“'I miss them, Mami.'
All those words I had to leave behind.
Also, words that in English didn’t carry the same feeling.”

-Julia Alvarez
Two-Minute Spanglish con Mami

BY JULIA ALVAREZ

When we landed in the USA, Mami told me to learn my English.
“Pero, Mami!” I whined.
“In English!” she reminded me.
“Okay, Mom,” I said smartly.
“Don’t be fresh!” she scolded. “My name is not ‘Mom’!”

It was the same at school. Sister Mary Joseph reprimanded me if she overheard me speaking Spanish to my sisters: “Girls, that’s enough!” she scolded in a calm voice with a calm face.

She didn’t look upset, when Mami was exasperated, her face was a tangle of furlous lines, her hands flew up, ready to slap.

When I tried speaking English, the school bullies taunted me, “Spic! Spic!” I ran home crying to Mami, who knew the most English in our family.

“They are telling you to speak! Speak! Learn to speak in English!”

I mangled the words. I spoke with an accent. I asked Mami’s help. “How do I say ‘empaquetar en inglés’?”

Mami said there wasn’t really an English word for when I ate too many sweets and got that sick, claying, I’m-going-to-throw-up feeling.

Mami said there was no word, extraneous in English for the first time I wore my new, store-bought party dress.

When my Bronx tias hung around the table after Sunday dinner, telling stories, Mami said there was no literature to describe those hours in English.

“I miss them, Mami.” All those words I had to leave behind. Also, words that in English didn’t carry the same feeling. Like when you bashed a finger, instead of crying “Ouch!” you said, “Oh.” Or “That’s enough.” Instead of “Yeee!” And how to get along without -itos attached to the ends of words, making the world safer, more affectionately kid-sized?

“Yee!” Mami said, weary with my complaints. “You miss those words? Bring them into English!”

And I did as she said, at last.

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