

WE THE GRANDCHILDREN

by Lucas Loredó

Our family comes apart. Like stars in a constellation drifting out of alignment. Lala is gone and our fathers aren't speaking.

We try to map the trajectory, to pinpoint the moment of final rift. We keep coming back to the summer of 1959 in Nicaro, Cuba—home to an American nickel plant. The town church kept the windows open year round. No stained glass, just wind and ocean sounds. Between houses a web of dirt roads and gossip. Bicycles. Heat.

The American Club was folded like a gem into Nicaro's soil. It had the only chlorinated pool in town. Walk down the road with your eyes closed. If you smelled chlorine, you smelled an American. The club was white concrete with a palapa roof of raw timber and palm fronds. It was the only building in Nicaro—including the hospital—that was *aerecondicionado*. The only building where, if you touched the windowpanes, you'd feel coolness on your finger.

We cobble together what we know of that time. Our fathers, the two brothers, Leo and Manolito. Their parents, our grandparents, Papa and Lala. Our family's house on the hill. Royal palms riding the half-mile slope to the ocean. Drying on the line out front, Papa's white

button-up shirts, shoulders pinched with clothespins. The time Leo and Manolito ate two cabbage-sized mangoes before lunch and threw up orange. The taro vine on the dinner table they'd lift from the pot to hide their liver and cow tongue under—how wildly that vine grew. Pinto the Magic Horse, who snapped his bridle and chased the brothers into the bay. Beatriz, the housekeeper, who promised Manolito that *el diablo* really *did* live in the flamboyán trees, that the rustling he heard in the canopy was a red hand grabbing branches. The time Leo and Manolito got in a fierce fistfight over an American girl named Holly Smith. How Manolito, a month later, left a bird of paradise on her windowsill and a note.

We know the revolution in flashes—stories told to us each holiday around a card table. Right before the family fled to the United States there were the thin mattresses covering the windows, the machine gun prattle on the front porch. A sea of silver bullets on the driveway flashing like liquid mercury. A glimmer of helicopter through tattered flags of flamboyán. Papa riding his horse, *Relámpago*, into the jungle with a flashlight and his medical bag. Dragging a sheet with a red capital H across the hospital roof as planes pregnant with ammunition zoomed overhead. We know of the final moment, Leo standing at a ferry's railing, seeing Cuba dip below the horizon for the last time.

That summer in 1959, Leo came home with an army-green *compañero* cap and refused dinner until Papa put on Castro's broadcast.

"Mami, they say it's the flaming symbol of the opposition to the regime," he said.

The next day, Manolito came to the dinner table with the same cap, spouting slogans he'd spent the day memorizing.

The third day, the two brothers chanted “*¡Aquí Radio Rebelde! ¡Aquí Radio Rebelde!*” until Lala, tight-lipped, pushed Manolito’s face into his squash soup.

“Castro cannot cook your food,” she said.

The brim of Manolito’s cap in the bowl. Him coming up, yellow soup dripping from his face, staring daggers—at his brother.

Our quiet Texan childhoods feel small by comparison. Withered, lacking wonder. Like a sheet of tracing paper pressed to a stone tablet, the charcoal rubbing a hazy counterfeit of the calligraphy underneath.

Here is the story we come back to, the one we toss back and forth over telephone lines. There was Leo, a striking, darkly handsome boy of 12, loose in the limbs but quick to use them. Sought after by the older girls who liked his strong nostrils and big lips. A kid who, when his handwriting teacher embarrassed him in front of the class, practiced a week straight by moonlight. When the teacher accused him of cheating on the next test, he looped perfect cursive across the class ledger, a *no-me-jodas* etched at the corner of his smiling eyes.

There was Manolito, a withdrawn boy of seven, crooked teeth, a wide, bulbous freckle on his neck he often covered with a red bandana. After a classmate called him mole-head on the playground, he spent his Christmas holiday carving a wooden doll, finely detailed and with the classmate's big ears, and set it alight on the boy's porch.

They were in the pantry, the ceiling fan pushing hot air around the brightly lit room. Leo’s friend, Tomás, laced his fingers together, giving Leo a boost.

Manolito stood lookout in the hallway. He twisted his *compañero* cap in his hands.

“We’ll get caught,” he said. Through the front window he saw Beatriz watering the bougainvillea. “Let’s play *rebeldes* in the yard. I’ll even be the Bautista. I will, if we go now.”

“Shut it, *maricón*,” said Leo. He reached a tanned hand up to the top shelf.

“If this works . . .” Tomás’s voice trailed upward and away.

Leo jumped down grinning, and in his arms he cradled a brown paper sack of flour.

Next they went into Papa’s room, where Leo picked through the jewelry box on the bureau. The scent of oiled rosewood, the glow of musty light. Manolito fluttered at the edge of the doorway.

“Leo!” he pleaded.

“Stop being a baby,” Leo said as he lifted out his father’s spare set of American aviators.

They went out back. Down behind a stand of flowering begonia, where the slope of the great hill began, Leo took off his tank top. He slid down his shorts. Tomás took them both. Leo removed his white Keds and set them aside. Only tighty whities now, his name written inside the waistband in Lala’s blocky black capitals. The crinkle of paper as Tomás’s grip on the bag of flour tightened. Leo got down on his knees—two soft impressions in the dirt and leaves—and bent his head as if in prayer.

“Put it good,” he said.

Tomás opened the bag and lifted it. Manolito’s eyes flashed back across the yard, searching for an elbow, a leg bending around the corner of the house, anything. The bag, tipping slowly. Then, all at once, a great burst of powder.

And Leo became a White Boy.

Fine dust settled on the begonia leaves.

“Give me it,” Leo said, and Tomás gave him the flour. Holding the bag, Leo opened the front of his underwear. Here we smile. Because Leo, our father, our uncle, let spill a plume of white powder that billowed out the bottom of his underwear like cotton clouds issuing from smokestacks.

Tomás, bless him, arched an eyebrow in appreciation. “Now you’re a real American,” he said.

The boys swapped clothes. For Leo’s tank top, Manolito’s white collared shirt. For the shorts and white Keds, Tomás’s pressed linen pants and church shoes. Tomás spit on his thumb and cleaned off the white fingerprints on Leo’s thighs and beltline. Finally, Leo donned the aviators, his *transformación americano* complete.

“Eh?” he said.

“Your hair looks like spaghetti,” Manolito said.

“Don’t be stupid.” Leo took out the pocket mirror he’d snatched from his father’s jewelry box. His face was white—not *gringo* white, but white-white. The powder weighed down his eyelashes. “No,” he said, “I look *rubio*.”

“A *rubio*’s ghost, maybe,” said Manolito.

“Shut it.” Leo shoved the bag of flour at his brother. To Tomás he said, “Let’s go.”

The two older kids turned to leave. “Besides,” said Tomás hopefully, “Americans can be albino, too. Being rich doesn’t protect them from *everything*.”

“I want to come,” Manolito called after them.

Leo looked back over his shoulder. “No babies allowed.”

Manolito stood at the treeline alone and watched his brother leave him.

When they tell us this story, our fathers agree about this: Leo really did get into the American Club. Waltzed right through the front door, his confidence a plume of peacock feathers behind him. The man at the bar was so tickled he even let Leo order a *Cuba Libre*. “For the little *americano*,” he said, holding out a sweating tumbler of amber liquid.

Manolito followed. He walked the ditch so the two older boys wouldn’t spot him. When he saw Leo pass through the doors, the shimmering current of *aerecondicionado* escaping the club, bending the air like a lens—when he saw Leo get a drink and head for the pool, Manolito dipped around the corner.

He was tired by then; it was a five-pound bag of flour, and his wrists were spindly as sunflower stalks. He removed his brother’s tank top. There, outside the picketed fence, the acid flavor of chlorine entering his nostrils and mouth, his shorts fell to the ground. After a careful look along each stretch of pickets, his underwear, too, fell.

We imagine a little naked boy behind a clump of bushes, puckered penis and buttocks, shoulders caved protectively inward. The youngest of us laugh nervously at this part, but the older know better—how nakedness and humiliation travel arm in arm.

Manolito dropped the sack to the ground. He dunked his hands in flour and worked quickly, cupping powder onto his arms like a chef dusting raw chicken. A white halo appeared at his feet. He slid into his underwear and shorts and pulled the tank top overhead, the cloudless sky framed blue for an instant in the neck and arm openings.

A fire hydrant served as a footstool. He gripped the wooden tops of the fence and pulled himself up—he barely reached its top with the bridge of his nose. The chlorine scent sharpened

and almost knocked loose his senses. His eyes ticked back and forth like the magnetic probings of a compass needle. A collection of white sunbathing bodies stretched in a ring around the pool. A lifeguard in red bathing trunks. A waiter wearing a half apron. Leo was there, tracing a circle around the pool with his *Cuba Libre* in hand. Finally Manolito's eyes settled on magnetic north: Holly Smith in a black one-piece bathing suit, reclining on a lounge chair, her blonde hair pooled around her. A pair of cat-eyed sunglasses—red—balanced on her stomach. She rubbed her feet together as she scrutinized an American fashion magazine with scientific interest.

At the sight of her Manolito's heart fell through the earth.

Years later, heading into his first year of college an ocean away, Manolito would search a dozen stores for sixties pin-ups in black one-piece bathing suits and red, cat-eyed sunglasses. The poster he found is still on the wall in his smoking room.

When we talk about the next part, we shake our heads. Because Leo, too, had found true north. His feline shoulder blades rolled as he stalked his prey. His feet silent and agile, alighting on the islands of pool-splashed concrete to avoid burns. The *Cuba Libre* extended, a tail for balance.

Here, Manolito waved shyly from over the fencing. "Leo" escaped his lips, a stage whisper. "Let me in." When Leo didn't turn, Manolito called his name again, louder, his arm higher, signaling.

But Manolito's brother was already upon her. He sat on the lounge chair next to Holly's. In each telling of the story, Leo says a different pick-up line. Once it was, "I noticed we were both *rubios*—we should compare shampoos." Another time, "My father is the best doctor in town, which means I am trained in the art of physical examinations." In one version he takes the

red sunglasses, his fingers grazing her stomach, and puts them over his own, saying, “Now I’m twice the American you are.”

The truth is, we doubt he said anything. His gift wasn’t words but an energy of presence. We bet he lowered himself next to her like a coil compressing. We bet he waited her out in a courtship of attrition. We bet Holly lowered her magazine after a while and turned to him with the same mild interest as if she’d noticed a ladybug crawling up her arm, and said, “Well, what?” Then we bet he stood and extended his hand, the other behind his back, the perfect gentleman. A big smile, teeth smooth and white as river stones. Then the offer: “How about a Free Cuban, Holly Smith?”

We like to think she looked Leo over, this ridiculous white boy, and thought, *This could be fun.*

Then she stood. However Leo managed it, it’s true: she stood.

We know the next part is what Manolito can’t get over, even now. The moment refracts and bends through the rest of his life, taking on shapes and colors like light splitting on the far side of a prism.

We see it, kaleidoscoping through time.

How years ago, at the American Club, Manolito waved his hand. Said, “Leo, let me *in*,” this time strong enough for everyone to hear. How a dozen sets of green and blue eyes pulled toward him as if someone had tugged a handful of kite strings. The heat behind his ears. The heat on his cheeks, spreading. And how Leo turned to see his brother on tip-toes, the moon of his face barely visible above the white pickets, motioning toward the side gate. How, instead of letting

his little brother in, Leo grinned and put out his arm, which Holly Smith took, the flour rubbing off on the inside of her elbow, and showed Manolito his back.

How that moment birthed a new star, sickly yellow and twinkling, in the brothers' constellation.

Manolito watched his brother take Holly away. Tears blazed clumpy white trails down his face. He jumped from the fire hydrant. He picked up the bag of flour and made a direct line for the front of the American Club. The attendant at the door had his hat tipped down and talked quietly to an old man in a chef's uniform.

"*Leonardo Miguel Romeo Martinez!*" Manolito shouted, his small lungs heaving each word. A handful of parrots startled from a nearby shortleaf fig. The door attendant looked up, his eyes shaded by the hat brim. With two hands Manolito gripped the bottom of the bag of flour, accelerated toward the big, arching front window of the American Club, and launched the bag underhanded.

We feel the moment of impact. The bag of flour cutting a clean hole through the window. Paper ripping, contrails of white powder. Manolito's arms outstretched and aggressive. At the pool, Leo turning momentarily, his ears perked by the echo of his full name and the far-away tinkling of glass. The cold *aerecondicionado* escaping the Club, violently, like the sudden loss of cabin pressure at altitude.

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One of us was there last winter when Lala's mind bent. She was an old woman by then, sick with lung cancer, and Manolito was paunchy and baggy eyed, his hair cropped close to his scalp, the only remnant of his childhood the still-thin wrists now wrapped in Papa's gold

bracelets. Leo wasn't there; he was working at the hospital in El Paso. A rare occasion by his mother's bedside without his brother, the lawyer sitting to his left.

A fire iron prodded the embers of Manolito's mind as he called the years back. The summer of 1959. Leo at the American Club with Holly on his arm, smug, white, a stranger. All the other times Leo, the older brother, could have included him but didn't: the lifting of candy from the food emporium in Waco, the boozy tubing trip on the Guadalupe, the first drive in the powder-blue Mustang. Bigger things: the missing invitation to sort through their father's possessions and the silence after Manolito's first daughter passed away. All the lonelineses of childhood and adulthood, everywhere in between, raked together and smoldering.

Leo again with Holly Smith on his arm. Forever there. The flour forever rubbing off. Leo with the looks. Leo with the guts. Leo always on the inside, and Manolito forever on the outside.

*Let him be the stranger for once.* We heard him think it, sitting there next to the lawyer, Lala resting quietly with the sheets up to her neck, her will pliable, her mind cobwebs. *Let him look at me across the fence.*

The brief consultation with his mother. Her tired acquiescence.

The lawyer's pen striking Leo and his children from the will.

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Only one of us, Leo's youngest son, knows this: that years after that day at the American Club, after the first round of artillery shells howled in arcs over their home to the mountains where the rebels stayed; after the ferry ride to America, slick and slanting; after all the fistfights in Miami and Meridian, Leo protecting his younger brother; after Leo's Ph.D. at the University of Texas at Austin; after Manolito left nursing school one unit shy of graduating; after the births

of their children and the death of Leo's second wife . . . It was only after all this, when Leo's youngest was home for the summer in El Paso, lacing a pair of white Keds, that he heard: Leo had never forgiven himself. That in their forties sharing a meal at Fran's in Austin, Leo had fiddled with a salt shaker as he stumbled through an apology, Manolito with a cheddar burger in his right hand, a pile of betrayals on the table between them.

We used to see each other constantly. The Texas gulf coast every summer, Manolito's for Christmas, Leo's for Easter. Special birthdays and first communions. Weddings upon weddings. One time at the beach we played cards so loud the cops came and Lala answered the door in her bra. Leo's sons hired a fire dancer for his 60th, and it took seven hours to roast the pig in the backyard it was so cold out. Every Thanksgiving, touch football in the leaves. Children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, eighteen of us shouting and laughing and growing up.

The last time we all saw each other was Lala's funeral, six months ago. For a while our fathers traded indignant phone calls, but now all is silence between them. We call and ask questions. Raise points of fact. Remind them of brotherhood and what it means.

But Manolito's hate radiates across years. The astrology, it seems, is already written. Yet still we try to blot out that yellow star in our fathers' night sky, to curb its heat with the whorls of our thumbs.