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Pura Vida

By Sierra Tribbett-Collins

The three-hour bus ride from the San José, Costa Rican airport to the Tilarán mountains in Monteverde can be most productively spent watching the unending blur of green—an earthy, beautiful monstrosity swallowing you whole as you shift to unstick your thighs in your bus seat. You’ve never seen anything like it. You sit with your overly stuffed gym bag in your lap, the airport label jutting out to remind you that, aside from your American clothes, makeup and anti-diarrhea pills, you are surrounded by newness, entering a country with the first fresh stamp in your untouched passport.

Even the students you travel with are strangers. At a college as tiny as yours, you’re shocked you don’t know a single one of them. Anxiety addles your mind and body more than usual, that little voice reminiscent of childhood: What if they don’t like me? You try to breathe away your reservations, to let go of the relationships keeping you tied to the southern U.S.

The jungle foliage whizzes past you as you realize just how comfortable you were this last semester in your routine bubble of boredom—your safe nest of depression. Spring of 2019 was unbearably lonely; your partner ended things abruptly on New Year’s Day, and your roommate and good friend set off for half a year in Oxford. Though introverted, you crave communion like anyone else, and your more talkative peers have always carried you through life.

Instead, you have spent the past five months getting high in your apartment, forgetting to eat more than a bag of microwave popcorn, and reading copious amounts of British literature for class. (And secretly sleeping with your ex, who is as clingy as he is unpredictably lukewarm.) In other words, you have officially spent an entire semester more of a loser than ever. Enough is enough.

You step off the bus and attempt to wheel your suitcase uphill to your new bunkhouse.

Your body is weak, still recovering from the tail end of a stomach virus. You can hardly manage with your bags, and are embarrassed to be as helpless as your small stature suggests. Your phone won’t connect to the spotty internet after three hours of being unplugged on the bus. Exhausted from the day of travel, you’ve yet to make conversation with your travel companions, and now the overly energetic intern is waving his flashlight, trying to show you the entirely dark campus. Seven boys are crammed into one bunkhouse, three girls to the other.

At dinner, the sophomore who has been flashing eyes at you—or maybe you’re overthinking it, maybe everything

exciting that has ever happened to you has been a delusional fragment of imagination—asks if you're vegetarian because all you got are black beans and plain rice, and you awkwardly tell him no, you just don't feel hungry. You're faced with the opportunity of a lifetime—six weeks of literature and astronomy classes in a rainforest paradise—and yet, you find yourself crying in the bathroom your first night. Everything feels so incredibly, overwhelmingly different. It feels like your entire life is about to change. You yearn for your college bedroom again, the solace in your little glass bong, the melancholic view from the top of the apartment building. Weeks from now, one of your new friends will admit that he cried that first night, too. Even your professor will candidly tell you that he felt like he had no idea what he was getting himself into upon arrival. For now, though, you stare at the wooden partition between your bed and your new roommates. Shortly after shaking a spider off of the provided wool comforter, the inner voice returns, convincing you that you are all alone in this world.

Everything on the campus you'll briefly call home is within walking distance. The bunkhouses, across from the soccer field, are a ten- to fifteen-second stroll from the bathrooms marked Hombres and Mujeres. The cafeteria, preceded by a massive wooden porch, sits three minutes south of a secluded classroom. The classroom, named after the local bird chachalaca, requires a short trip through a trail consumed by towering ficus trees. If you're lucky enough to look up at the right time, you'll freeze at the unexpected sight of a howler monkey swinging from branch to branch—carefree and uninterested in your presence. A coati wanders in the brush, a mammal resembling a hybrid of a raccoon and a bear cub, though the residential one on campus is called Stumpy for his missing tail.

Once daylight emerges, you feel rejuvenated and load your plate with gallo pinto, plantains and scrambled eggs. Everyone is instructed to scrape their leftovers into a communal bowl that will become pig slop. The entire campus is environmentally conscious—a combination of school and farm originally built for field research, later bought out by a nonprofit and converted into a study-abroad destination for students across America. You think about the uneaten food left on trays and in trash cans back home. At the very least, social anxiety compels you to finish as much as you can eat from here on out.

It's ironic that, despite your Southern background, you've only just come face-to-face with farm life in a different country. You grew up in a dinky yellow house with nostalgic West Coast parents—parents who, within months of their move to Jonesboro, Arkansas, still couldn't make their way through the thickness of their neighbor's accent: Jim Parnell don't live here, do he? Now, you run your closed fist down a cow's udder and successfully milk it. You realize what you've collected in this tin bucket will be part of making the hot chocolate they put out every evening after dinner—the three glass pitchers that students swarm around to form uneven lines. Everything here is cyclical. Sewage water is filtered into ponds out back, home to the tilapia you'll later groan at—tilapia for lunch again? Taking in the significance of every step in the process both uplifts you with amazement and weighs you down with a heavy sense of disappointment in yourself and the way you've lived your life thus far. Yes, you do your part—or thought you did—recycling bottles, turning off lights, reusing grocery bags. But the very standard of living in America seems corrupt compared to this.

The hiking trail just off campus leads you to purple flowers with a center so bright white the pistil seems to have been replaced by a miniature light bulb. Yellow grooved plants resemble flattened corn on the cob. Peachy-white angel's trumpets hang droopily from trees, their petals promising hallucinations if brewed and steeped correctly. (You and your peers are twenty-year-old idiots who lick them for an attempted high.) Green katydids watch from the nearest leaf, their red mouths curling into a lipsticked smirk. In the campus garden, you split open aloe leaves to rub on sunburns. You run into more cows on your walk back—brown-and-white calves that wander away from nearby farms but never seem to stray too far.

By your fourth day, you almost feel guilty for encroaching on nature's beauty. You've witnessed a life of children chunking soda cans out of moving minivans on road trips to soccer games. You grew up with a home address on a highway, where sidewalks were nonexistent and you were never permitted beyond the length of the driveway to the mailbox. Now, each step you take sinks into smooth, springy earth. You slip your cigarette butt into your rain jacket pocket, disgusted at the idea of stomping it into something so vibrant. The multicolored millipedes in the wet dirt would thank you if they could.

The nearest convenience store is a ten-minute walk. You are all

encouraged not to interact with stray animals. The captivating nature of a campus-farm hybrid—rife with smells of cafeteria and cow manure—beckons any dog to follow a friendly, unthinking student back to the promised land. Still, you can't resist stooping down to pet a mangy gray cat that circles the store where you buy Chiky chocolate cookies and Meneitos cheese puffs. You stuff your junk food into the backpack you always carry—no grocery bags offered in the first place—and face the repercussions when you pretend not to hear the loud chirrup of the same cat, waiting patiently on the doormat outside, trailing close behind for a mile. Maybe it breaks your heart a little. Everything seems to these days.


With how much of your time here is spent on foot, the various hikes and strolls give you time to get to know everyone. You are the only English major in a group of math and science majors. Your new sophomore friend is flirting after all, even with a girlfriend back home, and you shamelessly help edit his papers as you bond over music. There are two other girls on the trip, and you gravitate towards them out of shyness. One wears a double nose ring and matching Calvin Klein underwear and seems effortlessly cool; the other towers above you at six feet, a volleyball player with an air of innocence who seldom drinks alcohol. One of the boys quickly warms to you and has conversations with you about his sexuality; another is a competitive Smash Bros video gamer who shows you the ropes. Over time, you feel safe with these people.

The bar and the sushi restaurant, along with the rest of the nearest town, Santa Elena—but mostly the bar and the sushi restaurant—require a twenty-minute cab ride. One night, after karaoke and a handful of tequila shots, you slide around unbuckled in the backseat of the taxi, marveling at how dark it gets here, how close you are to the equator. You think about the ocelots and the fer-de-lances lurking in the depth of the woods on campus. They belong in this comfortable darkness—but do you?

Back on campus, you all drunkenly hoist blankets to the soccer field and lay together to stargaze—a genuine homework assignment for astronomy class. It's easier to talk to each other when you're looking at the immense black curtain of the night sky. You find yourself holding hands with the person on either side of you, cold and vulnerable together.

Your literature professor asks you to consider, during that first week, what it means to be a human in the jungle. Sharing a joint one night off a beaten path, you hear an unexpected howl and instinctively grab the arm of

whoever is closest. You don't have sharp teeth meant for tearing through flesh. You don't have an inner poison ready to emit when provoked. You don't have any sort of skin protectant; in fact, your pale skin is so defenseless that even the mountainous sun could overtake you if you let it. All you have, in this fleeting moment of supposed attack, is your own fear. Your professor's voice reverberates in your swimmy head: Think about it—just how helpless are we as humans? If our intellect were to be removed, could we even survive?

When you take a day trip to the Guanacaste beach—a break from your studies as well as your social, habitual binge drinking—you are more interested in the clusters of pink and green barnacles, amazed by the tongue-like appendages that poke out of them.  Little crabs litter the sand between your toes, while the larger ones burrow to avoid the crash of the waves. Off shore, on a grassy plot where you eat macaroni salad and reapply sunscreen, iguanas lazily saunter past without a second glance.

That's what you love most about this country: everything is real. Raw, even. There is no fine line between indoors and outdoors. You welcome the rainy gust of wind that cools down the library, and feel no fear or surprise when you discover a fat beetle struggling to pull itself out of the same sink where you wash your face.

One day in class, a tarantula hawk—its sting among the most painful of all insects—visits, carrying a dead spider in its grip. Your professor reminds you that it will feel no need to attack when it already has its meal right in front of it. The irony isn't lost on you: for all your differences in strength and size, you and your peers collectively scramble away from something so small and so utterly indifferent to your presence.

Nature here is inextricable from humanity—an aspect of existence impossible to avoid. This is an advantage foreign to most Americans that has been inevitably capitalized on.

In the big city, during a mid-trip excursion to San José, a man sprinkles pigeon feed into your hands and hair, waiting for birds to swarm before snapping an overpriced picture. "Lady, lady!" he cries, chasing you down to try to sell you the Polaroid. You all file, stereotypically, into a McDonald's, where another man strikes up a conversation with the mostly male group. "The women here are beautiful, no?" He plants an unwelcome kiss on your cheek. "Do you like coca?"

Later, you pull over on the side of a highway to tightrope-walk along the pavement far too close to speeding cars. Leaning against the railing, you watch dozens of white crocodiles bask happily in the Puntarenas heat, and you pretend to be more focused on them than you already are when a street vender wants sell you a necklace made of the animal's teeth.

In a country with an economy dependent on tourism, you fall victim—both to the novel beauty and the smiling men who recognize your whiteness. The city brims with keychains and beach towels bearing the unofficial Costa Rican slogan "Pura Vida. Literally "pure life," but more accurately translated to "full of life" or "this is living!"—the phrase that beckons tourists into a seeming world of paradise, an exotic never-ending beach trip, a tropical arcadia. Of course, you aren't immune to this, even though you want to be. Of course, you buy a bottle opener with the logo of your favorite Costa Rican beer, Imperial. Of course, you take a reprieve from cow manure and bug bites to do the usual white people things: zip-lining, coffee tours, shopping, shopping, shopping.

In fact, it isn't an arcadia at all, no matter how much you've spent the last few weeks in awe of its natural beauty. At the end of the day, it is still a place where people live, not some untouched, primitive holy land. Donna Summer blasts from a lingerie store speaker. Puppies and kittens are caged at a market booth that also sells beckoning herbs and spices. Men follow you from an Italian restaurant to your hotel. Streetlights and flashing neon signs stand stark against the purple equatorial sky. You squeeze mustard on a burger in a mall food court.

The trip to the city takes you out of the harmonious, one-with-nature mindset you'd adopted on campus. Even once you're back to finish your curriculum, you begin to consider the effects of your visit. At this point, you've started sneaking off to sleep with your flirty friend, thick itchy blankets laid out on the soccer field under the guise of stargazing again. You've eaten more raspberry ice cream bars and drank more rum than you can count, discarding plastic wrapper after plastic wrapper, glass rattling in your bag in the taxi—because despite the legal drinking age (eighteen), alcohol isn't allowed on campus, and you have to dump the bottles in Santa Elena.

By now, you've settled into routine, swatting away the bugs that once fascinated you, sucking energy from the surge protectors with your laptop. You think about the cashier at the convenience store who couldn't accept



your debit card when you wanted to buy a can of Pringles because the Internet was down from a storm for three days. You wonder if you really belong here—otherwise, why do you feel so shameful? So adulterous? So human? But who are you to assume the impact of every human on the environment? The taxi drivers who try to make conversation with you in English, the mothers steering four-wheelers with children in their laps, who one-handedly wave at you as they maneuver the winding mountain roads, the women who bring you fresh linens and the men who serve you breaded chicken and pineapple—would you think them as disruptive and unappreciative of the planet as yourself? As your new friends? What does it mean to be human when you've grown up so culturally different?

As part of your curriculum, you and the rest of your group visit a rural high school one afternoon and are challenged to carry out conversations in the classroom. At first, you're all awkward, fully aware of the fact that fourteen-year-olds are whispering about you and your bright red hair. With time, though, you and a nearby boy start passing notes. He writes in English and you write in Spanish as you practice your attempts at bilingualism together. He asks you if you like to dance, what kind of music you listen to, if you have pets. He points to the smooth face of your FitBit in amazement. "¿Es un reloj?" he asks, having never seen a watch like it before. Most of all, though, he wants to know what you're doing here, what made you come to this little fishing town in Costa Rica. Do you like the birds? he writes. They're very pretty.

Sí, me encantan los pájaros.

He passes a final note before you leave, forsaking his English: ¡Dame tu número! He wants your phone number. You clumsily reply in Spanish that you are too old for him. His friends realize what he's done and start laughing at him, and you embarrassedly say goodbye as his face blanches.

You forget his name, but you don't forget that face: toothy smile and pubescent acne and jet-black hair. You don't like the way you and the rest of your group subjected these children to your voyeuristic American tendencies—the fascination with the foreign. They were fascinated with you, too, but they weren't the ones barging into your classroom brandishing shiny jewelry and a watch that receives text messages, exuding a general attention-seeking air, a natural inclination to talk the loudest, to bear the brightest colors.

Even now, you wonder when travel writing ends and fetishization begins.

When you really are stargazing, and not sleeping with your friend, you feel dizzy with the realization that this universe is so entirely massive. You've gotten good at picking some things out of the night sky—the brightest light is Jupiter; the dense opaque thickness is the Milky Way; the T-shaped formation is the Southern Cross. Still, though, after six weeks of astronomy and literature classes and the numerous conversations on human and extraterrestrial life alike, you can't comprehend how much is out there. You can't comprehend the interconnectedness of humans on this planet—a clusterfuck intricately woven with issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion. You can't even comprehend yourself.



You don't know why you feel so guilty for rejecting a fourteen-year-old boy's advances in broken Spanish, for smoking a cigarette, or for squashing a bug. You feel both in tune with the world and displaced from it, suspended in air.

The day spent at the airport is the emptiest you have felt in weeks.

Back home, you and your new lover stop talking. You start falling back into old habits; food waste, compulsive phone-checking, overused A/C. You officially end things with your on-again, off-again ex, and relationships with the rest of your friends feel strained. You get ice cream with them one evening and don't talk much. Admittedly, you know you neglected to keep in touch during your six weeks away; now they seem to expect you to be the

same person you were before. The most isolating part of it all is that you can't decide what in you has changed. The closest you can get is this: you were very lonely, and then you were a collective unit—an experience that felt almost religious. You were a part of the stars in the night sky; you were a part of an ecological cycle; you were a group of friends that seemed to eat and breathe together. And this whole time—this point in your life where you were less solitary than ever—you spent it wondering if you belonged here in the first place.

The realization hits you one night, breathlessly. You are drinking alone in your apartment—always alone in that little blue apartment. Paranoia compelled you that week to take a pregnancy test, and you have spent the rest of it getting drunk and eating fried chicken or Kraft macaroni. As you count down the days until the fall semester starts, you think about the last day of class in Monteverde.

You close your eyes, watching it like it's television. It's a discussion of the different greetings attached to the Voyager spacecraft—a potentially useless shout into the void in case anyone out there were to discover the existence of humanity. In English, aliens would theoretically be greeted with a "Hello from the children of planet Earth." In Spanish, "Hello and greetings to all." In Japanese, "Hello? How are you?" In Russian, "Hello! I welcome you!"

There is an underbelly of cruelty, ignorance, and pollution in this world. There is so much you don't yet know, and even more you will never figure out. You don't foresee a lot of what's to come—a pandemic, for example, six months after your first and last trip out of the country. But you do understand, or have to choose to believe, that there is an inherent goodness present too—a goodness that is both deeply personal and collectively shared. A pure life that may not be attainable but can still be sought after. Whether or not you understand why purple flowers, hot chocolate pitchers, or tailless coatis matter to you, you know that they do. One day you'll realize you could trust in that knowledge this whole time.



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