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FIDEL CASTRO IN SURFERS PARADISE

To Become Fidel

In the beginning my mother was Fidel Castro from nine to five, Monday to Friday. In order to become Fidel my mother took a toothbrush and combed her eyebrows upward to make them look larger. Next, she applied gell to her charcoal grey hair and slicked it back so that it sat on her head like a thick woollen hat. The last thing that she applied was perhaps the defining costume feature. It was a thick beard and moustache that she made from teasing some balls of angora wool. Its fibres got caught in the fabric of our furniture so that we could always see where Fidel had chosen to sit in the afternoon to have her cup of tea.

She did not require much more pruning. She is naturally very Fidel Castro in shape and form. As far back as I can remember she has always been a thick-set woman with broad shoulders, big breasts, and thick legs like tree trunks. She had only to unhook her bra and she became a flat-chested woman with a sizable Castro-like paunch.

Celebrity impersonators are not a rare breed in Surfers Paradise. There are three Elvis's in our apartment block alone and a rather masculine Marilyn Monroe lives down the street. My mother, however, was definitely the only Cuban dictator on the sunset strip.

My mother became Fidel Castro in 1990 when we moved from Germany to Surfers Paradise. Surfers wasn't particularly a place that my mother was excited about moving to. In the brochures of the place it looked like the Las Vegas of the Southern Hemisphere, equipped with a beach that looked as unreal as the neon lights and cabaret dancers in the background. She preferred places like her hometown Brotworst where everything was grey, ordered and efficient.

To my pastry-chef father Surfers looked like a donut, fat and multicoloured, full of endless possibilities.

In her first few weeks of living here my mother could not remove herself from the balcony of our apartment. She felt both horrified and strangely attracted to the women who frequented the beaches. They were all top heavy with small waists and thin legs. She wondered how it was that they simply did not fall forward and land on their breasts.

In Germany people walk up and down the street in the evening, in order to socialise. They pause and chat and walk, not for the purpose of getting anywhere in particular, but rather for the purpose of seeing and being seen. In Surfers, it seemed to my mother, people walked for the purpose of finding some place to sit. They sat on deck chairs at the beach, they sat in front of poker machines, they sat at the all you can eat buffets. They sat for no reason at all and stared out into the distance.

It appeared to my mother that even the people who worked here spent rather too much time sitting, talking, not doing much. She could never quite bring herself to forgive the people of Surfers for the arrogance of their belief that they had a right to accomplish so little.

In the first few months my mother divided her time between sitting on the balcony and looking for employment. As a large box of a woman with a face like a brick wall it was very difficult for her to find employment in a town dominated by the hospitality industry. When the job came up at Henri's House de Wax it was perfect. Her job was to take the customers' tickets as they came through the door and to ensure that no one touched the wax statues. The only catch was that she had to come to work dressed as a famous world figure. Her boss, Henri, suggested that perhaps she could be Margaret Thatcher or Queen Victoria.

My mother's choice of celebrity was a lot easier than you would think. On the way home from her interview she passed a magazine stand on which there was a copy of *Time Magazine* with the face of Fidel Castro on the cover. His hard brick face caught her attention and she paused there in front of him to get a better look. He looked back at her and winked.

She bought the magazine and swallowed up all the information it had on the winking man. She looked at his picture on the front cover again, with his army greens and defiant stare, he filled some kind of void in her where something important was missing, something that could be found in him.

Change falls on the house of Castro

In the next few years our house began to change. Not so much change perhaps, but fill itself with a foreign presence. A picture of Fidel went up on our fridge so that I had to watch him staring at me thoughtfully every time I got the milk for my breakfast cereal. A Cuban flag appeared in our bathroom. The American products in our pantry disappeared without a trace as though they had never been there in the first place. Copies of *The Socialist Worker* began to accumulate in the corner of our kitchen where they would turn yellow beneath the hot sun that streamed in through the window.

My mother became increasingly immersed, obsessed by books, and politics, the newspaper, anything that caught her attention. She salvaged through her new possessions for evidence of the hidden oppression of the proletariat. She seemed restless, inattentive, grappling with so many ideas in her head that she could not form simple sentences out of it all. She turned inward and neglected to speak for a rather long time although it was clear that in her mind there were rather lengthy arguments being conducted.

It was at this time that things really began to change in my mother. When she moved it was with a much stronger sense of authority than I had seen in her previously. She walked in a stiff almost soldier-like march. She sat on the couch with her legs wide open as if there was something in that empty space that she did not want to crush.

There were days when she came home from work and did not bother getting changed out of her costume at all. She did not seem compelled to explain her behaviour and oddly enough we did not seem compelled to ask. My father and I kept our questions in our head and dreamt our answers late at night, as my mother came home from work, lit up a cigar and sat on the couch surrounded by a screen of smoke.

There were changes in the house that could not be spoken of without risk. After a few weeks of coming home to a house where dinner was not being made I ventured to ask, "Will dinner be ready soon?" To which my mother replied, "Revolutions are not made in the kitchen."

My father and I got used to eating Lean Cuisines and our bodies changed shape over time just like my mother's. We became smaller, leaner, less of a presence in our house and more like little lumps of pastry dough.

My mother is Fidel Castro

There came a day when I ceased thinking about her as my mother who worked as a Fidel Castro impersonator and began simply to think of her as Fidel. I am not the only one who began to think of her in this way, I am sure. She took on a new air of authority so that when she walked around our neighbourhood people took notice. The neighbour's kids no longer giggled at her funny accent, rather, they straightened up their bodies and stood in line as she passed.

My father did not always appreciate having Fidel Castro as a wife. He complained staunchly at first and then attempted to coerce her back into her former state with flowers and chocolates and foot massages. In the end his efforts were useless. It was my father, not my mother that had to change in

order to accommodate the other. He became smaller, I kid you not, he became smaller in stature as my mother became larger, taller, heavier in her footsteps. He became quieter as my mother found her voice again and turned into a great orator on many subjects.

Fidel in the Shower

Something strange began to happen between myself and my mother. I did not so much talk to mother any more as listen to her speeches. I followed her around the house a lot. I did not know why, I just felt compelled to do so. She ceased completely to make any attempts to be anyone but Fidel. She did not wear her floral dresses on the weekend. She did not take off her beard. She did not comb her hair down so that it framed her face in a lady-like fashion.

One night I had a particularly disturbed sleep in which I dreamt that my mother had taken to leading scores of Cuban soldiers around my bedroom. I awoke around five, needing to relieve myself and wandered out to the bathroom.

Fidel was in there with a towel wrapped around her waist, scratching her belly. She turned around, ignored me and walked straight out of the room. In my mind I redrew, the image of the body that I had just seen over and over again. Previously, I had thought that Fidel just let her breasts hang down in order to look like she was flat chested with a belly like a man who drinks far too much beer. But I was no longer sure. In my mind I witnessed over and over again the image of her standing with a towel around her waist. She had no breasts — a belly but no breasts. It was as though her breasts had cemented themselves together and found the place on her flesh where they were always meant to be.

What surprised me most was that I didn't find the incident disturbing in the slightest. It seemed to me on further thought that my mother's body had undertaken a kind of natural evolution. I lodged the image in the vault of my mind and resolved to think about it later.

Fidel Leads a Wax Revolution

On the fifth day of the strike my mother's face appeared on the front page of *The Paradise Herald*. She was standing in front of Henri's House de Wax as straight as a soldier guarding Buckingham Palace. Outside the museum there was a line of confused tourists. The face of a little boy was staring up at my mother. My mother was staring back at him. Her face spoke a defiant *no*.

All twenty-two of Henri's employees went on strike for forty days. They sat on the steps of Henri's every day from nine to five holding placards, singing,

cooking barbeques, laughing with their children and families. Tourists began to go to Henri's to see the strikers rather than the wax statues, so that the workers themselves became the exhibit.

It was Fidel who led the crowd so that when the strikers became discouraged and hung their heads low, staring at the pavement, she would rouse their spirits with her speeches. The strikers applauded for her, workers in the neighbouring shops left their positions to listen to her speak, the tourists shook her hand and had their photographs taken with her.

On the fortieth day of the strike Henri listened again as Fidel listed off the workers' demands. He caved in slightly and agreed to give them a slight raise and holiday pay on the condition that Fidel leave the museum and cease being their union leader. When Fidel put Henri's proposition to the workers they got up and left, went back to their homes and began the search for new employment. They could not, they said, turn their back on their leader.

Two months later the wax museum closed down. Henri could not find any new employees. No one in Surfers would work there even if he did pay higher wages. No one could explain why, they just remembered the pictures of Fidel in the newspaper and could not bring themselves to betray her. It became a site of resistance. They did not know what they were resisting but it felt like an important thing to do.

Henri sold all the wax statues at rock bottom prices. They turned up in all sorts of places around Surfers. Madonna and Michael Jackson took up residency in front of the poker machines at Crown Casino. Elvis helped sell chicken in front of Chucks Chicken Castle. Queen Elizabeth I was spotted at a foam party on South Beach.

Fidel Finds a Lover

Shortly after she led the workers' revolution at the Wax Museum, Fidel left us. She did not take much with her, just her army greens, her cigars, a few pairs of underwear. If the truth be told I think that my father was quite relieved to see her go. He crawled out of the bedroom, took his old place on the couch, sat up straight and began to grow larger again.

Everyone has their own theories on where Fidel went. Some say she ran off to the Philippines with the cleaning lady from the museum. Others say she went to France to lead a revolution at Madame Tussaud's. Others say that she went back home to Cuba. I have no idea where she went but I don't think it really

matters anyway. The point is that she had to go and in any case I'm sure she's still Fidel.

She sent me a postcard. I don't know where the stamp was from, I could not read the writing. It was not the kind of postcard one usually gets, with pictures of bridges and lakes and sunny landscapes. It was a picture of a grey building, standing firm and efficient, framed by a hazy blue-grey sky. She did not try to apologise to us, she did not write much on the back. She merely said that history would absolve her.

Fidel in my bedroom

Years after she left I found the museum's wax statue of Fidel in a little second hand shop on Rose Street. The shop lady drove a hard bargain for the statue but when I told her that Fidel was my mother she seemed to understand and sold it to me at a price I could afford.

I keep Fidel in the corner of my bedroom. I shine her shoes, dust off her uniform, tease her beard, stick a cigar between her fingers and kiss her cheek before I go to sleep at night. As I turn off the light in my bedroom and get underneath the covers I look over at her and she gives me a wink as I fall into sleep.

