

A True Tale of Rascals, Rogues, and Romance

The Cuban Chronicles



Wanda St. Hilaire

Letters to Paris

For fourteen years, I have had a rich, weekly correspondence with a cherished friend living in Paris. For the first eight years, we painstakingly handwrote our letters, sometimes up to thirty pages each. Writing in a journal or diary format, we have shared—without self-censorship—our thoughts, experiences, sexual ecstasies, agonies, doubts, fears, findings, failures, insights, and advice.

Oaxaca was to be the destination of my 2006 fall vacation for my twenty-third visit to my second home, Mexico. The choice was based on the wealth of history, indigenous culture, and exquisite cuisine in the region, and my intention was to have a quiet writing and learning vacation. Unfortunately, fueled by the presidential elections, the long-standing teachers' strike turned violent only a week before my flight date.

As I searched the Internet for a last-minute Plan B, I was drawn to Cuba. Quite by design, I had not been there in twenty years. Despite the urgings of friends, and my love of all things Latin, I kept my resolve, finding adventure in Portugal, England, Spain, Italy, Greece, France, and Mexico, Mexico, Mexico. Cuba fascinated me, and I would read or watch anything that popped into my field of vision about the history of this anomaly of a country, but I saw it as a dangerous place for a girl with predilections such as mine. It was largely because of my almost irresistible Cuban Richard Gere look-alike suitor on my first trip that I held my conviction for so long. Cuban men were too attractive, suave, and spicy to resist. So what is the problem, you

ask? Love me for my body, no problem. Love me as an escape from Alcatraz, no thanks.

I found an offer I couldn't refuse, and so, my longstanding resolve was broken. This tale began as a typical letter to France, which I dubbed *The Cuban Chronicles*.

Each of us views the world with a unique filter created by our upbringing, our past experiences, our hurts, and our pleasures. All events and people are real—as seen from my perspective. I do not profess to be an expert on Cuba; this is one woman's journey. Names have been changed to protect the innocent, the not so innocent, and the culpable.

*Two
Havana Nights*



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The dog that trots about finds a bone.
—Gypsy Proverb

September 8th
Havana, Cuba

Now we're talking.

I expected a bus and instead, a luxurious Peugeot came to fetch me. I give the tour manager kudos for arranging this at the nominal cost of a bus transfer. What amazing luck. My driver was a polite, quiet, young Nicolas Cage look-alike. He played spicy *reggaeton* music and offered to stop at any points of interest.

Nobody, not even friends who have been here, mentioned that Old Havana is closed to traffic, and that one would need to drag suitcases down the streets, lost in a maze, to find a hotel on arrival. I consider this an important point when one arrives alone and feels disoriented in a hot, huge, bustling city. Fortunately, my driver convinced a guard to let us park inside the zone and then helped me with my luggage. There is no vehicular traffic in front of my hotel, so I can only hope Armando is as brilliant for the ride back.

I laughed out loud when I saw my room; in light of the complications with *La Cumbre*, I'd asked God if he had a little spare time to find me a room. He definitely has a sense of humor. The hotel is small and boutique style, and designed like an old monastery. All employees are dressed like monks, including the maids. My room looks pious and antiquated, and is comfortable and clean. Even the room key is attached to an authentic antique key. Gorgeous trellises of vines hang down in the center of the hallway, and there are large wooden shutters, with an open window to the street. The pretty little lobby bar has a large religious mural and hosts a group playing soft, meditative music at different times of the day. The hotel is located in the heart of the action, and a decent breakfast is included at a café down the street. Do you remember when, on my trip to San Miguel de Allende, I stayed at Posada de las Monjas—House of the Nuns? Their spirits cast a stern eye over

me on that trip. On this trip, I am surrounded by watchful “monks,” but I have no intention of letting them keep me from lusty adventures, the way the ghosts of the nuns did.

In the first moments I arrived, the clammy heat and the antiquity overwhelmed me. I soon gathered my bearings and went out to investigate. Within the first half hour, I met an older Spaniard at a museum, and we took the tour together. He is a pleasant man, conservative, but with a mischievous sparkle in his eyes. He asked to accompany me around Havana. (I caught him filming me at the museum, but didn’t let on.) He lives close to Nerja, which was my favorite place in Spain. This was the city where my new husband and I stayed at the beginning and end of our extended honeymoon, and I cried by the sea because we had to go home, leaving the “Balcony of Europe,” as it was called.

Gabriel (the Spaniard) and I went for a *mojito* at the Hotel Raquel, a place I had seen on the hotel’s map and had found just before meeting him. It is a beautiful building and not much mentioned in the guidebooks. I had already agreed to come back at six to buy the smiling doorman with irresistible dimples a *mojito*, and Gabriel graciously bought one for him. We ordered an unusual but tasty pizza. In light of the flavorless meals in Varadero, it made me very food happy.

As Gabriel escorted me back to my room, he invited me to dinner at the Hotel Nacional. This is the one of the most opulent, historic hotels in all of the country and I wanted to see it, so I was thrilled to be asked out there on my first night. I asked a “monk” if it was safe to wander out of Habana Vieja late at night, and she pulled me out into the street, pointing to the cameras that were planted up high on every street corner.

Note to self: Don’t pick wedged thong out of bum on empty streets.

I took yet another cold shower, dressed in a pretty skirt, and then took a taxi to meet Gabriel. We toured the hotel and grounds, and chose the outdoor café for our dinner. Señor Gabriel was oh, so complimentary. I enjoyed being appreciated once again; it happens so rarely in my own country.

“You are exceptionally happy and act more like a sunny Andalusian than what I imagined of a Canadian. I am sorry to meet you on the last day of my trip.”

Am I as happy as a sunny Andalusian? While traveling, quite likely.

Clutching my hand, he walked me around the hotel grounds under an almost full moon, but I was uncomfortable with the intimacy of the gesture. I could not get past how he reminded me of my uncle. As you know, I am far more comfortable in the company of younger men. Although they probably make better partners, I can't see past the paternal mannerisms many older men display.

Back in Old Havana, we found an outdoor bar with fantastic music in a pretty square near my hotel. Wonderful bands play in every little corner and beautiful rhythms escape bars along the streets. The “MTV” music here is excellent as well.

Gabriel was intent on selling me on his second apartment on the ocean, and suggested many times that my next vacation should be to Spain. This conversation took place all in Spanish; he spoke not a word of English. Trying to understand him was taxing, but I got the gist of the conversation. He had been propositioned daily by many young Cuban women and found it sad, especially with a twenty-seven year old daughter back home; he couldn't imagine her having to prostitute herself to old, foreign men. He asked about the book I was working on, and I tried to tell him *en español* about my French love story. His eyes lit up.

“Maybe you will write a story about meeting me in Cuba and your trip to *España!*”

I found a Spanish angel for my first Havana night.



I'd read of the terrace on top of the "Hemingway" hotel, the Ambos Mundos (Both Worlds), so I came up here with my laptop. How inspiring to be writing where the man lived and wrote *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. It was perfect until a tour group arrived.

Yesterday, Gabriel and I popped into El Floridita bar, where Hemingway also used to drink, but it was too crowded, so we left. I remember well the statue of Hemingway at the end of the bar and have a picture of it somewhere. I shall take another with Papa and me as my muse photo, although my mum has, maybe wisely, suggested I give up Frida Khalo and Ernest Hemingway as muses because of their tortured, difficult lives.

There are an inordinate number of police everywhere for the political convention, so it is ultra safe in Havana at this moment. You don't mess around with Fidel's parties. I'm sure if I asked for an escort to my room at night, I could get one.

Last night in the lobby of the Hotel Nacional, I spotted a poster for a Saturday concert with the Buena Vista Social Club. Do you know of them? They are hugely popular amongst the Cubans, especially Cubans living abroad. I would love to see them. The intriguing part is that they will be playing with Los Tainos—the band managed by my once-upon-a-night Cuban lover, Alejandro. I had met him during the band's tour in Canada. I haven't felt inclined to contact him on this trip (and have lost his email address anyway), but can you imagine his surprise if he were to see me at the concert?

I found a little shop selling imported items from Bali and bought a pretty white tunic. It was newly opened and a most unusual shop for Cuba. I asked the manager how she had done this, because she wasn't a Cuban. She wouldn't say—maybe she was a mistress to someone in a high place? The locals, as well as foreigners, were fascinated and we had to line up to get in, six patrons at a time, to prevent a stampede.



It is evening, and I am sitting in the lobby bar of my hotel with Enigma type, tranquility-inducing music playing. I pet the smelly little stray housedog. They allow him to come in to rest and listen to a little meditative music each night. Thrilled to have the attention, he is dying for more petting and is baring his belly. My *mojito* is filled with fresh mint leaves, and the rum and lime taste strong and clean. I am following in the footsteps of Papa Hemingway.

I was weary after a long day of walking through the dusty streets, and watched the film *Notting Hill* on the small television. I heard what sounded like a tremendous rainstorm, but there is no window in my room. The centre of the hotel is open air, a fact I hadn't realized, and the rain was pouring down through the lush vines and into a fountain below. It thundered and deluged in a beautiful, melodious roar. I decided to take yet another shower and come down to the bar to write for a while.



Where are all the marriage proposals I hear of? Nobody paid me much mind at all today. I must have had my “don't mess with me” face on, the one with the deep forehead crevasse (which, my mother advised me in my youth, would one day be permanent if I kept scowling, and now almost is). That furrow denotes either stress or a powerful orgasm, and in this case, not the latter. There is a fine line between guarding oneself against harm and being open to new experiences when traveling alone. If you lean too far one way, you risk never meeting anyone, but

lean too far the other way and you risk being a target. I was warned that as a blond alone in Italy, I would be slapped and pinched like crazy, and that didn't happen either, although the men did not disappoint in their pursuit of *amore*. It's not that I want trouble, but I am curious. A friend of Rhea's, a heavy set, rough woman of my age, travels here frequently and claims to be sleeping with and being proposed to constantly by gorgeous, young men. I was one of two foreigners I saw in the entire day of walking through Old Havana.

I did not find the bank, so have to remember not to purchase any extras until Monday.

Out of my innate curiosity, I investigated a number of hotels I'd found online and I have no doubt that divine intervention played a hand at finding my hotel. After what I've seen today, I can see that this is, for me, the best location. It is on the quietest, cleanest street in all of Old Havana.

My driver today, on a horse-driven carriage tour, was a lively, wiry fellow of about thirty who spoke no English. We stopped at the birthplace of José Martí, the Cuban writer who is revered and considered a rebel-hero-martyr, an inspiration to his country. I will look for a book of his poetry. We passed through Chinatown, which now has almost no Chinese, and he stopped along the way at a tiny florist's to buy me roses. Even though it was most likely tip-driven, the gesture was sweet.

There is a frenzy of renovation and restoration occurring right now, maybe for *La Cumbre*, but only a fraction of the necessary work will be completed if this is the goal. Old Havana is considered a World Heritage Site, and I know UNESCO is doing extensive restoration here. This is the most antiquated and run-down city I have ever seen, and I find it fascinating. There are no strip malls or McDonald's, and that makes it a unique and, to my mind, precious place on this Americanized planet. There are many beautiful, well-maintained buildings, but most of the streets and buildings are ancient and extremely deteriorated. Apparently, after heavy rains, a number of buildings collapse

without warning, with the inhabitants in them. Almost no new housing has been built in the past half-century in Havana. It is such a stark contrast to my life in Calgary that it is distressing to think of all of these people living in such horribly decrepit conditions. Since arriving, I have been reminded in many moments each day of how blessed I am to live the way I do, and in the abundance and cleanliness that I enjoy. It seemed self-indulgent to ride around alone in the carriage, while Cubans in the large camel buses were packed like sardines in this heat.

“A free sauna,” the driver said as one passed.

The dog has decided to sit with me during my writing session, but damn he stinks. He might say the same for my old walking sandals right about now.



September 9th

In past letters, I have mentioned that Alejandro has emailed me infrequently. I didn't expect to hear from him after his departure from Canada, but I thought he was exaggerating when he said that he thought of me often, but that it was difficult to email from here. As it turns out, it is no exaggeration. After many kilometers of walking, I found an exceptionally slow Internet at a hotel today for a dear price. Alejandro would have to use the public Internet houses, which are few and far between. When Gabriel and I went looking for the main one on Obispo, there was a huge queue down the street, and the house had only two old computers. *Mon Dieu*. Even if I had any patience, I would not want to consume the Cubans' precious computer time. I wonder how the girls are communicating with their new Cuban

husbands? Forget about long distance calls from here. They are a ransom.

Kavel, my Indian ex-lover, had emailed to say that he called a few times from Florida and is now in Connecticut, but will call again when I return. I can rest easy now that I have let my mum know where and how I am.

The Buena Vista Social Club concert has been cancelled, allegedly due to lack of attendance. There is, however, no advertising except in the lobby of the Hotel Nacional. I could have assisted them with some marketing. I could have had that thing sold out in a half hour. So much for the chance to see Alejandro.

I am back at the terrace and enjoying a slight breeze but still in a full body sweat as usual. Even my earlobes are sweating. I thought I had brought too many clothes, but with three changes per day, I wish I had a few more now. I got my StairMaster exercise for the day walking up to the terrace instead of taking the packed elevator. A tour group just left, and I am pleased with the sound of silence.

One of the “monks” at the hotel has been pressing me to take a tour with him, but the carriage ride yesterday was enough for me. I prefer to stumble across things of interest. Yesterday, on my own, I found more hotels to investigate, and I went to see La Bodeguita del Medio, another Hemingway haunt.

There are large groups of men dining around Havana, because of *La Cumbre*, I assume. One group just passed by, nodding their hellos. They looked much like Mexicans.



It's late night, and I'm back at the hotel's lobby bar. I am turning into a lush, having yet another *mojito*. The hotel gets a lot of

attention from passersby, because of its beauty and soothing music. The little flea-biter dog is back beside me. I get itchy just looking at him, but I still love him.

After writing on the Hemingway terrace in the morning, I came back to the hotel for my second shower and clothing change of the day, then returned to the street patio at Taberna de la Muralla that Gabriel and I had found. The lunch was terrible, but the place was great. The band was on fire, and I was dying to dance; be careful what you wish for. The bandleader pulled two Latina women and me up to dance. He was surprised that I could dance, and I thought that was that. Not so. I had to participate in a *moviendo la cintura* contest, basically a shake your hips/ass thing. Cripes. I could have died; the place was packed. He had everyone cheer not just once, but three rounds, to see who was best. I could have triple died; being publicly judged has never been my idea of a good time. At least I didn't come in last. The winner was *cubana* who has lived in the States for most of her life, and she invited me to join her table. She was visiting family, and two members were with her. A young American doctor was also with them; he'd been thrown in jail for two days on his first attempt to enter the country, because he had no dollars on him, only Dominican money and a US credit card. He was sent to the Bahamas, and came back the next day with cash. Nervy guy. Mind you, his arrogance was so loud, it was no wonder he had had trouble. I was shocked when he left the waitress a one peso tip for their large bill. I'm sure that in the US, he would not embarrass himself by leaving such a pittance.

The bandleader, a happy, dark man of about forty, sent me a drink and asked me to meet him tomorrow night to go dancing. We made a tentative date, but I will decide tomorrow. Now that I think about it, there is no way an average Cuban can afford the dance club he mentioned.

Along the Malecón, I came across the large flea market. It was fortunate that I found it today, because Castro closes it tonight for one week for *La Cumbre*. I am sure the vendors are

not compensated. Also, the horse buggies must stop working for one week, unless they are summoned for dignitaries. I found a tiny white dress and a small Che Guevara pendant for Carrie's baby. Last year she home-stayed a Cuban for a show he was performing in. She fell for him and made a conscious decision to get pregnant. He has not acknowledged the baby, and his wife apparently gave birth within a week of Carrie. He must have potent swimmers. I thought it appropriate to bring back something from the homeland of the baby's father.

I find it appalling that people must live under such an ossified regime. I understand that Batista allowed Cuba to be a corrupt amusement park for the American mafia—not good. But as is usually the case, the liberator himself turned corrupt; he got drunk on power; and now Cuba is a contrast between white sand and turquoise water Paradise Island and impoverished prison. How does Castro himself live? Not like his people. (Forbes Magazine estimated his net worth at a cool \$900 million based on his control of state-owned companies). I am heartbroken, as well, by the animals, the many starving, hairless dogs and cats, and especially the horses. To my mind, a horse is an exquisite animal that represents freedom, strength, and pride. Some of the horses look beaten down, haggard, and exhausted, and I am told it is illegal to put them down, so the drivers literally work them to death.

The residue of *la dulce vida* that prevailed in the decades leading to the Castro catastrophe lingers in the streets of Old Havana. On their weathered faces, old men still wear the memories of what was. Easy days, rich with the flavor of *filloas*, and Havana nights, full of promise, fleetingly cross like a shadow across their eyes.

I have discovered that Cubans are not permitted to stay in hotels, so it was not Cubans (although maybe it was Cubans who now live elsewhere) who were staying at Hotel Barlovento. Can you believe it? The only exceptions made are for honeymooners

and VIPs with special passes. For vacations, Cubans can stay at a *casa particular* but not any hotel.

As I walked back to the hotel on a side street, a melody seduced me into a small bar. The lead singer grabbed me for a dance on my way from the washroom, and asked me to go out with him this evening.

“I have a boyfriend back home and I am in love.”

“Who cares?”

He escorted me part way home, pitching his program, and insisting I take his number. He was enormously built and aggressive, and of no interest to me.

I bought what looked like a used edition of the *Granma*, the daily communist newspaper, from a tired old woman on the street who wore a faded and worn housedress. She was so grateful that she gave me her address and invited me to her home, giving exact directions—such happiness for so very little.

The Italian restaurant recommended in my guidebooks is in a beautiful part of Havana not far from my hotel, with a large outdoor patio on the newly cobble-stoned street. The restaurant hosts a great house band, and the meal was the best I have had so far in Cuba. Real Parmesan!

The traditional Cuban music, the warm evening air, and the good food worked their magic. Strolling back to the hotel for the night, I was finally comfortable and in my element, like my old travel self, relaxed and awed by the foreignness and adventure; How Wanda Got Her Groove Back. It was then that a handsome, warm-faced Cuban stopped me.

“Why are you alone and so pretty? How can that be?”

We had a lively chat in the middle of the street, and he told me he is a journalist (interesting if it is true). He knew of my hotel.

“It is very *romantica*.”

He asked to meet me tomorrow and is to call the hotel at 9

a.m. He said that he, too, would like to go dancing tomorrow night, so we shall see what transpires.

The friendly bartender has brought a small fan to cool me, but I will still need a fourth shower of the day before bed. The humidity is unbelievable—about a gazillion percent—but let me tell you, I don't have a wrinkle on my face here. Also, my hair, which in Mexico always looks like an exploding blond dandelion, actually looks good.



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