



Machismo in Action

By Suzy Whalen, '13

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Sunset at Atacames

There is a legend that pervades the coast of Atacames, Ecuador, about the beautiful yet tragic love story of the Sun King and the Moon Queen. The Sun King, as it is told, rose every day, lighting up the beauty of the Atacames beaches in order to court the Moon Queen and make her fall in love with him. They could only enjoy their time together for the hours between day and night, that beautiful time where the vibrancy of the sun fades out and the twilight of the moon sets in. Thanks to their undying love, the sun rises every day to impress the moon, who greets him at twilight after hours of teasing and allows for an hour of embrace as the sun sets pink and yellow over the ocean and the moon takes over, engulfing the dark beaches below.

I caught bits and pieces of this legend the first time when Bernardo told me about it. Mostly though, my mind was

busy trying to figure out a way to explain why I needed to break up with him in comprehensible Spanish.

He told me the story as we walked down a crowded Atacames beach, as Ecuadorian music blared from various speakers and vendors selling hair beads, cheap sunglasses, and Pilsener, the local beer, approached us every couple of minutes. He told it to convince me that the love we had was real, to convince me how much fun we would have at his family party next month. He kept lacing his fingers in mine; I kept pulling them away.

I had met him the night before. We danced to one song at a club. I was drunk when his brother came up to me and told me not to break his heart. Bernardo found me on the beach the next day (shocking at first, but not as surprising once you consider that my group of friends and I were the only gringos on a 5-mile long



beach), asking why, as the love of his life, I had only danced with him to one song.

My friends and I were only in Atacames for two days and one night, but the culture there was rich, exotic, and restless. Coming from Quito, the cool capital city of Ecuador located in the Andes Mountains, the sea-level beach town of Atacames felt warm, sunny, and free. No longer were we confined within winding hills of chokingly high altitude where climbing a moderate hill on the walk to the bus station took your breath away.

We were on flat land, looking out onto a seemingly endless Pacific, free from the confinement that is an impoverished, bustling, highly Catholic, and conservative Ecuadorian city and any obligations that came with it.

The people of Atacames are darker skinned than the Ecuadorians of Quito, termed anthropologically as “Afro-Ecuadorianos.” They move to the beat of a natural, upbeat rhythm. They take in the vibrancy of the sun during the day and thrive on it through the night at the many straw-roofed bars that run along the beach.

Though we were immersed in this life for only a couple of days, we took that newfound freedom and vibrancy and enjoyed the hell out of it. We drank beers on the beach all day and enjoyed cheap alcoholic smoothies made with the freshest guavas, guanabanas and maracuyas as the sun set. We ran around

the discotecas all night, dancing to the ten popular Ecuadorian songs that were played constantly and never changed during our entire five-month stay in the country.

We felt free running around those beaches. So free that the idea of skinny-dipping just felt appropriate – until Cassidy’s dress got washed away; now that was freedom.

What I was not free from was Bernardo. He would not let himself believe we weren’t dating, in love, and destined for marriage. Thankfully I had been in Ecuador long enough to explain clearly in Spanish that there was no way he was in love with me, no way we should be together, and hint at the fact that he might have been a psycho. By the time we finished our walk, he had finally accepted our fates as completely separate.

So I thought. When I got back home to Quito I began to receive upwards of fifteen calls per day from him. I ignored all of them. This happened for two months. I lost my phone at one point and had to get a new one, losing his number. I unfortunately answered his call one day not knowing it was him and had to listen to his lengthy, disbelieving pleas for my affection.

The longer I lived in Ecuador, the more explicable his behavior became. Throughout my stay, I regularly experienced the *machismo* culture that pervades the male Ecuadorian psyche. The catcalls are a visible and perfect example. “Que liiinda,” “maravillosa,” “mi reina,” and “mi amor” are impossible to avoid while walking down an

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Ecuadorian street. They are degrading and embarrassing, especially as a white girl trying to downplay one's inevitable privilege in a world where one, for the first time, feels like a minority. Bernardo had picked me out of a crowd as a desirable American girl and now sought to control me, as a macho would do. However, the independence I had claimed as an American woman since birth was consistently challenged.

It was freedom, I now realize, that clashed with what Bernardo wanted. I was so used to being completely free as an American woman that the thought of being tied to a man like Bernardo was out of the question. To exacerbate this further, my friends and I went to Atacames to free ourselves of any obligation we had within the oftentimes-confining mountains of Quito. Bernardo imposed an obligation upon me in a moment of liberty, and I rejected

it completely. I wanted that fleeting, temporary moment of romance, only to be separated again after the night was over.

I wanted the legend of Atacames. The Sun chases the Moon throughout the day, only to be together for the small hour between day and night. Then the romance fades, as quickly as it began. The pinks, blues and yellows of the sunset over the ocean fade into black, and all that is left are cheap memories of a fleeting romance. I just wanted Bernardo to disappear into nighttime darkness.

In Ecuador, I had spent the entire time noticing differences between the culture in which I grew up and the one in which I was living. What I failed to realize and recognize, though, were the similarities. I am more Ecuadorian than I thought.



View of LA Playa Atacames