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The Shadowed Sky

In a Venezuelan farmhouse made of stone and wood, Elena skips into the kitchen in a nightie sewn by her mother. The lace on the gown's collar and pocket all embroidered by Abuelita, her grandmother.

Black beans and rice on the wood stove in a country kitchen. The fridge runs when power does.

The big house and farm go back more generations than Abuelita can count. Now there is just one milk cow, Pepita. Tomatoes in the garden, chickens in coops. A mango tree near the barn.

Through the kitchen window, Elena spies pigeons on the portico railing. Later she might be allowed to throw out bits of *arepa*, corn flat bread.

“Mami and Papi working?”

“Manuel and Blanca are teaching in the village as usual,” says her grandmother. “How about some breakfast? Here's an orange. Shall I slice it the way you love?”

“Yes please, Abuelita.” Elena bites off the fruit from each slice. Abuelita takes the peelings and creates letters on the table: C-O-O. “See,” she says, “these spell what the pigeons sing. Do you hear them?”

“I hear, I hear! Can I go and watch them on the portico?”

“Don’t you want breakfast?”

“Not now, Abuelita. I want to see the pigeons first.”

“Okay, but no further than the portico. I’ll watch you from the window.”

Elena slips arepa bits into her nightie’s pocket and leaps out of her chair.

“Wait!” says Abuelita. “Give them these rinds, too.”

As soon as Elena opens the door, the pigeons scatter. “Wait birdies,” she cries, opening her palm to reveal arepa bits and orange rinds.

“Just be still,” Abuelita says. “They’ll be back.”

Elena stands like one of the soldiers she’s seen in the city square, looking at him from the bus window.

Soon a few birds strut down the railing, bobbing their heads. Elena lets treats drop from her hand. The rush of plumage begins. “That’s all,” says Elena, as she closes the door.

After her favorite breakfast of rice with butter and cream, Elena wears an embroidered blouse and gathered skirt while she plays on the floor. “Coo-coo,” she says to her dollies. “That’s what the pigeons sing.”

Abuelita says, “You know, Elena, pigeons are really doves.”

“Doves?”

“Yes, love birds. White doves are a symbol of peace and love.”

Abuelita takes out her quartro, a small guitar with four strings, and begins to play a love song.

“Does Mami love Papi?” asks Elena.

“Of course. That’s why they had you.”

Abuelita's face has deep, intertwined lines, her flesh is growing loose, but her smile brings buoyancy to Elena. "What will we do today?" Elena asks.

"First I must milk Pepita," says Abuelita. "You stay here."

When she's finished, Abuelita carries a half-bucket of milk, sets it on the portico, and enters the house.

"Now we can play if the rains hold off. It's the stormy season," she tells Elena. She hands her a cotton bag of seeds for the birds. They head to the garden to settle under the ficus.

Birds with orange breasts skitter close. "Elena," says Abuelita. "Those are turpials, the birds of our country. Remember I told you?"

"Yes, Abuelita," says Elena, as she throws seeds. Soon yellow-breasted orioles join the scramble.

"And see, *mi querida*, here comes a dusty white dove wanting his fill. Today we are graced. Let me play a folk tune about their cooing."

Elena looks up. "But there's a shadow in the sky."

"That's a cloud, Elena. A big one. Feel the wind. *Dios mio!* A storm is approaching."

"But I want Mami and Papi to come home before it starts!"

"You must rush inside, little one. I'll put the cow in the barn."

Elena takes off to the farmhouse. She can barely close the door against the wind. Hailstones clatter on the old roof. Lightning flashes across the sky while trees crash the portico.

Elena runs to every window. "Abuelita! Abuelita!"

Electricity sparks; the house goes dark. Elena sobs, holding two dollies. "Abuelita!"

Finally, her grandmother crashes in the door, blown forward by the gale. She throws off her wet clothes and grabs Elena. “It will be all right, child; it will be all right. Let me start the fire and light the candles.”

“I’m scared,” screams Elena. “Mami and Papi will be washed away.”

“That won’t happen. They will be home soon. Don’t worry, little one.”

But Abuelita *is* worried. If the storm keeps up, the road from the village will flood. The only way home for her son and daughter-in-law is through the city, where armed guards attack protesters against the dictatorship. Billboard pictures of the president and his forces show what no villager wants to see.

Millions of people have fled the country because they have no food or supplies. No one dares complain to the government for fear of torture and death. Now with COVID, the situation has worsened. But the villagers, teachers and Abuelita know little of the pandemic.

“Elena, I’ll make you *una taza de caliente*, all right?” Abuelita coaxes a smile from her *nieta*.

But not for long. As soon as Elena finishes her hot chocolate, she begins to sob. “I’m scared! What if my parents drown in the flood?”

“Come here, *mi preciosa*. Let me brush your hair. We don’t even know if there’s a flood. Your parents could be home any moment. The road may not be washed out.”

“I want to go and find them, now!”

“Elena, we must stay here and be safe. The wind would blow you away.”

Elena runs in circles while the wind blows against the stone walls, and inside the room, bringing a loud whoosh. The youngster shrieks. Abuelita distracts her by strumming the *quarto*. Soon Elena twirls and sings off key.

“You have rhythm in your feet that’s missing in your voice,” laughs Abuelita.

Elena grabs her doll in a whirling frenzy around the room.

Abuelita barely keeps up plucking her quarto. “Slow down, little love, or you’ll fall down. You are getting too excited. Settle! Now, my dear, it’s time for a rest. Play in your room while I clean up a bit.”

After checking the fire, Abuelita paces back and forth on the only rug in the house, now trampled flat. She worries that Manuel and Blanca will take the road that runs by the square. She wrings her hands. Pulls at her grey hair. She’s heard that armed guards have rifles aimed at protesters and passersby. She’d been afraid since Manuel and Blanca began teaching in the village. But if it weren’t for them, village children wouldn’t learn. Abuelita warned her son about dangers that floods present, leaving travelers no choice but the road to the city. And if the torrent continues, the old farmhouse could be in harm’s way.

She hears Pepita mooing; she must have broken out of the barn. All Abuelita can do is pray that she will go back to safety. Winds are too strong for her to venture out.

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Putting the child to bed that night proves difficult. Elena tells her grandmother that guards with guns march on the square.

Abuelita’s gaze widens. “How do you know that?”

“Mami and I went by on the old bus. I saw them.”

“What? You saw them? When?”

“Christmas time.”

“Ay *Dios Mio!*”

Hiding her fear, Abuelita helps Elena change into her nightie, slips the dolly in the child's arms. "You will be all right, mi querida, I am here with you."

Elena clasps her arms around her grandmother's neck. "Will my parents be home when I wake up in the morning?"

Abuelita whispers "God will make it so. She kisses the child and tucks her in.

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The night is long. Abuelita pulls out a bottle of rum from the cupboard, pours a glass half-full, and plops in her armchair with her rosary. After a while, she hears voices outside—mutterings and the clamor of tumbling rocks. Portents of nature surrounding her farm, casting a spell. One refill of rum causes her to drop the beads and enter dreams of serpents and bird-eating tarantulas. Before sunrise she wakens clearheaded. More voices, deep and calling. She wrestles on her coat, hat and boots, ready to venture outside. Or so she thinks. After several workouts, she's blown back by the wind. Once inside, she still hears voices. She must go meet the forces. Using all her power and more, she makes another attempt and shoves the door open.

She tromps through muddy ravines and rotting tree trunks, while branches jab her arms and hail needles her face. No stars to help her navigate. Torrents slam her like a giant wave. In the distance, the barn has been sliced in half by a tree. Poor Pepita, where is she? And the mango tree? Abuelita presses both hands to her chest, fighting fear and exertion. Her movements slow and deliberate. What if she falls and careens down a ravine?

Floundering in the dark, she notices expanding shadows. What are these? Mysterious creatures haunting her? But their shapes resemble people—her people.

Through the mist, Manuel and Blanca stumble down the road, flanked by two villagers. Manuel leans forward, cradling his hand. Blanca holds one of his arms, a villager another.

“Madre!”

Abuelita hears the voice of her only son. He breaks through the line to reach his mother.

“Manuel, mi hijo. What happened?”

“Just need a bandage.”

“Let me see your hand.”

“Not now.”

“What happened?”

“Later,” says Manuel.

Abuelita stifles her tears, trembling inside. “*Ay Dios mio*. Let’s get you into the house and you can tell me more.”

Then she sees Elena race from the house in her nightie.

“Elena!” cries Abuelita. “What are you doing out here? You’ll get soaked and catch pneumonia!”

Blanca, drenched from the storm, dashes up to shield her daughter from the rainfall. Lifting her up, she says, “Here, my beautiful child, get under my coat.”

“Is Papi hurt?” asks little Elena.

“Not to worry, darling. We’ll fix his hand.”

Once in the house, they peel off their wet clothes, piece by piece. Watery mud and silt falls on the floor. Abuelita rushes to revive the fire from the coals. The Venezuelan sun is just rising. She hears her chickens chatter. The rain stops.

“Madre!” says her son. “Let me tend the fire. You sit.”

“Not until I see that hand.”

“I already rinsed it. One soldier knifed me, but it’s a clean cut and not bleeding. See?”

“I must wrap it properly.”

“Mami, we need to take care of the villagers first.”

“Of course, my son.”

Abuelita and Manuel dress the villagers’ cuts from knives and slashes from whips.

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“Now my son, tell me everything”

“Okay, Mami. I’ll start from the beginning. We took the road to the city to check on you and Elena. Four fathers of our village students insisted on coming to protect us.”

“How could they protect you?”

“They said they would cover us. I didn’t think they could pull it off. But they did. Now two are missing.”

“Ay *Dios*. Did they get shot?”

“I pray not. There were thousands of protestors and security forces in the square. I didn’t know what was going on. Guards attacked with knives, whips, and rifles. And some National Guard vehicles ran into the crowd, killing anybody in their way.”

“They are murderers!”

“Not only that. Police on motorcycles fired tear gas into the crowd. We could hardly breathe. Where Blanca and I huddled, the fathers of our students kept fighting back, despite tear gas and rifle shots. We started running, yelling for the villagers to join us. But they wouldn’t. Finally, two caught up with us on the road home.”

“*Gracias a Dios,*” says his mother.

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In one bedroom, Blanca towels Elena's hair, and dresses her in warm clothes. The child begs for una taza de caliente. "Coming up," says Mami.

They all congregate around the table where Abuelita has set out the rice and beans. But no one seems to be hungry. Manuel, with his good hand, pokes in the cupboard for the rum bottle. "Mami, you been nipping?"

"There's another bottle behind it, son."

Manuel laughs and brings both bottles to the table.

He addresses the wounded villagers. "I worry about the other two? Were they behind you?"

"For a while, but they disappeared. We pray for their fast return. May God hear our prayers."

"Let's pray," says Manuel. Afterwards he lifts his glass. "Here's to the fathers who protected us. We owe you our lives!"

"No!" says a villager. "You teachers saved our children. They can now leave our poor village because they know letters, numbers, and more—unlike their parents. You and teacher Blanca son heroés! The other teachers always left because of little pay and crime in our village."

"You are too kind. Blanca and I are honored to be the village educators. May the blood on the road may someday be our leader's! Now let's rest for a while."

Villagers sleep on the floor. The family scatters in other rooms. Abuelita hears her cow. She races to the window, but no Pepita. She slips out the door and heads for the barn, half of it still standing. Inside, the two missing villagers are huddled around the cow.

She runs to them and gives Pepita a hug.

"Why did you not come to the house, amigos?"

“Okay here.”

“No! You are hurt.” She helps them up and on the path home, past the standing mango tree. The cow plods along for a while, then turns back to what’s left of the barn.

Pigeons and orange-breasted turpials follow, watching the scene unfold.

Abuelita and the villagers trudge into the old farmhouse. The family is up and called to action. She collapses in her armchair.

“Es la voluntad de Dios, it’s the will of God,” says Abuelita, dribbling tears. “You all have escaped the regime forces. My precious Pepita will give us milk. I hear my chickens squawking in their coops. Even the mango tree still stands.”

Manuel leaps up. “And I will rebuild the barn!”

Elena skips into the room in her nightie, completes a perfect *pirueta*, and climbs in Grandmother’s lap.

Abuelita smooths Elena’s wispy brown hair. “How beautiful, my treasure. May you always be safe.