

*A Painted Seashell*

By Maeve Tholen

I visit you every day, although you probably don't know who I am, or why I'm here. Or maybe you recognize that necklace with tiny, brightly colored flowers painted around the edge of the seashell. You painted it for me, Abuela, you gave it to me on my fifth birthday. You placed it in my pudgy, little hand and told me that I had a choice. You said that I could be the beautiful flowers and stand out, be bold, or I could blend in and become the blank canvas of that white shell. Of course I told you I would be the flowers. I told you I would be bold like you, Abuela. You tied the soft leather string around my neck and told me one more thing.

“Alex, remember if you ever need me, rub this necklace and I will be there with you.”

I've rubbed the ridges right off of this seashell in the past eight years, Abuela, but I still haven't become the flowers that I promised I would be, and you aren't by my side. I knew you didn't mean that literally. I realized that my first day of kindergarten, when you didn't magically appear out of thin air when I rubbed the shell. But Abuela, even while I sit by your side in this uncomfortably pristine room, I can't even find a glimmer of the person you used to be in your chocolate brown eyes.



You insisted on the brightest yellow paint color that the hardware store sold for your kitchen. You said it reminded you of the sun in Cuba, your home. You complained about the weak sunlight that shines through the fog on the Maine coast. You told me that one day you would take me home to Cuba and show me the true brightness of the sun, but you never did.

We were in your cramped yellow kitchen frying churros when I first knew your mind was changing. It was hot for a Maine summer and the heat from the stove made me sweat. The oil popped and sizzled, telling us that it was ready for the batter to be piped into crispy tubes of deliciousness. You picked up the brown bottle of vanilla and looked at me.

“I- I can't remember how much vanilla to add.”

“It's just one teaspoon, Abuela. You know that.”

“Right, thank you, Alex,” you said. Your eyes sparkled, and you tucked a stray piece of hair behind your favorite yellow headband.

I replay that moment over and over again in my head now. I should have realized that you were sick. We'd made churros in your yellow kitchen a hundred times together- you had told me your Abuela taught you that recipe. You said that you had been using that recipe since you were five years old.

That wasn't the only time that you showed signs of forgetfulness. It started with the small things like misplaced car keys and paint brushes, things that I shoved to the back of my mind and never thought about again. But within a year you couldn't even remember my name. The name you suggested to my parents, the name that you carefully painted on all of my birthday cards, the name that you told me was strong and beautiful. Alexandria, Alex.

I should have told Mom sooner, but you know we aren't close, not since Dad left. Dad left us for some woman from the south and afterward Mom pushed me away, letting her grief fill my spot. Mom's heart curled in on itself, trying to hold onto the only things that she still loved, which I guess weren't me. I ran to you after Dad left, after Mom changed, and you took me into your arms and you held me tight as I cried. The best thing that you did for me was that you *loved* me, with all of your heart and never let go. You, my beautiful Abuela, never stopped believing in me, so I will never stop believing in you.



When my school sent everyone home in March, we took you to a care facility. Mom said it was because you were too much to deal with when she didn't have a stable job. I begged her to let you stay in your house with the yellow kitchen. I cried and I screamed and I yelled through my tears. She only shoved me away and told me to grow up. You never told me to grow up, Abuela. You said that the energy and pure joy of children made the world a little more bearable. You told me to always keep my heart young. That's what you did, Abuela. Your childish curiosity brought you from Cuba to Florida to Maine, and yet after all your adventures, you still ended up in that pristine prison full of sickly sweet nurses. I tried to save you from that place, but I couldn't, Abuela. I failed you.



The first time I visited you was a month after Mom sent you there. I dragged myself through that door, terrified of what I might see. The scent of bleach and lost hope filled my nose, forcing me to look up. Nurses bustled around, pushing wheeling chairs of sagging, ancient people. Others carried

plates of mushy food and thick binders of paperwork. A blond haired nurse checked us in and led us down the hallway.

The halls seemed endless and the walls seemed to squeeze closer together, making it impossible to breathe. My heart was pounding against my ribs, like a bird trapped in a cage. I was scared and nervous, but mostly I was mad at myself for letting Mom take you here. This was a place where old, sick people came to live the last of their lives. This place wasn't fit for my beautiful, strong Abuela. I know your memory wasn't the same anymore, but you would never have chosen to live the last of your days in a place so deprived of happiness and colors and sunlight.

I started to twist, twist, twist my short curly hair around my finger, until it turned purple. How could I let them do this to you, how could I be so weak and insignificant?

“Alex... Alex!” The door to room 18 was open and I was standing outside it shaking, my finger tingling.

“Come on in, your Grandma is ready to see you,” the nurse said with a sad smile.

Oh, Abuela. You sat in a musty wicker armchair, hugging a crocheted blanket and humming to yourself. You were holding onto that blanket like a lifeline, your knuckles white. The blanket was made of creamy pinks and yellows- you hated those colors. You loved the brightest yellows of the sun, the most vibrant pinks of guava fruit, not dull, muted tones. How could they erase everything that you loved from your life? But of course they didn't know what your favorite color was, you didn't even know that then.



It's been six months since you came here and I've visited you every day. After the first month, the nurses gave me permission to see you without an appointment. I quarantined for weeks so I could sit by your side and hold your hand, Abuela. I even got tested for COVID- 19 again and again, but I never will get used to the peculiar feeling. It's like a dull needle probing my brain, searching through my thoughts.

You are my escape from the droning science lectures that I have to sit in front of the screen for. I talk to you every day, Abuela, and you listen, humming along. You look at me every day and tell me what a beautiful girl I am, but you almost never say my name. Can't you remember that I am Alex, your neita, your granddaughter?

You remember my name only on your ‘good days’, the days that you hum and smile and say my name over and over. Your ‘bad days’ come often, too often. You cry and rock back and forth, wringing your hands, and you push anyone away that tries to comfort you. On bad days you howl Abuelo’s name, who died in Florida, and your son’s name, my father, who left our family when I was five. You even forget who the nurses are and try to run away from them, and you shriek that you want to go home. That was why mom sent you here, because she said she couldn’t stay up all night waiting for you to try to leave your own house. I told her I would stay up all night with you, but she wouldn’t hear of it.

The nurses won’t let me hold you and let you cry. The blond nurse once told me that you might hurt me with your flailing arms, even if it was only accidental. They have to restrain you and I watch. They told me not to look, the nurses said to sit in the lobby, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away from your screaming body in that chair. It makes my heart shatter when I see you like that, Abuela. You are broken, and now I am too. Every time one of your ‘bad days’ comes around, my heart shatters into a million pieces. It breaks smaller and smaller, the pieces sharper, like broken glass. But, Abuela, I will let my heart be broken as many times as it takes to make you remember.



Remember, Abuela? Remember when we would dance together, late into the night? You danced wildly, with no regret or embarrassment. You danced like your life depended on it. We danced with the fireflies in the summer, and we danced barefoot in the snow in winter, seeing how long we could stand it before we had to go back inside. We danced along the stone walls at the apple orchard, the soft rhythm of our bare feet making the green shoots of your garden push up from the ground in spring.

The underlying cadence of the wooden clave urged us to play one more song. These songs were your favorites from 1970’s Cuba. They reminded you of your life and your family and your memories from home. Sometimes they made you laugh and other times cry. You said that sometimes dancing was the best way to move on with life, to forgive and also to remember. I can’t dance without you now, Abuela. It feels like the music has no heart, without your laughter and bouncing feet.

Dancing was only one of the many extraordinary things you taught me. Remember how you taught me to garden? You showed me how to carefully work the roots of a pot-bound plant apart, so it could grow freely again. You taught me about the incredible and complicated way that plants

communicate with each other. We planted carrots that were all colors of the rainbow, we planted peas in the still frozen ground. We planted green beans, and purple and white speckled scarlet runner beans. Those were my favorite. And every year in spring you would plant a mango seed. You have planted one every year for the past twenty five years you have lived in Maine. You always hoped that one year it would sprout and you would have one plant to remind you of Cuba. You were so determined to make that little seed grow, that you sang to it every day. You sat and painted picture after picture of the bare soil, and you read to it. It never sprouted, but you never stopped trying.

Abuela, you gave me tools for life, and you gave me gardening tools, too- trowels and hoes, and long handled scratchers. The scratcher was my favorite, it allowed me to stand back and work from afar. That was how I moved through life, far away and unconnected, quiet and empty, but you showed me how to be different and love myself for it. You showed me how to be independent and creative. You gave me all of these tools to start my own garden one day, but I haven't even begun to rake-



“Alex, come on, it's time to go home.” I opened my eyes, Mom was sitting in a chair a couple feet away from me with large, purple bags under her eyes. When had she arrived? It had only been ten minutes since I sat down, hadn't it?

“One more minute and I'll be ready to leave.”

“No, you can't have one more minute, Alex. You have your first day of in-person school tomorrow, and you've been sitting there with your eyes closed for an hour talking to your Abuela. Don't you think that's enough time talking to someone who's lost her marbles?” Anger boiled in my stomach.

“What?” I said, my voice a deadly whisper. “Abuela has not lost her marbles. Don't you ever say that again!” I hissed.

“Sometimes you have to let go of things and move on, Alex,” Mom sighed, ignoring the hot, bitter tears pouring down my face.

“Abuela is not a *thing*! And how can you say that? She has taught me more about memories and moving on than you ever could have! Abuela said it takes time and tears. Can't you let me have that?”

“I-”

“And how can you even talk about letting go, when you’ve never let go of Dad?! You’ve been moping through life for eight years! Have you never considered how that that has affected me? Abuela was my parent when you weren’t there to comfort me. Abuela was always better than you.” Mom sat there ashen-faced. She didn’t call my name as I ran down the hall or even move from her chair.



It was October 17th, the first day of in-person school. It had been over half a year since I had been on my school campus. Mom drove me to school, blank faced and puffy eyed, and I sat defiantly next her, relishing the painful silence. I hadn’t even cared or noticed when remote learning started. I was a quiet person and therefore had a quiet social life. I didn’t have many friends. The only true friend I’d ever had was Abuela. I wasn’t excited to start school, because it meant having to be an outcast again instead of a nameless face on a screen. The latter was definitely better.

I survived school only because I got good grades and my teachers liked me for it, otherwise school was a hot mess. Although today as I walked through the halls before class, I realized that most people probably were as nervous as me. Most people hadn’t been out in public or even seen their friends in six months. They probably had as much of an idea of how to socialize as I did. We were all starting on the same level for once.

My first class was literacy, my favorite. This year I had a new teacher; she was young and her eyes sparkled when she smiled. I knew I was going to like her. She introduced herself and our first assignment. We had to write about something that was challenging while we were out of school and how we responded to it. What could I write about? The only thing I could remember about the past year was visiting Abuela. I couldn’t write about that. My teacher seemed nice, but she would have to read it- she would read my writing about Abuela. No one wanted to read about a heartbroken girl crying over her sick grandmother.



I hopped into the car that afternoon expecting to have another uncomfortable ride. Instead, Mom greeted me with a half-hearted smile.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said yesterday, Alex,” Mom said, surprising me so much that I jumped. Smiling was surprising enough, but talking to me after I yelled at her? We never talked much anyway, only enough to communicate the simple things, like when dinner was ready, or what time I had to leave for school. So I just sat there, my back stiff, as Mom continued.

“I’m sorry, Alex... I guess I just haven’t realized that my sadness affects you so much. You’re right, I have never been there for you- when your Dad left, or when Abuela was first sick. I haven’t been a good parent, but I want to try to do better if you give me the chance.” She said it all in a rush, then blushed nervously. I did that too, all the time actually. Maybe we could connect in some way, even if only in our shared social awkwardness. I think I could try to forgive her and move on.

“Alright,” I said, and smiled.



After a simple but lighthearted family dinner of spaghetti, I sat down on my bed and got to work. I was going to write that paper my new teacher had assigned, and I was going to write about Abuela. I had thought about it all through study hall. Maybe I didn’t have to write about the sadness I was feeling. Maybe I could focus on my memories of Abuela, the happy ones. Maybe I could look at these past months and discover a bright side to it all. Telling my story would help me open up and be who I am. I rubbed my smooth shell necklace and smiled. I knew right then that this was the first step in my journey to become the bright flowers that I promised I would be. I knew that I would be able to succeed with Abuela right by my side, if only in my imagination.

I started to write...