

ENGLISH: *CREATIVE WRITING*

Prompt: Through understanding differences we understand ourselves.

La verdad es hija del tiempo. Truth is the daughter of time. My step father's favourite Spanish proverb that became our household mantra. He first revealed it to me when I was six, and I have been turning it over in my mind ever since. While Rodrigo was his given name, it had become more Anglicised over the years, and we now simply referred to him as Roddy. He did himself no favours, endorsing the character traits of the stereotypical South American; a fervent temper that changed like the the weather, but nonetheless a heart of gold, and I guess that's why every year, on that day before Christmas, my brother, mother and I would celebrate the holiday with his family.

Cramped in the back seats of "The Woo", my brother and I would perform something of a balancing act as we tentatively gripped bowls of potato salad and chicken skewers alike, our parents bickering up the front. Our Daewoo Lanos would bump and rattle into the drive way, and Roddy would leap from the driver's seat with an energy worthy of awe, while we untangled ourselves from the seat belts and gingerly wormed our way out to follow him. Approaching the front door, we could make out the distinct heartbeat of the house as muffled yet rhythmic music seeped from its every crevice. We hesitantly stayed to the rear as Roddy was met by his gargantuan and perfectly rounded uncle, Eduardo. After having shared a fiery bout of Spanish with Roddy, he would then waddle over and attempt to welcome us, belching words that formed a language that was not quite English. 'Hola! Como estas?' we would half-heartedly return. A phatic greeting, but the only one we could offer.

Stepping through the wide doorway of Eduardo's house was like stumbling across a border and into a foreign country. Roddy's Chilean roots meant his entire extended family spoke Spanish, meaning that aside from the universal body language that transcended the barriers of race and language, we were robbed entirely of our speech. My brother and I would attempt to survive by huddling quietly in a corner or on the couch, attempting to go unnoticed, but our mother always sabotaged our efforts to separate ourselves from the rest. We would linger awkwardly while the silver-haired grandmothers and aunts, always side by side, would cry and slap their knees, their faces wrinkled with age, as their bodies shook with uncontrollable laughter at jokes we couldn't understand.

Sometimes that was the problem, understanding. I can recall from the previous year when I dared to partake in a game of musical chairs. After the flimsy framework of one plastic chair had snapped under the titanic weight of Eduardo, I filled in. One by one, the adults had found themselves without a seat to return to, and so wheezily retired, leaving it to just me and Roddy's six-year-old nephew. Circling the lone chair, the music stopped and I fell into it. I had won, but there was no cheers or whistles, only the dull murmur as they returned to their conversations. Roddy later told me that I was meant to let the kid win. At the time I assumed it was a cultural thing, but looking back I now realise you and I would probably have done the same at such a gathering.

There was not a sober man in sight, but everywhere I looked I found the details of a different culture. Whether it be the smell of assorted grilled meats, pungent wines, empanadas, stews, corn, beans, potatoes, or the distinct throb of the melancholy tonada, the house was decorated with remnants of the life they had lived in Chile. Even the air, thick with incomprehensible voices and obscured by the haze of cigarette smoke, felt foreign to my senses. When it can time to open the presents that we felt most out of place. We would simply spectate from the other side of the room as presents were handed throughout a circle of laughter. The rare parcels that were cast aside for us usually contained a dud plastic flashlight or a paper party hat. There was the sonorous and musical rhythm of the Spanish language as it rolled from their lips, only to be occasionally punctured by the harshness of our broad Australian accent. Them and us.

As I would look on at the sea of dark South-Americans, peppered with the occasional white complexion of an Australian, it occurred to me that they, too, had once felt like strangers, surrounded by an unfamiliar culture; isolated. Looking into their worn faces, I could see their history,

something that told me of the hardships this family had faced in migrating to a foreign land in search of a new home and a better life. I knew that the entire family was within walking distance of each other, as if upon settling here they had created their own village. All they had to create their own sense of belonging was each other. Each year I would see every family member return for the annual ritual that enabled them be with one another and connect with the familiarities that they no longer enjoyed in their daily lives. After having finally devoured our fair share of the mouth-watering cake we had been eyeing off all night, the nagging would begin. Only once my brother and I had mumbled 'when are we leaving?' for the one hundredth time were we able to pry Roddy loose from his conversation and make a hurried but well-mannered exit.

Driving home, I would see my mother's sense of relief in her smile. She understood that immersing ourselves into an unfamiliar place every now and then was a worthwhile thing. While I don't entirely understand these people, I am beginning to understand our differences, and see that it's okay to be different from one another. Over the many Christmas Eve gatherings, I have come to place my trust in time, and hope that one day I would know its daughter.