

## **Blood Compass**

**By Jenny Irizary**

I learned that I couldn't find direction with a compass in my hands around the same time that my fellow Girl Scouts joined my other classmates in asking why I had a "Jew nose," "Medusa hair," and "dick lips." I was the only kid at camp wearing a bandana all day instead of just in the mess hall to cover my frizzy curls, and I was the only kid who couldn't orienteer. My mom being the troop leader afforded my friends weekly opportunities to question why I didn't have preternaturally Nordic-spun silk on my head like her. Assuming that her appearance was just as suspicious as mine, that it was just a matter of juxtaposition, I plotted to evade these inquiries by getting away from her. And maybe I wanted to get away from her observations, too.

"You come from people that were no better than pirates, who sailed from Spain to avoid being burned by the Inquisition and then murdered everyone they met in Puerto Rico," my Viking-descended mother commented, referring to my dad's side of the family. "You should be good at using a compass; it's in your blood," she encouraged. This was not the first time that she had attempted to instill in me an ostensibly innate sense of direction. "You won't get seasick; your grandfather was from an island and came here on a ship," she'd falsely predicted when a fifth grade field trip took me aboard a faux 19th Century vessel docked in San Francisco especially for the indoctrination of eager, young, white minds studying the "Age of Exploration." After various bouts of vomiting that day, I was more worried about acquiring scurvy from losing my citrus-heavy lunch than about whether or not I could steer a ship that probably would have kept most of my dad's ancestors beneath decks.

Trying to capitalize on being included in a fantasy of pan-latinidad on a field trip to the mission in Sonoma, eagerly hoping to find a personal trajectory in the textbook equivocation of all histories vaguely Hispanic, I roused my classmates with tales of my dad's monolingual English efforts to avoid speaking in tongues during Spanish services as a kid in San Francisco's Mission District. Even on the topic of Pentecostal faith, my pan-spiritual mom was the uncontested expert at the dinner table, commandeering my dad's anecdotes, so I always imitated her emphasis and pauses when telling my dad's stories. Sitting in the open courtyard of the mission, I thought I could convince classmates that my stories of a life I'd never known matched their fantasies of Mission Indian basket weaving. By the day's end, my wax-singed hands had managed to make only lopsided candles that not even my ex-hippie mother could love. "Did you feel anyone's presence when you walked into the chapel," she asked. "Your ancestors forced people to labor and deny their beliefs, to relinquish their cultures, so there must be some bad energy." Having almost obtained an MA in anthropology, her keen sense of geography and history bridged the distance between Junípero Serra spreading Catholicism in 18th century California and my Puerto Rican grandfather fleeing the Anglo missionary that tried to adopt him in the wake of the 1899 U.S. takeover of the island.

Looking to the main scholar of human society in my life, I called home to ask Mom if she knew tricks to reading a compass, to which she answered sagely, "Are you kidding? I crashed into a house the first time I tried to drive. I have no sense of direction. Is Kristen talking to her

grandpa's spirit in her sleep again?" As she recounted the time she saw Death before hearing of her brother's departure from this plane of existence, I wondered if my inherent compass was broken, and if fixing it would do me any good. Adults that were strangers to me would approach her in K-Mart and thank her for finding them housing after one or more of the almost yearly floods, and yet she had no sense of direction. Maybe keeping my compass broken was the way to go. But if so, how could I escape the internal forces yanking my entrails towards that long chain of events that she always referenced? Perhaps I could please everyone by managing to evince the expected, by suturing all the binaries together: the exotic brutality and romance of colonial Spanish America as per Hollywood and Bartolomé de las Casas, the directionlessness of my peers, and my mom's broad historical continuum with her personal right to deviate.

Trying to cheer me up after taunting my compass-reading inadequacies, my cabin-mates begged me to tango with them, despite my insistence that I had only learned line- and square-dancing in school. Kristen giggled as I haphazardly dipped her, desperate to channel Antonio Banderas or Ricardo Montalban. "Why does your hair get so nappy in the heat," she laughed. "You're not Black." I mumbled that my dad was always mistaken for Irish as a kid, leaving out that his friends mistook his soft-spoken-ness for shame at being a Protestant traitor to presumably Irish Catholic roots, a different kind of postcolonial sellout than his cousins took him for. While his friends wondered how he could have curly red hair and not know his Hail Mary's, his cousins teased him for not looking Latino enough, for passing under his Anglo friends' collective radar.

When Kristen wasn't declaring to me that I should not hang out with my neighbor because, "All Black people are evil" in reference to someone who self-identified as Native Hawaiian, she was arguing with our friend Helga about the evils of the latter's grandfather's Nazi service. After our fifth grade teacher screened a documentary on the "Conquest," Kristen grudgingly considered that colonial hierarchies might have a downside, and in a compassionate gesture towards unity, she persuaded kids that hated each other to set aside their differences and chant, "Burn the Spaniard!" as they tied me to monkey bars with their sweatshirts every recess, with the sound reasoning that if Cortés had curly hair, as the film suggested, then I was naturally his direct descendent. Not eager for another round of that game, especially after Helga had offered to bring matches the next time, I finally pleaded, "My mom doesn't let Dad's relatives come over; I don't even know those people." That didn't discourage anyone's medically founded assertions that I was biologically predisposed to evils that their Mayflower ancestors would never have indulged in, even if I swept some of the same friends off their feet at camp that summer, opting to be, as their burnt-out parents often chanted, a lover and not a fighter.

For a week, we danced without any training, emulating a copy of a copy of the tango. Maybe if I spun in circles by night and handed my compass to my proudly Irish friend during the day, I could summon a time before she told me that her dad hated Blacks, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans the most while my dad was talking car repair with him in the garage. Whenever I settled into my sleeping bag, my mind circled around the idea that I was doomed by my blood or doomed by the twelve years I spent on a gravel road in a canyon without chronological addresses, with every house dangling precariously from hillsides that became landslides in the winter, living in and around all kinds of out-of-order. Directionlessness was a survival mechanism, a way to indulge childhood imagination rather than their parents' drugged-up imagination. The same kids that told me that cosmetic science could do something about my

nose and asked me who my ancestors raped to make my hair so ugly were called river rats by everyone wealthier, in honor of the foot-long allegedly baby-eating critters that lived in the flood plane with us. They had to climb onto their own roofs when the floods rotted their belongings, and when they came back to school, they told me without fail that my relatives came to this country to make them poor. But that week at camp, away from the river but never far from my mother or my friends, I tried to keep the compass away from my veins, relinquishing it to Kristen whenever possible. Maybe I could hike so far north that I would reach beyond the magnetic pull that my mom sensed around me and pretend to be directionless like all my friends did. Having a direction would have meant that I came from somewhere else, that I didn't belong. When I got home from camp, my mom asked if I learned any new campfire songs. "I may be the troop leader, but I am independent enough to think that it's cultish to make you guys sing these songs that haven't changed for decades. But you probably like it; after all, your people have a blood-borne passion for ritual."