

AROUND THE WORLD



TITO'S TROUBLE WITH COMMUNISM



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WELCOME TO CUBA





Welcome to Cuba, the Pearl of the **Antilles**! Lying at the intersection of the Atlantic Ocean, the Gulf of America, and the Caribbean Sea, Cuba's northern edge at one point is only 90 miles from the United States. Filled with fertile lands, beautiful coastlines, and stunning colonial architecture, it was once considered a tropical paradise. Internationally famous for its music, dance, food, and joyous people, tourists once flocked to Cuba for its beauty and promise of pleasure, but those days are gone.

Now, the pretty buildings lie in ruins, trash litters the sidewalks, and tourism has mostly dried up. The streets are no longer filled with love songs and dance but have been replaced by long lines of people waiting for food they can't afford.





Cuba has a government that practices **communism**, which means the government has total authority over what takes place on the island. However, despite having complete control, Cuba's leaders refuse to take responsibility for the hard times. They blame Cuba's problems on the political decisions of other countries, the global pandemic, and even sometimes the weather. But, the blame game is quickly losing effectiveness, and the Cuban people are asking questions. The country is failing, and since the communist government has complete control of the country, doesn't that make communism a failure?

From the outside, Cubans having questions for their government sounds reasonable, but questioning a communist authority is never permitted. Those who do are not given answers, and not only that, but they often disappear...

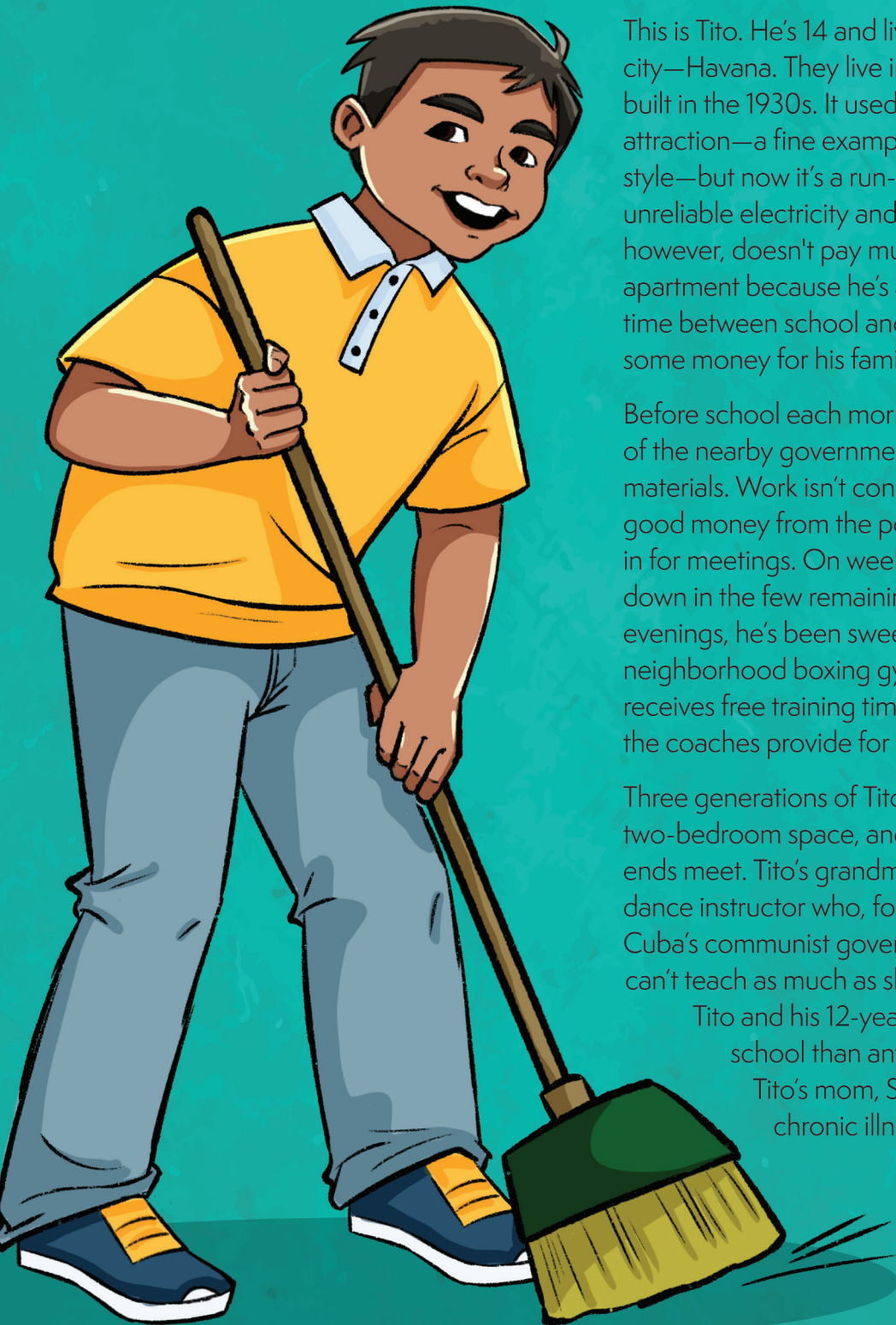
Antilles

A group of islands bordered by the Caribbean Sea to the south and west, the Gulf of America to the northwest, and the Atlantic Ocean to the north and east. These islands are divided into two smaller groups: the Greater Antilles and the Lesser Antilles. Cuba belongs to the Greater Antilles.

Communism

A political and economic system in which all property and resources are owned and controlled by the government. The result of this system is often dictatorship and government control of every aspect of people's lives.

Meet Tito and His Familia



This is Tito. He's 14 and lives with his family in Cuba's capital city—Havana. They live in an old colonial building that was built in the 1930s. It used to be a beautiful tourist attraction—a fine example of the **Art Deco** architectural style—but now it's a run-down apartment building with unreliable electricity and barely enough running water. Tito, however, doesn't pay much attention to the state of the apartment because he's almost never home. He splits his time between school and a handful of things that can earn some money for his family or a meal for himself.

Before school each morning, Tito spends time on the steps of the nearby government buildings with his shoe-shining materials. Work isn't consistent, but on busy days, he makes good money from the politicians and military men coming in for meetings. On weekends, he sells crafts with his sister down in the few remaining tourist areas, and recently, in the evenings, he's been sweeping and mopping the floors of a neighborhood boxing gym. In return for cleaning, he receives free training time and a nightly meal of **conгри** that the coaches provide for their fighters.

Three generations of Tito's family live together in their two-bedroom space, and everyone must hustle to make ends meet. Tito's grandmother, Maribel, is a respected dance instructor who, for decades, has given lessons to Cuba's communist government elite, but at her age, she can't teach as much as she used to. Her connections got

Tito and his 12-year-old sister, Carolina, into a better school than any of their neighbors could attend.

Tito's mom, Sonia, mostly stays at home due to chronic illness. She has trouble breathing, but

she is very artsy and makes the crafts that Tito and Carolina try selling on the weekends. The family's main source of income comes from Tito's dad, Rafa, who has run a taxi business for years using the family's classic '57 Chevy.

Cuba is famous for the classic cars that roam its streets. Those privileged to own one can use them to make money by driving tourists around in return for tips. However, since the COVID-19 global lockdowns, tourism hasn't been what it used to be.

Regardless, the car hasn't helped the family make any money for almost a month. It's running fine, but there's no one to drive it. Tito and Carolina are too young, Maribel is too old, Sonia is too sick, and Rafa, well, he's gone...

Art Deco

Short for the French *Arts décoratifs* (Decorative Arts), a style of art, architecture, and design that became popular in the early 1900s. It is known for its clean lines, geometric shapes, bold colors, and use of shiny materials like glass and metal.

Congri

A traditional Cuban dish of black beans and white rice flavored with various spices and additions.



What's the Deal?

Boys Tito's age weren't supposed to have to work so much. They weren't supposed to have to worry about taking care of their family or where their next meal came from either. But in Cuba, things have not gone according to plan. Back when his grandmother was Tito's age, Cuba had a large divide between the wealthy and the poor, with very few people in the middle. A man named **Fidel Castro** rose to power during the **Cuban Revolution**, promising a good life for everyone. Castro told Cuba's poor that if they followed him, poverty would vanish, and the nation would thrive.

With promises to spread the nation's wealth across the entire population, Castro gained many supporters. In 1959, following years of violence, he was able to take complete control of Cuba, and within two years, he fully adopted communism. The homes and businesses of wealthy Cubans were seized by the new government, and objectors faced imprisonment or were simply killed. But despite having total control of the nation's wealth, instead of redistributing it equally to the poor as he'd promised, Castro kept it for himself and communist government officials who were 100% loyal to him.

Castro ruled as a dictator and remained in power for almost 50 years. Then, his brother Raúl ruled until 2021. Today, no more Castros are in control, but Cuba's communist government remains in power, and a massive divide between rich and poor (which was never solved) continues today.

Over the years, many Cubans have been upset with their government. They've wondered why Castro's promises weren't kept, why a Cuban middle class never emerged, and why communist party loyalty is rewarded more than good ideas and hard work. It's okay to wonder, but if those thoughts turn into comments, questions, or critiques, then that's different.





Communism does not permit opposition, and Cuba has a long history of people disappearing if the government finds out a person isn't okay with how things are going and expresses their feelings.

Because of this, public protests have been very rare, but in recent years, things have gotten so bad that groups critical of the Cuban government have been taking to the streets of Havana. Tito's dad, Rafa, had attended a few of the street demonstrations, and he is known to speak his mind. No one has heard from him in about a month, but everyone pretty much knows why. Sometimes, those who disappear return after being "re-educated" by the government, but sometimes they're never heard from again. Tito and his family have been worried sick, but without the money that his dad regularly brought in from his taxi business, there is no time to dwell on Rafa's disappearance.

Fidel Castro

A political revolutionary who took control of Cuba and led the country from 1959 to 2008. Castro turned his country into the first communist state in the Western Hemisphere. When he stepped down, he gave control to his brother Raúl Castro. Fidel passed away in 2016.

Cuban Revolution

The political and military revolt led by Fidel Castro to overthrow Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship. Batista's regime ruled from 1952 to 1958, and Castro officially forced them out on January 1, 1959.



Breaking a Sweat

Tito is big for his age, but he's always been a gentle giant. He is generally a calm, mild-mannered boy who values his education, makes good grades, and never gets into trouble. Because of his size, he's attracted attention from the coaches at his neighborhood boxing gym for years. The coaches see his broad shoulders and long limbs and have often encouraged him to train, but until recently, he has always politely declined.

After his dad went missing, he asked the coaches if they had any work at the gym that could earn him money. They said no, they were hurting for money, too, but they did make him an offer. If Tito would train after school and then sweep and mop the floors, he could have a free meal. It wasn't money, and he was uneasy about boxing, but he rarely got enough to eat at home. Plus, it would be a relief for his mother and grandma if they didn't need to worry about providing dinner for their growing boy.

His first day inside the boxing gym was tough. The equipment was homemade and patched together. The sandbags broke easily, and there weren't enough gloves to go around. Other teens filled the space—mostly boys, but a few girls too, since Cuba recently lifted the ban on females competing in the sport. Everyone fought like they had nothing left to lose... which, for most Cubans, was true. Tito admired the fancy footwork and quick defense of those around him.

When it was his turn on the heavy bag, Tito punched, but it barely moved. He heard snorts and laughter coming from behind his back.

"Just a big teddy bear," someone commented.

Tito didn't turn around. He felt his face turning red, and he punched the bag harder and harder. In a matter of minutes, his arms felt like jello, and sweat dripped off his face.

A timer buzzed, and it was time to switch. Tito slumped against the nearest wall and took a drink of water. *That was harder than I thought.* When the session was over, he just wanted to go home, but it was time to sweep and mop.





CUBA

Cuba is home to the world's smallest bird:

the bee hummingbird, which measures about two inches long and weighs less than a dime! The island is also home to the smallest frog, the Monte Iberia dwarf frog—measuring less than half an inch.

Cuba is an archipelago,

a group of around 1,600 islands clustered together in the ocean.

Baseball is the most popular sport in Cuba.

It came to the country in the 1860s from the U.S.

Christopher Columbus was the first European to set foot on Cuba, and he wrote that it was "the fairest island human eyes have yet beheld."

Population: approximately 11 million people.

Size: 42,802 square miles (roughly the same size as the U.S. state of Virginia).

Some of Cuba's biggest exports are **sugar, tobacco, and nickel.**

Cuba has one of the **highest literacy rates in the world.**

Nationalism

Loyalty or devotion to one's nation or country. It creates a shared set of values, ideals, and culture among the people of a nation. When combined with communism, nationalism promotes the goals and values of the nation-state (or government) over every other individual or group.

Exile

The state of being banned from one's native country, typically for political or punishment reasons.

Sports... a Communist Strategy?

Sports play a large part in Cuba's national identity. The people take great pride in their athletes, not just for their successes on the world stage, but also for the traits they represent: discipline, excellence, and strength. As a country, the people find unity in sports—in discussing games and matches and cheering on their favorite teams. Two of Cuba's most beloved sports that exemplify this are baseball and boxing.

Baseball is considered Cuba's national sport. So, how did this American pastime make it to the island?

Through Cuban college students returning from the U.S. and other people stationed abroad. When the sport began on the island in the 1860s, Cuba was still under Spanish rule. Baseball was seen as an act of rebellion, in a way, against the typical Spanish tradition of bullfighting. By the time Cuba gained independence in the early 1900s, the sport had grown into a national passion.

Boxing came to Cuba in the early 1900s, largely due to American soldiers, and at first, served as a tourist attraction. A famous match hosted in Havana in 1915 drew a crowd of 30,000 spectators. Soon after, the sport began to take off, and for years, Cuba produced many professional boxing champions.

After the communists took control of Cuba, the nation's top athletes were no longer permitted to compete professionally. The government now controlled the careers of



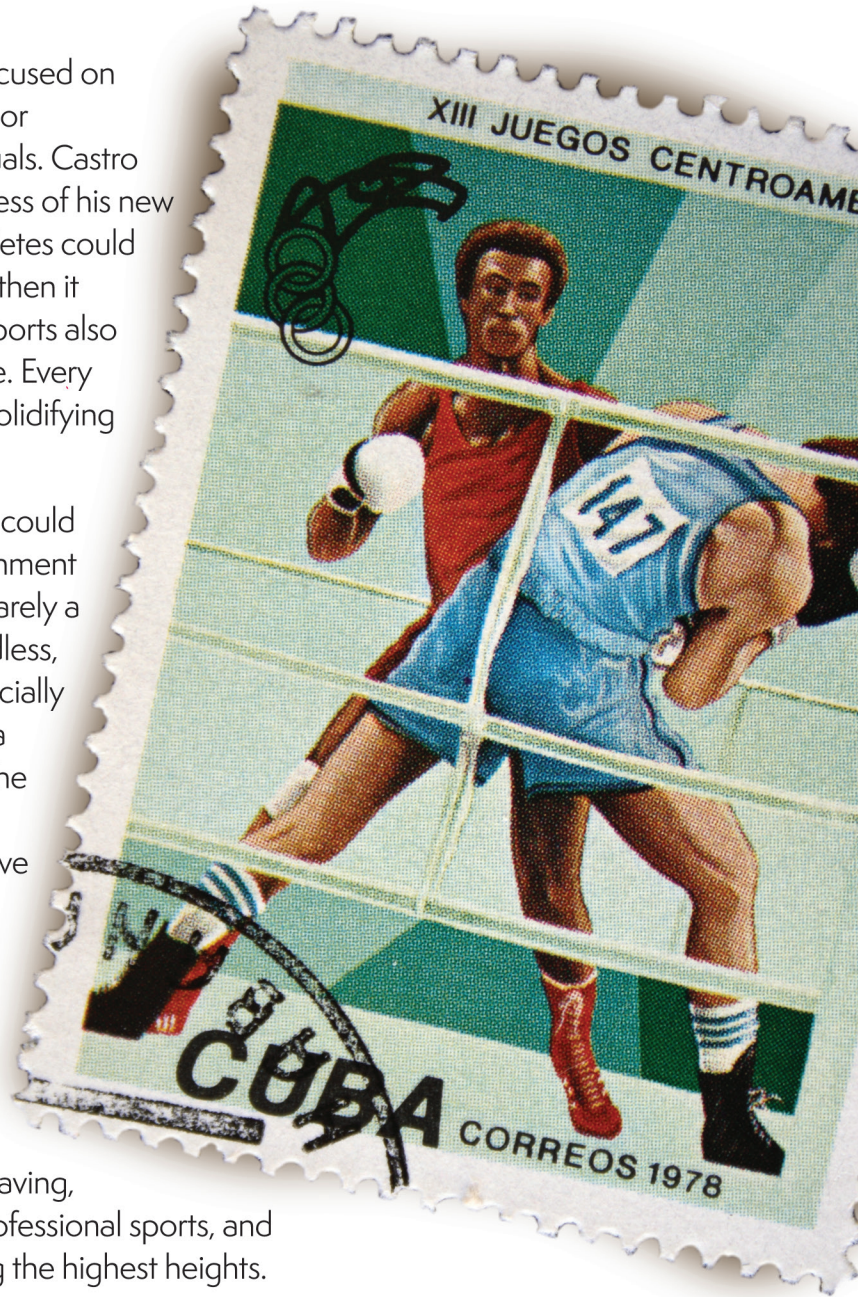


Cuba's best, and Fidel Castro wanted them only focused on representing the nation and not playing in leagues or competitions where they would be paid as individuals. Castro wanted to use sports as a stage to display the success of his new communist government. He believed if Cuban athletes could beat the U.S. and other anti-communist countries, then it would show the world that communism worked. Sports also served to unite the nation around a common cause. Every athlete's win was a victory for all Cubans—further solidifying the **nationalist** ideals of communism.

As a result, Cuba's top baseball players and boxers could no longer make money from their skills. The government gave them gifts and privileges, but they received barely a fraction of what top athletes elsewhere did. Regardless, Cuba became an international powerhouse—especially in the nation's two favorite sports. In baseball, Cuba took home the first two gold medals awarded for the sport at the Olympics, first in Barcelona (1992) and then in Atlanta (1996). In boxing, Cuban fighters have won 41 Olympic gold medals and 78 total medals, ranking second worldwide in each category.

With no opportunities for financial gain, over the years, some Cuban athletes (especially top baseball players and boxers) left Cuba, becoming **exiles**, so that they could compete as professionals elsewhere. In response to so many leaving, Cuba's government eventually lifted the ban on professional sports, and now young athletes like Tito can dream of reaching the highest heights.

Before his first training session, Tito couldn't help but wonder what life would be like as a pro boxer, but he felt silly for having those thoughts as he walked home afterward. At least his belly was full.





Grandma Maribel

Grandma Maribel was waiting for Tito when he got home. "Are you hungry?" she asked.

"No, **abuelita**," he said. "I got enough congri at the gym."

"Come, sit," she ordered. "Have some **guarapo**. How did boxing go?"

Tito shrugged. "I need to train more. Everyone in there is so quick and agile. I don't know how they move like that."

Maribel nodded. "You could do with some dance lessons."

"What?!" Tito exclaimed.

"Dance builds your strength, not to mention your balance and flexibility. It could help you become a better boxer. You'd have better footwork," she explained. "I can teach you."

Tito hesitated, not wanting to hurt his grandma's feelings. "I'll think about it."

"It's not embarrassing. I've taught many men how to dance... including your father. Oh dear, when he first tried to learn, it was as if he had two left feet!" Grandma Maribel chuckled, but her eyes were glossy with unshed tears.

"**Abuelita**, are you okay?" Tito gently touched her arm.

She shooed him away. "I'm fine. I'm fine." After a pause, she continued, "It's just not right that your father isn't here with us, sharing advice or cracking some joke. I hate to burden you with so much. You have school, two jobs, and now boxing."

"I can handle it," Tito assured her. "And if I work hard at boxing, maybe someday I can make the national team. Then the government will give us special privileges, and we'll have what we need."

"What we need," Grandma Maribel echoed dryly. "The communists have been promising to provide us with what we need since I was your age."

Abuelita

A Spanish term of endearment for grandmothers, meaning "granny."

Guarapo

A drink popular in Latin America, made from raw sugarcane juice mixed with water, ice, and lots of fresh lime.

No Longer Ours

January, 1959

A teenage girl sat in the backseat of a slick, turquoise '57 Chevy. She clutched a bag containing her belongings. As the car started, she asked, "Papá, where are we going?"

"To the city, Maribel," he replied.

"When will we come home?" Maribel asked.

There was a long silence as the car pulled away from their family estate. The cattle were still grazing in the fields, but the house was closed and locked up. Her parents didn't seem excited like they normally did when they went on vacation.

"You almost forgot these," her mamá said, handing her a pair of ballet shoes. Maribel thought it was strange that she would need her dancing shoes during a short vacation.

Finally, when the tall porch columns of the house disappeared from view, her papá replied, "We aren't coming home, Maribel. It's not ours anymore."





Revolution and Radical Change

Maribel was only 14 years old when the revolutionary Cuban government, led by Fidel Castro, took her family home in the name of equality.

Prior to Castro's takeover of the government in 1959, Maribel's family was quite wealthy and owned acres of land on an estate in the countryside outside of Havana. They owned farmland and cattle, and Maribel enjoyed dancing through the grassy fields in her free time.

Once in power, Castro got to work on implementing a new system: communism. His new policies and **reform** took a radical approach to Cuba's entire way of life. He began to **nationalize** most industries, including healthcare and agriculture. All private land, including Maribel's family estate, was seized and redistributed. The government controlled everything, from prices to food production, even house purchases.

Many people in rural areas, including Maribel's family, were forced to move into the cities and figure out new ways of living. Maribel continued to dance, though she had to learn in much tighter quarters. Eventually, she was able to make a living by teaching dance lessons.





Over the years, she's taught **salsa** to tourists and ballroom dancing to members of the communist regime. Sometimes, Maribel has even gone back to her childhood home, which is now used for state events and dinners. The reminder of what was taken from her is still painful to think about to this day.

Though she can rarely share her story without shedding tears, Maribel wants Tito to know why things aren't right. Communism stole her future, and the promise of provision by the government only turned up empty. Over 60 years later, Maribel is still far from home.

Reform

To improve or make something better.

Nationalize

To take private property and give it to the national government.

Salsa

A popular style of Latin dance that originated from Cuba. Salsa is usually a partner dance, with the couple following patterns of steps and spins to the energetic rhythm of the salsa music.

Trouble in School

The injustices of living in a communist country leave Tito angry and frustrated, but he knows there isn't much that he can do about it. He has to take care of his family, so his mentality is to keep his head down and work hard at school, his jobs, and now boxing. His little sister, on the other hand, is very different from Tito in almost every way.

Carolina is small for her age, but she's got a big and fiery personality. Like their father, Carolina never hesitates to speak what's on her mind, and her words have been known to get her in trouble. Many of her classmates are from families connected to Cuba's communist regime, and they haven't always appreciated Carolina's opinions.

Since the government controls what is taught in schools, many lessons taught to Cuban students center around praising communism. Last year, Carolina wound up in the principal's office for her behavior during a class period celebrating Cuba's health-care system.

Cuba has long bragged about the healthcare it provides for all its citizens. The school lesson focused on how, in some other countries, medical attention can cost lots of money, whereas in Cuba it is free. When the time came for student participation, Carolina didn't hold back.

For years, she had gone with her mother on regular doctor visits and also accompanied her when she required emergency care. Carolina told her class of the hours they've had to wait uncomfortably in waiting rooms, that running water and electricity oftentimes don't work in the clinics, and that necessary medicine is often not available. Speaking negatively about the government got her a warning, but now Carolina is on the verge of being expelled.



When Tito came home from the gym one evening, he found his grandma scolding Carolina for getting into a fight at school.

"I've worked hard to get you and your brother into a nicer school, and this is how you act?" Grandma Maribel asked.

"I can't stand how the other kids praise our government like nothing is wrong," Carolina fumed. "Where is Dad?! We all know the government took him away! A girl said he should have known his place... So, I punched her."

"It's not fair," Maribel agreed, "but that's not an excuse to act out. For the next couple of weeks, you are to stay with your big brother. Wherever Tito goes, you go. **Comprendes?**"

"What??" Tito and Carolina said at once.

"I'd rather be grounded," Carolina grumbled.

"I'm really busy, *abuelita*. I have boxing," Tito complained.

But Grandma Maribel's face was stern.

"Since Carolina likes to punch so much, she'll like boxing, and she can help you sweep and mop the gym."

Tito nodded and told his sister, "After school tomorrow, meet me at the boxing gym at 3:30 p.m. Don't be late."

Comprendes

Spanish for "you understand." When asked as a question, it translates as, "Do you understand?"



No Show

Tito waited outside the gym after school, and as the time ticked by, he grew impatient. His sister was running late. But as twenty, thirty, and forty minutes passed, he became worried. *Where is she?* he thought.

Though he really needed to train today, he decided to look for Carolina instead. *She's my responsibility*, he reminded himself. Tito retraced his steps back to school, but she wasn't there. He spent the next hour running around town, checking all of Carolina's favorite spots.

As darkness fell, Tito knew he had to head home. He was worried sick, though. *What if someone took her?* Tito wasn't sure his family could take another "mysterious" disappearance.

When he reached the apartment door, Tito was surprised and relieved to see Carolina waiting there.

He gave his sister a hug. "Where have you been? I've been looking everywhere for you." Taking a step back, he noticed Carolina's clothes and face were dirty.

"I went to a protest in the city," Carolina confessed. "Please, don't tell *abuelita*."

"What were you thinking? You could have gotten hurt. Or worse..." Tito didn't need to remind her what happened to their dad.

"I knew a few people going," she defended. "I'm just sick of all the lies, and I wanted to make my voice heard. Nothing is going to change unless we say something. Don't you get that?"

"I'm upset too, Carolina, but speaking out is dangerous. You have to understand there are consequences for your actions," Tito replied.

Tears welled in his sister's eyes. "We're disrespecting Dad if we stay quiet. And Mom continues to suffer in silence because our systems can't care for our basic needs!"

Hermana
Spanish word
for "sister."

"Calm down, *hermana*." Tito grabbed Carolina's shoulders.

"Don't tell me to calm down!" she shouted.

Carolina pushed Tito away. She waved her fists wildly, and he ducked. With a loud crack, Carolina's fist connected with the wall next to the door.

The old wall trembled and cracked, pieces falling to the floor. Dust filled the air, and the siblings started coughing.

A shout echoed from inside the apartment. It was their mom.



When the Dust Settles

Inside the apartment, their mom, Sonia, was having a coughing fit. With her body already weak from illness, the dust only made things worse. Grandma Maribel brought her a glass of water. Sonia assured them all she was okay.

Grandma noticed the blood on Carolina's hand and took her into the other room to patch her up.

"Tito, sit with your mom for a bit, will you?" she asked.

Tito sat next to his mom's bed and offered her more water.

"Thank you, **mijo**. I appreciate your help. You have been so strong for us, and I know it isn't easy," his mom said.

Tito nodded. "It's been hard since Dad disappeared. I miss him. I don't know how he managed everything... working as a taxi driver, taking care of us, fixing up the apartment. I'm exhausted just thinking about it all!"

"I'm sorry your teenage years are being filled with worry," Sonia shared. "Unfortunately, it's a family tradition."

Mijo

A Spanish term of endearment that comes from joining "mi hijo," which means, "my son."





Rations

December, 1991

Sonia handed her mother the sewing needle. She was patching up her old quinceañera dress for Sonia to wear for her special 15th birthday celebration next month. They couldn't afford to make or buy her a new dress.

"What do you think?" her mother asked, holding up the frilly ballgown.

But Sonia's mind wasn't on the dress. "Do you think the government will include a birthday cake in our rations next month?" she asked.

Celebrating with cake is a huge part of Cuban culture, and for many years, the government has provided cakes for special occasions. Her mother sighed. "I don't think so. The rations have been getting more strict, but I'll see if I can get the ingredients to make one for you myself."

Sonia smiled, but inside, she felt sad. A quinceañera was supposed to be the biggest party a girl had besides her wedding day. Hers would be little more than a family dinner. Though disappointing, Sonia knew it wasn't her parents' fault. Times were tough in Cuba, and everyone she knew was getting the same rations.

She remembered the cake the government provided on her 14th birthday, before the **Soviet Union** collapsed. It was a Tres Leches cake, and it was so spongy and sweet. Her mouth watered just thinking about it.

Sonia's mother put down the dress. "What kind of cake would you like? I can't promise anything, but I'll see what I can do."

"It doesn't matter. Whatever is fine," Sonia replied. She had learned not to get her hopes up, just as her parents had learned not to make any promises they couldn't keep.

Soviet Union

The Soviet Union was a large communist country, including Russia and many other republics, that existed from 1922 to 1991. It was a world superpower and a rival of the United States during the Cold War, with Cuba as one of its key allies. The Soviet Union played a major role in events like the Cuban Missile Crisis and World War II before breaking apart into separate countries in 1991.





The Special Period

Sonia's experience wasn't uncommon for Cubans during that time. Cuba had entered a "Special Period in a Time of Peace." But "special" was just a cover word for another devastating blow to the Cuban economy. Since the revolution of Grandma Maribel's day, from the outside, Cuba's embrace of communism appeared to be working... until the 1990s.

Supported by their communist allies in the Soviet Union, Cuba was able to maintain an image of a prosperous nation for 30 years. The Soviets provided them with military, political, and economic support. Soviet **subsidies** and imported goods made up a large percentage of Cuba's total revenue. The Cuban people enjoyed government-provided schooling, healthcare, and a liveable monthly ration of food. But, when the Soviet Union collapsed in the 1990s, everything came crashing down—Cuba with it. Propped up for years by their communist big brother, Cuba didn't have the resources to stand on its own.

Cuba's imports decreased by 75%, and food production decreased by 40%. With scarce access to food and other basic necessities, the Cuban rationing system grew more strict. Before the collapse, people could bring their government-issued ration book, known as **La Libreta**, to stores and get enough food to



Fiesta a nite



feed their families for a month. After the collapse, though, those rations decreased by half. Cubans lost an average of 12 pounds of body weight during this time and faced vitamin and mineral deficiencies.

Beyond the health effects, the transportation landscape changed as well. Because they couldn't import parts or gas for cars, most vehicles stopped being used. The government began distributing bicycles to help people get around. Horse and oxen-pulled carriages and carts were even brought in from farms to provide general transport.

As Cubans struggled to survive, the government had to make some changes.

Subsidies

Forms of money, such as cash or tax credits, which are given to individuals or groups by the government. Subsidies aim to promote production in certain industries to keep prices low and competitive.

La Libreta

Ration booklets, given to every Cuban, which determine how much food they get on a monthly basis. The rationing system began in Cuba in 1962 as part of Fidel Castro's communist system.



Markets Made by the People for the People

In the wake of economic crises, during the 1990s, the Cuban government finally allowed privately owned businesses again. They also revived their hotels and airports to increase tourism. Meanwhile, a **parallel economy** began, based on U.S. dollars, which allowed Cubans to make money from foreigners. Those who sold goods or provided services to tourists earned hard currency, which put food on the table. Side hustles became the norm since tourist dollars could buy more than the national currency.

A **black market** also cropped up, but it wasn't like a typical black market, dealing in drugs or illegal activity. This black market was selling everyday goods, including food, medicine, clothes, toys, and electronics. With nationwide shortages, the Cuban people needed a way to supplement the lack of goods. Many would bring in goods from other countries and sell them at a higher price for a profit. People could sell and buy through their local networks, but when the ban on personal computers was lifted in 2008, the black market network grew as people could use the internet to buy and sell. Economists estimate that nearly everyone in Cuba is involved in the black market in some way or another. It's become so necessary for Cuban survival that even government officials participate in it.



For a time, the Cuban economy found relief in a new ally—Hugo Chávez, the elected president of Venezuela in 1998. By offering Cuba large amounts of oil, Venezuela gave the Cubans a way to boost their economy. In return, Cuba sent Venezuela doctors, teachers, and other personnel to support them. But as Venezuela fell into its own issues with poverty and corruption, the oil imports to Cuba dropped off.

Having lived through all these hardships, Grandma Maribel and Sonia believe there are better solutions to Cuba's problems. If Cuba was allowed to have **free markets** and provide for itself rather than relying on unstable allies, then perhaps it could break the cycle of collapse.



Parallel Economy

An economic market that exists alongside the regular, government-controlled market. People buy and sell goods, but not under the direct supervision or control of the government or tax authorities.

Black Market

A type of parallel economy where people buy and sell outside of the government's control. Traditionally, black markets are known for illegal and immoral activities, such as selling drugs or people. In Cuba, however, the black market sells basic necessities like food and medicine that people can't get in the regular market.

Free Market

An economic system based on free competition between privately owned businesses, with little to no interference from the government.

A Fragile Facade

As Tito practiced boxing the next day, he couldn't stop thinking about Cuba's problems. He understood why Grandma Maribel was frustrated, and Mom was tired. They had hoped for a better future that never arrived.

THWACK! He punched a sandbag.

His own generation hadn't seen any better. The COVID-19 lockdowns halted all tourism to their country, and Cuba still hasn't fully recovered. Not to mention how the medical system which communists praised was overwhelmed during the crisis. With so many Cuban doctors sent abroad to bring money back into their country, there wasn't enough care or medicine to go around. Hospital hallways were overrun with patients, and the buildings often lacked consistent water and electricity.

Tito saw what a fragile facade the whole system was. *No wonder the country collapsed when Grandma was 14, when Mom was 14, and now that I'm 14...*

As he walked home from practice, Tito could hear the distant shouts of a protest in the city. People were taking to the streets like never before—tired of the lies and corruption. They raised their voices in pleas for change, but those who made too much noise went to jail or disappeared.

Tito admires Carolina's courage to speak out, but he doesn't believe that anger and emotion are the only way to fight. It's definitely not what he sees in the boxing gym. The more Tito watched the fighters, the more he realized Grandma Maribel was onto something with the whole dance thing. There was an art or rhythm to the movements—a calculated dance against an opponent. With his first competition just around the corner, Tito knew who he needed to talk to.



What sets Cuban boxers apart from other boxing athletes around the world? A little something called style. Though the sport's foundation was American, over the years, Cuba developed their own unique style with an emphasis on strategy, defense, and technical finesse. Many people compare it to a dance, with every aspect of the fighter's moves working together in perfect rhythm and balance.

Here are some key features of Cuban-style boxing:



Pawing Jab

A signature Cuban move, the pawing jab serves many purposes. It's like a quick poke that allows the fighter to test their opponent's response, measure their distance, and set up bigger punches. It may be a small move, but it has a large impact. This clever move is one of many ways Cubans can surprise or throw their opponents off their game.



Footwork

Just like footwork is important in dance, it also creates an advantage for boxers. Cuban-style boxing is known for its creative footwork—graceful and always moving and changing angles. This keeps the opponent on their toes, unsure what move will come next. It's a great strategy that allows the boxer to find opportunities to attack.



Defense

Cuban fighters keep a strong focus on defense. They are quick to dodge, sway, and duck to evade their opponent's punches. Like a shadow that slips away, Cubans use their defense to confuse and leave their opponents swinging at thin air.



Distance Management

Cuban boxers have a sixth sense for maintaining the perfect distance from their opponents. It's as if they follow an invisible line or ruler to keep that distance. Maintaining a proper distance from opponents is key for fighters to be able to quickly avoid or make an attack.



A Dance Lesson?

"One, two, three, four," Grandma Maribel counted out loud.

Tito had been trying to learn a simple dance step routine for over an hour. He felt ridiculous and definitely *not* graceful, but it was getting easier.

"Ready to put it with the music?" his grandma asked.

He nodded, and when she hit play on the old CD player, the soulful, swinging sounds of a **son cubano** classic filled the air. Tito counted the steps and swayed along to the music.

"You're doing great, Tito!" Grandma Maribel exclaimed.

Once he was confident in the rhythm of the steps, Tito began **shadowboxing** to join the dance with his boxing training. He threw punches at an invisible opponent while sliding and swaying to the beat. It was actually starting to feel natural. *One, two, duck. Three, four, jab. Retreat.*

The front door swung open, and Carolina busted out laughing. "What are you doing?"

"Quiet, *mija*." Grandma Maribel scolded. "He's practicing for his first fight, and with his new footwork, your brother is going to win!"

"You're going to look sooo pretty in the ring, *hermano*," Carolina joked.

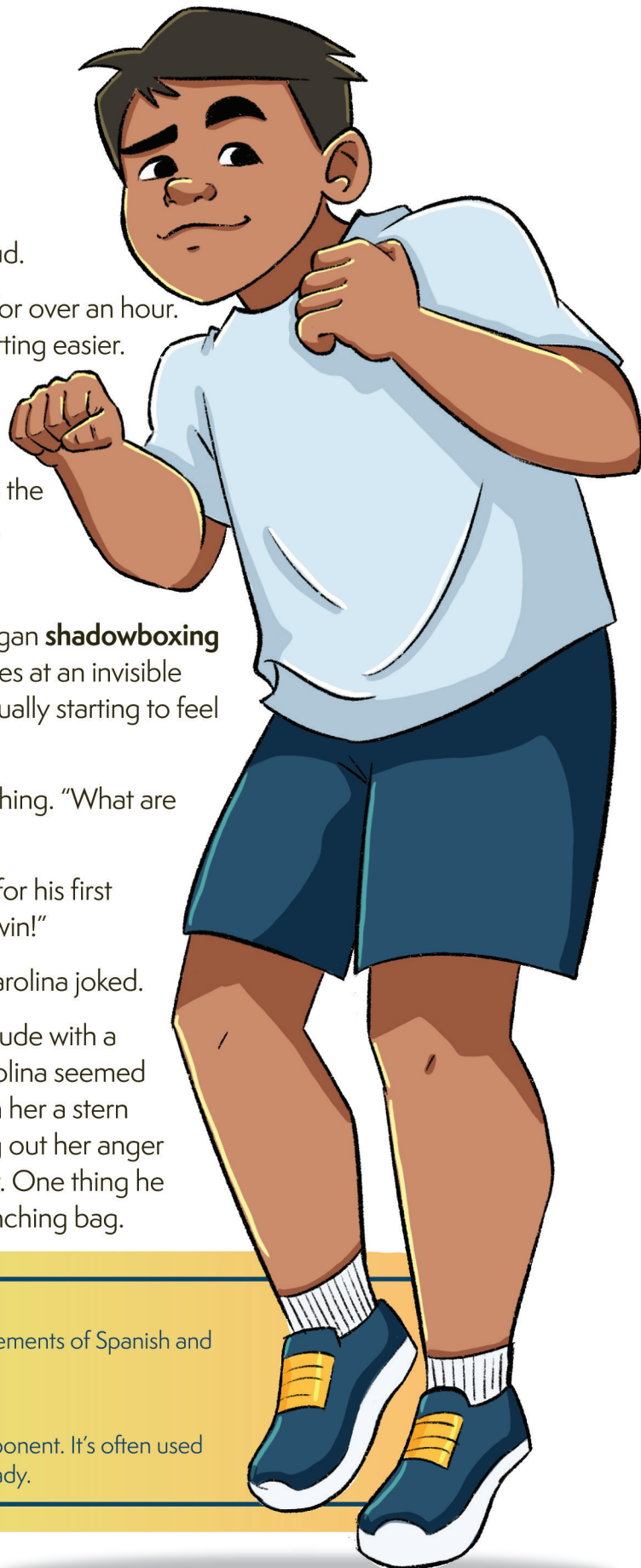
Tito held his tongue. He didn't want to encourage her attitude with a response. Ever since the incident of the wall collapse, Carolina seemed to be targeting him. He knew Grandma Maribel had given her a stern talking to while he'd sat with Mom. But why she was taking out her anger on him when he'd only been trying to help, he didn't know. One thing he did know for sure—he didn't like being someone else's punching bag.

Son Cubano

A genre of music and dance that originated in Cuba. It blends elements of Spanish and African song and dance styles.

Shadowboxing

An exercise where the athlete punches the air, but there's no opponent. It's often used as a warm-up in boxing to get the athlete's muscles and body ready.





Pressure Point: The U.S. Trade Embargo

Despite the difficult burden communism has brought to the Cuban people, the government often points the finger at what they deem to be a greater enemy: the U.S. **trade embargo**.

Prior to Castro's communist takeover in 1959, the United States supported the Cuban government and economy. Cuba's closeness to America's border made it easy for the two countries to participate in regular trade, and they shared cultural similarities. However, after the revolution, Castro seized many American-held businesses and land. His radical new policies alienated the United States and put a political enemy at their doorstep, so drastic measures were required.

In February 1962, President John F. Kennedy officially announced a full trade embargo with Cuba. This meant U.S. businesses couldn't trade with Cuba unless they had a special license. All Cuban imports stopped, and the only things the U.S. would export to Cuba were certain foods and medical supplies. Even travel to Cuba was significantly limited, with only a small list of exceptions.

The U.S. chose these extreme measures in the hopes that the Cuban government would change. They hoped that strong political and economic pressure would drive the country to democracy and freedom. But, a little over 60 years later, the embargo remains in place.

Over the years, the Cuban government has often blamed the embargo for its economic crises. By limiting trade and the markets it can do business with, Cuba believes the U.S., not communism, is responsible for its people's suffering. The Cuban people, though, see it differently. Many recognize the embargo as an excuse that frees the government from doing the hard work of finding true solutions to Cuba's problems.

Between 1959 and 2022, more than 1.7 million Cubans moved to the United States and Puerto Rico. From the revolution to the Soviet collapse to the pandemic, Cubans have fled their homes to find a better life. For many, the promise of freedom lay within the borders of the United States, where they could make money and feed their families. Those who stayed behind often relied on family members living in the U.S. to send them **remittances** to help them survive.

Sixty years of foreign pressure hasn't swayed Cuba from communism, but the internal pressure is growing. Will it be enough to spark real change, or will the government keep fortifying its facade?

Trade Embargo

Government restrictions on the trade of certain products, goods, or services with other countries.

Remittances

Money that individuals earn by working abroad that they send back to their family and friends in their home country.



A New Sparring Partner

With only a few days left until his first boxing match, Tito was spending nearly all his free time practicing. From training at the gym, to dancing lessons with Grandma Maribel, and even watching boxing videos online between the electricity blackouts, Tito was preparing physically and mentally for the big event.

After getting his wrists taped and his gloves laced up, he took his **southpaw** stance in front of the heavy bag, but before he could release his first jab, Tito felt a small tap on his left shoulder. Tito turned and saw his little sister wearing a pair of **focus mitts**.

"What are you doing here?" Tito asked.

Carolina shrugged. "Someone has to help you get your right hook ready for the ring."

"Why are you really here?" he prodded.

She was quiet for a long moment, which was very unlike Carolina.

Southpaw

A slang term for a left-handed boxer. In a southpaw stance, the right foot is forward, and the jab is thrown with the right hand.

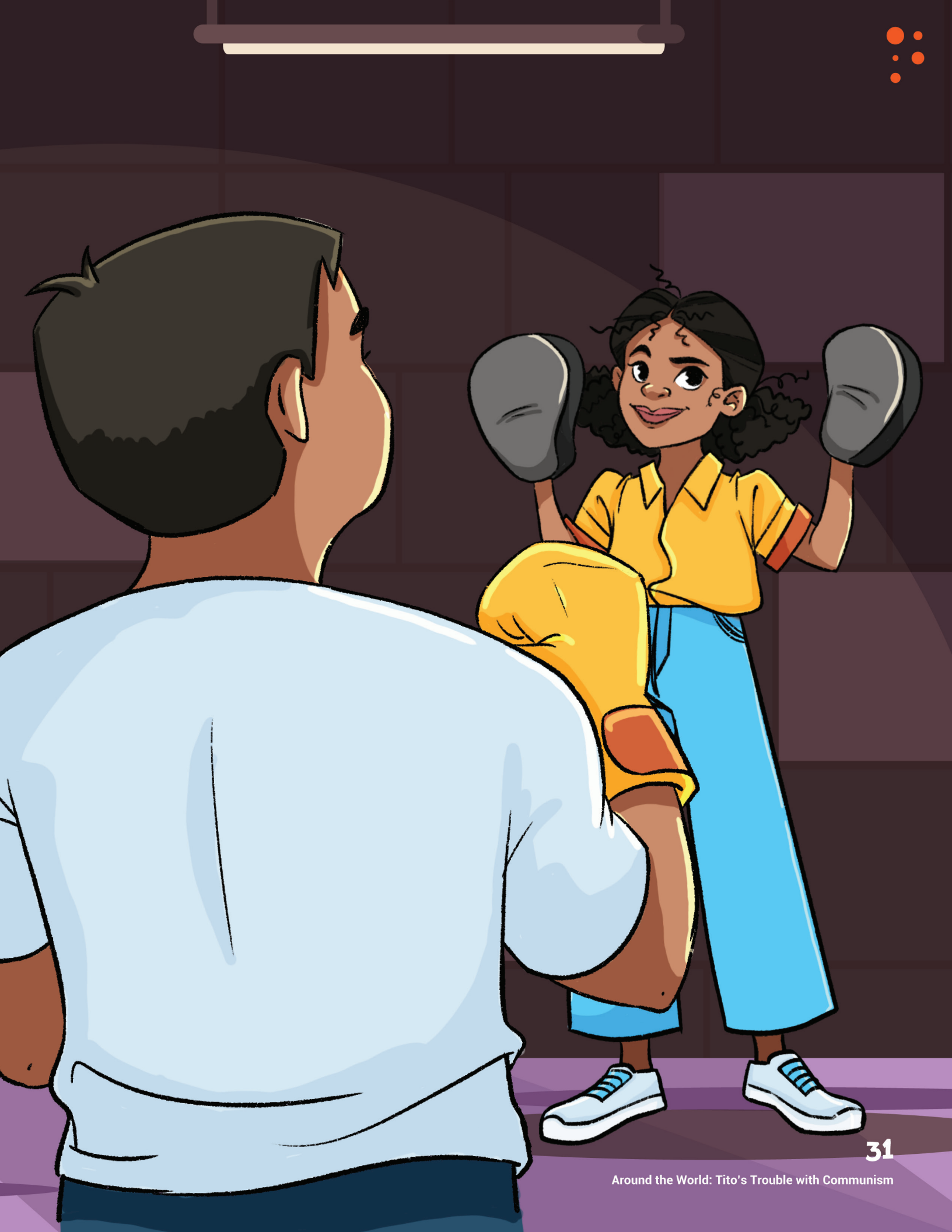
Focus Mitts

A padded target attached to a glove that is used in combat sports training.

"I saw you fixed the wall, and there's a receipt on the table for more of Mom's medicine. I came to say I'm sorry you've had to clean up my messes," she shared. "You didn't have to do that."

"Yeah, I did," Tito said. "It's what Dad would have done."

This time, his mention of Dad didn't make Carolina upset. She simply nodded, crouched into an athletic stance, and raised the mitts. As the siblings punched and blocked, Tito felt the tension between them melt. Though they didn't agree on everything and their country's problems were far from over, they could put their differences aside to focus on a new goal: Tito's fight. *Jab, cross, hook... Jab, cross, hook...*





Taking it to the Ring

It's the day of Tito's first official boxing match. He's warming up, but he feels pretty nervous.

Then, he sees Carolina, Grandma Maribel, and even Mom making their way to the bleachers. They wave at him. Though he wishes more than anything to see Dad with them too, he knows Rafa would be proud, and he draws on that for strength.

When Tito's name is called, he steps into the ring and walks to his corner. Everyone is chanting and cheering. They want to see a fight.

Tito turns and sees his opponent across the ring. The referee calls them to the center. They touch gloves and spring backwards into their stances.

Ding!

His opponent's first punch lands hard, and Tito stumbles back. He shakes it off and advances, getting in two punches of his own. *Jab, cross...* An uppercut to Tito's gut sends him to the floor, wheezing for air.





He gets back up and keeps going. *I just need to find my rhythm*, he reminds himself. With each punch he throws or blocks, Tito remembers who he's fighting for: *Carolina, Dad, Mom, and Grandma Maribel*. In the ring, there are no protests, no communism, and no empty promises. It's just him and his opponent, caught in a dance of strategy and stamina.

Tito lands a few solid punches before the first round ends. He's still standing. Tired and aching... but still standing.

Win or lose, Tito will keep training and fighting. He can't give up, no matter how hard it is or how many obstacles are in his way. Giving up is not the Cuban way. His people have suffered for many years, and things aren't getting better. But what unites them isn't just their pain; it's their perseverance. Their ability to laugh in the face of difficulty. To keep fighting in the ways they can. And maybe someday, all the friction will finally be enough to make Cuba into the pearl that gave it its name.

Tito smacks his gloves together and stands up tall. Two more rounds to go.

Ding!





Cuban Rice Pudding

Enjoy one of Tito and Carolina's favorite treats: Arroz con Leche!

Ingredients

- 1/2 cup short-grain rice
- 2 cups water
- long strip of lemon peel
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 1 pinch of salt
- 2 cups whole milk
- 1 (14-ounce) can of sweetened condensed milk
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- ground cinnamon for garnish

Instructions

Add the rice, water, lemon peel, cinnamon stick, and pinch of salt to a large saucepan. Ask a parent for a non-stick, heavy-bottomed pot.

Cook over medium heat while stirring frequently for 20 minutes. The water should be absorbed, and the rice should be softened.

Remove the pot from the heat and stir in the condensed milk, whole milk, and vanilla. Place it back on the stove and lower heat to medium-low.

Cook for 30 minutes while continuously stirring. If the bottom starts to stick, lower your heat and do NOT scrape the bottom of the pot. This will only loosen burnt bits and incorporate them into your rice, and we don't want that.

The mixture will be thickened after 30 minutes but will continue to thicken as it cools.

Add the rice pudding to a bowl or individual dishes, top with a bit of ground cinnamon, and refrigerate for a few hours until cooled.

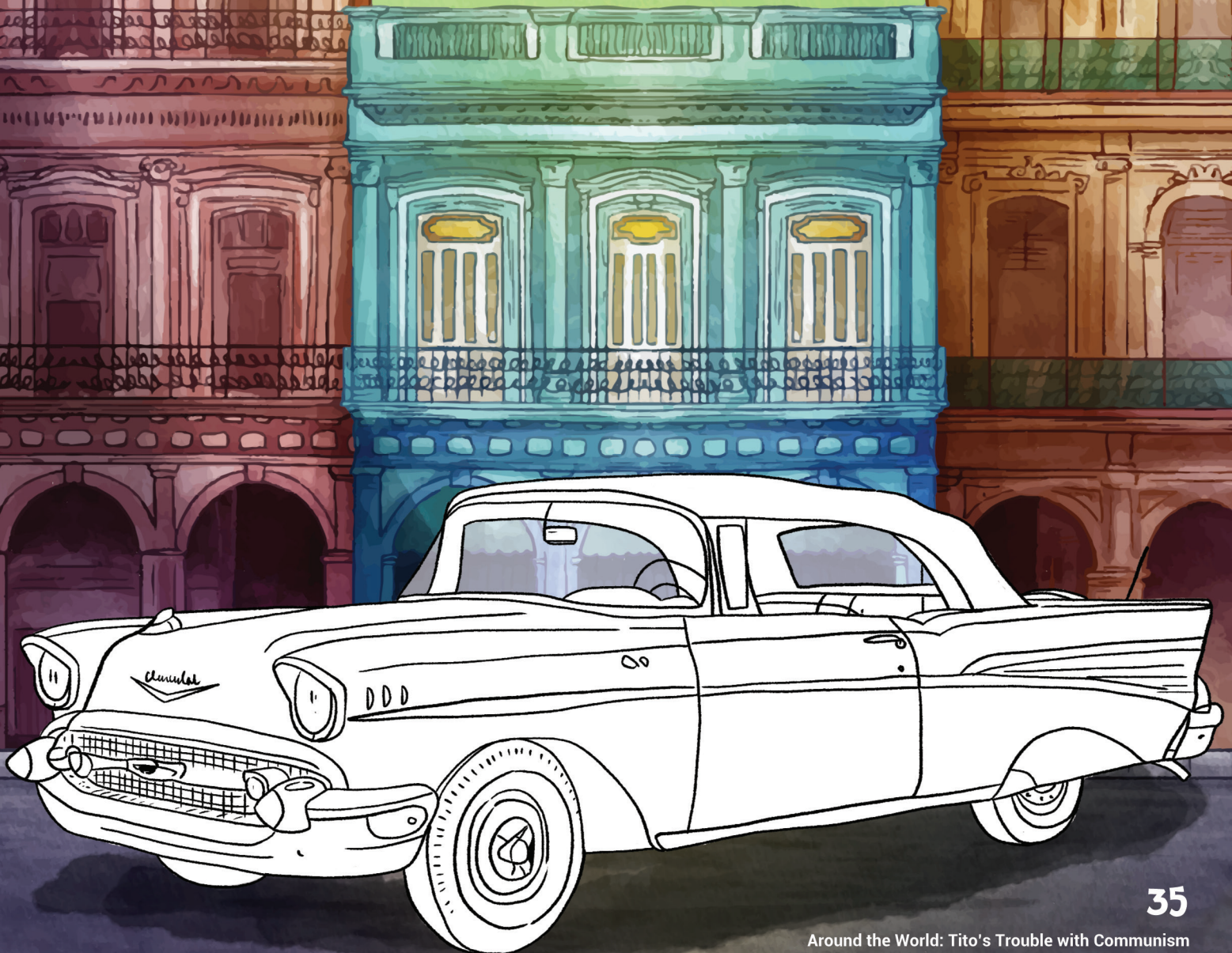


Delicioso!

Now you have a sweet,
creamy treat to share
with family and friends.

Coloring Activity

Tito's family has had this classic '57 Chevy for many years. Though it's held together with a hodge-podge of parts, it's still running great. Color in the car so tourists can take it for a ride!





Writing Activity

Write a letter to Tito and Carolina. How might you encourage them to be brave during difficult times? Do you think they should speak out or remain silent about the government? Why or why not?



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An illustration of five diverse cartoon children standing in front of a stylized world map. From left to right: a boy in a grey military uniform with a peaked cap and medals; a boy in a blue and white soccer jersey with the number 30 holding an orange ball; a girl with long brown hair in a blue top and yellow skirt; a girl with dark skin and braided hair in a yellow top and patterned skirt; and a boy in an orange t-shirt and grey shorts. The background is a blue world map with white outlines of continents.

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