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Fowl Play

Ana Delgadillo

The April sunlight streamed through the windows as my Advanced Spanish class stared at our teacher and tuned out. I was one of two sixth graders taking this elective surrounded by ten seventh and eighth graders. Our teacher, Mrs. Planck, taught with enthusiasm for Spanish culture, flailing her arms with excitement, her eyes going from little pebbles to ping-pong balls as she continued the lesson. She was the most un-Hispanic looking teacher, but she had a flawless accent. She looked to be about sixty, was blinding white, and had short platinum blonde hair that swayed with her arm movements. The white foundation caked on her face cracked over her wrinkles and pronounced her dark red lipstick more than it needed to be. The blue eyeshadow and thick black eyeliner became less pronounced as her eyes grew wider. Taking all of this in every Tuesday and Thursday proved to be too much for my sixth-grade brain and it became boring. I began to feel the sun rays wrap around me as they soaked into my back, and my head dropped into the crook of my arm in a light doze.

“Wah wah wah wah...” Mrs. Planck droned on. Meanwhile, in my dream: *Why am I wearing a dress playing soccer? I can't kick anything...*

“Wah wah wah wah...” *I can't move fast enough. I just want to score. Move stupid dress!*

“Wah wah are going to put on a play at the end of May! Won't that be great?”

Twelve heads immediately snapped to full attention. Taking this sudden movement as eagerness, Mrs. Planck continued bouncing in place with a childish smile. “Yes yes! We are going to host a Spanish play for the whole school at the end of May. Like a school treat before everyone leaves for summer. Let me tell you what it's about and then we'll decide roles.”

A mortified look passed from one student to the next. *I did not take Advanced Spanish to do a stupid play. I just wanted to get out of reading and writing electives. This was supposed to be EASY.* I shrank myself down to eye level with the table as she explained the plot of the play:

“It’s about an old farm dog that saves his farm from the evil wolf who keeps trying to eat all the animals. The farmer considers getting rid of the dog because he isn’t stopping the wolf. But the dog wins in the end and runs the wolf off the farm. Here are the different roles in order of most speaking.”

She smiled as she handed out the papers and met each of our eyes, expecting us to be jumping for this grand opportunity. However, the collective response was a couple of sheepish attempts at smiling and everyone else frozen in whatever position they were in when she first announced the play. I was ready to bolt out the door and claim an incurable disease that I only got in the afternoons on Tuesdays and Thursdays until summer started. It was the stupidest play I had ever heard. I could barely stand up and give two-minute book reports in front of twenty kids, let alone 350. I was one of the shyest people in a class where I had gone to school with every person since kindergarten. But my parents would tell me that because I had signed up for the class, I had to respect the teacher’s instructions, which meant I had to be part of this stupid play. So I sat and stared at the roles. *Old farm dog, turkey, wolf, farmer, farmer’s wife, pig, horse, cow, chicken... Maybe I could get a backstage role.*

After a few moments, Mrs. Planck asked, “Has anyone got play experience?”

Without thinking, I spoke. “Yeah, Sarah does. She was the lead role in last year’s Christmas play.”

I clamped my mouth shut after realizing I had spoken out loud. I never spoke up. I could feel every single eyeball on me. The heat in my sweatshirt turned up twenty degrees and rose to my face. My toes were crushed, and my ribs received a hard jab. I turned to my left and my fellow sixth-grade Spanish compadre was glaring at me. I could almost read the words “I’m going to kill you” in her eyes. She was my friend and I had just forced her into Mrs. Planck’s spotlight. I sank even lower in my seat hoping that an incurable disease would attack at any minute.

However, Mrs. Planck hadn’t noticed that Sarah was two seconds from punching me and turned to her. She clapped her hands and said, “Oh good! You can be the old farm dog!”

Sarah’s immediate response was, “Fine, but Ana is the turkey.”

Mrs. Planck looked at me. “Delightful! All right, so who else?”

As the roles filled up, I felt absolute terror. In two months, I was going to speak in front of 350 people. And I wasn't even speaking English, so no one would know what the hell I was saying. I knew I deserved it for throwing Sarah under the bus. At least Sarah was less pissed now that I was forced to join her as a lead role. She was still my ally. When I got the script, I saw that the turkey only had a couple lines less than the old farm dog. *Damn.*

Every Tuesday and Thursday, we rehearsed our lines in class. We went scene by scene with Mrs. Planck correcting our pronunciation. She declared every time we met, "Oh they are all going to love this! This is so much fun!" The whole class would exchange wary looks, and Sarah and I would die a little more inside.

For the first two weeks, I didn't bother looking at the script. It made me shiver and sweat thinking about performing. My parents kept nagging me to practice. So I told myself lies to feel better. I began to tell myself that this was a shot at stardom. The more I dwelled on this and repeated it to myself, the more my heart quickened with anticipation. I even started to smile thinking about the play. I held my head higher, stood up straighter, and filled myself with hope and confidence.

During boring science class, my mind daydreamed: *Maybe this will be my big break. Maybe God made me do this to show me what I am supposed to do with my life. It was meant to be.* I imagined myself hearing "Encore! Encore!" from the audience, maybe red roses thrown up to the stage while cameras flashed, leaving spots in my vision. My parents would cry with pride and my sister would brag, "Yeah, that's *my* sister. Wasn't she absolutely wonderful?" Maybe I would be a legend passed down among the generations of students. True, I still could feel that incurable disease coming at any moment, but my thoughts of fame and glory uncoiled the tightening in my gut. I became so enamored with the way my life would change after the play, I memorized all my lines in three days.

Our last week before performance, we practiced on the stage. My classmates were impressed by how often they heard my voice, and I was proud to be on speaking terms with the seventh and eighth graders. My friends were impressed that I knew older kids but were skeptical about the play. They didn't say anything more than "Nice!" because they didn't know what to expect. Plus, being in a play was *so* elementary school.

The one important aspect I had neglected was now forced to my attention. I needed a costume. I went to my dad, the creative idea generator and the least busy parent at the moment.

“Dad, I need a costume.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow.”

“And what are you again?”

Exasperated sigh coupled with rolled eyes. “A turkey, Dad.”

Long pause.

He stared off into space and pondered the many possibilities for a last minute costume. Then the sparks of ingenuity brightened his eyes and an innovative smile crept on his face, the one that only appears when he’s got a great idea.

“Okay, I know what we are going to do.”

And walking with confidence, we went downstairs to find my turkey costume.

Twenty minutes later, I emerged from the basement clutching my masterpiece and beaming. I had a costume that would steal the show.

I should have consulted my mom first.

I left my last class an hour before the play started. I ran to the gym where my costume and script were waiting for me. I changed into the black shorts and shirt for under my costume. I shook with excitement, ready for my dreams to come true. I radiated dramatic energy: eyes dancing, cheeks flushing, mouth mumbling memorized lines, body twitching through cues. Mrs. Planck marched us through stage positions and had the light and curtain people double check the set up. She gathered us all backstage fifteen minutes before to give us a final pep talk. She was wearing her most billowy shirt that draped down and hovered in the air whenever she moved. Tears welled in her eyes.

“I am so proud of you guys! This was the most fun I have had in Advanced Spanish. You are all going to do great!” With that, she clapped her hands, tilted her head to the side, and smiled as if watching a bunch of cute babies crawling around trying to play and speak.

I absorbed every word she said. My nerves shot electricity through my body, but goosebumps were the only show of the enthusiasm inside me. Mrs. Plank’s overpowering flowery perfume made

our eyes water but heightened my senses. The sharp breathing of the rest of my class around me was filled with exasperation. I shielded their wariness with my intense focus on becoming a star. *I will no longer be the sixth grade shy girl, they'll see!* I pulled on my costume and decided to add some extra red feathers to my head to complete the look.

The footsteps of 350 students, teachers, staff, and the few parents that came thundered into the gym. Unfortunately my parents couldn't come because they had to work, but I couldn't wait to recap how wonderful I was. I could hear the light patter of the kindergarteners walking nearest the stage and the thuds of the eighth graders' bodies bumping the back wall as they slid to their seats on the cold gym tiles. Mrs. Planck's voice boomed over the loudspeaker after the low rumble of bodies and voices quieted. "Welcome and thank you all for coming to the Advanced Spanish class's performance! They have worked hard over the last two months to produce this play, and we hope you enjoy it. There will be an English narration before each scene describing what is being said and occurring on stage. Thank you again and enjoy!"

That was my cue. I opened and closed my fists as I walked behind the curtain into my position. I looked down at my feet to make sure they were still attached to the ground. I held my breath waiting for the curtain to open. I could see Sarah to my right and could sense the others getting into position by the soft steps and low whispers behind me. My eyes bored into the back of the navy velvet curtain, the only obstacle between me and stardom. The narrator began in a high pubescent voice, "There once was an old farm dog..."

The pulleys creaked. The ropes rustled through the hands of the backstage manager. The curtain swished as they slowly parted. The stage lights revealed the first scene.

The lights blinded me, taking me by surprise. Instead of looking out at the crowd with a confident eye, I looked down, blinking uncontrollably, trying to get the spots out. That's when I made eye contact with one of my friends sitting in the first row with her kindergarten buddy. She immediately covered her mouth with her hands but not before her maniacal laugh came out first. Then it sounded like a mix of hyperventilating and spitting as she tried to conceal her laughter. She rocked back and forth, her face turning redder as she tried harder not to laugh out loud. The kindergartener next to her gazed up at me

with blank eyes and furrowed eyebrows. The cognitive gears spun as he tried to figure out what he was looking at. That's when the previous night's costume operation played back in my head *without* the grandiosity I had originally felt.

My dad is cheap and tacky. Always was, always will be. We grabbed three paper bags, glue, tape, a Sharpie, and a handful of fake art feathers. We took a brown shopping bag and cut three holes—one for my head and two for my arms. A half circle and connected W's were sloppily drawn on the front of my chest, and two cut-up paper bags were taped to the shoulders of my body bag for wings. The edges of my wings were triangular, instead of round, and lopsided. More W's (meant to be feathers) were drawn all over the wings. Then we added the remaining strips of cut-up paper bags to the back bottom of my body bag for my tail. We glued various colored feathers all over the suit to give it "the bird feel"—lime green, hot pink, red, navy blue, and brown. We didn't have a lot so they were sporadically glued on the bags. And my final act to add more feathers to my head (i.e. jamming feathers into my hair and then taping red feathers to my chin) to give the illusion of a gobbler capped off the whole fucked-up costume.

Horrified, my mouth completely dried up, and my chest deflated. The panic rose from my now leaden feet to the rest of my dangerously swaying body. My eyes began to dart around the gym, looking for some kind of approval, but I again became blinded by the stupid stage lights. Sarah was speaking, which meant it was almost my turn. *I haven't quite lost my dignity* broke through the frantic screams in my head. Determined not to look like a complete idiot, I put all the drama I could into my performance.

My sole focus now was not to completely lose it. Each time I went off stage, I refused to look at the crowd, fearing I would get stage fright. I pretended the curtain was up. What was once my glory gate now became my face-saving fence. I only watched what was happening on stage and waited for my cues. I blinded myself with the lights every time I had to look at the crowd. In the final act, the wolf football tackled me so that the old farm dog, Sarah, could come to my rescue. I could hear the laughter as I was side slammed and screamed, "GOBBLE GOBBLE!" as I fell. I glowered at my costume as the tape loosened, making my wings droop further and my tail barely hang on. I finished

the play with no mistakes. A small twinge of pride spread through me when I bowed, only to be dashed not more than two minutes after with the question and answer portion Mrs. Planck insisted on having.

A stumpy second grader with a stubby finger pointing directly at me stood up and asked, “Excuse me. What’re you supposed to be?”

The faint smile vanished as I responded curtly, “A turkey.” And with that, a collective “Oh...” rippled throughout the gym. My face burned so red that I would have been an overly crispy main entrée for Thanksgiving dinner.

I passed my friend who laughed at me: “Oh (wheezing laugh) my (wheezing laugh) gosh Ana! (more wheezing laugh) That was soooooo funny!”

“Yeah... it was all Mrs. Planck. Forcing us to do this dumb play. Haha...” I tried my best to respond coolly, though I knew my cheeks were scarlet and my voice was shaky. I haphazardly tossed my things in my backpack and rushed to find my sister to walk home. The four blocks back to my house were painful as I saw little kids point, laugh, and say “Turkey!” My sister struggled to keep up as I bolted down the street.

I threw my costume in the trash immediately after school and pretended the play never happened. My parents asked how it went. I gave a false, high pitched “Great!” and retreated downstairs. My sister knew better than to say anything about it. She just gave me silently laughing eyes every few seconds from behind the book she was reading. I vowed an eternal hatred for public speaking and to never feel so humiliated again. With that decided, I removed a red feather from my hair that I’d forgotten and focused on my homework.