

Cuba

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I want this to be a lengthy piece of prose but I'm not sure I have the paper to do it. I'm sure you can buy notebooks somewhere but I might need to go through three or five of the empty-shelved shops to find one. Inside each establishment formal glass cabinets separate public space from the shopkeeper's retreat. Inside each cabinet lonesome items sit on stainless steel racks. Behind the shopkeeper further objects are stacked up in small huddles. There are three types of shampoo and two brands of soap. When I speak in Spanish the shopkeepers look blank and I have to repeat myself. I'm conscious of the terrible curl of my accent.

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Arriving in Cuba to research the International Festival of New Latin American Cinema, I felt that I had come during exciting times. As I write, the country is in the run up to its fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the revolution. Ernesto 'Che' Guevara's face is everywhere: on t-shirts for the tourist, immortalised in museums and hanging high on government painted walls. Cinema was no stranger to the revolution and early manifestos heralded the art form's potential

to radicalise compadres both inside and outside the island. Throughout the years, the film council ICAIC produced and promoted the feature films and documentaries that bore witness to the country's socialist ideals. Even in the darkest moments of political repression, ICAIC demanded freedom of speech and expression, refusing to bow down to censorship and state interference. Its film festival brought and still brings left-wing filmmakers to the island from all over Latin America and beyond, creating debates that resonate through the text books on revolutionary cinema. The festival also provides the only time in Havana's annual calendar when a diverse selection of films can be seen across the city. In normal circumstances Cubans are shown poor DVD versions of a limited number of films, usually pirated US works.

While there is an air of excitement for the film festival drifting through the city there seems to be less enthusiasm for the revolution's anniversary that is only weeks away. Food shortages are still in place and although there are trained doctors littering the streets, most families rely on relatives overseas to send necessary medical supplies. Fidel Castro hasn't



been seen in months and even with his brother Raul holding the fort, there is a feeling that there is not much to celebrate.

My own hopes for the on-going revolution are fading fast. I already want a supermarket with gleaming shiny capitalist products where I can browse anonymously. Supermarkets do not exist here. Some of the shops, especially the ones with clothes, have large lines of people queuing outside. I would like to know what is inside that is so special but I am afraid to stand in line in case I look out of place. My stomach is turning slowly, grumbling about some kind of unfamiliar bacteria. As I write, the scent of sewage drifts up from the street. The city is full of the smell of excrement, from dogs on the pavement and from poor unsanitary plumbing that is too costly to repair.



The day after my flight I realised that I had to move to somewhere affordable. Hotel Islazul Lincoln wasn't markedly expensive but it was crumbling apart day by day. Strange noises came from the air conditioning unit that I had left turned off. Water dripped in through the bathroom ceiling. I couldn't afford to upgrade so I had to look for another option. When I went to the first *casa particular* in the old town I found a friendly family with a room to rent. They were looking forward to the film festival and were excited that I had come all the way to the island to attend it. Only as the introductory conversation continued did I realise by showing up I had made a reservation. I would now have to cancel that reservation if I didn't want to stay. The *casa* was clean. In the bedroom, a gaudy pink bedcover with an embroidered heart brightened up the room. The bedside lamp didn't have a light bulb but the bathroom was mere footsteps across the hallway. Sometimes it had hot water, sometimes it didn't. Sergio promised to tell me about the origins of *casino* music and suggested he would teach me how to dance. His wife spoke in an accent too strong for me to understand but she was happy to cater to my difficult vegetarian needs. There had been a drive a number of years ago to

encourage Cubans to take up a vegetarian diet for health improvement but as the food shortages increased it quickly became apparent that the *compadres* would have to eat whatever they could to obtain protein. In the living room I was surprised to see a computer connected to the World Wide Web. Cubans are not permitted internet access in their homes and with internet cafe rates at over £6 an hour the majority of citizens are priced out of possible access. Like many others across the

city, the family was illegally hacking into a foreign resident's connection. After taking all of this in it was time to do some preparation work and seek out the various locations of the film festival.

Outside, in the old town, European-faced tourists could be seen wandering amongst the colonial facades. They were

engaging in what a trio of Latin American filmmakers have termed *porno-misery*. With gigantic telescopic lenses protruding from their digital SLRs, they would delight in capturing the crumbling derelict cityscapes. They congratulated themselves on the close-ups that allowed each wrinkle on the beggar's outstretched hand to be revealed. I stepped quietly past them, over the dirt and the debris, but I didn't make it very far before that quietness was disturbed.

- *hey lady, hey, hey, hey lady, hey.* I ignored the comments and kept walking.
- *hola, hola, hello, hola.* Another one, I fixed my gaze squarely on the pavement in front of me.
- *hello, hey baby, over here, hey lady. Eh, you too good for me?*
- *psst, psst, hola, hola, hola...hola...hola.*
- *hey baby, hey baby.* I didn't want to be anybody's baby.
- *hey lady, psst, hey lady, psst*
- *hola linda. you beautiful*
- *hola, hola . . . hola . . . hola . . . hola. you bad educated?*

It wasn't just me. Every woman on the street was an object to be commented on. I hid in



the patio of a restaurant. Large leafy trees hung overhead and a musician gently strummed his guitar. Kittens and cats wound their way round the table legs. The only customers appeared to be white-faced tourists in shorts and sandals.

Tourist information could help me if I signed up to one of the flashy-cocktail-palm tree tours they offered on the resorts to the east of the city. I asked if I could take a local bus to the film festival locations. The woman with the long manicured fingernails ignored the question and carefully wrote down the name of a nearby hotel where I could find one of the special tourist buses. I continued around the city on foot, finding a couple of old cinemas that had long gone without renovation. They were large impressive halls with sweeping balconies and a determined grandeur that ignored the shabby seats in need of repair. They were also cheap. At less than six pence, cinema tickets were some of the rare affordable commodities for Cubans. When I arrived at the Payret in the old town, however, I found that there was a separate price for tourists, around one pound fifty. It wasn't a lot of money, less than the price of a mojito and nothing compared to the price of a multiplex back home. But it seemed unfair to charge that amount for the opportunity to view a pirate DVD in an old battered auditorium. When the sun died away I made my journey back to the *casa*. Streetlights were few and far between and my feet trod down on squelchy muck in the darkness.

Waiting for the film festival to begin I spent time leafing through old festival catalogues in ICAIC's library. The institute sprawls across a number of buildings including the city's best maintained cinema: sturdy seats, a good 35mm projector and reasonable sound. Since its inception, ICAIC has suffered and overcome blackouts that threaten the air conditioning in the delicate archive storage, various economic crises and political arguments with the government. Inside the library there were beautiful old film projectors that seemed in better upkeep than the small number of computers used by the staff. Enthusiastic correspondence with film councils and festivals around the world was sustained even through the shaky internet connections and an awkward postal system.

Back at the *casa* I found the family had a prior reservation to uphold and so they moved me into other another registered *casa particular* in the same building, just a flight of steps upstairs.

Christina welcomed me in with a smiling face and open arms but her husband Aurelio was too sick to get up. He was not just poorly but terminally ill. His hollow face and stick thin arms were the traces of a long fight against cancer. The hospital has sent him home as there was nothing more they could do. Christina proudly showed me the balcony outside my room and that is where I am now. Inside the living room a Spanish-language telenovela is playing on the television screen. I ask Christina if it is Mexican channel, confused by the adverts for private medical care, gleaming off-road vehicles and high speed broadband, none of which are available in Cuba. Christina smiles wryly. It is a US channel, another pirated cultural commodity. I cannot decide if it is cruel to have the unobtainable capitalist luxuries beamed into the home in exchange for the opportunity to watch a favourite television program. The sun is starting to fade and loud reggaeton beats are pounding out of the stereo system in the opposite apartment.

The days move slowly. I meet a Canadian student who has been here for over a year. She enjoys it but she tells me to stop using the local buses because someone will steal my bag or my purse. The local buses are around three pence; taxi journeys are about five pounds. She also tells me about the night someone followed her to her house and snatched her bag as she was putting her key into the door. I shift my purse deeper into my bag and check the bag's fastener. Her words leave me concerned about my credit card, the only access I have to cash and the only object I can't afford to have stolen.

Finally, the film festival begins and the cinemas fill with programs of events. Situated in the Karl Marx theatre, surrounded by an audience of over fifteen hundred, the president of the film festival, Alfredo Guevara gives his opening address. He speaks of revolutionary hope for the continent

– I have wanted to start from this reference (the education and culture of our people) because we appreciate in the whole of Latin America – in a way in some countries, in a different form in others – a rising movement of identity confirmation and sovereignty rescue, while in the world, and particularly in the Empire, the defeat of the neo-liberal stream opens possibilities still not measurable.





Yet as much as Guevara incites the political in his speech, there is also an explicit warning to the meddling that comes from the state.

– *I have only wanted to warn you: please, comrades, and all the more today, when the majority is young, and those that arrive, experienced: remain watchful! Do not allow the leaders-civil servants get hold of the audiovisual, do not allow the organizational structures to lose their dimension, do not forget that it will be fatal that bureaucracy, not as*

physical presence but as invader mentality allied to ignorance and opportunism takes the place that only corresponds to artists.

Miguel Littin, radical left-wing Chilean filmmaker who escaped execution by Pinochet's regime in the 1970s only to return to the country in disguise so as to film again, comes on to the stage. He is a long running guest at the festival and in attendance to receive an honorary award. I am delighted to see him in the flesh and listen in awe as he fills his acceptance speech with rousing calls for a new generation of inspiring filmmakers. The crowd claps, with polite, muted applause. It seems that after thirty years of film festival rousing speeches and fifty years of a continuing revolution, they have heard it all before. The lights dim for Pablo Trapero's opening film *Leonera* and it is when the film comes to a close that I finally hear the animated murmuring of an excited audience.

Over the next few days, the screenings are filled with Cuban spectators and handfuls of overseas visitors. Spectators line up to check the daily film times posted on photocopied sheets outside the cinemas. In the queues for seats, strangers bat comments and rumours



back and forwards about the films they have seen and will see. Running commentaries begin within the cinemas and spill out on to the streets. It is easy to hear which films are popular, which are difficult to grasp, which are disliked and which are dismissed outright. At the festival's base in the Hotel Nacional, fashionable directors walk coolly in and out of the press conferences while first time filmmakers dash between cameras with flyers, posters and screeners of their work. The days begin early in the morning with the nine am press conferences and screenings and end late at night when the last cinemas close sometime after midnight.

I have to find somewhere to stay that is nearer to the festival venues. As it turns out, the Canadian girl can help me find somewhere. The *casa* she knows isn't registered and so legally I'm not allowed to stay there but it is cheap. Because neighbours spy on each other and report counterrevolutionary behaviour I promise to keep a low profile. There are ups and downs to this new place. The bathroom doesn't have a working shower so I have to use a bucket to splash cold water over myself in the rusting bathtub. On the other hand, the neighbourhood is quiet and I can sleep late into the morning on the high lumpy bed.

As the film festival moves towards the weekend, screenings fill up more quickly. I walk past the Yara three hours before the first showing of Steven Soderbergh's two-part drama *Che*. There is already a queue of people stretching round the side of the building and down two blocks. Policemen stand at the entrance way, trying to look stern as more eager spectators sidle into the queue and join its misshapen form. It is either Cuban themed or Cuban produced films that seem the most popular. When the side doors of Cine Yara open to allow audience members in, a snaking thin riot begins. Spectators push and shove their way up the grassy verge, elbowing *compadres* out of the way. The policemen raise their batons to try and give shape to the mass

entering the cinema but their arms are pushed to the side. They barely maintain balance as the river of people forces its way past them. A similar riot takes place outside La Rampa and the shrieks and squeals of spectators squeezing in through the narrow entrance doors can be heard up and down the block. In each case, I watch from across the road, slurping on cheap Cuban ice-cream. I don't have the guts to enter into the fray.

As much as I'm enjoying the film festival I want to get off the island as soon as it ends. At the airline office the woman behind the desk has a sympathetic smile. She can bring my flight forward for free. I smile back at her in that cool, crisp, air-conditioned room. We are in the expensive part of town. Embassies and stately looking diplomatic homes sit behind immaculate gardens. In the taxi on the way

back to the *casa* the driver tells me that I am the third British person that he has picked up today. He asks me if Scotland is the richest part of the UK. I am a little surprised by the question and ask him why he thinks that. He says that he has always thought that was the case because our whisky is so



expensive. I laugh and the taxi carries on. Further into the journey he dips into his pocket and pulls out a coin from the local currency, the currency that foreigners are not meant to use. He hands the coin to me and asks me to look at the flipside. There is a picture of "Che" under the words *patria o muerte* (homeland or death). He wants me to keep it as a souvenir. I thank him and put it carefully in my purse.

The following couple of days also pass by slowly. At one point when walking down the tree-lined central street, a man walking in the other direction leans in closely and says to me in a strong voice *puta* (whore). I'm ready to go home. I go to the ATM machine to withdraw the rest of the cash needed to get me out of the country. It's not a lot of money, enough for the taxi to the airport, enough money to pay the *casa* for the accommodation and maybe a little



more for food. The machine spits my card out. I walk six blocks and try another machine. The card is rejected again. I pull out my phone but the man in the bank shoos me outside, saying I can't use my phone by the ATM machine. On the street I telephone my bank's emergency overseas number and ask what is going on. The man on the other end of the phone explains there has been a fraudulent attempt on my account, they have frozen the card and they won't unblock it until I return to the UK. I ask him what I should do but the call centre staff can't help me. Because of the US embargo and the country's own bureaucracy it is impossible to wire any money in. I phone the British Embassy. The embassy closed at 3.30pm. The passers-bys on the busy street look worriedly at my face. A woman touches my arm as she passes and asks if I am okay. I nod quietly and let her pass on.



Without any money to spend on a taxi, I take a bus to the British Embassy first thing in the morning. The woman behind the glass pane checks my passport and then gives me the phone number for the foreign office in the UK who may be able to help. I also speak to the Canadian girl who says she will lend me the money if needed. I now have two potential routes to get the cash and thirty hours until my flight. To clear my mind I go back to the festival to watch a film. La Rampa is a huge eight-hundred seater building with creaking black leather seats. When the sound is turned on the speakers crackle and hiss. The film itself is from Costa Rica, a sad tale about an orphan girl who loses her brother in a forest.

When I get out of the cinema I get a call from

the UK. It is the end of the working day and the foreign office still hasn't received the money transfer. They cannot say whether they will be able to get the money to the embassy in time for my flight. It's okay, I say, the Canadian girl is going to phone me in the evening and I will borrow the money from her then.

That evening the Canadian girl doesn't ring. I sit on the bed under the single light bulb, knees hunched up towards my chest. I stare into the blue wall in front of me as the hours tick slowly by. At 11.30pm there is a tap on the door and *la madre* passes me the phone. The Canadian girl is very apologetic about not ringing earlier but it is because she has been waiting in the police station all evening. Somebody pick-pocketed her bag on the patio at the

Hotel Nacional. While she was talking to a friend her identity card and purse were stolen. The problem, as the police office explained to her in the station, was that it could not count as theft if she hadn't been watching her bag when the items had been taken. It took her a while to refashion her story so that the police could file a proper report of theft. She is very sorry that she doesn't have enough money left to lend some to me.

The night-time hours crawl by. It's just as the sun is coming up that I get the message – *the foreign office has got the money. Check with the embassy as soon as it opens.* There are now ten hours left until my flight is due to depart. I get another bus to go to the embassy. Bodies are pressed in tight together, filling spaces around and above the passengers who have managed to obtain seats. At the stop where I need to



get off I have to push and squeeze to get to the rear doors. It is sunny and peaceful as I jog torpidly along the broken paving stones. Inside the embassy the same woman hands over clean, unwrinkled currency.

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At the airport, listless passengers are chain smoking as they wait for their planes to depart. There is no ventilation and so the smoke sits in

a fuzzy haze above the rows of red vinyl seats and below the one hundred and twenty eight country flags hanging from the ceiling. Surprisingly, the star spangled banner is at the end of a row, next to the Spanish red and yellow stripes. On the way to the airport there were signs painted on various walls asking for *paz en el mundo* (peace in the world). I'm tired and my eyes are red and sore but I can see the minutes on the clock ticking over to departure time.

