

MARTIN LAMMON

### *My Name Is*

“*Qué es mi nombre en inglés?*”

Our first day teaching, not one but many of our students in San Rafael wanted to know their names in English. “*Cómo se llama?*” Libby asked them. One by one, the people told Libby their Spanish names.

Káren.

Virgínia.

Nelson.

Eugénio.

“*Qué?*” Libby asked. The man’s name was familiar, but hard to pronounce: Ay-oo-hén-ee-oh. She asked him to write his name for her. When she saw all the letters, the jigsaw puzzle of Spanish vowels, everyone of them voiced, fit into place.

Alfredo.

Katia.

Francisco.

María.

María.

As if drawn by their names, the two Marías sat together, one a teenager, the other older. It was hard to say how old, but she could have been the younger María’s mother.

Júlio.

José.

Jesus.

Libby smiled at the man who ferried us up the mountain in the back of his truck. When Jesus grinned back, his moustache inched out from cheek to cheek, like a woolly worm in the middle of his round face. I looked across the room; all the men wore moustaches, full-bodied and virile. Younger men had a few years to go before they might joke and boast among their *compañeros*. I noticed that, among the older men, our friend Macho’s moustache was competent, but not nearly so thick as the rest.

Jeikel, Lamder, Olman, Yorlene, Concepción.

Libby reached the last table, where Macho sat waiting his turn to be called.

“And Macho,” Libby said. Then, to be fair, she posed the same question to him that she’d asked all eighteen of our students.

“*Cómo se llama?*” she asked.

“Omar,” Macho said.

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In her book, *Lost in Translation*, Eva Hoffman recalls how her family emigrated from Poland to Canada, how when she was thirteen, her school renamed her. Hers was a simple consonant adjustment, hardly a change at all:

Mine— “Ewa”—is easy to change into its near equivalent in English, “Eva.” My sister’s name— “Alina”—poses more of a problem, but after a moment’s thought, Mr. Rosenberg and the teacher decide that “Elaine” is close enough. My sister and I hang our heads wordlessly under this careless baptism.

My own grandfather, my mother’s father, was called “Bill.” In 1964, when I was six years old, I saw nothing strange about my grandfather’s last name. “Lichtenwald” was no stranger sounding than “Spangler,” “Moden,” or all the other names attached to relatives in my family. Even then, however, I knew that he was different, a man who sometimes spoke German, yet was born in Russia. In 1976, a freshman in college, I was a pallbearer at his funeral. My grandfather’s real name, I found out, was Wilhelm. My mother’s family was descended from the Volga Germans, eighteenth-century peasant farmers who followed their Prussian Princess when she married the Tsar. The farmers occupied Russia’s fertile Volga River valley. Over a century passed, but these people never assimilated, retaining their German language and culture. Even in 1964, after he’d lived in the United States for nearly 60 years, Grandpa Lichtenwald said supper prayers in a language I could not understand. Only his “amen” sounded safe.

But when I learned his true name and background, this man I hardly knew was reborn for me. Hoffman’s own experience had the opposite effect on her. After she and her sister endure their “careless baptism,” they return

...to a bench at the back of the room; nothing much has happened, except a small seismic mental shift. The twist in our names takes them a tiny distance from us—but it's a gap into which the infinite hobgoblin of abstraction enters. Our Polish names didn't refer to us; they were as sure us as our eyes or hands.

My grandfather was only a little boy when his family immigrated to the United States in 1908. Given the era, perhaps over the years he changed his own name, which in this country had become an epithet that invoked Kaiser Wilhelm. But I wonder what he thought when teachers and classmates, then eventually his own family, including my father, his son-in-law, called him "Bill."

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"*Qué es mi nombre en inglés?*" young María asked.

It was an innocent question, almost a game. When I was a boy, I had loved learning names for animals and foods in French, how a "dog" was *le chien* or "ice cream" was *la glace*. In high school, my French name was pronounced *Marr-tan*. But when María asked us that question, what could we answer? We might have said "Mary," but in *los estados unidos*, there were thousands of women named "María."

Many of our students' names, like our own, would hardly change at all. Káren, Nelson, and Virgínia changed only in pronunciation, the way my name changed. "Nelson," for example, was simply *Nale-sohn*, the way "Libby" became *Lee-bee*. Often, anglicized names would have simply dropped the last syllable in Spanish: Alfredo would become "Alfred"; Katia, "Kate" or "Katy"; Francisco, "Francis" or "Frank." But it would take more than a "small seismic mental shift" to look at these men and women and call them Frank or Eugene. I couldn't make myself say "Joe" instead of José. Should we make up names for Jeikel, Olman, and Lamder, call them Jackie, Ollie, and Lance?

And what should we have called Jesus?

Finally, Libby and I agreed that we should use their given names. Sobriquets might be fun in a high school language classroom, but they seemed out of place here, under the rafters of a barn on top of a mountain where there was no electricity.

"*Su nombre es su nombre,*" I said. "*Siempre. En inglés o español, es lo mismo, su nombre es su nombre.*"

Our students nodded. Macho smiled, bowed his head, conferring his approval. After almost a year hearing about this man, and now meeting him, it would not be easy calling him “Omar.”

#### MY NAME IS = ME LLAMA

With her felt pen, Libby scribbled her first lesson on a rectangular plastic writing board, five feet by three feet. Almost all of our lessons had to be written down this way or on an even smaller, messier chalkboard. Students copied vocabulary, exercises, and other instructions into notebooks they had purchased or on the blank backside of used paper. We had no books or printed handouts. Without electricity, we couldn’t have used an overhead projector even if we had one.

“*Todo junto* . . . Everyone . . . MY NAME IS.” Libby waved her hands as if she were conducting a choir to recite in unison the simple phrase.

What we heard, however, was a cacophony of syllables that sounded more like the bitter gnashings of Dante’s condemned souls. “Mi . . . Ma . . . Ma-nam . . . Ma-námis . . .” Consonants warped and wrapped around serifs, where vowels dangled, impaled on the twin points of the letter M, like decapitated skulls atop terrible spikes. Eighteen men and women spoke all at once, all differently, absolutely dissonant.

Then there was silence. The noise that had filled the barn did not fool our students, who looked at us for help, or embarrassed, looked down at their hands. But the truly astonished looked at their neighbors, unnerved. They had just come face to face with what Eva Hoffman called the “infinite hobgoblin of abstraction.” All their lives, they’d taken for granted the nuances of tongue, lip, and teeth. In just a few seconds, their own mouths had betrayed them, as if demons had possessed their speech.

Libby and I looked at each other.

“Let me try something,” I said. I wrote in big letters for the whole class to see:

ME LLAMA = MAI NEM IZ

The phonetics helped a little. When Libby asked each person, one by one this time, to speak, the results were mixed but more reassuring.

“*Ma Nam Ees Alfredo*,” Alfredo said.

“*Mi Nom Ase Beer-hee-nee-ah*,” Virginia said.

“My name is *Nale-sohn*,” Nelson said.

“*Muy bueno*,” Libby said. “Very good!”

A boy who should have been in *colegio*—that is, high school—Nelson was the only male student in the class without a moustache. When he smiled, it was all teeth and dimples, no tiger moth caterpillar that spread across his face.

Libby had taught English as a Second or Foreign Language for almost four years, but even in Japan she had taught people who were well educated. In West Virginia and Georgia, she taught university students whose TOEFL scores were not high enough yet to enroll in regular classes. I’d taught a few ESL classes in the summers, but mostly I taught writing and literature to U.S. college students who grew up in places with names like Hollidaysburg and Lancaster.

In San Rafael, many of the adults had little formal education. As in all of Costa Rica, school was mandatory from ages seven to thirteen, but in the community’s small *escuela*, all the children were in the same class. One day, they assembled in the park, singing a school song. Little girls and boys stood beside tall girls, all elbows and legs, on the verge of becoming young women. In our class, some of the mothers had not been much older when they had started having babies. In San Rafael, children were truly children, less worldly-wise than their eleven year-old peers in *los estados unidos*. But teenagers here quickly turned into adults. If you looked closely at the oldest boys singing at the school, you might see the shadow of a moustache arched over the open oval of their mouths.

A product of that class, Nelson was smart enough for *colegio*, but high school in Cahuita, almost 10 miles away, was not compulsory nor was it practical. Overcoming the mountain was not a simple task. Such isolation—both academic and geographic—made learning a new language more difficult even for someone like Nelson.

We soon learned, too, that most everyone was related to someone else in our class. Nelson’s parents were Virginia and Francisco. Jesus, Eugenio, Alfredo, and Francisco were brothers. In this farming community conjoined by geography, industry, and faith, where almost everyone attended the small church in the center of town, the strongest bond among them was family.

We were more than a class. We were a clan.

Júlio, our oldest student, was Lamder's father. Twenty-five years ago, Júlio injured his arm in an accident that paralyzed the pinky and ring finger of his left hand. As the oldest, he struggled the hardest with English, but he came to class every day, took copious notes, and always tried his best. When I looked over his shoulder, I found out that he struggled in his own language. Júlio often left out the silent "h" in Spanish words, or phonetically wrote "bibir" instead of *vivir*. But he was the kind of student I loved most, the student who had the least to gain by his studies. I think this father wanted to set an example for his son. Lamder was smart enough, but he was easily distracted and missed classes more often than Júlio would have liked. Presumably, he had more important matters to attend to than studying *inglés*. Playing *fútbol*. Working with a gas-powered buzz saw.

Macho—that is, Omar—was married to Katia, and their little girl Adriana was in my children's class. Olman was Omar's brother, and Káren was their niece.

Of all our students, Káren most wanted to escape the mountain. At first, she showed as much promise as anyone, but soon she became bored and distracted, a condition that everyone was occasionally prone to, even Nelson, but in Káren, a young woman love-lorn for anyone or anything that might carry her away, the longing was endemic. She stared outside during lessons. She sighed. One day, she showed me lyrics in English that she'd copied meticulously from popular songs—lyrics about heartache, disenchantment, and despair—as if she had understood every word. Her favorite groups were R.E.M. and Pearl Jam. She wore brightly colored dresses and tight-fitting pantsuits, as if our class were a party. She wore jewelry and make-up. Some days, she braided and styled her long hair.

Libby had prepared an elaborate syllabus, organizing topics that, day by day, would establish a foundation for basic English. After one day, however, Libby realized she would have to start over. In this class, spelling, vocabulary, and pronunciation were primary obstacles. Irregular verbs, articles and pronouns, modal expressions like "can" and "must"—all of English's "hobgoblins"—would have to be kept locked in the closet for awhile.

We would also set aside one of the fundamental strategies of teaching ESL, language immersion, where the teacher conducts all

lessons and class business in English. Most of the time, this strategy is also a necessity: Students come from a dozen different countries and English is their only shared language.

But in San Rafael, we soon learned that we would have to use Spanish in our class. The language and education barrier was only part of our dilemma. Without books or handouts, without illustrations and photographs, we did not have access to the graphic and tangible devices by which language teachers render abstract glyphs into food, landscape, and body. Unless we wanted to teach a vocabulary limited to what was within reach or what we could point at, we'd have to suspend conventional wisdom.

While we taught English, we studied Spanish. We learned new words from our students, while they learned another language from us.

"*Que es su nombre?*" One of the little girls who hadn't met Libby yet asked her the question that had so overwhelmed our class.

"*Me llama Libby,*" Libby said.

"*Cómo libre. Lee-bee es libre!*"

"*Un poco,*" Libby said.

The Spanish word for "free" could also mean "independent," "unrestrained," or "bold." I looked it up. Under some circumstances, *libre* could mean "single, unmarried." In two years, I'd certainly learned for myself that Libby was *libre*.

"*La nariz,*" Libby said, pointing to the middle of her face. "Nose."

"Nose," the class said in unison.

"*La boca es mouth,*" Libby said.

"Mouth." Eighteen voices sang out.

"*Mis manos son hands.*" Libby waved her hands over her head as if she were one more species of bird in Costa Rica, a well-known haven for feathered high-fliers. In a country not much larger than West Virginia, there are more kinds of birds here than in all of North America. What was one more?

"Hands," they all said.

Our students flapped hands over their heads. Even Káren waggled hers, bright red nail polish flashing in the barn's dim light. She flapped her hands as if she could rise out of her chair, over treetops, mountains, and ocean waters. She smiled, as if she could fly away wherever her mended heart, for a moment light and *libre*, might take her.

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After we finished teaching, Jesus drove us down the mountain and dropped us off at Lilan's grocery. From there, we retraced our way back home, walking along the highway past Soda Pininini and the empty *escuela*. It was only 5:30, but the immense tropical sky was already filling up with stars. By the time we reached the forest path, the only illumination we had were a few faraway stars, the flashlight we carried with us, and tonight, an early moon.

The darkness seeped like water into shallow gullies and crevices, filling up the spaces between roots, limbs, and broad leaves. We walked single file, Libby leading and shining the flashlight on the narrow trail ahead. Following that spot of light, I tried to ignore whatever rustled near our feet. On our afternoon walk to the highway, we dodged noisy lizards scooting for cover in the leaves. At night, however, in the dark I heard muffled snorting. I knew that sound belonged to an animal with lobed lungs, fur, and four-valved heart. I knew that lizards never snorted.

When I was a little boy, I was sure a wolfman, all fangs and claws, waited to leap out of shadowy corners and rip me apart. Even when I was older, over thirty and living alone in West Virginia, an empty house at night could trigger old fears. In these woods, in the heart of the Torrid Zone south of the Tropic of Cancer, sometimes the dark unnerved me.

By six o'clock, tired and dirty, we reached our front door after the long afternoon teaching and commuting to San Rafael. We unlocked the house, shed our damp clothes, and showered. The cool water and soap wiped us clean and woke us up. I filled a pot with tap water and black beans for a new batch of *gallo pinto*. While we waited for the beans to boil, we uncapped two *cervezas*, sat down at the kitchen table, and talked about how the children in our class were so curious and smart, and about how hard it was to learn another language.

It was October. I enjoyed working with these men and women, girls and boys, but I did not understand why so many of our students had trouble pronouncing certain words. Usually, it was an older person, often a man, mangling a vowel or dropping a terminal consonant. I was frustrated.

“The sounds are the same,” I said. “Almost every sound you make in English, you can make in Spanish, too.”

“But the sounds don’t fit the same in Spanish, the letters aren’t in the right place,” Libby said. “It’s not the way a word’s put together for them.”

I was on my second *Imperial* and loosening up. “Right, right, but I can look at a word like *niña*, apply the rules, and *es claro, no hay problema*.” I liked using this common expression. In language school, I’d learned it was the proper phrase, not the Hollywood surfer-dude’s slurred and mellow *no problema mon*.

“If I can pronounce *niña*,” I said, “then why can’t our students figure out a word like ‘name’? All the sounds are in both languages, what’s so damn hard?”

“Marty, you’ve gone to college, studied other languages, don’t you think that helps?” In Japan, Libby had worked at a language school, teaching salary men, high school students cramming for university entrance exams, and middle-aged housewives. At Georgia State she taught university students in exchange programs, an immigrant from Iran, a man from Mexico working at CNN.

“You have to understand, it’s not that easy,” she said.

Of course she was right. Libby taught me secrets I had never even noticed about my own language, those quirks of tongue, teeth, lips, and glottis that are effortless if you’ve been speaking English all your life.

When you say “runs,” for example, the terminal consonant is a “voiced” ending. Put a finger to your throat, say *nnn*, and you’ll feel a subtle thrum. After a voiced consonant, the “s” is pronounced like a “z.” But when you say “sits,” the ending is unvoiced, the ensuing “s” more purely sibilant. In English, hundreds of verbs conjugate the third-person singular by adding “s” and, utterly unaware, we shift back and forth between voiced and unvoiced endings. We say “the water boils,” or “she talks” or “he cries” or “she laughs.” We use the right pronunciation each time, without ever learning this rule.

I took a swig from my beer, swallowed. “My god,” I asked, “How do you teach your students all that?”

Libby smiled. “That,” she said, “is a good question.”

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For nearly as long as I can remember, I had been fascinated by the secrets of language. When I was seven years old and beginning to read, I had a coloring book that showed the French words for animals, colors, numbers, and foods. A “cat” was *le chat*, and a “dog” was *le chien*. I learned colors: *blanc*, *vert*, *bleu*, *rouge*. Even then I noticed how French and English sometimes resembled each other in mysterious ways. White was a *blank* color. On special occasions, my mom painted her cheeks red with *rouge*. A little older, I learned how a green field might be called *verdant*.

In high school, I studied French all four years, and it was my “second language” in college, where poetry became my other second language. I learned how the poet T.S. Eliot was influenced by French writers such as Baudelaire and Jules LaForgue. I discovered Dante, the great Italian Renaissance poet, and for one year in graduate school I studied Italian and Latin so that I could struggle with Dante’s *Commedia* in his original language. Those days, I was uncertain of just about everything, and Dante’s “dark wood”—*una selva oscura*—resonated somewhere deep inside me.

All those years studying other languages, however, I never learned to speak in French or Italian without first translating words in my head. When I expressed frustration, my teachers usually said that one really needed to live in another country to learn how to speak the language.

My teachers were right. In a practical way, my language studies helped me recognize and use many words in Spanish. *Alto* meant “tall” (altimeter). *Calor* meant “hot” (calorie). I loved to make these kinds of etymological connections:

<i>dulce</i>	sweet	dulcet
<i>gente</i>	people	gentry
<i>menos</i>	less	minus
<i>sol</i>	sun	solstice
<i>tarde</i>	late	tardy

In Costa Rica, however, I could not explain my ability to speak the language by mere cause and effect logic. As far as I could tell, words began magically to appear in my mouth even though I did not plan what I wanted to say. Something unbidden was working in me. On a warm night when ocean breezes cooled our front porch, I might

lean over to Libby, tell her how *la luna es linda, esta noche...tu estás linda también, señorita bonita*.

Granted, the words were simple, at best a child's vocabulary, but I spoke my new language with the bravado of a five-year-old. The words came fast, and even if this were only basic magic, like pulling a rabbit out of a hat, I was thrilled.

Like a child learning to talk, however, I sometimes got myself into trouble with words. I loved guessing cognates. More often than not, my language studies helped me when I guessed at words such as *información*, *sensación*, and *abreviación*, all the "-tion" suffixed words in English that typically were almost the same in Spanish. I also found it easy to use latinate prefixes such as *ex-* and *com-* (*excepcional*, *comunidad*). Yet even though I knew that these words shared common Latin roots, I was insecure making sentences. I might say to a student: *No tengo la información por su problema*. In my own mouth, the words were awkward and alien. I tried out a word in Spanish, waited, scrutinized my listener's face for the tell-tale tilt of the head, the raised eyebrow, the look that translated in Spanish as *Qué?* In English, that look meant "What planet are you from?" But like magic, more often than not my listener nodded, answered back, and *voilà*, we understood each other.

Sometimes, we did not. In San José, Libby and I had bought our groceries at the *automercado*. There, we shopped the way we did back in the United States. We explored shelves and bins, picked out what we wanted, loaded our cart, then headed for the checkout line. In Cahuita, however, we bought our groceries at the *pulpería*, where everything was behind counters. Lilan's grocery had most everything we needed, but we had to ask the woman working there, *por favor*, to hand us whatever we wanted: *frijoles negros o rojos* (black or red beans), *papas* (potatoes), *queso* (cheese), *papel higiénico* (toilet paper), and *corn flakes*. Usually, *no hay problema*.

Once, I wanted to buy spaghetti, saw the packages on the shelf, and said, with all confidence: "*La pasta, por favor.*"

The woman smiled. It was the look that meant "I understand." She walked to the shelf, returned, and handed me a box of toothpaste.

Strangest of all, however, was the day I wanted to buy fresh vegetables. Libby and I had a yen for green beans and, applying a little logic, I asked the woman behind the counter, "*Por favor, tiene los*

*frijoles verdes?*” The look she gave me was hard to describe. Her jaw dropped a little, and her eyes opened wide, both astonished and horrified, as if I were a man from Mars, or worse, an earthbound lunatic who ate moldy beans. Perhaps in that moment, I embodied her worst fears about *los gringos*.

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“You have to be careful of false friends,” Libby told me. “Words aren’t always what they seem to be.”

As we drank our beers before dinner, Libby explained how her students often made mistakes with cognates. For example, a Spanish-speaking person new to our language might ask, “May I molest you?” In Spanish, *molestar* means “to bother” or “to disturb.” In Costa Rica, we met several “false friends.” *Sopa* is not soap, but “soup.” If a man should say that he is *embarazada*, he will be doubly embarrassed, having just said that he is pregnant.

A different kind of mistake (*error* in Spanish, a true friend) but perhaps an easier stumble for *gringos* living in the tropics, was the Spanish word for “hot.” Luckily, our language school teacher had explained the difference between *calor* and *caliente*. Coffee is *caliente*. The *gallo pinto* on the stove may be *caliente*. Even the sun can be *caliente*. But on a moonless night, lying in bed, wet and perspiring, awake after a long day of sun, humidity, and no rain, if you roll over and say to your lover, “I’m hot,” you had better not say *estoy caliente* unless you mean business. Otherwise, you say *tengo calor*.

It’s the same in English. We say that an animal is “in heat.” We say “he’s hot” or in a bygone slang, “she’s hot to trot.” In our language, we never bothered to distinguish between words. For us, there’s “hot” and there’s *hot*.

I have to confess, armed with such linguistic secrets, some nights when the moonlight filled our bedroom window, I leaned close to Libby and whispered: *Estás muy caliente, mi amor*.

Some nights, bedsheets damp and crumpled at our feet, we were hot together.

“*Itadakimasu*,” we said together. The Japanese prayer-word Libby had taught me was a simple expression of thanks for food and nourishment. Dinner that night was beans and rice, cornbread, and

*piña*, that is, “pineapple,” not to be mistaken for *pino*, which means “pine.” That distinction was easy for us to remember. One of the largest dairy companies in Costa Rica is “Dos Pinos.” We saw their trucks and products everywhere; their logo, of course, was two green pine trees standing side by side.

That night, I loved learning new secrets from Libby, how a voiced syllable vibrates against the cartilage of your throat, or how the Japanese and Spanish words for “bread” are the same: *pan*. But I loved even more sharing older mysteries: saying grace at dinner; eating simple foods our ancestors would have recognized.

Now and then, I might say a poem out loud before dinner. My favorite was “The Clay Jug,” an ecstatic poem by the fifteenth-century Indian poet Kabir translated by Robert Bly: “Inside this clay jug, there are canyons and pine mountains, / and the maker of canyons and pine mountains....” The poem ends:

If you want the truth, I'll tell you the truth:  
Friend, listen: the God whom I love is inside.

We finished dinner at eight o'clock that night, almost bedtime for us, and that night I was sleepy, content after good food and three cold beers. But Libby knew we had to wash our dishes. For nearly a month, we had been steadfast in our kitchen duties, fighting as best we could against *insectas* and other creatures that might be summoned by crumbs, scraps, and dirty dishes.

I knew she was right, so I stood beside her at the kitchen sink. Libby washed, I dried. But I resented this mundane chore after our lively talk about the mysteries of language, after our salty *gallo pinto* and sweet *piña*.

Then I had an idea. “Let’s sing,” I said.

“*Qué?* What do you want to sing?” Libby said.

“The old songs.”

And so we sang songs we learned on the frontiers of our adolescence, old Beatles songs like “The Long and Winding Road.” We sang one of our favorites, “Me and Bobbie McGee,” trying our best to imitate the version that Janis Joplin had sung. *Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose*, we wailed, and stanza by stanza, the lyrics came back to us, words to songs we thought we had forgotten. Before long, we were finished washing our dishes.

In the kitchen, in silence, we hugged, wavered and swayed. Slowly, our wobble turned into a dance, and I began to sing.

When I first met Libby, the movie “Ghost” had been popular. As an evening social activity, one night she had rented the video for her Japanese exchange students. The girls loved the movie, even if they couldn’t understand half the dialogue. They especially loved the movie’s theme song, “Unchained Melody” by The Righteous Brothers.

Dancing with Libby in the kitchen, I started to sing the “Ghost” song. I am sure that, if I could hear a recording of my singing that night, I would be as embarrassed as a gringo who found out that he’d confided to his tico friend that he was pregnant. But in that moment, I thought my singing sounded sweet enough, and I hoped it sounded sweet to Libby. When I finished, however, she was crying.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said. “I’m happy.”

In Costa Rica, maybe the secrets I learned were only old secrets after all. Maybe all mysteries are like that, hand-me-downs, well-worn, but new to us when we are young.

Singing, dancing. Saying poems and saying grace. These customs belong to the language of what the body yearns for, the language that supercedes basic needs. The word *desire* comes from the latin *sidus*, which means “constellation” or “star,” hence “sidereal motion” refers to the motion of the stars. To “consider” means “to observe the stars closely.” To *desire* means “to long for the stars,” to hold them in your hands.

That night, nearly ten o’clock, it was very late for us. We climbed upstairs, got into bed, and read our books for a little while—one of life’s other great pleasures—but soon we were falling asleep.

I turned out the light. There was just enough moonlight and starlight that I could see Libby’s face. It did not matter to me that, in the history of humankind, billions of people had been in love before us. That night, we slept soundly. In the morning, we held each other close again, warming our bodies against the chill that was so common here, yet so strange to me, knowing the earth’s bulging equator lay just a little more than nine degrees south of our bed.