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## THE SEXIEST CITY IN THE WORLD

by Helen Lawrenson

*You don't care if you never leave Havana, and sometimes you never do.*

Lucrezia was a Cuban whore who looked like Norma Shearer, the oldtime movie star. The same pure line of profile, the chiseled nose, the classic lips, the narrow, delicate line of cheek and pointed chin and the turquoise eyes. She was a happy, friendly girl.

I met her at the beach in Havana, and she invited me to pay her a purely social call. I took along another American girl, an artist who had never been in a house of ill repute, although, come to think of it, I guess the average well-brought-up girl doesn't have many opportunities to do so (I am just fortunate) and regards such an institution with considerable trepidation. At any rate, Lucrezia received us with a gracious courtesy, introduced us proudly to her colleagues, got us ensconced in the inevitable Cuban rocking chairs and we sat there, rocking sedately, sipping a soda pop called, aptly enough, *gaseosa* and discussing clothes and our favorite movie stars.

Then Lucrezia told us that she was saving her money to get married and had already bought her wedding dress. She opened the doors of her wardrobe and there, hanging between a scarlet silk kimono and a transparent black negligee, was a conventional bridal gown of white satin and lace, with a long tulle veil attached to a coronet of orange blossoms. She brought it out and tried it on for us. She was genuinely pleased when we admired it, and she pirouetted in front of the full-length mirror which reflected the large bed with the crucifix hanging over it. "If business is good," she said in Spanish, "I'll have enough for a nice church wedding in a couple of months."

The majority of Cuban females are as chaste as girls are anywhere. Nevertheless, they are always pre-eminently

aware of sex as the most important and pleasant thing in life. This feeling holds true for all strata of society: prostitutes like Lucrezia, the aristocratic beauties of the fashionable set, the ravishingly pretty working girls like Dulce María Castrillón -her virtue zealously guarded by her ever-attendant mother- and water-front girls like the many who entertain mariners amid the vivid gaiety of the New Pastores bar. No matter what their social standing, their antennae are always attuned to the presence of the male. They never appear on the streets without being scrupulously bathed, perfumed, manicured and coiffed, even to run down to the corner drugstore -for *semper paratus* is their motto- and the simplest acts of taking a shower or doing their nails assume the erotic aura of a rite performed by apprentice courtesans in some ancient Temple of Venus. They live for love, and sometimes by it, and the result is a city whose mood of sensuous hedonism is irresistibly contagious to the stranger within its gates.

Havana has something to offer which is so toxic, so insidious, so hypnotic, that she casts a spell over the hearts of men from which they can never quite escape for the rest of their lives. She is a sorceress among cities. What makes Havana so alluring to the visitor is not her beauty, because other cities -Paris, Naples, Rio, for example- are more beautiful. Puerto Rico has a similar climate, Miami has as many palms, Nassau and Montego Bay are more chic. There is just as much vice in Marseilles, in Panama City, even in New Orleans. Mexico is more picturesque and Haiti is more primitive. But travelers who have been to all these places find in Havana a seduction more potent than anywhere else, even though much of the time they may be unaware of its exact nature. The intrinsic, basic quality of Havana is a deadly magic which permeates the very air which flows through the city, inescapable and inseparable, and which can only be defined, in the last analysis, as Sex. It is, without any doubt, the sexiest city in the world.

Cubans attribute it to the *ambiente* -the atmosphere- and accept it as the dominant factor of their lives. Foreigners going there to live find it as entrancing and fantastic as something out of the pages of Norman Douglas' *South Wind*. Tourists, caught for the first time in its deep, hot undercurrent, think that they must be losing their minds. Respectable middle-aged couples are effortlessly trans-

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formed into satyrs and nymphomaniacs. Timid North American males start acting as if they had just downed a magnum of cantharides; and every woman, no matter what her age or appearance, feels like a combination of Marilyn Monroe and Marlene Dietrich. One and all, old and young, male and female, they hear the pipes of Pan, they taste the ancient and imperishable lotus, and from then on all else is subordinated to the sultry enticement of the city. Home and family, job and politics, world affairs and domestic problems all fade away into unimportance. You don't care if you never leave, and sometimes you never do.

It is a place where nothing ever happens according to plan, but anything else can happen and usually does. You never meet anyone you're supposed to meet; you never get any place on time; you never do any of the things you have put down on your list as important; you never see what you meant to see; and you don't give a damn. You are basking in an indolent, lovely, magical sense of well-being, with a warm, narcotic softness flowing in your veins.

At home, you may be the type of a person who, after five or ten beers, either curls up in a corner and falls dead asleep, or else gets sick. In Havana you will discover that you can drink straight rum for fourteen consecutive hours, go to bed at dawn, and wake up a few hours later with a head as clear as a bell. It will surprise you to learn that you apparently don't need sleep, you can go without food, and you never have a hang-over. Furthermore, you will both look and feel radiantly healthy.

There is a clue to this in the fact that medical authorities tell us that a man feels healthiest and most vital when his sexual powers are at their height. There seems to be something in the air of Havana which has a curious chemical effect on Anglo-Saxons, dissolving their inhibitions and intensifying their libidos. This could be catastrophic under certain circumstances and in other cities. But in Havana the results can only be described as highly gratifying.

Havana might be pictured as the geographical counterpart of Zola's Nana. Like the woman Nana, the city exudes an essence, fragrant and fateful, of delight in love. In the streets the dark, warm, carnal life throbs with an endless ease and grace. You can sit at a side walk cafe and listen to its beat. You can stop, very still, for a while on the Prado and feel it in the process of absorption through your body. There are moments when you can taste it on your lips.

The accent on sex is everywhere. In the narrow streets

of the section called Old Havana, mysteriously beautiful faces peer at you from behind ancient Spanish iron grills, and nubile, dark-skinned girls slip through huge doors of carved wood which open to show tempting glimpses of dim, palm-filled, flower-scented patios within...In the sidewalk cafes opposite the Capitolio you sit drinking *mojitos*, while past you flows the crowd: the Spanish-blooded beauties with large black eyes carved slantingly in camellia-pale faces; the Cuban men in white linen suits, or guayaberas and slacks, their bright, impudent eyes darting in bold appraisal of every woman within range; the young mulatto girls walking like queens, in pink and scarlet dresses, their skin gleaming, their breasts arched high and forward, and the sweet laughter bubbling from their throats. The orchestra, composed entirely of girls, plays an old song, *Masabi*. "What is your name? Tell it to me...Como te llamas? Masabi." The musicians are *achinadas*, meaning slant eyes, a mixture of Chinese and Negro which produces some fascinatingly pretty girls, like Dora, a trumpet player who, when not tootling away for dear life at a *Padro* cafe, used to augment her income by taking in plain sewing and fancy posing. Artists loved to paint her golden-skinned body, and Bernard Karfiol, America's famed Academician, once did a hauntingly lovely portrait of her. One of my fondest memories of Havana is the night an American newspaperman and I went with Dora and Mercedes Luks, widow of American painter George Luks, to the First Annual Chinese Laundrymen's Ball, where we discovered that the Chinese are wonderful rumba dancers. We ended up in the Pacifico, a restaurant in the Chinese quarter (Havana is divided into sections called *Barrios* or *repartos* and the Chinese one is *Jesús María*) eating ambrosial concoctions of chicken and fresh almonds, while the proprietor, practically convulsed with laughter, insisted on our sampling a glass each of rose wine, raisin wine and sharp, pungent Chinese whiskey. The Chinese in Havana are full of laughter and gaiety, a friendly, charming people. For some reason no one knows, the girls orchestras on the Prado have been made up mostly of *achinadas* for the past twenty-five years or more. There are two or three of them within a block of each other, and half the time they are playing different pieces simultaneously, the songs blending in that sensual orgy of sound, both tender and strident, which is night in Havana: the exciting swell of voices, separating into the rich, staccato masculine tones and the tinkling sound of the women's voices, like the soft chatter of porcupines; the classic cries of the lottery-ticket vendors and the street hawkers; the clicking of dice in leather boxes; the honking of horns and the clanging of streetcars -this is the vital, dissonant music of the city itself, a sharp song breaking on the air and shivering into a thousand separate shadings of sound,

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like bells each at a different pitch, yet melting into a pulsating harmony with always, woven through it all, the bright pattern of the rumba rhythm.

The sensuous beat of the music is everywhere, all through the city, day and night: amid the opulent magnificences of the Hotel Nacional and the expensive glitter of swanky night clubs like Montmartre and Tropicana; out in the native Negro dance halls of Las Fritas; in the water-front bars; in luxurious private clubs like the Havana Yacht Club and the beautiful Vedado Tennis Club; and in taxi dance halls like Marte de Belona, where flexible girls in skintight satin dresses gracefully transform a ballroom into a boudoir before your envious eyes, as you realize that even a lifetime spent at Arthur Murray's is no substitute for being born with the tropical beat in your blood stream.

If the Tropicana is one of the most fabulous night clubs in the world, with its vast crystal arch and its sequined chorus girls perched like bright birds high in the palm trees, then surely one of the loviest is Sans Souci, where you dine and dance under the stars, in a setting unparalleled for sheer romantic beauty. Like all Havana night clubs, the show girls here are as exuberant as kittens, winking happily at the patrons, parading their alert bosoms and provocative hips with a joyful, saucy pride. Cuban men do not like girls to look like boys. They like girls to look like girls. This the Cuban girls do in eminently satisfactory fashion. They look soft, curvy, pliable and bouncy. According to our standards, they often appear too plumb in their clothes, but the Cuban male prefers a girl who looks good in bed to one who makes a sleek fashion model on the street. He never actually sees her clothes as clothes, only as a showcase for her body. In fact, he never really sees her clothes at all, because he is always busy visualizing how she will look without them.

In America, we too emphasize sex, but we do it more self-consciously. Often we appear to think it debasing or comic. We use it for jokes, we snicker at it, we exploit it commercially -sex for the love of money, not sex for the love of sex -and we refer to sexual comments made to girls as "insults." This is all quite incomprehensible to the Cuban who, whether male or female, does not feel that there is anything insulting about a man finding a girl desirable and saying so forthwith.

A walk on the streets of Havana is something every woman owes to herself once in her lifetime. In Italy, men pinch you; in America, truck drivers whistle at you; in Germany, the leer is rampant; but nowhere in the world does a woman get such concentrated, consistent and flattering attention as on the streets of Havana. There

the ogle is raised to the level of a fine art; there the sidewalk sheik attains his apotheosis. There is even one street corner unofficially dedicated to the purpose: the busy corner of Galiano and San Rafael, in the heart of the shopping district. It is known, colloquially, as La Esquina del Pecado, the Corner of Sin. There the local male talent assembles just to watch the female shoppers flowing in and out of El Encanto and nearby stores, and to outdo each other in the explicit heat of their glances, the fervid extravagance of their compliments, as each woman becomes, for the moment of her passing, a Gypsy Rose Lee on the runway, the Antigone whom all men desire, "the white, implacable Aphrodite."

The range of eulogy is extraordinarily varied. A compliment may take the form of just a brief murmured tribute to your dazzling beauty or it may volubly impart the information, assisted by elaborately pantomimed gestures, that your mere presence on the street has left the spectator stunned and blinded with admiration.

A similar reaction takes place with the waiter in the restaurant -one eye on your soup and the other eye on your legs- the clerk in the store, the elevator boy in the hotel, the businessman standing in front of his club, the lottery-ticket vendor, the traffic policeman. Any halfway attractive female is automatically assured that her eyes are like stars and the rhythm of her hips is divine music. Failing that, the very least response she elicits is a comprehensive, appreciative and extremely articulate look. A few days of exposure to this, and the American male finds himself boldly staring at every girl with a carnal glint in his eye and paying outrageous compliments to those who cross his path. It's all easy as falling off a log. Easier, in fact, and a great deal more fun.

The Cuban girl responds to a compliment like a flower opening to the sun. Her eyes grow liquid with pleasure, and she smiles with a spontaneous and natural happiness. She is neither embarrassed nor angry; therefore it would never occur to her to giggle self-consciously or to retort, as might an American girl, "Get lost!", "Drop dead!" or some similar tart rebuff. On the contrary, she is pleased that you admire her, and her feminine coquetry makes her sparkle and shine like some pretty bird preening its feathers. In La Bodeguita del Medio, an enchanting small place on Empedrado Street, famous for its old-time Cuban atmosphere and wonderful food and drinks, I saw a typical example of this when a Cuban blonde with dark eyes and a compact little body came in with some friends. The place was filled with writers, painters, editors and kindred souls who love it for its bohemian color and because it is cheap. They had all been engaged in a furious and spirited intellectual argument, but the moment the blonde entered, the arts were

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forgotten and all attention centered on her. Ecstatic murmurs of "Ay, qué divina!", "Her hair is like sunlight!", "What a phenomenal type" filled the air. Angel Martínez, the friendly proprietor, stood as if thunderstruck with admiration. "What an honor to be visited by such beauty!" he exclaimed passionately. "Look at those superb ankles!" said the waiter. The trio of musicians started playing Lecuona's *Damisela Encantadora*, and the look in their eyes was a tender caress. The blonde was not in the least flustered by this splurge of encomium. She fairly glowed with delight, and pretty soon she was keeping time to the music, her eyes flashing, her neat little hips swaying happily. She drank her beer and departed, with a dazzling smile for everyone. No one had made a pass and no pass was expected; she had seen no insult where none was intended; the entire place had come alive with a cheerful buzz of excitement while she was there; and everyone felt good about it, especially she, herself. It was one of those minor incidents that happen all the time, all over the city, to indicate the wholehearted interest the sexes take in each other.

In Havana everyone loves a lover. Taxi drivers take a personal interest in their clients and do everything they can do to implement the successful course of *amor*; and waiters beam fondly at sweethearts lingering at tables, instead of trying to hurry them out. Sex is always more important than mere business. Down on the water front, at El Templete, with its lovely view of the cobalt-blue harbor and the fishing boats, the *políticos* come for luncheon and spend long, lazy, sun-drenched afternoons drinking with their *queridas*, usually top-heavy ladies with enormous bosoms and slim legs. Everyone in public as well as in private life seems to have a *querida*, or mistress, and the higher his position, the more familiar the public is with his love life. All Havana was delighted some years back when a distinguished senator received an unexpected, but memorable, visit from his mistress who suddenly appeared on the Senate floor while that august body was in session, clad in her nightgown her black hair flowing down her back. No one knew how she got there, but she was waving a champagne bottle and she announced that she was lonely and wanted to see her Baby. The dignified senator took the incident with admirable aplomb, as did his sympathetic confreres. The senate adjourned while he took her home. The *ambiente* again! One could hardly imagine the same thing happening, perish forbid, to one of our own dear solons!

One of the more indispensable accessories to sex life in Havana is the *posada*, of which there are some forty to fifty scattered around at strategic points. A *posada* means an inn in Spanish, but in Havana it means a little room with bath, attached to a line of similar little rooms,

where you can take your girl. They are not really houses of assignation, because there are no residents girls; you have to bring your own. They might properly be called accommodation centers. The proprietor of the most luxurious one is justifiably proud of his establishment and boasts of its foamrubber mattresses, spotless bathrooms complete with *bidets*, and air conditioning in every cubicle. He tells you that the president of an important Latin American republic spent five days and nights there without budging outside once. Again the *ambiente!*

Is it the music, that subtly prurient mixture of African jungle and Spanish boudoir? Is it the rum, so stimulating and the same time relaxing? Is it the air, that wonderful tropical air teeming with ardent softness? Is it the Cuban attitude toward sex, the appreciative acceptance of it as the wellspring of all life, the common denominator of nature, the eternal miracle? Or is it perhaps a combination of all four ingredients, an inspired and heady mixture? Whatever it is, those who have known it and felt its spell, from Hergesheimer and Hemingway to the casual tourist, have given their hearts to it. A few years ago, a furniture dealer from East Greenville, Pennsylvania, named Victor Ritter, died and left the sum of \$45,000 to his twelve nieces and nephews. His will imposed one qualification: each of their heirs would have to make one trip, all expenses paid by Ritter's estate, to Havana, Cuba.

Only those who have been there can understand how he must have felt. In Bermuda nice young couples go on their honeymoons and the fields are green and everyone rides bicycles. And in Nassau the matrons play canasta on the lawn of the British Colonial and the tourist take snapshots of native boys diving for coins. But in Havana it is otherwise. There the blood of a different breed flows through the veins of the land; there the fateful and sweet doomed taste of the lotus lies on the lips of the city, and the song is that which burning Sappho sang so long ago:

*My blood was hot wine of love.  
And my song's sound the sound thereof,  
The sound of the delight of it.*

The shining harbor lies under the tropic sun, coruscated with light, a hot, metallic blue. The ships sail out, and from their entrails boom the deep, sustained and almost unbearable voices of their whistles. On the wharf a street orchestra plays *Adiós, muchachos, compañeros de mi vida...* the women weep and wave good-by... the long, low, glittering lines of Havana begin slowly to recede... and you know that someday, some way, you must of a certainty return to this lovely, toxic land which has set its seal irrevocably upon your heart."