

# FRONT PORCH

## **The Taxi** **Roddy Doyle**

-You like Cuban music? said the taxi driver.

He hadn't started the car yet. Bernard hadn't even told him the name of the hotel.

-I like good Cuban music, said Bernard.

-I have good Cuban music, said the driver. -For you.

Then he turned the key and the car was full of the same shite Bernard had been hearing all week. The driver took the car past the market stalls and the gang of cops on the corner and turned left onto the main road.

-Hotel? said the driver.

-Paradisus, said Bernard. -How much?

The driver pointed at the meter.

-Meter, he said.

He tapped the cd player.

-You like?

Bernard didn't answer. The driver turned it up.

-This is a special cd, he said. -Very special.

He leaned across and opened the glove compartment. The taxi was the only car on the road. The road was good and new looking; there were no potholes ahead. He straightened up behind the wheel. He'd left the glove compartment open.

There were cds inside, like the ones Bernard's kids burnt for their friends at home. It was a little display – three different covers in a row.

-10 pesos, said the driver.

Bernard said nothing.

-For your wife, said the driver. -Best music.

Bernard was getting used to this. It was a communist country. He'd grown up always knowing that, and it had said it in the guide book he'd read on the plane. And all those hijackers on The News when he was a kid – 'Take me to Cuba'. It was America's greatest enemy. It was nearly the last of the old-fashioned communist states. So, he hadn't expected to find the country full of salesmen.

-You want cigars?

-Want the best cigars?

-Want a beautiful girl? Very beautiful for you.

He'd been hearing it all week. On the bus here from Havana a few days ago, the bus driver had stopped at the side of the road. He'd plugged in a microphone and introduced himself as the best bartender in the world. He recommended his pina coladas. Drinks with alcohol would cost 2 pesos, and 1 peso without. He waited, then started the bus again and brought Bernard and four other passengers to Varadero.

Bernard hated pina coladas. And he hated knowing that he had enough money in his pocket to feed and clothe the bus driver's family for a couple of years. It was the type of money he always carried at home, but here it was a fortune.

He loved the country but he was sick of feeling guilty.

The car went over a hole and the cds began to slide out of the glove compartment. Bernard caught them and pushed them back in.

-You want? said the driver. -Which?

Bernard didn't want to say No.

-Your mother likes this music?

Bernard didn't answer. His mother was dead but he didn't want to say that. He knew it wouldn't stop the driver.

-Cuban music is best, said the driver. -Yes?

Bernard looked out the window.

-Where you from, my friend? said the driver.

-Ireland, said Bernard.

Everywhere else he'd been in the last ten years, in every other country, the response had nearly always been the same. 'Ireland? Ah, Roy Keane.'

Not here, though.

-Ireland? said the driver. -Shannon? You know Shannon?

-Yeah, said Bernard.

The driver thumped his chest.

-I been there, he said. -Beautiful country. Shannon Airport. Twenty years from here.

He was smiling.

-They like Cuban music in Shannon.

Bernard looked out the window again.

-Good Cuban music, my friend, said the driver. -You like. You said.

Bernard looked out, as they passed a queue at a corner. A lot of old women, and younger women holding kids. They were waiting for food. Rice and bread, maybe chickens. Bernard was going back to the hotel for as much as he wanted to eat – he was starving. But those people would be waiting for hours. He'd seen it in Havana as well, people in a line outside an ordinary looking door. Not a shop, or anything that he'd have recognised as a shop. Queuing for their rations.

Bernard nodded. He didn't look properly at the driver.

-Good music, said the driver. -You said.

-That's right, he said. -I like good music.

He hated this. He was no good at it. Haggling, or whatever it was called. Saying No.

They were at the edge of the town. The hitchers were there, on the side of the road, and on the road itself.

-10 pesos, said the driver.

That was 10 pesos convertible, about the same as 10 euro. It was what Bernard gave his youngest son every Saturday. It was what a doctor earned here in two weeks. It was a pint and a packet of Pringles. It was survival.

It was a pain in the arse.

-Ladies, said the driver. -They love this music. Yes?

Bernard had the Buena Vista Social Club at home, and one of the Ruben Gonzalez records, and he played them both now and again. He used to play them a lot more; his ex-wife had hated them. But this stuff in the taxi, it was like the German disco music that was big when Bernard was a kid. It was the music he heard in the gym in Dublin, when he went there.

He didn't want anything to do with it. He didn't even want to pretend – just buy one off the man and throw it in the bin back in his hotel room.

He didn't know why he was angry.

But he was angry.

And he did. He did know.

-I doubt it, he said.

He looked at the driver, and he looked away again. At the hitchers on the edge of the town.

-What you say? said the driver.

-What you said there, said Bernard. -About women liking this music.

-Yes, said the driver. -For sure.

-No, said Bernard. -It's crap.

Why did he say that? He didn't know. It wasn't like him; he didn't think it was. Being rude like that, aggressive.

The hitchers were another surprise. Bernard hardly saw any these days in Ireland. But there were crowds of them here, at the edge of every town, all along the roads. Women, men — a lot of black people — kids on their own. None of them looking desperate or tired. And none of the back-packers you'd see in other countries. There were even soldiers here, waiting. Going home? He couldn't tell.

It was guilt. That was what had him on edge. Being cornered. It was having to face the fact that he was rich.

The music stopped, suddenly. Bernard didn't look. He heard the glove compartment opened, right under his face. But he didn't look. He heard it shut.

There were beautiful women on the side of the road. And the sea behind them. It was Paradise, really. But what was it for them? They weren't looking at the sea. The taxi was going straight past them.

It was a life he'd never witnessed before. And that made him feel bad too. He was going home in a couple of days. He'd have his tan and his photos.

Enough. He was being stupid.

The music was on again. Changed. It was 'Chan Chan', the first track on The Buena Vista Social Club.

-Very good, said the driver. -Yes.

-Yes, said Bernard.

The driver nodded.

-Very special cd, he said. -10 pesos.

-I have it already, said Bernard.

The driver looked at him. Not like he'd been caught, or he'd lost the argument. He was looking at Bernard, like Bernard was a bit thick.

-10 pesos, he said again.

-I have it already, said Bernard again.

But he knew; he knew as he spoke. It wasn't the cd; it wasn't about the exchange. It was the money. The driver didn't want to beg for it.

He looked at Bernard.

-10 pesos, he said again.

And Bernard heard anger for the first time since he'd arrived in Cuba.

-Too much for us. Nothing for you.

He wasn't looking at Bernard now. He was staring ahead, at the straight road. They were near the hotel. They turned off the main road. The driver slowed at the gate. He rolled down his window as the security man came out of his hut. He shook hands with the security man. They spoke briefly in Spanish.

-Your room number, said the taxi driver.

The security man had bent down. He was looking in at Bernard.

-3412, said Bernard.

The security man stood back up. He tapped the roof of the taxi.

Cubans weren't allowed into the hotel, unless they worked there. Although Bernard had seen Cuban women with older European men, on the beach and at the swimming pool. He'd wondered how that happened, how it was arranged.

He was stupid.

The driver stopped at the entrance. He pointed at the meter.

-11, he said.

Bernard took out 20.

He waited for the change. He'd give the man a tip but he wanted the change first.

Then he changed his mind; he was still being stupid.

-Keep it, he said.

-Thank you.

The driver looked at Bernard.

-This is a very beautiful country, he said. -But it is hard. Goodbye.

-Bye, said Bernard.

He held out his hand. The driver took it. They smiled.

Bernard got out of the car.