

Delia

She wouldn't open the door to me that morning. Not at first. "Delia," I called. Neighbors shouted down that I should go away. Delia lives less than a block from Havana's bay on the second floor of what had long ago been a sumptuous building, in a neighborhood that before the revolution had been "caliente" with its gangsters and whores and remained so. "Delia," I called to her. As everybody knows, there probably isn't a doorbell working anywhere in the city, but not to worry, Delia's windows were hardly ever shuttered. "Delia says 'no me jodas,'" somebody shouted down from another window. A couple of kids playing out front told me Delia was really mad.

Delia is the premier hairdresser of Havana and one of her clients was on her way over with a charanga: eight musicians, four violins, three flutes, and a hint of drums. Richard Edgues was supposed to be coming too. Edgues, master of the silver flute. Edgues would be leading the charanga, of course. He's been leading charangas since the 1940s when his flute gave the chachacha its particular lilt. And for just as long as Edgues has been playing chachachas, he's been playing for the dead. Sometimes at the same time.

Like today for instance. That was what was supposed to happen.

One of Delia's clients had hired the charanga and declared a party. For Josephine Baker. Today was after all her birthday. And since Delia Montalvo had been Josephine Baker's hairdresser for decades, naturally the party must be at Delia's. However, according to one of Delia's other clients, the client arranging the party was apparently hoping not only to refresh the dead Ms. Baker's spirit but capture it. Swallow it. Become Josephine Baker, *La Seconda*. Yoruba magic with maybe a little Bantu Palo Mayombe mixed in can accomplish such things, it is said.

Delia explained all this about the charanga to me once she had recognized my voice and come down herself to hug me in and up the stairs. Two years had passed, and now finally we were sitting together again. She as usual with her Salems, both of us with our rumcitos. All around were Delia's great mirrors in their filigreed gilt frames; the fans of stained glass—the vidrios above her windows; on the floor—handpainted tile in glazes of whites and pinks.

How old must she be, I wondered for the hundredth time. Her children were well, she told me. Her daughter had graduated from medical school and was working in Angola—. I had known that, yes? And as she went back to the story of the charanga, I waited for the trademark Delia look. She'll talk and as she talks, her eyes, her mouth appear nearly mournful. If you keep on looking, if you don't turn away, suddenly she'll half-collapse in laughter.

We met over a decade ago. One of New York's glitzy fashion magazines had sent me to Cuba on assignment. And as I made my rounds, talking to the editors of the various women's magazines about revolutionary consciousness and interviewing designers at the State-run fashion industry about anti-imperialist aesthetics, somebody happened to mention that Josephine Baker's hairdresser was alive and well and living near the bay.

It was during the glory days of Cuban music that Delia Montalvo and Josephine Baker found one another. Cuban pianist and crooner Bola de Nieve—Snowball as the huge ebony-colored man was called—was the hit of Paris. When his friend Josephine asked him about a reliable hairdresser for her Latin American tour, he recommended the little girl with the sad eyes who used to sweep the shop in the old neighborhood. Folks had said she had magic hands.

The two women stayed together, living in Paris and traveling several continents for over a dozen years. What was Baker really like? "Sweet." Delia said it again and again. "She used to wear a little skirt," Delia continued mournfully. "It was made out of bananas. And Josephine would dance. And the bananas would fall off, one by one." By now Delia is in half-collapse mode. "Ah, Josephine, she was so sweet."

Josephine gave Delia the money to start that rarest of pre-revolutionary Cuban establishments, an integrated hair salon. “She told me I must take the money, I must have the salon, even after I told Josephine that I couldn’t marry her brother. Her brother was ugly—feo, feo, feo. He was too ugly.

“When I had my salon, every Saturday night everyone would make themselves very beautiful and come together to dance. Bola de Nieve would come when he was in Havana. Ah, but Bola dreamed of his death. I told you that story, no? How he flew home from Paris after his dream? He thought if he came home, he’d confuse the spirits, and if he had real Cuban mamey, his heart would grow so strong. But it all happened just like in the dream said—in the middle of the night on an old bus, on tour somewhere and he couldn’t breathe.

But enough of that. Let’s remember the happy times. There were lots and lots of happy times. Bola would come and sing at my salon, and so would El Beny. The Incomparable Beny More, they’d call him. But it was to my hair salon he’d come after Montmartre or Sans Souci. Ah, Beny he was so sweet. He had a farm and named his animals after all the musicians in Havana. His pigs for instance were called *Generoso y su grupo*. I’ve told you about his farm, right? Beny couldn’t keep it. Beny never had any money. Beny grew up in the cane fields. And when things were hard for him, he’d go back and cut cane. Anyway, on Saturday night we all would come to the salon and dance all the night long. In the morning we’d have hot chocolate. And nobody tried to take anybody else’s soul. No, I don’t remember that even once.”

All this uproar about the charanga had started months before when Delia’s client portrayed Josephine in a Cuban musical review. The client was a singer, of course, and there always had been a resemblance to Josephine, but it was when Delia had combed her hair in the old style that the singer had come to see the real possibilities.

“I curse the day I first combed her hair,” Delia told me. “Imagine anybody wanting to hurt my sweet Josephine. As though I would let that happen. And in my house!”

Delia is just about the only person I know in all of Havana who under no circumstances wants anything to do with the old Yoruba ways.

Here's why. There is a gatekeeper in the Yoruban pantheon, Ellegua he is called. Ellegua is he who stands in doorways, at the crossroads, at the beginning and the end of things. Ellegua is said to be an old old man with the head of a child. "And that's exactly right, that's exactly what he looks like," Delia told me once. "Except that he's silver." She was six when one hot night she awoke shivering. Ellegua was there dancing. "I tried to touch him, I thought someone must be playing a trick, and when I touched him it was just like touching a spiderweb, no more substantial



than that, still he kept dancing and dancing. All night long."

"Nobody is going to come here refreshing the dead," Delia said. "None of that mierda. Not here."

On Josephine's birthday, Delia gets out the CDs and plays her a little Mozart. That's all.