

## “How do you say..?”

In seventh grade I went on an exchange program to Costa Rica. My classmate, Nandi, and I shared a penpal, Karina, over the school year leading up to the trip, and we were excited to meet her. We visited Karina's school, and I was overwhelmed by the differences between it and mine back in Philly. When you stepped out of a classroom you could feel the breeze and hear the birds singing. After school, Karina's mom drove us to her house. I was feeling a bit nervous. *What if we didn't have anything to say? What're we gonna do? Oh no, I can't speak Spanish!* But I was also amazed by the beautiful landscape and rolling hills that I could see out the car window. When we got to Karina's house Nandi and I stood there gaping; her house overlooked amazing mountains in the distance, and fields below.

“¿Qué?” Karina asked.

“Huh?” We said, “the view is *asombroso!*”

Karina's house was nice and cozy. There was a door that led into her kitchen from outside. To the left there was a bathroom and Karina's room, and straight ahead was the living room and more bedrooms. In Karina's room there was one wall that was completely covered in toy cars. Floor to ceiling. And none of them were unboxed. It was a collection that Karina and her sister, Valaria, shared. In her room we solved a puzzle, listened to music and talked.

Well. “Talked.” Even though I'd been learning Spanish for eight years, I wasn't that good. So we communicated with broken sentences and... Google Translate. Nandi and I didn't have our phones, but Karina usually typed her sentences into Google Translate and showed us. You see, Google doesn't do the best at translating, and the sentences get funny. I had a bad cold that day, so Karina's mom offered to make me tea. But when Karina typed it out it said:

*“Would you like some medicine for your disease?”* We thought that was really funny.

After lunch, Nandi, Karina, her mom, and I sat on the porch and talked. We could hear her dad working in his garage out back. He repaired cars, which could be the inspiration for the car wall? Karina gave me a song suggestion, “I Feel Like I'm Drowning” by Two Feet. She wrote it down on a small scrap of paper that I still have folded up in a pocket of my backpack.

During conversation on the porch, Karina showed us her phone, “*whhaattt?!?*”

*“Our cat was killed yesterday.”*

“Oh no! Lo siento, es terrible.”

*“Oh, yeah, the cat was run over in front of our house.”* And she wasn't even upset, she just said it like that. Nandi and I, for some psychopathic reason, started cracking up.

“Oh wow, I'm so sorry, it's not funny, that's just so sad.” It was such a strange thing. Her cat was hit by a car, and she said it like she was buttering bread.

While we were watching a movie Karina's younger brother ran into the room.

“Hi!” he said in a squeaky eight-year-old voice, and ran out. We had a real acquaintance later, when I learned his name was Angel David, and he showed us his drawings of FNAF characters and English notebook. (He was better at English than we were at Spanish.)

At Karina's kitchen table we layed out paper and colored pencils and started drawing. At some point I had to go to the bathroom and said,

“Qué es el baño.” Karina pointed to the end of the hall.

“Gracias.”

As soon as I left, I realized that I said it wrong.

*Arrrhggg, I'm an idiot, that's not how you say, “where's the bathroom?”*

I felt dumb because “where's the bathroom?” is probably the easiest thing to say in Spanish, and I messed up. But I realize now that even though we didn't speak each other's languages very well, we still

connected and understood each other on some level.

Before we left their house, we all gathered together, Karina's family, Nandi and I, all squished up and took a smiley photo. Angel David gave Nandi and me little mangoes, and I gave him my drawing that I had made earlier of a flower.

I was an outsider in this culture. I was at someone's house who I didn't know very well, and didn't really speak their language. But we still formed a connection, and I'll never forget going to her house and meeting her family and learning about her dead cat. It's scary to communicate with someone when you have limited words. It gets awkward. But I realized that we were in it together. We *both* were having trouble communicating, and didn't know what to say all the time. But we connected through that shared awkwardness, and were able to have a really amazing experience.