**Canche Gringa**

Blonde, American Woman

Robyn Atkinson

**Over the Fence**

Over the fence—  
Strawberries—grow—  
Over the fence—  
I could climb—if I tried, I know—  
Berries are nice.  
  
But—if I stained my Apron—  
God would certainly scold.  
Oh, dear, -I guess if He were a Boy—  
He'd—climb—if He could.

-Emily Dickinson

*“****Gringo:*** *If you know any Mexican people then you'll know this is a non-derogatory term used to refer to US citizens. Mostly because the term "*[*American*](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=American)*" does not make sense to the rest of the Americans (all those people who live in the continent named "*[*America*](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=America)*", which is everybody from Alaska to Argentina), and the word "Estadounidense" (UnitedStatean) is too long. Folklore says it was generated when the US invaded Mexico, wearing green uniforms, and the people shouted, “Green Go Home.” With time it lost all derogatory status and was turned into the most common word to refer to any US citizen.” ~Urban Dictionary*

*Gringo, a Spanish noun, has the ‘o’ at the end that indicates gender – male. When it is changed to Gringa the gender is then female, translated to white American girl or woman; adding –ita to the end, Gringita, makes is even more enduring and loosely translates to little/cute white American girl. Nouns are either female or male and change depending on who they are referred to or in the case of a scissors or an apple, they’re just female. It is more complicated than that as there are words that don’t have the o or a but use el or la at the beginning to indicate gender. In the case of Gring-a, it’s obviously female.*

*Canche is Guatemalan slang for blonde. It is used to refer to American girls or women who possess a certain look. It is also an endearing label and when used with Gringa, Canche Gringa means, White American Blonde Girl/Woman. Canchita gringita is even more enduring.*

**Foreword**

Everyone has an interesting story. When you see or meet other people consider what they might know, feel, or how they may suffer.

Ask them about their story.

Remember a time when you suffered, and you couldn’t give to others like you may be able to now. Perhaps someone isn’t giving to you simply because they can’t; they can’t see out of their current pain or situation.

Or, they haven’t grown enough or aren’t wise enough to see past their current situation.

Consider that there may be a child inside who was wronged, hurt or has, perhaps, been taught to live life in the wrong way. They may have been led in the wrong direction by someone.

Yet, everyone has the capacity to be kind and learn. Perhaps instead of force in our dealings with the world, we use kindness and generosity. Instead of locking everyone out, we carefully work with them.

It may be messier; it may be scarier, but the results will be better in the long run. We’re all in this life together. Try never to assume anything about anyone; you will be proven wrong often.

Stay safe, keep your family safe; always stay safe – not just physically, but emotionally. Figure out what safe is, which is unique to you…go there.

**One**

Ivy moves her thumb and forefinger together toward the phone screen and hears a low scream as she touches it. The smooth surface reminds her of a frozen lake with ice so glossy you can glide over it with stocking feet. As she separates her fingers while maintaining contact, the low, wide kaboom and screech sound off in her ears. The flower opens into view and the colors and details are so vivid and explosive they ripple within her. Her eyes brighten as the flower reflects in them. The final, low crackling trails off as she looks at it in awe.

A firework.

She studies it. It is dark purple but has a white inner ring. There’s a hazy glow where the purple and white divide. The yellow center, on which little tentacles peep, have dots of nectar that hang in the air just above them. The petals have a velvet surface and there are imperfections including one part of the edge that is brown and wilted, but it is healthy and thriving mostly. She snaps a picture of it and pulls it up for review.

Taken out of a natural view and as a still photo, it is muted, dull, and grainy. She sighs and looks away. She stands up and steps back, presses the button on the side of her phone to close the screen, pushes it into the back pocket of her faded, torn jeans, and observes the flower bed.

The occasional bee, or butterfly, flits about touching down on a flower here and a flower there. There are many colors and sizes, and they sway in the wind. The wind lulls her into a sway in rhythm and brushes her skin. Her waist length blonde hair floats away from her body toward the field.

*Feels good, the freedom.* She feels her whole body relax; she wants to lie down and take it all in, absorb the warm sun, but instead she looks, perking up. The pink flowers have sharper edges than the purple ones with many layers, like a carnation. The yellow is soft, round, bright and vivid. The white is fierce, daring, and shining. They are the most noticeable as they compete for the spotlight.

She peers into the horizon and recalls when her husband of ten years planted the flowers and watched over them like he cares for everything else. He had tilled the ground until it was dark and raw like wet, used coffee grounds and spread the seeds he bought on the Internet. He installed a watering system, to ensure the flowers would have the hydration needed to survive and thrive. They were elated the first year, when they came up colorful, sturdy, and full. The bed was clearly in view of her favorite spot to sit and relax and she knows this was intentional.

*He is a farmer at heart and that explains a lot.*

*Can a wildflower stand on its own?* If she picks one, it will die. Maybe she could try to plant a seed by itself and see how it fairs, but that seems like a lot of fuss. She doesn’t move, fearful of hurting one; she is afraid her thoughts will turn to actions. Someday these flowers may no longer grow; her husband and she will be gone, so there won’t be a caring farmer and his wife to watch over them, enjoy them, and photograph them.

It occurs to her that perhaps the seeds that are spawned may blow in the wind and find a new home, like the corn that was now growing in the sandbox. Some may survive in what could then be the wild the way this place had been when they discovered it. The flowers that are left behind may not be as beautiful or thrive as much, though. Others may die off, never to grow again. This hits her deeply.

*Someone needs to be told about the wildflowers*.

“Mom. Mo-o-m. Mom.” The last Mom comes out like a statement, louder than the first two times and blunter. She snaps out of her thoughts. *Fuck, it’s always something.*

“Yes, I’m coming,” she shouts. Her voice cracks and strains on the last word. Her meditation is over and short-lived, as usual; her three children have been playing in the house with the oldest keeping an eye and they had enough of each other, she figures. She takes one last look at the flowers and the lake in the distance and turns around to go back to the house.

She makes her way through the green and lush lawn, and up the sprawling stairs of the patio to the French doors rushing in case something is wrong. She pauses at the door. No one is crying. No one is running in tears toward her.

Relieved, she opens the door and walks in. “What is it?”

“We just wanted to know where you were,” her oldest son says.

“OK, well, I’m going to start dinner, so you guys go play some more. I’ll call you when it’s done,” she says.

“N-o-o, come and play a game with us,” her daughter says with a long look, mouth scrunched up.

She takes a deep breath and blows it out. "Alright, just one game, then I'm going to get dinner ready."

At dinner, they have their frequent discussion around whose farts are the worst. Dad wins, although her daughter is usually a close second even though she is a tiny, petite thing.

She swallows a chuckle, then frowns. “As a reminder, this is not proper dinner talk. I hope you won’t talk like this at a friend’s house.”

They finish the dishes and take baths. After settling them into bed in their massive eight-bedroom four-bathroom home, she walks the length of the second-story hallway, looks around, and sighs. The dust has gathered on the hallway light fixtures again and there are fingerprints on the wall. Probably from Thomas and his friends running up and down with their grimy hands extended. *Those little shits, always a lot to clean; I told him it would be too much.* She feels the guilt set in.

Just because she grew up in a shack, with a mother who paraded boyfriends through her home doing drugs, and this mother went to jail, not only once, but twice, doesn’t mean she can’t appreciate what she has now. She reminds herself; her husband practically built it himself and she does love it. Her children are, mostly, angels. The cleaners are coming on Tuesday. She brushes it away*, it’s normal to feel overwhelmed at times, especially when this life is so different*. She heads to the patio to start a fire. It is her favorite spot to sit, drink wine at night and read, watch a show, or just stare at the stars. She sits back comfortably and covers herself with a blanket. Her gaze is drawn toward the sky like she is being beckoned. There is one star that is always there when the sky is clear, and it is peculiar. It is much brighter than the others and it fades in and out. It seems to move, but never goes anywhere. *A friendly alien flying saucer watching over them or an angel.* She feels comforted by its consistency and likes the fantasy.

It has grown chilly, but it is still humid from the heat during the day. The smoke rising off the fire sways with the wind, and she catches just the right amount of it and this smell provides comfort. It reminds her of growing up with wood stoves as their only heat; it was a deep warmth unlike any other. She also smells the manure and the fresh earth of the countryside as it wafts in and out. *Smells like money.* She laughs to herself as she recalls her late Father-in-law’s sentiment.

She tucks her face into the blanket. She palms her wine glass at the base of the cup and rests the base of the stem on the blanket. She stretches her legs as they have started to fall asleep under her and the blanket falls. She stands up, wraps it around her again tight fumbling with one hand, so it covers her legs and sits down again, resting her feet on the table next to the chair. Her wine glass tilted with this movement, and some spilled out onto the ground, dribbling down the side now. She uses her shirt to wipe it off, so it doesn’t get on the blanket, then takes a sip and relishes the taste. It brings some warmth like the fire.

It is quiet with her children asleep. The frogs from the pond bring a bright hum and a pause and another bright hum. There is an occasional chirp of a bird alongside the low crackle of the fire. *So much more peaceful than the city was with sirens and the constant hum of cars.* She didn’t mind it when she lived there. She hadn’t known she missed this, and she hadn’t thought she was a country girl. But she returned.

There was a possible deal breaker, she remembered. She agreed they could live in the country, but it had to be close enough to the city for her to work. She knew even then, ten years ago, it would never last, if she was stuck in some small Minnesota town like her husband wanted. She had lived too much.

*You can’t save the world*, her father’s words ring in her ears. The world she grew up in Minnesota taught her otherwise by making her tough and instilling the ability to see the world as one. The memories appear in the fire, the constant chatter of her family and cousins rising above the country sounds and smells.

*Ivy, come down to the lake and swim. Ivy, come down to the pond and skate. Ivy, come down to the lake and fish. Ivy, let’s go sledding, let’s play baseball in grandma and grandpa’s backyard. Candy making is the weekend after Thanksgiving; grandma and grandpa are finally letting us make candy canes.*

*Ivy, meet us at the climbing tree. Meet us at the treehouse. Meet me and we’ll steal cigarettes from grandma and grandpa’s house tonight. We’ll meet at the old tree and walk over. They’re gone to Germany visiting relatives, so we can climb in the window.*

“I bet I can climb this old tree in five seconds flat,” her brother said.

“I don’t think so and be careful. There are only wood slats and a cow rope to get up to the pallet on the upper branch. If you fall, you’ll crack your head open on the cement blocks down here,” Ivy said.

“You’re such a downer,” he said hoisting himself up with his feet against the side of the tree trunk easily making it to the pallet, which was worn and falling apart. She heard it creak. “Come up here.”

*I can do this too, even though I’m a girl.* As she climbed, she felt invincible; she felt the world turn. The red and white cow candy cane like rope ripped at her flesh even though it was soft and worn. Her feet slipped out of her sandals and scraped the side of the tree. Her body felt twisted and stretched. She imagined the dinosaur she dreamed about chasing her down the path between their house and grandmas didn’t catch her because she got up the tree so fast. It stopped short, stared, huffed, then ran away. *I can do anything, evade dinosaurs, and save the world.*

She climbed back down as swiftly as she went up. “I’m going to grandmas to visit.” She took off running fast. A mad race to get to the good food.

“Can I pick some rhubarb?” Ivy asked huffing when she rushed in the door that was always open.

“Yes, and get some corn and kohlrabi too,” her grandma said.

When Ivy came into the house her grandma pulled out the sugar and the salt.

Ivy took a taste of the rhubarb without the sugar and her mouth puckered chewing on the ropy vegetable. The kohlrabi was dense and starchy. The salt added some flavor.

“I must get back to my canning. Winter is coming and the vegetables are starting to get overripe. Go check the sauerkraut for me. I’m not sure it’ll be as good as Great Grandma’s German recipe. I hope I didn’t miss any ingredients,” her grandma said.

Walking into the backroom, she could smell the sauerkraut fermenting. She took a taste, and it was great; sour and soft, but not quite sour enough. “Seems to be coming along.” Ivy shouted.

“Great. Do you think your brother is coming for dinner? We’re having mashed potatoes, creamed corn, and pork boiled.”

“I don’t know. I think he was going home.”

“OK, Grandpa also plans to pull out the head cheese and blood sausage for you to try. Don’t forget to remind your brother when you go home that we’re butchering chickens next week.”

“It’s supposed to be hot tomorrow too, close to nintey degrees, so don’t you kids go swimming in the pond again. It has chiggers and other nasty stuff. If you want to swim, go across the road to Kreagle lake.”

“Grandma, can I stay here tonight? Mom’s boyfriend is staying over, and I don’t like him. It always smells funny when he stays.”

Her grandma hides her sigh. “Yes, of course, you can always stay here.”

What felt like the next day, the snow piled up to the top of the roof. The change in seasons happened so fast and it was wonderful. They decided to go sledding that day and they played so long, their fingers were frozen. When they came back in the house, they felt the warmth, the tingling, and a bit of pain in their hands and feet as they thawed.

“You kids will lose a limb if you stay out that long. Frost bite can really get you,” her mom said. “Your cheeks are frozen too. Look, there is white around the edges.”

“We went sledding for a while on the back hill, but Grandpa and Dad were out hunting, so I also ran down and helped Grandma make lunch for when they came in,” Ivy said while holding her hands up to the wood stove to warm them. The menu was venison chili, sweet, from last year’s hunt. She got a flash of the deer hanging from the light pole, it’s guts and hide removed, bleeding out.

Despite some warmth in her childhood, there was a lot of fighting and sadness, especially when her cousin died from alcohol poisoning. The family was wrought with divorce and dysfunction. Children the uncles didn’t know about showed up at sixteen, when they were allowed to find their biological parents. *Man, what a wonderful and messed up childhood. Imagine growing up any other way.*

The fire is starting to fade like her memories, so she adds some wood to it. She sits back down and covers herself with the blanket again.

Her husband comes out onto the patio.

“What’s shakin’?” he asks.

She turns to look at him. There is just one light shining by the patio doors behind him. He is tall and handsome with a classic Stearns County look. His eyes are brown and they sparkle. He’s like the country songs playing over and over on the radio that is always on in the garage. Strong, animated, and reliable. He can build and fix anything. He walks over to her and stands tall. The fire is a constant glow, reflecting off him.

“Not much, just relaxing,” she says.

“Yeah,” he looks out across the field to the lake. She looks as well and glances up. Again, the stars are so vivid and bright. She can see the big dipper.

“The kids go down ok?” he asks.

“Yeah, the little ones were both fast asleep before their head even hit the pillows and Thomas was also drifting off quickly,” she says.

“Cool, what’s on the agenda for tomorrow? What about the weekend?” he asks.

He gives her a quick kiss and makes his way back into the house after she fills him in on the week’s schedule.

She notices lightning in the distance and dark clouds looming a ways off, which fills her with dread. The sky is clear, and the stars are shining right above her. *That’s funny, the forecast didn’t show any thunderstorms.* The thought had crossed her mind, though, that they’d be having rain and potential storms later. It had been a hot day in July at about eighty degrees and humid and with the hot days come late evening thunderstorms often.

As the storm rolls in, she sits back and watches. She peers at the lightening flashing like lightning bugs through the trees a ways across the field. Her heart beats faster. *This storm isn’t likely to bring tornadoes, and it seems to be relatively calm.* As it moves toward their home, there are clear portions of sky where the stars are still shining through. The clouds drift off at the edges as well. Aside from the portions of sky peeking through, it is a black hole, light at the edges, and deep, dark in the middle. On cue, lightning fills the sky and then she hears a loud boom that shakes her.

Every time it storms and it’s fierce, she remembers the anxiety and fear from the October tornado that blew through her hometown. A friend’s house was demolished by that tornado and the family was in the house at the time. They survived, but the oldest child, who was five, crushed her leg on their way to the basement. The tornado had also thrown an F-150 across the cornfield and she could see it as they examined the house, on its side, crushed in several spots. It could have been her house or her dad’s blue Ford. *The fear they must have felt and the gratitude because it could have been so much worse.*

She goes inside; if she sits on the patio for much longer she’ll be caught in the storm. The fire is going out again and the rain will distinguish it.

She checks on the children. Her daughter had moved to their bed, because she is afraid of the thunder and lightning and her youngest son is sleeping in her oldest son’s room, because they are both afraid as well. So sweet. She gives them each a silent kiss.

She thinks how possible it is that something can shift, and she needs to be ready. She goes through her usual plan in her mind. If there is a tornado or the winds are blowing so much it is a danger to be near windows, she would run and sweep up her two younger ones, while yelling to Thomas to go downstairs. She figures that in that moment, her adrenaline would allow her to carry her two youngest to the basement. She also knows she’d be able to scale the wall and the catwalk and carry her oldest son to the basement in record time, if necessary. She figures her super Mom abilities will kick in. That is her plan.

She goes out onto the porch because the worst is yet to come. As she sits on the porch in the old white rocking chair her aunt had given her the rain starts to come down quick, fluid, and heavy. The lightning is bright and vivid, and the thunder is loud and booming. The wind is blowing hard. The porch is wide and long, so she is protected from the storm except for the rain that blows in, which she likes; it feels cool and refreshing. She feels the humidity start to lift. She loves this part as the storm passes and the crisp air comes rushing in.

“Did the rain stop? Is the storm over?” her husband asks as he peeks his head out the front door.

“Yeah, I think so,” she says and leans forward; she can’t tell if the water coming down from the house means it is still raining or if it is just coming off the trees and rushing out of the gutters at this point. “Yes, yes, it’s over,” she says, sits back and lets out the breath she hadn’t realized she was holding.

He walks out the door, slams it, pops off the deck and jumps onto the four-wheeler, then turns the key, revs the engine, and takes off into the night. She laughs to herself. Who knew what he was doing or what he had to run out to ‘take care’ of.

She wouldn’t have to twirl into Super Mom mode tonight, she thinks, almost disappointed. She can hear the thunder in the distance on the other side of them.

It has been a long day and the kids have many activities tomorrow, but she decides to stay up a bit longer; she has only had one glass of wine after all.

She pours herself another glass of wine and begins thinking about what had happened. The wildflowers and the thunderstorm, despite being mild, stirred up emotions.

It came rushing in, the raw shame.

She grimaces. Even though it had been many years, it is hard to shake. Part of the problem is that she hasn’t really dealt with all that happened; she was busy building a career, becoming a homeowner, getting married and having children. *Paying rent is like throwing money away, you should buy a house*, her father’s words are present. All the things she hadn’t dreamt of.

She didn’t know anything outside life in small town Minnesota and when she left to move to Minneapolis and then Guatemala, she still didn’t know anything. She didn’t know that you could get sucked in, caught up in things. She didn’t know that things don’t always turn out like you want them to and she had struggled hard with that. It had been tweleve years since she had seen him in person. The only contact being photos on Facebook and the occasional Facetime call. Life had moved on and so had they.

She had thought out loud one time. “I wonder why I stuck it out so long.”

“I think you fell in love,” he said.

It was so matter of fact like he wasn’t in love. Maybe she had, possibly they were in love, but something heavy interfered.

She had long turned to the practical side of the situation and life in general. She was sometimes lonely for the old days when she was surrounded by friends. She had relatives she couldn’t always relate to and the obligations stacked up. She still believes in great love, but decided long ago, it’s the decision to commit that makes it great, because the fireworks fade.

Like her husband now, who brought the fireworks, but she also practically knew they’d have a good life. He fulfills what she needs. It works.

She is brought back to the beginning of those times; she can remember her life before as if it is a movie she is watching; she is the main character. She imagines the goosebumps at the sad or happy parts and the close, intimate moments. She remembers the rise in her breath when feeling the fear, because of the thunderstorms with the possibility of tornadoes. She remembers the restlessness of love and the passion or longing.

She recalls the joy of the little and big things which include babies being born, weddings, a sunny, dry eighty-degree day, beautiful wildflowers, a clear starry night, a great friend, a great cup of coffee or glass of wine, or the look of a handsome stranger across a crowded room.

She feels the connection to the scene where the main character has grown and reflects. She is watching the past, the history, and the way things used to be, and she knows the next scene, the words, and the feelings. She decides she’ll relive it, if only to tell her story.

**Two**

The white, oval pill sitting in the palm of my hand represents sin. It’s lying there, smug, on its swollen belly. The streetlights reflect off its shiny exterior through the windshield of the car. A white clad devil. I am looking down at it so intently the stream from my laser eyes might disintegrate it. I can only hope.

My hand shakes yelling at me, fling it out the window; tell him to go fuck himself and run, run.

“The chances are slim,” I say.

I shift my eyes as far left as they go in the sockets feeling the strain on my nerves. He’s looking down.

“Well, I really can’t take a chance, Ivy. Just take it,” he says.

I trusted him. I feel like I’ve been walking behind him on a wooded trail, and I get hit in the face by this branch he has just pulled aside and let go of. He didn’t tell me, he doesn’t stop. Schlwap. I grimace, but despite the pain, I still don’t turn my head toward him; instead, I look up out of the windshield.

COWARD paints the sky in neon lights. I look down again.

“I don’t really believe in it,” I say after a long pause.

My Catholic upbringing has remained in me on some level. We used go to church during my elementary public-school days. In third grade, I would sit in the pew of church in our small town in Central Minnesota waiting for my turn to go to confession. The teacher would give us piercing looks if we didn’t sit up straight and appear to pray while we waited.

“Jackie, what are you going to say?” I whispered. I was looking straight ahead holding my hands in the universal praying position.

“I don’t know; maybe something about my brother and I fighting,” she whispered back and she shushed me. The nerve.

That might work. I had gotten in a fight with my brother the previous week about who was going to do the dishes. I told my mom, I had done them last time, which wasn’t true, and she made him do it.

I sat there anxious and praying that the priest would absolve me of my sin.

Liar. I could hear Jesus screaming at me.

I sat up straighter. If I was closer, maybe my chances of going to Heaven would be better.

When it was my turn to go into the confessional and I sat down, the slow scraping of the wood slat being lifted rang in my ears. “Forgive me Father for I have sinned…”

When I got home from school, my mother asked me a lot of questions about my day. I didn’t tell her about the confessional because she wouldn’t approve. I got the usual lecture out of nowhere.

“Ivy, you need to get a college degree and not ever depend on a man; look what happened with me and your dad; now we are struggling to make ends meet,” she told me. A lecture on men and divorce; I was eight.

I nodded my head and read the small note tacked to the cabinet again, which is still there, I think. It reads, “Female is the Future”.

My stomach turns. The faint smell of cigarettes in Muhammed’s car makes me feel sick; I love smoking, but the air is thicker with the remnants of it and his expectation.

I'm jarred as Muhammed looks up and at me. “I understand, but we need to be sure.”

I look up at him. His head is hanging down in what I perceive as shame and frustration.

I sigh. He is handsome. His hair is dark, almost black and his eyes are the same color. It is short and neat. His skin is a beautiful shade of tan. His mouth is big and when he smiles, it’s crooked at the bottom right corner like there’s a thread through it that’s being pulled. His lips are soft, full, and pink. His teeth shine white like the pill when he smiles and are big as well, and he has a gap between the front two. He is not much taller than me, at about 5’6”.

We’ve had some good times. A few months ago, we were sitting in my living room just talking. He reached toward my chest, and I flinched.

“Look, you just have a loose hair,” he said.

He pulled on it, but it didn’t come off me and it was long. Instead, it pulled at my skin forming a tiny mountain.

“Oh, my God, I’m so embarrassed,” I said.

He smiled, his crooked grin got me, and we laughed for a full two minutes. I yanked it out and we burst out into more laughter.

The seat of the car feels too soft. I might fall right through to Hell. My heart is breaking.

This isn’t the first time he has been through this, I realize, as I continue to stare at him; he knows too much. He’s ready to shove it down my throat if I don’t comply. In a certain way, he is. I sense his fear is of getting an American girl pregnant out of wedlock and the trouble that means for him. He isn’t the kind of guy who would abandon his child, or he wouldn’t be here, but he’ll kill it. I tip my head considering that.

In his country, I could be tortured or killed. In his country, I may be forced to leave my child out of wedlock in the street. I knew he knew it wouldn’t happen in the United States, but just like me, he had been raised a certain way and we often regress when faced with a dilemma.

I am only committing one sin. I close my eyes, put the pill in my mouth and pretend to swallow. I even take a drink of water and speak carefully while the pill starts to disintegrate tucked away in my upper cheek. I need to get out of here, so I can spit it out.

“I don’t think this is going to work out. We are so different, and you are leaving in a few months,” I say shrinking.

“I like you so much and it has been fun. Maybe we can keep in touch,” he says.

“Yeah, sure,” I say as I open the car door avoiding his look.

I step out of the car onto the right curb, stumble, spring up looking like someone who has just saved their beer from going underwater and make my way around the car. I manage to wave at him as I cross in front of the car and then sprint across the street to my main floor apartment’s front door. I spit out the pill and swish my mouth out with water when he’s out of site. Like any white pill, it tastes bitter and awful.

I stay here slumped over, my right hand holding me steady against the house while the remnants of the pill still burn in my throat. After a few minutes, I stand up tall. I've grown. The antidote. Doing what I want, which is always the case. He assumed I’d comply; I’m not, and I find satisfaction in that.

He is returning to Saudi Arabia after the semester, and we haven’t dated that long. Even if we had, I wasn’t about to live in a country where I’d have to cover myself and be under guardianship of a man. Even if he stayed in the United States, he would have expectations I couldn’t meet. I am grateful to have the choice about the pill and the boy.

I unlock my front door and walk into my apartment. It’s a nice size apartment. It has an office with French doors, two bedrooms, and one bathroom. I step onto the stiff carpet. My roommate, Jonie, is on the old futon my dad and stepmom gave me watching TV. She has been one of my best friends since we were juniors in college.

“Well, that sucked,” I say.

“What sucked? Weren’t you out with Muhammad? I thought you liked him,” she says.

“I do like him, but honestly, he’s not the one and he’s leaving soon, so we decided to end it,” I say.

I am not going to tell her about the pill. She is a great friend and one of the most liberal people I know, but I can’t speak it aloud to anyone, at least not yet. Even though I am liberal, I am ashamed of what happened. Sex before marriage, a broken condom, and the morning after pill.

Sex before marriage is a sin according to most religions, but 97% of the population does it anyway. So, to protect yourself, or right this sin, you must commit another sin in the form of birth control, the morning after pill, or abortion. Women bear most of the weight of this conundrum. Thank God for Roe vs. Wade, which solidified women's choice in the matter especially in the absence of accountability for men, and education and resources for women. I've heard the stories; women being thrown in jail, being forced to risk their life, and losing control over their own bodies. It was a slippery slope.

I sit down and watch the last half of *Sex and the City* with Jonie to get my mind off it.

It is an episode where Carrie decides to break up with Big because he doesn’t factor her into his life. She goes to his house wearing a beret and with French fries, thinking that they will figure out how to make it work after he has made plans to move to Paris, potentially, without her. Schwlap. He tells her not to make plans around him anyway. She throws her French fries and her French beret and tells him to go fuck himself. I love this show.

As I get up to go to my room, my phone rings and I flip it open just in time to catch my sister.

“Hey, how is it going in Minneapolis?” she asks.

“Diana. It’s fine, just watching some *Sex and the City.* I broke up with Muhammad. Probably for the better,” I say.

“Sorry to hear that. I didn’t think it’d last anyway,” she says and laughs. I don’t.

“So, today, we went out to Cuatros Grados Norte, which is a sort of hip part of the city. It’s safe and lots of young people,” she says.

“How is it speaking Spanish every day and having all your classes also in another language?”

“It’s ok, sometimes my brain feels like it’s mush, but it seems to be getting better. One of my friends hasn’t had a solid poop since we arrived in Guatemala. I don’t know why, but I can eat anything off the street and not get sick. I mean, I did spend a year and a half in Iraq with the army and never got sick either.”

I laugh out loud; I love poop stories.

“Sounds miserable for her. What else is going on in Guatemala?”

“Well, I’m wondering if you’d be interested in traveling here with me for ten days. We could go to Livingston, Puerto Barrios, Tikal, and anywhere else you’d like. I’ll plan it all, you just need to buy the plane ticket and pay your way otherwise,” she says. I get images of her jumping off the couch, wearing a towel, yelling ‘she-ra’. Always the more adventurous one.

“Well, I’m not sure if I can get off work for that long. I can check on it and get back to you,” I say.

“Sounds great, let me know soon, so we can plan. I’ll call you next week,” she says.

“Ok, talk to you soon, love you, bye,” I say.

“Say hi to Jonie, love you,” she says and hangs up.

“How’s Diana?” Jonie yells from across the apartment.

I’m not yelling. I walk back to the living room.

“She’s ok, says hi, asked me if I want to travel to Guatemala for ten days. I don’t think I want to go,” I say.

“Why not? Sounds fun,” she says.

“I mean, I’ve traveled a lot, but never to an underdeveloped country and that far by myself. I don’t know. I told her I might not be able to get off work, which isn’t true,” I say.

“I see; Ivy, you should; it’s a great opportunity. Listen, Steve called while you were on the phone with Diana. They want to meet up at Hoolihans for a drink. What do you think? It’ll take your mind off Muhammed and this looming decision,” she says.

“Sure, sounds good,” I say softening my voice and sitting down. “Jonie, I don’t like how Scott talks to you. He made a rude comment about your outfit and then a joke about your job last time we were out. These aren’t things a good boyfriend does, in my opinion.”

“I know, I have started to notice it too. I’m not sure our relationship will last, but I might try to talk to him first and see if it gets better,” she says.

“I think that’s reasonable,” I say. *It never gets better*.

Steve is in usual form and offends me as well this time. We decide to go home early. I walk the length of the apartment to my room and look around.

My room is simple and clean. I have a queen bed with a nice comforter and the bed is made. This is a step up, I think, from when I lived in a house in South Minneapolis with four girls right after college. My room was in the basement, the mattress was on the floor, it was messy, and I had very little else.

I look to my left. There’s a tall dresser, in which my clothes are folded and stacked. To my right, my guitar sits on a dusty stand. It’s so precious to me even though I can’t play well. I also glance at the TV and CD player, which are just a few years old. I’ve been able to buy some new things, I think.

That’s it. My life is one room and some shared space. I decide I am going to visit Diana in Guatemala.

I grab the t-shirt and shorts that are lying in a heap on my bed and put them on. I’m not going to bother brushing my teeth or washing my face tonight, no one to impress. I soon fall alseep.

In the morning, I hit the snooze on my alarm clock around 7 a.m., but the music continues. I reach over to tap the snooze on my cell phone, but it persists. Why won’t this goddam music stop?

I blink my eyes open, fluttering them a few times. They feel dry, and I am staring up at the flat white ceiling or the wall. My eyes roll back and then settle again. My alarm is playing Eric Clapton’s acoustic version of Layla very loudly from 92 KQRS as I wake up.

I hate it when this happens. The clock is blaring, and I have been trying to turn it off in my sleep but haven’t made any movements. I lift my head just enough, so I can lean over, I sigh and sort of grunt, then let my breath out like I had been holding it. I remember I’m alone.

I feel the heaviness of my head, the start of a headache, and a wave of nausea. I drank more than I realized last night. I hit the snooze button with a heavy hand and the music stops. I lay back against the soft bed and turn toward the wall onto my side now in a fetal position hugging myself.

I love that version of the song; I can just feel the guitar strings as they vibrate bringing the music alive. It lights me up and sometimes I play along on my guitar, but not this morning.

The bed is my only comfort as I was perfectly nestled under the blankets before straining to hit the snooze button. My pillow had been pushed in and scrunched up just right but is now all wrong. The alarm clock means I have work in one hour.

Twenty more minutes to sleep; just over two snoozes. I’ll have plenty of time to shower, grab a coffee, some Tylenol, and get the bus to work.

I am now wide awake, frustrated, though.

Even though things have just ended with Muhammed, there may be a guy. We’ve been friends for a while, and he has asked me out a lot. My senses ignite, the hangover lifts.

I get up and check myself in the mirror like he can see me grappling at my hair and face. Bags under my eyes and greasy hair. I only have enough time to take a quick shower, so I’ll have to use some powder to suck up the grease. I’m applying the powder and remind myself to cut back on going out late on *school* nights.

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I’m late to work, but it doesn’t matter. My work hours are very flexible since most of what I do is on the computer and can be done anytime unless there is a looming deadline. I do have a lot of work, though, coding, which I’m avoiding.

“So, what’s new with you?” Patricia asks when I walk up to her cube to say hi.

“Muhammad and I broke up and I’m considering saying yes to going out with Chad,” I say.

“Yeah, he’s been talking about you a lot. He says you’re really his type,” she says.

She looks around like there might be a spy lurking about and whispers, “In fact, he was just telling me last night. A bunch of us did mushrooms, I didn’t sleep, and I’m still high.”

I notice now that her eyes are glassy, and her pupils are dilated. She looks flushed.

“Oh, I see. You’ll crash later,” I say.

I am shocked she’s at work. I guess it’s not a huge deal since we work for a small software development company on the 24th floor of the Dane Rauscher building downtown and take the bus to work.

I know a thing or two about drugs since it was all around me in high school. Mushrooms, pot, LSD, codeine. You name it. My high school boyfriend, Chase, did plenty of them.

“Well, I better get to work,” I say. She throws me a peace sign and turns back to her computer.

On my lunch break I decide to call Chad.

“Hey man, are you up for a drink or two tonight?” I ask.

“Ivy. I would love that; where do you want to meet?” he asks.

“How about we meet at the Nicollet mall and decide?”

“Sounds great; see you at five?” he asks.

“Yep, sounds perfect,” I say.

I’m wandering around Nicollet mall at 5:30 and spot him. He looks great; tall, dirty blonde hair cut shot and styled nice; perfectly fitted jeans and a shirt that hugs his muscles in all the right places. He turns and sees me too, gives me a wave and starts prancing toward me. Dork.

“Hey, you look great,” he says. Lie.

“Where do you want to go?” I ask.

“I don’t know, should we walk a while and see where it takes us?”

“Sure.”I glance to my left. There’s a man holding a sign. It is a ragged cardboard square and reads in large awkward letters, “Military veteran, Homeless, Anything Helps”. He gives the man a look that I don’t completely understand but figure is disdain. I take a step sideways towards the man while reaching in my pocket, glance at Chad, and my next step is straight and continues in line with him after he gives me the same look. I also take my hand out of my pocket and return my arms to a slow sway. I am not comfortable with just walking away, but don’t want to start something.

“Why don’t you just give them food or something else instead of money? Then you know they aren’t using it to buy alcohol or drugs,” I say. I can’t help it; I am starting something after all.

“I just don’t believe in it, ok? I think they could get a job or support themselves somehow. It’s like those people who take advantage of welfare,” he says rolling his eyes.

“You know, welfare helped my mom through the toughest times in our life and provided for us for a short time after my Mom and Dad divorced.”

“Well, that’s great, but not everyone uses the system the way it’s meant to be used. And you talk about the Peace Corp sometimes. We have enough problems here; why should we go and help other countries; it’s irresponsible,” he says.

  His world is small.

“Well, I applied for the Peace Corp and will most likely be in the IT sector somewhere in Central America. I don’t plan to leave soon, but am heavily considering it,” I say.

“Let’s go have a drink here.”

I’ll never know what happened to the man, but perhaps me obviously avoiding him had an impact. Perhaps he doesn’t care. He isn’t a regular like some of the homeless people I see at the bus stop in the mornings and evenings to and from work. They walk up and down the crowds of people asking for something, needing something.

Maybe just human kindness.

I know Chad and I are incompatible, he is Republican, after all, but we have fun when we aren’t talking about our views on social programs or politics. Perhaps he is against it all because it might take me away.

I encounter a lot of *them*, Republicans, I suppose, because I work in a male dominated, power and money hungry field, IT. I love the work and I’m good at it, though, and our generation, tail end of X and beginning of millennial, is defining it despite the challenges with Y2K and the .com bubble burst that are just four years behind us. We women have it especially tough in this field, but it's worth the daily fight to advance our gender. We're building the marble staircase and I'm determined to stay in it despite the harassment, unconscious bias, and microaggressions.

When Bush was against gay marriage my Republican friend from college adamantly supported him, but never brought up this issue. I did.

I said, “You have friends that are gay, so how can you support someone who doesn’t believe in their right to marry and have the same type of life as you or me?”

He said nothing. That was the one time he was speechless and without a comeback. We had been friends for a long time, since our first years of college when we met in the computer lab, and he always had something to say.

Even though a lot of people don’t think so, life in the United States is clean and easy for us, and most people don’t settle down until their late twenties. Bill Clinton, despite his indiscretions, has sustained and even improved this comfort and peace, but Bush is working hard to change it. The threat of war is looming, and I can’t get behind him.

Chad snorts at a joke I made jolting me; *gosh, it wasn’t that funny.* Despite our disagreement, we have fun, after a few drinks. We turn our discussion to our friends, work, and anything that won’t stir up too many emotions. Chad drives me home and as we sit in the car, I can feel him wanting something, maybe needing something. Oh no, I started this, but I can squirm out of any real physical contact, at least for tonight.

“Well, thank you, I had fun, I have an early morning, so I’ll call you,” I say. Then, horror of horrors, my hand gets a mind of its own and clenches, my arm raises toward him. A fist bump? He looks at me like I have three heads and moves his hand to fist bump me back. At the last second, I pull my hand away. “Psyche.” At least I didn’t jellyfish it.

We find the car and head to me home. We park up and I get out. I replay my exit from Muhammad’s car minus the stumble and the shame. He drives off too quick. Did the tires screech?

I’m walking up to my apartment’s door a little slumped. Embarrassing. As I lift my gaze, I see Chase is there. I haven’t seen him in two years. He’s lying on the cement, passed out, with my mail in his hand. I poke him with my toe until he groans and wakes up.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

He stirs, lifts his head off the ground and looks up at me. “I just thought I’d wait for you. I was out with some friends in Uptown and it was close enough to get here by cab.”

“OK, why don’t you come in and we can talk,” I say.

I told him two and a half years ago that if we had been older, it might have worked out. He clung to that like a promise. When I explained to him that ‘working out’ meant he’d have to quit the drugs, he looked so sad, I just walked away and haven’t seen him since then.

"OK, hey, I got your mail," he says stumbling as he stands.

**Three**

Chase trails behind me like a sad, drunk, puppy dog into my apartment.

“Are you hungry?” I ask. Maybe he’ll sober up with some food.

“Yeah, sure. Do you have any of those TV dinners; Salisbury Steak and Mac ‘n Cheese? Remember? Our favorite,” he says his voice softening. I can see his face is a little flushed as he looks down.

It just so happens I do; it’s still a favorite of mine. I pull two of them from the freezer and pop the first in the microwave. As the wheel is turning, heating up our *favorite meal*, I say, “You just show up here after over two years. How did you even know where I live? What do you want?”

“I went out with some friends, and I at least knew you live close to Uptown. I called Alexis to get your address. I just wanted to see you; it has been so long. I didn’t think you’d see me if I called you. I’m tired of the sluts I meet. We have one night, and I don’t see them again,” he says.

The beeping of the microwave jolts me out of my astonishment at what he just said. I was in family photos we were so close at one point and he just says that. The beeping sounds like a forklift backing up; maybe I can hop on and back my way out of here.

“OK, you see me and then what? We don’t talk for another two years and then you show up on my doorstep again. Have you quit the drugs?”

“No, but I really want to; I would if we got back together.”

“Chase, you know that’s a lie. You must quit them for yourself and then maybe it’ll work for us. A lot has happened. I’m not the same as I used to be.”

“I know, Ivy, but …” his voice trails off in my mind. I can’t believe we’re here again. *What am I going to do with him?*

I sit down and place his TV dinner in front of him. I look at mine. I suddenly hate Salisbury steak; it looks like someone took a shit on my plate and the Mac ‘n Cheese is all clumped together. I shove mine aside while he is devouring his. I’m not eating it.

“Well, I’m not sure what else to say. I guess you’ll need a place to crash tonight,” I say.

I turn on the stereo and pop in the *Monsters of Rock* CD. I pull out a bottle of tequila and offer him a shot.

At 4 a.m., after several hours of drunken singing to hair bands I say, “I am going to sleep, I have work tomorrow, and you will be sleeping on the futon.” I grab a blanket and pillow from the hall closet and toss them at him.

“OK, goodnight, Ivy,” he says.

I wake up in the morning feeling like crap. No sleep, work in a few hours, and an ex-boyfriend on our futon, who I thought was in the past.

“Chase, wake up; I need to go to work, and you need to go home,” I say.

“Good morning, Ivy,” he says rubbing his face with his hand and leaning up on his elbow.

“See, we had fun, why can’t we try again?” he asks.

“Because of all the reasons I’ve told you a million times. Now go,” I say.

“You’ve sold out, Ivy. This corporate world and all these yuppies,” he says peering at me through bloodshot eyes and waving his hand around like all the so-called yuppies are in my living room.

“I haven’t sold out, I’ve grown up and you need to also,” I say.

I manage to give him a hug and since he looks so sad, I’m starting over again. It reminds me of the song by Stevie Nicks, *It’s Only Love*. He’d never let me go and give that gift to me; he isn’t going to clean up his life even though I hope he does. He calls his friend and after he is picked up, while I’m taking a shower, I’m brought back to when we first met and dated.

It all started in health class in ninth grade, when one of his friends asked me what I thought of Chase Opatz. Like most teenagers, I was oblivious to most things but my small circle. I had no idea who he was, but I pretended like I did.

“Um..., he’s ok,” I said and went back to my worksheet.

“Well, he thinks you’re hot,” he said.

“Ok,” I said not looking up. This piqued my curiosity, though. At that time, I had a lot of guys interested in, or who were becoming interested in, me. A very cute and popular junior had shown interest in me around that time. He wrote me a note one time that said, “Your feet must hurt because you’ve been running through my mind.” I immediately showed my friends, we laughed, and I dumped him.

After that, I found out who Chase was. He hung out in the pod with most of our other friends now that we were at the high school and in ninth grade. He was cute. Relatively tall at 5’10”, skinny, but fit. He was the class clown and named so in our senior yearbook; everyone laughed at and loved him. His hair was dark and fell in ringlets around his face. He had pale, almost porcelain skin and big green eyes. He had a strong jawline that would twitch when he was high. His eyes would be glassy and far off and he'd flex his upper jaw muscles as well. If I were to compare him to a movie star, it’d be Adam Driver.

We started hanging out at parties and made out on the hard ground in the back woods at one of the many keggers we had. It was strange and awkward like most high school romances start.

He was into drugs, which I was too naïve to understand. I’d drive him and his friends in my Dad’s Ford F-150 blue truck to St. Cloud and we’d hang out at any number of people’s houses smoking weed and even though I was oblivious then, I know now they’d do other things too.

One time, a girl threatened to throw herself out the second story window. She didn’t, but it was still dramatic. She probably would have just broken a leg, unless she landed on her head, but we imagined she’d splat on the ground, guts hanging out, as if she had jumped from the thirtieth floor of the IDS building, like someone recently had into the Crystal court downtown Minneapolis.

After some time, I heard rumblings he was cheating. Our friends, to get me to see the light, invited me over to Rob Ferry’s one night. Rob Ferry was fun and always had the latest car because his dad worked at a local car dealership. I was totally unknowing, just excited to see him when I went to Rob’s. I found out that he had been making out in the basement vault with one of the older girls in our circle. After that I told him to go away and proceeded to move on with my life. He decided then that he wanted me and only me. He started leaving notes in my locker every day slipping them through the small slits and stopping by. He would stare at me across the pod. I ignored him, and then briefly talked to him one night at a party, where I told him to go to hell and dropped my lit cigarette in his beer.

Eventually, he got under my skin. I mean, Adam Driver, right? After my shift at the local restaurant, I would sometimes climb a ladder to get into his second-floor bedroom at night and then would leave early in the morning out the front door. He was only one of two of his siblings living at home, so as teenagers live in their own little circle, we thought no one knew. They did, of course. I wonder what my parents were doing. I had too much freedom.

From there, we spent almost every waking moment together and a lot of the time was with his friends who I adored and adored me. We coordinated our whole lives. I practically moved into his house and became a part of the huge, fun family of thirteen siblings and all the spouses and kids. We would snuggle out on the back porch on the second floor with the TV just inside the sliding door and watch Star Trek. I’d smoke out the window of his bedroom. We’d just drive for hours, listening to music and talking, we’d camp every weekend in the Summer out in the field on the lake at his sister’s place.

We’d park and make out in the blue Ford. We’d bike miles from my house in St. Joseph to the Avon beach or from Albany to the Avon beach on the new Wobegon trail on the hottest days of Summer in Minnesota and just jump in when we got there. We’d talk and talk about important, deep things. He would grow weed in pots on the stairs that lead up to the attic, which you accessed through his room. When he broke both his arms playing basketball, he had gone up for a dunk and entirely missed the hoop landing on both elbows, I wiped his ass for him. It was a level of intimacy I haven’t reached since then.

After high school, I went to university, and he went to Community College in Brainerd with Babe the Blue Ox and Paul Bunyon. I’d drive up there almost every weekend and once again, heard he was cheating. He’d come home on the weekends and would have so many issues with his nose. Sometimes he’d just sleep for the whole weekend. Now I know he had probably been doing cocaine. I still didn’t break up with him and for some reason, he wanted to remain with me. *Have your cake*...

He delved deeper and deeper into drugs, and I had to move on. I fought for him, but it became clear to me that the drugs were more important than I was.

The disappointment that resulted from his inability to grow with me and make something positive of his life was difficult to move past and now I’m three steps back, maybe four.

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Chad and I have been dating for a few weeks. Chino Latino in Uptown, Minneapolis is one of my favorite restaurants. It’s a sleek, hip bar and restaurant with spicy street food from tropical regions. We have a big group this evening, some of my friends and some of his.

“I dare you to order the worm dish,” I say to my friend, Jack.

“You don’t have to dare me, it’s already ordered,” he says.

I don’t believe for a second that he plans to eat it when the waiter shows up with the dish. The worms are lying on the plate in what looks like an intentional, tangled, formation. They look like they have dirt on them, just like when you dig up an earthworm from the ground. I assume it’s seasoning, though. He proceeds to take a bite, chew, and swallow. Gross.

Looking right at me with one hanging from his fork, he says, “You want to try it?”

“Never,” I say.

I catch Chad’s eye on us from across the room. He has been talking with one of our friends, Jessica. He must have seen the look of disgust in my eyes because he excuses himself and heads for our table.

“Why, man? Does it even taste good?” he says and sits down.

“Sure, tastes like you’d imagine; like steak, but earthier.” He smiles through his open mouth, brown stuff hanging off his teeth, as he slowly lowers the worm into it.

Downtown Minneapolis and St. Paul and Uptown Minneapolis are very hip and eclectic with all types of restaurants and bars and interesting food. After a night of drinking, we’d go back to the Uptown café in the morning for loaded bloody Mary’s and greasy food. There are bookstores and clothing and makeup stores. There is a lingering discussion we need to have alone tonight despite all the people. Jack finishes his dish, gets up to join a few friends across the bar, and we find ourselves alone at the table.

I light a cigarette and take the first drag deep and slow, then blow it out up in the air, delaying this conversation. I look at him sideways expressionless, my elbow resting on the table, with the cigarette tipped up toward the ceiling between my fingers, the smoke rising up and away. There’s a picture of my grandma in a chair in their living room looking exactly like this. *I learned this move from her.* I wish I could ride its smoky wave right up and out of here.

“So, this trip to Guatemala; when are you leaving?” he asks.

“We’ve made final plans now. I’m leaving at the beginning of November, we’ll travel for ten days, then I’ll return. My sister still has school to finish,” I say.

It’s only August and hot, humid, or stormy. I’ve got some time.

“OK, what if I come with you?”

The thought of traveling with him for ten days does not sound fun. I at least know Guatemala is an underdeveloped country and he can’t even give a little to a man on the street in Minneapolis.

“Well, it’s a special trip for my sister and me. I haven’t seen her in a long time, and we’ve never done something like this before,” I say.

“Alright, I understand. We’ll have to plan something for just you and me then. A special trip,” he says and winks at me.

“Sounds great,” I say, taking another drag of my cigarette. Never gonna happen especially not with the porn star wink he just threw at me.

I look up and across the room, done with this conversation. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice he’s still looking at me.

I see my friends Kelly, Clint, Jay, and Andy walking in. They walk in two by two, but in a jagged formation. They aren’t talking, just looking around and taking in the room. This night is looking up. I snuff out my cigarette and stand up more quickly than I intended and stumble, I suppose to defy Chad’s steely look willing me to stay seated and turn my attention to them.

“Oh my God; the party is here,” I say while walking over to them with a huge grin on my face. They grin back and all gather around me.

Kelly is tall and blonde; he has big blue eyes, and he has been one of my best friends since our first years of college. We have a special connection.

We met for the first time at the ceremony for a professional fraternity we were both pledging. I came in a rush after having worked a long shift as a waitress, changing in the bathroom in the building, and sat down. I was not calm.

I noticed him for a second “Hi.” I proceeded to look down trying to calm my anxiety, because I wasn’t quite certain what this was about, but it was recommended to me.

Later, he told me he thought I was stuck up.

Aside from the fraternity and building a relationship there, we had classes together and he would make fun of how I would clean the goo that collected on the tip of my pen off by rolling it on my notebook. He also always made fun of how I was from the country as he was from the Twin Cities. It all annoyed me.

One night we went to the Java Joint, a hip eclectic coffee shop in downtown St. Cloud – I fretted over what to wear and decided on a pair of light blue ripped jeans, a white t-shirt, a light blue cardigan, and Vans. I’m not sure why, but I wanted to look cool. He was intriguing and brought me out of my shell. He lifted me up. He became my Kelly.

Clint has dark hair, blue eyes, and is shorter than Kelly. He carries an air of mystery that attracts a lot of women, including me at one point. We used to go to his apartment during college in Loring Park and it was just walking distance from downtown. We’d party all night, pass out at his place, then get up the next day and do it again.

Andy is a soft, quiet type who plays guitar well and sometimes we go to watch him at a local venue. Jay is funny, fun, and smart. He lives in San Diego but is home visiting. There are others, Jan, Clay, and Rob, who aren’t here tonight. I know them better than most people. They are a constant threat to anyone I date. Partially, because they don’t ever approve. I know they are just watching out for me; they don’t think anyone is good enough. They usually come up with a funny name for the guy or refuse to recognize I am dating anyone at all. They are just fun, and we never run out of stupid, hilarious things to do or say. They are also sweet and kind. I feel safe with them.

They nod their heads in greeting to Chad. He doesn’t respond; he just stands up at that point and walks over to Jack to chat and I notice out of the corner of my eye that they are getting another drink. I glance at him, and he mouths, *Do you want one?* and I nod yes.

“So, Ivy…” Kelly says, getting my attention with the others listening intently. He has that look on his face, where I know he’s about to say something insulting, but funny. His face crunches up, his mouth flattens, and his nostrils flare a little.

“What’s up with this guy? He looks like a pretty boy,” he says. He has at least lowered his voice to a whisper. Not funny after all.

“What do you mean?” I say. I know exactly what he means, and he knows I know.

“OK, fine; we’ve been dating for a while. He’s a friend of a friend,” I cave.

I feel the weight of their disapproval, but we move on; they know it’s not worth questioning me any further. “Let’s get a drink,” I say.

Despite Chad already on task to get me a drink, I walk with them to the bar, and we order a shot. At least this time it’s not a Prairie Fire like Kelly ordered me on my twenty-first birthday. I had taken it then, almost barfed, and went on to drink more. We have a shot of tequila, which is always a great party night starter.

“You know, Ivy, I’ve been quiet forever about things,” Kelly says. The tequila gives him some confidence.

I think, you haven’t really, but ok. He has known me forever, and has watched me date our friends, others, but never him.

“I want you to know that I’m always here for you,” he says. I can tell he wants to say more, but Chad is looking across the bar at us.

I look at him. “You’re one of my best friends. I know this,” I say. I leave it at that.

The night brings more shots and as I start feeling more confident myself, I tell Chad something. “You know, I don’t know where this will go,” I slur.

“It’s ok; we’re just getting to know each other,” he says. He’s tipsy too.

“OK, I just wanted to get that out in the open. I like you. We are having fun,” I say.

“I agree, and you are gorgeous,” as he says it, he leans in for a kiss, but at the same moment, I notice Kelly is looking at me from across the bar. I don’t turn away, but I do maneuver it into a peck.

We leave the restaurant at about midnight and it’s still hot and muggy. The pavement is also still hot, and I can feel it wafting up some over the bare part of my feet. I might melt. Like a true Minnesotan, I am more of a winter than summer person. I’d rather be cold and layered up, cozy, than hot and unable to get away from it like right now.

We get to his car; he’s driving. I decide then and there that I shouldn’t ride with him. He’s not sober and I don’t have a death wish tonight *and* I’m sweaty and gross. “I’m going to get a cab,” I say.

“Why? I’m fine; it’s probably less safe to walk alone by yourself waiting for a cab,” he says.

“You are not fine and I don’t want to ride with you. Just go on,” I say.

“Fine, if you’re going to be that way, then I will just go. Bye,” he says and puts the car in drive and leaves.

*Huh.* I am always aware, alert, and I am usually looking around in rhythm when I walk alone, especially at night in Minneapolis. It’s a safe city compared to most but still. This is something men know nothing about, like many things women face. The inner constant dialogue on keeping yourself safe. The rhythm varies depending on the time of day, the location, and if I’m more on edge for some reason, like now. Chase is still on my mind and I tear up.

My goal is to make someone think twice if they are hiding in the bushes. My fear of this is amplified because I grew up twenty minutes from where Jacob Wetterling was abducted for the first sixteen years of my life and one mile for the four years after. My mom was hysterical about it and constantly talked to me about being safe.

I have developed all sorts of tactics. When I lived close to where he was abducted when I was between sixteen and nineteen, I would walk on the long road by my dad and stepmom’s house and there were only corn fields on either side of me. I’d walk in the middle of the road when no cars were driving by; that way it was further for someone to get to me if they were hiding among the corn. I would carry a weapon of some sort, keys, a small knife, a pen, pepper spray. Tonight, I have my keys and pepper spray. I hold the pepper spray in the ready position in my left hand and a key between my pointer and index finger in my right.

If a car slowed down or it looked old and the guy looked creepy, I’d especially show that I was alert and aware and even deliberately stare at the license plate. Always look aware and alert. I assume an old car and creepy man equals abductor. He’s especially creepy if he has scruff and a hat like the drawings of Jacob’s abductor. If it was an old vehicle and more than one creepy guy rode in it, I’d be more afraid as I felt like gang rape was possible. It’s amazing how many creepy looking guys there are. I was also ready with my drop kick right to the nuts if anyone got too close.

Not all my tactics are to ward off abductors. If a car was coming toward me, I’d watch carefully to make sure it saw me. I would know if it moved at least partially into the other lane that it did. If it didn’t, I’d be ready to dive into the bushes although if someone suddenly decided to swerve and hit me, I probably wouldn’t have time. When I’d hear a car behind me too, then I know neither one can move over, so I would, almost to the ditch or the other side of the street.

*We put a lot of trust in people*. What if they didn’t secure their bike rack or trailer and it flew off and hit me. What if they looked away for a minute, not noticing me, and swerved too far? *What if I trust Chad and he breaks my heart?* The bigger threat especially back when I still lived at home was probably the neighbors who had ‘Beware of Dog’ signs in their yards and particularly the neighbor who threatened to shoot our dog if he saw it one more time.

I look down while I’m walking and see an empty tiny liquor bottle. I know if I step on it, it’ll hurt the arch of my foot, but I do anyway, and it crumples. *Huh.* It has been here a while and the hot sun has deteriorated the plastic. I see a hole that is tar filled and I stop poking it with my bare toe. It feels squishy and I feel like I want to cut it with some scissors. I know if I do, the inside will look fresh even though the surface is light grey and wrinkled like elephant skin.

I finally track down a cab and get home safely and Chad, well, he’s on my shit list.

**Four**

Fall is my favorite time of year in Minnesota. The trees turn shades of red, orange, and yellow and the air permanently turns cool and crisp. The hot, humid time of Summer is over, and the threat of Winter is hanging in the air. We usually go to apple orchards, where there are corn mazes and pits. Orchards are geared towards children, but I’m never shy to jump in the pit with them. The loose corn feels cool and refreshing. The downside is that there is a large amount of snot and God knows what else mixed into the corn. I’m not there all the time, so could even be poop. *Huh.*

I am about a month away from leaving on my trip and I don’t feel ready; it’ll be Winter when I leave and I hope we have snow by then.

I’m sitting in my bedroom, on the bed, my left leg bent and my right leg hanging over the side, practicing on my guitar. I pulled out the digital tuner earlier and became frustrated as the strings are old and stretch too far. I can’t get it perfectly tuned. The sound is not the greatest. I notice a slight crack at the base of the neck. Fuck, *I’ll have to bring it in to get repaired and get the strings replaced*. The guitar stand hasn’t done its job; it was supposed to be magical, keeping my guitar tuned and protecting it from injury. Clearly, I know nothing. But, for this audience, just me, it’s good enough.

My fingers are callused. The blisters formed a few weeks ago, broke open, and now my fingers are tougher so I can play longer until they blister again. I have my sights set on learning *Landslide* and it’s tough with a complex picking pattern. So far, I have the picking pattern figured out, but not the rhythm and I’m slow.

“Ivy,” Jonie yells.

*Shit, she’s home*. I’m not yelling, so I set the guitar down on my bed and walk out of my room. “Yeah,” I say.

“The house is a disaster. I thought you were going to clean. Mike is coming over and I want it to be clean for him,” she says.

“Um..., I never said I was going to clean. I’m busy,” I say. Not sure why I have to make sure our apartment is clean for her new boyfriend. I do like him, though.

I stand staring as she walks in a huff to our hall closet. She pulls out the Swiffer and starts feverishly cleaning the bathroom. *Freak.*

I walk back to my room. I’m not going to entertain this fit. I pick up my guitar and start playing again; I’m getting better, faster. Things are looking up.

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Over the next month of practice, the calluses develop so I can play longer and not get blisters. I’ve been playing this morning to wake up a little and get my mind off the trip. I need to take a shower, so I’m not late.

The water from the shower rushes over me as I review the day ahead. Awkward goodbye with Chad, traveling for eight to tweleve hours; new country, foreign land. Diana had made all the plans, as promised, aside from booking my plane ticket, but she hasn’t given me much information.

I’ve had this nagging feeling. It won’t go away, and I finally settle on, this trip will change my life forever. Change. My. Life. Forever.

Why?

I have no idea.

My flight leaves at ten. It’s now seven. I get out of the shower, dry off, run a comb through my hair, throw on some makeup, rush to pack, and make a pot of coffee. The coffee starts to wake me up so by the time Chad arrives at 7:45. I am hyper, strung out on caffeine and anxious about the day ahead. We’ve long gotten over the drunken night and luckily, at least, I don’t *think* he’s drunk this morning. Maybe high.

We arrive at the airport on time, thanks to him. If I had been left on my own, I probably would have been late, maybe even missed the flight.

“So, what are you going to do while I am gone?” I ask him without any enthusiasm.

“Well, I’ll miss you, but I have a feeling you won’t miss me. You’re going to have so much fun in Guatemala. Just don’t do anything you’ll regret, ok? I’m just going to hang out, go out a few nights with friends,” he says looking at me with puppy dog eyes.

I say goodbye, simple and quick and with a quick hug and peck on the cheek. In the back of my mind, I know this could be the end. I care about him but don’t love him and I am distracted easily.

“So, I’ll see you soon, ok?” he says.

“Yeah, ok, “I say.

As I walk away, I look around.

The air is cold and dry. The sun is shining, and it is brighter because of the snow and still air. The sky is filled with billowy clouds with light blue-sky peeking through. The sidewalk is clear since the sun had melted away the snow, but there are piles of it at the edge of roads. Ice spears hang from the roof of the airport, where the snow has melted and then froze again as it formed. My breath hangs in the air when I speak or even breath.

I am excited and a little afraid of the amount of time I will have for my own thoughts. I like to write, but never feel that it is worth anything. Mostly it is for me, thoughts, and feelings that I don’t want to share with anyone. Like a diary, but deep, not just a replay of the events in my life.

I make it through security and walk through the airport to my gate. I stop off at the bathroom on my way. As I wash my hands, I look in the mirror and out of the corner of my eye, I see a vase of flowers. They are different colors and fresh. How odd, I think; never in all my time flying have I seen fresh flowers in an airport bathroom. Perhaps the cleaning staff had a few extras at home, or someone forgot them when they left the bathroom.

They are placed meticulously, so it seems odd that someone would have just left them there. I imagine the possibility that some guy gave them to some girl as she left him to go somewhere and then she forgot them. It occurs to me that Chad hadn’t given me anything, maybe false promises. But I realize the flowers make my day a little brighter no matter where they came from.

As I fly to Dallas, I watch the clouds and imagine I am bouncing over them to my destination. It isn’t unusual for the clouds to billow and look as though they are messy pillows with unclean edges, but comfy and soft just the same. I know I’d fall right through them despite what they appear like. The white is striking.

I squint and shield my eyes with my hand. I also imagine sometimes when there is turbulence that the plane is on the ground, and it’s just bumps in the road. It eases my anxiety. I close the shade on the window. I start to think about my career and my life as though I’m not really living it – as though it is some other girl who had the great fortune of finishing her degree and has a good job.

I write...

‘The last time I felt good and normal and happy was when I was with Chase. I had little stability in my life and too much freedom as a teenager. He gave me stability and loved me for me. His family was big and fun and stable and welcomed me with open arms. After I lost that, I lost my baseline, my grounding. I hope to someday have that again.’

I write about what I think Guatemala will be like. I know they speak Spanish, but mine is not good despite having taken years of it in high school and college. I’ll have to rely on my sister and her friends.

I feel better. As I write and contemplate taking a nap, the pilot announces, “We’ll be starting our descent soon. We will be landing in Dallas in forty-five minutes.”

As the intercom switches off, I wave to a flight attendant. “Can I get a drink please?”

As I get off the plane in Dallas, I feel confused, lost, and exposed. I read my ticket several times to identify my connecting flight and make my way. I am clinging onto the ticket and check and re-check that I haven’t dropped or lost it. I put it in my purse and decide to forget about it. I wish someone was with me. *Relax, there is nothing that is wrong here. You are fine; you can do this. You are just in an airport heading to Guatemala.* *Diana will be there on the other side.*

Despite calming myself down, ‘what ifs’ spin through my mind. *What if what if what if? What if I couldn’t find my connecting flight? What would my sister think? What would the flight crew think? Or worse yet, what would my sister’s host family think?* I know these are mostly irrational fears, so decide to just tuck them away in my head like I did with my ticket in my purse.

I spoke with a friend once and he told me his sister’s fear was associated with letting her child leave the house. What if something she did caused the child to be harmed or worse, die? When I was on a trip in England an acquaintance of mine was afraid of heights. As we stood at the top of a winding staircase in one of the many attractions we visited, I asked, “What do you think is going to happen?”

“I’m afraid I might suddenly lose control and hurl myself over,” she replied.

So, fear can be about losing control, right? The fear of flying probably also stems from not being in control although I am not afraid to fly.

I see a bar across the corridor and decide to get a drink; I have a few hours before my next flight.

I know that sitting at the bar means someone will inevitably try to strike up a conversation with me, which I hate. What is it about airports and airplanes that make people think they can just press into other’s personal lives? I just want to be left alone. As I near finishing my first drink, a young guy takes the seat next to me, of course. He is cute. And since I really don’t feel any loyalty towards Chad, I smile at him. The alcohol has started working.

I want a cigarette, but the thought of having to go all the way outside to have one and then go through security again is daunting. It is worth it, though; the next flight is long.

I lie. “Do you have a cigarette? I left mine at home in my mad dash to pack.” I give him a flirtatious smile. I clearly see he has some in his shirt pocket.

“Sure, but only if I can join you.” He smiles back.

He looks like John Cusack. That strikes me. I love how he seems to be a tough, quiet brooding type like in *High Fidelity*, but plays so many leading roles in romantic comedic films. That’s why I find him attractive, the broodiness. My favorite movie of his is *Serendipity*, although *Say Anything* is a close second. I have watched *Serendipity* more than ten times. I just can’t get over the fateful story.

I down the rest of my drink. “Let’s go.”

As we make our way outside, he tells me he is flying to Costa Rica on business. His company is setting up a plant there and he is a quality representative; he’ll be living there for a few months. His name is Max and God, I don’t care..

“Well, I am going to visit my sister in Guatemala. We’re going to travel for ten days. My name is Rachel.” Another lie.

Before I know it, we have our cigarettes, make our way back through security and return to the bar. We are talking and flirting; I am not at all feeling guilty, just tipsy. As we continue to talk about nothing, I look at my watch, Oh my God, the time..

“Take care,” I say and take off running towards my gate.

I reach the gate just as the last section is boarding. I find my seat, the window, and crawl and stumble over the two people already seated annoying them. I stow my backpack and realize I feel tired.

As I fly to Guatemala, I calm. I recognize that I am a little sore from the day’s activities, flying and anxiety. Chad crosses my mind. I pop my headphones on to drown out the plane and him and try to take a nap. My favorite mix of music, some Fleetwood, some Eric Clapton, some Pink Floyd are in this playlist.

I wake up with a start and look at the time; I have been drooling on my tiny plane pillow. I am very close to arriving in Guatemala.

As we make our descent, I hope my sister is there to pick me up as she promised; my flight is on time. We land, I get off the plane, walk into the main area of the airport, and am instantly hit with a sense of home.

It’s as though I have been here before. It is like déjà vu but more grounded and not just a passing feeling. This is sticking with me, I realize. The smell is sweet and musty and familiar, and the air is warm. I look around the airport; it is plain and simple, small. Everything is tiled, and the tiles are clean but dingy. It isn’t at all like the airports in the United States with all the shops and restaurants. It is obvious it is just a spot to be dropped off or leave from. Minneapolis’s airport is one of the best; like the Mall of America; you could spend days there and not get bored. You can even get your nails done or get a massage.

I struggle with my sweater, which I had worn on the plane over my tank to keep warm; I don’t need it in this climate.

I make my way to customs and stand in line behind a family. It is my first real glimpse of Guatemalan culture. This family is European Guatemalan and is Mom, Dad, a boy and girl. The boy and girl are probably ten and tweleve or so. I recognize them from the flight and had overheard them attempting to communicate with the flight attendant. They are beautiful.

I start fumbling with my purse to find my passport and drop my lip gloss and wallet on the floor. I stand up and notice all of them are staring at me. Initially, I think it’s because I am making a lot of noise, but they don’t stop. I brush my face to make sure I don’t have anything on it. Then realize for the first time I stick out in this environment with my blonde hair and blue eyes. It becomes a little uncomfortable, so I smile and say, “Hola.” They look away and I resume my chaos.

I walk to the exit after seamlessly passing through customs and immigration. I had no trouble at all; I don’t think they even looked at the paperwork. I notice several signs with Spanish and understand some of the words. Several of the signs have names on them, but not mine. As I exit the airport, I locate my sister and run up to her.

“You made it, Bienvenido.” Diana cheers. “I am so happy to see you. We are going to have so much fun.”

I am relieved.

My sister looks a lot like me but taller at 5’7”. Blonde, blue eyes, arched cheekbones, beautiful full lips, and big eyes. She helps me with my bags, and we continue to the street.

We approach a taxi; there are several and the taxi driver is just leaning up against the side. As soon as he sees us, he stands up and clears his throat.

Diana whispers to me, “Watch this, you don’t just accept a price, you haggle with them.”

I observe as Diana tells the cab driver after he states a price. “No, veinte cinco quetzales.”

I understand her; that is twenty-five quetzales, which is approximately four dollars. It seems very inexpensive to me. The cab driver looks like he is thinking it over and Diana whispers to me again, “He’s just stalling to see if I’ll go higher.”

And, she is right, the cab driver says, “Esta bien.”

We load my stuff with the cab drivers help and start off. I look out the window. The city is dirty, and the buildings are old. It isn’t like downtown Minneapolis, which is pristine and kept up. I see people everywhere, walking; many of them look haggard like they haven’t showered nor had a decent meal in days. I’m uncomfortable.

Diana notices. “I know, it’s different, isn’t it? I was walking down the street a week or so ago and there was human poop in the sidewalk.”

I look at Diana then disgusted but on the verge of laughter. “How did you know it was human poop?” I ask, my eyes gleaming from tiredness as well.

“Because I saw a guy squatting by the tree before I made it that far,” she says.

Diana starts to tell me about her host family in preparation for meeting them. She explains how the Mom and Dad divorced, so the Mom is living alone. She says that the Dad had an affair and that was the end of their relationship. Not uncommon for the culture, she says, although it doesn’t always end in divorce. She tells me how the mother is prejudice against the indigenous people of the country. Diana had gotten lice from a trip to Honduras and the host Mom assumed it was from the indigenous people she had stayed with for a week. Despite the indigenous folks poor living conditions, they are clean. Life is hard; often the men must work away from their families for many hours in the hot sun picking coffee for little money. Alcoholism and abuse aren’t uncommon either, she tells me.

We arrive at the home, and I am alarmed by the large steel doors. I also notice the barbed wire at the top of the steel doors and around the top of the cement wall that surrounds the house.

Diana explains that if they don’t have this, the police are not going to protect them, and they might be robbed and kidnapped. Even with this, people were often robbed when criminals would push their way in. Despite a democracy having been put in place in the country, the police force and the government were still corrupt, so help was not easy to get. The country is poor and with it comes crime and corruption, she says.

The host Mom is home and greets me with a hug. She also leans in to kiss me on both cheeks. I flinch. Diana failed to tell me about this part of their culture. Like any true blooded American, I like my space and we don’t greet strangers this way, maybe a handshake. A few feet are comfortable, so I realize this will take some getting used to. I love the warmness of the host family Mom, though.

The house itself is cement and plaster. It is built very sturdy, and everything is tiled. The sturdy structure protects the building from earthquakes, the host Mom tells me.

Carola shows me to the room I will be sleeping in for the night. It is plain with a few pictures of Jesus on the wall and a baby crib in the corner. The quilt on the bed is old and tattered, but colorful, and the room is neat and clean. I sit down and notice the mattress is squishy and thin. As I unpack a few things from my large travel backpack I realize I’m excited. I know we’ll be traveling by bus, taxi, and sometimes on short plane trips, so I’ll have to get used to being on the move. We are leaving early in the morning for Puerto Barrios to meet up with friends of Diana’s.

**Five**

My eyes pop open. I can hear cars driving and horns honking in the distance. In the morning light, everything looks different. The baby crib I noticed the night before now looks tattered; the mattress is thin and there are no sheets or any other form of comfort. It obviously hasn’t been used in a while. The night before it looked clean, made, and ready for anything. The walls are made of plaster and the floor is tile. The sweet, musty smell is intoxicating. I slept well. I turn and stare up at the ceiling. It is so far away and clinical, but I feel good. Comfortable and cozy. I want to lay there and fall back to sleep.

“Good, you are up; we have to leave in about thirty minutes, and we have to eat, pack our stuff, and take showers,” Diana says as she busts into my room. Military.

“Remember that we aren’t bringing everything, so make sure you go through your stuff and leave behind what isn’t essential; we don’t want too much to carry,” she says.

I roll over on the bed, sit up and on the edge and groan. “Can we sleep a little longer? Catch a later bus?”

“There are no other buses today; we’d have to forfeit the money we spent and buy a new ticket, and we’d have to reschedule with my friends,” she says.

“OK, fine, but is there a Starbucks nearby so I can get a coffee?”

“The best I can do is Dunkin Donuts, and they don’t have fancy coffee like you want. When we get to Antigua, we’ll find someplace you can get a good coffee.”

“Are you kidding me? That’s a long time from now. You didn’t tell me this; it seriously might have prevented me from coming.” Diana looks at me, not sure what to say, and then, I smile.

“I’m kidding; trying to lighten things a little. You look worried right now,” I say.

I stand up, feeling a little tipsy, and head to the bathroom. It has the same tile as the rest of the house. I start the shower and the water barely trickles out. It is going to be a bad hair day. I am careful since I at least know I can’t let the water from the shower get in my mouth or I might get sick. As I towel off, Diana comes in the bathroom.

“Here, use this bottle of water for brushing your teeth,” she says.

When I traveled in Europe; public bathrooms were not readily available. Streets, buildings, homes, and stores were smaller, so I felt claustrophobic and cramped all the time. But you could drink the water; the mattresses were comfortable, and there was carpeting in the hotel rooms and homes, yet thinner than what I was used to.

As we walk to breakfast and sit down, Diana says, “Now, we are a target for theft. People know we are American just by the way we look and as soon as we talk, it’s confirmed. You and I are extremely wealthy in their eyes whether you think that or not. So, you must always keep valuables hidden. When carrying your backpack, keep it in front and keep it tightly closed. Once we get to a hotel, we’ll leave our passports and such in the hotel room but will carry the copy with us in case things are stolen from our room.”

I know if you lose your passport, it is a real pain to get home. I had encountered this while traveling in Europe. A girl with our group had left her backpack under her chair while at an Internet café. Someone stole the backpack along with her passport and all her money. Since she didn’t have identification, going to the embassy made it harder, that’s why the copies and keeping them separate.

The host Mom has breakfast ready for us. Juanita, her maid actually has breakfast ready for us. The maid is poor and has a child out of wedlock. Life is difficult for her in Guatemala. Luckily, the host Mom is willing to let her work and keep her child with her during the day, which is unusual, Diana tells me under her breath in English. Neither Juanita or the host Mom speak any English. Despite having become part of the family, she is still a servant, almost like a slave given her wage and conditions. She gets paid very little and must be extremely careful and work very hard or she will lose her job; there are plenty of other women who would love to have this job.

Diana had asked me to bring some Bath and Body Works, so we could give it to her as a gift. As we present it to Juanita, her face lights up. She is thrilled, that is obvious, but also catches herself and tempers her reaction so she doesn’t appear too eager. It isn’t even real Bath and Body Works, I think to myself. In my eyes, it is cheap stuff; in my mind, it has an off smell, not quite as pure and clean as real B and B.

The breakfast consists of instant coffee, plantains, black beans, eggs, and salsa. I am surprised we are drinking instant coffee and it is not good.

Diana reads my mind. “Most people drink instant coffee here because regular coffee is very expensive. Most of it is exported except for what you can buy in tourist areas.”

The last time I had instant coffee was at my grandma’s house years ago, but my Grandma drank it during off times of the day out of convenience, so she didn’t have to make a whole pot of coffee. I add more of the granules to my cup; I like my coffee strong.

The food is bland, which I didn’t expect. I assumed it would be like Mexico, spicy, or so I’ve heard. I’ve never been. Even though it is simple, delicious, and tasty. I haven’t eaten many black beans in my life, but I think to myself that they could become a favorite. The plantains are like bananas when fresh, but these had been fried and cream and sugar were available to put on them.

“Bitch, these bananas are not good; why do they fry them?” I ask.

"These are my favorite Guatemalan food, and they aren’t bananas.”

“Well, they taste like mushy, greasy bananas to me; I won’t be eating anymore of these,” I say.

Diana responds silent with a careful glance. I am being rude. sI look back with an apologetic face. *Sorry.*

“You know, you aren’t going to be very comfortable traveling in that. We’ll be doing some walking and the bus will be crowded and hot,” Diana says.

“I’ll be fine, if I am just sitting on a bus, how uncomfortable can I be?” I counter and roll my eyes.

As we walk out the door, I hoist my bag onto my shoulders. We walk along the street to the bus station, which is several blocks away and my feet start to hurt.

As we approach the bus station, I notice the tattered sign, a few buses sitting nearby and the drivers standing around smoking. It seems pretty sketchy, but I trust Diana; she has traveled quite often throughout Guatemala. I notice a few people standing around waiting for the buses; they are obviously Guatemalan, and they have very little with them. I suspect, for some of them, this is their life’s possession.

We board the bus, and I instantly feel annoyed with my sister.

“Diana, this is a comfortable bus and it looks like I’ll have plenty of room to sit,” I say.

“Yeah, Ivy, but we have to share with others, and we may have to walk when we get to Puerto Barrios,” she says.

I look around; there are several other travelers, and they appear haggard like they haven’t slept or eaten in days. Where were they going and where had they come from? I choose a seat next to Diana.

“OK, I don’t want to alarm you, but I do want to make sure you are informed along the way. Occasionally, buses have been stopped and robbed and last week a girl was raped during it in front of everyone on the bus. She was Guatemalan. The likelihood of this happening to us is slim, but sadly, it did happen. Since we are from North America, we are a target but not in that way. Our country sticks their nose in everything and would if something were to happen to an American while traveling, so while they’ll rob us, they will stay away from any other trouble,” Diana says. ”We have stuck our nose in Guatemalan’s affairs in the past.”

She goes on to tell me more about the war; I know some already. [The Guatemalan Civil War was fought from 1960 to 1996 between the government of Guatemala and various leftist rebel groups](https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=4d434ba673371ceeJmltdHM9MTY4ODg2MDgwMCZpZ3VpZD0yZmUxYjYyMi05ZWU4LTY4ZDctMThkNS1hNDhhOWYwZTY5NmQmaW5zaWQ9NjIyMg&ptn=3&hsh=3&fclid=2fe1b622-9ee8-68d7-18d5-a48a9f0e696d&psq=description+of+the+30+year+guatemalan+civil+war&u=a1aHR0cHM6Ly9lbi53aWtpcGVkaWEub3JnL3dpa2kvR3VhdGVtYWxhbl9DaXZpbF9XYXI&ntb=1). [The war was the bloodiest Cold War conflict in Latin America, resulting in over 200,000 deaths and one million displacements](https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=a13d5f4086cc367dJmltdHM9MTY4ODg2MDgwMCZpZ3VpZD0yZmUxYjYyMi05ZWU4LTY4ZDctMThkNS1hNDhhOWYwZTY5NmQmaW5zaWQ9NjIyNQ&ptn=3&hsh=3&fclid=2fe1b622-9ee8-68d7-18d5-a48a9f0e696d&psq=description+of+the+30+year+guatemalan+civil+war&u=a1aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cudGhvdWdodGNvLmNvbS9ndWF0ZW1hbGFuLWNpdmlsLXdhci1oaXN0b3J5LWFuZC1pbXBhY3QtNDgwMDM2NA&ntb=1). [The government forces were responsible for most of the human rights violations and genocide against the indigenous Maya population of Guatemala](https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=881e87b0403ecfdbJmltdHM9MTY4ODg2MDgwMCZpZ3VpZD0yZmUxYjYyMi05ZWU4LTY4ZDctMThkNS1hNDhhOWYwZTY5NmQmaW5zaWQ9NjIyNw&ptn=3&hsh=3&fclid=2fe1b622-9ee8-68d7-18d5-a48a9f0e696d&psq=description+of+the+30+year+guatemalan+civil+war&u=a1aHR0cHM6Ly9lbi53aWtpcGVkaWEub3JnL3dpa2kvR3VhdGVtYWxhbl9DaXZpbF9XYXI&ntb=1).

“Wow, it has only been six years since it ended. That’s scary,” I say.

Diana looks at me. “I know; I’ve asked some people here about it, but they don’t generally want to talk about it.”

“You just have to find a way to put it in the back of your mind; be cautious but open your mind to all the wonderful things Guatemala has to offer,” she says.

I think for a moment, isn’t it interesting that there are pros and cons to everywhere you go. The US is safe, at least safer than Guatemala. However, it is rigid and busy. Some parts of it are warm, but expensive. Minnesota is cold, but the standard of living is amazing. I can’t even smoke a cigarette and throw it out the window without being stopped by a police officer. Guatemala is beautiful so far and the weather is perfect, the people seem amazing, but there are dangers everywhere, volcanoes, earthquakes, and the aftermath of a brutal war. I just go to sleep.

I wake up to rustling around me. Diana is gathering her things up and was just about to wake me when she notices my eyes are open.

“Hey sleepy head, we’re in Puerto Barrios. We are getting off the bus to meet my friends and will be taking a boat to Livingston; it’s the only way,” she says.

As we exit the bus, Diana laughs. “Hey, we made it; why did we decide to take an early bus; you are clearly not ready to go.”

Diana is talking to Jose, her Guatemalan friend from school. Jose is taller than most Guatemalans, he has dark hair in an almost bob haircut; it reminds me of the Beatles, I guess, if they were Hispanic. His nickname is ‘Camarada’, which is comrade in English. It is endearing and a compliment to anyone nicknamed it since it means you are loved, fun, and noticed. I want a nickname.

Jose smiles and gives Diana a hug and kisses her cheeks. He leans in to do the same to me; I flinch. Still not used to it.

Camarada laughs. “Ahhh, someone is not used to our culture yet.”

I feel stupid and foolish even though it is a lighthearted comment. Camarada is clearly a cultured Guatemalan.

“This is my sister Ivy,” Diana says, “and we’ll have to go easy on her. She has never been to Central America before and she doesn’t speak much Spanish.”

Camarada just smiles and I feel like my fly is open, exposed. “Bienvenido, Ivy, we are going to have fun and we speak enough Spanish for you too.” His accent isn’t strong; it is exactly as I’d expect.

He winks at me and turns back to Diana. “Molly wanted to get a massage before we left, so we just have to pick her up. In fact, we were thinking maybe we’d just stay at my house tonight and leave for Livingston tomorrow morning. There’s plenty of room and it’ll be fun, plus one less night of hotel expenses. I have plenty of Gallo and Walter said he might be able to make it if you want to see him.”

He looks at Diana with a sneaky smile and laughs. Walter is Camarada’s best friend and Diana’s latest fling. I dislike the idea of staying at Jose’s house and have no idea what Gallo is.

Diana asks me, “What do you think?”

I don’t want to sound like a jerk to Diana’s friends, so I say, “Sure, fine, sounds like fun.”

“OK, then, we need to get going to pick up Molly in time,” Jose says.

Jose has a nice car and is clearly well off, but the town is run down. There are half buildings built or half demolished and most of the streets are dirt. People look worn out and tired, once again. It feels small. It isn’t a very big town, but the conditions make it feel smaller. I notice while we are driving that Gallo is plastered everywhere, on chairs outside cafes, on billboards and signs.

"What is Gallo?” I ask feeling secretly foolish. Certainly, they wouldn’t advertise it like that if it was something bad.

“It’s the national beer and pretty much runs the country,” Camarada says.

We arrive at the massage therapists. Molly is waiting outside smoking a cigarette; good, I think to myself; I have a partner in crime. She is gorgeous, tall, dark long hair, very American, huge boobs, and dressed well.

There is a connection between smokers that non-smokers don’t understand. It is like a club; if you smoke, you reject society’s view that smoking is evil. If you smoke, you accept others that smoke and will not judge them or hound them into quitting. It’s not that smokers don’t know the dangers of the habit, so telling them and hounding them doesn’t help. It’s simply an addiction and a smoker will minimize those dangers in their own mind.

Also, due to its nature, it took approximately two to three minutes or more to smoke a cigarette and it often had to be done outside, so there are a lot of conversations that occur due to this; some brilliant ideas probably developed from smokers because of it. Steve Jobs was probably a smoker in his youth and thought up the first Apple computer concept while chatting with his friends outside. Perhaps my connection with Molly will help me become the next billionaire.

“Hi,” I say, “I’m Ivy, Diana’s sister. Molly, can I grab one of those from you? I haven’t been able to get a decent cup of coffee or buy cigarettes since I arrived.”

“I hear you on that one; I have been here for THREE months and feel deprived,” Carried says.

Camarada gives Molly a look and I instantly know he is one of *them*. Despite loving Molly, it is an obvious point of contention for them.

We drive around town some more. “Tonight, I want to go to my cousin’s place with you guys, if that’s ok; there is a little party going on. Then a friend of mine has a pool and an amazing view right on the water, so I thought we could visit him too,” he says.

We arrive at his house and it is very nice; all tile again, but very well decorated and appeasing to me. There is a large open room with a small island bar in the living area when we walk in. There is plenty of alcohol, I can tell, in the cabinet behind the bar. I notice a door, which leads into the kitchen, I assume.

Camarada’s Mom emerges. “Bienvenido, hi Molly, Diana; who is your friend?” She approaches them with a kiss and hug. Her accent is also not strong and she reminds me of every show or movie I’ve ever watched with a Hispanic mom. The food will come next.

“This is my sister, Ivy; she’s visiting and traveling with us for several days,” she also gives me a hug and kisses my cheeks. I don’t flinch this time. Maybe because she’s a mom.

“Wonderful, Jose, make sure they have everything they need. Vanessa will provide you food and anything else. I am leaving shortly to go to the party, but I will see you there,” she says.

We settle in and put our bathing suits on. We leave for the party soon after.

We end up drinking a lot and swimming some; the landscape is beautiful beyond the water. The pool that is on the ocean is just amazing. We return after midnight and almost immediately go to sleep.

“OK guys, don’t forget we are catching that boat to Livingston tomorrow morning very early,” Diana says.

I wake up in the morning and decide to get ready quickly. The shower and toilet are once again difficult. I learned you can’t flush the toilet during certain times of day and the shower is a trickle.

We leave Camarada’s house and approach the boat area. Livingston is at the mouth of the Rio Dulce on the eastern coast of Guatemala and the only safe, efficient way to get there is by boat. It was the main port of Guatemala prior to Puerto Barrios being developed. I look across the river as we walk up and notice how green and lush everything is. It is a perfect day, probably around seventy degrees and no clouds. It is like the best days of Summer in MN, but this is the norm for Guatemala; even the rainy season is beautiful most of the time.

I look to the boat area and immediately observe how shabby the boat is. It is light blue like the sky. The surface appears bumpy, like the material they used to make the boat had been cast that way; paper matchet, comforting. There are several bench seats across the boat and a canopy over the seats. The canopy has several holes in it and is about as light as a bed sheet. I think to myself. *What is the point of the canopy? It certainly won’t protect us from much.*

There are life jackets, but not nearly enough for everyone in the boat. It is a short ride, so hopefully I could swim if I go overboard and can’t secure a life jacket. The boat is packed, and it makes me uncomfortable. Diana snaps some pictures of me while we travel.

As we approach the landing, I realize it is nothing fancy. It isn’t like the states, where every transportation port has a million vendors and shelters and bathrooms. I see nothing except a few buildings up the path. We pay the man running the boat with Quetzals and that is it. There are no official documents or gates to pass through. There is no scrutiny over whether your belongings are safe.

“The Garifuna Festival is happening right now. It’s a week-long celebration and that’s part of the reason we wanted to come here at this time. It’s in honor of the Garifuna culture and traditions featuring dances, songs, food, and religious ceremonies. The town will be alive with festivities honoring the first Garifuna settlers in Guatemala. The streets will be alive with Punta dance and other activities. The town has a major influx of people during this time.” Diana educates me on what we are about to encounter and emphasizes that it will be busier there than normal. The Garifuna people are descendants of Carib, Arawak, and West African people she tells me.

We walk along the broken street and I observe the bright colors of the people Diana mentioned. “Look across the river, Ivy; you can see Belize from here, just over that hill.”

We finally walk through an opening on the side of the street and there is an outdoor corridor with several doors. There was no advertisement that the hotel is even here. We walk to the end of the corridor and there is only a small desk with someone hanging out behind it.

Diana speaks quickly in Spanish and then asks me in English, “150Q for the night, Ivy; does that work?”

“150Q, that’s like thirty dollars, that’s fine with me.” I do the math; I’m a little off.

We open the door to the room and I understand why it is so cheap. The first thing my eyes are drawn to is the bathroom door, which is right across from the main door. It is painted red and looks like it’s been in the sun too long and is worn, like barn wood. It doesn’t reach the floor or the ceiling. It reminds me of our elementary school bathroom stalls except they were made of metal. I drop my bag on the bed and walk over to it. I open the door and poke my head in slowly scanning the small room expecting the inside to be better. There is no shower and no toilet seat. There’s a rusted metal garbage in the corner of the small space and the half roll of toilet paper looks thin, like tissue paper. It’s not better.

"You’re kidding me, right?”

“Look,” Diana says, “I told you that it wouldn’t be anything fancy. That you might have to rough it a little and you said you were ok with it.”

“God Ivy, it’s only for one night; we may have to stay at one more hotel like this, but the hotel in Antigua is very nice,” she says.

“OK, fine, let’s just leave it and have some fun, ok?”

Molly runs up to us as we enter the street. “There is a dance in the gym, you guys want to come?”

We decide to follow her, but as soon we get into the gym, I tell Diana I want to leave. It is hot and stuffy and there are tons of people.

Diana agrees to leave. As we walk, I feel like having a cigarette.

“Let’s stop here and sit for a little while; I want to listen to these guys play,” I say.

There are about five guys sitting on the steps of a *tienda* playing guitars and other instruments. As I hop up on the cement ridge across the street from them to sit and listen, and to smoke, I notice they are playing Pink Floyd’s, *Wish You Were Here*.

**Six**

The static sound of the first guitar is soft and vivid, playing the smooth rhythm as the second guitar begins picking and after a few moments the cords are brought together. It’s the point in the song where you want to start it over so you can experience the build up again. Like, *Tusk* or *Money for Nothing*, but this build up is slower, sweeter. The drums start; sweet, sweet drums. It is the best sound I’ve heard in a while and it’s only better because they are playing it. I close my eyes and sway my head a bit to feel it completely, but very slowly, so no one notices. I’d be embarrassed. No one sings out loud, but I am in my head.

I finally open my eyes and take in the five guys. Four of them are obviously Guatemalan, but one of them doesn’t have an instrument. He is standing with one foot propped on the bottom step, leaning in and then out, talking while they play. I can’t really tell to who because none of them are looking at him. The others are sitting in two rows on the second and third step: two each in a jagged formation. They are relaxed mostly; their legs hang over onto the lower step; second or first depending. Two of them are short, I can tell, because their legs don’t hang down as far. My attention doesn’t stay on them long. I look a more intently at the guy who doesn’t appear to be Guatemalan.

He’s handsome and mysterious, but I can’t quite place where he is from. Israel maybe? I definitely want to talk to him later.

They continue to play more of the music I like, such as Led Zeppelin. I especially like their version of *Stairway to Heaven*. The one without an instrument seems to suddenly notice us, he leans forward, says something to one of the guys on the second step, steps off, turns, and walks across the street and up to us.

“Do you have a lighter?” he says. I hand him my lighter. “Where are you from?” He pulls a cigarette out of his pocket, pops it in his mouth, and lights it, then hands the lighter back to me.

“The United States, Minnesota,” I say.

“I’m studying in Guatemala City for a semester. She’s visiting me for a week and a half,” Diana says.

“Ah, I see, my name is Pablo.”

“My name is Ivy and this is Diana,” I say peering at him.

“Nice to meet you. We’re all just traveling together for a week and we’re here for a few more days. They like to hang out and play. Sometimes at local places,” he says.

“Interesting; I really love the music,” I say.

“Yeah, so when did you get here?” he says.

“Just two days ago,” I say.

“Oh, so you haven’t experienced too much yet. I’m from Guatemala City and while it’s pretty safe for Americans, it’s not quite that way for us. Just last week my cousin’s car was stolen. He was at a stop light, and someone pulled the door open, forced him out, and drove off,” he says.

“That’s scary,” I say.

“Yeah, he had a really nice car. I have a convertible too, but I am very careful about where I drive it in the city,” he says.

I turn my attention to the *tienda;* it is small, just a concrete box with a rectangular opening and a few steps. The entire length of it could be walked in four steps. It is dirty and grimy. The stuff being sold is sealed. There are Doritos and other familiar items; it contains beer, pop, cigarettes, and candy. I am surprised the shop owners allow them to play on the steps and block the entrance.

There’s a long pause. Diana doesn’t fill in the gap.

“Nice, a convertible. It must be hard not to be able to drive it wherever you want. I have an idea. Why don’t I buy some beers?” I say.

I jump down from the cement wall, which is further down than I remember, and my ankle rolls. Ouch. I cross the street with a limp, shaking off the roll, say ‘*Hola’*, purchase a six pack of Gallo and hand them out. Pablo and Diana followed me over. I can tell the guys are grateful, but they don’t say much. We introduce ourselves.

I sit next to one of the guys, Carlos and we chat a little, but I feel shy. It doesn’t help that I accidentally spit on him when I am talking. He just sits there like it didn’t happen, but I can clearly see the gob of spit on his face. Neither one of us acknowledges it. I turn my attention away to say something to Pablo and when I look briefly at him again, the spit is gone.

I decide to go and change. I have on a brown scoop neck t-shirt and khaki capris. Not exactly my best outfit. As I stand, Carlos tells me they’re playing at a restaurant up the street in a few hours. He’s still talking to me but seems to slightly look away when he does. I suppose he doesn’t want a big gob of American spit on his face again and I guess they do want to see us again.

“We’re going to dinner with some friends,” I say, working out in my head that the timing isn’t right. They said they’re playing at six and that’s when the dinner is.

As I start walking away, the guy in the back asks me, “Where are you going?”

“To change my clothes.”

He has been sitting on the third step and hasn’t said anything to us. I don’t remember him introducing himself. He isn’t wearing a shirt and is very thin with longer black thick, curly hair and he is tall by Guatemalan standards, I can tell, even as he sits. It’s like he just appeared. I notice too there is a little boy sitting on a stool just to the right of the opening of the *tienda.*

“Let’s go,” I say and Diana follows me.

We change and freshen up some. We walk back out of the corridor onto the street and they are still sitting there playing. I ask if they mind if I take a photo of them. They say no, but that we have to be in the picture too. The little boy is still sitting there so he also makes the photo.

We meet up with Molly and Comorada and others for dinner. They had met some people who are traveling, and they have joined us. There is the German guy who is traveling around the world on a tight budget. He’s got a throttled voice but speaks pretty good English. He’s harrier than most, his clothes are dirty, he smells, and has big hands, if you know what I mean. Interestingly, I have only known blonde, blue-eyed Germans, so meeting a dark haired, dark eyed one is different. I stop just short of asking the German if he loves sauerkraut.

There are a couple of girls from Spain; they don’t speak English, so others must translate everything for me. I don’t like them. Their perfect, beautiful faces, long legs, and big tits are too much. They speak too sweet Spanish. I’m sure the guys will look at them like they do delicious burritos. *Competition.*

There is the couple from Canada. They say ‘eh’ every other word, just like you’d imagine and give off toothy grins anytime someone says something funny. *Dorks.* I am embarrassed because they are probably the closest in features and mannerisms to us. Although, I never say ‘eh’. Fargo is not accurate.

It feels like a community even though we just met. Everyone helps everyone else out, it seems. Guatemala is great, but it’s tough in many ways, I’ve already realized.

Pablo followed me to dinner. He seems to be infatuated and isn’t shy about telling me. He’s already speaking to me like he’s in love making promises that he’ll take care of me and boasting about how much money he has. I am a embarrassed to feel flattered since he is young, only nineteen. I told him he’s too young for me, but he doesn’t care. I start to ignore him and spark up conversation with the Canadian couple.

The restaurant is nice. It is made entirely of wood, even the floor. The large table we’re at has small candles and is also made of chunky wood. It is dim and almost romantic. We finish our dinner and decide to head to the beach.

I can hear the reggae music before we even arrive. Bob Marley; awesome. There is a bar on the beach up from the water and several people are drinking and dancing already as I walk up to the area. The bar is open and I start scrambling to find some cash to buy a beer.

Pablo appears right next to me. “Oh, whoa, you scared me,” I say.

“Well, I was looking for you everywhere. Please give me a chance, you are so beautiful, who cares if we are different ages,” he says.

I laugh. “Pablo, look, I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but this isn’t going to happen. I’m flattered, I really am, but please know that you are wasting your time.” I say the words simply and succinctly, so he will understand.I say to get him off my back, but also because I really need to use the bathroom. “I need to use the restroom.” I head to the bar. “*Donde esta el bano?*” I say to the bartender. He points up the hill.

The bathroom is an outhouse, I can see, as I walk up the hill. It is made of wood planks and the door is quite tattered and is hanging half open. I can smell it before I even reach it and when I open the door, I feel like I’m witnessing a murder. The toilet is crooked in the stall, and it is filthy like it hasn’t been cleaned in years. It is dark, the only light showing is from the bar which isn’t close. It also has no toilet seat and there is no toilet paper. But I really need to go. Hopefully something gross doesn’t come out and attack me.

I pull down my pants and hold myself up by putting my hand up against one side of the stall; God knows what is on these walls, but it’s better than sitting on the disgusting toilet. Something furry *must* be in this bathroom. I finish peeing, pull up my pants, visibly gag, and I stumble out of the bathroom.

Pablo is waiting for me. God. Even though I don’t want to give him the wrong impression, I grab his hand, pretend I’m stumbling a little then wipe my other hand slyly on him, to wipe off some of the scum from the bathroom walls. Furry creatures, be damned. They’re not getting me tonight.

Diana comes running up to us. “How fun, I’ve been dancing and talking with so many different people. Come on, let’s go in the water.”

I run after her, Pablo heavy on my heels. I look back, he’s running with a gleeful look on his face, tongue almost wagging, thinking he might still get some tonight, from this blonde, blue eyed American. It’s comical. We reach the beach and I pull up my dress, so it doesn’t get wet, and go into the water, just to mid-calf.

We all dance around and snap some pictures.

As we’re dancing, I notice that Diana is next to the Israeli guy. It appears they are connecting. I hadn’t really told Diana I thought he was cute and who am I to claim dibs on someone in this environment anyway. Pablo has disappeared, and I am tired of dancing in the water anyway.

I make my way up to a set of chairs that had been planted in the sand and plop down on one of them. As I do, I look to my left, out of breath, and notice the ghost that had been playing his guitar with the others on the steps. What is with this guy? I think.

“Oh hi, how are you?” I ask.

“Gud, I didn’t talk to you before or tell you really who I am, but I am Luis,” he says with an accent, emphasis on the English words in all the wrong places and broken.

My whole world stops.

He’s wearing a shirt now that says ‘Boss’. It’s written across his chest bigger and bolder than it should be. I can’t help but smirk a little, and hope he doesn’t notice, but I notice he has soft, curly eyelashes and soft, dark brown eyes close. His voice is soothing and comforting to me even as he spoke those few words. His accent has a soft edge to it. His hair is beautiful and curly, as I remember, and as he smiles, I notice a dimple at each corner of his mouth.

“I’m Ivy.”

We sit there, we talk of everything and nothing important. Everything around me becomes quiet and still as I focus on him despite the loud music and people dancing, drinking, and singing.

“So, you like Pablo?” he asks jolting me out of my trance.

“Oh my gosh, no, we were just talking. He’s too young for me and not really my type.” He cocks his head and looks at me questioningly.

We are interrupted, at that moment, by Diana. “We’re getting ready to head back to the main part of town. There’s a dance club we want to go to that closes in an hour.” Of course, I have to go along despite not wanting to ever leave the place I am sitting.

Luis gets up. “I’ll meet you there, ok?”

When he says ‘ok’, it sounds like his tongue is twisted and it comes out lightly slurred and muffled.

“OK,” I say, once again out of breath.

He starts walking away and joins the other guys in his group. He is carrying his guitar, which he had grabbed from the spot next to his chair. I watch him for a moment until Diana says, “Ivy, are you with us?”

“Yeah, sorry, I was a little out of it. Just tired, I think,” I say.

Desperation sets in and I’m not sure why; I just met him. I feel like we’ve known each other forever. I’m not comfortable with this feeling, I think, but I can’t deny it.

As we approach the dance club, I notice him waiting outside the door for me. He greets me, and once again, I feel the world grow still and quiet. I am suddenly at peace. We make our way into the club and dance very close to each other after he buys me a beer with the little money he has; I hug him tight. We both know this could be our only night together without speaking it out loud. I abandon all rational thought.

As we are sitting on the steps of the bar while it is closing, he starts playing his guitar and singing a song he made up; the words are so simple and about me, but cute. It’s a terrible song, but I don’t mind. He plays guitar very well.

We walk back to the bank of hotel rooms. Diana, Molly, and Camarada are also with us as well as some of the other guys from his group. We have some beer in our room to continue the party. I decide to grab some and come back to the street and he is gone. I hadn’t made a plan with him, but just sort of expected him to hang around and wait for me.

I see Pablo. “Where did Luis go?” I ask trying to hide my disappointment and surprise.

“He went back to the hotel. Do you like him?” “Yeah, sure, I think he’s cool; I’d like to hang out with him some more,” I say as casually as I can.

Without thinking, I make my way there. When I arrive, it’s a big opening and there are doors to rooms surrounding it. It’s a surprising given we’re staying in the fifth circle of Hell and we’re supposedly the ‘wealthy’ ones. I guess they have money, I think. Pablo wasn’t telling too tall stories.

“Why did you leave?” I ask.

“Pablo told me you kissed, and I thought you liked him. I was just going to go to bed.”

I look at him in astonishment, glance at Pablo with a piercing look. “We did not kiss; I have been very clear with him that I am not interested. I like you and want to hang out some more.”

Luis looks relieved; he also gives Pablo a look daring him to come near or tell another lie.

We decide to walk back towards my hotel and hang out. We don’t have any real plans, but I just feel at ease and want to spend more time together. I am babbling as we walk along.

Then, I am swept away.

Somehow, he finagled his way from walking next to me into an embrace and a kiss. I stop dead in my tracks, turn, and kiss him back.

His lips are soft, moist, and warm. I lean into him.

When we finally part, I look at him and smile, my arms around his neck, “Wow, you took me by surprise.”

“I have wanted to do that all-night long,” he says.

As I look at him, I notice how smooth his skin is and it is dark, like chocolate. His demeanor is so gentle. I feel suddenly like he couldn’t hurt me like I had been hurt before. Chase passes quickly through my brain. We continue our walk, holding hands then we decide to sit on the cement steps.

Molly comes strolling up and interrupts us. She was swerving as she approaches. “Hey, smoking buddy, do you have any? Camarada and I got in a fight, so I am going to smoke all I want just to piss him off.”

“Yeah, sure,” I say indicating with my eyes to Molly that I really want her to leave. She doesn’t catch the hint.

“So, we’re sitting at this restaurant with some other people having a drink. I light up a cigarette and Camarada grabs it and throws it on the ground and stomps it out. I took his drink from the table and threw it in his face. How dare he do that? What am I, something he can control? Then, some guy stood up to defend me by telling Camarada that he was out of line doing that and Camarada punches him. Seriously, his temper,” I look at her in astonishment, Luis says nothing.

“Then, he takes off and I can’t find him, not that I have really tried that hard,” she says.

“Wow Carried, that’s pretty intense over a cigarette,” I say.

“Yeah, I’m done, I’m heading to our room to go to bed. See you in the morning.” She swerves away smoke billowing from her cigarette.

“Was that girl on something? She seemed to be pretty out of it,” Luis asks.

“I don’t know, I know she likes to drink and smoke, but I don’t know if she does other stuff,” I say and look at him.

We decide to walk towards my hotel room and settle on the sitting on the wall. I pull out my portable CD player and start playing him the music I love.

We talk more about nothing and around 4 a.m. decide to go to bed. I don’t feel tired; I want to stay up all night, but figure I better get some sleep if I am going to get up to travel to our next location; we have to leave at 6:30 a.m. I invite him to sleep in my room, but we just go to sleep.

Two hours later, I wake up with a start and looked at the clock. “Diana, we need to go now,” I say.

I get up and get ready. When I come out of the bathroom, Luis is laying in the bed waiting for me.

“OK, I am so glad I met you, so please call me or email me when you have a chance. I would love to hear from you,” I say.

I grab my travel journal from the bed and write down my email and phone number.

“Thanks Ivy, you will be in my thoughts all day. I really appreciated spending time with you and I will be in touch,” he says.

I look at him before Diana and I rush out of the room. I want to say so much more, but there is no time. The morning has brought a reality that I can’t place.

He stands up and says he’ll walk out with us.

When we reach the street, he gives me a big hug and I finally let go of him and say, “Goodbye” and turn around to walk away.

I think, if I turn back and he is looking at me, we are meant to be. So, after a few steps, I do and he isn’t. He’s just walking with his back turned to us. His guitar is hanging down from where he’s holding the neck.

I turn on my heel and continue walking with Diana.

As we approach the boat station, I see the German guy from the night before and greet him. He is eating butter on some bread. The butter looks like it is about two weeks old.

I lean in to kiss his cheeks and he still smells of BO. I wonder briefly where he had slept the night before. I ask, ‘What are your plans?’

‘I am continuing through Guatemala to Honduras and other parts of Central America and then I’m going to South America for a month. In total, I am traveling for a year. I can email you my blog posts, if you like, I just need your email,” he says.

We’re part of a club, us Germans, so I give him my email.

The boat finally arrives, so we load our bags, and are on our way. It is a beautiful day, warm, dry, and sunny. Luis didn’t look back, I think. I’ll probably never see him again. Chad hasn’t really even crossed my mind until now; maybe there is something there long term. I don’t know. I do a quick comparison. Even though I don’t know Luis, one night with him was more enthralling than all the time I’ve spent with Chad. I am young, so don’t necessarily feel like I have to be loyal to him.

I look at Diana, smile, and say, ‘I think you were right; Guatemala does have a lot to offer.’