

CHANCLA SURVIVOR:

Growing Up Spanglish

I always thought the locuras in my family were specific to my house. Then I moved to Puerto Rico and saw four million people behaving the exact same way. And I realized, I'm not dysfunctional. I'm tropical.
—Bill Santiago, chancla survivor

As the Spanglish I grew up with eventually led to this book, ahora vuelvo a mis raíces, the source from which I still draw Spanglish strength each and every day, para terminar con lo que me parece el perfect ending.

Entonces vamos a shift gears un poquito and get personal. Y cuando digo personal, I mean sin pelos en la lengua. Porque mira, Latinos always put it out there and make fun of it, sea lo que sea. No matter what the foible or the tragedy, lo decimos like it is y nos reímos anyway. Eso sí, que no somos repressed!

I'd like to include a little transcript of an actual Spanglish family. La mía, of course. Ya verán como esto pondrá everything de lo que hemos estado talking about into context, siendo un ejemplo de Spanglish in action with multiple hablantes. As far as I'm concerned, what's going on en tales ocasiones is absolutely and sin duda alguna, a Spanglish event, because those involved se entienden a través de two different languages engaging symbiotically como un solo sistema de comunicación. Pero first you'll need a little background de como I grew up and to meet algunos de los characters en my life.

First Born

I don't know about all of you, pero I myself was born in New York, like most Puerto Ricans. It's been said I was "born to Puerto Rican immigrants." Lo cual es technically untrue, because los puertorriqueños somos U.S. citizens. Although, debo admitirlo, I did have an uncle who once got deported to the Bronx.

I am the first born of at least four children. And I went to George Washington Elementary School. We were the only Puerto Ricans in that school. And in the school play, I got to play the part of George Washington. ¿Qué les parece? I was a founding papi!

You should have seen me and Martha bailando salsa at the inaugural ball hasta las tantas. It even made the school newspaper the next day: "Fifth Grader Elected El Presidente. Fiesta Goes On Way Past Bed-Time."

Mi White Castle Es Tu White Castle

Back then I ate a lot of White Castles. De hecho, I just assumed White Castles was traditional

Puerto Rican food, because I pretty much went straight from breast-feeding to White Castle hamburgers. Así que pensé que tenía que ser comida típica de la cultura.

My father used to take us constantly porque había un White Castle cerca de su oficina on Prospect Avenue. Pero bien sabido era que los fries de McDonald's eran mejores. So we would get the burgers at White Castle and then drive over to McDonald's, para que mi papi pudiera conseguir the better papitas for his chil- dren. Todavía lo recuerdo como the greatest gesture of parental love, y estoy seguro de que people have been recognized as saints for lesser deeds.

You may think I'm jokeando, but White Castle played a significant role in my Puerto Rican upbringing. Every year, para Sanksgibing, my mother would stuff our turkey with eighty to ninety White Castles hamburgers. Entonces, all our friends and neighbors would come over and rave.

"Oh my God, this Puerto Rican stuffing is incredible! Can we have the recipe?"

"Sorry, family secret," decíamos nosotros, scrambling to hide all the little square boxes.

Latinos in Space

Now here's a joke I heard. You'll see the reason I'm telling you in just a little bit.

Q. Why were there no Puerto Ricans on "Star Trek?"

A. Because they're lazy in the future too.

You know how I heard that joke? From a Mexican. My girlfriend's brother told it to her over the phone. Pero el no sabía que ella lo tenía on speaker phone, and that I was listening. ¡Imagínate!

But what cracked me up era que I used to watch Star Trek, and Captain Kirk always seemed very Latino to me. Su behavior y su look, tú sabes. He wore those bright-colored shirts and had such over-the-top bravado. Y tenía siempre su pelo slicked back. Además, era bien mujeriego to boot. Olvídate, Kirk era un playboy fuera de serie y levantaba sus mamacitas all over the universe.

And since all the Latinos I knew at the time eran puertorriqueños, as far as I was concerned, Captain Kirk was boricua all the way.

There was even an episode called "Space Seed," en el cual apareció Ricardo Montalbán, playing the character he later reprised in the movie Wrath of Kahn. Yet even though Montalbán was speaking with a thick Spanish accent, I still thought of Captain Kirk como el más latino of the two.

Then one day, there's this commercial that comes on, with the Starship Enterprise in it. And the ship pulls into a drive-thru orbit alrededor de la tier- ra to order White Castles. Y pensé yo, "No way!" Entonces Captain Kirk ordenó like 500 de esos riquísimos little square hamburgers for the entire crew, y que "to beam up."

And I said to myself, "¡Mira pa' ya!, Captain Kirk eats White Castles!" How much more Puerto Rican can you get than that?

Me Llamo Bill

There were four of us boys in the house growing up. My three brothers and I: Billy, Tony, Tierney, and Larry, en el orden que nacimos. I know they're not "typical" Puerto Rican names. To which I say: ¿Y qué, so what?

Look, como fui el primero, I got named after my father, William, who was named after his father, Guillermo, which is Spanish for William. Entonces Bill es el apodo de William en inglés. And Mami still calls me Billy, which she still pronounces as "Bee-Lee."

After me, my parents estaban free to pick and choose names from las estrellas del show business.

My brother Tony was named after el actor Anthony Quinn. Y como si fuera poco, his middle name is Elvis, after Michael Jackson's ex-wife's dad. My brother Tierney is the most testosterone-driven de todos nosotros, even though he was named after a woman, la actriz Gene Tierney. Quizás estará compen- sating. My youngest brother, Larry, is named for Lawrence of Arabia. My mother le encantó esa película. And cuando Larry era un baby, a veces she would wrap a second diaper up on

his head, as a turban.

Not so secretly, though, I often wish que yo tuviera a real super Latino name, like Benicio del Toro. You could add “del Toro” to any name and it would instantly sound Latino, no matter how un-Latino it was: Chad del Toro; Captain Kirk del Toro; Scooby Doo del Toro.

Of course, “del Toro” means “of the Bull.” So maybe I could tack it onto my initials, and be known as B. S. del Toro. But I’d lose a lot of credibility. “Yeah, don’t listen to a thing that guy says. Don’t you know? That’s B.S. del Toro.”

A veces, like at a salsa club, me presento como Guillermo, just to make things easier. If I introduce myself as “Bill,” the music actually stops. “¿Cómo que, Biew?” they ask, implying, “What the hell kind of a Spanish name is that?” It can be pretty jarring, especialmente porque muchas veces Spanish-speaking people can’t pronounce Bill properly. I get Biew a lot. It’s sort of a combination of Bill and “eww,” as in “eww ¡qué disgusting!”

I’m toying with the idea of dropping Bill altogether and just going as Santiago. Or Santiago del Toro. Which has a nice ring to it. But I just got a great deal on some new business cards and got ten million made.

Así que I’m sticking with “Biew” por lo menos hasta que I run out.

Do You Smell Smoke?

My parents met at Papi’s law office in the Bronx. Mami came in one day to have her taxes done. And I am a result of that. Si no fuera por el IRS, I wouldn’t even be here. So every year cuando estoy filling out mis taxes, I just figure I really do owe them everything.

Papi pensó que Mami era such a hotty that he kept making excuses for her to have to keep coming back un sin número de veces. “Yes, Miss Valentín, why don’t you come again tomorrow. I need to see some more receipts. By the way, ¿A usted le gusta bailar?”

My mother was a Manhattan beauty queen. Es más in her neighborhood, se conocía como el pollo de la novena. She even won un certamen de belleza, the “Miss Five Boroughs” beauty pageant. By the way, that’s “boroughs,” not “burros.” And she won the title después que se casó con mi Papi. Well, who do you think entered her in the contest? My father wanted a trophy wife, aunque fuera retroactively.

Their courtship took place primarily en las pistas of the most popular salsa spots en Nueva York at the time, El Caborojeño, Happy Hill Casino, Los Panchos, Los Violines, and El Palladium.

When my mom speaks of those places her eyes light up. “Ay, y ¿qué puer-torriqueño que viniera aquí no quería un baile? That’s why I married your father. Le encantaba to dance y me llevaba every weekend. Esa era la recompensa de la gran jornada de la semana. Y tú entrabas for only three dollars,” she’ll say, with a shimmy of the shoulders and a shake of the hips, as her syncopated body memories kick in. “Así fue, hasta que I got married. Entonces no more danc-ing! Bueno, at least for me, porque tu papá todavía tenía su night life.”

As a confirmed mujeriego, Papi never let marriage cramp his bachelor style. Let’s just say Papi made Bill Clinton look like an ideal husband. My mother frequently lamentaba el no haberse casado with a man as faithful as Bill Clinton. “Ay, esa Hillary doesn’t know como de lucky she is, de haber conseguido un esposo tan fiel y respetuoso.”

Cada vez que Papi tenía un affair, my mother would burn all his clothes, his entire wardrobe, on the front lawn. She’d pile them up, y le echaba kerosene. Why she needed kerosene, I don’t know, porque el polyester ya era highly flammable. Entonces, encendía un fósforo. And whoosh, it was Bonfire of the Infidelities.

The neighbors would get used to it, y ni se molestaban en llamar a los bomberos. “Do you smell smoke?” “Oh, don’t worry about it. Mr. Santiago must have a new secretary.”

Of course, esto lo único que hacía era to make things worse, attracting even more other women to Papi, because he always looked irresistibly guapo wearing brand new clothes. Whenever my mother ya estaba harta, she’d just fly off to Puerto Rico, taking all us kids along with her. By the time I was six months old, I had racked up millions of frequent mujeriego miles.

There was never any effort to try and hide any of this from my brothers and I, either. My mother would bring us into it! She'd find my father's mistress's panties in the car and share her discovery. "Billy, mira lo que yo encontré en el carro de tu papá. Tenemos que ir a ver a la santera."

I would hear my friends' parents saying things like, "Honey, let's not fight in front of the kids." Meanwhile my parents, if they ever felt a good fight coming on, would postpone the bout until we got home from school para que we wouldn't miss it.

We'd walk through the door. Mami and Papi would be in their corners. A bell would ring. And my mother would go nuclear: "¿Y dónde carajo estabas metido hasta las cuatro de la mañana? ¡Desgraciado, maldito, canalla, sin vergüenza . . . HIJO DE LA GRAN PUTA!"

Oh, we heard that one a lot. Hijo de la gran puta. But we were so young when we were first exposed to the expression que no fuimos capaces de imaginarnos that it actually meant algo tan awful como: "son of the great whore." Honestly, when I was little, it sounded kind of sing-songy to me, like a lullaby. "Hijo... delagranpuuutaaaa.Hiiiiijoodelagaaaaaanpu-u-u-taaa . . ." For years, I couldn't get to sleep without hearing it echoing some- place in the house.

Pero un día, you connect the dots. "Wait a minute, hijo, that's my dad. He's the hijo. So la gran puta . . . What? ¿Mi abuelita? She's la Gran Puta?"

I was shocked. And suddenly it sounded so imperial to me. I could picture my grandmother sitting on a throne: "Yo soy la Gran Puta. And your papi, he is the hijo. Hijo de la Gran Puta. And you Billy, tú eres el nietecito, grandson de la Gran Puta."

And yes, we were traumatized by my parents divorce. Because they never got one. Mami hung in there, tú sabes. She wasn't about to walk away after investing so much of herself in her family. And there were other reasons. Somehow, a pesar de sus indiscreciones Papi was the best father in the world. And we all, including Mami, loved him immensely (ropa quemada notwithstanding). Plus, ¿quién iba a divorciar a mis padres? My father was Mami's lawyer. And he was perfectly happy with the situation.

That's Amor

Although growing up I never knew my father as a lawyer. Íbamos a visitarlo a su oficina, but I never saw him in action during a trial or anything. Así que, as far as I was concerned, Papi's only job era to make sure que nobody ever turned the thermostat up over 32 degrees.

Papi, bendito, just didn't believe in turning up the heat. "You have to acclimate, Billy. Just acclimate," he'd say, his breath rising visibly in our living room. And I'd say, "Acclimate?! What, build an igloo? It's warmer outside, where it's below zero."

Not only was he saving money on heat. As long as our teeth were chattering, they weren't chewing. Por lo tanto, Papi también estaba cutting his grocery bills in half!

So there we were, four little Puerto Rican spicicles, frizando our culitos off. And every winter we would actually pray for my father to have more frequent affairs, para poder calentarnos by the fire that my mother would inevitably make by setting his wardrobe ablaze en un incendio de venganza.

Yet, one day, mis padres started getting along. After decades of tribulation, involving many scenes of my mother literally dragging las mujeres rivales—out of my father's office, out of his car, or out of some club—by the hair, a puros gritos, things calmed down. The Gaza Strip—style animosity and rancor se esfumó de una manera milagrosa.

I remember calling home one time y fue Papi quién contestó el teléfono. "Guess who's here with me, Billy, aquí mismo, next to me, in bed," he said. "You'll never guess." "Who?" I said. "Tu mamá," he said.

And I was a little stunned, because they hadn't shared a bedroom, much less a bed, in forever.

"You don't believe me, right?" he said. Then I heard him, off the phone, saying, "See, I told you he wouldn't believe me, Judy. Toma, tú." And then my mother got on. "It's true, Billy. Estoy aquí next to your father."

After that stunning truce my mother revised her official position on matrimony. "Marriage can

be a beautiful thing, Billy,” she said. “If you can get through the first 30 years, the rest is easy.”

Their reconciliation, por más demorada que fuera, came just in time in a way. A few short añitos después, Papi was diagnosed with cancer, pobrecito. When he woke up from his first operation para removerle el tumor de su colon, we were all there. In a strained voice, still barely able to open his eyes, nos hizo reirwithhisfirstwords. “I’llbeback,”hesaid,hoarselymimickingelvalorde un action hero. And he was back with us for a few years more, con Mami a su lado, cuidándolo hasta lo último.

That day en el ICU del Veterans Hospital in the Bronx, cuando Papi se des- pertó with his typical incorrigible charm, the mood lightened. And my mother, acariciándole su frente, immediately started poking fun at him, through her grateful tears.

“Para que tú veas,” she said, compelled to point out that she was gladly there for him como su esposa, although as her husband he didn’t deserve it. “Después de las tantas que tú me haz hecho sufrir, I’m still here.”

EVERYBODY LOVES SANTIAGO

In a meeting with a producer once, I got an earful of one man’s prepack- aged idea for a sitcom concept that might be built alrededor de Bill Santiago. “OK, so you’re Puerto Rican, right?” he said. “So we do a show about you growing up on welfare in the projects in a broken home with half a dozen brothers and sisters, all from different dads.”

I said, “Whoa, wait, ‘perate un segundito, hold on. First of all, we weren’t on welfare. My father was a lawyer.”

“Lawyer,” he said, disappointed. “That’s not funny.” “And my mom was a school bus driver.”

“OK, well, a school bus driver, that’s funny,” he said, perking up otra vez. “So we do a show about you riding around with your mom on the school bus, through the worst neighborhoods in the city, picking up little bad-ass Puerto Rican kids. And the bus isn’t just yellow, it’s welfare-cheese yellow ...”

La verdad del caso es que we did eat a lot of welfare cheese at Casa Santiago. But it wasn’t because nosotros estábamos on welfare. Era que some of Papi’s clients were on welfare y se les hacía difícil pagar cash for his legal services. Como no tenían dinero, he let them pay with whatever they could. Muchas veces it was blocks of welfare cheese, lo cual funcionaba as a sort of Puerto Rican wampum at my father’s office. It was a payment plan que Papi ofrecía con mucho gusto, as Bronx courtesy.

Cuánto queso was due, se basaba on what specific legal service my father was providing. Por ejemplo, handling un divorcio might be worth three blocks of welfare cheese. Un caso de inmigración might be more in the range of five blocks. Defending you in a felony case where you were clearly culpable might set you back diez bloques del queso “Tío Sam.”

As a result, our refrigerator at home was always full of the stuff, which came in loaf-sized cardboard boxes. We could have easily built a whole new house con todo el welfare cheese que nos comimos during our childhood. We had it on Ritz crackers, in grilled welfare-cheese sandwiches, layered into lasagna, melted onto pizza. Y a mi siempre me ecantaba to slip a pedazo under the little square bun, for an extra cheesy White Castle cheeseburger. It’s the closest I’ve ever come to dropping acid.

And if you’ve never tried this highly prized black market dairy product yourself, no tienes una idea de lo que te estás missing. A thick slice of this deli- cious and nutritious government snack will beat the hell out of any over- priced Brie you’ve ever tasted, and make you wonder why anyone would want to live above the poverty level. Así de delicioso es.

Cuando one day I get mi propio sitcom en la televisión, I will absolutely insist that the main character on “Everybody Loves Santiago” have a secret weakness for Le Fromage du Welfare. Plus, I must beg to differ on the opinion that my father being a lawyer was not funny.

Papi’s Payphone

My father could call anywhere in the world from the payphone in his office con una sola quarter. It was a big black city payphone—with the coin box missing. Se le había...

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