



Abuela Invents the Zero

FICTION
Judith Ortiz Cofer
1996

Introduction

The writings of Judith Ortiz Cofer (1952–2016) writing reflects the differences between her two childhood homes: one on the island of Puerto Rico and one in a barrio (neighborhood) on the mainland. In this short story, Constanca is a teenager whose abuela (grandmother) comes to visit her in New Jersey. Caught between her American and Puerto Rican identities, Constanca feels embarrassed by the “bizarre” behavior of her abuela at church and hides her face in shame. Later, she is left to contemplate the meaning of “zero.”

“You made me feel like a zero, like a nothing.”

NOTES

- 1 “You made me feel like a zero, like a nothing,” she says in Spanish, *un cero, nada*. She is trembling, an angry little old woman lost in a heavy winter coat that belongs to my mother. And I end up being sent to my room, like I was a child, to think about my grandmother’s idea of math.
- 2 It all began with Abuela coming up from the Island for a visit—her first time in the United States. My mother and father paid her way here so that she wouldn’t die without seeing snow, though if you asked me, and nobody has, the dirty slush in this city is not worth the price of a ticket. But I guess she deserves some kind of award for having had ten kids and survived to tell about it. My mother is the youngest of the bunch. Right up to the time when we’re supposed to pick up the old lady at the airport, my mother is telling me stories about how hard times were for *la familia on la isla*, and how *la abuela* worked night and day to support them after their father died of a heart attack. I’d die of a heart attack too if I had a troop like that to support. Anyway, I had seen her only three or four times in my entire life, whenever we would go for somebody’s funeral. I was born here and I have lived in this building all my life. But when Mami says, “Connie, please be nice to Abuela. She doesn’t have too many years left. Do you promise me, Constanca?”—when she uses my full name, I know she means business. So I say, “Sure.” Why wouldn’t I be nice? I’m not a monster, after all.
- 3 So we go to Kennedy to get *la abuela*, and she is the last to come out of the airplane, on the arm of the cabin attendant, all wrapped up in a black shawl. He hands her over to my parents like she was a package sent airmail. It is January, two feet of snow on the ground, and she’s wearing a shawl over a thick black dress. That’s just the start.
- 4 Once home, she refuses to let my mother buy her a coat because it’s a waste of money for the two weeks she’ll be in *el Polo Norte*, as she calls New Jersey, the North Pole. So since she’s only four feet eleven inches tall, she walks around in my mother’s big black coat looking ridiculous. I try to walk far behind them in public so that no one will think we’re together. I plan to stay very busy the whole time she’s with us so that I won’t be asked to take her anywhere, but my plan is ruined when my mother comes down with the flu

Skill:
Plot

It seems strange that Connie would have to promise to be nice to her own grandmother. I wonder if this dialogue hints at a source of conflict in the story between Connie and her parents.



NOTES

- and Abuela absolutely *has* to attend Sunday mass or her soul will be eternally damned. She’s more Catholic than the Pope. My father decides that he should stay home with my mother and that I should escort *la abuela* to church. He tells me this on Saturday night as I’m getting ready to go out to the mall with my friends.
- 5 “No way,” I say.
 - 6 I go for the car keys on the kitchen table: he usually leaves them there for me on Friday and Saturday nights. He beats me to them.
 - 7 “No way,” he says, pocketing them and grinning at me.
 - 8 Needless to say, we come to a **compromise** very quickly. I do have a responsibility to Sandra and Anita, who don’t drive yet. There is a Harley-Davidson fashion show at Brookline Square that we *cannot* miss.
 - 9 “The mass in Spanish is at ten sharp tomorrow morning, *entiendes?*” My father is dangling the car keys in front of my nose and pulling them back when I try to reach for them. He’s really enjoying himself.
 - 10 “I understand. Ten o’clock. I’m out of here.” I pry his fingers off the key ring. He knows that I’m late, so he makes it just a little difficult. Then he laughs. I run out of our apartment before he changes his mind. I have no idea what I’m getting myself into.
 - 11 Sunday morning I have to walk two blocks on dirty snow to retrieve the car. I warm it up for Abuela as instructed by my parents, and drive it to the front of our building. My father walks her by the hand in baby steps on the slippery snow. The sight of her little head with a bun on top of it sticking out of that huge coat makes me want to run back into my room and get under the covers. I just hope that nobody I know sees us together. I’m dreaming, of course. The mass is packed with people from our block. It’s a holy day of **obligation** and everyone I ever met is there.
 - 12 I have to help her climb the steps, and she stops to take a deep breath after each one, then I lead her down the aisle so that everybody can see me with my bizarre grandmother. If I were a good Catholic, I’m sure I’d get some purgatory time taken off for my sacrifice. She is walking as slow as Captain Cousteau exploring the bottom of the sea, looking around, taking her sweet time. Finally she chooses a pew, but she wants to sit in the other end. It’s like she had a spot picked out for some unknown reason, and although it’s the most inconvenient seat in the house, that’s where she has to sit. So we squeeze by all the people already sitting there, saying, “Excuse me, please, *con permiso*, pardon me,” getting annoyed looks the whole way. By the time

Skill:
Plot

Connie already regrets taking Abuela to mass. She is embarrassed to be seen with her grandmother and more concerned about what others will think. I think Connie’s feelings will lead to the central conflict with Abuela.



we settle in, I'm drenched in sweat. I keep my head down like I'm praying so as not to see or be seen. She is praying loud, in Spanish, and singing hymns at the top of her creaky voice.

13 I ignore her when she gets up with a hundred other people to go take communion. I'm actually praying hard now—that this will all be over soon. But the next time I look up, I see a black coat dragging around and around the church, stopping here and there so a little gray head can peek out like a **periscope** on a submarine. There are giggles in the church, and even the priest has frozen in the middle of a blessing, his hands above his head like he is about to lead the congregation in a set of jumping jacks.



Skill:
Theme

Abuela gets lost in church, forcing Connie, the narrator, to make a choice. This choice is uncomfortable for Connie, so she decides to stay seated. It's clear she doesn't want to be seen in public with her grandmother.

14 I realize to my horror that my grandmother is lost. She can't find her way back to the pew. I am so embarrassed that even though the woman next to me is shooting daggers at me with her eyes, I just can't move to go get her. I put my hands over my face like I'm praying, but it's really to hide my burning cheeks. I would like for her to disappear. I just know that on Monday my friends, and my enemies, in the barrio will have a lot of **senile**-grandmother jokes to tell in front of me. I am frozen to my seat. So the same woman who wants me dead on the spot does it for me. She makes a big deal out of getting up and hurrying to get Abuela.

15 The rest of the mass is a blur. All I know is that my grandmother kneels the whole time with her hands over *her* face. She doesn't speak to me on the way home, and she doesn't let me help her walk, even though she almost falls a couple of times.

16 When we get to the apartment, my parents are at the kitchen table, where my mother is trying to eat some soup. They can see right away that something is wrong. Then Abuela points her finger at me like a judge passing a **sentence** on a criminal. She says in Spanish, "You made me feel like a zero, like a nothing." Then she goes to her room.

17 I try to explain what happened. "I don't understand why she's so upset. She just got lost and wandered around for a while," I tell them. But it sounds lame, even to my own ears. My mother gives me a look that makes me cringe and goes in to Abuela's room to get her version of the story. She comes out with tears in her eyes.

18 "Your grandmother says to tell you that of all the hurtful things you can do to a person, the worst is to make them feel as if they are worth nothing."

19 I can feel myself shrinking right there in front of her. But I can't bring myself to tell my mother that I think I understand how I made Abuela feel. I might be sent into the old lady's room to apologize, and it's not easy to admit you've

been a jerk—at least, not right away with everybody watching. So I just sit there not saying anything.

20 My mother looks at me for a long time, like she feels sorry for me. Then she says, "You should know, Constanca, that if it wasn't for the old woman whose existence you don't seem to value, you and I would not be here."

21 That's when I'm sent to my room to consider a number I hadn't thought much about—until today.

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