.” Brown Suit paused letting the import of this sink in.

Oh, *dios mio*, the old man thought. That is the biggest one yet.

His thoughts must have shown on his face.

“You don’t believe me! Look here.” As if he were defusing a bomb, Brown Suit gingerly lifted the lid off the box and turned the inside of it toward Alonso. There in a child’s hand, faint from age, was written: FiDel CaSStro.

“But what is the hurry? Our great leader must have many...” *Ay caramba*. How could he be so stupid as to question this emissary of him who sits on the throne of God? But the man in his impatience took no notice.

“Only this one will do. The future of the Revolution rests in this box. Fidel has been told he must stop smoking by those *pendejos* of doctors of his. I would throw them all in the bay, but he listens to them -- and feels like death warmed over. Have you heard him deliver any speeches lately?”

“Didn’t he address the sugar cane workers union last week?” Alonso kept up with the news thanks to a staticky old radio he had appropriated from an émigré’s apartment in 1965. It was on dawn to dusk every day as he worked. He could afford the electricity since he worked only by daylight and was in bed by dark.

“That was no speech. Nothing of the sort. A few comments. Only an hour and forty-eight minutes. Until he can see these,” he pointed down at the contents of the box with reverence, “restored to their former glory, he is speechless. Only with these can he gather his thoughts as he competes with Raul.”

He put a Yankee dollar on the table and in a voice dripping with menace said he was sure he could count on Alonso to keep this to himself. There would be further recompense when the job was done.

But Alonso noticed a fleeting look of worry in Brown Suit’s eyes. It was as if the brilliant ray of sun light in that painting in *Nuestra Señora de la Merced*, Alonso’s refuge at high noon on particularly blistering days, had shone straight into

his watery old eyes bringing enlightenment. Brown Suit had revealed *a state secret*: The Leader of the Revolution was not well. Brown Suit was at his mercy. He, Alonso Audencio, had POWER. He marveled at how it calmed him. This is what liberation felt like. His heart beat normally again. He took a breath that went deep into his lungs for the first time since the knock on the shutter. The fate of the great Fidel was in his hands, the only hands in Havana, perhaps in all of Cuba, who knew? maybe in the whole Caribbean, the only hands that could do this job. He would revive the genius of the Revolution, restore to him the ability to inspire the nation, because only he, Alonso Audencio, could take the black wooden dominoes from this ragged box and restore to a pristine whiteness the dots on each one. ○○○