

One Pair

This was the easiest and most fun piece I wrote. Bits and pieces of “One Pair,” including the final scene, were written before I began Advanced Composition. I wrote long paragraphs containing only images that I wanted to include in the piece--much of it did not make it into the final piece. But this was a good opportunity to relive a fun memory and let it say something to readers about what I remember about being fifteen: it was time to try new things, but I wasn't a grown up yet.

Revisions were easy for this piece and overall, I'm very happy with how it turned out. I loved sharing it with others, too, because many people laughed out loud when they got to the end. That was the experience I was hoping to create, and I'm happy to include it in this collection.

Written for Advanced Composition, Fall 2012

I KNEW next to nothing about Ecuador when I went there with my family when I was fifteen. Sure, I knew that Darwin visited the Galapagos Islands before he wrote *Origin of Species* and that the people there don't speak a language I know. Beyond that, I expected everything you see on the Travel Channel—pigs roasting on spits over stone hearths. Wrinkled obedient men in shorts pulling tourists around in tiny wooden carts attached to bikes. Women draped in luxurious cloth and gold bracelets. But Ecuador was none of these things. It was stucco sherbet-colored buildings barricaded behind black iron gates; faded shirts and blue jeans hung in dirt backyards littered with chickens and stacks of unused window panes. It was a blur of taxis emptying fair-skinned men in suits into skyscrapers on one block and colonial buildings on the next. It was incomprehensible.

Six days into the trip, my family hired a local tour guide, Carlos, and piled into a rusty white van with our duffel bags and iPods. We were headed eight hours through the Andes into the rain forest to spend the next seven days out of the capital city. I liked Carlos right away, even though he was just a few years younger than my mother. Compared to the people who leered out from sunken eyelids, he was healthy. His eyes crinkled into his face when he grinned, and he wore a backwards baseball cap and floppy polo shirt.

Unlike everything and everyone around me, he was comfortable.

"You know, I don't look Ecuadorian," he told me one night beside the hotel pool. We were reassembling a scattered deck of cards and watching bats zip across the water. The night air smelled of chlorine and Carlos's sweat.

"Why not?"

"My eyes are green—most people's are dark brown. And my skin is almost as light as yours."

"Oh. Well are both of your parents from here?"

"I don't actually know," he said. "I think so."

AFTER SHAKING hands with my parents, my older brother and me, Carlos pulled the van away from our gated hotel in the north part of the city. For the first

few minutes, he spoke only to my father, asking where we were from (Philadelphia) and how long we had been in Quito (one week) and had we been to the Virgin of Quito statue on Panecillo Hill (we had).

“All the tourist traps, eh?” he turned to look at my mother, who was squeezed next to me in the back row. She smiled politely.

He told my father about our destination: a hotel founded by a Swiss entrepreneur on the Napo River, which is a tributary to the Amazon River.

“I take groups once a month, twice maybe. After the Galapagos, the rain forest is one of the best places to see,” he said. “You will not see birds like these anywhere else.”

Soon the van left the lined roads of downtown Quito and climbed the steep gravel paths through the Andes. We bounced and swerved around sharp curves, and I leaned my forehead on the foggy window for relief. Through the window I saw buildings and walls and fence posts in ruin. Some were stone, some brick, splintered wood or rusted metal. There were piles of stones and discarded farm equipment—axes, wheelbarrows, containers long empty of pesticide.

But wherever Carlos stopped the van to let us stumble around on wobbly legs, we were in clouds. Not under them—*inside* their vast wetness, like the air breathed by mountain deer in bottled water commercials. The spectral stillness was a palpable force pushing the clouds down around us, muffling our human noise. Only the occasional sound of slow-moving vans and trucks broke through the thickness.

And my family kept saying things like ‘I can’t believe how cold it is up here’ and ‘We are literally *inside* this cloud. Can you believe that?’ The Webers have never been comfortable with peace and quiet.

But Carlos loved to talk, too. When we climbed back in, he picked up the threads of a long conversation with my parents about Quito and his wife and the languages he speaks (English, German, and Quechuan, a dialect spoken by his Andean ancestors).

Once when I woke up after dozing off, he was talking about birds.

“I have been watching birds for as long as I have known. I remember seeing birds when I was three.”

He looked at me through the rearview mirror.

“But I have not always had good binoculars like I do now. I can see from very far away. Toucans, hummingbirds, tanagers—”

The van bounced out of a pothole, and Carlos braked as we approached a sharp curve. I reminded myself not to look down over the edge and pressed my head against the window again.

The last thing I heard him say until I awoke at the hotel was: “But I still haven’t seen my condor...”

IT’S NOT surprising that Carlos hadn’t seen a condor in his years shepherding tourists through the rain forest. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature considers the Andean Condor to be “near threatened” because humans have encroached on their foraging grounds. Local farmers perceive the birds as a threat to their livestock and hunt them, leaving poisonous carcasses behind. They’re not endangered—yet—but Carlos had still never seen one.

“Well, maybe I have seen one,” he said over a nighttime game of *Lo dudo* (the Spanish version of Bull). “It’s hard to tell because they fly too high to see without binoculars.”

His binoculars—powerful enough to finally see his condor—banged against his chest as he walked. Unless he was holding them to his eyes, they were attached to him at all times with a harness that looked like it should have been holding a handgun.

THE DRIVE back to Quito was worse than the trip into the rain forest. Determined to survive the ride, I took Dramamine with a liter of water. An hour later, I had to pee so badly that I woke up out of a sound sleep.

“Mom, can we stop somewhere? I gotta pee.”

“Can you hold it? There’s no place to stop.”

I waited, sweaty hands pressed between my knees, for the sight of civilization and a grocery store, hotel, gas station—anything with a hole and four protective walls. Nothing appeared through the windshield. I bounced in the seat, trying to determine whether that made the pain better or worse.

“Stop that, Emily. We’ll be there soon.”

But we weren’t there—as I watched tall grasses and wood huts blur by through the window, I realized we weren’t going to be *anywhere* soon enough.

“Just let me out here,” I pleaded. “I’ll go outside.”

I slid out of the van and stepped into grass that I thought would cover me—it barely came to my knees. I looked for a tree or a rock or anything I could squat behind, but there was nothing but the short brush. As I shifted from foot to foot, deciding, the van door slammed and Carlos-and-his-binoculars appeared.

“Take your time. I’m going to look for birds,” he said, already looking into the cloudless sky.

I danced for a few more moments, considering my options. But I knew instinctively that no, I would not pee in front of Carlos and my family and mountainous birds looking down on me.

Before I could run back to the van, Carlos gasped.

“Ay,” he said softly. “Look at that.”

I followed the angle of his binoculars and spotted a curved black line the size of my pinky’s fingernail. It looked like the mustache-shape black line that every kid draws to symbolize a faraway bird. The shape banked noiselessly and glided toward the sun, miles above us. For a moment I noticed the clouds back in their proper place with wispy tails so far away I could blot them out with my thumb.

Carlos dropped the binoculars to his chest and looked at me.

“It’s a condor!”

Shit.

What I wanted to do next was ask Carlos for his binoculars and see the bird myself. I wanted to watch it glide and try to imagine how big it would be perched on my shoulder, how fierce it would look pouncing on a rabbit or a small family dog. I wanted to throw open the van door and drag my family out to see the bird, dig my camera from the depths of my backpack and zoom in until the bird was a large smudge of pixels, high-five Carlos and congratulate him on finally, *finally* spotting an Andean condor.

But I didn’t do any of that.

I opened my eyes at him so wide that they watered, clenched my hands in front of my bladder, and said:

“Carlos. We have to go.”

He looked over at me for a moment and blinked once, not hearing me, or maybe not believing me. But that look lasted only a second. A moment later he was strapping his binoculars to his chest and turning toward the van.

As he trudged ahead of me to the drivers’ side, I shuffled behind him, ashamed. I wanted to tell him that I was sorry for drinking so much water, for not being able to hold it while he fulfilled his dream. But I didn’t do that either.

As we pulled onto the road, I looked into the rearview mirror and caught him looking back at me.

“Carlos...” I started, wondering what I could even say.

He pulled the corners of his lips down and shook his head, stopping me.

“There are other condors,” he said. “But you have only one pair of pants.”