

Unificación: The Things That Bind Us

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UNIFICACIÓN: THE THINGS THAT BIND US

by

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ABSTRACT

Unificación: The Things That Bind Us is a collection of poetry and prose, using New York City's Spanish Harlem and Carolina, Puerto Rico as its backdrop. Each work in this collection revolves around a young man and his family, based on the real-life stories and experiences of the writer's grandfather, Luis. They are crafted with the intent of sharing aspects of Puerto Rican life both in and out of the continental United States with a diverse audience, including those who might not have encountered any elements of the Hispanic culture. Using techniques inspired by writers like Jesús Colon, Esmeralda Santiago, and Piri Thomas, each of the pieces focus on a different element of the Puerto Rican culture. The intent is to give audiences an idea of the cultural values, familial structures, and other norms typical of the Puerto Rican culture by providing glimpses into the everyday lives of the same family on the island and the mainland. The works capture their struggle to make the most of the life they've found themselves in, and emphasize one boy's growth as he attempts to find his role in the family. Overall, the goal of this work is to craft a story that can appeal to all audiences, bringing the Puerto Rican culture to life for all who encounter it.

For my grandpa, Luis, and his family. Thank you for all of the stories.

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Figure 1. *Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges, Underhill*

Source: Library of Congress <https://www.loc.gov/item/90710124/>

Live [li-ve] v.

“To have a life rich in experience...” (Merriam-Webster).

Survive [sir-VY-ve] v.

“To remain alive or in existence...” (Merriam-Webster).

ABUELA ME DIJO

Inspired by “Grandma, don’t come!” by Jesus Colón

My abuela, Mami’s mom, doesn’t like life here. Well, I don’t either. She never really says it, but I know. At night, she tells us stories from when she was una niña and her family lived in Santurce. Her eyes light up when she talks about primos y primas over there; I really want that. Even when someone mentions something small about the old life in Puerto Rico, she responds with some story.

They always start the same:

“Ven acá niños. Déjame recordarles algo de la isla,” her eyes change and she breathes, “de Puerto Rico.” And she’d tell us something about the village in Santurce—about the way the mornings smelled sweet and all you could see was a couple of other houses and grass and mountains. Or she’d talk about us going back, together, and taking family trips to the beach—una playa de verdad, with sand and warm water and coconuts on trees. But the best thing abuela would tell us about was all the space. You could run around in circles or up and down streets and you would hardly bump into anyone. You could wander around the village and watch the city from the outside and nobody would bother you.

Here, the streets are crowded and everything smells rotten. There’s rats in every alley and the buildings are stuffed with people. Everywhere you look, there’s something crazy and dangerous going on. Like one time, there was a fire in our building and we had to grab all of the people in our apartment and run outside. Mami was in her robe and she made us all stand in a huddle around her until the firemen said we could go back inside. She didn’t want us to wander around and get snatched up by someone bad.

I don't think they have fires over *there*. Abuela never talks about them, so they must not happen.

In New York, we have to walk to school in a pack. Every day, Mami says “los calles son peligrosos,” so everyone has to listen to me: Wally, Chucho, Roberto, Gabriel, and Phillip. I'm the oldest boy, so that means I'm in charge of everyone. Some people in our neighborhood are nice and they come by every once in a while to see us, but everyone else is mean. It's my job to watch out for the mean people when we're walking. On the streets, the people walk around with their skin pulled tight around their eyes and lips and their foreheads crinkle. They never smile. They hunch over and drop their shoulder when they walk by to shove you out of the way. And when it rains you can barely see the buildings, let alone the people around you.

Abuela says they have mountains in Puerto Rico. I think the skyscrapers here are kind of like mountains, only a lot less pretty and with more lights. She says the mountains are bigger than the buildings, and when you look at them from far, far away they look green all over. But if you move closer, you see trees and bumps and brown roads, you hear chirping and coquis, and you know you're home.

Santurce sounds really, really nice. Abuela says that they didn't have much, just each other. They lived in a little shack there, and whenever a new baby is born they add on to it with some plywood. They make rooms and put up blankets so that you can't see right into them when there's someone inside. I think they were poor, but abuela never says that. When it comes to that, she always talks in a way that makes her eyes look different—deeper.

“Las cosas estaban difíciles, pero me encanta la vida en Santurce,” she would say.

Mami's eyes would change, too, and she'd say, "Si, Mami. Pero aquí estamos juntos." Then she'd sigh and shoo us all away from Abuela's feet saying, "Go get ready for bed. No more stories."

Abuela Angeles always stayed quiet after that. She'd look out the window or sit in her rocking chair until she fell asleep.

I think I want to go back to Santurce. I was born there, I think, and Wally was too. We're the oldest boy and girl but we don't remember living there. I don't remember anything other than filth and smoke and fire escapes and the way that abuela's eyes change when she talks about la isla. Yes, I think I'll go back.

FIRE ESCAPE DAYS

I used to have a Tonka truck
The color of an overripe strawberry
That I'd pitch
Down
 and down
 and down
Until it smashed, landing
On the ground below the fire escape.

Every time, I screamed
To Dad and he'd look at me
With eyes clouded in disbelief and mischief
And a bit of amusement, too.
He'd shake
His head and the corners of his mouth would turn
Up—only a little—

Mijo,
He'd say,
again?
I'd smile, and a tear would drag
Down my face a little while my mouth
Twitched to match the shape of his. He smiled then, every time,
And went down
 and down
 And down to meet
 the strawberry Tonka truck
below and look

Up. He would hold it in one hand and look up,
Meeting my crocodile tears with a
Faux frown before coming back upstairs to our fourth-floor
Apartment. His black work boots
Clunked up the stairs,
Through the door, to the fire
Escape, and stop
At me.

In fifteen minutes we

Would do it all again
And tomorrow, too.

DÍAS DE ESCUELA—SCHOOL DAYS

Un día normal en mi casa, if we have school:

It's early, and the sun isn't up yet. Abuela Angeles is already awake, making us breakfast while Mami tries to get all of us up and ready for school.

“Vamos, mis niños,” she says. “You have school and I have to go to work.”

Mami always wakes me up first, so I can help her wake up the others. I have to run to the bathroom before Wally and the rest of them wake up. Compartir un baño para seis niños means it's war every morning before school.

By the time I finish, Mami is usually getting mad because the others are taking forever to get up. I give her a besito and say, “Good morning, Mami.”

“Buenos días, Luisito,” she responds. “Don't forget to say good morning to your abuela, too.”

I nod, and after I get changed and shake Roberto awake, I take a few steps down the small hallway and into the kitchen. It's cramped there; right when you walk out of the hall, you have to be careful that you don't run into the little dining table that sticks out. And Abuela is always there, standing next to the stove with a plate of her huevos revueltos con pan already in hand for the first one up, every morning.

The sounds of Tito Puente fill the room and Abuela does a little shuffle while she walks back and forth between the kitchen table and the stove. Little bits of light come in through the slits in the window, and her skin lights up for a second. I can see the little lines on her forehead, and the canas hidden in her dark hair gleam in the morning rays.

“Buenos días, Abuela,” I say as I give her a hug.

“Hola, Luisito. Cómo te sientes hoy?” she asks as she places a plate into my hands.

“Bien, Abuela. Y tú?” I put the plate down on the table and turn back to her.

“Bien, cariño. Hágame un favor, recoge a los otros niños. Hay que comer antes que la escuela.” She hands me another plate and I put it down before I go back around the corner and into the room.

By this time Mami is waking up the last kid, shoving the others through the door.

“Mami, the food is ready.”

“Time for breakfast, hijos. A comer,” she says, shooing Phillip and Wally (siempre los últimos) towards me.

Dad comes out of his room next, yawning loudly so that the whole house jumps in surprise. “Buenos días a todos.” He walks over to the counter, grabs a cup of café, and takes a seat on the sofa across from the kitchen table.

Us kids take turns saying good morning to him. When it’s my turn, I walk up to him, smiling. “Luisito, it’s almost time for school. Don’t forget to make sure your brothers have their things,” he says.

I nod and grab my plate from the kitchen, taking a seat at the table next to Mami. Dad stays on the sofa while the rest of us rush to eat, watching the news while he drinks his coffee. Ten minutes later, he gets up and says bye. “Have a good day today,” he says. “Stay with Luisito and be good, hijos.”

And with that, he heads out the door and off to work.

Twenty minutes after Dad leaves, Mami makes us go get our things while she helps Abuela clean up in the kitchen. They wash the dishes together until we're near the door and ready to go. We already know the drill.: me in the front, Wally behind me with Phillip and the others, and Roberto in the back. Mami makes us walk to school like this every morning. She says it's safer for us because we're so many.

"Everyone has everything, right?" I ask. "We're not coming back or we'll be late."

When nobody says anything, I nod and look to Mami.

"Listos?" she asks.

"Si Mami," we answer.

Abuela comes up to us, giving us each a kiss before heading back to the kitchen to clean up and get started on tonight's dinner.

"Everyone listen to your brother. Stay together. Have a good day my loves." Mami says the same thing every morning before sending us out the door.

And every day we head down the stairs like a mob, saying hello to any vecinos we come across. We walk out of the building and onto the sidewalk, still in a group. We don't stop walking until we make it to the school a couple of blocks away. The whole way, we stop for no one, never moving away from each other, me never taking my eyes off of the other people who walk down the street around us. When we get there, I drop off Phillip and the other younger kids at the elementary side of the building, then Wally and I head to the middle school.

We don't say much to each other, just making sure that we know where to meet after school, and that none of the younger ones have any reason to stay later that day. After, Wally heads to her class and I head to mine. We usually don't see each other for the rest of the day.

...

The school days always go the same.

I go from one class to another, listening to the teachers talk about history, writing, math. The constants of my school day: listen, take notes, answer if they call on you, but keep your head down. I try not to stand out, sticking to getting my assignments done and making sure there's no reason for them to bother Mami and Dad de mi parte. It works—for the most part. They have enough going on with Wally always trying to be on her own and Phillip causing trouble wherever he goes, even in elementary school.

By the time lunch rolls around I'm always bored. I sit with my amigo, Manny, in the courtyard. I can see Wally across the crowds of middle schoolers, drawing a group of people together with her loud voice and willingness to do nearly anything that you can think to dare her to do. Manny and I sit in the corner, away from all the booyah. We usually talk about leaving and what we'd rather be doing instead of being stuck at school. Other people walk past us, but don't pay us any mind.

"Let's ditch," Manny says. Cada día es algo diferente, some new scheme to get us in trouble.

"Can't," is always my response before I dive back into my lunch.

Sometimes he fights back. "Come on, Luisito. Just a quick trip, anywhere you want. We'll be back in time for dismissal."

When he gets like this it's tricky. I have to stare at him for a bit, usually a minute or so, before he groans and says, "Nunca quieres hacer algo divertido, coño."

We sit in silence, watching some of the other students run around for a few minutes before separating and going to class.

...

When school finishes, we meet at our normal spot, making sure that Phillip has all of his things and that all six of us are accounted for before we make the walk back home. We make the same formation as before: me in the front, Roberto in the back, everyone else between us. Mami always tells us to try to make it home as fast as we can after school—she doesn't like us to be on the streets for too long. I don't tell her that people always move aside when they see us coming, that the number of us moving in a pack through a crowd freaks everyone out, so they make a path for us. We're always home within the hour.

By the time we make it home, Abuela is almost done with dinner. “Hola mis niños. Qué pasó hoy?” she smiles and asks. She puts down whatever she's doing and sits at the kitchen table while we head to our room and put our things down. We take turns sitting with her, listening to her stories from the day, telling her what we want to eat that week. Every day, we each sit with her for a little while before going to do whatever homework we have while she finishes up the food. Then Mami and Dad come home.

When they walk in the door, we all stop what we're doing and go say hi. They're both always exhausted, dragging another day behind them through the door. Always the same, they walk in, say hello to us and buenas tardes to Abuela, and separate: Dad to the kitchen to grab a drink before sitting down at the TV and Mami to the room to change before helping Abuela prepare the dinner. The younger kids stay in the room, but I sit with Dad and watch TV for a bit, thinking about my day. The two of us sit there for a while, lost in our own thoughts while the TV

drifts throughout the apartment. The kids run around and Mami tells them to stop and go get their homework done.

By the time dinner is ready it's a free-for-all. The nine of us squish around the table, and Dad starts to tease Abuela about something being wrong with the dinner. "Oye, suegra. No vamos a comer habichuelas con este pollo? Qué pasó señora? Ya está demasiada vieja?"

She always pretends to scowl and slaps him with the baking towel before taking her seat across from him. The rest of the night goes smoothly, the family telling chistes and neighborhood chisme to keep the energy up. You can tell that Mami and Dad are still really tired, but they try to cover it up from us. They don't yawn or stretch or lean back against their chairs at the table, but when they think you're not looking, they'll sit back and close their eyes. When they do that, their faces get darker for a second, they look older and less like the Mami and Dad who dance around the house with us. That look never lasts for long. It's always gone before we have to go to bed. Their eyes brighten and their mouths smile just in time for the kids' yawns to start, and the night goes on, before we do it again tomorrow.



Figure 2. Aerial view of San Juan circa 1964

Source: U.S. Navy

Surviving [sir-VY-ving] v.

Being crushed by people and cloud-touching buildings and smoky skylines; not being able to walk around your neighborhood because Mami and Papi are afraid you'll get lost or taken. Life in New York.

Living [LI-ving] v.

Fresh air and clear streets; the smell of grass in the morning with the mountains in the background. Life in Puerto Rico.

NO SALE

Don't sell me your
"AMERICAN DREAM"
Ni que
 Everything is better
 Ni the streets are paved with
 Gold

Sabes que todo lo que
Brilla no es oro.

No thank you,
No gracias,
No sale. Instead,
I'll take some space
To breathe and live. Don't
Give me cramped, two-room
Apartments stuffed with: two parents,
Una abuela, 6 kids, and no room to breathe,
Trying to
Survive.

No, I'd rather have a life.
Give me clean, clear skies with no smoke or smog and
Coquis, those enchanting,
Inch-long
miniature frogs,
and stamp
A fat

NO SALE

Signed below my name.



Figure 3. Puerto Rican flag

“I survived New York, but I started living in Puerto Rico.”

PLANE RIDES

Mami says that I was only about a year old when we left Puerto Rico. I try as hard as I can to remember our life over there, but everything is jumbled. Whenever I try to pick out the memories of Santurce, I only end up with memories of New York. But there's one thing I know for sure: when we left Puerto Rico, we left on a plane.

We stayed in New York for eleven years, and Wally and I ended up with four more brothers than we'd left with. It was Waleska, Luis Ramon (Luis), Roberto, Luis Manuel (Chucho), Gabriel, y Phillip. By the time they wanted to leave, it was us, Mami, Papi, and Abuela Angeles in our two-bedroom New York apartment. We lived in Spanish Harlem, where all the other Puerto Ricans came when they left the island. We all wanted a better life, but it was harder to find than we'd expected.

...

I was twelve when we finally went back to Puerto Rico. Mami and Dad were tired of New York. They hated who they were there, and when Abuela told her stories it reminded them of how different it was back home. I guess one day they had enough of living through stories, so we got on another plane, all nine of us.

It was dark when the plane landed. Mami made us all rush to grab our carry-ons while we found the way out. Dad left New York a few days before us, making sure that everything was settled before the group moved in. Without Dad there to take up the front, we moved in a pack: Mami in the front and all of the kids surrounding her while Abuela Angeles pulled up the rear. It was daunting to see, a group of six kids of different ages and in varying stages of alertness slipping through doorways and somehow flowing through crowds like water over rocks.

I remember seeing Tío Wilson with Dad, his mejor amigo, waiting for us with their cars. I'm not sure how I recognized Tío, as I had only ever seen him in pictures. But the first thing I heard when we finally made it beyond the gate was the booming of his voice.

“Oye, Nene!”

Mami's face erupted into a smile before she embraced him, chuckling at her old nickname. The three of them laughed and hugged; Tío even gave Abuela a huge hug and called her “Mami” before turning towards us kids. It's a blur of laughter and hugs and “I haven't seen you since you were un bebe” and “pero que grandes son niños” before we can actually load everything up in the car. Tío Wilson told us jokes and old stories about when Mami and Dad were here last, when Wally and I were just babies and the others weren't even born. Once everything was settled, we split up into two cars and headed for Carolina.

I watched the trees zoom by and the faint outline of a mountain range grow in the distance, illuminated by the city lights. It didn't take long for Phillip and Wally to fall asleep, but Mami and Dad stayed up the whole drive. The two of them smiled and laughed for a long time and I tried to stay up, watching their shoulders loosen and the crinkles around their eyes and mouths grow.

I started to think as I drifted off. *The air feels different here.* I looked outside my window and watched the stars, thinking about how I'd never seen them so bright before. They were scattered across the sky, flashing at different times and illuminating the landscape around us as much as any streetlights could. The yellowing smudges against the dark, smooth backdrop took up almost every available inch of the night. I thought of them spinning and burning and exploding, countless lightyears away. I thought of them existing in their own world, unaware of

our family and others, struggling to live and not just survive. I looked at them, the freckles speckling the face of the universe, marveling at the sheer number of them.

We must have different stars in New York. These are so different.

...

When we made it to the house, there wasn't much to see outside. The street was dead, and the lights weren't even bright enough for you to see the mimosas that buzz around the air, flying in huge swarms and directly into your eyes. When we pulled into the driveway, I'd just woken up and had to shake the others awake, too. Mami smiled and said, "Gracias, Luisito. Go help your papi with the bags now."

I smiled back and nodded, leading the others out of the car with me. They're still shaking off the bits of sleep in their eyes before they realize where they are. When we rounded the car, Dad had already taken out all of the bags, and Tío Wilson started leading Abuela up the walkway and towards the door.

"Okay niños. Escúchen. This is our home now," Dad said. He handed each of us a bag before Mami came around and leaned her head on his shoulder. "When we go inside, just go straight to bed. I promise we can look around in the morning."

Everyone was too tired to complain.

I grabbed my bag and one of the extras before walking up the path and into the house. The other boys followed me, tired but excited to see how big our new house was. We followed Mami through the door, but the lights were all off, so we couldn't see anything. She pointed to the right side of the house saying, "Your rooms are over there. Boys, you're in one and Wally gets the other." A chorus of groans erupted, but before anyone could talk, Mami gave us her

look. You know, the look that says *cálmate o yo te calmo* and *you can sleep afuera if you want* all at once. After her look, we're always too scared to speak up.

We shuffled in, dragging our luggage behind us and tossing them in the corner. The five of us found our own spots on one of the two bunk beds that lined either wall before we completely passed out.

...

My first thought the next morning was *Where am I?* I turned my head and saw that Gaby's feet were in my face. When I looked up, I saw the planks of wood that held up the mattress above me. *Oh, yeah*, I thought. *We moved.*

The others in the room started to wake up as I wiggled out of bed. I could already hear Abuela and Mami in la cocina, tossing open cabinets and drawers to find what was probably right in front of them. I sat there, thinking about what we'd done, that we weren't in New York anymore, and that I was actually home. Abuela always used to tell me, "Eres Borciua, debes estar en Puerto Rico." But now that we'd returned, I didn't know what was coming next. New York had never felt like a home. It was just a place we'd stayed in for a while until Mami and Dad decided to move back. It'd never felt permanent. But here was different; Abuela said that we belong here.

Once we'd all woken up, Dad came into the room with Abuela and Wally. "Wake up, hijos. Let's see our home." He smiled, and it was like nothing I'd seen. I looked at Abuela and saw that something had changed, the air around her had shifted since New York. She didn't seem as small as she had before, like a single night of clear air and coquis was enough to somehow cure her of the gloom that hung around her in New York. Maybe because she was home.

Us kids jumped out of bed and ran to the hallway that we'd only glimpsed the night before. I could hear Dad yelling at us to slow down, but we sped around the house, throwing open doors and exploring this space we could call our own. I found four bedrooms and a kitchen big enough for all of us to fit in al mismo tiempo. The place was more than three times the size of our old apartment. Mami and Dad had a room, Abuela had one, there was one for Wally, and the rest of us boys shared the last one. Sure, we'd still have a bunch of us in one room, pero que grande! No more falling on top of each other in the mornings or rushing to get to the bathroom first or tripping on bodies on your way out the door. We finally had enough space for the nine of us. I stared at each room over and over again, amazed when I could stretch out my arms to either side without bumping into anyone.

We ran around like that for an hour, not believing how much more space there was. I ran into the kitchen screaming "Mira, Mami! Look at all this room!" She laughed and nodded, reminding me to make sure the others didn't get into trouble or touch things they weren't supposed to.

When the excitement of the new casa wore off, we all found ourselves in the kitchen. Dad came in, plopped down at the counter, and looked at us. "So," he said between sips of café con leche. "Qué piensan? Better than New York?"

I gave him my biggest smile in return. The others screamed in agreement until Mami had to quiet everyone down.

"Have you seen the outside?" he said. His eyebrow peaked, and his eyes shone like they used to when he'd tell us a secret.

Instead of answering, we took off. We scrambled over one another, rushing to get out the door. The first thing I noticed was the smell. The air was fresh and clean, missing the smoky tinge of chaos that clung to you everywhere you went in New York. And we actually had a yard, a big space with grass in front of the house and you could even see the mountains in the background! The sidewalk in front of the house was clear, missing the bodies and sounds of hundreds of people in passing that always lingered outside the apartment. It was like something out of a movie. All of that space, all the grass and clean air and mountains, and it was all ours. No more sleeping on top of each other or waking up on the floor because Wally wanted the bed. No more sitting on a stoop, worrying about someone yelling “Muévate niño” or hitting me when they tried to get through the door. I could imagine sitting in the patio, watching all the people pass and the kids play and the other families laughing and playing games. We finally had the space to walk around a neighborhood outside of the city with no cars, just freedom.

I watched the others run around for a while, waiting until Mami’s voice called out to us, telling us to come in and eat. My brothers ran inside, tripping over each other so they’d get some of Abuela’s huevos revueltos con queso first. By the time Wally decided to follow the others, the front door was banging against the wall relentlessly. It slammed against the frame again, and I caught a glimpse of something shiny on the front. I caught it with one hand before it could hit the wall, pushing it closed. A big, silver G hung crooked from a nail just below the peephole. *G, for la familia Gracia de Carolina.* I smiled and straightened it before following the others inside.

PARALLELED

Things are always different when you leave a place you know for a place you feel like you've never been before. Even if you were born there, if you have no memories, nothing connecting you to it, it's easy to create an image in your head that's vastly different from how things really are. But, still. So many things are bound to change with the move. The people, the sounds, the smells. Hardly anything stays the same. But the one thing you have—no matter where you find yourself—is your family.

When we first moved back to the island, things were still muy difícil. But they were better than New York. We had more people here, more family, which meant a bigger support system. That's important when you have a family with six kids. Abuela Angeles's family was in Santurce, maybe 30 minutes away, so we weren't as alone as before. She would always ask me to drive her there, hoping to visit the little shack she'd told us about when we were still in New York. Lots of Mami and Dad's friends were there, too, always dropping by to see us or to hang out. But the best days were when we went to la playa. Every couple of weeks, Abuela would organize a huge trip with everyone to the closest beach. We'd pack up the dog, the food, I'd help get all of the other kids together, and head out. Those days we'd waste away, the kids playing in the ocean while the adults enjoyed a couple of cervezas and swapped stories. Abuela would talk about her old amigas in Santurce, trying to find out if they'd stayed put or made the long journey across the ocean in search of something better. We ran around in our bathing suits, chasing the waves as they pulled in and out of the shore.

We still didn't have much when we moved to Puerto Rico. Our house wasn't that big by modern standards, but it was the biggest space we'd ever had. Mami and Dad still worked a lot,

but they weren't exhausted every day, worn out by city life. We had time to go places and explore, taking family trips to the beach and spending the holidays doing parrandas with the rest of the neighborhood. The whole street would be noisy—not like New York, but a different kind of noise. The people yelled with joy, and smiled every time they saw each other, screaming “vecino!” as they walked through their doors. We weren't dragging from place to place anymore, we made real friends with the people around us instead of having to just keep our heads down. That weight that we heaved with us wherever we went in New York vanished somewhere over the Atlantic, splashing down into the darkness and disappearing forever.

In New York, it didn't matter that we moved from Puerto Rico—for all of us kids, it was the only place we'd ever known. We just never felt we'd belonged there, even though we lived in an area where there were a lot of other people in our situation: emigrated from Puerto Rico with the whole family because things were supposed to be better. Nobody there gave us any issues. Back on the island, though, things were different. I thought school would've stayed the same—after all, how different could it be? But it wasn't. The kids at our school called my siblings and me “Americanos” and teased us about the way we said certain phrases. If any of them overheard us speaking in English, they'd snicker and whisper to one another.

I didn't understand it. Mami and Dad always told us to just ignore these people, to keep doing what needed to get done and worry about ourselves. So that's what I did. I didn't listen to their laugh when I spoke to my brothers and sister in English on our way home. I ignored their eyes when Mami spoke to us in English when she picked us up. But she noticed, and on the ride home she'd say “no se preocupen, my loves. You're going to be grateful when you grow up.” And we were.

At home, we spoke both English and Spanish—we stuck to Spanish when we were at school, except in English class. Abuela didn't speak much English, so we only spoke to her in Spanish. When talking to everyone else though, like Mami and Dad and all my brothers and my sister, it was English. Mami said it was important that we used English and Spanish as much as we could, so we could be fluent in both. Within one day we switched back and forth so many times that the language I thought in started to change. By the time I became an adult, I shifted my thoughts from English to Spanish and back whenever I needed them. The lines between one language and the other blurred—I used both, neither was dominant over the other. Our lives were split into two: home and school, native and foreign, part of and apart. Always split. Never merged. I existed in limbo, only noticing one side when the other pushed me away.

I'm grateful for the experiences I had in both places, both shaping me bit by bit. Even though I didn't quite fit, I found that Abuela was right. Life was better for us in Puerto Rico. My house shifted throughout the years, leaving Carolina to join the Navy, then moving every few years after that, but my home stayed the same. It doesn't matter where you are, because at the end of the day, you'll still have your family.

Un hombre [oon OHM-bray] n.

Someone who: places and provides for his family above himself; evolves—is always willing to learn, but can also make people understand; is fair, but firm; is cautious, but not afraid; takes care of those he's decided to bring into his life. A man.

Un niño [oon NEE-nyoh] n.

Someone who doesn't. A boy.



Figure 4. Marylin and Luis Gracia

QUERIDA MAMI:

Te extraño tanto Mami.
I wish you could be here to see
All the things we've built. Dad
Never got to see it, never
Got to meet my girls

And see in them
All the things you both taught me
And parts of you reflected in them. I see you
in the little things, the way
Kaylani dunks her tostada
Into her café on leche, watching
The steam rise and the bread go
Almost to mush, the way Marissa
Steps up and does what's needed,
Raising her girls the same,
The way they dance with Lilly,
The youngest you hardly knew,
At our parties to salsa and merengue
Swirling and spinning like they float just above the ground
A little more with each step,
The way Sandra helps us all make your coquito.

I imagine you still, sitting
In my backyard and watching the group of them,
Talking with this giant family they've assembled
Of bits and pieces of memories from then
And now that somehow
Fit perfectly into our world. I can still see the
Gentle lines that wear into your face, the
Times of trouble and strife, but also of jubilation and
Jokes that planted themselves in
The grooves of your skin. Ay, querida

Mami, I wish you were here,
If only to let us do it again, to let us all make more
Of our time with you, to let me
Take care. Stay
With us, and enjoy the life

We've built. You did your time,
Toiling beneath the stress of
Everyday life, now it's time to
Stop. You've earned it.

The things you taught us,
All of us, made us into who we were,
Made us into men
Who can care for themselves,
Even though we couldn't appreciate it then,
And take care of their household. No
"mis hijos no tienen que limpiar" ni
"relájate while I cook and clean and get everything done"
No, everyone helps. All those
Lessons you gave,
Passed down from you to your son, from
Me to my daughter, and her
To hers, a priceless heirloom
Drifting forever
Through time and family trees,
All leading back to you.

Querida Mami,
All this to say a simple thing,
Lost to memories and nostalgia and
Secret family recipes. Te extraño
Cada día. Espero que estes bien,
Mirando a todo que has creado
Con tu sonrisa. Porque al final
Todo es suyo. It's all yours,
Come revel in the field
Born of your planting.
Te quiero tanto.

Con cariño,
Luisito.

QUERIDO PAPI:

Me dijo que un hombre tiene que hacer una cosa
En su vida.
Que este es la unica cosa que debe preocuparme para todas las días.
Hoy y siempre quiero que estes orgulloso de mi
Porque todo que hago, y todo que soy
Es por ti.

You taught me a lot in those years,
Back when I wrote off everything you said as nonsense
Since it had nothing to do with what I was most concerned with: anything
But what you said.
 It's funny how those things come back
 When you least expect.

Me enseñó muchas cosas:
Como ser un hombre,
Como lavar el carro,
Como ser hermano.
Pero lo más importante fue
Que la familia supone todo
Y un hombre tiene que cuidarles.

Every time I picked you up from drinking with the boys
Because Mami was too nervous to let you drive on your own
 Even though I didn't have a license
We'd talk.
Every time we started school again,
You sat me down and explained your expectations, everything I was supposed to do and be
Because even though Wally was the oldest, she was a girl,
And as the oldest
boy,
It was my job to care for everyone else and look out for them.

Las enseñanzas que me dijo
Son algunos de mis memorias más especiales.
Siempre voy a hacer lo que puedo
En memoria de ti
Porque solo quiero que

Usted está orgulloso de mi y todo lo que tengo hoy.

Sin ti,

no sería ningún por ciento del hombre

Que soy.

Sin ti,

yo no hubiera tenido este familia.

Sin ti,

no soy.

Today, I watch the family I have,

The family that seems like it knows no bounds as it grows exponentially.

I teach my daughter that family comes first,

And that she can always rely on me.

I teach my granddaughters that Grandpa is always there

And always will be.

That even though I'm not their dad, I will protect them with my life.

I teach them all, by example,

What a man should be.

Like you did.

Gracias por sus enseñños.

Gracias por su nombre.

Gracias por mi vida.

Gracias por mi familia.

Gracias, Dad.

Te hablo pronto,
Luisito.



Figure 5. Luis R. Gracia and granddaughter, Kaylani

“Muy familial, everyone said of my grandfather, a family man. It was the best thing you could say about a person after you said he was kind and handsome, which you could also say about my grandfather” (Alvarez).

AN INCOMPLETE LIST OF THINGS I'VE LEARNED FROM MY GRANDPA/LOLO

Desde el primer momento, you were there. Hasta el ultimo minuto, you will be. Family first, always—even if they are a pain in the butt sometimes. The best cure for a cough is a shot of whiskey. There's nothing quite like life on a military base. Respect is earned, not given. If something needs to be done and you can step up, do it. In Hawaii, lolo means crazy, but in the Philippines it means Grandpa. *People are gonna think you're my dad because you don't age.* Lemonade: it's that cool, refreshing drink. The stakes need to be plunged deep into the soil if you want the tent to stay up. All fast food restaurants have crappy coffee. If you need something, just ask. "Brujería" was one of Great Grandpa's favorite songs. Be careful not to overfill when you're adding wiper fluid. You dunk your tostada in café con leche just like Great Grandma. There is such a thing as too many books. The proper psi for the tires on a 2004 Acura MDX is 32. A job is just a job, don't take it too seriously. A "Royal Hawaiian" isn't a real dog breed, it just means it's a mutt. *There will never come a time that I won't fall for your serious tone and joking eyes.* A Long Island Iced Tea is unfiltered danger in a cup. Have fun, but be aware of your surroundings. Car shows are the best kind of therapy. A grandpa is your forever dance partner at parties. Make sure that someone knows where you are if you're going somewhere alone, just in case. Stick with the same mechanic for as long as possible. Someone who doesn't respect you doesn't deserve your presence. Turn off the engine before checking your oil. You'll always have a home with Grandma and Grandpa. *You'll always be willing to help.* Family above everything and anything. Water is the nectar of the gods. You and I both know that Will Smith's "Switch" will always be one of the greatest songs of all time.

AFTERWORD: A GRANDDAUGHTER'S REFLECTION

Being of mixed heritage often means that it's difficult to feel completely connected to any of your cultures. Coming from a multicultural household, I never felt that my experiences growing up were strictly Hispanic or Asian or even American. Whenever I thought of my culture, I didn't think of it as split into percentages, matching the ratio of blood flowing through my body. I always just was—not one half something and a sixteenth of another, just all.

Getting older meant that I was constantly running into people who were of “purer” blood than myself. Running into full-blown Colombian, Puerto Rican, Filipino, and Chinese people was essentially like stop-and-go traffic: some cultural things we'd have in common (our taste in music, our love of arepas, the obsession with Manny Pacquiao), but then we'd inevitably start to talk about something I knew next to nothing about. It wasn't until I left high school that I realized how truly unique my upbringing was: there never existed a line of demarcation, separating parts of my life into culture-specific categories, but I never fully-experienced all aspects of any of them. When you meet someone who shares your family's heritage, you instinctively want to bond over a shared culture. But how can you help but feel left-out when you feel like a heritage you've tried your hardest to fully embrace hasn't embraced you in return?

Navigating the societies of my mixed heritage was always a challenge, so I wanted to make an attempt to learn more about my own culture with the intention of eventually sharing it with the world, showing everyone the aspects of it that I may or may not have experienced on my own. From this desire, this idea was born.

My maternal grandfather was born in Puerto Rico, moved to Spanish Harlem in New York City as a baby, and moved back to the island when he was 12 years old. After that, he went

on to leave once again as a member of the United States Navy, eventually meeting my Filipino-Chinese grandmother because of it. His life, constantly crossing cultural boundaries and navigating new societies, resulted in the part of myself that my friends have referred to as “the cultural chameleon.” As a result of his experiences traveling and his ability to carve a place for himself wherever he goes, my grandfather played a huge role in sculpting me into the person I am today.

Being of different heritages with their own unique idiosyncrasies meant that I could navigate diverse social situations with ease, but I never felt fully-connected to any culture in particular. Sure, there were parts of me and the ways I acted that were inherently associated with my Asian or Hispanic culture—but it was just “Hispanic,” not specifically Puerto Rican or Colombian. It’s not like my family sawed off their favorite parts from each country of origin, strategically connecting them to form me—I am a product of all of them, but that means you can’t decide what parts of you are from where.

Sitting with my grandfather to talk about his life and his upbringing, I realized that the greater issue here was my sense of identity: I didn’t feel I’d had the proper chance to get to know my culture, and I wanted to start. I already knew enough about it to feel some kind of connection, but talking about his experiences meant that I got to hear firsthand what growing up in a purely Puerto Rican household was like. These works are a reflection of my understanding, a means of transforming from mental to nearly-physical the concepts and principles of a culture that I’d only really had glimpses of growing up. In a way, it’s a work of translation. It’s a means of further familiarizing myself with my heritage and history, and sharing this appreciation with a larger audience.

I hope that anyone who encounters my writing will get a glimpse into the culture that was always a part of me, but I never recognized. I want them to understand things that are Hispanic in nature, but also the uniquely Puerto Rican experiences. I want them to find themselves grounded in the concept of family, the idea of caring for others, or any other thing they might have in common with my grandfather's story. I want them to embrace the wholeness of themselves.

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