

In the Other

By: Jordanna Matlock

I can't remember exactly, but it was one of the first nights we were there. Jayson and I had spent a long day exploring the city and we were happy to come back to La Madrina's house. Havana was different at night; it was much calmer and the people were relaxed, most likely because the summer heat only let up when it got dark. We had already eaten at a place on our street and we were extremely tired after braving the sun all day.

When we got in, we saw La Madrina and her two other guests sitting out on her balcony. Our host was a kind, loving woman evident by her smile and the fact that she insisted we called "La Madrina", meaning the Godmother. Her place was on the 4th floor and although it was torture walking up those stairs every day, once we got to the top, I always remembered thinking how beautiful the island was from a birds eye view. We were lucky to have such welcoming hosts, La Madrina and of course, Cuba.

She called to us, "Hola!" and motioned towards her. She didn't speak English very well, nor did we speak Spanish, but that didn't matter. La Madrina offering her space as our own was the most selfless thing she could have ever done. I waved to her and gave her my pointer finger, indicating we just needed a moment to get comfortable. Jayson and I walked past the living space and carefully trudged the narrow open hallway on the way to our room. If you dared to look down, you could see all 4 stories of the building, each level screaming the same tale of poverty and hardship. As we walked, I glanced at the clotheslines that hung our freshly washed sheets. There were no glass panes in any of the windows, just open square portholes, as if to force the visitors not to blind themselves to outside their own accommodations. With

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nothing blocking my view, I was breathing in the beauty of the city and at the same time, helplessly witnessing its pain.

We got to our room, our home for the week while we were in Havana, and felt relieved. We got changed into comfortable clothes, got a beer and a Cohiba cigar and a red fan La Madrina had gifted to me to create an alternative to the stifling humidity. Jayson and I left our quarters, walked back down the short hallway, through the living room onto the balcony. We greeted the other guests and helped ourselves to a seat on the old metal rocking chairs that were painted white. They were chipped, and looked as though someone had been sitting there a lifetime.

The other guests were a mother and daughter duo. The mother was born in the Dominican Republic and immigrated to the United States during her mid-life. She told us she loved her home but that it was difficult to survive because they lacked major resources. The mother expressed how she would never go back. Conversely, her daughter was a school teacher, a first generation citizen born in New York City. They were taking this trip together because the daughter had never been south of the border and her mother wanted her to know where she came from. As I looked at them, and contemplated the confusing mother/daughter relationship, just for a moment, I couldn't find any difference between them and me.

We all conversed back and forth, creating a beautiful tapestry of English and Spanish, black and white, American and not. The daughter translated for us, it was nice that we all got to know each other a little bit better. The mother asked Jayson and I what we did for a living. I looked at the daughter to translate our answer.

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“Well”, Jayson said, “Jordie is a classical bassoonist, she plays the fagotto. She also is a world music teacher’s assistant at the University in Arizona.”

Then I chimed in, “And Jayson is a jazz trumpet player, also a teaching assistant at the same University. In fact, Jayson brought his trumpet to Cuba with us so we could more closely study Cuban music.” I watched as the daughter translated the information to her mother and La Madrina. Their eyes got wide with excitement.

“Musicians!!” yelled the mother. La Madrina chimed in, “Toca! Toca!”

I looked at Jayson and smiled. I knew he had been waiting for the right moment to take out his horn. I motioned to him to go get his coiled pocket trumpet.

Only a second passed and Jayson was next to me once again with his horn. I had been in this position before. The mother suggested Jayson play something tropical, I could see they were trying to think of a song we would know. Instantly, La Madrina and the mother began singing Guantanamera, a famous Cuban folk tune about a beautiful girl who lived near Guantanamo Bay. “Guantanamera, guajira Guantanamera!” they sang loudly.

I chimed in, “Guantanamera... guajira Guantanamera!” We all laughed and sang together while the mother poured everyone another shot of tres anos Havana Club. Jayson then started playing the tune on his horn, and as he did, I began to clap 2/3 clave along with him. I remember feeling happy.

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Throughout the night, Jayson played a strange set list by request, it included:

Guantanamera, When the Saints Go Marching In, Rock Around the Clock Tonight and of course one jazz standard from the American Song Book, Blue Moon.

Jayson began playing a blues, and La Madrina and our new found friends, continued to dance. Hearing the blues once again, I contemplated how peculiar it was to feel so at home so far away from home. I decided to take a moment to myself. I got up, walked over the other side of the balcony, and leaned my forearms against the ledge. I usually would be afraid of the height but this time, I let my body weight sink into the old broken down building, leaving my safety only to the gods. I glanced north and saw the daunting El Capital, which is a larger replica of the U.S capital building. Its shadow seemed to cast over the entirety of Cuba. Below it, very close by, I saw a park that was full of old people gathered around tables to watch and bet on their friends playing dominos. I gazed at the young children in the streets playing soccer and couples walking home from closed out bars. I watched the alley directly below me, with people walking and laughing. There were bike taxis ringing their bells rushing by, and the occasional brightly painted American 50's convertible driving down the block. I could see the decaying buildings and the many lights in people's homes that lite up the island sky. In that snap shot of a moment, I saw everything.

For as long as I live, I will never forget the faint sounds of wooden claves, hallowed guiras, salsa and guacha beats that seemed to come from the night air itself. I could only imagine where the music was coming from. Maybe from an old woman sitting on a rocking

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chair on her balcony listening to the radio as she folded her laundry or a young couple dancing in front of the bar door to the live band that was playing inside.

And I thought, La Madrina, the mother and daughter, Jayson and I, were all a part of the mixture of Cuban sound that I was experiencing. We were all a part of that meshed noise, unknowingly collaborating with one another. Our musical parts being La Madrina and her two guests dancing and clapping, Jayson playing his horn, and me, humming along. I realized Jayson and I had traveled so far, over-seas and land, to hear the kept secret of Cuban sounds and here we were, creating them for our own.

Most likely, almost certainly, there was someone somewhere, wondering where that trumpet music and that clapping and singing was coming from, like I had wondered just a moment ago.