

How Tía Lola Came to Visit Stay

by Julia Alvarez

illustrated by Macky Pamintuan

Genre

Realistic fiction is made up, but the characters and events are so lifelike that the story seems as if it must be true. Before you read, establish your own purpose for reading to enhance your comprehension.



Question of the Week

**How can one person's view
of the world affect others?**

A stack of yellow envelopes is shown in the upper left corner. Below them, a photograph of two boys is visible. One boy is wearing a striped shirt and has a wide, joyful smile, while the other boy is partially visible next to him.

Miguel and Juanita have moved to a rented farmhouse in Vermont with their mother, Mami. Their father, an artist, has stayed in New York. Tía Lola, Mami's aunt from the Dominican Republic, has come to visit. But some of the ideas she has brought along are a little "different" and not always to the liking of Miguel or the family's landlord, Colonel Charlebois.

The long, sweet, sunny days of summer come one after another after another. Each one is like a piece of fancy candy in a gold-and-blue wrapper.

Most nights, now that school is out, Tía Lola tells stories, sometimes until very late. The uncle who fell in love with a *ciguapa* and never married. The beautiful cousin who never cut her hair and carried it around in a wheelbarrow. The grandfather whose eyes turned blue when he saw his first grandchild.

Some nights, for a break, they explore the old house. In the attic, behind their own boxes, they find dusty trunks full of yellowing letters and photographs. Miguel discovers several faded photos of a group of boys all lined up in old-fashioned baseball uniforms. Except for the funny caps and knickers and knee socks, the boys in the photos could be any of the boys on Miguel's team. One photo of a boy with a baseball glove in his hand is inscribed, *Charlebois, '34*.

Miguel tries to imagine the grouchy old man at Rudy's Restaurant as the young boy with the friendly smile in the photograph.

But he can't see even a faint **resemblance**.





Since the team doesn't have a good place for daily practice, Miguel's mother suggests they use the back pasture behind the house. "But let me write Colonel Charlebois first, just in case."

Their landlord lives in a big white house in the center of town. He has already written them once this summer, complaining about "the unseemly shape of the vegetation," after Tía Lola trimmed the hedges in front of the house in the shapes of pineapples and parrots and palm trees.

"Can't you just call him and ask him, Mami?" Miguel asks. After all, the team is impatient to get started with practice. A letter will take several days to be answered.

"You try calling him," Miguel's mother says, holding out the phone. Miguel dials the number his mother reads from a card tacked on the kitchen bulletin board. The phone rings once, twice. A machine clicks on, and a cranky old voice speaks up: "This is Colonel Charles Charlebois. I can't be bothered coming to the phone every time it rings. If you have a message, you can write me at 27 Main Street, Middlebury, Vermont 05753."

"Let's write that letter, shall we?" Mami says, taking the phone back from Miguel.

Two days later, Colonel Charlebois's answer is in their mailbox. It has not been postmarked. He must have driven out and delivered it himself.

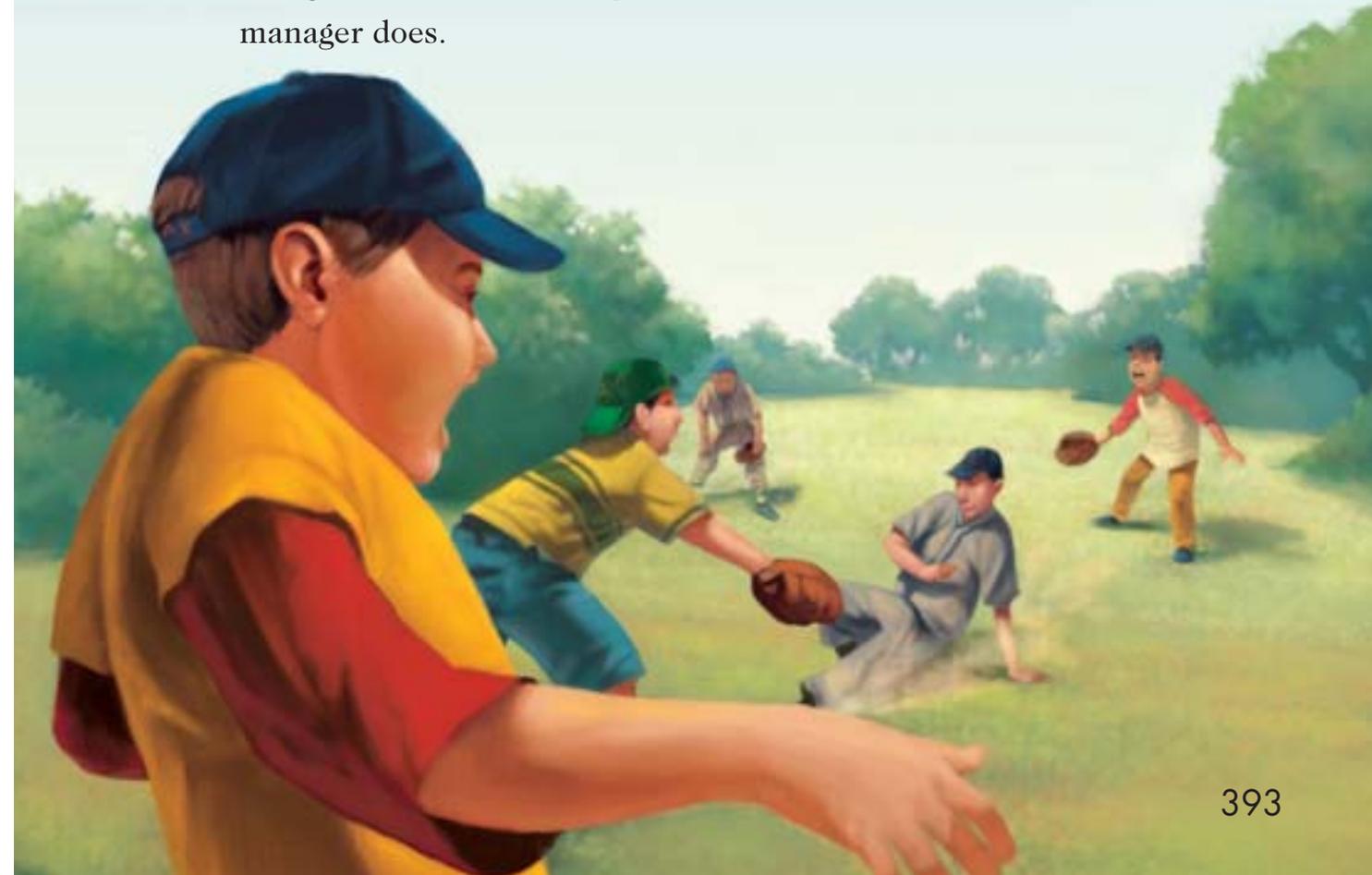
"I would be honored to have the team practice in my back pasture," he replies in a shaky hand as if he'd written the letter while riding in a car over a bumpy road.

"Honored!" Miguel's mother says, lifting her eyebrows. She translates the letter for Tía Lola, who merely nods as if she'd known all along that Colonel Charlebois is really a nice man.

And so every day Miguel's friends come over, and the team plays ball in the back field where only six months ago, Miguel (or maybe it was the *ciguapas*?) wrote a great big welcome to Tía Lola. Twice a week, Rudy drops by to coach. They play all afternoon, and afterward, when they are hot and sweaty, Tía Lola invites them inside for cool, refreshing smoothies, which she calls *frío-fríos*. As they slurp and lick, she practices her English by telling them wonderful stories about Dominican baseball players like Sammy Sosa and the Alou brothers and Juan Marichal and Pedro and Ramón Martínez. The way she tells the stories, it's as if she knows these players personally. Miguel and his friends are enthralled.

After a couple of weeks of practice, the team votes to make Miguel the captain. José, who is visiting from New York, substitutes for whoever is missing that day. Tía Lola is named manager.

"¿Y qué hace el manager?" Tía Lola wants to know what a manager does.



“A manager makes us *frío-fríos*,” Captain Miguel says. Every day, after practice, there are *frío-fríos* in a tall pitcher in the icebox.

It is a happy summer—

Until Tía Lola decides to paint the house purple.

Miguel and his friends have been playing ball in the back field—their view of the house shielded by the ample trees. As they walk back from practice, they look up.

“Holy cow!” Miguel cries out.

The front porch is the color of a bright bruise. Miguel can’t help thinking of the deep, rich purple whose name he recently learned from his father in New York. “Dioxazine,” he mutters to himself. The rest of the house is still the same color as almost every other house in town. “Regulation white,” Papi calls it whenever he comes up to visit and drives through town.

In her high heels and a dress with flowers whose petals match the color of the porch stands Tía Lola, painting broad purple strokes.

For a brief second, Miguel feels a flash of that old embarrassment he used to feel about his crazy aunt.

“Awesome,” his friend Dean is saying.

“Cool!” Sam agrees.

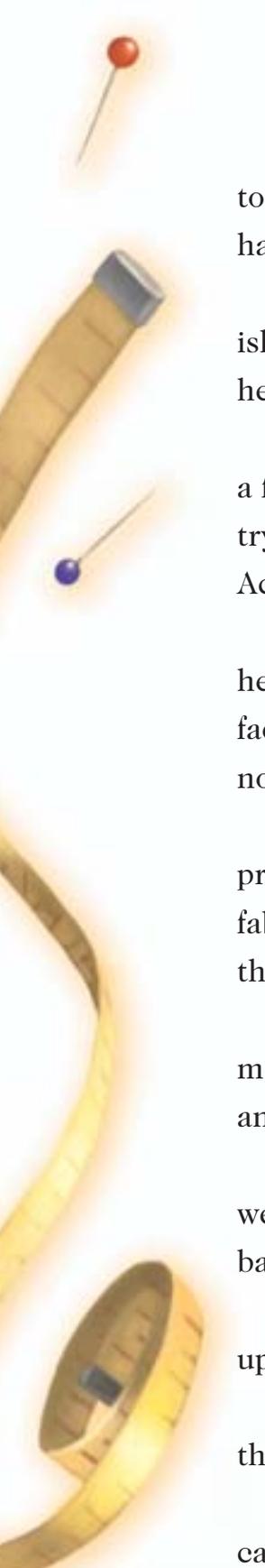
“¡Qué cool!” José echoes.

They wave at Tía Lola, who waves back.

“¡Frío-fríos!” she calls out. Today she has chosen grape flavor in honor of the new color of the house.

By the time Miguel’s mother comes home from work, he and his friends look like they have helped Tía Lola paint the house: their mouths are purple smudges. When they open their mouths to say hello, their tongues are a pinkish purple.





“Okay, what is going on?” Mami asks, glancing from Miguel to Tía Lola. She looks as if she is about to cry, something she has not done in a long time.

Tía Lola speaks up. Don’t the colors remind her of the island? “*La casita de tu niñez.*” The house where Mami spent her childhood.

Miguel can see his mother’s face softening. Her eyes have a faraway look. Suddenly, Mami is shaking her head and trying not to laugh. “Colonel Charlebois is going to throw a fit. Actually, he’s going to throw us out.”

“*El coronel, no hay problema,*” Tía Lola says, pointing to herself and Miguel and his friends. Miguel’s mother looks from face to face as if she doesn’t understand. Miguel and his friends nod as if they understand exactly what Tía Lola is up to.

The next afternoon, when Miguel’s friends come inside from practice, Tía Lola takes their measurements. She has bought fabric with the money the team has collected and is making them their uniforms.

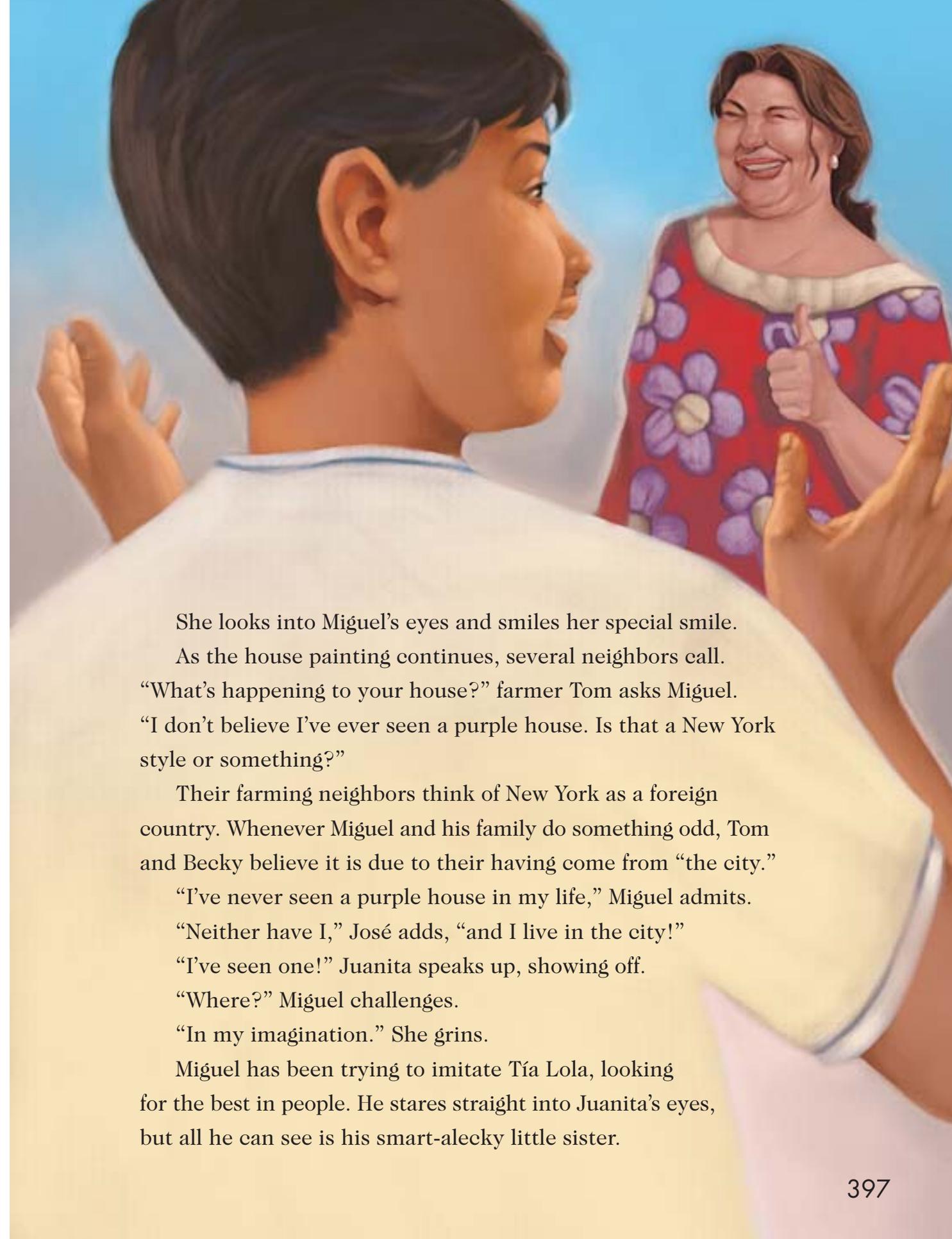
When it is Miguel’s turn, he stands next to the mark that his mother made on the door frame back in January. He is already an inch taller!

“Tía Lola, what are you up to?” the team keeps asking. “Are we going to lose our playing field if Colonel Charlebois takes back his house?”

“*No hay problema,*” Tía Lola keeps saying. Her mouth curls up like a fish hook that has caught a big smile.

“Are you going to work magic on him?” Miguel asks his aunt that night.

“The magic of understanding,” Tía Lola says, winking. She can look into a face and see straight to the heart.



She looks into Miguel’s eyes and smiles her special smile.

As the house painting continues, several neighbors call. “What’s happening to your house?” farmer Tom asks Miguel. “I don’t believe I’ve ever seen a purple house. Is that a New York style or something?”

Their farming neighbors think of New York as a foreign country. Whenever Miguel and his family do something odd, Tom and Becky believe it is due to their having come from “the city.”

“I’ve never seen a purple house in my life,” Miguel admits.

“Neither have I,” José adds, “and I live in the city!”

“I’ve seen one!” Juanita speaks up, showing off.

“Where?” Miguel challenges.

“In my imagination.” She grins.

Miguel has been trying to imitate Tía Lola, looking for the best in people. He stares straight into Juanita’s eyes, but all he can see is his smart-alecky little sister.

One afternoon, soon after José has returned to the city, Miguel is coming down the stairs to join his teammates in the back field. He pauses at the landing. The large window affords a view of the surrounding farms and the quaint New England town beyond.

A silver car Miguel doesn't recognize is coming down the dirt road to their house. Just before arriving at the farmhouse, it turns in to an old logging road at the back of the property. Behind a clump of ash trees, the car stops and the door opens.

Later, as he stands to bat, Miguel can make out a glint of silver among the trees. Who could it be? he wonders. He thinks of telling his mother about the stranger, but decides against it.



She would probably think an escaped convict was lurking in the woods and not allow the team to practice in the back field anymore.

The next afternoon, Miguel watches from behind the curtain as the same silver car he saw in the woods yesterday comes slowly up the drive. His friends have already left after their baseball practice, and his mother is not home from work yet. He can hear Tía Lola's sewing machine humming away upstairs.

"Who is it?" Juanita is standing beside him, holding on to her brother's arm. All her smart-alecky confidence is gone.

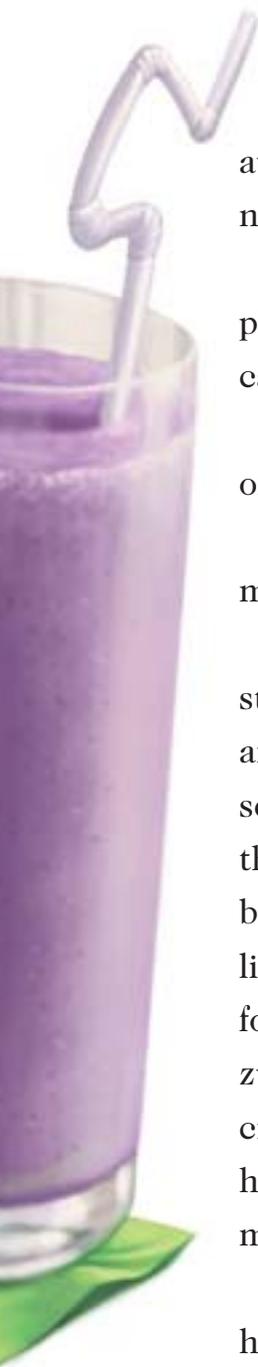
"I think it's him—Colonel Charlebois," Miguel whispers. Now that the car is so close, he can make out the old man behind the wheel. The hood has a striking ornament: a little silver batter, crouched, ready to swing. "I'm going to pretend no one is home," Miguel adds.

But Colonel Charlebois doesn't come up to the door. He sits in his car, gazing up at the purple-and-white house for a few minutes, and then he drives away. Later that day, a letter appears in the mailbox. "Unless the house is back to its original white by the end of the month, you are welcome to move out."

"Welcome to move out?" Miguel repeats. He wrote *¡BIENVENIDA!* to his Tía Lola when she moved in. It doesn't sound right to *welcome* someone to move out.

"We've got three weeks to paint the house back or move," their mother says in a teary voice at dinner. "I'm disappointed too," she admits to Tía Lola. After all, she really loves the new color. That flaking white paint made the place look so blah and run-down. "But still, I don't want to have to move again," Mami sighs.





Tía Lola pats her niece's hand. There is something else they can try first.

"What's that?" her niece asks.

They can invite *el coronel* over on Saturday.

"But that's the day of our big game," Miguel reminds his aunt. They'll be playing against another local team from the next county over.

Tía Lola winks. She knows. "*Pero tengo un plan.*" She has a plan. Miguel should tell his friends to come a little early so they can change.

"Change what?" Miguel's mother asks. "Change the color of the house?"

Tía Lola shakes her head. Change a hard heart. She'll need more grape juice from the store.

The day dawns sunny and warm. The cloudless sky stretches on and on and on, endlessly blue with the glint of an airplane, like a needle sewing a tiny tear in it. Every tree seems filled to capacity with dark green rustling leaves. On the neighboring farms, the corn is as tall as the boys who play baseball in the fallow field nearby. Tía Lola's garden looks like one of Papi's **palettes**. But now, after living in the country for seven months, Miguel has his own new names for colors: zucchini green, squash yellow, chili-pepper red, raspberry crimson. The eggplants are as purple as the newly painted house. It is the full of summer. In a few weeks, up in the mountains, the maples will begin to turn.

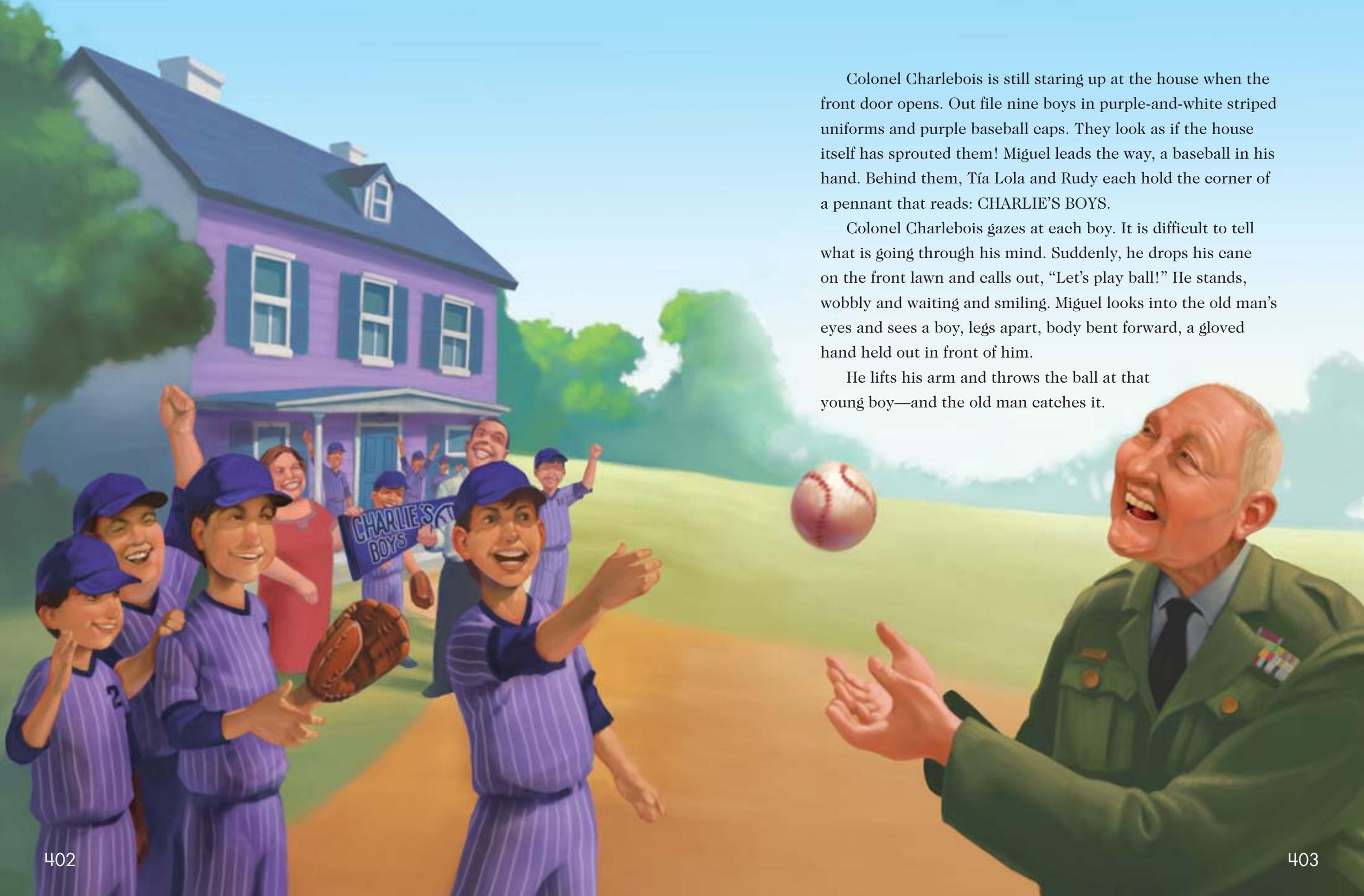
Miguel's friends and their parents arrive early. The boys head upstairs behind Tía Lola and Rudy. Their parents stay downstairs, drinking grape smoothies and talking about how their gardens are doing. At last, the silver car rolls into the driveway.

Slowly, Colonel Charlebois climbs out. He stands, a cane in one hand, looking up at the house. One quarter of the house is purple. The other three-quarters is still white. Which color will the whole house end up being?

Miguel looks down at the old man from an upstairs window. Suddenly, he feels a sense of panic. What if Tía Lola's plan doesn't work? He doesn't want to move from the house that has finally become a home to him.

He feels his aunt's hand on his shoulder. "*No hay problema, Miguelito,*" she reassures him as if she can read his thoughts even without looking into his eyes.





Colonel Charlebois is still staring up at the house when the front door opens. Out file nine boys in purple-and-white striped uniforms and purple baseball caps. They look as if the house itself has sprouted them! Miguel leads the way, a baseball in his hand. Behind them, Tía Lola and Rudy each hold the corner of a pennant that reads: CHARLIE'S BOYS.

Colonel Charlebois gazes at each boy. It is difficult to tell what is going through his mind. Suddenly, he drops his cane on the front lawn and calls out, "Let's play ball!" He stands, wobbly and waiting and smiling. Miguel looks into the old man's eyes and sees a boy, legs apart, body bent forward, a gloved hand held out in front of him.

He lifts his arm and throws the ball at that young boy—and the old man catches it.