



Half In, Half Out

ORBITING A WORLD FULL OF PEOPLE OF COLOR

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When you were born, you cried and the world rejoiced. Live your life so that when you die, the world cries and you rejoice.

—CHEROKEE PROVERB

When I was born, I came out red.

The way my mother tells it, I came out blood orange. I'm not sure what the doctors thought as they looked up at my parents: a Black man as dark as the inside of an endless pit, with slick wavy hair fit for an Indio, and a brown woman with thin, penciled-in lines for eyebrows and thick black corkscrew curls.

After they cleaned me up and the hospital air hit my lungs, my skin turned white. Yes, I know what you're thinking: How can that be? I ask my mother the same thing. "Tell me again how I came out," I'll ask at random. Each time there's a new detail: "You looked so much like your father's mother—she was Native from the South," or, "A head full of hair you had, it was dark and bone straight, with a curl at the ends." Even my tiny fingers were white, but there were traces of color around the nail

beds, dark halos around my earlobes, hints for what my skin would eventually become—brown.

I think about that a lot.

I grew up in a family where complexions varied like bruised and unripe fruit. We never thought to question why our skin is a particular color—my older sister Nina, light-skinned with a green undertone, my sister Jaime, light-skinned with more yellow and pink undertones. My brother and I—everyone swears that we are twins—both brown until sun-kissed when our tanned skin becomes the color of an eclipse. Hair as textured as they come, at times more coil than curl, at others more fine than coarse. All six of us so very different, but still familia no matter what.

Some family members spoke Spanish, especially the elders, like my tías, who only communicated in español, but all of my siblings and primos spoke English. It was normal for us to speak to the elders in English and them back to us in their native tongue. And if you didn't understand the language, you learned to pay attention to the body because facial expressions and hand gestures spoke volumes. A flick of the hand and the phrase "déjalo" meant leave it alone; knitting of the eyebrows, concerned eyes, tilt of the head, with a hand on the shoulder and "ya comiste?" meant have you eaten yet. It's strange to not speak a language fluently yet still be attuned to its meaning, but it's comforting all the same.

Back in Brooklyn, East New York, where I was born and raised, everyone in the projects was either Black, African, or Latinx. Having only been surrounded by people

of color, I thought that's what the rest of the world must look like. Imagine my surprise when my younger sister and I ended up in foster care at the ages of five and eight, plucked from the hood into an affluent part of Brooklyn to live with a middle-aged married white couple. They had a nice house, with an upstairs and a basement. It was probably the first time in my life where I had to sit at the dining room table for every freaking meal.

My sense of the world changed rapidly, and because I was a keen observer as a kid, I quickly learned all the ways that I stood out from white people. Hair perceived too wild to be tamed by the untrained hands of a white woman (thank God my mother taught me how to gather my mane into a ponytail). Requesting arroz con pollo, casamiento, a staple in my family's household, only to be given chicken noodle soup and a sandwich. Attending a school where an annoying white boy talked on and on about how he and his dad traveled to fancy museums around the city and the Brooklyn Botanical Garden all the time. At first, I was intrigued, devoured his stories like sprinkles on ice cream until his life started to seem too glamorous for me. I was only eight but had never been to the botanical garden or a museum. Most importantly, though, he had access to his family, and I did not, and that hurt. So the next time he droned on and on in class about riding the train into the Bronx with his dad to visit the New York Botanical Garden, I snapped on him. I begged for him to shut up and keep his stories to himself, but he just turned over his shoulder and kept on talking to the next student, unfazed.

I hated school. It was just another building, another

Principle

mostly white space where I felt out of place. I didn't want to go—but I didn't want to stay at home with my foster parents either. Teachers encouraged me to try to make friends. Regular check-ins with the guidance counselor, questions from my foster mom about how school was going, missing my family something fierce—too many emotions washed over me—anxiety, sadness, but more than anything anger, so I kept to myself.

I had convinced myself family was all I needed and that my mom was coming to rescue us at any moment. Every day after school, I looked forward to when the phone rang because I knew it would be Mami calling. I'd sit on the sofa drumming my feet against the base listening to Mami tell me how she was working on getting us all back together. How I had to be on my best behavior—cuidarse—look out for my younger sister, don't just trust anyone or let anyone touch us inappropriately.

Mami filled me up with her empty promises to come to scoop us up. Her calls became less frequent, and I finally stopped believing her.

I found myself eager to connect with a community that looked like me. But it was hard as a transfer student in the middle of the school year. While my white classmates could easily sucker the attention of my peers, I could not. After weeks of isolation and unsuccessful attempts at making friends, my teacher partnered me up with one of the other Black girls in class for an assignment. It was the greatest thing that could've happened to me. We became fast friends. Suddenly I was eager to go to school because I had something to look forward to. Someone to share secrets with.

We hung out all the time—sat next to each other in class, during lunch; at recess, we chased each other around the yard and played jump rope and tag. She even introduced me to a few of her friends and other kids of color.

Everyone started to think we were related—at the time, I thought it was because of how much time we were spending together, but now that I'm older, I know that it was just white people confusing us. Like when I showed up to class late from lunch one time and was called by her name instead of my own. The white teacher swore that I was her, but when I reminded her that my friend was actually not in school that day, she just clucked her tongue and said that she would be sure to mark me present. Things like that happened frequently. People would have a hard time calling me by my name, so Saraciea was folded into Shanice because her name was easier to pronounce. When she or I corrected them, folks just laughed it off, never really apologizing; they'd shrug their shoulders and blame it on us looking alike and sounding alike. Teachers claimed it was because we were inseparable.

Despite all of that, I finally started to feel like things were going to be okay, that I belonged again, that I could maybe survive being away from my family because I was no longer orbiting the world alone.

My world shattered all over again when I was told that I would be removed from the white foster family's home and placed in the Bronx with my tía and her family. It's not like I wasn't excited about being reunited with familia—it was more so the look on my friend's face when I broke the news that I was leaving. She asked me where I was moving

to, and I told her, and then she asked if it was because I was a foster kid. I'd never told her that I was in the system—my guess was the teachers probably did. Just like that, her words made me question if what we shared was even real or if she was just taking pity on me like everyone else.

The day I left the foster family's home is a complete blur, but I still remember that huge wooden dining room table, that sofa where my tiny body imprinted every day as I sat biting my nails, gnawing on the inside of my lip and cheek until they were raw, waiting for the phone to ring just to speak to my mom, and sometimes my other siblings—three-way was truly our saving grace. Most of all, I will always remember that white woman's face when we arrived on her doorstep in the middle of the night, with her wire-rimmed glasses perched on the brim of her nose. She was so patient with me, even when I lashed out in anger. Screaming how I didn't want to be there and for the social worker to take us back to Mami.

We met Mami and tía in a secluded family room in some tall building in downtown Manhattan. We frequently traveled into the city thanks to my being in the system; it's where we went to meet with our caseworker, and on rare occasions where my sister and I would have supervised visits with Mami. My other sister, Jaime, and cousins were in that room waiting for us. I swear I was so excited that I felt my heart pounding in my fingertips. Even though I would still technically be in the foster care system, we were all happy to be among family again. It made being away from my brothers and sisters and Mami better because we weren't surrounded by strangers or gringos. Plus, we could

call each other at any time, and my mom could pop over to see us whenever she wanted.

We moved into Tía's house with quickness—we didn't have much luggage to begin with, so it was easy to get settled. All six of my siblings were there that first night, so it was a reunion of sorts. Nina had come all the way from Brooklyn to see us, my sister Jaime was already living with Titi, and my brothers had transferred from the group home into her custody too. We ate a traditional Latin home-cooked meal, and then the fifteen of us piled up in the living room, some of us on the sofa, the kids on the floor listening to Mami, Titi, and my older siblings tell us stories about everything that had transpired while we were split apart. We talked for hours on end until the younger kids fell asleep, until Mami and my sister had to say goodbye to go back to Brooklyn. Nina promised she'd visit again, and Mami promised that we would all be back home real soon.

My tío, whom everyone called Papo, was the best uncle, hands down. He was Puerto Rican with German roots, so all of my cousins were various shades of brown but also white. You'd never know my cuz—a white Latina—pale skin, long dirty blonde hair, and everything, was Puerto Rican and Honduran unless you knew her last name, heard her speak Spanish, or spotted her with her parents. But you'd also never suspect that I—with darker skin and long thick curly frizzy brown hair—was Latina either. As kids, we had no reason to question our identity, but society forced us to. Because I stood out from the rest of my cousins, I was singled out a lot. An easy target for people to pick at when it came to our mixed race family. It seemed as though

everyone was armed and ready to challenge my right to exist. First, it was I couldn't be Black because my hair was too "nice"—I had that "good hair" according to all of the Black kids at my new school, in this new beast of a borough—the Bronx. I suddenly had to be "mixed" or "Spanish," Puerto Rican, or Dominican. I couldn't just be Black. I had to be mixed with something—and half the time, I didn't even know what being mixed meant. I mean, honestly, what nine-year-old is concerning herself with that?

I'll never forget that one day, my cousin—who is two years older—and I were playing Double Dutch in front of her beat-up Section 8 house on Allerton and Wallace Avenue when one of her friends asked to join us. We were excited to have someone else man the rope instead of using the gate to help us turn. But instead of just joining us, she asked who I was and where I came from. As if I was some outsider, some stranger who didn't belong. Of course, my cuz and I both responded that I was her cousin from Brooklyn and that I would be living with them now. That should've deaded the conversation right there, but instead, she probed on. "Okay, cool, but how is that your cousin if she's darker than you? Is she Puerto Rican too?"

My throat closed up as I scowled at the girl and gripped the rope tighter. Who was she to call me out like that? I was so taken aback I didn't know how to respond. Neither did my cuz. This was all new to me. I had no idea at that age what it meant to be Puerto Rican. All I knew was that I was Black, and that was that. But there we were having this conversation when I was just trying to kick it with my cousin and jump some rope. My cousin fidgeted

with the rope in her hands, shifting her weight around. It felt like we were trapped in that moment forever until my cousin finally just blurted, "Yeah, she the same thing as me, Puerto Rican and Hondurian." At the time, I believed if my older cuz said we were the same, then we were the same, punto final. I didn't even pick up at the time that she said "Hondurian" instead of Honduran, which later on in life a Honduran friend would correct me on—I had spent what felt like a lifetime mislabeling myself. My cousin's answer did the trick though because the girl shrugged it off like nothing, grabbed the rope, and introduced herself to me. The weirdness I felt dissipated, and we started jumping rope again.

That moment rocked me to my core, but it simultaneously empowered me. I had been navigating the world not really knowing anything about my culture, or where I came from. It made me take stock of who I was and who my family was too. It's not like I was learning about Honduras in school, so I found I needed to find a way to get answers on my own. I started to pay closer attention to everything and everyone. I secretly questioned why we did certain things, from the way we wore our hair to the food we ate and the holidays we celebrated. I even started to associate being Puerto Rican with being Black.

When Black kids at school cornered me on the playground, in the lunchroom, or during physical education and asked me what my ethnicity was, I stuck out my chest, stood upright, and proudly told them I was Puerto Rican and Honduran. It felt good finally claiming my identity, but I also paid attention to how their faces changed.

Identity

external
doersdm

How some would be excited that I was suddenly not just another Black girl, but also Hispanic, and others a little defeated that I didn't answer just Black.

The kids I considered friends were friends just because I liked them; it wasn't about race or ethnicity. But I did notice how Latinx kids began to embrace me. Suddenly they felt like they had a claim on me. I'd walk onto the schoolyard waiting for us to line up to go inside the school, and they'd approach me, all smiles and high fives like we had been BFFs all along. Commenting on my hair, and sharing thoughts like, "I knew you had to be Spanish because there's something about your complexion, like you look exotic." What made things even stranger is everyone knew my cousins. Once they found out that I was related to them, people were nicer to me: not just the Latinx and Black kids, but the popular kids too.

Even though we were two years apart, my prima seemed so tapped into things about our culture, about the world, whereas I felt like I had no clue. We spent so much time together while I lived with my aunt. We did everything together. We both rocked slicked-back ponytails and messy buns. We were partners in crime, from stealing sips of Corona behind Tío Papo's back to pocketing coins from Titi's laundry money.

Titi made us buy the same things and wear our hair the same way. She was very much equal, equal until she wasn't. For some strange reason, even though my cousin and I were close, we clashed *a lo*. She hated that I was in her shadow, following her everywhere, even when she snuck out to kiss her secret boyfriend. It became apparent

that even though I believed with my whole heart that we were the same, we definitely were not.

→ The way Western culture, and, especially, American culture, shames us for being non-white is heartbreaking. When I was younger, Mami would either braid my hair, put it in nudos—Bantu knots—or, my least favorite, use the hot comb. But while living with Tía, she and my sister Jaime decided my hair needed to be straight and more manageable, so they put a relaxer in my hair—JUST FOR ME is what the box said. I was about nine, and the thought of having silky straight hair like the beautiful Black girl on the box made my insides burst with excitement. I won't lie—it was the most painless of all the hairstyling sessions aside from my scalp tingling here and there. I remember sitting on the floor between my sister's legs as she parted my hair in four sections, greased my edges and my kitchen. She draped a towel over my shoulders, put on the noisy plastic gloves, and started applying the chemical straightener to my hair. I wasn't allowed to run around and play with my cousins. I had to sit and wait for the relaxer to take. That thirty minutes felt like a lifetime as my hair went from curly to wavy to straight. Periodically, I'd sneak into the bathroom, close the door, and stare at myself as my hair transformed. Not yet realizing that the seeds of self-hatred were being sown as the minutes ticked on.

Once the time was up, my sister and I went to the bathroom to wash it out. Both of us on our knees hunched over the tub washing the product from my hair. When I emerged, and in front of the mirror, I barely recognized myself. I had never seen my hair wet and so straight. It

our roots were so I could dictate my identity—not other people. Through conversations with my mother, I finally learned that I was, in fact, *not* Puerto Rican—that was my cousin's identity. I was, in fact, Black, Native American, Honduran, and Garifuna.

My mother and I have had extensive discussions about what it was like when she arrived in the States as a young girl, and one thing she told me has always struck a chord with me. She and the rest of her Honduran siblings were told to identify as Honduran, as Hispanic, never as Black because of the way they would be treated. That, for me, just hit different as I matured and navigated the world. Everyone is conditioned to view Black people as if we don't matter. Even among the Black community, society finds ways to pit us against each other, from colorism to the critiquing of our hair, our bodies, and so forth.

It was refreshing to have something to say whenever people asked me what I was, where I was from. I took so much pride in saying, "I'm Hondureña—my mom is from Honduras." And then more questions would come. What part of Honduras was she from? La Ceiba—we are Indias y Negras, we trace our heritage from the women. While other kids my age knew who they were, where they came from, I was only beginning to scratch the surface. I felt as though I had been robbed. You see, my grandmother ran away from her family when they moved from Honduras to the Bronx in the 1960s. Because of that, my mother and her siblings didn't grow up in a traditional Honduran household. Instead, my grandfather raised them, but he was always away working on ships, so he enlisted neigh-

was so long too. As a tomboy, I mainly wore my hair in a ponytail, but this new hair made me feel more beautiful. When I was older, though, I resented having had my hair relaxed. I often wonder what my original hair texture was like back then. Even though I've had natural hair since I was a junior in high school, I still feel like it never returned to what it once was.

Relaxing my hair wasn't the only anti-Black/Western ideals thing that was consciously imparted to me as a kid. Anytime one of us got hurt, we were instructed to use bleaching cream to take away or minimize the scarring. But for me (and any of my darker-skinned siblings or cousins), using bleaching cream on my knees and elbows was part of my daily ritual. We were instructed to apply the bleaching cream on any dark spots—one of my cousins even put it on her face. Honestly, looking back now, I know that it was just my family being anti-Black and navigating colorism. It's part of the hard truths we've had to grapple with. We've always celebrated our Blackness, our African and Indigenous roots, but deep down inside, we were all dealing with our own self-hate that was driven by what society and the media told us constantly—the closer you can get to whiteness, the better your life will be. Even now, until this day, I have to check my sisters, my cousins, and especially my mom, who still makes comments about my hair and what's acceptable to her. I politely remind her of all the ways she is contributing to white, Western ideals.

As I got older, I continued to ask questions about my family's ancestry. I desperately needed to know what

Whiteness

Colorism

Anti-Black
Whiteness

bors whom he trusted to look after them. Those neighbors were Black and Puerto Rican, so we definitely have their influences in our upbringing. I can eat arroz con pollo with mac and cheese and collard greens and then have flan for dessert. Our home was a melting pot.

I'm still actively uncovering the history and ancestry of my family. The elders in the family clam up whenever I start poking around, digging through family photos, asking questions about family members, about our dirty and shameful family secrets. Nobody ever talks to me if we are in a large group, but I've cornered my first cousins, and they spill the tea. I follow up with my tías, so many tías, who all hold a different piece of the puzzle when it comes to family history. Slowly but surely, I am capturing and low-key recording my findings so that others who have questions won't have to dig so deep to uncover our truth. So much has been lost purposefully over the years. I can trace my father's roots back to the white plantation owners in the South from his last name—Fennell—and though I know it's just a name, it carries all that history and pain. I'm focused on my Honduran side of the family at the moment. I imagine my father's history will be much more painful for me to explore, and I'm not sure I'm ready to go there just yet.

But I finally truly have a sense of who I am, a Black, Indigenous, Honduran woman. And I vow to never deny parts of myself for anyone, but instead to lean in, plant roots, and let the history of my ancestors live on through me by sharing what I've learned about us with my son and my future children. I'm proactively having conver-

sations with my siblings and discussing things about our childhood, how we were raised and the things that society forced on us so that we don't make the same mistakes with our own children. I've invested the time in explaining to the young people in my family that they can be more than one thing no matter what the world dictates, no matter what other Black or Latinx people tell them. Only we can tell the world who we are, but first, we must learn where we come from.