Americano*

BY RALPH KEYES

At recess, they'd follow me around, a shuffling crowd of several dozen children, staring, pointing, giggling. "*Mira, mira. Americano,*" they murmured. "*Americano*." Their tone wasn't hostile. I never felt threatened by this dark-haired gang. They were just curious; bemused. My followers ogled me as they might examine a new polar bear in the zoo.

That zoo was *Escuela Lopez Sicárdo,* an elementary school housed in a two-story cinder block building painted pale green. The wooden doors of my windowless first-floor classroom there were propped open when school was in session. They faced the bare dirt schoolyard where students like me milled about at recess.

Some days I'd pull a penny from the pocket of my khaki shorts to buy *bacalaito,* chewy codfish fritters, the size of a silver dollar. *Bacalaito* was sold from battered coffee cans by barefoot young peddlers. At times my fourth-grade classmates would try to abort the sale. "*Muy chispito, muy chispito,*" they'd tell me, indicating with a tightly curled thumb and forefinger that I wasn't getting a big enough fritter for my penny. I didn't care. I loved the salty, greasy taste of *bacalaito*. Also *tostones,* crunchy plantain chips sold in stapled waxed paper envelopes by the peddlers.

It didn't occur to me that my classmates might not have a penny of their own to buy *bacalaito* or *tostones* any more than I realized that being the only student to ride a bicycle to school wasn't the best way to bond with them. Just weeks before, I rode that bicycle to the Frazier Street Elementary School in State College, Pennsylvania, and saw no reason not to do the same thing at the Escuela Lopez Sicárdo in Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico. Since my teacher was worried about this bike getting stolen, she had me park it beside the blackboard. There, for

* Most of the names I use in this essay are pseudonyms, to protect the privacy of those written about.

the entire school day, day after day, my fourth-grade classmates could examine this bright blue J.C. Higgins and reflect on who could afford such a bike, and who couldn't.

If they resented this, none said so. Not that I'd have understood them if they had. My Spanish was as good as their English. We communicated with lots of hand gestures and inventive combinations of Spanish and English words. ("Wah ju name?" "Me name es Ralph.")

Most of my classmates lived in a *caserío,* a housing project that abutted Dos Pinos, the middle-class development where my family had rented a home. Only one other child from Dos Pinos attended Lopez Sicárdo. Families in Puerto Rico that could afford it generally sent their kids to private—usually parochial—schools. Most of the children in my neighborhood attended such schools. So did I, for the first month we lived in Dos Pinos. That month was spent wearing a blue and white uniform at the Escuela del Sagrado Corazón (School of the Sacred Heart). After a couple of weeks my mother asked how I liked it there. Fine, I said, except when one of the nuns asked for my hand, then whacked it with a ruler. Two weeks later I was riding my bike to Escuela Lopez Sicárdo.

It was unheard of for an *Americano* to attend a public school in Puerto Rico in 1953. Sending me there aligned with my family's progressive political views, however. It made us one with "the people." Except the people I'd been made one with could hardly miss the gaps dividing us: the money I had for snacks, my bike by the blackboard, the strange words I spoke. My blue eyes contrasted with their dark ones. They had black hair, mine was light brown. Though not tall back home, I towered over many of my Lopez Sicárdo classmates.

Our teacher—whom we called "Meesy Martinez"—was a severe woman in her late 30s with jet black hair and teardrop eyeglasses. Sra. Martinez didn't single me out for special treatment. She did, however, elevate me. The main way Sra. Martinez did this was by having me read aloud to my classmates. Even though I had no idea what most of them meant, I'd learned how to pronounce Spanish words, down to rolled r's. So I got to stand before my classmates—right next to my bicycle—and read to them about Zanzibar and Madagascar, sugar cane and pineapple plants, the Spanish-American War, and Puerto Rico's revered patriot Luis Muñoz Rivera.

Why my classmates didn't beat me up at recess remains a mystery. In fact they were remarkably tolerant of this new creature in their midst. I seemed to amuse more than annoy them. They enjoyed teach-

ing me Spanish, especially words such as "*pipi, caca,* and *culo*" (pee pee, doo doo, and butt). Also "*coño, carajo,* and *chicha*" (damn, hell, and fuck). Sometimes they had me say "*ñeta pu*" so many times in succession that it became "*puñeta*"—slang for masturbate—to the shrieking delight of those around me.

Outside the schoolyard, my popularity waned. There I encountered cool, often hostile looks from scruffy boys in bare feet. When these boys called me "Americano," their lip curled. The English this crowd practiced on me included "Ay, ju, foky, foky," or "Ju a sonamabeech." The Spanish I learned from them included "*maricón* (queer)," "*come mi bicho* (eat my cock)," "*chinga tu madre* (fuck your mother)," and "*tu eres un hijo de gran puta* (you're the son of a big whore)." These boys asked for money. They challenged me to fight. Then I learned even more Spanish, new terms like "*Eres cobarde?*" ("Are you a coward?") and "*Se rinde?*" ("Do you surrender?") Too often my answer was "*Si*."

A few months earlier, on a bright August day in State College, my father had got a call that seemed important. The voice at the other end offered him a job with Puerto Rico's Planning Board. His wife and four children hovered nearby as Dad stood stoop-shouldered in our dining room, ear pressed tightly to the receiver, responding occasionally with soft-spoken words that were hard for the rest of us to catch. After Dad hung up he murmured something to Mom. She burst out crying. I'd never seen my mother cry before. Dad took her for a walk beneath the broad green maple leaves of our neighborhood. I couldn't recall seeing this happen either. My two brothers and my sister and I waited anxiously for our parents to return. When they did—hand-in-hand—Mom was red-eyed, Dad subdued. They sat us all down at the dining room table, then announced that we'd leave soon for our new home: on an island called Puerto Rico.

There we rented a two-bedroom, single-story home made of cinder blocks in Dos Pinos. Its windows were jalousies without screens. Inside we slept under mosquito nets. The home's floors were crushed marble, their coldness underfoot untempered by rugs. In its living room we sat in sling chairs with bent iron frames, or on a platform couch with black and white upholstery covering a piece of foam. To an eight- year-old our new residence felt cool and stark. It was the perfect setting for a family out of place.

In a field behind our back yard in Dos Pinos a shack had been built of scrap wood and corrugated tin. Three boys named Paco, José, and Carmelo lived there with their mother, Isabel. Her sons taught me how to shoot marbles within a circle drawn in the dirt, how to hang lizards from your ears (by squeezing them at the jaw line then placing their lips over your earlobes), and how to make kites from palm frond stems lashed with thread and covered with brightly colored tissue paper. Although I missed sledding during our first winter in Puerto Rico, Paco and his brothers showed me how to slide down hills on broad, slippery banana leaves. After Three Kings Day (January 6th, the Puerto Rican counterpart to Christmas), I asked Isabel what presents her sons had gotten. "*No mucho,*" Isabel said vaguely. "*Unos juguetes pequeños. Aeroplanos. Carritos*." She showed me some flimsy tin airplanes and cars. Although many of my memories of Puerto Rico have faded, I have crystal-clear recall of those occasions when—by behaving like an average middle-class American—I was stunningly rude to those who weren't.

Eight is a lucky age to infiltrate a new culture. At that age you don't realize how many things you couldn't or shouldn't do. When a neighborhood house party was mounted soon after we arrived, I donned my little suit and clip-on bow tie, then gamely tried to do the dances I saw being done around me: merengues, boleros, and cha cha chas. In desperation a teenage girl grabbed my wrist and led me onto the dance floor, muttering, "*Venga, te voy a enseñar como bailar.*" ("Come on, I'm going to teach you how to dance.") And she did. Left, right, left, right, bend a knee, left, right, to the blaring trumpets and thumping conga drums of Tito Puente's band.

At year's end, I went from house to house with a group of young carolers called *aguinaldos*. *Aguinaldos* clack *claves* (rhythm sticks), shake *maracas* (rattles), and scrape *guiros* (dried gourds with carved lines on which a rhythm is scratched out with wire tines embedded in a wood handle). In place of a *guiro* we'd sometimes use a cheese grater and fork. Instead of *claves* a tin can and stick would do. *Aguinaldos* dressed in shabby, oversized costumes, like hoboes back home. One of us shuffled about in the middle as the rest sang: "*Saludos, saludos, vengo a saludar. Saludos, saludos, vengo a saludar. A loy, sa benito, benito a cantar. A loy, sa benito, benito a cantar.*" That's my phonetic memory of the song's words. I still have no idea what most of them mean.

To greet the new year, our class at Lopez Sicárdo mounted a tal-

ent show. Once again I put on my suit and tie, this time to sing Eddie Fisher's "I'm Walking Behind You," with expressive arm gestures. My performance could not have contrasted more with the folkloric dances and poetry recitals of my classmates. Its novelty, if not its quality, amused Sra. Martinez. She and my classmates laughed and clapped and she gave me a hug.

Meesy Martinez was less amused the day she asked me to take a glass flower vase upstairs and fill it with water. My teacher warned me to make sure the vase didn't break. That's exactly what happened, of course, as I stumbled on the cement steps while walking upstairs. Lacking the words to explain this calamity, I drew Sra. Martinez a picture of a stick figure sprawled on a set of stairs. I got scolded for that one, but nothing like the lambasting I took during a Three Kings party. Gifts were to be exchanged, a fact I neglected to tell my mother until the night before. Mom dug a small pair of earrings out of her jewelry box and wrapped them in a smidgen of gift paper. This present looked for all the world like a giftwrapped pellet of chewing gum. That's what Sra. Martinez thought it was. Scornfully calling it a "Cheek-let," she threw the gift back in my lap. "Never do that to a Puerto Rican!" Sra. Martinez shouted at the stunned little Americanito. I slunk back to my desk, put my head in my arms and wept. After I opened the little package to show her what it really was, Mrs. Martinez tried half-heartedly to console me. I'm sure she figured out the real story. Under the circumstances, however, used earrings were little better than fresh chewing gum.

Why couldn't my mother have hidden our tracks better? Why didn't she wrap the gift more artfully, in a little box, say? That wasn't her style. Mom disdained a bourgeois obsession with *appearances*. Also, at the time she was rather sullen. It was clear even to a fourth-grader that my mother was in Puerto Rico under protest. One day she lived in a rambling frame home shaded by maple trees in the cozy town where she'd gone to college and had lots of friends. The next day she was stuck in a barren little cinderblock house beneath a relentless tropical sun, surrounded by neighbors with whom she couldn't even talk. Mom found Puerto Rico's language too exotic, its coffee too strong, its music too loud. "I really dislike it very much," she wrote her cousin Pearl after we'd been in Dos Pinos for a few months, "and would love nothing better than to be back in the U.S."

Five of her family's six members agreed. Unfortunately the sixth was our breadwinner. My father was making twice the salary in Puerto

Rico that he'd made at Penn State. Better yet, he'd joined the island's vaunted Operation Bootstrap. Going from being an underpaid Assistant Professor of Economics to taking part in a cutting-edge economic development program was exhilarating. Dad no longer spent his days drawing supply and demand curves for bored students. Now he helped decide what land should be allocated to coffee bushes, what to sugar cane, to pineapple plants, or groves of citrus. Overnight my father went from writing course syllabi to drafting speeches for Puerto Rico's governor, Luis Mufloz Marin. Far from being the left-wing political pariah he'd been at Penn State, Dad had become a valued participant in a peaceful revolution. The rest of us were keeping him company.

Unlike Dad, who had a job he loved, co-workers he liked, and an island he found intriguing, all Mom had were four children to mother, ones who were as dumbstruck as she was by the contrast of that island to Pennsylvania. Clouds moved faster in Dos Pinos than they did in State College. It rained more often there, more briefly, sometimes on one side of the street but not the other. Sounds were new: the crowing of cocks at dawn, chirping of tree frogs called *coquis, chunk!* of coconuts being split with machetes, and exclamations of a man outside our house who pushed a cart with a block of ice and bottles of brightly colored syrup shouting "*Piragua! Piragua! Hay china! Hay piña! Hay frambuesa!*" For five cents this man—the *piraguero*—would scrape his shaver across the glistening block a few times, dump a mound of shaved ice into a pointed paper cup, convert the mound into an inverted cone with a metal shaper, then pour syrup from one of his bottles over the ice. There was something dramatic about this act—the scritch of shaver on ice, the plop! of ice falling into cup, the drama of its being transformed from a mound into a cone, then brought to life with a few squirts of color—that could never be matched by the antiseptic whir of a shaved ice machine. My favorite syrup was the luscious orange-yellow *crema*.

Other street vendors sold *helado* (a sherbet-like confection, cool, silky, and sweet), *dulce de coco* (macaroon-like coconut candy), and coconut juice sipped directly from the fruit through a straw. The aristocrats of cart peddlers were those who used a pen knife to deftly peel skins from oranges in a continuous ribbon before cutting a hole at the top from which to suck the juice. More mechanized vendors did this with a little hand-cranked machine that quickly peeled a neater strip. They were less impressive than the craftsmen with their pen knives.

A produce peddler regularly pushed his broad wooden cart past

our house. This cart was loaded with a still-life of exotic fruits and vegetable. For those accustomed to the earth tones of apples, pears, and grapes, the bold colors of mangos, papayas, and guavas (there called *guayabas*) was breathtaking. "*Que-ne-pas!*" he'd yell. "*Pla-tanos! Pi-ña! Naran-jas! Man-go! Gua-yabas! Papa-ya! Gui-ne-o!*" The first time we saw this exotic sight, my two brothers and I dashed out and bought several huge bananas. "Look how big the bananas are down here!" we exclaimed as we carried them back indoors. After Mom oohed and ahhed over our haul I peeled one and bit into it. And spit it out. The banana tasted like sawdust held together with glue. It wasn't a banana. It was a plantain, used only for cooking.

I never developed a taste for plantains (except as *tostones*), papayas, or guavas. I did come to love *quenepas*. When their green, leathery skin is peeled off this plum-sized fruit, a slimy yellow-orange pulp surrounding a hard seed slides out. The *quenepa*'s pulp has the consistency of phlegm and color of cantaloupe. This unlikely treat has a subtle flavor somewhat like that of melon. Its slick, chewy texture was like nothing my mouth had ever experienced.

Not just Puerto Rico's fruit but its foliage contrasted with Pennsylvania's elm and maple trees, its holly bushes and dandelions. Soon after we arrived in Dos Pinos a neighbor kneeled to show me how a light tap of his car key caused a fern-like plant to close up its leaves like fingers clutching money. This *mimosa* was just one of many exotic plants to confront our senses. The blossoms on citrus trees and hibiscus bushes put out a rich perfume unlike the more subtle cologne of dogwood and azalea back home.

Other local smells were less pleasing, especially the acrid smell of diesel exhaust being belched by the caravans of buses that trundled down every major road. Two or three boys usually clung to the back of such buses, their bare feet resting precariously on the rear bumper, their fingers gripping a piece of siding. Another form of public transportation, *carros publicos* (public cars) took several passengers at a time to their destination. "*Pisacorre*" was the local slang for this mode of transport, literally "the floor runs," because *publico* drivers accelerated so fast that the floor seemed to take off before the rest of their car could catch up.

Like so many drivers in Puerto Rico, *publico* owners used accelerators and horns more often than gearshifts and brakes. Traffic lights were considered advisory on Puerto Rican roads during the mid-1950s. Beside these roads, men gathered outside small open-air bars drinking

bottles of India or Corona beer as guitars and trumpets blared from the jukeboxes inside. Most of those men had mustaches and shiny pomade in their hair. Some wore *guayaberas,* white jacket-shirts with decorated with strips of lacy ribbon. Should a comely young woman walk by, conversation stopped as the men whistled, clicked their tongues, pursed their lips, and made elaborate comments to—or about—that woman. Mom noted that few of the objects of their attention wore girdles.

Together with Carl Wagner, another *Americano* in Dos Pinos, I joined the ranks of street vendors. Carl and I carried jars of Kool-Aid nestled within ice in buckets to home-building sites. "*Refresco! Refresco!*" we'd take turns shouting. We charged a penny a paper cup. Most of our customers were sweaty construction workers whose high cheekbones reflected their Caribe Indian heritage. "Me fias?" they'd ask with big grins. (Literally, "Will you trust me?", in fact, "Do you sell on credit?")

The American kids in Dos Pinos—half a dozen of them—quickly discovered each other. Some were the children of businessmen taking advantage of tax breaks offered by Operation Bootstrap. A few came from military families. My siblings and I were the only ones who'd come to *La Isla del Encanto* ("The Enchanted Island") because loyalty oaths weren't required by its government, my father's employer.

The presence of a small gang of *Americanos* didn't go unnoticed by neighborhood children. One afternoon when my gringo pals and I were playing in the field behind my house, we saw a swarm across the way grow larger and larger. This swarm proved to be a group of running boys. Their arms were raised. Small objects flew from these arms: rocks. One hit my head.

That night Dos Pinos parents of both nationalities organized a reconciliation meeting. It took place at the home of the Thompsons, a couple whose wife was Puerto Rican, husband American. The kids all sat on the floor, *Americanos* on one side, Puerto Ricans on the other. Their parents sat on chairs behind them. When my turn came to speak, I rose, and struggled for a tactful term to describe our adversaries. Finally I settled on "Boys who speak no English."

That wasn't entirely true. Charlie Thompson—one of the rock throwers—spoke perfectly good English. He just chose not to. A freckled towhead, "Char-lee Tohm-sohn" spoke the language of his

pals: Spanish. When it came to language and all its implications, every American kid in Puerto Rico had to choose. Like Charlie they could try to assimilate, learning Spanish as best they could. Or they could stick to their own kind and resign themselves to being outsiders. A few took the first path and went native. Most stuck together. I tried to have it both ways, learning Spanish and making friends in both camps.

Even those like me who chose to learn the local vernacular found it a challenge. Puerto Rican Spanish is like New York English. It's spoken rapid-fire with lots of swallowed s's and unique terms. Puerto Ricans called oranges *chinas,* bananas *guineos,* and buses *guaguas*. Pennies were *chavos,* homosexuals *patos* (literally "ducks"). Learning this Spanish took longer than I thought it would. One way I tried to speed my assimilation was by speaking English with a Spanish accent to English-speaking Puerto Ricans. I figured they'd understand me better this way, and sense my good will. "How arr ju?" I'd say to our next-door neighbor, Señor Paniagua. "Eet ees a nice day, no?"

Sr. Paniagua was a plump man with a mustache. When a "shirt pocket" radio I ordered from a comic book ad turned out to be a primitive crystal receiver, he helped me get it working. Later Sr. Paniagua broke up a fight I had with Charlie Thompson over baseball cards. I can't picture his wife. Like so many local women Sra. Paniagua chose to wield her considerable clout behind closed doors. My parents found the Paniaguas "difficult."

Except for a handful of Dad's officemates, my mother and father had problems with Puerto Ricans in general. Local manners were not always to their liking. They bemoaned the time-casual "*mañana*" attitude, the midday siesta that made shopping problematic, and the elaborate sense of decorum. It didn't help that neither one learned Spanish. Dad didn't need to. Most of his coworkers spoke English. Mom, as I said, was in Puerto Rico under protest. Learning Spanish would have made her feel like someone who'd been abducted and chose to adopt the ways of her abductors. San Juan Syndrome.

My own Spanish had progressed to the point that I could understand things people said to me on the street. They weren't all of the "*Chinga tu madre!*" variety. One afternoon I walked home from a shoe store, stopping every few steps to admire my new cordovan oxfords. As I did this, an old man standing in a doorway smiled and said, "*Son bueno*." ("They're good.")

Mom seldom had that kind of contact with locals. One of the few Puerto Ricans my mother got to know was our maid, Juanita. Juanita

lived in the *caserío*. Hiring her had been hard on Mom. Having a "servant" conflicted with my mother's egalitarian values. At the same time Mom yearned to be relieved of housework so she'd have more time to write poems, stories, and outlines of novels. Her ambivalence about having household help was resolved by a fellow expat who'd lived in Puerto Rico longer and advised my mother that *not* hiring a maid would be cruel. That hollow gesture, this woman explained, would deprive a local person of a chance to earn a living. Hence Juanita. Juanita was a plump mother of four in her late twenties who introduced our family to *pollo asopao* (chicken stew) and *arróz con habichuelas* (rice and beans), and showed us how to adjust our mosquito netting. Her carpenter husband built us a playhouse. We once visited their apartment in the *caserío*. There we saw several items missing from our home: silverware, scissors, tools. This was a confusing episode. Should we be mad at Juanita or understanding? I wasn't sure, then or now. It was just one more time when the rules of conduct for *Americanos* were confounding.

Many natives would have been happier if *yanquis* like us had just gone home. In her memoir *When I Was Puerto Rican,* Esmeralda Santiago paints a withering portrait of *Americanos* like my father, who advised her villagers to eat more balanced, nutritious meals incorporating foods such as broccoli that were widely unavailable in Puerto Rico. There are few meals more balanced and nutritious than *arróz con habichuelas*. Based on the ubiquitous *sofrito*—a base for many Puerto Rican dishes that combines cilantro, garlic, onions, saffron, recao, and other spices—rice and beans were served separately as a main meal, then mixed and re-heated as a leftover. Bits of pork or ham sometimes enhanced the dish. It's still among my favorites.

I also loved *pastelillos:* flat rounds of dough the size of a flour tortilla that were crimped into semi-circles with a filling of cheese or spiced ground meat, then deep-fried and served hot with big crunchy blisters covering their surface. Nearly as tempting were *papas rellenas,* fried balls of mashed potatoes filled with cheese or spiced meat, and *pollo asopao,* a chicken stew fragrant with cilantro and crowded with olives floating in its broth.

At a café beside the central square in Rio Piedras, Mom and us kids would sometimes buy *hamburguesa,* spiced ground meat patties on chewy, flattened buns. We'd eat our hamburguesas while sitting on stools at the counter, trying to imagine we were back at Rea & Derick's soda fountain in State College. *Hamburguesa* wasn't bad. It just

wasn't hamburger. For actual hamburgers—or better yet, cheeseburgers—we'd visit friends at the Navy base where "real" American food sizzled on the PX griddle. I can still taste soft warm cheese blending with the reddish brown juices of a plump, unseasoned hamburger resting on its pillowy white roll. Cheeseburgers tasted like home.

The home we left behind—"the States"—was always on our minds. We didn't leave the States fully behind, of course. Gene and I continued to subscribe to comic books like *Mad, Panic, The Crypt of Terror, The Vault of Horror.* We still collected baseball cards. At night, when weather conditions permitted, I could sometimes pick up faint, staticy words of English on a radio beside my bed. "Hank Bauer will bat clean-up tonight. . ." Home.

No setting reminded us more clearly that we weren't in Pennsylvania anymore than did the market on Rio Piedras's central square. This market featured row after row of open stalls filled with fruits, vegetables, meats, and sweets. Live chickens squawked in wooden cages. Freshly butchered hogs hung from their snouts on hooks. A muted roar of talk, shouts, trumpets blaring from radios, and dominoes clicking on tabletops filled the air. A gumbo of smells featured cilantro, garlic, guava, and boiling *asopao*. Beside this market, buses waited for passengers. These vehicles idled loudly, spewing exhaust fumes. One was a garishly painted 1930s-era vehicle with no glass enclosing its windows; only pieces of oilcloth that moved up and down like vertical accordions. This *Aguas Buenas* bus took passengers through the mountains between Rio Piedras and the smaller city of Caguas. It was the bus I rode home every day from school when we moved to the hamlet of Jagueyes, high in these mountains.

From the window of our living room we could see miles of hills filled with coffee bushes and African tulip trees. A small plantation of tropical plants—breadfruit, grapefruit, oranges, West Indian cherries, guavas, yams, calabasa, and plantains—grew on the slope below. Stalks of bananas—like ones I'd seen in geography books, but wasn't sure really exist—hung beneath broad green leaves. At night San Juan's lights glowed in the distance.

The closest thing to commerce in Jagueyes was the *colmado,* a little grocery at the end of the road leading to our house. The *colmado*'s double wooden doors opened directly onto the road. This is where the *Aguas Buenas* bus left me off. Before walking home, I'd buy a slice of crunchy baguette-style bread for a penny, or two cents with a smear of margarine, from the *colmado*'s owner, Don Julio. When I broke

my arm trying to leap from our porch to an adjacent swing, our maid, Marisol, said Don Julio could set it for me. Both bones had been broken. My arm hung in the shape of a "Z". As they thumbed through Dr. Spock, my parents thanked Marisol for the suggestion but said they'd rather take me to the hospital. After improvising a cardboard splint (as Spock suggested), that's just what they did, setting off on an excruciating, bumpy ride down the mountain to the Presbyterian Hospital in Rio Piedras where my broken arm was set and encased in plaster.

Why had we moved there? Our new house was nondescript: a small frame structure on a stone foundation set on a hillside. It was hard to get around the hilly surrounding area. Now we were more isolated than ever, inhabiting a lonely, secluded outpost on a secluded, lonely island.

Mom felt doubly marooned in Jagueyes. Not only was she stranded in a strange land whose language she couldn't speak, but as a nondriver she was now stuck on an isolated mountainside far from the closest city. A local trucker once drove her to Rio Piedras. On the way, Mom later told us, the truck driver said he was in love with her. (I'm sure that's not exactly what he said.) Within months after we moved to Jagueyes my mother began to have laughing-crying-shouting episodes in which she'd toss things around the house. The first time this happened I dashed under the covers of my bed, sure I'd caused her to go mad. In time these episodes began to feel routine.

Some new sounds began to compete with the static on my radio. Even across an ocean and a culture, the keening guitars, drums, and 4/4 beat of this sound was electrifying. My ears strained to pick up the beat. Instead of Baltimore Orioles games I now twisted my radio's dial trying to pick up Sonny Til and the Orioles, the Platters, the Drifters, and Frankie Lyman's Teenagers. That struggle symbolized the distance I felt from this musical insurrection. Its headquarters seemed to be Randy's Record Shop in Memphis, Tennessee. I wanted to enlist in Randy's revolution, but had trouble determining its manifesto. I could no longer check the Hit Parade at Murphy's Five and Ten in State College, or see what Rea & Derick's Drug Store had on their juke box. San Juan did have an English-language radio station—WHOA—but WHOA stuck to Perry Como and Patti Page long after Elvis shimmied onto center stage. (Later they would change their tunes.)

Keeping up with Elvis Presley in Puerto Rico was far harder than

following Eddie Fisher in Pennsylvania. Teenaged Americanos did their best. A friend and I started wearing pink and black whenever possible; just like we'd heard Elvis did. In time the look evolved more fully: Levi's with the belt loops cut off, pulled low on hips. T-shirts with sleeves rolled, or button shirt with collar turned up. Black engineer boots, steel taps on the heels. An ever-present comb in one's back pocket.

Getting the hair right was important. This called for following a recipe. Soften two tablespoons of Vaseline jelly between palms of hands. Rub briskly through hair. Mix with water hot enough to melt Vaseline. Comb straight up on sides, forward on top, together at the back. Pull a spit curl down the forehead. Complete with a part from crown of head to neck. Pat lightly. When the Vaseline re-jelled, I was set for the day.

I learned about this hairdo from classmates at the Antilles Consolidated School, where I'd enrolled in seventh grade. Antilles was called "the Navy School" because it was on the Navy base near old San Juan. Its students lived on that base, or at the Army's Fort Buchanan, or Ramey Air Force Base. Some were dependents of U.S. government employees, including substitute teachers like my mother (who'd forsaken her pacifist principles to qualify her children for what seemed like the best education available). Most came from the south. From them I learned to sir and ma'am my elders, slow my speech to a drawl when in a tight spot, and spit decorously through the gap in my front teeth.

The Navy school was filled with Elvis lookalikes and soundalikes. Many were serious students of rhythm 'n' blues. Not rock 'n' roll; R & B. They took pride in listening to the original versions of songs by black artists, not sanitized white covers. Pat Boone's name was mentioned only with a curl of the lip. Perry Como was beneath contempt. So were The Crew Cuts, the Four Aces, and The Four Freshmen. Soon after I enrolled at the Navy school, Billy Silliman—who studied R & B as if preparing for a final exam in ethnomusicology—asked me who sang "Money Honey." When I replied, "Elvis," Silliman sneered. "No, you moron," he said. "Clyde McPhatter sang it first."

With his slick black pompadour, rolled sleeves, raised collar, and hip-hugging Levi's, Silliman was the school trend-setter. A group of Navy School girls formed a Billy Silliman Fan Club. Like him they raised their collars and ducked into the rest room between classes to moisten their bobs and neaten their DA ("duck's ass"). Members of Silliman's fan club affected a swoon when he walked by. I can still

see Billy Silliman standing outside a classroom during an after-school party grinding his hips suggestively to Bo Diddley's thumping guitar blaring from a victrola inside.

Two young women I'd met in a park near our new house in Hato Rey, a suburb of Rio Piedras, invited me to visit them in their apartment. They told me to bring my Elvis Presley records. In their apartment we danced slow and we danced fast. I showed them what I thought was rock 'n' roll (more of a Lindy Hop, actually). "*Americanos no saben como besar*," one told me during a slow dance. ("Americans don't know how to kiss.") From fear that she was right, I pretended those were Spanish words I didn't know. A few days later, when a group of teenage girls passed me on the street, I once again feigned ignorance when—thinking I didn't speak Spanish—one murmured "*chocha*" ("cunt"). They all laughed.

My Spanish had gotten better, but was still limited. At twelve I had the vocabulary of an eight-year-old, with some words like *chocha* thrown in. I could understand the gay guys who hung out in an Hato Rey park when they told me I was "*muy guapo*" ("very cute"). At a basketball court in that park I learned not only a two-handed set shot but lots of new words. (I still know how to say "I fucked up my finger"—"*Me jodi mi dedo!*"—but not "I hurt my finger.") When a young woman passed by, all play would stop as the players vied with each other to say something seductive. "*Ay, amor de mi vida. Te quiero con todas partes de mi cuerpo*," ("Oh, love of my life. I want you with every part of my body.") This patter would be accompanied by low whistles, gasps, and loud air kissing.

A player named Piringo—who was built like Mike Tyson, and had a similar mien—once slipped while running toward the basket and fell hard to the ground. Piringo later returned with a piece of gauze taped to his forehead. He warned me that I'd seemed just a little too amused by his pratfall. Pinching my modest bicep between his thumb and index finger like a cook testing a cucumber, Piringo said that if I weren't such a *flaquito* ("skinny little thing") he'd beat the shit out of me.

Fights and arguments were routine on the basketball court. During one dispute a friend of mine pulled out his penis and held it straight to emphasize his point as he chased another player around the court. On another occasion a guy from a different neighborhood pushed over my bicycle, which was parked beside the court, then looked at me to see what I planned to do about it. Some friends offered me a knife. Seeing

no way to turn down their offer I confronted the bike-pusher with my borrowed knife in hand. Luckily he backed off, didn't call my bluff.

As usual, I had two sets of pals: English-speakers at school, Spanish-speakers in the neighborhood. A trickle of bilingual "Newyoricans" who'd started returning to the island from New York also became friends of mine. Our hangout was a local bar where we played pinball machines by the hour. I'd get "half-packs" of Kents at this bar, or buy single cigarettes for two cents apiece. A middle-aged woman who saw me light a cigarette in my mouth tsk-tsked. "*Ay, mira, tan pequeño, fumando,*" she said. ("Oh, look, so small, smoking.") I liked that. When you're as slight and baby-faced as I was at age twelve, you feel you need all the help you can get to let the world know you're no longer a kid.

I did quit smoking briefly after a soldier I met at a Fort Buchanan dance told me he wished he'd never started. Buchanan was one stop on a circuit followed by teenaged gringos every Saturday night. Puerto Rico's huge armada of buses shuttled us wherever we needed to go, even late at night, for a dime. By bus we'd roam from Buchanan to the Navy base to a couple of American schools outside San Juan and the studios of WHOA in Hato Rey.

WHOA—the island's only English-language radio station—was the gathering place for teenaged Americanos. By now they'd forsaken Peggy Lee and Percy Faith for Elvis Presley and Brenda Lee. WHOA hosted a dance party on Saturday afternoons: a little Americano Bandstand. Mick Jagger had yet to observe that rock 'n' roll was just sex by another name, but we already sensed that. When Sasha Sadowsky leaned back like a calypso dancer, shimmied her shoulders and danced crotch-to-crotch with Mike Hernandez, we knew something was up. Sasha—who smoked, and drank and liked to dance the Dirty Dog—was what would later be called "sexually precocious." Sasha once danced the Dirty Dog with me in my bedroom. One night when Sasha and I walked to the bus stop from a dance at Buchanan I got in a fight with Butch Banion because he called her a slut.

Sasha was best friends with Lisa Green, a bouncy cheerleader from Atlanta whom I coveted but who had her own eye on a *Newyorican* named Wilfredo. Wilfredo had a mustache and a reputation. He'd once slashed Barry Gruen's cheek with a pointed can opener. Barry and he later became pals. Both were classmates of mine at the Commonwealth School, where I enrolled for ninth grade after children of substitute teachers like my mother were no longer permitted to attend

Navy. Wilfredo was more popular than I was. During a bus ride to San Juan we had a conversation about how excluded I felt socially. To my surprise Wilfredo listened carefully and with great sympathy.

Wilfredo's use of a can opener on Barrry Gruen's cheek was an aberration. Most of our conflicts were settled with "comb fights." These consisted of teenage gladiators dueling with plastic combs whose handle had been sharpened. The first one to draw blood (a drop or two) "won." It was more street theater than street fight. Some of us did bring heavy chains to Commonwealth for a rumored brawl with students at a nearby public school. Luckily it didn't come off.

After friends of mine got driver's licenses, we'd cruise around town whistling at girls, or roar off to where we'd heard a fight was going on. At one such fight I watched Charlie Hawkins get beat bloody by Scooter Tasker in a field near Fort Buchanan. After giving up, Charlie told Scooter, "At least I wasn't chicken."

During a dance at Fort Buchanan I wandered over to watch a floor show at the officers' club. A comedian there kept referring to names that were new to me: Milton Berle, Lucille Ball, Sid Caesar, Imogene Coca. Puerto Rico didn't get television until the mid-1950s, and what it got then was in Spanish. A comedian named "Diplo " was popular. So were movies featuring Cantinflas. Even though there wasn't much on television that we wanted to watch, this didn't stop us from buying TV dinners at the new Supermercado Todos in Hato Rey. We ate our little pieces of fried chicken and instant mashed potatoes while straining to catch Diplo's jokes.

Todos supermarket was huge, brightly lit, had meat wrapped in cellophane, and towers of canned goods. It was the antithesis of a small *colmado,* or the market in central Rio Piedras. If we couldn't get back to the States, the States was coming to us. Sometimes I'd stick my nose between the frozen peas and corn in an open freezer at Todos so I could inhale frosty air, then try to remember what it was like to go sledding and throw snowballs.

Something else I did at Todos was buy bottles of Bacardi. There may have been a law against selling liquor to minors in Puerto Rico in 1958, but if there was, it wasn't enforced. At thirteen I started to drink—rum, mostly—always buying my own. *Cuba Libres* were the preferred drinks of boys like me: rum mixed with Coke and a twist of lemon. One day after school a friend and I went to a bar in downtown San Juan where we'd heard hookers hung out. This rumor proved to be accurate. As I played pinball nervously, my Cuba Libre sweating on

the glass, a buxom young woman named Luisa came over to chat. Luisa seemed amused by this *Americanito*. When my pinball game was over she backed me up against the wall beside the machine, put her arm around my neck, and laughingly ground her loins against mine.

Life was spinning pretty freely for me by now. My parents were alarmed by the way I was behaving. They'd always encouraged us to be independent, to follow our own path in life, but this wasn't exactly what they had in mind. My father wrote his mother that my behavior was "bordering at times on the juvenile delinquent." I reached Mom and Dad's limit the day I came home in a black shirt. My parents—usually so tolerant—angrily forbade me to wear it. They were not about to have a "blackshirt" for a son.

I stormed out of the house in protest, and didn't return for several hours. When I did, Mom and Dad were subdued. They sat me down for a talk. My parents said they were quite concerned about me. They were thinking about moving back to the States—not so much to get help for my special-needs sister, the usual reason they give for thinking about leaving Puerto Rico, but because they were so worried about me. They wanted to get me to a safer environment. They also wanted me to see a psychologist. That got my attention. I didn't want to see a psychologist. But I was impressed that they thought I should.

For years I took for granted that my behavior was what drove us back to the mainland. That left me with mixed feelings: happy for any excuse to go back to the States, guilty that it took my acting up as the reason we did so. Later I realized there was more to the story. Dad's position as an American working in Puerto Rico had grown precarious. Puerto Ricans were replacing Americanos in his office. Those like him who were still there didn't feel as welcome as before. If my father's work had been as rewarding as it once was, I doubt that we would have left the enchanted island.

Years later I asked my older brother, Gene, how he felt about our six years in Puerto Rico. "I hated every second of it," Gene said. Unlike Gene, I didn't hate every second of my six years as an *Americano;* just every other second. For decades after it ended, I looked back on our Puerto Rico period with intense ambivalence. I'm grateful that Spanish remains hard-wired into my brain's synapses. If we hadn't moved to Puerto Rico I might never have been introduced to the delights of *arróz con habichuelas, pastelillos, tostones, bacalaito,* and the delectable *quenepas*. Over time my ear had even grown receptive to music that aggravated me when we lived in Puerto Rico, even Tito

Puente's trumpets and conga drums.

But these are the reflections of a grownup. In my spleen Puerto Rico remains a place where I couldn't go sledding, got in fights, and upset my parents. It's not a happy place.

Four decades after my family boarded a Pan Am clipper for New York in 1959, I returned to San Juan by Delta jet with my wife and two sons. During our week's homecoming I saw Puerto Rico through new eyes, and heard it with different ears.

When I thanked an airport clerk for her help, she responded, "*A sus ordenes*," ("At your orders"); so much more graceful and gracious an expression than a curt "No problem."

As we walked to El Morro castle along San Juan's narrow cobblestone streets an old man standing in a second-story balcony shook *maracas* rhythmically and swayed to music playing inside his apartment. Before reaching El Morro we stopped at a *piraguero*'s cart to buy a *piragua*. It cost a dollar. The shaved ice was more gravelly than I remembered, but the *crema* syrup was just as ambrosial. At the castle itself huge parapets and classic turrets felt familiar, but not the many local families who flew kites on the grounds outside.

On our way back I bought a *guiro* at a handicraft store. While I tried scraping the tines of its fork-like tool against the grooves of the gourd, a man in back chimed in on his own instrument. He told us that *guiros* are used only in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic. Another customer—a Puerto Rican woman who'd come from Pennsylvania for her first visit in seven years—said, "*Que chévere que este Americano habla Espanol*." ("How cool that this American speaks Spanish.") *Chévere,* I remembered, is a word unique to Puerto Rico and some nearby countries. It's a cool word.

We rented a car and drove to Jagueyes. Lush green vistas beyond the perilous mountain roads were dramatic, like ones you'd expect to see in Brazil, perhaps, or Costa Rica. Now I understood why we lived on that isolated mountain. I'm sure my father heard about a house for rent in Jagueyes, drove out to have a look, and was sold on the views.

In Hato Rey, my fifteen-year-old son, David, and I got in a basketball game with several local guys on the same court beside Supermercado Todos where Piringo almost pulverized me forty years earlier. The other players were quite accommodating of these two Americanos. One named Vicente told me to tell David (who spoke no Spanish)

that he would give him a hand signal to shoot the ball. Their style of play was little different from the one I remembered—lots of layups and set shots, few jumpers—but their friendliness felt new.

This was the key difference between my adult experience of Puerto Rico and that of my childhood. In middle age Puerto Rico seemed benign, not the ominous place I recalled. It wasn't Puerto Rico that had changed, of course, but me. Looking back I can see how anxious I was during our six years on the island. As a kid I always felt on guard there, never sure exactly what was going on, and whether I might be in danger. Now I felt safe. No longer intent on protecting myself, I could appreciate the actual and literal warmth of the enchanted island.

Before we left Puerto Rico, I wanted to buy a keepsake: an ice shaver like those used to make *piraguas*. An amiable cab driver turned off his meter and drove us around a suburb of San Juan looking for one. Every hardware dealer we asked had lots of friendly advice but no ice shaver. We never did find what we were looking for, but enjoyed trying. After he left us at our hotel, I paid our driver and thanked him for his efforts. "*Era un placer,*" he said.

"It was a pleasure."