

The Queen of Bon Vivant

It is nice to get away from the muddy Mississippi River and cruise down to Cuba. I closed off your study and packed a couple of summer dresses. I just brought one hat and a pair of gloves. I can go shopping in the market and find some comfortable shoes to wear. This time of year, the banana plantations should be thriving and a little heat doesn't bother me. It's getting too cold back home to sit on the veranda and look out over the tree-lined city below. Standing on the starboard deck, my skin soaks up the moist thick air leaving no need for face cream.

Jacques, you are going to love this trip. Over the ten years we have been here together, this time will be different, New Year's Eve in Havana. Sounds like a second honeymoon. Doesn't it? Holding on tight to your urn, I want to feel you close. You always said you wanted me to spread your ashes in the blue Caribbean waters. Growing up Catholic, I thought cremation was blasphemous but with seventeen lawyers signing off on that lengthy will, there was no way I was going to get you in a casket like I wanted. Nevertheless, I will be buried in the family plot down the street in Lafayette Cemetery One. It faces Commander's Palace, so Daddy can get a whiff of good food even in the grave. I will take you with me. Forever together is our motto. That is how we made it through all these thirty-six years, you the intellectual and I the bon vivant.

I can keep up with you when we are alone. Then your Tulane buddies come around and I just slip back into my role as hostess. Luckily, you provided well for us with the three-story house on St. Charles. All the quiet neighbors are so envious, especially when the jazz band from The Columns hotel shows up after midnight. Ellis can make that baby piano come alive and you can hear the sound of the stand-up bass drifting through the trees. I love when Nellie comes to sing for us with her sultry voice. No wonder someone is always calling the police. When they

arrive, they just stay and tap their feet. The night lingers into dawn. The smoke from the last cigarette smoldering in the ashtray, catching the morning sun coming in from the tall green shutters. That is my favorite time of day. Then Maribel shakes us and makes a fuss because of all the glasses she finds spread from the parlor to the back porch. After she calms down, I can hear her humming the last song while she makes us breakfast, shrimp n' grits with a side of sausage.

Allowing her to stay with us was the right thing to do. I wouldn't think of her living in a shotgun shack and taking the streetcar to the house every day. Maybe that is how Protestants do it, but not me. I was raised better. Maribel came to us on her own accord, as a reference from Father Jim. He knew we would take good care of her and her children. We cleaned her up, made her look presentable and accepted her as one of the family. I am glad she only had two little ones to care for, Delilah age five and Anthony age eight. They were a handful at first. You remember Jacques, don't you? She had on that flour sack dress and yellowed apron. When she grinned, that broken tooth stood out. That is all I could see. Yes, you are right. I only look at the flaws. She didn't have much else with her, but a few clothes and three books for the kids. It was our pleasure to give those children a proper education at St. Mary's Academy. Daddy helped set up the foundation that gave them a full scholarship from grade school all the way to Tulane. He wants to keep the legacy going, one way or another.

Looking down at the cloisonné urn, I am getting that sinking feeling in my stomach again. You would like it, Jacques. I had it custom made. A very simple design, not lots of flowers like the others, but a heavy wavy line that snakes around to the top. Cobalt blue and gilded in gold, just like our favorite place setting. I want it to match the décor when I set you on the mantle above the fireplace. Of course, that is for another day.

I'm looking forward to our last trip together. This time we will go to that little café you always like and drink from the demitasse cups. I felt bad in '51, we had to end our trip early and couldn't make it. Oh, too many Cuba Libres the night before. I remember you laughing when I got up on the piano stand, threw my dress up and did the rhumba for the audience. The morning after was rough. I had such nausea. I couldn't take any smells that country was putting off. I promise this time will be different. Not too many drinks, just enough to get me smiling again.

The temperature is changing, Jacques. It is getting hotter and heavier with salt air. Can you feel it? Can you taste it? Just ever so slightly. Please tell me again why this gulf is so special. In your long prose, I know I got tired of hearing the same old stories. Now I wish you were here to tell it one more time. "Do you know why the water is so blue here, Vi?" You would go on and on about it. I sometimes just pretended to listen.

The ship is slowing down now. I took the biggest one this time. You never wanted to travel by boat. I didn't know how to handle your senseless fear. I guess it's all the books you read about the Titanic. I should have never let Daddy give you those every year for your birthday. I didn't know it would ruin your taste for cruises. You didn't die at sea; you died in your bed gasping for air! It was a horrendous sight. I tried to lift you up but I had to turn away. I yelled for Maribel to help. By the time she came in the room, you were gone. Just like that. I didn't even say goodbye. I don't want to think about that now!

This particular ship, the S.S. Florida, pulls out of Miami. I flew in Tuesday and stayed at the Fontainebleau instead of our usual Lido Spa hotel. I am living the high life and proud. I am not ashamed of our wealth. You worked hard as a lawyer for almost 20 years. A damn good one, too! It's not your fault those people got hurt offshore. I blame the oil companies that are greedy and value life for nothing but two cents. That was your job, to sue them for all they had. People

are still talking about the huge settlements you won for your clients. You did well by giving them more winnings than the court granted. I will always be in awe of your generosity. Just so you know, they are keeping your name on the letterhead. It is out of respect for your contribution to the firm and it doesn't hurt to have the recognition to bring in new clients. It was Daddy's idea. I didn't even have to ask.

Look, the shore birds are here to greet us, swooping in and catching the current gracefully. You always told me that we are getting close to land when we see the birds flying overhead. The shrieking sound tells me they know you have gone. I don't have to explain it to them.

I hear the Captain over the intercom for port of call. Let's get you settled in so we have time for our usual stroll along El Malecón, the esplanade that lines the waterside. I can see the vibrant greens, blues and yellows dotting the horizon. The buildings neatly side by side look so quaint and homey. We were going to buy one of those cottages. I'm glad Hemingway talked you out of it. That way we could stay at his place and not worry about the rebels brewing in the jungle. And, to think you can overthrow a government. In a way, I feel sorry for these people but if they can't help themselves, who can? Daddy says too much money goes out of this country and not enough stays. We cannot be helping everybody. Oh, the arguments you would get into. You never knew how torn I was. I couldn't take anyone's side in that debate. Therefore, I just slid back into being a hostess as Mother had done all those years. She taught me well to play the balancing act.

I reserved the Hotel Nacional with the Spanish spires, the Mexican tiled entrance and the artwork lining the hallways. They are holding our special room on the top floor with a view of the crystal water. I will make sure to spread a bit of you in the flower garden around the pool,

amongst the giant tropical bromeliads and overgrown bougainvillea. You will always have your spot to read the morning paper and keep you informed of the happenings stateside. I appreciated that you left me the society page untouched. We were a good pair. Your gentleness calmed my nerves whenever I found out that we missed another one of the Governor's galas.

In the evening, you would turn in early to be rested for your morning walk in the fog and I stayed down at the bar drinking Dirty Martinis, smoking Chesterfields. No sissy tropical drinks for me, those were only for tourists. I never told you I enjoyed talking to the bartender. Slipping him a \$100 bill to bribe him, I wanted to know where Frank Sinatra was staying. I never got a glimpse of Frank but my martinis always came with four olives. I appreciated that you let me sleep in and order room service. You took such good care of me. I thought for sure I would be in the ground before you. What am I going to do now? I guess I will just have to find that bartender and reminisce. For the rest of my life? I'll think about that tomorrow. Today, you and I are going shopping!

Which dress do you like, the pink or the yellow? I know what you are going to say, "Vi, you look good even in a potato sack." That Halloween I did look good but I had to trim that sack in one of my minks and wear pearls. I wasn't going to look poor at the Wilson's party. I am going to get them both. Let's not look at the price tags. This is our vacation to splurge.

The bellman just handed me the envelope. You know, the one with the safe deposit key that we left with the hotel manager last year. You told me it was the responsible thing to do. One key in Cuba and one key that was always with you. I made sure I took it out of your tuxedo pocket before they burned you up. That was our emergency plan. If anything happened while in this unstable country, we would go to the Concierge desk, ask for Mr. Henri and get our funds out of the safe. Then bribe a pilot leaving on one of the last planes out of here. Hemingway

laughed at you every time you explained it to him. He was always the dare devil, never paying any mind to the rumblings and whispers from the laborers. Mary and I would sit on the steps and sip fresh lemonade talking about her time as a war correspondent in Paris. It sounded so romantic. Not the part of being in the middle of any war torn country, but her stories always got me excited, wanting to go on an adventure! You always talked me out of it. Who will stop me now?

Good morning Dear, I'm glad I brought you along on this trip. It would have been so lonely here without you. I retired early last night so I could be up before noon. You see, I kept my promise that I made to you on the ship. I'm sorry I couldn't have joined you for breakfast on our trips. Better late than never, don't you think? Room service is here with fresh squeezed orange juice. All of your favorites, croissants with blackberry preserves and crispy bacon. I smuggled the canned figs in my suitcase.

It's time for poolside, the sand in my shoes can wait. Walking around the cabanas, I don't see the usual towel boys. I wonder where they are. We tip them well enough, all of us rich Americans spending our dollars here. They would rather sweat in the cane fields than sit around the pool all day. That's a shame. Such strange priorities these people have. I'll never understand it. I wonder who is going to put lotion on my back. I'll sit under the umbrella until I make some new friends.

Jacques, is that you? I swear that is you. You are looking straight at me. Your dark wavy hair looks the same and I know I bought you that shirt in the French Quarter. Grief is a funny thing that plays with the mind. I see you everywhere. Not so much back home but here especially. I hear your voice in the sway of the palm fronds. I feel your touch with the sea breeze

coming off the surf and an ever presence of your cologne mingling with the smell of black coffee.

“Excuse me, boy. I’ll have another, thank you,” I say.

You always corrected me when I called them boys. “Vi they are grown men, treat them with respect. We are in their country.” I would just laugh and flip my hair. I know better now but old habits die hard. This drink is for you, just for old times’ sake. I will sip it slowly as you tried to teach me to enjoy a fine scotch. It was hard not to choke even one small taste got my mouth burning. Give me a Martini, vodka please, extra dirty. You always had one ready for me.

Time to get dressed. The party is tonight and I want to be in a lively mood for the band. I think I will wear the black dress we bought at Bergdorf’s in New York four years ago. It was a wonderful trip walking in the snow, window shopping and getting ready for Christmas. Of course, you couldn’t wait to get me back to the room. That was my intention all along. I truly love you, Jacques. Even though I may not have told you as much as you wanted to hear. I don’t think I will ever find another quite like you, darling. Why bother looking. Aren’t we having a good time?

Harry and Ethel Morrison are meeting us for dinner at nine. I thought I would surprise them. We haven’t seen them since they moved to Vegas and opened the casino. He got the idea here in Havana. You were so sweet to play along with Harry and his gambling associates. I got the last minute spa treatment with our winnings. Sorry I saddled you with them while I enjoyed some peace and quiet. You know how Ethel can talk. Too bad Harry lost and she couldn’t join me for the day. She would have loved the two-hour massage. I did, immensely.

“It is time to polish you up for your debut. We want to look our best,” I say.

I brought the Hermes scarf. You know the one you said matches my hazel eyes. “Vi, your eyes sparkle like the stars in the sky.” You would smile, I laughed at your attempt at charming me into a kiss. I know you are not going to approve of this outfit but I am wearing the red lipstick even though you prefer the blush pink. Hair is in an Updo, not down as always, nails a little longer, with a French manicure! Look in the mirror, the fishnet stockings fit perfectly. How daring! From now on, Jacques, you will have to make the compromises.

The Morrisons left us a note at the front desk. They will be a few minutes late. That gives us time to get a drink at the bar. I won’t flirt too much. I swear that was so long ago. I was just asking the man at the bar what book he was reading. I don’t pay attention to fancy shoes and watches. Do I? Well, they were Cole Haan’s and a solid gold Piaget no less. Nobody here tonight seems to match that style. Nothing for you to worry about here, darling.

I guess you will have the usual for dinner, sea scallops in butter sauce with a side of baked potato, no chives. I’m going to have the Lobster Thermidor, side of asparagus with hollandaise sauce and a Caesar salad. I can hear you say, “Are you sure you want the salad, Vi.” Yes, make sure they put extra anchovies. I am going to start to live dangerously on our trips. To top it off, I’ll have the Baked Alaska for dessert. This time I will have to order the sherry. I hope Harry can remember which one you like. I see them at the bar. I wave them towards our table. They look perplexed. Ethel is staring at your new outfit. I think you look rather chic.

Yes, Jacques this is going to be a wonderful last trip together. Happy New Year, Darling! Say goodbye to 1958 and on to 1959! I hear the fireworks outside. They seem to be starting early. Viva la Cuba!