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Spring 2019

## How to Hold the Sky

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*Bard College*

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# How to Hold the Sky

Senior Project Submitted to the Divisions of  
Multidisciplinary Studies  
and  
Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
Summer Grace Flemister

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2019



# How to Hold the Sky

*A Novella*

*By*

*Summer Grace Flemister*



*To my dad, who first taught me to be a writer.  
Thank you for always believing in everything I do.*

*To my mama, who taught me how to be strong.  
I miss you much more than I could ever put into words.*

*To my grandfather, the leader, the activist, the storyteller.  
My biggest role model. I am so lucky to be your granddaughter.*



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To Sandra Cisneros, Jesmyn Ward, Esmeralda Santiago  
and all the other black and brown women who write:

Without you, I would have never found the  
courage to call myself a writer.





*Preface**Sunset in East Harlem*

I cannot see the sunset from my apartment. The sun falls behind the skyscrapers long before it reaches the horizon. In the summer, when the streets of New York stick to the soles of my shoes and I just can't seem to cool off, the shade that comes when the buildings block the sun is welcomed. While the sun is up and beaming down onto my neighborhood, people hide inside, trying to avoid the heat that grips their limbs if they're forced to trudge down the street. By 5 P.M., the streets are alive again. Kids come out of their homes to shout and laugh in the streets and a parked van with its door's wide open, plays salsa music. If the people outside are lucky, they may remember to look up at the fading sky. If they're even luckier, they might catch one of those special nights, when the sunset is just right, and so everything turns pink, or red, or orange. The light reflects off of the tops of cars as they whiz by, windows of buildings take on the bright colors of the evening, and even street signs change, their lettering invisible behind flashes of orange. For only a few minutes, the city cradles the colors of the sunset in its nooks and crannies.

If I am at home, I will lean out the window of the second story apartment I share with my sister and my niece. Drinking in the neighborhood, I cannot help but think of Puerto Rico; of Patillas, when I once had all of the skies above me; when I could follow the trail of the sun, from yellow mornings, to red evenings. I remember how even the green leaves of the trees would catch the color of the fiery sky, and how puddles of mud that decorated our land erupted, as though windows to what is above.

Today, I stand before a darkening blue sky. The sun has already moved behind the jungle of brick buildings. The moon which has risen, I'm sure, is also hidden. The pale blue reminds me faintly of the smell of coffee early in the morning when my mother rose before the sun did, and the evening, when the coquis began to sing as the birds began to sleep. Then a truck passes by, grumbling across potholes and leaving a black stream of smog behind it. Puerto Rican flags hang across fire escapes, and they flutter in the wind as the streets darken.

I shut the blinds and turn inside. My sister, whose daughter looks just like she did as a child, sits in the kitchen. Pasta bubbles in a silver pot, the lamp by her head shouts white light across the room. As my niece begins to cry, my little sister, who is now taller than me, bends, lifting her daughter from the ground. Sitting her on her hip

she begins to sing to her. Her daughter's small eyes widen as she hears her mother's voice.

*La linda manita  
que tiene mi bebé  
qué linda, qué bella  
qué preciosa es*

My niece wraps her hands around her mother's finger, and my sister begins to sing to her in English.

What a lovely, tiny hand  
my baby has got  
How pretty, how lovely,  
How precious it is



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## *Preitita Linda*

The night that my father came home late, I remember sitting at our kitchen table, scraping the sharp edge of a rock against the table's legs. Though the rock was sharp, it barely made a mark against the dense wood.

My mother was just outside of our home, leaning over a blue pot which hovered over a flaming log. The log was just long enough so that part of it stuck out of the fire unlit, and as the log burned, she pushed the unlit side further into the flames. She was stirring the pot with a wooden spoon, and every now and then, through our open door, she looked over at me.

The air was still and warm, and birds chirped loudly in the trees. Rays of sun made their way through the branches and the sun began to set, shining across Mami's face.

This house, with its tin roof that *pinged* when rain fell, was in the middle of a small clearing, surrounded by thick trees on all sides. On one side, la selva sloped downwards towards the sea and el pueblo de Patillas below. On the other side, the trees climbed towards the sky. Sometimes it rained hard enough that streams running down



el cerro rushed behind our home and my sister and I would sometimes imagine what we would do if the water ever got close enough to take us with it.

I was around six years old and still my parents' only child. It was just my mother, my father, and me. Papi worked on una hacienda a little ways from town from the early morning to the afternoon. He spent all day in the fields and under the red sun that turned the back of his neck brown and wrinkled. Papi came from a family of farmers in the north, just outside of San Juan, however, the last person in his family to own land had been his grandfather. He told me the stories that his father told him of corn and bean fields that stretched behind his grandfather's home. His abuelo had been forced to sell his land to a sugar cane company when the laws changed, and a new tax made it so they could no longer afford to keep it. Since then, my father's side of the family worked on farms all across the island.

"Yanguita," Mami called to me, and I dropped the rock. It landed on the ground and a small corner broke off, tumbling a few inches away from my toes.

"Get the clothes from the line before dinner. Papi will be home soon," she continued, and then she looked up, towards the sun, watching for a moment as it began to slide out of sight.

Normally, Papi came home around 5 P.M, his face covered in dirt, his fingernails black with soil, and his fingertips sticky, stained from caña de azucar. He wore an old straw hat, una pava, and often a blue button down which, by the end of the day, stunk with his sweat and was splotted with mud and green stains. On these evenings he would come through the front door and take off his hat which he would hang on a hook on the wall by the window. Usually, at this time, my mother was just finishing up dinner, and the table was already set. Papi would sit down in his chair in front of his plate, and Mami would put a cup of water in front of him, kissing his sweaty forehead. Then my father would turn on the radio and we would eat dinner.

Somedays, if he had forgotten to bring his hat to work with him, his skin would be as red as the inside of the sweet sandías that Patillas was named for. On these days, Papi's skin was hot to the touch, and my mother would laugh. "Mi blanquito... mi pobrecito," she would tease him, lifting his chin to the light as he sat at the kitchen table below her. Then she would go to where her sabila plant sat, its spiky arms stretching out of the window reaching for the sun. With a *crack*, she would snap off one of the leaves, and running her thumbnail across its spine would slice it open, revealing the gooey, sometimes clear, sometimes pink, gel. She would glide the inside of the leaf against Papi's skin, coating his face in the bitter substance, careful not to prick him

with the sharp points on the leaves. As did this, she would laugh again, saying, “This is why I thank God every day that the sun loves me. I would never trade my skin for yours.” To this, my father would sit me on his knee, pinching my cheeks and respond, “and this is why I thank God for our prietita linda.” Mami would roll her eyes still smiling, and my father would hold my hands in his, the white of his skin matching the inside of my palms.

Though Papi was blanco, he had hair like Mami that coiled and could have grown tall around him if he had wanted it to. But for the first few years of my life, I remember my father did not wear his curly hair. Saturday night once a month or so, after dinner was finished Papi would sit down at the kitchen table and my mother would get out a yellow comb and a jar of white cream. Mami would pull the comb through Papi’s hair, drawing a line against his scalp, separating his hair into two sections. His hair hung straight against his head, flopping to the tops of his ears. At the root, however, where his curls had begun to grow back, his hair had changed from silky and flat to tight and textured. With gloves on her hands, she would open the white jar, dip the comb into the cream, and begin to paint the chemical against my father’s scalp. The strong scent would take hold of the room, burning my nostrils, gathering around my eyes and making me dizzy if I got too close. Mami would leave the cream on Papi’s head until he

would hiss to her that it was burning him. Then she would take him, and she would wash his hair, soap and chemicals running into the dirt creating a stream along the grass outside. In the morning, my father's hair would shine in a way that my hair did not, and he would run his fingers through it absentmindedly. My mother never said much about his hair like this, straight & thin. I could tell that she did not like it by the way she pursed her lips in the morning as he looked in the mirror, and the way she sighed on those Saturday evenings when it was time to do it all again.

Mami came forward then and stood in the doorway, squinting in my direction, and I knew she was looking at the clock which hung on the wall behind me. Its round frame was brown, and it had no numbers on it, only thick black lines to mark the hours and thinner ones to mark the minutes. She frowned. Then she walked back outside. I saw that the fire was dying. The log Mami had been burning was just hot coals now, but I could still hear the pot bubbling. The smell of cebollas, ajo, y habichuelas made my stomach rumble. I watched Mami look out towards the trees where the road to town began, perhaps searching for Papi, expecting to see him in his straw hat strolling towards her.

I went outside where our clothes hung on a rusty wire, stretching from the roof of our home to a thin tree not so far away. The air was still. It was the eerie time of day

between day and night when the birds have stopped chirping, but still too early for the crickets and tree frogs to begin singing. A gust of wind blew through the leaves around me, sending a shiver up my spine. One of my father's shirts which Mami had secured with two faded pink clothes pins shook from the line, fluttering onto the grass.

There was a great big tree behind our house and its branches stretched out wide around its trunk, twisting and turning into the open air. Grey vines hung across the branches, and some of its enormous leaves which flapped like wings in the breeze were beginning to yellow. The tree was supposed to flower into beautiful open blossoms, las flores de maga, the flowers of Puerto Rico. However, it never seemed to produce more than a couple each season. As I looked at it, I saw a few blurs of pink which dotted the cloud of lime colored leaves. As I bent to pick up Papi's shirt from the ground, one of the tree's last flowers, carried by the wind landed at my feet. I picked up it up, pinching its yellow stem between my fingers and tucking the laundered clothes under my arm.

When I got inside, Mami was at her sewing machine, pumping the pedal beneath the great big wooden table that it sat on. Along the sides of the table was a column of tiny drawers in which Mami kept rows of thread coordinated by color. In the top drawer, she kept her needles and her pins which all sat nestled in a pin cushion shaped like una sandía. She was a seamstress, and she made clothing and fixed hemlines for

women in town. Her sewing machine sat up against the wall that ran from my bed to my parent's bed, in front of the biggest of the four windows in our home.

I placed the clothes in a pile at the end of the table. Mami had let the fire beneath the beans burn out and the pot now sat at the edge of the stove, just far enough from the heat to keep it warm but stop it from cooking any longer. She was tense as I leaned my forehead against her, but her arm was still soft against my weight. "Mami, look," I held the flower out to her, gently, afraid it would fall apart. She stopped the moving of her foot and the sewing machine slowed.

She took the flower from my hand and smiled. "Ven, vamos a comer."

Mami glanced at the clock and pursed her lips as she spooned me a bowl of rice and beans. She sat down at the table next to me after slipping a spoon under the pile of steaming food.

"Did I ever tell you about how your abuelo died?" She asked me. She stirred her food, dumping the beans on top of the rice, pushing the mix back and forth against the sides of the bowl.

I frowned and shook my head.

"Your bisabuelo, Benito, came to this place after he was freed from slavery. He grew up on this island under something called el Código negro. There were laws that

said what negros could and couldn't do, and until 1873, the law said that he had to work on a farm for someone. That they owned him. He was their property because he was prieto.”

My heart dropped a little bit as I understood what she was saying. The yellow scarf she had wrapped her hair in looked like gold against her dark skin. She always seemed to be very proud of her skin color, so much in fact that I grew up for a long time loving my skin and even wishing sometimes that I was darker, a feeling I realized, especially after coming to New York, that a lot of black girls do not experience. The way that I came out, Mami and Papi always told me that I was a mix of the two of them: equal parts Mami and equal parts Papi. As I grew older, some people called me negra, sometimes as a term of endearment, but other times saying it like they wanted to hurt me. Each time I remembered thinking that if I was negra, what was Mami?

Mami was very dark skinned. She was so black, sometimes she was blue. Papi often pointed out to me the way that my mother's skin was dark enough that it became a mirror, reflecting the colors around her. I remember times when the sun was setting over our house in Patillas, the sky flaring into a fury of oranges and purples. Mami would be outside, maybe gathering laundry that had been drying during the day or perhaps carrying water down from the stream, and Papi would say, “mira como ella

sostiene el cielo,” pointing out the way in which her skin became all of the colors of the sky and hills in the light of the sinking sun. In these moments I would watch Mami and wish that I could hold the colors of the sky on my face as she could. There were many other moments like that, where I both loved that I was half of my mother, but still longed to be all of her.

But at that moment, hearing my mother tell me that my great-grandfather had been owned by someone because of his skin, I shrunk away from her. Although at the time I could never have found the words to realize what I was feeling, I felt the weight of my great grandfather on my back.

Mami nodded again, and seeing the recognition on my face, her small brown eyes softened. Now her hands were in her lap as she fiddled with the pink flower, tracing its petals against the wrinkles of her palms.

“He was able to buy this land,” she continued. “Nobody wanted it because of the way that land slopes upward to the sky, and so the ground is tough and always so wet that crops did not want to grow... So, him and your bisabuela, Yaya, started a family here and eventually your grandfather was born.”

Mami seemed to be stuck on her words for a moment. “Pues...” she started again, this time smiling, “my mother loved these flowers. She spent much of her time tending



to this tree outside before it was even a real tree. When I was a young girl, I remember how thin it was, and how it bent and swayed so much in the gentle wind I thought it might blow away. Now, it has grown so tall, and yet only a few flowers grow each season. When I was younger, it was always covered and lit up with blossoms. When they fell and the wind blew, it looked as though a wave of pink had washed over the ground and covered our home. Sometimes we would wake up in the morning and petals were scattered across the floor of our house. Beula and I would stand outside and watch her, my mother, in the mornings when she would go around back to check on her flowers. She would talk to that tree because she said all things need amor para crecer.”

I leaned towards her again, trying to imagine my grandmother, whose image I had only seen from the grey photograph Mami kept on our mesa blanca by the front door.

The radio was playing in the background as Mami talked, still tracing the lines that swam across her hands. I had forgotten that she had started this story with slavery and asking me if I knew how my grandfather had died, and I think she had too.

I ate as my mother talked, and Mami, forgetting to eat the food she had made herself, also forgot to check the time or to wonder where Papi was.

It was dark by the time that he got home. I was outside scraping our plates clean, and Mami was at la lavadora, swishing water over the pot she had used. At the table inside, Mami had left Papi's dinner and covered it with a plate to keep the food warm and free of insects. She began to tap her foot again, and I looked up at the sky, surprised to see the moon. It would be time for me to go to bed soon, and I had never spent a night in our house without Papi being there.

Over the chorus of the coquis in the trees, I heard the crunching of leaves and the squishing of mud, and a shadowy figure emerged. He walked up the moonlit path, where the grass had died from so many feet walking down the same road every day for generations. "Papi!" I yelled out to him, and he lifted his hat and bowed. I laughed as I pulled on Mami's arm shouting "Papi regresó!" She put the pot down on the stone basin and straightened her back.

"And where have you been?" She asked Papi. She was shorter than my father but with her arms crossed and all of her weight resting on one hip, she seemed to be looking down at him.

He grinned at her under his hat and she nudged his shoulder with the back of her hand, repeating the question. He lifted his hand to his hat and brought it to his chest, revealing his newly chopped hair. My mother gasped, covering her hand with her

mouth, as did I. Papi's long straight locks were no more. Instead, his head was nearly shaved clean. He ran his finger over his hair and my mother laughed then, pressing the palm of her hand against his head.

The only way I ever learned what my father's hair truly looked like was through old photos that one of his sisters once left me. In these photos of Papi as a child, his hair hangs over him like a big grey cloud.

The last thing my mother had me do that night before I went to bed, was press the flower into the front cover of our bible. It was the bible that my mother said belonged to her mother, and after I had closed it, she had me place it on la mesa blanca, and she told me not to touch it for the next week. "If we do this, the flower will never die. No matter if the tree stops blossoming or a stroke of lightning snaps it in half," she slapped her hands together, "we'll always have this flower."

I placed the bible where she'd told me, onto that rickety table that sat by our front door. My mother had covered the table with white fabric, which she hemmed with lace. The small table was crowded with half used candles. A wooden cross hung from the wall above, and the few faded pictures that we had of loved ones, some I could not name, were scattered amongst small wooden santos. The biggest statue of them all was La Moreneta, a black painted woman, who holds a small child on her lap and wears a

gold crown over her hooded head. To the left of La Moreneta, my mother had also placed a statue of Maria draped in blue and white with a black rosary hanging from her hands. Dried red flowers lay across the front of the table.

After I had put the bible down, my mother put her hand on my shoulder and lit a red candle in between Maria y La Moreneta. She stared into the flame yellow flame.

“Papi died underneath that tree when I was 18.” She said sadly, “Mami came outside one day and she found him there lying on the grass, a smile on his face. She thought he was playing a trick on her.”

It took me a moment to realize she was finishing the story she had begun earlier. I looked up at her face, the sound of a fork scraping the bottom of a bowl as my father ate behind us at the table. The light of a candle gleamed on her cheeks, her skin reflecting the light as it always did, lighting up her eyes.

“Beula and I were out at el mercado, and when we came home the neighbors were here and there was a sheet over Papi. Mi mami became sick after that. They had been together for 34 years, and she quickly died. Su corazón ya estaba tan roto que trabajar ya no podía...”

My mother did not cry. Instead, her eyes fluttered, and she looked up from the red candle to the two tall wooden women. Then she brought her hand to her chest, drew

a cross, and kissed the tips of her fingers. I held my arms around her waist, looking into empty wooden eyes of the La Virgen.

## *All at Once*

My sister Taína was born in the summer, just before I turned 7. I remember my mother grasping my hand and pressing my fingers up against her stomach, which had grown large and round, and telling me I was going to be somebody's sister. I remember trying to imagine that there was a whole person growing inside of her.

The way Mami stood in front of the stove changed. When she cooked by the fire, she stood to the side, swinging her belly away from the flames, and she planted herself with her legs wide open like she was about to tip over. She often had her hand on her stomach, moving it in circular motions and sighing every now and then.

My mother's sister, Tía Beula, came down from her house on the top of the cerro every few weeks to check on Mami and the baby. Sometimes she brought a pot of food, other times, she stayed and cooked dinner for me and my father, but I also remember her praying over my mother, singing to her, and burning sweet smelling incense.

Taína was not planned, but she was expected. Both of my parents came from big families. My mother was the last of seven children, and my father, the fourth child of six. So, it did not come as a surprise to anyone except for me when my parents began

discussing possible names or when “cuando llegue el bebé” became a frequent conversation starter between them.

I thought it might be nice to have a sibling and have somebody to spend time with throughout the day. I remember standing between my mother and Tia Beula and imagining that my sister and I would be just like them. Most of all, however, I was excited for the baby to be born so that my mother could return to what I thought was her normal self.

My mother began her labor in the middle of the night. I woke up to her moaning across the room. Tía Beula had stayed the night, and she told my father to run and get la partera. The sky was dark, and the coqui frogs sang outside. I lied in my bed in the dark of our house, frozen and staring at the wooden beams across the ceiling until Tía Beula came to me.

“Yanga,” She called to me, leaning over my bed. “El bebe ya viene. We have to help Mami now, okay?”

There was a fire burning outside, and a pot of brown water boiled above it. My mother sat in the middle of the house, a towel on her forehead, rocking back and forth in a red rocking chair. Her cheeks filled with air as she exhaled deeply. Tía Beula

hummed to herself as she spooned hot water into a cup. I peered over the edge of the pot at the leaves and herbs that swirled at its bottom.

“Bring this to your Mami,” Tía Beula told me. I grasped the warm cup, walking slowly, careful not to spill the hot liquid.

“Mami?” I called to her. Her hair was tied up in a silk scarf and sweat pooled around collar bones despite the cool night’s air. I swallowed the lump in my throat and stepped closer to her, still holding the cup of tea with both my hands.

My mother drew her hand from the armchair to her face, lifting the towel to look at me. Her eyes were full of sleep and dark marks, like bruises, had appeared beneath her eyes.

But she glanced away from me and towards the stove where Tía Beula still was.

“Hot tea? Pensé que necesitaba calmarme.”

Tía Beula rolled her eyes, “This will ease the pain. Do as you are told hermanita.”

My mother took the cup from my hands and quickly closed her eyes again. I sat at our table, staying close to Tía Beula and watching my mother until Papi and la partera arrived.

By that time, my mother’s face rippled with pain, and Tía Beula had covered her with a blue blanket. Her hands moved rhythmically across her stomach, dancing with



her deep breaths. Her groans grew louder and la partera glanced at our clock on the wall, counting the minutes in between Mami's contractions. Papi stood behind her, holding her shoulders.

Eventually, the minutes between my mother's groans of pain shortened, and her moans turned to wailing. I looked out to the fire stove where only glowing coals remained. Birds were loudly chirping, and I knew the sky would begin to blue soon.

Mami gritted her teeth, and her skin shined with sweat in the dim light of our house. Papi was breathing with her, matching her quick breaths and squeezing her shoulder. All at once, la partera had my sister in her hands. She was so small, and a white film covered her body; she opened her mouth and began to cry. La partera smiled as she wrapped the baby in a fuzzy blue towel, placing her into Mami's open arms. The baby's crying stopped, and I watched as my sister stared up at my mother with wide eyes that matched her own.

Mami and Beula began to cry, and Papi sighed with relief. I looked at the blood on the blanket where Mami lied, my stomach turning over and over again. The room was suddenly too small, and too full of people and the smell of birth.

I went to the back of the house and padded through the mud to the tree under which Abuelo had died. It was the perfect climbing tree: its trunk split early into many

smaller thick branches that stretched out into the air. I pulled myself up the tree to a place where the branch divided into two still sturdy branches, just the right place to sit. I was high enough above the ground to feel as though I could breathe again. I could not hear my parents or Tía Beula talking through the songs of the waking birds.

I leaned my cheek against the rough bark of the tree, and watched my legs dangle, mud drying around my toes. I fell asleep up in that tree, just as the sun rose.



I woke up to my father calling my name. “¡Aqui estoy!” I shouted. He was on the edge of the jungle facing the trees. He laughed when he saw me, shaking his head before catching me as I leapt from the lowest branch into his arms.

I sat on the edge of my mother’s bed and peaked over the blue bundle she held to her chest. The room smelled sour despite the scent of burning incense. My mother let me hold my sister, who was so tiny and soft I was afraid I would crush her. Her skin was dark like my mother’s and she looked up at me with blinking eyes too big for her face. Her nose was soft and flat, and she had a full head of straight black hair. I rubbed my hand over her small head, imagining that this was what Papi’s hair must have felt like when he wore it straight. Her tiny head was doughy in my hand and I shuttered

realizing how fragile she was. I pushed her back into the arms of my mother, imagining what would happen if I dropped her.

“What will we call her, Mami?” My mother’s eyes were red and her skin looked grey. Before she could answer, Tía Beula came back to the bed and placed another cup of tea by my mother. She nodded her head in the direction of my baby sister and remarked to Mami, “ya se parece mucho a ti” Mami grinned through her sleepy eyes and Tía Beula put her hands on my shoulders and ushered me away, telling me that my mother and sister needed to rest and I needed to bathe.

My mother spent many of her days after that with her hair tied up in her blue scarf with a towel thrown over her shoulder. The dresses she wore never seemed to hang flat against her stomach again.

In the first years of her life, my sister was not called Taína. My mother chose Dolores for her at first, a name she explained was beautiful even if it didn’t last.

I never liked the name. The name means sorrow, a label clearly not fitting for Taína. She was such a happy baby, always smiling. She almost never cried. “¿Dolores, por qué tú no lloras?” My father would joke, leaning over my mother’s shoulder as she held my sister. But baby Taína would only stare back at him her toothless grin showing.

The name Dolores only lasted until she was about three years old when my father discovered her love for sandías.

Patillas was named after las sandías that grew along the valley in the grass. “Before los conquistadores got here,” Mami told me one day, “Los taínos grew sandías as big as you in groves on the hills.”

It was early in the morning, and my mother had a watermelon longer than Taína on the table. I remember it was so heavy that Mami had to wait for Papi to get home to move it from her garden because she could not carry it by herself.

My mother kept her garden on the edge of our land, a little way before the few scattered trees turned into a jungle. It was made up of what was left of the good soil that her grandfather had made and farmed when he first claimed the property. Here, Mami grew what she could for us. Though the garden was small, it produced vegetables much bigger than the ones I saw in the market. The onions she grew there were nearly the size of my head, and the peppers as long as my forearm. She claimed it was the magic soil that did all of the work for her. She only grew two or three watermelons each year, however, the few she did were the sweetest and reddest I have ever tasted. Now I go to the Pathmark by my subway stop and I look for the brown stain that tells me the melon is ripe like Mami taught me. They are 40¢ a pound and I have bought them once or

twice, but their insides are pale and even the darker ones aren't half as good as the ones that Mami used to grow.

Mami handed my sister off to me before walking to the curtain that covered her and Papi's bed. When she came out, she was holding my father's gleaming machete, which I was strictly forbidden from touching. After taking la sandía outside, she brought the blade down through the thick skin of the round melon. When it came through, pink juice dripped onto the ground.

She continued, "when los conquistadores came, los taínos taught them how to grow many things like beans and corn and indigo, but they kept their precious sandías hidden from them as soon as they realized they did not come in good faith."

My sister was two by this time, and after sitting in my lap for just a moment, she scrambled to get off, reaching her hands out for the piece of melon my mother was handing to me.

"But when the Spanish started bringing over africanos, and taínos began to dwindle in numbers, they passed their secrets and traditions over to the Africans."

One evening my father came home and found me and my sister outside in the grass. Scattered at my little sister's feet were three white sandía rinds. Red juice dripped down her chin, dropping onto her knees which were pulled up to her chest, and she held

a mountain of tiny black seeds in her sticky fingers. When my father saw this, with my mother's stories in mind, he began to call her La Taína. Mami clung to the name Dolores for some time before she finally joined me and my father in calling Taína, Taína.



The year my sister became Taína was also the year when we had our first Christmas celebration in our home. In the past, for as long as I could remember, we spent nochebuena at the house of different family members. That year, however, my father decided everyone should come to our home to celebrate. My mother beamed when he told this to her.

My father set to work decorating. In the corner, to the right of where our altar normally sat, he set up the nativity scene, something we left up every year until el Dia de los Reyes Magos had ended. He strung blue and white lights on the walls of our house, and by the front door he placed a shiny plastic tree which shook when the evening wind blew.

My mother made something every year to bring to whichever family member's house we were going to. Sometimes it was arroz con gandules, or, my favorite, pasteles, and she always had me help her with the cooking. I loved to help my mother cook. The

things she made often involved a lot of handy work and I admired the way she could move her hands so quickly and delicately at the same time. She smashed plantains, peeled cloves of garlic, and folded together pasteles like she was simply turning the pages of a book.

The day before Christmas Eve my father's sister, Tía Glenda, arrived at our house with her family. Papi brought home a live pig for el lechón. I stayed in the house and plugged my ears when they killed it, but Taína peered out of our window, wanting a better look. Papi and my uncle made the fire and hoisted the full body of the pig up over it with a stake through its middle. The blood that had flowed from the when its stomach was sliced open pooled in a dark puddle. The pig roasted all night over the fire.

That evening, I was at the kitchen table while my mother put the finishing touches on my and Taína's dress for the next day. My aunts were outside turning the pig, and Papi was stringing tinsel across the outside of our home. I looked at the clock in the kitchen, knowing my mother would ask me to put Taína to bed soon. Taína watched my father from afar as he stood on a stool to reach the top of our house. Only his legs were visible through the front door.

"Mami," she said suddenly, her eyes looking wider than usual.

“Hmmm?” My mother said. She was sitting at the kitchen table instead of her usual spot at her sewing machine. I peered over her shoulder to see the blue flowers she was embroidering onto the white fabric in her lap.

“Por qué tú negrita y Papi blanquito?”

My mother began to laugh at this. She glanced up for a moment looking over at my father, perhaps checking to see if he had heard his youngest daughter’s question.

She had a sewing needle between her teeth as she tied a knot with the blue thread. “Porque soy especial.” She said it matter of factly.

“Y nosotras?” my little sister said, her right eyebrow raised just like my mother.

“Claro! You are special like me and special like Papi.” She held the hem of the skirt in her hand, examining her work before starting again, “before you two were born, when you were just a dream in the back of your father’s head, and he was just a dream in the back of mine, your father longed to have two girls...” she pulled out her special pair of scissors, the ones she kept hidden in the corner where her bed was, away from me and my father. “Dos niñas especiales,” she recalled, grinning again, “dos niñas, igual que yo con mi misma carita.”

My sister and I giggled at this. My mother stood up then and took each of our hands in one of hers. I saw that of our three hands, mine was the lightest.



It was then that I remember a prickle of jealousy, bubbling up inside of me, because I realized that, perhaps, my sister was not equal parts Mami and Papi like I was and that she had more of Mami than I did.

In the morning, things went by quickly. Taína and I woke up to the sounds of our mother and Tía Beula in the kitchen. Papi had gone down into town and returned in the back of a truck with one of our neighbors who had offered to lend us tables and chairs. Papi set up them in the back of the house under the shade of my grandfather's tree.

The smell of the roasted pig cooking on the fire took over our house, and as the afternoon came to an end, tías y tíos y primos began to arrive.

By the time the sun set, the table was full of plates brought by different family members. People drank coquito and my uncles put on salsa music. Everybody was drunk and dancing and happy. We stayed by the fire into the night, my Tía Beula lighting candles and burning herbs to keep the mosquitos away.

Eventually, the night began to wind down and I was put to bed with Taína and our primos in our cot in the corner of the room. My cousins and I piled in, fitting ourselves underneath the mosquito net, and quickly fell asleep. My younger cousin Mariel who had just turned two a few weeks ago was lying in the crook of my arm. To her left, was her brother Gadiel, older by a year. Next to Gadiel, my sister slept.

I woke up in the night, the cold air making me shiver, and the clammy limbs of my cousins, who all seemed to be lying on top of me, left me unable to sleep. Mariel's cheek stuck to my chest, and my arm which was laying across her and Gadiel had fallen asleep. My sister was asleep with her mouth open, the two of us facing inwards. I slowly and carefully turned by body, turning my back to my cousins, facing outward.

Through almost closed eyes, I scanned the room. The curtain that normally covered my bed was left half open, perhaps so my mother and Tía could check on the babies. My mother and my father's sister Glenda were awake and whispering in the kitchen. The light was on above their heads, coloring their foreheads and the tops of their noses a dull yellow. A moth fluttered around the lamp, smacking against the bulb louder than their hushed voices.

When I turned around, they both looked over at me. My mother called my name softly, seeing if I was up.

I held my breath, staying as still as I could hoping I would pass the test.

After a moment or two longer, the voices picked up again.

My youngest and newest cousin Lorena was nestled in the bend of my tía's arm. As she and my mother spoke, Tía Glenda rocked herself back and forth slowly. In my

mother's arms was Lorena's twin sister Samantha who I learned was older than her by exactly a minute.

It was hard for me to hear what my mother and Tía were talking about. As the time passed and they forgot I was there, or that there were sleeping babies in their arms and throughout the house, their voices rose until I could clearly make out their conversation.

"Es una necesidad!" Tía Glenda said to my mother, her voice stamping on the last syllable.

I could hear the bewilderment in my mother's voice as she replied, "En serio?"

"That's what the doctor said. He said it had to be done. He said he was afraid I would be back next year and the year after that. We don't have the money for that. We did not expect two new babies, and now that's what we have. We can't have anymore."

"But why doesn't Hector—" my mother started but Tía Beula cut her off. "He doesn't want to. Besides, he's a man, he feels as though it will take a part of him."

"Hmm," my mother said, in her most polite voice.

"Es una necesidad," Tía Beula said again. "Ya me operó."

# *Yemayá and the Other Side of the Mountain*

The summer months in Puerto Rico were marked by storms. Like me, Taína became used to the ways that the weather changed in Patillas. For half the year, the air was warm and full of water. If rain came, it was only in short bursts. Dark clouds, heavy and plump, would roll in, covering the sun. Mami would call to me to help her get the clothes from the laundry line, and I would stare at the sky from the window, counting the seconds and waiting to see which way the wind was blowing. The first drops would fall, hitting the leaves and the dirt until the entire jungle hushed with rain. Taína learned to laugh and run in the strong winds that came and brushed up against our house, shaking the leaves from their branches and carrying the smell of the sea through the cracks in our walls. Mami would kick a bucket or two in front of the leaky holes in our roof, and think of Papi, down in the fields with the sugar cane, perhaps happy to have a break from the sun. The rain would come, angry and loud for a few moments, and then quietly roll away, revealing the sun and leaving the grass steaming.

Summer in New York is similar. The rain catches me when I least expect it. A crack of thunder tells me I have a minute or two to find an awning. People gather

together on street corners, in the doorways of bodegas, and we wait for the rain to stop. When it does, the city smell is gone and for a moment it just smells like rain. Then the concrete dries and the sour stench of New York City returns. I always think back to our leaky roof in Patillas, Taina splashing in puddles, and the sound of the stream: full and gushing among the trees.

I grew up thinking I knew what to expect during the stormy season. Though I sometimes overheard adults talking about los huracanes that plucked homes from the earth and threw them into the ocean or brought the sea level as high as the hills, I always felt safe in our home each year. The preparation before each storm became a pattern, like a family tradition.

The summer that Taina turned five, my mother woke me and her up in the middle of the night. She told us we were going to her sister's house. Tía Beula was a wide woman. Wide in the way that she smiled, and wide in the way that her laugh opened you up, even if you did not want to be opened. Her home was on the other side of the mountain, close to the peak, so that we had to walk up, over, and then down to get to her. She lived alone in a house much like ours, except the roof was thatched. Papi had offered to build her a better roof once. Perhaps he was just being polite, or maybe it was because he liked to build things, but Tía Beula shook her head and smiled when he said

this. Through the gaps in her teeth I saw the pink flesh of her tongue which always seemed show when she grinned. “Ni se te ocurre,” she told him.

Most of the stories that my mother told me about growing up in our house were about her and Tía Beula. They were the youngest of nine siblings and so they were the last ones to live in the house. They lived together when my grandparents died until my parents got married and my father moved in.

One day, I had asked my tía, “Why do you live so far up there on that mountain? Why can’t your house be here next to ours?”

“Yanguita, it was a dream of mine,” Tía Beula had told me. She smiled and said “Cuando era una niña I would stand right where you are and look all the way up there.” She pointed to the green that rose upwards behind me. “I loved growing up near the thick of the jungle so much, that I decided I would live in it.”



We left before dawn. The walk to Tía’s house was long, and I was glad the sun was hidden. The air was cool and thick, but beads of sweat appeared on my nose and the back of my neck as we walked. I held Taína’s hand, and she pulled me along, looking up at the trees. Everything was a deep green besides for the dirt at our feet, which was a bright red. It was the kind of dirt that would leave stains on the bottom of our feet.

This would be the first time that Taína had been to Tía Beula's house since she was a baby, and I was eager to show her a new place that I knew about and she did not. Even though we were breaking what I had come to know as our normal pattern for the rainy season, I was too distracted by our trip up el cerro to consider the implications of this change.

The walls of Tía Beula's home were decorated with altars and paintings of saints. She was very religious, although not Catholic in the way that my mother seemed to be. When she came to our house, she kneeled before the La Virgen, drawing a cross and kissing her fingertips. While my mother chanted prayers asking the La Virgen for protection, Tía Beula sang to her. She had a surprisingly high voice and that streamed out of the back her throat and was easy on my ears. I loved to hear her sing in the morning when the birds were chirping their loudest. It often sounded like they were singing with her.

Papi sang as we walked, poking us in our ribs until we sang along with him. He had machete strapped across his body, the blade hidden in a leather cover. When overgrown brush or low hanging branches blocked our path, he would take out his machete and slice them down. Mami was quiet and she walked ahead of us, turning back every now and then to look at Taína and me to make sure we did not fall too far

behind. As she walked, she carried a bag on the top of her head. It was something I would never master, and to this day, I'm not sure how she learned to climb mountains while carrying a load on her head like that. Once in a while, the white bag wobbled and she would lift a hand gently to steady its weight.

By the time we reached Tía Beula's house, the sky was a bright grey. Taína had fallen asleep on my father's back, and my feet were caked in mud and aching from the climb.

Tía Beula was outside sweeping together a pile of trash that she would later burn to ensure that it would not get swept up in the wind and thrown back at the house. When she saw us, her mouth opened up into a grin, and her yellow teeth shined in the grey light. "Yanga! Mi Yanguita!" she called to me. She pulled me into her, brushing her rough fingers against my face, and then sweeping Taína from Papi's arms and onto her hip. Taína rubbed her eyes and smiled shyly, as she often did when she interacted with anyone apart from my parents or me. She was always shy as a kid, even with people who she knew well, like Tía Beula who had practically pulled her out of the womb. Nonetheless, Tía Beula showered her in kisses and nose pinches. "Mis princesas!" She said happily, putting the hand that was not holding Taína on my cheek.



After she had set Taína down, she embraced each of my parents, and I took off with Taína into the house. I scraped my feet against the braided mat at her front door, careful not to track any mud into her home, and I made Taína do the same. Like our home, the house was small and simple. There was a kitchen when we first walked in, and then the bedroom with no door, where there were two beds. Each of the wooden walls was painted a different color. There was a small section in the first room near the floor where Tía Beula had once handed me some paints and a brush and left me there to paint what I wanted. I showed Taína the pink flowers I had drawn, like the pink flowers on our grandfather's tree.

Then I led her to my favorite part of Tía Beula's home. In the back behind a blue curtain, where our tía slept, there was a large painting of a black woman, in a blue dress, a white scarf hanging over her head and her shoulders. Her hands were at her sides, palms facing out, and gold light beamed behind her. Her dress melted into the curves of ocean waves at her feet.

"Quién es? Mamá?" Taína asked me. She put her hands on the small table below the bed and the painting and peered over at the bowl of water, the blue sea glass and the shells that lay amongst the blue and white candles.

“Es La Virgen” I said, proud to know the answer just as Tía Beula and my mother entered. I looked at the image again, and with my mother’s hair wrapped in a white scarf, I couldn’t blame Taína for thinking the painting was of her.

“Mentira,” Taína responded frowning. “Ella es blanquita.”

Beula came to us, putting her hands on our shoulders. “You’re going to confuse them,” my mother said, shaking her head.

Tía Beula began, ignoring my mother. “She is many colors: negrita, blanquita... whatever you want her to be, but her name, Yemayá, is what I call her.

I could practically see Taína’s head swelling with questions. My mother shook her head laughing. Papi looked away, putting his hands in his pockets in the corner of the room.

That night, as it began to rain, and the winds picked up, my father read by candle light, while my mother and Tía Beula prayed to the painting of the woman. They asked for her protection from the storm, for the protection of Tía Beula’s home and our house, which my aunt called “Papi’s house.” Taína and I shut our eyes and held each other’s hands, mimicking our mother and aunt.

Even with the sounds of the storm outside, I did not think to ask why we had left our home to stay the night at Tía Beula’s. Had I asked my father, he would have told me,

“the mountain at our backs will protect us from the storm. Down there the wind hits us in the face, and the water above will cover everything.” And I would not have believed that he meant everything, including our home, but he did.

## *Roots*

Shortly after she found out that she was pregnant with me, my mother decided that she was going to name me after my grandfather. She had counted the months, realizing that I was going to be born near the same date as abuelo. She kept the thought to herself, never telling my father until she dreamt about it. She told me this the first time we flew to New York. I remember her looking out the window as the sun set, turning the whole aisle orange. She gripped the armrest as the plane bumped along and described seeing her father, young and handsome, his hair not yet grey, standing below the tree that he had died underneath. “The pinks of the flowers fell from the tree like rain, and he was holding a bundle in his arms. Even though I could not see your face, I knew it was you.” The plane shook a little bit and she shut the window shade.

“And? Mami then what?” I asked her.

“Then I woke up, sweating and cold, and I turned to your father and said *la llamaremos Yanga*, and Papi said okay.”

My mother and Tía Beula had trouble speaking about their father for most of my childhood. Hearing this story on the plane, on our way to New York, I felt guilt welling up in my throat. It was not the same kind of guilt like when I got caught lying about

washing my hands, or when Mami had just washed our white tablecloth and I spilled coffee all over it. It was guilt that filled the empty space between my collarbones, and I couldn't shrug it off.



The morning after the storm passed, I woke up to silence. There was no wind or birds, or frogs, or rustling trees. Through the holes in the ceiling, I could see the sky beginning to brighten to grey, and I couldn't tell if it was because the sun had yet to rise or because the sky was still heavy with rain.

I lied on the cot next to Taína. She was snoring, as the leaky roof had left her feet wet, giving her a runny nose.

I smelled a fire burning and coffee being made, so I decided it was safe to get out of bed. I climbed over Taína onto the wet ground. There was about half an inch of water in the house, and it ran like a stream through the back of Tía Beula's home, and then out the front door.

Mami and Tía Beula stood by the stove, my mother stirring a cup of coffee. They were both bent over the table, their necks curving together, the heads leaning as they spoke quietly to one another.

When Tía Beula saw that I was standing there, she nudged my mother with her elbow. Mami stopped talking and looked down at the cup she was holding. Though Tía Beula cupped my chin in her hand, pressing a kiss into my forehead, she felt far away.

“Quiero un cafecito,” I told her and my mother.

My mother handed me the cup she was holding and told me to bring it to Papi. I found him outside wearing a dirty white tank top with sweat dripping from his forehead. Although it was the cool, the air was damp.

“Gracias miija,” my father said, sipping his hot coffee. He was clearing away the tree branches that had fallen in the storm. He broke down the smaller limbs, laying them out so that they would dry when the sun came and Tía Beula could use them for firewood. Then he threw the bigger pieces into a pile that he would finish off later with his machete.

My mother and Tía Beula walked out of the house then. Both of their skirts were drenched at the bottom. They began to walk down the path away from the house. Neither of them were talking.

“A dónde van, Mami?” I shouted, running to catch up with them.

“A la casa,” she told me. “We’re going to check on it,” Beula finished for her.

Then Tía Beula’s voice softened as she said “Quédate con tu hermana.”

I frowned and stopped following them. Beula gave me a smile that felt like a shrug. Then she turned and they entered the jungle.

I stood for a moment, watching them swish through the green. My mother's red skirt, and Beula's blue skirt were easy to spot. Then I took off to the cot that Taína and I had shared. I thought I would wake her up, and we would go together down the mountain after my mother and my aunt. But when I saw her snoring peacefully still in the same spot I had left her, I turned right around and ran outside to Papi.

"I'm going down after them," I said. My heart thumped in my throat.

He spit into the dirt and wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. I had never decided something to him before. He looked at me, smirking as if he thought I was joking. He chuckled. "No, Yanguita."

"Y por qué?" I asked my father. I had grown up there just as my mother and her sister had.

I probably would have stayed if he could have given me a good answer, but he only repeated what Tía Beula said. I had to stay with him and Taína.

So I took off, leaping across the mud, trying to keep my toes from sinking into the soft soil. My feet slid and squelched over the sound of Papi yelling my name. But his calls became further and further away until they stopped altogether.

The sun was beginning to shine behind the grey clouds and burn away the mist. I felt the fog sticking to my cheeks, my arms, my eyebrows. I walked along the wet ground, listening to the birds screeching and chirping, rustling the leaves. If life had returned to the jungle, the storm must have been gone for good.

The path that we had taken to get to Tía Beula's home was gone. Branches without their leaves were folded against one another. Though the forest was normally a fury of green the trees looked dry and lifeless. Once and a while the wind blew softly, and so rainwater fell from the leaves above.

Eventually I caught up to them. I spotted the red of Mami's skirt, and then noticed Tía Beula's blue beside it. They walked in silence, neither of them making a sound, even as they moved along the invisible trail, scattered with branches to step on or puddles to splash in. I began to walk quietly too, mimicking the way my mother stepped lightly and intentionally.

At one point I stepped on a prickly tree branch that I hadn't noticed, and though it snapped loudly under my weight, and I hissed as the rough bark scraped the bottom of my foot, neither Mami nor her sister turned around.

Ahead of me, Mami and Tía Beula marched swiftly.



As we reached the bend just before our home, where the thick of the jungle began to disperse into our backyard, the blue and red of their skirts disappeared and again I was alone. The air was still; my heart began to beat quickly in my chest. When I came out into the clearing of, I lost my breath.



Taína does not remember Patillas like I do. Sometimes she ask me questions about the details of the house and our land there. At first it started as a game, to test my memory, and a bedtime story when we moved to New York. At night, with the street lights illuminating our shared bedroom, I would walk us through the layout of the house. Each time, Taína would ask me to start in a different place.

I never talked about what the destruction looked like to anyone. I don't think Mami has either, except to say that our home was gone. It occurred to me recently that Taína has no idea what exactly happened to our home. I brought up the idea of going backwith her recently, and she scoffed. It was a Sunday morning, and church bells yawned outside. Taina was speaking to her daughter as we at breakfast, sounding out the English words she wished she would say “water, blue, food?” She asked her daughter, her hand floating from the glass of ice water on the table, then to the shirt she was wearing, then to the eggs on her plate.

“How could we go back? What if someone already lives there?” She said, turning to me.

I frowned at her. “What do you mean? It’s our land.”

She shrugged. “It’s been years. How could someone know a circle of empty land underneath el cerro is anything but.”



When I came out from behind the trees, I found my mother and her sister on their knees. Their skirts had been consumed by brown clay. They were wailing. It was a horrible sound that crept out of their throats, building and building. I was sure the sound would never end. My mother held onto Tía Beula’s arm, pressing her face into her shoulder.

Our home lay in pieces. Where the trees that sloped upwards towards the sky had been, there was only red earth and overturned roots. A landslide had destroyed everything in its path. Pieces of our walls, planks of wood, had been snapped in half and their sharp edges were scattered about, parts of them sticking through the mud. My mother’s sewing machine was overturned, separated from the table that it was attached to, and our green ice box was a little ways away. The door had ripped off and it was full

of water. I saw the cot that Taina and I shared on the edge of the jungle, torn and red with the earth.

Tía Beula stood, and my mother followed. The two of them walked over to their father's tree, their bodies shuddering with sobs, their feet tripping over each other as they stepped across the broken ground. Though the tree remained, the very limb I had climbed and fallen asleep in all those years ago was lying at its base.

My mother and her sister laid their hands down against the tree's roots. The black backs of their hands disappeared into mud, and I could hear the wet ground oozing behind their cries. My mother's soft hands scraped the base of the tree.



I remember my mother leaning back in a chair outside of our home. Looking up, she puts one hand inside of the other, tracing the lines on the back of her hand, lines that remind me of the roots of a tree or the streams in the jungle that twist and turn into the flesh of the land.

I was young, and my ears were hot and my face was sweating as tears streamed down to my chin. There was mud in my hair and I was biting my lip.

“Yanguita,” she was saying to me. “Yanguita no llores.”

“Why couldn’t you give me a normal name?” I asked her. I remember running up the hill to our house, despite my burning lungs, trying to get as far away as I could from the boys in town who called me Yanga la esclava. Yanga the slave.

“¿Porque no me dio un nombre normal, Mami?” I asked again.

My mother was sighing and shaking her head. “Your name is Yanga for your abuelo, Yango, my father who died before you were born. Tienes el mismo cumpleaños.”

Embarrassment turned my cheeks red, and I wanted to say I did not ask to be born on his day. I wanted to say, why couldn’t I have a normal name like a girl named Mia who has red hair that she gets to brush each morning. I wanted to push this name away from me.

My mother continued with the story of her father, Abuelo Yango, who was un pescador until he died. Abuelo Yango who fished each day with my mother in a boat that said her mother’s name across the side. Abuelo Yango who taught my mother how to swim so that she could fish with him, who rose at dawn each morning, who slept only after five of his seven kids were out of the house; whose nap never ended.

My mother was telling me this story, but I could not grasp it until this moment, after seeing the remnants of our house. As I watched her yell and cry for my Abuelo Yango, a part of me snapped, and I started to cry. In this moment, I understood the

weight that my name carried. I wanted to sit between my aunt and mother; I wanted to feel their tears like I felt my own.



Eventually Mami and Tía Beula stood. They knew I had been there all along, this I saw. My mother with her back still turned to me, lifted up her arm and beckoned me to her. I tried not to fall as I ran across the ground, leaping over the places where the earth had cracked open. Tía Beula began to pray and as my mother pulled me towards herself, the mud that covered her skirt and her hands colored my clothes as well.

When Taína asks me to recount the blueprint of our family's home to her, I think of this moment when I last saw our land. I think of how she never saw the destruction. Our clothes scattered and caked in mud, my mother's garden, the last of the beds her grandfather had created, swept away, all of her plants drowned. In her mind, with the help of my recounting, the house is still standing, the limbs of our grandfather's tree still attached and Mami's garden still grows.

## *Negra Sucia*

Papi had been saving money in secret, and two weeks before his flight, he talked to Mami. They spoke quietly in the kitchen while the rest of the house slept.

I crept out of the cot that my sister and I shared and, standing on the tips of my toes, willing the floor not to creak, I put my ear, then my eye, to the crack in the door. Papi pushed something across the table and Tía Glenda's plastic tablecloth squeaked under his hand. Mami gasped my father's name, "Cefe!" and Papi mumbled his plans to her.

"Leo talked to el jefe; he says they have a spot for me. You and the girls can join me soon."

Tío Leo was my mother's older brother; he had gone to New York when Mami was a teenager. Mami said that he sent money to the family whenever he could, but the last time he had been back to the island was when their parents died, fourteen years ago. He still sent mail to my mother, sometimes with money folded in between the papers. One Christmas, he sent two tiny yellow cars for Taína and me. They were the kind that you could wind up by rolling backwards. Taína and I would let them go on the bumpy

floor of our home in Patillas and watch the way they skidded and hopped over rocks or dents in the ground. They were lost in the storm.

I had never seen even a photograph of him, so whenever Mami mentioned her brother Leo, I pictured a younger version of Abuelo Yango, who Tía Beula had a framed picture of in her home.

“You did this without even asking me?” Mami said slowly. “What if I never want to go to there? Y la casa? We’re just going to leave it to sink into the ground?”

My father scoffed then, “Quieres regresar al campo? What is there for us in Patillas where I have to walk an hour to work every morning and you have to walk back and forth all day to get water? Where we piss in a hole in the ground? Esto no es la vida pa’ nosotros.”

Mami pushed the piece of paper my father had shown her back towards him with such force that it fluttered from the table and landed in front of the door I was hidden behind. The floor groaned as I leapt back to my bed. I pulled the covers over my head, though I could still hear my mother’s stifled cries.

As I lied in my bed, I thought of Mami on the night my father cut his hair; when he had come home late and she told me the story of her grandfather, who had left behind his life as un esclavo and come to Patillas.

The next morning, I woke up at the same time as my mother. At our home in Patillas, I was used to waking up to Papi's radio, the smell of coffee, or the rushing of water as Mami poured a bucket into our basin outside. Taína and I would wake up and I would begin my chores. In San Juan, I woke with Mami and Tía Glenda. The first few mornings, Mami had woken me up herself, before the coffee was made or Papi had even gotten out of bed. Now, however, I woke up by myself when the house was still quiet.

Taína slept soundly next to me. The night before, Mami had braided our hair the same way: in two long braids that fell down our backs. The scarf she tied around Taína's to keep her hair neat while she slept had slipped back and hung, twisted at the bottoms of her braids.

I heard the *click-click-clicking* of Tía Glenda's gas stove, and then the *scratch* of a match being lit. I dressed in my school clothes and came outside.

Mami was leaning on the kitchen table, her head down, and she was running her hands across her scalp underneath her hair. I saw that her own braids were coming undone. She looked up at me as the floor creaked, quickly re-wrapping her hair in a green scarf. She stood up, pouring herself a cup of hot water.

We moved in silence that morning. Papi came out of his room as Mami put his cup of coffee on the table. The sound of the city began outside, and the usual chaos of



the morning commenced: Tía Glenda's babies crying and laughing, dishes in the sink clanking against each other, Tía Glenda talking to Mami, who didn't say a word. Papi nodded silently as Taína told him about her mean teacher in school. Then Papi left for work.

In some ways, what Papi had said the night before about our home was right. In San Juan, life was somewhat easier. Water poured from the faucet right into the kitchen sink, we rarely had to think about using up all the water, and Mami's fingers no longer ached from carrying heavy buckets with thin metal handles. On the days when the water was scarce, a hose stretched into Tía Glenda's window, and we filled up an empty garbage can. Next to the refrigerator, a blue plastic jug full of water for drinking sat in a metal cradle for easy pouring. Each week, a new jug was delivered to the street below, and Papi carried it up the steps, replacing the empty jug with a full one.

Because there was no yard work to do in the apartment, Papi woke up and dressed as breakfast was put onto the table. He often came out just as Mami was pouring his coffee, mixing three spoonful of sugar into the dark liquid in the yellow mug that had become his. Sometimes he listened to the radio, but often times he simply came out of the room he shared with my mother, finished his breakfast and left for work. Tía Glenda and my mother left not long after.

Though I enjoyed the ease with which things could be done in Tía Glenda's apartment, the longer we stayed there the more I missed our home in Patillas. Her apartment was near the sea in a clutter of colorful homes that were stacked around each other, and though I could hear the waves crashing at night along the rocks that were in between el barrio and the ocean, I missed the sounds of the crickets and coquis.

A few days later, Papi came home slightly later than usual, carrying a bag of beans on his shoulder. At night, the sounds of cats fighting in the streets and bottles breaking could often be heard. Sometimes people laughed or screamed at one another. Tía Glenda told Papi that we were not allowed out of the apartment after dark. On our first evening after we arrived in San Juan, Papi brought me and Taína, who he carried on his shoulders, to the roof of our aunt's apartment. We watched the sun as it sank into the trees behind us, and the waves crashed in front of us. The ocean turned red with the sky, and I thought Mami would have liked to see it.

On this evening, a group of kids who looked a little older than me were gathered across the street. They laughed and shouted, calling each other names and pushing each other around. As Papi set the bag of beans down in the corner, I leaned my head out the window, hoping one of the kids would look up at me.

Bringing home, a bag of beans was something Papi did for us every few weeks now. It began when we first got to San Juan. Mami had meant to do it for Tía Glenda but forgot, and on his way out the door, she asked him if he would be able to go to the market and get some.

“I can do it Mami!” I said, eager to get outside of the house.

Papi sighed and nodded. Tía Glenda told him where to get it. She told him there was una vieja on the corner by the church that would sell to him. “Dile a ella que eres mi hermano, y ella te dará un mejor precio.”

Instead of the smaller white bag that Tía Glenda usually got once a week, one that I could have carried on my shoulders, and Papi under his arm, Papi came home with a brown sack so much bigger that even he had to balance it on the side of his neck.

Tía and Mami gasped and then laughed when they saw it. “What did you do? This must have been so expensive!” Mami said, looking slightly embarrassed. But Papi told her that one of the men he worked with had told him about a man who sold fifty-pound bags at half price on Fridays, and so buying a sack of beans no longer was a weekly errand in our home.

Papi had set down the bag in the corner by the water jug and then he untucked his shirt, huffing with relief. Mami retreated to the back room helping to quiet one of

my screaming cousins. Their teeth were beginning to pop through their gums, and their cries were constant through the day and night. My mother returned, pulled out one of Papi's bottles of Don Q which he thought were hidden and marched back into Tía Glenda's room. Years later, she told Taína to do the same when Taína became a mother and hadn't slept in weeks because of her screaming baby. "Just stick your finger in a bottle of rum, rub it to her gums and she'll be quite in no time," I remember hearing her say through the phone.

For dinner, Mami had made Papi's favorite: asopao. I sat down at the table across from Papi. Taína was telling Papi about school. Her class was learning about the fifty states. "M-i-s-s-i-s-s-i-p-p-i!" She said proudly.

Mami filled a bowl to the top with soup, and then she laid squares of avocado at the center. She placed the bowl in front of Papi. She served Taína and I next.

Tía Glenda came out of the room where my cousins and I slept. She nearly closed the door, leaving only a sliver of space. Mami and her ate standing up, leaning on the counter.

Papi cleared his throat. He had barely eaten anything from his bowl. The chunks of avocado still remained exactly where Mami had left them.

“Mijas...” he began. “Your mother and I have decided, that it is time I go to los estados.”

Taína’s spoon slipped from her fingers and bounced against the rim of her bowl. The silver of the spoon disappeared into the orange broth beneath the rice and strips of chicken. Tía Glenda winced and looked towards the cracked door where her children were sleeping.

“I will get to stay with Tío Leo in Nueva York.” He fumbled over the words and reached into his breast pocket.

“Look, this is from your Tío Leo. It’s where I will stay.”

He held up a painted postcard of the city skyline at night. The Empire State Building was off to the right, and behind it all was a blue sky. On the horizon, shades of pink and purple showed a sunset, and at the top of the postcard, it said “New York” in big white letters.

Papi handed the post card to Taína, whose eyes widened. She ran her fingers over the buildings. I looked over at Mami, but her back was turned. She had already begun washing the dishes.

I crossed my arms against my chest and leaned back in my chair. “¿Y por qué?”

Mami paused for a moment. She looked over her shoulder at Papi as he said, “There will be more money working in New York. It will make our lives easier.” Mami turned back to the sink, dumping water from the black garbage bin onto to the soapy pots and bowls she had just scrubbed.

“NuJorrCitee!” Papi said again and Taína clapped.

“When will you come back?” Taína’s face suddenly fell.

“It won’t be very long at all, mija” and my father smiled. Taína’s smile returned.

Papi’s bowl, full of asopao had cooled but mine was empty, so I stood and left my dish in the sink for Mami to wash.

I began to make my way to the room that Taína and I shared with our cousins.

Papi stopped me before I could get away. “Yanga, ven aqui.” He patted the chair that I had just left and told me to sit again.

I slumped down into my seat. The legs of the chair screeched against the tile floor with my weight and Mami hissed at me from the sink, “¡Callada Yanga! you will wake your cousins.”

My father began, “When I leave, you will have to go with Mami to get la habichuelas from the man I go to see. The bag might be too heavy for you and your

mother to carry. I asked him today and he said por un dolar mas they will deliver. His name is Rogelio. He's a good man." Papi slid a thin roll of money across the table.

I took the green bills in my fist deciding it was a promise from Papi that he would be back once the money he gave me ran out.

When I woke the next morning, Papi was already standing by the door with my mother's blue suitcase at his feet. He was wearing a white button down, and he had slicked his hair back. At the back of his head, where he had forgotten to put gel, his hair was just long enough that I could see this beginning of the curves his hair wanted to curl into.

I quickly dressed for school and then woke up Taína. Mami was wearing a white dress, her hair wrapped in her blue scarf. When she saw me, she gasped. "What did you do Yanga?" She reached towards me touching my hair.

I went to the bathroom to see what she was talking about. In the mirror, I saw myself, with lines under my eyes, full of sleep. The braids Mami had done for me earlier in the week were unravelling. Mami came behind me with one of her scarves in her hands. "I don't have time to fix this," she said, as she tilted my head back and wrapped the scarf over my hair.

She paused for a moment when she was done, looking from my face to hers.

Tía Glenda was excited for Papi as he left. She bounced one of the twins on her hip and beamed as a white público pulled up. Taína, looking glum, hid behind my mother's hand. Papi picked her up, promising to send a postcard as soon as he got there.

I thought my mother would cry. Instead, she forced a smile as Papi hugged her goodbye. Then Papi turned to me. He kissed me on the forehead, and I hugged him. He smelled like clean laundry. Mami had washed the shirt he was wearing the day before.

Cupping my cheeks in his hands, he whispered, "Take care of your mother." He lifted the blue suitcase off the ground and got into the cab. He waved through the window as the car pulled away.

Lorena, my youngest cousin began to wail, and I lifted her up, bouncing her on my hip as I had when Taína was her age.



It took us a little bit longer than usual to go through the bag of beans that Papi had brought home before he left. Perhaps this was because Papi was not around to eat his share. I wondered if he took this into account when he gave me the money. It had nearly been a month since Papi left when we needed a new bag. I checked the bag routinely, taking note when it soon became light enough for me to lift it with ease.



Finally, one night, I heard the bag emptying into the green bowl Mami used to soak them each night for the next day.

It had been almost a month since Papi left. We hadn't heard from him except for the first night, when Mami used Tía Glenda's phone to call her brother. In Papi's suitcase she had packed a shirt that she had made for Tío Leo, and she asked him if it fit alright, teasing him that she hoped it would not be too small for him. After speaking briefly with him, she called Taína and I.

"What was the plane like?" Taína asked Papi, and then before he could answer, "did you ride the train? Are you living in the clouds?" She was referring to the postcard of the Empire State Building.

Papi had chuckled and told her she would find out soon.

On Friday, I walked straight home with Taína after school, dropped her off so that Tía Glenda would have someone to help her with the kids, and then I went down to the corner where I waited for Mami. I leaned against the side of a building, watching the city go by. A car bumped by, rolling over the cobblestone street, two little girls in matching dresses ran by laughing, and a wrinkled man pushed a cart full of sliced watermelon, bright and pink on the inside. I thought of the few oval shaped sandías that

Mami grew every year behind our home and their bright red insides. The only money I had were the bills Papi had given me before he left.

Just then, I heard my mother calling my name. I smiled and hurried off to meet her as she walked towards me. She wobbled forward, and as I looked at her, I realized she looked different. Her cheeks had filled, and her ankles which shone under the hem of her skirt were round and red. The tops of her feet were bursting from the grey shoes she wore.

“Y el dinero?” Mami asked, and I opened my fist where I had been keeping the money tightly all day. She nodded, allowing me to hold onto it as we walked.

The store was only a ten-minute walk from Tía Glenda’s apartment, in the opposite direction of my school. Some of the buildings we passed were colorful concrete buildings that looked like they had been freshly painted, while the others were small wooden shacks, some of which looked like they might fall over at any moment.

I followed Mami into a bodega, stopping to look at the guayabas and plátanos piled up in front of the glass window which was plastered with Coca-Cola stickers. The door was held open by an empty wooden crate, with a smaller crate of oranges balanced on top of it. A white cat hissed and darted to the back as I followed Mami to the counter.

A man who looked a little bit older than Papi was there in a blue collared shirt. His skin was the color of sand, and his hair beginning to grey in some places. He was holding a newspaper and had a toothpick in his mouth, and I thought of Papi, reading the morning paper at our kitchen table while Mami made him coffee.

“¿Necesitas algo?” The man asked Mami through the toothpick in his teeth. He peered at her over the top of his paper.

Mami smiled as she asked for fifty pounds of habichuelas rosadas.

The man who made me think of Papi pressed some numbers into the cash register, and I watched as a number, almost triple the amount Papi had left me, appeared in white letters. He stuck his thumb out to the right as he said, “they’re back there by the wall.”

I looked over towards where he was pointing and saw two brown bags that looked like the ones Papi brought home for us.

If Mami realized that the price was much more than that Papi had said it would be, she did not say anything. Instead, she nodded, and smiled once again at the man as she opened her purse.

“And do you deliver?” She asked.

The man scoffed as he said no. Mami hand paused for a moment, as I saw her thinking of what to do. We probably could have carried the bag back home between the two of us, but it would have been hard. Besides, it wasn't affordable the way Papi had said it would.

“¿Usted se llama Rogelio?” I asked him, thinking perhaps Mami had gotten the directions wrong. I could not see the good man my father had spoken of.

He nodded, and then, after whipping the toothpick out from between his teeth, he said, “do you want to buy the bag or not?” He looked from my mother to me with little patience.

I held the money Papi had given me in my palm “Señor, my father Ceferino has come here before. He buys half priced bags from you one Friday a month and says you charge a dollar extra for delivery.” I don't know what I was expecting him to say after I said that. My mother put her hand on my shoulder, pressing lightly but still pulling me away as she hissed my name.

He shook his head, “No, I don't do that here.” He stepped back from the cashier and crossed his arms.

“You do, I know you do!” I said. The tops of my ears grew hot and my heart began to thump in my chest.

The man lifted his hands, opening his palms to the ceiling as he looked at my mother, “Ay Negra, calla a tu hija!”

“Yanga, basta ya,” Mami said between her teeth, and yanked my hand as she led me to the door.

As Mami pulled me towards the door, I stumbled against the empty wooden crate, knocking it off balance. The box of oranges above it fell with a thwack to the ground, and the door began to shut. The oranges rolled quickly across the store.

The man darted from behind the counter to catch the door with his foot. He leaned over beginning to collect the oranges, and for some reason, my mother paused again. She looked quickly at the oranges that had fallen, like she was going to stop to help him pick them up.

The man saw her feet stop and looked up at her, the frown lines in his face settling in like they belonged, and he said “Vete negra sucia!” He thrashed his hands forward, shooing her away.

Mami’s grip slid from my wrist to my hand as she carried on pulling me out of the store. We did not speak on the way home, except for when we passed la vieja that sold the smaller sack of beans. I pulled Papi’s money from my sweaty hand and lifted one of the bags onto my shoulders, the way I had seen Papi carry the heavy bag.

When we got home, Tía Glenda was distracted by the mail and didn't ask any questions.

There was a yellow envelope on the table that had been opened.

Curious, Taína leaned over Tía Glenda's shoulder. "It's from Papi! It's from Papi!" She shouted, holding the yellow envelope over her head.

"Wait for Mami!" I told her. Mami didn't look at the table, and instead she took the heavy bag from my hands and carried it to the corner of the room.

I snatched the letter from Taína before she could tear it open.

Taína sighed, throwing her head back dramatically, her braids smacking her back as she did so.

I held the envelope in my hands and looked at my father's scratchy handwriting across the face of the yellow paper. The return address said "New York, New York" in all capital letters.

I imagined our home in Patillas, the destroyed walls and Mami's overturned sewing machine. I saw the land growing over our house's remains, the mud sucking up the fallen roof, Abuelo's tree becoming just a tree, and in my memory, I could not hear the sound of the angry stream rushing as it did through the jungle. Outside Tía Glenda's window, there were dirty cobblestone streets, the smell of the rotting sea, and men who

stood at the corner reaching for women who passed, broken glass coming from their mouths.

Mami tugged the envelope from my hand and peaked inside before dumping the contents out onto the table. A white sheet of paper which had been folded three times, a post-card like the one Tío Leo had sent, and two photographs fell out.

She unfolded the letter, and a bill fluttered to the floor. Taína scooped it up and placed it on the table. It was the same amount of the useless money that Papi handed me before he left.

Mami handed the postcard to Taína who brought it over to me. “What does it say? What does it say?” She repeated, bouncing next to me.

I squinted, skimming over his details about New York, the people, the cold. Taína whined my name before picking up the photographs.

In the first photo, my father stood in the middle of the city, cars filled the space behind him, and a crowd of people filled everywhere else. My father held a giant piece of twisted bread in his hand and he smiled with his mouth open, the flash of the camera reflecting off of his face which seemed to have become even whiter. He wore a thick coat and a hat over his curly hair. He looked happy but unhealthy. Besides for the bright

white color of his skin, the bags under his eyes looked as though he was sick or had been hit in the face.

I couldn't believe the number of people in the photo. I wondered if the woman to his left, who wore a coat down to her knees and tiny black shoes and moved in a blur knew that she was in the back of this photograph that had made it all the way to Puerto Rico. On the back of the photograph Papi had written the date, 4 de diciembre 1976.

"Papi looks fat," Taína said laughing.

In the second photograph Papi and Tío Leo stood in front of a Coca-Cola sign, each holding a glass Coke bottle in their hands. They stood awkwardly next to each other. Tío Leo's eyes were half closed. He looked not much different than I imagined him. Like my mother, and Tía Beula, and their father. He was much taller than Papi and his eyes were small and brown like mine and Taína's. The two of them looked funny standing next to each other. Tío Leo dark skin shined but Papi disappeared into the grey of the photo.

"Wow..." Taína said. She stared with wide eyes at both photographs. "Nu jor seetee" she said slowly sounding out the words. Do you think we will get to go soon, too?



“Could you imagine being in a place that cold?” I said. “Mira la chaqueta Papi tiene que llevar. Do you want to wear a jacket like that that makes you look fat? Do you want your skin to turn grey like Papi’s?”

## *Nueva York*

My mother's third pregnancy was her hardest. She was in pain often. Standing all day at the factory left her ankles and feet sore, and sometimes she winced when she walked. She also had trouble waking up in the morning. I began waking up before her and often I or my aunt had to go in and wake her up to ensure she had enough time to get to work.

One Sunday, Taína and I were walking back to Tía Glenda's house after church. Papi had written that he would be coming to visit the following week. Mami's due date was fast approaching and he was hoping to catch the birth of his first son. As soon as my mother had gone to the doctor, and they had confirmed it was a boy, my mother had called Tío Leo.

I listened by the door as my mother asked to speak to Papi. "Vas a tener un niño." She told him. She chuckled quietly at his response. She told him about the sound his heart made on the monitor, each beat sounding like a rush of air.

"Do you think Papi will bring us presents?" Taína asked me as she skipped ahead of me down the street.

"You're going to get dirt on your shoes," I told her.

Mami had stayed home from church that morning. She had been feeling particularly unwell, and her breathing was heavy, like every time it passed through her throat and out of her mouth it was catching on something. I imagined that underneath the dark of her skin she was turning green as Papi once had after eating bad street food and he had thrown up everything Mami tried to give him for the next two days-- even water.

“Mami, maybe you should stay home?” I was braiding Taína’s hair while leaning on our mother’s bed. Taína’s hair had not been cut in a while, and, while her ends were fraying, it continued to grow. When I stretched out her curls, they went past her hip, but they were so tight that when I let go, they bounced right back up to her shoulders. She winced as I fought to pull a comb through her hair.

Mami sighed and hummed through a groan. She decided to stay home only after Tía Glenda insisted. Before we left, I said goodbye to Mami, who had gotten back into bed and had her legs up on a pile of blankets. I was taken aback by how large her ankles had become, and as I stared at her, I realized even her wrists and cheeks had inflated. She had sewing materials in her lap that she bought with the money she earned at work and was embroidering a blanket with my baby brother’s name onto it. Behind her was a

pillow in a pink case and through the thin fabric I could see the outline of the money Papi had been sending us, which she kept under her head at night for safe keeping.

“Taína and I will come right home after church,” I told her. She looked up from her sewing, and I expected her to tell me not to be silly or that we should stay with Tía Glenda, but she nodded and smiled wearily.

Tía Glenda had had the same idea, and as we left the church that morning, she patted my shoulder and told me I ought to go home and check on my mother.

As Taína and I walked home, we passed a tiny store on the corner which I had never noticed before. The door was open wide and painted a bright blue. Above it, in red, *Botánica* was printed. I stopped for a moment to look at the window. The bottom was lined with different colored candles in glass jars and saints were painted on them. There was a large wooden santo in the middle, that said Yemayá at the bottom of it, and it resembled the painting that Tía Beula had next to her bed.

“Maybe when the baby is born, we can go back to Patillas to visit Tía Beula,” I told Taína. I knew it wasn’t likely. How could Mami make the trip from San Juan to Patillas and then up and down the mountain with a new baby and swollen ankles? But Taína’s lips widened into a grin as she pulled her forehead from the glass window.

Taína and I stopped short when we walked through the door to Tía Glenda's apartment. Mami's knees were bent like she was fighting the urge to sit on the ground, and she had a hand on the kitchen table holding herself up. She was looking down at the pool of liquid at her feet. Taína ran to her, moving a chair underneath our mother so that she could sit. My limbs were heavy as I moved slowly forward. Mami held onto her belly and through shortened breaths she said, "tenemos que ir."

Taína and I helped our mother down the stairs and out the door. My sister held her hand, and Mami had her arm around my shoulder, resting her weight on me. I stood as tall and stiff as I could and we made it to the corner. I flagged my hand as a grey público rolled by.

Walking into the hospital with Mami, the white and shiny floors echoed under my Sunday shoes. Every foot or two, there was a blue square, and as we waited for Mami to be seen, Taína made a game of hopping from one square to the other, trying not to step on the white floor. Mami rubbed her stomach in circle over and over again and I remembered being seven years old, waking up in the middle of the night as Tía Beula asked me to bring my mother tea, and a partera came and helped pull Taína out while Papi stood behind Mami and kept his hands on her shoulders as she yelled.

I was thinking I should ask for a coin so I could use the pay phone and call Tía Glenda, but I didn't know the number to her suegros, where her and my primos has gone to lunch after church. Instead, I told Taína who was still jumping around to knock it off. Finally a nurse in a pink uniform came and walked Mami to her hospital bed. It was a room with two other women in it, all with round bellies like Mami. There was a curtain that could be closed for privacy but they were all open. My mother's breathing had turned to wheezing by then.

Everyone was moving so slowly. When the doctor finally came, he took one look under the sheet in between Mami's legs and he said she needed to be operated on. Mami's teeth were clenched together, and she only nodded when the doctor said this.

"The birth canal is too small, this baby will rip her in two," he told the nurse next to him.

Taína began to cry when he said this. Her little fingernails were digging into the top of my hand. So I jumped up, "Por qué? She had me and my sister without surgery, why does she need it now?"

The doctor shook his head without skipping a beat, "if we don't one of them will be crushed."

I frowned and looked at my mother. Her eyes were closed, her brow furrowed.

When I slipped my hand in hers, she squeezed tightly.

“You can wait outside,” a nurse said to me.

I looked at Taína, who was standing by the wall, tears down her chin. I took her hand, bringing her towards Mami.

“When we see each other again, there will be four of us.”



Almost exactly a year after Papi had left for New York, Mami, Taína, the baby, and I flew over the New York skyline before landing at JFK airport. Taína held up the postcard Papi had first showed us next to the window. The sky outside was much greyer, and clouds loomed covering the tops of the buildings.

Mami had braided my hair the night before into a bun like hers, and by the time we arrived in New York, my scalp ached from leaning my already tender head against the rough back of the airplane seat.

We were all dressed in our best dresses, Taína and I wearing our church shoes, and I held onto Mami’s suitcase as she carried my little brother.

Papi and Tío Leo were waiting at the gate for us. Tío Leo looked just as he had in the photo that I had seen of him. He had a smile like Tía Beula's that made me want to smile too.

The red-brown that was usually my father's complexion had faded and the skin underneath his eyes was almost see through. His smile stretched throughout his entire face as he saw us walking towards them. He looked from the baby, to me, to Taína, to my mother, and back to the baby again. Then he rushed forward, lifting Taína from the ground and embracing me. Mami handed him his son as soon as his hands were empty. She smiled quietly as my father cooed softly to his namesake.

As it turned out, Papi was not living in New York City. He and Tío Leo stayed at the labor camp in New Jersey over an hour outside of the city. So for the first month or so that we lived there, Mami, Taína, the baby, and I lived in a rented room in the house of another family who had relatives on the island.

When we arrived in New York, the weather was cold and windy. The air dried out my face and my lips began to bleed in their corners. Papi had gotten jackets for us. He gave me a pink one that was slightly too small, so I couldn't move my shoulders. It had a big tear in the sleeve which Mami stitched up. To keep my hands warm, I would pull the sleeves down over my fingers and trace the pink threading where the rip had been.



One day, Taína and I came home from school and Mami had packed all that we had into three bags, one for each of us to carry. “Otra vez?” Taína sighed. Mami shushed her, and the three of us got on the 6 train. I remember sitting on the orange seats, the weight of a suitcase across my lap. The train skipped loudly across the tracks and Taína held her fingers in her ears as she looked out of the black window.

This new apartment was on the corner of 116<sup>th</sup> and Lexington avenue in a five-story building with rusty red fire escapes on its front. As we walked inside, I could hear the train howling a block away, raised up from the ground along park avenue. Mami already had the keys, and she struggled with the multiple locks at the front of the door, trying to figure out which key went to which lock.

The inside of the apartment was small, with creaky wood floors that reminded me of Tía Glenda’s house. It was completely empty, and, for the first month, the four of us would sleep on a pile of blankets over cardboard.

Mami worked seven nights a week as a dishwasher in lower Manhattan, so when we moved, it took her even longer to get home. Nonetheless, she saved what she could and with help from Papi, and some of the friends of friends we become acquainted with, our apartment in East Harlem eventually became a home.

Sometimes, on Saturday nights, Papi took the train and came to visit us. When he did, he usually did not arrive until after midnight. In the first year, Mami would wait up for him, always keeping a plate of food ready to be heated up.

One night, in the middle of winter, I was stayed awake with Mami. Our house was still bare. We had one bed which Taína, my mother and I shared. On the nights Papi came, Taína and I went back to the blankets in the corner. One of our neighbors had given us a table for the kitchen and two mismatched chairs to go with it.

It was almost midnight, and Mami was falling asleep at the kitchen table with her cheek in her hand. My little brother was asleep in the bedroom in his very own crib which Papi had brought one day. I was sitting at the kitchen table next to my dosing mother, using the light above the stove to do my homework.

“Papi thinks we should have one more boy,” she told me, her eyes half closing.

I frowned, wondering where this had come from. I did not say anything.

“Do you want another brother?” She asked me.

I shrugged, thinking about it. “Where would he sleep?”

She smiled with her eyes closed and half nodded. “I think one is enough too.”

“Maybe it’s good I had La Operación,” she said, “no money for any more babies.”

“What?” I said,

She nodded and opened her eyes, leaning back in her chair.

She pulled her hands from the table, placing them in her lap, one inside the other. I watched as her fingers began to trace the cracks in her hands that winter had made. “When I went to the hospital to give birth to Cefe, they cut me open to get him out.” She told me. “He was much bigger than you and Taína. I couldn’t feel any pain when they were doing it, but I could feel them reaching down inside of me. I could feel their hands moving around, and then I heard crying. I lifted my head and saw the doctor holding your brother.” She closed her eyes. “He was all wrinkly and he looked just like you did you were born, but he has your father’s big ears.”

The wind outside whooshed against the window. I was silent as my mother continued, “I remember asking to hold him, but it felt like nothing was coming from my throat,” She brought her hand to her neck her eyes still closed. “I kept telling the nurse I wanted to hold him, but one of them had grabbed him and was wiping him off. Then the doctor who had been leaning over my stomach said “si tiene mas hijos, morirá, Señora Cora. We’re going to tie your tubes.”

A tear fell from her closed eyes into her cupped hands in her lap. “When you and Taína were born, I was the first person you looked at. La partera pulled you from me and

placed you in my arms... But no one was listening, so I nodded. I was thinking whatever would get me home with him and you and Taína.

She opened her eyes and looked at me. “I thank god that Cefe and you and Taína were all born healthy. That’s all that matters to me.” She smiled although her eyes remained glassy with tears.

My mother reached across the table, laying her hand across mine. Her other hand fell to her stomach, where her shirt hid the purple scar that stretched from hip to hip. As more tears began to roll down her cheeks, I thought of her standing outside of our home in Patillas, one hand holding her pregnant belly as she swayed to music coming from Papi’s radio. Papi had teased her before resting his hand on top of hers, following the music with her. We had no radio in this apartment in New York.

Years later, Mami gave in to Papi’s desire to have a second boy. I was sixteen and in high school at the time. I met Mami after school and we went to the clinic. She had taken the day off of work so that she could go without Papi knowing. My mother’s English was good by this time, but she still had me go with her, “por si acaso.”

Together we learned, not only that there was no such thing as having one’s tubes untied, but the doctor who had cut Mami open hadn’t tied her tubes in the first place. He had removed her uterus.

“¿Y Papi?” I asked. The light over the stove flickered and my mother looked down at where her hand cupped her stomach. Her other hand still held mine. As I looked down, I saw the similarities in our hands. Her fingers: short and thick, wrinkled in the sun and broken from the cold. Mine curved and cracked in similar ways. The inside of our palms were soft and bright.

The buzzer to our apartment rang, and my mother stood up quickly. She smoothed out the lines in her pants and pressed the square button on the intercom.

“Ello!” Papi said through the speaker. Mami pressed the next button over, and held it down, counting the seconds. Then she went to the microwave and pressed start. I opened the front door, listening as Papi stomped up the three flights of stairs.

When he appeared in the hallway, his blue jacket was wet, something white had gathered on his shoulders.

“It’s snowing!” He said excitedly. He kicked off his shoes at the front of our door and banged them together before bringing them inside.

Papi called my mother’s name as he rushed to the window. The microwave was beeping and she pulled out his steaming plate.

I followed Papi to the window. He still had his coat on as he lifted the window up as high as it would go. A gust of frigid air rushed in, and I heard Mami hiss my father's name. "You'll freeze the baby," she told him.

I leaned forward, sticking my head from the window. A few inches of snow had piled onto the red bars of the fire escape. The rooftops in front of us were covered in a layer of snow as well, and the street below was empty. Besides for one line of footprints crossing the street, the snow below remained untouched. The sky was dark grey with clouds, and from it, chunks of snow were falling. In the dark, it looked as though the snowflakes were parts of the sky falling down onto Manhattan. I scooped some of the snow from the fire escape into my hand. It was soft and cold and quickly began to melt. I held it for a moment, feeling the cold running up my arm. Taína joined me at the window, gasping at the sight. "How does it feel?" she asked, but before I could answer, she stretched out her hand next to mine, catching the pieces of the sky as they fell.



## *Author's Note*

Any ideas I had for this project began almost two years ago when I learned of the dark and often ignored history of US imposed sterilization practices within Puerto Rico. Due to the so-called overpopulation of the island, throughout the 1900s, women were coerced and forced into sterilization. It was referred to simply as La Operación. In 1965, a report completed by the Puerto Rican Department of Health found that 35% of Puerto Rican women between the ages of 24 and 49 underwent La Operación.

Around the time that I had begun learning about this, Trump was elected, and the defunding of Planned Parenthood seemed possible. As calls in support of reproductive rights and a person's rights to their body were loud in my ears and my heart, I was also troubled as I thought about the many women who have been targeted and sterilized because of the inaccurate notion of overpopulation. The idea that certain people have the right to choose to reproduce, while those that are othered are treated as if their bodies are taking up enough space already. While many women on the mainland were arguing for the continuation of their reproductive rights, all I could think of were the many women and people not just in Puerto Rico, but all across the globe who have never even been afforded reproductive justice. This includes the Puerto Rican women



who were used as test subjects for the making of the birth control pill as we know it, despite a lack of informed consent.

As I thought more about the coerced sterilization of Puerto Rican women, I realized how much this one, significant portion of Puerto Rico's history, and the lack of attention it has garnered is representative of the way Puerto Rico is often viewed by people on the mainland. There seems to be a general lack of awareness and acknowledgement for Puerto Rico and its people. Puerto Rican history is seldom taught in United States classrooms, the people who live on the island now are rarely on the radar of any estadounidense who isn't Puerto Rican, despite the fact that those living in Puerto Rico are US Citizens.

When I began to plan for my Senior Project, my goal was to write a set of narratives informed by the experiences of women who had been sterilized. I wanted to bring further light to this issue that so few know about, largely because I believe that acknowledgement is a step towards justice. However as I began to write, my project shifted.

Puerto Rico is a deeply personal topic for me. It is a part of me that I do not know very well, and yet it represents so much of my family. My great grandmother, Dolores, was born in Guayama, and my great grandfather, Benito, in Patillas. Though I was

raised being told I was Puerto Rican, I often felt as though I was trying to figure out what it means to be Puerto Rican. Spanish was rarely spoken in my house and as my family is also Italian and African-American, I often felt as though I was being forced to provide evidence or justification before I could identify with any of those ethnicities.

As is clear, although *How to Hold the Sky* is a story where La Operación is present, it is not *about* La Operación. It is an exploration of the aspects of my identity I often grapple with defining family, ancestry, motherhood, womanhood, and race, as well as the ways that they intersect.

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