

Spanglish, swearing and slang: Translating Junot Díaz's "Fiesta 1980"

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Summary

This thesis explores three elements that can cause translation problems when trying to translate the works of Dominican-American author Junot Díaz: Spanglish (the mixture of Spanish and English), swearing and slang. These elements are studied in depth in the theoretical framework, both as phenomena as such and, as far as possible, as translation problems. The theoretical knowledge is then applied in the analysis of one of Díaz's short stories, "Fiesta 1980". Several solutions for the translation problems discovered in the analysis are considered in a separate chapter. The insights acquired by the reflective texts are then used to create a Dutch annotated translation of "Fiesta 1980".

Introduction

The first time I came across the works of Junot Díaz, I was immediately intrigued by his distinctive style. His work was like nothing I had ever read before – and for me, as someone who has been a voracious reader since the age of about five, that was quite something. When it first came to choosing a subject for my Master thesis, Díaz's name immediately sprang to mind. However, as I had already discussed a Dutch translation of one of his books before, I decided to go and look for similar works to explore in my thesis. Nothing I came across, though, contained all of the components that had intrigued me in Díaz's works. As the time to actually start writing crept closer and as I kept coming back to Junot Díaz everytime I searched Goodreads for something else, I decided to cut the knot and just go for it.

The main focus of this thesis will lie on three of the elements that to me made Díaz's style so fascinating in the first place: his use of Spanglish, swearing and slang. The word Spanglish is a mixture of 'Spanish' and 'English', which is exactly what Spanglish is. Díaz himself was born in the Spanish-speaking Dominican Republic but moved to New Jersey at the age of six (Knight n.p.). As far as their origins are concerned, Díaz and the main character and story teller in most of his stories, Yunior, have a lot in common. Like Díaz, Yunior spends his early childhood in the Dominican Republic and moves to the United States at an age where learning a second language has already become more of a conscious process. Díaz lets Yunior tell the stories in his own language, which means that most of the text is in English, but switches to Spanish do occur in some instances. This practice of mixing more than one language in or between sentences is often called code-switching (Poplack 581). By having Yunior code-switch between English and Spanish, Díaz creates multilingual texts – texts which are written in more than one language. However, Yunior's language does not only consist of standard English mixed with standard Spanish. He also uses nonstandard language, including vulgar language and slang. It

is these elements of Yuniór's language – Spanglish, swearing and slang - that form the theoretical backdrop for this thesis.

Since I did not only want to write a research thesis, but also create an annotated translation, I had to not just choose theoretical subjects to write on, but also a specific text on which the theory could be applied. Over the past twenty years, Díaz has published two short story collections, *Drown* (1996) and *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012) as well as a novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007). Since I had already (partially) discussed *This Is How You Lose Her* in another paper, I decided to drop that as an option, which left me with one short story collection and one novel – still an incredible amount of writing. However, I quickly discovered that *Drown* had never been translated into Dutch, which, to me, seemed like a great opportunity to actually add something new. After reading *Drown* thoroughly and looking for my three elements of interest in all of its stories, I finally landed on “Fiesta 1980”, a story related by an adult Yuniór about a party in his childhood. This story seemed to contain all of my initial points of interest, as well as several other interesting potential translation problems.

The aim of this thesis is twofold: first, to discuss Junot Díaz's short story “Fiesta 1980”, some of its main stylistic elements and its translation problems in a theoretical and reflective way and second, to provide a Dutch annotated translation of that same short story. Consequently, this thesis will consist of two parts: the reflective part and the annotated translation. In the theoretical framework I will first discuss Spanglish, swearing and slang – not only as potential translation problems, but also as phenomena as such. I will then proceed to analyse the source text I chose for my annotated translation, “Fiesta 1980”. In this chapter, the text will not only be analysed in itself but also as a source text, focusing on potential problems that may arise when translating it. Solutions for the problems that are discovered in the textual analysis will be discussed in a separate chapter. Because “Fiesta 1980” is quite similar in style to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, I will not only look for these solutions in translation studies, but I will also sometimes refer to the Dutch translation of *The*

Brief Wondrous Life in order to see how its translator Peter Abelsen deals with some of the translation problems that occur in both “Fiesta” and *The Brief Wondrous Life*. The reflective chapters are followed by a conclusion. I will then produce my Dutch translation of “Fiesta 1980”, which will be accompanied by footnotes explaining certain translation choices. Lastly, the source text will be provided.

Theoretical Framework

When it comes to translating works such as “Fiesta 1980” several factors are at play. First of all, there is the presence of two (mixed) languages, Spanish and English in this case study. Multilingualism and code-switching form interesting challenges for a translator. Beside mixed languages, the work considered here also contains foul language and the language of the streets: swearing and slang. All of these factors – multilingualism in general and Spanglish in particular, swearing and slang – have to be considered not only as translation problems, but as bigger issues. To be able to choose a proper translation strategy, it is important to understand their position, function and status in both the source language and culture and the target language and culture.

Reine Meylaerts states that the rise of the nation state in the nineteenth century went hand in hand with the romantic ideology that one nation should also have one language. Multilingualism within a single text became something that was frowned upon. At the end of the twentieth century however, mostly thanks to Postcolonial Studies, multilingual texts gained new appreciation (Meylaerts, “Multilingualism and Translation” 227). Mixing languages became a way of adding style to a narrative, for example in terms of character building, plot construction and discourse (Meylaerts, “Multilingualism as a Challenge” 538). Using various languages in a text, for example the European language of the former colonizer and more local vernaculars, pidgins or creoles, also could and still can fulfil social and referential functions (Bandia 139). Multilingualism can occur in various forms and can vary in the type and number of foreignisms used. Writers can not only switch from one language to another, but can also make use of different dialects and sociolects to create a multilingual text (Meylaerts, “Multilingualism as a Challenge” 538). Furthermore, they can occasionally choose to use a single foreign word in an otherwise reasonably monolingual text, but can also write entire sentences or passages in a different language. With respect to the different manners in which multilingual texts can be established, Paul Bandia distinguishes between code-

mixing and code-switching. Singh (34) states that code-mixing happens between different sentences; when there is variation within a sentence, this is called code-switching. Poplack (605) disagrees; instead of making a distinction between switching and mixing, she distinguishes different types of what she all calls code-switching. According to Poplack, there are three forms of code-switching. The first one is tag-like switching. The speaker or writer produces a monolingual sentence, but adds an element in a different language. This element can be an interjection, for example the English 'Yuck' in a sentence such as '*Yuck, er zit kauwgom aan mijn schoen*', a tag ('Hij is echt gek, *isn't he?*'), a filler ('En ik was, *like*, helemaal overstuur') or an idiomatic expression ('Toen was ik echt *screwed*'). Poplack states that this type of code-switching requires the least amount of knowledge about the second language (L2). The second type of code-switching requires more insight into (the grammar of) L2 and is called intersentential. The speaker or writer changes languages on the boundaries of clauses or sentences. An example of this type of code-switching can be found in the title of Poplack's article: "Sometimes I'll start a sentence in Spanish *y termino en español*". The third kind of code-switching requires the most knowledge of the grammars of both L1 and L2: with intrasentential code-switching, the switches take place within a single clause or sentence. An example could be 'Yesterday *ging ik* to the *supermarkt* to buy some *melk*'. The speaker needs to have knowledge of both English and Dutch to create this multilingual but grammatically correct sentence; he needs to know that in English, you cannot place adverbs denoting time in the middle of the sentence (although you can do so in Dutch) and that Dutch is a verb-second language, so when you have an adverbial phrase in the beginning of the sentence, the subject and verb switch places. An author may only use one of the types of code-switching, but of course a mixture of the three types may also be found within the same work (Bandia 140).

As mentioned above, authors can have various motives for writing in more than one language. Bandia considers African creative writing, in which the European language of the former colonizer is often mixed with the indigenous languages.

According to Bandia, the main reason to use more than one language for African writers is a sociocultural one (143). For culture-specific items for example, there may only be a vernacular term. In those instances, the European language does not suffice to “adequately express African sociocultural reality” (141). Because it is sometimes – if not most of the times – impossible to guess what the indigenous terms mean, African writers often choose to add an in-text translation (141). This may seem to make the indigenous term redundant, but it still adds “local colour” (143) to the text. Code-switching may highlight the (in this case) African identity, emphasize the culture-specific elements and enrich the text stylistically. In his article about multilingual texts that mix Hebrew with various other languages, Tal Goldfajn states that code-switching is not only used to highlight the own identity, but also to emphasize otherness and dissociation (156). It is a way for authors or characters not only to show what they are, but rather to stress what they are not.

Translation is often defined as “the substitution of one language for another”, while multilingual texts can be characterized as “the co-presence of two or more languages in a single text” (Grutman 182). When translating a multilingual text, a translator has to substitute not just one, but two languages for one (or more) others. Translating a monolingual text can already be problematic, but multilingual texts in particular have often been related to translation problems and even untranslatability (Meylaerts, “Multilingualism as a Challenge” 539). Meylaerts however, disagrees with that statement: whatever problems multilingual texts may pose, they do not make that text untranslatable (539).

In a case study, Suchet analyses three French translations of *Hijo de Hombre*, a text by Paraguayan author Bastos that mixes Spanish with the indigenous language Guarani (152-3). In the analysis of the French translations, it becomes apparent that the three translators have used different approaches. The first translation, according to Suchet, is “characterized by a complete deafness to the source text” (156). The approach of this translator consists of translating the entire text – both the Spanish and Guarani – into French, creating a monolingual target text. By applying a

naturalizing strategy (Holmes 185-6), the code-switching is entirely lost. While Suchet expresses a rather unfavourable opinion about this strategy, it can sometimes be the only option. While in *Hijo de Hombre* two languages are mixed, there are also texts in which standard language is mixed with a dialect. These text can also be considered multilingual, but in translating them, the translator may not have any tools to preserve that multilingualism. Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*, for example, switches between Scottish dialects and a more standard form of English. In the Dutch translation by Ton Heuvelmans, the regionally marked speech has disappeared completely. In his article, Koster calls this "the only right and perhaps the only possible choice" (41; my translation¹). He states that because you cannot simply replace one dialect with another, a translation of a text in which dialect plays such a big part will automatically suffer substantial losses. However, Koster feels that in these cases, if someone were to be blamed for those losses, it should be the person that decided the work needed to be translated in the first place, rather than the translator who hardly has another option (42-3).

Besides getting rid of all multilingualism in the translation, Suchet's analyses reveal two more strategies. The second strategy she found in a different French translation of *Hijo de Hombre* is a more compromising one. All Spanish is translated into French, but most Guarani terms have been retained, albeit sometimes in a typographically adjusted form (157). However, these terms are hardly explained, so it may be rather difficult for the French reader to fully understand the text. The third translation analysed by Suchet displays various translation strategies. Foreignisms are marked by italics and often followed by a complete, in-text translation. Furthermore, Guarani terms that signify culture-specific elements are accompanied by footnotes, providing extra information. The three translations and their corresponding strategies could be ranked in terms of translator's visibility. The first strategy creates a text which seems to have been written in the target language,

¹ Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from sources in Dutch are mine, NO.

rendering the translator completely invisible, while the third strategy creates a text that very obviously presents itself as a translation. In his analysis of African creative writing, Bandia also analyses some translations of these works. He comes across a translation of Ferdinand Oyono's *Une vie de boy*, where broken French has been replaced by a form of broken English that the translator invented himself. Bandia rejects this strategy and states that it would have been much more appropriate to look at actual pidgin English from the region (150).

Information on Spanglish as a translation problem, if it exists at all, has proven to be hard to find. Fortunately, there has been some writing about the phenomenon in itself. So what exactly is Spanglish? Spanglish emerged in the United States, mostly due to the immigration of people from Central and South America. According to the CIA's World Factbook, approximately 15 percent of the United States population is Hispanic, and almost 13 percent of the population speaks Spanish at home ("The World Factbook: United States."). Language contact between Spanish and English resulted in the "amalgamation of two languages, and by consequence that of two cultures, traditionally viewed as separate" (Rothman and Rell 516): Spanglish. Ardila calls it "the most important contemporary linguistic phenomenon in the United States" (65), even though academically it has received rather little interest. Ardila proposes several reasons for this, one of them being the idea that Spanglish is just a debased form of Spanish (65). Alvarez mentions this negative attitude towards Spanglish as well, stating that language purists call the mixing "a product of laziness and ignorance" (486). However, she also states there is a growing acceptance for the language (485) as well as a growing number of people who speak it (483).

Before going further into some of the linguistic aspects of Spanglish, it must be mentioned that because of the speakers' various backgrounds, there are numerous variations (Ardila 65). Spanglish spoken by Dominicans in New Jersey (such as Yunior in "Fiesta 1980") may differ from Spanglish spoken by Mexicans in California or Cubans in Florida (Rothman and Rell 523) and interpersonal variation is possible

as well. Yet, as they are all results of the mixture of Spanish and English, they will be considered a single phenomenon here. In her attempt to define Spanglish linguistically, Nash argues to exclude certain utterances from being called Spanglish (224). According to her, utterances that have been translated word-for-word from Spanish into English (or vice versa) and are therefore ungrammatical, should not be considered examples of Spanglish. To clarify, Nash gives the following example: “No speak very good the English” is a literal translation of the grammatically correct Spanish sentence “No hablo muy bien el inglés” (224). She also excludes deliberate code-switching used for special effect, for example in advertisements; for her, only natural, inartificial utterances can be considered Spanglish (224). After giving examples of what Spanglish is not, she then goes on to divide utterances that she does consider to be Spanglish into different categories. According to Nash, there are three types, all with their own subtypes (225). Type 1 are utterances that are mainly in Spanish, but contain English lexical items. These loanwords can be technical or scientific terms or cultural borrowings (for example slang and idiomatic expressions). A more striking example is the substitution of Spanish words by their high-frequency English counterpart. Words such as ‘ejército’ and ‘marina’ are replaced by ‘army’ and ‘navy’ (225). Spanglish type 2 is also based on loanwords, but instead of borrowing them as is, they are ‘spanishized’ – that is, their pronunciation and spelling are adapted to the Spanish norms. This includes the addition of final vowels; ‘roof’ for example becomes ‘rufo’ in Spanglish, while ‘factory’ becomes ‘factoria’ and ‘carpet’ becomes ‘carpeta’. New Spanglish verbs are also formed by adding a Spanish verb suffix to an English verb. The Spanglish verbs are then conjugated according to Spanish grammar (227). Finally, calques, syntactic idioms and new, original expressions fall under type 3 (228). Rothman and Rell also propose a division of different kinds of Spanglish. Their first category roughly corresponds to Nash’s type 2 Spanglish, while their second category resembles Nash’s third (520-522). Unlike Nash, however, they also mention code-switching. While Nash’s Spanglish is mainly Spanish with some relatively small English influences, Rothman and Rell recognise

the fact that code-switching between Spanish and English is “of paramount importance” (523) for Spanglish. Alvarez mentions this as well – she distinguishes between two approaches: borrowing and switching (485). She, too, mentions the ‘spanishization’ of borrowed words. According to her, replacing a Spanish word by an English (although spanishized) equivalent has often to do with efficiency: “Spanish is famously multisyllabic”, she says (486). About code-switching, she quotes Zentella, who stresses that code-switching is not random, but a rather complex skill (486). Alvarez stresses that code-switching does not happen because the speaker does not know the word in the other language – sometimes it is simply more appropriate or efficient to express something in one language instead of the other (486). While Ardila goes into the different linguistic characteristics of borrowing and code-switching in Spanglish as well (68-71), he also distinguishes between two types of Spanglish based on its speakers. His type 1 Spanglish is spoken by early bilinguals who are fluent in both English and Spanish and often speak both at native speaker level. They code-switch frequently, but because English is the language they learned in school, that language is predominant (66-7). Type 2 Spanglish on the other hand is spoken by native speakers of Spanish who only later in life learned English. They tend to borrow and adapt words rather than code-switch (although that may occur as well) and Spanish is their dominant language (67). Combining all the information mentioned above, it could be said that Spanglish can roughly be divided into two categories: on the one hand there is borrowing, including loanwords, ‘spanishization’ and calques, which is mostly done by late(r) bilinguals whose basic language is Spanish. On the other hand there is code-switching, which is the preferred type of Spanglish for early, balanced bilinguals who (may) speak English most of the time but who may code-switch for example because English simply is not sufficient to express what they want to say.

Another subject of interest for this theoretical framework is swearing. Swearing is a universal phenomenon: in every culture, terms of abuse are known and used. The form and shape of these terms, however, differs from culture to culture

(van Oudenhoven et al. 176). In the article by Hofstede and McCrae, it is established that cultures can differ from one another in various dimensions (62-3). Two of them, that is individualism and masculinity, may influence what type of swearwords are used (more often) in a specific culture. Individualistic cultures value autonomy and personal responsibility, while in more collectivistic cultures, social networks and family are much more important. Insulting a person's family may be much more offensive to someone from a collectivistic culture than to someone from an individualistic one. The dimension of masculinity versus femininity can also influence swearing. In more masculine cultures, traits that are typically associated with manliness, such as success and assertiveness, are highly valued and insults insinuating a person lacks these traits may be found (more often) in masculine cultures (van Oudenhoven et al. 177). Research by de Raad, van Oudenhoven and Hofstede showed that indeed, the Spanish culture being more collectivistic, Spanish terms of abuse often referred to family (163). In the top ten of most frequently used swearwords in Spain were 'cabrón', 'hijo (de (la)) puta' and 'puta madre', which mean 'cuckold', 'son of a whore' and 'your mother is a whore', respectively. This type of family-related expletives did not occur in the Dutch top ten (de Raad, van Oudenhoven and Hofstede 160) and occurred only once in Dutch in de Raad, van Oudenhoven and Hofstede's research – compared to 96 times in Spanish. The Dutch, in their turn, used significantly more abusive terms relating to genitals and diseases (161). Later research by van Oudenhoven et al. confirmed this distribution and stated that swearing with diseases is a rather unique Dutch quality (184). Respondents who spoke American English in their turn used more terms related to sexual actions (182).

As a translator, these cultural differences are something to take into account. The adverb 'fucking' in American English may have the same emotional value as the adjective 'kut' in Dutch, while the Spanish 'hijo de la puta' may well be translated as 'kankerlijer' in Dutch – even though these are not literal translations, they are similarly emotionally charged. Of course, it must be taken into account whether or not the literal meaning of the abusive term is important. As mentioned above, the

emotional value of 'hijo de la puta' in Spanish and 'kankerlijer' in Dutch may be the same, but if the Spanish term is used to refer to a person whose mother actually is a prostitute, the literal meaning is more important than the emotional charge. When making these changes, the function of the expletive in the source text must be considered. The word 'fuck' for instance, is highly versatile in the English language; including derivatives (such as 'fucking' and 'fucked') it can be a verb, a noun, an adjective, an adverb or even an infix ('abso-fucking-lutely'). It can be used as an intensifier but also in a literal sense (when it means 'to have intercourse'). Because it can serve so many purposes, not every instance of the word can always be translated in the same way – Dutch for example, does not have an equivalent, except maybe in some cases the orthographically adapted "fokking". A translator must always consider the meaning and function of a swearword before translating (or not translating) it.

Slightly related to swearwords is slang. Like terms of abuse, slang is often tabooed, although not in all circumstances; it is unacceptable when speaking to a person of a higher (social) status or in formal writing (Dumas and Lighter 14-5). However, not all slang is abusive; the word 'bucks' as a slang term for 'dollars' will probably not offend anyone, yet its use is limited to informal situations. Eble defines the phenomenon as follows: "Slang is an ever changing set of colloquial words and phrases that speakers use to establish or reinforce social identity or cohesiveness in society at large" (11). Adams also mentions the identifying factor and informal status of slang, and adds that because of its colloquial character, slang can also be used to oppose authority (16). From these definitions, it can be gathered that slang terms are (sub)culture and time specific. This is what makes their translation potentially problematic. In his analysis of the Dutch translation of *Trainspotting*, Koster refers to the language of junkies. Translatability is not the problem here, as the Netherlands knows a similar subculture. What is problematic, is the fact that "the jargon of the subculture is loaded with English" (Koster 44). In these cases, the use of a calque is usually the only possible translation option. Consequently, the Dutch translation of

Trainspotting still contains many (seemingly) English slang terms (Koster 45). It becomes even more problematic when there is no comparable subculture or when the slang is used specifically to convey the speaker's (cultural) origin; Dominican slang used in New York cannot be replaced by Surinam slang used in Amsterdam. Again, using a calque in the translation is an option, although that may require a footnote or a glossary if the slang word's meaning cannot be deduced from the context. Another possibility is to replace the slang word with a better-known or more standard word in the target language, but that way, you may lose a significant stylistic aspect. All of these factors must be taken into consideration when translating a work that contains slang.

Textual Analysis

In the following chapter, the short story that will be translated later, “Fiesta, 1980” from Díaz’s debut short story collection *Drown*, will be analysed. This chapter will also discuss potential translation problems. Solutions for these problems will be treated in more detail in the next chapter.

“Fiesta, 1980” is the second short story in Díaz’s collection *Drown*. Before becoming part of the collection, which first appeared in 1996, “Fiesta” had previously been published in an issue of *Story* magazine of that same year (“Drown (short story collection).”). It was also part of the 1997 edition of *The Best American Short Stories*, an annual anthology of American and Canadian short stories, published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (“The Best American Short Stories.”).

Like many of Díaz’s stories, “Fiesta, 1980” is about Yunior de las Casas. Yunior and his family are originally from Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. Yunior’s father Ramón left for the United States when Yunior was three (Díaz, *Drown* 125) and it was not until Yunior was nine before his father came back for them and brought them with him to the States (63). “Fiesta” is set three years later. At the moment the story takes place, Yunior is twelve years old. He, his parents, his fifteen-year-old brother Rafa and his younger sister Madai live in New Jersey. The main storyline in “Fiesta” is about a party hosted by Yunior’s aunt and uncle who have recently moved from the Dominican Republic. To celebrate their new life in the United States, they throw a party in their new apartment in the Bronx in New York (or Nueva York, as it is almost always referred to in the book). On the car ride over, Yunior gets sick, like he always does in his father’s VW van. Once they arrive at the party, Yunior and Rafa join the other children – Rafa immediately going after the girls, leaving Yunior to play with a nine-year old mute boy. When the food is served, his father forbids Yunior from eating anything, since he will only throw it up later. His aunt, however, manages to sneak him some food anyway. While the party is going on, Yunior thinks about his father’s mistress, a Puerto Rican woman. Yunior’s mother does not know about her, but Ramón has not really tried to keep his visits to

her a secret from his sons – he has even brought them with him on several occasions. Looking at his parents dancing at the party, Yuniór contemplates what would happen if his mother would find out about the Puerto Rican woman. He finds it hard to imagine her without his father – even though they were not together for a big part of his childhood. When the party is over and they drive home, Yuniór is sick once again.

Although “Fiesta” takes place when Yuniór is a child, it is narrated by an older version of himself. This becomes visible not only because the story is told in the past tense, but also because Yuniór the narrator looks ahead to events that will take place later. When thinking about his parents’ relationship, he says “Maybe I already knew how it would all end up in a few years, Mami without Papi, and that was why I [thought about] it” (32) and two pages later contemplates “Later I would think, maybe if I had told her, she would have confronted him, would have done something, but who can know these things?” (34). These little flash forwards show that even years later, Yuniór still feels guilty towards his mother for knowing about his father’s affair but never telling her.

Ramón’s infidelity and Yuniór’s struggle to deal with the knowledge of it can be seen as a main theme in the story. Not only are there references to the Puerto Rican woman throughout the story, it is possible that even Yuniór’s carsickness is not so much a real illness as a physical reaction to his mental unease about the affair. Yuniór mentions that “[he] met the Puerto Rican woman right after Papi had gotten the van”. One time when Yuniór is sick in the car, instead of going home, Ramón takes his son to the house of his mistress. It may be that from then on, Yuniór is reminded of his father’s infidelity every time he gets into the van and perhaps the vomiting is a subconscious way of getting rid of that memory. On the other hand, Yuniór had already been carsick a few times before meeting the Puerto Rican woman - the reason Yuniór and his father were driving around together on the day he met the mistress, was that Ramón hoped that driving around more often and getting used to the van might cure Yuniór’s illness.

Another possible explanation for Yunior's vomiting is also briefly referred to in the story. Yunior's mother suspects it is the upholstery of the car that makes Yunior nauseous; "In her mind, American things [...] all seemed to have an intrinsic badness about them" (20). Since Yunior had never been carsick when they were still living in the Dominican Republic (22), his carsickness may be related to their move to the States. Moving and reuniting with his father has turned his life rather turned upside down and maybe that is what subconsciously turns his stomach upside down as well.

Yunior's Dominican background combined with his new life in the States does not only influence the story line, but also the way that story is told; it is filled with Spanglish. The main body of the text is in English, but the narrator often uses Spanish words. His Spanglish therefore corresponds to Ardila's Type 1 Spanglish (66-7). The reason for his code-switching may very well be the one mentioned by Alvarez (486): he often uses Spanish when it seems more appropriate or just better fits the situation. When he talks about his family members for example, he always refers to them with the Spanish terms 'Mami', 'Papi', 'tía' and 'tío', because that is probably the way he has always addressed them. Their meaning becomes apparent from the context – for example, the first sentence of the story introduces "tía Yrma" as "Mami's youngest sister" (17), making it clear that 'tía' means 'aunt'. A large part of the dialogue is conveyed in Spanish as well: the conversations within the story were originally in Spanish – demonstrated by the fact that at one point it is stated that Rafa says something to Yunior "in English" (24) – so the narrator chooses to quote this speech in its original form. These instances of Spanish are sometimes a little harder to understand for a reader who does not know the language, although again, context is very helpful. For example, when Yunior's mother blesses her children before leaving, she says "Que Dios te bendiga" and although readers may not recognize the exact words, from the fact that she is crossing her children and that "Dios" is written with a capital, it is not too hard to deduct that she probably says "God bless you". Of other occurrences of Spanish it is less easy to deduce their

meaning. For example, from the phrase “Coño, muchacho, what did you eat?”, someone with no or little knowledge of Spanish may not be able to deduce an exact translation of the word “muchacho”. To help readers in instances such as this one, Díaz added a glossary at the end of the book, containing short translations or explanations for some of the Spanish words – among which “muchacho”, which means “kid”. This list is rather short, however, so there are still some instances of Spanish in the story of which the meaning cannot be deduced from context and which cannot be found in the glossary either. These are mostly culture-specific items – words which probably do not have an English equivalent. For example, in “Fiesta” there are several mentions of Latin American dishes, such as pastelitos (25), tostones (26), chicharrónes and pernil (29). For these words, nor the context, nor the glossary are of any help. It could be argued that they are not mentioned in the glossary as they are not of any importance to the story – however, another dish that is mentioned in “Fiesta”, sancocho (29), can in fact be found in the glossary. Another consideration could be the source text readers’ familiarity with the dishes. However, this does not seem to be the case either. Pastelitos for example, are known in the United States, but are called ‘empanadas’ (“Dominican Republic Cuisine.”), while chicharrónes are often known as pork rinds (“Chicharrón.”). Even though source text readers may be familiar with the dishes, they probably do not know them by the names mentioned in the text. When translating “Fiesta” into Dutch, adding a glossary to the translation is an option as well. If a glossary is added, translators must choose between copying Díaz’s list indiscriminately and compiling their own.

Besides Latin American dishes, “Fiesta” contains several other culture-specific elements. Most of them refer to Dominican or Latin American culture and therefore it may be assumed most of Díaz’s original target audience is not familiar with them. Díaz, however, does not explain their meaning, not in his glossary nor in some other way. He relies on the reader’s ability to (at least roughly) deduce their meaning from the context. From the phrase “an offering to Eshú” (21), it can be inferred that Eshú is probably some kind of deity or saint, while Presidente in the sentence “a bottle of

Presidente in hand" (27) is an (alcoholic) drink and bachatas in "the radio was playing loud-ass bachatas" (29) are a type of music. When translating "Fiesta", a translator has to consider whether to explain the CSE's – for example with footnotes or in a glossary – or to follow Díaz's example.

As stated above, most CSE's in "Fiesta" refer to Dominican culture. However, there are a few culture-specific elements that are typical for the United States, for example the neighbourhood kids playing baseball, the speed of the car being measured in miles per hour and the toll basket the De Las Casas family passes on their way to the Bronx. These elements can also cause a translation problem, as they are unknown (or at least less common) in the target culture.

Besides the mix between standard (American) English and standard (Dominican) Spanish, "Fiesta" also contains nonstandard and vulgar language: slang and swearing, in both English and Spanish. All of the Spanish swearwords are listed in the glossary. However, not all of them are translated. While the glossary contains the meanings for "pendejo" (33) and "sucia" (34) – "a pussy or a punk" and "a tramp" (166), respectively – for "coño" (19, 24) and "carajo" (23) it only states that both of them are "a curse" (165). The difference may be attributed to the fact that the latter are interjections, rather than nouns, although a translation such as "shit", "fuck" or "damn it" might still have been possible. If translators decide to add a glossary to their translation of "Fiesta", like Díaz, this is a consideration to be taken into account. Besides the expletives, "Fiesta" also contains several slang words with Spanish roots. The word "flaca" for example, is just an adjective in standard Spanish (meaning "skinny"), but is used as a noun in "Fiesta", meaning "a skinny woman or girl" as stated in the glossary. The nonstandard "compa'i", by contrast, is not listed in the glossary, a decision translators may or may not agree with. It is also worth mentioning that there is one slang term in "Fiesta" that Díaz seems to have thought up himself: the word "askho" in the sentence "When Papi got me home, he went and cleaned out the van himself, an expression of askho on his face" (22). The meaning,

“disgust” can be found in the glossary, but outside of this book, the word seems to only exist as a proper name.

As well as Spanish nonstandard language, “Fiesta” also contains nonstandard uses of English. This nonstandard use consists of slang words and expletives but also of nonstandard grammatical structures. The story contains several sentences with multiple negations, including examples such as “He didn’t say nothing to nobody, not even my moms” (17). Sentences such as this one may pose a problem when translating “Fiesta”, as multiple negations are much less common in the Dutch language. Another more dialectal form of English that appears in “Fiesta” is the word “ain’t”, the colloquial form of “isn’t”. When translating “Fiesta” into Dutch, the translator must take it into account that the source text contains these nonstandard grammatical structures and choose whether or not to incorporate some of that nonstandardness in the translation.

Besides grammatically deviant structures, “Fiesta” also contains phrases that are often considered slang, vulgar or at least very informal, such as “kick our asses” (17), “get your ass whupped” (19) and “piss him off” (20). The last category of English-based slang consists of single-word instances, some of which are expletives, such as “ass-face” (23), “pussy” (24) and “motherfucker” (24). For both the phrases and the words, a translator must find suitable equivalents in the target language.

Apart from the Spanglish, slang and swearing, there are some other elements that define the style of “Fiesta”. First of all, Díaz never uses quotation marks throughout his story. Quotes occur in the continuous text, without any markings. What is also striking is that when talking about himself and another person, Yuniór always mentions himself first and always uses object pronouns. He does this even if the pronouns are the subject of the sentence, for example in the phrase “[m]e and him played Rafa and Leti” (26). What also stands out is the filler phrase “or something” that occurs regularly throughout the story. Another notable stylistic feature is Díaz’s use of words that do not match the register of the rest of the text; while most of the text is written in a low register, Díaz sometimes uses words such as “saliva” (22) and

“voracious” where he could have used lower-register synonyms. These small instances of high register stand out and in a translation, a translator should not just replace them with low register words without thought.

Solutions for Translation Problems

This chapter discusses potential solutions for the translation problems that may occur when translating Diaz's "Fiesta 1980" into Dutch, as described in the previous chapter. Solutions will be sought not only in theoretical translation studies, but also in the translation of a work similar to "Fiesta", *Het korte maar wonderbare leven van Oscar Wao*, Peter Abelsen's translation of Junot Diaz's novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Being written by the same author, "Fiesta" and *The Brief Wondrous Life* share various stylistic aspects and potentially also display similar translation problems. If a certain potential translation problem occurs in both works, it might be helpful for the translation of "Fiesta" to look into Abelsen's translation, to see what strategy he applied in that situation. To create a clear structure, the problems will be discussed and solved following Christiane Nord's top-down method (Nord 147), from the pragmatic problems at macro-level to the text-specific problems at micro-level.

One of the biggest pragmatic translation problems in "Fiesta" is the codeswitching between English and Spanish – the actually existing phenomenon known as Spanglish. The target text, however cannot be written in Spanglish. The main body of the source text, which is in English, must be translated into Dutch in the target text – otherwise it would not be much of a translation. The amount of Spanish, however, is much smaller. As code-switching between Dutch and Spanish is much less common in the target culture, the translator can choose to do several things when translating "Fiesta". The first option is to translate all of the Spanish into Dutch, thus creating a homogenous, monolingual Dutch text, like Heuvelmans did in his translation of Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (Koster 41). However, in *Trainspotting* the codeswitching was between standard English and a dialectal variety, which would be hard to substitute – Scottish dialect in an English text cannot be replaced by for example Tweants or Limburgish in a Dutch text. Because such a big part of the source text was in dialect, preserving it was not an option either. The amount of Spanish in "Fiesta", however, is much smaller in proportion to the amount of

English, yet it is stylistically very significant. Furthermore, although Spanish is much more ubiquitous in the (American) source culture, it can be assumed not every source text reader understands all of the Spanish used in “Fiesta” – especially the more nons words and expressions. Since the foreknowledge of Spanish of the source text reader and that of readers from the target culture may not differ so greatly, naturalizing the text completely seems too radical. Another option is to only translate some of the Spanish – for example by replacing the slang expressions with Dutch equivalents and only keeping the Spanish of which the meaning becomes very clear from context. This may make the text easier for the Dutch reader, but it would still lead to a significant stylistic loss. Preserving the Spanish seems to be the best option. In his article “Culture-specific Items in Translation”, Javier Franco Aixelá describes several approaches for dealing with CSI’s in translation (Aixelá 61-64). Some of these however, also seem appropriate for dealing with – in this case, Spanish words in an otherwise English text. One of the approaches that seems to be suitable in this case, falls under what Javier Franco Aixelá calls extratextual gloss (62). In this strategy the translator chooses to preserve the original word, but deems more clarification necessary. Díaz actually applies this strategy in the original text as well, as at the end of *Drown*, the short story collection of which “Fiesta 1980” is a part, he supplies the reader with a short glossary of some of the Spanish words and terms. However, as mentioned in the previous chapter, this list is not complete and at some points seems to be composed rather arbitrarily. If a glossary is added to the translation, the translator may want to draw up a specific list, rather than copying Díaz’s. This way, the translator can also take pragmatics into account: some of the Spanish words and terms may be known in the source culture, but much less so in the target culture. Abelsen applied this strategy when he translated *The Brief Wondrous Life* – although Díaz’s original did not contain a glossary, Abelsen added one to his translation. His glossary is preceded by a short comment:

To avoid an unmanageably long list, I have not included words that everybody knows or can deduce from context (you probably know what *puta*

means, you probably understand what *toto* means) – the translator (Díaz, *Het korte maar wonderbare leven* 327; my translation NO)

Abelsen's reasoning seems solid, although it does not always seem to hold in practice. For example, his glossary does contain the explanation for the word "abuelo", even though it first occurs in the context "my paternal abuelo" (Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life* 6), but does not contain the translation of the much less obvious "anciano sanmacorisano". This may have to do with the fact that the word "abuelo" occurs on several different occasions, while "anciano sanmacorisano" only occurs once. In translating "Fiesta", this is another argument that can be taken into consideration when choosing to add a glossary. Besides adding a glossary, another form of extratextual gloss is to add footnotes (Aixelá 62), in this case with translations of the Spanish words. One of the reasons Abelsen did not apply this strategy may have been that the source text, *The Brief Wondrous Life*, already contains footnotes, which mainly give historical information about the Dominican Republic and the Trujillo regime. However, since *Drown* does not contain any footnotes, adding them to give translations for Spanish words is a possible strategy when translating "Fiesta". This does make the translator more visible – the reader of the target text is much more confronted with the fact he is reading a translation than when, for example, a glossary is added. An even more intrusive strategy would be to add translations in the text, a strategy Aixelá calls intratextual gloss. This would probably make the text rather hard – not to say annoying – to read. Moreover, many of the Spanish terms can be found in quotations and in-text translations would make them highly unrealistic. All things considered, adding an extratextual gloss in the form of a glossary or footnotes with the translation of certain words (which meanings cannot be deduced from context) seems to be the best strategy when it comes to dealing with the Spanish in "Fiesta 1980".

The considerations mentioned above also hold for most of the culture-specific items in "Fiesta". Most culture-specific elements in the story are specific for Dominican culture and can therefore be treated like the Spanish words. It can be

argued that translating these terms in the text itself is even less favourable, as for many of them, there is no Dutch equivalent that conveys all of the cultural connotations of the Dominican term. Take “sancocho” (29) for example. Like cream tea in England or stamppot in the Netherlands, sancocho is considered a national dish of the Dominican Republic (Golden). Simply translating it as “soep” (“soup”) or “stoofpot” (“stew”) would cause a significant loss in the text’s cultural value, while a more descriptive translation (something along the lines of “traditional Dominican stew with various kinds of meat and vegetables”) would slow the text down and make it less readable. Abelsen chooses to explain some of the CSE’s in his glossary; he explains for example that a “cigüapa” (Díaz, *Het korte maar wonderbare leven* 36) is a “mountain nymph in Dominican folklore” (328) and that a “guaraguarao” (161) is “an indigenous type of hawk” (329). The meaning of these terms cannot be deduced from context but Abelsen deems them important enough to explain. Like with the Spanish words, the translator must contemplate whether a term needs explaining. If that is the case, an extratextual gloss again seems to be the best approach, as it preserves the Dominican references of the source text, but also gives readers background information in a non-intrusive way.

As stated before, most culture-specific items in “Fiesta” refer to Dominican culture. There are a few instances, however, where the story refers to elements that are typically American. For these pragmatic translation problems, it is very important to consider the foreknowledge of the readers. For some of the CSE’s, a linguistic translation (Aixelá 62) is easily available. This type of CSE is not too problematic – for example, although baseball as a sport is not as common in the Netherlands as it is in the United States and therefore can be considered an element that is specific for American culture, there is a Dutch name for the sport and most Dutch readers will at least have some idea of what it is. Abelsen, interestingly enough, chooses not to translate some American CSE’s in his translation of *The Brief Wondrous Life*. There is something to be said for not translating “high school” (Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life* 19 and Díaz, *Het korte maar wonderbare leven* 29), as the school

systems in the Netherlands and the United States differ greatly, although this does have a strong exoticizing effect (Aixelá 61 and Holmes 186). However, he also chooses not to translate “coffee shop” (Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life* 70), even though that word in Dutch has a different meaning than it does in English – namely an establishment where cannabis is sold, rather than a café or restaurant. This example shows that it is important to take connotations and foreknowledge into consideration when opting for a certain translation. An example of an American culture-specific element in “Fiesta” that causes a pragmatic problem, is the basket at the toll: “At the toll, [Papi] was feeling positive enough to actually get out of the van and search around under the basket for dropped coins” (21). The Netherlands hardly have any toll roads and the basket they have at some unmanned toll booths in the United States is probably unknown to most Dutch readers. A translator can choose not to do anything but translate the word “basket” and leave it at that. This strategy may cause an estrangement effect, but as it is mentioned in a specific context, the reader may be able to deduce enough of the meaning not to be bothered too much. Another way to solve this translation problem is to translate around it. Instead of “under the basket”, the translator can also have Ramón search for example “op de grond” (“on the ground”). Although the basket disappears, the meaning of the whole sentences stays more or less the same.

The translation problems concerning most of the American CSE’s are caused by a difference in foreknowledge between the readers of the source and target culture. “Fiesta” does, however, also contain more culture-specific translation problems. These problems are mostly caused by differences in conventions concerning units of measurement. For example, at one point Yúnior refers to the speed of the car: “[E]very time [...] Papi went above twenty miles an hour, I vomited” (20). However, in Dutch, speed is not measured in miles but kilometres per hour. Although Aixelá states that the use of a naturalizing strategy is declining (63), in these cases preserving the original unit of measurement has such a strong exoticizing effect that converting them seems necessary.

A more language-pair specific problem that arises when trying to translate “Fiesta” is caused by the presence of English expletives. As we have seen earlier, although swearing is universal, swear words are culture-specific (van Oudenhoven et al. 176). Every culture has its own swearwords, each with its own emotional value. Translating and localising them therefore seems a necessity. A related factor that must also be taken into account is the fact that compound expletives, such as “ass-face” (23), cannot be translated word-for-word – “kontgezicht” does not exist as a Dutch expletive. It is up to the translator to find an alternative that has a similar meaning in the target language. On the other hand, because of television and other (social) media, the Dutch have come into contact with a lot of English expletives. A word such as “fuck” is rather common in the Dutch language – it is even included in Van Dale’s *Groot woordenboek van de Nederlandse taal*, the leading Dutch dictionary. As stated in the theoretical framework, Dutch does not have an equivalent that is as versatile as “fuck”, so therefore and since the target audience is familiar with the term anyway, retaining it is actually an option. However, it can also be argued that not every instance of a single expletive in the source text has to be translated as a single expletive in the target text. A translator can also choose different translations for different instances of a single expletive in the source text. This way, the translator can choose the option that best matches the original meaning and emotional value of the expletive in that specific instance.

Another language-pair specific translation problem when translating “Fiesta” is posed by the nonstandard use of English in the story. This includes slang and nonstandard grammatical structures. The slang words can be treated like the expletives; in most cases it is probably best to replace them by a Dutch slang term with a similar meaning, so as to preserve the style of the original text. However, an equivalent Dutch term may not always be available. The translator can then choose to either keep the English term – if it is also used in the Netherlands, this should not be too problematic – or replace the slang term with a common Dutch word. This may slightly alter the text’s style, but if no alternative is available, this may be the only

option. The nonstandard grammatical structures can be dealt with in various ways as well. If a Dutch nonstandard equivalent is available, that is probably the preferable option. However, for most nonstandard structures used in “Fiesta”, there is no such equivalent. There is no Dutch form of “ain’t” for example. It must also be taken into account how nonstandard certain structures are in their specific languages. Although multiple negations are not used in standard English, they are used widely in various of its dialects. In Dutch, however, multiple negations are much more uncommon and much more regarded as a grammatical error, rather than an expression of dialect. In *Het korte maar wonderbare leven*, Abelsen chooses to leave out all of these nonstandard structures. For example, “It ain’t no fucking Middle-earth” (Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life* 201) becomes “Het is niet eens Midden-Aarde” (Díaz, *Het korte maar wonderbare leven* 196) – which translates back to “It is not even Middle-earth”. Instead of leaving out all of the nonstandard structures in the translation, there is also the option of creating them in other place in the target text. So for example, while there is no Dutch equivalent of “ain’t”, there is a nonstandard form of the Dutch word for “can”. Instead of “kan”, the translator can for example use the nonstandard “ken” in some instances. This way, the nonstandard stylistic elements do not disappear completely.

At a micro-level, “Fiesta” also contains some unique text-specific translation problems that cannot be categorized, such as the phrase “she poked us in our five cardinal spots” (20). Because the solutions for these problems depend so heavily on the context, they will not be discussed here, but in the footnotes accompanying the target text.

Conclusion

Junot Díaz's short story "Fiesta 1980" contains several interesting elements. From the theoretical framework it became clear that when it comes to multilingual texts, translators have several options. They can translate a multilingual text completely and thus create a monolingual text, but they can also choose to preserve the multilingualism and only replace one of the source languages by the target language. The foreignisms left in the target text can be translated in-text, accompanied by footnotes, explained in a glossary or simply not explained at all. These strategies can also be applied to Spanglish texts such as "Fiesta 1980". The type of Spanglish used in "Fiesta" is the one Alfredo Ardila describes as "type 1". In this form of Spanglish, English is the predominant language but code-switching to Spanish occurs frequently (Ardila 66-7). With the amount of Spanish in "Fiesta 1980" being so small but yet so stylistically significant, omitting it in the translation seemed too radical. Since the source text already contained a glossary and since it offered the opportunity to explain and translate Spanish words without disrupting the flow of the text, adding a glossary to the annotated translation seemed the most fitting solution to the problems caused by the Dominican Spanish words and culture-specific elements in the text.

The second element of interest for this thesis was swearing. Although some of the swearing in "Fiesta" is done in Spanish and was therefore not translated, the source text also contains several English expletives. As became clear from the theoretical framework, swearwords are often culture specific. On the other hand, the Dutch have become familiar with English expletives such as 'fuck'. In the chapter "Solutions for Translation Problems" it became clear that there is no cookie cutter solution when it comes to translating expletives; the emotional charge and meaning of every occurrence of a certain expletive must be analysed separately.

Thirdly, slang and other nonstandard uses of English were considered. Like expletives, slang words are often (sub)culture- and also time-specific and like it is the case with expletives, there is no single solution for the translation problems caused

by slang. For every occurrence of a slang term, the translator must find an equivalent that suits that specific situation. In the analysis of "Fiesta 1980" it emerged that Díaz uses not only nonstandard English words, but also nonstandard English phrases and grammatical structures. It became clear that preserving these nonstandard structures in translation was not always an option, as a Dutch nonstandard equivalent of a certain structure was not always available. It did, however, prove possible to add nonstandard structures in cases where the source text used standard English. This way, some of the nonstandardness of Díaz's writing style was still visible in the translation, albeit in other instances.

Translating "Fiesta 1980" by Junot Díaz proved to be an interesting project, in which many factors had to be taken into account and in which many translation problems had to be solved.

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Annotated Translation

Fiësta² 1980

Dat jaar lukte het Mami's jongste zus – mijn tía Yrma – eindelijk om naar de Verenigde Staten te komen. Zij en tío Miguel konden een appartement huren in de Bronx, vlakbij de Grand Concourse en iedereen besloot dat dat gevierd moest worden. Eigenlijk had mijn pa dat besloten, maar iedereen – oftewel Mami, tía Yrma, tío Miguel en hun burens – vond het een vet idee. Op de dag van het feestje kwam Papi rond zes uur thuis van zijn werk. Precies op tijd. We waren allemaal al aangekleed, en dat was maar goed ook. Als Papi binnen was gekomen en ons had zien rondlummelen in ons ondergoed, had hij ons flink op ons lazer gegeven.

Hij zei niks tegen niemand³, niet eens tegen mijn ma. Hij drong zich langs haar, hief zijn hand toen ze iets tegen hem wilde zeggen en liep meteen door naar de douche. Rafa keek me aan met die ene blik en ik keek terug; we wisten allebei dat Papi bij zijn Puerto Ricaanse scharrel⁴ geweest was en het bewijs snel van zich af wilde spoelen.

Mami zag er die dag heel mooi uit. In de Verenigde Staten had ze eindelijk wat vlees op haar botten gekregen; ze was niet meer diezelfde flaca⁵ die hier drie jaar geleden aangekomen was. Ze had haar haren kortgeknipt en ze droeg massa's goedkope sieraden die er bij haar niet eens zo waardeloos⁶ uitzagen. Ze rook naar zichzelf, naar de wind in de bomen. Ze wachtte altijd tot het allerlaatste moment voor ze haar parfum op deed, omdat ze het zonde vond om het eerder op te spuiten en dat dan nog eens te moeten doen als je op het feestje gearriveerd was.

We – ik, mijn broer, mijn zusje en Mami – wachtten tot Papi klaar was met douchen. Mami leek nerveus, op haar gebruikelijke, emotionele manier. Ze bleef maar friemelen aan de gesp van haar riem. Die ochtend, toen ze ons had wakker gemaakt om naar school te gaan, had Mami gezegd dat ze wilde dat we zouden genieten van het feestje. Ik wil dansen⁷, had ze gezegd, maar nu de zon in de lucht

² I decided to adapt the title to the Dutch spelling of the word as recorded in Van Dale's *Groot woordenboek van de Nederlandse taal*.

³ The ST uses a triple negation, but since multiple negations in Dutch are much less common, I decided that in Dutch, a double negation was a strong enough stylistic element.

⁴ I decided to replace the adjective phrase from the ST by a single word with roughly the same meaning, because the expression "seeing someone" is rather hard to translate into an equivalent Dutch phrase.

⁵ I added a glossary containing some of the (Dominican) Spanish words at the end of the short story.

⁶ I noticed I had unintentionally added some small puns throughout the story – not only here with "goedkoop" and "waardeloos", but also with "niet meer diezelfde flaca" and "aangekomen" a few lines earlier and "zonder een pocket in zijn zak" later on in the story. Although these do not occur in the ST, I decided to keep them because they are fitting translations.

⁷ Like in the ST, I do not use quotation marks.

naar beneden zakte als een klodder spuug⁸ op de muur, leek het alsof ze het het liefst zo snel mogelijk achter de rug wilde hebben.

Rafa had ook geen zin om naar een feestje te gaan en ik wilde sowieso nooit ergens heen met mijn familie. Buiten op de parkeerplaats waren ze aan het honkballen en we hoorden onze vrienden Hé en Je ken⁹ er geen kut van naar elkaar schreeuwen. We hoorden het zovende geluid van een bal die over de auto's scheerde, het gekletter van een aluminium knuppel die neerkwam op het asfalt. Niet dat ik of Rafa nou zo gek waren op honkbal; we speelden gewoon graag met de kinderen uit de buurt, waarbij we ze bij wat ze dan ook deden in de pan hakten. Door het geschreeuw wisten we allebei dat het gelijk opging en dat we allebei we het verschil zouden hebben kunnen maken. Rafa fronste en ik fronste terug, hij balde zijn vuist. Doe me niet na, zei hij.

Doe me niet na, zei ik.

Hij sloeg me – ik zou hebben teruggeslagen, maar Papi kwam de woonkamer binnengemarcheerd met een handdoek om zijn middel. Hij zag er zo veel kleiner uit dan wanneer hij aangekleed was. Er zaten een paar plukjes haar rond zijn tepels en zijn mond was vertrokken tot een knorrige streep, alsof hij zijn tong verbrand had of zo.

Hebben ze gegeten? vroeg hij aan Mami.

Ze knikte. Ik heb voor jou ook wat gemaakt.

Je hebt hem toch niet ook laten eten?

Ay, Dios mío, zei ze, terwijl ze haar armen langs haar lichaam liet vallen.

Ay, Dios mío, zeg dat wel, zei Papi.

Ik mocht nooit iets eten voor we weggingen met de auto, maar drie keer raden wie er daarstraks, toen ze het avondeten van rijst, bonen en zoete platanos had opgediend, als eerste zijn bord leeg had? Je kon het Mami niet echt kwalijk nemen, ze had het druk gehad – koken, zich klaarmaken, mijn zusje Madai aankleden. Ik had haar eraan moeten herinneren me geen eten te geven, maar zo'n zoon was ik nu eenmaal niet.

Papi draaide zich naar me om. Coño, muchacho, waarom heb je nou gegeten?

Rafa begon al van me weg te schuifelen. Ik had hem ooit verteld dat ik hem maar een schijtlijster vond, omdat hij steeds verdween, elke keer als Papi op het punt stond me een klap voor m'n kop te geven.

Nevenschade, had Rafa gezegd. Ooit van gehoord?

Nee.

Zoek maar op.

Schijtlijster of niet, ik durfde niet naar hem te kijken. Papi was ouderwets; hij eiste je onverdeelde aandacht op als hij je op je lazer gaf. Je kon hem ook niet

⁸ I decided to use the more informal "spuug" (in contrast with "speeksel" later in the story), to retain the different registers used in the ST (which uses "spit" and "saliva", respectively).

⁹ Because there is no Dutch equivalent for some of the non-standard English used in the ST, I decided to add non-standard Dutch in some places where the ST uses standard English, to compensate for the losses in other places.

aankijken – dat mocht niet. Het beste was om naar zijn navel te staren, die perfect rond en schoon was. Papi trok me aan mijn oor overeind.

Als jij moet overgeven-

Ik zal het niet doen, riep ik uit, met tranen in mijn ogen, meer uit een reflex dan van pijn.

Ya, Ramón, ya. Het is zijn schuld niet, zei Mami.

Ze weten toch al eeuwen dat dit feestje vandaag is. Hoe dachten ze dat we er anders zouden komen? Vliegend?

Eindelijk liet hij mijn oor los en ik ging weer zitten. Madai was te bang om haar ogen open te doen. Omdat Papi al haar hele leven in de buurt was, was ze een megawatje geworden. Elke keer als Papi zijn stem verhief, begon haar lip te trillen als een soort speciaal afgestemde stemvork. Rafa deed net alsof hij zijn knokkels moest kraken en toen ik hem een zet gaf, wierp hij me een *Kappen nou-blik*¹⁰ toe. Maar zelfs dat kleine beetje erkenning zorgde ervoor dat ik me beter voelde.

Ik was altijd degene waar mijn vader een probleem mee had. Het leek net alsof het mijn door God gegeven plicht was om hem over de rooie te krijgen, om alles precies te doen op de manier die hij haatte. Onze ruzies konden me niet zoveel schelen. Ik wilde nog steeds dat hij van me hield, iets wat nooit vreemd of tegenstrijdig leek, tot jaren later, toen hij voorgoed uit onze levens verdwenen was.

Tegen de tijd dat mijn oor geen pijn meer deed, was Papi aangekleed en zegende Mami ons, plechtig, alsof we op het punt stonden ten strijde te trekken. Wij zeiden, als we aan de beurt waren, Bendición, Mami, en dan prikte zij ons in ons voorhoofd, onze borst en onze schouders¹¹ en zei Que Dios te bendiga.

Zo begonnen al onze ritjes, met de woorden die me achtervolgden elke keer als ik het huis verliet.

Niemand van ons zei een woord tot we in Papi's Volkswagenbusje zaten. Gloednieuw, limegroen en gekocht om indruk te maken. Onder de indruk waren we zeker, maar elke keer als ik in dat busje zat en Papi harder reed dan dertig kilometer per uur, moest ik kotsen. Ik had vroeger nooit problemen gehad met auto's – dat busje was mijn vloek. Mami dacht dat het aan de bekleding lag. In haar hoofd hadden alle Amerikaanse dingen – apparaten, mondwater, gek uitzierende bekleding – een soort intrinsieke slechtheid in zich. Papi nam me liever nergens mee naartoe in het busje, maar als het moest, zat ik voorin op Mami's stoel zodat ik uit het raam kon overgeven.

¿Cómo te sientes? vroeg Mami over mijn schouder toen Papi de snelweg opreed. Haar hand lag onderaan mijn nek. Eén ding moet je Mami nageven, ze had nooit zweterige handpalmen.

¹⁰ I copied the use of italics to express these kinds of unspoken quotations from the ST.

¹¹ I could not find the meaning of the “five cardinal spots” anywhere, but because of the context I assumed it was some kind of blessing. I opted for this translation as to not confuse the reader.

Het gaat wel, zei ik, terwijl ik stug rechtdoor bleef kijken. Ik wilde Papi's blik ontwijken. Hij had er maar één, woest en scherp, en ik voelde me er altijd door gekwetst.

Toma. Mami gaf me vier mentas. Ze had er aan het begin van de rit drie uit het raam gegooid, als offer voor Eshú; de rest was voor mij.

Ik nam er eentje en zoog er langzaam op, duwde hem met mijn tong tegen mijn tanden. We reden Newark Airport voorbij zonder dat er iets gebeurde. Als Madai wakker geweest was, had ze gehuild omdat de vliegtuigen zo dicht langs de auto's vlogen.

Hoe voelt hij zich? vroeg Papi.

Prima, zei ik. Ik gluurde naar Rafa en die deed alsof hij me niet zag. Zo deed hij altijd, op school en thuis. Als ik in de problemen zat, kende hij me niet. Madai lag als een blok te slapen, maar zelfs met haar gezicht helemaal verkreukeld en kwijlend zag ze er schattig uit, met allemaal kleine vlechtjes¹² in haar haar.

Ik draaide me om en concentreerde me op het snoepje. Papi begon zelfs grapjes te maken, dat we het busje vanavond misschien niet zouden hoeven schoonschrobben. Hij begon eindelijk wat te ontspannen, keek niet meer de hele tijd op zijn horloge. Misschien dacht hij wel aan die Puerto Ricaanse vrouw of misschien was hij gewoon blij dat we met zijn allen bij elkaar waren. Ik wist het nooit zeker. Bij de tolpoort was hij vrolijk genoeg om daadwerkelijk uit te stappen en naar muntjes te zoeken die op de grond gevallen waren¹³. Hij had dat ooit één keer gedaan om Madai aan het lachen te maken, maar inmiddels was het gewoonte geworden. Auto's achter ons toeterden en ik liet mezelf wegzakken in mijn stoel. Rafa kon het niets schelen; hij grijnsde naar de andere auto's en zwaaide. Zijn echte taak was om te kijken of er geen politie aankwam. Mami schudde Madai wakker en zodra ze zag dat Papi gebukt op zoek was naar een paar kwartjes slaakte ze zo'n harde gil van verrukking dat mijn hoofd bijna uit elkaar knalde.

Toen was het uit met de pret. Net na de Washington Bridge begon ik me licht in m'n hoofd te voelen. De geur van de bekleding kroop helemaal mijn hoofd in en mijn mond vulde zich met speeksel. Mami's hand kneep in mijn schouder en toen ik de blik van Papi opving, keek hij zo van, O nee. Waag het niet.

De eerste keer dat ik ziek werd in het busje was toen Papi me meenam naar de bibliotheek. Rafa was mee en hij kon niet geloven dat ik moest overgeven. Ik stond bekend om mijn stalen maag. Die kun je ontwikkelen als je je jeugd doorbrengt in een derdewereldland. Papi maakte zich genoeg zorgen om meteen terug te gaan naar

¹² Although I mainly used my hard copy of *Drown* as source text, I also had an epub at my disposal. In the hard copy version, Madai's hair is separated into patches, while in the epub version it is separated into twists. Since a Google search for patches only yielded pictures of people with bald spots on their head, I decided to use the epub version of the story as my reference here.

¹³ I decided not to translate the American CSE "under the basket". The action as described does not change – Ramón is still looking for coins on the ground – and references to a "trechter" for instance, do not mean anything to the Dutch reader.

huis zodra Rafa de boeken had ingeleverd. Mami gaf me een van haar honing-en-
uienmengseltjes en daardoor voelde ik me beter. Een week later waagden we nog een
poging naar de bibliotheek en tijdens dit ritje kreeg ik het raam niet op tijd open.
Nadat Papi me thuis had gebracht, maakte hij zelf het busje schoon, met een
uitdrukking van askho op zijn gezicht. Dat was heel wat, want Papi maakte bijna
nooit zelf iets schoon. Hij kwam binnen en trof me aan op de bank. Ik voelde me
beroerd.

Het komt door de auto, zei hij tegen Mami. Daar wordt hij ziek van.

De schade was dit keer minimaal, niets wat Papi niet van de deur kon spoelen met de
tuinslang. Maar hij was wel pissig; hij porde met zijn vinger in mijn wang, een goede,
harde stoot. Zo waren zijn straffen: vindingrijk. Eerder dat jaar had ik op school een
opstel geschreven genaamd "Mijn vader de beul", maar van de lerares moest ik het
opnieuw schrijven. Ze dacht dat ik het grappig bedoeld had.

De rest van de rit naar de Bronx legden we in stilte af. We stopten onderweg
maar één keer, zodat ik mijn tanden kon poetsen. Mami had mijn tandenborstel en
een tube tandpasta meegenomen en terwijl allerlei auto's ons voorbijraasden, stond
ze buiten, bij mij, zodat ik me niet alleen zou voelen.

Tío Miguel was ruim twee meter lang en zijn haar was omhoog gekamd tot
een soort afrokapsel¹⁴. Hij gaf mij en Rafa een grote, verpletterende knuffel en kuste
Mami en eindigde met Madai op zijn schouders. De laatste keer dat ik Tío gezien had
was op het vliegveld, op zijn eerste dag in de Verenigde Staten. Ik weet nog dat het
leek alsof het hem helemaal niet zoveel deed om in een ander land te zijn.

Hij keek naar me. Carajo, Yuniór, je ziet er vreselijk uit!

Hij moest kotsen, legde mijn broer uit.

Ik gaf Rafa een duw. En bedankt, kuttekop.

Hé, zei hij. Tío vroeg het toch.

Tío sloeg met zijn hand als een kolenschop op mijn schouder. Iedereen moet
weleens overgeven, zei hij. Je had me moeten zien in het vliegtuig hier naartoe. Dios
mio! Hij rolde met zijn Aziatisch uitziende ogen om het nog eens extra te
benadrukken. Ik dacht dat we allemaal dood zouden gaan.

Iedereen kon zien dat hij loog. Ik glimlachte alsof ik me beter voelde door wat
hij gezegd had.

Moet ik iets te drinken voor je halen? vroeg Tío. We hebben bier en rum.

Miguel, zei Mami. Hij is nog jong.

Jong? In Santo Domingo lag hij nu allang te vozen.

Mami perste haar lippen op elkaar zodat ze een streep vormden, wat wel even
duurde.

Wat, het is toch zo, zei Tío.

Dus, Mami, zei ik. Wanneer ga ik weer eens naar de D.R.?

¹⁴ The ST calls Miguel's hairstyle a "demi-fro", but the exact meaning of that was nowhere to be found, which is why I decided to go for this slightly vague translation.

Genoeg, Yunior.

Dat is de enige kut die je ooit zal krijgen, zei Rafa zo tegen me dat niemand anders het kon verstaan¹⁵.

Naast die van jouw vriendin, natuurlijk.

Rafa glimlachte. Dat was een goeie, moest hij toegeven.

Papi had het busje geparkeerd en kwam nu binnen. Hij en Miguel schudden elkaar de hand op een manier die mijn vingers compleet geplet zou hebben¹⁶.

Coño, compá'i, ¿cómo va todo? zeiden ze tegen elkaar.

Tía kwam erbij, met een schort om en misschien wel de langste nepnagels¹⁷ die ik ooit heb gezien. Er was zo'n motherfucker van een goeroe in het *Guinness Book of World Records* die nog langere nagels had, maar ik zweer, ze kwamen in de buurt. Ze kuste iedereen, zei tegen mij en Rafa hoe guapo we waren – Rafa geloofde haar, uiteraard – zei tegen Madai hoe bella ze was, maar toen ze bij Papi was gekomen versteende ze even, alsof er een wesp op het puntje van zijn neus zat, maar toen kuste ze hem toch.

Mami zei dat we naar de woonkamer moesten gaan, naar de andere kinderen. Tío zei, Wacht even, ik wil jullie het appartement nog laten zien. Ik was blij dat Tía zei, Momentje, want voor zover ik het tot nu had gezien was het appartement ingericht volgens de laatste trends op het gebied van Dominicaanse kitsch. Hoe minder ik zag, des te beter. Ik bedoel, ik vond plastic hoezen over banken best mooi, maar tering¹⁸, Tío en Tía waren wel heel erg doorgeslagen. Er hing een discobol in de woonkamer en het gestucte plafond leek wel een druipsteengrot. Aan de randen van alle banken bungelden gouden kwastjes. Tía kwam de keuken uit met wat mensen die ik niet kende en eer ze iedereen had voorgesteld, hadden alleen Papi en Mami de rondleiding door het vierkamerappartement op de derde etage gekregen. Ik en Rafa¹⁹

¹⁵ I left out the translation for "in English", because that could cause some confusion – none of the text in this translation is in English (except for some loaned expletives) so adding 'in English' to this Dutch-Spanish text would seem a little strange. I decided not to add "in Dutch" because that would also sound strange, as the story obviously takes place in the United States. Instead I chose a solution that I think approaches what Díaz meant: because their mother and uncle were older when they moved to the States, it is likely their English is not as good as that of Rafa and Yunior. Rafa is saying something rather vulgar and he does not want the adults to know what he is saying, which is why, in the ST, he is using English. In my translation, I chose a more general translation that conveys that same idea.

¹⁶ The ST contains an American CSE here, a reference to Wonder Bread. Since the Dutch target audience is probably not familiar with this brand, I left out both the CSE and the reference to bread – which would not make a lot of sense in Dutch.

¹⁷ Again, a CSE is used in the ST, "Lee Press-On Nails", which I again left out because the target audience is unfamiliar with the brand.

¹⁸ Initially I chose to translate "damn" as "jemig", but that felt too polite. I then contemplated using "jzus", but I felt that, despite all the foul language in the text, that would not really work combination with the earlier passage about Yunior's mother blessing him. I eventually decided on "tering" because I feel that has a similar emotional charge and expresses that same unimpressed surprise.

¹⁹ Like in the ST, I always have Yunior refer to himself before he refers to the other person.

voegden ons bij de kinderen in de woonkamer. Ze waren al begonnen met eten. We hadden honger, legde een meisje uit, met een pastelito in haar hand. Het jongetje was ongeveer drie jaar jonger dan ik, maar het meisje dat gesproken had, Leti, was van mijn leeftijd. Zij en een ander meisje zaten samen op de bank en ze waren fucking cute²⁰.

Leti stelde hen voor: het jongetje was haar broertje Wilquins en het andere meisje was haar buurmeisje Mari. Leti had behoorlijke tetas en ik had meteen door dat mijn broer zijn pijlen op haar gericht had. Zijn smaak wat meisjes betreft was zo voorspelbaar. Hij ging tussen Leti en Mari zitten en door de manier waarop ze naar hem lachten wist ik dat het hem wel zou lukken. Geen van de twee meisjes wierp me meer dan een vluchtige blik toe, maar dat kon me niet schelen. Natuurlijk vond ik meisjes wel leuk, maar ik was doodsbenuwd om met ze te praten, tenzij we ruzie maakten of ik ze stupidos noemde, wat dat jaar een van mijn favoriete woorden was. Ik richtte me op Wilquins en vroeg hem wat er hier in de buurt te doen was. Mari, die de laagste stem had die ik ooit had gehoord, zei, Hij kan niet praten.

Hoe bedoel je?

Hij is stom.

Ik keek Wilquins ongelovig aan. Hij lachte en knikte, alsof hij een prijs had gewonnen of zo.

Begrijpt hij me wel? vroeg ik.

Natuurlijk begrijpt hij je wel, zei Rafa. Hij is niet dom.

Ik wist dat Rafa dat alleen zei om punten te scoren bij de meisjes. Ze knikten allebei.

Mari met de lage stem zei, Hij is de beste leerling van zijn klas.

Ik dacht, Niet slecht voor een stomme. Ik ging naast Wilquins zitten. Na ongeveer twee minuten tv kijken haalde Wilquins een zak dominostenen tevoorschijn en gebaarde naar me. Of ik een potje wilde doen? Best. Ik en hij²¹ speelden tegen Rafa en Leti en we hakten ze twee keer in de pan, iets waar Rafa ontzettend chagrijnig van werd. Hij keek naar me alsof hij overwoog naar me uit te halen, gewoon zodat hij zich beter voelde. Leti bleef maar in Rafa's oor fluisteren dat het niet erg was.

Ik hoorde mijn ouders in de keuken in hun gebruikelijke gedrag vervallen. Papi praatte hard, alsof hij ruzie maakte; je hoefde niet bij hem in de buurt te zijn om

²⁰ For quite a long time, I translated "cute" as "leuk", but I felt that the combination "fucking leuk" did not really work – it had something sarcastic to it, like it is really saying "they think are funny but they really aren't". I felt that the translation "schattig" had too much of a "sweet" connotation to it – it is something you say of a child or an animal, but not so much about someone you fancy. I then found out that "cute" can actually be found in Van Dale's *Groot Woordenboek van de Nederlandse taal* and decided that not translating it was not just an option, but in this case – in my opinion – also the best option.

²¹ In the ST, the personal pronouns are objective rather than nominative. I contemplated doing that in my translation as well, but "mij en hem speelden" sounded not only so grammatically wrong but also so unnatural (unlike "me and him played", which – although grammatically incorrect – sounds like something someone could actually say) that I decided against it.

te begrijpen wat hij bedoelde. En wat Mami betrof, je moest je handen bij je oren houden om haar stem te kunnen horen. Een paar keer liep ik de keuken binnen, één keer zodat ik mijn tíos kon laten zien hoeveel bullshit ik de afgelopen paar jaar in mijn hoofd had weten te stampen; een tweede keer om een glas zo groot als een emmer te vullen met frisdrank. Mami en Tía bakten tostones en de laatste pastelitos. Ze leek nu veel blijer en door de manier waarop haar handen aan ons eten werkten, zou je bijna zeggen dat ze ergens anders een ander leven leidde, waarin ze unieke en kostbare dingen maakte. Af en toe stootte ze Tía aan. Waarschijnlijk deden ze die shit al hun hele leven zo. Maar zodra Mami me zag, wierp ze me die ene blik toe. Blijf niet te lang, zei die blik. Maak die ouwe van je niet boos.

Papi was te druk in discussie over Elvis om me te zien. Toen noemde iemand María Montez en Papi blafte, María Montez? Laat me jóú²² eens wat vertellen over María Montez, compa'í.

Misschien was ik gewoon aan hem gewend. Zijn stem – die veel harder was dan die van de meeste volwassenen – deed me helemaal niks, hoewel de andere kinderen ongemakkelijk heen en weer schoven op hun stoelen. Wilquins wilde het geluid van de tv harder zetten, maar Rafa zei, Dat zou ik niet doen als ik jou was. Die stomme had wel ballen. Hij zette hem toch harder en ging toen zitten. Een tel later kwam Wilquins' pa binnen, een fles Presidente in zijn hand. Die gast had echt de zintuigen van Spiderman²³ of zo. Heb je hem harder gezet? vroeg hij aan Wilquins en Wilquins knikte.

Is dit jouw huis? vroeg zijn pa. Het leek alsof hij op het punt stond Wilquins een pak slaag te geven maar in plaats daarvan zette hij de tv zachter.

Zie je wel, zei Rafa. Je had bijna op je lazer²⁴ gekregen.

Ik ontmoette de Puerto Ricaanse vrouw voor het eerst vlak nadat Papi het busje gekocht had. Hij nam me mee op korte tochtjes, om me te genezen van mijn braakneigingen. Het werkte niet echt, maar ik had altijd zin in onze ritjes, ook al moest ik erna elke keer overgeven. Dit waren de enige momenten waarop ik en Papi iets met z'n tweeën deden. Als we alleen waren, behandelde hij me veel beter, alsof ik misschien zijn zoon was of zo.

Voor elke rit maakte Mami een kruisteken over me.

Bendición, Mami, zei ik.

Ze kustte me op mijn voorhoofd. Que Dios te bendiga. En dan gaf ze me een handjevol mentas omdat ze wilde dat het goed met me zou gaan. Mami geloofde niet dat onze uitjes me ergens van zouden genezen, maar de enige keer dat ze dat tegen

²² The ST uses italics here for emphasis, but in Dutch emphasis is expressed by accents, so I decided not to follow the ST here.

²³ The Dutch translation for Spider-senses is “spinnenzintuig”, but I felt that, without the Spiderman context, Dutch readers would probably not make that connection.

²⁴ The ST also uses italics here (“You nearly got your ass *kicked*”), but I felt that stressing “lazer” in my translation would sound really strange and unnatural.

Papi had gezegd, had hij haar de mond gesnoerd en wat wist ze er nu eigenlijk helemaal van?

Ik en Papi praatten niet veel. We reden gewoon wat rond door onze buurt. Af en toe vroeg hij, Hoe gaat het?

En ik knikte, onafhankelijk van hoe ik me voelde.

Op een dag moest ik overgeven net buiten Perth Amboy. In plaats van me naar huis te brengen, ging hij de andere kant op, richting Industrial Avenue en stopte een paar minuten later voor een lichtblauw huis dat ik niet herkende. Het deed me denken aan de paaseieren die we beschilderden op school, de eieren die we uit het raam van de bus naar andere auto's gooiden.

De Puerto Ricaanse vrouw was er en ze hielp me me op te frissen. Ze had droge, papierachtige handen en toen ze met de handdoek over mijn borst wreef deed ze dat hardhandig, alsof ik een autobumper was die in de was gezet werd. Ze was heel dun en ze had een wolk van bruin haar boven haar smalle gezicht en de scherpste zwarte ogen die je ooit gezien hebt.

Wat een schatje, zei ze tegen Papi.

Niet als hij moet overgeven, zei Papi.

Hoe heet je? vroeg ze aan mij. Ben jij Rafa?

Ik schudde mijn hoofd.

Dan is het Yunior, toch?

Ik knikte.

Jij bent de slimme, zei ze, plotseling tevreden met zichzelf. Wil je misschien mijn boeken zien?

Het waren haar boeken niet. Ik herkende ze als boeken die mijn vader bij haar moet hebben laten liggen. Papi was een alleslezer, kon niet eens vreemdgaan zonder pocket in zijn zak.

Waarom ga je geen tv kijken? opperde Papi. Hij keek naar haar alsof ze de laatste kippenpoot op aarde was.

We hebben heel veel zenders, zei ze. Gebruik de afstandsbediening maar als je wilt.

Ze gingen met z'n tweeën naar boven en door wat er allemaal gebeurde was ik zo geschrokken dat ik niet durfde rond te neuzen. Ik zat daar maar, beschaamd, met het idee dat er elk moment iets groots en brandends naar beneden zou kunnen komen. Ik keek een uur lang naar het journaal voordat Papi naar beneden kwam en zei, Kom, we gaan.

Ongeveer twee uur later dienden de vrouwen het eten op en zoals altijd zei niemand behalve de kinderen dank je wel. Zal wel een Dominicaanse traditie zijn of zo. Alles wat ik lekker vond, was er – chicharrones, gefrituurde kip, tostones, sancocho, rijst, gefrituurde kaas, cassave, avocado, aardappelsalade, een homp pernil zo groot als een meteor, zelfs een gemengde salade waar ik niet per se trek in had – maar toen ik

met de andere kinderen bij het buffet ging staan zei Papi, O nee, jij krijgt niet, en rukte²⁵ het papieren bord uit mijn hand.

Wat is er nu weer aan de hand? vroeg Tía, terwijl ze me een ander bord gaf.

Hij eet niks, zei Papi. Mami deed alsof ze Rafael hielp met de pernil.

Waarom mag hij niks eten?

Omdat ik het zeg.

De volwassenen die ons niet kenden, deden alsof ze niets gehoord hadden en Tío lachte alleen schaapachtig en zei tegen iedereen dat ze maar moesten gaan eten. Alle kinderen – inmiddels een stuk of tien – dromden de woonkamer binnen met hun afgeladen borden en alle volwassenen doken de keuken en de eetkamer in, waar de radio keiharde bachatas speelde. Ik was de enige zonder bord. Papi hield me tegen voor ik er vandoor kon gaan. Hij praatte zachtjes, zodat niemand anders hem kon horen.

Als je ook maar iets eet, krijg je op je lazer. ¿Entiendes?

Ik knikte.

En als je broer je iets geeft, krijgt hij ook een pak slaag. Gewoon hier, waar iedereen het kan zien. ¿Entiendes?

Ik knikte opnieuw. Ik kon hem wel vermoorden en hij moet het hebben aangevoeld, want hij gaf mijn hoofd een duwtje.

Alle kinderen staarden me aan toen ik binnenkwam en voor de tv ging zitten.

Wat is er mis met je vader? vroeg Leti.

Hij is een lul, zei ik.

Rafa schudde zijn hoofd. Dat soort shit moet je niet zeggen waar andere mensen bij zijn.

Jij hebt makkelijk praten, met je bord vol eten, zei ik.

Hé, als ik een kleine, kotsende baby was, zou ik ook geen eten krijgen.

Ik zei bijna iets terug, maar ik besloot me op de tv te concentreren. Ik zou niet degene zijn die begon. No fucking way²⁶. Dus keek ik hoe Bruce Lee Chuck Norris de vloer van het Colosseum insloeg en probeerde ik te doen alsof er nergens in het hele huis eten was. Het was Tía die me uiteindelijk redde. Ze kwam de kamer binnen en zei, Yunior, aangezien je toch niet eet, kun je me wel helpen met ijs halen.

Ik had geen zin, maar ze verwarde mijn tegenzin met iets anders.

Ik heb het al aan je vader gevraagd.

Ze hield mijn hand vast terwijl we liepen; Tía had geen kinderen, maar je kon merken dat ze die wel wilde. Ze was zo'n familielid dat altijd aan je verjaardag dacht, maar bij wie je alleen maar op bezoek ging omdat het moest. We waren nog niet eens

²⁵ The ST had Ramón “taking” the plate out of Yunior’s hands, followed by the sentence “His fingers weren’t gentle”. I tried to capture both the taking and the roughness of the action as described in the second sentence in this one verb.

²⁶ I contemplated translating this, but “geen sprake van” sounds way too polite and also does not allow for “fucking” to be inserted (no Dutch person would ever say “geen fucking sprake van”). I feel most Dutch readers are familiar enough with the English phrase and therefore I decided to keep it.

voorbij de overloop op de eerste verdieping voor ze haar handtas opende en me de eerste pastelito gaf van de drie die ze uit het huis had meegesmokkeld.

Ga je gang, zei ze. En zorg dat je je tanden poetst zodra je weer binnen bent.

Dankjewel, Tía, zei ik.

Die pastelitos hadden geen schijn van kans.

Ze zat naast me op de trap en rookte haar sigaret. We zaten helemaal op de eerste verdieping en nog steeds konden we de muziek en de volwassenen en de televisie horen. Tía leek als twee druppels water op Mami; allebei waren ze klein en hadden ze een lichte huid. Tía lachte veel en daarin verschilden ze het meest van elkaar.

Hoe gaat het thuis, Yuniór?

Hoe bedoel je?

Hoe gaat het in de flat? Gaat het goed met jou en je broer?

Ik herkende een ondervraging als ik er een hoorde, ongeacht hoe mooi hij was ingepakt. Ik zei niets. Begrijp me niet verkeerd, ik was dol op mijn tía, maar iets zei me dat ik mijn mond moest houden. Misschien was ik loyaal aan mijn familie, misschien wilde ik Mami gewoon beschermen of misschien was ik bang dat Papi erachter zou komen – het kon allemaal.

Gaat het goed met je moeder?

Ik haalde mijn schouders op.

Hebben ze vaak ruzie?

Nooit, zei ik. Te vaak mijn schouders ophalen zou net zo'n slecht antwoord geweest zijn. Papi is te vaak aan het werk.

Werk, zei Tía, alsof het de naam was van iemand die ze niet mocht.

Ik en Rafa praatten nauwelijks over de Puerto Ricaanse vrouw. Als we bij haar thuis avondeten aten, die paar keer dat Papi ons mee had genomen, deden we nog steeds alsof er niets gekks aan de hand was. Geef de ketchup eens door, man. Geen probleem, gast. De affaire was als een gat in de vloer van de woonkamer; we waren er zo aan gewend het te omzeilen dat we soms vergaten dat het er zat.

Tegen middernacht dansten de volwassenen als gekken. Ik zat voor Tía's slaapkamer – waar Madai lag te slapen – en probeerde geen aandacht te trekken. Van Rafa moest ik de deur bewaken; hij en Leti waren ook daarbinnen, met nog een paar kinderen, waarschijnlijk flink bezig²⁷. Wilquins was naar bed gegaan aan de andere kant van de gang, dus ik had alleen de kakkerlakken om me mee te vermaken.

Als ik de woonkamer inkeek, zag ik ongeveer twintig vaders en moeders dansen en bier drinken. Af en toe riep er iemand, ¡Quisqueya! En de anderen joelden

²⁷ "Getting busy" usually has a sexual connotation, but the presence of "some of the other kids" made me hesitant to translate "getting busy" as "vozen" or "flikflooien". I chose the Dutch equivalent "bezig zijn" because although it can have a sexual meaning, it is not too direct.

en stampen met hun voeten. Voor zover ik het kon zien leken mijn ouders het naar hun zin te hebben.

Mami en Tía stonden vaak naast elkaar te fluisteren en ik bleef maar verwachten dat er daardoor iets zou gebeuren, een vechtpartij of zo. Ik was met mijn familie nog nooit ergens geweest waar het niet compleet uit de hand gelopen was. We waren niet eens melodramatisch of gewoon knettergek, zoals andere families. We vochten als achtstegroepers, zonder enige waardigheid. Ik denk dat ik de hele avond wachtte totdat het mis zou gaan tussen Papi en Mami. Ik had altijd gedacht dat Papi op deze manier ontmaskerd zou worden, publiekelijk, zodat iedereen het zou weten.

Je hebt me bedrogen!

Maar alles was rustiger dan normaal. En het leek er niet op dat Mami iets tegen Papi ging zeggen. Af en toe dansten ze samen, maar na één liedje ging Mami steeds weer terug naar Tía om hun gesprek voort te zetten.

Ik probeerde me Mami voor te stellen in de tijd voor Papi. Misschien was ik moe of gewoon verdrietig door al het nadenken over hoe mijn familie was. Misschien wist ik eigenlijk al hoe het over een paar jaar zou eindigen, Mami zonder Papi, en dacht ik er daarom over na. Ik kon me haar moeilijk alleen voorstellen. Het leek alsof Papi altijd bij haar geweest was, zelfs toen we in Santo Domingo wachtten tot hij ons zou laten overkomen.

De enige foto die onze familie had van Mami als jonge vrouw, voor ze met Papi trouwde, was een foto die iemand van haar gemaakt had op een verkiezingsfeestje en die ik een keer gevonden had toen ik op zoek was naar geld voor de speelhal. Mami had hem bij haar immigratiepapieren gestopt. Op de foto wordt ze omringd door lachende neven en nichten²⁸ die ik nooit zal ontmoeten, die allemaal bezweet zijn van het dansen en wiens kleren gekreukeld en losjes om hen heen hangen. Je kunt zien dat het een hete avond is en dat veel mensen gestoken zijn door de muggen. Ze zit rechtop en zelfs in de menigte valt ze op, met haar ingetogen glimlach, alsof zij misschien wel de reden is voor het feestje. Je kan haar handen niet zien, maar ik stelde me voor dat ze een knoop legden in een strootje of een stukje touw. Dit was de vrouw die mijn vader een jaar later op de Malecón zou ontmoeten, de vrouw die Mami altijd had gedacht te blijven.

Mami moet gezien hebben dat ik haar bestudeerde, want ze stopte met wat ze aan het doen was en glimlachte naar me, misschien wel haar eerste lach van de avond. Ik voelde ineens de aandrang om naar haar toe te gaan en haar een knuffel te geven, gewoon omdat ik van haar hield, maar er bevonden zich een stuk of elf dikke, wiebelende lichamen tussen ons. Dus ging ik op de betegelde vloer zitten en wachtte.

Ik moet in slaap gevallen zijn, want het volgende wat ik me herinnerde was Rafa die me een schop gaf en zei, We gaan. Het leek erop dat hij succes had gehad bij

²⁸ Although cousins can also mean just “neven” or just “nichten”, I decided to translate it as both because that way it sounds like an even bigger group and because it is not clear from the ST whether all of those cousins are male or female.

de meisjes; hij glimlachte van oor tot oor. Ik stond op, precies op tijd om Tía en Tío een kus te geven. Mami hield de schaal vast die ze had meegebracht.

Waar is Papi? vroeg ik.

Hij is beneden, de auto halen. Mami boog voorover en gaf me een kus.

Je hebt het goed gedaan vandaag, zei ze.

En toen kwam Papi binnengestormd en zei dat we als de sodemieter naar beneden moesten gaan voor een of andere pendejo van een agent²⁹ hem een bekeuring zou geven. Meer zonen, meer handen en toen waren we vertrokken.

Ik kan me niet herinneren of ik uit mijn doen was nadat ik de Puerto Ricaanse vrouw ontmoet had, maar dat moet haast wel, want Mami stelde alleen vragen als ze dacht dat er iets niet goed ging. Ze had ongeveer tien pogingen nodig, maar op een middag lukte het haar me in een hoek te drijven toen we met zijn tweeën thuis waren. Onze bovenburen sloegen hun kind verrot en ik en zij zaten er al de hele middag naar te luisteren. Ze legde haar hand op de mijne en vroeg, gaat alles wel goed, Yuniór? Heb je ruzie gehad met je broer?

Ik en Rafa hadden al met elkaar gepraat. In de kelder, waar onze ouders ons niet konden horen. Hij had gezegd dat hij wel van haar af wist, ja.

Papi heeft me er nu twee keer mee naartoe genomen, zei hij.

Waarom heb je me dat niet verteld? vroeg ik.

Wat moest ik dan in godsnaam zeggen? *Hey, Yuniór, raad eens wat er gisteren gebeurd is? Ik heb die sucia van Papi ontmoet!*

Ik zei ook niets tegen Mami. Ze hield me heel, heel goed in de gaten. Later zou ik denken, misschien als ik het haar verteld had, zou ze hem geconfronteerd hebben, iets gedaan hebben, maar ja, hoe kun je dat nu weten? Ik zei dat ik problemen had gehad op school en meteen was alles weer normaal tussen ons. Ze legde haar hand op mijn schouder, kneep er zachtjes in en dat was het.

We waren op de tolgeweg, net na afrit 11, toen ik het weer voelde opkomen. Ik lag tegen Rafa aangeleund maar nu ging ik rechtop zitten. Zijn vingers roken raar en zodra we in de auto zaten was hij vrijwel meteen in slaap gevallen. Madai lag ook te pitten, maar die snurkte tenminste niet.

In de duisternis zag ik Papi's hand op Mami's knie liggen en allebei zaten ze daar stil en roerloos. Ze zaten niet onderuitgezakt of zo; ze waren allebei klaarwakker, kaarsrecht in hun stoelen. Ik kon hun gezichten niet zien en hoe ik ook probeerde, ik kon me hun uitdrukkingen niet voorstellen. Geen van beide bewogen ze. Af en toe vulde het busje zich met het felle schijnsel van koplampen. Mami, zei ik uiteindelijk, en ze keken allebei achterom, al wetend wat er aan de hand was.

²⁹ In the ST, "pendejo" is used as an adjective ("pendejo cop"), but I found the meaning of the noun more fitting in this case.

Glossarium³⁰

Noot van de vertaler:

Enkele woorden waarvan iedereen de betekenis wel weet, of wel kan opmaken uit de context, zijn uit deze lijst weggelaten.

Askho – afschuw

Bachatas – Dominicaans muziekgenre, Zuid-Amerikaanse versie van de smartlap

Bendición – God zegene je

Chicharrones – uitgebakken spek

Cómo te sientes? – Hoe voel je je?

¿cómo va todo? – Hoe gaat het?

Compañero – vriend

Coño. carajo – verdomme

Dios mío – (O) mijn God

¿Entiendes? – Begrepen?

Eshú – godheid uit de Yorubareligie

Flaca – magere vrouw, dun meisje

Guapo – knap

Malecón – beroemde boulevard in Havana, Cuba

Mentas – pepermuntjes

Muchacho – zoon, jongen

Pastelito – Dominicaans bladerdeeghapje

Pendejo – eikel, sukkel

Pernil – karbonade

Platanos – bakbananen

Presidente – Dominicaans bier

Que Dios te bendiga – Moge God je zegenen

¡Quisqueya! – naam voor de Dominicaanse Republiek in de taal van de Taino-indianen

Toma – Neem maar

Tostones – twee keer gebakken bakbanaanchips

Sancocho – traditionele Dominicaanse stoofpot

Sucia – sloerie

³⁰ Like the ST, my translation contains a glossary of some of the Dominican Spanish words and terms. Because I was already so immersed in the text that I found it hard to assess which terms needed to be explained or translated, I asked several people to read my translation and to indicate which of the terms they did not understand (or could not deduce from the context). I used their lists to create the glossary.

Source Text

Fiesta 1980

Mami's youngest sister — my tía Yrma — finally made it to the United States that year. She and tío Miguel got themselves an apartment in the Bronx, off the Grand Concourse and everybody decided that we should have a party. Actually, my pops decided, but everybody — meaning Mami, tía Yrma, tío Miguel and their neighbors — thought it a dope idea. On the afternoon of the party Papi came back from work around six. Right on time. We were all dressed by then, which was a smart move on our part. If Papi had walked in and caught us lounging around in our underwear, he would have kicked our asses something serious.

He didn't say nothing to nobody, not even my moms. He just pushed past her, held up his hand when she tried to talk to him and headed right into the shower. Rafa gave me the look and I gave it back to him; we both knew Papi had been with that Puerto Rican woman he was seeing and wanted to wash off the evidence quick.

Mami looked really nice that day. The United States had finally put some meat on her; she was no longer the same flaca who had arrived here three years before. She had cut her hair short and was wearing tons of cheap-ass jewelry which on her didn't look too lousy. She smelled like herself, like the wind through a tree. She always waited until the last possible minute to put on her perfume because she said it was a waste to spray it on early and then have to spray it on again once you got to the party.

We — meaning me, my brother, my little sister and Mami — waited for Papi to finish his shower. Mami seemed anxious, in her usual dispassionate way. Her hands adjusted the buckle of her belt over and over again. That morning, when she had gotten us up for school, Mami told us that she wanted to have a good time at the party. I want to dance, she said, but now, with the sun sliding out of the sky like spit off a wall, she seemed ready just to get this over with.

Rafa didn't much want to go to no party either, and me, I never wanted to go anywhere with my family. There was a baseball game in the parking lot outside and we could hear our friends, yelling, Hey, and, Cabrón, to one another. We heard the pop of a ball as it sailed over the cars, the clatter of an aluminum bat dropping to the concrete. Not that me or Rafa loved baseball; we just liked playing with the local kids, thrashing them at anything they were doing. By the sounds of the shouting, we both knew the game was close, either of us could have made a difference. Rafa frowned and when I frowned back, he put up his fist. Don't you mirror me, he said.

Don't you mirror me, I said.

He punched me — I would have hit him back but Papi marched into the living room with his towel around his waist, looking a lot smaller than he did when he was dressed. He had a few strands of hair around his nipples and a surly closed-mouth expression, like maybe he'd scalded his tongue or something.

Have they eaten? he asked Mami.

She nodded. I made you something.

You didn't let him eat, did you?

Ay, Dios mío, she said, letting her arms fall to her side.

Ay, Dios mío is right, Papi said.

I was never supposed to eat before our car trips, but earlier, when she had put out our dinner of rice, beans and sweet platanos, guess who had been the first one to clean his plate? You couldn't blame Mami really, she had been busy — cooking, getting ready, dressing my sister Madai. I should have reminded her not to feed me but I wasn't that sort of son.

Papi turned to me. Coño, muchacho, why did you eat?

Rafa had already started inching away from me. I'd once told him I considered him a low-down chicken-shit for moving out of the way every time Papi was going to smack me.

Collateral damage, Rafa had said. Ever heard of it?

No.

Look it up.

Chicken-shit or not, I didn't dare glance at him. Papi was old-fashioned; he expected your undivided attention when you were getting your ass whipped. You couldn't look him in the eye either — that wasn't allowed. Better to stare at his belly button, which was perfectly round and immaculate. Papi pulled me to my feet by my ear.

If you throw up —

I won't, I cried, tears in my eyes, more out of reflex than pain.

Ya, Ramón, ya. It's not his fault, Mami said.

They've known about this party forever. How did they think we were going to get there? Fly?

He finally let go of my ear and I sat back down. Madai was too scared to open her eyes. Being around Papi all her life had turned her into a major-league wuss. Anytime Papi raised his voice her lip would start trembling, like some specialized tuning fork. Rafa pretended that he had knuckles to crack and when I shoved him, he gave me a *Don't start* look. But even that little bit of recognition made me feel better.

I was the one who was always in trouble with my dad. It was like my God-given duty to piss him off, to do everything the way he hated. Our fights didn't bother me too much. I still wanted him to love me, something that never seemed strange or contradictory until years later, when he was out of our lives.

By the time my ear stopped stinging Papi was dressed and Mami was crossing each one of us, solemnly, like we were heading off to war. We said, in turn, Bendición, Mami, and she poked us in our five cardinal spots while saying, Que Dios te bendiga.

This was how all our trips began, the words that followed me every time I left the house.

None of us spoke until we were inside Papi's Volkswagen van. Brand-new, lime-green and bought to impress. Oh, we were impressed, but me, every time I was in that VW and Papi went above twenty miles an hour, I vomited. I'd never had

trouble with cars before—that van was like my curse. Mami suspected it was the upholstery. In her mind, American things—appliances, mouthwash, funny-looking upholstery—all seemed to have an intrinsic badness about them. Papi was careful about taking me anywhere in the VW, but when he had to, I rode up front in Mami's usual seat so I could throw up out a window.

¿Cómo te sientes? Mami asked over my shoulder when Papi pulled onto the turnpike. She had her hand on the base of my neck. One thing about Mami, her palms never sweated.

I'm OK, I said, keeping my eyes straight ahead. I definitely didn't want to trade glances with Papi. He had this one look, furious and sharp, that always left me feeling bruised.

Toma. Mami handed me four mentas. She had thrown three out her window at the beginning of our trip, an offering to Eshú; the rest were for me.

I took one and sucked it slowly, my tongue knocking it up against my teeth. We passed Newark Airport without any incident. If Madai had been awake she would have cried because the planes flew so close to the cars.

How's he feeling? Papi asked.

Fine, I said. I glanced back at Rafa and he pretended like he didn't see me. That was the way he was, at school and at home. When I was in trouble, he didn't know me. Madai was solidly asleep, but even with her face all wrinkled up and drooling she looked cute, her hair all separated into twists.

I turned around and concentrated on the candy. Papi even started to joke that we might not have to scrub the van out tonight. He was beginning to loosen up, not checking his watch too much. Maybe he was thinking about that Puerto Rican woman or maybe he was just happy that we were all together. I could never tell. At the toll, he was feeling positive enough to actually get out of the van and search around under the basket for dropped coins. It was something he had once done to amuse Madai, but now it was habit. Cars behind us honked their horns and I slid down in my seat. Rafa didn't care; he grinned back at the other cars and waved. His actual job was to make sure no cops were coming. Mami shook Madai awake and as soon as she saw Papi stooping for a couple of quarters she let out this screech of delight that almost took off the top of my head.

That was the end of the good times. Just outside the Washington Bridge, I started feeling woozy. The smell of the upholstery got all up inside my head and I found myself with a mouthful of saliva. Mami's hand tensed on my shoulder and when I caught Papi's eye, he was like, No way. Don't do it.

The first time I got sick in the van Papi was taking me to the library. Rafa was with us and he couldn't believe I threw up. I was famous for my steel-lined stomach. A third-world childhood could give you that. Papi was worried enough that just as quick as Rafa could drop off the books we were on our way home. Mami fixed me one of her honey-and-onion concoctions and that made my stomach feel better. A week later we tried the library again and on this go-around I couldn't get the window open in time.

When Papi got me home, he went and cleaned out the van himself, an expression of askho on his face. This was a big deal, since Papi almost never cleaned anything himself. He came back inside and found me sitting on the couch feeling like hell.

It's the car, he said to Mami. It's making him sick.

This time the damage was pretty minimal, nothing Papi couldn't wash off the door with a blast of the hose. He was pissed, though; he jammed his finger into my cheek, a nice solid thrust. That was the way he was with his punishments: imaginative. Earlier that year I'd written an essay in school called "My Father the Torturer," but the teacher made me write a new one. She thought I was kidding.

We drove the rest of the way to the Bronx in silence. We only stopped once, so I could brush my teeth. Mami had brought along my toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste and while every car known to man sped by us she stood outside with me so I wouldn't feel alone.

Tío Miguel was about seven feet tall and had his hair combed up and out, into a demi-fro. He gave me and Rafa big spleen-crushing hugs and then kissed Mami and finally ended up with Madai on his shoulder. The last time I'd seen Tío was at the airport, his first day in the United States. I remembered how he hadn't seemed all that troubled to be in another country.

He looked down at me. Carajo, Yunior, you look horrible!

He threw up, my brother explained.

I pushed Rafa. Thanks a lot, ass-face.

Hey, he said. Tío asked.

Tío clapped a bricklayer's hand on my shoulder. Everybody gets sick sometimes, he said. You should have seen me on the plane over here. Dios mio! He rolled his Asian-looking eyes for emphasis. I thought we were all going to die.

Everybody could tell he was lying. I smiled like he was making me feel better.

Do you want me to get you a drink? Tío asked. We got beer and rum.

Miguel, Mami said. He's young.

Young? Back in Santo Domingo, he'd be getting laid by now.

Mami thinned her lips, which took some doing.

Well, it's true, Tío said.

So, Mami, I said. When do I get to go visit the D.R.?

That's enough, Yunior.

It's the only pussy you'll ever get, Rafa said to me in English.

Not counting your girlfriend, of course.

Rafa smiled. He had to give me that one.

Papi came in from parking the van. He and Miguel gave each other the sort of handshakes that would have turned my fingers into Wonder bread.

Coño, compá'i, ¿cómo va todo? they said to each other.

Tía came out then, with an apron on and maybe the longest Lee Press-On Nails I've ever seen in my life. There was this one guru motherfucker in the *Guinness*

Book of World Records who had longer nails, but I tell you, it was close. She gave everybody kisses, told me and Rafa how guapo we were—Rafa, of course, believed her—told Madai how bella she was, but when she got to Papi, she froze a little, like maybe she'd seen a wasp on the tip of his nose, but then kissed him all the same.

Mami told us to join the other kids in the living room. Tío said, Wait a minute, I want to show you the apartment. I was glad Tía said, Hold on, because from what I'd seen so far, the place had been furnished in Contemporary Dominican Tacky. The less I saw, the better. I mean, I liked plastic sofa covers but damn, Tío and Tía had taken it to another level. They had a disco ball hanging in the living room and the type of stucco ceilings that looked like stalactite heaven. The sofas all had golden tassels dangling from their edges. Tía came out of the kitchen with some people I didn't know and by the time she got done introducing everybody, only Papi and Mami were given the guided tour of the four-room third-floor apartment. Me and Rafa joined the kids in the living room. They'd already started eating. We were hungry, one of the girls explained, a pastelito in hand. The boy was about three years younger than me but the girl who'd spoken, Leti, was my age. She and another girl were on the sofa together and they were cute as hell.

Leti introduced them: the boy was her brother Wilquins and the other girl was her neighbor Mari. Leti had some serious tetas and I could tell that my brother was going to gun for her. His taste in girls was predictable. He sat down right between Leti and Mari and by the way they were smiling at him I knew he'd do fine. Neither of the girls gave me more than a cursory one-two, which didn't bother me. Sure, I liked girls but I was always too terrified to speak to them unless we were arguing or I was calling them stupidos, which was one of my favorite words that year. I turned to Wilquins and asked him what there was to do around here. Mari, who had the lowest voice I'd ever heard, said, He can't speak.

What does that mean?

He's mute.

I looked at Wilquins incredulously. He smiled and nodded, as if he'd won a prize or something.

Does he understand? I asked.

Of course he understands, Rafa said. He's not dumb.

I could tell Rafa had said that just to score points with the girls. Both of them nodded. Low-voice Mari said, He's the best student in his grade.

I thought, Not bad for a mute. I sat next to Wilquins. After about two seconds of TV Wilquins whipped out a bag of dominos and motioned to me. Did I want to play? Sure. Me and him played Rafa and Leti and we whupped their collective asses twice, which put Rafa in a real bad mood. He looked at me like maybe he wanted to take a swing, just one to make him feel better. Leti kept whispering into Rafa's ear, telling him it was OK.

In the kitchen I could hear my parents slipping into their usual modes. Papi's voice was loud and argumentative; you didn't have to be anywhere near him to catch his drift. And Mami, you had to put cups to your ears to hear hers. I went into the

kitchen a few times — once so the tíos could show off how much bullshit I'd been able to cram in my head the last few years; another time for a bucket-sized cup of soda. Mami and Tía were frying tostones and the last of the pastelitos. She appeared happier now and the way her hands worked on our dinner you would think she had a life somewhere else making rare and precious things. She nudged Tía every now and then, shit they must have been doing all their lives. As soon as Mami saw me though, she gave me the eye. Don't stay long, that eye said. Don't piss your old man off.

Papi was too busy arguing about Elvis to notice me. Then somebody mentioned María Montez and Papi barked, María Montez? Let me tell *you* about María Montez, compa'i.

Maybe I was used to him. His voice — louder than most adults' — didn't bother me none, though the other kids shifted uneasily in their seats. Wilquins was about to raise the volume on the TV, but Rafa said, I wouldn't do that. Muteboy had balls, though. He did it anyway and then sat down. Wilquins's pop came into the living room a second later, a bottle of Presidente in hand. That dude must have had Spider-senses or something. Did you raise that? he asked Wilquins and Wilquins nodded.

Is this your house? his pops asked. He looked ready to beat Wilquins silly but he lowered the volume instead.

See, Rafa said. You nearly got your ass *kicked*.

I met the Puerto Rican woman right after Papi had gotten the van. He was taking me on short trips, trying to cure me of my vomiting. It wasn't really working but I looked forward to our trips, even though at the end of each one I'd be sick. These were the only times me and Papi did anything together. When we were alone he treated me much better, like maybe I was his son or something.

Before each drive Mami would cross me.

Bendición, Mami, I'd say.

She'd kiss my forehead. Que Dios te bendiga. And then she would give me a handful of mentas because she wanted me to be OK. Mami didn't think these excursions would cure anything, but the one time she had brought it up to Papi he had told her to shut up, what did she know about anything anyway?

Me and Papi didn't talk much. We just drove around our neighborhood. Occasionally he'd ask, How is it?

And I'd nod, no matter how I felt.

One day I was sick outside of Perth Amboy. Instead of taking me home he went the other way on Industrial Avenue, stopping a few minutes later in front of a light blue house I didn't recognize. It reminded me of the Easter eggs we colored at school, the ones we threw out the bus windows at other cars.

The Puerto Rican woman was there and she helped me clean up. She had dry papery hands and when she rubbed the towel on my chest, she did it hard, like I was a bumper she was waxing. She was very thin and had a cloud of brown hair rising above her narrow face and the sharpest blackest eyes you've ever seen.

He's cute, she said to Papi.

Not when he's throwing up, Papi said.

What's your name? she asked me. Are you Rafa?

I shook my head.

Then it's Yuniior, right?

I nodded.

You're the smart one, she said, suddenly happy with herself. Maybe you want to see my books?

They weren't hers. I recognized them as ones my father must have left in her house. Papi was a voracious reader, couldn't even go cheating without a paperback in his pocket.

Why don't you go watch TV? Papi suggested. He was looking at her like she was the last piece of chicken on earth.

We got plenty of channels, she said. Use the remote if you want.

The two of them went upstairs and I was too scared of what was happening to poke around. I just sat there, ashamed, expecting something big and fiery to crash down on our heads. I watched a whole hour of the news before Papi came downstairs and said, Let's go.

About two hours later the women laid out the food and like always nobody but the kids thanked them. It must be some Dominican tradition or something. There was everything I liked—chicharrones, fried chicken, tostones, sancocho, rice, fried cheese, yuca, avocado, potato salad, a meteor-sized hunk of pernil, even a tossed salad which I could do without—but when I joined the other kids around the serving table, Papi said, Oh no you don't, and took the paper plate out of my hand. His fingers weren't gentle.

What's wrong now? Tía asked, handing me another plate.

He ain't eating, Papi said. Mami pretended to help Rafa with the pernil.

Why can't he eat?

Because I said so.

The adults who didn't know us made like they hadn't heard a thing and Tío just smiled sheepishly and told everybody to go ahead and eat. All the kids—about ten of them now—trooped back into the living room with their plates a-heaping and all the adults ducked into the kitchen and the dining room, where the radio was playing loud-ass bachatas. I was the only one without a plate. Papi stopped me before I could get away from him. He kept his voice nice and low so nobody else could hear him.

If you eat anything, I'm going to beat you. ¿Entiendes?

I nodded.

And if your brother gives you any food, I'll beat him too. Right here in front of everybody. ¿Entiendes?

I nodded again. I wanted to kill him and he must have sensed it because he gave my head a little shove.

All the kids watched me come in and sit down in front of the TV.

What's wrong with your dad? Leti asked.

He's a dick, I said.

Rafa shook his head. Don't say that shit in front of people.

Easy for you to be nice when you're eating, I said.

Hey, if I was a pukey little baby, I wouldn't get no food either.

I almost said something back but I concentrated on the TV. I wasn't going to start it. No fucking way. So I watched Bruce Lee beat Chuck Norris into the floor of the Colosseum and tried to pretend that there was no food anywhere in the house. It was Tía who finally saved me. She came into the living room and said, Since you ain't eating, Yunior, you can at least help me get some ice.

I didn't want to, but she mistook my reluctance for something else.

I already asked your father.

She held my hand while we walked; Tía didn't have any kids but I could tell she wanted them. She was the sort of relative who always remembered your birthday but who you only went to visit because you had to. We didn't get past the first-floor landing before she opened her pocketbook and handed me the first of three pastelitos she had smuggled out of the apartment.

Go ahead, she said. And as soon as you get inside make sure you brush your teeth.

Thanks a lot, Tía, I said.

Those pastelitos didn't stand a chance.

She sat next to me on the stairs and smoked her cigarette. All the way down on the first floor and we could still hear the music and the adults and the television. Tía looked a ton like Mami; the two of them were both short and light-skinned. Tía smiled a lot and that was what set them apart the most.

How is it at home, Yunior?

What do you mean?

How's it going in the apartment? Are you kids OK?

I knew an interrogation when I heard one, no matter how sugar-coated it was. I didn't say anything. Don't get me wrong, I loved my tía, but something told me to keep my mouth shut. Maybe it was family loyalty, maybe I just wanted to protect Mami or I was afraid that Papi would find out—it could have been anything really.

Is your mom all right?

I shrugged.

Have there been lots of fights?

None, I said. Too many shrugs would have been just as bad as an answer. Papi's at work too much.

Work, Tía said, like it was somebody's name she didn't like.

Me and Rafa, we didn't talk much about the Puerto Rican woman. When we ate dinner at her house, the few times Papi had taken us over there, we still acted like nothing was out of the ordinary. Pass the ketchup, man. No sweat, bro. The affair

was like a hole in our living room floor, one we'd gotten so used to circumnavigating that we sometimes forgot it was there.

By midnight all the adults were crazy dancing. I was sitting outside Tía's bedroom — where Madai was sleeping — trying not to attract attention. Rafa had me guarding the door; he and Leti were in there too, with some of the other kids, getting busy no doubt. Wilquins had gone across the hall to bed so I had me and the roaches to mess around with.

Whenever I peered into the main room I saw about twenty moms and dads dancing and drinking beers. Every now and then somebody yelled, ¡Quisqueya! And then everybody else would yell and stomp their feet. From what I could see my parents seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Mami and Tía spent a lot of time side by side, whispering, and I kept expecting something to come of this, a brawl maybe. I'd never once been out with my family when it hadn't turned to shit. We weren't even theatrical or straight crazy like other families. We fought like sixth-graders, without any real dignity. I guess the whole night I'd been waiting for a blowup, something between Papi and Mami. This was how I always figured Papi would be exposed, out in public, where everybody would know.

You're a cheater!

But everything was calmer than usual. And Mami didn't look like she was about to say anything to Papi. The two of them danced every now and then but they never lasted more than a song before Mami joined Tía again in whatever conversation they were having.

I tried to imagine Mami before Papi. Maybe I was tired, or just sad, thinking about the way my family was. Maybe I already knew how it would all end up in a few years, Mami without Papi, and that was why I did it. Picturing her alone wasn't easy. It seemed like Papi had always been with her, even when we were waiting in Santo Domingo for him to send for us.

The only photograph our family had of Mami as a young woman, before she married Papi, was the one that somebody took of her at an election party that I found one day while rummaging for money to go to the arcade. Mami had it tucked into her immigration papers. In the photo, she's surrounded by laughing cousins I will never meet, who are all shiny from dancing, whose clothes are rumpled and loose. You can tell it's night and hot and that the mosquitos have been biting. She sits straight and even in a crowd she stands out, smiling quietly like maybe she's the one everybody's celebrating. You can't see her hands but I imagined they're knotting a straw or a bit of thread. This was the woman my father met a year later on the Malecón, the woman Mami thought she'd always be.

Mami must have caught me studying her because she stopped what she was doing and gave me a smile, maybe her first one of the night. Suddenly I wanted to go over and hug her, for no other reason than I loved her, but there were about eleven fat jiggling bodies between us. So I sat down on the tiled floor and waited.

I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I knew Rafa was kicking me and saying, Let's go. He looked like he'd been hitting those girls off; he was all smiles. I got to my feet in time to kiss Tía and Tío good-bye. Mami was holding the serving dish she had brought with her.

Where's Papi? I asked.

He's downstairs, bringing the van around. Mami leaned down to kiss me.

You were good today, she said.

And then Papi burst in and told us to get the hell downstairs before some pendejo cop gave him a ticket. More kisses, more handshakes and then we were gone.

I don't remember being out of sorts after I met the Puerto Rican woman, but I must have been because Mami only asked me questions when she thought something was wrong in my life. It took her about ten passes but finally she cornered me one afternoon when we were alone in the apartment. Our upstairs neighbors were beating the crap out of their kids, and me and her had been listening to it all afternoon. She put her hand on mine and said, Is everything OK, Yuniór? Have you been fighting with your brother?

Me and Rafa had already talked. We'd been in the basement, where our parents couldn't hear us. He told me that yeah, he knew about her.

Papi's taken me there twice now, he said.

Why didn't you tell me? I asked.

What the hell was I going to say? *Hey, Yuniór, guess what happened yesterday? I met Papi's sucia!*

I didn't say anything to Mami either. She watched me, very very closely. Later I would think, maybe if I had told her, she would have confronted him, would have done something, but who can know these things? I said I'd been having trouble in school and like that everything was back to normal between us. She put her hand on my shoulder and squeezed and that was that.

We were on the turnpike, just past Exit 11, when I started feeling it again. I sat up from leaning against Rafa. His fingers smelled and he'd gone to sleep almost as soon as he got into the van. Madai was out too but at least she wasn't snoring.

In the darkness, I saw that Papi had a hand on Mami's knee and that the two of them were quiet and still. They weren't slumped back or anything; they were both wide awake, bolted into their seats. I couldn't see either of their faces and no matter how hard I tried I could not imagine their expressions. Neither of them moved. Every now and then the van was filled with the bright rush of somebody else's headlights. Finally I said, Mami, and they both looked back, already knowing what was happening.

Glossary³¹

askho – disgust

carajo – a curse

¿como te sientas? – how are you feeling?

coño – a curse

Dios mio – my God

¿entiendes? – understand?

flaca – a skinny woman or girl

muchacho – kid

pendejo – a pussy or a punk

Quisqueya – Taino Indian name for the Dominican Republic

sancocho – a stew

sucia – a tramp

tía, tío – aunt, uncle

³¹ This glossary is not the same as the one that accompanies *Drown*; it only contains the words that occur in “Fiesta 1980”.