

La Oscuridad**By Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo**

Once again, she parked the car across the street, a few houses down. Although there was no reason for anyone to recognize her car, because it was a rental, she was afraid someone would figure out who she was. Although it had been a lifetime, many of the neighbors still lived around. And, of course, he would also recognize her. That is, she was sure he would, but would he? He had to recognize her. How could he not? What would that say about him if he didn't? What would it say about her? But it had been so long. So very long. Yet, she didn't want to take any chances and parked a considerable distance away while still having a pretty good view of the front of the house, the porch, and the front yard. She also had a view of the carport on the side of the house, the side next to Sivi's house. Only Sivi's parents lived there now. And from what she could tell, they were as old and decrepit as he was.

This was the 6th day Marne had parked in that spot. Or was it the 7th? She had lost count. All she knew was that time was running out (the date on her return e-ticket was fast approaching), and yet, all she could do every day was park within visual distance of the house and sit in the car until she couldn't hold her pee any longer and had to drive ridiculously fast to the McDonald's bathroom. From there, she would drive, defeated, to her hotel room, where she would tell herself that the following day she would gather the courage to go talk to him. She would then call her wife Rya to give her the disappointing

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“update” of the day. Marne just wanted to hear her wife say, one more time, and with the patience of a saint, “Maybe tomorrow will be different.” “Yeah, maybe,” Marne would say, defeated and deflated. She needed to find a way to break this nonsensical cycle. Why was this so difficult?

She had managed to see him every day, though. One day, he ran an errand in his car, although he shouldn't really be driving. He drove by her parked car, but she ducked her head on time, and he didn't see her. Another day, he walked to the street corner to get the mail. He looked so small and frail as he slowly made his way to the mailboxes and back. She remembered doing that herself decades ago, bebopping and skipping to and from. But his was a slow, labored walk, the kind that plants every foot squarely on the ground before moving the other. Another day, he watered the plants in the flowerbed in front of the house. And yet another day, he WD-40ed the hinges of the gate leading to the carport. He seemed to be active in spite of his age, which gave Marne some relief.

During those days, looking at the house from the car and (let's call it what it is) stalking him, Marne had taken stock of the neighborhood. It felt familiar and, at first glance, looked the same, but once she began paying attention to the details, she realized that a lot had changed. The colors of the house, for starters. The new paint he had chosen was more tropical, less formal than it had been when she lived there and called it home. More startlingly, he had remodeled the façade, giving the house a different shape and a more contemporary look. The changes made Marne not feel that

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pang of nostalgia she thought she would feel by looking at it. She concluded that this wasn't the house she had lived in over 30 years ago. His and Sivi's parents' house were the nicest-looking houses in the neighborhood. She was glad he took the time to maintain the house and was able to go through the expense of maintaining it. And she was glad Sivi's parents also still cared for their cute little house. But the rest of the neighborhood looked, well, a bit rough now that she was assessing it more closely. Some of the other houses looked dilapidated, like they were sad about something or slowly melting away into oblivion. The neighborhood, more than the house, broke her heart. Marne made a mental note to talk to Sivi about the neighborhood the next time they chatted on Facebook. Although she was now living in San Juan, Sivi visited her parents often and knew what the neighborhood looked like. She was going to be unhappy to learn that Marne had been there all this time without contacting her, though. But that was something to deal with in the future. The now was about him.

Before travelling to spend hours in a hot car staring at the house wanting to get a glance of him, her best friend Tara had asked her what was the purpose of going "home." Such a Puerto Rican thing, to call the island "home" even when the person had lived outside longer than they had lived on the island, and even when they had no intention of returning to live there. Home. Marne always smiled at that reference. For her, home was somewhere else, with her wife and her dogs. But the truth is that Tara had asked an important question. And Marne hadn't had a satisfying answer. Not to Tara, not

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to herself. She just had a feeling. Like this would be her last chance to see him, maybe.

“But why do you want to see him, Marne?” she pressed. “Not sure,” was all she could come up with. “You’ve always said that he made his choice when he didn’t support you all those years ago, and he hurt you so much that you never wanted to see him again,” she said, bewildered. “You walked out and demanded that he never contact you again.”

And it was true. She did and said all that because she was hurt. And all these years later, she was still hurt. So she said, “he didn’t support me, and that was unconscionable coming from someone who had the duty to support anything I did unconditionally.”

Marne saw the hesitation on Tara’s face.

“Unconditionally, Tara,” she pressed.

“I know, sweetie, I know that’s how you feel. It’s just, perhaps it wasn’t a condition but...”

“No, don’t do this,” Marne interrupted. “We’ve been over what happened way too many times. I needed him, and he failed me. Purposefully. It wasn’t that he didn’t know or didn’t know better, or that he forgot. He did not support me on purpose. And that was unforgivable. It’s still unforgivable.”

“So why are you travelling to see him?”

“I don’t know, Tara. I really don’t know.”

And here she was, sitting in a rental after travelling 4,000 miles, looking at the house, that house she had known so well, where he was now, living alone, what was left

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of his life. And maybe that was it. It broke her heart to think he was all alone. She had a strong urge to run to the house, ring the bell, and hug him when he answered. She wanted to talk to him and to tell him that she would never forgive him, but that she loved him. Still. It had been over 30 years, though. They hadn't spoken, seen, or communicated with each other in that time. And she wasn't sure how he would react to her suddenly showing up out of the blue after making such a ruckus, leaving three decades earlier. Because she made sure to make a ruckus. He never talked about her. That much she knew. Nothing like the gossip mill of a small town to learn things you shouldn't. After what he did, that was, perhaps, what bothered her the most. How could he not talk about her? How could he follow her request to the letter and not inquire after her, make sure she was ok? How could he not try to call her every few years (even if she hung up on him)? Send her a postcard now and then (even if she threw it in the trash)? She just couldn't let go of the fact that it seemed to be easy for him to follow her demand not to contact her.

Today, sitting in the car felt different. The sun was out, but not in that suffocating way it sometimes is out in the tropics. Humidity was low, and there was an eerie silence that covered the car and the neighborhood like a cozy blanket. She turned the engine off and rolled the windows down. A gentle breeze entered through one window and out the other, taking her back to her childhood running around the yard at her grandma Asla's house. A set of memories came flooding back like a reel. She, a ridiculously skinny child

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playing with her dad, eating guayabas, guamás, parchas, and chinas from the wild trees, bushes, and vines. She also thought of their summer day trips to Playa Buyé. Hers was a happy childhood, and Marne appreciated that because she knew that happy childhoods were not gifted to everyone. She had plenty of friends who had gone through terrifying ordeals as children. Thus, she understood that she owed both her parents that much.

But her childhood was a long, long time ago. Marne was now a middle-aged woman contemplating life and the fast-approaching path to old age. She had up and left this little corner of the world in the Caribbean three decades ago, trading the warm climate and turquoise beaches year-round for cold, snowy winters and dry, placid summers. Only sporadically did she “look back,” visiting San Juan and her hometown beaches like any other tourist. But she never visited him. Never him. As she is thinking about the contrast between her peaceful house in the Pacific Northwest and this house in the southwest corner of Puerto Rico that had meant so much to her, he came out of the house and proceeded to walk to the mailbox, slow step by slow step.

Looking at the back of his white-haired head, Marne decided to finally leave the car and walk to the entrance of the house. There she sat on the stoop, elbows on her knees, hands clasped in front, waiting for him to walk back. Close to five minutes later, he was coming back, looking at the stack of mail. Mostly junk, from what Marne could gather. Then, he realized that someone was sitting on the stoop of the house. She stood up, crossing her arms in front of her, resting her back against the door. He squinted,

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trying to translate the shape of the person standing in front of him. He was looking at her as people look at the light after being in the dark for a long while, eyes adjusting to the change in brightness. He was looking, unsure of who was in front of him, raising his arm to block the sun, his eyes adjusting to her presence after a 30-year absence. Finally, she saw the recognition in his eyes. Slowly, he pronounced her name as a question. “Marne?” he said, a big smile crossing his face. Her heart melted, and she smiled back, “Hi, Dad.”