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Una Hija Americana

I've always been told I have an international face. Strangers notice my dark hair, almond-shaped eyes and olive complexion and can't help asking about my ethnic background. I am happy to answer, of course. "My mother's Mexican. My father's German and Irish." Oh, I thought you were Native American, they say, or Basque, Italian, Iranian, Greek, and so on. It's wonderful to think I could fit in so many places, that, in a sense, I am a citizen of the world.

But it's a different feeling when I'm recognized for what I really am, a woman with strong ties to a culture she barely understands, a language she can hardly speak. Mexican people don't usually ask about my background; they assume it. Somehow they recognize me as one of their own. And when that happens, I feel honored, embraced and grateful, but also embarrassed, reserved, and a little unworthy. It's my grandmother's fault—and her gift—and I have mixed emotions about that, too.

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My grandmother was born and raised in northern Mexico—Monterrey and Saltillo. Her father was a dry-goods merchant, her mother an industrious woman with eleven surviving children. My grandmother grew up privileged and then poor, educated

and mannered, strong-willed and stunning. In Mexico she was a teacher, a lover of proper language, a fine dresser. In her early twenties, she came to San Antonio, Texas (a town with a booming Mexican population), and struggled to learn English. She became fluent, but the language never settled comfortably on her tongue.

She married the love of her life, who died, leaving her with two small children, then married again—a smooth talker who despite her protests took her back to Mexico. Though pregnant, she left him when she discovered he had another wife. Her third husband was a butcher in San Antonio, my grandfather, who died before I was born. Her doctor told her she was too old at age forty-two to have more children. She proved him wrong with twins—my mother and her sister. Until she was three, my mother spoke only Spanish.

My grandmother's family was admired in San Antonio, their grocery stores thriving. They were hard-working, quick-thinking, and proud. America had been good to them. They'd left revolution and poverty behind and adopted their new country wholeheartedly, even sending one of their sons to fight in World War II.

And then my grandfather made a decision that changed my mother's life. He and his brother relocated their families to Idaho in search of a better living. Once again my grandmother found herself moving under protest, leaving her well-established family and the familiarity of San Antonio behind.

Of the few Mexicans who lived in rural Shelley, Idaho, most were field workers. My grandmother—still influenced by the class system with which she'd grown up—needed her children to know they were better than field workers (though the older

children did occasionally work the fields for extra money). My mother was raised to say she was Spanish, not Mexican.

“*Soy una mujer moderna,*” my grandmother used to tell her daughters. “I am a modern woman.” To her this meant partly that she could put the past behind her. It didn’t appear to be much of a hardship for her to abandon so many of her Mexican ways if doing so meant moving forward in predominantly white Idaho. My grandmother never forbade my mother to speak Spanish, for example, but she didn’t encourage it either. Mexican custom became mostly an undercurrent in my mother’s life.

Perhaps my grandmother made the right decision for her children. When the family moved to Boise a few years later, they bought an impressive two-story Victorian on a stately old street, and earned the respect of their proper white neighbors. My mother attended the Catholic school on the corner. She and her twin were shy but popular. They rarely encountered racial slurs—probably because they appeared so thoroughly Americanized—yet for my mother there was always a sense of not quite belonging in the white world—and then again, not belonging in the Mexican one, either.

Years later, when my mom taught migrant kids in Nampa, Idaho, she was a powerful role model, a Mexican woman who had succeeded in America. Yet there was the occasional student who called her an Oreo—dark on the outside, white on the inside—and I remember how she’d come close to tears when she’d tell me about it. Mom could influence those kids in ways the white teachers could not, but she was not one of them, and, though they loved her, they never let her forget it.

And then there's me. One step further removed from the culture than my mother and looking a little less ethnic. My Mexican blood has always been a badge of honor, something I am inexplicably, perhaps overly proud of.

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I Am Special Day, fifth grade: Many of the kids show up in athletic outfits. They are special because they're good at baseball or soccer. Some of the girls wear aprons or ballet dresses. I wear an embroidered Mexican peasant dress, a shawl, and a sombrero. I walk with my head held high, which is the only way I have ever seen my grandmother walk. I am special because I am Mexican.

At age ten, I am mostly able to ignore the hurtful stereotypes of Mexicans in Idaho as lazy, dirty field workers or, worse yet, criminals. The racists who perpetuate those lies simply don't know us, I reason. To me, being Mexican is being my grandmother, a woman who seems to embody pride and civility and exotic mysteriousness, a woman who makes every word count, who loves and expects to be loved in return. To me, being Mexican is being beautiful, like my mother with her long, dark hair and flashing eyes, my grandmother with her silent movie-star looks and charisma, my great-grandmother with her soft, almost-Indian features and gentle smile. Being Mexican is the pictures in my grandmother's photo album of adorable girls in white First Communion dresses, a gorgeous bride in her Spanish lace veil, confident men in military uniforms and thick, black moustaches, and cherubic babies in embroidered dress clothes. "Mexican babies are the cutest in the world," my grandmother once told me, and I believed her.

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In San Antonio we sit in a restaurant, my Uncle Roman and me. It is 1990 and I am freshly graduated from college, newly engaged, and embarking on a career as a writer. I'm here to research a novel about my grandmother. My uncle will introduce me to the family—my family—for they become that the minute the door flies open and my great-aunts greet me with, “Welcome, Niece,” and throw their arms around me.

This restaurant, called *Mi Tierra*, is enormously popular. My uncle tells me it was my grandfather's favorite restaurant. On the matchbook is a picture of a man beaming a huge white smile beneath his full black moustache. He wears a *sombrero* and a *sarape* and strums a guitar. This *mariachi* player is my great-uncle, a once-popular musician in San Antonio. He's a distant relation, to be sure; in fact he and my great-aunt divorced, yet I claim him completely. I am looking for any ties to this city, to my birthright, and uncovering them wherever I turn.

The waitress addresses me in Spanish, and my uncle answers for me. It could be he is sparing me embarrassment, knowing my Spanish is limited mostly to the words I learned in junior high and high school. Or it could be he's playing his traditional role of patriarch. From Texas he oversees my family back in Idaho. My grandmother defers to him in many matters. She defers to *no one* else. So Uncle Roman holds a certain mystique for my cousins and me, those of us who know him only through his occasional visits, his Christmas Eve phone call, his money sent to help any of us in need, and his booming demands for us to respect our mothers, do well in school, and stay out of trouble.

But Uncle Roman represents something more to me. He has been my only real link to Mexican men, to how they think and behave. He can be gruff, certainly, and

arrogant and often chauvinistic, but there's nothing, nothing, he wouldn't do for you. I find him fascinating. In the white world, Uncle Roman has been a successful businessman, a respected leader, yet he's still at ease here in San Antonio, in the Mexican lifestyle. He has what my mother does not: the ability to function in both worlds. It's something I envy, as I know she must. As we eat, we talk about my grandparents, about his memories of growing up in this town, and I wonder if he realizes how lucky he's been.

It feels good sitting here with my uncle chatting about my grandma and eating *huevos rancheros*. American food just wouldn't taste right on this trip, for food is the other area in which this culture enriched my young life.

Looking back I don't think my grandmother enjoyed cooking, yet we adored the food she made for us, craved it as much as we craved kind words. I listened for the sounds of cupboards opening and shutting, of pans clanging, and Crisco cans sliding across the pantry shelf. Mostly my brother and I hoped for her sugar tortillas spread with butter. She'd been making them so long she never used a measuring cup, scooping out the Crisco and sugar and flour with her hand, and later giving us each a small ball of dough to play with. Her other specialty was a heavy vanilla cookie she called a *panecito*. One of my favorite tasks was sitting quietly at the dining room table helping her separate the good pinto beans from the bad and from the tiny pebbles that sometimes made their way into the bag.

I was in junior high before I realized not everyone ate egg tacos for breakfast or that most people didn't add tomato sauce, red pepper, and cumin to their homemade

chicken noodle soup. Like the language, the subtle influences of Mexican cooking worked their way into my life without my awareness.

Here in this restaurant in San Antonio, the menu reminds me of her, though she never once made *tamales* or *chili rellenos* or many of the other dishes people associate with Mexico. Yet the things she could do with beans, stewed tomatoes, and rice were every bit as flavorful as this food that people are waiting in line for. Perhaps it is appropriate then that Mexican restaurants—as tacky as they sometimes appear with their faded paper flowers, fake parrots, and high wicker chairs—often heighten my awareness of the culture I sometimes yearn to be part of. Here among faces that seem slightly darker versions of my own, breathing the aromas of my grandmother’s kitchen, hearing the language that so captivated my child’s mind, it all comes back to me.

I excuse myself to the bathroom where I find three girls not much younger than me changing clothes and laughing. One is obviously embarrassed. She looks at me sheepishly, shrugs, and makes a comment in Spanish. I smile and say those words I hate to say, “I’m sorry, I don’t understand.” Then I catch that look I hate to see; it’s somewhere between bafflement and pity. At moments like this I curse myself for not pursuing Spanish beyond school. I wash my hands and leave, once again reminded that I never will completely fit in here. And at the same time, I want to hug these girls. I want to thank them for trying to let me in on the joke, for including me for just a moment.

To be part of something and not be part of something—that is what it’s like to be half of a race. Like so many children of immigrants, I sometimes struggle with the balance, but like so many grandchildren of immigrants, I’ve learned to let go, to delight in being American.

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But letting go doesn't mean forgetting. I wish my grandmother had understood this.

“How do you say this word in Spanish, Grandma?”

“Why do you need to know that?”

“Tell us about growing up in Mexico then.”

“Ay, it was a long time ago.”

“Maybe we should all go there someday, together.”

“Why would you want to go there? This is your home.”

“Was it—bad?”

“It was *calor*—hot. Go outside now. Go play.”

I never gave up. My brother and I hung close to Grandma in the hope she'd slip and share something of herself. I asked my questions again and again and got the same brush-offs until I learned to gauge her moods. When she was humming, she was happy, and when she grew still for a moment I could sometimes snatch a nugget from her mine of memories. It might happen on the front porch swing with the scents from her beloved rose garden drifting to us across her hand-watered lawn. She'd get a distant look in her eye and say,

“I saw Pancho Villa once when I was nine. He rode into town and killed a merchant in the street. The *Federalistas* were chasing him.”

“Did you know the merchant, Grandma? Did you see the body? What’s a *Federalista*?”

But the moment was gone, as if my rush of questions had buried her memories. “Go get your shoes, Teresa,” she’d say. “Let’s go for a walk.”

I stole my way into her private world, though, by eavesdropping on her conversations with her sisters in Texas. She’d laugh, sigh, and often moan, “*Ay, ay, ay,*” and I’d wonder what trouble some distant cousin had gotten into. I’d pretend to watch TV while I listened intently. I loved seeing my grandmother this way, hearing her this way, and it didn’t matter that I didn’t understand her words. They were beautiful because through them I could see her as she must have been in her youth. I could hear the one part of her past she could not divorce herself from, this Spanish language that filled her and gave her soul. I realized even then how lucky I was to have another language as a musical score to my childhood.

In the end, after several strokes, my grandmother shifted from the English she’d never quite mastered to the Spanish that came so naturally. By the time I was in college and my grandmother had arrived in the nursing home she loathed, she spoke almost exclusively in Spanish, and I struggled to understand. This bothered me most when she’d get that distant look in her eye and I couldn’t resist asking about her youth. Sometimes she’d answer, briefly, as always, only now I could not comprehend her stories. Our last conversations are mostly lost to me.

Her words come to me occasionally, though, as I raise my own children. I hear myself using her expressions, working the few words I know into our everyday speech, extending to her great-grandchildren that special part of my own childhood. Sometimes

this is conscious; often it's not. "*Donde está mi periódico?*" I ask my son each morning, and he rushes to find my newspaper. "*Ven acá, hija,*" I say to my daughter, and she comes to me. "*Muy bien,*" I tell my children when they've done well. "*Te amo,*" I say. "I love you."

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Eight years after my first visit, I return to San Antonio—now a wife and mother and grounded in a new understanding that being "ethnic" is as much about personal experience as it is about race. My grandmother has been gone six years and I miss her. I have come to interview her remaining siblings, to find out more about her through them. I no longer hope to completely fit in, but, as always, I am eager to learn. And I enjoy looking the part, immersing myself in the culture for a few days.

I am introduced to my mother's cousin, the gifted artist Nivia Gonzalez, who gives me a poster of my favorite of her paintings—a Mexican woman in the market surrounded by the flowers she sells. Like most of Nivia's subjects, the woman's eyes are closed. "My woman isn't looking at you," Nivia once said. "She is looking inward, deciding for herself what she wants to see and why." If there is an image that represents what it means to me to be half-Mexican, it is this. I had that poster nicely framed and it hangs in my family room where I can see it every night. It reminds me of my ancestry and of a woman who seems, in many ways, like my grandmother.

In a sense, though, this figure in the painting could also be me. The sights, the smells, the rhythms of Mexico surround her. She holds them close—as she does the flowers—yet she does not look at them, but inward at her own heart. There the best of her memories, her family, and her heritage reside, but also the best of the life she has today.

Her memories shape her but do not define her. She is content, confident, at peace. Yes, she is special because she is Mexican, but more so because she used her grandmother's gift to look inward and decide what she wants to see and why.