

**The First Two Pages of “The Pearl of the Antilles”
by Carolina Garcia-Aguilera**

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An Essay by Carolina Garcia-Aguilera

Last year, I was honored to have been invited by the editors of *Edgar and Shamus Go Golden* to contribute a short story to the collection they were putting together. There were only three requirements: that the story feature a private investigator as the protagonist; that the story was set sometime between 1910 and in the 1940s; and that it could not be more than 8,000 words in length. The first two requirements did not present a challenge—as a licensed private investigator for over thirty years, I was familiar with the duties of the profession, and as a history major in college, I had experience in conducting research—but it was the third one with which I knew that I would have trouble complying.

In the twenty-five years since my first novel was published—I’ve now written twelve—I’d contributed to over a dozen anthologies, so I knew the challenge that writing a short story with a limit of 8,000 words presented. For me, writing a 100,000-word manuscript was easier than an 8,000-word short story; writing “short” did not come easily. I was much more comfortable taking my time to lay out a story—structure, pacing, dialogue,

descriptions, etc.—and condensing it into just a few thousand words would take a great deal of planning. However, I'd never shied away from a challenge—especially one that involved being part of such a prestigious endeavor—so I accepted the invitation.

The first decision that I needed to make was where to place the story. The logical choice would have been Miami, where I lived and where I had set the majority of my other novels and short stories. I was intimately familiar with the city, so that would be the easiest. However, I wanted to challenge myself, so I discarded that choice and instead decided on Havana, where I had been born. My three daughters have always claimed that I “eat, sleep and dream” of Cuba, so that seemed a logical place. Had I known how difficult and time-consuming that would be (I spent over two weeks working on research alone), I might have rethought my decision, but once made, I did not look back.

In the past, when I would write about a place, I would go there to check out where I wanted to set certain scenes. Armed with a camera, I would take pictures of the different places so when I would begin to write about them, I could accurately describe the settings. Going to Havana was impossible, so I had to get my information about the layout of the city from the internet—not ideal, but it would have to do.

Next, I had to choose a time frame. The late forties, in the years right after WWII, were an interesting time pretty much everywhere in the world, so I thought that would be a good choice for the story. I began to conduct research about what it was like to be a private investigator in Havana in the 1940s, and quickly found there was almost no information regarding that profession there. Given that, I decided that I would, instead, focus on the city itself, concentrating on the social, economic, and political situation there at the time. The investigative story, by necessity, would be secondary to those.

Years ago, after three or four of the books in the Lupe Solano series had been published, I was contacted by Dr. George Demko, a professor at Dartmouth College, who told me he taught a geography class at the college. He would assign his students to read detective novels set in particular places, believing that the geography of crime fiction was essential to the novels. He informed me that because the sense of place was so integral to my novels, he used them to teach his students about Miami—quite a compliment! I have never forgotten that, especially while I was in conducting research for “The Pearl of the Antilles,” so I made sure that the descriptions of places and locations were correct. “Sloppy Joe’s was one of the most popular watering holes in town, and Pete was a regular there. Founded in 1933, at the corner of Calle Zulueta, it had always been sketchy and decadent.”

The deeper I got into the research into Havana after WWII (by the time I had finished writing the story I had an almost two-inch high stack of papers that I had printed out), the more convinced I'd become that I had made the correct decision when I had decided that Havana would be the focus of the story and that the actual case that my private investigator would be working would be secondary.

Havana, in the years following World War II, was a fascinating city, a true melting pot: "Post-World War II Havana was a place where anything went." The phrase "sunny place for shady people" accurately described the city in that time. The American Mafia was becoming more entrenched in various legal and illegal activities; Batista's government was becoming increasingly corrupt; sugar was king; and both Cubans and visitors to the island were becoming more accepting of and attracted to the debauched offerings that could be found everywhere in the city. "In Havana, in 1947, temptation was everywhere."

As far as the detective in the story was concerned, as I had not found any information regarding what being one entailed back then in Havana, I figured I had the liberty to make that up. As a result, I decided that the private investigator would be a woman, one who was in love with the Havana of post-WWII. I had to come up with a plausible reason why a

single twenty-five-year-old woman from Vermont would choose to live there. Because of the war, it made sense that my private eye would have served in the American armed forces, so I decided that she would be stationed in Cuba. As far as her background in investigations, in conducting research of the role of women in the armed services, I came upon the Code Girls, a little-known investigative arm of the Navy. It was a fascinating discovery—and I probably spent too much time reading about it, but I could not help myself.

Although it took up so much time to first research and then write “The Pearl of the Antilles,” I very much enjoyed doing so. I’m seriously thinking of starting a series featuring Sophie Stevenson, the private investigator protagonist of “The Pearl of the Antilles,” and setting it in the Havana of the late 1940s. The series, though, would allow me to write more than 8,000 words! “The Pearl of the Antilles” came in at 7,997. I’m excited!

The First Two Pages of “The Pearl of the Antilles”

Havana

March 1947

I opened our office door and was greeted by the familiar sight of Big Pete, my secretary and assistant, lying on the sofa in the corner of the reception room. He was wearing the same clothes from the day before, with a musty ‘morning after the night before’ odor emanating from him. Whatever Pete had

been doing, it must have been a hell of a time; it was close to eleven o'clock—S.O. Stevenson and Brothers, Private Investigators, didn't keep traditional office hours—and he was still passed out.

“Rough night?” I waited a few seconds. “Again?”

“Save it, Sophie. I already feel like shit without you lecturing me.” Pete glared at me with bloodshot eyes that reminded me of road kill. “Especially since it hasn't been more than a couple weeks since you cleaned up your own act.”

I let his comment slide, mostly because it was true. Pete was referring to the recent morning when I had woken up on top of my bed in my apartment wearing another woman's clothes. I had no idea how I ended up that way. I recalled having gone on a bar crawl with some of my amigos from the Cuban Navy, but that's about all. Nights with them could be counted on to be wild, which wasn't so unusual for Havana, and it must have been a memorable time even if I couldn't account for the last hours. It was probably better not to know, I decided. That morning I swore to live a clean and wholesome life, regardless of the fact that I was living in probably the most debauched and corrupt city in the world.

When I had been asked to supply a quote for my high school yearbook, I came up with “Lord, lead me not unto temptation, for I'll find the way myself.” I had been pretty precocious. In Havana, in 1947, temptation was everywhere. So far, I'd gone two weeks without succumbing to the vices the city had to offer, but my path had never been a straight and narrow one, so who knew how long that was going to last.

My curiosity got the better of me, so I asked. “Where were you, Pete? Sloppy Joe's?”

Sloppy Joe's was one of the most popular watering holes in town, and Pete was a regular there. Founded in 1933, at the corner of Calle Zuleta, it had always been sketchy and decadent. Pete could down a half-dozen of the bar's signature drink, which shared a name with the place: a potent concoction of pineapple juice, cognac, port wine, curacao, and grenadine. It was a mix that could send a weaker man to the hospital, but in a guy with Pete's constitution, it just resulted in the massive hangover that I was witnessing that morning.

Pete got up slowly, painfully, holding his breath as he straightened his clothes in a halfhearted effort to pull himself together. He still hadn't answered me, and, as I watched him, I hoped that he hadn't gone to Las Fritas Nightclub, a shabby but ridiculously popular place known for such a degree of extreme indulgence in sexual pleasures that it employed two nurses round the clock who were supplied with syringes of penicillin for anyone in need of preventative measures, a service that no doubt helped to contribute to its success. The whole arrangement was so notorious that a song, "Penicillin," was written there in tribute. Another trademark of the place was an extremely lewd dance called "shoeing the mare." It wasn't a place to take children.

Post-World War II Havana was a place where anything went. The wartime boom that followed the war made it an environment that caused vices to explode and sins to become a way of life for much of the city's residents, a free-and-easy mentality that was shocking to moral, churchgoing types. For Pete and me, it was behavior that guaranteed us a very comfortable standard of living. We were one of the very few private investigator firms working in the city, and we would never run out of work; for us, vices were annuities.

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Carolina Garcia-Aguilera is the Cuba-born, Miami Beach-based, award-winning author of ten books including the Shamus Award-winning novel *Havana Heat*. Garcia-Aguilera is also a contributor to numerous anthologies but is perhaps best known for her Lupe Solano series. Her books have been translated to twelve languages and a film was made from *One Hot Summer*, her seventh book. Garcia-Aguilera became a private investigator a profession she has practiced for thirty-five years-in order to credibly write novels and short stories featuring a P.I. as a protagonist.