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Abuelito

Margarita C. Delgado
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

An outsider's perspective of the Spanish funerary process and the universal grappling with grief.

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Margarita Delgado

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Travel Writing

Abuelito

“This country is barbaric,” I whispered to my mother in English. I wasn’t sure if it was the itch of my tights in the humid heat, the crowd of strangers pretending to know who I was, or the fact that I was about to be forced to watch Abuelito’s casket be cremated that put me in such a bitchy mood. I could feel my face contorting into an involuntary semi-scowl under the thin layer of sweat the typical Galician humidity bestowed upon me; the north of Spain can never decide if it wants precipitation or intense heat so the weather was both inside the funeral home-- hot and sticky. My mother turned her face sharply towards me, gave me a sour look and continued to gab in Spanish with the woman next to her. The lack of sleep made me feel like she was rolling her r’s extra hard just to be vindictive.

It had been 36 hours since my Abuelito, or little grandfather if you speak English, passed away in a hospital twenty kilometers from where he grew up. He left Spain with his family at the tender age of eleven and had a Spanish upbringing in an American city, New York. He spoke of his love for America often. While he loved it there and his thirty years with the Marines, Abuelita’s declining health needed clear Spanish air and her aged cousins. When I was nine they made the move back to Spain permanently after spending almost forty years State side. After she died Abuelito decided to stay in our little sleepy village of Pontedeume. Pontedeume is nestled in the green mountains of northern Galicia. The roads are still made of cobblestone upon which dozens of *viejas* travel up and down

in the morning. Their slow, wobbly gate sets the pace of life in Pontedeume; the most exciting events are religious holidays with almost Pagan tendencies, like when all two thousand Pontedeume citizens come to one beach and set a statue of the Mother Mary out to sea on a small handcrafted wooden boat.

Abuelito always sworn that he'd "never get stuck in this one horse town." But alas here I was, sweating profusely in a funeral home in northern Spain. On the fridge back home in New York there was a picture of me, ten years old, dressed in traditional Gallega garb. There's a bright red thick wool skirt hanging from my waist where a long-sleeved white shirt is tucked into the band. A black wool vest with minimal gold embroidery weighs down on my torso. The traditional look is complete with a scarf tied around my head, hiding a brown mess of curls. I'm squinting into the camera because the sun was strong that day while Abuelito rests an arm on my shoulder and practically radiates pride. Our faces, differing only in gender and age, are shockingly similar. Ten years later, back in the funeral home, I absentmindedly scratched at my legs, reminded of how heavy and thick the wool was that particular day. I thought about the relationships my friends had with their grandparents and how they would talk about one of two things—they either loved their cuddly, cooking baking grandmas or found it annoying whenever a grandparent expressed interest in their lives. As I matured so did my friendship with Abuelito. He stopped teaching me simple things like how to bait a fishing hook and began teaching me history, politics, kindness, the importance of education, etc. He loved to tell stories and I had the idea to record him one day. We talked for about an hour when I came to the question, "So, first black president, how do you feel?" Abuelito nodded slowly and looked to the distance for a moment.

“Obama... My favorite nig-“

“And we’re done!” I quickly snapped the video camera shut, but not before Abuelito’s wheezy laugh was recorded.

“Marga, vamos arriba ahora,” *We’re going upstairs now*, Maria Jose said to me softly, extending a tan withered hand and touching my shoulder. I stood up from the wooden bench I was sitting on, directly across from the casket in which Abuelito was lying. His rich, dark brown casket was propped at an angle as if he were standing on his heels, leaning away from us so that the American flag we laid on it wouldn’t fall. I explained to about a dozen people that *la bandera de los Estados Unidos* was for the time he served as a Marine. He enlisted when he was sixteen and living in America and about to embark on a lifelong career. But, to the Spanish, the flag draping was such a strange tradition. I thought their confusion was ironic, considering it barely overshadowed mine about the fact that only three feet away there was a propped-up casket behind a glass display window like it was a novelty item to be viewed for amusement. This I did not voice, as my pursed lips and furrowed brow already practically screamed for me that I didn’t want to be there, and my mom was mad enough at me already.

I was still asleep at Abuelito’s two days before the viewing when mom and Maria-Dolores, a family friend, made the decision to take Abuelito to the hospital. We were in our second week of playing hospice nurses to my mother’s father. There was no one cause to his steady deterioration. Years before he had beaten lung cancer but it had apparently returned. Before we got to Spain, there were some strokes but the doctors couldn’t tell us when they happened. I noticed first when I was on the phone with him three days before our impromptu journey to Spain. He would begin sentences only to turn

them into gibberish at the end. A soft, “So, yeah,” let me know that he was aware of what was going on. He just couldn’t stop it.

When we arrived at the hospital, following the ambulance closely, the paramedics told us how incredulous they were that he was still alive.

“Yo tambien,” *Me too*, I stated, thinking back on how many times I had struggled to pick him up off the floor after he would try to get out of bed at four in the morning. At the hospital we waited hours for him to pass. He wasn’t moving or conscious but his “damn ticker,” as he used to call it, wouldn’t give out. His breaths came slow and dragged out. Every once in a while he would stop breathing, his barrel chest completely still, and mom’s hand would dart for mine. A second or two later, a deep sigh would escape him. When the fourth hour rolled by we began to grow even more worried. Was he in pain? Would he go easy, like this? Where was his mind-- could he hear us? Nurses popped in and out, some soothing, others stoic. It was a long night.

In the funeral home, I watched as two men stepped into the room that contained the casket, folded his flag the wrong way and prepared to lift my Abuelito.

“No necesitas ver, muñeca,” *You don’t need to watch, dear*. My mother’s lifelong friend, Elena, tugged me by the elbow after noticing I hadn’t moved from in front of the glass window that showed the men preparing to take the casket. “Sera atendido,” she soothed me, petting my hair. *They’ll take care of him*. She took me into the main hallway of the funeral home where my black heels clicked on the marble tile floor in contrast to Elena’s soft scuffles from her sneakers. Apparently in Spain, or at least in Galicia, no one dresses up for funerals.

In the hospital, Abuelito had taken three quick successive breaths suddenly and then he was gone. Mom and Maria-Dolores and Forti, another family friend who came as soon as she heard, rushed to his side. I didn't feel the need to move immediately from my spot leaning on a wall for two reasons: what was there I could do? and the sudden display of emotion would have only made Abuelito laugh. Once when I was six I told Abuelito I loved him, my first time saying it out loud, and his belly shook as he laughed, greatly amused. There was absolutely no question how much Abuelito loved me but voicing emotions wasn't his style. In the hospital we cried, hugged each other and were forced swiftly out of the room by nurses who needed to prepare the room for the next patient. I dipped back quickly, around a short nurse with a stumpy ponytail, and kissed Abuelito's still warm cheek before dipping out of the room again to the angry Spanish grunts of the nurses. I called my boyfriend back in America and ignored the looks I got from a group of young *gitanos* outside the hospital when I started crying loudly in English into the phone. It was eight in the evening his time, two in the morning my time.

I wandered back into the dingy white hospital hallway to find my mother. Instead I found Maria-Dolores and Forti in a waiting room, arms open and ready to comfort me.

"Su madra tiene resolver algunas cosas," *Your mother needs to settle some things*, Forti said, explaining my mom's absence. I buried my face into Forti's shoulder, smelling sunscreen, and wondered if I would ever be adult enough to handle such matters or, more pertinently, when we would go home. I got my answer to the latter question when I stumbled into bed at around five that morning. When someone dies in Spain, all funeral arrangements must be made immediately after. I thought this was due to their disdain for embalming but the process felt too rushed for it to be a reason of science. There was no

moment alone for the family to absorb what just happened, no condolences offered by anyone and no sympathy tears. For coming from such an emotional people, the doctors and other officials we dealt with faced death with the stoniest of faces. Maybe it was that this was their job and thus a daily affair or that they had no way of understanding, no matter what language I spoke in, that I had just lost my best friend. That night, I felt like I simply blinked instead of technically napping for three hours. I had to get up and start preparing for the first day of his viewing.

Elena took me upstairs in the funeral home, where marble turned to a puce colored carpet. We followed our group from downstairs, one that had significantly thinned out. Only close family friends and relatives were allowed into this room. While passing other rooms I heard a woman crying. She was screaming so loud her pain was almost tangible. I closed the door quickly behind me, hoping mom didn't hear her. I don't know why I felt like that mattered. The room was bright, with white walls and open windows. The carpet in here, like the one in the hallway, was a hideous shade of puce. There were four faded couches, each one against a separate wall. On the wall farthest from the door, a boxy television was mounted. The screen was black but flickered to life as soon as I took a seat next to my mother.

When I had stumbled out of my room the morning immediately following Abuelito's passing, I struggled to put make-up on in the hallway mirror while my mother explained to me how Spanish funerals worked. During my time in Spain I had only gone to two funerals, both too long ago for me to remember. There was no set time.

"There's never a set time here, we're in Spain," I quipped, right eye burning from accidentally sticking the mascara wand into it. Mom clicked her tongue in disapproval.

“I’m being serious here.”

“Yo tambien.”

“Don’t be a smart-ass,” she insisted harshly. “There’s no set time, so we could be there for a while. It ends whenever the last person wants to see him, sees him,” she finished with a sigh. “Dios mio, I can’t believe he’s gone.” We were quiet after that.

That whole day was awful. The viewing lasted almost ten hours and I hadn’t eaten or taken off my heels. There were droves of people. People I didn’t know, people who last saw me when I “was this high!” (“Mira que alta! Mira que guapa!” *Look how tall she is, look how pretty!*), people who made fun of me whenever I broke from Spanish to say something private to my mom.

“This is bullshit,” I had muttered after three more people I didn’t know came and kissed me multiple times on my face. They were dressed, like almost everyone else except me and my mom, in their normal casual outfits: overalls, thin button down shirts, straw hats, dirt under the fingernails. This was a farming community and one could certainly tell just from the look (and sometimes smell) of everyone. They were hard workers, toiling away for hours in the sun to leave a legacy of an abundance of beautiful land and a few euros to their future generations. They were also, in that particular moment, getting on my last nerve.

“They know what that word means, *Marga!*” my mom said, horrified at my word choice. I shrugged. If anything, my temperament shows how embedded into me is the Spanish culture. Many stereotypes about Spaniards might be false, but the one about the fiery temper rings true. My mother, a supreme example of it herself from time to time, can attest to that.

In the room upstairs I had my clenched fists pressed into my eyeballs.

“Are you kidding me? What is wrong with this country?” I hissed to my mom, keeping my volume low. The boxy television mounted on the wall showed an image of Abuelito’s casket on some type of conveyor belt mechanism. The belt continued on, out of sight, into the large square opening of a metal wall. Flames licked the sides of the opening from within. I put *dos* and *dos* together and realized what was happening. Of course I knew he was going to get cremated. He told me all the time that’s what he specifically wanted after he passed on (that and absolutely no church service, about which I had to fight my mom.) I just didn’t know that I would be seeing it.

I stared wide-eyed at everyone else in the room, about eleven people in total, and wondered how they could be so calmly focused on the screen I refused to look at. A girl with whom I spent many young Spanish summers, Paloma, crossed the room and took my pale hand in her tan one. She sat next to me, a gesture of comfort. I looked at the television in a brief moment of bravery but turned away again as soon as I heard the click of the conveyor belt starting and the quick jerk of the casket beginning its journey to the fire. I hated every minute that it took for his casket to reach the fire. Watching the cremation is one of few dying cultural connections between the modern Gallego funeral practices and the Vikings that once inhabited the area. This version of the tradition seemed subdued. In my head I pictured flames several feet high, a pile of thick wooden branches built up to the size of a man. People crowded the fire at a safe distance to watch Abuelito burn in the funeral pyre. There was a sense of honor around the idea. I thought about how the Suebi, the feared Germanic people who once had a prominent kingdom in Galicia around the 400s, and Abuelito would have gotten along famously. Of course a

man affectionately nicknamed Juan Wayne would have a position of honor in such a tribe. He would be wearing the horns of a gigantic animal he took down with his bare hands.

A man in a suit came into the room to announce that we had seen all that we could. The cremation would take about three hours. We were welcome to stay but it would be understandable if we came back the next day to pick up his remains. On that note, I popped up immediately. I needed food and to not be surrounded by so many Spaniards at one time.

The meal after was silent. The café was open and airy and bright due to the amount of windows. The weather had cooled considerably and there were gentle murmurs about food. I found myself full surprisingly quickly but took forkfuls from time to time anyway. The thing about grief, no matter the kind, is that it takes up so much room in your stomach there's none left for food. I didn't want to eat, but I knew I had to.

The next day we returned to pick up his unexpectedly heavy urn. We waited about a month for Abuelito's birthday to roll around (he would have been 90 in July) when a friend took us out into the perpetually cold Atlantic Ocean on his boat. After much debate we settled on the spot where you could see our little home village of Pontedeume, Sada and other smaller Spanish towns. Mom and I put his ashes into the water as gently as we could and watched the grey cloud ghost through the sparkling water. Mom swears she saw a fish go with him and took it as a sign that Abuelito was pleased. We came back to our significantly emptier apartment and I rubbed aloe on the sunburns I had received from the Spanish sun.