

HOW NOW BROWN COW?

and will come to think this several times over the next few weeks, that my doorman must suspect untoward activity. The work-from-home writer in r0H seems to have taken a Latin lover. And it's the guy from *Law & Order*.

I have exactly four classes to master Spanish—or at least memorize enough words to order dinner. As it stands, my foreign-language skill set includes a hundred words of Swedish, high school French, and fairly decent Italian. But unlike Swedish or Italian, Spanish is not a language of diminishing importance—there are (almost) entire continents that speak it, not to mention large pockets of New York.

Marlon starts me off with the verb “to be” (*ser*) and the other verb “to be” (*estar*). I’m already annoyed. Why would any language need to two forms of “I am”? Naturally, I think I can make it better. Forgetting for a moment that I don’t speak Spanish, I decide that it’s up to me to tweak the language spoken by billions of people for thousands of years, to make it smoother, more logical, smarter. This is part of my process. Right between denial and acceptance, between prepositions and Marlon’s work sheet for “Things Found in the Kitchen.”

No matter how many times I do it, learning a new language is discombobulating. Not only is it hard to find the signposts pointing to comprehension, but it’s hard to read them even when you find them. I can’t get through the process without fighting off the twin demons of confusion and shame—which I remember all too well from my AP French class. So I just say “What?” 75 times until I get it.

And eventually, I do. Between classes, I’ve been slipping Spanish words into conversations with my husband and the Dominican guy at the deli, rolling my “R”s, lisping

my “Z”s, and flicking my tongue on the back of my teeth for that satisfying “nyah” sound. By my last class, I feel great. Tonight, for my final exam, I will have dinner in Spanish Harlem—where I’m going to order an entire meal in Spanish. No pointing, no dictionary, no pictures, no English. Bring on the *cervezas*! Another dash of *sal*, *senorita*! *Mas agua, por favor!*

Marlon looks a little panicky. “We will practice,” he says warily. He stands up and, wielding an imaginary pen, folds an imaginary napkin over his arm, poised to take my order. This goes on for a few minutes, and as I say my *muchas gracias para todo*, I silently hope my husband is okay with soup for dinner. Because if he wants pasta, I’ll have no idea how to order it.

Later, we head up to my final exam at a tiny restaurant on East 116th Street, where the corner delis have taqueria counters and men wear cowboy boots. I sweat through my very choppy dinner order, managing to request water with no ice. I even haltingly ask the cute Mexican waitress to stick to the *Español*. She seems confused. It’s clearly so painful for me, and she has a decent grasp of restaurant English, but she’s a good sport. She plays along.

As the dinner continues and the beer bottles multiply, my Spanish gets *muy meglio*. Soon I’m telling the waitress that I’m a *vegetariana*, that I favor food that is *speziato*, and that dinner was *eccellente*.

When we get up to leave, the waitress gives us a warm goodbye and laughs a little. “I think I did pretty well,” I say to my husband. “I wonder why she’s smiling.”

He smiles too. “Probably because you were speaking Italian.”

— DANIELLE PERGAMENT



SPANGLISH

or, *How One Woman Uses Her Mastery of Italian to Conquer Spanish in Two Weeks*

It's Friday afternoon and Benjamin Bratt is standing at my front door. He says his name is Marlon, he's from Language Trainers, and he's here to teach me Spanish, but that doesn't change the fact that he's the spitting image of the actor—albeit with an Ecuadorian accent. I realize now,



BIO Danielle Pergament is a contributor to *Allure* magazine. Her writing has also appeared in *The New York Times*, *Marie Claire*, and *New York*. She lives in Manhattan.

