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Advise Me

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Advise Me

The caller clears his throat when Doctora Isabel asks about birth control. “The rhythm method,” he finally responds. In the background I hear a crackled announcement on what sounds like a warehouse PA system, followed by the caller coughing. Doctora Isabel interrupts: “The rhythm method is acceptable, but do you realize,” she asks, “that with this, biologically, your wife most wants sex precisely at the times you can’t have it?”

The voice doesn’t answer; it isn’t meant to. In the pause, Doctora Isabel’s advice uncoils. She explains fertility cycles and female sexuality; she repeats the tenets of the rhythm method. “Very few men have the ability to resist a wife who wants to have sex with him.” She slows slightly. “Do you see what I mean?”

The man assures her he does. I see him cupping the phone near the open door of a loading dock, plucking flecks of dirt from his nails as he nods, watching the clock and thinking about his wife, about how they got themselves into all this. He is middle-aged, I can tell from his voice. I understand enough of their conversation, too, to know that he is an immigrant, that he has five children, and that his problem, the reason he is calling Doctora Isabel, is that he doesn’t want to have any more. “How many years have you been married?” Doctora Isabel asks.

“Nine,” he says.

“So five babies in nine years,” she emphasizes. Her advice is now obvious.

I am jogging up a snowy hill in Iowa with my dog when I hear that call. Mornings like this are how I’ve come to listen to Doctora Isabel, “El Ángel de la Radio.” She is the most well-known Spanish-speaking call-in advisor in the United States, “a Latina version of Dr. Laura, Dr. Ruth, Ann Landers, and Dr. Spock,” to quote her website. On Facebook—where Doctora Isabel poses with French-manicured hands and a frosted wave of hair—she has fourteen thousand fans. She reminds us to breathe, she tells us that “a head full of fear leaves no space for dreams,” and she posts, in both English and Spanish, on such topics as “the love boomerang,” food as medicine, happiness, erections, perfectionist children, angry teens, meditation, and sleep deprivation, all of which are

also occasional topics on her radio program. On the radio, however, she speaks only Spanish. And the most frequent subject is love.

I began listening to Doctora Isabel soon after I got back from a summer trip to Guatemala to learn Spanish. I was thirty then and enamored with change. Before leaving, I had been dumped by a woman almost ten years younger than me, a woman who liked to climb trees and who left glitter in my sheets and whom I had liked because she didn't like commitment. The year before that, I had quit a well-paying job and a stable relationship to move to a small town in the Midwest to study creative writing. That first year in Iowa, though, I drank more than I wrote. I threw parties and went on road trips and could not manage to stay in a relationship. I woke up hungover and alone on New Year's Day and made two resolutions: to write more and to learn Spanish.

In Guatemala, I rented a small room with a single bed from a middle-aged woman and her mother. Most nights I was asleep by ten, and in the mornings I wrote and then went running. I ran past the juice salesman and the coffee farms and, sometimes, I ran up the side of a mountain and stretched at the base of a huge cross that had been planted there many years before. In the afternoons, I walked along cobblestone streets to a small school near the town's central park, where for four hours a day I practiced speaking in new verb tenses: the present, then the past, the future, the conditional, and finally the subjunctive.

I understood almost nothing at first; then I recognized a few words, and finally whole sentences that let loose into a paragraph or, if I was lucky, two. I lost five pounds from the heat and exhilaration of not knowing so much. I flirted, virulently and in basic Spanish, via e-mail with a woman from Spain whom I'd met back in Iowa before leaving. I fell in love with the estranging rhythms of the language. And then I returned to Iowa. I missed the bewilderment of feeling like a child again, lost in a world of words I was learning one by one. So I went looking for ways to replicate what I had felt that summer. And that's how I found Doctora Isabel.

What I liked was the cycle of the advice show: questions follow answers follow more questions, the essential problem repeating in permutations until it culminates in an answer. It was a structure that allowed me to parse meaning through context. Before my run each morning, I would cue up another episode, clip my dog to his leash, and head out into the early light, Doctora Isabel's advice buzzing in my ear as I began to sweat.

Hola, hola hola! she enthused from her Miami studio at the start of each show, and I followed along, bisecting hickory forests and grass fields, trying to imitate her accent. The callers would say they felt nervous, and Doctora Isabel always told them to breathe, advice that takes the form of a command: *respira*. *Cariño*, she called those on the other end of the line, *mi amor*, *mi hija*, and as she spoke I recited translations in my head: darling, my love, my daughter. I could understand only select words—husband, scared, Houston, work, abuse—but from those clues I built stories. I told myself I was listening not for the advice, but for the vocabulary lessons. And for a while, that’s what I believed.

A few days after I got back to Iowa, I called up the Spanish woman I had been flirting with. Her name was Marta. She had smooth tanned skin, green eyes, and a gray streak running through her brown hair. She spoke to me in Spanish because she knew I wanted to practice, and though my speech was halting and error-riddled, she waited patiently for me to finish my thoughts, only occasionally correcting me or offering up a word.

On our first date, we drove to see a movie in a nearby town and arrived early enough to take a walk. We talked about my time in Guatemala and her summer traveling through Chile. It was warm that evening, and we both wore sleeveless shirts. I asked her to teach me slang, and she laughed and said that *guay* means cool and that the phrase *echar un polvo* means a fuck or a screw.

“I need to study more,” I said at one point, using the verb *necesitar*, and Marta laughed again before correcting me.

“*Necesitar* is only for real needs, like water or sleep,” she said. “*Tener que* is what you say for everything else.”

I thought how strange it was to have two words for need, and I told her that.

“Only because it’s not your language,” she said. “For me it’s normal.”

We passed a clapboard house fronted by an American flag, a small community garden, and then a cornfield. Every once in a while, we weaved close enough to each other in our walking that our bare arms touched.

Two days later, we went swimming in a lake. Then we went for ice cream. And that night, I made popcorn and we watched an early Pedro Almodóvar movie without subtitles that Marta had to pause every so often to explain. Afterward we sat on the ledge of her front porch drinking beer. Around midnight we slipped into English.

“I like the English word *ledge*,” she said.

“I like the Spanish word *tiniebla*,” I told her. It means both darkness and ignorance, but had always sounded to me like the twinkling of stars.

At some point we stopped talking and the night grew hot and silent. As I followed Marta up the stairs to her bedroom, I thought about that phrase *echar un polvo*. Literally it means “to throw dust.”

Listening to Doctora Isabel in those first few months, I am unsure what I made up and what I actually heard. Some mornings I would finish my run and realize I hadn’t understood any of the show. It had been all trees and pavement and me thinking about just one word. *Murciélagos*, the only word in Spanish that uses all the vowels. It means bat. Or *me pones*, what you say to someone if they turn you on.

But other times, it was as if I fell into a rhythm while listening, and suddenly I thought I could understand perfectly each stranger’s problem and also the advice of this equally strange woman, whom I had started to think of as a friend. In moments like that, I didn’t hear individual words but conversations. I was running within the language, and it felt like I had entered the weather itself.

One day, the caller on Doctora Isabel’s show was a boy from Guatemala, so I tried to listen extra closely. He sounded upset, and at first I was sure he had said he was gay. But then he said that his problem was that he had been caught with a naked teenage girl. The caller assured Doctora Isabel that nothing had happened but said the girl’s family wanted him to marry her. Doctora Isabel asked if he had immigration documents and the boy said no. I couldn’t understand how having documents related to the naked girl or to the caller’s possibly—though increasingly not that likely—being gay, and, in trying to understand, I began thinking about Guatemala and then about Spanish and finally about Marta.

At some point, I lost track of the advice Doctora Isabel had been giving to the boy, and for a minute or two there were only waves of foreign words while I ran within them. Doctora Isabel advising and the boy listening. She asking and him answering. I passed students grilling in the park. I ran by blooming asters.

After a while, Doctora Isabel’s speech slowed, as it almost always does before she comes around to her parting words of advice. She said something I couldn’t understand in a voice that grew softer with each word, and then she paused: *No te cases si no la amas*, she concluded. Don’t marry her if you don’t love her.

And just like that the session ended. The teenager thanked Doctora Isabel, and the next caller was crackling onto the line. Her advice was

essentially about the magnitude of commitment. And that was the first time I realized I was also listening to Doctora Isabel for her advice.

What I loved most about learning another language was how the world seemed to double. I would stay up late some nights reading through phrase books, enchanted by the thousands of expressions in Spanish that made so little sense to me. *De tal palo, tal astilla* translates as “like father, like son,” but literally means “from the stick, the splinter.” *Tomar el pelo* means to pull your leg, but actually translates as “to pull your hair.” Why the stick instead of the father, the hair instead of the leg? Why throwing dust instead of getting in the sheets? Why two verbs to communicate a need?

One morning I woke in Marta’s bed, and when she turned to me and said *buenos días* with a slight smile, I remembered again how everything is gendered in Spanish, even the day and the night. Marta was naked beside me and I watched the light from the window graze her shoulder. I thought for a moment that this might be something that would work. Until she asked me to stay.

“Do you want to get a coffee?” she asked, switching to English.

But I was already out of bed.

“I have to go for a run with the dog,” I said. And she nodded like she understood. I had told her I wasn’t one to jump into anything. She’d said she felt the same. I got dressed, kissed her one more time, and walked home to grab my iPod, put on another episode of Doctora Isabel, and head out for a run. Only briefly did I wonder if I should have stayed.

I’ve been a runner nearly all my life. I started running when I was six and we lived in Missouri and had a next-door neighbor whose dad wanted her to be a track star. Because I had nothing else to do and few other friends, I would go on training runs with her. We ran while her dad followed us on his bike and sometimes we ran alone. We ran two miles, then four miles, then six. We began training for a kids’ triathlon. We entered the state track and field meet, running the one- and two-mile races in our individual categories. I never won a race. I didn’t like competition. What I liked was running itself.

We moved away from Missouri when I was ten and after that I almost always ran by myself. In Wisconsin, I ran along snow-covered blocks, layered in tights and baggy sweatpants my mom loaned me. In Florida, where we moved after that, I ran along sidewalks that lined swamps in the midst of becoming suburbs. I ran past dead armadillos and sinkholes, and once I almost ran straight into an alligator. In Texas, where

I lived after college, I ran along the bayou and on bridges that passed under a latticework of interstates. I was running in a Houston neighborhood when I met my dog Finn. He was a street dog who followed me for a mile back to my house and then waited outside my door for an hour, even after I told him I couldn't have a dog. Eventually I opened the door and let him in.

I have always felt, secretly, that I might be happiest without someone to spend my time with. Before Marta, the women I dated complained that I needed too much time alone. They said I put up too many walls. They said I was always trying to leave, always thinking about moving away, never still. Marta had none of those complaints. But still, I loved to be alone. I would wake in the morning in her bed and leave her sleeping to go for a run. That is when I felt the happiest. When I was alone but with the memory of just having been with her. It was a contradiction that I wanted to resolve but didn't understand how.

That fall, Marta and I took our first road trip: to a park near the Iowa-Wisconsin border, where a trail leads over Indian mounds to a cliff overlooking the Mississippi River. We'd packed egg salad, tomatoes, and a loaf of bread, and while we drove, I put on an episode of *Doctora Isabel*.

"This is her," I said, because I'd already told Marta about *Doctora Isabel* and how she was helping to improve my Spanish.

"Hmm," Marta said.

The first caller was a mother worried about the books her son had been reading. She thought they were devilish and that maybe he was doing drugs. *Doctora Isabel* asked if she could talk to the son, and after the mother put him on the phone, *Doctora Isabel* began lecturing him on air.

Marta turned it off, mid-solution.

"She's Dr. Phil in Spanish," she told me.

"She's not that bad," I said.

"Yes," she nodded. "She is."

We passed cornfields and giant white windmills. An arc of birds appeared in the sky. I thought about how, in the ancient world, advice took the form of signs, which were seen as translations of messages from the gods. The cooing of doves, the flight of eagles, the entrails of sheep: each held answers to questions about war, wealth, or love.

Marta turned on NPR and started talking in English about a girl she had known back in Spain who had once walked on a man's back and stomach but balked when he asked her to walk on his face. I laughed and watched the birds out the window. Only later did she explain that

the story was about sexual desire. I had thought it was about boundaries.

The next day on my run, I returned to the moment in that episode where we'd left off, and I listened again. I wanted to know what would become of the boy, if the hardness in his voice would eventually abate, if his mother would begin to cry, if Doctora Isabel could solve the problem they'd put before her, if there would be a fight, if the son hated his mother, if he really did smoke pot, and if talking to him reminded Doctora Isabel of her earlier days teaching students science in Miami, long before she had gone back to school for an education and a psychology degree and started the show that made her famous—in the Spanish-speaking world, that is.

What I discovered was that Marta was right. In that episode, at least, Doctora Isabel was too simplistic. She did sound a bit like a Spanish Dr. Phil. But even knowing that, I kept listening. I had this feeling that I would someday discover something important in the radio program. I just wasn't quite sure what.

We are a “confessing animal,” Foucault once wrote. “The confession became one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing truth.” But what does it mean that we are also a voyeuristic animal? That as much as we confess as a form of truth-making, we also exult in watching others confess?

One day the woman calling into Doctora Isabel was crying. She sounded frightened, and I understood that her husband beat her and that she had no one in this country she could turn to for help. But she was speaking so quietly, in a Spanish with words running one into the other, that at first I couldn't make out anything else. Doctora Isabel listened, waiting. Finally, she interrupted. You have to leave him, she told the woman. I understood her perfectly. She used the imperative: *Repite conmigo*, “Repeat after me,” she said. Then she enunciated: *Soy fuerte*. The woman hesitated, and when she repeated Doctora Isabel's words, it was almost a whisper: *Soy fuerte*. “I am strong.”

But Doctora Isabel wasn't having it. “Say it like you mean it,” she commanded. “Say it louder.” The woman tried.

“No.” Doctora Isabel prodded. “More.”

The woman grew louder still. *Soy fuerte*.

She was shaking, or at least her voice was, and I worried that the pressure itself might be a form of abuse. But then the woman repeated the phrase even louder, her volume bringing a shuddered static to my

earphones, and I began crying without even realizing I would, running across the imprints that wet autumn leaves had left on the sidewalk.

For Thanksgiving that year, Marta invited me to spend the holiday with her in Pennsylvania. We drove out to a small town called Meadville to stay with friends of hers who worked at a university there. One of them was Mexican, and the first night she and Marta stayed up late talking, me sitting silently between them, trying to keep up.

Listening to them was like cueing up episodes of *Doctora Isabel*. “I want _____ the dog _____,” Marta said. “Yes! _____ with me _____ this summer,” her friend answered. At some point, the exhaustion of being left out for so long overwhelmed me. I excused myself, climbed up to the attic bedroom I was to share with Marta, and again without realizing I would, started to cry. When Marta joined me later that night, I said, “You don’t understand what it’s like to be so lost for so long.”

“Yes I do,” she said.

And of course she was right. In some ways, she understood perfectly what I was feeling then. She had moved to England alone when she was in her early twenties. For the first few weeks she could only say small phrases and words, mostly “work?” which she said so many times she finally landed herself a job in a government cafeteria. She lived in London for a year, France for another year, Chile for two years, and then China for three years before coming to the United States. Only now, she said, ten years later, was she beginning to feel at home among so many foreign sounds.

“You have to enjoy the lack of control,” Marta advised me once.

“I mostly do,” I said, “except for when I really don’t.”

A day before Thanksgiving, we all took a trip to Pittsburgh to see the James Turrell exhibition at the Mattress Factory. In one of the most famous installations, you walk into a dark space and follow a ramp up to a chair. There, you find yourself in complete darkness in a space whose size you cannot guess or even comprehend. You are told to stay at least fifteen minutes and wait to see what will happen. Not everyone can or does, but I did.

What happens, or what happened to me, is that floating red shapes appear and begin to bob through the space. They are like the blotches that appear in your eyes when you close them, but also they seem alive. Turrell once called the installation an experience “where the seeing

that comes from ‘out there’ merges with the seeing that comes from ‘in here.’”

In the gestalt theory of language learning, everything we hear for the first time in a new language is an inkblot test. Each time we hear a new word, we hold it up against the light of our own system of speech. Sometimes the sounds we decide we have heard are real foreign words, and we identify them as such and pin them there, their wings stiff, within a sentence. But other times, they keep flitting away from us, even after we imagine we have them cupped in our hands. In those instances, we turn them into the words we want them to be. This is called the factor of closure. We see a rush of dotted lines and we want to close them together. We hear a stream of sounds and we want to knead them into tight, fat bundles of words. A sentence. A story.

What the Turrell installation taught me, and what Marta was trying to tell me that night, is that you sometimes have to let go in order to gain mastery. It was amazing how much that installation reminded me of what it was like to learn Spanish. And, if I am going to draw parallels here, how much both of those experiences resemble the incertitude of falling in love.

For a few years, I thought about calling Doctora Isabel with a problem of my own. When I lived in Colombia for nine months and Marta and I tried to make it work long-distance. Or when, after we moved in together the following year, we began to fight over the smallest of things: the temperature of the house, who would do the dishes, when and where we’d go on vacation.

After a while, I began to imagine calling Doctora Isabel with other, less classifiable problems: when my knees ached and I could no longer run and I felt much older than I was, when I woke up spitting fire and wanted nothing more than to drop everything and disappear into a horizon somewhere to the south, or when something awful happened in the world—the Newtown shooting, the Syria fighting, the bus rape in India—and I wanted to disentangle what this meant about us, about our violence. When I was seeking closure for something that wouldn’t shut. Mostly, though, I thought about calling when I was trying to decide if this was the time to stop running and settle down.

But in the end I never called. I had listened to so many problems and heard so many words of advice that I felt I knew what Doctora Isabel would tell me if I were to call. Don’t commit if you’re not in love. Don’t let others tell you how to have a family. Don’t stay with someone who

makes you feel weak. But do take risks. Do listen to the advice you keep telling yourself.

One evening not long ago, Marta and I were walking to a friend's house a few blocks from ours for dinner. It was dusk or close to dusk and, again, it was summer. We were talking about the possibility of having a baby when suddenly I looked up and, on the edge of the sidewalk near the grassline, saw a bloody dove. The bird was so white that the darkness of the blood looked almost mythical.

I stared and was about to point it out to Marta when, in the next step, the bloody dove became a crumpled sheet of crepe paper streaked in tar. I felt both relief and profound loss. A part of me had wanted it to be a bloody dove, just like a part of me had wanted to stay forever in that world of the half-committed and partially understood, that liminal space in which everything is what you make it and answers can be found in the flight of birds or in the words of a woman advising in another language on the radio.

Eventually, though, I learned to speak Spanish. I fell in love. We decided to have that baby. But I still run. I will always run.