

The Watcher**By Keishla Rivera Lopez**

I spent a few summers in Puerto Rico during my childhood. Many sensory feelings arise that transport me back through my memories: the smells of salt water in the air and stewed beans and fried plantains in the kitchens of my family; the taste of the sweetest mangoes and oranges; the freshly made passion fruit juice that my grandfather would peel for us with his farmer's knife; the kiss of the sun constantly grazing my skin, providing a fleeting glow. I remember the abundance of mangoes and oranges on the trees, almost too many for the tree to bear, the fallen fruit rotting on the ground if they weren't picked up in time. I felt like that was wasteful, so I would run to grab easily accessible fruit on the ground. My grandfather would stop me, propping me up on his shoulders instead, so I could pick the fresh fruit, rather than the fallen or low-hanging. He taught me to put the work in for a sweeter reward.

Perhaps the most poignant trip that comes to my memory was during the summer of 2007, when I was thirteen years old. I remember being excited to spend two months in the warmth and beauty of my motherland, my parents' birthplace and home. A place that, in my young adult life, I would call home, too.

Our family spent a couple of weeks preparing for our summer vacation by shopping for new clothes, a pair of sandals, and a pair of sneakers for each child. There were four of us. So, my parents had to dress eight feet with shoes that were tough

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enough to last in the monte, Puerto Rico's mountainous terrain, and hopefully through the school year. In actuality, I was excited to go shopping because this was the one time of the year when we were able to get some outfits and shoes that looked new enough for the beginning of the school year. My younger self was jealous that my mom would buy clothes for cousins that I didn't remember meeting. I know it seems selfish, but as a kid who lived in cramped apartments with few luxuries, seeing shirts, blouses, or skirts that could've been mine stung. We went summers without air conditioning and lived in shitty apartments where landlords refused to turn the heat on for winter. I experienced my fair share of hardships and wondered why do cousins that I met a handful of times deserve what I would miss during the school year? There were plenty of no's in supermarkets for expensive ice cream, clothes, and toys during ordinary days of the year, or simply anything that could be deemed "un lujo."

"Why are we buying gifts for people when it isn't Christmas?"

"Because we're luckier than a lot of people and we can't show up empty-handed."

My mother would say this with a look that told me to shut my mouth.

I didn't think we were lucky. I remember one year in middle school when I was mocked for wearing knock-off sneakers my dad bought for me at the flea market. Later, in high school, I lied to teachers that I 'forgot' about homework assignments because I didn't want my friends to know we didn't have internet at home, or I didn't have my own computer. Because then they'd know we were poor. I seemed irresponsible, though I

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stayed in the school's library as long as I could after school and during my lunch, trying to finish homework assignments. The absence of the internet made me feel like a loser because I was constantly unaware of what was trendy or cool. But in that moment, I didn't say anything else because I didn't want my mom to think I was being malcriada.

“Ok, Mami.”

Those were the only words that followed a scolding stare or mini lecture because I knew my mom was right. Though at the tender age of thirteen, I didn't know why. My mom sacrificed everything for her children and fit the archetypal role of the sacrificial mother who would forego food if that meant her children could have a bit more to fill their bellies. She stood up to my father for us when he wanted to discipline us with a sandal, a belt, or his words. My father grew up without his mother and sort of missed half of his parenting – the half that showed empathy, tenderness, and love – the half that would have balanced his childhood and made up for his abusive father.

The air in Puerto Rican campos was fresher and lighter than in the metropolitan area of San Juan. Life was more relaxed here. There was no need to rush or be productive and tick off boxes on a to-do list like americanos. Although there was a hint of manure in the air – from the cows, horses, and chickens that were bred on the farms – I loved the way the air smelled. As if it just rained. And I loved it. I know it rains everywhere, but this was a scent only the Caribbean could produce.

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I don't know why, but every time we flew to Puerto Rico, we took a late flight and arrived around two or three a.m. During our drives past the metropolitan heartbeat of the island onto the main highway that led us into the mountainous interior, my siblings and I were petrified of the descending darkness. The farther away we were from San Juan, the darker the roads were – it was almost impossible to see. I always feared something would jump out of the pencil-thin roads, which were lined with fruit trees and long, thick leaves in various shades of green. I would lean against one of my siblings and rely on the car's sharp turns on the zig-zag roads to rock me to sleep.

Upon arriving at my abuelos' house, we were greeted by family. Folks stayed up past their early campo-driven bedtimes to welcome us. There was always warm pan sobao and fresh donuts from a local bakery, and Abuela made café con leche. This tradition felt like a homecoming. Like my heart and body were finally home. It was a different feeling than being in the states. For once, I felt like I could take a deep breath and exhale. There was no limit to how Puerto Rican I could be; I wasn't being watched or corrected. I just was. I felt so free! It was refreshing to speak Spanish without it being corrected by someone who felt they were an authority figure on language. I could be loud. We weren't in the city anymore and didn't have to worry about being too rowdy for the neighbors next door or upstairs. We didn't want to feed into stereotypes about Latinos. But I never understood that because the way we express ourselves demonstrates our emotions and allows us to *feel* and celebrate blessings in our lives.

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Gringos wanted to control our behavior and regulate our flavor. We were pots of sancocho simmering about to burst and overflow, and *they* were constantly lowering down our flame. If it were up to them, the fire would never burn.

My abuelos' house was a concrete one-level home that changed color every time we visited. It was as if the house had its own identity. The last time I was here it was lime green, and yet it managed to stand out from both the unruly plants and overgrown trees, bleeding monochromatic green around the house, separating it amongst the other homes. On the left side of the house, there was a pink-tiled patio. Abuela cleaned it with a bucket filled with water, Fabuloso, and bleach every morning. The patio led to another entrance to the house, straight into the kitchen, the heartbeat of the house.

I remember eagerly running up the hill across the thin road to my aunt's house to greet my cousins with my mother and sister while my brother and father stayed behind in the kitchen for a midnight snack. Upon entering the house, my aunt welcomed me to sleep at her house during this vacation and motioned for my suitcase. My mom interrupted us before I could accept.

"Gracias, hermana. But she'll stay with me at Mami's house. The older ones can't wait to get away from me, but this one... she can't fall asleep without me," my mother lied and grabbed my bag with a firm grip.

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“No entiendo. She prefers to be with her cousins and sister, like a big sleepover.”

My tía advocated for me but failed to sway my mother. As we made our way down the hill, my mother gave me the do-not-talk-back-to-me look, and I didn't dare refute her.

I wouldn't understand my mother's concern and care for me until I was asleep in Abuela's room, sharing a bed with her and Mami, and a loud scream awoke us. This wasn't a city, so any sound resonated thrice as loud, as if soundwaves bounced off the mountains. My mother and Abuela moved fast out of bed and forbade me from following them out of the room. When they left, they closed the door behind them. I noticed the light crawling into Abuela's room from under the door. At this moment, the sounds of voices made their way into the dark room. I heard my brother, parents, and grandparents fussing about the night's developments. I was the only one who was being forced to stay in bed, the only one withheld from information. I was angry that my brother was allowed to see what was happening while I was locked away. I felt like a doll whose entire purpose depended on others. I had to be quiet, pretty, and could only participate in 'the fun' when allowed. It felt as if I could be picked up and plopped on a shelf at any given moment.

I peered from the odd-shaped metal window to obtain information for myself. My tía and my sister were standing outside the front door. They looked so much smaller from my vantage point. I suspected her daughters were asleep because they weren't outside. When my sister noticed my mother on the road, she ran down the hill into my

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mother's arms, like a reconciliation scene out of a movie. It wasn't until the light from my abuelos' front door showed on her face that I realized tears cascaded from her brown eyes and cleansed her porcelain skin.

While the adults and my brother murmured in the living room, I tried to decipher their words by placing my ear to the wall, hoping to know what occurred outside of this room. These concrete walls were made durable to withstand storms, but proved unreliable in my endeavor. As I crawled back into bed, admitting defeat, I realized I was angry for being kept out of the loop. This wasn't the only time I've been left out of the room where important conversations were taking place. As I pondered overcoming exclusion, my sister entered with two pieces of toasted pan sobao y mantequilla, a Puerto Rican treat.

"What happened out there?" I asked excitedly while reaching for a piece of bread.

"I don't want to talk about it," she sighed. The tears that once fell from her eyes were now dried streaks on her face. Her nose was runny, and she had trouble developing a relaxed breathing pattern. I didn't think I had anything important to say, so I held her hand in mine to say the words I couldn't. I hoped my hands told her *I'm here for you*. A few minutes passed, and she started whimpering. I squeezed her hand tighter and watched her cry and eat her bread.

"All I'm saying is Mami was right to make you sleep here," she said, breaking the silence. "A guy knocked on my window and tried to enter the bedroom I was staying in!"

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“What? No... could it have been a dream? Did you tell Tía?”

“I did. And she told me there was nothing to worry about. Apparently, a guy named El Velón visits from time to time. It’s super weird cause she says he’s going to come inside and get her and she’s not afraid. She thinks it’s just a secret admirer. She didn’t believe me when I told her I saw the shadow of a machete.”

“Isn’t that the person everyone says comes out at night if you don’t do your chores or do bad in school? I thought it was just a story.”

“No, he’s real! I saw him! Besides, Abuelo and Papi are outside right now trying to catch him. That’s why you’re not allowed to leave the room. None of the girls are supposed to be seen.”

Throughout the entire trip, I made sure I wasn’t outside alone after dark. When I went to bed, I didn’t ask God for new dresses or shoes. Instead, I prayed God would never let me or my sister be caught by El Velón.

I make my way to the subway after leaving my office in midtown, the place where young professionals and the aura of hustle and bustle touch you in a manner that is less harsh than Wall Street. I’m desperate to get back to my apartment and finish packing for my trip back to Puerto Rico, wondering how it will be after all this time, almost a decade. I’m a different person now, a young woman, not the naive little girl I once was. I navigate the sea of people like a maze and finally make it to the A train. I spot an open seat and

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grab it, a Manhattan miracle, and I pull out my phone, typing reminders to buy small gifts for my family, nothing grand just tokens of appreciation that won't compromise too much of my limited space in my carry-on bag, to stop at the bank, and to pack a dog bag for Benny, my black lab that I rescued when I first moved here. "I have become my mother," I think to myself, and I smile. I finally understand that these gestures are actually about kindness and generosity. To give more than you receive, and, in turn, you nourish your soul.

I see a shadow on my phone screen, and I sense someone is too close for comfort, which happens often on the train, but it feels like I'm being watched. I look up from my phone and quickly glance at the guy next to me. He's dressed in all black, propped up against the handrail, asleep. He's harmless. I have a sense of relief and feel like I've built up this irrational fear in my mind. I'm about to absentmindedly scroll through my social media feed when I look across from me and notice there is a man looking at me. I can't tell if I should be concerned or if it is simply a coincidence. I decide I won't be alarmed, and I get up from my seat, grabbing my brown leather tote.

I notice the man watching me is getting up, too. Can this be another coincidence? This time, I know better than to brush it off, and I'm cautious. I finger through the contents of my bag and grab my pepper spray, which I sneak into my jacket pocket. I hold it in my fist as I exit the subway, ready to protect myself if anything should happen on my journey home. Ever since I was a little girl, I always felt like I was in danger even

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if I wasn't. I blame it on being raised with tales of needing safety from predatory, lurking men as the monsters of this world, instead of the big bad wolf or evil stepmother tropes of fairy tales. But this fear you can't really shake. It activates the survival instincts in you, and the panic forces you into decision-making mode. What will it be: fight, flight, or freeze? Without much contemplation, I refuse to be like a baby deer in headlights, to feel like prey. I choose fight.

These five blocks feel longer than usual, and I turn my head to look over my shoulder as I feign looking at the color of the traffic light to cross the street. That man is nowhere in sight, and I'm surrounded by a crowd of strangers, mindlessly going home or meeting friends for after-work drinks. No one is paying attention to me. I keep reminding myself of this, convincing myself that no one is following me. I let go of the pepper spray in my pocket and the clenched feeling in my body. I finally feel safe. Is this the female cortisol tax? To be constantly stressed and feeling like one can barely make it home? My parents were worried when I said I'd be moving to New York City as a single woman. My boyfriend and I parted ways after college, and I knew my mom would have felt better if I had come here with him. I kinda liked that the city was crowded, and people were always around because no one would do something heinous with so many witnesses around. It's kind of morbid, but I like to be realistic. Logic provides a calming sense of relief. I'm a fighter after all.

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I finally arrive at my small, but cozy, studio apartment. It has become a sanctuary, a quiet place to write. I don't get to write what I want, yet, but I'm hoping I get a chance with the right assignment; something with substance that will demonstrate to my editor that I have what it takes to get out of the "how-to" column and "listicles" of silly quick reads, the kind meant for this new generation with short attention spans. I want to write something worthwhile, something that is meaningful and can change someone's perspective. It doesn't need to be the front page, but I want to be proud of the piece. I know at twenty-eight years old, there is plenty of time to accomplish this, but work would go smoother if I enjoyed what I was writing.

I set my alarm, an hour earlier than usual, to drop off my dog at the sitter and run a couple of errands before I head to JFK. My excitement will probably get me up before then, as I have flight jitters and am anxious to return home. I don't know what to expect, and though that is usually unnerving, it also feels electrifying.

This is the first time I return to my abuelos' house alone. There is no one here to hold my hand or have conversations with me in English. Abuelo is working on the farm and is too far away. No one arrives with pan sobao, café con leche, or pastries from the bakery. There is no homecoming celebration. Everything is different, and I suddenly realize Abuela was probably the one behind that tradition, and it might be too painful to continue it. Upon arriving, I see that the physicality of this place is unchanged – the air

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smells the same, the roads are tiny, and it is extremely quiet- as if this mountain town is still or frozen. I felt like I was on a movie set waiting for the star to enter the scene and say her lines. Is that me? Am I the one who disrupts the peace? A rooster *cock-a-doodle-doo's* and grounds me. I'm reminded it's not all about me. The other farm animals join in and sing a campo song. I inhale. "It feels good to be here," I think, and let out a long exhale.

The house is now painted white with navy blue trimmed windows. Ever since Abuela died, the house lacked color. The house feels empty and no longer smells of stewed beans or coffee. I don't have to go inside to know Abuela's room no longer smells of powder. Every sensory remnant of hers is now gone. This house is the only archive that imprints her life, reminding us that people make a place. I think about legacy and how four concrete walls house the memories and livelihoods of an entire family. Will my family always belong to this house? Is my abuela's spirit stored here?

I hate the thought of an empty kitchen or being in Abuela's room without her, so I walk up the hill towards my aunt's house. I drag my body upwards, feeling like I'm missing someone, a sibling or my mother. How could I be at our family's home without them? I kinda gather the feeling that I'm not supposed to be there. I inhale a deep breath of mountain air and ignore the feeling fluttering in my stomach. I force my feet to move, one in front of the other, until I reach the front door.

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I wake up feeling displaced. I've never slept in this room before, and I'm dumbfounded. I pull the striped pale yellow and white sheets from my body and notice my belongings have been meticulously arranged on the mahogany dresser. Everything in this room, like abuela's, has an antique quality to it. I can't believe I slept in this room. I've spent my life haunted by the image of my sister running down the hill, wondering what her eyes really saw, and found myself in the exact place that haunted her as a young girl.

"Are you up?" I hear my Tía call out. "I'm heading to work soon and made you breakfast."

Tía and I didn't talk much last night. Here, bedtime is between seven and eight, so my arrival really ruptured my aunt's routine. Tía and I briefly talked about my job as an editor and contributing writer to an established magazine, and her part-time work as the assistant manager at a local supermarket. She's old enough to retire but prefers to keep herself busy. I tell her I enjoy the flexibility in my schedule and being paid to write stories.

"I'm coming," I yell. I glance at my cellphone and squint my eyes to make out the time. It is eight-thirty in the morning, and if I were at home, I would still be asleep.

"You Americanos sleep all morning. Your coffee is getting cold," she joked.

I walk over to the kitchen hand over my eyes, blocking the sun. All of the windows and the front door are open. The sun feels warm.

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“Tía, it is still early,” I grunt.

“Early? I’ve fed the animals, watered the plants, made breakfast for you and abuelo,” she says with puckered lips. She applies a red Revlon lipstick without a mirror, as if she’s memorized all the curves and dips in her face.

“Okay, Tía. That’s the way it is over here. Over there, some people sleep until nine-thirty am, and others sleep till noon. Depending on your job, you can have a lazy morning. I, for one, start my day slow with a cup of coffee.” I grab the handle of a white mug decorated with pink roses on the rim and take a sip.

“Uh-uh. I refuse to accept you, a professional, young lady, will waste her day sleeping in. When you get married, you won’t be able to get away with that. You’ll learn to get your housework done in the morning and then go to work.

“Hmm,” I thought about my response. “If I do everything, then what will my husband do?”

“Well, he’ll work.”

“But I work, too. So how does this make sense?” Tía’s eyebrows furrowed and exposed her confusion. She didn’t have a good explanation.

“Well, I don’t know. It’s like life rules nena. And we live by them. Eat up. You’re too skinny. There’s plenty on the stove, so don’t be shy.” She kisses my forehead, grabs her car keys and pocketbook, and walks out the front door.

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“I don’t have to accept that,” I say in between mouthfuls of scrambled eggs and toasted, sliced white bread with butter, but she’s already gone.

After I lace my sneakers, I jog along the thin roads, forced to scrape my arm along hanging branches due to the lack of sidewalks. These roads aren’t meant to be jogged or walked. I thought about renting apartments in New York City. People are extremely concerned with the walkability score, which basically determines how easy it is to walk in a certain neighborhood while also considering how close you are to shops, places of care, and entertainment. Mami’s hometown would get a zero.

I end my run early and walk towards the white and navy house. I avoid going inside because I am not ready to confront the last remains of my grandmother. Instead, I skip to the back and walk beyond the area where the horses, cows, and chickens are kept. As a little girl, I was never allowed to explore the untamed and overgrown fields. I’m wearing black and white Nike nylon shorts and a black Temple University t-shirt. My arms and legs are exposed, unfit for this hike. I ignore the signs that I shouldn’t be walking back here and admire the enormity of it. All of this is my family’s. Birds of tropical colors fly over me. There are many banana, mango, orange, and plantain trees. I lower my head and notice passion fruit bushes in the distance, in amazement at the bounty provided by the land. This way of life is unimaginable to me in New York; it is a luxury.

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I continue walking on a makeshift trail, unaware of how much time has passed. Tía calls me. She informs me that it is almost dinner time. I sense apprehension in her voice and try to calm her by telling her I'm headed home immediately and cannot believe the word 'home' escaped my mouth. Is home a feeling? Is it a sense of connectedness and belonging within a space? My relaxation is stifled by an eerie sound of brushing against bushes. I blink and try to see what creature is making that noise— is it an animal or a person? I hope it's a squirrel, and as soon as that thought comes to mind, I feel puzzled trying to remember if they exist in the campos of Puerto Rico. I hope it isn't a snake or an unrecognizable man, two of my great fears. I unbuckle my Lululemon waist pack— searching for my pepper spray or anything that could be useful. The contents inside my pack, my iPhone, a compact hand sanitizer, Burt's Bees lip balm, and a granola bar, are useless. I hear the noise again, closer. It could be a farmer employed by my grandfather, or worse, El Velón. Completely unprepared, I follow my gut instincts. I open my GPS to orient myself and make my way back.

I spent the entire day walking in the spaces that were once home to my mother. I feel close to her and make a mental note to call her as soon as I make my way back, wanting to get more of her story of growing up here. It takes me a while to retrace my footsteps, and the evening sky has developed into a mixture of blue and pink, a candied sky. I take my final steps up the hill towards my aunt's house and am greeted by the scent of stewed beans and fried chicken cooking on the stove.

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“Hello there. You look like you had a long day,” Tía greets me with a hug.

“Hi,” I embrace her. “I didn’t realize I was so far out back. It took me a while to retrace my steps, and I have dirt all over my legs.”

“You do look a mess. You know, a young lady isn’t supposed to be dressed in tiny shorts, especially on the farm. There are men that work out there.”

“Tía, this is what I wear back home. These are exercise clothes! Besides, I do not dress thinking of strange men in public,” I argue calmly.

“You are not in New York. These mountains hide danger. It gets dark really fast, and then you can’t see who is nearby. What if I didn’t call out to you to get back? Who knows what kind of danger you’d be in right now? Oh God... I can’t even think about it.”

“I understand you’re worried about me, Tía. And I love you for that. But I’m not a little girl anymore. I have pepper spray. I can defend myself.”

“Is pepper spray a match for a machete?”

“What?”

“Never mind what I said. Go wash up and have dinner.”

“No, Tía. Please finish what you were saying,” I pleaded.

“I don’t know if I should. I don’t want to worry you,” she said firmly.

I waited and tried to soften her up by complimenting her food. This was easy since she was easily one of my favorite cooks in the family. We laughed a little and

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talked about our pets and her life alone in this house. I offered to clean up and make our post-dinner coffee and asked for more information while I avoided her eyes.

“I guess you won’t let this go, and you’re right, you’re not a little girl anymore. I’m not sure you remember when your sister slept here one night and ran away scared...”

“Yes, I remember,” I interrupted. I was enthusiastic to learn the truth about this night. “She said she saw something, but you didn’t believe her.”

“Well, it turns out your sister was right. We only lied because... that was something your mother and I did to protect you girls,” Tía sighed. She scrunched her face trying to find the words that I needed to hear my entire life. “There was a man. You remember El Velón, right? Well, he’s kinda obsessed with me. Maybe in love. I don’t know. When I was married, my husband scared him off. He returned shortly after my divorce. He comes at night to the back door and says he wants me. I’ve never really seen his face, but I’ve seen his shadow in the back.”

“But Tía, aren't you scared of him? That’s not normal for a guy to come to a woman’s house all the time. Is it true he carries a machete?”

“He does, but I carry a machete, too! He will not get into this house. The last time he was here, your abuelo scared him away.”

“I can’t believe he’s real. I thought this was a made-up monster.”

“Oh, he is a monster. There have been stories gathered over the years. The police told us that he’s raped and killed women, but he can’t be caught. He uses the dark night

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sky, and unlit mountainous towns, and the forest to his advantage. He's gone by the time the police arrive. One time, he organized a car to pick him up and drive away from one scene. I just can't believe he hasn't died yet. That's what I'm waiting for."

"No." I scratched my head and dropped my washcloth. "I can't believe everyone just lets him get away. I can't believe he's real. He's literally watching young girls and women and hurting them. Why isn't this handled more seriously? Why isn't there a massive search? Girls just have to deal with this serial predator. And you all talk about it as a joke?" I caught my breath, but the worry lived in my eyes.

"Honey, I didn't want to worry you. We're fine. Nothing can happen to you while I'm here. But this is why I tell you to stay home and dress appropriately."

"Tía, do you understand that this man's behavior has nothing to do with me and my clothes? He is violent, and the problem lies with him and his actions, not mine. I shouldn't have to stop living my life because a psychotic man is normalized in this town." I was angry and saddened. I thought of all the girls who lost so much because of this man, of the families broken because of his violence. I can't believe the entire family lied to us and made my sister feel like a fool as a form of pseudo-protection. She deserves to know that what she witnessed is not a fallacy. I couldn't express this in words, so I said all I could muster, "This is not okay."

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“That’s the way it is,” Tía said as she grabbed the pot of steamed milk from the stove and poured the milk and coffee into two mugs. She handed me my cup and held my other hand. “I’m sorry, but it’s the truth.”

“And I refuse to accept that truth.” I excused myself from the table and grabbed my cellphone. I thought about changing the world with this newfound information. Do I try my hand at investigative journalism and write a piece for work? I know withholding information is harmful, and knowledge provides, at the very least, a modicum of power. There was someone who needed to know before I told the world. My sister deserved to know the truth, her truth. I dialed my sister’s phone number and anxiously awaited as the dial tone sounded in my earpiece.

“Hello, what’s up? How’s the trip?” she asked.

“It’s pretty unexpected. There’s something you need to know.”

It angered me that this ‘situation’ was mishandled due to everyone’s acceptance that *some* men act this way. I learned about the truths of this story when I was woman *enough* to understand. I guess a young child can only know she’s in danger from the everyday threats to all kids – being taken away from their families. But I wasn’t allowed to know of the dangers that only applied to me, my sister, and my girl cousins. We weren’t safe because our bodies were deemed prizes to claim and conquer. What does it mean to be robbed of knowledge that could protect you or save another woman?

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The most terrifying thing about this story is that the threat of *The Watcher* still exists. He would be mentioned in a myriad of conversations as a passing anecdote: “Did you hear what happened to so-and-so the other day?” and a disturbing story where the lines of fiction and nonfiction were blurred. The Watcher’s perpetuity in everyday conversation remains a ghostly reminder that the past still lingers and haunts us, no matter if we allow it.

In my Uber ride to the airport, I hear about a man of similar antics who goes by a different name– the space changes, but the crime does not. Various derivatives have taken shape throughout the entire island, which has descended into an epidemic of gender-based violence. In this moment of anger, I feel an epiphanic lightbulb moment, and I realize I have the story I’ve been wanting to write. It is definitely not my beat at the magazine, but I’m sure my editor can find somewhere for it to belong. Either way, I feel compelled to write it. As I wait for the plane to take off the runway, I remind myself I’m a fighter. I open my laptop and write the first few sentences of this story.

I grew up listening to stories about ghosts and monsters, like El Cuco or El Chupa Cabra, that would scare me enough to obey my parents, my tías, and tíos. These monsters would hide under your bed, your closet, or camouflage with the dark. I don’t think any of those creatures scared me as much as El Velón. No matter how many times I heard this name when I was younger, it never dawned on me to translate it into English or figure out its

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meaning. I was twenty-five years old when I finally realized that El Velón was Spanish for “The Watcher.” This means as a young girl, I was trained to be scared of a man who watched me. This story was important. It is important. This man was no longer a folkloric tale or a jíbaro story to discipline my siblings, my cousins, or me. This wasn’t a myth or legend. This shit was real. And no one did anything about it.