

NO COVER

Meg and her housemate, Bonnie, take off work early on Friday afternoon. Meg leaves her Intermediate class in the hands of a substitute and walks down the dimly lit hallway, experiencing a strange ripple effect: every classroom on this floor is studying the exact same material. “I—am—walking,” students recite haltingly. “I—am—sitting. I—am—learning. I—am—make—progress.” The inevitable teacher correction, in this case a British male: “No, what’s the gerund form of *make*?” “Making, *making*. I am *making* progress.” Meg and Bonnie have been in Ecuador for three months, and already Meg feels that she could teach this lesson in her sleep.

She finds Bonnie in the lobby, chatting with the security guard. He looks the way Ecuadorean men always look when talking to Bonnie: eyes wide, cheeks flushed, bodies tipping forward to make sure they don’t miss a word. Meg waits for her to finish, wondering, as she does multiple times a day, when her own Spanish will suddenly improve the way everybody keeps saying it will.

Finally Bonnie says, “Chao, chao,” and turns to Meg, grinning. They take a bus to the airport, thinking that with Friday afternoon traffic, it will get them there in about the same time as a taxi. They’re wrong. When the bus grinds to a resigned stop at one end of the airport

complex, the traffic seemingly impassable, Meg and Bonnie get off and jog the rest of the way, watching planes angle down between the mountains and bump onto the tarmac. They walk into the airport lobby just as Amanda emerges into the throng of waiting families and taxi drivers and women selling gum and cigarettes. Bonnie runs toward her. Meg hangs back, afraid of pushing people accidentally. She watches her friends make their way back through the crowd, Bonnie pink and breathless, Amanda tense, maneuvering her suitcase through the maze of bodies. When Meg hugs her, she smells deodorant, coffee, and plastic airport upholstery. This, she quickly decides, is the smell of America. She misses it.

They go outside and back down the sidewalk until they're outside the airport gates. "It's no use getting a cab inside the airport," Bonnie tells Amanda. "They charge twice as much." When a taxi pulls up, she crouches at the driver's window to bargain, her tassled purse and blond hair flapping against her back. Then she gestures at the other two to get in. Amanda says, "I need to put my suitcase in the trunk," and Meg asks the taxi driver, "Tú puedes abrir la, la, la," until he understands the word she doesn't know and pops the trunk. As they hoist the suitcase in and slide into the backseat after Bonnie, Meg remembers that taxi drivers are *Usted*, formal, *Usted*, shit. It's been three months, get your pronouns straight.

Bonnie squeezes Amanda's hand and says, "You're here! Finally! In Ecuador!"

"I'm here!" Amanda says. She ducks her head and stares across Bonnie and out the window. Meg follows her gaze: the sun is dropping behind the mountains to the west. It's rush hour and Quito's north-south corridors are packed, stop lights shifting uselessly from green to yellow to red. Through the windshield to the hazy southeast, Meg spots the volcano Cotopaxi, its white crown gleaming with snow. She starts to point it out to Amanda and then isn't sure it's

there at all, maybe just the last strands of sun mixing with clouds. “You’re here!” she says, echoing Bonnie.

The taxi driver pulls into traffic and the cars behind him honk, angry at being forced to yield ten feet of progress. He says, in heavily accented English, “It will be a long ride.”

Bonnie says to Amanda, “Just wait till you see how amazing this place is. It’s such a crazy, hilarious country. What do you want to do tonight? Go out for margaritas? Karaoke? The Bungalow?”

“What’s the Bungalow?” Amanda asks.

“Ooh,” Bonnie says, “it’s this club where girls drink for free from eight to ten. Then at ten there’s a big line-up of boys outside trying to get in, cause of course all the girls inside are smashed.”

“Right,” Meg says, “and eighty percent of the girls inside are white, like American or European. It’s so weird.”

“So,” Bonnie says, “the Ecuadorean men come in and everybody starts dancing and it’s a free for all, basically. A find-a-white-girl-find-an-Ecuadorean-boyfriend free for all.”

“It’s so messed up!” Meg says. They both laugh.

“Wow,” says Amanda. She tilts her head to the side, shiny blonde hair falling fast across her cheek, then straightens up and smiles. “I’m up for anything. Remember our dorm room YouTube series? And the Halloween pranks, and the anonymous E-cards we’d send to people?”

“Oh my God,” Bonnie says. “We’ve missed you!” She and Meg laugh and don’t look at each other. Since moving to Ecuador, they have visited famous churches and sampled food and gone to bars where people try to talk to them in English. They have bought wooden bead bracelets and talked to other English teachers about the differences between American and

Ecuadorean men, and it has been fun and a little tiring, or at least that's how Meg feels now, in the taxi. She leans her head back and watches the mountains inch by.

#

Each room in the apartment that Bonnie and Meg share is painted a different color. The living room is salmon, with wooden floor tiles that are peeling up in a few places, a sofa, an armchair, and a glass coffee table covered in trinkets that their landlady provided. Amanda collapses on the sofa and picks up one of the trinkets, a plastic mermaid growing out of a scratched glass bulb. "This is kind of funny," she says, and Meg suddenly can't remember having seen it before, though she's sure it's been sitting on their coffee table for months.

"This is it!" Bonnie says. "Our apartment. Isn't it beautiful?"

"It's adorable," Amanda says. "Wow. You guys live here."

"We live in Ecuador!" Meg says, and she and Bonnie scream for a second.

On the other side of the living room wall, someone turns on a stereo. The beat seems to vibrate out of the sofas—thump, thump-thump, thump, thump-thump. It makes their own apartment seem strangely quiet.

"So," says Bonnie, dropping to the floor and spreading her legs out in a stretch, "how are you, Mandy? Case manager, working in the nation's capital? What's it *like*?"

"Oh," Amanda says, looking toward the living room window as if open to any answer floating by. It's not a real window; it's made of thick plastic that you can't see through, and lets in very little light. Meg imagines sometimes that it's like a tinted car window, and a family on the other side enjoys watching the lives of these two American girls who put on eyeliner in front of the scratched bathroom mirror and shout slowly in Spanish over the phone, straining to understand and be understood. Who spend far too many hours hunched over Facebook in a

darkening living room on Sunday afternoons, and who sing to Katy Perry and Lady Gaga in high, thin voices when they're alone.

"You know," Amanda says finally, looking away from the window. "Frustrating." She puts one arm behind her head and tugs on it with the other arm.

"Why frustrating?" Bonnie says.

Amanda lets her arms fall forward, exhaling. "Because I look for housing in a city where there's no housing. So I don't have a lot to do at my job. Which is a little ironic."

"Wow," says Bonnie. "So do you put people in homeless shelters?"

"The shelters are full, too."

"Yeah, we learned about that in Urban Studies," says Meg, feeling strangely anxious to put a word in. It's the first time she's thought about it since moving to Ecuador, despite the fact that it was that class which convinced her she wanted to study social work someday, or at least that was what she told everybody at the time. "It's crazy," she says, and tries to think of some other angle.

"Mm-hmm," says Amanda.

They both look at Bonnie, but Bonnie is nodding along to the music next door. "Danza Kuduro. That song is *everywhere*. Where do you want to go out tonight?"

Amanda looks at Bonnie for a second before answering. "Honestly, I'm pretty tired. Would it be okay if we stayed in?"

"Of course," Meg says quickly. "We go out all the time."

"Sure," Bonnie agrees. "We can go out tomorrow. Popcorn?"

#

In the kitchen, blue paint is chipping off the walls. There's a gas stove and a refrigerator and a drain in the middle of the floor. "Isn't it cute?" Meg says.

"It's really nice," says Amanda. She runs her hand across the wall closest to the door, where a dozen small, colorful fliers are taped. "What are these?" she asks.

"Oh, those are handouts we get walking around the Mariscal," says Bonnie, pouring oil into the pot. "Remember, the party zone we showed you in the taxi? With the plaza in the center? Imagine that crammed with, like, five thousand people on a weekend night. And there's guys shouting, *No cover, no cover, first drink for free, Tequila shots, ladies enter free*, and all kinds of stuff. Everyone will try to hand you a flier promoting their bar and we just started taping them up here so we could remember the deals."

Amanda smooths down the edges of a flier with her fingernail. "Rubias no pagan," she says. "What does rubias mean?"

"Blonde girls," says Bonnie.

"Blonde girls. Right. Blonde girls don't—wait. Blonde girls don't pay?" Amanda turns around, tapping the flier. "Seriously? So we'd get in for free but Meg wouldn't?"

"Oh, I'm a rubia here," Meg says, rubbing her coarse brown hair self-consciously. "Anything except black hair is pretty much okay."

Amanda stands with her mouth open. "Is that legal?"

"I don't know," says Meg, expecting Bonnie to jump in and answer for her. When she doesn't, all Meg can think to say is, "That's a good question," which she says while Bonnie shakes the pot and they listen to the popcorn kernels rolling back and forth. The question is aggressive, complicated; it makes her feel like she's failing in some fundamental way. It reminds her of that same class, Urban Studies, in a way that annoys her and then makes her sad.

Bonnie shakes the pot. “Not all clubs are like that obviously. It might be more of a mountain thing than a coastal thing.”

“Hmm,” says Amanda. She moves to the window, where parallel slats of glass slant downward, and stands there for a while. “Can you see the stars in Quito?”

Meg goes over to the window next to Amanda and looks through the slats. There is a sliver of light in another building a few stories down, where a woman with her hair in curlers is standing at a kitchen counter just like hers and Bonnie’s. “Yeah, I mean, when it’s clear,” she says. She tries to look up but, as usual, the slats won’t let her.

#

Meg’s room is big with purple walls, and a row of thin windows that let in the cold whether they’re open or not. They sit with the pot of popcorn in the middle of the bed and a bottle of watermelon Zhumir on the bedside table. They each have a glass filled halfway up. Amanda takes a sip and says, “Wow. How much does this cost?”

“Like four dollars,” Bonnie says. “*Yeah.*”

Meg says, “Watermelon’s the best flavor. It never gets old.”

Amanda takes another sip and smiles. “You guys really live here, you know? Together. It seems so nice.”

Meg and Bonnie smile at each other a little guiltily. They talk all the time about how nice it is to be here.

“Is Quito dangerous?” Amanda asks.

“Not really,” Meg says, while Bonnie says, “Oh my God, yes.”

“I mean,” Meg says, “not crazy dangerous, but of course you have to be careful—”

“No, but I mean, bad stuff does happen,” Bonnie says. “That English teacher, Sharon? She’s been mugged, like, eighteen times. She says when she stands at her window at two a.m., she can see coke dealers lined up in the trolley lanes, dealing.”

“Yeah, but that’s Sharon,” Meg says, her face getting hot suddenly. “That’s who she *is*. Why would she stand at her window at two a.m., anyway?”

“Well,” Bonnie says, “it *is* dangerous. I never told you what happened to me the other day, but it was pretty crazy.”

“What are you talking about?” Amanda asks, putting down her glass.

Meg’s cheeks are still red from the unusual exertion of challenging Bonnie, instead of standing a half-step behind her repeating, “Sí, claro.” It wasn’t like this in college: Meg did Literature and Bonnie did Spanish and Dance and Amanda did basically everything else, from Political Science to Pre-Med. Their areas of expertise connected enough to yield respect and conversation, while remaining comfortably separate from one another. Here, everything is crisscrossed—what they know and don’t know, what they think they know, what they know they don’t know but pretend to know anyway. What they used to know and don’t know anymore, like where they’re going, or why they’re here, or what their days are valued at, anyway. Meg can’t figure out how to use her time these days. In college, she made to-do lists. Here, she can never think of anything she’s supposed to do, and because of that, in some convoluted way, she can’t think of anything she wants to do, either. So she ends up doing whatever she ends up doing; the moments of decision-making go by blurry, unnoticed. She hasn’t decided to go dancing until she’s already there, dizzy, unsure whether she approached the man in front of her or he approached her.

Bonnie says, “I had just gotten done teaching. It was eight at night, it was raining, and I didn’t have my umbrella. So I left the school and started running home. It’s not that far,” she tells Amanda, “maybe ten minutes if you go fast. So I’m running, running, it’s pouring down rain, and suddenly I hear someone whispering, *señorita! Señorita!*”

“What?” says Meg, trying to imagine.

“Right,” Bonnie says, finishing her glass in a swallow and straightening up into storytelling mode. “I didn’t know where it was coming from, so I kept running until it started getting louder, like a hoarse person trying to shout. I’m looking around and I see it’s this guy three stories up in that apartment building near the artisan market, Meg. He’s on the third floor and he’s lying down and he says something like, *I can’t get down.*”

“Something *like* that?” Meg says. “Or that? Is that what he said?”

“I mean—that’s what he said,” says Bonnie. “I can’t get down.”

“Was he a construction worker?” Amanda asks. She takes a swallow but doesn’t take her eyes off of Bonnie.

“I don’t know. I just stared at him. He said he was stuck, he had fallen up there and gotten hurt, I guess, and he wanted me to call someone to help him get down. It was crazy, honestly. I’m drenched, there’s nobody else around, and this creepy guy is shouting at me from an abandoned building.”

“A building under construction,” Meg says. Her cheeks aren’t hot anymore. Her stomach has started to hurt. She grabs another handful of popcorn anyway. “You never told me about this. So? Did you call?”

“Who would I have called? I wasn’t going to stand there and ask for a phone number. I mean, on the one hand, he could have been a construction worker who just needed a hand. But

on the other hand, targeting a young woman when there's no one else around? And Meg, you know how construction workers here are." She says to Amanda, "They catcall you every time you walk by. So—it was complicated, you know?"

"So you—" Amanda says. Her eyes are rounder than usual. She's sitting up very straight on the bed.

"I was exhausted," Bonnie says. "My jeans were literally sticking to my legs."

Meg drinks what's left and sets her glass on her bedside table. She doesn't know why she said she liked watermelon Zhumir. The sweetness is nauseating. "You never told me," she says.

"Well, this was just—what, two or three days ago? You were asleep when I got home last night and the night before I think we went to Ladies' Night." Bonnie puts a handful of popcorn in her mouth and crunches. "I'm okay," she says. "Really."

"But—" Amanda says. She says it as if it's the end of the sentence.

"What?" says Bonnie. She holds the bottle out to Meg, lifting her eyebrows. Meg shakes her head.

Amanda says, "You left an injured man on the third story of a building in the rain, Bonnie!" Her cheeks have splotches of red spreading out toward her forehead and neck.

Bonnie sucks her breath in. Meg might have missed it if the noise weren't so unusual. "But we don't even know if he was telling the truth! He might not have been hurt at all!" Her voice is high, shocked; curls fly out from her face. Meg feels a wrench of repulsion and understanding for Bonnie, for this not-knowing that has seeped into all parts of their lives, the absence of a single instinct or thought that they can trust just because it sounds true. Meg doesn't know what true sounds like anymore. Is it *dame* or *deme* or *me da*, or simply *por favor*

with a lot of hand gestures, which usually works better than anything else? True has become whatever Bonnie says, and Bonnie, Megan sees now, pretends to know and does not know; that is how she makes her life in this place.

“I think it’s cultural,” Bonnie says. “Here it’s harder to know when you can trust people.” This is not true. The fluttering in Meg’s stomach is getting worse.

Amanda sets her glass on the bedside table. Bonnie twirls her hair around a finger. They listen to the bass next door, the cheery doorbell, people’s voices lifting and dropping.

“Guys,” Amanda says softly. “What if he’s still there?”

Meg’s stomach jolts. “Shit,” she says.

Amanda says, “It’s possible. We can’t pretend it’s not.”

“Shit,” says Meg.

“What’s wrong?” Bonnie asks.

“I just feel a little weird,” Meg says, standing up. She says to Amanda, “It’s kind of normal here, for your stomach to act weird sometimes,” and then runs to the bathroom. “Shit,” she says, as she lifts up the toilet seat, and an hour’s worth of watermelon-flavored popcorn spills out of her mouth into the bowl.

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As they step into the cold air, the security guard calls, “Going dancing, señoritas?” Meg looks at Bonnie, who is staring straight ahead, across the wide avenue where cars fly by, to the park with palm trees where they buy Pingüino ice cream and snow cones in the daytime. Now long shadows wiggle in orange lamplight, and Meg thinks she sees a person walking around.

“No,” she says to the guard, and tries to smile.

“Do we catch a taxi?” Amanda asks.

Bonnie looks up and down the street. A taxi drives by and then another, but she doesn't reach out her arm to flag them down. "We'll walk," she says.

"Is that safe?" says Amanda. She looks from Bonnie to Meg. "We shouldn't take risks. I'll pay for it if that's the issue."

"We're walking," says Meg, because Bonnie has already turned and started doing just that. They follow her, a swift, ragged triangle, with Amanda bringing up the rear. Meg has walked down this street at night before, but always in a bigger group and usually with at least one boy. Tonight she's aware of her own breath, the air racing in and out of her lungs. It reminds her of her first days in Quito, when she hyperventilated unnecessarily every time she thought about how high in the mountains she was.

They turn onto la Patria, another wide avenue, with a kiosk on the median selling corn on the cob, a lantern dangling over the grill. People gather waiting for their corn, girls in tight jeans and high heels, boys passing cigarettes from hand to hand. They pass the crowd with their eyes on the sidewalk. The corn smells delicious and entirely out of the question.

Amanda says, "Well, this seems like a nice area to live!"

At the McDonalds, Bonnie takes a right and then a left. They're next to the artisan market, crowded in the daytime with Americans and ponchos and alpaca rugs. Now it's abandoned, metal latches pulled over the locales, graffiti bubble letters that Meg doesn't understand. The street is very dark.

Bonnie stops and points. "He was there," she says.

Across the street stands a skeleton of rafters and floorboards with no siding. There are six stories in all. A wedge of the moon slides out from under a cloud, and suddenly the building shines silvery, cobweb-like.

Amanda looks at Meg with wide eyes. “So—”

“I guess we should call,” Meg says.

Bonnie crosses her arms. “Call, then,” she says. She doesn’t look at them.

“I don’t speak Spanish,” Amanda says.

Meg can tell that she regrets the whole thing—the conversation, the walk, maybe the whole trip. She is surprised at her lack of defensiveness, how willing she is simply to agree. The cold, the Zhumir, the tiny kitchen with fliers flapping against the wall. Bars with too much smoke and techno music and people calling her *gringuita*. The woman whose apartment they can see into, who has a husband and a son, who wheels her elderly mother in for lunch every Sunday and who will outlast them a hundred times in this neighborhood, in this city, who does not spend her waking hours memorizing the names of fruits and soccer teams and drinks at the bar, who does not forget immediately the names of almost every person she meets. Meg breathes cold air into her lungs. She cups her hands, takes a deep breath, and calls, “Hola!”

They listen to the silence. “That was really quiet,” Amanda mutters.

“Hola!” Meg shouts. “*Is someone there? Do you hear me? Do you need help?*” Her voice is louder now. “*We’re here! Call if you need us!*” She doesn’t know if she said that last line correctly. She might have made it subjunctive when it isn’t supposed to be. Or maybe she didn’t make it subjunctive after all. The whole thing is irrelevant. “*Llama si nos necesitas!*”

They wait. From a long way away, they can hear the Mariscal—the dull ring of too many beats compounded, a chatter of voices, an occasional firecracker. On this street, there’s nothing. The third floor of the building is dark; the moon has disappeared.

“Well,” Amanda says, breathing out hard. “I guess he got out okay.”

“That or—” Meg stops.

“No,” says Bonnie.

“Probably not,” says Meg.

They wait. Amanda says, “I don’t want us to take any risks.”

There’s a tarp strung around the construction site, barely shoulder high, and behind the tarp is a ladder propped against the second floor. It’s not a Home Depot ladder; it seems like a collection of large sticks from different species of trees, nailed haphazardly into place. Meg looks at the ladder and then at the hollow dark space where the moon is supposed to be, and then southeast in the direction of Cotopaxi, though she knows it will be invisible. “I’m going to go up.” The gerund catches her off guard, the forward motion of it. In all the hours coaching her students to say this, how many times has she said it herself? I—am—going. By implication, somewhere, for some purpose, now. It feels good.

Amanda asks, “Are you sure?” in a way that implies that she hopes very much Meg will say yes.

“Yes,” says Meg. “Just help me over this tarp.”

“I’ll keep watch,” says Bonnie limply. Her arms are still folded. They cross the street and Meg looks back at her, her white sweater and skinny jeans and hair falling out of a braid. She looks restless and small and very cold.

Meg says, “Let me step up from your palms. Like that. Here.” She grabs the top of the wooden post that the tarp is wrapped around and pulls. Her hand is instantly stinging. “Keep lifting!” She grabs the top of the tarp, pushes it beneath her feet, and falls to the other side.

“You okay?” says Amanda, peering over the top.

Meg looks at her hand. A jagged line of red threads weaves down her palm. Some are becoming brighter, blood rising to the surface. “Splinters,” she says.

“Oh no!” Amanda says. “Do you want to come back out? You don’t have to go up. It’s probably really dangerous. What if you find a body up there?”

Meg closes her hand and opens it. It cracks and folds in strange places. “It’s all right.” She remembers throwing up earlier and realizes her throat and stomach don’t ache the way they usually do afterwards. It’s as though everything that had to leave her body has left. Even her hand feels peaceful—bloody, stinging, but still.

She tugs at the ladder. “*Careful,*” says Amanda, sounding almost in pain. Meg steps onto the first rung, then the second, then the third. It holds her weight. She scales the last four rungs quickly and steps into the second floor. “*Hola,*” she says, quietly. She considers heading back down. Then she walks, slowly, into the darkness of the building. There are stairs back there, she knows; she saw them from the ground, before the moon disappeared. Finally, her foot hits concrete, and her eyes adjust. She climbs slowly, breathing with her mouth closed. A body, no body. A body, nobody. Nobody.

The third floor is brighter, or maybe she’s just less afraid. She walks across the empty concrete to the edge, where she can see Amanda and Bonnie. Amanda, hands on the tarp, peering up; Bonnie still across the street, watching her feet. The moon emerges suddenly and both of the girls turn silver. Meg stands breathless looking at them. They could almost be the ice statues they visited in Saint Paul last year, on one of the coldest days of winter. The statues were scattered across a city park: painstakingly sculpted, beautiful and destructible and alone. It was too cold to take pictures; they stared briefly at each sculpture and then rushed to the nearest coffee shop, where they drank hot chocolate and talked about their futures. Meg can’t remember now what they envisioned, only that they believed in all of it, that they saw every colorful piece of their plans as not only possible but easy, destined. They did not imagine a single day that

would not mean something, that would not be rich and laden with purpose. They believed that even sadness would be romantic; they chiseled their future lives to perfection and they did not laugh at themselves in the process. They listened and sipped and affirmed and now they are here, the world flickering between silver and black, each of them alone. Meg looks beyond Amanda and Bonnie to the dark market and the orange streets and the hills with tiny dots of light.

Suddenly, at the edge of the horizon, a jagged stripe of lightning flashes, and the volcano appears for an instant in its entirety, snowy and calm. “Look!” Meg shouts, although the lightning has passed, although she’s pointing into darkness. “It’s Cotopaxi! Cotopaxi! Cotopaxi!” The sounds land just right on her tongue.

THE END