

## Aguapanela con Limón

I stood in front of him in the field -an ocean of grass that extended for miles until it merged with the *Boyacá* Mountains, rocky giants that watched over the valley of *Oicatá*. His long legs rose like stilts from his hooves as he strolled free through the plain. He was the color of bright molasses, with a white stripe that stretched straight from his forehead into the inside of his nostrils. His belly ceremoniously expanded and contracted as he breathed, making his nostrils wiggle and blowing hot air into the wind. Midway through the field he stopped at a patch that was greener than the rest and drove his teeth into the ground, tearing through the soil clumps of grass with seamless effort.

I began walking towards him, moving slowly. Midway through the meadow I stepped on a branch, snapping the twig in half, making a hard, dry sound. He lifted his head and spotted me. I froze. His big marbles blinked curiously and examined me. He realized I was carrying a bag of *panela*, so he began to gallop towards me. As I stroked his head, passing my hand gently through his white stripe, I felt the hairs of my arm move with the hot air of his breath. I took out a cube from the bag and opened my hand widely so he wouldn't bite my fingers off. As he snatched the *panela*, the noise of his teeth breaking the cubes resonated in his mouth, slowly scraping the sweets into nothingness

In a matter of seconds he demolished them, yet he wasn't satisfied. He stuck his head in the bag and licked the remaining speack. He began sniffing me for more. I showed him my hands and told him that I was out, but he was determined to get more. He licked my hands with his rugged tongue until any memory of sweetness remaining in my palms

was gone, but still he wasn't satisfied. He sniffed my jacket like a hound tracking the next hunt for his master until he stopped in my right pocket. He then began to stick his large head into it. Little did matters of logistics and size proportions matter to him at this point. He had spotted sweetness again and wanted another piece. I shoved his face aside, but he continued to drive his mouth forward into my pocket, pressing hard against my stomach. Nine hundred and fifty pounds of flesh, bones, muscles, blood, hair, teeth, nails, sweat, mucus and saliva ramming me back as he tried to make the impossible possible. I pushed his relentless snout again and retreated a couple of steps so his sheer force wouldn't trample me. I stuck my hand in my pocket and took out the cube. One last rock of brown, unrefined, sugar cane cube that I had somehow forgotten. I held it in my fingers and started turning around to feed the insistent animal.

Suddenly, I felt an electric shock leaving from the tip of my fingers, straight through my spinal cord and into the back of my head. Excruciating pain that travelled rapidly from my right hand to my neck. As I looked at my hand, I saw the horse's teeth clamping my fingers while he snatched the last cube out of them, squeezing them together like a garbage compactor. I pulled it out as strongly as I could and surrendered the cube to the beast without a fight. As I sucked my sausage fingers and rubbed them quickly with my other hand, trying to isolate the pain in one single spot, I noticed that my fingernails began to blacken, as if they were being filled with ink.

I looked up to the horse. He grinned at me with his big teeth and neighed while he devoured the last cube. The fucker was mocking me. Like igniting a fuse, his laughter made the pain rising in my spine quickly morph its way into anger. I stood up while still holding

my swollen fingers and looked him straight in his marbled eyes to confront him. In that moment, a strange sensation of familiarity came over me. As I was looking deeply into his eyes, I felt I wasn't looking at a horse anymore. The look the beast was giving me was exactly the same as the look my grandfather had the day I finally met him.



I always envied children with grandfathers when I was little. I didn't grow up with them, so I couldn't do anything but imagine how they would be like. On my mother's side, my grandfather Ricky died of an aneurism when I was a baby, so I couldn't claim to know him at all. My grandfather Beto was still alive, but barely. He was in a car crash when my dad was just 15 years old, which had left him in a vegetative state. We would visit him every time I went to my grandmother's house, but the way he lay in his bed motionless would remind me of an abandoned boat, just drifting without any sign of direction or response to the outer world.

My sister and I would sometimes walk to the park near our house to see Grandfathers buying chocolate ice cream for their grandchildren, the cones dripping under the tropic heat and leaving a brown puddle in the pavement. Or in my school's annual bazaar I would watch them buy pink cotton candy that glued to the children's lips like feathers sticking out of a stuffed pillow. My brothers and I didn't have that, so we would recreate Ricky and Beto through the stories that our parents told us. My dad told me once that grandpa Beto loved *aguapanela con limón* (hot panela with lime) in the mornings. He

would claim as a scientific fact that it was the perfect combination between sweet and sour and swore that it's miraculous properties could cure any disease or illness known to man. Knowing this, I decided I would always bring *panela* when I visited him and prepare him a cup of *aguapanela con limón*. I would heat it up in my grandmother's microwave for fifty-five seconds, slice a lime in half with a sharp knife, squeeze the acid into the hot tea and stir it with the blade of the knife. I would then take it to the first floor where his room was and give it to Otilia, a sweet and slightly goofy nurse that took care of my grandfather. She had been helping my grandfather for more than twenty years now, bathing him, changing him, feeding him, cleaning him... Talking to him. It could easily be said that she was an off-the-record second wife. Every time we performed our sacred *aguapanela* ritual she would give it to him by the spoonful and I would lean next to him with a napkin just in case it spilled I could wipe the hot liquid off. I never said anything to Otilia, but I also leaned next to him hoping I would see a reaction. Something to prove to me that he was here... That he was aware. But every single time he would just grunt and cough, swallowing with difficulty but with no palpable response. Of all the times in little over seven years where I brought him *aguapanela con limón* while he was still alive, I never got any response from him. Not ever... except once.

It was an afternoon after school. I must have been around sixteen years old. I entered his room again with a cup of freshly made *aguapanela con limón*. Next to the bed was an electronic monitored that indicated all of my grandfather's vitals. It showed a series of red numbers worthy of an old arcade game and made a monotone-sound that reminded

me of an old record player when the record is done, clicking perpetually until the other record is put in place. I stood beside him as Otilia gave him the drink. Again... some grunting and coughing... No reaction... When he finished the cup a sigh of pure disappointment escaped me. With yet another failed attempt of communicating with my grandfather, I was resigned to call it a day. I gave him a kiss on his bald head and stroked his hands to say goodbye but, as I was about to leave, he grabbed my hand. With a strength unimaginable in a man in his condition, he pulled me close to him. The pull made me drop the cup, making a hollow sound against the carpet. He looked at me with his tired red eyes and clamped me to the point of discomfort. His sudden attack of consciousness scared me, I wanted to be released from his grasp, but I kept watching at his eyes. After what seemed to be an eternity, he smiled. He was here... He was alive. I let myself get lost in his sight and swim into the deepest corners of his eyes. For the first time in my life, I saw him. I saw his life, the father of my father, his accident, his pain... I saw his soul. The accumulation of frustrations, fleeting joys and regrets of a man condemned to watch his children grow into men and women with children of their own, without being able to embrace them, hold them, kiss them. Condemned to grow old alongside his wife but in separate rooms, in separate beds. But yet a man able to communicate his entire life in one single tired smile. For the first time in my life, I met my grandfather.

He died shortly after that moment, but now I stood there again, years after, staring at that same look again. Only this time his eyes didn't look tired anymore. His crippled old body had left him and now he was free. Free to ride down the plains. He grinned again and neighed

loudly, echoing in the mountains. I smiled back. As he turned around, I watched him gallop his way down the valley, never to see him again.

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