

## MORIR SOÑANDO

by Bob Dumont

from his book, *Borough of Churches*

I had been working late that night so around nine-thirty I put on my coat and scarf and walked out into the cold December darkness and headed for Rosita's, a little Cuban diner on upper Broadway that stays open twenty-four hours a day. As I approached, I saw glowing through the steamed-over front window the familiar sign with the tiny, pink neon rose blinking off and on and dotting the "i" in Rosita. Inside, the small main counter with room for only seven people was completely occupied. I had to sit by myself at the opposite counter, which is smaller still, with a very narrow top, and which runs along a wall where there is often a cockroach to be seen exploring the cracks in the paint. Halfway up the wall hang plastic reproductions of the flags of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic. Posted just above the flags is the handwritten list of the various flavors of *batidos* served here. One flavor in particular, *Morir Soñando*, a concoction of orange juice, milk, crushed ice, and sugar, I often order during the summer, savoring as much the saying of its whimsical name as the sweet, cold, exotic taste.

I was very hungry and ordered a complete dinner: the daily special — something called *biftec palomilla* which came with yellow rice, black beans, bread, and salad; on the side I ordered a dish of fried sweet plantains. I gave my order to Rosita herself, a plump Cuban lady who runs things during the day but whom I was surprised to see still working so late. When I asked her what *palomilla* meant in English, Rosita, usually unfailingly pleasant, seemed preoccupied. She shrugged and said "*Palomilla es palomilla...* I can't explain in English. Is very good. *Carne*. With onions."

Some regulars from the neighborhood were clustered at the end of the main counter nearest the kitchen. They were drinking coffee and chatting in Spanish with the cook who was known as Maestro; with the dishwasher, an old man with a perennial, toothless grin whom everybody simply called Hola; and with Carlos, the night manager and younger brother of Rosita. Maestro and Hola were leaning in the doorway that leads into the kitchen, above which hangs a faded black and white photograph of a park in Havana. The photograph, taken in the early 1950's, depicts a wide, sun-splashed plaza full of flowers and palm trees with people sitting on benches or promenading about, and a row of bleached limestone buildings in the background. Carlos, short and stocky like his sister, had grown a mustache since the last time I had been in. He was arranging a pile of fruit — pineapples, mangos, papayas, bananas — on top of a small table wedged into one corner of the narrow, rectangular-shaped room.

Also having coffee at the main counter were three guys in their early to mid-twenties, student-types. They wore the sleeves pushed up on their crew-neck sweaters and were sharing a pack of Marlboros. Next to them was an enormous black man who kept his face only a few inches above a plate of spaghetti and meatballs which he noisily shoveled into his mouth. At the other end of the counter, closest to the front door, sat a Spanish kid of around fifteen, trying to make an impression on Gabriella, the young Puerto Rican waitress who was wearing a purple sweater and gold hoop earrings, and who always has her hair done in the latest, most-popular Latin style. The kid would rise from his stool and lean over the counter while whispering to her whenever she passed in front of him or stood nearby making coffee.

I waited for my food to come.

After the enormous black man had finished his plate of spaghetti and meatballs, he muttered something to one of the student-types. I couldn't hear what he said but the three of them all looked at each other, laughed, and continued to ignore him.

Just then my food arrived, with Rosita and Gabriella bringing out steaming plates and bowls from the kitchen, setting them on the main counter, and calling out "Amigo!" to me. I transferred everything, one dish at a time, to where I was sitting and immediately got down to business with my meal — so much to eat that I had the plates and bowls spread all across the narrow counter top.

The enormous black man was now paying Gabriella. Though she was on the last part of her shift she was still full of energy and over-the-counter jokes such as "You owe \$4.00. For everybody else it's \$2.00. But since you are *especial* and my friend I only charge \$4.00." I knew what was coming next.

"Water is free this time but next time you gotta pay. Okay?"

Unsmiling, the enormous black man got up and half-lumbered, half-staggered to one of the stools along the same counter where I was sitting and plopped himself down. He sat slump-shouldered beside the door and kept his back to me while staring out into the night where the first few wet snowflakes were appearing. From a coat hook on the wall beside him he took a shabby old overcoat and an aviator's cap and held them on his lap for a long while, still gazing through the glass door. At last he stood up and began to put on his coat, but evidently it was so tattered inside that each time he put his arm into the sleeve, his hand got caught and became entangled in the lining. He thrust his arm into the sleeve again and again but the same thing kept happening. He tried the other arm, but with the same sleeve, such that even if his hand had gone all the way through unobstructed, he would have succeeded only in putting on his coat backwards. However, he eventually realized this and resumed with his original plan.

His face was puffy and it seemed to be costing him a great deal of effort just to keep his eyes open and focused on what his hands were doing. He resembled a boxer who, having been hit once too often in the early rounds of a fight, was by the later rounds nearly asleep on his feet. Again he forced his arm deep into the sleeve, and then turning the coat over so that he could peer up the cuff, he searched in vain for his hand which was once more hopelessly lost in the lining.

The din in the restaurant rose higher as each of the conversations grew more animated. Cigarette smoke filled the air. No one was paying attention to the enormous black man.

He began pulling bits of paper and broken cigarettes out of the holes in his coat — he had determined that somehow this was part of the problem — and then he practically had the coat turned inside out as he tried to adjust the lining. Finally he got everything fixed just right. He stuck his hand into the sleeve and this time it emerged from the other end. Halfway home.

After another couple of unsuccessful attempts with the other arm, and I was sure his stamina was exhausted, his hand suddenly shot through the other sleeve. He made a shrugging movement and the coat was across his shoulders. He put on the aviator's cap and pulled the flaps over his ears, letting the fastening straps dangle down the sides of his face. Leaning and slouching, and without buttoning his coat, he pushed his way out the door and into the darkness. I thought he would no doubt immediately disappear into the night, but first he stood on the curb, the snow coming down all around him, and took a long piss right on the right-rear tire of a late-model, two door, two-tone Buick Riviera with fancy wire hubcaps. And then he did disappear — half-lumbering, half-staggering up Broadway.

The Buick belonged to Carlos who was busy in the kitchen and had not seen the enormous black man urinating on it. He came swaggering out of the kitchen smoking a cigar and fingering his mustache. While taking the money out of the cash register he asked me how I liked my steak. "*Deliciosa*," I told him and asked him what *palomilla* meant. He said it was a special cut and patted his rear end. He put the money from the cash register into a bank deposit bag, put on a coat, and went outside, followed by the regulars from the neighborhood who stood around admiring the car which by now had acquired a thin layer of snow on top. Carlos then jumped in the Buick and drove off by himself.

Meanwhile I had finished my meal and ordered a little *café negro* to top it off. The trio of student-types paid and left but not before Gabriella went through her repertoire of jokes one more time. The Spanish kid had long since given up on making progress with her. He sat and sulked while nursing a can of Coke. Without a word he paid and left too. For a while all was quiet in Rosita's — uncharacteristically so.

But not for long.

The door flew open and in she swept in leather pants, open-toed high-heel shoes, and full-length fake fur coat. Her abundant hair fell down her back and her face was caked with make-up. She had long, fluttery eyelashes and her eyelids were shadowed in turquoise so that they matched her painted fingernails. She breezily greeted everyone as if she knew all of us and had expected us to be here when she made her entrance. “Hi — how you doin’,” the woman said to Rosita and Gabriella, to Maestro and Hola, and then to me. “Good to see you.” She had a low, husky kind of voice, but not at all unpleasant — and the accent was obvious — a purest Brooklynese such as one almost never hears even in Brooklyn nowadays.

“Is the boss in? I came about the job,” she said to Rosita.

“No, he leave but he back soon.”

“Okay I’ll wait.” She perched herself on the stool at the end of the main counter closest to the door. “He told me to come back at ten o’clock. Is it ten yet? I don’t mind waiting.”

Rosita did not seem terribly enthused with all of this. She frowned. She drummed her fingers on the counter. She stared in the other direction toward the kitchen.

“Do you speak English? I *hablo* a little Spanish. Is this a Cuban restaurant? This is such a nice little place. I’ll bet the food is good here. Do you serve Mexican food? I love Mexican food. Do you have chili? I love chili. Do you put beans in your chili? I hate beans. Excuse me, is that whiskey you’re drinking?” she asked me as I finished my little cup of *café negro*. I couldn’t tell if her face was that of someone old who looked very young, or someone young who looked very old.

I told her it was only black coffee.

“Coffee? Oh I’ll bet the coffee is good here. So this is a Cuban place. I’ve never had Cuban food. Is it good? Like Mexican food? I love Mexican food.” This was finally too much for Rosita who retreated into the kitchen. She hissed the words *puta* and *blanca* under her breath loud enough for Maestro and Hola to hear, which caused both of them to start winking and smirking. Gabriella, however, unflappable as always, remained on duty.

“I’m so tired,” the woman continued. I’ve been all over town today. I work for a messenger service. It’s hard work. Nine to five just walking around. And some of the packages are so heavy.”

“You wanna know something?” Gabriella rejoined, “I come here at noon and I gotta work until midnight.”

“But I need another job. Or what I really need is one that pays more. You only get the minimum wage as a messenger. Is the boss coming back soon? He told me to be here at ten.”

“He be back in a minute,” said Gabriella.

“I don’t mind waiting. I know he’ll be back. He told me to come and see him. Maybe I should eat. I sure need this job.”

“You speak Spanish?”

“A little, and I have a lot of friends who do too. I took two years in the *escuela*, high-*escuela*.” Her few Spanish words floated on her Brooklynese like drops of oil on water.

“You need it here.”

“Oh I’m sure. I’m sure. Say, what does that sign mean? *Batidos*. What’s a *batido*?”

“It’s something you drink. *Muy deliciosa*. Like a milk shake. You wanna try one?”

“Oh no thank you. I’m sure it’s very good — but no thank you.”

“You live around here?”

“No I live in the Village. Charles street”

“You mean you walk all the way up from the Village? That’s a long way.”

“No, I walked all day in my work. I took the train from the Village. It’s not so bad. One train brings you right here. I love the West Side. I hate the East Side. The people are all so unfriendly. Where do you live? Spanish Harlem maybe?”

“Nah I live at a hunderd thirty-five and Broadway.”

“And where do you live? Here in the neighborhood?” she now asked me.

I told her I only lived a few blocks away.

“Do you come here a lot? I’ll bet the food is good here. How’s the coffee?”

I told her the coffee was excellent.

“Oh I’ll bet it is. But I hate coffee. I drink tea. And do they serve Mexican food? I love Mexican food. You have chili don’t you?” She turned on her stool towards Gabriella again. “Do you put beans in your chili?”

“Yeah we put beans in our chili.”

Even though I’d had an enormous meal and coffee, and even though it was December, I suddenly felt like having a *batido*. “*Un morir soñando por favor*,” I said to Gabriella. My Spanish — adequate for ordering meals and reading the signs on the subway, but for little else — always seems to amuse her.

“Do you speak Spanish too? Everybody here speaks Spanish.”

“I’m like you. I only speak *un poquito* — a little bit.”

“You said *morir* didn’t you. *Morir* — something. That’s to die isn’t it? To die — something?”

“It’s *soñando*. It means dreaming.”

“Oh I see. To die — dreaming... *morir soñando*... What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s just one of the flavors of *batidos*.”

“It sounds so sad.”

“Here you are amigo,” interrupted Gabriella as she handed me my drink and a straw across the counter.

I happened to glance outside just in time to see the Buick roll into the parking space again. Carlos got out and came swaggering through the snow and through the door. He had taken only a couple of steps inside when he stopped in his tracks.

“Oh hi there! Remember me?” She spun on her stool towards him, smiling, while the eyelashes went to work.

At first it appeared as if Carlos would do an immediate about-face and go bolting out the door.

“Oh yes... yes... how are you?” he managed to stammer. His eyes darted around the small restaurant and then fastened on Rosita who had stepped out of the kitchen and stood at the other end of the counter, staring down the length of it at the *puta*. It made for a strange scene with Rosita glaring at the *puta* — the *puta* smiling broadly at Carlos — and Carlos gaping at his sister.

“I came back at ten o’clock like you said to. I’ve been waiting. Everyone is so nice here. This is such a nice little place.”

Carlos had left his swagger behind in the snow. He walked now on tiptoe: past her, past me, past Gabriella, past Maestro and Hola, past Rosita, and disappeared into the kitchen. Rosita turned and followed him, but not without hurling a last, angry glance over her shoulder.

Carlos spoke first, his voice lowered, no doubt hoping that this would prevent Rosita from raising hers. But it was no use. Her voice, excited and high-pitched and scornful, came pouring out of the kitchen. Maestro and Hola moved away from the doorway as if there were a fire. Rosita’s Spanish was gushing so rapidly that there seemed to be no breaks between the sentences, or the words even. And the only word I could understand was “*Putá! Putá! Putá!*” Each time she repeated it she screamed it still louder. Carlos could only get in an occasional “*Sí pero* —” whenever his sister paused for breath, but she would resume quickly without letting him say more.

Gabriella went about cleaning the espresso machine and washing some cups and saucers while Maestro and Hola stood by the front door and contemplated the snow. I stared at the flag of Cuba hanging on the wall a few inches in front of me and sipped my *batido* which tasted sweeter and sweeter the closer I got to the bottom of my glass. I glanced out of the corner of my eye a couple of times towards her but she had her back to me, elbows on the counter, with her face buried in her hands.

At last the shouting stopped and Carlos emerged from the kitchen. He kept behind the counter as he tiptoed towards her.

“I just find out — we no need nobody after all. I forget. My sister she hire somebody else already.” Carlos’s normally copper-colored complexion was now a sickly gray. A forced smile once or twice flickered across his face but vanished in an instant.

Everyone was looking at her. At first I thought she was crying — she was crying! — but then was smiling sweetly as she showed her face and wiped away the tears.

“Oh I understand. It’s quite all right. These things happen. Your sister hired someone else. She’s your sister huh? It’s all right. It was just a misunderstanding. Well I’d better be going now. Does anybody know what time it is?”

“Ten-thirty,” chimed Gabriella, breaking a long and awkward silence.

“Oh ten-thirty, yes it is late.”

She inclined her head toward each of us as she slowly revolved on the stool. “Good-by everybody. It was very nice meeting all of you.” She lowered her eyes and stared at the floor for a moment.

“This is such a nice little place.”

And then she left.

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Once again an uncharacteristic quiet reigned in Rosita’s. Gabriella came out from behind the counter to clear my dishes and I leaned out of her way while finishing my *batido*. I got up and told Carlos what I had had and the bill came to \$7.75. As he gave me my change he kept repeating for my benefit, “I forget. I forget. My sister hired somebody else already.” I nodded. I laid a tip on the counter which he quickly scooped up and tossed into a cigar box full of change.

I stood by the door knotting my scarf and buttoning my coat. Carlos stood in the corner beside the pile of fruit, fingering his mustache and intently studying the faded photograph of the sun-splashed plaza in Havana. Gabriella was joking with Maestro and Hola and with another pair of regulars from the neighborhood who had come in, ordered coffee, and acted as if they were going to be hanging around for a long while. I saw Rosita’s shadow move inside the kitchen.

Outside, the cold air was most invigorating and the wet snowflakes landed on my face and cooled my forehead which felt almost feverish. I walked up Broadway, half-hoping, half-expecting to see her again — sitting perhaps on one of the dilapidated benches in the center median. Though it was snowing fairly hard it was not nearly cold enough so that any would accumulate. Still, the snow was very beautiful as it floated silently down and was caught in the glow of the street lamps and the brightly colored, neon-lit storefronts. And then I did see a figure,

hovering on one of the benches a couple of blocks ahead. But before I could get any closer it suddenly moved away, half-staggering, half-lumbering across Broadway, and disappeared forever this time down a dark street of tenements where only the Spanish-speaking people live.

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Robert Dumont was born in Oklahoma in 1947. He is a graduate of Tulsa University. In 1974 he and his wife settled in New York City, where they remain, residing in the borough of Brooklyn with their two children. His fiction has appeared in *Telephone*, *Innisfree*, and *Caprice*. His two collections of short stories, *Borough of Churches* and *New York Transit(s)*, will be available soon — for information email [rdumont133@aol.com](mailto:rdumont133@aol.com).

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