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Robin Cone-Murakami

Study Abroad Essay Contest

Galapagos, Ecuador, Spring 2013

Never Thought It Would Be So Hard

Never thought goodbyes would be so hard...we came into this program as strangers, as individuals with our own expectations, our own goals and insecurities about entering into a new life with new people in a new country. Four months later, as the semester comes to a close, we have transformed, not just as individuals but also as a group...as a family. It brings on melancholy feelings and memories thinking of the past four months of my life and recalling those last precious moments with the strangers whom I came to know as family. I left Ecuador with sisters, with brothers, mothers, fathers, and cousins. It is such a great grand world we live in and everything seems so far away from everything else. But this whole experience made me realize exactly how small it is. Four months can change everything. It all depends on where you are, whom you're with and what you're doing. I left my family, my country, and my home to embark on a strange new journey and I came back with an army of a family and a fiery passion to change the things I can and the patience and wisdom to accept the things I cannot. During my last few weeks in Ecuador, I was nervous to travel back to awaiting problems, excited to take on my new challenges, and sad to leave the people I had come to love. My last three weeks in the country I had come to adore played out as such...

My host family hosted a going away party for Julie, the volunteer living in the house with us, and me. My host mom prepared our favorite Ecuadorian dish, "Pollo con coca cola," or chicken with coca cola sauce and an Ecuadorian drink for family and friends who came to dinner to say goodbye. After dinner, I went out with my host sister, host cousin and Julie to one of the popular bars where we hung out with friends while listening to live music and failing horribly at pool. After the bar, we moved on to the discothèques, what we call clubs, and danced the night away to salsa, merengue, and reggaeton with other students, volunteers and locals. As we moved our hips to the Latin music, friends whirled past, led by their partners into daring combinations of twists and turns. To end the night, we took a cool dip in the ocean. As we giggled together, and the small waves pushed past us onto the shore, the moonlight shone off the current and highlighted our smiles.

The next morning, I woke up bright and early to meet other students at the main pier to embark on a fishing boat until late afternoon. In ordinary circumstances this would not be such a big deal, but since the Galápagos is surrounded by the Marine Reserve, no one is allowed to fish aside from small-scale fishermen who have acquired permits to do so. Therefore, as tourists, it would be completely illegal for us to fish if we weren't students on a field trip. For most of the morning, we cruised along the coastline of San Cristóbal with two lines in the back of the boat. While we were not asking the fishermen questions about their profession and the paradox of being able to fish in a Marine Reserve, we lay on the bow of the boat and swapped stories while the sun turned our skin a darker shade of brown. We ate our packed lunch in a sandy cove with clear light-blue

water. As we floated, baby sharks no bigger than my forearm swam in small circles underneath the surface and large pelicans dove and swallowed small fish whole. On our way back to town, we caught a large fish with scales that shined rainbow in the sun.

Unfortunately, even in the Galápagos, where the sun shines bright most days and the animals greet you as friends, bad news finds me in this world among worlds. My best friend had run into significant health problems, so I decided to change my flight to go home to Hawaii earlier than I had originally planned. Life in a foreign country, on an isolated National Park of an island had turned tables on me and I was faced with phone calls with limited fuzzy connection, Facebook messages and email to communicate across sea and continent. I was worried for my friend and stressed about my final exam and papers, and anxious about my dwindling time on the islands, but my friends kept me breathing and my head above the waves. Amongst the worry and stress, I found a respite in singing at the impromptu graduation we set up for our friend Vanessa who would not return in time to her home university for her own. After our final exam, we stood lining both sides of the beach entryway as Vanessa walked down her sandy aisle in white dress and a cardboard cap made from a breakfast cereal box. People gave merry speeches, offered toasts and congratulations and gave out awards (I won the award for the student to most likely negotiate a peace treaty!). To bring the ceremony to an end, I was commissioned to sing the Graduation Song by Vitamin C. Everyone gathered round swaying to and fro singing along to the chorus with me. As the song ended, we hugged, we kissed and Vanessa walked away as a college graduate.

The next day saying goodbye to my Galápagueño friends and family was much more difficult than I ever thought it could be. That morning I bid goodbye to my host sister, who had to go to work, and as I sat on my bed crying as she left the house, my little host brother sat on my bed petting my hair and my host sister's four-year-old daughter cuddled up next to me as the three of us spent one of our last moments together. It was probably one of the sweetest things that had ever happened to me. Later that morning, my host sister and I held hands through the window at her teller booth at the bank offering words of consolation and promises to visit. I gave kisses to my host family as we parted ways outside of our house and I waved goodbye as the taxi whisked me away. My last glimpses back showed my little host brother running alongside my taxi window before we turned the corner and headed on towards the plane that would fly me away from my Galápagueño life and back to the States.

Back in Quito, our program paid for hotel rooms for all the students to stay in throughout the weekend until that Sunday, when most students would return back home. I spent the weekend walking around downtown Quito with friends doing some last-minute sightseeing and souvenir buying. On Saturday night, we attended a farewell dinner at the university with our professors. After dinner we all crowded into one room on the top floor and spent the entire night swapping funny and embarrassing stories, telling truths, and giving compliments until it was time for the first round of students to leave. I had never been around so many people crying and sniffing, clinging to each other until the last possible moment. I had not even cried at my own high school graduation, but I did cry seeing these people leave, the strangers I had only met four months before.

My previous host family offered their house for me to stay in until my flight later in the week. The next few days, I spent some time with my old friends from Quito, savoring my sweet time left in Ecuador. When it came time to leave, my host family drove me to the airport at night and my host mom, having a managing job at the airport, walked me all the way to my gate. Hugs and kisses were not enough to fill my heart as I bid goodbye to my new family. Promises to return and visit were all I could offer, but the gratitude I felt would not be fully expressed or repaid. I hope that someday they may visit me in Hawaii so that I may show them the same hospitality, love and friendship I was so surprised and comforted by when I first stepped off the plane and into my host family's arms. Every time I share a piece of my adventure I feel I do not do it justice. I loved the people, I loved the music, I loved the food, I loved the mountains, and the rainforest, and the sea. I loved it all. A blog can only convey so much of an experience but I hope my writing gave you a bit of excitement and a sense of wonder. Don't believe Ecuador is all I have written it up to be? In my eyes, it is. And I cannot paint you a clearer picture than the real thing. From the grand city of Quito, to the rolling hills of the Páramo, to the trees that tower above in the Amazon, to the majestic volcanoes of the Andes, and to the salty blue ocean around the Galápagos Islands where giant manta rays and hammerhead sharks rule the seas, I cannot think of a country with so much diversity, so much wonder and so many questions unanswered and places unexplored...Still don't believe me? Then here's my challenge to you: get a passport; get on a plane and go.