

The Night of the Cubana

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She had persuaded her husband, uncle and neighbour to accompany her to the restaurant-bar-cum-disco that her friend and colleague Donny had invited her to, to join him and his sort-of-Cubana-girlfriend there, “for a memorable evening my dear,” was the way he put it, in that Oxbridge intonation, still properly in place after 40 years living and teaching in Britain’s erstwhile colony, the US of A. Uncle had freshly arrived from Islamabad, en route to Texas to visit his daughter and son-in-law, but being a bon vivant and chafing at Islamic restrictions even at 60, he wanted to party. In fact, the whole evening had been cooked up in his honour – Donny, having been warned of uncle’s nefarious intents, had arranged to bring along his sort-of-girlfriend’s sort-of-girlfriend... an additional enticement to whet Paki uncle’s carnal appetites should the need arise, as it very well might, given uncle’s own stories of his colourful past and his expressed present desires for “fun, my dear niece, funfunfun... life too short, and your favourite uncle is at the top of his game, ha ha,” this, accompanied with a nod, nod, wink wink, say no more leer, and the niece, floored by his sexist charm and crushing hugs that took her breath away, silencing her feminist critiques, “of course, uncle dearest, you shall have whatever you wish!” In his gregarious presence, she became simply the niece who wanted to please her favourite uncle, give him a good time, as she always wanted to please everyone... even though she was beginning to realise at forty that you can please only some of the people some of the time, try as she might....

Neighbour Maha was like her name... a Persian moon, pretty in an aging, Ann Margaret sort of way; Shaheena had not been able to figure out whether her hair was naturally blonde or dyed, given that Maha was Iranian, the product of an eastern culture of dark tresses and swarthy looks, Shaheena had thought, adopting Hollywood stereotypes about the way all “Moslems” were supposed to look – but then, Maha also had blue eyes, so there... and she was a doll, really, but though single, not into men that much (or women for that matter)... she hadn’t had a boyfriend in years, which Shaheena found surprising, given her

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neighbour's good looks and warm personality. "Oh well, it's really what needs to be done," Maha would say matter-of-factly. "Why?" her more romantically-inclined Pakistani-American neighbour would pipe up from time to time, impatient at Maha's arms-length attitude toward men she'd seen looking at her with interest at cookouts and Christmas parties she'd attended at Maha's home over the 5 or so years she'd known her. Yes, Maha the Iranian Muslim was sure to celebrate Xmas, ornament-laden tree and all, but never seemed to know when Ramadan rolled around or Choti Eid or Barri Eid... "Well, you know, I am descended from a French branch which was Christian" she'd proffer as explanation to Shaheena's occasional inquisitions on the matter. But why the no-men rule? Clearly this had nothing to do with Maha's being a pious Muslim woman not wanting to consort with men! She insisted she was fine with it, a rule not of her own making, but one she was happy to go along with. Her pearl, her joonam daughter who was ten at the time, did not want to share her divorcee mummy with anyone, least of all a man who wasn't her own daddy.

So when uncle arrived for a week-long visit, Shaheena, or Cheena as she was known, did not go out of her way to introduce him to her neighbour, knowing he'd be out of luck. But uncle dearest upon meeting Ms. Moon at a casual barbeque Cheena invited her over for one eve, insisted she be invited to the soiree being planned for his enjoyment in the city that weekend. Not a problem, the more the merrier, thought Cheena, especially as her hubby might get into one of his moods given that Donny was going to be there; Haani, her hubby, didn't like Donny, and Shaheena was sure it was because he'd found that postcard Donny had sent her... silly little thing like that... poor Donny, a scapegoat for Haani's utterly misplaced jealousy, at least this time. "Poor me too," thought Shaheena self-pityingly... this is so unfair..." She felt her feminist credentials (yesyes she was a feminist in her mind, never mind her role as pimp for uncle dearest) – being called into question each time Haani reacted this way to her perceived betrayals of some traditional credo of living she had tried to challenge all of her married life, obviously rather unsuccessfully. So yes, definitely, the bigger the crowd, the less the chances of any unpleasantness... feeling ashamed of her own fearfulness, she quickly turned to *mamujan*, "but uncle dearest..." she warned him. "My friend Donny is bringing this other woman along just for you, so mind you don't just focus on Ann Margaret..." And uncle laughed, that cigarette-heavy laugh of his, "dear niece, don't you know your uncle by now? The more women, the better for me.... I can handle them all, ha ha..." Cheena knew then that she loved him. An uncle after her own heart. Suave, fun-loving, heartbreaker of women, single for the third time in his life, kids grown, just living life to the fullest. She wondered how her love could co-exist with envy, that too of a lifestyle her feminist self found abhorrent... could she be really as messed up as her hubby always accused her of?

“I can’t believe I’m here,” Shaheena said aloud to herself, startling the passenger to her left, who thought she was speaking to her. “Sorry, just mumbling to myself,” Cheena offered sheepishly by way of explanation, though none was required. “Must be my guilty conscience.” This time she managed not to voice her thoughts, racing higgledy-piggledy through her overwrought brain, feverish with images of herself dancing lustily away at hookab-bars with strange Arab men she’d surely meet during her weeklong writers’ retreat in this ancient city where old and new worlds existed simultaneously, and where downriver queens like Hatshepsut once ruled over men. Donny would have loved to come here, the past suddenly intruding on her present. Odd that only a week ago Donny’s other so-called girlfriend – not the Cubana but the Spaniard, the woman Cheena now knew as her best friend back home in the States – had been roaming these same shabby streets, in thrall to the once-upon grandeur and might that was ancient Egypt.

“And of course, I must invite that other great Cubana – my colleague who thinks she looks like Rita Hayworth” Haani groaned at Cheena’s expanding guestlist. “You know I’m only agreeing to go along because I like your uncle,” he said, as she blew him a coy kiss, despising her own girlie role-playing. “I know darling... I’m so grateful. But really, I thought you liked Pamela, and her husband or boyfriend or whatever Bill is, too....” Cheena trailed off as Haani interrupted with a sardonic aside to uncle, who was blowing smoke-rings on their newly-constructed deck.

“Your niece Shaheena has this knack of picking up the whackiest characters and then insisting I like them when I simply tolerate them for her sake. Like this Pamela and her Bill... for one thing she is this huge Russian....” “Well she’s half Cuban,” Cheena protested. “Ok, ok,” opined Haani, “that may be, but her manly demeanour is that of a Russian *babushka*, and the funny thing is she thinks she’s this stunning beauty and amazing wit....” “Stop being mean,” Cheena butted in, “she is smart and is working on this spy novel which sounds really interesting and very Marxist.... Stop!” – before Haani could really lay into her with his send up of Shaheena the would-be Marxist-who has-a-hard-time-making-ends-meet-on-200K-a year.... “Acha bhai, she is a little weird, granted, but c’mon, she is interesting with her stories and theories about Cuba as a failed communist state... which of course I disagree with” this Cheena proffered hastily in the hopes Haani wouldn’t pounce on it and begin his long tirade on her “fake” communism and worse, her total misunderstanding of Cuba and of Marxist theory and praxis in general. He had a way of backing Cheena into a corner... maybe because she let him. Uncle was beginning to look vaguely bored so Cheena hastened to add, as a diversion for her own thoughts as much as for uncle’s benefit, “Pamela is really attractive uncle, don’t listen to Haani...” glaring at her husband which had no effect whatsoever on him. Au contraire, he gleefully continued warning uncle about the dreadful bores he was to meet the next night, and how his niece was such a

hypocrite; uncle chuckled delightedly, adding in his own ribbing of Cheena, though his was much more good-natured than Haani's....

So then as usual, Cheena and Haani began to bicker about being late arriving at the venue for a night of fun and Cheena realised she'd better shut up if she wanted to stop the scene from turning really ugly. Haani could be a nasty motherfucker, passive-aggressive as he was; didn't care two hoots that uncle and Maha were also in the car. "Running to Donny Dunbar are we? Well well, this may not be the mudbath he wanted you to...." "Peace, Haani, enough... please," she hated the pleading note that had crept into her voice in spite of her anger at his nasty habit of humiliating her in front of others by bringing up past foibles. Luckily he stopped to curse at the driver in front of him who veered left without any warning. Uncle and Maha seemed engrossed, thankfully, in a conversation about lottery tickets and chances of hitting the jackpot. Uncle being an inveterate gambler, was trying to convince Maha of her folly in pinning her hopes of achieving wealth by buying a dozen Lotto tickets a week; she was having none of his statistical analysis which had clearly not prevented him from continuing to gamble himself. "You forget my dear," uncle said squeezing Maha's shoulders, "my form of gambling requires some skill." Never one to back off, Maha insisted, ever so slightly but firmly pulling away from his shoulder-lock, "so does mine; I just have to pick the right numbers!" And we all laughed, even Haani, who by now had found a parking spot and was feeling manly having honked and cursed away another contender for the coveted space.

"Why, this is just a dive," Cheena's heart sank, "and look at these ugly formica-covered tables," she thought, turning up her nose, never mind her Commie ideals. Donny, sitting next to the woman he'd been banging for the past three years since his Puerto Rican wife had thrown him out over yet another marital infraction she'd caught him in – waved Cheena and her party over, looking a bit glum. Cheena understood immediately she'd have to assume her usual role of party-sparker, if this evening was to be saved from its sad seediness. She saw that Donny's bushy mane of graying curls had been tamed into the ponytail which had undoubtedly been his passport to many a bush-land, his black-rimmed spectacles making the pallor of his skin appear more sickly than she'd ever noticed before. The buxom but very fit-looking woman seated next to him – or rather, draped over him – wore her hair a very yellow shade of blonde in a fashionably short n' spiky cut that made her look rather like David Bowie. Her legs – one of which was thrown across Donny's thigh – were encased in some sort of black skintight sheath – and as everyone made to slide over and sit down around the two tables pushed together to make up a tight seating arrangement for 10 – though there would only be 9 all told in the end – all eyes were on The Leg. The Cubana – who introduced herself as Marisel and tried shaking hands while maintaining her pose – pretended not to notice,

and kept right on sitting that way, smiling with an expression that was a cross between a cheeky delight at being noticed, and something akin to panicked shiftiness as her eyes darted here and there without actually holding anyone's gaze. It didn't take Cheena long to figure out the cause of Donny and La Cubana's dis-ease. As uncle, Maha and she slid over in that order on the inside of the table, with Haani parking himself next to the Cubana on the opposite side, and Donny occupying the head of the table, Cheena realised that Pamela and Bill had been sitting the whole time before their arrival on the far end of the table from Donny and Marisel. As Cheena greeted the two of them – Pamela holding her cigarillo aloft between freshly-painted nails in red, her violet eyes (and Cheena didn't care what Haani thought, the eyes at least were pretty striking), expressing a mocking hauteur beneath her Brooke Shields-like brows, Bill seated at the foot of the table sporting a hat tipped jauntily on his squarish head – she realised they'd all stumbled onto the scene of Class Struggle 101.

Pamela, the high-brow writer and scholar of History was pitted against Marisel, the hairdresser, for the title of La Cubana. "Pero, I like to dance and dreenk after I close my shaap..." fawning all over Donny, Marisel continued in her slightly nasal, thickly-accented voice, "and I love Daanny becaaz he's not liiike a teepical maatherfucking griingo, are you mi amor..." she trailed off with her lips jutting out in a pout, realising she might be offending some "higher class" scholarly sensibilities with her coarse tongue. She knew at least Cheena and Pamela were academics since they were Donny's colleagues at the university where he taught across the river. Donny, refusing to be drawn into her amorous orbit composed alternately of endearments and cuss-words, began a conversation about the latest cricket match between Pakistan and England with Haani, that had ended in an inglorious defeat for Pakistan just two days earlier. Uncle was engrossed in Maha and ordering drinks for the two of them, while Pamela suddenly announced to the table loudly with a sound between a grunt and a guffaw, "well, drinking and dancing without a care for the morrow or worrying about self-improvement and the progress of the people is precisely what led to the Cuban Revolution... which was meant to help those on the lower end of the class spectrum rise to lives made better with education..." Ouch. Cheena looked over warily to the other end of the table to see what reaction this comment had elicited, that is if the "other" Cubana had even understood the intended slight. Cheena somewhat shamefacedly realised her own snobbery... the dumb blond stereotype mixed in with class prejudice was hard to shake off. Marisel started nonchalantly adjusting her skintight blouse to further show off her cleavage, clearly a sexier sight than Pamela's rather shapeless bulky frame. Donny made some purring noises in her direction as she announced she was bored sitting around, with too much taaalk, no aaaction... "honeeey, c'mon, the DJ ees playing grrreat salsa moosic, lets all daance." So, no reaction to the insult, except Haani who decided to throw a comment in the

direction of Pamela before getting up reluctantly to join the dancing party, since he wasn't fond of "showing publicly standing up what one desires to do privately, lying down." Cheena recalled thinking that was such a clever formulation in the early days of their courtship, even though she herself adored public displays of everything. "Cuba needed a revolution all right... but despite the 100 percent literacy and great healthcare, the country is a mess, and most Cubans would like to leave and live in the US if they could," stated Haani matter-of-factly. "Yes, where we can have freedom, and enjoy these fun life..." Marisel was clearly thrilled at what she took to be a personal defense from Haani, oh she wasn't as dumb as she looked, and started batting her lashes at him and swaying provocatively to the music. Undeterred, Pamela lashed back, "I don't know that I would consider struggling to meet rent on a hairdresser's salary freedom, or," raising her left eyebrow, "dressing like a two-bit..." Luckily for everyone, Marisel, Donny and Haani were all gyrating to the music by then, and no one except Cheena heard the catty remark, drowned out in the blaring music. She made vague clucking noises meant to signal agreement with Pamela – she was, after all was said and done, an equal-opportunity pacifier, wanting everyone to have a good time, that's all. "Never Gonna Give You Up..." was pulsating from the amp over in the Bar area which had a little wooden dance floor in front of it. Cheena pulled Pamela and Bill up and had them laughing by the time they all got to the dance floor as she sang along with Rick Astley... never gonna let u down, never gonna run around and desert you... never gonna tell a lie....

Donny pulled her over to where he was dancing to the side, while Marisel now had her legs astride Haani's right thigh and looked for all the world as though she were riding a horse. Haani, hater of dance, disco and drink, seemed to be enjoying himself just fine. Cheena, trying to act cooler than she felt, started moving in lockstep with Donny whose breath reeked of Johnny Walker every time he brought his face close to her to try and say something, but she kept right on smiling while thinking this is disgusting, what a stinky smell and why am I doing this, trying not to look over in the direction of her husband and *that* woman. Before she knew it, La Cubana with her tight tight plastic pants was screaming... "oooooh look, mi amiga has finally arrived," and immediately left off dancing to go grab uncle who was in the middle of jumping up and down most inelegantly for a 60 year old with Maha on the dance floor and sweating profusely in the process. "Viviana, thees is handsome uncle of Daany's friend; he ees from Pakistan and he ees traveling all over the United Estates." The song ended and in the few seconds of silence all one could hear was La Cubana screeching at the top of her lungs, "And he wants a companion to go weeth heem to Las Vegas, pero ees so, si?" She lowered her voice realising the music had stopped. She winked at uncle, and lowering her voice, said still loud enough for all nearby to hear, "my friend is sooo much fun... you won't regret taking

her weeth you on your treeep.” While uncle stood there surveying the woman thus introduced to him, who was plain and short and round, giving him all the power to objectify and reject her if he so chose (he did), Cheena began to feel sick. As the “Man in the Mirror” started pulsating over the speakers, Marisel grabbed her and began the crotch-massage on Cheena’s thigh, now extending her tongue over her lips. Before Cheena could pull away from the leg-hold, Marisel had leaned over to her ear and was yelling, “I would laave to invite you and your husband over to plaay with Daany and me... both of yoo are soo cute...” All Cheena could do was smile at the Cubana foolishly, playing along, pretending, pretending this was all perfectly acceptable behaviour in her book... she who held Nin and Hemingway up as models to her students, felt waves of nausea ebbing and flowing, the air thick with smoke coming her way from the other Cubana, Bill and Uncle, never mind the dozen other folks who had squeezed onto the tiny floor and were rubbing shoulders with her and everyone else, boozing and blowing smoke rings everywhere... the no-smoking laws were a thing of the future. She managed to wrench free just in time, racing to get to the bathroom before it all came welling out of her.

“You know my dear,” said Donny conspiratorially to her over their annual birthday lunch date at the Hudson House some months later. “Your dear hubby who pretends to be so above board and always keen to bust you,” Cheena wondered where this was going, and felt something besides curiosity, something akin to a panicky feeling, rising up inside herself as she kept smiling flirtatiously at Donny, managing to state in the coolest possible voice, “Yes, darling, what about dear Mr. Ahmed?” They always referred to her husband as “Mr. Ahmed.” Made him seem more distant and disconnected with herself, somehow. Her writerly, more dangerous self; the ab-normal self she so desperately wanted to cultivate, liked this compartmentalising of her self, this gap between what was, and what could be, depending upon who she was with and where at any given moment. But the split subject theory worked only when it involved her own subjectivity – what was this about Mr. Ahmed’s hidden Hyde? “My dear,” thoroughly enjoying himself now, Donny continued as he brought his head with the lion mane closer to her face, peering shortsightedly over the rim of his thick-paned spectacles, “your husband,” lowering his voice just a tad, enunciating every word in his best David Frost impression, “well, I don’t know how to put this more delicately Cheenaa,” stressing the last syllable, “Marisel told me,” again, he stopped for effect, but of course Cheena knew better than to show any but the most cursory of interest in the tid-bit, wondering how salacious the impending revelation could possibly be. “Out with it, my love, out with it,” she countered with her chop-chop lets get on with it voice, “you know I must dash in a few, can’t be late picking up *mon fils*...” She thought it would be a good idea to wade back toward mundane waters. Donny straightened up

with a sigh, realising the charming afternoon was drawing to a close despite his best efforts at prolonging it and his own fantasies about what-ifs and possible could-be's. Stirring three cubes of sugar into his cappuccino he announced, "Mr. Ahmed had a hard-on the size of a zucchini, my dear. I must tell you, Marisel was very turned on by him, and it appears the feeling was quite mutual."

The crême brulee she had been sharing with Donny suddenly lost its appeal, and she shoved the remainder over in his direction. "Darling," she drawled in her best pussy-cat imitation, "do finish it off." Lest she appear too hasty, she stretched her arm up on the curved armature of the booth on which they were cosily seated, and, rolling her big hazel-brown eyes, remarked, "well, my dear Donny, just like a man, don't you think? To be aroused by a woman grinding her you-know-what into his thigh... what did you expect? I trust you weren't offended?" turning the tables on him now. "Hardly my dear," was the not quite the satisfying answer she was hoping for.

"You know I'm not the jealous type, but given Mr. Ahmed's possessive proclivities, I must confess his behaviour that night surprised me." He gave her another sharp glance, as if to assess whether she too had been surprised by this revelation that the man who claimed fidelity as the rockbed of any "true" relationship, and who was always castigating Cheena for her perceived lack of it, was as capable as any other of being aroused by someone other than his life partner. "I don't see what the big deal is," she began, noticing her voice sounding irritable now, even as she willed it to remain cheerily nonchalant. "Being aroused is one thing," even though truth be told, Cheena had never expected it from a man who she was convinced had eyes only for her, much as she detested the scrutinising gaze when it pried open all her secrets. And she was, admittedly, rather shocked at his arousal by a low-class Cubana "puta"... hmmm... Mr. Phd betrayed by his Penis... as she finished off, "actually doing something about it is another, isn't it?" Cheena ended by smiling sweetly at Donny. As she paid up the bill, since it was her birthday treat to Donny, he leaned over to kiss her thank you on her hand, his gaze lingering admiringly on her finely-tapered manicured fingers, the nails painted an autumnal shade of scarlet. She'd forgotten he'd been a bridge-player. "Ah, but my dear, Mr. Ahmed gave her his card, asking her to call him sometime." That Donny, always with an ace up his sleeve. What could Cheena do but roll her eyes again and suggest laughingly, not meaning a word of it, "well that settles it then; we really will have to do that foursome Marisel suggested as she plastered her tight sweaty body all over me that night!" And Donny, his eyes lighting up now, came out with "You know she adored you... so this could be a lot of fun..." Time to wave goodbye, hastily, hastily, hasta manana, later alligator, mommy duties beckoning, damn the husband, who cares, a foursome indeed, ha ha... poor stupid lonely booze-addled pimped out disgusting Donny, a wannabe hustler, such a shame, can't even be a respectable academic, so much for his

Oxford pedigree, honestly, thinking I would ever stoop so low... shameshamepoppyshame.... Haani you snickeringsonfoabitch... lalalalala... she sang along to Baby You're No Good on the fast ride home.

As she lay in her bed in the seedy little hotel on a shady street in downtown Cairo, a place she'd picked at random on the net without doing any homework and now realising she'd been penny wise but safety-foolish, Cheena knew this was the end of something. The man she had been foolish enough to sign up as her guide, had turned sullen and aggressive at her teasing refusal. Good God, she was pushing fifty, and still playing games that always, but always, turned dangerous. The enormous weight of the half-century number startled her into what was or not, a reverie, maybe a revelation, she couldn't be sure. The only thing she could be sure of was that she had heard the call of the muezzin, before the Dream settled upon her, or maybe it was her life that was the dream, la vida es sueno....

The call, insistent, shrill, powerfully male, has penetrated my dreams, woken me up she imagines, humming....

*the muezzin is dancing, on the radiator grille
The shریف don't like it, rock the casbah, rock the casbah...*

She remembered thinking as she fell into a semi-slumberous state, the guide has a very sweet face, his eyes flattered by long curly lashes a girl would die for....

She is with a new colleague on campus, a gay man with queer icons pasted proudly on his office door. Prominent among these are a couple of black and white photographs of Montgomery Clift, so shamelessly, joyfully flaunting his beauty, a beauty that would be destroyed fairly early in his life by a freak accident, a beauty she associated with her youth, growing up in a pre-fundamentalist Pakistan where teenage girls could still go in giggly groups to the cinema to see him steal the show as a man unafraid to cry in the war film, From Here to Eternity. Of course, she had not known then that Clift, her heartthrob, was gay, as she had not known many other things besides.... And so, she was suddenly, inexplicably, in her gay colleague's company, only, he wasn't big and bear-like in her dream; he had been transformed into someone else, handsome, svelte, a pretty-boy quality enveloping his slight, boyish form. They start chatting and laughing, and then she finds herself in his house by the sea, sort of like the big, concrete houses in Karachi, her husband's city, a city Cairo reminded her of twenty-five years ago.... They are sitting cross-legged, on the carpeted floor, engrossed in conversation, flirting, flirting. She has been lured into a sense of safety, he is gay after all, but then she feels the challenge, she finds herself asking him nakedly about sex, just as the man who had brought her to the hotel had asked her after a long day in the desert, and elicited only a tired refusal. But the man of her dreams is making her excited, against her better judgment. His smile is sweetly erotic, or maybe sardonic, she can't be sure; she can feel her body hot under the covers, her mind agitated, confused, elated. He is teasing me now, mocking her pretended innocence, although she feels her naiveté to be real, it has always worked as a charm in past

encounters; but what is this, his teasing has taken on an insistent quality, they are kissing now, erotically-charged feathery kisses, the kind where you trace another's lips with your tongue, then he pulls back and mockingly demands what makes her think gay men don't also want women, it's just about putting your prong somewhere, any hole will do, the more the better, and hasn't she always wondered about orgies, he'd like to show her one, yes, now, what did she think she was walking into, was she stupid or what, and before she knew what was what, the curtains jerk open and there's his lover, and suddenly the room is filling up with guys, tanned, muscular shirtless bodies and they all want... HER. "But, but... this is not love, not even desire..." she foolishly mutters, to try and stave off what seems inevitable, what her dream lovers tell her she herself has engineered. No, no, you are wrong, she tries to tell them, but they have transformed into a menacing gang. She knows she has to run, to escape somehow, she is weeping at her impending rape, oh god, she will be torn apart, penetrated, defiled, how will she explain the bleeding and the bruises to her husband when she gets back, provided she can escape from this bellish nightmare, ever... she jumps out the window and then she is off, running on the sand, chased by gorgeously threatening young men who, oddly enough, all look like herself, except that they are much lighter-skinned. Then, without warning, it is the muezzin's voice that is following her into her dreams, wake up in the name of Allah it screams, and she is grateful to it and to her body's need to empty a bladderful of whiskey.

Waking up, Cheena realised she had somehow been saved from explaining another outrageous episode in a life that kept gnawing at the edges of conformity without being willing to give up its comforts. She has been saved, she found herself thinking, perhaps from herself, perhaps from certain death. How long can we evade our own mortality, she wondered? She woke up to a very misty morning by the Nile, and could see nothing at all beyond the balcony grill...

*The muezzin was dancing, on the radiator grille
The sheriff don't like it, rock the casbah, rock the casbah.*

So it had come to this. She heaved a sigh of relief, maybe a tad wistfully at what could have been, what even was once, but no more. Was it simply age? Had it caught up with her like it did with everyone else? Or was it real? This feeling deep inside... but not of being lost, no, nor about the *sherif* not liking it or muezzins dancing on radiators. The song had changed. She was simply going home. And not just to the man who had stood by her, however angrily. She was going home to Maha, the one whose intelligence she had always underestimated, the one who'd said to her that night after they'd danced on the riverbank on a moonlit summer night to the unknown singer's rendition of Ray Charles' "Hit the Road Jack" –"honey, it takes real courage to come back." Maybe in this re-turn, some new inspiration would well up; hey, you never

know! Cheena smiled, recalling Maha's stubborn belief in the Luck of Lotto. Of course, this meant you had to continue playing the game, even when the rules suddenly changed, midstride, whether it was you who changed them, or whether it was Life's alarm-clock shaking you out of your dream-sleep, "wake up!, wake up!" As she came awake, Cheena thought to herself that a trip to Cuba was definitely in the offing. Some fantasies of machismo had to be put to rest, some new understanding of revolution arrived at.