

Lon Otto

What Is *Son*?

This is my cathedral, she says in Spanish, sweeping her hands to embrace the tenement rooftop, the wire clotheslines strung overhead from canted, rusting poles, the ponderous arch of tropical night sky. She's María Haidí, the Afro Cuban woman who is going to teach these Lutheran pastors and professors and college administrators to dance in Old Havana. From a corner of the roof, a tower and part of the façade of Havana's baroque cathedral a few blocks away is visible, though the visitors are so disoriented still from their first day in Cuba that they barely get her joke. María Haidí opens her palms to the spidery tangles of two television antennas, one strapped at its base to a crumbling brick chimney, the other screwed to the little shed at the top of the dizzyingly steep stairway that led them up to the roof: These are my bell towers. Welcome.

There are fifteen of them in the delegation from Duluth, Minnesota – nine men and six women, seated in a ragged semicircle. Tom Vogel had grabbed one of the folding chairs farthest from the cleared space in the center of the roof, where María Haidí is beginning to explain the essence of Cuban music, which she says is the essence of Cuba, and the instruments, and the rhythms, while their tour leader translates into English and three other Cubans – musicians, apparently – stand around behind her and periodically hand her instruments – ebony claves, maracas, a little drum, a ridged gourd rasped with a stick, a bead-encrusted rattle the size of a watermelon – or step forward themselves to demonstrate. The *tres* with its three doubled strings. A waist-high conga drum.

The band members may be members of her family, though none is nearly as black as she is, whose skin is the color of a freshly-blued gun barrel. A wiry, gray-haired man may be her husband, a teenaged girl in spandex shorts may be her granddaughter. María Haidí's long print dress sways over her ankles and bare feet as she

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sails through her lecture, clinking the claves against each other in various complicated rhythmic variations, singing scraps of melody.

The musicians take up instruments, and the group plays a *guajira*, traditional country music, then something salsa, then something else. And *son*? What is *son*, again? Tom wonders. It's confusing but pretty in the soft January night atop a decaying colonial mansion, and when a little girl comes out and hands everyone slender paper cones full of peanuts, and an older girl serves mojitos in plastic glasses from a rusty cookie sheet, and Jorge, the tour leader, translates the gist of María Haidí's sweet, sly jokes, it's easy to forget that something scary is inexorably sweeping toward them.

Tom Vogel cannot be the only one braced behind a mask of laughter and applause and tipsy appreciation. These aren't the first mojitos they've been served today. During one of the songs, a beautiful young man and woman slipped out of the stairway shed and are perched now on the rooftop's wall like cats. Tom edges his chair back a little to get a better look past the thick, bobbing shoulders of Jack Olson, the college chaplain, who arranged the Cuba trip. And suddenly he feels himself toppling backward toward the empty night air and the cobblestone street three long stories below. Before he has a chance to cry out, a stone balustrade catches him, stops his fall. It holds him there, the rear legs of his chair sunk in a kind of gutter, staring up at the dim stars and horizontal sliver of moon.

Heart banging in his chest, he stays that way for a minute, tilted back as if he could not be more comfortable. Half of his mojito sloshed out, but most of it ended up on the tar and concrete roof rather than on his trousers. He sips the sweet, watery drink. The young man is watching him from across the rooftop. No one else seems to have noticed the incident. The young man leans over and says something to the young woman beside him, the music crashes to a close, and the Lutherans applaud.

The young man and the young woman come forward and María Haidí introduces them, Roberto and Isabel, who will demonstrate some of the dances of Cuba. The little band plays, Roberto takes Isabel in his arms, and they dance beneath the yellow light of a few bare bulbs, twining as effortlessly as if they were one being, the two of them and the music, salsa or meringue (or *son*, what was that?), and they occupy the complicated rhythms so completely it's hopeless to parse the movements of their feet. Tom gives up trying. Isabel is wearing a little tank top and a short skirt

that swirls above her muscular legs. Roberto's seafoam guayabera shirt is open to the middle of his smooth brown chest, and his tight black pants shimmer like streams of oil pouring over his tireless thighs and calves and ankles.

"Cute," Denise Albrecht murmurs in Tom's direction without taking her eyes off the dancers. Tom returns his chair to level, drags the back legs out of the gutter, and leans forward to hear what she's saying: "They are such a cute couple." She's a professor of Old Testament studies at the college where Tom teaches a social theology course every other semester.

"Very cute," he says. But they aren't a couple, he's pretty sure. Except in the dance. Passionately together as the music spins them, their bodies swirling into each other, lips wet and drawn, he senses a fine fabric of reserve stretched invisibly between them. "Gorgeous," Tom says, when it seems as if Denise is waiting for something else from him, and he applauds with the others as the dance ends and the beautiful girl embraces the beautiful boy. Hot, hot, yet they're not into each other, he's sure of it, and for a second, as the dancers are bowing and pretending to catch their breath, Roberto meets his eyes.

Son – she's saying something about *son* again. Doesn't it just mean "sound"? María Haidí shows them in slow motion the steps of some dance, the basis of all the others, she says, her fine-boned feet swirling like trout beneath the hem of her dress, which she lifts so everyone can see. Like this and this and this. Like this and this and this and then this. And then a variation, then another. Tom feels the muscles of his face quiver with the exhaustion of too much smiling, too much feigned interest and appreciation as the little *grupo* begins another song. Really, he doesn't care about Cuban music one way or another, though he knows he should love it, everybody loves it. And dance has always been a realm of inadequacy and embarrassment for him.

Roberto and Isabel move into the center of the audience square in each other arms, whirl and dance. And then Isabel is drawing a red-faced, laughing sociologist to his feet, Steve Amos, the only man in the tour group relaxed or clueless enough to wear shorts to this evening program in Old Havana, and she leads him into the salsa steps. He's pretty good, and Roberto coaxes Julie Lux onto the dance floor, the Dean of Women, and then puts Steve and Julie together, and two others, and two others, with great applause and nervous laughter from those still sitting, until the end of the song.

María Haidí shows them another dance step, Roberto and Isa-

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bel demonstrate it, but this time they leave the Lutherans seated, though Steve and several others who were drawn into the previous dance are jumping around in their chairs, agitating to be included. After another dance is explained and the musicians begin to play, Isabel and Roberto go to the newly-experienced dancers, dance with them for a few minutes, pair them up, pull others to their feet, some protesting lamely, but obviously pleased to be included.

The group is dividing comfortably into dancers and spectators, the spectators careful to show what a good time they're having without drawing attention to themselves. Tom feels himself relax in the soft purr of rum and sugar and tropical breeze off Havana harbor and the satisfaction that he's actually gotten to Cuba, tagging along with this delegation whose mission isn't remotely clear to him. It's not political, they've been told that often enough. They're mostly left-leaning in their own minds, sympathetic to the Revolution in a Lutheran, non-activist way. Dave Reinhart from Business Administration and Rachel Weeks from Philosophy are unabashed capitalists, and that seems fine, too. A goodwill trip. People to people. Witness, one of their orientation speakers had said, but Jack was quick to clarify that it wasn't witness in the Lutheran sense, evangelism. Tom doesn't know what it means, but he's still tingling with the luck of having been included. Cuba. Here he is in Cuba, on the rooftop of a decaying colonial building in Old Havana in January, learning to dance.

Learning to dance: that's the rub. The frontier between dancers and spectators inexorably deteriorates as Roberto and Isabel invade the realm of the wallflowers, pulling more and more Lutherans onto the dance floor, guiding them through the elementary steps, pairing them up when they seem to have it, moving on relentlessly. Roberto grabs Irene MacDougal, lucky woman, Political Science, and Tom thinks he has one more song to go and might even escape unscathed, there are more men than women and the pairing is resolutely heterosexual, when suddenly Isabel is standing in front of him and taking him by both hands and guiding him into the awkwardly bumping herd of pastors and professors and academic administrators.

She places his hands here and here, she counts the beats for him in practiced English, she holds him close enough to her lean body that he moves automatically with her, with the music (*son?* is this *son?*), and it's as effortless as flying is in dreams, he's dancing (*salsa! son!*). And she looks up at him and murmurs the other En-

glish phrase she must have memorized long ago: "You dance very well!" And with that it all falls apart, he misses the beat, almost stumbles her into another couple, and they struggle through the rest of the endless song. "Okay!" she says, "bueno!" and lets him and the others sit down as she and Roberto demonstrate something unbelievably fast and complicated, clearly a virtuoso dance, no threat to the Lutherans from Duluth.

The evening slides on that way, demonstrations of dizzyingly difficult dances by the professionals, easier dances in which the visitors participate. The Lutherans have settled back into their chairs, pleased with themselves, even the most clumsy, proud of having taken part, when María Haidí steps forward with Jorge interpreting and says that this next dance, the *guaguanco*, is a very sexual one, in which the man tries to touch the woman's sex and she tries to keep him from doing so. She evades him, María Haidí says, but she doesn't make him go away. The band plays and Roberto and Isabel begin what seems an ordinary rumba, then Isabel whirls away and Roberto pursues her, indeed feinting toward her crotch with his hips, his hands, his tight buttocks, while Isabel dodges away, never missing a step, never letting him touch her there, never making him go away. He uses a napkin sometimes, María Haidí says, and Roberto pulls a big silk handkerchief out of his pocket and flicks it toward his partner's sex, and sometimes the woman does too, she says, and Isabel grabs a handkerchief of her own from one of the musicians and waves it toward Roberto, evading, inviting.

The Lutherans are laughing in disbelief, some of them applauding, good sports or good anthropologists or just red-blooded, tolerant Minnesotans. Tom studies Roberto's face whenever he gets a glance of it, trying to read his expression. He has a funny thought and leans over to Denise and asks, "Do you suppose we'll get a chance to try this one?"

And as soon as the sentence is out of his mouth, Denise laughing appreciatively at his joke, Isabel is drawing Steve from the row in front of him, and clueless or cool, grinning, red-faced Steve attempts some version of the rumba steps and makes tentative gestures with his hands towards Isabel's midriff, not an inch lower, while she keeps her distance and pretends to be fending him off. Then she pulls Irene to her feet—really pulls her—and parks her on the dance floor in front of Steve, and then gets Jack onto the floor with herself and waves her handkerchief in his red face framed by that snow-white Hemingway beard, then others and

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others, until Tom finds himself with all the rest of them out on the rooftop dance floor, chugging around in the throes of some kind of waking dream, no longer worrying about their feet or the beat or what *son* is. Those who have scarves or handkerchiefs pull them out of pockets, flick away, witnessing what they can't quite believe and will never be able to explain.

It doesn't matter how many men or women there are now, since most of them are avoiding a too-obvious couple-dance anyway. Tom finds himself close to Roberto and keeps an eye on him while going through the motions of erotic pursuit with Denise and Linda Prochnow, the chair of foreign languages, who have let him into a kind of friendly triangle. Roberto is swaying and gyrating in front of Barbara Beckmeister, from English, who is grinning and grabbing for *him* in a manner that is clearly confusing him, though he hangs in there. She isn't grinning, Tom realizes. It's a grimace of indignation. She really is angry, she'd knee him if she could, double him over his genitals, if he weren't so agile. Had he actually touched her? Tom is edging his point of the triangle between them, as if by accident, when the song ends, leaving the Lutherans giddy with their own naughtiness.

María Haidí is laughing and clapping in admiration, she can't believe it, they're the best group ever. When they've settled themselves back in their chairs, she explains more dances. Roberto and Isabel demonstrate, the little band plays, the Lutherans dance or stand around talking or sit it out, nobody is paying attention any more. The little girl and Isabel appear with cassette tapes cheaply labeled "*María Haidí y Son de Cuba*," and they sell out, at five dollars apiece. Roberto has disappeared.

On the bus back to the hotel afterward, Denise drops into the seat next to Tom. "Whew!" she says.

"Whew. You said it." Tom doesn't know her very well. Though they teach in the same department, he's just a part-timer.

She leans in close to him. "Did you see Jack and that girl at the end?"

"Isabel?"

"He was like a grizzly bear, hugging the poor little thing." She half stands up in the seat. "Hey, Jack!" He must have been somewhere near the front of the darkened bus and doesn't respond. Denise sinks back into the seat. "He told me she called him 'Papa,' because he looks like Hemingway. I've never seen him so pleased with himself."

"He does, sort of."

"I told him, 'Watch out for Roberto afterwards. He saw you pawing his partner.'"

"I don't think they're actually a couple," Tom says.

She digs around in her purse, looking for something. "They're brother and sister," she says.

"What?"

"I was talking with one of the musicians."

"Well, I thought it was something like that."

"Imagine him dancing with a partner who's *not* his sister!"

"I better not."

Denise laughs. "*You'd* better not? Whew!"

"Whew," he says, "you said it."

And in the dark night they cruise along the Malecón, the sea on one side and ruined old buildings on the other, columned, porticoed, balconied, louvered, their pastel paint long ago weathered into ghosts of color. What is *son*, exactly? he thinks of asking her, but instead turns the other way and stares out the window at the glittering waters of Havana harbor, the lights of terrible Moro Castle shining in the distance, the bright finger of a lighthouse searching.