

THE FOLLOWING STORY COMES FROM MY BOOK, *MARGARITA CAT*.



I lived aboard my sailboats and cruised between employments on four continents over four decades, while learning six languages along the way.

*MARGARITA CAT* stitches together forty years of logs and letters into short stories that sketch some of the people I met who went *walkabout* on their boats, people who conspired to violate society's civil right to defraud them, and who often succeeded.

Whether new lights or last embers, these apostate sailors formed a confederacy of heroes which the Greeks would have loved.

Margarita Cats do for certain.

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# The Day of the OVNI

The town of Luperón lies at the foot of one of two mile-long bays. Nothing much happened to it since 1492 when Martín Pinzón ran off with Columbus' middle sized ship, the *Pinta*. Pinzón hid out in Luperón where he searched for gold and power — the power of the vice-king of half the world — if he could get back to Spain before Columbus. Columbus got stuck on the tiny *Niña* after having lost his flagship, the *Santa María*, on Limonade Reef just east of Cap Haïtien in Haiti. He caught Pinzón anchored in Luperón where he traded with the Indians for gold. The two captains, by then mortal enemies, began the hazardous return to Spain from Luperón.

Four hundred and eighty-six years later Luperón tried to host a tourist development project with villas, condos, hotels and a marina. To put the best face possible on it, progress came slow. The townspeople never quite hung with the turns. For instance, a Spanish company built a large all-inclusive hotel complex on the beach along the lines of Club Med. You would think the locals would have welcomed all the service jobs available in such an enterprise. Bell hops, bartenders, housekeepers, gardeners, water sports jocks, pool boys, beach life guards, mechanics, handymen, office workers.

The hotel manager, a small fat man from Galicia, smoked Moroccan cigars though he lived in the land that gave tobacco to Europe. Every time this Gallego hired a local man, his new employee soon wandered off his task to romance the foreign women he saw. It didn't take long for the new man to declare himself in love and to ask his mark to take him to Toronto where he would satisfy her forever and win all the Canadian cockfights.

If the lady balked, the tyro nonchalantly started with the next female available, and so on down the line until one of several things happened. Either a fat, ugly girl whisked him off to her room, he got slugged by a Polish auto worker, or he got escorted off the grounds by one of the fat little Gallego's big fat goons with the five o'clock shadows and the guns, the ones that, late at night, stood by the disco doors.

But hotel employees did sometimes get to Canada with a fat, ugly girl with acne.

The Gallego finally learned to hire his help from Puerto Plata, and he built pleasant on-site bungalows for them to live in. He continued, however, to allow the comeliest of the local females to work at any excuse of a job he could muster.

The hotel guests, working class Europeans and Canadians, paid everything up front while still back in their home countries, usually through vacation layaway plans run by their unions. They arrived by group charter planes and tucked themselves into buses for the ride to Luperón, where they disappeared into the hotel and steadily drank into the inexhaustible supply of their all-inclusive plan's rum and whiskey.

The Dominican Republic, your basic banana republic, has an endless supply of sugar, from which they make very good, and exceptionally cheap rum. So cheap, in fact, that the hotel's guests couldn't possibly drink enough to recover its prepaid value — but that didn't stop them from trying, while they video taped their vacation stunts, usually sexual. They bore into the booze, into the food and into each other during a full six nights and seven days, whereupon they boarded buses for the airport and home.

The real winners in this business? The union bosses, who managed the vacation funds, and the local governments, who mortgaged buses and taxis to local drivers.

Rarely did any of the hotel guests take the one mile walk to town. Nor did they engage one of the taxis hanging about the hotel entrance, not when these blue-collar

factory workers discovered the taxi drivers wanted \$30 for the one mile ride.

The taxi chauffeurs lay around and under the hotel marquee like a badly disgruntled group of union strikers looking to bash any scabs trying to breach their lines. You couldn't blame them for their ill temper. They had laid out enormous sums to the government for their cars to make a business piloting rich first-world tourists around the region's hot spots — like, for instance, the dirt floor bordello in Las Maras and the town's cockfight ring, the *Gallera*. Instead they drew what the hotel catered to, floor sweepers from the truck plants of Russia's Kama and England's Birmingham.

Truck plant workers and newly licensed *campesinos*, neither understood the other.

A new taxi driver would start out ambitiously standing around in front of the hotel entrance, sweating in the reflected heat from the blacktop. He would put up with that for only a few days. The occasional guest query got answered in his best English with “turdy dollahs”. The guests invariably replied “Holy shit!” in whatever language.

After a few days of that, the taxi guys that stuck it out just stayed seated in the flower bed in the shade of the marquee and stared dolefully at any jabbering tourist until he saw dollar bills thrust in his face. Then he drove the car based on the uproar from the back seat. If he turned left and the foreigners exploded, he turned right. If they exploded again, he went back to the straight-on path.

Some local entrepreneurs had put up modest restaurants and bars in the little village of Luperón where only Lucas had had one before. They sprouted on the road to the hotel in expectation of a boom that never came. They built their restaurants by tying together bamboo frames which they walled with *yagua*, the course weave of burlap-like sheets that unwind from a royal palm at the top of its bole. They topped the whole mess with a thatch roof from the cana palm, and stuck a roasting pig out front. Each day they hoisted the pig onto the spit and began to warm it again over a charcoal fire.

Tourists never stopped at these places as the pigs looked a bit green after a day or two, but the locals came to them seeking shade, especially those that got fired by the hotel and still had a little pocket money.

The layabouts congregating in these failed ‘tourist shops’ gradually created a market, and micro enterprises began to sprout in them, giving Luperón a tourist boom of sorts, if only of locals who could afford neither a beer nor a slab of green pig.

For example, Gomero, the tire man, had worked for many years under the shade of a large mahogany tree outside the small village school where he shoed horses and fixed moped and pickup tires. Now he had a real business location, one of the abandoned bars at the edge of town on the hotel road. The one room *yagua* shack became his garage, and the space behind the bar served as his office.

Not having much paperwork to do, Gomero put a discarded Styrofoam cooler in his ‘office’ and diversified his business with a small bar. Clients could sit around drinking Gomero's beer from the cooler while he patched their tires. He charged only a peso over cost.

Each noon the police sergeant asked Gomero why he had a cooler. The Gomero always said “It's to keep my tire patches cool, for they work better that way.” He then would hand the sergeant a free beer, and the sergeant would join the group to listen to the tale unwinding from a young gigolo just deported back home from Toronto where he had lived for a while with a fat Canadian girl with acne whom he'd met in the hotel.

Since his *gringa* had a high tech job in a telephone answering service, the boy didn't have to work at all. He had a great life up there until Immigration caught him.

One slow Sunday, while the storytellers gathered in the failed bars and gift shops on the hotel road, while the wannabe politicians fired their arguments across the street from porch to porch, while the Catholic and the Evangelical churches hymned away in competition with full pews, a thing happened that hadn't happened before or since.

A cruiser I'll call Mike came to town. Mike had long since gone ashore in Puerto Plata. He had trucked his sailboat to the front of his house to use as a flowerpot just to remind himself to never go to sea again.

Mike had initially learned to sail when he worked with weather balloons in the Pacific islands in WWII. After the war he had a great idea. He started a balloon advertising business in California. It went national, and he later became deeply involved in ballooning as a sport.

After cruising the Caribbean he found house living a little boring, so Mike got together materials for a balloon and bought an old van for a chase vehicle. Good thing too, because after he came home with a real honey of a 19 year old girlfriend, he got locked out of the house and had to live on the beach in the van.

That slow Sunday morning Mike took Dolores on her first balloon ride, starting from the beach in Costambar. During the flight Mike carried on showing Dolores how to fly the thing using the gas flamer and, a remarkably bright girl, she seemed to pick it up instantly.

The light morning winds carried them gracefully to Luperón where Mike saw a great meadow just outside the town in which to land. His landing site had a huge round mahogany tree smack in the middle that made it easy to identify when he pointed it out to Dolores. Mike gave Dolores the con and told her to land anywhere in the big meadow with the big tree.

Ess-ing slowly up and down, each ess more shallow than the last, Dolores got the contraction close to the ground and smoothly landing, until one of the mahogany branches reached out and caught a piece of balloon cloth blown its way by an errant breeze. The wicker basket spun and caught the ground. Both Mike and Dolores pitched out of it like a pair of dice from a Backgammon cup.

The balloon had gotten alarmed attention from Luperonenses while it still flew as far away as the beach at Guzmancito. Word spread quickly, emptying the gift shops, bars, porches and churches. Lucas dropped her hymnal and ran from the church along with all the parishioners and the priest and altar boys still in their robes. As the thing wobbled and essed its way toward the town the cry went up, "*OVNI! OVNI!*", for *Objecto Volante No Identificado*, or in English, UFO.

The churchgoers, already contemplating the metaphysical that morning, spooked without hesitation. The layabouts, always ready to believe fantastic stories, took up the cry and led the hysteria. The Policia and the Guárda Nacional hurried to the scene with shotguns and rifles, but they stooped low in the thick of the crowd until they saw Mike and Dolores sprawled on the grass looking somewhat human.

Mike remembered the sergeant of police standing over them with his pistol pointing between his eyes until Dolores sprang up and started dancing around screaming.

"*Ay Diós! María Santísima! Yo lo hize! Soy pil-ooo-to! YO SOY PIL-OOOOO-TO!*"

That got the crowd surging forward. *Piloto Dominicana!*

Lucas later told me her first impression that a Dominican had made it to NASA!

And a female! A female Dominican astronaut!

I got to sit and sip beer with the astronauts at Lucas' while the town's fathers stood around, and the rest of the population milled about in the street trying to get a glimpse of *la piloto* through the restaurant's grillwork. A national holiday spirit prevailed.

On Monday, after Mike and Dolores had packed up and gone, I took the *guagua* to Santiago to arrange for a hydraulic crane to lift out my old Perkins 4-108 diesel and drop in the new one.

Pronounced GWAH-GWAH for the sound buses made long ago with their ah-oogah horns, these vans for 8-12 passengers carry lots of cargo and people — I've ridden with up to 23, not counting chickens. They have a *cobrador*, a boy who takes money and pushes passengers into place not unlike the pusher in Japanese trains. *Guaguas* travel fixed routes and don't leave their stations until nearly full. Along their route, sort of like their ah-oogah ancestors, the *guaguas* stop and signal remote farm dwellers of their availability with a beep-beep instead of an ah-oogah, ah-oogah.

I squeezed into the back seat between three women and an old gent with a glass tube sticking out of his chest. Always curious, never shy, I asked him, "What's that glass tube doing sticking out of your chest?"

He obliged by showing me his dialysis catheter in all its gore, and explained the whole procedure. He said he traveled the two hours to Santiago, fording creeks and bouncing over potholes, twice weekly to sit at a machine to take the pee out of his blood. He said he'd done that for over a year now, and he felt he'd live to ninety. I feared I would break his catheter and cause him a mortal stab wound the way the bucking of the van violently and unexpectedly thrust me against him.

Once again I got reminded how Dominicans actually mirror the always pleasant and visibly happy, yet stoic, Javanese — and of how well free market medicine worked.

In Santiago I made a deal with the crane people to bring down to Luperón a hydraulic crane, the kind the utility companies use to put their men up on a pole in baskets — we used to call them "cherry pickers". My companionway left only millimeters on either side of the 4-108's engine block, and I wanted supreme precision from both the crane and (gasp!) its Dominican operator. I stood beside the crane I wanted and thumped it enthusiastically while all the guys in the crane business called, "You need a *pedi-bonay!*" again and again. I never got from them exactly what a *pedi-bonay* could do my big yellow hydraulic crane couldn't do, nor even what one looked like.

After signing up for the crane I wanted I bought a couple of 4x8 foot sheets of fiberboard with which to line the hatchway, pad the deck and generally protect *Jalan Jalan's* teak from a waywardly swinging engine as it floated out of the boat.

On the taxi ride back to the *guagua* park, with the big sheets on the roof of the car, I held down their starboard side while the driver held down the port. We only slipped once, and while we held up traffic to recover them, obliging drivers from the stopped cars got out and helped us. Then, back in the park, the *guagua* driver from Luperón and his passengers, even the old gent with the dialysis catheter stuck in him, all pitched in to tie the sheets of fiberboard down to the top of the van. Pretty much like cruisers "helping" you get off ground when you'd rather do it yourself, everyone had a loud opinion.

But it got done. Would it have in Fort Lauderdale? Or would they have arrested me and a dozen drivers while we sprang about the highway chasing the boards?

Three days after the OVNI I sat on the curb of the government dock, next to my uncrated new engine, and with *Jalan Jalan* moored stern-to the pier tight behind me. I sucked on a beer and waited for my hydraulic crane. Life in Luperón suited me. I ate every day at Lucas' restaurant where everything from crab to turtle steak, with beer, salad, fries or *tostones*, rice and beans cost only a couple of bucks total.

I considered the crowd on the pier a bit of a drawback. They considered me the town's TV. While the boat lay moored side-to they would hang their legs over the pier's edge and stare through my large saloon port lights all day and all night. Every move I made got discussed animatedly with me in the third person as though I performed remotely. When I emerged from the shower in a sarong, cheers went up. When I switched off the lights to sleep, a long "Aaaaahhh" lay down with me. Now that *Jalan Jalan* lay stern-to I hoped the audience would drop off.

Alarums and excursions rippled from the far end of town. Eventually a parade moved down onto the long pier, first little boys running backwards, yelling triumphantly, "*Pedi-bonay! Pedi-bonay!*". Behind them came the dogs, and behind the dogs came the layabouts, and behind them . . . the *monster*.

Only a hoarse "Oh, shit!" escaped me when I read the sign on the monster as it turned to come onto the pier — 'Pettybone'. A 105 foot erector set Pettybone crane for raising high steel. I couldn't believe it. I argued and cursed with the operators. I showed them my contract for a hydraulic crane.

Unperturbed, they patiently set up their rig, leaving 70 feet of it aside, and checked it all out, the 80 pound chain hook and all. Gobs of tar-like cable grease spat from the spools when they moved, and the operator took pulls at a bottle between grabs at a huge array of long squeeze-handle levers in front of him that made the spools move with heroic jerks. I went numb.

Jumping around like a mad organist at a great Wurlitzer from hell, the operator of the *Pedi-bonay* cradled the old engine through the companionway like a thief stealing the crown jewels from a bed of theft sensors. The monster bucked up and down and generally convulsed on the pier, but my engine crept gently through space unafraid. Same with the new one on the way in.

I genuinely stood in awe of that operator. On the way back through town I sat with the operator atop the thing like a conquering Caesar returning from the wars. Boys, dogs, layabouts and now pretty girls thronged the street.

I halted the spectacle to dodge into the Haitian homo's warehouse to buy a case of ice cold Presidente Grandes for the crew of the *Pedi-bonay* to ride home with. Just the thought of their voyage through the rural hamlets, each town giving them a hero's welcome, and more beer, and then on to the highway back to Santiago with the crew full of beer plowing through traffic — I wanted to ride with them to see all that.

Coming back into the sunlight I couldn't believe what I saw. A boy in shorts and tee shirt stood at the top of the raised boom, his feet wedged into the bottom rails of the boom's steel box and his bare knees braced hard out onto the top two rails. The boy took wire from the supply wound around his wrist and twisted a splice into the electric cables that they had snagged and pulled down while driving through town on the way in that morning.

The crowd gathered around the monster and yelled conflicting advice to the kid.

"That's the ground!"

"No, that's the hot wire!"

"No, no! That's what they call the neutered!"

I ran to the driver and begged him to order the kid down, "*RIGHT NOW!*" The crew just laughed.

"He'll get electrocuted for Christ's sake!" I could see myself in jail without the million peso bond they would levy on a patently rich Gringo.

"After all, didn't he rent a whole *Pedi-bonay* like it was nothing?"

The driver tried to put me at ease by telling me, "He's wearing sneakers. And anyway, we've got rubber tires". I pointed out that he'd let down the monster's steel legs. He just shrugged and cracked open a beer. I thought sickly how many wires they'd pulled down between Luperón and the highway fifteen miles distant. I didn't go with them.

Next weekend Rosa met me at the highway crossing in her little diesel Mazda. Driving back through the *campo* to get to Luperón we got held up by a ratty looking van type of ambulance going slow and making frequent stops in the middle of the narrow road so that farmers could gape at this wonderful lifesaving vehicle. We could make out that the white truck had "Dixie County" printed on it, but we couldn't read the rest, because they had covered it up with "*DONADO por el PRESIDENTE*".

We first saw the new-used ambulance with its rear doors flapping open as it careened around a sharp curve. Men stood hunched over inside holding on for dear life. On one of the stops we got close to it and recognized the mayor of Luperón and assorted dignitaries of all the political parties. They recognized me as the *Pedi-bonay* man and heartily hoisted their cups to me. I glanced sideways at Rosa to see if she appreciated the esteem with which the town's elders held me after only a week's residence.

Not a chance.

The ambulance went to the two man Luperón fire department which had a horse drawn pumper wagon that wouldn't move. Each day the firemen got into the new vehicle and crawled about town with its siren hooting. Each day they carried notables of lesser and lesser distinction to use the bar in the back, until the machine finally died in front of the pumper shed.

Some years have passed since the OVNI came to Luperón. The road in from the big highway now has a paved surface.

The Gomero has a two story concrete house in town only twelve feet across, for which reason he had to make a spiral staircase from the sidewalk out of iron rebar in order to reach his room above the shop. In the garage he has a small freezer and a generator to cool his patches. The sign across the front proclaims *GOMERO DE LUPERÓN*, and the loafers under it pay two pesos over cost for a Presidente beer.

The Evangelical church has a fancy new addition along with a yellow American school bus that still says "St. Andrews" on the side.

The sagging ambulance stands permanently in front of the mechanic's house.

Even considering the day the government paraded in with a banged up garbage truck painted "*DONADO por el PRESIDENTE* with "*CITY OF STEWART*" still showing faintly, nobody thinks anything really of note has happened in Luperón since the day of the OVNI.

Perhaps, if my luck holds, nothing ever will.