

Hilary Batista

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Hoover High School, Hoover, AL

Educator: Brad Coltrane

Category: Short Story

For the Heroes

There's a field out in Santiago Rodriguez.

Full of the most wondrous colors you could ever imagine. Enchanting greens and bright yellows. Riddled with magnolias and tulips and fresh daisies. An artist's dream. My dream.

And a dream is right, because for the longest time, it seemed that is what it would always remain.

There were 10 of us. 10 of us living in our parent's *rancho*. I was caught in the messy medium: 11 years old. Not young enough to get away with most things, not old enough to be taken seriously. I lived my life in the middle; unseen and unheard, my sole job being keeping my younger siblings in check and not being a pain for the older ones. I never spoke of the plans I had for life outside the rancho, because at any rate, it seemed impossible. That was me. That was what came to mind when anyone thought of Nata.

Well, to anyone except Pablo.

Pablo was the second eldest, coming in at 18 years old. And whatever light I felt the rancho had dulled in me, only shone brighter in him. He had a lopsided grin, a brown face typically covered in dust from the fieldwork, but eyes that held onto hope. Hope for a better future. And in some ways, it was contagious.

Our days consisted of doing whatever tasks were necessary - picking *platanos* and *maracuya*, tending the livestock. But sometimes, when the sun was starting to set, casting a golden hue over the horizon, Pablo would beckon me to come outside. And we would run out on the field, free of responsibilities and fear and the constraints the fates had placed upon us.

One day while we were walking through the field, I let it slip: "I want to be an artist, Pablo."

My hand instantly clamped over my mouth, as I realized what I had just said. I closed my eyes, fearful of what his response would be or what he would think. I expected a scolding, like the one all my other older siblings would give when I even so much as brought up the subject of a paintbrush. But instead, he put his arm around my shoulder and smiled warmly.

"A *pintora*," he said, tilting his head up towards the sky, *qué orgullo*. Creating paintings of the likes of Frida and Picasso. How about it, Nata?"

I hesitated, unsure of what to say. I wanted to make my work known — Lord knows how much — but I was so accustomed to being caught up in the middle. My place was the backstage view, hidden behind a canvas or the soft strokes of pencil. But still, it was Pablo, and I didn't want to let him down. So I'd smile and let my mind think of all the possibilities.

"And what about you, Pablo?" I'd asked him when I was done entertaining my fantasies, as we continued to walk down the field. "What will you do?"

"I'll be an *héroe*." He puffed up his chest, planting his hands firmly on his hips. "An architect, Nata. That's what I'll

be.”

I eyed him curiously, unsure of where to begin, with all of the questions swarming around my mind. Wondering how this would even be possible, with all the work we had to do, and how he could even afford the schooling. But I ended up settling with one question, the one that seemed the most prominent at the time.

“A hero? As an architect?”

He stopped abruptly and looked at me, an eyebrow raised. “Yes, as an architect. An *héroe* doesn’t need to wear a cape, Nata.”

I gazed up at him as he continued to speak, his expressions becoming more animated as he got more passionate. “An *héroe* can be an ordinary person. Someone who says they’re going to take life by the reins. Someone who has the courage to forge their own path. That’s what I’m going to do; I’ll go to architect school, and I’ll design buildings, Nata. Buildings that will house ordinary *héroes* of their own.” He stopped, and then the sheepish grin was back. “A little cheesy, eh?”

I laughed, my thick, black braid swaying in the cool, summer breeze. It was getting late, so we returned, arm in arm, towards the rancho. Pablo continued to talk — about how there was an opening for a training in the city, about museums and galleries and the plethora of things he wanted to design — but I continued to think about what he had said, and if it would hold true.

Months passed by, and I figured he himself had forgotten about it. The pull of the rancho was just too strong, even for someone as ambitious as Pablo. But one day, he burst into our small kitchen, looking even snarkier than usual. His face was washed and he was wearing his best black shoes, along with a thick, new coat. In his right hand, he clutched an envelope.

“*Noticias, hermanos.*”

We all turned to look at him. He stopped, his arms raised up in the air. He knew he had our attention, and he wanted to maintain it as long as possible.

“Get to it today, Pablo,” grunted Roberto, our eldest brother. He, like most older siblings caught with the task of raising kids they did not give birth to, was quick-tongued and meant business.

Pablo slowly slid the envelope in Roberto’s direction. I carefully watched his face as he opened it, noting the way it transformed from calm to curious to borderline rage.

“You what?” Roberto stood up, his head almost hitting the ceiling. “*Estas loco?*”

“*Loco, no. Inspirado, sí.*”

What followed was a chaotic frenzy, as Roberto’s face turned a deeper shade of red than I had ever seen before, and the kitchen shook with horrendous yelling. I instantly began to do my job, leading my younger brothers and sisters away from the scene. As I did this, I managed to string everything together.

Architect school. He had done it.

And he was leaving tomorrow.

“Don’t worry about me, Nata,” He said the following day, as we loaded his bags onto the makeshift truck that would get him to the city. Mami and Papi had approved, only because they had no other choice. When Pablo was set on something, he was all in.

“I’ll miss you, Pablo,” I whispered as he pulled me in for a final hug, and quickly found myself wiping away a few fallen tears. “But I hope it goes well. Go be an *héroe.*”

At that moment he kneeled and gently held my arms, looking at me with an expression I couldn’t quite pin. “You too,

Nata. Promise me you'll keep painting.”

I wasn't sure what to say, but it was Pablo. So I nodded, and broke away before I could start crying again. Quickly retrieving into the house, I watched as his figure disappeared into the backseat of the truck. I had hoped he would turn around, but he never did.

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Even after his departure, the sun continued to both set and rise in Santiago Rodriguez. Life felt strange at first, but eventually, I began to grow accustomed to his absence. I'd continue to work in the mornings, and dedicate the late hours of the afternoon to my paintings. I made a promise, and I intended to keep it.

The loneliness of not having him nearby would hit me most when I'd walk out on the field after a long day. I could practically see him standing there, his wide-toothed greeting me like a warm hug. *How are the pinturas coming, Nata?* I imagined him saying.

I kept working on them, because I knew one day he'd be back, and I'd get to show them to him. I always looked forward to that day.

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“*Una carta.*” My younger sister, Jimenez, burst through the back door one day, carrying a small envelope in her hand. She passed it to my mother, who was seated on our rugged couch. As she tore it slowly, I hovered close, wondering what it could say. Perhaps a greeting? Some news from the inner cities?

What happened next flashed by in a blur. I remember the distinct moments: my mom's knees buckling, Papi and everyone else rushing in. Jimenez bursting into tears. Roberto punching a hole in the wall. Again, I tried to do what I always did: hold everyone together. But this time, it was through blinding tears. I had once again managed to piece everything together. *A building. Pablo. A fall. Our deepest condolences.* I lost my brother as abruptly as he left.

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For the longest time, I couldn't manage to paint. Even as the months passed and my family managed to somehow stitch itself back together, I had absolutely no inspiration. Everything felt too noisy, too quick, too rushed. Because while the seasons changed like normal, my normal would never be the same. Whenever I'd pick up a paintbrush, I'd find myself staring at the canvas, my eyes hollow and tired from countless restless nights, trying to pretend I was okay when my whole world seemed broken. I just couldn't bring myself to do it. It seemed wrong, almost rude to Pablo. I was willing to settle for my dream, he wasn't. So why him? Why not me instead?

It wasn't until I found myself once again on the field, captivated by its brilliant beauty, that all of the conversations Pablo and I had shared there flooded over me. And I recalled that I had made a promise, one that I had intended to keep. So although it hurt, I began to paint again. Harshly, at first. Dreary colors — solemn grays, haunting blues. Not a single trace of light.

But this seemed wrong, almost a disservice to Pablo. The one who brought light wherever he entered. So I began to add some color. A little red here, a dash of orange here.

Eventually, I started to paint a field. Full of the most wondrous colors you could ever imagine. Enchanting greens and bright yellows. Riddled with magnolias and tulips and fresh daisies. An artist's dream. My dream.

And then I did something else I would never have imagined myself doing: I shared it with my family. And they loved it. They *adored* it.

So much so, that they surprised me all the more by sharing it with an inner-city newspaper. One that was picked up by an art gallery, a gallery that was planning on displaying a series of paintings portraying rancho life. And they wanted my painting featured.

My art was going to be seen by a huge public. This is what I had silently dreamed of for so many years. This is what Pablo had always encouraged me to do. So when asked if I would accept the offer, I said yes.

But something was still missing.

Then it dawned on me. I took my pencil, and on the canvas scribbled some letters on the bottom right corner: *Para los héroes*. For the heroes.

Hilary Batista

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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Category: Poetry

Both Here and There

You ask me where home is,
How could I tell you?
I can't point out a stoned-copper building
Covered in footsteps of new and old
A teacher that's seen me grow
Classmates whom I can recall for years
 In that sense,
 no.
But I can tell you this
Home is my grandma's house,
The Bayahibe Rose greeting me good morning
And the rustling of pages bidding me goodnight
The palm trees that line the streets of Miami
The waves that crash on the shore of Wilmington
The sunsets of Birmingham
The words I've come to write and come to know
Warm smiles of strangers who've become friends
and friends who've become family
Strong shoulders of a mother and a father
Playful teasing of a brother
 In the simplest sense,
 home is both here and there.
All of the little places and glimpses of life
That have taken up a piece of me.

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Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Tradition

You run down the street to the *colmado*, instantly overwhelmed by the savory aroma of *pasteles en hoja* and *arroz con guandules*. Sweet fruits line the shelves – mangos, pineapples, strawberries – a sunset display. You look around as dark, brown eyes meet yours, acknowledging you warmly. A group of elders crowds around a table, smacking their domino pieces down onto a board, chattering in light Spanish with one another as they share a *Presidente*.

The little kids are riding their bikes through the *barrio*. They toss a baseball down the street, using sticks as makeshift bats, their laughter enveloping you like a sweet melody. To foreigners, the sight may seem dirty and unsanitary. To the kids, it seems like home.

You stop by your grandma's house. Ocean blues and fluorescent yellows cascade off its borders. Even with all the years that have passed, you can still recall every moment shared within these four walls. You make your way into the *galleria*. A book rests in your right hand as you take a seat in your favorite rocking chair, though you don't plan on reading for a while. You simply sit there and sway, observing the drops of rain as they hit the tin roof and bounce onto the ground. The slow, rhythmic way of life here pulls you in.

In comes your *abuela*, her gray hair tied into a loose braid, her colorful earrings matching the festive atmosphere. She engulfs you in a massive hug, proceeding to then pull you into the living room. Salsa and bachata tunes hum in the background. Marc Anthony. Juan Luis Guerra. Michel el Buenon.

In come your *primos*. They smile and tease you, *la gringa*. *Callate*, you say, but you smile. You know you couldn't mean it if you tried, and so do they.

The whole family arrives. *Los tios y tias, abuelos, cuñadas y cuñados. El entero grupo* You dance. You laugh. You eat. Pictures are taken and pictures are shown. Stories are made and stories are uncovered. At one point, when you can't so much as even think of accepting one more plate, you lean back and try to take it all in; to store every face, every detail, every person into your memory. The festivities last late into the evening.

It's *manana*. You don't want to leave. You say *adios* and hold back tears in your eyes. You promise you'll be back soon.

You're here. You're 1,465 miles away, but you couldn't feel closer if you tried. Oftentimes, you get tired of the constant tug-of-war. Of feeling stuck in the messy in-between: not quite American enough, not quite Dominican enough. The world beckons for you to line up, pick a side. Which will you choose?

You don't want to choose. You want to be the joyful beat of merengue, the t.v. humming the score of a touchdown on a lazy Sunday afternoon. The passion of Spanish, the dynamic of English. The rowdy - and at times chaotic - bubble of community, the strength and independence of solidarity.

You know who you are. Two in one. You will never let any of it go.

Las fiestas, los dominoes, la comida, las sonrisas. La familia. Todo. Esta en tu sangre.

You will never let it go.

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Prayers

It doesn't have to be a wondrous melody
One that rivals those of Mozart
Chopin or Tchaikovsky
It can be comprised of a few misshapen keys
Riddled with flats and accidentals here and there

And it doesn't have to be performed in front of thousands
In gold-rimmed concert halls
Filled to the brim with with peering faces
Sometimes, a small audience is enough
Sometimes, just one is enough

Nor does it have to be loud
An intricate lyric
An elaborate composition
A heart-wrenching oeuvre

It can be a gentle whisper
The quiet stillness of peace
Rhythms of grace
Songs of reverence
Uttered to the Father

Knees bent
Arms raised
Prayers.

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The Essence of Writing

My fingers hover over the keyboard
I don't think I can write this
My mind carries a tune
But if I don't, who will?
Of resilience and forbearance
Perhaps if it were a little sadder
Of peace and joy too
But that's not me, is it?
I once felt I had to dim down my emotions
Maybe if I say it this way
My passion and my pride
Will they like it then?
But isn't the whole point of artistry
The lines are too short
To express what is true
The lines are too long
These words encompass me
Too much detail
And they hold onto you
Not enough
These words are my story
I don't think I can write this
May they make the road a little lighter for both me and you
Just write.

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Category: Poetry

I Like Me

I like me.
With my coffee-colored eyes
And unruly curls that flow down my back
I like me.
With my rounded nose
And my skin, color cinnamon
With my lips that have comforted many
Speaking words of life

At times, I wanted to be like a tree
Willing to grow through the cracks
Lined with sturdy branches offering
A place of shade for you
To write that haiku
And make that call
The one you said you always yearned to do
And I wanted to be like a piano
My life playing a wondrous tune
One that could bring a smile to you
Or maybe I could be a house
With rooms bursting with music
Stretching a warm invite to you
But even if I could offer you these things,
Would that do?

I'm still learning
But I like me.
With my mind that searches
For the unknown in the midst of what is seen
And the joy I've come to find in the mundane
And the stories that flow through me
Sometimes it's still hard to say
But yes, I like me.
I really do.