

**IN THE HOUSE OF MAGIC AND SORROW**

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*Everyday life in Latin America proves that reality is full of the most extraordinary things.*

— Gabriel García Márquez



**D**OGS ON ROOFS. I NOTICED THEM THE FIRST TIME I visited my girlfriend in Chiquimula, a large town in the dry, eastern part of Guatemala: Small black dogs, beady-eyed and yappy. Collies with lion-like manes. German shepherds with enormous tails. They peered over the roof edges, growling, barking, or silent and majestic against the blue sky. They were guarding the houses, I supposed, or were there as *adornos*, symbols of their owners' virility and wealth. They seemed like griffins, descended from a dimming sky to warn, chastise, haunt.

I'd read Gabriel García Márquez and other Latin American authors before coming to Guatemala as a Peace Corps volunteer in November of 1990. But until I saw those dogs on rooftops, I'd thought "magical realism" was a mere literary invention, a fresh conceit to use when writing fiction. I hadn't known how close it was to the truth.

Later, I was sitting on a bus in Cobán when a man with gold stars on his front teeth climbed on and held up a tube of toothpaste. The stars, I realized, were fillings. He spoke of the toothpaste's salutary effects: how its ingredients came from distant places and were the best that nature's forests and science's laboratories had to offer; how it made your teeth as white as clouds. He spoke like a preacher, with reverence and conviction. He was, I thought, giving a fabulous pitch. But who would buy toothpaste from a man with four fillings in his front teeth? It would be like buying diet pills from a fat man.

The bus driver turned the key in the ignition. The engine grumbled and kicked on loudly. The gold-toothed man quickly ended his speech: "Who would like a tube of this magnificent toothpaste?"

Hands shot up. He made a dozen quick sales and, grinning, jumped off the moving bus.

Another afternoon I was walking through cornfields after having helped to build a silo in Pambach, a village high in the mountains. Looking for the road back to town, I asked directions of two *indígena* girls who couldn't have been older than seven. They were beautiful in their white blouses and dark blue skirts. I inquired in Spanish, but they replied in Pokomchí, the local language, which I didn't know. It was growing dark, and I was worried I wouldn't find my way back before nightfall. I imagined spending the night in a cornfield. Panic began to grow in me.

The girls pointed down a path. Grateful, I followed it for a hundred yards or so, but the path forked. I cursed. My panic was returning. Then I heard giggles behind me. I turned and saw the girls. They pointed left. I took the left path. After another hundred yards, I again reached a fork. Again I heard giggles and saw the girls, who pointed to the right. Twice more I reached forks in the path, and twice more they were behind me, giggling and pointing the way.

Finally I reached the road to town. I turned around to thank the girls, but they had vanished.

When García Márquez was a young boy, his grandmother would tell him stories about the ghosts who roamed the house they lived in. Her tales both fascinated and terrified him. "That was our relationship," he said, "a kind of invisible thread keeping us both in touch with the world of the supernatural."



**S**OON AFTER I CAME TO GUATEMALA, I BEGAN TO VIEW myself, romantically, as a guest in a house of magic and sorrow. I was welcomed in Santa Cruz Verapaz, the town of four thousand where I lived, but I knew my stay was limited and that I would never feel entirely at home there. Rather than rue my foreignness, I appreciated the liberty it offered me. As a privileged visitor, I saw up close the joy and, more often, the pain my friends and neighbors experienced. But I never had to acknowledge their joy and pain as my own. I'd worked as a journalist before joining the Peace Corps, and something about the role of disinterested reporter still appealed to me.

I'd been in Santa Cruz Verapaz for several months, but I hadn't made many friends in town. Hector, an agronomist I worked with on nearby farms, might have become a friend, but he was suspicious about my true mission in his country and half certain I was a CIA agent.

I'd tried to befriend the children next door, but they seemed wary of me. There were eleven of them, from three families. In the mornings, as I stepped outside to begin my workday, at least two children would be stationed at the pair of large windows in the front room of their house, staring at me with wide eyes.

One day when I was leaving to teach English at the junior high, I found nine-year-old Elvira sitting at the bottom of my steps. Elvira was thinner than her sisters, with a narrow face and long, dark hair. She wanted to know what time it was. When I told her, she asked to see my watch. "Pretty," she said before fleeing back to her house.

My mother had sent me a dozen children's books in Spanish — including *Where the Wild Things Are* and *The Cat in the Hat* — in part to share with children, and in part to help me learn the language. The next time I saw Elvira on my stoop, I brought her a book. "Borrow it," I said.

When I returned home from teaching that afternoon, Elvira was on my stoop again, and the other children were leaning out of the windows, their faces stacked like the ones on totem poles. She handed me the book I'd given her earlier. "Do you have others?" she asked.

I invited her into my house while I went to get the books. When I stepped out of my bedroom, Elvira was standing in the courtyard, touching a rose on a bush growing against the wall. Seeing me, she drew back her hand and prepared to run. But I smiled, and this seemed to reassure her. I put three books in her arms.

"Thank you," she said. Before sprinting out of my house, she added, "Your rose is very beautiful."

One afternoon, I was sitting in my dining room with Pablo, one of my students, when I heard my toilet explode. I ran to the bathroom as four neighbor children exited, screaming. Water was shooting from the toilet tank and cascading into my bedroom. I grabbed the flexible pipe the children had pulled loose and tried to reattach it. Water raced up my arm and sprayed my face. Pablo offered vague advice with a broad grin. Elvira, the oldest child on the scene, said, "It's Elda's fault."

I asked Pablo to fetch Freddy, the handyman who lived up the street, and after Freddy had repaired the toilet, I gathered the three children who remained: Elda, the one Elvira said had done the damage, had gone home. I scolded them for fooling around in the bathroom. "A toilet," I said, "is not a toy." The three listened with heads bowed. When I dismissed them, Elvira stayed.

"Elda wanted to get rid of her *caca*," she said.

"Of course," I said, "but you don't flush a toilet by pulling off the top and —" I stopped. "Wait a minute. Do you know how to use a toilet?"

I told Elvira to bring over her siblings and cousins, so I could show them how the toilet worked. Elvira returned with everyone save Elda, who'd been traumatized by the exploding water.

The children crowded into the bathroom, some squeezing into the shower stall, and watched as I explained: "When you finish, use this —" I pointed to the flush lever — "to say adios to your *caca*." The children laughed and took turns flushing the toilet, marveling at how the water curled around the bowl.

Elda didn't come to my house for several days, but when she did, Elvira took her to the bathroom and gave her a flushing lesson. Standing outside the door, I heard Elda's cry of delight at the swirling water.



**DON AUGUSTO HAD A BROAD, POCKMARKED FACE AND A small nose.** He might have been ugly if it hadn't been for his smile, which was large and generous. He always smiled when he saw me, and he always greeted me by name.

I worked with Don Augusto on the health committee at the local Centro de Salud, the health center. The committee met every Monday night, and he would come with his wife, Doña Beatriz, and sit in the back of the room and say nothing until it came time to volunteer for some task. Then Don Augusto was always the first to raise his hand. His willingness to volunteer became a source of good-natured humor: when his hand shot up, everyone laughed.

During the committee's annual fundraising drive, Don Augusto and his wife collected more money for the health center than any other committee pair, including me and the visiting social worker, who were assigned to petition a wealthy ex-Mormon who operated a dairy farm nearby. Don Augusto managed to outraise us all simply because of his persistence. Whereas we were content to let people give whatever they wanted, Don Augusto, after receiving a donation, would smile his generous smile and say, "The center is for you; could you

give a little more?"

At the next meeting, after counting all the money, we debated what to do with it. Ana Dora said we should paint the center. It hadn't had a paint job in four or five years. The building itself, she said, needed to project a sense of health in order for people to believe they might become healthy inside it.

For the first time since I'd been a member of the committee, Don Augusto spoke. He said we should use the money to buy new medical equipment, because most of what the center had was outdated or broken. After he'd raised so much money, I thought Don Augusto's suggestion would carry some weight, but only his wife and I voted with him to buy medical equipment.

Despite his defeat, Don Augusto volunteered to paint the center. On my bike rides in the morning, I would see him standing on a ladder, brushing on bright yellow paint. When I saw the finished product, I understood Ana Dora's argument. It did look like a place where people would want to come when they were ill.

A month or two after the building had been painted, Don Augusto began vomiting. He told his wife that it was nothing, probably something he ate. But his vomiting persisted, and half an hour before dawn, he fainted. He was barely conscious when Doña Beatriz and her neighbors rushed him to the Centro de Salud, where they learned that Santa Cruz was experiencing an outbreak of cholera.

The two doctors who were doing their internship in Santa Cruz had gone on an excursion to El Salto, a village five hours south of town, and weren't expected back until the next day. The nurse put Don Augusto to bed and tried to make him drink fluids. There was nothing else she could do; the center had no intravenous equipment. Don Augusto died before sundown.



*(end of excerpt)*