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My Beard Has Three Hairs

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by *Matias Travieso-Diaz*

*Mi barba tiene tres pelos
tres pelos tiene mi barba
si no tuviera tres pelos
yo no tendría una barba*

– Gabriel Aragón (“Gaby”), Alfonso Aragón (“Fofó”) and Emilio Aragón (“Miliki”)

It was sometime in 1951. I was a timid eight-year-old who largely kept to himself and was more interested in reading comic books or adventure novels than playing marbles or throwing balls around in the backyard. I used to think there was something wrong with me, because I did not socialize much with other kids and felt no great urge to do so.

I was growing up in a blue-collar neighborhood in the outskirts of La Habana, and my father, a taxicab driver, barely earned enough to keep us fed. My parents, my three-year-old brother and I lived in a house owned by a spinster aunt, together with two other aunts and my sickly paternal grandmother. There was always a lot of noise around the house but no intellectual stimulation.

Late in 1950, commercial TV came to Cuba, the second country in Latin America where this new form of entertainment arrived. Almost immediately, those who could afford them purchased TV sets and began receiving soap operas, news, cooking shows, comedy programs, and most significantly, live broadcasts of Cuban League baseball games.

We were too poor to afford a TV set for our home; we did not get one until 1956, and in the meantime our main form of entertainment was listening to the radio, for there was a great supply of radio programs freely available and radio sets were cheap. As luck would have it, however, our next-door

neighbors somehow managed to buy one of the first TV sets in our neighborhood. I was friendly with Tonito, the son of our neighbors, and they invited me almost every night to drop by and watch TV with them.

Tonito was four or five years older than I and we had little in common, except that there were some TV programs we both enjoyed. In particular, the most popular children's program that played on Cuban TV was Radio Circo, a comedy show featuring three Spanish clowns, "Gabi, Fofó, and Miliki." They had been in Cuba for several years performing in theaters and over the radio, but their live TV show starting at the end of 1950 cemented their fame, both in Cuba and later through Mexico, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Argentina and later back in Spain.

The trio of clowns (all brothers in real life) were loved by children because their comedy skits were lively, full of jokes and pratfalls, and included a number of irresistible little tunes that the children who attended the theater where their live broadcasts originated would sing along with the clowns.

I can no longer recall most of the songs that I learned by watching the broadcasts, and which Tonito and I sang along with Gabi, Fofó, Miliki, and the children present at the theater. One of the tunes, however, proved unforgettable. To a very straightforward waltz tune, the first stanza went like this: "my beard has three hairs/ three hairs has my beard/ if it did not have three hairs/ I would not have a beard." The song was to be accompanied by mimicking the beard length by motioning under the chin, the hairs by touching the head, and the yeses and noes by nodding. The trick was that subsequent stanzas were modified, at the clowns' direction, to omit one or more of the words in the lyrics. Thus, the second stanza was to omit the word "hairs," and had to be sung like this: "my beard has three [silence]; three [silence] has my beard; if it did not have three [silence]; I would not have a beard." The third stanza would instead omit the word "beard;" in the fourth stanza, both "hairs" and "beard" were to be omitted, and then the entire sequence was to be repeated, each time faster than the previous one. Hilarity set in when, as the tempo quickened, many children became unable to keep up, either failing to omit a required word, or keeping silent when they were supposed to sing, or doing the wrong hand gestures; until, finally, there was a general chaos punctuated by screams, laughter, and guffaws.

Tonito and I would watch the performance of this song, which occurred in most shows, until we had it memorized. Memory did not always help: I soon noticed that Tonito would be able to keep up with the increased speed of performance until about the third repetition; then, he (and most of the children at the theater) would become confused and miss some or most of the required actions. I, on the other hand, never missed a cue or a beat, and was in sync with the clowns as the other kids faltered.

I started to ponder what was going on. Tonito was a perfectly normal pre-adolescent. He was very friendly and had a sweet disposition. Yet, somehow, his innate skills (he was a talented baseball player) did not extend to all areas, for he was easily confused by a song that I regarded as simple-minded to the point of being stupid, whereas I sailed through it without giving it any thought.

It finally dawned on me that I could, and did, have talents that differed from those of other kids. I was no worse than anyone else on account of being poorly coordinated and lacking athletic abilities and social graces; on the other hand, there were other areas – mostly those of the mind – where I might have an edge over most of my contemporaries. I knew I did well in school, but to an eight-year-old this meant little; on the other hand, in a one-on-one mental competition (like the one I had unconsciously been carrying out against Tonito) I was bound to come out ahead.

Thus, thanks to an inane but unforgettable children's tune, I made the transcendental discovery that I could be different, but was no worse or better for this, than the rest of my peers. I thus gained a sort of self-confidence that allowed me to negotiate the difficulties that I was to encounter later in life.

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Born in Cuba, **Matias Travieso-Diaz** migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over one hundred and fifty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in a wide range of anthologies and magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. A first collection of his stories, "The Satchel and Other Terrors" is available on Amazon and other book outlets; additional anthologies of his work are scheduled for publication in 2025. His story "Twilight (<https://theamazine.com/2024/06/01/twilight/>)" was published by The Amazine in June 2024.

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