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Chiapas, Mexico

by Linnaea Cunha, Creative Writing

Linfield College Semester Abroad Program in Oaxaca, Mexico

The streets should be swarming but they're not. Instead there are blue masks and a silence strange for Monday morning. We are in Chiapas, the southernmost state in Mexico, in a hotel in the former state capital. Ten students at the end of a semester abroad. Even here, where certificates on museum walls act as reminders of the area's past ties to Guatemala, people are reacting quickly to the news from México City. We're hours away from that epicenter, but swine flu, in this time before the jokes about the name stripped the thing itself of some power, was a chilling phrase. With our youth, our immortality drenched in American pop culture, we whisper to each other "this feels like a zombie movie." The stillness, the anticipation, those medical masks.

It's strange to see a city so frightened, especially because it is otherwise so lovely. Nestled in high in the mountains, San Cristobal de las Casas is a dream. The buildings are colonial, sturdy yet graceful with delicately arched windows and doorways, their facades painted cream and blue and yellow. The streets are paved with stones and wind like an orderly maze, wide enough for comfort but close enough for mystery. Up here things are lush; the jacaranda seems a brighter shade of purple, the hotel courtyards are filled with plants and above tiled roofs peek so very many trees. In gardens you can find bracken ferns, plush moss, pine trees, bougainvillea, little flowers like bells and paper lanterns. In the afternoon around three the rain comes with a sound like thunder made by the sheer force of the water against the tiles, against the panes, against the stone streets. The closeness of the clouds, the weight of all that water. It's a physical oppression, but one that lifts after an hour leaving the streets slick and the air fresh. They call this a *pueblo magico*, a magic village. And with the lingering rain, those mountains against the sky, the way the humid air turns our faces to porcelain after so many months of dry wind, it is. The strange contrast of the buildings, the streets, and the colors, the encroaching greenery, the way the mountains loom, it's like being in a Europe enchanted, removed from time, from logic.

Only all the picturesque magic can't completely stop the intertwined spread of rumor and speculation. Pharmacies are now sold out of face masks and public schools have been closed as a precautionary measure. We heard from a girl who heard from a girl from Vermont that the U.S. embassy has been temporarily closed. In our hotel it feels like a siege; trapped by rain, trapped by disease. Even when we venture out, hugging the walls of narrow streets, we are trapped close against our own breath by that layer of material clammy against the mouth and nose. We can curl up in our beds beneath the heavy blankets, wool and patterned and piled in layers, but there's a dampness that never leaves them, and our stomachs keep clenching in knots.

Through it all the rain in San Cristobal is torrential, a pounding and a tremor, trapping everyone inside for a few hours. In our hotel siege we sit, creased brows and computer screens flicking from CNN to BBC to the CDC and back again. But it is a beautiful siege--lush tree-covered mountains peaking through the clouds and mist, everything glistening and dripping and blurring in the rain. For every moment where panic rears up and causes us to spit out words of fear and pull our masks a little closer, there is another of exhilaration at the wonder of this place that has us standing on the hotel roof laughing in the rain. This vast world can be so scary, but we are so lucky to be here to see it.