

2011

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### Recommended Citation

Hayhoe, Sarah (2011) "The Death of Ignorance: Essays on Identity and Travel," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 3, Article 5.

Available at: <https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/jiur/vol3/iss1/5>

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## **The Death of Ignorance: Essays on Identity and Travel**

*Sarah Hayhoe*

*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels,  
but have not love,  
I am only a resounding gong  
or a clanging cymbal.”  
1 CORINTHIANS 13:1*

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Behind the Fernando Chaij library, the Argentine sky was fading from purple to navy blue. I watched from the *ombú* shrub in front of *hogar nuevo*, my dormitory, as Alfredo, one of the campus security guards, came out of his tiny glass guardhouse beside the rear campus gate. He walked through the open gate and out on the pavement of the narrow street that ran parallel to the green metal fence that surrounded the campus of *la Universidad Adventista del Plata*, the UAP. With one hand he gripped the gate and slowly pushed and then pulled it shut. The green gate towered several feet over Alfredo's head and was wide enough for two small cars to drive through into the library's small side parking lot. With spots for maybe 25 cars, I rarely saw any vehicles parked there. Most residents of *la Villa del Libertador San Martín* walked or rode bicycles around the small town. My roommates Ana and Naty had told me the people here were more likely to drive mopeds than cars anyway. After a lot of flipping through my Spanish-English dictionary, I understood that at 19 and 20 years old neither of them had their driver's license, and it would be normal for them never to learn how to drive.

Since arriving in *la Villa* three weeks earlier in September, I had been faced with a new kind of normal. I was surrounded by locking gates, locked doors, and Spanish. I looked again toward the gate to see Alfredo pocket his keys and walk away from the library and out of sight behind the cafeteria, *el comedor*, likely headed to the gymnasium in that corner of campus to lock another gate door. Soon came darkness, and I could not read the commemorative letters of Chaij's name on the front of the library building from where I sat with *hogar nuevo* on my right. From a distance, through a few naked tree branches I could see the light from my dorm room on the second floor, number 33. Naty and Ana had been studying nutrition and anatomy and physiology when I had left. I had another few hours before the *preceptora* locked the dorm's single entrance for the night.

I needed the open night air as the gates and buildings locked down and the darkness closed in. From across the field in front of the library, the ground-nesting birds shrieked a goodnight serenade to their neighbors that lived in the pecan trees between the library and the *Facultad de la Salud* where Naty and Ana studied nutrition and nursing. The inhospitable sounds of the birds pounded my ears reminding me that I had a headache coming on. Most of my days ended with headaches. Haroldo, the director of the ACA program, said it was normal for exchange students to get headaches at first from being immersed in Spanish. *A new kind of normal*, I thought. The university with its sights and sounds was overwhelming. I could see, but I felt darkness around me. I could hear, but I could not understand Spanish any more than I could diagram birdcalls.

The sprawling base of the *ombú* shrub where I sat and cried reminded me of the stalactites and stalagmites in a cave—the sharp, pointed rocks stretching down from cavern ceilings and pointing up like fingers from the floor trying to touch each other. I heard voices coming down the path between me and the library field, so I walked around to the other side of the gigantic *ombú* that faced *hogar rosado*, the second girls' dorm. I didn't want to be speechless in front of any more people. The *ombú* was more like a tree than a shrub, and I could lie down on the exposed root system without my feet touching the ground. The branches hung so low and the sloping base slanted so gradually that I could lie down in the dark without anyone seeing me. *It's so dark, it does feel like a cave*, I thought. With that image in my mind, my imagination began to run away with me to other dark places. I might have even fallen asleep.

In that way that only makes sense in dreams, I saw a boy with dark brown hair, green eyes, and skin peppered with freckles. He reminded me of a character from a movie I saw once but can't remember the title of. He was short and soft with a round face, and I knew, as one usually does know things in dreams, that if he had spoken he would have had a British accent. But he didn't speak; he didn't even smile—probably because he was in a dark cave with only one small black lantern that made shadows look like echoes sound. Strange enough, there was no sound, not even the steady drip of water from the hanging stalactites punctuating the silence.

Suddenly a slender, hairless hand reached out of the blackest shadow toward the boy's round face. Surprised, the boy opened his mouth, but no cry or scream came before the hand grabbed his lips, squeezing them together and twisting one, two, three times as if turning a key or winding a clock. The boy's green eyes widened and the lantern flickered as the hand wriggled back into the blackest shadow like a serpent after it strikes. Then I heard the first sound, a deep, low moan muffled and desperate like something buried alive. The boy was groaning with his mouth shut. Then I saw why. Below tears of fear and flaring nostrils, where a mouth should have been, was nothing but a smooth gag of flesh and a new freckle, a mark shaped like an old-fashioned keyhole. The boy dropped the lantern, scratching his face from ear to ear, clutching the space between his nose and chin. The lantern struck the ground and faded for an instant. Then it went out, leaving the boy alone in the dark with the mouthstealing hand. Dramatic, yes, but dreams can be like that and still make sense.

Slowly I opened my eyes. I felt the cool roughness of the *ombú* with my fingertips and then reached to brush my fingers across my parted lips. Being misunderstood and speechless was terrible and terrifying. The UAP campus was my cave, and I felt like I had lost my mouth and my ears. No one knew me, and I couldn't know anyone. I was no one, nobody, *nadie*.

I cried in the dark a little while longer before walking back to *hogar nuevo*, my dorm. Crying can be nice and necessary sometimes, but it can last only so long. And when it's over, you have to decide to do something about whatever it was that made you cry in the first place. I was stuck in the dark; the lantern had gone out; I had to make a light. I had to learn Spanish. Language was the light to shine on my experience. That was why I went to Argentina in the first place, wasn't it?

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In September of 2005, just in time for spring in the Southern Hemisphere, I had arrived in Argentina at the UAP with 74 other American students. Well, we weren't all American, a few students were more exotic than that and had the passports to match. Several were from Haiti; one girl was from Kenya; another guy was from Botswana, but without exception we had all attended schools in the United States before going to South America. We converged on the UAP's tiny campus to learn Spanish and travel. We created space for ourselves in the four dormitories, *el comedor*, the library, and the ACA building where we attended most of our classes. The American girls moved in with Hispanic students in *hogar nuevo* and *hogar rosado* near the library and *el comedor*. Closer to the front of the campus and *el portico*, the main gate, the American boys moved into *hogar azul* and *hogar verde*. In the dorms, all of us lived with Hispanic roommates.

Natalia Casella and Ana Espinoza welcomed me into room number 33 at *hogar nuevo*. Naty, as everyone called her, loved me from the beginning, I think. She was Argentine to the core, raised in the capital Buenos Aires. Ana was an international student from Ecuador and was more shy and ethereal than Naty most of the time. But Ana was full of surprises. At random times, her energy would skyrocket, and everything would make her laugh until she couldn't breathe and no noise came out of her mouth. Naty was a freight train; Ana was a rollercoaster. As I learned more Spanish, their temperaments became even more apparent, especially Ana's.

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After living at the UAP eight weeks, the exchange program took all the Americans on a trip to Buenos Aires. The day we returned to campus the morning light was still dim as the *colectivo* pulled into the *Villa*. After traveling through the night, I didn't even have the energy to say "thank you" to Glenda, the ACA secretary, and Haroldo, the director. My friend Renee and I carried our luggage through the campus buildings and parted ways at the top of the stairs at floor number 2 in *hogar nuevo*. There would be no classes, only pillow time. Through the sheer

curtain at the end of my hall I could tell that the sun was trying to rise. The dorm was almost silent. As I walked down the hall, I heard the sound of a blow dryer running on low in one room.

At the end of the hall, I slid my key into the chrome lock piece of room 33. The hollow door swung open with almost no noise. I shut it behind me and slid my duffle bag and backpack under my bed, took off my glasses, and fell into bed. It wasn't until hours later that I noticed the pile of used tissues on the floor next to Ana's bunk.

When I woke up, the midday sunshine illuminated our small room. Even the heavy floral curtains drawn across the wall-window couldn't keep it out. The *pieza* looked a lot like a cell with cold, pink linoleum, plastic lawn chairs at the counter under the windows, locking closets made of particle board, and metal bunks.

Ana was still in bed. I showered, dressed, and struggled through a chapter of grammar homework. Ana was still in bed. I curled my hair, went to *El Ceapé* to buy *chipas*, tiny rolls of Argentine cheese bread, and then walked to *El Navegante*, the cybercafe, to check my e-mail. When I got back, Ana was still in bed.

Around 4 o'clock that afternoon, Naty rushed into the room as she always did after classes. She said she had missed me and was glad that I was back. I said I had missed her and was glad to be back. We hugged and got dressed to play *fútbol* at the *municipal* off campus. It wasn't until we had left the dorm lobby that Naty mentioned Ana.

"*Pasaba mas que toda la semana así,*" said Naty.

I kicked myself for not studying my past tense verb conjugations, then expressed my worry.

"A week?" I asked in Spanish.

"*Sí, mas que una semana. No come ni asiste a clase. Por lo menos no creo. Solo se levanta de cama para ir al baño. Es un lío.*"

Naty spoke fast, and I could barely catch the verbs for eat, go to class, get out of bed. From her tone, I could tell she was very concerned but also annoyed.

Before I could ask her if she knew why Ana was voluntarily bedridden, we had arrived at the indoor arena, and the other girls called us onto the court and assigned us to *fútbol* teams. At the end of the scrimmage, Naty ran ahead to change and meet a study group at the library. I stopped by the ACA building where some Americans were sitting on the yellow benches munching on *chipas* and talking about home. It was the day after Thanksgiving. On our trip to Buenos Aires, our directors had taken us out to a famous café for tea and dessert when our mouths were missing mashed potatoes and pumpkin pie at home.

When I finally returned to the *pieza*, Ana almost knocked me down when I opened the door. Her big brown eyes stared at me but didn't seem to see me.

"*Ana, ¿qué te pasa?*" She didn't even hear me; she was crying and moaning so loudly. When I reached out to touch her, she rushed across the room to her bed on the lower bunk and huddled under her pink comforter, rocking back and forth. Through her cries she mumbled to herself in low tones. I watched her uncertain of what to say or do. Then her voice escalated, punctuating her ranting with exclamations of "*¡Estúpida, estúpida!*"

That was enough. I left the room and walked down the hall toward the dean's office. On my way down the stairs, I realized I had no words. What was I going to say to the *preceptora*? I didn't even know how to say cry in Spanish. Right then, Evelyn, who roomed with my friend Finley from Tennessee, was passing me on the stairs. Evelyn was always ready to do two things: help and smile. I needed help, and a smile wouldn't hurt.

"Evelyn," I turned toward her, *¿Cómo se dice...?*" I resorted to sign language and began to make crying sounds while rubbing my eyes with my fists.

"*Hola, Sarita.*" She smiled and laughed. "*Se dice llorar.*"

"*Llorar?*" I had to ask her to spell it for me so I could try the Argentine pronunciation. So I learned how to say: Ana cries and cannot stop.

*La preceptora* on duty, Lizi, came to the room with me. Ana was exactly where I had left her. As we opened the door her rantings fell to a murmur. Lizi sat on the edge of my bed across from Ana and asked questions. She looked kind but very serious. I barely understood anything she said. A sense of helplessness washed over me. I stood still for a few minutes before excusing myself. It was nearly time for the *comedor* to open for dinner anyway. As I pulled the door shut behind me, I heard Ana's voice begin to sharply answer Lizi's questions.

When I returned from eating, I found only Naty alone in the room.

"*¿Dónde está Ana?*" I asked. I noticed her pink comforter was missing from her bare mattress.

"*La preceptora la llevó al Sanatorio,*" replied Naty.

I had to ask Naty to repeat herself three times before I understood that Ana had been admitted to *el Sanatorio*, the hospital, next to the university. It took even longer for me to get the full story from Naty.

"*Está así por el suizo, el lindo que estudia medicina.*"

"*¿Quién es el suizo?*" I couldn't remember if *suizo* meant Swiss or Swedish. At any rate, this had to do with a European medical student.

"*El amigo de Paulo.*"

"*Se llama Chris?*" Paulo and Chris were almost always in the gym when I went there to lift weights. I had never really talked with Chris, but both he and Paulo were involved with the English Sabbath School that I attended before church services each week.

"*Sí, lo mismo. El guapo.*" Naty rolled her eyes and fanned herself with her hands. Chris was good-looking, but I had never seen him with Ana before.

"*¿Qué pasó? Nunca escuché noticias de ellos como novios.*" It took me three tries to get out the boyfriend-girlfriend-breakup question.

"*Porque nunca fueron así. Sólo era de su mente. Completamente imaginado, mentira.*" Naty's reply shocked me more than I could have anticipated. When I heard that they had never dated or been close, I began to recall a conversation with Paulo where he mentioned that Chris had a girlfriend in the Philippines where his parents worked as missionaries.

"*Por eso, Ana está ridícula y desanimada fuera de reconocimiento.*" Naty raised her fist and hit her forehead with it, a repulsive gesture I had found to mean stupid or crazy.

“*Un lio.*” It was a mess.

“*Sí... Un lio.*” Naty agreed.

“*¿Qué hacemos?*”

“*No sé.*”

“*Bueno.*”

But we didn’t know what else to do about it.

Three days later, Ana came back from *el Sanatorio* to live with us. She functioned like a person again leaving the room for classes and meals and not just to use the bathroom down the hall. But she still didn’t smile much, and I never heard her laugh out loud anymore. I looked up the word “to laugh,” *reír*, so I could ask her about it. When I did, she told me everything in her mind about what had happened. I couldn’t understand most of what she said. I was her roommate, but without language, I couldn’t be her friend; I couldn’t take care of her; I couldn’t be a human being. I tried, but I realized I had lost my basic identity as a compassionate, kind human being all because I lacked the tool of language.

From the few things I did comprehend, I sensed she was still paranoid that everyone on campus was talking about her and calling her a fool. I told her that no one was talking about her and Chris. *Nadie*. Only her friends who loved her were concerned for her. When I said *nadie*, her chin quivered and she reminded me what *llorar* meant as the tears came. *Ella lloró*.

The word *nadie* made Ana cry again. When I told her *nadie* was talking about her behind her back, it meant Chris wasn’t talking, thinking, or caring about her. *Nadie* meant she didn’t belong with him. *Nadie* meant she was no one but herself, a person she didn’t like very much. She was not enough in her own eyes. She was *nadie*. *Nadie* was a word Ana must have learned as a very small child in Ecuador, but this experience with fantasy and paranoia gave the word new meaning. In that time and place, Ana felt like *nadie* because she was no one to Chris. Chris was *nadie*, only an illusion in Ana’s mind. I was *nadie*, only my secret self-trapped inside these experiences and observations made incomplete by my broken language. It hurt to watch. It hurt to listen, but then I had felt like *nadie* before and knew my identity could change. More language, please. I needed more light.

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When I arrived in Argentina for the first time, I was herded onto one of two double-decker buses called *colectivos* that took all of the ACA students from the Ezeiza airport down the widest avenue in the world to the Brazilian Embassy. When the *colectivos* parked on the side of the *avenida*, some of us got out to look around at the city sidewalk, the fences around trees, the trash blowing and clinging to ragged patches of grass, the unreadable business signs, and the cement. I knew none of the people standing around me. We had descended from the bus together, but I had spoken only with Mr. and Mrs. Tenorio, the middle-aged couple who had been seated near me

onboard. After making introductions and conversation for a few minutes, Haroldo, the ACA program director, approached us on the sidewalk with something to say.

“The Brazilian Embassy is very close, and the first group of students have already filled out their paperwork. You all must apply for a Brazilian visas for our first ACA trip to Iguazu in October. We need 20 more of you to go and make your arrangements now.”

His English was very smooth and deliberate. I later found out that he had moved to the United States as a thirteen-year-old and lived there all of his teen years. I joined the new group forming outside the Embassy and followed Haroldo inside. We walked down a long dim hall covered in mahogany-colored paneling. Our rubber and plastic heels clicked on the black and gold tile as we turned up a narrow stairway. At the landing, we were bathed in fluorescent light and greeted by golden queues and dividers that guided us toward the stoic faces behind windows where we spoke English through round holes in the glass. The official in the booth gave me brisk directions without a smile. Papers and pen in hand, I left the window and crossed the long room to an outer wall with a ledge the right height for writing on.

“Your name is Sarah, yes?” I turned to find Haroldo at my shoulder.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Be careful when you sign the bottom of the application. Look at your passport because the signature on the visa application must be practically identical to the one on your passport.” I nodded and unzipped my camera bag to look for my passport. “They will deny the visa if the signatures don’t match almost perfectly, and then we would not be able to reapply for another visa before our trip to Brazil.”

“I understand. Thanks.” I almost smiled and then remembered my Spanish professor in the States warning me not to smile in public when I was traveling, especially at men.

“People will think you are either stupid, crazy, or advertising. At the very least, they will know you’re American,” he had said. As I turned back to the application, I figured my professor had probably been referring to smiling at strangers, but I didn’t feel like smiling at anyone right then anyway. It was strange to think I might need to relearn how to smile here.

Every so often I glanced up from the application and watched the people in the queues. The Americans were unmistakably dressed in Hollister, Abercrombie, and Ecko labels. We were a collection of colors, jeans, polos, hair, and skin tones, deposited in an official universe of black ceramic and varnished lumber. An embassy is a place where no one really belongs; we just go there for permission to go somewhere else where we may belong more or less. The Embassy was neither Brazil nor Argentina, and I had almost no idea what the difference was anyway.

As I studied my own signature at the edge of my passport, I overheard Haroldo speaking in Spanish. All I could guess was that he had asked a question by the way his voice lifted at the end of his speech. Until now, I had only heard him speak English to us with an occasional word or phrase in Spanish.

“After today, we will speak to you only in Spanish,” he had announced on the *colectivo*.

Over my shoulder, I saw a few American students look dumbly at Haroldo where he stood in the center of the opening to the hall and stairway. A tall, black guy with a tattoo spelling P.A.T. on his right arm raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders while mumbling something out of the corner of his mouth to his neighbor. I had met Pat on the *colectivo*. He had sat in the row in front of me but had spent most of the ride turned around talking with me. Whatever he had said got a laugh from Hubert, a shorter guy with cornrows. Haroldo didn't seem to hear either of them. He repeated his question just as another guy with sandy blond hair wearing a Hollister t-shirt stepped through the door.

"*Nadie*," responded the Hollister model.

I saw recognition and understanding on his face; it was in the way his eyes focused on Haroldo's face and the way he stood ready for directions. His one-word reply caught something in my memory. That word: *nadie, nadie*. What did it mean? In my mind I could see a snapshot of it on a page of my college Spanish textbook, but the space where the definition was supposed to be remained foggy. I couldn't remember how to understand.

*Nadie*. Finally, it fit into my memories of Spanish 101, and I felt like *nadie* without words or understanding in a busy, strange place. *Nadie*. No one. I was just another American with a 90-day tourist visa and two options. I could be speechless or I could babble in English.

Looking back, the scene in the embassy reminds me of Homer's *Odyssey* because Odysseus—the epic's hero—uses the word nobody, or *nadie*, to escape death at the hands of the one-eyed Cyclops. That's what you get with a degree in literature. They teach you ancient ideas that don't make any money but are somehow valuable because they describe the essence of being human. Somehow language and the way we use it makes us human.

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I was a strong-willed child. That's a nice way of saying I was a brat. I was a picky eater and refused most of what my parents cooked and put on my plate. One night when I was four or five, I was so upset with Mom and Dad for making me eat chili that I ran into the kitchen yelling, squatted, and peed all over the wood floor in defiance. Take that Mom and Pop. I'll piss on your black-bean chili. Funny and embarrassing, I know. I probably still had to eat the soup, since I have other vivid memories of Dad holding me in my chair with one hand and squeezing my nose shut with the other while Mom waited for my mouth to open so she could shovel in the warm chili.

Mom was a teacher. Elementary school. She taught me to read, write, and eat chili, of course. One day when she was feeling especially instructive, she sat me in front of the television and popped a tape in the VCR. It was called *The Miracle Worker* and was my first introduction to Annie Sullivan and her famous blind and deaf pupil Helen Keller.

Mom told me to pay close attention to the dining room tantrum scene where Helen destroys the dining room and table setting when Annie tries to make her use a spoon instead of her hands to eat.

“Is that how you want to look when you throw a fit about eating dinner?” I remember Mom asking.

I was impressed. I didn’t start liking chili, or anything else that normal people enjoyed eating, but I definitely didn’t want to be a human hurricane like Helen. Besides Annie locked her in the dining room until she ate with her spoon and folded her napkin anyway, just like my parents tag-teamed force-feeding me chili. So what was the point of resisting when her teacher was trying to help her belong and behave like a functioning member of her family instead of a grasping animal?

As I said, my mother was a teacher; she taught, and I learned Helen’s story. I watched the film version of *The Miracle Worker* more than once as I grew up. I was impressed again and again by Helen’s intelligence and Annie’s determination to give Helen language. I read the play and saw it performed live, but it wasn’t until college that I checked out the books Helen wrote, the testimony of her own journey with the words Annie had given her.

In her autobiography *The Story of Myself*, Helen writes that Annie had been trying for weeks to show her that everything has a name and an identity that can be communicated through language. Early one morning, she had given Helen a new doll and repeatedly signed “d-o-l-l” in the girl’s hand. Annoyed and impatient, Helen struck the doll on the hearth, shattering it to pieces. “I felt my teacher sweep the fragments to one side of the hearth, and I had a sense of satisfaction that the cause of my discomfort was removed,” Helen recalled. “In the still, dark world in which I lived there was no strong sentiment or tenderness.” After the doll incident, Annie took Helen to the well-house and forced the girl’s hands beneath the water pump.

“As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word *water*, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers,” remembered Helen. “Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that “w-a-t-e-r” meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away.

I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange, new sight that had come to me. On entering the door I remembered the doll I had broken. I felt my way to the hearth and picked up the pieces. I tried vainly to put them together. Then my eyes filled with tears; for I realized what I had done, and for the first time I felt repentance and sorrow.”

According to Helen, that night was the first time she went to bed looking forward to what a new day would bring. Before, in the “valley of twofold solitude” in which she lived, there had

been no strong sentiment or tenderness. Even though language opened her life to repentance and sorrow, it brought hope and anticipation, a reason to live. Language is a light to shine on our experiences. With language we assign, create, and communicate meaning. We do this within ourselves, and with each other in relationships. It's part of the essence of being human. Helen's well-house experience shows how language changed her identity, her perception of the world, and her choices. Despite the silent darkness of being both deaf and blind, language was the light that guided Helen out of the cave.

Later as I struggled learning Spanish as a second language, I remembered Helen. Her silent darkness was darker and quieter than mine. Before she learned language, her quiet darkness was a lot like a case of aphasia, a neurological loss of meaning and symbolism. It might sound like something from science fiction, but the truth is that damage to a certain part of the brain can rob you of language. It's not as bad as losing your mouth completely like the green-eyed boy in the cave since you could still move your lips and make sounds. But then again, it's probably worse than that because meaningful speech would be gone along with the ability to read or understand anything being said. Neurologist Richard Cytowic writes that "Not only words, but gesture, semantic and syntactic meaning, even the melody of speech all [vanish] from the mind in an instant." That's aphasia, the loss of meaning and symbolism. In a less extreme sense, that's what Helen experienced before her revelation at the well-house, that's what separated me from Ana and others at the UAP. That was our plight.

For Helen and for me, experience only made sense with language, and in that symbiotic relationship only together were words and experiences meaningful. The question raised by aphasia and our aphasia-like experiences was what happens to our humanity when our symbolism is taken away? Do we become *nadie*? After all, Helen didn't refer to language as her "human heritage" for no reason.

Language is a light to shine on our experiences. As a part of our identity and humanity, language is given to us. It is not something we choose, at least not at first. We use it and modify it. It shapes us and defines our experiences giving our lives meaning. Without language, we can't make deep friendships. Without language, we would be lost in the darkness like a patient with aphasia or Helen Keller before the well-house. Without language, our experiences don't make sense. Language is a light that shapes our identity—who we are.

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*"Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter,  
but the advantage of knowledge is this:  
that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor."*  
ECCLESIASTES 7:12

I've heard it said that "the darkest part of any place is our ignorance of it." Hearing about dark places makes me think of caves—places where bats live, sleep, and poop; places where bears hibernate; places where dragons hoard gold and pirates bury treasure; places where you need a headlamp or a nightlight. We start life afraid of the dark, and some of us never get over it. We start life ignorant, and a lot of us never get over that either, at least not completely. As a kid, it takes a while to beat the dark, to quit being afraid of it. Eventually, we learn our bedroom isn't so bad; then we conquer the space under the bed and figure out the closet is safe even after Dad caught a bat in there once. Getting over the dark isn't a once-and-for-all kind of battle; it's progressive. Every new place we go, we have to do it again. Grandma's house. Third-grade slumber parties. Camping trips. The more we face the dark, the better we get at it.

Somehow as kids, we start life afraid, and fear doesn't just go away. At the same time, we start life hopeful. Hope makes us dream good dreams in spite of nightmares. We hope and fear and have to figure out the difference between our dreams and the dark. It's all part of being human.

Before I went to study and live in Argentina, I remember being afraid to travel even though I spent my childhood dreaming about traveling. I've heard it said that travel is the death of ignorance. That's another way of saying: run away from home, leave your nightlight, take your headlamp, and check out that cave. New places and the people who call them home measure who we are and force us to face ourselves in new ways. We learn about the place and about ourselves. We learn from the people there and how we fit into a world that is much bigger than our home. When I left the States, I was ignorant and afraid. I wasn't afraid of traveling the way I was afraid of the dark as a kid. I wasn't afraid to travel because I could get hurt or robbed or lonely or embarrassed even though those are fearful reasons some people give for not traveling. I was afraid to travel because it cost money.

As kids, we're afraid of the dark long before we ever worry about money. As kids, we don't usually dream about money either. It takes time for us to realize what it means when Mom or Dad says, "A trip to Disney World is too expensive" or "We can't afford cello lessons" or "You'll have to pay for a snowboard yourself." Money isn't inherently good or bad, light or dark, but it is powerful, enough to affect our hopes and fears. Some people act like money is everything when it isn't. Others like to think that money doesn't matter when it does. In and of itself, money isn't a sweet dream or a nightmare, but it has the power to make dreams come true. The sad side of that truth is that without money many worthwhile dreams are never fulfilled.

I've always liked to think I'm good with money: after all, I've had money in the bank since I was a kid. When I was 10, I got my first job delivering newspapers for the *Brunswick Times Record*. I remember calculating how much money I could make in a year of delivering papers, which was a little more than a thousand dollars. It sure beat the nickels I earned for making my bed and dusting the piano. I was amazed by all the wonderful things I could finally afford—candy at the corner drug store, a new bike, a snowboard, cool clothes from the GAP, another new bike, a flight to Florida to visit my cousin for his birthday. At the tender age of 10, I became a

paying customer, a consumer stimulating the economy one crumpled wad of dollar bills at a time. So began my relationship with the American dollar.

I knew the numbers on my bank statement gave me the power to purchase most things at the mall, but I didn't anticipate the power it afforded me in *la Villa*. Money and freedom mean power. When we have money and the freedom to spend it as we see fit, we have the power to create experiences, own stuff, give gifts, make dreams come true. The way we use that power reflects who we are. It also shapes who we become.

By the time I was in college considering a study abroad program, I made a little more money than I had with the *Times Record* paper route. But by then, I understood what my parents had meant when they said, "things are expensive." College was expensive, and so was traveling to another continent. In different ways, both college and travel were dreams of mine, and it took a lot of calculating and hard work to figure out how to afford both. I knew the exchange rate from dollars to Argentine pesos was favorable. I knew once I arrived at *la Universidad Adventista del Plata* almost all my needs would be provided for. But even as I waved to my mom and dad from across the security checkpoint and boarded my ten-hour flight to South America, I was nervous about money.

The night we all arrived on the bus from Buenos Aires, I remember hearing Josh, one of the language program assistants say, "This is it. Everyone in *la Villa* has been waiting for you. They wait every year for the Americans to come. We're almost like celebrities here."

*Celebrities?*

Sure enough, we arrived with our pathetic Spanish, foreign fashions, and ATM cards, and discovered that we were icons. We brought our computers and iPods, our cash and debit cards—things that few other students at the UAP had. And we discovered that what we didn't have were limits at the cafeteria, quotas on our weekly laundry services, or consequences for breaking campus policy. It didn't take long for us to recognize the double standard and that the double standard had something to do with money.

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A few weeks into our first quarter at the UAP, I was off campus visiting new friends, Pichu and Marli, with two other ACA students, Renee and Phil. Pichu was a medical student at the UAP. She had a house, a car, and a fondue set. The house and car she shared with her younger brother. The fondue set she shared with us. Sitting around the kitchen table at Pichu's house dipping pieces of fruit into semi-sweet chocolate, I glanced at the clock hanging on a lonely wall. It was hung too high, and I had to crane my neck to read the black hands. Ten forty-eight.

"When is curfew again?" Renee had been checking the time as well.

"Eleven o'clock, I think," I replied.

"Yeah." Phil leaned forward in his chair preparing to stand up.

"We should go, huh?" I suggested.

When we stood to leave, Pichu and Marli looked at each other, shook their heads, and laughed at us.

“What? ¿*Por qué te preocupes por la hora?*” Pichu covered her mouth to keep from laughing.

“You’re ACA. You don’t ever need to worry about curfew. Don’t you know that yet?” teased Marli.

Phil, Renee, and I looked at each other and smiled without showing our teeth. All we could do was shrug. We knew they were right.

At orientation, we were overwhelmed by all the rules, but it turned out that most of them didn’t apply to us anyway. That year, there were 74 Americans living inside the campus fence, and any of us could jump it or just sneak through the *portico* when the guards weren’t looking. The worst that could happen was a talk with the *preceptor* or *preceptora* in the dorms.

We were also told that daily chapel attendance was required, but nothing happened when we didn’t show up. When I could finally understand the speakers and songs later in the school year, I attended the meetings more often. At one of them toward the end of our final quarter, students were called on to stand and represent their countries of citizenship. When the United States was called, only four of us stood. If non-ACA students didn’t show up for evening worships or meet curfew, they were warned, disciplined, and then expelled. A few ACA students, however, stayed out all night, sometimes coming back drunk. This didn’t happen often, but the fact that the behavior was tolerated at all spoke volumes. Americans have everything they want, do anything they want, and get away with it. That was the stereotype and often the reality at the UAP. It didn’t make sense at first, until I realized how much the Americans paid to be at the UAP. American means money in *castellano*. We paid more to attend the UAP than any other students. We supported the school, and that money meant diplomatic immunity.

Not including airfare and other travel expenses, I paid about \$13,500 to participate in the UAP’s language program. My friend Pichu paid a little less than 7,000 pesos to study medicine for one year at the UAP. While I was in Argentina, the exchange rate for the Argentine peso against the U.S. dollar was three to one. If you do the math, this means that Pichu attended the UAP for an entire year for approximately \$2,300 in U.S. currency, and medicine was the most expensive program offered at the university. Students studying for other careers paid even less than this. The fees I paid to be at the university, live in *hogar nuevo*, and eat in *el comedor* equalled what Pichu and five other medical students paid together.

Now, the ACA program did offer four six-day tours; three of them were international. I tried to consider other possible overhead and operating costs that could account for the large difference between tuition and living expenses of ACA and national students. Undoubtedly, not all of the money paid by ACA students (or our guarantors) was seen at the UAP. After all, the bill was paid to a managing office located in the United States that was also responsible for similar programs in Spain, Italy, France, Germany, Austria, and Mexico. At any rate, we were high-paying customers, and we paid for the double standard.

The more I traveled with the ACA program and on my own, the less I worried about money. Overspending was still possible, but after paying for the international flight from the U.S., travel expenses were cheap. It was a dream come true.

We soon learned how to find and make use of the services of Giselle, the travel agent who always wore glitter in her nail polish, her sweater, or on her eyelashes and whose office was only two blocks from the campus *portico*. She sent us to destinations like Macchu Picchu, Buenos Aires, Foz do Iguacu, Patagonia, and Rio de Janeiro. We stood on mountains, hiked on glaciers, got sick, watched *bailerines del tango*, explored waterfalls and ruins, and became friends along the way. Many other students at the UAP didn't have the option because they didn't have extra money to travel. And I discovered it wasn't just a matter of money.

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A month or so before I left Argentina and the UAP, my roommate Naty asked me a question. By that time, conversation in Spanish was almost as easy as in English.

"Will you come back to visit us in *Wilde*?" I had just spent the past weekend visiting her and her family in their home in Wilde, a suburb of Buenos Aires.

"I want to, but I don't know when I will be able to," I answered. "You could come visit me and my family, too. Anita said she would like to visit *los Estados Unidos*."

Naty smiled and took a deep breath.

"I really want to. I could practice my English with your parents and sister."

"*Claro. ¡Dale entonces!*" I liked the idea of showing Naty my little Wisconsin town especially in the spring when the redbuds bloomed.

"I really want to," she said again, "but they don't let many people into the U.S. with Argentine passports."

"Why?"

"They think we will stay illegally. . . . At least, that's what my dad said, and he works with the government. I guess I wouldn't mind staying there if you found me an American boyfriend." She said boyfriend in English and laughed, rolling her eyes and squeezing my knee. "*¡Sí! Sarita, debes encontrarme un boyfriend de los Estados Unidos.*"

I laughed.

"Naty, I don't know any American boys good enough to be your boyfriend. You're too awesome."

"*¡Ay! No me digas.*"

Whenever we talked about travel especially to the United States, Naty got wistful as if she was about to cry. Then she would shake her head and make herself smile until her nose wrinkled and say softly, "*Sólo es un sueño.*" It's just a dream.

My friend Finley, another ACA student, wanted her roommate Evelyn to visit her home in Tennessee over the summer. Evelyn was from Corrientes, one of Argentina's poorest provinces.

She worked hard to earn enough money to stay in school at the UAP. She and Finley talked and planned all the things they would see and do together in the States.

“*Probablemente, no va a pasar,*” Evelyn would say, “*Pero soñar es muy lindo.*” She didn’t think it would work out, but dreaming was nice. Finley was more determined.

When Finley’s grandmother offered to pay for Evelyn’s airfare, the two of girls went to the U.S. Embassy in Buenos Aires right away to try to work it out. They filled out visa paper work, paid a nonrefundable processing fee, and waited for an interview. Their interview didn’t last long. After reviewing Evelyn’s economic background, the official gave them more paperwork to fill out and said, “You can fill these out and get more references, but to be honest, I don’t think this will work.” Later when Evelyn was out of ear shot, he told Finley, “It would be much easier for you to come back to Argentina for a visit.” They didn’t give up on the extra paperwork, but in the end, the official was right. Evelyn’s visa was denied, leaving her with a dream unfulfilled. When Finley told me what had happened, I couldn’t understand what it must have felt like for Evelyn to be rejected in that way because of money.

In April, after living in South America for eight months, I experienced a fraction of what Evelyn must have felt to be denied and limited because of money. The ACA program took its final tour to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. We stayed in a high-rise hotel within walking distance of the beaches Copacabana and Ipanema. It was a beautiful city—the people, the beaches, the landscape. We took a train to the mountain above the city where the massive statue of *Cristo Redentor* stands stretching his arms out over the metropolis sprawling in the valley between water and mountains. Some of the ACA girls got piercings during one afternoon we spent in a major shopping district. Everyone tanned and bodysurfed on the beaches. None of this reminded me of Evelyn. It wasn’t until our fourth day in the city that I thought of her when we toured the Rio offices of H. Stern, world-class jeweler.

Growing up as a Seventh-day Adventist, I had next to no exposure to fine jewelry. In general, personal adornment—earrings, necklaces, rings, bracelets—is discouraged among Adventists. Plain dress is a longstanding tradition that’s still practiced but often disregarded, especially by younger generations. As a child, the most jewelry I ever wore were the strings of fake pearls and clip-on earrings my grandmother bought at thrift stores for my sister and me to play dress up with. I wasn’t in the market for cheap accessories at Walmart, let alone fine jewelry. This explains, in part, why I had never heard of H. Stern before seeing a large advertisement for the jeweler in our hotel lobby in Rio.

The offices of H. Stern were modern and posh, staffed by multi-lingual associates of every ethnicity. In the lobby, we took pictures of each other posing in front of a floor-to-ceiling sign lit with every imaginable color highlighting the white text of the H. Stern logo. The tour of the headquarters complex took more than an hour. We filed past windows and displays of every uncut, cut, polished, and set precious stone the company dealt with as a woman with a soft Latin accent explained the history and expansion of the company over a loudspeaker system:

“Hans Stern was a German immigrant, but a native of Rio at heart, with a dream of sharing Brazil’s precious stones with the world. The company, which started with Hans and one other employee in the 1950s, now has almost 3,000 on staff. Its most important assets are its craftsmen, who bring the jewels to life. Its headquarters here in Ipanema, Rio’s fashion district, boast more than 42,000 square feet of high-rising modern architecture. The H.Stern building is the largest space built for jewelry manufacturing and commercialization in the world. The complex, which also houses offices, workshops, souvenir shops, galleries, a museum, and an exhibition hall, dedicates 12,000 square feet to the sale of fine jewelry and watches, and has become one of Rio’s most famous tourist attractions, receiving 10,000 visitors monthly. Thank you for visiting us at H. Stern. Remember to take something with you to remember us by.”

As we completed the tour, our group was ushered into the exhibition hall we had heard about over the loudspeaker. It smelled like exotic perfume and flowers. The light was soft and natural, making the spotlights on the jewelry in the display cases shimmer like sun on snow—aquamarine, tourmaline, diamond, amethyst, imperial topaz. Many of the gems I didn’t recognize. I had never heard of imperial topaz before. Ouro Preto, Brazil, is the only place in the world it’s found.

Some of the ACA girls went straight up to the counters and asked to try on rings and necklaces. I was ready to leave. Trying on jewelry wasn’t my idea of a good time, but I tried to tell myself this was an opportunity to take advantage of. *How often will I get the chance to wear the value of a four-year college degree around my neck?* I thought. I wandered through the people and displays, until something caught my eye. At the center of the salon, was a small circular display counter full of golden jewels. A slender, dark woman in a black suit and heels stood behind the counter. She was young and blond with full red lips. I felt her watching me as I looked through the glass cases.

“Are these all imperial topaz?” I asked the woman. I looked up into her face in time to see one side of her full, red mouth curve up into her cheek.

“Of course,” she replied in cool tones.

I stopped in front of her and looked down into the case at one necklace. It was the most beautiful piece of jewelry in the building. In the bright light, the imperial topaz shimmered golden like crystal sunshine arranged in spreading clusters of leaves on slender strands of gold.

“It is very beautiful, no?” asked the red-lipped woman.

“Yes, it is,” I agreed and looked up from the necklace.

The woman scanned me from head to toe, raised her eyebrows, and placed her manicured hands possessively on the glass display case between us.

“Are you interested in purchasing this piece?” she asked pointing to the necklace.

“I don’t think so, but it is beautiful,” I replied, “Could I try it on?”

“Do you know how much this piece is worth?” she asked. I thought it was a stupid question for her to ask since prices were only available by request; none were posted.

“No, how much is it worth?” I asked.

“One hundred seventy-five thousand American dollars.”

I was stunned. That was more than what my family’s house was worth.

She tilted her head to one side, leaned forward over the counter, and whispered.

“I don’t think this is in your price range. If you are not considering buying it, then no, I cannot have you try it on. You might like to look at some of the things in the gift shop, they might have more of what you can afford.” She stopped and looked at me with a satisfied expression on her face, as if to say, *I’m done with you, you can go now*.

I felt sure my face matched her red lipstick, but I stood still for a minute looking at the woman and then down at the necklace. I wasn’t a celebrity here like I was at the UAP. I wasn’t rich here like I was at the UAP.

Hans Stern had a dream, and that dream gave this saleswoman the power to stand over a handful of gold-colored rocks, reject me, and make me feel like nothing. That feeling reminded me of Evelyn and the U.S. visa. Now, I knew, in a small way, how it felt to ask and never receive. The difference was the U.S. visa was part of Evelyn’s dream to travel, while for me, the necklace had no part in my dreams. Travel was the death of my ignorance.

When we returned to the UAP from Rio, I met Evelyn in the hallway of *hogar nuevo* one afternoon. A few weeks had passed since her visa request had been denied. She was mopping the pink tile floor. I always saw her working unless she was eating in *el comedor* or spending time with friends on Sabbath when everyone rested.

“¡Sarita!” She smiled. Evelyn’s smile was eternal and ready for everyone because she loved everyone.

“¡Evelyn! ¿Cómo andás?” I stopped to greet her with *un beso*, a kiss on the right cheek. She was just finishing the floor, and I helped her take the bucket to the bathroom to dump out the dirty water. We talked about some of the things we had been reading. I could tell she was tired, and I asked her about work and school. The term was almost over, and I figured she must be stressed with exams and plans for vacation.

“Yes. Exams take a lot out of me. I have to study a lot, you know. But I’m thankful to be able to take the tests. *Sí, agradecida...*” she paused as if thinking about what to say next, “Sarita, I’ve been pretty disappointed the past few weeks. I worked all last year to save money for school. I thought I had enough to keep taking classes next term, but I found out that I don’t. So, I have to work *como becaria* again.” She sighed and closed her eyes. Her eternal smile stopped shining for the first time in the eight months I had known her.

“I’m sorry, Evelyn. I’m so sorry. How long will you have to work before you can take more classes? You’ll still live here, though, right? We’ll still see each other?”

I couldn’t think of anything else to ask or say. Without student loans or government support for higher education, a lot of students at the UAP had to work to put themselves through school if their families couldn’t afford tuition. Many worked more than every other year to fund their studies. I was disappointed for Evelyn. I remembered talking with Evelyn months before when we had first met about her dreams of how she wanted to change the world.

“I want to open an orphanage and start a school back home in Corrientes,” Evelyn had said. “My province is very poor. There are many children with nothing and no one. I feel I can relate to them. Soon my father will be gone; he has been sick with cancer a long time, and I’ll be an orphan. When you really think about it, almost everyone becomes an orphan or at least half of one when one of their parents die. And then so many never know their parents even if they are alive somewhere else in the world. That’s true religion, no? *Como dice Santiago* . . . to help the orphans and widows.” While she had said all this, her smile faded as her words grew more serious, but when she asked “That’s true religion, no?” she smiled the eternal smile again. She believed; she hoped; she dreamed in spite of the challenges she faced. I didn’t want her dream to die.

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“*¡Naty! Vamonos, ¿eh?*” Evelyn and I were already halfway to the bus terminal down the main street of *la Villa, 25 de mayo de 99*, and Naty was 20 meters behind us slowly catching up after stopping to chat at the *portico* with some guy she knew.

“Oh, leave me alone,” Naty shouted in Spanish from behind us.

“We will if you don’t hurry up,” I called back. Evelyn laughed through her eternal smile as we kept walking past the terminal with its mural map of the Entre Rios province painted on the side of the building. Across the street, *el banco nacional* was closed for the evening and a line of people was forming outside the glass-enclosed ATM. Naty finally caught up with us as we passed the blue *supermercado* on the edge of *la Villa*. The street was quiet, and the sun was hanging low trying to beat us to *punte blanco*, the white-arched bridge over *el arroyo* where we were headed three kilometers away. We walked by houses and apartments until *25 de mayo de 99* ended in cow pasture, and the beaten path to *punte blanco* began.

“*¡Ay! ¡Qué lindo!*” said Evelyn admiring the falling sun. The fields smelled like cows, and every so often a car or bus would drive by on the two-lane road next to our path. We talked about classes for a while. Next, we talked about boys for a while. We were on our way back to the *Villa* when Evelyn asked Naty a question.

“*Naty, ¿Cuál es tu sueño?*” It was a lighthearted question, but Naty took it seriously.

“My dream?” Naty repeated. A car drove by and passed through the white twin pillars on either side of the road that marked the town limits of the *Villa*. “My dream is to get my license and drive a car someday so that my husband won’t have to take me places. I’ll be able to do it myself. I want that a lot . . . almost as much as I want a good job when I graduate.”

I looked at Evelyn to see if she was as surprised as I was. I had no idea one of Naty’s life goals was to learn how to drive a car.

“That’s a good dream,” said Evelyn without smiling. “It is expensive, but you could do it, I think . . . Yes, that’s a good dream. I hope it comes true.”

“Me too,” I said.

“Sarah, you can drive, no?” asked Evelyn.

“Yes, I can.”

“All of the Americans drive,” said Naty.

“Yes, I think you’re right,” I agreed. We were quiet for a minute as we breathed in the smell of cows in the dark.

“Sarah, what is your dream?” Evelyn asked.

“I don’t know yet,” I replied. “I just know I really want your dreams to come true.” I was overwhelmed by the options, options that Evelyn and Naty didn’t have.

By the time we stepped back onto the asphalt of *25 de mayo de 99*, the sun was gone. We were in the dark again like kids trying to figure out the difference between fear and hope, dreams and nightmares. Evelyn dreamed of finishing school and teaching. Naty dreamed of driving and finding independence. I didn’t need to dream of education or a driver’s license. Those things were already provided for me. As we passed *el banco nacional* and the ATM, I couldn’t help but think of not just the money but the privilege and freedom to which I had access. Before traveling to Argentina and knowing Evelyn and Naty, I had thought I understood money and what it was for, but I had been ignorant. Money could still buy things, but my understanding of what things were worth buying had changed. My understanding of which dreams in the world were worth fulfilling had changed. I thought of Evelyn’s lack of tuition and her dream of building an orphanage. I thought of Naty’s desire for independence and a driver’s license. And I knew that from then on, my dreams needed to be about more than my own desires. I did not choose privilege; it chose me, and that brought a sense of responsibility to my dreams.

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*“Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror;  
then we shall see face to face.*

*Now I know in part; then I shall know fully,  
even as I am fully known.”*

1 CORINTHIANS 13:12

The crisp edition of *El Clarín* laying on the library table in front of me made me feel like I had just gorged myself on *chipas* from the *Ceapé* bakery. I had only been at *la Universidad Adventista del Plata* for a few weeks, and Haroldo, the exchange program director, had told all of the ACA students to start reading the newspaper because journalists used a small and modern vocabulary. After scanning the unfriendly Spanish of the headlines, I settled on one with a few words I recognized: *SALUD: LO RECIBIO UNA MUJER DE 38 AÑOS QUE HABIA SIDO DESFIGURADA POR UN PERRO*. I understood a total of four words: health, woman, years, and dog. I pressed on to the next line: *Implantaron la nariz, el mentón y los labios de una donante con muerte encefálica*. *Nariz*, *mentón*, and *labios* stood out to me as I recalled the diagrams that

hung on our classroom walls in the ACA building. One diagram was of a human face with the bold heading *CARA* and dark lines connecting Spanish nouns to parts of the face. I wondered what a woman's nose, chin, and lips had to do with a dog. The question pushed me on like a first grader sounding out "See Spot run." Thus I learned Isabelle Dinoire's story.

*Realizaron en Francia el primer trasplante de cara.* I flipped through the red bilingual dictionary. **realizar** – to carry out, to execute. **primer** – first. **trasplante** – transplant. They carried out, in France, the first face transplant.

*Implantaron la nariz, el mentón y los labios de una donante con muerte encefálica.* **implantar** – to implant. **nariz** – nose. **mentón** – chin. **labios** – lips. **donante** – donor. **muerte encefálica** – brain dead. They implanted the nose, chin, and lips of a brain dead donor. My translations were crude, but their meaning riveted me to the plastic library chair. Isabelle Dinoire, a 38-year-old French woman, lost her face. In her own home, her own dog attacked her and ripped her nose, lips and chin to shreds. Then after living behind a surgical mask for months, she got a new face, someone else's face.

Somehow, despite my ignorance, I had managed to find the most gripping article in the newspaper. Reading was exhausting. I sounded out each word and tried to identify the nouns and verbs before choosing one to look up in the dictionary. There I was, an American exchange student reading a South American newspaper article in Spanish about a French woman who got a new face. I had changed places in the world. Isabelle had changed faces in the world. And neither of us would ever be same again.

As the words became meaningful and Isabelle became more real to me, I looked up at the other students seated at the library tables around me. My eyes moved from face to face—all the same, all so different. Eyes, noses, lips, cheekbones, jawlines. Some faces were more captivating than others. Some I looked at for a split second, while I had to deliberately turn away from others in case they sensed me staring at them. What's in a face?

When we look in the mirror, we don't just see a face. I see me. You see you. Our faces are not hands and feet. When I look at my hand, I say, "That's mine." When I look at my face, I say, "That's me." We are our faces. But our faces are not all that we are.

.....

When I first arrived at the UAP in Argentina with the other ACA students from the States, we were celebrities. Our faces were famous. People we had never met knew our names. We were different. Different was exotic. And exotic was desirable. *Villa* residents and university students would stop the black American girls in the streets to admire their dark skin and touch their hair extensions. The Americans with blond hair and blue eyes were popular, too. And according to the UAP students, most of the white Americans were blond even if we weren't viewed that way in the States. My eyes have always been blue, and in Argentina I got to be blond without bleaching my brown hair. Few of the American girls could walk down the main street in *la Villa*

without being hissed at. Blue eyes and lighter hair meant the attention was a sure thing. We learned that they don't whistle in South America; they hiss or make "ch" sounds when a pretty woman walks by.

On campus, the attention tapered off as the year progressed, but the limelight was still shining. One day in the middle of the school year, I was waiting for some friends outside one of the boys' dorms, and a guy I had never met before approached me with a disposable camera in his hand.

"*Te llamas Sara, ¿no?*" he asked. I nodded and shaded my eyes with my hand. The afternoon sun was blazing and made me squint.

"Do we know each other?" I asked in Spanish.

"No, we've never met, but I see you a lot," he replied.

"Okay. . . so what's your name?"

"Oh, I'm Carlos from Colombia."

"Nice to meet you."

"You, too, Sarah." He wasn't shy at all. He just stood there with his disposable camera in hand and stared at my face with one corner of his mouth curving up into his cheek. I wasn't sure whose turn it was to say something, so I waited. And he waited.

In the meantime, several of my friends walked out of the dorm and saw me standing on the steps with Carlos looking at me almost as intensely as the sun was beating down on my face. From the corner of my eye, I could see them cross their arms and whisper to each other. I think Carlos noticed that they were waiting for me because he broke the awkward silence.

"Can I have a photo taken with you?" he asked, holding up the camera.

"Uh," I glanced at my friends who were making faces at me. "Sure, I guess so."

"*Bueno . . .*" He walked up the last three steps to where I stood, put his arm around my shoulders, and with his other hand held the camera out in front of us and pushed the take button. I tried not to squint too much. It was quick and painless, but enormously uncomfortable. I felt like the object of someone's truth-or-dare game or one of those guards at Buckingham Palace minus the red coat and furry helmet. After Carlos snapped several pictures, he withdrew his arm and started walking down the steps. Halfway down the steps, he stopped and turned.

"*¡Que ojos!* The sun makes your eyes shine like the sky," he said looking me straight in the face again. He stumbled over the last few words, then stumbled over the last few steps and jogged across the *cancha de cinco* and into *hogar azul*, the other boys' dorm. I felt like I lived in the spotlight. Yet, somehow the spotlight on my face cast a shadow on the rest of me. We are our faces. But our faces are not all that we are.

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Another night later in the year long after I first read about Isabelle's new face, I was in the campus library doing homework and reading. When I glanced up at the clock hanging by the reference section, a shadow behind one of the bookshelves caught my attention. *Is that . . . is that*

*Gustavo watching me from behind the stacks? No.* I couldn't quell the involuntary flashbacks of an awkward meal at *Jalisco* with Gustavo, Finley and her boyfriend Stephen. The shadow moved toward the aisle between shelves. It was Gustavo with his graying hair and shameless stare. I glanced back at the clock, then looked back at my open book as if I hadn't seen him. In that moment, I wished I could change faces or, at least, wear a mask.

Several weeks before, Finley and Stephen had approached me outside the campus chapel after an evening program. They made a valient effort to speak in Spanish only.

"Sarah, *¿qué haces este martes por la tarde? ¿Tenés planes?*" asked Stephen.

"No. *¿De qué piensan ustedes?*" I didn't have any plans on Tuesday, and I was curious about what Stephen had in mind. Although the three of us attended the same university in the States, I hadn't spent much time with Stephen and Finley since coming to the UAP.

"Bueno, *pensabamos en comer en algún restaurante de la Villa con nuestro amigo Gustavo. Tal vez con otros más también. ¿Conoces a Gustavo?*"

Eating out with any Spanish speakers, whoever they were, meant a good opportunity to practice conversation unless they were studying English.

"No, *no lo conozco. No creo. ¿En cuál restaurante quieren comer?*"

I wasn't sure who Gustavo was. Stephen and Finley spent time with a different group of students at the UAP than I did.

"*Jalisco. ¿Has comido allá?*"

"No todavía. *Pero me gustaría.*"

*Jalisco* was a new Mexican restaurant just across the highway. The idea of eating food with peppers and onions was seductive after months of bland Argentine menus. While they like basil and a little garlic, Argentines don't appreciate spicy foods.

"Bueno, *vamos,*" Finley smiled.

"Ok. *¿A qué hora vamos a salir?*" I asked to clarify.

"*Vamos a las seis de aquí. ¿Está bien?*" Finley suggested. We nodded, and it was decided: Tuesday at six.

I invited both my roommates, but on Tuesday they decided they needed to study instead of spend money off-campus. When I got to the meeting place in front of the chapel, Stephen and Finley were already there.

"Is anyone else coming?" I asked in Spanish.

"I think so," replied Finley.

"Gustavo said he would be here. Argentines aren't known for being on time though," said Stephen twisting his wrist to glance at his watch. A few minutes later, Stephen waved at someone behind me.

"Che, *Gustavo. ¿Cómo andas?*" he called out.

I turned to see a middle-aged man dressed in black slacks, a red dress shirt, and polished leather shoes. *Why is he so dressed up?* I wondered. As he drew closer, I noticed the fine lines around his eyes and graying hair that was parted and slicked to the side. This was the Gustavo

that the younger guys respected for his *fútbol* skills, and he appeared to be in his mid- to late-thirties at least. I recognized him from some *fútbol* matches I had watched at the *cancha de cinco* between the boys' dormitories. He was one of the men who made hissing noises and whispered *¡Qué ojos hermosos!* when I passed by them in *la Villa*. I looked at Finley and Stephen. *Have I just been tricked into a double date?* I wondered. Either way, I was stuck. It reminded me of the time the year before when my friend Rebecca invited me to tour several art galleries in downtown Chattanooga without telling me that we were meeting a single, male friend of hers or that she had to leave early to make an appointment which meant I had to ride with her single, male friend who happened to be a graduating theology major on a wife-hunt. On our way to *Jalisco*, I found out that Gustavo was also a theology student in search of a wife. I spent a good portion of the dinner pretending to understand as little of what Gustavo said as Finley and Stephen seemed to. By the time we arrived at the restaurant, I was convinced that Finley and Stephen were completely oblivious.

The next day at the *cancha de cinco* between the boys' dormitories, I played a few *fútbol* matches. Mara Lea, an ACA student from Washington state, stopped to watch. I waved and went to sit next to her when I subbed out. We greeted each other in Spanish before reverting back to English.

"Did you go on a date last night?" Mara asked raising one blond eyebrow.

"Well, I'm not sure what to call it. But where did you hear that?"

"Oh, I didn't hear anything. I just saw you coming back with Finley and Stephen and Gustavo last night. Some of us were getting ice cream at Samar's and saw you walk by."

"Oh. Did it really look that awkward?"

"A little. The reason I ask is . . . well . . . Gustavo is kind of crazy about American girls."

"I get that vibe, but how do you know that?"

"Well, I know because he proposed marriage to me."

"No way! Are you serious? When? How?"

"I know it sounds crazy. But I was just sitting outside the music building by myself one afternoon waiting for my brother, and he was walking by and turned back around to talk with me. He asked a lot of questions about how I like Argentina and Spanish, what I wanted to do with my life, and if I was dating anyone."

"He didn't just up and ask you to marry him then. That seems psychotic."

"No, I just noticed him watching me in the cafeteria, and whenever I was alone, he would come and talk with me and ask more personal questions and tell me about himself and what he was looking for in a wife. He would lay on the compliments really thick like *Your hair/your eyes/you're beautiful why don't you have a boyfriend?* I tried to avoid him and avoid being alone, but one day he found me again by the music building and proceeded to tell me that I was such a beautiful person, such a good Christian woman and that I was exactly what he was looking for in a wife. It was awful."

“Oh my word. So what did you do?” I felt a little sick and a little sorry for Gustavo even though his behavior was incomprehensible to me.

“Well, I mostly pretended not to understand and asked him distracting, simple questions until my brother came to meet me. I know that’s a little cowardly, but he made me so nervous. I heard that he did almost the same thing to Tasha, too.”

“That’s so weird to me. I wonder if that makes sense in his culture, chasing blue-eyed Americans half his age.”

“Maybe, I don’t know. I don’t really care. I just want to be left alone.” Across the *cancha*, I saw Gustavo come down the front steps of the green boys’ dorm. Mara did, too.

“Quick! Let’s go. You’re next, you know.” Mara put her arm through mine and guided me along the sidewalk toward our dormitory.

In the library over a week later, I tried to finish my homework as fast as possible while noticing that I was almost the last student left in the periodical section. As I put my dictionary and other books away in my bag, I look around relieved to find no sign of Gustavo. On my way out, I said goodnight to Horacio, the front desk worker, and pushed open the heavy glass door. Before I was down the front steps and over the culvert where the black lizard lived, I heard the door open again and then steps behind me on the sidewalk. At the fountain halfway between the library and *hogar nuevo*, a hand touched my shoulder in the dark.

“*Permiso*,” said Gustavo. I turned and looked him directly in the face backing several feet away from where he stood by the fountain. We were the only people in that part of campus.

“*Hola. Buenas noches. Es muy tarde, ¿no?*” I said without leaning in to greet him with *un beso*. I turned to walk toward my dorm again.

“*Espera, por favor, Señorita*.” He said wait, so I looked at him again and waited for him to say more. It wasn’t a fight-or-flight situation. It was worse. I knew he was about to say something uncomfortable or embarrassing, and that instinct made me want to say *buenas noches* again and run for *hogar nuevo*. But I waited.

“*¿Te gusta este lugar, la UAP, no?*” He put his hands in his pockets and stared at his feet.

“Yes, I like it here more or less,” I replied in Spanish.

“This place likes you, too,” he said looking at me with the light from one of the sidewalk lamps shining on one side of his face. He had a good face, a full head of hair and a strong square jawline. His skin was weathered and dark like thin leather. The light jumped across deep lines around his mouth and the fine lines at the corner of his eye. His youth was gone.

“Do you think you might stay here after the other ACA students leave?” he continued.

“I don’t plan to stay,” I answered.

“You should think about it. We need good, Christian women like you here,” he said.

“I think there are already a lot of good, Christian women here,” I countered.

“Maybe so,” he assented, “But they are not as beautiful as you are with eyes like blue stars.” He kept his hands in his pockets, but stopped staring at his feet and looked me directly in the face.

It was all I could do to keep my eyes that were “like blue stars” from rolling up inside my head.

“Gustavo, I need to go. I have an early class tomorrow.”

“*Espera, Sarita,*” he said again. Hearing him call me Sarita made my shoulders rise up to my ears and shiver. “I need to ask you something,” he said.

I remembered my conversation with Mara Lea and sensed what was coming.

“Why do you not have a boyfriend?” he asked.

“Because I don’t need one,” I replied.

“Well, I think, you just haven’t met the right man until now. You are a good, beautiful, Christian woman. You need someone to protect you, take care of you.”

I could hardly believe this conversation was actually happening. Without waiting for me to reply, Gustavo switched gears.

“Why do you think I have no girlfriend?” he asked. In the dim light from the sidewalk lamps, I thought I could see his eyes get wetter. Tears?

“Gustavo, I’m sure that God has a lovely, Christian woman for you to meet someday and care for. I’m also sure that that person is not me. You just need to be patient, and I just need to get back to *hogar nuevo*.” The Spanish words rolled out fast without catching on the end of my tongue. It almost surprised me.

“*Buenas noches, Gustavo,*” I said as I turned toward my dorm. The light in my room, number 33, was on, and I could see Naty putting some of her photocopied textbooks on the shelf by the window. *I’ll be pulling those curtains shut when I get in there,* I thought.

Gustavo was still standing by the fountain with his hands in his pockets. His mouth was partly open, but he didn’t speak for a moment. When he did, it was as if he hadn’t heard a word I had said.

“Will you go with me to the concert in *el Parque de las Americas*?” he asked.

“No, Gustavo, I won’t go with you. I think you should ask someone else and think about what I said before. *Buenas noches.*” That was enough. I walked to the dorm.

When I got to my room, Naty was sitting on my bed reading a magazine.

“*Sarita.* I missed you! Where have you been?” she asked in Spanish. I loved it when Naty called me *Sarita*; it didn’t give me shivers at all.

“Oh, Naty. I missed you, too. I’m so glad to be home.” I walked across the pink linoleum and closed the heavy floral curtains. I didn’t want to be a target for more clichés or empty compliments. I didn’t want to be in the spotlight like a one-sided tourist attraction. I wanted to be more than just a face to someone. I was glad to be back in room 33 because Naty was there, and I was more than a face to her. She wasn’t my friend just because of my blue eyes. We are our faces. But our faces are not all that we are.

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Paulo was one of the best looking guys at the UAP, at least according to some. He was tall. You could tell he worked out. He was blessed with an eternal tan from his Hispanic heritage, and to top it off, his eyes were blue. Paulo studied theology at the UAP, but because his parents lived in the States, he had visited there long enough to learn English and speak it well. I still tried to speak with him in Spanish though, even when he tried to practice English with me.

One day in the *comedor*, I sat with Paulo for lunch. At our table, everyone started talking about birthplaces and family backgrounds. Paulo joined the conversation and was proud to explain his multicultural heritage. He was a resident of Argentina, but he wasn't Argentine. His father was from Peru. His mother was from Bolivia. And Paulo had been born in Paraguay. When he said, "Paraguay," a guy a few seats down from me made a strange noise. I had heard of sniggering before, but I had never heard someone actually do it. It was not the same thing as laughing at all.

"I didn't know you were one of those, *una paraguas*," he sniggered. I didn't understand why calling Paulo an umbrella was worth sniggering about, but I saw Paulo's broad shoulders tense at this remark, and I couldn't help but notice that the guy made his comment after he had finished eating. Sure enough. Almost immediately, he picked up his tray and walked away toward the trash. I followed Paulo's cool blue eyes as he watched the coward's retreat. If it had been a joke, it wasn't funny.

"Argentines are famous for their pride, at least the ones with the most European ancestors. They look down on everyone outside. It's about wars and *fútbol*," Paulo told me later. "Everyone has fought over land. Now they keep fighting on the *cancha de fútbol*."

"What do you mean, the Argentines with European ancestors?" I asked.

"For an Argentine, the whiter you are, the more European you look, the better. If you look dark or indigenous, that's too bad. Everybody wants white skin and blue eyes. That's best, most beautiful." Paulo shook his head. "That's the way it is."

Paulo's observation reminded me of a conversation I had had with Jess, a blond ACA student. In my first months in *la Villa*, I spent a lot of time with her and a handful of other ACA students at an apartment on the edge of the town that belonged to Iago, a Spanish nursing student, and Dockie, an Argentine nursing student. It didn't take long for Dockie to fall hard for Jess. He was a short, dark young man from one of the northwestern desert provinces where the best way to deal with summer heat was to take off clothes. Dockie only wore shirts to class, and his pants were almost always a little lower than everyone would have liked. Intercultural romances flowered between a number of ACA and UAP students. Another ACA friend and frequenter of Dockie's apartment, J.P., began dating Yami, an Argentine medical student, about the same time Jess gave in to Dockie's advances to date. And the four of them spent a lot of time together.

"Yami doesn't like Dockie," Jess mentioned to me and a few other girls over *milanesas* at *La Vieja Estación* bakery and restaurant.

"Why do you think that?" I asked.

"She kind of told me."

“Well, what did she say?” I took another bite of my sandwich. *Fried egg is great on this*, I thought as I waited for Jess to reply.

“She told me that I deserve someone taller and whiter, and that she knows other Argentine guys who like me that I could date. Guys who are less indigenous looking.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah, I think she was, too. She seems really proud that her family is European and Arabic.”

“But they’re all Argentine, and so’s Dockie’s family,” another girl spoke up.

“You would think so,” replied Jess.

“What is that about?” the other girl frowned and asked.

“I think they call it prejudice,” I answered between swigs of soda. Jess nodded.

Jess was a beautiful girl; she was also white and blond. Somehow these facts made Yami think Jess and Dockie didn’t match. For Yami, faces were more important than the people behind them.

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In the third quarter of the school year about two months before I left the UAP for good, Naty and I stopped by *Samar’s heladería*, the ice cream parlor on *25 de mayo de 99*. We both ordered two scoops of *dulce de leche granizado*, my favorite flavor, and sat down by the front windows looking out on the main street. While we fed ourselves with miniature plastic spoons, Naty kept checking her watch. Agostina, Naty’s 16-year-old sister, was coming to visit for the weekend, and her bus was scheduled to pull into the *Villa* from Buenos Aires soon. As we savored our *helado*, more customers came into the parlor out of the Fall sunshine. Naty turned around in her seat and recognized the family that had just walked in. Naty knew almost everyone there was to know in the *Villa*. The man and woman looked European with fair skin and soft brown hair and eyes. In the woman’s arms, she held a baby with white blond hair and pale blue eyes. Naty was out of her chair to greet them before I could get another bite of ice cream into my mouth. They came over to our table to meet me, and Naty and I made small talk and admired their son, Nelson.

On our way to the bus terminal to meet Agostina, Naty talked about baby Nelson and his parents.

“They are very proud to have such a beautiful baby,” said Naty.

“They should be, most parents are proud of their children,” I said.

“No, Nelson is even more special. Did you see his hair and eyes? He reminds me of Agostina. She was like that when she was little.”

When I met Agostina, I understood. She was blond by American standards with deep blue eyes. She and Naty had similar facial features. They had the same smile that showed their gums and wrinkled their noses. But Naty was darker in every way with hazel eyes, olive skin, and brown hair. At the UAP, Agostina got almost as much attention as the American girls. Over the

weekend, several guys approached Naty to ask about Agostina, her age, who she was, and if she was single. Naty played the role of protective older sister well, but when a guy that Naty was interested in came to ask her about Agostina, she didn't talk to me or Agostina until the next morning. When it was time for Agostina to go back to Buenos Aires, Naty was almost relieved.

"*Sarita, tenés que visitarnos con Naty. Por favor, ven a Buenos Aires, en serio.*" Before boarding the *colectivo* at the terminal, Agostina hugged us and told me I had to go to Buenos Aires with Naty to visit their family.

"*Mamá* wants to meet you. She'll make the best food, and we can eat *alfajores* and *palmeritas* for breakfast. Naty told me those are your favorite," said Agostina. I promised I would try to come and visit the next month. I liked Agostina. She knew she was pretty. She was confident, but she was also kind and treated everyone well not just the people she wanted to impress. Naty still worried that her sister thought she was better than everyone else.

I made it to Buenos Aires and met Naty and Agostina's mom, Edith Casella, in May. For a long weekend, I stayed with them and their younger brother and sister, Dante and Flor, in their two-story brick house with wrought-iron bars over the windows. We ate *alfajores*, *palmeritas*, and other breakfast pastries. We walked through their neighborhood called Wilde, and visited all their close relatives. We talked about our families, and I began to understand the tension between Naty and Agostina.

"*Sarita, mostrame algunas fotos de tu familia. ¿Tenés?*" Mrs. Casella was very impressed with my Macintosh iBook G4 and all the pictures I had stored on it. We spent a lot of time looking through photos of me and Naty before she asked if I had any pictures of my family.

"You see all of us. We want to see your people and their faces," Mrs. Casella smiled with the same smile she had passed on to Naty and Agostina. The only difference was the growing creases in her forehead and the gap between her front teeth. She was a quieter woman than her daughters, but when she spoke, her voice carried the force that ran the house where no man had lived in years. She and Naty's father were divorced, something very unusual in a Catholic country like Argentina.

"I don't have a picture of my parents on my computer," I replied, "They don't like having their picture taken, but I have some of my sister, Katie." Mrs. Casella nodded and sat at the round kitchen table beside me as I scrolled through pictures on my laptop and maximized one of both me and my sister taken at Christmas time while I was home from Argentina on vacation.

Katie, my only sibling, was about Agostina's age and in her third year of high school. In the photo, she smiled and her almond-colored eyes sparkled above high cheekbones. Her long raven hair fell in full curls around her slender neck. She was beautiful with her fair skin, dark features, and her modelesque height. I had always thought she was the most photogenic person in my family.

"You are more beautiful than your sister," said Mrs. Casella matter-of-factly as she looked at the image on the computer screen.

“That’s not true,” I said without thinking. I was confused by her comment; it was a thought that had never crossed my mind.

“*Sí*,” she said, “She is pretty, but she’s too dark. She can’t compete with your eyes.”

I tried to explain that blue eyes weren’t a big deal, but couldn’t get the words out; I was too upset. My mother never judged her daughters as if their lives were a beauty pageant. I realized this idea about beauty and the value of one face or feature over another was what caused tension between Naty and Agostina. Faces. Eyes, noses, lips, cheekbones, jawlines—all the same, all so different. Maybe Mrs. Casella had never said the words, “Agostina, you’re more beautiful than your sister,” but Naty knew that not all faces are equal. In those words were the seeds of pride and shame, narcissism and jealousy, prejudice and pain. We are our faces. But our faces are not all that we are.