

To my little sister, Dani,

When I was younger I told people that our dad was destined to be a chef.

Sure, he would cook nightly meals with maybe a little more skill and zeal than the average parent, but what made me so sure that his purpose in life was to cook for others was much more related to the very specific image that was and always will be imprinted in my mind.

There's a very recognizable way in which his face lights up. This subtle but all-encompassing change in demeanor is usually accompanied by bouts of laughter, loud bachata music, and a demonstration of confident yet slightly disjointed Spanish dance moves.

When I was younger, I associated this image simply with our dad cooking. But as I've gotten older, I've realized that his palpable pride and bliss while he's cooking is much more connected to his background than it is to the act of composing a dish. And in the kitchen it's really only ever accompanied by Caribbean food— *platanos* sitting half sliced on the counter, *yucca con mojo* simmering on the stove.

It's incredible to me that this same person who is so proud of his culture, so content, and so sure of who he is, can sit across from me and say "I know where my home is but that doesn't mean I've found my community. I haven't."

He'll tell you that he hasn't always felt this way. He'll tell you that the place where he lives has transformed how he expresses his culture. He'll explain why even his siblings, with whom he shares two parents, identify differently than he does.

Dani, I'm telling you this because I've seen you begin to struggle. For a long time I struggled in the same way. I know that coming from a mixed background makes understanding our identities and place in the world hard. I know that it's tempting to identify with what we most resemble, because that decreases the chances that those around us will call it into question. I know that those around us will make it feel as though we can only *truly* be one thing. But I know that many of us don't only identify with what we resemble at first glance, if it's what we identify with at all.

Growing up, I never would've guessed that our dad had had such a similar struggle.

Today, Jamaica, Queens, New York is not a particularly diverse place. In the 1980s this was even more true. Knowing that his chances of graduating from his local high school in Flushing, Queens, were low, our dad woke up an hour before the rest of his family members, slurped the contents of a cup containing more sugar than coffee, hopped on his dirt bike and headed to school in the next city over. After school, he'd spend hours playing basketball with his black friends from his almost all-black high school who saw his caramel-colored skin and teasingly called him Hispanic slurs. He might also spend time with his porcelain-skinned girlfriend, whose friends and family members saw his unkempt, pronounced afro and called him black slurs. When

his dirt bike was stolen, he continued the routine on a ninja street bike. When that was stolen, he traveled in a Mazda rx7. When that was stolen, he walked.

Our dad is comfortable being called Hispanic. He's also comfortable checking the box that says "Black" when options like Hispanic aren't available. He understands that he is both. But when he's posed with the absurd, impossible, and painfully common question of "What are you?", he'll respond with neither. Instead, you'll get a single-word response: "Dominican." Ask him if he's Hispanic or if he's part black and he'll respond with a shrug, "technically, sure."

As a kid in Queens, he was burdened with labels he didn't own, and had no interest in owning. But whether he chose to play basketball one day or spend time on the Italian side of town the next, he returned at night to a house that was never quiet, with a kitchen that never stopped bustling, and a mother who would hover over his plate until every bite of *platano* had been cleaned off of it. He'd go home to a place where he didn't have to question his culture or his identity because each were so deeply embedded in the food he was eating and the family that was surrounding him.

We know that when he graduated he moved to California, alone. There, people continued to classify him without knowing anything about his background. He still struggled to feel a sense of belonging in either the black community or the Hispanic community. But what was different was that there was no haven to return to at the end of the day. He recently told me that if he had known that, he isn't sure he would've left behind what he did.

But I think that if he hadn't left, he wouldn't have learned to have confidence in his identity even in the absence of a community that understood it, and maybe he wouldn't have been able to teach me to do the same.

Because in time you'll find that while your mixed appearance and culture mean you can't comfortably occupy space in the black community, the Latinx community will rarely offer you a seat without a sideways glance. You'll find that in these spaces and in others, people will make assumptions about both you—your upbringing, your values, your experiences— and about where you belong simply because the *exact* shade of your skin deviates from the shade expected.

But because of this you'll also find that the way you choose to identify doesn't have to align with the way strangers or peers choose to classify you. What you decide on will probably have some relation to our lineage and biology, but the fact that you chose an ethnic identity that feels most like *home* is of so much more importance.

I know that the Mexican half of us is what dominates our appearance. I know that at home, in LA, that's the part of us that it's easiest to find a community for, and it's the part of us that is met with the least skepticism. And I know that because of that, it's the part of us that's easiest to identify with. But I also know the guilt that comes with choosing one identity and feeling like you're abandoning another.

Just like our dad did, you'll see that society is all too eager to label you as one thing. But you'll also see that like most people, you're simply more than that.

Because when I think about my culture, I think about the remarkable and sizable Mexican community we had around us growing up. But I also think about the much smaller Dominican community that sometimes seemed to exist only in the confines of our kitchen. And that community has done just as much to shape who I've become.

When I was younger, I read our dad's willingness to slave away in the kitchen for hours as a love for cooking.

When I was younger, I saw his Sunday morning bachata dance sessions as him being in a good mood.

But now I understand that neither was that simple. Because of the many times my dad stood in the middle of the warmly lit kitchen, in the midst of a chaotic food scene, music in the air mingling with the unmistakable scent of spices, he never once failed to extend his hand and beckon us to join.

And he was inviting us to be a part of something much larger than a single dance.

Love,  
Olivia