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I GREW UP READING *HOUSE ON MANGO STREET*

Catalina Londono

But I remember loathing it as each vignette would paint a picture of women with olive skin and shiny black hair, and I imagined this us vs. them version in my head. I imagined them with accents that rolled off the tongue like miel, I imagined them making their father's proud on the night of their quinceanera during their father-daughter dance, with hips so full and wide, with feet that had memorized the beat to every cumbia and bachata song, Because what I've been scolded for all my life, it's not the steps you memorize, but the rhythm. And what I've been scolded for, for all my life, is that I do not have rhythm.

But it's okay because the Saturday mornings that I'd spend with my grandmother, we rehearse this in her kitchen floor, over and over and over again, and still, she has not established the fact that I do not have rhythm. Instead, she'd laugh, call me *mija* and throw on a pot of *cafe con leche*, and then she'd scold me for never finishing the rest of my *cafe con leche*.

But my father's mother was different. I was never her equal, and why should I be? She tried so hard to perfect me. She tried so hard- by feeding my diet teas and uncomfortable glares when I'd reach for seconds. *Las mujeres de colombia deben ser así*, she'd say, waving her pinky at my face. Colombian women have standards for their bodies. They do not know Happy Meals and Pizza Pies with extra cheese and extra pepperoni. Maybe it's a boycott against

commercialized fast food, maybe it's a boycott of true happiness, because I've never met a McGriddle I didn't love, maybe it's a boycott on ourselves because when we demand deprivation, it's a sign we're doing something right. And for her, she had a different image for me. An image of women with olive skin and shiny black hair. And for that, she would scold my father.

And my father, I like to give him the benefit of the doubt that he tried even when his efforts were futile. He tried his hardest to please his mother while also trying to make sense of his daughter that at times, hated her last name, hated speaking Spanish to adults, hated his mother's food, hated her own skin, hated her own hair, hated her own accent, hated how isolated she would feel at a family get together when all the adult women in the room, would glare at her and tell my father to watch her weight as well as critique the ten year old who would look a lot better with some mascara and an eyebrow wax. The shy ten year old tends to seek refuge in family bathrooms, where she'd hold herself and sob uncontrollably into washcloths, towels, her own shirt printed against the rolls on her stomach when she had to, and realized that what she hated the most in this world were the Hispanic women who often scolded her and reminded her she would never be enough. And there was my mother who scolded back. My mother, unabashed by the women in our family with lip injections and Brazilian butt lifts who seemed to somehow limit their world to BEBE clothing and acknowledge that yes, my husband is definitely out with another woman tonight.

My mother and I shared a common language that flourished with our love for vallenatos and Selena but also our love for The Cranberries and Alanis Morissette. Sunday mornings required a big pot of sancocho, white rice, aguacate and Madeline, and maybe The Wild Thornberrys. She never scolded me, she instead made me feel like I was enough, made me whole.

I read *House on Mango Street* now, and when I have moments where I struggle to find my identity, I read over the vignettes that have taught me to make sense of diet-inducing tias with bad boob jobs and Saturday mornings

with my grandmother where we'd laugh and dance and dance and laugh to Elvis Crespo and Grupo Niche. I love who I am, I scold myself when I feel otherwise. I scold myself when I'm too shy to dance because I think I have no rhythm, I scold myself when I second guess whether I want another empanada, because the answer is always yes, you always want another empanada, I scold myself when I stop myself mid-conversation because my accent doesn't flow like miel. But nowadays, I really don't do that anymore. And when I do, I think of Esperanza from House on Mango Street.