

Pseudocyesis

A short story by Jocelyn Johnson

I know that the Spanish word *embarazada* means “pregnant”, but there I was, traveling alone through central Guatemala, balancing too many foreign words on the tip of my tongue. Those bare syllables sounded so familiar, like they should translate to mean “embarrassed”—which I was at the moment I uttered them. Anyway, I didn’t start off a liar.

What happened was I slipped while boarding a boat onto Lake Atitlan, so that I was flying face first towards the cabin and deck; my arms flopping wildly like fish in a bucket; my breasts nearly bouncing from my haltertop. My left flip-flop flew off and pierced the silty water. I managed to avoid the waiting lap of an old man, his eyes shining like foreign coins, and landed instead in a pile of fishing nets. I just jumped up, red-faced and flustered.

“Estoy embarazada,” I stammered to the open-mouthed passengers and crew.

This German boy, Wolfgang, who I’d met at breakfast, was boarding behind me. He stood laughing loudly at my acrobatic spill. I started to point out that he looked funny too in his Mayan man-purse and a bright woven scarf which glowed against his snowy skin;

those Guatemalan accessories that would never reconcile with the grey streets of Stuttgart. Instead I asked him to help fish my shoe from the water.

When Wolfgang was still giggling a moment later, I glared at him. “It’s just what you said to everyone in Spanish,” he explained.

“You mean when I said I was embarrassed for falling?”

“I mean when you announced you were pregnant after nearly flattening yourself.”

An odd look of realization must have flooded my face, because he patted my shoulder in consolation. He told me he was always saying the wrong things in Spanish, too. Then our launch set off for a routine taxi across the placid water.

But the moments after my blunder were anything but ordinary. Something had shifted—a new sweetness in the morning air, like satinwood coming into bloom. It showed itself in the salty fishermen jostling to help with my backpack, and the trio of local women offering coy smiles, and in everybody crowding together to make more space for me. For the entire boat-ride, the crew acted differently, too, their grins tinged with contradiction, as if I were a cross between an overripe fruit and The Blessed Virgin.

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Then later, pushing through a crowded market at Chichicastenango, I felt it again, a salience at my center—as if those earlier words misspoken had lodged in my belly, were growing into a poem there. I tried to ignore, deny it, but in the end, I found myself nurturing it a bit.

Estoy embarazada, I whispered to myself, my own magical thinking, making a mantra of the foreign words. And by God, those squat Mayan women with flat ancient faces parted like cornstalks to grant me a wide berth.

Then from out of nowhere, this small cinnamon-colored man stepped right in front of me, spitting out a ridiculous melody from a wooden flute. A cache of crude instruments dangled from his coat sleeves like rigid fringes.

“Can’t you see I’m in a family way?” I offered bluntly, standing my ground. He clearly did not understand English but his gaze drifted up toward me and his errant melody fizzled to a single odd note. Then he let me pass.

That was the quickest turn-over in the history of handicraft sellers. I’d spent weeks running from them in every village. This time, I just stood there, pressing air into my small belly, caressing the new hard space I’d created.

When I looked up a dark-haired woman was sauntering towards me. “You were on the boat earlier,” she said in lovely clear Spanish. “What country are you from?” As we chatted I realized she was the very first Guatemalan woman to approach me.

“You’re still so tiny. When are you due anyway?” she asked. Surprised at first, I answered her with gleaming eyes.

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That was going to be the end of it, really. That night, I took a crowded chicken bus back to Antigua, sat crunched next to an open window with the wind just pouring in. At town, I left my bags at the first hostel with a vacancy and strayed into Ladies’ Night at a nearby *discoteca*. The bartender was this British man who kept free, but watery, vodka tonics sliding towards me. His eyes bore down the V of my tee-shirt. His moist plump fingers groped for mine across the sticky bar. Even so I stayed until closing, gyrating among a string of foreign boys whose faces blurred like passing views out a bus window.

The next morning I picked over my breakfast at the hostel: flaccid plantains and a dry turd of black beans. My head still pounding out the rhythms of the night before, I considered my travels: I had already trekked to distant hill stations, to moss covered pyramids where entire nations had been born; but to me, it felt like one beaten path after another.

After eating, I wandered into the maze of sun-bleached cobblestone, my daypack slung lazily over my arm. I had to do something, so I set off toward this church, *San Francisco*, hoping to discover a new view of its bone-white façade.

Instead, I got turned around at *Calle Segundo*. At a crossroads, I noticed an archway into a hotel. Through the hotel's foyer, at the center of an elegant courtyard, I could see a fountain: four stone figurines pointing in the cardinal directions, water spouting in dramatic arcs from their abundant stone breasts. They looked like sirens, like whores, like mothers.

I entered the hotel, drawn by those figures. The receptionist rose her finger to halt me: a gesture crossed between "I'll be right with you" and "Hold on there, *chica*", but her ear was glued to the receiver, so I brushed right past. I stood before the fountain for a moment, then ducked into the bathroom off the courtyard.

The bathroom was spacious and shady with a framed, full sized mirror—a distant cousin to the foggy, antique looking-glass in my hostel room. Suddenly I wanted to see myself clearly again. I had only just turned twenty-one. I studied my reflection.

Then I dug through my daypack, laid all of my belongings out on the small bathroom shelf. I had my guidebook, a jacket for cool shady courtyards, and a canvas belt that I'd bought the day before. I looked hopefully into the mirror again.

At that moment the feeling from the boat, from the market, washed over me again; my knees trembled, my heart raced. Then I realized with satisfaction what to do. I carefully folded my fleece and arranged it beneath my shirt, using the belt to secure it. I readjusted and turned and turned again. In my mirror image, I carefully smoothed my new belly. I looked ridiculous and pitiful and beautiful.

Crossing back through the lobby, I heard the footsteps almost immediately, the precise click of quickening heels; then cold fingers, like ice-cubes, on my shoulder:

“Can I help you?” the receptionist snapped.

By then I was almost at the street, but I knew I had been caught red handed. I swallowed hard, turned slowly.

But when the receptionist saw my profile, she deflated. “Oh—I’m sorry,” she said, her voice going soft. Then she leaned in and confided in a whisper, “I had to go all the time with my first one too.”

I don’t know what I felt at that moment, exactly—more than relief, elation maybe. I thanked the woman and sauntered out, my legs splaying like scissors commensurate with my charade, my heartbeat ringing like church bells in my ears. Maybe it was like

shoplifting, or jumping out of an airplane. Maybe it was like falling in love. I don't know—I've never done those things.

For three days I went on like this. I'd sneak out before breakfast with my stomach brimming, then come back to the hostel after suppertime. To improve my look, I bought an ace bandage, a roll of duct tape, a maternity shirt. Beneath its empire waist my belly inched ever bigger until I began to feel other changes too. My face, for example, glowed like a lantern. The world seemed new and fresh against my skin. I'd sit in the *parque central* taking up a whole park bench, munching salted papayas that vendors sold, the kind I'd never had a taste for before.

Sometimes the local women would come up to me and crinkle their eyes, even touch my shoulder gently, like a prayer. And I could smile demurely at any man and his eyes would meet mine reverently. I just had to stay vigilant of elderly women who tended to swoop in for a quick, potentially disastrous, squeeze. When I blocked them, they thought I was just being protective; they looked proud of me.

“Your first!” they'd exclaim in Spanish, clasping their raspy hands together in delight. I'd walk away alternating between guilt and vindication.

On the fourth night I had trouble sleeping. I was going home in a few days, but I wasn't ready to go back to the same life: daydreaming while dusty professors droned on about

history and anatomy; drinking with the same boring boys whose faces flitted from my mind by the next morning. This trip was supposed to be my antidote, my cure. I bundled my fleece beneath my night shirt, tucked it into the elastic of my panties. The soft fabric caressed my skin like a lover, lulled me fast into slumber.

That night I dreamed of walking in circles. My belly was flat, so no one believed me, but I could feel something writhing and heavy against my spine. Then my legs wrenched outwards as if God was cranking a screw at my sacrum. I cried out in labor and produced a bloody sac. When I peered in, it was empty. I woke at dawn and reached for my belly, but my crumple of clothes had come undone in the night.

The last day of my trip was a Friday. In the cool early morning I started towards the market near the bus depot without my false pregnancy. I told myself it would be better just to be a normal girl, a tourist shopping for final souvenirs.

But even before I had reached the corner, I knew I would go back to the hostel. In my cell of a room I prepared my belly as big as ever and set out again. Maybe it was like when a plain girl puts on a daring red dress, goes out dancing where nobody knows her. How can she go back to being that plain girl again?

When I arrived, the weekend market was already bustling. I perused the crowded stands for a while. Then between the tight rows of tables I sensed someone behind me, the

lemony scent of satinwood. Clumsily, I turned towards that sweetness and almost knocked into her.

“Perdon,” I fluttered, our twin bellies nearly colliding.

“Oh no, I’m sorry,” she answered in a slight southern tenor. She was American, too, my age. The arc of her stomach was less prominent than mine, half covered by a halter not made for a pregnant girl. A belly ring sparkled at its center.

“Hey, you’re from the States too,” she grinned generously with something undecipherable at the edges. “I’m Charlotte.”

“I’m Mary,” I managed, through a smile that was tight and wide.

The two of us chatted for a moment about traveling. Then Charlotte paused and settled her hands, like nesting hens, on her belly; I shifted, feeling tape pull against my skin.

“Everyone here just treats me like I’m weird or something,” she started, “just because I’m pregnant, I mean. The local men will barely look at me. And the women touch my stomach like it belongs to them. It’s not what I expected, being here.”

“I know what you mean,” I muttered, half heartedly.

“And the funny part is *this* is probably why I came here in the first place.” Charlotte went on. “I guess I was trying to get away from who I was becoming at home, figure out what the fuck to do with myself. I mean, I’m only 19 and my body’s going crazy. My boobs ache all the time— do your boobs ache?”

I just nodded too eagerly. Then Charlotte looked long and hard at me, my belly alongside hers.

“So, how far along are you?” she queried.

“Third trimester,” I lied—and for the first time I felt like a liar; forming those simple words to a girl I did not know. Everything to that point had just been smoke and mirrors.

“And you are still traveling in the third trimester? Wow.” she said, an odd note in her voice, like a flute out of tune. She raised one eyebrow, a simple gesture, and I felt naked.

“It’s just that you look so great,” she concluded.

As Charlotte complimented me, I looked down at my flip-flops, afraid to see if she was mocking me.

“Sorry, I must sound so judgmental. I don’t mean to,” she finally continued. “It must be rubbing off, I guess. It’s just that everyone keeps telling me what to do since I got pregnant. You know: stay in school, don’t travel, say goodbye to life as you know it. This is the most natural thing in the world, right? And I wonder if I’ll survive it. I feel like a clock is ticking, and I have T minus six months to finish everything I’ve ever wanted to do. And I don’t even know what that is yet.”

“I know what you mean,” I answered. I did. I forced myself to look up, to see for sure. I met Charlottes’ gaze: two clear pools looking at me earnestly.

In the silence that followed, the two of us just stood there, bearing witness to one another, even as a pack of American boys breezed past. They could have just as easily been on my campus at home. I thought I saw one of them smirk at us. He pursed his lips and made a long mooing sound. Charlotte must have heard it too; she bowed her head like a setting sun.

“Well, I’m sorry for talking your ear off,” she said softly. “Unless you want to... do something?”

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” I answered, short and brusque.

“Okay, well good luck then,” Charlotte finished, but I was already turning away.

I managed a few hurried steps before I started running, almost knocking over a vender's table, plowing right through the group of college boys. For the most slender moment it felt good to run—like I could sprint right out of the market, take flight.

Then I felt the fastener loosen. I reached down to cradle the mass of cloth at my belly, but it was too late. It was already unraveling so that a length of bandage streamed from my tunic.

People parted to let me pass. Were their faces puzzled or shocked or laughing? I couldn't tell—everything was bleeding together. I kept moving, searching for an exit, until I heard a familiar voice calling my name:

“Mary, hey Mary, wait!”

When I looked up, there was Wolfgang towering above everyone, transformed even since I'd seen him the week before. His blue-pale skin was pink and sunburned, his hair shaggy around his face. He was dressed absurdly in a traditional poncho and a leather *sombrero*, but no one stared at him; they were staring at *me*. I watched helplessly as Wolfgang picked his way through the crowd. Then he was right in front of me, grinning garishly:

“Mary?”

Our eyes met for a moment before Wolfgang looked down from my flushed face to my body unraveling. His smile loosened and fell away, his eyes widened. I felt humiliation spread over my skin like fever.

“God, Mary. What happened to you?”

I wanted to answer him. Really. I tried to form words, an explanation, but my throat was fast flooding with water and silt; the audacious girl I had become was drowning and all I could do was emit an odd, helpless gurgle. I never get sick, never— but that day my stomach seized up in violent protest and I couldn’t help it: I heaved and vomited on the dusty floor between our feet.

The whole market tilted as I stumbled away from Wolfgang. I dropped to my knees at the end of the aisle of stalls, behind the wall of dusty rugs for sale.

“Good price, for you,” the vender said in lilting English, repeating the string of foreign words like a mantra.

I balled up there for a moment, panting, my fingers running frantically over the spectacle of my belly. I could still feel the weight of Wolfgang’s glossy gaze, and with it, the cost of my daring; self-consciousness filled my chest like a ragged breath.

Roughly, I tugged the remainder of bandage and fleece from my belly. I ripped the silvery tape free even as it tore delicate hairs from my skin. It left sticky, symmetrical welts along my midriff.

“It’s time to go home,” I mumbled, gathering myself.

“Every color, we have, Miss,” the vender sang, oblivious. When I stood, his eyes widened at a glimpse of my bare belly, my shirt floating impotently around my waist. He licked his lips, lasciviously.

I ignored him and ducked out the back of the market, where rows and rows of chicken buses lined up, idling loudly, spewing caustic diesel fumes. Each bus was colorfully painted with graphics, punctuated by invocations to God, going God knows where. I was still trembling as I slinked past, my face down turned and swollen, my fleece balled up and cradled in my arms.

