

PRIETA

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I grew up with an immediate awareness of the pigmentocracy long held by our community and its deeply embedded definition of beauty.

My grandmother's favorite storytelling time would entail tales about her rich landowning father in Guadalajara. She would pore through pictures of tíos and tías we had never met, showcasing blonde hair and light eyes. She would constantly tell us that we weren't Mexican, but Spanish. "*Your great grandfather came from Spain and married in Mexico.*"

Her most treasured tale would be about her youngest son, el consentido—the favorite one. My uncle lived by her side all through adulthood and until his death. She would wax poetic about his long blonde locks, and how she wouldn't dream of cutting his curls.

"His golden hair would hit his waist, and he was so beautiful he was often mistaken for a girl."

I only knew him with dark hair and dark eyes. She would say that his skin and hair color changed in adolescence.

After she passed, my mother and I were going through her things. We found her beloved portrait, wrapped in velvet and gingerly kept in a treasured box: it was my uncle at age two with long blonde hair. It was the closest confirmation of the truth of her story.

I never met her paternal family.

I was confused about her account of her family history, especially as I grew older. If her father was rich, why were we poor? We lived in government housing and our sustenance was mostly creative dishes made out of subsidized cheese. None of my immediate family had blonde hair or light eyes. And my uncle? He was dark haired and balding. We also nimbly navigated the Mexican border often but hadn't dreamt about traveling to Spain.

My absent father had dark skin. My younger sister looks just like him.

The two skin colors often pitted against each other shared a bedroom their entire youth.

"Prieta!"

"Negra!"

I can still hear it. It bellows in my ears.

I know this is my sister's story to tell, but I don't remember any *cariño* with those words. Her nickname was a constant reminder of my grandmother's disdain for her skin.

Another story that was often re-told by my abuela was how my aunt's boyfriend was showing pictures of his baby daughter—a fair skinned child—and my little sister, in the midst of the ooh's and aah's, pointed to the picture and exclaimed, "She looks just like me!"

A roar of laughter came from my grandmother.

She repeated that story over and over again, aghast that my sister would think she looked like that child. I remember she often re-told it to mock my sister. My grandmothers' laughter did not subside with each re-telling. Even years later, this stale, recycled story, told to shame my sister into thinking she could possibly be beautiful.

When I left for college, my grandmother was quite upset that my mother was allowing me to leave home before a "proper young lady" should. To deflect her resentment and disappointment from me, my sister mollified my grandmother by promising her that she would marry someone light-skinned, so that her own children would not be dark-skinned, like her. Even putting these words onto paper brings tears to my eyes.

The older I get, the more this promise stings. It is a sharp edge against my own skin. I often wonder what role it played in my own notions of beauty and worth.

During the most current Black Lives Matters protests, my niece joined the marches, waved the signs and walked through the streets of our city. My beautiful niece has been a very active protestor.

My mother, my niece's grandmother, called me to exclaim her disapproval of this activism, "This is not our fight!"

It is.

It's our fight, especially in our own households.

