

In the past week or so, I have had Puerto Rico on the brain. It's been put there by timely new curiosities regarding Lin-Manuel Miranda and Walter Mercado, but it resonates further because of my own family history.

I sat down to write a travel essay, but let me start by copping to the fact that I have never been to Puerto Rico. My connection to it is real but frayed. My mother's mother was born and raised there before she left for New York City to study law. (This was in the late 1920s, mind you.) She stayed on the mainland for the rest of her life, only returning to the island for infrequent short visits. My mother's mother was, by all accounts, an extraordinary woman, though I was only alive for three or four years before she died, so my memories of her are ghost-like at best.

My mother's relationship with her extraordinary mother, with Puerto Rico, and with her Latinx heritage was complicated. At best. Her parents divorced when she was very young (her father was a Kansan and an alcoholic, not in that order), and her working (Catholic) mother shipped her off to Catholic boarding schools for much of her childhood. She basically toured the Caribbean and Latin America. I suspect there were schools a little nearer to home as well, though the details were always a little fuzzy. For the most part, the nuns, to hear my mother tell it, were very mean, and she spent most of her time crying—particularly on the weekends, when most of her classmates traveled home and she was stuck in the dormitory alone. Later, in high school in Washington, D.C., where she and her mother finally settled together, she dated the wrong boy (he was Jewish, also a talented pianist—most certainly, in the eyes of my grandmother, in that order), so my mother was again shipped away—to Puerto Rico, this time, to live with relatives. It turned out she loved that experience, being surrounded by cousins and aunts and uncles. It was, perhaps, the time of her life. But still, all that exiling throughout her formative years scarred her.

For a long time, she rejected anything that had anything to do with Puerto Rico. Notably, though she was bilingual herself, she didn't teach my sister or me to speak Spanish. There were a few nick-nacks in the house, a few risqué t-shirts that reflected her heritage, but largely my sister and I were gringos, and that's the way my mother let it be.

The one real nod we made to my mother's roots came at Christmas, when we made what she called paella (but was, ostensibly, arroz con pollo with some other stuff mixed in). Much later, after my mother's death, I shared that fun fact about myself (proudly, too proudly) at a lunch table at a well-known writer's conference in New England. A Latinx writer tsk-tsked me—"Paella's a Spanish dish," she said, as if I was either lying or had somehow gotten my life story wrong. I was embarrassed and ashamed, and I do take her point, even now. The dish we ate was, at best, an ersatz version of questionable provenance, and it was a telling faux pas that, well into my thirties, I didn't know what I didn't know (so to speak) about my "Puerto Rican" heritage. I had only partial access to my family's history, so I couldn't say for sure how or why we ended up eating "paella" every Christmas. All I knew is that it was the one reliable time all year when my mother acknowledged—and we could access—the deepest layer(s) of who she was. And it made us—it made me—feel closer to her. It still does.

As I get older, as I now have a son, as my wife and her family have deep roots in the Caribbean, I feel my ignorance of that part of my background so deeply. I feel as if it is

somehow not exactly mine to claim, because of how I look, because of my (lack of) language, because I don't know where to start to (re)connect. I so desperately want to go there, and I want to promise myself I most certainly will someday, but the world's current predicament makes such certain claims or promises about, well, anything seem like whistling through some kind of graveyard.

If I think about it all too much, it makes me sad.

This was supposed to be a travel essay. In a way, I suppose, it is. I am not, though, the traveler in this story. I am sunk deep in the new territory, like some lost and lonely flag on the moon. I can't blame anybody for that. I'm proud of my mother and my grandmother, for living the lives they lived. But I didn't know them fully, and can't, until I find a way back to their true place of origin. And that means I don't, and can't, fully know myself until I do that, either.

I know what I need to do. I need to learn Spanish. I need to learn about Puerto Rico, about my family there. And, yes, I need to go there. But really, first, I need to somehow find it in myself.

One of the first poems I ever published was called "My Mother in a Mango Tree," and it was set in the Puerto Rico of my imagination. It's lost to time now. I don't have a copy of that journal or even of the poem itself. As I recall, it was mostly just the image of my mother as a little girl, sitting in a tree, her face sticky with mango juice from eating her fill of her favorite fruit. My mother, happy. My mother, the sensualist. My mother, in the garden. My mother, in paradise. That—vaguely but still powerfully—is what Puerto Rico means to me. That, more than anything, is what I need to find inside of me.