

# **HOW TO BE A CHICANA ROLE MODEL**

**by Michele Serros**

**Betsy Amster Literary Enterprises  
2151 Kenilworth Ave.  
Los Angeles, CA 90039  
Tel. 323-662-1987  
Fax. 323-660-4015  
AmsterLit@Compuserve.com**

### Special Assembly

Yesterday, during first period, we didn't have the spelling test 'cause Mr. Evans said over the loudspeaker we were gonna have a special assembly in the cafeteria. Thank God, 'cause I'm the worst speller in this whole class.

Anyway, I didn't know what to expect, but later I found out that we had guest speakers, different people from the community, planning to talk to us. We had a cop, a news lady (anchor woman) from the local Spanish station, a poet AND, drum roll, please . . . Anthony Rivera! Can you believe it? I mean, ANTHONY RIVERA! He's a big ol' star and here he comes all the way from L.A. just to speak at our school! I mean, he's a Michael Jackson dancer and everything and man, I *wish* I could see him on General Hospital but I gotta come to this prison everyday and our BetaMax is already broke, so I can't even tape G.H. anymore!

Anyway, the assembly started out real slow (what else is new?) and the cop talked about safety and saying no to drugs and the news lady talked about where she went to college and then the poet read this boring poem and how she was told she could never be a writer, but she followed her dreams . . . blah, blah, blah, and THEN it was time for Anthony to speak. But I guess he wasn't ready or something, because last minute they had the school nurse talk instead and she rambled on about how important it is to drink milk because our bones are still growing and during her whole talk, I could see Mr. Evans look at his watch and check the door. And then when the nurse was done talking, Anthony still hadn't shown up so then they had Mr. Romano talk about try outs for the soccer team, but there was only so much he could really say. I saw Mr. Evans whisper to Mrs. Regalado and then, wouldn't you know it? Anthony Rivera showed up!

He looked really tired and his suit was sorta rumped but I mean, he made it! He got us really pumped up, yelling, "Any raza in da house?! Viva El Cinco de Mayo!" Which sorta didn't make sense 'cause Cinco de Mayo was two weeks ago, but, hey, it was ANTHONY RIVERA! So he yelled out this kind of stuff for like ten minutes and he kept saying how happy he was to be here over and over again. To be honest, he looked a little nervous. He kept looking at his watch like Mr. Evans did and tapping the side of the podium like Miss Knudson does when the class gets out of control and he also kept scratching the side of his face. Maybe he was nervous because there were "so many beautiful women in the audience." Ha, ha. Then he talked about how he dropped out of school and moved to New York City and lived on the streets and how he'd danced on the street corners and then at some party, he met someone who knew someone who worked for Michael Jackson's limo service. So he starting dating the first person for a while and then he dated the second person and then he moved in with the receptionist who worked at the limo service and wouldn't you know it? He finally met Michael Jackson! And then, he got to be in his video!

Then Anthony did Q & A. That's questions and answers. I saw Margaret Simon ask if he was married and Renee Harris ask to kiss him! Can you believe it? In front of everyone! Then someone asked if he had any children and Anthony just shrugged his shoulders and said, "Not that I know of!" Funny, huh? I saw Mr. Evans frown when he said that. NO sense of humor.

When the assembly was over, I rushed over with all the other girls to meet Anthony and it was like a mob scene. He signed autographs and even Patty Romero's windbreaker. He kept misspelling names and forgetting the date, but the woman who came with him, she was wearing all black and carried this fancy-looking briefcase, I guess was like his helper, and she corrected everything for him.

I guess you can say I learned a lot from yesterday's special assembly. I mean, if you're Mexican, or even Puerto Rican, like Anthony Rivera, and you've dropped out of school and live on the streets of New York City, you can still make it. You can still

be a great role model and be in a music video and someday have someone look over your shoulder to correct all your spelling.

MS: 'cause, cuz, or cause throughout?

## Role Model Rule Number 1:

### Never Give Up an Opportunity to Eat for Free

I kept the poems in a Pee Chee folder. Three poems written on college rule paper 'cause that way they looked longer. One of them I wrote in math lab, the other in the quad during my lunch hour and the third one I wrote when Paul R. broke up with me and I had nothing else to do that Friday night. Okay, so I wasn't no Jewel and my parents worked too hard to keep me from living in any ol' van, but I was pretty proud of the poems. I read them during open mike at every little bookstore and in any little coffeehouse around town and Mari and Angela were always in the audience and *they* said they were good poems. But I often wondered, <sup>if</sup> did anyone else get anything out of them?

So naturally, when I got the phone call I was excited. The woman on the other end was from my college said she got my number from a classmate. She said she was organizing a writer's conference, a Chicana writer's conference. She emphasized *Chicana*.

"We're having writers," she told me. "*Chicana* writers fly in from all over the Southwest. It'll be two days of readings, workshops and lectures, here on campus. Can I count on your participation?"

Did she even have to ask?

Mari and Angela were happy for me, but surprised.

"How is it she called you?" Mari questioned. "I mean, don't take it wrong or anything, and I like your poems and all, but how did <sup>the</sup> ~~this~~ organizer of this great grand writer's conference connect with your work?"

"It's a *Chicana* writers conference," I gloated. "And I guess good word gets around."



The conference was over a month away but already I was practicing reading my poems in front of the hallway mirror, typed them up on flat white paper and put them in a new Pee Chee folder, one that had no scribble. I found a cute tank top at ClothesTime to match my lime green skirt. I thought about shaving my legs above my knees.

A week before the event I get a call from the woman.

"I know this is last minute," she said. "But it looks like we'd like you both days. Are you available?"

"Oh, of course," I assured her. Dang, three little poems and already I was in demand!

"Great," I heard her exhale and shuffle papers. "So . . ." she spoke slowly as if she was writing while she <sup>talked</sup> ~~was talking~~. "We have Michele . . . available . . . both Saturday and Sunday . . . to serve brunch."

What? Did I hear right? Brunch? To serve food? My heart dropped. *Food?*

"Oh . . ." I started ~~to tell her~~. "I thought, I thought you wanted me to read, to share my poems."

"Oh no," the woman chuckled uncomfortably. "We've had our writers, our *Chicana* writers, selected for months." Then her tone suddenly changed. "I'm sorry about any confusion. I thought I was clear when I first called you. I guess, I guess I'm so overwhelmed <sup>by</sup> ~~about~~ the conference and all. Wait, let me see . . ." I could hear her shuffle more papers. "You know on Sunday, we're having an open mike. Are you familiar with those? You're more than welcome to share your poems then."

When people say, "You're more than welcome to . . ." what they really mean is "Look, not only was your name not on our original list, but you really weren't a choice at all, we never even really thought of you. But to alleviate this feeling of guilt, the guilt for not thinking of you in the first place, I'll throw this last minute invite your way." There's nothing more offensive than <sup>being</sup> ~~to be~~ told, "You're more than welcome to . . ."

The whole gesture is really an insult. A slap in face. So I'm sure the woman was surprised by my response.

"Sure," I told her. "I'll be there. Both days. Oh, one last question. Do I have to bring my own hairnet?"

That night I complained to Angela.

"Quit being such a big baby," she said as she put up a new cleaning schedule on the fridge. "At least you'll get to eat for free and then later you can read your poems. I mean, there'll be more people at this conference than at any of those ol' fake coffeehouse readings you do. So, what kind of food you think they'll have?"

A week later ~~on that~~ Saturday morning I found myself at the conference, donning a regulatory name badge, meeting and greeting dozens of Chicana writers, essayists, <sup>and</sup> poets from all over the Southwest, and posing the imperative question.

"Scone or croissant?"

"What, you don't have any pan dulce?" A woman <sup>wearing</sup> ~~in~~ a ~~shoulder~~ scarf <sup>around her shoulders</sup> looked <sup>over</sup> the pastry platter ~~over~~.

"No, all the kitchen help polished them off this morning with their champurrado," I answered dryly. "I'm afraid you're stuck with either a scone or a croissant."

"Well . . . I'll take a croissant."

The woman behind her then asked me something in Spanish.

I answered her back and continued to scoop fruit salad onto her paper plate. She didn't move forward but instead looked at her friend, rolled her eyes and remarked in Spanish, "I thought this was a **Chicana** writers conference and this one here can't even speak Spanish!"

I looked up at her. What was *that* about? What had I said wrong? How did I say it? Did I use <sup>u</sup>muy <sup>u</sup>instead of <sup>u</sup>mucho? R's not rolled out long enough? Oooh, I can

get so sloppy with those. Should I have asked her? A Chicana help another Chicana with her Spanish? I don't think so.

I scooped more fruit salad onto her friend's plate and my face just burned. Why didn't I speak up? Why was I feeling so embarrassed? First I was this so-called writer trying to push my poems on supposedly other fellow writers and now I was this wannabe Chicana trying to horn in on a conference, their conference. I wasn't even worthy of serving Cinnamon Crispas. <sup>to NUTS</sup>

That night I complained to Angela again. We were in my room watching TV.

"I'm not going back," I told her. "I ain't gonna spend my Sunday morning dishing out mango crepes to uppity Mexicans." <sup>h</sup>

"I thought they were Chicana."

"Whatever."

"So you're not gonna go," she said as a statement rather than a question. "And now you're not gonna read your poems at open mike? Man, you're sure giving this woman a lot of power."

"I ain't giving her no power," I changed the channel. "What do you mean, power?" <sup>h</sup>

"I mean, you were so <sup>psyched</sup> siked about this conference and even though you were just gonna serve food, you were all looking forward to meeting all these writers, your fellow Chicana writers, and you were gonna read your poems and now, because of this woman, you're not gonna do any of it."

"But Angela, she totally cut me down, in front of her friend. In front of other people. I don't have to take her shit."

"You know," Angela said, <sup>h</sup> "Why don't you write a poem or something about how you Mexicans treat other Mexicans who don't speak Spanish?"

"But I *can* speak Spanish!" I reminded her defensively. "And I don't make fun of other people's Spanish."



"Yeah right." She changed the channel. "So anyway, how 'bout write something about Mexicans who don't speak Spanish *well*. That's something you can write about. Besides, I'm getting tired of those three old poems of yours."

"Nah, I don't even care," I told her. "I'm not gonna waste my Saturday night worrying about <sup>that</sup> ~~this~~ woman or this whole Woman of the Corn Nuts Conference. I'm just gonna relax."

I grabbed the remote and changed the channel back. "And what do you mean, you're tired of my three old poems?"

That night, after Angela left my room, I worked on a new poem. A poem bout how Latinos treat other Latinos who don't speak Spanish well. Great idea, huh? The next morning I gathered my three "old" poems and my brand spankin' new one and stuck them in the new Pee-Chee folder. I was armed. I was ready.

The open mike was held in the college's ~~multipurpose room~~. <sup>conference room / auditorium?</sup> ~~From where I was~~ <sup>from my seat</sup> ~~sitting, during the first reader,~~ I could see the woman. She was in the fourth row, two aisles ahead of me. She was going through her purse and checking her airline tickets. Man, all I could think ~~about~~ <sup>was</sup> that she better pay attention when it was my turn to read.

Thirty minutes later my name was read from the sign-up sheet and I walked to the stage. From the podium I could see her ~~more~~ <sup>more</sup> clearly. I quickly read my three poems, saving the new one for last. Then I saw the woman laughing with that friend of hers. Oh, she must've just heard someone speak Spanish and caught a grammatical error, a grammaticas wrongos. I cleared my throat and started ~~the first lines of~~ <sup>reading</sup> my new poem ~~calmly~~. I looked up from my paper and saw that she was ~~then~~ <sup>reading</sup> going through her day planner with her friend. She was checking off dates and her friend was comparing them against her own pocket calendar. They weren't even paying attention to me! I raised my voice and directed my voice toward her. My fingers clenched the sides of

the podium and I was balancing all my weight on the tip of my toes. She ~~was still not~~ <sup>wasn't it</sup> paying attention. I found myself not taking <sup>in</sup> time to exhale, not swallowing my saliva, things I learned in Mr. Bower's speech class that were very important to do when public speaking. <sup>in</sup> But all I could think about was getting the words out, reaching this witch of a woman and demanding she learn a lesson from me <sup>but</sup> and unfortunately, it looked hopeless. <sup>I read</sup> The last lines of my new poem <sup>but</sup> were read and then thirty short seconds later, I was done. My mission not accomplished. The woman was now offering her friend a mint.

I walked away from the podium feeling so defeated, <sup>and</sup> the last thing I wanted was ~~some~~ idle chit chat from anyone. But then this man, in a tie and glasses, approached me. He looked <sup>like</sup> the boring business type, the kind to pull out standard business cards <sup>from</sup> ~~straight out of~~ Kinkos <sup>out of</sup> ~~from~~ his wallet. ~~—~~ ✗

"Well, that was different," he said. "Boy, you sure have a lot of anger in your work!"

"Oh, yeah . . . thanks." Was that suppose to be a compliment? Why was I even thanking him? My poems, angry? He obviously knew nothing about poetry.

My eyes stayed on the woman as the man yakked on. She was now getting up from her seat. I needed an excuse to confront her <sup>with</sup>, something ~~that was~~ direct. Obviously, my poem didn't work. If only I could've got rid of the man, <sup>but</sup> but he just kept talking and talking. Men, ~~they~~ can be so chit chatty. ✗

"You know, a lot of writers don't use Spanish like you do."

Oh great. Here we go again. And now my first critic was getting away.

"Are you working on a manuscript?"

"A what?" I wasn't really paying attention. I looked over his shoulder. The woman was leaving through a side door.

"A manuscript?" He asked again. "Do you have one?"

"No, not at all," I answered curtly. Was he making fun of me?

"Well, I'm a publisher," He pulled a card out from his wallet. "I have a press, it's a small one, but if you don't have a manuscript . . . "

"Oh" I took his card. It was stiff, beige and basic with only his name and the words, 'Publishing Company' printed underneath in black block letters . I thought of my three, I mean, four poems. I thought how I didn't even have a computer and how I used the typewriter at school to type them up. I thought about this man, a publisher, who was interested in publishing poetry. My poetry. <sup>Did</sup> people still do that anymore? If I had a book, I could sell it after my readings at the coffeehouses, I could give it to my friends as a little gift. If I had a book then maybe next year I'd be invited to read poems, rather than serve food ~~at the that same writer's conference.~~

"Actually," I told him. "I do have a manuscript. I mean, I thought you meant <sup>it saying</sup> on me." I tapped the side of my forehead as <sup>if saying</sup> in silly me! "It's actually on floppy, at home." Floppy? That was the right term, right?

He looked over his shoulder to see what I had been looking at before. "Do you need to leave? Is someone waiting for you?" he asked.

"No," I told him as I saw the woman leave with her friend. "Nobody. So," I opened my PeeChee folder. "Let's talk about my book."

DEB- FOOTNOTE FOR  
PAGE 7

\*Some people call them bunelos, but Taco Bell tagged them Cinnamon Crispas. Crispy flour tortilla triangles topped with sugar and cinnamon. Shame they don't sell 'em any more.

## Senior Picture Day

Sometimes I put two different earrings on the same ear. And that's on a day I'm feeling preppy, not really new wave or anything. One time, during a track meet over at Camarillo High, I discovered way too late that I'd forgot to put on deodorant and that was the worst 'cause everyone knows how snooty those girls at Camarillo can be. Hmmm . . . actually the worst thing I've ever forgotten to do was to take my pill. That happened three mornings in a row and you can bet I was praying for weeks after that.

So many things to remember when you're <sup>seventeen</sup> seventeen years old and your days start at six am and don't end <sup>until</sup> ~~if~~ sometimes <sup>five</sup> five in the afternoon. But today of all days there's one thing I have to remember and that is to squeeze my nose. I've been doing it since the seventh grade. Every morning with my thumb and <sup>fore</sup> ~~one~~ finger I squeeze the sides of it, firmly pressing my nostrils as close <sup>to the base</sup> as they possibly can get near the ~~base~~. Sometimes while I'm waiting for a tortilla to heat up, or just when I'm brushing my teeth, I squeeze. Nobody ever notices. Nobody ever asks. With all the other shit seniors in high school go through, squeezing my nose is nothing. It's just like some regular early morning routine, like yawning or wiping the egg from my eyes. Okay, so you might think it's just a total waste of time, but to tell you the truth, I do see the difference. Just last week I lined up all my class pictures and could definitely see the progress. My nose has actually become smaller, <sup>narrower</sup> ~~more narrow~~. It looks less Indian. I look less Indian and you can bet that's the main goal here. Today when I take my graduation pictures my nose will look just like Terri's and then I'll have the best picture in the yearbook. I think about this as Mrs. Milne's Duster came honking in the driveway to take me to school.

Terri was my best friend in seventh grade. She came from Washington to Rio Del Valle Junior high halfway through October. She was the first girl I knew who had contact lenses and four pairs of Chemin De Fers. ~~Can you believe that?~~ She told



everyone that her daddy was gonna build 'em a swimming pool for the summer and that I could go over <sup>to</sup> swim any time I wanted. But until then, she told me, I could go over <sup>we could</sup> and play on her dad's CB.

"Your dad's really got a CB?" I asked <sup>her</sup> ~~as soon as she told me.~~

"Oh yeah," she answered, jiggling her locker door. "You can come over and we can make up handles for ourselves and ~~we get on and~~ meet lots of guys. Cute ones."

"Whadda ya mean, handles?" I asked.

"Like names, little nicknames. I never use my real name. I'm 'G.G.' when I get on. That stands for Golden Girl. Oh, and you gotta make sure you end every sentence with 'over.' You're like a total nerd, if you don't finish with 'over'. I never talk to anyone who doesn't say 'over.' They're the worst."

Nobody's really into citizen band radios anymore. I now see 'em all lined up in pawn shops over on Oxnard Boulevard. But back in the 7th grade, everyone was getting them. They were way better than using a phone 'cause, first of all, there was no phone bill to bust you for talking to boys who lived past The Grade and secondly, you didn't have your stupid sister yelling at you for tying up the phone line. Most people had CBs in their cars, but Terri's dad had his in <sup>the</sup> ~~his~~ den.

When I showed up at Terri's to check out the CB, her mama was in the front yard planting some purple flowers.

"Go on in already," she waved me in. "She's in her father's den."

I found Terri just like her mama said. She was already on the CB, looking flustered and sorta excited.

"Hey," I called out to her, and plopped my tote bag on her dad's desk.

She didn't answer but rather motioned to me with her hands to hurry ~~on~~ up. Her mouth formed an exaggerated, "Oh **my** God!" She held out a glass bowl of Pringles and pointed to a glass of Dr. Pepper on the desk.



It turns out Terri had found a boy on the CB. An older **interested** one. He was fifteen, a skateboarder, and his handle was Lightning Bolt.

"Lightning Bolt," he ~~had~~ bragged to Terri. "Like, you know, powerful and fast. That's the way I skate."

~~Isn't that cute?~~

"So," Lightning Bolt asked. "Where do you live? Over."

"We live near Malibu," Terri answered. "Between Malibu and Santa Barbara. Over."

"Oh, Excuse me, Fan-ceee. Over."

"That right," Terri giggled. "Over."

We actually lived in Oxnard. Really, in El Rio, a flat patch of houses, churches and schools surrounded by lots <sup>of</sup> strawberry fields and some snooty new <sup>stucco</sup> homes ~~made~~ <sup>of stucco</sup>. But man, did Terri have this way of making things sound better. I mean, it ~~was~~ the truth, geographically, and besides it sounded way more glamorous.

I took some Pringles from the bowl and thought we were gonna have this wonderful afternoon of talking and flirting with Lightning Bolt <sup>until</sup> Terri's dad happened to come home early and found us gabbing in his den.

"What the. . . !" he yelled as soon as he walked in and saw us hunched over his CB. "What do you think this is? Party Central? Get off that thing!" He grabbed the receiver from Terri's hand. "This isn't a toy! It's a tool. A tool for communication and you ~~just~~ don't use it to meet boys."

<sup>Too remain intact of Bolt's imperson?</sup> ~~★~~ "Damn, Dad," Terri complained as she slid off her father's desk. "Don't have a cow." She took my hand and led me to her room. "Come on, let's pick you out a handle."

When we were in her room, I told her I had decided on C.G. as in "California Girl."

"You mean, like that song?" she asked.

"Yeah, sorta."

"But you're Mexican."

"So?"

"So, you look like you're more from Mexico, than California."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, California is like, blond girls, you know."

"Yeah, but I'm Californian. I mean, real Californian. <sup>Even</sup> My great-grandma was ~~even~~ born here."

"It's just <sup>that</sup> you don't look like you're from California."

"And you don't really look golden," I snapped ~~back~~.

We decided to talk to Lightning Bolt the next day, Friday, right after school. Terri's dad always came home real late on Fridays, sometimes even early the next Saturday morning. It would be perfect. When I ~~arrived~~ <sup>got</sup> to her house the garage door was wide open and I went in through its side door, <sup>where I</sup> ~~I strolled in and~~ almost bumped into Terri's mama. She was spraying the house with Pine Scent and offered me some Hi-C.

"Help yourself to a Pudding Pops too," she said <sup>through</sup> before heading into the living room ~~with the mist of aerosol in front of her~~. "They're in the freezer."

Man, Terri's mama ~~made their whole~~ life like a commercial. Hi-C, Pringles in a bowl, and the whole house smelling like a pine forest. Was Terri lucky or what? I grabbed a Pudding Pop out of the freezer and was about to join her when I picked up on her laughter. She was already talking to Lightning Bolt. Dang, she didn't waste time!

"Well, maybe we don't ever want to meet you," I heard Terri <sup>flirt</sup> ~~joke~~ with Lightning Bolt. "How do you know we don't already have boyfriends? Over."

"Well, you both sound like foxes. So, uh, what *do* you look like? Over?"

"I'm about 5'4" and have green eyes and ginger colored hair. Over."

Green? Ginger? I had always took Terri for having brown eyes and brown hair.

"What about your friend? Over."

"What about her? Over?"

Oh, this was about me! I **had** to hear this. Terri knew how to pump up things good.

"I mean, what does she look like?" Lightning Bolt asked. "She sounds cute. Over."

Well, I ~~over~~ heard Terri hesitate. "Well, she's real skinny and uh . . ."

"I like skinny girls!"

"You didn't let me finish!" Terri interrupted. "And you didn't say 'over'. Over."

"Sorry," Lightning Bolt said. "Go ahead and finish. Over."

I tore the wrapper off the Pudding Pop and continued to listen.

"Well," Terri continued. "She also sorta flat chested, I guess. Over."

What? How could Terri say that?

"Flat chested? Oh yeah? Over." Lightning Bolt answered.

"Yeah. Over."

~~Terri paused uncomfortably~~ I could feel this uncomfortable pause in Terri's voice. <sup>It was</sup> As if she knew what she was saying was wrong and bad and she should've stopped but she couldn't. She was saying things about a friend, things a real friend shouldn't be saying about another friend, but now there was a boy involved and he was interested in that other friend, in me, and her side was losing momentum. She would have to continue to stay ahead.

"Yeah, and she also has this, this nose, a nose like . . . like an **Indian**. Over."

"An Indian? Lightning Bolt asked. "What do ya mean an Indian? Over."

You know, **Indian**. Like pow wow Indian."

"Really?" Lightning Bolt laughed on the other on the other end. "Like Woo-Woo-Woo Indian?" He clapped his palm over his mouth and <sup>waited</sup> ~~blew out air~~. A sound I knew all too well.

"Yeah, just like that!" Terri laughed. "In fact, I think she's gonna pick <sup>↓</sup> Lil Squaw<sup>↓</sup> as her handle!"

I shut the refrigerator door quietly. I touched the ridge of my nose. I felt the bump my mother had promised me would be less noticeable once my face "filled out." The base of my nose was far from feminine, and was broad like, well, like Uncle Rudy's nose, like Grandpa Rudy's nose and yeah, a little bit of Uncle Vincente's nose too. Men in my family who looked like Indians and here their Indian noses were lumped together on me, on my face. My nose made me look like I didn't belong, made me look less Californian than my blonde counterparts, and hearing Terri and Lightning Bolt laugh, more than anything I hated the men in my family who gave me such a hideous nose. *more than anything*

I grabbed my ~~tot~~ bag and started to leave out through the garage door when Terri's mama called out from the living room. "You're leaving already?" she asked. "I know Terri would love to have you for dinner. Her daddy's working late again."

I didn't answer and I didn't turn around. I just walked out and went home.

And so that's how the squeezing began. I eventually stopped hanging out with Terri and never got a chance to use my handle on her dad's CB. I know it's been almost four years since she said all that stuff about me, about my nose, but man, it still stings.

During freshman year I heard that her dad met some lady on the CB and left her mama for this other woman. *Terri's* Can you believe that? Who'd wanna leave a house that smelled like a pine forest and always had Pudding Pops in the freezer?

As I hear Mrs. Milne's impatient honks from the drive way, *impatiently* I grab my books and run down the driveway, squeezing my nose just a little bit more. I do it because today is Senior Picture Day and because I do notice the difference. I could be too skinny. My chest could be too flat. But *do not* God forbid, I look too Indian.



Role Model Rule Number 2:  
Remember, Commerce Begins at Home

It was matter of getting rid of the boxes. Ten large cardboard boxes that weighed over forty pounds. **Each.** Getting them up the stairs to the apartment wasn't a problem. The Takatas, who live below <sup>us</sup>, had their son carry them up for me. He's got this crush on Angela and ~~it's instant now~~ he uses every opportunity to flex muscle in front of her.

"Is there anything else you need moved or lifted?" he asked once the last box was put in the corner. He glanced down the hall way, toward Angela's room. "You need another jug of Sparkletts?"

"No, that's pretty much it, Arlin," I started to lead him back to the front door. "Hey, thanks a lot."

Once the boxes had made it into the living room, that's were they stayed. For a long time.

"So, what's up with the boxes?" Angela asked me in this annoyed tone one morning in the kitchen. ~~It had been a week with the boxes.~~

"Well, they're the books," I told her. "I mean, my book."

"Your book?" She marked her initials on the chore sheet. "You mean, the book you wrote? It's done?"

"Uh- huh."

"Why didn't you tell me?" She walked over to the living room and tried to open a box. "Ooh, can I have me a copy?"

"For \$5.95." I held my palm out.

"\$5.95? You gotta be kidding!" she laughed.

"Well, yeah, I mean, no." I suddenly felt embarrassed. "You can have one for free. On me."



"No, I mean, you really gotta be joking. You're selling your poetry book for six bucks? What, so people can decide between you and a twilight feature? Girl, you're selling yourself short." She wasn't having luck getting the box open.

"I didn't write it for the money." I reminded her.

"Hmmm," she <sup>said</sup> ~~didn't really answer me~~. "That's what they all say in the beginning. So why are all the books here? Shouldn't the publisher be pushing these?"

It was then I had to share <sup>the</sup> details I'd been putting off. Details about how the press folded, how the publisher, the man in the tie and glasses with the boring business cards, confessed he had one too many obligations to distribute any more books and how it was up to me to sell my book on my own.

"So now," I explained to Angela. "I'm gonna have to go from bookstore to bookstore peddling my books. Can you believe that? You think people are gonna want a poetry book? Like who's really gonna care?"

But Angela wasn't sympathetic.

"Well, I hope they're outta here by Christmas," she said firmly, looking around the living room. "'Cause this year, I wanna a big tree and we're gonna need lots of space for it."



But the boxes didn't move. They stayed in the living room through the end of summer, through fall and into the holidays. ~~And~~ <sup>Because</sup> because of the boxes, we didn't get the big tree like Angela wanted. We had to get a small one, one that fit on our kitchen table.

"Hey, you need help carrying that up?" Arlin called out from his front porch as Angela and I carried the little bush up the stairs.

"No, that's okay Arlin, we got it."

"Okay, but you let me know if you need anything!"

④

To make the boxes less noticeable, I converted them into living room fixtures. I draped a piece of batik cloth over a stack of three and that made a pretty <sup>convincing</sup> ~~convincible~~ end table. Another stack of six boxes was transformed into a coffee table. And the last single box made a pretty sturdy door stop. Make that a very sturdy forty-pound door stop.

Once the boxes were out of sight, under the fabric and behind the front door, I didn't have to see them. I didn't have to deal with them. They didn't exist and nothing was said about them again.

Until one day I came home from school and found Louie, Angela's man, in the living room watching TV. He was on the couch and had his legs propped up against the coffee table/ six box stack. The corner of one of the boxes was slightly torn open and I could see the spine of my book. I could see my name on the spine. The bottom of his Adidas were scrapping against it.

"Hey, watch it," I snapped while propping the front door with the door stop/single box. "There's books in there."

"Books? Under the table?" He sat up a little.

"No, Louie, the whole thing's made of books." I lifted the fabric up. "See, they're all books."

"What, these left over from all the classes you've dropped?"

"Ha, funny." I pushed his foot off the boxes. "Look, Louie, I gotta keep 'em in good condition in case someone wants to buy one."

"Buy one? How's someone gonna buy a book when they're under this hippie blanket here in the living room?"

④

Louie was right. I had to sell the books. It had been nearly half a year and they hadn't moved. I had sold a few to family, but I mean, come on, that's family. And Mrs. Takata seemed to like it when I gave her one.

So the next week I took a few books with me down to my car. ~~Just a few, okay,~~  
five to be exact.

I looked at myself in the rearview mirror and told myself that I was now a sales person. I could do it. I could sell anything. I was smart and charming and ~~that I've~~ I'd always done well talking someone into something. I sold the L.A. Times and those chocolate bars for Little League and one time in junior high, I sold magazine subscriptions and won a trip to Magic Mountain. All you had to do was look people in the eye and smile and use their name a lot during your conversation. *Cake.*

The first place I went to was, of course, a bookstore. The great big new one over on Westwood Boulevard. The one with no parking ~~and~~ where everyone is reclining on couches, eating scones and letting the crumbs grease up the pages of books they never plan on buying.

The store's information counter was circular, with lots of computers and those poetry magnets and teeny little books on how to improve the planet. I went there first.

"Are you the rep?" a woman asked me when I told her about my book. She looked at her clipboard. "I don't have one scheduled for this time. Oh, you're not the rep? You're the author and this is your book? Well, usually we work with reps or distribution companies. Where's your ISBN number? We can't sell anything without an ISBN number. I've never heard of this publisher. No . . . I really don't think so."

I didn't understand. I had smiled and said her name, but she didn't bite. It wasn't chocolate bars, and unlike the L.A. Times, she had never heard of me or my book.

A customer waiting to ask a question looked over my way impatiently and that was enough for me. I put my books back in my back pack and left the store.

I didn't think about the books for another month and then one day I came home and found the door stop/single box was missing. After searching through the

apartment I found it in the bathroom. Angela had needed something to put the floor heater on and she thought the door stop/single box was the perfect height. The weight of the heater created creases across the covers of the first two layers of books.

"Angela!" I pounded on her bedroom door. "What's up with you treating my books like this? You don't treat books like this! What's up with you?!" I was pissed.

She opened her door and looked at a damaged book in my hands. "What?" she said dryly. "You think your customers are gonna complain?"



The following week I tried a second bookstore. It wasn't as large as the new one on Westwood Boulevard and it didn't serve scones. It was a bookstore that claimed to sell books "by and about women." Maybe they'd be more open to selling a book by a woman they never heard of and whose book didn't have an ISBN number. I parked a block away and spoke to myself in the rearview mirror again. "I'm smart, I'm charming, I can sell anything . . ." blah, blah, blah.

I put five books into my backpack and entered the store. I saw a woman behind a counter. She looked up and smiled. ~~I grabbed it as an opening~~

"Is the buyer in?" I asked her.

"I'm the buyer," she said. "Can I help you?"

Her tone was suddenly abrupt and to the point. It made me nervous right away.

"Oh, hi. Uh, I have this new book." I pulled one out from my backpack and gave it to her. "I'd like to give you a complementary copy. Maybe the owner will want to carry it in your store. I can take it on consignment . . . or whatever you'd like." I pretended to concentrate on an Ani De Franco poster behind her.

"Well, I'm also the owner," the woman told me. "As well as the manager and the cashier, today anyway. I sorta do everything here." She looked at cover and frowned.

*Oh man.*

"I can't read anything without my glasses," she said as <sup>she</sup> pulled her frames down from the top of her head. She looked at the cover again. She opened to the first page, skimmed the table of contents, then read a little of the first poem.

*Please, you don't have to like it, just be interested in it. Just say something, something nice, anything. Comment on the color of the jacket, praise the font I chose, mention how thick and nice the paper is. Please, just say something, anything kind about my book.*

But she didn't say anything particularly kind. Her words were blunt and businesslike. She looked at the back cover, then the front cover again and then she looked at me.

"I'll take five," she said.



## Hispanic Cultural Event

"Hello?"

"Hi, Ernesto?"

"Yes?"

"Oh hi, this is Michele. Michele Serros." 

"Oh, hey there Michele."

"Hi, <sup>Ernesto</sup>Ernie. Um, I hope I'm not disturbing you, but I'm calling about my honorarium for the reading I did last month."

"Ah, yes, your honorarium. Of course. You haven't received it?"


"Uh, no."

"That was a great night wasn't it? I just love it when I can give back to the community. So many people . . ."


"Yeah, there were a lot of people. Your house is beautiful."

"Oh thank you. You know, not many successful Latinos, like myself, remember their roots. But me, I remember where I'm from."

"Right. So, um, listen Ernesto, when will I receive my honorarium? You mentioned that I would receive it that night and I know you got busy helping set up that rock en español band but it's already been over a week and I'd really like my payment."

"Oh, right, right. Let me see, today is Tuesday, I'll have it out today, so by Friday you'll have it." 

"Friday?"

"Yes, no later than Friday." 

"Great. Thank you, Ernesto."

"Please, call me Ernie."

"Okay, thanks Ernie."

"No, thank you. You really helped raise the awareness of Latinos in the arts."

### Role Model Rule 3: Stay in School

"You're just gonna have to become a man," Martha said.

She and I were both ditching English Composition. Hiding out in the girl's bathroom near the science building while Canary was on his break, smoking Kools and highlighting The Recycler. It was our only opportunity to relax from dangling modifiers, run<sup>1</sup>on sentences and the bleeding red ink from Mrs. Smalley's fascist correction pen.

"Become a man?" I asked.

"Yeah, you want people to read your stories someday don't you?" she unrolled a handful of T.P. from the stall nearest her. "Look, book type people, they ain't gonna be interested in what a girl has to say, let alone a Mexican one. You need to make yourself less Mexican, less girl!"

"Less, girl? Now how do I do that?"

"By changing your name!" She placed the whole wad of toilet paper under the faucet's running water.

"My name?" I asked. "To what?"

"I dunno. Some man's name. A nice regular American man's name." She went to get more toilet paper and added it to her wad.

"Like Tunlop?"

"No, not a P.E. teacher type of man. A distinguished type of man. The kind that wears blazers. Remember that guy who came from the college to talk to us? *That* kind of man, one with a distinguished type of name. Why not . . . " She threw her wad up towards the ceiling. Why not . . . Michael?" Her wad immediately fell off *and landed with a wet plop on the ground* @

"Michael?"

"Yeah." She looked up at the ceiling, got more paper from the same stall. This time she grabbed less. "That's close enough to Michele, isn't it? It's the masculine version."

"Hmmm," I thought it over out loud. "Michael Serros."

"Oh no, you can't keep your last name. *That's* your biggest problem. Hey, what does Cerros mean in Spanish?"

"How should I know? I flunked Goodwin's Spanish class."

"Goodwin. He's a dick."

"Yeah," I agreed.

"I think . . . I think it means hills." She scrunched her new wad of TP into a tight ball and held it under the running faucet water for less time.

"Yeah!" I remembered suddenly. "You know what? It does. What about it?"

"Well, okay, why not hills . . . hill? I got it, Michael Hill!"

"Michael Hill?"

"It's the perfect name!" She flung her new wad hard towards the ceiling.

"But how will people know <sup>↓</sup>its me?"

"Start telling people *now*."

"Well, what about people I forget to tell? I mean, how will they know if they want to buy my book and they don't know which book to buy?"

"What book?" Her wad immediately fell down.

"The book I'm gonna write."

"Worry about that <sup>later</sup> ~~then~~!"

"You mean when I *start* to write the book?"

"When you start to write the book, start telling people about your name change."

"But what about Terri, Patty and Cha Cha? What if I can't reach them?" I unrolled some toilet paper and handed it to her.

"Where are they gonna be?"

"Probably still here."

"And where you gonna be?" She demanded to know as she took the toilet paper from me.

"Uh, probably New York."

"In New York? Now why you gonna be in New York?"

"Haven't you been listening to me? I'm gonna be writing my book!"

"Oh yes, your book," She scrunched up the paper. "Now what's this book gonna be about?"

"I dunno, stories and . . . stuff."

"What kind of stuff?" she asked suspiciously.

"I dunno, living on Orange, El Rio, the Maria's across the street."

"You gonna write about me?" She placed her new ball of toilet paper under the ~~same stream of faucet~~ <sup>again</sup> ~~water.~~

"I dunno ~~know~~." To be honest, I couldn't really see Martha in any of my stories.

"Well, if you want to write about me, and I am giving you permission to do so now, would you please make sure you spell my name right?"

"Which name? Marty, Martha or the one your mama calls you after she's done talking with Mr. Evans?"

"Hey. . . " She aimed her TP wad right at my face. "I want you to use my real name, my complete name, in full."

"Okay, okay." I held my hands over my face.

She pulled the wad away from me.

"But, hey," I asked. "Shouldn't you change your name too?"

"I'll take my chances." She searched the ceiling for a clean area.

"Hey, how come you get to keep your real name and I can't?"

"Cause if I'm gonna to be a character in your novel and then they make the movie version of it they're gonna need my real name for <sup>tw rs</sup> credit."

"My novel?"

"Didn't you say you were going to write a novel?"

"Well, I said a book."

"Book, novel, they're the same thing." She added more water to her TP wad. "A novel just weighs more."

"Like how much?" I asked, suddenly worried.

"You know the De La Torre's cat, Blackie?"

"Yeah."

"Well, a novel weighs a little less than her." She <sup>crouched, lowered</sup> brought her fist to the side of her knees <sup>and</sup> then with all her <sup>possible</sup> strength, flung the wad <sup>at</sup> the ceiling.

"Now how do you know that?" I asked.

"'Cause one time Mrs. De La Torre gave me a ride to school and Blackie was in the front seat with me and when I grabbed my backpack it was actually Blackie in that little carrying case of hers that I grabbed and I thought 'Wow, I almost took Blackie to first period with me!' But anyway, <sup>and</sup> now that I think about it, Blackie was much heavier than *The Great Gatsby*."

"How many pages are in *The Great Gatsby*?"

"A lot." She glared <sup>at</sup> her wad as if she was <sup>actually</sup> daring it to drop. "I mean the whole class still hates Miss Bentley for assigning it."

"Miss Bentley."

"Yeah, she's a bitch. So anyway, you gonna go to the beach with us?"

"Nah, I can't. I got a test 7th period."

"Oh, come on, We're gonna go to the oil piers. <sup>!!</sup>

"Nah, I really gotta take this test."

"You're gonna flunk it anyway," she looked at the same wad <sup>stuck</sup> that <sup>was</sup> <sup>stuck</sup> between the air vent and <sup>the</sup> overhead lighting. "I think ol' Canary is near the music building by now so I'm gonna cut across the quad to the parking lot while I have a chance. Here, take my books. I can't take them to my locker and I don't want to take them to the beach with me."



She pulled out a beach towel and halter top from her backpack and handed me her books. She took one more look up at the ceiling.

"So you think it'll stick?"

"What?" I was too busy thinking about <sup>(h)</sup>were I was gonna stash her backpack.

"The wad!"

Oh, I thought you meant my new name!"

"Believe me," She patted me on the back. "Ten years from now, everyone is going to know you as Michael Hill."<sup>u</sup>

## Fourth Thursday in April

Unlike the reasons the Ms. Foundation <sup>gave</sup> ~~have~~ to initiate "Take Our Daughters to Work" Day, my father didn't take me to work so I could simply "celebrate my worth as a girl" or to "gain confidence and voice in my opinions." ~~These were considered reasons of privilege and opportunity.~~ No, my father's decision to let me accompany him to his job <sup>that is, the one he held during the day</sup> was simple <sup>because</sup> my parents couldn't afford a sitter. Great Aunt Lydia announced she was fed up with all the grand kids tearing the plastic off her living room furniture and, unlike what so many people think of Mexican grandmothers, ours really disliked children. **Really.** And for me to stay home? Now, that was out of the question, 'specially after that tortilla frying incident I ignited in the kitchen last month. No, on my school's staff development day, it was decided I would go to work with my father.

While Patty Romero's dad sold gold anklet charms over the phone and Margaret Simon's dad actually drove over The Grade to work in Hollywood, it was my father who I believed had the most glamorous of all jobs. He worked in an atmosphere filled with movers and shakers, politicians, and deal makers; a place where foreign destination was the <sup>focus</sup> ~~destiny~~ of everyone's personal and professional agenda. My father was a custodial engineer at the Oxnard city airport.

He prepped me the night before about our day together. "So you know we're gonna have to get up early."

"Early like six?" I asked.

"More like four," he laughed.

"In the morning?" I cried. "Why so early?"

"Cause that my job," he answered.

I started the day with my father bleary-eyed and hungry. But the thought of eating was out of the question. It was just too early. Once at the airport my father bought me a cup of hot ~~water~~ chocolate and as I sipped it I slowly began to feel more

and more coherent. I followed him on his route around the terminal, helping him collect soiled papers, empty French fry containers, and bits of chewing gum foil from the ground. Inside the terminal I counted the squares of tile that he buffed to a ~~shiny~~<sup>super shiny</sup> super gloss.

"Hey," I asked. "Did you know that you've cleaned 928 squares so far?"

"So far?" he ~~said~~<sup>asked as</sup> while he wiped his forehead. "It seems like a million already."

Later I handed my father sheets of paper towels ~~while~~<sup>as</sup> he sprayed ammonia and water onto the large bay windows that ~~looked out onto~~<sup>over</sup> the runway. For our ~~part~~<sup>some</sup> we were able to witness ~~hundreds of~~ small planes whisking ~~away~~ families to exciting vacations outside of Oxnard. ?

"What kind of plane is that one?" I asked pointing to a small aircraft with blue stripes.

"That's a cessna," he answered. "Looks like a six seater."

"Have you ever been in a plane like that?"

"No," my father said. "I hate planes."

Later I discovered that everyone who headed toward the runway had to lay their luggage flat on its side on a conveyer belt. A monitor above the belt then exposed all the ~~personal~~ insides of the luggage, and I stood at distance, anxiously hoping to snag a sight of some X-rayed chones or brassieres. No such luck. I had fun guessing how many people would "go off" after walking through a metal archway and then watching one man, who refused to take off his belt buckle, start yelling and ~~be~~<sup>get</sup> finally taken away by security.

Yes, I felt proud knowing my father worked in such an interesting place of employment, surrounded by worldly patrons, official looking uniformed staff, and ~~big~~<sup>who wore big buckles</sup> buckle-wearing mad men. ~~Until one woman~~<sup>But then a woman</sup> at the reservations desk, asked me a question.

"Where are your parents, honey?" she asked. "Are you lost?"

"No, I'm here with my dad, George."

"George?" she responded with a surprised look. "Who's George?"

"George," I answered back. "He's my dad. You don't know who he is? He's been working here, like, forever."

I pointed out my father as he lugged a large gray waste bin out of the ladies restroom.

"Oh," the woman remarked. "I've never noticed him before. Is he new?" She asked the man ~~seated~~ next to her. "Do you know any George?" The man shook his head ~~no~~.

I couldn't understand this woman's questions or the surprised tone in her voice. My father had worked a full three years at the airport, sweeping its floor, running feather dusters across its counters, dragging mops across the linoleum, <sup>and</sup> yet this women, as well as the man ~~seated~~ next to her, my father's own co-workers, hadn't even heard of him.

Later that afternoon, on the way home, I ~~skipped~~ <sup>didn't</sup> asking my father why his friends at work didn't know who he was. I guess, even at 11 years old, I knew the reason. It was as though he was a ghost, the brown ghost in green, <sup>un</sup> ~~not~~ noticed, unseen. I suddenly felt so ashamed of my father. I guess his job was <sup>not</sup> so glamorous after all.



Years later, my father revealed something to me I never knew. He was awarded the Custodian III badge -- a small, white, oval pin granted by executive personnel to janitors who exhibited a commitment <sup>to</sup> ~~in~~ custodial engineering. But it was that pin, that small little pin, that scared my father. While janitorial work is a stable and honest way to make a living, and that pin represented a hefty raise, increasing his paycheck to an solid eighty dollars a week, it foreshadowed my father's future as a ghost; an invisible man no one would ever see, get to know, or much less, respect.

ital. During the month of April for the past few years, I've read and heard about the millions of mothers, aunts, uncles and fathers who've escorted their daughters, nieces and young female friends to their own places of employment. I've seen the photos of Time Magazine correspondents relating news<sup>1</sup> breaking faxes to eight<sup>1</sup> year<sup>1</sup> old visitors, I've heard the NPR commentators sharing airwaves with high<sup>1</sup> voiced preteens, and I read about the one girl whose father, a pilot, let her request for take off.

Through this type of parental career guidance, this fourth Thursday in April declared "Take Your Daughters to Work Day," young girls are granted glimpses into their own futures, taught the benefits of career options available to them, and most importantly, how to value and respect a person's worth.

But for me, it was a lesson learned too painfully. ]

Michelle - this feels a bit too heavy handed and sentimental ✓



#### Role Model Rule Number 4:

#### Seek Sisterly Support

My white blouse had a peter pan collar, a front frayed pocket and perspiration stains under the arm pits. You might ask why didn't I just run over to Mervyn's across the street and buy me another blouse without any yellow arm pit stains. But then it wouldn't really be a part of the uniform, would it? And <sup>I had</sup> to wear the exact uniform given to me as a newly appointed representative of Fox Television Studios, ~~was mandatory~~. The rest of my ensemble included a heavy navy blue blazer and a shapeless gray narrow skirt that I quickly hemmed to my knees with duct tape before my shift. I also had to wear pantyhose, which I brought with me. Thank God. I'd hate to be handed used ones and see what kind of stains were on those. Mine were regulation <sup>style</sup>, nude colored sheers that gathered at the ankles and lay low in the crotch. No wonder old women are always so cranky.

Hers was less of an uniform, and more of get up: A black spandex body suit that flared out near the knees and elbows in multicolored ruffles. She wore a matching bolero jacket in a Pucci like design and on some days, ~~if she decided~~, she wore colored fishnets. She got to wear a Betsy Johnson chain belt. Once, during the Emmy's, I got to wear a red ribbon to support AIDS awareness. She made probably three or four grand a week. I made \$125. She had her own parking space where some cute Cuban waiter was always parked, waiting to pick her up and take her out for midnight paella. I parked far, far, far from the studio, too embarrassed to let anyone see my ratty old Geo Metro, and then drove the thirty minutes home in silence to a roommate cooking spaghetti in his boxers. But that was the difference between us. Between a studio page and a Flygirl. Between Jennifer Lopez and me.

I took the job at *In Living Color* 'cause Kirsty had said the hours would be flex, the pay pretty decent and I'd get to eat for free in the studio commissary. "It'll be fun,"

she promised. "You'll get to meet celebs like MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, and Chuck D. They're always coming by to watch a taping."

"What about Ja'net Dubois ?" I asked.

"Who's that?"

"She played Willona on 'Good Times.'

"Who?"

"You know, Janet Jackson's mom, her foster mom. You don't remember her?"

"Oh, uh, she hasn't been invited yet, but Janet Jackson sent flowers twice."

When I first saw the Jennifer I felt a connection right away. Hey, she's brown, like me. Maybe Mexican, like me. Do I detect an accent? Should I ask her where she's from? I have to be careful (See Role Model Rule Number 9<sup>1</sup>). But I rarely got a chance to be close enough to talk to her. While I was up in the audience seating area, checking off guests lists and counting seats for the live studio audience, she was down on the studio stage, practicing dance routines, joking with Rosie Perez and drinking diet Coke.\* While I was alone, standing guard outside the studio for hours on end in the evening's cold and praying for any type of human interaction, she was behind the guarded doors of the Green Room chit chatting with Jim Carrey (then<sup>2</sup>/James Carrey) and Damons Wayan (then<sup>3</sup>/considered the only cast member on the show that would someday<sup>4</sup> make it<sup>5</sup> big) about a taping well done. Okay, so you already understand the difference in our positions.

I thought if only I had a chance to talk Jennifer she would help me. A brown woman supporting another brown woman in a Black world. Remember, it was the set of *In Living Color*.

"I'm thinking of talking to one of the Flygirls." I told Lenny, one of the other pages.

"Which one?"

"The Mexican."

"She's not Mexican, I think she's Puerto Rican. Why you wanna talk to her?"

"Well, see, I'm really a writer."

"Aren't we all?"

No, really I am. I write everyday. I was thinking maybe she could help me. I mean, I always see her talking to Keenan and sometimes I think of some funny things. Maybe he can use some of my funny things."

"You have a script?" Lenny asks.

"A script? Like what I'm gonna say when I meet her?"

"No stupid, a script. A screen play."

"No, not really."

"And you call yourself a writer? In L.A.? Listen, remind me to give you a copy of my script when we get to our lockers. After reading it, then see if you wanna call yourself a writer. My little baby's gonna be my ticket to stardom."

"What's it about?"

"Elton John."

"Elton John?"

"Yeah, my two main characters are based on characters from his work. One's Norma Jean and the other is Bennie, like from Bennie and the Jets. Get it? And they have a pet. A crocodile named Roc."

#

One day I found myself at the craft service table and Jennifer was near by. She smelled so good, real fresh <sup>like</sup> and she was wearing a neon green two-piece dance outfit. The scrunchie in her hair was also green. She must have a personal stylist. <sup>I thought</sup>

"Hi," I said meekly while helping myself to a handful of <sup>Peter</sup> Petting Farm gold fish.

I guess she didn't hear me.

"Hi," I said again. "Hey, that's really a cute outfit. Do you get to keep them afterwards?"

She looked at me, popped the top of her can of soda and then turned to ask the craft service guy, "This damn coke <sup>\*</sup> is warm. You got any ice?"

I tried another time to talk with Jennifer again. This opportunity was during dinner in the studio commissary. The commissary was a lot like a high school cafeteria, in the sense that the tables were filled by cast and crew according to popularity. The most popular kids sat at Keenan's table 'cause, of course, they wanted to be near Keenan and Jim Carrey. The second most popular table was where the Flygirls sat. The next chosen area <sup>was</sup> ~~is~~ where the writers, mostly young Black guys in Dockers, and some studio heads, a few old white guys in Dockers, ate. Then there was the crew table where all the cameramen and grips ate. And then, last and most definitely least, there <sup>was</sup> ~~is~~ the pages table, where only the pages sat.

Now, the seating arrangement in the commissary was not set in stone. A lot of times, kids visited other kids at different tables, and sometimes you'd see a Tommy Davidson talking to a studio head at their table or you'd find a grip trying to flirt with a Flygirl at the Flygirls table, but no one ever came to chat with the pages, *ever*. We were the square pegs, the square pages.

"My, my," I remembered Garrett, the fifty<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>-year<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>-old new page commenting as he surveyed the commissary for the first time. He had just sat down to dig into his turkey leg and monkey bread. "This is just like Christmas dinner!"

"What do<sup>u</sup> ya mean?" Lenny asked. "Eating on fold<sup>u</sup> up tables and off paper plates in a room full of strangers? Damn, Garrett, where do you eat Christmas dinner? Downtown at The Mission?"

I didn't hear Garrett reaction to Lenny's comment 'cause I had just seen Jennifer get up for seconds. That was my cue to join her at food line and share some words with her.

"Man, the food looks so good tonight," I said to her as she looked over the cold pastas. "I just love when Celebrity on Wheels caters. Hey, that's a cute belt. Oh, by the way, what generation are you?"

Too aggressive?

She didn't answer me but rather got the attention of a server and said, "This risotto is friggin' cold. Nuke it for me, will ya?"

(4)

I was beginning to think I'd never have a private moment with Jennifer. Maybe she didn't recognize that I was a brown girl just like her. Maybe she didn't care. Maybe she was used to people always complimenting her. Then one day, I was asked to <sup>collect</sup> ~~gather up~~ the dirty towels from the fly girls <sup>↓</sup> dressing room. It was late in the evening after a taping and I knew <sup>be</sup> ~~it would~~ only her and a few other fly girls. It would be the perfect chance to talk.

I knocked on the dressing room door. No one answered. I could only hear hip hop thumping.

I knocked again.

Still no answer.

I pounded on the door with the side of my fist.

The music was lowered and the door was opened.

Jennifer answered. "What?!" she asked annoyed.

"Uh, I'm here to get your towels." Suddenly I felt like a door-to-door salesperson pushing country music 8 Tracks. "Are you finished with them?"

"Wait," she put her palm out. "You're telling me you made us turn down Big Daddy Kane, just to hand you our friggin' towels?"

"Well I <sup>be</sup> ~~didn't~~ . . ."

"Turn Big Daddy back up," she yelled over her shoulder to another fly girl and then looked back at me. "Now, you just wait here till Daddy's groove is done and then you knock and **then** we will open the door." She slammed the door and I immediately heard laughter.

When "Big Daddy's groove" was over I knocked on the door again. No one answered. I knocked again. I could hear a new song starting, but no one had said to come in. I continued to tap on the door a few more times then finally I opened it slowly



and discovered they had all left the room through a side door. Their white towels, smeared with sweaty beige foundation and red lipstick, ~~w~~ere in the sink under running water. As I collected the soppy wet towels, I could hear their laughter bounce off the studio's high ceiling as they exited through a faraway back entrance.

#

The next night I complained to Kirsty.

"Well, at least they rounded up all the towels for you. Sometimes I have to wait near the showers and **hand** them their towels. That one fly girl, the white one with the big thighs, if she drops her soap she wants me to go in and pick it up for her."

"Still, why does Jennifer have to be such a bitch to me?" I asked.

"Don't take it so personally. I mean, she's a Flygirl, you're a page. Maybe she's embarrassed of you, or for you."

"Embarrassed?"

☺ Yeah. Come on, I'm sure she knows you're Latina and maybe you remind her <sup>of</sup> what she could be and maybe she doesn't want to be associated with you in any way. Maybe she thinks if someone sees you guys talking, it's gonna make you both look the same."

"The same?"

"Okay, never mind all that." Kirsty said as opened the door to start letting people in. "Just tell yourself she's the worst of all the dancers and she's never gonna be known outside of this show. She'll never be famous."

#

That night during my whole shift I thought about what Kirsty said. She was right about Jennifer being a Flygirl and me being a page. Once you're <sup>are</sup> put on a page uniform, you're already a target of passive contempt. You're a reminder <sup>of</sup> how <sup>wrong</sup> detoured a career can go and what a waste a college degree could be. Everyone knows you're around just to separate <sup>sweet</sup> 'n low from sugar, take phone messages, or tape off <sup>a</sup> seats in the studio audience (two, if Heavy D is in <sup>da</sup> house"). These are things a ninth

grader could do and actually the whole page experience is a lot like freshman year. You're at the bottom and that'd be okay, I guess, to start at the bottom, if you were still in high school, and young and everything. People would be all supportive and say things like, "Remember me when you make it, When you go far and become a star!"

But if you were 25 years old, like me, and still wearing a uniform, people don't say that kind of shit anymore. In Hollywood, if you're closer to thirty than twenty, you've already exhausted your chance on going far and becoming a star ~~and~~ You're just floundering and people view you as pathetic. Maybe they know about the yellow stains under your arms.

While Kirsty began to take people to their seats, I imagined what it'd be like, say in the not-so-far future for Jennifer and me. What if one of us was famous, really famous, and the other still in a uniform?

(4)

#### Fifteen Years Later

Former Flygirl: Hello. My name is Jennifer and I'll be your waitress for the evening.

Me: Save the introductions and just bring me a menu.

Former Flygirl: Shall I bring you the wine list?

Me: What? You think I gotta research what I wanna drink? Just bring me a highball and if you get a single drop on me while serving it, I'll have your job.

This is raw silk you know.

Former Flygirl: Yes, of course.

She returns with my drink.

Former Flygirl: "Uh, excuse me, Ms. Serros?"

Me: "Yes?" [I look up from my copy of *Variety*.]

Former Flygirl: "I don't mean to disturb you, but do you want your dressing on the side?"

Me: "On the side? Do I *look* like I need it on the side? For god's sake, toss the damn sauce with the greens and call it a salad already. And don't try to camouflage any iceberg under the endive. I do know the difference, you know!"

Former Flygirl: "Yes, of course. Oh, Miss Serros?"

Me: "Now what?"

Former Flygirl: "Well, I know you're a busy person but you know I'm not really a waitress, I'm an actress."

Me: "Oh really? I haven't heard that one before."

Former Flygirl: "And I know you're one of Hollywood's top writers. I mean, everyone knows your name can make or break a movie."

Me: "True, true."

Former Flygirl: "Well, we actually, oh this is funny . . ."

Me: "Funny? Funny how? I don't have time to laugh. I'm busy, busy, busy!" I grab my cell phone out of my Prada bag.

Former Flygirl: "Funny, in the way that we actually worked together on a TV show, back in 1991. Remember *In Living Color*?"

Me: "*In Living Color*? Was that some kind of How to Paint with Acrylics show on PBS? That name doesn't ring a bell." I give my home number to a busboy and he winks at me.

Former Flygirl: "No, it was a sketch comedy."

Me: "Oh, yes. I do remember now. Well what about it?"

Former Flygirl: "Yes, well, I was a cast member."

Me: "You? On TV? What exactly did you do?"

Former Flygirl: "I was a dancer."

Me: "Oh, yes, one of those Spice girls."

Former Flygirl: "No, I was a fly girl. And, well, I've done a little acting since then."

Me: "Really?"

Former Flygirl: "Well, I played Selena, the Tejana singing sensation, in a feature film and well, I was paired with Ice Cube and a giant python. But you know, now that I'm older, the good scripts, the ones with the gratuitous backside shots, aren't coming in anymore and I was wondering, I mean, since you're a brown woman and I'm a brown woman and I thought maybe you'd wanna help out a sister, so I was wondering if you maybe you could think of a storyline, a part for me."

Me: "A part for you?"

Former Flygirl: "Yes, I'd work really hard."

Me: "So, you say you were a fly girl, is that correct?"

Former Flygirl: "Yes."

Me: "Well, why don't you fly girl, I mean, fly fly far away girl and let me eat in peace!"

Former Flygirl: "What?"

Me: "Ha ha, just joking. But listen I do have some industry insider advice for you."

Former Flygirl: "Oh really, you do? What?"

Me: "Lemon scented Clorox!"

Former Flygirl: "Lemon scented Clorox? You mean, dye my hair?"

Me: "No, for your uniform. The lemon scent will eliminate the smell and the bleach will get rid of those yellow stains under the arm pits. Do it quick 'cause you're making me wanna barf every time you lean over to fill my drink!"

#

I came out of my day dream and found Kristy had pretty much seated everyone by herself. "There's still a line outside," she told me. "Can you go outside and tell 'em they won't be getting in?"

I hated telling outside people they <sup>couldn't</sup> ~~can't~~ get into a taping. They're considered ~~C~~<sup>1</sup> list seat fillers who've been waiting outside for hours. They're always told ~~because~~

*that since*  
N they have a ticket they're definitely gonna get in to ~~watch~~<sup>the</sup> a taping, but come 9 PM,  
when the studio audience is ~~full~~<sup>filled</sup> with VIPs and family members of the cast, we don't  
need them ~~at~~<sup>after all</sup> to fill seats and we turn them away. ~~And here~~<sup>all after</sup> we kept them waiting  
outside, ~~leading~~ them on for hours.

I went outside and told the crowd there were no more seats. There were moans, pleads, jeers and a few middle fingers.

And then I saw her.

"Oh, hey, excuse me! " I called out. "Hello! " It was definitely her.

"Me?" she asked, pointing to herself.

"Yes, wait a minute!" I looked down at my clip board. "There must be a mistake. You should be on the list."

The woman walked over to me. "Oh honey, I haven't been on any list for years. I just thought I'd come by and take a chance, see if there were any seats available. I really love the show."

"Wait," I told her. "Maybe there's something I can do."

I looked at the clip board again. The seats were filled, the studio packed to capacity. There was only one seat not taken yet and it said, 'Friend of Jennifer's, fly girl.' I immediately crossed off the name and unhooked the thick rope.

"You're in luck," I told the woman. "We have one seat left."

"One seat? You're kidding? That's great, honey." The woman patted my shoulder. I pulled out <sup>~</sup>sheet from my clipboard and asked, "Uh, if you don't mind, could I have your autograph?"

"You want *my* autograph?" The woman looked surprised.

"Well, we're not suppose<sup>Cd</sup> to ask the guests, but I'm a really really big fan of yours."

"You're a fan of mine?" She took the paper and wrote on it. "Honey, you've just made my evening."



Later after I sat the woman into the last empty seat and after the stage lights dimmed and the A.D. yelled, "Quiet on the set!" I stepped back by the railing, near the other pages, and read what the woman wrote to me. Her words <sup>still inspire me</sup> of hope, her dedication of inspiration still stick to my heart today.

EXT. { To Michele,

Reach for the stars and someday you'll go very very far.

Good Luck!

Love, Ja'net Dubois

a.k.a Willona Woods on 'Good Times'

DES/COMP: FOOTNOTE, PAGE 35

\*This isn't an opportunity for product placement. This is just what I remember to the best of my recollection. She could have very well could have been drinking a diet Pepsi, maybe even a diet Shasta. Definitely a name brand. Come on, we are talking about one of the most popular TV show in the early '90s! They aren't gonna have any old Iris brand.

Call #2

"Hello?"

"Hi, this is Michele Serros. Is Ernie Chavez in?"

You mean Doctor Ernesto Chavez, Ph.D. ?

"Uh, yes."

"No, Doctor Chavez isn't available to take your call. May I take a message?"

"Yes, can you tell him Michele Serros called and that I still haven't received my honorarium?"

"Your honorarium?"

"Yes, I read at his luncheon last month and he told me I would have it by last Friday and here it is Thursday and I haven't received it. Maybe ~~I should~~ <sup>you could</sup> check to see if he has the right address?"

"I'll tell him."

<sup>would you like my address</sup>  
"Well, ~~should I check my address.~~"

"I'm sure he has it. He <sup>is</sup> a very meticulous man."

"Okay, well, thank you."

"Thank you. Good bye."

## Role Model Rule Number 5:

### Discard Discontinued Text

I guess I've worn them since I was 10 years old. At first they were just a simple and inexpensive attempt to look cool 'cause when you wear sunglasses it doesn't matter if your eyes aren't blue or that you don't smoke cloves, or that your lashes ain't that long 'n lovely, wearing shades just **make** you feel glamorous.

So here I am, already twenty<sup>five</sup> years old, and here I'm still sporting the things, cheap plastic Melrose knock-offs I found on the boardwalk. But this afternoon I'm not wearing them to look cool or even to feel glamorous <sup>and</sup> everyone might think I'm wearing them 'cause the sun is pretty harsh today. <sup>But</sup> The sun I could deal with. No, today ~~of all days~~ I'm wearing sunglasses 'cause the last thing in the world I wanna do is cry in front of all these people. I clench my jaw and think about what I read from page 254 in Volume 15, Letter P, as the woman in the burgundy blouse breaks into **Ave Maria** and Father Connor sprinkles the holy water on the <sup>( )</sup> laden coffin. <sup>? flower?</sup>

Volume 15, Letter P was part of the set of encyclopedias my father brought home from work one day. He was a man in uniform, a <sup>winny</sup> ~~rating~~ green short sleeved shirt and matching stiff slacks, flexing <sup>his</sup> janitorial muscle evenings at the El Rio Library. Some Fridays he'd come home with <sup>his</sup> arms filled with discontinued books, damaged magazines and long playing records; items considered outdated and <sup>useless</sup> ~~no longer valid~~ by the Ventura County Library Association. But to us, ~~my family~~, they were free, which meant they were still good. **You just don't turn down things for free.**

On the day ~~of~~ when he brought home the encyclopedias, I inhaled every piece of information crammed between the thick textured burgundy colored covers. They were <sup>an</sup> impressive set. Twenty four volumes in all (M and N were doubled up, X, Y and Z made up another single book ) and published in 1956. The inside flap of each book was stamped in purple ink <sup>with</sup> ~~stating~~ 'DISCARD' indicating that the text was outdated.

But, really, I thought, as my father handed them over to me to look at for fun, how much could facts change in just twenty years?

Volume 1, Letter A was my absolute favorite book. It contained a section regarding anatomy and featured three whole illustrated pages dedicated to the human body, without clothes. ~~So many days~~ after school in my playhouse, I ~~opened~~ <sup>opened</sup> that volume to show off the outline of a male urinary tract to all my friends.

"Your dad brought this home from work?" Patty Romero asked.

"Yeah," I bragged.

"Man, you're lucky," Goony added. "All my dad brings home is a lousy headache."



But it was in Volume 15, Letter P that I learned about Psychology. Or more importantly, social maturity. There, on page 254, was a black and white photo of a young girl in her bedroom, laying across the bed. She was alone holding a handkerchief to her eyes and she was crying. The caption underneath read, "A mature person does not cry in public. A mature person waits until they are in private to express their emotions."

~~At 10 years old~~ more than anything, I wanted ~~was~~ to be mature. As a preteen, I still wobbled in high heels and ~~winced~~ <sup>wincing</sup> after sneaking a sip of my grandfather's coffee. I feared I would never be mature. So after reading page 254 in Volume 15, Letter P, I thought that if refraining from ~~tears~~ <sup>crying</sup> in public made you mature, then that's what I could easily do. Simple enough.



But on some days, the tears couldn't help but trickle out and so on those particular days, days I thought I might cry, I wore sunglasses. I wore some the week after witnessing Robert G. skate the Couples Only skate with Stefanie De la Torre and I wore a pair a whole month after Mama Kitty was hit by a speeding catering truck. Yes, sunglasses were the perfect accessory for the up and coming mature ten year old.

Fifteen years later I wore a pair the day everyone gathered in the H wing of Community Memorial Hospital. Camped out in the waiting room, we were all there, Alma, Alfonso, Lydia, my father, and, oh too many people to name, all waiting to hear good news about my mother, who was really bad off, and even though they were all family, and even though we were all indoors, I still wore the sunglasses. I didn't want anyone to see me crying.

"Michele, it's your twenty minutes."

This is how the visits with my mother went. Private time, one at a time, that we filed in for 20 minutes of private time. ~~lasted a short twenty minutes~~ That was the hospital rule.

When I entered my mother's curtained area in the ICU, I pushed my sunglasses to the top of my head. There was no way I wanted any tinted plastic coming between my mother and me, and, I'm no doctor, but I've watched enough episodes of G. H. to know when someone is really sick and I could tell she was very sick. Her face was blank, yellow colored, and her eyes were half closed and smeared with clear gel to help maintain their moisture. Large white machinery hummed over her in unison, and displayed digital graphs that charted her losing battle, diagnosed a body that was losing a battle every second.

I sat at the foot of my mother's bed and took her hand. Its icy coldness scared me and I took it between my two hands and rubbed. I looked at the hand and remembered it being part of a pair that once filled fortune cookies with a junior high school campaign slogan (Confucius say: Vote for Michele!) the same hands that typed terms papers for me, laid brick designs for a fancy patio, that clapped with joy for every 'A' I got on a report card . . . oh so many things those hands did when they were healthy, active and warm.

"Hey mama," I whispered. "Hey, you look great. You look so much better."

You never know about people when they're classified as being in a semi-comatose state. You gotta remain positive and upbeat cause you never know what they may over hear, and that something negative could really make them feel their situation is hopeless and they may



given and  
N

leave. The last thing I wanted was for my mother to leave. I stretched my eyebrows and my jaw and tried to concentrate on not crying. I thought of the sunglasses on top of my head, but the last think I was gonna do was put them on. I stayed with my mother for my ~~time of~~ twenty minutes <sup>and</sup> ~~then~~ tucked the peach colored blanket under the sides of her thin cold body. I squeezed her hand one more time before I left.

#

"Any changes?" Angela asked when I came back to the waiting room. She got up from the couch and was already holding her car keys. I had forgotten we planned to have lunch together and suddenly I realized I was so hungry. I hadn't eaten in almost two full days.

"Nothing, " I told her. "No changes."

"Well, let's go to Marie Callender's," she suggested, trying to sound positive and in charge. "I think some food will make you feel good."

"Good?"

"Well, at least a little better." She looked uncomfortable. She pushed the elevator button and rubbed my shoulder as we waited for the doors to open. I clenched my jaw tighter.

Once we were in her car and leaving the parking lot, I rolled down my window and reached for my sunglasses. They weren't on top of my head.

"Wait," I called out.

"What's wrong?"

"My glasses. I left them . . ." Then I remembered. "I left them on the night stand with my mom."

"Get 'em later," she said as she started onto the street. "You don't really need them, do you?"

"No, I mean, yeah I do. I feel like shit and I don't wanna go out like this. I gotta go get them. It'll only take a second."

Angela turned back into the hospital's parking lot and I got out of the car and ran back to the building. I took the elevator back to the third floor.

"What's wrong?" Aunt Lydia asked when she saw me run back into the waiting room. "I thought you were going to lunch with your roommate."

"I forgot my glasses."

"You came all the way back for sunglasses?"

"I need to get back into the ICU. Is someone with her?"

"No, Emma just came out. But be quick, 'cause her father wants to see her and it's his turn next."

I went into the ICU and saw my sunglasses on her night stand near the Kleenex box and plastic water pitcher, just where I had left them. I leaned over to get them.

"It's just me, mama," I whispered. "I forgot something." I squeezed her hand and was turning to leave, when I felt it. She squeezed my hand back.

"You're always forgetting something." she whispered softly.

I turned around. I couldn't believe it. My mother's eyes were now completely open and she was awake. She was alert and actually communicating with me. "Oh my God." I continued to squeeze her hand. "You're talking!"

"Of course, I'm talking. Hey," she whispered. "you're hurting my hand."

"Oh, sorry." I immediately let go of it. "But you were in . . . you've been out for days, they said that you were . . ."

"They don't know what they're talking about."

I couldn't believe it. My mother was awake. She was actually having a conversation with me! The graphs behind her displayed higher numbers and that once dreaded digital line now revealed slopes.

"I'm gonna go get the nurse." I started to get up from the chair.

"No, wait," she whispered. "I wanna talk, just me and you."

"But shouldn't . . ."

"Where were you off to earlier?" she interrupted.

"Well, I was gonna go have lunch with Angela, but don't you think . . . "

"Your roommate, right?" she asked quickly. "Where were you going?"

"I think Marie Callender's."

"Oh, I love Marie Callender's. Their pasta primavera is so good."

"Mama . . ." I started to say. But it was no use. She just wanted to talk.

"You know, pasta primavera means Spring Pasta, in Italian." She continued.

"Bobby's daughter told me that. She went to Italy, remember?"

"Yeah," I rolled my eyes. "How could everyone not know? She sent postcards every day!"

"Yeah, she's a little show offy, huh?" My mother smiled. "You know, I want to go to Italy."

"You do? You never brought that up before."

"I decided when I get out of here, that you and I should go to Italy. Let's go to Italy."

"Mama, I think you should concentrate on getting better."

"You know," she leaned closer to me. "When you left earlier, the doctor came in and said I was already so much better."

"The doctor said that? Which one? When did he said that?"

"He said I should be out by next week."

"Next week?" I was actually beginning to feel light-headed from the excitement. "How come he. . ."

"Wait, wait, listen," she interrupted. "I have some money, a little saved up, so I say let's go to Italy this summer. Listen, I want to go. Tell me you'll go, just me and you."

"Of course I wanna go to Italy, but . . ."

"Promise, this summer."

"Yeah, this summer, but wait . . ."

"So, why did you come back?" she interrupted again.

"I forgot my sunglasses."

"You came back all the way just for sunglasses?" She suddenly started coughing..

I poured her some water from the pitcher and she continued to cough until she drank from the cup. "You can't go one hour without sunglasses." She said after clearing her throat. "Put 'em on. Let me see you in them."

I put the glasses on.

"They're too big for your face," she said.

"I like them like this."

"You look like a movie star."

"Like an *Italian* movie star?" I joked.

You never know what could happen once we get there!" She laughed softly. "Now listen, you go have lunch with Angela and I want you to buy one of those travel books. Get one on Italy and I want you to come back here and we're gonna plan our trip."

I didn't get up from the chair right away. I wanted to look at my mother. Her face was full, <sup>of</sup> filled with color and actually glowed with life. She looked back at me and smiled. My mother was better. She was definitely going to live. I leaned over, kissed her forehead and squeezed her hand. It was warm.

#

The next thing I knew was being woken up by a nurse. I had accidentally fallen asleep on the chair while talking to my mother. None of the nurses knew if I had just <sup>gone</sup> going over my allotted twenty minutes or if I had actually fallen asleep. They couldn't tell 'cause I had on my sunglasses. I never made it back to the parking lot to meet Angela for lunch and my mother and I, well, we never got to planning our trip to Italy. By the time a nurse had shaken my shoulder, my mother had fallen back into a coma. She died four days later.

And so here I am wearing the sunglasses. The same sunglasses I left on her night stand. Everyone says there was no way I could've possibly had such a conversation with my mother. Everyone swears she was completely comatose and that I must've dreamt the whole thing. "You were tired," my aunt Emma tried to explain. "You hadn't eaten in almost two days and you just imagined she talked with you." But I refuse to listen to her or anyone else in my family. I know my mother spoke, just with me. I look at the woman in the burgundy blouse and concentrate on her foreign words of *Ave Maria*. They are partly in Latin and I think of Italy. I wonder if I will ever go there someday and then suddenly I feel overwhelmed with fear, loss and sadness, all at once. I think how far away Italy actually is. I think about how big the world is and how suddenly small and insignificant I am. So many people in the world and eventually, inevitability, we will all die.

I feel my eyes begin to fill with tears and I immediately think of page 254 in Volume 15, Letter P. I adjust my sunglasses closer to my head and clench my jaw tighter as I think about how long it will be before I can get home and go to my room so I can lie across my bed and cry in private.



## Chavez Unseen

"Chavez residence."

"Hello, is Ernie available?"

"You mean Doctor Ernesto Chavez Ph.D?"

"Yes, right."

"No, he is on vacation with his family in Mexico. Is there a message?"

"Well, I worked at a event he organized two months ago and . . . "

"Are you a student? Because Doctor Chavez doesn't take calls from students at his private <sup>residence</sup> ~~home~~."

"No, I'm not his student. I worked at an event he had at his home.

"The one for the Chicano Karaoke Club last week?"

"No . . . "

"The Cajete Mujer Conference last week end?"

"No, no, it was over two months ago and it was a luncheon, at his house. I still haven't received my honorarium and he hasn't returned my calls."

"Well, I will definitely forward this call."

"Thank you, I would appreciate that."

## Role Model Rule Number 7:

### Respect the One Percent

During the holidays it's expected that families, no matter how harmonious or not, spend time with one another. If you have a traditional Mexican family like mine, it's an excuse to get together, ditch the Suddenly Salad mix and anything Swanson and devour homemade moist or dry (depending on who made them) pork tamales. It's a time to join together and sigh with relief upon discovering that every gift box has a receipt on the bottom. It's a ritual to observe great Aunt Lydia as she turns up the TV volume to high and lowers the iron's setting to low so the annual pressing of used Christmas wrap can begin. "Now this piece is just beautiful," she'll remark holding a large piece of red foil wrap, pointing out how it glistens from the TV's blue hue. "Ricky should've been more careful taking this one off."

But one year, 1996 to be exact, <sup>was different</sup> ~~I can still recall that warm balmy winter evening that chilled my troubled heart.~~ It was the year that I spent the evening of Christmas alone

I spent it alone not only because I was emotionally overcome, but <sup>because I was</sup> completely outraged by my family's actions. Relatives who I **thought** were a loyal tight loving circle of kinship actually went and did it. Went against the wishes of a dead man, ~~an elderly deceased~~ family member I might add, and stabbed him in the back on the holiest of all calendar days. They actually got into their Hondas, drove across town and <sup>chose</sup> ~~preferred~~ <sup>to spend</sup> ~~her~~ <sup>rather</sup> over him. <sup>with her</sup> ~~quality Christmas family time.~~ Supported **her** business endeavor <sup>preferred</sup> ~~than~~ respect the One Percent's artistic effort. God, I'm so ashamed to admit, but my family actually ~~preferred~~ <sup>to spend</sup> the last hours of Christmas night with Madonna. Not the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus Christ, not My Donna the Benifield's twenty year Palomino that had just given birth to twin foals, but **Madonna**. Yes, that one. That new film of hers, Evita, premiered nationwide and wouldn't you know it, landed in <sup>a</sup> ~~mini~~ mall theater smack in the middle of Oxnard.

"How can you go?" I protested as they searched The Ventura County Star for show times. "What about our promise to Uncle Charlie?"

"Who cares about that old promise," my cousin Gina said as she looked for her car keys. "He made such a big deal about everything, anyway. It's a movie, a musical, it's *Madonna*."

"You know," my Aunt Margaret remarked as she caught herself in the living room mirror, "I could have been Evita in my college musical. Remember that, Lennie? I had the voice of a choir girl. I almost had the role too, but they said my hips were too wide and that I didn't look Latina enough, not like *Madonna*."

And that would have been Uncle Charlie's point. Uncle Charlie was my father's oldest cousin, a struggling actor during the '60s and the '70s and <sup>even</sup> a little bit during the early '80s. He never found an acting gig. As a third generation Mexican, he was always told he looked too brown or not brown enough, too Mexican, yet not *Latin* enough.

"You know <sup>there are</sup> all the Latinos in this country, from heading political offices to creating careers with dish water hands, but you never hear our stories, see our lives on the big screen. We're almost the largest minority in this country and we barely make up one percent on film! They gave the part of *Zapata*, one of our own, to a *guero* with dyed hair!"

Unfortunately Uncle Charlie's last role was <sup>five years ago, as</sup> ~~that of~~ a dying man at Community Memorial, ~~where he died five years ago~~. Before he died he whispered to his wife, Aunt Lucy, "Please, promise me you'll always respect the one percent."

Since then, in honor of Uncle Charlie, we've refused to pay money for films featuring Latino roles portrayed by non Latino actors. We do this out of love, *para respeto* for Uncle Charlie. But my family, as <sup>they</sup> demonstrated that one Christmas, had long forgotten the promise.

"Madonna's different now," Gina tried to explain. "She's a mother."

"She's always different," I replied. "Every year we see just how different she is."

ital.  
MS - a couple more examples here? Either of films, TV shows that Charlie mentioned, or of other films the family wanted to see, but didn't out of respect to him?

*ital.*  
"Don't talk about Madonna that way," Aunt Lydia bit back. "She doesn't even have a mother. She died when she was a little girl. I saw that on Behind the Music and then on Oprah. Even Oprah almost started crying."

"Oprah's always crying."

"Don't say that about Oprah. She's sensitive."

#

*ital.*  
So this was how the holiday dialogue went that Christmas. I pledged allegiances to beloved celebrities as seen on the E! channel and defended affinity to MTV pop stars.

*wait.*  
And *ital.* that's why I spent Christmas alone. The front door slammed, shaking the wreath on the other side and three cars pulled out of the drive way. I picked up some green and gold wrapping paper, remembered *ring* Uncle Charlie and my promise to the one percent as I turned the TV volume to *high* and the iron setting to *low* and began to press.

## Good Parking

A scholarship and a house. That's what it took for me to finally ask my father to visit. In the ten years of living in Los Angeles, my father has never visited me, not once. I've never invited him. I guess I always wanted to be in a living situation he would be proud of and now I was living in a house. Small, but still a house, and I had just won a university scholarship. This would be a perfect time. He would be impressed and I was definitely ready for him.

So I called my old baby-sitter, Connie, who still lives in El Rio ~~and~~ right next door to him. I didn't call her to tell her about the award or to ask her to make the trip to L.A. with him. <sup>NO</sup> I needed her to walk over to my father's house and ask him to call me. My father doesn't have a phone. He always says, "If someone really wants to tell me something they can write me a letter. Why should I pay for what **they** want to say?"

So Connie is his only connection to the outside world. When she goes over to tell him someone needs to talk to him, he ~~then~~ walks over to El Rio Stop 'n' Shop and makes the call, the length of his conversation depending on how many dimes he has in his pocket.

About an hour later I <sup>get</sup> his phone call.

"Why are you telling Connie our business?" My father accuses me.

"Dad, all I did was ask her to ask you to call me. I don't a choice 'cause you don't have a phone."

"Well. . ." He relaxed a bit. "What do you need?"

I tell him about the scholarship. I tell him how I want him to go the awards ceremony with me. "But," I tell him, "It's from 6:30 to 7:30 . . . at night."

My father goes to bed at 7 PM every night. If he were to come to the ceremony with me, we wouldn't be getting off the UCLA campus <sup>↓</sup> till almost 8 and then there's the one <sup>↓</sup> hour drive back to Oxnard. He wouldn't be getting to bed <sup>↓</sup> till after 9 PM and I don't think he's done that since high school.



But his response really surprised me. "Oh, that's no problem," He said. "I'll be there. But I'm gonna get to your house early. I'm gonna get there early so we can find good parking."

To my father, good parking means free parking. I grew up being driven in circles around city blocks all in the name of good parking. As my sister and I grew <sup>rated</sup>nauseous in the backseat of his VW, my father would claim, "The City doesn't deserve more money than it already has."

My father arrived at my house at 2PM, four and a half hours before the ceremony. I met him at the door in cut offs and a sweat shirt.

"What?" ~~He~~ asked when he saw me through the screen door. "You're not even ready?"

Dad," I said as I started to let him, "It's not until tonight. Why are you here so early?"

"Oh you think this is early, but let me tell you, time, it goes by like *that*." He snapped his fingers. "Remember when you were just in high school and having all that trouble and I said it would all pass. 'Blink your eyes and it's gonna pass before you know it.' Well, didn't it? Didn't it all pass?"

"Dad, those were the longest four years of my life." I cleared off the couch for he could sit down, but he wasn't listening. He was now going through my records.

"Hey, is this a Richie Valens album?"

"Yeah," I told him. "You wanna to hear it?"

"Oh, I love Richie Valens! You know he was from La Colonia?"

"Dad, you think everyone is from Colonia. He was from **Pacoima**, not Colonia."

"He was? Are you serious? Man, all this time. . . well, yeah, put it on and then you can go get ready and then we can go out and get a soda or something."

To my father 'A soda or something' means a soda and ~~nothing~~ <sup>else</sup>. My father hates eating out. To him, restaurants are a big waste of time and money. "You know why they always bring you a salad?" ~~He says~~ <sup>asks</sup> all the time. "To fill you up. All

that lettuce as water on it and anyone knows water fills you up right away and then they bring you just a little piece of meat and you can't even enjoy that 'cause you're so full from all the water. Hey, you know Bobby? Well, his daughter went to Italy. And you know what? Over there they serve the salads *after* your food and they're small and you don't even have to eat it."

I went to my room while my dad sang along to *Donna*. . . *I had a girl and Donna was her name.* . . He looked out the front window, swaying his head slowly and *shaking* the change in his pocket. I wondered if this one song was reviving a whole high school experience for him. He suddenly looked sad. Did he have a girl named Donna? *He should've just blinked his eyes to make it all pass.*

I went through my closet and thought *how* it was going to be a long night. He hadn't even congratulated me, *nothing* about my award or anything. Maybe if we saw a movie it would kill some time and I would stop feeling sorry for myself.

"Hey Dad," I called from my bedroom. "Do you wanna go see *Mi Familia*? We can still see it on a big screen."

"Is that that movie with that guy from *L.A. Law*?" he asks.

"Yeah, Jimmy Smits."

"Nah, I don't like him. I don't like all that Mexican gang stuff. I grew up with it. Why should I have to pay to see it all over again?"

"Dad, *Mi Familia*'s not about gangs," I told him, "It's about family, life, a Mexican family, like ours."

"Then why should I pay to see that? I already know about that. People should pay me. What about *Congo*? Is that out yet?"

I came out of my bedroom and found my father looking around the kitchen. I was getting so annoyed. "Forget a movie," I told him. "So I guess we'll just get that soda or something."

"What's this?" he asked, looking at the kitchen counter.

"Oh, that's a tortilla maker," I told him.

"A tortilla maker! Are you serious! You're kidding right? You were born with a tortilla maker, like this!" He <sup>palms</sup> suddenly slapped his hands together <sup>and rubbed them</sup> quickly back and forth <sup>had</sup> like he really did have a piece of masa between them. "I can't believe you actually spent money on something like this. God, I'm so happy your mother isn't alive to see this!"

"Dad," I told him. "Who has time to make tortillas from hand?" This thing only takes seconds." I pulled it out from the counter to show him but he wasn't listening, he was back in the living room.

"So Michele, do you own this place or are you still renting?"

"Own! Dad, how could I possibly own a house in the middle of L.A.? I'm still a student. I can barely work part time. Do you know much a place like this is worth with the property and the garage and the great street parking?"

"Street parking? You pay extra to park on the street? In El Rio, everyone parks for free. You know, you'll never be able to buy a house if you keep giving your money away The City to park on its street."

~~I was feeling more and more like~~ <sup>felt</sup> failure. Why did I ask him to visit? I was not ready for this. I was not ready for him. I was twenty-three years old. When my father was twenty-three, he was a married man and the father of two. At age twenty-three he held the keys to a brand-new car and a custom home he not only built, but owned. At age twenty-three, my father's credit could buy him the world. He would never understand where I was in life.

I grabbed my bag and opened the front door. "Let's just go," I told him.

We walked down my walkway and were getting into my car when he asked, "So hey, how much is this scholarship for?"

"It's for \$3,000." Suddenly the amount seemed like nothing.

"\$3,000? Now that's a nice chunk of money. What did you have to do?"

"Oh, write this essay," I told him. Why was he even asking?

"\$3,000? For any essay? Are you serious? So how long did it take you?"

"I dunno, about 4 hours . . . I mean, after editing and everything." I told him.

Uh-oh, I thought, here it comes. Now he was gonna tell me what I could have been doing in those four hours, how in <sup>those</sup> four hours I could have been studying <sup>or</sup> looking for a better job or how four hours is a lot time to gamble for an award I may not have won.

<sup>Do</sup> "Did you know when I was your age <sup>when I was your age</sup> how long it took me to make three thousand dollars? Do you know how long I had to drag that mop across the linoleum at the Oxnard airport? When I was your age I couldn't even dream of having \$3,000 all to myself. You know, money like that doesn't come easy. That's the problem with a lot of kids, they don't know the meaning of hard work. <sup>They</sup> The just write an essay and then they get \$3,000."

<sup>Red</sup> I then <sup>flipped through it</sup> saw my father pull out his wallet and go through it. "You know," he said, <sup>ring</sup> as his voice softened a bit, "I didn't realize you had won so much money. We should really celebrate better."

I couldn't believe it. Through the corner of my eye I saw him look through his wallet again. I could see a thick tight wad of green bills <sup>stuck together</sup>.

"\$3,000, huh?" He asked again. "That's almost a thousand bucks a hour! You're doing pretty good." He paused. "You know what? Forget about getting just a soda. We're gonna go get something to eat. We're gonna go to a restaurant! And you know," he <sup>thumbed</sup> looked <sup>money</sup> through his wallet again. "I'm gonna let **you** pay."



Role Model Rule Number 6:

Live Better, Work Union.

I'd been working full time at Annie's Art Emporium for almost a year, <sup>selling</sup> overpriced brushes to part time art students and <sup>Styrofoam</sup> balls to frantic mothers who hissed at their children, "This is NO way to make a solar system, <sup>not</sup> last minute like this! You need to plan ahead! Next time, you're on your own!" The following month I'd see the same mothers hissing at the same kids, "This is NO way to make the Mission San Buenaventura! You need to plan ahead! Next time, you're on your own!"

It was already mid<sup>1</sup> May and my annual review was approaching. I knew it was time to ask for more money, maybe some benefits and definitely my own locker. I had been sharing one with Gary since <sup>that first early</sup> <sup>first</sup> <sup>hour</sup> I clocked in. Every morning, <sup>as</sup> I put on my orange corduroy smock and plastic name tag, I started the same rant.

"Gary, you know how much we actually earn a day? I mean, a full day's worth of work? Twenty eight dollars. Can you believe that, Gary? Twenty<sup>1</sup>eight lousy dollars for being here all day. And that's *before* taxes. And when are they gonna hire more help? You know, I don't even have time for break anymore. We really need to form some kind of union thing."

"A union? he asked.

"Yeah, you know my uncle Charlie was an actor and he told me that people can form these unions to protect themselves from unfair . . . "

"Oh come on," Gary interrupted as he looped the <sup>long</sup> ~~wide~~ apron strings twice around his waist. "Why you wanna start something? At least on Sunday, we don't have to wear the smock."

"Gary, we're closed on Sunday."

"I know, but still."



One day ~~this~~ woman wearing a gauze dress and that bulky jewelry you learn how to make from Sunset magazine came into the store. She had a Florence Henderson hair cut. ~~Not the same~~ style she had during her early Brady Bunch years, but later, when she was pushing Pam non stick cooking spray in TV commercials.

She kept looking at me as I rung up her total. Then she squinted her eyes.

"Are you Indian?" she asked.

"Nope," I answered curtly. I knew the procedure. You had to cut 'em off quick ~~or~~ <sup>because</sup> if you give 'em one little pause, one little inch of breath, they'd start talking about their last trip to Taos or Santa Fe or how much they love turquoise jewelry."

I rung up her total and announced, "\$180.45."

"You sure look Indian," she said as she pulled out a credit card.

"Well, I'm not." I pressed my lips together tightly and formed a stiff smile.

First rule of customer service, always smile.

"Are you sure?"

"What, you don't think I know what I am?"

The woman literally stepped back.

"I'm so sorry," she placed her hand on her chest. "I didn't mean it like that. Really, I didn't. It's just that a lot of people aren't sure about their ancestry. I mean, I didn't find out I was part Swiss until after I married."

"That's okay," I answered. Second rule of retail service, the customer is always right. <sup>Besides,</sup> ~~and~~ maybe she was correct and maybe I wasn't sure what I was. I did see Dances with Wolves three times and really enjoyed it. <sup>Anyway</sup> ~~Besides,~~ there was no way I could afford <sup>to</sup> ~~snapping~~ at a customer.

The woman looked at my name tag. Shit, now she was gonna call Charlie and complain that she had some surly counter girl with attitude. Goodbye annual raise! Adios, ~~own~~ locker.

I swiped her credit card through and even though it cleared, I told her it had been declined and that I need another one. It was so worth it <sup>to</sup> ~~seeing~~ the embarrassed, confused look on her face as she searched in her purse for a check book.

"I really should cut the card in half," I told her as I gave the card back to her and pretended to ~~be doing~~ her a favor. "But I'm sure it's just a mistake with the computer."



The next day Gary told me there was a call for me.

"Is this Michele?" the voice asked.

"Yes."

"I don't know if you remember me. I was in the store yesterday. I have a Florence Henderson haircut, not when she was in the <sup>the</sup> Brady Brunch, but rather . . . "

Okay, so she really didn't say the last part.

"Oh hi, I remember you," I told her. "How can I help you?" Third rule of customer service, remain pleasant <sup>in all</sup> ~~during all~~ circumstances. Plus maybe she knew I lied about her credit card validation.

"Well, see, Michele, I'm an artist."

*Yes, like every other customer who comes in here.*

". . . and I have a show coming up, actually in five weeks and I don't know how to ask this . . . "

"Oh, excuse me," I interrupted her. "But I have to help a customer and I'm all alone at the counter."

"Is there another time I could call?" she asked anxiously. "When do you have a free minute, a break?"

"I, well . . . I don't know. I really have to go."

"I'll call again," she added quickly before hanging up.



But she didn't call again. Instead she came by the store the next day when I happened to be out at lunch.

"Hey Mitchie," Gary said waving a business card in front of me. "This woman came by asking for you."

"For me?" I slurped the remains of my Loco Half 'n Half drink.

"Yeah, some artist lady. Here." He gave me the card. *Scrawled in pen, were the words*

It said Sheila Emmerson. ~~Handwritten were the words~~ *at* "Please call." Hmmm. What was this plea all about? I stuck the card in my smock's pocket and told myself I'd call her before I left work. But before I knew it was already five o'clock and Julie was picking me up and we were gonna go to L.A. for the weekend. You know how that is. Then, for some reason, when I woke up Sunday morning ~~in~~ *at* Meno's place, I remembered the woman's card in my smock's pocket and ~~that~~ *headed* that I'd call her first thing Monday morning.

But Monday I was put in stock inventory and I guess being away from the counter and from people ~~made~~ made me forget. On Wednesday I discovered the card was no longer in my pocket and by Friday, well, it was already the weekend again and all I could think about what outfits I was gonna wear, which boys were gonna be at the club and who'd make Meno most jealous.

That afternoon the woman surprised me with a call. I was at the counter sorting pens by color and Gary was nearby counting construction paper packs.

"Is this Michele?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," I recognized her voice.

"This is Shelia Emmerson. I had talked to you about a week ago. I also left a card for you. Did you ever get it?"

"Oh, yeah, I got it but I lost, I mean, I misplaced it."

"Well, I'm calling because I'm wondering if you <sup>are</sup> interested in some extra work. You know I mentioned I was having a show in about three months and . . ."

"An art show?"

"Yes, they're showing my work over at the K.T. Vawter Gallery in L.A. Are you familiar with it?"

*Footnote*  
"Oh yeah," I lied. "I'm in L.A. all the time."

"Well, since I met you the other day, I really think you can help me."

Great. What does she need? *Did she want me* ~~Me~~ to dish up food? Take coats? Serve wine? I thought I better find out exactly what she needed. (See Role Model Rule Number Two) *"Remember, commerce begins at home."*

"Yeah, so what is it that you exactly need?" I asked. I held the phone between my chin and my shoulder while I rung up another customer.

"Well, I always feel a little awkward just coming out and asking people I don't know, especially if they're not with an agency or anything. Or *are* you with an agency?"

An agency? Oh, so she did need service help.

"No, I'm not with any agency."

"Oh, so as I mentioned I'm an artist."

"Yes, you told me that."

"And I think, I think you'd be perfect."

"For what?"

"To model for me."

"You want me to model?"

Gary looked up at me. I turned away and cupped the mouthpiece with my hand. The last thing I wanted was him thinking that I thought I could be a model.

"What do you want me to model? Like clothes?"

"No no no," the woman laughed. "I do portraits, figuratives. I really could use you for this next show."

"I don't know," I hesitated. "What do I have to do?"

"Not much really. Just sit still."

"Sit still? For how long?"

"Well, sometimes for a long time."

"What if I have to go to the bathroom?"

"Well, if you have to go, I really think you should go," she laughed again. "I mean, you can take breaks."

"Well, I don't know . . ."

"Of course I'll pay you," she added quickly. "How does ten sound?"

"Ten . . . bucks?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"Probably two afternoons. Both Saturday and Sunday."

"Two afternoons for ten bucks?" I asked her. "I don't know, those are my only days off. Maybe I could do one day."

"No, I would pay ten *an hour*."

"Ten dollars an hour?!"

"Yes."

Ten dollars an hour? I couldn't believe it. Here at Annie's I made a lousy \$3.50 an hour. It would take me at least three hours to make what this woman was offering me in only one. Plus all I had to do was sit around with a wind machine in front of me? She was crazy. She must be an artist. She was rich. She was definitely Swiss. So Swiss and rich to be giving so much money away.

"So, could you come to my studio this *week end*?" she asked.

I thought of my weekend plans in L.A. Just half an afternoon sitting still for this woman would let me get those strappy sling backs I wanted. The open toe black suede ones. I could even get a pedicure. Hot pink polish. Mmmm . . . <sup>and</sup> Meno loved toe cleavage.

"Yeah, I'll be there. Just one more thing."

"Yes?"

"You paying cash?"



"What was that about?" Gary asked as I hung up the phone.



"None of your busy-ness," I told him. Suddenly I felt great. Suddenly I felt like I was six feet tall and that every customer in the store viewed me in a different way. I yawned a fake yawn and <sup>super</sup>stretched my arms across the counter. Suddenly I was bored sorting pens. Suddenly I had attitude. Suddenly, I felt . . . just like a model!

I left the counter to go to the employee's bathroom. I was excited to <sup>newly discovered</sup>reevaluate my ~~suddenly noticed~~ model good looks in a full length mirror. But once in front of it . . . oh, come on. No way. I stood side ways and sucked in my stomach. ~~I pored over my face and~~ the bright white green light exposed pink blemishes on my chin, black heads near my nose and rough skin across my forehead. Were my eyes lids always so puffy? Is that a mustache or bad bathroom lighting? Why didn't I get braces while I was still living at home, rent free and a beneficiary on mom's dental plan?

I went to the stock room and used the phone. I called the woman back.

"Oh, hi Michele," she answered. Then she sounded nervous. "Oh please don't tell me you need to cancel."

"No, it's not that," I assured her. "It's just I wanted to know why you asked me to model. I mean, I'm not really model material." Just saying the words hit my ego hard.

"Well, I pick people for different reasons," she said. "A certain look, a particular feature. One of the first things that really attracted me to you was your nose."

"My nose?"

"Yeah, it's not one of those typical small, little, turned up things. You know everyone and their mother has a nose like that or I should say, everyone who reads <sup>ital.</sup> Marie Claire and then goes out to get a nose job. Your nose looks very, how should I say, Indian?"

"Indian?"

"Yes. Is there a problem with that?"

Well, yes, there was a problem with that. This woman was exoticizing me. It was plain and simple. I read about this type of behavior, this <sup>particular</sup> form of racism in that book Making Face, Making Soul and <sup>also</sup> actually in an episode of "What's Happening," when

Shirley is hired for a job 'cause she make the work environment more "interesting." ~~?~~  
Last thing I wanted was to be some exploited subject and be put on display for this woman's little art show. Yes, there was definitely a problem. But how ~~do~~ <sup>should</sup> I go about making my point? Writing a poem about it was out of the question (See Role Model Rule Number 1). What could I say or do to make it clear to people like her that they can't always get what they want? God, it was so uncomfortable. Then ~~the thoughts of~~ <sup>the thoughts of</sup> Uncle Charlie, actor and organizer, came to ~~my~~ mind, and suddenly the words just flowed.

"I didn't know it was my nose you wanted. I mean, it has specific requirements. It poses only for scale."

"What do you mean? Scale?"

"I'm afraid you can't have it for less than \$200."

"\$200!"

"A day."

"That's a lot just for a nose."

"Yes, but it's an Indian <sup>N</sup> looking nose, a member of Local 233."

"Local 233?"

"Aren't you familiar with it?"

"Uh, yes," she said. I could tell she was lying.

"But my show," she ~~started~~ <sup>said</sup>. "It's in five, well, now four weeks and . . ."

"And I have the nose."

"Yes, you do," she agreed slowly. "And I wouldn't want to break any union rules."

"And I wouldn't want you to."

"Okay, so . . . I guess I'll see you on Saturday."

"Of course."

I hung up the phone and put my hand to my nose. It was Uncle Rudy's nose, Grandpa Rudy's nose and a little bit of, well, you know the story, and thank God I inherited their nose, cause my particular feature knew how to sniff out opportunity. Cause this nose <sup>would</sup> never <sup>but</sup> be caught dead in a Marie Claire spread, <sup>ital</sup> was able to negotiate supply and demand <sup>And so my little Indian nose</sup> and his little Indian nose? Well, <sup>after having made</sup> it went all the way to the bank <sup>making</sup> 400 bucks in just two afternoons during the month of May.

TES - COMP:  
Footnote  
to page  
66

\* I really don't like to lie and I'm not advocating lying. As an aspiring role model, you really shouldn't lie and should always tell the truth. Lying is bad. You can make up stories and color the truth for sake of storytelling but to lie to someone's face or into the TV camera is just outright unacceptable. <sup>by</sup> Specially if you get caught. Which I, as an accomplished role model, have never been.

"Mr. Chavez!"

"Yes?"

"Oh, I'm so happy to have reached you! You're a hard man to pin down!"

"Who is this?"

"Oh, sorry. This is Michele, Michele Serros"

Who?

Michele Serros, you had me read at your luncheon back in May."

"Oh yes. Now is not a good time for me to talk. What can I do for you?"

"Well, I haven't received my check, for my reading."

"Oh no. I wish I would have known earlier, because now our funds are nearly depleted."

"But I've been calling you."

I haven't gotten any of your messages."

"Well, uh, I still need my payment. I mean, the agreement was I would be paid after my reading."

"Yes, but if we don't have the money, we don't have the money. There's nothing I can do."

"But you had the money back then, I don't understand."

"Look, I'm in the middle of organizing the Hispanic Literature Series. Let me call you after the weekend and I'm sure we can straighten this whole thing out then."

"But . . ."

"Mira, let me just call you next week and I promise to get your money to you."

Role Model Rule Number 8:

Reclaim Your Rights As a Citizen of Here, Here ✓

*Almost every week*  
~~Nearly weekly~~ by a white person, I'm asked The Question. *asks me The Question:*

"So, where are you from?"

"From Oxnard," I answer.

"No, I mean originally."

"Oh, Saint John's Hospital, the old one over on F Street."

"No, you know what I mean!"

#

No, what do you mean? And why is it important to you and why do you really need to know? When Latinos ask me where I'm from it really doesn't bother me. I can't help but feel some sort of familiar foundation is being sought and a sense of community kinship is forming. But when whites ask me The Question, it's just a reminder that I don't look like them, which must mean I'm not from here. Here, in California, where I was born, where my parents were born and were even my great-grandmothers were born, I can't help but feel that whites always gotta know the answer to **everything**. It's like they're uncomfortable not being able to categorize ~~specific~~ things they're unfamiliar with and ~~they~~ need to label everything as quickly as possible. Sometimes when I'm asked The Question, I like to lie and make up areas within the Latin World from where I supposedly originated.

*MS - can you  
offer some sample  
dialogue between  
say, two Latinos  
discussing their  
origins?*

#

White Person #1: Where are you from?

Me: From Enchiritova, it's actually a semi-populated islet off the coast of Bolivia.

White Person #2: Yep! I knew it! I knew it! Kevin, didn't I tell you I thought she was an Enchirito!

White Person #1: Tag her!



Now, instead of getting uncomfortable, I immediately return The Question to the person who's asking. It's amazing how many white people don't know anything about their own ancestry or background, and it's no wonder, <sup>so</sup> as a people, <sup>that</sup> a lot of them confess to feeling so culturally bankrupt. I've also discovered that white people get really defensive when you ask them where they're from. The Question is thought of as "odd" or "unnecessary" and is answered <sup>with</sup> ~~during~~ a uncomfortable <sup>series</sup> ~~period~~ of pauses, wrinkled brows and temple rubbing. They're confused when The Question is put upon them, because after all, they look like they're from good ol' 'here,' rather than some faraway 'there.'

Me: So where are **you** from?

El Other: Me?

Me: Yeah.

El Other: Oh, I'm from here.

Me: From Los Angeles?

El Other: No, from here, here."

Me: You mean the corner of Venice and Inglewood?

El Other: No, silly. You know what I mean.

Me: No, what do you mean, really? Where you from?

El Other: <sup>I</sup><sub>m</sub> I don't know.

Me: So what's your ethnicity?

La Other: Oh, I don't got no ethnicity.

Me: Everyone has an ethnicity.

La Other: No, I mean, I'm like a total mutt!

Me: A mutt? Come on, don't say that. That's like calling yourself a dog.

La Other: Well, I am. I got so much of every kind of blood I couldn't even begin to tell you.

~~La Other: No, I mean, I'm like a total mutt!~~

~~Me: A mutt? Come on, don't say that. That's like calling yourself a dog.~~

~~La Other: Well, I am. I got so much of every kind of blood I couldn't even begin to tell you.~~

Me: African?

La Other: Absolutely not!

#

Me: So are your parents originally from the U.S.?

El La Other: Why?

Me: Just wondering.

El Other: Well, my mother is French - Canadian and my father, his family's actually from Iowa. Wait, no, they're from Idaho.

Me: So what's your father's ethnicity?

El Other: American.

Me: No, ethnicity. Not nationality.

El Other: Hmmm. . .

Me: You don't know?

El Other: Not really.

Me: Well, were your grandparents born in the U.S.?

El Other: No, they came from Europe. I never really thought <sup>about</sup> of it.

Me: So how do you like it?

El Other: What?

Me: America.

El Other: What do you mean?

Me: I mean, has it been good to you and your family?

#

Me: And where are you from?

La Other: I'm from here actually. One of few people who can actually say they're native Californian.

Me: Your parents as well?

La Other: Of course, my parents, my grand parents . . . I'm sixth generation Californian.

Me: Sixth Generation Californian? Wow, you don't look Mexican.

La Other: **What?**

④

Me: So what's your background?"

EI Other: You mean, where did I attend school?

Me: No, where's your family from.

EI Other: From here.

Me: Oh, your grandparents grew up in L.A.?

EI Other Me: Oh no, I mean, here, here.

Me: As opposed to 'there, there?'

EI Other: Are you making fun of me?

Me: Never mind. So where exactly are your grandparents from?

EI Other: Why?

Me: I'm just curious.

EI Other: Why do you wanna know?

Me: I was just wondering. You look like you're from somewhere else.

EI Other: Somewhere else?

Me: I don't mean anything bad by it. You just look . . . different.

EI Other: What do you mean, different? Different as in how? That's the weirdest thing I've ever heard. No one has ever said I looked like I was from somewhere else! I'm American, American, from here, here.

MS - a little more here to conclude this chapter: how do their conversations end?  
How do you / they feel? Etc.

## Let's Go Mexico!

Part of it was 'cause I wanted to read Olga's poems the way she wanted them read, not some translation by a Ph.D. I also thought it'd be cool to if I knew what Beck was saying in that song of his he sings in Spanish and man did it bug the shit out of me when people hi-fived me and remarked, "Cool, I don't speak Spanish either!" <sup>in reference</sup> referring to a poem I wrote years ago.

Okay, these are minor explanations, but the main reason I wanted to learn more Spanish was for credit. The foreign language credit. I couldn't graduate without it.

"You don't speak Spanish?" my counselor asked surprised.

"Not really," I told her. "I mean, I could improve."

"Well, I don't know what to say," she said looking over my transcripts. "I don't see how you're going to get the credit you need and still graduate in June. You're going to have to stay here at least another year."

It was late summer and I was going over my class selections with her. For the past months all I could think about was my final summer as a student and here she was telling me that I had another year of classes? No way. I'd been at <sup>Santa Monica College</sup> SMC off and on for six fucking years and now the supposedly simple two year stint at UCLA was gonna take me <sup>even</sup> longer? Nuh-uh. **No way.**

"What if I switch majors?" I asked desperately.

"Not at this point," she answered matter of <sup>to the</sup> faculty. She pulled a slim catalog off her office shelf. "You could go on a study abroad program. That way you'll get the

credit in a matter of months rather than taking three quarters here. What about Mexico? You've been to Mexico, right?"

I immediately thought of my week-ends with Mark W. <sup>Mark was a</sup> Typical blond surfer boy ~~Mark W.~~ who really did say "dude" all the time and, just like me, was sometimes a student. We often extended weekends jaunts to a five full days down in Ensenada. During the afternoons we packed the trunk of his Subaru with Kalua and firecrackers. And in the evenings, oh man, the evenings we filled twenty buck hotel rooms with the smell of our sexy funk. Of course, I'd been to Mexico. But then I remembered CeCe, who said Baja doesn't really count as Mexico.

"No," I told my counselor "I haven't been to Mexico, really."

"So, you've never **really** been to Mexico and you **really** don't speak Spanish," she said. "Well, do you **really** want to graduate?"

(#)

I picked Taxco as the place to learn, I mean, improve my Spanish. Located <sup>ital.</sup> ninety miles southwest of Mexico City, it's a charming silver mining town clinging to the steep hills of Guerrero state. Locals, eager to practice Spanish with visiting American students, make it an ideal setting for the total Spanish immersion experience. I got that part out of the catalog. You don't think I really talk like that, do you? In the catalog there were pictures of students (white) lounging around the school's ~~aqua blue~~ <sup>aqua blue</sup> swimming pool being served pina coladas by waiters (brown). Another photo had two female students (white) buying ~~silver~~ jewelry from native artisans (brown). I looked at the photos and wondered how I'd fit in.

The whole application process seemed simple enough. You filled out an application, <sup>wrote</sup> ~~write~~ an essay of intent and <sup>gave for</sup> ~~made an~~ informal interview to prove you <sup>could</sup> ~~can~~ speak <sup>enough</sup> ~~some~~ Spanish to at least get you through customs. While I was waiting in line for my interview, I met two other students (white) who were gonna go to Taxco as well. When I overheard them during their ~~own~~ interviews before me and I grew



nervous. Their Spanish was so good! When it was my turn all I could think about was how well the other two students had spoken. Finally, after an excruciating ten minute conversation *en español*, the two interviewers (white) smiled and said, "Have a great time in Taxco!" Whew! So, after my departure date was set, I arranged for the time off work, sublet my room to a friend, bought a fanny pack (yeah, right) and promised my man I wouldn't fool around with anyone south of either border. By late January, when everyone would be searching for sale sweaters <sup>at</sup> the Gap rack, I'd be in sunny Mexico, speaking Spanish, sipping margaritas and preparing to graduate, on time, in June.



We took a mini bus into Taxco. We were one of three buses, all filled with students from other parts of the country who picked Mexico as <sup>the</sup> a place to study Spanish. As soon as we drove under the main road's archway and <sup>entered</sup> into the town of Taxco, I immediately sensed the whole population was familiar with mini buses such as ours. The locals actually waved us in.

Once all the students and coordinators arrived at the school there was a welcome luncheon in our honor. We were served apricot <sup>the</sup> marinated quail in roasted chipotle sauce and corn pudding on a verandah overlooking a swimming pool that was filled with brown water and tadpoles.. A Scottish student asked me, "Is this how you ate at home, growing up?" <sup>at</sup> "Oh yeah," I bragged, thinking of the Hamburger Helper, Spanish Style, my mom whipped up on pay day Fridays. After lunch all of us heaved our luggage to the school's main entrance and waited to be picked up by our *caseras*, new host families. <sup>it had</sup> This one student, Kevin, <sup>was</sup> was picked up by his casero <sup>who</sup> who was this long haired dude who pulled up in a black late model jeep. The casero was wearing tight faded jeans and a belt buckle in the shape of mota.

Funny, some Spanish comes naturally.

Anyway, Kevin bragged "sweet!" as he picked up his back pack and flung it in the jeep's back seat. Then the two drove off, leaving us in a trail of dust behind them.

~~Sounds cliché, but really did happen~~ ★

Twelve more students were picked up by their new caseras and then there were five of us left, standing around talking. About ten minutes later, a white VW Bug made it's way up the hill. It stalled half way and we all waited for it to start up again, but we could hear the engine <sup>trying to</sup> just turn over. It wasn't gonna move.

The driver got out and lifted the hood of the Bug while a woman in the back seat got out and walked up the hill towards us.

"Shit, I hope she's not here for me, " I overheard someone remark. "I don't wanna be stuck with a family without a car."

"That's not her car, stupid. It's a taxi."

"A VW taxi? Don't they know they catch on fire?"

The woman spoke to our program coordinator and then he looked at his clipboard and called out my name. The woman was here for me. I looked over at her and she smiled. The coordinator then called out four more additional names.

"Wait," I <sup>told</sup> questioned him before walking over to the woman. "I didn't ask for roommates. I requested a private residence, my own room."

Even though I was speaking English, his native language, he acted like he didn't understand.

"We'll work on the details later," he patted me on the back. "Just go for now. Go with the flow." He quickly looked back at his clipboard.

✓ The  
My number of roommates doubled in a matter of a week. A friend told one friend and then they told one friend and so and so on. It got around how grand our house was: a three-story home with a spacious sun deck, laundry facilities (important), strong water pressure (more important) and a lush courtyard. All for about a hundred

bucks a month. There was always unfamiliar luggage curbed near the front door ready to be unpacked and Senora Saldana, my casera, was always eager to take the extra renters and the extra cash. ~~I think~~<sup>≡</sup> out of all the household amenities, everyone dug the lush court yard the most. It allowed students to ~~write~~<sup>brag in</sup> postcards to home ~~and~~<sup>and</sup> ~~to~~<sup>to</sup> "Dear Nathan, as I write this, I'm relaxing in a sunny authentic Mexican courtyard. I feel very festive surrounded by all the clay pottery and native foliage."

At first there ~~were~~<sup>was</sup> nothing but white girls living in Senora Saldana's house. In ~~their~~<sup>their</sup> white socks and fancy sneaks, they shared stories of summers spent in Spain and how Mexico was *so* different. I called the girls I lived with the White Socks and labeled them differently by appearance or character traits. There was Dandruff Sock, Pink Sock, Clinique Sock, PMS Sock and Slutty Sock.

While the White Socks marveled ~~at~~<sup>at</sup> the quaintness of Mexican culture, I could only feel ~~so fairly~~ familiar with it. From the rancheras crackling from transistor radios and roosters crowing at dawn to eating pan dulce for breakfast and ~~down to~~<sup>finding</sup> the red box of manteca kept in the bottom shelf of the refrigerator. Ah, just like home. But then again, I never had no White Sock in my house correcting my Spanish.

"No, Michele it's *el* problema, not *la* problema," Clinique Sock reprimanded me. "Wanna know a little secret? Think of a problem as a man. Men are always problems, right? If a problem is masculine that means its equivalent article is masculine as well. So it would be the masculine *el* rather than the feminine *la*. Get it?"

But The White Socks didn't think the men in Mexico were such problems. They sucked up to them. ~~Arriving~~<sup>They came</sup> to class late, complaining loudly about a Hector, a Fausto or Valerie. Don't ask me about that one.

"Damn, they're so horny," Slutty Sock complained loudly in class as she checked her neck for bruises in Clinique Sock's compact mirror. "I've gotta make sure I keep track of my pill, 'cause these men are just so into making babies and starting families and I ain't gonna be no green card for no one. That's the last thing I wanna ~~do~~<sup>do</sup>."

~~do~~ I got career goals. That's why I'm even here in the fucking first place, being bilingual is only gonna advance my opportunities in the work force."

#

One night The White Socks wanted me to go out with them.

"My God, you're such a homebody," Pink Sock remarked. "You're gonna get old before your time."

I was old. Actually the oldest of anyone in the whole program. But they didn't know that. I had shaved five years off my age and told my roommates I was only twenty two. To be Chicana and not speak Spanish well was one thing, but to be counting twenty<sup>1</sup>seven candles on my next birthday cake and still be an undergrad? Forget it. I couldn't bear a double dose of jabs, not matter how playful they intended to be. Yes, sometimes I can be so fragile, a flower. Make that una flor. In Spanish, flowers are feminine.

"Becky's right," Dandruff Sock agreed. "You oughta come out with us. "We got the Marcarena down and Lido's cousin from Mexico City is coming down. I'm sure we could find you someone. What are you gonna do? Stay here and watch novelas with Mati all night?"

They all laughed and two of them did a hi-five. I suddenly felt a chill.

Truth was I wanted to hang out with Mati. She was Senora Saldana's helper (not maid!) and the one who picked us up from the school that day. She was about 4'11" with long thin black hair she kept back in two bobby pins and she had these bulging calves from shopping on the steep streets of Taxco. At nineteen, she was just about the youngest of all of us, but she looked the most tired and overworked. When she didn't spend Saturday nights in her scuffed white pumps and red velveteen dress down at the zocalo, she could be found in the kitchen watching the line up of Mexican soaps on a mini black and white TV and frying up tortillas in some form of a snack. I couldn't think of a more enjoyable evening.

"Nah," I told the White Socks. "I'm just gonna catch up on my studying."



After The White Socks bailed, I went into the kitchen to hang out with Mati. She heated up a cube of lard in the frying pan while I turned up the volume on the opening credits of *Marisol*. Everyone knows the best part is when Enrique sings the title song.

"That Enrique sure is fine," I told her in Spanish. "More than his father."

"Yes!" she agreed in English.

Wow. Sex *is* the universal language.

The next morning the PMS Sock told me, "You know Michele, if you really want to make the most of Mexico, you're gonna have to make more of an effort to get involved with its people. You wouldn't believe all the people we met last night and here you stayed cooped up with Mati watching TV."

"I heard you made tostadas," Pink Sock piped in.

"Yeah, we did."

"You did?" Dandruff Sock asked. "Hey, did Mati show you how to get the tortilla in the shape of a bowl? Like at El Torito? How do they do that anyway?"

It was only a matter of weeks before I grew homesick. I mean really homesick. I began to feel isolated not having anyone <sup>to have a real conversation</sup> I could really talk with. Why hadn't I taken CeCe's advice and borrowed her Walkman? *ital.*

"No no no," I had told her. "I don't want major modern conveniences from home. I wanna embrace <sup>the</sup> full Mexican culture in its natural setting. I wanna inhale the language, the music, the <sup>the</sup> people. But by the third week, I was jonesing for a *People* magazine and a Carl's Jr. Famous Star <sup>ital.</sup> didn't sound bad at all. *PMS-?*

I heard a commercial break through the static on Mati's kitchen radio and a familiar theme song hit me hard. Oh, <sup>rat</sup> the little jingle I <sup>so much</sup> heard that day brought back so many childhood memories, <sup>so many</sup> nostalgia and thoughts of *home*. Before I knew it, the jingle was over and I was left <sup>so</sup> unsatisfied. I realized if I wanted to get over being homesick, I would have to travel to Cuernavaca, a city one hour north of Taxco. I



decide to <sup>10</sup>travel to Cuernavaca, (a town tagged "Eternal Springtime,") the following Sunday morning. By Saturday evening everyone knew of my plans.

"Oh, I heard you're going into Cuernavaca?" Pink Sock asked. "You gonna eat at Las Mananitas? I read they have the best swiss chard tamales there. At least that's what I read ~~that~~ in *Let's Go Mexico*."

"Oh, then I'm sure it's true."

"Hey can you make a trip to the mercado for me?" PMS Sock asked. "I hear they have every herb and root under the sun and maybe there's something that could help with my cramps."

"Don't forget to visit Museo Robert Brady," Clinique Sock added.

"Robert Brady as in . . ."

"No, not *that* Brady, silly! He was a white man but he was really into Mexican art."

"Oh."

"I hear the guys are fine in Cuernavaca," Slutty Sock said looking at herself in the bedroom mirror. "Maybe I should go with you."

☞ Well, I sorta wanna go on my own."

"Hey, shouldn't you travel with someone?" Clinique Sock asked. "I mean, in *Let's Go Mexico*, it says women in Mexico really shouldn't travel alone."

"Well, maybe tourist-looking women," I said. "But I mean, I think I can blend in."

"Yeah, until you open your mouth!" PMS Sock laughed. Then all five White Socks high-fived and I suddenly felt that chill again.

The next morning I woke up at 6 AM. The White Socks were sleeping off tequila shots and Mati was the only one awake in the whole house. She was in the kitchen, separating cloves of garlic and dividing them for the upcoming week.

"Vas a Cuernavaca?" she asked.

"Yeah," I told her.

She frowned.

"Si," I corrected myself.

I decided to wear baggy jeans, <sup>and</sup> an oversized flannel <sup>shirt</sup> and put my cash in my bra. It was only an hour away, but ~~still~~ if Let's Go Mexico said women should be careful traveling alone, <sup>I wasn't gonna take any chances</sup>

Once I arrived to Cuernavaca's bus station, I walked into Plaza de Armas, the city's square, <sup>and</sup> strolled <sup>rb</sup> pass the mercado, <sup>and</sup> ~~definitely~~ pass Las Mananitas. When I came across some ATM's and a gas station, I could almost feel I was getting closer to <sup>my destination</sup> ~~what I was looking for~~. I asked a few people <sup>for directions</sup> about where I ~~wanted to go~~ and they pointed up the street. ~~I walked one more block on a paved road and~~ before I knew it, what I had been looking for was smack in front of me. I looked up, covered my mouth in excitement and hurried in.

I took a seat at the formica counter and looked around. Oh, just the color combinations <sup>used</sup> on the walls, the textures of the stools, it all took me back home to, dare I say it, El Norte. The smells from the kitchen, even the background music piped in made me think of all the Sunday mornings, the weekends I spent ~~with my family~~ surrounded by <sup>my</sup> double dare me to say it, Mexican American <sup>family</sup> memories like this.

Finally a woman in a blue dress and white apron came up to me and asked, "Cafe?"

I nodded. She poured me some coffee, then asked, "Lista?"

Of course I was ready. I had been ready all week and I knew exactly what my heart and appetite had been aching for. The homesick pangs had grown stronger and more intense as each day in Taxco passed.

But when she asked to take my order I paused. Oh my God, had I already forgotten? I suddenly went blank. I felt light headed, ~~somewhat~~ dizzy. I focused on the pictured place card on my table. What I wanted quickly came back to me.

"Yes," I told her. "I'll have, I mean, Quiero un Rootie Tootie Fresh 'n Fruity."

"Jamon o salchicha?"

"Salchicha."

"Un Rootie Tootie Frech y Fruity con salchicha!" she yelled to the cook.

I took a sip of my coffee. I saw the same cook pour a small puddle of pancake batter onto the greased up griddle and lay some sausage next to it.

~~Suddenly~~ all my loneliness was lifted that Sunday morning.



By the end of the month I couldn't take the White Socks anymore. I grew resentful that the program coordinator hadn't returned my calls or that Senora Saldana refused to offer me the vacant room she had on the second floor.

"That's Bernardo's room," she explained. "He coming next month from Italy and he always stays in that room."

"Can I rent it <sup>until</sup> ~~til~~ he arrives?"

"No, Bernito wouldn't like that."

One day I came home to the sounds of Slutty Sock and a visiting boyfriend wailing along to Jane's Addiction. Their noise filled the courtyard. The cacti even looked limp. <sup>It</sup> ~~That~~ was the final straw, and ~~that same~~ <sup>that</sup> afternoon, I went on my own to look for a new place to rent. I found a divorcee named Soco ready to rent out a single room with a bath. The minute we talked I instantly detected a catty competitive streak in her and ~~I~~ liked it. She quizzed me about Senora Saldana's house, how clean it was, how Senora Saldana's diet was going, and does she still have that sixty inch Sony TV? I knew she was jealous that Senora Saldana had a bigger house that allowed more students to rent from her, thus increasing her monthly income. I added to Soco's weakness and fed her with exaggerated stories of an overcrowded house with weak water pressure and a refrigerator crammed with expired milk and petrified tortillas. I told her how I often found chicharron crumbs on the kitchen counter every morning, evidence of Senora Saldana's midnight snacking. Soco shook her head, <sup>u</sup> clicking her tongue in pleased disgust.

As a renter in Soco's home I immediately like felt a part of her household, which consisted of herself and a live-in helper, Tere. In mid March, Soco invited me to a local wedding. She claimed anyone that was someone was going to be there and it infuriated her a week later when she discovered that Senora Saldana had also been invited. I lent Soco my Guess sandals and she loaned me a black lace hankie to wear in the church. We spent the whole afternoon getting ready for the evening wedding. ? MS

After the church ceremony we went to a local hotel for the reception. Senora Saldana showed up with three White Socks in tow. Soco only had one student, me. "But, hey," I nudged her in the ribs with my elbow, "I'm **brown**."

After the dinner and the cake cutting and a long <sup>the</sup>winded toast by ~~an~~ <sup>the</sup>inebriated best man, everyone started dancing. I was amazed to witness brown boy guests showing off <sup>twir</sup>regional expertise with their loose hips and smooth moves. They desperately vied for attention from the White Socks. I immediately felt lonely and out of place while I watched the White Sock's sweaty bodies get fanned by the cloth napkins of local boys. Finally Soco and I joined hands and created a group of single <sup>the</sup>woman and we all danced in a circle. It was just like the old days at The Odyssey, I thought, 'cept none of the men were wearing eyeliner or lip <sup>the</sup>syching Duran Duran. Soco pointed out that Senora Saldana had done the same thing but that her circle was much smaller.

Later, when we got home <sup>when</sup>after midnight and I was in my room getting ready for bed, I discovered Soco ~~she~~ <sup>sucking</sup>had stashed three small bottles of tequila in my purse as well as six recuerdos; little plastic bags filled with heart-shaped chocolates. Soco was still up watching TV when I ~~had~~ found her secret stash. I entered the kitchen, waved my purse and smiled. She smiled back, embarrassed. We stayed up, watching a rerun of Marisol and ~~sucked~~ <sup>sucking</sup>the liquor out of the chocolate hearts. We then shared <sup>a</sup>one bottle of tequila. And then a second one. She told me Senora Saldana's <sup>last year's</sup>dress was tighter than the ~~last~~ <sup>last year's</sup>time she wore it to the ~~other~~ <sup>other</sup> big wedding in town ~~last year~~ <sup>last year</sup> and



I laughed. Then I told her about one of the White Socks asking about the bowl<sup>h</sup> shaped tostadas, like at El Torito, but she just frowned. As much as I tried to explain the humor in it, she didn't quite understand.



My Spanish was getting better, but not fast enough. Every homework assignment returned ~~back~~<sup>it</sup> to me was marked up with red ink, looking like the instructor had a nose bleed all over it. I was told to talk with a local named G. Rod.

"G. Rod?" I asked. "What kind of name is that?"

"It's short for Geraldo Rodriguez," a nameless student told me. "Talk to him. He's better than any ol' tutor."

I met G<sup>o</sup> Rod near the stand where the local Indians sold wooden bowls and silver bracelets. I learned I could score pot, stolen phone cards, and naked pictures of a brunette Daisy Fuentes from him.

"Next week I should have bootleg Christian," he bragged

But what I really wanted from G Rod was a new text book. Mine wasn't any help at all.

"You sure these are the right answers?" I questioned him suspiciously as I looked at each page in his book. Next to every exercise were the answers written in pencil.

"Oh yeah," he assured me. "The old person that had this, graduate with good grades and he live in Spain now."

The book turned out great. I found how easy it was to raise your hand in class when you knew the answers. I arrived to my sessions with great enthusiasm and clicked my tongue and shook my head slowly whenever the White Socks got answers wrong. Probrecitas blanquitas! I had the most free time than any of the other students and took Mati out to lunch twice a week.



I was on top of el mundo until I saw it. The name of the book's former owner. It was written on the last page of the book. How could I have not noticed it before? J Randall. The old owner was named J. Randall. What kind of name is J. Randall? Masculine or Feminine? It didn't matter. Randall was definitely not Mexican, not of color. It reeked of whiteness, ~~and here~~ <sup>and here</sup> this J. Randall knew all the right answers in Spanish and I didn't. What could be worse? I felt so ashamed, but I knew what I had to do. I walked to the nearby river that flowed near our school and I held the book high over my head. I flung the text into the roaring water.

Yeah, right. I'm not **that** dramatic. I actually sold the book to Miles, this British kid who's <sup>not</sup> Spanish was slightly worse than mine. He paid triple the amount ~~for what I~~ <sup>had</sup> ~~had bought it for.~~ <sup>spoke</sup>

I may be spanglish, but I'm not stupid.



It was my last week in Mexico and Soco wanted to treat me to dinner. "I want to take the bus into Ixtapa and treat you to pijones," she said.

The trip into Ixtapa was 45 minutes south of Taxco. I had never been there and I had never heard of pijones. I mentioned this anticipated dining experience to an instructor and she remarked, "Pijones? How glamorous!"

I mentioned the dinner to the White Socks during a study break.

"Do you even know what pijones are?" Dandruff Sock asked.

"Of course," I answered and quickly changed the subject. "So where's Señora Saldana taking you guys for your good <sup>bye</sup> dinner?"

"Nowhere yet," Clinique Sock answered. "We probably won't even be taken anywhere. I mean, there's twelve of us now and I don't think she could afford to take us all out."

"Oh, that's too bad," I responded.

Soco and I arrived to Ixtapa three o'clock on a Saturday. The restaurant was only about three blocks away from the bus station.

"Let's sit outside," she told me once we got there. "It's nice out."

It was ~~nice out~~. But after a short while ~~even~~ the late afternoon sun was beating down on us. We looked for a table with an umbrella that wasn't covered in pigeon shit and after a few minutes, we gave up and sat inside, near an open door.

Soco was so animated. I could tell this was a big deal for her. Taking a bus ride out of town and treating me to dinner. She ordered us beers and some time later, when she looked over my shoulder I could tell from her expression that our food was coming to our table. I sat up and cleared my space for the it.

A large white plate was set before me topped with a small green salad, a fan of avocado and lime slices and there, smack in the middle, were the pijones. The glamorous pijones ricos <sup>were</sup> staring me straight in the eyes <sup>- for they would have</sup> if their eyes were open, that is. But they weren't. They were closed, because these pijones, these pigeons, were dead. I was looking down at two charred pigeons on my plate, inches away from my nose and you better believe miles away from my fork. There was no way I was gonna eat pigeons.

Soco tore a wing off her own pijaon and started chewing.

"What's wrong?" she said. "Eat up, eat up!"

"Yeah, ~~M~~mmm, yummy," I answered. I took a corn tortilla from the basket and when Soco wasn't looking, I nonchalantly covered the birds with it. But when I looked down I was horrified to discover that the tortilla resembled a blanket and now the pijones looked like they were napping.

Since I didn't want to wake the pijones from their sweet dreams of one day flying to the top of the Statue of Liberty, I decided to pick at my salad. Slowly I nibbled on the lettuce and tomato rings. Next I worked on the avocado slices. Anything so I wouldn't have to look down at my plate. Anything not to look at the sleeping pigeons.

I took a sip of my beer and looked out onto the street. I saw a handful of their gray brothers fighting in the gutter over a French fry.

Oh God, wasn't it time to go? Wasn't our bus leaving yet? I felt so guilty because I knew this was a big costly deal for Soco.

"Come, come on," she urged me with her hand, the hand that didn't have a piece of pigeon in it. "This is delicious."

After a short while my salad was finished, the avocado slices had been consumed, and there were no more tortillas. There were only the sleeping pigeons on my plate. But I just couldn't do it. I tried think of something else, bowling scores, the cute boy at the wedding, should I give Soco my Guess Sandals? Anything but eating the pigeons.

What's wrong?" Soco asked.

"Nothing," I answered. "I'm just sorta full."

"Full?" Already?" Then she looked suspicious. ~~She asked slowly.~~ "You don't like them, do you?" *she asked slowly*

"No, of course I do. We actually eat these back home, all the time, for Sunday dinner. I guess it's, well, making me sad to eat them again, 'cause see my grandma used to make these and she's dead now and . . . well, I've sorta been trying to cut down on my pigeon intake and you know, they're high in cholesterol and . . ."

Soco reached over to my plate with a smirk on her face. She grabbed the head of one of my pigeons and twisted it off. She stuck the whole thing in her mouth and rolled it around. When the waiter came to our table, she pushed the pigeon head to one side of her mouth with her tongue and told him, "We'll take hers to go."



By late April my program had ended and I decided to leave Taxco early in the morning. The White Sock<sup>6</sup> asked me to join them in Acapulco before heading home.

"We can go para sailing, and get our hair braided and there's a IHOP on the main strip," PMS Sock informed me. "Come on, how long as it been since you've been in a HOP?"

Uh, this week? I didn't go and just told them I was anxious to get home. We hugged and promised to be friends forever. Clinique Sock gave me some Turn Around Cream and Slutty Sock shook her finger in front of my face, "You better not write about me in your books."

"I promise."

The morning I actually left Taxco, Soco gave me a water color painting and her helper, Tere, gave me a silver ring. It was almost like a ceremony near the bus when Tere took the ring off her finger, said some words in Spanish and slipped it onto one of mine. I felt my eyes start to water, but then ~~felt foolish~~ <sup>Tere's</sup> I remembered seeing a mason jar full of cheap silver rings on her night stand and I imagined she handed every departing student one, the same ring she conveniently wore during their duration as a renter.

As I got comfy in my bus seat, I thought of returning home. I just knew Aunt Alma would have a BBQ in my honor and everyone would be there, in her back yard, hopping over all the fresh holes that Warlord had dug and checking the bottom of their shoes for dog shit that Warlord had, well, you know. Uncle Manny would stroll in with a case of Coronas on his shoulder and Tia Annie would say I'd gotten too dark and now everyone would think I ~~was~~ <sup>went</sup> really away to work in the fields. Cousin Benny would comment, "Just 'cause you lived in Mexico don't be thinking you're all bad and that you know everything about Mexico and Mexicans and be correcting my Spanish." *What about your English?*

As the bus crept out of the station, I nibbled on a salt cracker and waited for my Dramamine to take over. On the way out of Taxco I saw three mini buses coming in on the narrow road. I was on Tres Estrellas, the <sup>huge</sup> premier Mexican bus line that ~~was huge~~ <sup>in size and demeanor</sup>, and I wondered why we moved over to the side of the road to



didn't, you could get a *relapse* and miss lots of work or worse, you could die and miss lots and lots of work. Being Mexican, I grew up conditioned to understand that missing work is bad. A Mexican without a strong work ethic? *Come on.*

When Aunt Tura called I claimed I had a major upset stomach and that I really couldn't talk 'cause, well, I was just in too much pain. But in actuality, I was sitting in front of the computer staring at a blank screen, waiting and waiting for a story to come to me. My Rafa, who publishes a local fanzine, said if I had a story by the weekend he'd consider publishing it and might even take me to Titos for tacos as payment. I couldn't imagine giving up a free lunch at Tito's. (See Role Model Rule Number 1)

So there I was, ~~Saturday morning~~ hoping it would be just a matter of time before some intense ~~focus would allow some creativity to react on my keyboard~~ <sup>concentration would cause a burst of</sup>. The last thing I needed was some chatty tia or chismosa cousin to call, but when the phone rang, there I had to go and answer it. And wouldn't you know it? It was Tura, Aunt Tura, the worst of all repeat offenders. No matter how many times you repeat you gotta get off the phone, she keeps just keeps yakking and yakking.

"So, I really can't talk," I told her. "I wanna make sure I get better today so I don't miss work tomorrow."

"So, what have you been eating?" She questioned me again.

"Well, last night I had two bacon wrapped chili dogs with some left over mole from last week's enchiladas . . . you know, just the regular stuff . . ." my voice started to trail off.

"You're always with the stomach problems," she clicked her tongue.

"Yeah, I guess so," I rolled my eyes, then looked at my blank computer screen. God, couldn't she take a hint?

"Maybe you inherited this from your auntie Chayo," she continued. "You know, she always had the stomach pains."

Great. Here we go with another story about some ancient aunt who I had never hear of, never met, but of course, I have her exact same medical condition.



"I didn't know her," I told Tura curtly. "So anyway, I'm just gonna rest and wait for my Pepto-Bismo to kick in."

"Yeah, Chayo had the stomach problems," Tura went on. "but they were actually ulcers. And that's a little different from what you have, huh? But she got rid of them when she got rid of the Bug. Do you ever hear about that VW Bug she used to have?"

"Nuh-uh." Christ. How could I've known about someone's car if I had never heard of **them**? And hadn't Tura heard what I just said? I was sick. Sick. Should I've ~~just~~ just hung up and pretended we got disconnected? No, 'cause then she'd think I passed out or something and then she'd call 911 or worse she'd drive over herself and then I'd never get any writing done.

"That VW was the cutest car," Aunt Tura remarked. "You'd be driving down Saviers and everyone would just look at you in that thing. It was like one of those little toy cars you'd drive at Disneyland or something. But it gave her so many problems.."

I could've put her on hold. Would she even notice? What about speaker phone? That'd be sort of funny plus her voice would be muffled enough so I <sup>w</sup> couldn't really <sup>have to</sup> pay attention to what she was saying. Oh, why not? She wouldn't even know the difference. I pushed the speaker button on, put the phone back on its receiver and got up to get more butter for my ham sandwich.

"So many problems with that car," I could hear Aunt Tura's voice echo down the hallway. "Not car problems, like the engine or the windshield blades not working, if you know what I mean."

"Uh-huh," I answered from the kitchen and she didn't even notice.

"But problems because of all the attention she'd get. You know what I mean?"

"Nuh-uh." I answered as I re-entered my room. I opened my filing cabinet and I pulled out a manila folder filled with newspaper articles I had once found interesting. Maybe some news "from around the globe" would spark <sup>some more</sup> interest.

"Well, there'd she'd be coming out of B & D or Bob's and there was always some man admiring the VW's back motor or the tires, what are those called with the white around them? White walls? "

"Uh-huh." I started to read a newspaper clipping about a two hundred pound thirteen year old in Tennessee stuck in his tree house. "Tennessee Teen Tubby in a Tight Squeeze," the headline read.

"Well, between you and I, I think men just made up more questions about the car just to keep talking to Chayo, and you know she was so beautiful back then. A regular Latin Rita Hayworth."

*ital.* "Rita Hayworth was Latina."

"She is? I mean, she was? Well, anyway, Chayo just answered what questions she could about the car, but you know Oxnard. Everyone knows each other and it got back to Uva, her third husband, that his wife was talking to strange men in parking lots."

"Uva?"

"Yeah, he was German, just like their car. Funny huh? Chayo was always with the foreigners."

"Oh." I read that the tree house teen was stuck for six days. I started highlighting quotes from his neighbors.

"Uva <sup>that</sup> would get jealous and <sup>they</sup> she and he would have these horrible fights and he threatened <sup>N</sup> if he heard one more story, just one more story about her flirting with strange men, that he was gonna take away her car keys and ~~that~~ <sup>ital.</sup> he was gonna drive her whenever she needed to go some where. Can you image? A grown woman having to rely on a man drive her around?"

"Nuh-uh."

"So anyway, whenever Chayo drove the car to B & D or to Bob's, she'd just prayed no man would be waiting by it when she came out. And of course, this made her so nervous and tense. Wouldn't it make you tense?"

"Uh-huh." The Tennessee tubby story was just too sad and I guess it wasn't really *me* enough. I crumpled the article up and tossed it into the waste basket. I found another clipping about the Taco Bell *Chihuahua*. Evidently, a group of Mexicans in the entertainment industry were *voicing* upset upon learning that the voice of a Mexican *born* celebrity was dubbed by an Argentinean, a light *skinned* one at that.

*the dog right?* "All the time she'd drive that VW clutching her side," Aunt Tura continued. "Can you believe that? And finally one day, when she pulled up in her own drive way, there was another car blocking her space. And can you guess *who's* car it was?"

"Nuh-uh," I logged on to the internet. There was a story about teen gangs in the heartland. Hmmm . . . could I possibly turn that into something Chicano Lit. like?

"The car belonged to Margaret Luna," Tura said. "You know Julia's daughter? She was dropping off some Tupperware that she had borrowed from Chayo and was coming out of the house right when Chayo was pulling up."

"Uh-huh."

"Now, Margaret didn't have a cute little VW. She had a Ford. An American car."

"Uh huh." God, what was the fucking point of this story?

"Oh well, as I was saying, she asked why Chayo was holding the side of her stomach and Chayo said it was nothing. But that Margaret, she's so sweet, she tells her she's gonna go to the store to get her a bicarbonate and asked if she wanted to go with her and can you guess what happened?"

"Nuh uh." Hanging up on Tura began to sound better and better each second she babbled on.

"Well, Margaret got behind the steering wheel and Chayo got in the passenger seat and Margaret drove 'em over towards Bob's Market and wouldn't you know it?"

"What?" I took a bite of my sandwich.

"They never returned."

"Never returned what?"

"No, I mean, Chayo and Margaret never returned. They were both never seen again!"

"Wait, she just took off with Margaret?"

"Uh-huh."

"Tura," I pushed myself <sup>away</sup> from the computer and picked up the phone receiver.

"You mean this Auntie Chayo left her husband, left Oxnard, left with the clothes on her back with another woman and was never seen again?"

"Uh-huh."

"Wait, what did Uva say?" I badgered for answers. "How'd he react?"

"Well," Tura answered slowly. We later discovered Uva wasn't really married to her."

"What?"

"He was really just a contact. She used him to sell Mexican <sup>?</sup> in Germany. She had a pretty good little business."

"Are you serious?"

"And that day she took off with Margaret she drained her account.. Must of been in the high hundred thousands!"

"Tura," I opened a new file on my computer. "This is a crazy story!"

Suddenly I heard a click.

"Tura, you still there?" I asked.

"Oh, I better go," she said slowly. "You know, it's probably Emma on the other line."

"No, Tura wait."

"No, I better take her call. She never takes no for an answer. I can never get her off the phone."

"Wait! Tura, just tell me one thing."

"I'm sorry, Cheli, " she interrupted. "I hate to be rude, but I gotta take this call."

"Wait, how come I never heard this before?"

She sighed heavily. "Because you're a lot like Chayo."

You mean with my stomach aches? I don't know what you mean."

"No, I mean is that you both need to look in your driveways."

"Our own driveways?" I looked at my blank computer screen. I glanced at my newspaper clippings.

"That's what I said," Tura lowered her voice as if someone entered the room.

"Nobody ever bothers to look in their own driveways anymore."

MS - I find this a little too  
opaque an ending, as well as  
a bit too abrupt - what does  
Tura really mean? Do you  
end up writing your piece?  
Can you tighten/clarify here?



## Coming to a Theater Near You

Greetings Michele!

Per my phone message, "The Disappearance of Garcia Lorca" (Columbia Tristar) stars Esai Morales, Andy Garcia and Edward James Olmos. The suspenseful thriller tells the story of famed Spanish poet, Federico Garcia Lorca and the young man who would not rest until he identified the great playwright's murderer. Columbia Tristar, in conjunction with the upcoming release of the film, has scheduled several poetry readings from Lorca's most recognized works. We are looking for local poets, such as yourself, who would be interested in reading Lorca's work. Please contact me at your earliest convenience.

Yours,

B.J. Price, Senior Publicist

Dear Mr. Price,

Thank you for your invitation. I am a fan of Lorca's work and am pleased to hear that a recognized institution such as Columbia Tristar is seeking ~~out~~<sup>out</sup> working poets to honor his work and life. I'd love to be a part of the readings you have scheduled. Please forward more information to me.

Michele Serros

Ms. Serros,

Thank you for your quick response! I am sending a messenger with material regarding our event to your home. Feel free to ask my assistant to send you any books about or by Lorca. We are anticipating a great turnout, many influential individuals in the entertainment industry. We have scheduled our event for Monday, June 5th (Lorca's Birthdate!) at 3 PM. If you know of any other poets who would be interested in spreading the passion of Lorca, let me know as soon as possible.

In the spirit of poetry,

B.J. Price, Senior Publicist

Dear Mr. Price,

Thank you for the promo package and all the poetry books. My grandma Lola loved the 8x10 glossies of Esai Morales. I have spoken with many poets who wish to be part of your event. One question: What type of honorarium is Columbia Tristar offering to the poets for their participation? Please let me know so we may confirm our involvement and proceed on planning for a successful reading.

Michele Serros

Michele,

I will look into an honorarium. We hoped local poets would be more interested in celebrating the love of Lorca than focus on monetary reimbursement. I mean, Lorca himself didn't obtain financial success from his own poetry right away!

Poetry Lives!

B.J. Price, Senior Publicist

Dear Mr. Price,

Thank you for checking about an honorarium for the poets. As much as we love to celebrate the written word, <sup>we</sup> like anyone who works for a living, <sup>devote</sup> a great amount of time

and effort ~~is put into the process and product of~~ our work. Although we won't be reading our own poetry, we will be putting much time and effort to promote your film. Because your event is in afternoon event, many of us will need to leave work early to participate and we trust you understand our situation. Please contact me at your convenience.

Las Poetas en Los Angeles

Dear Mr. Price<sup>^</sup>

We were very surprised to see our names in the newspaper listed as readers for your promotional event. We never confirmed our participation and we can't understand why your company would advertise an event without confirming the availability of its speakers. We have yet to know if Columbia TriStar is offering an honorarium for us and question if Columbia TriStar recognizes a working poet's craft. This could be an opportunity for Columbia TriStar to recognize poetry in a higher regard. How could you celebrate the life of poet while exploiting the livelihood of other poets? Please contact us immediately.

Las Poetas

Dear Poets,

Sorry about the confusion, but great news! You're in luck. I spoke with Carol Grant, Senior Advisor of promotion and merchandising at Columbia TriStar, and indeed she can offer an honorarium. While it can not be in monetary value as you had requested, we can offer the poets free refreshments after the event; your choice of one (1) coffee, tea or even a cappuccino, courtesy of Columbia TriStar. See you at the event!

Lorca Lives!

B.J. Price, Senior Publicist

Dear Poets ↑

We don't quite understand your explanation for not wanting to be a part of our event, but will accept your decision. Fortunately, we have secured actors Ted Danson and Lou Diamond Phillips as talent to read from Lorca's selected work. While they are not poets or of Hispanic descent, they have generously donated their time to be a part of our event. I am sending ~~a~~ messenger<sup>^</sup> to your homes to retrieve all the promotional materials, including the 8x10 glossy of Esai Morales, so please have them available for pick<sup>u</sup>p.

Signed,

B.J. Price, Senior Publicist

Role Model Rule Number 10:

Any Press is Good Press

Being a role model sometimes takes you to faraway lands: Chicago, New York, San Jose. You have a presentation to present, poems to recite, a dissertation to . . . dissert? Sometimes you get the five star treatment, a fancy schmancy hotel where white help helps with your coat and calls you by your last name which is mandatory even if they don't know how to pronounce it correctly.

I always like to make up fake elongated Spanish sounding surnames not just to make their job more challenging but to also add a little diversity to their life. I've created a name that includes my grandmother's middle name, my mother's maiden name and the name of a character from at least one Garry Marshall sitcom.

"Excuse me, you dropped your scrunchie," Ms. Michele Maria Ruiz de la Verne de Fazio."

"Oh, thank you."

#  
-But just last month I was asked to speak at a distinguished university, okay, it was actually a night class held at a local high school, and I got a call early this morning from a woman named Lori regarding my presentation. Lori told me that in order to save money I'll be staying at her house and she hopes I don't mind. I'm nice and gracious to Lori, as possible as I can be so early in the day but after hanging up with her, I get to wondering what her house is like. Does she have cable? A toaster oven or microwave? Does this Lori have kids, a dog or a husband who's gonna pounce on my bed and wake me up at six in the morning? But none of this matters as much as my concern in knowing if Lori is white. I must find out as soon as possible. As much as I



may pride myself as seeing "No color lines!" <sup>crucial</sup> it's detrimental to my reputation that I find out if Lori white. Why? Because I have an engagement to speak at, an obligation to be prepared, a responsibility to look presentable, which means I must have my clothes ironed, pressed to perfection. If Lori is white, she isn't gonna have an iron, 'cause as everyone knows white people don't iron. It's as simple as that.

"An iron?" Wrinkled white people always question. "What do ya need an iron for? If something's wrinkled, you just throw it back in the dryer on the fluff cycle for a bit or turn the hot water on in the shower and the steam will get all the wrinkles out."

"Turn on the shower?" I ask. "When nobody's taking a shower?"

"Yeah, just shut the windows, close the door and let the shower run for like 20 minutes. Everyone does it."

No, most **white** people do it. So now I know who to blame for that severe drought we had in California in the late '80s.

To be honest, <sup>1/2</sup> and this is an embarrassing confession for a self proclaimed super starched Chicana <sup>wait</sup> but the <sup>2011</sup> unification of an iron and ironing board in my house while growing up ~~were almost~~ nonexistent. I rarely saw my mother ironing. We had one iron, ~~most of the time~~ caked with black goo and the seared remains of a pink polyester shell, and one rickety ironing board that sent Mama Kitty running for cover everytime it was set up, ~~letting out that sharp piercing shrill~~. So, just from whom did I learn the meaning of making a well pressed statement? Who conditioned me to recognize the value of double creases? One answer, Martha Reyes. Years ago, as a preteen, she taught me a lesson I never forgot.

Martha Reyes was my childhood best friend who lived up the block. As kids, we dressed alike, talked alike, dug the same boys and lied to all the same hall monitors. We had everything in common until we entered junior high and then the changes between us became apparent. Martha started to iron, **everything**. Her penneltons, the

white T-shirts she wore under her penneltons, her corduroys, the black socks she wore under her black winos.

As a seventh grader, I started grabbing things out of the dryer and throwing them on while Martha, ~~on the other hand~~ <sup>and</sup> starting choosing ironing board covers that complimented her bedroom wallpaper.

When I mentioned Martha's ironing obsession to Patty Romero, she ~~concluded~~ <sup>said</sup> "Well, that's 'cause Martha's a chola now and they iron everything."

Later I asked Martha, "Are you a chola now?"

"Who said that?" she demanded to know. She was in her bedroom, hunched over the ironing board as usual and creating creasing on the back of her Levis. <sup>?</sup>

"No one."

"Someone from some other clicka, I mean, neighborhood?"

"No <sup>z</sup> actually, it was Patty."

"Oh, well, what do you think?" she asked.

"Well, you sure do iron a lot."

"I just wanna look nice." The steam from the iron made her white powdered face turn pink.

"But why do you have to iron everything?"

<sup>hand</sup> "Because I want everything to look nice." She put the iron on its stand. "I wanna show you something."

I followed her to the hall closet and when she opened it, I couldn't believe what I saw. There, on the two shelves, among sleeve extensions, various cans of starch and extension cords, were irons, so many irons <sup>they were</sup> lined up in two rows according <sup>to</sup> ~~by~~ size. She pulled one iron off the shelf. "You can't use the same iron for different clothes, she explained. "This one, well, I just can't get rid of it. It still has some heat left to it and it's old but you remember my aunt Ruthie? She loved this iron. She put pleats in everything and this iron always came through for her. She always looked so nice in her clothes. Too bad she was never actually able to see how nice she looked."

"What do you mean?"

"She was blind."

"She was blind? How could she iron?"

"The settings were in Braille."

Martha pulled down another iron. "This one's left over from my sister's wedding. She got ten irons at her bridal shower. Can you believe that? Only fifteen! Anyway she kept 11 out of respect and gave the rest out to family. I got this one. Look, it's still in box, from Robinson's May. Fancy, huh?"

her sister was 15, or she got 15 irons in the end?

"Yeah."

Next Martha showed me a heavy looking chrome and black contraption. "Now this one is one bad ol' thing. It was my great grandmother's. My mother's grandma." She pointed out the sharp tip that made a perfect V. "Check out the point on this thing."

"Yeah, it's sharp."

"They don't make 'em like this anymore. I use this one strictly for collars and cuffs and it heats up in less 10 seconds. In my great grandma's will, she requested that the dress she be buried in be pressed with this iron." Martha put the iron back. "Oh, and look, check these out."

She rolled her sleeves up and then made a face. "Shit, now I'm gonna have to iron ~~the~~ them again. Oh, well, check it out."

She showed me her wrists, which were covered with several raised dark burns.

"Ewww!" I looked away.

"It's nothing to get grossed out over," she snapped. "My mother had these scars, my grandmother had these scars. I can't even imagine being a Reyes without these iron bites. They're a permanent mark of excellence."

I looked at her burns. "Martha," I started to tell her, "I don't understand. Really, what's the big deal to have everything so perfectly ironed?"

"You really still don't get?"

"Not really."

"Okay, I'll show you what the big deal is."

"Yeah, I wanna know."

We went back to her bedroom and she pulled out a shoe box from under her bed. In it was an assortment of snapshots, some dried flowers and her sister's faded high school graduation tassel. Martha dug through the box and pulled out one color photo. She held it to her chest. "Okay, you really want to know?" she asked again.

"Yeah, Martha, come on, what the big secret?"

"Okay, remember when Anthony Rivera came to speak at our school? After Cinco de Mayo?"

"Of course I remember. It was the most exciting day of my life."

"Now, what I'm gonna show you may make you sick, it may shock you, but I'm only showing you to teach you a lesson."

"Okay, okay." I pretended to brace myself.

The picture Martha showed me was of herself. To one side of her was Mr. Evans, our principal, and to her other side was Anthony Rivera. Anthony Rivera, dancing sensation and former General Hospital star.

"Look at his suit, look close," she said.

Anthony was wearing a dark blue suit. Creases ran across his chest, and some gathered around each thigh. There were sweat rings under each arm.

"Perspiration pads would have taken care of that," she pointed out. "And extra starch near his knees would have prevented the creases. He should've thought ahead and known he was gonna be sitting in the car, waiting on a chair before getting up to speak."

"God, he looks horrible!"

"Yeah, really ruins your impression of him, huh?"

"But on G.H. he looked so good."

"Yeah, well they got people who take of things like that, like with portable steamers."

"Portable steamers?"

"Oh, yeah, my mom ordered me one. It should be here next week, you should come check it out."

I looked at the photo again. "God, look at the wrinkles near the elbows and his lapel, it has lines on it."

"Yeah, and you know the worst part of it?"

"There's more?"

"This picture is gonna be around forever. I mean, after we're dead and after he's dead, someone's gonna find this picture and see how lousy he looked. Can you believe he went out looking like this and he's Mexican."

"Actually, I think he's Puerto Rican."

"Puerto Rican? Who told you that?"

"Margaret Simon."

Really? Well anyway," she looked at photo again. "What do you think of our Hispanic role model now?"

"If only he took the extra time to iron," I said. I suddenly saw Martha's point.



And it was because of that day, and those words from Martha's mouth that I laid in my bed thinking about my presentation, thinking about Lori. Was she white? Would she have an iron? I picked up the phone and star 69'd her to find out.



\*Levis, see Guess.

## I Know What You Did Last Summer

The following is based on the actual diary of a 27<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> year<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> old Chicana Lollapalooza Road Poet.

It is not a definitive statement on the middle class<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> alternative music scene. It does not offer any solutions.

It is, however, a highly personal chronicle and may provide insight in the complicated world we live in.

Names, dates and places are been changed in accordance with the wishes of those concerned.



Dear Diary,

I can't believe I was picked! Two months from now I will be on the road, touring with Lollapalooza. <sup>ay</sup>Yea! Beth says they were suppose to have Nirvana, but since they couldn't make it (sad), they will now do the spoken word thing. Unknown poets instead of Nirvana, I don't see the connection. Anyway, who cares. I get to go on the road! I get to read my poetry to stadium crowds across the country and guess what? I will get paid! Can you believe it? I will keep a record of the whole experience and then I will have documentation of all my exciting adventures. Oh, but what if someone finds you? Oh God, dear diary, that could be hell. I guess I could use code names. Like symbols or maybe write everyone's name backwards. No, I'll use no names, just like in Go Ask Alice. Then in case someone finds you, my dear sweet best friend, they won't know I'm writing about them and then shun me like Harriet the Spy. Beth, oops, I

mean, ---- says she thinks the Beastie Boys are gonna be on this tour. I hope so. That ---- is so cute. This is gonna be the best summer of my life!



Dear Diary,

July 4th - Today was the first day of the tour. We were in Las Vegas and it was 117 degrees. Can you believe it? I saw two boys faint outside of the mist tents. Part of my job as a Road Poet is to read poetry all the time, anytime. The heat was so painfully uncomfortable . . . I changed three times cuz my clothes were just saturated with sweat. So, twelve of us will tour as Road Poets, but when we get to a new city, local poets will be added to that venue. As a Road Poet one of the perks is getting to eat for free at any of the food stands, and ---- from Big Belly Burritos told me to come by anytime for free food. I asked him if there was lard in the burritos and he said no way and then when I said ~~oh that's too bad~~ and then he laughed and said he'd throw in some lard just for me. He's pretty cute, if only he wasn't working a food stand.



Dear Diary (Denver, Colorado)

Every night ---- comes by the buses to deliver a stack of cheese pizzas and cases of beer. And sometimes ----, who's with the Beastie Boys, comes by with a chunk of pot the size of a brick and this is like 11 PM every night! I'm not even eating or smoking any of it. I want to stay in shape, I want to stay focused, 'cause I have a lot of work ahead of me and I want to do a good job.



Dear Diary, (Kansas City)

Today was the greatest day. Hey, I sound like ---- from the Smashing Pumpkins! How can I not? I hear that song every single night before getting into my bunk in the bus to fall asleep into sweet nothingness. There are ten of us on the bus and it's really like a slumber party every night. We crank up the music, flash the lights off and on and

dance in the back end of the bus. All the other poets are so fun and nice. Anyway, today I sold a book! Can you believe it? This girl, actually gave me six bucks for my book! I mean, she could have bought a hemp bag or a beaded choker or even a Big Belly Burrito, but no, she bought my book. This is the best summer! See Ya!

#

Dear Diary, (St. Paul)

What a horrible day. Today I read poems to only two people in the poetry corner and they weren't really in the corner to listen to poetry, but were just waiting to use the out house. They always put the out houses by the poetry corner so there's all these people who aren't into poetry and who just gotta take a piss and sometimes they yell things. It's sorta demeaning to be reading in a place called the corner. I mean, why can't it be called the stage, or <sup>the</sup> arena or even <sup>the</sup> an amphitheater? Corner sounds so infantile and unprofessional. Being in a corner reminds of school when I was sent to stand the corner cuz I talked too much and I had to stand in it to learn how to be quiet. There ~~were~~ <sup>who were</sup> these guys, waiting to use the outhouse, screaming <sup>red</sup> at me to shut up and just show them my tits. I pretended not to hear them, But between you and me, dear diary, it was hard not to. Today more poets had trash thrown at them. Thank God it wasn't my turn on stage.

#

Dear Diary, (Milwaukee)

I thought this was suppose to be like the granddaddy of alterna teen concerts, but everyone looks the same. I mean, the SAME. Oversized wallet chains, dyed hair, blond dreads, Baby T's with little sayings from the '70s. God, this '70s revival thing is longer than the '70s themselves. And all these skinny little white kids are wearing oversized Dickies and Ben Davis and I can't help but think of all the kids I teach over in Southgate or El Monte and how they aren't allowed to wear that type of clothing 'cause it makes them look like gang members. More privileges for the white Ticketmaster class.

#

Dear Dairy, (St Louis)

Last week I remember thinking I was the happiest person in the whole world, in the whole universe, in all of God's creation. Could that have only been last week or was it endless light-years ago? Today, when ----- and I were waiting for the rest of the bus entourage, we talked cop shop with some state troopers. When I told them I was from L.A., they said they'd never want to work in L.A. and that the LAPD has to put up with so much shit. When I asked them what they meant, they said (and I quote) "Well, out here everyone talks American, but in L.A. you got your Orientals and your Mexicans and you gotta talk to them and none of them speak English good, and that's stressful and no wonder you just wanna beat the shit out of people."

#

Dear Diary, (Chicago)

Sorry I haven't written for a while. It's been raining. Each time a drop of rain hits me, I can swear it's a tear making up for the ones I want to cry. I don't understand it because last night I was so happy. I ate six wonderful, delicious, mouth-watering, delectable, heavenly slices of pizza but when I woke up this morning I felt horrible. Maybe it's not a good idea to eat so late at night. I had really horrible dreams and now I'm depressed. Today they told us they can't have any more poets on the main stage cuz too much trash is being thrown at them and it's damaging stage equipment. So now we are relegated to stay in the corner. All the other poets are really bugging me. The male poets do nothing but scream and scream and go on about their penises. Everyone is reading stuff about O.J., Kurt, sex or drugs. Nobody knows what Oxnard is and my stuff isn't going over very well. I'm actually looking forward to going home. So far this summer hasn't turned out what I thought it would be.

THIS IS  
MILANO'S.

#

Dear Diary, (Columbus)

My suede mini, the patchwork one, doesn't fit anymore. Neither do my cut<sup>1</sup>offs. I shouldn't eat the pizzas anymore, but it's really the only thing I look forward to. Today, ----- from Big Belly Burritos asked if I wanted to make extra money making burritos. He said he'd pay me seven bucks under the table<sup>2</sup>. So now I roll burritos three hours a day. I like hanging out with his crew. They're really the<sup>most</sup> sincerest<sup>3</sup> people, besides the Tibetan monks, that I've met so far and I'm really their best roller. I saw ----- from The Breeders bite into a burrito that I rolled and it didn't split open at all. Well, enough of this chitty chat and writie-write. I better help ----- think of some fun things for the little alterna teens to do tomorrow.

Dear Diary, (Cincinnati)

Today all the Road Poets had a interview with MTV. I HATE talking about poetry. I mean, come on, what can you possibly say? It's like talking about sex, I'd rather just<sup>4</sup> do it<sup>5</sup> than talk about it. Ha ha! No, but I never know what to say, cuz you sound either arrogant or boring or just plain show<sup>6</sup>offy. So I really didn't say much and when it was aired I wasn't even mentioned. I really felt left out. Just like in Mr. -----'s English class.

Dear Dairy, (?)<sup>7</sup>

Today I went skateboarding with ----- . I bought me my own skateboard and then I had it signed by all the bands. He said I should pray that one of them dies of an overdose and then my board <sup>8</sup>with<sup>9</sup> be worth so much money. So anyway, we were surrounded by acres and acres of corn fields and the sun was setting and it was so nice. Until he asked, shouldn't you be at the corner reading your poetry? And then I felt guilty. But the thought of going back to the poetry corner and reading to stoned frat boys with tribal tattoos was just too depressing.



Dear Diary, (?)

Sorry I haven't written for a while. I've been depressed. We've been to so many places I've lost track of time and places. I called ----- today long distance and cried when I heard her voice. When I told her I was working making burritos, she said, "Michele, you shouldn't be rolling burritos. You're there to read your poetry." but when I told her I liked the burrito makers <sup>more</sup> than the poets, and that I liked making burritos more than hearing poetry, she just said "You're making us all look bad." Later I didn't know if she meant I make other poets look bad or other brown people (which of whom I haven't seen any in a long time) look bad. Oh, and today this girl BEGGED me for my <sup>access</sup> badge. I've seen her at the last three venues working at one of the feminist tables and she said, "Please, please, please I have to meet ----- from the Smashing Pumpkins!" But when I casually mentioned to her that he was married, she said, "I don't wanna meet his wife, I just wanna fuck <sup>him</sup>." Oh, like I should have known better. So much for sisterhood!

#

Dear Diary, (?)

I'm taking a break from the tour. I'm sick of the poets and the poetry corner and all the male poets that scream, scream, scream. I decided to go into Ann Arbor with everyone from Big Belly Burritos. In order to get the ride I had to help break down their stand and now I still reek of onions and bleach. We <sup>all</sup> had to sit in the back of U haul truck with no windows or <sup>much</sup> air and I ~~was warned~~ that ----- wakes up in his sleep and pisses on people. I didn't sleep at all, <sup>last</sup> ~~all~~ night.

Dear Diary, (NYC)

Oh, the New York poets are the best! Man, they must write and practice a lot. They can think up poems quickly and lay down rhymes and just recite them quick. I wish I could do that. I am so jealous. It's raining and there's mud everywhere and I've lost my favorite platforms. I really just want to go home. Only one more day to go. ----- joined

the tour and I hear she hands out candy in exchange for borrowing equipment. Her toe nail polish is chipped. Tacky.

④

Dear Diary,

Well, the tour is officially over for me. What a summer. I don't want to hear or read anything in stanzas for a while. If I see one more burrito, I will throw up and if I hear that screaming intro for "Sabotage" one more time, I'll scream! I am writing this from the train. I decided to take a train home rather than fly. It will take three days and ----- said I was crazy to take the train back to L.A., but I don't care. I want to see the country. I want to take my time and think about things for a while. Right now I'm eating an orange yeast roll I bought from the snack machine and it is so, so delicious. I can feel its warmth and <sup>am</sup> actually experience <sup>ing</sup> the orange zest. It's a thousand times better, a million, a trillion times better than all that catered crap they served us on tour. I'm sitting across from an Amish family and they look so content and stress-free. No airs or gimmicks. I mean, what's it like to be so discipline<sup>d</sup> and humble and use craftsmanship for practical reasons, not just making art to show off and get attention? I wonder what it would be like to live on an Amish farm? Could I live on an Amish farm? I will definitely check into that for next summer. See ya!

COMPILES:  
FOOTNOTES  
FOR PAGE  
114

\*Promptly reported to the IRS.

\*\*There are no dates or locations for the following material. It was recorded on single sheets of paper, set lists, place mats, etc.

## Chasing Community

"Hi, is Ernesto Chavez available?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Do you know when he'll be available? This is Michele Serros and I really need to talk to him."

Yes, I recognize your voice, Michele. Well, you know it's National Hispanic Heritage Month and he is busy, busy, busy with events, luncheons and conferences."

"Well, who can I talk to about my honorarium?"

"Hmmm, I don't know what to tell you. He's the one who controls all the funds."

"Is there another number I can reach him at?"

"Have you tried him at home?"

"Yes."

"Do you have his pager?"

"Yeah, but he hasn't returned those calls either."

"Have you tried emailing him?"

"Uh-huh, I've done that too. I also sent him a letter, certified."

"Well, I don't know what to say except that I'll take your message, again."

Role Model Rule 11:

Buy a Little Black Dress for Special Occasions

*I think it feels a little bit jarring to have this role model rule suddenly shift to a third-person narrative. I think it'd be much more effective if it was recounted as a first-person anecdote.*

"So what little affair is it this time?." He plops back on the bed and watches her <sup>like the other</sup> ~~role~~ <sup>model ruler.</sup> pack.

"What?"

"The conference, reading, whatever, you know."

"Oh, it's a conference. Mujeres en Movimiento."

"Women on da move. Now that's you."

"Yeah, that's me, all right." She folds a sweatshirt and sticks it in her bag.

"What's the theme?"

"Uh, roles in gender, identity and race."

"Again?" He grabs the newspaper from the foot of the bed.

"We can never stop talking about it!"

"So how long you gonna be gone?" He starts skimming the classifieds.

"Just three days."

"Three days?" He looks up. "I thought it was just gonna be overnight."

"Honey, weren't listening to me?"

"I don't remember you saying three days."

"Yes, I did. You just forgot."

"And where is it again?" He goes back to reading the paper.

"I'll be at the Red Lion."

"Where?"

"The Red Lion in San Josie."

"They always have conferences there."

"Yeah, I guess so." She crams three crossword puzzles books into the side pocket.

"Didn't the last three conferences take place in San Jose?"

*The tone of this piece is so totally different than the others - too serious and self-conscious - and the reader's left wondering how to respond.*

"You know, you're right, " she agreed. "I guess I haven't really been paying attention."

"So are you gonna be on a panel?"

"No I'm actually gonna be a speaker."

"What are you gonna talk about?"

"Unity, Latina unity."

"Man, you better pray people don't start getting along."

"Why?"

"Or else you're gonna be out of a job."

She throws a rolled up pair of white socks at him.

"So what else are you gonna do?"

"Go to workshops, focus groups."

"To focus on what? How to be a bitter Chicana?"

"A what?"

"A better Chicana."

"I think you were right the first time."

"I was just messing," he looks up from the paper. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"I really don't want to go to this thing. I mean, there's never anyone interesting at these conferences, nobody I ever click with. I get tired of the same old faces. I guess I do get bitter having to hear and do and repeat the same old things over and over again."

He gets up from the bed and puts his arms around her waist. "Oh, three days will go by before you know it," he says. "You won't believe how fast three days can go by. So," he squeezes her tighter. "It's all women at this conference?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Cause," he says as he digs his face into her left shoulder. The short ends of his hair tickle her neck. "You're gonna be nice and horny when you come back."



An hour later he drops her off the airport. She enters the terminal leading to the plane and she finds her seat, 22A. Yes, right over the wing, just like she requested. As soon as the seat belt sign beeps off, she immediately gets her bag from the overhead and heads for the bathroom. She kicks off her loafers and unzips her khakis. Sets her body free of a sweater set and bra and squeezes into a tight black slip dress. One foot on the toilet, she balances to check for V.P.L. \* in the mirror. Shit, there's lines, but to actually go pantyless? Now that might be too nasty, plus *the jiggle*. No way. She decides to keep her panties on. She applies more lipstick then remembers what she read in Mademoiselle. She wipes off the red crap and applies cinnamon flavored chapstick instead. Then she reached into the very bottom of my bag and slips on her favorite shoes, black suede sling backs, open toe.

When she get back to her seat, the elderly woman in 22B looks up at her.

"My," the old woman remarks smiling at her. "Must be a special occasion."

"Yes," she tells her. "It is."

She tilts her seat back, turns her Walkman to high and counts the 45 minutes to San Jose. Yeah, it's special, alright. Super special. And when she exits out of Gate 37, the same gate she's been exiting for the past year, he'll be waiting for her like always and he'll dig his face into her neck and his long dark hair will get mixed with her long dark hair and he'll wrap his arms around her, snug around her hips, where they will stay for the next three days, three short days that will go by much too fast.

## The Very Big Deal

"So just how long is his hair?" Auntie Alma asked.

I tried to envision a picture she would understand. An image she would appreciate. Jesus? Too heavy. Che Guevara? Too revolutionary. I needed something more within our cultural grasp.

"Okay," I said. "You know Cher, right?"

Alma smirked. "Of course, I know her. Not personally, but I know who she is. I've had a subscription to *People* since it first came out. So what about her? Don't tell me his hair's as long as hers."

"No, not that long," I assured her. "But you remember her second husband?"

"The one who wore make up and had the long tongue?"

"No, not him. She was never married to him. I'm talking about Greg Allman, her second husband."

"The blond one?"

"Yeah," I said. "So Ronnie's hair looks just like his. He's also got a little soul patch, fuzz on his chin too."

"Oh, I know what he looks like now," She opened the top cupboard and searched for something. "That's long. Why does he have such long hair?"

"He's always had it that way."

"Well, I guess it's all right. I mean, Jesus had long hair. And most men, when they have long hair, it's always really pretty. Why is that anyway?"

"I dunno," I agreed. "But you're right."

The questions concerning my new boyfriend were getting more personal, more in-depth, and this made me nervous. Since my mother died, I saw Auntie Alma as the primary maternal fixture in my life. I wanted her approval badly, and more than anything, I wanted Ronnie, my new boyfriend, to be accepted by the whole family. He

was due at Alma's in less than an hour to meet everyone, Alma, Auggie, Uncle Charlie. . . the whole crew. I was in Alma's kitchen helping make more food, last minute, as usual.

"And he's definitely **guero**, huh?" Alma asked as she handed me a glass cup full of rice.

"Yeah."

"Just how white?"

"Okay, you know Cousin Izzy?"

"Charlie's youngest daughter or the Icelia up north?"

"Izzy up north."

"He's not as white as her!"

"As white as her stomach," I paused. "In the winter time." We both cringed at the thought.

"Oh my God, that *is* white."

"Yeah, I know." I poured the rice in the pan.

"So you must really like him," she said.

"Yeah," I smiled. "A lot."

"So," she lowered the flame under the pan. "Robert tells us he has some tattoos."

"Just a few, like on his arm."

"Any near here?" She asked suspiciously and pointed to the webbing between her thumb and pointer finger.

"No, why?"

"Nothing." She added some onion soup mix to a carton of sour cream and started mixing.

"He wasn't ever in jail was he?" she asked.

"Well . . ." Shit. Just how honest should I be? I ended up confessing. "Not really jail, per se."

"What do you mean, *per se*?"

"I mean, he spent a few months in juvie."

"A few months! In juvenile hall? What'd he do?"

"Oh, it was just some stupid thing. I mean, he was still in high school and it was only juvie."

"Yeah, but a few months, he must have had priors."

"Now, how would you know something like that?" I asked playfully.

"I hear things," she answered nonchalantly. "On the street y mas."

"But anyway," I added quickly. "He's mended his ways since then. I mean, he was way younger back then and he knows right from wrong. I mean, he's a pretty spiritual guy."

"Oh, like Catholic?" She pulled out a spatula from the drawer and helped me stir the rice.

"No, Alma," I laughed. "He's far from Catholic."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, he's spiritual and everything, but he doesn't actually believe in a God."

"What?!" Oh my God. I can't . . . I don't believe this!" She looked upwards toward the ceiling and made the sign of the cross quickly. "Shhh! Don't ever say that again in my house."

"Oh come on," I put a lid on the rice. "Half the family doesn't even go to church."

"Shhhh!" She said as she pointed to the ceiling again, "He doesn't need to know that. Stop it. Just be quiet!"

I walked around the counter and pulled up a kitchen stool. I <sup>folded</sup> joined my hands together out on the counter, rested my chin on them, and I exhaled quietly to myself. I felt uncomfortable, nervous. And then I felt suddenly sad. If my mother was alive there would be <sup>fewer</sup> ~~less~~ questions, <sup>fewer</sup> ~~less~~ negative comments. If my mother was alive <sup>there'd</sup> ~~they'd~~ would be more acceptance and I wouldn't be defending a new boyfriend's statistics an

hour before his arrival. I dreaded the thought of Ronnie coming to dinner at Alma's house. Maybe it was much too early for such formalities, but now it was now too late to call and cancel. He was already on his way. I noticed a frown on Alma's face as she counted forks and knives. I knew she was disappointed <sup>by</sup> ~~on~~ the information she <sup>had</sup> learned about Ronnie. I looked at the kitchen clock. Maybe it wasn't too late to call him and cancel.

Alma stopped counting silverware and then she came over towards me and put one arm around shoulders.

"You know," she said. "All these things about Ronnie <sup>aren't</sup> ~~isn't~~ important. What's important is how you feel. If you love him that's the only thing that is worth feeling. Because let me tell you, love comes around rarely. I mean real honest <sup>to</sup> ~~to~~ goodness love ~~and~~ you have to grab it when you can."

"Really?" I put my hand over hers.

"Really. All these things, him having long hair, being locked up, not believing in God," she made the sign of the cross again, "I guess, all these things really don't matter to us, to family. I mean, we're not the ones in love with him. Besides, all these little things are all so superficial."

"Yeah?"

"Yes, And believe me, your mother would be so happy that you're happy." She squeezed my shoulder. "Oh, you're so tense. Look, why don't you go over to B & D and get some more sodas, get some more beer if you want." She squeezed my shoulder one more time and walked away from the counter. "We still have another half hour."

"Yeah, I'll run over to B & D," I relaxed both my shoulders. "I also gotta some salad fixings, some stuff for Ronnie to eat."

"To eat?" Alma whipped around "Look at all this food I've made!"

"I know, but Ronnie really can't eat much of it."

"What do you mean? He's not feeling well?"



"No, it's just . . ."

"Cause you know I make the best chicken soup."

"Yeah, I know, it's just . . ."

"Wait, don't tell me," she put her hand over her heart. "He doesn't like Mexican food."

"No, no. He loves it. It's just Ronnie doesn't eat meat, he's a vegetarian."

"He's what?"

"He's vegetarian."

"Vegetarian? You never told me that."

"I didn't think it was a big deal."

"Not a big deal? How can you leave out such an important detail?"

"Alma, it's not a big thing. In fact his whole family doesn't eat meat. He was raised that way."

"And he told you this or did you have to find out on your own?"

"Alma, of course he told me. I mean, our first date, we went out to dinner and yeah, he told me right away."

"And you still accepted him like that?"

"Accepted who what way?" Just then Auggie<sup>and</sup> Benny walked into the kitchen.

"Michele's new boyfriend," Alma told them. "Did you know he was a vegetarian?"

"What kind a man," Auggie asked, "Doesn't eat meat?"

"Yeah, what kind of man don't eat meat?" Benny added his two cents. "You remember the Calvert's next door?" Benny continued as he dipped his fingers in the beans and pulled out a piece of bacon. "They were vegetarians. They had a big ol' vegetable garden and everything. The biggest garden on the block and they still died. They weren't all that healthy."

"What kind of man just eats vegetables?" Auggie repeated. "I mean, where does he get his **ganas** from? Those little broccoli crowns?" Then he and Benny laughed together as they left to go to the backyard.

"They're called florets," I called out to him. "Alma, please tell him what we just talked about."

"I don't know," she hesitated. "I mean, personally, I just think it's unnatural, strange."

"Alma, what about all this talk about love, and acceptance and how important it is to find someone you care about in life?"

"That was before you told me he and his family was vegetarians."

"Alma, you gotta be kidding."

"Okay, tell me this, he'll eat my rice, right?"

"Well, no."

"But everyone loves my rice."

"I know, but you put lard in it."

"That's not meat."

"I know, but it has animal fat."

"Oh, so now *you're* suddenly too good for my rice." She put her dish towel to her face and it looked like she was gonna cry.

"Alma, please, what's the big deal?"

"It's just," she talked between what sounded like sobs, "It's just . . . I'm so confused!"

"About what?"

"What I'm gonna serve."

"What do mean what you're gonna serve? Serve what you've already had planned. I'm just gonna get a few more things at the market."

"No, not what I'm gonna serve tonight."

"Then <sup>6</sup>where <sup>2</sup>what are you talking about?" Now I was getting confused.

"What am I gonna serve at the wedding?"

"The wedding? What are you taking about?"

"It's just that since you were a little girl, your mother always dreamed that someday you would meet a nice man, a nice Mexican man, and you'd have a big Catholic wedding and we'd, we'd. . ."

"You'd what?"

"We'd have lots and lots of tri tip, Santa Maria style, and now, the more you tell me about Ronnie it's becoming less and less of a dream. I could accept he isn't Mexican, that he doesn't believe in God, but he and his whole family won't eat meat, won't eat tri tip?"

Just then the door bell rang.

"So what, now he's early bird too?" She took off her apron and started for the door. "You didn't tell me that either!"

I pulled her back. "What do you mean tri tip *Santa Maria* style?"

"I mean, Santa Maria style, how Vincente makes it."

"Uncle Vincente?"

"That's the way he makes it. Your mother had specifically asked him to make it for your wedding."

The door bell rang again.

"For *my* wedding and he said yes?"

"Of course."

Ever since I was a little girl I've grown with tri tip eaten at barbecues, weddings, and family reunions. <sup>The</sup> ~~with~~ <sup>made</sup> leftovers ~~relegated~~ <sup>of</sup> to a wonderful week tri tip sandwiches and burritos. Tri tip is the triangular shaped tips of beef loin and it can be a tough piece of meat if you don't know how to cook it right. Some people make the mistake of removing all the fat ~~off~~ before cooking, but if you put the fat side on the fire first, the moisture penetrates the meat and makes for the most moist and <sup>deliciously</sup> ~~super~~ tender cut of beef you've ever had in your life. Uncle Vincente's way of preparation is traditional

Santa Maria style, <sup>which means first</sup> ~~in that~~ he sears the lean part of the meat ~~first~~ over the fire for 5 to 8 minutes to seal in all the juices, then he flips the meat over to the fat side for 35 minutes, then when the juice seeps from the top of the meat it's time to flip it over for another 35 minutes. After removing it from the grill you can ~~to~~ trim off all the fat, <sup>but</sup> only if you want. The whole process is pretty time consuming and no one really wants to be <sup>standing</sup> over a hot grill, timing the flipping of meat. But here the burden was being selflessly offered for my future wedding feast.

"But Vincente hasn't made tri tip like that in years." I told Alma.

"Since Vivian's wedding," she reminded me. "In 1979. He said it was all too much of a bother but he said he'd do it or you. But if your future family doesn't eat meat . . . I don't know what to say. " She walked over to answer the door but I pulled her back.

"It's a pretty big deal for Vincente to make tri tip Santa Maria style."

"A very big deal," she agreed.

"Maybe it is too soon to have Ronnie over, to meet family," I told Tura. "I mean, what's the rush. What's the big deal?"

"What is the big deal? Tura agreed.

We both stood on the other side of the front door. Neither one of us moved to answer it and neither one of us acknowledged Ronnie's impatient knocks and door bell rings. I put my finger over my lips and Aunt Alma nodded. We stayed quiet, on the other side of the front door until we heard Ronnie pound it one more time with his fist then walk back down Alma's walkway to retreat to his car and finally drive away.

## Role Model Rule Number 12:

### Learn the Difference Between a Great Contact and a Good Connection

I received the invite in early September. It was on heavy cream colored paper with ragged edges like some fancy wedding invitation. It didn't have a postage stamp of a two white doves forming a heart and it didn't have that pastel colored confetti tucked inside that spilled on my carpet upon opening. No, the flair went as far as the ragged edges. And this invite, ~~somehow~~ bold and business-like, was from a women's television network, America's Number One Women's Television Network, the return envelope claimed. The network was requesting my presence at a national focus group for women and wouldn't I want participate in their three day conference? Wouldn't I like an all <sup>1</sup>expenses <sup>1</sup>paid extended weekend in DC? How about hanging with over one hundred female luminaries in some posh hotel? So, since they considered me "a woman who makes a contribution to her community," and I needed a snow globe from DC, I naturally checked the <sup>yes</sup> box on the reply card and mailed it back.

Angela said it sounded all so bourgie and boring. "You're gonna be stuck with all these women who married into privilege."

"Yeah, your <sup>1</sup>probably right."

"Pretending to have stuff in common with them <sup>1</sup>while stuffing your face with crab cakes and champagne."

"That's for sure."

"Hey, how can you get me an invite to this thing too?"



Although I couldn't get Angela an invite, she was actually excited that I was asked to be a part of the conference. "Make sure you get lots of business cards," she said. "And definitely make lots of good contacts." Three months later, <sup>was</sup> I in DC in a



cute little brown <sup>mini</sup> ~~max~~ skirt I found at Ross. I kept the tags tucked in just in case I didn't spill any crab cake on my lap. I may <sup>decide</sup> ~~have wanted~~ to take the skirt back later, after the conference.\*

My first good contact was a girl I met at the first evening mixer. Her name was J.T. and she worked for Rock the Vote. I actually remembered her from the airport in Los Angeles. She was the one who set off the metal detector with her nose, tongue and nipple piercings. We clicked instantly <sup>I</sup> ~~she~~ <sup>was</sup> ~~also being~~ in her twenties and <sup>had</sup> ~~with~~ the tags of her Marshall's blouse tucked in. Together we ~~pa~~ <sup>pooh</sup> ~~poohed~~ the women in gold buttoned power suits and helped ourselves to the first glasses of free wine that came our way. After just one glass each we both became relaxed and started mingling among a roomful of East Coast CEO's, highly decorated generals, and one bona <sup>fi</sup> ~~fi~~de former Miss America. (No, not the one found in nudie shots ~~Y~~). We all wore name tags, mine saying, 'Chicana Poet, Los Angeles,' which, thank God, eliminated anyone asking The Question (See Role Model Rule Number 8).

All of the attendees ~~at course~~, were women. Bold, vocally <sup>opinionated</sup> women who were not <sup>shy about</sup> ~~intimidated~~ to grab the complimentary pencils from behind their ears and <sup>scribbling</sup> ~~carve~~ comments onto <sup>notebooks</sup> ~~their clipboards~~. And for the next three days, that's what we did. Talked and took notes in formal discussions, contemplating glass ceilings, the future of breast feeding in the unemployment line and what <sup>re</sup> ~~woman's~~ television programming really should be <sup>between</sup> the douche and weight loss commercials.

After three days of such intense focus we were all going to be honored by one grand finale dinner, one that would be filmed and later shown in snippets on America's Number One Women's Television Network. I checked my Ross skirt for any noticeable lap spills and J.T. applied her eyeliner heavier. "Just in case the camera points our way," she said.

But when J.T. and I entered the banquet hall that evening, we discovered there wasn't just one camera, but dozens of them, heavy looking industrial sized equipment

with men in headsets behind each one. Almost every camera was directed toward one table that was strategically placed in front the stage. It was clearly the table reserved ~~for the big wide table that was on TV,~~ "J.T. pointed out.

We walked by the reserved table and started to make our way through the banquet room. It <sup>was</sup> filled with hundreds of ~~more~~ circular tables, each topped with maroon colored linen cloths and oversized floral arrangements. I thought of all the weddings I attended where you were allowed to take home the centerpieces. Does a four feet high winter foliage display count as carry on?

Suddenly I felt a tap on my shoulder and I turned around. "Michele!" It was Julie, one of the coordinators from America's Number One Women's Television Network. "We have you sitting at the reserved table, this evening."

"The reserved table? Me?"

"Yes, over here," she took my hand and started to lead me towards the reserved table, but not until J.T. could quickly whisper in my ear. "You know why they asked you to sit there, don't you? They gotta have their little rainbow roundtable ready for their close up on national TV."

I took J.T.'s comment as pure jealousy and followed Julie to the most important table of the room. I was immediately introduced to my dinner companions, a blind Native American college professor on my right and an Armenian physicist in a wheelchair to my left. I thought about J.T.'s comment. Hmm. Gradually, however, more and more women in similar monochromatic double breasted suits filled up the rainbow round table. I met a playwright who I <sup>do</sup> ~~ve~~ seen featured numerous times in *People* magazine, an orchestra leader (with bad breath) and ~~one~~ <sup>a</sup> Washington heavyweight with a bone crushing handshake. I was ~~slowly~~ surrounded by detailed chit chat <sup>about</sup> of ski weekends in Aspen with Martha (Stewart) and how <sup>an</sup> old pal, George (Lucas) was so happy that <sup>the shooting of his new movie</sup> his Star Wars ~~trilogy~~ <sup>going</sup> was ~~doing~~ so well. I suddenly felt self-conscious. Oh, what could I possibly talk about with these women? What could I possibly saw that would add to their six figure lives? "Hey, you know they got Kate

Spade bags over at Ross for six bucks?" "Is that a real cell phone? But it's so small!" After a good thirty long minutes of silence on my part, I thought, I'd do just what I always do when I'm in situations like that. I'll seek out those who I have something really in common with.

"Oh, are these shrimp and mango wraps?" I joked with the waiter. "Just like our grandmas used to make, huh?"

"You're from Zacatecas?" I asked the bartender. "I'm from Zacatecas!"

"You really like it?" I questioned the second server. "I got it at Ross!"

#

After some time had passed, I could feel an overall sense of nervousness in the air. It wasn't just me anymore. We were <sup>all growing tense</sup> waiting on ~~someone~~ <sup>for</sup> ~~it seemed. Someone~~ <sup>mystery</sup> who was ~~our~~ guest speaker and they had not showed up yet. It couldn't be Anthony Rivera could it? Finally a woman <sup>woman</sup> with a slim stack of papers <sup>a</sup> rushed over to our table. She was skewer stick of a ~~female~~ <sup>woman</sup> with short feathered frosted hair, large eyes and ~~one~~ very sharp pointed nose. She put her papers down on the table across from me and shook hands with the **People** playwright, and hugged the orchestra leader with bad breath. They were obviously friends, or at least colleagues. As she seated herself she looked over my way and smiled. I smiled back and then I <sup>told</sup> ~~heard her~~ <sup>told</sup> the server, "Just coffee," as she pushed aside her plate of wilted spinach salad and looked over her papers. She was obviously our honored guest speaker.

And then she kept looking around. That nervous kind of observation, like when you're at a party and you don't know anyone, so you keep looking for a familiar face to come rescue you ~~from solitary~~. Or, like when you're at a party and you're already talking to a person you know and you're pretty comfortable with that person, but you're actually pretty bored so you keep looking over that boring person's shoulder, hoping you'll find spot someone cooler to talk with. Oh, <sup>like</sup> ~~am~~ <sup>I'm</sup> the only one who does that?

~~Never mind~~

Anyway, that's what this woman was doing and I could <sup>feel</sup> ~~feel~~ she was uptight. I mean, she drank her coffee ~~straight up~~ <sup>straight up</sup> black and her eyes were wide and ~~inquisitive~~ <sup>startled-looking</sup>. Then the rubbing started. First a few swipes at the tip of her nose, then she brushed under it, left to right, right to left, quickly so no one would notice. She took another dainty sip from her coffee cup.

At first I figured that maybe she thought she had something hanging from the inside her nose and I really did I feel for her. I know what's it like being in public with a feeling that something's clinging from the inside and that you really can't do anything about it. She kept playing with the tip of her nose and then I realized why she was really doing all that little swiping. Not for fear of booger, not for concern of dried post nasal drip, but for fear of residue, blow residue. You know, coke, cocaine, the evil white powder. Of course! That's why she was so nervous and that's why she was so skinny and **that's** why she was so late. She was in the bathroom doing lines. Oh, God, I looked around, could anyone else detect her secret?

I immediately thought that I shouldn't be at the same table with her. What if someone snaps a picture of us? What if the TV camera picks her up as my dinner companion? She could be bad for my aspiring role model reputation. I thought of my father, who always said you may not have money, you may not have fame, but you always have your credibility, and here this woman might very well destroy my drug-free, just say no credibility. She might discredit my future of P.S.A's. or the back of page of **Latina Magazine** just because of her little socio economic problem. The Chicana Poet in Ross and the Coke Head in Chanel. Oh dear, I definitely had to sit at another table. Before I knew it a bright white spot light lit up our rainbow roundtable. Oh, God, I was gonna be seen on national TV with this woman! She smiled directly into the cameras and made her way up to the stage and waited for a second introduction to the podium.

As the applause echoed in the banquet hall I realized once the woman was done with her speech the camera would surely follow her back to the table. I looked around and saw J.T.'s table was filled up and that in fact every seat in the hall was



taken. I began to feel more and more uncomfortable. There was no other place to sit. I finally pushed myself away from the table and decided just to leave the dinner altogether!

I felt another tap on my shoulder. It was Julie again. "Michele, wait. I really think you should meet Cokey."

"Cokey?"

"Our guest speaker. She's a writer too. A journalist."

Cokey? Oh my God. Did Julie have no discretion?

"I think she'd be a great connection for you," she continued.

Connection?! What, did Julie think I did drugs? Coke? Do I have that look?

Did Julie think that all ethnic minorities are on the search for better drug connections?

"Look Julie, I don't need that type of connection, we have <sup>that</sup> our in *the barrio*!"

"Excuse me?" Julie asked, confused.

I held the side of my stomach. "Look Julie. My stomach hurts. I think it's my cyst. I think it's acting up."

"Oh dear, can I get help for you?"

I shook my head and just got away from her as fast as I could.

The next morning <sup>was frantic</sup> with noon time check outs and <sup>#</sup> frantic shuttle bus schedules, <sup>and</sup> I didn't get a chance to tell Julie and, unfortunately, J.T., good bye. And during the whole five-hour flight home I thought of the conference and all the topics discussed and especially the guest speaker. I guess it didn't matter what class or race one may be, we all have our faults and problems. That woman had her own issues to deal with. Was I more critical because she was the honored guest speaker at a seemingly prestigious conference? Was I more surprised because she was wearing designer clothing and appeared <sup>?</sup> <sup>?</sup>

And I almost forgot about that woman, the guest speaker who flicked her nose nervously, until one night, a few months later, I'm watching TV with Angela. We finally



scrounged up enough money to get the TV fixed. It'd be a while before we could ever afford cable and subscribe to America's Number One Women's Television Network, but we were watching some late night news program, and then I saw her. The woman. She was actually featured on a live segment that was just ending.

"Oh my God!" I slapped Angela's leg. "I had dinner with that woman! She was at that conference I went to in Washington."

"You're kidding me," Angela said. "You met her? Man, you really did hang with the high rollers."

"What do you mean? You know of her?"

"Know her? Of course. Who doesn't know her?" Angela said as she turned up the volume. "Now, *she* would have been a great contact for someone like you."

"... *Reporting from the White House, this is Cokie Roberts, special correspondent.*"

DEB/CMP:

Footnote  
for page  
130

\*This isn't really considered fraud, and don't be thinking it's "ghetto." It's simply a woman's prerogative to change her mind, especially about clothing. Besides it didn't have one of those "This is a special occasion item!" tag attached to it.

## 10:15 AM: Do You Know Where Your Hispanic Role Model Is?

Fifteen after ten. Ten minutes and already all those kids, brown kids, inner-city low-income underprivileged children of underrepresented ethnic minorities have been waiting in a cafeteria. Waiting for me, their woman, brown woman, suburban raised, low on income, low on gas, from an underrepresented ethnic minority. And here I am late, again.

God, why didn't I check Angela's Thomas Brother's Guide last night? Why didn't I make sure I had enough gas in my tank *yesterday?* All these unplanned stops and pull overs make me late. And why, why did I have to make what I thought was gonna be a quick stop at Lupe's Panaderia for that cafe con leche? Okay, okay so it wasn't a Pandora. It was actually a Starbucks and I got me a Frappuccino. Gotta make sure I ditch the cup before I enter Bell Gardens. Don't wanna cross contaminate, as Alex says. Uppity Westside trash belongs on the uppity Westside.

If I had done all this and skipped all that I would've already been there. Been on that pull-out stage from the cafeteria wall, reading the paper-clipped pages I've been reading for the past two years now, re-telling the same jokes, recounting the same memories ". . . *and then my English teacher told me, 'you could never be a writer* ' . . . "

But instead I am God knows where, ten minutes late and . . . shit, which way is north? Stephanie Kendall's directions say head north. Okay, where's the sun? No, that means west, or is that just during the day? Aaah, here we go  $\frac{1}{m}$  North. Okay now make a left.  $\searrow$  Into main parking lot after passing Pollo Loco  $\searrow$  Main parking lot, where are you? Okay. There ya are.  $\searrow$  Check in with Main office.  $\searrow$  Easy, two minutes max. Here are I come you lucky kids!



"Now, *who* are you supposed to see?" A short woman in the school's main office asks a second time.

"Stephanie Kendall and I'm supposed to be in the cafeteria **right** now. I'm speaking today and I'm already fifteen minutes late . . . Can't I just leave my driver's license with you?"

"No," she pauses slowly. "I'm afraid not. We have regulations. No one can enter the school grounds unless they're on the list. Kendall? Is that with a K? I don't see anything here. Larry," she turns to a kid at a typewriter behind her, "Larry, do you know a teacher by the name of Kendall? No, you don't?"

She turns back to me. "I just don't know. This is so odd. What grade does she teach?"

"Fifth. Fifth grade. Look, I really need to start my presentation. Is there anyone else you can ask?"

"Well, no wonder!" The woman looked up at me. "If you would've told me that in the very beginning this whole mystery would've been solved. Did you hear that Larry? <sup>No</sup>~~Know~~ wonder we don't know any Kendall."

Okay, now I'm gonna go crazy. She knows something. Even Larry the student helper knows something. But me? I know nada. Let me in on your little secret, **please!**

"See," she explains. "This is Roosevelt **Intermediate**. You're looking for Roosevelt Elementary. What you need to do is . . ."

But I'm not listening anymore. I'm outta there. Running out of the office, down the hall, bumping into millions of cha-chas tittering on their super high platforms and knocking their super shiny vinyl mini backpacks that hang off their shoulders. ~~I mean~~ I'm speeding so fast I can barely feel the barks of the hall monitor nip at my heels.

"Hey, slow down!" he yells after me. But **he's** too slow. I'm already in my car, out of the main gate and heading onto Atlantic Boulevard, driving back down the main street. Where is that main parking lot? I see Pollo Loco, again. I'm back where I started from. Shit, I should've waited, should've listened to what that lady was saying. Main parking lot . . . main parking lot. Where is . . . Ah, right there! And there's this big

kid with a shaved head, standing out front, flagging me down. *Yes, I see you.* I pull into the parking lot and he runs after my car.

"You're late!" he breathes heavily from his short run.

Dang, they start young.

"I know, I know. Here, can you help me with this?" I hand him a folder and a large bottle of water. "Has everyone been waiting long?"

"Oh yeah, we didn't think you were gonna show up. Mrs. Kendall is inside reciting your stuff to everyone."

"My stuff? You mean my stories?"

"Yeah, you wrote about the old lady and her owl, didn't you?"

"No, that's not me."

"Are you the one who lives in the purple house?"

"No, that's not me either."

"Well hey, I'll take you to the cafeteria, anyway."

We're rush down another hallway when I see a sign.

"Is this the cafeteria?" I ask.

"Yeah, but go in through there." He points to a double door.

I enter through the doors and they bang shut behind me. I'm at the back of the cafeteria and all these little kids turn around. A hundred brown faces steaming pink from the mid morning heat and there, on the stage, in my spot behind the podium, reciting one of my poems, is Stephanie Kendall. She smiles and waves not one, but both hands enthusiastically over her head.

"Oh, you made it!" she calls out. "We were so worried we gave you the wrong directions. Did we? Did we give you the wrong directions?"

*Hey, there's an idea.*

"Well," I start slowly. "I didn't discover they were wrong till I was already way past Hayes Street and then I had to pull over and ask someone at a gas station."

"Oh, dear, I feel horrible."

"Well, it happens. I just hate to keep the kids waiting." I walk to the stage and start to set my papers on the podium. The whole cafeteria is so much noisier now; paper rustling, binder rings snapping, and whispers, the kind of whispers that reek of judgment. It still gets to me. I know I should have dressed cooler.

"Oh, yes, of course. " She pushes her long bangs out of her face and walks down the stage. "I mean, of course not. Well, let's get you started. I was just reciting to the kids, you know, to prep them. They're very excited."

"Great."

"I'd like to introduce you, if you don't mind."

"Sure, I'm still setting up." I continue to arrange some note cards and my folder full of papers.

"Okay, children," Stephanie Kendall struggles to get their attention. "Shhhh . . . children! Luz, put the candy away now. There'll be no chocolate bars sold during this presentation. Okay, children. Listen up NOW! We have a very, very special guest, someone who drove a long way from the Westside to be with us here today. Children, we have with us today a writer, a poet, a Mexican American writer who has overcome many obstacles in her life to get where she is today. I myself saw her read her poetry at a coffeehouse and well, what I was reciting to you was what I remember her reading. And that's why I've asked her here for Hispanic Heritage Month. She is a role model for you all. She is of your community. Marcel! **Cajete** now! As I was saying, children, she is a role model not just for Mexican American children, but for all Hispanic children, children from Guatemala, from El Salvador, from . . . oh, you're ready? Okay, without any further delay, I present Michele Serros!"

And I stand there, behind the podium, smiling, while five million kids, okay, maybe a hundred and fifty, brown kids, inner city . . . well, you know, are waiting for me to start my talk. And my mouth starts to move and the words come out, the same words I've been repeating at least eight times a month; during extended lunches, after work,



before school, on my few days off and of all things, I <sup>still</sup> have to go and remember what Monica told me.

"Only loser artists still speak at schools," she said. And while she's up in Washington state leading a women's writing workshop in the countryside enjoying the scent of jasmine and pine, I'm here, off the 710 freeway inhaling manure from the nearby Bandini plant and all the exhaust belched from every two ton that roars by. Here again, in front of a cafeteria filled with elementary students, kids who could care less, seeing me only as a day's delay before their next math quiz. I read, talk, recount stories that are meant to inspire, entertain, educate. Personal conquests, and the whole time I'm talking, reading these so-called heart-felt words from my soul, there are other more important issues that cloud my mind.

*Ricky Martin isn't gay, is he? CeCe told me he was, but he can't be, can he? I mean, I was never into Menudo, or General Hospital but he's sure looking fine these days. I'd hate to fantasize about someone who could never really would be into me. And that's important to me, that a guy is into me. If he is, gay that is, maybe I should start thinking about Joey Lawrence. They sorta look alike, don't they? But what's more acceptable in fantasy land, a gay brown boy or a white straight boy? Oh, the politics of the imagination.*

Where am I ? Okay, okay still here, middle of the story. How could I possibly drift in and out like this? I need to stay focused. FOCUS! Did anyone notice? Good, looks like everyone is still paying attention. What's with that skinny kid and his back pack? I know I should've asked everyone to put their binders and backpacks under the seats before I started. God, I hate playing the disciplinarian. I'm the guest. I'm the role model. *I'm* the one giving back to my community and I don't want to put up with this shit. God, the kid with his backpack is really ruining this for me. Why can't he just pay attention to my story?!!

*10 more minutes to go. I wonder if I stopped reading now if the other teachers would notice. Only Stephanie Kendall knows for how long I was gonna read. Maybe*

*my being late threw her off. Can I do a Q & A with 5th graders? Shit. They're getting antsy. What's with that teacher in the front row? Why is she twitching like that? Does she have to go to the bathroom? Go already! Okay. this is gonna be the last story and then I can start some kind of game. What kind of game? Game, game, game, something fun for 5th graders, something has to come to me.*

I finish my story and turn over the paper that I was reading from. No applause, just a painful silence.

"And that's the end of that story." I let the cafeteria know that I'm done.

"Aren't you going to read again?" A voice in the back asks. It sounds old, a teacher's. "According to the schedule, you still have ten minutes."

"Well, I wanted to set some time aside for open dialogue."

Complete quiet. I hear another two ton roar by.

"I mean, questions and answers," I explain.

More silence. This little girl, a flacita, whispers to her friend and they both laugh. What are they laughing at? Are they laughing at me? I didn't say anything funny. What's so funny?

"Well," I try to ignore them. "What I want to do is, uh, talk a little about what it is like to be writer. Does anyone have any questions?"

More silence followed by sounds of binder rings snapping.

"No? Well, uh, I had this game in mind that I think would be fun to play. It will involve everyone and it's like a word game and sometimes when I am alone I . . ." I start shifting around the papers on the podium. I look at the clock over the flag. I smile at Mrs. Kendall. I look at the clock again. *Help me. Damn it!*

All of a sudden . . . the bell! Oh yes! That glorious sound, that savior from failure. I can't believe what it still represents to me, even years after graduating from grade school. The bell. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

"Okay, kids. Kids, before you leave for recess," Mrs. Kendall takes over, "we need to thank Miss Serros for coming here today. She is a writer. A Mexican

American writer and everything in her life has been a struggle for her. My class, I want everyone to line up and give her a high five."

"But Mrs. Kendall, it's already recess!"

"No! You will get in line and high five her. Everyone, now! Two lines <sup>1</sup>/<sub>m</sub> boys here, girls over here."

"But Mrs. Kendall!"

"No!" she screams. "Get in line and high five her, NOW!"

And while the rest of the cafeteria runs out onto the playground, Mrs. Kendall's class lines up to grant me high fives. Now, everybody knows that high fives are a gesture denoting excitement or achievement, shared by enthusiastic participating parties. But what I get are sweaty fifth <sup>1</sup>/<sub>grade</sub>, germ <sup>1</sup>/<sub>infested</sub> hostile swaps. Sharp stinging slaps across the ~~my own~~ palm <sup>1</sup>/<sub>hard</sub>, angry, defiant. "It's because of YOU, Miss Mexican American writer," these hi fives accuse, "that we're gonna be late for recess! It is because of YOU I don't get dibs on the tether ball! Thanks a lot, Miss Struggling Mexican American Writer!"

I smile at each child and I switch my hands every so often to lessen the pain and break up the monotony. Thirty two pairs of hands wait impatiently in line to smack my own and finally, after the seemingly long five minute formality, the last kid slaps his small brown fingers across my hand and races out.

Mrs. Kendall approaches me. "Well," she exhales. "That was nice. But, I don't understand. They're usually so excited about visitors. I mean, usually they don't even want to leave for recess. They just want to be *near* a guest speaker."

**Thanks a lot.** I start to collect my things from the podium.

"Do you know Eva Perez, the Peruvian poet?" she asks.

"I've never heard of her."

"Really? She's Hispanic."

"Yeah, well."

"She was such a hit just last week. The kids just loved her."

"Great."

"I mean, I've been teaching here for eight years and I've never witnessed anything like when Eva Perez visited. Some of the sixth graders even started a fan club for her."

"That's wonderful."

"Yes," Stephanie Kendall laughed. "She's quite a woman. She's really great with kids."

*Oh, and I'm not ?* "Well, they're really wonderful kids," I tell her. "So attentive. I'd love to come back." *Yeah, right.*

"Say," she looks at her watch. "Would you like to stay for lunch? We always have our guest speakers eat in the teachers' lounge and I'd love you to meet some of the other teachers."

What's this? The teachers' lounge? During my entire twelve-year tenure of public education I've taken only mere peeks of the teacher's lounge. One time in the eleventh grade, when I was on my way to the library, I saw Father Sanders loosen his collar and light up a cigarette that was *on a holder*, and another time, in the seventh grade over at Rio Del Valle Junior High, I caught Ol' Lady Oily Hair, our home economics teacher, eating Spaghetti-O's out of the can. And it wasn't even heated! Can you believe that? I should've demanded a recall on the C+ she gave me! More than anything I wanted the inside edition of the teachers lounge, to kick it with the academic heads, but to experience it with Stephanie Kendall? No way.

"Oh, that really sounds so pleasant," I tell her. "But I really should get to work. I work way over in Santa Monica and I don't wanna be late. That's one thing that's important to me <sup>in</sup> being on time."

"Should you make a call?"

"Nah," I wave my hand ~~aside~~. "They're pretty flexible. Besides, my boss knows that right now writing is my main focus."



"Uh-huh." She isn't really paying attention anymore. "Well, that's a shame," she says. "I really wanted you to meet the other teachers and I wanted to talk about some of your stories. I have some suggestions."

"Suggestions?"

"Yeah, just a few minor improvements." You know, in college I majored in English with an emphasis in Latin American Policy."

"Well, I'm not ~~from~~ Latin American."

"Oh, that's right. I guess I'm still thinking of Eva Perez. Well, I can at least walk you to your car."

My car suddenly couldn't seem ~~more~~ farther away and while we cross the field of empty metal fold<sup>up</sup> chairs in the cafeteria, all I can think about was how evil Stephanie Kendall is. How can she be talking to me this way? Doesn't she know I ~~that~~ know I sucked? Doesn't she know I would feel shitty knowing how popular another poet was with her students? I immediately hate Stephanie Kendall. I damn her to a life of cafeteria poetry readings and call for the powers that be to create south-east winds via the Bandini manure plant. There is nothing Stephanie Kendall can say or do to make up for her evil. Just then a smell hits me and no, it's not from the Bandini plant.

"Wow," I sniff the air. "Is that coming from the kitchen? Is that what I think it is?"

"Yes, it is," she brags in a sing<sup>g</sup> song type of way.

"Seriously?" I ask her. "Is that what the<sup>re</sup> serving today? I mean, it's not someone's lunch they're heating up for themselves in the microwave, is it?"

"Oh no, we have it every Tuesday," she promised. "Sometimes we have so much of it, they serve it again on Wednesday."

"Well," I check my own watch. "I guess I can be little bit late to work. I mean, a person has to eat."

Suddenly my getting to work on time didn't matter. My being late to Roosevelt Elementary didn't matter and my presenting a sucky poetry reading wasn't such a big



deal. I guess sitting down with Stephanie Kendall, fifth grade elementary school teacher with a degree in Latin American Policy, isn't gonna be the end of the world. The only thing on my mind is that I indulge in my favorite dishes, one that my own wonderful Mexican mother often served: chicken pot pie. But this is chicken pot pie, *cafeteria style*. Nothing, absolutely nothing, can be better. It's been years~~/~~since I've savored the tiny bits of super moist, extra salty chicken chunks in a thick yellow gravy bubbling out of a cracked crust burnt by a white<sup>clad</sup>, hairnetted cafeteria kitchen staff.

"Great!" Stephanie Kendall links arms with me. "I'm so happy you can eat with us." She leads me towards the aroma and into the teacher's lounge.

"Hey," I ask her. "Did Eva Perez visit on a Tuesday?"

"Actually, if my memory serves me right, I think she came on, wait let me see, she came on a Monday morning. Yes, it was a Monday now that I think of it."

"What does the cafeteria serve on Monday?"

"Green Bean Casserole and tuna fish salad, why?"

"Oh, nothing, I smiled~~/~~smugly to myself as I <sup>take</sup>took a plastic tray from their<sup>l</sup> stack.

DES: Footnote for page 139 { \*As a role model, even if you have only a few things to say make sure you cram a stack of papers into one folder. This gives the impression of importance and an over prepared presentation

## Christmas Bonus

"Happy Holidays! Chavez residence."

"Hi, this is Michele Serros calling for Doctor Ernesto Chavez? Is he available?"

"Doctor Chavez is spending the Christmas holiday in Hawaii with his family.

This is his housekeeper. May I take a message?"

"Do you know when he'll be back? I really need to talk to him."

"I believe sometime after January 2nd, but then he's off to Miami to meet with the Cuban Cubic Zirconia Committee.

Well . . . will you ask him to please call me?"

"Sure, Feliz Navidad!."

## Counter Productive

"You're over an hour late!"

"<sup>What</sup>Two hours?" I put my back pack in my locker. "Dan, I'm scheduled for two o'clock."

"No, you were supposed to be here at one. Not five after two. You have customers waiting and Janson called. His order's all wrong and he's PISSED. Why didn't you call?"

Dan's always on my case. On my back, checking the little hand on the time clock, recounting the minutes on my time card. Only two weeks out of the year do I breathe easy, feel my spine go straight and experience an all<sup>over</sup>around calmness. Two weeks when Dan goes on his vacation, back home to Illinois.

"I didn't call 'cause I didn't think I needed to," I tell him. "Dan, I am scheduled for two. If I should've called for being five minutes **tar-dee** after my scheduled time, then I'm sorry. I couldn't find parking." I could never tell Dan the truth, that I had a mid<sup>1</sup>morning poetry reading at Roosevelt Elementary way out in Cudahy, miles and attitude away from Santa Monica. I could never explain that I decided<sup>1</sup>last minute<sup>1</sup>to break pie, chicken pot pie that is, with a roundtable of elementary school teachers to discuss Latin American Policy and how to keep chalk prints off your ass.

"Where do you have this idea you were scheduled for two?"

"Dank it's not an idea, it's a fact." I pull my wrinkled smock out from the locker. "I told Laura I was coming in at two. I told her three weeks ago in writing. I had to get my cyst removed."

"Your what?"

"My cyst." I pull my smock over my head and pull my hair<sup>from</sup><sup>out</sup>under it. I scrunch my face to make myself look in pain. "At first I thought I had hurt myself from work, with all the heavy lifting and everything. But it turned out to be a cyst. The doctor found it right on my ovaries and . . ."

"Ugh," Dan grimaces. "I don't need the details."

"I thought you wanted to know what happened to me. Like I told Laura, I needed <sup>have</sup> to ~~remove~~ my cyst, <sup>removed</sup> or else I coulda had some major complications. Ask Laura, she knows about the whole schedule change."

"Laura's on vacation."

"Oh, she is? Oh, yeah, that's right. " Of course I knew that. Vacationing supervisors always give good excuse. They're never around to confirm schedule changes and by the time they get back from where ever they were, they're in such a revitalized mood, with their tans and their little snow domes that they place right on their desk <sup>that</sup> to show everyone where they've been. They'll agree to anything. "Well, I don't know what to say," I continue with Dan. "Cept I'm sorry for being, what, five minutes late. I just better get down there and help Artie."

"Can you work?" Dan asks. "What about your cyst?"

"Dan, weren't you listening to what I just said? I don't have it anymore. I guess I could've rested at home but I didn't want to let Artie down. He goes crazy when he has to wait on customers. I better get down there."

When I get to my department no one is even around. Not one customer like Dan claimed to have seen waiting. <sup>Artie</sup> ~~Artie~~ is in the back cutting a small yellow mat at the mat cutter.

"What happened to you?" He puts the mat down, takes off his glasses and starts cleaning them. "I need to eat."

"Nothing happened to me, <sup>Artie</sup> ~~Artie~~. This is the time I was suppose <sup>cd</sup> to come in." I don't speak directly at him but instead talk to my reflection in the mirror above the department's phone.

"The schedule says one o'clock." He doesn't let up. "I haven't been to lunch and I've been waiting for over an hour for you to relieve me."

"So go." I look at him from the mirror. "What are you waiting for? I'll watch the counter."

I check my hair out in the small mirror above the phone and start fixing my barrettes. Bangs or no bangs? God, it drives me crazy.

"Did you hear me?"

~~I didn't even know Artie's still talking to me.~~ "No, what?" I ask him.

~~"I said, I'll be back in a half hour."~~ He takes off his smock and makes his way past me.

Of course, he won't be back in half an hour. It will be back in twenty nine and a half minutes. Old people are either on time or way early and even though <sup>Artie</sup> ~~Artie~~ can never finish his lunch on time <sup>when</sup> ~~the~~ big ass seven course lunches his wife makes him, he'll be back exactly like he says he will. Old people never lie.

As soon as he bails I go to the front counter and grab the service bell. We've had the service bell for only four months. Dan brought it to our department the day after Thanksgiving. He was so convinced we'd be more efficient with it. He said if we didn't wanna hear the bell, all we had to do was stay on our toes. "The bell shouldn't go off more than ~~the~~ once by the same customer." Dan insisted. The bell was an asset to our department. The bell would regulate fine service. The bell is our best friend. I toss our best friend into a small box filled with Styrofoam shipping peanuts and begin to call Angela at home.

I'm thrown off by her voice on the machine. *Hey, you've reached Angie and Michele. We're not home right now. If this is Hardy, hey, I need directions for tonight. I won't be home till almost nine so I'll be able to make it downtown by ten. If you want, come on by and meet me here. I'll leave a key under the duck, the little duck, not the big one. Okay? Or you can call me at work. Or if you want, you can . . . BEEP*

What's this about? She changed my outgoing message? I check the counter again and see only <sup>one</sup> ~~some~~ woman looking at the mat samples. Cool. I dial Angela's work number.

After punching in all the extension codes I finally get Angela.

"Small purchases, this is Angie, may I help you?"



"Angela, it's me. What's up with the new outgoing message? Why did you take mine off?"

"Oh, I had to leave Hardy a message."

Yeah, and everyone else who calls. Angela, you don't leave messages on the machine telling people where you put the house key."

"Well, if they're calling, they gotta be friends. And if they're strangers, then they don't know where we live."

"Can you help me?" I look up and see the same woman at the counter. I nod at her, turn my back away from the counter and keep talking to Angela.

"So where you going tonight?"

"Oh, just this party. Bobby G. is in from school and Linda Moore is gonna have a little thing for him. No big deal. "

"Oh, I know Bobby. He's funny." *Invite me, ask me to go.*

"Yeah," she stretches. "He sure is. I can't wait to see him."

"So, hey, I had this great reading today."

"Really, where was it at?"

"Sorta by South Central." *Sounds street, that'll impress her.* *ital.*

"South Central?" she asks suspiciously. "Where in South Central?"

"Just this space. It was sorta an academic crowd." She didn't need to know exact details.

"Did they pay you?"

"Well, they took me to lunch. . . " *Just the teachers' lounge, but still they asked me to join them.* *ital.*

Suddenly I hear Dan's voice. "Let me get someone for you ma'am. Michele, will you help this customer?"

I hang up quickly with Angela and go to the counter. I see the same woman there. "Oh, I'm sorry," I tell her. "I thought you were still deciding on colors."

She throws me a look like she knows what I'm about and then Dan throws me a look like he's gonna deal with me later.

"I bought this in Egypt." The woman explains as she flattens out a papyrus piece on the counter. It's an imprint of two skinny pharaohs and some even skinnier looking dogs at their feet. "It's very fragile," she tells me. "Have you ever worked with papyrus before?"

"Oh, yes," I clear away the mat samples left behind from the last customer. What did she think? I mean, they sell this papyrus shit all over the boardwalk, stacks of them they can't rid of, and what does she mean, "I bought this in Egypt?" "Okay lady, so you've traveled."

"I want a thick black lacquer frame for it. Everything in my house is white with black lacquer." She squints her eyes and holds the papyrus piece with a corner frame sample up and away from her.

Claudia, the other girl who works mornings, told me when I first started working at Alexander's that Blacks always want lacquer frames. "Then you got your whites," Claudia explained. "They like beech wood, all that white washed shit." She pointed to the samples on the wall as if she was a tour guide or something. "They always want that Southwest look for their Palm Springs pad. But the Mexicans," and she placed her hand on her chest as if she was bragging or something. "Well, we like gold wood."

I took the last preference as a note of achievement. Everyone knows that gold is the best. Gold wood frames are the most expensive and the most difficult to join at the corners. Only Mexicans are savvy enough to recognize its value. "Look at this one," she held up a corner sample of a ornate gold leafed wood molding. It looked like a knick knack straight from the Vatican gift shop or the master bathroom at Tia Annie's house. "I got this frame," she said. "And, check it out, for a 24 by 36, I got it *half* off. I framed a picture of the *virgen* in it for my mom. Are you into the *virgen*?"

"Uh, yeah. Of course," I answered. How do you answer question like that? I mean, if you're "into" a saint? She smiled and her gold tooth showed. We've been pals ever since.

After three years at Alexander's I'm beginning to think that Claudia is right. Or is it just a coinky-dink that here's another Black woman wanting a black lacquer frame for her home?

"What do you think of this one?" She shows me a thinner version of the same frame.

"Yeah, that one's nice." Come on lady, I'm not working on commission. Who cares what I think?

"Well, let me see what my sister thinks." She looks around. "Oh, do you have a bathroom?"

"Yeah, you need to get the key from the back register."

When she leaves the counter I go back to the phone and start to re-dial Angela's number.

"What do you think you're doing?"

I don't even have to look up. It's Dan, again.

"I'm calling up orders," I tell him.

He looks around the counter. "Where's the bell that's suppose to be out here?"

"It should be out here," I hang up the receiver, "I could swear I saw it earlier."

"That lady had been waiting over ten minutes for you to help her."

"But Dan, I was calling up orders."

"Even if you're on the phone calling up orders, as soon as you hear the bell, you're to get off the phone **promptly** and service the customer who's at the counter. You do not keep them waiting!"

"Dan, I know, I thought she was still looking at samples. I greeted her when she first came to the counter."

"No you didn't. I saw your back towards her the whole time. Michele, don't argue with me. I was at register four watching the whole thing. That bell needs to be on the counter at all times."

I start to shift things around on the counter, helping him look for the bell.

"Maybe <sup>Arht</sup> ~~Aria~~ accidentally moved it," I say. "Lemme check in the back."

I pretend to look for it on the back table when Dan calls out to me again.

"Michele, you got another customer."

Man, I am not *even* in the mood for this!

I walk out and it's Nikki Chase standing there on the other side of the counter. Shit, I'd much rather deal with the woman and her stupid ass papyrus.

"Hey, What a surprise!" She actually looks more shocked than surprised. "I didn't know you worked here!"

"Oh hi, Nikki," I try to sound casual. "I didn't know you lived out this way."

"I don't," she answers. "I hate the Westside. I go to Loyola and I'm just between classes. My next class starts in a couple of hours. What about you? Where'd you end up transferring to?"

"I haven't transferred yet, really."

"Michele, are you serious?" She raises her eyebrows. "God, you were at SMC before / got there. Don't tell me you're becoming a professional junior college student!" She puts her hand over her mouth to cover her laugh.

"No, no. Nothing like that." I try to smile. "I'm transferring in the fall."

"You're always transferring 'in the fall.' Come on, how long have you been saying that?"

No, really I am. I'm going to school in New York." *Yes! Good one.*

Her tone becomes a little bit more serious. "Oh really? Where to?"

"Columbia," I answer. Just like that. My eye doesn't twitch, no skip in my voice. Nothing. Damn, I'm good.

"Columbia! You're . . . going to Columbia? I don't believe it. I mean, what are you studying?" She looks so astonished, so . . . so humbled. *Double yes.*

All that time I spent with Nikki in the math lab at SMC all she could talk about was Columbia. "I'll just die if I don't get into Columbia," she used to say. "I mean, I just *have* to live, study and *breath* Manhattan. I mean, west coast colleges can't even compare to what's going on with the east coast. I mean, they are so ahead." Then I'd answer with a fake yawn, "Yeah, about three hours, right?"

"Yeah, well I'm gonna be studying creative writing."

"Oh, that's right you want to be a writer. I mean, wow, you never mentioned anything about wanting to go to Columbia when we used to study together. That's really great, Michele. Wow, I'm really happy for you."

Any more 'wows'? And so what if I never mentioned it? People change their mind all the time. People make *new* plans. Please Nikki, just leave. I don't want to talk with you anymore.

"So, anyway, how funny *we* run into each other, huh? I had no idea you worked here."

"Just part time," I tell her. "I mean, whenever they need extra help. I'm sorta on call."

"Oh, how funny." Her eyes scan the wall of frame samples. "Ooh, that one's nice. How much would a frame cost for something like that in an eight by ten?"

"Which one?"

"That one, third from the left and the fourth down." She gets on her tippy toes to point out her selection across the counter.

"Oh, the white *washed* oak one?" I smile to myself and pull the sample from the wall.

"Oooh," she takes and looks at it closer. "My mother would *love* this."

"Does she have wood like this in her house?" I ask.



"Not really," Nikki answers. "But our condo in Palm Desert <sup>is</sup> it's filled with white, bleached wood like this."

Check out my girl/<sup>g</sup>Claudia! She really does know her shit!

"Well," I look up the frame in the price book. "For an eight by ten, it'll run you about thirty two bucks."

"Thirty two bucks?" She answers. "You gotta be kidding! And then there's the labor charge, right?"

"Exactly," I gloat. "That's another eight bucks." Don't even try to work a deal.

"Hmmm, I just don't know. I just came in looking for a little something for my mom. Then I thought a frame or something would be cute, but now I just don't know. What are you getting your mom?"

"My mom?"

"Yeah, for Mother's Day."

"Oh, yeah, that's right."

"Don't tell me you forgot about Mother's Day? Oh, God, Michele, nice daughter you are!"

And that's when it happens. It feel numb. My stomach begins to hurt. And all this petty superficial counter <sup>ch</sup>ch-chat Nikki and I just exchanged becomes meaningless. Non productive. Ol' Nikki Chase and her successful university transfer. Ol' Nikki Chase and her aspiring academic career at Loyola Marymount means jack 'cause right now, this minute I'm reminded of what she has and what I haven't. Something I haven't had for over twelve months. Something I can never have in my life again. Nikki Chase has a mother and I do not.

"Well, don't let me keep you from your work. You go back to what you were doing and I'm just gonna look around the store for something else. This frame's <sup>o</sup>just ain't gonna do it, money wise. But I'll come back to say bye before I leave."

Just then Artie returns back from lunch.

"How was the counter?" he asks me.

"Fine. No sales." I'm not paying attention and my stomach begins to hurt more.

"I have some left over chicken from lunch," Artie tells me as he starts to put on his smock. "You're welcome to have it later for your dinner break. It was my son's birthday so there's even some cake. You want it later tonight?"

If I know Artie's wife, it'll all be in a little Tupperware containers. And everything will be separated by food groups in their little plastic compartments and it will remind me of my mother, how she was a Tupperware lady and would sometimes put together my lunches for school. And how I would be so embarrassed 'cause I just wanted a regular type sandwich lunch in a regular brown bag. But nothing my mother did was regular, including the birthday cakes she got for me every year. But last year, she didn't buy me a birthday cake. She baked the cake from scratch and it was like eleven inches high with super sweet pink and orange frosting. And while it was carried out to the kitchen table, she just reclined on the living couch with her eyes partly closed and a throw blanket up to her chest. She watched from the living room while I blew out the candles and wished my wish. *Please, God, don't let this be the last birthday, don't let this be the final cake from her. Please just make her better, healthy again, and I promise, come October I will bake her a cake twice as high.* But I guess I must've told someone what I wished for, <sup>be</sup>cause she never did better and died three months, four days later.

Now, the thought of eating Artie's son's birthday cake made by his own mother is too unbearable. The side of my stomach begins to hurt more. While I put back the frame samples that Nikki had just looked at, I answer Artie. "Oh, no thank you, Artie, I really don't feel that great."

"Is it your cyst?" He asks.

"My cyst?"

"Yes, Dan mentioned that you had an operation. In your stomach? Are you in pain?"

"Yeah," I tell him. "Sometimes I'm in a lot of pain and I don't realize just how much pain until it hits me much later."

Role Model Rule Number 13:

Honor Thy Late Night Phone Calls From Abuelita

It was a mid-Saturday afternoon and I was on the couch with Gabby Mi'jo, *again*. Gabby Mi'jo and I were *always* on the couch. Locking lips, smacking hips, inhaling lengua. Fully clothed. We had yet to make the transition from living room to bedroom and it was driving me crazy.

"Aren't you getting tired of making out all the time?" I asked that afternoon.

"Why, are you?" he asked back.

"No, I just thought maybe you were."

"Why would I?"

"I just wanna make sure you're having fun."

"Isn't this fun for you?"

"I didn't say that. I just thought there might be something else you'd rather do."

"Like what? You wanna go to Tito's?" he suggested.

"No . . ."

"What, you want pizza?"

Gabby, never mind. I'm sorry I even brought it up."

"Brought *what* up?"



This is how the couch conversations went. So frustrating I'd just shove my tongue back in his mouth to stop the whole dialogue and we'd continue to make-out, neither one of us initiating anything further.

Gabby Mi'jo was far from being boyfriend material. He was carless, directionless, bought all his sneakers from Payless, but me? I could care less. So why would I spend hundreds of afternoons with him on my lumpy couch, fully clothed and sharing spit when I could've been, say, alphabetizing my records or picking the pills

off my angora sweater? Why? Because Gabby was a **fan**. How many woman can say that? I fantasized casual introductions at future social functions.

"This is my father George, my room mate Angela and, oh him? That's Gabby, he's my fan. For how long? Oh, I'd say for the last ten years of my career."

(4)

Gabby Mi'jo contacted me the way most fans do. Not by email, not by calling the publicist in New York, <sup>not</sup> ~~not~~ by sending a letter to my post office box, but by way of Grandma Sally. Grandma Sally is the lone female survivor of the family name. The family name that goes back to Mexico. Yes, **that** family name. While los privados in my family have opted for unlisted in the phone book and the women, well, they've gone hyphen or forfeited our paternal namesake for matrimonial assimilation, Grandma Sally is still a badge, bragging Serros; listed in the yellow pages alongside Grandpa Louie who's been dead for over 18 years. Gabby Mi'jo knew I was from Oxnard and on a whim called the first and only Serros he was given when he called directory assistance. That Serros was Grandma Sally. She didn't give him my number. She gave him my home address.

"Grandma," I later asked. "Why did you give this guy my home address? That's more unsafe than giving out a phone number. Please, don't do it again."

"Oh, but he sounded so nice," she asserted.

"Nice? Grandma, now how could you tell that?"

"He sounded Mexican?"

(4)

When I finally got Gabby Mi'jo's letter, I opened it anxiously. It wasn't every day I got fan mail and his looked adorable. Sloppy handwriting on a black and white checkered envelope you just know he's had since the Eighties. Inside, the typical misspelling of my first name:

"Dear Michelle," the letter started. "You don't know me. My name is Gabriel Morales and I'm a sales associate at SuperCrown Books . . ."



The rest was a blur of words linked together, but what stood out was, "I'm your biggest fan." Hmmm . . . a fan, eh? You know what that means. Sex. *Easy sex.* Gabby included his phone number and I looked at the clock on my night stand. 11:30 PM. Well, he could've still been up. Is it rude to call someone you really don't know so late in the evening? Maybe. But he *was*, after all, a fan. He shouldn't mind. I immediately punched his number.

A woman answered the phone. *Shit.* Girlfriend? Wife? I was about to hang up but instead I found myself asking for him. The woman covered the mouthpiece and called out, "Gaaa-beeee! Meeee-ho!" It was obviously his mother. Could it be he . . . *still lived at home?* The volume on the TV in the background was loud and I could tell M\*A\*S\*H was just starting. God, I've always hated that song. She had to call out for him again, "Gaaa-beeee, Meeee-ho!"

"I'm so sorry," she apologized once she got back on the phone. "He just got home from work and he's got that stereo of his blasting. Here, let me go get him for you."

I imagined her walking down a wood paneled hallway covered with Sears family photos in thin cheap metal frames and maybe one of those cloth calendars depicting Columbus's discovery of America. Typical Mexican American interior design found in the homes of many of my own relatives. It was all so familiar and endearing to me.

I heard her call out again, "Gabby Mi'jo, someone's on the phone for you. I don't know. A girl." It was then I fell hard for this Gabriel Morales. The fan I hadn't even met. Could it get any better?

"This is Gabby," he said once he got on the phone. His voice was nasally and after just five minutes of talking with him, I could detect the ten year age difference between us. This would be so wonderful, I thought. He was young, Mexican and a fan. Obviously it *did* get better. I was in heaven.

But as I found out, he just wouldn't do it. Sleep with me, that is. He dug couch action.

"Maybe we should just go get those tacos at Tito's," I suggested out of mere frustration.

"Aren't you having fun?" He pulled one of the pills from my angora sweater out of his mouth.

"It's just we've been doing the same thing for so long," I complained. "The same ol' thing, don't you wanna try something new?"

"What, you wanna try their enchiladas?"

I certainly didn't want to be the one to initiate that Gabby Mi'jo and I sleep together. I mean, I have my own pride, and suppose he tells people?

"Yeah, that poet chick was busting moves all over me, but I turned her ass down."

Que embarrassing!

It used to be a girl could simply say, "God, I'm sorta drunk" or "You think my boobs look bigger since I've started taking pill?" and that would be enough to make any guy unleash and unzip his inhibitions. So, what would it take to make someone like him, the ardent admirer, and someone like me, let's say, the fancied one, get a groove going?

Then I thought of it. Something he just couldn't resist. I re-read his letter to reassure myself. His words, "I'm your biggest fan" stuck out like a billboard ad. This would be cake. And just in time. The springs from the couch were leaving welts on my backside.

"You know," I whispered to Gabby Mi'jo the next afternoon we were together. "I wrote a poem."

"Hmmm, Mmmm," he answered softly.

I brushed the hair out of my face and lowered my eyes. "I wrote a poem," I repeated. "About you."

"About *me*?" He immediately pulled back and opened his eyes.

"Yeah," I whispered.

"What did you write?" He asked.

"You know, just how great you are."

He sat up. "Are you serious?"

"Hmmm, Mmmm . . ." I closed my eyes and kissed his ear.

"Can I see it?"

"Well, it needs some work."

"A poem about me," he looked up towards the ceiling. "Wow."

It had obviously made the impression I wanted.

"How many revisions have you done?"

Uh, so far? About eighteen." *Eighteen?*

"Eighteen?" he exclaimed. "Oh my God, you only did five revisions on Masa on La Mesa, and that won the Vikki Carr Creative Writing Competition!"

"How did you know that?"

"I read it on the internet. Man," he repeated. "You must be getting it ready for publication! Are you? Is my poem gonna be in your next book?"

I looked into his brown eyes and, oh God, were his lashes always so black and beautiful? I just couldn't let him down.

"Yeah, well, I was thinking about it," I lied.

~~And the more he asked these questions,~~ <sup>the</sup> more I panicked. The truth was I hadn't written a poem, a sentence, a word, anything about Gabby Mi'jo. But I just knew it would make him glow and he would be so excited that he would want to initiate sex with me.

"I mean, I want *it in*," I told him, trying to give him subliminal messages. "I've already told my editor about it."

"You told your editor? He started to unbutton his shirt. "About me?"

"Well, yeah," I purred.

"Oh, Michele," he moaned softly and brought his lips back to my neck. His fingers locked around mine and he took my hand <sup>and</sup> leading me to my bedroom.

**Finally.**

#

The next evening I got a call from Gabby Mi'jo. It was a little after 11 pm and he just got off work.

"Hey," he bragged. "I put your book on the staff recommendation shelf."

"Really? Oh Gabby, that's so sweet."

Yeah, I sorta got into a fight with my co-worker. He wanted to keep Tom Clancy on. But you know, I gotta take care of my baby."

This was twice as good!

"So, what did you do today?" he continued.

"Oh, I cut down old flyers for scrap paper and then . . . "

"Did you work on the poem?" he interrupted.

"Poem?"

"The poem you wrote for me."

"Oh, yeah, well, actually I looked it over."

"It's not one of those short Japanese poems is it?"

"You mean a Haiku?"

"Yeah. No wait, I take that back, I mean, I don't mind if it is. Really, I don't even know why I said that. I just wonder what you wrote.

"Oh, you're gonna like it."

So, when can I see it?"

"Gabby, it's not that simple. I mean, sometimes I get nervous sharing some of my work. 'specially pieces that are so personal."

"It's personal? How personal? Oh, hey, my mom wants to watch M\*A\*S\*H and the phone doesn't reach into the other room. Hey, I'll stop by your house tomorrow before I go into work ."



I've always felt like a loser laying around in bed in the mid afternoon, but with Gabby Mi'jo it was so different. It was 3PM and we were still under the covers looking up at the ceiling. I had an after<sup>l</sup>sex snack on my mind when he asked, "So, what did you write about me?"

"Whadda mean?" I looked over at him.

"In my poem. What did you say?"

"Oh, you know . . ." my voice trailed off. What could I say? I didn't even know.

"I feel like . . ." Gabby Mi'jo started. "What's it called when someone or something makes an artist think of something?"

"A source of inspiration?"

"No, that word, it sounds like mucus."

"Muse?"

"Yeah, that's it. So am I, like, your muse?" He smiled slowly and his chipped tooth poked through.

"You know," I smiled back. "I think you are."

"And I think," he said<sup>u</sup> pulling the covers over him and getting on top of me, "that I can be late for work."



I never had so much of Gabby Mi'jo that month. Why hadn't I thought of the poem thing earlier? Talk of the poem worked like foreplay.

"So have you picked out a title?" he whispered.

"Sorta," I whispered back.

"That's usually the hardest part, huh? Coming up with a title."

"Hmmm, Mmmm," I agreed<sup>u</sup> unzipping his Painter pants. "It's *very* hard."



"So, how many stanzas are in it?" he moaned.

"So far six."

Six? My, that's a lot of words for little ol' me."

"You're far from little, *Gabriel*."

But by the third month the honeymoon was over. Gabby Mi'jo didn't want to have sex with me till he saw the poem.

"I don't think you really wrote a poem about me," he snapped suspiciously.

"Gabby, of course I did. Why would I tell you that?"

"I dunno, I just think it's weird that's its been over two months and I haven't seen this poem."

"Oh Gabby, wouldn't you rather wait and see it published? Won't that be better, more fun?" I started to undo his belt buckle.

"So when is this book coming out?"

"Around late 2001."

He pushed my hand away. "I gotta go."

"Gabby, baby, wait. What's up?"

"Nothing," he fastened his belt buckle. "It's just that my mom's making frito pie tonight and I'm already late for dinner."

I *had* to write the poem. Any poem. But what could I possibly write? What could I possibly say about Gabby Mi'jo? He was making it all so difficult, making such a production out of nothing. Men, they always gotta have their little dance of courtship.

I spent the following week at my computer trying to come up with something. His looks, his voice, the cute little mature way he answers the phone at work,

"SuperCrown Books. This is Gabriel speaking. How can I help you?" *Sigh*

Something, anything would do, but nothing was coming to me. I rhymed, did exercises. Gabby, fabby. . . cabby. . . ugh. I went to the library\* to search for

inspiration. Finally, in the foreign literature section, I found this one book. A hard cover book of poetry from the late '70s by this poet named Eva Perez. Her name sounded so familiar, but I just couldn't remember where I'd heard of her. Anyway, she was from the Peru and she had this short poem about some long distance lover. It was exactly six stanzas. It was perfect. It was beautiful. It would do the trick. I checked the book out, feeling smug that I could have her poem rewritten, a la me, by that evening, which meant I could have sex with Gabby Mi'jo's before his shift the next day. *ital.*

The next morning I looked over the Eva Perez poem. It was now restyled and retitled on a piece of my personal stationery with my signature. I called Gabby Mi'jo right away.

"You wanna come over later?" I asked.

"I dunno," he answered dryly. "My dad needs help in the garage."

"Well, when you're done maybe you can stop by. I wanna show you your poem. It's done."

"It is? I'll catch the number six right over."

Gabby Mi'jo was over in twenty-five minutes.

"So, can I see the poem?" He asked through the screen door.

"Dang, Gabby," I took his hand and let him in. "It's been so long since I've seen you. First let's have some fun. Mind if we just kick it in the bedroom for a while?"

"Well, okay. But then I wanna see the poem."

Twenty minutes later we were both looking up at the ceiling with the covers up to our chests. "You know Gabby," I started. "I'm thinking of using a different font just for your poem, different than the rest of the poems in the book."

I leaned over to my night stand, opened the drawer and pulled out the poem.

"Okay, now," I held the paper over my heart. "Be kind. I put a lot of time and emotion into this."

"Just let me see it already!" He laughed and grabbed the paper from me. He looked it over.

"So, when did you finish this?" <sup>h</sup>He asked.

"Oh Gabby baby," I stretched under the covers. "I don't think it'll ever be finished." I leaned over and kissed the side of his neck. "It's an on-going labor of love. I think the longer *we're* together, the longer the poem will ultimately be. The more intense *we* are, the more intense it will be. You know what I mean?"

He read it over again. "So, you wrote this?"

"Gabby, of course I wrote it." I pulled the covers closer to my face. "Oh, you're thinking 'cause my voice, the way I wrote it, is different from other things I've written?"

"I know what <sup>v</sup>voice <sup>v</sup>means," he snapped.

"But baby, it's just you're so unique and I had to go with what my muse gives me." I started twirling the hairs on his chest. "Don't you like it?"

"So, you obviously know who Eva Perez is," he asked.

"Eva who?" I answered in a confused tone.

He held up the poem and looked at me sideways. "Michele, this is her poem."

"What?"

"Come on, Michele, I work at SuperCrown. Or did you forget? This poem is an Eva Perez poem, you just moved a few words around."

"Gabby, what are you talking about?"

He got up from the bed and grabbed his pants from the floor. "You lied to me! You told me you wrote a poem about me, for me, to publish in your next book and you never did, did you?" *ital.*

"Gabby . . ."

He started pulling his pants on. "You totally led me on."

<sup>He</sup> pulled his white T-shirt over his chest and grabbed his ~~car~~ keys off the night stand.

"Gabby, no," I begged. "Please, don't go. Let me explain."

But it was too late, he was already leaving the bedroom and <sup>storming</sup> going down the hallway.

"Wait!" I called out. "Gabby, wait! I'm thinking of writing a novel and you're gonna be the protagonist. The **main** character!"

I never heard from Gabby Mi'jo again. Every time I called, his mother told me in an uncomfortable tone that he wasn't home even though I could hear his stereo <sup>in</sup> on the background.

And I could have written it off. I mean, using poetry for sex, taking advantage of ~~my position with~~ a sales associate at SuperCrown. But it was so painful and I missed Gabby Mi'jo so much. Laying on couch just to watch TV became pathetic and I cried uncontrollably every time our song, the theme for M\*A\*S\*H, came on.

I longed to hear from Gabby Mi'jo once more. I searched the far back end my mailbox, asked the publicist in New York and checked my email. Nothing. Gabby Mi'jo <sup>disappeared from</sup> was out of my life as quickly as he had <sup>entered it</sup> been in. Then one day, during the afternoon, I decided to go <sup>visit him at</sup> into his work. I guess just wanted to *feel* near him. I saw his picture hanging behind the cash register and learned that he had made Employee of the Month. The words, "Assistant Manager in Training" were underneath his smiling face and I couldn't <sup>remember</sup> recall him looking so happy. He was obviously doing well without me. As I was about to leave the store, I <sup>three books by Eva Perez</sup> saw on the staff recommendation shelf ~~were~~ <sup>three books by Eva Perez</sup> three books by Eva Perez. I found own book marked down, way down, and placed on a table alongside book markers and last year's calendars. I burst into tears and immediately left the store.

And while I was sad and all, I couldn't help but think what a selfish idiot I had been. I mean, Gabby Mi'jo was <sup>a</sup> person. A sensitive, kind human being. ~~I mean~~ <sup>he</sup> was a lover of literature and he took the time to write me a letter and here I just used him for my own hormonal needs. He was happy cuddling on <sup>the</sup> couch, just talking and kissing and here I had to push him into something he wasn't quite ready for. How



much would so many women would give for a guy so honest with his emotions? He <sup>had</sup> ~~was~~ once been an adoring fan and I, recognizing his status on the (1) level, used him. ?

Do you think Maya Angelou uses poetry to lure potential play? Do poet laureates have a roladex of conquests? Do Pulitzer prize winners hand out copies of their hotel keys at book signings? Most positively not. I was a horrible, horrible poet person.

That night the phone rang. I looked at my clock and saw it was a little after 11 PM. Could it possibly be . . . Gabby Mi'jo, just getting off his shift? Perhaps someone from his work recognized me and told him of from my earlier visit and now he had a change of heart. Oh, it couldn't be him, could it?

I answered the phone and I was right. It wasn't him. It was Grandma Sally.

"Ay mi'ja," she clicked her tongue. "I'm so sorry to be calling so late."

"No, it's not too late grandma," I answered half heartedly. "What's wrong?"

"Well, this boy called here wanting to get a hold of you and I remembered what you told me about not giving out information about you. But oh, he was so nice. A real nice Mexican boy."

"Grandma," My heart raced and my hopes rose. "Was his name Gabby Mi'. . . I mean, was his name Gabriel?"

"No, no it wasn't."

My heart sank.

And," she continued proudly, "Even though he insisted he was your biggest fan, I didn't give him any information about you. Just like you asked me."

My heart sank deeper.

Here was a fan, a boy. A nice Mexican boy and the opportunity was lost. Thanks a friggin' lot, Grandma Sally.

"No, what I did this time," she said, "was get *his* number."

I looked at the clock on my night stand. 11:09 PM. "Quick grandma," I said as I searched for a pen in the night stand drawer. "Give me his number, quick."



*Footnote  
for page  
165* { \* I could have easily searched for inspiration on the internet, but with so many libraries closing for lack of federal funding, it makes a statement as a tax paying citizen (ie, good role model) to patronize them and help keep them in existence. My father worked in a library.

Call #28

"Hello, this is Regan Williams, publicist for Edward James Olmos and Jennifer Lopez. My clients are interested in hosting a fund-raiser with Doctor Ernesto Chavez and we are wondering if . . . "

"One moment please."



"Hello? This is Ernesto Chavez, Ph.D. How can I be at your service?"

"Hi Ernie!"

"To whom am I speaking with?"

"It's me, Michele Serros. Hey, sorry I had to resort to . . . hello? Ernesto? Are you there?"

## Role Model Rule Number 14:

### Mind Your Table Manners

They're usually card tables. Actually pretty sturdy ones that some part-time clerk pulls out from the back closet, sets up and tops with a small vase of gerber daisies. If you're Mexican, they'll cover the table with that festive looking oil cloth your grandma picks up for a buck fifty a sheet, but they'll brag that they "found" it for a mere nine bucks a yard over at some ethnic specialty store. The cloth makes you feel safe. Everybody knows that there's no place warmer and more comfy than a Mexican grandmother's kitchen. You instantly feel weepy. But whatever you do, ~~do not~~ hold back your tears. (See Role Model Rule Number 3)

Someone from the store's staff will offer you a glass of wine, red or white. "We got a shit load of this Peter Vella left over from when Greg Louganis was here," they'll say. "Would you care to have some?" If you're like me, you'll skip the vino and request a Loco Half 'n Half which is my favorite drink from Pollo Loco, <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> half Horchata Ole and half Piña Colada Bang. If you're guaranteed to sell more than five books, they'll get anything for you.

This is the gravy, the niceties, I call them, of your actual book signing. Months earlier the foundation had already been set; you've confirmed the time and date, sent out all the flyers, faxed announcements to the weeklies and now you're actually peeking <sup>out</sup> from the two-way "spy on deadbeat employees" mirror of the store manager's office, praying that interested book type people, or even a male celebrity hiding out from the law for breaking his parole, shows up. Then, slowly ~~before your eyes~~, you witness a small crowd beginning to form. They <sup>start</sup> ~~are beginning~~ to fill up the seats. You check your watch and know better than to start on time. You wait the obligatory fifteen minutes. The assistant manager of the bookstore ~~then~~ welcomes the crowd and reads a list of upcoming in-store events. Then she announces your presentation, performance, reading, whatever and suddenly you get nervous. Will people really

believe that's a mere cold sore on your lip and not a herpes "cochina" scab like cousin Benny calls them? You look down and see the red polish on your toe nails is chipped, exposing the green underneath. Your feet scream Christmas and here it is mid-March. Too late for any touch-ups. You hear a damp applause and that's your cue. You appear from the manager's office and quickly hide behind the podium to camouflage your stomach. You don't think someone made a trip to Pollo Loco and came back with only a beverage, do you? You smile, exhale and acknowledge the adoring faces.

( )

"Thank you. Thank you," you say. "Oh, it's wonderful to see so many people here!" *There could be more. What's up with these empty chairs in the front? You specifically told the manager you wanted a minimal amount of chairs so that more people would have to stand and then it would look crowded and then you'd feel in demand and then . . . okay stop it, you're beginning to sound like Diana Ross in Mahogany!*

"It so great to be back in L.A.!" *Is it really? You like to get out of that fake ass town as much as possible and now you're being fake just by claiming it's great to be back. You've just come back from visiting Auntie Berta in that stinky nursing facility in Fontana, but they don't really need to know that. Let think you've been on tour, on the east coast, in New York. Yeah.*

"I'd like to start off with something a little different." *Different than what? And why? They don't know what you usually read. Are you trying to make them feel special? Oh, your special little reading for your special little audience, so little they didn't even FILL UP ALL THE CHAIRS! Okay, just read something from your book already!*

And so you start sharing stories and you say to yourself how wonderful it is having all eyes on you and why did you make such a fuss in Mr. Bower's speech class in high school? It's cool having people listen to what you want heard. And you talk and read words that you've chosen for the next sixty minutes or so and then you finally

say "Thank you very much," and that's the audience's cue to clap. You hear what sounds like another damp applause and then you take your drink, you take your book and you're led to The Table, that card table where you'll meet a small percentage of those in the audience, ones who actually bought your book. Now, this is the meat of your book signing. This is about sales. Profit. Percentage. Will you ever sell enough books to pay all your late fees at Hollywood Video? Enough royalties to get Sallie Mae off your back?

The people who go to The Table have just bought your book. They will want it signed. You'll write your name in it and you'll smile. A lot.

Now many discussions occur at The Table and you must remain pleasant and cheerful at all times. ~~The following is a few examples of dialogue I've personally dealt with at The Table. It all took place at one book signing in Los Angeles. Take a moment to review and allow yourself the opportunity to learn from my experience.~~

The first person in line to have her book signed <sup>is</sup> was a woman. I opened her book and I <sup>saw</sup> saw my signature already written across the bottom of the second page.

"Oh," I pointed out. "I've already signed it."

"Yes, you signed it," she says firmly. "But not the way I wanted."

"What? I mean, excuse me?"

"You don't remember me, do you?" she <sup>says</sup> said. "I met you at Book Village in San Jose about a month ago and I specifically said to write something about my daughter getting married and you didn't."

"Well, it does say 'Congratulations'." I pointed out the underlined inscription.

"Yes, it says congratulations. But for what? My daughter has had many achievements in her life. How is she gonna remember which one you're talking about? Sure she hasn't written a book, yet, but how is she gonna know what you're congratulating her for? Just rewrite it, would you?"



I smile and write in 'on your upcoming nuptials' to the already existing 'congratulations.'

The woman <sup>takes</sup> ~~took~~ the book back. "No, she's already gotten married! Jesus, Can't you fix it?"

I ~~crossed~~ out 'upcoming' and added 'Isn't marriage pure bliss?' The page is marked up with the blue ink corrections and additions.

"You know," the woman <sup>says</sup> ~~said~~ as she <sup>cs</sup> ~~hovered~~ over me. "I really should just get another one."

"Oh, you wanna buy another book?" I ~~eyed~~ the store manager.

"Buy one? I shouldn't have to pay for it. After all, it was you who made the mistake."

She then <sup>cs</sup> ~~grabbed~~ the book back and <sup>leaves</sup> ~~left~~ The Table before I really could say anything. I reminded ~~ed~~ myself to find out if she paid by check so I can copy down her phone number and prank call her later. Then I remembered she had bought the book a month ago. Damn!

The next person <sup>is</sup> ~~was~~ a thin young woman with brown lipstick and black polyester pants.

"Hi," I ~~looked~~ up at her. "Who should I sign this for?"

"Oh, just your name will do," she <sup>cs</sup> ~~waved~~ her hand carelessly in the air. She then leaned into the table. "So, hey, have you thought of the talent for the film version?"

"Talent?"

"Like, I can totally see Andy Garcia as your brother and maybe Edward James Olmos as your dad."

"Edward James Olmos?"

"Yeah, you know, <sup>vv</sup> Miami Vice, <sup>vv</sup> American Me <sup>v</sup> . . ."

"Yeah, I know who he is." **Duh.**

"He'd make a great Mexican father."

"Yeah, he would, wouldn't he?" I ~~smiled~~.

Behind the casting agent/ brown girl <sup>is</sup> ~~was~~ a young guy. He <sup>isn't</sup> ~~wasn't~~ holding a copy of my book, but ~~actually~~ <sup>it's</sup> a copy of something else. It ~~was~~ a paperback with a worn cover and he casually ~~tossed~~ it on The Table.

"This is my book," he announced.

"Your book?" I opened it and looked over a few pages. "Wow, congratulations."

"Yeah," he underlined <sup>his</sup> ~~her~~ his name, Marco De Valle, on the cover with his finger.

"This is me. . . . You've never heard of my book?"

"Uh, not really, but you know I'm behind with my reading and there's a lot out there."

"Yeah, a lot of **shit**. But you know," his voice lowered. "I haven't sold that many copies and I'm wondering, well, I was just wondering how you think I can get the word out."

"Well," I <sup>tell</sup> ~~told~~ him. "You're gonna have to do a ton of readings, put stuff on the internet, start personal mailing lists, visit schools, cut ribbons at Latino-owned skateboard parks . . . " I knew he <sup>isn't</sup> ~~wasn't~~ really listening to me.

"Man, that's a lot of work," he interrupted.

"Yeah, but if you want your book to sell . . . "

"That's too much work. I don't wanna have to do all that. I just wanna write."

**Well, don't we all?** "So, did you want me to sign your book?" I smiled at him.

"You mean **my** book?"

"No, I mean, one of my books. You want me to sign it?"

"Nah, I mean, I didn't buy one."

"Oh, well, is this for me?" I looked at the book he's written. **Ooh, I'm gonna take this back and get some store credit, maybe get the new Frank Black CD.**

"Oh, no," he takes it from my hands and puts it back in his backpack. "I just wanted you to see it."

"Oh, well thank you for your support."

Next <sup>is</sup> ~~was~~ a young girl and her mother.

"This is the first time my daughter ~~has~~ ever attended a live reading," the mother gushed. "This is the first time she's <sup>CS</sup> actually met an actual author."

"Oh, that's so nice." I smiled at her daughter and softened ~~ed~~ my voice. "Hi there, what's your name?" The girl doesn't respond.

"She really shy," the mother explained <sup>CS</sup>. "She never really talks. She just loves to read and read and read."

"Oh," I laughed ~~ed~~. "Lucky for all the writers in the world." I <sup>take</sup> took the book from her daughter's hands. "So, who do I make this out to?"

"You can make it out to her," the mother <sup>says</sup> said. "Her name's Ixotchtiquelta."

"E- ah . . . ?"

"Ixotchtiquelta," She repeated <sup>CS</sup>. "You've never heard it? It's a common name in the Nahuatl language."

"Oh, right." I attempted to write out the name as it sounded.

"Nooo," the woman looked <sup>CS</sup> at my writing and frowned <sup>CS</sup>. "I-X, not E-X, and there's only one C. No, not like that. No, Q not G. Oh forget it. Just put down Missy. That's what her grandparents call her."

"Oh, I feel horrible," I <sup>tell</sup> told the mother. "I really butchered her name."

"Well, that's okay," she responded <sup>CS</sup> half heartedly. "She's used to it. You don't write or read Nahuatl?"

"No, not really."

The mother clicked <sup>CS</sup> her tongue and remarked <sup>CS</sup>, "That's really a shame."

"Do you?"

"I'm starting. I'm taking lessons over at the Learning Annex."

I continued ~~with~~ my dedication and I rubbed ~~ed~~ an itch on the side of my nose. Suddenly I <sup>feel</sup> felt something loosen and when I looked ~~ed~~ down on the page I'm horrified to see a small dry something or another has fallen from the inside of my nose and ~~was~~ <sup>is</sup> now in the middle of the page. I <sup>don't</sup> know if I should look up and check if the girl and

her mother had seen it or <sup>if I</sup> should I ~~ve~~ just nonchalantly brushed ~~ed~~ it away and keep writing? Should I ~~have~~ circled the snot, slammed ~~med~~ the book shut and deemed ~~it~~ performance art?

I ~~didn't~~ <sup>don't</sup> do any of those things. Instead, I just dated my signature and ~~gave~~ <sup>give</sup> them back the book.

"Oh, thank you," the mother ~~continued to~~ <sup>es</sup> gush. "This was pleasant. Thank you!"

Whew! They didn't see the booger fall. They both walked away and I overheard the mother remark, "Isn't that nice, *Ixotchtiquelta*? You got your book signed!"

"But mom," I heard the young girl suddenly speak up, "Her booger's in it. I don't want her ol' snot in my book!"

The mother grabbed <sup>es</sup> her daughter's arm. "Shhhh! We'll get rid it as soon as we get home. Just don't touch it."

<sup>one by one</sup> One by one faces, people, and smiles. Everyone wanted their own words in my handwriting. Women seeking advice how to improve their writing and men asking how to publish manuscripts they haven't even started to write. It's the same situation in every city, every county. And then I see *him*.

I looked up and right there in front of me, on the other side of The Table is the most beautiful face I've seen in a long time. He's a twenty-something tall thing, a Mexican, a naturally *red-headed* Mexican. You know the kind with that dark red hair and copper complexion and a dab of freckles across the nose? My favorite.

"Hi ya," he said.

*Hi ya ?* Suddenly it's the sweetest salutation I've ever heard. So goony Hee Haw cute. I smiled to myself.

"Oh, these are for you."

He brought me flowers!

I stood up. I <sup>felt</sup> my skirt's waistband pinch <sup>my</sup> waist. Damn, why did I polish off that whole Pollo Bowl? "Oh, they're so beautiful." Thank God, no baby's breath. This guy is perfect.

"You know, you're my favorite Chicana author."

"Really?" I giggled. "Oh, you must not read a whole lot." Now normally I would've been offended. What up with the marginalization? Like 'My Favorite Martian?' An alien? What's that suppose <sup>to</sup> mean? But instead I just giggled.

"No, I mean it," he insisted. "I drove over an hour to get here."

I couldn't even look at him. I covered my cold sore with one hand and started to sign his book. I tried to focus and steady <sup>shaking</sup> the shake of my hands. God, I was suddenly so nervous. His own hands were on The Table and he was tapping his keys on it. I checked the keys. Was one of them a hotel key? (See Role Model Rule Number 13). Is this a message? A sexual Morse code <sup>in</sup> with his tap, tap, tapping?

"So, what's your name?" I tried to sound casual and noticed my pen <sup>continued</sup> ~~to shake~~ <sup>was still shaking</sup>.

"Xavier," he answered.

"With an X?" I asked.

"Of course."

I'm designing wedding invitations in my mind.

"So, um, I was wondering . . . " Xavier the red <sup>headed</sup> Mexican hesitated.

Oh, he's shy. I'm making him nervous. Just what was he wondering?

"Is there any way I can get a hold of you?"

Not that shy.

"I'm putting on a fund-raiser and I was hoping . . . " he continued.

"Oh, yes," I interrupted him. "I just love giving back to my community! Here."

I jotted out my phone number in the book. There's my work number, my home number, my email address and the number of my Grandma Sally."

"Grandma Sally?"



"She can get a hold of me no matter what," I explained.

"So," he looked at my numbers. "I'll give you a call you this week."

"Yes, that'd be perfect." My voice suddenly became high and soft.

And then Xavier, who spells his name with an X, started to walk away. But then he turned around. What was this? One last comment? One final compliment? ~~Al~~ One lasting look into my eyes for his long lonely drive back home?

"Oh, by the way," he said, "I just loved your first book."

"My first book?" I asked, confused.

"Yeah, <sup>The</sup> House on Mango Street."

## The Plaintiff, The Poet

"Mr Chavez, you seem like a reasonable man. And from what you tell me in your deposition, an upholding citizen of your community. That's why I don't understand why you're even here. But let ask you Mr. Chavez, at this event, the event you had <sup>in</sup> March of 1998, did you have caterers, servers, valet parkers?

"Yes, of course, your honor."

"What about any floral arrangements? Did you have any gardeners come the day before to spiffy up your yard? A pool man to clean your pool?

"Well, yes."

"And sir, did you pay them for their services?"

"Well, of course."

"So how is it, Mr. Chavez, that you would make a promise, a verbal contract with a poet to read at your event to, as you say in your deposition, "add some cultural entertainment" for your Wednesday Afternoon Latino Fine Arts League luncheon and then not pay that poet?"

"Well, I . . . I guess it wasn't a priority."

"It wasn't a priority?"

"Well, I mean . . ."

"I rule in favor of the plaintiff, the poet. Mr. Chavez, I order you to pay the \$25 owed to the poet, her eight dollars in gas money, and an additional \$2,000 for punitive damages."

"\$2,000! Your honor, don't you think that's a little extreme?"

"Mr. Chavez, I have to make an example out of you. I need to send a message to all the community members out there that I have no patience for this brown on brown crime. To cheat a poet out of monetary acknowledgment and gas money is the most pathetic ~~extreme~~ act I've seen all my years on the bench. That's all I have to say to you. Next case, The Performance Artist v/s California Polytechnic State University!"

Role Model Rule Number 15:

Role Model Number 15: Answer All Fan Mail

Dear Mrs. Serros,

Hello, my name is Carolyn Carrasco. My friends call me C.C. You came to my school, Roosevelt Elementary, to read some poetry. You must remember me, I sat in the front and I was the one with the Lisa Frank binder, the newest kind. My teacher, Mrs. Kendall, said we should write you a letter to thank you for coming to our school. So here I am. She told us you were a good role model and I want to know if you <sup>know</sup> Daisy Fuentes. She is my favorite model. Oh, <sup>and</sup> do you know Eva Perez? Would you like to be in her fan club? We need one more person to help with our car wash-bake sale so we can have enough money to bring her back to our school. She's <sup>my</sup> ~~the~~ favorite model, after Daisy Fuentes.

Carolyn Carrasco



Dear Michele,

First of all I want to apologize for not returning your calls. I guess I was still upset with you about the poem thing. Your book just came into my store and it reminded me of you. I read a little bit of it when we aren't too busy, but I'm a store manager now, so I don't have much time. Anyway, if you're <sup>↓</sup> interested, I'd like to have you at SuperCrown for a book signing. You can call the store and ask for Lillian. She's the reading coordinator and sorta my girlfriend. So if you come, please don't mention we used to watch M\*A\*S\*H together, if you know what I mean.

Gabriel J. Morales

Dear Michele Serros

I am an English teacher and bought a copy of your book at a local bookstore here in Calabasas. You have some very good poems. You need to, however, concentrate on making your poems more universal. The average kid in Connecticut may not understand your stories and you need to make them accessible to everyone. Instead of using a colloquial term such as chicharrones, why not just pork or ham? A ham sandwich? Everyone knows what that is. Next time you sit down to write, think about the kid in Connecticut. Will he appreciate and grasp what you are trying to say?

Poetry is a very difficult market to succeed in, so I offer you the best of luck. I myself have sent out manuscripts for the last ten years and have yet to be published and I have a Masters in creative writing!

Sincerely,

Donald P. McWhite

Dear Michael Hill,

Just joking! Hey it's me, Martha, Martha Reyes! I go by Marti now. Hey, what's up? It's been soooooo long since I've seen or talked to you. I ran into your Grandma Sally over at Bob's, the one on Gonzalez, and she gave me your address. I wanted your phone number but she was all tight with it. She's hard that way, huh? Well, anyway, I was in the B. Dalton bookstore over here in the Esplanade and saw <sup>your</sup> ~~her~~ name on a book! I couldn't believe it! I told the cashier, "Hey, I know her! She was my best friend!" but that witch didn't even give me a discount. But that's life, in Oxnard, anyway. I would like to see you sometime. Maybe if you're not too busy, you can come visit me. What's up with you? I still see Patty Romero and Goony around.

Well, I just wanted to say hi and tell you I'm thinking of you and say that the picture of you on your book, your clothes look real nice and looked professionally pressed. I'm proud of you. Call me, kay?

Marti



Dear Ms. Ceros

My mom just bought me your book and I have to say, I didn't want to read it, but when we got home, and I hope I'm not being rude, but on the second page of your book there was some dried booger, my mom says secretion, from your nose and we were going to remove it that same day we bought your book, but when my mother was about to scrape it off we noticed it was in the shape, she calls it an aparishun, the shape was of one Jesus' tears, like when he is on the cross already close to deth. We tore out the page with your booger on it and its<sup>↓</sup> in our living room in a shoe box and surrounded by cotton balls. It looks really pretty and a bunch of people from our neighborhood came to see it. And my aunt sells corn on the cob, my dad calls them elotays, for all the people that wait in line and my uncle met people who need some work done on their cars and my sister finally met a boy, he came with his sick grandma, to get healed and me, well, I'm just writing to tell you that you are a very very good roll model and that booger on the page in your book has changed our lives more that you'll ever, ever know.

Love,

Ixotchtiquelta Hagen -Perez

p.s. Write back!