

Hail Mami, Full of Grace

In this work in progress titled, "A Cuban Heritage for an American Daughter," the author's journey back through memory to her childhood in communist Cuba serves as springboard for recounting the joys and challenges of growing up Latina in the United States and parenting an American-born child. This excerpt recollects a self-sacrificing Cuban mother who, inculcating feminist views to her daughters in exile, can now be appreciated from the author's adult perspective as a mother herself. While the immigrant mother literally crossed national borders to give her children a better life, the bicultural daughter's mothering in mainstream America often entails difficult crossings of linguistic and cultural borders. The practice of renegotiating ways of being within the family and community creates a flexibility whose example, ultimately, will serve the next generation well.

We're all born into language. Over time the first language of instruction, songs, caresses and reprimands creeps into our memory where it is stored, internalized and eventually reproduced by us to in turn communicate with others. From that repository of words we articulate instinctively our needs, desires, and thoughts. We can identify a mother tongue when we feel a visceral connection to it like the stirring you feel when hearing the national anthem, the deep-in-your-gut language that we use to express, even in thought and without words, the kaleidoscope of our humanity.

For me that's Spanish, the language of my inner child's first loves and fears and adult vulnerabilities, the one I learned from family members, Cubans and Spaniards all. Once I became a mother, speaking Spanish to my child was innate, not like the array of other caretaking tasks that, far from instinctive, I had to learn. With the birth of my daughter, Katrina, I discovered the strangeness of mothering in English, the impossibility of baby-talk in a second

language. I had navigated successfully in English from first grade to a Ph.D. and yet lacked cuddle words to communicate with an infant. Because I had been mothered by a Cuban woman, the vocabulary of nurturing gushed out of me only in Spanish as if giving birth had cracked the floodgate of a reservoir until then dammed. My daughter's cooing tapped the natural flow of my native language and I delighted in teaching her to name the world differently. Why did I assume that our bond in Spanish would carry us through life, as mine with my mother and hers with her mother, and as far back the family line as oral history can summon? The growing precariousness of our language alliance worries me deeply as English engulfs her, draws her in, and claims her for the Anglo community.

It began at about age four, the southern twang in her voice. My child sounded foreign, as if a miniature version of her pre-school teacher rode home with us to play with her toys, sit at our supper table, and call me "mama." Till then she had always called me by the Spanish mami. Video recordings taken of her are the only proof I have that Spanish was the language of her initiation into the spoken word. But once in pre-school Mrs. Joy would come and go in her voice, catching us by surprise. Why were her daddy and I baffled? She is a certified Georgian, after all. Got a birth certificate and a note from a former U.S. president recording her legitimacy: "To Katrina Hélène Schweitzer: Welcome to a wonderful family, a fine state and a great nation." Signed: Sincerely, Jimmy Carter. Whenever I teased: "You're a Georgia peach, and I'm a Cuban mango," between giggles she insisted, "no, no, I a Cuban mango." It took her awhile to conjugate the verb "to be" in her sentences. My American-born daughter, who will you grow up to be? For fear of losing her to another language and culture, I attempt a legacy of words in English as a bridge to another language that revives recollections and lessons learned from my exiled Cuban mother.

"Mami, sheee mami." Katrina slurs the Spanish "sí" for "yes" on the home video at age two. At six she still asked to watch herself as a toddler and I always conceded, anticipating the pleasure of reliving through the recorded images a time when my little girl's attempts to speak Spanish linked her to me, to my mami, her grandmother, abuela Lala, officially Rosa Eulalia Muiños González de Norat. The outdated possessive "de Norat" came to be added later, with marriage at nineteen in a pre-feminist era.

Back in the '50s a young Cuban woman's moment of glory came with a walk down the church aisle, the longer the better to showcase the gown and its yards-long trailing train—an appendage, signifier of the burden of marriage and literally the weight sure to be put on with children—that visibly slows a bride down, a real drag. Just weeks before the wedding ceremony Lala realized it was going to be a mistake. She had specifically requested a green-toned ceramic floor and celery colored walls for the master bedroom to match the Sea breeze green bathroom tiles already installed. The mahogany wardrobe was being lined in a satiny quilt of similar hue. Clothes closets were in common use then, but the tradition of the wardrobe as a fine piece of furniture

for lingerie and linens was popular among brides. No powder puff pink or sky blue for a married woman. Lala certainly did not want that. The double RR's for Rosa and Rafael had been embroidered pale and green on sets of towels. Lala's color scheme showed up too on the bed linen needlework, and on other decorative appointments, final touches in the bedroom suite. The china had been bought, the furniture picked out, kitchenware sat in boxes. Her white bridal gown fitted to perfection. The bride-to-be jotted the most important details on a notepad. Others floated in her head as would in a few weeks the layers of tulle of her bridal veil.

Meanwhile, Rafael, the future groom was busy working at his father's bodega, the grocery kiosk right next door to her dad's butcher shop. That's how the grocer's son had met and fallen in love with the butcher's daughter. For Rafael keeping the house construction on track had become a second full-time job, buying materials, ironing out issues with laborers, firing a few independent contractors and finding new ones. Whether it was a matter of price or convenience, Rafael didn't think twice about Lala's color preference. She dropped in one day to find an expanse of Camellia Rose tiles, still gritty but quite permanent, laid with artistry on the master bedroom floor. The coordinating pink walls pulled it all together in a revolting show of inconsiderate male insensitivity. "Bells and whistles went off with that affront. It was a big slap in the face and I should have called off the wedding," the indignation still crisp in mami's voice. "All my linen, the wardrobe, the bathroom tile were mint green and then the floor and walls of the bedroom a horrid pink. Can you imagine how I felt? "Pero," she aspirates the "but" of life-long resignation, "I was nineteen. I didn't have the guts to walk away. My parents had spent money. Family and friends knew of the wedding ... I don't recall if the invitations had been mailed, and I don't remember the song and dance your father gave me, but I backed down. Hija, listen daughter, don't accept Camellia Rose if your heart is set on Sea Breeze Green."

That tile incident set the tone for fifty plus years of married life. Rafael would get his way by ruse or force and Lala would concede, her ego pureed time and again, subtly, and sometimes blatantly, molded into thinking that her choices, preferences or dislikes were sub par, stupid, flighty, worthless, short of feeling that she was a leech as a stay-at-home wife. "Never stop working," papi firmly said when I announced plans to marry Albert, "men don't respect women who are burdens." And it was just like him too, that famous tirade that mami described over the line in a long-distance whisper. How could a daughter be so selfish, setting a wedding date in May? Didn't I know that he always left the States by March? In May he would be in Spain again at his retirement cottage in the village. Why not plan an October wedding when he'd be back in the States for his annual visit? "Mami, tell him I'm getting married when it's convenient for me, after the spring semester is over at the college. He's invited, but is free to decline." Easily said from Atlanta. And of course he blew his top. In the months leading to my May wedding mami and my sister

Hilde assure me that life with him was hell. Mami, the family peacekeeper, usually played referee in our household clashes and hated it, caught as she was between husband and daughters, Cuban culture and American influences, and generational differences that added up to her own struggle with the double bind of biculturalism.

Until Katrina was born our family had only one “mami,” the best four-letter word in life. Without a mother meaningless would be the essence of *casa* and *amor*. It’s the same with the “mama,” heard in the United States’ South. “Mama,” in her bosom one finds a first “home” and “love”—also four-letter words in English. Hard to find a linguistic equivalent for “single parent” in Spanish, but that’s what mami was for nearly five years in Cuba till the day we reunited with papi at Kennedy Airport in New York. Holding a small portfolio of documents, mami had clocked in many hours standing in lines on polished marble floors of government offices in La Habana of communist Cuba. Finally, far from the familiar *Camellia Rose* of her bedroom floor, we stood on a new expanse of ceramic tile among the comings and goings of travelers in a busy foreign airport. Our plane’s touch-down on American soil was the culmination of mami’s difficult choice between staying in Cuba with her parents and joining her husband in the U.S.A. She was in New York, and we at her side, because she had judged it best for us to grow up with a father. For mami, the welfare and happiness of others has always come first. I’m sure analysts and feminists could say plenty about that, but in Hispanic culture a mother’s sacrifice is expected and respected. Ironically, although acutely aware of papi’s *machismo*, mami would not be able to explain its feminine counterpart, the *marianismo* that she has practiced as a way of life because self-sacrifice is what a good wife and mother does without a label.

Lala was being the perfect wife when she moved into the back room of the small grocer’s kiosk, cooked on a double kerosene burner, slept on her old maiden bed, and bathed in a tiny rundown bathroom. All the while, boxes of house wares and every stitch of the newlyweds’ furniture sat stored in her parents’ big old house on Finlay Street. Seven months earlier, in July of 1952, she had walked down the aisle, said a quivery “I do,” then gone on a honeymoon, and returned to live in a fully furnished new home, finished under deadline. Rafael had continued working with his father, Juan, at the *bodega*. For convenience he had built his house right across the railroad tracks from the store. He could get home in a hop and a skip when at one o’clock shopkeepers closed for the *siesta*.

Within four months of the wedding Rafael had a falling out with his father, dissolved their partnership and arranged to buy a small kiosk in another part of town. His rudimentary survey of housewives in the area yielded their willingness to patronize the *bodega* if it reopened, but some ladies warned that the corner at Cisnero Bettancourt and Asunción Streets had proved bad luck for the two previous proprietors. Frequent break-ins had left those merchants paying for stock bought on credit and stolen from storage before ever making

it to the kiosk's shelves. Rafael figured that if he didn't guard his investment somehow, he too would be wiped out. He couldn't afford to be robbed, not with his credit to the hilt after fixing up and stocking the store. That on top of debt he already owed his father-in-law for money borrowed to finish the new house. As insurance, a cot in the backroom of the kiosk would have to do for awhile.

Los Laureles was inaugurated without much fanfare. Rafael and Lala kept the previous store's name, either because there was no money for a new sign or because the one it already bore reflected well the beautiful cherry laurels shading the property. At first, Lala crossed town twice a day to take Rafael lunch and dinner. Then around Christmas she began staying longer, helping behind the counter whenever she saw her young husband working feverishly to keep customers from waiting too long in line. Rafael had discounted merchandise to attract people. And it did, like termites to wood.

Lala realized he could not keep up that pace as a one man show, at least not till the celebration of the Three Wise Men in January that marked the end of the holiday season. She also knew that with the stockroom brimming, Rafael was not about to let any son-a-va-bitch Grinch make out with his goods. The overnight arrangement on the cot had stretched on for months. That's how Lala, virtuous bride turned perfect young wife, sacrificed the comfort of a new home to follow Rafael to the store's backroom. Another grave mistake within the first year of marriage because her sacrifices, taken for granted, set the stage for happily never after. Over the years Lala followed Rafael to various business ventures and moves to the United States, Spain, back to the States, then back to Spain, all with a stoic sense of duty and at a cost of great mental distress. As modeled by the Virgin Mary, marianismo, a sugarcoating for oppressive cultural practices, expects women to endure indignities in silence, or at least with grace.

And endure Lala did, especially on one particular night in the cramped store backroom. Lying under the covers in their bed she felt rotten with the flu. Across from the bed sat a small TV and several of Rafael's relatives watching the nightly baseball game. It had turned into a routine, them showing up after dinner, cramming into the couple's studio. That evening they found Lala ill, but like greedy children they settled in front of the only TV set in the family. They disregarded her condition and need for privacy. She resented their frequent intrusions and her husband's complacency, but never as bitterly as that night when her body pleaded for quiet and sleep. Caballeroooo otro jon ron! With every home run the fans in the room and the stadium cheered together. Several months later Rafael's dog fell sick. He nursed it with care, spooned-fed him the prescribed medication, and turned away his relatives when they arrived to watch the baseball game at night. He explained that his dog was sick and needed rest. They could hardly believe it and poked fun at him. Mami couldn't believe it either and filed away the indignity in silence. Over the years, her feelings have been bruised or crushed at infinitum. "I have never gotten used

to your father's ways," she says like a Chinese wife speaking bitterness.

I am myself a married woman now. My anger runs deep, seething, a residual of growing up female and Hispanic. Injustice, I will not sit quietly and take it. At home our precious enclave of peace can easily shatter. I growl and lash out at the slightest criticism or offense. Once when I complained that unseasonably hot days for an Atlanta winter had brought ants back to our kitchen, Albert pointed the finger. "I've noticed that you sometimes leave crumbs on the floor or in the kitchen sink. That's why we get ants. Why don't you try cleaning them up before leaving the house in the morning." Katrina's breakfast crumbs, the ones I don't see or don't wipe up because there's no time today, because we're running late for our 7:30 a.m. commute to school, late because she either didn't want to brush her teeth or wanted to play dollies two more minutes, or got her coat zipper snagged and started to cry, or refused to wear the knit cap in three shades of blue, even though I explain that it's so cold outside that she will see her breath. Those stressful little glitches that occur many mornings as I, a working mother, try to make it out the door on time; those slight delays my husband does not experience because he leaves the house childless and promptly at 6:55 a.m. He, who has dedicated every waking moment of his morning to himself, his swimming, his shower, his grooming, his newspaper, his breakfast, is surprised by my anger. Those crumbs that make me the culprit of our ant problem, come at me, hurled like rocks, jagged, hurtful, to stone the imperfect wife. At such moments my mouth, like a geyser, shoots forth mami's fifty years worth of suppressed grievances. Katrina's daddy must be living with a madwoman.

Push the right button and I escalate a difference of opinion into a battle, the skirmishes mami never fought for herself. I go for the jugular. My anger is raw. I am sorry that I sometimes scare Katrina. At times I've scared myself. Growing up no one yelled in our household of four. Feelings and frustrations were zipped up tight, smothered and left to fester under the skin. It was useless to protest because papi's Will was done, no matter what, his would be the Last Word. "For the sake of peace" or with a similar phrase mami would dash any hope for intervention, negotiation, or some affirmation that others—the three females in the family, the majority—had rights too. Growing up I was convinced mami that prayed: "May my Lord and husband accept the sacrifices at my hands and the silence of my daughters for the praise and glory of his name, for the good of our family, and everlasting serenity. Amen." Are my outbursts as harmful to Katrina, as my mother's silences? She probably could not help acquiescing for the sake of peace in the home any more than I can help raising my voice in the name of equity.

Accepting oppression with grace, how difficult in practice. Women with children, no professional skills and little English scarcely have a way out of an unhappy marriage. The ageless trap. Endless variations. "Avoid my predicament with education," mami insisted. Mami washing papi's shirts by hand, the only three he would wear, no washer or dryer in the apartment, not until

we graduated from college and bought her one, all the while a German-made all-in-one washer and dryer sitting unused in the brand new condominium in Madrid ready for mami whenever papi decided to retire, but in the meantime mami kept taking the 7:00 a.m. bus to the fuse company, la factoría, five days a week, eight hours a day of humdrum repetitive finger work that caused tunnel carpal syndrome in one hand and from the loud machinery, migraines that she hauled home and suppressed with medication while she finished cooking what she had started that morning, when she rose at 4:30 a.m. in order to prepare his thermos bottles with the home-cooked lunch that he insisted on six days a week, often seven when he worked Sundays, no, no sandwich would do, no ordering take out food, no, not for him, he wanted a hearty meal because he worked very hard.

Complicity dies hard. One Friday after school I take Katrina to visit the abuelitos. My parents are on their annual visit to the States. They pine to see their only grandchild. That day Katrina insists on playing soccer, then basketball. They insist on the barbecue, the dessert, the cafecito. It's getting late, we need to get home because Albert is due at the house at 6:00 pm. But the sandwich and salad I have in mind for his dinner is unacceptable to mami. No, a man needs to be fed after a day's work. She packs food for him so that I won't look bad, so that I, who also work full time, can play the faultless wife. Instead of appreciating her thoughtful gesture, I'm peeved. A tinge of guilt caps my visit. Biculturalism sometimes sucks—le zumba.

Every mother/daughter relationship, by the very nature of its intimacy, has conflicts. I'm surprised how little open friction mami and I have had. It is within motherhood that we share the most common ground. In raising my daughter I attempt to emulate her invaluable legacy of giving us roots and wings. Like most Latinas of her generation, mami didn't think in terms of feminism, a foreign concept she could sketchily explain. From her perspective, women postponing marriage, waiting longer to have children, afterward placing them in day-care to continue working, or skipping the spouse and kids package deal altogether to instead pursue a fast-track career seemed at odds with the sacrifices wives and mothers were supposed to make for their families. None of that was applicable to her. What got mami fired up was wanting better for her girls. Her feminism wasn't in the practice, but in the advice. No labels needed. "Hijas, estudien, estudien. Study, get an education, that's what men respect. Don't be like me. No, not like me." Yes, mami. I'll try. I promise. And I learned the lesson well.

Today I can roar in either Spanish or English. Now, how do I ward off the anger? From a young age mami's instructions were clear, never a husband before a college degree. "Secure economic independence so you won't be trapped like me," and her anecdotes honed in the message. "I remember the humiliation as a newlywed in Cuba when your father begrudged my asking for money for a haircut or a new dress." "But I like your hair long," or "Your closet is full of clothes," he would snort, even as he polished his new Studebaker squeaky

clean. “I felt as if I were asking for alms, and even though I helped your father out at the store, I didn’t get paid a centavo, not a penny.”

When Hilde was ten and I nine and we were living in Union City, New Jersey, mami walked us to the neighborhood Savings and Loan one afternoon, opened two savings accounts and taught us to religiously deposit part of our weekly allowance. “Niñas, listen girls no one has a right to the money you earn and save. If you get married share expenses, but keep your bank accounts separate for peace of mind—because you never know.” We were still playing with dolls when mami began plotting our escape route from a potentially bad marriage. She took on the role of financial advisor and strategist for our future independence—this from a woman who has never written a check herself. Poor mami, she had left her parents in Cuba to save us from communism and we still grew up fearful, imprisoned in island culture under papi’s totalitarian rule. But out of oppression empowerment is possible. Mami’s crowning glory: two college-educated daughters, fluent in Spanish, grounded in their native heritage, completely functional in Anglo society, with personal investments, and under no man’s thumb. Mami, a feminist? By instinct. Hail mothers around the world, across borders here on earth, as they pray in many tongues with hope everlasting that all their sacrifices will not be in vain.