

becoming *la* becoming *la mujer* marisa navarro

I used to dream that Superwoman would fly into my life, her legs unshaven and her hair cropped short. She would swoop me up and take me somewhere that made me feel safe and beautiful—a place far from the hell I knew as public high school. In this distant place, I would feel sensual for the first time ever, without feeling dirty. No one would assume I was destined to be a teenage mom, or that my brown skin marked me as a criminal. I wouldn't be "too dark" or "too fat," and my intelligence would never be compromised.

Those were ambitious goals for a Mexican-American girl growing up near East Los Angeles. Every year, the drill team girl had a kid, then the prom queen. Pregnancy was so common it was almost a game to guess who the next teenage mother would be. Still, East L.A. is the only place I've lived where the scent of Aqua Net and overprocessed hair mingles with the sounds of English, Spanish, Chinese, Korean and Armenian. There was comfort in being

surrounded by hundreds of other brown people. I missed that when I went away to college and found my skin color and dark hair made me stand out in class.

I was one of the fortunate at my high school, shielded from some of Los Angeles's harshness by college prep classes. My parents stressed education all my life, so I focused on earning good grades, hoping they would be my ticket to a better life. But there was a price to pay. Since many of my female classmates wouldn't make it to graduation (pregnancy or lack of interest leading them to drop out), girls' actions became dichotomized into right and wrong. There were "good girls" (those who went to college) and "bad girls" (teenage mothers on welfare).

Early on, my parents reinforced that message, and there could be no margin of error. "It's out of love we tell you this, *mijita*," they'd say. "Be quiet. Study hard. Don't have sex. Go to college, and then get married. A good daughter doesn't dress like a slut. A good daughter doesn't pierce or tattoo herself. A good daughter doesn't rock the boat." If I messed up, my whole future would be over. I must be a good *hijita*.

My parents also grew up in East L.A. I never told them what I faced at school, but I'm sure they knew. That made the parental leash even tighter. As an immigrant (my dad) and a first-generation American (my mom), they stressed hard work and success at any cost. It's a drive I don't think any person who is fourth-generation American or beyond can fully understand. Perhaps it's the stigma of the accent fresh in the memory, the blunter racism and the hard labor not even a distant memory. Either way, it fuels parents' determination that their children will not be like them.

In my family, being a good *hijita* meant more than simply being an obedient daughter. It also meant being desexualized. Being of mind but not of body. Wrapped in that word were my parents' hopes for

me—and for themselves. I was to transcend the racism they'd experienced and to surpass society's low expectations.

My father was the success story in the family, and he was proud of it. He came from a small town in Mexico, graduated from college in the United States and made lots of money. Somehow, my sister and I had to do even better than he had. On top of being supernaturally smart, we had to fulfill his macho idea of sensuality, a classic Madonna/whore tightrope that demanded we be attractive yet pure. We were expected to be skinny, have long hair and wear clothes that showed our womanliness. Yet, we had to carry this off in a way that let men know we were unavailable for sex.

Sex was the biggest threat to my parents' carefully laid plans. Having sex meant I'd impede my chances to succeed, to achieve an American dream greater than the one offered to my parents. It meant I'd inevitably get pregnant and become a statistic, trapped in a community that was slowly falling apart. My body (and what I did with it) could make or break our family's future. The concept of the body as a battleground had much more meaning than even the most radical feminist could conceive. I needed only to keep my legs tightly locked, and everything would be all right.

Eventually, the word *hijita* left a sour taste in my mouth. It meant I was my parents' daughter. I didn't belong to me.

When I hit puberty, my father took on a form of desexualization with me and my sister. Boys were not humans, but the makers of sperm, waiting to plant their seed in us. For some reason my father saw me as extra fertile ground that he was determined be kept fallow. The only way to accomplish this was to forbid boys into the house and into my social life. If a boy called, I was questioned about his intentions. My father would bend down, squint and stare into my eyes to make sure I wasn't lying.

To further the desexualization process, he inspected me before I

went out. If I wore lipstick or a tight shirt that showed my breasts, I was criticized and called a slut. I tried being the dutiful, plain daughter, but still I lost. When I cut off my hair and started wearing baggy pants to avoid his scrutiny, my father called me a boy. Where was this invisible line that would win his acceptance? What did it take to be a good *hijita*?

Since I couldn't figure that out, I looked to my older sister. My father always had a special fondness for her. I think it was because she was just so smart—smarter than all the white kids. In high school, she defied him by experimenting with sexuality, sensuality and love. She proved she could be smart and sensual and have neither quality compromised. As an intelligent woman, she was unhappy learning about science and literature while knowing nothing about her body. She innocently assumed our father would be okay with this, since it didn't affect her grades.

Instead, he became enraged. Didn't she know that sex led to pregnancy and pregnancy led to welfare, which led to family dishonor? Although my sister didn't agree with his linear thinking, she was powerless to convince him otherwise. He would not have it. My sister became a bad *hijita* and was kicked out of the house. This terrified me; maybe *la familia* wasn't really about unconditional love after all. And if my sister and my father shared a special relationship that I would never have, what would happen to me if I did the same thing? I was too scared to find out.

I played out my teenage years like a script. More than anything, I felt I dressed in drag throughout high school, wearing clothes that would get boys to look at me, but only with vague interest. Avoiding male attention consumed my thoughts so much that men were all I thought about.

In the end, they won. I was constantly concerned that my outfits were too sensual. I had a hard time looking at my face in the mirror,

much less the rest of my body. Everything was wrong with me. Caught in a paradox, I was always dissatisfied. I hated that men were attracted to me, but I also hated that I didn't have big breasts or a thinner waistline. No guy wanted a fat, small-chested girl.

I lost all sense of ownership and control over my physical self. My memories of that script are vivid, too easy to relive:

Act I: First Year—(Sur)Real World 101

My math teacher walks around the room and then stops and leans his back against mine so that my head and breasts are flattened against the desk. Two boys sitting next to me laugh. I put my head down and silently swear that I'll stick quadratic equations up his ass. Eventually, I stop paying attention in class and drop from an A to barely a B. I chalk it up to the fact that I always hated math.

Act II: Sophomore Year—Boys Will Be Boys

A boy likes me and decides to show it by grabbing me every day. He does it when my back is facing him and I'm trying to be taken seriously. In the beginning, I yell that he's a fuckin' dick/asshole/no good motherfucker. He smiles and grabs me again. Eventually, I stop reacting, hoping he'll go away if I don't pay attention to his games. He assumes that means I like it and grabs me even more. Sometimes I think I should fuck him to get it over with, because that's all he really wants. Maybe afterward he'll leave me alone. But I don't. Not because I love myself enough not to fuck an asshole, but because the thought of someone seeing me naked is terrifying.

Act III: Junior Year—Honk If You're Horny

Trying to walk down the street with my head up has become the most political act of my teenage life. I dread major roads and busy intersections because men yell at me or stick out their tongues like deranged lizards. I hate how all they see is long hair and breasts, and how with each honk they take a piece of my self-esteem with them. These are the kind of men that stick silhouettes of women with

big tits and tiny waists on their cars. These are the kind of men who smell estrogen and think fuck. I start to hate everything that makes me look like a woman—the breasts, the hips, the long hair—because I'm getting lots of attention, but no self-esteem.

Act IV: Senior Year—Stand by Your Man

By now I hate myself for turning men on, for being a "slut." All I want is for someone to love me for my mind. I'm tired of having my body picked apart by my father, being a virgin but made to feel like a whore. I figure since I'm already dirty, having sex won't make it any worse.

In bed, the boy I'm dating pulls my hair and pretends to slap me to make his dick harder. He calls me a slut and a ho'. I lie flat as a board, confused, scared and sexually unfulfilled. I let him fuck me without a condom, without birth control pills, nothing. My body is too dirty to be worth protecting against AIDS or pregnancy. Everything the men on the street and my father told me seems true.

One day the boy laughs and says that the first time he saw me, he thought I looked ugly because my skin was dark. He doesn't want to take me to the beach or lie down in the park because I could get tan again. Another time, he tells me to shut up because I sound "too Mexican." What race does he think I am? I ask. He smiles, caresses my face and tells me he doesn't like to think of me as Mexican. He means it as a compliment. At eighteen, I think if this is love, then maybe I was meant to be alone in the world after all.

Act V: Pomp and Circumstance

The most beautiful song I've ever heard. I collect my diploma like a trophy of war and run far away.

I left Los Angeles for Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, knowing the distance of a thousand miles had to release the

parental leash. I wanted the power to create my identity, a power that I didn't have before. I purposely chose a women's college because I knew I needed time away from men.

School saved my mind and body. In college, I wasn't anyone's *hijita*, and I wouldn't be anyone's slut. I was able to come out of the closet, first to myself and a year later to everyone else. Women told me I was smart and beautiful; neither quality was ever questioned. When I took up smoking and drinking, I wasn't a bad *hijita*. Good and bad vanished, and I was *la mujer*. That phrase sounded beautiful and empowering to me.

At school I met many different types of women who were smart and proud of their bodies. I had a friend who fought boys. One time she was flyering a concert about a group's homophobic lyrics, and a man shouted "dyke" at her. She grabbed a pool stick, chased him down and threatened to show him "what a real dyke can do." The guy was so dumbfounded that a woman wasn't going to put her head down and take his shit that he hid underneath a pool table and waited for others to calm her down. I met many women who felt comfortable wearing dresses and grabbing their crotches in public. Others recited Marx to their lovers as they prepared to make passionate love.

I thought racing to be a part of the queer community would save me. I enlisted in the dyke world complete with uniform—short hair, overalls, cap on backwards and body piercings. As an extra buffer, I gained twenty-five pounds to make sure men wouldn't be interested in me, and to make sure I didn't have the body of a "slut." I walked down the street with pride, knowing that men no longer honked at me. I was undesirable. There was power in that for me. I thought I was screwing the patriarchy, subverting the status quo of femininity.

I didn't realize, however, that I was still blaming myself. At twenty, I had only run away from my problems and never dealt with them. I still felt as if my body was dirty and shameful. I still believed

that the unwanted sexual attention I got in high school had been my fault—as though I'd "asked for it" by trying to fit a narrow prescription of femininity.

Soon, I found myself trying to follow the status quo of a different community, complete with confining norms and stereotypes. Now, instead of wanting to be a good *hijita*, I found myself trying to be a good queer girl and a good feminist. The role was just as confining. The feminist and gay communities still had a white/classist/racist framework—one which did nothing to address the multiple-identity dilemmas that came along with being a queer Latina feminist.

When I looked in the mirror, I felt just as much in drag as I had in high school. Finally, after twenty-one years of confusion, I realized I could be happy only when I defined my own idea of beauty and sensuality. My identity had too many layers for me to wrap it into a convenient package. The most political statement I could make was to look the way I wanted and not be ashamed of it. Today, my closet reflects my philosophy with a feather boa, tuxedo shirt, overalls and platforms all peacefully cohabiting. Such nonsensical words as *butch*, *femme* and *drag* have disappeared from my vocabulary and my fashion style.

And naked, I'm just as sensual. I can look at myself and not feel ashamed anymore. Sure, I have stretch marks all over my ass, scars all over my body, and my breasts are lopsided. But that's what being a real *mujer* is all about. Real *mujeres* live life intensely—and their bodies show it. They feast on food, drink with revelry and play hard. I look forward to watching my body develop more, to becoming more curvaceous. I'm ready for anything that happens, whether it's cellulite or muscle definition.

Now that I wear whatever I like, I feel sensual. I can go to a club and let the beat lead my hips. That's what I like best about dancing. My mind doesn't think. The rhythms dictate how my hips will sway,

how my whole body moves. I don't care if men or women are ing. My sensuality is for me.

I need to discover how my body can move. I need to know me before anyone else can. I thought if I reached this epiphany and expressed my sexuality with freedom, that men would see me as a target. I was wrong. It wasn't my body that made men yell and grab me. It was them.

And, in some ways, I have little power to change that. I can't single-handedly overturn messages telling men that women are sex objects. I can't uproot myths casting women of color as wild and sexually available. I also understand my parents' mistakes. Instead of shielding me from boys and sex, they should have prepared me for what I would come to expect. Instead of "protecting" me by teaching me body hatred, they should have taught me to cherish myself. Had I been proud of my body, I may not have let street harassers bring me down so low. I wouldn't have risked my life sleeping with assholes. I would have known how to defend myself.

I accept this now and fight to unlearn twenty-one years of conditioning. So far, I'm doing pretty well. Without realizing it, I've developed a new body language. When I walked with my head down, men picked up on my powerlessness. I believe that my confident new stride actually scares some of those assholes away. Once in a while, I get catcalls, but now those men are sure to get flipped off, barked at or blown a kiss. I realize why my friend is willing to fight boys, and ultimately, I would fight a man. I spent so many years feeling ashamed of my body that rolling in the dirt might make me feel cleaner.

In the end, no Superfeminist ever flew in from the sky to save me. It took me years to realize that nobody else could rescue me. I didn't have to be a superhero. I just had to allow myself to become *la mujer*.