

Alma Morales

Niña de Mexico, Student of America- Daughter of Nowhere

Alma: it is a simple four letter word. It is a title, a name, an identity. In the mouths of the *gringos* it is Al-Mah, in the sweet Spanish voice of my mother it is Ah-lmah. It is but a small distinction, a slight change of emphasis, but to me it is two entirely different words. I was born on October 23, 1994 in the middle of the central valley in the small local hospital of Lindsay, California. I was the second child, the first girl. I was born in that town, and I spent the next eighteen years hiding within it: *atrapada y abrazada dentro de su seguridad*.

My mother was 22 when she crossed the border: young, scared, and *a punto de tronar*. She was seven months pregnant with my older brother; *era su última oportunidad*. She had tried earlier at three months but failed. Now with a belly ready to burst, she felt the weight of impending jeopardy crushing her with every silent breath. My parents often joke with my older brother saying, “*Te robaste la ciudadanía bato*”; but we know better; it wasn’t stolen, it was earned. My parents made a home *en el Norte*; they found comfort in a small Hispanic town. They set roots and began to build their prison there; *encerrándose dentro de la protección de su pequeño México en el Norte*. For the first years of my life I was Mexican, only Mexican; I knew nothing else. *Existía solamente dentro del mundo Mexicano que mis padres habían creado*. Outside of that world I simply did not exist. I had no identity in the world of the *gringos*.

Like most other kids, I started school when I was five. I didn’t cry on my first day of class; my mother has always been rather proud of that; “*Mi hija es bien machita*,” she likes to say. But I suspect it wasn’t bravery that kept me silent, it was shock. Before then I had always

been *Rosí*; stepping into that classroom I became Alma. I'd never been called by my first name before then and it felt foreign to me. I found myself in a new place, with new people: *un lugar diferente, con niños diferentes*. I was in a new world, distant from the small Mexican one of my parents, so I created a new me. Alma became the name of my American world *y Rosí el nombre de la mexicana que cargaba dentro*. School opened the door to what had once been the terrifying foreign territory *de los gringos* and English became my passport. By the age of 6, I learned how to balance my two identities; like all double lives the key was separation. The split between my two lives is easy and clear; I suppose it had to be for a six year old to maintain it. I exist in two worlds, the American world of business and academics, *y el mundo íntimo de comodidad y familia*. I tread no middle ground, *vivo mi vida en blanco y negro*, and in the grey areas I simply make a choice, Alma or *Rosí*. I am one or the other, and deep down I am neither. Spending my life residing between two worlds has left me with no permanent home; I am a mermaid choking in Mexican deserts, a snake drowning in American waters. *Ni mexicana o americana, soy una hija perdida*, a wandering soul without a homeland.

My parents raised me and my brothers the only way they knew how: like good Mexicans. I was raised as a Catholic, *bautizada gritando y llorando a los doce meses*, rebelling against my Catholic upbringing since infancy. As good Mexican Catholics, my parents always had a strong faith. Their entire lives having been filled with poverty, trials, and suffering, *Dios era su única esperanza*. They found comfort in the assurance that, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled... Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God... Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven” (Matthew 5:5). I cannot say I share the blind faith of my parents, but I understand their dependence on it. I was baptized at one year old; years later I completed my first communion, and my confirmation. I let my parents

believe in my faith the way they believe in their own, because it is easier than admitting I am different, *que no soy como ellos*. For Mexicans, all the ones I have known in my lifetime, religion is more than just a belief; it is an all-encompassing lifestyle: *Dios y la Virgen María se encuentran en cada segunda oración*.

But that was never the case for me. Throughout my lifetime, including childhood, I suppose I was always an existentialist without ever knowing there was a name for it. Growing up in a Catholic home it was never a question of God's existence; rather it was a failure to understand the importance of it. I shared Sartre's existential belief that even if God did exist, it did not matter; I was the only one creating myself, *yo sola inventaba mi persona, y yo sola era responsable por mí misma*. I thought of God as a viewer standing before a television screen, *su existencia no importaba*; whether he watched or not, the characters' lives continued onscreen, completely independent of his presence, unaffected by his existence. Yet despite my own beliefs, strong as they may be, I felt a longing to understand the Catholic faith, *de pertenecer a la comunidad de mexicanos católicos*. I recall a time when I was 13; my friends, who were also Mexican, began going to church. Driven by a compulsion to prove I was just as Mexican as they were, I attended with them. I recall spending hours sitting in the pew thinking about anything but God and religion, suffering immense boredom for the sake of proving my Mexican roots, *atentando de pintarme el nopal en la frente*. I find myself still sitting in that pew. I continue to let my parents believe in my faith, though deep down I suspect they know the truth. Yet the longing we feel to relate to one another, *de pertenecer al mismo mundo*, keeps us pretending. I've never been a real Catholic, but I suppose it's just another label I've failed to live up to completely.

Life for the children of immigrants is as it is expected, simple, but immensely complicated. My father, the single greatest man I will ever know in my lifetime, first crossed the border when he was seventeen: *un niño abandonando su niñez*. Like all Mexican boys my father crossed the border in search of work. He slaved *en las huertas del Norte* just to earn a couple dollars for his family back in Mexico. At 24 he fell in love with my mother and they married, *mi madre siempre lo amo desde niñez*. My dad claims he did too, it just took him a little longer to realize it. Months after they were married my dad crossed the border again for work; he was a seasoned professional at that age. A few months later he returned to Mexico to help his now pregnant bride enter *Los Estados Unidos*. He had nothing *en el Norte*, not a home or a penny to his name, only a pair of flaky brothers who couldn't be counted on. *Pero mi madre lo siguió*; she followed out of love, with nothing but a promise keeping her strong. *Una oportunidad de un futuro mejor para nuestro bebe*; that was the promise my father made her. That is the promise he works himself into the ground every day to keep.

Like any real Mexican, I've been to the fields: *un mundo cubierto en polvo donde el cuerpo muere y el alma te carga*. Unlike many Mexican fathers I have come to know, my father refused to have my brothers and me work the fields every weekend like the rest of the Mexican boys and girls. I remember vividly the three or four times in which my father reluctantly plucked me out of bed as a little girl at early dawn, *la luna aun brillando más fuerte que el sol*. He dressed me in many layers: a long sleeve shirt covered by one of his old button up shirts, a bandana wrapped around my nose and mouth, and his favorite work cap over my tightly braided hair. Work was always about an hour away; he'd wake me up when we'd get to the *huertas*, the sun only barely beginning to show a hint of light. "*Bien despacito mija,*" he'd always say, "*Si te cansas te sientas, si tienes hambre te vienes al carro y te comes el taco que me hecho tu mama,*

tú no te preocupes, nomás lo que puedas.” I know my father’s softness on my brothers and me always warranted teasing from his work buddies. They’d shout at him across the orchards, “*Mira mi Omar, mas pequeño que tu Jr. y ya hace una caja solito,*” but my dad didn’t care. He didn’t take us to the fields to master his trade; he took us to see the life that he was desperately trying to save us from. Being Mexican my brother and I, like all the other kids, were expected to end up in the fields: it was our tradition, it was our heritage, it was our curse; but my father fought against that with every ounce of strength in his body. He supported my mother and three children with the less than minimum wage he earned working the fields. Yet he never complained, never forced my mother to go to work with him either, “*Yo no voy a llevar a mis hijos a que los cuide un extraño, para eso tienen su mama,*” he’d say. I had a humble childhood; we never had much, *pero nunca nos faltó nada*. As Mexican as my father is, he raised us like Americans, believing we could do anything, be anyone, and have everything we worked for. My father was a boy full of potential. He carried so much intelligence, dreamt of great things, and he sacrificed everything for my brothers and me, so that we could become what he never could. At only 45, my dad is a withered man now, *su ojos cansados y eternos*. But when he speaks of my older brother, a third year at UCSD, my younger brother, a brilliant 7th grader finishing 8th grade courses, and me, a first year at UCSC, *sus ojos brillan*, his smile widens, and his face lightens to that of a younger man, whose potential has been reached, and whose dreams have come true: a Mexican father, raising American children. I’ve grown my entire life aspiring to be just like my dad, and he’s spent all of his ensuring that I end up nothing like him.

Try as you will to raise a Mexican girl as an American, she will still be expected to grow up as a Mexican woman. I was the only girl in my family, just me, my two brothers, and the dozens of neighborhood boys. When I was younger my mother went out of her way to keep me

away from all the boys. “*Porque no puedo salir a jugar y Jr. si!?*” I’d protest, “*Porque afuera andan todos los niños! Que va a decir la gente si te miran solita con puros barones, no no, te me quedas adentro!*” she’d kindly reply; but I’d always find a way out. I grew up playing universal quarter back for the boys playing football on the street, being taught how to cook and clean by my mother, encouraged to be a lawyer by my father, and taught how to care for babies by my mother and aunts. Was I a Mexican girl dreaming of being American, or an American playing at being Mexican? I still haven’t figured it out. My parents’ dream for my brothers and me has always been clear: get an education, get a good job, and be happy living a life they never could. With me, however, that dream gets a little complicated. The goal is still education and career, live the American dream, but it conflicts with the expectations of me as a Mexican woman. At UCSC I am Alma, a clever intellectual student full of potential; at home I’m *Rosi, madrina, cuidadora, cocinera, limpiadora, y mujer*. My parents are fully aware of my intelligence, they’re rather proud of it and all I have accomplished with it; but I know that like all Mexican parents when they dream of their *niñita*’s future there’s always babies and a hardworking husband, *nunca independencia*. As Anzaldúa states, in the Mexican culture, “Woman are made to feel total failures if they don’t marry and have children” (*Borderlands*, 39). Throughout my life I have balanced being Mexican, American, and a woman in both worlds. Over time I’ve come to realize that circumstances are such that in order to succeed as an American woman or *una mujer Mexicana*, I must fail at being the other. I cannot be both. Raised to dream like an American girl, expected to become a Mexican woman, *mi vida entera es una contradicción*. The years of schooling to accomplish my American ambitions *y los años entrenando para cumplir mi trayectoria Mexicana*, have created an internal struggle within me. What is it that I really want,

the American dream or the Mexican tradition? It's a harder decision than you'd expect, and it all stems back to who am I really, *Alma o Rosi*?

Mexican, American, and a woman, I exist in multiple worlds. I was raised like a Mexican girl, encouraged to dream of an American life, and expected to balance the two. *Vivo en dos mundos, soy una sirena ahogándose en el desierto, una serpiente hundiéndose en el mar.* Not Mexican or American, I'm a lost child, *una alma perdida sin un hogar.* I strain to prove I belong in the *gringos'* American world *y batallo para pertenecer al mundo mexicano de mis padres.* But I must always keep my worlds separated. I live my life in black and white; I tread no middle ground. *En los espacios grises simplemente decido, soy Alma o soy Rosi; y profundamente no soy ninguna.* Mexican, American, and a woman, I am only ever sure of one of those labels. The others I fail to live up to every day.