

A Short Story
by...
Genesis Piña

Mr. Garces by Genesis Piña

Once we were in the gringo's land, my father had made it very clear that the familia Garces would never become American. We would not absorb their culture or live their lives. We would eat the foods, celebrate the holidays and way of life of our country. To him, we would exist as if we were living in our city of Santo Domingo.

In the morning, my mother would make the platanos, which she'd mash, boil or make into tostones - depending on how my father had wanted them on that day. Once the aroma of her cooking filled the air, I knew that the meal would be ready soon, so I'd go into the kitchen before my mother would call me to bring my father his plate of food.

Every time I'd go in to the living room, my father would always be lying down on the plastic covered couch, watching Primer Impacto or Las Noticias. His head would be resting on the arm of the couch as his legs would be curled into his body. And when he'd turn to me, I'd always stare at his right lazy eye, wondering why it was the way it was and then, I'd realize that I was staring and would quickly give him his plate of food.

For most of the Saturdays, my father would always be found in this way, sometimes asking my mother or me for a glass of water or cold beer. It was only when my father had gotten his meal, that I'd go bring my older brothers their plate and then my mother and me would eat. We didn't really sit around the table to eat - that was something we did only on holidays and when we did, it was always an awkward feeling. But usually, my father would eat in the living room, laughing as he heard some of the Spanish dirty jokes on TV. Meanwhile, the rest of the Garces would be in the bedroom that we all shared, mimicking the way my father had laughed - while my mother hushed us up to eat.

Freca, my oldest brother, would be sitting on the top bunk bed, eating and looking through magazines. Manuel and I would be on the floor by my parent's bed with our plates on our laps, watching cartoons. My mother would sit on the stool by us with her food - silently watching Bugs Bunny run on the TV screen. But at times it seemed as if her eyes, her whole being was somewhere else - past Bugs Bunny, past us. Sometimes, I'd go and give her a kiss on the cheek to take her out of the trance. She'd smile and look at us and tell us to finish eating. I loved my mom, but I hated her too.

I hated her every time I had to clean or learn how to cook. I hated her every time she tried to mold me into a little housewife. *I'm not cleaning after no man*, I'd say in Spanish and she would just nod her head and tell me to finish up with what I was doing. *Tu vera - you'll see*, I'd yell and she'd ignore me. She'd do the dishes and I'd scrub the damn pots. *Scrub, Scrub, Scrub* - she'd say in Spanish. *Get the concon out* - the hardened part of the rice at the bottom of the pot. And

when I got tired of scrubbing, that's when I'd get really angry and tell her how I wished I'd been born a boy. *But why can't Freca or Manuel do the scrubbing?... Why don't they clean?!* And as my eyes watered up from the anger, my mother would simply look at me and tell me that the boys did not do those things because *ellos eran varones* - they were boys.

It was true. At times, I hated being a girl. My brothers never did much in the house. They'd throw out the garbage and clean their room - but only when they wanted money from my mother. Because they were boys, they could wake up as late as they wanted weekend mornings, but I had to be up by 10 AM helping my mother to clean and make breakfast. And while I had to stay home, "pretty in pink" for the rest of the day, my brothers could go outside and play. And while my mother did their laundry, she'd only help me with mine.

This was how it was. In our home, boys were different from girls - but they always listened to their father.

By the time the rest of the Garcés had woken up, the house would be clean and the meal would be ready. My mother would set up breakfast and I'd stay near the bathroom, reminding my brothers in Spanish, to clean up after themselves. *Ya better leave the bathroom clean, you pigs because the only one I'm cleaning up after will be Dad.* Usually they'd listened, but when they wouldn't - we'd argued and fight. I'd start yelling, pinching their arms, while Manuel would punch me and Freca would push me away. My mother would be yelling from the kitchen - *Dejen de pelear, parecen animales - Stop fighting, you look like animals.* But we wouldn't pay mind to her, until my father spoke.

When my father spoke, we'd listen. He never had to yell. He'd speak calmly and only once. The mere fact that our father would have to speak more than once scared us. It was the tone of his voice and the expression on his face that would make me cry. He'd tell me not to do something again, and just by him saying it - I'd cry. To my brothers, he'd do the same thing - but when he had to give them a good whooping, he would. He'd take that belt from around his waist and swing. My mother would try to stop him, but once my father's mind was set on doing something, no one would stop him. After the whooping, my brother would be crying and my mother would go in and hug him, telling him not to cry. *But why he never hits her? Cuz I'm a girl!!* I'd say laughing, making fun of the way he was crying. Those were one of the few times I loved being a girl!

But usually when my father was in sight and we were up to our fighting, we'd be quiet as we gave one another evil looks and once he was no longer there, I'd kick my brothers in the leg and run. They'd chase after me and try to hit me back, but once my mother would start to yell out *Miii -guel*, my father's name, we would all run into our room. My brothers would hide in the closet and I'd slide under the bed breathing deeply as I coughed and laughed all at the same time. Once it was real quiet, we'd come out of our hiding place and blame one another.

Most weekends were like this. Weekdays though, no one would be in the house but my mother. My brothers, who were both in high school, would go to school early in the morning. But once or twice, I'd hear them say that they would be cutting, and I'd threaten to tell if they didn't do something in return for my silence. I'd never would have really told my father about that, but once he heard them talk about it and whooped them so good, that after that, I never heard the word again from them. So while my brothers headed off to the train station at 191st to go to school, my father would be the one to walk me to school, reminding me *Hiciste la tarea- did you do your homework?* More often than not, I'd tell him I did, reminding myself to do my math homework on the bus.

Once I was on the bus, it was always the same ride to and from school. I'd sit by the window and try to do my math, but my eyes would wander off to either what I was going to do when I got home or what had happened in school that day. When it had come to my school, my father and mother had argued about which one to place me in. My mother had insisted I'd be placed in a school where I could learn both English and Spanish, but my father said that it wasn't necessary, that I'd go to a school with all the little Spanish immigrants and learn Spanish well. He said that English I would learn in time, just not yet. But I hated him for that.

Sometimes, when I'd go downtown to Mickey D's and be in the play room, the little white children would speak to me in English. And when they did, I'd sit there and speak Spanish as if they could understand me... but they never did. *Mira - Look*, I'd say and they'd answer back *What?* - looking at me as if I was from another planet, and because they were two and I was the only one from that planet, they wouldn't play with me.

Luckily for me though, when I started school, it was required of me to learn English, so I was placed in the bilingual class at my school. But when my father had learn about this, he got real upset, arguing with the school board members about him wanting me to learn Spanish only. It was only when the English speaking board members spoke to him about it being necessary for me to learn the language, that he gave up. I knew he had given up because he couldn't argue back in the English language and would not embarrass himself. And so while my dad was angry, I was happy.

In the beginning, when my father would pick me up from school asking what I had learned, I would always tell him about the English words and tenses I had learned. "*I will go to the park. I went to the park.*" And as I'd try to say more, he'd stop me in the street and look at me, telling me that I wasn't in school anymore - to speak Spanish. I never questioned why he was so against me speaking English and just did as I was told, but deep down, I wanted to learn it quickly.

At home and around my neighborhood, it sometimes seemed that only my brothers knew the language, which they hardly spoke at home. But if I couldn't hear the TV when they were watching it, I knew they had it on low volume and that they were listening to BET, '*musica de prietos*' - Black people music, as my father would call it.

Back

My father had not wanted us to be listening to anything but Spanish music, but my brothers would as often as they could without him noticing. And if one of my brother's English speaking friends called and they weren't home, it would be my mother answering timidly in English the words she had learned from my brothers - *He no home*.

Unlike my father, my mother had wanted to learn. Sometimes, I would hear her speak to my brothers in English, asking them *how you sai it - um.. de boy is wat...* and my brothers would laugh at her accent and while I repeated what she'd say, they'd correct us both. Together, we would do this often, whenever my father was at work.

When he'd come home, my mother would have his dinner ready and as he'd eat, my mother would look at the hung portraits of family and old friends. Once or twice, my father would catch her looking at the pictures and would try to keep them all alive with his stories- trying to keep us all together and all Dominican.

Usually when he'd start his stories, my brothers and me would pretend to be busy doing our homework so that he wouldn't call us to hear the story. But my mother, she had to stay and listen to the same story every once in a while. "*There he goes again,*" Freca would whisper. Giggling, I'd start lip saying the story, word for word as my father said it while Manuel would look at us both and snap: "*Shut up before he hears you*".

My father just wouldn't understand that we weren't in his little island anymore. There were no palm trees and no colmados. The weather wasn't always hot and humid; children didn't run barefooted, there was always running water and hot water too. Unlike him, we liked the life we were living, we wanted to be like them - sound, act and look like the gringos. But we were all too afraid of telling him this truth, and so we lived the lie.

Whenever he was around, we pretended that the Dominican culture was all we knew and all we really wanted. And it was not easy.

Sometimes, when my brothers and me would argue, we'd get so upset that we would let English words slip out - only to sense and feel our fathers head turn to us with a solemn look. One of us would always notice it and so we would quickly go our separate ways.

But when he wasn't around, we became gringos.

My mother was picking up the English language quicker every day, wanting to go out to places where she could sit and hear others speak English, as she'd quietly smiled - glad to understand what was being said. My brothers would go to work downtown - away from our neighborhood, meeting up with friends from different races; ones that did not speak the Spanish language.

Already in high school, I too was making friends with people who were not Latinos, although occasionally I did not want them coming to my house. The last time I had brought a white friend over and had introduced her to my family, my father had greeted her with: "*Hola, como estás- Hi, how are you?*" But when he realized that she was not one of the light-skinned Latinas, but rather a gringa. he politely shook her hand. took his coat and left. When he had come back later

that night, he began to argue with my
mother - asking her why I was not bringing Latino friends home. My mother had tried to calm
him down but, he would not listen
and sternly called me over, telling me in Spanish: "*When I am home, I do not want those
people in my house*" - and that was that.

I never understood why my father wouldn't be open to both worlds; and when he was forced
to - it'd always upset him to the point
that we would have to leave him alone while he muttered curses to himself in Spanish. At
times, it seemed that he was only really
happy when he was at home, with the pretending Garces living the Dominican life; and when
he would go on vacation to the island,
to see his family, his friends and his land. That is why it was no surprise that when he died,
we knew that he would be buried in his
beloved country of the Dominican Republic.

The night of his death, we had learned that he had been killed while taxi driving in the city.
A couple of passengers had shot him
for the little cash he had carried and he had instantly died on the spot. I remember sitting
around the TV with my brothers and my
mother in our room as we watched the ABC news on channel 7, waiting to hear the keys in
the door so Manuel could switch the
channel to Univision on channel 41. But my father did not come home at the time he usually
did, so while my mother made us go
to bed, she stayed up in the living room - silently sitting in that same trance she would sit in
when she used to watch Bugs Bunny
run on the TV screen. Her eyes, her whole being was somewhere else - but this time, it
wasn't past Bugs Bunny or us. And this
time, it wasn't my kiss on her cheek that took her out of the trance; it was the phone call
that she received about my father
having died.

I remember my mother had his body sent to the Dominican Republic so that the funeral
services could take place over there. I
remember that when we arrived at our house in the city of Villaduate, my father's body was
already there; so that family and
friends could see it within 24 hours before he was buried. The street outside our house there
was filled with people - family,
friends and even strangers, who were standing or sitting in chairs and who would eventually
go and see his body. They came over
and expressed their condolences and while they followed us in to the house, I saw him.

He was laying there in a black ceramic coffin, surrounded by flowers and my grieving
grandparents. And while my brothers and my
mother went to join them, I looked around and I saw my father's whole meaning of "*preserve
our culture and its language*". I saw
the people and their custom of feeding the people, who, no matter how remotely related
they were or not, came to the viewing.
Volunteers came out with plates of food handing them out to whoever was around the home.
And when I went to see my father with
the tears dripping down my face, I looked at him.

No longer able to see his right lazy eye, I began to remember the persistent way in which he
had tried so hard to keep us
Dominican. Did he really think that we would have had a better life if we had not adopted
some of the things from the gringos? Did

he really not think that the Garces could actually be individuals of two cultures and languages, the American and the Dominican? No, it must be that while the rest of the Garces had pretended to be only Dominican, he too pretended not to see how we were able to be Dominican and American all at the same time.

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