



## Why Carmen Rita Wong Isn't Afraid to Tell All

Questions about the identity of her biological father led the author on a deeper quest for answers about who she is and what motivated her mothers' omissions. Carmen details the journey in her new memoir, *Why Didn't You Tell Me?*

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Alicia Menendez:

If the question of who we are must be answered in part by the people we come from. What do we do when those people are not reliable narrators? That question is at the heart of Carmen Rita Wong's new memoir, *Why Didn't You Tell Me?* It is a quest for answers about who she is, where and who she comes from and the mystery of her mother's secrets. Carmen, my love, you did it. Congratulations.

Carmen Rita Wong:

Oh my gosh. Thank you so much.

Menendez: Carmen, tell me about the man who, growing up, you understood to be your biological father.

Wong: You're talking about Papi Wong. He was a Chinese merchant Marine who stepped off a Norwegian shipping vessel in the early fifties in Manhattan, on a pier, with the shirt on his back and just went into Chinatown and started a new life. So I knew him as this guy who kind of came in and out of my childhood, my early childhood life, but he was always a presence. He liked to peel off dollar bills. One of the ways he showed his love was doing that and taking my brother and I out to Chinatown. And he was a big influence on my life. He definitely taught me some hustle.

Menendez: In what ways growing up did you experience yourself or your identity as being Dominican Chinese?

Wong: It's such an interesting question because it was so natural that it's almost like I didn't even think about it and I'll tell you why. People say Dominican, Chinese? That's crazy. How could that be natural? Well, uptown Manhattan, we were an extended Dominican family immigrant who settled within kind of like a couple of blocks, right? So my tias and my cousins and extended cousins, and once removed, twice removed, all kind of lived around each other. And then my cousins also had a Chinese father. And these were the cousins who lived across the street, and these were our best friends growing up, my brother and I. So it was seen as just normal. It didn't seem not normal until we moved out of that space.

Menendez: Your mom remarries a named Marty, you moved to New England and it really is in New England that you experienced race and racism for the first time.

Wong: Oh yeah. Traumatizing. I'm just going to tell you like, no joke. When we moved there, my brother and I, my mother who was pregnant at the time, and my new father, stepfather,

Marty. We were it. Girl, we were it. We had one of those very nice development communities with houses and picket fences and all that business. And we got stopped in the car one night, two doors down from our house by the police. The neighbors had reported us. Why would the police stop us in our own... Right in front of our own home? It was a big wake up call. And I was really young.

Menendez: Carmen, what was your earliest inkling that Papi Wong wasn't your biological father?

Wong: I remember being in my mid to late, late twenties and my brother told me something that Papi Wong got involved in that's not so good, because he was a gangster and a con man. So I think he got in trouble again. And I just remember getting off the phone with my brother and something just hit me. My brother was so much like papi, any chino Latinos listening will go, aya. Instead how we go, ay ay ay, they go aya. He was so, even from the way he ate with his chopsticks and all this, just so much like him. And I was searching inside me. Where did he live in me? Where was he?

Wong: Because of course, physically, you can explain it away because when you're mixed kids, you come at all sorts of ways. And I just was like, it wasn't the physical part. It was inside of me. Where was it? I couldn't find it. And that kind of was solidified when my brother told me that my mother had confessed to him that she had had multiple abortions before me. And so that made me realize that maybe she was involved with someone else. That was it. That's when it started.

Menendez: You ask a very powerful rhetorical question in, *Why Didn't You Tell Me* that I want to pose back to you, which is, how do you stop being Chinese?

Wong: I have to pause for a second because it's a question I'm still trying to answer because the real answer is, you can't. But you can. You can't because I spent the first 31 years of my life being half Chinese. I have a name that is not the norm, that has shaped my life tremendously. I can't give it up. So in that way, in terms of how I was raised Chinese, I can't stop that. But what I am very clear on is that I don't know if I can say I'm part of the Asian community anymore. I don't know. The Asian community has been so accepting of me and the few Asian friends that I know that I've told this to, don't see a change. They don't see any reason why I shouldn't be a part of their community. But I think as my Latin-ness has been questioned, there's going to be a lot of questioning on that. For sure.

Menendez: I want to talk about the moment in which you find yourself confronting your mom, because it is not as though you are confronting her when she is in her best health, when she is most able to have this conversation. So take me to the context and the moment that we find you in when you are finally ready to ask her this big question.

Wong: My mother, I had gone by that point almost two years without speaking to her. We were not, or I decided that I needed a boundary. I could not function and get ahead and save myself from drowning, psychologically without giving myself some space. And then I got a call that she was in the emergency room, stage four cancer, from one of my sisters. So the whole thing that broke this first surprise open was the urgency of my mother dying. And interestingly, it wasn't she who told me, it was Marty, my stepfather.

Wong: And it was because he was dating... They were divorced, and he was dating a woman who he told this to, the secret. And she was like, how can you let... You can't let her mother die without her knowing this. So he told me, so I went to her with two of my sisters for backup, for emotional support, to literally confront her at a time when I hadn't seen her for two years. And it was so sad, it was almost, you just couldn't even swallow it. But I had to do it.

Yes, she was dying and she was sick. But all the more reason why she just had to give me at least, I won't say the truth, I'll say her side of the story.

Menendez: Which was what?

Wong: Her side of the story was that she was still married to Papi Wong at that time and she was having an affair, a relationship with Marty and she became pregnant and I was her third scheduled abortion. And the reason why I am a Wong, she said, was because Papi Wong stopped her from having an abortion. He said, no, this is my baby. I'm going to raise this baby. This is mine. Don't do it. So she made up a very dramatic story of this is why I'm a Wong and this is why she kept this story, and this is why Marty would never be able to claim me because he didn't want me in the first place. And of course, we find out that this is all just another story.

Menendez: As promised, I'm going to save this piece for people who read the book because you think that I have peeled back all the layers of the onion. We are not even getting started here. It is notable to me, Carmen, the role that abortion plays in your mother's life and then subsequently in your own life and the advocacy of the work that you have done as a member of the board of Planned Parenthood, the moment that we find ourselves in, you, the mother of a daughter, yourself. I just, I wonder how you're thinking about this book coming into this world in this moment.

Wong: Yeah. I had my own abortion fund as a teenager. Because my mother's example of what I saw as her life, a very smart, she was an ambitious, very intelligent woman, very intelligent, whose education stopped at 15 because they left their country. Right? She had all her dreams thwarted. And frankly, we, as kids felt that. We got the brunt of it. And her life was ruled by her reproductive organs. Her life was ruled, I mean, when you say why didn't you tell me? I mean, a lot of the answers lie in the patriarchal structure of Latin families and American life. She didn't feel like she had choices. She felt that the only way that she could have any autonomy as a young woman was to basically find love men's arms. Right? And of course, get in some trouble and have these abortions.

Wong: And it's funny. I do not think... So I've had people say to me, oh, well you were quote unquote, saved from abortion. Shouldn't that make you anti? I'm like, you got to be kidding me. That made me so pro-choice, I can't even tell you. That woman should have had more choices. And frankly, if I hadn't been born, I wouldn't know I wasn't born. So we wouldn't have missed me. But I saw her with Marty then who didn't believe in birth control, very Catholic. She having four babies back to back, to back, my younger sisters, and almost dying with the last one. And she was miserable. I really grew up believing I needed to have control over when and if I were to have a child and every single person who can have a child should have that choice.

Menendez: Why Didn't You Tell Me is in many ways about men, the different father figures in your life, your two ex-husbands, but the man who was most vivid in your retelling to me was your brother, Alex. And I'd like for you to talk to me about the confluence of losing your sibling at the same time that you are losing, what was your sense of identity.

Wong: My brother only passed away two years ago at the beginning of the pandemic. He was the person in my life that I was closest to. Always. I even forgot your question because I just got lost in missing him.

Menendez: It just occurred to me reading it, that I was like, I wish she had Alex for all of this.

Wong: Yep, absolutely. The book is dedicated to him. He was my wonder twin. For anybody who remembers Saturday morning cartoons, we were the wonder twins. Even though we were

five, six years apart, I always forget. He was the only one who championed me. I credit him with so, so, so much. And I was getting frustrated with selling this book, the memoir, because the publishing world, as you know, is very blanco, right? It's very white. And people couldn't understand all this intersectionality. And my brother passed away and I was taking another crack. I was about three years into to having written it over and over again in different ways that different people wanted me to write it.

Wong: It's, you're too angry. This is too confusing. There's too many characters, all this sort of stuff. And in frustration one day, I just, I missed him so much and I just cried an angry cry and said, Alex, you've got to help me figure this out. It's got to get done. And the inspiration to write it in this format came to me in that moment.

Menendez: Again, a lot of the characters that are going to move throughout the memoir are men, but your mom is the central character in so many ways, right? Outside of yourself. She is the one you are begging this question of why didn't you tell me? She is the one that you keep sort of coming back to. And the answer you offer for why she didn't tell you, I think is one of the most incredible parts of the entire book. And you're clear, you don't have a neat answer and you don't have a definitive answer for why she didn't tell you. But somewhere in there is an incredible insight on the women of her generation. Where have you landed on this question of why she didn't tell you?

Wong: It is a enigma, in many ways. And in many ways, it's very clear that when you are a woman in a time where your options are limited, when you're an immigrant, she was initially undocumented, where you have a father figure like my abuelo, my grandfather, who was a very big tall, strong, abusive man who ran that house and all the women lived in fear. What are your options if you're smart and you're ambitious? What do you do? I also think my mother was very... Generational trauma is a big thing. I'm glad that people are speaking about it now. I feel like that's something that hasn't been really spoken about enough, and now we have epigenetics. Now we have the whole science and the idea that basically even genetically, trauma and abuse gets handed down through families. She was a product of that.

Wong: And that is a big reason for why she did what she did. Do I think that's an excuse? Do I think it's okay? Of course not. Absolutely not. But I can see and understand. And that's something that I hope that when people read this, you can have an idea of holding all multiple ideas of people in your head that yes, yes this person was abusive or my parent was abusive, but they also were broken. They also loved me. They were also a child who was broken by someone else. Not to say it's okay, but to understand them as separate human beings, your parents, from you. And that they have their own story as to how they got to be who they are and why they made these decisions. I think that's important. It was a gift to me to figure that out.

Menendez: What has your mother's sort of commitment to omission changed about you and your pursuit of the truth?

Wong: I have developed a reaction to her. Sometimes we just, we just do that. We don't grow up like our parents because of them, sometimes we do. We become who we become in spite of them. I have almost a compulsion really, to tell this truth because I know now after all these years in media. Then I started weaving stories into some of my financial advice. I would have young women, young brown women, Latina and Black women, Indian, come to me and just say, oh my God, thank you so much. And women were so grateful to hear those personal stories, I'm not alone. I'm not the only one. That I was like, oh my gosh, the

truth is powerful as hell. That's why I'm sharing it. As to my own personal life, I don't want to raise my daughter with secrets. They're corrosive, building relationships with your kids by withholding, they're going to find out. I think I opened the book with, when you bury the truth, you bury it alive, that baby lives and that baby screams, and it's going to get heard eventually, so it might as well be by you.

Menendez: Carmen, congratulations. And thank you so much for doing this.

Wong: Oh, thank you so much, Alicia. Thank you for all you do and your support. Thank you for having me.

Menendez: Thank you, as always for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua, and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead, Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer and mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. It makes our day email us at [hola@latinatolatina.com](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com). Slide into our DMS on Instagram, tweet us at Latina to Latina. Check out our merchandise that is on our website, [Latinatolatina.com/shop](http://Latinatolatina.com/shop). And remember, please subscribe or follow us on Apple podcast, Google podcast, Good Pods, wherever you are listening right now. Every time you share this podcast, every time you share an episode, every time you leave a review, it helps us to grow as a community.

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