

## A Rainbow with Gold at Both Ends

*Madelyn Daigle*

Tall buildings shade the street at the center of the city, wind rushes through the passages, and the chill of the atmosphere at 13,000 ft. bites through my jacket.

“Vamos a sacar dinero aquí,” says Beatriz, the volunteer coordinator. One by one we enter the ATM cubicle and withdraw a few hundred Bolivianos. I shuffle forward, hyperaware of the money belt around my waist, reminding myself to hide the cash before stepping out of the little room. I lock the door behind me and punch in my pin. I hesitate when the machine prompts me to enter the amount I wish to withdraw, as if I have to calculate the exchange rate one more time. I wonder if it’s a point of no return. If I don’t take out any Bolivianos, maybe I can fly home tomorrow and pretend it never happened.

*Beep, beep, beep.* The ATM reminds me to take the cash. I fold the Bolivianos, zip up my money belt, and step back onto the street.

~

The 355 minibus starts its route from the top of a hill just a minute’s walk from the *Hogar de Niñas Obrajes*. The altitude turns that hill into a mountain and I’m breathing heavily when I reach the bus. It’s empty;; the driver is having his lunch at the stand across the street. I use both hands to fight the hill’s gravity and slide open the side door. I climb into a seat next to the window. Without a smartphone to scroll through, I survey the neighborhood until the driver returns.

Unlike buses in the United States, here minibuses only pick you up if you flag them down and they only stop to let you off when you shout that request. Handwritten posters in the front window indicate major route markers like popular streets, monuments, and plazas. The route numbers (indicated by a sign on the roof of the bus) are mostly useless unless you need to get to a very specific place only serviced by one route. Once you wave to the driver of the appropriate bus, you decide where to sit. Sometimes hopping in the front passenger seat is the best bet because you have good visibility, which is helpful if you’re not quite sure where to get off the bus. If you climb in at the side door to sit in the back, you squeeze in next to the other passengers on bench seats. Whenever you climb into a minibus it is appropriate to greet the other passengers with a “Buenos días”

or “Buenas tardes.” The other passengers respond with the same salutation. I find this especially important to indicate to the driver and passengers that I speak Spanish and have at least a semblance of an idea of what I’m doing.

When you are approaching the place you would like to disembark the bus, there are a few ways to indicate to the driver that you would like to stop. Old men usually bark out “¡Bajo!” right as we pass a corner and the driver quickly puts on the brakes. I find it more polite to let them know a few seconds sooner, and shout out “¡Bajo en la esquina, por favor!” Sometimes just “¡Esquina, por favor!” depending on how much time I estimate I have to speak before we pass the corner in question.

Some of the 355 drivers are used to the volunteers and know our stop near the Fundación Arco Iris building on the other side of the city. They look up into the rearview mirror and make eye contact when we turn onto the street. “¿Vas a bajar?” they ask.

~

I move one thread at a time into the shape of the number four. I pull the end of the thread through the opening in the “four” and tighten it around the other threads. Slowly, a pattern takes shape on the *manilla*. The boys sitting on the bench next to me have made more progress. Except for Michael, but he’s only six years old and he has to keep asking me which thread to use. My *manilla* is alternating blues and greens, but I must have missed a memo because everyone else is using light blue and white—the colors of the *fútbol* team Bolívar—or red, green, and yellow—the colors of the Bolivian flag. My fingers feel clunky in the chilly basement.

It’s our first week working as volunteers full time. The nineteen of us have been doled out to the twelve projects of the *Fundación*. I’ve only been volunteering with *Talleres Ocupacionales* for a few days and the thought of making *manillas* in this basement for the next ten months makes the room feel even colder and darker.

I move a small piece of sandpaper back and forth over the surface of a wooden jewelry box. The basement is still cold and dark, and now my arms hurt. Only one of the boys is here working on a latch hook rug. I wonder how long I have to keep doing this until I can go back to making *manillas*.

Two weeks later, I move my stuff upstairs to the *Casa de Paso* office. Finally, I’m out of the basement of arts and crafts and I’m ready to actually make a difference for the *Fundación* by helping where help is needed.

~

Theresa and I herd the boys into their dormitory. “Ven, Michael,” I say. I’m trying to remember what it was like when I was that young and whether my mom still dressed me in the mornings. “Manos en el aire, por favor.” I pull his

shirt over his head and help him change into his school uniform. I fold his play clothes and place them on his pillow.

The *dormitorio* is grim, but it could be worse. The linoleum floor is bland and the wood-paneled walls are undecorated. The barred windows let in some sunlight. Each bunk has one pillow and one thick alpaca blanket on it. The clothes I put on Michael's bunk are his only outfit besides his uniform.

Theresa has been assigned to *Casa de Paso* since our first week. She used to have to take care of the younger boys by herself; now we divide the work. Sometimes Michael and Angel egg each other on and hold their arms stubbornly by their sides. Angel is easygoing and quick to smile; he uses his cuteness to his advantage. Michael is more likely to sulk until he gets what he wants. Theresa reasons with them in Spanish, "Ya hemos llegado tarde muchas veces. Tienes que poner la ropa porque salimos en cinco minutos, no más."

I start singing in English, "So put your hands in the air...and wave 'em like you just don't care." The boys laugh a little when I wave my arms above my head. "Vámonos," I say. "¡Canta conmigo!" They give in and let us change their clothes.

~

It's Saturday, and Theresa and I are at *Casa de Paso* to help with laundry. The boys don't have too many clothes to wash but they don't have washing machines either. The sun beats down on the roof in true high altitude fashion—threatening to burn without providing any real warmth. We drag tin basins to the sinks and fill them with cold water. The clothes are thrown in with a sprinkle of powdered detergent. The older boys attack the laundry with as much enthusiasm as laundry can command. They've been washing their own clothes for a long time. Soon the rooftop is ringing with shouts and splashing water. I feel self-conscious for my hesitation. I want to tell them that I obviously know how to do laundry—just a different way, with a washer and a dryer.

Theresa handles it well, scrubbing the younger boys' clothes with determination and in that moment looking more like a mother than a volunteer. I move from one place to another, washing at the sinks for a while, then rinsing the clothes that others washed, then wringing out the clean laundry and draping it over the walls that enclose the rooftop patio. My knees ache from the concrete floor and my hands are wrinkled from the water. I feel guilty for feeling unfulfilled by the work. The younger boys hoist up their pants and stomp around on the laundry in the tubs. Theresa keeps scrubbing.

~

The sky is pitch black and pouring rain from all directions. We're walking up the hill from our apartment in the *Hogar de Niñas Obrajes*. The other half of this year's volunteers live in a house in a neighborhood at the top of the hill and

they invited us over for drinks before going out to a *discoteca*. I'm pretty damp from the inside out because power-walking up the hill is making me sweat and the rain is soaking through the bottom of my jeans. Step after step the wet denim chafes against my ankles and regret chafes against my good humor. The rain has put a real damper on the festivities.

The group begins to split—the volunteers in better shape maintain their pace up several flights of stairs and I'm slowly falling behind. I take ragged breaths of thin air, willing my legs up the stairs because I don't want to arrive after everyone else. We finally reach the outer gate of the volunteers' house and ring the bell.

“¡Hola, hola!” they answer the door and welcome us in with enthusiasm. I resent them a little for their cheery dispositions, but I also desperately want them to like me. I'm the only volunteer that arrived at the *Fundación* independently. The others are German students sponsored by the government-funded *Weltwärts* and they've been together since a pre-trip orientation. Two other American volunteers are college graduates that came through a foundation called Hope Worldwide. The Germans are comfortable in the room full of alcohol and their native language. I lean back into the couch, trying to pick up anything I can from the conversation. I sip the juice in my cup and smile like I'm having a good time.

“Hey, Español, todos!” one of the volunteers calls out. “We want to include everybody.” I smile and say I don't mind. The conversation quickly returns to German.

~

“¡Vámonos!” I call out to the boys. Angel, Derry, Michael, and Gabriel run past me and into the street while I sign us out at the *portería*. The notebooks and loose pencils in their backpacks bounce tumultuously as they speed down the steep street.

“¡Espera, por favor!” I hope they remember to stop at the bottom of the hill. Angel turns around and asks me to carry his backpack. I drape it over my shoulder and he takes off running again. They're far ahead and I have to pass by the *cervezería* at the end of the street by myself. I pretend that the men standing against the wall don't intimidate me at all. I let the backpack shield me from their attention.

The four-lane freeway at the bottom of the hill funnels all traffic into the city. The boys are waiting for me at the curb. “Dame las manos,” I say. Derry takes one of my hands and Angel takes the other. Derry holds Michael's hand and Gabriel holds onto the backpack I'm carrying. As soon as I see an opening in traffic we sprint to the median. Gabriel lets go of the backpack and sprints through traffic to the other side as well. “¡Espera!” I warn the others, and a truck

rolls past us. “Ok,” another opening and we run to the other side. We’re halfway to school.

~

The minibus speeds down the freeway to *Zona Sur*, the wealthy neighborhood of La Paz. I know where to stop, but I read the street signs to be sure. We pass 14<sup>th</sup> Street, 15<sup>th</sup> Street, 16<sup>th</sup> Street... “¡Bajo en la diecisiete, por favor!” The driver brakes and I hand over 2.10 Bolivianos in change before climbing out. 17<sup>th</sup> street reminds me more of home than anything else I’ve seen in the city. *Zona Sur* is full of residential homes, shopping, and restaurants not unlike a suburban town in the United States. Even the air seems clearer here, and I breathe in deeply. I make my way to my favorite coffee shop. My usual table is available and I open my computer to access the Wi-Fi. I feel a familiar sense of guilt for letting my guard down here among strangers more than I do at the *Fundación*. I don’t dwell on it, but the feeling is there at the back of my thoughts. My parents should be on Skype any minute now. My coffee arrives and I’m sipping it contentedly when I hear the familiar ringtone. “Hey guys!” I say, as my parents’ image pops up on my screen.

“Hey sweetie,” my dad replies.

“¡Hola chica!” from my mom.

I feel the pinch at the back of my eyes that precedes the tears.

~

I knock on the doorframe and Beatriz looks up. “Hola, Madelyn,” she says. “Pasa, por favor.”

I take a seat across from her and she asks how I’m doing. I try to explain how I want to switch projects again. There is too much quiet time at *Casa de Paso* and I’d feel better if I was busier during the workday. It’s the same reason I moved from *Talleres Ocupacionales* and even I’m not sure I’m convinced it’s the whole truth. At least this time I lasted three months. Beatriz calls the *coordinadora* of a different project to see if she could use another volunteer. I’m perched on the edge of the seat with an accelerated heart rate, hoping for a “yes.” I look at the clock, out the window, and at the papers on the desk instead of looking at Beatriz. She listens and says “sí” in agreement.

In less than a week I’m walking into the office of *Apoyo Social Familiar* for the first day at my new project.

~

I look down at the hand-drawn map of an intersection and try to orient myself correctly. There aren’t any markers on the corners to indicate street names. I sigh and start walking down one of the streets anyway. At first the sun feels nice and the walk is pleasant after the hour-long minibus ride. The sun quickly becomes too hot and the wide streets feel more like a desert with each dusty step.

I spot a schoolyard up ahead and check the map again. No school. I wish I could call the volunteer that drew this map last year, and ask them what they were thinking. Instead I approach a *tienda* to ask for directions. “¿Conoce Usted una familia Orozco por aquí?”

“No, no. La señora se ha ido. Ya se fue.”

“¿Sabe Usted adónde?” I asked, trying to get some information to bring back with me.

“No, no sé.”

I thank the woman and turn around. I’ve spent long enough looking for the Orozco family. If they wanted the help of *Apoyo Social Familiar* they should’ve called us to give their new address. I dread the next home visit on my list, wondering if it’s another dead end.

I wonder if the discontent and cynicism have crept in too far for me to be satisfied with any of the work here. Maybe the feeling of satisfaction and productivity that I’m yearning for doesn’t exist in long-term volunteer work, where I find more setbacks than triumphs. After nine months of this, I want to go home more than ever.

~

It’s early morning and I’m in a cab on my way to the airport. I eagerly glance down at my watch and back up at the nearly empty freeway. I want to make it there before their plane lands.

The arrival terminal is sleepy when I walk in. Only a few people wait on the rows of plastic chairs. One monitor shows the incoming flights. My family should be here soon.

A few minutes pass and travelers begin filing through the automatic doors at the end of the hall. I can’t help myself, I edge closer. I can’t tear my eyes away from those doors as I scan the faces that emerge every few seconds. As if to counter the excitement, an irrational fear bubbles up that maybe they weren’t on this flight. I shove it back down but I start to scan even more eagerly. Finally, three faces I recognize walk through the doors. I cry again.

I’ve known for a few weeks now that I’ll be leaving Bolivia two months earlier than I had planned. I want my family to see everything that I’ve seen, but above all I want them to understand why I decided to leave early. I want them to reassure me.

~

Warm tears are welling up at the corners of my eyes. I put a smile on my face and turn around one last time to wave goodbye to the other volunteers. That makes a few of the tears fall down my cheeks. When I turn back around there is no one else in line and the immigration officer calls me forward to his desk. He’s wearing a dark green uniform and has that unfeeling expression on his face that

seems standard-issue for foreign military. I lug my suitcase through the door with one hand and hike up the big backpack over my shoulder with my other hand. He flips through my passport and scrutinizes my visa.

“Cuánto tiempo has estado en Bolivia?” He asks.

“Nueve meses,” I reply. “Desde Agosto.”

“Qué haces?”

“He trabajado con la Fundación Arco Iris como voluntaria.”

“Vas a volver a venir a Bolivia?”

“No,” I answer steadily but another tear drips down my cheek. I can’t imagine willingly returning to the country anytime soon. “Tal vez en el futuro pero ahora no sé cuando voy a volver.”

He stamps my passport and slides it across the desk. “Gracias por todo lo que has hecho para Bolivia.”

I can’t formulate a response, so I nod a little and take my passport. I feel sick as I walk to my gate. I don’t know if I did anything for this country that warranted a thank you, much less a thank you from a uniformed officer. I want to put it all behind me. For a while I forget what the officer said to me. But someday I will want to remember.

## Glossary of Spanish Terms

“Vamos a sacar dinero aquí.”	We’re going to take out money here.
Hogar de Niñas Obrajes	Literally: home of the girls of Obrajes, an orphanage where some of the volunteers live in the Obrajes neighborhood of La Paz
“Buenos días.”	Good morning
“Buenas tardes.”	Good afternoon
“¡Bajo!”	Literally: I descend.
“¡Bajo en la esquina, por favor!”	Literally: I descend at the corner, please!
“¡Esquina, por favor!”	Corner, please!
“¿Vas a bajar?”	Colloquially: Are you going to get off?
Manilla	Bracelet
Fútbol	Soccer
Fundación	Foundation
Talleres Ocupacionales	Occupational Workshops, a project that teaches boys in the <i>Casa de Paso</i> orphanage how to make crafts
Casa de Paso	It means: house of passing, a small home for boys transitioning from living on the street before placement in a larger orphanage
“Ven, Michael.”	Come on, Michael.
“Manos en el aire, por favor.”	Hands in the air, please.
Dormitorio	Dormitory
“Ya hemos llegado tarde muchas veces. Tienes que poner la ropa porque salimos en cinco minutos, no más.”	We’ve already been late a lot. You have to put on the uniform because we’re leaving in five minutes.
“Vámanos”	Let’s go.
“¡Canta conmigo!”	Sing with me!
Discoteca	Nightclub
“¡Hola, hola!”	Hey, hey!
“Hey, Español, todos!”	Hey, Spanish, everyone!
Portería	Gate



“¡Espera, por favor!”	Wait, please!
Cervezería	Brewery
“Dame las manos.”	Give me your hands.
“¡Espera!”	Wait!
Zona Sur	Southern Zone
“¡Bajo en la diecisiete, por favor!”	I’m getting off at 17 <sup>th</sup> Street, please!
“Pasa, por favor.”	Please come in.
Coordinadora	Coordinator
“Sí.”	Yes
Apovo Social Familiar	Literally: social family help, a project that provides services and food to families in extreme poverty
Tienda	Small shop
“¿Conoce Usted una familia Orozco por aquí?”	Do you know an Orozco family that lives around here?
“No, no. La señora se ha ido. Ya se fue.”	No, no. The woman left. She’s already gone.
“¿Sabe Usted adónde?”	Do you know where she went?
“No, no sé.”	No, I don’t know.
“Cuánto tiempo has estado en Bolivia?”	How long have you been in Bolivia?
“Nueve Meses. Desde Agosto.”	Nine months. Since August.
“¿Qué haces?”	What do you do?
“He trabajado con la Fundación Arco Iris como voluntaria.”	I’ve been working with the Rainbow Foundation as a volunteer.
“¿Vas a volver a venir a Bolivia?”	Are you going to come back to Bolivia?
“No. Tal vez en el futuro pero ahora no sé cuando voy a volver.”	No. Maybe in the future but right now I don’t know when I’ll return.
“Gracias por todo lo que has hecho para Bolivia.”	Thank you for everything you’ve done for Bolivia

