

Found in Translation

~by Megan Arellano

Who you're sitting with on the bus says a lot when you're 15, and I'm sitting with this super cool girl, solely on the basis that we share something important.

Her name is Jessi, she's a year older than me, beautiful, with an effortless ease talking to others. Like, she's probably been to a party where there's alcohol. She's definitely had more than one boyfriend. She chose to sit with me because she recognizes the sound of my last name, and I've told her I'm Hispanic.

It can't be anything else. I have braces that leap out of my mouth, pencil thin brows that don't really fit my face and the wardrobe of someone who panicked at Kohl's when she had to choose between the junior's and the misses section. The only trend I'm setting is overusing the phrases "Well actually" and "I heard it on NPR".

So, there's a lot riding on this moment. If I can somehow show her that we're alike, I have a chance to reinvent myself. When she asks me if I speak Spanish, I say yes. I even believe it. I've taken 2 or 3 classes in school. What more is there?

Jessi turns to me, smiling, and begins to speak Spanish in a playful and conspiratorial tone. Instantly, it's obvious that I lied. I wish I remember even one word she said. I may have not even known one word she said. Even today, the memory is packed behind mental caution tape. Did I say *no entiendo*? Did I just stare blankly at her? I'm pretty sure we sat in silence for at least 10 minutes afterwards.

She was never mean about it, but from that point forward, I felt I was on the other side of the rope. No longer were we two *hermanas* dealing with the same struggle.

Around that time, the high school Spanish teachers would regard me quizzically during introductions,

"¿Pero tu apellido?"

"But, your last name?"

Arellano. The one irrefutable qualification that I have to being Hispanic. It's my membership card that sometimes earns me an '*hola*' or a smile of recognition. When I married my husband, I told him that I wanted to keep my name for professional reasons, but really, I couldn't bear to lose my one credential to membership in *la gente*.

Ever since I saw my original sin of not speaking Spanish, this shameful nudity of my tongue, I have been transfixed by it. To the modern mind, it's nonsensical. I know parents who bend backwards to make sure that their child gets enrolled in the dual Spanish English program so that their child will speak a language that my grandma threw away.

In some ways, her choice makes sense. My grandmother Mary Louise Martinez was born in 1941 in Fort Collins. Her parents came for the “white gold” rush promised by growing sugar beets, part of a wave of brown laborers augmenting a previously white labor force. They raced to squeeze every beet out of the ground, to maybe send their children to school as time allowed.

Mary grew up in a neighborhood called the Colony outside of official city limits. She knew that her dad needed to be home before sundown, or there could be trouble. An unnamed police officer said part of the job during the 1950s and 1960s was “to keep the Mexicans on their side of town,” according to a study from the city archive. Storefronts had signs that said, “No Dogs or Mexicans Allowed.” When she was a girl, my grandma thought that if she had blue eyes, she wouldn’t have to have a period.

As a grandma, she ascended to the inscrutable authority of what it meant to be Hispanic. *Quinceañeras* were trashy, but being able to dance was cool. She loved sharing her tamales and enchiladas as our heritage but always omitted a couple ingredients if she gave out her recipe so that no one else could get it quite right. She was proud of her brown skin, but not of all brown people.

Most importantly, she spoke Spanish. Many times, I heard about how my grandma tried to teach my dad Spanish. Most famously, by telling him about Easter bunny in front of his little sister. “El co-ne-jooo, I told him, so many times” Or she’d brag about how she could clap back at the church ladies who said nasty things about her in Spanish, thinking that she wouldn’t understand.

When I was about 9 or 10, my brother and I took our first Spanish class. At grandma’s, my parents nudged me forward and told me to say something in Spanish.

“*Hola, ¿como estás?*,” I ventured.

“Oh my God, your accent!” Grandma said through a cackle, “It’s terrible!”

Two decades later, my accent is not so bad. If I speak tersely enough, the cashier at Mexico City airport exchanging my dollars for pesos will ask me where I’m from. When I say I’m American, he’ll tell me that he thought I was Costa Rican because of my accent. When I talk to the taxi driver, we can converse for the whole 30 minute ride about Mexico City’s architecture, how it’s been affected by globalization, and whether the city should keep growing.

By this time, I have been taking Spanish lessons at least weekly for five years. Before each one, I try to spend about 20 or 30 minutes slowly reading out loud, enunciating every word. If the word sounds clunky coming out of my mouth, I stop and listen to Google Translate until I can say it less awkwardly. It took me years to roll an r, but now that I can, I sometimes joyfully practice the sound over and over if I’m out walking by myself. I joke that I don’t want to sound like Peggy from King of the Hill, but somehow I believe speaking seamlessly will iron out the wrinkles of my complicated journey with Spanish and identity.

Each word I borrow from the vault of Spanish becomes an affirmative statement of who I am. I'm a person who wants to know the word for nuance, *matiz*. I'm a person who likes the sound of *atisbo*, the word for glimpse. A person who thinks it's a perfect onomatopoeia. *Atisbo*, it sounds like a sip, and I like to imagine myself taking in a scene in tiny furtive gulps. The words are a structural reinforcement rebuilding the self I like, reminding me of who I am.

Spending time in Spanish has come to feel like a vacation from my regular self, even when it's just a zoom call. But doing it on a trip to Mexico itself is a special prize. On this trip, I'm going to see a movie at the Cineteca Nacional with my favorite tutor Victor. The complex is more than 500,000 square feet with 10 screens devoted to celebrating and preserving Mexican cinema. Besides the film archive, there's rotating exhibitions, a bar, a coffee shop, a bookstore. It's a bit like one of those fancy tech campuses, but without the underlying foreboding.

Victor and I are killing time in the bookstore, chatting idly. I stop to flip through cookbooks. At home, I use one called *The Essential Cuisines of Mexico* by Diana Kennedy a lot.

"I mainly just use one cookbook at home written by a white lady," I tell him in Spanish, "I've been meaning to get a cookbook that's a little less Gringo, you know."

Hearing me, an older brown woman interrupts me to correct.

"Wait, are you talking about Diana Kennedy? She really did the work; she did the research. That's a very good cookbook. There aren't many that are better."

Thrilled, I tell her that she's right. I'm so pleased to have understood, but also to have chosen a good cookbook.

"Actually, her recipes always call for Mexican oregano, and I never know if that's different from the oregano I use in the states. Do you know? Where would I find that?"

These are the little delights that I savor in my mind. But I would never say that I speak Spanish, if someone asked. For one, when I think about that woman in the bookstore, I remember it in English, a kind of bracketed yellow subtitle over a scramble of Spanish I couldn't quote. Yes, I used to dream of when I could understand every lyric in a Shakira song and now I can sing along if I want to. But now I also imagine picking up an adult book and being able to read it without pausing for a dictionary. I can feel the tether of my vocabulary and the way people slow down their speech when they note what I can and can't understand.

So, I wanted to immerse myself more. The last time I spoke to my grandma on the phone before she died, I wanted to tell her how far I'd come. A good friend with a background like mine learned enough Spanish to have a conversation with his grandfather. Even an imperfect conversation between them in Spanish was a great source of shared pride.

Suddenly, I imagined myself healing great cosmic rifts in our family history. Or at least not getting roasted for my accent.

As a conversationalist, my grandma held court more than she asked questions. So on the call, I dutifully listened to which one of her children she was mad at and cooed appreciatively at the cute antics of the newest grandchildren. Gradually, the focus turned to me, and I dared myself to say something real.

“You know, I’ve been taking Spanish lessons every week for a few years now. I think I’m getting pretty decent,” I told her.

“*Qué bueno*,” she responded mildly, “and what about your job?”

After all this time putting my foot in my mouth in Spanish, mixing up the words for comb and penis, straining to expressing basic thoughts, I thought my reflex to push ahead would be stronger. That maybe I would cheekily respond *que mi trabajo es aburrido, pero seguro*, and go on to describe it all in great detail. But I just told her that my job was fine, dependable but fine, and we cycled through the rest of the regular questionnaire.

I picked at this exchange in my mind like a scab for years. Mostly I assumed my grandma knew my Spanish was still too rudimentary to be worthwhile. Later I decided she withheld it on purpose. Crispr for the aspiring Hispanics that wanted to save their children from hardship and pain — instead of editing your genes, all you need to do is hold your tongue. I asked my aunt about Grandma’s Spanish eventually and got a much simpler answer:

“Oh my goodness, my mom really didn’t know how to speak proper Spanish, it was more of a Spanglish,” she told me, “All the Spanish she learned was from her friends.”

That makes a lot more sense. In early 20th century Fort Collins, school was only in English. My great-grandma Maggie taught her first two children only Spanish, according to my aunt, and then they struggled in school. As the youngest of six, my grandma only heard English from her parents. Eva Lee Martinez was a few years older than my great-grandmother, and she told oral historian Charlene Tresner about her experiences at school.

“I was about 9 years old; I didn’t even know how to speak English you know. That’s the reason why I encourage my children to speak English instead of Spanish, which in a way wasn’t too good,” she said.

It’s too late to know exactly why my grandma hid the truth from me. She is a magician who took her secrets to the grave, but whose act I don’t enjoy anymore. I think she wanted admission to the same club as me, but faked her way in, standing just behind the rope, heckling the people who wanted it.

Or maybe in her mind, she actually did speak. What does it mean to be fluent anyway? Is it when you can order a cup of coffee in a language? Learning that my grandma never spoke Spanish, at least not to my standard, removed some enchantment from my life. There was

never some secret gossamer web of another language overlaid on her life. She never sat content at her Thanksgiving table, watching her adult children talk and laugh after their bellies were full, knowing that this is a *sobremesa*, an after-dinner conversation.

Jhumpa Lahiri described learning a language as swimming in a deep lake in her book *In Other Words*. At first, you stay where your feet can reach the ground. With time, you dare to swim where you could drown. In the end, she concludes that the lake is more like an ocean, “A tremendous, mysterious element, a force of nature that I have to bow before.”

I think my grandma recognized the beauty of that ocean, maybe even seeded my lust for its waters. But it's sad that I never saw her feet leave the shore.

As I swim Jhumpa Lahiri's ocean, I've learned that I will never be a fish. There is no level of skill where I grow gills, no level where I don't get occasionally roasted. But I can dive deeper, see beautiful coral reefs and fish I never knew. Sometimes I like to imagine I appreciate my scenery more, like a visitor in Atlantis. So no, I don't really speak Spanish. But I like trying.

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