

The Cuban Connection

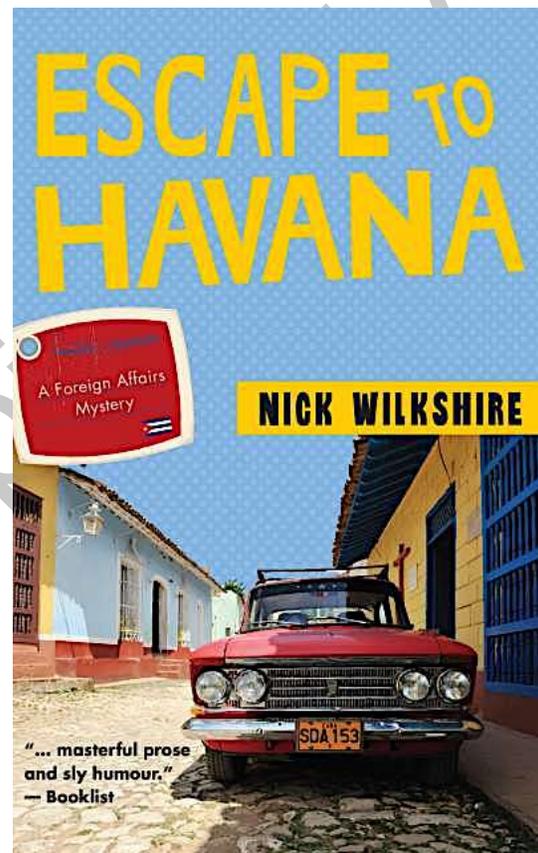
Foreign Affairs Can Be Deadly

Suspended Sentences
by Jim Napier

Canadian bureaucrat Charlie Hillier has had better evenings. Attending a diplomatic function in Ottawa's tony neighbourhood of Rockcliffe Park he finds himself among a group of guests who are being treated to a tour of the residence when their guide opens a door and encounters a couple half naked and clearly in the throes of passion. His embarrassment only grows when the woman in question singles Charlie out of the crowd and orders him to "close the *goddamned* door."

Charlie is understandably piqued, as the woman is his wife, Sharon.

Fast forward a few weeks, when we find Charlie Hillier trying to pick up the pieces of his life. Sharon has informed him that their fifteen-year marriage is over, and that was followed by a settlement agreement from her lawyer that deprived him of whatever small vestige of manhood he had retained. And unwilling to remain the butt of water-cooler jokes in his job in Foreign Affairs, Charlie applies for a posting abroad. The luck of the draw finds him heading



to a three-year posting in Cuba, with but six weeks of Spanish under his belt and no great enthusiasm for the lack of creature comforts he is anticipating. But it was Havana or an obscure post in central Africa, and suddenly Cuba didn't look half bad. Charlie has no idea that the privations of his

new posting will turn out to be the least of his problems.

As Charlie begins settling into his new post in Havana as the new Management Consular Officer, or MCO, at the Canadian Embassy, at first it seems that life has dealt him some decent cards. By the luck of the draw he has been billeted in a sumptuous villa with its own swimming pool, and to his surprise he seems to be taking to his new job, handling the assignments the ambassador gives him with growing confidence.

But "Foreign Affairs" turns out to have new meanings for the fledgling diplomat as he encounters a ravishing consular officer with the Indian embassy who suddenly disappears, two ladies of the night looking for the former resident of Charlie's villa, and some ominous-looking thugs who seem to have a special interest in drugs. When the bodies begin piling up Charlie

experiences the many nuances of culture shock, and before long his concern will shift from *How do I do this job?* to *How do I survive this job?*

Escape to Havana is immensely readable and great fun. Author Nick Wilkshire has a genuine flair for capturing the atmosphere of his settings, and portraying the nuanced relationships in the diplomatic world. He has woven a fast-paced, colourful, and cautionary tale about the glamorous life of the diplomatic set, peopled with believable toughs and an engaging protagonist, and set against the colourful backdrop of a nation struggling to transform itself but saddled with old ways that will not go quietly into the night. A book that should be required reading for aspiring members of the consular corps, *Escape to Havana* is the first of an entertaining series that should wear very well.

Jim Napier is a professional crime-fiction reviewer based in Canada. Since 2005 his book reviews and author interviews have been featured in several Canadian newspapers and on multiple websites, and his own crime novel, *Legacy*, was published in April of 2017. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com