

Language Barrier

When my older brother and I were kids, the only time we ever spoke Spanish back to our parents was at the dinner table. “*Más pollo, por favor, papito.*” I knew all the words for different kinds of desserts. *Galletas, helado, pastel.* During the early years of my Spanish education in middle school, my parents and I would converse in restaurants, mostly about our waitresses or the quality of our meals. My formal Spanish education came to its peak my freshman year of college. After a nasty break-up with my first girlfriend, a girl my parents adored, I had the ability to inform my father of the sad news in Spanish, because I felt less vulnerable that way.

My brother and I never achieved Spanish fluency. Our linguistic shortcomings were obvious whenever we were around our cousins. We were too “American” for the rest of the family, but what that really meant was that we were too Jewish. My father’s decision to marry a Jewish woman, convert and raise his children Jewish never sat well with his family, even if my mother spoke better Spanish than any of them, or, more importantly, that my parents were, and still are, very much in love.

As I was driving to dinner last night, I received a call from one of those cousins, Valicia. I hadn’t heard from her in a year, not since she called to tell me our grandmother had died. I had to be the one to call my dad, at 2 in the morning, to tell him his mother had passed, because none of his siblings would call him. That is to say, they did not call until a few days before the funeral to tell him not to come. For obvious reasons, last night, I let Valicia’s call go to my voicemail and I walked inside Chili Peppers.

For the past few months, I’ve been practicing my Spanish at this *taquería*. The employees can tell I’m not a native speaker, but they indulge me for the most part. But, inevitably, when the questions get tough, they switch to English for my sake. They tend, at that point, to look me straight in the face, almost as a challenge, to see if I’ll continue on in Spanish. As I approached the counter, my phone beeped to inform me that Valicia had completed her message. I pressed the OK button and held the phone up to my ear.

I spoke up to be heard over the ovens, “*Quisiera las fajitas. Pollo, por favor.*”

Valicia’s message was friendly, yet coldly formal. “Hello, *primo*, this is your cousin, Valicia. I know I haven’t been keeping in touch lately...”

I’m a picky eater, which is good practice. “*En vez de frijoles quisiera más arroz.*”

“I just wanted to tell you that our grandfather is in the ICU. His condition is critical, but stable. He’s at Sacred Heart in Visalia, in case you want to come visit him.”

I watched the cook put bell peppers in my fajitas because I don’t know the word for bell peppers and couldn’t ask to have them kept out. I stood there and thought about what it would be like to visit my grandfather

on his death bed. In my mind, I pieced together the sentences that would remind him of who I was after ten years. “*Buenas tardes, abuelo. Soy Daniel, el hijo de Bernardo.*” I imagined I’d want to tell him that my father didn’t know I was there. Or maybe I would lie and say I was there on his behalf.

The cook asked me what kind of tortilla I wanted and I stumbled over the word for flour. The owner waived me over to the cash register. “*¿Es todo?*”

“*No. Quisiera una soda. Mediana.*” After I figured out how to tell my grandfather who I was and whether I was there on my father’s behalf or not, I stopped. Where would I go from there? Would I tell him I love him? Would I tell him I wish I had spent more time in Visalia? My only happy memories of Visalia were playing dominoes with him and the one time that we communicated through pictures drawn in my little sketchbook. Would I tell him that my father forgives him? Would I have the right? Should my father even forgive his parents, the people who said to him, on the day of his wedding, that eventually his “Jew bitch” would leave him so he could come back to the family?

“*¿Crédito o débito?*”

“Um, *crédito.*” What would I say to a man I’ve never held a coherent conversation with? Where would I begin? How could I get over the years of exclusion? How could I speak with a man who never got over my mom’s skin or my poor Spanish?

The owner handed me a cup and my credit card. “*Las fajitas y una soda, señor...*” he paused briefly, glancing up from the register, “...is this going to be for here or to go?” His finger was poised over the keypad, his eyes on my face, waiting for my response.

I deleted Valicia’s voicemail and closed my phone. “*Es para llevar.*”