“Where do you live again?” I asked my host mom in the best Spanish I could muster—hoping I’d misheard her the first time.

We were standing near Lake Atitlan, at the base of a dormant volcano. She pointed and I followed her finger as she picked out a dot in the distance. Up past the ceramics factory, past the four-story hotel-looking house that was under construction, nestled on the second road from the top of the mountain, juuuuuust below the waterfalls. I groaned. No one had told me this was going to be a PE program.

My host mom, Petrona, began to shuffle up the mountain. She moved surprisingly fast for her age of sixty-four. She was a strongly built woman—short, but not small—with the top of her head barely making it to my chest. Her hair was long, the color of tar, and silky—with the occasional sprinkling of gray and white. She kept her mane wrapped in traditional Mayan textiles and twisted it atop her head like a crown. She had a wide smile that was almost always present. Her teeth were a faint gray and capped in gold—one even had a gold star in the middle that would shine as she spoke. Her skin was cooked a reddish brown, the color of clay, and you could barely find a spot on her that wasn’t wrinkled. She was barefoot most of the time, but today, Petrona had donned her finest: old leather flip-flops. While barely keeping themselves together, they were the only pair of shoes she owned. She wore the same huipil—a traditional Mayan dress-like garment in Guatemala—that I would see her in for the next month. It was thickly woven together with patterns of quetzals—emerald green birds with long tail feathers that
had become a symbol for the Maya—and flowers around the collar. It looked heavy on Petrona, but she wore it proudly as she crusaded up the mountain—a knight in her blue *huipil*. 

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“¿Quieres que tome tu mochila?” Petrona asked me, eyeing my backpack.

I stopped watching my feet so I could address her. I had been trying to distract myself from the climb by counting in my head while simultaneously ensuring that I didn’t step on part of a chicken carcass or a puddle of sewage or, more importantly, that I didn’t slip on a rock. I shifted my pack around on my shoulders. It was only a medium sized hiking backpack but it weighed as much as me, and the near vertical climb made it feel even heavier. I rejected her offer to carry it, knowing I would feel guilty for letting her do my labor and I was determined to finish the hike on my own.

I pushed on, catching up to her and then allowing myself to look around. We had made it halfway up the mountain. The houses around Lake Atitlan were mere dots in the distance. The mountain loomed above me. At the top were the great *caracas*, or waterfalls of San Antonio. They were nestled in a crevice and, at certain angles, seemed to disappear. A few dozen feet below them, I could make out the *milpas*, traditional Mayan farming land where all the crops were growing together, not in straight rows as I had come to know from farmland in the US. There was a variety of plants in the *milpas* boasting their produce—rice, bananas, corn, and beans. Little canals had been dug and lined with rocks to provide an irrigation system for the crops, utilizing water from the *caracas* as it fell. Chickens wandered through the different vegetation and dug around to peck at bugs and garbage in the dirt, often with six or seven chicks in tow.
I started to feel faint. *Damn it! Not this again!* I stopped and pretended like I was admiring the view as I struggled to control my breathing. Cardiac arrhythmia and scaling mountains are not a good mix. As I regained my sight, Petrona walked down towards me and grabbed my backpack. This time I just wanted the trek to be over.

“¿Listos?” She asked, waiting for a sign that I was ready to keep going.

“Listos.”

She balanced the backpack on top of her head, holding it steady with her right hand and powered on. *Show off.*

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At the top of the mountain Petrona finally stopped.

“Aquí.”

She pointed at a little cinderblock and plywood shack: my home for the next month. Her house was like many others in the little Mayan village of San Antonio, Guatemala, where I would be conducting research for my anthropology class. The village existed on the side of a dormant volcano, facing Lake Atitlan. The further up the mountain—and away from the lake—you went, the poorer its inhabitants were.

“Aquí es Negra.” Petrona pointed at a little black chicken that began to investigate my pack, alerting me that her name was Black.

She introduced me to the turkeys and other chickens that liked to wander around the house, and that were particularly interested in exploring my bed. She showed me how to pour a bucket of water into the toilet in order to make it “flush.” Then she guided me into a little mud hole behind the toilet and told me how much of the room temperature water to pour into the boiled water before pouring it over me to shower.
I settled into my little room, glad I didn’t have to climb the mountain again that day.

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*Why does he have to hold class in his cushy hotel at the bottom of the mountain?* I grumbled to myself as I prepared for the forty-five minute descent down the mountain to meet my professor and the other students for class. Going down was the easy part. Climbing back up for lunch and then up again at the end of the day… not so much.

It usually took me about an hour to get up the mountain—an hour and a half if I chose the longer—yet less steep—route. For the first couple weeks, Petrona almost always walked with me. She hustled up and down the old volcano like she owned it, stopping for only a few seconds to wait for me or to gossip with her neighbors. I was jealous of how comfortable she was with the climb, how easy it seemed to be for her despite her age and lack of shoes with any traction.

As if the altitude and vertical climb wasn’t bad enough, the summit also housed many other threats and challenges. There was the drunk man who followed me from my house to work every day, slurring his advances in broken Spanish but gesturing enough for me to have a clear idea of what he wanted. Then there was the group of construction men near the mountain’s base who catcalled as I walked past (as if the whole “archaeologist look” of hiking boots, overworn jeans, and a flannel/shirt combo was sexy). Petrona tried to protect me from the added dangers of climbing the mountain as much as she could. Yet, she couldn’t always be with to protect me. The mountain didn’t care if I was healthy or ill, confident or timid, safe or threatened: it was always there, waiting for my ascent.

I sighed and focused on the hotel in the distance: thirty minutes to go!

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“¡Hola!”
A young boy, about fifteen, and a little girl, around seven, were coming up the mountain towards me.

“¡Hola! ¡Buenos días!” I smiled and returned their greeting before continuing down the mountain.

“Soy Adriana y esto es mi primo, Manuel.” The little girl wasn’t finished with me yet and introduced herself and her cousin, Manuel.

I stopped walking and turned around to return the introduction.

“¡Mucho gusto! Mi nombre es Rae.”

“¿Cómo un rey?” She inquired.

“Sí, cómo un rey.” I agreed, realizing it was easier to go along with saying my name was “King” than simply a weird American name.

“¡Te voy a llamar Reina!”

I laughed. Being called a Queen couldn’t be that bad. Suddenly, Adriana reached out her hand to squeeze, poke, and prod my arm, covered with a half-sleeve of tattoos.

“Me gustan tus tatuajes.”

“Gracias.” I thanked her for the compliment and watched as she tried to rub off one of my tattoos.

“¿Qué es eso?” She asked, pointing at the little cat I had above my elbow.

“Un gato.”

“¿Y eso?” This time she pointed at the large owl on my shoulder.

“Un búho.”

When we finished going through the names of all the animals I had tattooed on my arm, Manuel told me about the butterfly he hoped to get done on his neck. We talked about school,
discovering they went to a different school than the one I worked in, and where we lived in the village. They were excited to find out that I was living with their great aunt, Petrona, and pointed out a bright blue house with brown shutters that was Manuel’s home, only a few feet away.

“How much longer will you be staying here? Maybe we could grab an ice cream or something?” Manuel asked me in Spanish.

I told them I only had a week left in the village but that we could probably find a day that worked before I had to leave. Then I excused myself, worried I would be late to class. I waved goodbye to my new friends and finished hiking down the mountain with a smile on my face and a little spring in my step, glad to have a reason to look forward to the hike.

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After class, I marched back up the mountain at full steam hoping to see Adriana and Manuel before the sun went down. I slowed down when I neared their house. The window was closed and there wasn’t any noise to signify them being home. I sighed and started to walk up the mountain at a much slower pace than when I started.

“¡Reina! ¡Reina! ¡Tengo las tatuajes también!”

Adriana came running down the mountain, yelling about the tattoos she now had, leaving Manuel laughing in her dust. She proudly showed me her arms, covered in swirls, scribbles, and the occasional smiley face. I smiled and I tried to keep from laughing so as not to bruise her pride.

“¡Estos son muy hermosas!” I told her how beautiful her “tattoos” were.

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Petrona is going to worry, girls aren’t allowed outside when it’s dark. I had lost track of time talking to my new friends and reluctantly had to say good-bye. I began to make my way up
the mountain again. I breathed the mountain air in deeply, looking up from my feet to take in a beauty I hadn’t noticed before.

“¡Hasta mañana, Reina!” Adriana called out to me.

I stopped to wave. I noticed how high up I had already climbed then turned around to face the mountain again, took a deep breath, and set my eye to the highest point. I started the ascent, step by step, and smiled as I passed my neighbors.

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Ten minutes later, I could see Petrona in the near distance—standing by our little house—the star in her tooth twinkling from the remaining sunlight of the day as she smiled and shouted something to me.

“¡Bienvenida! ¡Bienvenida a casa!” I could just make out her words over the sounds of dogs barking and children squealing with laughter in the houses around us.

*Welcome home!*

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