
AN UNLIKELY LOVE LETTER

ERICA GARZA

TO YOU WITH your endless nail salons, fast food chains, liquor stores and taquerias. To you with your teenaged mothers, baldheaded vatos, lowriders and paleta men. Know this: Despite all the shit I talked and how often I edited my place of birth depending on my audience, I send you this with love.

I know it's late, but hear me out. It's true you are all I wanted to get away from when I bought plane tickets (on credit) to Paris and Barcelona. To London and Maui and New York and Shanghai. You are what I blamed for my innate laziness, my cellulite, my fear, my boredom. You are what I felt ashamed of when travelers in faraway hostels traded stories about their almost always charming seaside hometowns and exciting metropolises. All I could ever say was: "I grew up in LA, but not in Hollywood, not Downtown, not near the beach, not in the valley, not near Brentwood, Bel Air, Los Feliz or Pasadena." And later when tough neighborhoods became cool neighborhoods, I still had to say, "No, not Silverlake, not Highland Park, not Echo Park, not Eagle Rock." And yet I couldn't even claim street cred. "No, not Compton, Inglewood, Boyle Heights or the LBC."

Montebello. Off the 60 freeway, near East LA, Pico Rivera, Monterey Park and Rosemead. Ten minutes from Downtown LA, unless there's traffic. Half an hour from LAX.

Home to a mediocre golf course, a mall I never liked, rows of bridal shops, piñata stores, Mexican and Armenian churches, donuts-and-Chinese under one roof, bulletproof bank tellers, twenty-four hour taco stands, and suburban streets like the one I shamefully called home for decades.

Listen to me. I'm not ashamed anymore. In fact, I'll admit that every time I reluctantly tried yet another Mexican restaurant somewhere far from you, I was surprisingly nostalgic. When the mariachis boarded the 1-2-3 train in Manhattan, I always tipped them. I never, not once, pronounced the G in guacamole. I was proud of you in a secret way that I could not justify what with all my snobbish arguments on being "cultured," endless travel planning and my expensive education.

But I see now, *you* are and always will be my primary education. And in many ways, my most valuable. You are, after all, the backdrop to all my important firsts. What is a first bike ride without the Rose Hills sign looming in the distance? What is a first love without the Montebello Skate Park and that tall, dark-eyed boy with a skateboard? What is a first paycheck, a first drive in my own car, a first decision to get out and see the world, without you—home—to lead me to it?

After all, the glamour of elsewhere simply doesn't exist without the mellow mediocrity of home. The *Mona Lisa* is just a painting without the rough, graffitied walls of Whittier Boulevard's shops. Hyde Park isn't all that unless I think about how many times I've dragged my feet around Henry Acuna Park, dreaming up all the places I'd see one day.

Home is a launch pad, a starting point, an introduction. Home isn't just where the "heart" is, as the old tired adage goes. It's also where the gut is—the source to all that I have become. And sometimes, at the far ends of the Earth, immersed in the unfamiliar, the exotic, the epic, comes gratitude for that one place, unlike any other, that I know too well. That wore me out. That urged me to get up and go.

Somehow, it feels like you planned it all along. When you taunted me late at night with the illegal fireworks and backyard parties. When you stole the family car from the Costco parking lot. When you led me to that library, to those books on maps, and taught me how to dream. You're a sneaky bastard, Montebello, but I love you for that.

Thank you.