

SAMPLE CHAPTER

The handsomest man in Cuba

Excerpt from Chapter 8: La Casa de Lolita

Each morning at Lolita's house I wake and open the two little shutters in the front doors to let in the mournful cries of 'tomates ... cebolla ... ajo ...' (tomatoes ... onions ... garlic ...) and the clack-clacking of wheel barrows trundling through the narrow cobbled laneway.

Lolita goes to work every morning at 7:30 sharp, to a hospital job that pays her \$5 a month. With this pitiful salary she buys food, cleaning products, or an item of clothing; just one of the above. On the table she leaves me a small plate of scrambled eggs, two bread rolls toasted with a scrap of cooking oil, and a jug of freshly squeezed orange juice. I am aware she's given me her daily ration of one bread roll plus that of her estranged husband. On the faded walls are photos of her wedding day, in which her ex is blocked out by happier photos of herself, pregnant before her miscarriage. He left her while working in another part of the country and she attributes the loss of her baby to her heartbreak. Such things are accepted with a sigh in Cuba, the paradox being the intense closeness of family, married to the accepted waywardness of the Cuban male. There is even a name for this type of hombre, 'picaflor' or 'he who picks [women] like flowers.'



I ask José directly about this and he just shrugs.

'It's the Cuban male,' he says. *Mucho calor*, which translates, very loosely, to 'a lotta hotta testosterone.'

In the tiny nook of a kitchen, I light Lolita's rusty petroleum camping stove to heat water for a wash, and wait for the oily black smoke to disappear. Outside, water comes trickling from a pipe every five days. It is collected in three large drums, the reserve for the coming dry week. I stand in the waterless concrete shower, ladling cupfuls of hot water over my head, and let the spillage fall back into a bucket so as not to waste a drop. I am careful not to use her small bar of soap though she freely offers it, for it must last her a month. By government decree, toilet paper is found only in the dollar shops, so there is a neat stack of newspaper squares sitting in the dry basin.

Leer el culo chuckles Lolita. It translates as a favourite Cuban joke, 'Let your asshole read it.'

When Lolita is at work I poke my head through the curtains to her bedroom. I am humbled to see a narrow, squeaky stretcher on a sunken floor where the once-elegant colonial tiles have broken and lifted to reveal the gaping hole below. In my room the dressing table is adorned with empty plastic shampoo and lotion containers left behind by passing guests.

'Decorations,' explains Lolita simply, when I ask her why she bothers to keep them.

On the wall is a collage of perfume and cigarette advertisements, carefully cut out and pasted onto a square of cardboard. These products are nowhere to be found in the austere, often empty shops where lines of Cubans press their noses against the windows with dollar bills clutched in their palms, waiting patiently to be let into Dollarland.

Each night I eat the most delicious vegetarian food I've tasted for a long time. The fare itself is simple, pumpkin puree, rice, beans, braised cabbage, fried green banana, and maybe a little milk curd for dessert. Yet the flavours are rich and wonderful, full of love and the leaves of thyme that grow in the tin can hanging on the fence.

A small black and white television fills the house with drama and hope. Between nine and ten o'clock in the evening, all of Cuba stops, dries its hands on a towel and sits down to view *la novela*. There are always three or four hyper-real novelas running on the one channel. Lolita makes many apologies for the impoverished state of her house, but somehow, this little space is filled with love and light. Most of all, the house is filled with Lolita, a rotund, warm and smiling woman who soldiers on in the face of penury and practises her near-fluent German every night, a skill learnt years ago when Fidel sent his people to Russia, Bulgaria and Germany to assist Cuba's communist brothers. As she practises, she dreams of work in Cuba's exploding tourist industry, work which some day might give her the freedom to buy both food and one of those large bottles of shampoo in the same month.

Copyright 2004 © Lynette Chiang All Rights Reserved