

Dreaming in AMERICA

By Nick Padron

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor PETER STAVROS writes: I was drawn into this story immediately, from the opening lines as Mrs. Blanco cautions herself to preserve the strength of her smile, knowing that she would need it later. I wanted to follow her on her journey – this skillfully presented journey amidst the rush and bustle of a bygone era New York City viewed through the eyes of someone who marvels at her bus commute like a tourist, where “[t]here’s a kind of musical play choreography in the way New Yorkers march across the streets, in the stop-and-go of the vehicle traffic,” so clear in its depiction that it was almost as if I could see the action unfold before me. The author is deliberate in the reveal of Mrs. Blanco’s backstory as this quite eventful day plays out for her. I was fully invested in her narrative and satisfied by the delicate payoff at the end. NF Padron’s crisp use of language paints the scenes perfectly. “The long hallways of the boarding house are gloomy silent,” and inside an employment agency “[t]he stale air in the gray-walled office reeks of cigarette smoke and indifference.” And Mrs. Blanco doesn’t just eat a donut she fortuitously found abandoned on a windowsill still wrapped in wax paper, after longing for one earlier from outside a storefront window, but “[u]p by her lips, she breathes in its baked aroma and bites the sweet soft dough filled with even sweeter jelly as though performing a delicious but sinful act.” I was moved by “Dreaming in America” and give it **five-stars**, and I’m eager to read more from NF Padron.*

Senior Editor Charles writes: *As soon as we started reading this magnificently understated, masterfully controlled story we knew we were in the presence of genuine talent. This is the real thing. Writing so simple and so good it puts a lump in your throat. A masterpiece of portraiture that not only tantalizes but comes with a surprise: an ending that will make you smile. (Spacing and font size are author’s own.)*

QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language):

A slow-moving black convertible as long as a yacht comes sailing slowly through the mass of bodies. And there, over the sea of outstretched fluttering hands, the figure of John F. Kennedy appears in a royal blue suit, his face under a crown of impeccable chestnut hair, and a smile of perfect white. Drawn by the delirious multitude, Mrs. Blanco reaches out to him as if attracted by an invisible magnet, and their skins clasp together for a magical instant. Then just as quickly, the candidate’s caravan floats away.

DREAMING IN AMERICA

Nick Padron

Mrs. Blanco has always known she had a smile, sensed it even before she became aware of it. When nothing else would do, her education, her figure, her presence, that simple pull at the ends of her lips spoke with a language of its own. This morning she knows she's going to need it. So sure she is, in fact, that after brushing she restrains from flashing her teeth at the mirror to preserve her smile's full strength.

Outside the window is dusky gray. She reaches for her floral dress, something to brighten up the Monday morning that awaits her. She closes the closet door softly, so as not to wake up her son who's still asleep in the bed they share. From on top of the night table, she picks up her reading glasses next to the Selecciones del Readers Digest magazine and slips them on. She wears them all the time now when it's dark.

The long hallways of the boarding house are gloomy silent, her roommates either asleep or gone to work. In the kitchen, she greets Rita, the owner of the casa de bordantes. No need to start shining her smile yet. The radio is buzzing the local Spanish news. Mrs. Blanco has her breakfast in between Rita's comments. They're mostly about the weather getting colder. Where Mrs. Blanco comes from el tiempo is not much of a subject. It's either raining or it isn't, and usually too hot. Not here, in the city of long coats. The first thing out of people's mouths here, friends or strangers alike, is the weather, how cold is it going to get or what's going to fall from the sky today.

Mrs. Blanco finishes putting on her face by the front door. She reaches into the bottommost of her purse for the keys and locks every lock before she steps away.

It all begins in the elevator, with the simple act of pressing the call button on the wall brass plate. The doors open on their own and she steps inside the mirror and metal box. Her belly shivers as the floor drops, a combination of dread and excitement she's still acquainting herself with since she arrived in New York. Part of the luxury trappings of a past future time, an aging modernity, she is only now catching up to.

For better or worse, everything is temporary. If she is certain of anything it's that. Exile with all its heartbreaks, the same as the guilty enjoyment of a New York elevator ride, is only provisional. The bearded atheists who had forced her and so many to flee her homeland would not keep her forever from the life God had meant her to live.

Outside, it's colder than it looks. She buttons up the winter coat Rita sold her for five dollars and tightens Amelia's red scarf around her neck. As she walks past the store windows in her stiff overcoat, her reflection isn't all that unappealing. It not only conceals her long-lost silhouette and keeps her warm; it also makes her feel part of the landscape, like another New Yorker.

At the bus stop, everyone climbs in one at a time, each dropping a token, unrushed. It is at moments like these too that she's reminded how far she is from home. Tokens instead of money, no one hustling to the empty seats, no conductor to collect the fare. The efficiency of it makes her wonder, though. In her town, buses had a driver and a conductor, and when they'd seen her a few times, she didn't need to signal her stop. Everyone was more in touch with each other, less orderly, sure, but more normal. She wonders how the americanos, as smart as they are, could have missed that, the simple human touch.

The downtown bus travels in the shade of Broadway's architecture, a sightseeing show for Mrs. Blanco—and the reason she preferred them to the subway. She presses her forehead on the icy glass window. She grins at the bright storefronts along the way, with their window displays projecting out to the street like movie screens with views of domestic scenes, gleaming kitchenware, and elegant mannequins wearing the latest styles. There's a kind of musical play choreography in the way New Yorkers march across the streets, in the stop-and-go of the vehicle traffic. The grandeur everywhere moves her, the polished sheen of rotating doorways, the assembly lines of yellow taxis, the sheer abundance of affluence. Her faith in the infinite might and wisdom of the americanos is reaffirmed at every intersection.

The bus stops at a red light.

When she left Havana, all she and her boy were allowed to bring was \$120.00 and — as she liked to say — all the hope and Kleenex they could carry. And, of course, the fervent belief that the United States of America would never allow a Communist nation to take root just ninety miles from Key West. This wasn't only her opinion: everyone she knew was of the same mind. The end of the bearded revolutionaries was only a question of when — maybe a year at the most before she'd be back with her family around her again, back to where she was born and married and had her children, home until three weeks ago.

Today is a particularly difficult day for Mrs. Blanco. It's her first day out looking for a job, in search of employment, something she's never done or needed to do before. At forty-six, the only job she ever had was that of housewife and mother, work that had prepared her for just about anything except to look for employment — much less in a foreign land. The task does not intimidate her as much as the idea of having to ask for it in English, a language she loves to hear but she's incapable of articulating without embarrassing herself.

Mrs. Blanco looks at the note her exiled friend, Marta, had given her. "Get off on 34th Street. Walk to 8th Avenue, Garment Center. They're always hiring sewing machine operators in the factories around there," it says.

In Havana, she had a Singer machine with a wrought-iron foot pedal her husband bought her. She'd fashioned dresses and shirts for her children with it when they were younger, even sewn a camping tent for her son's Boy Scout troop once. Sew? Mrs. Blanco could sew just fine.

From the bus, she keeps watch of the street signs at every corner. "Get off when you see the Macy's store and walk around the area looking for Sewing Operator Wanted signs on building walls," Marta's note says.

Many things she never needed before or thought she ever would are needed now. Only a few weeks ago she still lived at home with her husband of twenty-two years and her two children. She'd known the comforts of a well-off existence, which had come with much struggle and only in recent times. But in less than a year of the communist takeover, it was all torn apart, beginning with the seizure of her husband's business, the family house, even the cars. Then came days of desperate rushing around like on a ship in the storm, throwing everything overboard, trying to sell, trade, and hide whatever remained of the family's assets. But the idea of seeking asylum didn't come until later when talk of an even more horrifying law was proposed. The enactment of what they called 'Patria Potestad.' The law that gave the communist government parental rights over un-emancipated children. Once the rumor took hold, the question of whether or not to leave the country was settled.

The communists could take everything she owns, she decided, but not her son.

Almost overnight, she found herself thousands of miles away, confined to a bedroom in an overcrowded boarding house in New York City with her twelve-year-old son, starting her temporary life of 'political' exile, a refugee — a 'worm,' how the fidelistas called the likes of her.

Although the hardships of her younger days now seem like something to look forward to, Mrs. Blanco doesn't allow herself to wallow in her misfortune as some of her fellow exiles do. Hope is fresh yet. Still, the day-to-day is far from easy. Rooming in an apartment full of political refugees is like living with a big wounded, grieving family. Rare is the night that she is not awakened by the muffled sobs of some of her roommates. Exile is the same as living in a permanent state of emergency, ever hanging to a single hope. Every rumor, every word printed or heard on the radio about the homeland has to be dissected, reinterpreted for hidden meanings, every piece of news a new topic to argue about. The one thing the entire exile commune agrees on, though, is, with God and the americanos on their side, everything the comunistas have stolen from them would be theirs again. And this was something Mrs. Blanco believes with all her heart.

Across the street, on the northbound side of Broadway, Mrs. Blanco notices a sign written in English and Spanish. It speaks of union, employment, and brotherhood. Compelled by a sudden impulse, Mrs. Blanco pulls the cord and gets off the bus, and then doubles back up the street.

The sweet smell of recently baked dough stops her on her tracks. She rests one hand on the shop window and stares at the trays full of happy-looking donuts arranged in rows. Mentally, she counts the change she has in her purse, hoping. But she knows all too well how much she has, or rather how much

she doesn't have, then walks away thinking of all the weight she still could stand to lose — once again looking at the positive side so as not to weep.

She stands under the sign she saw from the bus and takes up the dark and narrow staircase. At the top landing, she halts by the opened smudged glass door. The stale air in the gray-walled office reeks of cigarette smoke and indifference. Facing a long counter dividing the room, a handful of people are lined up by a faded yellow line on the floor.

Mrs. Blanco steps in and surveys the women working behind the counter and at the desks beyond, pecking on their typewriters. A couple of suited men sit behind glass-partitioned cubicles.

She stands demurely at the end of the line and listens to the English-speaking voice of the bespectacled woman behind the counter, concentrates on it.

The person at the counter walks away and Mrs. Blanco moves up a step.

In front of her, there's a tall black lady and a Latina-looking one who's at the counter now. She's speaking to the bespectacled woman. The harder Mrs. Blanco listens to what they're saying the less she understands.

A minute later, she hears "Next." She remembers what next means. In English, every word sounds so much nicer to her, like in the subtitled movies, the voices of Doris Day, Elizabeth Taylor, and Audrey Hepburn, so musical even when uttered in anger. Yet she's just unable to articulate the words, as if her mouth isn't put together the same way as theirs.

The tall black lady steps up to the counter. Mrs. Blanco places the tip of her shoes on the yellow line on the floor. The tall lady seems upset. Something in the document the bespectacled woman handed her has set her off. Her voice is getting louder. She reminds her of those powerful-voiced Protestant preachers in the movies. Mrs. Blanco tries to decipher what each is saying. The noisier they get the less she comprehends them.

The tall woman starts to shake her finger at the impassive bespectacled face behind the counter. Suddenly she wheels and stomps away, hollering menacingly at the entire place. When she reaches the door, she balls-up the insulting document, hurls it in the general direction of the wastebasket, and storms out the glass door.

Now the office staff is up, bunched in groups around their desks, ruffled by the irate lady. Mrs. Blanco is up next.

The bespectacled woman waves from the counter. "Come on up."

Mrs. Blanco approaches with a tentative smile: she didn't hear 'next.' Her throat tightens up. "Pleese, laydee, S-peak S-panish?"

The bespectacled woman turns around and with a cigarette between her fingers waves at someone and walks away.

Spanish Carmen comes to the counter: "How can I help you?"

Mrs. Blanco lets out a sigh of relief and broadens her smile. "Aaayy," she sings out. "Thank God you speak Spanish, mi hijita. What a relief."

Spanish Carmen almost smiles.

"Well, the truth is I am looking for work," she says leaning closer to the counter. "Let me explain: I have only been in this country for three weeks, yes. But I am a hardworking person and a fast learner, and I am willing to do whatever work that is being offered."

Carmen gives her a squint-eyed look. "OK, let's see your book."

"Libro?" Mrs. Blanco, unsure whether Carmen has understood, starts again. "Maybe I should tell you, I am a married woman. I have two children, yes, two. My oldest, my daughter, she's in Cuba with my husband, los pobrecitos ... I'm sure you must have heard how terrible things are over there now with those communists taking over, my God. But my son, he's with me. We had to bring him out right away before the communists start taking the children to Russia. Yes, that's another thing those communists are doing. But he's in school now, thank God. And God willing, my husband will be coming to join us very soon. Now, my daughter, we're not too worried about her. She's already eighteen and engaged, yes. She's going to marry a boy we know, a good boy. But in the meantime, well, my son and I have to stay here, you understand, until we can return. So you can imagine how difficult it's been for me to find a job without any English —"

"Excuse me a moment, Mrs. Blan-co, right?"

"Yes," she answers, reaching into her purse for her passport, her ID. "In Cuba, married women get to keep their maiden name, not like here. Yes, it is Blanco."

Carmen, assuming the walk-up is looking for her book, says as she flicks through the Rolodex, "Let's see . . . We have a few openings for iron operators today. Would that be something you'd want to do?"

"Ironing? Oh, sure. I can iron. My husband tells me no one, not even his mother, can iron his shirts as well as I do."

"All righty, then. Give me your book and I'll send you right out."

Mrs. Blanco hands her passport.

"Not this, your union book, or your card, whichever you brought with you."

"I am sorry señorita. I don't have a union book. I could get one if you tell me how—"

"Oh, oh. How can we send you out on a job, if you're not in our union? This is an employment office for our union members. This is not for anybody. I mean you have to be a member."

"No problem, I will join the union. Just tell me how."

“It’s not like that. I’m sorry, the jobs we have are for our members in good standing only.”

“This is no problem for me. No problem at all. I want to be a union member. Just tell me what I have to do and I will join your union. You see, we just arrived in New York and I need a job—”

“You’ve already told me, Mrs. Blanco. But I can’t send you out unless you’re in our union. It’s just how it is.”

“But I will be very happy to be a member of your union. What is it? Is there a fee?”

“Yes, well no, it’s not just a fee. To join our union, you must first work in a union shop for at least three months before you can apply.”

“You’ll have to pardon me, Carmencita, chica. It’s a beautiful name, Carmen. I almost named my daughter Carmen, yes. I have a cousin named Carmen too. She’s my favorite cousin—”

“Mrs. Blanco...”

“Forgive me, Carmen, I will not bore you with it. But listen, if you give me the ironing job, I promise you I will come back in three months and ask for you personally and I will join your union. A promise is a promise.”

Carmen looks over Mrs. Blanco’s shoulders at the line. “Look, I’d love to help you —”

“But Carmen, my girl, how can I work for three months and then join the union if you don’t give me the job first?”

“These are the rules. I’m really sorry.”

“You mean you can’t give me a job unless I already have a job?”

“Not really, but in your case, I’m afraid so.”

“Why would I come to ask for employment if I am already employed? I’d be too busy at work!”

“I’m sorry. Take this brochure with you. Read it at your leisure. There’s nothing else I can do. Next . . .”

Mrs. Blanco buttons up her coat. “Ay, Carmencita, really. I’m afraid it’s going to take me a long time to understand this country.” She straps her purse on her shoulder. “To have an employment office for people already employed—” She finished her comment with a silent headshake of disbelief.

As Mrs. Blanco walks toward the glass door, the heat of emotion wells in her eyes. She halts next to the wastebasket. She looks down at the balled-up paper the screaming lady had shucked with such disdain. Quickly, she lowers herself, picks it up, slips it into her purse and walks out.

Two blocks away, she stops to decipher the words on the paper. It’s a printed form filled out with ink but without a bearer’s name on it.

“... Jane Holly Blouses ... West 61st Street ... Steam iron operator ... Salary: \$1.25 an hour ... attention: Mr. Weinstein.”

Her face lights up. She has no reservations in applying for a job a disgruntled member of Carmen’s union didn’t want. Unions, what are they good for anyway? In Cuba, they called them sindicatos, like the one the communists first organized in her husband’s factory and then abolished after they confiscated it. But if unions is how the Americans choose to call them, it is fine with her.

On Columbus Circle, Mrs. Blanco runs into a crowd of people waving signs of ‘JFK for President.’ She works her way around them and hurries down 60th Street, crosses West End Avenue, and turns on the corner. The Hudson River is just down the road.

A cold wind blows on her face, clean, crisp American air.

61st Street is solid with parked cars. She finds the address. A sign above the doorway says Jane Holly Blouses. She enters the building. Out of the biggest elevator she’s ever seen, she encounters a pretty girl at the desk by the door. Mrs. Blanco switches on her smile and hands her the wrinkle-creased but now straightened flat employment form.

The receptionist, chewing gum, picks up a telephone, says one phrase and hangs up, then says something to her and points at a metallic door. The stained sign on it says ‘Employees Only.’

“San-cue,” Mrs. Blanco says.

She enters a high-ceiling workshop with long tables. Mr. Weinstein, a thirty-something, pleasant-looking man in a tie and dress shirt, comes walking from behind a stack of rolls of fabrics. The out-turned toes of his shoes are shiny but dusty . . . a man who doesn’t mind getting dirty at work. Mrs. Blanco approves.

She holds out the paper.

Mr. Weinstein doesn’t look up at her smile. He scowls at the paper. “Where’s your union booklet?”

She answers with her brightest smile something that sounds like this to Mr. Weinstein, “Chess, I lie to goo-erk bery mosh.”

He releases a long sigh, steps back, and shouts over the machine noises “Josefina,” then waits, glancing at Mrs. Blanco, sizing her up.

Spanish Josefina, short, with a round cheerful face, races over obviously pleased to be the boss’s interpreter.

“Ask Mrs. Blanco if she has her union book or her ID card.”

Josefina translates the question.

Mrs. Blanco takes a deep breath and is about to explain why she doesn’t yet have a union card when Mr. Weinstein with the out-turned toes cuts her short. “Never mind,” he says with a dual expression of pity

and mirth on his pale face. “Tell Mrs. Blanco not to worry. Tell her to come back tomorrow at eight in the morning ready to start training. Ironing.” He gestures as if waving an iron. “And tell her she’ll be starting at a dollar an hour, not at a dollar twenty-five as it says in the form. OK?”

Then Mr. Weinstein adds without the need for translation, louder as if his Spanish would be better understood at a higher volume. “Ma-nya-nah worky on time. OK?”

The message is translated anyway and Mrs. Blanco, beaming, almost curtsies at her new boss. “San cue, bery bery mosh.”

Walking back to the subway, Mrs. Blanco’s eyes overflow with tears. She can’t believe her luck. To have achieved what only twenty-four hours before seemed like a monumental impossibility feels nothing short of a miracle, as though the Virgin herself was watching over her.

Suddenly, she remembers how hungry she is and picks up her gait. Back in the rooming house, there are hot dogs and a can of Campbell soup waiting for her. Tonight, she announces to herself, she will take her son to the pizzeria on Broadway and celebrate. She slows her pace as she approaches a tumult in Columbus Square.

The crowd is so thick she can’t see the end of it. Dozens of JFK for President cardboard signs are up all over the street and over people’s heads. Motorcycle policemen are cutting off the traffic. Red lights are swirling. A sudden upsurge of voices and motor noises breaks out and she is dragged by the rushing human tide toward the edge of the sidewalk. A slow-moving black convertible as long as a yacht comes sailing slowly through the mass of bodies. And there, over the sea of outstretched fluttering hands, the figure of John F. Kennedy appears in a royal blue suit, his face under a crown of impeccable chestnut hair, and a smile of perfect white. Drawn by the delirious multitude, Mrs. Blanco reaches out to him as if attracted by an invisible magnet, and their skins clasp together for a magical instant. Then just as quickly, the candidate’s caravan floats away.

Mrs. Blanco extricates herself from the mob. She walks away toward Broadway unaware of the importance she would later give to the event. A half-block up 61st Street, she begins to feel faint. She leans on a wall to wait for it to pass. Beside her, there’s the tangle of tubes of a scaffold on the side of the building. On a tall windowsill behind her, she sees a neatly folded white paper bag. She takes it and peeks inside. There are two jelly donuts wrapped in wax paper, a capped coffee cup still hot, two sugar packets, a plastic stirrer and paper napkins. She looks around her at the busy sidewalk of incurious New Yorkers passing by. She sighs and puts it back, and walks away.

She halts abruptly, turns back, picks up the paper bag and rushes up the street with it.

On Broadway, she finds a bench in the median promenade. She sits down, pours the sugar into the steaming coffee, and stirs it. Slowly, she takes out a donut. Up by her lips, she breathes in its baked aroma and bites the sweet soft dough filled with even sweeter jelly as though performing a delicious but sinful act. Pigeons start gathering nearer. The November sun shines with a silver glow through the overcast Manhattan sky. She savors the donut unhurriedly until it is gone except for the white sugary dust

on her fingers. She looks into the paper bag, and summoning the phenomenal strength only motherhood could give her, Mrs. Blanco saves the remaining donut for her son.

She gathers herself up and takes the subway uptown.

In her room, she finds her son with his heavy white-sox feet resting on the radiator. He has the transistor radio up by his ear. She drops the groceries on the small table by the door and gives him a kiss on the cheek. He's busy mouthing along with the song playing, mimicking the singer. He's singing in English.

Mrs. Blanco doesn't fool herself thinking if she ever went out job-hunting again that she'd be hired the same morning, shake the hand of a presidential nominee, and find a bag with fresh donuts and coffee. But it had happened. And she had done it all on her own. She knew her exiled roommates were going to ask her how her day went, they always ask about everything. She'd have to be watchful of how she told it. Measure her elation, soften the magical aspect of it. Tragedies bring people together, but personal good fortune, not so much. To be an exile, to be forced to flee one's homeland and seek refuge in a foreign country, is no different than living with an open wound, hurting part of every moment.

Mrs. Blanco approaches her son. His head is bobbing in time with the music. She lets the sweet-smelling paper bag fall on his lap. He drops everything when he sees the donut.

"How did this get here in one piece?" he says, amazed.

"Son, you wouldn't believe the day I had even if I told you."

"Did you find anything?"

Mrs. Blanco smiled.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Pleasure and pain involved the creation of this story. For some time, my cousins and other relatives had been asking me to write about my mother. I knew why. No one who knew her ever forgot her hilarious sense of humor, her stories, how she made everyone laugh, her down-to-earth life force. Mother was an original. At family and friends gatherings, I was always introduced as "Diva's son." Yes, her name was Diva, but she couldn't have been less the type. In a way, this was part of what made writing this story a challenge for me. I didn't think I'd be able to write the kind of "Diva" story my family and friends expected to read. Her fun side wasn't as memorable to me as it was to others. To me, she was my mother, my entire family after we fled our homeland. The pain and desperation she masked from the world, she didn't hide from me. Part of the reason why I didn't think I could do justice to the smiles with which her name was uttered thirty years after her passing. But time and its changing ways prevailed, and I finally came up with my first "Diva" story. I'm not sure if it is as much fun and entertaining as she was, but there it is.*

My literary and stylistic influences are few but very potent ones: Hemingway, Garcia Marquez, and Don DeLillo, writers who I have read their entire oeuvre and studied. Many books have also left their mark on my writing: Kerouac's On the Road, Bukowski's novels, the classic Russians, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Dostoevsky. Joseph Conrad is of special interest because we have one thing in common: we don't write in our mother tongue. I'm a fan of many Latin American novelists: Cabrera Infante, Alejo Carpentier, Isabel Allende, Reynaldo Arenas, the list is long. I read nonfiction as well, History, biographies, Harari's Sapiens, Carlos Castaneda's books were a great read. Commercial writing and bestsellers don't attract me as much, but some have had an impact on my writing, The Mambo Kings, The Kite Runner, The Godfather, too many to remember them all.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Author NF Padron resides in Miami FL. and in Madrid, Spain. His stories have appeared in numerous literary magazines and anthologies in the U.S. and abroad. His first fiction collection, Souls in Exile was published by Adelaide Books, NY. in Nov. 2020. He is the author of three novels, including Gabriel Hemingway's The Cuban Scar. His latest novels, The Exhumation, and Where Labyrinths End, are scheduled for publication in 2021.

EDITOR'S BIO: Peter J. Stavros is an author and playwright in Louisville, Kentucky. His chapbook, *Three in the Morning and You Don't Smoke Anymore* (Etchings Press, 2020), is available now. More can be found at www.peterjstavros.com. His story **Room 310** and his play **Three Sides** both appeared in Issue 6.