

## In The Mix

Don't know why I bother to send this, because there must be thousands of mixed Mexican/Filipinos in this world. What difference is one voice? I suppose since my fathers been gone for over twenty years now, that his time on earth is not even worth noting. Then again, I know better. All I have to do is sit still for a moment, and he comes home to me.

John Ramos Mariano came to the United States from the Philippine Islands, joined the U.S. Navy, then afterwards attended college somewhere in Kansas. He spoke Filipino, excellent English without an accent, and flawless Spanish. He bounced around the country, for reasons too vague to remember right now, and landed in Merced, a central valley town in California. It was as if all that time before he drove into the city limits, didn't count. His life, a lovely Mexican girl named Mary, and their six children, began from that point on.

"What town were you born in Daddy?" I asked when I was about eight years old. "Isabela, in the Philippines," he answered. It sounded strange, exotic, and faraway. He was about five foot five, dark-skinned, and thick calloused. His hands were a constant amazement to me. They were large, scaly, and cracked. I called them alligator hands. I'd rub them gently, try to soothe the pains away. His appearance was like a deceptive shell to people who didn't know him. Outwardly, he looked ragged and pitiful, due from working in the fields dusk to dawn. Always disheveled, always dusty. Deceptive, because he could disarm with a genuine warm smile and surprise you with intelligent conversation. It took people by surprise. Behind those dusty, twinkling eyes, was someone educated and extremely witty.

We lived a poor, but split existence. With Mama, it was full Mexican culture with all the sights, sounds and smells, right down to religion. I was baptized catholic as a child. Most of my friends and family were Mexican. With Daddy, it was the unique language and rice at every meal. It was the unforgettable excitement of pig feeds, where the pig was shot, then hung upside down to drain every drop of blood in a large pan. The succulent meat mixed in that cooked blood with spices that makes my mouth water. Daddy was Pentecostal, and I was baptized at fifteen. A baptismal of choice, the air filled with the holy ghost. We were the luckiest family ever. The best of both worlds.

Even when Daddy cleaned up, it was mostly clothes from the secondhand store. "The willy-willy," he used to call them. Besides not really being able to afford new things, he hated wasting good money. Sometimes he'd walk out of the willy-willy with a full suit, two pairs of shoes, three dress shirts, belts and socks, and spend less than five dollars. He would beam with delight like he'd robbed them and gotten away with it. "Now we have money left to buy donuts," he smiled. He'd point the old car home, and break into one of his favorite made-up songs along the way. We'd all join in, swinging and singing loudly, "Chik Koree Chik, Chilaki Chilak, Aunt Jemimah, Kookala Boomba!!" As soon as we got to Boomba, he'd reach over and tickle us.

When I grew older and worked side by side in the fields with Daddy, I'd became more and more curious of his other life. The one before us. Why would someone as hardworking, and obviously educated as he, be working in the fields? What had put him in this place with us?

Daddy never lived in the same house as us. He was always coming in before light to wake us, feed and send us off to school, before he trudged off to the fields. There was a lot that was unspoken, accepted as routine in our house. All my life, he never held my mother affectionately, never shared intimacy. I could see the pain in his eyes in those early morning hours, as he glanced at the closed door of my mother's room. Inside with her, always a different man. But he never confronted, wouldn't raise his voice. Daddy just looked away. I really believe all the time and affection in his world, was transferred directly to us, and we

never let up, drained every ounce. No matter how I shook it, it always pointed to my mother. His greatest love, his most magnificent failure. She broke his heart, practically killed him. We kept him alive.

When it came to Parent/Teacher conferences, Mama never attended. Mama was rarely home, always out having a good time. Daddy would come to every meeting, every event, straight from the fields, tired and caked in dust. The only clean part of him was the feeble attempt to wash his hands and face. My teacher in fifth grade Galen Clark Elementary, Mean Mrs. Meyers, ended class early for Parent/Teacher night and had those students with parents scheduled early, wait. I dreaded Parent/teacher days. Daddy would come, and he would definitely be dirty, and everyone would see him. I faked an excuse to go to the bathroom and went outside I checked the parking lot. Sure enough, there he was coming out of that clunky old pickup, stomping his boots hard on the pavement to knock off the dirt. Patty Gomez walked by me and said, "Isn't that your father coming down the hall?" I looked away angrily and said, "That ain't my father. I don't know who he is." I went into the bathroom and stayed there a long time.

Daddy, finally came out with Mrs. Meyers and they walked to the steps outside. She was talking and smiling, and shaking his hand. How could I ever face her or the other classmates? Daddy looked around searching front and back, but didn't see me. I slid to the back of the fence, climbed over and ran home about five blocks away. I didn't want to face Mean Mrs. Meyers the next day, but had no choice. To my surprise, she took me aside and raved about Daddy. "Your father is the kindest, most charming man I have ever met. The fact that he came directly from the hot fields to take part in our Parent/Teacher meeting tells me he is an extraordinary father." I expected to be punished, and instead was filled with a great sense of pride. One other thing I felt, was strangely ashamed. It was like that with every teacher, every conference. Whenever they met him, they absolutely fell in love with him. They knew, what I couldn't see at the time.

It takes awhile for kids to see clearly, learn to appreciate. You wake up one day, let it roll through your sleepy eyes, and suddenly there's tears. I'd remember his rough hands. Those loving, alligator hands. Scene after scene of total pain and sacrifice unfolds. He lived through, and inside us. "Daddy, why aren't you a great success? Why did you stay with her? Why did you let us sipho every dime, every breath?"

Finally, the most telling point of all, the realization that he was not our real father. There were whispers. Plenty of whispers from those, supposedly in the know, but we never let them get close to the wall of love and loyalty we'd built. I am the middle child of six. With each new birth, Daddy waited outside, gathered us in, gave his name. He never blinked, when it came to raising us. We were his children, no matter what anyone said. To this day, every one of us will fight to the death, if you dare say otherwise.

"Are you Mexican, or Filipino?" someone asked. I could hear Daddy singing in my ear, "Chik Koree Chik, Chilaka Chilak, Aunt Jemimah, Kookala Boomba!!"

"I am the best of both worlds."

Written by: Charles Mariano