

Worlds Apart

by Reyna E. Vergara

Abuelita stretches out her index finger. A simple request follows, “*Mija*, llévele este almuerzo a su abuelito,” ‘Sweetheart, take this lunch to your grampy.’ When *abuelita* would call me *mija*, she spoke to my soul; to the part of me that was reserved for a special kind of love. I look around at the acres and acres of wilderness in front of me. I am afraid to go alone, but how can I say no? I take a step forward. When I pass the threshold between the house and the open field, my heart begins to pound. I’m a 10-year-old city girl, but today, on my grandparents’ farm, I must become a grown country woman. I hear the rusted gate closing behind me, and even though I want to run back to the safety of their mud house, I know I cannot. As I glance backward, I’m reminded of the strength of my grandparents’. They built the house with their own hands. Yet here I am, their granddaughter, trembling at the knees. The lunch pail is heavy.

As I walk, I mentally mark my path, recording every shrub and stone, not realizing the futility of my endeavor. But soon, everything begins to look the same. My mind starts to play tricks on me, and I have visions of being attacked by snakes. My cousin, José, on his way to the well, was bitten by one. Fortunately, his boots saved him. *Darn! I’m wearing sandals! I’m as good as dead!* But maybe I won’t be attacked by snakes, wolves are far more common around here. I still remember the ones that walked next to *Mami*, *papi*, and me when I was a very little girl. The colorful bus had dropped us off on the side of the road, several miles from the farm. I could hear the wolves moving in the shrubs along the road, but it wasn’t until they howled that I felt a warm droplet of water in my panties. I cried for *papi* to carry me on his shoulders, but now, he’s not here.

The dreadful scenarios of my demise continue haunting me, but to my great relief, I find *abuelito*. I’m elated to see him! He has always been *Mami*’s hero. So, he’s mine too. But something stops me from jubilantly thrusting myself forward. I read my surroundings carefully. I realize that I’m standing on a dry piece of land, the very dead ground that *abuelito* is tilling with a homemade hoe. He’s sweating profusely and making very little progress. The tool in his hands seems to be overpowering him. His clothes are worn out, patches upon patches. I can’t take my eyes off this tiny, indigenous, old man. In my distress, I feel immobilized. My hands almost fail me, as I catch his food pail mid-air. *Did I think that abuelito worked in an office?* I wasn’t sure what to expect, but this was not it. I stand there watching him, like a ghost. I feel the need to take it all in, but I can’t grasp it. Everything in life seems to happen too fast for me, and I often find myself in the middle of something that I wish I had more time to think through. I’d like to talk to someone about this, but it’s useless. *Mami* would scold me or give me orders. This is what the adults do, so I continue to live in my head.

At this moment, I want to hide and reappear only when I have understood, when it all makes sense. But, *abuelito* needs his lunch now. So, once again, I have no other option but to keep moving forward. I take slow steps, and when I’m at a short distance from him, I stop to watch him intently until he notices me. Smiling, he takes the food and thanks me. Although he’s wearing his *sombrero*, jeans and long sleeves to protect him from the sun, his burnt skin looks leathery. I can see the wrinkles that adorn his face and the indentation of his lips at the places where his teeth have fallen out. He finds a spot under one of the few trees that have survived the draught, uncovers his pail, and stares at the food. Finally, he realizes that I’m still there. So, he tells me that I don’t have to wait because it’s too hot and the field is no place for a little girl. I’m charged to go, but I hated to leave. I’m betrayed by my sense of obedience. The good little girl I am does as he says.

However, everything inside me tells me to stay, keep him company, and give him a hug. Despite tripping over several stones, because I'm not paying attention to the path, I continue to stare at *abuelito*, sitting helplessly, leaning his back against a solitary tree. He has so much work to do. It feels overwhelming.

The last time I looked back, I saw him dossing off, with his *tortillas* by his side. I wanted to pick him up and carry him to the home he built when he was young and newlywed. He deserved to rest a little. But once again, I felt as I often did, helpless and confused. Life seemed so unfair.