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El Supermercado

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El Supermercado

By Gabriela Gonzalez

My first job was as a cashier at a Mexican supermarket. It was an easy enough job, but one part I always struggled with was greeting customers. The expectation was that we would greet customers as soon as they approached us. Given that the supermarket was located in San Diego county, our clientele was diverse. We were tasked with making a split-second judgment on approaching customers in English or in Spanish. I tried to read as much context as possible. Maybe they were shopping with someone else and speaking in one language or another. I started just saying hi and putting the onus of picking a language on them. All our cashiers were bilingual to some degree. I still had Spanish speaking customers look at me and decide to speak to me in English whether it be because of my light skin or maybe something in the way I carry myself. I'd also get English-speaking customers who would see me and for whatever reason decide to try Spanish. It was an awkward dance that I never quite got used to, but it became routine. I messed up plenty of times, but customers were always understanding.

A few years after my first job I started working at another Mexican supermarket. My most memorable customers were a white couple. They were unloading their cart and whispering in English so that made my language choice for me. "Hi, did you find everything okay?" I asked. The man looked up at me and stared. This wasn't an unusual response. Some people hate making small talk and others are just rude in general. I began scanning their items and he finally spoke up. "I'm sorry," he told me with a smile, "I don't speak burrito." He laughed, but I felt my body freeze and my heart accelerate. "I asked if you found everything okay," I managed to get out. I have a tendency to cry when I'm frustrated so I was doing my best to keep it together. "Sorry," his companion chipped in, "we're from Texas." I stayed silent until it came time to read out the total.

Those few minutes had me reeling. The man had looked at me and made the same split-second judgment I had to make hundreds of

times a day, but in such a different way. Maybe I mumbled. Maybe it was my skin. I am white-passing at times, but maybe not this time. Maybe it was my name tag proudly displaying Gabriela or maybe the fact that he was visiting a Mexican grocery store. Whatever his reason was, he could've avoided me. It was a slow morning and the cashier next to me was clearly white. He chose me and he chose to make a tasteless joke. I know Texas is not a monolith of white English-speakers who have never encountered the Spanish language. He made the deliberate choice to belittle me and belittle the millions of people who speak Spanish. I wanted to tell him that I am actually a pretty substandard speaker of "burrito" despite having Mexican-born parents who primarily spoke Spanish during my childhood. I wanted to say that because of people like him my father actively encouraged me to act "whiter" so I could blend in and face less discrimination. All I managed to do was follow my usual script and say, "Have a nice day!"

I cannot say that I'm not guilty of similar judgments. My job asked me to do it hundreds of times daily. My coworkers usually had some Mexican ancestry whether they were nth-generation Mexican-Americans or had migrated from Mexico themselves. Other coworkers were Central American and a smaller portion were white. It was easy to develop a categorization for my coworkers based on whether they spoke English, Spanish, or some degree of both. So when a new cashier started, I made my own judgments. All the other cashiers were bilingual so I assumed she was too. We got to know each other in the downtime between rushes of customers, but it was only small talk. One shift we were placed on neighboring registers and I was surprised to hear her say "Sorry, I don't speak Spanish" to a customer. Well, I thought, I guess her parents never taught her. Later I decided to ask her about it. I was not expecting her to say "because I'm Filipino." I was taken aback because I never thought to question my assumption that she was anything other than Spanish-speaking. I had struggled daily with making assumptions about the language and culture of our customers, but I still did the same to someone I worked with for weeks at that point. She worked at a Mexican supermarket. The other cashiers spoke Spanish. She had a Spanish name. Her skin was darker than mine and *I* speak Spanish. Why would she be anything else?

My time as a cashier at two Mexican supermarkets taught me that we all make quick judgments and assumptions about others, but that there is no norm for any race, gender, sexual orientation, or any other facet of identity. You can never know someone fully just from a quick glance. People are multifaceted in ways we can never fully assume.