**Comida Colombiana**

My phone illuminates the room and tells me that it’s 5:15 AM. I contemplate going back to bed, but I know the rooster will wake everyone at six. I wash my face, pull a sweater over my head, slip into my destroyed jeans, and make my bed so Maria, the owner of the El Saman hostel, won’t have to. I undo the bolt on the wood shuttered window and gently push it open, being careful not to let it creak and wake anyone. It’s still dark out, but the Colombian sky glows pink and purple before sunrise. Looking past the Saman tree, I can see the silhouette of Maria’s plantain field and the horses from her stable nibbling grass at its edge. I neatly tuck the remainder of my belongings into my suitcase. Two weeks isn’t nearly enough time spent in a place like this. I’m going to miss it.

I head to the kitchen before chef Otélia, or “Oti” as I have come to know her, preps for breakfast. Flicking on the light, I look for something small to snack on. Everything is appealing, and everything says so much about the two weeks I’ve spent in Colombia for my grandmother’s 90th birthday and family reunion.

Wandering around the kitchen, I see a familiar bag sitting on the counter. What’s left of yesterday’s bread sits at the bottom of the crinkled paper sack. Reaching in, I find my favorite bakery item. I loop my fingers through the hole in the center of the piece of bread, and remember the first time I tasted it driving through the countryside.

*I pull the backs of my sneakers over my heels and head to the gravel lot in front of the Hotel del Campo. Four Old Willis Jeeps that we’ve rented for two weeks wait to take my family hiking.*

“So where exactly are we going?” I ask.

“You’ll see when we get there,” Aunt Ligia replies. “Just get ready for the ride.”

She tucks pieces of her choppy black hair behind her ear and gives me a wink.
“¡VAMOS!” she yells. And just like that, we’re off.

In the back of the truck, my brother and I talk with our cousins and catch each other up on our lives. The last time I saw my family in Colombia, I was eight years old. We spend the next thirty minutes covering 12 years, and my ten-year-old cousin, Dominic, deems it okay to sarcastically comment on everything that anyone has to say. Though my other cousins and I grow annoyed with his childlike antics, we do our best to entertain them until the Jeep comes to a stop.

My aunts, uncles, and parents file into the panadería, a Colombian bakery, and motion for us to wait. In two minutes time, my dad emerges with a big brown paper bag. He hands it to me and tells me to share with the rest of the kids in the car. The Jeep starts back up again and I place the bag in the center of the truck bed. Inside, we find little rounds of recently baked bread. I grab for one that is hollowed in the center and tear it open. Immediately, I begin to salivate. The heat trapped in the soft airy dough is intoxicating, and I can’t wait even a second longer to pull a piece to my lips. The bread has been infused with Colombian cheese, and the salty starch makes my taste buds tingle. I fixate on it.

“What is this?” I plead.

My cousin Estéban giggles and in between bites, responds, “Pan de queso. ¿Muy deliciosa, que no?”

As Dominic starts to mimic Estéban in a robotic tone, I am able to drown out his pre-pubescent voice when I hear another Jeep in our family caravan honking. I look up to see my dad pointing in all directions. I stand on my seat and swallow what’s left of the pan de queso before my jaw drops. All I can see for miles are mountains and stretches of rolling hills blanketed in mossy green grass. A gust of wind whips through my hair and I can feel it find its way around the range, breathing life through the leaves on the palm trees scattered around the
terrain. For the first time on this trip, Dominic falls silent. As we ascend into the mountains, my cousins and I take in the tropical climate and marvel at what surrounds us on all sides while we finish the bag of bread from the panadería. Each day for the remainder of our trip, we repeat this ritual.

Walking around the kitchen island, I stop at the refrigerator and take a quick peek inside. I’m hoping to find a leftover slice of queso blanco, a Colombian cheese so fresh it melts in my mouth even though it’s always served chilled. Looking for the block of it, I find the chorizo that I know Otí will grill for this morning’s desayuno. Of the varieties of chorizo across the South American continent, the Colombian variety is undoubtedly the best because of its unique paprika and chili pepper blend that clings to the meat in its casing. Seeing the packaged links, it doesn’t take me long to pinpoint the best chorizo I had on my trip.

We eat dinner just outside of the mountain where uncle Mono’s farm sits. There are lightly salted patacones made from plantains, filets of fish beneath a creamy white garlic sauce with capers, and spicy chorizo sausage served with steamed rice and lime wedges. I pass on the fish, and fill up on chorizo. My mouth lightly burns from its remnants, the chili pepper flavor stinging my tongue—a most wonderful sensation. It’s around six-thirty and the sweltering sun finally begins its descent as the wheels of the Old Willis Jeep shift the pebble-rock road beneath us. We are on our way up to the farm, and Mono begins to list the animals he owns.

“¡Cerdos, vacas, caballos…todos!”

“Horses?” my cousin Stephanie asks. “Horses for what?”

“For the work,” he responds. “To carry the food places.”

When we reach the end of the road, Mono directs us to the back of his farmhouse and takes us inside the wooden fence guarding the animals. The pigs and cows graze together, and I start to wonder if we grazed on his animals. Was our dinner supplied by the confines of this
fence, the freshwater stream we saw earlier that day, and a plantain field not too far from here? Looking around, I wonder if there’s one less pig in this pen that ended up on my plate at dinner.

I imagine Mono alongside his workers on horseback, riding down the mountain with fresh cuts of meat from his backyard, stopping to fish at the stream, and picking a few plantains before delivering these supplies to the restaurant.

“¡Cuidado!” my uncle Gilberto warns, snapping me out of my vision.

I turn to see a calf wandering behind me. I give it a few quick pats on the head before I walk to the horse stable where my cousins have begun to gather. We get to ride them, but have to return before the sun completely sets. I hoist myself up, swing my leg over the saddle mounted on the mare, and gallop off toward the bottom of the mountain like Mono and his men do every day.

I shut the refrigerator door and see the fruit basket hanging in front of the kitchen window. There are so many guanabanas, mangos, maracuyas, and coconuts that the bowl looks about ready to overflow. I run my hand over each fruit. The spiky green guanabanas and furry coconuts tickle my palm, while the maracuyas glide smoothly through my hand. Poking at a mango, I discover that it is soft and ripe, so I decide to slice it. Pulling the mango from the center, a granadilla sitting at the bottom reveals itself. I don’t hesitate to set the mango aside and grab for the granadilla. I savor it the way I did when I had it for the first time shopping in the streets of Salento.

There are many little shops on this strip. We pop in and out of each to pay our respects and pesos to the Colombian artists who handcraft their goods. A shop of animal figurines carved from native trees. A shop of woven ponchos in colors on the Colombian flag. A shop of widdled musical instruments being strung by a storeowner. I spend the longest time in an accessory store. Its walls are lined with boards of painted earrings and colorfully printed woven scarves. I carry my loot to the register, and see the cashier enjoying a strange fruit. My dad hands me some
pesos to pay with, and I point to what the woman shovels into her mouth with a spoon. He promises me that he knows where to find one, and after paying, we thank the woman and leave her store. We weave through the crowd of people and arrive at the fruit market at the city’s entrance.

Outside, vendors sell cups of mango and coconut sticks dripping in lime juice with large grains of salt stuck to them. I venture inside with my dad, and we find a basket filled with what I learn are granadillas. He cracks the smooth yellow shell open for me and hands me a necessary utensil to eat what’s inside. I scoop a spoonful into my mouth and crunch down on the slimy gel coated gray seeds. At first, I compare its texture to a pomegranate’s, but these seeds burst with an exotic fruit juice containing a flavor so unbelievably sweet and sour at the same time. It is truly unmatched and unrivaled by any other fruit I’ve eaten in my twenty years. The liquid that flows from each individual seed stains my taste buds with delight, and I want so badly for the granadilla to be bottomless, to be never-ending. My final scoop of seeds proves to be the most bittersweet. Standing in the center of the market, I discover my new favorite fruit.

I finish the granadilla. Leaning on the island counter, I see the hostel’s coffee bean bag. I reach my right hand inside and pick out a few beans. I study them with my fingers, feeling smooth curves as I slide them across my hand. I am only able to discover the little groove that splits the bean down the center by touch, for at a glance, the line gets lost in the rich black-brown shade. Their coloring is that of a perfect roast. I hold the beans in my palm and bring them close to my nose. Shutting my eyes, I breathe in deeply and the scent fills me with warmth. At once, I am sent to the coffee plantation in Quimbaya.

A two-hour drive through the country finally brings us to a stop at the zip line course. My cousins and I hop to our feet in the back of the Jeep. We are restless and ready to get out of the car and into our harnesses. Our course instructor says, “Damas primero,” so I step to the front
of the line as the eldest girl of my cousins in the group. He weaves the vinyl belt through my legs and fastens it around my waist. I’m ready.

On the takeoff spot, we are all given directions. I half understand his rapid Spanish, and when he reaches the end of his spiel, he says, “Miran hacia abajo.” I step to the edge and he pushes me off the platform. The 300-meter zip line extends over the familiar Colombian hills I’ve come to know. Suspended several feet above ground, I am captivated by the coffee field below me. There are thousands of plants, their branches full of ripe beans ready to be picked. I watch coffee farmers moving from bush to bush, and remember when I spent a day in their shoes. At first, I had resisted my family’s decision to spend the remainder of an all too long day in the sun picking coffee beans. But currently flying across this zip line, I couldn’t be happier that I ended up joining them that afternoon. My favorite part was pulling the beans from branches and placing them in a wicker basket tied at my hip. Occasionally, I would sneak a seed or two, squeezing the raw coffee bean from its cherry red casing, letting it fall to the ground. I’d then eat the best part of the fruit covered seed—the skin, its taste sweet and texture smooth. As I approach the platform at the end of the zip line, the canopy surrounding my stopping point shades the workers from my sight. I know I’ll remember them tomorrow morning with my first sip of coffee.

I toss the beans back in the bag and return to my room to retrieve my camera. I take pictures around the hostel and capture the rooster’s call. I can hear my family stirring in their rooms. After circling El Saman, I swing in the hammock that hangs in the outdoor dining room, and I wait for Otí to go into the kitchen. After a few minutes, she opens her door and I can hear her footsteps nearing closer. She rounds the corner, sees me, and smiles.

“Siete y media, niña.” Seven thirty.
For the next hour, I help my mom and dad pack up while we wait for breakfast to be served. We’re sad to go, but know that we spent our time in Colombia well. Maria knocks and tells us to come to the table. Otí already has the plates at our places. Arepas, huevos pericos, and chichurron lay before us, and yet again, my mind drifts back to my experiences in the Colombian countryside.