

The Way of the Dinosaurs

— RAFAEL CAMPO —

¡PENDEJO! I SHOUTED THE WORD at the top of my lungs, knowing exactly what kind of reaction it would elicit. *¡Coño!* I added that one for good measure.

My father glowered at me from over his shoulder, taking his eyes off the congested highway just long enough to silence me. We were in the old family Ford LTD, with its textured beige upholstery, rust-red paint job, and brown vinyl hardtop. My younger brothers tried to suppress their giggles, sitting on either side of me in matching pastel-colored polyester miniature leisure suits, their black hair combed back neatly, shiny and hard from a liberal application of my mother's Aquanet hairspray. Around us, the highway stretched toward a horizon crowded with huge scaffolds and water towers and angled cranes, which reminded me of the fossilized dinosaur skeletons I had seen in museums. I was fascinated with dinosaurs, but not for the reasons most six-year-old boys were. To me, they were like my family, which was not yet extinct the way *tyrannosaurus* and *triceratops* were, but still on the verge of being lost forever. We were on our way to Elizabeth, New Jersey, to visit my *abuelos*. I was trying my hardest not to have to speak Spanish.

"Don't you talk that way," my father snapped. "We don't use that kind of language in this family!"

I loved being forbidden to speak Spanish. I tried to think of some more choice cusswords, but then thought better of getting my father too angry, noticing the speed with which the trash scattered amidst

the tall roadside weeds streaked by. I wanted to speak English, and only English, like all my friends in school did. We lived in a house that my parents had hired some workers to paint a rich shade of gold, with a redwood deck off the back that looked out over a small lake, and neat little black shutters and our own basketball hoop at the end of the sloping driveway. Some of my mother's new friends even drove Cadillacs. Going back to Elizabeth was like going back into prehistory, with its grimy sidewalks, menacing streetwise teenagers, and small, crowded apartments in ugly brick buildings—"tenements," I said quietly to myself, recalling a particularly mellifluous word from the *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* I was reading cover to cover. I had to admit I liked those words the best.

"What did you say?" My father asked pointedly into the windshield. I was glad he was still angry, and thus still speaking in English. I was grateful not to have to "practice" my Spanish anymore. English, cold, corrective, and formal, was employed whenever anyone in the family got in trouble. With any luck, we would stay in English mode for the rest of the journey.

My family had survived the savage world of Elizabeth, progressing into the secure white suburbs, with its sunny, tree-lined streets. That first winter, I noticed that even the snow stayed whiter longer in our new home; in the city, it was always spoiled within a few hours of falling, streaked with stray dogs' urine and soiled by the soot drifting down from the nearby smokestacks. Even the fire hydrants in Ramsey looked clean, standing at attention like bright red soldiers of the public good. And the trees! Full and healthy—not stunted, or half-dead and ghost-like in places, or missing whole big chunks of branches where errant trucks had plowed past them or black power lines cut through. "Birch," I whispered to myself. "Elm. Linden. Sycamore." I was trying especially hard to memorize the names of trees as I came across them in the dictionary, hoping they would take root in my mind and push out the Spanish. I didn't even know the Spanish names of most of them—*flamboyanes* and *palmeros*

like those my Tía Yoya painted did not grow at all in America, at least in the places we had lived. Spanish, I had decided, was the language of the receding jungle, the language of the distant past, the language of certain extinction.

By learning English, I hoped I would someday forget Spanish completely. In fact, I believed that only by *unlearning* Spanish could I finally leave Cuba behind and become truly American. Though I had never actually been to Cuba, I imagined it was a terribly primitive place. On the maps I had seen, it looked like something unpleasant the United States had inadvertently stepped on. I populated its uncharted mountainous terrain with naked, dark-skinned Indians and all manner of exotic flora and fauna—I even imagined it might be a last refuge for the dinosaurs.

Among the few stories my father told us about Cuba, one of my favorites was about the time he and my abuelo discovered gigantic bones at the far end of their property, where some men had come to dig sand, which my abuelo, ever the entrepreneur, had started to sell. I wasn't sure why anyone would want to buy sand, but that really wasn't the point of the story. I had surprised my father when I used vocabulary words like "entrepreneur"—sometimes I acquired English words he hadn't yet learned himself. Like my abuelo, he was first and foremost a good businessman. Whether those great bones belonged to a dinosaur or not, he couldn't say. In his new life, which involved manufacturing aluminum cans and plastic tubes for soda and toothpaste, there wasn't much time for wondering about dinosaurs—or even for telling us more stories about Cuba.

We were lucky to lose the family ranch in Guantánamo province, I told myself, likewise the small *cabaña* that stood on a nearby cliff overlooking an endless beach, because here in America six-year-old boys were not preyed on by stray velociraptors. It wasn't a good idea to try to get my father to talk about Cuba anyway, because he would usually lapse into Spanish; my mother, who was Italian-American, her skin white enough that in summertime she would freckle instead

of tan, would then frown a little if we were all at the dinner table. She had met my father taking a Spanish literature course in college. She was beautiful and very popular, so when my father first called her to ask her out on a date, she didn't really remember who he was. Lots of young men called her asking for dates. I imagined him talking to her on the telephone with his thick accent, trying to persuade her to go to a movie. It's true my father was very handsome, but on the telephone, since she couldn't see his face, all she had was this heavy accent to go by. She almost said no. Therefore, because of Spanish, I might not ever have come into existence.

In my evolutionary view of the world, English had to overcome Spanish in my consciousness. Even though I didn't like girls, I was sure I would need English to survive in other ways. I thought of my abuelo, who was forced to work in a factory that made cheap preformed yellow plastic tables because he couldn't speak English. My abuela didn't have a job at all—not like my mother, who was a substitute teacher at my new school in Ramsey, New Jersey—so she stayed in their apartment all day long, crying a lot over all that they had been forced to leave behind in Cuba. That's why they were poor and had to stay in Elizabeth.

It was my mother who cared most about our intellectual and social advancement in the world. When she packed us into the car, instead of heading south on these same highways, it was north-east to New York City and its magical sites and endless museums. Besides being a teacher, she was an artist. Dominating our living room was her dramatic painting of a bullfight, with its blood-red background and glittering golds and silvers in the matador's costume. She took us to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where I copied her pensive staring at the large canvasses depicting places all over the world except, it seemed, Cuba. Even the dry, dusty expanses of Spain appeared; the Spaniards themselves, however, as painted by El Greco and Goya, and even Velázquez, seemed malformed, brutish, and backward.

Even better than the art museums was the Museum of Natural History. I savored one particular memory of my first visit there. I'd run shouting into the cavernous room where the massive dinosaur fossils were exhibited, calling out the name of each specimen and describing its habitat, range, and feeding preferences (*Carnivorous! Herbivorous! Omnivorous!*). The polished floors and the towering columns only emphasized the distance we had traveled, and from cold-blooded reptiles with brains the size of a pea to human beings with the capacity for self-awareness, from the overgrown jungles of Cuba to the epitome of culture and learning that was New York. I remembered the proud look on my mother's face as one of the museum's staff—surely an expert on dinosaurs himself—commended me for my clear pronunciation of so many difficult names and my mastery of scientific terminology. We all celebrated afterwards with ice cream sundaes, a delicacy far more decadent than the shaved ice in a paper cone doused in fruit syrup that was my father's treat years ago on visits to Havana with his family.

Soon I recognized the huge green sign for Elizabeth (and not the George Washington Bridge) as it flashed above us, and then heard the tinny clinking of the LTD's blinker as my father signaled to exit the highway. I tried to resist the surprising slight anticipation I began to feel as we neared the Cuban neighborhood. My father called back to us to lock the car doors as more and more buildings, old decrepit warehouses and boarded-up strip malls, began to enclose us. We were almost there.

My abuela had probably prepared the usual elaborate feast of *pernil*, *congrí*, *maduros*, and *yuca con mojo*. It always amazed me how she could produce such a sumptuous meal from the tiny kitchen at the back of their apartment. They would be playing old Cuban LPs, and in the middle of dinner, my abuelo would stand and then sweep her up into his arms, and they would dance for a few moments alongside the table that stretched into the living room, as they didn't have a big dining room with a proper dining room table like ours.

There would be Spanish newspapers lying about, drooping over the edges of those small plastic yellow tables brought home from the factory. My abuelo was always reading, though I still disbelieved my father's boast that he had a fancy library filled with books in their old ranch house in Cuba. Then, my abuela would cry a little, smiling through her tears at all of us kids as she settled back down in her chair.

Later, my abuelo would want to walk down the block to the Cuban bakery with us. The street they lived on was still relatively safe, and we would pass beneath windows with blinking colored Christmas lights framing them from the inside, even when it wasn't winter-time. Behind the tall glass of the bakery's display cases, countless varieties of *pastelitos* were arranged, gleaming like the fancy porcelain figurines my mother collected, each variety a different geometric shape: *carne*, *jamón y queso*, *chorizo*, *pollo*, and my Tía Marta's favorite, guava. Though we couldn't eat another bite, my brothers and I would still clamor to pick out our favorites, which were then neatly boxed and tied up with a red-and-white string for us to take home. While we would be making our choices, jostling each other for the best position in front of the glass, my grandfather would argue in Spanish about politics with the owner of the bakery, drinking coffee out of a tiny Dixie cup and smoking a cigarette. On the way back I clutched his hand, which felt as hard and strange-shaped as one of my toy dinosaurs.

Of course, the hardest part of these visits was when my abuelos would speak to me in Spanish, and I would have to pretend I didn't understand them. If truly mastering English meant truly unlearning Spanish, then I could make no exceptions. I knew this meant I would get to hear even fewer stories about Cuba, but even then I understood we were never going back there. My abuela would try for a while, telling me how much she loved me, asking me about what I was learning in school, but I would go on helping her wash the dishes with a perplexed look on my face. Sometimes I would

just ignore her, drawing and coloring dinosaurs fierce reds and yellows and greens in a small corner of the kitchen table she'd clear off for me. Or I would interrupt her to inquire, standing on my tiptoes and looking out the window over the sink, "Isn't that a maple tree, Grandma?" knowing perfectly well she couldn't understand me.

I liked being in the kitchen with her, enveloped in the strong fragrances of garlic and cumin and olive oil, and the sing-song lilt of her voice, but I reminded myself that I was helping her really because it was the least I could do, especially if I wasn't going to speak Spanish with her. Plus she had already suffered so much. Spanish was the language of her suffering, it was the language of betrayal. Spanish was the history that didn't really exist, vanished forever like "the missing link," or like other fossils of whole species of dinosaurs that the world would never know. It was best to unlearn this primal tongue, the deliberate loss of which became the genesis of how I learned English.

Now, almost 40 years later, when I try to remember an intentionally forgotten Spanish word, what I first recall is the heartbroken expression on my abuela's kind face.

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