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A Letter from Nueva York

BY WINGATE FROSCHER

IN THE COOL of the Puerto Rican evening Segundo sat outside his shack on the big stone doorstep. Since the women were well known for their fear of the night breezes, he did not order his Moncita to sit with him. She remained inside in the dark or with only a candle, even after the firstborn had been rocked to sleep. Segundo, his belly comfortable with the rice and beans and smoked codfish she had cooked for him, leaned back against the doorframe, smoked a cigarillo or two and conversed with the passersby.

Usually, these were men returning late from work on the finca, their hoes on their shoulders or their machetes at their belts, pausing to ask if he had heard what next the American would order when the grapefruit groves had been weeded—fertilizer to be spread perhaps, or trees to be pruned. And often there was Segundo's father, Don Rafa, seeking news of his grandchild or lamenting his years and the passing away of the old days. Nearly always he settled himself on an old fruit crate near Segundo and, as if impatient with these last years of his life, slapped at his leg with the little switch he carried.

One evening he was late and Segundo had time to wonder if he had been taken ill before he finally caught sight of his stooped figure making slow progress through the pasture across the road. In the dying yellow light, now quickly giving way to a deepening blue above the dark wall of the hills, his figure seemed almost motionless. Then the ragged straw hat began to bob up and down more and more clearly until at last the old man raised his switch in greeting and crossed the road.

He groaned deeply as he settled on the crate. "I say . . . Good, I say there is no devil like a woman who has not been beaten every day of her life."

Segundo stretched his bare feet against the hard-packed earth below the doorstep, feeling again the tightness of his muscles, tired

after his day in the groves. "Mamá and the spirits again?" he asked.

"As always. But since Adón has gone she is crazy."

Segundo shrugged. Mamá had always disturbed herself too much over the ways of his brother Adón. It should be no surprise now that he had abandoned his woman and little ones for some new excitement, perhaps a stray female or a trip across the island to San Juan.

"For hours she must rave," Don Rafa was saying. "Thus it goes. The young grow up to mock the father and the tongue of the mother burns like a cane field. See, she hasn't enough with Anselmito and Paquita—even the youngest are too big to be fussed over now. For God, what does she know of the loss of sons? I, who have lost so many before Adón. . . . All those children of my earlier women wandering God knows where. . . ." He spoke in such a soft voice that it seemed as if all the chirps and buzzings of the evening left off so he could be heard.

From inside came the bold voice of Concha, the laundress at the American house, who had stopped by earlier to chat with Moncita: "Don Rafa, today I heard that Adón has gone to the States. Imagine. . . . Hail Mary," she continued when there was no reply. "How will he ever reach the States? Such importance he gives himself."

"Mere chatter of females," said Don Rafa. "Mere chatter."

"There is talk of a place called Arizona. Segundo is that the same as Nueva York?"

"I believe so." Segundo, having been to school for a few years, was always consulted on such matters. He had never heard of Arizona, but if it was in the States it must have something to do with Nueva York.

"Adón," said Don Rafa gruffly, "has probably gone to find work on some other finca."

"Ay," piped Moncita, from the darkness, "it must be some finca where they pay the most to the laziest."

"If he has gone to Nueva York," said Don Rafa, giving no sign that he had heard her, "so much the better. There he can make himself into something."

Concha did not laugh with Moncita, but stepped past Segundo and down to the ground to stand facing Don Rafa. She wiped her nose with force. "Ay, Don Rafa, thou knowest his worth well enough. That rascal—what has he ever done well but make eyes at the women?"

"And gamble away his wages at the cockfights," added Moncita.

"Quiet!" Segundo whispered sternly, lest she anger the old one. And being a respectful wife, she drew back from the doorway in silence.

"In Nueva York," said Don Rafa, "he can make himself into a doctor or a good, who can say what he may do?"

"Crop and feathers!" Concha remained firmly before him, her legs apart, her arms crossed. "Even a stupid old negra like me can tell thee that a man must study to make himself into a doctor. Better if he stayed here like Segundo and cared for his little family. Who will care for thee in time?"

"Ay, Concha, thou art as crazy as my Luisa María. If Adón and Segundo both left, I would still have Lolito and Anselmo coming along. For that, I had many. Thirty-nine, know it? And no one woman was enough. . . . I rest in God. Adón will send money. Who says he will not? Soon I shall no longer be able to work. . . . See, already my voice fails me. And when I can no longer work, I shall have to listen to my woman all the day as well as all the night. . . . But I shall not endure it long. God will soon call me and I shall be glad to retire myself from this life. Then shall I wander in peace with my compatriot ghosts. . . ." There was a sigh from the old one that seemed as long as the years he had lived. "Now that I am down to my last two women. . . . At least, they believe they are mine. . . ." A smile seemed to lose itself under his moustache and his voice wandered off into silence, as if he were dreaming again of his youth during the Spanish times when he must have strutted like a fighting cock in the bright uniform of the Civil Guard. His clothes now hung on his stringy frame as if made entirely of patches, colorless with forgotten dirt and many washings at the river. "Coño," he cursed suddenly, "I have years!"

"I too have years," said Concha, her voice softer than before.

"But I have seen more of this world. I have wandered in all parts of this great island and I have learned a thing or two. I have learned that anything can change. Today, my Adón may be a stupid jíbaro. Tomorrow, he may be a learned doctor."

Concha opened her arms and said no more. Don Rafa remained silent, still beating at his leg with the little switch while his face dimmed into the advancing night.

SOME WEEKS LATER there was a morning when the American Señor called Segundo back to the kitchen porch after he had brought the

mail from town and gave him a letter addressed to "Don Rafa and his family."

How rare. . . . Segundo took the letter and hurried to the house of his father. It must be from Adón. Yet how could it be? Adón had never learned to write.

The old one took the letter and sat down in his chair at the big table. He did not open the envelope, but sat regarding it for many minutes. The sunlight pouring through the doorway seemed also to shine through the flesh of his fingers, to reveal the bones, and between those bones the letter remained, while he continued to suck at his old clay pipe.

"What could it be?" demanded Luisa María. And several of the young ones also began pushing themselves into the affair, Anselmito squealing and giving with his elbows as Paquita tried to push him aside.

"By the writing beside the stamp," said Segundo, "it appears to come from Nueva York."

"From Nueva York! Most Sainted Virgin!" cried the mother, now shaking with such excitement that the buns of her hair seemed about to come loose. "Look, Don Rafa, what does it say?"

He removed the pipe from his mouth. "Swallow the tongue," he said, and returned the pipe to his mouth.

More quietly, she began to whimper. "Clearly, it must be from my little one, my little desired one. Tell me, what does it say?" Her voice suddenly rose almost to a screech. "Tell me! Tell me!"

"Woman," he shouted, "Give thyself silence!" And now for some minutes there was silence, while he sucked again at his pipe and regarded the writing on the envelope. "Good," he murmured, while the young ones stared at the mystery of all this, "well written is the name, well written."

The mother began to whimper again, softly, like a sick kitten, while the loose skin of her bony face creased itself into deeper wrinkles. And then, scratchily, her voice returned. "Oh, what a mother can support! Look, a stupid old dog holding a letter as if were gold. An old dog waiting for his last days. Oh, that God may witness my pain. . . ." Her eyes rose heavenward. "Oh, Mary, Virgin of my soul. . . ."

The roar of Don Rafa shook the house. The pipe shot from his mouth and clattered to the floor. And in this new silence, he said, "Listen, if it is written in English, how can I read it? Even Segundo can not read it."

"In English? Then for certain it was not written by my little desired one. That little brute never learned English. Such foolishness—to tell me that my little desired one could write in English. Oh, what a mother can. . . ."

"But woman, I have told thee nothing. It comes from Nueva York and therefore it may be in English. True, Segundo?"

Segundo nodded. Don Rafa rose from his chair and took the pipe which Lolita had picked up for him and stuck it back in his mouth. Clearly, he was now on his way.

The mother backed out of his path, her fists clenched against the sides of her face as she moaned. "Oh, the spirits, the spirits. . . . Truly, I shall have an ataque. . . ."

Don Rafa, with Segundo following him, walked slowly through the doorway to the porch and down the steps to the ground. Then, with his feet planted firmly in the yellow dust of the road, he turned to face the mother, still up on the porch.

"Adón can not write in English," he said with force. "Therefore the letter must have been written for him by the girl in the post office in Nueva York—like the girl they have in Albahaca. Thus I shall go to the Señor and he will tell me what the letter says."

"Ay. . . . How good! How good!" Her eyes brightened and she clapped her hands as her bare feet came down from one step to the next. "The Señor will read the English and we shall go to hear him. . . ." She leaned against the side of the house and lifted first one foot and then the other to brush off the dried mud. "How good! . . . Thus the American will give us the message from my little desired one. . . ." She pushed the clamoring young ones away and tried to rub some of the spots of dirt from her dress. "Quiet, quiet. . . . Go stay in the house. Go help Melinda in the yam patch. . . . Oh, Most Sainted Virgin, how good it will be. . . ." Her voice broke into a cackle as she spat on the back of her hand to wipe away a smudge. "Let us go," she said, with a wave of her hand to show Don Rafa that she would walk behind him, "let us go. . . ."

And in that moment the old one turned and gave it to her: clear and loud, a bofetada across the face!

She gasped, falling back without tears. And now in a hush of all things, where only the bamboos across the road could be heard whispering against one another, she crept back up the steps, her skinny limbs shaking like those of a foal, her head nodding in obedience.

Such a bofetada. . . . Thus it must be, thought Segundo, though he pitied her and wished he could comfort her without angering the old one. But he could only agree with him that she had mixed herself too boldly in the affairs of men.

"Come, my son," said Don Rafa, and without a backward glance, he began to walk down the road. "As all the world knows," he muttered after a little, "a woman's bite is worst when she has lost her teeth."

ON THE BACK PORCH of the American house, the Señor took the envelope from Don Rafa and tore it open. "But this is in Spanish," he announced.

"And it comes from Neuva York?" said Concha, having left her ironing board for the reading of the letter.

"Señor," said Don Rafa, ignoring her, "if you will do me the favor of reading it. . . . My eyes are too feeble."

The American smiled and began: "'For Papá, Mamá and the others, here writes Adón the son.'"

"Good," said Don Rafa, nodding at the floor. Concha stood with her arms crossed, sniffing suspiciously and winking at Segundo.

"'Across the sea, I have arrived at last in Nueva York. It appears to be all city. Now it is said that Arizona is far away and no one is certain of the street. All is noise and very pretty. All the world speaks English. I found myself with various countrymen. They showed me where to go. I live in the house of a negra who speaks only English.'"

"Imagine!" said Concha. "A negra like me who speaks only English."

"'Most good are the things, and the countrymen of this street know all there is to be known. I have found work. I work in a grandiose hotel containing as many people as the whole town of Albahaca. In truth, the hotel in Albahaca would fit into the kitchen of this one.'"

"Milk of duck!" said Concha, sneering.

"'There are so many dishes in this hotel that I am the washer of only some of them.'"

"A man washing dishes!" Concha burst into a hoarse shriek of laughter. "Hail Mary!"

"Good," said Don Rafa, solemnly chewing at his moustache, "let us see what else he has to say."

The Señor continued to read: "'Tell Segundo to come to Nueva

York. There is much work and good pay, and the things are very amusing. Adiós, writes Adón the son.’”

Concha was still snorting. “Man, are we to believe all that? The rascal thinks he’s rich already.”

“That is all then,” said Don Rafa. “Many thanks, Señor.”

The Señor nodded and returned the letter. “It says he lives on 114th Street.”

“More than a hundred streets they have?” Don Rafa grinned. “Such importance they give themselves.”

Segundo stood beside him, looking down over his shoulder as he examined the letter until he found the name Adón. Then he held his flat, blackened thumbnail against the name and scratched at the paper a few times. “Good,” he said at last, and folded the letter and tucked it away inside his shirt.

“Heh,” muttered Concha, “that lazy rascal, the laziest that ever swung in a hammock. . . .” But with a glance at the wetness in the eyes of the old one, she shrugged and said no more.

In truth, he appeared to be full of sorrow as he turned and walked in a great slow loneliness from the house. Segundo could hear him making soft sounds to himself as he retrieved his bamboo switch from the porch steps and started down the driveway toward the road between the groves.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING he accompanied Segundo to Albahaca in the truck. He said he had decided to ask the girl in the post office to write a letter to Adón for him. Now, in the brightness of a new day, he appeared to have lost his sadness. But he had little to say except to remind Segundo once or twice not to drive so fast.

“I should be riding an old mare,” he said, as the truck swerved to avoid the rump of a cow grazing at the side of the road. “In the old days a man rode more slowly, but he always got there too soon anyway.”

“How goes Mamá?”

“Like this truck. Last night she plastered her face with leaves. This morning her voice is like new. For God, she has nearly deafened me with ‘tell Adón this, tell him that. . . .’” Don Rafa shook his head. “Tell him to wear his saint’s medal. Tell him to keep his money knotted in a rag in a tin can. Tell him not to gamble at the cock-fights. . . .’ Carrajo, he is no longer an infant.”

“Does she want him to come back?”

"Who knows? Most of the time I did not even hear what she said—just the noise. I shall not tell him to come back. Let him work hard, I say, and make himself into a man of importance. . . ." The old one grinned, his eyes sharpening with a new light. "And what a letter will be written. Three times the girl in the post office will have to stop and rest—or maybe more. At least three times she will have to change the pens. And knowest what I shall make her write to the young devil?" His voice grew stronger against the rattling of the truck. "Good, I shall tell him to molest me no more with his silly letters, not until he has made himself into a doctor or a lawyer or something—something more than a washer of dishes. For God, he should need more than tin cans to hold his money."

He was still chuckling to himself when Segundo stopped the truck before the post office, near the line of people waiting for the services of the girl who wrote letters.

"How rare," said the old man when he had climbed down and stood wrinkling his nose and blinking in the sun. "Today all the world appears to have its little sorrows."

To Segundo, the line seemed no longer than any other day.

LATER, when he returned after completing his other business of the morning, he found Don Rafa ready to go home.

"How much did it cost?" Segundo asked as the truck rolled out of town.

"Nothing, my son. It cost me nothing."

"I didn't know she would write a letter for nothing."

The old one did not appear to have heard him. "Sons. . . . How many sons? They come tiny and they go away big. How many have already retired before me to the high places? Six or seven perhaps. And eight or ten who died young and thus became little angels. . . . Thirty-nine given to the light. Truly, a piece of the world. Thus, when I myself depart and begin to wander in the high places of the rain so many shall I have to watch over—Adón and the rest so scattered. Clearly, I shall be very occupied. . . ."

"And how much did the little stamp for Nueva York cost?" Segundo asked impatiently.

Don Rafa nodded slowly, as if not certain that he cared to say anything, while the truck jugged along between the rows of coco palms. Finally, he said, "Nothing. . . . No, my son, I waited for the others and watched while the girl scratched their sorrows into the paper.

...” Segundo could see teardrops sparkling on his wrinkled brown cheeks. But he was smiling as he wiped his eyes. “Thus have I come once more to Albahaca, and only to please thy mother. But a letter is only more sorrow. Therefore I did not molest myself with it. Carrá, I did not even speak to the girl who writes.”

Segundo took one hand off the wheel, uncertain of what to say. Then he thought of Luisa María and said, “Mamá will feel the spirits.”

“Let her! Let the spirits descend like a plague of gnats. . . . Perhaps I shall not even tell her. What does she know of the loss of sons?”

“But Adón is not lost. In the States he—”

“In the States he is lost. Never again in this life shall I see him. Like the others before him, he is lost.”

Segundo shook his head, but remained silent, for he found himself wondering about his firstborn and the new one Moncita would soon give to the light. And he could follow his thoughts no further as they flew wildly beyond him into the unknown.

“Why should I molest myself with the letter?” said Don Rafa. “I had nothing to say.”

✦ WINGATE FROSCHER is the author of the novel, *The Comforts of the Damned*, which was published by Appleton-Century in 1960. Avon is issuing a paperback edition of the book this spring. His stories have appeared in a number of periodicals and one was reprinted in *Best American Short Stories* 1953. An editor as well as writer, Froscher was born in Puerto Rico and now lives in New Jersey.