

Prose Second Place
“Identity” by Isabel Dunn
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Are you Hispanic or Latino?

My mouse hovers over the ‘yes’ option, then flicks down to ‘no.’ I frown, then switch it back to ‘yes.’ Somehow, both answers feel simultaneously right and wrong.

Technically, I do have Latina blood. My papa was born in Cuba and came to the United States when he was a teenager. A quarter of my heritage comes from him. But is that enough? Is my blood all that it takes to identify with such a vast culture?

I don’t look Cuban. I have pale skin and hazel eyes. I don’t sound Cuban, either. I have a typical Michigander accent. My name isn’t even Cuban. Isabel is technically a Spanish name, but most people wouldn’t know that unless I told them. And my last name, Dunn, comes from the Irish part of my dad’s side. If my mom had kept her maiden name, and I had been called Isabel Gonzalez-Perez, would I find it easier to select ‘yes’ on this simple question?

When I was younger, I did my best to learn Spanish. My mom would play songs to help me translate, teaching me that queso means “cheese” and por favor means “please.” My papa would start every conversation on the phone with “Hola, cómo estás?” and I would respond with “Bien, y tú?” Despite all the effort, the Spanish never stuck. Maybe I started learning too late. Maybe I wasn’t immersed enough. Whatever the reason, there was a definite disconnect, and it was one that I felt constantly.

It didn’t stop at language. I was overlooked to play Latina character in a local production of the musical West Side Story until someone told the director that my papa was Cuban. When I made a comment about how I look white, one of my friends responded, “Well, that’s because you are.”

However, identity isn’t all about blood and appearances. After all, my experiences are what connect me to my identity. While most kids were raised on stories of “Little Red Riding Hood” and “Jack and the Beanstalk,” I was told the tale of “Un Cerdito fue al Mercado” (known in English as “This Little Piggy Went to Market”) and Don Quixote de la Mancha. I still remember my papa laughing as he told me how Don Quixote once mistook a windmill for a giant and charged into battle, only to be lifted up and carried around by the blades.

Together, my papa and I made Spanish recipes. My mom’s favorite dish was Arroz con Leche, with the sweet milk, warm rice, cinnamon, and raisins. My favorite was always Moros y Cristianos, or black beans and rice. I could eat it for days without getting tired of the taste.

So am I Cuban in spite of my upbringing or because of it? I think back to my childhood, to the stories of my papa’s life back in Cuba, and the traditions that he has carried on to the future generations. I think of today, with voicemails on my phone from him: “Hola Isabel, llámame porque necesito ayuda con la computadora!”

Are you Hispanic/Latino?

Yes, I decide. Yes, I am.