

Chapter 1: Why The Hell Am I On This Motorcycle?!

The three stars of Orion's Belt blink familiarly at me from an unfamiliar night sky. I look at them, shaking my head in disbelief. What the hell am I doing on the back of a motorcycle at nine at night in frickin' South America? I'm fifty-four-years-old for god's sake.

The young teenage boy driving the bike leans into a corner and, instinctively, I lean in the opposite direction, hoping my move will keep us upright. My grip on the young driver's thin waist is at first tentative, uncomfortable with the intimate connection his threadbare T-shirt causes, but then more desperate as I watch the pavement race by beneath my feet. Hey - what did that sign just say?? My destination's thirty kilometres away? On this metal purveyor of death?

I feel like I've stepped into a book and am watching myself, a crazy woman in a faded orange singlet and drab shorts, sandwiched between a skinny teen-age boy and a big, dirty backpack. Her frightened eyes wide beneath her short and messy dirty-blonde hair as she scans the darkness trying to see what lies beyond the single beam of light the small dirt bike gives off.

Clearly, I hadn't been thinking straight ten minutes ago, when I climbed off the small wooden boat that had brought me across the Rio Magdalena. It was much darker than I'd expected when we landed and there were no lights to assure me we were in Mompox where I thought I'd been headed. Hustled up the slope to an assortment of vehicles and moonlit bodies under a tree, a mass of men rushed at me.

"Aquí, Señora!" "Here, Madam! You want a taxi?" "You want ride?" From every direction, voices yelled at me. Some in English, most in unintelligible Spanish. Tired and overwhelmed by the noise, I searched the faces, hoping to find one that was less aggressive than the others. A young boy smiled at me from behind the crowd and I pushed through the others to reach his side.

I grip this young boy's body now, wishing that it had been a taxi driver who smiled at me back at the river. That I was speeding down this dirt road wrapped in a protective metal frame instead of perched on the back half of a narrow, vinyl seat, afraid to relax my feet in case my leg touched the hot engine. With my pack safe beside me on a seat instead of feeling like it was going to topple me backward off the bike, wondering how much it was going to hurt when hit the ground and my bare legs skidded across the dirt at a million miles an hour.

I blink rapidly as something flies in my eye and though I'm reluctant to let go of the boy's waist, I do, desperate to fish out whatever is plastered on my eyeball. I slide the much-smaller-than-it-feels mass out of my eye then retrieve my death grip on my young driver.

Able to see now, I relax a bit. It's not that bad, I admit as the warm wind cools my face, ruffles my hair. I look up again, at the blackened sky, at the thousands of stars twinkling down at me. No...I think...it's not that bad at all. As long as I don't look down.

I smile with a sudden thought of my bike-loving sibling, always trying to get me on her dirtbike when I was young. Look at me, sis, I think! I did it. I'm on a motorbike! And not just in any old place. In the middle of South fucking America!

We drive on and on through the darkness, the bike's high-pitched whine the only noise in the still night, not a glimmer of light other than the faint golden beam ahead of the bike.

Twenty more minutes pass before I see anything that hints of civilization, but then, we pass a dim light in a small, curtained window, and then another. More lights show up and we suddenly hit pavement. Are we here?

My young driver pulls off the road and turns to me. "*Cual hotel, Señora?*" I tell him the name of the hotel I plan to stay at. A hotel, that, according to my guidebook, has a reputation for kindness *and* cheap dormitory beds for 20,000 pesos (nine dollars).

We wind through the village's empty streets, dark but for the moon and the white facades of homes it lights up. Then I see the river again, a dark shadow behind the silhouettes of trees. The air smells musty, of river rot and decomposing leaves, carried to me by the light breeze.

We slow down as we reach a line of dark buildings and then stop. My driver nods at one of them. Though the last bit of the ride was better than the first terrifying part, I breathe a sigh of relief as I climb off the bike on to the unmoving pavement.

"*Puedes esperar una momento?*" I ask the boy. Can you wait for a moment? He nods.

I walk up to the huge wooden door and knock. A moment later, an old woman peers at me suspiciously through a barred window. "*Tiene cuartos?*" I ask. Do you have rooms?

Her eyes sweep over me, taking in my old sweater, shorts and dusty packpack. "Yes," she grunts.

I turn back to the young boy on the bike. "*Gracias por esperar.*" Thanks for waiting. I hand him some coins then wave as he heads off into the night.

I turn back to the hotel owner. "You speak English," I say, smiling.

"Of course I do. I'm American!" she spits at me. "The rooms are 70,000 pesos," she says, almost angrily. What the heck - where's the friendly smile? Apparently, she didn't read the guidebook.

"I can't pay *that* much," I say. "Can I stay in one of your 20,000-peso rooms?"

“WHAT?” the old lady screams. You think I will rent you a room for 20,000 pesos? Are you crazy? Do you know how much it costs us to run this place? I can’t imagine what you were thinking, coming to my home this night, thinking I would let you stay here for 20,000 pesos.”

I try to calm her. “It’s only what I saw in the guidebook, I’d be happy to pay a little more,” I say.

“What guidebook did you see this in?? No guidebook would say there are rooms here for that price! You must be crazy to think it would be worth my effort to make up a bed for 20,000. You should just leave,” she says.

“Yes,” I say through my shocked stupor, again feeling like the night’s not quite real. “Thank you. I’ll look for another place.”

“Well,” she says, I can’t imagine what you were thinking...but, since you’re here...you might as well look at the rooms.” She opens the medieval door and beckons me in.

Despite my misgivings about staying with this unfriendly old woman, I follow her through the cavernous rooms of the hotel toward a small room and then she goes off on another rant.

“Look how big these rooms are, and these beautiful new bathrooms!” We walk by the kitchen. Angrily, she shouts out. “You see this bleach? And that dish soap? Do you know how much I pay for those things?”

“Yes, I do see that, *señora*,” I say, again trying to calm her. Your house is very beautiful. I’m torn between sucking up to her and bolting. But she continues her tirade, and finally, I’ve had enough. I’m obviously so not welcome here.

“Thank you, *señora*,” I say. “ I’ll find something else.” I turn and walk out of the kitchen, my eyes searching for the door to the street. She follows me. With a last insincere thank you and terse goodbye, I walk quickly away from the house into the dark night.

Trudging along the quiet river through the warm humid darkness, my mind races. So, what next? I guess I should have had a Plan B. I shake my head and snort in disbelief. What a crazy night this has been!

I follow the river past more darkened buildings and fifteen minutes later, as my back begins to ache from the weight of my heavy bag, I finally see a hostel. The Casa de Viajero - the Traveller’s House – that sounds lovely. I walk through its arched doorway.

A young woman greets me with a most welcoming smile and, within ten minutes, I’m slipping into my PJ’s and crawling appreciatively between the crisp, sweet-smelling white sheets of my simple, single bunk. I pull the thick quilt from the foot of the bed over me and snuggle it up to my chin, sighing in relief and contentment.

I'm the only one in the room; the other three bunks are empty for now. Again I sigh, more deeply this time, exhausted to my core. I close my eyes, savouring the silence.

But despite being so tired, my thoughts won't quiet. What a crazy trip this has been already! I've had more adventures in the last three weeks than I had during the entire year prior. Or maybe the last *two* years! As I think about my journey, the last anxious hours slowly disappear, replaced by memories. Of dancing in the moonlight, floating in mud volcanoes, standing up to an army of lobsters and having their siblings for dinner, eating no end of weird food, and puking numerous times.

This is why I love travelling, I think as I relax more deeply under the covers. Living life to its absolute maximum, every day different, growing and learning with each new adventure.

I wish I could convince my friends how magical, how life-altering travel is. Simple travel. Minimal clothes. Long-term, budget travel. The kind of travel where you don't know where you're going, but somehow, you know you'll figure it out.

I have no idea what the next eleven months in South America is gonna bring, but I can't wait.

Chapter 2 – The Beginning

But perhaps I should begin my story where it should start...at the beginning.

Three weeks ago, I couldn't have even imagined that I'd soon be hurtling down a dark road on a motorbike. I was back in cold, snowy Canada then, daydreaming about South America where I was heading to in two days time. Buzzing with excitement to finally be doing what I'd dreamed of doing for thirty years. To travel solo for a year. To once again, put a backpack over my shoulders and head into the unknown. Without a plan.

Thirty years ago, when I did same thing at age 23, everyone deemed me a bit crazy. When I mentioned I was off to hitchhike through Europe for a year with a backpack, my family and friends gaped at me. Why would you do such a thing? they asked me. Wondering, perhaps how I, with my complete lack of common sense (according to them) might survive such a crazy trip.

Now, thirty years later, when I informed my friends and family I was taking a year sabbatical from work to travel solo through South America, they didn't seem as surprised. They still didn't understand it though. Why would anyone want to travel for a year with only a backpack? they asked. How can you leave your job for a year? How can you afford to do that?

You just do it, I'd said to my colleagues as I danced out the office door.

And so, here I am. On a plane, with my friend Brenda who's joining me for three weeks. I'm so thankful to start this trip with her. I won't be half as anxious knowing I'm not heading into this journey alone. That I can ease myself into it and have a few weeks to relearn the ropes. And she's gonna be so much fun to hang with...I never met a girl who laughs so much. And she's super excited to be travelling with me. Even though I'm ten years older than she is.

It will be interesting to see how I feel when she leaves. I've been waiting for umpteen years to travel by myself again, to again experience the crazy adventures I'd had when I was twenty-three that would never have happened if I were with someone. I wonder if I'll still want to go it alone quite as much after three weeks of, I'm sure non-stop laughing over the stuff we do together.

So now we are sitting in our narrow, tiny seats, four hours into our eleven-hour flight, heading further and further away from Canada.

My mind whirls with both excitement and fear. Oh god. I'm really doing this! *Am I still fit enough to carry a forty-pound backpack around for an hour, looking for a place to stay? I wonder. Will the 'kids' at the hostels want to talk to an 'old lady'? Will those budget dorm rooms I used to love staying in still hold the same appeal, or will the snores and smells of unwashed twenty-something boys drive me to the hotels that I'm more used to these days?"*

As I sit in my allotted twelve uncomfortable inches of space, my nerves prickle with the realization that I'm heading into completely unfamiliar territory and...for a crazy long time – a year! I breathe...make myself relax. You've got this, I tell myself. You know what traveling's all about.

Yes I do. I'm not as naïve as I once was. Not like I was back in 1983 when I got on a plane, off on a year-long solo adventure to Europe where the countries, I imagined then, would be coloured in pink, green, blue or orange. Like the maps I was always poring over. I ponder that silly thinking now, thirty years later, as I head off into the unknown again, realizing that, although that kind of thinking was *very* naïve, it wasn't *so* silly. The colours *do* exist. Maybe not like I'd imagined back then, but as a rich and vibrant tapestry of languages, accents, foods, landscapes, characters and culture.

So, yes, I've got this. Who cares if I'm not the youngster I once was? I'm going to spend this whole year living life to its maximum amazingness. I'm going to eat glorious and strange foods and be fearless while doing so. I'm going to butcher the lovely Spanish language without fear until I can have real conversations with the new friends I meet. And I'm going to see and do crazy ass things and trust that fate and good luck will keep me safe.

And then I'm gonna come home and write a story about my adventures. See if I can help those baffled friends and family members to understand why I travel like I do. Hopefully, inspire them to try it. But maybe I'm dreaming. Maybe after my friends read my stories, they'll think I'm even more crazy.

Chapter 3 – Cartagena – Anxiety, Arepas and Adventures

Oh god, I'm so glad you're with me, Brenda!" I say fervently, as we walk through the Cartagena airport where the buzz of a hundred indecipherable conversations assaults us from every direction.

She looks at me curiously. "What's the matter?" Her face is open, her eyes bright under her now-furrowed brows. She thinks I have this travel thing all figured out, I realize, wonderingly. Ha. Well okay... I can pretend I know what I'm doing.

I smile. "Nothing. Just happy you're here!"

And I am! I have lots of friends who love the idea of travelling but very few friends, like Brenda, who, despite never having travelled anywhere outside North America, *want* to throw a backpack on and bus aimlessly with me through a country with a dubious reputation. Like me, she's dreamed of travelling all her life – but with three young girls, she just hasn't been able to manage to fulfill that dream. I love that I get to be part of her first big trip. She introduced me to running more than a decade ago, pushing me, after years of sloth, to jog, and to, a few months later, run ten long, aching, lung-busting kilometres. And so now, as she motivated me then, I hope I'm motivating her – that this will be only the first of many journeys for this dear friend of mine.

But I'm not quite the fearless leader she thinks I am. After reassuring her with a smile, I go back to anxious mode. Quietly. Without letting her see. Raking through my memory bank, searching for the Spanish phrases for 'Where's the bus to the city centre?' 'How much?' 'Can we get off here, please?' The words that I hope will get us from the airport to the hostel.

As we exit the glass doors of the airport, I see a line of taxis. Oh my god, that would be so much easier than a bus! He'll take us right to our door. Arguments swirl through my brain...pretty lazy, Caryn. You're supposed to be a backpacker, not a spoiled tourist who takes taxis. And a bit of a hit to your budget, don'tcha think?

While I'm arguing with myself, Brenda is doing no such thing. She's already walking toward the taxi in front of us. Her choice made, I let my arguments slip away and embrace what I know I

really want to do. There's two of us splitting the fare, after all. And I can live with a little guilt on this first day.

"Ten dollars," the driver says to my hesitant "*Cuántas, por favor?*" Sold. We dump our bags into the open trunk and pull away.

The highway is a solid mass of vehicles, four or five-wide with no semblance of lanes and horns screaming from every one of them. A stark change from the noisy, yet civilized and immaculate airport. Holding my breath, I watch people and scraggly dogs dash across the highway. Cars speed on, not deterred for a moment. Our taxi merges on to the highway and we join the melee.

And then we're off it, driving through a busy neighbourhood.

"Getsemani?" I ask the driver. He nods.

Previously, a haven of prostitution and drugs, this historical neighbourhood's shoddy bars and brothels have been replaced with bright hostels, restaurants, and shops in a myriad of colours - bright blue, salmon pink, sunshiny gold. Getsemani is where we'll be living for a couple of days.

Behind the doors of the Mamallena, our hostel, a pretty, dark-haired woman in a short-sleeved red silk shirt stands at a tall counter.

"Hola. Me llamo Caryn Stroh...tenemos reservaciones."

And then, our beds secured for three nights, we follow the woman through Mamallena's colourful and tropical courtyard, flashing smiles at the other travellers scattered about, some on sun beds, others at tables. I glance down at my white and pasty body and cringe as I compare it to the lovely brown bodies on the loungers. Just give us a couple of weeks, I say to them silently. We'll be as pretty as you then.

We are back outside within minutes. Smack into mayhem and heat. Horns screech as cars and motorcycles impatiently scream at the crowd slowing them down, and a blast of hot air hits me like it's solid. Cooking grease and pungent body odors, the only smells I recognize, saturate the air. It's crazy. And I love it!

We walk without a plan, our eyes darting from one side of the street to the other. An old man is busy at his cart, pouring coffee from a plastic thermos into styrofoam cups, handing each as it's poured to one of the noisy group of men arguing around the cart. Wagons, piled high with fruit: thick, red slabs of juicy watermelon, chunks of orange papayas and mangos, and slices of golden pineapples. I breathe in the tangy and sweet scents.

"Crap, it's hot," Brenda says. It is. Every breath is a mouthful of heat.

"*Dos, por favor,*" I tell a tiny woman tossing lemons in and out of a metal press with amazing speed, squeezing their pungent clear juice into a, hopefully, clean pail. She hands each of us a big, plastic cup of juice then waits while we thirstily drink half of it down. She tops up our cups. Wow, how nice.

"*Gracias,*" I say, smiling at her. "*Cuántas?*" How much?

"Mil," she says, and I hand her a thousand pesos, about fifty cents. Crazy. For two, no...she actually gave us *four* glasses, of cold, delicious lemonade. Wow.

As the afternoon deepens, my stomach begins to grumble.

I stop at the next food stand I see. A woman, her white apron dark with oil stains, is pushing small pieces of white cheese into balls of dough, flattening them and throwing them on to a sizzling grill beside several now-golden cakes.

"*Qué son ellas?*" I ask. What are they?

"*Arepas con queso,*" she says. *Queso* I know – that's cheese. But arepas? No idea.

"Do you want to split one just to try it?" I ask Brenda. She nods. I hold up one finger and the woman lifts a golden patty off the grill. She spreads butter over its surface, drops it into a small, waxy bag then scoops a plastic spoonful of fried things from a metal bowl and fills the rest of the bag.

"*Gracias,*" I say as I hand over another thousand pesos. Holding the bag out first to Brenda and then taking a few of the thin, crispy rounds, myself, to eat while we walk, we try our first Colombian food.

"Tasty," Brenda says, as she nibbles. "Kind of like dried bananas but not as sweet."

"Platanos," I tell her, recognizing them from an earlier trip to Central America.

I break the arepa, handing her a roughly torn half then biting into my own, already imagining its cheesy crispness. But...the delicious bits of cheese bubbling through the frying dough are more salt than cheese. And it's not butter sweetening up its top but, rather, oily margarine whose rancid smell makes my olfactory senses cringe as I chew my first bite, just as that nasty Parkay I remember having as a kid.

We stop at the next food cart. Looks *much* better. Onions, thinly sliced and fried a golden brown cover half the grill's surface, with thick sausages sizzling alongside. A sweaty T-shirted boy wipes his dripping forehead with a bandanna then fills a small bag with grilled sausage and onions. They are spicy - full of cumin, garlic and heat - and sinfully juicy and delicious.

We walk forever, popping over to this and that food stand to try yet more greasy meats, and into a tiny open bar for a cold beer, where I tried to ignore the small crowd of leering, leathery-skinned men in the corner staring at us like we were hookers and making, I'm sure, rude comments, seemingly without worry that we'd understand them. Brenda, of course, was oblivious to their stares, just happy to have a cold beer in her hand.

After hours of exploration, Brenda turns to me with a "Do you have any idea where we are?" We've twisted and turned so many times we could be anywhere at this point. And the day has gone from bright to dusky almost without us realizing it. Funnily though, I'm not in the least bit nervous as I contemplate which way we should head next. A curious peace, given that we're completely lost. In the world's largest cocaine producing country. But it's difficult to feel nervous when moon shine and a warm breeze accompany us like kind guardians as we walk through the dark streets.

The narrow street suddenly widens into a large plaza, and we enter the open space, awestruck by its grandeur, the magical setting created by the moonlight on the cobblestone, the soft gleam of light illuminating the arched windows of the towering stone cathedral at the end of the square.

The square's filled with tables of people, music, laughter, and a thousand Spanish conversations. Laughing, I watch a small group of teenage boys follow slowly, almost sneakily, behind two gorgeous, dark-haired *chicas* teetering over the cobbles in precariously high heels. Thank god, I'm past the age of wearing those.

As we weave into the crowd, I look at the people congregating around the tables. Roly-poly grandmas, kerchiefed, in light sweaters and sombre black skirts, and younger women sporting bright 80's style blouses with puffed sleeves and scooped necks. A mustachioed grandpa so handsome in his old-fashioned suit jacket and felt hat, stands chatting happily with a younger counterpart. I see the affection in his eyes as he bends down to pat the head of a little one tugging on his pant leg, who then runs back to climb into a woman's – his mama, I suppose, then down just as quickly, clearly too excited to stay on his chair. The conversations from every corner of the plaza create a tangible buzz in the air.

We sit down at one of the tables and, within seconds, a waiter approaches.

"*Que quiere, chicas?*" he asks. What do you want, girls?

"Did you hear that Bren?, I say, grinning. "He called us 'girls.'"

Her brow furls in confusion. "We *are* girls," she says. Oh well, when she's fifty-four, she'll understand why it's cool to be called a girl.

Sangrias ordered, we relax. The plaintive notes of a guitar behind us turns our heads and I grin happily as two young men strumming guitars wander toward us. When they notice our eyes on them, they break into a beautiful ballad, their voices harmonizing beautifully. Their dark long-lashed eyes meet Brenda and my admiring, blue ones.

"*Muchas gracias!*" we both say as they finish their pretty melody. I fish in my small purse for some coins.

"*No, gracias.*" one of the boys says, waving my coins away. "*No necesario,*" he says. "*Solo queremos sus corazones.*" We only want your hearts, he says. , ' he says in Spanish. Our smiles grow.

They introduce themselves to us as Alberto and William, and begin their next song, another intricate and plaintive melody that somehow turns up the moon's brightness a notch. Gosh, and I haven't even started drinking yet! My smile widens as I absorb the loveliness of the song.

A pile of colourful hats walks toward us from the next table and, as the headless legs reach us, a hand is flung out, sweeping the hats to the side and revealing a smiling *Señor*. With much flourish, the hat salesman bows, and then, with his impressive, drooping mustache quivering over top of his laughing mouth, he selects a hat from the high pile – a huge, flimsy pink concoction - and plops it on Brenda's head. He tosses an even larger and floppier *sombrero* on mine.

Unwilling to be left out of the party, Alberto and William begin a lively and joyful song. One that brings Brenda and I, in unison, onto our feet where we prance with a total lack of self-consciousness and abandon in our beautiful hats, giggling at our silliness and feeling confident and beautiful. The night feels magical. The kind of magic that only music, moonlit plaza and the heady attention of three men can bring.

Discovering our sangrias on the table, we sit down and pick up our glasses. As we click them together in a celebratory toast, the entertaining trio, perhaps seeing our attention is no longer on them, disappears into the night. Without asking for a single peso. A magical moment, for sure

We sip our sangrias, and I savor its tang and icy sweetness.

"So fun!" Brenda says, her eyes sparkling and her grin wide. We're both buzzing with excitement, and guzzle our drinks too quickly, bringing on an immediate and intense alcoholic buzz. Too full of good energy to sit still, then, we stand up and begin weaving our way through the tables to the other side of the plaza.

At the edge of the square, a little market's been set up with tables of macrame bracelets, colourful woven bags, hats, and umpteen cheap, plastic fridge magnet emblazoned with 'Te Amo Cartagena.' I love Cartagena. Yes, I do. I buy my first souvenir, a delicate anklet with a tiny bead at its centre.

As I hand a few coins to the woman and tuck away my new purchase, I ask her, "*Donde está Getsemani?*" She points and we walk out of the plaza in the direction of Getsmanii.

We giggle constantly as we walk down unfamiliar streets, both of us high on joy and appreciation for the night we've had. The days events roll through my mind and I smile to myself thinking about all the times I've used Spanish today. How anxious I was at the airport wondering if my pathetic vocabulary would get us safely to the hostel. Such useless worrying. Somehow, I've gotten us where we've needed to go, fed and watered, and set up with nice, warm beds to go home to. So proud of myself.

We reach Getsemani and our hostel in no time at all, though I have no idea how we did so. Floated perhaps. Despite our excitement, I pass out quickly, my body, if not my brain, exhausted from our very long day.

I wake in the night, a little groggy and wondering for a moment where I am. A loud clunk beside me and I suddenly remember. I peer through the dark and watch several kids as they tramp through the room and kick off their shoes (the loud clunk), just coming back, from their night out. I pull out my little alarm clock from under my pillow. Holy! It's five in the morning! That's a late night. Slowly, the room quiets and I fall back to sleep.

I wake up again at seven and slowly crawl out from my sheets, still in the same clothes I wore yesterday. *Well, get used to that*, I think to myself – *you only brought two changes of clothes on the trip*. I stand up, expecting to see Brenda sleeping in the bunk above me, but the bed's empty, the sheets and thin coverlet pulled back messily. Where the heck is she?

I exit the room, tiptoeing so as not to wake the sleeping kids, wondering a little why I'm being so kind after their noisy entrance in the wee hours. Over the next couple of days, I discover that late nights – or early mornings - are the norm, at least for these kids. They'll catch some sleep for a couple hours, then hit the beach, grab some food and do it all over again the next night. Crazy. I'm happy I've left that kind of partying behind me. It's much nicer to wake up feeling fresh and ready for the day with a wallet still full of pesos.

I head to the courtyard, hoping to find both a hot cup of coffee and Brenda. The sun beams into the outdoor space, almost too bright for my sleepy morning eyes. Brenda sits a picnic table at the side of the room, chatting with a tanned young blonde. She sees me and waves. I smile and silently mouth 'coffee' at her as I head to where I think the kitchen might be.

I find both coffee and *desayuno* – breakfast. As I look at the food options, Brenda walks up behind me.

“So, we can have free pancakes,” I tell her, “And there’s fruit salad too, but it costs.” Both of us forego the fruit and Señora Not-Gonna-Smile-Cause-I’m-Sick-of-Cheap-Backpackers hands us a plate of pancakes.

Taking a seat at an empty bench, we eat our pancakes, gazing about at the colourful murals on the courtyard’s walls and the flowering vines climbing from brightly painted pots. Though it’s very early, the sun is already warm, and I turn my face into it, basking for a moment like a lizard and enjoying the indecipherable but comforting buzz of conversation throughout the courtyard.

Last night, we chose amongst a list of fun activities written on a blackboard in the hostel’s hallway and so, with our stomachs full, we head outside to join the group already in the shiny, spiffed up eight-passenger tourist van waiting to take us to *De Lodo el Totumo*. A mud volcano? Who wouldn’t want to see that?

I feel sealed off from the real world in our air-conditioned space and watch Cartagena’s early morning activity through the van’s windows as if it was a movie screen.

At the edge of the city, cement becomes dirt, and grey becomes green, the buildings replaced by mango trees and palms. Under the trees, wizened, old women sit in the dusty roadside behind colourful piles of fruit and wicker baskets overflowing with vegetables and dried herbs.

A couple of hours later, we pile out of the van and strip off to the bathing suits we put on before donning shorts and tank tops this morning. Following the others, we walk through the dusty parking lot and past a few grass and tin-roofed shacks, toward a fifty-metre-high, dark, cone-shaped pile of soil. We join the line of bathing-suited tourists climbing the wooden, rickety stairs up and around the cone.

At the top, I look down into its shaded interior and observe tens of grey, slimy bodies floating in mud in a twenty-five-foot square mud hole. Brenda climbs from the platform to a ladder and begins her descent. I follow her down and as we reach the muddy orgy, the bodies break apart, making space for us. Submerging myself into the thick, grey muck, I’m pleasantly surprised at how warm and comforting it is. There is nothing to anchor my feet to and so we lie beside each other, floating motionless in the bottomless pool. Suddenly, I feel myself moving. We are pushed along the surface by two young boys through the other floating bodies then transferred to the hands of two handsome young *chicos* who leisurely begin massaging our slick, muddy bodies. Though very strange and a tad invasive, the massage is quite wonderful. I lie back with my eyes closed and try to relax as the boy’s strong hands rub and squeeze the muscles along my arms and then my thighs. Despite the strangeness of the experience, I’m disappointed when, too quickly, I’m pushed away, my spa moment over. I float languidly for a few moments

more, then, suddenly tired of the hairy legs and sharp elbows poking me, I climb up and out. Brenda follows close behind me.

We're led down a hill to the lake below us, to a group of old women with buckets. One gestures me toward an empty chair and then, this old woman, in her long skirt and apron, the sleeves of her sweater rolled up, pours bucket after bucket of lake water over my head and body. She pulls my bathing suit top out and reaches in past my blushing face to give all of my bits and pieces a good scrub, and then pulls me up from the chair give me a last rinsing. All cleaned up, I stumble back up the hill, too shocked to wait for Brenda.

She finds me five minutes later, but she's laughing so hard she's unable to talk. She tries again, but only gets five words out before she collapses in a giggling fit again. Finally, she's able to talk.

"Oh my god, Caryn! I hear this quiet, little 'plop' as the lady's rinsing me off and when I look down, my pad is sitting there between my feet. Soaked with water and huge! It must have washed out when she poured the water down my bottoms," she says, plaintively. "I look up at her and she looks down then back at me, and then says something to the women sitting under the tree beside us. I don't know what she says, but they all look at me and giggle. And then she leans over and scoops up my Stayfree with the bucket and throws it somewhere. Oh my god... I didn't even see where it went...I couldn't even *look* at them at that point.

I look at her in commiseration between my own fits of laughter as she recounts her story.

"I just left. Without saying anything," she tells me, ending her sordid tale. "Oh my god," she says again.

Back at the parking lot, we gather our cameras from the boy who'd photographed us in our mud bath from the top of the cone and was now waiting, his hand out for a tip. He assures me that our *propina* will be shared with our masseuses *and* those female human washing machines down at the lake.

Brenda and I return to Cartagena with a story for our journals, a story I swear on our friendship not to share with anyone else.