

# Aunty Misery

by Judith Ortiz Cofer

## Read with a Purpose

Read "Aunty Misery" to learn the consequences of a simple wish.

**Preparing to Read** for this selection is on page 89.

## Build Background

"Aunty Misery" is a folk tale, a story that has been passed on by word of mouth from one generation to another. Often, folk tales contain fantastic elements and try to explain why things are the way they are.

This is a story about an old, a very old woman who lived alone in her little hut with no other company than a beautiful pear tree that grew at her door. She spent all her time taking care of this tree. The neighborhood children drove the old woman crazy by stealing her fruit. They would climb her tree, shake its delicate limbs, and run away with armloads of golden pears, yelling insults at *la Tia Miseria*,<sup>1</sup> Aunty Misery, as they called her. **A**

1. *la Tia Miseria* (lah TEE ah mee say REE ah).

One day, a traveler stopped at the old woman's hut and asked her for permission to spend the night under her roof. Aunty Misery saw that he had an honest face and bid the pilgrim come in. She fed him and made a bed for him in front of her hearth. In the morning the stranger told her that he would show his gratitude for her hospitality by granting her one wish. **B**

"There is only one thing that I desire," said Aunty Misery.

"Ask, and it shall be yours," replied the stranger, who was a sorcerer in disguise.

**A Read and Discuss** What has the author told us so far?

**B Reading Focus Comparing** What similarities do you notice between this story and "The Monkey's Paw"?

**Vocabulary hospitality** (hahs puh TAL uh tee) *n.*: friendly or generous treatment of guests.

"I wish that anyone who climbs up my pear tree should not be able to come back down until I permit it."

"Your wish is granted," said the stranger, touching the pear tree as he left Aunty Misery's house.

And so it happened that when the children came back to taunt the old woman and to steal her fruit, she stood at her window watching them. Several of them shimmied up the trunk of the pear tree and immediately got stuck to it as if with glue. She let them cry and beg her for a long time before she gave the tree permission to let them go, on the condition that they never again steal her fruit, or bother her.

Time passed and both Aunty Misery and her tree grew bent and gnarled with age. One day another traveler stopped at her door. This one looked untrustworthy to her, so before letting him into her home the old woman asked him what he was doing in her village. He answered her in a voice that was dry and hoarse, as if he had swallowed a desert: "I am Death, and I have come to take you with me." **C**

Thinking fast, Aunty Misery said, "All right, but before I go I would like to pluck some pears from my beloved tree to remember how much pleasure it brought me in this life. But I am a very old woman and cannot climb to the tallest branches where the best fruit is. Will you be so kind as to do it for me?"

With a heavy sigh like wind through a tomb, Señor Death climbed the pear tree. Immediately he became stuck to it as if with glue. And no matter how much he cursed and threatened, Aunty Misery would not allow the tree to release Death.

Many years passed and there were no deaths in the world. The people who make their living from death began to protest loudly. The doctors claimed no one bothered to come in for examinations or treatments anymore, because they did not fear dying; the pharmacists' business suffered too because medicines are, like magic potions, bought to prevent or postpone the inevitable; priests and undertakers were unhappy with the situation also, for obvious reasons. There were also many old folks tired of life who wanted to pass on to the next world to rest from miseries of this one. **D**

La Tia Miseria was blamed by these people for their troubles, of course. Not wishing to be unfair, the old woman made a deal with her prisoner, Death: if he promised not ever to come for her again, she would give him his freedom. He agreed. And that is why there are two things you can always count on running into in this world: Misery and Death: *La miseria y la muerte*.<sup>2</sup>

2. y la muerte (ee lah MWEHR tay).

**C Literary Focus Patterns** What parallel episodes can you find in both "Aunty Misery" and "The Monkey's Paw"?

**Vocabulary gnarled** (nahrlid) *adj.*: covered with knots; twisted.

**D Read and Discuss** What is the connection between Death being stuck in Aunty Misery's tree and what is going on in the rest of the world?