



*Back from Cuba, still two inches above ground.  
Difficult to adapt to a land below freezing.*

PETER HORN

**D**ecaying, yet lively beauty with bad breath from the mouth of a thousand ancient diesel engines: Santiago de Cuba in December.

The sun warms you all year 'round, you won't stay pale too long. People friendly, open and caring, at least in the eyes of a guest from the land of perfect functioning. Family is valued here, neighbors help each other, kids appreciate the smallest gift. You turn your head at yet another gorgeous female, and you can bet she will smile back at you with lots of white teeth, appreciating how you appreciate her beauty. Better forget about your protestant inhibitions, this is another world, this is Cuba.

Food is basic and natural, except the ghastly canned spam they eat if they can't get their hands on some black market meat, for Cuba's culture is strictly carnal. An invitation for dinner implies you will have to contribute the main ingredient, maybe a bunch of red fish, bought for a few dollars from a lifeguard at Playa Siboney, or frozen lobster tails in a pack of ten, snatched from state resources and kept in an ancient russian refrigerator, ready to be bought with hard currency by a hushed client.



After the meal you get a chance to dance Salsa with Grandma, chew some of those yummy fried banana chips called *tostones*, meet a large family living together in a house which is a building site, cement bags waiting in the corner to create more space for a better life, collect little kisses from each child, from every woman who happens to be around, *con mucho cariño!*

There is music on every corner; learn how to hold the claves to get the best sound. Watch those girls shake their bottoms, big or small, red or yellow with black stripes. Abundant and constantly in swaying motion: *la cintura!* – You can learn it, too. Or at least get close to the feeling how it would be if you really could. Jesus Christ and Mona Lisa are gently looking down from opposite livingroom walls on awkward foreigner's bones aspiring to qualify for Salsa Paralympics. Have some more rum with lime under the spinning fan. Every five minutes a neighbor or street vendor is dropping in. Friendly, wordy conversation



with lots of laughs. When your concentration starts to fade move to the kitchen and join in with your hosts to prepare delicious *fritura de malanga*.

On TV, learn each and every detail of Havana's health statistic from Fidel in person, if you can stand to listen for three hours. Now you know how many blind people live in Cayo Hueso (eighteen), and that rum can be dangerous to your health. Enjoy *maní* from a street vendor, wrapped in a paper cone made from a page ripped from a chemistry book. Tropical delights galore. *La Buena Calabaza*. Old folks with crooked teeth play domino, timelessly perched on crude home-made chairs in the shade. Don't be afraid of the dogs, they are small and well-behaved like little sheep and won't harm you.



Darkening streets haunted with gaudy cars from a legendary past, hungry shark mouths with streamlined figurines on their bulging hood, what function do these forms follow? From now on your Cuban dream will be populated by nickel-plated swans, forever.

When at one in the night on your way home a skinny dark lady in a long white figure-hugging outfit stops you in your tracks, don't be rude if she doesn't fit your schedule, buy her a beer, later she'll take you to her mother's house for a *bembé*. Watch the person possessed by a spirit spin around and around in trance with his eyes closed, your eyes wide open, he talking with hands, the *santera* interpreting, chanting, the audience joining in, drumming away on plastic buckets. Feel a little shaky now? – Share a bottle of rum with the *orisha*. Let it happen. *No tengas miedo*. Don't be afraid. Life is for us to live it, now, not in a future uncertain, unpredictable. There is no such thing as an all risk insurance...



Breakfast is adorned with ripe Mango and sour-sweet Guanabana, coffee black and strong, sorry, no milk today, but again tomorrow, much too sweet. Stroll across Parque Cespedes, a sadly bare square since something killed all the trees. From a balcony opposite the cathedral Fidel proclaimed the victory of the revolution four decades ago. Trying to avoid the *jineteras'* penetrating stares is pointless, like fending off mosquitoes at

dawn. *Where are you from?* – Best to buy your way out with a tiny bar of hotel soap, a disposable lighter. They will not be disposed, they will be refilled and repaired, again and again: another roadside workplace. Those people do have a sense for small things that go unnoticed until you need them.

Wait another hour and half an hour more at the bus stop. This is another kind of wait, not boring at all. Buy ten lemons for a peso, and be sure to bring a bottle of *Ron Santiago*. Watch the beer truck spill blue fumes, its engine never shut off during the workday because it has no battery.



Here comes your ride to the beach, one hour for the equivalent of ten cents, standing tightly packed on the truck with two hundred and twelve companions (uneducated guess). Next stop, more passengers, yet there is still enough space for another mulata to wedge in her shapely behind.

Stumble on through now deserted streets towards the very basic comfort of your twenty dollar *casa particular*, feet sore, it is late. No need for a taxi, you enjoy the walk because you are not alone. Later, under the shower, prelude of slippery delights under a thin stream of lukewarm water; then, at last, light skin mingling with brown.

Fragrance, heat, moisture, community. Sweat moan refrain. Sated soon, too soon. Trying to fall asleep with the background chorus of piglets squeaking, russian refrigerator rattling and air con humming, sleep is a scarce commodity, but golden rum and gentle warmth contribute to soothe a needy soul.

Waking up from half-sleep, not from the alarm clock fearfully anticipated but from the distant sound of congas at two thirty, once again at four in the morning from a little roosters's hoarse cry, announcing another day of struggle for the Santiagueros, and the day of forced departure for the alien struggling with time, mercilessly advancing, ripping his heart apart. Another long, longing glance at the smooth, brown sculpture lying there clutching the thin sheet. Hold on to her, hold on to the moment so very present, so real, so precious. Heart beating, thoughts whirling, anticipating future sadness in a far away place across the seas called home.

Your princess for a week has to get up early, much too early, bidding you a hasty farewell to rush to her badly paid job, this time on Honda wings, a rare luxury enabled by her part-time knight. She doesn't seem to have an idea about what all this meant for you.

Let's keep on dreaming, let's be realistic. Do they love you and like your dollars, too? Or do they love your dollars and like you a little bit, too? Heck – life is a dream, and life is a deal also – and not a bad one, for us and for them, when we come to Cuba.

