

Farmer to Table by Carol Newman-Rivera

Dad,

Yesterday Pablo asked me why I still dig with a shovel. I told him it was an order from my therapist.

I don't even have a therapist.

I know what you're going to say, but please, give me a break. I'm almost seventy. That means I'm allowed act like the grumpy old man you always were. Also, kids these days need more to wonder about. The AI tells them too much.

Pablo is that scrawny kid I wrote about in my last letter. His parents sent him over cause they want him to stay away from the street gangs. Not that he'd ever get into one of them. He asks too many stupid questions.

Which leads me back to the shovel and why I still use it.

Pablo was crouched down, his stick arms resting on his trashed jeans. He watched me skeptically as I drove the shovel into the earth for what must have been the hundredth time.

"It just seems like you're doing more work than you need to." He continued as a drop of sweat slid down into my eye. "I mean, we've been out here for an hour and you *still* haven't finished the hole. What's the point of having Angie around if you're not gonna use her?"

Ah yes. The glorious Angie. The great, almighty AI system to which Pablo has given his undoubted devotion.

I sighed.

"Listen, I don't expect you to understand now, but someday, you'll be old like me," I panted. "And you will wish that things were back to how they were before." I spat a clump of mucus onto the ground and drove the shovel back into the earth. "Also, you should know by now that it's never a good idea to put all your eggs in one basket. One day, Angie will stop working, and then what? You won't know a single thing about how to grow a plantain because the AI has been doing it for you since before you could walk."

By then the hole had reached the sufficient size, and I grabbed a plantain bulb from the bucket of water that sat next to me. I placed it in the center, on top of the freshly upturned earth.

"Alright then. I think you can finish up." I gave Pablo a good-natured slap on the shoulder. "I'll be working on lunch."

He glared at me, and I thought maybe he'd try to say something snarky, but he kept his mouth shut and got to work.

Good kid that one is.

Look, I know it isn't all that necessary for Pablo to learn how to work things the old-fashioned way; I've been told plenty of times that the likelihood of Angie failing is low – less than one percent – but that doesn't make me trust it any more.

You know, I really think God made some sort of mistake when he wrote me down to be alive in 2050. You should be here now instead of me. I'm too much of an old soul to appreciate any of these new things, no matter how much it helps the business. You always were excited about the new technology; I remember you said it would help us become less reliant on the mainland, and it has. Sixty percent of our food is produced on our island. Slowly but surely, we are escaping the grasp of the U.S.

I'm excited. But I'm also scared.

Anyways, I don't usually make Pablo dig up holes. Most days, I have him follow around one of the soil-bots, since he's always had a big interest in how they work. I can't tell you how many times he's asked me to explain the mechanics behind them. But I got sick of him asking, so I told him to go figure it out for himself. Ever since then, he's been following them for hours, watching the machines dig up perfect-sized holes in minutes and mix different types of soils together to achieve the most nutrient-rich combination for each plant species. Pablo even came up with the idea to use Angie's drones to receive deliveries of fertilizer from the slaughterhouse nearby. In exchange we send them the food that isn't deemed high enough quality to be taken to the market. If other farms get on board with the AI system, then Angie will be able to do this automatically, sensing and calculating the needs of each farm and using the drone system to exchange products. Pablo has gone out to farms in an attempt to get them to implement the new system. He is very ambitious.

I still find myself walking the grounds with my machete in hand; I always make sure to grab it before making my way out of Section A and into Section B, back towards the house. I've made Section A my personal garden. I thought, if I had my own area, it'd keep me from interfering with the real work. I love it, but I still find myself getting in the way of the machines anyways. I grow oranges and pineapples and mangoes and even cherries, and I grow it all myself. No AI interference. Just me and my plants.

Farther along is Section B, our largest production section. Usually, the place is filled with rows and rows of plantains, but this year is supposed to be a rough one with the hurricanes, so we've switched to larger percentage of root plants. I must say, it's one of the best parts about having Angie around. She scans the radar and observes weather patterns so well that she can tell me what day a storm will make landfall. Saves me a ton of money too.

Pablo tried to convince me to let Angie genetically modify the plantains so that we could keep producing them even during rough hurricane seasons, and I almost said yes. The thing is, my new neighbor Faustino let me taste one of the modified ones, and I'm telling you, it tasted different. You would not have approved. I think Pablo is still holding a grudge against me for that.

Unlike the rest of the farm, the house hasn't changed much since you last saw it. The kitchen light still flickers every four and a half minutes, and I haven't been able to get rid of the cockroach infestation. They scurry out of the cabinets in the morning, when I wake up to drink my coffee.

The kitchen has a special place in my heart, probably because it reminds me of when you were still here. I've tried to bring Pablo up to cook with me, but he has even less interest in it than digging holes with a shovel. I don't mind too much though. The kitchen has become my safe space, aside from my garden in Section A. Even though Pablo doesn't join in the cooking, I still force him to eat *verduras con bacalao* with me every Wednesday. I told him if he didn't then he'd get fired.

You should know I *always* cook with the produce from Section A, but last week, I didn't have any *yuca* that was mature enough for me to dig up, so I took some from Section B instead.

I know, shocking.

I decided I might as well get all I needed from Section B and make a sort of specialty meal out of it. I placed an order through Angie and walked down to the designated soil-bot that was retrieving my produce. I watched as its long prongs stuck into the earth and spun around faster and faster and faster until stopping all at once, revealing a large armful of *yuca* lying perfectly on the soft soil. We then repeated the process with the *yautía* as well as the potatoes, and finally, the plantains. Since I didn't need a whole *racimo* of the fruit, the soil-bot reached a mechanical arm up into the base of the tree and deftly sliced off two.

I'll admit it. Watching the soil-bot was a lot more fun than I expected. Just don't tell Pablo.

Finally, I pulled the *bacalao* from the freezer; this is the one ingredient I'll always have to get from the store. Our fishermen won't find it in the warm waters that surround our island.

I dumped the *yuca* into the boiling water right after the *yautia* and the potatoes, thinking about how we once used to dig the pale roots up with our own hands, the red clay soil staining our fingers for days on end. But my hands no longer dig for the fruits of our land; they now gleam with an aura of unnatural cleanliness.

I know what you would say. "What kind of hands are these *mija*? They look like they haven't done an honest day of work in years." You'd pat my hands and give me a shovel. Tell me to go dig some holes.

But this food is just as good. I scoop it into my mouth and chew slowly, the hearty root vegetables melting in my mouth, just as they did when you would make them for me. My hands may not have grown this food, but the land I live on did. And maybe that should count for something too.

I hope I can see you soon Dad. I think I've got a solid ten years left in me, but who knows. I've started making plans to pass the operation over to Pablo when he turns 21. I think he'll do a good job. At least he knows how to dig a good hole.

Love,
Your daughter