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Stuck in the Middle

Loreto Lopez
Loyola Marymount University

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Friday February 19, 2016

Finally, after 9 years I'm back in Mexico. I'm so exhausted from travelling for 10 hours, but I'm going to eat dinner with my family soon. The last time I saw them I was 12—what are they going to think of me when they see my 21-year-old self? When they hear me speak in my broken Spanish? Will they think I'm too American?

I follow hesitantly behind my Tía Lala, mom, sister Lulu, brother Nene, and his girlfriend Kimberlyn into Casa Hyder. It is an old house that now serves as a hotel. Vines grow over the faded brick walls and there is cobblestone on the ground instead of pavement. The furniture and doors are old yet beautiful in my eyes. The lights that illuminate the house are dim and Christmas tree lights adorn the bushes and trees. It's so romantic—perfect for a wedding!

As we walk further into the house I hear voices and eventually see my family. The butterflies in my stomach flutter so fast! We finally approach them and I am engulfed in a sea of hugs, kisses, smiles, laughter, and new faces. I know I was supposed to anticipate change, but I can't help but be shocked. Everyone has aged. I meet my cousin Paco's two children who did not exist the last time I was in Mexico. I spot my cousin Benjamin (the groom!) with a smile on his face and see Liesbeth (the bride) for the first time—wow, she's gorgeous. *You have good taste Benjamin.* I'm finally able to spot my Tía Yola—I've been dying to hold her in my arms again and see her smile. She always has me laughing my butt off with her jokes on the phone, like saying she spent the night dancing outside with her broom. After greeting some more family members, I meet Liesbeth's who came all the way from the Netherlands. They're all tall and blonde, but friendly.

My family looks different to me, but they don't say anything about my appearance, nor do they let any emotion other than happiness show on their face. When I open my mouth and speak Spanish I feel like the little girl they once knew—chubby, crooked teeth, giggly. But I am not. That girl was not in conflict with her Mexican blood and American lifestyle, the way I am today.

* * *

“Maria Loreto Lopez”—it's a name I have always had trouble with. It sounds beautiful when said in a Spanish accent – like it was meant to be said. My name doesn't have the same effect it does as it would in Mexico. Loreto would not be considered a middle name, because 99% of the Mexican female population has Maria in addition to their first name. But I can't do that here, where people will understand what I'm saying even less. “Loreto” (“Dorito Burrito”), “Lor-ay-to,” “Lotoro,” “Lorenzo,” “Marissa.” *I'm sorry, but what?* These are only a few of

the variations of my name that I have heard. Do not even get me started on my experiences with roll call. I cringe when I know the teacher is getting close to my name. No no no no no no. Is it really that hard to pronounce?

Even though my name hints at my heritage, sometimes I feel like I don't fit in with some of my other Mexican friends. I grew up and live in Montebello, only a few minutes from East LA. Throughout middle school and high school I met many people who live in East LA and many of my closest friends ended up being from there. We all came from immigrant families, raised by people who came from Mexico to America in search of opportunity. Despite this commonality, I always seemed different. I am light-skinned and speak broken Spanish—something my friends used to and occasionally do still make fun of. Before I wasn't able to roll my r's I used to pronounce my name as "Loleto"—how embarrassing! I mean, I understand the language pretty well except for some phrases here and there, but I just have some trouble speaking it. It probably doesn't help that I speak to my mom in English and she speaks back to me in Spanish—weird, right? I spoke Spanish with my dad but he died when I was 15. Consequently, I have nowhere to practice my Spanish except when I talk on the phone with my relatives in Mexico. I also don't like much Mexican candy and my friends acted like this is a crime. Sorry, but I prefer ice cream and boba instead. I don't listen to Banda, Bachata, or Corridos—in fact, I find these genres of music to be one of the most annoying and dreadful things I've ever listened to. Above all, I was teased as the nerd among my Mexican friends. I did all of my homework, always received A's, never got in trouble, and in high school I was in AP classes with many Asians (the smartest kids in school) and did as well as them. Meanwhile, my East LA homies were behind in some classes (even had to repeat some), took summer school, and were in the 2.0 GPA range.

For all of this, I was called a "white-washed Mexican." Why is it so wrong to be different?

* * *

Saturday February 20, 2016

The ceremony was beautiful, simple yet elegant. It was outside on a gorgeous sunny day and there were no more than 100 people invited, so it was intimate. To see members from my family, Liesbeth's family, and their friends travel across the world and spend a day together was truly wonderful. Not to mention the food was bomb: *chilaquiles*, *arroz con pollo*, *tacos*, *frijoles*, *enchiladas*—all made by Mexican hands with fresh ingredients. It was a proud day to be a fatty. I also danced like a fool but I did not care one bit. I'm a Latina, but I can't dance. I danced a little to salsa but mainly stepped on my partners'

feet. Oh well, nobody made them ask me to dance- *quien te manda?* The dance floor was so full, there was hardly a place to move! When the American music came on though, like Christina Aguilera's "Candyman" and Beyoncé's "Single Ladies," the dance floor was almost empty. Well hey, that just meant it was my time to shine. My sister and I were there movin' and groovin' doing the whip and nae nae and Single Ladies dance. Some guests were even looking at us to copy our moves! I heard one say as she pointed her finger at me, "Hey, she knows how to dance like Beyoncé!" That's right homie, I do. Needless to say it was pretty clear who the Americans were in the room. What mattered to me though was that I had fun, probably the most fun I have had in a long time. I felt free and all the weight was lifted off my shoulders from stress in school. The wedding was my moment of happiness.

But every good thing comes to an end.

* * *

Sunday February 21, 2016

I don't want to go back. This was a dream, paradise. I forgot about everything that was going on back home—can someone remind me what responsibility is? Stress does not exist here at San Miguel de Allende, only joy. Here I don't have to worry about research papers, midterms, driving back and forth to school every day, and where I'm going to get money for gas and food. Here I am not exhausted from juggling school, work, and an internship; doing all three at the same time because of how competitive the job market is right now. I forgot for a while that I was a senior in college, scared about the future, constantly being pestered about what I am going to do after graduation. I DO NOT KNOW. Stress here, stress there... Honestly, the only things I miss from America at this point are my cats.

There is also so much culture here, so much history that is beautiful to see and take part in. I spent the day exploring the town with my mom and Lulu and I wish I could have spent countless more days doing that. We visited almost all the churches in San Miguel de Allende and I was in awe of how old they were, how much history they contained. The architecture and the way they're decorated inside and outside is unique to Mexico. They're beautiful compared to the churches in Los Angeles. And oh my Lord let me tell you about the food. Vendors set up their little carts of food on the street and inside *mercados* so that my nose is filled with the smell of *elutes* covered in butter, mayonnaise, cheese, and *chile*—*They probably contribute to diabetes but they're so irresistible*—freshly squeezed juices, *nopales*, bread, ice cream, and so much more. All the shops are filled with authentic, hand-made items. There are colorful bags, jewelry, sandals, dolls,

rosaries—the list goes on and on. But the shirts are my favorite! They're all embroidered by hand with colorful designs and in every shape, color, and size. The streets are busy but it's a pleasant busy—not like the streets of LA. Can someone tell me where to find all of these wonderful things I found and experienced in San Miguel de Allende in Los Angeles?

When will I see my family again? Nine years is too long to be away from them. I can't hold them in my arms and see them smile. I try so hard to keep the tears from falling down my face but it happens anyway. My mom looks at me and says, “*Y tu, porque estás llorando?!*” My Tia Yola just grabs my arm and tells her, “*Déjala llorar, está triste!*” She pulls me over and I cry so much on her shoulder I can't even say goodbye to Liesbeth's family – and I don't think I will see them again.

* * *

People talk about the struggles of being a first-generation student, but I feel many fail to mention how hard it is to be away from your family for so long. When I tell people that almost all of my family lives in Mexico and I don't see them often, some say I'm **lucky**. Lucky???? There is nothing lucky about being separated from the people you love!! “But Loreto, that way you won't get annoyed of each other and have to deal with family problems that arise.” Please, let me be annoyed, let me deal with problems. Because it would be with them. To be honest, I get jealous when people post holiday pictures of their family on Instagram and Facebook. The dinner table is full of food, they cook *tamales* together with their *tías* and *abuelitas*, and there are always so many relatives present. But my holiday dinners are just of my mom, Lulu, Nene, my Tío Angel, and my cousin Inez—maybe a relative or two that are visiting from Mexico if we're lucky that year. I know I should be grateful that at least I have a family, a roof over my head, and food to eat, but I can't help it.

Many don't say how hard it is when you don't feel completely American, but know you're not completely Mexican either. Unfortunately, I did not feel this way until recently when I began to learn more about different cultures including my own and after I met other first-generation students. Talking with them made me feel like I belonged somewhere—we share the same passions, the same determination and drive, as well as the same sacrifices and hardships. All because our families were looking for something better than they had before. Our shared identity has caused some of my friends to encounter this problem and they have found their own solution, but I haven't. I feel like something is missing inside of me and I can't find it. My mom said why bother making more of an effort in teaching us more things about our culture if we live in America. Mexico is not our *país*, America is. We are Americans. I don't know about you, but I'm not pleased

with that reasoning. I need to know more about my past, where I come from. If not, how will I be able to teach my future children Spanish? What will I tell them if they ask questions about my family history? I'm afraid they will lose a connection with Mexico, an important part of who I am. But they can't.

What do you do when you're stuck in the middle?