

4-15-2021

## Abuela

Nikki Zambon

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/oval>

**Let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

---

### Recommended Citation

Zambon, Nikki (2021) "Abuela," *The Oval*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/oval/vol14/iss1/9>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Oval by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).

# ABUELA

Nikki Zambon

*Abuela* groans in the night. I hear her bones creaking.

She wakes early, while the rest of her little house sleeps and farts in darkness. A slow leak of Spanish escapes her lips, a harsh whisper that pierces the unlit house. She slides her feet into the matted blue slippers beside her bed.

Rest, I would tell her, if she listened to me.

She smooths her joints, coaxing the cartilage into place. She rocks back and forth until she's heaved herself into standing position, unstable as a tangled string puppet. There's work to be done and the boys won't be up until noon.

Every morning, she rolls a cigarette and puts the kettle on. She waddles to the cupboard to take out the maté, a small, silver gourd, and a dirty bombilla straw.

The rest of the house holds a steady slumber, but *Abuela* sees the sunrise.

She pours boiling water into her gourd, *con azucar*—she always takes it sweet—and sucks up the first bit of loose green tea through the straw.

She once told me if someone offers me the first sip of maté, they're making a fool out of me.

She is four feet, ten inches tall. With a red knitted cap and a rolled cigarette dangling from her lip, she bustles around the kitchen, chopping yellow onion, boiling small potatoes, warming milk on the stovetop.

Her hands are braided at the knuckles, peppered with age spots and old scars. She uses a wooden mallet to pound meat for *milanesa*. She melts fat to prepare *torta frita* for the rainy day to come: a tradition in this country.

The most gentle alarm clock, the smell of hot oil cracking garlic cloves, wafts in from her kitchen and awakens the house.

Every morning, I move to the table to watch the cigarette perched between her lips grow a tail of ash long as a shadow, waiting for it to disappear into some pan or another, but it never does.

Grandma magic.

The boys are up. Men really, but you wouldn't know it by looking at them. They play games on their phones all day and sneak out to get drunk in the night. And you should hear the way her four grandsons talk to *Abuela*, the only woman left in the family after their mother died a few months back.

They tell her to shut up. Call her *idiota*. They tell her to make them more food, clean their filthy socks, roll their cigarettes, stop bothering them to find a job. More meat. Stop telling me to eat.

And after they've released all the pain from the depths of their mouths, she takes their words, straps them to her back, and falls to the ground to keep scrubbing. She mutters to herself as she cleans the bathroom floor. All the things she does, has done, go unnoticed.

She yells at me for feeding the stray dogs in the *barrio*, who come together in a pack and howl outside her window all night, demanding more. I lower my eyes and toss them scraps when she's not looking.

She spits insults at the aloe plants outside of her house, talking about useless, rotted leaves. She lets me rub their smelly slime across her face, embarrassed to be doing something so impractical and vain. Her furrowed brow relaxes beneath a gentle touch. I tell her it's good for the nerves and makes her beautiful. The next day, I whisper an apology about our faces stained yellow from the decay. She sticks her tongue out at the mirror.

Every day, the wrinkles on her face set a new course, hollowed out lines in a forgotten field. Her eyes, a dark, unidentifiable color, descend deeper into her skull.

The only flashy thing she ever does is dye her hair one shade of red too bright. The boys tease her about the skintinted cherry on her scalp. She swats them with a towel, holding back a girlish smile.

I sip her sweet maté at the table. I nod my head, listening to her endless flurry of Spanish, without understanding much. The others speak slowly so I can follow, but for *Abuela*, it isn't about whether or not I comprehend.

It is about someone sharing maté with her as she speaks.

She warns me.

When my fiancé and I had first come to Uruguay to live with her, she didn't like me. A *gringa* in her house. What was her grandson thinking? There were plenty of women in this town who would be content with him. He always has to be so difficult.

She barely acknowledges my presence for months, but continues to

feed me.

One evening, I refuse to eat. I cry on the bed, missing my mother, unable to forget about my decisions. Leaving my country to marry a man who didn't tell me his real name until we were already engaged. *Abuela* enters the doorless room carefully, moving to the bed to pet my hair until I am calm enough to eat her goulash soup.

Ever since then, she rolls me a cigarette first thing in the morning. She washes my dirty shoes when I'm not looking. She mends my underwear and leaves them folded delicately on the bed.

But she still won't let me cook. Not that I would want to.

One night, in the dark with only the glow of the TV playing her beloved *Telemundo* soaps, my fiancé and I fight. It is violent and *Abuela* stands in the doorway of her room, watching us. Her crimson hair flies out in different directions while we poison one another in her home.

The next morning, she comes to my bed while my fiancé is out of the house. She looks at me with frantic love, telling me to leave. Telling me to take my chance and never come back. She loves me, but never come back.

I lived with *Abuela* for many months more because I was intensely in love with her grandson.

I wake up every morning in the dark. I light the pre-rolled cigarette *Abuela* has left for me on the counter. I overwater the aloe plants and kick stones in the driveway. He and I fight and hit and disgrace her little house for months.

Until finally, I understand that *Abuela* knows best.

But even now, though it's been years since I left, I fret over tender bones, sighing in the night, waiting for someone to hear them. I find myself thinking about whether she still dyes her hair the same shade of lipstick red, or if she lets it grow coarse and grey like I also wanted her to. I imagine all the boys have left her by now. I worry how she gets her meat and potatoes and cream from the corner store to her house.

I miss the *zapallo* she would go out of her way to cook for me every night because she knew it was my favorite. I remember the short, white wedding dress she insisted on buying me from town, too expensive, but wanting to make me feel loved and pretty. How I never got to wear it and left it dangling in the very back of her closet when I went away.

I wonder if she cooks *torta frita* for herself when it rains.

Above all, though, I wonder about a long, unwavering cigarette ash.