

Acclimating 01.09.2020 – 01.22.2020
aka "Learning the Currency"

Day 1: Learning the Currency

Get as much information as you can before you go. Get it from the people who know what they're talking about. The price of things. How much should a taxi from the airport to the flat cost me? Between 70 to 80 thou? That's like 40 bucks, right?

Haggling is key. I've seen a price cut by half in under a minute. Of course, it's hard to know what it all means in dollars. Constantly doing conversions, mathematics. I went to the super-market and dropped 250,000 *pesos* on groceries. On the way back to the flat, walking up the hill, the bags weighing me down, a street kid hollers at me.

"Can I get something out that bag!?"

I just shake my head. For thanks he taunts me. I wonder if there is a "best" response in situations like these.

This many organisms living together in a city. Of course there's going to be all different types. Types that are going to be a nuisance and types that are unexpectedly helpful. You've got to take it as it comes and keep moving. Learn to adapt.

Trial and error is unavoidable to a degree. Learn as much from others and past mistakes as possible. This is the true definition of "*getting ahead in life*".

A veritable zoo.

The government is corrupt and doesn't care and what your left with is a zoo.

Day 2: Acclimating

A mass of flesh on the floor. A writhing human body. Bloated and distorted stomach with a red *bulto* sticking out the side. Breasts out and falling this way and that, wrinkled and disgusting. As I pass it looks up at me and makes a gurgling noise.

I keep on walking.

Stay in the shade. It's not worth it to sweat overly. The humidity hits you everywhere regardless.

Get the routine going. The hours you'll be going to bed, the time you'll get up. I don't have much choice in the matter. My street seems to be a hub for students who stay up drinking and smoking until 2 *en la madrugada* on a regular basis. I don't mind it too much. Between midnight and 2 is the best time anyways. Everyone I know is asleep and I can get lost in my work.

The luxury of free time. Do not take it for granted. There is no commodity more valuable. Love itself not being a commodity.

I went to a nice café and all the baristas were pretty and my type. I sat at a table facing the street and worked on my book. A little poor street boy came by with a cut out cardboard box filled with candies. Tried to sell me some but spilt the contents all over the floor. One of the baristas ran over, stricken with pity, and helped him restock it, picking up all the fallen *Halls* from between the bushes. Took a good 5 minutes too. Finally, having his livelihood back in order, the boy tries his sales pitch again.

"No, gracias" is what I tell him, putting my right hand to my heart. I could sense the barista who had helped the boy immediately develop a distaste for me.

Should I be so cold-hearted out here? I fear that feeling for the people may get me hurt. I know who I am and who I am not. This is something very valuable.

Day 3: Experiencing the "Real" Medellin

Need to stay off the phone. A terrible influence over my life. It's ruining everything. Need to stay focused. Remind myself, what did you come here for? There's a vision in that mind that wants to be made real, and only hard and consistent work will make that happen. How silly it would seem to the gods looking down at us from through the clouds, silly humans, pursuing silly pursuits. The gods don't give a damn either way. They do what they want, with *impunity*. Now that's the goal. Would it be so wrong to aim for that?

Met Mr. Authentic today at the café. Told me he lives in the "real" Medellin. Meaning the *comunas* where the humbler folk find their residence. Presumably, *El Poblado* is a gentrified simulation of the city served up for the infesting *gringos*.

Is the mall not the real Medellin? Is the shopping district with the *Gucci* store not the true culture? That's something that hurts to disbelieve. They do it different here, don't they, all that? The subtleties are richer in the heart of the dark consumer jungle. The *comunas* and the *favelas* of the world can keep their culture to themselves for all I care. I'm a big city boy, and there's no denying that.

No dar papaya, dicen. Don't got any to give. Got a heart of ice for all these beggars and lame peddlers with their sticks and small children doing their bit to pitch in. Something so cool about the intellectual bum. Out there reading a magazine, his feet all dirty. I admire that. Those are the real philosophers.

Day 4: Barrio Antioquia

There's a security guard that vigilates outside my window at the spot across the street, one *Pizza's Piccolo*. Sometimes, he's got a dog with him. That's reassuring.

Had to go back through the hood on my way home from yoga class. Rubble on the floor everywhere, like a graveyard for bricks. Front doors wide open and the bed right there and the guy lying on it watching TV. All sorts all over the streets, one-eyed beggars with black hands, desperate looking men huddled in circles *hablando* in heavy slang, children laughing and playing. Now the area around my flat seems high-end.

The streets here have a violent intensity to them. Don't even think about saying hello to the people that pass you by. They'll think you're trying to sell them something. The honesty is refreshing. Everyone is sizing you up, and so you start sizing them up too. *When in Rome*.

On the metro people wear their bags on the front. You've got to be smart in the city. Don't show your back to anyone. This is the only acceptable presence: calm, but focused. Got to be disciplined about it. Not show-offish, but definitely not weak looking. We in the jungle here, and the weakest get weeded out.

There's a bum that wanders around the area near my metro stop. Tall light skinned fellow with dirty dreads. On each finger he has a ring fashioned out of barbed wire or old copper or the like, twisted round the digit tightly and many times, like a crown of thorns.

Day 5: Settling In

Played with a spider in my room today. It acted just like a pudgy little scared eunuch. Tripping over itself every time I raised my hand. But it kept coming back, flicking up those cute little white mandibles. Afterwards, I thought about killing it. You should never underestimate even the littlest of your enemies.

Feel more at home in the city. Walking the streets with growing ease. The walk through *Barrio Antioquia* changed my perspective. It's nice where I'm at.

Day 9: My Teacher

She's a very intense lady. Very sexy. He smiles to himself and lies down. Wanted some Medellin and got some Medellin. Had a nice day. Felt like one of "the people" on the metro. Here they say I've got a Spanish accent. They're just tickling my pride.

It's nice to give some change to a bum every now and then.

A barrage of experience. Too much to handle and definitely too much to write down. Just got to go when I got the time. No use making rules and limits and timetables. Can't get them to stick. So what I'm saying is it's best not to swim against the current. Accept it.

What has been done over the past 5 days? A lot. A lot of information. A lot of talking. A lot of walking. Up hills and the sides of goddamn mountains. Fuck a taxi. I got legs. The sweat here evaporates off you anyways. Never felt so good to sweat so much in so much time in all my life. I feel healthy, despite the *arepas* and *empanadas* and *aguardiente*. Not bad stuff. It's far too easy to party out here.

Don't feel like going out. But do feel like dressing up.

Day 11: Comuna 13

The thought of returning to Canada does not make me happy. Thinking about waking up in the cold, grey skies, trapped inside. All the bad habits that will resurface as a result of that. What a grim picture! Here it's hot and sunny and if I get up at 6AM all the better because I have more of the day to enjoy. The sun itself gives you energy. You sweat out everything, and drink water, and feel good. Despite it all, it's better than back home, just for that. I can't abide the cold, won't, never will. Don't give a damn either. Won't sacrifice in that regard. Won't do it. Don't even try to talk me out of it. Understood? It just don't make sense. Plain as that.

Now why does it have to be such a pain in the ass to make some money out here? Corrupt government flourish in the middle of the jungle. Went on a tour to *Comuna 13*. Absolutely overrun with tourists. Barcelona, Paris, they can't compare. Everything here is cramped, and they've set up little "museums" and "street shows" and the guide brings you round and drops you off at each one on the hope that you'll tip. It's sad for the ones that live there. Can't even move around for all the commotion and the noise. Tour guide had a nice little place though, just off the beaten path, with a cage around it and a friendly German Sheppard on the patio. Told me most of the population own their places, and for those that rent it's about 300,000 *pesos* a month. That's like 125 dollars. Still, I'm used to certain luxuries.

Day 14: Just Friends

Matched with a transsexual off of *tinder*. Medellin is full of them. At first I didn't believe she was a transsexual. The problem with the trannies out here is that they look like the real deal, and sometimes even better. That is, until she sent me a voice clip. I could just hear the hormone therapy oozing off her voice. It was a real let down. Truth be told she was gorgeous and just my type.

She was going on about men being insecure about dating transsexuals because of what their friends might say. I told her that was not my concern in the slightest. For me it was the fact that she had a penis.

"My sexual organ is not used in matters of intimacy, and truth be told I do not like it to begin with."

"Yes, fine," I tell her, "but the thing is, I actually *like* the female sexual organ."

"Well, let's not talk about your sexual preferences" she responds. Fair enough.

I get a text from her telling me she spent the entirety of Monday night taking liquor outside my building. I thought I had seen her from my window in front of the blue *notaría*.

"But how did you know where I lived?" I ask.

"I saw it in one of your *stories*," she responds, "and now I've confirmed it."

This put a bit of fear into me. But not too much. What's the worse she could do? Show me her penis?

Man About Town 01.23.2020 – 02.11.2020
aka "Seeing the Sights"

Day 15: Feel Like Home

Got a clique. With its own personalities and intrigues and all. Love triangles too. What position do I hold in the hierarchy? Things are still in the nascent stage. I can still stake my place.

Every price is less than half of what they say. Take my word and be confident about it. Getting ripped off, and knowing you've been ripped off, is not a good feeling. Choose your bums carefully too. You want a successful bum to support, not one of these useless beggars.

My new washer lady is a *testigo*. I saw the watchtower magazine lying on a table. She seemed impressed when I told her my *Abuelo* was an *anciano*. Now I wonder if I've got an "in" anywhere I go. Not quite as good as being a freemason, but it never hurts to be part of a special group.

Strawberry guy sold me another bunch. 20 for 20? What a joke. I told him 10, and that was still overpaying. Damn good strawberries though, and I like his face. I respect a hustler at any rate.

Day 16: Seeing the Sights

An unmanned paratrooper plane flies over the jungle. Shots of empty cockpit, parachutes hanging from holsters. All of a sudden plane starts shaking violently from turbulence, resumes. Handles and dials in cockpit move on their own. Autopilot switched on. Starts to nosedive.

Day 20: What to Do?

It's getting to the point where I have to decide what to do next. And not even on any metaphysical level. My rent's up in a week, and I haven't got a place to go or a flight out of here. There's one thing I'm sure of though. I don't want to go back to Canada. Back to the cold.

Keep meeting girls and having great conversations and it ends there. Maybe I'm out of the market. Too old, who knows. It's not like when I was 24 – those were the days. I hate that I can look back and recognize days that were better than today.

Ultimately, I feel down. Really down. I don't want to go back. I want to stay, I want to have sex with some beautiful Colombian girls, and I want to write this book. Goddamnit, I need to earn some money though! That's the problem! I'd feel like a fool to blow through all my savings. Unless there was a book to be had by the end of it. It shouldn't be so nerve-racking, investing in yourself, but these sorts of problems arise, and instead of going full throttle you look for a job or something or anything that keeps you in the same loop that's got you nowhere up till now. Faith! Faith, faith, faith, faith, faith, faith, faith, faith, yes, yes, yes what a beautiful, beautiful word! I pray to myself tonight and tomorrow morning when I rise that I will have faith in myself! Can I sell this book? I'm too much of a realist, the most I can say is I hope so. But either way it's better than going back to the cold. The dark cold, and the dark glares and cold shoulders and closed up hearts and ears and minds. Back to the cold, and to the same work and habits, that makes me want to barf. Never forget, I told myself back then, and I don't plan on doing so.

Day 21: Decision Made

The smell of human trash in the park of lights. Old folk shambling, they've all got some malady or other. Young men with dirty faces, hands and feet and nothing to lose walk with an unmistakable jaunt the world over.

Old man on the park bench next to mine just upped and barfed all over the floor. The crazies only talk to people who they think will listen to them. Ignore their existence.

With every gust my nostrils are filled with the stench of human sewage. A real nastiness to the people. But they seem keen enough on helping each other out.

When you dismount the subway in the centre there's 5 hat shops on the block. They've all got the same promotions and the same selection. These people haven't got the slightest business sense. Despite the oppression and the corruption it really is a 3rd world country for a reason. And that's why I love it.

Guys sit on a bench and start doing coke off the end of a straw in broad daylight in the centre of the city. Moms and sons peddle their sisters and daughters as sluts and smoke cigarettes in the haze and humidity of the garbage dump air. Everybody's smoking a *puro*, probably to kill the stench.

Malls everywhere. The streets full of vendors peddling fake *Calvin Klein* and *Carolina Herrera* off hangars. They've turned the old churches and government buildings into malls. All of them selling junk. Everywhere junk, absolute trash, waste for landfills, horrible ugly garbage polluting the earth, and the worst thing is they haven't got any taste.

A beggar will ask for anything. If you've got a burnt out bogie in your hands they'll ask for it, as though they're *owed* your human refuse. It's a poverty of spirit.

In the graveyard district all the stores sell tombstones.

Got accosted by a prostitute. Problem was, found her attractive. Tried to evade her but she cut me off. Had to almost put a hand on her shoulder and hightailed it.

In *Parque Poblado* I see a girl for the third time, sitting on the same bench, great posture, tall, light skinned, very attractive, a few empty beer cans on the bench beside her. Saw her in the morning, midday and now at night. Sitting in the same spot, she hadn't moved. Same problem, I find her attractive. I look at her and when our eyes match don't know what to do so nod but she looks away. Hope she didn't think I was suggesting. Would have liked to ask what she was doing there all day.

Day 24: Pretty Lady

"No sex" she keeps saying, referring to me and her. "That's the only rule."

And I hadn't even mentioned a thing or made a pass at her all day.

I tell her I'll think about it. But I already know the answer. Despite everything she's saying her heart is calling for something else, and I know I'm not the man to give it to her and that this can only lead to conflict. No matter what a woman tells you it's best not to take them at their word but to read between the lines and follow the dialogue of their eyes. And I didn't want any complications.

Day 26: Not Afraid to Be Wrong

Making friends left right and centre. Popular here. Foreigners who speak the native language are well received.

Dare I say it, but I love her. Can't wait to be reunited with her. Maybe it will be a mistake. But it's a chance I'm willing to take. I think the pleasure outweighs the pain. This is what makes me love life and try and try again. I'm not afraid of getting hurt. In fact, I'm used to it.

Day 32: Get Serious

No time for love triangles or women in the midst of midlife crises. I've been on this planet a long time. An ancient one. Deep down the path of 1000 steps. The medicine is inside of me. I reflect it back to them. Tranquil, with a great desire to make the most of life.

Time is to do things different. Get crazy. Live life as life is. Everything. The centre of the city is life. Dangerous, inspiring. Don't run from uncomfortable situations. Ride them out. You'll be surprised what might happen in the night.

Day 34: Man About Town

Feel like I can really make a difference in this city. *A la orden*. I help the hustlers make a buck and give some change to a bum. When I smile at the girls they giggle to their friends and make another lap. Feel like I'm needed here, like I've got a purpose, like something the city has been waiting for. Everywhere I go I make friends, they respect me, shit goes smooth. Signs and signals that descend and guide my path. If this is the work I was meant to do then I'll take on the responsibility gladly.

How to stay here longer. How to stay, and not work. I can't imagine working here. I've got to make it like a freethinking man, Casanova style, money appears. I have no fears here, no regrets. The thought of going home is what bothers me. To go back to the dark and to the cold and to the *sterile*. Let us hope and pray that this can continue. I am famous here.

Las Colombianas 02.12.2020 – 02.29.2020
aka "The Romantic Man"

Day 39: Sound Advice

I gave her all my energy. It only made sense at the time. Make the most of it while I have it. Now I can hardly sit up straight. Only thing I have energy for is eating and lying down.

Consumed me, literally. Devoured. Totally wasted.

There's nascent violence in this city, but it's harmless. It just thinks it needs to be violent. Really, it doesn't want any of this. It knows it wouldn't work out. Like the bomb in the Botero piece in *San Antonio*. It might pop off but it won't lead to anything. Won't do any damage. Just an ugly reminder of a failed attempt.

It's more scared of me than I am of it. I hope I didn't get here too late. Hope the city hasn't lost its spirit yet.

All my female relationships are getting strained. Happens when they want something from you that you won't deliver.

Nothing wrong with growing old and lonely long as you got money. Old, lonely and broke. That's misery.

It's best to accept the filth and fit in. Have you ever been somewhere where there are more bums and crackheads and missing limbs than regular people? And somehow the women are even more beautiful here, movie star vixens.

Be a novelty, be a *gringo*, be whatever they want you to be. But you don't go to a foreign country and be a nuisance. Mix in and if you're going to stand out make sure they respect you for it. A fool who can't speak the language or handle money is the first target. Same same but different. The perfect mixture.

Go to the seediest joints. Whip your money out in bundles and count it right there. *En fin; dar papaya*. But make sure it's nice and ripe.

I recommend the *claro*. It's a milky corn drink. Make sure they give you at least one *bocadillo* with it. *Bocadillo* not meaning sandwich, like it does in royal and noble Spain, but instead signifying a sort of gelatin brick made of *guayaba*. Take a small bite of it and put the rest in your *claro*. It'll give a little taste and provide a sweet treat at the end. The *claro* also has the added benefit of being basic, or alkaline, which is necessary alongside all the fried food that's the staple out here.

Day 42: The Stabbing

I'm in the park of ballerinas breaking up with Germs. I had too many doubts about her, well-founded doubts too, and I knew it was best to end it with her than let those questions run rampant in my mind.

It all started when I was in the centre. I was smoking a menthol *Camel* and feeling real good about myself. I had eaten at a restaurant just off *Plaza Botero* where the waiter gave me a nice jug of *claro* and a healthy slice of avocado and complimented my Spanish. I'm smoking this cigarette and one of these street vendors peddling cowboy hats approaches me. I wave him aside with something small but he must've picked up on my accent because now he's trying me first in French and now in English.

"Uhh...where you from?"

"Elsewhere" I tell him.

He gives me a look that says "*Oh, you think you're hot shit, huh?*". Then he launches into the typical Colombian sales pitch;

"*Mari, coca, pastillas?*" he rushes out in a whisper.

"I've already got all that" I smile at him.

He gives me that look again, that same look with that same attitude.

"Toss me a smoke, will you" he asks.

I pull a bogie out for him and he holds up his hand to shake mine.

"*Cuidate*" he winks at me.

Take care. But I could sense the meaning behind the words. I knew that now, sooner or later, something was going to happen.

So there I am, in *Parque Bailarinas*, a few days later, breaking up with Germs, and she's telling me this story about how she spent the night getting drunk with her brother's friends and that's why she never got back to me, and I'm preparing to end it, when this dirty punk steps in front of us.

"Where you from"

From the get-go it was obvious what he was up to. But I didn't care.

"Piss off" I tell him, turning back to Germs. "Go on with your story."

She looks nervously from me to the guy back to me and stutters out a few words of her lame explanation.

But now the punk has backup. His accomplice pulls up with a bike, one of those that's got the basket out in the front, and the first punk sticks his hand in the basket and pulls out a giant knife.

"Give me everything you got" he says.

"No" I say, grabbing his arm. His accomplice takes two rings off Germs and starts trying to stick his dirty fingers in my pocket and I push him off me.

"Give me everything you got" says Punk One again, looking desperate.

"No" I say, holding his knife arm in one hand and Dirty Fingers in the other.

Seeing that he wasn't going to get a thing off me, he gives me a look full of vile spite, a sort of hatred from a weak heart, and pokes me in the belly. Then he and his accomplice run off. I had been drinking tea out a mug and now it falls to the floor and breaks.

Germs starts running.

"Run, run!" she calls after me.

I lift up my sweater and look at the damage. There's a stream of blood trickling down my belly to my boxers. *Motherfuckers*. I look around. There had been some other people in the park too, and now they're running as well. I take another look at my broken mug, decide it's a lost cause, and make my way to the street. Two of the bystanders, these two guys, run up to me, all nervous-like.

"Oh shit, oh shit, you OK?"

All of a sudden the street is full of taxi drivers getting the scoop and then driving off to lynch the fuckers. Germs gets to talking with these two guys. Supposedly the punks had tried to rob them too but they had run away immediately. They were talking tough enough now though, talking about catching the guys and killing them. I just wanted to go to the clinic. Not that the cut was bad, but I've never had a tetanus shot before and I doubt these punks kept their cutlery clean.

The two bystanders grab some medicine out their car and put this brown liquid over the cut and clean me up a bit. For a moment it crosses my mind that they're in cahoots with Germs, that

this whole thing is a set-up, and that this brown medicine is some of that "devil powder" drug I'd been warned about.

"You'll be fine, *marica*" says the tough-talking flier. "They'll give you a shot and send you off."

I nod at the guy and make to leave but Germs is now deep in conversation with them. "*This girl*", I think to myself, "*she just wants to have her fun and have no one tell her otherwise*". I'm overwhelmed with a great sense of distaste for her.

Finally I get Germs to stop socializing with the runners and we head to the clinic.

It's just at the end of the street here, she keeps saying. But I'm starting to suspect she's bringing me somewhere else. It really is horrible losing trust in someone.

I'm holding up my hoodie, stomach exposed, blood trickling down my belly button, staining my boxers, people on the streets looking on with mild interest.

"Do you want to finish you story?"

She looks kind of nervous.

"No, there's nothing to finish."

"Then what was it you told me you had to be sincere about?"

"No, nothing, I just wanted to tell you what I did last night. I wanted to be respectful instead of telling you some excuse. Look, the clinic is just at the top of those steps..."

I look up but it looks dead up there, I can't see a light. This bitch, could she really...could she really be setting me up? But no, we get to the top and I see a couple of security guards outside a pharmacy and the clinics right next door. The receptionist at the front desk sees my bleeding belly and directs me to *urgencias*.

There's a few innocent families in the waiting room. I strut in looking like a criminal with my black hoodie and hole in my gut.

"I've been stabbed. Can I see a doctor?"

The receptionist looks at me with lifeless eyes.

"*Seguro?*"

"No, haven't got insurance. I'm not from here."

"Well, it's a million-dollar deposit then."

"Hold on for a second there. How much is this going to cost me? I just want it cleaned and a tetanus shot."

I start arguing with the receptionist as my belly continues to ooze vital juice. I'm thinking maybe it's best to clean it by the bathroom sink and hope for the best. But something in my eyes must've inspired trust in her, because now she's talking about she'll let me through if I sign a paper saying I'll pay afterwards.

"Of course, of course, *claro que sí. Gracias, amor.*"

"I'll call you in a bit. There's one boy ahead of you with a pain in his chest."

Turning around I see a security guard who wasn't there before watching over me. Who knows, maybe they think the punks'll come here to finish the job. Or maybe they don't trust me. I wouldn't blame them.

Me and Germs sit on the balcony to wait. A hospital with a balcony. I love South America. Colonial style. I pull out a lollipop and start sucking on it.

"So that's it? You don't have anything to say?"

"About?"

"About you and me, what happened, how you feel?"

"You have your position and I have mine, and I respect yours. There are different interpretations of everything, and one's not right and one's not wrong."

"Did anything happen?"

"What do you mean, did anything happen?"

I laugh. "Don't feed me that. We're not kids. You know exactly what I mean. You say you want to talk sincerely? I'll show you what it's like to talk sincerely. All this stuff about interpretations and being an individual is just an excuse to offload responsibility. Respect is not deciding to tell me what "really" happened last night, whatever that means. I'm an individualist too. But that doesn't mean I don't think we have some responsibility to the people we have relationships with. No matter how short they may be."

The receptionist calls me in and a nurse directs me to a gurney and closes the blinds and asks me what happened. She cleans my cut and tells me the doctor will be by soon. When the doctor arrives I'm pleased to discover it's a young and attractive lady. She seems pleased too, smiling at me and sitting her plump bottom right there on the gurney, pressing her meat up all against mine. She says I can get some stitches but I decline, I just want the shot. She obliges me, gives me another few sweet smiles, and then I'm discharged.

Back in the waiting room I find Germs being interrogated by 2 cops. They ask me for my ID. Then they show me a photo off their cell phone. It's Punk One, handcuffed and in the back of a cop cruiser, and he's crying like a goddamn baby. I let out a big laugh.

"Yes, I think that's him"

A few moments later the captain pulls up, steps out his truck and saunters over to us like a field sergeant. He shakes the hands of the 2 cops then looks at me.

"Look," he says, "this is the situation. We got the kid. Now, you can come with us to the station and denounce him. What do you say?"

The last thing I want is to spend the night in a police station full of corrupt cops in a foreign country answering questions and filling out forms and wondering what they're doing with my passport. And above all else, I'm not a snitch.

"Honestly, I don't think so. Right now I just want to go home and shower and go to bed."

The captain gives me a searching look.

"You know that if you don't come he'll probably end up getting out. And then, if he does this again, the next time it might be to a defenseless person, like her-" he nods towards Germs.

"I'm ok, thank you though."

"That's fine," says the captain, with an understanding nod of the head, "You're not obliged to come."

They give me back my ID. The staff at the hospital say goodbye. Germs walks with me back to my flat. I break up with her and head inside and go to bed.

Day 44: Push and Pull

She suggests we meet outside the church in Poblado Park. Coincidentally, this is where I had met Germs for the first time, 2 weeks prior. I get there and I'm happy because she's pretty. What's more, she's brought me some weed and a bottle of ice wine from Ontario. I love a girl who brings me gifts.

I give her a quick 15-minute interview in the park to ensure she's not too crazy before inviting her up to my flat. We get to drinking the ice wine and some other wine I had and to

smoking some weed. We're laughing and joking around. I'm sitting on the edge of my bed and she's on a chair pulled up right between my legs.

You know those moments when there's a moment of silence, and everything up to that moment has led to it, and it's the perfect moment to lean in and plant that first kiss? This wasn't that moment, but she closes her eyes and inclines her mouth towards mine. I'm taken aback.

"You want to kiss me?" I ask her.

"No, no, I wasn't..."

"Don't worry, you can kiss me" I tell her, and kiss her. She reminds me of a friend of mine from high school. Someone I've always been effortlessly close to, he was one of the few people who always understood me, and the fact that she reminds me of him, and somewhat resembles him too, makes me even more attracted to her.

The night progresses as such: we continue to drink and smoke and stay by the window, looking out at all the people partying on the street, not talking much, just looking at each other in between bouts of kissing. It's getting to that point in the night where if things don't progress then it would be best we went our separate ways.

"You are very beautiful" I tell her. "The truth is, I'd like to have sex with you, but at the same time, I don't think it's a good idea to have sex with you..."

Before I can say another word she pushes me onto my bed.

Day ??: La Colombiana

La Colombiana makes use of a variety of techniques to seduce and ensnare her prey;

Many Men: *La Colombiana* will have many male friends. You will not know which ones are friends, and which ones are "friends". It is best not to even go out or to meet them. Take her word. However, there is usually one man in particular that she will bring to your attention and tell you certain pieces of information that will alarm you. Usually, this man is not even the one you have to be worried about. He is only a false bait. By distracting you with this man, forcing you to focus your attention on him, looking for patterns of behaviour or comments on pictures or texts that pop up on her home screen, she is really still with a man who she will *never* mention to you.

Unexplainable Behaviour: Behaviour that seems to suggest something but really means nothing. Offhand comments that seem to reveal some hint or clue but are actually empty. Being late, not answering the phone, giving obscure responses to texts. All of this is to put the fear into you.

Barrage of Lies: This is one of the favourite techniques of *La Colombiana*. Perhaps you already have some doubts about her intentions or her fealty. So, to throw you off the scent, she bombards you with little lies. These are usually harmless. Perhaps she told you her doctor's appointment was tomorrow, but it's really today. Or she tells you that she's in one part of the city but she's actually in another. Small things, small little lies, to confuse you. At this point, there are too many questions to ask, too many doubts, that the male victim simply gives up trying to get the "truth". Note that the truth from *La Colombia* is an ever-changing entity. It might fluctuate and shift and change forms within even just one argument. Being objective, being realistic, thinking in terms of facts and evidence, this sort of behaviour will get you nowhere with *La Colombiana*.

Violent Pendulum: Another favourite tactic of *La Colombiana* is the violent pendulum. One moment, she is the sweetest thing on the face of this planet, sending you heart eyed emojis and telling you never to leave, the next she's saying you're horrible and it's best we never speak again, and then back to being heart eyed.

In essence, *La Colombiana* ensnares her prey by confusing him, whether it be through a barrage of lies, violent pendulum swings, or through pure sexual seduction. Being confused in this way, the victim becomes susceptible. He is weak, needs something secure to grab on to, and in this moment *La Colombiana* offers herself. Stay strong, play their games, but do not take them seriously. Do not seriously get jealous, but at least give the impression that you are jealous if she oversteps the bounds of decency. Never, note, never, do not ever try to fact check or do research on what she has told you. You will only waste your time. If she tells you that a man is her friend take her word for it. If they are doing anything else, or have a past together, either you will not want to know or she will not let on. The less questions asked, the better. In Colombia they do not have many materialistic goods to distract themselves, so they start fucking young and they fuck a lot. Do not be surprised if *La Colombiana* has a higher body count than you do. Do not dwell on this. Surprisingly, *La Colombiana* is fairly forgiving when it comes to cheating. If you feel the need to even the odds, have your fun on the side, and keep mum about it. Only a fool sacrifices his freedoms and devotes himself to *La Colombiana* before she has done the same for him.

What it comes down to is this – she will always have her men on the side. It is your responsibility to forget her business and mind your own. The less you ask and question her and her infidelities, the more time you will have to build up your own harem. The decision you must make is this – do I want to discover the “truth”, or do I want to have fun? With *La Colombiana*, take my word, you will want to have fun.

Day 50: Module 1

Arguing, loving arguing, is riding the cortisol train, it is an addiction, cortisol, the – “I need to get this off my chest, I need to offload this weight, this *culpa*, I've got to put it well on you, make the source and reason of my unhappiness your fault”. Let your stomach, your hips and your groin release. Don't be mad because others don't hold onto hate like you do. Don't postpone your happiness because you expect some retribution. Have you not heard the saying “*the best revenge is to not be like them*”?

Therefore, the best response is to let go of hate, and do what you want to, what you are jealous of others for, you can do it now, don't fixate on the past or lost time, because this is still just postponing your happiness. Don't repeat the same mistakes again. This is the basis of intelligence – someone who learns from experience. To *learn* is to open your mind and find the paths that will lead you to your own happiness.

Day 52: Dismantle

Remain calm, experiment with the situation, don't be afraid of getting hurt...don't let your happiness be determined by that...ignore the nonsense and focus more on what is for me. Take things calmly, slowly. Nothing needs to be resolved, I am the one occupying my mind with these thoughts.

There is no competition between her and me. My life is mine and hers is hers. If I don't want to I don't want to. If I want to I want to. It only bothers me when I think about it. I sleep well enough.

Your darkness could never sully my love. It is too pure. Touching me might sting you, though. I have to remind myself, I have nothing to fear, that God is protecting me, that no weapon formed against me shall prosper, none of your tricks or witchery or pettiness for that matter. Wave it aside. Ignore it. It only has power if you let it. The devil is always trying to work his way in. No respect.

Thank God I wore a condom with that crazy bitch.

The Slump 03.01.2020 – 03.19.2020
aka "The Bums of Medellin"

Day ??: Things You See While Sitting in a Café

This one overweight street peddler that's been trying to push a stolen *gopro5* for the last few weeks, walking up and down *the 10* poking it into the face of any *extranjero* unlucky enough to get in his way.

First time a *menu* has taken time.

The half-retarded little guy, they enlisted him to do a job, he thought it was cool, helping out the big bros and all, that he'd be part of the gang, but it was too much for him, too much strain on his feeble mind, now he wanders the streets with his blown out boombox blasting reggaeton and harassing the blonde girls.

Day ??: Lleras

Black American tourists get their blunt stomped out by a female cop. So rough the way she did it. Brusque. I can tell she likes the power trip. All cops are the same. They love to bully and harass and intimidate. They've got the law on their side.

Probably the least interesting thing that's happened these days past. There were relationships and trysts and fights and an excessive amount of local anaesthesia. But that's slowly making its way out of my system.

There's this strange girl in my class who one day turned around, grabbed my pen, used it to write for 5 minutes, then turned back and returned it, all without saying a word. And she had her own pen, too. She messaged me today, got my number out the group chat, talking about her neck hurting because she was arguing all night. God please save me from these psychos.

All my relationships with women get strained. They all want something from me that I won't give. Then they tell me I'm still just a boy. I guess they have to make the decision clear in their own minds. But why must they always start a fight? I find the immaturity outstanding.

There's so many beautiful ones, I'm so capable of falling in love. I'm starting to like them *bad*. I'm thinking of dating a prostitute. Why not? If anything, I'd expect her to be more honest than these self-proclaiming "good girls". I'd sure love to pimp this last one. Sell her pussy out on the streets...that'd be some good revenge.

I'm not obsessed with the idea. I'd rather not feel the need to be avenged at all. But I'd like to know, what other course of action is available to a man in this situation? As though pride weren't a thing. As if you didn't know all about it.

Day ??: Memories

Walking the streets solo reminds me of Spain. Being all alone, needing to kill time and waste energy, aimlessly walking the streets. This is the price to pay for my solitude and sanity.

It's not so horrible, really. It's just that my legs are 2 different lengths; the left being longer than the right. So as a result my lower left back begins to hurt after about an hour. Nothing I can't handle. Just a mild nuisance. That's what most of life is, in between the wild bursts of happiness that come so unexpected – a mild nuisance.

Day ??: The Bums of Medellin

Do you ever get jealous of the bums? Right there on *the 10*, in front of all that traffic and smog and the overbearing car dealerships, lies this bum curled up in the fetal position, napping. 4 hours later, as I'm making my way back, he's still there, in the same position, his head on his knapsack, napping. How could you not envy him? That level of contentedness, I've always strived to live like that. Patience...really is waiting for days and weeks and months on end. I can't wait half an hour in patience...how can this man be right there on the side of the street, in the heat and haze and noise and that awful heavy smog and pollution you can taste in the air here in the valley...how can he sleep so peacefully? How could you not envy this man? Is that not the pinnacle of existence...to take it as it comes? I am jealous of these bums, the ones that don't beg, the ones that don't ask, the ones that don't try and ask where you're from and run their little swindle. I'm envious of the bums that just sit there and don't give a damn. Yet they survive. This truly is the pinnacle of mankind.

She's been out partying till the PM of the following day 2 weeks in a row now. Then she texts me afterwards and tells me all about it. We still talk every day. She messages first. She won't let me go. So sometimes I call her, sometimes she calls me. Might as well go along with it, for now. Today when she calls she tells me she wishes I never slept with Germs. How she found out about her I still don't know. Says she was at a party last night and that Germs was there, and that Germs was making out with lesbians and that she's into polyamorous relationships and lord knows what else. Not that I doubt any of this, but there's no way I'm trusting it coming from her.

This is the same pattern that's happened in the past. It's always harder to get over some, especially if immediately following life falls in a slump. No girls messaging me on my phone, and the other prospects have all run dry. No new distractions. She stays there, in that special place reserved in my mind – "*the last girl that I loved*". And what a horrible place that is. Love that is no longer that lingers. And she loves to make a point that she's all out and about, here and there, a new *amigo* every day, I wonder if she's slept with them all. No point in wondering too hard, those are the sorts of answers I'll never get. Plus, there's too many of them to even begin trying.

I've always found that women are bigger haters than men. They hate when your life doesn't revolve around them, especially if they're interested in you. So instead they become cold, as though you've done them some wrong. Oh, it's so miserable, these women with so much pride, who hate you for not loving them. How could you expect me to love someone so negative?

Day ??: Thoughts

I'd love to be a bum. A real bum. A man of the streets. At the same time, I love my comforts. I think I'd rather not be a bum, for now. At least not too much of a bum. I'd like to have my own bathroom, for example.

"Push and Pull". You can't force anyone to be your muse. I love being alone. Only the existence of others makes me uncomfortable with it.

40 Days of Isolation 03.20.2020 – 03.31.2020
aka "La Cuarentena"

Day 72: 40 Days of Isolation

I met with My Teacher in the morning and leant her my camcorder. I don't know why, I doubt she'll use it, and I've been using it every single day. But that's the way life works. In an offhand sort of way she suggests that *la cuarentena* will last 40 days. I take this as a sign.

Push and Pull messages me over *instagram*. The story being that someone stole her phone and now this is the only way she has of speaking to me. Truth or lie or silly little trick to upset my attention, at this point I no longer care. Regardless, my response remains the same – politely indifferent.

I go to *Franchyes* and the place is all packed up and ready to close, but when the waiter sees me he gets a table out the back and sets it up special in the entrance. Problem is he gives me the *frijoles* instead of the *sopa de pollo* I had ordered. I still tip despite this. Solidarity is the most important virtue to uphold in times like these.

Received some awful news. They're extending *la cuarentena* another 19 days. 22 days total of *aislamiento obligatorio*. Now the thought of going home comes seriously to mind. Can I even leave the country? There's no taxis on the street, no cars nearby or *uber* – how will I get to the airport?

And if the country devolves into chaos? All those shotguns and assault rifles toted blatantly on the street. Military state. Security guards form a gang and come around blasting down doors and taking what little food I've got stored in the drawers. Starved to death, what a pitiful way to go. I keep putting my hands in prayer and praying like I've never prayed before. I feel like a soldier going into battle, praying a bullet don't take his life.

22 days of *aislamiento obligatorio*. Will I go crazy?

Day 73: Bunker Down, Meditate

Received the news that apart from the 22 day *cuarentena* there is a 30 day ban on entry and exit to Colombia. Airports will be closed. If I'm going home it's got to be tomorrow. And who knows if 30 days *really is* 30 days. They might extend this all summer. Spoke with my parents. Decided I'd stay here, bunker down, meditate.

Went for a walk to the bank. No problem. Cops drove past multiple times. Nothing. A few pedestrians. A couple people walking their dogs. Mostly security guards, city landscaping and *rappi* food-delivery guys on bikes or *motos*.

Day 74: Appliances

Did a big clean up of my place. Took the dust out between the grills of the fan. Fridge broke. Ice starts dripping all over my food, getting my salad and my butter wet. Frozen strawberries and blueberries are melting on the counter. Had to buy a new one.

Landlords are being their usual professional selves. Professionally full of shit. Evasive when it comes to the topic of covering the cost. Telling me I should take it to a technician, as if they don't already know that everything in the city is closed. They can't come by to check it out

themselves either, because they're not even in the city. No, they're spending *la cuarentena* out in the country home on their *finca*. Shameless thieves.

Day 75: Fiend

Woke up late. My Teacher is messaging me about the camcorder. Can't figure it out. Joaquin messages me from Spain and tells me that *la cuarentena* there has been extended another 14 days. Other than that morning usual.

Having a hard time finding some weed. Mr. Authentic knows how to be real accommodating over the phone but that's it. Push and Pull messaged me and told me she took some ecstasy on Saturday with an *amigo*. She can't get any weed for me either. I try messaging this fat girl over *tinder* who I'd previously been ignoring because I see she's got "420" in her bio, but when I ask to pick up she doesn't get back to me. I feel like a fiend, debasing myself for a quick fix, and oh how they love to see you do that, and how they love to take advantage.

At last My Teacher messages me telling me she's going to be holding onto my camcorder for the entire *cuarentena*. I tell her I'm trying to get a hold of some *mari* to keep me company. She sympathizes with me, empathizes even – she used to fiend to. Tells me her male friend will gift me some tomorrow at the studio. I hope they do.

Day 76: Being Emo

Yoga in the morning off the laptop. Then again, a hip sequence.

American style breakfast. I've got an appetite. Watching *Gundam Wing* and thinking about being emo. Eating chocolate. Living good.

Push and Pull messages me. Telling me she's coming to *El Poblado* today. I ask her if that means she'll pass by to say hello. She says no and I like the response. Then she explains herself twice over, that she's coming to see her uncle or whoever. Fooled.

I go for a walk looking for weed. Like a real fiend. I go to *Franchyes* and I see that the gate is open. A bum salutes me from the street corner. I'm thinking maybe I can buy off him. I sit on the curb and text My Teacher, reminding her about this *mari* she mentioned yesterday. Now a female bum pulls up, accompanied by a black dog with excellent sheen, and joins the bum on the corner. Seeing the two of them together puts things into perspective. They're just too dirty, I don't want to buy off them, have their dirty fingers touch my herb. I hop in *Franchyes* and order a *menu* to go. *Sopa de papa y pollo a la plancha*. They toss in a *bocadillo*. When I finish eating I drop it in a glass of milk and drink it slow.

At last My Teacher gets back to me. I can pick up in the reception area of her building complex. I get dressed and leave immediately. 20 minutes later I'm up the hill and the guard at the gate is telling me no one's allowed in the building. But he knows My Teacher by name, so he gives her a call, tells me she's coming down. I'm waiting, 5 minutes, 10 minutes, 15 minutes, the guard gets a call, she's not coming down, some domestic dispute. I imagine she's having ridiculous conversations with her male friend. I have the feeling that there's some confusion there, that perhaps she has suggested something to him regarding me. She is a *Colombiana*, after all.

The guard sends a gardener to pick up from the room. Unknowing accomplice, accessory to crime, still guilty in the eyes of law. He comes down holding a white tube between his thumb and index finger like it's infected. Hands it to the guard, the guard hands it to me, I stuff it in my

drawers and head back. When I get home I pop the lid and there's another smaller tube inside the first like a Russian Doll. Crack the second and I'm pleased to uncover a couple grams of pale ivy green bud with a faint smell. Definitely different than the stuff their packing *dedos* with on the corners of *Barrio Antioquia*. With proper management this will last me the rest of *la cuarentena*.

I do some more yoga, eat a tuna salad and go to bed.

Day 77: Foreshadowing

Wake up slow. Push and Pull messages me. Tells me she's making a carrot cake. I ask if she'll save me a piece, just to be polite. She says yes but that it will go bad soon.

"So, will you bring it to me?"

Now she goes off on a rant. She's not bringing me anything. What, will I pay for her *uber*? What's more, I've been irresponsible and have seen people, and she doesn't want to get infected because of me.

"*Y yo tampoco de ti*"

Ok, she responds, buy the ingredients and make the cake yourself. Then she unfollows me.

Later in the day I meet up with Master Class in the park where I got stabbed and we go for a walk. We take a seat in *Poblado*. Not long after we sit down 2 cops arrive on a *moto*. They don't harass us, but I'm not in the mood to take chances, so we leave. Head to my place and put on *Leon the Professional* and cuddle on my bed. Don't feel ready to have sex with her yet. It's because I can't have sex without kissing, and I'm not sure if I want to kiss her. I have a feeling I might not like the taste of her breath.

She leaves, saying that I can come by to do my laundry. I'm running out of underwear.

Day 78: Deep In

My laptop is dying. It's been getting worse. I restart it and am welcomed by a screen that reads – "*Fixing (C:) 22% complete*". I start praying. Pace back and forth in my *piso* sweating. In times like these I see how dependant I've really become. If my laptop or phone were to go, I'd be disconnected from everyone, unable even to buy a ticket or check my funds, lost in the world without easy entertainment.

I go grocery shopping. Outside *Carulla* a bum begs and I give him 700 *pesos*. As I'm walking through the park I hear a voice in English calling after me.

I turn around and now there's another bum in a tie-dye shirt and face tats. I respond in Spanish and he starts telling me he needs change for a phone call and that he hasn't eaten. He's from Orange County, California, and he has no idea how things work out here. I pull a bag of chips from out my groceries and hand it to him. But before I even drop it in his hand he's holding out the other, begging for change. I almost pull back the chips. Unappreciative. We start talking in English. He asks me where I'm from and when I tell him Toronto he beams up.

"Man, the *Jays* in '92 and '94 were my team. Won it all because of a guy named Carter. I was 15 at the time. Man, sorry for bothering you."

"No worries," I tell him, "best of luck, have a good night."

Back at home I see the security at *Pizza Piccolo's* give a bum a cup of *Coca-Cola*. They stop and chit-chat for a bit.

Another bum saunters down my street. Goes through the garbage outside *Sushi World* like a raccoon.

Day 79: Energy Work

As I'm surveying the street from my window the Crazy Glue Sniffing bum that lives in the area comes by and calls up to me, asking for change for food. I toss him a 500 *peso* coin. He gives me a thumbs up and proceeds to buy a bottle of glue at the *bodega* next door.

Next up comes the Orange County Cali bum. Doesn't recognize me from my window. Tries giving me his *shpeel* once again, begging for food. Told him I gave him that bag of chips last night.

"That was last night. This is today."

"Let me see what I got" I tell him.

Tossed him about 300 *pesos* in loose change. The fool completely misses or drops half the coins. So now I have to direct him about the street to pick them up. Won't have this beggar losing any of *my* money.

Once he collects them all he looks in his hand, brings his fist to his forehead and yells – "Damn, I've got to *rob a motherfucker* to eat out here!?"

I dare you to try, motherfucker. I'll stab you in your face.

Day 80: Branding

Monkey see, monkey do.

She may have given me a venereal disease from afar. Her closet is made up entirely of yoga pants.

Ate good today. Too much that is. Went to *Franchyes* but they were closed and the bums had taken over the place, lying on the steps and watching the TV. The one from the corner the other day offers his fist for a dap and like a fool I return it. Then he runs after me, asking for change. I tell him maybe one day.

Went to another place and got a plate that cost me 20 thou. Double the price of *Franchyes*. And the food wasn't even as good. A bad day. A bad day. I knew it.

Went to Master Class' to pick up the rest of my laundry and told her the same thing. A good day is usually followed by a bad day. That's how my life keeps a balance, I suppose.

Master Class is all hung up on branding and content. The word branding is a turn off for me. Same with "content creation". The sort of nonsense that pops up on my *medium* feed. It's all a façade, I tell her. To cover up the fact that nothing is there. What matters is the product. For an artist, at least, you should focus on the product. The perfect product wouldn't need any branding. People would flock to the fountain of youth, cohesive website design or not. I'm glad nothing transgressed between us.

Day 81: Routine

My mother called me in the morning after my exercises but I wasn't in the mood to have any conversations.

Once that first bite of food enters my mouth all I can think about is my next meal. After dinner I fantasize about breakfast.

Went for a walk in the rain. Succeeded in getting my shoes soaked.

The bums own the street now. And I feel their numbers only to increase. What with the lack of work and absence of care in this country. The bums and the cops. I'd rather avoid the latter. But always close by, in case the bums get out of hand. I don't leave my *piso* without my *hierramenta* anyways. Went to the park where I got stabbed and looked at Master Class' balcony. I could see the light from her TV flashing against the walls.

Day 82: Out of Hand

Doorbell rings. I poke my head out the door of my *piso* and look down the steps towards the entrance to see a dirty hand reaching through the bars of the iron front gate and buzzing *el timbre*. I head back inside and look out from my window down to the street to see who it could be. It's the Crazy Glue Sniffing bum, he's standing there, waiting for me, and when he sees me he smiles and begs for change. Gave him a thumbs up and then ignored him. The nerve.

Day 83: Cuarentena 12

Talked with Joaquin in the morning about my article and the bums of Medellin. Stomach started feeling better. Changed my *calzoncillos* twice. I find they're symbolic. Like changing pillowcases once you've overcome a cold.

I get an email from the Canadian consulate in Cartagena that there is a special repatriation flight departing for Toronto from Bogota on Friday. I dismiss it.

I think I've got a cavity. When you haven't got dental you pay more attention to your teeth.

Return to Canada ***04.01.2020 – 04.03.2020***
aka "Signs and Significations"

All has happened so quickly. On the first I spent the entire day in bed. Watched Orson Welles' *The Stranger*. Master Class messaged me, telling me that they are going to start enforcing stricter restrictions. Read online that they might extend *la cuarentena* until June. That's when I start getting nervous. I open the email regarding the flight. Departing from Bogota...how will I even get to Bogota? The airports are closed, no flights, not even national ones. What's more, Bogota is a 10-hour drive from Medellin, and something tells me busses are a no go as well. It seems like I'm stuck here for now, whether I like it or not.

All day I hear the ominous whirring of helicopter blades, flying around, *surveilling*, and over the loudspeaker an impersonal voice, an authoritarian omniscience telling people to stay inside.

In the night I practice my yoga. I'm on the floor, in corpse pose, lying there, my window open, in total silence. Then suddenly I feel a wobbling sensation in my body. I wonder at first if it's a result of my practice, some involuntary reorganization of my bits and pieces. But the sensation increases, I start to feel the flat itself sway on its foundations, I can hear the creaking in the timber, as though a subway were running directly beneath it all. I get up and look outside my window. Everything is normal. I see an arm toss a bag of garbage out from *Sushi World*.

I must be going crazy; I think to myself. But a minute later I receive a text from My Teacher telling me it was a minor earthquake. I take this as significant. I feel that it must be a sign, but I don't know how to read it. I'm reminded of a story a friend from New Zealand once told me. She had been there when a massive earthquake rocked the country a few years back. Generally, she says, we take for granted that the earth is our one safe space, that secure solidness you can't wait to unite yourself with after a nerve-wracking flight or spending time at uncomfortable heights. But the quake teaches you that even the earth can collapse beneath your very feet. It was as if the earth had betrayed her trust, and now there was no safe place to be. I wonder if the earth here is mad with me, or warning me, telling me it's not safe, telling me to go. But there's nothing to do, so I go to bed.

The next day, the second, I go to Master Class' to do laundry. I mention the special repatriation flight to her and she tells me that she knows another Canadian who's got a transport set up to take him to Bogota. This piques my interest, but it's already late afternoon, and so it seems to me too late to make it. While my clothes are in the wash she suggests we go to *Éxito* to do some groceries. She picks up a couple small things, eggs and the like, and I pay for her as thanks for the laundry. On the way back we stop off in *Parque Balarinas* to have a smoke. I point out to her the bench I was sitting on when I got stabbed, where my mug fell. I'm holding the lighter, about to ignite her cigarette, when 2 cops pull up on a *moto*. A bald one and a fat one. They take our IDs and tell us that there's a fine for breaking *la cuarentena*. They're asking for our passports, telling us that if we don't cough them up they'll have to take us to *Migración*. Master Class starts arguing with them, but her Spanish is abysmal, sort of like a farce of everything that is wrong with *gringos*. The cops make some signs between each other.

"Let me ask him" says Fat Cop.

"Not yet" says Bald Cop.

"C'mon, let me ask him."

"Ok, ok go ahead."

Fat Cop motions to me and I step aside with him. But before he even says a word I know what the pig's about.

"Listen, this is the situation," he says, "either you pay the fine, or, you can pay us now and forget about it." Real subtle.

"How much is the fine?" I ask.

"4 million" he says. Bullshit. It's 900,000, I saw the sign myself.

"I haven't got a thing on me. Paid for the groceries with credit."

"What about the girl?"

"No clue. I don't got anything to do with her."

"...so then if you haven't got your passports we'll just have to take you to *Migración*..."

Bald Cop is going on, letting Master Class bumble over herself, making absolutely no sense.

"Listen, we'll go get our passports. We've got them in her flat, which is just over there..." I point towards Master Class' balcony. Bald Cop, who is obviously the leader of the two, follows my finger.

"If you don't come back, we're taking your ID's to *Migración*."

"We'll be back" I assure him.

The *portería* shakes his head when I tell him the story. In Master Class' place the first thing I do is disencumber myself of the joint I had on me. Don't want them uncovering that in a body search. Then I take a photo of my passport. The worst thing to do in this sort of situation is hand over something physical – this gives the cop all the leverage. Once he's got his dirty paws on your document you're not getting it back until he gets what *he* wants. More fool me for handing over my ID.

Police have always been a source of fear for me, the antagonizers in many a nightmare. When I see one on the road in my rear-view mirror my heart freezes over, constricts, pulse increases, cold sweats, the whole ordeal. It's an involuntary fear with a logical basis. They're the only ones you'll encounter on the streets who can *compel* you to do something. Sure, a punk can threaten you with a knife, but you can always stab him back. Not so much a cop. And that is truly something scary.

Meanwhile, Master Class is pretending like she can't even find her passport. As though she's misplaced it in her meticulously organized flat. Regardless, we have to get our IDs, so we head back out. Opening the door for us the *portería* shakes his head again.

"Don't give them anything" he advises. Young guy. I like him.

Back in the park we tell the cops we couldn't find our passports. They're going on with the same threats. Master Class is being argumentative, entirely the wrong tactic to take with dirty cops. At this point I see that they're not going to give up so I decide to play along.

"Will a photo work?" I ask, and load up an image of my Spanish passport. Of course, I entered the country with my Canadian, so any fine applied there wouldn't be valid. Bald Cop pretends to start filling out the fine but stops before he even writes a single digit down.

"We need hers, too" he tells me.

"Why? She hasn't got anything to do with me. Fill out my fine and let me go."

"No, no, we need hers too...or you can pay us now."

Now they've gotten too greedy and gone too far.

"You know what," I tell them, "I just got an idea. I haven't got any money on me right now, but let me call the Canadian consulate. I'm sure if I explain the situation, they'll lend me some money."

I can see the fear on the pigs faces.

"No, wait, there's need for that."

"No, no, really, they'll handle everything..."

"Don't worry, you're free to go, but we better not see you in the streets again."

"Oh really? Why, thank you officer. You won't, *te lo juro*."

Back at Master Class' we have our cigarettes and I look out over *Parque Bailarinas*. I have a superstitious mind. I believe bad things happen in 3s. First the stabbing, now the extortion. I wasn't going to wait for the third to pass. It dawns on me that this was the sign I was waiting for, that I should get the hell out of Colombia. Pandemic or not, I don't abide the helicopters and the loudspeakers and the cops roaming the streets like hyenas. I sense that things are only to get worse. I remember the Canadian with the transport that Master Class mentioned. I ask for his number but she's being difficult, like she doesn't want to give it to me. Being shifty and flaky; for what, who knows. Maybe she wants me to be stuck there with her. This makes me sick of her and even more eager to go. But I'm not playing any games now. I tell her straight – give me the digits – and she does.

The following events occur in succession, one immediately following the other, lasting for a period of 31 hours: I head home and book the last ticket available for the flight. The Canadian gets back to me and sends me the contact details for the transport. I call and the woman on the other end of the line tells me the pickup location is in Poblado Park, right outside my door, which I take to be another sign. The pickup time: 8PM. I look at the clock on my laptop. It's 5:30. So I've got just over two hours to pack 3 months of living. Run over to Master Class' to collect my still wet laundry and say my goodbyes. Fold and pack everything in an hour and a half and still got time to eat the half pineapple I'd been saving in my fridge. Rescue as much food as I can, beers and bananas and the like, and head out. Leave the keys for the flat under a rock in front of the studio. My Teacher tells me she'll collect the deposit from my landlords and pickup the fridge. Too bad about the camcorder.

Transport is a *Mercedes Sprinter*. Bunch of Midwestern Canadian women wiping down the seats with disinfectant. We take off. I hand out the beers to the other passengers and try to nap but my head keeps bumping up against the inside of the door making any real rest impossible.

Our one stop during this overnight cross-country trek is off the side of the road, and when I dismount it looks like we've arrived at the far end of the galaxy. Pitch-black, flat land, no stars, the only sign of life a one-legged man peddling drinks and *sanduches* under a lamp in the barren landscape. We stretch our legs, empty our bladders, and head back out on the road.

We get to Bogota by 4AM but they're not letting us into the airport. Say we've got to wait until the Canadian diplomat arrives. And that won't be until 9. So we huddle around each other, smoking cigarettes and fighting off the nighttime cold of the Andes.

At about 8AM they decide to get us to line up. Busloads had been arriving all night. More Canadians, as well as Germans and Americans, who had their own special repatriation flights that day. Luckily I'm at the head of the line. Like a conveyor belt they shuffle us in, one at a time, passport, pump of the sanitizer bottle, scan of the forehead with a laser, and then ushered upstairs. From here it's another waiting game. They come by in shifts, every 5 minutes, and pump more sanitizer into our hands, until the air in the place is saturated with the smell of it and I'm nauseated.

Through the window I see a bunch of people lying out in the sun. Escape the cycle of sanitization and go outside to join them. Bunch of hippie Germans sitting in a circle, kicking off their hiking boots and *Birkenstocks* and eating organic sauerkraut and the like. I take off my hoodie and lie down in the sun, basking in it, listening in on their conversations, the way the language bounces up and down, very similar to English. Then a German diplomat comes around. Cristoph Waltz-looking sort of fellow. Starts giving a big speech. Somehow, I think I can

understand German. The Colombians claim we're holding a demonstration, lying out here in the sun, so we've got to go back in. The hippie Germans let out a collective "aww", yet they gather their nomadic belongings with a painful efficiency and march back in, single-file.

At last they open the check-in counter. Sign up, line up, check in, drop off, customs. Get through. Buy a *Red Bull* and load up on the plane. They've got us packed in like sardines. No food served, just chips and nuts in plastic bags. 6 odd hour flight, we land, disembark, immigrations, customs, pick up, head out.

Pearson Airport, terminal 1, return to Canada.

Where I Belong 04.04.2020 - ??
aka "Future Calling"

Familiar products. The blue of the *Pop-Tarts* box. That's how I know I'm home. Decent pots and pans. The trappings of the domestic life.

Went for a walk in the forest. The colours are all different here. Cool greys and pale browns, a drab tableau. The air is a piercing cold that attacks your hands and feet first and then penetrates down to your bones. And there's no bums on the street.

Get the news that they've extended *la cuarentena* in Colombia another 2 weeks. Until the 27th. This makes me happy. Makes me feel like I read the signs correctly. I'm told by someone who loves me that "*This is where I belong*". I'm not inclined to disagree. For the moment it would seem that way. Luxury, comfort, and too much food – I could get chubby here. But it's dark and it's cold out. The spaces are big and the houses look like toys off a playset – so perfectly squared with clean bricks and new shingles on the roof. But there's no bums on the streets. Not under the bridges by the river either. And it's snowing in the middle of April.

Yet despite all that there's a glimmer of hope in my heart. And I'm not speaking metaphorically. A tiny flame that's keeping me warm in the cold, bright in the dark, full of fertile desires in a sterile land. Maybe because it's spring. It's always easier in the spring, knowing that summer is coming. But there really is something there, and I can feel it in my heart, I can almost see it. It's an affirmation written on the petals of a flower, in the flames of a fire. It's a reminder that, this time, last year, I was on another continent, not knowing then that I'd come home, that I'd ever go to Colombia, and not ever guessing the circumstances under which I'd be compelled to come back. Yet despite my ignorance in these matters all these things came to transpire in but a short span of life, without much plan but with a great deal of purpose.

The future can be a source of anxiety. But to me it calls excitedly. The mere thought of it thrills me. More so than living in the present, which is pleasant, the future is the unknown, and the unknown is where possibility lies. Even if it involves danger, and risks, money lost to shameless thieves and failures to be had, mistakes to be made and scars to develop, I find it all so exciting. So long as there is heat and there is sun. So long as there is love and hate and art. So long as there's women to be had, and beggars to despise and bums to admire.