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Any Color Apple Shaped Card

“They took advantage of us because we was ignorant” ... my grandmother said to me with melancholic voice, referring to the military people who came in to their town on March of 1957. She continued: “We thought they was being kind to us when they bring us fresh meat and sweets to eat, but we didn’t know yet that somethin’ was gone change our lives forever”.

“My grandmother was told by one of the soldiers that week that in a couple of days, four to five men would come to town with four different color apple shaped voting cards (one was white, and the other three were red, yellow and green), the soldier told my grandmother: “Just make sure you pick any color apple shaped card you like and put it in the corresponding jar, that’s how you will vote”, she immediately asked him: “Why we voting for mister?”, the soldier replied: “to elect our new president, of course”. No one in town had any idea about the presidential elections in our country because they were never asked to vote in the past. The vote of black people in Venezuela didn’t really count up until then I guess.

The day of the voting came, and the whole town got together to go vote for the first time, but not really knowing it yet, most of them picked the color white voting card, which helped General Marcos Perez Jimenez to win the elections. He wanted the town to become a military base right away, so they gave everyone in the town exactly nine days to evacuate the town otherwise they

were threaten to burn down their houses with them in it if they refused to leave. Grandmother was eight months pregnant with my father when she had to say goodbye to her home and the home of her ancestors forever. My grandmother and her family moved to the city, she had some money saved up so she bought herself a small house and this time she made sure to get a title on this house. "If we only knew how to read and write, none of this would have happened to me and to my people, they set us up to give up our lands and we easily fell for it because we was ignorant", she said.

I grew up at my grandmother's house in a rundown ghetto neighborhood called "El Recurso" located in the City of Maracay, Aragua. My parents met when my mother was on her first year of college. But very soon my mother had to drop out of school when she found out she was pregnant with me, Yikes! Well... like every unwed woman did back then, she moved in to my grandmother's house (where my dad lived) and stayed home to take care of her brand new family.

I have no recollection of ever going to a public library, because there was none available while I was attending Elementary and Middle school. We also didn't have extra money to just go to the bookstore and buy books, so I really never read just for the art of reading, only read textbooks to complete my school assignments. My mother knew how important education was, so she made damn sure I learned how to speak and write proper Spanish. She would tutor me one hour each weekday on grammar, spelling, punctuation and calligraphy.

When I started middle school, I realized I didn't really develop good reading habits or skills whatsoever, but instead I developed a tremendous passion for writing stories about my life,

poems about boys I had crushes on, and songs about my relationship with God. By the time I graduated high school I had already finished two notebooks, wrote in them from cover to cover.

Now as an adult I think about my early literacy experiences, and it all becomes so clear of who inspired me to start writing my own stories. It was my grandmother, *abuela Lipa's* voice, always so eager to tell me stories about her life and about her people. The vivid images on her head about a specific person, place or event and her passion for sharing with others these precious memories in a very animated way made me want tell my own story. But this time I would not only remember specific people, places or events but I would also write these memories down for others to read them, so they can too experience what I experienced, feel what I felt, laugh at my jokes, or cry when I was heartbroken.

“What makes memories feel so real is that ‘real-time experience is just as indirect’ as remembered experience. In Other words, the neurobiological process of recollecting an experience is in some ways identical to the process of experiencing it in the first place”. –

MICHAEL DAWSON¹

My grandmother, *abuela Felipa Mijares* was born on May 26, 1915 in a very small town called Turiamo in the state of Aragua, which is located on the northern coast of South America.

To *abuela Lipa (short for Felipa)*, Turiamo was her land, the land of her ancestors, it belonged to them by right and now they have lost it forever. *“Augusto Mijares carajo!, ese hombre si que fue bueno con mi gente, los trababa como familia”* (Augusto Mijares damn! That man was so good to my people, he treated them like family), that’s what Lipa used to say about the Spaniard man who bought her ancestors when they first got to Turiamo on a big boat from somewhere in Africa.

When I think of *Lipa* I can only picture her being old, a strong and very strict black woman but still very old to my young eyes. Her grey hair was always braided in tiny cornrows, and on her saggy and wrinkled neck a very small but kind of gross looking wart kept on growing, I remember it moving the whole time she was talking. When the sun was finally going down at about 5:00 in the afternoon, she would go sit on her beat up rocking chair in the backyard of her house and she would say in a very high pitch but very sharp and long voice: “*Ohhhh-eeeeeee Vanessaaaaaaaa! Vena’ caaaaaaaaaaaaa! (Hey Vanessa Come here!) Ya que el clima esta mas fresco, anda y traeme un poquito de café mija!*” (*the weather is cooler outside, go grab me some coffee lil’ girl*). I would run down to our kitchen and bring her some coffee, and then she would proceed to tell me stories about her precious Turiamo, and how much she missed it there. I was probably about eleven years old at the time when I heard *abuela Lipa* telling me the story of her great great grandmother Juliana Mijares for the very first time. Juliana was the last house slave in her family until probably around 1856 when the abolition of slavery finally took place in Venezuela.

Right after the abolition of slavery the social, economical and educational conditions were so deplorable that a lot of the already freed slaves preferred to stay in their towns instead of migrating to the surrounding cities to improve their family’s lives.

Juliana was already in her late sixties when she became a free woman. So her and her family decided to stay in Turiamo and continued with their semi-slavery life style. She was offered by her masters *un conuco*, a very small plantation to cultivate for themselves and worked as their maid until the day she died.

Three more generations of hard working women passed, all of them still working for the white men as maids. Sixty years later, black people, especially black women in Venezuela had no business getting an education because even though they were not slaves anymore, they were still looked down on and not treated as equals.

When *abuela Lipa* was eleven years old, her mother Damiana got her a small job washing and ironing a small load of this soldier's dirty uniforms for only 10 cents a piece. So her chances of going to school and getting an education were nowhere near her. She never learned how to read and write but instead she was taking from her mother "Basic Housekeeping 101" lessons.

Lipa will be 99 years old this year, and every time I have the chance to talk to her over the phone she reminds me with great sadness in her voice about that unforgettable Apple Shaped Card story. She would repeat to me the same statement with no variation in her words: "*If we only knew how to read and write, none of this would have happened to me and to my people, they set us up to give up our lands and we easily fell for it because we was ignorant*".

Unlike my grandmother I wasn't tricked or forced to leave my country to come to Utah. I chose to leave what I once called home in search of love, hope, to start my own family, I don't even know anymore if those were even the real reasons. What I do know for certain is that I am who I am now because of what I know about my past, where I came from and what life has taught me since I left Venezuela. So, here I am writing my own story where there is no ignorance, and no more color apple shaped cards, no more exiles.

Notes

1. Michael Dawson, "Margin Notes on The Society of Mind"