How to Wait for Your Daughter in Europe

by Richard Corbett

Order a fourth café con leche. You feel comfortable ordering that in Spanish, sitting at a table in the Lion Café, on the afternoon of your first day in Madrid, two days after Christmas. Plan to lay low today, start to get over the jet lag and wait until your daughter arrives in the evening with some language skills.

The waiter doesn’t know what to say to you because he doesn’t speak English and he has figured out that you don’t know Spanish. All you’ve said so far is café con leche. Four times.

Men supposedly do not like to ask for directions or for help generally but you would be glad to ask lots of questions now, if you knew how. The other Spanish phrases that you memorized for this trip don’t seem helpful. You examine them anyway, sipping your coffee.

Soy americano.

Everyone in the café has probably guessed that. Saw you coming a mile away.

Soy abogado. Why would that interest anybody? There are plenty of lawyers in Spain, just as there are plenty of lawyers everywhere.

Estoy cansado. There was no sleep to be had on that noisy overnight flight from Newark. So, you probably look tired, even after four café con leches. So, no need to tell anyone.

Best to wait for Anne to arrive on her midyear break from Aix-en-Provence where she has been studying through her Wellesley program. With a slight smile, she’ll switch from French to Spanish (however that happens in her brain). Tomorrow she’ll take you to the phone store to get your phone programmed to work in Europe (however that happens in this country). When Anne arrives, you can work out your plans for the first visit to Spain for both of you. The Prado. El Retiro. Tapas bars. New Year’s Eve in the Puerta del Sol.

Another Spanish sentence comes to mind, with no one to tell it to. Mi hija habla español. My daughter speaks Spanish.

Still, there is an urge to somehow signal that you are sympathetic. You want to tell someone that you like this café — that it is a clean, well-lighted place. But you don’t know how to say that. There is a powerlessness to your first day so you begin to strategize.

Consider becoming extraordinarily good at hand gestures. Or perhaps just appreciate the humor of your situation.

What do you call someone who speaks three languages?

Trilingual.

What do you call someone who speaks two languages?

Bilingual.

What do you call someone who speaks only one language?

American.

Or maybe forget strategies and just wait for Anne. You settle up with your waiter by flourishing a handful of euros and letting him sort through them.

At midnight, back out on the street, you see every vehicle as a taxi, until it comes far enough down the street to prove otherwise. Every vehicle is a fresh opportunity for disappointment, for further concern. You stay on the street, waiting, your phone useless in your pocket. You walk less. You stay standing in one place longer. You rest the knees.

At two in the morning, exhausted, your dark thoughts have fully developed. She is lost somewhere in Europe. A flight went to the wrong place. Some disturbance has arisen; no amount of American ingenuity or education can overcome it. Maybe she never got on the plane. Or the plane never took off, for reasons known only to people who travel around Europe by plane.

Just now, sitting on the curb, your knee aching, your eyelids closing, the taxi comes upon you suddenly. Your daughter is there, hugging you, explaining about a Ryanair flight cancellation and no way to let you know.


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