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TRAVELS ON THE DANCE FLOOR

Grevel Lindop



André Deutsch

other worlds. I only hope she can accept her presence in this book as generously as she accepted my absence from home. Without her, none of it would have been possible.

All air travel undertaken in the course of the journey has been rendered carbon-neutral by donation to Atmosfair, the gold-standard carbon-offsetting charity. Please visit atmosfair.com to see how you can reduce the environmental impact of your own travel.

Finally, my respect and gratitude to Ochún for her protection; and to Elegguá, who opened so many doors for me, and who fortunately has a sense of humour.

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The flight to Havana was delayed, so instead of landing in mid-afternoon, we've touched down late at night. I come down the steps from the plane into the hot damp darkness feeling a blend of excitement, apprehension and immense fatigue. My eyelids are swollen, my ankles ache. Part of me feels bouncy and alert, ready for anything and excited to be in Havana at last. Yet somewhere deep inside, I'm aware of a seething current of exhaustion that threatens at any moment to well up, knock me over sideways and make me sleep for ever. I follow a straggling line of fellow-passengers across the tarmac to the glass terminal building.

Manhandling my bag from a disorganized heap that seems to have fallen off the carousel, I join a long queue behind a red line on the floor. Here I wait my turn to step up to a glass booth, where an immigration official who looks like a twelve-year-old boy in uniform stares unsmiling from me to my passport photograph and back. He scrutinizes my entrance permit intently. I wonder if it contains some awful mistake. I recall having problems with the tiny spaces given for squeezing in those long Havana addresses where you must give not only the house number and district, but also the names of the intersecting streets on either side of your particular block – all this to be written in capitals, under the warning that any irregularity in completing the permit will result in its rejection. At length he asks me the purpose of my visit. I tell him “*Turismo*” and he gives me a broad grin. “Enjoy your visit,” he says.

I walk through customs to join the queue for money-changing, and exchange some *libras esterlinas* into Cuban *pesos convertibles*. Then I retreat to a quiet corner, where I stash most of them in my money belt and the rest in my rucksack, uncertain which is the more secure. I've been told both “Don't carry anything on you in the street”, and “Never leave anything behind in your room, even if there is a safe”. I'm keeping

my passport and the bulk of my money next to my skin – but who knows how safe that is?

I edge my way into a seething crowd that seems to move in all directions at once: hauling wheeled cases, whistling to attract the attention of friends, shepherding children, wielding crutches, puffing ecstatically on a first post-flight cigarette. At first there are signs up in the roof saying TAXI, but soon they disappear. I plod on and am starting to despair when a tall, pleasant-looking young man appears at my elbow. “Taxi?” he asks. I breathe a sigh and resign myself. “*Si*”, I say. I know it's a basic rule that you never take an unauthorized taxi, but my entire nervous system is overloaded. I can't face any more searching.

The young man strides ahead of me through the crowd, out through some glass doors into the car-park. A couple of rows back is his yellow Fiat (or is it a Lada?). He heaves the trunk open. The lid has some rusty dents, but then I wouldn't expect to find immaculate cars here. He's very helpful with the luggage and insists on putting everything in. It's a vast relief to feel it lifted off my back. I get in and find there's another Cuban in the rear seat. He greets me ceremoniously and we shake hands. The two of them put their heads together over the address I give them. I tell them it's a *casa particular* – a private house that rents rooms – not a hotel. I ask how much the ride is going to cost, and the quoted fare sounds reasonable. So we launch into the traffic.

Scrunched up in the passenger seat, I peer out as best I can. I glimpse harsh street lighting, hurtling lorries, battered concrete buildings, pulsating (and ignored) traffic-lights, clusters of young people grouped around motorcycles. There are brightly coloured, striped murals on the ends of buildings. I register a vast image of Che Guevara on the side of a tower block. Half my brain takes this in, while the other half maintains a desultory conversation – my name, my work, where I come from, English football teams. *Chicas Cubanas*, I'm told, are *muy guapas*. Very hot indeed. Would I like them to arrange for me to meet a pretty Cuban girl? They can fix it, no problem. No, thanks, I tell them. Yes, certainly I like beautiful girls, I'm already married to one. Et cetera.

The driver tells me they have to stop to get some gas. Oh right, I think, this is where they're going to ask for extra money. But they don't. We pull in at a distinctly run-down service station which seems to be partly a bar, populated by a few young men in jeans and T-shirts

drinking from beer-bottles, and a larger number of girls with long hair and very short skirts who lean against the petrol pumps chatting and flicking the ash off their cigarettes into puddles of oil on the tarmac. Maybe these are the hot chicks my driver recommended. My fellow-passenger leans forward over the back of my seat and goes on talking to me about Cuba – until the driver returns, slams his door, and we drive on.

Suburbs start to show up, yellow streetlights patterned by the leaves of dusty trees, wide unkempt pavements patched with dry grass, iron gates sheltering low houses that recede into shadow. We crawl through a grid of streets – Havana suburbs are built as a matrix, avenues cutting across one another at right angles – Linea, Calzada, 3rd, 5th and so on – identified by names or numbers cut into the faces of little stone pyramids set at each street corner, so the driver has to crane from his window to scrutinize the pyramids until he gets to the right junction.

We come to rest in front of a dark house guarded by tall gates of wrought iron backed with rusted sheet metal. I can see the number on the gatepost. The driver lifts out my bags and hands each one to me with elegant courtesy. I pay him, adding a tip, then watch the car recede into the dimly glowing distance before I turn to the gate. It looks as if it hasn't opened in fifty years and might be the entrance to a mausoleum.

There's a bell-button at one side; I press it without much hope and wait, listening to the unceasing musical scrape of the cicadas. I'm just wondering whether to press again when a dim light shows from somewhere inside and I hear shuffling footsteps, then the sound of much complicated unlocking. One of the gates swings back a little way and a man, cautious and stooping, in pyjamas and something that looks more like an old overcoat than a dressing-gown, stands in the space revealed. He has glasses and a long, troubled face. He welcomes me in, explaining that they've been expecting me, his wife knows about everything and we'll settle it all in the morning. I start to ask about breakfast, but he waves this and all other concerns aside. We agree that they'll call me at eight (though all hours have now become meaningless to me).

He takes me round the side of the house to a back door that leads to my *habitación*. It's just big enough for the bed to fit in. There's a straw mat, a mirror, a chest of drawers and a scratched and chipped ghetto-

blaster on the windowsill. There's a tiny bathroom with a shower at the back. A vast ceiling fan hangs over the bed. Well, it's pretty basic – to be honest, rather more basic than I'd expected from the website I used to book it. But right now, the crushing necessity, the thing every cell in my body wants, is to sleep. The room is stiflingly hot. I tell my host I'll be fine and he shuffles off, leaving me to play around with the plastic knob that operates the fan. It takes a while to coax the fan into turning at a pace that takes some of the heat out of the air without roaring like an aircraft propeller, but I manage it. Then I unstrap my rucksack, drag out some night things, and collapse into the darkness.

When eight o'clock comes I pull some clothes on, just in time to catch my landlady – a smiling broad woman in an apron and slippers, very concerned about the lateness of my flight and whether I've slept – and negotiate about breakfast. It's coffee, fruit (papaya, guava, mango), bread, fried eggs if I want them, and hot milk. (I soon discover that milk is a much-prized drink in Cuba, a country where there are few dairy cattle and people are often short of protein. I'm lucky to get it.)

I eat at a small iron table in the yard, among flowering shrubs in pots, under an array of strings and wires which I guess will carry washing later in the day. High walls in every direction hide any trace of Havana's suburbs apart from the windows in the tall neighbouring buildings. But I'm feeling pretty pleased with myself – and it's only when I start to unpack that the true meaning of last night's taxi ride becomes clear. I notice that the envelope given me by Susan, which I've carried in the centre of my rucksack, doesn't look quite right. Surely it was smoother than that, and more neatly stuck down? I dig further in among my clothes. An envelope that held around a hundred pounds sterling is still there – but it's empty. My stomach lurches. I scramble around, but the money is gone. I examine Susan's package again. It's been opened and everything it contained apart from the letter has been carefully removed, and the paper stuck down again – neatly but not quite neatly enough. How the hell did that happen?

Then I remember the stop at the gas station. Of course: beautifully simple. The driver stops for gas, his friend keeps me talking, the driver pretends to fill the tank and meanwhile checks expertly through my luggage. No wonder he was so politely eager to help with my bags. He

was making sure they went into the trunk where he could get at them. And how neatly everything was strapped up afterwards so there was no sign of any tampering. A tidy, expert job. And thoughtful. Nothing taken but the money (and whatever else Susan had packed for her friend). Just as well most of my cash and documents were in my money belt. If you take an unlicensed taxi, I say to myself, that's what you get. Or worse. Welcome to Cuba.



Later I'll have to break the news to Ernesto that whatever he was expecting from Susan has, through my stupidity, been stolen. But just now I can't face it. And I'm due to meet my dance teacher at noon. So I dig out my street map of Havana, throw my white trainers into a backpack and set out for the Teatro Neptuno, where we've arranged to meet. The walk through the suburbs is dreamlike. Playful Art Deco houses sporting wavy lines of coloured tiles or circular windows: a modernist version of Toytown, alternate with ornate, crumbling baroque mansions. Every so often there's the spectral, vine-covered shell of a house that has simply collapsed from within. The concrete pavements are cracked and have patches of dry, yellowish grass growing through them. I pass smart-suited workers and schoolchildren carrying little briefcases, their immaculate clothing a weird contrast to the patched and splitting buildings.

I've chosen a route that leads to the Malecón, the grey waist-high sea wall that runs for miles along the frontage of Havana keeping the waves from battering the buildings – though in several places groups of men with concrete-mixers are repairing breaches made during the summer hurricanes, when the waves hurled themselves right across the road and smashed into the lower storeys of the buildings on the other side. Most still have their ground-floor windows criss-crossed with heavy-duty adhesive tape to minimize the damage from shattered glass if wind and water should decide to punch their way in again. It's high tide now, and as I walk along beside the Malecón irregular waves from the turbulent water keep smacking into it, sending towers of spume over the rampart onto the

pavement, where the water drains away through huge gratings and back into the sea.

The sun is already hot. I'm tired with walking so when I reach the main urban area, Centro Havana, it hits me with full intensity. Between high, raddled buildings cut dead-straight streets, narrow as canyons, filled with a haze of traffic fumes. Fiats and Ladas are everywhere. So are the classic cars famous from the travel brochures: great hulks of Plymouths and Dodges, dented, filled, rusted, much repaired, many of them matt in texture as if they've simply grown too old to shine any longer, or painted with house paint complete with brush marks. Every one trails a cloud of blue smoke to mix with the black fumes from the diesel trucks.

The buildings are a fantastic vision of every possible architectural style, all of it cracked and crumbling. Curling iron balconies are adorned with birdcages, washing, bicycles, old TV aerials. The narrow pavements are plentifully daubed with the leavings of the packs of friendly stray dogs I've encountered every few blocks on my way into town. Elaborate classical façades, moulded with flaking stucco nymphs holding swags of fruit and foliage, adjoin concrete 1940s shop-fronts which have lost their plate-glass windows and had them replaced with sheets of plywood. Mysterious hammerings come from cavernous ground-floor spaces behind metal grilles.

Every so often there's a gap where a building has simply disappeared, the walls on either side of the gaping hole shored up with vast slanting timber props. A four-storey-high fig tree flourishes inside one such space; another is filled with stacked breeze blocks and scrap iron. I pass an open door, inside which is an immaculate white marble staircase. Peering in and taking a few steps up, I see that the flight takes a half-turn and opens into empty sky. There's nothing at the top; it's just a dream-staircase, a detail from a surrealist painting.

And all the time people pour past me, people of every colour and physique, mostly dressed in jeans or denim shorts and T-shirts. Here and there an old person sits, cigarette in hand, in a cheap kitchen chair set out on the pavement. I quickly realize that there's no typical Cuban physique. Truly every height, build and colour is here. Some people are as pale as I am; every shade of pink, brown and black is represented. No one takes the slightest notice of me.

I've arranged to meet Johannes García, Director of the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba, in the entrance to his headquarters, the Teatro Neptuno, which is situated (naturally) on Neptuno, between Escobar and Lealtad. Spotting a tiny sign with the street name in rusted cast iron, I turn the corner and start to look for numbers. There are fifty or so to go. Ahead of me an elderly lady in a wheelchair pushes herself gamely along in the carriageway, against the current of cars and bicycles, which circumvent her perilously. I walk up alongside and ask if I can help. Where is she going? Only a few blocks, it seems. So I bend to it and get the knack of keeping a steady pace over the unevenly tarmacked road surface. And a few minutes later, I am sailing with the steady momentum of the wheelchair past the Teatro Neptuno where Johannes García and associates sit in plastic garden chairs under the flaking blue-and-white stucco arch of what must be an old cinema, recognizing me at once, waving and calling out, while I shout that I'll be back in a moment, just as soon as I've taken this lady and her wheels around the next corner.

When I walk back to the Neptuno, Señor García gets out of his chair and we go through the introductions. He's tall and wiry, very dark and very ceremoniously formal. My *profesora*, he tells me, is to be Geldys; and with a bow and a sweeping gesture he ushers forward a lovely young black woman with her hair in braids. She wears a black-and-white tracksuit and trainers, and smiles broadly as she shakes my hand. She will show me, Señor García assures me, everything I need to know. I am in her hands.

Geldys raises her eyebrows and nods, then invites me to follow her. Instead of heading into the depths of the theatre, as I'd expected, we go down the steps and along the street. Where are we going? To her apartment, she tells me, for my first lesson.

I almost have to run to keep up with her through a maze of streets, turning a corner here, crossing to the shadowed side there. At one point she grabs my elbow gently to save me from stepping in front of a fuming diesel truck loaded with timber. Finally we get to a hot narrow street sloping down to the sea. On either side are tall doorways in high flaking façades of brown and ochre, studded with the usual metal balconies. Geldys slips a key from the pocket of her silky tracksuit bottoms and unlocks a beaten, blistered brown wooden door, its rim

scarred with past forcings, pitted and scabbed with the remains of old locks and hasps. Inside, the air is cool, damp, dusty. A big black umbrella leans beside a rusty fuse box from which emerge tangled electric cables. She beckons me to follow her up a tight spiral staircase of white stone. It goes up and up. Every so often there's a small landing with a door. I stop by one to get my breath back. When we reach the fourth floor Geldys produces another key, unlocks another cracked and damaged brown wooden door, and stands back to let me enter. She follows, shuts the door and slams a big iron bolt across.

We're in a light, bright room with a floor that looks like stone. There's a formica table with some stacking chairs, and an old wooden cabinet full of plates and china ornaments, its shiny top covered with photos and cheap souvenirs – a miniature plastic Eiffel Tower, glittery pictures of the Alps, a "snowstorm" globe. There's a silvery plastic CD player. Opposite, a curtain on a string partially hides a sink and a twin-tub washing-machine.

Geldys is changing her shoes, so I take off my sandals and put on my white trainers. She admires them, calling them my "*preciosas tenis*" – a word dating, I guess, from the days when trainers were just tennis-shoes.

Then we get started. Geldys positions me in front of her – I have to learn to stand firm in the disconcertingly direct gaze of her dark eyes – and tells me to do exactly as she does. She presses a button on the CD player and salsa music starts up – something percussive and halfway towards rap. And from that moment Geldys begins systematically to exercise, and retrain, every muscle in my body. First it's just the neck: we turn our heads – left, centre, right, and back again, over and over again, first slow, then fast. Then it's shoulder movements. Chest. Arms. Hips.

It's clear I can throw away everything I thought I knew. Geldys starts from the assumption that I know nothing and deconstructs my every movement. We work for two hours, and at the end of it I haven't actually taken a dance step. Instead I've started to develop a new sense of my own body, a new kind of internal map.

The key, Geldys makes clear, is first of all the chest area, in fact the heart, *el corazón* – that organ mentioned in the lyrics to every salsa track. I have to find the internal point of balance at the centre of the

chest, and swing from there, as if it's a kind of pivot. And Geldys isn't shy about showing me how. She grabs my neck, my waist, my shoulders, the sides of my chest, with hands firm and practical as a baker's kneading dough. She tilts my ribcage gently up and down, to and fro. When I don't seem to be getting the message, she grabs my wrists and plonks my hands solidly on either side of her stocky torso, where I grip on, feeling the firm protrusion of her breasts under her T-shirt while she undulates with a kind of floating motion around that elusive centre point. I start to get the feel of it and swing freely for a few beats – delighted shrieks of “¡Eso es! ¡Okay! ¡Eso es!” – before I lose the knack and revert to jerking my shoulders up and down.

But gradually it starts to come. My centre of gravity changes; I begin to find that it's possible to loosen up and let the different parts of the body flow, or float, to the music, almost independently. I realize I've had a habit of holding my body tightly together, as if afraid the bits of me would somehow come apart if I didn't keep them together in one tense mass. But this is like becoming pleasantly weightless, floating from a point at the middle of the chest that miraculously supports everything else. That is, until I lose it once again. But we keep at it, pausing only for *un refre'co* (a plastic bottle of cheap cola) at half-time. Geldys is smiling, patient, encouraging. The time goes too fast. When we finish, she gives me exercises to practise for the next day – in front of a mirror if possible – and sees me to the head of the marble stairs. I kiss her on both cheeks – I can feel her warmth, she's sweating almost as much as I am – and head off down into the darkness. Out in the blinding light I cross the pitted carriageway and look back up at the balcony. Geldys is there, leaning over, waving. I wave back, turn the corner into Trocadero and lose sight of her.



There's a vague uneasiness at the back of my mind, though, and I trace it to the knowledge that I shall have to call Ernesto and confess that I've lost the consignment of goodies entrusted to me by Susan. I am not looking forward to making that call.

But I know I have to make it, and I do. When Ernesto answers, he's

puzzled about who I am. I manage to explain that I'm a friend of Susan's, and he suggests I come over. I'm not sure whether he's quite grasped my story about the theft, but I go down to the Malecón and hail a cab. It's a vast coffee-and-cream Plymouth, completely matt as if every trace of its gloss has been polished away with fine-grade sandpaper. There are two ladies – slight, middle-aged and well dressed – already in the back, but I climb in alongside them on cream leather seats networked with an astonishing craquelure. We head across town. The car is air-conditioned, so we're cool despite the glaring afternoon light reflecting off the concrete road surface. Salsa music pounds from the car radio.

San Miguel, between Soledad and Aramburu, turns out to be a brown stucco block in a long narrow thoroughfare full of the usual street life: four guys leaning earnestly into the innards of an old blue Packard, its huge hood propped precariously on a length of timber; kids circling on bicycles; a small pack of yellow stray dogs trotting purposefully along the pavement. The entrance to number 19 is a dark passage guarded by a rusty metal grille. There's no bell or knocker. As I peer into the depths, a small brown boy wearing just a pair of shorts appears from nowhere to swing on the grille and ask if I want Ernesto. He pulls the gate open and I follow him in. He calls ahead of us down the passage in an accent I can't understand. The passage is like an alley: once inside I can see the sky above, and several storeys of tenements stretching high above us. The boy leaves me to wait outside a door while he goes in. Beside me, a stocky chap dressed in swimming trunks – good clothing for the afternoon heat and humidity – bends over a plastic washing-up bowl, rinsing his back with cold water from a green hosepipe. He straightens up and shakes my hand, introducing himself as a friend of Ernesto's.

A moment later the boy re-emerges, followed by Ernesto, who's tall, wiry and black, with a round, melancholy, wrinkled face and delicate features. We shake hands – his arms are as long and skinny as mine – and he welcomes me inside. As we go, he introduces me to his wife, a powerful-looking lady as broad, stocky and stolid as Ernesto is slender and animated. She wipes her hands on her apron to take mine, and kisses me on both cheeks. She's busy cooking on a gas stove right in front of the door – so close that I almost walk into the hot pans as I enter the apartment.