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Tim Elhajj

20/20

I am late for work.

In the backseat, my two second-grade kids chatter happily with one another in Spanish, a language I don't know. Their cheerful voices make me feel vaguely uncomfortable, an alien in my own car. I still the impulse to hush them quiet.

I pick my way through traffic in a light rain, a fog blurring the surrounding woods. I am out of my element. My wife usually drives the kids to school while I dash off to work. She found the Spanish immersion school the kids attend. When she first suggested the children go there, I was dubious. Why would I want my kids to learn a language I don't understand? But the kids have thrived there, finding an intimacy and challenge they might not have found anywhere else. As usual, my wife was right.

I moved across the country to be with her. Here in the Pacific Northwest, we're worlds away from where I grew up. The only Spanish I heard as a kid came from watching Speedy Gonzales yell, "*¡Ándale! ¡Ándale! ¡Arriba! ¡Arriba!*" in cartoons. I hadn't even realized that those words mean: Up! Up! Move! Move!

In the small steel manufacturing town where I spent my youth, the elementary school taught only English. In the 70s, the bottom dropped out of steel, leaving rage as the town's only remaining export.

So, in my twenties, I picked up enough Spanish to buy drugs in seedy Philadelphia ghettos, graffiti-covered Manhattan housing projects, or abandoned tenements up in the Bronx. In the drug bazaars, my friends and I would roll down our windows and yell for the dealers to come to the car. Although my friends told me what to say, I felt sophisticated shouting out the window in Spanish.

"*Veinte, veinte!*" we hollered.

To me this meant, "Yo, *hones*. C'mere." It was sensible, everyday Spanish for drug dealers, all the foreign language I needed to know.

As we pull to the drop-off curb at school, my kids blast out the back door. I haven't been to the projects for many years now. Got sober. Found work. Started this family.

My kids have forgotten their jackets, which lie on the back seat of the car. It's too wet to go to school without a jacket. Rolling down the

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passenger window, I shout, “*Veinte! Veinte!*”

Both kids shoot a puzzled glance back at the car.

“*Veinte, veinte!*” I shout again. Just like back in the day. I think, Come on, kids. Hurry up. I don’t have all day.

Finally, my son, Aaron, comes back to the window.

“Why are you yelling twenty, Dad?”

“*Veinte* means twenty?” I ask, with mild wonder.

Aaron nods.

“You sure?” I want to know.

“Yep,” Aaron says.

He sure looks sure.

In my twenties, I shouted “*veinte*” to say, “I am a white boy in your neighborhood, and I want to buy drugs.” I shouted “*veinte*” as if the incongruity of my presence hadn’t already made my quest apparent. I shouted “*veinte*” with gay disregard for what I was doing with my life. I shouted “*veinte*” with great joy, for I was about to get high. If there were a better way to live, I could not imagine it.

Since my twenties, without even intending, I’ve followed the counsel of Speedy Gonzales: “*¡Arriba!*” “*¡Ándale!*” Move! Up! And though I’ve doubled in age, moved thousands of miles from home, even cultivated a cute little paunch to drape over my belt, I still don’t know any Spanish. I think it’s time I learned.