"Roberto, not again," said Josephina Burgos, groaning. "How many times must you tell this story?"

"But we love this story, Papi!" cried Ofelia. "Please tell it again, just this one time!"

Roberto took a sip of instant coffee from his mug and stared thoughtfully at his family, who had gathered around their white laminate-top dining room table. It was a cool, clear night in Chicago in 1978, and the neighborhood kids had gone home hours ago after filling their bags with Halloween treats.

Ofelia was sitting across the table from him, chewing a Clark Crispy Bar, her eyes wide with anticipation. She was seven years old with short brown hair, big brown eyes, and oversized tortoise-shell glasses. Roberto's niece, Mercedes, was seated to Ofelia's right, next to her mother, Paola, who was his sister-in-law. Mercedes was six years old and had thick, raven-black hair like her mother. Roberto thought their Indio appearance was because of their Taíno blood, but it was impossible to know for sure.

Carlos, five years old, was sitting on Josephina's lap to the left of Roberto, and was holding a cowboy hat he had worn earlier when trick-or-treating. Luis was to Roberto's right, and was ten years old. He was tall for his age and lanky, with black wavy hair like Roberto.

"I want to hear the story too," said Carlos, looking up at Josephina imploringly.
"Yeah, let's hear it, Papi," said Luis.

Roberto smiled and turned toward Josephina. "I guess I'm outnumbered!" she huffed.

"Mi querida, Mercedes hasn't heard this story. And we are all here..."

"Tell us about the witch!" interjected Ofelia.

"Okay, okay," said Roberto, placing his hand on his wife's knee. "But I must get the blessing from mi media naranja. She is a critical part of this tale."

"Yes, fine, Roberto," said Josephina, chuckling. "Go ahead and tell the story. For Mercedes."

Roberto leaned into the table and shut his eyes. A hush fell over the room.

"I must have been around Luis's age," he began. "It was August 1961, and I was sitting on our front steps outside our home. It was a typical house on the outskirts of the Fajardo Pueblo barrio, built of wood planks with a sheet metal roof. It was in a densely packed area, a squatter's community, and most of our neighbors fished or worked as macheteros at the mill.

"My mother was pregnant with my sister, your aunt Cassandra, and was about to go into labor. She was in the bedroom with my father, and was tired and uncomfortable.

"My father had called for a midwife, and we — and by that I mean my parents and I and two younger sisters — were all waiting for her to arrive. The air was thick and sticky in the house, and I had stepped outside to escape the oppressive heat, but it wasn't much better.

"My mother was sicker than usual with this pregnancy. Her ankles were badly swollen, and she had shortness of breath. We were all ready for the pregnancy to be over.

"I was holding a stick and tossed it in the direction of our small, tan mongrel, which was sitting under the shade of a banana tree. The dog stared momentarily at the stick, then shut its eyes. It was too hot to play. I sighed and tapped my bare feet on the rotting steps. I wanted to be away from here. I wanted to be in the water, exploring the mangroves for snapper or floating on my back in the lagoon. I thought of my father, and how he could toss a mallorquin while standing on a wooden fishing boat in the rolling waves. He was born in Fajardo, a child of the water, and I wanted nothing more than to follow in his footsteps.

"A short while passed, and I saw an elderly black woman walking toward our house. She wore a white turban and an ankle-length white dress partially covered with a plain yellow apron. She trudged down the dirt road in bare feet, and held a palm-frond, hand-woven basket filled with dried plants."
"I had never seen her before, and thought that she might have come over from the Dominican Republic or Haiti with one of the recent immigrant families. As she approached the house, the tan mongrel suddenly became aware of her presence and began barking. It paced nervously back and forth the closer she came, yapping incessantly, until my father burst from the door of our house, tossing a rock at it.

"I called for Doña Ramirez,' said my father gruffly. He was a tall, proud man with skin nearly as dark as the woman's, weathered from sun and salt. I could see that he was tired and on edge, a sign to stand clear of him or else risk receiving a lashing.

'I am here for your wife,’ said the woman calmly.

“My father glared at the woman, his arms crossed, and shook his head from side to side. ‘No, I called for Doña Ramirez. She has delivered all of our children.’

“In the distance, I heard the faint sound of thunder. Gray clouds were forming overhead.”

‘Your wife is in trouble,’ said the woman, standing a few feet away from the banana tree. 'Doña Ramirez sent me.'

"My sister Analilia poked her head out of the front door, staring at the woman. She was nine years old and often helped my mother around the house.

"'Get back inside,' snapped my father. Analilia glanced at me, then retreated indoors. "'What do you mean? How do you know she is in trouble?'

"There was another distant rumble, and I saw a small green lizard dart past my feet and under the stairs.

"'You must purify this house,' she said. 'I will help you. Then we can deliver the baby.'

"'This is no time for superstitious old women,' said my father. 'I will fetch Doña Ramirez myself.'

"'There is no one to fetch. Doña Ramirez is dead.'

"My father placed his hand on his forehead. He was sweating, and his gray, button-down short-sleeve shirt was soaked through. 'When did this happen?' he asked in a hushed voice.

"Doña Ramirez died this morning, at her home,' the old woman said, crossing her heart. 'I was with her, praying the Rosary.'

"My father said nothing for a minute or two, staring at the darkening sky. There was a flash of light, and the wind picked up. 'I have never seen you before,' said my father eventually.

"I live outside Fajardo. I came to see Doña Ramirez last week,' she said. 'I had a premonition about today.'
"My father seemed to have recovered his bad temper and suspicion. 'We are a God-fearing family,’ he said. 'What are you?"

"I am here to help you deliver your daughter,’ she said. 'Doña Ramirez sent me.’

"My father scowled, and he came down the steps, approaching the woman. 'I don't know why you think you could come here. Be gone, woman. We have nothing to do with witchcraft,’ he said, turning to me. 'Roberto, go fetch Doña Santiago.’

"The woman faced me, her dark eyes cloudy like the gathering storm. I was terrified. How does she know my parents are having a daughter? I thought.

"'The troubles are just beginning for you,’ she said. 'Your family tree is branching, and it will splinter off in directions you cannot fully understand today.’

"'Enough!’ shouted my father, his fists balled together, ready to strike.

"'Yes, I have tried enough,’ she said, turning to leave. 'The evil energies are traveling. God willing, they will not linger in your home, but I fear I am too late.’

"Papi,’ interrupted Carlos. "Why didn't abuelo listen to the old lady?"

"Shh,’ said Luis.

"Let him finish the story, Carlos,’ said Ofelia.

Roberto twisted the end of his thick, black mustache and stared out the window. He could make out the hazy orange glow of the streetlamp from his seat.

"My father, he was quick to anger. His pensamientos, his thoughts, were angry that day. From stress. And from distrust of people different from himself. He never trusted Dominicans or Haitians. I cannot say why. And what you say in anger can become a maldición. What my father had not realized that day was that he had placed a curse on his family.

"Soon after my mother gave birth, the nature of the curse became apparent. Although the labor itself was thankfully free of complications, something was wrong with Cassandra's eyes. She was born with gray clouds in them, like the bruja. At first we thought they might clear up, but after a month or so it became obvious that she was not fully aware of the world around her. She had these unusual fast eye movements and was restless and irritable. Perhaps she is like my father, I thought. He never seems to stay still and has a quick temper. And perhaps I was right. The evil energy the woman spoke of may have flown into Cassandra. But there was also, we soon discovered, the issue of cataracts.
"Congenital cataracts are very rare in children, but it afflicts some people, and my poor sister, we learned, had them. Unfortunately, we were also very poor, and my parents did not get Cassandra the proper treatment in time to save her eyes, which is why she went blind. Had they sought help months earlier, maybe Cassandra's outcome would have been better. But the story of Cassandra's descent into blindness is a different, sad tale. What you need to know is that shortly after she was born, we knew something was wrong with her, and I knew, at least, that the bruja's prophecy had been correct.

"The full nature of her prophecy, however, had yet to be revealed. That happened a few weeks later, in late August.

"I was with my father early one Saturday morning on a secluded beach just north of the city, preparing to set lobster traps. The sun had not risen, and it was dark. My father and I would come to this beach often where he had tied his yola, which he had built by hand, to the base of a palm tree. It was painted navy blue and could fit about four people in its hull. He called it his Doncella, his maiden. Rowing the yola in the sea was like a courtship dance, and he never took for granted that no matter how much he might try to coerce his Doncella, it was a fickle thing, readily influenced by the emotions of the water.

"This was storm season, and there were signs that the weather was turning. My father wanted to bring in one last catch before it was too dangerous to do so, and he also wanted to move his yola farther inland in case there was a storm surge.

"I was baiting the wooden traps. This consisted of placing sardines in a mesh bag and then tying it to the trap's compartment near the entrance. The farther the lobsters moved into the trap's compartments, the more difficult it was for them to escape. Bricks were stored in the yola, and we used them to help the traps sink into an upright position to the ocean floor.

"After about an hour, we were ready to set off. We had finished preparing all the traps and had eaten a breakfast of chicken-filled pastelillos. My father always ate before he fished, because he never knew how long he might be out on the water.

"The yola was not equipped with a motor, so muscles propelled the craft. My father was a vigorous man and had rowed for years in many conditions on the ocean. The oars were secured by mounted oarlocks on the gunwales. He sat on a bench in the center, and pulled on the oars in a backward rowing position. I sat on a bench near the stern of the yola, sandwiched in between the lobster traps. The light was just coming out as we headed out toward the reef, but it was darker than normal, and overcast. The ocean appeared relatively flat, with few whitecaps. It appeared to be a good day to fish.

"My father's demeanor quickly changed, however, as we rowed beyond the protection of the shore. There was a strong offshore wind, and my father was having trouble maintaining a smooth rowing stroke. I could feel the pull of the ocean, and the waves were getting choppier. And that's the issue with the ocean. In a split second,
before you’ve barely even ventured out on the water, it can suck you in and consume you. To those who say that our planet is Mother Earth, they are missing the obvious. Our planet is mostly made up of great oceans that control and stabilize life, and people are completely at its mercy.

"Roberto!" Father shouted above the grinding waves. 'Tie yourself down. Do it now!'

"I stared at my father. Panic gripped me, and I could see the strain on his face as he tried to row the yola into the enlarging waves. There were whitecaps now, propagating in every direction, and spray was beginning to affect visibility. We crested a rogue wave that was easily twice the height of the others, and I could feel the boat accelerate as it descended, rolling the yola ominously to one side. The lobster traps slammed against the hull, and I would have been tossed into the open waters had I not been holding onto my seat.

"I tried to regain my composure. I pushed the traps at my feet toward the stern and got down with them, placing my legs under the bench so I was facing my father. I grasped the nautical rope connected to the traps and tried to find a loose end so I could tie myself down.

"Cut the rope!" said my father, quickly reaching for the straight-blade knife attached to the belt on his pants and tossing it at my feet. 'Cut the rope for you and me!'  

"My hands were shaking as I picked up the knife. I pulled a length of rope; it was thick, twisted, and made of coir, and the blade did not easily slice through it. I could hear the Doncella groan and prayed that the blessed madre María was watching over us.

"I cannot turn back!" exclaimed my father. 'The winds are too strong!'  

"I finally cut two pieces of rope, about five or six feet in length. I tied one piece around my ankle and to my bench, then crawled over to my father and did the same with him. At this point, with the spray and the powerful swells, we had no sighting of land. We were being pushed farther and farther out to sea. The wind was unrelenting.

"The expression about bad luck came momentarily to mind; se vuelve sal y agua, everything one touches turns to salt and water. Here we were, ruining our trawl lines, sitting in a tiny dinghy in a vast expanse of salt water. The bruja's premonitions were coming true. We were being carried away by evil energies.

"It soon rained. At first it was a drizzle, and combined with the ocean spray, I took little notice. My heart was racing, and each swell brought the weight of the traps and bricks cascading painfully into my back. After about ten minutes, the rain intensified, and water was coming at us from all directions. My father appeared to be laboring; his tank top was soaked through, and the veins of his biceps were visibly bulging from exertion.

"'Roberto,' he said, gasping. 'Toss the bricks out of the Doncella!'"
I saw, to my horror, that the yola was filling with water, fast. The boat had an open cockpit and there was nothing to keep the water out. The water and our gear were weighing the yola down, causing my father to strain with the extra burden. I grabbed the bricks and threw them overboard, one at a time, while always keeping one hand firmly grasped on the bench or gunwales.

"'The bucket!' shouted my father, pointing to a small bait bucket floating in between us. 'Bail the water!'"

"For the next hour, a storm battered the Doncella. There was an explosion of water and thunder and lightning. I prayed and prayed and bailed and bailed. My father toiled with the oars, his strokes becoming shorter to keep the yola centered. We rode the waves up and down, with each wave being like a formless opponent that we had to vanquish. My stomach churned as we were pushed farther out into the ocean, and I could not envision us doing this for much longer. And just when it seemed like we were at our breaking points, nearly as suddenly as the wind, the rain, and the waves had appeared, the storm subsided and all was calm.

"We must have been on the water for an hour and a half at this point, but it seemed like days. The sky cleared, and the yola rolled gently up and down in the waves. The Doncella was still heavy with water, but my father and I were too exhausted to care. We could feel the morning sun on our backs, and we both shut our eyes and lowered our heads over our chests while we idly floated in the empty waters.

"I woke a short while later to the lapping of waves against the Doncella. The sun was rising overhead, and the air was still. My father was bailing water from the hull of the yola. This was a tedious process with such a small bucket, and I tried to help by scooping water out with my hands. Another hour passed, and the Doncella was mostly free of water, except for puddles around our feet. My father was lightly rowing to keep the boat stable, but he did not appear to have a destination in mind. His eyes were fixed blankly at the horizon. We said nothing, and I knew we were lost.

"By midday, the sun was hot overhead and my lips were chapping. The saliva in my throat felt like sandpaper, and I felt weak. My father stared at me, and I saw tears in his eyes. The constant anger, the frequent eruptions that seemed to characterize him, had dissolved, and there was a tenderness I had not seen before. "'I should have listened to the bruja,' he said at last. 'Turn around. Let me see your back.'"

"I rose unsteadily in the yola and turned toward the stern, with my back facing my father. 'You lost blood,' he said, examining my back.

"I felt his hands lifting up my white tank top. He pressed a wet cloth into my lumbar region. 'Hold this, nené. You'll be fine.'"

"I held the cloth against my back and turned to face him. He had taken off his shirt and was bare-chested in the sun. 'Are we far from land?' I asked.

"'No, we can't be,' he said. 'Tonight, if we cannot find our way back, we will use the stars to guide us.'"
"I fell into an uneasy sleep. I was lying on the waterlogged bottom boards, with my head resting against the curve of the *yola*’s frame, sandwiched next to the lobster traps, which smelled of sardines and saltwater. I had my arm over my eyes to shield me from the sun, but I could still see bright yellow and orange stars under my eyelids. I came in and out of consciousness, waking abruptly when the *yola* rolled heavily to one side or when my father shifted his weight to stretch his weary arms and legs.

"*Stand up,* said a voice in my head.

"*I cannot,* I responded. *I will sleep the sleep of death.*

"*You will stand up. Now!* commanded the voice.

"I rose and found myself not in the *Doncella,* but standing on a tranquil turquoise sea. From the depths of the waters, I saw rising a dark woman, wearing a sargassum turban and dress, surrounded by a glistening school of whirling sardines. *Where am I?* I asked.

"The woman stood over the waters and stared at me through her deep, blue-black eyes. *You are in the tears of your father,* said the woman.

"*What am I doing here?* I asked, shuddering.

"*You are here to cleanse yourself from his troubled spirit,* she said.

"The woman stepped forward and reached out her hand. *Come to me.*

"I walked over to her, and she grasped my right hand. I felt an electric shock course through my veins. There was no pain, just a flowing current of warmth. *I will immerse you in the tears of your father, to clear the balance,* she said, gently spinning me around and leaning me backwards until my face was momentarily beneath the waters. All around me, I could see millions of sardines circling, as if they were trying to ward off any predators trying to harm me. I opened my mouth in awe, and as the water rushed in, I could taste rum and salt.

"I felt pressure on my back and the woman lifted me up out of the waters, and when I surfaced, I was now back on the *Doncella,* sitting upright and fully awake. My father had been staring at me, and he smiled as I rubbed my head.

"'Welcome to the world of the living, my son,’ he said. 'We will be home soon. I can feel it. I cannot say why, but I can feel it in my bones.’

"We had been on the water for nearly twelve hours when we heard a sound that startled us. At first I thought it was a figment of my imagination, but as my father continued to row, the sound became more distinct, resembling the staccato of a drum. 'Look, over there!’ exclaimed my father, pointing over his shoulder. Even
though I was facing the bow of the yola, I was exhausted and had not noticed the contours of the shoreline in the distance or the large vessel approaching us. It was difficult to make out the ship at first, and my father rowed with renewed energy to make sure we intercepted it. Another thirty minutes passed, and this time, the ship was coming into view. It was a large, steel-plated naval landing ship that was riding high, displacing great swaths of water as it raced toward us.

"My father picked up his bloodied tank top from the hull of the yola and gingerly stood up on his seat, waving the shirt and shouting. 'Help us!' he cried. '¡Ayudame!'"

"I joined my father and stood up, waving my hands. I could make out the white hull numbers, 1176, below the 50-caliber mounted guns.

"A metal rescue craft was deployed from the ship, not much larger than our Doncella. Four U.S. naval officers were in the boat, and one was carrying a fifteen-foot boat hook. "Hey there!" said a sailor, standing on the stern of the craft with a white-and orange-striped lifebuoy in one hand. 'This is a United States Navy live impact area. It's off limits!'"

"Another sailor joined him at the stern of the craft and stared at us.

"'You look like you're in bad shape. Do you need a lift?'

"'Yes. Please help,' said my father. 'We come from Fajardo.'"

"'Fajardo? What the heck are you doing out here on a rowboat?'

"'El viento era malo.'

"'What did he say?' asked the man with the lifebuoy.

"'He said the wind was bad,' said the other sailor as he extended the boathook toward our yola. 'Jesus, let's get you towed back to base. You're at the Vieques Naval Training Range.'

"A direct route from Fajardo to Vieques Island by motorized boat would normally take ninety minutes. There were many vessels traveling back and forth between the islands daily. But our yola was blown off course in a circuituous manner, and we likely spun around the currents near Culebra before drifting south toward the eastern part of Vieques. My father said that we were saved by the grace of God, and had we missed the island we could have ended up in the middle of the Atlantic headed towards Africa.

"The sailors towed us to port, and from there they helped us make arrangements with a commercial fisherman who was sailing to Fajardo that evening. He was an elderly man, with a gray beard and bleached, long-brim Panama hat. He met us at the naval base in his thirty-foot, diesel-powered fishing vessel, with the word Greenpoint painted on the side of the hull. 'Follow me,' he said, directing us inside his boat, where he handed
my father a tow line and pointed to the bow eye. 'Tie it down here and then to the stern of your boat. You can ride in the Greenpoint or in yours. It's up to you.'

"My father made a bowline knot and leaped out of the boat into the shallow waters, wading a short distance to the Doncella to secure it. I watched my father handle the line with ease, letting it slide through his hands as he allotted enough space for the yola to be towed at a safe distance from the fishing vessel. He was comfortable in the water. It was what he knew.

"I leaned my back against the gunwales of the Greenpoint and stared at the sky. The sun was setting, and the sky was blue and pink and cloudless. I will not be getting back into the yola, I thought."

"Is that why you left Puerto Rico?" interjected Mercedes. "You didn't really want to be like your father, after all?"

Roberto smiled and took a sip of his coffee, which was now cold. He stood up and stepped back from his chair, placing his hands behind his back and staring at the clock on the wall.

"It is said that the spirits of brujas allow them to see into the future," Roberto continued, still looking at the clock. "My father's anger, his problems with drinking, I should add, were not uncommon sins. But when directed at a bruja, the evil energies rebounded and were passed on to subsequent generations. To my sister, Cassandra. To myself."

"Are they passed on to us?" asked Mercedes.

"What I can say is that seven years after my father and I were swept to Vieques, when I was old enough to leave Fajardo, I left for Brooklyn. For a neighborhood called Greenpoint. The U.S. mainland was where I wanted to be."

"What your father, your uncle, is trying to say, is that he was cursed into marrying me!" said Josephina, laughing.

Roberto turned around, frowning.

"Mi querida, stop teasing. It was no curse meeting you in Greenpoint. It was a bendicion!" exclaimed Roberto.

"I think when I am older," said Ofelia, "I would like to become a bruja. One that helps people."

"Very well. And if you become a bruja, just remember that you don't ride broomsticks and wear pointy hats on Halloween," said Roberto. "You are a medium. You will need to have a clean and beautiful cuadro — a spiritual power. You will help people uncover the causes of their troubles. No hay casualidad, hay causalidad — there is no coincidence, there is causality, so the expression goes. Or at least, that is what I saw. And that is what I felt, in the depths of my bones, on the water that day."
David Santiago is a writer and technologist who lives and works in northern Virginia.