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Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Naperville, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

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THE AMERICAS

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

Frustration Rules

HAVANA, Cuba

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By Paige Evans

"*Cooño!* I am dying of the cold!" Diana, a gravel-voiced, lesbian photographer known affectionately as "*Flaca*," or "*Skinny*," wraps stick-thin mocha arms around her shivering torso. Beside her, I feel only a mild chill in the night's breeze.

Her friend Antonio, a stylish dancer, slips a bottle of rum from under his billowing blouse and hands it to her: "Take this, *Flaca*. It will warm you." Diana swigs from the bottle, shuddering with satisfaction as its fire ignites her insides. She laments: "I should never have sold my jacket. But who thinks about winter during the summer?"

"I will buy a beautiful jacket once I get to Spain, says Antonio. "Something very expensive." After trying for years to get out of the country, Antonio has a job lined up as a television dance commentator in Spain. He expected to leave Cuba at the beginning of January, but problems with his papers have delayed his trip. Antonio hopes to avoid giving the Cuban government the bulk of his overseas earnings, but the government will not let him leave Cuba without first approving his work contract. "In Europe the buildings are heated, so the cold does not enter the bones as it does here. Right, Clarice?"

Antonio's French girlfriend, Clarice, hates it when he talks about Spain; he has made clear his departure will signal the end of their relationship. She swigs from the bottle of rum and gazes with blue-moon eyes at El Morro Castle across Havana's bay. We are walking along Havana's expansive seaside boulevard, the Malecón. Though usually flooded with Cubans and tourists strolling, sitting and serenading; the Malecón is almost deserted tonight. The usual line of *jiniteras* (prostitutes) standing along the road has vanished. We have passed only a small boy fishing in the polluted bay, a man slumbering on the sea wall beside his bicycle rickshaw and a gaggle of adolescents undulating to *El Medico de la Salsa*. That, and several uniformed policemen.

Antonio stashes the rum under his shirt as we turn onto Twenty-third Street with its tumult of foot and motor traffic. We walk by a pair of crisply uniformed policemen, each leading a German Shepherd, and Diana, who has been keeping score, mutters: "Ten on foot, six in cars."

The heavy police presence in Cuba's capital is the result of a recent overhaul of the country's laws and penal system, concurrent with the 40th anniversaries of the "Triumph of the Revolution" and the National Revolutionary Police force. Arguing that "The Revolution does not have to renounce its humanitarian character in order to be firm, in order to be rigorous," Commander-in-Chief Fidel Castro dramatically raised punishments for crimes including theft, pimping, prostitution, not working for the state and migrating to Havana from Cuba's provinces. Though the new laws themselves were not published, the punishments they carry were; most Cubans know them

precisely. The crime of not working for the state, for example, carries a prison sentence of eight years.

Beginning *la lucha* “the fight” in Havana against Cuba’s escalating crime rate, Castro shipped hundreds of police to the country’s capital city from its provinces; doubled police salaries; and bought 400 new Citroen police cars to patrol the city. The main Communist Party newspaper, *Granma*, has been announcing openings for police officers daily.

A young, white, mustachioed cop stops Antonio in front of the immense Havana Libre Hotel and demands to see his *Carne de Identidad* — the state-issued identification card Cubans are required to carry with them at all times. Antonio produces his dilapidated *Carne* with a defiant flourish. The policeman eyes him threateningly. Antonio’s *Carne* shows that he is a Havana native — not a “*Palestino*” who has come to Cuba’s capital from the interior in search of illegal work or dollars. His work papers, which the policeman also demands to see, show that he is an officially-licensed dancer.

Frustrated, the policeman growls at him: “What are you doing with these women?! You are not supposed to be with foreigners!” Antonio unleashes a disdainful laugh. “Where is the law saying I cannot walk with a foreigner?! Show me the law!” Clarice tugs imploringly at her beloved’s sleeve, but he yanks his arm away. She turns to me, her features riddled with worry, and whispers: “I do not know why he always has to provoke. He only makes things worse.”

Grabbing Antonio’s arm, the policeman barks furiously: “I will show you the inside of the police station! Come with me!” Clarice, who is blonde and disarmingly beautiful, steps towards the policeman and offers him a gentle smile. Eyes wide, she speaks in exaggeratedly halting Spanish: “I am sorry, officer. What is happening? I am a French journalist. I write about Cuban arts. I interviewed this man. He is a dancer. Can I help?” The policeman’s demeanor transforms completely. Flashing a flirtatious grin, he assures Clarice: “No, no, Beautiful. There is no problem.” But when he turns back to Antonio, his eyes are black ice. “I will let you go. But get a new *Carne*. This one is disgraceful. Next time, you will be fined.”

As we walk away, Diana lights a filterless cigarette and draws its thick smoke deep into her lungs. “Be careful, Antonio.” Antonio waves dismissively towards the officer and chortles: “I am not afraid of that idiot!” Looking over her shoulder to make sure no one is listening, Diana hisses: “You should be afraid! I am afraid! Everyone I know is afraid! They could arrest me for selling my photographs *por afuera* (outside the country)! A *chibaton*” — (literally “big goat,” this is what Cubans call snitches who report neighbors’ clandestine activities to the Communist Party) “could turn my mother in for renting without a permit, some bitter old lady who is envi-

ous of my mother’s nice house! The CDR (Committee for the Defense of the Revolution) on my father’s block could turn him in!” (Diana’s father makes bootleg rum with black market rubbing alcohol stolen by a pediatrician from the state-run hospital where he works.) “And if any of us argues in our own defense that we are forced to do these things, that we have to lie and cheat and steal in order to survive because a monthly state salary will not buy one week’s vegetables, they will say we are Counterrevolutionaries and punish us further!”

“That is exactly what *El Grande Señor* wants to do with these new laws, *Flaca*. To scare us. Because it is cheaper to scare people than to feed them, and less of a risk than letting them feed themselves.” Antonio takes a long shot of rum, holds up the bottle and muses: “Rum. This is Cuba’s *real* public medicine.” Diana grinds her cigarette butt into the sidewalk with her platform’s chunky heel. “I do not want to talk about politics. I hate thinking about politics. It upsets me.”

A long line of Cubans is waiting to buy ice cream for pesos when we arrive at the Copellia. Antonio, who frequents swankier haunts where tourists pay in dollars, groans: “Why are you obsessed with Copellia, Clarice? We can go down the block and get better ice cream for dollars” [Clarice’s dollars] “and not have to wait on this line!” But Clarice will not be swayed. She has been clamoring to go to Copellia, an exceptionally popular spot among Cubans, for weeks.

As we join the end of the line, Diana says: “I am working on a series of photographs about Frustration. I want to make a book of them. I want to show people’s frustration in their eyes, in the way they hold their hands. I want to show their frustration from their cheap shoes up to their sad smiles.”

A uniformed guard stops us from entering Copellia and says Clarice and I must go to the designated section where tourists pay in *divisas* (foreign currency). I show him my foreign resident’s identification booklet, which looks like a passport and is stamped “CARNE DE IDENTIDAD PARA EXTRANJEROS.” Clarice tells him she wants to include Copellia in the French guidebook she is writing about Havana. The guard shrugs amiably and lets us pass.

Moving swiftly between crowded work stations, Diana asks Copellia’s lackadaisical waiters what flavors remain. The first floor’s open-air patios have only vanilla. But Diana finds a room on the second floor that is serving chocolate. She is thrilled. Practically everyone in the cavernous, fluorescent-lit room is working their way through several platters of chocolate ice cream. I count 16 “salads” of five scoops each between two teen-aged boys. Diana and Antonio order three “salads” each. Clarice and I both order one. This strikes Diana as a crime, and she chides us: “Only one?! Girls! It is choco-

late!" After her first plate, Diana pauses momentarily, licks chocolate lips and reflects: "In a bitter country, you must have something sweet."

* * *

Our train is an old, battered thing, with rattling metal walls, filthy windows and a pervasive stench of urine emanating from the toilet. As we settle into its worn wooden seats, I try to gauge whether this train is, indeed, in worse shape than those I rode in India 10 years ago, or whether my tolerance has simply dropped with age. Beside me, Ismael comments: "This train is much more modern than the one I traveled on as a boy." We are heading to Surgidero de Batabano, the departure point for boats to Cuba's second largest island, La Isla de la Juventud. Earlier this week, when Ismael inquired about tickets for the hydrofoil between Surgidero and the Isla, the ticket seller said he had to buy tickets 15 days in advance. She did not mention that foreigners could buy tickets for the same day in dollars, or that Cubans could buy peso tickets without advance notice for another boat, the Catamaran. Later, she shared this information with me — a foreigner, who therefore merited special treatment.

I am glad to be escaping Havana's intensified police presence and its attendant paranoia. I'm eager, too, to see the Isla de la Juventud — a place where the Cuban government and its foreign partners have not invested money to build tourism, and where the facade normally presented to Cuba's visitors thus does not mask uglier realities. The Isla's history, too, intrigues me. It was once the haunt of notorious the British pirate Francis Drake, whose adventures there inspired Robert Louis Stevenson's novel, *Treasure Island*. In the 19th century, the Spanish exiled Cuban independence advocate Jose Marti to what was then known as the Isle of Pines. And Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista imprisoned rebel Fidel Castro there from 1953 to 1955. Castro's own government subsequently renamed it the Isle of Youth in tribute to the young people who volunteered to study at "schools in the countryside" while working on the island's vast citrus plantations.

To my surprise, our train leaves the station precisely on schedule. It stops, though, about 30 meters down the track and remains at a standstill for over an hour. No announcement is made to explain the delay. After 40 minutes' wait, I grow agitated. But the Cubans on board seem completely unfazed. A lithe teenager with fraying hair extensions and an American flag spandex bodysuit pulls wee puppies from her handbag, and a crowd of children flocks around. A toothless, sun-singed old white man jokes loudly to his curler-headed daughter, who is busy painting her nails. Two young men — one in a "SIEMPRE COCA-COLA" t-shirt, Reebok shorts and a *Mano de Orula santeria* bracelet; the other in a Tommy Hilfiger t-shirt and a NY Yankees cap — toss quips back at the jocular old man,

keeping themselves and the rest of the car entertained.

The train finally starts up and inches through Havana's destitute, outlying neighborhoods, with their crumbling, laundry-hung buildings and debris-littered streets. It wends its way ever so slowly through the "Havana Countryside," across red-earthed plains cultivated with potatoes, tomatoes and cucumbers; where machete-wielding workers bend under a strong morning sun. The man seated in front of us — an Afro-Cuban albino with a gold front tooth (at which I peer at and realize that it has "NIKE" imprinted on it) explains to Ismael: "A train traveling this route three days ago derailed. Many people were injured. News of it will not appear in the newspaper, of course, but everyone is talking about it. The line has not yet been repaired..."

Too tired to concentrate on Spanish, I stop listening to their conversation and look instead through the window's soot at the sagging wooden poles that run parallel to the track. Electrical lines, some severed and swaying in the breeze, hang loosely between them. I imagine opening the window and reaching outside to grab one of the severed, live wires. I imagine the current zapping up my arm to my head, making my hair fly out like a character in a Looney Tunes cartoon.

* * *

The catamaran vibrates wildly for our entire three-hour trip — so badly that the soundtrack of the Jim Carey movie being shown, though played at a deafening decibel, is entirely inaudible. Bones and eardrums still quivering, Ismael and I leave the port and walk along a dusty road towards the center of Nueva Gerona, the Isla's capital. There are no motorized vehicles and only a few bicycles. And not a policeman in sight. Marble hills loom in the distance, and blocks of grimy, low-cost apartment buildings line the outskirts of town. Below a freshly painted billboard proclaiming "LA REVOLUCION POR SIEMPRE," a long line of people waits listlessly for one of the few *juajuas* — buses — that run daily from Nueva Gerona to the surrounding countryside.

No touts flock around us offering houses to rent. At first, I find this a relief. Then I begin to worry we will not find a place to stay. The only hotel in town — a sleepy, rundown place that caters mostly to peso-paying Cubans but allows foreigners to pay in dollars — is full. In hopes of a commission, its receptionist, an expressionless woman in a worn uniform, leaves the front desk unattended and escorts us to three grim homes with rooms to rent.

As the receptionist speaks to our third potential landlord, I spot a cheerier-looking house nearby with a sign advertising rooms to rent. When I go over to it, the owner, a squat woman with magenta hair, refuses to speak with me. I find her extremely rude, but Ismael surmises she does not want to steal business from her neigh-

bor or the receptionist, with whom she will have to live long after I leave. Indeed, immediately after we part with the receptionist, the squat woman appears beside me and extends a pudgy hand: "My name is Barbara. Everyone knows me as Babi." As we walk to her house, Babi gurgles enthusiastically: "There are so many things to see on the Isla! Tourists love the Isla! You will love it, too!"

Babi's house is slightly less depressing than the others we have seen. She leads us through the living room, where four generations of her family watch the Tasmanian Devil whirl on an overloud television, and into an adjacent bedroom. There are threadbare stuffed animals piled on the bed, frilly curtains and a poster of a semi-nude platinum blonde sticking out buoyant breasts. I mutter to Ismael that I do not like the poster. He looks at me blankly.

Babi's grandmother, a stooped but still sparky woman, comes in to see if we like the room. So do Babi's mother, husband, toddler daughter and adolescent nephew. Stepping away from the crowd, I explain to Ismael my reaction to the poster and its objectification of women. He nods, seeming to understand, and tells Babi: "We like the room. Except for that poster."

All heads abruptly swivel towards me, and Babi's grandmother cackles: "Why, are you jealous?!" Four generations laugh raucously. I feel my face flush red, then redder. As Babi takes the poster down from the wall, she jokes: "This photo is actually of me!" She sticks out floppy breasts. "Many women are jealous of my body, but I try not to let it bother me!"

By the time Babi's mother, husband and nephew have used the communal bathroom, there is no running water left in the shower or toilet. And there is no more toilet paper. In its stead, a section of a yellowed Rudyard Kipling poetry book (in English) hangs beside the toilet. Murky, reddish water dribbles from the sink's faucet. I get dressed for dinner without washing up.

On Nueva Gerona's main drag — a pedestrian boulevard lined with dingy storefronts — we stop at *El Cochinito*, a restaurant specializing in pork dishes. It has run out of food. Next door, at *La Casa de Pollo*, we wait more than an hour for a table. When we are finally seated and greedily debating whether to have smoked or fried chicken, the waiter informs us: "We had two more pieces of chicken, especially for the two of you. But the cook burnt them." Ravenous, we head to *La Casa de Arroz*, where there is nothing left but rice and deep fried pork rinds. At the only remaining restaurant in town, a dim Chinese place whose menu consists of four variations on chop suey, the waitress greets us with: "We only have soup left ... Bone soup."

In an attempt to distract ourselves from our growling stomachs, Ismael and I go to *El Patio*, a cave-like bar

with a cabaret floor show. The *Patio's* bartender cursorily glances at my *Carne* and tosses it back at me. Arguing that drinking is a luxury and not something I need in order to carry out my studies here, he makes me pay for the drinks in dollars. But he allows me to buy plantain chips — evidently a necessity — with pesos.

As two scrawny men in stretch pants and ruffled sleeves lead five gyrating, g-stringed women around the stage to distorted salsa music, a beefy man with midnight skin approaches our table. From his patent leather shoes to his snappy cap, he is dressed all in white. Strings of bicolored plastic santeria beads hang around his neck and left wrist. Thick tortoise-shell glasses make his eyes look ghoulishly oversized. Taking a spit-soaked cigar from his mouth, the man sibilantly introduces himself as "Ssantoss Hernandez... But everyone calls me *El Gordo*."

Santos pulls up a chair and flags the waiter, who brings a bottle of cheap rum. Despite Ismael's and my protests that we do not want any, Santos pours the rum into three glasses. He gulps down the contents of his glass, draws on his soggy cigar and announces: "I am the director of this cabaret. I do it out of devotion, certainly not for the small salary. It is not easy. We need many things. Do you know what a key for a *tumbadora* costs? Eight dollars! And that is just one key! Or a microphone?! We are poor people. Where is any of us going to get eight dollars? I must find money, somehow, to buy these things. I hope you — an American and a lover of the arts — will give whatever money you can to help us."

I grow uncomfortable, as I do whenever someone here asks me for money. And guilty. I search for a diplomatic way to turn Santos down. By now, dollar signs are flashing in his froggish eyes. He continues his pitch: "I also hope you will make a contribution to the school of music dance I am founding. I imagine it is something you and your organization in the United States would want to help us with. It is a perfect project for you." I tell Santos ICWA funds individual Fellowships, not schools. His eyes narrow, and the dollar signs disappear. Sucking in his lips indignantly, he exclaims: "But you are a rich American! What do dollars matter to you?!"

Ismael and I leave the *Patio* early to get to Nueva Gerona's own Copellia ice cream parlor before it closes. But the Copellia is dark, and a battered sign hangs on the door, saying "The ice cream has not arrived." We go to the 24-hour dollar store to buy chocolate; it, too, is closed. Sitting on the pedestrian boulevard, where clashing disco songs blare distortedly, I grumble what a frustrating day it has been. Ismael nods sympathetically. "It has been a frustrating day," he agrees. "And you must feel the frustrations all the more because you are from a developed nation, where things do not work like this... But imagine feeling those frustrations every single day of every year of your entire life. And you have no choice. You cannot leave. That is how Cubans live." □

