

The Park

By Luís Zanforlin

I was always going to be a part of that park.

“It’s too high.” Alex said with a bottle of mouthwash filled with vodka and green food coloring.

“Step on my shoulders and grab the scaling – we can do this.” Moritz boasted. We were six, trying to climb the gazebo at the park. It was dark and humid and the smell of beer mixed with concrete made us feel adventurous.

It was just another night at the park.

I was 16 – I liked music; that was all there was to me. And I was in the city of Machala in the heart of Ecuador. I spent warm days on a year of foreign exchange meeting other students, drinking beer, listening to music, and eating *chifles*, a local snack made with plantain. That’s all we did, everyday after our second sleep cycle called school, before we stumbled back to our host families for dinner.

My first days in Ecuador weren’t particularly hard, not like most exchange students experience in the situation. I didn’t know anyone there, the language, or exactly where I was in the map but I didn’t care. As long as I had my music life would be the same, I’d had a small group of friends to keep me busy, a family to give me shelter and homework I would ignore, for all I knew those were laws of physics, no matter where you go. It all works the same way.

Moritz, from Germany, and I were coming home from school one day and decided to take a new turn to the city’s main neighborhood. We walked a couple blocks until we arrived at a gate blocking the direction we were heading. It was tall and made out of vertical and horizontal white bars. Behind it, what looked like an empty park. We thought about going back but in order to we would probably have to walk a couple blocks more than planned and the heat was so intense that wasn’t really an option, so we climbed the fence in order to cross the park.

The shadows from the trees made so it was dark in the middle of the day, the place was filled with broken bottles and unidentifiable trash. We walked towards the center of the park and arrived at a dirty, old basketball court (rare in a soccer country). We walked a bit more and arrived at a dirty gazebo with names and profanity written all over it and only at that moment did it strike us that we were the only ones there.

It doesn’t takes us long to find the opposite fence connecting us to the part of town we were trying to reach. We climb it and go our ways to our host

families. I can't speak on Moritz's behalf but I think we were both puzzled by the abandoned park hidden in the middle of the city.

A few weeks later that became The Place. Every day after class me, Moritz and the other exchange students united at the park to talk, drink, dance and play. The park was perfect; it was isolated and hidden from the locals, there was enough space for us to spend our wasted energy from the joke they called school, and it had private enough places so that we could have a bit of young romance. Although, the most important thing in it was it was a judge-free, culture-free zone. We all came from completely different parks (see what I did there?) of the world so there, we had no social or cultural norms, no right way to talk, walk or behave; we simply did what felt right.

At the park we could be who we were and there I learned who I was, at the park I wasn't a 16 year old boy that liked music. I was a Brazilian who liked learning about people's cultures. I liked telling stories, making jokes and playing soccer. I found out I could dance salsa and talk to girls, I learned that the laws of physics works different in each environment and that I had the power to decide what would be my environment.

Alex stepped on Moritz shoulders and made it to the roof. Then one by one we helped each other climb to the top and with our permanent markers we wrote our names on the roof tiles. I knew the park would always be a part of me so I was always going to be a part of that park.

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