

Gracias a Dios

Carmen Benavides-Garb

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Gracias a Dios

Carmen Benavides-Garb

“Escuchar para aprender y aprender a escuchar, esta historia ocurrió una vez en un pueblo muy remoto donde la gente hablaba una cierta girozoncia (made up word).” This is how my Abuelita Elsita would start all of her stories. Standing at 5 ft tall she commanded any room she entered. She had a scar going from her hairline to through her eye, due to a major car accident years ago. She had short gray hair and wore colorful sweaters. She had 4 kids and grew up in the countryside. She never went to high school and loved playing “Escoba” (naïpe, card game). She helped teach me how to make empanadas, Chile’s national dish. She was a devout Baptist woman. As a kid it would amaze me that she would just like sitting for hours reading the bible again and again. I couldn’t understand how someone could believe in something so fiercely that they cannot see. She could recite bible verses off the top of her head, her own bible was filled with annotations, highlighted sections, underlined in blue ink. She would always tell me and my brothers’ folk stories as if she was performing in front of an audience of thousands. I always think she was meant for the stage, she had a beautiful singing voice, maybe if life didn’t deal her the cards it did, she would’ve been a singer. She had a traditional view on marriage and gender roles, she is the only person in the world who would tell me I had to prepare myself for a husband, and she was the only person in the world I would not contest when she did. I have a thousand small memories of Abuelita Elista but looking back I didn’t know her all too well. I wonder what she was like at my age. What her dreams were, her hopes, did she ever question the God she loved so dear? Abuelita was the matriarch in my family tree, and she brought light wherever she went. I’d like to remember her this way.

Abuelita Elsita had Alzheimer’s and it got increasingly worse as she got older. She didn’t know who I was during her final years, and it was such a conflicting feeling. I was angry that she didn’t know who I was, after she had been such a big part of my life, how could I be forgotten so easily. I wasn’t mad at her, because I know she wasn’t to blame, there was no one to blame in fact, which made it even more infuriating. But throughout the worst of her Alzheimer’s, she always remem-

bered her religion. Read her bible. Preached about God. I have never believed in God in a traditional sense, or found much use in organized religion. But seeing how it got Abuelita through the toughest moments in her life; fleeing her home country, leaving her husband, losing her memory, I feel more connected to religious people. Because at the end of the day for Abuelita, God was hope, regardless of if I thought it was real or not, it helped her and she was able to overcome through faith; how could I ever disregard religion after that? This was one of the biggest lessons she taught me, to see value in religion and to see the positive impacts it had on her.

We knew Abuelita was dying a few weeks before her passing. Her health was slowly declining and she wasn't talking. I was so scared to visit her in her final days, to see her bedridden, to see the most powerful woman I've known in such a vulnerable state almost felt invasive. She had created an image of who she was in my memory, one that didn't match the small frail woman on the cot. She passed away last year, when I was at a math class. We were leaving for Chile that same day to drop my brother off there for his year abroad. We were returning back to the motherland and she was going on; we were all going home. As we said our final goodbyes before our flight, I thought to myself if there is a god Abuelita Elsitita is definitely going to be first in line to go through the gates of heaven. She has a spot there; she gave her life to her God. I prayed that day for the first time in years, to a god I didn't believe in, for her sake, that he guide her to heaven. This was one of the only times in my life where I felt peace through God. Abuelita would be so proud, gracias a dios, as she would say.