

Sweet Cookies and Salty Nuns

By Jennifer Coburn

I leaned close, my mouth just inches from the intercom on an unmarked brick building in Madrid, and whispered the password. A perfunctory buzz was followed by the sound of the enormous wooden door unlocking.



Katie Coburn with a treasured sweet cookie.

*M*y 14-year-old daughter Katie and I navigated a maze of dark hallways until we found the right room. It was empty except for a dark wood Lazy Susan operated by a chain thick enough to restrain King Kong. We had been told we'd never set eyes on a soul in this building. Our business would be conducted through the Lazy Susan, then we should leave immediately.

A door slammed. Katie and I were greeted by a woman's voice that barked in rapid-fire Spanish, demanding to know what we wanted.

"I feel like we're doing something wrong," Katie whispered.

"Don't be silly," I assured her. "We're here to buy cookies from nuns. It doesn't get much more wholesome than this."

Sister Scary snapped at us again. What. Did. We. Want?

Everyone in Madrid had been incredibly patient and understanding when Katie and I tried to speak the language. Our Spanish was basic junior high school level, but locals gave us major points for our earnest efforts. Certainly a nun would do the same, especially when she heard the voices of a mother and child.

"Hello, Catholic sister," I said in Spanish.

She replied with her usual question: What did we want?

"We want cookies, please," Katie offered.

Fast, angry words came through the Lazy Susan.

"Mom, she says they have many different kinds of cookies,"

Katie said, panicked. “She said to look at the list, but she just rattled off a bunch of cookies that they don’t have today.”

We looked at a list that offered almond biscuits, tocinillos de cielo (creamy egg yolk and sugar dessert, topped with caramel), and sherry mantecados (soft lard biscuits) or naranjines (orange sweets).

“Just tell her we’ll take whatever they have,” I told Katie.

“I’m not talking to her,” she whispered.

“You won the Spanish award at school,” I reminded Katie, cowardly pushing my child toward the Lazy Susan. Katie shook her head emphatically.

I proceeded with the nun, saying something like, “I like cookies. All cookies are good cookies. What cookies do you like to eat, Sister?”

A loud sigh came from behind the wall followed by the sound of finger drumming.

Katie looked at me, wide-eyed.

“Here is our money, sister,” I said, pulling the chain of the Lazy Susan. I placed eight Euros inside and assured her, “All cookies are good cookies.”

We heard the clank of the heavy chain, then the Lazy Susan door opened. Inside was a box of orange cookies baked by the nuns of the Convento de Corpus Christi.

“Amen,” I said reflexively. “I mean, thank you, sister.”

We heard nothing but the shuffle of her feet followed by the slam of the door.

A half hour later, Katie and I sat on the steps of a nearby pizza, feasting on our holy sweets, giggly from the sugar and adventures at the convent we dubbed Our Lady of Perpetual Impatience. The customer service wasn’t the greatest, but the cookies were an exquisite act of god.

Two chubby older women in plain black dresses and orthopedic shoes passed us. One gave us a thorough inspection, a head-to-toe once-over. “Stupid tourists,” she said in Spanish.

The voice sounded awfully familiar.

Jennifer Coburn is the author of four novels.
Visit jennifercoburn.com.

FOR SWEET COOKIES AND SALTY NUNS, VISIT:

Convento de Corpus Cristi – Madrid, Spain
Plazuela del Conde de Miranda, 3
(Near Mercado San Miguel)

9:30 a.m.-1 p.m. and 4 to 6:30 p.m.

On the left of the convent is an old wooden door.
Ring buzzer and say, “Dulces.”



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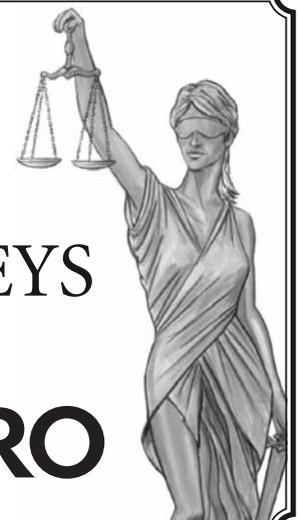
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