

Auténtico

~By Ricardo Acevedo

She told me I wasn't Mexican enough.

I was baffled: How could I, a known Hispanic of the last 17 years (at the time) be false? Maybe the cactus on my forehead wasn't stapled on tight enough and it fell off.

"You don't speak Spanish so you're not *really* Mexican."

When I was a kid, I used to believe that if I had learned Spanish instead of English, I would've been browner, like God was measuring the first few years of my life and siphoned the melatonin from my skin once he'd realized his mistake.

Like a tortilla, it felt like there was a wrong side and a white side—and I was stuck in the middle. Where did others draw the line? The border?

And yes, she was Latina.

I found myself on Olvera Street one morning, feeling a sense of pride, I thought my grandmother might've slipped into my genes. The marketplace lit with math problems I knew the answers to. But my first conversation became my last when I opted for comfort instead of culture; I stuttered Spanish until silence begged us to finish the transaction. I was lost in a sea of me.

On a college field trip down to Ensenada, heads spun towards me after every break in conversation. "What did she say, Ricardo? I only got about 20% of that." I had only gotten 30%.

I was in Chicano limbo: Only Mexican when I was here and American when I was abroad. A sort of identity hell for light-skinned folk like me. Was this the felony for failing your people?

The verdict was out despite my evidence:

As a kid, I had a rational fear of flip-flops. Still do.

I closed the door to my room whenever my mom roasted chiles, lest my lungs pay the price. Having the cure-all to EVERYTHING in the form of a 7-up. Midnight mass on Christmas Eve and stuffing myself full of tamales the next day. Despite all that, I was cast into a box of their choosing and told "stay."

So, who am I, really? Am I the poncho-wearing alien, hiding jobs most people wouldn't want anyways under my bed for keepsake? Or am I the 3rd gen white-passing excuse of a true blood Latino?

I'm the Mexican that left the box you put me in, and I'm the American my grandparents wanted me to be. I'm the conjunction of decades of difficult labor; of my bricklaying grandfather and my onion-picking father; of my grandmother on the assembly line and of my mother, a MEND volunteer in her youth. I'm the voice of a near-century of struggle, of hardships, of beauty and perseverance in the face of adversity. I'm the "x" after Latin: the crossroads of my family's past, my present, and our nation's future. I'm everything you believe I'm not and more.