Letters From Guatemala

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Carmen, a physical therapy student, is the closest to a doctor in Santa Tomas, so she is called upon quite often. The priest arrived for the anointing of the sick. This is when the reality of what was happening really started to set in. Afterwards, I left the house with my own sister Carmen and immediately led to the bedroom. Jennifer was lying in the center of the bed with the rest of her family gathered around. She is the cutest little baby, only 6 months old, dressed up in an expensive white and pink dress that I'm sure the family couldn't really afford. Jennifer was dying. Jenny's young parents sat next to her while Carmen did everything in her power to make the baby's last few hours on earth as comfortable as possible. Carmen, a physical therapy student, is the closest thing to a doctor in Santa Tomas, so she is called upon quite often. The priest arrived for the anointing of the sick. This is when the reality of what was happening really started to set in on me.

Afterwards, I left the house with my family to go to Sunday evening mass. It was quick for obvious reasons, and afterwards we rushed back to Jennifer's house. I was invited into the room again. What I saw was very disturbing, so I turned and left right away, not to return even when they asked me to.

Why wasn't Jenny at a hospital? Why can't Carmen do anything? Why can't the Peace Corps do anything? Why Jennifer?

For the next three hours I sat in the other room thinking about what was happening and came to some conclusions. We, all of us in these nice developed rich countries, are no different than Jennifer and the rest of the people down here in Guatemala. It doesn't matter if your parents, or your parents' parents or whoever it was that migrated to the US just to give their family a better life, YOUR SPIRIT could have just as easily been born in Guatemala. It doesn't matter if you work hard to provide the best life for your family, these people work hard too, and their kids are still born in poverty. It doesn't matter if you have extremely strong faith and pray to God everyday to take care of your family, these people have faith too.

There is no difference between these people and us. Not a damn bit of difference. We were just lucky enough to be born in a developed country. Just by the luck-of-the-draw. That's it. So please don't feel that the life of Jennifer is any different than the life of your own sister, brother, daughter or son, because the loud cries I heard coming from the bedroom at 10 o'clock last Sunday night could have just as easily been YOUR parents mourning YOUR death.

Do you feel lucky? I do.

10/27/02 (Two weeks prior)

I was riding my bike home, Sunday afternoon, from my site mate's house (Laura). We are building a patio at her house and I was doing some landscaping to stabilize the soil on a slope in her backyard by planting some ornamental cactus, Ixote (a native palm looking shrub) and some of my favorite banana trees. I was just past the center of town when I saw a pickup sitting in the road with a bunch of people gathered around it. I thought to myself, someone was selling bread or something for a good price, so I'd better get up there and take advantage of this. I leaned into my Giant 21-speed mountain bike, and picked up a bit of speed. I got closer and realized that these people were not rushing around buying good from the back of the truck, they were just standing around with blank expressions on their faces. I got a bit closer and then I saw, propped up in the back of the truck, a statue much like the ones from the church in Esquipolus. Then without notice, my legs seized, my bike stopped, and I nearly fell off because I forgot to put my feet down.

What I thought was a morbid statue from the church was actually
a man propped up in the back of the truck with a huge gaping wound across his face and head. (I'll just go and tell you right now this man lived, which seems to me to be miracle.) This campesino had gotten himself into an argument with another man from his village. The argument escalated into a machete fight, which is not an uncommon way of setting problems in the aldeas.

Now I have seen a few things in my short 24 years but I have NEVER seen anything like that before. (I'm trying to decide if I should go into detail. No, better not.) I really had no idea just how much blood was in the human body.

The problem with this whole scene was that nothing was being done for this poor guy. The people were just standing around, not in a hurry or anything. No pressure had been applied to the wound (this thing was huge) so it had just bled until the blood finally coagulated. I started barking at these people to get to the hospital NOW! Olopa is a bumpy, dusty, two-hour drive from the nearest hospital and if this dude was going to have any chance, they needed to get going. (I actually thought the guy might have been dead, and that was why everyone was just standing around, but I still wanted them to get him to the hospital and out of the street. There were lots of kids taking this whole scene in.) I think the gringo yelling at them, broke the trance, and the truck started slowly down the road. The only clue I had that this man was still alive was that his head was bouncing around as the truck went over the rocks and bumps in the road. This meant to me that rigormortis had not set in yet.

I went home and decided not to have pasta for supper like I had planned. The next morning I was riding my bike through town on my way out to the aldeas when I ran into Laura. We talked for a few minutes then I remembered last night. I said, "You will NEVER believe what I say last night!"

She replied "Oh no, you didn't see a snake did you!?"

Life in Guatemala!

January 31, 2003

My help was needed translating a set of instructions for a moisture meter machine used to test the moisture content (M.C.) of dried coffee beans. To produce the highest quality coffee, the beans must be dried to 6-8% M.C. before roasting. So I took off down the mountains on the bike in the rain in search of some chapinño (guy) in a white truck who I've never met. Not too worried about the mud flying everywhere, because the lady that washes my clothes is a miracle worker. Maytag's got nothing in Doña Sara. Found my chapinño, Luis, on the side of the road buying coffee from some campasinos (a campasino is basically a farmer however the term is used for anyone that doesn't live in a large town). This is an event I've seen many of times but this time something was different. I was watching little kids 10 to 12 years old, lugging costals (large nylon gunnysacks, weighing 100lbs when full of coffee berries) up a steep muddy embankment. At the top of the embankment there where two men doing business, Luis and the owner of the coffee. I recognized two of the kids right away, my neighbor Ilda, 10 and Ismeralda, 11. They each carried a half costal up the hill and dropped them by the truck. That would be 50 lbs of coffee these 60 lbs gals just carried for maybe 1/4 of a mile in the mud and muck, through ditches and streams, and finally up a steep slippery embankment to the roadside. I thought to myself, these scrawny little girls just did something most healthy grown men in the states couldn't do even if there lives depended on it. Then I thought, well at least they should make some decent and much needed money for the hard work they just did. By the way, it takes the average campasino 7 hours, to pick two 5-gallon pales of coffee berries. Each 5-gallon pale weights 25 lbs, so the neighbor girls just carried in the 2 pales of coffee (50 lbs) which they spent all day picking.

So now lets see what these girls are going to make for their gut-wrenching, backbreaking work. Luis measures out the coffee; yep it's 4 pales exactly. He reaches in his pocket and pulls out a wad of cash and counts out 76 Quetzales (19 Q per pale) and hands it to the man who owns the coffee picked by the kids. He then turns to the girls and hands them 28 Quetzales, 14 Q, for each of them. "Fourteen Quetzales!!? I said out loud to the men. "That's all they get, fourteen lousy Quetzales!!" That's less then 2 dollars for a full day's work. Most of us make more then 2 dollars in the 5 minutes it takes to walk to the lounge and grab a cup of coffee.

Something's not right here.

I'm red in the face at this point. Not only did these kids get paid squat for picking coffee all day, I just realized it's a school day and these kids ditched class for 2 bucks. Then just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, of course it does. I hear the sounds of a child struggling and grunting as he climbs the last stretch up the embankment to the roadside. The costal on his back is so full of coffee I can't even see the child under it, just a pair of little rubber boots slipping and sliding in the mud. He lets the costal fall from his back with one final grunt, and collapses on top of it with exhaustion. I shot over to the boy, put my hand on his tiny
shoulder and turned him over. Without warning, I was knocked back with surprise. It was Cruz! (Cross in English) a 12-year-old Chorti Indian boy that lives in the hills somewhere close to my house. He comes around every once in awhile to hang out, listen to music and work in the garden. I pay him with candy, lunch, or fresh vegetables when things are ready. His Spanish isn’t the best, (not that I can talk) because they speak Chorti in his house and he has never been to school. I asked him one day if he would write his name for me on a piece of paper. He dropped his head and he mumbled “I don’t know how.” I remember that moment so vividly.

Now here’s Cruz, drenched in sweat, breathing wildly, and with a smile on his face. He was smiling as I helped him up to his feet. He said, “look at the costal I just carried, it’s full!” I grabbed a hold of the costal and gave it a good tug. It didn’t budge and Cruz chuckled. I’ve just been shown up by a 12-year-old boy who’s small for his age probably due to a lack of protein in his diet. Now I get into it, bend down, use the legs and give it everything I’ve got. Yes, the thing did come off the ground but not without enough visible straining in my face that all the kids got a good laugh at the gringo. This was a full costal, 100 lbs and change. I asked Cruz why he was carrying 4 pales of coffee when I knew he only picked 2. He said, “there was a little girl that couldn’t carry the berries in, so for a fee of 1 Q. per pale, I hauled these 2 pales in for her.” So Cruz, the little opportunist. I love it, made and additional .24 US cents for carrying the extra 50 lbs of coffee to the roadside. The costal Cruz carried probably weighted 25 lbs more than his own body weight. This explains why 80% of all campasinos have hernias (men and women).

So who thinks they’re tough?

-Matt