

# The Hot Water Bottle

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**M**y grandmother had an amazing ability to heal. I was convinced she could cure any illness, and neighbors and friends of our family always sought out her many intricate home remedies. I used to suffer periodic bouts of painful and violent stomach cramps for which Dr. Pancorvo had told my mother to give me paregoric. I did not care for elixir of paregoric, for even though I liked the way it tasted, it always made me groggy and odd feeling. As a five-year-old, seeing things that weren't really there when I took that medicine always terrified me. Since my mother was generally away teaching school, and my grandmother was not particularly fond of medicines anyway, during those times when my cramps would seize me, Abuela would bring out her magic water bottle.

She would place tap water into one of the big pots she had hanging from the ceiling hooks in her kitchen. Then she'd put a handful of charcoal from the pail she kept outside the door into the stone charcoal grill pit. She would crumple up a sheet of used newspaper, light it with a match and heat up the water. She would dip her index finger into the pot at intervals, just to make sure it was hot enough, but not scalding.

For all the years we lived in Cuba, my grandmother never owned a stove or cooktop. She had learned to cook on charcoal

from her mother and grandmother. She could make eggs, grill steak, fry fish or boil water very efficiently. Besides, she used to like to buy charcoal from Ignacio's father who three times a week would swing by with his creaky wooden cart pulled by a lanky-looking bay hag with a large Roman nose and mule ears. Abuela knew I felt sorry for the old ugly horse and liked petting him and feeding him apples and she also knew that Ignacio's father was very poor and could use the money so I think that for those reasons she kept cooking with charcoal. Besides, Abuela, like most Cuban "Islenos" (descendants from the Canary Isles), was known to be very tight with her money, a trait she clearly inherited and passed onto me. She always insisted she didn't like the smell of cooking gas when resisting my grandfather's efforts to buy a gas stove, but I really think she just used this as an excuse to save money.

When my cramps were tolerable I would sit on a wood crate in the corner of the kitchen and watch Abuela go through the water-heating ritual in wonderment. When the pain was unbearable she would carry me over to her bed in the room beside the kitchen where she knew I could hear her and she me. I can still remember the soothing gurgling sound of the hot water as she would pour it into the red rubber bottle—the sound a thirsty person makes when they chug a large drink. With a towel, she put a special strangle hold around the neck

of the bottle, holding the neck just so, ensuring the hot water would never spill as she poured it in. I could see the dense steam column condensing as she screwed the top on and tested the flank of the flat red rubber bag against the skin of her face.

"There is power in that bottle," I thought as I watched



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### Antes de Comer

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her. Within seconds, she'd square my hips flat on the bed, undo the top button of my trousers, look directly into my eyes, always carefully delineating exactly how I was supposed to hold the bottle just so over the lower part of my belly. She always insisted I must lie very still and listen to make sure the water inside the bottle didn't slosh as it rested on my abdomen. I can remember being ever so careful to breathe slowly so I wouldn't make the water slosh. Abuela would then sit on the edge of the bed with her knees together. She would place the palm of her hand softly on my shoulder. Her wire rim glasses encircled her brown eyes which made them look big and round and kindly looking, like those of a cow. She would gaze downward, almost as if in prayer and then she would begin to tell me stories— like how little birds liked sitting on the wires near the electric poles in the street when it rained because they could feel the noise of the rain on their feet. Without fail, and within minutes, the waves of piercing cramps would slacken as I balanced that water bottle on my abdomen and she continued her stories.

It was not unusual for my eyes to get heavy during these water-bottle-balancing acts, like when I took the elixir of paregoric, but there were no hallucinations. Sometimes I would awaken and find that I had fallen asleep for one or two hours and hadn't even realized this. By this time the cramps were generally gone, and the water bottle, which had usually toppled off the bed onto the stone floor in the bedroom, was no longer warm. I might hear Abuela tinkering in the kitchen and I would feel completely back to normal and be ready to go out

and play with my friends or feed the animals before my uncle Yayo came home. Sometimes I felt so good she made me warm sweet lemonade with fresh squeezed lemons she picked from the lemon tree by the kitchen.

My grandmother died when she was 96. Every night before she went to bed she insisted on drinking a tepid glass of water with two tablespoons of sugar dissolved in it. I don't know if this had anything to do with her longevity. I do know that she was a major influence in my becoming a physician and that from her I learned the meaning of good bedside manners and of caring.

I have often wondered what must have gone through my young daughters' minds when they were little as I would heat the water in the microwave just-so, and choke that red rubber bottle with a towel, pouring the steaming water without a spill, invoking all the healing powers that my grandmother so deftly ingrained in me. I have also often wondered if they really bought into the stories about the little birds sitting on the wires in the rain....

■ *An academic physician for over three decades with a primary emphasis on a career of scientific writing, **Dr. González-Rothi** is a relative newcomer to creative prose. 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 work published in Acentos Review and HEAL.*