

PAPÁ ANTONIO

A fictional narrative

By Yvanna Balabarca Martinez, 11th grade (age 16)

He is sitting in front of a wall larger than himself, making him look up from his wheelchair and point with his finger to roll back its wheels. Antonio has always been a critic who refuses to be surprised. A man too experienced to be amazed or fascinated. For this reason, he has little interest in art, food, or life.

The old and wrinkled hands of Antonio, full of moles and freckles, rest on his legs. With the little vitality he has left, he straightens up to contemplate the painting, as if in some way showing respect to what is before his eyes, or perhaps fighting against a threat, like memories from the past.

"Give me my glasses," he says with his characteristic Basque accent that still nurtures his vocal cords. Stoic, serious. His son places the glasses on his nose and behind his ears. "What is this?"

"It's a work by Pablo Picasso," his son responds, standing behind dad's chair, "it's called Guernica."

"Like my home."

"Yes, dad. This painting was made to remember the tragedy of Guernica."

Dad remains silent for a few seconds, as he often does. He hums a "Hmm" and stays quiet longer. "Why is it called that?" He doesn't look at his son; he analyzes the figures in the mural. Geometric figures that, even if he tries to get closer, don't seem to take human forms to him.

The patient son squats beside dad Antonio. "Okay, let me explain how it goes," he says in a calm and willing tone and begins to point. "On the left, you can see a mother with her dead child. It represents the pain and suffering of the civilian victims of the bombing."

And suddenly, it is April 1937.

The sun is shyer than in other places, and although in Guernica it has always been like this, with highs of eighteen degrees Celsius, today is different. Today, it seems ashamed to come out, feeling it is disrespectful to shine over the city of Guernica.

Heart-wrenching screams leave the dry throats of what remains of a community, of families, of survivors. Antonio, just nine years old, has already tasted hell.

His small hands are unable to move, and his throat, unlike the scene in front of him, does not work. He is paralyzed, even though the impact has already occurred.

Antonio, just nine years old, watches a woman take in her arms what remains of a baby. A woman who that very morning was a mother. A nine-year-old child should not know what a baby looks like inside. A mother should not see her most precious work destroyed either.

"Execrable fascists!" She screams to the sky, to the flying deaths that obliterated Guernica. "The son!" Her lungs resonate as she lifts what remains of the child to the sky, screaming as if she herself were being stabbed: "They killed my son! The son! They killed my son!"

The dad blinks after his son asks him something, back to present. "What?"

"Do you want me to continue?"

"Ah, yes, yes. Go on." He waves air with his wrinkled hand, nodding.

His son now points above the woman's head. "The bull is often represented as a symbol of brutality and darkness."

And suddenly, it is April 1937.

And Antonio sees his cow lying on the ground, and the other half in the neighbor's house rubble. The same cow from which he got milk several times or brought grass to eat. The same cow his father bought for him to learn to care for the livestock. Antonio, just nine years old, sees half of his favorite cow with its eyes open and its pairs of legs separated by more than two meters.

"The fallen warrior with his broken sword symbolizes defeat and resistance."

Toñito looks at his destroyed city. A nine-year-old child who should not know what blood looks like, in any other context than his scraped knees after an afternoon of play. A nine-year-old child who should not know any other context for a mother's scream than the call that dinner is served. A nine-year-old child who should not see fresh meat, in any other context than being prepared for a family lunch.

"The woman with the lamp," says his son, looking with respect and silence at his stoic father's tears falling from the corners of his eyes, "symbolizes hope and the revelation of truth."

It is now 1981, in Casón del Buen Retiro, six years after the death of the dictator Francisco Franco, and with the establishment of democracy. Antonio is no longer nine years old. Antonio is even a grandpa who has lived to see his Spain freed from the inhumanity of fascism, at 53 years old.

He is sitting in front of a wall no longer larger than himself, making him look up from his wheelchair and clasp his hands with fingers intertwined above his lips. Grandpa Antonio's old and wrinkled hands, full of moles and freckles, tighten their knuckles. With the little vitality he has left, he yields to the painting, slumped. He allows himself to slouch like the old man he is now, as if in some way mourning what is before his eyes, a bitter memory. But there is no struggle with past memories that is not resolved in the present.

Because finally, it is September 10, 1981, and the Guernica painting has finally returned to a Spain with restored democracy. Grandpa Antonio hugs himself so tightly that he hopes the part of him that is still nine years old can feel it.

"Look, Toñito. Spain is no longer sick," he whispers to himself, in a voice that he and Spain can hear.