

# The lady at the top of the building

*Iris Mónica Vargas, MS*

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When the winds had made full display of their fury, on September 2017, and silence had befallen, a hurricane had only then began its onslaught. It is what happens after, what changes you, and not the roaring of the invisible, wide, spiraling mouth arriving from the sea.

Years ago, when I was a little girl, my family and I experienced Hurricane Hugo. We lived then in a small barrio in the mountains of Puerto Rico. Our house was humble as was everything else around us. We didn't have much in the way of economic resources. No common pleasures such as dining out on Fridays or any other day of the week, no vacation trips to other countries, no fancy schools, no luxuries of any kind. A single gift each Christmas. We lived in a house that my father built all by himself, with wood that soon enough had rotten at the bottom, through which I became acquainted daily with the varied population of insects with whom we shared our surroundings. The structure we called home had one window in the front of the house. Everything else — the entire one bedroom/bathroom the house contained -- was dark. My father worked very hard, changed jobs every few years, and saved money all of his life, diligently, such that one day he could build what would become our next house: a structure made of cement that would take thirty years of work (by all of us), and patience (from all of us), to almost finish. It was that structure, a quarter of it already erected, that would help us survive after hurricane Hugo. Every year my school required

my father to fill out a survey in which there was a line he would fill the same way every time: \$19,000/year. It was the same every year. The job, we would always joke, was always a different one. We were a family of four. That is the story not only of my family but of many other Puerto Rican families.

After hurricane Hugo we spent three months without the service of water and two without electricity. We all learned to ration the water when we cleaned up, using a small palangana (basin) in which we would place -- and reuse during that same cycle -- not more than half of a gallon of water, if you were an adult, and not more than a quarter of a gallon if you were a kid. Those were the shortest, most efficient, eco-friendly acts of self-grooming I have ever practiced. My mother kept everything in place such that life didn't feel as messy and chaotic as it was, and antibacterial detergent was our savior. That, too, was the story of many families after the hurricane.

Two years ago, the moment I heard the news -- a hurricane had formed and was approaching --, all those memories of my childhood in rural Barrio Bajuras, in Vega Alta, came back. I knew well that the emotional experience of hearing the sounds of the wind in the darkness, however threatening, would be the least of anyone's worries. This time, though, I was a mother. Though no longer living in an economically disadvantaged situation, like I had for so many years of my life, when the winds had dwindled and three weeks had gone by, when I was seeing our supply of rice and beans grow shorter, when I heard the radio hosts of the only station in the country that was broadcasting daily candidly acknowledging that they had just found out they were the only station that could be heard in the entire island, and then requested reporters -- anyone, really --- with information and a way to get to their quarters to provide it and to describe for the rest of us what was happening outside our hometowns, the state of our country, our island, I

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**Iris Mónica Vargas, MS**

Title: MS, Physics and Science

Affiliation Universidad de Puerto Rico, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Email: [irismonicav@gmail.com](mailto:irismonicav@gmail.com)

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felt a particularly poignant sense of urgency and even fear.

The world had kept on moving, but ours had somehow stopped and it seemed nobody could hear us. In a literal sense, most cell phone towers were down. We were, in practice, now isolated from the rest of the world. I don't think I had ever understood what our political condition meant — being a part of the United States yet not really, formally referred to as a commonwealth, otherwise existing as a colony of a political power in the world (one of the last ones in existence), not having the authority to pursue our own economic treaties and negotiations with other countries, existing, oddly, as the property of the government of a group of people, most of whom have never individually known our culture or even, in some cases, our geographical location. Never before had I been consciously aware of what it meant never to be regarded as an equal.

There's this "thing", a sort of "act" I always saw people doing while I was growing up. It's something I've never been able to describe exactly, and I know it could sound quite strange. Whenever we — classmates and I, family and I, friends and I— would visit Old San Juan, the heart of the capital of Puerto Rico, the center of tourism in our country, and we would find ourselves near a tourist, we became performers of sorts. This is what I mean: our voices rose, our laughter got wilder, our daily habits were suddenly displayed in a rather more theatrical manner, as though we were triggered to put on a show for whom we had assumed a curious audience, interested in getting to know us. We remained, however, no matter our insistence on being seen or acknowledged, unseen actors and actresses.

Whenever I think back to my childhood days, or my university days even, being around American tourists, I remember feeling, perhaps not in a completely conscious way, a sense of invisibility. It wasn't that I wanted to be like them, or that I wished to resemble them. It was not a longing for what they had or for what they represented: I knew what they had. It was everywhere around me — at every store at the mall, on every commercial on TV. It was more a wonder about their curiosity about me. Why did such a curiosity seem not to exist, about what I represented as a human being, or as a culture?

It is true: no matter where one goes, a tourist seldom possesses the detail of recognizing, the introspection to understand, or the awareness of the presence of, the host. The place visited becomes merely an object, the means to a purpose, and everything around it blends in seamlessly. People disappear; they are but splotches of color, their shapes unrecognizable, indistinguishable. Such shortsight, however, becomes especially noticeable and incongruent when the tourist and the host are not utterly strangers, but are supposed to hold some kind of kinship, even a relationship -- for better or for worse —, one that began with an invasion, in 1898, more than a hundred years ago.

As the weeks went by and the lines for gasoline grew longer at the gas stations and longer at the supermarkets for whatever was left or had just been received of food (lines could each last an entire day), as people began daily searching the highways and smaller streets for jets of water coming down the mountains to collect with their containers and take home, and as we all searched for the elusive cell phone signal that would prompt hundreds of people to stop anywhere along highway 52 just to have the opportunity to tell someone, using the last bit of energy on their communication devices, and the last bit of gasoline in their tanks, that we were "okay," we understood we were alone.

The world knew more about what had happened to us than we, ourselves, did. And sometimes, the world thought it knew better. I would later become acquainted with a news article, for instance, citing a spokesman at the USNS Comfort, a NAVY hospital boat anchored near our shores, saying physicians there spent days attending but a reduced number of islanders, as though implying that we were misusing thoughtlessly the great, expensive resources allowed to us. In reality, however, that was one of the many resources to which we didn't have access.

Many physicians didn't know about the hospital boat, and for some of the ones who did, the referral process proved to be ineffective and complex. Roads were closed. Bridges had collapsed. Entire communities were isolated. People did not have access to Wi-Fi services. People could not communicate neither with each other nor with the rest of the world. Most people didn't even know there was such boat.

We didn't have access to news reports. Gasoline was scarce: it was a resource one used only cautiously. Men and women could not gain access to local hospitals, and many a time, when they finally did, if their malady was deemed non urgent, were instructed to return home and wait it out, instead. Other times the hospitals themselves were not equipped to help. Delays in treatment occurred. Chronic conditions worsened. 4,645 Puerto Ricans --grandfathers and grandmothers, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters of someone --- became "contentious statistics" of a hurricane aftermath. Their bodies, too, even after death, were covered with the grime of waiting -- for their remains to reach San Juan so their condition of absence could be confirmed by a medical examiner, or for medical examiner themselves to be the ones traveling to the corpses so the "state" of the diseased could be recognized as "disaster-related."

Even then, a President and a Governor denied them. "They had anywhere from 6 to 18 deaths," claimed a President. The official Puerto Rican death registry recognized only 64 of those diseased.

If the story of Puerto Rico has often been told without a heroic end, without the stamina, the courage, the energy and the vitality of its people; if it is rarely told without mentioning the dedication and the hard work of the fathers and mothers who built a roof over their homes, no matter the circumstances; and if the stories threaded around it leave out the creativity and the persistence of its sons and daughters, and the strength of its Pueblo, it is only because the story that is often diffused is seldom the one that we have told through our own voice.

Millions of branches felled by the hurricane during its walk were cleared by neighbors all across the island the afternoon after the winds had finally subsided.

Medical students, such as my colleague, Estefanía Rivera Mudafort, organized themselves throughout the country to help out. Estefanía, for instance, organized a Christmas tour that December to bring presents to children in economically disadvantaged, often forgotten neighborhoods in the town of Loíza. Walking alongside her down the streets of Loíza one day, I saw a neighbor wearing insulating boots as he attempted to untangle and organize high-voltage --live-- cables that

had fallen and were now blocking the entrance to his house. In another barrio, high-voltage cables that were still threatening to fall, lay at the height of the kids heads as they whisked by in their little bicycles.

All across the island, the country was aided, fixed and rebuilt by groups of volunteers -- neighbors helping each other. From things as complicated and dangerous as managing high-voltage cables, to mundane acts of removing meandering iguanas from a neighbor's house (an effort that could be rewarded with a bag of fresh avocados to spice up a rice-only diet), to the labor of love of students helping to clean up their own schools, and gigantic, poignant signs arising out of every corner of streets and highways with anonymous messages of union, support and encouragement of one another, Puerto Rico showed its resilience, its integrity, its stature and most of all, its inner strength.

My grandmother, an octogenarian woman with a heart condition, remained without the service of electricity for six months after the hurricane. And two years after the event, when you look out highway 52 into the horizon, at different points along its extension, seas of blue tarps catch your eye. Thus, when a news report was published last July (2019) in which a private chat conversation, more than 800 pages long, was made public, where the Governor of Puerto Rico and several members of his cabinet and close colleagues spoke mockingly about Puerto Ricans of different walks of life -- people who were obese, disadvantaged, members of the LGBTQ+ community, victims of hurricane María, and even, indirectly, those who had lost their lives in the aftermath --, the grief accumulated throughout the past two years underwent a powerful transformation.

I know it did in me

It was as though the invisibility I had felt when I was a child every time I found myself amongst the American tourists in Old San Juan had resurfaced, only this time it had words attached to it, making it tangible. How could someone who supposedly understood the challenges the people in our communities faced every single day, treat us in such a way, as though we were, as a People, invisible to him, and as though even in our own land we were, collectively, utterly unseen?

You can spend years attempting to find the words to describe exactly what which you feel and that is nearest to your heart. Though time will allow me to do better one day, for now, a metaphor will have to suffice. I remember the first time I ever volunteered at a hospital, before I applied to medical school. I was one of those volunteers whose job it is to transport patients from one part of the hospital to another. One of the first patients that I ever assisted was a lovely woman whom I had to wheel to the radiology laboratory. She was to receive a chest X ray. After we had chatted for a while and she had shared some of the details of her affliction with me, she lifted the gown off her chest and showed me her breasts. She wanted me to see the scars her illness had left on the surface of her skin. This was important to her story. I once wrote about her. I understood, though it took me a while, that she had needed to take possession of herself again, of her identity, by claiming her body and the illness that ailed her as hers, as things she could name herself, instead of continuing to have someone else name them for her. Her way back into visibility, into the dignity of visibility, not only with respect to others but with respect to herself, was to tell her own story, seizing back what medicine, in its arrogant, paternalistic ways, had appropriated.

I wasn't in Puerto Rico on Wednesday, July 24th, 2019, and I regret it. I had been taking a course outside of the island, in Chicago, and now I

was waiting for my return flight to Puerto Rico at the time when my compatriots were gathering in front of La Fortaleza, in Old San Juan. I was watching, live, from the airport terminal, the broadcast of the celebration: the Governor of Puerto Rico had finally announced his resignation and all around people were singing ---some Silent Generation could be spotted and many Baby Boomers, many Generation X and many more Millennials. All political parties included. I turned on the volume of the broadcast. I held my device as far as I could away from my body such that what I was watching could be appreciated by anybody nearby. I was doing that thing we do, that thing we always did when we were walking Old San Juan and we stopped near an American tourist who couldn't bring themselves to "see" us: I was being theatrical. I was purposefully performing. This time, however, I cared not to be seen, or be noticed, but for others to notice what I was seeing.

On a facebook video, gone viral, of the afternoon, electric, a women, age indecipherable, stood, moved to tears, atop a building, watching as people went by singing down on the streets of Viejo San Juan, painting themselves clear, into perfect focus, such that everybody anywhere in the world could see, could hear, the Pueblo that had found and seen itself, the one that had always existed, and the power to exist with dignity that has always been ours.

