

Travel Tips for the Solo Female in Central America

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I.

Do not pick up pillows thrown
into airplane aisles by withered men
in fraying straw hats. Do not idealize
a population. Always bend at the knee.

II.

Know that there are two words in English
for when it happens, *solitude* and *loneliness*,
but only one in Spanish
because you'll soon learn that the two
are lovers who shuffle tenderly
on each other's feet as they dance,
and sometimes appear to be dancing alone.

III.

Carry a rock in both hands
when walking at night in the highlands.
It is not men that you fear
but a skeletal mongrel
who hears the ghost footsteps
of guerillas and soldiers in shadows,

the animal who nuzzles in daylight
but attacks at night
with inherited fury more instinctive
than copulation. Be like the children
who've heard only hushed whispers of the war
but who realize its fear at dusk
when the mountains and the dogs begin to rise.

IV.

Dance the salsa or the meringue
or any Latin dance that demands
a female be pliant
in her partner's arms. Dance
even if you are American and have learned
(down to the deepest, most profound
sway of your hips) the intricate art
of not-to-be-led. Respond
to the mere goading of finger on wrist
or waist, but let it be by the dark one
with gypsy eyes and long black hair
who does not smile as he swings his partner
higher than the rest, as her obedient body
plunges toward well-worn tile
and he turns, long enough to seem
he's forsaken her (long enough to hope
he might be gazing at you) and then spins
with the elegance of a thousand night creatures

to capture her there by the nape
of her neck in one accurate
field-roughened hand.

V.

There is a word in Spanish for what lingers
in the bottom of your cup after the first thick
startle of unfiltered coffee. Do not drink
this residue, these dregs, that will grip
to the back of your throat and grate like sand
between teeth. It is *xinga* - something left behind
like the name of a city difficult to pronounce
or the eyes of the children in her streets.
It is dawn in San Pedro - warm bread wrapped
in smooth wax paper and the voice of women
spiraling through fog: *pan de canela,*
de chocolate, de banana...