

Ghost Boy

— FRANCISCO GOLDMAN —

MY AUNT LEE AND UNCLE JOHN, a surgeon, were the high culture branch of the family. She was a violinist, he a cellist, and they met playing in a Depression-era chamber orchestra in Boston. Aunt Lee, my father's oldest sister, was from a Russian Jewish immigrant family that fled the czarist pogroms, and Uncle John was a Russian Catholic émigré who'd left after the Bolshevik Revolution. They lived in a colonial house in Concord, Massachusetts, that bore a historical plaque dating it to the 1700s. I used to imagine that it had once been the home of a minuteman citizen-soldier of the American Revolution, the true ones who fired the shot heard round the world.

In my first memories of Uncle John, from when I was four or five, he was already old, with snowy hair, a walrus mustache, round reddish cheeks, and jolly blue eyes. Uncle John was ten years older than Aunt Lee, who was older than my father, and my father was born in 1910. So Uncle John was old enough to remember a 19th-century boyhood. I recall a framed photograph of him in a military officer's dress uniform. For a long time I thought this was a picture of Uncle John in the czar's navy, but that is probably wrong. I vaguely recall someone once telling me that that picture was from World War II, when Uncle John served as a U.S. military surgeon.

I loved visiting that old house, with its low ceilings, thick wood beams, and big brick fireplace, the rooms filled with musical instruments, books, old European tchotchkes, and a mounted 19th-century navigator's globe that was almost as tall as myself. It was like a house in an old fairy tale, where maybe the musical instruments came alive at night. Portly Uncle John dozed off in his armchair.

Then my little sister, Barbara, and I would draw close to listen to him chortling and muttering to himself in Russian. What was he dreaming of? Here's a clue: One time he switched to English, and we heard him cooing, "Oh Tootsie, oh Tootsie."

Uncle John and Aunt Lee never had children. When I was 12, they gave me *The Hobbit* as a birthday present, which became my favorite book. (My parents wouldn't have known about Tolkien.) I was about 15 when Uncle John died. My sister, serious about music, was always especially close to Aunt Lee, who gave her violin lessons and a violin. When I was in college, Aunt Lee passed away. My sister inherited a number of her belongings: classical and opera records, books, paintings. (I took for myself a hardcover edition of *War and Peace* in Constance Garnett's translation.) My sister also inherited an old reel-to-reel tape recorder and boxed recordings of musical performances, some of Uncle John and Aunt Lee playing duets. There were also family recordings: another uncle telling war stories, or describing a recent family trip. There was at least one tape-recording of my family, from when my sister, mother, and I had finally returned to Boston from Guatemala to live after a long separation from our father. I was about four. In that recording, I was much taken with some recent trip to a zoo, which I went on about at length, in effortless Spanish—until my mother's voice interrupted, prodding me to speak in English.

"And we went to *de zoooloo*," I obliged, in an astonishingly strong Guatemalan accent, "and we saw *de mohnnn-keeeeeees*."

It was strange to be a college student, listening to your four-year-old self do something that you couldn't do anymore: speak fluent Spanish. It made sense that I'd learned Spanish before English, because by the time I was four most of my life had been spent in Guatemala. But it wasn't until I heard that tape that I really knew that about myself. Where had that little boy's Spanish gone? Where had that boy gone? He was me, but he was also somebody else: somebody who spoke Spanish. Maybe he was still living a parallel life in Guatemala, unaware of his English-speaking double.

My father was 20 years older than my mother. And my mother, like Uncle John, was a Catholic. I spent the first years of my life shuttled between Guatemala City and Massachusetts. Early marital strife between my parents caused these separations. By the time I was three, it seemed decided that my mother, sister, and I were going to be staying in Guatemala permanently. But when I was four I contracted tuberculosis, and that precipitated a move back to Boston and an uneasy parental rapprochement. The shock of dislocation imprinted itself inside me in such a way that I have, I think, an unusual number of vivid memories even from when I was two or so, of my *abuelos'* house in Guatemala City, of airplane flights on Pan Am airliners, of a midwinter move back to an austere little house that I'd never seen before in the Boston suburbs.

As long as I've been conscious of such things, I've had the sense of a double or divided life. Guatemala City and Massachusetts. Catholic and Jewish. Guatemalan and American. Contrasting memories of the populous, pungent patio of my grandparents' house in Guatemala City—chickens, parrots, my pet rabbit, the Indian girls who took care of and fussed over me—and of sitting for hours at the living room window in the Boston suburbs staring out at snow and remote-looking houses that were like mirror images of ours. These are the bedrock images of an inner landscape that I still inhabit as if they are aspects of one singular place. But how true is that if you can speak the language of only one of those places, and not of the other?

The little boy who at some point must have been able to speak both had been cleaved in two: one who spoke English, and the other—vanished! A permanent absence. I was his ghost, and he was mine. In a sense, I've spent the last three decades, during which I've lived as much in Latin America as in the United States, as if on a mission to bring those two boys together again.

Latin Americans are often bewildered by, and a little contemptuous of, all those U.S. Latinos who don't speak Spanish. When you

are a "U.S. Latino" who makes his or her living as a writer, it can be pretty embarrassing, if not mysterious.

In my case, it's not a total mystery. In the first grade, I sometimes got Spanish and English words mixed up. And I was being educated in a very white Massachusetts suburban school system. My first-grade teacher was actually very nice, and I will never forget those glorious few weeks when she read us *Charlotte's Web*, a chapter a day, and how smitten I was, pretty Miss Hogarth! But my mother was called into the school by administrators, and told that for my and my sister's benefit, only English should be spoken at home. My mom could speak English, couldn't she? Of course she could—she'd even gone to college in the States. So why were we using Spanish at home? Then, once or twice a week, I was called out of class for sessions with the speech therapist charged with ridding me of my Spanish-speaker's accent. It wasn't as if, at the age of six, there was time for me to learn how to distinguish between English and Spanish words on my own, and how to pronounce them like my classmates. No, this was urgent business.

Speech therapist: "Say Mother."

Me: "Mud-hair."

Speech therapist: "Noooo! Mother!" Smack!

Me: "Ouch! ¡Vil bruja!" (Okay, I exaggerate.)

I imagine that all across the USA other kids must have been going through a similar process. What kind of country produces educators who think it necessary to exorcize foreign languages and accents from little children? But, after all, this took place almost half a century ago, when I was in the first grade. Obviously, our country has changed a great deal since then. Americans no longer grow nervous when they hear foreign languages spoken in their streets and schools. It's not like they would ever do anything so silly and superfluous as to encourage Congress and state legislatures to pass

laws declaring English our only and official language, for example. It's not as if they would ever criminalize, or stigmatize, people for being native Spanish, French, or Arabic speakers.

A few years ago, a New York City publishing house decided to bring out an English-language translation of a novel by a friend, the exceptional novelist José Manuel Prieto, who grew up in Cuba; was educated in the Soviet Union; became a citizen of Mexico, where he published his first books; and currently lives in New York. (His 12-year-old daughter already speaks four languages!) The publisher chose a supposedly reputable translator, but when José received the first draft of the translation, he was appalled. It was a mess. At one point in his novel, José had described a stripper doing a pole dance, moving up and down it like a caterpillar—but the translator had the stripper holding onto a “tube” that was moving up and down like a caterpillar! You could excuse the translator for being unfamiliar with stripper poles, but not with being so clueless about Spanish-language subjects and verbs. José was bewildered. Wasn't the United States the richest, most powerful nation on Earth? Then how could it have such incompetent professional literary translators?

I remember pondering that question, and the simple answer that occurred to me.

“It's because we're the nation we are, so rich and powerful,” I told José, “that we have such incompetent translators.”

After all, he was one of those rare foreign authors who actually sells his book in the United States, it being a known fact that no other country publishes fewer books in translation—defiant monolingualism can sometimes seem an essential aspect of our national literary *carácter*. Everyone knows that if people in other countries want to do business with us, they have to do it in our language. If the leaders of foreign countries want to negotiate with us, they have to do it in our language, too. A country that speaks to the world only in its own language and describes reality to itself only in its own language will be able to convince itself of anything. Sometimes that may be a recipe

for muscular triumph, and sometimes for tragedy. But it's obvious, José—translators aren't what made America great.

Once you possess another language, your sense of reality changes—it's as simple as being able to connect to the Internet and read, say, what people in Mexico are saying about the immigration issue. Suddenly the world seems twice as large, and twice as peopled, and more interesting than it did before.

The summer after my junior year in college, in 1976, I invited some of my college buddies down to Guatemala, where we could travel around a bit and stay with my family. Four of us drove from Ann Arbor in my friend's Ford Mustang. It was an important trip in many ways, but there is one incident that especially haunts me. We were out walking in Guatemala City one night, on deserted streets near the Parque España traffic rotary. A VW Thing with four guys our age pulled up, and they asked us in Spanish if we knew where there was a good disco. We climbed aboard and went bombing around the city in futile and soon forgotten search for that disco. Eight of us jammed into a VW Thing, smoking the most potent pot I'd ever had. But the universal stoner's language is not quite comparable to the Language of Diplomacy. With my fractured Spanish, I divined that they were college students like us, but from neighboring El Salvador. The Salvadoran Army had stormed and occupied their campus, massacred a bunch of students, and they had fled in their VW Thing to Guatemala City, to get out of harm's way, I guess, and to just hang out.

I didn't know anything else about them, and even less about the political situation in El Salvador. I didn't know if they were at all political or what they really thought about anything or what their lives were like, and my Spanish wasn't good enough to find out. I didn't suspect, of course, that within a few years, Guatemala City, El Salvador, and most of Central America would be engulfed in violence and war. And I had no inkling that I'd spend so much of the rest of my 20s there, covering the wars as a freelance journalist, working

at my first novel, and just living and learning. I only knew that there seemed to be something deeply daring and wild and intensely alive about those guys in their VW Thing, and that some of that was rubbing off on us as we charged around those dark, mostly deserted streets that night, the cool mountain tropical air in our faces and hair, making our shirts flap. After we'd ridden around awhile, they let us off and drove away. I like to think that one of those Salvadoran kids was like a version of my old lost self. We'd met, and smoked some pot. But we hadn't really been able to talk—a door slammed shut on all my curiosity.

If we met today, communication wouldn't be a problem. I'm a fairly fluent Spanish speaker again, just like when I was four. For years my mother and I have spoken only Spanish to each other. To get my Spanish back took a long time and enormous commitment. To borrow a certain literary metaphor, it was like constructing my own garden of forking paths that I can follow back into the past, to a place where that lost boy and I were never separated, and forward into a familiar landscape where two separate countries comprise one.

FRANCISCO GOLDMAN (Boston, Massachusetts; 1954-) is the author of four books and numerous pieces of journalism for publications such as *Harper's*, *The New Yorker*, and *The New York Review of Books*. His first two novels, *The Long Night of White Chickens* and *The Ordinary Seaman*, were finalists for the PEN/Faulkner Award. His third novel was *The Divine Husband*. His newest title is *The Art of Political Murder: Who Didn't Kill the Bishop?*, a nonfiction account of the 1998 murder of Guatemala's Bishop Juan José Gerardi. Goldman teaches at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut.