

Hi,

I hope you are happy and healthy, and all is well in your world...

At 6.45am, the city bus I usually take to school does not actually come to a stop to let passengers on and off. If I'm lucky, I can leap in the door while the bus stops briefly at the red light, otherwise it's a matter of grabbing the door handle and swinging up while the bus is still moving, hoping that my feet land squarely on the bottom step. Occasionally the ticket guy will firmly grab my free arm and haul me in over the gutter, if he happens to be hanging out the door at the time – it's normal on a Quito city bus to see someone leaning out the open door shrieking destinations. Then, I navigate the remaining steps and race down the aisle to find a seat before the bus hits the corner... Of course, if I don't make it before the corner, there is no choice but to hang on for dear life – both hands clinging to the rail overhead, spread feet jammed into the floor – until after we've screeched around the bend. There are times I could almost swear we were riding on two wheels instead of four... Once I'm sitting, I pull my book out of my bag and pretend to read for the 45-minute hell-ride to Carapungo, while simultaneously sliding around wildly in my seat despite both feet planted firmly on the floor, and gripping the back of the seat in front of me to prevent being flung out the window.

It would probably take a bus travelling at normal speed over an hour to reach my destination, but my bus roars through traffic, swerving in and out of lanes, honking at cars and trucks in its path and frequently going right past bus stops at top speed, leaving bewildered passengers standing on the side of the road, gaping in disbelief at the back of the rapidly disappearing bus – this has happened to me twice so far. (I have learned some choice curses in Spanish as a result!) Eventually, I get off right outside the school, leaping from the door of the moving bus and landing squarely on the crooked pavement, trying not to break or sprain an ankle or choke on the thick cloud of black diesel smoke the bus farts out as it roars impatiently away. The strange thing about this whole process is that at that hour of the day there is a bus every 10-15 minutes or so. To where in hell are they hurrying? For the purposes of self-preservation, I've tried the 6.35am, 6.55am and 7.10am buses; sadly, they're all the same.

Classes at Colegio Miguel Angel Buonarroti are like normal classes; twenty to thirty kids all screaming at the same time, running wild around the room, taking half an hour to find a pencil, gossiping to best friends for the whole lesson, asking the same question fifteen times, no one paying the slightest attention to anything the teachers say. There is little difference in behavior between the pre-school kids (starting from about four years old) to the high school kids (up to 18 years old), although the younger ones are slightly better behaved. Refusing to speak a word of Spanish to anyone – except the two administration ladies if I need something – makes them all crazy, but everyone, students and teachers alike, are quickly learning that if they want to speak to me, they have to do it in English. It's a tough rule, especially since I understand pretty much everything everyone says in Spanish and it's really hard not to laugh sometimes. Until I showed up, none of the English teachers ever spoke English in their English classes; which is pretty much the norm for local English teachers right across Latin America. If any of these kids ever speaks a word of English outside these walls, I'll be totally gob smacked. However, just by listening to students and teachers interact, I'm learning tons of useful Spanish! I'm glad to have Fridays off; total chaos for five hours a day, four days a week is enough.

Meanwhile, Sunday has become cooking day... YAY! After 16 months without being able to cook anything except instant noodles (YUK!) I finally have a (nearly) fully-equipped kitchen in my central city apartment. Usually I make a huge pot of vegetable soup to eat throughout the week. Occasionally *maduros* (thinly sliced and grilled ripe plantains) with a dash of Nutella make a great afternoon snack when I wake up from my siesta! Cris taught me how to make *ceviche* with tuna last week. That was amazing! Served with *patacones* (double fried and squished green plantains) and fresh *tomatillo juice* (tree tomato) which was painstakingly squooshed by hand since there's no blender in the kitchen... It was the first time I've ever made *ceviche*... So easy! Bowls filled with peppers, onions, tomatoes and specially spiced fish, super delish! We had a great lunch.

Someone recently gave me some imported pumpernickel bread – one of my favorites – which is excellent with fresh slices of avocado and a ton of black pepper. Sometimes I get eggplants and cook them various Turkish ways; grilled slices or *Hunkar Beyendi* (eggplant puree with stew), and *menemen* (Turkish omelette) is still a favorite dish. This week I had another craving for Turkish food, so I made *Biber Dolmasi* (red peppers stuffed with wholegrain rice and vegetables) for a

change. As the sun set over the Andes, I sat in a huge armchair in the picture window eating a delicious pepper filled with spicy rice right out of the pan, watching planes circle over the city from the east and then head north towards Mariscal Sucre Airport. I'm grateful it's their tail-ends I'm seeing zooming away from my apartment building towards the runway. Just a few weeks ago, quite near to where I live, a light plane crashed into a house where a family was watching television. You don't need me to tell you what happened next... I've been telling people for years that watching television is very bad for you. It's true.

Desperate for clothing for both work and play, I was forced to go clothes shopping. Anyone who knows me well also knows how much I love shopping for clothes (I'd rather spend the day sliding naked down a gigantic cheese grater!) So, the dreaded expedition began on Friday... Two streets filled with stores, one massive shopping center – Generica to its core; UGH! It took me two hours to get bored and frustrated and go home empty handed. I guess it didn't help that I've been a mobile snot factory for at least five days, hadn't slept very well for a week while I cured my bronchitis naturally (i.e.: drug free), and was feeling a little stressed out by several other factors, including having to go shopping with an extremely limited budget. The second attempt on Saturday, following a feast of exotic tropical fruit for dinner and a decent night's sleep, was much better. After an intensive search, I found a couple of pairs of jeans that actually fit. Then, I found a light sweater which works – purple, of course. Wearing a dress and flip-flops to the store markedly improved the whole 'trying on jeans' experience which is one of the things I hate most about shopping. Luckily for me, it was 27°C (86F) in the middle of the day. The size thing is quite confusing in Ecuador. It's literally a matter of ignoring the tag – which could state anything from size 6 to size 48 – and deciding whether or not it makes my butt look fat! Seriously! I'm not kidding! And I always wondered if that was a real question!

Satisfied the torture was over, I went home to sew darts into the back part of the jeans that always juts out (because the people who design jeans seem to have a global belief that women do not – or should not – have booty. Someone should tell them about chicks with booty! Actually, they should learn that chicks with booty rule – especially in Latin America! – and therefore should be seriously considered as a powerful demographic when it comes to jeans design) So after my mini sewing spree, I grabbed the black denim jeans I bought in Mexico (before I lost 20kg) which had become ridiculously enormous, with the previously stitched waistband sitting precariously low on my hips and the crotch hanging down to my knees. I chopped them off right at the crotch before hemming the first mini-skirt I've owned in approximately two and a half decades. This surprising development comes about for a few reasons; three women in the last six months have told me that I have great legs. (Who knew? Sure as hell comes as a huge shock to me!), I'm desperate for something to wear, and I have very little ready cash to spend on clothes. Throwing anything away seems like a crime, so I'm transforming whatever I can, although I have to admit the swimsuit that hangs off me like a threadbare potato bag is way beyond redemption; hair-bands maybe?

On Sunday, before the weekly cooking spree, and after the 6km power hike around Carolina Park with my friend Jennifer, a short time before we feasted on excellent Indian nosh at a nearby restaurant, we stopped at a department store to buy bright orange leggings to go with the new mini skirt. (You did not seriously think I was going to wear that tiny thing around in 10°C (52F) without something warm under it, did you?) Fortunately, I have matching orange socks that will go well with my black leather steel-capped King Gee work boots. (Yeah, I can hear you gasping in horror! Did I ever claim to be a fashion icon? I need clothes, not Dolce & Gabbana!) And a couple of light tops that I can cover with either my black or purple sweater. (Yes, orange and purple. Any objections? And while you're thinking of horror fashion, do you think a pair of fishnet stockings would be okay under a pair of shorts?) So, for a grand total of less than \$40, and a few nicely placed stitches, I now have a whole new mix and mismatch wardrobe. Who would ever believe that I once won awards for fashion design?

Life is filled with sunshine and surprises, just the way I like it. I hope yours is too...

big love, big hugs, big smiles

Roni

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