

SAMPLE CHAPTER

The handsomest man in Cuba
Excerpt from Chapter 13: The 55-Cent Hotel

The little hotel in the main street is full of delegates attending a conference. I look at the crumbling shack of a hotel and wonder, 'What kind of conference?' The proprietor tells me there are some cabins for rent on the beach, which I locate with some difficulty.

At first I am refused in the usual way ('it's full'), but further pleading leads to a heavy sigh and scratching of unshaven chin by the very handsome but humourless attendant. He repeats several times that he is not authorised to rent to foreigners; finally he caves in to my pleas. He reminds me of that ruggedly hunky monster in Reservoir Dogs, who had a penchant for slicing off ears, and I muse momentarily about how life rattles its dice, that Mr. Famous Ear Slicer actor is probably languishing beside a pool somewhere smoking Cuban cigars and wondering whether to order salmon or caviar on his bagel, while his body double is languishing here in this concrete cubicle cogitating about renting a 55-cent cabin to a vagabond on a bike.

The little 'resort' consists of a run-down block of two dank concrete 'suites,' each with a non-functioning shower cubicle. The rack rate is 11.30 pesos (about 55 cents) a night. On casual inspection it strikes me that only thing missing from the room is the central torture table. Out on the beach, a smattering of equally tragic A-frame cabins rent for 16.30 pesos a night (80 cents), each barely lit by an unflattering fluorescent light.

At first the attendant shows me to the hotel block, no doubt well-meaning in wanting to give me the most economical room. After pacing the crazed cement floor several times I decide to upgrade to the luxury of one of the A-frame cabins. However, after enlisting the attendant to help me shift my bags over, I wish I hadn't moved; the windows cannot be opened, there is an airconditioner on the wall which exhales bad breath, and the seatless toilet reeks of stale pee. He shows me how to turn on the light. You flick the switch on the wall, walk to the centre of the room, grab the two frayed wires dangling down and touch them together. The lamp sputters to life. To turn it off, you must use the switch. To turn it on again, you use the two-wire method.

I change into my swimsuit for a celebration dip under the sinking sun and am immediately besieged by mosquitoes and sand flies. I quickly give up after only getting my ankles wet. Besides, the Cuban winter has arrived. In this deserted and condemned holiday spot (someone local tells me that it has a Cuban zero-star rating) I meet a foursome from Bayamo, a town several days away to the northeast that I would duly pass through on my way to Holguin. There's André, a very black Afro-Cuban, his neighbour, and two giggling Cubanas, also 'neighbours' I imagine. They immediately give me their addresses and say they expect to see me at either of their houses in two days. They are drinking from a bottle of strong stuff and it occurs to me that they'll probably forget their invitation and blink at me





blankly if ever I do land on their doorstep.

They suddenly decide to pile into their rusty old car with its government worker's plates to return to their hometown 160 kilometres inland. They invite me to join them, I decline.

I start to walk back to my cabin when a toothless old ice cream seller appears, his coolbox mounted on the front of his bicycle. He speaks reasonable English, being one of the few who clearly paid attention in class. Absurdly, his passion is not ice cream flavours but advertising slogans, and he can recite an endless list of them and even come up with new ones.

Later, I wander over to see what the resort restaurant offers. There is a plate of congris, a plate of boiled plantain slices and a plate of lettuce which come to 2.80 pesos, or 15 cents. I share my table with a group of three women who are doing some government testing of mosquitoes in the area. One of them shows me a small corked test tube with a single fat mosquito in it. The pages in front of them are wordy and technical. I get out my stashed pizza to share also, which the cook generously warms up for me.

I return to my cabin and notice how stuffy it is with the windows closed. I look for the attendant and ask if I may borrow the rickety old fan I saw in the cheaper hotel room. He looks troubled. Apparently the fan is authorised for use in that room only. I point out that he can have it back at eight o'clock, before the even bigger boss arrives. He relents, though he is clearly bothered by this flouting of the rule book. I inspect the sheets. They look and smell clean. I fall asleep to the turbo prop sound of the fan.

In the night I hear a rustling sound. It's the kind of noise that makes your eyes instantly peel open and scan the darkness for a shape you don't want to see.

It stops, then starts again as I am falling asleep. I reach for the flashlight I put under the pillow when travelling and shine it around the room. The rustling stops. I close my eyes. The rustling starts. I swing the flashlight towards the sound again but see nothing. I close my eyes, glad that I have hung my string bag full of food from the top of the rocking chair.

In the morning I find that the night thief has done a tightrope act of the most daredevil order. All of the fongo bananas in the string bag have been neatly split open and the insides nibbled clean. Nothing else has been disturbed. If I catch that rat I will sell it to the Ringling Bros.

I present the evidence to the attendant who rubs his unshaven chops, shrugs and says, 'Eso es Cuba. That's Cuba.'

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