

Whitney Laycock

### Chile the Country, Not the Food

I wasn't always depressed, at least I don't think so. As a child, teachers often scribbled words like *happy* or *well-adjusted* on my comment card, the one you carried with you your whole life, the one that determined for instance whether you were put in Miss Hughes' "Math for the Gifted" or "Math for Dummies"—although those weren't the names they used. But when Annalisa looked at me with her narrow, hazel eyes, I felt depressed. I also found myself wishing for the hundredth time that I was back halfway across the world, where I had been just a week before.

The game was simple. *Truth or dare*. It was one I had often played with this very group before leaving to Chile, only this time it felt uncomfortable, like I was surrounded by strangers.

"Umm, truth." I was too afraid that a dare would lead to the idiotic game of dialing some random boy's phone number and hanging up when he answered.

"What's your most embarrassing moment?"

*Besides this one?* I thought.

It had been embarrassing to be in a home with no roof and a dirt floor, having the thin Chilean woman serve me, a thirteen year old girl, a cup of peaches and going without because there wasn't enough. It had been embarrassing driving in the biggest car on the street and seeing little children without shoes run up to sell us a box of bandaids, trying to earn a few pesos. It was embarrassing to think that these girls I had called friends had no idea that there was a country called Chile where some people lived in cardboard houses, and buses honked endlessly and three-legged dogs roamed the dusty streets looking for a place to die. Where women left their

gated homes and went to the market every morning for freshly-baked bread, passing the man in a neon blue exercise suit performing his morning aerobics to a 1979 disco song that blasted out his portable boombox. A country where the sunset was a fiery orange every night, and people you didn't know kissed your cheek, and hope for many came in the form of an old box of cigarettes.

“I tripped up the steps once at school.”

How could I ever tell these girls about what living in Chile had really been like? How the terrible and the great mixed together and now defined my life. How I had yearned to come back during those long, lonely days, but now I wished only to return to my adopted home. Somehow I was supposed to get along with these girls who only talked about boys, and clothes, and phones. Now I was just another statistic, like everyone else inside the American bubble where life never changed. I belonged to a reality that didn't know me anymore, a refugee in my native land. People around me spoke English, but I didn't understand what they meant.

I never expected to feel that way about coming home. Certainly not when a chubby fist placed a thick breaded sausage into my right hand and a doughy meat pie into my left. We were at a social gathering and I sat alone, the only blonde in a sea of black. I looked up to identify the person who had invaded my space only to find a large woman grinning back at me.

“Choripan,” the woman said, pointing to my right hand.

“Cherry pan,” I mimicked.

The woman smiled. “Empanada,” she mouthed, motioning to my left hand.

“Im pen a da.”

Before leaving, my friends had informed me that I would be eating tacos for the next three years. Or, they taunted: “Chile? Do they eat Chili there?” I quickly found neither to be true.

There, with a chubby woman smiling at me and my hands full of food I'd never heard of, I learned my first Spanish words and was introduced to a land that would forever change my life.

When the gods created the earth, they gathered the best parts from every continent and put it all together in one spot they called *Chile*. At least that's how the legend goes. *A narrow strip of land in South America rich in forests, lakes, and volcanos*. That is what you will read in a travel book. But that is not my Chile. My Chile is not like other people's. My Chile has a nutty, roasted smell like the peanut butter we smuggled in. My Chile feels like rough whiskers against my cheek, a *beso*. My Chile tastes bitter, like an overcooked empanada, but it also tastes sweet like *manjar*. My Chile is the home I never intended to have.

Three weeks into my international experience had me already wanting it to be over. Especially one day at school when two Chilean boys, Juan Carlos and Fernando, came up behind me on my way to gym class.

"Hey, new girl!" Juan Carlos shouted.

I closed my eyes. Should I just keep climbing and act like I didn't hear? I cocked my head back to look at them.

"Fernando thinks you have a nice ass."

I turned around and ran the rest of the way up the stairs. I moved quicker than normal as I entered the female changing room and assumed my usual spot in one of the bathroom stalls. This time instead of changing, I sat on the toilet seat and choked back sobs as I waited for the last cluster of girls to leave before I could bury my head and cry.

Just a few months ago my dad had promised that this would be a good experience. Sitting in those stiff airplane seats and dabbing my eyes with the warm towels the flight attendants

brought, my dad had put his arm around me and squeezed my hand three times. *I love you*, my family's silent code.

“Remember, Whitney,” he whispered. “A turtle doesn't get anywhere by staying in its shell. It has to stick its neck out. ”

Hearing a swear word that I had never heard directed to me was more than I had bargained for, however. When school finally ended and our driver took us home, I dashed up the white cobblestone, passed my mom's extended arms, and hurled into my room. There, buried under a foot of pillows, I cried until my nose got stuffy and I couldn't breathe.

“Whitney, do you want to tell me what's wrong?”

My mom stood at the door. Between tears I recounted the story, embarrassed to say the word *ass* in front of her.

“I hate it here, Mom. Why did we have to move? I just want to go home and be with my friends.”

She didn't say anything, but instead sat with me and stroked my hair until my eyes closed. I don't know what my mom said to my dad, but I do know that my brother, David, walked with me for a month to gym class. My old self would have been annoyed at being followed around by my eleven-year-old little brother, but this was my new life.

David had a large head. My theory is that it was that big in order to house his abnormally large brain, the dial of which was set somewhere between genius and mastermind. I had never paid much attention to him before we moved to Chile. Other than the occasional fight, we both had pretty separate agendas.

David first earned my respect when we coaxed the two babysitters watching us to play a game of hide-and-go-seek tag. Our parents were away at a training which meant that David and I had free reign of the house and the afternoon. As one of the adults rounded a corner about to grab my sleeve, I jerked away and the hand that would have been my captor struck out and knocked off a mid-sized marble statue my parents had on display. It fell to the floor, decapitated. Never one to be unnerved, David rushed to locate a ping-pong ball which he decorated with a sharpie smiley face and placed on top of the statue's hollow neck.

That began a history of mischief. We passed the time learning piano duets, letting our batons fly as we conducted John Philip Sousa over our radio, and defending our pool against the imaginary raids of the Chilean mafia.

David and I were no less exuberant at school. We spent lunch time challenging each other to typing tests in the computer lab and folding paper cranes to hang in our teachers' classrooms. Most of the students couldn't understand the odd boy and girl from Utah and so they left us alone, but we found unexpected friends in two girls from Japan and one from Korea. Sometimes we ate lunch with them, swapping our fruit rollups for pieces of seaweed and chicken.

One time Yoon Jin from Korea pulled David aside and asked in broken English, "Why you play with sista?"

"What do you mean?" David asked.

"I have one brother. We do not play."

Without hesitation, David responded, "I like playing with her. She is my best friend."

David got me through those lonely years of gym class and school lunch.

That all changed when we moved home. Now I was sixteen, David was fourteen, and we both had to learn how to refit into a peer group that had carved us out. We were older and were expected to act it. Gone were the days of imaginary games and folded paper. David didn't have too hard a time readjusting; he was always good at making friends. I, on the other hand, sat in my tenth-grade English class counting the days until I could graduate and leave to culinary school. *Food, I thought. That is a language I understand.*

"Mrs. Pierce," The loudspeaker cackled, making everyone in the room jump and bringing me back to reality. "Could you send Whitney down to the principal's office?"

Amid my classmates' teasing *oohs*, I made my way down the E wing corridor, feeling a mixture of relief and terror knot in my stomach. When I got there I was surprised to find my dad.

"Do you have everything, Whitney?" My dad asked. "Let's go for a drive."

I nodded dumbly and followed him to the car. We didn't speak much; our relationship had been strained ever since returning home. I broke the silence when we pulled into a deserted parking lot.

"Where are we?"

My dad smiled and pointed to a brown and yellow sign: *Pantrucas Chilean Restaurant*. As we walked in and read the familiar titles off the menu—Ensalada de Tomates, Empanadas de Pino, Pie de Limón—my heart filled with an emotion I hadn't felt for many weeks: joy. I took my dad's hand and gave him three hard squeezes, something I had refused to do for months. *I love you.*

"See, I told you," My dad said, giving me a hug. "A turtle doesn't get anywhere by staying in its shell. It has to stick its neck out."

Now you know my story and why I shout out for the humanities. My voice will never be silenced because my story is who I am. It is important because it is mine. That is what the humanities is. The emotions, thoughts, and experiences that make us who we are and teach us what it means to be human. The stories that bring us together and celebrate our similarities and our differences. The question shouldn't be if we need the humanities, but rather what we would do without them. It is a fight that needs everyone. Now it is time to stick your neck out, share your story, and stand with those who have gone before. We decide what we stand for; I for one stand and shout for the humanities.