

## Historical Notes

Puerto Rico is made of volcanic rock. It is located between the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, on the boundary of the Caribbean and North American plates, and at one of the three points of the Devil's Triangle, also known as the Bermuda Triangle, a setting for inexplicable shipwrecks and airplane crashes.

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Borikén is Puerto Rico's Arawak name, used by the Taíno people who settled on the island between the 7th and 11th centuries.

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Before Western science confirmed it, the Taínos knew that hurricanes had eyes. Their *cemies*, or ceramic icons, featured faces with arms spiraling in opposite directions.

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They planted yuca and yautía. Root crops could resist strong winds.

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The Caribs of the Lesser Antilles factored in hurricane season, the worst of which is over by October, when planning their raids of Borikén. When Ursa Minor, “the canoe of the heron,” appeared in the night sky after the summer solstice, this was their signal to begin preparing for war, which usually happened between late September and December.

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Bartolomé de las Casas was a 16th-century Spanish priest who witnessed the first wave of genocides in the New [Old] World. In 1542, he wrote *A Brief*

*Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, in which he deemed the Caribbean Islands “pitiful,” their inhabitants “humble,” “clean,” and “docile.” In a moment of poetic empathy, he likened the Spanish conquerors’ behavior to that of “ravening wild beasts, wolves, tigers, or lions that had been starved for many days.” This was meant to convince Prince Philip II of Spain to put a stop to the carnage perpetrated by their countrymen, who, after arriving in 1492, defiled San Juan (one of Puerto Rico’s early names) and more than 30 other islands. De las Casas estimated that by the 1520s, 2,100 leagues of land were uninhabited.

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In the name of Catholicism, the Spanish pillaged native lands and raped their people. They stabbed, dismembered, and cut Taínos to pieces “as if dealing with sheep in the slaughterhouse.” They made bets to see who could split a man in two with the stroke of a pike. They took infants from their mothers and threw them in the rivers. In the memory of their Redeemer and his 12 apostles, they hanged their victims in gallows and burned them alive.

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To restore the island’s population, de las Casas suggested importing slaves from Africa, a decision he later regretted.

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Puerto Rico went on to become an important port for the Spanish Empire, but remained scarcely populated due to the lure of the more prosperous territories in South America.

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In the 1800s, when the rest of the Americas were freeing themselves from Spain, Puerto Rico and Cuba remained colonized. In 1897, the liberal Spanish government agreed to the Charters of Autonomy of Cuba and

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Puerto Rico, which allowed the islands to govern themselves as overseas provinces of the Empire.

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On July 25, 1898, U.S. soldiers led by General Nelson Appleton Miles invaded Puerto Rico through the Guánica Bay.

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We have been U.S. citizens without voting representatives since 1917.

## Pedro/Buelo

Hurricane San Felipe II  
Caguas  
September 13, 1928

When you are born a jíbaro  
into a heap of tobacco leaves  
three months after the wind  
takes down the family farmhouse  
you look for a roof at the bottom of a glass  
for the rest of your life.  
You walk to school with no shoes on  
and a cigarette in your mouth.  
You don't pray; you raise yourself better  
than your parents did.  
And because the worst has already happened  
at a hundred miles an hour,  
you look people in the eye  
and tell them the truth.  
You enlist in a stranger's army  
to help feed your brothers,  
and play the same game of war for a decade  
and never complain.  
You plant aloe and grapefruit and mango  
to feed your wife  
with the same macheted hand  
you were dealt.

You punch in and out in the same brown suit  
every day  
to feed your daughter  
before cocktail hour,  
before feeding yourself.  
You kill a rabid dog  
with a can of sardines  
to stay alive  
for your daughter's daughter,  
who looks to the bottom of your glass  
for a roof.

## Hurricane San Felipe II

San Felipe II was the most powerful hurricane to strike Puerto Rico up to that point. It was called San Felipe because it passed through the island on September 13, the feast of Saint Philip; not Philip the apostle, but Philip the martyr, father of Saint Eugenia and husband to Claudia. He and his wife renounced their political life in Alexandria and converted to Christianity. This was after Eugenia ran away from home to live as a man in a monastery and was wrongfully accused of seduction by a besotted woman she had healed. Eugenia bared her breasts to a confused Philip, who happened to be the prefect overseeing her trial, in an attempt to prove her innocence. Because a woman could never seduce another woman. It was called San Felipe *II* because it was the second time a hurricane blew through the island on that same day in September.

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When it hit the Caribbean, on September 12, San Felipe II was already a Category 3, and only strengthened after crossing Guadeloupe that day. When it made landfall in southeastern Puerto Rico, it was as a Category 5 storm, carrying winds of up to 160 mph. The mountains in the Cordillera Central got up to 30 inches of rain. The death toll was over 300. Over 20,000 homes were completely destroyed, and almost 200,000 suffered damages. Tobacco, citrus, coffee, and sugar crops were destroyed. It is estimated that the hurricane cost the island \$50 million in crop and property losses. This is in 1928 USD, roughly \$855 million in 2022.

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Nearly 1,500 people died in the Caribbean alone. Most buildings in Guadeloupe were flattened. Farmers in Montserrat nearly starved before relief got to them.

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When San Felipe II made landfall in West Palm Beach, Florida, it was a Category 4 hurricane with winds of up to 150 mph. It caused a 10-ft storm surge. Before weakening along the coasts of eastern Georgia and the Carolinas, it crossed Lake Okeechobee. While the exact death toll wasn't confirmed, between 1,770 and 2,500 people died there, which is why San Felipe II is mostly known as the Okeechobee hurricane.

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“Yuquiyú está furioso. ¿Te fijas como de pronto hinchó la corriente?”

“Yuquiyú is angry. See how all of a sudden he swelled up the current?”

—Marcela in *La Víspera del Hombre* (1958) by René Marqués (1919–1979), which is set in Puerto Rico and begins in the months leading up to San Felipe II.

## Sica

Sica, my mother's paternal grandmother, came from a long line of farmers who had never left the Caguas Valley.

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She woke up at 5:00 a.m. every day. She washed her face, braided her hair, and went to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. Hard bread, a couple of melon wedges, and goat's milk. No one in the house ever complained, even though they knew that their lunch and dinner would look exactly like breakfast.

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She took pleasure in small things. She was proud of her long, black hair. She enjoyed smoking cigars she rolled herself. She drank cognac, which she kept in the trunk by her bed.

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My grandfather, his brothers, and sister went through life free to roam, smoke, and drink whatever they wanted. By the time he was 11, my grandfather, Pedro, carried cigarettes in his pockets. By the time he was 15, he had a tolerance for rum.

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Leandro was Pedro's father. For most of his adult life, Leandro was in jail for homicide. A neighbor had propositioned his oldest son, my grandfather's big brother Jacobo, so he killed him with a machete.

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My grandfather was the first person in his family to attend university.

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On his way to school one day, a pit bull attacked my grandfather. The dog bit off a chunk of his leg. He whipped out the can of sardines he had in his lunchbox and beat him on the head with it until the dog was dead or close to it. He disinfected the wound on his leg with urine. The scar was barely visible, from what I can remember.

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My mother says Sica was the softest, gentlest person alive. She had gone through so much loss, letting things slide was probably the best approach to dealing with children and bad times. After her husband was imprisoned, Jacobo worked in the United States so he could help support his mother and send my grandfather, his youngest brother, to university. My grandfather, who considered Jacobo a father figure, said he worked in a quarry. My mother said he worked on farms. Either way, Jacobo came back to Caguas after he was able to save up a little bit of money. He and Sica shared a home, which my grandfather Pedro visited with my mother and uncle every Sunday. They'd bring her peach concentrate and tobacco.

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My grandfather's enabling of their mother's smoking seemed to be the only point of contention between Jacobo and him. In 1978, Sica died at 97 in her kitchen. She collapsed by the stove. Jacobo, who never married, died the same year I was born, 10 years after his mother.