

The Man Who Lost His First Last Name!

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I had shaved that day, not out of anticipation for the meeting of the extended family, but out of frustration for not having a set of clippers in hand for which to trim my beard. I don't like shaving I should say. Don't get me wrong, I am happy when I can feel the smooth of my skin, when there's no harshness or abrasiveness to be felt, but it's those stubborn razor bumps that I hate, they are the ones that keep me from shaving daily. I now rather like my small beard; it accentuates my dreadlocks and spreads my uniformed darkness through out my upper appearance.

I placed myself at ease knowing I would soon be meeting the other members of the family. No worries. In a few hours I would be the center attraction, the invited guest to the Sunday meal they often appreciated without many interruptions. Yes, I did see myself as an interruption, but I did not feel disposed, I actually favored my spotlight. Being different, or being the *difference*, isn't all that bad. I have felt that way many times and as such have become quite used to it. I've actually grown a kind of arrogance from it, which can be seen as a form a protection really. This over assurance allows me to feel secure in the person that I am and the person I have been (sometimes overly secure). Whenever I feel slightly displaced I think back to my growing years, my pubescent days, and I say that nothing of this new life—the life the grown-ups spoke about with fear and admiration, of the classes that sat above us—is something I really want, and by not wanting it I can keep it at a distance. By not wanting it I can shield its penetration; I can keep it from creating sweats of worry as I sit amongst it; amongst *them*. Before you rush to judge my superciliousness, let me first continue about my day with the family.

This Sunday lunch, of which a clean shave preceded it, found me in Spain meeting my partner's family, Barcelona more specifically and even more specifically then that, St Quirze; a small village about thirty minutes from the big city. Catalonia is where they said they lived and they were adamant about this though not imposing. I was there meeting my partner's uncles and aunts, grandmother's and cousins, and to be blatant, so as to create an immediate point of reference, they are white and I, well, am not. What I am you may identify by the end of this story, or then again, you may not, but should you, well, please share it with me; I would like to know! Being that I am not white, and have the kind of hair that they could never have, it was no wonder, or amazement in my part, that they looked at me with slight whispers. But why shouldn't they? My hair is dark and curly, long and dreaded, and my skin not of a Spanish color (then again what isn't in the "Spanish" color?).

The family looked at me as if finally given permission to gawk. Not only to see, but analyze. I was, after all, the one who had accosted their "young lady of the house," and as such they should look. But don't think for once that their investigations were done out right and obvious—much the way kids often behave when something intrigues them—no this was done hospitably. "Would you care for some potatoes...? Maybe some wine!" Whenever I'd look up, grinning ever assured at my perceived distance from it all, I would see one of them looking at me. They fancied me, I am sure. I mean, I am not an

ugly man, actually far from it, very attractive some would say, with that deep soprano voice and those brilliantly fixed eyes (though a bit red from drunken genes), *and he is slightly muscular too, very athletic I am sure*. “You have not done badly.” I caught one of the aunts whispering to my partner when the meal was over. So by this, I knew I was being looked in many ways.

The first questions came while dinner commenced. “Where are your parents?” One of the grandmothers asked me, with the statement in her eyes that read, *a man without roots is not a man*. She looked at me deeply and erected herself after placing a spoon of squash soup in her mouth; she inched her spine forward that much more as if bending even the slightest would show fragility she was not ready to concede. It should have been to no surprise that others followed suite with their intense, yet bemused, look into history.

“My parents are from Cape Verde, and that is where my mother is, although my father is in the United States.” I said this and looked at my partner, waiting for her to translate, something I had become very used to in my life. I knew from experience that such mentioning of separated parents brought about a quietness and uneasiness as to the cause of it. But my parents weren’t separated in the matrimonial sense, only in the geographical sense. “Please tell her,” I turned to my partner before she started her translation, “that my father is still working in the States and he will soon join my mother in the islands as they look to retire.”

This translation business has always been tide up with me in some way. When I was young and lived in Portugal, I could barely speak the ‘mother’ language, choosing most often to speak Kreole, the language from my neighborhood, and would often be asked to translate that language into Portuguese; this by my aunts, neighbors or family friends. I hated doing it back then, with a prisoner’s hate for chores, but some how I have come to a point of appreciation about it all. Not for the specific acts of translating but its very idea. I find that the act actually removes me from ownership; I can always place blame on it and distance myself from any reality it tries to convey. I don’t take it serious, especially as there’s no such thing as pure translations, so why should I? Who knows what the grandmother took out of my answer, by the time it hit her ears it had traveled through someone else’s history. And if that history is not mine then I am not responsible for it; each to their own! This translation thing is also done with other things. How were they to understand the history of my parents’ culture and their relationship to couples living long periods of time away from each other, yet still in union? How would that ever be translated?

The old lady looked at me and smiled and took yet another sip of her warm soup. I finally saw her spine ease, and she relaxed slightly. She had broken the silence of intrigue and now others could enter. That dark boy who looked at them, whose teeth were white and bright with assurance, had a history, and now the mouths of the hungry could be fed.

Moments later one of the uncles began to shift in his seat. I picked this up immediately; he wanted to ask a question, but did not really know how to go about it. He paused with a confusion of emotions, discomforted yet energetic by what that discomfort may discover. Through the corner of my eyes I saw him whisper to his daughter (her English was slightly more advanced than that of the others in the room). She then turned to him with slight whispers and he then turned to me. “Antonio is a Spanish name.” He

bubbled in excitement. His volume surely louder than he would have liked, but he caught some of the looks he wanted; those that intrigued at his ability to speak this other language, they intrigued at his courage to travel beyond the familiar. How dumbly we praise idiocy in hopes of bravery.

“Yes it is I am sure, seeing as the Portuguese country was initially Spanish.”

Though he caught most of the answer, his daughter still had to translate parts of it. I could tell he wanted to continue the discourse, but he had to concede to his inability. He reverted to asking his daughter to continue her translations. “So you are not from Cabo Verde?”

“No, I am, it is just that I was born in Portugal, but my culture, my heritage, is Cape Verdean.”

“Ah, OK—but how, how is it you speak English then?”

“I was raised mostly in the States!”

“In America?”

“No, the States. It can’t be all of America.”

Speaks English as his thinking language, but was born in Portugal; parents separated in different countries. He says he’s Cape Verdean!

Like most times when this conversation is had, confusion sinks in. With the addition of more puzzle pieces the image becomes more and more abstract. The whole family looked around. *A mongrel maybe!* This is why distance is imperative for me. Caring is not in my vocabulary, not anymore, but yet I have to explain this history while biting off a piece of chicken; *my goodness, this chicken is dry, where is the sauce?*

My girlfriend said, in Catalan, “In our first weeks together, when he told me his full name, I was surprised.” She then proceeds to say it slowly, so it wouldn’t be missed, “Miguel Carlos Da Veiga Monteiro.”

“Da Veiga Monteiro?” One of the aunts inquired.

“Yes.” I replied, while slowly wiping my lips with my crystal white napkin; one which had clearly been dipped in bleach to be made whiter. “But in the states I only use, Miguel Monteiro.”

“But why?” The uncle asked.

“Well, that is what they like using in the States, they like keeping names short. I guess you can call me the man who lost his first last name when he moved there.” I began to chuckle, but no where was my attitude shared. It was a lesson I had learned long ago and had momentarily forgotten; humor is hard to translate.

“So, how—well, what do you consider yourself?” The grandmother asked me directly, not authoritatively, but very disciplined.

“I don’t *consider* myself, I already am. Asking anyone to consider themselves as to what they are, is something I stopped asking long ago.” They all quieted and placed their attention on the food which grew cold with the silence of the imbued answer.

I like doing this, this *leaving them quiet for a spell* thing, but you have to know when to do it. Discomfort is not a bad thing when used correctly and advantageously. I used to entertain such discussions and spend my time carefully building myself for others so they could understand, so they could feel at ease, but I stopped. Why should I give them the pleasure of not working as hard as I do at discovering myself? There is no way I am giving them the easy way out.

The family looked at me with bemusement from time to time, but through this circle of occasional stares sat one pair of eyes that seemed to be—interestingly—where most would want to place me; in that slightly uneasy place.

“This is my aunt’s husband.” My partner had said in the beginning when the initial introductions went around. “He does not speak Catalan, but Castellano.”

“Oh, ok.” I mentioned, not yet knowing what Castellano meant.

Realizing, she turns back to me and says, “It’s what *you guys* are used to calling Spanish.”

“Right, right.” I nodded my head as I looked at him and him at me. We were both foreigners in a way, for he could not speak this Catalan dialect which controlled the room, nor could he speak the English which now presided over the dinner table, but he had worked for his space in the table I sensed. He had been accepted long ago as part of this family (or as part of something), and it was now my turn to be studied I supposed. His sustained awkwardness struck me as odd and I couldn’t easily disregard it. He didn’t look at me as if another gate keeper to the family, for unlike everyone else, whose only insecurities came from the uneasiness they could not outwardly express, he was more involved in being as blank as he could, as humble as he could be, and now that I look at it, he actually appeared to be the most at ease.

It felt like we wanted to call out to each other, but I am sure for different reasons, for what I later understood to be his ease, at first I took to be his discomfort. In my ignorance I would have told him to bask in his difference, to understand that in some ways he was impenetrable. That if he eased his worry over not having to take responsibility for something they cared so much for, their culture, their language, their “young lady of the house,” he could actually live a pretty relaxed life. But in turn he looked at me (when he actually looked at me, which wasn’t very often) as if to say, look beyond your smile young man and understand what it really means to ignore. I wondered if there, right there in his simplicity, was where true irresponsibility laid.

I had earlier in the day inquired about the garden of the home, I had mentioned its ease and beauty, the facility with which the eye flowed over the effortless flowers and how its placement in the corner of the yard was almost perfect in attention. It felt unprovoked and assured; confident really. I was soon to learn that he, this man who was sending me the most complex signals by not saying much, had actually architected it; he was a gardener, *their* gardener. How fitting I thought as he sat here, reclusive and unhindered as if in full knowledge of lesson I had yet to learn. And I, I looked at him and found him slowly taking a spoon of the earlier soup to his mouth; his second bowl. Whenever his eyes came up they would do so only to look passed the table and on to the garden.

I had accepted the notion, some time ago, that to come off assured and confident ones needs to lead with questions and never allow the type of quietness that is hollow and deaf. Once so often one should entertain the notion of interest, by doing so you invite a kind of appreciation, the kind most people want to feel. I learned this lesson through working with kids, and seeing how they always seek to be seen, and when they are seen they go through a period of gestation, a kind of calm; their flutter eases. Adults are the same. They have not grown beyond such needs, if anything, the older they get the more they need. As I sat there I threw some comments here and there, mostly to survey the interests of those that surrounded me. I ate the food and said how delicious it all was and

it finally dawned on me that this man, this gardener, knew nothing of what I had been saying. What was being translated wasn't translated to him, and so I wondered. Why had he not taken the chance to learn the language of this table, the Catalan he married into by proposing to be a woman's second husband after her first marriage had failed? And why did he not care for the other languages that now filled the room?

I asked my partner to tell him that I found the garden to be beautiful. He responded with a simple thank you. His wife looked at him with glinting eyes as he followed my comment with another sip of the cooling soup. He looked at me and smiled. I now know that at that moment, that very moment when our eyes met over that dinner table of 'Catalan food,' he called me a fool; a fool for having spent the time to come and sit amongst them.