

FICTION

THE WRONG GIFT

by Roanna Forman

She found the building fine. White, terraced, once maybe a model for senior living, but now missing doorplate numbers and in need of a paint job, like an architectural little old lady that can't get out to the beauty parlor.

The electric door opened into the lobby, where a group of neighbors were "out" for a Christmas morning chat. "I'm from the Elder Visiting Association," Jacqui said to a small African-American guy buried in his jacket. "I'm here to visit Maria Cardoza for Christmas. They said I need to sign in here."

Happy to oblige her with this apparently dispensable formality, the security guard handed Jacqui a pen. Like the building itself, it too was past its prime - no ink. "Here's another one." "Thanks." She wrote her name, the apartment number, the time in.

"Where's 103D?" "That's a couple of doors down to the left," said a tiny wheelchaired lady from the Christmas klatch. "Maria's deaf, she's hard of hearing. You have to bang on the door." Yes, that's what the note from the Association said. "Hard of hearing, sign in at security at desk, knock loudly."

Outside the entrance on the left, garden apartments for the mobility-impaired ran the risk of being security-impaired. At one unit, a plastic cover shrouded an air-conditioner. On the door of another apartment, a grayed-out rectangle showed the outlines of a now-missing unit-number sign. A piece of paper in a window read, "Wanted - a person who finds fulfillment in elder care."

But there was no 103D along the row of ground floor apartments. Like a person lost in an airport, Jacqui turned to carry her two shopping bags of goodies into the apartment building, when the security guard glided up to him. "Miss -- Maria Cardoza, she's in 1418 on the fourth floor."

He led her back into the lobby, sat down at his desk, and dialed. "There's someone here from the Elder Visiting Association to see you."

"Okay, fourth floor, apartment 1418," he repeated, activating the electric door to the elevators. "Remember, she's hard of hearing, bang on the door," the lobby group maven reinforced.

Jacqui pushed the button. The elevators responded, as anyone would at that age - slowly. Their doors stayed open a little longer for tired legs or walking implements. An 8 ½ x 11-inch piece of paper directed the reader to "Press G for the lobby floor."

Arriving at the fourth floor, Jacqui studied the directional arrows in this mini O'Hare of old age, and headed towards 1418. The beige carpeted lobby smelled like mothballs. Little dolls hung on some of the doors. It was very quiet.

End of the hallway, on the right, was an unbolted door, on it an embroidery of a rooster and the words "Maria Home." At this point, she always was. "Ola, llego de la Asociación para Ayudar a los Ancianos," Jacqui yelled. "Okay, come in." Maria was sitting opposite the television - image on, sound off - in her wing chair. It was like a throne from which she surveyed the TV images, the window, and the life of the street. Jacqui sat opposite her on a couch covered in plastic slipcovers and studied the Cuban memorabilia on the wall. Ornamental plates. A carving of the long-suffering island with symbols of indigenous products. Wood-carved hangings. A figurine dancer. Spray-painted cane. The Cuban flag, in cloth and in beads.

Maria herself was a piece of Cuban memorabilia, "Llegé de Cuba hace 43 años," she'd arrived 43 years ago. She pointed to every item on the wall and described it: sometimes Jacqui understood her words, sometimes she didn't. It didn't matter. It was the telling and the listening that counted.

Commemorated in 2002 with a "Grito de Yara" award for Cuban pride, she even wore Cuba. A pendant of la isla dangled from a red, white and blue necklace hanging around her neck. Maria pointed out the matching bracelet. She told Jacqui that the set was a gift from a friend. "Se retiraron a Florida dos años atrás." They retired to Florida two years ago - they were gone now.

A walker, a metallic servant, was always ready to help her rise. "Me duele tanto las rodillas, las piernas." Her knees and legs

hurt her so much. Obesity was not helping her cope with these aches and pains, nor with her diabetes. She wore little white leather walking shoes, a Christmas gift. "Son mi numero." They were a 6 ½ www – comfortable. Comfort was what counted now. A sleeveless canary jersey, a warm apartment, new white walking shoes. Comfort.

Jacqui proffered the flowers the agency gave her, and Maria found a vase (Jacqui ignored the yellow ribbon on it). They toasted the holiday. The sparkling cider and the two little cups were also compliments of the agency. But the bottle had been sitting on its side – Jacqui was afraid of bubbles. "Está bien." Maria didn't mind, she said. Jacqui uncapped the bubbly; it foamed down the sides of the bottle. She wiped it up with the dishrag – they shared a carcajada, a laugh - and some bubbly. "Rico."

During a lull, Jacqui noticed a red gingham covering on a small table; the cloth was gathered and stuffed into a doll's head. Maria's friend on the fifth floor made it for her. "Bonita, ella." Dolls started to register in the periphery, perched on hutches and cabinets like small ballerinas ready to come to life. They were dressed as "Gone with the Wind" extras or Victorian ballroom dancers.

"Que lindas, las muñequitas." How beautiful the dolls were. "Ah, venga!" Maria got up and led Jacqui into her small dark bedroom. Diagonally opposite them was a wall hanging of a Cuban beach scene; a single fallen edge destroyed the illusion that it was a mural on the wall, but the effect wasn't entirely undermined. Jacqui noticed the metal bars around the bed. They sat on it, and Maria pointed, smiling, to the shelf over it. Behind the religious figurines a group of simple plastic dolls, some pink-skinned, some brown-skinned, sat, stood and leaned along the shelf. They were dressed in little knit outfits she's made for them - flounce skirts of pink, green, red, purple. She'd even made their heads of hair, strand by strand. The chiquitita lounged in a small straw seat, a tiny straw hat on her head. Maria pulled a large negrita from behind the curtain. She was the eldest of these toy grandchildren.

She pointed to the wall opposite her bed, to a portrait of her and her brother as children of five and seven. "Murió hace dos años." It had been only two years since his death, in Spain. She sat quietly, very still. Jacqui could not comfort her; the thought of losing her own sister was unbearable. Maria gestured with her eyes to a portrait of her mother. Dead five years ago at the age of 97. She crossed herself. And the other, a sister – gone. "Yo soy la única." Jacqui was stumped at her quiet grief – the thing to do was to take her hand, but the moment passed.

Usted es Católica?" No, she wasn't Catholic. "Soy...Protestante." Better to lie, Jacqui decided. "Si, Protestante; es mejor tener una iglesia."

They went back to the living room – it was brighter, bigger, less cramped by loss. Jacqui remembered the gift from the agency – so nicely wrapped. She presented it ceremoniously. Even the silver and gold giftbox was pretty. She struggled with the box for a moment, opened it. It was a man's shirt. In that moment, the agency's solicitousness plummeted from demonstration to hype. Start backing and filling, Jacqui thought. "O, lo siento, Señora." She asked her permission to bring her another gift the following week.

"Está bien, no es nada." If she wanted to come and visit, that would be fine, but the gift wasn't the issue. So, the following week Jacqui would visit her, around 2:30.

Meantime she would shop around for a doll.

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