

## Culture Clash

It was raining. John slogged down the red clay road to his new home. The road cut through fields of green rice. Everything he heard was filtered through the splash of constantly running water of the irrigation ditches that bordered each road, each field. Creeks hid just below the grain, snaking through the crops; giving and taking and always moving. Just above the fields were the foothills of the Cordilleras that looked so serene from here but surely were saturated with the same splashing, trickling and gurgling.

The foothills were where the Country Director told him he would find his “site,” Ochenta Casitas de Villa Altagracia. It was a small shack town of a long-defunct sugar plantation. The Director informed him that the bateye had great potential for a development worker. A limited diet, no plumbing and a fanaticism for alcohol and voodoo remedies meant chronic poor health. He’d be plenty busy.

He was to meet Sue, a young teacher working as a Peace Corps volunteer. It was she who solicited a doctor from the development agency. All the Country Director told him was that she taught at a small school and she was very highly recommended by the embassy.

“Probably a tie-dyed-deadhead,” John wrote in his journal about her. “I hope she isn’t a vegetarian. I need more than rice and beans.”

John slipped down the last slope before the entrance to the village. The torrents had eroded any coarse material on the roads that could provide traction. The walk was swampy. His boots filled with mud. Before he entered the village he adjusted his Brewster cap. At six foot he

looked like a whip under the poncho, two sticks of Levis jutting into the duck boots his uncle bought him for autumn Wisconsin hunting. Under both arms he carried two bulging backpacks filled with the other-world possessions he thought might help him through the adventure- a portable CD player and five of his favorite discs: Elton John's Greatest Hits, Jethro Tulle Best Of, a Doobie Brothers compilation, a "Tribute to the Eighties", and something from Lynyrd Skynyrd; a comb, a Swiss army knife, a diary with one unfinished entry, pictures of his late dog, a bottle of Tinactin ointment, blank postcards of Caribbean scenery he had not witnessed yet with his own eyes, a deck of cards and an assortment of candies he thought he'd use to befriend folks in case his personality didn't make it through his painfully elementary Spanish. The rest of his bags contained just enough clothing to last a week between washings unless he stained his underpants. He'd wondered if they could send underwear by way of diplomatic mail.

He entered the village through a stand of trees. The houses were arranged in four rows, fifteen houses a row except the last one, which stood out like a hockey player's grin - eleven palm board shacks with gaps throughout. John feared he was in the wrong place.

As John went over the math and possible translation errors, a little brown boy with a belly the size of one of those Buddhas you rub for good luck came up from behind one of the trees and waited for John to see him. He was slick with rain and naked. The boy felt his way over to the stranger.

John scratched his head and looked about. Had he confused the name of the site, it being in Spanish and all? He went to look down at the condition of his boots when he noticed the child with a start.

"Hey! Where'd you come from?!"

In answer, the boy tugged at John's poncho and pulled him in the direction of the village. As he stumbled behind the little brown boy, John felt a nausea from the bug he contracted during training mixed with churning anxiety. His decision to leave a perfectly good apartment, car and girlfriend, amongst other things, to live in this God-forsaken mud hole fed his doubts. All provoked by the fact that he had flunked the state boards and now would rather run to the watery end of the world then to deal with a more responsible next step, like gainful employment or a committed adult relationship.

Looking into the darkness of the doorways for signs of life, he saw eyes floating within and nothing else. He smelled wood burning and rot. The boy was singing a song as he pulled the gangly gringo to the shack at the end of the first row, dragging his hand along the palm board planks of the cottages.

The house looked a lot like the tool shed behind his grandpa's place. It had one window without a pane and a door that didn't fit the jam. The whole structure sat on a cement slab that in places was lower than the surrounding mud.

The door was ajar and the little boy kicked it open. John stepped into the house and blinked his eyes. Colors bled into the darkness and were illuminated as his pupils adjusted. His mind somersaulted as he saw what the house sheltered. Scuba gear was piled next to a futon. A stereo/CD player sat atop a guitar case. Pictures of white people lined the cement ledges where the cinder block floor met the palm board walls. A small collection of hacky sacks surrounded a beautiful woven basket he was sure could never be found in any market in this country. Care packages from home, no doubt.

The boy released John's hand and went behind a sheet hanging a doorway separating the two rooms of the house. He heard the boy and a woman talking in Spanish. The sheet rustled and then revealed a young blonde woman in a t-shirt, a long cotton skirt and Birkenstocks.

"Hi!" She greeted him with a large-gummed smile, leading the boy into the room by hand.

"You're a bit dressed for this weather aren't you?" she said. Her top, he noticed, wasn't tie-dyed but had written across it, "Atheism Doesn't Start Wars"

"Are you Sue?"

"No, Sue's the boy. Yea, I'm Sue. They sent me a bright one."

John faked a grin.

"Come and set your stuff down" she laughed.

John wasn't charmed by the cheery smart-alec. It was bad enough the weather sucked and nobody ate regularly, but he was going to need some real patience to deal with this lady.

He sat his bags on the cement floor.

"I need to sit down".

"Oh, sure. You still got Gringo feet. Sit here." She pointed to a small chair, about the size of those chairs you see for children that mimic adult furniture. It had a woven seat and a wooden frame that John was surprised to feel was sturdier than it looked. He sat down and immediately rocked back onto the two back legs. The aching fatigue in his lower back melted away as the stress of his weight shifted.

A bit more relaxed, he could begin to collect himself.

"So," he began, "does Peace Corps beat a real job?"

“I don’t know. Does a med degree bought by Daddy from a banana republic beat a real med degree?”

“What do you know about my degree?”

“I know everything about your degree. I hired you.”

“You don’t dress like any boss I’ve ever had before.”

Sue handed him a small cup of coffee she prepared using a coat hanger and a nylon sock. He accepted it warily. Why serve things in such small containers? Hardly worth the effort.

He sipped the coffee and found it too sweet. He drank it all anyway. Didn’t want to get her started on gringo coffee habits.

“Well, boss, what are you going to have me do here?”

“I’m not your boss, I just asked for a doctor and they sent you.”

“What’s wrong? Catch a parasite?”

“Not me, College Boy, look around you. This isn’t like that place in the Ukraine where they eat yogurt all freaking day and live longer than cockroaches.”

She sat in a chair opposite John, her welcoming duties over now, and wrapped her arms loosely around the little brown boy.

“What do they need? I hope they don’t expect a surgeon...”

“No. They need a general practitioner. Mostly for the babies. We’re losing a lot. Five newborns have died in the last month in this village alone.”

“Parasites?”

“No, dehydration. I hope you read more than the chapter on parasites.”

“Don’t Peace Corps volunteers teach hydration? It’s easy, you know.”

“Yeah, I know, but I’m only one person. I’m also a woman person, which in this culture doesn’t count as a whole person. Teaching takes up a whole lot of my time, too. They need someone they see as a doctor, someone they can believe in. You’ll have to do.”

“Honored.”

A light breeze lifted the pillow case window shades ever so slightly. A tease of relief from the heat.

“What’s with the eighty casitas?” John asked to fill the awkward pause.

“What?”

“The *Ochenta Casitas*. There are only fifty-six. I thought I was in the wrong place.

“Oh. The sugar company had twenty-four of the shacks taken down to fuel their boiler one year as an austerity measure.”

“Ah.”

The boy twirled little ringlets at the bottom of Sue’s dress. He rocked to and fro between her legs while Sue sat in front of the big gringo.

“Who’s the boy?”

“Oh, this is Macho, my buddy. He lives in the house next door. I’m his Godmother.”

“He hasn’t looked at me in the eye, yet. Local custom?”

“He’s blind. Born that way. He gets around better than most of us.”

She’s freaking family here. In my neighborhood you had to have a generation behind you before you were invited to cocktails, John thought.

“You’ve gotten pretty close to these folks, heh?”

“Yeah, this is, like, my second home, you know?”

“But it’s, like, only your second month here, if I got my information correct.”

“Development workers and missionaries don’t get it. We come here and live, eat and sleep with these people. We live in their culture.”

“Sure you do.” John said while fingering the keys on the laptop sitting next to the futon.

“You’re really roughing it. Where’s the Jacuzzi?”

“O.K., Doc. Let’s go over the project proposal. We’re supposed to be at the clinic first thing in the morning.”

The chat morphed into a professional conversation, peppered with words like, “constituency”, “variables”, and “diagnostics.” Sue and John focused on the reports spread on their laps, while jotting notes, exchanging comments, calculating, planning, and measuring.

The little brown boy left Sue and wandered toward the doorway. In spite of the clouds, the gray afternoon glow cast a gleam of weak light upon the cement floor. The boy sat his naked bottom at the foot of the door and let his legs dangle over the house’s foundation. He kicked his feet aimlessly above the mud as he gazed blankly into the drizzle.

Down the road two women haggled over a man. A boy no older than sixteen was copulating with the little brown boy’s sister behind the latrines as the old sergeant ran through the rice field chasing his perpetually runaway pig. Under the shelter of a mango tree, a handful of women beat the week’s wash on the rocks along the canal. And the rain kept falling. The little brown boy knew, because he heard it tapping on the roof and felt it slap the tops of his feet.

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