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

"Cuba-Cola"

HAVANA, Cuba September 27, 1998

By Paige Evans

After an extensive apartment search, I have finally chosen a home for myself in a centrally-located neighborhood called Vedado, where most of Havana's cultural organizations are located and many of its artists live. The apartment is on the upper floor of a colonial building. It has its own separate entrance, a rarity in Havana's rental world. This feature alone is hugely appealing to me. I had my own apartment for years in New York and am accustomed to independent living; two months of renting rooms in various Cuban family homes proved a trial for me. My new apartment has other attractions, as well: 20-foot ceilings, huge windows that offer ample light and ventilation, original tile floors and lovely antique furniture. I find it charming.

Upon moving in, however, I realize the place has its downside: ancient wiring, a sagging bed, peeling paint, outlets so old they no longer hold a plug, a stove that leaks gas and a cistern so clogged it prevents us from having any water my first few days there. Plus, my new landlady does not want me to have an international phone line installed, for fear the government will penalize her if I use it to communicate politically controversial information. America Online's e-mail service is my pipeline to the outside world, so her reluctance on this front is a major issue. But every Havana apartment has its quirks. I decide to stay, urge my landlady to make repairs and invest in some minor adjustments myself. I am eager to make a home here. No small feat.

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A new friend and fellow New Yorker who has lived in Havana for the past 20 years warns me that old wiring will destroy my electronic equipment. This concerns me. I depend on my computer and don't know how I'd get by without it. I ask around about wiring. Each person I speak with proffers an equally firm but differing opinion. My friend's warning, coupled with the fact of frequent power outages, leads me to Havana's sole computer store in search of a high-powered surge protector. The store sometimes sells what I am looking for, but this morning I am told *"No hay,"* or "There is none" — a constant refrain here in Cuba.

Over the next two weeks, I check into the computer store on an almost daily basis. Finally, they have the surge protector. It is manufactured by Tripp Lite, a U.S. company based in Chicago, Illinois. Though the U.S. Department of Treasury trade embargo prohibits the sale of U.S. products to Cuba, items such as Marlboro cigarettes, Nike sneakers, Levis and Coca-Cola are available throughout Havana. These products are either manufactured at a plant outside the U.S., or they make their way to Cuba via a third

country such as Mexico or Panama. Their prices are generally much higher here than they are in the U.S. A pair of Levi's jeans, for example, costs around $70 in Havana, as compared to roughly $40 in New York.

I ask the saleswoman at the computer store if the surge-protector's two-year warranty applies in Cuba. She laughs, shaking her head. Then I ask her about the surge protector's three-prong plug, as nearly all outlets here have only two prongs. She recommends I cut off the plug's third prong. I scan the side of the surge protector's packaging, which carries a single warning in bold lettering: "USE WITH A THREE-WIRE ELECTRICAL SYSTEM ONLY." I suggest to the saleswoman that the plug's third prong must serve a purpose, otherwise it would not be made this way. With complete confidence, she assures me: "Do not worry about it. Here in Cuba, everyone cuts off the third prong. It makes no difference at all!"

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I have plans to spend the afternoon shopping with Ismael, the unusually hardworking and honest handyman I've hired to install a grounded electrical cable and new, three-pronged outlets. In anticipation of our outing, I go early to a *Cadeca*, or government-run currency exchange booth, to exchange U.S. dollars for Cuban pesos. Though it is only 9 a.m., there is already a long line for the *Cadeca*. As is customary here, I ask who is "*el ultimo*," — the last person — and join the end of the line.

Until 1993, the possession of even a single U.S. dollar was a crime here, punished by a jail sentence. Though it is still technically illegal for Cubans to earn U.S. dollars outside of tips, countless Cubans now do so. The Cuban economy currently operates with three official currencies: the Cuban peso, the U.S. dollar, and the *peso convertible*, a U.S. dollar-equivalent created in 1994 by the Cuban government in an effort to regulate the dollar/peso exchange rate. *Pesos convertibles* are accepted anywhere goods and services are priced in U.S. dollars, but they are rarely used.

In 1994, the black-market exchange rate was 120 Cuban pesos to one U.S. dollar. In 1995, the Cuban government introduced *Cadecas* in an effort to control currency speculation. The *Cadecas* and the black market now offer almost identical exchange rates. A sign hanging outside the *Cadeca* lists today's rate at 21 pesos to one U.S. dollar. This rate has varied only slightly over the course of my ten weeks here. Cubans all seem to know the exact exchange rate on any given day, and most can mentally convert prices between pesos and dollars with impressive speed and precision.

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Though the *Cadeca* is a government-run booth, the official exchange rate is actually one Cuban peso to one U.S. dollar. Government-run tourist hotels — many of which ordinary Cubans are not allowed to patronize, even if they have the dollars to do so — offer this rate at their front desks. Entrance fees for most cultural events and establishments also reflect this rate: Cubans are charged 10 pesos to a foreigner's 10 U.S. dollars.

Both the government and individual Cubans are eager to gain U.S. dollars, a powerful currency. Tourist establishments and services operate with dollars, and foreigners are encouraged to use dollars rather than pesos whenever possible. When I spent a day touring Havana with a Canadian ecotourism entrepreneur and the Communist taxi driver assigned to him, the driver (the first Cuban I've met to fully toe the Party line) urged me to use dollars even at the *Agromercados* — privately run fruit, vegetable and meat markets whose prices are listed entirely in pesos. "Why bother to change your dollars into pesos?" he queried incredulously. "You can use dollars at the *Agro*! The vendors will figure out the conversion for you!"

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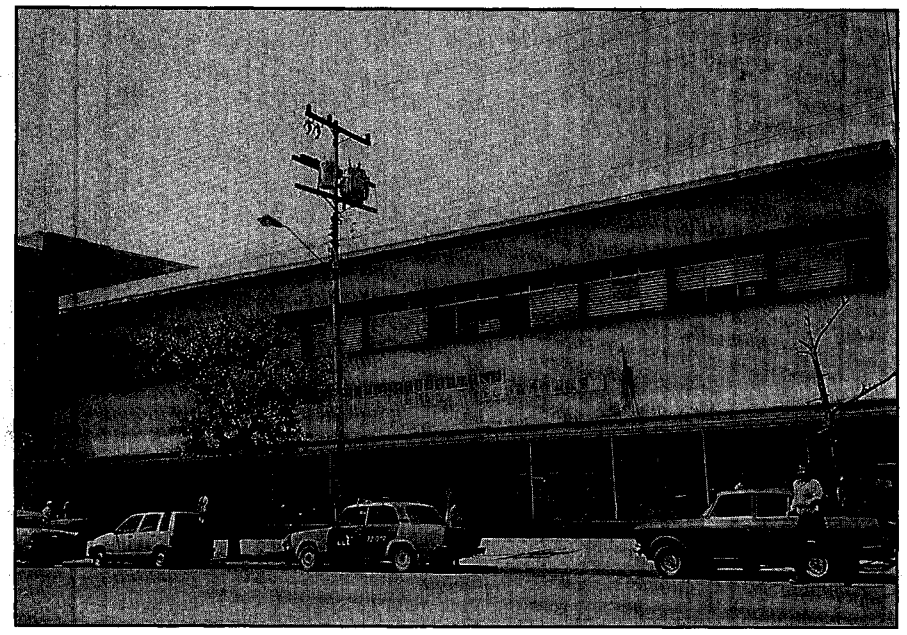
A half-hour passes while I wait at the *Cadeca*. As I inch my way forward, I watch three different Cubans cut into the line ahead of me. One young man asks another to change money for him. A second befriends a woman, and then steps into line ahead of her. A third sidles up to the armed guard on duty who, after some jovial conversation, personally ushers him to the front of the line.

Just as the man directly before me reaches the exchange booth, the guard announces they are shutting down operations in order to fix the booth's alarm system. The *Cadeca* will reopen after lunch. The line erupts with protests. The man in front of me bellows at the guard, arguing vehemently that they should fix the alarm during the scheduled lunch break. The guard completely ignores him. He is more receptive to my questions, however: I am a foreigner and deserved preferential treatment. Oozing charm, the guard smiles and kindly informs me: "This man is here to fix a problem with the alarm. We must do it right now, for security reasons. It will not take long. If you would like to wait, it will take only an hour or so."



This peso-based commercial center was once ... Woolworth's.

I head instead for a supermarket that a woman standing behind me on line yesterday told me sells cutlery. Somehow, Havana's residents seem to know the entire inventory of every store in the city and the exact price of each item therein. "What did it cost you?" is inevitably the first question Cubans ask about any new purchase. Prices vary from store to store, even for identical merchandise, and bear little relation to value. So it pays to keep a mental score.

It is 10:15 a.m. when I arrive at the supermarket. Though a schedule posted on the door claims the store begins business at 10:00, a long line of people is still waiting outside for it to open. Each new arrival grumbles complaints about the supermarket's tardiness, asks "El ultimo?" and queues up in an orderly fashion. When the doors finally open, however, the line dissolves; people swarm toward the door. I enter the store and check my backpack at the baggage check located directly inside, offering my Cuban temporary residency card as photo identification for its retrieval.

Then I scour the aisles in search of cutlery. I have already visited several stores looking for forks and knives and am ardently hoping to find them this morning so I will not have to continue using my Swiss Army knife and a lone tablespoon to eat my meals. No luck. I do find a dish rack and a spatula, though, for which I have also been looking. On a whim, I decide to buy coffee and toilet paper as well; stores here often run out of products, and it's wise to stock up when something is available.

I wait on line at the cashier, proffer a 50-dollar bill as payment. The cashier holds up the bill to the light, inspects it, and asks me for photo identification. I hand her my Institute of Current World Affairs press card, and she dutifully transcribes my ICWA identification number in a notebook, together with the serial number of my 50-dollar note. I wait on line at the baggage check, retrieve my backpack, and wait on line again to exit the store. Before I can do so, a uniformed guard must inspect my shopping bags, checking that the items therein correlate with those listed on my receipt.

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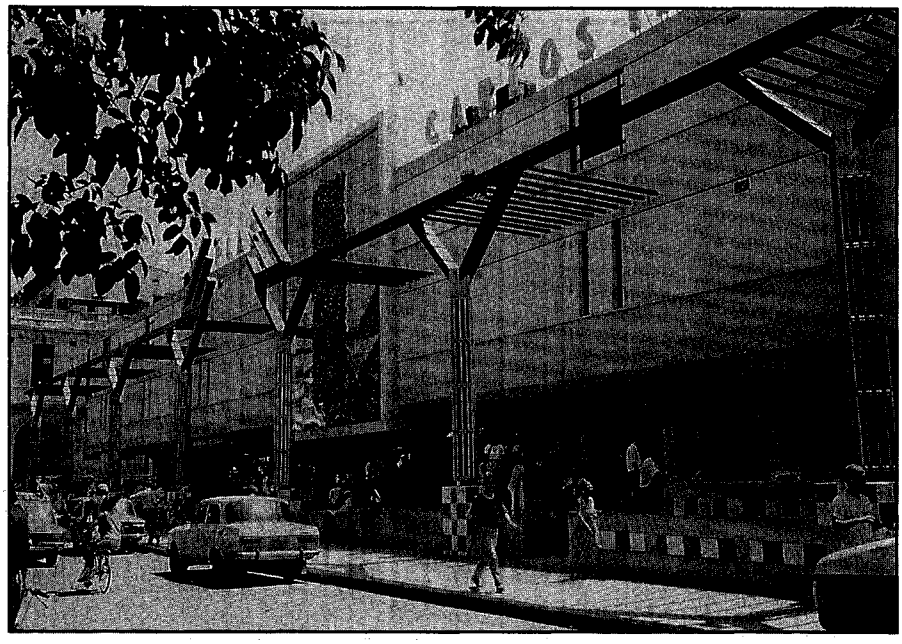
I hurry home to meet Ismael, who arrives bearing two small bouquets of mariposas, Cuba's fragrant national flower. I feel guilty that Ismael, who has very little money, has spent some of it on me; but I thank him, put the flowers in water, and enjoy the way their perfume scents my apartment.

Ismael is dressed in Levis, a fake Nike t-shirt, and a "USA" baseball cap he tells me he could not have worn in public just a few years ago. With a sheepish grin, he explains that he bought two pairs of Levis with money his grandmother sent him from the United States, adding: "She probably would not be very happy about that!" At the current exchange rate, the U.S.$140 Ismael spent on blue jeans is worth more than many Cubans' annual wages.

As he escorts me on a walking tour of shops in Centro Habana, a bustling neighborhood in the heart of the city, Ismael tells me about himself. He is 29; he and his older brother both left school at 18 in order to earn a living; he has entered the national lottery to emigrate to the United States six times and never won;



Havana's first mall: Carlos III

he loathes the taste of fruit and vegetables and so must supplement a diet of fried foods, sweets and coffee with multivitamins — when his doctor can supply them. He has a three-year-old daughter. He slips a photo of a beaming little girl from his wallet and extends it to me proudly.

Ismael tells me he divorced last year after 10 years of marriage. I've met many divorcees here: Cuba's divorce rate must be among the highest in the world. Evidently, young Cubans often marry after knowing their partners only a short time and foreigners often marry Cubans following whirlwind romances. Little wonder that such marriages do not endure long.

In my first ten weeks here, I have already received three marriage proposals from men hoping to wed a foreigner and so get out of Cuba. Though I'd only just met the last of these potential husbands while waiting on line at a sandwich stand, he immediately concluded I was refusing his proposal because I don't like dark-skinned men.

Ismael shakes his head sadly and laments: "Young people in Cuba have three choices. They can resign themselves to leading an honest life, which is very limited; they can become thieves; or they can become *jiniteras* and *jiniteros*" — hookers. His face clouds. "I worry all the time about my daughter's future. Do you know how many Cuban girls become *jiniteras?* More every day. In Cuba, *jiniteras* are like gremlins. You know the film? You put them in water, and they multiply."

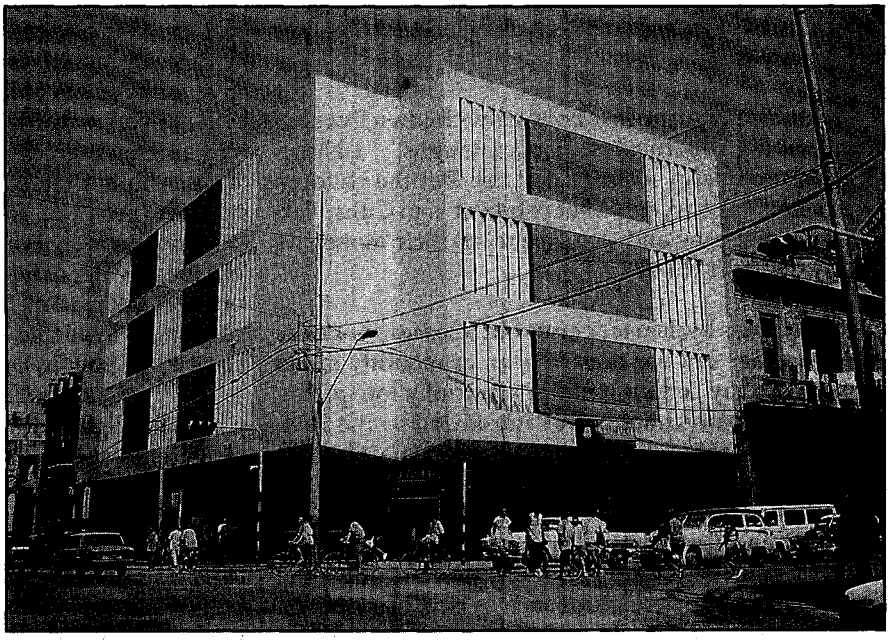
Ismael leads me to *Carlos Tercero,* Havana's first shopping mall. It has three floors of glossy and brightly-colored stores and reminds me of U.S. vertical malls from the 1970s. The place is packed with shoppers. Ismael tells me he likes it here because everything is clean and new. As we wait on one line to enter a store, then on another to leave it, however, he complains: "All this security is ridiculous. The stores have those alarms that go off when you take something with you. I do not know why they do not use them." Then he jokes: "Instead of Coca-Cola, it is *Cuba-Cola,*" ["Cuba-Queue"].

Like most of Havana's dollar stores, the bulk of the mall's shops offer a jumble of overpriced, cheaply made merchandise: from frying pans, to men's briefs, to china figurines, all in one small store. We come across few of the myriad items I am hoping to find. As Ismael puts it, *"Hay mucho aqui, pero no hay nada"* — "There is a lot here, but there is nothing."

As we emerge onto the street, Ismael advises me to carry my backpack in front of me. He rubs a forefinger along his opposite forearm, warning me to be especially wary of black people. I have received many such warnings from light-skinned Cubans. When I bristle at this advice, Ismael asserts: "No. It is a fact. The majority of thieves here are people of color... Whatever racism there is in Cuba exists on the part of blacks, not whites."

Ismael leads me into a store with prices in Cuban pesos. It is dimly lit; there are no other customers; a grim-faced saleswoman sits idly behind the counter. The display case in front of her contains scant items: a few ceramic ashtrays; yellow liquid for cleaning bathrooms; ancient, two-pronged outlets; 60-watt standard light bulbs.

Surprisingly, the price of standard light bulbs here



One store that looks like what it is: a U.S. dollar department store

equates almost exactly with the price in the U.S. dollar stores: 20 pesos, or about $1, per 60-watt bulb. Ismael explains that until recently light bulbs cost only 45 cents each; their price inexplicably doubled overnight. Because standard light bulbs were expensive even at 45 cents on a Cuban salary, many Cubans use more economical and energy-efficient fluorescent bulbs to light their homes.

I ask the saleswoman whether she sells handkerchiefs. It has been relentlessly hot and humid since my arrival in early July and I want a handkerchief to wipe the constant stream of sweat from my brow. Ismael eyes me dubiously. "Handkerchiefs?!" He sounds appalled. I nod, adding: "I cannot find them anywhere." He digests this for a moment. Then, tilting his head slightly, he reasons: "All right. All right. Who says only men can use handkerchiefs?"

Ismael is now completely focused on finding handkerchiefs for me. He asks a black-market entrepreneur vending a rubber boot whether he also sells handkerchiefs. The man suggests another vendor who was selling handkerchiefs just yesterday across the street, but the woman he indicated is nowhere to be found. Ismael also asks a watch repairman, who is servicing a watch on his sidewalk cart before a transfixed audience; the proprietor of a peso store dedicated exclusively to children's birthday party decorations; and a boy on

My friend Ismael searched everywhere for handkerchiefs — even this shop (left) specializing in children's birthday decorations.

rollerblades hawking a rank-smelling lobster he assures us is freshly-caught.

I express my surprise at how many children I've seen here wearing rollerblades. Ismael laughs. "I know! They are expensive — forty dollars! But the children love them!" He shrugs. "That is how it is in Cuba. Parents save and save and then spend all their money on one gift for their child."

As we pass by, Ismael points out a *bodega* — a store where Cubans can use their *libretas*, or monthly ration booklets, to buy certain items at artificially low prices. When the Cuban economy was subsidized by the Soviets, these monthly rations included adequate amounts of food as well as such items as clothing and soap. But rations were drastically reduced when the Soviet bloc collapsed and Cuba's "special-period" economic austerity program began in 1990. Today they include small quantities of basic necessities such as rice, black beans, bread, eggs, coffee and sugar; other items, such as chicken and fish, are offered only occasionally.

Ismael chuckles at the paltriness of the current rations. "We get three eggs a month. What can you do with three eggs?!" Then his expression hardens. "They give milk only to children up to seven years old. What will happen to my daughter once she is seven? She will still be growing. She will still need calcium. What will happen to her teeth and bones? I cannot afford milk. Milk is expensive!" Powdered milk is cheaper and therefore more widely bought than liquid milk, but it is decalcified. A liter of liquid milk costs 10 pesos, or 50 cents on the black market; but it also lacks calcium. Milk with calcium is available only in dollar supermarkets and costs an exorbitant U.S.$2 per liter.

Ismael lights a filterless cigarette and inhales deeply. "Cigarettes, they give only to people born before 1960. I am too young. I know I should not smoke. It is a waste of money. But I smoke. Everyone in Cuba smokes. I smoke because life here is so hard. I smoke as an escape. I smoke because it is better than drinking rum — you cannot work after drinking rum. I smoke because it gives me something to do other than just thinking. I smoke because it calms my nerves. Have you met one person in Cuba who does not have a problem with their nerves?" ❑