

Two Stories · *Michael Martone*

ON QUAYLEITO

I KNOW NOW how it works. I spent one afternoon in my office with an eye glasses repair kit dismantling the thing. I unscrewed the little screws that held the tiny hinges, unhooked the rubber bands, untied the threads with tweezers, freed the minute springs as fine as hair. The pieces lay scattered on my desk blotter. I put the various parts in the empty squares of days mapped out on the appointment calendar. I had been ordered to lay low awhile, rehabilitate myself.

I never drink the water anywhere. It can make you sick. But in Chile, I waded into one of their outdoor markets to look for something local to ingest. I wasn't going to be a Nixon holed up in the limousine rushing through the *plazas* pelted by eggs. I believe native populations can smell the fear. Gorbachev kissed babies on a street in Washington, D.C. I can shake a few hands and handle some grapes in Santiago.

Marilyn waited back at the embassy. I was sandwiched in a three car motorcade. "Stop the car," I ordered. "How do I say 'How much?'"

The car was already floundering in the market crowd. I like to move through a thick mass of people this way, the ring of security wedging me along, hands, disconnected from the faces they belong to reach through to touch me, to try to grab my hands. "Steady, lads," I barked out to the agents.

The squids were huge, draped over clotheslines like parachutes. The shrimps looked like stomachs. Chickens squawked when the vendors held them up to me by their feet. We'd move from the sun to the shade made by awnings of brightly colored blankets and gauzy dresses. I could smell coffee roasting. The potatoes were the size of golf balls and colored like breakfast cereal. Rabbits in wooden cages watched what must have been skinned rabbits skewered on spits turning over charcoal fires. Where we walked, the ground was covered with the skins of smashed vegetables and crushed leaves and tissue wrappers. I slipped on a banana peel.

I pointed at fruit I had never seen before. The crowd that had been drifting along with us hushed to a whisper. The farmer brushed the flies

away from melons that looked like pictures of organs in an anatomy book. Stripped, gland-sized berries secreted gummy juices. The apples had thorns and were orange. Another fruit had been split open to show it was choking with sacks of blood red liquid. The flies swarmed around the farmer's hand as he pointed from one bushel to the next. He threw some plums into a sack and waved away the aide who tried to pay him.

"*Gracias*," I said, reaching in for one. I pulled it out and held it up. The crowd cheered. The press took pictures of me eating the plum. I felt like a matador, the crowd cheering me on. The translator said something about water. I told him I didn't want any, that I never drink it. But he had meant that the plum should be washed. It should have been washed before I bit into it. Too late. The bite I took went to the pit. I survived though I was sick later. It didn't matter. I was going to get sick one way or the other. The plum was good. It tasted like a plum.

On the way back to the car, we bumped into a stand filled with carved wood figures of little men. I thought they must be souvenirs like the dolls of baseball or football players you get at the stadiums back home whose bobbing plaster heads are attached to the uniformed bodies by a bouncy spring.

"*Cuanto vale?*" I asked the surprised seller. The translator told me what he said.

"Is that the right price?" I asked the translator.

He shrugged. "Seems fair," he said. And I told him to tell the man I'd take one.

I held the figure in my hands admiring the workmanship. Though crude there was a deftness to the carving, the way the clothes hung on the body. The bright paint seemed festive and foreign. People in the crowd jockeyed around to get a look. The statue was lighter than I imagined, hollow. I shook it and heard something rattle inside. I noticed an unglued seam at the waist. The crowd was shouting at me now.

"What are they saying?" I asked the translator. He told me they were shouting instructions on how it worked. As he said that, I was pulling gently on the doll's head. Just then, the joint below the shirt cracked open and a little flesh painted pee pee sprung up. The crowd went wild.

Back then, when I bought the doll, I laughed it off. I told the press it was a gift for my wife. I jerked its head a time or two to show what happened. Everyone in the crowd was smiling and giggling. Security, too, looked

back at me over their shoulders to catch a glimpse of the exposition, the flesh colored splinter tipped with the head of a match.

When I returned to the embassy, I didn't tell Marilyn what the doll did. She found out after listening to the Voice of America on the short wave. Nothing was mentioned at the state dinner that evening. "Get rid of it," was all she said before turning off the lights and rolling over in bed.

Maybe I should have washed the plums. I was up all night in the bathroom. I brought the doll in there with me. As I sat in the bright tile light, I contemplated the thing. Its enigmatic smile, the way one eye seemed to wink, how its arms and hands and fingers looked like vines grown into the trunk of its body, what did it mean?

Everything I touch transforms into things I cannot begin to understand. I was terrified when I squeezed from my own penis its first drop of semen. I was twelve, taking a bath, soaping myself hard when I felt the shiver. I thought it was the chill in the air of the room then I saw the little white pill slip out of me. It was soap, I thought. It burned. It had gotten inside. But it wasn't soap. What had I done? Who could I tell? I had hurt myself badly, I thought, and once I thought that, it did not surprise me to then think that I had gotten what I deserved. I have always gotten what I deserved. I washed and washed myself. Years after that, here I was sick again in a strange bathroom in Chile, and a souvenir that didn't have a name regarded me as my insides rearranged themselves spontaneously.

In Chile, I found out later, the ending *ito* gets glued to every name. It means little, *ito*. It's affectionate. Little this, little that. And the kind of doll I bought that day in the market are now called *Quayleito* after me.

The guts of the thing are all spread out on my desk. I know now how it works. The springs, the trap door, the counterweights, the whole mechanism of the joke. I still don't know its purpose, why it was made. Poor little *Quayleito*. What to do now? My days are empty. Idle hands. Devil's playground.