

Abuelita

CAMINCHA

To Reyna María, it's like they never left. They visit her often, sometimes in groups, sometimes one at a time.

When she sees them she has to focus: Now let's see, who is this...? It might take her a while. Because it's difficult to accept, for instance, that *abuelita* still walks for her. To accept her presence, like last Thursday morning at the peak of the rush hour on crowded BART.

There she was, like a superimposed image on a photo, there she was between the suits and briefcases, *The Chronicle*, *New York Times*, the lap computers. An ethereal presence. The light radiating from her made it impossible to concentrate on details, colors, clothing, what was she wearing? Her smile, concluded Reyna María jumping out at her station. *I'm not going to tie myself in knots about this. I'm just going to be happy she came to me this morning, let me see her.* For she has been dead for decades. And in her lifetime was an invalid in Tingo, Arequipa, in the south of Perú.

The story was she had been thrown from a horse and never walked again. An abused wife at twenty-two was mother of a daughter and three sons, the oldest, Reyna María's father.

With *abuelita* on her mind Reyna María drove into the foggy avenues leaving sunny Noe Valley behind her, only to find a pocket of sunshine in cousin Julia's block. Oh, *abuelita*, yes! It's your magic at work. I feel you close to me, she smiled, and rang the doorbell.

Sunday afternoon teas at cousin Julia's was when they talk about the past as if happened yesterday. But she walked for me, I remember her making the effort getting herself out of bed and her words, be strong, be yourself. . . Reyna María blurted out while her eyes followed the sunlight that danced around the family's relics that Julia treasured, the mahogany furniture, the crystal set out around the room, the lace curtains in the windows overlooking the garden.

No. It can't be, sneered Julia, shaking her head to emphasize her disgust with what she was hearing.

Alberto, Julia's brother, smiled at Reyna María through his eyeglasses, while lifting the corner of his lips above the delicate china cup he was drinking from. His voice calm, listen Julia, we know it's true. Why can't you accept it?

Julia looked pained – she liked to think she was the only one who knew the family's secret.

Reyna María repeated, yes, she did. Avoiding Julia's eyes so as not to give in to the arguments she saw brewing in them, she connected with Alberto. His solidarity like *abuelita's* sustaining her now same as when they were growing up. It was the usual game, Alberto showing disdain for members of their family, specially Julia's bad temper. Julia not daring to oppose him.

Reyna María gathered strength and stubbornly went on. Yes. She did. *Abuelita* got up and walked when we were alone, walked, her voice rose – blushing brought it down – and continued. She got out of bed and walked to the little drawers in those cabinets she had had specially built. Remember, they lined the walls of her room? She got up for me, to find the tiny colored bottles, ribbons, beads that she

regaled me with, to dry my tears or to make me smile.

She forgot Julia. She was again three or four, the little doll Alberto loved to spoil. And he, Alberto, nine or ten. Her hero: tall, brave, strong, he could even carry her on his back without dropping her while galloping at full speed round and round the center patio of *abuelita's* house.

Reyna María had taken it all for granted then, the same she took for granted the coarse hands that cooked her papita, the soft ones that prepared her warm baths and lovingly overdressed her against cold evenings.

Amid all that propriety. Didn't know it was their secret, that *abuelita* could walk when she wanted to. For not until after her death, when Reyna María was eight, did she hear about the unhappiness *abuelita* had withstood. Bits and pieces fell in her ears on quiet evenings when everyone thought she was safely asleep in her bed: how he taunted her, that husband of hers. That was the voice of Aunt Elva.

Taunted her...? That was Aunt Marta.

About her lack of interest in his sexual advances, and never showed her any mercy. She was just a child. Uprooted, it was cruel! answered Aunt Elva.

How was...cruel? Aunt Marta.

Abuelita begged him to let one of us – the old housekeeper, someone familiar – accompany them to the isolated posts that he volunteered for as Colonel. It was 1898, you know? So much of our country was undeveloped. She hungered for spiritual, moral support amid the savage surroundings of jungle or mountains. But he wouldn't allow it.

She was just a child, dried up like a flower starved for company, for love. she suffered so... Aunt Elva's voice trailed off.

So it was that Reyna María found out in bits and pieces, that in her lifetime *abuelita* had been treated as just another “hysterical” wife. Her fears, needs, concerns ignored. And had survived her marriage at fifteen, to a man three times her age, by pretending to be an invalid. A marriage arranged by her father who delivered his daughter straight out of the convent where she had been sent after her mother's death.

Reyna María remembered how she had looked forward to summers with the family at *abuelita's*. Looked forward to visits in her room, from which *abuelita* watched and listened to the rhythm of the household, the family that revolved around her, such was her magnetism, her strength. Through windows that opened onto her patio bustling with activities of the day: the housekeeper going back and forth, keys in hand, between orchard and animal pens. The cook in the kitchen scrubbing pots in the sink. Meantime the houseboy hurrying to feed the birds – *abuelita's* collection of colorful parrots, canaries and parakeets – hurrying to bring them out to the patio before the noon meal was to be served.

Ohhh, a voice rising in frustration, the clean clothes haven't been delivered. The washerwoman's little son rubbing one bare foot against the other had brought news of his mamita being sick. The voice quiet now, oh well, the señora wants me to give you some of the potatoes and corn from the pantry and also some onions and peppers and...

Reyna María remembered *abuelita* – a mother bird spreading her wings of protection over her – with a welcoming festive smile after

hearing what she had been waiting for, her timid knock on her door. She remembered the tenderness that came to her eyes and softened her features when she looked at her, her favorite granddaughter, the one born out of wedlock to her oldest son.

Come she'd say. Close the door, she'd caution. And placing her legs slowly over the side of the bed stretched her arm and took my little hand in hers warm, smooth. Our faces almost touching, we smiled at each other. Then *abuelita*, leaning on me, would get colorful beads and ribbons. Look what I have for you today. Her soft voice rose up and without letting go of my hand she would walk to the little drawers brimming with petals, as soft as the morning by chance in her orchard. And now decades later, now across oceans, from one continent to another, *abuelita* still walks for me.

Directing herself to Alberto, Reyna María came back from her reverie offering a smile as apology and repeated: yes. She got up and walked for me. And was about to say something else, about having seen *abuelita* on BART last Thursday morning. But instead gave him that special look that between them meant, I'll tell you later. . . . □