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THE AMERICAS

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

Breeding with the Enemy

—Part 1—

Bal Harbor, Florida

March 16, 2000

By Paige Evans

I began to suspect I was pregnant at the beginning of May. By the middle of May, I was sure of it. I had all the tell-tale signs. But then again, maybe I wasn't. I'd had all the tell-tale signs before and found it was a false alarm.

Various factors in my life made the prospect of an unplanned pregnancy both more appealing and more complicated than it had seemed at other times. I'd turned 36 in November and had been longing to have a family of my own for years. For the past nine months, I'd been in a strong relationship with a man I love — a fine man who would likely be an exceptional father to our child and husband to me.

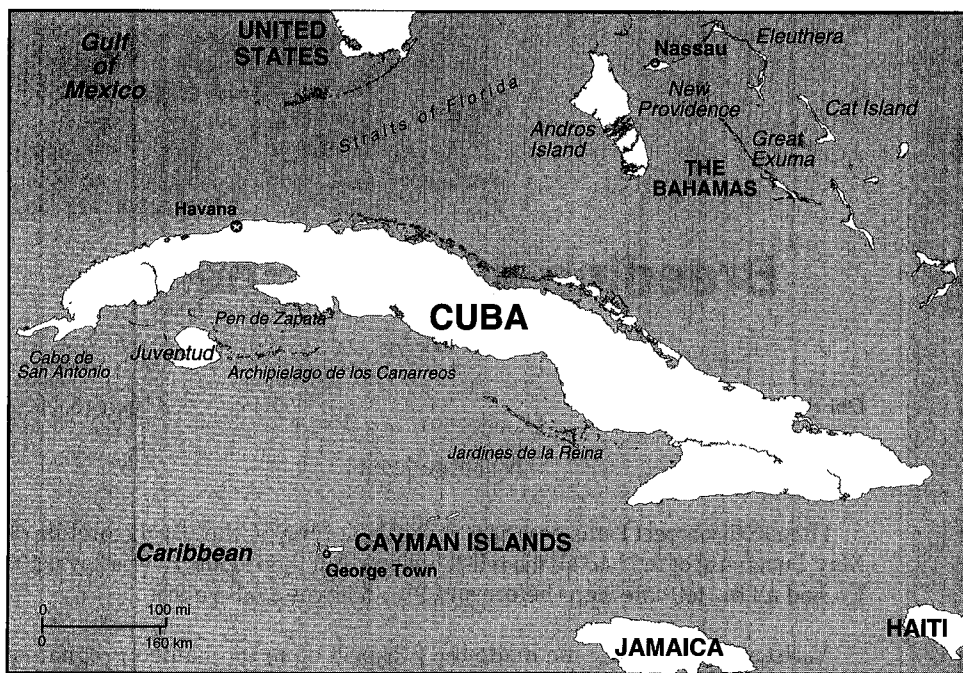
But that man was from an "enemy nation" and from a world within that nation vastly different from my own. I'd lived a privileged life of travel and intellectual pursuit in an Ivory, Ivy domain. He'd begun working at blue-collar jobs at 14, went to high school at night and, at the age of 29, had barely been outside his birthplace of Havana. I wondered about merging these two worlds, about bridging the diplomatic divide between our two nations and about establishing a life together in the States. And I worried about jeopardizing the extraordinary Fellowship that had brought me to Cuba.

If I were pregnant and decided to have the child, there were also medical concerns to consider. I'd most likely receive my prenatal care in Cuba — which, due to a lack of information, technology and medicine, doesn't always merit its reputation for outstanding medical care. Plus, Cuban prenatal care might not be covered by Blue Cross/Blue Shield. (Though a permit from the U.S. Department of Treasury allowed me to do research in Cuba, the Trading With the Enemy Act, which prohibits U.S. companies and citizens from spending dollars in Cuba, might prohibit coverage in Cuba by a U.S. health insurance provider.)

There were other issues, too. If my maybe baby were born in Cuba to a Cuban father, Cuban law could prohibit my bringing the baby back to the States with me. My paranoid landlady might kick me out for fear that, if my child were residing in her house when he was born, he could inherit the house under Cuban law. And most disturbingly, early in what would be my first trimester I'd unwittingly taken an unusually high dosage of a potent antibiotic called Metronidazol — a medication proven to cause cancer and birth defects in animal fetuses.

* * *

Early pregnancy tests don't exist in Cuba. Neither do blood or urine tests for pregnancy. In Cuba, suspected pregnancies are confirmed or refuted by



the technician — a jolly, moon-faced man with thick glasses and a gap-toothed smile — chatted amiably with me. While pushing up my shirt and rolling down my shorts, he posed the standard introductory questions: “What are you doing in Cuba? How long have you been here? Do you like Cuba?”

When I said I do like Cuba, the ultrasound specialist’s tone turned playfully ironic: “All foreigners who visit Cuba like it here.” He was probably referring to the great divide: the privileges foreigners with dollars enjoy that Cubans don’t; the

sonogram. This seems an expensive and elaborate method, given that in the States you can walk into almost any drugstore or supermarket, pay 15 dollars and know with almost 100 per cent certainty whether you’re pregnant or not.

Like most services in Cuba, health care is strictly segregated between Cubans and foreigners. The clean, well-lit and relatively well-equipped Cira Garcia Clinic in Havana’s affluent Miramar neighborhood is dedicated to health care for foreigners; patients pay internationally competitive fees in dollars.

At Cira Garcia’s pharmacy and the other “international pharmacy” across the street from it, customers are required to present their passports to prove foreign citizenship: Cubans, even with the dollars to pay for it, are not permitted to buy medicine there. They, instead, are forced to buy medicine at woefully understocked *peso* pharmacies or on the black market, or to have relatives bring or send it via courier from the United States. Though the government would deny it, many Cubans claim the medicine sold to foreigners at the international pharmacies has been donated to Cuba by other countries in the form of foreign aid.

I went to Cira Garcia for a sonogram one morning in early June. As instructed, I’d drunk plenty of water so the sonogram image would appear more clearly. I had an appointment but I ended up waiting for two hours anyway. After living in Cuba for a year and a half, I’ve grown more used to waiting; but my distended bladder made the delay excruciating.

As I lay down on the table in the ultrasound room,

rights and freedoms we have that ordinary Cubans are denied; the limited, very different view we get of their country. But my bladder was bursting, and I was worried about what the sonogram would tell me. I didn’t want to get into it. So I let his comment go.

“I worked in Ethiopia. I found the women there enchanting,” the technician reminisced, while slathering my stomach with jelly. As he moved a sonar device across my belly, he narrated what I should be seeing on the sonar screen: “This is its head... See the nose — there? And here are its legs...” So I was pregnant, after all. My insides clenched, and my pulse quickened. I began to panic. I stared at the screen and tried to focus, but I couldn’t make out the different body parts. They all look like a blur to me, underwater images in varying shades of gray.

The sonogram specialist flipped a switch when he reached the fetus’s heart, and I heard its heartbeat through a speaker. I started to cry. I didn’t realize a fetus was so highly developed at this early stage. I didn’t know I’d hear its heart. “I love to do sonograms on pregnant women,” the specialist cooed. “It is such a joyous experience for a mother to see her growing child. I have seen a baby girl sucking her thumb in the uterus. I have seen a baby boy scratching his testicles.”

* * *

Dr. Fernandez, the expressionless, tobacco-stained gynecologist who prescribed the unusually high dosage of Metronidazol I’d taken, gruffly dismissed my worries about the drug’s possible adverse effects on the baby. “We do not prescribe Metronidazol to pregnant women. But there is no evidence of the drug causing birth defects in

human fetuses," he informed me in a rapid fire, barely intelligible mutter.

Though he treats foreign patients at Cira Garcia, Dr. Fernandez speaks no English. Surprisingly few Cubans do. During most of the three decades that Cuba depended on Soviet subsidies, Cuban students were taught Russian in school. International tourism was only revived in the early '90s, and learning English has just recently become both permitted and a priority. Also, Cubans — even those like Dr. Fernandez who now work almost exclusively with foreigners — rarely tailor their Spanish to make it comprehensible to non-native speakers. They speak extremely fast, cut off word endings and run their words together. Whenever I asked Dr. Fernandez to repeat himself, he did so begrudgingly, in exactly the same accelerated mutter.

"If you ever want to have a biological child, you should have this one. You are already *thirty-six* years old." He made 36 sound ancient. "If you wait any longer, it will be very hard to carry a pregnancy." The doctor was clearly impatient with my indecision and anxiety and ready for my consultation to be over. He began to flip through the files stacked on his desk and curtly responded to a few more questions. Then, without explanation, he rose and strode out of the office.

The moment he was gone, his nurse — a chatty, matronly type — sprang up from the chair beside me and settled into the one behind Dr. Fernandez's desk. "There is no perfect time to have a child," she mused. "I have three sons, and none of them came at a perfect time. When I got pregnant with my third son, my husband did not want me to have him. But I told him: 'This is my problem. You leave this to me.' And our third son turned out to be our best child."

I smiled and nodded. I wasn't sure what to say. A nurse had never spoken with me in such a confessional, unprofessional manner before. (Cubans often leap to the personal in a way I hadn't experienced before coming here.) I appreciated the nurse's intentions: she seemed genuinely to want to help me with her motherly advice. But I had no desire to open up to her.

The nurse didn't seem to care. Unabashed, she went on: "You are with a good man, a serious person." Dubbing someone a "serious person" is a major compliment in Cuba. But I'm not sure how she gathered this. She'd met Ariel only once, at a recent appointment where he barely spoke. "In the end, though, it does not matter who the father is. Children belong to their mother."

"The problems between Cuba and the United States should not get in the way of your having this family." This nurse was on a roll. "We Cubans do not hold anything against the people of the United States. Your government is the problem. Not one person I have met from

the United States is in favor of the blockade." I didn't bother pointing out that Americans in favor of the U.S. economic embargo against Cuba — mostly Cuban expatriates who'd had their property seized during the Revolution — wouldn't visit Cuba on principle. So naturally the nurse had never met them. "The blockade hurts the Cuban people terribly. The government of the United States wants Cuba to do everything a certain way: its way. It will not accept Cuba doing anything else. So, for forty years, the United States has made Cuba suffer."

I'd heard this argument countless times before while living here in Cuba. And I mostly agree with it. For 40 years, the embargo has made the Cuban people suffer. It's undeniably hard — almost impossible — for a neighboring island nation to survive economically without official trade with the United States.

The embargo is not only inhumane, though; it's also misguided. Rather than hurting Cuba's Communist government, as it's designed to do, it has offered Castro an ideal scapegoat for all his country's ills. In the eyes of the world, it's made Cuba into a martyr: a courageous renegade who dares defy its powerful bully of a neighbor, the United States. And all Cuba's ills do not stem from the U.S. embargo. Castro's totalitarian dictatorship and the makeshift Communist system it's cobbled together are partly responsible.

"Besides," I grumbled internally. "I'm here for a gynecological check-up. Why the hell do international politics have to enter into it?" The answer, I knew, was simple: I was a U.S. citizen living in Cuba. Politics entered into every aspect of my life, whether I wanted them to or not.

* * *

Later that day, I returned home to find my cleaning lady, Luz, scrubbing my clothes in the bathroom sink. Luz is 59 years old; when her husband died three years ago, she moved from the provinces to live with her daughter in Havana. Though Luz's husband worked for 35 years operating machines in a soap factory, his pension — the equivalent of \$3.50 per month — isn't enough for her to live on. So, like many older people in Cuba, Luz lives with her adult children and works *particular*, or privately, to earn some money.

Luz had been trying to convince me to have a *Cubanito*, or "little Cuban," for months. She'd repeatedly mentioned a healer who sells drops to infertile women, assuring me the drops worked wonders. Though not a *santeria* initiate, Luz, like many Cubans, embraces some of the religion's beliefs; and she turns to healers and *babalaos* (*santeria's* priests) in times of need.

I didn't mention my pregnancy to Luz. I wanted to decide whether to go ahead with it first. As we sat down to lunch, though, she launched into a lecture about the

benefits of motherhood: "Every woman should have a child. Children give you a reason for living. Otherwise, you go along and go along, and what for? Why all the struggle? With children, you know what your purpose is. You have someone else to think about, all the time! You do not have the same kind of liberty anymore, and that is a relief. When you are old, you can look back and think: 'That is my child. I did that.'"

"Ariel is a good person. He would fight to help you and your family. And he is still young. But in the end, it does not really matter who the father is. A child belongs to the mother." This was beginning to sound like a Cuban mother's mantra. Maybe both Luz and the nurse thought this because of Cuba's high divorce rate and because divorced Cuban fathers rarely maintain relationships with their children. Or maybe the *machismo* still prevalent in Cuba prevents men from being involved fathers, regardless of marital status.

I ate my spaghetti and didn't say much. Luz, like the nurse, wasn't fazed by my silence. "It does not matter if you are rich or poor," she told me. "I was always poor, but I lived well for a poor person. I never worked when my husband was alive. And I never wanted for anything." I didn't bother reminding Luz that she was referring to the period when Soviet subsidies provided for the necessities of most Cubans, and that these days she constantly complains about escalating costs and how the state no longer provides what it once did. While clearing my plate, Luz stared at me intently: "What mattered was my family, not money."

That night, I visited my kindhearted, beleaguered friend Osvaldo, who's like a surrogate Cuban father to me. Osvaldo knows both me and Ariel, and he understands something of our situation personally, culturally and politically. He was thrilled by the news and urged: "Have the child! Maternity is one of the basic roles of every woman. It helps make her whole. And you do not have many more years in which to have a child."

I glanced up at the crucifix hanging on the living room wall above his gray head. Osvaldo is a devout Catholic. Before the 1959 Revolution, about 85 percent of Cubans were Roman Catholics, with varying degrees of devotion. Afterwards, Cuba's Communist government expelled scores of priests from the country and discouraged Cubans — particularly Catholics — from openly practicing religion. Religion has been increasingly tolerated in Cuba, though, over the past decade. Since the Pope's visit in 1998, Catholic churches are being renovated across the country, and many Cubans are once again openly embracing Catholicism.

"Ariel is a good person. That is not easy to find. It does not matter that he is not educated. He is hard-working. I am sure he will have success in the United States if he goes there." Osvaldo's gaze followed mine up to the

crucifix. "Jesus said not to worry about the future. He told us to live each day as it comes."

Osvaldo's wife, Elsa, appeared carrying a plate of mango slices. Elsa usually has a warm, heartfelt laugh; that night she seemed withdrawn. When I asked her what was wrong, she heaved a deep sigh. "My god, my god," she lamented, "I am thinking of retiring." Elsa liked her job as secretary in a bicycle factory: it got her out of the house and allowed her to buy useful black-market items from colleagues. But she was hoping her 28-year-old neurologist daughter, Diamela, would leave her boorish boyfriend and come home again to live. "If I am at home during the day, I will be able to help Diamela with whatever she needs."

Like Elsa, Osvaldo is a dedicated, self-sacrificing parent. He rises early each weekday morning and rides his shoddy moped across town to Diamela's boyfriend's house, then delivers his daughter to the hospital where she's in residence before heading to work himself. His daughter is his *raison d'être*. His daughter is his hope. I, in contrast, had always envisioned myself achieving a balance of giving, engaged motherhood and personal fulfillment via a career. Elsa and Osvaldo's example of unadulterated selflessness in the face of parenthood is not quite what I had in mind.

"You should visit Diamela at Calixto Garcia tomorrow," Osvaldo suggested. "She could arrange for tests for you there and recommend another doctor for you." Many Cubans I know approach health care in this way. They seek out a doctor through some sort of connection to ensure personalized attention or bring a "little present," like a bottle of cooking oil, to the doctor at their local polyclinic to guarantee quality care.

When Ariel and I arrived at Calixto Garcia, the receptionist was deeply involved in a phone conversation. "And the hair color?" she purred. "Does the hair color matter to you? What about the color of her eyes?" She clearly didn't intend to cut short her conversation to attend to us. Why should she? She was only earning the equivalent of about six dollars a month, which, with escalating prices, didn't go very far. With the meager wages and poor working conditions of most Cuban state jobs, there isn't much incentive to perform well.

Living in Cuba has made me more of a Capitalist. Before coming here, I was charmed by Che Guevara's rebellious idealism and socialist dream of ending poverty and injustice. But the realities of modern-day Cuba bear scant connection to Che's heady ideals. Why should a worker make sacrifices to contribute to a repressive state that, at this point anyway, offers its citizens very little?

When she finally deigned to acknowledge us, the receptionist told us Diamela wasn't there. But Ariel and I decided to look for her, anyway. Calixto Garcia's corri-

dors were dark and empty, their walls a chipped, grim beige. A young doctor in a lime-green miniskirt and high-heeled mules (with a white, short-sleeved shirt thrown over the ensemble to make it look more official) directed us toward the on-duty room. We found the shy and wispily beautiful Diamela inside, eating a piece of cake. On hearing my predicament, she told me: "No Cuban doctor who works with Cubans can have you as a patient. Unless, of course, you marry Ariel and decide to become a Cuban citizen. Otherwise, it is illegal and very dangerous to do." She furrowed her brow. "The state is getting strict about this."

Then Diamela's doeish eyes brightened. "But I can recommend an excellent gynecologist who treats foreigners," she assured me. "His name is Doctor Fernandez." My spirits sank. In the States, I'd have a range of doctors to choose from for prenatal care. But as a foreigner here in Havana, there seemed to be only one doctor available to me: a surly, uncommunicative man, in whose begrudging counsel I placed little confidence.

* * *

The following day, I polled my American friends on their reactions to my situation. Some felt my quandary was too deeply personal for them to make suggestions — a far cry from the Cuban nurse! Others encouraged me to have the baby, as my Cuban advisors had done. Still others urged caution. They suggested I wait until my financial and romantic situations were more secure. They warned me to think seriously before "abandoning

my dreams" and subjecting myself to "a life of servitude." They argued that if I aborted this child and then decided to start a family later, I could use fertility treatments or artificial insemination — or, if necessary, I could adopt.

These counsels of caution contrasted sharply with the advice I'd received in Cuba. They advocated a level of financial, reproductive, even psychic control that ordinary Cubans have little possibility of achieving and so don't consider. But in the educated, professional Manhattan world where I was born and raised, control is a valued commodity.

In New York, most of my peers had pursued their careers early on and were just now beginning to have children; in Cuba, I should be a grandmother by now. In my New York world, adoption, artificial insemination and fertility treatments are all standard features in the reproductive landscape; in Cuba, they're rarely an option. To my New York professional friends, I was a bohemian, barely keeping myself (let alone a baby) financially afloat; in Cuba, I was a rich foreigner — and besides, who considers finances in deciding to have a child, anyway?

I, personally, think control is overrated; in most cases, it's also illusory. I went ahead and had the baby, am letting Fate take care of itself. And I know I'll never, ever regret that decision. The love I feel for my son is more tender, pure and joyful than anything I've ever experienced. If I end up abandoning my dreams, I can't imagine blaming it on him. So far, he's only enriched them. □

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