

# WHAT I MEAN TO SAY IS THIS

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## *How much.*

You have been told, repeatedly, how much he loves you, but 'I love you' sounds too plain that he just has to translate it to a hybrid language, the spores of English and Spanish and Tagalog cross-fertilising one another, the pidgin of his childhood: *te quiero talaga*; *love na love kita para siempre*. Days pass, and his words reveal their hidden grammar, their arcane etymologies. You end up feeling as if you were becoming the sole diagrammer and decoder of his sentences.

Then you speak it as much as he does, even actively directing its mutations. You love him too, you tell him: *amándote is easy*; *my mahal mucho*.

Over time the novelty withers, hardens into something compact, resembling a seed, a stone. You abandon the connubial pidgin; you begin speaking in long stretches of Tagalog only, English only. (You never attempt to speak Spanish only, baffled by its neurotic assumptions about time, its hair-splitting tenses.) And there are his increasingly vehement Spanish sentences, which, when translated into Tagalog only, into English only, strike you as code words for 'I'm seeing someone else'. *Estoy cansado*. *Llegaré tarde*. *Tengo previsto asistir a una reunión en Hong Kong el fin de semana que viene*. ('A reunion in Hong Kong?' you ask. 'A *meeting*,' he translates, speaking slowly.)

The inevitable falling apart, the confrontation. You ask him if he's seeing someone else, whether his love for this someone else is greater than his love for you. The trouble is you shouldn't have asked the questions in succession, because what he ends up saying sounds to you like 'medyo' or 'medio', and all it leaves you is to decide which of the questions he really answers: whether it's only slightly true that he is seeing someone else, whether he only slightly loves you, whether his love is split down the middle between an unknown someone else and an uncertain you.

***Sino'ng nanay mo.***

Before your engagement he says his mother wants to meet you. Of course, you say, eager to please.

What he tells you: her name is Mita, a woman so straight-backed she might be the very rod against which all who threaten entry into the family should be measured. The one who decides your education is not impressive enough, your background can't be traced to Europe, you're chabacano. ('You mean like I come from Zamboanga?' you ask him, just to clarify. 'No,' he explains. 'Quiero decir vulgar, what my abuelita called *une roturière*,' temporarily bringing another language into the conversation.)

The many ways 'not one of ours' can be said.

And so you finally meet her, and with a big smile you unfurl your arms in her direction: a bright sun, rays reaching out. 'Buenos dias, Ma'am Mita.'

Her lips barely open when she speaks. 'Don't call me mamita, you're not my daughter.'

***What is right.***

There are certain words, you need to keep reminding yourself, that sometimes mean something else. Derecho does not always

mean going straight (recto), but going right; being right is not always being correct (correcto), but being good (bien); bien is not always good or right, grammarwise, when bueno or buena is good or right. The lapse into English, in these moments, to clear the confusion. The desire not to have to go or be right, but to go or be left instead. Confusion sets in again: to go left is izquierdo, to be left behind is dejado; dejado also means messy, and in Tagalog dehado is the one no one bets on.

***What he means.***

You will be unhappy, the marriage will fail, you will never leave. A number of times you will go as far as putting your clothes in the only suitcase you own. Then you will put your clothes back in the closet, stow your bag back under the bed. You will just picture yourself weighed down by your bag, dragging yourself to the door, never looking back, leaving.

You will prepare dinner, wait for him at the table, keep waiting, wait some more. You will keep doing this.

Until one evening, suitcase in hand, you will open the door and see him arriving. The absence of surprise on his face; how you will marvel at how good he is at hiding his feelings.

'I'm leaving you,' you will say. Not so much as a nod, or a stare, but he will say something. It will sound like 'I know' or 'Ay, no.' A moment will pass as you attempt to figure out what he means. You will turn back, empty your bag, ask what he wants for dinner: your decision is that he is surprised, that he is telling you no.

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