Mami and Papi used to speak it when they had a secret they wanted to keep from us children. We lived then in the Dominican Republic, and the family as a whole spoke only Spanish at home, until my sisters and I started attending the Cecol Morgan School, and we became a bilingual family. Spanish had its many tongues as well. There was the matón of Pedro Joaquín from Spain, whose lisp we all loved to imitate. Then the educated español my parents’ families spoke, aunts and uncles who were always correcting us children, for we spent most of the day with the maids and so had picked up their “bad Spanish.” Campesinas, they spoke a lifting, animated campuno, so swallowed, endings chopped off, funny turns of phrase. This campuno was my true mother tongue, not the Spanish of Calderón de...
Customs

la Bara or Cervantes or even Neruda, but of Chucha and
Ilumondha and Gladys and Ursulina from Junquillo and
Lissey and Boca de Yuma and San Juan de la Maguana. Those
women yakked as they cooked, they storytold, they gossiped,
they sang—boleros, merengues, canciones, valses. Theirs
were the voices that belonged to the rain and the wind and
the teeny, teeny stars even a small child could blot out with
her thumb.

BESIDES ALL THESE versions of Spanish, every once in a
while another strange tongue emerged from my papi’s
mouth or my mami’s lips. What I first recognized was not a
language, but a tone of voice, serious, urgent, something
important and top secret being said, some uncle in trouble,
someone diverting, someone dead. Say it in English so the children
won’t understand. I would listen, straining to understand, think-
ing that this was not a different language but just another
and harder version of Spanish. Say it in English so the children won’t
understand. From the beginning, English was the sound of
worry and secrets, the sound of being left out.

I could make no sense of this “harder Spanish,” and so I
tried by other means to find out what was going on. I knew
my mother’s face by heart. When the little lines on the cor-
er of her eyes crinkled, she was amused. When her nostrils
flared and she bit her lips, she was trying hard not to laugh.
She held her head down, eyes glinting up, when she thought
I was lying. Whenever she spoke that echiberish English, I
translated the general content by watching the Spanish ex-
dressions on her face.

SOON, I BEGAN to learn more English, at the Carol Morgan
School. That is, when I had stopped gawking. The teacher
and some of the American children had the strongest col-
oration: light hair, light eyes, light skin, as if Ursulina had
soaked them in bleach too long, to detention. I did have some
blond cousins, but they had deeply tanned skin, and as they
grew older, their hair darkened, so their earlier paleness
seemed a phase of their acquiring normal color. Just as
strange was the little girl in my reader who had a coat and a
dog, that looked just like un gato y un perro. Her mami
was Mother and her papi Father. Why have a whole new lan-
guage for school and for books with a teacher who could
speak it teaching you double the amount of words you really
needed?

Butter, butter, butter. butter. All day, one English word that had
particularly struck me would go round and sound in my
mouth and weave through all the Spanish in my head until
by the end of the day, the word did sound like just another
Spanish word. And so I would say, “Mami, please pass la
mantequila.” She would scowl and say in English, “I’m
sorry. I don’t understand. But would you be needing some
butter on your bread?”

WHY MY PARENTS didn’t first educate us in our native lan-
guage by enrolling us in a Dominican school, I don’t know.
Part of it was that Mami’s family had a tradition of sending
the boys to the States to boarding school and college, and
she had been one of the first girls to be allowed to join her
brothers. At Abbot Academy, whose school song was our lull-
laby as babies (“Although Columbus and Cabot never heard
of Abbot, it’s quite the place for you and me”), she had be-
come quite Americanized. It was very important, she kept saying, that we learn our English. She always used the possessive pronoun: our English, an inheritance we had come into and must wisely use. Unfortunately, my English became all mixed up with our Spanish.

Mix-up, or what's now called Spanglish, was the language we spoke for several years. There wasn't a sentence that wasn't colonized by an English word. At school, a Spanish word would suddenly slide into my English like someone burting into line. Teacher, whose face I was learning to read as minutely as my mother's, would scowl but no smile played on her lips. Her pale skin made her strange countenance hard to read, so that I often misjudged how much I could get away with. Whenever I made a mistake, Teacher would shake her head slowly, "in English, YU-LEE-AH, there's no such word as columbo. Do you mean a swing?"

I would bow my head, humiliated by the smiles and snickers of the American children around me. I grew insecure about Spanish. My native tongue was not quite as good as English, as if words like columbo were illegal immigrants trying to cross a border into another language. But Teacher's discerning grammar-and-vocabulary-patrol ears could tell and send them back.

SOON, I was talking up an English storm. "Did you eat English parrot?" my grandfather asked one Sunday. I had just enlisted yet one more patient servant to listen to my rendition of "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers" at breakneck pace. "Huh?" I asked impolitely in English, putting him in his place. "Got your tongue? No big deal! So there! Take

My English

that! Holy Tohael! (Our teacher's favorite "curse word.") Go jump in the lake! Reely dumb. Golly, Gosh, Shang, clichés, sayings, hot-shot language that our teacher called, ponderously, idiomatic expressions. Riddles, jokes, puns, conundrums. What is yellow and goes click-click? Why did the chicken cross the road? See you later, alligator. How wonderful to call someone an alligator and not be scolded for being disrespectful. In fact, they were supposed to say back, In a while, crocodile.

There was also a neat little trick I wanted to try on an English-speaking adult at home. I had learned it from Elizabeth, my smart-alecky friend in fourth grade, whom I alternately worshiped and resented. I'd ask her a question that required an explanation, and she'd answer, "Because . . . " "Elizabeth, how come you didn't go to Isabel's birthday party?" "Because . . . " "Why didn't you put your name in your reader?" "Because . . . " I thought that such a cool way to get around having to come up with answers. So, I practiced saying it under my breath, planning for the day I could use it on an unsuspecting English-speaking adult.

ONE SUNDAY at our extended family dinner, my grandfather sat down at the children's table to chat with us. He was famous, in fact, for the way he could carry on adult conversations with his grandchildren. He often spoke to us in English so that we could practice speaking it outside the classroom. He was a Cornell man, a United Nations representative from our country. He gave speeches in English. Perfect English, my mother's phrase. That Sunday, he asked me a question. I can't even remember what it was because I wasn't really listening but lying in wait for my chance. "Be-
cause . . ." I answered him. Papito waited a second for the rest of my sentence and then gave me a thumb nail grammar lesson, "Because has to be followed by a clause."

"Why's that?" I asked, nonplussed.

"Because," he winked, "Just because."

A BEGINNING WORDSMITH, I had so much left to learn; sometimes it was disheartening. Once Tio Gus, the family intellectual, put a speck of salt on my grandparents’ big dining table during Sunday dinner. He said, "Imagine this whole table is the human brain. Then this teeny grain is all we ever use of our intelligence!" He enumerated geniuses who had perhaps used two grains, maybe three: Einstein, Michelangelo, da Vinci, Beethoven. We children believed him. It was the kind of impossible fact we thrived on, proving as it did that the world out there was not drastically different from the one we were making up in our heads.

Later, at home, Mami said that you had to take what her younger brother said "with a grain of salt." I thought she was still referring to Tio Gus’s demonstration, and I tried to puzzle out what she was saying. Finally, I asked what she meant. "Taking what someone says with a grain of salt is an idiomatic expression in English," she explained. It was pure voodoo is what it was—what later I learned poetry could also do: a grain of salt could symbolize both the human brain and a condiment for human nonsense. And it could be itself, too: a grain of salt to flavor a bland plate of American food.

WHEN WE ARRIVED in New York, I was shocked. A country where everyone spoke English! These people must be smarter,
book or learn a catechism of grammar rules. Instead, she asked us to write little stories imagining we were snowflakes, birds, pianos, a stone in the pavement, a star in the sky. What would it feel like to be a flower with roots in the ground? If the clouds could talk, what would they say? She had an expressive, dreamy look that was accentuated by the wimple that framed her face.

Supposing, just supposing... My mind would take off, soaring into possibilities, a flower with roots, a star in the sky, a cloud full of sad, sad tears, a piano crying out each time its back was tapped, music only to our ears.

Sister Maris stood at the chalkboard. Her chalk was always snapping in two because she wrote with such energy, her whole habit shaking with the swing of her arm, her hand tap-tap-tapping on the board. "Here's a simple sentence: 'The snow fell.'" Sister pointed with her chalk, her eyebrows lifted, her wimple peeked up. Sometimes I could see wisps of gray hair that strayed from under her headdress. "But watch what happens if we put an adverb at the beginning and a prepositional phrase at the end: 'Gently, the snow fell on the bare hills.'"

I thought about the snow. I saw how it might fall on the hills, tapping lightly on the bare branches of trees. Softly, it would fall on the cold, bare fields. On toy children had left out in the yard, and on cars and on little birds and on people out late walking on the streets. Sister Marie filled the chalkboard with snowy print, on and on, handling and shaping and moving the language, mastering all over the board until English, those verbal gadgets, those tricks and turns of phrases, those little fixed units and counters.