



Still to this day I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be, but there's no way I can be a regular American because I look too ethnic.



Lisa

My name is Lisa. I really love horses, and so I live out in a more rural area of Riverside. I wind up having a long commute to work, unfortunately, but that's the way it goes. I'm also an avid video gamer. Can you believe that? A lot of people think you're technologically dead once you hit forty.

I am somebody who feels very much American, and I was brought up culturally White. You know, meatloaf and mashed potatoes. But I was always reminded that I wasn't White, by everybody else around me, basically. "No, no, no. You're not one of us. You're something else. What else?"

That "something else" depends on the region I'm in and the minorities most prevalent there. Sometimes people think I'm Hawaiian or Samoan, maybe because I've been overweight since puberty and I have curly hair. Here in California people assume I'm Mexican, for the most part. Yes, my dad is Mexican,

but I don't speak a lot of Spanish, and I don't have the cultural experiences that people assume I do.

One time I was standing in line to get a burrito, and this guy was in front of me marveling at how fast they were making the food. And he says to his son, "It's all in the thumbs, how you roll it." And he turns to me and says, "Right? It's all in the thumbs?" And I'm like, "Dude, if I was any good at this I wouldn't be standing here trying to buy a burrito." I grew up on Midwestern fried chicken and roast beef.

Another time at Costco this guy came up and asked me, "Do you speak English?" I said yes, and he asked me to watch his cart. But I'm thinking, that's how you lead off!? There are plenty of blondes from Spanish-speaking countries too, you know.

When I was in Louisiana things were different – there, I was Black. I remember a guy driving one of those horse drawn cabs, and he offered me a special rate because "you know, we have to help each other out."

And then I was once in a craft shop on a Navajo reservation and this lady goes, "Oh, can I take your picture with this pot?" And I'm like, "I'm not the artist. I'm a tourist, like you!" And she says, "That's fine. Can I just take your picture?" And I'm thinking, is this because my hair is in pigtails? She's gonna



“I had been spending a lot of time at fairs – I was showing livestock with Cal Poly, and saw that there was a variety of beadwork entered, including some Native styles, and I thought mine was a superior piece of work. So I figured, why not? And I was right. I won the category for that year. It’s the best piece I ever made.”



put that in her photo album, “Look, a real Indian.”

My whole life I’ve heard the inevitable question, “What are you?” And then it’s, here we go again: My maternal grandmother is half Black, half White. She married a man who was Black and Choctaw. And my dad is from Mexico City. When I share my background like this with someone I’m always wondering, what is it that you plan to do with this information? Are you just idly curious, or are you going to use it to stereotype me?

When I was a kid, I was really trying to self-identify as White. I distanced myself from my ethnicity by laughing about “wetbacks” and “beaners” along with the other kids. It was this desperate attempt to stamp away my ethnicity and feel like I fit in. I also relaxed my hair for years because I couldn’t stand the curls and kinks. And – here’s my own prejudice again coming in – I wasn’t about to put Jheri Curl in my hair.

I take a lot more pride in my heritage now. I’m a mixture of all of these races, and this makes me unique and it’s a beautiful thing. That’s really what the great American melting pot was supposed to be about, not just White people mixing with other White people.

While exploring her Native heritage, Lisa took up beadwork. She made this bag, patterned on one seen in a Native arts magazine, using the lazy squaw stitch.

But what I’ve found is that when I embrace one part of my identity there is always someone saying “Well, you’re not enough of this,” or “You wouldn’t understand because you’re too much of that.” So, I have this whole push/pull between all these groups that I belong to, but none of them wants to embrace me. It’s like being a man without a country.

When it boils down to who I am, sometimes I still don’t know. I might look ethnic, but I wasn’t raised ethnic. I’m a little more culturally connected than I used to be, but I still don’t feel different from just a regular old American.