



Dear Juan



A photograph of a baby lying on a bed, wearing a white onesie with a colorful pattern of animals and objects. The baby is looking towards the right. In the background, there is a handwritten letter on a piece of paper, partially covered by a piece of gold tape. The text is overlaid on the image.

To: My baby brother,
Ivan

From: Your big sister
who loves you very
much, Deni



MALLORCA, SPAIN | JUNE 2019

DEAR IVAN,

YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT FEAR IS UNTIL YOU'RE STANDING AT THE EDGE OF A CLIFF STARING DOWN INTO THE DEEP BLUE MEDITERRANEAN SEA. AS I'M STANDING AT THE EDGE OF THE CLIFF ON THE BEAUTIFUL ISLAND OF MALLORCA, SPAIN, I AM IN AWE OF WHAT I SEE. I SEE TALL MIGHTY MOUNTAINS FILLING THE HORIZON. I HEAR THE SPLASHING OF WAVES AS THEY HIT THE SIDE OF THE CLIFF. THE SMELL OF SEA SALT AND SUNSCREEN FILL MY NOSE. DRESSED IN A SLEEK BLACK AND BLUE ONE-PIECE SWIMSUIT, AND SPORTY SWIM GOGGLES, I WAS READY TO JUMP, OR SO I THOUGHT.

IN THAT MOMENT, THE ONLY THING HOLDING YOU BACK IS YOURSELF. IT WAS UP TO ME TO DETERMINE THE LIMITS OF MY CAPABILITIES. IT IS EASY TO SAY YOU ARE GOING TO LET LOOSE, HAVE FUN, AND JUST JUMP! BUT ONCE YOU'RE UP THERE, AND ALL EYES ARE ON YOU, THERE'S AN INTENSE PRESSURE THAT COMES OVER YOU. HERE I AM, A SIXTEEN YEAR OLD GIRL WHO'S NEVER BEEN OUTSIDE THE COUNTRY, STANDING ALONE AT THE TOP OF A CLIFF LOOKING DOWN . I HAD MADE THE DARING CHOICE TO STUDY ABROAD IN MALLORCA, SPAIN, DRIVEN BY MY DESIRE TO LEARN SPANISH AND EXPLORE THE WORLD.

THE PRESSURE OFF ALL THOSE EYES ON ME DOESN'T COMPARE TO THE PRESSURE I FEEL TOWARDS MYSELF TO JUMP. DEEP DOWN, I KNEW THAT IF I ALLOWED FEAR TO CONQUER ME AND BACKED AWAY FROM THAT LEAP, I WOULD FOREVER REGRET IT AND WISH I HAD THE COURAGE TO JUMP. WHO KNOWS WHEN A SIMILAR OPPORTUNITY WILL PRESENT ITSELF? THIS IS THE ONLY MOMENT THAT TRULY MATTERED. AND SO, SUMMONING EVERY OUNCE OF COURAGE WITHIN ME, I TOOK THE PLUNGE.

AS I BROKE THROUGH THE SURFACE OF THE WATER, A WAVE OF WARMTH COVERED MY SKIN, WHILE THE RADIANT SUN CARESSSED MY FACE, FILLING ME WITH AN EXHILARATING RUSH OF ENERGY. AS TERRIFYING AS IT WAS TO CONFRONT THE UNKNOWN, THE OCEAN WELCOMED ME WITH OPEN ARMS. IN THAT VERY INSTANT, I FELT CRADLED AND CHERISHED BY THE EMBRACE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA. IT OFFERED ME THE REASSURANCE I NEEDED, A GENTLE REMINDER THAT I POSSESSED THE CAPACITY TO ACCOMPLISH FAR MORE THAN I HAD EVER DARED TO IMAGINE.



GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK, ARIZONA | MARCH 2020

DEAR IVAN,

LIFE IS FILLED WITH BREATHTAKING MOMENTS THAT LEAVE US FEELING INSPIRED. WHEN I WAS FIFTEEN YEARS OLD I WENT ON A TRIP TO VISIT ARIZONA, A PLACE OUR FAMILY HAS NEVER SET FOOT IN, WITH MY GODPARENTS AND THEIR FAMILY.

WHILE IN ARIZONA, A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY PRESENTED ITSELF, A CHANCE TO VISIT THE GRAND CANYON, A PLACE I HAD ONLY EVER DREAMED OF WITNESSING IN PERSON. AS WE MADE OUR WAY TOWARDS THIS MAGNIFICENT NATURAL WONDER, SOMETHING UTTERLY UNEXPECTED HAPPENED. IN HOT DESERT ARIZONA, A SIGHT I NEVER IMAGINED ENCOUNTERING BEGAN TO UNFOLD IN FRONT OF ME, SNOW IN MARCH. ASCENDING THE MOUNTAIN, I BRACED MYSELF FOR THE UNKNOWN. WITH ONLY A HOODIE AND A PAIR OF CHANCLAS ON MY FEET, I HAD TO REIMAGINE THE GRAND CANYON EXPERIENCE THAT LAY BEFORE ME.

UPON OUR ARRIVAL, I WAS GREETED WITH SNOWFLAKES AND FOG. TURNS OUT IT WAS SO COLD THE SNOW BROUGHT A FOG THAT COVERED THE CANYON WHICH DIDN'T ALLOW ANYONE TO SEE MORE THAN 10 FEET PAST THE EDGE OF THE CLIFF. YET, DESPITE THIS UNFORESEEN TURN OF EVENTS, I WAS CAPTIVATED BY THE SHEER BEAUTY THAT SURROUNDED ME.

THE BEAUTIFUL MIGHTY GREEN TREES I IMAGINED SEEING WERE NOW COVERED WITH PRISTINE WHITE SNOW. I WAS ABLE TO GET A GLIMPSE OF THE VASTNESS OF THE CANYON, BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY, I WAS ABLE TO WITNESS HOW THE SNOW CONNECTED AND BONDED STRANGERS SEEING AS NO ONE IMAGINED THE CANYON TO BE THIS MOSTLY, COLD, AND COVERED WITH SNOW. ENGAGING IN CONVERSATIONS WITH FELLOW TRAVELERS, WE EXCHANGED STORIES OF THE GREAT DISTANCES WE HAD TRAVERSED TO SEE THE GRAND CANYON, AND OUR INITIAL DISAPPOINTMENT SLOWLY TRANSFORMED INTO ACCEPTANCE. AMONG US WAS SOMEONE WHO HAD JOURNEYED ALL THE WAY FROM FRANCE, ONLY TO BE GREETED BY THIS UNEXPECTED PHENOMENON. IT REMINDED ME THAT DESPITE OUR BEST-LAID PLANS, THERE ARE ELEMENTS BEYOND OUR CONTROL. YET, EVEN AMIDST THE UNFORESEEN, BEAUTY CAN BE FOUND.

THIS EXPERIENCE WAS A POWERFUL REMINDER THAT LIFE IS EVER CHANGING AND NOTHING IS SET IN STONE. IT TAUGHT ME TO EMBRACE THE UNEXPECTED AND FIND BEAUTY IN EVEN THE MOST UNEXPECTED SITUATIONS. ALTHOUGH MY ADVENTURE WAS NOTHING AT ALL WHAT I EXPECTED IT TO BE, IT DID NOT TAKE AWAY FROM OUR TRIP. REMEMBER TO FIND THE BEAUTY IN ALL SITUATIONS, ESPECIALLY THE MOST UNEXPECTED ONES!



OAXACA, MEXICO | DECEMBER 2022

DEAR IVAN,

DESPITE THE IMMENSE LOVE AND SECURITY I FEEL WITHIN THE EMBRACE OF OUR FAMILY, IT DOES NOT CONFINE ME TO A SINGLE PLACE. ON THE CONTRARY, THEIR UNWAVERING SUPPORT FUELS MY DESIRE TO EXPLORE THE FAR CORNERS OF THE WORLD AND CHASE MY WILDEST DREAMS. SOMETIMES WHEN YOU'RE LOOKING FOR ADVENTURE, YOU DON'T NEED TO TRAVEL TOO FAR TO FIND IT.

THIS PAST CHRISTMAS, I MADE THE DECISION TO JOURNEY TO MEXICO, NOT ONLY FOR MYSELF BUT ALSO FOR OUR PARENTS. IT WAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO IMMERSE MYSELF IN OUR RICH CULTURE AND CONNECT WITH RELATIVES WHOM I HADN'T HAD THE CHANCE TO KNOW BEFORE. ACCOMPANIED BY OUR SIBLINGS, I FOUND MYSELF IN A QUIANT TOWN IN OAXACA, MEXICO, WHERE WE WERE WARMLY WELCOMED BY A FAMILY WE HADN'T SEEN IN OVER A DECADE. MY HEART RACED WITH EXCITEMENT, AND A HINT OF ANXIETY ACCOMPANIED ME AS I FELT AS THOUGH I HAD STEPPED INTO AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT REALM.

AS WE ARRIVED AT OUR MOTHER'S CHILDHOOD HOME, THE WELCOMING SMELL OF FRESHLY BAKED BREAD FILLED THE AIR, MINGLING WITH THE SOUNDS OF HORSES AND PIGS NEARBY. HOWEVER, IT WAS THE JOYFUL LAUGHTER AND ENTHUSIASM RADIATING FROM OUR FAMILY MEMBERS THAT TRULY TOUCHED MY SOUL.

AS A MEXICAN AMERICAN, I HAD SPENT SO MUCH TIME AND ENERGY ASSIMILATING INTO AMERICAN CULTURE THAT I HAD NEGLECTED TO DIVE DEEPER INTO OUR OWN VIBRANT HERITAGE. BUT AS I IMMERSED MYSELF IN THE RUSTIC COUNTRYSIDE, LEARNING THE ART OF BREADMAKING AND PARTICIPATING IN SACRED CEREMONIES LIKE THE WEEK-LONG "POSADA," HELD EACH DAY TO CELEBRATE JESUS, MY WORLD UNDERWENT A PROFOUND TRANSFORMATION.

NEVER BEFORE HAD I FELT SUCH A PROFOUND CONNECTION TO MY ROOTS. I ABSORBED THE ESSENCE OF OUR TRADITIONS, EVEN EMBRACING THE NATIVE LANGUAGE OF OUR ANCESTORS, ZAPOTECO, AN ASPECT THAT NOT EVEN OUR MOTHER HAD BEEN ABLE TO EXPLORE FULLY. THIS NEWFOUND CONNECTION FILLED MY HEART WITH LOVE AND JOY, INSPIRING ME TO SHARE MY EXPERIENCE WITH THE WORLD. IN A SPUR-OF-THE-MOMENT DECISION, I UPLOADED A VIDEO ON TIKTOK, SHOWCASING MY CULTURAL JOURNEY. TO MY ASTONISHMENT, THE VIDEO WENT VIRAL, GARNERING OVER 12 MILLION VIEWS. THROUGH MY PROUD DISPLAY OF OUR HERITAGE, I NOT ONLY FOUND PERSONAL FULFILLMENT BUT ALSO MADE OUR FAMILY BEAM WITH PRIDE.

NOW EVERYWHERE I GO, I CARRY THE LOVE AND SUPPORT OF OUR FAMILY, PROVIDING ME WITH THE STRENGTH AND COURAGE TO EMBRACE NEW EXPERIENCES AND CELEBRATE OUR VIBRANT CULTURE. THIS TRANSFORMATIVE JOURNEY TO MEXICO HAS NOT ONLY ENRICHED MY UNDERSTANDING OF OUR ROOTS BUT HAS ALSO IGNITED A DEEP SENSE OF PURPOSE WITHIN ME.



LOS ANGELES AIRPORT | JULY 2022

DEAR IVAN,

IT'S 5 P.M., AND I FIND MYSELF AT THE LOS ANGELES AIRPORT, RACING AGAINST THE CLOCK WITH A FLIGHT SCHEDULED FOR 5:04 P.M. DESTINATION: CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, TO REUNITE WITH A FRIEND I MET DURING MY UNFORGETTABLE STUDY ABROAD TRIP TO MALLORCA. HOWEVER, FATE HAD A DIFFERENT PLAN IN STORE FOR ME. JUST OVER AN HOUR AND A HALF LATER, MY DREAMS OF THIS LONG-AWAITED TRIP WERE SHATTERED AS MY FLIGHT GOT CANCELED DUE TO UNFORESEEN WEATHER. SIX MONTHS OF ANTICIPATION GONE IN AN INSTANT.

BY 10 P.M., THE AIRPORT HAD EMPTIED OUT DUE TO MOST FLIGHTS LEAVING LAX BEING CANCELED. WITH NOTHING BUT TIME ON MY HANDS, I WENT INTO WORK MODE AND DECIDED TO DO SOME HOMEWORK, STARTING OFF BY FINDING A TABLE TO SET UP MY WORKSPACE WHILE VIBING TO MUSIC. HOWEVER, THAT SOON GREW BORING VERY FAST, PROMPTING ME TO SEEK A CHANGE OF SCENERY. AN IDEA SPARKED WITHIN ME. THE AIRPORT WAS PRACTICALLY DESERTED, GRANTING ME THE GIFT OF HAVING THE ENTIRE PLACE TO MYSELF! AND SO, THE FUN BEGAN.

I DARED TO SIT BEHIND THE FLIGHT ATTENDANT DESKS, THE FANCY BAR IN THE MIDDLE OF THE TERMINAL, I EXPLORED THE LUXURIOUS LOUNGES, AND EMBARKED ON A LEISURELY STROLL ALONG THE ENTIRE TERMINAL.

ADMIRING THE CAPTIVATING ART PIECES COVERING THE WALLS AND WINDOW SHOPPING, I MADE IT A POINT TO TRY OUT EVERY FUNKY CHAIR I ENCOUNTERED, SIMPLY BECAUSE I COULD. I INDULGED IN PLAYING MY LECTURES AT FULL VOLUME, ATTEMPTING TO FOCUS ON MY SCHOOLWORK. FATIGUE DID CATCH UP WITH ME AT ONE POINT, BUT AMIDST THE EXCITEMENT, I COULDN'T IGNORE THE FACT THAT I WAS STILL IN AN AIRPORT, WITH STRANGERS COMING AND GOING. DETERMINED TO STAY AWAKE UNTIL MY FLIGHT, I RESORTED TO RECORDING MY EXPERIENCES, PRETENDING I WAS A YOUTUBER, WHICH HELPED KEEP ME STAY UP. THERE WAS NO WAY I WAS GOING TO SLEEP AT THE AIRPORT AS A SINGLE FEMALE TRAVELER WHO HAS REPEATEDLY BEEN MISTAKEN FOR A CHILD ALL MY LIFE.

AFTER WHAT FELT LIKE AN ETERNITY, THE MOMENT I HAD BEEN WAITING FOR ARRIVED AND I BOARDED MY FLIGHT. EXHAUSTION HAD CONSUMED ME, HAVING BEEN AWAKE FOR 20 LONG HOURS, AND ALL I COULD THINK ABOUT WAS SLEEP. FATE, HOWEVER, HAD A LITTLE TWIST IN STORE FOR ME AS I FOUND MYSELF SURROUNDED BY NOT ONE, BUT FOUR CRYING BABIES! YET, I DIDN'T CARE. IN THE MOST UNEXPECTED CIRCUMSTANCES, I HAD DISCOVERED AN ADVENTURE, AN OPPORTUNITY TO FIND JOY AMONG THE CHAOS. AND NOW, AS I WAS FINALLY ABLE TO SLEEP AND REST AS I EAGERLY ANTICIPATE WAKING UP IN THE VIBRANT AND ENERGETIC CITY OF CHICAGO. THIS EXPERIENCE TAUGHT ME A VALUABLE LESSON: EVEN WHEN STUMBLING ACROSS AN OBSTACLE, IT IS CRUCIAL TO SEEK OUT THE SILVER LINING AND HAVE SOME FUN WITH IT. WORSE COMES TO WORSE, AT LEAST YOU HAVE A FUNNY STORIES TO TELL IN THE FUTURE!



SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA | JUNE 2023 :)

DEAR IVAN,

AS I FIND MYSELF AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA, A PLACE I NOW CALL MY HOME, I CAN'T HELP BUT REFLECT ON THE CONCEPT OF "HOME" ITSELF. AFTER YEARS OF GOING ON VARIOUS ADVENTURES, IT'S COMFORTING TO RETURN TO A FAMILIAR ENVIRONMENT. HOWEVER, AT THIS MOMENT, I REALIZE THAT "HOME" ISN'T NECESSARILY A SINGLE PLACE. THE JOURNEY OF GROWING UP HAS TAUGHT ME THAT LIFE CAN LEAD US TO DIFFERENT CORNERS OF THE WORLD, AND IN DOING SO, WE HAVE THE AMAZING OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE THE ENTIRE WORLD OUR HOME.

I'M STILL NAVIGATING THROUGH THE UNCERTAINTIES AND NEW EXPERIENCES THAT COME WITH BEING THE FIRST PERSON IN OUR FAMILY TO PURSUE HIGHER EDUCATION AWAY FROM OUR BELOVED LOS ANGELES. IT'S EXCITING YET NERVE-RACKING ALL AT THE SAME TIME. THE FEELING OF HOMESICKNESS IS A VERY REAL STRUGGLE, AND I WON'T DENY THAT IT CAN SOMETIMES TAKE ITS TOLL ON YOU. IT'S TAKEN ME TWO YEARS OF BEING AT UCSB TO FINALLY START EMBRACING THIS PLACE AND CREATE A HOME AWAY FROM HOME. WHILE BEING HERE I'VE MADE SOME LASTING FRIENDSHIPS, BEEN ON SILLY SIDE QUESTS, AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, I'VE GROWN INTO SUCH A STRONG RESILIENT PERSON.

ABOVE ANYTHING ELSE, I AM FILLED WITH JOY TO WATCH YOU GROW AND EMBARK ON YOUR OWN ADVENTURES. NO MATTER WHERE LIFE TAKES YOU, REMEMBER YOUR BIG SISTER WILL ALWAYS BE THERE FOR YOU. AS YOU NAVIGATE THROUGH YOUR OWN JOURNEY, KNOW THAT I AM HERE TO PROVIDE SUPPORT, GUIDANCE, AND A SENSE OF HOME WHENEVER YOU NEED IT.

WISHING YOU ENDLESS ADVENTURES AND GROWTH,

DENI <3



Love,
Deni

