

The Diverse One

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I am overweight, loud, caustic, short, coldhearted, promiscuous, and Latina. I am brash. I am too forward with regards to romantic endeavors and sexual conquests. I am argumentative and short-tempered. I am sarcastic, and, frankly, sometimes I am rude. I do not consider these words insults; they are merely descriptive.

Humans are complex beings, so we decided to devise millions—if not billions or trillions—of words in an attempt to explain who we are, and those words above describe me. I never considered myself to be a deviant. I was—I am—who I am. It's this belief of mine that kept me ignorant for the majority of my life. I am eighteen (almost nineteen) years old. I have existed as a *person* for approximately 6,850 days, yet it was only when I was a high school junior that I realized *words* were not simple.

They were insults.

They were praise.

They were limitations.

I am smart.

I pride myself on my intelligence. Rather than focus on material things, I value my capability and competence. It is because of this that attacks upon my intelligence strike me as the most hostile and hurtful.

In the tenth grade, I was made aware of the abundant sexism and invocation of stereotypes by a classmate of mine. We had all recently received our PSAT scores, and my class was all exchanging our results. One of my classmates asked me how I had performed on the math section, saying it was impossible and that he hadn't heard of anyone doing better than he had. Much to his dismay, I had scored perfectly on the math portion. When I shared this, his face twisted in frustration. Eventually, it smoothed out, and he replied, "That's weird. Usually girls aren't good at math. You must be *really* good at guessing." With that, he walked away.

Nobody defended me. Nobody said, "Valeria has always been really good at math!" I didn't defend myself. The comment attacked my pride. I was embarrassed. What if I was just *really* good at guessing? His snide remark had undermined my confidence.

In reality, I knew I had done well because I had performed well and knew the material. I love math and always will, but the assumption that I couldn't be *that* good at it since I am a girl shook me. My accomplishments had been diminished to mere luck rather than hard work and genuine intelligence. I eventually shrugged it off. I told myself my classmate was just a chauvinist and that

people would know my accomplishments were well deserved, but things weren't the same after that exchange.

I began to notice how people equated my successes to luck or pity. I won president of a club because they wanted their first female president, not because I dedicated over two hundred hours of work to it in one semester. I was put in charge of team management because girls are better with handling things sensitively, not because I had the best credentials. I did well on my essay because my teacher hated men and knew I was a feminist, not because I stayed up for twenty-seven hours cycling through revision and deletion. I was never the reason of my own success.

To everyone else, my success was situational *not* dispositional. I assumed that, as we grew older, my peers would realize I worked hard and deserved the results I received. I was wrong.

When I applied to colleges, I was extremely anxious, as were all my peers. Every day, we would express our worries and anxieties. One day, one of my classes had finished early, so, for the final fifteen minutes, all the seniors discussed where we were waiting to hear back from and whether we thought we would get in or not. Each classmate would share their anxieties and be met by a chorus of sympathetic sighs and encouraging words.

When it was my time to share, I expected the familiar faces around me to provide me with the same support. Instead, I was struck down with sneers. *Ever heard of affirmative action? You're a Hispanic girl interested in STEM. Of course, you'll get in.* That's why I would get in. Not because of my grades or extracurricular activities, but rather I would be accepted to a prestigious university because I have a vagina and am brown.

This wasn't the last time people would tell me this either. Even today, girls and guys alike will comment on how I would get a job over them because of companies' attempts to diversify work environments. I am only qualified because of pure circumstantial chance, not because of anything of my own doing. My intelligence is irrelevant to my success.

I am outspoken.

When I was little, my mom taught me to stand my ground. I was not to waver in the face of opposition, but rather I was to defend what I believed to be right. I remember coming home crying one day after preschool. A kid had hit me and called me names, and, when I told the teacher, I was told to be nice because "you catch more flies with honey than vinegar."

My mom's response to this was simple, and I follow it even today: if someone hits you, you hit them back twice and twice as hard; nobody strikes you down. Granted, this advice may seem a little hostile and violent, but I understood what my mother meant. Nobody should put me down. I am the one in control of my life, and nobody's negative thinking should stop me from pursuing what I love or saying what I mean.

This lesson is one of the only things that has remained with me throughout my life. When I decided to do karate and dance simultaneously, I remembered that nobody else's opinion mattered, no matter how often people tried to categorize me as a girly-girl or a tomboy. When I was morbidly obese but signed up for the school's cheer team, I reminded myself that my body is strong and capable and that whatever the boys whispered about when I walked by didn't affect my performance. When I spoke up in class against something I found sexist and racist, I held my head up high and ignored my classmates rolling their eyes and annoyed groans. When I embraced my sexuality, I coined the epithets as traits rather than insults.

My mother taught me to ignore the hate and to be true to myself. This brazen confidence seemed—still seems—to bother many people. I was told to be quiet. *Ladies don't raise their voice.* I was told to be small. *Girls should cross their legs and fold their hands. Dainty is equivalent to small.* I was told to watch my language. *It isn't very feminine to curse.* In fact, I was told to be less of myself in every sense of the word. *Cross your legs. Lower your voice. Don't speak unless spoken to. Gum wasn't invented for women; it's unladylike. Make sure you don't hurt anybody's feelings. Just give him a chance! Don't hurt his feelings. Watch your mouth. Should you be eating that much? Don't lift weights; you'll get bulky. Isn't that a sport for boys? Oh, but why do you always wear black? You'd look so pretty in pink or pastels.*

I was told to be someone else. I am told to be someone else. I am loud and outspoken and sarcastic and insensitive and headstrong and stubborn and overall a hassle. I love boxing and ballet. I love cursing and poetry. I love manspreading and modeling. I love debating and listening. I love what I love.

I am constantly told I am unladylike, but that I show potential. What does that even mean? Honestly, I am begging someone to tell me, because I sure as hell don't have the answer.

I am ugly.

I am not conventionally attractive. I am short, overweight, and have innumerable skin issues that seven dermatologists haven't been able to get rid of. I am not the slender girl you see in magazines, nor am I the JLo that some people seem to expect a Latina to be.

I am attractive but in a weird kind of way. I don't mean this negatively. I think I'm great. I love the strength and power of my body, and when I look in the mirror I see one gorgeous girl. I don't fit the predetermined ideal image of beauty, but that fact isn't an invitation for men and women to express that they *also* approve of me.

Being the child of a Puerto Rican and Nicaraguan, I have been raised in a society that fetishizes my culture. I have grown up surrounded by the perverted images of Latina beauty. People take it upon themselves to express their personal approval of my existence. I am *exotic*. My tan complexion is described as *caramel* in magazines. My dark hair and eyes are said to be *exotic*. My hips and stomach are *curvaceous* according to red carpet hosts. My deviation from the toned, slim blonde American girl-next-door is seen as a novelty.

I am a spectacle. Time and time again, I am approached by men in a club and told that they've been "hoping to find a dark girl tonight" or that they've "always loved a little Latina." If and when I try to push them away, they take my protests as an invitation to further apply cultural stereotypes, saying things like "Yes! I love the feisty part of you Latin girls" or "Come on, mami! Let me be your papi!"

I am expected to be promiscuous and sultry. I am supposed to have Shakira's hips, JLo's butt, and Sofia Vergara's breasts. I am expected to wear tight clothing to attract men. I am expected to put up a fight but eventually give in because *that's what Latinas do*. I am surrounded by expectations.

I do not think myself special. My life is nothing out of the ordinary, but it is that fact that makes my story all the more appalling. I am not the only woman who faces these kinds of situations. I am not the only woman whose success is equated to pity or attempts to increase diversity. I am not the only woman who is hushed and critiqued for being unladylike. I am not the only woman who walks outside only to be catcalled, groped or fetishized. My experiences are my own, but they are not uncommon.

Ever since I was born, I have been gendered and raced. I have had expectations build up and have never quite met them. I am constantly going to be pigeonholed, but this does not mean I cannot—women cannot—rise above it. The norms surrounding female existence persevere today, but they cannot persevere forever. I am smart. I am outspoken. I am ugly. I am undoubtedly myself.