

Tell Me

“DIGAME!” – Tell me! The raw, harshness of the voice on the other end of the phone propelled the receiver away from my ear. I didn’t understand the words but the rudeness of the tone came through loud and clear. I almost hung up.

I dug for some courage and stammered out the Spanish phrase I had been practicing for the last five minutes. “Quiero hablar con Teresa, por favor.” I wish to speak with Teresa, please. **“¿QUE?”** – What? There was a wheeze followed by a guttural Uhhh.

Who was this? It couldn’t be anyone connected with the Teresa who had been described to me as a wonderful gentle woman who could teach me Spanish. “Please let this be a wrong number,” I thought.

I was desperate for a Spanish teacher. I’d lived in Mexico for one year and had come to the realization - no way, no how was I going to progress with the language without some formal teaching. I aspired to know more than how to order a beer – “un sir-vase-a-pour fa-bore.” I was about to start building a house and the ability to communicate was paramount.

“Teresa, Teresa.” I repeated. “¿Ella en casa?” - She in house? I persevered with my limited Spanish and one finger on the disconnection button of the phone, ready to cut this conversation if he continued being so churlish.

“AY, TERESSA,” the voice softened a little and I thought – Whew, we’re communicating. “¿Si, Teresa en casa?” Yes, Teresa in house? I was a long way, away from using verbs and putting sentences together. Every Spanish word I spoke felt like I was reaching deep into my throat, dragging it out letter by letter.

“Noestaenlacasadejemeunrecardoylopaso” he spewed a succession of words that to my untrained ear sounded like new age jazz, a bunch of instruments out of sync.

I couldn't leave a number for her to call me back. Even though the year was 1994 phone lines, to where I lived were still two years into the future. Whenever I made a trip into town I'd queue up at the larga distancia office, pay my five pesos for the use of a telephone and cross my fingers it would be Teresa who answered.

After five or six calls and never finding Teresa en casa, the voice and I settled into a familiar, primitive form of communications.

“¡DIGAME!”

“¿Teresa?”

“NO.”

CLICK.

Sometimes I wondered why I continued calling. I think curiosity kicked in and I was intrigued to know the face behind the voice. In my mind he towered over my small stature. His face was pocked marked and weathered with two deep furrows in between his eyes, formed by glaring out his hatred of the world. His hand that gripped the phone held a cigarette, his fingers dark with nicotine stains.

I also wanted to meet the kind of woman who could live with such a monstrously rude person.

Then finally one day the commanding voice answered - “DIGAME!” wearily I said my part, “Teresa?” ---“**TERESSA, ES LA GRINGA.**” It's the American girl.

The voice of Teresa took over the phone. A voice with a soothing, sweet lilt.. I could hear her smile in the singsong words. - “Hola, this is Teresa, how can I help you?” I wanted to reach through the telephone lines and give her a hug. I wanted to say, is it really you and dramatically burst into tears. Reaching her had become an obsessive challenge and I’d finally crossed the finish line. An image of Teresa during all my phone calls had remained elusive but now I was able to conjure up a delightful, motherly, baker of fresh bread, hugs and kisses type person.

The next day, following Teresa’s directions I parked outside their home and took in the surroundings. She said she lived in a neighborhood in the making and their house would be easy to find, as it was the only one with a garden wall and an iron gate. She had been modest in her description. Looking around, I could see it was also the only one finished and painted, complete with roof –tiles. Bright red bougainvillea flowers spilled over the wall, contrasting with the gray bleakness of the concrete block houses with tin roofs surrounding hers. Dogs barked incessantly and I could hear a child howling, in anger not hurt.

Inside the gate, there was a manicured garden, filled with exotic plants I had yet to learn the names of. Someone in the household had an eye for splendor and the patience to care for it. An aroma of fresh baking spilled from the house. The front door was opened, so I knocked timidly on the frame of the screen and said “Hola, anyone home?”

A man and a woman appeared simultaneously. Teresa was exactly how I had seen her in my mind’s eye. A woman coming close to sixty, not fat, not thin - softly rounded. She approached me with a wide-open face, brown laughing eyes, creased at the sides, smiling broadly and gave me a kiss on the cheek and a heartfelt hug. “You must be Cristina.”

The man hung back a little, we stared directly into each other’s eyes. I didn’t have to look up, we were the same height. His close, cropped graying beard and thinning hair

gave him the appearance of a retired professor and his watery eyes were kind eyes. His hands were small, the hands of an artist. They were nicotine stained.

“You’re not the man who answers the telephone!” I blurted. He looked over at Teresa, perplexed. Teresa translated. “She wants to know who you are.” “¿QUE?” – What? he said. “Ay mi amor....Oh my love, - Enrique, for pete sake will you turn up your hearing aid. “He hates the neighbourhood sounds,” she apologized for him.

Enrique gave Teresa a gruff look, the kind only someone deeply in love can get away with and he reached behind his ear and adjusted his hearing aid.

That day I learned that Enrique was a Spaniard and Spaniards have a direct ‘dura’ hard no nonsense way about them. They answer the telephone –¡Digame! - Tell Me! Mexican’s answer in a softer tone, Bueno! – Good.

I started my classes with Teresa. Learning Spanish was the bonus, learning about their lives the prize. Soon I was saying. ¡Digame! Tell Me, Tell Me!

For thirteen years we have shared many beach walks, many sangrias, many paellas and the tears and laughter that go along with changes in life. All the while they have captivated me with stories from their extraordinary lives. The inspiration for my first novel comes from them. It’s a work of fiction based on some inconceivable truths. It’s also a work of love.