

Luis León Barreto is a member of the '70 Generation, and one of the Canarian writers with the largest number of readers. After his novel *Los espiritistas de Telde* (Telde's spiritualists) won the XVI Blasco Ibáñez Prize he has become a literary classic. He is the author of twenty books, among which his short stories books *El Mar de la Fortuna* (the Fortune Sea) and *¡Mamá, yo quiero un piercing!* (Mum, I want a piercing!) stand out, as well as his novels *Ulrike tiene una cita a las ocho* (Ulrike has got a date at eight), *Los días del paraíso* (Paradise days), *La Casa de los Picos* (The House of the Peaks), *El Velero Libertad* (The Liberty sailing boat), *El crimen del contenedor* (The container murder). He figures in the anthology *Cien años de cuentos (1898-1998)* (A hundred years of short stories (1898-1998). *Antología del cuento español en castellano*. (Anthology of the Spanish short story in Castilian), of José M<sup>a</sup> Merino (Alfaguara, Madrid, 1998)



# Self help

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1ª edición, Junio de 2007

Colección: Cuentos para la Guagua

Asesor Literario de la Colección  
Plácido Checa Fajardo

© de esta edición: Dirección General del Libro, Archivos y  
Bibliotecas

Edición no venal  
Depósito Legal: GC-191-2007

Producción, diseño y realización: Cam-PDS Editores, S.L.  
Francisco Gourie 107, 2ª Planta - Ofi. 18  
35002 - Las Palmas de Gran Canaria  
Tfno. 928 44 59 08 | Fax: 928 38 09 97  
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A slap of hot and humid air welcomed him as soon as he set foot on the steps. After this he had to join large queues to pass through the security controls. Everything without rushing, with the calmness of the tropics.

—I have got some pretty young girls —a man in a porter uniform told him.

—Thank you, —he replied without even looking at him as he handed him his luggage. He

just wanted a cold bath and a long rest to forget the ten-hour flight.

—No problem, my friend. I will keep them for you for tomorrow evening. What hotel are you going to?

—To Habana Libre, and that means a thirty dollar fare.

He did not feel like bargaining nor did he want to listen to the guy who was talking over and over about the good profits of exchanging American currency into pesos and was determined to show him his photograph album so he could have a great time looking at it.

—This is Marlén. She's fifteen. And this is Yanel: I'm sure she is not seventeen yet. What happens is that they develop very fast, he added.

Look at them, my friend, they are models and act in the theatre.

As well as the heat and the heavy smell of sea, he noticed it was the city he had been looking for, because at the hotel there was a trio playing «Guantanamera» over and over again, with a sickly-sweet catchy rhythm of guitars, maracas and voices. Such delicious mojitos, as many as you like. Later on, when he was in his room, he discovered that the air conditioning did not work and he leant out of the balcony to see the faded street lights creating a gauze on the streets and the parks. The lift operators looked like schoolgirls, in impeccable uniforms, and smiled flirtatiously with their perfect pearly white teeth.

Before going to bed he sniffed the saltpetre and took a fancy to go for a walk along the jet-

ty, passing the sacred stones of the parades and carnival passages, on the avenue through which Fidel came along at the time of his victory.

Two very young boys came out of the shades to entertain him with a drink of Santiago rum, the true Matusalem rum. He could not refuse it. They also offered him a good exchange rate for his money.

—We know pretty girls, my friend.

They passed the bottle calmly to one another to drink long sips. Both the tiredness from the plane and the jet lag had made him pretend his legs were weak.

The first thing he did when he arrived at his hotel room was to take his pillow out of his luggage. He could not bear hotel pillows: they were always too hard, excessively soft, sunken or

stiffened. So, at all costs, he would not leave his house without his pillow. It was impossible to move round the world without it.

He went down to the buffet and savoured the tropical fruits before tasting the fried pork. Fortunately he did not see the taxi driver, but unfortunately Hemingway's Floridita was being renovated and the Revolution Square looked like a big mausoleum. Thank goodness he didn't see Marlenes nor Yaneles, instead he was being shown the purity of the Communist System at Lenin Square. He recognized the achievements in public health and education and the vigour of the suburbs where the micro-squads worked, the graveyards and the monument to the Maine, with its new anti-yankee explanation.

At night, at the «Bodeguita del Medio», he ordered a daquiri and for dinner black beans, dried beef and yucca. Afterwards he walked in the Cathedral Square and fell in love with that place of deteriorated beauty, its columns and facades, the gallantry of its boulevards, the port sheds, and the pubs only for tourists. Everything reminded him of his grandfather who had stayed over there. His guide had not confirmed if he knew somebody with Castaño as a surname. Who knows how many cousins he could have spread throughout the villages.

He filled up his stomach with cocktails of good rum and crushed ice, coloured by fruit essences and juices.

He had to read to get to sleep, so he picked up the first book he found.

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What's happening in your life?

How is your health?

How do you earn a living?

Do you like your job?

How are your finances getting on?

And your love affairs?

When did you finish your last relationship?

What are you thinking of doing at this moment?

He was startled. Iberia's magazine could not be a self-help manual. He had looked at pages absent-mindedly and had even been interested in the guided tour to Trinidad. But what would happen to us without the mob of advisers who are willing to manufacture a positive mind for us, to change our attitude and give us energy?

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Timoteo thought he had to rest; he opened his pill flask and took two pills. It was essential to look good the following day because he would finally meet her. When he saw her photograph he was excited about her young appearance and her smile and he would try to repay her by offering her the glory of Albacete: his vegetable gardens were the best in the region not to mention his sheep and pigs. In addition, he had a small grape vine. Concerning the other things she would eventually adapt to the new situation. He had also explained everything to her in his letters: the people in his village were good but there was little entertainment. She would get used to it and he would not be very demanding after their wedding because when you are seventy you do not have a big sexual appetite.