

### This is America. Speak English.

Marcella Cintron sighed heavily in the backseat of her family's station wagon. Considering she was squished between her two sisters, the seat belt buckle was stabbing her in the butt and the AC was out on what felt like one of the hottest days of the summer, Marcella felt like her heavy sigh was well warranted. So she did it again. *Sigh*.

It wasn't like her sisters noticed though. They never noticed or cared about anything she did. Marcella was the baby of the three Cintron *hermanas*. *La bebé* they called her. Usually the youngest sibling got away with murder but not this *bebé*. Her parents treated them equally, making them work hard for everything and rewarding them accordingly. What was the *problema* then?

The problem was that Marcella was different from her family. Where her family was loud, outspoken and lively, Marcella was quiet and much more reserved. When her family heard news about a *prima* getting in trouble, her Abuela, mother and sisters immediately assumed the worst, writing off their cousin and immediately cutting her out of their lives. Marcella liked to ask questions, observe and then form an opinion based on the facts. Her family hated this, usually rolling their eyes at her when she asked, "Well, did anyone actually look into Nina's boyfriend having a shady lingerie business on the side?" (Nina = *prima*. Trouble = stealing thongs for boyfriend.) But what did she know? She was only twelve years old, *la bebé* and different. These were three traits of unreliability as far as they were concerned.

Shockingly enough, this didn't bother Marcella. This had been her whole life (so far) and she was level-headed enough to know they wouldn't change. They were different than Marcella and Marcella was different than them. But even so, she sighed again. Partly because all of her reasons for sighing were extremely valid, but partly because she wanted her sisters to hear, roll their eyes and ask, "What now?"

This is a weird thing to want, right? Your sisters to be annoyed with you? But it was during those times that Marcella felt like part of the family. Included. Not an outsider who was so different than them that they didn't know what to say to her. Or how to relate. But again, they didn't hear her. This was because her mother had Marc Anthony's "Aguanile" blasting in the car. Her mother had been repeating the song for the last twenty minutes. When her family loved a song, they just played it over and over again until the song was old hat and they moved on to the next. Marcella thought it was annoying that her abuela, mother and sisters acted like they were hearing the song for the first time *every time* it replayed, but it didn't stop her from tapping her foot and nodding her head to the beat each time it did. Music was one of the few things they all loved – one of the few things that made her feel connected to her family and her Puerto Rican culture.

The song ended right as her mother parked, her sisters acting out the final instrumentals as the car shut off.

"Okay," her mother said, turning her head to look back at them. "*¿Rápido, sí? We have to get the bulk of our things from La Bodega and that's across town. I want to be in and out.*"

"*Sí, Mami,*" her and sisters replied.

Her mother nodded and pointed to the passenger seat. "*Ayuda Abuela, Luisa. Samara, tú también. Marcella, grab the bags, por favor.*"

Without another word, the Cintron sisters did as their mother asked. Luisa, her eldest sister, got out first. She waited for Samara, the middle sister, to exit as well before closing the door behind her. Marcella watched as their abuela, Clara, opened her door and allowed Luisa and Samara to assist her to a standing position.

Abuela was young compared to her other friends grandmothers, but she had bad arthritis in her knees and hands from being a beautician for over twenty years. Abuela was the loudest, most outspoken and liveliest of them all, but she struggled with standing up and sitting down. It had taken her abuela years to admit that she had been in so much pain and when she finally had, her mother had felt so much guilt. A week later Abuela moved in with them (their father hadn't been too thrilled about that) and her mother had told the sisters that if anyone forgot to help Abuela stand up or sit down *they* wouldn't be able to stand up or sit down. Abuela was one of the proudest, most stubborn people Marcella knew, but as far as she could remember, her grandmother never said a word about the help. Her pain must have been that great.

Once her grandmother was standing and her sisters had shut the passenger door, Marcella exited the car. Closing her own door, she headed to the trunk and grabbed the reusable bags. Her mother liked using those bags when they went to the American grocery because it forced her to only buy what they needed. La Bodega had mostly Spanish groceries so basic things like eggs, cereal and carnation milk were a lot more expensive there. They didn't go to the American grocery often – her mother wasn't a huge fan – but it was necessary and every penny they spent mattered.

Marcella's father worked in construction and her mother did hair with her grandmother at their shop. They were better off than some of the other families in her neighborhood, considering how many people lived in their home, but when she visited her white friends' homes from school, she was reminded of how much they didn't have.

"Okay," her mother said again. But this time there was a smile on her lips. "We're going to play a little game."

Her sisters looked at each other and smirked. Marcella nodded, smiling on the inside. Even Abuela was excited as she clapped her hands and said, "*¡Un juego, me gusta!*" A game, I like it!

Her mother laughed as they all walked into the store. She moved her family to the side so they didn't block the entrance and explained the rules.

"I have split *la lista* into two so because of this there will be two teams. Whoever gets everything the fastest and meets back here in *viente minutos*, gets *helado!*"

All of them gasped, including Abuela, before cheering loudly in the store. Ice cream was a very special treat, one they did not get frequently, so this was a big deal.

"Gloria," her grandmother said softly to her mother. "*¿Estas cierto?*" Are you sure? "*Se que no tenemos dinero extra para gastar.*" I know we don't have extra to spend.

Marcella's mother approached her grandmother and squeezed her shoulder. "*No puedo estar apretada todo el tiempo.*" I can't be tight all the time. "And it's summer! Who doesn't like *helado* in the summer?"

"I know I do," Samara replied.

"Yes, yes, we know," her mother said back. Shaking her head at her second eldest. If anyone had an obsession with sweets it was definitely Samara.

Abuela nodded at her mother so her mother turned to look at her sisters. In doing this, she missed the small smile that appeared on her grandmother's face. Marcella saw it though and it made her heart swell.

"Marcella," her mother called to her. "*Ven aca* so I can give you your list."

Marcella started to head over when her abuela gently pulled a strand of her hair. When she looked up, her abuela had her finger to her lips. The corner of Marcella's mouth lifted slightly. Abuela knew Marcella had seen her smile after her mother had walked away.

Again, Marcella was different, but in times like those, she realized she had to get parts of who she was from somewhere. Her abuela noticed everything too and to some extent, kept her thoughts to herself.

She brushed her hand against her abuela's as she walked past her and stood in front of her mother.

Her mother held up two lists with her personal handwriting on it. She waved the one in her left hand around.

"Team A," she started, "is Luisa, Samara y Mami." Her sisters fist bumped each other and threw an air high-five at their grandmother. "For Team B," her mother said waving the other list around, "*es tu y yo Marcella.*"

Her mother handed the first list to Luisa and gave their list to Marcella. Marcella analyzed its contents:

- *Carne* (Meat)
- *Pescado* (Fish)
- Cereal x3
- *Huevos* (Eggs)

What they needed to get was easy enough to find, but Marcella didn't know what was on her sisters list. Also three of the four items were in different parts of the store. Marcella knew her mother had done that on purpose and she was happy. She didn't like when things were easy. It made winning that much more rewarding.

"Okay!" her mother finally said. "*En sus marcas, listos, fuera!*" On your marks, get set, go!

Luisa, Samara and Abuela took off towards the back of the store. Well, as fast as they could with Abuela in tow. Marcella and her mother did the same, but headed towards the produce section. When her family played games like this, her and her mother loved to be on the same team. Luisa and Samara thought their mother always chose Marcella because she was *la bebé*, but what they didn't understand was that the pair of them were very decisive and didn't like to stray from lists. Her sisters and her grandmother on the other hand, would easily come back with five extra things.

During this time together, her mother explained her reasonings behind selecting the grocery items that she did: how the meat and fish should look, what a good price was for protein and how to check the eggs to make sure none were broken. Her mother also let her pick the different kinds of cereal since it was just her. They, of course, had to get their father's favorite, but two out of three was amazing. Her sisters would be so jealous.

Most importantly, they took this time to catch up. Her mother asked her how school was going and if there was anything she wanted to talk about it. They did all of this in Spanish just in case Marcella got embarrassed about a specific topic, but mostly they spoke in Spanish to keep the conversation between themselves.

Marcella's first language was English. It was her mother's second, but she had lived in the States long enough that her accent was no longer present. That didn't stop her from speaking Spanish and enforcing the practice of the language in their home. Marcella was glad she did because she knew long term, being bi-lingual would take her far, but what gave her joy in speaking Spanish was that it was Abuela's first language. Because of this her English was not that good and even though she practiced, she was her confident self when she spoke her native language. Being able to communicate with elders was important. There was so much to learn from them.

Marcella and her mother headed back to the meetup location with time to spare. When the other team arrived, they had barely made the cutoff and indeed had a few more things in their cart.

*“¡Ustedes pierden!”* her mother told them. You guys lose! She motioned for them to move towards the checkout line so they all started walking.

“So not fair!” Samara protested.

*“¿Y por qué?”* Abuela asked. Marcella could hear the irritation in her voice. Her abuela didn’t like to lose either.

*“Pues, Mami,”* her mother started, *“Marcella y yo llegamos aquí primero y ustedes tienen cosas extra en su cart.”* We got here first and you guys have extra things in your cart. Marcella couldn’t help it, she stuck her tongue out at her sisters. She was never one to gloat, but they *had* gotten there first and that team *always* grabbed things not on the list.

*“¡Mami!”* Samara whined. “Marcella stuck her tongue out at us.”

Her mother looked down at her and Marcella wanted to fold into herself. This was why she kept quiet and tried to be good. She hated getting in trouble more than anything in the world. She could already feel the tears welling up in her eyes when her mother turned her head and looked back at Samara.

*“Nadie le gusta un cuento de hadas o un mal perdedor, Samara.”* No one likes a tattletale or a sore loser.

Marcella and Samara’s jaws dropped at the same time. And then when their mother reached out to give Marcella a high-five, Samara huffed and fell back to walk with Luisa. Marcella looked up at her mother and grinned.

*“Ahora hay una vista que no veo regularmente,”* her mother said. Well this is a sight I don’t see often.

Marcella shrugged. *“Estoy feliz.”*

Her mother grabbed her free hand and squeezed. *“Bueno, también estoy feliz.”*

When they reached the register there were a few people in front of them, but there was enough room to start adding some of their items to the conveyor belt.

*“Luisa, Samara, ven y empieza a poner cosas aquí.”* Come and start putting things on here. *“¡Mas rápido nos vayamos, mas rápido podremos tomar helado!”* The quicker we leave the quicker we can all get ice cream!

Marcella’s sisters eyes lit up. For being fourteen and sixteen, you’d think they wouldn’t have gotten so excited, but their mother usually kept to her rules. Only her and Marcella should have won the prize, but it seemed like Team B would be enjoying the win also. She wondered why her mother was in such a good mood, but didn’t want to mess up the ice cream for everyone so she didn’t ask.

Her abuela didn’t seem to care though. *“¿Gloria, por qué tan buen humor?”*

Her mother smiled and was about to speak when someone behind them spoke instead.

“This is America. Speak English.”

Marcella and her family turned to the person who'd spoken. Behind them stood an older white couple. A gray haired male and a white haired female. The words spoken had come from a female.

Marcella's mother smiled, but it did not reach her eyes when she replied, "Pardon me?"

The white woman sneered before repeating, "*This is America. Speak. English. You're lucky to even be here.*"

Marcella froze then. She froze because she'd never heard anything so rude in her life. She froze because there were so many things that the woman did not know about her mother or her family. But most importantly Marcella froze because her mother, after a moment of staring the woman down, simply turned away and hurried them through the checkout line.

When they left the store Marcella couldn't help but notice how different her family's vibe was from when they arrived. They had been happy, singing and jovial. Now they were somber, eyes turned down and defeated.

Marcella did not understand. How could that terrible woman's words affect her proud and outspoken family so? Even her sisters said nothing and for some reason this made Marcella very angry.

"¿Mami?" She said to her mother as they drove out of the store parking lot.

"¿Si, Marcella?" Even now her mother sounded deflated.

"Why did that woman assume we didn't speak English?" Marcella tried to keep the bite out of her voice but she failed.

"*Por qué es una estúpida puta blanca,*" Abuela said in return. She hadn't tried to disguise her bite at all.

Marcella's eyes widened to saucers. She looked at her sisters to see if they had just heard what she'd heard. They had. Their eyes looked the same as hers, their jaws almost to the floor.

"¡Mami!" her mother chastised. "*¡No digas cosas así en frente de las niñas!*" Don't say things like that in front of the girls!

Abuela turned her head to look out of the window, refusing to respond to her daughter. Marcella couldn't help but watch her grandmother. Her body was so tense. Marcella could see her hands clenched into fists on her lap, but what had Marcella feeling everything from fury to complete and utter sadness, was the single tear she witnessed streaming down her abuela's face.

In Marcella's twelve years of life, she had never seen her abuela cry. Ever. And now she was shedding a tear for some rude white woman who didn't know her? Or them? Or their story?

Marcella was different. She was quiet and much more reserved, asking questions, observing and then forming an opinion. But the anger and hurt she felt from seeing her abuela's single tear, made her explode.

"Abuela's right though! That woman is a stupid white bitch!"

"MARCELLA!" her mother yelled as the car screeched to an abrupt stop. Her mother started to turn her head to give Marcella the tongue lashing of the century when she realized they were in the middle of the street. Seeing this, her mother started driving again and properly pulled off to the side of the road.

Her sisters shocked expressions turned to her then. Even her grandmother looked at her in surprise. The only person that wasn't speechless was her mother.

*"¿Que te ha pasado?!"* What has gotten into you?!

"That woman made Abuela cry!" Her mother and her sisters looked in Clara's direction now. She had turned away once more, but not before they all watched as she wiped at her tears.

*"Ay Mami,"* her mother said softly.

But Marcella wasn't finished. "And I am upset! And I've never been this upset and I don't know why I am. All I know is that that woman ruined our day and we let her! Why? I know I'm quiet and you guys don't like that, but I love that you all are loud and say what you feel and have fun. I love our *familia*, but I've never seen anyone be able to take your voices away. Why would you let you her do that?" Marcella looked at her grandmother. "Abuela, why would you let that woman make you cry?"

Her abuela didn't look at Marcella, but after a deep breath, she said, *"Por qué . . . he tratado con personas como ella toda mi vida y después de todos estos años todavía me duele cuando alguien me ve menos de."* Because . . . I've been dealing with people like that my whole life and after all these years it still hurts when someone sees me as less than.

All Marcella wanted to do was cry too. She wanted to pull her mother, grandmother and sisters to her chest and hold them tight. Because in that moment she realized this had not been the first time they had experienced something like this. Her sisters were only fourteen and sixteen. Only two and four years older than her. How old had they been when someone had made them feel less than?

Her mother and grandmother were US citizens. They were successful and had their own business. How often did they get treated less than they deserved?

It was because of those questions and their likely answers that Marcella couldn't allow herself to cry. She couldn't allow herself to become another silenced Cintron.

*"We are proud boricuas,"* she began. "It is a coveted skill to be able to speak two languages. And we are not lucky to be here. We were born here. We deserve to be here and we can't let people like that woman make us think otherwise. Not anymore." Marcella made sure everyone in the car made eye contact with her before she finished. "We can't let anyone silence our voices again. Please."

Without warning, her sisters pulled her into a hug. Marcella could hear their sniffles as she hugged them back. When they broke apart, her abuela's hand was waiting for her. She grabbed it and squeezed, smiling as her grandmother patted their clasped hands with her free one.

And finally there was her mother. Gloria Iris Cintron. The strongest woman she'd ever know apart from her abuela. Her mother was looking at her through the rearview mirror. For a while, she didn't say anything. She just stared at Marcella as if she was looking at her for the first time. In some ways she was.

When her mother did speak, all she said was, *"Nunca mas."* Never again. And then she nodded her head in Marcella's direction. It was more than enough so Marcella smiled and sat back in her seat.

Her mother took a breath before starting the car again and driving off. No one spoke, but it was not like before. It wasn't defeating and out of character. It was as if they too, were seeing themselves in a different a light.

One for the better. That silence only lasted for a moment longer, when the radio cut on. Marcella could hear the intro of the song even though the volume was still low. She looked at her sisters. They were already grinning.

*"Mami,"* Luisa started, *"¡subirlo, por favor!"* Turn it up please!

So her mother did. The drums of the song greeted them right before Marc Antony's voice filled all of the open spaces in their car. Samara thrilled as the song continued, making her mother and grandmother laugh. Everyone's bodies started to move as the song continued to build up to the chorus. Marcella laughed out loud because she knew what was coming. And even though the AC was out, the windows were down and there happened to be a light breeze flowing through them. The belt buckle was still stabbing her in the butt, but she didn't let it affect her mood. And even though she was squished between her two sisters, she didn't sigh. This time she wrapped her arms around their shoulders and joined them as the backup singers belted out, *"Aguanile Aguanile Mai Mai."*

As Marcella did this, openly laughing and dancing with her *familia*, she realized that maybe she wasn't so different after all. She was comfortable, confident and proud. Like they were.

**Writers note:** I have experienced this rudeness in my life. Many times. My mother many more times. My grandmother, I can't fathom how often. Unfortunately, my experiences did end like this story. Too many times we allowed non-white people's ignorance affect us and make us feel less than. There were times where I actually do remember my mother speaking up and correcting the ignorance, but in doing so, it made her the bad guy – the unrefined one. It was a lose-lose situation and it was our normal. I hope this story opens eyes to even the smallest instances of racism and I hope that in this new normal no one will have the power to silence our voices. Thank you. Ilia out.