

The Language of Love

By Jonathan Lockett

I'm doing fine these days.

Actually, that's a lie.

Just last night I had one of my "moments" as they've come to be called, a thirty-minute episode where the pain hit me deep in my chest, knocked me out of my bed, fetal position, tears running dry, eyes swimming in and out of focus until I had no choice but to shut out the harsh light, and then all I saw remaining behind my eyelids was *him*.

My therapist says I'm too analytical. That I need to become more feeling.

Well, shit, the *feeling* last night had me paralyzed. I tried to do what she suggested, let the feeling wash over me, bathe me, so to speak, before pushing it gently away.

Problem is, it wouldn't go anywhere. Wouldn't budge.

Him.

Sonny.

My ex.

We've been broken up three months now.

By all accounts I should be over him. Lord knows I've been trying. Working hard, staying busy, seeing my therapist, doing everything I can to get over him.

But with love...it just takes time.

And the holidays don't help.

Not one bit...

So I lay there, eyes squinted shut, arms flung across my breasts, knees hugging my stomach as I cried, ached, begged, and pleaded with him to leave me alone...but as usual he wouldn't.

I could see him, clear as day, his extra long eyelashes, the thin dark goatee peppered with flecks of white that I came to love, his toothy, curvy smile. I had a fantasy right then and there—I know my therapist told me these bouts did little to move me forward toward closure—that these micro-fantasies might indeed help me short-term, by infusing me with a much needed quick dose of pleasure, but long term, they just hurt—because these scenarios would never come true.

But last night, I didn't care. The pain was just too great.

So I let the feeling move me, carry me off to that place where Sonny and I meet in my dreams. He was where I always desire him to be: in my bed, facing away from me, his heavy breathing therapeutic. Instantly, I could feel his warmth from where I lay, and I was powerless to stay away. So I nudged him gently with my toes, and as always, he turned faithfully, wrapping his dark powerful arms around my body, settling his hands on my breasts, massaging a nipple, pulling me into him, simultaneously nuzzling my neck as he inhaled my scent, grinding against my ass, his wonderful member growing hard. I'm not even gonna front: I was powerless to resist him as waves of love rolled over me. So in my mind's darkness I smiled, and guess what? The pain in my chest

receded like the tide. Soon, I found my breathing steady, my heart rate no longer erratic, no more reggae beat in my chest.

Finally, after holding me tenderly for a while, Sonny left me and went away.

What time, I could not say. All I know is this—at some point I fell into a deep, dreamless state, where there were no thoughts of him, no images of us, no memories of better times, months ago when I felt complete, never wondering about the host of insecurities that seem to constantly plague me now.

Thankfully, at some point my brain just shut down, allowing me the rest and serenity I desperately needed.

For several hours, Sonny stayed away...and in that time, I found quiet peace.

The roar of engines rumble loudly as I'm pushed back into my seat.

Moments later we are heading into an indigo-colored sky. Here we go, I think to myself. Knuckles are turning white as I try not to let my apprehension show. The plane thankfully is half-empty, so no one spies the worry-lines etched into my dark face.

I am here at the insistence of my best friend, Candace.

Need to refocus my energy, she says.

Need to re-funnel all of this nervous energy into something productive. Something fulfilling.

Like a much-needed getaway vacation.

So here I am—Thursday night, evening flight out of Baltimore Washington International, heading southward towards my island destination, one Candy came up with—the Dominican Republic—a place I'd never even given a moment's thought to. But through Candy's insistence that I get away (the fresh air, warm nights would do me good, she kept repeating) I began to warm to the idea. Money wasn't the issue. Taking time off from work wasn't a problem either.

So why did it take me so long to finally capitulate to her?

Because secretly I was holding out—hoping that Sonny would come around—hoping that I wouldn't need any island getaway, that he'd come back into my life and be my refuge—my calm from the storm.

But that didn't happen.

So here I am...

Three hours from white sandy beach, bonfire-lit beach-front parties, ever-flowing libations, yet my mind is restless.

Even though I made myself a promise. Not to think about *him*. Already I've violated that pact in the past two minutes—but hey, at least I'm trying.

Back to the present.

Eight days, seven nights. I think I can handle that. And in a sense, it's a good thing that I'm going away. With the holidays upon us, there are parties galore—the girls have the social calendar thing turned up high. This trip frees me up from having to turn down happy-hour requests from them and my co-workers, all of whom think that the best way for me to get over *him* is to parade myself around in short-skirts (even though it's below freezing outside!) and sexy form-fitting tops as I sip the latest trendy martini...please! That may work for some of my attention-starved friends, but it does

nothing for me. The thought of sifting through a bunch of nothing-to-offer-me-but-the-dick-in-their-pants men makes me gag.

So here I am.

Miss I've-never-been-out-of-the-country-let-alone-by-myself, sitting nervously waiting for the plane to get out of this insanely steep power take-off, wondering for the hundredth time today what I'm doing here, signing up for this shit, when I know in my heart, it won't help, cause I'm beyond help—I'm still in love with a man who's moved on...

Jesus.

That triggers another thought—an evil one—I begin to wonder just what Sonny is doing right now as I jet away.

This is the part I absolutely hate—when my mind goes on auto-pilot and heads off in these stupid-ass directions.

My therapist tells me to shut these negative thoughts down. But easier said than done.

Let's see...it's Thursday night, and Sonny could be doing a thousand and one activities that are far more engaging than mine.

I bet he's doing happy hour—no, Sonny's not a happy-hour kind of guy—he's older than me and thus didn't go for that kind of shit. Actually, we rarely went out, preferring to stay in and enjoy one another's company.

But then again, he's newly single; a guy, back on the prowl, on the hunt, so to speak, and where better to find some fresh meat than at places where silly single girls flock like elephants to a watering hole.

Or perhaps he's already found one and has her absconded to his home—the one we used to share on Thursday nights like this one—candle-lit living room, smooth jazz on the box, apple martinis as only he can make them...

Perhaps he's already gone there—kneeling in front of her right now, incense and candle light wafting over his smooth form as he gently peels her jeans down, the same way he did mine that fateful night six months ago, before tasting my core, lapping up my sex with a hungry tongue that arrested my heart.

STOP IT.

The plane noses down, arcing to the southeast. Out my window I can see the sunset—and it takes my breath away—an unbroken line of vibrant red and orange-laced clouds, with a hint of warm shades of pink—I find I cannot do anything but stare in awe at God's beauty—and this in turn triggers thoughts of Sonny. For it's at times like this that I miss him terribly. Miss sharing moments like this. The feeling that overtakes me is one of intense sadness. Thankfully, no pain accompanies this feeling.

The moment passes. A calm overtakes me. I smile at the sunset—and thank it for making its presence known to me. I resolve to be strong; and to have fun on this trip. I can hear Candy's voice from a few hours ago: "Girl, go down there and enjoy yourself—forget about your problems, cause they'll surely be here when you return!" A short laugh before she continues. "Seriously, Tonya—leave Sonny here in the States—go down there and get your groove back, like Stella did! I feel confident that you can find fun and passion if you just open up your heart to the idea..."

Yeah, I say to myself.

Easier said than done...

Lately, that's become my mantra for everything under the sun.

I'm dreaming when his smooth voice awakens me.

"From the flight deck..."

It was strange, but I was actually dozing, the paperback novel falling into my lap as I gave in and nodded off, getting some much needed sleep. I dreamed I was laying on cool white sand, my newly purchased white bikini looking fierce against my smooth dark skin – but I digress!

Suddenly, there was a shadow hovering over me; I glanced up into the sun; I could not see his face, but I did notice the dark, near black skin, the way his muscles were etched into his upper body like rippling Sahara sand, the flash of white teeth dazzling against dark supple skin. I leaned forward, the pressure in my loins remarkable.

Lately, I've found myself incredibly asexual—as if the parts down there no longer work. I've had no desire to be with anyone physically—and I find that I can't even recall my passionate episodes with Sonny without straining my brain to offer up the details. Actually, I liken my current state to that of a zombie—living without actually feeling. I am going through the motions, but just that—going to work, going home, walking Buster. My appetite is in the shits. I'm losing weight. I reluctantly see my friends, smile when they ask me how I'm doing. Fine, I say; over Sonny yet? Please, I respond! Does Tonya look stressed?

So this new feeling is a welcomed relief—and suddenly I find myself growing wet. It surprises and relieves me simultaneously.

I leaned closer, desperate to decipher his words, when I hear: "From the flight deck..." ruining whatever chance I had with this sexy island man...

"Folks, Captain Rawlings again. One hundred and eighty nautical miles from the Dominican Republic. Due to a small mechanical problem we are going to have to detour and make an unscheduled stop...nothing to worry about though..."

My heart is suddenly in my throat.

Unscheduled stop???

My travel agent said nothing about an unscheduled stop!

I guess that's why they call it *unscheduled*...

More details: we'll be landing in Cuba shortly...a quick detour while maintenance is performed. Mechanics are on the ground waiting—the delay should be minimal—all passengers will be let off the plane, but are to remain in the terminal, close to the gate—and await further instructions.

The rest is a collage of images, all flying past me way too fast.

The seatbelt sign goes on. The flight attendants return to their seats.

Fast.

And suddenly we are diving toward the island named Cuba—and as I grip the seat on either side of me, knuckles going white, I mouth to myself, no longer caring who sees me, God, Sonny, I miss your calming presence more than ever...

A thousand thoughts run through my head, but one is overpowering—I didn't get to say goodbye to *him*.

I rack my brain for a way out—please wake up, I tell myself, please let this be a dream—let me be tossing and turning in my own bed, and when this fit is over I'll wake up, sweaty limbs twisted around damp sheets, exhausted but alive, Buster at the foot of my bed, watching me with those hawkish eyes, head cocked to the side, wondering what the hell is wrong with his master.

Again.

But it is not to be.

Instead, we land smoothly, as if not a care in the world. And my face is pressed against the window like that of a child, attempting to get a sense of this new foreign land, its smell, sights, and sounds. Of course, nothing comes to me through the thick pane but smooth dark tarmac and twinkling lights.

We deplane quickly, told not to remove our carry-ons. Okay—I'm just glad to be on solid ground, so I enter the terminal, following the throng of travelers like a soldier, wondering if they know any better than me.

Maintenance is estimated at ninety minutes. I half-hear the announcement because my nerves are frazzled, my pulse is pounding. I need a drink—the vacation is not going well. I glance around, seeing no one wearing a friendly face. People are speaking Spanish—their tongue is foreign to me. So I head off on my own, passing a newsstand, a duty-free shop, a woman's boutique—its warm earth colors inviting—already deciding what my course of action is going to be.

Shopping—a girl's cure for whatever ails her...

The female sitting behind the glass counter is plump, rakish, with piercing black eyes that follow my every movement. At first I find it unnerving, as if I'm a convict, wondering if she's just picking on me, or does she have this overarching distrust for all Americans. But after a moment I begin to lose myself in the colors, fabrics, and patterns displayed here, forgetting she's even there. A dress catches my eye; another one; then another—a flimsy halter top, a knit bikini, a pair of sandals—oh my! The store has Cuban music playing from a small boom box behind the counter—the rhythm is hypnotic and I find myself feeling it in my neck, shoulders, and back. Minutes after I have arrived I have three items draped over my arm and a pair of shoes in hand, all the while eyeing the bikini section when I hear her stir. She gestures to the dressing room with a half smile. Quickly, I've forgotten my troubles—airplane maintenance, failed love—for the moment, both are faraway concepts.

I enter the dressing room with a full heart.

Forty minutes later, when all is said and done, I've purchased a beautiful sun dress—vibrant reds and oranges, like the sunset at takeoff, a pair of red pumps that match the dress to a T, and a sexy-bikini the color of turquoise. I'm giddy as I sashay away from the store, shopping bag in hand, checking the gate over my shoulder, seeing the throng of travelers still there. Good. I'm in need of a drink. More than enough time.

I find an airport lounge a few minutes later. It is crowded, the bar and table area filled with people. I move to the bar, stand behind an elderly Cuban puffing on a

gargantuan cigar before I shift down to the right a few patrons. Cigar smoke makes me sick.

The bartender eyes me. He is young; his hair is impossibly black and thick; he wears a goatee and a single earring hangs from his right ear. He wears a tight muscle tee shirt tucked into black jeans. I gaze over him absentmindedly, then order a margarita with salt. He nods but does not speak. When my drink comes, someone makes room for me. I place my bag and purse down and take a seat.

The drink goes down cool and smooth. I lick at the salt, swallowing it while glancing around the bar. There are mostly Cubans here—a few Europeans, a lone American couple judging from their attire—shorts, tattered tee shirt, and flip-flops.

A Cuban couple in the corner catches my eye. They are sitting at a table, the man, youngish, straight hair, thin glasses, with no facial hair sits beside a model-thin woman. She wears her brownish hair down to her waist. Her high cheekbones and hazel eyes are arrestingly beautiful. They gaze into one another's eyes—saying very little. She runs a finger up and down his forearm, ever so slowly. His trace the contours of her full lips. Their actions are sensual, passionate, and I find the whole scene mesmerizing and hauntingly depressing.

Everything about them reeks of love.

I feel the pang in my heart blossom as I observe them. I sip my drink, more like gulp, attempting without success to switch my brain onto another track. I glance around, swiveling in my barstool, taking in the others with my panning gaze, wondering their destinations, guessing their professions. But it doesn't work. I keep coming back to the couple in the corner.

The young ones in love.

For a moment I find I cannot do anything else but stare.

And wonder about their perfect lives.

Just look at them.

The look between them says it all.

They are perfect.

Their world is perfect.

STOP IT.

I feel my own depression deepen.

Like a chasm it widens with every breath.

I gulp at my drink.

Gawk at them. And gesture for another.

And another.

The bartender smiles.

Forcing my brain now, whipping it around like a bed sheet in the wind, I wonder what the man behind the bar is like in bed.

So I display a sexy pose—purse my lips as if pouting. Stick out my breasts. Play with my hair. But it isn't working.

He can read the aura that hangs over my head like a storm cloud. Its color is dark gray, ominously black. Rain, lightening, and thunder are coming. He can see it in my eyes. So he moves away, tending to someone else.

Someone brighter.

When I finally pay my tab and saunter away an hour later, my gate is silent.

My plane has come and gone.

Havana, Cuba, eleven p.m., no luggage, no familiar faces, all alone.
Suddenly everything, everyone I know is far away.
Quickly I conjure up Sonny – beg him to hold me for a moment.
But he is not there.
I am alone.
I can do nothing.
Nothing at all but cry...

Thirty minutes of yelling and screaming has done nothing to change my circumstance. I am *still* in a foreign country – my plane has left me, the last flight to the D.R. for the night, I'm without luggage, *still* – worse, no one within striking distance speaks a bit of English! I cannot for the life of me fathom how an International airport cannot have English speaking airline reps working; perhaps it is the lateness of the hour – regardless, I've been communicating via sign language and non-verbal cues for the past half hour.

They know I'm beyond anger.

They know I'm read to explode.

But the Cuban lady in front of me is unsympathetic. She spreads her hands out like a priest offering up baptism. Her face is a study in neutrality. She does not smile; she does not offer apologies. She speaks Spanish slowly, as if enunciating each word will help me understand.

It does not.

Finally, she scrawls a word on the back of a bent-up boarding pass – I recognize the word "hotel." Exhausted, I nod. She makes a phone call – the third one this evening. Speaks rapid Spanish to the receiver, replaces it, and scribbles something else down. I snatch up the paper without apology, glance at it – trying to decipher its meaning.

A street address.

The name of a hotel.

Both meaningless to me.

My shoulders sag – I begin to weep again. No one comforts me. No one reaches out to help.

Just what kind of fucking place is this, I wonder?

Sadly, there are no answers.

Closing my eyes, I recall a moment that is etched into my psyche like surnames on a tombstone. Suddenly the images rush towards me. I let the floodgates open, face into the wind, and smile. Yes, it's all coming back now...

I was having one of those horrible days.

A series of three-hour meetings that were a waste of everyone's time. Bickering among the team members. Another lecture from the boss on how I needed to "handle" my people better. Once again, I contemplated leaving my job – once again mused how I hated getting up every morning – suffering through an oversized commute only to arrive at work irritable, before spending the entire day in fire-fighting mode – not even getting a chance to accomplish any real work. Sometimes I wondered why I even bothered.

I left around seven, fought severe Beltway traffic, even for this time of night. Some accident involving an eighteen-wheeler hauling cattle had us inching along. Would it ever end? I swore—I cursed. I beat the steering wheel in front of me.

Nothing helped.

Then Sonny called.

Quickly I told him my woes.

And his voice cut through all of the negativity and bullshit of my day, swatting away everything that was unimportant, making me calm.

He told me to come over.

That everything would be taken care of.

When I arrived at his home forty-five minutes later the interior lights were dim. He met me at the door—swept me up in his arms, silently holding me for what seemed like an eternity, squeezing me with such passion and with such energy that I found myself dizzy. It felt so good to be in his arms, safe once again, that the day's unfortunate proceedings just fell away, like meat from the bones. And I was left holding onto him—Sonny's firm reassuring form, resting my head on his chest, inhaling his wonderful cologne, running my hands along the small of his back, blinking my eyes rapidly to ensure that this was not a dream.

He assured me that it was not.

He made me a simple dinner, but one I will never forget.

First, he led me into the candle-lit living room. Sat me on the couch that I've come to love—its cushions wrapping themselves around the contours of my body and holding me tight.

Next he brought me a glass of Yellow Tail Shiraz. Told me not to move—and the dazzle in his eyes held me captive. I nodded, feeling the well of emotions rise. So I watched the candle-flames as they danced and sizzled. Soft jazz emanated from the stereo—something by Keith Jarrett—the jazz pianist. The melody raptured me, enthralled me with his playing.

I watched as Sonny went to the kitchen to prepare my meal. I wasn't very hungry. But my mouth began to water when I smelled the pungent flavor of stir-fry shrimp and Far East spices wafting in the air. He tossed the seafood over fresh-cut Romaine lettuce, stirring in chunks of feta cheese dressing. Served it to me on a bone china over candlelight.

Just the two of us.

He did not eat.

Instead he sat before me hearing me recount my day. Watching me eat—listening with the intensity of no one before him. Soon he moved around beside me, took the fork from my slender hand and fed me. I recall leaning into him, closing my eyes, wishing I could muster the words to convey the feeling that was searing itself into my heart and soul.

But I could not.

Instead I swayed to Sonny's beat, allowing his body to envelop me with his warmth.

Later on that night, he drew a bath for me.

Hot water, lavender and avocado oil, plenty of bubbles, scented candles on either end of the tub. He bathed me, sitting behind me, legs splayed as I closed my eyes, fingers meandering their way down my belly, gliding over hair and mound, until they

found my clit, lightly rubbing against the flesh of my sex as he cupped my breast with his other hand, removing any last remnants of the polluted day.

That night, Sonny was beyond words.

He toweled me off in front of his vanity, the only light coming from twin candles. My back was to him as he rubbed the towel against my ass and thighs, slowly moving lower. I watched him, silently. Finally he let the towel drop, moved behind me, cupping both breasts in hand as his lips met my neck. I gave my flesh to him, tilted my head away so he could suck me; closing my eyes, then reopening them so that I could see.

I wanted to witness *everything*...

Sonny observed me watching him, eyes unblinking as his fingers found my core again, wet to his touch.

Opening me up, spreading my legs, breath harried, he entered me from behind, slowly and methodically, eyes never leaving mine, not blinking once, filling me up ever so slowly with restraint that I thought was an illusion—the feeling so overpowering that I almost cried, pushing back into him, forcing him to quicken his pace, riding him right there as the candles flickered and sparked, our rhythm a syncopation of darkness and light, beveled edges of glass distorting our lovemaking into something wild, unbridled, and beyond passion until nothing else mattered but him burrowing inside me, devouring my neck, lips, cheek, and mouth; his fingers sliding between my teeth, and I having no other choice but to suck on his digits as if they were some sort of delicacy. Our breaths expanded, our pulses increased—I recall it well.

Eyes locked onto one another. Daring each other to look away—yet we did not.

Not even once.

Exhaling a breath that sounded like a suffering moan, I begged him to come inside me, the first time for me...*ever*...and when I felt him quiver, quicken, and release his seed, I cried.

That's when I knew...

I loved this man.

The thought petrified me to the core.

At the same time, it made me whole.

And that alone made me smile...

A touch to the shoulder whisks me back to reality.

The stark whiteness of the airport terminal is overpowering.

I turn, knowing the feeling that I just conjured up is sinking.

It leaves me.

Just like Sonny did.

I face a Cuban man—my age, black hair and beard closely cropped, piercing black eyes, a composed smile. He is wearing an airline's uniform, neat and trim—gesturing for me to follow. He is patient. His gaze is kind. I glance over at the woman behind the counter—she is silent, watching me with brooding eyes. I pan back to him, confused. He gestures again. Says something I cannot understand. But his voice, for the first time this evening is reassuring—comforting. So I find myself following him.

It is late.

I am scared.

I am alone.

Yet I follow him.

He leads me passed security, through customs, speaking confidently to the officer who stamps my passport and waves me through. He directs me into Havana night air, mid-sixties, light breeze, and through a wide parking garage. Finally, after walking for ten minutes, we stop at an oversized Buick, circa 1960s. The car is immaculate—in mint condition. He grins, and I force a half-smile. He is a gentleman, opening the door for me, waiting for me to settle inside before he closes it gingerly. Then we are off.

He steers north, Avenida de Independencia toward the city. I am mute for the first few minutes as he drives, the Spanish colonial architecture and forty year old automobiles something out of old cinema. I just stare out the window, resting my head on the doorframe, not saying anything, wouldn't matter if I did. But then I turn my head to gaze at my driver. He is staring straight ahead, but he feels my stare and turns to meet mine.

We both watch each other for a moment.

Both eliciting mirror smiles.

Then he says something that is smooth and comforting.

The meaning is lost, but it doesn't matter.

He reaches for the knob to the stereo and turns it on. Finds a station that is playing something mellow, something soft, turning the volume down as if preparing to communicate.

A part of me is apprehensive because of what has transpired this evening, and of things unknown, yet to come. Nevertheless, as I glance his way again, taking in his features, the smooth caramel skin, the jet black hair, I feel a quiet rush. The beard is neat and trim, and I find that I am staring at his chin, noting the angular lines. He turns again, smiles and says something more. I realize I don't even know his name.

"I'm Tonya," I articulate slowly, over the melodic Cuban music, lifting a finger and pointing it inward toward my chest. "Tonya," I repeat with conviction.

My driver nods once. He repeats my name. "Tonya," he says, but with a thicker accent. Escaping from his lips my name conjures up royalty. I sit higher in my seat. I smile as I nod. "Yes, I'm Tonya," I exclaim.

He places his closed fist on his chest, turns to me and says, "Diego."

"Diego," I repeat.

"Si, Diego. Si," He nods his head and winks.

For a moment there is forced silence between us. And then out of nowhere I begin to laugh—it begins as a low chuckle, just for me alone, but then I find I want to share it, this *feeling* that has come from out of nowhere—and, like a robin's nest, it has made a roost in my heart. So I raise my voice and laugh again, shaking my head slowly, the absurdity of my situation, shaking it off, laughing some more. Diego glances my way sharply, a frown etched on his normally smooth face. Soon he joins in. Seconds later, the interior of the car is filled with laughter.

It feels good to laugh.

It feels good to be in company worthy of laughter.

I reach down into my shopping bag, place the hem of my newly purchased sun dress between my fingers. Rub the fabric, and feel at peace.

Two thousand miles from home, but I am okay...

Suddenly I am speaking rapidly, staring straight ahead as the words gush forth. I find it difficult to control. Not wanting it to stop.

"Diego, you wouldn't know what's swirling around in my brain right now. Lord, if Candy and the girls could see me now!"

He eyes me and shrugs, but his smile urges me on. So does the new song playing on the radio—it's up tempo, swing...and I once again I feel the music invade my pores. Outside the twinkling lights of Havana are hypnotic, intoxicating. I stare, enthralled.

And continue...

"I mean, this shit is so ridiculous, no one would believe it if I told them. Imagine me—off to the D.R. to escape failed love, only to find myself detoured to Cuba, of all places! Imagine that—you can't understand a word I'm saying, can you?"

Diego blinks, listens intently.

"Okay, my friend. You know, you're the closest thing I have right now to a friend—not a soul closer...nothing, not even an acquaintance within two thousand miles. Isn't that sad?"

Diego shrugs. And points out my window. My eyes follow—we are approaching the city and I find myself mesmerized—it is beautiful—enchanted, lights sparkling, splashes of color everywhere.

I go mute, thinking about my lost words.

And Diego takes over.

My newly found friend is animated when he speaks, waving his arms in the air, gesturing here and there—pointing to an old square with archways etched into stone buildings several hundred years old. Or an old church that is haunting and handsome.

The city is alive, even at this hour...you can feel it—hear its pulse, feel its soul stirring like an awakening child; people out on bicycles, bartering in an open-air market, children playing in the street, buggies being pulled by horses. We slow to a crawl, the traffic infectious, and I roll down my window so that I can take in the sounds and smells unfiltered. There is music everywhere, and "Viva Cuba Libre!" signs on street corners, artwork painted onto the side of homes, Castro's portrait hanging below streetlamp every dozen feet or so. Diego is talking again, a rapid-fire diatribe that is completely lost to me. But the rhythm envelops me, calms my nerves. So I nod, smile, point to objects I want him to explain. Tell me more, I'm saying, demanding him to give it all to me, leave no stone unturned, not one drop un-spilled. He smiles in between words, glancing over at me, sneaking a quick peek at my body when he thinks I'm not watching.

But I catch him.

And it amuses me.

Unexpectedly I find myself excited, sitting here in this forty year old Buick gliding through Havana of all places, living on the edge, living spontaneously, flying without a parachute, driving on a road not mapped out, not at all the way I'm used to doing back home, where things are safely mapped out for me—and this thought gives me renewed strength.

I feel strong.

In control for the first time in...what? Months?

God, has it been that long?

Suddenly, I realize I haven't thought about *him* since I've left the terminal. That was at least twenty minutes ago? The reflection leads to an uncontrolled grin.

And a second thought.

Thank you, Diego...

And conversely: fuck you, Sonny!

I turn to my savior and smile. "There's this asshole of a guy I used to know," I begin in a cocky voice that shocks me with its resonance and timber. "Fell for him and his unconventional ways. Things started out great, but turned into something all wrong."

A smirk alights from my face.

Diego watches me, breathless.

"Wanna hear about it?" I ask.

The hotel is on a side street that is barely wide enough for Diego's Buick to pass. We roll to a stop and conversation ceases. I was enjoying our time talking, even though neither of us could understand a word the other was saying. Regardless, it felt good to get certain things off my chest, and I found myself revitalized—as if I had just awoken from a much needed nap. But when the Buick came to a stop I glanced up, and my situation came crashing down upon me. I didn't want this to end.

I steal a glimpse at the back of the boarding pass. Check it against the plaque affixed to the painted brick wall not far from where I sit. Someone sits in the shadows on a decaying milk crate, eyeing us curiously. The place appears rundown, home to vagrants and tramps, like a brothel in one of those B movies. Diego is gesturing toward the building but I shake my head rapidly.

"No," I say. It comes out as a whisper, so I repeat myself.

"No." A bit more forceful this time. Shake my head again. Turn in my seat so that I'm facing Diego completely. "No," I say for the third time, in case he wasn't paying attention. Then I add, "Diego, please—I don't want to stay here—I don't want to go."

Diego has put the Buick in park. Another slow song is on the radio—and it seems he is considering my words along with the lyrics to the song. I can't understand what is being said, but the tone is unmistakable—unrequited love, gray skies, hearts out of sorts—regardless of the language, the meaning is clear.

I reach for his forearm, Diego glances down toward it, turns his head to offer up his gaze. It is one of compassion and understanding. I begin to say something, then shut it down.

What else can be said?

How can I make him understand?

Diego waits a moment.

A bird can be overheard chirping, and I wonder if it is searching for its mate.

He turns to me and nods. Puts the Buick in drive and rolls into the dark.

When we reach the corner I instinctively reach out to stroke the flesh of his bearded cheek.

He smiles in return, bending his head to briefly meet my touch.

The moment is not lost on either of us.

The ride to Diego's flat took the better part of twenty minutes. And it was just as well, because I needed the time to decompress, to float outside of myself and reflect on things unsaid; so I closed my eyes, rested my body against the doorframe, and allowed myself to dream.

Dreamed while not really sleeping.

I thought of Sonny. And of things that could have been.

Unlike the previous episodes involving him, I found myself growing angry by the second. And this was a relatively new emotion for me. Up to this point I'd been so analytical—wondering what had gone wrong—analyzing the relationship from every possible angle—what I did or could have done, same for Sonny.

But tonight a different thought coursed through me. I felt anger at the man whom I fell for months earlier.

I found myself asking basic questions about love.

Because I was raised to honor love above all else—momma had taught me that love was absolute—it was the pinnacle—it was heaven.

So why then, did our love fail?

What happened to make Sonny just give up the way he did?

If he really loved me, I pondered, wouldn't he do *whatever* he needed to do to make me happy?

Yes, the answer came easily to me—he would, if he truly loved me.

That brought a different thought to mind, and I didn't like where it was headed...

Perhaps Sonny never loved me.

STOP IT.

Sonny loved me. In his own way.

And yet...

This nagging feeling wouldn't escape.

I felt my jaws tighten.

The fact was, Sonny hadn't gone after me.

He hadn't followed me here.

If what we had had been true love, he would have.

The truth was like a cold slap to the face.

If Sonny really loved me, he would have hounded Candace like a dog until she turned over my itinerary to him, and he would have been there at BWI waiting, armed with two-dozen roses, begging me to stay.

That's what I would have done...

If Sonny really loved me, he would follow me to the D.R. if need be, wrestling with the hotel staff until he found his way into my room, getting down on one knee, begging for forgiveness, asking—no, *demanding* that I take my rightful place in his life.

That's what I would have done...

And the fact that he *wasn't* here—the fact that Sonny *hadn't* done any of these things—or anything remotely like it—showed me his true colors.

And that fact didn't just make me angry.

It made me mad.

So *fuck* you, Sonny.
For teasing me with wisps of love.
Fuck you, Sonny.

For taunting me with infinite possibilities.
My anger rises, like bile in the throat—I can taste it now—it clouds my vision—I can feel it constricting my veins, the blood is no longer flowing—I’m drying up, wilting like a flower not watered, dying inside—I can’t feel a thing...

So I thrash my arms about as if in offensive mode—striking out—hoping that he’s within hitting distance, in harms way—because at this moment, I want him to feel my pain, taste it the way I do, the bastard, for the pain he’s caused me.

So take this!

But Sonny is agile; he is strong. He sidesteps me easily, dancing around me like a prizefighter. I angle my arms to the side, fake a thrust, parry, strike a second time, only to miss again—

“Senorita? Senorita Tonya?”

The voice is rising, filled with apprehension.

I open my eyes. Allow time to focus.

The Buick has stopped.

Diego is facing me. He wears an expression painted with concern. My hands are pressed against the windshield of the Buick—I can see the smudge lines where my fingers have made contact with the glass.

I blink. Swallow hard.

“Tonya?” he repeats.

I nod my head, drop my hands to the side. Exhale a breath. Glance around.

We are in a dimly-lit one-car garage—its walls are filled with tools, shiny red compartments, plastic cases of auto parts—white walled tires suspended from hooks in the ceiling, plastic bottles on wooden shelves, gasoline cans leaning against tin walls.

Diego exits the car.

He hits his head on the low-hanging yellowing bulb. He curses loudly, the meaning of his words lost to me—but regardless, it makes me laugh. He ducks and scratches his scalp as the bulb arcs back and forth like a pendulum, creating alternating patterns of light and dark. Diego scurries around to the side and opens my door. I take a second to consider him and his outstretched hand. The absurdity of it all has me shaking my head.

I’ve come this far; have no idea what I’d do or where I’d go otherwise.

It seems my destiny, at least my immediate future is etched, so I let this man pull a befuddled woman from the car and into his arms.

You look at Diego, you see a simple man.

The uniform has a lot to do with that.

But enter his flat and you’re open to a whole new realm of possibilities.

I’m standing in his space, and it is wide and airy. About nine-hundred square feet, mostly on one level, the loft consist of a single open space, divided ingeniously by Diego’s decorating. A narrow staircase leads to the bedroom above, which is also open, overlooking the space below it.

I'm immediately struck by the depth to this man. Diego is not simply an airline worker – that much is for sure. He is so much more than that.

Book shelves line a brick wall. I walk over, peruse his collection. It is eclectic – I can tell even though most of the titles are in Spanish. I recognize a few titles, the classics: Moby Dick, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Jane Eyre, Luis Manuel Garcia', Jose' Lezama Lima, Toni Morrison.

I'm impressed.

Adorning the walls is an unassuming collection of art – vibrant colors that reach out and grab the viewer. Sculpture litters the floor. Track lighting highlights his collected works. Several guitars, one six-string and a twelve lean against the windowsill. A free standing fireplace made of ceramic is pitched in the midst of the floor, vented out the nearest window by a metal chimney.

His record collection – vinyl, cassettes, and CDs – is extensive.

Prince, Wilson Pickett, James Brown, Bob Marley, Boys II Men, Ashley Simpson are the ones I recognize. Many others are Cuban musicians and singers.

I spy an old porcelain tub in one corner, surrounded by several of those Chinese panel screens. The toilet is on the far end, hidden by a rickety door painted purple. A well-worn couch is sequestered against the windows. A number of upholstered chairs are arranged around a low coffee table at the other end. The kitchenette is small yet functional. The loft is multi-colored – an expansive red wall meets burnt orange at an angle – the opposite wall is yellow, the far end, also red – it works though, contributing to the overall artist's atmosphere.

Diego holds his arms wide, yet his remarks are lost on me. I grin, show him I'm feeling his space – and I am. Suddenly, I'm seeing this man in a different light – Diego, sans the uniform could be a university professor – I can see him in a mock turtleneck, puffing on a cigarillo as he converses with students. Or an artist – painter, sculptor, someone creative – yes, I can see that easily. Or a musician or author, although his hair needs to be a bit longer – more jewelry, a piercing or two, maybe a tattoo for the former occupation rather than the latter.

He gestures to the sofa and I sit, suddenly feeling the weight of my current situation come crashing down upon me. Right now I should be on a white sandy beach, holding a frosted drink with a paper umbrella – instead I'm exhausted physically, emotionally drained, and sweaty – I'd give anything for a shower!

As if reading my mind, Diego goes over to the tub and turns the faucets on high. He returns, lights some candles on the coffee table and starts a fire in the fireplace. I watch him silently, resting my head on the back of the couch. My thought travel back to several months ago – Sonny lighting candles in his home for me, building a fire for me – and then I turn these thoughts off like throwing a switch; not wanting to dwell on the past.

My therapist would be proud. Not to mention I've done enough of that shit already.

Diego reaches the stairs, pulling his shirt out of his pants and unbuttoning it while climbing. When he arrives at the top, the shirt is off, and I marvel at his cut form – tight mid-section, lightly haired chest.

He watches me observing him.

Diego smiles.

I glance away nervously.

Taking advantage of the time alone I use the bathroom. It is small, cramped—a narrow mirror shows me that I've had a rough night. Worry lines are etched on my normally smooth dark face. Hair's a mess—makeup, worse. I sigh.

I could really use that shower right now...

I exit the bathroom. Diego is standing besides the fireplace. His chest is bare—his face and torso painted with orange firelight. Beyond him the lights of Havana shine and sparkle. He and this place are suddenly beautiful.

I glance around, taking in his loft, the man, the atmosphere, this situation.

I am here—not sure why—but I don't believe in coincidences.

Things happen for a reason.

And yet...

It is like a dream—surreal, none of this real.

Diego takes my hand, leads me across the bare hardwood floor to the tub that is close to overflowing. He has laced the water with bubbles and sweet-smelling fragrances. He shuts off the faucets and suddenly the loft is pin-drop quiet. Diego points, quietly ushering me into the bathwater. I stand fast—not ready to disrobe. Then he hands me an oversized towel and disappears before either of us can say a word.

The water feels soooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo fucking good I can't express in words just how much pleasure it brings me. Akin to a blanket—it covers like a second skin, permeating my pores, opening me up, allowing me to breathe again, and I'm floating on a cloud of bubbles and foam, inhaling the sweet scents as wave after wave of liquid warmth lap against my swollen breasts. I sink deeper into this heaven willingly.

My eyes are resting shut, head back against the edge of smooth white porcelain, hair immersed, arms floating by my sides. I resist the urge to touch myself because Diego is someplace nearby, and I lack the strength and energy to do so.

So I drift off to sleep.

And dream.

I am in a cobblestone square at midday, Old Havana. A flock of children trail behind me. On either side of me are two young girls, no older than eight. I hold their small soft hands in mine as they skip alongside of me, their eyes as big as saucers as they take in the colors, sights, and sounds of the day. I am gesturing with my chin toward a juggler who is entertaining a throng of passersby. The children run to him, oblivious of the traffic—colorful art deco cars that inch along like snails.

I cross the street, stand in the background, watching the juggler as he wows the crowd.

This is my life now. No longer insanely long commutes, fire-fighting mode, working for bosses that I wish were dead.

No regrets.

Two thousand miles from home. Except, this is my home now.

I'm smiling, the sun hitting my cheeks just so—I feel wonderful, there is no weight on my shoulders, no heaviness in my heart.

An aging Cuban with stained yellow teeth smiles at me and winks. I grin back. Then someone covers my eyes from behind. I can feel the skin—soft, not at all a laborer,

no cracks, no calluses to the digits—instead, smooth and warm like the sunlight that bathes me.

I spin on my heels.

And face Diego, whose chest is obstructed by a sheaf of freshly cut flowers. I grin uncontrollably as he hands them to me.

“For me?”

“Of course,” he answers. Leans in to kiss my cheek. The electricity courses through my frame, knotting my spine, making me quiver like a dandelion in a breeze.

“Occasion?” I ask playfully.

“I need a reason, *Senorita*?” he responds.

And I move into his space, placing the flowers behind his back as I press myself against him, feeling the heat, even in this square with the sun on my back. We kiss; our tongues lick against each other before twisting like branches on a vine. Behind us, the kids are making funny noises, “ooohing” and “aaahing” our public display of affection. So I disengage myself from Diego, transmit in secret a little message only for his eyes and ears, of delicious things to come later on that evening when we are alone, free of the children that have become my work, my life.

Diego disappears into the crowd. And as I clutch my flowers, I am content.

Then, out of the corner of my eye I see the disturbance. I pan right, follow the movement, see the goatee and something familiar—the mouth, lips, I can’t quite distill the eyes because they are covered by colored lens, but already I feel the tension in my gut building, mounting, and then he is in front of me.

Removing the sunglasses with a flourish, it is the curved eyelashes, like those of a Bedouin’s sword, which reach out for me.

My heart misfires.

I step back.

Sonny.

I gulp. I nod. No words emerge.

He is here, in front of me, smiling. Holding out his hand. Gesturing for me to come.

But I can’t.

I have a new life here. This is home. My work, my love.

I clutch the flowers tighter.

Scan the crowd for my kids—they are here, watching me with hawk-eyes, distrustful of this stranger. It is as if they sense *something* unsaid between us.

Holding out his hand...

I try to tell Sonny no, try to explain to him why I can’t.

That he’s too late.

Instead, I wake up, not joltingly, as if quaking, but rather, slowly; eyes adjusting to the shadows, feeling his hands in my hair. I glance up, focusing; feeling the weight of the warm water on my chest and limbs.

Diego is there, shirtless; wiping away the tears with his thumbs.

In the background there is music playing, Spanish guitar or perhaps Cuban, I don’t know the difference. But the melody is haunting and beautiful.

Diego leans over me, filling his palms with bathwater, and washing my dreams away.

And I consider how my therapist is always saying how I'm too much thinking and not enough *feeling*.

So I let this feeling carry me like a raging river, emotion spilling over, so overpowering that I sprout fresh new tears.

This does not scare Diego.

He merely washes these new ones away.

Then goes about tending to my hair.

His fingers are magic, working inside of the thick, dark jungle that is my mane, lathering it with fragrant lilac-smelling shampoo; massaging my scalp until I am purring like a kitty; rinsing out the suds, then combing out the tangles with slender fingers that are strong.

All the while humming along with hauntingly melodic Cuban/Spanish guitar licks...

We glide to a stop in front of the club entrance at half past two. A uniformed Cuban male rushes up, opens the door and helps me out. I'm wearing my new sun dress and matching shoes, my hair has been scrubbed clean, slicked back with gel—it shines in the moonlight as it angles down my back. I've added a touch of rouge to my already colorful cheeks, eyeliner that highlights; large hoop earrings dangle from my lobes, thick caramel lip gloss that makes my lips look fuller and plumper than they already are. But I'm not complaining. And neither is Diego.

He comes around the front of the car after handing the attendant some folded bills. I overhear his whispers; assume he's telling the guy to use kid gloves with his ride. I guess some things never change—valet parking is the same, regardless of what country you're in.

The club is pastel stone front, loads of hanging vines and palm trees lining the entrance—red neon splashed above the ornate doorway. A throng of young people, all dressed as if they are attending a Hollywood premiere are milling about. Diego takes my hand, and I use the moment to marvel at his attire. Clean Italian suit, crisp white satin button-down, no tie, oversized collar folded over the lapel of his jacket; French cuffs; sparkling onyx cufflinks; shoes buffed to perfection. I steal another minute to take in his features, and decide that this man is incredibly sexy. I think back to my thoughts earlier in his flat. This man is so much more than an airline employee—he is anything he wants to be—a modern day Renaissance man.

The interior of the dance club is packed. Not warehouse-large, but multi-leveled, the interior has been decorated to look like a Cuban square—faux storefronts, hanging plants, archways cut into the walls, vibrant colors for street signs, twinkling stars overhead. Stairs are cut into the sides, and patrons line them up and down, watching the dancers on the floor in the center of the club as if on holiday parade.

As soon as we enter, Diego is treated like a celebrity. He keeps a tight hold on my hand however, even as he makes frequent stops to converse in rapid Spanish with folks who greet him. A few women in tight skirts and flimsy tops kiss him on the cheek, giving me the quick once over as if I were a threat, and I presume from our closeness that I am.

I *am* a threat to them. Tonight anyway.

Diego gestures to me and says my name—I hear “Tonya” in the midst of his rhythmic diatribe, along with “Americano.” I smile, nod my head, feeling the Salsa music envelop me with its force and purposely step. And I find that my shoulders have a mind of their own tonight. Diego senses this too, cuts his conversation short as he moves us deeper into the crowd toward the dance floor.

At once I feel the anxiety overtake me.

I glance ahead, watching the couples spin, dip, and tango—thinking to myself: no way I can do what they do.

I’ve always admired the way Latinos dance—their way of one leading, the other following, like doing the Hustle, except Salsa, Rumba, and Merengue take it to a whole ‘nother level. My eyes scan the packed dance floor—these couples aren’t just good—they are close to perfection!

My palm is moist in Diego’s. I pull on his hand, willing him to slow down and detour to the bar where I can sit and take a moment to compose my thoughts. But all of a sudden one of the little chickadees who pecked his face a moment ago is on his heels, grinning and leading him towards the dance floor before I can object.

For a second I feel fire behind my eyes, but the moment passes quickly—Diego looks to me for agreement, being the gentleman that he is, and I nod slowly, eyes on the bitch letting her know in the universal language of glaring female stares that I’m hip to her game. The bar is off to my right—so I head over, eyeing a space that has miraculously appeared, not far from one of the bartenders.

Over the din I mouth “margarita”; the bartender nods and I swivel around towards the dance floor.

Diego is out there, in control. He has taken hold of this peroxide blonde, twirling her around his wrist as if she were a mannequin. I stand there watching dumfounded. He makes it look so...*easy*. They move well together; where he leads she follows, and suddenly I find myself wondering about their history—Diego expertly pulling her into him, placing his hand on the small of her back, witnessing her eyes sparkle as he dips her low, allowing her cleavage to spill like Dom Perignon. But it is an illusion, I tell myself—it no longer matters.

He came with me.

He will leave with me.

This much is certain.

I sip on my drink slowly. Watch others as they glide on by.

I stand out—not because of my darkness—there’s plenty of *us* here—but because the locals can sense that I’m different, not from around here—and they can smell my fear. Yet, the males, as expected, are intrigued. Already, I’ve had several of them speak to me in their native tongue. I smile, shake my head while raising my shoulders, as if to say, “no comprende...”

The music shifts; and the bleached blonde is replaced by one of her friends. I continue to sip my drink, feeling the alcohol creep inside me, spreading like an uncontained oil spill. My shoulders are grooving, I’m feeling more relaxed now. I’ve made eye contact with Diego and he’s smiling; I blow him a kiss, then absentmindedly lick my lips.

Diego disengages himself from the woman to join me. I take another sip of my drink, run my tongue around the edge of glass, sucking at the salt as if it were an aphrodisiac. Diego is watching me closely; hand on my waist while wiping his brow

with a handkerchief. I raise my voice over the din of the music, telling him that I think he moves well. He shrugs, orders a drink, leans in to speak with me. His lips brush against my neck, sending chills through me. I love the rhyme to his talk; love the cadence to his timber. I tell him so—pressing my lips to his ear this time, letting them rest there as he pulls me closer.

I flash a smile as the fake blonde walks by, missteps as she spies our intimacy, Diego and I huddled, deep in conversation.

Diego grabs his drink, a mojito, a tall, frosted glass loaded with crushed mint sprigs. Taking a long pull, he holds it out to me—pressing the glass against my cheek. I laugh, take a gulp, nod furiously, and signal the bartender for a second round.

I'll have what *he's* having...

Moments later we are on the dance floor. Diego is a wonderful teacher—patient and methodical—he could care less for the other couples surrounding him—he makes me feel as if he and I are the only ones on the parquet. Taking my hand, he guides me; holding me by the waist, he leads me.

And I follow.

To me dance is instinctual.

It is innate.

Minutes later he is twirling me around his hand as if we've done this a million times before.

I am grinning ear to ear.

People are stopping to watch me.

To watch *us*.

Diego is masterful. He ensures that we look good together, moving as one.

Thirty minutes later my extremities are painted with a thin layer of sheen. We've been dancing non-stop, and I feel muscles being awakened that I didn't know existed. I come out of the apex of a turn, reel back into Diego until our hips meet; facing him, we greet each other with beams before he leads me off the dance floor.

Another round of mojitos and ice water chasers.

I'm loving this night.

And I tell Diego so.

Thank him for his part in all of this. My hand is draped around his neck, almost sitting on top of him. We are laughing; he's speaking to me; I'm listening; interjecting, talking back to him—neither of us aware of what the other is saying.

Yet it does not matter.

I am feeling more connected to him than I have to another human being.

This feeling; this bonding—is one I haven't experienced in...a long time...

The music slows, and couples begin to leave the dance floor. I excuse myself from Diego and head for the raised D.J. booth on the other side of the floor. Folks watch me as I saunter on by; I hold my head high and strut my stuff like a runway model. Feeling good—feeling life and all she has to offer for the first time in a long while.

Candace would be proud!

The D.J. is this dark skinned Cuban with a pockmarked face. I ask him if he has any hip-hop; he stares at me uncomprehendingly as if I'm an alien being.

Tonight I am. Yet I press on.

To his surprise I climb the short steps, entering the booth. Spy the collection of CDs and vinyl behind turntables and electronics. I move close in order to yell in his ear:

Jay-Z?
Snoop?
Usher?
Alicia Keys?
2Pac?

I see his eyes widen, confirm the recognition at the mention of the last name. He turns, rifles through his rack before pulling out a thick 12-inch. I grin, slip the vinyl out of its sleeve, hold it at an angle to the light, flip it over, point to a track exclaiming, “play this one, this one here!”

He nods, but I doubt he’s comprehending.

Back with Diego, swaying to the Cuban slow jam raining from the sound system, overhead fans blowing coolness upon our heads like shower-spray. Diego is eyeing my dress, nodding his head, winking at me. I play with his lapels, finger the cufflinks seductively, nodding back.

Yeah, you look good too...

Suddenly the space deepens, darkens.

And I hear the old familiar drum and bass line, hear the unmistakable voice that is only 2Pac, “Yo Yo Yo, throw your fingers up!!” and I have no choice but to squeal with delight as I grab Diego off his barstool, and drag him wide-eyed to the center of the dance floor.

The other couples that were slow dancing are unexpectedly standing in disbelief. Suddenly, things are reversed; they are like a fish out of water and I’m in my element.

Finally.

So I throw my hands up, finger snapping as my neck and shoulders pop—all of a sudden I’m dancing the way I love to move—free style, the way we do it in D.C., like when I’m alone and my song comes on the radio...

Besides, I’m a black girl. Need I say anything more about the way *we* do it?

Diego watches me for a moment before mimicking my moves—he learns fast—hands in the air, footwork reminiscent of an Earth, Wind & Fire concert. I’m grinning as I give him my back, push my black-girl ass out, let it connect shamelessly with his pelvis, grinding against him as his hands wrap themselves about my waist. And then we are moving as one, syncopated to this foreign beat as the crowd claps to the rhythm, envious of our connection as “*Temptations*” plays on.

Soon couples are joining in. Minutes later the entire floor is filled, fingers and hands in the air as 2Pac raps about lust-filled love in a thug’s ever-tempted world.

I spin to face Diego, move in until inches separate us—will him to move along with me—follow me, I mouth, my breath in his face and lovely eyes, and he does so, following my lead as he presses into me. His beautiful features are splayed before mine, and I consider what it would take to kiss him.

A slight lean. That’s all.

Before my thoughts can reach completion his lips are pressed over mine.

We are spinning now as we kiss, a slow circle that rejects the concept of endings. He holds me as we continue our arc, bodies dipping in sync to Pac’s bass-line, mouths pressed shut, feeling the heat and pressure mount. Then my lips separate and Diego follows, and I experience his tongue enter my mouth. I taste him for the first time, feeling him shift against me, his loins aligned with my loins, his growing hardness allied with the soft groove of my sex.

My panties are laden with moisture. So I move closer still, excited by the wonderful possibilities that await us, relishing this moment; ensuing that I *feel* every muscle fiber, ever synapse as it discharges, not wanting to miss a single solitary beat.

Diego's hands find my ass as I find his—and the room and sounds begin to melt away like snow on a sunny day—there are no longer couples dancing beside us, no more 2Pac lamenting about misplaced passion, no crushed mint sprigs, no peroxide blondes, no throning, no party-goers, no ice-water chasers—instead, just the two of us—our passion wrapped around our bodies like sturdy bindings...fervor that has been mounting, sensual zeal that is cocked like a semi-automatic, ready to explode.

I can feel it in our dance.

Experience it in our kiss.

It's a sentiment that's been a long time coming...

It is well after four when we return to his flat.

We've been dancing non-stop for several hours, and I feel like Cinderella, except that time for me has unexpectedly stopped—this night is somehow frozen—the clock isn't budging—twelve o'clock for me ain't coming.

At least not yet.

So I give into this feeling, let it whisk me up and carry me away, to this place where I love—where I'm free, mind devoid of distractions and harmful beasts. And Diego is there with his picture-perfect smile, his soothing touch, lips that are like fire on my skin, igniting something in me that's ready to detonate.

I'm standing by the window, the sprawl of Havana laid out before me like a Thanksgiving meal. Lights twinkling as the city sleeps. The scene is spellbinding, tantalizing; and for a moment I remain there, legs apart, elbows on the sill as I take it all in, inhaling it like sweet vapor.

Behind me and to the left, the ceramic fireplace is the color of a sun ripen mango—its warmth comforting, like a ratty sweater you refuse to throw away. Diego is on the couch not too far away, guitar in hand, dispensing a soulful melody.

His hands attack the neck expertly, and for a moment I concentrate on the movement his fingers make, the sensually slow up and down as his digits slide over frets, imaging my body as an instrument, his instrument, splayed before him, permitting him to love me the way he is loving that guitar.

I am not afraid.

I close my eyes; the song ends; and another one begins without fanfare.

A slower groove.

One I know.

My eyelids part, my gaze pans over to the musician, Diego, whose eyes are shut as he sings.

The words pierce my heart.

Because I know them.

I understand their meaning clearly.

Diego's voice, wafting over the guitar strings, is pure.

"I...I'm doing just fine...getting along very well, without you in my life..."

The tears pool, yet I hold my head high, scanning the horizon for something to focus on—a reference point, so that I will retain my sea legs, not experience any sudden vertigo, and freefall.

“Time made me stronger; you’re no longer on my mind...”

So I nod at the melody and lyrics that speak to me in volumes.

Diego’s stare is unfocused, his head is turned away as he sings, plucking his instrument as the words waft over us; enveloping us like fog, this song, *my* song—telling me that it is okay—everything that I feel is okay.

Go ahead—let go...it’s alright...

“Time made me stronger, you’re no longer on my mind...”

When the song is done Diego places the guitar carefully on the ground and comes to me. I remain by the window sill, legs still splayed—I haven’t moved; eyes shut, moving to a quiet rhythm, the one in my steady heart.

I feel his hands on my back, trailing downward to my ass. He lifts the fabric of my sun dress; kisses my neck, nuzzling against me. Running his hands up my thighs, he bares me, my plump heart-shaped ass meeting the night-time air, Diego touching my skin with a light hand, raking his fingers along the cleft that bisects my cheeks. I bend forward, allowing him to marvel at my goods, feel his fingers ride the fissure down until he reaches my core. It is moist and gaping; his electric touch sending chills through my spine.

On one knee he kisses me *there*, and I suck in a breath, exhaling slowly as he tastes my softness with a flick of his tongue, teasing me before settling down, inhaling my scent, tongue curling in to collect the juice of my cavern before swallowing it down like wine.

My eyes are closed and yet, I see colors. Vibrant ones—crimson reds, indigo blues, sunflower oranges—they splash across my eyelids as clear as day, tumbling in front of me with a purity that is as unsullied as a mountain stream. Suddenly he is rifting me wide, his tongue burrowing into me with a frenzy that is enthralling, and as the pleasure ripples outward like a stone thrown into a quiet lake, the hues blur, a kaleidoscope of sensual patterns combining into species yet to be discovered.

I moan, not because I want him to hear my sex talk, but because I have no choice—this feeling, Diego swallowing me up, consuming me—is so overpowering that I grasp the sill for support before I fall.

“Oh God, Diego!” I shout, my words muffled as my head is thrust into my forearms, Diego’s fingers spreading my ass cheeks, splitting me like a piping hot biscuit in order to get to the meat, to my very core. I flex my knees, bend at the waist—I want him to have it all, taste my goods unencumbered. So I raise one leg, pressing my knee against the wall; holding my thigh in place with a hand.

“Take me, Papi!” I scream, “Eat me!” I yell as Diego’s face becomes a blur against my slippery thighs, flash-fire of passion erupting in my loins.

“God, YES!” I stutter.

He is *consuming* me; his lips, cheeks, chin, and nose glazed with the liquid of our loving. I reach behind, grasp at his thick hair, command him with my actions to devour me, leave not a morsel left. I am demanding him.

And Diego, on his knees, complies willingly.

I feel the pressure mount. Try to resist, attempt, without success, to heed to its awesome power.

But it is too great.
And I am too weak.
The avalanche comes; Diego can hear the rumble.
It appears with little warning, shooting from my epicenter outwards like a burst
damn, electrifying limbs, singeing synapses as the tidal wave barrels forward, Diego's
tongue curled into a phallus that fucks me with a force that is all consuming.
I can do nothing but grasp his head and growl.
Ride this wave.
Ride this luscious wave.
Ride this luscious out of control wave.
Ride this oh-my-God-this-feeling-is-awesome out of control wave.
Ride this I'm-coming-so-hard-I-can't-believe-I'm-seeing-colors-behind-my-
eyelids wave.
In time this wave subsides.
Slowly.
When I am done quaking, when I no longer feel so wonderful it hurts so damn
good, his tongue laying flat against my clit as the aftershocks pulse my labia, my heart
ratcheting in my chest wall as I will the muscle to calm down, I speak to God: Forgive
me; and please don't take me yet, I've got so much more to do. I beg, I plead, as Diego
retracts, and the cool air finds my exposed sex, wet and sticky, caressing it, the way
raindrops lick at leaves in the springtime.
Diego smiles.
I ruffle his hair.
Kiss his lips passionately.
Taste my own juice on his mouth.
And lead him up the narrow stairs to his bed.

There I ride him.
Slowly.
Delicately.
Purposefully.
Before was out of control.
Fast.
Frenzied.
Lustful.
This is controlled.
This is passionate.
This is love.
So I ride him.
Using long full strokes that ensure he feels every inch of me—I want him to
remember—Resign myself never to forget.
We're in Diego's bed, my slippery thighs flexing over his sweaty ones ever so
slowly as I lift off his lap, hands on his chest, fingers curled into his hair as his cock
breaches the opening to my womb—and just when he is ready to fall away, I slowly,

delicately, purposefully sit back down, swallowing him up, devouring his sweet member the way he consumed me earlier.

Diego's hands are at his sides. My breasts sway inches from his face. I feed him a nipple—mamma's got something good for you to eat, I muse, letting his tongue ravish my areolas, circling them, painting them with saliva as I squeeze my flesh into his gaping mouth.

The feeling is indescribable.

We are making love, the experience sweet—the joining of two strangers who, for some reason, have connected at this time, in this foreign place—and yet, as I kiss his lips, continuing my rhythmic ride, taking my time, not in any rush for this evening to finish, I marvel at the way he *feels*—not analyzing it, not intellectualizing it, just allowing this sensation to fill me with the intensity of a hurricane.

Diego and I are one.

I slow to a pause.

Press down until he's in me so deep my cervix aches.

But it is good pain.

It is an awfully good ache.

I smile, stare at him unblinking.

Yes, Diego and I are one.

And it feels so good.

Later, he is laying behind me, holding me tenderly as his thick member slips in and out of me in slow motion—in and out, in and out, in and out, the music—our music is salsa, a slow-motion salsa groove that is steady and pure. The tempo is in and out, in and out, in and out. My eyes are closed, we've been loving for seemingly hours, and yet, I don't want it to end—so I grasp his ass and force him deeper into my loins, turning my head to his, offering up my tongue, nose, cheek, eyelids as in sacrifice, I don't care, Diego, I'm pleading, as long as you take me there, to that place where I'm on fire, all aglow, take me please, I beg of him—and he complies.

We love like that for seemingly hours.

Afterwards, in the afterglow of our love making, he is laying besides me, the soft hues of dawn creeping in to nudge us, lap at our feet, and I'm still awake, not wanting to miss a beat as his fingers trace figure-eights around my navel.

The passion we shared was sweet and raw and pure.

Primal.

I nuzzle my head against Diego, my mind is a slate—I merely exist at this time and in this space—predawn Havana alongside a stranger named Diego who loved me sweetly and with a raw purity that is uncommon as white tigers.

Then I think of him.

Sonny.

In the midst of our lovemaking he came to me.

For a moment, I saw him clearly.

And then he faded like headlights into mountain mist.

I shed a silent tear for the man I used to love.

Love, but no longer in love.

Diego tells me in his native tongue that it's alright to let him go.

That I'll always love him; always carry a piece of him around inside of me, in my heart—where I can conjure up images of him whenever I choose.

But the times we had are gone.
He no longer exists where I am. No longer wants me.
And I don't want a man who doesn't want me.
Sonny didn't come for me.
He wasn't the one.
Truth is—he wasn't good for me; I wasn't good for him.
And as dawn rises I recognize this truth.
So I say a silent prayer for the man I used to love.
Sonny— who I've been mourning all these months.
Sonny—the man I used to love, has passed on.
So I eulogize him.
Remember the man and the way he used to make me feel.
Diego tells me it's alright to cry.
Tells me it's alright to feel the way I do.
And in time, I am no longer sad.
My heart no longer hurts.
My "moments" are finally gone.
I meet the dawn as new woman—the sun rises into a cloudless sky—Havana yawning after a restful sleep, and I am refreshed, revitalized, standing proud, sure-footed, a renewed purpose to my step.
I smile at my reflection in the mirror that greets me—it is bittersweet, yet I refuse to look back.
Diego has taught me that.
So I grin.
He smiles back.
We laugh as he takes my hand.
And I squeeze it—making sure this is no dream.
But it's not.
Everything about how I feel is *real*.

So this is how the story ends...
Diego walks Tonya up the jet way at half-past nine, hand in hand, her palms moist in his, not wanting this feeling to end.
But it must end.
A first-class ticket is waiting at the gate in her name. Her plane is fueled and ready to take her to the Dominican Republic. In less than an hour she'll be on white sandy beaches, ever-flowing libations, cool breezes, the scent of garlic, onions, coriander, and oregano; Sancocho, African yams, and curried goat hanging in the air.
That's the last place she wants to go.
But life goes on.
And so does she.
So she turns to Diego and musters up the courage to say goodbye.
She promised herself that she wouldn't cry.
Diego presses his thumb to her lips, displaying his picture-perfect smile. In diction-perfect English he says, "Sonny is a fool for not loving you right."

*Tonya stares at him uncomprehending, mouth agape.
The weight of his words – and their meaning, come crashing down upon her.
She opens her mouth to speak.
But he kisses her passionately before she can say a word.
Then turns and hurries away before she can spy the tears that meander through the
valley of his bearded face.*

*A week later, an evenly tanned, well rested Tonya walks through the entryway from
customs at Baltimore Washington International Airport into a waiting throng of people.*

Candace is among them.

*The first thing she notices is the way Tonya moves – gliding along with a purpose, and
carrying herself like royalty.*

They hug for minutes, the two best friends having missed each other terribly.

“Let me look at you,” Candace says loudly, “Oh my God, girl, what happened to you?”

Tonya beams, pirouettes before taking a bow.

“Nothing.”

*“Bullshit – something **drastic** happened...”*

“Well..” Tonya says, blushing.

“You met someone.” It is a statement, not a question.

Where to begin?

How to tell Candace exactly what happened?

She’s changed. Become a new woman. Mourned lost love – and found a new one.

Tonya’s evolved.

She knows now what she wants.

She knows now the possibilities that exist for her.

And she refuses to settle for less.

Yes, Tonya is different now.

Everyone around her notices it.

She is willing to take on new things. She is ready for the unexpected.

Hopeful of the possibilities that await her.

Tonya has evolved....

Will she see Sonny again?

Perhaps, but her time with him is through.

Will she see Diego again?

Only time will tell...

*In the mean time she refuses to glance back – only forward, into the brilliant sun that
seems to shine on her every single day, warming her cheeks.*

No longer just analytical, much more feeling now.

*Waiting for that special someone to come into her life and sweep her off her feet; take her
to that place where love is passionate, sweet, and pure.*

Diego taught her that.

When she closes her eyes she can still see his picture-perfect smile.

And his words reverberate in her mind’s ear.

She carries him around where she goes.

*Along with Sonny – deep in heart, in that compartment reserved for those special souls
that touched her to the core.*

*Available to conjure up images of loved ones whenever she chooses.
No longer solely thinking...much more feeling now...
A changed woman.
Evolved...
Tonya's therapist is indeed proud.*

The End

**December 22nd, 2004 – January 2nd, 2005
Accokeek, Maryland/Boston, Massachusetts**

© 2005 by Jonathan Lockett. All rights reserved.

Visit Jonathan online at www.jonathanlockett.com