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Dignity, Power and Place
in the Caribbean Space

Order #13137 (a***a@gmail.com)

Hijos de Borinquen

Melissa Alvarado Sierra

Summer of 2012

From the dark and rusty colonial door of my apartment, I can see San Justo Street, empty and lifeless in the pre-dawn, but for a single car that appears and hops over the uneven, 500-year-old cobblestoned lane. The buildings are discolored and peeling, and abandoned storefronts float in the early morning fog of Old San Juan. A putrid smell burns inside the nostrils. When did it all go so wrong? The sun warms the earth and the fog evaporates. Blank-faced humans on foot and inside cars start to populate the street. I head out, counting the new “For Sale” signs as I slouch to the soon-to-be-bankrupt supermarket.

I’m not originally from San Juan and came here to escape the loneliness of the center of the island, where nothing seemed to happen. My mother would say San Juan was too fast for her, too busy. She’d rather stay in Cayey, by the mountains, with the peace and silence of a rural town. But it was San Juan that made my heart leap. The thought of seeing masses of people crossing the congested streets, dancing to salsa inside restaurants and bars, clinking their glasses and yelling salud! That’s my San Juan of yesteryear. Youthful, celebratory, busy—with the energy of possibility. But now I see nothing but inexplicable smells on the streets. Maybe a mix of cornered urine, half-empty beer cans, fried somethings, and the dirty hair and armpits of those stretching their arms asking for menudo to buy bread, to buy water, to get gas please, please, un menudito por favor. We are dressed in melancholy. We no longer dance.

I keep walking to the supermarket down San Justo Street with my greasy hair in a bun and my wrinkled clothes hanging sadly on me. A long line of cobblestone-hopping cars follow as if we’re all going to a funeral. I hear the engines behind me, see the hands of the homeless below me, smell the stink and don’t mind

it. I'm used to it. I'm like my island. Something went wrong with me, too.

I reach Fortaleza Street by mistake; I have walked too far. When the mind races with desperation, streets seem to merge and dissolve, and you walk mindlessly. Three black SUVs with tinted windows wake me from the daze as they pass by me, probably coming from the governor's house at the end of the street. It could be the very governor or one of his people. I read in the *El Nuevo Día* newspaper that the government bought a \$245,000 armored SUV for the governor. "In this economy?" people said. "How flamboyant of them," people said. The fancy SUVs bump their way down the street, and I make a U-turn on the sidewalk to change course towards San Francisco Street, where I'm supposed to go.

Before reaching the supermarket, I see the Poet's Café, a little sanctuary of the written arts where books are celebrated and placed over tables, on the shelves, on the floors. I go in for a moment to indulge. I look up for the first time today and feel myself stand a little taller. I take my hands out of my pockets. My friend Cristal, a big, bald, strong, dark woman in her 40s, is day-dreaming by a stand of coffee mugs. "Don't take them all. Leave some for the tourists," I say to her. "Too pricey, anyway," she responds and then kisses me hard on the cheek, hugs me strongly, too, just like we do here. "Haven't seen you in centuries, little writer. Are you happier as a freelancer?" Cristal says through a smile. "Well, I work less," I say.

"Want to grab a cocktail?" I say to Cristal, surprised by my own words. It's too early for that, but Cristal agrees and I forget about the groceries I'm supposed to buy. We walk together right pass the supermarket and hike the hilly calles of the old city, moving up to San Sebastian Street, where bars are still throwing little sad parties for the tourists who dare to come down here and the locals with nothing better to do.

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As we reach the street, I remind myself that if there is one place I love dearly on this island: it is this rotten old city by the sea, rolling out cobbled streets and peopled by colorful folk. I remember that, and I get thirsty. We enter El Taller, where suspender-wearing bartenders with oily mustaches make the only cocktail I like in all of San Juan: Hijos de Borinquen—children of Borinquen (Puerto Rico). El Taller is old, rickety and smelly because there's no dinero to fix it, though the hipsters that run it would like you to think it looks that way on purpose. It was the new cool-kid spot a few years ago, included on every list of places to visit in San Juan; I like it because it reminds me of the cool Puerto Rico bars from the 70s, where locals would dance salsa well into the wee hours, satiated and drunk from drinking too much Schaefer. I order my Hijos, then another one, and then another one. Cristal drinks beer.

We are sitting by the bar table. The bartender introduces himself as Juancho.

"Mami, ustedes estan muy buenas pa' estar solas," says Juancho, (you're too hot to be alone).

"Not gonna work, dude," I tell him. "Go hit on a gringa," I say. "If you wanna talk like a normal person, then we can talk," Cristal adds.

"Okay, okay. Like the honesty, girls. What's up? Feeling shitty?"

"Life sucks and then you die," says Cristal.

"That's pretty shitty." He turns to me. "Where are you from?"

"I'm not a gringa," I say, a little pissed, a little tipsy.

"Okay, so are you from San Juan?" he asks.

"Now I am. But I'm from Cayey, originally. Del campo"—the countryside.

“Una jibarita, I see”—a hillbilly. Why were you ordering in English, then?”

I tell him I’m so used to it. I even think in English. “It’s disgusting,” I say. “My family laughs at me for it. But here in San Juan everyone’s so impressed when you speak English. I feel normal doing it here. Funny because in California people told me I had a strong accent and they could not understand me, and some treated me like shit for it. They could tell I was not from there. And now here you are saying I don’t look like I’m from here? Where the hell am I from then?”

I tell Juancho and Cristal that the worst thing about explaining to gringos where I’m from, when I was in the U.S., mostly had to do with geography. Many thought Puerto Rico was next to Spain. They confuse it with Portugal.

“Yeah, that shit happened to me,” Juancho says. “In Texas.”

“Rough,” Cristal says. “I mean, it’s rough for us, right?”

“Sometimes,” he says. He had lived in Houston, bartending at a bar downtown. “Some called me “brownie” or “little Ricky” for Ricky Martin—little cause I’m so short. But lo peor, the worst of all, was when people asked me for a green card. Like, what the fuck, I don’t need a green card, okay? I was born an American citizen!”

“During a vacation in New York,” Cristal says, “two guys at a 7-Eleven asked me for a green card when I was buying beer. I didn’t even know what that was.”

“That happened to me in Vieques, of all places,” I said.

“¡Que!” they said together.

“Asi mismo como lo oyen. The American lady I worked for asked if I needed a permit to travel to the U.S., or a green card to live there,” I said.

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“What did you say?,” asked Juancho.

“I said, ‘If I needed a green card and Puerto Ricans were not US citizens, then the US would not have turned Vieques into a testing ground for bombs for sixty years and I wouldn’t have developed cancer as a result.’ The lady said nothing back.”

Juancho asks if I want another Hijos, but I’m reaching drunkenness. He wants to know why I came back to Puerto Rico.

“I missed it,” I say. “When you leave, no one tells you how much you’re going to miss it. I felt like the coqui frog. Did you know that if you take the coqui out of the island it dies? It dies, carajo.”

“I never really left the island, so I don’t know how that would feel like,” said Cristal. “I’m glad I stayed and I will never leave.”

“Even when things look like that?” I said pointing to the decaying buildings outside.

“Yes, there is a putrid smell and the walls are crying, but it’s all ours,” said Cristal. “We can give it a good rinse and a fresh new paint job, and it will shine again.”

Juancho and I stared at her for a few seconds and then smiled. Things went wrong, but they don’t have to stay that way. I ordered another Hijos and called friends to coordinate a cleaning brigade. We knew it was our job. We’re Hijos de Borinquen.

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