

Alyssa Lopez
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Different Family, Different Culture, Same Me

My dad lets out a hearty laugh as we pay our \$1.50 fine and pass through the tiny line of toll booths off of the Pennsylvania Turnpike. It has been nine years since he and I have visited his side of the family, and you can see the relief in our faces to almost be back in his native Pennsylvania after our long trip from Michigan. Only now, after twelve hours of highways and semi-trucks, twelve hours of smooth jazz and random country stations, twelve hours of coffee cups and bathroom breaks, does he roll down his window and contentedly light a cigarette. We are finally back in his hometown; Reading, Pennsylvania, the city where it seems on every street he could tell you a story about a mischievous adventure from his childhood. Our beat-up '90 Dodge Dynasty glides down the freeway for a few minutes, becoming engulfed by the massive buildings and never-ending apartments of downtown. Tossing his glowing cigarette butt out of the window, my dad takes one more out of the case – much to my dismay from the back seat – and, lighting up again, asks me, “So Aly, you know what to say to your Nana and Abuelo when you see them... right?”

My dad's family is the most stereotypical Puerto Rican family that I know. All of my uncles, aunts, and cousins live in town, and it seems that every time I hear stories from my dad, a new relative pops up as a part of the family. They are the exact opposite of my mom's small, white, Midwestern family from Michigan. In her family, everyone is much more reserved, standoffish, and loves the extreme Michigan weather. On the other hand, the Lopez family is full of a bunch of loud, tan, habitually warm-blooded, smokers. That's why I loved visiting when I was a kid. I tried to absorb all of the excitement, laughter, and constant surroundings of

their fluent Spanish as it flew past me. Only able to visit once a year back then, my dad and I were constantly doted on. My aunts, or Titis, made all of our favorite foods, like arroz con pollo and banana pasteles. My Tíos, or Uncles, would sit me on their laps and coax me to repeat little words in Spanish that they pointed out, hoping that their lessons would accelerate my language and make me a full-blown fluent speaker by the next time we met. My Nana would sing to me Spanish lullabies before I went to bed, her thick accent mesmerizing me into dreams. I relished the attention as a child, and now I couldn't wait to see my obnoxiously animated family once again.

I shift our sleeping dog around on my lap in the crowded back seat, and get a huge puff of smoke in my face. The next few minutes are filled with random Spanish phrases and words that my dad spurts out. They have no meaning to me, yet I try to understand for his sake. He is concerned with my appearance to all of his family, and his newfound preoccupation with cigarettes shows me he is also worried about how he will look as well. Once again, he starts up the hurried lecture I've heard three times already during the car ride of the correct ways to pronounce our welcome blessings: annunciating each syllable in the word "*ben-dee-see-own*," or "*God Bless You*," and stressing the importance of the double kiss on the cheek and a big, sincere hug. With that, we pull up to the small, white brick house on Pear Street and stretch our legs. I can't wait to finally be able to act Puerto Rican for a change. *It feels so good to be back.*

Our arrival was planned as a surprise for my Nana's 75th birthday. The only person who knew we were coming was my Titi Jackie, who strategically arranged for both my Nana and Abuelo to be home in the kitchen when she let us in. Like clockwork, we rang the doorbell once and heard her heavy, deliberate footsteps stomp through the living room to the glass door. Stepping aside, she waved us over to the stairs where no one could see us. "*Dios te bendiga*,

gracias a Dios que llegó bien. Gracias a Dios,” she whispers, thanking God for our safe trip, while giving us both long, overwhelming hugs. She smelled just as I had remembered, of lilac and cooking spices. Instantly I felt at home.

My Nana was so surprised that she began to sob upon seeing my dad. She clutched her oldest son while tears ran down her wrinkled face and dropped to the floor. They shared a great hug, while my dad whispered his blessings into her tiny ears. Watching them from the kitchen door, I saw my dad’s tall body carefully wrap his arms around his mother’s frail stature. When they finished, I was sent over to my grandparents to bid them “Bendición” with two kisses and a steady hug each. Their reaction seemed satisfied, but after it was over there was nothing more for me to say. I stepped out of the way for my dad to make conversation, and slowly lost grasp of what was being said through their energetic interjections and joyous laughter.

Nine years and four Spanish classes since my last trip to Pennsylvania, and I was no closer to being a part of my dad’s family than I was the last time I visited. My language was nowhere near the fluent Puerto Rican I heard my dad speak on the phone. I’d all but forgotten the Spanish classes of my past – instead I had begun to focus on all of the chemistry, physics, and calculus classes that dominated my schedule. I expected everything to be the same with my dad’s family, but now I was older. No longer was I a child to be pampered, nor was I excused for not knowing how to communicate in Spanish. My family expected me to know more. *Why didn’t I?*

Before ten the next morning, it seems the entire Lopez family has descended on my Nana’s house. I hear what sounds like hundreds of footsteps reverberate off of the basement walls as I get ready to go upstairs. My dad has been up for hours, and back to his regular Pennsylvania routine of Puerto Rican brewed coffee, Telémundo, and the local Spanish

newspaper. Coming down to grab a set of glasses, he sees me standing in front of the mirror. “A plaid shirt? It makes you look too white. And why don’t you throw on some more makeup? Cover up that white skin, you *gringa!*” Gringa, his pet name for my mom and I – Spanish slang for a white girl – stabs my heart with pain. He grins jokingly as he walks back up the stairs, but doesn’t see the panic on my face as I turn around to examine myself more closely. Sure, I knew that I wasn’t as tan as my dad or any of his family – I inherited my mom’s pale skin, which covers up any hint of Hispanic heritage my father may have genetically passed along. However, I had never realized it was so obvious until my dad so bluntly pointed it out. Desperate to look more Puerto Rican, I chose a less ‘country-inspired’ top, and threw on another couple of layers of translucent powder. *Hopefully that’s enough.*

As soon as I got upstairs, crowds of uncles, aunts, and kids swarmed around me, waiting to catch a glimpse of their elusive niece or cousin. Each received a customary hug, and two kisses on the cheek, but when there were no more hugs to give out, I froze up. My Tío Gilbert stepped up and asked me how old I was, to which I shyly answered “Oh, umm 16.” My cousin Ruben chimed in with another question: “What have you been up to in school?” The questions were all easy enough, and I thought I’d be able to get away with not speaking any Spanish for a while. Then, my father yelled from the back of the crowd, “How about showing them your Spanish, Aly?”

In my mind, the entire room went dead silent. I fumbled around with a few things I could say, but nothing I had practiced seemed correct at the moment. “Ummm, ¿Yo estudio... er... mucho quimica y matematicas?” My statement about having lots of chemistry and math classes came out as a question. *How could I fix it? Should I try to say it again?* My mind was racing with possibilities, but my humiliation made me decide to stay quiet. Immediately I could feel my

face turning bright red as I awkwardly lowered my gaze to floor, hoping no one would notice my flawed Spanish. There was silence throughout the circle around me as my uncles and cousins tried to find something to say. I couldn't help but see a glimpse of disappointment in my dad's eyes as I stumbled through that simple sentence. Sensing my discomfort, my Tío waved it off, speaking in his thick accent to my other cousins with a wide smile on his face, changing the topic and seemingly forgetting the incident.

I had no clue if my Tío was talking about me or something else afterwards; all I wanted to do was go back downstairs and hide my face. In my dad's eyes, I had disappointed him. I didn't have his family's characteristic deep tan skin and loud, energetic laugh. He had instantly been able to fit back into his old lifestyle by taking up his habit of smoking two packs a day, and swearing like a sailor again. What could I do to be more like him? And now, after all of my practice of many different sentences about my life and school, I couldn't even say something correctly in Spanish? I looked around the room and saw a sea of bronzed skin that I didn't have. Feeling like I didn't belong, I resorted to standing against the wall and avoiding contact with as many people as possible. This just wasn't working out.

"So wait, who's the white girl between Ashanti and José?" I heard a woman's loud voice ask from the other side of the thin living room wall. It was one of the first bits of English I had heard very clearly in a while, and her words pierced my heart for a moment while I listened for a response. The digital camera with all of the family pictures was making its way around the room to all who wanted to see, and from what I could tell, the woman was looking at the picture of all 12 cousins. "Ay, ¿la niña de Frankie?" *Frankie's girl?* I wanted to turn around and look at the picture myself, but couldn't bear the thought of the woman seeing me. I did not want to be the

“white girl.” Fighting back tears, I made my way to the back door and snuck out to the garage, hoping no one would be able to find me there.

I wish I had been able to deal with my family more directly, instead of running away. Instead, I called my mom back home, and cried into the phone. “Mom? ... Can you come get me? ... Just skip work! ... PLEASE?” By this time I was blubbering hysterically, to the point where not even I could understand myself. I babbled on about my stupid white skin, and how much I wished I had the same personality and looks as my dad and his family. “If... I looked like... dad... it’d be... easier!” I got out through gasping sobs. I knew in the back of my mind that it really wouldn’t, but it felt good to blame my bad day on something that was out of my control.

My mom let me cry out my frustrations before she started to calm me down. After a few moments of silence, she began, “Aly, I’m not going to come get you. Calm down. Take a few deep breaths and listen to me.” She waited until she heard me actually begin to breathe normally to speak again. “You are a smart, beautiful girl, and your dad’s family sees that. They don’t care if you speak Spanish or not, they just want to see you being happy. You haven’t seen them in a long time, and it’s not like they expected you to have changed that much. You’re the same little girl they remember from nine years ago, and they still love you the same as back then. Make the most of this experience.” With tears still in my eyes, I listened to everything she had to say. It made sense to me. I still had the same white skin and inclination for English as I did the last time I had visited. That much hadn’t changed.

When I finally hung up the phone and dried my final tears on my black sweater, I saw the layers of powder from my face cover my sleeve like a white glob. It was no use; I was not tan, and never would be, but why should that stop me from getting to know my family? I hadn’t

driven twelve hours out here to sit in a dark, dusty garage and cry about things I couldn't change. Wiping off the rest of my make-up, I eventually got up and went back into the busy house.

My cousin Ashanti caught my arm as I was making my way back to the living room. "There you are! Come look at what Lily made on her computer!" she said with bursting excitement. I smiled and followed her to my cousin Lily, who was sitting on the couch surrounded by at least a dozen of my other cousins. Her face spread into a wide smile as I walked up, and she turned the computer for me to see. On the screen I saw the picture of me and all of my cousins, edited with a plain purple frame and four simple words: *Todos juntos otra vez*, or "All together again." At that moment, my eyes started to wet again, but this time with tears of happiness. Looking up, I saw twelve other tan faces smiling back at me, and felt immensely proud to be a part of my Puerto Rican family. It didn't matter that I didn't look exactly like my cousins; I realized they still loved me because I was a part of their family. Our blood bonds are much stronger than my white skin.

Sure, I wasn't coddled by my Tíos and Titís anymore, but I began to make jokes about my less than perfect Spanish, and stumbled my way through forced conversations about school and food. "La comida es muy bueno," *The food is really good*, I commented to my Tití Jackie with my young cousins on my lap, watching her cook rice around the stove. Her genuine smile seemed to appreciate my effort to fit in, and made all the difference to me.

A few days and hundreds of hugs later, my dad and I packed up the car to head back to Michigan. We had said goodbye to the majority of our family the night before, and now only my Tití Jackie, Nana, and Abuelo were left to see us off. We all exchanged long embraces and I could feel my eyes well up – this time wondering the next time I would see my family again. A knot formed in the pit of my stomach, and I felt I could not even speak without bursting into a

hysterical fit. After hearing their blessings for a safe trip, I plopped back into the car and waved to the three of them, fighting back the tears. Perfectly planned, my dad pulled out his last cigarette from the carton and lit up as we pulled out of the driveway. We sat in silence for the first five minutes of the ride back, both noticeably sad to leave our family. Throwing his cigarette butt out the window, my dad finally turned to me and said, while smiling, “Your Nana wouldn’t stop saying how much you look like me when I was your age. I should show you pictures some time, you really have the Lopez ‘features’.” Smiling, I looked at my dad and saw the same eyes, nose, and hair that I had. We did look pretty similar, but I had never really noticed.

I never told him about my tears in the garage – it didn’t really matter after our short conversation in the car. My skin was white, but I was still a part of his family. I will never have tan skin like my dad or his family, but I’ve come to accept that truth. I’m still not fluent, but hope to minor in Spanish at the University of Michigan. Further, I now strive to push myself to become fluent so that one day I could have a real conversation with my aunts and uncles. More than ever, I want to demonstrate my pride in my Latina heritage and continue the Puerto Rican legacy to my future children by being able to teach them Spanish as well. The bonds that I feel when I’m with my family are much deeper than any other worry or preconception I may make up about myself. So what if I can’t speak perfect Spanish at the moment? *Yo soy puertorriqueña*. I am Puerto Rican, and proud of it.