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Thomas Walz

THE LITTLEST GUEST UNINVITED

He stood staring at our busy table. His eyes barely reached to where he could see across. How long had he been there? I had no idea. I had been too engrossed in the pleasures of our meal. It was only when I felt his surveillance that I looked in his direction. Under his arm was a small bundle of newspapers. He obviously belonged to that army of infant peddlars that filled the streets of this city.

We were in Tegucigalpa, one of many unknown capital cities in the Third World. Teguc (ta' goose) as it is called is the capital of "Spanish" Honduras, at the time, 1968, still distinguished from "British" Honduras. The meal to which our uninvited guest bore witness was our farewell dinner. Seven college students and I as their faculty leader were about to complete a three week seminar. The meal was a reward we granted ourselves after a period of perceived privation.

We had roughed it some during our brief sojourn. We had traveled unpaved roads in worn out bluebird school buses, used the bush for bodily needs and ate more refried beans than we would have preferred. But our tough times were not nearly as severe as those with which the average Honduran must cope for a lifetime. Our meal was simply another taken for granted privilege of the haves in the world, something most of us were still learning.

As the first director of the Peace Corps in Honduras, but then a college professor, leading the third world seminar was a way I had found to revisit Honduras. During my two year tenure in the Peace Corps, I had fallen madly in love with the place for reasons too complicated to explain here. Had my family situation permitted, I was prepared to spend the rest of my life there.

The place chosen for our dinner was a Chinese restaurant located directly across from our pension. Over the front door was a hand painted sign that bore the unimaginative name, "Cafe China," and its ambience was classic third world. Napkins were cut into quarters, no two pieces of silverware matched, and a noisy ceiling fan moved stale air in circles. In their thirty years of non-acculturation to Honduras, however, the owners had preserved their homeland tastes and skills. My group was delighted with the choice of a place

where a Buddha was forced to share space with a statue of Our Lady of Suyapa. His belly was used to prop up pictures of the owners' children.

The "China" boasted no public health certificate. Such regulations had not yet been invented in that part of world. Unimpeded by regulation it was, nonetheless, relatively clean. Like all Honduran small businesses, the owner sat impassively behind the cash register, while his mestizo employees or children did the work. Apparently he had not followed the pattern of child labor, because no working children were evident. There was a single aging mestiza employee who did the waitressing, while the owner's wife cooked and washed dishes.

The child beside us appeared to be nothing more than your everyday unwashed, underfed newsboy. His uncut, uncombed hair had grown to shoulder length—a baby hippie, who couldn't afford a ring in his ear. His hair might have been even longer, but in its matted condition it was hard to tell. At his age, he could have passed for a girl, but newsgirls were a rarity in the third world.

I was drawn to his eyes. Big, saucer like, they were enlarged like an owl's for night vision. Perhaps his life on the street, where I guessed he slept, required such acuity. Unlike most children, his eyes were neither moist nor alive. They were intense, but fatigued, the eyes of a geriatric child.

He was less than four feet tall, judging by the height of our table. I guessed him to be about six or seven. He could have stepped from a Dickens novel, a tiny Oliver with a banana republic twist. One would assume him to be tough and street wise, but my instincts didn't confirm it. Along with the tiredness in his eyes was the look of naiveté of the very young. He presented himself like a puppy, but a broken puppy.

He wore a tattered red and black cotton shirt, many sizes too big and deeply faded, more by exposure to the sun than from frequent washings. The sleeves of his shirt fell six inches beyond arm length. His tiny hands were evident only because he had used rubber binders to pull the surplus sleeve high enough to free them for use. His frayed khaki shorts, contrarily, were extremely tight fitting and probably had been with him since he could walk. He wore no undergarments to which his button-deprived fly bore witness. His feet were shoeless and dirty.

The child's skin was a potpourri of extremes which generally came out brown. He didn't look like he had recent acquaintance with a shower or tub,

but he had made an effort to clean himself up before entering The China. I could picture him scooping up water from puddles left by the afternoon rain. He would pat his face and other uncovered places down to his ankle, then dry himself with a copy of yesterday's newspaper. Dark streaks from this effort would be due, not to carelessness, but to the residue of newsprint. He was too young and too poor to know that newspapers in Honduras were for wiping your behind, not for drying your body.

Meanwhile my group had eaten their fill, washed it down with ample supply of El Indio, the local 12% beer, and were prepared to process the trip and the seminar. "Please tell me what part of the seminar did you like best and why?" I asked. Moments of silence followed as students looked to one another to see who would speak first. It was Rosa Anderson, the shiest person in our group who began. Rosa had a Mexican mother and a Swedish father, perfect Carmen Miranda skin, and a touch of insecurity. She was attractive, bright, and quiet, with quiet her most pronounced attribute.

"*Las Ruinas de Copan*," she whispered. Rosa had been the only one in the group fluent in Spanish, but she hadn't used it much because of her shyness. "Why Copan?" She was silent for a time, then spoke, "I am not sure, there are no words for it. It was the spiritual feeling I had about the place. You could almost reach out and touch the Mayan spirits. I felt some kind of connection with the special energy that seemed present there. Maybe I have a Mayan gene."

Others joined in, partly to support their shy colleague and partly to affirm how similarly they had experienced the ruins, its stellas and temples. Obviously the trip to Copan, which we had made in the back of a rusty pickup, had left a positive impression.

The students seemed to be fully engaged in the discussion. However, I was distracted. That damn kid, still standing there, was affecting my concentration. Before continuing the discussion, I turned to him and asked how much he wanted for one of his papers. "*Diez centavitos*," he replied in his child's voice. "How many papers do you have?" I asked. He counted them, struggling somewhat with the unaccustomed question. "*Siete* (seven)," he replied. "*Por favor*, I would like them all." I handed him an American dollar. He quickly gave the dollar back and said he wanted 70 centavos. "Would you accept a Lempira (100 centavos)," I inquired. Like an experienced street vendor, he replied "*si, patron*."

I gave him the lempira, he handed me the papers, and I distributed one to each of the students. Through all this exchange, I realized I was being both cute and patronizing. Then having paid the young man, I expected him to run for the door jumping for joy over his windfall. Yet he simply looked at me, put the money in his one pocket without holes, and returned to his post eyeing our table. "Is there anything wrong?" I asked. For some time he looked at me. Finally he replied, almost inaudibly, "Could I have what is left on your plates?"

Rosa picked him up, put him on her lap, and handed him her fork. Immediately he attacked what was left. As he finished her plate, Rosa moved him to the lap of the next student. Like a Vegas gambler, he understood he had the license to clean the table.

Thankfully the students sensed the need to let the child eat in peace. Then without my having to repeat my question, Jessica, the only black student in our group, spoke, "What meant most to me was the visit to the Garifuna village of San Juan de Tela. The Caribe girls were black like me, even blacker and taller. They should be the poster girls for a 'black is beautiful' campaign. I watched them when they danced. They were beyond graceful. Until then I had hated everything about Honduras."

Jessica would return from our trip to find her father near death. He died shortly thereafter, followed soon by her mother. This strong willed college junior was left with five younger brothers and sisters, whom she proceeded to care for in their family home. Following her degree in social work, a marriage, a child and a divorce, she became a med student at Harvard. Today she heads an inner city clinic in her hometown, with a daughter in medical school.

A third student, one of two males on the trip, spoke for the Isla de Bahia. This handsome anthropology major would one day become well known as an international correspondent. Then, he was just another young man driven with the intensity of the times. He credited his choice to how much he had learned from the archeological project we visited—the raising of a sunken Spanish galleon.

The Bay Islands, for the unfamiliar, is a network of three small islands about thirty miles off the north coast of Honduras in the Caribbean. Home to English buccaneers since the 17th century, the language of the island is predominately "pirate English," though most islanders are bilingual in Spanish. It is also an island with considerable Caribbean black and Garifuna influence. The governor of the islands at the time of our visit, was a Caribbean black.

He will be best remembered by our group for his comment that on the islands he had fathered over sixty children.

The final choice of our most educational “place” came from the other male student. Paco was a tall, loose limbed junior majoring in criminology and social work. He was emphatic that the visit to the prison in the capital city was the highlight of the seminar. This visit had taken place on the very first day of our trip. “You can’t imagine how shocked I was when they let us wander through the prison unescorted. It seemed unreal. I expected to be taken hostage any moment.” He stopped and reflected before continuing, “I couldn’t believe that they let family members visit daily and work with their prisoner relatives, even make love with them if they so desired.” He stuttered momentarily, then added, “and especially letting the mothers drop off their pre-school children so the fathers could take care of them while they were at work was mind blowing. It seems so civilized, so much less violent than American prisons.”

My own choice was the very first thing we had done after we arrived in Tegucigalpa. We had sat outside the public cemetery and watched families bear the tiny caskets for burial. If I remember correctly, there were at least ten caskets carried into the cemetery during the hour or so that we were there. I tried to explain that it wasn’t any morbid fascination with death that had led to my selection, just the realization of the fragility of life in the third world. “Each time I visited the cemetery,” I said, “I was reminded not just of the immense differences in material wealth and health that exist between the haves and have nots, but of how universal are the feelings about the loss of a child.”

On the edge then of losing it, I suggested that we all needed time to pack for tomorrow’s early departure. I reached over and took our little friend from the lap of the student on my right, joking that he and I would take care of the bill. Fortunately, the students departed quickly, perhaps sensing my growing distress.

I paid with the remainder of my lempiras, supplemented by a few dollars, and then could feel it coming. I rushed out the door believing I was about to vomit. But it wasn’t nausea. I sat on the curb and cried. The tiny newsboy had pinched the soft underbelly of my profession, its propensity for noble oblige. With the street somewhat empty and the students in the pension, I cried long and hard. A soft wind blew across my face. In the quiet of the hour, the night seemed to be crying along with me.

I'm not sure how long I sat there, with my head in my hands on the curb facing the hotel, with my back to restaurant. When I raised my head, guess who was sitting next to me, resting his small chin on his hands? Finally I had the sense to ask him his name and lift him from the category of faceless newsboys in which I had placed him.

"Carlitos," he responded. "Is something wrong, are you sick?"

"No," I answered, "I'm just feeling stupid. I want to apologize for not noticing your hunger and for teasing you."

"That's ok," he replied, "I had a good supper. Those people were nice to let me have what they didn't want."

Without moving from the sidewalk, we talked on. I asked many personal questions. No, he didn't go to school; yes, he had a home and a mother; no, he didn't sleep there much. Why? Too many babies crying all the time. No, she wasn't worried about him. She had too many worries herself. No, he didn't have a dad, but his mother had a boyfriend. Yes, he slept in the street. Would I like to see where? Yes, I said I would.

We had only to walk about fifty feet through the alley that separated a theater from The China to find his home. It consisted of a large weathered cardboard box resting on an abandoned chassis of a truck. Yes, he had been sleeping there for sometime; no, he didn't know how long; yes, he had been hungry tonight because he hadn't eaten anything all day; no, he did not eat more than once a day. He didn't usually eat until he had sold enough papers to buy "his tortilla." Sometimes the Chinese proprietor gave him leftovers which was why he felt he could ask us for what we had left on our plates.

It was difficult to say goodbye to Carlitos. Part of me wanted to crawl into that box with him, hold him tight and protect him from his predators. Yet I knew I would go back to my bed, with its sheets and pillow, get a few hours rest and return to an America of "Disneyland" becoming "Disney World" and "K-Mart's" giving way to Wal-to-Wal-Mart's."

So, dear Carlitos, I wish you well. Your probable destiny is not one I wish for the children of the world. What we left you with was a few crumbs and the sale of seven papers. To you it was a full stomach, at least for one night, and the curiosity of watching a grown man cry.

I even forgot to ask your last name.