



PERILOUS JOURNEYS  
with a SPANISH NOUN



*Madre*



LIZA BAKEWELL



## W E D D I N G

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AS IT turns out, Armando could have translated the graffiti *A toda madre o un desmadre* this way: “fabulous or a fuckup.”

“But Armando, I don’t understand,” I announced from the passenger seat of his silver Chevy Impala, when I told him the translation others had whispered in my ear after I had seen the madre graffiti.

We were on our way to a wedding, although we were dressed in black because in Mexico, as Armando informed me in the nick of time, one wears black to evening weddings.

“Black?” I thought of funerals as I grabbed a dark dress from my closet.

“It’s elegant.”

It was late afternoon on Saturday. Like the calm after the windy whitecaps of Friday rush hour, the city streets were still. Not the stillness they have during a Catholic holiday, but close. Rippled only for a moment by Armando passing through.

He was a good driver. I can’t say that about all the drivers I met, but like them, he was fast, which is why he avoided rush hour. Also, for him, Mexico’s love of one-way streets was a nuisance. Not to mention its love of *topes* or traffic bumps that the Mexican authorities impose on drivers, rather than take any chances with

setting speed limits. It's a different approach from what you have up north. More like a physical blow versus a legal request. The first one always works, however. The second one, *más o menos*. But the stop-and-go's of the first are extreme in Mexico. Whiplash-ing. I can't think of any other word to describe their relationship to the passenger in Armando's car.

Armando especially loved to drive around the city when he could cruise its streets with abandon. He would take questionable shortcuts, disregard lane divisions, not bother with signals, and then drive up onto sidewalks and around the topes.

"But Armando, it's one way. And *not* this way!" I exclaimed on our way to the wedding. Zipping his car up a one-way street the wrong way was his idea of efficiency, a relief from the morass of unidirectional side streets that composed my neighborhood.

"It's okay," he said at full speed. "It's Saturday. There's hardly anyone around." Other times he'd say, "Don't worry. It's Sunday." Or Easter or the Virgin's birthday.

I'm not Catholic. And by the time I was speeding down Mexico's side streets with Armando, I had outgrown my love of breaking the law, not to mention roller coasters. But it was times like these that I thought of converting to one side or the other instead of hanging within the secular straight and narrow. There were no air bags in those days. So I prayed like crazy for the Virgin, Christ, God, and the Holy Spirit to look over me, a rosary at the very least to grip instead of the dashboard, when weekends and holidays came around and I was whirling about town with Armando. For distraction I found temporary solace inside the cushions of conversation topics that required out-of-body contemplation. Mexican slang was always a good one.

"Armando. How is it that *a toda madre* and *desmadre* translate the way they do?" I tried to make the question feel new. "Can you connect the dots for me, throw me a line, build me a bridge? Can you help ferry me over to the other side, transfer me with some clues?"

Silence.

“And, also, by the way, why mother and not father?”

Not a peep.

So I filled the void. I mentioned that a few days ago I had heard *de poca madre*, another expression with mother in it. Literally “of little mother.”

“It means ‘great,’” someone had told me.

“Great? You’ve got to be kidding.” Sure enough I realized the way it means great. It goes like this, unique, singular, happened all by itself, with little if any maternal intervention. Therefore, “great.”

“Armando, do I have that right?”

He nodded.

A response. We’re getting somewhere, I thought.

And so I added *de poca madre* to my list, along with *a toda madre*, *un desmadre*, *me vale madre*, which I translated in this way: great for being absent; great for being present in some form or other; a fuckup; and worthless or I don’t give a damn. Soon enough a pattern started to take shape.

“Wait a minute. A *toda madre*, a lot of mother, and *de poca madre*, from a little mother, both mean the same thing?” The pattern was topsy-turvy.

“Yes. In a way they do.”

“How is that? In what way?”

“I don’t know,” and he switched the topic.

THE STUDY OF language can occur just about anywhere. But if carried out by a linguistic anthropologist, it usually occurs in situ, rather than out-of-situ, on a street rather than in a lab. Villages and urban neighborhoods are perfect for the anthropology of language; kitchens with a lot of cooks can be gold mines; taxis and bars with strangers offer treasure chests; Armando’s car, with only Armando and me, turned out to be chock full of goodies, once I understood a

few things about it. Because in the *performance* of language—when stories are told, conversations evolve, gestures and intonations are made—a *no* accompanied by a silent wink might mean *yes*, but you'd have to be there to know. And you have to be there to see everything else: Was it a woman or a man speaking and to whom; from what class; what cohort; what time of day, month, year; when in history; in the kitchen or the bar; what was everyone wearing? The anthropologist's approach revels in the fluidity of language, its infinite variations, its heterogeneity, the way speakers and listeners manipulate their communication, the way the variables of gender, class, region, age, education, ritual, religion, and the like interact with what's said and how it is understood within these performances. And then there's pure play, rhythm and rhyme, tone and style, twisted grammar and far-flung punctuation.

The problem for me has always been, where and at what point do I draw the line? Which is why on occasion all I wanted was a direct, well-defined answer from anyone here in Mexico about anything at all concerning *madre*. Early on in this journey, I hadn't planned to write a book on the word. Back then I had only wanted to understand Spanish and Mexico better so I could carry on like a native.

Armando cleared his throat.

Well, okay, like a native . . . bricklayer.

“So, what *does* this or that *madre* mean?”

Nada.

“Armando, are you there?”

But he remained quiet on the topic.

“Because Armando, aren't mothers worshipped here, your mother, that guy's mother?” I asked him frequently. This time I mentioned the Mexican painter Magali Lara who had waxed eloquent on the topic with me. Warm houses, kitchens, food, and savory smells came to her mind, when she thought of Mexican mothers. I reminded him of all the wonderful stories he had told me of his mother.

“Yes,” he interrupted, “but not *that guy’s* mother,” and laughed, while taking his hands off the wheel to smooth the lapels of his suit.

Was he nervous?

I was petrified.

“And what about the entire country’s love of the Virgin Mother, the Virgin Mary, and the Virgin of Guadalupe?” I continued. There is no person alive in Mexico who can’t go on and on about the Virgin of Guadalupe—non-Catholics included. She’s not just a religious figure, she’s a cultural icon. She’s at the very heart of national identity. After she appeared to a hardworking indigenous man, Juan Diego, in the sixteenth century, the story goes, she consecrated the ground under her, legitimized Spain’s presence in the hemisphere, and later justified the War of Independence from Spain. Later the state draped Mexican flags over her image in many churches, claiming her as its Protector. Mexico was a chosen land. There are Mexicans who claim with great pride, I am *guadalupana* or *guadalupano*, in the masculine if a man, meaning they are believers in *Her*, and that makes them *really* Mexican, ones living in the aura of her Grace.

In the four months I had been in Mexico, I had already seen at least a million representations of the Virgin of Guadalupe. In months to come I’d see another million. Armando had pointed out to me the Colonial ones inside church altars and tucked into courtyards off beaten paths. But on my own and with other friends I had seen her painted into murals and onto canvases and scraps of tin, molded into statues of clay and plastic, placed on bedside tables, street corner shrines, and dashboard altars. There was the ceramic one nestled in the outer southwest corner of the red house on the way to a friend’s in Tizapán. Another covered with plastic flowers at the bus stop behind the market. The enshrined one in front of the small church in the plaza across the street. The one at the taxi stand on Magdalena. Another next to the spark plug posters in the back of shops where shoes are cobbled, business cards printed, suits tailored, and where afternoon chats percolate in the interstices of the day. All the Virgins

inside private chapels, homes, subways, *peseros*, *combis*, buses, and cars. The ones cascading down plunging necklines. The miniature one inside the shoe shiner's wooden box, the size of his ring finger.

"This is the land of mother worship," I exclaimed.

"Yes. Yes."

"So why are these idioms, at least in my notebook, beginning to add up to a list of mixed signals, that is, praise mixed with disdain?"

Just then he saw something out the corner of his eye, a beautiful church, a delicious restaurant, a friend's home, and with these sights his ticket to change the topic. Because, as it continued to turn out, *madre* was not a word that a Mexican gentleman would use, or analyze for that matter, in front of a lady. It wasn't polite. Also, it wasn't politic. And Armando was *bién* educated, not to mention a politician of sorts.

The truth is that it was hard to get a straight answer from Armando on anything at all, much less mothers. His indirectness in most areas was not a problem, we usually arrived at the punch line one way or another, but when it came to linguistic *madres*, it had an impact on just how border-crossing a speaker he was going to let me become.

"Armando, I'm an anthropologist," I sometimes pleaded with him.

But no go. At least no direct go. As faithful a friend as he was, when it came to helping me out with my inappropriate Spanish, his approach was the linguistic analog to the circumnavigations of ground travel here—roundabout.

In retrospect I see that Armando's circumlocutions turned me into a linguistic anthropologist, when before I was perfectly happy being a cultural anthropologist with a side interest in language. Both his silences and subject-turnings drove my curiosity beyond where I had wanted to go. They gave me a craving, like the ones that overcome me for dessert the moment I put myself on a diet. I was driven.

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