

Seis Dedos, Six Toes by Amarilys Gacio Rassler

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Eight-year-old Cachita put down the machete and stared at the tobacco field in front of her. She slapped away the ant and rubbed hard the itching spot on her foot. The place, a year ago, where she had the sixth toe.

“Cachita, *mi niña*, my girl ... let’s go.” Cachita’s *mamá* leaned over a rusted barrel and wiped sweat off her forehead. She gripped a limp, white chicken by the neck and dunked it in the scalding water. Hot vapors flowed up Mamá’s face. Her *café con leche* skin flushed red.

Cachita nodded. She flicked mud from between her toes, smelled a tobacco leaf, her grandfather, *Abuelo* Pancho, picked earlier that morning and then, with a thud, brought down the machete on another chicken for her mother. Off went the dead hen’s head, rolling off a bloody piece of wood. *Una más*. One more done. Just like Mamá and her *abuelo* had taught her.

Cachita’s chest swelled. Señora Ortencia will make her *arroz con pollo*. And that night, in her *bohio*, in Cachita’s home, with dirt floor and thatched roof, there will be two more *pesos* and Mamá’s *sopita de pollo*.

Cachita slipped on her brown sandals, her only pair of shoes, while again watching the field. The patch with the half-harvested tobacco plants where her lean, strong *abuelo* in his big straw hat, pulled leaves. She swatted a fly away, yanked her wrinkled yellow skirt up and wiped *mocos* from under her nose. Cachita was glad her cold had kept her home from school. A day of no shame for being small and no sound of that name, *Ratón*. Today, no children laughed because she once had a sixth toe. No slap of mean words at recess when the teacher was inside. “*¡Seis Dedos, Seis Dedos!* Where’s your toe now?”

“Cachita?” Cachita’s *mamá*, thin as a twig, plucked feathers from the fat chicken sprawled on a metal table by the hot barrel.

Cachita glanced at Mamá and then studied the field. Abuelo went again inside the tobacco barn with Cachita’s sister, Estela. Cachita waited, scratching her foot and squinting. The midday sun, high and bright, blew flames on her face. She blinked a drop of sweat away from her eye and stared at the barn door.

Abuelo flung the barn door open and out with him came, Estela. Cachita’s heart skipped like Señora Ortencia’s dog. Her Estela, the sweet eighteen-year old with coal-black hair who heard Cachita’s stories and knew all of her secrets.

Estela held to her chest a cup and plate that she had brought into the barn with food and drink. Now, both empty.

For three weeks, Cachita had been told to stay away from the barn. Cachita shielded her eyes, her hands like umbrellas, to see her sister better. *Ay, sí*, there it was again. Every time Abuelo and Cachita’s sister came out of the barn, Estela’s smile would spread wide like an avocado slice. And every day that avocado seemed to grow bigger and bigger.

“Cachita, *ven, mi amor*. Come, my love.” Mamá wiped her hands with a rag, sat on the old black bench in front of their *bohío* and patted the place next to her. Cachita knew what was coming. She grinned and trotted to her mother and waited for the song.

“Cachita, Cachita, my pretty little girl.” Mamá sang loud and high like the trill of *abuelo*’s guitar, her everyday tune to Cachita. “*Cachita, Cachita, pedazo de cielo que Dios nos dio*.” Cachita, Cachita, a piece of heaven that God gave us. Then Mamá’s arms, like gentle vines, went around her, rocking her back and forth, back and forth as Mamá lowered her voice and sang the song softly in her ear.

Cachita never tired of this time with her mother. And within the embrace something like a little bird flew out of her, circling around, in Pinar del Rio's beautiful blue sky.

Afterward, Mamá would get very quiet, hold her tight and kiss her head. For Cachita, those moments remained her favorites of the day. Mamá's hug and kisses, *dulce*, like the pulps of very sweet mangoes.

"Mamá, you made up that song?"

"No, *mi niñá*. I changed it a little for you. Abuelo heard it in Havana last time he visited Tío Pepe."

"Mamá?"

"*Sí*."

Cachita pushed gently out of her *mamá*'s hold to ask once more, "Who's in the barn? Why can't I go there?"

"Shush. *Calladita*, quiet, *mi niña*, quiet." Mamá's hands wrapped around Cachita's arms. "*Muy calladita*, very quiet." Mama's dark eyes grew wide. "Cuba's air has ears."
