

THE THIRD SIDE OF BRAVERY

Courtney Justus

“You can hear it,” I said. “The river.”

We were in the Amazon rainforest for the first time. The three of us—me, my younger brother Danny and our father—stood at the edge of a small dock on the outer rim of Manaus, looking out at the Amazon river, the heat and darkness a shroud around our bodies. Dad had taken us to nearly every corner of the world since we were toddlers. Even so, we had never stepped foot in Brazil, never seen the *caimanes* lurking on the river, the piranhas ready to snap at limbs lurking below the water's surface. We had arrived in Manaus at nightfall, then taken a cab to a small dock just outside the city proper, where two young men in torn T-shirts and cargo shorts waited for us beside a wooden motorboat, maybe ten or twelve feet long. I fumbled over the mediocre Portuguese and Spanish phrases I knew as I asked the young men to load our duffel

bags, gesturing with my arms to aid our communication. Danny stood to my right, arms crossed as he stared at the water, his brown eyes hard.

“Where's the hotel?” he asked.

Our father pointed out at the shadowed trees. “Out there,” he said. There were no buildings in sight, only the motorboat, waiting to take us out into the rainforest, this world we had only read about in books. We loaded our bags onto the boat as Dad said something to the conductor about our hotel, who merely nodded and started the motor.

I jumped a little as we began moving through the water, which sloshed and murmured at our feet. In response, the conductor pointed to a short metallic handrail on my right.

“Hold on,” Dad said.

With each rev of the motor, we drew closer to the chattering of nocturnal creatures, the trees in their canopies bending in curves and arches. The only light was from a square hand lamp that our conductor held in one hand while guiding the boat with the other.

The four of us remained completely silent as the boat drew deeper and deeper into the rainforest, a gentle fog settling around us. I drew my navy-blue hoodie tighter around my shoulders, shivering as a wind brushed past us. Next

to me, Danny had started shaking, but I sensed that it wasn't from the night air, which had settled around us gradually, dense and humid. Slowly, I reached my hand out to him. He squeezed my fingers only a moment before wrapping one arm around himself, then gripping the same rail with his other hand. I was jittery, too, not so much because of the water, or even whatever creatures I knew were out there, but because of what I didn't know, what I wasn't sure was there.

In front of us, our father gazed out at the river, at the form of an island, abounding with palm trees and flower-filled bushes, where we would be spending the next seven days. I studied his face, deeply tanned with faint scars running diagonally across his neck and jawline, the yellow glow of the lamp illuminating his profile. I could see the sky lapping dark and cloudy at the edges of his frame, the water sloshing, rising to meet the very edge of the boat, his silhouette taut and unbending against the night wind. He had crossed so many borders, seen more countries than I could remember, but even so, he still looked on in wonder as the trees loomed over us, his eyes wide in a mixture of wonder and questions. I half-expected him to start asking the men something about the rainforest or the river, but he remained silent.

We get to see our father a couple of times a year, most of those two- to four-week instances spent abroad, or at least out of state. In the years following the divorce, our father took us on several trips, for sometimes up to three weeks, but usually for at least one. When we were younger, Danny and I played a game in which we'd guess where Dad was going to take us on vacation. With our father, you never knew. In the game, the person whose answer was farthest from the destination would have to buy the winner candy or do their chores for a week. We only played it once.

By the second trip, we had determined a pattern: usually, we would go somewhere at least three hundred miles away, probably warm, with no cell service or Internet. After a relatively poor childhood in east Texas, living with his father's side of the family until his emancipation at age sixteen, without so much as a car ride across the state line until then, our father had decided that he wanted to see as much of the world as possible, and he wanted us to explore it alongside him. Careful saving and scrimping, followed by an unexpected inheritance from his maternal grandmother, made many of our trips possible.

I suppose, in retrospect, we were luckier than most kids, well-traveled, privileged. I try to tell myself that, but you can only tell yourself something so many times before you have to reinvent it, in order to keep thinking it's true.

§

Our resort spread out across half of a small island, lights from the insides of tiny wood cabins dotting the night landscape. With our bags in tow, we treaded carefully along the lantern-lit path to the small cabin that we would share for the next week, the rightmost one in a row of five. I wanted to send Mom a message, but the only place you could get Wi-Fi was the eating area, which was closed for the night. Momentarily, I struggled to remember the time difference between San Antonio and Manaus, until in a flash, it came to me: only two hours. I wondered: if I waited until morning to reach out to her, would she spend the whole night worrying if we'd made it here safely?

I pictured her sitting in the garden behind our two-story brick house on the north side of San Antonio, tending to tomatoes and peppers, flitting between hibiscus flowers and birds of paradise. Here, flowers stir outside of every windowsill. Vines traverse each and every wall. Most days of the year, Danny and I live with her. She always traveled with us while she and Dad were still married but hasn't been outside of San Antonio in the past couple of years, preferring to stay in town, close to her side of the family, rooted in our home.

§

Whenever the next school break was near, Danny, Mom and I began nervously awaiting the phone call from Dad, calling us forth for our next trip. Whenever these phone calls came, always a few days before school got out, I would pick up, because Danny was too scared, and Mom couldn't talk to Dad without hiding in her room for hours afterward, away even from her plants.

The phone call about the Brazil trip came on a Wednesday afternoon, approaching my seventeenth birthday. Instinctively, I picked up right after the first ring.

"Mica," my father said. He'd been calling me that for years, even after I asked him to stop. Everyone else called me Micaela. Then again, perhaps it was fitting, for my father to call me something different from everyone else.

"Hi, Dad," I answered, my voice deadpan. Outside, the wind stirred the hibiscus petals.

"We're going to Brazil," he said, slowly, as if whispering a secret. "To the rainforest."

I suppressed a sigh. Dad was always thinking of far-off places where we could go, but even Brazil seemed like too much of a stretch. Especially the rainforest; why couldn't we just go to the beaches, or to some country where we actually knew the language? We didn't speak a single word of Portuguese,

so all we'd have to go on was my mediocre Spanish, acquired from my freshman year. At least this was better, perhaps, than when we had traveled to Romania, the native language bearing similarities to Spanish and French, neither of which any of us spoke at the time. At least this time, maybe I could be a little more prepared.

“Aren't you excited?” he asked.

As I mulled over a response to his question, Danny came into the living room. He stared at me with one of those wide-eyed looks, the kind he used whenever I was on the phone with Dad.

“Yeah,” I said, my voice unchanged. “Yeah.”

“You should be excited,” he said. “We've never been to Brazil before.”

I nodded, even though he couldn't see me. It was more to myself, an attempt at reassurance, an effort towards actual excitement. I had always wanted to see the Amazon, to see the macaws and canopy layers and wide, quietly roiling river. So why couldn't I show him how I felt?

Dad went on for a bit longer, quickly mentioning the trip dates and what we needed to pack. Danny and I would have to get yellow fever shots, plus renew our passports. I wrote it all down, like you might write a grocery list or

reminders to yourself. I wanted to tell him I was excited, but thought I might be lying somehow, betraying the lurching feeling in my stomach.

“So... is that all?” I finally asked, waiting for him to say something about my birthday, ask me about school.

“Were you expecting something else?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No,” I said. “I’ll see you in a few weeks.”

When I finally hung up, I looked at my brother with his brown eyes and wrinkled red T-shirt, trying to determine the best way to sum up the conversation. It came out rushed, blabbersome, as my words often did immediately following these conversations. When I finished, he looked at me and struggled to speak.

“But... we don’t speak Portuguese.”

“Yeah, bud, I know. But I have my Spanish. Maybe I can just use that.”

“But I don’t know any Spanish, either.”

“I’ll teach you.”

He sighed, raising his arms briefly, then letting them fall in frustration.

“Why do we have to go to the rainforest?”

I shrugged. “Danny, I was wondering the exact same thing.”

A pang of regret sliced through me just then. Here I was, complaining about going to the Amazonian rainforest, while other people could only dream about this sort of vacation. Yet I knew that this wasn't just another vacation with my father. Next year, I would turn eighteen, and could make my choice as to whether I wanted to go on these trips, or to stay behind.

“When do we leave?”

“Two weeks from today.”

“Micaela?”

“Yeah, bud?”

“Did he ask what you wanted for your birthday?”

I shook my head. “No, bud. He didn't.”

§

The morning after our arrival, I woke with the sunlight streaming through the bamboo blinds and coarse, white curtains of our cabin, the sleeping forms of my brother and father still half-curved on either side of me. I thought again of Mom, her body bent over the pink hibiscus flowers, pressing her small face to them. In the white light, I studied the Portuguese phrases I had printed out earlier that day: *Bom dia*, good morning; *meu nome é Micaela*, my name is Micaela; *obrigada*, thank you. Not that these would be too much help, but I

figured that, if I had to speak to everyone in broken Spanish or just plain English the rest of the time, I could at least find a few words to say in their native tongue, to give them that common courtesy.

We took our meals under a canopy of palm leaves and wood, where families sat eating plantains and mangoes with their hands, mothers dabbing the faces of their small children and instructing them in English, Dutch, Spanish, to sit, to eat, to listen. I liked how the cooks said my name, separating it into four syllables – *Mi-ca-e-la* – drawing out the *I*, their tone rising with the *e*. The way they said Danny's name, *dah-knee*, grew throaty at the beginning, with that clipped *e* sound at the end.

I dug my teeth into sweet mango, tiny strands getting stuck in my teeth, tore my way through plantains drizzled with maple syrup, followed by an omelet. One of the employees had let out the macaws, one grey, the other with yellow, orange and blue feathers, two wildly different arrows shot from the same bow. They each flew in separate directions across the cafeteria, then eventually came to perch on the same branch.

With my phone under the thatch table, I sent Mom a message through social media, telling her we had arrived late at night and were having plantains and omelets for breakfast.

“Don't use your phone at the table, Mica,” Dad said without looking up from his plate.

I looked up. “It's just for a second.”

“Don't use that tone with me.”

“What if I just want to text Mom? Tell her that we're not stranded in the middle of the Amazon somewhere?”

Dad slammed his hand against the table. A family of four, two parents and their children, dark-haired and quiet, looked over at us. I met the eyes of the girl, maybe ten years old, wearing teal cargo shorts and a white cotton T-shirt. She looked at me for a long time, and I did not look away.

§

Before the divorce, we rarely shared the full length of a meal together. More often than not, Mom would call out that dinner was ready, then she, Danny and I would sit at the table, waiting for Dad. After working part-time as an editor for a local travel magazine, sometimes from home, he would spend hours in his study, writing on pieces of lined paper torn from notebooks, tacking these pages, as well as photographs, to one of the walls. My father wasn't one of those people who kept a map tacked up on one wall of his home, red and white pins dotting the landscape like acupuncture needles jutting out

from a patient's skin, the dots crisscrossing the land, forming lines like a ribcage, like a backbone. Instead, my father pinned up one single picture from each place where he had traveled, the caption below it the city name, country, and the year he had visited, along with the season.

I have only caught glimpses of these items in the few times I have been able to go into his study, usually when I would go call him for dinner. Sometimes I would get lost looking at those photographs, wanting to transport myself, just for a moment, to the places where he has been.

On many nights, it took more than fifteen minutes for him to join us. On those nights, I would always start eating before he sat down, even though guilt crept up inside me for it. Danny, on the other hand, would gulp down his food ravenously, as though he'd been waiting for permission for hours.

"Stop scarfing down your food," Dad once said to him on one of the rare occasions when we all started eating at the same time. Dinner that night was fettuccini alfredo with breadsticks. "You're not an animal."

"We've been waiting for fifteen minutes," I'd snapped. "We're hungry."

"Micaela, honey," Mom said, softly. "You don't have to say it like that."

"Your mother's right. Don't use that tone with me," Dad snapped.

“We shouldn’t have to wait on you all the time. We have things to do,” I said, looking at the painting just between Mom and Dad’s faces. A wooden frame showed a basket of apples and pears, purple and black shadows streaking the background and touching the fruit, as if someone had shut the door to a dark room and painted by mere candlelight or through the fading light from a window. Some nights, I had dreams in which I was in that room, staring at an apple as I waited for my father to enter, except there was no window, and the candle got put out.

“‘Things to do.’ Spoken like a true teenager. Do your to-dos involve planning our family vacation to Morocco? Or backpacking in Patagonia, Argentina? Or making money to support this family? No, I didn’t think so.”

“Honey,” Mom said. She reached for his hand, but was looking at me, her hazel eyes tinted yellow and glistening, like those of a trapped animal.

“You should be reprimanding her, Lillian. Say something.”

Mom’s face turned to stone. When she didn’t say anything, Dad got up, went back to his study, and slammed the door.

§

After breakfast, Dad headed towards the cabin with us, but just before we reached the entrance, he veered off on a nearby path. I wanted to keep

exploring the grounds, but instead went inside with Danny, who had started feeling sick.

“You didn’t have to yell at Dad like that, you know,” he said once we were inside.

“What was I supposed to tell him? I was trying to send a message to Mom, and you know the Wi-Fi here sucks.”

“At least you have your phone here. I don’t.”

“You’re not old enough for a phone yet, silly. Remember?”

“Yeah, but what if something happens to you and I need to call Mom?”

“Well then, you can just use my phone.”

“But like, what if you fall in the river or something?”

I pictured myself immersed in the dark waters, slipping under as the lights above me dimmed, not a single voice piercing the air, save for my stifled screams.

“I don’t know,” I said quietly. “I don’t know.”

§

The next morning, the sound of Danny vomiting woke me from my dream, something about macaws and silver fish swirling in a cloud-streaked sky as black water roiled below. Daylight had not yet crept its way through

our windows. I went into the bathroom, then touched the back of my hand to his forehead; his skin burned. I gave him medicine, two tiny pink pills I put in my hand and stretched out like a suggestion, a question almost. He took them.

Nearly an hour later, he still knelt on our bathroom floor, somewhere between heaving and vomiting. I closed the door behind me and told Dad we should find a doctor.

“It didn’t seem so bad yesterday, but I think it’s gotten worse,” I added.

“He’ll get over it,” he said, looking into his bedside mirror as he adjusted a green bandana around his forehead. “Just a day bug. Give him some Pepto Bismol or Advil. It’ll pass.”

I already gave him medicine, an hour ago, I thought. I wondered if I should tell him but feared this might count as back-talking. So instead, I just mumbled, “Dad, I think he’s really sick,” just as Danny retched once again.

He turned to look at me, the look in his eyes opaque, as though he was trying to hold something back, or inside.

“I’m not payin’ for some Brazilian prick to tell me what I already know, then give him medicine he doesn’t need. And the hospitals here? I’m not sticking my son in one of those places.”

Then he returned to the mirror, untying and then retying the bandana. I looked at him, hoping he would turn away from the mirror again for one minute, just look me in the eye, or look at his son, but he didn't. So I excused myself, went out to the front desk by the eating area, where Sandra, the receptionist, was painting over her pink-orange manicure with clear polish.

"*Doctor, doctor,*" I said in Spanish, pointing at our cabin.

"*O que aconteceu?*" she asked, still wielding the top of the polish, her voice sing-songy, like I was a girlfriend and we were just chatting.

"*Enfermo, enfermo.*" I kept on pointing. I wanted to kick myself; I couldn't remember how to say sick in Portuguese. Then I realized I had never learned it because I didn't think I'd have to.

Tears brimmed in my eyes. Sandra must have understood me, because the next thing I knew, she was on the phone, pointed words flying from her painted lips. "*Um medico está chegando,*" she finally said. I mulled over her words; *medico* sounded like medic, like medicine, like relief. I finally understood that she was saying *A doctor is coming*, so I waited for what seemed like hours, my cheeks flushing with the heat, until finally a middle-aged Brazilian man in green scrubs approached us and spoke to her in Portuguese. Sandra said something to him, so he turned to her, then to me again.

“*Español!*”

This single word, these two syllables, sent a quiet swell of relief rolling through my chest. I turned to face him, throat constricted, like vines had found their way around and through it.

“*Mi hermano está enfermo.*” I collapsed into his chest, tears falling down my cheeks. In a place so beautiful and foreign to what I had known, I just wanted to go home.

§

When fights started breaking out between our parents, Danny and I tended to migrate to one of our bedrooms, closing the door without locking it. I was scared of what our parents would think of us if they knew that we had locked the door because of them. Once inside, we would play with action figures or Legos, whichever ones were closest to us, most within our reach, the two of us escaping to worlds of our own creation.

One night, when I was maybe twelve or thirteen, Mom was telling Dad that we should visit her relatives here in Texas, take some time off to do an in-state trip with them. He balked at the idea. When the screaming began, Danny and I hid in my room, playing with Lego action figures, pretending that they were in a jungle trying to escape from rabid alligators.

“We don’t have to jet around the world all the time. We can let them spend time here, with their other family members.”

“Listen to yourself. ‘Jet around the world.’ Listen to the way you sound. To your children!” Dad yelled.

“You’ve never asked them how we sound to them,” Mom countered.

I wanted to say something. Something like, I understand her. I agree. The words she says make sense to me. But I didn’t. I couldn’t bring myself to step outside.

Even after I started high school, even after Dad no longer lived with us, I still let Danny into my room sometimes, just so we could play with Legos.

§

It turns out, Danny needed both aspirin and insulin. Dad and I accompanied him to the sick ward, where we both waited in plastic fold-out chairs by his bed while the doctors stepped in semi-circles around him.

In perfect Spanish, the doctor later explained Danny’s sickness to us. I didn’t understand all of the Spanish words at first, but as the doctor repeated them slowly, I began to parse each one: *deshidratado* sounded like dehydrated; I remembered that *estómago* was stomach, so he must have been talking about the stomach bug. When the doctor put one hand to his forehead, then waved

it quickly and leaned backwards, saying *fiebre*, I learned that *fiebre* meant fever.

I know that there are words in some languages that don't exist in others. I'm sure that there are probably many Spanish and Portuguese words with no direct translation, or with multiple possible ones. Someday I will learn them, I told myself. Someday these doctors and I will be able to understand each other without stumbles, without interruption.

§

The trip I wish I could remember most was our family vacation to Morocco. That year, Mom had wanted to go to Greece, but Dad insisted that we go to Morocco, to see Marrakesh. I can only remember a few flashes of the landscape, stark white and tan buildings against the burnt orange and brown of the desert, skies blue and open. Though in pictures Danny and I stand in front of different sites, stroll side by side through the fruit market, I can only recall those flashes of land and sky, the distant taste of citrus fruit. In pictures, Dad rides on the back of a camel, drives an ATV through the desert sands.

"But those are dangerous, aren't they?" I asked once, pointing to a photograph of my father on the ATV. My friend Cara knew someone who had died after driving one into a ditch in the forest.

“They are, if you don't know how to use them,” Dad replied.

“Your father is a brave man,” Mom added, slipping her hand over our father's. He did not take it, simply letting her delicate fingers rest on his hard knuckles.

Our father told us then that there are three sides of bravery.

“One is the side you have shown the world, your most visible side,” he began. “The second is a hidden side, one you may have only shown to a few people, or the one you want to show but aren't sure you can. Then, the third, is the other hidden side. It's the side no one else has seen before.”

“Why can't those last two sides just be combined?” I asked him. “They sound like they're the same.”

“They're not,” he replied. “They are not the same, never can be. You know a little of your second side, but you cannot know your third side of bravery until you have shown it.”

He took another sip of water. “Think of it,” he said, “as a fire hidden within a tight capsule, a hurricane in a fortune teller's ball, hidden away inside of you. Until something breaks the capsule. Until something sets it free.”

The next three days crawled past us like the Sun across the sky, slow and humid. I spent the first part of each morning with Danny, who would stay in the cabin until our next meal, before I went kayaking with some of the other families at the resort. I convinced him to come with me to some freshwater pools in the afternoon, the two of us crossing through the grassy area surrounding the cabins until we came to a clearing flanked by thin trees and a couple of trunks, sliced in half, that served as wooden benches.

“These are the pools the guides were talking about,” I said.

Danny dipped one hand into the water. “They look... muddy.”

“That's only because of the stuff on the bottom, I think. The water's fine.”

He slid his arm further in, nearly to his shoulder. “It's so cold.” We watched a group of minnows circle his fingers, and he giggled. I looked up at the canopy above us, the sunlight dappling between the leaves, then took off my shorts and slipped into the water.

Slick, moss-covered stones lined the bottom of the pool. I still remember us wading, the cold water sending goosebumps from our spines straight up through each limb. The brownish water up to our necks, he would close his eyes, let his body float briefly before swimming back to shore, to sit on a flat rock and look into the trees. His brown eyes matched the water. Whenever I

dove under, pressing my palms to the stones' slick surfaces, I wondered if I could get any closer to what he saw, to the words he wanted to say.

§

There was one night, shortly before my parents announced the divorce, that I made honor roll at school. My homeroom teacher awarded me a red ribbon with gold lettering, spelling out *Principal's Honor Roll*. It was the first time in a while that I'd made such high grades, and the first time the school had started giving out ribbons. Mom said we should go out to celebrate, but I asked if we could order pizza. For some reason, the idea of staying in, eating pizza and talking to my family sounded like a nice one.

The four of us ate on the couch, watching the Discovery Channel and then *Family Feud*, talking during commercials or when we found something funny. *Family Feud* was one of the few shows the four of us could watch together, without anyone losing interest. Even so, between Dad's long stints in his study and all my schoolwork, we hadn't watched it all together in a while. I thought of my friend Cierra, whose family also ate around the TV whenever I came over for dinner, opting for *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* or *Breaking Bad*, the five of them huddled together on their red suede couches, hands and arms

brushing close together in a way that reminded me of sea otters. Were they always like this? Just sitting together, eating without complaint, just like this?

As Steve Harvey announced one round after the next, I kept waiting for someone to make a comment, one that would be followed by a complaint, an argument erupting shortly thereafter. But the moment never came, and by the time I could finally relax, the show was nearly over, and it was time to go to bed.

A few nights later, Mom and Dad sat us down on the living room couches and told us that they were getting a divorce.

“We’ll still live here,” Mom said. “Except your father will be getting an apartment elsewhere.”

“After my next trip, that is,” Dad added. It turned out, he was going to Egypt for two weeks, by himself. “I promise you’ll still get to travel with me later,” Dad said. “I’ll make sure of it.”

I dragged my fingernails across the fabric, listening as the low noise pierced the air.

§

For our final night of the Brazil trip, Dad had signed us up for a night canoe expedition. Thiago, one of the main tour guides, a short but well-built

man in his thirties, would be leading it alongside one of the newer guides. I had seen Thiago at breakfast, practiced my Portuguese with him, at which he would kindly nod, softly correcting my pronunciation. Even so, even knowing that he would be leading the expedition, my stomach clenched at the thought of being out on the river at night, in small canoes, two or three people to a boat as we glided through the dark waters. We had been on a piranha fishing excursion a couple of days beforehand; I'd seen the creatures that tourists had pulled from the water, piranhas and silver fish with pale or dark eyes, their pupils flat discs that stood out against their shiny, glistening flesh.

Originally, we were supposed to go with several other guests, some of them kids even younger than us. As we approached the dock that evening, however, Thiago told us that we were the only ones left.

"Just us?" Dad asked in English, pointing to me, Danny and himself. He wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"Yes. Three," Thiago replied. He then held up three fingers to Bruno, his assistant, who simply nodded. I wanted to tell Dad to at least try to speak in Portuguese or Spanish, but something told me to hold my tongue.

"Dad, I don't want to go," Danny said firmly, crossing his arms. I looked at Dad, then at Danny, who stared right at our father, who had stopped mid-

gesture, arm pressed to his forehead, to glare at his son. His arm dropped; then, he took a step closer.

“Grow the fuck up.” Then he turned back to face the water.

I stared at Dad. He had never spoken to Danny or me like that before. Even when we'd disagreed about things, he had never sworn at us so loudly, so suddenly. We didn't dare defy him because doing so could mean a loss of safety or even more. We'd had nightmares, Danny and me both, about being abandoned in some foreign, possibly tropical destination where we didn't speak the language. And now, as we stood watching Thiago and Bruno, I could sense that Danny and I were both remembering those dreams.

§

Bruno took Danny and me in a deep, wooden canoe, while Dad and Thiago set off ahead of us, later veering in the opposite direction. Though Bruno barely touched the small lamp in our canoe, its light seemed to dim with each movement of the boat along the river. I sat in the middle of the canoe, with Danny trembling softly behind me. I wanted to reach back, try to comfort him somehow, but I feared that even one small movement would cause the canoe to rock sideways, sending us sprawling into the water.

The rainforest at night still buzzed with the movement and chatter of bugs and water animals, yet the eerie quiet that settled over us as we rode across those black waters made it seem like we were in some kind of bubble, our own world apart from the outside one.

As we turned into a small cove, Bruno raised the lantern, then paddled over toward a cluster of plants. Besides the lapping of the water, I couldn't distinguish any animal noises.

"*Yacaré*," Bruno said, so softly that I could barely hear him at first. He pointed at the end of the cove, to a black form sitting on the water, close to the edge, where bunches of leaves shot out towards a collection of slow-forming ripples. Then, as we drew closer to it, I realized it was an alligator, a baby one at that. Probably one of the *caimanes* that I'd heard another tour guide talk about.

Bruno reached down into the water, hand arching over the alligator. Just as it was about to swim away, he caught it in his hand, squeezed both sides of its jaw between his thumb and peace fingers.

"*Un yacaré*," he repeated, holding the alligator out closer to Danny and me. The creature made a small noise. Danny and I both flinched, the canoe shaking with our short movements.

“You're hurting him,” Danny said, tears choking his voice. “Tell him he's hurting him.”

I opened my mouth, only to realize that I didn't know the words for hurt or pain in either language.

“I want to go back. Tell him we need to go back.”

Though I did not look back at my brother, I knew that he was crying.

Bruno loosened his grip on the gator, letting it gently back into the water. It swam quickly away, its small form barely disturbing the water. After paddling for a few more minutes, Bruno held up his lantern to a tree that stood directly in front of us. Right there, mere feet away, a red and black spider perched, its legs long and spindly.

Danny's tears choked back his scream. I turned my head as far back as I could. Danny scooted as far back in the boat as he could. He stopped, perhaps sensing the precarious movements of the canoe. Then, just as it seemed to be regaining balance on the water, it tilted to the right, me, Bruno, and Danny falling alongside it.

“Danny!” I gripped his arm as we fell into the cold water. I felt something move underneath me; whether it was the current or some creature, I couldn't say. The three of us reached for the canoe, but Bruno was the one who set it

upright. Just as I was about to climb back in, I felt something nick my ankle, and I screamed. Danny sobbed as Bruno tugged us both back in, just as an alligator, maybe six feet long, swam in front of us, its wide, yellow-brown eyes watching us.

Danny was saying something, burbling, but I couldn't make out any of the words. I was still emerging from the bubble, caught somewhere between a daze and full awareness. Something came from my mouth too, a string of words that sounded something like *OhshitDannyohnoDannyohshit*. Bruno gazed at me, brown eyes steady. In them, I saw a question, and I wished that I knew how to draw it from those eyes, so that it would pour into his soft voice.

“*Queremos volver,*” I finally declared, pointing in what I thought was the direction of the shore.

Bruno pointed his paddle the same way, raising his eyebrows. I nodded. He dipped the oar in the water almost soundlessly, turning the boat around and directing it towards the shore. From ahead of us, I heard a voice call out.

“Hey! What the fuck?”

As we headed back to the main island, a shadowy form came into our sight, taking on color and shape as it drew closer to our boat. Moments later, the forms turned from shadow to Dad and Thiago's silhouettes. They stopped

in front of our canoe. Bruno guided our boat to the right, so that both canoes were parallel to one another, floating ten or maybe twenty feet apart in the dim light.

“Stop. No, no. We're not done yet,” Dad called out.

“*We're* done,” I said, still feeling Danny trembling behind me. *Does he even know that we're soaking wet?* I thought. And maybe he didn't; maybe he couldn't tell in the half-darkness.

“The canoe tipped,” I said.

“You should have been more careful.”

“We *were* careful.”

“Don't you *dare* talk back to me, Micaela.”

His saying my full name shifted something within me. I stood on my knees, looking at his shadowed face. He matched my gesture, then rolled his shoulders back, both fists clenched at his sides. He stared at me, clearly fuming, searching for words.

“Danny is scared, and so am I. We are going back.”

I could hear Dad's breathing grow heavier. I studied the distance between our two boats, worrying that they were closer together than they appeared.

“You were always like this. Always talking back or hiding away. Just like your mother. Just like your mother when she—”

“Stop!”

When I heard the voice call out from beside me, it took a moment for me to realize that it was my own brother. He looked straight ahead, whether at Dad or at some point near him, I wasn't sure. But his eyes were open, he was still, and he spoke.

“Stop it,” Danny said again, his voice even louder now.

“Stop what?” Dad barked, as though he couldn't believe that these things were being said to him. As if he had no idea what he'd put us through, tonight or on so many other trips.

“Stop hurting my sister.”

Again, the truth fell upon me slowly. Dad had never hit us, but I soon realized that that wasn't what Danny was talking about. Not at all.

“I have never laid a hand on *either* of you—”

“That isn't what he means,” I said. And I knew then that the capsule had broken, the ball shattered, scattering wind and light into the dark air.

When we got to shore, I took Danny by the hand and led him straight to the reception area, Thiago and Bruno just behind us, Dad by their side, his calm breathing interjected with raggedy intervals. I turned around to meet Bruno's eyes.

“*Precisamos protegê-los,*” he said, looking from Dad back at me.

I mulled over his words. *Protegê*, like *proteger*. *Proteger*, as in protect.

I looked at Bruno a second time. It was then that I noticed his forearm, covered in red lines and scar tissue, a small tattoo nestled in the inner crook of his elbow. I never learned how he earned those scars, only that he had them for a reason.

When we reached the front desk, it seemed abandoned, all the lights around it now dark.

“Hey!” I called out, banging my fist on the desk. Behind me, Thiago shouted something in Portuguese until a sleek-haired woman in her twenties, her eye shadow smudged at the corners, came out to answer him. This time, it was not Thiago who spoke first, but Bruno, who spoke slowly in a calm, clear voice, gesturing towards Danny and me, at which the woman nodded. “*Venga,*” she said, beckoning with her hand, then leading Danny and me into a back office behind the reception desk, which had the feel of a doctor's office,

pale and sterile, where a white cord telephone sat on a desk alongside scattered piles of typed pages and notes on yellow legal pad pages. Just seeing that telephone there brought back memories of daydreams I'd had when Dad took Danny and me on a sailboat for six weeks, with minimal communication equipment, back when Danny and I didn't have cell phones. Every day of that trip, I had pictured a bright red cord telephone magically appearing on the main mast. I would pick it up, dial the first phone number I ever learned by heart, and be connected immediately to Mom's voice.

In that small office, I took hold of the phone, then, with trembling fingers, dialed the familiar number. It took me a couple of tries, and even then, I realized I had forgotten to dial the proper area codes. By my fourth try, I was finally able to get through. As the phone rang, I couldn't even think of what time it was in Manaus, or what time it could possibly be in San Antonio.

With a shaking voice, I told Mom what had happened, stopping every few seconds to swallow so that I wouldn't start crying in the middle of my sentences. With Thiago and the sleek-haired woman's assistance, we spoke to a representative from Latam, who somehow arranged plane tickets for Danny and me, for a flight leaving Manaus airport just past one a.m.

“Come home,” Mom said. “My brave kids. I’ll meet you at the airport. Please come home safe.”

After a brief conversation with Mom, my throat raw and constricting, I emerged from the back office and looked at my father. His hair stuck up from his forehead, which glistened with sweat, eyes glittering like the stars splashed across that Amazon sky, and if I had not known that it was anger on my father’s face, I would have thought it was heartbreak. Years later, when Danny and I were old enough to decide that we would no longer see him, I would think back to his face, to the way it glistened that night. And I would wonder if perhaps that was what it was, a breaking as his children left, to reveal a kind of glinting that only the darkness could bring out.

Mere hours later, Thiago and Bruno escorted us, bags in hand, to an orange and white passenger van, which took us to the Manaus airport. Explaining our situation to the airport employees took all the Portuguese and Spanish phrases I could muster, plus the assistance of a short woman named Alfonsina, her dark brown hair pulled into a tight bun at the back of her head, who helped me with the words I still wasn't quite sure of, smoothing out the story in a way that made it seem almost not my own. I still wonder what became of her, this trilingual woman with her crisp voice, who guided us along this part of our

journey in an early morning, in-between kind of hour, who we left behind at an airport to which I thought I might never return.

Within twenty-four hours, we were back in San Antonio and in Mom's arms, both of us hugging her at once, arms thrown around her neck, Danny and I both refusing to be the first one to let go, like we were little kids again.

I later learned the Spanish words for pain and hurt: *dolor* and *lastimar*. I couldn't tell you this whole story in Portuguese or even Spanish, a language I still barely know, but perhaps with some gestures, perhaps if we both work at it, you might somehow understand.

Courtney Justus is a fiction candidate in the MFA in Creative Writing program at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. She was a two-time finalist for the James Hurst Prize for Fiction. Her world travels and experience growing up in Buenos Aires, Argentina frequently inform her work. Her work appears in *fjords*, *SOFTBLOW*, *Press Pause Press* and elsewhere. You can learn more about her at courtneyjustus-writer.wordpress.com.