



# Latin American Literary Review

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## The Coquí Call

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Jose Acosta searched the piles of paperwork stacked neatly in front of him for the pamphlet on housing services. It was the one with a picture of a new public housing building flanked by a photoshopped cobalt blue sky. It had been there just a moment ago. He was sure it was between the stack for health services and the pile for FEMA. The family standing before him, parents with three young children, were the latest arrivals in need of assistance. Jose stepped back to gain a broader perspective of the table, slid on his reading glasses, and then tugged on the lapels of his cardigan sweater.

"Ah yes, right in front of me," he said after eyeing it.

After locating the necessary pamphlets, he directed the family to the table where the two women representing Chicago Public Schools were waiting. They would ensure the children were properly enrolled in school and received the necessary supplies.

"And make sure the kids get vaccinated. Free vaccines are provided at Norwegian American Hospital," Jose informed them. He never failed to mention that his daughter, Marisol, a nurse, worked at the hospital.

After Hurricane Maria, the fieldhouse in Humboldt Park had been converted into a hurricane resource center. The iconic building was now not only a Puerto Rican cultural center, but a ray of hope for so many displaced islanders escaping the wreckage left by the storm. Many had extended families already in the area. Others had nowhere to go and learning of the refugee center drew them, without other connections, to Chicago. Jose understood their anxieties. He had been one of them, under different circumstances, many years ago. Jose had come to Chicago from Humacao after being discharged from the Marines. At first, he had felt like a tourist, an outsider, always dreaming about returning home. Anticipating the time when he could earn enough to visit or have economic opportunity enough to return to the island. But eventually his thinking changed. He met his wife, settled in Humboldt Park, had a son and a daughter, and soon realized he was no longer a tourist. No longer just passing through.

When Jose learned of the intention to modify the cultural center to also serve as a climate refugee welcome center, he was one of

the first volunteers. He possessed the necessary skills to assist the newcomers and make them feel welcome and at home. Language. Life experiences. Compassion. Jose had it all. He was stationed up front, one of the first to greet the arrivals with a warm smile and, when he could find them, the informational pamphlets to help them settle into the city. The position had provided him an important purpose and he took his responsibility seriously. With Marisol volunteering in Puerto Rico through National Nurses United, Jose needed to balance his time at the center with caring for the two grandkids. His wife had died three years earlier and his life was not nearly as full as it once had been. The opportunity Maria provided seemed to come just when he needed something to feel productive and to fill growing voids in his life. As horrible as it was, it had done the same for Marisol.

Hurricane Maria had created massive flooding, crippling power outages, critical structural damage, and untold human death and displacement. As the realization of the catastrophe began to settle in, Jose recalled the two hurricanes he had experienced as a child in Puerto Rico. There had been Hurricane Santa Clara when he was six and when he was ten Hurricane Donna had hit his hometown of Humacao. He remembered his mother's fear from Santa Clara, and when Donna arrived, he feigned bravery and insisted he would protect her. She had told him he was a courageous boy and would become someone in life. He would do great things. She lived a long life, into her nineties, but not long enough to see him achieve great things. Jose didn't suspect he would live long enough to see himself achieve great things either.

During his second week on the job, he met a family from a small-town in southern Puerto Rico. There were two young children, their parents, and the maternal grandmother. The grandmother's eyes revealed distance and apprehension, and Jose sensed the woman's bewilderment about being uprooted from her life. The woman's world had been cruelly turned upside down. She had been abruptly whisked away from the life she had always known. She appeared to be about Jose's age, and he could only wonder about the struggles she and her family had endured, not to mention the challenges ahead. He learned their home had been flooded. All their

belongings destroyed. Very quickly, after the storm, mold had begun to advance along the floors, walls, and snake around stairway banisters. Electricity was cut and not expected to return for weeks, maybe months. Despite the grandmother's resistance, the family made the difficult decision to leave their home and island. There really was no other option. They had to flee. A cousin was living in Chicago and the difficult decision was made to take refuge. Eventually, they promised each other, they would return to the island.

The displaced family returned to the center several times and Jose began to speak with the grandmother. Her name was Miriam and she admitted now that her family was what officials labeled climate refugees, she had no idea what their future would bring. She wasn't even sure she wanted to go on with a life so far away from her island. Jose attempted to encourage her, to convince her things would be okay. She needed to have patience. He reminded her that everyone had moments of vulnerability in life. Times when they were overwhelmed with worry and frightened and alone. Jose had felt that too, especially when he had first come to the United States, like an exile washed up on an unknown shore. He imagined all people felt like that sometimes. He further explained how Chicago was what was known as a sanctuary city. A city of hospitality, not hostility. It was also proudly known as the city of big shoulders. This city had accepted him many years ago, and it would be the same for her. In time, she would see.

"But I plan to return to Puerto Rico," Miriam insisted.

"Yes, you can. But it will take time, Miriam."

"Do you think?" she asked unconvinced.

"Yes, but in the meantime make the best of things. And I'm here to help," Jose reassured her. He would show her where to find the best coffee, the best restaurants for Boricua dishes like *pollo guisado*, *bacalao*, and *avena de coco*, the best produce for cooking, and help her acclimate to the community. He wouldn't mention the difficult winters just yet.

Jose had provided Miriam all the details about Marisol. How his "*valiente*" and "oh-so courageous" daughter, a highly skilled nurse, was volunteering on the island. Where people are in need, my Marisol will go, he had told her. Miriam agreed it was very admirable of her and he must be so proud. Jose explained how Marisol had recently called, fortunate to have found cell service in a remote mountain village. She had called simply to allow her two children to hear the songs of the *coquís*, the tiny tree frog native to the island. The children gathered close to their grandfather as he held the cellphone, with Marisol capturing the unmistakable whistle on the other end, "Co-kee! Co-co-kee!" The thought of it brought tears to Miriam's eyes.

Miriam's family was staying with a host family nearby, within walking distance of the fieldhouse. She began to visit the center a few times a week. Just to get out of the house, she had said. Jose kept his eyes peeled for her and each time she visited they talked and with each passing day Miriam felt more and more at home. Each day less of a climate migrant or refugee. Jose too began to

look forward to his hours at the center and his time spent with Miriam.

One day Jose invited her for coffee at the nearby boathouse, the place where he played dominoes most Sundays. Near their footpath bordering the baseball diamond a handful of old-timers were taking batting practice. The dull crack of the baseball against the wooden bat cut through the air and Miriam's distracted eyes followed the sound. High fly balls sailed against low hanging, fluffy clouds. At the boathouse café, overlooking the lagoon, they talked for hours. Jose learned that Miriam was a widow. Her husband had died nearly ten years ago and ever since then she had lived with her daughter and family. They insisted she move in with them immediately after her husband had died. She was in such a state of loss and confusion that she just went along. She surrendered and allowed her daughter and husband to do for her what they thought was for the best. And in hindsight, at the time, it had been. Although it had been nearly ten years, maybe it wouldn't be forever. Maybe one day she would be on her own again. Have a new life that would look very different from the old life. And who knew, maybe she could even learn to love again. When she said that, Jose's expressive eyebrows raised, and beneath them, his copper-colored eyes twinkled.

It had taken weeks for Jose to work up the courage to ask Miriam out for dinner. When he did, she said she would need to check with her daughter.

"Do you need her permission?" Jose asked.

"Well, I suppose I don't."

"But it's courtesy. I understand."

"Yes, it's courtesy," Miriam echoed.

At that moment Miriam realized how the tables had been turned. Wasn't she the parent? Had things become so upside down that she now needed her own daughter's approval to go out to dinner with a nice man? No, she really didn't. But as her new friend had suggested, it was the respectful thing to do. And they were all more cautious these days. Refugees. Miriam could not get accustomed to that label.

Refugees, in her mind, were adults and children fleeing war torn countries in sub-Saharan Africa or the Middle East. Scenes of abandoned pockmarked buildings with exposed and snarled rebar. War battered geographies where food was scarce, and infrastructure was badly damaged or non-existent. Dry, barren places where maelstroms of dust accompanied hordes of ravaged people as they trudged for miles in search of a safe-haven country. People she would see on television and her heart would break for them. Tears would often settle in her eyes at the idea of the cruel traumas people had to endure in this world. More striking it had seemed as she sat comfortably in paradise, on her back patio in Puerto Rico with the birds and the tropical trees and flowers and at night the comforting songs of the *coquís*.

Certainly, her country was not one of those arid and impoverished places. No, her island was lush and green and filled with sunshine and food was plentiful. Colorful fruits sprouted from trees in

her very backyard. Flowers bloomed and birds sang. She had been grateful and did not take things for granted. Oh, the island had its problems. She was not that naïve. Crime, corruption, the infiltration of drugs. But it was her world and one she understood exactly how to navigate and thrive in. The world was turbulent sometimes. And now she had to accept that her life had been swept up in one of its many torrents.

Jose and Miriam climbed the stairs to the boathouse café. There were several games of dominoes in progress across the terrace. Jose greeted a couple of the players before he and Miriam slipped inside the café and ordered cortaditos and returned outside to one of the small tables. They gazed off into the late autumn sky. A pale blue backdrop with slow, lazy clouds floating across. As they began to visit, Marisol called. An ideal opportunity for Jose to introduce his new friend to his daughter. Jose and Miriam huddled close, hearing firsthand intelligence from Marisol of Maria's devastation and the resulting human toll. Listening to Marisol's reports,

Miriam began to accept that her time in Chicago would not be brief. It would be more than simply a transient passing. Maria had seen to that. Miriam would be required to accept Jose's advice and make the most of the city he called hospitable. She would learn the Humboldt Park neighborhood, frequent the shops on *Paseo Boricua*, the section of Division Street between California and Western, enjoy a morning pastry and espresso. Her stay would not be brief. What she hoped to be brief was her status as refugee. She would do all she could to allow that label to lapse and sail away like an old silk rebozo.

Near the end of the call Marisol revealed she would be coming home soon. In two weeks, she would be back home in Chicago. Back with her children. Back to work at Norwegian American Hospital. Back in time for winter. For Miriam, with her newfound plans to give the sanctuary city a chance, she had but one request of Marisol before returning home. Would she please call back in the evening so she could hear the songs of the *coquí's* one last time?