

# Chapter 1: A Dream of Faith

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*Catalina Pimiento*

*In one of the few love stories by Jorge Luis Borges, a Colombian teacher meets and falls in love with a Norwegian woman. When she asks what is “being Colombian,” he responds: an act of faith.*

It is 1998 in Bogotá, Colombia. At that time, it was a city of eight million people. The wealthiest live in the north, the less fortunate live in the south. The south is where I live. From there, everywhere is so far away. It takes hours to get to work, to school. I am 15 years old and live in a cozy flat with my family: mum, dad, and two younger brothers, José and Sebastián. In two years, I graduate from secondary school. What's next? Maybe I'll study medicine, maybe chemistry. Archeology would be even better, but what is that even like? I don't know any archaeologists. My friends (who are mostly cousins) are also wondering what to study, and their parents insist they need to find a career that is lucrative. Life is too hard otherwise. My parents are not like that. Even though they know first-hand how hard life can be when you are poor, they insist that I should study whatever I want, and that I should follow my passions. I feel very fortunate, but I am not sure how we could pay for my education in a country where that is a privilege and not a right. I have always been aware of our financial constraints, even at a very young age, and I constantly worry about them.

A year has passed, and it is now my 16th birthday. My parents give me a one-year subscription to *National Geographic* magazine. I receive the first issue. The cover: an article about the great white shark. I read the issue start to finish and all of a sudden, like an epiphany, it becomes very

clear to me: I will study biology and save sharks from extinction! My parents support this idea. I am so excited. Especially because deep down, part of me thinks that becoming a biologist is extravagant, even surreal, especially for a girl from Bogotá, in the heart of Los Andes and 20 hours away from the closest beach. I have never even met a biologist before, nor a shark researcher. It is insane, but I am going for it. If my family supports it, it cannot be that crazy.

There are a number of prestigious universities I can apply to, one almost free but very hard to get into (La Nacional), one super expensive (Los Andes), and one just about affordable (La Javeriana). My missions: to get in La Nacional by passing an admission test, famous for being almost impossible, and to get the best possible grade in the secondary school exit examination test (ICFES), which is used to determine students' academic readiness for admission to universities. I stress so much about this. I think of failing this test as the worst thing that can ever happen to me. So, along with my best friend Karen, I decide to take multiple extracurricular classes after school. I also plan a strict self-study program while I aim to get the best possible grades. Part of my plan consists in waking up at four in the morning to study before school. I start developing the insomnia that will remain in my life for the years to come. But worse than that, I give myself an eating disorder because instead of eating lunch, I save all my pocket money to pay for the extra courses I am taking (although we cheekily manage to take one of these courses without paying, until they find out and kick us out). At the end, and despite my efforts, I fail to get into La Nacional.

Not securing a place at an affordable yet prestigious university breaks my heart. I feel ashamed, embarrassed. But then, the results of the ICFES arrive and I get one of the highest scores in Bogotá, which grants me the Andres Bello Award. The award letter states that this prize secures a place in any university I want, and a scholarship. Oh, immortal jubilation! Next day I go to the ICFES headquarters only to find out that I will never receive such a scholarship. The people I speak with tell me, in a mocking tone, that they do not know anything about it, and that it must be an error, a relic from a previous system. I am frustrated but I shake it off quickly because broken promises about scholarships are very

common in my country. So instead, I take a loan from the government to pay half of the tuition in La Javeriana, where I easily get admitted, as I got excellent grades at school. I have no idea how we will pay for the other half, but it doesn't matter. We will worry about that when the time comes. I need to have faith that it will work out.

It is now the year 2000. The curriculum at La Javeriana is rich, inspiring, and exciting, which is not surprising. After all, this is a mega-diverse country and there are few places in the world better suited for studying biology. So, I take courses in botany, genetics, zoology, ecology, evolution. But my years at university are taking place at a peak in Colombia's internal conflict. Violence is endemic in Colombia, with generations enduring different mutations of it. For my generation, it is bombs, kidnapping, massacres, crossfire, mass graves, displacement, and fragmentation mines, in cities as well, but mostly in rural areas. Colombian people suffer immensely. Watching the news has become too painful for me. Is the evening news showing violent scenes in black and white? Or is it a coping mechanism from my subconscious? Traveling to the countryside has become too dangerous. Some people from the cities have stopped going altogether. Even if nothing happens directly to us, we are all constantly scared. Every night I pray, begging that nothing horrible (like in the news) happens to my family. Yet, life goes on: we go to work, we go to school, we gather at our grandparents' houses on Sundays, have barbecues and dance, as per usual. In fact, these are happy times, in a way. We kind of live life as if every day was our last. Like the song says, "we are here today, we don't know tomorrow."

In the meanwhile, the education of all biology students is being tainted by a big paradox: not to be able to do much fieldwork in a mega-diverse country. However, in La Javeriana, we still visit some wonderful field sites in the Caribbean, the Amazon, the Andes, and the Eastern Plains. We manage to do so by getting to these sites by plane, instead of by bus, as crossing our convoluted geography would be too dangerous. That means I need a lot more money, which, in addition to the half-tuition, makes the already difficult situation for my family even more challenging. My brother José has just finished school and is working for a bit, so he helps me before he starts university and begins his own strug-

gle. My grandmother helps here and there, too. But my parents do most of the heavy lifting. I do not know how though, given the circumstances. No one in my family knows how we manage to pay for things, really. But it just happens, as an act of faith and a privilege I live with, without realizing. The financial stress of my family and the violent environment makes me constantly anxious, and I develop very high expectations for myself, again: to get the best grades in my cohort in order to make my family's effort worth it, and then to succeed professionally and become financially independent as soon as possible so that I can take care of them.

It is in the middle of this chaos, of this uncertainty and anxiety, and this constant sense of danger, that I first learn about academia through a Colombian scientist who later became my life-long mentor. Carlos has just returned from studying in the US and is now starting a research group. He tells me all about academic life in the US and it all seems so luxurious to me. Do people really get paid to do research in a subject they feel passionate about? Where do I sign? Becoming a scientist is my new goal in life. But for that, I need to excel. I also need to make important connections and go abroad to get international research experience. And of course, I need to become fluent in English, which I am getting close to achieving thanks to my love for rock music and US-American comedies. Every day while I commute (which takes at least one and a half hours each way), I daydream about emigrating to the US or Europe to do a master's and a PhD, to one day devote my life to the study of sharks and to lead a research group. But this dream seems so far away. One of those dreams people never achieve.

It is now March 2003. After a long day of classes, I take a bus back home. It is not rush hour, so I get to travel sitting down. The bus is rather empty. I have a Walkman and start listening to the radio. I have a long journey ahead, so I start drifting into sleep. I realize I am sitting on a pile of papers. The handwriting looks like a less nice version of my own. It seems to be a letter, addressed to me. It says:

*Catalina,*

*This is a letter written by yourself from the future, exactly 20 years from now. I know how worried you are about the next steps in your life, so I decided to send you this letter. There are a lot of things I want to say, but I will start by saying that everything will be fine. Not just fine. Your dreams will come true. So please, stop worrying so much.*

*I have a lot to tell you about the future. It is crazier than you can imagine here. We are constantly connected to the internet and can access all kinds of information within seconds from our phones. We can also message or video-call anyone from anywhere in the world, and take pictures and share them with our friends and family. We can watch all sorts of movies and (you are going to love this one) we can listen to all the music. Yes, all of it is now easily available. So, pretty soon, the world will be so inter-connected that it will feel smaller and more accessible. Traveling internationally (one of your dreams) will become easier, and we do it a lot. We have been in many different places. In fact, we have lived in five different countries. Don't worry, you have maintained your connection with your family and friends despite the distance. But you meet new people too, many of whom will become essential parts of your life. You find your other half unexpectedly, and alongside this wise, loving, resilient, and beautiful man, you feel at home, safe, and complete. Your family visits a lot and you visit them, too. Sebastián, in particular, is by your side in every step you take, and you share wonderful adventures together.*

*You fulfil your dream of learning English, moving abroad, getting a PhD, and becoming a shark researcher. You first embark on a journey to study whale sharks, which opens many academic opportunities for you and becomes your key to entering grad school. You will regard this time as one of the happiest of your life. But grad school, despite being a dream come true, is full of challenges and disappointments. You will often feel like you can't do it, and many will try to convince you that you are not good enough. But luckily, and as per usual, you have an amazing network of people who support and encourage you. After many, many, many rejections, you will do multiple postdocs where you, for the first time, will feel academically confident, independent, and strong. So, remember this:*

*you won't always feel this insecure. During this time, you get to meet incredibly clever people with whom you collaborate and establish long and loyal professional relationships.*

*Following an unexpected path, you end up working in a world-class university. You have the privilege of leading a research group and spending your workdays thinking, reading, and writing about sharks. Proposing research projects and discussing ideas on why and how sharks go extinct becomes part of your routine. You learn to use an array of computational methods that would seem like science fiction today. Your research group aims at informing conservation efforts to protect sharks from extinction, just like you wanted when you first read that National Geographic magazine. Every day you feel lucky and privileged. Although, this comes with some guilt, as you cannot help but compare your luck with that of less fortunate people in your country and the rest of the world.*

*A lot of the privileges that you are lucky to have now, such as traveling the world, being connected with your loved ones, using your phone, and living a comfortable and healthy life, comes with a price. Not specifically for you, but for us, as a civilization. Our planet is heating (actually boiling) at an accelerated rate, and we are facing a climate emergency. Our very existence in the future is uncertain. We are driving many more species into extinction than you could have ever imagined. Sharks are one of the groups facing the highest extinction risk. We are all to blame, but every day it becomes more and more evident that a minority of people, those profiting from extractivism and exploitation, are the most responsible for destroying our planet and our society. Governments and corporations all around the world are complicit. In the meanwhile, underprivileged people all over the world pay the highest price for the ecological breakdown we are facing. You are protected from this all to an extent and feel, once again, guilty, but with a sense of urgency for change.*

*But do not think this is a problem of the future where I am writing this letter from. We now know that this began before we were born. That many of these issues were not on our radar growing up in Colombia because we were too busy surviving, and because the future was more a fantasy than a matter of time. Once you realize all this, a lot of what you believe in will change. In fact, understanding*

*these issues will feel like an awakening for you, almost a re-birth. You will be finally able to fully comprehend that overwhelming feeling that you have in your chest when you see injustice and that node in your throat when you see suffering. Even if you cannot articulate that in the most eloquent way, you will understand it and that will be enough. Most importantly, you will no longer feel so lonely in that struggle because you will share all of that with others. You will find a community of people who share this view of the world in the most unexpected places.*

*Although you will have a persistent and unsatisfied hunger for change over the years, which is very present as I write this letter, I can say that some things will change. In 2016, the Colombian government will finally sign a peace agreement with the FARC guerrillas, terminating a war that for so long we thought was never-ending. You will actively participate in this peace process with enthusiasm and optimism from abroad, and you remain engaged with Colombian politics, despite the many disappointments and setbacks.*

*Importantly, as you awake to the most fundamental problems of humanity, you get to better understand who you are. You no longer wonder to what extent your interests are yours, or the influence of others. Part of that is also enabled by an interest in exercise and physical activities. You suddenly realize that you are actually physically capable, you overcome many of your numerous fears, and you become braver, stronger, and bolder. Although right now you live in a country in which, despite its immense beauty and unique geography, being outside can be scary and dangerous, this physical journey inevitably leads to a totally new journey through nature. Not that of a biologist living in a flat surrounded by concrete, but that of a human feeling at peace when she is outside hiking, running, and, mostly, swimming.*

*Yes, swimming! You discover your happy place in the ocean, as well as in lakes and rivers, and you feel pure bliss in every stroke, as you glide through the water, blinded by the reflection of sun, filling your lungs with crisp air, and hearing the silence of the dynamic ecosystems beneath you. So, as you can see, in that journey of academic ambition you embarked on as a teenager, your most precious*

*accomplishment will be that of having honest and close connections with other people, your friends, family, colleagues, and allies — and with nature.*

The bus has suddenly stopped, and I wake up from a deep sleep. It seems like there is a lot of traffic ahead of us. I look out the window and see chaos in the street. A normal scene for a weekday in the late afternoon. I take my headphones off and vaguely remember the wild dream I just had about reading a letter to myself from the future. I can only hope, have faith, in this dream becoming true one day.