



Days of Discomfort

Riley Hope

The second afternoon of the two weeks we will be in Mexico City is spent trying to find a Korean restaurant I saw from the back seat of the cramped Toyota we are renting. By the time we have gotten the car crammed back into the underground parking lot that is tucked under our Airbnb and everyone has taken a quick shower to wash away the sweat from a day of wandering through the streets, it is late. My father-in-law asks if I know how to get to this restaurant, and I tell him yes, despite the fact that I almost immediately forgot the name of it after I saw it.

While everyone has their back turned, I begin frantically googling Korean spots nearby. To my dismay there are twice as many as one would expect in Mexico City. I pick one whose photos look similar to the one I saw from the car. The family mobs out into the narrow hallway in a single file line because there is no room for us to stand next to each other and waits patiently for the elevator that will only fit half of us at a time. While we wait, I try to imagine how in the world they brought so much as an armchair into the apartment through this hallway that is only a few inches wider than my short father-in-law's shoulders.

As soon as our feet hit the sidewalk, an angry black cloud shouts at us from overhead. It is followed only a few seconds later by a bright flash of lightning a few miles away. Both the sound and the light are amplified by the towering buildings around

us. Every time I leave Little Rock to visit other major cities, I have the same realization that the lake I grew up by is more like a pond compared to these places. I look back at the building that our Airbnb is in as the skies start to grow darker. My eyes follow the painted stucco siding all the way to the top, trying to see the window that leads to the room my husband and I are sleeping in. Overall, the building gives the impression of being a series of single-floor houses stacked haphazardly on top of each other, not unlike a house that a toddler has built out of Legos. When we first arrived, I stuck my head out of a window in the back-most bedroom, only to find walls of similar texture traveling in either direction, all at sharp and strange angles. The gap between the window my head was hanging out of and the cracked window across from me was less than half a foot. If I really wanted to, I could have jumped into the other family's apartment with ease.

We travel blocks between goliath buildings, hoping the rain will hold off until we make it to our destination. I can't help but wonder what exactly is being housed in all of these skyscrapers. About two blocks away from the restaurant, we are swallowed by a fast-moving stream of people. The crowd appears like smoke, suddenly and without warning. I can't help but giggle at the height difference between myself and the people around me. I've never been the tallest in the room, and I'm suddenly very aware of my corporal body in a way I have never



been before. The sky is threatening to burst overhead at any second. I am busy trying to take a photo of something with my camera when my husband taps me on the shoulder and points to the awning ahead of us. Perched on the edge of a concrete outlet that couldn't be more than a foot wide are several men, watching the crowd shift and move below them. They are crouched like cats and in the low storm lighting, I swear they have fluffy tails. I can't get the film camera re-wound fast enough before the tide moves us forward again.

We don't get very far from the cat-men before the sky opens its sharp jaws and dumps water on us. Within seconds the rain turns into hail the size of golf balls that pelts us relentlessly before we find shelter under an awning with other fish from the stream. The smell of weed floats through the damp air. We watch vendors hastily take down their booths and rush by to find a place to wait out the storm. Three men waddle by, weighed down under the ridiculously large umbrella that had been attached to their food cart. A puddle turns into a small pond off the curb in front of us, and every car that passes by is inches from drenching us.

The lady next to me scoots closer, shivering. For a moment, I am struck by the realization that this storm has driven all of us under the same awning and no one seems to be looking twice at the obvious tourist. When I glance at the tiny woman next to me, she looks up and grins. All of us are one and the

same—soggy wet human beings. At the end of the line, a teenager with piercings and spikey hair beckons an *abuelita* to join him. A child splashes at the edge of the awning where the rain hits the ground. The hail makes a solid *thunk* when it lands on the passing cars. Then the storm leaves as quickly as it came, and the brief reprieve from the heat is broken. The sun peaks out from behind gray, empty clouds, and the humidity returns. We return to our journey.

Eventually, the stream of people spreads as we spill onto a wider street. The Google map in my hand says we are close. My father-in-law stops to put money into an upturned hat sitting on the ground in front of a man with a young girl in his lap. The man thanks him profusely and refers to the little girl as his daughter. He cries when my father-in-law puts another dollar in the hat. My father-in-law has just seen his daughter for the first time in years today and is feeling a little sentimental. There are tears in his eyes when he returns to our little convoy. He takes his daughter, Frida, by the hand.

By the time we arrive at the restaurant, I've been given an extra hard time for choosing a Korean restaurant in Mexico. What's worse is that I have no idea if this place will actually be good or not. If it's the latter, I know I won't hear the end of it for the remainder of the trip. The teenage girl who seats us is noisily chewing bubble gum and doesn't bother to spit it out. She has thick, winged eyeliner and stomps as she leads us up the stairs. I decide that it's best

to get everyone drunk before we try this food, so I order two bottles of Soju. Frida and Pa are hesitant to try it but are easily persuaded once they figure out that it is, indeed, alcohol.

Before we left for our trip, we spent a night in Dallas at the house of my husband's aunt and uncle. Flying out from the Dallas airport is infinitely cheaper than flying from the Little Rock airport, but getting up early enough to drive from Little Rock to Dallas to make our flight sounded less than fun, and thus, we were welcomed into their home. My husband's uncle, Ricardo, joked about not eating too much food in Mexico because it isn't treated with the same chemicals that food in America is and it is easy to get sick if you overindulge. We laughed and listened only partially. Later, when both me and my husband and then my mother-in-law fight back a stomach bug from hell, we would mark this night at the Korean restaurant as the catalyst.

In the moment, however, we happily stuff food that we cook ourselves on a grill in the middle of the table into our greedy faces, consequences be damned. We finish our plates with full and happy bellies. Outside, night has fallen, and the city has doubled in activity. Frida tells us that there is



a soccer game tonight between America and Cruz Azul, which is apparently a huge match. Everyone who passes by in a jersey seems to carry an electrical charge with them. The street in front of the restaurant is lit up by vendors and their booths or carts of food and apparel. We buy umbrellas from the nearest stand and wander along. Frida stops frequently to peer through windows of bars, watching bits of the game on the TVs inside.

"Should we buy a cigarette?" My husband asks. "A single cigarette? Is that possible?" He points to a display of cigarette cartons with a pricing list. A single cigarette is one peso. On the backs of the full packages, there are vivid cancer warnings showing the effects of the disease on people. Mutilated jaws and deformed lungs, black tar coating the inside of organs. The Soju in my belly turns in an uncomfortably warm way. Though I am never one to turn down a cigarette after drinking, the pictures do their job all too well.

"Maybe not." On the walk back to the Airbnb, my mother-in-law insists we go see the *Museo Nacional de la Revolución*, which means we have to squeeze back into the comically tiny vehicle and play a quick game of Tetris to back the car out of the parking lot.





The *Museo Nacional de la Revolución* is not actually a museum but rather a massive pavilion-like structure that looms over a district of bars and clubs mostly frequented by the locals. It is not exempt from the presence of vendors, and my husband gets caught in the snare of one selling a high-powered toy laser. My mother-in-law has found a photographer and is talking about taking family photos in Acapulco in the morning.

In the dim light emitting from the *Museo Nacional de la Revolución*, I can see that there are things written in graffiti on the concrete. I squat down to read them better. “¡Javier Adair Es Un Violador!” one reads; “¡Muerte Al Machismo!” another says. All across the hundred-odd square feet of the *Museo Nacional de la Revolución* are names of men being called a pedophile, a violator, a murderer. Others call for peace for women or present facts on femicide in Mexico.

When we first got to Mexico City, my mother-in-law wanted to visit the *Monumento a la Independencia*, known to everyone as El Ángel —a sky-high spire-type sculpture topped with an angel made of bronze and covered in twenty-four caret gold, whose hand is holding out a laurel crown.. We were disappointed to find that it was blocked off by barriers because of a protest that had happened days before we had arrived. Thousands of Mexican women had flooded the streets with signs, calling for the protection of their mothers, sisters, and daughters.

Now, at the Museo, leaning over these declarations sprayed in black paint on the concrete, I begin to imagine the throngs of angry women around me. I can see clearly the bandanas tied around their faces; I can hear the sharp hissing of the spray paint cans in their fingers. The plaza seems to be filled with shouting and chanting and even a little crying. In a day’s time, while we are still in Mexico, the first female president of Mexico will be elected. The female population will breathe a sigh of relief, finally seeing a light at the end of the tunnel. But today, standing among the ghosts of rebellion, I find my eyes filled with tears. I run a hand over the names of victims written hastily in a list form. The ages next to their names are horrifyingly low. My mother-in-law finds me in this same place and shares a moment of silence with me.

Years before this trip, she told me a story that her mother had told her from her birthplace of Durango, Mexico. Her mother had a sister who was seeing several men in the village. Somehow, they’d all found out they were seeing the same woman, probably due to the size of their village. One night on her way home, she was cornered by four of them in an alley. They took turns raping her before beating her to death. She bled out on the orange dust, alone and battered.

The story was told as fact, without emotion or personal attachment. I remember thinking I could feel every blow dealt to her body, every bruised spot

where greedy hands had touched. I don’t know her name, but in my head, I add her to the list of victims on the concrete. Between the buildings to the left of us, the moonlight catches *El Ángel*, who winks down at me.

For a brief moment, the laurel crown in her upturned hand is turned into a can of spray paint.



Riley Hope was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, and has lived in the state her whole life. She attended the University of Central Arkansas, where she earned an undergraduate degree in Creative Writing and a minor in Spanish. After graduating, she lived and worked in Monticello, Arkansas, with her loving husband. In 2022, they moved to North Little Rock, where they now live with their two dogs and two cats. Fast forward to December 2025, Riley received her graduate degree in Professional and Technical Writing from the University of Arkansas Little Rock and she now interns for Braddock Avenue Books.

Riley has been writing for as long as she can remember. For birthdays and Christmas, all she would ask for were empty notebooks to fill with stories. She has been published once before in UCA’s literary magazine, *The Vortex*. She hopes to continue writing and one day publish a book.

