I first saw him on the bus. He’d just bought some apricots, which I’d rejected for health reasons. But if he’s buying them… there was no way that flowing red mane was in any way accustomed to the Ecuadorian biota I’d been ingesting for the past four months. He was probably just as fragile as the plastic bag holding his newly purchased produce. I waved the vendor back over to me—she’d hung around, hoping to make another sale before getting off the bus. One dollar. 5 apricots. Diarrhea or not, we were in it together now.

“Muchas gracias!”

We sped along the surprisingly smooth roadway for half an hour more before pulling over at Parque Nacional Cajas. I went through my mental checklist: Backpack? Got it. Hat? Already on my head. Crutch? Literally can’t leave without it. I grabbed my apricots and took a deep breath, exhaling sharply as I pushed myself out of my seat.

I wobbled off the bus, closely followed by my redheaded companion. He broke the thick silence between us.

“Where are you from?”

Ugh. What a lame question. Out of all the lines in the world, he chose that one? I rolled my eyes on the inside.

“The US,” I said. “You’re from… the UK?” I took a stab based on his accent.

“Australia actually. What’s your name?”

The gravel crunched beneath our feet—five, counting my crutch—as we made our way to the park’s visitors’ center, myself feeling like an over-prepared interviewee. His were easy questions. But safe. You had to admire his approach. I was surprised how much he was able to get out of me during that 20-meter walk.
By the time we reached our destination I was panting with the altitude, my crutch arm starting to seize up. Sooner than I’d realized, we were standing in line to sign in behind a woman from Spain. *This is where we’d break off.* Just another small-talk partner who I’d never see again. What a shame. However cliché his questions, I found myself intrigued by his story.

I was hoping to do a three- or four-hour route. It was now 11am—that’d give me enough time to eat the lunch I’d brought and flag down a bus going the other way to get back to the city before dinner. I examined the map, waiting for the red-haired man (Thomas O’Sullivan, as it turns out) to finish speaking in disjointed, awkward Spanish sentences to the guides before I could ask them for advice.

“This one is three hours? Okay. And it starts where?” My ears perked up. Would we not be separating after all? The pain in my hand brought me back to reality; I switched arms with a grunt. I’d imagined a solo hike when I first boarded the bus here. Thanks to my current state, that’s how it would be.

After a few minutes of listening in on his cringe-worthy conversation, I decided to jump in. “I’m also interested in a similar hike,” I told them. And here it came:

“Ay, no, we don’t recommend that,” they said.

“You’ll need to go with a guide.”

“Your foot can’t take it!”

I’d been through the routine before. No, I’ll be fine. Yes, I know my foot is broken. No, I don’t have money for a guide. Yes, I’ve done this before—when my foot was worse off, mind you! I briefly recalled the hike I did in the Galápagos: 6 hours of pain and fighting back tears… They had a point—but I was much too proud to let them convince me to back down. I was going to see beautiful sights, damn it! Even if I had to slide down on my ass. After putting up less of a fight than expected, they seemed to concede.
“Ok. So this is more or less a three-hour route for you—and maybe five for you.” The ranger, defeated raised his arm towards my crutch—as if I’d forgotten. “You’re completely sure?” The both of us nodded, and headed towards the door. Those apricots had gotten my digestive juices flowing—I was headed to the bathroom.

“Do you want to hike together?” The question took me by surprise.

“Uhhhhhh…” I felt like the rangers, trying to convince him that this was a bad idea. Hadn’t he heard our conversation? The time estimate? I’d thought my crutch was pretty visible. And here was this guy, from halfway across the world, asking me to spend time with him. “I feel like we might be going different speeds. Not sure you’d want to put up with this.” I balanced on my good leg, lifting up my crutch as a demonstration. Just to make sure he knew.

“Oh, yeah, I’m in no rush. We’re doing the same route anyway, right?”

I conceded defeat, hiding my excitement. “As long as you’re sure.”

*

At the top of the mountain, we stopped for lunch.

“Wow.” He shook his head, mouth full of apricot.

I hadn’t dressed for the occasion. My long-sleeve tee was soaked with sweat, and my underwear had started to peek through a few new holes in my jeans. But all things considered, those were sacrifices I was willing to make for our budding friendship. He was surprisingly in shape for a man who’d been on the go since February, which came in handy considering how often he was forced to pull me up. I consistently lagged behind—but with him, I wasn’t a burden.

I heard a shutter click and snapped my head around to its source. There was Thomas—I’d taken to calling him Tom at this point—hiding a smirk behind his camera,
snapping what was bound to be an Instagram-worthy shot of me artistically looking into the distance. I’d be lying if I said part of me hadn’t been hoping for it.

“So inspiring,” he chuckled and stood up. “Can’t believe you made it up here.”

I barely could myself. But I was only halfway done. We’d been able to see our return route on the way up, about half as long and twice as steep as the already very difficult ascent. But, as I told myself earlier, I was going to do this. Even if I had to slide down on my ass.

* 

I twisted around, checking my pants for damage—nothing too bad, it seemed, just a little bit of abrasion. Tom chuckled, getting up from the boulder he’d been sitting on for the past 15 minutes.

“Sorry about the wait.” I wiped the excess dirt of the seat of my jeans.

“No worries man. More time to enjoy the views.”

Lakes of all shapes and sizes dotted the landscape on our way back to our origin, flooding the ancient páramo, rippling slightly with each breeze. Stopping to take pictures along the way, we wondered what kind of geologic processes could have created such stunning patterns and marveled at the orange-and-red paper trees along the shoreline. After some time, we found ourselves back on the gravel drive where we’d started our adventure. The silence we shared refused to impose.

With the right hand motions, we were eventually able to persuade a driver to stop for us. Overjoyed for the chance to sleep, the two of us settled in for the ride back to Cuenca. I woke with a jolt as we rolled into the station to see Tom already awake.

“So you want to get dinner?” he asked. Of course I did—but I was vegetarian. Not exactly the easiest diet to account for in Ecuador.

“Totally fine if you want to go somewhere else,” I told him. “All good man.”

“Oh, no, I’m easy.” His eyes sparkled as he squinted at the sun.
We ate Indian that night. I laughed at the Bollywood videos playing behind his head; he told me about his home. He described his job as a physical therapist—me interrupting every now and again to direct his attention towards a particularly absurd Tamil music video—and told me about the small town near Melbourne where he’d grown up.

“I’m not too excited to return. I realized in the past few years how small that town really is,” he explained.

“Oh man, I feel that.” I told him about the city of Kent, Ohio, and the people who inhabit it. “I just don’t feel like I fit in there anymore.”

The next few hours couldn’t have lasted long enough. Here I was, eating a passable channa masala in Ecuador. Myself and a man I’d met hours before shared stories as if we’d known each other since grade school, myself interrupting him now and again to tell him about the songs I recognized. Nostalgia and novelty played against each other in the location, the food, and our relationship. Eventually, we headed to a bar for a few drinks before bed. To him, a chance to enjoy a beer; to me, a going away party. I sipped on my Cuba Libre as he talked to a US immigrant who’d recognized us as foreigners. We headed back to our hostel together, his red beard shining in the streetlights.

*

I last saw him at around 8:30am on Sunday. He’d just packed up his bags, getting ready for the 6-hour ride to Baños; I’d tried to set an alarm, to “just so happen” to wake up in time to bid him adios. Instead of getting out of bed, though, I rolled over, half asleep, and saw him heft his backpack. He munched on his last apricot, and glanced back at the room. Just a quick scan to make sure he hadn’t left anything, and that was that.

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