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Opening Extract from...

Caliente

Written by Chris Hilton

Published by Dunbar & Meredith

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First published in 2012 by Dunbar & Meredith
Flat 24, Connaught Street, Northampton, Northamptonshire
NN1 3BP

Distributed by Gardners Books, 1 Whittle Drive, Eastbourne,
East Sussex, BN23 6QH
Tel: +44(0)1323 521555 | Fax: +44(0)1323 521666

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British
Library.

ISBN 978-0-9569827-0-4

Typeset by Amolibros, Milverton, Somerset
This book production has been managed by Amolibros
www.amolibros.com
Printed and bound by T J International Ltd, Padstow,
Cornwall, UK

Don't trust a brilliant idea unless it survives a hangover.

Jimmy Breslin

ESCAPE TUNNEL

MARCH – NOVEMBER 2000

I had no real idea how I would get there. I just knew I would go somehow. A review of my finances told me that leaving for *anywhere* was a good idea. I owned a small terraced house that could be sold, but nothing of real value among my possessions. I spent more than I earned every week. I had borrowed heavily and run up several credit cards to their limit. The plan was to get as much money as possible, by whatever means open to me. And go. Perhaps some financial advice would help? I placed an ad in *Private Eye*.

**ESCAPE TUNNEL
COMPLETE
FLIGHT BOOKED**

Discreet legal and financial
advice needed
to avoid mishaps.
Credentials and
requirements to
Box 1096.

*The above ad appeared in issue 997 of Private Eye on
March 10th 2000*

A reply arrived one week later. It was from an inmate of an open prison who was serving two years for fraud. He invited me to visit him. Over the next few months I visited every weekend. Paul was allowed out on weekend passes. We drove to a nearby pub and made our plans, or more accurately, I followed his instructions.

NOVEMBER 24TH 2000

I shut down my computer and tidied my desk. People shuffled, grabbing coats and chatting – a Friday night buzz. A few people called out – have a great time, don't do anything I wouldn't do. The usual stuff. I had booked two weeks' holiday and left the next day. I looked over at Jo; she was watching me. We'd been close, designing logos together for six years; she helped me through some tough times. She knew something was going on and she was

pissed off because I hadn't told her. I understood, but I hadn't told anybody. It wasn't personal.

'See you Jo,' I said.

She smiled, a not altogether friendly expression.

'See you Chris, have fun.'

The clock ticked on and we piled towards the door and out into the damp, cold evening. A few more have funs echoed around the car park, mingled with slamming car doors and revved engines. I watched Jo as she pulled out of her space and I waved. She waved back and drove away. I thought I saw her shaking her head. I sat in the empty car park and smoked a cigarette. Then I drove contentedly, dreamily, through the grey, bad-tempered Friday night crawl. I left my car in the Pink Elephant long-stay car park and booked into the Gatwick Hilton. I spent the next three hours roaming the airport, drawing dollars and sterling from various ATMs and exchanges. The next morning I did the same and posted my Pink Elephant ticket to Paul. The car belonged to him now. At four that afternoon I boarded a Cubana flight, direct to Havana. Paul, now free and tagged, called as I sat on the runway,

'All set, Reggie?'

'All set.'

I had \$100 000 in an attaché case and considerably more than that in a Channel Island bank account, accessible in Cuba. I didn't set foot in England again for two years.

No one is ever old enough to know better.

Holbrook Jackson

ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE IN CUBA

CHRISTMAS/NEW YEAR 1998/99

Sara and Keith were teachers from England. I didn't want to intrude, but Keith turned out to be a late night drinker and we often sat drinking mojitos into the early hours, became holiday friends and Sara seemed glad of my company during the day. They were fun, if a little naive, and we had some good times together.

One morning at breakfast they said they had a Cuban friend, a young man, a physical education teacher, who was going to show them round a local junior school. Did I want to come along? I did. He turned up after breakfast. He was black, very handsome, shortish, but with a powerful build, cool and polite. He was very well dressed. I sensed a dark humour in his eyes.

'This is José,' said Keith.

He seemed proud of him, an acquisition, a trophy. We walked up Obispo, the long narrow street beside our hotel in Old Havana, and turned into a pretty, tree-lined square,

then into a meandering house that turned out to be a school. It was full of happy, noisy children in the maroon uniforms that denoted their age group. José spoke to a teacher who responded with a look of annoyance before nodding and giving him some curt instructions. José then led a class of twenty or so children, crocodile fashion, up to the park opposite the Inglaterra Hotel in central Havana. We sat on a bench and watched José coach the children through a strange set of exercises, which they appeared to thoroughly enjoy. They ran a few small races, all of them cooperating willingly with whatever games he devised. Keith and Sara cooed and aahed, admired the behaviour of the children and commented on how happy they all were. After about thirty minutes José called time and we all walked back to the school, where Keith declared it was time for lunch. José had another brief exchange with the teacher and off we went to a restaurant on O'Reilly, where the food was cheap and we could drink mojitos on the balcony.

Lunch lasted a few hours. The meal was José's reward for the tour. Keith and Sara bombarded him with questions about Cuba. His English was good. I asked him about a situation I'd found myself in a few nights before. A German woman who lived in Cuba had invited me to a poetry reading. After a meandering taxi ride we ended up at a large villa with a lively party in progress and not a poet in sight. The patio held three large metal baths filled with cans of beer submerged in cold water. Bottles of rum lined the perimeter. A band played salsa and everybody there seemed to be doing just as they pleased, which was everything. A long line of expensive cars lined the street;

occasionally one would move as a series of apparently prosperous drunks went out for more alcohol. The German woman, who was enormous, got red-faced and bad temperedly jealous when I danced with any of the women. She was far too much woman for me, so at about 3.00 a.m. I suggested we leave. It was impossible to find a taxi. She proceeded to have a panic attack, convinced she was going to be raped and murdered. I thought that unlikely, but flagged down a passing car and paid the driver to take us back to Old Havana.

‘How,’ I said to José, ‘could this be?’

After all, this was a socialist country, the last bastion of equality and justice. Who owned the villa? Who owned all those cars? Who were all those people? He’d been smiling and laughing throughout my story, trying only slightly to hide his amusement from Keith and Sara. His eyes showed more than just humour when he replied,

‘Anything is possible in Cuba.’

Keith and Sara retired for a siesta. I wanted to be alone for a while, a vague feeling of excitement giving me a warm feeling. I recognised it; it had been absent for a few years. I asked José if he would like to go for drink that night, knowing the answer. We arranged to meet at the Sevilla hotel; I didn’t want to run into Keith and Sara. We didn’t stay at the Sevilla. José took me to a peso restaurant where we ate and drank at Cuban prices. He asked me a lot of questions about my life.

‘What about you?’ I said.

‘What about me?’

I took a sip of my rum; he’d introduced me to Silver

Dry, pure and white; he said that the sugar in mojitos gave bad hangovers. Silver Dry was organic Cuban rum. Eat occasionally and drink water with it, don't overdo it, no hangover. It was clean.

'Well,' I said, 'you're not a teacher for a start.'

He spluttered his drink.

'I'm not?' he said, 'so what am I?'

'You're a hustler,' I said. 'You just borrow those kids. And what were those games you were putting them through?'

He could barely speak for laughing, but he didn't admit anything. I liked that.

'So you had a taste of Cuba,' he said, referring to the party, 'did you like it?'

'Yes, I did.'

'Do you want a woman? I can find you one.'

'No.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. I just don't.'

I got back to the hotel at about 2.00 a.m. No sign of Keith to share a nightcap or two. I ordered a large Silver Dry. Used to company that day, alone I became melancholy. The barman was the inscrutable rather than talkative type, so I sat alone and reviewed my day. The Ambos Mundos was recommended to me by a travel agent, Hemingway had stayed here when he wrote *For Whom The Bell Tolls* – the twenty-four hour bar, the airy high-ceilinged lobby, the monochrome photographs of Hemingway, Fidel, Ché, assorted gangsters, it oozed character – romantic, corrupt and promising.

I nodded to Jorgé, who was on security duties. I'd come in the previous night to find him minding the hotel alone, the other staff were probably sleeping. He came behind the bar to serve me, stood soldierly erect and, I thought disapproving, as I drank and tried to engage him in conversation. I succeeded by buying him drinks. He was a true believer in Fidel and the revolution and by seven the next morning he'd drunk at least eight Cuba Libres, rum and coke. Between us we solved most of the world's troubles. When the day staff arrived he was stumbling around talking happy nonsense. They gave him a few funny looks but said nothing. I thought I may have got him sacked, was pleased to see him still here.

I hardly got started on my drink when something bright and shiny began to seriously affect my peripheral vision. In the bar mirror I saw a Cuban girl had seated herself next to me; she was smiling determinedly at my right profile. She wore a bright red t-shirt; enormous gold earrings swayed and sparkled. I turned to her; she'd gone for the red-hot poker look – red jeans to match. I wasn't in the mood, said 'No gracias' and turned back to the mirror. My reflection didn't improve my mood. She wasn't in the least discouraged and asked in precise, beautifully spoken English, if she could have a beer. I bought her a beer.

I continued to ignore her while the barman studiously ignored both of us and she smiled unconcernedly. Jorgé chatted to his security colleague by the door. I couldn't figure out how she had got into the bar. During my stay I'd seen a few men, not the best advertisements for the Caucasian male, attempting to take Cuban girls to their

rooms. They were politely but firmly stopped at the lift by hotel security, and told that it was against the law. Single Cuban girls were generally not allowed into hotels at all without good reason. Prostitution is illegal in Cuba. That, of course, is irrelevant. I'd seen Cuban girls with tourists, I'd been approached by girls of varied age and beauty, and declined, not through any moral superiority or lack of desire – I just couldn't see how it all worked, didn't feel comfortable with it. More importantly, I hadn't been impressed with many of the men I'd seen parading with stunningly beautiful Cuban girls on their arm. I didn't want to look like them.

But here she was. Jorge and his friend had found something fascinating to watch through the window, were discussing it at length. The barman busied himself being inscrutable. I wondered if I'd overdone the rum, because if anyone but me could see the lady in red, still drinking beer and smiling, they showed no sign of it. But, it was two in the morning, respectable residents were tucked up in bed; things change after midnight no matter where you are in the world. She'd been allowed in. She knew somebody. Interesting. Fed up with my reflection I turned towards her. The smile remained in place, an impish child-like smile that seemed to say, 'OK, what shall we do next?', as though we'd been together all day. Her hair was cut short above her ears, curly, but she'd sort of straightened the top two inches and gelled it upwards. It could have looked masculine, but Cuban women don't do masculine, and I was suddenly aware that she was quite beautiful. Her brown eyes flashed at me in the light. How do they do that? Mid-to-late twenties, light brown skin with high

cheekbones, tapered chin, carefree smile framing perfect white teeth.

If I'd wanted her I'd have felt intimidated. I was in my late forties then and though I thought I was in good shape, my reflection disagreed. I was pale and tired. But I was only buying her a beer, wasn't I? The day's drinking had jaded my appetite for anything other than sleep. I'd buy her another beer, have one more rum and go to bed. Yes. I ordered, same again. The barman somehow managed to serve us without acknowledging our presence.

'Take the drinks here,' she said, 'is more comfortable.'

She indicated a dozen small tables away from the bar, next to the windows and the street. I said no, that I would drink up and go to bed.

'Me too,' she said.

'No.' I pointed above me; my room was on the fifth floor, 'I go here, you go there.' I indicated the door. She smiled as though I was being very silly, picked up the drinks and took them to a table. I followed.

Her name was Irene. She asked me where I was from, what did I do? Did I have any family? Was I alone? Why? Her English was good, though she said she spoke only 'a little'. Where did she learn? At school. Did she live in Havana? No, she was from Santiago, but she had family here. She had a young daughter in Santiago. She was bright and easy to talk to. My drink was finished and I wanted another. She changed to rum and ordered some snack biscuits.

'Are you hungry?'

She nodded. I gave her five dollars. There are twenty-four-hour bars along the length of Obispo. She took the money and rose to go.

'You stay here,' she said.

'OK. After this,' I raised my drink, 'I sleep.'

'Me too'.

Ten minutes later she was back. She had some chicken and what appeared to be hot crisps. She offered me some. No thanks. She offered the change. I shook my head.

'When you finish I go up, you go out,' I said.

'No. I stay with you.'

'It's impossible.'

'Is possible. Give the man ten dollars, no problem.'

So that's how it worked. I looked over at Jorgé. He and his friend had been watching, now they looked quickly away. Jorgé talked very loudly, indicating how dark it was tonight, or how large the moon, or something equally important.

I thought about it. I wanted to want to, but I really didn't want to, not now. She had no intention of going anywhere. Every time I said that I was going upstairs she replied, 'Me too,' and shrugged, as though it was inevitable. I wondered if she just needed a room for the night, what was left of it, though she didn't seem concerned. She didn't seem concerned about anything. In fact, if she could get any looser, the rum was making her so; she was enjoying herself. I tried another approach, took twenty dollars from my pocket, put the note on the table. She stared at it evenly.

'Take this. Now I go this way, you go that way. Do you understand?'

'Yes, I understand. Is a present for me.'

'Yes, a present. Now you have to go.'

'No. I stay with you.'

She sipped her drink, shrugged and smiled. I gave in.

Apart from anything else I needed to sleep.

'You go to your room,' she said, 'five minutes.'

I walked to the lift. Jorge dragged himself away from his conversation and followed me, opened the concertina doors. I handed him ten dollars.

'Do you know her?' I said.

'Irene. Yes. I know her family. A good family.'

He was soldierly again. His moustache was intimidating. Had he set this up? Enjoyed our conversation from the night before? Or just noticed the cash? True communist he was, but everyone needed an angle to stay above the peso economy.

'I've never seen her before.'

'She likes you.'

'She doesn't know me.'

'She likes you.' He shrugged.

In my room I cleared stuff off the other single bed. I didn't feel any different about wanting to sleep, but was curious about what she'd want, what she'd do. A knock at the door. Jorge had brought Irene. She walked past me into the room and looked around. I was about to speak when she came towards me with a look, half predatory, half amused and kissed me full on the lips for a long time. Her kiss woke me like an electric shock and, suddenly, I was wide-awake, tingling, alive and ready for more. She broke off, studied my face and smiled.

'Wait here,' she said, and disappeared into the shower.

I waited.

I flew home two days later. José came with me to the airport. We sat at a bar waiting.

‘Will you come back?’

‘Yes.’ I surprised myself by how sure I was. ‘But it won’t be until this time next year, Christmas. I hate Christmas in England. I have to make some money. I’ll stay for a few weeks next time.’

We exchanged addresses and numbers. I hated goodbyes and I didn’t want to go home. I never did.

‘You are leaving Cuba without having a Cuban woman.’

‘No.’

He gave me his full attention.

‘When?’

‘She stayed in my hotel room for the last three nights.’

‘Did you like her?’

‘Yes, she was good fun.’

‘Fun?’

I explained. He shook his head and laughed.

‘How much did you pay her?’

‘I didn’t pay her. We went out and I paid. I gave her a present last night.’

‘That means she likes you. Was she beautiful?’

‘Yes, in a funny way.’

‘Was she good?’

‘None of your business.’

‘So she was good,’ he said. ‘All Cuban women are good. That’s why men come here and fall in love. The women are uninhibited, not like in Europe. Men come here, women too, and then they keep coming back. Everybody loves Havana.’

‘I’m not in love,’ I said.

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’m sure.’

‘When you come back you will fall in love.’
‘I don’t think so.’
‘We will see,’ he said.