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Slice of Life

Melanie Schindler

The sound of wheels on gravel grew louder, so I rose from the rock where I was seated and stuck an arm out to catch the driver's attention. I'd heard you could catch a bus in either direction along this road. After checking out of the last hostel, I walked for two hours before sitting on a rock to wait and watch bugs. The driver saw me and pulled over. I hopped on, throwing some change in the cup near the steering wheel. An Asian man sat quietly in the back as four Brits in the front filled the silence. Their accents and boisterousness gave them away. I wiped the sweat from my forehead with the tail of my shirt and sat in the middle.

I sat quietly, happy to be moving again. I had no desire to bond with the others on the bus. When I first arrived in Colombia, strangers, bus drivers, baristas, and receptionists were all my new friends. A sponge soaking up their collective wisdom, I was overcome with curiosity and enthralled by the constant absorption of newness. Only a few short weeks later, I preferred the more passive role of observer.

Leaning my head on the window, I dozed and woke suddenly to the driver shouting, "aquí." I gathered my things, hurled my pack onto my back, and said, "gracias" as I hopped off. I wasn't sure exactly where "aquí" was. A signpost labeled Minca caught my eye. I knew we were in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta but hadn't kept a close eye on the map to know exactly where the road would lead. I walked for a few minutes and saw a sign labeled "Casa Lobo," with an arrow upward that led to a trailhead. I had heard of "Casa Lobo" and knew it was a hostel, so I followed the arrow along a steep zigzag trail, taking a break near the top to catch my breath.

I saw a man tending a fire outside of what could only be described

as a treehouse. He greeted me in Spanish but seemed surprised when a “gringa” like myself could keep a conversation. He was from Medellín, but he moved here because he was tired of the city. He’d made this place his home because he enjoyed the solitude coupled with occasional human connection with travelers passing through the hostel. He showed me his shower, toilet, and home, complete with a door and windows. The fire pit, hammock, and upper level for stargazing were what drew me in. After he gave me the tour, we reached a natural end to the conversation, so I said “nos vemos” to the real-life Tarzan and hiked the remainder of the trail to “Casa Lobo.”

When I opened the door, I was kindly greeted by a woman in her mid-thirties with dark hair and beautiful skin.

“Hola, cómo estás?” I asked her.

“Bien, soy Marcia. ¿Tienes una reservación?” she asked.

“Mucho gusto, soy Melanie. ¿No, está bien?”

She nodded and logged into the computer to book me for one night. I opted for a hammock since it was the cheapest option. Marcia gave me a key and walked me to my hammock. There were cabins sprawled out across the grounds, but we stopped at the collection of hammocks in the center. This would be my first time sleeping in a hammock in the jungle, but there were mosquito nets to protect from the bugs and I imagined the sounds of the jungle would be strangely soothing at night.

“Qué hay que hacer aquí?” I asked Marcia. She recommended a trail with a waterfall ten minutes away. When I heard the waterfall, I threw my phone and keys in my fanny pack and locked everything else in wooden cabinet #4 to head to the trail, then thanked Marcia before I left.

The trek back down was much faster. I wondered what animals I’d see. My thrill-seeking self wanted to see it all. I walked confidently without protection of any kind, partially naïve to potential dangers, but mostly apathetic to them. I knew I was foolish, but I also knew that my naïveté was the only reason I was in Colombia. Though unprepared and hopelessly confused most of the time, traveling alone reinforced the

importance of curiosity and open-mindedness.

I found the trailhead and could already hear water. For a mile, I followed the sound, until I reached the waterfall. I allowed myself to be mesmerized by the rushing water for a moment. Then I stripped to a bra and shorts, about to jump in, when a toucan landed on a branch a few feet away. We locked eyes, staring at each other for what felt like an eternity. I'd never seen a beak so colorful, and I wanted him to stay forever. When he flew away, I stared longingly after him. When he was no longer in sight, I dove deep into the water, holding my breath 25 meters to the foot of the waterfall. I stood, embracing the assault of the freezing water. Once my skin was numb from the cold, I swam back to the log to watch the water cascade effortlessly upon the rock.

Suddenly, a branch snapped, and panic invaded my body as I searched for signs of danger. My cell phone had no service, and I didn't carry a knife. I knew I was stupid to parade around South America alone and totally vulnerable. I convinced myself that nothing was there, and no one was trying to kill me.

I quickly got dressed, remaining on high alert. I knew huge, poisonous snakes slithered around unseen. Wild animals hid behind every tree, ready to pounce. Strangers lurked behind every corner, eager to rape or sell me for sex. The very trees that had fascinated me were now taunting me. The jungle was no longer a safe and mysterious place, but a valley of bones. I ran the mile back and slowed only when the familiar trailhead was in sight.

I was fully dry by the time I got back to the hostel. When Marcia saw me, she told me she forgot to recommend her favorite restaurant, *The Lazy Cat*. I thanked her for the recommendation and realized I was starving. I'd been too anxious to think about food, but hadn't eaten much all day and it was nearly three PM. I grabbed money and checked my phone to see no notifications. Then I half-ran, half-walked to *The Lazy Cat*.

Quickly seated on the back patio beneath a canopy of trees, I wondered how in the world I ended up somewhere so breathtaking and any thoughts of fear and loneliness vanished. I ordered "un café

con leche” and then pulled out my phone again to connect to Wi-Fi. Normally I wanted everyone to leave me alone, but today the silence felt deafening.

When the waiter came, I ordered tamales. The food came within ten minutes, and I proceeded to enjoy the best damn tamales of my life. I ordered a second cup of coffee, pulled a book from my bag, and read as I put my feet up on the chair across from me.

On my walk back to the hostel, families and friends sipped their coffee and laughed as the evening air grew cooler and I envied them. I coveted their joyful laughter and wished to join them. But instead, I looked forward and walked even quicker back to the hostel.

When I arrived, I saw the Brits from the bus and a few other strangers gathered in the communal area exchanging travel stories, already several beers deep. I walked straight past these potential new friends to my hammock. With a surprisingly deep longing for home, I wrapped the hammock around me like a cocoon, drifting off to sleep to the soothing sounds of the jungle.

Melanie Schindler is an academic advisor in the College of Engineering and Mines at the University of North Dakota, with bachelor's degrees in communications, international studies, and Spanish. She has written for The Odyssey Online and a personal blog, *Stay Curious*, which are both written in a confessional, listicle style. More recently, she dabbles in writing poetry and short stories.