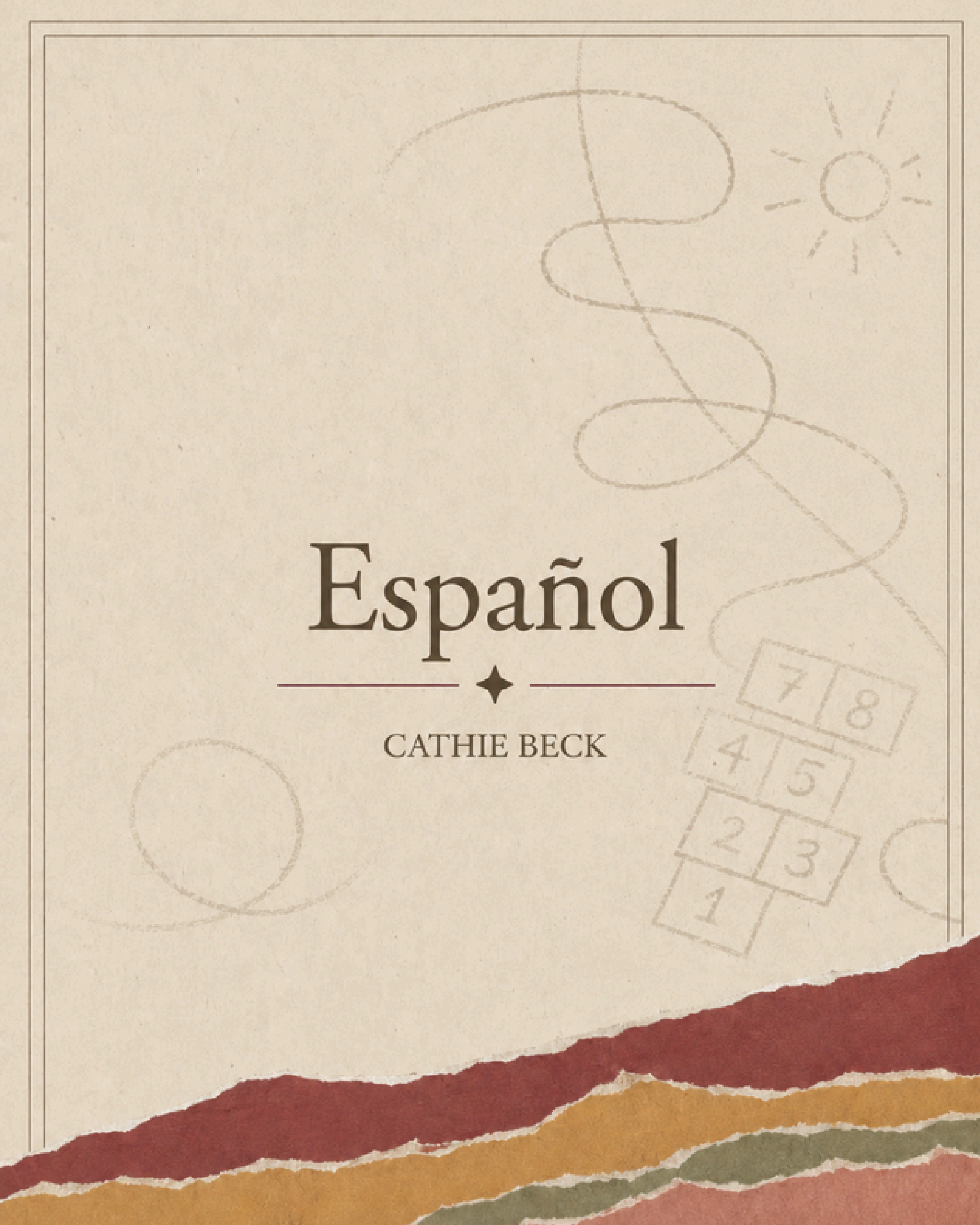




Español

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CATHIE BECK

HE WAS OUR ONLY SOURCE OF INCOME. We walked at least a block behind him. Always. That was our safety range. Most afternoons he stood on Eastern Avenue behind Our Lady of Blessed Redemption Grade School, though Mary Theresa said she saw him on Michigan Street near the kickball diamond sometimes. Mary Theresa was my best friend and the third oldest of twelve children. We were both nine years old that fall.

I did it for the money. I was also the third oldest but we only had six kids. We lived on my dad's seventy-nine-dollar-a-week paycheck, when he brought it home.

Mary Theresa probably did it for similar reasons, though she may have done it for sport. She liked to say smart-aleck things and was the first one of us to cuss out loud. She called Sister Patricia Amadeus a hairy-legged old bitch to her face the first week of school that year and instantly won my respect.

We were always startled to round the Rural Street and Eastern Avenue corner, though he lurked there every afternoon. It made us giddy when we spotted him. He waited for us, patient, and when we finally stopped skipping and pushing and yakking about whether Sister Patricia Amadeus shaved her face or not, he would face us, sullen, standing straight, but never stepping toward us.

His hair, black and slicked back, lay like shiny plastic against his brown skin. I cannot remember his hands or his legs or his feet.

Because he was all coat.

His coat wrapped him from neck to mid-shin like a shroud. It hung to his ankles. It was a tan coat with lots of buttons down the front and a big, wide belt at his waist, though neither was ever fastened. He kept his coat closed by jamming his fists deep in his pockets and crossing his arms in front of him.

I would always pinch Mary Theresa's arm hard when I first spotted him, and then Mary Theresa would shriek and shove me hard on the shoulder. The racket attracted his attention. It was our trio's signal, our method of communicating, and he would shift his weight expectantly.

"You do it!" Mary Theresa said. She was my boss that fall.

"I can't!" I screamed. "He'll get me!" I covered my mouth as the words were meant only for Mary Theresa, though any fool on the block could hear me.

Then I made sure he was looking at me.

"Español?" I said, real quiet. I always said it real low the first time 'cause I was scared. It was kind of practice, a warm-up.

"He didn't hear you," Mary Theresa said. She had moved back ten paces.

"Shut up Mary Terry." I always called her Mary Terry when I was mad. "ES-PANN-YOLE?" I repeated, taunting and hesitant.

He moved one step closer to us. I screamed and jumped back to Mary.

"You've got to get closer," she said and grabbed my wrist and yanked me forward. Then she took over. She stuck her arms out from her sides like a spindly bird and spread her feet a foot or so apart to balance herself. She bent over a little at the waist and poked out her skinny, nine-year-old butt.

"ES-PANN-YOLE?" she called, loud and sing-songy, making the word a sentence of its own. The man did not move.

“ES-PANN-YOOLL?” she repeated, and this time she shook her butt back and forth to the beat of the syllables and made circles with her arms and swung her hips wider.

I stood next to her. “Ess-pann-YOLL,” I called. And there we stood, the two of us shoudler to shoulder, our mouths open and yelling like hungry baby birds, our butts dancing back and forth. Sometimes when we really got going, we would turn circles on the sidewalk and chant in unison, “Es-pan-yole, we love you! Es-pan-yole, we love you!” We threw him kisses for a finale.

He always waited until the end, until we were done. Then he took one step forward; at the same time, we jumped about three steps back, keeping that full city block between him and us, and he would flip open his coat--wide. Sometimes it flapped a couple times.

It was the first and last penis I ever saw when I was nine years old. It was the only penis I ever saw from a block away. Mary Theresa had nine brothers, so she had seen lots of them, but she shrieked as loud as me and we both held each other’s arms, giggling and hysterical and titillated and ashamed.

That’s when Español gave up his quarters. A fistful of them, pulled from the depths of his deep pockets and hurled them across the sidewalk. We waited till he left, then raced to the corner and grabbed them, checking the curb for strays.



He kept us in Cokes and Hostess Ding Dongs up till Christmas that year, and we were financially devastated in January when we came back to school and he was gone, though we both had hopes that maybe he had just switched corners on us. It worked out okay in the end, though. Patrick, Mary Theresa’s brother, taught us to shoplift in the spring.

CATHIE BECK, *Español*