

LATINA IN LIMBO

By Sylvia Mendoza

1979

The silence trailed behind me on the deserted street, better known as Fraternity Row, a place I rarely set foot on. But no one was around in the pre-dawn hours following a campus-wide, after-football-win Saturday-night binge.

Los Angeles lay sleeping, its choking smog not yet slithering to the yellow-gray sky. And I, I was wide awake, wanting a breath of the unusually fresh air, invigorated with every movement as muscles bunched with my long strides while my heart pumped with the effort.

I listened to a taunting whisper in my ear, took its dare to cross into this land where trespassers who weren't white and wealthy stood out like a lone evergreen against pristine snow. That aside, it was, after all, the shortest route to my student apartment complex only a few blocks away.

Glancing down the street, The Row intrigued me to no end. I wanted to study it, dissect it, research it, let it seep into my brain. I wanted to understand it and its inhabitants.

The whisper beckoned me forth to take advantage of the quiet, to take a step into this parallel world. Perhaps I could learn secrets along the way, satisfy yearnings, taste the forbidden, think about what-if's, dream about possibilities.

And so I walked with purpose and awe, ready to see an inkling of what life was like on the other side, where girls wore plaid skirts with coordinated tops, gold hair glistened with a designer shampoo scent and jewelry dripped off reed-thin bodies like sugar-coated licorice ropes.

And there I stood, full-bodied in a peasant skirt and huarache sandals that I normally didn't wear, braless in a tank top the color of my honey-brown skin, with silver hoop earrings my only decorations. My thick, dark, waist-length hair—which had always been my best asset—now suddenly seemed like an abomination.

To say I stood out was an understatement.

I let the journalist in me take over. It was easier to put up defenses and a nonchalant facade as the Silent Observer.

Distancing myself from this foreign world I inhaled details that intimidated me even as they fired me up, made me imagine, allowed me to live here, belong, if just for this one moment.

The grass was definitely greener here. Literally. It started with the expansive manicured lawns that stretched out from stately fraternity and sorority houses. Trees as old as the hundred-year-old university lined the sidewalks. I noted with some relief that they were cracked and chipped, raised and buckled not unlike those sidewalks in the last neighborhood where I had lived in San Diego.

Arrogant, ostentatious beauty was magnified in the manors, in the procession of power apparent in every shiny car parked along the street—the Mercedes, BMWs, Jaguars, Porsches.

My own Ford Pinto sat in the driveway—I hoped it had made it safely through another night—at my apartment those few blocks away, a world away.

I shrugged away those nagging thoughts that made me dive into self-doubt. “Observe,” I reminded myself. “Observe.”

It was time to take off those rose-colored glasses.

A closer look peeled back a layer of much-needed truth. I stopped walking, my own image of the pristine area tarnished. Trash had been tossed in the bushes. The stench of vomit and beer hung in the air and the heavy scent of money couldn’t wash that away.

Everything in perspective, I felt better. With a keener eye, we were, after all, just students. Young with hope. Alive with fever. Insistent with yearning.

“Hey woman! Go back to Mexico where you belong!”

The words slashed brutally through the pre-dawn silence. Hatred seared through every word so severely, it was like being pelted with flaming arrows.

I craned my neck, looked this way and that, wondering who had been following me, who had to suffer such indignity. I looked up at the open windows of the frat houses, wondering who could hurl hate with such velocity. The words themselves did no harm. It was the tone, the intent and the venomous spit riding the tail end of a power trip.

So ugliness lived here, too, festering just beneath the beauty, seeping into the stench surrounding me. It wouldn’t take much peeling of layers to get to more gritty truth.

I looked up again, toward several open windows.

Coward. Who could be such a coward? To be so stupid, so small-minded, so succinctly intolerant. To yell such a thing and hide behind the shadows, unwilling to face the target like a man.

The target. Glancing around the street yet again, I stood there alone.

Alone.

Only then did I realize he was yelling at ME!

My face burned. In all my over-protected years attending Catholic schools, never had I felt so exposed, naked, vulnerable. My skin color, my presence had prompted prejudicial reaction? Since when?

Suddenly I was at the stake, a target for hate.

I didn’t belong at the stake.

In one breath I wanted to explain that I’d never been raised in Mexico. That I unfortunately spoke little Spanish. That I came from a hard-working, middle class, third generation American family with a Navy career dad who was beyond patriotic.

In the next breath I wanted to curse, seek the wrath of God to strike him down, yell out my last name with pride I’d never known, had taken for granted.

How could being from Mexico ever be wrong or ugly in the first place? Why should subsequent generations in the United States suffer such atrocious, unmitigated attacks? Was being Mexican-American such a vile thing when the beautiful culture breathed vitality and spirituality into a new heartland? Could pride, beliefs and superstitions peppering the many different colored skins within the culture be such a threat?

How could I begin to know the answers?

My body shook with fear, but more—there was rage and humiliation I’d never felt before.

I raised my hands to protect myself from more of the onslaught, but the coward was through, slithering back into the shadows like the vermin he was.

Now the onslaught came from me.

Never giving skin or name much thought, the time had come. Self-inflicted repercussions slammed within me.

I was too brown to be white. Too white to be brown.

I was neither white nor brown. Neither Anglo nor Mexican, neither American with Mexican heritage or Mexican with Americanized heritage. I was not Chicana, La Raza, nor brown power. I spoke little Spanish even though Spanish was my first language. Never raised around the beautiful bilingualism of my extended family of cousins, aunts, uncles, grandmas and grandpas, I was a third generation Mexican American. My dad, in his dark brown skin, was as patriotic as could be as a Navy officer. Assimilation was the name of the game. He wanted what was best for us. That included speaking English, embracing American patriotism, education and family values of pride, respect and generosity, even at the risk of losing some sense of identity.

Perhaps it was a matter of survival.

What were my beliefs? What traditions was I carrying on? What was I casting aside?

I was Mexican-American. Should it have mattered?

In those few seconds, my self-image shattered.

I was a Latina in Limbo.

Never having lived by labels, I didn't even know what a "true" Latina was.

Immobilized, I questioned my identity, my self-image, my purpose in life.

A firm believer that things happen for a reason, the ordeal stripped me to the soul, forcing me to look inward, to understand where I was, who I was and why.

Why had the words shattered my spirit as easily as it shattered the stillness of the morning?

I hurried down the street now, hugging myself, ashamed for something I did not understand. Expecting stones to be thrown, more ugliness to sear the air, people to come to their windows and point at me, I ran.

Without knowing it, I'd been straddling an invisible fence all my life, a fence that clearly separated, that shouldn't have been crossed, that made the grass appear greener on the other side even though upon closer inspection, both sides seemed threadbare.

Safe outside the rundown student apartment where I lived, I slowed, came to a stop. The tears of frustration and horror came then, hot and swift.

"Go back to Mexico." Why had the phrase hurt so deeply?

Was losing touch with my roots and being "totally" American a disgrace? Could I ever be "totally" American with brown skin and the lilt of my last name?

Lost and confused, the questions plagued me, as they would for years to come. They would simmer in the back of my mind, like a bubbling *caldo*, sometimes scalding, other times deliciously hot and nurturing.

Burning myself was the least of my worries.

Slowly I pulled on a protective armor, climbed up and straddled the fence again, gazing out over the no-man's land surrounding me. I might have been a Latina in Limbo, but I'd forge ahead anyway.

I refused to veer from the paths I'd chosen for myself—as a student, aspiring journalist, daughter of a Navy officer, a young woman of substance. Despite what I might

realistically have to face—people questioning my capabilities because of my skin and name, unfair obstacles placed in front of me, racial undercurrents, I was moving forward.

Throwing off excess baggage to lighten my load on this journey would help.

It was time to dig up some truths about myself. Time to peel off the layers of my own existence.

HOW I BECAME A LATINA IN LIMBO

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Language Barriers

In those years of the late 1970s, before the term Latina was born, Affirmative Action gave me opportunity. I received scholarships, awards for my writing, kudos because of my ethnic background. Because of my last name.

The opportunity held a double-edged sword. At first I had wanted to believe that the recognition came from my skill and not because of my name. Many people told me to “get real,” to pull my head out of the sand.

“Thank you for your confidence in my work, for what it’s worth,” I wanted to say.

I filled the quota, and no more? I refused to believe that.

I had worked damn hard to get my foot in the door and was pushing it open no matter how heavy it was.

Once through that door, however, doubts seeped in. I wondered if I deserved the awards at all. Did it count that I lived only by remote association with my ethnic background?

I knew about my cultural richness, knew where my great-grandparents had been born and raised in Mexico and Spain, loved the wonderful traditions I’d taken for granted. Even though the beauty of the Spanish language was never lost on me, the sad truth was, not speaking Spanish didn’t affect me one way or another as I grew up.

Speaking only English at home had been my parents’ choice. They were hard-working, middle class, Navy-first, proud and disciplined. We had to adapt to life on any Naval base, anywhere in the world, where a variety of cultures, religions, and races blended into one big extended, unconventional family.

Yes, English was the universal language as we traveled the world, and it would become the only language my brother and I would speak. That was our life. It was all we knew.

But speaking English well, studying it, falling in love with its nuances and magic of its words—didn’t bring guarantees in a world ruled by harsh words such as immigration, assimilation and division.

What did assimilation mean, anyway? Born and raised in the United States—just like my parents—meant, in theory that we were American. We didn’t have to “assimilate.”

But the hatred thrown at me in that one college moment opened me up to the prejudice that I was bound to face in the course of my life from both Latinos and non-Latinos, because of my skin color and name, yanking me out of an everything’s peachy-keen *la-la* land.

As whitebread as the people living on Fraternity row were and judged us, many of our supposed Latino brothers and sisters called kids like us Oreos—white on the inside, brown on the outside. And suddenly, that seemed like just another unfair label.

Life just isn't that black and white. Ever.

Pulling my head out of the clouds, I took a good hard look at my parents. Angry that they'd limited us to one language, robbed us of something beautiful, I wondered if they saw my brother and me up there, straddling that fence.

Anger targeted at them wasn't fair, either. My life was a wealth of experiences because of them.

It wasn't until many years later that I learned my dad had worked the fields as a boy, traveling across the country with his family, following seasonal crops, hating every minute of it. It was no wonder he packed up, joined the Navy and left the small Texas town he called home the first chance he got.

Perhaps it was also no wonder he wanted his kids to get as far away from that brutal life as possible, starting with a good education, a sturdy foundation of American pride and leaving everything culturally divisive well behind us.

Perhaps my mother got a taste of freedom in moving away from her family, on her own, just after her graduation. In the 1950s, a headstrong woman like that was more than brave entering the workforce. Faith and desire fueled her, but speaking English propelled her forward. She might have wanted more of the same for herself and her children as time passed and the moves between exotic or remote places became more frequent.

Maybe the language barrier was a generational thing, as well. Cousins and friends my age were sucked into a time warp when speaking Spanish in school meant reprimands and becoming social outcasts.

Unfair! I cry. I look at cousins both younger and older than me, slipping from English to Spanish effortlessly with beautiful bilingualism. Yes, I understood Spanish well and could speak haltingly. Yes, a twinge of envy tugs at my heartstrings at those times. What did my parents make me give up? What was the trade-off when all they had hoped was to give my brother and me a better life than they'd had?

Isn't that what all parents want for their children? I keep trying to convince myself that their choices for us were for the best.

But sometimes the best intentions backfire, as we all know.

Doing My Time

The barrio didn't give birth to me.

Stereotypes didn't raise me.

Tales of crossing over, of financial hardships, of battling barriers, of struggling with English as a second language, of growing up surrounded by gangs had never been my life.

That wasn't to say it was any better or worse than others' lives. It was simply as foreign to me as Chamorro, the language spoken on the island of Guam when we lived there. We were dropped into these lives, to make of them what we could.

Special bits and pieces of this lovely Mexican culture filtered through to me, after all. The memories grounded me and gave me a glimpse of little things that linked me to other generations and to a culture older than time.

The memories molded me in tender, meaningful ways and remain in my heart.

The ranchero music blasting on the radio on Sunday mornings; the grandmas whipping up a meal for four or forty in no time flat; the huge family gatherings where we were always welcome and embraced no matter how long we'd been away; family dramas that rivaled the telenovelas; traditions including tamales at Christmas and buñuelos on New Year's Eve and trying to make homemade tortillas; my grandma's superstitions and dream interpretations; my Opa's ranch house in Texas; the extravagant baptisms, first communions, quinceañeras and weddings; the non-stop talk, talk, talking; the lipsticks and high heels; the unbreakable bonds between the generations--my mom, aunts and grandma.

Yet, stereotypes portrayed all Mexican-Americans living in barrios. So, naturally, according to the media, they were true indicators of the lives we *all* led.

Living in the barrio wasn't an indicator of *my* life. Stereotypes had never been my thing.

I didn't do the hard time associated with living in the barrio.

Did being barrio-less make me any less Latina?

No.

In terms of doing time, Latina experience boiled down to three things. First, we each do time in our own way. Second, no matter where we lived—in the barrios or the suburbs, in the city or in the country—at one time or another, many of us have been judged and sentenced because of our skin color or last name. Third, we've had to define ourselves and our experiences, breaking stereotyped labels.

It could have started with a simple encounter.

Looking at myself one way while most of the rest of the world looked at me in quite another, I saw middle-class, educated and adaptable, with dreams of becoming a writer not a far-fetched plan.

Then there was reality and rude awakenings.

My first assigned college roommate saw my name and spiraled.

She admitted one night in a drunken stupor that when she'd seen my name on the housing list she had desperately tried to change apartments rather than move in with someone "like me." But it was too late to move elsewhere.

"Mendoza?" she had asked and shuddered even as she told the story months later. "What kind of name is that?"

Fear and loathing had filled her, she confessed.

"I'm glad I didn't move," she finally said. "You aren't like those other Mexicans. You're okay."

I stared at her blankly. Flabbergasted at her preconceptions, I didn't know what to say. I was actually American but also an "other" type of Latina, I wanted to point out, but knew the point would be lost on her.

The *other Mexicans* she referred to, I learned, belonged to groups like MECHA, believed in a cause, were politically active for their people. The ones she referred to spoke Spanish fluently. They spoke both languages with purpose and used that knowledge to their advantage, while grounding themselves with real roots.

The ones she referred to blasted non-Latina chicks like her for her narrow-mindedness and inability to see beauty in diversity. The ones she referred to she feared because, from the outside at least, they were so very different from her.

I wasn't one of *those* Mexicans.

Isolated encounters like this added up, ripped me up, fired me up.

Yes, I guess in my own way, I did do time.

Coming Full Circle

Decades later, the peeling continues, as I search for a place where my soul can rest and I can find some comfort in who I am, contentment with who I've become.

Leaving aside labels, I naively believe in equality and idealism and that change and acceptance starts with one person. It also starts with acknowledging that the path I chose to follow was a path I was meant to be on all along.

There are still roadblocks on that chosen path. There always will be. But sometimes the hardships balance out with nice surprises and nothing short of miracles.

Marrying a non-Latino may have diluted me in some ways, but it strengthened me in others. Although he accepted my cultural background, things would have been different with someone who had a similar upbringing. The way we celebrate, the way family dramas are played out, whether good or bad, the importance of church and saints, candles and sacraments, superstitions and stories, the unspoken rules of devotion and loyalty sometimes are inexplicable.

They just are.

However, I provided a glimpse of my heritage while inheriting another. I'm that much richer for meshing together two cultures.

I am lucky to live in California where "acceptance" might be easier gained. The tradeoff, however, is living on a border town. I also get the brunt of immigration issues, and am constantly surprised by people's thoughtless, cutting remarks that should have died decades ago but instead come as naturally to their lips as if they were ordering a fast food burger.

The comments are brutal, heart-wrenching and racially unfair, bringing to life the ingrained ugliness of bigotry. We live with it.

"Those Mexicans take our jobs, our health care, our welfare." "I'll get some Mexicans to work on my property." "I don't want my kids going to school with all those Mexicans. They'll bring down the high standards." "That carful of Mexicans shouldn't be there." "Go back to Mexico."

Each comment slaps me in the face over and over again. Forty years have passed since my bubble first burst. Have I come full circle, just to find that things haven't changed?

Somedays I feel I'm right back where I started from when I started the journey. Sentenced to a Limbo of undeterminable length, I finally open my eyes to reality around me—some people will always see differences more readily than similarities, acceptance isn't always the norm, and the media and politics perpetuate stereotypes.

The journey has not been rosy. I've been broken into fragments time and again, the wounds sometimes superficial, sometimes deep. I sweep up the pieces of myself left dangling here and there, hold them close and by some miraculous gesture, they meld together again, stronger than ever.

It's from all these fragmented pieces that I am whole.

In all truth, I've grown from the comments, the hardships and the joys. I hope they have made me a stronger woman, with compassion for those less fortunate, whatever their skin tone, and a vow to open my mind to diversity and possibilities.

Was I doomed to Limbo? Would my children be doomed, as well?

No.

Was I naive? Idealistic?

Yes.

As I raised my children, I had to be. I wanted them to be accepting of others in their differences and carry with them what's important, what matters as a decent human being.

What I know is this: I carried the uncertainty of my identity all my life, and even though it was buried in the recesses of my mind, it still simmered like a volcano growling in its sleep.

Awakening from this hazy slumber, I realize labels don't need to be limiting or one-dimensional at all. I am American. I'm Latina. I'm a woman. Mother. Journalist. Educator. Believer.

To be Latina means answering to "mija," yet pledging my heart to the red, white and blue. It means being a Navy brat yet embracing childhood memories of baptisms and cascarones, midnight vigils and playing *lotería*, sacrifices and celebrations and the laughter that sweetened coffee and pan dulce secrets deep into the night. It's visiting relatives I've met only twice before but whose embrace makes me feel like I've come home. Whether Spanish is spoken or not, whether skin is brown or white, to be Latina celebrates spirit and sisterhood, roots and reasoning, family and the future. Latina means calling my own daughters *mija*, knowing their melting-pot heritage will carry on this legacy that has been my lifeline all along.

Comfortable in my skin, comfortable in the way I raised my children, a twinge of uncertainty still surfaces occasionally, but I've learned to push it aside to live life, get past regrets and enjoy the beauty of my heritage, my culture, my world, whether it's in bits and pieces or full-on glory.

I will dwell on the positive. For every negative encounter, there have been hundreds of absolutely incredible people, experiences or achievements that told me I was on the path that was right for me.

More than anything, I've learned I am simply a woman of deeper dimensions, deserving of more than labels. And with this thought, I move through life with the richness of two blessed cultures intertwining like vines of wisteria and jasmine showering my life with sweet scents.

Limbo might not be such a bad place to be. For here, I'm allowed to embrace the Latina in my soul and offer myself up as a woman of substance.