

Spanish Classes

By Erica Garza

It's not too late to take Spanish classes, is it? And surely I can find the time. After work, I'll take a night class. Nothing crazy, maybe twice a week. Or I can get those Rosetta Stone CDs people rave about. They have them at Columbus Circle, or better yet I'll order them online when I get to work.

I better hurry.

Leaning against the subway door of a crowded N train, I'm reading over someone's shoulder about the Healthcare Reform Bill just passed. Yet all I can think about are the years I wasted with high school French classes. Three years and all I can really do is count to fifty and recite the days of the week. Pathetic. And two semesters of Italian plus a study abroad, yet all I know are a few food items, which I probably just picked up from menus. It never much mattered that I couldn't understand my father's first language; that I was just about the only one in my family who couldn't. All my cousins, my brother, my sister—all of them found it valuable enough where I just found it ordinary. Less exotic. Uninteresting.

What an ass I am.

The article about the Health Care Reform Bill claims that some Americans fear the U.S. is turning into a socialist nation. Socialism. It's something I don't know enough about. I'm not proud of it. If only I'd paid attention in History class. I think about the wasted hours in History class, which reminds me of the wasted hours in French class, and I consider that maybe if I pair Spanish classes with Rosetta Stone CDs and get a tutor on the side, I'll be semi-fluent within three months, just in time for Chulo's eighty-seventh birthday party. And then I'll ask him if he thinks the U.S. is turning into a socialist nation.

It would be great—ideal—if as soon as I got off the train, I could just dial his number and ask. But I can't just call him up and ask because Chulo, my grandfather, doesn't speak English. And I don't speak Spanish. So there you go, a perfectly natural thing in the world—a conversation between grandfather and granddaughter—impossible without a translator.

And the translator, usually my dad, doesn't like me prying for socialist information from Chulo. He says it'll upset him, and my grandma usually takes care of that.

If I were playing the six-degrees-of-separation game, I'd be just two links away from a socialist revolutionary. My grandfather, just one link.

And I hardly know a thing about it.

The gist of the story is all I have, all I've ever had, and it's something that expands with mystery and meaning every year that I don't find out more.

Chulo's mama was a pianist, his papa, a surgeon. When he was just a boy, they were both plagued by some unidentified disease and died. So my grandpa grew up in an orphanage in Mexico City that I can't visualize. I have to read *Oliver Twist* to fill in the blanks. The orphanage was in the neighborhood of Coyoacán, a place that I would visit some seventy years later and love for its bohemian vibe. When Chulo is a teenager, Diego Rivera—that world-famous, womanizing artist—goes to this undecipherable orphanage looking for boys to hire for a special job. He takes Chulo from the orphanage to a beautiful blue house, the *Casa Azul*, belonging to his wife Frida Kahlo.

My grandpa doesn't know Diego and Frida for too long. And that's too bad because I wonder what they were like outside of what I know from biographies and Hollywood's interpretations. They introduce him to a man who will be staying in their home while they are away. A man whose name Chulo says accented and in a whisper. A man whose name I must have had on a History test at some point. Leon Trotsky. Runaway to Mexico. Revolutionary. Chulo works for him for two years.

What did Chulo do for him? What was Trotsky like? I visited the *Casa Azul* once with my family, Chulo included, and I watched his old blue eyes tear up as he inched slowly through the gardens and rooms adorned with Frida's eerie portraits. He mumbled things to my father, who translated in his half-ass way so that I only got fragments of what could be recalled. How Trotsky liked tomatoes stuffed with rice and cheese. How the cats were fed, how the plants were trimmed and other various chores.

My dad says the reason Chulo never talked about his time with Trotsky was not because he had negative associations with this man or his job but because as Chulo immigrated to the U.S., he lived with an anxiety that such associations would be detrimental to his and his family's new citizenship. He performed hard labor with his hands until he was an old man, raised his seven children, and did the best he could. These things could not be compromised.

The woman has noticed I'm reading over her shoulder and folded the paper under her arm. And soon I exit the train with the hope that maybe there's still time. Time to learn his language, time to uncover that story, time to convince him that nobody would dare deport an eighty-seven-year-old man for having once been poor and in need of a job.

I will finally be ready to listen. If he's ready to give.