

ICWA LETTERS

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THE AMERICAS

Paige Evans is an Institute Fellow looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts.

Family Concerns

HAVANA, Cuba

October 15, 1999

By Paige Evans

While my husband Ariel Diaz and I are having dinner Friday, it pours — like it has every evening since we arrived in Remedios. Afterwards, as the fierce, clotted clouds and crack of lightning recede into the surrounding countryside, we notice that the Parroquia de San Juan Bautista de Remedios' doors are open, casting an amber glow into the town's main square. Mass has just ended, and townspeople of all ages file out of the church. We go inside.

First built in 1545 and recently renovated, this is the finest church I've seen in Cuba. As we admire its inlaid mahogany ceiling and gilt altar, a short, doughy man in casual clothing approaches. His eyes shimmer gently, and he asks me: "Are you a big belly?" This is how Cubans refer to pregnant women. I reply that I am. The little man excitedly takes me by the hand. "Come, let me show you something!" he exclaims, leading me down the aisle to a statue in the church's eaves. It is the Virgin Mary. Her arms are tenderly crossed above a swelling belly, and her features radiate peace.

"Look! This image is very rare! Usually, we see Mary depicted with the Baby Jesus in her arms, or breast feeding. But we do not see her pregnant! People from all over the world come to see this statue. It is from the Seville School. See her belly? From this angle, here. And look at her hands, at her face. She is so tranquil! So happy! Are you happy about your baby?" I tell him I am. The little man smiles brightly. "Well! You feel as she does, then."

* * *

A guard dourly stands duty at the gate outside El Carmen's *nave*, or *parrandas* warehouse, above a sign warning "DO NOT ENTER." The neighborhood's mascot — a hawk, with wings and talons forbiddingly extended — soars across the warehouse's massive metal doors. The male symbol, a circle with a diagonal arrow pointing upwards, surrounds the raptor; the word "POTENTE" is emblazoned beneath it. As he escorts us inside the warehouse, Alberto Gonzalez Medero, a burly, bristle-haired man with a walrus-moustache, nods toward the legend and chuckles at its obvious double meaning.

Alberto, a buyer for the Carmen neighborhood, introduces Ariel, Celia (the Director of Remedios' *Parrandas* Museum) and me to several others who also work at the *nave* year-round: his sister, who oversees the warehouse's merchandise; his brother-in-law, another buyer; and the president and vice-president of the neighborhood's *Directiva*, or governing body. El Carmen also employs three men to guard its *nave*, in rotating shifts, at all times. In the four months leading up to December's *parrandas*, the neighborhood will employ 60 more people to prepare El Carmen's *carozza* (a parade-style float) and *trabajo de plaza* (a towering, stationary structure) for

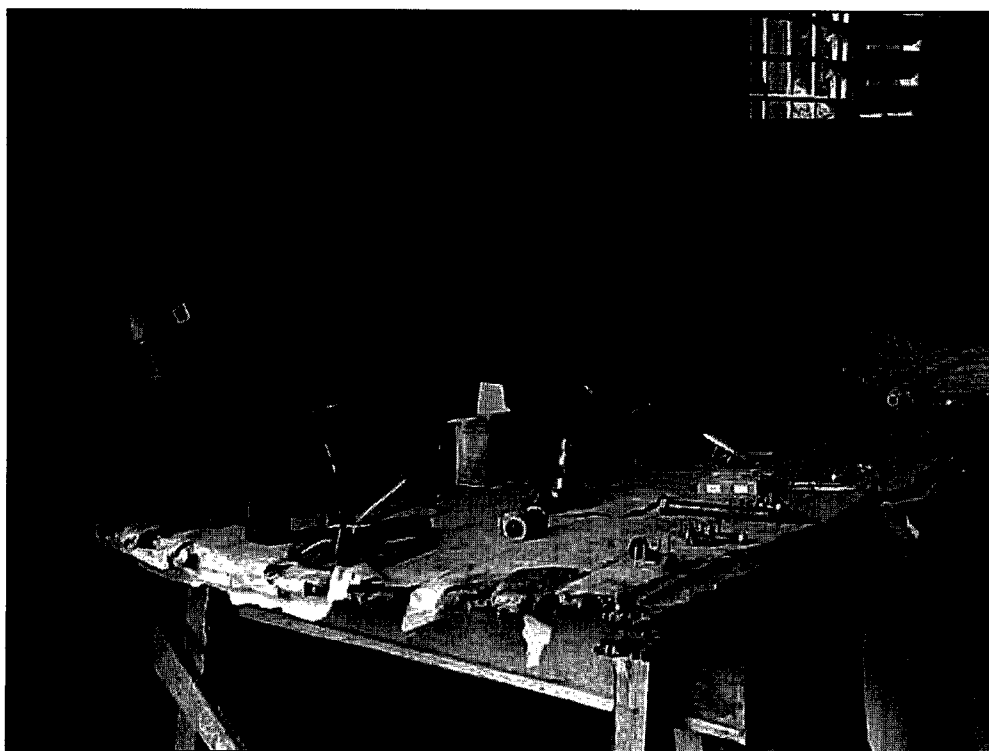


Photo: Ariel Diaz

Tools and other hardware items are sold for pesos to raise money for the parrandas.

the town's all-consuming annual festival.

Every year, the *parrandas* cost Remedios' two competing neighborhoods, El Carmen and San Salvador, around 500,000 pesos (U.S.\$25,000) each — no small sum in a country where salaries average about 200 pesos (U.S.\$10) a month. The rivals raise this money by renting out their mobile *carozza* platforms and *trabajo de plaza* interior frames to neighboring towns for *parrandas* held at different points in the year, and by working as middlemen in the buying and selling of tools and spare parts.

Alberto indicates a table just inside the warehouse's entrance displaying paintbrushes, hinges, screws, welding goggles and outmoded power tools with peso price tags. "We buy Russian tools and other equipment, which have been sitting unused in state-owned warehouses, and resell them at slightly higher prices to Remedianos and state companies that would not otherwise have access to these materials. We conduct all our business in pesos. The state forbids us to use dollars."

He leads us to a sizable, windowless room stocked with more hardware items. Inside, his young niece and daughter Anita, a wispy eight-year-old with saucer-eyes and tousled curls, are making designs on the floor with electrical cable. "Will you put that back, just as you found it, my sky?" Alberto rumples Anita's hair. Giggling delightedly, she ignores his request and follows us out of the room, as Alberto explains: "There is a truckload of screws, spigots, car parts and welding materials parked outside. Tomorrow, we will drive the merchandise to Havana and sell it for higher prices, and in greater quan-

tities, than we could here in Remedios.

"Both neighborhoods raise all our own funds for the *parrandas*. We operate like private businesses. And we pay the state a huge number of taxes for this privilege," Alberto grumbles. "We pay a Social Security tax. We pay a tax on profits from our sales. We pay the industrial market tax. And we pay the ONAT tax, simply for the right to sell things. Everyone who works privately in Cuba — people with restaurants in their homes, people who rent out rooms — must pay ONAT. It is a very high tax, a kind of state control of private businesses. In the end, we have less than 40 percent of what we started with.

"In the 1980s, the Directives operated more independently. But the state decided to impose greater control. In some ways, this was necessary. The quality of the *parrandas* varied too much from year to year. The state wanted to regulate things, to make sure everything continued smoothly from one year to the next. But the control it is imposing on us does not work. The state does not know how to control the *parrandas* effectively.

"It will not let us develop as a business. Last year, an Italian wanted to do business with our neighborhood. He wanted to import our *trabajos de plaza* and *carozzas* to use for an annual carnival in Italy. It would have meant a great deal of money for us. A lot of money. But the government cut off our negotiations. Foreigners who do business in Cuba must do it with the state and the state alone."

Alberto does not mention the huge heaps of green bananas and winter squash piled just outside the store-

room door. When Ariel asks about them, Alberto offers an incomplete explanation: "Those are gifts — for people at companies who help us to resolve problems with materials." (Later, Ariel informs me that this produce, which El Carmen uses for barter, must have been stolen from a state-owned farm.)

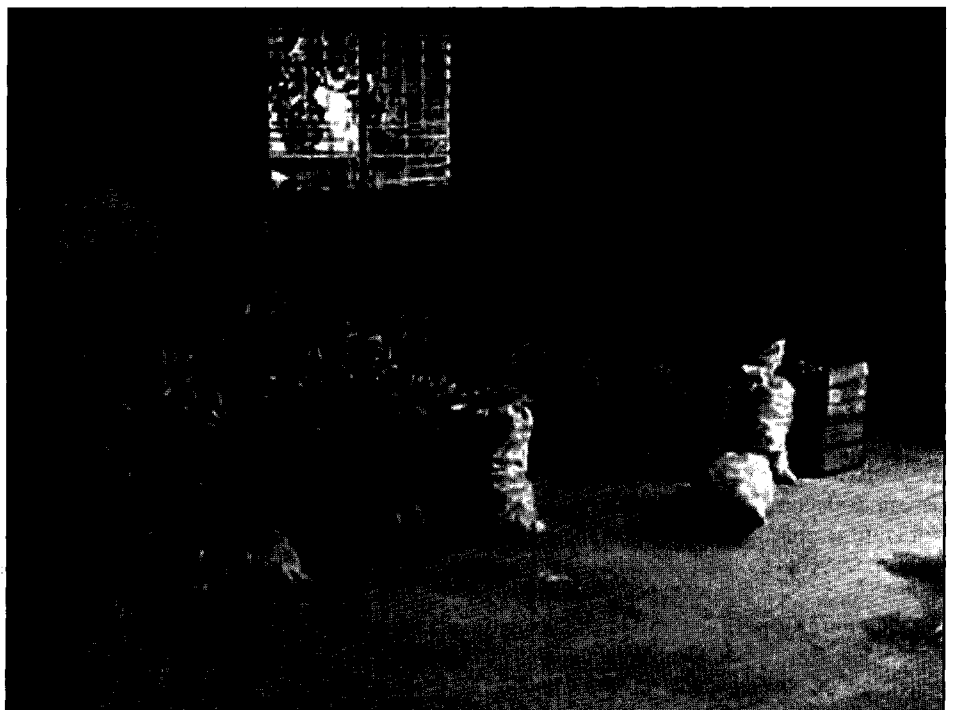
Alberto boasts: "Sixty per cent of all materials entering into this town do so because of the *parrandas*. The local government turns to us for help every time they need materials. If they want to fix the church, they come to our warehouse looking for wood. Remedios' economy depends on the *parrandas*. Our carpenters earn more than five times their regular wages when they work for the *parrandas*. The state companies where they are employed excuse them for four months, because they can earn so much more working for us.

"We all work long hours in the months before the *parrandas*, sometimes seven days a week. The wives and families who have been through the *parrandas* before are used to them. But for new workers, the *parrandas* can create serious problems. My own marriage ended the first November I worked for the *parrandas*, when my wife was five months pregnant. She could not understand why I was working late, or why I sometimes stayed out drinking with co-workers and business associates. She did not believe me when I said it was for the *parrandas*. She complained. She made my life miserable. Finally, I said: 'This is my work. This is the way it is.' And we got divorced." Alberto shrugs resignedly. I scan the warehouse for his daughter Anita, who is drawing a huge sunflower on a swath of brown paper with her cousin.

When I ask him about El Carmen's Directive, Alberto brightens. "In the Directive, we work together like a family. Each week, we sit down together and discuss what we have accomplished. We all feel responsible for what we did or did not do, because we depend on each other. When one person in the Directive does not do his job, all of us suffer. We are all very aware of this, and we work hard as a result. Also, we help each other. When something needs to be done, any of us will do it. It does not matter what someone's official position is. This does not happen in a state company. In a state company, no one feels responsible for anything, so nothing gets accomplished." Alberto gives a dismissive shrug.

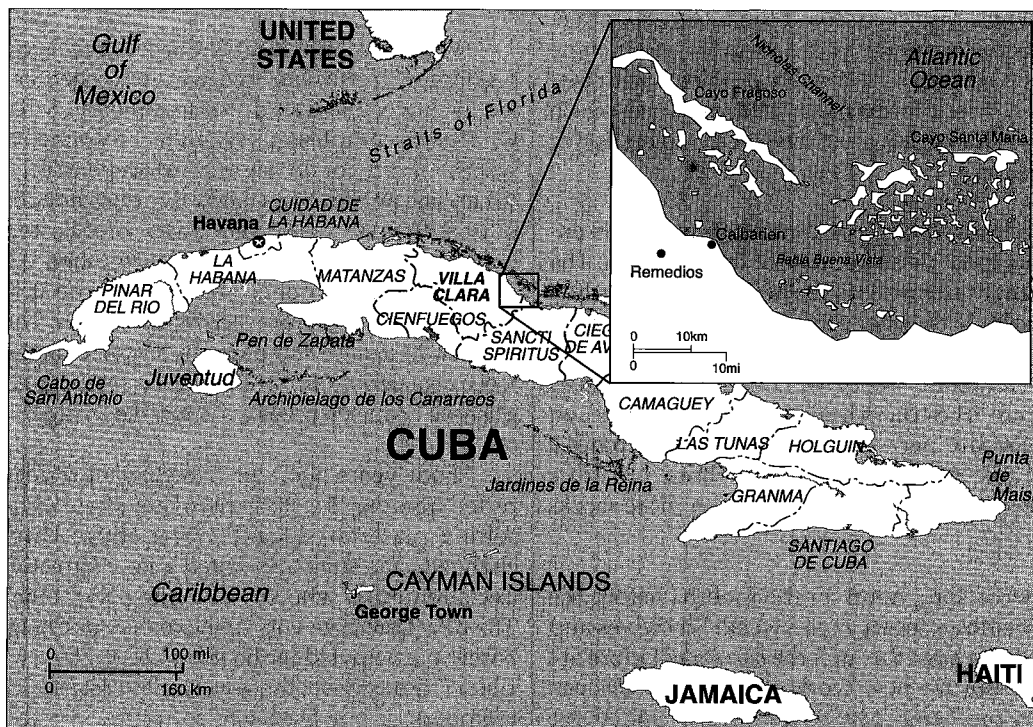
"Four years ago, our Directive's president was arrested because the state discovered he was buying and selling materials illegally. The entire Directive was changed. The state appointed a new Directive, a group of Communists who knew nothing about the *parrandas*. The new Directive was so incapable, our neighborhood barely participated in the *parrandas* that year. It was terrible. The next year, the government asked all the former members of our Directive to return — except for the president."

Alberto shows us a second storeroom, stuffed with materials for the *parrandas*: boxes of nails and screws, gallons of paint, paintbrushes, tape, cardboard, a mammoth spool of brown paper, sacks of plaster and cement, miles of electrical cable. "Our Directive starts gathering materials in January, just after the *parrandas* from the year before have ended. So by July, when we are considering designs for the *carozzas* and *trabajos de plaza*, we know



Heaps of green bananas
and winter squash and
boxes of oranges that El
Carmen uses for barter

Photo: Ariel Díaz



exactly what materials we do or do not have access to. After comparing the possible designs, we choose the ones we think, realistically, we can best execute.

"Our electrician and master carpenter analyze the practicalities of each design. The designers do not know about these things. They are painters, not builders. They do not realize, for example, that the townspeople cannot see the feet of the statues on the *carozzas*." Alberto nods towards a corner of the storeroom that's packed with light bulbs. "Most *carozzas* these days use about 20,000 light bulbs. *Trabajos de plaza*, which can reach 90 feet or more in height, also use a great deal of lights. Light bulbs are hard to get in Cuba. And they are expensive. You cannot imagine what we go through to get all those." Alberto grins, raising his eyebrows suggestively; but he does not elaborate.

In the warehouse's vast main room, Alberto points out two large, horizontal wooden spools, each with a crank on one side. Both are covered with raised metal squares, laid out in different patterns. Alberto cranks one of the spools. "This is the lighting system we use for the *carozzas* and *trabajos de plaza*. It works like the earliest computers. Both neighborhoods have used this system for years. It is very antiquated. Some people believe we should use modern computers to run our lights. But most of us do not want to change. It would be expensive. And we know how to use this system effectively. It is a tradition.

"Generally, people want to preserve traditions in the *parrandas*. But many people have begun criticizing the tradition of setting off fireworks in the middle of the square. Every year, there are more fireworks — the neigh-

borhood with the bigger and louder explosions wins. Nearly four thousand dangerous fireworks are now set off during the *parrandas*. Old people and children want to watch the *parrandas* from the square, where all the action is. Vendors want to sell concessions there. With all the fireworks, though, it has gotten too dangerous.

"Only authorized people are supposed to light the fireworks. Still, there are often casualties. Eight people have died in the past nine years setting off fireworks. This is usually due to neglect. People get drunk and set off fireworks, or they do not pay adequate attention to what they are doing." Alberto shakes his head knowingly. "I, myself, have never been hurt setting off fireworks during a *parrandas*." Anita, who has appeared beside her father, flashes an impish smile. "Yes you have, Papi. Remember the time you were burnt on top of your head?"

* * *

After spending a windy afternoon on the virgin, soon-to-be developed Santa Maria Key; Ariel and I, sandy and disheveled, climb into our wee, rented Subaru and drive back toward Remedios. As we pass a cluster of decaying cinder-block houses, four men leap out from the side of the road and try to flag us down. Assuming they're overly aggressive hitchhikers (a common breed in Cuba), Ariel swerves slightly to avoid them. Then he notices a young woman, sobbing, with an unconscious child in her arms. He stops the car.

"Take us to the clinic in Caibarien," the woman's gangly companion demands, as they squeeze into the back seat of the car. The little girl, who looks about two

years old, has a gaping wound in the center of her forehead. Blood gushes from it, dousing her mother's clothing. "My baby my baby my baby my baby my baby," the mother moans hysterically. The gangly woman explains: "She fell face first on the floor. Her mother was standing nearby when it happened, but she was not watching. She feels responsible."

As Ariel speeds through a maze of streets in Caibarien, honking at the flocks of cyclists and pedestrians ambling along in front of our car, the girl awakens and lets out a piercing shriek. Her mother panics and screams: "MYGOD! MYGOD! MYGOD! MYGOD!" The little girl bawls. Honking, dodging, Ariel steadily urges the mother: "Tell her it is all right. Tell her everything will be all right. It is better she is crying. It is better she is awake. It is a good sign." I feel nauseous and paralyzed. Like the girl's mother, I'm terrified. I cannot speak or look at the bleeding child.

When we drop them at the crumbling clinic, our car breaks down. We're steeped in complete darkness; nothing at all ignites. In the parking lot, as a wall of listless people watch him from the clinic's gaping windows, Ariel opens the car's hood and strains to check the engine. A swarm of mosquitoes descends and attacks us. They're all over me: my legs, my arms, my stomach, my face. I've never been bitten by so many mosquitoes in my life. I try to cover myself with my soggy towel, but it doesn't help. I wonder how Ariel can stand it out there.

The onlookers multiply. They mutter comments from the clinic's doors and windows but do not offer help. Ariel attaches a stray wire to the car's battery, and the car lights up. Swinging open the driver's door, he spots

the gangly woman in the crowd and asks her about the girl. She gives a helpless shrug. "They are looking for thread to stitch her head."

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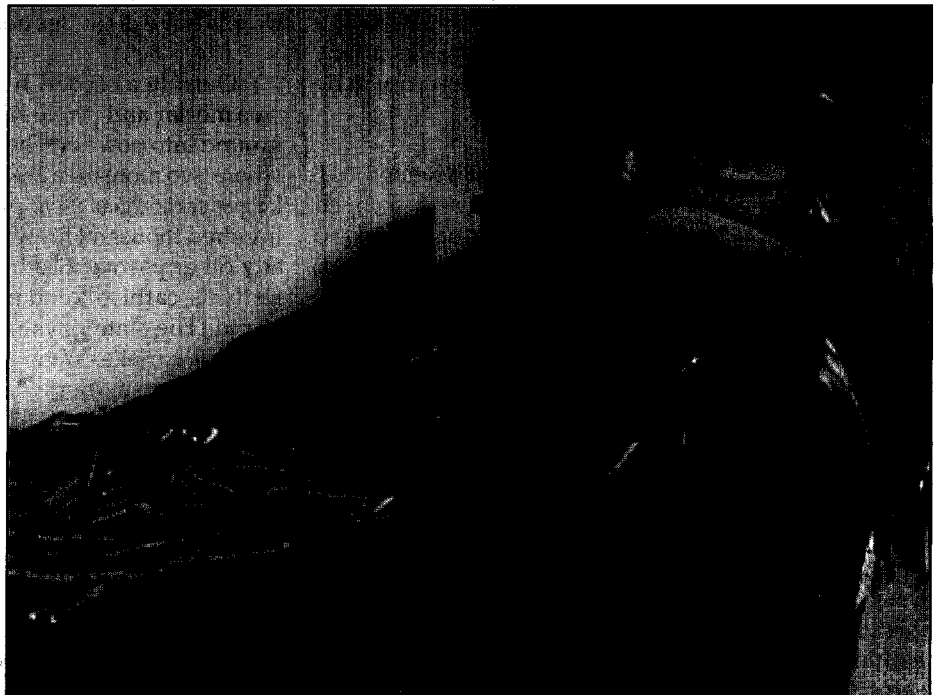
Remedios' fireworks factory, the oldest in Cuba, was first established by a pair of entrepreneurial Spaniards in 1884. Fireworks were incorporated into the *parrandas* celebration shortly thereafter, adding brilliance and color — as well as a war-zone atmosphere — to the town's popular festival. Today, the *pirotecnia* stands just outside of town: a safety measure in case of explosions. Also for safety reasons, the factory is made up of several separate huts, all surrounded by a wire mesh fence.

At the front gate, we ask a porcine man in a grungy green army cap, who is known as "Lele," for the factory's Director, who is known as "Pupi." Eventually, Pupi appears. A caramel-skinned, soft-spoken man with kind eyes and gray-stubbed cheeks, he leads us through an overgrown meadow to the first whitewashed hut. Inside, two men sit at rough-hewn counters, stuffing colored powders into crude cardboard cartridges.

"We make fireworks here in a very primitive way. We do everything by hand. We grind all the chemicals into powder by hand." Pupi shows me a thin pole made from a sugar cane husk that's used for launching fireworks. "We use sugar cane husks for many things, because they are always available."

Lele, who has followed us into the hut, stares suspiciously at me with beady, pink-rimmed eyes. "Unfortunately, we suffer from a terrible blockade" — the U.S.

*The fireworks in this factory
are made completely by hand.*





Lele shows us how chemicals are ground into powder.

economic embargo. "For this reason, we have access to very limited resources. We have to be inventive, to work with what we can." Lele spits when he speaks. "Last year, a Spanish fireworks manufacturer visited us here. He explained how modern fireworks are made, and he set off a number of them to show us the latest developments. He was a good man, a humble man. And he was a friend of Cuba. That is the most important thing. He wanted what was best for Cuba." Another suspicious glare. "Although he has a machine that can produce 18,000 fireworks daily, the Spaniard was impressed with what we do here. It is not that our products are more beautiful. It is not that we can make more of them. But we know our trade completely. We can build these fireworks at any time, in any place. He does not have the expertise to do that."

"There is no pyrotechnics school here in Remedios," Pupi says. "All of us who work here have developed our craft through experience. Most of us have worked here for thirty or forty years. We began as boys, because we liked it. You must like this work to do it. Many of us learned from our fathers and grandfathers. It is often a family thing. My uncle was a fireworks manufacturer here in Remedios before the Revolution. He ran his own company, which was very successful. He encouraged my father to join the business. Then my father taught me and my brother.

"My father gave me two books on pyrotechnics. They were published in the 1950s, before the Revolution, when fireworks manufacturers in Cuba had access to more sophisticated materials than we do now. So they are not really helpful as guides. At this *pirotecnica*, we have learned each chemical's precise weight and composition

empirically. We know from experience where the dangers are and how to avoid them. We avoid problems by doing things in a specific order and by being careful not to mix certain chemicals. We can tell from the smell when chemicals have not been mixed correctly."

Pupi leads us out of the hut, past several knee-high vats filled with water. "We keep these filled in case something ignites, and we need to put it out." Lele adds: "We have never had an accident here, thank God. There have been serious accidents in other fireworks factories — in Cienfuegos and Camaguey — where fourteen or more people have died. But not here."

Outside a second hut, Lele demonstrates the massive mortar and pestle where the factory's chemicals are ground into powder. Then Pupi brings us to another hut, where two more men are packing different chemicals into larger cartridges. "We produce between two and three hundred thousand fireworks each year. That is more than any other pyrotecnica in Cuba. We make fireworks for festivals, carnivals and political celebrations all over the island. The state pays us according to how many fireworks we make. We are always paid the same rate for our work, no matter what festival we are working for.

"Both of Remedios' neighborhoods buy fireworks from us. They are two of our many clients. Generally, we dedicate one month to each neighborhood — exactly the same amount of time for each order. We are all from Remedios. Each of us sympathizes with one of the two neighborhoods. But as workers, we are not partial. Inside the factory, we are pyrotechnicians. We do the best work we can, for whomever. When we leave the factory, we can have tremendous arguments over our different

neighborhoods. But inside, we work amiably together." Pupi sighs. "Each year, the Directives from the two neighborhoods order more and more fireworks —"

"They want the biggest and loudest explosions possible!" Lele interjects heatedly. "They want bombs! They want a war!"

"They are limited by finances, of course. And by the municipal government, which specifies the number and kind of fireworks they are permitted to set off —"

Lele's face has turned a deep red. "The barbarity of the bombs and all that, it has got to stop!"

"They no longer order the quieter, more beautiful fireworks —"

"We can make fireworks that are works of art! Fireworks with quality!"

Pupi's tone is pensive, resigned: "Those kinds of fireworks cost more, of course. And the neighborhoods are no longer interested in them."

"We have lost some of the great traditions of the *parrandas*. The finer fireworks. And the *repiques* —" Afro-Cuban percussive preambles played by roving bands for months before the *parrandas*, stirring the town's festive and competitive spirits — "have lost their importance," Lele laments. "The *repiques* are a great tradition."

Both men shake their heads sadly. A mournful silence weights the air. Then Pupi's eyes sparkle, and a glimpse of a smile plays across his lips. "Still, there are no days more beautiful than those leading up to the *parrandas*, when the *trabajos de plaza* and the *carozzas* are being assembled in the main square. During those days, the townspeople's curiosity builds, together with their expectations. That is really something to see." Then Pupi's melancholy, momentarily abated, returns in full force. His eyes dull, and his mouth tightens with anguish. "After the *parrandas*, though, we Remedianos feel a profound emptiness. We feel fallen."

* * *

On returning to Havana, I go to Etecsa, Cuba's state-owned telephone company, to pay my July bill. Etecsa's offices for international phone lines, which are paid for in dollars, are far less crowded than those for local peso phones; but a substantial number of people are waiting in the lobby nonetheless. I ask "El ultimo?" or "The last one?" — a perennial question in this land of lines — and stand behind the surly Italian who grunts and raises his hand. When Etecsa's receptionist notes my protruding belly, she beckons me forwards. In Cuba, pregnant women don't have to wait on lines. Every Cuban seems to

know this rule and honor it without qualms. Though often loath to force my way in front of people (many of them older or in worse shape, physically, than I am), I follow the receptionist's lead and move to the head of the line.

"CONGRATULATIONS!" the two women who work with phone payments cry out as I enter their office. Disregarding the squat, pasty-faced Russian she's waiting on, one of them — a lovely, coffee-colored lady with a dash of Robin's-egg shadow above each eye — asks me: "Are you going to give birth there, or here in Cuba?" This is usually the first question Cubans ask when they note I'm pregnant — before "How many months?" or "Is it a boy or girl?" I answer that I hope to give birth in the States, provided the baby's not premature and they let me on the plane. (Cuban air regulations forbid women to fly in their third trimester of pregnancy, and even at the end of the sixth month a medical certificate is required, verifying length of pregnancy and the woman's fitness to fly. This cutoff point is a full two months earlier than in most countries.) Nodding approvingly, the attendant jokes: "You come to Cuba to procreate, but you take the child out of the country... just like all the other foreigners!"

When the Russian has waddled off and she's attending to my phone bill, I ask the lovely lady whether I could have an international phone line installed in Remedios. "REMEDIOS?!" she gasps. "Remedios?! Why would you go to Remedios?!" I tell her I'm interested in writing about the town and its *parrandas*. On hearing this, the other attendant chimes in: "REMEDIOS?!"

The concept of a foreigner relocating to Remedios — by choice — strikes them both as hilarious, and together they explode into raucous peals of laughter. When their mirth finally subsides, the lovely lady tries to address my question. Wiping gleeful tears from her eyes, she flips through a directory of Etecsa offices nationwide, murmuring: "Remedios... Remedios... Where *is* Remedios? What is it near? Cienfuegos? Camaguey? Ciego de Avila?" Clearly, the town does not hold the same significance and appeal for these Habaneras as it does for its own inhabitants.

Intent on helping me nonetheless, the lovely lady tries phoning several regional Etecsa offices to ask whether international lines reach the remote Remedios, where few households have even peso phones. The usual telecommunications frustrations — congestion in the phone lines, operators that don't answer, constant busy signals — hinder her efforts. After a long stretch of futile phoning, she suggests: "I will keep trying, and I will call you at home when I have more information. I am sure something can be done." Though I doubt the lovely lady will actually follow up, I believe her assurance that a solution can be arranged. In today's Cuba, when someone is paying in dollars, it usually can. □