Sample translation

From *Havana Taxi: Life and Lies in the New Cuba*

(*Havanna Taxi: Liv og løgn på det nye Cuba*)

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**The starting line**

It was raining in Havana on the night I thought this book would never see the light of day. We had spent the afternoon getting the car in working order, because the following day we would put it through the technical test that would permit us to register it as a taxi. We had lubricated the axles, cleaned the chassis and painted over the ugly welding seam; an acquaintance lent us handles for the passenger doors. The window wipers were still missing, but I knew someone who could lend us a pair. Our strategy was to dress up the old lady in enough finery that a car inspector would declare her safe for the road. And should we be lucky enough to get her through, we were ready to start operating our own taxi service.

Even though I knew all this – even though I knew that tomorrow was the day everything had to come together – I was stupid enough to take the car out on an evening drive. I’d agreed to stop by to visit David, a friend who made his living providing people with advice and spiritual guidance. David lived in San Miguel del Padrón, atop a hill where Havana flattened out into a number of rural districts containing houses and farms. The traffic flowed calmly out of the city centre – the tyres were full of air, the headlamps cast their golden light out into the gloaming, and for once I managed to find third gear without a problem. The steering wheel felt tight. Replacing the driveshaft had done wonders, halving the play in the steering from 180 to 90 degrees. The car was still heavy as a ship to manoeuvre, but the wheels now responded more quickly and turned more tightly. I drove across the bridge at Via Blanca and all the way up Calzada de Guines without bumping down into a single pothole. I knew this road well now, and was particularly satisfied with how I held the outside bend behind a bus, skirting a bomb crater of a pothole without getting a puncture.

Driving a car from 1953 required ingenuity. In addition, drivers like me – who operated without a fixed diesel supplier on the black market – had to drive economically. One trick was to put the car into neutral just before the top of a hill, to pull yourself over without using the gas. On the other side, you could freewheel for over a kilometre if you were lucky. As I approached the top of the incline that led to San Miguel, I pulled back the gearstick and allowed the car to float over the crest, as if off a ski jump. I felt butterflies in my stomach. Then the motor fell silent, and all I could hear was a lovely rattling from beneath the bonnet – *rackata-rackata*.

I parked next to a goat tethered to a tree. David came out to meet me with a smile and a comment: ‘And *this* is when you decide to show up?’ He asked me to wait in a kind of waiting room in his back garden, which had been built for religious purposes. In a corner stood an altar featuring the deities; a Bollywood film hummed silently on a flatscreen TV. Soon the sound of drumming and song could be heard from David’s office, and a woman emerged with coffee: ‘He’ll be back soon.’

The summer holiday was approaching, and many people were seeking David’s religious expertise. After twenty minutes I was shown in. David was wearing a red-chequered cap, baggy as a baker’s hat, which showed that he worshipped Changó, the god of war and thunder. He had the stocky body of a wrestler but a kind, childish face, which now beamed at me: ‘*Estoll!*’ Cubans struggled to pronounce my name, and I didn’t blame them. David washed his face and hands and asked me to do the same. Then he set a coconut shell on the table, lit a cigar, and poured a bag of black and white cowry shells into his hands. He rubbed his palms together as he said a prayer, then rolled the shells across the table. And so *the reading* began.

‘Estoll,’ said David. ‘I see…’ He leaned across the table. ‘I see something to do with some paperwork, some paperwork you’re working on. A process involving *papers*, they tell me.’

David looked up. I nodded, thinking about the technical test the next morning. If it was a success, our legal taxi service could start operating. We’d driven a few times at night without a licence, but that kind of thing was dangerous in the long run. ‘Be careful with these papers, be *careful*, it’s going to demand a lot of you – do you hear?’ David spoke quickly, a mile a minute. ‘You must be prepared, do you hear what I’m saying, Estoll – you must be *well-prepared*.’ I told him about the test with the transport authorities, and David mumbled a prayer for the bureaucratic nightmare we would soon face.

‘Now they’re saying – listen to me, Estoll – they’re telling me that you mustn’t tie yourself too strongly to any one person. Then things will go wrong.’ I thought about the book I was writing. I’d decided that it had to be about several people simultaneously; several stories, rather than just one. One of the stories would be about the car I had bought. At the same time, I suspected that I myself would be only a minor character, and that the book would have to be about more than the car. I wanted to write about the people I was getting to know, ordinary Cubans who were living in extraordinary times. Not tying myself too strongly to any one person sounded like appropriate advice. I nodded again. ‘You must do as you have planned,’ David said. ‘Do you hear me – you must *stay* on the path you have chosen.’ It was good that I had finally come here for protection and to be cleansed.

When the reading was over, David said that I should stand. ‘Close your eyes and hold your breath.’ He filled his mouth with clear rum, took a step back and sprayed the fluid over me, on both sides of my body. Then he blew cigar smoke into to my face. I was cleansed.

I gave David some pesos for his work, and we said farewell. On my way out, he handed me a lucky stone, which he told me I should always keep in my pocket, and one of his red-striped Santería hats: ‘Put this on when you’re in trouble.’ I put the stone in my pocket, folded up the hat, and got into the car. David peered in through the passenger-side window and pointed towards the city. ‘The floods are coming,’ he said prophetically. ‘The rain is a blessing.’ The summer rains in Havana could be of biblical proportions – I remembered how I had waded through water up to my knees just a few weeks earlier.

Now, as I reversed out of the drive, the first drops were falling heavily against the roof of the car; by the time I was back on the main road, the rain was pouring. Without window wipers the visibility was poor, but thanks to the headlights and the new electrical system I’d be able to manage. I pressed the foot switch on the floor to turn on the lights, but the rain – this blessed rain – had shorted the connection. It boded ill for the drive home, and worse for the test the next morning. I pressed and cursed, cursed and pressed, but it was no use. And so the old lady and I trundled through the wet darkness towards the city centre.

At this point, I didn’t yet know precisely what I’d got myself into. I’d come to Cuba to do research – my job was to complete some anthropological fieldwork for a PhD on the market reforms Raúl Castro, the new president, had implemented. Fidel Castro had grown old and weak. The island was opening up to the world, people said. Go now, before it’s too late.

Alongside my research, I had received a grant to write a book about Cuba. As a literary experiment I’d spent the money on a car, a Buick Roadmaster sedan from 1953. It was attractive to look at, with matt, mint-green paint. Along the doors on its sides, from the back wheels and all the way to the front, a strip of chrome shot like an arrow. Round headlamps peered at the road like fish eyes; inside, the steering wheel and seats were original, upholstered in yellowed white leather. But I knew nothing about motors and old cars, other than that they constantly needed repairing.

A short distance down the hill, I noticed that the driver’s seat was vibrating. When I slowed down I recognised the sound, because this had happened twice before already. I had a puncture. Luckily, there was a petrol station at the bottom of the hill. ‘*Aire?*’ I shouted out of the window, but the attendant only shook his head. The next station was in Virgen de Caminos. I wasn’t sure whether I’d be able to make it there before the car was driving entirely on the rim; a sharp turn might twist the rubber off the wheel. I accelerated towards the next junction, but had to slam on the brakes as a blue Lada turned in from the side. Braking the car was not unlike braking while riding a sled, and I continued towards the Lada. The central reservation came to my rescue – as I turned away from it the wheels screeched, as if in a car chase in an old gangster film. I rolled slowly onwards, and heard cheering from someone on the pavement who had seen the manoeuvre. The tyre was now almost flat.

Nor was there an air pump at the next station. The closest alternative was in the opposite direction, believed the attendant – I could forget trying to drive any further. The man pointed towards the station I’d just come from, but I chose to keep going – there was one last possibility, a 24-hour filling station behind the university, which was ten minutes away. The wheel clunked and bumped, and I shuddered at the thought of what was now happening to the rim. If I was going to make it to the station in time, I would need luck on my side.

I took a deep breath and reached for the red hat David had given me, which lay on the passenger seat.

So there I sat, in my Buick 1953, marinated in rum, with an Afro-Cuban lucky stone in my pocket and a Santería hat on my head, when I suddenly thought about what my friend Fernando had said earlier that day. Fernando was a chain-smoking professor of anthropology whom I visited from time to time, with contacts in the Communist Party. Fernando had asked me to keep a low profile, especially now that I’d got involved in the taxi operation. ‘Don’t attract attention to yourself,’ he’d said. ‘If the police catch you, even for the smallest offence, they’ll deport you. Be careful – they know about you. And they’ll be keeping an eye out.’

Now an ominous *dunk-dunk-dunk* could be heard from the rear tyre. The rain trickled down the windscreen and sweat ran into my eyes, but I had no choice but to continue. I twisted out of my shirt to wipe my face. When I reached the main road to the university, I ran a red light without meaning to – the stress was making me blind. Luckily the street was empty, and at last, up ahead, was my final salvation. When the attendant at the station set the hose to the valve and I felt the car lift, I had the urge to throw my arms around his hairy neck, but I simply smiled and handed the man five pesos. I put my shirt back on, and backed out of the station. The wheel seemed to be in order. Even though the front headlights were still on the blink and the tyre was probably punctured, I now had enough air to complete my journey. The junction behind the university was dark, but up ahead shone the exit that led to Cayo Hueso – I would soon be home.

It was precisely here, as I was congratulating myself at having navigated the situation so masterfully, that I realised the trouble I was rolling into. A white Lada with the letters PNR on its door – Policía Nacional Revolucionaria – was parked under a tree beside the exit. Was it empty? The lights were off, but I caught a glimpse of two people outside the car. My grip on the wheel tightened, my jaw locked, and I hunched over the steering wheel as if my body was attempting to shrink. I rolled innocently over the junction, no faster than a woman pushing a pram. They won’t see me, I thought, they *won’t* see me, the dark will save me, or maybe they won’t care – after all, what would two idle police officers care about an innocent little… Perhaps twenty metres remained when a pair of eyes met mine. The policeman was leaning against the bonnet of the police car, wearing a blue cap, grey shirt and a walkie-talkie on his belt. It looked as if he’d been waiting all night for this very moment, because he now sprung to his feet, lifted the walkie-talkie and shouted a message into it. His colleague ran towards the driver’s side door and threw himself into the car.

At this moment, my consciousness stopped working and my body took over, because my body had heard Fernando’s warning, *my body* had understood what was at stake. If I was stopped, not only would we miss the technical test in the morning, but I might lose the plates to my car. My residence permit might be revoked. The book, my research – yes, the whole damn lot – was hanging by a thread. My body decided that my right foot was the way out, a sole against the gas pedal, a hand against the gearstick, third gear – wonderful – fourth gear, two hands clasping the steering wheel. The motor responded, and soon the police shrank in the rear-view mirror, thirty metres away, then forty.

Towards the top of the hill I overtook a bus. *Comeon-comeon-comeon*. The bus was slow, even by Cuban standards. I considered pulling into the opposite lane to overtake it, but the bus was coughing out black smoke that obscured my view. And back there – what was happening back there?

In the cloud of exhaust I momentarily wondered whether I’d imagined the whole thing. Maybe I wasn’t even the person the police were after – maybe they’d been called out on another job at the exact moment I’d driven past?

[Chapter continues]

Excerpt, pp. 21–32

**The Lie**

Days that change the world begin like all others, and there was little to indicate that Norges Rodríguez would remember this one. The city of Havana sounded and smelled just as he had come to recognise it in recent weeks. As he walked towards the last residential block before the island met the sea he could hear the roar of the waves out there, exploding with heavy booms as they hit the sea wall. Its proximity to the sea gave Havana a specific smell. The sea breeze rushed through the city, sprinkling salt water over the roofs.

Norges glanced over at Taylor, who was lagging behind him on the street. ‘*Nene*,’ Norges said, using one of their nicknames for each other. ‘How’s it going?’

‘Don’t *talk* to me,’ said Taylor, stumbling towards a bench on the pavement. Norges didn’t know what to say, so sat down beside him. Taylor ran his hands through his sleek black hair and pushed his thumbs into his ear canals to shut out the traffic and the sea. He was breathing heavily through his nose and his eyes were streaming – as they always did when he got a migraine. Norges wanted to take care of his boyfriend, but Havana had run out of Excedrin, the medicine he needed, so there was nothing he could do to help.

Not too long ago, Norges had been an ordinary boy in Santiago, Cuba’s second-largest city. He had grown up in Los Pinos, a traditionally Black neighbourhood on the city’s outskirts featuring simple Leca houses. In such neighbourhoods, three generations of Cubans lived together. Here there were grandparents who had dedicated their lives to Fidel Castro’s revolution in 1959; fathers and mothers who had got themselves an education in the 1970s and 1980s, and built institutions to make the revolution function. But in Los Pinos, there also lived a new generation of young people who grew up in the time of scarcity and corruption that followed the fall of the Soviet Union. For them, Cuba was an island of power outages and destitution. The Revolution was a picture in a school textbook, a slogan on a placard. They dreamt of leaving, apathetic and sad as they were about everything that didn’t work.

Norges had been just like them. As a teenager, he’d planned to train as an engineer – to get himself a study grant and get the hell out of the country. He had felt there was no future for young people in Cuba. His family had agreed.

The fact that Norges *hadn’t* left, but instead travelled 800 kilometres across the island to Havana to start a new life, was down to a dangerous idea – an idea that takes hold of young people at regular intervals. It was the idea that it was possible to change the world.

*Stay, don’t go*, it said.

*Fight, and then change will happen.*

Five months had passed since Norges first met the young man sitting beside him on the bench. The encounter had taken place at the state-run youth cultural centre in Santiago where Taylor worked. At the time, Norges was working as a telecommunications engineer, and he was at the centre to help install its new intranet. On his knees beneath a desk and with cables in his hands, he heard the sound of infectious laughter. Norges surreptitiously glanced up to see a well-groomed young man at the end of the office. Taylor was light-skinned, his hair dark and shaved at the sides, long and wavy on top. He had friendly brown eyes. He was also masculine, with high cheekbones and a strong nose.

To say that everything happened quickly from this point onwards would be an understatement. Just hours after they met for the first time, and minutes after they had kissed at a crossroads outside Taylor’s workplace, Norges had blurted out a question: ‘Will you move to Havana with me?’ For his entire young-adult life, Norges had thought about how he was going to tell the world he was gay. He would break the news to his family, then leave town. In Taylor, he saw someone who could change his life.

Norges’s friends viewed him as an introvert, but in recent years he had begun to open up, especially online. Norges wrote his own blog, *Salir a la Manigua* – ‘Into the Wilderness’ – where he posted progressive, contemplative texts about local history, film, music and the Internet. These were the kinds of things he believed were possible now; to express oneself was no longer dangerous. Norges’s writing brought him contacts at overseas embassies and among the independent press. There were a dozen or so bloggers like him spread across the island; they shared opinions on home-made websites, and engaged in long discussions online. But none of them, not even Norges’s closest friends, knew what Taylor came to know at the crossroads.

Norges was twenty-seven years old, in love with a man – and he was afraid.

Twenty-nine year old Taylor Torres, on the other hand, had self-confidence, three years’ experience being openly gay, and a mother who accepted him for who he was. At the time Norges asked Taylor to move to Havana with him, Taylor was searching for a way out of a long-term relationship with an older Cuban. He took this young stranger, who suddenly no longer seemed so strange, by the hand, smiled breezily, and answered: ‘Okay, let’s go.’

With every passing week that brought them closer to their departure for Havana, Norges gathered more strength to come out, surfing the web for films and articles about others who had taken the same step. He practised the conversation he planned to have with his mother in front of the mirror. ‘Má,’ he would say, ‘I’ve fallen in love. With a boy.’ She probably already suspected. She would surely understand. But on the morning that Norges was finally ready to break the news, he hesitated and sent his mother a text message instead. He spent all day at work with his phone in his hand, but received no reply. When he got home, he found his mother in bed. He could see that she’d been crying.

‘But Má,’ Norges tried. ‘*Now* I’m finally going to be okay. I’ll show you a film that explains everything – there are people who take their own lives because they *can’t* tell the world who they are…’

‘You were going to commit suicide?!’ his mother exclaimed. ‘Oh, *Norgito*, we raised you as best we could.’

Norges knew that he hadn’t lived up to his parents’ expectations. As a child, he had been different. He preferred to read or watch TV, rather than running around outside with the other boys. His father sent him to boxing classes, but he never felt comfortable there. Norges built his world around books, TV, radio – and eventually the infinite Internet. His little sister, Claudia, was his complete opposite. When visitors came to the house she would entertain the adult guests with song and dance, while Norges sat in his room, reading. Claudia thought her brother was boring and weird. Their mother used the pet name *el viejo* – the old man – about her pensive son. ‘*Norgito*!’ she would say. ‘You have to get out more!’

Norges had never lacked love from his parents. After the fall of the Soviet Union, his father had started selling oranges on the street to supplement the income he earned as a teacher, but in the evenings the children gathered around him as he sat at the piano in the living room. Norges’s father played while his mother and Claudia sang, and Norges would join in, albeit more shyly. In the summer, Norges’s parents lay their children on the roof and waved palm leaves to cool them through the night, so they’d be able to sleep even when the power was out and the electric fans no longer worked.

But despite this care and security, which Norges would one day come to feel great nostalgia for, there was a lie within the family. It wasn’t true that Norges was a boy like most others, who would soon find himself a girl and settle down. The truth was clearly more than they could bear, at least for now.

Norges’s mother looked at him through tears, as if she had failed.

‘You don’t understand,’ he said. ‘I’m in love.’

His mother didn’t respond. Instead, she put a hand to her forehead and pointed to the living room. ‘Your father has a pain in his chest. He’s been crying, too.’

That day, Norges cut the rope that held a weight he’d been dragging around for his entire adult life. He was still afraid and uncertain about where he was headed, but when he was with Taylor, his steps felt lighter. Havana was on the other side of the island, but the distance now seemed less vast. Santiago was on the periphery, while the capital was at the centre of the life he wanted to live. And Taylor was crazy enough to join him.

Some things were already in place. The boyfriend of Norges’s sister got Norges a job at the Instituto Superior del Arte, the art school in the capital, where he worked and she studied. It wasn’t much – Norges would be responsible for administrating the institution’s social media accounts and Facebook page, now that an increasing number of Cubans were obtaining access to the Internet. The pay was 300 pesos a month – barely fifteen dollars – but Norges would be able to live on campus for free.

On the morning of 17 December 2014, the pair were hunting for a job for Taylor. They had first visited the Ministry of Culture, without success. But a friendly clerk gave them a name, then pointed them in the direction of the country’s most prestigious cultural institution, Casa de las Américas – there might be work to be found there. They had almost arrived at Casa de las Américas when Taylor’s migraine caught up with them.

Opposite the bench on which they were sitting, an elderly man rounded a street corner taking quick steps that belied his age.

‘Have you heard?’ said the man as he approached the bench. ‘They’ve released the five heroes!’ He didn’t wait for an answer, but simply continued on his way.

All Cubans knew the story of *Los cinco heroes* – the five countrymen imprisoned in the United States in 1998 after it was revealed that they were Cuban agents. A court in Florida had convicted them of espionage, conspiracy to commit murder and ‘acting as an agent of a foreign government’. The Cuban authorities claimed the court case was politically motivated; the agents had been undertaking intelligence work, but not to weaken the US – they had infiltrated anti-Communist groups in Miami in order to prevent terror attacks on Cuban soil. The authorities had begun a propaganda campaign in support of *los compañeros* Gerardo, Antonio, Ramón, Fernando and René, who had sacrificed their freedom to defend their homeland and suffered a gruesome fate in the prisons of *El Imperio* – the Empire. The campaign to release the Cuban Five had buzzed as the background music to the life of every inhabitant of the island for almost sixteen years. Painted illustrations of the five rugged faces hung everywhere: ‘End the injustice. Release the Five!’

And now they were free. Taylor lifted his head from his hands. Before the old man rounded the corner of the street, he turned and shouted: ‘And Raúl’s going to give a speech, at twelve o’clock!’ Then he disappeared. Norges looked at his watch. The speech would start in less than fifteen minutes. They got up. Casa de las Américas was bound to have a TV.

On the next block a car was parked in the middle of the road, a rust-flecked wreck from the 1950s. A young man was bending down to look under the hood, while another leaned against the car door. Norges could hear fragments of their conversation. ‘This is going to be something *totally* different,’ said the man standing beside the door, clearly excited. The voice from below the bonnet was more cautious: ‘We’ll just have to wait and see what they say.’

‘Did you hear that?’ said Taylor. ‘This is about more than the five heroes.’

He was right. Raúl Castro’s speech would be remembered for far more than the release of five Cuban agents.

Taylor’s migraine was gone. Norges noted that his legs were moving faster.

The Casa de las Américas was the last building before the sea. It was reminiscent of a modern church, with its grey shell and white concrete columns that stretched towards the sky. At the very top was a square tower, with a clock that showed it was almost midday. Above the main entrance hung a massive stone map of Latin America, as a reminder that the fate of Cuba was linked to that of an entire continent. At Casa de las Américas, authors, artists and actors met for debates, book launches and film screenings. When Norges had supplemented his blog with his own Facebook page, *la Casa* was one of the first institutions to which he had given a ‘like’.

Their plan had been to give Taylor’s CV to a manager at the centre, but when the pair entered the main hall they were no longer sure what was most urgent. They knocked on the door of a female clerk’s office. Taylor explained that he had been referred by a contact at the Ministry of Culture, but was interrupted by the older woman – first she had to watch the news on TV; they could accompany her. Rapid steps led them through a hallway with art and theatre posters on the walls. Then a door to an open-plan office was opened to reveal the employees of the communications department. Nobody seemed to notice the two men who sneaked in to stand at the very back. Norges followed the employees’ gazes towards a TV screen at the end of the room. LIVE, said the text in one corner, above the red logo of CNN Español. They had arrived too late; Raúl Castro had already spoken. But now another famous face appeared.

Norges had first heard about Barack Obama in the summer of 2008. He had been twenty years old during the American presidential election campaign. As a student at Universidad de Oriente, he’d had access to the Internet – 50 megabytes a month – and could read about the duel between the Republican candidate and the Black senator from Chicago. His friends sometimes joked that Norges, with his chestnut-brown skin, sticking out ears and slow way of speaking, was reminiscent of a young, Caribbean Obama. Norges could think of worse people to be compared to.

At the university the Internet had been slow, and several websites, such as that of the *Miami Herald*, were blocked. Luckily, Norges’s father was working at a hotel in the city centre, and his son was permitted to use one of the computers in the office behind the lobby for his studies. When there was nobody around to see him, he surfed the web uninterrupted. At the Hotel Bayamo, Norges read the column of the BBC’s Cuba correspondent, Fernando Ravsberg. He read the *Miami Herald*, and the Spanish newspaper *El País*. Father and son also watched broadcasts featuring news of the American election campaign on the TV in the hotel lobby.

‘This is about more than just the future of the United States,’ Norges’s father explained one evening. Norges understood what he meant. As the first Black president, Obama would also represent a part of their history – his victory would also be theirs.

Norges’s great-grandmother, Augustina, had grown up in the 1880s, in slavery’s final decade, working as a cook and maid for French landowners. Augustina’s parents had been among the last people to be ripped from their homeland in West Africa and sold as enslaved persons in the Spanish colony. Augustina’s daughter, Juanita, became the first member of the family to learn to read. She moved from the farm to the city of Santiago in 1957, two years before the revolution. While Juanita was pregnant with Norges’s father, she worked as a maid for a wealthy white couple. Norges’s father grew up in the home that Juanita and her husband built in Los Pinos, a new neighbourhood on a plain just outside the city, where the streets had no name.

‘This election is about you and me, and about all of America,’ said Norges senior, nodding towards the TV screen.

On election night on 4 November, father and son had installed themselves in the lobby; Norges’s father had ordered a Becks beer for each of them as the results rolled in. Norges felt his palms grow sweaty as California, Illinois, Oregon and Hawaii turned blue on the screen. When the election result was finally displayed in shining letters – ‘BARACK OBAMA ELECTED PRESIDENT’ – Norges’s father got up from his chair without saying a word. In Times Square in New York, people stood on the roofs of yellow taxis, screaming at the sky with joy.

*Sí se puede*. Yes we can.

In Chicago, the TV camera lingered on American civil rights activist Jesse Jackson’s face, which was wet with tears. Norges glanced over at his father, and had to swallow when he saw that he was crying, too. ‘This is big, *Norgito* – this is big for all of Latin America.’ Norges’s father threw his arms wide and hugged his son.

When they walked out into the warm November night, the streets lay silent in the dark. On the back seat of the motorcycle taxi on the way home, Norges felt an unexpected, almost inexplicable sense of pride begin to grow within him. At home, he lay awake as he looked at the ceiling and thought about Obama’s slogan, *Sí se puede*. The next morning, he took out a notebook and began to write a letter: ‘Dear *señor presidente*,’ Norges wrote in his finest handwriting. In his letter to the newly elected leader, he explained the pride that had flowed through him – ‘a twenty-year-old student of colour from Cuba’ – as he had watched Obama giving his victory speech in Chicago. ‘My father and I watched the entire broadcast on TV,’ he wrote. ‘We felt your victory.’ Norges wrote about the hope that Obama had brought to people. In Cuba, too, a new president had taken power – Fidel’s little brother, Raúl Castro. ‘I have faith in you, *señor presidente*,’ Norges wrote. ‘You can help to change my country.’

His father thought the letter was magnificent. I have to find someone to translate it into English, Norges thought excitedly – then he’d be able to post it to the White House. He transferred the text onto a computer, but doubt began to gnaw away at him. What would the Cuban Postal Service say about a young boy writing to the United States’ new leader? He wasn’t worried about reprisals, but would they even let such a letter through? Time passed, and Norges didn’t send the letter. He archived it deep inside him, not believing that he would ever hear from the most powerful man in the world.

But six years later, in the lunch room in Casa de las Américas, Norges felt that Obama was speaking to him directly.

‘Good afternoon,’ said the President of the United States, live from the White House. ‘Today, the United States of America is changing its relationship with the people of Cuba.’ In front of the TV someone had got up from their chair and was standing with their coffee cup in their hands, interrupted in the middle of their lunch break. Through the screen, Obama looked straight at them. In his deep, statesman-like voice, he described how the United States and Cuba would now re-establish a diplomatic relationship after half a century of hostility. The current sanctions and isolation policy stemmed from the Cold War. Just as the power of hope had torn down the Berlin wall between East and West, Barack Obama and Raúl Castro would tear down the wall between the United States and Cuba. The trade embargo was ‘a failure’, Obama said. The time for dialogue had come.

The news confirmed what Norges had felt that evening in front of the TV in the Hotel Bayamo, when Obama was elected president. In this world, everything was possible. Cuba was entering a period in which hope would become more common than apathy and cynicism. Norges had written about it on his blog, about his belief that a great upheaval was imminent, one in which old and new generations would come together – ‘in the spirit of Nelson Mandela’ – to create a new Cuba where all citizens could speak freely and determine the country’s future course. His cousins had laughed at him. His fellow students believed it a waste of time to think you could change this country – the future was elsewhere, outside Cuba. They called Norges a dreamer, and cautioned him against writing his blog. ‘You’re an engineer, not a journalist,’ said one of his friends. ‘Stick to your profession, you’re asking for trouble.’

But none of them had understood what was coming. The time of surveillance and censorship was coming to an end, wrote Norges on his blog. ‘The grey elements in our society have been replaced with jubilant, vibrant colours.’

For eighteen months, the United States and Cuba had negotiated in secret. If two of the world’s most vehement enemies could become friends, surely there was no limit to what free-thinking young Cubans could achieve? Norges and Taylor left Casa de las Américas without any job offer, but the sky above Havana was blue. Taylor’s eyes shone with tears, and he spoke excitedly with his mother on the phone as they walked to find a bus back to the art school where they were staying. Taylor’s aunt had left Cuba in a dinghy in 1994 and now lived in Las Vegas. They would finally be able to see each other again.

Norges walked beside Taylor, smiling to himself. He thought about all the people who had left Cuba, and wondered whether they’d come back, now that the wheels of history had begun to turn again. What luck that his personal liberation should coincide with the brightest moment in his country’s history! Young people had a role to play now. By writing and criticising, organising and debating, they could change the world.

Norges was twenty-eight years old, in love with a man, and no longer afraid – neither of revealing his sexual orientation nor of the secret police, the ‘grey elements’ that people warned him about.

From the bus on the way back to the art school, Norges and Taylor observed scenes reminiscent of those that took place in Havana in January 1959. When dictator Fulgencio Batista fled the country, people had flooded onto the streets bearing flags and banners. Now a new dam had burst. Strangers came out of their homes to embrace one another; on Calle 23, the cars beeped their horns in chorus. American and Cuban flags waved from windows and balconies. In Old Havana, the church bells rang with wild abandon.

That evening, Norges sat on the pavement in the Internet zone outside the student dormitory, his laptop on his knees, searching for words that could express how he felt. The art school was situated on an open, grassy bank. Outside the dormitory the streetlight was broken, and a dozen or so figures sat on the ground in the dark. But around Norges, young faces were illuminated by the mobile phones and laptops that connected them to the Internet, as if they were holding torches in the night.

‘Sometimes, you’re left with no words,’ Norges wrote on Facebook. His eyes reflected the light of the screen as his fingers tapped across the keyboard. ‘Sometimes there’s so much you want to say, but nothing comes out. So many feelings… We hope this might be the lead-up to rediscovering and changing the country,’ Norges wrote. ‘Long live the friendship between the United States and Cuba!!!!!’ He clicked *publish*.

Several years would pass before Norges managed to sufficiently organise his thoughts to understand what had actually happened that day. The day of hope – that treacherous day of hope.

Excerpt, pp. 313–317

**Gusana**

For her entire adult life, Yaima had thought she was different from the people who left Cuba. She had promised herself she would stay on the island, not because she thought she was braver or stronger than most, but because she was convinced the country that would emerge after Fidel and the end of hostility with the United States, after the market reforms and connection to the Internet – that country would be different. Freer, lighter, safer. Yaima had believed this story so intensely that when she found herself pregnant, she decided to keep the child. The new Cuba would be a good place for Ignacio to grow up in.

But in the months after Norges and Taylor left, Yaima felt something stirring within her, a feeling she couldn’t control. First it was hard to put into words, but later, when she looked back, it was obvious why she’d begun to think differently about the future of her homeland. Norges and Taylor’s departure had affected her. She understood them and sympathised with them, and without truly noticing it, she also saw herself in them.

It had started the day Yaima submitted her master’s thesis at the art school. Three months had passed since she had returned to Havana alone after attending the conference in New York with Norges and Taylor. Even at the graduation party, as she stood with her diploma in her hands, her mother and the professors had begun to hint that maybe she should go away for a while. ‘There are many opportunities outside Cuba,’ they said. Perhaps Yaima ought to look for something abroad. Yaima interpreted this to mean that her presence on the island was putting her mother and the rest of the family in a difficult situation. Representatives from *la seguridad* regularly called her mother, enquiring about Yaima. Among party colleagues, there were whispers and gossip about the ‘counter-revolutionary’ daughter in the family. Perhaps it would be a relief for her family if she left.

Yaima also began to wonder what kind of life Ignacio would actually have in Cuba. A child of regime-criticising parents might be treated differently by teachers and bureaucrats. Ignacio would grow up the son of a dissident, the kind of person the authorities called *gusano* – a worm. What kind of life was that?

Perhaps there was something to what Yaima’s mother and professors had said. There *were* opportunities outside Cuba. Yaima’s father-in-law lived in Tampa, Florida, and had always said he wanted to arrange a family reunification for his son, so he and Yaima could obtain residence permits. They had never seriously considered the offer, but now the couple decided that Yenier would go over to the United States to arrange the paperwork – not because they were going to leave Cuba, or at least not immediately, but because it might be good to have the *opportunity* to leave, should life in Havana become too difficult.

Such was the slippery slope towards exile, full of doubt and self-delusion.

Yenier had left the country to visit his father in Tampa two weeks before Hurricane Irma hit Havana. They were still not yet sure whether Yaima and Ignacio would follow him, or whether Yenier would return to Havana. And *if* the family moved, whether they would stay in the United States for good, or for a shorter period of time.

As the Hurricane approached the city, these were the kind of thoughts that were spinning through Yaima’s mind. On the evening before the hurricane hit, she was alone with Ignacio in the family’s apartment, listening to how the empty water tank bumped and pounded on the roof. She asked the neighbour across the hall to watch Ignacio and climbed up the ladder from the balcony. The wind tore at her as she made her way onto the roof, and Yaima got down on all fours so as not to lose her balance. Out at sea, she saw what was approaching – a black wall of wind and water. It was the first time she’d seen a Hurricane with her own eyes. The wind was trying to cast the water tank into the sea; she needed something she could use to attach it to the roof so it wouldn’t blow away. Yaima caught sight of some scraps of cable wound around a TV antenna, which had been left hanging there after a neighbour had tried to connect to the pirate network from the United States. She unwound one of them, and tied it to the water tank’s handle. Then she wound the other end around a pipe, tightened the knot by hanging her entire weight off it, and crawled back to the ladder.

Yaima’s improvised solution using the cable withstood the hurricane, but that night, as she lay in bed with Ignacio nestled close to her and the howling wind outside, as the buildings boomed and the balconies creaked, that night there was something inside her that let go.

Two weeks after the hurricane, Yaima stood in the airport departure hall with her son and as many of their belongings as she was able to carry. She put her suitcase on the luggage belt and wheeled Ignacio’s pushchair towards border control. Maybe the guards understood what was going on – that here was a *gusana* about to leave Cuba. Or perhaps they had been instructed to intimidate Yaima, because as she walked through the metal detector one of the guards told her that her baggage required a ‘special review’. They asked her to follow them into a private room. Yaima was used to guards checking people’s luggage as they entered the country, but she had never experienced anything like this while leaving.

First, the guards emptied the contents of Yaima’s backpack onto a table; documents, a laptop, a baby bottle, some toys. Then they inspected the wheeled suitcase, opening all the zips. At first, Yaima tried to speak up. She wanted to know why they had chosen her, and asked them to take care with her photography equipment. But then, when they began to search Ignacio’s pushchair, Yaima fell silent. She disappeared into her own head, did as they said, and handed them the pack of nappies she had brought along for Ignacio. The guards lay the nappies out across the table as if they were packets of cocaine. Then the inspection was over. The guards said nothing; they simply nodded in silence, and apparently without interest. Yaima was permitted to gather up her things and go.

By the time she took her seat on the plane, Yaima was more certain than ever that Cuba would not be a good place for Ignacio to grow up. In the United States, she had no job and knew hardly a single person, but her son would still have a better life there. The motor droned to life and the plane began to move. As the pilot swung the plane onto the runway, Yaima thought of the fumbling goodbyes she had said to her family and friends over the past few days. Only three people knew that she was planning on staying in the United States: Yenier, Norges and Taylor. Norges and Taylor had supported and encouraged her – Yaima was looking forward to seeing them again, but the truth was that she was also ashamed at being one of the people who had left Cuba. To leave meant losing ground against the regime.

Besides, Yaima wasn’t sure whether she would succeed in a new country. She had therefore kept her decision secret, even from her mother. The plane accelerated, its speed pushing Yaima back in her seat. Back against everything she was now leaving.

Then they were airborne, and Cuba shrank. The landscape stretched out like a human spine, bearing all the stains and scars of a troubled life. The blood-red earth. The dark trees. The roads, dwindling to thin lines. The speed of the plane made it look as if the vehicles had stopped, as if down there, time stood still. In the seat next to her, Ignacio played with his teddy bear. The coastline came into view, and then Cuba disappeared from the window. Yaima fought to hide the fact that she was crying.

[End of chapter]

Excerpt, pp. 346–350

**How this book was born**

It’s strange to think about the person who moved to Havana and began to write this book almost seven years ago. The person who thought he knew something about Cuba, who had read a few books, learnt Spanish, and been given money from an institution that bought the lie. In reality I knew nothing about what I was getting myself into, only this: that the aim had to be to say something true. I wanted to document my experiences in a way that would help readers understand something about how life is lived on this island. The events I’ve described in these pages are therefore events that actually happened.

When Linet stood on the Malecón in the morning light and lifted her phone camera to capture Fidel’s coffin as it came down the road, I stood beside her, looking in the same direction. Later that day we sat drinking coffee in her kitchen, and Linet told me about the unexpected feeling that had risen up in her as she saw the coffin pass – the sorrow at the loss of an old friend. The scene in which Norges and Taylor shared a cigarette between the night and morning shifts at the Gold Coast Hotel in Las Vegas I was able to describe because I was there, and shared that same cigarette with them.

This book also describes incidents that I didn’t observe personally, but which I’ve reconstructed with the help of images, videos, Facebook updates, memories and other scraps from the past. For example, I met Catalina on the day after she was involved in the inspection at the Almacén Provincial, when she was still able to describe her boss in vivid detail; the way he had stuck out his chest and declared that ‘there’s at least 3.4 tonnes of meat missing here!’ Linet lent me her notebooks from Cuba Emprende, and Norges and Taylor gave me access to parts of their correspondence. They have also documented their story through blogs and social media posts, which constitute a rich archive.

I lived in Havana for twenty months between 2015 and 2018. During some of this period I lived with my girlfriend at the time, Ingrid Jasmin Vogt – who was also the reason I had gone to Cuba in the first place – and Naomi, who spent the first months of her life here.

The book was actually completed in the summer of 2021, but the riots that broke out in July caused delays to the planned publication schedule. I visited Havana four months after the demonstrations described in the book’s final chapters. During this visit, I spoke with participants and eyewitnesses. It was these discussions, along with the great volume of video footage that exists online, that enabled me to try to reconstruct the drama that played out during and after the protests. The dialogue between Yoan de la Cruz and his mother is taken from a piece that was published on Yucabyte.org, the website that Norges and Taylor set up. In the other instances of dialogue in the book, the words are based on the accounts of at least one person who was present and heard what was said. I have corrected or adjusted individual sentences from web forums and Facebook that contained grammatical errors or ambiguities that hindered the reading experience.

This book would not have been possible without the collaboration and patience of all the main characters, who felt that something was at stake in documenting their country’s story. Taylor, for instance, managed to dig up a photograph he took of his boyfriend the night after Norges lost his job at the art school, when they took the bus to visit Yaima. *Dig* is the right word, because at such moments I felt that my writing must be a little like the experiences of a gold-digger. Among all the grey, all the insignificant bits of information, you suddenly chance upon something that glitters. This photo made it possible for me to describe Norges’s body language as he sat on the bus, feeling that his life was falling apart.

Yaima and her husband Yenier, who are both filmmakers, filmed events they had no idea would become important in documenting the story of their homeland, like the day in Plaza de la Revolución when Tania Bruguera failed to show up, the international meeting in Panama, and Fidel’s funeral. Other useful resources have included Cuban media reports and websites. Using the party press and official blogs, I was for example able to reproduce a version of the speech that Rubén del Valle gave to the students at the art school after Tania Bruguera was prevented from setting up a podium in the Plaza de la Revolución. In an interview with a party loyalist blogger that was published the day before the meeting, del Valle called her appearance a ‘reality show’ and referred to Bruguera as ‘a fruit of the revolution’. Since Norges and Yaima, who were present in the lecture hall, also remember similar quotations, I have concluded that this was likely what del Valle said.

In order to help readers understand how people live in Cuba, I’ve been convinced that they must also *feel* something. This book is therefore not a historical report. I have included certain scenes and *not* to include many more, tiny pieces of a vast universe.

Some of the events I’ve described occurred long before I came to Cuba. In some cases, I have been forced to trust individual accounts exclusively. I’ve spoken with those involved, and their family and friends, over a period of seven years. They have had to tolerate countless questions from me, often at ungodly times: *Hola Norges, it’s me. I was just wondering, do you remember what you were thinking the morning after Hurricane Irma hit?*

Norges, Taylor, Linet and Yaima agreed to appear in the book under their real names. All other persons who are referred to, and who are not already public figures, have been given pseudonyms. The main characters have read the translated manuscript not only to comment on errors and misinterpretations, but also to warn me about details that might put others at risk. In Cuba, the truth can be dangerous. Especially in cases where people have taken a risk by speaking to me, I’ve recounted the story in a way that hides their identity. The names I have chosen for the academic institutions I collaborated with – Centro Cultural and Fundación de Folklore – are pseudonyms. This also applies to the names of the hotels and the public sector organisations described in Catalina’s story.

If I have been at all successful in giving the reader an impression of Cuba, this is down to the book’s main characters letting me into their lives. I drank coffee with Norges’s parents in Los Pinos, visited Taylor’s old neighbourhood in Dos Caminos, ate dinners with Linet’s mother and grandmother in El Hoyo and accompanied Catalina to the top floor of the Hotel Guantanamera, where she once worked as a bartender. When Catalina and I did our rounds of the bureaucrats in order to register the car as a taxi, I sometimes had the feeling that we were pursuing a dual purpose. On the one hand, we had to register the car – something that turned out to be more demanding than we had imagined. But at the same time, I also got the impression that Catalina wanted to show me something *more*. She wanted to show me a country that didn’t live up to her expectations. I remember how Catalina once sighed after we had met yet another corrupt bureaucrat, as if she wanted to say: *You see, that’s how things are here*. On one occasion, we met a caseworker who was at least honest enough to ask us for a bribe straight out.

‘That’ll be fifty,’ the woman said, pointing to the tower of papers that represented the applicants ahead of us in the queue. ‘And by the way, we’ll need the amount in fives, because we have to share it among everyone in the office.’ When I handed her the money, the woman stapled the bills straight onto the case file. Back in the car, Catalina turned to me and said: ‘Well, *hijo*, how many kilos of book do you have now?’

I ended up with many more kilos than I managed to transform into literature.

By the time I travelled home, my computer contained over a thousand pages of field notes from the research I was doing, in addition to 500 pages of diary entries, interviews and observations linked to the people and events discussed in this book.

Over the course of twenty months, I conducted research among people who worked in the private sector in Cuba. I worked at some of the larger markets in Havana, selling shoes and clothes, fruit and vegetables, cars and apartments. Although very few of these experiences made it into the book, for me they are all part of the same thing: my attempt to say something about what’s at stake for the people who live on this island.