

# Introduction: America Ferrera

By: America Ferrera

*Adapted by Fishtank Staff*

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MY NAME IS AMERICA, and at nine years old, I hate my name. Not because I hate my country. No! In fact, at nine years old I love my country! When the national anthem plays, I cry into my Dodger Dog thinking about how lucky I am to live in the only nation in the world where someone like me will grow up to be the first girl to play for the Dodgers. I do hate the Pledge of Allegiance though, not because I don't believe in it. I believe every word of it, especially the "liberty and justice for all" part. I believe the Pledge of Allegiance to my bones. And at nine years old I feel honored, self-righteous, and quite smug that I was smart enough to be born in the one country in the whole world that stands for the things my little heart knows to be true: we are all the same and deserve an equal shot at life, and a place on the Dodgers' batting lineup. I hate the Pledge of Allegiance because for as long as I can remember there is always at least one smart-ass in class who turns to face me with his hand over his heart to recite it, you know, 'cause my name is America.

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The first day of every school year is always hell. Teachers always make a big deal of my name in front of the whole class. They either think it's a typo and want to know what my real name is, or they want to know how to pronounce it (ridiculous, I know), and they always follow up with "America? You mean, like the country?"

"Yes, like the country," I say, with my eyes on my desk and my skin burning hot.

This is how I come to hate American History. Not because I don't love saying "the battle of Ticonderoga" (obviously, I do). But because no teacher has ever been more excited to meet a student named America than my first American History teacher.

He has been waiting all day to meet me, and so to commemorate this moment he wheels me around the classroom on his fancy teacher's chair, belting "God Bless America" while a small part of me dies inside.

His face reminds me of Eeyore's when I say, "Actually, I like to go by my middle name, Georgina, so could you please make a note of it on the roster-paper-thingy? Thanks." When he has the gall to ask me why, I say something like "It's just easier," instead of what I really want to say, which is "Because people like you make my name unbearably embarrassing! And another thing, I'm not actually named after the United States of America! I'm named after my mother, who was born and raised in Honduras. That's in *Central* America, in case you've never heard of it, also part of the Americas. And if you must know, she was born on an obscure holiday called Día de Las Américas, which not even people in Honduras know that much about, but my grandfather was a librarian and knew weird shit like that. This is a holiday that celebrates *all* the Americas—South, Central, and North, not just the United States of. So, my name has nothing to do with amber waves of grain, purple mountains, the US flag, or your very narrow definition of the word. It's my mother's name and a word that also relates to other countries, like the one my

parents come from. So please refrain from limiting the meaning of my name, erasing my family's history, and making me the least popular kid in class all in one fell swoop. Just call me Georgina, please?" I don't say any of this, to anyone. Ever. It would be impolite, or worse, unpatriotic. And as I said before, I love my country in the most unironic and earnest way anyone can love anything.

I know just how lucky I am to be an American because every time I complain about too much homework my mother reminds me that in Honduras I'd be working to help support the family, so I'd better thank my lucky stars that she sacrificed everything she had so that my *malcriada*<sup>1</sup> self and my five siblings could one day have too much homework. It's a perspective that has me embracing Little League baseball, the Fourth of July, and ABC's TGIF lineup of wholesome American family comedies with more fervor than most. I feel more American than Balki Bartokomous, the Winslows, and the Tanners combined, and I believe that one day I will grow up to look like Aunt Becky from *Full House* and then Frank Sinatra will ask me to rerecord "I've Got You Under My Skin" as a duet with him because I know all the words better than my siblings.

So I let it slide when people respond to my name with "Wow, your parents must be very patriotic. Where are they ACTUALLY from?" This is a refrain I hear often and one that will take me a couple of decades to unpack for all its implications and assumptions. I learn to go along with the casting of my parents as the poor immigrants yearning to breathe free, who made it to the promised land and decided to name their American daughter after the soil that would fulfill all their dreams. After all, it is a beautiful and endearing tale. Only later do I learn to bristle and push back against this incomplete narrative. A narrative which manages to erase my parents' history, true experience, and claim to the name America long before they had a US-born child. Never mind that they'd already had a US-born child before me and named her Jennifer. Which is both a much more American name than mine and one I would kill to have on the first day of every school year.

But I am nine and I do not think too much about narratives and my parents' erased history. I think about my friends and getting to go over to their houses, where we play their brand-new Mall Madness board game and search Disney movies for the secret sex images you can see if you know where to pause the VHS. I think about how cool it would be if my mom ever let me actually sleep over at a friend's house and how that will never happen because she's convinced all sleepovers end in murder and sexual assault. I think about how cool it would be if my friend was allowed to sleep over at my house and how that will never happen because her parents, who are also immigrants, happen to agree with my mom about the murder and sexual assault thing. I think about how when I'm in junior high and look more like Aunt Becky I will have a locker and decorate it with mirrors and magazine cutouts like all the kids on *Saved By the Bell*. I think about how I will grow up to be a professional baseball player, actress, civil rights lawyer, and veterinarian who will let her kids go to sleepovers. And I think about boys. Well, I think about one boy. A lot.

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<sup>1</sup> spoiled

Aside from having a challenging name, I feel just like all my friends. Even all the things that make my home life different from my friends' home lives seem to unify our experience. Sure, my parents speak Spanish at home, but Grace's parents speak Chinese, and Muhammad's parents speak another distinct language that I can't name, and Brianne's Filipino parents speak something that sounds a little like Spanish but isn't. My favorite part of going over to my friends' houses is hearing their parents yell at them in different languages and eating whatever their family considers an after-school snack. Brianne and I consume an alarming amount of white rice soaked in soy sauce while we stretch in the dark, listening to her mom's Mariah Carey album.

Speaking Spanish at home, my mom's Saturday-morning-salsa-dance party in the kitchen, and eating tamales alongside apple pie at Christmas do not in any way seem at odds with my American identity. In fact, having parents with deep ties to another country and culture feels part and parcel of being an American. I am nine and I truly belong. By the time I reach ten, this all begins to change.

The first person to make me feel like a stranger in a strange land is the first boy I ever love. I am six years old when I fall in love with Sam Spencer<sup>2</sup>. And the full agony of loving him is bursting out of my tiny bones and pulsing through my tiny veins. He has very silky, soft brown hair that is almost entirely short except for the rat's tail that dangles down the nape of his neck. I sit behind Sam on the magic carpet at reading time, and I try to be sneaky about braiding his rat's tail. Whether we are making pizza bagels or building castles in the sandbox, all my little six-year-old mind can focus on during Ms. Wildestein's kindergarten class is braiding Sam's hair, talking to Sam, and sitting near Sam. With every passing year, new boys and girls are added to our class but my heart remains fully devoted to worshipping at the altar of Sam Spencer. By the time we are in third grade, I am aware that other girls also think Sam is one of the cute boys, but I am secure in the deep foundation we have built starting back in kindergarten. When I sit next to him at lunch, he does not tell me to go away, and that has to mean something. I don't need to tell him I love him or need him to declare his love for me. I just need to sit next to him on the reading carpet and stand as close to him in the lunch line as possible. I'm fulfilled with making him laugh from across the classroom by taking my long brown hair and turning it into a mustache and beard on my face. I think of him as mine, because my heart says he is. What more proof do I need? I never imagine that our relationship will ever need to be spoken about.

One day, we, the students of Ms. Kalichek's third-grade class, are lined up after lunch. I am locking arms and stifling giggles with my girlfriends Jenna and Alison when Sam taps my shoulder. This is unusual. He is not often the initiator of our conversations. I turn to him very attentively and wait. He opens his mouth to say, "I like Jenna more than you. Do you want to know why?"

The masochist in me answers too quickly. "Why?"

He says, "Because she has blue eyes and lighter skin than you."

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<sup>2</sup> Name changed to avoid awkward Facebook interactions.

He turns around and rejoins his group of boys. I stand there frozen. Ice-cold. Learning how fast a heart beats the first time it is crushed by love, how quietly skin crawls the first time its color is mentioned, how wet eyes become when they realize for the first time that they are, in fact, not blue, like Jenna's, the color Sam likes better. I stand there wishing to return to the moment before Sam taps me on the shoulder, before I learn that it would be better to not look like me, at least if you want the first and only boy you've ever loved to love you back. Which I do.

Shortly after, I learn that it is also better not to look like me if you don't want to be singled out at school and questioned about your parents' immigration status.

It is 1994, and California just voted in favor of Proposition 187—an initiative to deny undocumented immigrants and their children public services, including access to public education for kindergarten through university. There is fear inside the immigrant community that their children will be harassed and questioned in their schools.

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I am in third grade and do not know or understand any of this. Nonetheless, my mother pulls me aside one day when she is dropping me off at school and says, "You are American. You were born in this country. If anyone asks you questions, you don't need to feel ashamed or embarrassed. You've done nothing wrong."

I am so confused, but I take my mom's advice and feel the need to spread it. I mention to some of my friends that people might be asking them questions and that they shouldn't be afraid, they've done nothing wrong. They stare blankly at me and then go about their hopscotch. None of my friends seem to know what I'm talking about. I have the sneaking suspicion that their parents did not pull them aside to have the same talk. While I am grilling some more friends on the playground about whether they've been questioned about being American, a big kid I don't know interrupts me to say, "They don't care about *us*. It's just Americans like you." My mind short-circuits. Americans like me? What does that mean? I wasn't aware there were different kinds of Americans. American is American is American. All created equal. Liberty and justice for all. I manage to say something to the big kid, like, "Oh," and I never talk about it at school again. I never talk about it at home either. But I do spend some time wondering what the big kid means by "Americans like you."

Is it about my name? Is it the salsa music at home? Maybe this has something to do with my skin and my non-blue eyes again. That's ridiculous, we don't separate Americans by the color of their eyes. Do we? Are there different words for different kinds of Americans? Am I half American? Kind of American? Other American? I am nine years old, and suddenly I am wondering what do I call an American like me.

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As I grew older, I got better at recognizing when someone was trying to tell me that I was not the norm and that I didn't really belong in a given place, which seemed to be just about everywhere. The Latina clique would call me "that wannabe white girl who hangs out with drama kids and does lame Shakespeare competitions" to my face because they thought I didn't understand

Spanish. I let them believe that so I could keep eavesdropping. My AP English teacher would excuse my tardies because she assumed I was bused into the neighborhood like most of the other Latino kids. "Bus late again?" she would ask. I'd drop my eyes, take my seat quickly, and never really confirm or deny. The truth was I lived a few blocks from school but hated waking up early. Her assumption that a kid who looked like me didn't really belong in this neighborhood bought me a few extra hours of sleep a week, so I let that one slide.

I may have been a whitewashed gringa in Latino groups, but I was downright exotic to my white friends; especially to their parents, who were always treating me like a rare and precious zoo animal. They'd ooh and aah at my mother's courageous immigrant story, then wish out loud that my hardworking spirit would rub off on their children. They particularly loved having me around when they needed something translated to their housekeepers or gardeners. Seeing such a smart and articulate brown girl was like seeing a dog talk. They were easily impressed.

Even at home I walked a fine line between assimilating to American ways enough to make my mom proud, and adapting in ways that would disgrace and shame her. For instance, bringing home straight-A report cards was a good thing, but attending late-night coed study groups to achieve said As was shameful and likely to turn me into a drug-addicted, pregnant high school dropout. Decoding people's expectations and then shape-shifting into the version of myself that pleased them the most became my superpower.

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Shape-shifting was a useful skill to possess as an aspiring actress, but it didn't stop people from labeling and categorizing me. In fact, when people found out that my dream was to become an actress, they made it their duty to remind me of who I was . . . and who I wasn't.

Family members would say to me bluntly, the way families are prone to do, "Actresses don't look like you. You're brown, short, and chubby." Classmates would say, "You have to know someone to catch a break, and you don't have any connections to the industry." Teachers, hoping they could steer me toward a more sensible career path, would simply ask, "What's your backup plan?" But I wasn't sensible, I was an American, damn it! An American who wholeheartedly believed what she'd been taught her entire life: that in America no dream is impossible, even if you are a short, chubby Latina girl with no money or connections! What was wrong with these people? Didn't they know that in America fortune favored the dreamer willing to work hard? I mostly felt sorry for them and their lack of imagination, and went about working to make my dream come true.

I acted wherever anyone would let me—in school, the local community college, and free community theater programs. I spent one summer riding three buses to get from the Valley to Hollywood in order to play Fagan's Boy #4 in a community theater production of *Oliver!* I babysat kids, looked after my neighbors' pet pig, and waitressed to pay for acting workshops. It was impossible to know which opportunity would open a door to my career, especially in LA, "where there are so many scams designed to take aspiring actors' money," as my mom liked to warn me. But I threw myself and my hard-earned cash at every single opportunity that came my way. And to everyone's surprise, including my own, a few doors started opening for me when I was still only sixteen years old.

To nobody's surprise, except my own, Hollywood was not as ready for me as I imagined. I thought the hard part was getting through the door, and I was sure that as soon as Hollywood saw me in all my glory, passion, and optimism they'd roll out the red carpet and alert the press: Americas new sweetheart has arrived!

Somehow the boxes I resisted being shoved into during my childhood were even tighter and more suffocating in Hollywood. The first audition I ever went on, the casting director asked me if I could "try to sound more Latina."

"Ummmm . . . do you want me to do it in Spanish?" I asked.

"No, no, do it in English, just sound like you're a Latina," she clarified.

"But I am Latina, soooo isn't this what a Latina sounds like?" I asked.

"Okay, never mind, honey. Thanks for coming in, byeeee," she said as she waved me toward the door. It took me far too long to understand she wanted me to speak in broken English. And instead of being sad that I didn't get the part, I was angry that she thought sounding Latina meant not speaking English well.

Even after I'd had some great successes with *Gotta Kick It Up!* and *Real Women Have Curves*, two movies that allowed me to play Latina characters who were not just broad stereotypes, I was constantly coming up against people who thought it was silly for me to expect to play a dynamic and complex Latina who was the main character in her own story. Even some of the people I paid to represent me did not believe in my vision for my career. When I was eighteen I told my manager that I was sick of going out for the role of Pregnant Chola #2 or the sassy Latina sidekick. I wanted him to send me out for roles that were grounded and well written. I wanted to play characters who were everyday people with relatable hopes and dreams. His response was "Someone needs to tell that girl she has unrealistic expectations of what she can accomplish in this industry." And the saddest part was that he wasn't wrong. I mean, I fired him, but he wasn't wrong.

After hustling for years to break down doors and working my hardest to prove my talent and grit, I had to admit that the stories I wanted to tell and the characters I wanted to play were virtually invisible from our cultural narrative. I have been supremely lucky to get the opportunities to play some wonderful, authentic, and deep characters, but if I look around at the vast image being painted about the American experience, I see that there are so many of us missing from the picture. Our experiences, our humor, our dramas, our hopes, our dreams, and our families are almost nonexistent in the stories that surround us. And while growing up that way might turn us into badass-Jedi-master-translators-of-culture who are able to imagine ourselves as heroes, villains, or ThunderCats, we deserve to be truly reflected in the world around us.

For seventeen years, I've had a front-row seat to the impact that representation has on people's lives. I've met people who've told me that *Real Women Have Curves* was the first time they ever saw themselves on-screen, and that my character, Ana, inspired them to pursue college, or to stop hating their bodies, or to mend broken relationships with a parent.

I've heard from countless young people who came out to their parents while watching *Ugly Betty*, and young girls who decided they could, in fact, become writers because Betty was a writer.

And, most common, I hear from all kinds of people that they gain confidence and self-esteem when they see themselves in the culture—a brown girl, a brace-face, an aspiring journalist, an underdog, an undocumented father, a gay teen accepted by his family, a gay adult rejected by his mother, a store clerk getting through the day with dignity and a sense of humor, a sisterhood of girls who love and support one another, and, yes, share magical pants—simple portrayals that say in resounding ways, you are here, you are seen, your experience matters.

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I believe that culture shapes identity and defines possibility; that it teaches us who we are, what to believe, and how to dream. We should all be able to look at the world around us and see a reflection of our true lived experiences. Until then, the American story will never be complete.

This compilation of personal stories, written by people I deeply admire and fangirl out about on the regular, is my best answer to my nine-year-old self. My plan is to find a time machine and plop this book in her hands at the very moment she first thinks, *What do I call an American like me?* I'll tell her to read these stories and to know that she is not alone in her search for identity. That her feelings of being too much of this, or not enough of that, are shared by so many other creative, talented, vibrant, hardworking young people who will all grow up to transcend labels and become awesome people who do kick-ass things like win Olympic medals, and run for office, and write musicals, and make history that changes the country and the world. And it won't matter what people *called* them, because the missing pieces of the American narrative will be filled in and rewritten and redefined by Americans like her, Americans like you.

Americans like me.