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My Isla Del Encanto

My heart was beating, and I was afraid and excited. My nose pressed against the cool plane window. I see turquoise waters that outline white beaches that surround vibrant green mountains. “Attention passengers, if you look outside your windows, you will see we are about to arrive at our destination. The island of Puerto Rico,” the pilot announced over the intercom. This is the first of many times in which I will view my island from a plane window. I didn't know it in that moment, but this island would become one of the most precious places in the world to me. A place that made me feel like I belonged even when I didn't fit in anywhere else.

At eight years old, my mother sent me on a plane by myself for the first time with only a stewardess to guide me. I set off on what felt like a great adventure. I spent the first “best summer of my life” there and would spend the next eight summers making better memories than the last.

That first summer, I swam in cool rock-filled rivers, explored mountainsides, and felt the first bit of real freedom to explore and do as I pleased that I had ever felt before. Puerto Rico was this wild place, so different from my home back in Florida. My cousins didn't have cable television, so instead of spending all their time watching cartoons alone in their room like I did,

they played outside every day. Outside was more fun than anything on television anyway. We would just walk out of the house and go on any adventure we wanted, something I could never do back home. The island was a place of freedom and exploration on a level I had never experienced back home. It felt like I was in one of those TV shows instead of just watching them on a screen.

Our first time out together, my cousins insisted they had a secret place to show me. We walked up the mountainside to my uncle's farm. The road to his house felt as if it were a perfect ninety-degree angle. I had watched his jeep climb it before and wondered to myself how it didn't flip over every time he tried to go home. This was the path my cousins took me to climb. My feet slipped in my flip-flops, and I could feel the condensation form on my body. They led me away from the road onto a dirt path into the woods. I was so exhausted by the time I pulled that last emerald leaf out of the way that it took me a second to register what I was looking at. In front of me was the kind of view you only see in movies or screensavers. The forest ended on a steep cliffside, and beyond that cliffside, I could see what felt like the entire town of Yabucoa. Pastel houses with flat roofs and square businesses were laid out before me. Beyond the town, I could see the beach and the ocean spread out onto the horizon. I took in that moment. I can still smell the floral scents of the tropical forest mixed with the distant ocean. I can still remember that feeling of awe I had that this kind of beauty could exist. That was the moment I knew I had fallen in love with the island.

It felt like everyone knew everyone in Puerto Rico; my aunt would honk the whole way when we went out. She'd honk at a neighbor, a friend, a member of the family too distant for me to know. She'd pull over and have a chat with the old man who lived down the street. Back home, a car ride was just a trip from point A to point B. In Puerto Rico, there was this sense of

community I had never encountered. By the end of that first summer, I felt I belonged to that community.

I cried at the end of every summer I visited Puerto Rico and begged my mom to let me stay. She never did take me up on that offer, so every year I would return home to what felt like a dull life of cable television alone in my room, counting the days until I could get on that plane again and see her mountains rise in the distance through the plane window.

Every visit for the next eight years was better than the last. I grew closer with my cousins, and every year would be a bigger adventure than the year before. My final summer there, we were all old enough to have licenses, and I got to see even more of the island than I had before. I longboarded in Viejo San Juan; I went into the Castillo San Felipe del Morro for the first time; I swam on the beaches of Dorado. I even explored more of the towns where I had spent the majority of my summers. We went to the town square of Aguas Buenas to ride our boards, eat empanadillas, and drink OK Cola Champagne.

For ten years, I wouldn't see my cousins again, I wouldn't hike the forests and climb the mountainsides. I would have to spend the next ten years never falling asleep to the sweet lullaby of my island's beloved coqui. If I had known that I would not see Puerto Rico again until almost ten years later, I would have stayed up later during those nighttime chats with my aunt. I would have spent longer days at the beach. I would have had an extra *quesito* from the *panaderia*. I would have savored it more.

After that last summer, life at home became more complicated. I started working and wouldn't have a vacation again until many years later. I dropped out of high school and had an awful time with my mental health for many years. Puerto Rico and the summers I spent there so

happy seemed like a distant memory. In that time, Puerto Rico was ravaged by Hurricane Maria. So many of my cousins moved off the island to find better wages and better lives that they just couldn't find on the island. We became spread out throughout the states. Every year, it felt like I had less reason to go than the last. I wondered if I returned, if I would even recognize it. I wondered if it would feel as magical as it once had.

It took me some time, but I was finally able to pull myself out of my depression and work my way into a management position at a job that offered not only vacation days but a high enough wage that I could afford to do things when I took those vacation days. My grandmother was older and could no longer take care of herself, and she moved back to Puerto Rico with my aunts. I finally had the money, the time, and the reason I could use to justify using that time to go back to my magical place. I bought the tickets and made plans to spend my 25th birthday in a place my heart had been yearning for.

This time, as I looked out the window of the plane, I was not alone. I sat between the man I loved and my mother, the woman who made all those summers possible in the first place. Outside the window, I could see those familiar green mountains and the white beaches just as I had remembered them in my head. I looked over to my boyfriend and saw him feeling the same wonder I felt the first time I looked out the plane window.

When we landed, I thought that maybe Puerto Rico had not changed so much since my last visit. At first glance, just from the sky and from what I could see of San Juan, everything was as I remembered. It wasn't until we traveled to the small towns my family lived in did I see the damages. Abandoned houses were left in rubble as the people who owned them had to leave instead of rebuild. Some of the businesses I had grown up going to completely shut down forever. My aunt's *quenepa* tree which I spent the summers eating from had been washed away.

In those 5 days we spent there we lost power 3 times, something that had never been a problem when I was a kid. When we went to the beach, there was more trash and tourists than I had ever seen before.

Still, in so many ways, Puerto Rico was the same. While many of my cousins had moved away, my aunts and uncles were still there. In their old houses, that while a little worse for wear were as I remembered them. In the spot where the quenepa tree was, there was now a small growing mango tree. My uncle's farm still sat on top of the ninety-degree angle climb. I excitedly told my boyfriend that I was going to show him a secret place, only my cousins and I knew how to get to. We made the climb that felt even harder than it did in my flip-flops as a kid. We pushed through that last bit of forest, and after almost ten years, I got to see that view again. The town was still there, the ocean was still there, and the view was still there.

So much had changed in me and my island. We both had suffered hardships that maybe should've taken us both out. But they didn't. Puerto Rico stood beautiful and strong, and so did I. If she could weather the storms and come out the other side, so could I. I felt at that moment that something in me had come full circle. If my island and my people could persist, so could I. Things will always change, and there will always be obstacles, but that doesn't mean there is still not beauty to be seen and life to be lived.

As I looked out over that cliffside, I wondered when I might see this view again. Who will I be when I look out at this town again? How will things have changed here and in me? Only time will answer those questions. The only sure thing I know is that I will make it through in the end. There is a saying in Puerto Rico: "Sigue pa'lante." It means to carry on or keep going. As I looked at my view in my secret place, I thought to myself, *sigue pa'lante siempre*.

