

Live in Fragments

Until I was eight, I thought *mijo* was my nickname.

Mijo related to Matthew, I figured.

A name straight from The Good Book.

Mijo was what my grandma called me every time she visited from Alaska.

Mijo can you bring me a Coca-Cola?

Stand still mijo, I need to anoint your forehead with olive oil.

Mijo, tell me your favorite bible verse.

Sometimes I'd dress up for grandma in a dark blue suit and deliver verses like one of the Pentecostal preachers we adored. My go-to verse was Matthew 28:20: "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." She'd clap her hands, sending her stout bracelets—cobalt, topaz, emerald—jangling. I'd clasp my hands over my heart and bow like I was on stage at one of those awards shows my father hated.

When she led prayer, she said everything in English, then followed up with some gibberish. My father and older sister had labeled her "weird" before I could remember, so *weird* was how I interpreted those noises.

I had no idea that she was speaking Spanish.

In 1998, companies faced boycotts if they permitted a hint of Spanish anywhere near their product. And though we lived in Southern California with all its diverse possibilities, my parents had decided to settle in a conservative suburb called Canyon Country. My world – the desert backyard where no plants grew, my bedroom painted blue with a racecar divider in the middle, the cul-de-sac of mechanics and cops where I was never to leave—had made it evident that real Americans spoke only English.

My father wasn't pleased that in this environment most of my friends were Black and Brown boys. Danny Ortega was my best friend until we were nine and Danny feared that hanging out with a fey kid made him look gay. The one time my father picked me up from Malik Washington's birthday party, he looked at the kids waving goodbye to me, and instructed

me to “expand your friend group.” In the 1990s, many White people took pleasure in casual racism, and his barbs—deployed only around other White people—were read as more comical than bigoted. His dark humor had an edge-lord quality, and I believe my mother took comfort in his no-questions-asked confidence. He loved to talk about himself, and he could not conceive of a world where others knew something that he did not.

Decades later, I’d learn why my mother found refuge in this boastful man with (so it seemed) limitless confidence in his own (White) power. It must have been appealing for my mother to meet someone like my father, a nationally-ranked sharpshooter who was always ready to fight anyone. She had endured a great violence at 18, which was why she dropped out of nursing school and joined the Marine Corps, and here was a handsome young man who loved her deeply and promised to always protect her from a dangerous world of countless enemies.

I think of my grandmother as *abuela* now, but for most of my life, she was “weird grandma.” I didn’t use my father’s terminology—“the spicy bitch”—but I understood that there was something “wrong” with her. She always fought with my father, an Italian-German cop in the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department who usually stayed at a friend’s house during *abuela*’s week-long visit.

My grandma pronounced Mexico with a soft lisp and claimed that half of California really belonged to México; my father, the product of Texan textbooks, was adamant that The Alamo was a fight strictly for independence and that no Mexican was ever shot or lynched—unless he was a criminal and had it coming. *Abuela* would toss her hands up to heaven, her colorful bracelets clashing as she shook her head, said something in her weird tongue, and left the room.

One day at a grocery store, I overheard a man call his son *mijo*.

I was stunned.

How did this man know my nickname?

I asked my sister, five years older, why those guys were talking like that.

Decades later, her reply remains as clear and loud as recorded music: “They’re speaking Spanish, moron.”

My mother never talked about race. She took comfort in the song “Red and Yellow Black and White/ They are precious in his sight/ Jesus loves the little children of the world.” She never talked about the Black cousins she had in Ohio, or her fraternal grandmother who wore whitening makeup and gloves inside the house. It’s possible that she didn’t know her father’s birth certificate read *Negro*; it’s probable that she was raised to imagine herself White; maybe she was taught that to ask any question about “that” was the height of effrontery.

The only conversation we had about race was indirect and incomplete. I was seven and asked my mother about what was on The History Channel: protesters in Alabama, a documentary in sepia tones. A young woman who looked White was being told to drink at the water fountain for Black people. Now—how unfair was that? She looked White, no? And why were there separate fountains at all?

My mother rushed from the kitchen to the living room. I was surprised by the swiftness of this Sunday school teacher who was so often praised for her calm poise. But now, the veins in her neck were tense. Her gaze was unfocused, yet frantic.

She took the remote from my hand, saying she had to change the channel to something more appropriate.

My question repeated itself: “If she looks White, why does she have to drink from the other fountain?”

She was quiet for a long time.

“Mom?”

Her voice was shaky: “Back then, people weren’t as advanced. If you had one drop, you were Black. That’s how people thought back then. But not anymore. You don’t have to worry about anything like that.”

She patted my head and settled on Cartoon Network.

For several minutes, I was dazed. Not by the zany tunes, but by my mother. Why was she acting funny? Why was she having me watch cartoons over the History Channel, which she always described with warm approval as “educational.”

Even at seven, I understood, on a subcutaneous and primordial level, that White was good and Black was bad. I was good; my family was good; and hence, we were White. But could the difference between good and bad, Black and White, be so porous and interchangeable? Could race be

real if someone who looked White was treated as Black? I was moved by the injustice, but I'm ashamed to say I was more concerned with how this impacted me. Could this sort of prejudice happen to me? If Whiteness wasn't an immutable trait, then was it something that just came and went? Was it something I could lose?

Then the cartoons did their work.

I stopped thinking about race. For years and years, I wouldn't feel these questions.

Back when, by default, I hazily imagined myself to be a White boy, E.M. Forster was one of my favorite authors. Curiously, I found him through Zadie Smith. I was assigned to read *White Teeth* at 19 and instantly recognized my coming of age in public schools in Anchorage with its grand mix of languages and cultures. *White Teeth* was one of the only books I encountered to reflect this reality of people crossing boundaries of race and class and gender; people loving each other and finding ways to love themselves despite the many forces that drove them apart.

What Smith loved in Forster was his forgiveness. His resistance to dogma and his insistence on the carnal, imperfectly human gesture. Many political and economic problems would lessen if people could fully know each other, he believed. Forster famously distilled his credo in *Howards End*:

Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die.

I still believe in this adage—only connect—but increasingly I have realized it downplays several unforgiving limitations. “Only connect” makes it easy to imagine that connection is an on-off switch where you're connecting or you're not; that the path to connection is unilateral; that tradition has a clear lineage. But identity, especially in the US, is never as straightforward as we'd like. How can my inheritance be simple when my family comprises enslavers and enslaved, the people who silenced Chicano, Native, and African American history, as well as the people who continue to make that history?

My attention has drifted from the phrase *only connect* to *live in fragments*. I like how *live in fragments* is still a neighbor to the more famous and heart-warming *only connect*, how it is probably the more accurate descriptor for my country, one that is united and distinct and still grappling with its many histories; a country that lives in fragments and is better for it. The Saint Lucian poet Derek Walcott once recognized the power of embracing all of the cultures that influenced his poetry: “Break a vase and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole.”

My country has produced great beauty and unspeakable brutality. As I think more about my sublated and reclaimed history, I realize that my family’s secret is less of a remarkable narrative than a representative sample of how a nation came to be, which truths and lies it chooses to follow.

My mother died before I could ask her about our Mexican and African American heritage. I do not know how she would respond to me journeying through the past. I believe she would be encouraging, but I also know she was a conservative woman who had met my father in the Marine Corps and was attracted to the protection he could offer. Her birth certificate listed her as *White*. She likely didn’t know that her parents’ records through the years list them as *Negro* or *Mexican*. Still, she was open to learning; she always wanted me to speak up; she believed in the mysterious force of words; she wanted me to heal, even if she could not bear such benevolence for herself.

My ties with my father and sister severed the same week that my mother died in the first week of October, 2017. My abuela had passed the year before. Suddenly, I had no nuclear family.

What to make of the global shifts that comes with losing the most important people in your life?

Six months after my mother’s death, I was unmoored. I read the books she read the last months of her life; I wrote a play where she won the 2016 election; I took a DNA test hoping to know more about my mother and abuela; I visited Ireland because my mother once said that her father was “vaguely Irish,” and it was in the lobby of the Irish Museum of Modern Art where I read the test results that broke my life open.