

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Kitten

Khadijah McCaskill · Thursday, April 11th, 2019

There was a point about a month ago where I felt like I had mentally hit a wall at my internship. I was emotionally exhausted. I had altogether managed to avoid the “volunteer bubble.” If anything, I felt slightly alienated and unable to relate to volunteer life in the small Costa Rican coastal town of Samara at all. There was plenty of it; tourists, travelers, and students attending the nearby language school poured in and out of Samara by bus almost daily. Germans, Texans, Frenchmen, and Canadians all called Samara home.

About a month into my internship I became really close to a lot of Ticos in the community. Some of these people were considered...deviant. They were on the outskirts. They partied too much, or were too loud (usually a combination of both). But they were generous and welcoming. Having met tourists from all over Europe and North America, they spoke the slang of 4 to 5 languages. They had extended networks of family and friends that welcomed me warmly, looked out for me and gave me a real taste of life in Costa Rica.

My hair was so rough and grown out at this point. But it wasn’t the only reason I didn’t feel ready for my upcoming 27th birthday. It had been 5 months since I dropped everything to take what I thought was an opportunity of a lifetime at my internship in Costa Rica. This dream I had built of moving to a different country, finally getting the Global Experience I needed to break into the jet-setting, impactful international development career I’d always known I was meant to have. With my savings drained in the first 2 months due to a “sudden rent increase,” I found myself working seven days a week to support my stay and not embarrass my parents. A woman breezed in to the hotel I worked at on nights and weekends when I wasn’t at my internship. She wore a sunhat low over her eyes and a shawl around her shoulders. Even though she had to be about 70, her demeanor was strong yet playful. We got to know each other over the few months she stayed. No one ever stayed for very long. By this point, I’d also learned the fantasy this place created. People would leave from wherever they were, from all over the world, move to this little beach town and reinvent themselves. I learned fairly quickly to trust every third sentence that came out of anyone’s mouth. But she was different. Smoking at the bar a few weeks before my birthday I mention needing a haircut. “I can cut your hair,” she says, eyeing my errant strands. “I can pretty much do anything creative with my hands.” I believe her.

Sitting in the kitchen chair with a sheet on my lap feels all too familiar. “Whatever you do, don’t get pregnant,” she whispers to me in between snips from the safety scissors we scavenged earlier that day. “That’s what happened to me when I moved to Thailand.” I knew she wanted to cut my hair to tell me this in person. She knew I was getting enough flack for the man I was with in the

small beach town. I won't begin to explain the complicated web of racial dynamics between expatriates, tourists, Indigenous and Afro Costa Ricans, suffice it to say my intersection at all and none of these compounded my isolation in an abusive relationship. Codependency, paranoia, and stress gripped my reality and kept me close to a man who drained me of what little money I had while I struggled to keep a brave and professional face for the town and my family and friends. I felt alone in this experience, but she knew all too well. She cut my hair and told what sounded like a ghost my future past. She met her daughter's father during a massage certification program in Phuket. A few months later, a new baby arrives. A jealous, vindictive man becomes more so with her attention occupied elsewhere. I decided to test this theory. I beg for a kitten for my birthday.

He obliges because he knows I'm lonely and will hope this will shut me up. After a week, the kitten and I start to bond. A dark look spreads across his face. The one that I know means he's going to do something cruel. He ties the kitten to the bedpost to go drinking with the tourists and disgustedly moves her off of the couch to plop down where she had been curled up sleeping. One night, after suffering one too many indignities, the kitten slips out of the back of the small bungalow window, jumps to the tin roof and mewls for her mother. The heartbreaking cry shakes me out of my sleep. I'm not surprised the bed is empty. But my phone, I just bought for my birthday. I can't find it! How will I find the kitten if I-. He has my phone. I don't want to believe it. I don't want to believe he stole from me. Not right again. Not when the kitten is mewling on the roof in the middle of the night. What will the neighbors think? I was always so concerned with my appearance. I stand on ladders and chairs stretching out my hands until the roosters crow drowns out the tired kittens mewling.

I'm completely despondent at work. I don't pay attention and my patience is short. I come home to hear the kitten still mewling for its mother and something in me snaps. I throw out everything he owns, everything he might ever want and lock the doors behind me. He comes home with a jovial swagger as usual. His usual nonchalance quickly turns into panicked anger as he realizes what has happened. "Fea," he says to me in a sing song voice "you open the door." He adds his own roars of indignance and banging on the door to the chorus of kitten mewling and beach town sounds. The neighbors add theirs too and the police show up. I sit on the couch and watch it all happen through the screen door. So much for appearances.

The following day, I come to the bungalow to find the kitten asleep on the couch.

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