

Chapter 2

The Art of Assimilation

I never knew I had carefully crafted a plan of defense and mode of survival at a very early age until I looked down years later and realized I was expertly walking on eggshells each time I left the comfort of my diversified home. Within the folds of my mother's arms, my heart's beat raced in a harmonious symphony with hers. Despite the ruptures my mother faced against my father and his renouncement from our family, her sweet talks remained. Our Spanish tongues rolled out words and danced in synchronization. Within those moments, I was never conscious of the threat my existence posed to the outside world.

It was only when I faced the textures of reality that I began to program myself unconsciously. At home, I could speak Spanish to my parents and both Spanish and English to my older sister, who, like me, was placed in a land unknown to our parents and new to us. We learned two languages simultaneously, code switching between the two of them before we even took our first step. The big television screens from the 1990s with humps on their backs and thick black borders spoke English every hour of the day on every channel, helping us differentiate between the words of our parent's native tongues and the ones we could hear from the people walking their dogs just outside our apartment street.

Our mother never told us directly, but I always knew her intentions. She left the screens on to help us get comfortable with the language faster, which would eventually aid us in advancing in the real world and for our own imminent survival as kids *con padres inmigrantes*. The television's many channels were the sources to our familiarity with the English language until we could attend American

schooling. Once the gates of our education opened, we had already garnered skills in both languages and our new roles as translators between our white teachers and brown parents melted into our young brains seamlessly. Despite my readiness for the school year, my proficiency in two languages could not solve all of my problems.

The exposure I faced in school violated my innocence in mere seconds and thus I began my long and excruciating journey at mastering the art of assimilation, although firstly through trial and error. I first began my attempt to assimilate visually through divine power and religion. Although I saw some faces reminiscent of my own features, the ones which did not bear any resemblance outweighed the latter in the occupation of my mind. The beautiful tall teachers resembling the Barbies from the tv commercials came to life. They had extremely sanded blonde hair and crystal blue eyes, ones which juxtaposed the plain brown hair on brown eyes combination which resided within me. I was very confused as to why I did not resemble them visually. Was I an unlucky batch? The thoughts created in my young brain were that of childlike innocence, but not without the direct help of an identity crisis sparked through the frightening collision of my two contrasting worlds. I wanted to abandon the features I was born with completely and become a representation of something I simply was not.

I went home one day after elementary school and before I went to bed. I prayed like my mother taught me to. Except this time, I took my prayer stance to the front of a mirror and prayed to God that when I woke up in the morning, my brown hair would somehow transform into a pale blonde and my brown eyes would become an iridescent blue. A child desperate for change, I even told Him I would be happy with just the eye change because it would make me look unique. Not too brown and not too

white. A perfect resemblance of what I thought resembled my dual identity. A halt. A mixture. A luckier batch.

I was a lot older when I recalled this absurd demand was a repressed childhood memory and not just a fictional hazy fever dream. My mother looks back at that day and sees it as a funny harmless story. I, however, felt very embarrassed and ashamed remembering this was a day in my younger life that actually occurred. The unfortunate truth of my younger self hopelessly wishing to look white revealed itself to be a universal experience among minorities like me. As I pondered this traumatizing fragmented memory from the past, it was a reminder of the waking beginnings of my struggles with what it meant to paradoxically accept assimilation and reject it all the same.

I didn't ask for my name to sound white, but it unintentionally did. My mother was the nanny of two sisters before giving birth to us. They were white and their names were Ashley and Brittany. My name became Ashley and my older sister's name became Brittany. I longed to look white as a child, yet I had been granted the name of one without asking for it. It was not as lovely as I would have thought it to be. A brown face with a white name. My mother didn't see things the way I did. My resentment for my name snowballed into another identity crisis, piling onto the ones that were left unresolved. I did not have a Latina name, nor did I look like my white name. I later repented all the times I took my anger out on my mother as a kid. It really was not her fault. Her genuinity and wholeheartedness did not reflect the evil prejudices in modern day America. The name has since become more popular with Latina girls, which I find quite beautiful and relieving even as a fully grown adult who has come into acceptance.

I was frustrated because I knew I could not put a disclaimer on paperwork that I was not white despite my name. My last name wasn't too commonly Hispanic, so there was really nothing that could save me from showing up and feeling automatic shame. I would sit and think for hours of fake scenarios, the shocked white faces that would take a look at me and spit laughter with their dry mouths. I would allow my overthinking to take control and swallow my rationality whole. My English was fluent and yet I felt less than capable. I did not understand this notion all throughout my youth. These thoughts felt pitiful and embarrassing. I felt alone day after day. I was trying all sorts of methods to become one or the other. From a very early age, I had begun swimming into the ocean of assimilation without realizing what I was battling with had a name. Each time I tried to swim deeper, violent waves would overcome my efforts, drown me, and wash me up to shore like lifeless disheveled seaweed.

I was born and raised in Chicago, a diverse city filled with various cultures. The demographic of Latinos were mostly Mexican. Something I was not. My parents both came to America from different parts of Guatemala, a small country on the strip that makes up Central America. The lost and forgotten. Mexico's neighbor. Not Mexico. Mayan, not Aztec. Not Mexico! Why did Americans not get it right? Were they ignorant, self-absorbed, stupid, or all of the above?

The innocence that had lied beneath my bones had been slashed once more and transformed into anger. I was angry. I was frustrated that I felt no sense of belonging from anyone outside of my home. The more I tried to become a part of that world in my own selfish and unrealistic ways, the more I was rejected from it. If I couldn't embody the visuals of a stereotypical privileged American, what else could I do?

I was hindered by the idea of social classes and did not realize sooner that I was stuck at the one all the way at the bottom. The only way to move from there was to go up. The televisions from my adolescence rang in my ears louder than before. I could speak two languages, but I didn't feel heard in either. I could not change my name or my appearance, I could only create two portals and shapeshift in and out of them. I could use it to my advantage. Though, the cost of that would make me feel no longer human. I would be a programmed machine with automated messages. I longed to stay afloat and through trial and error, I had created a system that would help me survive as the epitome of two contrasting natures. Through the efforts of my parents, who risked their lives to set foot on American soil, I was a miracle child. A child carrying two identities. Living at home wasn't the hard part, it was existing outside of it. My slow burning realizations were all data which confronted the real roots of what it meant to be simply me.

But how could I assimilate into the world before me without leaving behind the one I hadn't properly met? These heavy thoughts lingered in my mind at every waking hour. A new day meant a new fear, a new decision, a new battle. Could I possibly assimilate without forgetting one or the other? I longed to redefine what it meant to assimilate without bargaining one part of myself for the unpromised acceptance from the other. Nothing I did felt like it was enough. The isolation I felt ignited my relentless overthinking.

Living in a country that proudly punished Native Americans for participating in their culture and forced them into assimilation fueled my desire to shove my American identity into a sewer and force the lid shut. I was beginning to believe that I was the problem. Two beasts brewing inside me, transforming me into an unrecognizable monster. I wanted to be a princess, but instead I was

Frankenstein from Mary Shelley's novel. The ugly, disproportionate being destructing everything in his way. I was othered just like him, a force of obscurity rejected by nature itself. I was to be banished and extracted from the only society I had ever laid my eyes on. But where could I go? The country I hadn't properly met already painted my face white and declared my bones a lost cause. I needed to go where the wild things are. As I began thinking of ways to plan my escape or blend into the walls of my room for the rest of my life, the faulty antenna of the television caused the images on the screen to flicker. I could feel the channel separating its colors from each other, forming a mesmerizing vertical rainbow. There was no longer any signal.