

“To smoke or to eat, that is the question.”

Josefina de Diego  
**Internal Monologue on a  
Corner in Havana**



Translated by Dick Cluster

God, I'm dying for a cigarette! If only my pension got me through the month, I wouldn't have to sell my rationed smokes. But a peso apiece, that's not bad, with that I can buy a little rice and a head of garlic every now and then. You can't do much on eighty pesos a month. Who would have thought that after twenty-plus years of work and with a university degree, I'd have to stand here on this corner selling my monthly cigarettes? And surreptitiously, because there's no way I'm getting caught in this "profit-oriented activity," as they say these days—without paying the tax on it I'd be in jail for sure. And how I love to smoke! But, in truth, I can't complain. This corner is quite entertaining, everybody's mixed up in something, more or less the same as me. Really it's a prime spot: the Farmers' Market and two kiosks of CADECA, the Houses of Hard-Currency Exchange. Such an ugly acronym, they really outdid themselves this time. There are other terrible historic ones, like CONACA or ECOA, but this is one of

the worst. Sometimes I miss potential customers because I'm amusing myself by people-watching. It's comical, almost musical. You hear, "psst, psst, *change money*, listen, exchange," all the time, like a timid hawker's chant. Or else the old man who sidles up so mysteriously and tells you "I fix gas stoves" and keeps walking, and you don't know whether you really heard it or you imagined it all. The other day a lady let loose a really hair-raising yell because she thought the old guy was a thief, and then there was a hell of a fuss. The old man didn't show his face in the market for about a week. I could smoke this cigarette right now. God, how hard it is to quit! If it hadn't been for this illness, I'd still be working and things wouldn't be so tough. When they told me they were retiring me on eighty pesos for "total incapacity to work," I almost had a fit. What an absurd law, since when you get sick is when you have to spend the most. But all the letters I sent, complaining, didn't do a bit of good. That's the law. And eighty pesos, at the official rate, that's less than four dollars. So there: Improvise! Once in a while somebody with dollars drops a coin or two, which helps my budget out. The one who's even worse off than me is the guy who sells plastic bags from the *shopping*,<sup>1</sup> for a peso. This truly is illegal, more illegal than what I do, because at least I bought my little cigarettes myself, but those bags, where did he get them from? Whenever I can, I warn him of possible inspectors. We have a kind of unofficial union of "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." We're all here for the same reason, trying to get by without hurting anybody much. In fact, it doesn't seem to me we're hurting anyone at all, but I can understand how the Government can't allow it. If everybody were like us—but no, people are too much, if you give them an inch they'll take a mile and they'll end up robbing you with machine guns like in American films. Boy, how I miss my TV! A few days ago it broke on me and now I can't even

---

1 The *shopping*, pronounced "choppin," is Cuban slang for the network of hard-currency (dollar) stores, now accessible to Cubans and foreigners alike. The nickname probably comes from the bilingual ad for one such chain: *compras fáciles*, "easy shopping."

watch the soaps. Luckily just the picture went out, so at least you can hear it. 'Cause getting it fixed, forget it, it's Japanese, Sanyo, and the repairman charges in dollars. At least my nephew is an electronic technician and soon he'll be back from a mobilization in the countryside—he went with the university. The mobilizations of the sixties and seventies, they were fun. Or at least that's how I remember them. Maybe it's just the "good old days" always seeming better, I don't know. I always thought they weren't very productive, especially the Sunday morning ones. "The important thing is attitude, *compañera*," they told me when I tried to demonstrate to the leader in question that between gas, snack, depreciation on the truck tires, oil, et cetera, the cost was greater than any possible income. "Professional vices," he told me. "Be optimistic. You economists think too much." In those days to buy a pack of cigarettes over and above the ration was just a peso and sixty centavos—shocking—and now they charge ten. What I'd love to do would be to buy a jar of that coconut sweet from the guy across the way there, but for a dollar? That's what I get for a whole pack of loose cigarettes, no way. Maybe later on, if I get some "reinforcements" from my sister who lives in Venezuela. Every now and then along come a few dollars that I sure can use. If I sell all these cigarettes I'm going to treat myself to a paper cone full of banana chips, for two pesos, two cigarettes, that's not bad. You can't always live in austerity, no sir, because "Life is a Dream," as my high school literature teacher always used to say. Such a good teacher! He made us learn a few things by heart, to improve our vocabularies he said. I never thought I'd come to understand so perfectly the part about "when he turned his head/he found his answer on viewing/that another wise man was chewing/his discarded crust of bread." Around here there are tons of those wise men. But the one who's really worse off than me is the one who picks through the garbage dumpster in front of my house. The poor man, he doesn't know there's never anything of value in there—I give it a quick look every day. He ought to go to one by some embassy or near the hotels. Although it's not so easy, because the dumpsters have got their proprietors

by now. If I don't sell these cigarettes soon, I'm leaving, because it looks like Noah's Flood is about to hit. And I'll end up with no banana chips. Yesterday one of my neighbors, in the building across the street, put a sign up in his porch: "Plumber—house calls." He must be dimwitted, how else can he fix plumbing except by making house calls? There's a lot of nuttiness, people are posting all kinds of signs, hilarious ones. Not to mention the names of the *paladares*.<sup>2</sup> Cubans have a certain nostalgia for small businesses and for advertisements different from the official ones, which sometimes makes you want to cry: "The Delights of Eden," right, and what you see are three little tables with a few homemade tablecloths. But clean, and with pleasant staff. I worked in one, and things were going really well, but then it got closed down and I was in the street again. Now it's started pouring, ugh, what do I do now? Smoke the cigarette and not buy the chips? A dilemma worse than Hamlet's! How would it go in my case, teacher? "To smoke or to eat, that is the question." That would be funny if it weren't the truth, and if it weren't for the fact that this is me instead of some latter-day tropical Hamlet. Better I should take the cigarette home and, if there's gas, make a little coffee and have my smoke. As they say in that charming English movie, "Life isn't perfect and besides, it's short." Tomorrow's another day. Who knows, maybe a few bucks from my sister will turn up.

### RESPONDING PERSONALLY

1. Write your thoughts and feelings as you read this selection.  
OR Write an internal monologue you think a street person might be having as you walk by.
2. List the protagonist's complaints. With another student, compare lists to see how they are similar and/or different.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Paladares*, literally "palates," are small family-run restaurants in people's homes. The popular term comes from the name of a fast-food chain started by a character in a Brazilian soap opera shown on Cuban TV.