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Motherland

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Bard College

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Motherland

a novella

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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Introduction

“Being neither ‘Latin American’ nor ‘North American,’ [Puerto Rico’s] place is a space of erasure. Many do not see it in a historical subject or finality. For them, the history of Puerto Rico does not count and, consequently, is not told. It comes neither before nor after; it remains outside, without complexities . . . It is the pure *not being*.”

— Arcadio Díaz Quiñones (79)

When considering ideas for a Senior Project, I never strayed from Puerto Rico as subject and setting. It was the only and best way, I felt, to honor this island to which I have simultaneously every right and no right. Growing up in the United States, journeying back once a year, my story has much in common with that of the narrator of *Motherland*, but this isn’t a project about me. Rather, it’s about women’s relationship to place, to the stories they allow themselves to tell, and to those stories that remain after the event becomes history.

This novella, based loosely on the life of my great-grandmother, began as an exploration of “authenticity” in Puerto Rican narratives. Being allowed to tell a story “authentically” (though, of course, we should question what it means to be authentic, rather than genuine or earnest) requires a means of authentic expression, i.e. one’s own language. But Puerto Rico does not have its own “native” language. This is but one example of the situation outlined by the Díaz Quiñones in the passage that opens this essay, Puerto Rico’s place “being a space of erasure.” Twice colonized, first by Spain, then by the United States, the island’s native tongue is necessarily an imposition of a coloniality. Doris Sommer and Alexandra Vega-Merino, in their introduction to Puerto Rican Giannini Braschi’s bilingual novel *Yo-Yo Boing!*, state that

“keeping Spanish dominant [in the face of English linguistic imperialism] ... has been practically heroic” (15), despite the fact that the colonial imposition of Spanish was an act of force against the indigenous Taíno.

Any Puerto Rican can tell you that every conversation takes place between the two languages, or across them. A long story told in Spanish will be punctuated by “you know?”; a takeout order will specify “chicken *con* broccoli.” This is the point of Braschi’s book, which employs code-switching throughout its entirety to evoke the linguistic reality of diasporic Puerto Ricans living in the States. The narrator, also named Giannina, speaks from a perspective that is conscious of the limitations and possibilities of this narrative mode. In one passage, she responds to a comment on its limitations from her partner, who is also bilingual:

— . . . You must realize you’re limiting your audience by writing in both languages. To know a language is to know a culture. You neither respect one nor the other.

— If I respected languages like you do, I wouldn’t write at all. El muro de Berlín fue derribado. Why can’t I do the same. Desde la torre de Babel, las lenguas han sido siempre una forma de divorciarnos del resto de la humanidad.

Poetry must find ways of breaking distance. (142)¹

The act of responding bilingually to a pro-monolingualism comment serves as proof of bilingualism’s effectiveness as a mode of speech and, by virtue of medium, narrative. The narrator-Giannina responds to the critique by rendering it moot, paving the way for the possibility of the truly bilingual mode.

¹ If I respected languages like you do, I wouldn’t write at all. *The Berlin Wall was torn down*. Why can’t I do the same. *Since the Tower of Babel, language has always been a form of divorcing ourselves from the rest of humanity*. Poetry must find ways of breaking distance. (Translation my own.)

Yo-Yo Boing! was, for me, key in the creation of this novella, because it asked (and answered) these questions of language in Puerto Rico. In its original, more ambitious iteration, the project was going to begin in Spanish, then incorporate English more and more until it was written completely in English, mirroring the linguistic coloniality of Puerto Rico. But ultimately, I realized that my vision for the project was less political and more personal, and I chose to write the novella without so much explicit manufacture of the organic bilingualism that marks Puerto Rican speech. In order to remain loyal to that concept, I wrote the novella between languages: the modern-day, bilingual narrator lives in English and therefore must narrate in English, but must communicate her characters in the language in which they lived, in Spanish. The jump between languages simultaneously communicates a jump across time. (A translation of all dialogue into English is available at the end of the novella for non-Spanish speakers.)

The act of Spanish being spoken in a narrative written in English was an important detail thematically as well as with respect to historicity. Because the project took its inspiration from the life of my great-grandmother, a Spanish speaker who knew little English, it was very important to me to respect that detail and her life as a historical figure, though the actual story departs notably from her life as she lived it.

My great-grandmother lived during a foundational and turbulent period in modern Puerto Rican history. A business owner of Corsican heritage, and a relative of the Puerto Rican revolutionary Antonio Mattei Lluberas, she was married to the mayor of Yauco, also of Corsican descent, who helped Luis Muñoz Marín, the first democratically elected governor of the island, frame the constitution that created the Estado Libre Asociado, or Commonwealth of Puerto Rico in 1952. Born before the Spanish American war of 1898, she, too, was a twice-colonized subject.

She lived to see Puerto Ricans gain American citizenship in 1917, the birth of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party in 1922 and the massacre of its members in Ponce on Palm Sunday, 1937, the Gag law of 1948 that made it illegal to fly the Puerto Rican Flag or sing the anthem, *La Borinqueña*, and of course, the ratification of the Constitution in 1952, mentioned above.

But despite her marriage to a mayor, my great-grandmother was not, at least on paper, a political person. Rather, she wrote poetry, in addition to keeping the business, a *bodega* that served food and sold imported goods. Her collected poems were odes to her children and grandchildren on special occasions, or musings on pollution, on the home — *poemas de mujer*, for lack of a better term. As we overlapped on this earth by only a year, and I never got the chance to speak directly with her, I don't know if she wrote about the *independentistas*, or about the question of a republic for Puerto Rico. I will probably never find out. But as I wrote the character inspired by her in this novella, I imagined a woman who lived in a time when *las poetisas* were unable to commit their politics to paper, even in the form of a poem.

I see the self-censure of those unwritten poems of the protagonist of this novella, inspired by my great-grandmother, as being analogous to the presence of Puerto Rican literature and history in mainstream American culture today. “Neither ‘Latin American’ nor ‘North American’,” as Díaz Quiñones says, Puerto Rico’s cultural output doesn’t have a shelf at the bookstore, nor its history a class in American secondary schools. Another impetus for this project was to correct this lack: to create a space for a Puerto Rican narrative outside of the dichotomy of Latin vs. North American culture. The trans-generational, multilingual form of *Motherland* suggests a new genre drawing on the literatures of diaspora, of cultures that do not conform to one continent, or to one century.

The choice to include a visual component as part of this project—photographs, taken from my family archive, that punctuate each chapter, or movement, of the novella—seeks to answer that last element of Díaz Quiñones’ damning assessment of the Puerto Rican place. If Puerto Rico “comes neither before nor after,” if it is “pure *not being*,” then these photographs too, *cannot be*. But the visual element holds proof of the *being*, and of the “finality” of the archived moment; the photographs show the evolution, in the past, of the relationship between two subjects — the place and the past, and me, the photographer, the future. If, as Barthes says, the camera makes us remember that we are going to die, so too does it make us remember that we have lived.

This brings me to my last choice, which was to have the story be told from the perspective of the non-living. I have structured the novella so that the narrator is being told the story by the ghost of her great-grandmother, who appears to her at the foot of her bed in Puerto Rico, where she is visiting. It was necessary, almost obvious, even, that the character of the great-grandmother have control over the story being told; in order to authentically convey her passion, denied to her in life, she must be attached, by the spirit, to the place until she is able to properly tell the story that comprises the novella. The narrative had to be told jointly through the present, by means of the young Puerto Rican-American narrator, and through the past, by means of her great-grandmother, in order to form a complete portrait of Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican women and their relationship to the place — the motherland, as it were.

In sum, this project attempts to begin filling in the “space of erasure” of Puerto Rico and tell a story both universal (of the irrevocable relationship of motherhood to loss) and highly

specific to a place (Puerto Rico). My hope is that the reader emerges with a sense of a rarely told history and a deeper knowledge of America's oldest colony.

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Timeline of Puerto Rican History

- 1493 First contact on Borinkén between the indigenous Taíno people and Cristóbal Colón.
- 1511 Slave revolt led by the cacique Agueybaná II, in collaboration with other Taíno caciques and the Carib people, against the Spanish; Agueybaná II is killed.
- 1550 Taíno people nearly extinct due to slavery or forced labor, disease and mass extermination by the Spaniards.
- 1810 - 1825
- Wars of Independence in South America shrink the Spanish empire to just Cuba and Puerto Rico.
- 1815 *Real Cédula de Gracias*, or Royal Decree of Graces, declared, promising land in Puerto Rico or Cuba to any Catholic who swears allegiance to Spain. Many Corsicans, in particular, begin migrating to Puerto Rico.
- 1868 *El Grito de Lares*, the first Puerto Rican declaration of independence against Spain. Puerto Rican republic declared. Spanish suppress the uprising; its organizers go into exile in the United States.
- 1897 *Intentona de Yauco*, the last Puerto Rican declaration of independence against Spain, led by Antonio Mattei Lluberas. On September 25th, Spain grants Puerto Rico political autonomy.
- 1898 Spanish-American War. The United States invades Guayanilla, Puerto Rico, on July 25th. Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines and Guam are annexed to the United States by the Treaty of Paris. It becomes compulsory to speak English in schools in Puerto Rico.

- 1902 Cuba gains independence from the United States.
- 1917 Puerto Ricans are granted United States citizenship so that they may enlist to fight in World War I.
- 1937 Ponce Massacre. On Palm Sunday, police open fire on peaceful marchers from the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party protesting the arrest of Albizu Campos, President of the Nationalist Party, killing 17 civilians and wounding 235 bystanders.
- 1946 Jesús T. Piñero appointed governor of the island. He is the first Puerto Rican to hold the post.
- 1948 Luis Muñoz Marín elected governor. He is the first democratically elected governor in Puerto Rico. He is re-elected four times.
- 1948 Law 53, better known as the “Gag Law” (La Ley de la Mordaza) is enacted, making it illegal to fly the Puerto Rican flag, sing the national anthem, or speak, write, or form an assembly in favor of Puerto Rican independence.
- 1950 From October 30 to November 1, popular uprisings sweep Puerto Rico, in Jayuya, Utuado, Ponce, San Juan, and other cities. Griselio Torresola and Óscar Collazo attempt to assassinate President Truman in Washington D.C. Albizu Campos is arrested and sentenced to 80 years in prison. 3000 nationalists arrested across the island.
- 1952 Constitution ratified on July 25th, establishing Puerto Rico as a Free Associated State (*Estado libre asociado*, better known as a commonwealth) under the United States.

Motherland

a novella

At the end of her long life, Ana Dominga would remember only a few things: the emerald green wax that shone off the new banana leaves; the spunsugar sound of a china plate breaking; the flavor of the first black coffee of the yield; the softness of an empty bed; and the smell of the bombs and of the plaster that littered the streets.

I know this because it has been passed down through the blood, through the spirit and into the memory. I am compelled to know because of something beyond me, calling me to her, from across the generations.

Ana Dominga is sitting in the corner of my room, curled in her rocking chair, as old as the bark of a tree, watching me write her life. It is so painful for her to see herself be told like this, she who is as extant as a shadow, dependent on the living to write her long-dead story. It's a compromise, for her to give me her words and for me to make them real again, so I sit, dutifully tapping, for my *tía*.

Cada historia es una historia de familia, she says. Every story is a family story. She is full of truths like these. For her, every story is four daughters, a ruined fortune, an unlikely suitor, because those are the stories that get passed down from mother to daughter, aunt to niece, when the radio has been switched off or we are sitting together under the violence of a hurricane, trying to pass the time until the calm. She maintains that here, especially, all stories are family stories, because they're only decipherable through the strands of alien last names, each inextricable from a trait, a history, Spain, Corsica, Nigeria, New York, lawyers, poets, moneylenders, men of God. Because they wouldn't be here if it weren't for the land, and the land wouldn't mean much if it weren't for them.

The story that brought me to her, in fact, was from my *tío abuelo*, my great-uncle Vicente, and only circles back to her tangentially.

“Did you ever hear the story about the Altieri?” In the room with my sister, he speaks English, forgetting, in old age, that we’re both Spanish speakers.

“No, *tío*, I haven’t.”

It goes like this: When Juan Altieri, a rich Corsican *hacendado*, married Maria Lartigaut Calder, the daughter of a slightly less rich Corsican *hacendado*, they were quickly blessed with a daughter, Lidia. As people of these families do, they brought to Yauco from Adjuntas a nameless Calder cousin who would take care of Lidia, allowing Maria to keep her hands clean. When the cousin became pregnant, she was sent back to Adjuntas “for the shame,” my *tío abuelo*’s words, where her son was born and begat a line of to-this-day illegitimate Calders, born of that virgin shame. I, writing now, want to name it—a rape, it was a rape—but to have that word so stark at the end of a story my *tío abuelo* recalls humorously, the illegitimacy still the butt of the joke, seems unfaithful to the story, an overstep of mine not to tell it the way my *tío abuelo* does. Ana Dominga doesn’t take her eyes from mine for a second, willing me to tell it.

I pause, soaking it in. I offer something harmless. “Wow, *tío*. That’s a story.”

It doesn’t end there. It’s really the beginning of a long story, says my *tío abuelo*, about Juan Altieri, who married into the family, by the way. When Maria Lartigaut Calder, now Maria Lartigaut de Altieri, passed away, Altieri married another woman, Enriqueta, from another prominent Yauco family, *los Bartolomei*. Enriqueta gave him a series of children and, with that gift, forbade his daughters from his first marriage, Lidia and Agostina, from marrying, so that they could take care of her and their father as they aged. It’s a story so typical I could name a

dozen books with the same plot that have also been adapted for film, a pure family story *según* Ana Dominga.

Of course they fell in love with handsome but unsuitable boys from the town. Lída was in love with Álvaro, my *bisabuelo*, a distant cousin on the dead Lartigaut side. They had always known each other, but in the heat of late adolescence something came alive in each of them as they brushed past each other in the *placita* that anchored the church. Álvaro knew that she was an impossible love—everyone in the town, with its sole boulevard, knew—but pursued her anyway. They sent letters back and forth—*te quiero, te amo, ardo por tus besos*, etc.—until Mami and Papi found the secret stash under Lída’s twin-size. Lída protested—*son suyas, Mami, nunca he visto siquiera a este Don Nadie*—but in the end she was sent back to Corsica with the other landowner’s naughty daughters. (The tragedy is that it’s assumed she did in fact love him too—but why? Women are always being exiled for being loved by men.)

Agostina also *se enamoró* with a super *Don Nadie*, so *Don Nadie* that even my *tío abuelo*, keeper of secrets, town-in-La-Mancha’d him—*de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme*. They, however, skulked off to San Juan and then New York to get married, the soft mango of pregnancy barely curving out of her white dress, at City Hall, on the very edge of that island. (What the twists of this story have in common is their characters’ moving further and further away from the mountainside nucleus, a town known for less and less.) They only returned to Yauco when Altieri was on his deathbed, his second wife having long passed, cared for dutifully, sweetly, by home-come Lída. History wants so badly for these people to leave this earth in atonement, but Altieri passed surrounded by his seven children in a mansion that he built after the strategic acquisition of land made him the richest man on that side of the *cordillera*. Lída,

who was still in middle age as beautiful as the inside of a ripe pomelo, took care of that house until she, too, died.

Ana Dominga wants me to tell this story because she could have been her, Lída; Ana Dominga was the one who married Álvaro, Lída's one-time *novio*, a suitable man after a not-so-suitable one. As my *tío abuelo* tells the story, he, as a young boy, was sent on an errand to the Altieri house to deliver a package of *longaniza*. Lída answered the door and asked him his name. To me, he says this, this heartbreaking accident of time, as though it were the punchline of a joke, the way he told the end of the first Altieri story. He gave his name —Soy Vicente Dominicci Torrei, el hijo de Álvaro Dominicci—, and in response, Lída said: —*¡Yo pudiera haber sido tu madre!* I could have been your mother. Not, I was almost your mother. The subjunctive makes it improbable, but history makes it impossible. (The complicated thing is that, given the tangled connections of Corsicans in the town at that time, had she in fact been his mother, there is no guarantee that he and his brothers would have turned out any differently.) My *tío abuelo* laughs and laughs, the story over.

Ana Dominga is shaken by the way Vicente, her son, my *tío abuelo* tells it. She hears *I could have been your mother* as a reminder of a fact that had been drilled into her after almost a century: that she came as the second choice, though I suspect there is more to it than this. That when Álvaro was thwarted in his pursuit of Lída by a transatlantic steamer, the possibility of her bloomed like red wine on a white jacket. Ana Dominga has, over a century, tried to forget, she wants me to know. She has tried to remember that she did so much more over a century than marry, but everything feels as if cast in a shadow. She owned and ran a café, the only of its kind, in Yauco, from the day she married to the day she slipped on wet marble and broke her femur in

two places, leaving her bedridden for almost fifteen years until she died. Her husband by that time was but a distant memory, a silhouette on a postage stamp, and the children of his various *aventuras* were long settled across the island, though some dutifully returned to keep vigil over their *tía*. What was singularly amazing was that she lived over a hundred years, carefully lifting herself into her wheelchair and stationing herself at the balcony that overlooked the Plaza de Armas and beyond, towards Collores.

She dislikes that I say *lived*, because in English it has a definitive end, whereas the Spanish, *vivía*, the imperfect, connotes better the ongoingness of her now-ended life. She dislikes that I tell this story in English at all. (It's the only way I can tell it in good faith.) She cannot control whether I render the subjunctive as would or could. She fears more than anything else the lack of control, which she feared as much in life as in death. Which is why she wants for me to tell the story of how she took control, or didn't, and how she learned to soak in the salitre that came in off the Caribbean Sea.

This is all between the pages of her *poemario*, the collection of her poems that was bound for the occasion of her hundredth birthday. These poems were squarely in the genre of *poemas de mujer*—in English, inelegantly, woman poems. Always watching, observing, chronicling first communions, weddings, births and deaths like a reporter. *Para Tonio en su boda. A Paloma, un ave maravillosa. Contra el vicio*. Four-line stanzas. Simple rhymes. It was enough to simply write them against the great silencer (time) and a society of men who would never take a *mujer poeta* seriously.

What no one knew was that, when the book was presented to her, she cried not because of the tenderness of the gesture, but rather because the incomplete *poemario* would be her

legacy, because she had not in life had the courage to write about the profound sadness she had faced; indeed, she hadn't written a single poem during that period at all. It was impossible to be a woman and a mother and to be sad and to fear and to love all at once while also writing it down, for her. And so she gives it to me, less like a burden than like a white, handknit shawl draped around my shoulders; it is mine to pass on to my daughters, and to their daughters, and so on.

This I know because I was there, at least in body. The first daughter to be born from her matriline since her own two, I was brought to her like an offering. She held me in her ancient lap and, because she could no longer speak by then, looked up, flush, her eyes wet with involuntary tears, to cheers and clapping from all the *primos* and *primas*. Then I was brought back to the mainland to grow. It wasn't until many years later that my *tía* and I knew each other again, when she appeared to me at the foot of my borrowed bed in Río Piedras, to tell me her story.



Ana Dominga Torrei, angel, was on her way to the café when the wind picked up, scrambled the hot, stagnant air of November, and deposited at her feet the front page of that day's newspaper, which read that her husband had been elected mayor of Yauco.

She paused there in the street and read the article studiously, with a bend in her neck, as though its meaning were far away and she had to squint to understand. It said that he, a Popular Democrat, had won in a landslide, and that even the incumbent, who had only been in town for a year, filling in for his father, had voted for him. The governor would come to town the next week to meet him, as long as there wasn't a demonstration that day. Ana Dominga thought about it and calculated that she would need to double the regular order of rolls and Cola syrup to anticipate the volume of people that would mill around the plaza that day, wandering into the café when all the hands were shaken.

She turned on Calle del Sol and started up the hill, rickety with cobblestones, her new, white purse blowing in the wind behind her. She held it close to her chest so that it wouldn't be lost in the wind, unusually strong for this time of year. In it, she had her black notebook, a few loose dollars, and the keys to the café and to her apartment. Her hands around the purse were brown and delicate, worn but soft, like carefully tanned leather. She wore her nails unpainted but long, the style in those days. She rarely wore makeup but didn't need to, her skin still tight around her eyes and lips, lightly freckled as it had been when she was a girl. Her dark brown hair, neatly combed and pinned, stood against her face like a frame. The one part of her that did not appear polished, with dignity, were her shoes: brown, scuffed, what used to be her church shoes, the years of scrubbing them free of the daily stickiness of the café had left them faded and worn. She needed, making a mental note, to buy new ones.

By then she was in the shadow of forty years old, and had been married for almost eighteen years, officially, but she only occasionally saw her husband around their small town now, three years since he had gone to live with a girlfriend he had gotten pregnant. Yauco was, as it is now, six streets and a series of rolling hills, but two people who lived rather public lives could hide themselves surprisingly well, if they knew what routes to take. Her husband had always been good at that, staying out of the way, out of focus, the better to observe what was going on around him. Which was why he made an obvious candidate for mayor. On the folio of the paper his face beamed out, light against the shadow of the building he and the other town officials stood against. He still looked young, nowhere near his forty-five years.

Ana Dominga was then not quite middle aged but age had middled her, made her stomach slightly looser, made her hair a little wilder in the wind. Her face was still young, but the years of sun had worn it down and given her a shadow of wrinkles around her eyes and mouth. She was petite but commanded a presence, her voice soft but decisive. A single mother to six children, she was the subject of many prayers from the well-meaning people in town; they thought of her not as needing their prayers, but of being fortified by God's grace all the same.

She held her hat tightly on her head as she made her way around the corner to the café. Its door opened with a bang. The wind, which had followed her all down Calle del Sol and up the avenida that lined the plaza, now ran around the plaza, making it so the water in the fountain fell at an angle, like ribbons around a maypole. A cloud of dust, a sigh, exhaled into the large room. She walked across the large, open space of the middle to the white marble countertop, which was at once the centerpiece and border of the room, the line between them and her, and set her bag down inside a wooden drawer that Luis Calderai had made for her. The wood was dark,

mysterious, slightly foreign feeling, having lived another life before becoming a drawer to keep her purse in her café in the town in which she was born.

People would begin to come in as soon as the sun had crested over the eave of the church across the plaza. And all of them would have read the newspaper, would have heard the news. She began to sweep, her heels clacking against the worn wood of the floor.

Antonia walked in as Ana Dominga had finished wiping down the counter for a second time. —Buenos días, mamá—, she said. Ana Dominga let her daughter sleep in a little bit before coming into work with her, now that Antonia had finished high school. Antonia undid her scarf from around her neck and used it to tie her dark, curly hair away from her face. She began to boil water to make coffee and took down a ceramic cup from the rack that hung above their heads. Ana Dominga kept tidying at the counter and watched at the windows. Slowly the plaza began to come to life, a number of ants crossing the colonial square at intervals, now the rest of her children led by her younger daughter, Isabela, in immaculate order holding hands past the window, the youngest, Carlos, waving at her on the way to school, her heart heavy watching them from behind the windows. But she was glad to have the café, and her daughter to help her, and Yauco all around her as she remembered it, shrouded by palms, the church bell ringing.

Just after eight, a friend of Antonia's came in for her morning coffee before going to work. —Buenos días, Titi— she said, the two sharp syllables, *tee, tee*, snapping Ana Dominga away from the window. This friend, Lorena or Loreto, she could never remember, worked as a secretary in the mayor's office. She carried that day's newspaper under her arm.

—Oye—, she said, addressing Antonia, —¿tú sabes lo de tu papá o qué?

—Sí, claro que sí. ¡Qué emoción! Aunque tendré que pararlo en la calle para felicitarlo—, she said, almost smirking.

—Basta, ¿eh? No hables mal de tu papá— said Ana Dominga. Her voice was quiet and confident, a little nasal, and she pronounced her *s*’ crisply, as if to set an example for the young girls who dropped it from their words in that distinctly caribbean way.

—Y usted, Titi—, said the friend, ¿votó usted?

—Claro que no—, said Ana Dominga, —nunca voto. No hace ni una grama de diferencia, ya que se elige el ganador antes de que votemos.

—Mamá, no sea tan cínica. Mira lo que pasó con Muñoz Marín. Y acabó usted de decirme que no hablara mal de mi papá. Él ganó la posición por su dedicación al pueblo.

Ana Dominga blew air out of her mouth and pointed with her lips to a man in the corner who had been waiting to be served. —¿No tienes tú trabajo, hija linda?

Antonia huffed away. Her friend lit a cigarette at the counter. —Sabe usted qué, Titi, que con su papá en la oficina del alcalde, vamos a ver muchos cambios aquí en Yauco, en todo Puerto Rico. El gobernador no viene para conocer a todos los alcaldes de los pueblitos de la cordillera. Me dicen que su esposo ahora es un hombre poderoso.

—No es atractivo chismear—, said Ana Dominga, leaning over the counter, —ni fumar dentro de un café—. She plucked the cigarette out of the girl’s hand and tossed it in the sink behind her. —¿No te lo dijo tu mamá?

—Disculpe, Titi.

—No hay de qué—, said Ana Dominga. That was her way: authoritative and forgiving at the same time. This was why most women in the town, especially the younger ones, saw her as a

kind of universal mother. She didn't like to acknowledge it, but she thought of herself this way, too.

The door opened and shut constantly with people coming and going, and soon the room was filled with the morning chatter of men and women on their way to work, on their way to shop, meeting friends in the morning in the café, the only one of its kind in Yauco. Antonia turned on the radio but soon it was deafened by the sound of men, women talking and eating, laughing, spilling crumbs from a *pancito con mantequilla*, the brush of napkin, newspaper, leather, ceramic, the liquid sound of coffee and milk, the chunk of cut sugarcane, the outside sound of the plaza waking up, the clack of heels on cobblestones and the occasional running of an early exhaust pipe. Antonia flitted around the place serving coffee, tea, plates of cured meat, smiling white through her red mouth, her movements quick and specific. Every customer greeted Ana Dominga by name as they came in, or by calling out *¡Titi!* as they removed their hats and found an open seat in the increasingly crowded room, calling out a quick *¡Nos vemos!*, we'll see you, as they left. At every sound of the door brushing against the jamb Ana Dominga registered a pleasure of having served.

The café may have been started with money from her husband's wealthy *hacendado* family, but its success was all her own. She was the one who had the idea after seeing pictures brought back from Paris. She brought in the marble countertop, the chrome-sided tables and chairs. She decided to serve bread with guava paste and *queso fresco*, *galletitas*, *lomo* from Spain, pineapple and *guineos*, alongside hamburgers and Spam and frappés. It was the only place of its kind in town that wasn't the church or the *parque*, and young and old people alike came each day for a *cafecito con leche*, *avena con coco*.

At lunchtime her children filed in from school, demanding hamburgers. —Hola, mami—, said Isabela, kissing her mother on both cheeks. She sat down with Antonia at the far end of the counter, together again after the long separation of half a day at school. They were always so close, the bond between two sisters so immense, though they were so different. Antonia was simple (not that a person ever really is), where Isabela was, and Ana Dominga hated to say this, more complicated. Where Antonia was content to brush her curls nightly in front of the mirror, Isabela devoured book after book, magazines from the States, even the newspaper. Isabela wrote poems, like her mother, but only in English, so that no one could read them, though of course she translated them for her sister. As a child she insisted on walking everywhere backwards, so as to have different view from the one Antonia would get by walking forwards. That was their relationship: Isabela the moon to Antonia's sun, Antonia the land to Isabela's ocean.

Obviously, she loved all her children equally, but she was most fascinated by her two daughters, and the triad they all made together. The boys were still so young, and there were so many of them; they would get on fine in a world that was made for them.

Francisco, her second-youngest, held up a piece of paper and proudly waved it in front of his mother, jolting her from her train of thought. —Mira, ¡nos dieron un mapa de los Estados Unidos!

Carlos, with his small lisp, added, pointing, —Aquí está Nueva York, y Florida, y California.

—¿Y dónde está nuestro Puerto Rico?—, Ana Dominga asked. The boys looked at each other, and Vicente, the second-oldest boy, pointed vaguely to the ocean that ran along the coast. —No, no niño—, she said, taking the map and laying it on the counter. —Puerto Rico está . . .

—, but she couldn't find it. The mapmaker had cut off the map just under Florida. —Bueno, está por allí—, she said, pointing at the countertop slightly southeast of Florida. —Almuercen ya.

Ana Dominga watched her boys eat their *hamburguesitas* and thought about how it was impossible for them to find Puerto Rico on a map. They were there, weren't they? Even an afterthought has its place. The title for a poem came into her head: *Entre ser y estar en el Caribe*. She took her black notebook out of her apron pocket and noted it on a blank page. The poem itself would come later, to be tucked into the drawer of her nightstand.

She remembered looking at maps when she was young and newly married, when their father was just her husband and had promised to take her on a boat to New York, though she had never actually left Yauco. She had imagined she would see all of America from the boat as they meandered up the coast to that other island, Manhattan. But in fact he had never even been able to take her beyond Collores.

Looking at her boys, with the juice of their hamburgers dripping down their chins, she wondered if they knew or would know about that aspect of her before-life. Because when she herself was growing up she felt that she knew so little about the personhood of the people who had raised her, her parents, and it wasn't until they died and become angels themselves that she realized that they, like she, were people, and that she, like they, would one day have communicated everything she would be capable of telling and then expire, like milk. But something about the smallness of her sons' faces, the silkiness of their hair, that prevented her from asking her children those *did you knows*. She considered that maybe if her husband had continued to be their father he would be able to transmit that secret, inside history for her, without her consent, as he did so many other things. Maybe these small people whom she had

made would for a long time only know her as the woman that made them brush their teeth, and only after she was no longer that woman would they understand her as that, a woman. But it was all too much to take against the backdrop of their eating lunch.

They finished up and walked back to the school, which was next to the church on the other side of the plaza adjacent to the street that the café was on. Isabela led the pack the block and a half back, as she always did. She relished going to school, and was perhaps too aware of only having one year left before she would graduate and go to work with Antonia in their mother's café. After that, she would get married, Ana Dominga thought, the most responsible thing for a girl to do.

By three o'clock the café was more or less empty. Ana Dominga told Antonia to go home and start simmering dinner. She went to sit at one of the round tables that had been moved outside the store onto the sidewalk facing the plaza. The wind had died down. A few pigeons cooed around the base of the fountain, jumping from its rim to the small gazebo that was sometimes a newsstand that stood at the corner of the square. Ana Dominga picked up the newspaper from that day and began to pore over it in earnest. Aside from the note about her husband, there was a piece about another bombing in Utuado, a demonstration in Villa Rosales. The *independentistas*, the activists behind the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, were thriving on their side of the island.

She sighed, considering the news. More demonstrations, more bombings meant more days where she couldn't open the café, more spoiled milk. She looked around the plaza, the church with its high, Spanish arches and plaster moldings, crumbling from the salitre, and then up the *cerro*, with its multicolor houses packed tightly together, their ornate, wood-framed

balconies blending into each other, like a railway above the narrow alleys, telephone wires beginning to criss-cross the paths and give way to laundry lines further up the hill, where the city yielded to coffee growers and the lush, green mountains of the cordillera, the lush, green mountains where she was born, where the *independentistas* moved like palm fronds in the wind.

She had come down from the *hacienda* and met her husband in that same plaza, buying a magazine at the newsstand that now carried the newspaper with his face on it. He had that same mustache over the widest smile she had ever seen, reaching at least to his ears, which stuck straight out from his head. When he killed another teenager for asking her to dance she considered it the most romantic thing she had ever had done for her, straight out of a *radionovela*. Murder! It was so extreme. Never mind that he had shot the other boy with a pearl-handled pistol his father, a Sorbonne-educated doctor turned *hacendado*, had brought back with him from the wild streets of Cap Corse. They married in a Catholic ceremony in the church at the top of a hill, looking out over the sea.

(But I would do the same thing, wouldn't you? He was a Corsican, from a good family, a French family, and look, now people called him *alcalde*, mayor. There wasn't a whole lot else she could do. Who would love her? I, half a century later, it turns out.)

He had always been sympathetic to the *independentistas*. In fact, she tells me that later, after everything else had transpired, he refused to give up the names of the *independentistas* from Yauco, even though he had more than enough reason to do so. To the Americans, he said: *Métanse ustedes en los negocios suyos, yo me meto en los míos*. Stay out of our business, essentially. His quote in the newspaper illustrated, however, a dramatic turnaround; he said he

was looking forward to collaborating with Governor Luis Muñoz Marín to enhance the status of Puerto Ricans in the eyes of the Americans: *Que les mostremos cómo podemos ser americanos*.

To Ana Dominga, the *independentistas* fought for a noble cause, but it didn't make the least difference to her to whom Puerto Rico belonged. She, with her shiny American citizenship, could go to New York any time she pleased (though she didn't, and wouldn't). She purchased her clothes from a Sears Roebuck catalogue. So what if Puerto Rico was not, literally, on the map? In the Dominican Republic, in Haiti, people starved. She ran her business with American dollars. Which is not to say she wasn't proud of being Puerto Rican; she was, immensely. She felt it in her chest when she heard the hushed, whispered *Borinqueña* in the aftermath of an *independentista* bombing. But she knew where she stood, and that was firmly southeast of Miami.

Ana Dominga took another sip of her *cafecito*. She put down the paper on the table and looked back out on the plaza she knew so well, at night and during the day, over the course of years. The church across the plaza to the east had its doors closed but its shutters opened, and Ana Dominga imagined it empty, dusty, illuminated by the growing-westward light in a few angled sections that would brighten a few key points: the altar, the capilla of San Pedro to the left, and the second pew where Titi Negroni sat and prayed the rosary every day.

Titi Negroni was like a ghost in town, spoken of hushedly, hurriedly. She had been the wife of a prominent importer of Spanish goods, but it had been many devastating hurricanes since anyone remembered how long ago her husband's soul had left his body. Now she spent most of her time in the church, where she stayed from the morning mass until the last candle went out. She was old and yet ageless, so wrinkled that her skin, for all the wrinkles, blended

together again, like many layers of lace. Her status as a fixture in the town rested upon something no one could really touch, a feeling that was both familiar and foreign, that allowed Titi Negroni to have her presence felt even as she prayed the rosary alone in the church.

Ana Dominga felt a kinship with Titi Negroni, strange as her presence was. Though she had no children, Titi Negroni was, too, like a mother to Yauco itself. She was everywhere at once, her presence as comforting as the sun's rising. Ana Dominga was Catholic, not religious, but when she speaks to me about Titi Negroni now there is something holy in the air around her name. One day, while hearing mass in the church, Titi Negroni, in her usual spot a pew ahead, sneezed; Ana Dominga conspicuously avoided the phrase *Dios te bendiga*, God bless you, because she could not command God to bless this woman the same way she could not command her husband to be a present father, or Puerto Rico to be on the map they handed out in school.

Usually she would go into the church and appreciate the light that fell on the altar in the late afternoon, but on that day she closed the café early, double-locked the latch, and walked in the opposite direction from her house, towards the water, to the modern building where her husband was living with a young woman named Sylvia, the *aventura* he had that sundered their family unit.

(This is what I mean when I say she thought of herself as an all-mother of the town. When Ana Dominga found out that, out of the many, many *aventuras* her husband had had through the years, that he had managed to love only one, a poor girl from Adjuntas, she realized that this was her chance to extricate herself from the punishing life of being his *mujer*. She gave them her blessing and went with the children to live above the café, while they absconded to the cheap apartment he kept for those purposes. This caused her a great guilt: Ana Dominga, older,

more attuned to life's injustices, could bear the psychic weight of an unhappy marriage, but Sylvia had never known how good life could be. So Ana Dominga, to repay that debt she owed, visited her, brought her old baby clothes, stockings, housedresses, even when her husband yelled that they could afford new things. She checked that she was eating enough and that her husband—their husband, sometimes, in her head—took her to see her parents on some Sundays. And when Sylvia got pregnant after that first, catalytic one miscarried, Ana Dominga found a doctor that would take the long walk down to the water, through the loud, disorderly neighborhood where they lived. She tried to take care of Sylvia the way Sylvia had taken care of her marriage.)

Ana Dominga rang the bell at the gate and watched as the lights ticked on in each room towards the door, now that it was dark. Sylvia came out, all belly and hair, in a house coat that looked new. Ana Dominga could hear the TV blaring in the living room where it had been placed just so, under the lattice window, that the neighbors could hear the fact of their having a television through the night, a behavior that belonged in a neighborhood where it wouldn't be considered, literally, lording over. As Sylvia approached the gate, Ana Dominga could see that she was barefoot.

—Felicidades— Ana Dominga said, congratulating her.

—No está, Titi — said Sylvia through the wrought iron bars of the gate.

—Vine para verte a ti. ¿Puedo entrar?

—Rapidito—. She undid the lock and let Ana Dominga follow her in. The rooms were strewn with boxes, and the furniture, normally covered in the artifacts of a life, was bare. The TV

was still on, and Ana Dominga imagined their two children lying on their bellies in front of it, their mother helpless to put them to bed.

—¿Adónde se van a mudar?

—Pues, claro que tenemos que mudarnos a una casa entera, ¿no? Ya que él es alcalde. Y cuánto tiempo quería serlo.

—Supongo que sí. Entonces, ¿por qué no estás celebrando con él esta noche?

—Lo celebramos anoche. Había un montón de gente aquí. Compró una botella enorme de espumante. Hoy está en San Juan, conociendo al gobernador.

—¿Tú no fuiste con él?

—No—, said Sylvia, —pero me ha prometido que me llevará allí un día. Hoy hubo una reunión importante. Pero es un secreto, no digas na’.

—¿A quién se lo voy a decir?—. They were quiet for a moment, and then Ana Dominga said: —No me dijiste adónde van, pues.

Sylvia shook her head. —No quiere que yo te diga.

Ana Dominga was stunned. —Pero, ¿por qué?

—No le gusta que estés en la casa, que me visites. Es inapropiado, me dijo.

—¿Cómo que inapropiado?

—Ya que fuiste su mujer, y ahora que yo la soy, no tengo que explicártelo. Mejor que se hace final la separación entre ustedes, y entre nosotras.

Ana Dominga gathered her white purse against her and rose to leave.

—Agradezco todo lo que has hecho para mí, y para las niñas—. Sylvia stayed sitting, her hand over her expanding womb, until Ana Dominga had closed the latch behind her.

The way she tells it to me now, she felt stupid. Embarrassed. Rejected for being so selfless, and welcoming Sylvia into her heart when she had no reason to, and every reason not to. Why shouldn't she be allowed to go see Sylvia's children, whom she had almost help raise, who were almost her own children but for the womb in which they grew? How embarrassing, to have to escort herself out of the house like a servant.

She walked back up the hill, away from the water, in the dark, holding her purse close to her side. It could be twenty minutes, or it could be an hour, until she would reach the plaza again and arrive at the apartment, where the smell of Antonia's cooking would greet her. The night was cooler now, soft, and the sound of the waves brushing against the shoreline of the island could be heard receding into the distance as Ana Dominga walked towards town. Her heels clicking against the recently paved sidewalk sounded a metronome against which the waves kept the beat, even whole notes against her ta-ta-ta-ta. It was a beautiful night, as beautiful as any, which sharpened her humiliation. Too old to cry, she concentrated on walking in quarter notes.

When she got back to Yauco Pueblo, and followed the shadowy steps up to the entrance of her apartment, she felt a sense of relief at coming home to her children, who would have to love her no matter what. She could see Antonia, Vicente and Francisco through the wrought iron gate that covered the door and the windows, sitting around the radio like an illustration in a magazine. Ana Dominga watched them without making her presence known.

In all, they were six, willowy children with soft, dark hair and skin like the inside of a walnut, more like her than their father in appearance. None were much more than two years apart; Antonia, the oldest, was 17, and Carlos, the youngest, was 8. They were all named for family, but at a certain point in all those Corsican families the ten or so names in use blended

together in one long line dotted with Marías in their various iterations. Her husband had wanted names that were wrapped up in the church like the swaddling around their newborns, Devota, Concepción, but Ana Dominga put her foot down; she felt like the presence of *dominus* in her own name was like a weight around her shoulders, especially for someone who could never be as powerful as God. It was too much to live up to. (Another reason why she was called Titi Torrei in town.)

She walked in the door and prepared the kitchen for a late dinner, thanking Antonia for waiting for her. When they had all sat down, Ana Dominga noticed that one seat was empty.

—¿Dónde está Isabela?— she asked.

Antonia and Alvarito looked at each other. —No sé— said Antonia.

—Fue con los gemelos—, said Francisco, —y nos dijo no que no te dijéramos—.

Alvarito kicked him under the table.

Los gemelos. The twins. Ana Dominga stiffened. Margot and Alberto Calderai, the younger children of Luis, the man who had made her the wooden drawer in which she kept her purse in the café. She had known him well before she was married, but she was grateful that their children, even in their small classes, had never become friends. Luis was a brilliant man, another Corsican, who chose woodworking as a profession because of its noble utility, though he could quote Homer in dactylic hexameter. Of course he was an *independentista*. Those ideas had trickled down, militantly, into his oldest son, Fernando, who was somewhere in the foothills of Jayuya, a cadet of the Republic, which was how the Nationalist Party called their young recruits. The mother, Elisa, was in shambles. Of the twins, Margot was exceptionally clever, always competing with Isabela for the highest grades in their class. Alberto was smart, but lazy, and had

been friendly with Alvarito playing soccer in the schoolyard. To Ana Dominga, it didn't matter if their sons were friends, but brilliant girls could be so cruel to each other, push each other to the furthest edge.

—Bueno, espero que regrese pronto— said Ana Dominga, repressing the worry from her voice. The family minus one ate quietly, each member preoccupied for their own reasons, all circling back to the absence of Isabela, who barely ever came home late. Antonia cleaned up the meal while Ana Dominga made Carlos, Francisco and Vicente bathe. The boys were in their room early, while Antonia sat up with her mother for a little while before falling asleep in the wicker chair.

Ana Dominga sat watching the door almost without blinking. She didn't imagine, on purpose, where Isabela was, where Margot could have brought her, who she could be with, what they could be doing together: drugs, sex, walking down to the shore and taking off their shoes, wetting the soles of their feet, the webs between their toes, in the Caribbean, she forgot about it all, she who had never done any of those things even after marriage, and then it was too late. Ana Dominga wanted these things for Isabela, she wanted her to be a girl who *did*, but not if it kept her daughter out of her reach.

A memory jumped into her head and played there on a loop. She had taken Antonia, Isabela and Alvarito to Lago Lucchetti when they were younger, when Vicente was not yet even a seed to be planted. The children toddled around the rim of the lake, picking young reeds out of the wetland to weave into baskets. Ana Dominga relished the chance to sit in the grass and pull her skirt up over her knees and let her ankles warm by the water after the long walk. She had been about to doze off when she heard Isabela shrieking.

—¡Mamá! Mamá!

—¿Qué te pasó, mi niña?

Isabela was alone, crouched down low by the edge of the lake. Antonia and Vicente were playing around the bend. Ana Dominga took Isabela by the elbow and tried to get her to stand up, to see what was wrong, but she squatted even more firmly down. —No puedo dejarlos solos—, she said.

—¿Quién, mi reina?

—Los patos, mis patitos—, she whined. She lifted up a corner of her skirt to show six or seven yellow ducklings huddled together under her legs. —Su mamá no está, no los puedo dejar solitos.

—Bueno, pues, la esperamos entonces—, said Ana Dominga, taking a seat next to her daughter. Isabela stayed firmly squatted over the ducklings for almost an hour, wiggling her small body every so often to ease the tension. But the ducks' mother didn't come back, and it was getting late. She begged and pleaded with Isabela to get up and start the walk home. Isabela refused to leave the ducklings. —¡Pero su mamá!— she cried.

—Su mamá siempre los puede encontrar. Así son las mamás.

Isabela still wouldn't move. Ana Dominga had to grab her by the arm and throw her over her shoulder to move her away from the ducklings. Isabela threw her body around her mother's shoulders violently in protest. —Si no dejas de culebrear te vas a hacer daño—, Ana Dominga said. Not a second later she heard a small *pop*, then Isabela stopped wiggling and started screaming. Ana Dominga walked as fast as she could, with the sobbing five-year-old over her

shoulders and a child in each hand, back towards the doctor, who popped Isabela's shoulder back into its socket as easily as it had come out.

That was the first time her daughter had ever been hurt. Ana Dominga never really forgave herself, even knowing it was an accident. Isabela didn't remember it. But Ana Dominga saw the image of her daughter squatting over a brood of bright yellow ducklings as vividly in her head as though it were a framed photograph on the wall. That was the image she came back to as the feeling of guilt (that Isabela hadn't come home yet, as though it were Ana Dominga's own fault, as if she herself had lost her) that had been present in that episode and this.

It was past eleven when Ana Dominga heard the iron latch slide out from the keeper and the great gate creak open, when she felt herself take her first breath of the night. Isabela came in as though she were coming straight home from school, dropping her bookbag on the floor next to the dinner table and walking towards the kitchen to fix herself something to eat. She passed Ana Dominga in her rocking chair and froze. —Buenas noches, mami—, she said weakly.

—¿Dónde demonios estabas?

—Estaba en la biblioteca con Margot Calderai, después fui a su casa para cenar. No me dí cuenta que había anochecido.

—¿Porqué le dijiste a tu hermano que no me dijera adónde fuiste?

—No se lo dije.

Ana Dominga smacked her daughter's face. —Díme la verdad.

Isabela's voice wavered. —Ya te la dije. Oiga, Margot y su hermano Alberto me trajeron a casa, no estaba caminando sola.

And indeed the sounds of two young people floated up from the street below. This didn't mean anything, where the truth was. The truth was a slippery, unconscious thing, half-formed, unknown to either mother or daughter. (The truth was that Margot and her twin brother did take Isabela home, but not before taking her to the Cadets of the Republic meeting that their brother, Fernando, was leading that night in Guánica.) Ana Dominga chose to believe her daughter because she was not willing to admit the possibility of a lie. Isabela, in this way, remained her daughter. Ana Dominga made the sign of the cross over her and blessed her, *Dios te cuide*, willing God to heed the command for the first time in her life. Isabela was sent to bed without food but without the promise of a more severe punishment. Then Ana Dominga went around the apartment, shutting windows, locking doors, blowing out candles, until it was just her, in the dark, in the home.

She could hear Isabela and Antonia whispering late, never quite going to bed as much as digesting information to spit it up again later, in bursts of girlish chatter. She knew that she would never be able to access that secret world between sisters even if she had borne it in her for nearly two years. Even if she kept their hearts locked away inside her, embalming them in her own, until she died. Whereas fathers, their father, they were allowed to forget, he had forgotten in the course of pursuing his own desires, which were, it would be revealed, the desires of many.

Because, and little did she know it, a change was on the horizon. While Ana Dominga considered the scope of her life, and the force she had to use in order to keep its elements together, the island was rolling and heaving under her feet. And her husband was in that elite group that had the power to keep it together. Bombings, shootings, demonstrations, and her daughter coming home late from school. I would have kicked, I would have shouted, I would

have moved, far away, to Bayamón, to Harlem, to Tokyo, anywhere without that fear. But instead Ana Dominga sat down at her small desk, in her small room, with the large marital bed with one side undisturbed, and began to write the poem whose title had come into her head just that morning: *Entre ser y estar en el Caribe*.



In the meantime there was the problem of bridge crossing. That is, how to get from a poem, to be lost among receipts, tax returns, notes to self, to the urgent period after the slow build of beginning. That's the problem with writing like this, transcribing the memories of a life. At a certain point, the page needs to turn, and the physical act refuses to connote all the subtleties of a dream switching. Though it seemed like it happened all at once, it in fact took over a year for the climax to unfold, a climax among many in Ana Dominga's long life. She remembers it like days of the week.

Ana Dominga thinks, in order to explain it (I am writing, I am writing this with her), to get away from the particular drama of her life, to write from beyond her, even if she is the center of all the action. She wants me to forget all about her. So we move towards the capital.

These are facts: at the time of this drama another was unfolding across the island. Not that of the *independentistas*, though it played a role. Rather, the question of what is to be done with the island of Puerto Rico was being asked jointly in Washington D.C. and San Juan. The very first Puerto Rican governor of the island had been appointed, not elected, within the last ten years, and the first democratically elected, Puerto Rican-born, New York-educated governor had taken office only very recently. The *independentistas* wanted a republic, but that was marginal compared to the wants of the many. The truth was that to become an independent nation, Puerto Rico would have to give up the benefits of citizenship (given only in order to recruit soldiers for World War I), the steady stream of tourism that put it on par with bigger, badder Cuba (for now), and the American dollar. This was an absolute impossibility.

No, the question was whether the island should be given more autonomy (as Spain had done not a moment before giving the island up at the turn of the century) or join the United

S-T-A-T-E-S, i.e., give up its flag and anthem. Ana Dominga could fathom neither for her island. She says island because *country* isn't technically correct; the island had never, ever in the history of the world been a country in its own right. Even when the Taíno were alive, it was an island called *Borinkén*, land of the valiant lord, broken up into different, allied chiefdoms. No matter what the men in either capital called it, the island was simply land that had fed and nurtured its people for millennia, a motherland.

Ana Dominga was made deeply sad by the possibility of change. To become a self-governing colony was humiliating, like a child being given an allowance, but to become a state was anathema, and to become a republic impossible, irresponsible. Why couldn't they just do nothing? She had her business, her family, her walk down to the Caribbean. (But thousands had never used a television, or finished school. It took almost six hours to drive to San Juan, a distance of only 90 miles. Breakfast for many could be just a cup of coffee. Clean water flowed only in the richest parts of the island, the ones Americans were keen to go to. Thousands chose New York instead.)

She remembers her husband's swearing-in from the radio broadcast she caught as she washed dishes in the café. She imagined the capital, where she had never been, hot and sunny, her husband's mustache catching drips of sweat, his hand on a Bible, American flags waving in the Atlantic wind. The announcer spoke a picture as clear as day. Through the static of the old machine she heard a sizable crowd cheer for him, migrants from her end of the island, *orgullosos* of a native son.

She had expected his mayorship of the town to go something like her marriage, but in fact nothing changed measurably. She continued to open the café and place her purse in the

drawer that Luis Calderai had made for her. The same people came, ordered their coffee, their pastry, and left. The church across the plaza tolled, Titi Negroni inside, praying. Christmas, New Years, Three Kings' Day passed, and the rains slowed. There was talk every day of the changes in San Juan; Ana Dominga heard it all in the café over the clattering of dishes. But she continued.

A new worry bubbled to the surface under the calm of routine she felt. Antonia had met a boy. Not just any boy, but a young man. Henry Waller. He was the son of an American exporter who lived in Ponce, specializing in bringing Puerto Rican embroidery to the mainland. Father and son were passing through Yauco on their way to San Germán to meet a supplier when their car broke down going down the hill from Collores. Though there were cars in Yauco at that time, none were as new or as large as the forest green Dodge with the chrome detailing the Wallers had shipped down from Detroit. Ramón Pedrera was summoned from the mechanic to help the *gringos* while a crowd gathered. Antonia had joined them on her way back to the café from the baker's, craning her neck to see what had happened, when Henry met her eyes. His face flickered into a smile, his teeth white, his lips thin and pink. Antonia looked away. Henry left his father to walk towards her.

—Hello—, he said. —Hola—. He waved at her comically, with short jerky movements. Antonia laughed but didn't say anything to him. —No English?— he asked. —¿Cuál es el nombre tuyo?—, *What is the name of you*, he asked with an overripe accent.

—Antonia Dominicci Torrei—, she said, giggling.

It turned out that that was the depth of his knowledge of Spanish, having been educated entirely by imported tutors. But he still, through sign language and tone of voice, encouraged

Antonia to go on a walk around the plaza with him while his father and Ramón worked on the car.

Henry Waller was handsome. Henry Waller was wealthy. Henry Waller walked with a slight limp from the injury that discharged him from service. He ordered his *piragua* with *parcha* syrup and offered Antonia a taste. He was born in New York City and flew to Puerto Rico from a place called Idlewild. When he left Antonia to go back to Ponce, he kept saying *Domingo? Sunday?*, which led Antonia to think he had made a date with her.

These and other details came out over dinner that night. Everyone had something to say. The boys wanted to know where he had been stationed and what kinds of combat he had seen. Ana Dominga wanted to know how old he was, was he Catholic, how was he going to pick her up for their date? The boys spent the rest of the night playing Americans and Germans, while Ana Dominga thought back, wistful, to the last time a man had stopped her on the street to tell her she was beautiful (her husband). But Isabela, who was so young, reacted with a stranger and more foreign violence than Ana Dominga could have ever thought.

—Sólo a ella le gusta el gringo porque tiene dinero que su papá ha sacado de nuestras manos—, she said, spat.

All noises in the room clattered to silence. No one had ever heard Isabela say anything with such anger. Ana Dominga did not even have the words to describe what Isabela said, so alien it was to what she knew of the character of her daughter. The room remained silent, digesting what had been said; even Carlos, too young to understand the implications of what she had said, had trouble absorbing the tone of her voice.

—No lo conoces para nada, nena—, said Antonia, finally.

—Sé muy bien cómo son los imperialistas. Les gusta que peleamos entre nosotros, porque se benefician de los despojos.

—¿Cómo aprendiste la palabra *imperialista*, eh, nena?—, said Ana Dominga like a smack on the wrist.

—Mejor que salieras con el gringo si estás dispuesta de vender tu dignidad’.

—Basta—, said Ana Dominga. The quiet strength of her voice overtook all the noise of the room. Isabela pushed back her chair with a loud, articulated scrape and went to the room she shared with Antonia. Ana Dominga went over to the side of the table she had exited from and saw that the floor had been deeply scratched. That night, Antonia slept in her mother’s bed, forming an alliance against this newfound anger that, Ana Dominga feared, marked the start of Isabela’s teenage rebellion, her growing older. (She couldn’t know how much deeper it would go.) Where had Isabela learned about imperialism? And where had she learned to drop the *d* from her words, to eat the *s*? Her Spanish had been almost Castilian in its precision.

It should be obvious but Ana Dominga pushed the thought of the Calderai twins far back inside her. Even if her daughter was drawn the surge of *independentismo*, a distant but real possibility, she could save Isabela in her mind by preserving the image of her as she had been, a child, until recently. Isabela in her confirmation dress. Isabela wading scared in the Caribbean for the first time, her sister behind her. Isabela brandishing her schoolbooks like a new toy on Christmas morning. Isabela waving an American flag when Muñoz Marín was elected and came through town with his legion of expensive American cars.

Antonia’s flirtation didn’t seem to go that far, anyway. Where could it go? They didn’t speak the same language. Not that Ana Dominga gave what Isabela said much thought, either,

but one couldn't ignore that there was a vast gulf between them. (He tried to come to Yauco that Sunday, but no one in the town would tell him where the daughter of Titi Torrei lived. That didn't stop him from sending a package of intricate lace to the café, where he remembered she said she worked, leaving his address and a tutored note in Spanish: *Escribame cuando tiene usted tiempo, porque fue un placer conocerla*. Their epistolary getting-to-know-you was chaperoned heavily by the Waller family translator.) Antonia stopped bringing up his name, though she brimmed inside with a secret, a liquid love she kept far away from her house, which grew tenser every day.

Isabela started spending less and less time at home, despite her mother's directive. Ana Dominga wasn't able to shepherd her daughter to and from school every day, at least not without closing down the store. And at fifteen Isabela should be able to take care of herself. Whenever Ana Dominga asked, Isabela said she was doing her homework with Margot, as she had the first time she had been late. But when Ana Dominga asked Elisa, the mother, if the girls had been spending time at their house, she said she hadn't seen them. The teacher also denied that they had been staying late at the library, another possibility. There were so few other places to hide in town that the last option was that the girls took the afternoons to disappear entirely.

What confused Ana Dominga was why Isabela would be taking such pains to avoid the house, and where she would go to become invisible, and why she would lie. For all her imagination as a child, she had never lied, and if she had hidden a thing it was only to protect it. She had always shared her life with her sister and her mother, giving each woman equal importance in her dealings with them. If she confessed first to Antonia that she had stepped by accident on a lizard, the next time she killed a centipede for hiding under the sink faucet, she ran

to Ana Dominga. The three of them were anchored by Isabela's honesty, the Holy Spirit to their Father and Son. So it wasn't that she was doing something wrong that bothered Ana Dominga, but that she was hiding it.

Ana Dominga began, for the first time in her life, to snoop. She searched her daughter's notebooks when Isabela was asleep, only to find that her daughter, always studious, had stopped taking notes almost entirely, save for the date on the top of the page. When Isabela left her clothes out to be washed Ana Dominga pressed her face into them, picking up only known notes of coffee, of water, of girl-smell. She looked under the mattress Isabela shared with Antonia. She looked under their bed, in her drawers, in the soles of her shoes. Whatever Isabela was hiding, she kept it within her, known only to herself and those she let in.

Ana Dominga got a better indication of the truth during *Semana Santa*. A huge parade came through town, taking the week to walk through all the southern towns of the island's coast. It was spectacular. Dancers from Ponce in matching costumes moved their bright blue skirts with a sun-colored underneath through the Avenida down towards the church, where a band improvised a bachata. A giant papier-mâché of the Son on the cross was carried on the backs of men from the other towns who had picked up and joined the parade then and there as if it were a bus, getting on, getting off. On the head of the statue of Jesus, instead of a crown of thorns, sat a crown of candles flickering in the wind like a Santa Lucia. Women threw petals of bougainvillea, of hibiscus, to be walked into a lush carpet.

Vicente, Francisco and Carlos were enlisted to march with a corps of boys from the elementary school, so Ana Dominga stood at the corner of Avenida Santa Ana and Ponce de León with a group of mothers from the school. It was the first time the school had joined the

display. The boys marched awkwardly, like wind-up soldiers, each carrying accessories designed to represent the school: a stack of books, pencil sharpeners, a miniature chalkboard and eraser to be played like cymbals. The girls would join next year, maybe. The boys incorporated themselves into the main parade, maintaining the solemn pace of the other marchers.

It was a sight, all light and color, sound, salvation. Ana Dominga let a smile cross her lips, then crack open into a wide, toothy grin, then, unprovoked, a laugh. She was laughing because everything was so beautiful in unison; her boys were so pure and awkward in their robes, Yauco so earnest in its devotion. She was laughing because everyone else was laughing, happy, too. She laughed and clapped with the women around her, ecstatic to be part of this celebration of this humble place on this day.

Then suddenly, dust. A wave of people streamed towards the plaza. The bachata had turned into the crystalline beat of broken glass and a harmony of screams, cries, shouts, *¿dónde estás?* Men pushed each other out of the way, onto the ground, thuds of body on dirt. And on the opposite side of the plaza the dancers one by one ceased their movements like a balloon running out of air.

An explosion had gone off in the street separating the café from the tailor, shattering the windows of both shops. A man staggered out from the wreckage, every inch of his face and body peppered a vivid red, having been caught in the shower of broken glass. His was the most gruesome sight: blinded, he walked toward the center of town, as slowly as an angel come to Earth, bleeding pore by pore. As he moved towards where the people had gathered, watching the dispatch of firemen and policemen—because who else do you call?—the people moved around him, enveloping him like the ground a seed.

Ana Dominga was quick to gather her youngest three underneath her. The impulse that struck her, though, was not to run to their apartment, to safety, but to stay and watch. From where she stood, she could see a white truck with mud splattering the sides pull up to the corner of Avenida San José and Ponce de León, where two men jumped in the bed. In the moment that it idled there she noticed that the driver's face was young, soft, female. It took until the truck had started up the hill towards Collores for the recognition to strike her: Isabela. (Could it be?) She dropped her arms from around her boys and started walking, then running up Ponce de León behind the truck. The distance between them grew larger and larger until she could no longer fight the weight of her own body, and the truck disappeared.

The conclusion was that the attack was orchestrated by the *independentistas*. In their newspaper the editors lauded the attack, a non-violent protest, they said, against American influence in the municipality. The choice to target the the corner of Calle del Sol and Avenida Santa Ana was to disrupt the flow of commerce, encouraging residents to work together outside the dollar. And to do it during *Semana Santa*, that was just serendipity: the unknown attackers had acted on their own. The piece ended with a direct address to the mayors of Yauco and Ponce, and to Muñoz Marín: *Puerto Rico para puertorriqueños, Borinkén por boricuas*.

Ana Dominga wasn't the only one to notice the young, female driver of the truck, but rather than Isabela, witnesses had seen Margot. She was immediately named a suspect, an accomplice in the attack, because of the association with her brother, Fernando, who was suspected as its perpetrator. But both of the girls, as well as Margot's twin, Alberto, had disappeared. The police asked Ana Dominga if she had heard from Isabela, to see if they could talk to her about Margot; she lied and said that Isabela was staying with her uncle in Cayey. (A

lie no one would ever verify with her husband; the whereabouts of her children were a woman's business.) Since her daughter wasn't officially a suspect the police couldn't tell Ana Dominga anything about the case, especially if they had found Margot. But wherever Margot was, she knew, Isabela would be too.

The café had to be closed while new glass was ordered to repair the storefront. Ana Dominga, with the days stretching out emptily, purposelessly in front of her, began to pray as she had never done before. She started to go to morning mass, and, when that wasn't enough, returned for the evening service. Before too long, she spent entire days in the church, praying for her daughter to come back to her. This was how she came to know Titi Negroni.

When Ana Dominga came in, Titi Negroni had already long been settled on her hassock. The older woman, immersed in prayer, never turned around to see who had let the light in, even when Ana Dominga let the doors close with a bang. Outside of the daily masses, they were often the only two people in the large, Spanish church. This was how the first miracle happened.

Each day that the café remained closed Ana Dominga inched one pew, one foot closer to the old widow's place at the second row, slightly to the right of the altar. Titi Negroni, it turned out, whispered her rosary, her words folding into large, sweet meringues of prayer: *Dios-te-salve-María-Llena-eres-de-gracia-El-Señor-es-contigo*. Blessed are you among all women. The practiced rhythm was precise as a heartbeat.

Titi Negroni never said anything besides her prayers until one day, a week after Ana Dominga had started coming, when she turned around and looked at the younger woman, who was getting ready to leave. Ana Dominga felt Titi Negroni's eyes on her and slowly lifted her head. Titi Negroni reached out, frail as a new sapling, and, shaking, placed her soft, brittle hand

on the back of the pew. Her mouth opened and shut a few times, the way a baby gums at its mother's finger. The two words, the whole of Titi Negroni's address, came out with the same sound as two branches rubbing up against each other make in the wind.

Bendita sea, she said.

The statement was vague enough, and the situation portentous enough, to send Ana Dominga reeling. *Bendita sea*. It played over and over again in her head as she walked from the church to her house. Who was she blessing? Who did she want to be blessed (by God, by her)? *Bendita sea (usted)*, bless (you), a sign of unlikely respect from the much older woman. *Bendita sea (ella)*, bless her, who was she? Isabela? How did she know, she who had not left the church in the day in a decade? Ana Dominga, stirring a pot of rice, silently working a banal question of grammar as if it were the key to the universe. *Bendita sea*, like an imperative, *be blessed (you)*. Or could it be possible that she meant it to be in the subjunctive, casting a shadow over the blessing, *bendita sea*, blessed may you/she/I be? (Is it possible to use the subjunctive to communicate the existential doubt of whether or not I, me, *yo*, here Titi Negroni, am able to receive grace?) Ana Dominga at her desk, diagramming the phrase over and over in her black notebook. Thumbing her rosary out of habit: *bendita sea usted, bendita sea ella, bendita sea yo*. She blessed (or she commanded to be blessed, or she hoped that God may bless) Titi Negroni, Isabela and herself.

She never got a chance to confirm the meaning. Titi Negroni, for the first time in the collective memory, was not in church when Ana Dominga arrived the next morning. She sat impatiently through the mass until:

—Y rezamos por el alma de nuestra bendita María de los Remedios San Juan Bautista de Negroni, amiga de la Iglesia y de todos nosotros, amén.

Could it be that her soul had left this Earth? Ana Dominga left the mass then and there. She asked around and found out that Titi Negroni lived on the same road leading to Guánica as had Sylvia and her daughters. As Ana Dominga opened the gate to the lot that Titi Negroni had shared with her husband, an unlikely chill enveloped her, as strong as the cold on the mountains when she was a girl.

The one-story building that had been the widow's home was overrun with women with their heads covered in blue muslin, not monks, not mourners, and barefoot men shaking in the cold. Inside, the rooms were decorated in an old style inherited from Europe, vaguely baroque yet simple, with black and white tiled floors and many, many gilded mirrors. There was no sign of Titi Negroni or her body.

—¿Dónde está la dueña?—, Ana Dominga asked one of the women.

—Se fue. Vinimos para presenciar el milagro.

—¿Qué de milagro?

—¿No lo oye usted? ¿El sonido?—. And indeed a sound filled the room, both a song and a low hum, that seemed to build off the bodies of the witnesses and the walls of the house without originating anywhere in particular. —Lo oí desde mi casa, allá—, said the woman. —Me llamó. Salté de la cama y vine a ver. Vi el alma de nuestra señora subirse al cielo y con ella se fue el calor. Se lo juro a usted. Soy el testigo.

Ana Dominga could see her face halved by the woman's head in a round mirror behind them, and she, without meaning to, met the eyes of her reflection. Without feeling it herself, she saw the reflection wink. She felt a nudging, a compulsion, to press further, to witness.

—¿También se fue su cuerpo? —, she asked.

—No tuvo cuerpo ella—, said the woman. —Tan cercana a Dios fue ella. Ya subió su cuerpo pa' estar con Él. La que estaba con nosotros fue el milagro de su alma encarnada. ¿Quiere usted ver por dónde se subió?

Ana Dominga followed the woman down a hallway into the bedroom. A sea of witnesses parted for them and left out the door they came in. Ana Dominga inhaled sharply. The curtains were the same hand-embroidered lace that obscured her own view to the town center. On the small desk there sat the exact pink ceramic plate that held her cosmetics, only here it sat under jars of yellowed perfume. The bedframe of the double bed was made of the particular gilded metal railings that Ana Dominga slept between each night and, what shocked her more, the coverlet was rumpled only on the left side closest to the window, where a single pillow lay. The other side was flat, immaculate, as if it had never been slept in. Ana Dominga exhaled slowly, carefully, knowing that their two bedrooms were twins.

—Allí, allí—, the woman pointed to the disorderly side of the bed, —es dónde subió.

—¿Cómo sabe usted?

—Oiga—. Listen. Can you hear it? —Me lo dijo ella misma—. The sound of a thousand years of women biting their tongues. The love Titi Negroni and her dead husband shared. (The presence of Ana Dominga's angel at the foot of my bed, telling me to wake up, to write, there's

no time to lose.) The sound of a china cup falling off a high table. *Bendita sea. Bendita sea.* —Le habla. La está llamando, Ana Dominga.

Está en donde el barco. No la busques; te encontrará cuando esté lista. Está bendita. Están benditas, todas. Somos todas benditas. Te lo juro. Te lo prometo. Las amo. Las estoy mirando.

—¿Quiénes son—? Ana Dominga nearly shouted. But the moment had passed. The woman stared at Ana Dominga, startled by her outburst.

—Si no la oye usted, mejor que se vaya, para dejar oír los que pueden.

—¡La oigo, la oigo! ¡Está conmigo!— Ana Dominga protested but she was already being pushed by the small of her back out of the bedroom that was identical to hers.

A swarm of witnesses continued pushing her towards the front of the house, and she heard the buzzing grow weaker and weaker. *¡La oigo!* But it was no use. She spun and spun until she reached the front door and fell out of the house, face-first, onto the flagstone. She looked up to see Sylvia with her two children, a new infant slung across her chest.

—¿Estás bien, Titi?—, Sylvia said to Ana Dominga. She did not reach to help her up. Ana Dominga clumsily lifted herself by her elbows, then by her palms, to stand and face her husband's wife.

—¿Qué haces aquí?

—Oí el ruido y quería ver si la viuda Negroni se había muerto o no—. It was clear that Sylvia meant the noise of the gathering crowd and not the miraculous sound that had brought them there.

—Me dijeron que ni estaba viva cuando la conocimos, y ya se fue—. Sylvia, confused, didn't fill the pause that Ana Dominga left for her. —La nena es preciosa—, she continued.

Sylvia beamed and touched her forehead to that of the infant. —Es verdad, ¿cierto? Le dí el nombre de Luz Caridad. Mi marido se puso furioso cuando supo. Quería que la nombrara como sus hermanas. Pensamos en Fortunata. Pero como que no estuvo...—. Sylvia glanced up from her daughter with a look of shock on her face. —Titi, estás sangrando—, she said, touching her hand to own mouth. Ana Dominga brought her hand to her face and took it away warm and wet. She had chipped a tooth, and her lip was bleeding.

—Me tengo que ir—, Ana Dominga said. The miraculous sound that came from Titi Negroni's passing became fainter and fainter.

—Voy contigo, te ayudo—, said Sylvia, but Ana Dominga had already taken off towards the town, running.

The same adrenaline that numbed the pain beginning to spread through her mouth now propelled her down the dirt road and through the zigzagging streets that formed the lower part of Yauco. She ran faster than she ever remembered running, until the running itself became an illusion and her body moved effortlessly forward. Clouds of dust sprouted where her bare feet fell, her good church shoes long abandoned, to be found or lost to the Caribbean, to be beaten against the sea wall until the heel became an old bone. Her blood churned inside her like a city in an earthquake. Her mind froze except for one thought: *me tengo que ir*. (And the image of Titi Negroni's bedroom, identical to hers, bubbling underneath it.) Without her realizing it, she was already in town.

The streets were empty. She wandered through them barefoot and covered in blood from her lip down. She brought her hand to her hair and felt that it had been wisped large and impossible. She looked like a ghost herself.

The sky threatened rain. She could hear the first rumblings come in from over the Cordillera. The dark grey, purplish humidity, as if a bruise, gave her the sensation of having been swollen from the inside. Her skin felt heavy. She felt one, then a second droplet, and then she was soaked. She continued walking through town in the direction of the church and her apartment until she a sound, underneath the wall of water, call out to her: —¡Titi!

It was Luis Calderai from the doorway of his shop. —Titi, ¡qué haces! Ven aquí, que la lluvia te está empapando—. Luis Calderai did not call her Ana Dominga, although they had known each other since they were children, before their marriages, when she became Titi, though he had called her Ana Dominga before. *Anita Dominita*, the children teased her. *Ina*, he had called her sweetly. The rain poured so hard that he appeared almost spectral. She kept walking past his calls, her chin high and proud to catch the rain, and then promptly stopped. —Por favor— he said. She turned towards him and walked the length of the block until she was under the awning of his shop.

—Entra, entra—, he pleaded. —Ven acá.

—No sé qué decirte—, she said.

Though the rain had cleaned her up as best it could, Calderai registered that something had happened to her that day. —Titi, ¿qué te pasó?—. He reached out to touch her face but Ana Dominga flinched backwards. They stood there locked, wrist to wrist, palm to palm, with Ana Dominga smoldering under her wet skin.

—¿Dónde está mi hija?

—¿No está con su tío? Esto es lo que me dijeron la policía.

—Tú sabes que desapareció el día del atentado. Está en dónde tus gemelitos, y yo sé que tú sabes dónde están.

Calderai dropped his head, and Ana Dominga let his arm go. He sat down on the stoop in front of his shop and stayed down, looking at her from below. —Tú sabes que mi hija también desapareció. Todos mis hijos. Hay rumores que fueron desaparecidos—imagínate, desaparecieron a mis hijos, ¡de solo quince años! No hay palabras para describir cómo está Elisa. No me mira, ni me habla, ni me toca. Yo estoy solo. Completamente solo.

—Me puedes decir eso, ¿yo que he estado sola desde cuándo?

—Al menos tú tienes a los demás, los cinco hijos, ¡qué suerte! ¿Me entiendes? ¡Yo estoy sin nadie!

—Tú sabes dónde están, ¡tú sabes!—. She cast a shadow over him, even in the rain, that was at once full of blame, sorrow, pity, fear, resentment, love, because even if he was to blame for her pain, it was at least a thing they shared.

—Yo no sé, Titi—. He stopped and looked back up at her. —Te ha cambiado mucho, esta vivencia.

—La vida tiene que cambiarnos, si no, no la vivimos.

He stood up and reached out to grab her hand again. —Yauco te necesita como estabas. Tus hijos te necesitan como la madre que eras. Yo te necesito, como cuando eras mía—. His rough, calloused fingers swept across her knuckles, the gesture far too familiar.

Ana Dominga pulled her hand away and stepped back from under the awning, her eyes narrow. She looked into his as if searching behind the pupil for the man she had known. And then she realized that Luis would never know how it felt to be alone the way she did. —Yo no soy de nadie—, she said and walked away.

She heard the dull noise of his protest grow farther and farther away. As before, running from the seaside to the town, she walked as if on air. She crossed Avenida Mattei Lluberas and walked through the park, shaded with palms. She walked out onto Calle del Sol and crossed again towards her apartment.

She was surprised to see a forest green Dodge parked on the corner under her family's home. New cars did not often stop and park in the streets of Yauco. She passed it and swept her index finger over the hood. It was cold; it had been parked for a while. She knelt to look at herself in the chrome siding over the tire wells. Her lips were swollen from chipping her tooth, and her hair was drying into those loose and wild waves that she pin-curled every night to keep in order. She looked not crazy, but young. All of a sudden, she thought back to looking at herself in a mirror on her wedding day. She had been so scared. She felt like a girl playing dress-up in someone else's clothes. It hadn't hit her that she would be joining this person, her husband, soul to soul, for all eternity. She could hardly conceive of eternity, true eternity, except for that minute where she considered herself in the mirror before they walked down to the church, taking in every hair, every pore, every cell that had built upon itself to bring her there, that day, in front of the mirror. Her eyes, her nose, her mouth, the dip above her lips where her husband would kiss, her new husband, when it was pronounced that they were, under the eyes of the Lord, a holy union, for modesty's sake he would kiss her philtrum in front of all their families,

and when they made love for the first time that night he would kiss only there, and when he touched his hands to her hips to bring her to him he breathed hot and ragged there, and she would not part her lips at all, even when he entered her and the pain she felt was bigger than her entire life and all its sorrows, this, becoming a woman, she did not part her lips at all except to whisper *buenas noches* when it was over and she felt herself *there*, an alien thing, slimy and beautiful, that she hadn't known when she looked at herself, pure and horrified, in the mirror that morning.

And as she tells me this, her heart breaks all over again because of what happened next.

She left the Dodge and walked around to the gate leading up to the second-floor apartment. She went up the stairs and found the door to the apartment unlocked. On her guard, she walked into the front room where she found Antonia and a young, light-skinned man sitting on her couch. They shared the loveseat, their hands intertwined, their knees innocently touching. When they heard the door close, they both sprang up from the seat. Ana Dominga could see that Antonia's face was flushed.

—Mamá—, said Antonia, —te presento a Henry Waller—. So this was he, Ana Dominga thought. —Quiere casarse conmigo. Queremos casarnos.

She said nothing, just looked at him standing next to her daughter, his fiancée. He was uneven, one hip cocked over the other. His light brown hair looked, to her, like something you would pull out of the carpet. His eyes were gray flecked with green, like mold. But he was still uncomfortably handsome, the way men with money are. He looked like a house on a cliff, clean water, silk.

They all stood in silence until it occurred to Henry to jump in. —Hola, señora! Soy Henry—. He stuck out his broad, masculine hand with all its bones and met her eyes with his.

—I would very much like to marry your daughter—. He looked at Antonia. —Me gusta casarme con la hija tuya—.

Ana Dominga smiled in spite of herself. She could tell the sincerity from the tone of his voice. She almost began to embrace him, but then her face clouded. She thought back to everything that had happened that day—the miracle of Titi Negroni and their shared bedroom, the run-in with Sylvia and then Luis, and that memory, out of nowhere, of her own wedding day, and she considered the seriousness of the suggestion: her daughter, the only one she had a hope of keeping close, married to a *gringo*. —Pero hija, ¿cómo puedes haberte enamorado de él? ¿Cómo van a entenderse?— she said.

—Me ha escrito miles de cartas en español. Desde el principio. Es un hombre sincero y serio que me quiere, y le quiero yo. Nos entendemos, mamá. No sé cómo. Entiendo la manera de su cara—.

Henry stepped towards the two women. —Señora, it would mean the world to us to have your blessing.

—Quiere tu bendición, mamá. Quiere que nos bendigas.

Ana Dominga thought back to Titi Negroni's pronouncement from yesterday, the day before she died. *Bendita sea*. Titi Negroni had engineered a miracle in order to clarify for her that they (all) were blessed, and had spoken to her when all the world could only hear a low, magic hum. Ana Dominga thought about that and the deep tie between them, confirmed in death, and about Isabela, who now, missing, was most in need of being blessed, and about her hateful words the first day Henry Waller came into their lives. Ana Dominga tongued the spot where her tooth was now chipped. The action made her lips pout as if she were pointing with them,

gesturing towards Henry. Antonia and Henry recognized the motion and their eyebrows went up, in synchronicity, anticipating an answer. That was when Ana Dominga saw that perhaps they did understand each other in their own, tongue-less way; maybe love made language moot, a courtesy for others.

And maybe her sister's wedding to an American would bring Isabela home.



In the book of her poems that her children had made for Ana Dominga when she turned 100, a poem for Antonia's wedding was noticeably absent among the *poemas conmemorativos*. I tried to ask her about it and she waved me off. *No pude dedicarme a escribir después de que se fue*. (She means Isabela.) And looking through the book, and knowing something about her life, it's clear that production drops off after that period, skipping Antonia's wedding, Alvarito's graduation, Carlos' first communion, and the new Constitution of Puerto Rico, tying it inexorably to the United States. It picks up again at the birth of Antonia's daughter — *Para mi nieta, Anna Waller* — and continues through the births, weddings, lives and deaths of another half century.

The *poemario* isn't particularly notable as a work of art. There are only a few copies, bound, as I said, for the occasion of her hundredth birthday, and the one I had I lost under a pile of magazines for the better part of a summer. The cover is a faded blue-yellow. The words TITI TORREI and UNA VIDA DE RECUERDOS stand out in a serif font against a cloud of words relating to her life in a sans serif. Inside, the dedication gives her name as simply Dominga.

If not as an art object it serves as an archive of the life of this woman, who is so remarkable as to have come back from the dead to fill in the missing pages. It chronicles the occasions that threaded through her life. It places her, however, firmly in the role of the observer, the rememberer, the archivist. *Una vida de recuerdos*, a life of memories, does not include a *yo* who isn't *feliz de haber visto / crecer este niño tan listo*, or who doesn't *espero que dentro de esta Concha / esté también una perla*. The speaker of these poems reacts to the world around her, always watching without influencing.

The absence of this period of her life from the *poemario* suggests a departure, a profound change in the way she viewed her life and the events that comprised it. She reminds me that the poems of her *poemario* were not all the ones that she wrote in her lifetime; rather, they were edited down, curated and condensed, to provide a portrait of a hundred years of life. The taste of her family dictated that the portrait be a positive one. The poems of that period — if they were written at all — must have been dark, brooding, filled with the imagery of her day-to-day: gunpowder, broken glass, lack (of her daughters, of her sons), if there was a way to write it. All this, the facts she gives me now, comes from retrospect, almost a century of careful analysis from both sides of the wall bridging the living and the dead.

She doesn't confirm that she finished anything during that time after Isabela's disappearance. But her memories of this time are so rich, so clear, it is like she has her black notebook in her lap, where I can't see it, and she's reading aloud.

The wedding she remembers as a very intimate spectacle. Preparations started almost the week before. The Wallers filled the plaza with white tents and tables, stringing it with bright white lights that had to be wound around the lamppost, the only lamppost in town, and hot-wired to the town grid. The morning of, attendants began decking the church in white roses and lilac, flown from a florist in Virginia, where the Wallers owned a summer home on the Potomac. A cake as tall as Ana Dominga herself, topped with individually blown glass figurines of the bride and groom, was assembled in the café, whose windows had been fixed but which had not yet re-opened. A dress for the bride was sewn from the very best of the Wallers' lace store. Antonia wore her dark hair curled up underneath itself under a tiara and a short, modern veil that went

only to her shoulders. When they kissed for the first time, in front of all their gathered family and friends, Henry dipped his bride down almost to the church floor.

The entire town, whether or not they had been invited, swarmed to the church and stayed for the reception outside in the plaza. It was a good thing, too, because Henry's guests numbered his parents, their maid and two other American couples who had come to Puerto Rico with their small children to take advantage of low capital. They took up one pristine table to the right of the newlyweds. All of Yauco ate a bite of beef Wellington and drank a sip of champagne, whole families sharing a plate and a flute, and whatever was lacking was supplemented by vast basement stores of rum, and a mountain of *pasteles de yuca* the women had presaged a need for. The night had barely ended at dawn, when the senior Waller had led the men in singing folk songs he stumbled through the lyrics to. People remembered it as a party that lasted a week, a remedy to that year's truncated *Carnaval*.

Antonia took a few days after the wedding to pack before moving to her new home with Henry in Ponce. The Wallers had bought them a small but ornate house on a hill overlooking the water, and given Henry the green Dodge to bring them to and from the downtown. Henry would become the vice president of his father's export company and Antonia would work on being a good wife and, soon, a mother. She spent her last few days at home cleaning the china, playing with her brothers, and consoling her mother, who inside was almost mute with grief, but masked it as the happy sadness of children growing up.

—Pero ¿cómo te voy a ver cuando seas una *lady* en la colina en Ponce? Vas a estar demasiado ocupada para verme, tu madre, quien está ahora sola.

—Henry te puede recoger en el auto— Antonia said, annoyed, as she removed a thick layer of dust from the windowsill. —El camino a Ponce dura menos de una hora. Podrías caminar si quisieras.

—Pero ¿cómo puedo dejar a los niños solos en la casa?—. The dust had grown thick in the house, and Ana Dominga coughed purposefully into her fist.

—Los niños caben en el auto también.

—No te olvides que tu pobrecita mamá nunca ha dejado a su pueblito. Sería la primera vez que yo saliera.

—¡Qué oportunidad maravillosa para ti, mamá!—. Antonia grabbed her mother and kissed her on both cheeks. —¡Cuántas cosas puedes ver! ¡Qué aventura!

—No seas irónica conmigo, nena—. Ana Dominga's face darkened. —Y más, ¿qué pasa si tu hermana decide volver y no esté yo?

—Ya tomó su decisión, mamá, y nos dejó. Me da igual si vuelve o no.

—No hables de tu hermana así. Te quiere mucho. La quieres mucho también.

—Si nos quisiera, no nos hubiera dejado por una lucha que a nadie le importa si la gane o no.

—A mi me importa, y a ti te debe importar también. ¡Es nuestra tierra, nena! Si no te hubieras casado con el gringo no hablarías así.

Antonia drew back, stunned. Ana Dominga saw her daughter's face age from girl to woman in an instant. She knew she would never be able to take back what she had said.

—Nunca más hables de mi esposo así—, Antonia said.

Antonia moved out on that Friday, leaving Ana Dominga to re-open the café by herself. She found herself overwhelmed at the support of her customers; all had returned, even the ones who had become accustomed to making their coffee at home. She had to hire one, then two girls from town to replace Antonia, who remained cool towards her mother after that ignominious conversation. Ana Dominga returned to taking orders, smiling and waving back to the calls of *Buenos dias, Titi! Nos vemos, Titi! Hasta mañana, Titi!* As far as everyone who came to the café knew, she had no reason to be upset; the only person who knew that Isabela was missing, really missing, was her family and Luis Calderai. But she fought back tears each time the door opened and the bell rang, another sign that life was moving on without her daughter.

It was a period of many changes in San Juan. They were close to passing a new Constitution, one that would make Puerto Rico part of the United States forever. The *independentistas* were that much further from seeing their cause realized. There were no more attacks in Yauco after Isabela, Alberto, and Margot had disappeared, even though here and there there were fights, shootings, arrests in the mountain towns that separated the east from the west. Ana Dominga tried not to think about Isabela in those towns that were a world away, but she, without Antonia to distract her, felt herself slipping deeper into a sadness without a cure.

The days were slow and sleepy, warm with the saturating heat of late summer. The windows had to be kept open despite the constant buzz of mosquitos, whose bodies Ana Dominga found in every possible crevice, bloated from feeding off of her. The boys left to spend the summer on the small family coffee *hacienda* Ana Dominga grew up on, where they woke every day to the smell of roasting beans and the cool air coming off the *cordillera* as she had as a girl. But this meant that Ana Dominga spent the summer truly alone. Henry Waller had a

telephone line put in for her to call Antonia, but often the line rang and rang without an answer. When it did, Ana Dominga could barely hear her daughter for all the static, and Antonia had little to say to her mother. She preferred to imagine Antonia's life as the mistress of a house, going to dinner parties in white gloves, pinning her hair up smooth against the side of her head, wearing pale pink lipstick shipped from New York. She began many, many poems about her daughter's new change in status, but finished none of them.

Then, one afternoon, a letter came for Ana Dominga at the café. It was postmarked San Juan, three days before. It was from Isabela.

Mamá,

*Espero que esta carta te encuentre bien. Me sentía avergonzada de haberles dejado así, tan rápido, sin aviso. Te quería decir que estoy **bien** y sana, con algunas personas cuyas identidades probablemente podrías adivinar (no las quiero escribir aquí si esta carta cae en manos equivocadas).*

Se ha vuelto muy peligroso quedarme en nuestra isla, que amo con toda la vida. He decidido irme para los Estados Unidos, hasta que sea seguro volver, o hasta que decidamos irnos para otro país. Nos vamos en unos cuantos días más, cuando llegue el barco el viernes. ¿Lo puedes imaginar? Voy a cumplir los dieciseis años en el barco y, cuando llegue a Nueva York, seré una mujer a carga de sí misma.

De la boda de Antonia, de la cual me han llegado noticias. Como puedes imaginar, mis sentimientos sobre ~~el novio~~ su esposo todavía siguen iguales, pero

estoy feliz si ella está feliz, y les deseo mucha felicidad. Odio que perdí verla antes de que se casó. Le escribiré a ella prontito.

Esta carta debe servir como mi despido. Espero que no me busquen ustedes, especialmente mientras me persiguen (porque hay personas que quieren encontrarme, estoy segura de eso, y si me encuentran nunca me volverás a ver). Abraza a mis hermanos, y a mi hermana y a mi cuñado, y díles que les quiero. Te quiero, mamá.

Isabela

Ana Dominga felt her chest swell with emotion. Her daughter in a strange new city without her. Being followed, her letters traced, because of these new friends. Her hands were shaking as she reread the letter. *Hasta que sea seguro.* She couldn't wait that long. Isabela was safe with her mother and with her mother alone.

Ana Dominga closed the café for the day, her brain alive again with purpose. The Wallers' green Dodge was parked outside the apartment; Antonia and Henry both were inside, waiting for her.

—Mamá—, said Antonia.

—¿Qué están haciendo aquí?—, asked Ana Dominga.

—Henry tuvo que pasar por aquí para el negocio. Insistió en venir para sorprenderte—.

Antonia paused, and looked carefully at her mother. —¿Te pasó algo, mamá? Te ves rara.

—Sí. Sí, algo me pasó—. She showed her daughter the letter. —Isabela me escribió. La tengo que encontrar antes de que se vaya para siempre.

Antonia took the letter and read it over. She traced her sister's handwriting with her finger, mouthing the words. Then she grew pale. —Mamá, no podemos buscarla. Podría ser peligroso para ella, y para nosotros.

—Ella sólo tiene quince años. No podemos dejarla que vaya a los Estados Unidos, a Nueva York sola, sin alguien que la cuide.

—Ella sabe lo que hace. Sabía lo que hizo cuando se involucró con estos gemelos Calderai—. Antonia stood with her arms crossed over her chest, her mind made up.

Ana Dominga's gaze turned desperate, wild. She looked to Henry. —Por favor, Henry. Me puede ayudar usted, ¿no?—. She paused, thought. —Please. Take me to San Juan. *Por* Isabela.

Henry looked at his mother-in-law, then at his wife. Antonia shook her head. —Ya está atardeciendo. ¿Por qué no esperamos hasta la mañana? Nos quedaremos aquí en mi pieza. Mañana decidimos qué hacer.

Ana Dominga assented. If they left now, they would get there at two in the morning, and there would be nothing to be done. And then, once all four of them were together, she couldn't be sure that Henry and Antonia wouldn't just turn Isabela in to the police and be done with the whole affair. No, she had a better plan. She made them a quick dinner of *arroz con gandules y pollo* and took out three glasses of port. She refilled Henry's glass twice, listening to their stories about their life in Ponce. Neither of them noticed that she barely touched her own drink. She kept her eyes on Henry and Antonia, but heard only to the sound of clock on the wall: *tíc, tíc, tíc, tíc*.

They went to their bedroom around ten o'clock. Ana Dominga left the dishes to soak in the sink and then went to her own room. She sat on the edge of her bed in the dark, waiting. She

thought back to the spirit of Titi Negroni: *Está en donde el barco. Te contactará cuando esté lista.* At least she had Titi Negroni watching over her, watching over them both. *Somos todas benditas.* She prayed to Titi Negroni to keep Isabela safe and in San Juan.

It was midnight when she heard finally heard snoring. She crept out of her room in her bare feet, sticking close to the walls so that the floors wouldn't creak. She went to the door to Antonia and Isabela's old room and silently pushed it open. Henry Waller lay face up on the bed, his mouth open, snoring, while Antonia was curled in the fetal position with her back to him and to the door. Ana Dominga, her eyes adjusted to the dark, scanned the room and saw the key to the Dodge on the dresser. She leaned into the room to grab it, then, just as softly, closed the door and crept back to her own room. She put on a simple housedress and her sweater with the pearl buttons, because it was cold in the *cordillera* at night, and her everyday shoes. She stuffed Isabela's letter in her purse and left the house, locking the doors behind her.

It was a full moon, and the streets were cast in a silvery glow. She was the only person in the streets, perhaps the only person awake in all of Yauco. She breathed in the night air, heavy with salitre, then opened the car door. She sat at the very edge of the driver's seat, her chest almost brushing the steering wheel. She turned the key and the engine roared to life. She let up on the clutch while pressing down on the gas, as she had been told by her husband many years ago, moving slowly into the road until the car made an unhappy sound and jerked to a stop. Ana Dominga froze. The silence knitted itself back together as if nothing had broken it. She started the car again, put it into first, and drove off to the east.

She was a natural at driving. The steering wheel moved with the curves of the road as if pulled by a magnet; the road seemed to melt away under the tires. The moment she crossed from

Ponce into Juana Díaz, she gasped; the furthest she had ever been from home was no different from the road leading to Collores. The full moon illuminated everything clearly, showing her that every part of her homeland was as silvery and magical as the sea. Every switchback that brought her up and back the mountains of the Cordillera was like a step on a long staircase; she had to keep going, or else lose everything. North, east, north, east, to the ocean.

It was dawn by the time the road changed from the long, narrow country lane to wide and crowded boulevards. She saw, for the first time in her life, a stoplight. (She stopped at its blinking yellow light, unsure of how to proceed. A line of cars grew behind her, honking in chorus, until one finally snaked up the line in the left lane and drove around her. She had to wait until all the cars had done this before she could crawl forward into the intersection, looking left and right, left and right, to be sure that no one was going to smash into her.)

She followed the signs for the old port city, where the boats came in and out, and drove over the lagoon. To the right she could see a brand new hotel soaring high over the palm trees and the flags that lined the bridge. Cars—new, big, American—drove around her as the day began in the big city. The sun rose high behind her as she drove west into the little island where she knew her daughter would be.

The morning cool burned off and Ana Dominga started to feel beads of sweat forming around her hairline. She decided to leave the car in a lot and start out on foot to look for Isabela. She walked north, towards the *fortaleza*, scanning the streets as she went. They were full of bright red American tourists, in their whites and Panama hats, guided by little boys, no older than Francisco, wearing *pavas*. The boats from the Cayman Islands and Cuba had just begun to dock, and more and more people streamed out of them, searching for discounted bottles of rum or just

dry land. So much of the marina area looked the same, and was filled with the same type of people, that Ana Dominga had walked around it twice before realizing it.

She found herself in front of the largest building she had ever seen in her life: it was shaped like a huge, beige ship, docked forever in the street. She sat down on a bench across the way, fanning herself with her hand. It was so much hotter here than in the mountains, she thought. She looked across the street to see a young couple in embrace. The man was tall and wore a *guayabera* and dark khakis. The woman was much smaller and was wearing a pink and green dress. She had her face away from Ana Dominga. Between the two there was a suitcase not much bigger than a briefcase. The two parted and the woman turned to face where Ana Dominga was sitting. She gasped: it was Isabela.

The man and Isabela went separate ways, the man up the street towards Calle Fortaleza and Isabela down towards Avenida Ashford with the suitcase. Ana Dominga jumped up from the bench and followed Isabela as she walked away from the marina. She followed her daughter at a distance of about a quarter of a block, keeping behind the throngs of tourists. Her daughter's dress blended in among the Americans. Isabela turned right and back up a narrow side street; so did Ana Dominga. Isabela turned left towards an old, Spanish-style square; so did Ana Dominga. When Isabela stopped to buy a *piragua*, Ana Dominga hid behind a large statue of Cristóbal Colón and watched as Isabela went over to the fountain and sat on the rim, the suitcase between her legs.

She didn't see Ana Dominga coming until her mother was almost at the fountain. Her eyes went wide but she didn't move. To Ana Dominga, she looked grown up, almost older than Antonia, with her hair cut short and her lips painted pink.

—Isabela—, said Ana Dominga.

—Mamá—. They embraced. Isabela gave no resistance. Ana Dominga had the sensation of being held by her daughter, as she had held her daughter so many times in her life.

—Recibí tu carta—, said Ana Dominga.

—¿Cómo viniste aquí?

—No te preocupes. Vas a ver cuando vengas conmigo.

—¿Adónde?

—A Yauco, claro, nena. Estoy aquí para recogerte antes de perderte a los gringos—. Ana Dominga said this reassuredly, almost jokingly, convinced that, now that she had found Isabela, the whole episode was over, and mother and daughter would ride back over the mountains together.

—Mamá—, Isabela said, —no puedo volver. Me están buscando—. She lowered her voice. —Secuestraron a Margot y a Alberto anteayer, lo vi con mis ojos desde la guarida. No sé dónde deben de estar, ni siquiera si están vivos o muertos, o si los van a devolver. Y ahora los independentistas no nos pueden proteger. Nos vamos esta tarde a las tres.

Ana Dominga heard this as though it were being read over the radio, a fiction. She asked the only thing she could think to ask, as if Isabela had just told her she were going to the park.

—¿Con quién vas?

—Con Ferdi, Fernando. El hijo mayor de los Calderai, tú lo conoces. Tiene que ir conmigo también. Ha sido un hombre perseguido más tiempo que yo.

—Pero hija, ¿cómo vas a estar más segura en los Estados que aquí? Es el mismo gobierno, la misma policía.

—Los cadetes nos dieron pasaportes falsos. Nadie nos conoce allí. En Manhattan tantos boricuas que en la isla, más aún, y la población de los que no pueden sostener la vida aquí está creciendo. La revolución está en Nueva York.

Both mother and daughter sat there, saying nothing. They gripped each other's hands as if for the last time. The way Ana Dominga had gripped the midwife's hand when Isabela was born; that same pain was now directed inward, at her heart.

—¿Tienes miedo?

—No.

Ana Dominga stayed to see Isabela off. She and Fernando, the same man Ana Dominga had seen her daughter embracing earlier, stood at the rail of the ship arm-in-arm, waving until they were too far away to see. Ana Dominga stood at the marina until the ship disappeared into the horizon, and then until the sun dipped low into the west. She realized that she was, for the first time in her life, in front of the ocean. She walked down the boulevard in the paling, crepuscular light to the rocky Atlantic beach. The waves crashed so much harder than they did in the Caribbean Sea. She lay down among families having picnics and children playing in the surf, and there she fell asleep.

When she woke up, the waves were lapping at her shoes. She was alone again. The sun had risen again behind her, and the sky was a soft blue, stretched out over infinity. By now Isabela and Fernando would be docking in Miami. She took her shoes off and walked across the beach, then up the stairs that she had come down yesterday and through the boulevard towards where she had left Henry's Dodge.

She drove through the empty city streets for a while, crisscrossing the streets of pastel buildings, heading in no direction in particular. She stopped at a gas station to fill up the car. While the man pumped the gasoline she felt her stomach growling, and realized that she hadn't eaten since dinner two nights ago. She decided to leave the car and stop at a soda fountain across the street.

The inside was big and modern, sparkling with chrome and shiny red leather. Clocks above every booth ticked seven in the morning, about the time her café would be filling with people. But there were only a few men and women scattered here and there, mostly sitting alone. She went up to the counter and bought a *mallorca* and a coffee with milk. Two women dressed like secretaries talked in low voices in a booth near the window facing the gas station. Ana Dominga's *mallorca* was a little stale when it came out, reheated from yesterday's leftovers. They didn't throw anything out here, she thought. Ana Dominga savored the thick fat of the milk in her coffee, cut by the bitter fruit of a bean that had likely taken the same journey she had: over mountains it had never gone before, towards the ocean it had never seen. Only she was going to return home.



So that was the story of how and why Ana Dominga left her hometown and came back, not to leave again. She would go to Ponce when Henry Waller would pick her up to see her daughter and grandchildren (he now kept the keys to his car in the pocket of his nightshirt), and she went to San Juan only one more time, after Carlos grew up and moved there, like his older brothers had, one by one, over the years. The local girls she hired to help her run the café got married or left, one after the other. One girl, Amalia, was the only one who stayed. They ran the business together until Ana Dominga slipped on the newly washed linoleum floor, broke her hip and remained bedridden until she died. Amalia and her daughter, Monica, were the ones who took care of her. Each brother took turns driving back to Yauco every weekend with their families to visit their *titi* (for now, with the *autopista*, the drive only took an hour and a half). They held her hundredth birthday party in the same square where Antonia had been married over sixty years before, only both Antonia and Henry had died. Alvarito had died. Amalia had developed Alzheimer's and was confined to bed. Sylvia, who used a walker, and her three daughters were there, as were all the girls, now women, who had worked in the café over the years. It was they who had pushed the grandchildren to bind Ana Dominga's *poemario* for her, as a present to celebrate a hundred years of life. When it was offered to her, her hands shook, tracing the front cover. Her twig-like arms struggled to hold it up, even as a granddaughter, Ileana, presented it to her. She smiled as she looked over the pages; she had stopped being able to speak by the time she turned 97, and could only mouth the words to say thank you. Everybody clapped and sang for her:

*Feliz, feliz en tu día
amiguita que Dios te bendiga
que reine la paz en tu vida,
y ¡que cumplas muchos más!*

Ana Dominga died three years later, surrounded by her three surviving sons and Monica, Amalia's daughter who had taken care of her. Monica was the one who called the boys — though by now they were old men — to make their way down to Yauco. The grandchildren followed the next day and stayed until after the funeral. They got around to putting up a For Rent sign in the window of the café, which had been vacant for nearly twenty years, and put the second-floor apartment up for sale.

Yauco had not grown much at all; it had not seen the boom of Bayamón, or Mayagüez, or even Fajardo. Which isn't to say that it had stayed in the past either. The windows in the main commercial street advertised beepers for sale, jeans made in China, two for \$10. Every building in town was painted a bright pastel, the same way they were in Ponce and in San Juan, hoping to bring in tourists, but they didn't come. Even the ones who rented Jeeps at the airport to drive across the *cordillera* to see the coffee plantations did not stop in Yauco Pueblo. The town remained slow and sleepy, resisting poorly the migration to the bigger cities, and then ultimately to New York.

Before Ana Dominga had turned fifty, there were more Puerto Ricans on the island of Manhattan than there were in Puerto Rico itself. Even the *independentistas* had moved, incorporating themselves with the Young Lords in Chicago and in Harlem, fighting for the rights of Puerto Ricans in those cities. Year after year, polls on the island showed an almost fifty-fifty split between people who wanted Puerto Rico to remain a commonwealth and those who wanted it to become the 51st state. The rest, as my father said, *votaron con los pies*, voted with their feet. Left. And the population grew old.

I am the daughter of one of those that *votó*, and claimed my right to the island with my chestnut hair, my privilege of flying back with my family. I belong to the generation of *más-que-tús*, more than you's, fighting to be considered Puerto Rican despite living in the States, despite not speaking Spanish, despite an Italian father, despite an Irish last name. *Pero yo sé cómo cocinar el flan. Yo sé cómo suena el coquí.* But I actually *live* in New York. But I actually *speak* Spanish. But I go back once a year. But I go back twice.

It's a silly game, a friendly competition among children of diaspora without the vocabulary to talk about it, except memory. I remember the bridge over the lagoon with its alternating flags, Puerto Rican and U.S., and the Caribe Hilton looming across the bay, as my grandfather crammed us all in the back of his truck, the four women in the back, him and my father up front. I remember walking out of the airport and the weight of the air hitting me, home I had never lived.

I never met Ana Dominga until the day she appeared in the rocking chair in the corner of my room at my grandparents' house this past Christmas. One night it rocked on its own, the next her ghost was sitting there, looking at me as I read in bed. Her ghost was not like the picture of her taken on her hundredth birthday; as a ghost, she was a woman around fifty or sixty, with hair that was going gray but still neat and short behind her ears, and wrinkles that puffed and softened her face. Her hands were thin. She had the coloring of a living woman but something in the way that she took up space in the room signaled to me that she was not truly there.

—Hello?— I ventured. No response. I tried again in my heritage Spanish, underpracticed and tentative. —¿Hola? ¿Quién es usted?

Her eyes brightened and she angled her face more towards where I sat. She gummed at her lips a few times, the way my grandmother, who could not speak, did.

—¿Quién es usted?— I said again. —¿Por qué está usted conmigo?

She stayed there moving her lips without a sound, until I heard what must have been her voice coming from inside myself (the same way she heard Titi Negroni's voice after she was dead).

Tú eres la hija menor de mi nieta Maribel, no? I nodded. *¿Cómo te llamas?* I answered her: —*Me llamo Dominga Isabela.* She appeared to sit back, contented, in the rocking chair in the corner of my room. I felt her presence change from cold to warm, the way the air changed when I stepped out of the airport in San Juan. She continued to sit in the rocking chair but I felt her, at the same time, next to me on the twin-size bed with the gold railing that had been passed down since my grandfather slept in it.

Tengo que decirte algo. And then she introduced herself, although by then it was clear who she had to be. *Me llamo Ana Dominga. La autora del único poemario publicado en nuestra ilustra familia. Qué asco. No me dejaron decir lo que había que decir. Tengo que decírtelo a ti, ahora si es posible. Pero puedo volver.*

So began our correspondence, I the amanuensis of the undead. Each night I remained in that room she came to me and told me about this particular period in her life that remained untold. She repeated herself sentence after sentence until I took it all down on a yellow legal pad that I had to borrow from my *abuelo*. On the night before Three Kings' Day, she told me the story of driving across the *cordillera* to go find Isabela, and then she went quiet. I was supposed to go back to the mainland on the eighth.

—Titi, ¿hay algo más que quiere añadir?—, I asked her the next night, the night of the sixth of January.

No, mi niña. Eso es todo.

—Pero ¿qué pasó después?

Como tú sabes. Nada pasó. La vida pasó. ¡Y viste que no hay una diferencia entre la vida y la muerte! She laughed.

—Pero Titi, ¿no volvió alguna vez a ver a Isabela?

She went quiet but in a pensive way, as if considering a difficult problem of grammar. *Había una vez, como la penúltima, cuando la ví en el camioncito después del atentado de Pascua. Era la Nochebuena, y estaba caminando por la plaza en frente de la iglesia. Pasé por la casa de los Calderai. Habían instalado ventanas de vidrio. A través de ellas vi a la familia Calderai, Luis, Elisa, y dos jóvenes, supuse que eran Margot y Alberto—ya habían reaparecido. Estaban cenando por la luz de unas velas. Me detuve allí, mirándolos. Y por la luz de las velas que parpadeaban juré que la chica era Isabela. Pero la luz cambiaba tan rápido, y vi a Margot y a Isabela, casi al mismo tiempo. Margot. Isabela. Margot. Pues bien, porque la verdad es que yo pudiera haber sido su madre.*

The phrase gave me pause, like I'd heard it before: *pudiera haber sido su madre*. I could have been her mother.

—¿Pudiera usted haber sido la madre de quién, Titi?

Siempre me amaba Luis Calderai. Fue el único hombre que me trataba con cariño, aún cuando se casó con Elisa Lluberas Torres. Quería casarse conmigo, pero mis padres querían que me casase con un hombre de bien, un hombre de influencia. Siempre pienso, aunque estoy

muerta, en el amor que Luis Calderai gastaba en amarme. Yo pudiera haber sido la madre de sus tres, o él pudiera haber sido el padre de mis seis. El chiste es que no hubiera sido tan distinta la familia Calderai Torrei que la familia Calderai Lluberas. Ambos nosotros perdimos un hijo; quizás ninguno de nosotros habría perdido a nadie si Luis y yo nos hubiéramos casado. Pero no se puede vivir en el condicional. Esa es alguna de las cosas que aprendes cuando te haces adulta.

—Entonces, ¿nunca volvió a ver a Isabela en vida?

No. Her bottom lip quivered and she crossed herself. *Espero que cuando me ayudes a cruzar al cielo, la vaya a ver en la muerte. Esto es lo que he anhelado.* And with that she sighed. Her body, her presence, faded away with the exhale. I knew I wasn't going to see her again.

The next morning I took the old Jeep, whose leather seats had long been cracked with the salitre and whose seat belts had been lost to time, and drove myself across the *cordillera*. I was in Yauco before noon. I drove down what used to be Calle del Sol, now Calle Muñoz Marín, and parked in front of the church, next to a police car.

I walked through the six streets that made up the *pueblo* and stopped in front of what used to be Titi Torrei's café. It was empty. Someone had taken out the marble countertop that she had stood behind for so many years and the windows were foggy with dust. The tailor's shop, whose windows had also been blown out in the *atentado*, was now a unisex hair salon. I walked around the block to where her apartment was on the second floor, above what was now a money exchange. A banner advertising Medalla beer hung from the balcony. In all it took me twenty minutes to walk from corner to corner of the *pueblo*.

I stopped for lunch at a *kiosko* off the side of the road leading back to Ponce. I ordered an *alcapurria de jueyes* and a young green coconut. The *alcapurria* came out blistering hot from the fryer and I left it on the paper plate while I drank from the *coco* with a straw. My skin was darker than it had been when I arrived over two weeks ago and stood out against the creamy center of the coconut. I took the straw and pushed it against the walls of the *coco*, scraping its white meat and sucking it into my mouth. I gave the woman who ran the *kiosko* a five dollar bill and said *Gracias*. She said *Thank you, goodbye* to me in English.

When I got back to San Juan, I looked at all the pages I had taken down from Titi Torrei, Ana Dominga. It was a wrinkled stack of pages whose writing I could barely read, I had written so quickly. The complement to the incomplete *poemario* Ana Dominga had been given as her lasting mark on this earth. A work that said what she had wanted to say all those years ago, that expressed the pain she was never able to. I put the pages in a manila envelope and packed them neatly in my suitcase.

I didn't tell any of my family about this experience I had with Ana Dominga. They could not fathom the possibility of a ghost trying to set the record straight. Out of curiosity I asked my mother, who was her granddaughter, what she remembered of her *Abuelita Titi*.

"She was in bed for most of my life," my mother said. "I remember sitting in her lap when Moni would put her in her wheelchair to sit at the balcony. We could see the big church in Yauco. Then I got too old for that. She didn't make a lot of sense as she got older."

"But Mama," I said, "did she ever tell you any stories about when she was younger? About Titi Isabela?"

My mother furrowed her brow. “Titi Isabela? We don’t call her that. We never talked about her. I don’t think I ever saw a picture of her, even. My uncles took all those pictures out of the albums. One time, when I was in New York, I tried to look her up, but I guess she never went back to using her real name. There was no trace of her.”

There it was. So Ana Dominga needed another record of Isabela from someone who had never known her, who could not tell the story of Isabela, the *independentista* who ran away from home and disappeared, but rather that of Isabela the girl, the daughter of a woman who had tried to mother so many.

My parents left to fly back to Miami and I to D.C. I spent the two-hour flight watching the Atlantic shift from green to blue to black. I thought about what I would do with the stack of pages I had spent the last two weeks writing. Was I supposed to stick them in the missing pages of the *poemario*? To publish the story of Isabela, to make it known?

So when the airline couldn’t find my luggage, and with it the manila envelope with the pages I had taken down, I was at a loss, standing alone at the baggage carousel at Dulles. I left my name and address with the woman at the counter and walked empty-handed to the parking lot. As I drove down Route 66, I thought about it: Would she come back for me and have me take it down again? Did she know, somewhere, that the story was gone? There was no one alive or dead who could tell me what she would have wanted.

I arrived at home a few minutes before midnight. The heat had turned itself off while I was away, and the cold winter air had seeped into every corner of my house. I poured myself into bed with a pile of heavy blankets on top of me. And then I dreamed of everything Ana Dominga had told me, and prayed for her return to Isabela, wherever she might be.











PRIMER GOBIERNO DEL PARTIDO POPULAR EN YAUCO, ELECTO EN 1944





Glossary & dialogue translation

This section has been provided for those who are not fluent in Spanish. I encourage anyone with a background in any romance language to attempt to read the project bilingually, and suggest that those who don't know Spanish consider the experience of not having access to that information.

The glossary will define words used in Spanish within the English narration, and the dialogue translation will bring the Spanish dialogue into English, with corresponding page numbers.

Glossary

General

Atentado: attack

Borinkén (also *Borinquén*): the Taíno name for Puerto Rico. The Puerto Rican endonym “boricua” is derived from this word.

Coquí: small tree frog and symbol of Puerto Rico

Guayabera: a white dress shirt

-ita, -ito: suffix meaning “little.” Hence, Alvarito’s name is “little Álvaro.” Also used to indicate familiarity or affection.

Pava: a traditional hat worn by *jibaros*, or the Puerto Rican peasant class.

Poemario: a book of poems

Según: according to

Ser vs. *Estar*: two forms of “to be” in Spanish. *Ser* is the word for permanent states of being (*ser boricua*, to be Puerto Rican), while *estar* is the word for impermanent states (*estar en Puerto Rico*, to be in Puerto Rico).

People

Abuelo: grandfather

Aventura: literally “adventure,” slang expression meaning “mistress” or “side piece.”

Gringo: foreigner, tourist, American

Mujer: literally “woman,” colloquially “wife.”

Novio: boyfriend or fiancé

Primo: cousin

Tía: aunt

Tío abuelo: great uncle

Titi: honorific similar to “auntie.” Can be a literal aunt or an older woman.

Places

Autopista: highway

Avenida: avenue

Calle: street

Cerro: hill

Cordillera Central: the central mountain range dividing the east and west sides of Puerto Rico

Fortaleza: fortress. Used here to indicate *El Morro*, a large fortress built by the Spanish to guard San Juan against invaders in the sixteenth century.

Hacienda: a country estate anywhere between a farm and a plantation.

Hacendado: *hacienda* owner

Kiosko: literally “kiosque,” a small restaurant (usually somewhat dilapidated, in an area with a lot of other *kioskos*) that serves Puerto Rican beach food.

Pueblo: town, used here to indicate the downtown area of Yauco.

Food

Alcapurria (de jueyes): plantain dough stuffed with meat (in this case, *jueyes*, a type of crab) and then fried.

Arroz con gandules y pollo: rice with pigeon peas and chicken

Avena con coco: oatmeal with coconut

Cafecito con leche: Coffee with milk

Galletita: traditional large, hard cracker, eaten for breakfast or as a snack

Guineo: banana

Lomo: cured pork sausage

Longaniza: cured pork sausage

Mallorca: Puerto Rican pastry

Pancito con mantequilla: bread with butter

Parcha: passion fruit

Pastel (de yuca): a typical Puerto Rican food served around Christmas or during celebrations, consisting of ground meat inside a dough (made from yucca or plantains), encased by yucca leaves and then boiled.

Piragua: Puerto Rican shave ice

Queso fresco: farmer's cheese

Dialogue translation

13

They sent letters back and forth—*I want you, I love you, I burn for your kisses*, etc.—until Mami and Papi found the secret stash under Lída's twin-size. Lída protested—*they're his, Mami, I've never even seen this nobody*.

Agostina also *fell in love* with a super *nobody*, so *nobody* that even my great-uncle, keeper of secrets, town-in-La-Mancha'd him—*whose name I do not care to recall*.²

14

He gave his name —*I'm Vicente Dominicci Torrei, Álvaro Dominicci's son*—, and in response, Lída said: —*I could have been your mother!*

15

For Tonio on his Wedding Day. To Paloma, a Marvelous Dove. Against Sins.

20

—*Good morning, mamá*—, [Antonia] said.

² Opening line of Don Quixote: “Somewhere in la Mancha, in a place whose name I do not care to recall...”

—*Good morning, Titi*—, she said, the two sharp syllables, *tee, tee*, snapping Ana Dominga away from the window.

21

—*Hey*—, she said, addressing Antonia, —*Did you hear about what happened with your dad or what?*

—*Yes, of course. How exciting! Even if I have to stop him in the street to congratulate him*—, she said, almost smirking.

—*Enough, eh? Don't speak poorly about your father*— said Ana Dominga.

—*And you, Titi*—, said the friend, —*did you vote?*

—*Obviously not*—, said Ana Dominga, —*I never vote. It doesn't make a lick of difference, since they always choose the winner beforehand.*

—*Mamá, don't be so cynical. Look what happened with Muñoz Marín. And didn't you just tell me not to talk poorly about my dad? He won because he's so dedicated to the town.*

—*Don't you have work to do, my beautiful daughter?*

—*You know, Titi, with her father in the mayor's office, we're going to see a lot of changes in Yauco, in all of Puerto Rico. The governor isn't coming to meet just every mayor of every backwater mountain town. They tell me that your husband is a powerful man.*

—*It's not attractive to gossip*—, said Ana Dominga, leaning over the counter, —*or smoke inside a café*—. She plucked the cigarette out of the girl's hand and tossed it in the sink behind her. —*Didn't your mother ever tell you?*

—*Sorry, Titi.*

—*Don't worry about it*—, said Ana Dominga.

23

—*Hi, mami.*

—*Look, they gave us a map of the United States!*

Carlos, with his small lisp, added, pointing, —*Here's New York, and Florida, and California.*

—*And where is our Puerto Rico*—? Ana Dominga asked. The boys looked at each other, and Vicente, the second-oldest boy, pointed vaguely to the ocean that ran along the coast. —*No, no, honey*—, she said, taking the map and laying it on the counter. —*Puerto Rico is . . .*— but she couldn't find it. The mapmaker had cut off the map just under Florida.

24

—*Well, it's around here*—, she said, point at the countertop slightly southeast of Florida.

—*Eat.*

The title for a poem came into her head: *Between being in the Caribbean.*

26

To the Americans, he said: *You mind your own business, I'll mind mine.*

Let's show them how we can be Americans.

—*Congratulations*— Ana Dominga said.

—*He's not here, Titi*— said Sylvia through the wrought iron bars of the gate.

—*I came to see you. Can I come in?*

—*Quickly.*

—*Where are you moving to?*

—*Well, obviously we need to move to a proper house, no? Now that he's the mayor. He's wanted this for so long*

—*I suppose so. But then why aren't you celebrating with him tonight?*

—*We celebrated together last night. There were so many people here. He bought a huge bottle of bubbly. But today he's in San Juan, meeting the governor.*

—*You didn't go with him?*

—*No*—, said Sylvia, —*but he promised he'd take me there one day. Today there was some important meeting. But it's a secret, don't tell no one.*

—*Who would I tell?*— They were quiet for a moment, and then Ana Dominga said:

—*You didn't tell me where you're going.*

Sylvia shook her head. —*He doesn't want me to tell you.*

Ana Dominga was stunned. —*But why?*

—*He doesn't like that you're in the house, that you visit me. It's inappropriate, he said.*

—*What do you mean, inappropriate?*

—*Since you were his wife, and now I am, I shouldn't have to explain it to you. It's better if we go our own ways, you and me.*

—*I thank you for everything you've done for me, and for the girls.*

32

—*Where is Isabela?*—she asked.

Antonia and Alvarito looked at each other. —*No sé*—, said Antonia.

—*She went with the twins*—, said Francisco, —*and told us not to tell you*—.

33

—*Okay, I hope she comes back soon*—said Ana Dominga, repressing the worry from her voice.

34

—*What happened, my love?*

—*I can't leave them alone*—, [Isabela] said.

—*Who, my angel?*

—*The ducks, my ducklings*—, she whined. She lifted up a corner of her skirt to show six or seven yellow ducklings huddled together under her legs. —*Their mamá isn't here, I can't leave them alone.*

—*Alright, so we'll wait for her*—, said Ana Dominga, taking a seat next to her daughter.
[...] —*But their mom!*

—*Their mother will always be able to find them. That's how mothers are.*

—*If you don't stop wriggling you're going to hurt yourself*—, Ana Dominga said.

35

—*Hi, mami*—, she said weakly.

—*Where the hell were you?*

—*I was at the library with Margot Calderai, then I went to her house for dinner. I didn't realize it had gotten dark.*

—*Why did you tell your brother not to tell me where you went?*

—*I didn't tell him that.*

Ana Dominga smacked her daughter's face. —*Tell me the truth.*

Isabela's voice wavered. —*I already told you. Listen, Margot and her brother Alberto brought me home, I wasn't even walking alone.*

37

Between being in the Caribbean.

42

—*She just likes him because he has money that his daddy took out of our hands.*

—*You don't know him at all, nena.*

43

—*I know very well what imperialists are like. They love it when we fight each other, so they can take advantage of what's leftover.*

—*Where did you learn the world imperialist, huh, missy—?* said Ana Dominga like a smack on the wrist.

—*I hope you do go out with the gringo, since you're so ready to sell yourself.*

—*Enough—*, said Ana Dominga.

44

Write me when you have time, because it was a pleasure to meet you.

46

The bachata had turned into the crystalline beat of broken glass and a harmony of screams, cries, shouts, *where are you?*

47

The piece ended with a direct address to the mayors of Yauco and Ponce, and to Muñoz Marín:
Puerto Rico for Puerto Ricans, Borinkén by boricuas.

Hail-Mary-full-of-grace-the-Lord-is-with-thee.

—*And we pray for the soul of our blessed María de los Remedios San Juan Bautista de Negroni, friend of the Church and of us all, amen.*

—*Where is the mistress of the house?*

—*She's gone. We came to witness the miracle.*

—*What do you mean, miracle?*

—*Don't you hear it? That sound? [...] —I heard it all the way from my house, over there—, said the woman. —It called to me. I jumped out of bed and came to see. I saw the soul of Our Lady rise to heaven and with her the warmth was gone. I swear it to you. I'm the witness.*

—*Her body is gone, too?*

—*She never had a body—, said the woman—, so close to God she was. Her body already left to be with Him. What was with us was the miracle of her soul made flesh. Do you want to see where she rose up?*

—*There, over there—, the woman pointed to the disorderly side of the bed, —is where she ascended.*

—How do you know?

—Listen. She told me herself.

52

—She's speaking to you. She's calling to you, Ana Dominga.

She's where the ships are. Don't look for her; she'll find you when she's ready. She's blessed. You're all blessed. We're all blessed. I swear to you. I promise you. I love you all. I'm watching over you.

—Who are you?

—If you don't hear her, maybe it's better if you go, to let those who can, hear.

—I hear her, I hear her! She's with me!— Ana Dominga protested but she was already being pushed by the small of her back out of the bedroom that was identical to hers.

—Are you okay, Titi?—, Sylvia said to Ana Dominga.

—What are you doing here?

—I heard the noise and I wanted to see if the Negroni widow had died or not.

—*They told me that she wasn't even living when we knew her, and now she's gone forever*—. Sylvia, confused, didn't fill the pause that Ana Dominga left for her. —*Your baby is beautiful.*

—*Right? I named her Luz Caridad. My husband was furious when he found out. He wanted to name her like her sisters, something like Fortunata. But since he wasn't there...—.* Sylvia glanced up from her daughter with a look of shock on her face. —*Titi, you're bleeding—,* she said, touching her hand to own mouth.

—*I have to go—,* Ana Dominga said.

—*I'll come with you, I'll help you—,* said Sylvia, but Ana Dominga had already taken off towards the town, running.

—*Titi, what are you doing! Come here, you're getting soaked. [...]* —*Please—*he said.

—*Come in, come in—,* he pleaded. —*Come here.*

—*I don't know what to say to you—,* she said.

—*Titi, what happened to you?*

—*Where is my daughter?*

—*She's not with her uncle? That's what the police told me.*

—*You know that she disappeared the day of the attack. She's wherever your twins are, and I know you know where they are.*

—*You know that my daughter's gone, too. All my children. There are rumors that they were disappeared³—imagine it, they disappeared my children, barely fifteen years old! There aren't words for how Elisa is. She won't look at me, or talk to me, or touch me. I'm alone. Completely alone.*

—*You can say that to me, I who have been alone for how long?*

—*At least you have the others, five children, what luck! Do you understand? I don't have anybody!*

—*You know where they are! I know you know!*

—*No, I don't, Titi—* He stopped and looked back up at her. —*This has changed you, this experience.*

—*Life has to change us. If not, we're not living.*

—*Yauco needs you as you were. Your children need you as the mother you were. I need you, like when you were mine—*

—*I don't belong to anybody.*

³ “Disappear” (*desaparecer*) has two meanings in Spanish—the conventional “to disappear,” and to be forcibly disappeared, abducted by government forces and imprisoned, tortured and/or killed as a means of repressing political dissent. Also used as a noun, *los desaparecidos*, the disappeared ones.

—*Mamá*—, said Antonia, —*this is Henry Waller*—. So this was he, Ana Dominga thought. —*He wants to marry me. We want to get married.*

—*Hi, ma'am! I'm Henry*—.

—*I want to marry myself to your daughter.*

—*But honey, how could you have fallen in love with him? How are you going to understand each other?*—[Ana Dominga] said.

—*He's written me tons of letters in Spanish. From the start. He's a good, serious man who loves me, and I love him. We understand each other, mamá. I don't know how. It's like I can read his face.*

—*He wants your blessing, mamá. He wants you to bless us.*

I couldn't make myself write after she left.

For my granddaughter, Anna Waller

A LIFE OF MEMORIES

A life of memories does not include an I who isn't "happy to have been shown / this clever young man grow," or who doesn't "hope that within this Concha⁴/ is also a pearl."

63

—But how am I going to see you when you're a lady on that hill in Ponce? You're going to be too busy to see me, your mother, who is now totally alone.

—Henry can pick you up in the car—, Antonia said, annoyed, as she removed a thick layer of dust from the windowsill. —The drive to Ponce is less than an hour long. You could even walk if you wanted to.

—But how can I leave the boys alone in the house?

—The boys will fit in the car, too.

—Don't forget about your poor mother who has never so much as left her town. It'll be the first time that I've left, ever.

—What a wonderful opportunity for you, mamá!—. Antonia grabbed her mother and kissed her on both cheeks. —So many things you'll get to see! What an adventure!

—Don't get ironic with me, miss—. Ana Dominga's face darkened. —And what will happen if your sister decides to come back and I'm not here?

—She already made her decision, mamá, and she left us. I don't care if she comes back or not.

—Don't talk about your sister like that. She loves you so much. And you love her too.

⁴ Girl's name, short for Concepcion; also conch shell.

—If she loved us, she wouldn't have left us for a fight that nobody cares if they win or lose.

—I care, and you should care too. It's our land, nena! If you hadn't married the gringo you wouldn't be talking like this.

—Never talk about my husband like that again.

Good morning Titi! See you later, Titi! Till tomorrow, Titi!

66

Mamá,

I hope this letter finds you well. I feel so ashamed to have left you like that, so fast, without warning. I wanted to tell you that I'm safe and well, with you can probably guess who (I don't want to write them here in case this letter falls into the wrong hands).

It's become very dangerous for me to stay on our island that I love with all my heart. I've decided to go to the United States, until it's safe for me to come back, or until we decide to go someplace else. We're leaving in a few days, when the boat comes on Friday. Can you imagine? I'll turn sixteen on the ship, and, when I get to New York, I'll be a woman in charge of myself.

I heard about Antonia's wedding. As you can imagine, my feelings about her fiancé husband haven't changed, but I'm happy if she is, and I wish them the best. I hate that I missed seeing her before she was married. I'll write to her soon.

This letter should serve as my goodbye. I hope you don't look for me, especially while they're following me (because there are people who want to find me, I'm sure of it, and if they find me you'll never see me again). Hugs to my brothers, and my sister and brother-in-law, and tell them I love them. I love you, mamá.

Isabela

—What are you doing here?—, asked Ana Dominga.

—Henry had to come by on business. He insisted on coming to surprise you—. Antonia paused, and looked carefully at her mother. *—Did something happen, mamá? You look strange.*

—Yes. Yes, something happened—. She showed her daughter the letter. *—Isabela wrote to me. We have to find her before she leaves forever.*

—Mamá, we can't go look for her. It could be dangerous for her, and for us.

—She's only fifteen years old. We can't let her go to the United States, to New York on her own, without anyone to take care of her.

—She knows what she's doing. She knew it when she got involved with those Calderai twins—. Antonia stood with her hands over her chest, her mind made up.

Ana Dominga's gaze turned desperate, wild. She looked to Henry. *—Please, Henry. You can help me, no?—*. She paused, thought. *—Please. Take me to San Juan. For Isabela.*

Henry looked at his mother-in-law, then at his wife. Antonia shook her head. —*It's already getting dark. Why don't we wait till the morning? We can stay here in my room. Tomorrow we'll decide what to do.*

72

—*I got your letter—*, said Ana Dominga.

—*How did you get here?*

—*Don't worry. You'll see when you come with me.*

—*Where?*

—*To Yauco, obviously, nena. I'm here to get you before I lose you to the gringos—*. Ana Dominga said this reassuredly, almost jokingly, convinced that, now that she had found Isabela, the whole episode was over, and mother and daughter would ride back over the mountains together.

—*Mamá—*, Isabela said, —*I can't go back. They're looking for me. They took Margot and Alberto the day before yesterday, I saw it with my own eyes from the hideout. I don't know where they could be, or if they're even alive or dead, or if they're going to let them come back. The independentistas can't protect us anymore. We're leaving this afternoon at three.*

Ana Dominga heard this as if it were being read over the radio, a fiction. She asked the only thing she could think to ask, as if Isabela had just told her she were going to the park.

—*Who are you going with?*

—*With Ferdi, Fernando. The oldest son of the Calderais, you know him. He has to go with me too. He's been wanted longer than I have.*

—*But honey, how are you going to be safer in the States than here? It's the same government, the same police.*

73

—*The cadets⁵ gave us fake passports. No one knows us there. In Manhattan there's the same amount of Puerto Ricans as here, even more, and the population of those who can't keep living here is growing. The revolution is in New York.*

—*Are you scared?*

—*No.*

78

But I know how to make flan. But I know the sound the coqui makes.

—*Hello? Who are you?*

79

—*Who are you? What are you doing here?*

You're the younger daughter of my granddaughter Maribel, no? I nodded. *What's your name?* I answered her:—*My name is Dominga Isabela.*

⁵ Of the Republic, the youth branch of the *independentistas*.

I have to tell you something. And then she introduced herself, although by then it was clear who she had to be. My name is Ana Dominga. The author of the only poemario ever published in our illustrious family. What bullshit. They didn't let me say what I needed to say. I have to tell it to you now, if it's possible. But I can come back.

80

—Titi, is there anything else you want to add?—, I asked her the next night, the night of the sixth of January.

No, darling. It's all there.

—But what happened after?

You know. Nothing happened. Life happened. And now you see that there isn't a difference between life and death! She laughed.

—But Titi, didn't you ever see Isabela again?

She went quiet but in a pensive way, as if considering a difficult problem of grammar. Once, like the time when I saw her in the truck after the Easter Sunday attack. It was Christmas Eve, and I was walking through the plaza in front of the church. I passed in front of the Calderai house. They had put in glass windows. Through them I saw the Calerai family, Luis, Elisa, and two young people, I guessed that they were Margot and Alberto—they had reappeared by then. They were eating dinner by candlelight. I stopped there, watching them. And by the candlelight that was flickering back and forth I swore that the girl was Isabela. But the light changed so fast, and I saw Margot and Isabela, almost at the same time. Margot. Isabela. Margot. All the same, since the truth is I could have been her mother.

—*You could have been whose mother, Titi?*

Luis Calderai always loved me. He was the only man who treated me with kindness, even after he was married to Elisa Lluberas Torres. He wanted to marry me, but my parents wanted me to marry a rich man, a man with influence. I always think, even in death, about the love that Luis Calderai wasted in loving me.

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I could have been the mother of his three, or he could have been the father of my six. The joke is that the Calderai Torrei family wouldn't have been that different from the Calderai Lluberas family. We both lost a child; maybe neither of us would have lost any if we had married. But you can't live in the conditional. This is something you learn when you're an adult.

—*So you never saw her again in life?*

No. Her bottom lip quivered and she crossed herself. I hope that when you help me move on to Heaven, I'll see her in death. That's what I've ached for.

Photographic Index

All photographs used in this work were sourced via my family archive or were taken by me personally. Some of the pictures from my family archive may have been originally sourced from newspapers or other non-original sources.

16 // My grandparents and I on a balcony in Yauco (circa 1995).

37 // View of San Juan city sprawl from my grandparents' home, Río Piedras (present day).

59 // View of the island of San Juan from an airplane (present day).

74 // A van selling fruit on the road, Yauco (present day).

83 // My grandmother as a young woman, Adjuntas (date unknown).

84 // My grandfather (right) meeting with governor Luís Muñoz Marín, San Juan (circa 1952).

85 // My father (right) and uncle as children, Pittsburgh (circa 1965).

86 // The church and plaza, Yauco (present day).

87 // Caption: First government of the Popular Democratic Party of Yauco, elected in 1944.

88 // My grandfather as a young man (circa 1945).

89 // My grandfather walking towards the building in which he grew up, Yauco (present day).

Suggestions for Further Reading

The following is a list of sources that I consulted during my research for this project, or which informed or inspired the novella. I have included them as suggestions for the interested reader.

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