

I Am Puerto Rican

by Yelena Rivera

I spent my last Sunday in Puerto Rico kayaking with my nature loving pals. That night while packing, tired and with my hands cramped in a rowing position I had a smile on my face. I could still taste the salt, see the thousand shades of ocean blues and greens, feel the mangroves touching my skin, and the caress of our trade winds. I had only 6 days left in the place I've had called home since my childhood and did everything possible to ignore the dull pain that grew inside my chest.

I was about to pull up my roots and fly them to a city where I had only but a job waiting for me. I had looked before for work in other countries thirsty for new experiences and adventures. Those didn't come through. Now I had no choice but to move to Atlanta, Georgia because the economic crisis of my motherland had finally reached me.

I said goodbye to Puerto Rico during my kayaking trip. I said hasta luego (till later) to family and friends, at lunch, at dinner, at work, while packing, while sending boxes by mail. We didn't stand still to think about the fact that we didn't know when or if we would see each other again. There was no time to spare. Friday, I worked till 6pm. I was a contractor and I

didn't have the luxury of even taking a day off. With still packing to do I could only do a quick dinner with my dear friend Zoila and her fiancé. We hugged, she cried, we hugged again. I couldn't cry.

I packed my last bag one hour before heading to the airport. It was held with masking tape and looked like the bundle a homeless person would prepare. Ivelisse, my superwoman friend, helped me to tidy up the apartment I was leaving behind and gave me a ride to the airport. No time to talk, to have lunch, to cry or to start missing each other. But I was okay. My lungs were still filled with the sweet salty humid air of my beloved Island. Soon enough I was on my way. The sandy borders, the flirtatious palm trees, the lush green mountains, vanished from my view. And the turquoise waters which at some point changed into navy blues stopped to a halt when I reached my destination. But, although I had a window seat I was not aware of any of this, I was so tired that I had fallen soundly asleep.

I arrived at my new Atlanta apartment the 1st of April of 2014 at 5pm. This, after landing in Jacksonville, staying a couple of nights at my mother's house in Savannah and driving from there to here. Exactly seven days before I would start working at Georgia Tech. When I opened the door, it hit me. The air was dry and cold, the empty sterile space and the parking deck view

screamed "You're not in Puerto Rico anymore". My mother, who was happy to have me closer to her was hurt by the look on my face. I hated what I saw, I couldn't ignore anymore the pain in my chest. I felt like a knife was stabbing me from the inside out. I wanted to run. But to where? I wanted to go back to Puerto Rico. But without a job or money, how, and to what?

I was trapped. Finally, the tears started to flow. I cried walking to the supermarket. I sobbed trying to find a place to eat. I cried, wept, bawled, while walking up and down the street, tired but with the energy that desperation and a broken heart provides. I cried till I fell asleep on the carpeted floor. My mother did her best to make me feel better. She kept saying, "Hija, I know you'll make it here. You've been through a lot worse!" But now even the worse seemed better in Puerto Rico. I wanted to hug my friends or walk to the ocean to find some peace. I could not. I could not.

Three years later I've made a couple of new friends and one of them is of Puerto Rican descent. She was the first person to after 2 years in Atlanta invite me to their home. Here, I've spent holidays alone at my apartment, in Puerto Rico I always had a friend's house to go to. Here, I eat my hearty lunch alone at my office. Back home I used to have lunch with my chatty coworkers and the breakroom would smell of spices and the menu

would always include rice and beans. There I would greet everyone with a hug and a kiss. I'm still learning how to greet people here. There I was Puerto Rican and white, here people and institutions confuse race with ethnicity and ethnicity with native tongue and place of origin. Yes, I am both an American citizen and a citizen of the Americas by birth. There, I used the last names of both my father and mother, Rivera Vale, here to avoid confusion I must use just one.

I've gone back home during the holidays and my trips fill my uprooted heart with enough joy to keep my homesickness at bay.

About two years ago, I went to a conference in New Orleans. At the hotel, I needed some toiletries and found two ladies cleaning a nearby room. I asked for soap. The lady with a thick southern accent seemed to not understand me, which has happened here before, and the other one with a different type of accent even less. I address the latter in Spanish and she understood. I said "Yo soy de Puerto Rico", she said "Y yo de Nicaragua". She told me the story on how she had recently spent thousands of dollars bringing her teen daughter to the United States because she feared for her life. She told me how most of the money she makes from her 2 jobs goes to pay the man who loaned her the cash for her daughter's "trip" and the rest, of course, goes to her 4 children. Yes, because besides the girl, she has 3 sons

still in Nicaragua who she hasn't seen in years. She asked me, "Do you like it here?" I told her, "I miss my Island." She told me she missed her village, her family and friends and that one day she would have the money to return. When I went back to my room I cried because I knew her pain... I have felt it before. I managed to dry my tears when I found solace in thinking that someday I would be able to tell our story.