

The Language of Love

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There are two cars, four adults, and two children. Or, to be more accurate, there are three women, one man, one boy, and one girl. The three women know each other, the man knows one of the women, and the boy and girl have crushes on each other. The problem: how to divide this group between two cars in a way that will make the long drive home pleasant. Or, if not pleasant, at least bearable.

I'm not particularly good when it comes to mixing math with people so I don't offer a solution to the rest of the group, because I figure one of them will sort it out. We're about to start driving back to Caracas from an island in the Caribbean, where we've been camping out for five days. It's late in the afternoon, and the sun has started its final lazy descent towards the horizon, the turquoise blue ocean we're leaving behind. We're heading towards the interior, towards the heavily patched and decaying two-lane highway that winds its way up the mountains to the new, four-lane tunnel that connects the airport and coast to Caracas, which is in the valley on the other side of the mountains and full of high-rise apartment buildings and exhaust fumes.

On clear days and evenings in Caracas, you can sit out on the patio, seven or eight stories above the din of the automobiles and motorcycles, sip a martini and look at the rows of cardboard, crate, mud, and tin shacks nestled in the mountains, a few miles away. They're far enough away for you to think they're just brown and orange rectangles in a green field. Or, if you are one of the lucky high-rise residents, you get to sit back and watch a sinuous, thick mass of clouds snaking through the sky just above one lush green mountain. And during the rainy season, on the days that are grey and heavy with moisture, a massive cloud bank usually sinks low enough to envelop the entire summit, as well as the ten-storey hotel up there which, for reasons too numerous to recount, will never be completed; a needle-like bright red tower with shiny balconies for all the guests to sit on,

as they enjoy their drinks and look down at Caracas, its clusters of high-rises and clouds of pollution. This is the only mountain near Caracas that isn't covered with rows and rows of shacks, and it is the view towards which we are headed.

There are four adults: Carmelita, Carmen, Robin, and myself. The children are Juan, who is Carmelita's brown-haired son, and Clarissa, who is Robin's red-haired daughter. I know Robin, but only met Carmelita and Carmen on the camping trip. The result: Carmelita, Juan, Clarissa, and I are in one car. Robin and Carmen are in the other. I'm pretty sure it was Robin who arrived at this equation, but I'm not one to argue.

Earlier this morning, on the launch taking us from the island to the hot, dusty lot, where we had managed to park our cars in the shade of some palm trees, Robin told me she needed a break from Clarissa, that they hadn't been apart in five days.

"I need a rest," Robin sighed. "Sometimes, I need a rest. I haven't had a rest since my husband left me."

Robin is given to hyperbole, which may have been why I was initially attracted to her. She always knows how to dramatize her situation, make the most of a daughter's missing pink sock. I used to think that this was all I could understand – a person haunted by extremes, or, as Robin put it, the ghosts that chase you through your life.

Robin was a mirror I could see myself in, a mirror that showed me that I hadn't quite fallen through the floor. Maybe on it, but not through it. There have been times in my life when the only women I was attracted to were those who, despite being in some kind of peril, always managed to get dressed up. It wasn't because I thought I was some kind of knight in shining armour, far from it, but because I believed that the only situation that was truly hopeless was my own. Maybe it's why I haven't owned a sports jacket or worn a pair of shoes in years.

After sorting out what was what and tossing our stuff into the right trunk, I hopped into Carmelita's car and told Clarissa to get in the back. She smiled, happy to spend a few hours with Juan without her mother around.

It's hard to make rules for a child when you're not the parent. I'm not a parent, and, when I was a kid, I never could follow rules much. It may have been why I bought Clarissa candy and stuffed animals, and said okay too much of the time. Or it may have been a way to buy myself some of the things I wished I had when I was a kid. It doesn't take much to figure out why some people have children: they want a second chance. Every now and then in my life I've wanted a second chance, but I have never wanted to be a father. Being near someone else's kid is enough for me. It is usually the concerned parent I find troubling, not the screaming kid. Like I said, I can understand extreme behaviour.

It's when someone acts reasonable or – a favourite word these days – rational, that's when I begin wondering exactly what form of measure is being used.

I look over my shoulder, stare at the wriggling heaps in the back. Clarissa and Juan are wrestling, babbling away, and grinning like idiots. They are chattering in Spanish, something Clarissa refuses to do when she is around her mother. It makes me happy to hear her singing away and teasing Juan in his language, though I don't know why at the time.

I'm slouched down in the front seat while Carmelita drives. She doesn't speak much English, and I don't speak much Spanish. Every now and then one of us looks in the back to make sure the children haven't started playing "doctor" yet. That's the limit Carmelita and I seem to have set. Wrestling and loud singing are okay, but no nudity and muffled whispers.

I guess Carmelita and I have the same approach. Let the kids wear themselves out, but don't let them take their clothes off. Eventually, exhausted from their excitement, they will fall asleep, and the music coming from the tape deck will be the only sound inside this bright, metal bubble zooming deeper into the night, the only sound that other than our hearts, we want throbbing beneath our skin. The music is like an extra heart, because it takes all the pain and turns it into comforting words one doesn't need to know in order to understand them.

Carmelita has a brand new American car that is wine red and fast. The tape deck is on loud, and a woman is begging her man to come back. I might not know Spanish well, and Carmelita might not know much English, but we both understand the music she slips into the tape deck. Most songs are like children, they make a sound you understand.

Soft sultry voices and a small fast car. I've always liked going fast, and I've always liked women who drive cars fast and smooth, as if they are preparing to be the one revving the engine outside a bank in Warren or Mentor, Ohio, one chilly November morning, a cold grey sky and a room full of unsuspecting tellers and clerks.

Carmelita is part Spanish and part Chinese. She and her family moved from the Philippines to Venezuela when she was a small child. Her father had gotten a transfer from Manila, where he managed some kind of shipping company. He didn't want to stay in the Philippines; he wanted to go to America. Caracas was as close as he got. He's *muerte*, dead, she tells me, and her mother, who is Chinese and Catholic, likes to stay up late and watch reruns of popular old American TV shows, particularly *The Flying Nun*.

While we were camping, Robin told me that Carmelita's mother sipped wine like a lady from another century. It was, she said, fantastic to be with her, because she was someone who remembered a way of living that no longer existed. Robin seemed to think that

I would like to meet her, because she was sure her life resembled my mother's. I didn't tell Robin that the resemblance isn't always the best place to begin, and that I was more interested in what shows Carmelita's mother watched, and what else besides wine and television she used to escape the empty bed. "I didn't even know she watched television all night long until Carmelita told you," Robin whispered, while we lay in our tent, listening to the wind and the ocean. "I thought you two would sit around and drink red wine from Chile and she would tell you about what it was like to be a girl growing up in the Philippines." I could tell Robin thought it was strange that I was more interested in what television programmes an old woman watches late at night than in hearing about her childhood, but I wasn't sure I could begin to explain why I wanted to know such things.

Juan is seven, Carmelita is maybe twenty-five, but she looks like she's still in high school. She has a soft round face and big liquid brown eyes, the kind you see in yearbooks. I am the scruffy American guy who is visiting Robin, an unemployed, recently divorced American woman, who lives across the hall from her friend Carmen, in a high-rise in a respectable part of Caracas.

This might sound like it has the makings of a TV show, but no company would sponsor it. It's not funny enough and it's a little too real. Who wants to hear a young, attractive Venezuelan woman compare dictatorship to democracy and happily conclude that the former has far more virtues than the latter? Or listen to a woman talk about a relationship that should have ended before it began? Who wants to listen to sentences that end in long meaningful sighs? We don't want our lives to sound like soap operas, but they do. And like the most popular ones, ours go on and on. But unlike the stars of the shows, we don't get paid to betray or to be betrayed, again and again. We become villains, but those who hate us don't feel like they're biting into a big, sweet, delicious apple when they do so.

What am I doing in a red car speeding down a decrepit highway in Venezuela with a woman who hates to be caught behind any slow-moving vehicle? What am I doing with a woman who pushes the pedal to the floor so she can pass busses crammed with sad-eyed men and women, trucks full of oil, pigs, chicken, lumber, or fruit? What am I doing with a woman who thinks of all of these familiar sights as irritating billboards to the life she is trying to leave behind? Twenty years ago, around the time Carmelita was five, these rusted old cars and dented trucks were brand-new shiny items parked on quiet, dark streets in Brooklyn or the suburbs of Des Moines. Twenty years ago I thought my life would turn out different. But now, sitting in a car that passes everything else on the road, I hear myself wishing she would go faster and not stop in Caracas.

I am dreaming, though I didn't know that then, because I think I am someone in a car with a woman he can't say much to, on his way back to a city whose streets and neighbourhoods he is just starting to learn, a city which has quickly lost its charm and become, like every big American city, a noisy gathering of unpredictable forces. Like those around me, I am someone stuck in the dull hallways of his own history.

In reality, this means I am someone who left his wife and got involved with a woman whose husband had left her stranded in Caracas. I met Robin at a party in New York eight months after I left my wife. When my friends tell me that I am still on the rebound, and that I ought to be careful, I tell them that I've been on the rebound all my life. They see a friend of theirs spinning out of control, while I see a basketball bouncing in front of oncoming traffic. What they really want to tell me but don't is that my new situation isn't going to work out. What I don't tell them is that I know it's not going to work out.

Robin was in New York trying to figure out how she could stay in Caracas.

"It's cheaper there," she told me.

"It isn't like America," she said a few minutes later. "The Venezuelans are a friendlier and warmer people. They aren't greedy or cold like Americans, especially New Yorkers. My husband and I went down there years ago. I wanted to stay on, work with the people down there. I lived in the jungle with them. It wasn't easy, but I stayed with them and eventually learned to speak their language."

The people, I wondered to myself. Who are the people anyway? Do they have to live in the jungle to be people? What about us? Were we some kind of animal just because we lived in big dirty cities and ate meat with knives and forks? It's true, I hadn't eaten monkey or tapir, but neither had Robin. Besides, you don't need to go to a jungle to eat such things, you just have to know what restaurant serves them.

But all this I kept to myself when we started talking. Maybe because she didn't have to tell me her husband left her – her pale green eyes told me something had happened to her, that she was ready for something else to happen, and, if I was ready, we could be something we wanted to have happen. We could be the story we wanted to be, that's what we thought to ourselves that night, and why we decided to see each other again. The problem was we were neither speaking the same language nor imagining the same story.

In retrospect, it was easy to leave my wife, far easier than getting married to her. I got up one morning and said to myself, Today is the day. I certainly didn't say that when we talked about getting married. Sleepy eyed, she rolled over and asked me where I was going. I told her I was going to see my shrink, something I did four mornings a week, and

had been doing for five years. My wife and I had been married a little more than two years, but she said she could never remember what I was doing, that I was always busy doing something, and that it was too much for her to remember, particularly since she had so much else on her mind. She had chuckled and pretended to go back to sleep.

A few months earlier we had gone through the same routine. It had become a skit, something I was supposed to laugh at when she teased me. I made the mistake of trying to tell her that I had gotten tired of laughing at her jokes, as well as accepting that she had forgotten why I got up early four mornings a week, and rushed down the stairs to the subway. I didn't tell her that if she didn't know where I was going and couldn't remember this detail after two years, then she had no idea who she had married and it was time for me to go.

The way I looked at it, I was going to a shrink because it was my last chance to connect the wires in my head. Otherwise, I was going to walk into a fire one day. What kind of fire I didn't know, I just knew it was out there, and if I didn't get some kind of map in my head, I was going to be swallowed up by something before I could get out.

The last time I had come close, it was too close. I wasn't even drunk. Every other time I could blame it on drink or drugs: the months in the hospital after I rammed my car into a tree; the heroin addict in a topless bar; the cab driver who chased me with a tire iron because I told him he should have stayed at home that day and fucked his wife, rather than trying to fuck me.

I woke up one morning and gave it all up. It was right after my girlfriend, Sally, took her dog and the silverware, and moved to Barcelona. This was before I was married. My friends didn't say I was on the rebound then, and maybe they're feeling guilty now. Who knows? I've never asked them what they thought – it's too far away and I'm not the same person I was then.

I went five long years without drinking or taking drugs. One night, while driving up a hill, in a hurry to get home, I decided to pass between two motorcycles up ahead, but I ended up ramming into a moving van stopped at an intersection. The driver thought I was from Mars when I told him what happened, and I thought maybe he was right. I figured it was time to get the internal wiring thing checked out, to see if I could get back to Earth. But, in order to do so, I needed to find out about the person who couldn't tell the difference between two motorcycles going sixty miles an hour and a truck stopped at a traffic light.

Maybe that's why I like women who drive fast. Or maybe it's just that I like to go fast, but I don't want to be the one driving anymore. I have a friend in Texas who has a black

Porsche and whenever I visit him, I say, "How fast can you make this little machine go?" Show me your stuff, Buster. And we both laugh as we zoom down the highway. Yeah, I'm thinking to myself. Show me we can go through this wall and come out the other side. Show me how this thing can part the Red Sea.

I went to see my shrink that morning, and two nights later I left my wife and moved into my office down the street, a little storefront where I made models of whatever the client wanted. That morning and the next I didn't say anything about my plans to the kind-faced man who was helping me patch myself together. I took my silence to mean that I was going to be seeing him far longer than I expected, which I didn't mind, because at least he didn't ask me what I was doing in his waiting room four mornings a week.

When I told my wife it was over and that I was moving out, she looked at me as if I was a stranger who had taken over her husband's body, which was probably the closest she ever came to recognizing me. There were no tears, not in the beginning. Just phone calls and short, handwritten notes. Recently her lawyer sent me a letter, so I figure we have entered the phase where surrogates will do all our communicating. This is not a surprise, but a relief. It was the form of communication we were most comfortable with when we were married. Two people who could have passed for our twins did all the talking, while she was in her studio and I was in my office.

Carmelita has been driving nonstop for five or six hours when she sees a gas station and decides to pull in. The kids are asleep in the back, and the car with Robin and Carmen is nowhere to be seen.

The gas station is a stained cement oasis illuminated by a blue sign and a bright overhead spotlight; three ageing, dust-coated pumps looking like tin copies of Easter Island monoliths greet us as we drive past them, pull into the lot. Behind us, caterpillars of headlights and taillights wriggle their way up and down the mountain, through a thin mist or smog.

I get out, quickly walk into the bathroom and discover the light doesn't work. I try flushing the toilet, and that doesn't work either. I figure I'm lucky, because if it had started overflowing, I would have had to use the sink and be out of there before anyone found out. Then I figure the sink is going to have to do anyway, that it has to be cleaner than the toilet, which stinks and which I can't see. A dark wet hole in a humid closet is not my idea of creature comfort. Some people like Robin can live in the jungle, but I'm not one of them.

The sink is by the door, and there's a crack of light coming from the gas station's blinking blue sign outside. It's not much, but it's enough to show me the sink is relatively

clean. The room is hot and smelly and I'm sure that I'm going to get sick if I stay in here much longer.

I'm like some crazy gymnast, trying to hold myself above the grimy sink, trying to take a quick but necessary crap. I know it's comical, a man with his pants down, balancing himself above a sink, shitting in it. Necessity may be the mother of invention, but it's also the uncle of hilarity, I tell myself. Besides, I'm glad I'm not the next guy, because he faces an even stiffer challenge.

I get out of there quick, see Carmelita sitting in the car, waiting. Tapping the steering wheel in time to the music. Who's singing? I wonder. What sweet, slow lament is filling the air she inhabits? Juan and Clarissa are asleep in the back, entwined around each other like thick pieces of rope.

Trucks hauling their cargo, an occasional bus belching blue smoke – everything is thundering by, causing the ground to shudder slightly. An acrid cloud of smoke and dirt hangs in the night air, like the last, indestructible remains of something that has been cremated.

I must have been thinking about it all along, but I didn't want to know what I was thinking. I wasn't quite ready to listen.

The third time I came to Caracas and stayed with Robin and Clarissa, she wanted her daughter to speak to me in Spanish. It was show-and-tell time, something parents seem to need to do with their children. In the kitchen, while she and I were getting dinner ready, she said that she wanted to see if Clarissa accepted me or not. "It's a little test. I just need to know where you stand in Clarissa's eyes."

After putting the dirty dishes in the sink, and closing the patio door, Robin and I sat in chairs and Clarissa stood in front of us, a bright little puppet. She laughed at first, and then began speaking gibberish. I laughed, while Robin admonished her daughter, who was by then rolling on the floor, giggling and chattering, a nervous pile.

Later that night we argued. I told Robin that I didn't think she should've made Clarissa perform, and she thought that meant I was telling her that she was a bad mother, a failure. Somehow I had become the villain, the one who didn't understand what she had been through. I didn't argue because I agreed with her. One doesn't understand what someone else has been through, but that's not the point.

"But a marriage that doesn't work out isn't a failure," I told her.

"It is if you were once in love," she said grimly.

There are certain things you should never let become food for competition, and one of them is the past. The past is always growing too fast to eat it all. I didn't know then why everything that happened that night bothered me so much, but it did.

I'm standing outside the bathroom, beneath the blinking blue sign, bright overhead spot, and armadas of bugs swaying to and fro in the still, tropical night air. Occasionally, a sizzle of electricity interrupts the steady hum of the neon sign and the trucks going by. It is the sound of another bug flitting into the electric coils of the Venus flytrap the attendants have mounted above the office door, like a lamp for lost travellers.

I wonder if they ever come out of their office to sweep up the pile of winged corpses gathering on the low cement step outside their door, and, for some reason, I start walking towards the glowing lantern. What is it about death that makes you want to look at it? What makes you believe you won't blink or turn away?

For some reason, I stop and look back at the car. Either they are asleep in the back or slouched in the front seat of a bright metallic bubble, a toy spaceship with big, wide wheels. Whether they're thinking or dreaming, each of them is the sole inhabitant of his or her own planet. I figure there's no need to get in right away and break the spell that has settled over them, no need to act as if our being together is anything more than an accident from which we can quickly and efficiently extricate ourselves, so I stand here, bathed by the blue light, head swivelling slowly like a periscope towards them, the trucks and busses disappearing into the misty night, the bright orange electric coils glowing, like the ribs of a skeleton locked in a furnace, and the bugs getting jolted out of the air. And I tell myself this is as good a time as any to begin learning more about the language of love.