

Where is home?

Yaniana Castro Rátiva

The plan was to pay the English program exchange at Central University, travel to Toronto for one month, learn English at Toronto University English Program (I will not get into details about the idealistic ideas of learning another language in such a short time I had), and finally come back to Colombia.

I traveled on June 2017. That month was over in no time; it was enough for visiting almost all touristic places in Toronto with other Colombian students from my university, but I barely could speak some English neither understand it. Shyness took the best of me, fear too, that . When my mother knew this, we understood that trip would be longer than planned.

Lucky me, the Pilipino host family I had was nice: Rose always cared to make me feel at home, Jhon tried his best to talk to me even if he preferred his mother tongue, Tagalog; and Jhonaird –a talkative-nine-year-old boy at that moment– sometimes explained me all words I did not know. They were truly glad to accept me for six months more. With that matter solved (though homesickness had not healed yet), finding a cheaper English program was my next priority.

One of my mom's friends had his son –Sergio– studying at WTC (Western Town College in Toronto). He arranged a meeting with the Colombian coordinator there, and later texted me that Nubia would be waiting for me next day before five o'clock. My only solution for not getting lost, due to my stubbornness of no wasting money in something like data –plus I did not want to ask for directions–, was to take a lot of screenshots with my cellphone.

Next day came. The steps were: take bus 34A or 35B, get down in Jane subway station (last stop), take the green line to Bloor Young, later the yellow one to Eglinton, and finally walk five minutes. At breakfast time, I shared my plan with Rose, however, she had a better option: bus 32D, get down at the last stop, wait for another 32D, and go until Duplex Avenue.

During my first month I became so familiar with the subway system that experience another type of public transportation sounded great. At the bus station, I took the number 32D,

everything went smoothly until I got down before Duplex Avenue because I misheard the stop. Completely lost, I went in circles for hours without any sense of direction; angry with myself, and reluctant to ask for help.

It was my fourth time crossing a quiet neighborhood one block far from the main avenue when, after organizing each single word, I thought the next question: “Excuse me sir/miss, I’m lost. Could you help me to find this address? (show the address in my cellphone with a shivering hand)”. Bravery or nothing, besides, the hot weather had me at the edge of exhaustion. Soon, an old woman walked next to me. “Excuse me, miss...”. “No, no, no. Sorry, I can’t... (the only words I understood)”. “Could you...”, “No, no...”. She went away. Silly bravery. At least nobody witnessed that.

Coming back to the avenue, thoughts like: “I can’t ask someone else”, “what if I try another day”, “It’s already 3:30!”, “Try to look like you’re not lost!”, “Are you sure you want to come back?”, “You can find that place by yourself”. A black man put an end to this. He approached me asking if I could help him find a location in his Google Maps. Of course, I was not of much help to him, but he was to me. “I’m lost too”, I answered. After that, he searched my address, and told me the direction I should follow –south, west, north, or east was the same to me.

I arrived at WTC at 4:30 (yes, from where I was to WTC there were more than thirty minutes by foot. Yes, I did not risk myself again by taking another bus), talked with Nubia, and signed a contract for studying there.

Following months became enjoyable as I managed to communicate better. Jhonairstopped saying things like: “She doesn’t know any English”, or “You don’t understand anything I say”, so my self-confidence improved allowing me to play more often with him. A huge achievement. Classes were less frightening, occasionally I could speak my mind. More than once I ate out. Little by little I started to appreciate how comfortable Toronto was, how safety streets were and, how kind people could be (usually).

Six months passed without me noticing. Good times fly. Farewells are not easy to handle, however, mine was. At the airport, Jhon waited outside in their car, Rose shed some tears,

Jhonaired bragged his strength because he would never cry for something like that –it hurt a little–, and I kept smiling.

Ready for the departure, I sighed. Something inside me felt at ease; something strange that knew I was coming back to a place I knew deeply, and where I would always fit in with English or without.