

Language Lesson

by Michael D. Brown

"Classica Latina," Evert said. He was referring to David's cousin Elena, whom everyone called Ely. We were standing next to David's Chevy. It was a Thursday night. I had asked Evert if he'd met her.

"She's going back to Los Angeles tomorrow," I said, "I mean back to Ontario."

"¿Perdón?"

I knew my sentence was too long, but after a year here in Tuxtla, I was still too lazy to try for the Spanish. I mean, I usually know the words but I want to respond as quickly as I would in English back home with friends.

"Mañana ella regresará a su casa."

"Oh," he said and picked at his thumbnail. He said nothing for about three minutes, but when I lit a cigarette he made a disapproving noise. "¿Y David?"

"He's in with his padres. He'll be out in cinco minutos. La escuelita está abierta." I pointed up at the classroom on the second floor of David's grandmother's house where Evert was studying English.

"Esperaré."

I smoked my cigarro under his watchful eye. We were never able to make too much conversation even when I was teaching him at Educenter. Now that David had opened his own school, Evert had come to learn with him because it was much more affordable, but he wasn't progressing rapidly, I guess because David spoke Spanish more frequently than the other place allowed and Evert was as lazy in his way as I in mine.

David soon came out of his parents' home and motioned for Evert to go with him upstairs nextdoor so they could start their lesson. To me he said, "We're gonna take Ely out for some tacos after classes, okay?"

"Is your brother coming?" I asked.

"No?"

"Sure, why not? The more the merrier." I lit another Marlboro as he and Evert went up the newly erected escalera. The new rule was we shouldn't smoke in the office or anywhere where the kids or any of the students would see us, but I couldn't sit in the back room with the door closed. It was just too hot. The one fan was being used in the classroom.

Hector and Ely came out into the street and walked over to his car which was parked behind David's. She had her hair set in large rollers and was wearing capri pants, sandals and a sweatshirt. He had shorts on.

"Freddy, my friend," Hector said, "Un cigarro, por favor."

"Are we going to "Tacos de la Muerte" later?" I asked as I extended the pack.

"I guess," he said, "Ahorita, I have to take my cousin up to Farmacia to get a phone card. It's cheaper for her to call home on David's cell."

I was measuring the validity of Evert's assessment of Ely. At the moment, she looked much more Californian than Mexican.

"No clases?" Hector asked.

"Not tonight," I said, "I'm just standing out here smoking."

They both laughed because they knew the rule did not come from David, but rather from Señora Esquivar because although Señor Esquivar smoked whenever he felt like it, he did not like seeing either of his sons smoking, nor any of their friends. Once in a while when their father was away in Teopisca we might smoke in front of their mother and she would ask for one, but it was as if the vice had been all but obliterated from everyone except Señor Esquivar when he was home. And since the school was in his mother's house, it was thought best not to foul up the air if he should stop up to check on things.

I held out the pack to Ely. She hesitated, but then took one and put it in her pocket. "Thanks," she said, "For later," and patted her breast. Her nails glistened with streetlight. She had only smoked three or four cigarettes in the two weeks she had been visiting the Esquivars. She did not eat pork. She had a beautiful complexion.

She always spoke to her cousins half and half in perfect Spanish and perfect English and she swore like a truckdriver when she was out with us or visiting my place.

She had kept us up chatting about movies and music until five in the morning three times while Hector slept on the floor in front of the television.

They got into Hector's Stratus and headed up the street.

"Hasta luego," I called out.

"Later," Ely said, waving.

Forty-five minutes later, David and Evert were leaving the school. Evert came down the stairs as David was locking up. He seemed surprised to find me still standing in the street. I didn't tell him that I'd taken care of my banking business at the Banamex three blocks away nor that I'd spent some time talking with one of the few friends I have here who speaks very good English. It must have looked to Evert as if I'd been standing around smoking cigarettes for almost an hour.

Hector and Ely, who had returned to the house about a half hour prior, now came out to hook up with David and me to go for the tacos. Hector had changed to his chinos and Ely looked great. She had combed out her long brown hair and put on a little make-up. She was wearing a black pant suit and heeled boots.

When they saw each other, Evert and Ely exchanged greetings and spoke for a little bit in Spanish before he took off for home.

Then Hector took his Stratus to the parking lot and the three of us followed in the Chevy and waited for him to join us. I felt uncomfortable in the back seat because I usually sat in the front, and it was a little more so when Hector came and squeezed his big body in beside me. I was thinking I should be used to the seat by now as I'd been sitting in it for the last two weeks whenever we took Ely somewhere.

At the taco stand we found an empty table, took some Cokes out of the ice-chest and pulled the plastic chairs around so we could all have a good view of the little black and white portable television.

"Cuatro de pastor," David said, "Con todo." We always started with four.

"El mismo," I said.

"Dos de tripa y dos de res," Hector said.

The money man looked at Ely. He seemed to remember her from a previous visit. "Dos de res?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Sabes qué, I saw that guy cuando fuimos a San Cristóbal." She said to David.

"This guy?"

"No, tu alumno. Como se llama, Edward?"

"Evert."

"Sí. He was in that fucking bar we went to."

Hector and his brother smiled at each other and then David looked at me. They were amused with Ely's casual swearing, which seemed all the more incongruous coming from her looking the way she did now.

"I didn't see him there," David said.

"Yeah, he was upstairs when we were waiting for a table. We spoke a little bit."

"I really envy you," I said to Ely, "The way you've been able to speak to everybody here. I've been here a year and I find it difficult to make conversation with anybody."

Hector patted his cousin on the shoulder and said, "La reina de Tuxtla."

"That's just because I have some Spanish," Ely said, "Mom and Dad speak it all the time at home."

"And because you are so beautiful," David said, "You are an exotic attraction here."

"Because I'm half gringa, you mean. At home, it's a fucking problem."

The tacos were brought and nobody seemed to want to get into the problem of being Mexican in the States. Both brothers had related different stories to me of their separate trips to Canada and New York and California. Hector who was light-skinned had no

trouble getting anything he wanted in Ontario, Toronto nor in Ontario, California, but David who was a little darker had run into some racist attitude in Canada though he said he had some good times when he visited New York, the trip he had made prior to knowing me and then again when he stayed at my place. I always felt a little guilty when the subject was broached because everyone I had encountered during my stay in Mexico had greeted me with nothing but kindness and I am so obviously not Mexican with my fair hair and light complexion.

We ate without speaking. Arnold Schwarzenegger was threatening somebody in Spanish on the little television.

"Quieres más?" David asked.

"You?"

"I think another one."

"Yeah, then," I said, "I'll have another. The salsa here is great."

Hector said no and asked me for another cigarette. Ely pulled the one I had given her earlier from her purse and lit it.

"You know," she said to me, "That guy is not so nice. That Evert. He told me he didn't like having you for a teacher because you wouldn't meet him half way."

I was taken back a little. First because I'd never picked up on his attitude and secondly because I was surprised Ely would tell me he said that.

"Well, you can't win 'em all," I responded, trying not to look upset.

"What a bastard," she said.

"He's not so bad," I said, "He's right, you know. I should speak better for all the time I've spent here. I still don't appear grateful enough for all the dinners I've been invited to at the Esquivars."

"Ah, mi tia," Ely said, "She's an angel."

"My mother understands you," Hector said.

"I hope so," was all I could come up with.

To Ely, he said, "And she's sad because you're leaving tomorrow."

"I don't want to go either, but I have so many things to do to get ready for the fall semester."

"Are we going to watch the movie?" David asked to everyone but he was looking at me. He knew I didn't like staying up late, hanging out at his parents' place but his eyes expressed the request for me to have a little understanding. This was his cousin's last night in Tuxtla. He'd said he didn't know when he'd be able to see her again, a trip to California being at least a year outside of his budget.

At the house, the four of us sat in the upstairs television room. The Esquivars had gone to bed with the admonition that Hector and Ely should not stay up too late as the plane was leaving very early in the morning.

