

# Auli'i Cravalho

THIS IS WHAT I remember from my childhood.

I always woke with the sun in my eyes. The warmth and light seeping through the panels. I grew up in my mama and papa's plantation home in Hawai'i where its single-wall construction will do that: allow you to wake with the sun. I grew up in the same house my father did; Mama and Papa were my paternal grandparents. I slept on top of my mama's quilts, in my papa's worn shirts, and left the windows with their ripped screens wide-open. The tangerine trees outside were warm, bright orange and robust, fruit I held with two hands pinching the skin, tasting it through my nose like my papa taught me. Running across the lanai, across the front yard, across the driveway. Past the hibiscus hedge, through the macadamia nut grove, down, down, knowing every dip in the concrete, jumping over, skirting around the memories of skinned knees in the past. Barefoot and sweaty. Face flushed with warmth, cheeks in a constant blush. I ran hot those days. Hot with curiosity and love and adventure. I begged for stories of the past and barreled over the worry of rudeness or sensitivity to get them. I read until my head was full of adventure, and listened to my papa tell me stories about Puerto Rico and the humid tropical nights until my heart ached for its waters. The floor of the living room was my stage, and I spent hours reenacting fact and fiction; kissing mirrors and dancing to seventies radio. I knew exactly who I was. *Exactly who I was*, at that early age of five.

By the time I hit double digits, I felt as though I knew everything about everything. And thirteen-year-old me? Forget about it. I've come to learn that "*who I am*" is not exact at all. That each piece of my character was spontaneously created years ago, and nurtured since. Culture, held together with glitter glue and adorned with googly eyes. Genealogy, forever branching with love from each

and every family member. “Growing up” taught me that my dreams were supposed to fit in standard-size envelopes. But Five-Year-Old Me covers the page with Dora stickers and hand-delivers it instead. Sixteen-Year-Old Me types my aspirations in Times New Roman and writes in MLA format but allows Seven-Year-Old Me to go in with a pen to add hearts over the *i*’s in my name. And yes, my college essay is going to be totally dope and possibly covered in stickers. But it will only be so because I keep looking back to that bright-eyed kid and asking her, “Does this feel right?” And in the future, when I look back—even just five years from now—will I be able to see my own growth?

Take sixth grade. Ten-Year-Old Me had a show-and-tell, and I was so proud to talk about my family. I shared stories that had been told by my paternal grandparents. How my mama was full Portuguese, and my papa was all Puerto Rican. How just before Mama passed, my father told me she never wanted to stop holding me, even though her Parkinson’s disease was so bad she could hardly walk. I told them how I used to dance and constantly step on my papa’s tired feet because all I wanted to do was twirl whenever I heard a mariachi band play on the old cassette tapes. I shared everything I remembered about them with the class: their food, their cultures, their love. I shared about my maternal grandparents too, how my mother was the seventh child of seven children, how family get-togethers meant three-day-long parties and sleepovers filled with music and an endless supply of food. I learned how to weave flowers into *hakus* (flower crowns) and how to fish like the best of them (the best I could anyway).

Each of my grandparents had passed by the time I was able to share their stories with my class. In an unselfishly selfish way I talked about them because I wanted my show-and-tell to be radically different from the rest of the class. I didn’t have a hamster or a goldfish. I didn’t want to share my favorite book or a favorite fictional superhero. I wanted to talk about the heroes of my life. I talked and talked, and probably took up more than my allotted time of five minutes, but no one could stop me. I had pride coursing through my veins. And I remember how I glowed with it when I sat down at my table, until my classmate said, “You’re too white.”

Now let me clarify—this classmate wasn’t being rude. Sure it was unfiltered, but she was merely stating a fact. I was fairer than most of my classmates, though

all of us were of mixed descent. Let me also clarify that I am only able to say these thoughts as Seventeen-Year-Old Me. But Sixth-Grade Me turned to this chick. Paused. And said: “What?”

My mind connecting my heart’s emotion to this week’s vocabulary word: *confused*. “You’re too white to be Mexican,” she continued. As if my ethnicity was just beyond my understanding.

“I’m not Mexican,” I started. “I’m Puerto—”

“Yeah that,” she interrupted. “You’re definitely not that.”

I paused again. “Okay . . .” I smiled tightly, trying to laugh it off.

“I’m just saying,” she continued. “If you’re going to say you’re Port-o-Whatever you should at least look it.”

She proceeded to barrel into a more in-depth explanation before I rushed to explain “I’m Puerto Rican, Portuguese, Hawaiian, Chinese, and Irish.” And suddenly her eyes lit up. *Finally*, I thought, *she gets it*.

“Oh! Well, then you just look, like, ‘super Irish.’” Shrugging her shoulders, with her two fingers dancing into an air quote. Yet another awkward pause.

“What the heck does ‘super Irish’ look like?” I asked, my eyes narrowed into slits as I aggressively quoted her and her air quotes.

“Well . . . Um. You. I guess.” She had finally stopped herself, looking around, realizing the surrounding tables were now her audience. When my stare was her only response, she made her final remark. “You just . . . don’t look like anything you said you are.”

I didn’t say anything after that. I turned away from the tables of searching eyes and hid my flaming cheeks with my hair, my lips pressed tightly together to keep my eyes from revealing my hurt. My mind spinning a hundred miles an hour trying to think up a retort, something, anything, that would make her eat her words. Something about how I grew up in a Puerto Rican–Portuguese–Hawaiian household, and that I knew how to say “you’re stupid” in all three languages (*I didn’t* really). How I could stick it to her by knowing dozens of stories of Puerto Rico and that I could eat a whole bowl of poi if it was left in front of me (*Well . . . not the whole bowl*). And if she wanted to keep arguing with me, I would argue that she was mixed too! She was Hawaiian like me, Portuguese like me, simply darker-skinned in all her glory. But if all she saw was

my “whiteness”? If all else failed? We could take it out at recess! And then she’d *really* see my Latin temper!! (*Now that I could do.*)

Instead, I stayed silent. My pride ripped from me. Wishing my culture would show itself. Wishing my mama and papa looked a little more like me. Or me a little more like them. My easily tanned skin, not quite as light as my mama’s, but too light when compared to my Hawaiian mother’s side of the family. Soft curly hair that matched my papa’s, but with baby hairs that refuse to grow, so unlike the long flowing locks of my Hawaiian cousins. It took a long time of defending myself to realize I didn’t have to. Not to anybody. I am who I am. I am what I am. I grew up as a loving Hawaiian Portuguese, running around barefoot and climbing trees, eating fried plantains until I fell asleep still chewing. I grew up in the land of my Pacific ancestors and could recite their folklore before I could even think of writing it down. I celebrate Chinese New Year eating noodles for a long life, and Saint Patrick’s Day cooking corned beef and cabbage, leaving our household smelling it for days. I’m mixed. And you can bet damn well I’m proud of it.

And if I could go back (because you know I would if I could) . . . If I could sit where I sat, argue the entire sixth-grade conversation again, I would finally have the perfect retort that would make my family proud, and Me-of-All-Ages proud too. She’d say, “You just . . . don’t look like anything you said you are.” I’d notice she was as embarrassed as I was. I’d take in her own mixed features, so different from mine, and everyone else’s. I’d take a breath, look her right in the eye, smile, and say, “Well, then, I guess I just look like me.” And I’d sit again in pride.