

The Lone Blonde

“La Reserva Nacional Altos del Lircay?” I asked.

“Sí,” nodded the sleepy driver, eyeing my hiking shirt and zip-off pants.

“Mil pesos?” I asked, digging in my pocket for correct change.

“No, no, después,” he said, and motioned me onto the nearly empty bus.

I turned down the aisle and noticed the other passengers were wearing denim and work boots and staring at my blond hair. I avoided eye contact, remembering the men who had leered and followed me last night as I returned to my hostel, and quickly found a seat next to a window. Not for the first time, I wondered what I was doing running around South America by myself.

We drove out of Talca and into the fog that blanketed all of Chile’s central valley that morning. I strained to get a glimpse of the Andes, and the lower slopes into which I was headed, but saw only white and muted shades of gray. I looked for some sort of reference point, an object or scene that would anchor me to the moment, but the mist billowed around my window like a wormhole to another dimension. We stopped to let more passengers on, and a woman in professional clothing got on and sat near the front, and though I didn’t speak to her, I felt a kinship with her, as if we had some sort of camaraderie amidst the work boots and men, and swirling, undulating mist.

I caught glimpses of grass and trees and houses as we traversed the lowlands around Talca, but all were formless, seen through a veil of cloud, detached from their realities as if part of a dream. The bus was quiet as we passed through this area: not even fragments of conversation broke through the tranquil morning. My ears popped as we started up in elevation,

but I could see nothing out the window to confirm my body's adjustments. We stopped again, and more professionals, workers and some schoolchildren got on. They all glanced at me as they walked by, and I stared out at the fog and imagined hiking through it would be like walking through water.

In contrast to the fog of Talca was the smog I had left in Santiago a few days before, offset somewhat by the winds that swept through in the summer, but still at times unbearable. Chile's capital was not an inhospitable city—green with parks and beautification projects, maneuverable for pedestrians and relatively inexpensive—but it was a city, far removed from the natural world and what I had come to Chile to see.

Ostensibly, I was in the city to teach English—I had signed a contract with a school for a year—but teaching was simply my vehicle to another world. My goal was to learn Spanish, but my first love was mountains. When I learned that Chile offered me a chance to discover both of these, I abandoned what was comfortable and familiar without a backward glance, and threw myself headlong into a distant and alien culture

What struck me first about Santiago that I did not expect was its history. Founded before most of the cities in the U.S., every building had a story, every park held a memory, and every street name meant more than just an address or direction. I got caught up in the city's charms in the way only an outsider can, wandering, exploring, marveling, and always experiencing. I was more than a tourist—in trying to adopt Santiago as my home, and trying to get it to adopt me, I had to give in to its rhythms, the ebb and flow of its tides, and let it determine the direction of my discoveries.

Santiago is also a crowded city, congested on both street and sidewalk, and my loss of personal space meant that I spent my days a little less than comfortably. Riding the subway or an

elevator occasionally resulted in a mild claustrophobia, as bodies pressed against me from all sides, eliminating any claim I had to the air in my vicinity. Back to back, side to side, skin to skin, they—we—crammed into buses, trains, plazas, parks, roadways: a clammy, uncomfortable current of almost 5 million flowing beneath the skyscrapers and white-clad peaks of the Andes. Inevitably, the charm of history wore off, and when the smog of present-day set in, I got out of town.

Without warning, we burst through the fog and the morning sun seared my eyes. As I blinked away the sunspots I turned to look inside the bus, and saw the sun reflected in the eyes and smiles of the people on board, sitting next to and across from and behind me, and standing in the aisle. I hadn't noticed that the bus had filled up so quickly, but the easy, familiar way in which the passengers stood on the lurching bus chatting with their neighbors suggested this was nothing out of the ordinary and, in fact, they looked forward to it.

The driver had acquired a second-in-command sometime during our trek through the fog, an attendant who jumped on and off the bus at stops, assisted passengers and dealt with money. He was essential on this trip, and, I would eventually learn, common on all Chilean buses. His movements were nimble and efficient, but his interactions with his passengers were what made me realize he was at home on this bus.

The first stop we made after coming out of the fog was for a family waiting by their front gate. The fence was lined with oleander bushes of different heights and shades of green. Their trunks were spaced evenly apart, but the branches were wild and unruly, tumbling over the top of the low fence and through the gaps in its slats. They had also been planted around the front door of the house, a weather-beaten but sturdy structure with clotheslines extending like spider webs from its eaves. As the attendant got off the bus, he greeted the family in typical Chilean

fashion—handshake for men, kiss on the cheek for women—and took the bundle, wrapped and tied with twine, from the father as if it were a gift, and stowed it underneath the bus, to be dropped off farther up the road. The men exchanged few words beyond their greeting, but the attendant managed a second handshake and a pinch on the cheek for the baby in the mother's arms before ushering their two school-aged daughters onto the bus in front of him. They dutifully kissed their greetings to the other passengers as they walked down the aisle to a seat. Their parents waved as the bus pulled away, and I was surprised to see that everyone on the bus waved back.

The bus moved on, and it seemed as though the fog had been replaced by dust, fine white-brown clouds of it that filled the cabin and my nostrils, and settled in my teeth and eyelids, already gritty from my early rising. Unpleasant as it was, it seemed entirely appropriate and fitting that the fog of the city gave way to the dust of the country, where I saw men toiling in fields, swaybacked horses standing in pastures green with weeds, chimneys pumping smoke into the cloudless blue sky. Life was dirtier, and closer to the earth, by comparison.

I watched the newest passengers get on the bus, and latch onto the people next to them, who were in turn latched onto those in front of them, filling the bus beyond its capacity like a suitcase that won't close. Though I was usually loath to give up my personal space, it felt natural to me that I should squeeze myself and my daypack against the window so that a third person could perch on the outside of the seat. Unlike the crowds in Santiago—pungent bodies straining to breathe air that wasn't just exhaled by someone else—no one squirmed in their seats or avoided eye contact. I hardly noticed my room was gone.

Whatever space was left inside the bus was filled with the conversations of the passengers. The murmurs of adult discussions across the aisle were punctuated by the squeals

and laughs of the children, playing across the seats in their school uniforms. Their teachers, deep in their own conversations, made no effort to shush the students, and the cacophony, saturated with the varied pitches of voices young and old, reached my ears as a pleasant din.

“Como está tu madre?” I looked back at the old woman behind me and saw the look on her face matched the expectance in her voice.

“Muy bien, gracias,” answered the man sitting next to me. “Está mejor que ayer. Y tu marido, como le va con la salud?”

“Está—” she began, but the screams of the children drowned out her response.

Listening to the buzz around me was like staring into murky water—bits of conversation would materialize, but I could catch only snippets before they faded back into the muddy blur. I fell to watching faces, and noticed two young men sitting across the aisle from each other. They leaned on their knees and discussed the issues when they could catch sight of each other through gaps in the people standing in the aisle. When the bus swerved around a corner, the men continued their conversation with the people who fell in their laps.

The man next to me was dressed in a sweater and slacks, and appeared to be the only one on the bus, aside from me, who wasn't contributing to the chatter. He tried to read from the book he had with him, a thick volume of history, but he gave up with a sigh and started talking to the worker sitting across the aisle. That man stuck his tongue into the gap between his teeth when he talked, but my neighbor ignored it the way siblings overlook each others' bad habits.

I was traveling alone for the first time, and as I discovered, I was not the only one sensitive to my pale skin and blond hair—men whistled and called out to me from their cars, their windows, next to me on the sidewalk, and it was only during those instances that I was glad I was not yet fluent in Spanish. I was learning to ignore the custom as Chilean women did, but

sometimes it left me disconcerted and sharply in tune with my solitude. Travelers were not uncommon along this route—trekking in national reserves is often high on many European travelers’ itineraries—but rarely do they go by themselves, and those who do are never women. Somewhere in the back of my mind this thought fought to be heard, but I ignored it like the man ignored the gap in his friend’s teeth, and it was refreshing to observe that the people on the bus were ignoring me in the same way.

The bus stopped again after what seemed like a long stretch, and I braced myself for the new passengers who would squeeze their way on, but instead people got up and filed off, including the man next to me and the woman at the front. I looked out the window and saw monkey bars and swings, and other children running up to meet the kids getting off the bus. About half the passengers got off at the school, and it was the relative silence that became deafening rather than the clamor that had persisted throughout the trip. While I breathed more easily, I felt that I had lost a part of myself. Conversation continued, but at a subdued volume; the passengers left on board seemed intimidated by the absence of chaos and noise. The rattles of the bus were obvious now, creaks and groans rising in protest like an old body pushed to its limits. Without others pressing against me pressing against the window, I became aware again that I was alone, and resumed my shrunken posture, staring out the window and trying not to be noticed.

The end of the route was the town of Vilches Alto, which, from what I could see, consisted of a few houses, a store, and a gravel road that passed straight up the middle. The remaining passengers got off and continued up the road in a pack, the rhythm of their conversations broken only by the huffing required to climb the hill. The driver made sure I knew what time to be back for the return trip before he got off himself and went to talk with the man

sitting in his yard near the bus stop. The air was heavy with eucalyptus oil, and through the trees I saw more forest and an occasional mountain peak. I did not, however, see the entrance to the reserve, or any signs that told me how to get there. An old man missing his front teeth asked me if I was headed for the reserve, and told me to follow the pack—they were workers at the day lodge just outside the park boundary. I fell into step with them, and a man wearing a red bandanna asked me about myself and my travels in Chile, and why I wanted to travel alone. He led me personally to the administration building where I paid the entrance fee.

The ranger who welcomed me into the National Reserve spoke the clearest Spanish I had heard in Chile, and he drew me a map by hand of the best hiking trail in the reserve. Our meeting was not simply an exchange of money for an entrance pass—it was an exchange of ideas, a sharing of observations and customs. We discussed the operation of parks like this one in the U.S.; we compared the state of the indigenous peoples of our respective lands. He told me not to start a fire and not to shoot anything, and he waved me off down the trail.

I hiked through tall eucalyptus groves, stands of spindly lenga pines, and scrub brush, passed waterfalls, gurgling streams and dry flood washes, encountered horses without riders and ranchers driving cattle. I got lost, found the trail again, and walked all day under a harsh sun that turned my skin many shades of pink. I reached the rim of a deep valley and stared up at the gleaming peaks of the Andes. Despite my adventures, though, I couldn't help but look forward to riding the same bus down the mountain again. I thought going back to the city might be worth it if I could take that bus to get there.

I arrived at the stop before the bus, so I sat on a low wall and waited. “Hola,” I heard, and turned to see the two boys who lived across the street walking toward me.

“Viste un hombre en caballo?”

“Es nuestro tío. Está cerca?”

I nodded. I had seen their uncle on horseback a couple miles down the trail.

“De donde vienes?” one asked.

“Los Estados Unidos,” I answered.

“Como se dice Brasil?”

“Como se dice elefante?”

They seemed amused by my accent and asked me to translate the names of more countries and animals. They told me how old they were, and I told them the year I was born and made them figure out my age. We sat on the wall and talked until the bus came, and everyone from the day lodge came down the hill and got on. The boys’ uncle appeared, and one of them joined him on the horse, and off they rode, down the trail and into the gathering dusk.

The ride down was less crowded than the ride up: No one had to stand in the aisle on this leg of the journey. The road was just as dusty as before, though, and the dust, combined with the twilight and my fatigue made my vision grow hazy, as if I were passing through a curtain, a diaphanous barrier between the world I had left and the one I would soon be entering. I was too tired to worry about being a lone blonde in Latin America, and once or twice I caught myself nodding off before I finally gave in to slumber. As I drifted off, I thought of the smiling face of the second boy waiting with his father as everyone climbed aboard, shaking hands and kissing in typical Chilean fashion. As the bus pulled away, the boy and his father waved to the passengers with the same tenderness I’d seen from that first family, but this time, I noticed, the boy waved to me, too.