

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Privilege

Mireya S. Vela · Friday, June 19th, 2020

In the morning, I wake to the sounds of a curdling scream. I wake with an intake of breath that I can't release until I know where I am.

Inside, I start the usual mantra, *Please, please don't let this be mom's house.*

I'm awake. I'm at home with my husband. This isn't my childhood.

*Everything is okay, I tell myself. It's okay. Everything is okay.*

I keep my eyes open. The light in my room is brilliant. There are no bars on the windows like the ones in my childhood bedroom window. I count the windows. Light comes in through two spaces. I keep myself awake so that I know where I am. Next, I look for the door to my room. If I can find the door to my bedroom and it's where it's supposed to be, then I know everything will be okay.

The nightmares are common. It's the leftovers from a life lived in abuse. Frequently, I dream that I'm back in El Monte. I'm trapped. There are no options and I can't get out. I look at the phone.

*What time is it?*

The phone comes into focus.

*Oh, it's 6:30 AM. What the fuck?*

It takes me a moment to realize that it's the kid next door screaming. He likes to scream. As far as I can tell, there isn't discernable reason for screaming. He's nearly 5 years old. I feel that is something he should have outgrown.

*Why doesn't he use self-control? Emotional regulation?*

I lay back down and close my eyes. I won't fall back to sleep. Thankfully, this is a weekend and I can take a nap later.

Upstairs, I hear my husband walking around the kitchen. He's likely making coffee.



The neighbors moved in when Raquel was over one year old. The young woman and her husband

moved in at the brink of giving birth. She's a blond vegetarian who is trying to make it as an actor. Her husband is a musician.

My relationship with these neighbors is complicated. The young woman is enthusiastic, direct, and loud. She's also very physical. All of these things feel invasive to me—an introvert. I liked my previous neighbors who were friendly and helpful, but also understood the importance of boundaries and apologized when their baby cried all night. This neighbor is unapologetic.

Before I know it, she's knocking on my door again.

My home is my safe place. This home is everything I ever wanted. But it doesn't feel as safe anymore. And I'm thoroughly annoyed.

I'm vocal about being annoyed.

"I don't like being your fucking scapegoat when you are too fucking lazy to go to the store," I said to her when she calls asking for cheese.

Cheese is expensive.

"You are not supportive," she says.

She's angry and offended.

"No. I'm not supportive. Remember that and stop asking for cheese."

"This is fucking shit. This is so fucked up," she says.

The young woman was brought up differently than I was. Like me, she was brought up in chaos. But unlike me, she believes in sharing and living together harmoniously, as well as understanding each other's resources so you can benefit from them.

I think this is all bullshit. I don't care for the kumbaya attitude. If she wants something I have, she will have to pry it from my cold dead hands.

I tell her as much after she's lived next door to us for about 8 years. She has two children now and the youngest is a screamer. She has anxiety.

She busts through our house with her children. They are all barefoot.

"I think we should have an emergency plan to prepare for the earthquake."

I know she is a catastrophic thinker, and I already don't like where this is going. But my husband lights up when he hears "emergency plan".

"What are you thinking?" he says.

"I think we should do like a neighborhood thing where we bury water and have an open discussion of what medications we have available," she says.

“No,” I say.

Her daughter finds my daughter and they leave to play together. Her son is looking for balls to throw in my house. I’m getting anxious.

“That’s not happening,” I say again.

Her son has found the balls. He didn’t ask to borrow them. He simply decides that he can use them and starts to throw them in my living room.

“Why not?” she says.

“Because you can’t expect everyone to tell you what medications they are on. And if I have a medication, it’s because I need it. I’m certainly not sharing it.”

She frowns.

“And I’m not spending my afternoon burying water.”

“Why not?”

I hate when she does this. When she makes me accountable for my answers. What I say isn’t good enough. I have to have logic and facts to back it up.

Her son runs up to me, “I want a chocolate bar.”

“Because,” I say, “I don’t need to bury water. I have plenty of water.”

“Mireya, can I have a candy bar?”

“But what if you need more?” she asks.

“Mireya, can I have a candy bar?”

“I don’t have a candy bar,” I finally respond.

“I won’t need more. I have a lot. And if there is an emergency and I need water, I am not spending my time digging it up from the backyard.”

“Then what are you going to do?” she says.

“I might just watch when you bury your water and take it.”

She laughs. But it isn’t a happy laugh.

Her son has moved on from the candy bar and is throwing the ball in my entryway.

“There is no throwing balls in this house,” I say when I realize she isn’t going to do anything.

“Why not?” he says.

“Because it’s a rule,” I say.

I collect vases and his ball has twice hit one of them. I'm stressed.

But it's always like this. He always comes into my house and takes control. He hunts around for toys he never asks to borrow. He looks through the drawers for candy. When he finds something he likes, he asks to take it home. To our young neighbor this is all amusing. To me, it's like someone is trying to take away all the things I have worked hard for.



I've been living in this neighborhood for a while. But it doesn't stop my neighbors thinking that my father is my gardener and my mother is my nanny. I haven't openly introduced them to all the neighbors, because frankly, it's none of their business.

But one day, my dad comes in telling me that he just got asked his gardening rates. And I lose it. I run outside.

"Hi," I say to my neighbor.

He lives across the street and down a couple of houses. He's an odd guy that owns a pack of small dogs. He's always especially thoughtful with me.

"Hi," he says.

"The man you just asked about his rates. That's my dad."

"Oh my god. I am so sorry."

"It's okay," I say, "I just wanted to let you know."

I walk back inside, feeling calmer.

A few months later, my husband and I are walking up the hill. Our street only has room to park on one side. The neighbors collectively try to be thoughtful parkers. But I see that one woman has taken two spaces up with her tiny car.

I have groceries bags in my hands. I'm annoyed because I had to park so far down the hill. And clearly, this person doesn't live here. My hair is in a loose bun and I'm wearing my husband's sweater. As I pass the car, I see that its owner is at the door. I pass by, in broad daylight, on the way to my house. I throw her an unfriendly look.

Later, blond neighbor's husband tells me that they had a friend over who almost had her car stolen.

"Oh no. We can't have that," I say, "Maybe you can file a police report?"

"Yea," the neighbor says.

I go back home. My husband is sitting in the living room.

"Hey, the neighbor says that they had a friend over and that these two gang members tried to steal her car. He said that this large overweight Latina attempted to distract her, and her boyfriend was

going to attack and take her car.”

“Wait, what?” he says, “She’s talking about us.”

“What? No,” I say.

“Yea, you were walking in front of me and I was walking after you—“

“Oh, shit! I told him to call the police.”

I run back to their house to explain, to ask them not to call the police. The husband apologizes but the blond neighbor finds this amusing.



One day, the blond neighbor comes over with her wet laundry.

“I need to use your dryer,” she says.

“Why?”

“My dryer isn’t working,” she says.

“There’s a laundromat across the street,” I want to say, but I don’t.

“I’m working. But go ahead.”

Barefoot, she goes to my downstairs laundry room. She comes back up, expecting to be entertained while she has to wait for her laundry to dry. I remind her I’m working. But she’s already talking about all the fears she has.

I set aside my work. I know I can spare a few minutes. She’s talking about disease. She’s paranoid about illness.

“I hear you,” I say, “I have a bunch of people in my life right now that are struggling with cancer. My father-in-law just got diagnosed, but I also have a friend who recently found a lump.”

“Name a third.”

“What? No.”

I have no idea what she is talking about.

“You have to name a third or I might be the third,” she says.

She’s breathing hard and panicking.

“Name a third!”

I’m feeling defensive. And I consider joking to disarm the situation. But I know this isn’t the right time.

“Name a third!”

She puts her head in her hands.

“Fuck. Okay, I guess I have this other friend...”

She stays till her laundry dries. I cringe each time to puts her dirty feet on my sofa. Then bring up it all up and begins to fold it in my living room. She’s embracing this set-back with her dryer as best as she can. But I just want her to leave.

The blond neighbor thinks we are the same, but we aren’t. She’s one of those woke white people who claims to have had a horrible childhood.

She doesn’t see color, she says. She only sees people.

I think she’s full of shit, but I don’t say anything. Being “colorblind” is just a way for people to not have to be responsible for their racist acts. But quite frankly, I’m employed to do social justice work. I don’t want to have to explain race and inequity at home.

And I can’t stand her complaining. She constantly borrows gardening equipment like shovels and clippers. I don’t see why she can’t afford her own.

Then, one day after looking for my shovels for a while, I text her.

“Stop taking my shovel without asking.”

“I’m not. Why are you being so weird?”

“Because when I look for that motherfucking shovel, I want to know that’s it’s where I left it.”

“Well, we didn’t borrow your shovels. We have our own.”

About an hour later, her husband comes over to give us our shovel back. I’m still seething, but I politely thank him.



I know what’s wrong with me. I know why this bothers me so much. I like being self-sufficient and prepared. I couldn’t afford gardening tools before. I value what I have and what I had to do to get them. While she simply holds an empty hand, expecting it to be filled. She won’t give anything in return. In fact, I’ll have to ask for my shovel repeatedly. And swallow my anger when she tells me, she borrowed the clippers without asking but they aren’t sharp enough. In fact, she tries to make me feel bad that she had to borrow shitty clippers. When she returns them, she acts important.

“I had my dad sharpen these for you,” she says.

“Thank you,” I say.

I think about letting it go, but I don’t.

“I’ll thank your dad when I see him. I’m sorry you had a hard time finding them and when you took them they weren’t sharp enough. They are where I can find them, because they are mine. And

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they are just as sharp as I need my clippers to be. Stop fucking borrowing things without asking.”

*(Artwork by the author)*

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