

Papi and Me

by **Ricardo José González-Rothi**

A sixteen-degree forecast for North Florida was about the only type of day one would dare wear a herring bone wool sports coat and not look out of place. As I peeled the plastic bag off the hanger and pulled it from the closet, I noticed the handkerchief in the breast pocket.

The prior summer, I had found myself consoling a despondent mother, making funeral arrangements, and sorting through my dead father's belongings. He had owned the jacket for over thirty years, probably only wearing it three or four times. Sporting hand-crafted leather buttons, wide lapels, and stitched lining, Papi boasted about "the thick and precise weave, that it was handmade in Scotland... ." He had bought it on sale at Schlessinger's, paying cash. It was the only nice thing my father ever bought for himself since we came to America.

Forty-five years earlier we had become steeped in a not unfamiliar trajectory for refugees, ten adults and six cousins crammed into "the uncle's house in New Jersey" and cozily sharing a single bathroom—one sink, one toilet. Since our having left Cuba, Papi worked temporarily as a dishwasher at Steak-n-Shake, then leveraging his thirty years' experience as a grocer, he was hired as head cashier and bag boy in someone's Latin market. We had no car. Every day, he stood at the bus stop at Bergenline and 85th. He opened Kiko's six days a week, worked on his feet twelve or thirteen hours each day for a not-to-boast-about hourly wage. The owner made good money. My mother, a former school principal in Cuba, worked the graveyard shift cleaning bedpans and surgical instruments in a community hospital. She and Papi saw each other during

the week like passing ships, and it was during weekends that we spent time together as a family. That would be the rhythm our lives in New Jersey for several years.

My father thrived on the simplicity of life. I remember a few months after we arrived in the US, when on a bus to southern New Jersey, we passed a cornfield. He stood up from his seat marveling at the orderly rows, the tall stalks, the deep green leaves. I think it reminded him of the remote farm where he grew up with four younger brothers and two sisters whom he left behind when we came to the United States. He was mortified and greatly embarrassed, when in his excitement while looking out the back window, the bus driver barked in New-Joisyish English “Hey, you! Sit down bac dare!” Papi didn’t understand what the man was saying and was greatly embarrassed and offended as other passengers looked up. It wouldn’t be the last time he would be embarrassed about not speaking or understanding English. Despite efforts by me and my brother to teach him, he struggled. It was hard for a man in his mid-fifties with barely an eighth-grade education to learn a new language. He couldn’t understand why people would become frustrated when he struggled with his “Inglich”, which made him that much more self-conscious. For almost ten years he depended on one of us to accompany him to the bank to translate when he deposited his paychecks.

My father had immaculate handwriting, and even with a disabling lack of sensation in his fingers such that he could no longer button his shirts, he wrote monthly to our family back home. We, in turn, rarely heard from them. When I would inquire, Papi would propose that the mail delivery in Cuba was poor or that they couldn’t afford the stamps or that the government intercepted the letters. There was probably some truth in all his explanations, but I suspect these were in part a justification, his way of coping with unrequited replies. I think he felt responsible that they stayed behind and that he left, duty-bound, with his immediate family. I recall him sitting pensively by a window one evening, with a paper pad on his lap, while he wrote to his siblings in Cuba. It was before Christmas, an urban-grey New Jersey day, and it was snowing heavily. It must have been painful for him to be away from his siblings, longing for the Cuban sun, and knowing he might never see them again.

Papi was ecstatic one day when early in my senior year of high school he approached me with a proposal that if he could save enough money, I could partner with him and buy “our own grocery store.” Dreading the effects of my response, I had to be frank and told him that what I really wanted was to go to college and eventually study medicine. Facial muscles betrayed his disappointment, and with a forced smile and a deflated nod, he acknowledged my response, never to bring up the topic again.

My father continued to work until he was seventy-two, when his knees no longer allowed him to stand for long periods of time. He helped me through college, and then through medical school. Several years ago he stood beside me for a photo when I was honored by students I taught as Professor of Medicine at a school where I would eventually establish myself as a senior faculty member.

The summer he died, I had sorted through his personal belongings. I folded the herring bone jacket and put it in my suitcase along with his old wallet and his penknife. Inside a well-creased envelope, postmarked May 1973, was a five-page letter I had written him thirty-four years earlier upon graduating from college. Written longhand in Spanish, I had detailed how much I appreciated him and all the sacrifices he made for me and for our family. I told him that I loved him, that I hoped I could make him proud of me some day. I also let him know that every time I wrote out my middle name (his first name), I would remember to think of him. It was the only letter I found in his belongings. I flew back to Florida.

On this cold February morning, months later, while getting dressed to make hospital rounds with my residents, I slipped on Papi’s wool jacket. It fit, looked and felt right. I noted a small, hard bulge over the breast pocket. When I pulled the handkerchief from the pocket, a peppermint wrapped in plastic fell onto the bed.

Standing in front of the mirror, wearing my father’s jacket and holding peppermint and handkerchief in each hand, I chuckled. Papi always insisted that it was impolite to cough

in public, and he never forgot to remind us that if we went out, we should always take a mint in case we felt the urge to cough ... and yes, in the event we coughed, we should always have a handkerchief to cover our mouth.

Being a lung specialist, many of my patients struggle with incessant coughs. How ironic was it to have found myself, so ensconced in the academia of it all, that I had forgotten all about peppermint and cough.

My father had simple likes, but he was also a complex man. He carried his emotions deeply and quietly. Complaining about the hardness of life was never part of his vocabulary. He was well-liked by the countless customers he served as a grocer and businessman for over sixty years of his profession, both in Cuba and in Kiko's market. It was not unusual for me to see my father interact with strangers over the years, even those who could not understand his broken English, and universally they always seemed to find my father likeable. At home, Papi rarely showed exuberance in his emotions, except for those times his granddaughters would tickle him mercilessly. In my fifty-seven years around him I never actually saw my father cry. I am sure he cried, but if he did, it was not in his nature to shed tears publicly. This was not something I would inherit from him. I wonder sometimes if things between Papi and me might have been different. We might have had a great father-and-son grocery business.

As I stepped into my car on the way to work, I conjured a hint of his Old Spice aftershave ... and I could almost feel the warmth and familiar grip of his two muscular arms wrapped around me from behind, just like he used to do when I was little.

I approached the on-ramp on the highway. Looking on the rearview mirror, I thought about my middle name.



An academic physician for over three decades with a primary emphasis on scientific writing, **Ricardo José González-Rothi** is a relative newcomer to creative writing. Silver hair and a busy career have not deterred him from his love of the written word and the magic of the tale. He has had fiction, creative non-fiction, and poetry featured in *Acentos Review*, *Heal Literary Magazine*, *Gainesville Magazine*, and the journal *Chest*.