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Fiery Fast Teamwork

Belen Jurado

bjura605@live.kutztown.edu

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Fiery Fast Teamwork

I hadn't even remembered what day it was until I heard the shout of what seemed to be a street vendor selling fireworks. I got up from bed and stood at the window. A man was pushing a large cart on the street, with a sign that read "Adios 2018". My view confirmed my suspicions, I woke up in the morning of New Year's Eve. Besides the street vendor, my eyes witnessed the entire neighborhood preparing for the big day. The stores and restaurants across the street were opening up shop, people were coming and going from the market, cars zoomed by the hectic street. It was a typical New Year's Eve morning in Guayaquil, Ecuador. I finally decided to get ready for the day when I heard the ruckus that came from downstairs.

My mother, brother and I were staying at my grandmother's house for the holidays. The big house was filled with cousins, aunts, uncles, and pets; chaos is bound to occur throughout the day. After getting dressed and brushing my teeth, I went downstairs and said good morning to everyone, with a hug and a kiss on the cheek, starting off with my grandma. Once I was eating breakfast, my cousin Luis asked me, "Have you made an *año viejo* yet?"

I was chewing on a sweet piece of bread while I answered, "No. What about you?"

Luis sighs and says that he hadn't built one yet. Being 24 years old, he was trying to come across as if it was no big deal, but suddenly he became very interested once I suggested on making one together.

The burning of *año viejos*, which translates to "old year," is a New Year's tradition that is practiced throughout the country. It consists of burning an effigy at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve. These effigies are made of paper, wood, and rags and are built to represent people, cartoon characters, objects, and whatever else you can think of. They are burnt as a

symbol of destroying the bad energies from the past year, in order to start the new year with a clean slate.

“What should we make?” Luis asks me.

I responded, “I don’t know. We don’t even have materials or paint or firecrackers.” We both scanned our eyes around the room in search of anything that we could use. “We might be able to gather materials...we just need to find them!” I exclaimed. Luis and I locked eyes in agreement. I finished my breakfast and Luis and I split.

I reunited with Luis after an hour of intense searching and we had quite the haul. I visited our family members next door and Luis visited his friends from across the street and around the block. Most of them were kind enough to give us the materials we needed here and there. We had plenty of boxes, cardboard, newspaper, and Luis managed to buy some firecrackers. With our materials piled on the ground, Luis and I towered over them.

Luis asks me, “What do you think we can make with this?”

I arranged the boxes on the floor and I kept rearranging them until they formed different shapes. We stared at every shape with confusion. A robot? An animal? A politician? After many minutes of debate, my little brother Nico walked up to us.

“Do you want any help?” He asked us. He already finished his año viejo that he made with my mom days ago, so he was looking for something fun to do.

We politely declined his offer, assuring him that we’d figure out what to build soon. As my brother turned around to leave, Luis and I locked our eyes on the toy Nico was carrying under his arm. I spun him back around and asked if I could borrow his toy for the day. After some heavy persuasion (this was his favorite toy), he handed it over to us and made us promise

to take care of *Alex*. It was a large, plushy toy that resembled Alex, one of the characters from the video game Minecraft, which he also was obsessed with. Luis and I examined the toy.

“This is perfect.” I tell Luis.

We agreed to make our own cardboard version of Alex and then we went to work.

As we stuffed the cardboard boxes with newspaper and firecrackers, we made a plan to go out and look for paint. I questioned my cousin if we would be able to find any paint at all since it's New Year's Day. I assumed hardware stores must have been closed. He assured me that the hardware store three blocks away will most likely have what we need, but we would have to get there as soon as possible before they ran out of paint. We agreed on paying fifty-fifty, and we ran out the door.

Luis knew where we were going, I didn't. We walked three blocks down until it was time to cross the street. 38th Street wasn't the easiest street to cross.

Cars, motorcycles, buses, and trucks zoom by all day and night. This street could use a few more pedestrian crossings and stop signs. We manage to cross the hectic street. A motorcycle sped right behind me before my feet hit the sidewalk. Luckily, all it did to me was get my heart pumping. My cousin and I approached the busy hardware store. This store was definitely making a big profit since everyone in line was making their año viejos last minute. After a long wait in line, we bought our paints. We brainstormed about details on the walk back to the house.

Once we got back to the house with our paints, getting back to work on our cardboard creation was easy. Luis and I are the only artistic ones in our family. That made our work flow smooth as butter. We taped down limbs onto a torso and taped a head onto the body. We managed to form a makeshift Alex; it mostly looked like her, a few proportions were off, but it

would do. Convenience was key in a situation like this. We moved our workspace outside to the sidewalk so that we could paint freely.

As we were sitting on some rocks out on the sidewalk, I admired the environment that surrounded me. It was nothing like Allentown. The air smelled of exhaust, rotisserie chicken, and *tripita asada*, grilled pork intestines, that were being sold across the street. This part of the city consisted of small to medium sized houses and all of them were built and colored differently. Those colors ranged anywhere between beige, hot pink, green, white with red stripes, and many houses weren't even painted: they confidently rocked their gray cement blocks. Kids were running and playing around on the street, and street vendors were selling vegetables and ice cream while blaring Christmas music from a speaker. I snapped back into reality once Luis finished adding the final touches. We stood back and admired our project. Hours of rummaging, stuffing, building, taping, running, and painting paid off. For a last-minute arts & craft project, our año viejo was looking pretty good.

“Too bad we’re going to burn this thing tonight,” I joked with my cousin. The sun was going to set soon, so we relaxed for a little before getting ready for tonight's celebration.

Around eleven at night, the entire house smelled like food, candles, and a variety of perfumes. My grandma, all of my cousins, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, family friends, and house pets were all in one place. It was a full house. When it got close to midnight everyone headed outside to see the show. Everyone in the neighborhood had their año viejos placed in the middle of the street, with each household compiling theirs into a separate pile. Families took pictures with their own año viejos, including me and Luis.

Once the last ten seconds of the year were counted down to zero, hugs were given out copiously and the año viejos are lit on fire. It was quite the sight to see. At 12:05, you could easily look down each street and find dozens of piles of burning año viejos.

I found Luis in the crowd, wished him a happy new year with a hug, and we watched our little Alex turn into ashes.

I turned to Luis: “Thanks for building an año viejo with me. I had fun.”

“Yeah, me too!” He replies as he chucks more fireworks into the blaze.

I nodded towards all the fireworks and effigy burnings that surrounded us and chuckled, “This is so bad for the environment.”

Luis chuckled with me, “Oh, yeah definitely.”