

On the Verge Writing Contest, 2023, First-Place Non-Fiction Winner

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Dialogue Essay: **Unsaid**

Most of my life, I grew accustomed to being different, only partially belonging in some places, while being completely alienated from others. I constantly felt like an outsider in my own culture, as well as the country I lived in. I felt like people didn't understand my home country, while I worked day and night to understand theirs. Sometimes I think we all live in little worlds that don't connect or communicate, each one floating in our own sense of reality. I wonder if our worlds ever connected.

I sit in the back of the taxicab, an older Indian man drives me from the airport, the air is cold outside, and it stopped snowing. I reach into my bag's pocket and find my old passport, the Mexican one. I open it as the driver looks into his rear-view mirror to look me in the eyes. He says, "Madam, where are you from?" I begin to think how my family immigrated from Russia, Spain, and Lebanon, that's why I'm white, but I was born in Mexico, but no longer live there, and then I moved to the States, and now I'm here... Canada. "Mexico," I replied. That's the short answer of course, the kind of answer I give to strangers. This man has no idea about my life, he probably thinks it's the place where they make tacos and wear the stupid sombreros. Or he might tell me, "I know Mexico! I went to Cancun once!" which will be followed by a passive nod and fake smile from me. But he doesn't. This man looks again into his rear-view mirror clutching the steering wheel, and says, "Mexican girls are very brave." This time I didn't nod, but instead sat in shock and contemplated this man's words. After the ride I tipped him well, but I couldn't stop thinking about the conversation I had with him, how he had told me something about my own culture that I had never realized.

I find it funny how little we know about each other; how lost some of us get in conversations with ourselves, but less and less with each other. Maybe if I had the chance to sit down with the taxi driver, I would've had a long talk with him. I would've told him that I'm from Mexico City, the city with Jacaranda trees that are so potently purple, who cover the streets of lilac petals every spring. The city where food can take you to a different dimension, remind you of your ancestors and make you feel like you are always welcome. Food that feels like an adventure and a hug at the same time. I would've told him of the spirit of Mexican families, how we are so intertwined with our loved ones even after they have left us, we leave a trail of candles, orange flowers, and sugary bread for them. If only I had a chance to talk to him, for more than fifteen minutes, I would've told him my story. But I would never lie to him, I would explain to him the dark parts of my home country too. The parts that Americans are most eager to talk about...

Americans are obsessed with Narcos. They watched the show on Netflix which shaped their perspective of Mexican society and gave them their only perspective of Mexico; a dumpster third world country infested with delinquents and run by the Narco's cartels. Although, it's important to understand this reality, it fails to represent the real issues in Mexican culture and life. To these Americans that watched the popular show, I would've told them about all the other real issues that Mexicans face today. The problem with these conversations is that they are not being held, which misrepresents the real problems in Mexico and fills outsider's hearts with fear and rejection of the unknown. I remember this particularly when I moved to the United States of America, and a couple of years later the elections rolled in. I was never politically involved until the Trump elections began. I was glued to the television, day and night checking the news while witnessing a historic election that could potentially end my family's stay in the States. Until one

day, a boy of my class looked me in the eyes and said, “Go back to your own country!” I stared at him. Heartbroken. That he didn’t know. How could he have known? This immature 16-year-old boy had no idea of the pain I had been through to get there. My eyes filled with tears, my chest hurt, and my throat closed as I said to him, “I can’t.”

This boy never knew why I had left my beautiful, warm home to be in this strict and complicated country. It wasn’t my choice, but I never told him that. I should’ve told him how I loved my country, and how going back was not the insult or punishment he assumed it was. That I missed my grandma, who stayed behind with my other family members. That it had been five years since my family moved illegally into the United States to save us. I should’ve told him how my mother went to the flower shop one day in Mexico to pick out some white roses for my Aunt Eta. But as soon as my mother touched the flowers, the lady in the shop backed away and a van full of men screeched into the road, blocking it, and four of the five men grabbed my mother’s legs and arms. That she kicked and screamed for her life and the old flower lady couldn’t do anything to stop them as they pointed a gun to her head. I could’ve told him how it wasn’t that bad that my mother got kidnapped for only 12 hours, since my friend’s uncle got kidnapped for 6 months. I could have told him that I had escaped! Lucky me had escaped in search of a new life with my family. But I thought that boy could have never understood, so I kept quiet and never said anything to him. Sometimes it’s not about the words we say, but the ones that were left unsaid. Maybe if I had said something, he would’ve seen me for who I am. If only he knew that the Mexican people had warm hearts, unmatched generosity, and a hardworking mentality. That we were victims of this violence, not perpetrators. If only he would’ve known, it had been five years without returning home.

Moreover, I come from a country that doesn't speak for women, and we must speak for ourselves. Mexican women are not part of anyone's statistic, or perception of the world. We must constantly fight for our place in this world and have difficult conversations with people who see us as objects. Objects that have sexy accents and are "feisty" or "Caliente." Must we be overly sexual just to be noticed? When they have never met a Latina that takes care of her siblings, cooks for her entire family and speaks not only your language with fluency but her own.

I've come to the realization that most people don't know what a Mexican girl is. Then I remember my taxi driver, and I agree... I think we are brave. Brave enough to educate others on our culture and the false perceptions about our people. Brave enough to move across countries and start our lives over, leaving everything behind without looking back, even when others warned us we would fail. Leaving because of persecution and leaving because of a lack of opportunities for women. Brave enough to understand other people's language and feelings. And brave enough to tell our stories, no matter how different or complicated they are, taking the risk of being misunderstood.

Fast forwarding to the present I'm in my new home, Canada. I'm walking by the steps of the Vancouver art gallery with my sister and my mother, until we notice a protest of women all covered in lilac purple clothing and signs. The same lilac purple so recognizable in Mexico City from the Jacarandas. The sign reads, "NI UNA MÁ" which translates to 'Not a single more,' representing the ongoing fight of women in Mexico against feminicides. My mother and my sister glanced at me, and without hesitation we climbed up the steps of the Gallery and stood among these women. Mexico's biggest problem isn't cartels or Narcos, it's the silencing of women and our of real problems. The problem that leaves over 600 girls dead every year at the hands of a male family member. So, I speak for all women when I say that we should be

listening to women, our stories, and our sufferings. Because one day our unspoken sorrows will speak, and our governments and communities will listen. I encourage women to not swallow your pain, to have the difficult conversations, and to never leave things unsaid.