

Brenna Womer

THICK LIKE ME

On a campus shuttle my sophomore year of undergrad, a woman sat next to me and whined about her beet-red sunburn. I was polite and smiled and listened about her weekend at the lake.

“You’d understand if you were white,” she said, and my stomach seized up. I’m mixed, but it’d been a while since anyone called it out like that; I’d let my guard down. I’d forgotten that when white people say that shit, it feels like an accusation; it feels like being caught.

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My husband thinks astrology is bullshit, but if you ask me, I’m a Gemini sun, Cancer moon, and Leo rising. I’m also an INFP-T, an Enneagram 4w3, and my love language is words of affirmation; though, I tend to show love by giving gifts. According to my Enneagram results, I’m a compulsive identity seeker, and it’s embarrassing to admit I needed the test to tell me as much.

I don’t see myself clearly; I never have. I’m fighting a lifelong battle against dysmorphias of body, intellect, and achievement. And a few years ago, in my mid-twenties, I realized I’ve also been enduring a crisis of heritage, of blood. As a young person who felt the inescapable friction of never quite fitting into the homogenous society and culture in which she was raised, I thought the only way I might ever stand out as worthy of affection and admiration and love was to blend in at all costs. And because of this thinking, I rebuffed any threat to the veneer of whiteness, even the ones I now see as rife with potential offerings.

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I attended middle school at Bethel Baptist in Hampton, Virginia. It was a K-12 school and most of the classes were taught by people without education degrees, who may not have had degrees at all; I doubt the school was accredited. Most of the teachers were parents, as were the “librarians.” We read a lot of Jane Austen, memorized carefully selected poems from Dickinson and Longfellow and Frost. Each book in our closet of a library was hand-selected and approved by a committee comprised of the very same parents and teachers and church elders. We had chapel every school day and were expected to attend the adjacent Baptist church with our families on Sundays. We also had a mandatory retreat at a rural camp every year, which all the students plus chaperones travelled to by bus.

One evening on the retreat, I was changing at my bunk before dinner, and Tiffany, a Black girl in my class, looked over at me in my underwear, and said, “Dang, girl, I thought you were skinny like all these other white girls, but you’re thick like me.”

I don’t remember how I responded—though, I probably let out a nervous giggle and ran to hide in a bathroom stall—but I do remember obsessing over the comment and feeling deeply conflicted for a long time after. I was moved that another person had recognized themselves in me, had named a thing that made us like, which my white friends never did. But I was afraid and ashamed that what she recognized of me didn’t conform to what I understood was beautiful: thinness and whiteness. And I didn’t know how to locate value in any part of me that was anything else.

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Sometimes my mother texts me pictures of photographs of Mexican relatives I’ve never met. My great-grandmother, Alice Salazar, married a white man, had five children, and refused to teach them Spanish. This was a rare detail about my grandmother’s childhood and something I couldn’t understand

when she said it while chopping cucumber for Sunday lunch's obligatory iceberg side salad. When I asked why, she said she didn't know but that her mother only wanted her kids to speak English.

In 2019, I met an art professor named Mariella while teaching at a university on Colorado's Western Slope. We were the faculty advisors for the two components, visual art and literature, of the campus literary magazine. We actually liked each other, so our advisor meetings took place at a brewery over snacks and beers, and I learned she's from Puerto Rico. Mariella and her husband, a white man who works in IT, had brought her mother from Puerto Rico to live with their family in Colorado, and they'd hoped to bring her brother and his family too after Hurricane Maria, but the Trump administration had squashed that dream for the time being.

Eventually, I told Mariella about my Mexican heritage and how I'd only really learned about it once I was grown. I told her my grandmother never spoke Spanish because her mother wouldn't teach it, and any Hispanic or Indigenous culture Alice may have known had stopped with her. I told her when my grandmother was fifteen, she married my grandfather, an Italian American submariner, and that now they're Southern Baptist Conservatives retired in rural Missouri. They love ranch dressing and Sean Hannity and don't own a spice rack, and we rarely talk about the people and places we come from.

Mariella said she wasn't surprised, that from what she understood, it's fairly common for Latinx immigrants, especially from Mexico, and first-generation US citizens not to pass on their native languages as a matter of survival. It's seen as a burden to bear, just one more thing to render them other. And so, culture is lost; histories are erased; blood is bleached.

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When I say I didn't know about my Mexican heritage until I was older, that's not to say I didn't know I was different where I grew up. I was raised on bases across the US and in England, where I was born and where my dad is originally from.

Military bases are white places. We knew a little more diversity in our neighborhoods because my father was enlisted, not an officer, meaning he joined up without first getting a college degree. The officers' neighborhoods were almost exclusively white, with bigger, newer houses and nicer lawns; they had separate clubs and facilities. Lots of officers, too, chose to live off-base where they could maintain a higher standard of living, and their families often got to stay longer in one place.

When I was eleven, we were stationed in Altus, Oklahoma, and my best friend, Ashley, was the daughter of a base dentist, an officer. There was a creek that split base housing into two sides; on one, the enlisted side, all the streets were named after flowers (we were on Honeysuckle), and on the other, the officers' side, they were named for trees. There's a photo from my eleventh birthday in an album in the upstairs closet of my parents' house in Southwest Missouri where they retired to be near my grandparents. I'm an only child, and my mother hates parties and socializing, so for birthdays I was allowed to pick one friend to spend the day with. That year, we went to a minor-league baseball game and a sit-down restaurant for dinner. I picked Ashley, and before we left for the game, my mom took us to the Base Exchange to buy matching dresses. They were early-2000s glam, the discount version of something worn by an Olsen twin—ombréd green and yellow lycra with curled hems. Ashley's size small hung loose from her slight, athletic frame; she wasn't wearing a bra yet and didn't need to. Everything about her was long—her milk-white, freckled face; her straight, blonde hair; her arms and legs and torso.

In the photo, Ashley and I are sitting in the stands of the small stadium, looking back over our shoulders and smiling with teeth. These were the preteen years before makeup and cell phones, when I insisted on carrying a purse even though the only things I had to put in it were Lip Smackers and a velcro wallet with my military ID. We're sweaty and happy, and the Oklahoma sun is beating down; the tops of Ashley's cheeks and nose have started to burn red, and next to her,

there I am: a deep, bronze tan, my brown hair parted down the middle and accentuating the roundness of my face and fullness of my cheeks. I look like a little Latina. Seeing the photo now and knowing that's how I looked to everyone around me, it makes sense why I felt different: in the whitewashed, militaristic spaces I grew up in, uniformity was expected, and I am essentially varied.

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My father is white, with light brown hair that turns blonde in the sun and small, blue eyes; his pale body is covered in freckles. When he'd show up for school events, smelling of Faultless heavy starch and Kiwi shoe polish in his camouflage uniform, kids would ask if he's my "real" dad. The spitting image of my mother, no one has ever questioned whether I'm hers, but as a child, I understood this as a matter of chins and lips and noses; I look like her because I came out of her. My mother bears a strong resemblance to her own mother, too, but as a military kid without enduring family ties, I never really gave much thought to who came before my mother's mother.

Both my parents grew up poor, and their parents grew up poorer. I can count on one hand the relatives who went to college and would need a third to count the high-school dropouts. I can't trace my lineage back on either side past my great-great-grandparents, people I'd have almost been able to meet during my lifetime. What I know of my ancestors is mostly missing census data, dashes and blank spaces on government forms; it's a lack of photographic evidence of their existence because they couldn't afford to have their pictures taken and weren't important enough for anyone to ask or offer. It's relying on my grandmother's failing (and repressed) memory for details to help piece together who and where I'm from. It's the understanding that addiction, incarceration, and abuse are rampant factors discussed euphemistically and often glossed over entirely; it's my grandmother whispering to my mother about *bad men*.

When I search my Mexican family name, Salazar, for the

first time, I learn how incredibly common it is and that it will be of no help in uncovering anything about my heritage. I also learn that housekeeping is a common occupation for Salazars. Throughout my mother's childhood, while her father was out to sea, her mother held jobs as a hotel maid. When I was in high school, after fifteen years as a homemaker, my mother, too, took a job with a maid service and worked as part of a cleaning crew. Both women are neat and orderly; though, my mother's standards (and my father's) are so high, she calls herself a mess.

I took a job as a housekeeper once, when I was a freshman in college. My mother was working at a retirement home, and an elderly woman said her son was looking for a cleaner. I was broke, so my mother suggested me. He left a key under the doormat, a caddy of cleaning supplies, and a check for \$50 on the banquet inside. I had no idea what the fuck I was doing. After accepting the job, I'd googled "how to clean like a professional" because at eighteen I was too stubborn to ask my mother for advice. I didn't know to squeegee water droplets from the shower doors or that I was supposed to wipe off the residue left by the granite cleaner once it dried. I tried to leave a light-dark checker pattern in the carpet with the vacuum like it said to online, but it looked easier when the woman on YouTube did it.

That night, as I ate in the campus dining hall, I got a call from the man whose house I'd cleaned. He laughed at me over the phone, pausing at one point as though I might explain myself, but for which infraction, exactly, I wasn't sure, so I stayed quiet. Eventually, he said I could keep the check, but my services wouldn't be required again. I said okay and hung up before the man could tell me just how useless I was at this thing my people, the Salazars and church-raised women everywhere, were meant to be good at—before I started to cry.

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My freshman and sophomore years of high school we were stationed on a base in Alaska. I took photos at school events

for the yearbook with the film camera I bought on eBay, and one winter, the editor assigned me to the Snowball Dance, which I hadn't planned on attending because nobody asked. I wore something sparkly and watched couples dance all evening through the viewfinder, but the only attention I got was from José, a Mexican guy a year above me. He asked me to dance a few times, but I always feigned preoccupation with the picture taking, and none of the white girls would dance with him, so he wallflowered most of the night.

I'd pop out of the dance occasionally to hang out with a couple fellow yearbook staffers who had volunteered to take tickets and nominations for Snowball King and Queen outside the gym. One guy said he noticed José had been hovering around me and asked why I didn't dance with him.

"You don't have to take pictures all night," he said, but I told him I wasn't interested in José, that I didn't want to dance with him.

I went back inside just before they announced Snowball royalty, and I was poised to take a picture of the winners when the announcer said José's name and mine. Apparently, no votes had been cast for the award—it was forty-below outside, and the dance had been sparsely attended—so the yearbook staff put our names in the shoebox because they wanted José to have his dance and thought we were cute together. Someone put a fuzzy, pink tiara on my head and gave José a plastic scepter, and everyone cleared the floor to watch us dance to Chris Brown's "With You."

José's smile was wide, and he sang every word to the song with both hands at my waist. He tried to maintain eye contact, but I couldn't hold his gaze, breaking every few seconds. My face was hot; people were staring and whispering around us, and I was desperate to know what they were saying about us, about me. I remember being awed, too, though, by José's openness. He was so happy to be dancing with me. I was deeply uncomfortable at being wanted by another person and had no idea how to receive his desire. Instead, I wanted to

disappear.

I've thought about that dance hundreds of times in the fifteen years since. I've wondered why I didn't just dance with José when he asked in the first place. I was always pining to be asked to do anything. The truth is I didn't want to dance with José because none of the white girls would, and if I did, that made me different from them. So, when I was finally dancing with José and racked with embarrassment, it wasn't because I didn't like the person I was dancing with, it was because I was wondering why they'd chosen me to be his queen.

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My mother's understanding of her Mexican heritage was steeped in stereotype when I was growing up. She told me I had "child-bearing" hips long before she could have known their shape and said people with our skin tone should never wear yellow. Sometimes she called me "chica," but it was only one of three or four words she knew in Spanish, and she carries a deep shame at her lack of interest in cooking—similar, I think, to my own for cleaning—and her hatred of cilantro.

I've always known my mother as an identity seeker too; though, I didn't realize that's what she was doing until I was older. We jumped from church to church on her whim, and I went back and forth between the base school and church school and homeschool throughout my childhood and adolescence. She was always on a different diet, buying special books and pills and powders for them online. She still cycles through phases with religions and politics and projects. A few years ago, she asked me to attend the mass where she'd become an official member of the Catholic Church after a year of devoutness and RCIA classes. I went home with my parents for dinner after the ceremony, and my mother confided she was thinking of "doing a year without god" and had been watching talks by atheists online.

For most of my life, I hated how unreliable my mother was. How she could go from a movie lover one day to having me smash any of our VHS tapes rated PG or higher in the

driveway with a hammer; from telling me my virginity was something sacred, my body meant for my husband alone, to giving me blowjob lessons in the kitchen of our apartment at 16. It was a confusing and turbulent way to grow up, but as I've gotten older, I've realized my mother has always been just as desperate for identity as I am; she just has other people depending on her for shit while she tries to figure herself out. I've always kept people at a distance and still do. Today, I don't have close friends, I don't want kids, and I've severed numerous family ties for safety and political reasons. My husband and I married ourselves without witnesses on a park bench in Colorado, which is, apparently, legal in the Centennial State. But it's hard to share yourself with someone, anyone, when you're not sure who exactly that self is, when even the simplest shit, like who and where you're from, is in constant negotiation.

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I had a good friend in adulthood once, our relationship spanning five or six years—my longest to date. She was mixed too, her mother Mexican and her father white, and every time we went out together, we were mistaken for sisters. When we lived in the same city, we'd go out for tacos and take shots of tequila and tan by the pool. She wasn't fluent in Spanish but grew up with her mother speaking it and visiting their family in Mexico. She loved to talk to me about her mother, a real matriarch—a fierce, loyal, hard-working woman who once fed a street dog meat and glass after it tried to bite my friend when she was little girl.

“You don't fuck with my mother,” she'd say.

When I moved to start my MFA in Michigan, she moved to Portland, Oregon, because she'd always wanted to. She started a ceramic-jewelry business, and I'd order earrings in wacky shapes and bright colors to support her early on. We started growing apart but made an effort to keep in touch. We talked on the phone a few times, and she'd send me little notes with the earrings I ordered. In one, she dreamed up a trip for the

two of us to Mexico since I'd never been. She said we'd get in touch with our ancestors and learn more about ourselves and each other. She's always been the best dreamer. In one package, she sent a stick of Palo Santo that I still have and burn when I know the moment's right. I was living alone in the Upper Peninsula, pursuing writing hundreds of miles from anyone I knew. She was hustling in Portland, waiting tables and making art. And we had this plan together, two Mexican girls, seeking.

When the AWP Conference was in Portland, I slept on her couch. We were seeing each other for the first time in years, and things were a little awkward. We hadn't talked for months before I messaged to ask if I could stay with her, but I was still excited and kept the dream of our Mexico trip alive and tucked away. I wanted to see her favorite places in the city, to shop vintage, eat and drink, and talk about life. But there was an instant formality when I arrived, a brusqueness about her that I couldn't pin down. I attended my conference, and she worked her shifts, and we carved out one whole day to spend together, just us. That morning, we stopped first at the post office, and it took about ten seconds for the postal worker to ask if we were sisters. This time, we didn't coo or play in response like we used to—though, I was ready and hoping we might. Instead, I could tell my friend was irked. She gave a polite smile, said no, and went on with her business.

My friend was on a special diet at the time of my visit, one she went off shortly after I left, so we ate breakfast at a vegan spot, and she pointed out ¿Por Qué No? where she said I could go for tacos alone. We went to Powell's on Hawthorne to browse and sip and sit, but instead of catching up, she got a diet book and told me about all the things we shouldn't be putting in our bodies—one of them, the coffee I was drinking as she sipped herbal tea. Next, she took me to another café where I was increasingly self-conscious about the coffee (my third of the day) and muffin I ordered. We sat outside in the sun together, eyes closed and heads tilted back. She started

asking about my family and, eventually, my grandmother specifically.

“So, she didn’t even speak Spanish?” she asked.

At that point, I didn’t know my grandmother wasn’t allowed to learn Spanish as a girl. I hadn’t yet spit into a vial for AncestryDNA, a Christmas gift from my mother, and been shown Sonora as the region my people are from. (A test that the results of which I understand now are mostly useless anyway; though, for a while, they were another glimmer of hope for some claim to identity for me.) I didn’t know how to explain the whitewashing effect of US military culture that went back generations on both sides of my family. I didn’t know how to explain that my grandmother descended from addicts and abusers and didn’t like to talk about her past or where she came from.

“I didn’t realize your *grandmother* didn’t even speak Spanish,” she said, and I could see her wheels turning as others’ and my own often do when considering my ethnicity, gauging proximity to determine how big a piece of me this facet represents and whether or not it’s enough for me to claim.

“In that case,” she started again, “I’d encourage you to tread *very* carefully.” I could see her bricking up the space between us. “Don’t go around calling yourself a Chicana and shit,” and in that moment, I understood the trip we’d planned for what it was: a dream.

Our last stop was a resale shop where—surprisingly, after our talk at the café—things felt more normal between us than they had all day, at least for a while. We loaded our arms with clothes and hefted piles to the fitting rooms, picking things out for each other and swapping as we went. I got to the Puebla dress in my stack and stepped out from behind the curtain to show her as I’d done with every outfit prior. The dress was thick and clearly handmade and stitched. I felt strong and beautiful in it, connected to myself and the women who came before me. I bought the dress that day knowing I’d save it for something special and eventually wore it for the first time

almost two years later on my wedding day with a grocery-store bouquet and a pair of earrings from my grandmother. When the curtain opened, my friend’s face took on the same look it had at the post office when we’d been asked if we were sisters.

“Nice,” was all she said.