

“Puertoricanness”

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It was Puerto Rico waking up inside her. Puerto Rico waking her up at 6:00 A.M., remembering the rooster that used to crow over on 59th Street and the neighbors cursed “that damn rooster,” but she loved him, waited to hear his harsh voice carving up the Oakland sky and eating it like chopped corn, so obviously sure of himself, crowing all alone with miles of houses around him. She was like that rooster.

Often, she could hear them in her dreams. Not the lone rooster of 59th Street (or some street nearby...she had never found the exact yard though she had tried), but the wild careening hysterical roosters of 3:00 A.M. in Bartolo, screaming at the night and screaming again at the sky.

It was Puerto Rico waking up inside her, uncurling and shoving open the door she had kept neatly shut for years and years. Maybe since the first time she was an immigrant, when she refused to speak Spanish in nursery school. Certainly since the last time, when at thirteen she found herself between languages, between countries, with no land feeling at all solid under her feet. The mulberry trees of Chicago, that first summer, had looked so utterly pitiful beside her memory of flamboyant and banana and ... No, not even the individual trees and bushes but the mass of them, the overwhelming profusion of green life that was the home of her comfort and nest of her dreams.

The door was opening. She could no longer keep her accent under lock and key. It seeped out, masquerading as dyslexia, stuttering, halting unable to speak the word which will surely come out in the wrong language, wearing the wrong clothes. Doesn't that girl know how to dress? Doesn't she know how to date, what to say to a professor, how to behave at a dinner table laid with silver and crystal and too many forks?

Yesterday she answered her husband's request that she listen to the whole of his thoughts before commenting by screaming, “This is how we talk. I will not wait sedately for you to finish. Interrupt me back!” She drank pineapple juice three or four times a day. Not Lotus, just Co-op brand, but it was *piña*,¹ and it was sweet and yellow. And she was letting the clock slip away from her into a world of morning and afternoon and night, instead of “five-forty-one and twenty seconds – beep.”

There were things she noticed about herself, the Puertoricanness of which she had kept hidden all these years, but which had persisted as habits, as idiosyncracies of her nature. The way she left a pot of food on the stove all day, eating out of it whenever hunger struck her, liking to have something ready. The way she had lacked food to offer Elena in the old days and had stamped on the desire to do so because it *was* Puerto Rican: Come, *mija* . . . ¿quieres café?² The way she was embarrassed and irritated by Ana's unannounced visits, just dropping by, keeping the

¹ Pineapple

² Eat, darling, you want some coffee?

country habits after a generation of city life. So unlike the cluttered datebooks of all her friends, making appointments to speak to each other on the phone days in advance. Now she yearned for that clocklessness, for the perpetual food pots of her childhood. Even in the poorest houses a plate of white rice and brown beans with calabaza³ or green bananas and oil.

She had told Sally that Puerto Ricans lived as if they were all in a small town still, a small town of six million spread out over tens of thousands of square miles, and that the small town that was her country needed to include Manila Avenue in Oakland now, because she was moving back into it. She would not fight the waking early anymore, or the eating all day, or the desire to let time slip between her fingers and allow her work to shape it. Work, eating, sleep, lovemaking, play—to let them shape the day instead of letting the day shape them. Since she could not right now, in the endless bartering of a woman with two countries, bring herself to trade in one-half of her heart for the other, exchange this loneliness for another perhaps harsher one, she would live as a Puerto Rican lives en la isla,⁴ right here in north Oakland, plant the bananales⁵ and cafetales⁶ of her heart around her bedroom door, sleep under the shadow of their bloom and the carving hoarseness of the roosters, wake to the blue-rimmed white enamel cups of jugo de piña⁷ and plates of guineo verde⁸, and heat pots of rice with bits of meat in them on the stove all day.

There was a woman in her who had never had the chance to move through this house the way she wanted to, a woman raised to be like those women of her childhood, hardworking and humorous and clear. That woman was yawning up out of sleep into this cluttered daily routine of a Northern California writer living at the edges of Berkeley. She was taking over, putting doilies on the word processor, not bothering to make appointments, talking to the neighbors, riding miles on the bus to buy bacalao,⁹ making her presence felt . . . and she was Puerto Rican, every bit of her.

1986

³ Pumpkin

⁴ On the island

⁵ Banana plants

⁶ Coffee trees

⁷ Pineapple juice

⁸ Green bananas or plantains

⁹ Codfish