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LETTERS

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

Promised Night

HAVANA, Cuba **January 3, 1999**

By Paige Evans

Antonio, a statuesque, cocoa-skinned Cuban dancer dressed in turban and sarong, expansively ushers Ismael and me into the apartment he shares with Clarice. Clarice is a French journalist with Rapunzel hair, azure cow's eyes and a wide, toothy smile. She and Antonio have been going out for four months, living together for three. Their relationship is explosive, passionate, rarely peaceful. Clarice is consumed by Antonio: she loves his flare, his quirky, comical mind, his refusal to follow rules. She is one in a long line of Antonio's foreign girlfriends. Antonio occasionally models for foreign advertisers shooting in Havana; he once choreographed tourist shows at the beach resort of Varadero. Mostly, though, he attends cultural events and parties, socializes with renowned artists, and lives off his foreign girlfriends' dollars.

It is December 16th, the eve of the *Dia de San Lazaro* — Saint Lazaro's Day — and Antonio has gathered together a motley crew to celebrate the event. There is the amiable, bush-headed Cuban, Camilo, whose clothing — from his oversized, tie-dyed pants to his scruffy striped knit hat — is a flower child's burst of color; Camilo's dour Swiss sidekick, Marie; the doughboy Cuban costume designer, Vladimir; Vladimir's cherubic young crush, Marco; the ambling Californian filmmaker, Bart; the gentle Cuban handyman, Ismael; Antonio, Clarice and I.

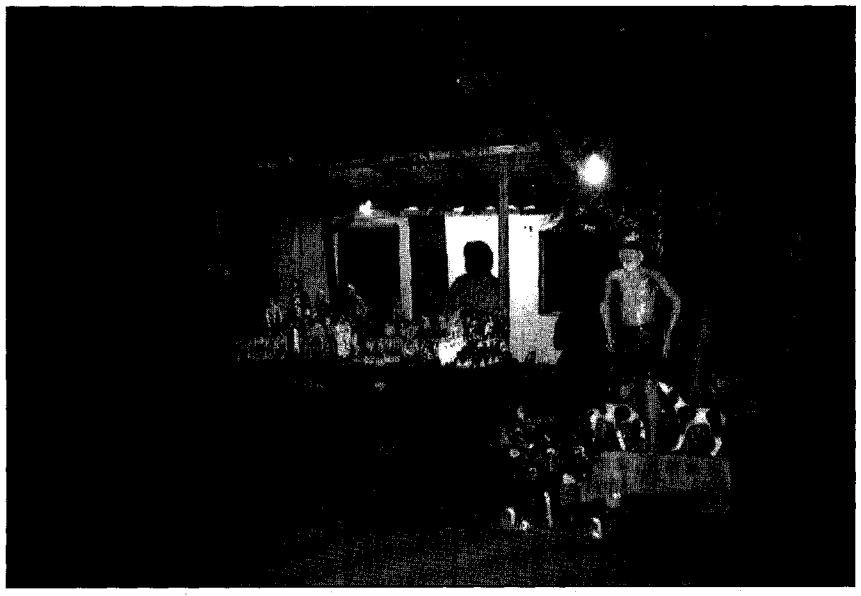
Before setting out for El Rincon, the distant Havana neighborhood where the Church of San Lazaro is located, we eat a dinner of fried chicken, fried plantains and ham sandwiches prepared by Antonio. In a country where many children are raised by single mothers, Antonio was raised by his father. In a country where few men cook, Antonio is an able chef. In a country where most people cannot afford to entertain, Antonio is perpetually hosting dinner and cocktail parties. But then, Clarice, not Antonio, paid for tonight's dinner.

While inhaling a ham sandwich, Camilo — who was trained as a mathematician but makes money working as the agent of a successful sculptor friend — tells me: "A group of French scientists are making a second moon for the millennium. It will follow its own orbit, exactly like the moon's, and it will grow and shrink at exactly the same rate the moon does. This second moon will be so precisely constructed that it will only lose one minute in relation to the real moon's orbit per year."

Camilo's eyes glow with excitement. He does not notice the bread crumbs caught in his extravagant beard. "At the start of the year 2000, we will look up into the night sky, and we will see two moons. Fantastic, no? Two moons!" Suddenly, Camilo's eyes cloud, and he heaves an exasperated sigh. "I heard of the project from an astronomer friend who met a French scientist. But I cannot find out anything more about it. I cannot buy a magazine and read

about it. I cannot do research on the Internet. I have no access to such information. None. I am Cuban, and Cuba is The Land Without Information." Camilo downs a shot of rum and pours himself another. "Clarice said she would investigate it for me when she went back to France last month. But she found nothing."

(While in France Clarice did, however, manage to buy the inflatable sex doll Camilo requested as a sculpting material, as well as an electric hot plate for an elderly, stoveless friend and two bestselling novels by Cuban exile Zoe Valdes — all of which are strictly banned here in Cuba. She was the only person on her Paris/Havana flight to have her baggage checked at Cuban customs. The customs official confiscated the hot plate, arguing that electrical appliances cannot be brought into Cuba as they exacerbate the country's already dire electrical problems. He did not find the sex doll or novels, however, as they were wrapped in clothing and buried deep in Clarice's suitcase.)



Remembrances on sale along the way to the Church of San Lazaro — including a plastic model of the Saint himself, at the right with crutches and dogs

After dinner, as we endlessly wait on an endless line for a *camello* — a lumbering, uniquely Cuban contraption with a truck's cabin and a massive two-humped body — Antonio says: "Those of you who have never ridden a *camello* before are about to experience Hell on Wheels. The *camello* will be hot, with little or no ventilation. It will be packed with people, some of them thieves. Be careful with your cameras. Keep your bags in front of you. Remember that it is December. There is a great deal of danger this month. People want money for *El Fin de Año*, to get their children a toy for New Year's, buy themselves a new outfit in which to celebrate, buy a bottle of rum."

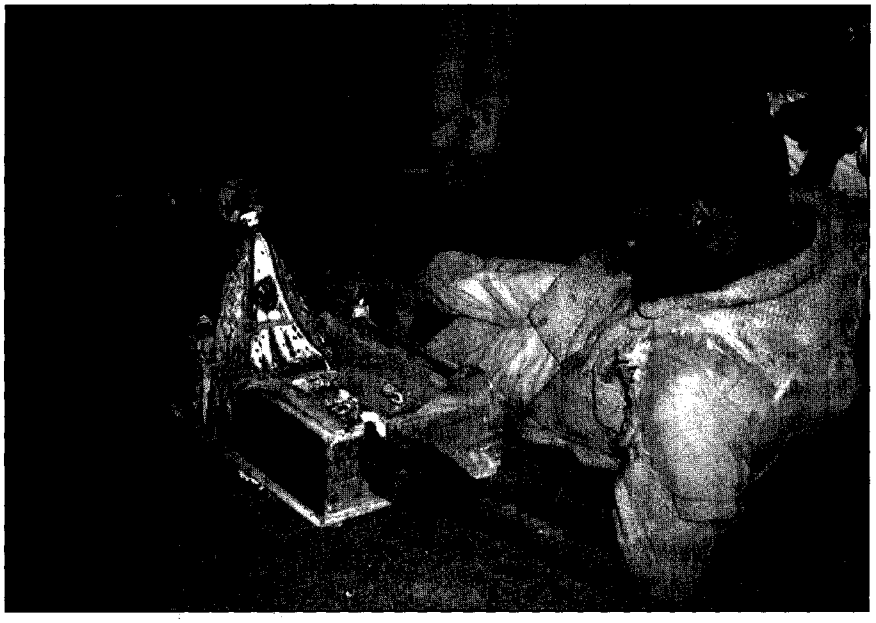
The *camello* is crowded with people heading for El Rincon. A woman seated near us carries a furry white dog in her handbag. She tells Antonio: "My dog has a tumor in her stomach. It causes her great pain. She needs an operation. I am bringing her to the church tonight to ask for San Lazaro's help. To pray that her operation goes well and helps to ease her pain."

The Cuban San Lazaro de Batania (as distinguished from the Catholic Church's San Lazaro Obispo) is the patron saint of dogs as well as poor, infirm and aged people. In Cuban religious iconography, he is depicted as covered with leprous wounds and walking with crutches, flanked on either side by loyal hounds. Combined in the syncretic religion *santeria* with the Yoruba *orisha* Babalu-Aye, San Lazaro is one of Cuba's most popular saints. He is believed to help devotees with their troubles and hardships, offering them cures, protection and advice.

Antonio sprays the first shot of a fresh bottle of rum on the *camello's* floor "for the saint," swigs from the bottle and passes it to me. Back in the U.S., red wine is the only alcohol I drink; and even that, only occasionally. But Cubans drink rum. Constantly. To be sociable, I've tried to adjust to rum here; I mix it with something sweet like fruit juice or cola to mask its taste. But tonight, we have brought no mixers. Tonight, I want to prepare myself with drink. I take a shot of Antonio's rum. It burns my throat and scorches my stomach. I take another shot.

As I gag on rum, Antonio talks about his impending trip to Spain to visit a documentary filmmaker for whose work he once danced. This will be Antonio's first trip outside of Cuba. Though he has saved only a few hundred dollars, he hopes to travel for a long time in both Europe and the United States. He hopes never to come back. He tells me: "I have waited a long time for this. I am ready. I cannot wait to go... Many Cubans think all they have to do is leave here, and everything will work out for them. They think the roads in other countries are paved with gold. I know this is not true. I know it is hard to make your way in a new country where you do not know the customs, where maybe you do not speak the language. I will be just one more person there. I will have to fight for everything I get. But I can fight. I am ready to fight. I learned how here, on the street — " He takes another swig of rum and passes the bottle to Clarice.

"Who you know can make all the difference in life. Who you know can change things for you. Like with Julian — " Antonio spent most of last week with the wildly successful New York painter Julian Schnabel, whom he first met at Havana's renowned Latin Ameri-



A pilgrim, feet chained to the weights at far left, drags a religious box toward the church.

can Film Festival two years ago and has been talking about ever since. "Julian invited me to New York. He has offered me a house there. He said he would help me find work, introduce me to all sorts of people. I believe he intends to do this. But I cannot depend on it. You never know with people. You cannot trust anyone. You can only really depend on yourself."

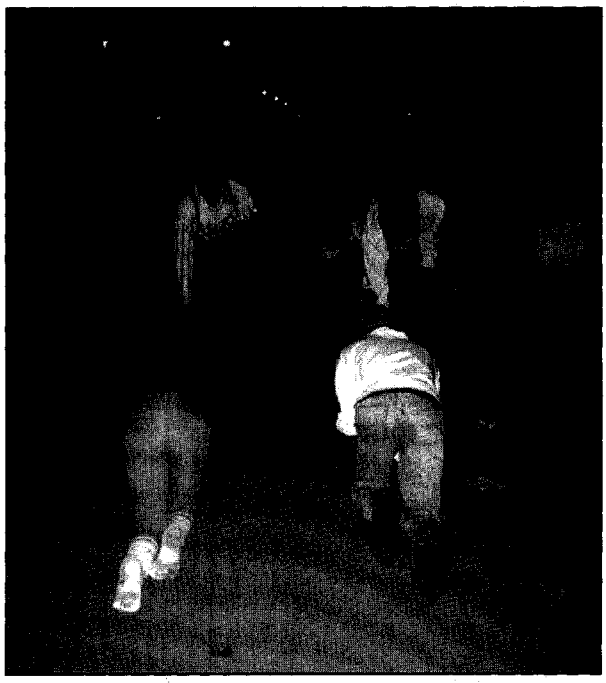
The *camello* drops us off in front of "Los Cocos" — the hospital compound (once a leper colony) where Cubans with advanced cases of AIDS are quarantined. Antonio gathers our clan together in a knot and warns us: "This is a dangerous night. Very dangerous. There will be thousands of people, many of them thieves and drunkards. You foreigners are fresh meat to them. Clarice, watch your bag. She is so careless with her possessions. You can tell she comes from a rich family. It is a miracle her bag has never been stolen." Clarice rolls her full moon eyes at him. She has heard this many times before. Antonio continues: "We must look out for each other. We must stay together. Do not separate from the group, even for a moment. This is not a place any of us would want to be alone."

Our group joins the flood of pilgrims of varied ages, creeds and colors making the three-kilometer hike to the *Iglesia de San Lazaro*, the Catholic church where ceremonies honoring San Lazaro are being held tonight and tomorrow. Many pilgrims pass bottles of rum among them; some sing; others shout boisterously. I ask Ismael whether drinking rum on this holy occasion is considered sacrilegious. He laughs, shaking his head: "Here in Cuba, drinking rum is normal. People do not see drinking as a bad thing. Rum is a part of life in Cuba. It is a part of religion, too."

Camilo buys peeled orange halves sold from an overturned crate by the side of the road and distributes them, Christlike, to all but Ismael, who cannot stomach fruit. Bart wanders off to videotape a table laden with plastic icons of San Lazaro in graduated sizes. When his camcorder pans to her, the grim-faced young saleswoman beams an infectious smile at the camera's lens. Vladimir signals, and our group stops to wait for Bart. Ismael buys salted peanuts wrapped in white paper cones from a stooped, paper-thin old man intoning *"ManiManiManiManiManiMani"* — a familiar chant on Havana's streets — and hands them out among citrus-sticky fingers. Bart rejoins the group, and we continue our march towards the church.

We approach a prostrate old man inching along the road on his bare stomach with rocks chained to both feet. He pushes a box stuffed with pesos with one hand and carries a lit candle in the other. This man is one of the many pilgrims fulfilling *promesas*, or promises, to San Lazaro tonight. Most of these *promesas* involve suffering. The sight of the old man's excruciating crawl makes me wince and turn away. I am an uncomfortable spectator at this procession of self-flagellators. I am also both stirred and bewildered by the old man's faith, something that has never played a role in my own life.

Antonio takes pesos from Clarice's backpack and



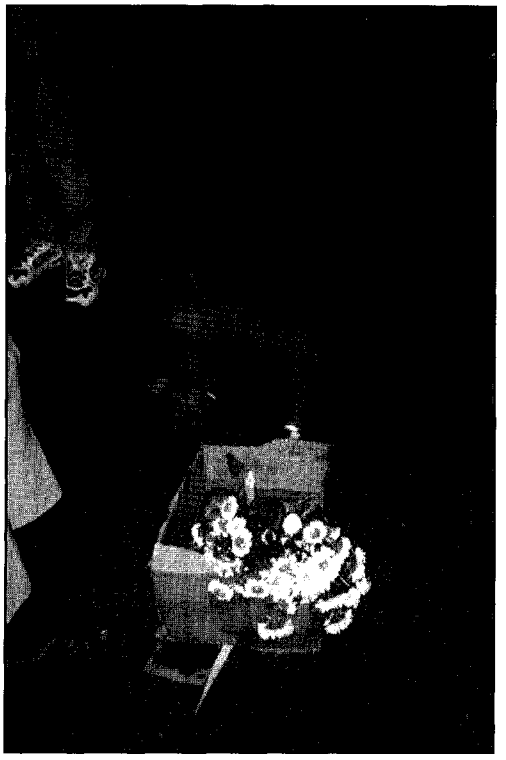
Middle-class penitents on hands and knees

drops them into the old man's box. He kneels beside the man, extending Clarice's microcasette recorder toward his mouth. "Sorry, Sir... Your *promesa*?" In a quavering, piping voice the old man tells him: "I worked overtime with a Microbrigade for fourteen years building apartments in order to earn my own apartment. They tell me I will have it in February." Bart crouches near the old man's head to videotape him. Clarice stoops by his feet and shoots a photo. Wary of objectifying the man and sensationalizing his plight, I hesitate. Then I snap a picture. I am both self-conscious at taking the old man's picture and eager to capture his powerful, disturbing image on film. Clarice shoots another photo. So do I.

Unfazed by our photographing frenzy, the old man continues: "But I know how it goes. Someone who wishes me ill could tell them I have not been working hard enough on the Microbrigade, or say I was not really sick when I said I was. For this, they could take the apartment away from me. It happens all the time... I have a daughter. She is 23. But I trust no one. The only person you can trust in this world is yourself. I have no family. I have no friends. All I want is my own home. I have worked for it. I deserve it. I promised San Lazaro I would crawl to the church if he helps me get it."

Antonio moves on to another prostrate pilgrim. This man, younger than the last, has a shriveled hand and barely functioning legs. Crawling laboriously on skinned knees, he speaks slowly, deliberately, into Antonio's tape recorder: "I was born with legs that did not work. I could not walk. For many years, I was in a wheelchair. I asked San Lazaro to help me. And he did. I can walk now. I have some trouble, but I walk... I promised San Lazaro that if he helped me, I would come here every year and crawl to the church in his honor. And I do it. I pay him back in this way for all he has given me."

A pilgrim makes his way on his back.



Another, on his side, pushes a box of daisies for the Saint.

Next, we approach a burly man in his mid-30s who is shimmying rapidly along the road on his bare back, grimacing as he goes. I ask the barebacked man if I can take his picture. He nods, stone-faced. As I snap his photo, the man tells Antonio: "I had problems with the law. There was a trial. Before the trial, I promised San Lazaro that if all went well, I would crawl on my back to the church in his honor. It went well — I am a free man. Tonight, I am paying my promise to San Lazaro."

We pass a faded lady with globbed-on mascara and a nest of platinum hair sitting on the porch of her ramshackle house, watching the pilgrims parade by. As we peer through her open door at the shrine she has built to San Lazaro, she invites us in to look at it. The shrine centers around a large, brightly-painted icon of the saint perched on a table draped in shiny white polyester and covered with flowers and lit by white candles. We drop pesos onto a plate of money at the saint's feet, then ask the woman if we can use her bathroom. Like many other Cuban bathrooms I've seen, this one is spotless but rustic: it lacks a toilet seat, toilet paper and running water.

Back on the street, Vladimir is looking for Marco. He cannot find him. A wave of worry passes through

our group. We search the crowd for Marco's baby face and beatific smile. He is not there. Vladimir shouts: "Marco! MARCO! MAAARRRRCOOOO!" Marco does not appear. Camilo jerks a thumb towards his mouth, indicating that Marco was drunk. The thought of being lost, drunk, in this strange sea of humanity makes me shiver.

Crowds arriving at the Church of San Lazaro

After waiting a long time for Marco, we finally move ahead. The road becomes abruptly, strikingly, dark. There are no homes, no street lights, nothing but banana plantations on either side of the road and as far ahead as I can see. Though still technically within Havana's city limits, the area we are in is known as "Habana Campo" — the Havana Countryside — and its landscape does seem more a part of Cuba's provinces than its capital city. Passing pilgrims, rendered faceless forms in the darkness, take on a menacing quality. Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, Marco appears. Relieved, Vladimir castigates him for wandering off. His face pale with fright, Marco takes a step closer to Vladimir. Vladimir turns away.

Off to our left, high above the squat silhouettes of banana trees, Ismael spots a swath of vivid light cutting across the pitch night sky. Our group stops to gape at it. The starfall trails through the sky for what seems a very long time and then, finally, disappears. For a moment, we all stand in dumbstruck wonder. None of us has ever seen anything like it. Then we explode in a chorus of exclamation: *"Cogno!" "Ay, mi madre!" "Que es esto?!" "Que cosa mas linda!" "Incredible!"* It seems apt to have witnessed something transcendent on this strange, powerful night.

A barricade blocks the road to the church, and blue-

uniformed policemen check bags and pockets before letting people pass. One policeman — neck and torso solid muscle, like a pit bull — slaps a drunken young man hard on the side of his head. "Look at you! You are disgraceful!" he barks, thwacking the man's head a second, third, and fourth time. Clarice cries out: "Stop that! Leave him alone!" and Antonio jerks her arm to silence her. The pit-bull cop turns to check my backpack, which has a bottle of rum inside it. I watch his face nervously as he fingers the bottle through my bag. He simply says: "No glass inside," then turns back to the drunken man. I consider throwing the bottle of rum away, but Antonio grabs it, transfers its contents to a plastic water bottle and ushers us through the barricade.

The already too-thick crowd grows denser as we enter the gate of the Iglesia de San Lazaro. As we jostle our way toward the church, Antonio buys white candles and lights them, distributing them among us. At the church's entrance, he warns: "Be careful. We are entering the eye of the storm." With that, we are swept into a vortex of worshipers, all pushing their way towards the far side of the church, where a life-sized icon of San Lazaro is carried aloft on extended arms.

Body is packed tight against body against body: this is a paradise for thieves. A man fingers the back pocket of Clarice's jeans. As I snatch away his hand, another man, on her far side, eagerly eyes the contents of her shirt pocket. I feel dizzied by claustrophobia and desperate to get out. Antonio points toward an exit at the side of the church and commands: "Let's go. There." Following his lead, our group turns and makes its way out.

Antonio stakes out a spot for us on a lawn littered with pilgrims. We don sweaters and jackets against the crisp night air. A grainy loudspeaker blares a prayer to San Lazaro: "In the name of San Lazaro, let the good spirits help me. And if I suffer from afflictions or am in danger, may you come to my aid. In you, Patron, may I find the strength I need to rise to the tests of this planet..." The prayer is supplicating and extensive. When it finally ends, a tone-deaf duo sings songs to San Lazaro so distorted by the ancient sound system their words are incomprehensible.

We pass yet another bottle of rum between us. The alcohol makes my head swim, and I lie down to still it. I have not been this drunk in years, probably more than a decade. My head spins, and I sit up to still it. Beside me, Antonio and Clarice lie curled together like stacked spoons. I watch them and ponder how, despite — or because of — their constant trials and tribulations, they share a strong bond. I overhear Antonio whispering into Clarice's ear: "You know, 98 percent of the men on this island would kill to marry you. Not me, though. At the start of the new year, in just two weeks, I am going to Spain. And that will be the end of us."

* * *

In the chill of dawn, as we stumble back toward the *camello* stop, Clarice tells me: "Last night, I prayed to Saint Lazaro for a miracle. I asked him to let my relationship with Antonio survive. I am crazy, no? My promesa would only lead to more suffering." She chuckles bitterly, shaking her head. "Last night, when we saw... whatever it was. For a minute, I went outside myself. I did not think about any of this craziness. What we saw last night, that was the real miracle."

And it was.

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