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The author and her 2-year-old son, who is half Nicaraguan, half Nebraskan.

COMING TO TERMS

shades of meaning

For one dark-haired Latina, having a blond, blue-eyed baby led to a full-blown racial identity crisis.

WRITTEN BY SANDY M. FERNÁNDEZ

The first time my son's coloring became an issue was on an icy night in January 2005, two and a half years before he was born. His father and I had been dating a few months, and we were in that dreamy stage when you send up trial balloons—*I want three kids; do you want three? Oh, good!* Feeling toasty and safe as Rob drove us to dinner, I started mulling over kids. “Do you think they’ll look Latino?”

I asked. “I worry that they’ll look generally American and won’t, you know, identify with their heritage.”

Identity has always been a preoccupation of mine. I came to the United States from Nicaragua abruptly when I was 9 years old, sent “on vacation” during the civil war. I never went back. In the suburbs where my family settled, my espresso hair and almond eyes revealed that I was “from somewhere,” and 30 years in, I still think of myself that way. Rob is the opposite: a fourth-generation midwesterner who, as perhaps I should have noticed, looks “generally American.”

WEREN'T MY DARKER GENES SUPPOSED TO BE DOMINANT? HOW HAD I CARRIED HIM FOR NINE MONTHS, THEN BEEN ERASED FROM HIS FEATURES?

"You sound like you don't want them to look like me," he said. "What about their identifying with my German heritage?"

Buddy, what the hell are you talking about? I thought. They'll go to kindergarten; they'll eat hamburgers—your culture's everywhere! The details of the rest of that first argument are tedious, except to say that our relationship survived, and by the time I found myself in labor, Rob and I had a plan: Our son would have Rob's last name but a Spanish-language first name. I figured that, as part of a package with brunet looks, "Pablo" or "Santiago" would adequately tout the *abuelo* in his bloodline—and keep my son conscious of the same.

Except that when Diego was born, he wasn't dark-haired. He wasn't even brown-haired. He looked, in that super-serious newborn way, like nothing so much as a shrunken-down version of Philip Seymour Hoffman in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*: blue-eyed and blond, peaches and cream, passable as Nebraskan but unpeggable as a Nicaraguan.

Really, this shouldn't have even surprised me. My younger brother, Jaime, was the classic nutmeg-and-cinnamon Latino baby, but photos of my mother show a little girl with fair Shirley Temple curls, and my grandmother still stores blond locks trimmed from my head before it darkened. Plus, I know the drill: We're an ethnicity, not a race; we come in all shades.

And yet. Rob, as surprised as I was, joked in the e-mailed birth announcement that Diego's looks, "for the record, are the same as my dad's, so not unreasonable." But it felt unreasonable to me. Within second-cousin range in my family, the coloring spans from Christy Turlington to Frida Kahlo—but no one, to my knowledge, had ever flashed icy baby-blues. Weren't my darker genes supposed to be dominant here? How had I carried this child for nine months, then been so completely erased from his features?

"When do you think his eyes will change?" I asked the doctor at our first well-baby checkup, four days later. Even in my postbirth haze, I'd spent Diego's naptimes surfing the online mommy boards for information, comforted to find I wasn't the first to have been discombobulated by a paler-than-expected newborn. It was a hot topic, meriting an "expert answer" from a pediatrician who wrote that because darker eyes require more pigment than lighter ones, it's not unusual for a newborn's to gradually darken.

"Oh, by 9 months," the doctor said.

That became my mantra: 9 months. I clung to it, obsessed. Diego was, in many ways, a model newborn—a greedy nurser; a champion sleeper; gifted, from the beginning, with his father's easygoing nature. But as weeks went by, I noticed that the subject I kept joking about—*Ha ha! Who woulda thunk it? Isn't that weird?*—was his coloring. And the emotion underneath was only barely submerged.

I arrived in the States as a Central American preteen in the 1980s, the era of Christie Brinkley and Bo Derek. Back home, prettiness had never been my claim to fame—I was more of a tomboy—but neither had it been an issue. Then suddenly,

among all the other disconcerting changes, I found myself demoted several rungs in the looks department.

My response was a lifetime of brown-is-beautiful protests. In high school, I didn't even let my mom top our Christmas tree with an ethereal angel we'd received as a gift, arguing that, as a Latino household, we had to reserve the place of honor for one that looked more like us.

Now here was my kid: Tiny. Angelic. Blond.

And I felt that as loss.

Diego fattened up a little, and the cowlick on his head grew out. But at 9 months, he was as fair as ever. Rob's mom called him "a little Hummel," after the porcelain figurines of chunky-legged German kids.

"What if he doesn't change?" asked one of my aunts, wistfully, as she cradled him. This is the aunt who thinks Jennifer Lopez is trashy and Gwyneth Paltrow is the most beautiful woman in the world.

"He's going to," I snapped.

But another month passed. Then another.

My wake-up call came at, of all places, Costco. Diego had been cranky, and we'd all had a long day. In the cheese aisle, and again in the meats, Rob and I wheeled past a Latino family with a toddler in the cart who was chubby and alert, with onyx hair and an aristocratic Mayan nose. Both times I pivoted to look at him. When Diego fussed again—he hadn't napped, he wanted the blueberries, something—I turned to Rob and hissed, "That's what my child was supposed to look like!"

It was, again, meant as a "joke"—but as it came out, Rob looked startled, and I flushed, wondering who had heard me. It didn't escape me that if I had heard a similar dis of a Latino-looking kid, I probably would have called Child Services.

When I shared the story with a Chicana friend, empathy was not forthcoming. "Sandy," she said. "You have a gorgeous, healthy baby. Who cares what color his hair is?"

And that's when I finally understood what had been going on: I'd been stuck in a fighter's crouch, the one I'd spent a lifetime readying in order to protect my kid. I'd been preparing to teach him to see the beauty in his cinnamon skin tone, obsidian hair, single-lidded eyes—to value them even if the world around him didn't. But my son was not going to need me on this. The world—which had told me no such thing—was going to tell him he is beautiful. And about that I felt a little jealous, a little lost, and a little left behind.

Diego is 2 now. His first word was *gracias*; he loves avocados, Peruvian food, and the Mexican kids' singer Cri-Cri. His eyes are flecked with hazel, but I've accepted that he'll never look like Mario Lopez. I've also learned, however, why he might one day resemble Gael García Bernal: Last Thanksgiving, an aunt revealed that a previously overlooked maternal great-grandfather had been "short and blond, with blue eyes."

My mother had completely failed to mention him. But at this point, the news didn't surprise me. You know what they say: Latinos are an ethnic group, not a race. 🍷