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COOL

LANGUAGE SPECIAL

I Sold My Body for Spanish Lessons!

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The Spanish Education of a Guatemalan Guinea Pig

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COLLEEN FRIESEN DONATED HER BODY TO SCIENCE AND GOT A NEW TONGUE—NOT TO MENTION UNEXPECTED INSIGHT INTO CENTRAL AMERICA—IN RETURN.

CORY WAS MORE ASTUTE, and a little more direct, than my other incredulous friends. "Let me get this straight," he said, leaning forward. "They're paying you for your shit?"

Exactly.

It started when I saw a pop-up banner screaming "FREE SPANISH LESSONS!!!" Somehow, the Internet had known that learning Spanish was on my list of top 50 things to accomplish before I die. All I had to do was (a) volunteer in a Johns Hopkins University clinical trial for a vaccine against traveler's diarrhea by (b) drinking a slippery-salty blend of dead *E. coli* and cholera bacteria two weeks and one week before leaving American soil, and then (c) promise to check in with their nurses to provide blood and "other" samples. I'd have to use common sense in eating, but there were no particular restrictions. I could suck back *huevos*, *aguacate*, and *frijoles* to my heart's content, and in exchange they'd pay for three weeks of Spanish classes and a homestay in Antigua, Guatemala. How could I lose?

MAYBE NOT ONE OF MY BETTER IDEAS?

Day One, 5 a.m.: I descend into chaos. Guatemala City. A driver is holding a beat-up piece of cardboard with writing on it. It looks almost like my name.

I finger the cut-off stubs of the rear seatbelts. We're off. Dogs flee, my body jerks, his horn blares, and I realize I may not get to the other 49 things on my list. Jesus remains nonplussed from his plastic perch on the dash as we hurtle toward Antigua.

And then my silent driver stops. I have no address except for the school. This is obviously not the school. I am left standing in front of a crumbling wall that is slowly returning to its origins of rock and sand. There are several high wooden doors. I push buzzers. I'm alone in the cool morning, the smell of damp stone and a faint hint of cigarette

smoke. Except for the odd cockadoodle-dooing rooster, the city's 30,000 inhabitants must still be asleep. Finally, one of the battered doors creaks open to reveal a grinning young woman. Only one Spanish phrase comes to mind: "*Dos margaritas, por favor.*" I stick with a stupid, mute smile.

She leads me through a little covered courtyard. I weave between lines of laundry to follow her. She opens a door. There is a bed, nightstand, small desk, and wardrobe. The room is cold and lit by a single bulb. I am to lie down and sleep. She will feed me soon. Thank God I am good at charades. Like the Cheshire cat, my homestay mother's shining dark eyes leave the room last.

HOME SWEET HOMESTAY

Vilma and Roberto are in their twenties with three children under the age of 5. The family sleeps in one ten-by-ten-foot room. This frees the two extra rooms for rentals to students. The living room has nothing in it but a television. There are assorted pictures of a suffering Jesus and a much happier-looking Mickey Mouse. The kitchen consists of sink, one cupboard, stove, fridge, and blender. The table has five chairs.

That afternoon, I wander into candlelit churches heavy with the sugary-pink scent of rose petals piled at the altars. I see Mayan woman kneeling, the bottoms of their hardened feet exposed as they beseech their silent saints.

I come back for dinner and meet another language student, Anna. Vilma serves us our dinner—beans, rice, and unidentifiable meat—along with *licuados*, blenderized slabs of watermelon flesh and purified water, while Roberto keeps the kids quiet in their one room. We listen to him shushing the hungry children, and eat quickly.

Later, the nightly ritual unfolds as Vilma stands in the kitchen with a makeshift ironing board made of towels piled on the table. Each item emerges with crisp edges. Every day that I am there, Vilma does her daily scrubbing at the large sink in her little concrete courtyard. She scrubs and rinses

and wrings out diapers, shirts, little dresses, and pants, and hangs them on crisscrossing lines. The smell of soap is strong and clean.

BACK TO SCHOOL

Monday morning: Time for school. Already, I am understanding more of what Vilma and Roberto are saying. They just keep enunciating slowly, gesturing and talking, and I'm getting it! Almost. Vilma decides to walk Anna and me to school. She tries giving us directions first, but like the taxi's plastic Jesus, our faces register nothing. We are to come back for lunch after four hours of one-on-one instruction, and then the afternoon is ours.

The school is buzzing with foreigners. Each little table has a chair on either side. One for the teacher. One for the student. Intensive instruction. Every second citizen in Antigua must be a language teacher.

My days take on a lovely rhythm. Classes in the morning after my breakfast of fruit, bread, and instant coffee. I stop at the *panaderia* and stock up on more doughy things to fill my ever-hungry gut. Quickly, I move beyond pointing. I actually ask for an item, understand how many quetzales it costs, and say thank you. At lunch Vilma, Anna, and I have progressively longer conversations—though it's increasingly apparent that this is because Vilma is a saint. She repeats herself endlessly and patiently until she can see the light dawning in my eyes. She uses props in the kitchen and names each ingredient as she explains how to make my new favorite dish of *embuecos*—corn tortilla folded over a chunk of white *queso*, dipped in frothed-up egg, and fried to a crispy bit of gooey heaven. She looks through my guidebook and maps, and by her pointing and slow repetition, I learn where to find fogs of frankincense, the best, most velvety *alfombras*, those magical carpets laid on the street made of flower petals, grasses, and dyed sawdust, and when the Madonna will be carried through the streets by women in black.

In the afternoons, I walk to the *parque central* to sit under the soft purple petals of the jacaranda

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IT'S HARD TO LOOK CASUAL WHEN YOU'RE PACKING A FLUORESCENT-ORANGE ZIPLOC BAG WITH A RADIOACTIVE SYMBOL ON IT LABELED "DANGER-BIOHAZARD-SPECIMEN."

REALITY CHECK

On the weekends, I board the chicken bus for nearby villages. The bus bumps down the pitted streets, and the locals rhythmically make the sign of the cross as we pass each church. Their hands are kept very busy.

In San Marco, on Lago de Atitlan, I find funky red-striped pants. I'm ready to barter. "Can I try them on?" I ask in my best Spanish. The shopkeeper nods and guides me into her bedroom. There is a bed made of boards, a thin layer of reed mat that is freeing itself of its woven bonds, thin blankets and pillows that have seen too much sweat. The photo on the wall is of a child all in white holding a Communion school certificate. Everywhere, listless flies, who long ago gave up the battle against the confines of the room, buzz and hang on walls and bed. My enthusiasm for a deal wanes.

In the little hotels, I discover the same facilities that exist back at Vilma's. That is, the *agua caliente* dial on the showerhead is more suggestion than description. Every day, proving the adage of hope springing eternal, I force the dial over to the hottest setting, trying not to touch the exposed electrical wires. I then attempt to wash my hair without actually letting the cold trickle touch my head. I slime the wet around on my clammy skin, using my useless little pack towel. I pull my boring beige travel garb onto my damp skin. Khaki never looked so bland until I landed in a country where the women dress to compete with the parrots.

BAPTISM BY WORDS

The last week of school: My teacher, Maria, a young, widowed mother of two teens who has patiently spent the last three weeks shepherding my linguistic stumbling, asks me to write about my typical day back home. My fingers clutching my Bic, I write in my paralyzed Spanish. I write that I like to have a hot bath every night. She stops me after that sentence.

"*Agua caliente? Cada noche?*" You can lay down in water up to here?" She brushes back my glossy blue-black hair and holds her hand to her neck, her café au lait hand against the rainbow embroidery of her blouse.

"*Usted tienen gusto de baños?*" I ask, running my broken fingernails through my grubby hair. Do you like baths? I am wishing desperately for *jaban de San Simon*. At San Andes Itzapa, where the wooden statue of Saint Simon accepts offerings of rum and cigars, vendors sell bars of pungent soap that promises to wash away your sins. Unfortunately, it is back in my room at the bottom of my pack. I realize that I have been communicating, but it is only now that I am beginning to understand.

"I don't know," says Maria. "I've never had one. But it sounds very nice." ☺

LOWDOWN

IF YOU GO: THERE ARE OVER 75 SPANISH SCHOOLS IN ANTIGUA. NEARLY ALL PROVIDE ONE-ON-ONE INSTRUCTION. MOST OFFER A HOMESTAY PROGRAM, WHICH ENSURES A DIRECT ECONOMIC BENEFIT TO LOCAL FAMILIES.

THE PROBIGNA SCHOOL (PROBIGNA.CONEXION.COM) ALSO PROVIDES SCHOOL BOOKS TO RURAL CHILDREN.

JOHNS HOPKINS IS NO LONGER RUNNING THIS PARTICULAR STUDY BUT MAY OFFER FIELD OPPORTUNITIES FOR OTHER TRIALS IN THE FUTURE. CHECK OUT JHUCLINICALPHARMACOLOGY.ORG/DDU/VOLUNTEER.ASP.

VOLUNTEER FOR OTHER MAD EXPERIMENTS LISTED AT CLINICALTRIALS.GOV.

trees. The air smells of cotton candy and roasting cashews. It is damp from the mist of the fountain. I study my *verbos*, but mostly I just sit.

EASTER RESURRECTION, NOT INSURRECTION

Easter Sunday: The square is filled with teens screaming, "*Cristo vive!*" I am in awe at their fervor. No one is buying Hallmark cards or chocolate bunnies. They are pinning their hopes on his returning from the dead. Fireworks explode. I keep thinking the black-suited soldiers are turning on the people. After all, it has happened already so many times in the horrific history of Guatemala, even though they've recently had the first peace-time elections after 40 years of civil war.

NO SUCH A THING AS A FREE LUNCH

A couple times a week, I sink over to the Johns Hopkins unit to deposit my "payment." It's hard to look casual when you're packing a fluorescent-orange Ziploc bag with a radioactive symbol on it labeled DANGER-BIOHAZARD-SPECIMEN BAG. And how do you get rid of the bubblegum-purple medical gloves, the little cup and the wooden stool-collection spoon when you're sharing a bathroom with a whole family and the only wastebasket has no lid? My daypack solves the problem neatly, though I'm sure my face still looks furtive. I can't wait to dump it in the little Johns Hopkins bar fridge.

I may not be able to conjugate all my *verbos*, but I'm learning a new lingo. I tick off the box that says my stool was fully formed. An *illness episode* is described as "when the stool takes on the form of the cup." Sort of McDonald's soft-serve style.

I'm delivering my goods, and Johns Hopkins duly delivers theirs. Every day my free instruction improves my struggling Spanish. I'm not quite ready to discuss the works of Gabriel García Márquez, but I'm able to converse with shopkeepers and locals.