

An Hour with Abuelo

By Judith Ortiz Cofer

"Just one hour, *una hora*¹, is all I'm asking of you, son." My grandfather is in a nursing home in Brooklyn, and my mother wants me to spend some time with him, since the doctors say that he doesn't have too long to go now. I don't have much time left of my summer vacation, and there's a stack of books next to my bed I've got to read if I'm going to get into the AP English class I want. I'm going stupid in some of my classes, and Mr. Williams, the principal at Central, said that if I passed some reading tests, he'd let me move up.

Besides, I hate the place, the old people's home, especially the way it smells like industrial-strength ammonia and other stuff I won't mention, since it turns my stomach. And really the abuelo² always has a lot of relatives visiting him, so I've gotten out of going out there except at Christmas, when a whole vanload of grandchildren are herded over there to give him gifts and a hug. We all make it quick and spend the rest of the time in the recreation area, where they play checkers and stuff with some of the old people's games, and I catch up on back issues of *Modern Maturity*³. I'm not picky, I'll read almost anything.

Anyway, after my mother nags me for about a week, I let her drive me to Golden Years. She drops me off in front. She wants me to go in alone and have a "good time" talking to Abuelo. I tell her to be back in one hour or I'll take the bus back to Patterson. She squeezes my hand and says, "*Gracias, hijo*,"⁴ in a choked-up voice like I'm doing her a big favor.

I get depressed the minute I walk into the place. They line up the old people in wheelchairs in the hallway as if they were about to be raced to the finish line by orderlies who don't even look at them when they push them here and there. I walk fast to room 10, Abuelo's "suite." He is sitting up in his bed writing with a pencil in one of those old-fashioned black hardback notebooks. It has the outline of the island of Puerto Rico on it. I slide into the hard vinyl chair by his bed. He sort of smiles and the lines on his face get deeper, but he doesn't say anything. Since I'm supposed to talk to him, I say, "What are you doing, Abuelo, writing the story of your life?"

It's supposed to be a joke, but he answers, "*Si*,"⁵ how did you know, Arturo?"

¹ *una hora*: Spanish

² *abuelo*: Spanish word for "grandfather"

³ *Modern Maturity*: a magazine for retired people.

⁴ *Gracias, hijo*: Spanish for "Thank you, son."

⁵ *Si*: Spanish for "Yes"

His name is Arturo too. I was named after him. I don't really know my grandfather. His children, including my mother, came to New York and New Jersey (where I was born) and he stayed on the Island until my grandmother died. Then he got sick, and since nobody could leave their jobs to go take care of him, they brought him to this nursing home in Brooklyn. I see him a couple of times a year, but he's always surrounded by his sons and daughters. My mother tells me that Don⁶ Arturo had once been a teacher back in Puerto Rico, but had lost his job after the war. Then he became a farmer. She's always saying in a sad voice, "Ay, bandito!⁷ What a waste of a fine mind." Then she usually shrugs her shoulders and says, "*Asi es la vida.*"⁸ That's the way life is. It sometimes makes me mad that the adults I know just accept whatever is thrown at them because "that's the way things are." Not for me. I go after what I want.

Anyway, Abuelo is looking at me like he was trying to see into my head, but he doesn't say anything. Since I like stories, I decide I may as well ask him if he'll read me what he wrote.

I look at my watch; I've already used up twenty minutes of the hour I promised my mother.

Abuelo starts talking in his slow way. He speaks what my mother calls book English. He taught himself from a dictionary, and his words sound stiff, like he's sounding them out in his head before he says them. With his children he speaks Spanish, and that funny book English with us grandchildren. I'm surprised that he's still so sharp, because his body is shrinking like a crumpled-up brown paper sack with some bones in it. But I can see from looking into his eyes that the light is still on in there.

"It is a short story, Arturo. The story of my life. It will not take very much time to read it."

"I have time, Abuelo." I'm a little embarrassed that he saw me looking at my watch.

"Yes, hijo. You have spoken the truth. *La verdad.* You have much time."

Abuelo reads: "I loved words from the beginning of my life. In the *campo*⁹ where I was born one of seven sons, there were few books. My mother read them to us over and over: the Bible, the stories of Spanish conquistadors and of pirates that she had read as a child and brought with her from the city of Mayaguez¹⁰;

⁶ **Don:** a Spanish title of respect, used before a man's name

⁷ **Ay, bandito!** Spanish for "Oh, goodness!"

⁸ **Asi es la vida:** Spanish

⁹ **campo:** Spanish for "countryside"

¹⁰ **Mayaguez:** a port city on the western coast of Puerto Rico

that was before she married my father, a coffee bean farmer; and she taught us words from the newspaper that a boy on a horse brought every week to her. She taught each of us how to write on a slate with chinks that she ordered by mail every year. We used those chinks until they were so small that you lost them between your fingers.

"I always wanted to be a writer and a teacher. With my heart and my soul I knew that I wanted to be around books all of my life. And so against the wishes of my father, who wanted all his sons to help him on the land, she sent me to high school in Mayaguez. For four years I boarded with a couple she knew. I paid my rent in labor, and I ate vegetables I grew myself. I wore my clothes until they were thin as parchment. But I graduated at the top of my class! My whole family came to see me that day. My mother brought me a beautiful *guayabera*¹¹, a white shirt made of the finest cotton and embroidered by her own hands. I was a happy young man.

"In those days you could teach in a country school with a high school diploma. So I went back to my mountain village and got a job teaching all grades in a little classroom built by the parents of my students.

"I had books sent to me by the government. I felt like a rich man although the pay was very small. I had books. All the books I wanted! I taught my students how to read poetry and plays, and how to write them. We made up songs and put on shows for the parents. It was a beautiful time for me.

"Then the war came, and the American President said that all Puerto Rican men would be drafted. I wrote to our governor and explained that I was the only teacher in the mountain village. I told him that the children would go back to the fields and grow up ignorant if I could not teach them their letters. I said that I thought I was a better teacher than a soldier. The governor did not answer my letter. I went into the U. S. Army.

"I told my sergeant that I could be a teacher in the army. I could teach all the farm boys their letters so that they could read the instructions on the ammunition boxes and not blow themselves up. The sergeant said I was too smart for my own good, and gave me a job cleaning latrines. He said to me there is reading material for you there, scholar. Read the writing on the walls. I spent the war mopping floors and cleaning toilets.

"When I came back to the Island, things had changed. You had to have a college degree to teach school, even the lower grades. My parents were sick, two of my brothers had been killed in the war, the others had stayed in Nueva York. I was the only one left to help the old people. I became a farmer. I married a good

¹¹ *guayabera*: Spanish

woman who gave me many good children. I taught them all how to read and write before they started school.”

Abuelo then puts the notebook down on his lap and closes his eyes.

“*Asi es la vida* is the title of my book,” he says in a whisper, almost to himself. Maybe he’s forgotten that I’m there.

For a long time he doesn’t say anything else. I think that he’s sleeping, but then I see that he’s watching me through half-closed lids, maybe waiting for my opinion of his writing. I’m trying to think of something nice to say. I liked it and all, but not the title. And I think that he could’ve been a teacher if he had wanted to bad enough. Nobody is going to stop me from doing what I want with my life. I’m not going to let *la vida* get in my way. I want to discuss this with him, but the words are not coming into my head in Spanish just yet. I’m about to ask him why he didn’t keep fighting to make his dream come true, when an old lady in hot-pink running shoes sort of appears at the door.

She is wearing a pink jogging outfit too. The world’s oldest marathoner, I say to myself. She calls out to my grandfather in a flirty voice, “Yoo-hoo, Arturo, remember what day this is? It’s poetry-reading day in the rec room! You promised us you’d read your new one today.”

I see my abuelo perking up almost immediately. He points to his wheelchair, which is hanging like a huge metal bat in the open closet. He makes it obvious that he wants me to get it. I put it together, and with Mrs. Pink Running Shoes’s help, we get him in it. Then he says in a strong deep voice I hardly recognize, “Arturo, get that notebook from the table, please.”

I hand him another map-of-the-Island notebook—this one is red. On it in big letters it says, *POEMAS DE ARTURO*¹².

I start to push him toward the rec room, but he shakes his finger at me.

“Arturo, look at your watch now. I believe your time is over.” He gives me a wicked smile.

Then with her pushing the wheelchair—maybe a little too fast—they roll down the hall. He is already reading from his notebook, and she’s making bird noises. I look at my watch and the hour is up, to the minute. I can’t help but think that my abuelo has been timing me. It cracks me up. I walk slowly down the hall toward the exit sign. I want my mother to have to wait a little. I don’t want her to think that I’m in a hurry or anything.

¹² **POEMAS DE ARTURO:** Spanish for “Arturo’s Poems