

# [Latin girl](https://assignbuster.com/latin-girl/)

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On a bus trip to London from Oxford University where I was earning some graduate credits one summer, a young man, obviously fresh from a pub, spotted me and as if struck by inspiration went down on his knees in the aisle. With both hands over his heart, he broke into an Irish tenor’s rendition of “ Maria" from West Side Story. My politely amused fellow passengers gave his lovely voice the round of gentle applause it deserved. Though I was not quite amused, I managed my version of an English smile: no show of teeth, no extreme contortions of the facial muscles — I was at this time of my life practicing reserve and cool. Oh, that British control, how I coveted it. But “ Maria" had followed me to London, reminding me of a prime fact of my life: you can leave the island, master the English language, and travel as far as you can, but if you are a Latina, especially one like me who so obviously belongs to Rita Moreno’s gene pool, the island travels with you. This is sometimes a very good thing — it may win you that extra minute of someone’s attention. But with some people, the same things can make you an island — not a tropical paradise but an Alcatraz, a place nobody wants to visit. As a Puerto Rican girl living in the United States and wanting like most children to “ belong, " I resented the stereotype that my Hispanic appearance called forth from many people I met. Growing up in a large urban center in New Jersey during the 1960s, I suffered from what I think of as a “ cultural schizophrenia. " Our life was designed by my parents as a microcosm of their casas on the island. We spoke in Spanish, ate Puerto Rican food bought at the bodega, and practiced strict Catholicism at a church that allotted us a one hour slot each week for mass, performed in Spanish by a Chinese priest trained as a missionary in Latin America.