Arched Eyebrows

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From my bedroom window in this Mexican pueblo, I search out Gemini in the midnight sky. I usually feel small and insignificant under the stars, but tonight I do not. I am one of The Twins. One or both.

Gentle snores drift through the thin walls of the room next door where twelve orphans sleep. Five other rooms each hold as many children. The assortment of snorts, gurgles and whistles rising up from the sounds, like a universe at rest. I am twenty-two years old and a Peace Corps volunteer in the Our Holy Mother of God orphanage.

In two days, I'll drive home to L.A. for a fiesta honoring my great uncle Beto, who's retiring from his job with the electric company. Relatives are expected from as far away as New Mexico and from as close as Pacoima. It promises to be noisy, ridiculous and festive by day and melancholy by midnight.

The women will cook and gossip in the kitchen and the men will drink outside on the patio and wander inside later to watch a little boxing. Someone will be expecting a baby and the boy cousins will be outside admiring someone's shiny, new paint job.

"You think she'll be there?" I asked my sister two nights ago from the raspy public telephone in the pueblo's tiny cobblestone plaza.

"Who?" she asked.

"*La* Gloria," I said.

I haven't seen my cousin, Gloria, for nearly five years and I'm dying to see her face when she sees how Chicana I've become. I didn't speak much Spanish as a kid, but here in the orphanage it was learn the langauge or die. I wear skirts (no shorts) and have learned the ways of a respectable *mejicana* in social situations. But it is the morning task of kneeding and rolling and flattening dough into tortillas with the orphanage's other women workers that's become my favorite morning ritual.

Every morning about five o' clock, six of us shape several hundred tortillas while Hermana Rosaria, the orphanage's small, sharp-featured cook, unsuccessfully tries to arrange and manipulate my love life. I tell her that norteamericanas don't worry about marriage and their biological clocks in the United States half as much as *mejicanas* do, even the Latina ones.

She cocks her head to one side like a raven trying to figure me out. Shaking her head, she finally gives up. "Dios mío," she says, crossing herself for protection from my words.

As the family reunion nears, Hermana Rosaria hears about La Gloria and the way she used to call my sister and I "Homogenized Hispanics." Our hair was too güero; our noses not Azteca enough.

When I explain these things and more to Hermana Rosaria, it's like Nettie and I are back in our Aunt Sylvia's house in San Fernando Valley where our parents went weekly to play 21 or poker at the cool Formica table in our Tia's kitchen. Time ceases

to be and Nettie and I are sitting cross-legged on the two-tone green shag carpet once again. And there is Aunt Sylvia's oldest daughter, La Gloria.

My mental picture of La Gloria freezes her in time to how she looked at age 13 or 14, sitting there in that living room, snapping her gum sharp and loud. Her lacquered bangs from a shiny roll on her forehead like a chocolate Hostess HoHo. Thin snakes of velvet black eyeliner droop over each eyelid, chola-style. She's about twenty pounds overweight, but, as she likes to say, she carries it well. Aunt Sylvia's Pedro Infante record plays in the background and La Gloria snaps her chicle to the beat.

Gloria, who is two years older than I and three older than Nettie, is the toughest girl in junior high. She rolls a five and moves her silver marker to Boardwalk.

"You owe me fifty bucks," I say.

La Gloria looks at me hard and mean and hisses that there ain't no damn way she's going to hand over no fifty dollars rent.

"You have to," I say. It's the rules. Don't start cheating, Gloria, I'll tell your mom."

My mom is an all-powerful Chicana who knows Monopoly is a gringo, capitalistic game and I ain't gonna pay the stinkin' rent , so get that through your güera head," she says. "Here we play it like this is real life, comprendes? You're going to have to evict me just like the landlords do."

Her mother yells from the kitchen for Gloria to get up and grab her another Budweiser, the King of Beers. La Gloria sighs and starts for the kitchen. She stops in the doorway and

strikes a pose, a Latina Cheryl Tiegs looking over her shoulder.

"Roll," she commands Nettie, who rolls the dice right away.

From the doorway, she turns her evil eye on me and her lip curls up in a sneer. "Ha, ha. She rolled. You lost your chance and your money. Better luck next time," she says.

By the time she quits twenty mintes later, she's about to go broke. Nettie and I always beat her at board games even though she's older than us. Gloria knows a lot about some things, like how to French kiss, but she isn't what papá calls "practical." Losing at Monopoly or Scrabble or Battleship never bothers La Gloria. She thinks she's the hottest thing on the west side of town just because she's vice president of the junior MEChA chapter at school.

With her high arched eyebrows, nut-brown skin and lips painted with stolen tubes of Revlon lipstick, Gloria is the undisputed chola queen of the cigarettes-behind-the-gym crowd she runs with. Nettie and I would love to wear dark lipstick only our father won't let us. He says Gloria is headed down a hard road, but Aunt Sylvia doesn't see it.

Neither does anyone at our school. Everybody treats Gloria and her friends like thery're ultra-cool, tough shit---or maybe like they're afraid of them. In junior high, sometimes it's hard to tell the difference.

As for the stolen lipstick, which La Gloria has in fourteen luscious shades, she says it's not like a crime because the Hi-Lo Drug store in our neighborhood charges too much for

Pepsi, so in the end it all comes out even. Gloria has developed her own brand of logic for situations like this that always works in her favor. That girl has a reason for everything---except for why she kept me out of MEChA.

La Gloria told the MEChA club that me and Nettie weren't really, really her blood cousins, that our medium-brown hair proves we were probably adopted. She said our family hadn't eaten menudo on weekends for years, ever since our dad got a promotion at the plant, which she claimed was almost like turning our backs on our cultura.

Our cousin further pointed out that Nettie and I didn't even know Spanish, because our dad was intent on us becoming what she sarcastically called "real Americans." Before we were born, he decided we'd learn English only so we didn't have to go through the things he did when he got to school and didn't know any English. I guess he didn't know we'd go through other things instead, like not getting into MEChA.

"They don't even know what *la revolucion* is about; they are so unaware," La Gloria told her MEChA friends. "Mention it and those Huerta fake cousins of mine think you mean the American Revolution," she added, and the kids all cracked up.

Then Gloria had to go tell the MEChA club that I got straight A's, which was true, and that my idea of fun was sitting around doing algebra, which wasn't. My friend, Carmen, who was there, called it a rousing speech about remaining pure to *la causa* that would have made Zapata proud. The membership vote was unanimous. I did not get into MEChA.

"There was the pure pressure thing going on, big time," Carmen said.

Instead I got into Cal Berkeley years later while La Gloria took a cashier's job at the Hi-Lo Drug store. I went home to L.A. for family gatherings whenever I could, but I never saw Gloria because she was always working.

I don't know that we would have grown closer anyway, we were so different. Even at these getherings, I was often studying, something most of the family didn't understand.

"Ayyy, that Lara. Nose in the book all the time," I'd hear relatives say from the other room. Papá would explain I had a test on Monday, even when I didn't.

"I say she thinks she's too good for us," Barbara sneered. Barbara is our cousin, too, and La Gloria's younger sister.

After college, the Peace Corps sent me to México where the Spanish I learned was quite different from that spoken in the neighborhoods in and around L.A. I recognized that the placas on the walls should have read "barrio," not "varrio." I noticed that the desperately poor people living in cardboard shelters clinging to canyon walls lived without menudo on Saturdays and still kept their culture intact. There were no such phrases as "vamos a las movies" or "homeboys," espressions you heard around the Valley all the time.

During rare weekends off from the orphanage, I drove to Guadalajara and visited museums and bought postcards showing the pottery of the Mayas. I trekked to the remnants of ancient civilizations where I strolled among the gods of civilizations past.

Four days after sitting under The Twins and that midnight sky, I got to my great uncle Beto's party assured that La Gloria and I will finally be on equal footing; that she can't deny me the heritage that is mine as much as it is hers. I didn't need MEChA to find myself; I'd found myself out in the world on my own.

I am thin from my nine months in the orphanage the day I walk into my Aunt Sylvia's house for the first time in several years. I bring pottery as gifts and wear a woven dress with an embroidered bodice hand-stitched by an Oaxacan woman who sat in the mercado with a child at her breast.

My nearly blind grandmother, Remedio, is here and I greet her in perfect Spanish. She calls me "preciosa" as she always has each of her nineteen granddaughters. My father, still in his work shirt, brags about how I speak Spanish better than he does now and his eyes brim with tears. My mother beams in the corner, cheeks flushed pink. My uncle Tito lets out a long, low whistle.

Hugging a Tía here, a niece there, I make my way to La Gloria, whose surprised eyebrows arch even higher than normal. She still has on her button-up uniform blouse from the Hi-Lo Drug with "Gloria T" embroidered in red on the front. I stop in front of her and she surveys me critically.

She gives me a quick nod and I say something witty in Spanish and some of the cousins laugh. Gloria takes a swig of the beer sitting in front of her and we both feel the weight of the hushed silence as our aunts and uncles and nephews and nieces and cousins watch us; her eyes narrow like a trapped animal.

I am just about to say something else when her boldly painted eyes flash bright with victory and I know for a second how she must have looked at the MEChA meeting so long ago, the reigning junior high school queen de la raza.

"Who is this?" she yells. "La conquistadora? The queen of Spain?' The nephews begin to snicker while la Gloria continues. "Our San Fernando Valley Spanish not good enough for Ms. College Graduate, Miss Orphanage Worker? The hell with this. Let's play 21. Hey Nettie. Get me another beer, girl."

And Nettie does.