

When I was very young, Portuguese flew readily off my tongue. I would watch soapy telenovelas each afternoon, listening to the rapid fire cadence of characters embroiled in their daily drama. The Brazilian bossa nova danced around the kitchen each night as my mom cooked us a hearty dinner of couscuz com frango.

For most of my life, it was just my grandmother, my mom, and me. I felt blessed to live with two of the strongest women in the world. My grandmother, minha vovó, was my best friend. When most people think of Brazil, they probably imagine Carnival, with exotic costumes, sleepless nights, and the samba dancers bouncing off of every beat. But I think about my grandma's flowy shirts with flowers twirling around each sleeve, the nights she stayed up to read another story to me, and the way she shimmied around the kitchen to Mais Que Nada. Though seemingly unrelated, both of these connotations share the same characteristic: garra, or drive -- the unconditional will to succeed. They share Brazil.

However, after my grandmother passed suddenly, I lost my connection to garra for a time. Without her to talk with, my fluency in Portuguese began to diminish. I no longer watched any telenovelas or listened to bossa nova. At that stage of grief, my culture only reminded me of the void left by her passing.

But by not facing the pain of her loss head on, I was diminishing both her memory and the culture I held so dear. Some words in Portuguese became harder to find and the taste of brigadeiro, Guaraná, and coxinha were fading in my mind. Although I believed I was saving myself from pain, I had never felt further from my grandmother, and that was worse than anything else. So, in the spirit of my grandmother -- of garra -- I started with something that felt like moving forward while also remembering to look back. I learned to play one of my grandmother's favorite songs "Con te Partiro" -- "Time to Say Goodbye" -- on the piano.

For months, I had worried that I wouldn't be able to stop myself from crying when I heard the song. Yet whenever my fingers touched the keys, she would appear on the couch, sitting quietly with her head tilted and her eyes closed, swaying gently to match the rhythm of the song. And one morning, with sunlight painting the room and a gentle breeze swirling out the windows, I performed the song for my family.

Despite playing piano for years, I had never experienced so directly the power that playing music gave to create meaning. Every keystroke was an ode to my grandmother and closure for myself. And as those notes floated off into that clear morning, I could feel clearly once more her arms around me, and the way she'd bend down to whisper "não chore minha filha." Don't cry, my daughter.

After that day, Duolingo owl dominated my phone notifications, and my mom and I began speaking only Portuguese when we were alone. I watched "Cidade de Deus" and memorized the lyrics to "Linda Demais." I typed "Brazil" in the search bar of the New York Times every morning, determined to navigate the extensive political landscape. I reveled in Brazil's sensual, sanguine, saucy culture, even as articles made me remember my grandmother, holding her head in her hands after she lost her job in the court system because the military believed it a threat.

As I learn and remember, I see the way that garra continues to function in Brazilian culture: the way it is never wasted on complaints or resentment but rather only used to fuel proactivity, creativity, and hope. At the same time, I can say both to my grandmother and to Brazil: "Eu estarei sempre com você, viva em memória e em espírito." I'll keep you with me, alive in memory, alive in soul.