



TRANSCRIPCIÓN ORIGINAL DE STUDIO OCHENTA

MIJA ON THE MIKE - CARMEN RITA WONG

00:09 LORY

Bienvenidos and Welcome to Mija on the Mike, where me, Mija, interviews daughters of immigrants who are making moves in their industries around the world.

00:15 LORY

Today I'm so excited to invite author and journalist Carmen Rita Wong. You are an American radio television and online journalist, personal finance expert, and author of the brand new book: "Why Didn't You Tell Me". Which is a huge page-chirner.

00:27 LORY

I'm so excited to talk about it. It explores her journey to finding out more about her cultural origins after the passing of her mother. So thank you, Carmen, for joining me on the podcast today. Let's begin with what is "Why Didn't You Tell Me"? We have to get to the juicy stuff first, because it's, yeah.

00:45 CARMEN

Well, first of all, thank you so much for having me. What a wonderful, wonderful podcast Mija on the Mike, because it's just, yeah, if there was one book that was about being a Mija. If there was one, this is it.

00:57 CARMEN

My mother kept a lot of secrets. One of them is, of course, my origins. Where did I come from in the terms of, you know, who my father is and the whole story behind who she was back then when she made a decision to essentially raise me: Dominican-Chinese, Dominicana and China.

01:16 CARMEN

And she was Dominican and Papi Wong, this was Chinese immigrant, both immigrants, arranged marriage. And I was raised a Wong. I was raised China Latina and for 31 years and when she got sick with cancer fairly young in her 50s, I discovered that he was not my biological father.

01:39 CARMEN

And when I confronted her about it, she made up another story. And that was the story I lived with for another 10 years until that crazy thing called DNA testing came about. And I found out it was somebody else completely.

01:54 CARMEN

So it's as much a book about, you know, it's not a book about me finding a father. It's a book about, I have plenty of those. It's a book about discovering my mother, but not as her daughter, as her daughter and not. I had to see her as a full human being. I had to kind of do this psychological detective work to figure out why would she do something like that?

02:22 CARMEN

And she did something that was incredibly painful because my origins didn't weren't just as easy as father and mother. It was also about race, about identity, then another, a stepfather and his race and his identity. And it was so messy and painful and I needed to understand it. And in discovering who she was as a person, I also discovered myself. So that's the kind of book it is.

02:50 LORY

It sounds like such an amazing story. And when I first read the description of it, I was like, no, this can't be real. It doesn't sound like it could happen. Like it's a telenovela plot, but it is. It is your reality. I would like to just start off with, you know, you're a finance reporter. It's not something that you're, you know, specializing in. You're not necessarily doing stories about race and culture like this. So I would love to kind of talk about how you shifted into this thinking, into this kind of discourse that you now had to kind of create with their personal story. So, you know, how was that shift for you? And what did it feel like to own your story like this?

03:26 CARMEN

Yeah. Well, there's two things that have always been there. One is who I am in my identity, of course. And my voice, I've always had one in the sense I've always been a pain in the ass for people. But I've always been questioning things. And two, I've always been a writer. I started out covering finance at Money Magazine and Fortune, so, you know, in the late 90s, if you can believe it.

03:49 CARMEN

So I had a career of about 20 years in media covering finance. That included, you know, hosting my own TV show. And I also wrote advice column. So the writing was always there. You know, moving out of that career, I did well. It was great. But moving on into writing and writing something so personal, and part of the reason why, you know, I had a couple of advice books. I had a couple very lovely, salacious novels that I did as an experiment, just to see if I could just do it and have fun basically writing a couple of telenovelas, which was great.

04:25 CARMEN

I was like, okay, I'm going to do something so big and so personal that, you know, this is going to be, you know, if you're going to enter the room, you might as well enter, you know, a full out. So that's what I did. And I've always wanted to write the story.

04:39 CARMEN

And I'll tell you why. I mean, the impetus was I was that little kid who had a very difficult home life. So I just found solace in libraries in other people's stories, whether they were real or fake or not, just stories And I looked in those shelves and I was like, we are not there. Women aren't there. Latina, Asian, Black, we're not there. LGBTQ, I just didn't see us. And I said, well, wait a second, like, you know, we're American stories. Why don't we hear about our stories?

05:09 CARMEN

So it became this thing that was always in the back of my head. I wanted to see more of our stories and the belief that my story is complicated as it seems and dramatic and all that. Guadalupe was a piece of work. Is a very typical American story. I have heard from so many people that their parents kept secrets. They're another race. They have another father. They have another this. Millions of people share my story. And millions more if you just brought in it out to being, you know, an immigrant, the first born in this country. Huge, right?

05:43 CARMEN

So I just wanted to add to that and just another layer of, you know what, I'm sure other people share similarities with me. And I was right. Thank goodness.

05:51 LORY

Oh my gosh, definitely. I remember reading the again, the synopsis and I was like, yeah, but this isn't so far in. I feel like I've heard a lot of stories recently about the DNA testing being big part of this kind of conversations around our origins And it's so wild to think that, you know, a couple years back, we couldn't have even imagined fathom that speaking of the past, I would love to for you to kind of tell us about the young Carmen Rita Wong growing up. What was your childhood like with those blending of cultures?

06:22 CARMEN

Well, it was very rich, not financially, but culturally, very rich. So I started, we were in Harlem with a ton of Dominican family that had come, you know, after the war. So uptown was Dominicana land and my cousins were there and Diaz and they just so many people.

06:45 CARMEN

But it was between that and Chinatown with Papi Wong. So my worlds were rich, beyond belief, right? Was there a ton of love? I don't know, but my abuelo loved me. I'll tell you that. But my mother was young and, you know, and having fun with her friends and working, you know, they worked for Oscar de la Denta, you know, sewing seamstresses, a lot of Dominican women. He employed in his atelier. But then my mother divorced Papi and remarried an Anglo-American man.

07:16 CARMEN

So he was the complete opposite of Papi Wong. Papi was to say it any differently. I couldn't, he was just Chinese gangster. He was a gangster. That's one father. And then my stepfather was, she met him, you know, he was a fellow student of a friend of hers at Columbia University and graduate school economics. So complete opposite.

07:39 CARMEN

And then he moved us to New Hampshire, which in the late 70s, early 80s was white. I mean, very even southern New Hampshire, which is where we were, which is now pretty diverse, right? Back then, I mean, it was farmland. So we left our family, our culture, our food, our music, how we dressed. We left literally everything to live in a white America that was as foreign to me as living in a completely different country.

08:12 CARMEN

It was isolating. It was very, very difficult. Those were difficult years. So I found solace in reading. And my older brother, who, you know, protected me as much as possible, we fought just like siblings, but my brother was, you know, my big brother saved my sanity.

08:28 LORY

That's so interesting because, you know, today we talk a lot about identifying as hyphenated Americans. How do you even define yourself or how did you define yourself then? And then through the many stages of your discovery, how did you keep redefining yourself? Because it feels like you're, you know, if you were to fill out this SAT application, fill out this ethnicity form, you know, you have to check everything now.

08:54 CARMEN

Well, according to my DNA, even with indigenous too, like I check everything, like literally, I've got everything in me. However, that's what this country is. It's all of us. So of course I'm American. But as we know and as we see much more now, this country is very different, simply depending on what state you live in, what town you live in, what city you live in. There are so many different Americas within America. And for me in terms of biology, what's interesting is, you know, I was very worried about, you know, when I found out that I'm not biologically Chinese, it was devastating because it was, I was like losing a whole identity. But at the same time, I realized, well, what have I really lost?

09:40 CARMEN

You can't change the fact that I grew up Chinese with a Chinese father who only passed away this June. So he's been in my life for 50 years. You can't stop that. That doesn't change me. And what's wonderful is that, you know, the Latino community accepts me, the Chinese community accepts me, the African American community accepts me because I'm Afro-Latina for sure, for sure. That's very important to me.

10:05 CARMEN

My daughter, her father's German descent, so she's white presenting, she knows she's Latina, but she also knows she's white. She appears white, right? But she also knows she has all her cousins are black, but their last names are Wong. So my family really defies the ideas of what the label of race is versus culture.

10:27 CARMEN

What I hope is that people take away from my book too and besides everything about the mother daughter thing, which is huge, is that race is not culture. And we know that in Latino community, but a lot of people don't. And these ideas of what it is and stuff, you know, those are put on us. We have to know ourselves, know our families, know where we were raised. I think it's important to not let people tell you who you are.

10:56 LORY

Yeah, you're the citizen of the world in that sense. I always have the same kind of conversation because I'm Colombian American living in France and my husband's French. And so I have this whole thing of what are you now? And so I just say, I'm a New Yorker. I'm from Queens.

11:11 CARMEN

Yeah, I mean, if people think, hopefully I don't get that question anymore because that's probably just too grown, but like nobody's just like, what are you? I mean, it also, it depends on who's asking me because I believe that that's like a really loaded question that's full of projections.

11:23 CARMEN

People love to just project stuff on you. I've had people really, you know, covering finance for so many years, they get these, you know, finance bros. I think they know everything, you know, and it's like, you know, what are you? And I'm like, I'm Afro-Latina Chinese New Yorker, you know, and they're like, well, you don't look like this to me. You look like that. You don't get to sell the world what it is, right?

11:47 CARMEN

So if you're asking me because you're genuinely curious, fabulous. If you're asking me because you want to pin me down so that you can be, you can tell me what my identity is. Absolutely not.

11:59 LORY

And that's so hard, right? Because these days, I think, I mean, coming up in a multicultural community like that, you don't ask yourself these questions because it's only when you exit that space that you get confronted with the fact that not everywhere is this diverse, not everywhere is, you know, having this kind of mix of communities and races and cultures.

12:20 LORY

Not everywhere will have, you know, the Chinese Cuban restaurant. It's not Washington Heights, like everywhere. But you know, that's, I completely understand how difficult that shift must have been for you. And so I do want to get into your many dads that you have. But before that, I want to talk about your mother because, you know, this show is a lot about our relationship with our families and how they shape who we are and how they pass on their cultures to us. So how was that relationship with your mom? You know, how was Spanish in your household? What was the thing that kind of dominated your, your everyday...what culture?

12:58 CARMEN

Ay, mi español es terrible. Because I have not been able to practice as much, you know, once on my family's past and I haven't been able to travel during a pandemic. So I'm rusty, but Spanish was my first language. Well, when we moved to New Hampshire, they didn't teach Spanish in school and my new Anglo-father did not allow my mother to speak Spanish in the house. It was that whole idea of melting pot assimilation. So I lost my Spanish, the nuns in school only taught French. So I took eight years of French.

13:32 CARMEN

So I can understand French. I can really help with the Spanish, by the way, because I didn't took Spanish in school, but they have similar structures. So it's very interesting how language can kind of go over time. And then I can travel in Italy and somehow understand because I have all these other languages. But the thing about was more so about just the culture of being Dominican, you know, it was very much the culture of being Latina. I was raised with beauty pageants. My mother put me in beauty pageants, we watch beauty pageants. Unfortunately, because boys does that give you body dysmorphia.

14:07 CARMEN

But, you know, it was, she wasn't allowed to cook the food anymore, but thank God we drove back to New York often because she was very homesick. And I think God that I had that childhood there with the family because I think it's one of the most precious things of my life. It fills my heart, even if my heart wasn't filled necessarily by love. Like I said, I was it, but just being surrounded by women of all different colors, families that were made of hodgepages of, you know, cousins or siblings that weren't related, but maybe we're related like we didn't know. I mean, that was very Dominican thing. Like you took in people, you didn't know.

14:52 CARMEN

We were my grandfather's second family, you know, like he had a wife and kids, he put in the Bronx, but he lived with Abuela, who was his second partner, but it was also the food that was also the music. It was a way of living that was just very vibrant and rich and expressive. And that I never lost.

15:15 LORY

I'm curious about how that community shaped so much of the connections that you could make when your mother passed. You know, how was that experience of making all of these discoveries within that community? Because I imagine you weren't alone, thanks to that the rest of your family kind of supported that question.

15:34 CARMEN

No, i was alone.

15:36 LORY

Really?

15:37 CARMEN

Oh, yeah, no. My mother was ostracized by the family. When she moved to New Hampshire, she became pretty cut off. I mean, she talked to cousins and all that stuff, but we became very cut off. And then they decided, you know, my cousins decided that we started talking to white, dressing to white, you know, this is the other thing that she thought she was my mother, thought she was better than everybody else, blah, blah, blah. You know, all of this business.

16:04 CARMEN

She was raising us very, because then I had four younger sisters after to be very accomplished. So it was all about college. Her family felt that that was aggressively American, aggressively white, and it wasn't right that she was raising me to go to college

instead of getting married and having children. And to this day, a lot of the family still feels that way. And it's fine. But that's part of the culture that, frankly, I'm glad she didn't, and not because I looked down on it, because she gave us choices in many ways.

16:39 CARMEN

Even though I didn't feel like I had a choice. Trust me, she would have killed me, skinned me alive if I did not go to college. But she also did say you're 18, you go to college and you're out. After that, you do whatever you want. At least I was given another option. And that's very important. So I was always very grateful for that. But no, I mean, and also too, you got to understand about, I mean, to my point about like, there's different communities in different states, in different towns, in different cities, the Dominican, you know, mass immigration that happened during Trujillo and out of Trujillo.

17:13 CARMEN

There was a whole generation that came and they'd had their kids and then the kids grew up and then the kids moved. So everybody was out of New York City by the mid 80s. My grandparents passed away by early 90s. That's it. Everybody dispersed. New Jersey, Texas, New Hampshire, wherever. We didn't have that anymore. And that's unfortunate. And that's also kind of like an American by product, right? It's like you can't keep communities together sometimes.

17:47 LORY

And it's almost like it's because of the desperately seeking the American dream, you kind of become this individualistic. It always comes back to the same topic on every one of these episodes. Every conversation I've had with other daughters of immigrants, it always comes back to individualistic, Western Culture versus our Communitarian Culture and how we have to kind of reconcile the two. And if we can't, then there's going to be a suffering there. And there's going to be what we call generational trauma.

18:13 LORY

So I would like to hear your thoughts on not, you know, you talk about generational trauma of course in your book, especially because you know, all of these things are happening with generations of generations of your family. And now you as a mother are going to be coming with all of this baggage, cultural baggage, emotional baggage, crazy situation baggage. How do you deal with that? You know, how are you kind of facing all of this with your own daughter?

18:37 CARMEN

Fifteen years of weekly therapy.

18:40 LORY

Oh my goodness.

18:42 CARMEN

And it masters in psychology. I definitely think that there is pain and heartbreak in both situations. I wish there was a place where I could have felt welcome even though I was different in my own community, you know, even in graduate school, I worked with a

Dominican organization that because of the way I spoke, when I went to leave, I said something about being Dominican and they were shocked.

19:13 CARMEN

And I said, what did you think I was? And they were like, we just thought you were Anglo. People have ideas of what and how things and culture should be. I desperately missed and mourned my Dominican family and a lot of them because they just did not agree with the choices that we made. Now, I also feel I didn't have a lot of choices, right? I had to do what my mother told me to do, really. But I also, like I said, I'm really happy especially that I had the choice to be able to pursue a career and be a mother and, you know, all that stuff.

19:46 CARMEN

I want everyone to have all these choices and not being looked down on in their community if they choose to do that. I think the only idea of individualism that I like is the idea that we treat people as individual human beings, but we live in a community. And that's what I miss. I loved being a community. At one point when my daughter was very young, we lived in a building that had a lot of old-school New Yorkers in it. And I loved it.

20:12 CARMEN

It was a very mixed building, but all of the neighbors knew each other. We all knew each other. It was just like when I was a kid, when you could just like go down the hall to play, just go. Or just go down, you smell something good and you're like, you know, knock, knock. What are you cooking? So that's great.

20:29 CARMEN

And that's part of the community that I absolutely miss. I think, you know, with the therapy, what I've realized is we have to make peace with what we've been given. We can pursue and mindfully try to live the values that we want, but we also have to live in a society and with families that maybe don't accept those values. So for example, I have redefined what family is to me. Family are people who show up for me and my daughter. I show up for you. You show up for me. If you do not, even if we're biologically related, sure, you're relatives. Do you know what I mean?

21:07 CARMEN

And that doesn't necessarily jive with Latin culture so much. It's like if you're related, you're related, period, and you owe people stuff and they're like, you owe them this and I say, you know what? For my mental sanity sake and for the value of myself as a human being, as an eldest daughter, I'm sure you've had a lot of eldest daughters, right? On the show.

21:27 LORY

I am the eldest daughter.

21:28 CARMEN

There you go. There you go.

21:30 LORY

So I have that.

21:32 CARMEN

Girl. We will get skinned alive if we don't set boundaries as to how that idea of family love works. Because that's what happened. Man, I would kill myself for everyone's love. Kill myself. I run myself to the ground. Is the one paying for this or giving this or taking care of that or calling or showing up or arranging or built always?

22:00 CARMEN

I'm always there for you if you need me. But when tables turn, who's there for me, right? So I just think that we can honor family, but we can also define family. And it's so much better for our mental health when we've been the only ones doing the eldest daughter syndrome.

22:20 LORY

Yeah, yeah. All of those responsibilities on your shoulders and you decide that to choose wellness and choose your own happiness. It can be hard to accept.

22:31 CARMEN

You said your own and then I'm like, well, there's the individuals part, right? Choosing my own purposes. But here's what I say. The part of the reason why I'm in therapy is so long and choosing to be more well, it's not just for me. It's for my daughter. I want to be a better mother to her. I want to be a better citizen of this world. I want to be a better person in this world. I believe that that's part of the community element that may be being forgotten because it's not about boundaries for me. It's boundaries so I can breathe, live, survive and serve better and love better.

23:10 LORY

Thank you for sharing that as well because I think it's a challenge like everyone has their own perspective on it, but in the end, we're all just trying to be better humans. As much as damaged as we are, as much baggage as we have, we're always trying to be better people to ourselves and to other people. I love seeing it that way. These interviews end up becoming therapy for me because it's we're all going to facing these same things.

23:33 LORY

I do want to get to your many fathers. As a daughter in those different spaces, like you said, you had New York and you're the daughter, everyone's daughter, you're me, how far everyone in the sense that the community is taking care of you. They're caring for you, but going to your actual fathers who made you, what is that relationship?

23:54 CARMEN

I'll tell you this. I've had three fathers, but not one whole one. I wrote this book as a conversation with my mother's ghost because my mother was the most important figure in my life and shaped my life tremendously. There was Papi Wong, who was the father, who raises him as my father, but I didn't live with him as I grew up. We moved to New Hampshire and then I lived with my stepfather, who I call Marty in the book.

24:23 CARMEN

Then he has four girls with my mother who I helped raise, you know how it goes, but my brother and I are the Wong's, and then of course I find out about a biological father. Here's

what I'll say. I like to not focus on them very much. They're part of things, you know, they were partially always there in a way, but none of them were my father.

24:53 CARMEN

Papi Wong is like, sure, he was always around at some point, except when he was put away, you know what I mean, you got to read the books, it's saucy. And he was a colorful, colorful character and always showed up and come on how much money you want today, you know, and he made up for his lack of being around with, you know, \$100 bills, that sort of thing. But he was a wild chaotic character.

25:21 CARMEN

Who I realized though, now that he passed away in June and I realized that he was actually the probably the most of, he was the most my father, even though I never lived with him because he actively wanted to be my father. He called all the time like a pain in the ass, but he always, always wanted to be in my life.

25:45 CARMEN

Marty's still around, so I don't like to talk about it too much out of respect for him and my sisters, but I'll say this, it's a very different form of parenting. I think that Papi, as the years go by, like I just feel like he was very much my father in the end. He absolutely was, even though I lived under the roof with Marty, I very much wanted him to be my father because I wanted this whole, I mean, who wants, okay, so on the one hand I got a gangster who's crazy and on the other hand, I've got this, you know, very professional, youth-wearing, briefcase-wearing, builds my mother-a-house, you know, American man with the Wall Street Journal and blue blood, like, which father would you choose, you know what I'm saying?

26:33 CARMEN

And so I very much wanted to be his kid back then, but you know, I wasn't or I was, you gotta read the book because then I was, but then I wasn't. Oh, Guadalupe, my mother, man. Look, look, she had three men thinking I was theirs.

26:52 LORY

That's more, more Papi than one girl needs.

26:56 CARMEN

Let me tell you, she was something else. We had a very difficult relationship. We, but it has like nobody business. My mother was an abusive person, but I cannot not look back and be like, ¡Lupe!, like, wow, like you cannot respect, not be impressed. I'm kind of weirdly impressed. Talk about survival instincts. She was a survivor.

27:24 LORY

And now you are too, because you have, you know, grown up and gotten out of those spaces that were difficult. And now you're, you have your book, you have your career, you have your, your respected in your field. It's what she dreamed for, you know?

27:41 CARMEN

Yes, and no. I, let me put this way. It's so funny. When people read my book, everybody has, comes at it. Like it's almost like a rush hour test, you know, the psychological inkblots. It's

like what you tell me about your reaction to the book, not to freaking you out, but I can see a bit of you, right? So for example, some of the older readers, women, older women, reading go, oh, but like, Lupe would have been so proud of you. And she did such good with you. And I'm just like, did you read the same book that I wrote? Like, yeah, sure, but at what cost?

28:22 CARMEN

I paid way too high a price, man. I should not have had to pay that price. I did not feel loved. I felt like a piece of property that had to perform, that had to do what I was told or else, that was put down constantly, that was constantly striving for love and affection. Children should not have to work so hard to be loved. And I think the biggest gift you can give your kids is that if you love them as they are and you invest in them, right? And you invest in yourself and your, in your mental health so that you treat them with kindness, that could will be a success. Because they'll be a success in the world.

29:08 CARMEN

How do you define success? Sure. I mean, I did good, right? I did, I did great. In a good place, financially and all that sort of stuff. But I could have traded some things for just more bit of being accepted for who I, and love for who I was.

29:26 LORY

Yeah. Oh my goodness. And then also looking back on it, now you've had all of this time to reflect on it. So you're no longer in those feelings. You've now put words to that situation. What does that feel like? I think like a lot of the time, like you said, it depends on what stage of the journey you're on. And if you're an older person who is going to see it as, oh, you're proud of your kid. Or if you're somebody who is, you know, in the moment of, I'm struggling with my family and kind of going away from it. What does it feel like now to be able to, you know, be in your power and then put those words to the page and be open about it?

30:01 CARMEN

I definitely set out what I, I did what I set out to do. And I've heard back from so many wonderful people who have said: "You've helped me think about my relationship with my mom differently. You've helped me see things differently with my mother. You've helped me see that I'm not alone in my relationship with my mother."

30:25 CARMEN

Those things are huge and it's funny when my publisher first bought my book, she's, she's also a mom, also a woman of color. And she was like, this book is going to help so many grown daughters with their mother. So I was like, I hope so. You think? I hope so. And I'm like, yes, that's what I'm hearing. That makes me so happy. It fills my heart because it's easy for me, easier for me now that she's been gone for 20 years, almost 20 years, right?

30:54 CARMEN

I remember it was like to live in it. It's painful. So I'm happy that it's out there. I'm also hoping like that I'm helping people understand that you don't have to forgive. But what you can do is you can understand and that'll bring you peace too. So I don't necessarily forgive my mother or my fathers because they haven't apologized and I've given my father's opportunities to do

so and they've not. And they haven't changed behavior. Anyone I confronted my mother before she died, she told me a whole nother lie. Now I know why she did it. It was survival on her part. And I go into that in the book and you can see why I did why she did it and why, you know, I accepted it. But to see her as that human being who made those decisions, not as my mother, but as a scared, desperate human being, that has helped my peace. Like so much, I can't even tell you, I'm at peace with her. I can now talk to her like a human being as opposed to be screaming in my head. You know, even if your mother's still around, you're like, oh, God, I'm mad you're like, you know, you're like, but now I can even just be very just calm talking with her spirit, you know?

32:14 LORY

Yeah, you've come to that place of healing. That's beautiful. We're going to come to the end of this section of the interview. We always do like a speed round of questions, fun things like cultural things. But before we get to that, I do want to hear maybe if you can share an anecdote because on Mija Podcast, basically the structure of the show is a fictionalized novella, which is largely based on my own family's immigration experience.

32:40 LORY

So I hear you. I fictionalized it so that I could almost tell the stories we tell ourselves without feeling like I couldn't, you know, I didn't need to fact check everything that I was telling. I wanted to really tell the story in the most, the best way, let's say. And so what we do is basically kind of do these kind of vignettes with those anecdotes, like an audio photo album moment. I don't know if you had like anything that immediately came to mind when I asked, okay, what is an anecdote that kind of defines your experience in some way as a child?

33:14 CARMEN

I describe this in the book. So Papi used to come pick us up my brother and I on the weekends from our apartment up in Harlem. And he drove this big crazy car, he'd ganked a car. And he'd pick us up to take us out to fancy dinners on the weekends in Chinatown, mostly to show us off to his bosses or his colleagues. And my brother and I would get all dressed up. And Abuela would make me the cutest little outfits from like remnants from the salon. And she made me this little fur, chubby coat out of remnants. And I had little go-go boots. A male-to-brother resolved dressed up in his little suit and he'd pick us up.

33:57 CARMEN

And we'd be weaving through these huge restaurants, huge with like white tablecloths and a diis in the back and I'm red and gold everywhere. And he was such a charmer. He'd be going through saying, yeah, hey, and speaking in Mandarin, we'd just be weaving through these two little brown kids who did not look Chinese at all. And just in wonder, dressed up in our Dominican-ness, and then coming into this Chinese world, and he would bring us up to the diis where the boss was and show us off. And he used to tease me. We'd dinner. My favorite dish was like this whole steamed sea bass.

34:44 CARMEN

And I could use chopsticks from day one. My favorite, favorite foods were a mung-goo and this steamed ginger bass. And he would tease me about like he'd take the eyeball and he'd bring it over to me and be like, eat the eyeball so you could see underwater. You know, it was disgusting. I'd be like, no, no. But it was beautiful to know where we would go to sleep at

night, which is uptown with our Dominican family. But be sitting there with our Chinese father with everyone chattering in Chinese around us and eating this incredible food it's beautiful worlds.

35:22 LORY

Oh, thank you for sharing that. That is beautiful. All right. Now, we are coming to an end, so I'm going to do the Mija speed round questions. You just have to answer, like, first thing that comes to your mind, okay? So what language do you swear in when you accidentally touch a hot plate?

35:38 CARMEN

Oh, Spanish.

35:40 LORY

What's your favorite food?

35:41 CARMEN

Oh, my gosh. All sorts of things. Dominican, mango, Chinese, whole ginger-stacey bass, American or Mexican food. Love Mexican food. Love. Love, love, love. Love it. I put Tahin on everything. Oh, love that.

35:59 LORY

All right. Song that you've had in your head this week?

36:02 CARMEN

Oh, my gosh. I just saw Janet Jackson last night. So, with listening to Janet Jackson all week. So that's what's been in my head. And my daughter was in Into the Woods for her high school performance. So before that, it was a full week of "Into the Woods".

36:16 LORY

Amazing. All right. What is your last Google search that you are comfortable sharing?

36:22 CARMEN

I don't even know. I don't even know what my last Google search was. Like, this is like not my research week. You can't be on a non-research week. But usually I'm googling some crazy things like, I don't know it. Like for my next book, which covering some people in the civil rights and feminist rights movement. So it's like all that stuff from the 70s.

36:45 LORY

All right. What is the most embarrassing dream that you had for yourself when you were growing up?

36:51 CARMEN

Oh, my gosh. Oh, I just, I wanted to be an actor and a dancer. I wanted to be a solid goal dancer. Everybody who's a certain age knows what solid, go, go, go, solid goal dancers. And you will see that's what I was raised on. And these dancers were incredible. And, ooh, I was in love. I thought I was going to be a solid goal dancer.

37:13 LORY

And what was your biggest dream that maybe you could say that you accomplished?

37:18 CARMEN

Oh, this book. And I am not just being a salesperson. This telling my story, feeling like I have a story of tellings important enough to tell and that it can touch people and that it's an American story. Oh, it's huge because hosting and co-creating and co-writing my own daily national TV show, I thought that was a big deal. This feels so much more because it's just me. I'm so happy to be in libraries, those libraries that I lived in as a kid. Oh, makes me so happy.

37:55 LORY

Oh. All right. That's it. Thank you so much for your time, Carmen. Now tell us where we can find you, where we can find your book. Is it audiobook out? There's an audiobook, right?

38:04 CARMEN

Yes, so yes, it's on everything. You can get digital, you can audio however the hard car was the only one that has the great pictures in it. But my paperback comes out this summer soon. So it's accessible to everyone and I read the audio. I'm at carmenritawong.com and you can get the Spanish language version, *español* tambien, and Instagram at [@carmenritawong](https://www.instagram.com/carmenritawong).

38:26 LORY

Amazing. Oh, last thing. What is your advice to other mijas who kind of want to learn more about their origins make peace with their origins?

38:36 CARMEN

Do seek out help. Do seek out great therapy. There are, I started out when I had no money on a sliding scale, use resources, read, do a lot of self exploration and do that self work to get to know who you really are and what's very, very important to you. What's causing you pain and those patterns and what you can do. Self-awareness is key. Just be kind. Why does someone get you upset? Why, why, why? Just constantly be asking the why. That's the work that I mentioned and it's just been tremendous and a tremendous help and you can do that also with your relationship with your mother for sure.

39:19 LORY

And our father.

39:21 CARMEN

And or fathers no matter how many you have.

39:26 LORY

Amazing. Thank you so much, Carmen. This has been so much fun.

39:30 CARMEN

Thank you so much.

39:35 LORY

Thanks for listening. This is Mija on the Mike, a season of reflection on our shared experiences as daughters of immigrants. Over the next couple of weeks, I'll be sharing stories like these and inviting guests to share theirs.

39:49 LORY

Follow us on Instagram at @mijapodcast. That's M-I-J-A podcast and leave us a note if you like this story.

39:56 LORY

Tune in every Wednesday for a new episode. This is a production of Studio Ocenta, a Latina-owned multi-lingual podcast studio dedicated to raising voices across cultures. For more from Studio Ocenta, follow us at @ochentapodcasts on Instagram. That's O-C-H-E-N-T-A podcast with an S on Instagram.

40:14 LORY

P.S. Don't forget this season is also about you. If you have a story you'd like to share or if you'd like to be a guest on the show, I invite you to reach out on Instagram at @mijapodcast and leave us a message with a short story or memory of yours that warms your heart. We'll read it out loud on the show. Hasta pronto. Ciao!