

The Madman

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Category: Creative Nonfiction

He was overweight and orange. His yellowing hair dissolved into pale roots above his intense face. His raspy, loud voice didn't seem to match his pressed suit and sky-blue tie as he spoke the crowds into a frenzy from inside the computer screen on the desk. I hunched over Papi on the office chair and rested my chin on his head as we heard the madman speak.

"*Que barbaridad*," Mami stood behind us, a lit firecracker of Puerto Rican indignation, her arms crossed and one of her red grading pens twiddling between her fingers.

I remember feeling fear. Not for anything that I had done, but simply for existing. It was hard to understand that my people, fellow Americans, would actually believe these words. Yet the pale crowd on the computer screen continued to cheer. They thought we were rapists and criminals.

I had seen people think like this before, back when I was twelve and Papi moved us to the mountains of Ellijay, Georgia. The people there dressed as ghosts and marched around the town square. They called black people "lazy" and owned bumper stickers that said "I hunt black and brown". One time, a large, rugged man with an ugly dog in the back of his pickup followed me and my sister to a neighbor's house. He watched as we ran from him and frantically pounded on the door before he sped off. That was a time of fear. But I thought those days were behind me.

Fall of 2016 I was taking high school American Government with Mrs. Fran. She was a large woman with a bob cut and a voice like Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*. But I remember she was kind. And she really wanted us to learn about the way our country ran. So she made us watch the madman's debates on TV.

Nobody would've guessed that the madman would have made it this far, opposite one of the most powerful women in the country. My pencil ran fast in each of those debates as I took notes on the unfolding drama. He name-called. He used racist phrases. And in between debates, a video emerged about him harassing women.

In spite of this, he made his way into my school. The blazing red hats and shirts began to seep in on the bodies of my classmates. They would walk around the hallways chanting his words, while others would perform so-called impressions of Mexicans by waddling and sticking out their teeth. Whenever I saw this, I felt my heart tighten into a ball. In my head, I could hear the madman's words against my people, and I wondered if my classmates believed me to be a rapist and criminal, something separate from them, because of what I looked like.

I still remember the shock when the madman won against the powerful woman. It seemed like the whole country stopped and closed their eyes, hoping that they would wake up gasping and sweating in their beds.

My high school was whiter than a fresh snow day. There were only a few of us with darker skin that roamed those hallways. I hardly ever talked to any of them since it was a busy school, but when the madman came, I always felt like they all had my back. I wonder if they ever felt the same way about me.

One of those kids was Raph from my algebra class. He was serious, lean, and muscular with a crown of thick black hair and a pointed, Hispanic nose—Colombian, I believe. We only talked a few times, but I remember noticing one day that he missed class, and the next day he was more serious than usual.

That afternoon when Mami came to pick me up from school, I slid into the front seat of the car and kissed her on the cheek. As we pulled out of the school parking lot, she said, "So I was talking to Carmen and her friend was there. Her friend told me her husband and his

brother got in trouble here at the airport. Somebody called the cops on them because they looked Hispanic and I guess they thought they were illegal. Don't you take class with their son? Raph, or something?"

I nodded mutely. What had happened to my world, a world where it was no longer safe to look like me among my own people?

Then the strong gales of a storm blew away my blindness. The storm Maria howled her way across my birthplace of Puerto Rico and shattered it. She left my family scrounging for water and food, and left my grandfather sitting on his concrete steps in a panic attack. The tropical trees no longer cooled the citizens. Instead, the lady Maria had exposed them all to the raging heat of the sun. Mothers cried and children ran naked.

The madman could not understand. All he could do was scream. When he visited my birthplace, he threw paper towel rolls at the citizens. And perhaps that's when I knew that America had raised me, but Puerto Rico had birthed me—that the salt water of the Caribbean pumped through my veins, boiled by the sun that cracked and hardened my skin. Those were *my people*. When I saw my countryman Lin-Manuel Miranda on *Ellen* calling for the help of *my people*, I felt my heart grow strong. When I saw how *my people* rebuilt on their wreckage, my heart beat to the rhythm of their hammers.

Eventually, I graduated high school and moved to a university. In the time that transpired, the news was a whirlwind of ghost-clad marches, swastika-bearing mobs, people getting "cancelled" because of racist comments, and minorities staging attacks on themselves. Meanwhile, I joined the Latin American Club on campus and landed the role of the *Piraguero* in the university's version of Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical *In the Heights*. I still remember the pure ecstasy that electrified every body part as I danced a lively salsa onstage with a crowd of *my people*. This, *this* was something that the madman could not take away. I still close my eyes and I can feel the warmth of the laughs around me, and my toes still tap to the music.

The madman kept marching into my life with news of caged children and caravans, of *my* brothers and sisters crying for help. Too many of those cries fell on ears that were shut toward them, ears that had already labeled them as "illegal" and therefore irrelevant. But I remember playing with those children when I was growing up.

I remember the sisters Ziarah and Estela with their fat baby brother and their mom's juicy tamales. I remember Ashley, who loved taking care of children even at the age of nine. I remember Omar, who prayed like an angel. I remember Yolanda, who loved to argue but didn't know enough English to make her point, and Adiel, her buck-toothed younger brother who called out the thief stealing my sister's offering at church. They were eventually caught and their family was scattered to three different locations: the parents to Honduras, Yolanda to Texas, and Adiel to Atlanta, Georgia. They were not criminals. They were children like me. Except they had less clothes and toys. And their father worked construction while their mother cleaned bathrooms.

Christmas of my sophomore year I got a text. It was Emily from high school, inviting me to hang out with her at her church's Thanksgiving banquet. I missed her laugh and smile, so I accepted. She was just like I remembered—beautiful, with flowing blonde hair framing her pale face and living blue eyes. We talked over plates of macaroni, mashed potatoes, and pie, and she flashed that winning smile and charming laugh I was so fond of.

I was finished helping her clean up the tables when she introduced me to her group of friends. There were five of them, two boys and three girls, and all white. "This is my Puerto Rican friend Josue," Emily said. Then she laughed. "So if I ever get kidnapped, you know who did it."

Even today I can feel the sharp sting of those words. My worst fear was true. In the alleys of Emily's mind, the tan of my skin and the language of *my people* was equivalent to

criminality. It didn't matter that we were high school friends who had battled hardships together. It didn't matter that I had spent most of my life in America and dedicated myself to giving back to the community and being a good citizen—she did not see me as a part of her country.

Perhaps it was that incident that made me realize that no one was going to speak for me or *my* people in these situations. That task fell on me. *My* people were counting on me to defend their dignity and humanity. That's why when my classmate Caroline declared an innocent joke as reverse racism against her white skin, I could not hold my tongue. My stories came out. I told her about Ellijay and the ghost people. I told her about Raph from algebra class. I told her about Emily. And I asked her to consider if the harmless joke she was whining about was real racism or a coping mechanism that afflicted people had to develop over the years. I left Caroline that day feeling triumphant, feeling like I had carved my line in the sand and ordered humanity not to step on my identity anymore.

That night, my parents were talking about the madman. Papi was angry. Mami had a concerned look on her face. The madman was in trouble finally. But it wouldn't make a difference, Papi said. The madman would still keep his job.

I called my friend Stanley. I spoke to him about everything on my mind. I'll never forget his southern drawl as he said, "They've never been able to hold you Hispanics down. No matter how much they try to keep you out, you just keep flooding in and rising. That's what scares them about you."

I've never felt prouder. I belonged to a kingdom of warriors. A kingdom whose citizens did not know better than to struggle for their honor and dignity and to demand their place in society. We would not take no for an answer. We staked our claim on this land and we fight to the death to keep it, even in the face of a madman. Not because we are political, but because we are people. These are *my* people.

I stand with them.