Natalie’s alarm blares, and I jolt up, forgetting where I am. I identify as an “anti-morning person,” so it takes me ten minutes to, first, remember I am in Colombia and, second, muster up enough momentum to leave my cot. Natalie, my roommate, is already out of bed as I fumble around trying to locate the light switch. There are holes in the walls, stuffed with T-shirts as a creative quick fix, but sunlight is persistent, with thin rays piercing through small gaps. Sections of the room are highlighted, but not enough to see. Mostly, I am worried about accidentally stepping on a tortoise—pets of my host family, las tortugas seem to prefer our room, and at night they lurk under our beds. There is a discrepancy as to how many tortoises actually live here, though. Answers vary from four to five. I average the answers, concluding there is a potential for four and a half pet turtles underfoot.

My shirt, even at 7:00am, is soaked with sweat from the relentless heat. I change, throw on my shorts (which belong to my sister but have been stained so badly I fear I can never return them), and shuffle to the kitchen. Joaquinita, our host mom, has been up for several hours preparing slices of queso fresco and a sort of cassava cake for breakfast. I wake my taste buds up by dousing everything in a moonshine-esque homemade hot sauce made by Bernardino, our local guide. There is also fresh juice made from a mysterious pink fruit that tastes like bubblegum. I gulp each cup down greedily. No one talks at breakfast; we are all thinking about the day ahead, the participants, Spanish, and the heat.

I am in San Basilio de Palenque, a small coastal Colombian town, to conduct linguistic research through a program called PIRE, funded by the National Science Foundation. My research focuses on gender-based biases and sociolinguistics in the Spanish-based Creole that is spoken here. The Creole is referred to as lengua meaning “the language.”

After breakfast I set up my workstation the kitchen table, the tablecloth still sticky from breakfast. I make sure that my recorder is charged and my computer—an indestructible Dell that could probably be used underwater or thrown down a set of stairs and continue to function normally—boots up. The drawback is how heavy the laptop is. I massage my neck, realizing I should probably start lifting weights if I want to have a career in ethnographic research.

At this point, participants begin to file in. They vary from 16 to 63 years young. Some are musicians, some grandmothers, and others are teachers or students. I prompt them with questions and record their answers, energized by their stories of growing up in Palenque. They point out situations where they chose to speak in Spanish and the conversations they prefer having in lengua. They listen to phrases in both languages, some with a male speaker and some with a female speaker. Í a ten tré ngombe, Tengo tres vacas, they hear through headphones. To elicit assumptions based on the perceived gender, I ask each participant what they think. I record their answers and move on to the next participant.

By noon my mouth is dry, and research pauses for lunch. I ask Joaquinita if she needs help cooking. She nods and hands me a grater and slice of coconut for what I selfishly hope will be sweet coconut rice. After lunch, the morning participant system is repeated. Each participant
filters through the six different research projects headed by a different Penn State researcher. After my last participant I play back the recordings and notice how much life in Palenque is captured in the background. I can hear the faint sound of a broom being flicked back and forth on concrete—*swoosh, swoosh*. I hear my host brother’s baby cry and then coo as she bangs cups and spoons on the floor. I make out the roar of the milk truck as it passes outside, harmonized with gleeful shouts.

We have some time before dinner, so I grab my bag and walk to the center of town with my friend Sara. We buy a couple bottles of water, and I throw in an ice cream bar for the walk home. The ice cream brings me back to life in the punishing heat as Sara feeds the neighborhood dogs bits of crackers and bread. The pups follow us the short walk home like a small caravan that attracts attention in the form of stares from locals. Back in my room, I try to turn on the fan to no avail. I tell Joaquinita, and she explains the power has gone out. I ask when it will be back on, but she just shrugs and says maybe in a couple of days.

We scarf down dinner, homemade empanadas crafted with leftover *queso fresco* from breakfast, followed by a collective congregation of locals outside of their homes in plastic chairs with books and cards. Much of life swirls around us outside. I notice the lack of front doors on each home, which means children, pigs, and chickens dart from house to house, often followed by dogs. The dogs are supposed to keep the other animals outside of the house but easily forget their duties when food is available. It is cooler outside in the shade, and I find myself nodding off, book in hand. As the sun sets, red, orange, and pink hues paint the sky, blending like watercolors. I am reminded of the sunsets in State College and wonder what is going on outside of my little bubble in Palenque.

Stars enter stage right, speckling the night sky as exhaustion weighs down my limbs. Our small research family part ways, returning to our temporary homes. I collapse onto my cot and roll down the mosquito net dangling from the ceiling. Within seconds I am snoring, hibernating, and preparing to emerge from my cocoon the next day—rinse and repeat.