

Dorota Masłowska

How to Take Control of the World without Leaving the House: Cuba

Last year, having succumbed to the influence of my older and stronger peers, and following the invocation of The Most Holy Marie Kondo, The One that No One Remembers Anymore, I ended up in church. Back then, her work was Read by Everyone, as well as by me. I bought a copy of her gospel entitled “The Magic of Cleaning”, where Marie asks us to renounce the abundance overcharging our lives, and I also began to carry out the action of Great Tidiness. The simple confrontation with the numerous objects that had gathered over the years was very revealing, because up till now I had considered myself a non-materialistic person; but it turned out that I’ve actually succeeded in gathering a fair load of things.

Tackling the mess of all these supplies seemed to go on forever. I had many objects of enigmatic origin, meaning, and function. Maybe it wasn’t even me who possessed them, some things were just lying around at home, those things had their own things, their things, in turn, had little thingies of their own, and they, then again, would receive pens and ugly festival tote bags for free, Frubies, milky candies and cuddly toys. I’d been fighting them fiercely for days, but a new head was growing out of each one that I’d cut off before. There were object-colonies lying everywhere, sub-colonies, units and subunits, FARMS and sub-farms. “Winter clothes / left by guests / accessories.”

“Ugly prizes/ statuettes / before 2015”, “Souvenirs from people I don’t want to remember”, “Single flippers”, “Animal’s hair/ dog.” Not to mention the five kilograms of coins, seventy-something ashtrays, never opened gifts. Unused, dusty, pointless, in stacks, piles, lines, heaps, sacks, and other crappy bags, did they not only remind me of what’s been bad and is apparently over – still enduring through THEM, persisting in THEIR persistence- but also of what’s been beautiful; however, now it’s rotten and wilted, and only those stupid objects remained: paradoxically resistant to decay, and some of them even seem to last forever.

What could have been done? One could give away a part to those that haven’t been converted by the Mariekondian invocation yet and continue to carelessly cover themselves with whatever they can find. And what’s left will just get thrown away– so, eventually it’ll be handed over to chaos itself, but always ac-

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accompanied by the painful certainty that one doesn't really get rid of all these things; it'll just remain a bold but empty gesture because most of them might even survive the end of the world.

But let's not talk about these things; this is about my life, after all. Those tedious days of cleaning really changed something. I felt light, free, fresh, fresh like a freshman. At least for 2–3 months. However, from one day to the next, the neophyte's bliss faded away unnoticed, the anti-object-alerts gradually lost their intensity; as a result, and following their custom, the things started to sneak in again, to worm their way, while sending each other predatory whistles, and, of course, whenever I looked up – startled – a deathly hush.

The Mariekondian convention happens to be this violent step forward, followed by two, three, four quiet, unconscious steps backwards, as if nothing ever happened. Oh this, because it's so pretty. Oh, that's a shame, it's so cute. And this, I got it for almost nothing at Lidl. A small bidet. A balloon. A spiralizer for vegetables. 10-pack socks. Things, things, things. I remember how they still followed, ran after me as we rushed to the airport in the early morning; how they insisted on jumping into my suitcase, so cram-full that I had to push down and jump on it. . . push down and jump . . . to close it somehow.

Once on board the plane, I instantly put on "Madame Bovary" and now it actually hits me how it was no coincidence that it was she – of all people – who joined me on my way to Cuba, the poet of shopping, the icon of gadgetry, director at the object-and-clothes theatre, where she passionately staged different roles taken up from the novel. "Don't buy this dress, it's too expensive. Buy a smaller one, but two of them. Or wait, wait for the off-season sale, you idiot!" – I screamed out, emotionally scattered in thought, while lifting the fifth-hundredth 10g-pack of Pretzels to my lips, washing them down with tea, each sip out of a new cup, with my new tea-spoon, and the packaging gathering between my feet. While the aircraft begins its descent to Havana, the beautiful Emma, played by Isabelle Huppert, is just replacing her entire upholstery, furniture, she has already bought Japanese vases, a proper little hat with a fuzzy tassel, and now she rushes to meet Rodolpho. . .

A dull bump against the asphalt. The lights go on . . . once everyone has ascertained that they're still alive, the passengers begin to crawl out of their seats, and messy lairs, their slumbers, stacks, heaps, piles. Everybody walks out, and it's exactly at this moment that the chaos becomes visible. . . this whole wreck. Muddled blankets and scattered cups, plates and bottles, packaging and plastic sheets, half-eaten sandwiches, headphones, torn newspapers and other (even for us at the time) evident leftovers of creatures that sat out 10 boring hours in a place completely WITHOUT INTERNET . . .

And here we are now, at the airport, with its broken air-con, here we are, with 15-year-old staff members – girls in white knee socks and neat shirts, their

official rigidity melting into heat and boredom – searching through our bags. There's this one piece of luggage already rolling around on the baggage carousel for half an hour and – heads up, cause it's the first time I see such a thing – a car tyre . . . another one appears fifteen minutes later. . . and it spins uselessly, it spins and drags along tape, packaging, chaos. . . all this goes on for a long time, just as is common in countries where time isn't money, but merely time, a relative, extensive, malleable and definitely non-luxury matter that everyone possesses abundantly in this place.

In the meanwhile, we're already in the car, driving through the sultry night. Darkness! Not this yellowish, neon-LED-like Varsovian darkness, but real darkness, black, with silhouettes of palm trees, sheds, old Chevrolets and cargos, Fiat Autos and horse buggies leaning out of the night. Even then, we still think this is some kind of joke or post-flight delusion, just like our accommodation in Boca Ciega, where we're actually just walking in. . .

. . . and I really have to concentrate, praying to the Great Almighty Basebathito, the God of swimming pools and sound systems, God of mouthy women and heavy bass lines; praying, so that he would help me to describe most precisely the state of Casa Carlos . . . and eventually, I have to acknowledge that Casa Carlos is some sort of ongoing pool party, surrounded by hotel rooms with no windows. I should also mention that it's a rather poorly attended event, not quite successful in terms of volume; though with loud dancing music starting between six and seven o'clock in the morning, its sound echoing against the concrete walls for hours, causing ripples in the empty pool, and even making the non-existing window glass quiver.

. . . But the day we arrived happened to be a Friday, so I remember that there were some bouncing chicas, guys showing their muscles, and I remember how, once we entered the place, everyone suddenly went quiet; whether it was sipping a drink, squeezing someone's boob, having fellatio in or outside corners – those performances had stopped, as if we were two bad-ass teachers arriving with their class register and globe, willing, as always, to ruin the whole party. . .

So, it had been quite weird there from the start, suspicious, naughty. But the poor little room they'd offered us had walls, a bed, the air-con running at 10 degrees, a wall unit slowly falling apart, and therefore, everything we needed to get ready for bed, to close our eyes, to fall asleep. So now I lie in this coolness . . . close my eyes and listen to strange noises. The thumping Despacito, water whirling through the pipes . . . the air conditioning breaking out in weird barks, grunts, slurps . . . phantasmatic cockroaches creeping into my ear, S. taking a bath, slender streaks of ice-cold water snaking over his body . . . ice, ice cubes, clacking teeth . . . I listen, and listen . . . already drifting off . . . just then, from between this hydraulic babble and rainy creeks, Orfeo appears, comes for me . . . now tak-

ing my hand and gently leading me into the icy wastelands of dream and reverie . . . when suddenly – bang! Out of nowhere, someone tugs at the doorknob. A giggling chica enters the room in dancing strides. Jeez girl . . . what's so funny? maybe you'd like to tell us, so we can all laugh about it?

Although she notices me, she makes no attempts to leave, starts to chatter something and sneakily, incredibly sly and almost unnoticed, she is directly heading for . . . and whoever is familiar with my previous writings, knows that drunk girls in want of using my bathroom, are a recurring motif in my life . . . So, maybe it would be worthwhile to finally analyze this phenomenon at therapy; cause what I consider as something “happening” to me, is apparently deeply and subconsciously rooted in the way I was abused by my parents during childhood, and though I insist, shouting: DON'T DON'T DON'T! NOU NOU NOU! Etc., she is just smiling and carries on as if she was at her own place! As if she was at hers!

I sense that there is no way of stopping her now, that I'll have to get up and block the door with my body . . . it's a desperate move I've actually spared for the worst case, because she's wearing a swimming suit that reveals her heavy and all-around tanned breasts, thighs, dripping with water, and a towel that's gradually slipping off her body; and here I am, in my repulsive and broth-stained reindeer jammies, wearing my braces . . . Finally, I somehow manage to get rid of her, but still in all, isn't there something wrong with these girls nowadays that they actually think everyone would like them to piss into their toilet and feel honoured for it?

Anyway, it's already morning . . . morning or not-morning, it's hard to tell when there are no windows; look . . . windows in houses or even hotels might be inconspicuous but they're still a great invention. To catch some daylight or to at least to figure out the time of the day; an easy trick, just a pane, a piece of wood or whatever. Back in Poland, if you live in a room without a window, you can manage somehow, because there is always the opportunity to ask Google what time it is, what it's like outside on the streets, to ask about the special offers, or what they're demonstrating for. But in this place, the internet-free reality: emptiness, nothingness, nothing. Only the sound system's doodle, boasting, enchanting music foreboding sexual intercourse.

So, finally, we left our bunker on a bright-blue and gloomy day [. . .] we walked onto the road that connects Boca Ciega with the nearby Guanabo and continued hesitantly towards the palm trees and elms. Everything was totally new, totally surprising. The trees were very big, ancient, fibrous, and bandaged with lianas. Street corners were lined with heaps of rubbish, where beautiful, dark-blue roosters were feasting.

We passed many remnants of ruined villas. The same walls, the same building patterns; desolate signs had been newly attached to them, announcing in sev-

eral languages that the construction is still “in progress.” An easy way to stop evil tongues, always ready for tittle-tattle about how this is obviously a ruined city! That’s how, in the best of worlds, stupid gossip is cut off without expense. Finally, we’ve arrived in Guanabo.

Meanwhile, this small town slowly drags itself back to life from its great scuffle. The cleaning continues. Some woman sweeps listlessly over a stream flowing alongside the street. A cleaner from the petrol station kicks a can, it lies a little further away. I wouldn’t call the Cubans the Germans of the Caribbean. I wouldn’t even call them the Poles of the Caribbean, and you know what that means. What once lied down, remains to lie around. What once got hung up, still hangs around. What stinks, continues to stink. Destroyed by the hurricane Irma, the city isn’t very keen on cleaning. Smashed concrete, shattered pathways and whole streets still standing in water, all waiting for God’s mercy. Though there are certain values the Cubans do care about. Cars, for example. It’s incredible how the Cubans have taken care of their Fiat 126p cars, this Polakito that is exceptionally popular over here (it might even cost 6,5 thousand euros!!). Tarted up and painted in the most beautiful colours; often in silver, sometimes even in gold! In Havana, for the first time in my life, I saw a man washing a car with his bare hands . . .

But let’s return to more pleasant matters now. [. .] We are hungry. This may not be as interesting as to describe it over paragraphs in a report for a cultural magazine, but from one day to the other, such matters will play an essential role in our lives. Back then, we are still young, naïve, unaware, coming from a country where you can find heaps of peas or other sultan’s treasures on every corner. Here, in front of the bakery, a large queue of people is waiting impatiently with their freshly cleaned plastic bags. Eventually, the bread, or should I rather say the bread roll, appears. Already old when it’s still fresh, expanding like sawdust in your mouth; but in fairness, it comes in different variations: big and small.

[. .] In the meantime, the Mercado opened, so, with a majestic gesture, we left our backpacks at the depository and walked in confidently [. .] If there is much of anything down here, then it’s staff: two women watching over the bags, another woman observing the entrance, another one taking care of the checkout, a cashier, a manager, a supervisor in each alley. And this whole machinery enfolds around rice, pasta, ketchup, and jam. And rum. We are considering buying rum. Unfortunately, while paying, you get extremely nervous if every single move of yours is being watched by 7, 8, 9 or even 10 people . . . the bottle breaks. We stand above a growing puddle of rum, like naughty children. No one talks to us, nobody dares to look at us.

The staff members exchange some casual remarks. At the same time, no one’s in a hurry to start cleaning. This puddle is probably still there today, but I believe that now it’s full of corpses, floating around, corpses of people who once

stepped into it, and never managed to get out, or people who fell into it face-forwards with nobody making an effort to help them.

Not seeing any way out of this impasse, we decide to move on but . . . Hola, hola, little rascals! Some people run out of the shop shouting, making gestures. We go back. Again, we stand there remorsefully, waiting for insults, tortures. Through the window, we can see the manager approaching us, sent for from another shop, and surrounded by a mob of assistant managers and saleswomen, jumping over the puddles and the bulging cobblestones, buzzing with a large set of keys for the local prison, probably an ice-cold hole without showers, without micellar water or dental floss . . . The council continues. Just a moment later, to our surprise, we are being offered another bottle of rum, and this time, even a bigger one! With body language, our Spanish at level A minus one, we express remorse, joy, relief, and out of this fraternal atmosphere between the Polish and the Cubans, we set off to continue our journey . . .

But early enough, we realize that Guanabo isn't really a place to wander about, especially now that it's getting hot, with all the dogs lying across the pathway like corpses. People move here and there through the mud, holding bags full of bread rolls; big rolls in one, small rolls in another bag. Or the other way around. There is a shopping passage with a manicurist and a watchmaker – this place here is still a reality, where you actually change your watch's batteries instead of just throwing it away. There is also a landline phone solemnly standing on a stool, and a bakery that offers disastrous cakes, as if they had been previously eaten by some mean kids, disgorged, and put together again before the arrival of their parents. PCV-carriages roll down the streets, dragged by sickish horses, eaten up by flies and often charged with large sound systems.

And at this point I must really sacrifice at least one paragraph to the importance of a decent and powerful sound system for the Cubans' lives. Here, the sound system is an essential part of life, even for those who are just approaching the age of reproduction; and for those who've already reached it, up to the point where they're now just recalling how it used to be. Like an LED-shaken altar, families display it on their terrace or front porch, sitting next to it, regardless of their age, level of reproducibility or depression. Quite often, they don't even drink, simply satisfied with the sound system's toxic doodle, showing a cheap gaze, and drifting off with great world-weariness. In the songs, sad men (never women!) sing about sexual relationships they've had, will have, have, could have . . . it's as if the whole life in Guanabo is centered around the act of reproduction . . .]

The next day is Sunday, with sunshine and strong wind! We swim in the blue and raging sea, yelling, entirely swallowed by the foamy manes, the pearlescent of the wild waves. Once we arrive at shore, we enter the cafeteria Las Palmitas, where we have to spend some time with Tony and his uncle, it's inevitable. Writ-

ing this, it might seem we're familiar, but I actually just grin and bear it, because I know just as little about them as you do. Tony is a shabby Latin lover: he wears reflective sunglasses and a Lakers shirt.

I guess his uncle has seen, and especially drunk, plenty in life; his eyes are bright and washed out of illusion, his skin is rather flabby, not well-rested and pale, he's probably not familiar with L'Oréal. Tony is agonized by my civil status and the nature of my relationship with S. He generally talks a lot, and persistently: to us, to himself and the world, just like that; later, he and his uncle are drinking piss-coloured beer, they start talking about us while we're still right next to them . . . In a word, once we've got everything positive out of this encounter, that could now turn into something negative, we return to our concrete Casa Cess-pool. [. .]

But Cuba is not only fiery despacitos and disgusting food, there's also professional commitment. As visitors of the upcoming Theatre Week, we'll hold a workshop in Havana the next day . . . It starts at 10 o'clock, so we still have time to throw a glance at one of those bent, local streets . . . And it was just like stepping into Alice's Wonderland for a moment . . . you enter, and already . . . there's stirring, cooking, boiling over. From each window, smaller window, hatch, even peephole, mad worlds are growing rampantly into our eyes. Fermentation, expansion, tremendous increasement. The gasification of this street is totally mind-blowing! The smell of rubbish, shit and soap. Ruined facades, damaged sirens, careful rubbish constructions, and shopping bags getting cleaned by neighbours. Worlds emerge from other worlds, emerge from other worlds, emerge from other worlds, emerge from other worlds!

We enter a coffee shop with all its selection enclosed in a poor thermos flask. The coffee costs 1 peso, a beautiful mammita is pouring a gulp into our cups . . . In the meantime, we discreetly look around her modest shop . . . an old armchair, a melted and slightly sun-beaten Christmas tree . . . a framed poster of the Spice Girls on the wall, so old and sun-bleached that Geri Halliwell looks totally like Mel B, and Mel C like Mel B . . . One is tempted to say: we have objects, we have computers, the internet, smartphones, functional and non-functional, designer and non-designer, this or that clothing.

But the people down here, they have life.

Now, just to come back to Marie Kondo's "Magic of Cleaning" for a moment . . . but where did I put it? "Farewell to Surpluses. Japanese Minimalism"? No, that's not it. "Hygge, the Danish Art of Whatevver"? "Zero Waste Life"? Panic-fuelled, I search through my „Books concerning the fact that I have too many things"-shelf. Or maybe I left it on the "Books concerning the fact that I have too many books"-shelf?

When did the reflection on the abundance of objects in our life actually transform itself into just another accumulation of objects? As if we played a part in some sort of implementation of the Midas myth, where everything turns into a product, gadget, or power bank sooner or later, and then, shortly after, turns into rubbish, rubbish, heaps of rubbish that will be segregated with the aid of necessary segregators, secretaries, segregators and the smart ‘SegreGO!’ app. The publisher of the next “The Magic of Cleaning” edition has already added a “cleaning organizer” and the “Mini-pronto”-atomizer.

Because Marie Kondo desperately talks us into a life that holds a suitable, seasonal costume and expedition ready for us, where every festival is full of flyers and bags of crummy buttons. And, after all, the products take over our eating habits, clothing, mating, sex, birth, disease and dying – as well as our not-eating, not-clothing, the lack of sexual intercourse and our PLANNING of giving-birth – but not only this – they also produce an ensemble of agitated feet, eye’s dryness and other necessities that are much more refined and only slightly unnecessary. And not to forget, the whole sector of products made for buying other products – such as shopping magazines – but not only shopping magazines, cause really, what magazine is not about shopping nowadays?

Nearly every “Women”-, “Achievement”- and “Heel”-magazine is a calculation of things one can buy. Also showing products that serve to take a picture of oneself presenting other freshly-bought products – now, that’s perverse. After all, the level of pleasure, safety and comfort has not increased for a long time – we only multiply objects because they form some sort of three-dimensional, pictorial language that serves us to cry out different tales, and those longings, aspirations, despairs, unfulfillments that are hidden within them. And in all of this, suddenly, there is Cuba. This world without goods.

Total consternation. Cause up till now, even travelling through poor countries, I’ve always been used to certain standards: the locals were somehow living their modest life, but the tourists oases were full of wealthiness and Toblerone – although surrounded by barbed wire and with a curfew – always buzzing 24/7. But in Cuba, it’s not about money or no money; here, food and other products ARE SIMPLY NOT AVAILABLE. [. . .] Gobbling bread rolls, rearranged, and decorated with other rolls, going through all sorts of stages: disbelief, denial, finally a crisis, and then, a slow reconciliation with this destiny, even a certain affirmation. For example, the realization that what I considered to be one and the same roll in the beginning, turned out to be a variety of roll-types, confusingly similar to one another. A sweet and loamy roll. A dry one, with a hint of graham flour. Another one, still moist after having lied around for a week. The same thing with the sandwiches. Identical. In my rejection, I confused the breakfast sandwiches with the lunch and dinner sandwiches, although they were served at different

hours. I confused the rice for beans, confused it for rice with beans with salt . . . it wasn't the same after all.

From one day to the other, I gradually begin to differentiate the nuances of this situation. Facing the impossibility of fulfilling the daily acts of consumption, and separated from the illusions of the internet, we've willy-nilly chosen the only possible option in this place: life. In Havana you just had to step out onto the street, and the hot and incredibly busy molecules already started to bump into our heads.

Coloured flakes were rustling between the leaves of the Ficus tree. Chickens, pig's heads – as a sacrifice to the local divinities – and bunches of bananas were rotting under the tree. The taxi-horns were screaming insistently. Beheaded chickens were hanging in lopsided shacks. At once, some fat cock jumped out from behind the fence and ran off with an important, hasty step, as if going back to fetch a viola he'd forgotten at home . . .

It smelled like combustion. The undershirts got torn by the wind. Horns! The foamy sea was directly flowing into the city behind the boulevard, overwhelming the pedestrians and cars. The Girón skyscraper, a gigantic block of concrete, hung over the neighborhood like a cliff over a picnic; entirely made off sly clearances like prostitute's tights, with the azure madness of the sea shining through them. There were some shabby gyms framed by its gates, where the barbells broke like grass. A shopping centre, a bleak establishment in the characteristic style of a demolished space shuttle. And a grocery shop, its assortment standing out through the large display of Vietnamese marquise-type pastries and a drastic stench of rotten meat.

[. . .] In the evenings, we're peeking into the windows. In the postcolonial villas, the tall apartements were carefully separated in two; in the lower part, a grandpa's head, he's cooking rice with beans, and above his head, a ceiling, and the feet of somebody who's sweeping the floor.

Seen from the perspective of the tumultuous life we're living back home, a life, where we're continuously clogged with some kind of impossibility, some obsession or agitation, cause we've already unlearned how to LIVE; where we only watch, scan, incessantly scroll through something appearing on bold screens . . . now, suddenly POISONED with this dense, stinking, shrieking intermeshing of streets, fingers and parks, we are not able to believe in Warsaw anymore. That it's somewhere out there, like a graveyard, with the neon lights of its arcades glimmering in the dark, with its golden terraces, announcing pointless advertisements, discounts, and collections. [. . .] That we're able to wander around with other zombies for days, searching matters for our – Lord, have mercy – Madame-bovarian worlds and sets in which we then perform ineptly, pretending to be some cool people from H&M commercials. Day after day it strikes us more clearly

that the objects, gadgets, extras, systems, and technologies granted us a lot, but they took away something essential after all.

Life. That's why the Western vampires are coming to this place, to steal corporeality, eroticism, and stamina. To sprinkle themselves with this hot, vital blood; to observe, how people walk here, how they dance, how they shout, how they live. To drug themselves with their cheerful, shining bodies at a cheap rate, to trade them for foreign zombie-currency, immediately traded for Macs or smartphones by these bodies. Though it's also clear to the naked eye that offsite, Cuba is producing a skinny nag, dragging a hoary sound system through Guanabo. The awful West squeezes in through all sides. In places where it's possible to catch the faintest Internet signal – in parks and next to big hotels – pioneer-smartphonists are gathering. This looks totally unusual in the local context – where boredom, lethargy and impasses are still apparent in the urban landscape – people, just sitting next to each other uniformly, gazing uniformly, searching for topics of conversation, addressing each other, playing domino . . . Finally, the ones with the smartphone are the ones cut off from reality, mesmerized, crowding about, trying to catch something invisible in the air. Over here, the best of worlds is falling apart, and surely, in a few years, there'll be M&M's, billboards, labour factory-camps and an infinite influx of plastic bags, filling up the country just like they filled up the West in the nineties, turning it into a rainbow-coloured dump.

This process is also visible in our apartment. Made for Western tourists, it overflows with arrangements that flatter our taste and peculiarity. Our own, unused soap. Cups inscribed with 'Cappuccino' and a thing that is completely absurd over here: a box for Ikea cutlery! A huge Samsung fridge. Once you've understood how much space it actually occupies in the heart of its owner, you almost wouldn't dare to use it. We also receive clothes hangers, one of them single serving – the one being used for women's panties. Being a tourist over here is a rather tasteless piece of bread for me. You're obliged to visit the different places where Ernest Hemingway did something, said or drank something, and all this is already a reason to conventionalize Cuba as an extraterritorial country of the European Union; a Mojito costs 4CUC, awful white guys are running around, draped with their cameras, so boring, they make me want to puke. The only thing that saves our day is Oscar, our guide, and luckily not Pascal. Oscar is a humorous Cuban who's been educated in Szczecin and a specialist for the fabrication of ship's engines.

I've asked Oscar whether he was building a ship's engine himself, but he still has to think it over, he told me. We are joking a lot and Oscar is always pulling those typical apprentice-jinks as if he was still in Szczecin, attending classes on the various types of ship's engines, just about to feel the professor's book slap against his head . . .

I still haven't written anything about our cultural, educational, and intellectual activity over here. We don't idle and boldly penetrate the cultural structures of Havana. We tell everyone about the situation in Poland . . . about how we've been damaged during the war; but not only during the war, because we've also suffered before and after the war.

How the cruel invaders tried to depolonize Polish children, but these brave orphans didn't allow it and would've rather died than to subject to cultural annihilation! How the European Union is constantly taking money from us, wasting it for some never-finished, suspicious motorways and unnecessary buildings, ugly as sin, meanwhile our patience comes to its end; if it continues like this, we are obliged to sanction other member states, deal out financial penalties, and ultimately, even throw the Union out of the Union and run it ourselves! That's how it could end. However, this isn't always of interest to everyone as we've noticed in the literary centre of Dulce María where we've been invited to a sort of . . . yeah . . . nobody really knows what exactly.

The centre is located in the decrepit villa of Dulce María, God bless her soul. I don't know her work, but I guess she was writing some sort of crime novels; and must've had a contract with Mercedes, because the lodgings comprise around 400 square meters, with a height of eight meters. Inside, nice trinkets with some already broken-off brilliants, but still showing loads of diamonds, topazes and emeralds. A variety of different things that S. and I don't even have at home. Namely pianos. Or Japanese tapestries, Chinese vases, secret storage rooms, and – not like the ones we have at home, made from the shabbiest wood – marble stairs.

We get invited to the director's study. THE DIRECTOR'S. [. . .] (And now when I think of all the soap characters I met at every corner in Poland, those who didn't even stand, didn't even lie down next to the directors! The polished suit, padded at the elbows . . . showing an old commie's tics, making hand-washing gestures while talking about finances. A TURKISH JUMPER! Grey, grey, triple grey plus a bark cushion's pattern imprinted on his face! Meanwhile, this director. . . not an old crocodile, not Neptune, nothing like a chief. Remarkably big, black, with piercings, tattoos, puffs of grey curls and wearing a fantastic shirt as pink as a Barbie cabriolet. As is customary here, the meeting is assisted by his pretty secretary, who pours drinks, watches his nails and waits for the end of the assembly. She pours him a glass of juice, and, with a fancy gesture, he sweetens it with spoonfuls of sugar. Well, he says, and smudges the spilled juice on his desk, with fingers sticking out of his hand like a bundle of sausages.

Cuban writers are keeping him company. Two older fellows. One of them speaks Polish "TAK" [engl. 'yes']; it gives him so much pleasure that he continues boosting, repeating: tak, tak, tak in different tonalities, rhythms. And he's really

lucky that he's actually encountered such kind-hearted people like us. I don't even want to imagine what could've happened if he'd met some cruel fuckers who would've taken the piss out of him [. . .].

But we smile politely, and once the conversation gets to the topic of Polish culture – quite well known to our interlocutors that were subscribed to the “Polonia” journal in the seventies – almost starting a race, they begin to shout over to each other, exchanging the names of Polish writers: Sienkiewicz! Andreh Ważda! Stefan Milos! No, no, no, Czoslew!! CZOSLEW MILOS! No one knows what's supposed to be the outcome of all this, no one knows, and everyone seems a little intimidated by this lack of knowledge, this incertitude, entirely unlimited, but then again, strongly limited by the potential of this whole situation.

The vernissage of a young photographer from Havana, inspired by Stańczyk the jester, remains just as mysterious to us. BY THIS STAŃCZYK. The melancholic, sitting around in his red jammies! However, while we're making fun of the absurdities encountered in this enterprise, more and more people begin to gather in front of the Centro Hispanoamericano . . . more and more people . . . the Stańczykistic art is clearly an important, popular movement over here, attracting the public. The first Stańczykologic congress in Havana can be considered an open event. The Stańczykologists have been fetched from San Jose. The eccentric Stańczykology professor arrived from the University of Trinidad. [. . .]

After the successful conference, the Polish group of Stańczykologists takes us out for clubbing. A strict selection rules the club, like the Varsovian Piekarnia in 2001: a retro telephone with a dial disc at the entrance; daredevils get waved through by an employee, then, the security guy approves the earlier pre-admission. The straws sticking out of the mojitos show obvious tooth marks of their previous users, yeah that's true, but they only cost 15 nacionales, so just as much as a dirty, torn plastic bag.

A big signboard hangs in front of the bar, listing all the add-ins that are not available anymore, which really cuts the choice between a pizza with cheese and this same pizza. Pancakes are sizzling on a big and ancient cast-iron oven, watched by a cook who's wearing a blue polo shirt, showing brick-red stains under his arms – remnants of years' sun and sweat – but nevertheless suitable for daily use in Cuba. Just like the shabby porters' liveries represented in the elevators, or the police officers' turnout; they're wearing wellies instead of boots and uniforms that are completely perforated on the shoulders. The Pizzeria is obviously a popular place, although our guides of authentic Havana – Dorota, Hubert and Łukasz – think that it has really downgraded lately. [. . .] The following day [. . .] we drove down to Trinidad.

We take a taxi-bus, together with a gang of young Spanish women, two old Dutch bon vivants and a young, silent Brit showing a desperate gaze, who, as I

realize now, was probably going there to commit some sort of exceptionally well-elaborated suicide, e.g. to let himself get torn apart by some local taxi-drivers, merchants or other people who'd push a lunch-menu into his hands.

I could still see him walking the busy streets – with frantic eyes, a map and a guidebook, he was rapidly, pointlessly walking in circles, not looking at anything. Back in the bus, the road stretches before us, it's hot, the vapourway is boring as hell, we get stuck behind some horse, tractor, smelly Kamaz truck again and again, or behind the bus that's very popular over here; that is, a lorry, with people sitting on a bench above the load bed.

We're surrounded by thickets and jungles, with ridiculous monuments, ruined stadiums, abandoned skyscrapers, once cheerful and today cheerless towns, leaning out of this verdancy from time to time, in a state of long-suspended decay; with single billboards standing around, chewed up by wild animals and alternately citing Che and Fidel. The driver – a young Latino wearing a golden necklace, a simple shirt and worn tracksuit bottoms – stops quite frequently during our drive, taking care of some transactions, interests, orders, changes, leaving numerous boxes in the bushes and picking up others in return.

And somehow, we're finally arriving in Trinidad. By now, we've been in Guanabo and Havana, which, apart from the set-up districts for tourists, has its own independent life, completely dumping itself on everyone. Here – the sheer opposite. Only a part of tourist life is pulsing, swarming about, antlike, while all around it, this destitute church-town is slowly falling apart.

At the local tourist office, the town's residents encircle rich Germans, Italians, English, and Dutch people, trying to squeeze out as much as possible of their purses, while the rest is waiting on the outskirts, in numbness, doze, lethargy. Abandoned on one of those dark and sultry streets, profoundly covered with buildings, we still haven't realized that we've ended up in the Cuban equivalent to the Polish Kazimierz Dolny. The ancient townhouses have openly displayed ground floors, so that it's possible to look inside, where every family presents some sort of exhibition of their lives: the prettiest furniture, flowers, pictures of relatives from Miami, enclosed by golden frames. The real life, I think, though it might be more modest, seems to really be taking place in these theatre-like settings.

Italy? Germany? Holland? – people are shouting after us. Poland – we respond initially, obviously acting thick as mice. Lewandowski! – they respond. So, we change our strategy. Italy – we respond, but that's when they say: Berlusconi! They know how to respond to every headword. Holland? Hollandaise sauce. Germany? Hitler. Saying all this, they immediately approach us, pushing some junk into our hands – it turns out that we've already bought different things off them

during this pattern; now it's just about paying them. We try to escape, but there are other ones jumping out from every corner, alley and angle. [. . .]

Wherever we find ourselves, tucked up wearily, Silvio rushes upon us and begins to show us his tricks: some balls, little boxes here, cards there, tiny cups! Seeing this, an older woman, selling some bracelets made from rowan berries, acts cleverly and joins Silvio in pestering us; waiters are instantly appearing from the underground, pushing their watery vapomohitos into our hands and everyone interacts in this transparent conspiracy and close collaboration; we're already sitting down, and they are waving our arms, walk with our feet, play with our heads as if they were balls, charging us for everything all the time. Over and above, Caribbean flops and trillers are arriving from everywhere, charming at first, but ultimately, even someone who can count to three, could easily sum up all these songs.

Below the bus station, a crowd of people romps about, chattering leisurely – just as the bus arrives, they break away like a flock of crows. A little further up, it's already less touristy on the streets – there's some kind of terrible silence, suspension. Someone is watching television. A horse sleeps. A dog barks. An old mommy stands around and stares. A man is cutting his nails, his wife and daughter are watching him. Security guards on the beach, making sure no locals try to enter it.

I didn't shed any tears after Trinidad. But I returned to Poland with a certain grief. Cause I had the feeling of having experienced a spiritual transformation, a total resocialization. I've never felt as awfully rich as I did after my return from Cuba. The apartment - like an only slightly run-down Carrington residency. We can light up our cigars. Pomp, extravagance. Two ketchups in the fridge. LUXURY. That's where I ran out of noteworthy advantages. Darkness. Internet. People scurry past concrete fortresses. Sublime silence on the metro, everyone shoots bubbles. Shopping. Cars. No music. Alienation, loneliness. It's totally unreal, knowing that, just a moment ago, we were carefree, happy, and alive, alive like never before.

Dorota Masłowska (born 1983 in Wejherowo) is a Polish writer, playwright, rapper, and columnist. She is the author of the novel *Wojna polsko-ruska pod flagg biało-czerwoną* (2002, UK edition: *White and Red*, Atlantic Books; 2005 US edition: *Snow White and Russian Red*, Grove Press), for which she received the Polish cultural award Polityka's Passport. For her next novel *Paw królowej* (2005, *The Queen's Peacock*), she received 2006 Nike Award, Poland's most important literary prize. Her play *Dwoje biednych Rumunów mówiących po polsku* (2006, *A Couple of Poor, Polish-Speaking Romanians*. Transl. by Lisa Goldman and Paul Sirett, Oberon Books 2008) is performed all over the world. As a rapper artist, she has released two albums *Społeczeństwo jest niemile* (2014, *The Society is Not Nice*, aka Mister D.) and most recently *Wolne* [2023, ambiguously: *Free* or *The Slow Ones* (songs)]. She lives in Warsaw.