

^{the}New Physician

TNP presents Mehr-Afarin Hosseini's first-place short story, "Baile de Agua," in its entirety, complete with the author's footnotes.

Baile de Agua

by Mehr-Afarin Hosseini

In Roman mythology, "Cuba" is the goddess of infants and is there to protect them.

He hesitated for a second, stopping and looking back to make sure that we were following him. Sweat was dripping from his forehead, and he was breathing hard. His round, blue eyes, with that strange contrast to his tanned skin, jumped around on his face. A thin mustache, stretched with a smile, sat above his lips with a golden tooth shining from the corner of his mouth. Swinging his arm through the air, Vladimir signaled us to keep following, then turned back to walk again. We limped after him with slippers that dragged on the concrete from fatigue and heat and could not keep up with his fast pace.

Since the day we had set foot here, the sun was shining sharp without hesitation, penetrating our eyes and burning our skulls. Regardless, we had wandered the streets all day every day, so now our sunburned shoulders could not bear the touch of our shirts anymore, and the blisters between our toes had blistered again. Siavash had lost the map with all the attractions the very first day. But that first day, too, we had figured that we did not need a map. It was enough to just wander by the hotel for a while, and it would not be long before one of the locals approached to sell us cigars or black market ballet tickets for Alicia Alonso or just a glass of mojito and

dragged us into valleys and alleys that were not even on the map. We had found the attractions in the first couple of days, from Revolución Museum to Revolución Square and Revolución Avenue and the “well of miracle” of the Hotel Nacional.

He turned into an alley covered with cracked cobblestones and then a building, pink colored with glassless rectangular windows. In the small balconies, clothes were hanging, untouched by the windless air. The scalloped moldings around the windows and balconies were remains of the Spanish architecture of the colonial times and from their chewed tooth it was clear that since then, too, they had not been restored, like the deep scars carved on the walls by the whip of the storms of the tropical climate. I sighed. Siavash turned to me in silence.

As we got to the door, a strong smell of urine mixed with rotten trash caught me halfway and made me grab Siavash’s arm and pause for a second. His gaze moved from me to the door undecided. “Come on in! Come on in!” Vladimir was yelling from somewhere. A small boy with dark, skinny legs was sitting on the front steps, staring at me and my futile attempt to scatter the flies with one hand in astonishment. I shook my head accepting defeat and entered the dark place unwillingly, pulling Siavash in behind. Seeing our shadows, Vladimir started to run up the stairs again; we after him.

“Come, come. Tourists, locals, everyone here tonight,” he said, out of breath, with a thick Spanish accent. “Drinks—eh—beer, mojito. Mojito, ha? Good, good.”

Splash of our slippers. The metal handrails were hot, the steps all pink-colored and broken. Then

we started to hear the noise of a fan and a man's laughter, whose shadow appeared at the door frame on top of the stairs. Vladimir said something to him in Spanish. The man instantly turned to us, shook our hands with a wide smile and introduced himself as Ernesto. He was a short, young man in a red shirt with beamy black eyes, constantly blinking. And every now and then, he wiped the sweat off the back of his neck with a piece of cloth that dangled in his hand.

"Señorita, eh, from where?"

"Canada."

Vladimir raised both arms to the air: "Oh, Canada, Canada—eh, Toronto, Quebec. But..." He touched his face with his hand as he stared at mine and continued undecidedly: "but Cubana! Cubana!"

"No, no, born in Iran," said Siavash, realizing his gesture, smiling.

"Ah, Irani. Irani in Canada," Vladimir's face shone with a wider smile.

He then turned to Ernesto who seemed lost and said something in Spanish after which they both shook their heads and laughed. Vladimir patted Siavash on the back and said: "Me Irani friend, good man, good," and raised his arm as if he was referring to someone from the distant past. He was probably one of their annual customers, though. He then came closer.

"Me, eh, want to go Canada," he whispered.

"Amigo, me, small child? Sick—eh, he to go Canada, ha? But amigo, listen to me, Cuba..."

He paused and looked around. Siavash and I had bent forward unconsciously to better hear his

quiet whisper. He came even closer this time, moving his finger in front of our eyes to emphasize.

“Cuba a big prison,” he said, and moved away holding his breath. His eyes had expanded, and their whites were showing. But before he moved far, he put his arm around Siavash’s shoulders and dragged him to the other side of the room. I did not follow them.

But before I had a chance to look around the dark entrance, Ernesto, who had remained silent until then, had grabbed my wrist and drawn me toward the bar and the clean mojito glasses that were sitting in a perfect straight line on the counter. He pointed to the skinny-legged metal tables and the stools around them.

“Señorita, this is cafe, good?” he said.

I didn’t reply. I was immersed in the colorful paintings on the walls; black women in red flowery dresses that hardly framed their immense bosoms and buttocks. From the few glassless windows, a pale light entered the bar, which made the empty place look emptier. My blisters were now burning, and the constant thirst was coming back. Ernesto stood in front of me and swinging his arms in the air, with badly broken English, was trying to tell me again about the night life of the cafe that the tourists and Cubans, everyone; that mojito and beer and...

I interrupted him. “Señor, agua? Agua?” I said, pointing to my lips.

Suddenly he paused, gathered his arms and bent forward. “Sorry, but no water,” he said apologetically. “But, eh, beer? Beer, mojito...” His arms started to swing again, but he didn’t know what else to say. “Ramba, salsa...”

Then he snapped his fingers and took one step toward me.

“Señorita, Señorita, dance?”

The sharp smell of his cologne entering my nose, I took a step back. He took a step toward me, smiling. His short legs moving forward and back, in the quiet of the cafe, the ridiculous splash of his slippers echoing, and the dirty piece of cloth dangling in his tanned hand, drooping.

I sighed, turning my eyes away from him and gazed about the dusty cafe. Other than a middle-aged couple, who were sitting on one of the tables near the windows and were drinking beer, no one was in the bar, and the wheezing of a fly that passed by now and then was the only noise that cut the tiring monotone mantra of the fan. A white statue of José Martí with a drooped head sat beside a dirty flag and a dying plant in the corner. A breath of hot air traveled with the breeze of the fan, and the humidity that followed was unbearable. My mouth was dry, and I was getting melancholic.

We were not used to the heat yet. In the afternoons when the sun got this sharp, we took ourselves to one of the touristy cafes that had the luxury of air conditioning and, except for their employees, not even the footprints of a Cuban had not touched their front doors. We would sit there and order Cuban coffee, embarrassed that we could not sit on the hot benches of the park with the locals and drink those one-for-a-peso Slushies sold by the vendors on the side of the road. Once he was cool and comfortable, Siavash would take out his dissertation sheets one by one, a Marxian analysis of a Marxist political-economy. For a couple of hours, he'd edit in

silence or put his fingers in his hair and stare at the cup of coffee. But then his pen crawled to the margins, drawing circles aimlessly, or he took tiny notes that no one else could read. Eventually he would drop the pen, fold his sheet meticulously into a paper hat and put it on top of his head. He sat there with his arms crossed and stared at me without blinking until I was forced to drop my pen and close my notebook.

“Whatcha writing there so fast?” he would ask.

“The same you’re writing,” I’d reply immediately.

He’d shrug, and as he got up to order ice cream, his paper hat fell off his head. It was a while since the last time I had laughed that hard. Maybe the Cuban climate really was doing something.

I drew aside from Ernesto, who, even though he had sweat dripping from his forehead, had now added hand movements to his rhythm and crawled to the nearest window in hope of the slightest breeze of fresh air. My mouth was drier than a desert. But the humidity was even worse outside, and my lungs got filled up with heavy air that I could not exhale. Nonetheless, I stood there for a little while, for on the roofs my eyes had caught sight of those bonny antennas that I had not seen since we had left Tehran. I could hear the splash of Ernesto’s slippers behind me, this time in synchrony with a clap. He was calling out to me, out of breath, to see their black-market cigars that were much cheaper than the legal ones.

“I don’t smoke,” I said with a sigh, not taking my eyes off the flat roofs. We did smoke, lately hashish, on the roof by the cold straw of the cooler that sweat in the summer heat, like our moist bodies

in the midst of those lovemakings on the roof, hasty from the fear of roaches and *commite*¹.

A faint smile was appearing on my face. There was in the square of the roof up there an absolute freedom. And the rest down there, well, concrete; only decorated with string lights of the Revolution Anniversary and, occasionally, the flags of *Ashura*.

A nagging feeling inside wanted to ask Ernesto what they did on the roofs of Havana, but I knew that as soon as I turned around, he would bring out another worthless thing from his bottomless counter for sale and would stare at my pale lips with those goddamn hopeful eyes, no matter how many times he had heard “no” from them.

I didn't know where he had gotten his futile hope from that in the silence of this hellish crypt with his foolish dance...or Siavash, with that unbearable fake smile that he had glued on his face for the past year and now after all had thought that maybe the Cuban climate will do something for me, and a miracle would happen.

What I feared was exactly that the goddamn “miracle” was taking place again.... Seventy-nine days of every day waking up with the dread of blood and every time on that 79th day.... The image had always been the same: I'm sitting there on the bed motionless, staring at the white of the wall, as Siavash would say, like our melancholic poet Kasrai². There is pain inside me, not of loss anymore, but of disillusionment. The pain of the vain hope a prisoner

¹ *Commite* is the special guard or committee that deals with what is considered public “non-Islamic” behavior in Iran, such as public display of affection by an unmarried couple.

² It is told of the Iranian Marxist poet, Kasrai, that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, he remained in his room for two years and stared at the cracks on the walls.

has for freedom until the last moment before his execution. They have done it all for me. Votive stews from grandma, thick and sweet electuaries from Mashad³ prepared with holy Zamzam water imported from Mecca, prayers from the Imam Saleh mosque. It does not happen. A thousand times I've been meaning to say to him, but he stands in front of me with that fake smile he has kept on his face for the past year. I can see a line of hope in between his eyebrows and cannot say no. I take the pill and swallow without water. Caressing my belly, I believe again that perhaps this time.... Alas, on the 79th day the fetus is aborted and blood sheds; the color of red Normandy poppies.

At night when we get back from the hospital, I pretend to be asleep on the bed and can hear him weep in the bathroom. Once more everyone rises up; tarot cards and talismans, bitter decoctions, holy daggers, banned books, manifestos, team-houses, reddened shrouds-Cut. Taking one hundreds. The image seemed to be always the same, and I was already too tired of it. I had come here for what? "Jose Marti's statue like an image of sorrow in the frame of Ernesto's torn slippers"; "A cupboard full of antibiotics in my house and the corpse of Vladimir's infant on the bed"; "My aborted fetuses in mass produced blackberry-jam jars, especially purchased from Farahzad⁴." Carelessly written notes by me, stamped with the round coffee-cup bottoms.

³ Mashad is a religious city in Iran that hosts the temple of a *Shia'* imam.

⁴ Farahzad is a district in Tehran famous for its homemade fruit-leathers and jams.

Ernesto's voice had gotten closer again, but it seemed he had exhausted all his futile attempts at English and had switched to Spanish. The breath captive in my lungs had not come out yet, and I was getting dizzy. I felt his hand on my shoulder.

"Señorita!" and his face with a wide smile appeared from the corner of my eyes. As I turned to him, he jumped back and still talking fast-paced started to dance again, with arms swinging around a revolving head encircling a bonny torso that every once in awhile showed from the open top buttons of his red shirt, sweat dripping from his chest, darkening the red. He was so out of breath that I thought he was going to faint. His words had turned into a delirious muttering that as hard as I tried, I couldn't understand. I was thirsty, and his foolishness was driving me mad. I just couldn't anymore.

I had already started to walk toward the door when he suddenly stood in my way, blocking me, and as I, grabbing his collar, impatiently went to push him aside, his legs twisted, and he clung from my shoulder. He was clenching my arm and couldn't catch his breath. I grabbed his arm, pulling him up. He raised his head toward me. He was smiling, but meeting his eyes, I suddenly came up against such endless frustration that the finite reality of his smile shattered. Through a limitless tunnel we entered a space outside of time, a place beyond the noise of the fan and flies.

He was about to say something again, but I interrupted.

"Let it go already, it's over." I said. "Come, let's sit down and chat for a while."

My voice echoed in the silence that we had suddenly entered. I could see he was shocked. Astonished, he stared for a while, his eyes jumping around over my eyes in search of an answer. Then letting go of my arm, he took a leap and walked backward for a while in utter disbelief. But then, with a sigh of relief, he collapsed on a chair behind him, and his head drooped sideways on his neck. A hand fan with a badly painted picture of Ché on it, which he was most likely going to sell me, slipped from his fingers and fell on the floor. He stared at the floor for a while and then at a cigarette butt buried within the ashes in the ashtray. He didn't make a move, and I just stood there hesitantly in a deafening silence.

"Over," he said finally without looking at me, in that language which we both comprehended in the timeless space. I sighed in relief, finally being able to breathe; leaped forward, pulled the chair beside him and sat down.

"Yep, over," I said, pushing the cigarette butt further into the ashes with a finger and leaned forward to catch his eyes. But when he looked up, his face had become so pale and cold, without a trace of that wide smile that I couldn't bear his gaze and turned my head.

Outside of us, time had stopped, and others had remained motionless in their spots. Looking around I could see Vladimir far in the corner of the other room. He was standing beside Siavash with his arms suspended in the air and his mouth left hanging in the middle of an unfinished sentence. Now that I took a good look at him, I could see that he was not middle-aged, as I had thought. Layer after layer of

sunburn over days of running after tourists had made his face age, and only his blue eyes had kept their lucidity. His shirt was glued to his sweaty body, and I could see that he was very skinny. How his insistence on showing us the bar had annoyed me earlier!

“Your friend Vladimir’s really got your back. He dragged us all the way from the theater in blistered feet,” I said, smiling, desperately trying to break the silence again. Ernesto didn’t answer. In the chance he had gotten outside of time, he had closed his eyes and was taking a nap. I had cooled down in the meanwhile, and I wished I could have one of his cigars now. The trance that had taken over Ernesto was gradually surrounding me also, but I wished to speak. I tapped on his cold hand on the table.

“Wake up. I wanna tell you a story.” I said. He opened one of his eyes with effort, still not saying a word.

Once a Cuban told me about a time when they were left without water in Sierra Maestra for several days, and the sunlight, sharp and continuous, was the only thing coming down from the sky. One morning a couple of comrades took up a tinplate pan and to bear their thirst and pass the time, one used it as a drum and the other danced. Boom, boom. boom, boom. Like the African dances, back bent and arms up like an eagle ready to strike. Their dance had woken everybody up, and he, too, had gotten warmed up and went after them. A little he danced, a little he sang with a dry throat, sounding more like a howling wolf. How, how. How, how. They were so absorbed by the dance and the rhythm that they did not notice how far they had moved from the tents and how fate led them to that abandoned sealed well.

Now I have seen the well myself, in the Hotel Nacional museum. They called it the "well of miracle," and they actually had the summary of this same story. It said that it was true that the well was sealed. However, its circular walls above the ground had created a deep pit that had contained the rain water, and this water had rescued that squad during the drought.

"And this is how the story ends."

I waited for him to say something, but he had closed his eyes again and was quiet.

"It's a good story, isn't it?" I said. "I believe it, do you?" He smirked with his eyes still closed.

"If one does not believe his own stories," he said, "what should one believe then?"

"That *is* true," I said, laughing louder than I intended, "except that sometimes *others* write the stories."

I shifted in my chair, put my finger in the ashes and stirred the cigarette butts.

"Now that you're hanging," I said, pointlessly laughing again, "let me read you another story." And I took out from my pocket a rumpled piece of paper that I had been carrying with me for the past few days. He opened one eye again.

"I heard about Mirza Kuchak Khan that in the year 1970 A.D., he and a company of his comrades had pitched tents in the woods of Siah-Kal and had recently confiscated ammunitions from the Siah-Kal treasury, prepared for combat against the king of time; a king lost the reign of his kingdom and slave to his earthly desires. It is said that they traveled to the villages nearby and taught the written and spoken word to peasants and collected food as wage. One day during afternoon prayers, a disheveled dervish passed

by, begging for a piece of bread. Mirza, who had not a dirham in his possession, did have a carnelian ring, a precious souvenir from a beloved friend, took the ring out without disrupting his prayer and bestowed it upon the dervish.

“Whoever works righteousness benefits his own soul; whoever works evil, it is against his own soul: nor is thy Lord even unjust to His servants.” (The Holy Koran, 41:46)⁵

And I laughed again louder than I intended, but this time my laughter echoed such in the absolute silence that I had to cover my mouth.

I put the rumpled piece of paper with my own handwriting on it on the table in front of him.

“You can take it,” I said.

But Ernesto was deep in sleep and not responding to my taps anymore. His skin was cold and gray. I picked up the paper again and, folding it in half meticulously, put it in front of myself. Then I closed my eyes and listened to my breathing until a sedating trance came over me, but as soon as I fell asleep, the fan started again and I woke up.

Ernesto was standing by the window. He was pointing to the ceiling with a handfan with a picture

⁵ Three distinct historical events are confused in this narrative:

- a) It is said of Imam Ali, the Prophet’s son-in-law, that once during prayer a beggar passed by him asking for food and, without disrupting his prayer, Imam Ali took out his precious carnelian ring and gave it to the beggar.
- b) Mirza Kuchak Khan (1880-1920), founder of the 1914 revolutionary constitutionalist movement of Gilan in Northern Iran. His body was decapitated by Reza Khan.
- c) Siah-Kal: a forest in Northern Iran, where a group of socialist revolutionaries, inspired by the Cuban revolution, gathered to uproot a socialist movement against the aristocracy in 1970. Most were found and executed early on by Mohammad Reza Shad, the son of Reza Khan and the last shah of Iran. The few who survived later founded the Organization of Iranian People’s *Fadaei* Guerrillas.

of Ché on it and was saying something in Spanish that I did not understand. I got up from the chair. The heat was suffocating. I looked for Siavash. In his place beside Vladimir, I could now see a broken statue of Hercules, probably another left behind from the colonial times, and he was nowhere to be found. I couldn't wait any longer. I ran to the door and desperately trying to show them both now coming toward me with my hand gestures begging that I am hot and I can't anymore. I found my way down the stairs. On the door steps, where the small boy was sitting before, now was a broad-shouldered man with tattooed arms. His gaze was following me running insanely, in wonder. I paused near him; on his arm was a tattoo of Ché with the beret. He smiled at me.

I stepped out and puked right there. Siavash was calling me from somewhere. I was probably pregnant again! I could not smile but hopelessly thought that maybe this time.

The splash of slippers on the stairs banged on my head like the sharp spears of the bare sun.