

## Havana Holiday

When I ask the mother superior if I can have Luisito for a day, she stares at me as if I'm asking to borrow the baby Jesus. Luisito is the smallest resident at the Bejucal nursing home—adopted son of the nuns, pet of nurses and old folks alike. By the end of my month-long volunteering stint, I've become as unabashed about my favoritism of Luisito as any of the staff. I've also become so bored with my own volunteerism—sloppy attempts to wield a Cuban mop, fleetingly successful campaigns to enliven the dementia unit—to desire Luisito's company at all times. He's both my sidekick and daily salvation. As my month of volunteering winds up, I tell him I'm plotting our escape to Havana. Luisito and I will go on a Cuban vacation the right way—the way the non-Cubans do it.

The mother superior finally grants me permission but warns that Luisito is *not* to consume beer. He must be back in Bejucal by nightfall—sober and unsunburned. The next step is to negotiate a ride for myself, Luisito, and Luisito's wheelchair in an ancient Oldsmobile full of commuters. I think I see dollar signs in the taxi driver's eyes when he catches sight of the three of us. A foreigner, a cripple, and a large metal object: so many reasons to overcharge.

The driver scoops up Luisito's kid-sized body and delivers him to the front seat—a vast couch with no seams but a few rips. I slide in alongside Luisito, whose head reaches only two-thirds of the way to the seat top, and sling my left arm behind him. Treating my shoulder like a customized headrest, Luisito nestles into its crook and then puts on my sunglasses.

Luisito has a way with women. Though strangers are typically cold to him, at first—while adjusting to his unique proportions—Luisito has methods of speeding up the endearment process. His classic move is to take a lady's hand, tug it down to wheelchair altitude, press her palm against his stubbly cheek, and then shrug up his shoulder to keep the skins in a close, warm sandwich. He

has so many adopted mothers and pretend girlfriends that he often slips and calls one by another's name.

Luisito does not bother as much with members of his own sex. His rapport with men has nothing to do with doting or caregiving. In fact, his closest male buddies sound mocking and sometimes rough when they address him—until you catch the bemused lilt in their voices. Today, on the way to the taxi corner, a middle-aged man on a bicycle nearly smashes into Luisito and me, swerving at the last minute, calling out his name.

"Sooo . . .," our taxi driver begins, as the old Oldsmobile floats down a one-lane road toward the highway. "Big day in Havana, eh Luisito?"

I had no idea that Luisito was acquainted with this man. He nods, looking unfazed, his head bobbing to the tinny salsa music.

"Where'd you pick up the foreign girl?"

"She's American," Luisito replies, speaking loudly for the benefit of the backseat passengers. He doesn't answer the question, instead voicing what he cares to voice.

The road from Bejucal to Havana is decorated with propaganda. I have the sun-faded billboard slogans nearly memorized:

*We Continue in Battle.*

*The Enemy Cannot Imagine Our Unity.*

*Socialism or Death!*

*Conserve Electricity.*

Whenever I pass by these words in a cab full of quiet commuters, I can't help but try to read them in the Cuban brain. Is the Revolution-speak hackneyed by now—so many decades later—like a plain Jane Coca-Cola sign? Or do the roadside commands penetrate in another way—like Choosey Moms' Choosing Jiff—squatting on thoughts that shouldn't belong to billboards?

But Luisito doesn't read, so I get a break from the Cuban psyche. I'm not even sure that his low line of vision allows him to see anything but bright sky—until Luisito begins inquiring about buildings. Each time we pass a large, multistory structure, Luisito demands: "What's that?"

Though there are a couple buildings he's able to name for me—"el hospital de locos," for example. The mental hospital is set back from the highway, so we get a long look at it as our taxi passes. Luisito spots what I do: a large man in a wheelchair zooming full-speed down the sloped driveway, parallel to the highway. His arms are cranking the wheels. A nurse, dressed all in white, runs about twenty feet behind.

"Ha!" I exclaim, whipping my head around to verify that it's a chase. "He's escaping."

"He's escaping," echoes Luisito with a giggle.

He and I speak the same subject-plus-verb Spanish. Our sentences are simple and often in agreement. We're both happy for the fugitive. The man won't make it far, but he's already made the day unordinary.

The landscape changes as we begin to approach Havana. Luisito notices.

"That building is *falling*, Colleen!" he says, with a tone of accusation that I'm not sure how to respond to. I follow his finger to a three-story home on wooden stilts—a typical Old Havana building taking a cavernous turn, despite those trying to live square lives inside. This building is graver than most; scaffolding keeps it upright.

From the tone of Luisito's voice, you'd think a bomb decimated the capital overnight. The age of his country comes as a shock. I try to imagine the last time Luisito might have traveled outside Bejucal and realize years may have passed. As we drive deeper into Havana, he stops citing each gray, time-battered apartment.

At the nursing home, Luisito is often teased for being a "*nino de la Revolucion*"—one of those born the year the Cuban Revolution "triumphed," as the official expression goes. Some carry the joke further, mostly the old men, and tell Luisito that he is Castro's love child. Subtract nine months from his October 3 birthday and the dates grow strangely suggestive. Luisito must have been conceived in the crazed few days after the old dictator fled the island and the young bearded leader marched into Havana, triumphant.

Before the taxi delivers us to the city, Luisito pulls a stuffed animal bumblebee out of his jean pocket and holds the smuggled goods up close to my face. I've seen this toy before, in a foggy black-and-white photo taken of Luisito decades ago. He's seated at a distance from the camera in his wheelchair, holding the bee below his chin. It's dirtier now but still wheezes out a cry when you press your thumb into its middle.

Luisito doesn't mind being called a "*nino*." On the contrary, he seems to find the word cozy when he slips it on. "*El nino de la casa*," he often mutters, usually when someone is petting his head. *The kid of the house*. The kid of the nursing home. What Luisito absolutely *won't* talk about is his date of birth. When asked how old he is, Luisito goes mute. While his stick limbs suggest he remains in the adolescent bracket, his hair color hints otherwise. Tiny white hairs jut up across his buzz cut, prominent in the otherwise jet

black thicket. Once, I made the mistake of commenting on the salt-and-pepper mix. He looked down and said nothing. Because his life overlaps so neatly with the national timeline, though, it's not necessary to ask the question. All across the country—on billboards, murals, water towers—the age of Castro's revolution is professed.

As for being the love child of Mister Fidel, Luisito refutes this with his jam-packed chest puffed out. Sometimes he even hoists his little body onto the armrest of his wheelchair to look taller while defending his name (an argument which usually culminates with the straightforward claim: *Yo me llamo Luisito*. "My name is Luisito.")

The joke, however, will never be killed for one reason: there's no one to disprove it. Nine months after Fidel Castro marched into Havana, triumphant, a baby was left at the door of the Casa de Beneficia orphanage. A nun on the late-night shift discovered a baby whose abnormalities were plain, even in infancy. The mother had left her name and phone number on a piece of paper, but they both proved false.

Once we arrive in the capital, the only thing standing in the way of a dip in clear, chlorinated waters is the gatekeeper of the Central Park Hotel. Hotel doormen in Cuba are trained to weed natives out of the tourist stream. Foreigners have fresh dollars; Cubans have one-twenty-sixth dollars—grubby bills called *pesos cubanos*.

The third-floor nurse who helped Luisito get dressed this morning must have had this doorman bias on her mind. He's wearing a plain white t-shirt that the nuns gave him (to replace his ratty Pope John Paul II tee), washed-out jeans that occlude the stick-like width of his legs, gray-edged kid-sized sneakers, and finally, a sailor's cap made of white canvas material.

"You don't speak Spanish," I remind him while hoisting his wheelchair up from street to sidewalk. "Make up words if they ask us something. But no Spanish."

A pack of Europeans is loitering near their tour bus, clogging our pathway to the hotel door. As Luisito and I veer around the tourists, I prepare some lies of my own. ("He's my son. No, no—he doesn't talk. What, do you have some sort of problem with the physically challenged?") Though I doubt that playing the political correctness card will get us far in Cuba.

The hotel door is pure glass with a gold insignia. With the midday sun at its brightest hue, it's impossible to see what lies on the other side of the glass. I can only guess what kind of scrutiny

Luisito and I are facing. Before I lay a hand on the handle, though, the glass door swings open like an homage. Luisito and I breeze by the doorman. The blast of air-conditioning congratulates us. We are Swedes, Australians, royalty. Security men with headphones stand throughout the lobby. We go straight for the elevators.

Once the gold elevator doors are closed, Luisito and I burst back into Spanish. Tourists ride alongside us, but we figure they know nothing beyond "*gracias*." In Spanish, I want to gush about what lucky bastards we are. In Spanish, Luisito has already gotten over that and wants to discuss why the elevator has mirrors for walls. The tourists do their best not to gawk, instead stealing glances in the gold-hued mirrors. Their floors ding and whisk them away. Luisito and I go all the way to the roof.

Luisito has a thing for heights. His caretakers found this out a few years back when he disappeared. They searched the entire nursing home, in all spaces big and tiny, only to conclude that yes, Luisito was indeed missing. Finally, someone came across an empty wheelchair on the roof. It was positioned beside a ladder, which led to a higher landing. Luisito had climbed, on his meager knees, all the way up to the top. He was seated near a collection of electrical wires, looking giddy and guilty. To this day he maintains that he was "fixing an antenna," as if electronic repair were a routine pastime of his.

From the top of the Central Park Hotel, Havana's decay blends into a gray montage below, while the tall spires and domes exaggerate themselves at our height. They are capitalism's leftovers: the Bacardi tower, trimmed in yellows and oranges like a story-book castle; the National Theatre, with its stone angels bounding over each other, vying for clouds; and the centerpiece of Havana—the dome of the Capitolio, modeled after the U.S. Capitol building—bulging in the skyline like a mushroom cap.

But Luisito's gaze is lured to the pool. Swimmer-less, it lies before us serene and clear. Luisito has never seen such a pool of water and begins to strip. I help him tug off clothes, though I'm not sure what to expect below them.

Luisito has not grown in length or width past adolescence, and his torso has an egg shape, as if someone packed his body into a concentrated ball, as they would clay or snow. Irregular rib bones jut out from his chest, not satisfied with the narrow quarters. His legs are meager sticks, nearly even in width all the way down, and not much longer than a ten-year-old's. They allow him to scramble around in short spurts but have never tolerated walking.

His "bathing suit," it turns out, is more like nubby blue under-

wear than a Speedo. He looks like a muscle man cartoon: a concentrated body mass that might combust if it were any more beefed up. Though in Luisito's case, it's not muscle but vital organs that test the skin's limits. That's what makes his naked deformity so chilling: the question of how it all found room in there, and functioned.

As soon as Luisito touches the water, he starts giggling beyond control. Luisito doesn't laugh like other people. His laughs happen on their own volition, doing cartwheels down his nasal passage, unable to wait to make it out an orifice. By the time the giggle fit passes, Luisito's salt-and-pepper hair is soaked with pool water.

"I'm cold," he announces, keeping to the side of the pool, where my bare legs are submerged. I look down at his face, which is bluing.

Luisito has a great big head. His face is nearly normal—handsome even—but his brown irises point in slightly different directions. His nose and ears have followed the rules of aging, growing a bit each year until they outsized all other features. As for teeth, Luisito's are large ivories of the proportion you'd expect in a political cartoon. Unless he actively purses his lips, Luisito cannot hide these teeth. Even now, as he shivers unhappily in the cool pool, I see the bottom ridge of his molars.

There's a hot tub off in the corner, cupped under a vaulted roof. I suggest we transfer there, and Luisito stares suspiciously. He doesn't know what a hot tub is.

I try to translate, but without the word for "bubbles," the best I come up with is "a pool with hot water."

"Really hot?" he asks, probably imagining a human-size cauldron. Back at the nursing home, the finest bathing apparatus is the communal shower. No bells, no whistles, no bubbles.

So I call it a little pool. A special pool. "We'll have the special little pool all to ourselves," I pledge.

This is what wins Luisito. A resident of communal institutions since infancy, Luisito takes individual portions and dimensions whenever possible.

I lug his goose-bumping body out of the pool and make a quick wheelchair transfer. We pass a row of Europeans on lawn chairs. They look up from their vacation reads—novels with shiny, freshly bent covers—and stare.

The hot tub does not disappoint. The bubbles scurry up and around Luisito's bare body like hurried fingertips. I climb all the way in and float toward my giggle-seized friend. While our skin dulls to the bubble bath, Luisito and I decide to sing. Our knowledge of music hardly overlaps, so we have to settle, unfortunately,

on the *Ave Maria*. I give it my best operatic soprano, Luisito produces an elfin yodel worthy of a Disney soundtrack, and our duet is flattered by the hot tub's acoustic roof. *Que buena vida*, I say to him, lowering my head into the warm water, and he says it back to me, again and again. "What a good life."

By this time, Luisito has gotten a handle on what a "hotel" is but wants to clarify some things. The first, unsurprisingly, is whether the power goes out here. Luisito despises nothing more than having electricity yanked on him. A blackout can be two minutes or ten hours. No one ever tells you ahead of time or apologizes for the inconvenience. When Luisito starts to complain about power outages, he sounds like a crabby old man, citing the comforts he's unable to enjoy when electricity is taken—his color television, his fan, the elevator that carries him between floors. Only when you spend a late-night blackout with Luisito, feeling his clingy fingers imploring yours to stay, do you learn that he is actually afraid of the dark.

"Hotels have their own . . . engines. Private engines. When the power goes out, they can keep the lights on."

"Generators?" Luisito clarifies, staring at me, one eyeball at a time.

I nod. That's the word. "Yes, hotels have generators."

"I'm going to live here. This is where I'm going to move in."

I sensed the genesis of this plan on the ride up here, when I looked in the gold-hued mirrors and caught Luisito beholding himself.

"Luisi," I plead. "You can't. Nobody lives in hotels."

"Then who are *they*?" He looks out the archway of the hot tub.

"They're just some people on vacations." I can already see the looks on the nuns' faces when I bring back their darling, corrupted by five-star tourism.

I try to lay out the situation in plain terms—that hotels are for visiting, temporarily, for a week at most—but nothing can curb the possibility billowing in Luisito's brain. The question will crop up all day long, doggedly hopeful.

"What if *you* lived in the hotel *with me*?"

As soon as I step out of the hot tub nook and go fetch Luisito's wheelchair, I notice that two things have happened since Luisito and I began pruning our fingertips underwater. One: the poolside lawn chairs have filled with hotel guests. Two: these guests just listened to our holy duet.

"Nice voice," a pot-bellied Brit remarks.

Luisito pulls his vacation costume over his wet skin and psuedo-

Speedo. We have no towel, but this doesn't bother him. He's smiling wide at something across the pool. Finally, he points.

"Look," says Luisito. "*Una china.*"

There is a cute Asian girl sunbathing beside the water, speaking in English with Caucasian friends. As if seeing a fantastical creature, like a unicorn, for the first time with his own eyes, Luisito is mesmerized. As I crouch alongside him, shoving his second-hand sneakers onto two resistant feet, it strikes me that island tourism isn't just exotic for those who come from afar, on planes and cruisers. If anyone has cause to gawk at Old Havana's motley international crew, it's a local like Luisito—a man who's lived his life, in its entirety, within the boundaries of this island and its revolution.

Back on the street, Luisito and I set out in search of a restaurant. This is a dangerous thing to do in Old Havana: to attempt spending. A dozen Cubans will sniff out the ready dollars and advance with a pitch.

Lobster at my aunt's house!

*Mojitos* where Hemingway drank!

Spare bedroom at my cousin's friend's brother-in-law's!

Get in this taxi.

I err and make eye contact with a man on the corner, and err again when I don't shake my head "*no*" at the restaurant he's pimping. Before I can conjugate *esperar* into command form and say, "Wait," the man is lifting Luisito's wheelchair straight off the sidewalk, up all three steep concrete stairs.

So we're eating lunch here. The restaurant's interior is dark mahogany and the bar décor seems handpicked for the tourist's thirst—proffering rum and pineapple combos. Nevertheless, I trust that the caliber of food here beats nursing home cuisine, and that's the main objective of the day.

The waiter hands us menus and Luisito begins giggling at his. I think I know why: choices. That morning, before leaving the nursing home, Luisito verified that he would be missing a particularly horrendous meal—eggs. To him, eggs are an unpalatable reminder that his country rations meat, and that at least once a week, this ration doesn't make it through the ranks of the institutionalized.

Luisito grows impatient for his lunch when he sees the Europeans to our right feasting. ("They're eating! Where's ours?") In the nursing home dining hall, every resident receives his rice-and-beans sustenance at the same time, on a tray, between 12:15 and 12:36. When our food finally comes, a band begins to play tradi-



tional Cuban ballads. Any background music at this point is appreciated because Luisito does not speak while eating. He chews with his mouth open, as if a view of his filet minion supplants small talk.

The lead singer of the band is a black man wearing a purple satin vest. His black bow tie is patterned with white musical notes. Every time the band finishes a song, he flails his arms to the climaxing beat and shimmies over to a table of over-served Italians. It is scarcely past noon, and they have drunk the equivalent of a Cuban doctor's monthly salary in red wine.

Tourism has a way of turning the Old Havana regulars into loud characters. Tips are more bountiful when the Cuban plays the part—personifying the defiant, seductive, enigmatic (but contented!) country called Cuba. The world's keepsake anachronism.

The big women in la Plaza de la Catedral wear costume gowns that billow with way too many rainbow-colored ruffles, impersonating historical figures located nowhere in Cuban history. On the front patio of the Hotel Inglaterra is an old man with deep bronze skin and a beard of white stubble, who sings to the tourists eating breakfast. He accepts money but also pens. Even the children understand that they are figurines on a set. They command tourists to take their photos, leaping into exaggerated poses—karate chopping the air, kicking up their shoeless feet. Once the camera flashes, they demand candy bars.

Young men in Havana's tourist strip have two career options: cigar hawker or salsa teacher. The salsa teacher requires a jolly disposition but strong rhetorical skills as well. He must persuade the female vacationer that she hasn't *lived* until she's moved in his arms. The singer in our restaurant could easily double as a salsa man by night. He's got the merry-by-nature act down and knows a susceptible European when he sees one. By the time Luisito and I gobble down our savory cuts of beef, the singer has the Italians on their feet, swaying to the music. A band member passes around a hat for tips. Luisito stops chewing and stares as I take out the compulsory dollar and drop it in.

The cast of tourists in Cuba hardly changes: the lusty Italians that come in all-male groups or alone, looking for women and many of them; the German girls who spend a college semester falling for the first Cuban who utters a convincing "*Te adoro*"; the Japanese who move in flocks, shooting digital photos of the bright landscape as if it were lunar terrain; and finally, guilt-ridden American liberals, who find any excuse to come to Cuba, either

with the U.S. Treasury's seal of approval (Baptist church missions, cancer research symposiums, Jewish heritage trips) or simply in violation of American law with pleasure and pride.

When Luisito and I pass through the Old Havana thoroughfares, ignoring cigar pitches and sidestepping peddlers, I sense that Cubans are having trouble pegging us. Our purpose is clearly asexual (the last thing you would ever imagine Luisito to have is a manly organ) and the wheelchair rules out salsa dancing. Too many details make us an odd couple. My *gringa* pronunciation, his elfin voice. His deformity, my bleach-white skin. My wad of foreign currency, his tattered toy bumblebee.

The best guess is that we are category V, section B: medical asylum on communism's bill. The medical visitors, along with left-leaning Americans, compose Cuban tourism's wholesome half. My young son, or little brother, or shrinking husband, or pet elf must have some rare disease that capitalism is being a tightwad about curing. So we've come here, to Cuba, the land of medical care as a fundamental human right, where doctors pitch in as farmhands on the weekends. Luisito and I will spend a week or so in the downtown hospital, attended by Cuba's finest, and then work in some light sightseeing before we fly off to resume healthy, wealthy lives. Maybe Cubans look at us and wonder if—since we won't be patrons of the salsa or the cigars—we'll be so kind as to tip our dirt-cheap physician.

The vacationland malaise hits midafternoon—after we're overfed with beef and fed up with cigar pitches. So I decide to take Luisito to a home. A real Cuban home. The closest thing I know to a real Cuban home is the boarding house on Jovellar Street where I often rent a bedroom. Delbis, the *senora* of this casa, knows her guests well: the Dutch girl who fell in love with a Cuban painter, the Italian guys who honed their womanizing skills here last spring. Delbis collects the stories of her clientele and seems to appreciate the anomaly I've added to her guest book. I have no lover in Havana. I have no salsa teacher, no crush on him. I hang out with a peculiar playmate who's twice my age and half my size.

Delbis has heard about Luisito. When I ring her doorbell, she knows to expect an uncommon guest. Nevertheless, as I negotiate Luisito's wheelchair through the casa door and then down the dim, narrow hallway, I feel nervous. Apparently Luisito does, too. We sit around the kitchen table with Delbis and her niece, making small talk, and I wait for Luisito to pipe in. He's supposed to charm them. That's his life skill, and these Cuban women are a

prime audience. But Luisito goes bashful on me. He looks down at the floor, where his little-kid feet tap the linoleum tiles, and talks only of refrigerators.

Yes, refrigerators. Since we arrived, Luisito has been stealing glances at the three ancient appliances along the wall of the kitchen. They are rotund, dotted with rust, and sealed with metal handles—the kind that flip out like old-fashioned trunk clips. Luisito informs my host family that two of their refrigerators are Russian-made and one is American. He must have picked up this factoid by loitering in the nursing home kitchen—his favorite haunt—hoping for meat handouts on egg days.

Hanging around the nursing home kitchen was how I versed myself in a certain type of Cuban humor—Pepito jokes. Pepito is a sweet little schoolboy who stands for the upright Cuban citizen: simple, patriotic, satisfied with his communal lot. What gets Cubans laughing during a Pepito joke, however, is that Pepito eventually shows his true colors, right at the punch line, saying or doing something cynical and greedy. There's a nurse in Bejucal who likes to tell one about Pepito's grandfather leaving Cuba for the United States. As grandpa darts off with a suitcase, Pepito yells after him, "Grandpa, you traitor! Don't forget what size shirt I wear!"

The people of Bejucal adore Luisito for many reasons. He is small, simple, and exceedingly sweet. But they also love him for loathing blackouts, for bitching about beef shortages, and most of all, for wanting to move to America. If their own prospects for winning the immigration lottery or falling in love with someone from Nevada are unlikely, then Luisito's are pure satire. Through him, anyone can make light of the limitations that come with Cuban citizenship.

So Luisito stays one notch below real—without age or stature, without family obligation or sexual inclination—and talks about how he's just got to get to the United States. How he's had enough of this crap and just wants to sink his teeth into one of those juicy hamburgers from the commercials. Cubans roar and never forget his name. Luisito: the elf that wants to be a Yankee.

When I feed him the right lead questions, Luisito finally tests his classic line on my host mother: *Hay que irse para la Yuma*. Loosely translated, it means "One's gotta leave for America." In Spanish, it sounds like a wise old adage with a splash of street slang (if the nuns take responsibility for "Ave Maria," forty-plus years of uncensored nurse's aides are to blame for the edge in Luisito's lexicon). *La Yuma* is what certain Cubans—the same types who joke

about catching the next flotation device to Florida—call the United States. It has connotations of a promised land—one that's more imagination than a probable destination.

Luisito's head is down when he sheepishly tells my host mother that he's gotta leave Cuba, gotta get to la Yuma. Like a limp cord suddenly jerked taut, comic relief rips across the kitchen. Delbis's niece lets out a loud guffaw and claps her hands loudly, twice.

Head still down, Luisito combats a smile that would otherwise take over his face. I'm not sure that he understands why the most hackneyed remarks in Cuba—about how life ain't easy, how immigration is the only way—become hysterical when he puts them in his own mouth. But the huge piano-key teeth are showing. Luisito has won the kitchen.

Now there are endless matters to discuss and my host family—all smiles—pumps him to keep going. How is he planning on *getting* to La Yuma? (My suitcase, just big enough to hold a Luisito.) What will he *do* there? (Work. He says he'll work. Adorable.) But won't he miss his dear president Fidel?

Now, this question is a setup. Luisito walks right into it every time, shotgun loaded. He knows to take his anti-Castro bravado far—that he, as a mini-man, can get away with blasphemy that full-size, incarcerable Cubans cannot. To the Cuban ear, the sound of this convent-raised munchkin, this Pepito incarnate, calling Fidel Castro a shit-eater couldn't be more delicious. As for the little one born looking like E.T., comedy is always the best approach for the forty-six-year-old kept indoors for life.

"Do you want to eat dinner before we head back?" I ask Luisito.

"And you?" He deflects, wearing a crocodile smile.

Every time I present the possibility of a food or an uncommon treat to Luisito, he tosses it back like a hot potato. All offers—ice cream, *churros*, soda, cookies—have rebounded with the same two words: "*Y tu?*" What Luisito means to say, of course, is *si*. Yes. He wants everything.

Never sated, Luisito's indulgence bone has grown immense over the decades. By the time he and the revolution turn fifty, it's forecasted to burst through his compacted frame and grow its own mouth—this one with fangs and a tongue capable of stretching across the Florida Straits, into beef-focused fast food restaurants.

The illegal cable channel from Miami, the infamous "23," hasn't mitigated Luisito's appetite for the fruits of capitalism. In a country of only four government-controlled television channels, the

Miami broadcasting is a loud temptation. With all its game shows and Jerry Springer knock-offs *en Español*, it's a vulgar advertisement of the Latino-American dream. The old television set in Luisito's bedroom picks up "Canal 23," though by the time it reaches the Bejucal nursing home there is no sound and the images are obscured by a static Luisito calls "rain."

Food commercials—nonexistent in Fidel-Vision—are what transfix Luisito most. On more than one occasion, nursing home employees have caught him salivating at savory meat slices behind the torrent of inter-nation static. He once asked me if meat "like that" really exists in my country. Just like an Asian, or a Yuma ninety miles from Cuban shores, roast beef (the slices whose edges fold atop one another like ribbon) could easily be a fable.

Every time I visit the Bejucal nursing home after a trip to the capital, Luisito knows to expect something for his hunger pains: a lukewarm piece of fried chicken, soda in a can, a chocolate Easter bunny (which I'm still not certain Luisito peeled the purple foil off of before consuming). Luisito has a sixth sense for my secret bundle. The moment he spots a lump in my backpack, a gremlin giggle (or, as the physical therapist calls it, "the laugh of the pirate") is heard.

Luisito knows to get me alone—quickly. There are too many hands around the nursing home to risk waiting. Even the nurses that bathe and tuck Luisito into bed like guardian angels have been known to *llevar*—to lift, to take. It's rarely called "stealing" in Cuba, with the verb *robar*, because every Cuban has *necesidad*, and every Cuban (save Luisito) has sisters and brothers and children and cousins whose *necesidad* multiplies their own *necesidad* too many times to allow for ethics. I once made the mistake of hoarding a Luisito gift, entrusting one of the infirmary workers with a bright green, bendy-legged Kermit the Frog, so that Luisito would get it on his actual birthday. Long before October 3, Kermit was gone—someone else's present.

The more time a foreigner spends in Cuba, and the farther she strays from Vacation Row, the more *necesidad* finds her. Sour middle-aged women corner her to say what the billboards don't, thrilled to have a foreign audience for the pent-up rant. This is their chance to finally expose what a bastard that ex-husband is, to no one other than the bimbo Cuban vacationer who thinks he's dreamy.

In Bejucal, there is no inappropriate time to teach the American girl why it's a bitch to be Cuban. We could be lifting a frail old lady into bed, or spoon-feeding a hungry diabetic who wishes the tan-

genital spoon would just get around to his lips. No one has tallied the number of times I've listened, or sensed how thoroughly soaked I am by now—six months into my Cuban vacation. On behalf of the Swedes and Canadians who never make it to the Bejucal nursing home, I listen to them tear down the legend again, and again, and again.

Rather than douse me with more guilt, Luisito suggests easy ways I can alleviate what I'm carrying: feed him, buy him toys, feed him. Eagerly, I subscribe to the Luisito plan—to purge my guilt, but also for the simple pleasure. I start smuggling my dinner meat up to the third floor, where he's sprawled out on his bed watching the Brazilian soap opera. He looks at me and then my blue plastic cup. There is a pause. The gremlin giggle. The pirate laugh. Then the feast. Luisito chews with his mouth open, intent on mincing the meat between his molars. I watch, reveling in the best part of my day.

"Good?" I ask, knowing the answer.

Luisito nods, smacking. "A little water," he says, which means, "Go fetch me some."

"Spoiled," I tease, then fetch.

It's easy to spoil someone who's been an orphan since infancy. I make a pastime of it. I daydream of flying north, to the Yuma, where I can pack a fat suitcase of cotton candy and bags of spicy beef jerky and marshmallow fluff and gummy worms and a disco ball—battery powered and black-out proof. I'll force in downy stuffed animals from FAO Schwartz, remote-controlled cars, face paint, Pez dispensers, water guns, and a toy refrigerator—Russian, if I can find it. This is how I come to grasp the Cuban-American dream: the dream of going back, loaded.

Luisito is a born dreamer but has learned to be pragmatic. When he realizes that my month in Bejucal is almost over, he begins to make pointed, persistent appeals for gifts. It begins with batteries. Then an electric shaver. More batteries. A fluorescent lamp for the blackouts. Batteries for that lamp. A refrigerator—Luisito sized—with a freezer shelf. Size eight shoes.

What will later begin to exhaust me about Luisito isn't the length of his wish list but his reaction once granted a gift. "And when they run out?" he asks me when I bring him a jumbo pack of batteries. "And when it's gone?" is his first concern about a new bottle of Bacon Bits. Regarding a toy piano: "And when it breaks?" A flashlight: "What about batteries?" The mini-refrigerator I spend my final stack of traveler's checks purchasing: "Look: the freezer isn't big enough." It's not appreciation I need to see from

Luisito; it's a sign that he takes some joy—if even for a half-second—in a granted wish, before thinking ahead to its dissolution. But Luisito has lived through too many shortages—too many years without batteries or light or chocolate bunnies—to trust a prosperous burst.

Today, after accepting ice cream, and churros, and a can of pop, Luisito accepts a full package of crème-filled chocolate cookies that I buy impulsively on the street. But just seconds after I hand over the roll of sweets, I catch him tucking them away in a fold of his wheelchair seat.

"You aren't going to eat them?" I ask, embarrassed to hear myself sound hurt.

"Nooo," replies Luisito, in that hushed but emphatic voice teenagers use on mothers who embarrass them in public. "I'm saving these. For *later*."

Luisito's "later" isn't just about the elapse of time. Later is about withdrawing into a place and moment that no one but Luisito can see or know about (hence the mystery of whether the chocolate bunny's foil wrapper was peeled or consumed). I once gave him a full jar of peanut butter with instructions to share. Days later, I spotted the jar beneath his television. It was clear as a fishbowl. I do understand why, though, privacy could make anything taste better in a home of two-hundred-plus beds.

To arrive at our dinner restaurant quickly, we catch an old Cuban cab. It's a wide-hipped, chocolate brown Chevy that feels like a puffy jacket around us. The cab driver is flirtatious with me. He thinks he knows Luisito, eyeing him in the rear view mirror and saying, "Yeah, I've seen you around before." Luisito, who is not appreciative of the overt flirting, does not humor the error.

"I live in Bejucal," he says peremptorily, rolling his eyes at the man. I'm floored by the rudeness. Just when I think I know his every idiosyncrasy, Luisito behaves like a stranger. Once, I brought a German girl from Delbis's boarding house to Bejucal to meet Luisito. Before I could even finish the introduction, Luisito flung one of his long arms into a stiff salute and said "HUP, HUP!" My German friend gasped, knowing, as I did, that this was Luisito's rendition of "Heil Hitler!" I blamed channel 23.

The restaurant we choose is in the heart of Barrio Chino—Havana's one-lane attempt at a bustling Chinatown. The red paper lanterns don't do much for authenticity, but in Cuba's monochrome capital, they do enough. Luisito and I take seats on the empty patio of a restaurant, and our waiter hands us menus with photos, as if sensitive to my language and his literacy issues. Im-

mediately, Luisito points to the photo of the light green bottle with the long neck.

Beer. We debate whether Luisito should order a cold one—just like we did at lunch—only to conclude that it isn't the best idea to disobey the mother superior. We do this to appreciate the possibility. It's not every day that beer can be contemplated.

Our waiter pays us special attention—first, because we are the restaurant's only clients; later, because the idea of us, as a pair of diners, seems to tickle him. He eyes my friend like Luisito is a beguiling animation, and then glances across the table, to check that I'm duly charmed.

Luisito, while gnawing on his fried chicken, makes the uncharacteristic decision to speak. The reason is that Luisito has a question for our waiter, and it's pressing.

"Do the lights go out here much?"

"Not that much."

I watch Luisito masticate. This news complicates things. Now, when he makes his plea to move to a Havana hotel to the nuns, he'll have to append: "or Chinatown." Luisito says nothing. I doubt he's pleased.

Now fully worn out by our gluttony, I push the remainder of my stir-fry across the table, to Luisito, which he accepts. I then excuse myself to the bathroom and leave Luisito to gobble both entrees. When I return to the patio, the entire waiting staff is standing in a cluster behind our table. They are watching Luisito with plain delight. I resume my seat and see that Luisito has mistaken my sweet and sour sauce for a desert, and picked up his spoon. He's eating it as if it were *crème brûlée*, right out of the bowl.

"This is delicious," Luisito tells me, awe softening his voice.

The waiter brings the check, and I notice my date starts shuffling through the mysterious crevices of his wheelchair seat. When he pulls out a one-dollar bill, my face turns crimson. I have no idea where this dollar came from; Luisito's caretakers don't even earn U.S. dollars, let alone hand them out. It's possible Luisito has been saving this bill for more years than I've known of an island named Cuba. The last thing I want to do is shoo it from the table, but I can't let Luisito spend it.

"I want to buy a Coke," he tells me, looking flushed himself. "For later."

He's thinking of all the ordinary days. He's thinking of a stock-pile.

"Let's just put it on the bill, Luisi. That's easier." I say, recover-



ing my natural skin tone. Luisito looks relieved that I'm covering the cost, though proud that he tried. He still owns gold, and now a pop, too.

During the first month I volunteered in the Bejucal nursing home, Luisito and I developed a routine that kept the staff chuckling and telling stories. We were the home's odd couple, interacting like caricatures of ourselves. To Luisito, I was La-Americana-with-the-Bleeding-Heart. To me, he was The-Little-Handicapped-Cuban-That-Could. Daily, we recapped our plan to smuggle him to La Yuma in my luggage.

"It's going to be a bumpy ride, you know," I'd warn him in a loud, teacherly voice.

"I'll make it," he'd boast back, in front of one of his favorite nuns. "I'll make it."

But by the end of our vacation day, Luisito and I aren't in our usual jokey moods. Too much sincerity has leaked out throughout the day—each time I veered his wheelchair around a pothole, each time he rephrased his hotel inquiry revealing an earnest dream behind it—to keep up the air of jest.

After today, our relationship will be less about public diversion and more about our strange but sincere affinity. If I don't find him during a blackout, he'll track me down with a scolding when the lights go back on. "Where *were* you?" If I don't run into him paddling down the long nursing home halls by lunchtime, my day pales. Luisito and I will carry out simultaneous hunts for each other, scouring the three-story facility, asking the same staff for clues.

"He was just here."

"She's looking for you, too."

And when I catch people looking down at Luisito in his wheelchair, muttering *pobrecito*, "poor little thing," I'll want to take their sympathy and slip it in their back pockets. Without being rude, or without them even knowing, just—giving it back. There are plenty of people—around the nursing home, around Cuba—who could use an extra helping of pity. Luisito has done just fine.

The ride home is different from the ride to Havana—a muted backdrop for the day humming in our heads. Luisito and I sit in the back seat this time, without hogging the attention of the taxi's passengers with our banter. Like a toddler who arranges his mother's body as his pillow, Luisito pulls my right arm over his shoulder and nestles in. We fit.

This cab actually looks like a cab; it is yellow, boxy, and only

two or three decades old, rather than four and a half. It races us through the quieting landscapes, where the sun gives parting glances to palm fronds and rooftops. The day's first cool breeze pours through our open window, laying soft pressure on our cheeks as we watch the roadside scenes.

The billboard slogans are hushed by the closing day (*Vigilant and Combative We Continue; These Are Times of Loyalty; Cuba Will Prove That the World Can Save Itself; Drink Water*). Luisito and I have stretched this day as far we can pretend that days are elastic, and our stomachs, too. Now, we have to admit to haste; the tall, barred doors of the nursing home close and lock at 9 PM.

Luisito must be thinking of the nuns by now. He knows that everyone in the nursing home is waiting for us, bracing themselves for detailed accounts of our trip. The odd couple returns: sun-kissed, surfeited, having climbed to the top of Havana, having seen it all.

Luisito will announce his plans to move to a hotel and have them rolling on the floor. The story will fly between units, from night shift to day shift, recounted in the kitchen, couriered to the parish. In return, they'll promise Luisito and me that nothing remotely stimulating happened while we were gone. Today was the dullest egg day on record.

As soon as I hoist Luisito's wheelchair up the main door's steps and flash a smile at the reception room, this hope collapses. There's no hero's welcome. The old men seated there, in the same seats they sat in this morning, and yesterday morning, have forgotten that we ever left. You can see it in their gazes. Reactionless gazes. We are two familiar people, stepping in after stepping out.

I push Luisito's wheelchair through the lobby of old men and wish that I could guard him from the odor of institution that wraps around us. I had forgotten that "home" was not only Luisito's amphitheater of adorers but a building where hundreds of old people live until they die.

A nun named Sister Jubi once told me that people with Luisito's disease—a medical word I had no hope of recognizing in Spanish—don't live long. I pressed for a more exact age and she turned her wrist in the air uncertainly. "Fifties, sixties . . ." She explained that a small body with its organs pressed against each other couldn't endure for a normal lifespan. I felt cold and changed the subject.

Whenever I spend time in Havana's touristy zones, I'm always struck by how the vacationers explain themselves. They say they're here "to see Cuba before." Before: as if Castro's time-warped island were due to detonate any second. As if tomorrow—one one tomor-

row—the streets will fill with Cubans throwing their ration books in the air, clamoring for credit cards. The billboards will be painted over—since Marlboro pays better than the revolution—and a ferry, no, a bridge will be built from Miami to Havana, laying planks of welcome to the tardy Puerto Rico.

The longer I spend in Cuba, the less capacity I have to believe in this After. In Bejucal, roaming about with Luisito day after day, I come to sense the stubborn status quo of this place. The blackouts come and go, stoking discontent that Cuban people know how to relieve: by venting, by laughing, by leaving. I watch the patterns, listen to the gripes, the echoes, the Pepito jokes, and grow doubtful that this Cuba could do anything but endure. This Cuba could so easily turn forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty, and the only change would be the number on the bulletin boards. Luisito's age.

When I go back to Cuba, I don't know what will be harder to stomach: passing by the same color-drained buildings on the boardwalk, the ones that slouch like old women, life-tired, and willing to let the next storm wash away their bones. That, or a Home Depot in their place, stout and sparkling, with automatic doors that flinch open for every passing Cuban. How I can care about Cuba as much as I do and remain utterly ambivalent about its future, baffles me. What I do know is that this ambivalence is not born of indifference. It's a duel between my enchantment and my exasperation. It's the conflict that comes from staying on the island long enough to perceive its longing, but long enough also to get its jokes, and take joy in a sense of humor that triumphs, regardless of repression, regardless of whether the lights are on or off.

There is one thing in Cuba that I cannot find changed: Luisito. The purest product of Cuban influences, Luisito could chuckle off a hurricane and give the term "binge eating" new meaning. On Luisito, I squandered all of the humanitarian energy that first impelled me to spend a year volunteering abroad. He was a small, simple redemption for what jaded me so swiftly: communism, yes, but also my own intentions and capacity to give. Without him, my idealism would have dried up too fast, and taken too much generosity away with it.

Though Luisito would put all that in much simpler terms. If he overheard me measuring the depth of my disillusion against the depth my affection, he would yank on my nearest arm, get me crouched down beside his wheelchair, and while strumming the inset of my forearm, he'd explain what has passed between the

two of us, using—as he does in more serious moments—the third person.

He'd say that Coh-lene is living far away from *familia*, far away from where it snows and there are hamburgers, and Coh-lene (just like the German girl or those foreign people on the roof) needs someone in Cuba. Coh-lene needs someone for company. And Luisito is good at company. And Luisito has always wanted an American girlfriend. And Luisito would like more than anything to have a full-size refrigerator of his own, for his bedroom, with a generator plug to keep it cold during blackouts. In Luisito terms, he was just the safest and most satisfying person I had to love.

Whenever I make it back to the Bejucal nursing home, lugging a swollen suitcase, I imagine I'll find Luisito in an unchanged room. Before exchanging a word of greeting, he and I will hear the gremlin giggle. The pirate will laugh. If, by then, the impossible has gotten around to happening, then Luisito and I will enjoy the very finest the impossible has to offer. We will get up at the crack of dawn, dress like bona fide vacationers, and head to Havana, where the ninety-mile bridge will usher us to the Yuma for a day. We'll spend the sunny hours wandering around the corner of la Yuma they call "Me-am-mee," eating all of the legend that television promised, and be home before the doors close at nine.

Luisito, wise man that he is, will know to slip a relic into the crevice of his wheelchair seat, so that when the spell breaks, he has his proof—for later. Chocolate crème cookies in those cartoon-sized teeth, speckling the smile he's hopeless at keeping to himself.