



Reeling in the years with papa Hemingway

by F. Daniel Somrack

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My first trip to Cuba, over a decade ago, was a journey of self-discovery. The Caribbean oasis was closely associated with two of my long-standing hobbies: smoking cigars and reading Hemingway. After all, Cuba was renowned for producing the finest *hecho a mano* cigars in the world and for inspiring Ernest Hemingway's Pulitzer- and Nobel-Prize-winning masterpiece, *The Old Man and the Sea*. A great cigar along the Hemingway trail – it sounded like a plan.

My first stop in Havana was *La Real Fabrica de Tabacos Partagas*. Located behind the imposing *Capitolo Nacional*, the five-story, brown and beige factory hasn't changed much since opening its doors there in 1845. It's still divided into a processing area, rolling galleries, and aging rooms, with the only addition being the small retail store near the front entrance. In addition to its namesake, Partagas, the shop sells other name brands manufactured there, including Cohiba, Bolivar, Ramon



Hot sun, salty seas, and enormous fish: it seems no element of nature in Cojimar, Cuba, could match the prowess of the Hemingway-Fuentes fishing duo. In fact, the two captured the 1,542-pound fish shown in 1958's film version of *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Photos by Roberto Herrera Sotolongo, circa 1952.

Allones, and La Gloria Cubana. With variety being the spice of life, I bought an assortment and began my quest.

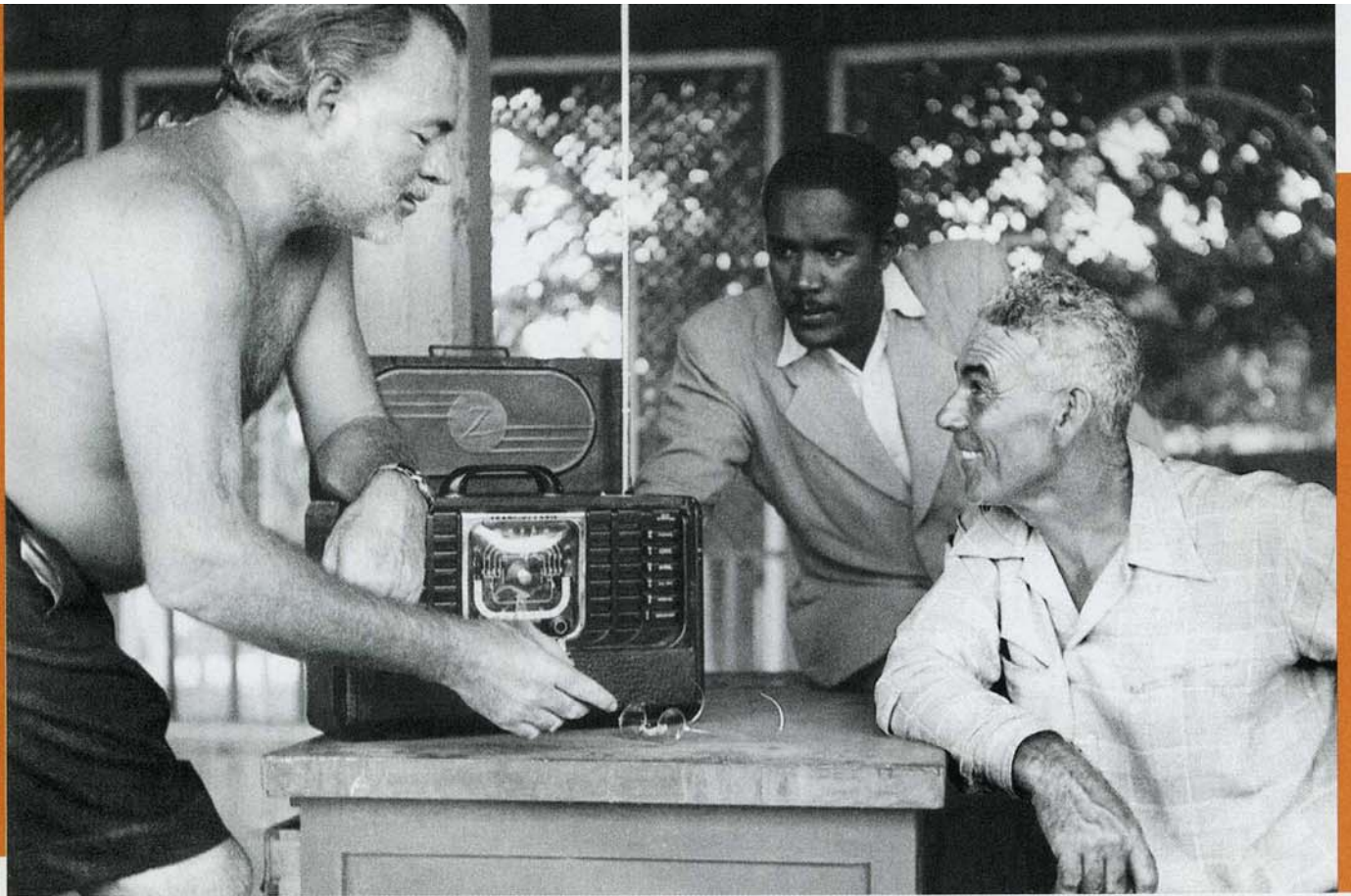
Near the waterfront in Habana Vieja is the Ambos Mundos hotel, where the influential American writer was headquartered in the early 1930s. He spent his mornings working on the best-selling novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, in a tiny, corner room on the fifth floor. Room 511 is a museum now, but for a couple of dollars you can sit at the author's desk, touch the keys of his typewriter, or just gaze out the window at a pink cathedral or the harbor in the distance. In the evening, Hemingway liked to walk the surrounding streets of Old Havana and visit his usual haunts.



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Hemingway's favorite bar was El Floridita. Photographs there show the writer sitting at the bar, gulping ice-cold drinks, and chatting with Hollywood royalty. The daiquiri was invented there and "Papa" reportedly holds the record for downing sixteen doubles at one sitting, prompting El Floridita's staff to name the enlarged version "*Papa Doble*." On warm afternoons, he'd drink at La Bodeguita del Medio, enjoying a cool Mojito made of rum, lemon, and mint. But the bars and restaurants of the city were just shadows without souls. The real Ernest Hemingway survived in the recollections of an old fisherman who lived by the sea and dreamt a sweet, recurring dream of lions playing on the white beaches of Africa. The old man's name was Gregorio Fuentes.

Fuentes, the last link to a writer who dominated his era in literature and helped define a generation, had served as Hemingway's boat captain, fishing companion, and faithful friend for the last twenty years of the author's life. He may have been the inspiration for one of Hemingway's most indelible fictional characters: Santiago, the indomitable fisherman in *The Old Man and the Sea*. It is uncertain whether Fuentes was a direct model for Santiago, yet glimpses of him appear in other Hemingway characters, like Antonio in *Islands in the Stream*. What *is* known is that Hemingway was a good listener, and many of the anecdotes and firsthand experiences he gathered would later appear in his fiction.



Excitedly surrounding the radio, Ernest Hemingway, his friend and driver, and Gregorio Fuentes listen for news of the Nobel Prize. Hemingway subsequently donated his gold medal to the church of the Virgen de la Caridad, in Santiago, Cuba, where it still resides today.

Photo by Roberto Herrera Sotolongo, circa 1954.

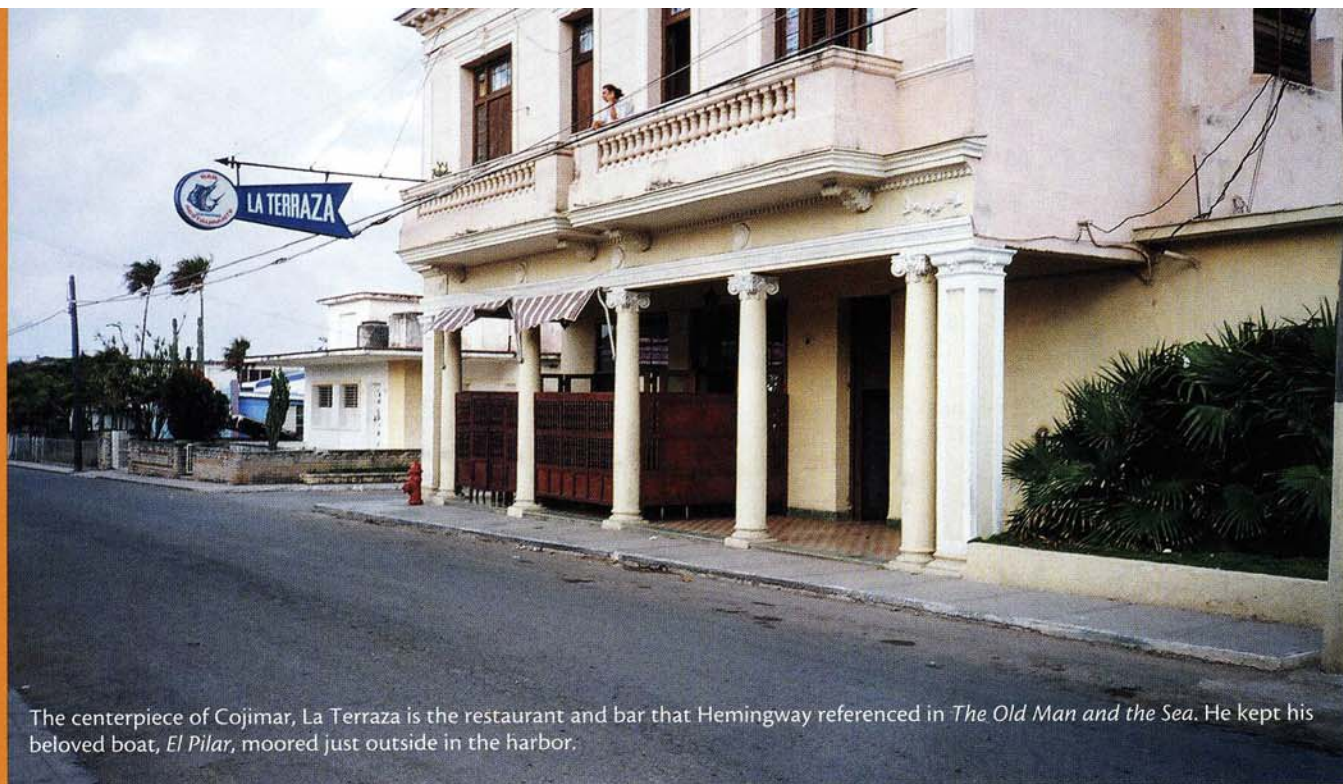
Gregorio Fuentes lived a few miles from Havana in the sleepy fishing town of Cojimar. The centerpiece of the town is La Terraza, a restaurant and bar that Hemingway wrote about in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Built on a giant rock overlooking the harbor, I could sense the sacredness of the place as I entered through its double wooden doors. "Through the open terrace," Hemingway wrote, "I look at the sea, deep blue with white crests, crossed by fishing boats looking for Dorado." He was a regular customer here between 1940 and 1960 when he kept his boat moored in the harbor, and the fishermen called him "El Viejo" or Papa.

La Terraza de Cojimar is a popular tourist attraction that was totally refurbished in 1991. Past the long, wooden bar is the restaurant in the back, with its wide bay windows and panoramic view of the sea. The history of the bar is reflected in the photographs on the walls, one of which shows Captain Fuentes and the white-bearded Hemingway holding a giant tarpon. After a long day on the water, they would rendezvous here with the Cojimar fishermen, sharing drinks and tales of high-sea adventures. The walls remembered, but they were silent. It took the kindness of strangers to direct me to the home of Gregorio Fuentes.

At 209 Calle Pasuela, I found his cottage – small and white, with pale-green trim. Greeted at the door by his forty-five-year-old grandson and caretaker, Rafael Valdez, I was invited inside. Sitting stoically in a wicker chair, holding his trademark cigar in a gnarled hand, was Gregorio Fuentes. Looking neat but casual in blue trousers and yellow shirt, he wore a black baseball cap with "Captain Gregorio Fuentes" spelled across the front. He had a gaunt, weather-lined face, and arms that were blemished from his years in the tropical sea and sun. But his penetrating, deep-blue eyes were keen and alive.

This was the man who had probably shared more adventures and misadventures with the prizewinning writer than anyone. They first met in 1928 during a storm at sea – Fuentes working as a fishing merchant trading between Havana and Florida, and Hemingway on a sloop he occasionally chartered from Joe Russell, his rum-running pal and owner of Sloppy Joe's Bar in Key West. Low on fuel, and in the midst of a gale, Hemingway was forced to take refuge at Dry Tortugas, sixty-five miles east of Key West.

"As I was passing, a man called out to me in beautiful Spanish," recalled Fuentes. "He said that he was an American



The centerpiece of Cojimar, La Terraza is the restaurant and bar that Hemingway referenced in *The Old Man and the Sea*. He kept his beloved boat, *El Pilar*, moored just outside in the harbor.

and that he'd been stranded without fuel or food for a long time. That man was Mr. Hemingway. I shared some raw onions and wine I had on board. Afterwards, I towed him to the local lighthouse so he could telephone his destination in Key West. When I left him, he said, "Thank you, my friend. I'll see you again in Cuba." Fuentes proved to be a first-rate storyteller and, despite his ninety-five-plus years, his recollections about his famous friend were lucid and insightful. It didn't take me long to realize that the larger-than-life adventurer and the sensitive, tragic writer were the same man.

In 1934, with a \$3,000 royalty advance from *Esquire* magazine, Hemingway realized his dream of owning a fishing boat. He consigned the Wheeler Shipyard in Brooklyn, New York, to construct a custom-made yacht to his exact specifications. The thirty-eight-foot boat, christened *El Pilar* after the patron saint of Spain, was made of black walnut and had a top-cruising speed of ten knots. Transported by rail to Florida, she sailed from Key West to Havana on her maiden voyage.

Carlos Gutierrez, a seasoned veteran of the sea, was hired to skipper the boat but Hemingway fired him after an argument. Remembering how spotless and well organized Gregorio Fuentes had kept his own boat, the author then hired him to captain the *Pilar*. During a 1940s interview, Hemingway described his skipper as "a man who would rather keep a clean ship, paint, and varnish, then he would fish. But I know too, that he would rather fish than eat or sleep. It was luck to find him." Fuentes was paid \$250 a month to steer the boat, cook the food, and mix the drinks.

"Mr. Hemingway would call me when he wanted to go out," Fuentes recalled. "I would have the boat stocked and ready to sail when he arrived. They were very happy times for us, full of adventure. We were young in those days, full of life." They were two men bound together by their love of the sea and adventure; the Gulf Stream, what Hemingway called "the deep blue river," served as the backdrop for his greatest works.

"One afternoon, we were sailing along the north coast when we happened upon a skiff with an old man who had drifted out to sea," Fuentes told me. "The old man was crazy with fatigue from battling a giant fish. He was weary and surrounded by sharks. It was a fierce contest. We stopped to offer help but the old man shouted for us to get away. When we heard that the old man had died in the struggle, Papa was heartbroken. Mr. Hemingway wrote his book as a tribute to that old man and to all fishermen in Cojimar."

Gregorio Fuentes, a Spaniard born July 11, 1897, on Lanzarote in the Canary Islands, arrived in Cuba as a six-year-old orphan after his father, Pedro Fuentes, a ship's cook, died when a mast crushed him during a storm at sea. Young Gregorio was raised in neighboring Regla by Canary Island immigrants who cared for him until he reached adolescence.

Earning a living piloting boats, he married Dolores Perez in 1922 and moved to Cojimar to raise their four daughters. By the time he met Hemingway at age twenty-five, Fuentes was a master seaman.

Fuentes vividly remembered the day in 1954 that it was announced that Hemingway had won the Nobel Prize for

Literature. "We heard it on the radio," he said. "Papa said to me, 'We will have very much money now,' and it was true." The writer had long considered himself a *Cubano sato*, a Cuban by adoption, if not by birth, and he publicly donated his solid-gold Nobel medal to Santiago, Cuba's church of the *Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*, Cuba's patron saint. It's been under the church's guardianship ever since.

In the years that followed, I became a frequent visitor to Cuba, spending many afternoons with Gregorio at La Terraza,



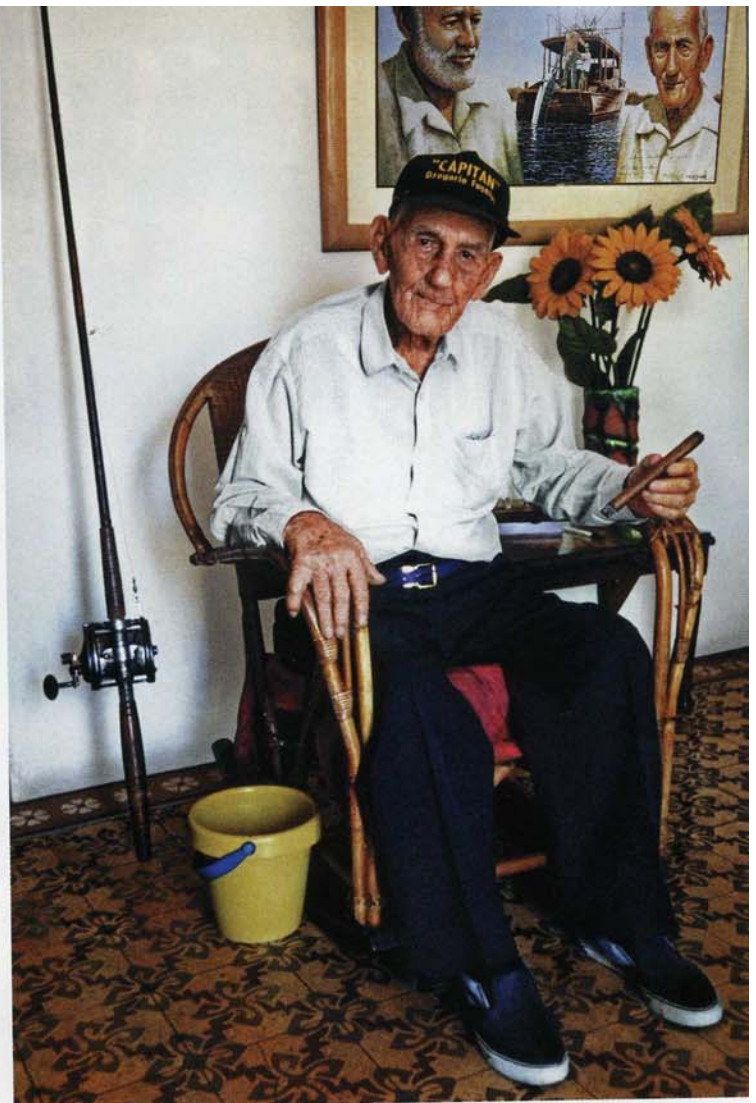
Two men bound together by their love of the sea and adventure; the Gulf Stream, what Hemingway called "the deep blue river," served as the backdrop for his greatest works.

enjoying a cool drink and sharing a good cigar. Fuentes never cared about the various brands I offered, but I noticed that he preferred larger sizes like double coronas or Churchills. Recalling his youth, he told me that he'd smoked an average of twenty-five cigars a day. "I began smoking tobacco at six," he said. "After my father's funeral, I went to a village and bought a bundle of cigars for two dollars. The sailors found it amusing that a child would spend his money on cigars.

"Mr. Hemingway only smoked tobacco on special occasions, but never cigarettes," he went on. "He wanted to be a great hunter, and he said that prey could smell cigarettes on a hunter."

The 1958 film version of *The Old Man and the Sea* was shot on location in Cojimar. Spencer Tracy, cast as Santiago, prepared for his role by spending a great deal of time at sea with the local fishermen, learning their techniques. His performance earned him his sixth Academy Award nomination. And to find the giant marlin used in the film, Hemingway and Fuentes sailed to Cabo Blanco, Peru. "We caught the enormous fish together," Fuentes explained. "It was a 1,542-pound black marlin. It was just the two of us and we battled with it [for] three hours. Papa was so excited." The impressive fish had, in fact, set a record at the time.

"The last time I saw Mr. Hemingway was in 1960, when he was leaving for the United States. He came here to my house to say goodbye. He shook my hand and said, 'Take care of yourself and *Pilar* as you have known how,' and walked out the door," reminisced Fuentes. "It was the last time I saw him."



Gregorio Fuentes, Hemingway's skipper, confidant, and friend, in 2000. Even at over 100 years of age – his face lined and his skin weathered – the old man's eyes were keen and alive.

Hemingway returned to the US briefly, before embarking for Spain, where he fell ill and was brought back to the US for treatment. He was suffering from several maladies including high blood pressure, an enlarged liver, and depression, for which he received electroshock treatments. But with these treatments came memory loss, and Hemingway then retreated to his large ranch in Ketchum, Idaho, where he planned to settle.

Hemingway's years in Cuba, particularly during the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship, were some of the bloodiest and most chaotic in the island's history. Fidel Castro, who claimed that *For Whom the Bell Tolls* inspired his own guerilla war, only met the author once – at the Tenth Annual Ernest Hemingway Marlin Fishing Tournament in 1960, where Castro took first prize. The Bay of Pigs invasion the following spring had made it impossible for Hemingway to return to his island home. "I am totally convinced of the historic necessity of the Cuba[n] Revolution," Hemingway is reported to have said, and this



A smoker since the young age of six (yeah, you read that right), Gregorio Fuentes only gave up cigars once he became ill and too weak to smoke in 2001, at the age of 104.

sad realization, coupled with his escalating physical and mental disabilities, contributed to his depression. The author-adventurer killed himself in Ketchum in 1961.

“In my whole life, I’ve known few other people of his character. He was a man apart, worldly and capable of immense generosity and valor,” said Fuentes, perhaps on behalf of every Cojimar angler that had known Hemingway. As a tribute to their beloved Papa, the fishermen of Cojimar gathered bits and pieces of their broken propellers and deck ornaments and melted them into a bust of the writer. Erected in a small rotunda overlooking the sea, it was unveiled in 1962, on the first anniversary of the author’s death. “It was a symbol of our brotherhood,” Fuentes remarked simply. “A thank you to Mr. Hemingway for all of his years of friendship.” Throughout that friendship, Fuentes and Hemingway had celebrated their birthdays together over a bottle of whiskey and, for years after Papa’s death, Gregorio kept the tradition alive by drinking one glass and pouring a second over the bust of his friend.

Though Hemingway bequeathed his boat to Fuentes, the old man never fished on it again. “I could never sail on *Pilar* without Papa,” he wistfully said. “If I went out on the boat, it would only remind me of him. He used to say to me, ‘You and me are like brothers.’” Instead, Fuentes donated the yacht

to the Revolutionary Government of Cuba, where it was dry-docked at Hemingway’s estate *Finca Vigia*, now a museum in San Francisco de Paula. Fuentes continued to work as a fishing merchant and occasionally a charter captain until he finally retired in the 1960s.

On a humid afternoon in August of 2001, I stopped at La Terraza to see Gregorio, only to find that he hadn’t been in for several days. At 209 Calle Pasuela, Rafael told me that his grandfather was ill and too weak to smoke. “He’s like a child again,” he said, as he walked me into the bedroom where the old man was peacefully asleep. I placed a few cigars near his bed, wished him well, and left. “Remember,” Rafael said, “when you come to Cuba, *this* is your home.”

On January 13, 2002, Gregorio Fuentes, the humble old fisherman of Cojimar, passed away at the age of 104. Until the end, he remained the same wise, courageous captain – always close to nature and blessed with innate nobility. Driving away from our last visit, over the dusty, narrow hills of Cojimar, I couldn’t help but remember the final sentence of *The Old Man and the Sea*: “Up the road, in his shack, the old man was sleeping again. He was still sleeping on his face and the boy was sitting by him, watching him. The old man was dreaming about the lions.” *CM*