I have lived most of my life never thinking about my own relationship to race, ethnicity and culture, or more specifically, not having to think about it. I’m white, and any cultural divergences I took from the general white, American culture attributed to my Jewishness were small enough to ignore or at least, small enough to hide without thinking about it too hard. That is, until I learned about my grandpa.

Finding out the origins of a grandfather I didn’t know I had and the subsequent situations that knowledge put me in forced me to change my conceptions of race, ethnicity and culture, and made me adapt my self-concept to accommodate for things I had never expected. At a family Thanksgiving dinner, when I was sixteen, my grandmother finally told my mom about her biological father, an Afro-Cuban man named Joaquin. This isn’t really the story though. This new information didn’t alter my self-perception until it changed others’ perceptions of me, which only came up nearly a full year later in my senior-year Spanish class.

In this class, we had just been assigned new seats, and everyone at my new table was Latina. The three girls were excited to all be in a group together and started speaking Spanish rapid-fire. Not wanting to assume things about me, or possibly confused at how I seemed to understand them when most white, Iowan high schoolers would have tuned out immediately, one of them asked if I was Latino. I answered, "a little bit, kind of," and she pressed further, asking what exactly that meant. When I answered that my grandfather was from Cuba, she was almost pleasantly dismissive. Waving her hand in a sarcastic sort of motion, she said, "A little bit’, you had me scared, thought you were gonna say your great-great uncle or something stupid like that. A quarter is enough, you’re one of us."

In the moment, I was surprised, and confused, but happy that they had categorized me in a way I hadn’t done to myself. Before then, claiming it felt like stealing. It felt like someone else had to open the door for me to feel comfortable even thinking about what my grandfather’s heritage meant for me, and that’s what those girls did. Before then, I had been content to ignore what my grandfather’s existence meant for me. But if just mentioning him had made people classify me as part of a group I’d never claimed on my own, I knew I couldn’t keep ignoring it. It’s been a few years, and I’m still figuring it out.

I’m still White, but knowing more now about my grandfather’s culture and personal history makes me more comfortable to acknowledge that ethnically and culturally, there’s something new growing. It’s complicated, because Latinx isn’t a race the same way black or white or Asian are. A Latinx person can be any of those and more because Latin ethnicity is based on culture and family, rather than on any physical characteristics. Though, because of how Latinx people are
racialized in the US and because I didn’t have this connection as a
child, you’d still be hard pressed to find me calling myself Latino
without specifying further. To non-Latinx Americans, I’m white and a
little bit Latino, while to Latinx people, I’m equally white and
Latino because race, as a social construct, isn’t the same in every
culture. Those girls were the catalyst for all this thinking, but the
most important reason I have to consider this something I can’t ignore
is that Joaquin thinks I’m Cuban. He wants me to be, and I think I owe
it to him to try and fit a part of what he’s given me into my self-
definition.