NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Don’t Sign Anything and Other Advice for Volunteering Abroad

A Thesis Submitted to the

University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree

With Upper Division Honors

Department Of

Journalism

By

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DeKalb, Illinois

May, 2012
University Honors Program

Capstone Approval Page

Capstone Title (print or type)

Don't sign anything and other advice for

Volunteering Abroad

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Department of (print or type)  Journalism

Date of Approval (print or type)  8/29/11
AUTHOR: Kyla Gardner

THESIS TITLE: Don't Sign Anything and Other Advice for Volunteering Abroad

ADVISOR: Craig Seymour

ADVISOR’S DEPARTMENT: Communications

DISCIPLINE: Journalism

YEAR: 2011

PAGE LENGTH: 22

BIBLIOGRAPHY: None

ILLUSTRATED: No

PUBLISHED (YES OR NO): No

LIST PUBLICATION: N/A

COPIES AVAILABLE (HARD COPY, MICROFILM, DISKETTE): paper

ABSTRACT (100-200 WORDS): on following page
The process of writing my memoir began with brainstorming. I created mind maps – the webbed charts of bubbles of related ideas – furiously, trying to get as much from my experience down on paper, as many ideas and memories and facts and people as possible.

From there, I reread the journals I had kept. They were helpful for putting together a time-line of more significant events, but were largely full of my complaints and worries and therefore disappointingly less helpful as a chronology of my day-to-day activities.

During the writing process, it was helpful to read memoirs. I saw what worked and what didn’t, what interested me and what different formats and approaches authors had taken.

I began to write. My writings were at first a hodge-podge of short beginnings of story ideas. My advisor and I had decided that my project would be a series of vignettes, so I narrowed down which experiences I wanted to expand into longer scenes.

After more and more writing and revising, I began to see the form my full-length memoir would take, and where the vignettes I had chosen for this project would fit in. It was easier to write them with the overarching form in mind. My final collection is five vignettes of personal memoir about volunteering for a mission in Guatemala.
This first vignette is the first scene of the memoir – it takes place, linearly, 4/5 of the way through my stay in Guatemala, so the book will come back to this scene later and then continue moving forward past it to conclusion.

The second vignette is the second of the memoir – it starts the chronological telling of the story.

Asshole

Josiah moves quickly, grabbing folded clothes on the bed and some from a less tidy pile on the floor.

I ask, “So, if they’re a bunch of assholes, doesn’t that make me the lead asshole?”

He laughs. “No, don’t think that.”

I tiptoe carefully, finding with my feet the few places where the floor is revealed, sidestepping a suitcase to sit on the edge of a bed in this guestroom of Casa Madre.

Katherine walks in with towels and asks if the couple should take them. This is how our conversation is moving: I am interspersed between crises of a less existential matter.

“But, I’ve taken advantage of the mission. $100 a month? I’ve been told that doesn’t even cover eating three meals a day here. And I don’t pay rent.”

“No,” Josiah says. He pauses packing to look at me. “Don’t even worry about that. You have more than worked off your fair share.”

He’s right. I’ve been a slave to this mission for months as the volunteer volunteer manager. It’s those volunteers, dozens of them cycling through the mission each week, they are the assholes I’m referring to. I am never far from my ringing cell phone, from a crisis of culture clash, of language difference, of quintessential American up-tight-freak-out-ness.

And now I’m the one freaking out.

Katherine and Josiah move from room to room, and I follow them. I help them hang the laundry on the clothesline before they have an appointment to scuttle off to say goodbye to someone.

They’re my bosses, a late-20s-something couple from Texas. I’ve been volunteering for the San Lucas Mission in Guatemala for less than four months; they’ve been working for it for almost three years. They’re packing to go home for two weeks, taking back some things before they move back to the U.S. permanently in August.

“Why doesn’t a Guatemalan do my job? That could be a wage for someone.”

“No Guatemalans really want it,” Katherine says. She tells me that a local named Tono used to, but he has since moved to the United States. No one else is fluent enough in English.

“No one wants to work with Americans all day,” Josiah says.

Marie, a retired nurse, a good friend of Katherine and Josiah’s, is here to help watch their five-month-old baby Elianah while they pack. Our conversation started with all five of us – including the infant, though she didn’t contribute much – talking in their living room.

When I had been there for a little bit, they asked, do you mind if we start packing?

Marie is helping to care for their baby, but I feel infantile in my neediness from them.

A few months back, I had found Katherine at the local soccer pitch, a fenced in astro-turfed field no larger than a the size of a maybe two, three 18-wheel trucks side-by-side. She watched Josiah play, rocked Elianah and called out encouragements.
But isn’t the mission kind of a tour service? I had asked her then. What help was the mission really providing?

Well, there wasn’t really a comfortable middle class in San Lucas before the mission, Katherine said. It’s not perfect, but it does do good. The clinic, the coffee production. Be careful of getting too negative, she said.

I hung around long enough to make it seem like I hadn’t just searched her out for this conversation. That I was interested in the game. I watched the ball bounce off of the chain-link fence. Her answers make sense, I thought.

“Come over anytime you want,” Josiah tells me. “You can relax here, watch movies, get away from the mission.”

I take the key to Casa Madre when I am offered it. I ask Josiah if I can bring over Elise and Roberta, my housemates with whom I have become inseparable.

“Better just you,” he says.

Katherine tells me it’s okay to stay at Casa Madre as long as I want. I can tell the mission I’m going on vacation and turn off my cell phone. I can hide; that’s what her and Josiah been doing.

Well, yeah. For months. I noticed. Other volunteers always told me how cool Katherine and Josiah are, or used to be. They are receptive to me, at times. But they are less open now than they once were, I am told, less inviting to newcomers. They had become jaded. I don’t know when they came to their breaking points, but it must have been sometime after their fourth month here, the time I am coming to mine. I feel weak.

They are in a hurry, and we all exit the house. They go on their way to whatever despidida – goodbye – they owe obligation.

I would never officially say goodbye, never have the opportunity to talk to them face-to-face again. A death threat from the limpieza – the mob, kind of, in San Lucas – kept the two in the US longer than they expected, and I took my own permanent leave from Guatemala about a month after this conversation, in June.

Getting In and Getting Here

This feels like cramming for a test.

I read my palm-sized, purple Latin American Spanish phrasebook as the flight attendant walks past. I feel embarrassed. I hope she didn’t see.

This is as doomed to failure as cramming for a piano recital. I had sweated my way through a plonky beginner’s rendition of Fur Elise in high school, and now I’m going to struggle through basic vocabulary and verb conjugations in a town with few English speakers.

When the plane lands, I heave all of my belongings and checked bags out of the sliding glass doors of the airport and see a wall of Guatemalan taxi drivers calling to me. It had been building over the course of the flight, but now that the plane has touched down and I am alone and anyone I know is at least 1,500 miles away and I am in a country of strangers and Spanish and I don’t even have any local money or a cell phone I immediately regret lying to my mother.

My mom is crying. I don’t know why. I hug her, I tell her it will be okay. We are talking about my planned arrival in Guatemala. How will she know I am safe? I should buy a cell phone here that will work in Guatemala, she says. I should call the mission’s US sister parish in
Minnesota and ask for contact information for the other travelers arriving on February 6. She must be picturing my gruesome murder on the six o’clock news. Or maybe just my disappearance. Drug smugglers, pretending to be from the mission. She’ll never know what happened. My corpse, sinking to the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. Maybe I’m a sex slave, at least until I become addicted to cocaine. Maybe I don’t even get off the plane. It goes down in flames.

It’s cooler than I expected. But I’m sweating anyway, out of nervousness. I scan the faces in the crowd and the signs they are holding to see if maybe a driver from the mission is one of them. As I look at each, they try more eagerly to grab my attention, waving a sign, speaking broken English, whistling. But their signs are not places I want to go. Chichicastenango, Quetzaltenango, Solola. I don’t know any of these places.

I’m the only one exiting the airport who remains in front of the sliding doors, besides an airport security guard to my left. The other people who exit have clearly been here before. If I couldn’t guess from their brown skin and little baggage, I could guess from the confident way they saunter from sliding glass door threshold to the open arms of Guatemalans, family members maybe. Or to a taxi driver. In confident Spanish, they announce the name of their destination. They know how much a fare should be. They know where they are going.

I’m not going to call the church in Minnesota. It was difficult enough to get them to respond to my application to be a long-term volunteer.

“The website said I would get a response in six weeks. It’s been seven.”

“I know, I’m sorry.” It’s always the same woman with the kind voice. A secretary, probably. I imagine she has gray hair, large glasses, a pink cardigan. Maybe soft fushcia. “The volunteer coordinator just had a baby, she’s behind on going through applications.”

I take matters into my own hands. No baby will stop me from living my dream of volunteering overseas. I buy a $10 phone card for international calls and call the Guatemala parish directly.

A man’s voice answers. In Spanish.

“English?” I ask.

“Un momento.”

A woman’s voice comes on the phone. I ask about my application to volunteer. She says she doesn’t know, what’s my name?

I tell her, and she leaves.

The connection is lost.

When I call back several minutes later, I can’t understand what the Spanish man’s voice is saying, but I’m guessing it’s something about no English speakers being around because no one is coming on who does. I hang up.

My only way out of this airport is through the mass of people, but right now, I do not want out. I want in. Back, back, back. Back through customs, back through baggage claim, back through the exit ramp of the plane. Let’s just turn that sucker around and refuel and get back to Chicago suburbia.

One of the taxi drivers steps out from behind the fence and approaches me. I look at the airport security guard. Is this okay? Is this allowed? The guard doesn’t make a move. The woman is well-dressed, young. She doesn’t seem threatening.

She speaks English. “Do you know where you’re going?”
“We don’t go there, but I can find you a taxi that does.”
“I have a ride. Someone’s picking me up.”
“If they don’t come, let me know.” She writes down her name and number on a card for her taxi service, and steps back behind the fence.
This makes me feel better. Someone is looking out for me.

I tell my mom I’ll call the parish in Minnesota. I’ll ask for the contact information for the other groups arriving the same day as me. It’ll be safe. The mission knows I’m coming. A ride is arranged. They only transport flights that arrive before 3 p.m., otherwise you will be taken to the airport hotel. They don’t take the direct route; they take a safer, indirect route. I don’t tell my mom it’s because of bandits on the main road, but I throw around ‘safe’ as much as possible. This calms her.

A group of 20 or so middle-aged, Midwestern people walk through the sliding glass doors.
“Phew, it’s hot!” barks a man in a floppy vacationer’s hat. He wipes his brow.
Please, please let them be going to the mission. I will give anything to be taken under the wing of these 20 parental figures.
I turn my face back towards the crowd, scan the signs one more time. One of these people has got to be the driver from the mission. Now that a large group of gringos has arrived, he’ll surely walk up soon. Maybe he’s one of the buses, vans in the back. He’ll step out and come get their things. “San Lucas mission!,” he’ll call.
I overhear conversation about volunteering. A lake. Clues, clues. This has to be it. They have to be going there.
“Where are we headed? Are any of these our drivers?” a woman asks.
The same man with the floppy hat. He seems to be in charge: “San Lucas.”
Oh my god I am alive and I will live. If we’re trapped, we’re here together.

I, obviously, lied to my mom. I didn’t know who my fellow travelers were. I had already been enough of a burden on the Minnesota woman, calling, bothering, asking. I called to tell her my flight information, to make sure I was arriving the same day as other travelers, so the mission didn’t have to make a special trip. But I didn’t ask for their contact information. It seemed so childish. I’m 19, goddammit, a kind of a full-fledged adult-child now that I’m not enrolled in college anymore. I have independent health insurance. I am taking on the world, realizing my dreams, throwing myself into a third-world country and volunteer position without any preparation. Look how responsible I am!

My fear melts as I introduce myself to the group. We talk about our respective stays.
“Six months!” they say. They are impressed. Soon, another group emerges from the airport. I guess moving through baggage claim and customs is significantly less speedy when you are traveling in a herd. The new pack of travelers is also going to the San Lucas mission, and it is a group of high schoolers.
When the drivers from our destination finally arrive, I am thrown with the teenage group. “Six months?” the middle-aged group leader says. He is not impressed.
We have to exit the bus for some reason, I don’t know, I don’t speak Spanish. I think the drivers want lunch. We can go to the airport food court. Burger King, Pollo Campero, an asian fast food restaurant, a pizza place. I chip in for pizza with the teenage group, I give several dollars, I don’t have quetzals to buy my own food. My first meal in Guatemala is airport pizza.

I stay up late packing the night before my trip. Do I really need all of these shirts? How many pairs of pants? I imagine that I’m going to be living in a straw hut with a dirt floor. I was told no details about what I would do or where I would live after the secretary told me I was accepted. I can’t bring too much stuff, it will be insensitive. I give myself one, large duffel bag and my backpack. No more. I pack. I unpack. I fret. Material possessions stress me out.

I feel better now that we’re on the road. Guatemala City is new, exciting, armed guards in front of all the banks, cars, trucks, tropical trees. Small stands, people selling juices, fruits, snacks. We get on the highway, the volcanoes, the clear blue sky. It’s all so new, so foreign, so thrilling. I love car rides anyway, this is like heaven. Then we’re on dirt roads, going through towns. The people, they stare at us. We stare at them. Fountains, women with baskets on their heads, dirt roads. It gets bumpy.

It’s hours later, dusk, that we stop in front of a hotel. The group disembarks, the teenagers squabble over rooms, and I wait outside. The man in charge only speaks Spanish but I try to communicate that I’m not with this group, or the other group, or any group.

His eyes show realization. He picks up my bags, walks me down the dirt path and up a cobblestone street. We stop at yellow, single-story house. When we enter, it’s more of a motel. The house is shaped like a U, with rooms along the outside and an open courtyard in the middle.

A small woman greets me, and she doesn’t speak English either. My guide and her converse for a few minutes and they lead me to a room. I’m handed keys, my guide, who has so gentlemanly taken my bags, puts them down. So I’m not living in a hut. I don’t think. Is this where I’m staying? Is this old woman my host family? There’s a queen bed. A nightstand. Dressers, a closet. Not a hut. Definitely not a hut.

It is clear I am supposed to follow when my guide leaves. He points to things, says what I can only imagine is their Spanish translation: church, kitchen, parish, food.

I’m too nervous to feel hungry, but the meal is watery vegetable soup and stale bread anyway. The man points to the utensils, leads me to the biblioteca. It’s a large room, mismatched tables lined up in a U, a stage with more tables to my left. On the wall are shelves and shelves of books, old photos, paintings. The room is filled with maybe 50 people, finishing eating their dinner. They all look to be American. The sound of English hums throughout the room.

I thank my guide – I can at least remember ‘gracias’ – and he walks away. He talks to a blonde girl who is sitting down in the U, and we make eye contact. She nods, speaks to him some more, and he comes back to the exit, which I’m standing in front of. He pats me on the shoulder, gives me one last smile, he has a tooth missing, but it’s a large smile and it’s charming. He leaves.

“I’m Michelle,” the blonde girl introduces herself. “I have some things to take care of, but you can eat, and find me before you leave.”

“Is there a phone I can use to let my mom know I got here okay?”

“In the office, the white one. Don’t talk long, the long-distance minutes are expensive.”

I eat a little, talk to two men who are volunteering for two weeks.

“Six months?” they say.
“Kyla, honey, wake up, it’s 3:30.” My mom shakes my shoulder. I come out of sleep, I look at my clock, it registers.

“Agh!” I jump from my bed and start moving. I had set my alarm for 2 a.m. We needed to leave by 2:30, to get to the airport at 3:30, for me to catch my flight at 5:30. I’m going to miss my flight. I scramble, I get my luggage – still too much? – and we’re out the door and on the road.

My mother and father drive me. It’s still dark. The roads are barren. I don’t know if my dad is speeding. God, I’m going to miss my flight. I compulsively check the clock on the dashboard. 3:41 Breathe, breathe. It will be okay. You’ll make it. You won’t make it. Shut up. I will. If I don’t, it’s okay. I can fly out later today. Tomorrow. 3:41 Tickets will be expensive. I don’t have that money. I’ll explain it to the airline. They’ll understand. No they won’t. I’m gonna make this flight anyway. 3:41. I’ll be in Guatemala by 2:30 p.m. It will be okay. 3:41. Will the mission care? They’re expecting me. I’ll look like a flake. Will they ask me not to come? They’ll understand. Not like the airline. I can’t afford another flight. Jeeze. 3:42 I’m not going to make it oh god oh god.

Michelle walks me through the streets and we stop at an ice cream shop, where another one of the volunteers is sitting, talking on the phone. She looks young, maybe 20’s, Hispanic, pretty. The shop’s front is completely open to the air. Few things are walled in on four sides here, it seems. The volunteer keeps talking, and Michelle offers me chikis, shortbread cookies with chocolate. I eat one. Better than the soup.

We continue on without the volunteer, and Michelle introduces me to the volunteer house. We enter the premises through a large, black door. I am introduced to some more volunteers. We talk for a little bit. I’m so nervous. I don’t know what to say. They are so calm. Will I be this calm at some point?

Michelle talks about hiking a mountain the next morning.

“Would you guys mind if I came with you?” I’m not going to miss out on my first adventure in Guatemala. Food-court pizza, ugh. I need something adventurous, out-of-the-ordinary to write home about. Day one and I’m already wasting time.

“No, you’ll want to rest.” Michelle tells me. “You’ve had a long day. You’ll have plenty of time for this hike, don’t worry.”

“How long did you say you’ll be here?” the other girl volunteer asks.

“Ty?” I ask.

“Um, oh hiii,” Ty doesn’t remember my name. We took an 8-week improv class together at Second City. I’m missing the last class meeting next week.

“Where are you going?”

“Houston for the day, business. Flying back this afternoon. And you?”

“Um, I’m moving to Guatemala for a bit, to, uh, volunteer.”

“Oh, wow.” I don’t think he knows what to say. I don’t know what to say.

And we’re boarding. Turns out, I made my plane. When I ran into the airport, it was as barren as the early-morning streets. The line to get my boarding ticket was 20, 30 people. In line for security, five.
An email from Tom. The volunteer house has internet, and one of volunteers lets me use her laptop to check my email. It’s from my boyfriend, well, ex-boyfriend—we decided to break up because I was leaving the country for six months. I had called him the night before, around 11. We talked. And then I turned my phone off. And kept it off. And left it in the United States. But his email is sweet, he cares about me, he’s not over me, even though we had to break it off for practical reasons. He knows I’ll do great things in Guatemala. It’s encouraging.

When the volunteer from the ice cream shop emerges from her bedroom, profusely apologizes for being on the phone so long it was a crisis with her best friend she’s so sorry and her name is Roberta and nice to meet you and she hugs me and this combination of friendliness and the email from Tom is all I need. I can do this. I can fucking do this.

As I wait at the terminal during my layover in Houston to board my flight to Guatemala, there is a group of middle-aged Midwestern-looking people. I wonder if they are going to the same place I am. I notice that, for the first time in my journey, the announcements are in Spanish before English. We’re boarding. Here I go.

The male volunteer walks me back to the old woman’s house. He’s soft-spoken, seems a little shy, but he’s friendly. I enter the house, it’s dark. I go to my room, I open my suitcase, change. I lay down, and I’m so tired, my body is sinking. But my brain, it’s going full speed. I feel like I can’t turn it off. I’m here, I’m really here. I’ve made it. I’m freakin’ 19, I don’t speak Spanish, I’m in Guatemala, I have no idea what I’m going to do. Michelle told me breakfast is at 8, I’ll see her and everyone then. So, that’s comforting. Whatever comes will come.

This was either a brilliant or a really stupid idea.

This vignette comes in the middle of the book somewhere.

**Power Point on God**

I pour myself a cup of coffee. The parish is quiet; all the volunteers have left for their work assignments. I’ll put off going to the projects for a little bit to enjoy this peacefulness, this coffee made from beans picked outside this very town. I’ll write a little bit in my journal, it never far from my side.

Padre Geovanny comes into the parish after mass. He sits down with me at the table outside and we chat absentmindedly before he gets into what I can tell he really wants to talk about.

“How come I never see you at church?”
“I, uh, I’m not very religious.”
“You parents, are they religious?”
“My mom is Catholic and my dad, he’s...no, he’s not.”
“Do you believe in God?”
“I don’t think so.”
“You don’t think so?”
“I don’t believe in God.”

I was raised Catholic.
I remember my first hint of defecting came when I was maybe 7 or 8. My Sunday school teacher had told us that he believed being a good Christian was more about being a good person than going to church every Sunday.

I told my mom about this liberal definition of good Christians. She said, “Yeah, but we’re Catholic.”

Catholics are seen as adults in the church at 13, when they go through the process of confirmation. I chose my patron saint, assumed her name, and wore an itchy dress to a long mass. My mom told me that now that I was an adult in the church, I could choose how often I wanted to go. I chose never. Add in years of high school English reading Camus and Sartre and having discussions with like-minded faith-doubting friends, and it was set. I didn’t think about it much. I didn’t read a lot about atheism or religion.

Geovanny starts grilling me.

“Where do you think the world comes from?”

I have never studied high school Spanish, but I have studied high school French. We learned a lot of vocabulary and had a lot of simulations like buying things from a store or ordering in a restaurant or making a telephone call. There was never a unit about “Vocabulary for the Big Bang Theory” or a simulation of hot-button topic debate, like creationism versus evolution, economic disparity and the wealth of nations, abortion.

I try my best to explain the big bang. I couldn’t do it in English either.

“I don’t really know, I just don’t believe it comes from a man in the sky.”

I’m trying not to be too offensive.

We go on like this – him posing me metaphysical, unanswerable questions and me, offering weak, half-hearted answers that only drain me, make me doubt myself, and make me feel humiliated. I feel like I’ve shown up underdressed to a party. Everyone is wearing nun outfits, priest robes. I’m dressed like the devil, pitchfork, horns and all.

I tell him that I believe in evolution.

“So you believe people came from animals?”

“Yeah,” That’s pretty much the point, right?

“Do you think people are the same as animals?”

Well, yeah. Just a little bit smarter, I guess.

“Can animals love?”

How am I supposed to know?

“You know, it’s my job as a priest to try to get you to believe in God, right?”

I guess I never looked at the job description.

I can finally let the discussion end when Geovanny proposes that if he can perform a full mass in English, would I come to church?

Sure, I say, if you can perform a full mass in English I’ll come to church. I agree because it’s a bet I know I’ll win.

He seems satisfied.

Geovanny knows some things in English, but he’s not anywhere near able to hold a conversation. Then again, he does have what he believes to be the power of God on his side, and people have done some crazy things for their God. You know, mass murder and things like that. Memorizing roughly an hour of English isn’t that hard, is it?
As I walk home, I begin to doubt my decision. What about all of the townspeople who would have to sit through that mass not understanding a thing? Will Father Greg, the head priest, allow it? Will he be upset with me if he finds out it’s my doing?

When I tell Roberta and Elise about my encounter, as religious people, they are horrified. “You know he’s not supposed to say that, right?” Roberta tells me when I get to the part about being Geovanny’s new project. “It’s probably because he’s a young priest.”

Roberta also tells me that Geovanny has probably never met anyone who doesn’t believe in God before. At least that would admit it to his face. Really? I feel like a circus freak.

The next time I walk into the parish, Geovanny says he has something to show me in Mario’s office. “Sit down,” he says. I choose the rocking chair. Geovanny rests against Mario’s desk, Mario in his office chair. Mario seems to know what’s going on; he’s not put off at all by the two of us walking into his office and sitting down like this.

“We’re just worried about your soul,” Geovanny begins.

Traitor. How could he humiliate me like this? In this moment, I hate him.

I feel like I’m at an intervention. The way I’ve been bombarded by two of my friends, sat down, and told that they’re worried about me.

Geovanny says he has something to show me. I hope he won’t pull out a letter and tell me all the ways my atheism is killing me and how he just wants the Kyla back that he knew before. The one he thought believed in God. Get off of that atheism; it’ll kill you. Ultimatum time.

Geovanny opens PowerPoint on Mario’s computer and my intervention moves away from emotional letter reading and towards high school lecture. He has not gotten fancy with the background. It is a beach scene; the sky is pink, the foreground ensconced in silhouette. This is the same background for every slide. He has, however, not neglected the ever-popular transition wipes and fades, which give the weightiness of his subject matter such legitimacy.

The first slide: “Has something ever happened to you that you couldn’t explain?”

Mario and Geovanny both look at me expectantly.

“Si.”

Well, yeah. It’s been quite a wild journey to this rocking chair and I can tell you some of the major steps – taking a year off of college, buying a book about volunteering abroad, getting on a plane, getting off a plane – but those are the literal steps. I can’t explain how my life took this course out of the many paths it could have taken. I could have graduated in four years, I could have never learned Spanish.

The next slide pixelates in diagonally.

“That was God.”

Oh, dear.

The next slide:

“Have you ever felt love for someone?”

Again with the expectant look.

I respond with a begrudging, “si.”

The next slide:

“That was god.”
I am starting to see a pattern emerge. Every other slide will have a question that any reasonable person will have to say yes to. The next slide will prove, with air-tight logic and sound supporting evidence, that the response of yes proves the existence of a higher power. The slide show ends, and we’re all just sitting here; I’m looking at them, they’re looking at me.

“Can I leave?”

“You don’t have to believe today. You probably won’t. But slowly, Kyla, day by day, you will come to see the truth.”

“Okay. I’m going to go.”

If only the Spanish conquistadors could see us now. The way Geovanny is defending a God that was forced upon Guatemalans, the way I feel held captive and forced to ingest their religion.

I can’t talk with Elise and Roberta about this. From the internet café I call my friend Nik, with whom I discuss metaphysical matters, and later my friend Aaron, who is the most atheist atheist I know.

“I feel so uncomfortable. I feel wrong. I feel weird.”

“You don’t have to decide what you believe today,” Nik says.

“First of all, that’s ridiculous. Power Point? Kyla, if you’re not convinced, I don’t know what will you convince you.” Aaron says.

“Is religion really a thing I decide/am convinced of?”

Nik: “You don’t ever have to decide. These are questions people have been thinking about since the dawn of man.”

Aaron: “Kyla, when someone argues with you, and you say logic is on your side, and they say, my argument overcomes logic, you’re not going to win. Of course you’re going to feel bad.”

“You’re right.”

Nik: “Don’t worry, it’ll be fine.”

Aaron: “I know.”

Several days later, I get an atheist care package from Nik in the mail. Not only does it have cookies (unrelated) but a book titled The God Delusion and a mockumentary parodying religion.

I devour the book, and once again feel okay. There are people like me out there. Elise and Roberta and I are fond of movie night, so we watch the mockumentary together. I think it makes them uncomfortable. Roberta says she’s tired and so retreats to bed early, Elise sticks through until the end.

“It’s awesome that Nik sent you all this stuff,” Elise says afterwards, as we eat some of the cookies.

“Yeah, I can’t believe it. The shipping on this box must have been outrageous. I also can’t believe it wasn’t opened at ravaged by the Guatemalan postal service.”

“Maybe she said a prayer before she sent it.” Elise is kidding.

“That’s probably it.”

“It’s funny that you came here to save Guatemalans, and here the Guatemalans are, Geovanny and Mario, trying to save you.”

“They just don’t want me to burn for eternity in Hell.”
“It’s kind of cute, that they care that much about your immortal soul.”
I guess Elise is right. Their intentions are good, they are only trying to convert me because they care about me. Or is that what Guatemalans thought when conquistadors showed them the light?
To hell with good intentions.

This vignette appears about 3/4 of the way through the memoir.

Wizards

“Do you guys want just the regular cookies, or the special cookies?”
This is lame. This is so lame. That guy is, like, from a movie. A bad movie. The three of us girls, we laugh, giggle nervously.
“The special cookies.”
Christ, this is so lame.
San Pedro, across the lake from San Lucas, is known for its drugs.
This restaurant has hammocks and we’re sitting on pillows on the floor. Our waiter is wearing a poncho. The clientele have dreadlocks.
This is dumb.
The cookie is tiny and shaped like a small roll. They taste okay, and we eat and chat and then Elise says, holding out her hands and looking wide-eyed at the table, “Woah, you guys, I think I’m high.”
And we all laugh. Elise has never done drugs before, didn’t drink until she was 21.
We buy three more cookies, to eat at home some night, we pay, we leave, I don’t feel anything. Elise, on the other hand, feels much.
“Kyla, did I pee my pants?”
We are walking along a dirt trail, the one that led us to the restaurant from the boat dock. I hold Elise’s hand and lead her because she cannot handle the task of walking herself.
“No, you didn’t.”
“Are you sure?”
If I wasn’t frustrated because she is taking so long to move, I would probably find this funny.
“Kyla, I can’t see the ground. It’s too far away.”
“It’s okay, just keeping walking. You’re fine.”
“No, I think I peed my pants.”

When we get to the lakefront where the boat is waiting to take us back to Santiago, from where we will catch a pick-up truck ride back to San Lucas, Elise has to pee. We try several restaurants, they won’t let non-customers use the bathrooms. The fourth time we enter one, I offer 50 quetzales to use the bathroom. We are obliged.

“Don’t tell my Dad about this.”
“I won’t, Elise.” I met Elise three months ago. How does she think I’m going to contact her father from Guatemala? I couldn’t find the man if I were in the United States.
“Please, really, don’t.”
“Okay, okay.” I can’t help but laugh, but she takes it to mean that I’m lying.
“T’m serious, Gardner. He would not be happy.”

There are three Mayan women sitting across from us on this boat. They are watching us. God, they know. They know. No, they don’t. It’s fine. They’re staring at us because we’re gringos, not because they know we’re high. God, what do my eyes look like? Red and small, like Elise’s? I ate another half of a cookie, the half of Elise’s she didn’t eat, as we boarded the boat. Time is starting to slow down, I’m starting to wor-

“Kyla!” Elise screeches and grabs my arm and I’m tugged sideways.
“Elise, wha-?”
“Shhhh.” She bows her head, squinting out at the lake. It’s started to rain, and two men in a small canoe, probably fishermen, are paddling along. They have to fight the wind of the storm. Their blue ponchos float behind them like capes. They have hoods, covering their faces.
“Wizards,” Elise whispers.

We catch the pick-up in Santiago. Rides on these trucks are one of my favorite things in Guatemala. Everyone stands, holds onto guard rails. The truck swerves quickly around turns impossible to predict with the hills, mountains, volcanoes on either side. The wind whips through your hair, the truck feels like it’s going to roll over at any second. It’s the closest thing to flying.

Today, because of the rain, we’re crouched down in the back and it’s covered with a tarp. The three of us, Roberta, Elise, and me, are huddled towards the front of the bed. Some Guatemalan men returning from work are intermittently jumping on and off the truck, paying their fares as they go. It’s difficult to hold on, and the ride is bumpy. My calves hurt from squatting and my hands hurt from holding onto the slippery bars. I don’t want to sit, but eventually give in and soak the seat of my pants.

Elise is oblivious to the bumpiness and horribleness of this ride.
“Up, where the people areeeeee!” She’s singing a sloppy rendition of “Part of Your World” from the little Mermaid. She sitting with her legs out straight in front of her, her arms outstretched to either side and gripping rails. Her head wobbles from side to side as she sings. She looks crucified, a regular Jesus.

I look back at the men holding onto the back of the truck. They are watching Elise, smiling, laughing at her. I make eye contact with one of them, and I look away. I’m embarrassed.

“We need to get Elise a tuk-tuk when we get back to San Lucas,” Roberta says.
“We’re like, two blocks from the drop-off point,”
“We can’t walk her through the streets like this. What if someone from the parish sees?”

I fumble with my money when we arrive to pay the driver. I am nervous, I feel the world pressing in. The rain, the bustle of San Lucas mid-afternoon. Everyone is watching me.

We practically drag Elise into a taxi and back out of it a minute later, through our door and into our house. Safety, solitude. No one watching now.

I throw the bag of cookies on the table, we all retire to our rooms. I collapse in a pool of self-hatred in my bed. We’re no better than Father Jaime said we were. No better.

The first thing I know about Father Jim – he’s called Father Jaime (hi-may) by the Guatemalans – is that I’m supposed to really like him.
The second thing I learn about Father Jaime is that I don’t.
He’s good friends with Marie, but as anyone who is good friends with Marie, he is not always liked by her.
Father Jaime is one of several priests who come to the mission for a couple of weeks a year. These priests promote the mission back at their home parishes and have a stake in its success.

Father Jaime does not like to see young, eager volunteers ruining these stakes. One day at lunch, Father Jaime is talking loudly to another priest about how the volunteers just come here to relax by the lake and do drugs.

He’s saying it loudly, so Roberta and I know that we’re being called out. Roberta rebuffs him, quite sharply, defending me.

I would later grow into this defensiveness on my own. After leading a group through the orientation and helping set out a lunch for them, one of the leaders came up to me and asked me why I left school.

“It was a private school, pretty expensive. I’m taking some time off while figuring out where I want to go next.”

“Well, you could be working and saving for where you want to go next.”

“Well, I think this experience is invaluable.”

He had nothing to say.) But today, Roberta is doing the defending. And quite well.

Elise, Roberta and I would never get along with Jaime, and would tend to avoid him in the future. We did work and we were there for a purpose.

Purpose at a volunteer mission seems very important. Everyone is upon arriving asked to justify their being in Guatemala. The most common question is “Why are you here?” The next most common – “What do you do here?”.

Initially, most volunteers come to ‘help.’ When they find out that’s not really an option, as many do not, they justify it in other ways.

Katherine told me my purpose here was to build relationships. Roberta told me she believed her purpose was to be a student of San Lucas. Elise’s purpose, to relax after graduating college in three and a half years, to help the poor?

And mine?

I wake up, it’s maybe 11 midnight. I drink some water, walk out to the common area on my way to the bathroom. Roberta comes out of it.

We recognize our own weariness in each other’s eyes. The day was stressful, taking care of Elise, the pot didn’t make either of us feel good.

“Let’s never do that again,” Roberta says.

I agree.

This vignette appears before the story returns to ‘Asshole,’ the first scene where I effectively quit my position as volunteer volunteer manager. This might be the climax of the book, when I doubt my purpose and place in Guatemala the most. There is one vignette in between “Wizards” and this one, detailing my work the next morning, before I return home, where this one begins.

Don’t Sign Anything

When I meet Elise she’s half way out of the door and I’m half way through it. This is the large black iron door that is the entrance to the long-term volunteer house. It’s as big as a storefront.
Elise would later experience what she felt was a literary revelation about this door. “You guys,” to Roberta and me, “it’s such a metaphor. It’s like this giant door is what separates us from the Guatemalans.”

“Elise, it’s a door. That’s exactly what it does.”

At present:
“Elise, where are you going?”
“There’s something wrong with Deborah. I think she’s sick. She said she wants bread.”

Okay, sure. I shrug it off. Who knows? Deborah spends all day either cleaning our house or cleaning Dona Roly’s. Good thing poor girl gets a rest and some carbo-loading on Elise’s dime.

When I walk through the other large door – this one wooden – to our house, I stop in the middle of the large room at the center of our home. If it had any furniture besides a table and a few chairs at that table, it might be more than a large, tile-floored, stone-walled, high-ceilinged meeting place between the bedrooms at the corners of the house.

A moan comes from the bedroom at the Southeast corner.

When I come into the room Deborah is lying on the bed. She’s holding her head and she’s tossing and turning. Her eyes are turned up so I can see the whites. She’s speaking rapid Spanish with a lot of “Dios” being thrown around, and if I believed in such things, I might think she was possessed by the devil.

I have no idea what could have come over her. Does Guatemala have strange diseases that we don’t have in the United States? The kitchen ladies admonished Katherine the other day for smelling roses. The little animals will go up into your brain and stew it around, make you crazy, they said.

Has Deborah been smelling animalito-infested plants?

Elise comes in with the bread. She holds the small, plastic baggy that has several small rolls inside. She seems unperturbed by what is happening to Deborah. Well, perturbed, but like this is what she’s seen. And she thought bread would cure this? I don’t know that anything short of horse tranquilizers could cure this.

Elise feebly tries to give Deborah the bread.
“I don’t understand, she keeps talking about bread,” Elise says.

But then – oh no – it can’t be, no, not that, I can feel it, the terrible, terrible understanding, washing over me. Bread. Cookies.

“Elise, how many cookies did we bring home yesterday from San Pedro?”
I know she was in no state to be counting cookies yesterday; too many wizards.
“Let me check,” she says.
As she turns to go, I grab her wrist.
“No, Elise, before we go out there and look, we have to be sure. How many?” I know it’s three. But did I eat an extra one? That would make it two. Did we buy three? Maybe we bought two. Someone didn’t want an extra one.

“Kyla, I have no idea, why?”
“The bread, she was talking about those cookies. Deborah ate a cookie.”

I have never seen real terror mixed with real revelation the way it is composing itself on Elise’s face right now.

We both go to the table.
Two.
Two cookies.
Maybe our fourth house mate ate one this morning? Maybe we only got two. How are we to be sure?
Deborah weighs probably under 90 pounds. I think she’s 16. She’s probably never touched a drug or drop of alcohol in her life.
And now she thinks she’s going to die.
“Elise, we need to get her home.”

I use my best Spanish to explain to Deborah that Elise and I will pay for a taxi to take her home. I don’t know how much Deborah earns by working so often for Dona Roly, but a taxi ride from anywhere to anywhere in town is 3 quetzales, roughly 35 cents. It’s on me.
Elise and I hold her small frame and help her walk out the door and down the stair of our house and out to the street.
She feels even tinier than she looks. We walk outside the door and Elise hails a tuk-tuk. We give Deborah the bread. A parting gift, a little something for her trouble. We tell the driver to take her home, wherever that is. If she can even say it in between groans.

It’s only after we put Deborah in the taxi and send her home and walk back to the house that I notice the Chernobyl-like situation.
“Jesus Christ, Woods, what did she do to the bathroom?”
“I just thought she was being thorough.”
Usually when Deborah cleans the bathroom, she’ll wipe down the toilet, maybe the sink. This time, she’s pulled down the shower curtain and most of the things that were in the bathroom are now spilling out of it into the hall. In addition, a very long hose travels from outside all the way into the bathroom. I’m surprised I didn’t trip on it walking in.
I’ve never known potheads who get high and clean bathrooms, but I guess this is what it would look like.

We do the only thing we can think of; we call Roberta. She has to tutor today, tutor the small girl with cancer in the cockroach-infested house. Roberta tells us, when we ask, how she is able to ignore the roaches. It’s because the small girl, Juanita, does. One will crawl across the table during a lesson; Juanita smashes it with her bare hand and then pays it no mind. No big deal. So Roberta pays it no mind. No big deal. Roberta also tells us that she thinks Juanita needs a real tutor. A certified teacher. Not someone who is just learning Spanish and has never taught, just a volunteer for the mission.
So we call her, and she’s on the way to her tutoring session.
“Hey guys, what’s up?”
“Roberta, Deborah ate one of the pot cookies,” Elise comes out with it.
Roberta laughs
“No way, you guys,”
We tell her more, and she laughs more. And then she has to go.
All Elise and I can do is wait in terror.

The door bell rings.
Elise and I look at each other, petrified.
Who could that be? We just talked to Roberta; she couldn’t be home yet.
“It’s probably Roberta. Maybe they cancelled her tutoring session.”

Elise tries to reassure both of us but we both know it’s a lie. Two Americans just exited their gated house and threw a spastic, crying Guatemalan teenager in a taxi. The streets are busy in the afternoon; anyone, everyone could have seen.

Maybe it’s the friendly man who sells bread in the panaderia across the street. Maybe it’s Deborah; she forgot where she lived. Maybe someone at the Parish has already heard and come to talk to us.

Elise and I go outside. The door bell rings again as we’re walking to the door.

“Vengo!” Coming.

We open the large, black, iron door and in front of us is a small Guatemalan woman I, at least, have never seen before. Her face is wrinkled and her hair is on top of head in the traditional style, with reflective thread running through it. She is old, and strikingly short. Four feet tall, maybe.

“Um, hi.”

“I’m Deborah’s mother.”

Fuck. We let her in, and now the three of us are standing on the concrete driveway.

“She ate some bread here. What was in that bread?”

Sugarcoating this or lying is not going to make things any better. All I want is to absolve this poor woman of her fear right now. If I tell her I don’t know what’s in them, she’ll continue to worry until the effects have worn off, and probably for some time after that. She might take Deborah to the doctor. Then I’d be screwed. And, I just don’t want her to worry.

“There were drugs in there.”

Thank God I know the words for drugs. But, I guess, in Spanish, marijuana is marijuana anyway. I tell her that too, when she asks what kind.

She asks me what the effects are, how long it will last. When I sat in health class and learned about marijuana and when I hid behind tennis courts in a darkened park and smoked my first joint with friends my junior year of high school, I didn’t expect that I would ever need to draw upon these experiences as focus points in a discussion with a Mayan mother. But here I am. She’s concerned that Deborah is going to die. I try to explain to her that Deborah won’t die, it’s just drugs. Harmless drugs. She just needs to sleep.

“How long?” she asks.

“A few hours,” I say. I don’t know.

To top it all off, I’m not really fluent in Spanish.

I invite her in and she follows me to the porch, but we stand outside.

I take control of the conversation, and Elise stands by. Deborah’s mom glances at Elise every once in a while, but her admonishments are mainly directed at me.

“Good Christians don’t do this; we don’t do this.”

First of all, I’m not Christian, or at least not a good one, seeing as I don’t believe in God. Secondly, I definitely did this. I definitely, definitely did this bad thing. But I’m not going to argue this one.

“I know, I’m sorry.” I keep saying I’m sorry.

In Spanish, the translation for ‘I’m sorry’ is ‘Lo siento,’ which means, ‘I feel it.’ In Spanish, it’s more about the empathy, not sympathy.

I don’t know what it’s like to go into a drug experience completely unprepared, completely without the knowledge that you have taken any, and to (probably) never have taken
drugs before, and to have those feelings overcome your body slowly and strangely and alienly. You must feel like you’re going crazy.

But, as from yesterday, I do know what it’s like to feel very, very bad on drugs. And, specifically, those very same pot cookies that Deborah has ingested.

And I know that, right now, my stomach is turning in all sorts of guilt-covered knots and absolute self-hatred.

So, lo siento. I feel something, something awful. One look at Deborah, and I knew what she was and is feeling is awful, too. You may not be able to see how I’m feeling because I’m not holding my head and writhing on a bed and begging a higher power to help me. But if I thought any of those things would help me right now, I would do them.

Roberta comes home a little bit later. She walks through the door, sees the looks on our faces, and knows that we’re not kidding. We sit on Elise and my beds in our room and discuss possible consequences.

“Well, can volunteers even be fired?” I ask.

“I’ve heard of Father Greg presenting people with one-way tickets back to the United States,” Roberta says.

“You really think he would do that?” Elise doesn’t believe it. She’s always found Father Greg a little more kind-hearted and good-willed than Roberta and I have.

“You guys, this is pretty bad,” Roberta won’t let Elise get away with idealism.

We sit in silence. We wonder. We avoid each other’s eye contact.

It’s Roberta who speaks first.

“We need to find out about her family.”

“Why?” Elise asks.

“We might not be safe.”

It’s take me a minute to comprehend this. Repercussions of physical harm hadn’t even crossed my mind. If Deborah has family vengefully inclined, we could be stabbed. Worse. All those things my mother probably pictured when she cried in my arms before I left.

Maybe it’ll be her father, or her older brother. Tall for a Guatemalan man, maybe 5’10”. Broad-shouldered. A skinny black moustache. The mustache will curl at the ends, like a movie villain. And he’ll smile when he’s got us cornered. He’ll enjoy machete-ing us to death. The druggie Americans, they’ll be sorry, he’s thinking right now, sharpening his blade.

When I first arrived here, I felt invincible. I’m a United States citizen; I’m from the most powerful country in the world. If anything were to happen to me, the news media would immediately jump on the story. It would be an international scandal; I’d become the darling of the country. My school picture, my hands folded underneath my chin, would be on TV, the president would ask my captors to return me. The nation would come together over the darling 19-year-old volunteer for the poor.

Marie told me about a volunteer who got up early to meet people to climb the Mirador. She was waiting at a corner less than a block from the volunteer house at five in the morning.

Two teenage boys, Guatemalans, were walking drunk down the street. They started cat-calling her; she ignored them. But they ran up to her, and they grabbed her. And they pulled her pants down and one of them held her down while the other assaulted her. She struggled and managed to break free and run before they could do anything worse. She was badly shaken, understandably, and booked a plane ticket for home within a couple of days.
So I can’t think bad things can’t happen because of some red, white and blue aura surrounding me. The wealth of the nation you come from has little to do for you when you’re being held down by two men and it’s the strength of your muscles and the size of your fear and adrenaline rush versus theirs. International politics have little to say in this situation. No international news junket is going to paint you as the poor soul; the US embassy is not going to dispatch the national guard. You’re going to get on a plane, if you’re still alive, and you’re going to leave.

So, we all stiffen as we sit in my and Elise’s room. Who knows where Deborah lives, but it’s in San Lucas, we’re pretty sure. So she’s definitely made it home by now. It’s been an hour. That’s enough time for a plot to have been hatched, for the machete man to be waiting outside our door.

Roberta looks at me.
“Kyla, I know you don’t pray, but whatever it is that you do, do it.”
God knows we need some sort of help right now, so Elise and Roberta decide to ask theirs for it.

I think we should tell Father Greg.
“It’ll get back to him anyhow. It’s better that he hears it from us. Then maybe we won’t get plane tickets home.”

“No, no.” Elise shakes her head, her lips turned inwards. “No, we can’t tell him. Not about the drugs.
“We’ll say we didn’t know” Roberta says.
I scoff. “He won’t believe that, he’ll know.”
“I don’t think he’ll call us out for lying.” Roberta, again, is practical. “I trust Angel. We’ll ask him if we should tell Father.”

We’ve resigned ourselves to going home. We’re ready to get on a plane tomorrow, or the next day. It’s only fair. We’ve accepted it.

We exit, solemn. We walk to Angel’s. I look behind my back every once in a while.

Angel lives across from the parish. He’s Roberta’s good friend and early-morning jogging partner, and would later become my good friend and early-morning jogging partner. He is probably 50-some years old, and like most Guatemalans, has a gold tooth when he smiles. He is very warm, very generous and very serious. He worked for the mission for a long time. Father Greg helped him control his alcoholism. He knows Father well, and he knows everything about San Lucas even better. Angel is our best option.

He knows the town inside and out. He knows the people in the limpieza, the “cleaning” group that actually polices San Lucas. The police are corrupt; they can be bought, they do little. Even if Deborah’s family does nothing, we might have to worry about vigilante justice, a punishment from this group.

There’s really no working justice system in Guatemala. Three days before today, a video was released of a Guatemalan lawyer who says, if you’re watching this tape, I am dead, and it was the president of Guatemala who had me killed. He was shot while riding his bike through Guatemala City. The reasons are confusing, but they lead back to corruption and drug money.

In March, there was one night at the parish when Father Greg announced during dinner that there was drug traffic unrest moving through San Lucas. We all needed to go directly our hotel or house and stay there. Between 2000 and 2010, Guatemala had the fourth highest murder rate out of any country.
So the limpieza is a group of men, some who live in San Lucas, some who don’t. They come into town to punish people for their crimes. Beat them, torture them. I don’t know. I never really understood whether this group was good or bad. Sure, it’s vigilante justice. And Josiah’s name ended up on the list at the end of his stay because townspeople didn’t like that he was working to give power to the underprivileged. But it’s one of the things people have to fear, besides the God the Spanish gave to them, when they do something wrong.

After we stop thinking about ourselves, we think about Deborah. She’ll probably be overtaken by sleep, or the munchies, at some point. She’ll wake up and probably feel scared, but her brain will feel back to normal. And she’ll be okay. She probably won’t go down a path of drugs after this incident, seeing as she didn’t seem to have a positive experience, so at least there’s that. Hypothetically, we saved Deborah from the drug road not taken. Hypothetically. Realistically, it’s something that she’ll probably try to forget, as I have tried. But I think we’ll both remember it forever.

“Angel, we have to talk to you about something very serious” Roberta says. From this point forward, Roberta takes the lead. Either because she knows she needs to, or because Elise and I aren’t stepping up. Thank god for 32-year olds.
She tells the story very carefully: We went to San Pedro for lunch. We bought the cookies. The cookies had drugs in the them.
Angel just listens and nods.
“Mhm,” he agrees from time to time.
We didn’t know. Marijuana. When we found out the cookies had marijuana in them, we decided not to eat them. We put them on the table. Dona Roly’s housekeeper Deborah ate one.
“With the drugs in it?” he asks.
“Yes.”
Do we know Deborah’s last name? he asks. We don’t. We try to describe her, but don’t get very far. A skinny, Mayan, teenage girl with long black hair? That’s more than half of the young girls in town. We don’t know where she lives. All we can tell him is that she’s Dona Roly’s housekeeper.
“Dona Roly has had a lot of those,” he tells us.
We ask him if we should tell Father Greg.
Angel says Father is “Buena gente” – good people.
So, yes.

It’s maybe 5:15. A little bit before dinner. The kitchen ladies are busy cooking, Mario is preparing to go home. The volunteers are still showering in their hotels after the day’s work before coming to eat in the biblioteca, so the parish is quiet.
Father Greg is sitting in a rocking chair in the small room that connects the main office of the parish and the biblioteca. Father has his own private corners back near the kitchen, but for now, he’s relaxing and reading in this guest room. We can see him through the screen door, awash in the warm orange glow from a lamp near him.
“Father, we need to talk to you,” Roberta says. “Can we come in?”
He is as obliging as Angel, though he doesn’t seem to register our fear and panic and sense of urgency as Angel did.
Or maybe it’s that we feel less a sense of urgency now. The parish is the safest place in town. Within its walls, we’re safe.

Roberta tells the same story that she told to Angel. As father listens, he rocks back and forth in the chair and twirls a toothpick between his teeth with his fingers. He’s wearing his usual uniform: a red Minnesota baseball cap and a colorful, patterned shirt, locally-made. When Roberta is done, there is a pause.

“You said this girl is your housekeeper?”
“Yes, father, she’s Dona Roly’s housekeeper.”
“Oh, well, there have been enough of those.”
He asks, “Do you know her family name?”
“No, father.”
“We’ll have to find that out.”
He calls in Raul, the parish’s (not murdered by the president) lawyer, and tells him we might have a problem on our hands, and that he needs to find out who the family is of Dona Roly’s housekeeper du jour. After this information, Raul seems a little confused as he looks around at the three of us sitting there. He leaves.

“Did you tell anyone they had drugs in them?”
“Yes, Deborah’s mother came to our house.” Elise and I had related the horror to Roberta.

“That’s a mistake.”
Oops.
“If anyone asks you, don’t admit to it, don’t say anything, tell them you don’t know what they’re talking about. Don’t sign anything.”
He rocks. He twirls the toothpick.
And I figured honesty was the best policy. The best policy, in Guatemala I guess, is denial. Knowing about drug traffickers will get your shot on your bicycle. Best not to sign anything.

“Where are they now?”
‘The cookies, father?’
“Yes.”
The cookies are where we left them, at our house, on the table. Roberta says so.

“Bring the cookies to me. We’ll bury ‘em.”

When we emerge through the screen door, Mario is waiting for us.

“What’s going on?” he asks. He has a smirk on his face. I doubt he knows what happened, but he seems to be enjoying the obvious terror he can see on our faces.

“Nothing,” I say. I know that I’m never going to tell him.

“Angel’s been looking for you guys,” Mario tells us.

“Girls,” we hear Angel call to us from within the biblioteca. He’s hidden his body behind the wall, only his head sticks through the door frame. He doesn’t work for father anymore; he’s not supposed to be here.

We run up to him and all walk quickly in stride out through the other door of the biblioteca towards his house.

“If you know that there were drugs in those cookies, don’t tell father.”

Angel is a savvy man. He knows that we bought the cookies on purpose, that we wanted the drugs. He had feared that we had lied to him about that, but that we wouldn’t lie to Father.
After the incident, we can’t decide whether Deborah was a brat and thought she could get away with stealing some of our food or whether maybe, like residents of third-world countries tend to do, she hadn’t eaten enough that day. So she couldn’t help but fall to the temptation of the small pieces of bread sitting on our table.

She might have looked at the cookies. She had been up since before sunrise, first cleaning at Dona Rely’s, then coming to our house. The sheets were heavy when wet, the bathroom gross to clean. She was exhausted, hadn’t eaten since having some beans in the morning. Maybe she thought just one, small piece of bread would give her enough energy to finish the day’s work. They won’t mind, she thought. They’ve left them out here, in the common room. For anyone to eat, right? They’ll just think it was someone else in the house.

Or did she think we had left them for her? Had we left food there before? I can’t remember.

Deborah didn’t come back to work for three days. On the fourth day, Elise and I return to the house in the afternoon and Deborah emerges from one of the bedrooms and walks up to us and apologizes.

She was apologizing? To us?
She also asked us not to tell Dona Roly, her employer. Not tell Dona Roly which part?
What vindictive bastards would we be if we marched up to Dona Roly and said, Sack this thieving girl! I paid for that pot cookie goddamit and if I can’t move to Guatemala and legally buy pot cookies and trust them to the safety of my own home, then what can I do?

We said it was no problem, we wouldn’t tell her. We said we were sorry. What I wanted to say was, I’m sorry, Deborah, it’s my fault, too because I left those out and I bought them in the first place and I’m the type of person who takes a year off of school and I go to a third-world country and I say I’m going to save the world, I say I’m going to help and all I do is do drugs one time and have a bad experience and then give that experience to someone else. I’m sorry that I come from a rich country and I can work a 20-hour week as a cashier at a hardware store and come down here and support myself with that money for a month. I’m sorry that you are, in the view of the world, underprivileged because you’re Guatemalan and underprivileged, in the view of Guatemala, because you’re Mayan and underprivileged, in the view of the Mayans, because you’re a woman. I’m sorry that I can be whatever I want to be, a teacher or a journalist or a doctor and I can attend school and I can do those things. I’m sorry that I don’t know how much you make and I don’t know what your dreams and wishes are and maybe you don’t want to get married when you’re 16 and pop out five kids and live with a dirt floor and barely be able to send the kids to school and wake up at 4 a.m. every day to cook and clean and care and be the last one to go to bed at night, too. I’m sorry that I don’t know if you go to school or if you work full time and whose decision that was. I don’t know what your dreams are and if you’re saving that salary for college or if your family needs it or whatever else. I’m sorry that our lives are so different but that as young women and humans in general we’re pretty similar. And I’m sorry that our lives came together in this horrible way.

We worried a little after that. But not a lot. We never heard anything about it.

Emy, the wife of Doctor Tun, would often talk to Elise, Roberta and I in the main office at the parish and laugh and joke with us. We even ate at the Tuns’ one time. After the Deborah incident, Emy was cold, barely even acknowledging our presence in a room.
Perhaps Deborah had been taken to the clinic. Or Father called Dr. Tun. And Raul knew something was up, but he hadn’t seemed to have figured it out or cared. If Katherine and Josiah or Marie or Mario ever found out, they didn’t let us know it; they didn’t act any differently.

We didn’t tell any of the other volunteers.

I can’t recall whether it was Father Greg or Angel or Marie or someone completely unrelated to the incident that told us this, but someone told Elise, Roberta and I that Guatemalans are very private, very family oriented. Gossip travels fast in a small town like San Lucas, so people keep their dirty laundry to themselves (though not literally, since the women have to drag it to the lakefront and wash it in front of anyone who cares to look in the mornings) but they keep their figurative dirty laundry to themselves. Whoever in Deborah’s family knew probably wouldn’t tell anyone else.

And so we were safe. No plane tickets home, no unfortunate stabbings.

And things were routine once more; we didn’t really talk to Deborah, she didn’t talk to us.