A Part of Growing Up

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Once again I'm getting aboard a plane that will take me for a long trip back to my childhood in Puerto Rico. This journey will be difficult, but I know my landing will be a safe one; for even though the airways of my memory are difficult to ride, they lead me to a better understanding of myself. There are many stops I could make on this journey, but I have decided to stop only at those ports that will be easiest for you to visit. I want you to come with me, because I want to give you a clear idea of how hard and sad it was for me to grow up in poverty; and I'm also hoping that you will understand how glad and proud I am of having grown up this way.

When my thoughts started traveling on this journey, I discovered that the sadness and difficulty of my poverty were almost always together like inseparable friends. It was always depressing and painful to see my brothers race home at lunch time to see who got the largest share of milk. I didn't have to race home, because the milk was for my brothers who worked hard on the farm every day. But I can remember how I used to sit under the banana trees to wait for them. Even though I was little, I can still remember the hunger on their faces and the smell of dirt and sweat from their bodies. Sometimes my mother and I took their lunches to the farm. But we never took glasses to drink water or milk, because we had only three or four glasses. Instead we used the large, rounded-oval leaves of the malanga to drink.

The lack of food and money was not only a painful fact at home but also at school. It was even more painful at school because then it was evident to me that there were other people who had more than we did. I couldn't understand why. I also couldn't understand the agony and desperation on my father's face at the beginning of every school year. He wanted to give us so much, but he had so little. We wanted a pair of shoes and maybe some socks, but we couldn't get them. He couldn't give us five cents for recreo time (recess) to buy
candy. Instead my mother used to get up early in the morning and go to the farm to look for eggs, which she usually didn't find. But when she found some, we sold them in town for two cents each. Since there were never enough eggs to buy candy for everybody, we used to split the candy. And when Mom did not find any eggs to buy candy with, I used to stay in the classroom, like a prisoner whose cell is left open when the main gate is closed. I was free to leave the classroom, but I wasn't free to leave my poverty.

I was used to the fact that we were poor, and that I couldn't leave that poverty; but the time my father took me to Las Fiestas Patronales de San Juan Batista (a carnival), I felt deep in myself the injustice of it. The carnival was in town, and my father and I had to walk a long distance through the mountains to get there. But once we got to town I forgot how long and tiring the journey was. We looked around for awhile, and then Dad took me to the carousel.

I remember the sad voice my father had when he told me, "Tan solo tengo una peseta pa'una mesia" (I have only a quarter for one ride). He then put me on one of the wooden horses on the carousel. Every time I passed him I would wave and smile. But the ride didn't last long. I wanted to get onto the horse again, though a tall man told me I couldn't. Then Dad took me away from the carousel. I just stood aside watching the carousel go round and round with my little empty horse. I couldn't see why I had to pay money when there were many empty horses in the carousel and the carousel was going around anyway.

I learned that without money I couldn't get another ride on the carousel, but I could learn how to share—and I did. I learned that to survive in poverty people need to work together like bees in a hive. My family didn't have much, but what we had we shared with others. The other families in the community also shared with us what little they had. My mother used to mend and wash my wornout clothes and give them to somebody who needed them more than I did. Whenever Mom needed something we had, they would borrow it from us. In a sense our small community was like the big family in which everybody knew that to make life easier we needed to help and understand each other.
Even though there were suffering and misery in my poverty, there were also happiness and understanding; that's why I'm proud of my childhood. I believe that my childhood has played an important part in the development of my character and personality. I am really proud to say that money can't buy the best things in life—things like real friendship, nature, and love for people. I'm glad that I can love people for what they are instead of what they have. As I told you at the beginning of this journey, my landing has been a safe one, not only because I have come to understand myself better, but also because I'm able to love and care for people. And there is nothing more beautiful than to have love for people.

*First Prize Winner of the Annual English Department Writing Contest, Category I.*