

When Dogs Howl

My girlhood friend, Rita Moreno, was not the one of screen fame. She was the daughter of a single mom. They called themselves Mexicans. Chicano was a little too radical back then in our coastal Texas town, but they were tuned into their heritage. They spoke English accented with Spanish, like when Rita would say, “*I got down from the bus*” instead of “*I got off the bus.*” From time to time she mentioned going to LULAC activities. That’s the League of United Latin American Citizens, the largest and oldest Hispanic and Latin-American civil rights organization in the United States. I didn’t realize in those days that Rita and her family were sort of like activists for their own rights. Heck, I didn’t even know their rights were in question. I knew she was proud of her Mexican heritage like I was proud that my bubbie (grandmother) was from Russia and spoke an English thickly flavored with the guttural sounds of Yiddish.

Once when we were at recess in fifth grade shuffling our feet on the scrawny grass, she told me that a dog howling meant someone nearby was going to die soon. She said it was a Mexican tale. I hoped it was just a tale and not true, because I heard dogs howl all the time and sure didn’t want death knocking for anyone at my house. My neighbor’s dog would whine mournfully at the sky when he was alone too long. It meant he was lonely. Or maybe he was afraid his absent family wouldn’t return because they were dead. But they always came back, and when they did, he stopped howling. I later learned that dogs figure prominently in Mesoamerican folklore. It’s a common belief that a dog carries the recently deceased person across a body of water to the afterlife.

After all these years, these decades, when I hear a dog howl, I think of Rita. I remember how her dark eyes would twinkle and dimples would grace her full cheeks every time she told a story or shared a juicy nugget of news.

As teenagers we shelved books together at the city library, both of us earning \$1.10 an hour. Oh, what we could buy with our weekly paychecks! Maybe a tube of lipstick and a pop

magazine brandishing a cover photo of the grooviest rock 'n roll stars a la Davy Jones or Mick Jagger or any of the Beatles. And then we would still have leftover dollars.

One time as we were squatting between rows in the non-fiction section putting those books in order, she told me that someone called her mother a greaser while she was working a recent shift at the cleaners. I looked at Rita and asked why. What did that mean?

She stared hard at me a long moment, no twinkle in her eyes, before answering.

“Because she’s Mexican.”

I’d never heard her voice sound like a stone before. I’d never heard of grease associated with anything but food or cars. I thought Mexicans and white Jews were sort of the same, a little bit different but still ... white. After all, there were maybe as many Latino kids in my classes as non-Latinos. I wasn’t counting. There was Yolanda, Oscar, Carmen, Eloy and others. And I was the only Jewish kid. Darker kids, the African American ones, they had to stay on their own side of town, the side for those called *colored*. At least until the mid 1960’s.

So many shades of white. Of brown. Of black. So many shades of truth, pieces of truth we hear, pieces we tell ourselves so we stay wrapped in the comfort of what we know, what we think we know.

My mom once told me a story she heard of a woman who was a little bit black, maybe had a white grandparent. She was what we would call today biracial, but looked white. However, she had to stay behind the color line with the African Americans, a punishment of sorts because there was at least a drop or two of African blood in her veins. African blood along with white blood. All of it red. At that time in my young and limited world, the complexity of that situation—that a person who could run away and choose to pass as white to live an easier life rather than stay in a familiar community with all the hardship that meant on that side—was a cloud floating way over my head, not something my experience or intellect could yet fathom.

It was about that time, ten plus years since the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, that the federal dogs howled at the hard line between black and white schools. It moaned a long,

agonizing death knell for forced segregation in non-compliant places like where I lived. Gradually, some from across town began trickling into the previously all white schools, *our* schools, as we would have said.

I never knew if the reverse were true, if white kids began trickling into the previously all black schools. But really, I knew that wasn't the way it worked. Even though we were told our separate schools were equal, everyone knew the white schools were the desired ones. After all, there must have been a reason white kids didn't trickle over to the other side. It was many years later that I came to understand the specifics of the shameful lie of that 'separate but equal' phrase.

Rita and I eventually lost touch with each other. We each married, had a child or two, divorced and pursued our professions. She stayed in the community where we grew up while I ventured farther and farther west until landing in California. Recently a Facebook posting from our high school class flashed on my screen announcing that she had passed on. I clicked to her obituary. In her photo from recent years she still wore that warm smile and those twinkling eyes. I donated to the cause listed, one that assists those with a cancer diagnosis. I wonder if she heard a dog howl to announce her leaving and if it guided her peacefully to the afterlife.