

ICWA LETTERS

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

What the Future Holds

HAVANA, Cuba

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By Paige Evans

Rudolfo, a rakish, 24-year-old jokester who spends his time drinking rum, smoking pot, cavorting with tourists and wooing significantly older foreign women in hopes they will someday take him out of Cuba, has invited me to a *tambor* — a *santeria* celebration honoring Ochun, the *orisha* of love and rivers. We plan to arrive early so I can videotape the throne to Ochun with the camera my parents sent me for Christmas. But the lumbering 1952 Chevrolet we flag down gasps, coughs, then stops altogether shortly after we climb into it. Flashing an apologetic smile, its amiable driver clambers out and tinkers with his jalopy's Soviet-made diesel engine. The car groans into motion, but stops four more times before we finally reach Centro Habana. The fifth time, Rudolfo helps the hapless driver start his ancient Chevvy with a heaving push. By the time we arrive at the *tambor*, a trio of drummers is already playing the sacred *bata* drums, and the *Madrina* — the *santera* advisor overseeing today's ceremony — says I cannot videotape the throne until after the drummers have finished playing to the saints.

As Rudolfo and I amble across a decaying inner courtyard past a weathered cage aflutter with sacrificial pigeons, he shakes his head soberly and laments: "*La calle esta mala*" — "The street is bad." Rudolfo's brow knits as he contemplates the myriad harsh new laws and penalties instituted over the past two months and the drastically increased police on Havana's streets enforcing them. His tone, usually cavalier and ironic, is tinged with fear. "I do not know what He is doing, but I can tell you it is nothing good. It is never anything good. I have been stopped six times just for walking on the sidewalk! One of those shiteaters is going to figure out my work papers are fake. I could spend eight years in prison!" He pours himself rum from the bottle I brought for our host and gulps it down resolutely. "I am going to work for the state." As I gape at him in surprise — Rudolfo is an outspoken critic of the state — his lips curl into a sly grin. "I will work for *el estado*, I will steal from it and I will make real money on the black market."

We peer through a carved-wood doorway into a room where an elaborate throne to Ochun has been constructed against one wall. Gold lamé fabric fans from ceiling to floor around a gold-clad figure representing the *orisha*, and a bounty of sweets — massive, lemon-icinged cakes; baskets stuffed with meringues; ceramic bowls heaping with yellow star cookies; platters of canary-colored cream and sponge cake swirls — covers the floor. The pea-green room looks familiar to me; I realize I came to a *tambor* here three months ago. Rudolfo nods in confirmation: "The owner of this house rents it out for religious functions. It pays well."

We move on to the living room, which is packed with people dancing in rows and singing to the *bata*'s complex rhythms. Rudolfo introduces me to a plump, effeminate little white man with puffy eyes and pouty lips, whose

features ignite with delight when he hears I am from the United States. "Really?!" he exclaims in heavily-accented English. "Cuba treat you good?!" Before I can respond, the little man has joined the crowd of people stepping and swaying to a song honoring Ochun. Rudolfo whispers admiringly: "He will speak later as Ochun and tell people about their lives."

As we watch, the little man starts rubbing his head and dancing in an off-kilter way. The crowd gives him berth, nudging each other and whispering as Ochun descends and possesses him. The *tambor's* *Madrina* appears and ushers the man into an inner room, from which he emerges dressed in gold lamé pantaloons, a forest-green blouse and an Elizabethan-style mustard-colored cap. He drifts around the house on pudgy bare feet, greeting people with a mixture of Yoruba and Spanish in a quavering, exalted voice.

Rudolfo, who hopes to become a *santero* but cannot yet afford the costly initiation ceremonies, comments: "This man is very good. He often says the truth." I ask Rudolfo how he knew beforehand the man would be possessed by Ochun and how the man knew to bring his Ochun outfit with him to the *tambor*. He explains: "The *Madrina* picked him." As with many explanations concerning the complex and mysterious religion, *santería*, this does not really make sense to me. Does that mean the *Madrina* chose whom Ochun would possess? Before I can question Rudolfo further, I notice the little man (now embodying Ochun) strolling toward us, exuding an air of self-importance. A gangly, pock-marked lad with a protruding Adam's Apple and ragged teeth trails him. As they reach us, Rudolfo winks at me mischievously and mutters: "He will tell us you and I will get married. Then I will be happy, and you will be sad."

Ochun gazes at me with a sympathetic, faraway look and speaks in Yoruba, which the gangly guy translates into Spanish: "You are a daughter of Ochun. You have come to this land to find me... When you return to your country, you will have a problem with papers. Someone in your family who does not like you. A signature. You must be very careful about what you sign... You will meet a rich man whom you knew once but have not seen for a long time, maybe years. A millionaire. He has something to do with these papers. He will make you very rich... If what I have said happens, you must bring the gift of a gold mantle to my house the next time you come to Cuba. Wear a necklace in my colors. In times of trouble, call out my name, and I will help you. You have a good heart. You can sleep tranquil at night."

* * *

"They interrogated me about every detail of your life!" My landlady Teresa, always a nervous person, quivers with agitation after our appointments at the Immigration Office. My interview with the officious, olive-

uniformed officers lasted a surprisingly short time and involved only a few simple questions. Teresa's, evidently, was far more extensive. "They asked me everything. Everything! They asked what your schedule is, where you swim in the mornings, whom you meet with during the day, what you write about. They asked me what you use your telephone for and why you use electronic mail. I told them I asked many people about international telephone lines before you installed yours, and they assured me people have them without trouble, that it is a normal thing. They asked me if you are doing anything political. Are you?! What is it are you writing about?!" I go through this with Teresa almost daily. In a tone flattened by constant repetition, I assure her I am studying and writing about the arts.

Teresa pulls anxiously at her throat's sagging skin. "They asked me that, too. If you are really a student and what it is you are studying. What books you read, if you go to classes. I said I do not live with you, I do not know what books you read. I told them you listen to a good deal of Afro-Cuban music. They asked me who visits you and who your friends are. They asked whether someone washes your laundry and whether you have a regular boyfriend. I said you have a separate entrance, so I do not know who comes and goes in your house. I told them you lead a regular life, that you are a tranquil person."

Teresa tugs at her throat some more; it turns a deep red under her anxious fingers. "They already knew all about you. They knew the answers to all their questions before they asked them. Someone has been watching you and reporting to the CDR (Committee for the Defense of the Revolution). Our neighbor across the street is an Informer. Juana, who cleans both her house and ours, says she spends all day watching other people. She sees everything! And she talks — how that woman talks!"

Teresa's balding, milky-eyed dog, Chucha, howls pathetically and scratches her feet for attention. She kicks him away distractedly. "I am too old for this! I am too old for all these worries! I do not want to rent out my house to strangers. I want to sell my house and live with my son in the United States. But I cannot sell my house! It is against the law! And my son will not come back here. He is afraid they would not let him leave. I may never see my son again before I die!" Sudden sobs wrack Teresa's body. Breathing in great gulps of air, she finally calms somewhat and dabs at her blotchy face with her sleeve.

"They say Immigration is interrogating everyone who rents. But you are an American. It is worse with you. I must tell you, I am worried. I am very, very worried. I have never rented to an American before. I have never had these sorts of troubles! I do not need these troubles! I am an old woman. I have problems with my nerves. The rent you pay barely covers our necessities!"

She waves towards a tray heaped with a jumble of medicine bottles. "Food and medicine for Armando and me, medicine for the dogs. I suffer from problems with my nerves. I have high cholesterol. I will ask my son who lives in America to send me more money each month. That way, I will not have to rent. If I decide to stop renting, I will warn you in advance. If I decide to rent to someone else, I will also warn you."

* * *

Clarice and I arrive early at a dilapidated building in the working-class neighborhood of *El Cerro* to avoid waiting on line for a consultation. I buzz a bell beside a battered door hung with a poster of the Pope reaching out to Cuban children. A long while later, an ebony head with cat's-eye glasses and a shock of white hair appears in a third-floor window. When I shout that we are here for a consultation, the head disappears, reappears and calls down: "The key is inside!" as a basket is lowered towards us on a string.

Nelsa greets us warmly at her apartment's front door. She wears pink stretch pants, a Chicago Bulls jersey and fuzzy gray slippers; her glasses are streaked with grime. Several of her front teeth are missing, and those that remain jut out dramatically from her mouth. Stooped and hobbling, she ushers us to a lumpy couch in her spare, tidy living room. She places a gnarled hand on my knee and wedges her pear-shaped frame between me and the couch's threadbare armrest.

Despite advanced years and severe arthritis, Nelsa exudes an infectious energy and enthusiasm. "I am studying English! I want to go to the United States. I have applied for a passport and a visa to visit my son, who lives in Washington. My son is a violinist ..." She takes a copy of *Forbes* magazine from her coffee table and flips to a photo of a big band orchestra, in formal dress, holding their instruments exultantly aloft. Twinkling a toothless smile, she points proudly to a plump man with a violin. "He also plays for the Washington Symphony Orchestra."

After we chat a while, Nelsa leads us up a plank staircase to a cramped, concrete-block room with a small wooden table in its center and a rough-hewn bench to one side. Sweeping a bare, beefy arm around the room, she proclaims: "I built this room myself. You know how hard it is to get materials in this country. But I did it! I carried in the cement, I built these walls. No one helped me. I raised two children by myself, too." Beatific prints hang on the wall opposite the bench: a robed, vaguely smiling Jesus, the brown-skinned Virgin of Regla and a huge dove carrying a red rose in its beak. A plastic San Lazaro stands in the corner, a bowl of money at his feet. Nelsa nods for me to sit on a child-sized chair at the table and for Clarice to sit on the bench. She takes a magnifying glass, a deck of cards and four coconut-shell disks

from a shelf behind the table and sits opposite me.

Nelsa tells us emphatically: "I am not a *santera*. I am an *espiritualisita*. *Santeros* work with blood and with dirt. I work with the spirits of the Dead. They sacrifice animals. They have ideas I do not agree with. I believe in God. One God. Whoever truly believes, believes in that one God." She swivels around to include Clarice. "The most important thing in life, the thing you girls must always remember, is to follow your heart. Alec Baldwin, the artist, wanted first to be a politician. But that life did not feel right to him. So he asked one of his brothers to get him a small role in a film. A nothing role. But Alec Baldwin put all of himself into it, and he did very well. In his next film, he got a secondary role. Again, he put himself into it and again, he did very well. In his next film, he had a starring role opposite Sharon Stone, and he made five million dollars. Because he put his heart into his work."

Nelsa takes my right hand and, using my blue felt-tipped pen, traces the lines of my palm. There she sees unbelievably positive things: mountains of money, an extraordinarily long life, hearty independence, acute intelligence, a facility for languages, travels "*como loco*," heaps of good luck. She warns me, though, that all these things will not come easily. "The dog that has four paws can only follow one road. You must choose one road and work hard to pursue it. With these hands, you could be a professional thief. Or a magician. Not everyone can be a magician, you know. But you could. You could also be on television and have great success with it. You must choose what you want to do."

"You must also be patient. I learned about patience as a child. I wanted a pair of red shoes. I thought about them all the time, I wanted them so badly. But I finally put the shoes out of my mind, as I could not afford them. Then my mother bought me a pair of red shoes, without my asking her! Now, I want to go to the United States. But I know I must put it out of my mind and hope it will happen."

Reading my Tarot cards, Nelsa tells me: "You will have a lot of money. A lot of money. You will be very rich. Maybe a millionaire. You will fall in love with a man with gray hair. He will be very rich, too. There will be papers. Legal papers. There will be a struggle at first, but everything will be resolved in the end. You will have many successes. Your successes have already begun. You will have a lot of money."

Nelsa tells me to think of a "yes" or "no" question and throws the four coconut-shell disks on the table. Two land with the pale inner shell up, which Nelsa explains signifies "yes"; two land with it down. Though it strikes me that this means equally "yes" and "no," Nelsa shouts "Yes!" definitively. The same configuration falls after my next two questions; Nelsa proclaims "Yes!" more excit-

edly each time. On my fourth question, all four shells land pale side up. Nelsa shouts "YES! YES! YES!" exuberantly and refuses me any further questions.

Clarice's readings run along similar lines, only they are even more positive. Nelsa says she is fiercely intelligent, eminently spiritual and effusively romantic. She predicts Clarice will have success after success in life. She will be exceptionally rich, wildly happy and artistically fulfilled. But Nelsa fails to mention Clarice's tortured, all-consuming passion for her Cuban boyfriend, Antonio, and her obsession about what will become of their relationship after she returns to France in two weeks' time. Nor does she mention that in a short time, Clarice may never see Antonio again.

* * *

Amelia — a bony, coffee-colored woman of indistinguishable age — leads me through a narrow living room dominated by a massive new television set she mentions was a deal at \$389.94 to the back of her dank, low-ceilinged house. There, she ushers me into her windowless consultation chamber. It has a small table in its center and a host of santeria related items on a shelf against the wall. Wooden and plastic figures of Catholic saints, some worn and others still fresh, clutter the shelf: Cuba's patron saint *La Virgen de la Caridad*, who is associated with the Yoruba *orisha Ochun*, San Francisco de Asis, San Lazaro, Santa Barbara and Las Mercedes. Among them stand a glass of dry white wine for San Lazaro and three glasses of water for the other saints. At the shelf's far end, a glass boat holds a blue-clad figure of Yemaya, *orisha* of the sea, with a cup of money on its bow.

Amelia writes down my full name on a pad and marks my forehead and palms with a round piece of *cascaria*, a chalk made from pounded eggshells. She places the *cascaria*, together with two shiny sea stones, in my cupped hands and motions for me to touch them

to my forehead, the base of my throat and each cheek. Then, while chanting something rapidly in Yoruba which involves my name, she takes up a bunch of shiny sea-shells and raises them, too, to my forehead, throat and cheeks.

After throwing the shells down on the table, Amelia hands me the piece of chalk and a stone and tells me to take them between my palms and shake, then separate them, holding one in each hand. Nodding towards my left hand, she takes the dark grey stone therein and, while chanting, taps it to the shells. Then she does the same thing with my right hand. She repeats this ritual several times, occasionally jotting down tabulations, such as "5-17," on the pad under my name.

After a round of throws, Amelia tells me: "You will inherit a good deal of money. Someone in your family will try to make this very hard for you. Be very careful of what you sign. Read everything carefully and only sign when you fully understand it. You must protect what is yours. Spend your money wisely and always save some... Open your eyes. Someone is watching you. Be very careful of what this person sees. You could have serious trouble with the police. Open your eyes. Be very, very careful. Do not trust anyone. You do not have friends."

At consultation's end, Amelia suggests I get beaded collars in the colors of four *orishas*: Ochun, Yemaya, Chango (Lord of fire and virility) and Obatala (the aged and just king of all *orishas*). She says I should wear the necklaces, whenever possible, all at once. I already have a collar in Ochun's colors of yellow and gold, which I bought shortly after my encounter with the little man. And I plan to get a blue collar honoring Yemaya, as I've always loved the sea. I doubt I will wear the two necklaces simultaneously. But I'll wear each at times and maybe even feel protected by them. I can use a little extra protection. After all, who knows what the future holds? □

