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The Things We Talked About

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The Things We Talked About

Angelica Julia Davila

My sister couldn't talk. Developmentally speaking, children begin to talk between eighteen and twenty-four months. The average number of words that an eighteen-month-old can say is about twenty, typically basic nouns like "mama" and "papa". By the time children hit the twenty-four-month mark, it increases to about fifty words. It's at this time that children will begin to put two words together to form rudimentary sentences or phrases, such as "dog wag." Significant gains in language should be seen between ages two and three when a child will begin to use three or more words into sentences.

But Ale, at age three, could say "mama" and as far as I recall, that was about it. Despite this, she'd make what others would describe as incongruent noises to express herself. I want to stress this part, the sounds she made were treated as just incongruent noises by society and even so-called experts.

In the mornings when Mom when Mom worked her shift at the deli counter of Dominick's, Ale and I would hang out in the living room of our apartment. We're ten years apart, so I, the thirteen-year-old, was responsible for her, the three year old. I watched *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, while Ale assembled blocks, cars, or plastic kitchen toys into a long line across the carpeted floor. She did this a lot. She seemed to take pleasure from lining up toys and items in a line, a behavior that is often associated with autism.

Ale would later be diagnosed with autism at age five, but back in our *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* mornings, we didn't know there was a term to explain her actions that differed from other children. In fact, we had never even heard of the word *autismo*. The term was still relatively unknown, and maybe even more unknown to those of us in the Latino community. Before the word autism entered our lives all we had known was that Ale was just a bit different.

So, there we were. Me watching the endless morning marathon of *Buffy*, and Ale making her lined accomplishments. An art of sorts. Then Ale would say, “Washi wash!”

I would look down at her, and she would be looking at me. Her mouth slightly open, and her eye very bright. She seemed to be waiting for me to acknowledge what she had just said. I would learn later that this exchange was an example of joint attention, which is the sharing of an experience with one another. Children often engage in joint attention with their parents and others at as early as two months. Other examples of joint attention include when a child points to an item, thereby inviting the parent or sibling to look at the item, too. Children with autism may have a difficult time partaking in joint attention, and Ale didn’t always engage in it. However, in the mornings when we’d have our little conversations, she was inviting me to respond.

Ale would say, “Washi, wash!”

I nodded at her. “Oh?” I’d say.

“Washi wash wash!” Ale would say.

“You’re right,” I’d reply.

“Washi wash,” she’d say, as if to confirm my agreement with her wash wash assertion. She would then go back to lining up her toys. She’d make other sounds, but these were more to herself. She wasn’t inviting me to intrude on her own conversation, and so I’d go back to watching the show. “Washi wash” was the way she invited others to communicate with her.

There were other times when Ale would say “Washi wash” and hand me something. I interpreted this to mean, “Here, hold on to this for now.” Other times I’d swing her around and she’d exclaim, “Washi wash!” which I decoded to mean, “This is fun!” Then there were her longer soliloquies, when “Washi wash” would be emphasized in any point in her performance.

I'd usually respond as you would with any child, "You don't say? Tell me more." And washi wash she would. She was three, and I was thirteen, and yet we had developed our own method of understanding.

My sister soon got a nickname in our family. She became known as La Washi Wash. Most of the sounds that she formed consisted of washi and wash in different forms, such as:

Washi wash

Washi wash wash

Wassshi wish wash

Washiwassha

"Ahi viene La Washi Wash," my aunts and uncles would say whenever my sister would walk into a room. And is if on cue, she'd say her signature phrase, "Washi wash."

I should offer a disclaimer here. It wasn't like we weren't working to help Ale form congruent speech, but we also didn't squander her own method of expression, which was using "Washi wash."

A speech therapist, developmental therapist and occupational therapist walked into our home during early intervention. There is no punchline, there is only "Washi wash." To provide her with other forms of communication, the therapists taught Ale bits and pieces of sign language.

She learned the sign for "more." She would close both hands, allowing her fingers to touch the thumbs. Then she would bring both closed hands toward each other so that both hands met and touched at the fingertips. This signaled "more."

Soon our conversations became more dynamic. She'd signal "more" while saying "washi wash!" She'd signal "more" followed by the movement for popcorn (two fingers popping in the air) while saying "washi wash."

“More popcorn?” I’d reply in our kitchen. “More,” I would say slowly.

And she’d push her hands together to agree “more.”

“More,” I’d say to try and get her to hear the sound clearly.

“Washi wash!” she’d say and still signal “more.”

I can’t recall exactly when Ale stopped saying “Washi wash.” I don’t know if it was gradual or if it stopped all at once. And I can certainly tell you that Ale, now nineteen years old, doesn’t even remember ever having said “Washi wash,” but for me washi wash allowed us to talk as sisters.

“Washi wash” represented Ale inviting me to enter her world, and to live in it by her rules.

Angelica Julia Davila is a writer and comedian. She is a Ph.D. student in the Program for Writers at the University of Illinois at Chicago where she also received her M.A. degree. Angelica has an autistic sister and works for the Resource Center for Autism and Developmental Delays (RCADD).