

**Genre** Autobiography

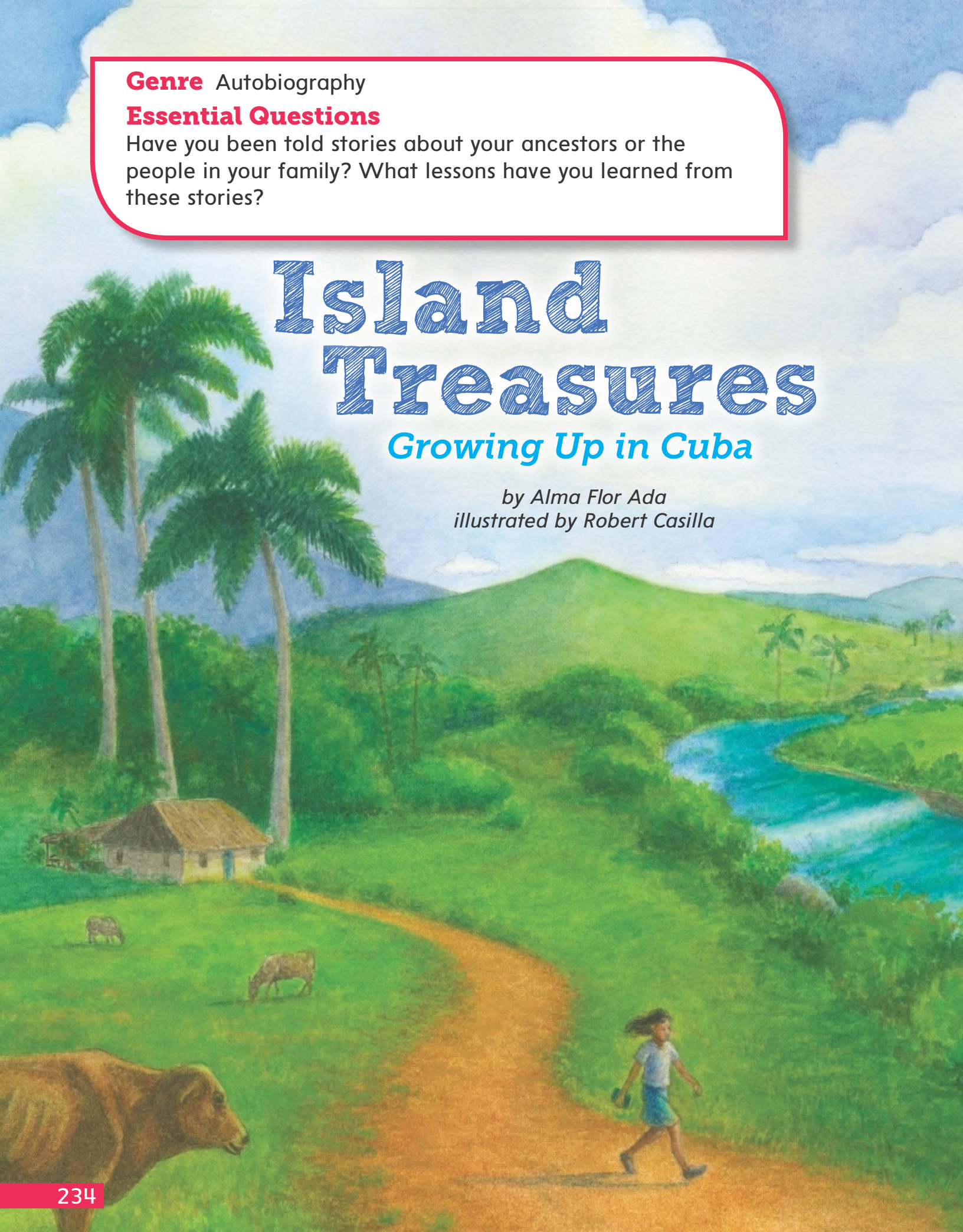
**Essential Questions**

Have you been told stories about your ancestors or the people in your family? What lessons have you learned from these stories?

# Island Treasures

## *Growing Up in Cuba*

*by Alma Flor Ada  
illustrated by Robert Casilla*





## Introduction

AT LA QUINTA Simoni, the weathered old house where I was born and where I lived for much of my childhood, the magic began early in the morning when my grandmother would wake me up for our daily visit to the cows. In Cuba, only prized cows in large *haciendas* lived in barns; our handful of cows lived outdoors, grazing on grass all year round. When our farmhand milked the cows under a tree, my grandmother would hand him a large glass and he would direct a squirt of milk straight into it. She always let me drink first, and as I raised the glass, holding it with both hands, the foam on top would tickle my nose.

Later in the day, the magic continued. I was allowed to roam our fields freely, and I would spend long stretches of time by the river, observing the fish: the small *guajacones* who skimmed the surface, eating mosquito larvae; the swift *biajacas* swimming deep in the water; the brown *renacuajos*, tadpoles at different stages of turning into frogs. The large green tadpoles with yellow bellies would turn into *ranas toro*, the bull frogs we heard at night—since these were not easy to spot, seeing one was a rare treat. This was also true of *jicoteas*, river turtles whose hearing was very sharp; no matter how quietly I approached, all I could see were the ripples they left behind, because they would jump off their rocks and into the water before I even reached the river.

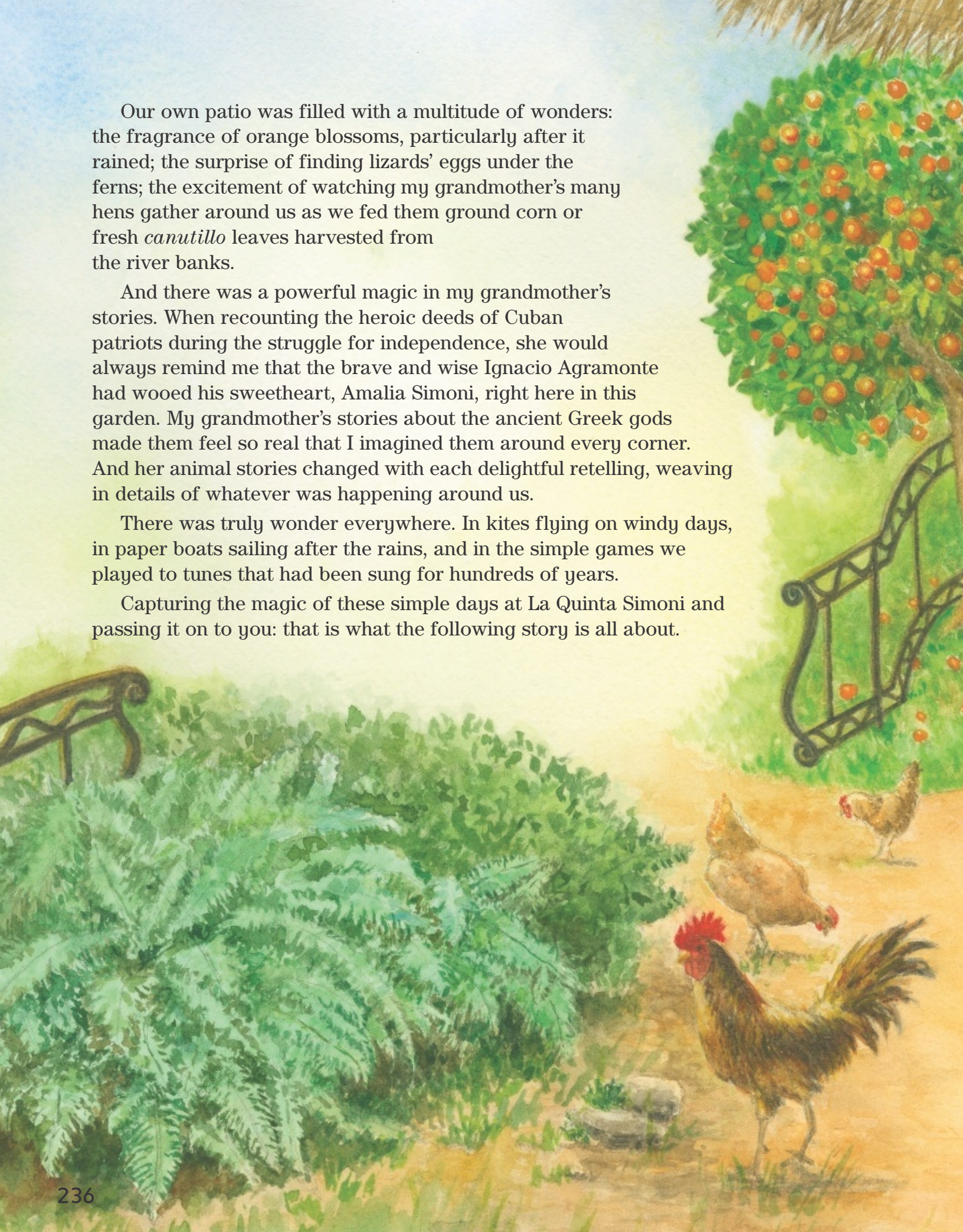
There was also the large fallen tree that lay on the ground close to the river: a resting giant with a number of branches that grew straight up from its side. If I had known then what a harp looked like, I would have said it resembled one. Instead, for me, the fallen tree was a many-masted sailing ship on a daring voyage, and I read many tales of adventure while nestled there.

Our own patio was filled with a multitude of wonders: the fragrance of orange blossoms, particularly after it rained; the surprise of finding lizards' eggs under the ferns; the excitement of watching my grandmother's many hens gather around us as we fed them ground corn or fresh *canutillo* leaves harvested from the river banks.

And there was a powerful magic in my grandmother's stories. When recounting the heroic deeds of Cuban patriots during the struggle for independence, she would always remind me that the brave and wise Ignacio Agramonte had wooed his sweetheart, Amalia Simoni, right here in this garden. My grandmother's stories about the ancient Greek gods made them feel so real that I imagined them around every corner. And her animal stories changed with each delightful retelling, weaving in details of whatever was happening around us.

There was truly wonder everywhere. In kites flying on windy days, in paper boats sailing after the rains, and in the simple games we played to tunes that had been sung for hundreds of years.

Capturing the magic of these simple days at La Quinta Simoni and passing it on to you: that is what the following story is all about.





## Choices

MY FATHER'S FAMILY and my mother's family were as different from each other as a quiet mountain stream and the vast ocean. My father's family was small in contrast to my mother's, with its many aunts, uncles, first and second cousins, great-aunts, and great-uncles. But not only was my mother's family large, it was also very lively, cheerful, and adventurous, while my father's father and brothers were quiet people who seldom spoke about anything personal.

We frequently spent our evenings together listening to stories of my mother's family. Through these stories people whom I had never met seemed as familiar to me as those who lived nearby. It seemed as though I had heard their voices and taken part in their adventures. But it is a story told to me by my father's father that I would like to share with you now, a story that remains vivid in my memory and that has greatly shaped who I am today.

Abuelito Modesto would stop by my house every afternoon for a short visit. He would pat me on the head or give me a formal kiss on the forehead, and then he would sit and talk with my parents about the political and social issues of the day. He sounded very knowledgeable to me, but also adult and remote. He was a large, formidable man, and although I listened in fascination to his words, I felt as if it would be many years before I would be able to share anything with him, or he with me.

One afternoon when he arrived, my parents had gone out and I was the only one at home. He sat to wait for them in the dining room, the coolest room in the city house where we lived at the time. The house was bathed in the quiet so prevalent in the tropics during the hottest part of the day. As usual, I was buried in a book. Then abuelito Modesto called my name and motioned for me to sit on his lap. I was surprised by this gesture of warmth and affection, since I was almost ten years old and especially since he never asked any of us to sit by him. Yet I welcomed the invitation to get close to this man who seemed so remote and yet so wise. I never knew what prompted him to tell me the story that came next, but I have always treasured it.





“You probably know that I was once very wealthy,” he began. As I nodded, he continued. “I was only twelve years old when I left Spain to come to Cuba. My father had died, and since my oldest brother was arrogant and very authoritarian, I decided to leave my home at La Coruña. I roamed the port until someone pointed out a ship that was about to sail, and I managed to hide aboard. A sailor discovered me shortly after the ship set sail, but the captain said I should sail with them, and when we arrived at Havana he helped me get ashore. I searched for work, and fortunately I was taken in by the owner of a hardware store. He worked me hard! I cleaned the store and helped with all kinds of odd jobs. I had to sleep in the storage room on some burlap sacks, but I learned the business well.

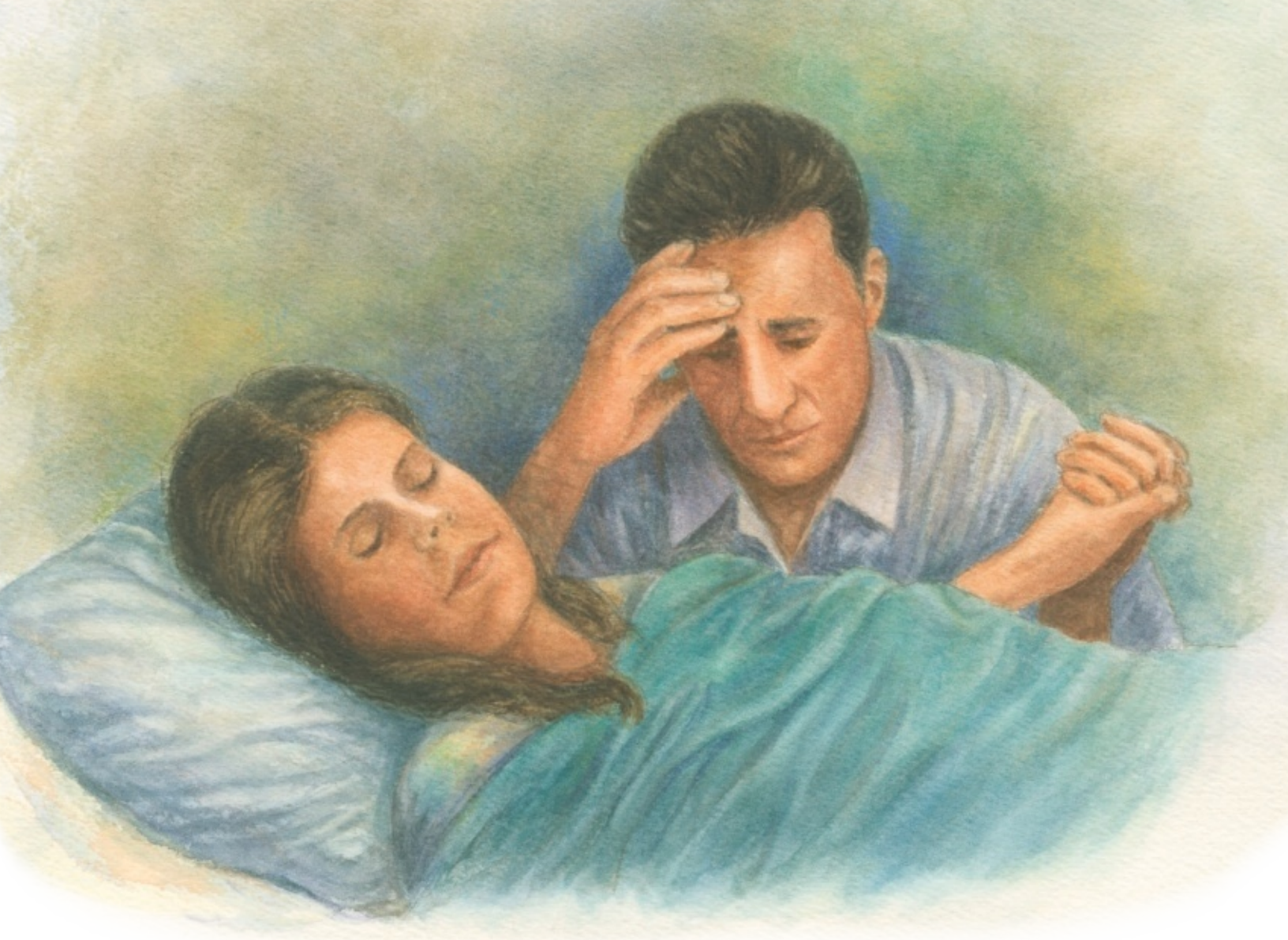
“One day a young American came into the store with a surprising machine that played music from round black disks. It was made in the United States and was called a gramophone. I was astonished and excited. Imagine, a machine that could bring the great opera singer Enrico Caruso’s voice into each home! The hardware store owner didn’t want anything to do with this machine, but I was fascinated by it. I followed the American when he left the store and offered to work for him. For the next few years, I sold this new invention. Eventually I became the major representative in Cuba for the manufacturer, and traveled the island from end to end. I loved the land around Camagüey, and I saw how cattle would thrive on these fertile plains, so I bought some land. The land turned out to be even more valuable than I thought, and I became wealthy.”

He paused. Even though I didn't know the meaning of the word *nostalgia*, I know now that is exactly what I saw in his eyes. "The years passed," he continued. "I married your grandmother and we had four sons. Then she became very ill. Since she was too ill to be moved, I had a doctor come to the *hacienda*. But although he did all he could, she did not improve.

"One evening, an exhausted horse and rider galloped up to the *hacienda*. The rider was my business manager in Havana. He'd ridden at top speed from the train station in Camagüey, and close up, I saw that it was not only exhaustion that marked his face, but panic. 'You must come to Havana immediately,' he urged me. 'There is a financial crisis and the economy is collapsing. The president of your bank sent me to warn you. It's urgent that you travel to the capital in person to withdraw all of your money, or else it will be lost.' I considered his alarming news as the man looked at me impatiently, unable to understand why I wasn't ordering fresh horses to take us to the train. But was I to leave your ill grandmother?"

He paused again, and I saw that the look in his eyes had changed. This new feeling was one I recognized even as a child. My own eyes must have looked the same the day I found a bird, which only a short while ago had been alive, lying dead in our backyard.





My grandfather finished his story: “I did not return with him. Your grandmother did not get well, and the economy did collapse before I could get my money from the bank. I was no longer a rich man. But I was there by your grandmother’s side until the end, and I held her hand in mine as she passed away.” I looked down at my grandfather’s big hand, which was covering my own. And then I knew I would not have to wait until I grew up to understand my grandfather Modesto.

There is no one alive today who remembers María Rey Paz, the grandmother I never knew. And there are probably very few people living who remember my quiet but steadfast grandfather, Modesto. Yet I am certain that these ancestors of mine live on in my children, who have known from a young age what choices to make where loved ones are concerned.



You will answer the comprehension questions on these pages as a class.

### Did You Know?

Cuba is home to many unique animals and plants. The world's smallest bird, the bee hummingbird, lives in the forests of Cuba. An adult bee hummingbird is only two inches long!

## Text Connections

1. Give examples of how Alma Flor Ada uses many of her senses when remembering La Quinta Simoni.
2. How do stories make Alma Flor Ada feel close to her family?
3. Why did Abuelito Modesto leave Spain for Cuba?
4. Explain how Nellie Bly in "One Fantastic Journey" and Alma Flor Ada in "Island Treasures" share a similar goal in their writing.
5. Describe a cherished memory that makes you feel close to friends or family.
6. Why are shared stories an important part of a family's heritage?



## Write

Tell about a family story that you will always treasure.

# Look Closer

## Keys to Comprehension

1. What is the author's goal for sharing a story of her days at La Quinta Simoni, and how do the details of the text support her goal?
2. Why does it mean so much to Alma Flor Ada when her Abuelito Modesto invites her to come and listen to a story? Quote from the text to support your answer.
3. What are two main ideas of Abuelito Modesto's story, as Alma Flor Ada tells it? Explain how details support them.

## Writer's Craft

4. Explain what *haciendas* are, based on the context in which the word is used in "Island Treasures."
5. Contrast the chronology of events in "One Fantastic Journey" and "Island Treasures."

## Concept Development

6. With what reasons does Alma Flor Ada support her claim that "my father's family and my mother's family were as different from each other as a quiet mountain stream and the vast ocean"?



Read this Social Studies Connection. You will answer the questions as a class.

## Text Feature

A **caption** is a phrase or sentence that gives more information about a photograph.

# Ignacio Agramonte: Hero of Cuba

Soon after Christopher Columbus came to the islands near North America, he claimed the island of Cuba for Spain. Except for a brief time under British rule, Cuba remained a colony of Spain for nearly 300 years.

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, Cuba suddenly became an important source of sugar. What had been a remote little island became an important place on the map. By the late 1800s, many Cuban people wanted independence. One of the heroes of this Cuban struggle for freedom from Spain was a man named Ignacio Agramonte.

Ignacio was born in 1841 to a wealthy family. After travels in Europe, he studied law in Havana. A few years later, in 1868, he married his long-time love, Amalia Simoni. That same year, a man named Carlos Manuel de Céspedes declared Cuban independence from Spain at La Demajagua sugar mill. He freed his African slaves so they could join in the fight, and began what is now called the Ten Years' War. A month later Ignacio joined the insurrection.

In 1869, Ignacio was elected as a member of the constitutional assembly, who, with de Céspedes, wrote a constitution for Cuba. Because of disagreements with de Céspedes, however, Ignacio left his role with the new congress. Instead, Ignacio became a famous general in the Cuban Army. Under his formidable leadership, his troops won many battles.

In 1870, Ignacio's pregnant wife and child were captured, and eventually ended up in the United States, never to see Ignacio again. Ignacio Agramonte was killed in battle on May 11, 1873. Although he died before Cuba truly became independent, Ignacio is still honored for the steadfast efforts he gave to the cause of freedom.



Buildings in Old Havana, Cuba

1. How did Ignacio try to fill his role as a citizen of his community and nation?
2. How did Carlos Manuel de Céspedes's freeing of his slaves relate to democratic ideals?
3. How do citizens become involved in government today?



## Go Digital

Research more about Cuba's government today. How did it change after the time of Ignacio Agramonte?