

White in My Book

"The good thing is that when people talk to you on the telephone you sound white."

I was in high school when my father told me this. My Mexican father whose parents crossed the border into California in the 1920s. My father who grew up a picker's son, served in Korea, and worked as a garbage man for more than 30 years. My father whose skin was like rain-soaked wood, his body like a cinder block, his hair black like a cast iron *comal*. He had a readiness in his countenance to assume the worst in anyone not family. He said I sounded white, and he meant it as a compliment. When I say it now, it sounds like nails on a chalkboard. A reference that is as outdated as sounding white.

Yet, my father was right. My parents moved to San Ramon, a Bay Area suburb, in 1971, a year before I was born. Monday through Friday I attended all-white schools, but on the weekends, we returned to Oakland where we bought our weekly groceries at mercados and ate at Mexican taquerias, even though we ate homemade Mexican food every day. It's where I lived my Mexican life with my cousins. We lived only twenty miles apart from each other, but their English sounded different than mine. Theirs held onto the melody of Spanish and it was laden with swag. I wanted to sound like them so badly, but when I tried to copy their intonations, their vernacular, I sounded like a phony. My cousins adored me regardless. *Iz cool Lolo, you can't help it if you white-wash, we loves you anyway prima.*

Without a doubt, my cousins were the cool kids at their high schools. They possessed the confidence, the right wide-laced sneakers, and the big Aqua Net hair that would make hallways part when they strolled past. Me? I wasn't blond enough or cheerleader-material enough, to be a part of the *in* crowd. But like every John Hughes film, there was a peripheral clique where I fit in. At lunch, my friends and I would sit shoulder to shoulder, tilting our ears towards each other to share the stiff wiry headphones that plugged into our Walkmans. And when a popular jock called me 'taco' or asked me if I wore a sombrero at home, my friends and I would retort with intellectual insults.

Then, on the weekends I would dance in my cousin's basements where they threw parties with DJs and dance-offs held on flattened cardboard boxes. Maybe if I had grown up in Oakland, the Robocop and the Cabbage Patch would have naturally flowed from my limbs. My cousins would imitate my moves and tease me. *Prima, you so cute, what you call that dance, the Valley Girl?* I'd do a twirl and scrunch a shoulder up to my cheek. Their friends would cut side-glances at me, but never more than once. By association, I was cool, and their friends became my friends. *Lolo have that Boy George style. What those shoes called you wearin? Creepers? Que qué? They look creepy to me, nah, just messin with you cuz, you look fly.*

I slid across and through both worlds.

In my 30s, I worked as a Statistician at a food science laboratory. I was the only non-white employee at my job. I developed a close relationship with one woman, in particular. She had a genuine interest in my life and culture, so one day, over lunch, I shared an experience with her. Incidentally, my co-worker's name was Karen.

So, I was working at the Bagel Bakery in Dublin (Karen nods, she knows the place), I was around 18 or 19, right after high school, and this woman calls in an order for a dozen bagels. I took her order and baked her bagels. She walked in a little later, gave me her name, and I rang her up. Nothing out of the ordinary.

This woman looks at me funny over the cash register, "Can I speak to the young girl who took my order over the phone?"

"Sure, that's me."

"No, I want the American girl who took my order over the phone."

"Sure, that's me."

What's going on here? This woman hasn't even looked inside her bag yet. We go back and forth like this a few times and finally she says,

"I'd like to talk to a manager."

"Ok..."

An ugly feeling lands in my gut. I go to the backroom, and I talk to my boss, the owner. His name is Alex. He's a tall white guy in his 30s. I tell Alex what's happening. He looks annoyed, but he follows me up front and asks the woman how he can help.

She's relieved to see Alex.

"I called in an order for some bagels from a pleasant American girl and 'this girl' here is extremely rude and she is a liar. Clearly, she's not American." She shakes her head and her bobbed blond hair bounces around her face. Somehow, in her brain, the appearance of my brown skin, my brown eyes, my brown hair, and my short stature, converted my perfect American accent into a broken jumble of words.

Alex looked at me, then at the woman, and apologized. For a second, I thought his apology was meant to explain that I was the only employee on that shift and of course it was me who took the order. But instead, he says, "Lorena, please apologize for your rudeness."

What? What?

"Hell no!" And I stormed to the backroom.

I finish telling Karen this story and her blue eyes look at me with genuine care. She put her pale hand on mine, "Oh Lorena, that's awful, but I want you to know that you will always be white in my book."

What? What? I did not yell hell no, but Karen and I were over, in my book. I thought of my cousins and how fiercely protective they were of me. Don't mess with my prima, pendeja, go ahead and see what happens.

I also remembered vividly my father's words. I will always sound white on the telephone. Lucky me.

It's been twenty years since my Karen moment, and when the memes and gifs of the current-day "Karens" started popping up all over the internet I could not help but retell this story to my friends, my family, to my kids. The more I relived it the more I understood what my father had tried to tell me. He had given me a warning. People were going to judge me by my Mexican face. He wasn't wrong. Versions of both Karen incidents have happened more times than I can count. Even so, some of the white kids I grew up with are some of the best friends I've ever had. Hell, even my cousins love them.

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I don't slide across both worlds the way I did when I was a kid. My internal antennae, honed by 18 years of residence in San Ramon, pick up on the smallest slights and micro aggressions. Today, I walk around in my brown skin and my valley girl voice, with my father's warning in my countenance. I walk around with my cousin's voices in my heart. *We loves you Lolo, you with us.*