

RED RIDIN' IN THE HOOD

By Patricia Santos Marcantonio

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Inside a cardboard box, Mamá packed a tin of chicken soup, heavy on cilantro, along with a jar of peppermint tea, peppers from our garden, and a hunk of white goat cheese that smelled like Uncle Jose's feet.

That meant one thing.

"Roja, your *abuelita* is not feeling well," Mamá told me. "I want you to take this food to her."

"But Mamá, me and Lupe Maldonado are going to the movies," I replied, but felt guilty as soon as I'd said it.

"What's more important? Your grandmother or Lupe and the movies?" Mamá closed up the box.

"Wear your new red dress, the one that Abuelita made for you. That will make her feel better," Mamá said.

I couldn't say no because I didn't want to feel guilty again, so I put on the red dress. It was long and old-fashioned, with a high collar. I looked like the kid on *Little House on the Prairie*.

"Go straight to Abuelita's apartment," Mamá said.

"*Sí*, Mamá," I answered.

"Here's bus fare."

"*Sí*, Mamá."

"And keep away from Forest Street. You know it means trouble."

"*Sí*, Mamá."

I waited for another order, but instead Mamá kissed my cheek.

The day was bright, so I put on my sunglasses, hoping none of my 22 friends would see me carrying a cardboard box that smelled like Uncle Jose's feet and wearing a dress that made me look *estúpida*.

I decided to walk and keep the bus fare. I was saving change for a new shirt I had seen in the window of the Martinez clothing store—a shirt a whole lot cooler than the number I was wearing.

After a few blocks, my arms grew tired carrying the box and I knew I needed to take a shortcut. I looked up. There it was.

FOREST STREET.

I could hear Mamá's voice telling me to stay away, but I didn't listen.

Forest Street got its name because it was lined with the biggest trees in the whole barrio, tall and thick and blocking out the sun, making even morning light seem like sunset. As I walked down the street, the city and home seemed far away. Birds whistled a delicate, carefree rhythm. Two skinny police officers nodded to me as they walked past.

"I don't know why Mamá says this block is trouble," I said to myself. "It's quiet and kinda peaceful."

But as I walked farther, the trees grew thicker and Forest Street grew dark.

Then came a roar and the blare of loud salsa music.

Up rolled a glossy brown low-rider Chevy with licks of flame painted on the hood. It jolted up and down, the hydraulics making the driver's large, hairy ears bounce. His smile was broad and full of teeth. SUAVECITO was painted on the back windshield in blue and silver.

"*Hola!*" he greeted me.

I didn't stop. I remembered Mamá's advice about not talking to strangers, and this guy was strange.

"I say, *hola*, Red."

I stopped. "How'd you know my name?"

"You're wearing red, ain't you?" His smile and laugh were mixed with a growl. "My name is Lobo, Lobo Chavez."

I began walking again.

"Where you going?" He pushed his sunglasses to the top of his head. His eyes were orange hungry marbles.

"Not that it's any of your business, Lobo Chavez, but I'm going to visit my *abuelita*. She's not feeling so well today."

“You should be careful,” he said. “Lots of bad dudes hanging around Forest Street.”

“Like you?”

“Not me. I’m harmless.” Lobo’s gigantic tongue went all the way around his mouth and over his large black nose. “Hey, Roja, just a few doors down is the best panaderia in town. Stop in and get your *abuelita* some empanadas with *calabaza*. She’ll love ’em.”

“Thank you. I will.”

Lobo pulled down his sunglasses. “I hope your ol’ grandma feels better, Red.” He zoomed up the street, hydraulics in time to the beat of the music on his radio.

Lobo Chavez was right about the bakery. The *calabaza* empanadas were great. I bought two, one for Abuelita and one for me, which I ate as I walked slowly, enjoying the treat. But then I noticed the sun starting to go down, so I hurried.

Abuelita’s apartment building was at the edge of Forest Street. I ran up the stairs and knocked at her door.

No answer.

“Abuelita, it’s Roja.”

Inside, I heard scurrying.

“Abuelita, are you okay?”

“*Sí*, Roja. *Entra*,” a little voice said.

The room smelled of the lavender soap my grandma used. It also smelled like wet dog. That was unusual because Abuelita’s landlord wouldn’t let her have a pet.

“I’m in the bedroom, Roja,” she called to me.

“Abuelita, you sound like you got a chest cold.”

I opened the door. The shades were drawn and the room was dark. But there was enough light to see Lobo Chavez in Abuelita’s bed, wearing her nightgown and glasses and smiling as if I didn’t notice he was not my grandmother.

I knew then that this was one pretty dumb wolf.

Yet I worried he might have hurt my grandmother. I realized suddenly how much I really loved her, and how angry I was at this wolf in Abuelita’s clothing. I decided to play along to find out what had happened to her.

“Abuelita, look at what Mamá sent you,” I said, all cheery, like the girl on *Little House*, and set the food on the table.

“That looks so good.” Lobo rubbed his bloated stomach.

I wanted to laugh, but couldn’t.

“Abuelita, I never noticed before, but what big *orejas* you have.”

He put a hand to his ear. “The better to hear you with, *nieta*.”

“And what big *ojos* you have, Abuelita,” I said.

“The better to see you with, Roja.” Lobo opened his eyes so big I thought they would pop out of his head.

“And, Abuelita, what big *dientes* you have.”

Lobo slobbered a little. He had been waiting for this one. He leaped out of my grandmother’s bed. “The better to eat you with!”

But I had secretly grabbed a chunk of the goat cheese, and when Lobo opened his big mouth, I shoved in the whole smelly piece.

Lobo put his claws to his throat and groaned. “This tastes like someone’s dirty feet. Yuck!”

I ran out the door and yelled, “POLICE!”

The two officers I had passed earlier ran up the stairs.

“That wolf has my grandmother,” I told them.

The officers chased Lobo around the apartment, but the wolf tripped on Abuelita’s long nightgown, and they easily caught him.

“Where is my grandmother, Lobo Chavez?” I yelled.

“She wasn’t here. I was going to eat you and then eat her for dessert when she came home. I eat people. That’s my job,” Lobo confessed, his face still a little green from eating all that stinky cheese.

Just then, Abuelita walked in.

“Where have you been?” I hugged my grandmother. “A wolf was going to eat us.”

“I was feeling better and went out for a quick game of bingo,” she said.

Abuelita looked at Lobo. “Officers, please take my nightgown off that wolf. He’s getting hair all over it.”

“Yes, *señora*,” the officers replied.

“Well, I’m happy you are safe, Abuelita,” I said.

“And I am happy *you* are safe,” she said. “This is a dangerous world, and it’s best to keep your eyes and ears wide open, even if they aren’t as big as a wolf’s.”