

## The Wave

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Helicopters flew low in steady circles around the city. The hum of their whirling blades kept our heads low but eyes high. Within them, megaphones poured out Spanish phrases I only half-understood. It was then that I began to deeply question my decision to hunker down in Colombia. Even without a strong understanding of the language, the keywords like *seguro* and *pandemia* made their message clear—the 2020 Covid lockdown had begun.

The window to return to the States had closed weeks ago. Retreating to live with my parents in Tulsa or apartment hunting during a pandemic both sounded equally miserable, let alone the actual logistics of making a mad dash to an airport in those hectic times. I’d seen enough disaster movies to know that precious lifeboats and humanitarian flights don’t go to scraggly twenty-nine-year-old backpackers. If a wave was coming, I told myself I’d take my chances holding my breath and going under it here, rather than trying to scramble over the top.

Once the virus spread to Italy and Spain, the question was not “if” but “when” the wave would reach South America. The imminence I accepted, but still failed to grasp the scale of what lay ahead.

“Three weeks, tops,” my fellow ex-patriate Evan had said to me at our final gathering before the lockdown officially began. We stood on his 17th-floor balcony drinking cold beer, watching the streets below, usually brimming with all the sounds and scenes of Latino life, now oddly silent. It felt as if the city itself held its breath with us, none knowing what would happen next.

“If we all do our part and crush the curve, then we will be back to normal by March,” he assured me. “April at the latest.”

We were fools. Hopeful-too-stupid-to-know-we-were-already-damned fools.

Sentiment and solidarity were still held high in the early days. People clapped as the police passed in the streets, played music and danced on their balconies, and flew the bright yellow, red, and blue flag of Colombia proud from their windows and rooftops.

I realized my own accommodations were less ideal for the developing situation. I had rented an Airbnb room in a shared house—cheap, but suitable for normal life in a middle-class neighborhood. A private bedroom and office, with a bathroom and kitchen shared with other guests, most of whom had the good sense to flee weeks ago. However, the entire building lacked one element critical in the lockdown world—windows.

In the before times, this didn’t matter much. I was only there to sleep and occasionally work. Known as the city of Eternal Spring, Medellin sports a balmy 70-degree temperature throughout the year. With its countless cafes, restaurants, and parks all within walking distance, I spent little time inside my modest accommodations.

As the lockdown took effect, the world became physically dormant but digitally ablaze. At first, I treated it more like an extended snow day rather than the beginning of a year-long siege, allowing my media escapism to run rampant. The various screens offered a never-ending parade of news and numbers designed to both rattle and shackle my already frazzled attention span. The lack of natural sunlight further disoriented me, and the identical days marched by in eerie unison.

Sleep was the first routine to falter. Under normal circumstances, I keep a fairly disciplined schedule, but after a week in the muddled times, it became difficult to convince

myself there was much reason to sleep—or wake—at any particular hour. I’d fall in and out of rest whenever it vaguely called out to me. Aside from a few emails and cursory meetings to prove to those that paid me that I did indeed still exist, the days were spent doing as much or as little as I chose.

Physical health stumbled next. Like everyone else, I made an honest effort in the early days. I constructed a makeshift gym with water bottles on bamboo sticks, an ironing board bench press, and bought a jump rope and resistance bands. One of the common rooms had a grated ceiling and at midday, you could get some decent sunlight, and on truly blessed days, a breeze. With enough caffeine, I could whip myself into a fervor for an hour or so for an honest sweat. Still, these were shallow trenches at best, and my enemy a persistent one which, in time, overcame all.

On ambitious days, I set up a table in an unused part of the house I called, “Cafe O’Dea” to motivate me to cook and feel like I had variety in my living spaces. Yet the call of delivery food services was insidious, and as the case numbers climbed, I retreated into their fleeting comforts. All I needed to do was poke my own softening body to see the truth, I was losing not only the Battle of the Mind, but that of the Belly as well.

Like cruel clockwork, three days before the current lockdown expired, the Powers That Be extended the lockdown by three weeks. The first extension disheartened me. The second angered me. After the third, I stopped writhing and would simply open another box of terrible wine when the news officially broke.

After a few months, I felt more mush than man. Twice a week, we were allowed to grocery shop, and I seized this opportunity to get in some steps and sunlight. I would go to several grocery stores, walk up and down the aisles until I’d covered all the possible routes, and

only then begin to actually shop. I dubbed the activity “Playing Pac-Man.” None seemed to notice. Strangers barely made eye contact, as if the virus could spread through sight.

As April waned, my anxiety increased. I had long since been forced to abandon my grandiose thirtieth birthday plan. The original plan was to fly to southern Colombia, and then take a slow boat down the Amazon to Brazil. I saw it all so clearly then. I’d sleep in hammocks on the deck and fall asleep to the hums of the untamed wild. Go on jungle excursions along the way and catch a glimpse of the legendary pink dolphins, then finish up my twenties with an appropriate flourish and bow. It had been unthinkable back in February that the quarantine would reach May, now the whole thing seemed so inconsequential compared to the current state of the world.

Instead, my thirties began with a throbbing head, scratchy lungs, and an uneasy stomach. I spent the previous night playing yet another invigorating round of “let’s drink and see if we can fix the world’s problems with talking” with Evan. I peeled myself from his couch, drank a cup of bitter coffee, and walked down the street towards my house (I never quite called it home), not wanting to wake and bother my equally hungover friend.

I arrived at the house wobbly but altogether fine until I stood in the hallway. Dimly lit and stinking of malaise, it seemed to stretch into a tunnel far longer than its real thirty feet. I wanted nothing more than to turn around and go back outside, walk anywhere else until my feet throbbed, but I knew that wouldn’t happen. I knew that I would have to walk down that hallway, like a hundred times before, where I would stew for days in that damn room, and likely do it all a hundred times after.

My phone and computer buzzed with messages but I just couldn’t summon the strength to respond. Most birthday messages aren’t meant to be actual conversations and I felt anything I

said in response would either be a lie or end up with me making people uncomfortable with the truth of my state.

I showered and challenged the water heater to scald my skin off. When it failed to do so, I put on some mostly clean clothes and curled up in bed. I ordered myself a pizza and cake, and put on *Lord of the Rings*, the kind of surefire “In Case of Emergency” strategies that in the past have sparked enough joy to snap a funk.

I found it incredibly difficult to care though. I foresaw no future trips with pink dolphins, no parades or auspicious signs that the next decade would be a triumph.

Instead, I was confined in a dark room with scattered pizza and half-empty wine boxes, ignoring phone calls from family and friends alike. I felt like I was being dragged into my thirties behind a chariot, head bouncing, and barely even bothering to fumble with my binds.

I rallied the energy to check my phone and immediately regretted it. The first photo was of a friend of mine with his wife and small children in what appeared to be a cozy movie marathon. In the next, my ex-girlfriend and her new boyfriend curled up in their chic studio, probably right before or after screwing each other's brains out. It felt like I had squeezed lemon juice into my own eyes.

I ate a slice of pizza and as expected, it was terrible. Colombians are lovely people but atrocious cooks, and what they've done to the international darling of pizza should be investigated as a war crime someday. The cake was marginally better. Afterward, I lay there and stared at the ceiling until I drifted to sleep to the sweet sounds of swords clashing and the death cries of orcs.

There was no quick fix. Days and weeks continued to drag, some better than the last, some worse. I accepted that I would likely be in Colombia the rest of the year and decided I

could at least bump up my housing budget since wine was cheap and I had little else to spend money on those days.

I moved to an apartment with a massive window in the living room. I could see clouds again, and watch storms and sunlight alike roll over the mountainous edge of the city. On the streets below, fruit vendors would shout from dawn until dusk about the quality of their wares, and by pure osmosis, my Spanish vocabulary flourished. The shop at the bottom of my building had become the effective hub for the neighborhood. Covid restrictions relaxed and we were allowed out one hour a day to exercise—then even half-days, when numbers were low.

During the better times, a friend tagged me on a post by the local library back in Arkansas—a free month-long “Writing for Fun Workshop.” I knew I had a little momentum behind me and, once I committed to something, I tended to dig in—for better or worse. The leader applauded my effort and gently pointed out my stumbles. Always, she encouraged me to keep writing.

The weekly deadlines gave my gelatinous life some much-needed shape. I soaked up every word of criticism and praise and, when the workshop ended, the leader invited me to her writer’s critique group. I quickly accepted and writing transformed from a half-hearted habit to a dedicated craft.

Like so many other people, the pandemic leveled my life. No longer could I hop between countries carefree, privilege pouring out of every pore as I explored the world on a whim.

For the first time in years, I was forced to sit still in a small dark room for months.

Then a slightly larger and brighter one. I learned much from both.

Parts of it were strangely poignant—some hilariously bleak in hindsight—but like other difficult periods of life, it’s become a useful benchmark of experience. Prior to my trip, I felt

myself a well-seasoned traveler prepared to handle anything the road threw at me. The forced stillness and seclusion of the pandemic challenged me in a manner I previously had not thought possible.

One of the positives about getting slammed with such a wave is that afterwards, when the water settles and recedes, it leaves a bare but solid foundation upon which to build.