

II. Place

'El Mono Está Chiflando'

Havana is a flirt and co-conspirator, beckoning lovers and schemers with her honey dawns. Most eyes fix on the city's decay – Cerro's falling down facades, the caving roofs of Marianao, and the pocked mosaics of Centro Habana. Obsessed with the crumbling splendor, such surveys miss the magic of lives revealed through winking louvers: arthritic hands rearranging a clutch of silk gardenias; a More menthol balanced between the red hot nails of a five peso manicure. Through stolen glances, I slip into Havana's secret heart, a world of half-revealed myths and mysteries.

What goes on behind those stained glass panes lining Paseo or the porthole propped ajar in that Miramar manor? Undoubtedly there's the violent hiss of a pressure cooker parching musky black beans and the stereoscopic blast of the nightly news. Next door, a mother pins a tiny talisman to the back of her baby's shirt protecting him from the evil eye. Meanwhile, her husband connects the propane tank to the kitchen stove, cursing under his breath. Not far from here, lovers swish their hips to the *timba* beat drifting above a clothesline sagging with jeans. Over the garden wall, a small boy stands poised before his cockatiel's cage, ready to fling it open and dump in some seed before she makes a break for it. Chickens peck around the fallen leaves and hibiscus flowers at his

feet. His dachshund waddles inside. Even dogs shrink from the sun's slow, hot glare, which makes us lethargic and uninterested in working past lunchtime.

Havana tolerates the sun like the widow does the first wife at the wake. The city's motley architecture, with concrete apartment blocks squatting next to Romanesque mini-mansions and art deco balconies is designed to mitigate the sun. Cut short by wooden louvers or swan print curtains, darkened by tinted glass or clouded by milky panes, the sun is rebuffed and controlled by whatever means possible. While we rely on straw hats and baseball caps, umbrellas and newspapers held aloft, libraries and homes, bus stops and *bodegas* adapt design to create shadow and cool.

Sometimes the effect is achieved with thick, concrete walls that stamp out the sun and swallow the damp without ever digesting it, catacomb like. Perpetually fusty, visitors wince at the dank their hosts no longer notice, shaking off the stink with laughter, rum, and the occasional bickering flare up. Those with more resources build walls of decorative, stenciled breeze blocks with cutout flowers that keep the sun mostly out while letting fresh air in. Delicate in a way cement never was intended, such are the walls of parishes, schools, and the Alta Habana homes of the party faithful. I ache to go inside to see the long rays of a six o'clock sun streaming through these concrete daisies, dappling a blue-and-yellow tiled floor.

Tempering the heat with tile is a simple, graceful solution on which Havana relies heavily. All over the city, bas relief nymphs, rococo flora, and hand-painted curlicues catch the eye. Functional in more than form, tile moderates the heat and is easy to clean. With mops unheard of and vacuum cleaners nonexistent, every Havana home, office, museum, and cafeteria is equipped with a bucket, cotton rag, and t-shaped stick used to

swab floors. Only effective in practiced hands, it's harder than it looks, raising red welts on my palms and straining my back. The rag never collects all the fallen hair which blows in circles like tumbleweeds around our home; it won't be retired until it's holey and grey with ground in dirt. Even then, the rag is kept hanging around for some future use – garden clean up perhaps or to plug a gap during the hurricane.

In Havana, oblique light is rare and cherished, shadows embraced. Windows are placed high up and out of reach as if child-proofed, sitting rooms are set back, and shade trees are greedily sown. Today, the flaxen light of a late winter afternoon tries to pierce the dark spaces enveloping Calzada Infanta or Cayo Hueso. There, locked deep in the porticos and alleys of Havana's urban heart, shadows provide alibis. But *el mono está chiflando* - the monkey is whistling - blowing that cold winter wind that penetrates where the sun can't, bearing away damaging secrets on its velvety tips. Wandering the dusty streets of downtown, the smell of spicy black tobacco and basil mingles with those secrets. Just as I catch the scent, cocking my head to divine from where, it's gone.

I'm surprised Cuba doesn't sink, it's so full of secrets. Miguel is planning to defect at the next boxing tournament while his sister considers the raft route; Mirta is cheating on Julio but since he found out he's been sleeping with David; and the good General was caught on tape making an off-color remark. Goodbye General.

All those secrets, innocent and otherwise, hover above the Malecón before drifting out to sea. It's a paradox that Havana's air should be freshest here, along the five miles of seawall where lovers betray one another, hatching escape plans. Nearby, like birds on a wire, young black bucks and their foreign flings lose mystery in translation. The city's most sacred space, the Malecón mixes the heavy sighs of the long fight with

hope, yes!, for tomorrow. Exhaustion and expectation make today feel revelatory, distinct from what came before and what we promise ourselves will come after. Hope lives carefree along these salt-cured curves of wall that protect cracked homes from the final fissure. Taking the Malecón's sea air is to take a fresh breath; a nightly ritual in the city of secrets.

The streets are bathed in a tender melancholy every sunset, as the sky lopes through shades of orange, red and pink on its way to the Blue Hour. Elsewhere, twilight quiets the manic and sends poets to paper, but here in Havana, florescent tubes cauterize that comforting light, sending a green B-flat buzz over the rooftops. Caught between dusk's tranquil rays and night's inky depth, the sickly glare shines on Havana's missteps and stains, revealing the tender parts no one wants to admit. This is when smiles wither without warning and rough edges jump into sharp relief. At night, mistrust infects the hearts of lovers and somewhere black beans are hissing under pressure, a talisman works against the evil eye, and hips twist to the beat, desperate to recreate myths.

My friend's grandmother Anita, a hunched woman with broad hips and hair dyed the color of bread crusts, is sweeping tiles as faded as her hummed refrain. Her left eye, clouded by cataract, betrays nothing, but her right sparkles with a distant memory that ebbs and flows with each pass of her broom. She shuffles and flicks her way to the front patio clucking disapproval as the green plastic bristles trail strands of long, raven hair. I lift my feet, reaching carefully for the tiny teacup with the broken handle Carmen

proffers on a plastic tray. I smile, sipping gingerly at the sweet liquid that catches at the back of my throat. Like the smell rippling off the Río Almendares at dusk, Cuban ration card coffee is earthy and sharp, more chaff than bean and cut liberally with sugar.

Carmen shoots me a wink and confides, “Grammy doesn’t like me combing my hair in the *sala*. She hates sweeping it up.”

Out of earshot now, Anita works around the heavy wooden rockers the handsome *compañero* from next door carefully arranged against the front wall. Strains of her melody reach the street as she tries for the upper register. The noonday sun burns high and hot beyond the Ionic columns of her stately home. It’s really too torrid to be out here, even in the patio’s deep shade, but Anita is determined to fight the dirt that blows off 23rd Street, covering her crotons and ferns with what looks like human cremains. She sweeps more urgently, wishing she were rocking in one of those chairs right this minute, sipping a lemonade swimming with mint.

“¡Oye Mima!” shouts Yanesi, her neighbor from two doors down. She’s the pretty one with the *santero* husband who read the divining shells for Anita after the doctor found the lump in her breast. The priest’s divination had proven spot on so she consulted him again when her daughter got in on the *bombo*, the lottery for a visa to emigrate to Miami. The Santería holy man had heard the *orishas* right: Nelly didn’t get the visa. What he failed to hear - or what the saints failed to convey - was that she would leave on a raft six months later.

“You shouldn’t be working in this heat abuelita. How are you feeling?” Yanesi asks the old lady after pecking her on the cheek and taking her hand, roughened and deeply lined on the palm side but buttery soft on top.

“Still here, thank God. I don’t like this heat, but it’s better than that horrible cold when *el mono está chiflando*. Last week my arthritis was...” she trails off with a whistle through false teeth.

“God was it cold! My aunt Lydia, my dad’s sister – you know the one, with the son on the volleyball team? – she has terrible asthma. How she suffers! ”

“No es fácil.”

“No it isn’t easy. Here, take some oranges,” Yanesi insists, reaching into her bag, the plastic wrinkled from being washed and line dried so many times. “They’re sweet,” she says of the greenish fruits.

“Gracias, my child,” the old lady says taking them and laying them on the windowsill. She picks up her broom and her forgotten melody, wondering why they’re called oranges when they’re green.