

Massachusetts Letters About Literature 2017  
State House Awards Ceremony  
May 16, 2017

TOP  
HONORS  
LEVEL III

Dear Ms. García,

"Oy, Chico! Don't you know that the fried plantains, the golden *platanos fritos*," my grandmother Alicia emphasized in her Spanish lilt, "Ah, those are the best part! Yes, the *frijoles negros* are delicious, but those plantains are in your blood." We shared a smile, and I looked down at the plate in front of me -- steaming black beans over rice, fried sweet plantains, and a cup of apple juice. At eleven years old, I heard what she said, but didn't fully understand what she meant. Only now can I hear her say, "Enjoy these foods, for they are Cuban -- and Cuban is in our hearts." My mind had not wandered over that memory for years, until I read *Dreaming in Cuban*.

My great-grandfather, on my mother's side, was born in Cuba. His father was born in Cuba. His great-grandfather was born in Cuba. You get the idea. Alicia, or Ali, however, was born in the United States. Her parents were visiting, and between Washington and New York her mother went into labor... on a train. Boy, did Ali love to tell that story! Anyway, Alicia was a US citizen, and her parents were just as surprised as anyone else! Having never immigrated, and never filed any paperwork, they always expected to have a Cuban baby. But by some miracle, she was American.

This meant that when the time came, she was able to marry an American Air Force pilot. A good man, named Jack. Working with the government at the time meant one's spouse could not be a foreigner, for reasons of national security... I can just imagine the grin on his face when he discovered the Cuban woman he loved so much was in fact American, and so they were allowed to marry. Anyway, she left Cuba to travel the world with my grandfather. A week later, the Cuban Revolution began.

Now, most of my family had it easy. Leaving Cuba before the Revolution meant the typical sadness associated with leaving your home, leaving all your friends and family behind, selling your house, taking your things with you, same old, same old... That was the easy way. But after the *Revolución Cubana*, once the Castros took over, Fidel wanted his "Cuban brothers" to stay and accept his rule, so emigration was not made easy. What does that mean? He declared that "traitors" like my great grandparents were allowed \$5 and a suitcase when leaving the country.

Can you imagine? If you were told, "You need to leave your town, your family, your house, your car, the shop that you own, all the money you ever earned -- and put whatever belongings you have left, for your family of 7, in one suitcase, with 5 dollars in your pocket." ... What would you bring? I don't know.

But this narrative has gone on long enough. Remember your character Pilar? Pilar, the emotionally conflicted, Cuban-American teenager, reaching out to her grandmother for a sense of belonging and purpose. Pilar, the artistic, open hearted adolescent, with a crazy family, living in a big city, trying to find her own path- honestly, Pilar's so much like me, it's like this whole book reflects my life like the surface of a rippling pond, where the face you see is curved, a little different, but with all the same features, and the same smile. But the most important connection between Pilar and me is that both of us have an intense hunger for a sense of belonging, and acceptance in our own part of society.

I often wonder where I fit into the world. Sometimes I'll think, *If someone asks tomorrow, will I say I'm Cuban, Irish, English, or Bostonian?* Can the word "American" say all that, with half as many syllables? My family is from every corner of the globe-- so what does that make me? With an Irish and English dad, that half of the family has always been connected through the idea of the hardworking Irish who picked themselves up by their bootstraps, and the accomplishments of our English heritage, England having been one of the most sophisticated societies of the world. But my Mom's side of the family, on the other hand, is Cuban, focused on huge family gatherings, and warm, tropical foods. Irish, English, and Cuban- they're all on opposite sides of the world.

So must I pick one? Or am I like a painting, full of many different colors, but all the more beautiful for it? Pilar's heart is divided just the same; "Even though I've lived in Brooklyn all my life," she thinks to herself while wandering Miami alone, "it doesn't feel like home to me. I'm not sure Cuba is, but I want to find out. If I could only see (my grandmother) again, I'd know where I belonged" (*Dreaming in Cuban*, 58). Pilar's yearning for a place where she is accepted and feels at home is so real and pressing that she booked a bus ticket to Miami by herself, just to try and find her people. This act of distancing herself from her

American childhood and trying to get to Cuba shows how her heart is searching for the Cuban side of her, looking for acceptance there. Pilar, like me, feels disoriented, her way through the world unclear, and her identity even more obscure. So how did Pilar do it? How did Pilar find peace, and find her home?

Well, she went to Cuba. She faced her grandmother's country, entered her grandmother's house -- but it wasn't her own. She realized that all those winters in the Northeastern snow, all those years speaking English, they were part of her, too, not just the *frijoles negros*, not just the *plataños*. That's when Pilar understood that wherever she went, she would be at home.

You see, this whole time, I've thought, "Well that man over there, he's African-American. The lady's voice here is Canadian. That boy, there, he's from Boston, I can tell." But I read *Dreaming in Cuban*, and now I understand that it's never so simple. For Pilar, her journey came to an end when she understood that it wasn't where you live or how you speak that says you're Cuban. It's not what you eat or what you wear that makes you American. It's how you feel, who you love, and how you think of yourself -- that's who you really are.

Through reading this book, my own ties to my nationality and my heritage got pulled into my mind. I read of Cuba, and thought, "Will I ever be a part of that?" I read of the US, and I thought, "Is this who I am?" But near the end of the book, it clicked. I understood, just like Pilar. My grandmother, my mother, and I are all Cuban. My father, his father, and I are Irish and English. I take them with me wherever I go, and my language doesn't change that. I guess what changed in my mind was that now I feel I can belong to more than one heritage and family. America is the land of opportunity, after all, and nothing stands between me and being accepted, not as *Cuban*, not as an *Irish*, not as *English*, not as *white*, not as *male*, but as Oliver. Just as who I am, and who I choose to be.

My grandmother Alicia died about 2 years ago. And maybe part of this letter is to her. But the last thing I felt when I closed this book is that now Cuba is passed on to me. Now is when my identity is put in my own hands, and the future of this wonderful family, this beautiful nation, is up to me. And beyond that, it's up to us as the next generation to define it as whatever we feel it should be. Alicia always told me stories of her days in Cuba, and her days of travelling the world -- she painted pictures of beautiful lands, countries of acceptance, and people living in them full of love, with open arms. Ms. García, you helped teach me that now I need to make sure the world remains a place welcoming to all nationalities, whether you're Cuban, Irish, English, or anywhere in between.

And in the end, I have come to terms with what's in my heart. It's Irish, yes, English, and Cuban, too -- but it's more than that. My grandmother taught me to accept others, and accept myself. So maybe the most important thing within us, the thing that really makes a difference, more than the language you speak or the food you prepare, is the way you love, and accept those around you. That's what you taught me, and that's what I need to show others.

So what I could have said, in 2 words instead of 1000, is "Thank you." Now I better understand how to accept the different parts of myself; now I better understand how to accept others the same way.

Sincerely,

**Oliver**

Grade 9