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## Para Mis Amigas

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# Para Mis Amigas

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Jesse Pedraza

One of my most vivid memories from my childhood started during recess back at my old elementary school in Los Angeles. Figueroa Street School was located on the corner of Figueroa and 111th Street, right smack in the hood. It was the home of the Dolphins. I attended this school 3 years: kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade. Recess was my favorite for many reasons. It was much more than my need to be outdoors, outside of the suffocating classroom. If I could, this is what I would say to her now, “Ms. Simpson, this isn’t quite working for me, this traditional pedagogy is crowding me, I’m uneasy learning this way, and I have a need to move around. I’m punished for being too talkative, too hyper, too busy with my hands.” Expressing myself, saying what I felt at that age could have changed my experience in school, but only if someone would have actually listened to me. I wish children were given that type of agency and allowed to blossom.

Sigh. This is a lot. This is a lot to remember.

It was more than that. I loved recess because I got to be with girls. My girlfriends. Mis amigas. I had 3, black and brown girls with whom I spent my childhood. Morenas. Mis amigas. We’d run to the yard and grab the ropes from a bucket at the recess cabinet and rush to untangle the ropes. We quickly ran to save our space on the playground. We’d take turns. I’d hold onto the ropes first and then we’d alternate. Our friendship was as if we were the four directions. East, South, West, North. We’d create magic together. A joy that was pure, innocent and required nothing more than 30 mins, two ropes, and our ability to be agile, quick to use our limbs. This was the very first time I ever felt my femhood be understood and supported. They were girls and I was a “boy,” yet they treated me no differently. I felt part of a family — a family who had my back.

I felt the stares as I jumped. I felt the toxic masculinity bleed out from the eyes of the boys in my grade. I could see their desire to jump too but I could also see the fear that held them down to the ground. A pair of those eyes came from my cousin, Fabiola. Fabi, morenita, gordita, con su camisa grande and the pans (sweatpants) she'd wear on a daily basis. Her lazy ponytail would slip from the tight grip my tia tried to impose as she quickly got her ready for school each morning. There she was, friendless on a bench staring at me as I jumped. She glared at me and at my girlfriends. I'd glance up sometimes to look at her looking at me. Her stare was full of envy; her stare was that of her father and her mother. She watched and made observations, and saved the data to be used, against me, later on.

At 2:55 p.m. I'd wait for her at the gate. We'd walk home together to her house. My mom got out of work at 5 p.m. everyday. I'd have to wait for her at my cousin's house for the longest two hours of my life. Fabi and I had a complex relationship. For a moment during the walk home, she was Fabi Fabi and she'd let her guard down and was silly with me. Our walk home did not require her to be who she "ought" to be. She was funny and would make me laugh. As soon as got closer to her house, I could feel her ease subside.

She turned on me as soon as we got home. We fought immediately over small things, she was always trying to take things away from me and I was fighting to get them back. (If you're brown, growing up with a lot of cousins, you know how this goes, the constant playing, real emotions of comparison, jealousy, and mischief all intertwined.)

It was during one of those moments that we got into, maybe, one of the biggest fights of my seven-year-old life. She pushed me, yelled at me, releasing all the hatred for me she had stored up during her day at school. She pushed me onto the fence behind her house. I stood there resisting. I was extremely skinny and was wearing my school uniform. Dark blue shorts and a small white polo shirt with my spaghetti arms swimming out of the sleeves. I pushed back.

I knew this moment was much more than fighting over the ball. Fabi was homophobic. Fabi and I both knew a secret. A secret revealed every time we'd look at each other. She hated it. She was queer and she knew it. I knew it. I knew I was queer and she did not like that either. Her aggressive pushing evolved into a toxic storm above us, "Faggot, puto, marica." I could feel those words on my skin; they tried to break me. I felt the cloudy sky overwhelm me. I was tired. I was fed up with this shit. I pushed back like I never had before; given her size it was very rare for me to muster the courage to fight back – but not on that day. "Get off of me you stupid bitch!" I yelled at her and I smacked her ponytail off. "STOP IT. STOP IT!" Her mom overheard us fighting from the kitchen window.

That day everything changed. My aunt, María, who was a lot like her daughter – butch, wearing loose-fitted "boyish" clothes – came out of the house. Angrily she yelled at me and told me she was going to call my mom. I stopped and went inside the house. I was uncomfortable and unsafe there. I felt the same most of the time around my family members. I waited for round two. I was ready. I was fed up. Fabi came inside, with her messed-up ponytail, and continued her attack, "Jesse nomás le gusta andar con niñas en la escuela. No tiene amigos. Solo amigas." Her proclamation was precise, as if she had spent a good chunk of time preparing for this moment and this speech.

I looked at her and then at my aunt, tears in my eyes. Fabi had out-ed me to maybe the most dangerous, homophobic, and closeted person in our family. We all knew what Fabi was trying to say. It was the huge pink elephant in the room. It was the truth everyone had tried to bury under the rug. I screamed, "We're all fucking queer Tia!! ALL of us."

My Tía María saw right through me, Fabi, and herself. She knew what was happening. I was a reminder of why she'd only fuck my Tío on special occasions. My mom was called soon after that, after the fight, there was nothing left. I zoned-out for the rest of that day and survived. As I write this story now, two decades later, my memory both fogs and unravels. I can somewhat remember what happened to me at home, a bit too ugly, and I choose not to write

about it here. Without a doubt that day changed everything. I still remember the beating, the blood, and the tears.

In retrospect, I went through what I would now call a “queer/fem” genocide. A robbery of the sum total of my joy. I have survived emotional, physical, and mental warfare for many years after that. The fem is always fucked with. Fem is always undervalued. Strangers, partners, and family members always try to be beat the fem out of our bodies, our souls, our very lives.

My femhood has survived. My femhood is who I am. It is the brilliance behind my work and it is the core of my activism. It is my resilience; it is what connects me to my humanity, to earth, to my people, to myself and to all the magic in the world. It was what connected me to mis amigas en second grade. It is what connects me to the deepest joy I have ever felt. It will be never be destroyed regardless how much people try to rob me of it.

## REFLECTION

I shared this piece with a few muxeres in my life before submitting this to the journal and the reactions were all different. Some of these muxeres are part of the abuse I experienced. These muxeres are my family. I’ve come a long way into my healing, as it is a process and I believe it is one without a final destination. I must live with what I’ve been through. But what gives me strength and courage is sharing my historia. Porque hay muchxs Jesses y muchas Fabis y Marías en mi comunidad. Complex relationships intertwined with harsh lived realities, ones caused by colonialism and all its ugly tentacles.

I feel it is important for me to share this cuento for many reasons, but mostly I want to be able to memorialize my pain and my blood, I do not want my pain to have been shed in vain. I hope my life’s stories serve a purpose and help cultivate the conversations necessary for healing. I am very grateful for the encouragement and support I have received during my writing process.