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Going to Cuba

A sketch by Chekhov recounts the incident of two rural constables escorting an old vagrant to the local workhouse. The day is hot and their journey has been long and dusty. They decide to rest a little by the side of the road. The old man has refused to tell them his name or where he is from, but as he relaxes on the ground, he begins to spin a fancy of his homeland—a place of wondrous plenty: clear, cool streams from which fish leap to catch themselves on lines; berries and fruits fall ripe into outstretched hands; milk and honey and always fair weather. His description enralls the other two; they are carried away by his fantasy. Then one of them snaps out of it, and they get back on the road. But, for a moment, both prisoner and police have been set free.

Our imaginations, often falsely confirmed by memory, can cross many borders, but these escapes are doomed and freedom always lies just beyond. For example, if I were to go out my door here on Monterey Street in Pittsburgh, take a right at the YMCA on the corner, then continue in a southeasterly direction across the point where the Allegheny and the Monongahela rivers agree to become the Ohio, and then, if I were still to continue this same range athwart the southern states, my next landfall would be Cuba. Just beyond Cuba lies the Isle of Pines.

“Where is the Isle of Pines?” It is August of 1951, and the basement dive of Louis’s on Sheridan Square is a frosty enclave within the steamed province of Greenwich Village. Rosemary Clooney is singing “C’mon to My House,” and the woman who has just sat down at my table has jumped up to dance to the quasi-Arabic melody, swaying in her summer dress to the blast of the jukebox. No one takes any notice of her; she moves within a cell of her own, a figurine turning within a bell jar.

Someone is always playing the song, always feeding the jukebox so that Clooney sings without let-up until closing time, which it is close to right now. Three a.m. Just before, while Clooney takes a break, this blonde walks over from the bar and sits down at my table. She doesn’t seem to be with anyone, and she carries a worn leather portfolio under one arm. Out of this folder she has taken a newspaper clipping and hands it to me. She is very pale with stringy hair and eyes of beer-bottle green that seem to slide off into the whites around the pupils.

“C’mon to my house, c’mon to my house . . . c’mon,” Clooney starts up again. “I give you ca-*nn*-dy.”

This woman has just asked me to go to Cuba with her, to the Isle of Pines, then jumps up to dance by herself, not waiting for my answer nor hearing my question. Her bare feet pivot and shuffle on the sawdusted floor of the bar, and she gives herself to the music in a way that seems to be a demonstration of something. I think of the women in Robinson Jeffers’s poetry. Wild. Primitive. Probably dangerous.

So when she sits down, I have to ask her again. She is a little breathless and tastes a droplet of moisture above her lips before she answers.

“It’s an island off the south coast of Cuba,” she tells me. “I own one hundred acres on the beach. They’ve discovered oil on my property. What do you think?” She motioned to the newspaper clipping in my hand. “Will he die?”

The picture that goes with the article shows the mangled wreckage of a Jaguar convertible smashed against a large tree in Cleveland or Columbus. The horrific hybrid has produced a senseless being who, the account says, lies in a coma, near death in a hospital. His injuries are severe and numerous. “Do you think he’ll die?” she asks once more.

“Doesn’t look good,” I say. Her expression is distant, a gaze for a moor or some desolate tundra, and I see not a shadow of concern or anxiety. Only a cool calculation. “Do you know him?”

“He’s my husband,” she says. “As soon as the son of a bitch dies, I’m going to Cuba. Why don’t you come with me? The Isle of Pines.”

Going to Cuba. In the smoky, mechanically frigid zone of Louis’s, the tropical island rises in my imagination like a great ship, safely anchored in an artery waiting for the flood tide. The smell of disinfectant from the men’s room becomes the aroma of conifers. I can see the surf curling around the beach like a cuff of lace.

This summer I have been attending lectures in Anglo-Saxon and Old English at Columbia to make up for courses I slept through during the previous year at my home university. My GI Bill is about to run out, but I am not all that interested in finishing my degree, at least not at my university, which has become a preppy, hostile stockade around my dreams of becoming a writer. Some of my contemporaries were already living in the Village and chatting up the resident literati at places like Chumley’s or the White Horse. I wasn’t even living in the Village, and my time in New York was given to making up failed courses. Other contemporaries have already jumped into the currents of their careers as copyboys at the *Times* or UPI or into lower echelon jobs in publishing, freelancing reviews in magazines.

I don’t want a career; I want experience. I want to write—and

didn't Hemingway say that to become a writer, experience had to be gained? And where was he getting his experience then? Cuba.

Moreover, Delmore Schwartz and Dwight McDonald are not my mentors, as they are for others. My current master is the old poet Maxwell Bodenheim, whose watery-eyed perception of my apprenticeship, as I would sit across from him at the San Remo, tested no more of my potential than the next cheap Chianti. What would Max think of this offer? I ask myself. Would he pick up and go to the Isle of Pines with this strange woman?

—Where is the Isle of Pines?

—Off the coast of Cuba, Max. Should I go there to write?

—Hell, yes, go there. These Chicago winters are going to kill me one day.

But of course we are in New York, so Bodenheim is wrong on both counts, and I give serious consideration to this willowy blonde's offer. It is nearly three a.m. at Louis's in Greenwich Village on Sheridan Square in 1951. Dancing in her bare feet, self absorbed and strangely calm, I decide to call her Tamar. Red, the bartender, whose hair is actually on the silvery side, begins to ease people over their final beers.

"Well, he's still alive," Tamar reports. She's just returned from the pay phone at the back, after taking all the change I had. A small enough investment, I have reasoned.

"You called the hospital?" Was it Akron or Toledo?

"He's still in a coma. Pelvis smashed. What's the thorax?"

"Chest." Red has caught my eye and looks meaningfully at the stairs that lead up to the street.

"That too," she says. The Jaguar had been traveling at a terrific rate of speed and the driver had been very drunk.

The summer's anthem starts up once more and Clooney la-de-dahs Saroyan's lyrics as if they were an epilogue for the evening.

Cleverly, I make a deft transition. “C’mon to my house—c’mon,” I croon to this pallid creature with eyes that seem to have no back to them. As we climb the steps into the humid heaviness of the August night, I am thinking that no troubadour could have done better with his Auvergne shepherdess.

This summer I am driving a 1946 Ford Anglia that looks like a normal car from the side but, on turning a corner, the vehicle nearly becomes a vertical line, like a car in a cartoon. Also, the floorboards on the passenger side are sketchy, and my passenger’s skirt billows in the updraft like a spinnaker as she holds her cracked sandals in her lap. We putt-putt up Seventh Avenue, still a two-way thoroughfare then, and Tamar hugs her briefcase and seems to enjoy the ride.

Yet, I expect her to have me stop at any moment as we journey north, and I run a couple of lights so as not to give her the chance to change her mind. There’s a cool madness about her that suggests her natural habitat lies below Fourteenth Street, and I wonder if transporting her into the rarefied atmosphere of the Upper West Side might wring a mortal change in her. I glance at her face. Her features remain composed in their fixed serenity: no sudden wrinkling around the eyes, no catastrophic hollowing of the cheeks.

“Who is this Tamar you keep calling me?” she asks when we join Broadway at Thirty-fourth.

Indeed, I have renamed her—a preliminary to possession that at least one of us recognizes—though my nomination has dubious authority because of my confusion of Jeffers’s heroines. I’ve mixed up the murderous, hot-blooded Tamar with the barefoot loving shepherdess who gives up her life defending her lambs, a confusion I am to have with more than one woman.

As we go up Broadway I give her a quick gloss of Jeffers’s poetry, at least my study of it in my father’s library a few years back,

where the falling line accounts of lust between brother and sister, woman and woman, and even—I leave this out—woman and stallion often inspired a sexual frenzy in me not experienced since reading Zola and Maupassant.

“There’s a phone booth,” she says suddenly. We are passing through the intersection of Fifty-seventh Street, Columbus Circle just ahead. The doings at Point Sur have held no interest for her.

“You just called the hospital, just before we left Louis’s,” I say and keep my foot down on the gas pedal. The Anglia’s four cylinders are generating a lot of heat, and sweat is popping out on my brow, trickling down from my armpits. The little car has become a portable oven. But Tamar looks cool and comfortable, though I wonder how she will fare in my room on 104th Street. One window on the building’s airshaft, one small sink in the corner, and one chair. The stale sheets on the narrow bed, where only this afternoon I listlessly studied the conjugation of *lufian*, a traditional paradigm of a weak verb and meaning “to love.”

“Maybe he’s had a sinking spell,” Tamar reasons.

“I don’t have any more silver,” I say.

“We can get change,” she says.

“Where? It’s after three in the morning!”

“In a subway. They make change all night in the subway.”

I press on. The Anglia is making all the sequential green lights on Central Park West, all in one run. On our right the park looks inviting, a more natural and attractive alternative to my close and sultry room, but I’m afraid her Jeffers persona might take over. I can imagine her running off, barefoot, into the urban woods around the Reservoir to emerge on the East Side—gone forever.

Even when I park across from my building, I still expect her to flee downtown, but she follows me almost meekly across the street and waits, shoes in hand, as I unlock the apartment’s main door. As we rise in the elevator I am thinking that I am about to

lufian a woman who is almost a widow, that to lie between her thighs I will replace a man who lies horribly mangled and near death because of a passion that had driven him into a sycamore tree. The elevator labors to altitude and my heart spins like a turbocharger. That Tamar travels light and has no place to sleep has not occurred to me.

But this summer of 1951, I am borrowing more than books from my father's library and the urgencies of mind and matter they inspire. His history has also become a study for me, a *curiosa* to browse. He has just died the year before, and this final abandonment has led me to trace his and my mother's path around New York, to follow the outline of their lives, lived without me, before it becomes grown over in memory. Like a child who puts on a parent's clothes to gain intimacy, I have been putting on the accoutrements of my parents' history so that I might come to know them better. It is, of course, a charade and, like all "dress-up" games, made silly by daylight.

Until I was fourteen, my maternal grandparents cared for me in Kansas City, Missouri. My mother left me with them when I was able to make the transfer from breast to bottle, at a year old, and returned to New York to be with my father. Their reasons for this arrangement I have put down elsewhere, but they still mystify me.

However, she would return for brief visits, sometimes to take me back to New York for a week or two with my father, and then she would return me to my grandmother's house on Roberts Street. Her entrances into that small house were always noisy and exciting, as if the Barnum and Bailey circus parade had turned off of Independence Avenue to come down our street. She spoke of restaurants they had eaten at, important writers and artists they had met, of the artists' studios visited in Greenwich Village. She was like the press agent for a calamitous, triumphant road show,

though I am to learn later that these outlandish advertisements of their life were mostly fabricated to convince her parents the marriage was okay, that all was well, and to court the stern opinion of her father by this show of success.

To listen to her, my parents seemed to own Greenwich Village and much of the rest of Manhattan. In Kansas City I became acquainted with the Jumble Shop on the corner of McDougal and Eighth Street. I could visualize the lobbies of the Brevort and the Lafayette hotels and the funny things that went on there. I heard about exotic places like Romany Marie's and a German restaurant that sounded Chinese—Luchow's. In 1951 Greenwich Village has not changed so much from their day, but I know little more about their passage through it. I cannot afford to enter Charles French Restaurant, where my father was supposed to favor the crepes, nor can I find Romany Marie's. Edna Millay's little house, she has just died also, is just as my mother described it and so is the Greenwich Mews, where Mae Mott Smith had her studio. The inner courtyard of Patchin Place looks the same through the iron grill gate, though I'm not sure of the unit where the Welsh novelist John Cowper Powys served them tea by a cozy fireplace.

"e.e. cummings lives there now," I tell Tamar. This is later in the week, and that afternoon we have just made reservations to fly to Havana. She is impatient to take flight—probably impatient with my guided tour as well. She looks around Sixth Avenue for a phone booth. So even as she calls Akron or Toledo, I am trying to put on parts of my parents' life, none of which fit me even if I could afford the garb.

The little sum I have managed to save from my GI allowance is supplemented by the four bucks earned every weekday in a delicatessen in the garment district. This goes mostly for beers at Louis's or an occasional symposium with Bodenheim at the San Remo. Every day, starting at eleven o'clock after my classes

at Columbia, I take orders over the phone for sandwiches and bagels, custards and Jell-O puddings that are then delivered by a couple of black kids to nearby offices. These guys, like me, also get their lunch, and, at the end of our stint, the three of us are given brown-bag bonuses of bagels and containers of cream cheese and potato salad. Sometimes a little lox or a piece of brisket. These provisions usually do me for supper.

But I envy the delivery boys for they get something extra. Their lunchtime missions take them into the frenetic environs where women's clothing is being designed and fabricated, where the silken confinements of women's bodies were being fitted in place at such a fever pitch that the very sandwiches delivered probably lay half eaten at the end of the day.

"Where are you going?" Tamar's voice is muffled this first morning; her face is pressed into the one pillow on the bed. The shade drawn down to the windowsill flaps idly in a humid breeze to play a brilliant scarf of light upon her naked rump. "We're just getting to sleep."

I am painfully aware of this fact as I slowly pull on my clothes. "I have to go to work," I tell her. My body is sore, blood has been drawn. She is everything Robinson Jeffers claimed she would be.

I tell her about my job, that I'll be back in a few hours and she should get some sleep. Delicacy keeps me from mentioning that I had missed my eight o'clock class in Old English. The small gash just below my rib cage—Tamar's nails were long and crimson—had happened just as everyone else was discussing the position of the negative *ne* before the verb, a convention that was to disappear with Middle English. That had been part of the day's assignment.

Tamar has slipped into a deep sleep.

My response to the ringing telephone at the delicatessen is Pavlovian perfect. As I take down orders for cheese and ham sandwiches,