



MY ARRIVAL 2

THE FAVOR 6

BAD ADVICE AND DRIED FISH SOUP12

THE DOPE AND THE ROPE16

THE BOY WHO FELL FROM HEAVEN20

EERIE COINCIDENCES23

PISTOL PACKIN’ GUARDIAN ANGEL.....27

THE JUDA IN THE TREE33

THE CLINIC35

BEYOND THE MOUNTAIN39

AFTERWORD.....43

MY ARRIVAL

“Next!”

The word cracked through the terminal like a rifle shot. My head throbbed, thoughts spinning in a loop: Go or stay? Stay or go? The guard’s voice rose again, sharper this time, pulling me toward a decision I wasn’t ready to make.

.***

I was rather naive when I first arrived in Honduras. Looking back, perhaps it was my naivety that saved me. I didn’t know much about the country when the invitation came; in fact, I didn’t even know where it was. I had to look it up in the Encyclopedia. All I knew was that it was an opportunity to get out of the United States and breathe some different air. I was on the run — not from anything illegal, but from a life that had become meaningless.

It would be easy to blame Vietnam, or any one of the many other traumatic experiences I had gone through in the twelve years that followed. It was more than PTSD. It was the realization that I no longer fit into American society.

I had sent my resume to several organizations outside the United States, but a lack of formal education and foreign-language skills automatically disqualified me. Then a call from a Baptist minister in Mississippi changed everything. He was organizing a medical mission trip to Honduras, but the doctor scheduled to distribute medicine had backed out at the last minute. If he couldn't find someone with medical training to replace him within two weeks, the trip would be canceled. I mentioned I was only a nurse, not a doctor, but he assured me it wouldn't be a problem because the team would visit an orphanage in the mountains. The only requirements were a passport and \$500 for airfare and expenses for the six-day trip. I accepted immediately, without a second thought.

The day after receiving the call, I went to the post office to apply for a passport. I didn't want to take any chances, so I paid the extra money for fast service. That cut into my available cash, and I wasn't sure how I would raise the rest of the money. I had already sold almost everything I owned to pay off a credit card debt, and although I still had my Chevy van, something I swore I would never sell, I still owed \$800 on it. Reluctantly, I put a "FOR SALE" sign on it and parked it in the front yard. By the afternoon, it was sold for \$ 1,200.00, leaving me \$100 short of what I needed. A visit to my uncle Rich, who was suffering from ALS, provided the rest. When I told him about my plans, he handed me \$250 without hesitation.

My parents drove me to Mississippi at the agreed-upon time and left me in the care of the Baptist preacher and his wife, a couple who lived in entirely separate worlds but could put on a good show for their friends and congregants. Over the next twelve years, our lives would drift along like three independent balloons on separate strings: almost all the time together, but never touching.

On my first day with the Pastor in Tegucigalpa, before the group arrived, I learned a lot. Like many pastors I had met before, he seemed different when he was away from his followers and supporters. This worried me, but he explained that his main goal in Honduras was to find a village where a group of doctors could establish a permanent clinic. These doctors were funding his efforts, which gave me hope, knowing others were involved.

The remaining group members arrived at Toncontín Airport the next morning. The mountain orphanage director had arranged for the local village bus to pick us up. Although the bus was crowded, it was clear that the front seats were reserved for us. The journey took five hours, with only a 20-minute rest stop. During the trip, there was no interaction between the villagers and us.

I was disappointed with the bus ride, and my disappointment grew upon arriving at the orphanage, as it seemed they had made little preparation for our arrival. The mission director and his wife apologized for the condition of the rooms, explaining they had just returned from a six-month furlough and

hadn't had time to clean the house. The Pastor and the mission director excused themselves to the mission office while our team tidied the house. Afterward, we met the 20 orphans, who were housed in poorly constructed wooden and metal structures behind the parsonage. They were not allowed inside the director's home, and we were told that all interactions had to happen in their living area. I wanted to get to know them, but the language barrier made this difficult. The director provided few opportunities for communication outside his presence.

There was one child who was physically disabled — their “mascot” for fundraising purposes, as I came to understand it. The story was that he needed surgery in the United States, and donors were being asked to give toward it. I seriously doubted, however, that anyone ever intended to follow through with the surgery, regardless of how much money was raised.

I managed to go out several times with James, the young translator hired by the Pastor. Though an American citizen, his upbringing in Honduras due to his father's missionary work gave him a local perspective. We visited several families in the nearby community, and I treated some severely malnourished children along with others requiring medical care beyond what our limited supplies could provide. As this happened, I started to question the true purpose of organizing this trip. The orphanage, too, felt less like a refuge and more like a stage set for donors. I had come searching for purpose, but already I sensed that survival here would mean learning to see through masks.

Although I feel we didn't accomplish much during our time there, I had a very positive impression of the children and villagers. Soon enough, it was time to leave, and while waiting outside for the bus, we heard it approaching from downtown. The music was loud, and the passengers were singing along. All the front seats were taken, but the mission director boarded the bus and briefly talked with the driver. I saw money exchange hands. Shortly after, the driver told the first three rows of passengers to move to the back. As they hesitantly obeyed, I realized why the passengers on the way up had been so quiet and distant.

I was the last one to board the bus, and as I made my way down the aisle, I glanced toward the back and could almost feel the hostility radiating from the displaced passengers. Then I noticed something: near the very back, an older woman was sitting alone with a cage of chickens at her feet. Something about her stillness amid all the commotion made me keep walking. Instead of taking my reserved seat at the front, I went all the way back and inquired, as best I could without a shared language, if I could sit with her. She seemed unbothered by the idea, so I settled in beside her as the bus lurched forward and the music started up again.

It didn't play for long. The director stood up, leaned over to the driver, and handed him more cash. The music stopped abruptly, and for the next five hours, the bus rode in near silence — broken only by the voices of the mission team near the front, who talked freely among themselves in English, sharing their impressions of the country and its people with the easy candor of those who assume no one else can understand them. Some of what they said was less than generous, and I was ashamed to be associated with them.

I sat in the back with the older woman and her chickens, saying nothing. But my mind was anything but quiet. I had come to Honduras as part of a team, slotting neatly into a role someone else had written for me. Now, watching the countryside roll past the window, I understood I no longer wanted to play a role. I dreaded returning to the life I had left behind, yet with no money, no plan, and nowhere to sleep, I had no other choice. My head was still spinning when the bus pulled up in front of the airport departure gate. We said our goodbyes to the mission director and to James, and I took my place in the customs line, bag in hand, doing my best to look like a man who knew where he was going.

“Next!”

“Again, the question circled: stay or go. But this time, I heard my own answer—spoken aloud before I could stop myself: “James! Could I stay at your place for a few days?”

“Si, no problem, but you would have to sleep on the floor.”

“Great!” I shouted as I grabbed my bag and walked back through the terminal doors, away from the line, the flight, and everything I had been heading toward. The group stood watching me go, too astonished to say much of anything. I gave them a wave and kept walking.

I arrived in Honduras with \$93.00 in spending money for the six-day excursion. I ended up staying for 12 years.

THE FAVOR

My discovery of Yocón wouldn't have been possible without Paul, an American evangelist and dental technician who had spent many years living in Honduras. His son, James, who was my translator on the mission team, kindly offered to let me stay at his home for a few days while I decided my next steps.

James, who was in his early twenties, lived in a small house with his wife, their four-year-old daughter, and his wife's 14-year-old brother. When I arrived at the family compound in Talaga, James introduced me to his father.

Paul asked about my plans, and I explained that a group of doctors was planning to set up a small clinic in a remote village. They had been visiting Honduras with various teams, each time to a different location, but without follow-up, their efforts lacked continuity. They aimed to establish a clinic they could revisit yearly to support sustained health improvements in the community.

“How long are you planning to be around?”

“As long as possible,” I responded. “I don’t want to go back to the States.”

“Where will you stay?”

“James invited me to sleep on the floor in his house for a few days. After that, I don’t know.”

“Well, that’s not going to happen. I have a spare room in my house where you can stay. There are things you can do around here to earn your keep.”

For the next two weeks, I stayed busy helping with the garden and rebuilding a wall in the kitchen, but there was never time to look for a village, which was my main objective. I brought it up one night over dinner. Paul thought for a moment, then mentioned a village he had visited a few years earlier. It was remote and underserved, but he assured me the road was manageable—just a few miles of dusty dirt track and a few crossings. “Nothing to worry about,” he said. “We can make the trip on Saturday.”

Paul, James, and I set off in Paul’s battered Toyota pickup, raising a cloud of ochre dust behind us as the paved road transitioned to gravel and then to a rough track. When we reached the river, I felt a flicker of unease. It was wider than I had expected and murkier, and the makeshift crossing—little more than packed earth and hope—looked like it hadn’t been dry in weeks.

“This river doesn’t look safe,” I muttered.

Paul grinned, the kind of grin that pretends to banish doubt. “Four-wheel drive—no problem.”

Halfway across, the Toyota dropped into a hidden hole. The truck tilted, water rising around our boots, sinking with the slow inevitability of a ship going under.

We scrambled onto the muddy bank. In silence, we watched the Toyota sink, inch by inch. Fortunately, we weren’t entirely without resources. A farmer was working nearby with a team of oxen, and after a brief, animated negotiation, conducted entirely in Spanish, he agreed to pull the truck onto dry land. The engine sputtered back to life. Paul wiped water from the dashboard with a rag.

Then he looked at me with the earnest hopefulness of a man who had not yet considered the possibility of defeat.

“Do you want to try again?” he asked.

“No, not if this is the only crossing, it would be too risky for a medical team.” Survival here would mean gambling with rivers—and I wasn’t ready to stake lives on chance.

What began as a debate about the wisdom of a second attempt quietly settled, and a heated discussion about baptism and original sin reignited as we made the journey back. Although we had debated these issues before and never changed our views, it was a good way to pass the time. Unbeknownst to us, however, we also passed the turnoff that would take us home.

“Are you sure we’re on the same road?” I asked after what seemed like a longer period than it took to come. “I don’t remember all these curves.”

“Hmmm, you’re right,” Paul responded. “I wonder where this road is taking us? We can stop at the next village to find out.”

The road wound upward through jungle hills until the ridge split open, revealing a valley so beautiful it felt like a secret kept by the earth itself. There, on the canyon floor, a small village sat with a river running through it.

“That’s it!” I exclaimed. It was exactly what I had envisioned.

We drove down into the valley and stopped for a cold Coke at a small tienda, where Paul, in fluid Spanish, inquired about the village and gathered what information he could. He returned with news in two parts.

“Good or bad news first?” he asked as we got back on the road toward home.

“Good,” I responded, glancing back at the village in the valley.

“Well, they would love to have a clinic here. The closest hospital is four hours away, and they mostly rely on a ‘medicine man’ and his magic potions when they’re sick. There haven’t been any Western people in the area for nearly two years.

“That sounds like a challenge,” I replied enthusiastically. “What’s the bad news?”

“The reason there are no Westerners here is that two Peace Corps workers were killed in a brawl between rival political parties. Plus, gangs and remnants of the Contra soldiers still drift through this part of Olancho like bad weather.” Paul urged me to look for a location closer to civilization. I nodded, but inside I felt the pull of that valley—a place marked by danger yet whispering of purpose. Sometimes belonging hides where others fear to tread.

After returning to Paul’s house, I called the Pastor in Mississippi and told him about the village. He said it sounded good and that he would inform the doctors. Two days later, he called back and said the doctors were very excited about finding a village and had donated an old Chevy pickup truck and medical supplies to get started. He told me to tell James he could start working full-time, and that his first assignment was to come to Mississippi to pick up the truck and the donations. The doctors would cover his expenses.

When I relayed the information to Paul and James, Paul suggested that the three of us make the trip back to the States so he could bring back an old school bus that had once served as their mobile vacation home. It was sitting in a storage yard in Texas. If he had the bus in Honduras, he could convert it into a mobile dental clinic and expand his ministry, which included pulling teeth and making dental plates for people who could not afford them.

“Who is going to drive the bus?” I asked, suddenly feeling a bit overwhelmed.

“With my bad vision, there is no way I can drive a bus.”

“Don’t worry, I will be driving the bus; you can drive the Toyota. It’s small and easy to drive. James will drive the Chevy pickup.”

Paul made it sound so simple, but had I known what we were in for, I would have acted on my ‘*Are you crazy!*’ feeling and tried to come up with another plan.

We started early in the morning. It was decided it would be too crowded with the three of us in the front. I volunteered to lie down in the back of the truck,

which fortunately had a cover. The cover, however, was too low, preventing me from sitting up straight. I slept a lot because the only view was out the dirty back window.

At dusk, Paul and I swapped places so he could rest. James then took the wheel, and we carried on through the night. I was astonished by the danger of the roads in Mexico—no shoulders, drivers with their lights off at night, and sometimes wreckage from head-on collisions left unattended. I don't recall much else; I only remember feeling immense relief once we crossed back into the USA.

We initially traveled to Mississippi to pick up the Chevy truck, which we were told had been fully overhauled. Then, we drove to Texas. Paul drove ahead alone, while James and I enjoyed the Chevy's spaciousness. After several miles on the highway, we communicated via walkie-talkies that we wanted to stop for food. Paul took the next exit, and we followed. James pressed the brake pedal to slow down, but nothing happened. He pumped the brakes multiple times, but there was no response. The emergency brake slowed us a bit, but as the turnoff light turned red, Paul applied his brakes, and we collided with his rear.

The damage was minor, so Paul repaired the brakes himself instead of taking the truck to a shop. Later, we arrived at the storage yard and began cleaning the old school bus that Paul had used for family camping trips years earlier. While searching through a closet, a rat suddenly jumped out—trapped with nowhere to run, it scampered up my pants. I screamed, pulled my pants down, hoping it would escape without leaving any bite or scratch marks. Needless to say, I became much more cautious afterward.

Paul was a skilled mechanic and got the old bus running in just a few days with parts he found at a junkyard. We slept on the bus to save money, and before we knew it, the departure day arrived. I felt nervous because, with only one good eye, my depth perception isn't reliable. The roads in Mexico worried me, but I was doing this as a favor to Paul, for everything he had done for me.

The first stop was buying insurance, a necessity when traveling through Mexico. Paul said he would take care of it and went in with all the papers. He came out a short time later and said, "We have a problem." He was already listed on the Toyota's insurance, so he had to add my name to the bus's insurance.

"No! I cannot drive that bus through Mexico!"

"You won't have to. All you need to do is drive it through the entry point. Once we are in Mexico, I will take over. Just relax, you can do this."

I agreed to it, but I was a nervous wreck going through customs on the Mexico side.

It went smoother than I had thought it would, and after checking in, Paul took over driving the bus, while I drove the Toyota, with James bringing up the rear in the Chevy.

Everything was going smoothly until we reached a police barricade in central Mexico. They were inspecting for weapons, drugs, and who knows what else. The officers were heavily armed and intimidating. After a thorough search of the cars and the bus, they finally told us we could go. As I climbed into the Toyota, the officer in charge motioned me out, recognizing that my name was on the bus insurance, not the Toyota. Paul didn't argue this time, but as we exchanged keys, he whispered, "Drive slowly, I'll figure something out."

Ten miles down the road, he pulled over in a small rest area so that we could trade vehicles. Two young men approached us and asked if we were headed to Honduras. They were former Honduran soldiers who attempted to get into the US after their discharge, but got caught. They were hoping to get a ride back to Honduras, and Paul said, "Okay."

I felt such relief when we finally entered Guatemala. While waiting for the paperwork to be processed, a well-dressed man asked Paul for a ride to the Honduran border, and Paul invited him to travel with us in the bus. Everything was proceeding smoothly until lunch. Paul stepped off the bus to join us, but as he approached, the well-dressed man suddenly jumped out of the bus and

ran away. Thinking there must be a reason for his sudden flight, the two former soldiers chased after him and managed to catch him. However, their quick action drew the attention of the border patrol, and for a moment, I feared we might all end up in trouble.

Paul checked and found that his passport and wallet were missing from the bus. The man, of course, denied it and claimed that Paul had kidnapped him. The police did not know what to do because they said they had no evidence. The two former soldiers then grabbed the man, turned him upside down, and began shaking him. Paul's wallet, passport, and a bunch of other stolen items fell to the ground, and the man was arrested on the spot. Paul reclaimed his belongings, and we drove off with Paul driving the bus in the lead. It was late afternoon as we pulled into the yard, with many friends and neighbors there to welcome us back.

The following week, James and I made plans to move to Yocón. James had some hesitation about moving his family away from the security of living with his father, and I think Paul saw me as a threat to their relationship as well. One evening, there was a heated discussion among James, his wife, and Paul. It was all in Spanish, so I didn't understand what they were saying. By morning, James and his wife were loading the Chevy. An hour later, we left, with no words of farewell, only silence.

The journey began with a favor and ended with one too—a favor that reshaped bonds, turning bridges into crossings that no longer led back.

BAD ADVICE AND DRIED FISH SOUP

During our initial days in Yocón, we settled into a rented adobe house in the town center. It hadn't been occupied for years, resulting in holes in the walls and floor from rainwater seeping through broken roof tiles. I was hesitant to

rent it because of its poor condition, but James convinced me that it could be easily repaired. I arranged my belongings in a back room, while James and his family stayed in the rest of the house. As I began sweeping the dirt floor, a cloud of dust arose. Laughter echoed outside. James's wife took the broom, sprinkled water, and showed me how to sweep only the debris, not the earth. The wall and floor holes could be patched with wet clay blobs and smoothed by hand. A special, soaked clay was applied to the walls, turning snow white or light blue when dry, depending on the clay used. By the end of the day, the house looked much cleaner and more livable.

On the second day, as I began unpacking the medical boxes, someone brought a child in with a machete cut on his arm. It was bleeding profusely, but when I applied pressure, it stopped, and the wound only required a bandage. There was a problem, however: James's wife could not stand the sight of blood, and I realized that having the clinic in the house would not work. I asked James to ask around, and he found a neighbor who offered me a small room where I could set up my clinic. By the third day, everything was ready, and when I went to the clinic on the fourth day, three ladies were waiting for me. I believe I saw seven or eight more people that first day—nothing very serious; however, the gratitude of the people receiving a free examination and ten aspirin from a “western doctor” was exhilarating for me, especially after having spent several months feeling useless.

“¡Espera, por favor!” I heard a child call as I was about to close the door. I had no idea what he was saying, but as I turned, I saw a boy and a man following him, carrying an older child in his arms. I called for James and reopened the clinic so that the man could lay the boy down on the table. I could see that the child was very sick, so I took his temperature. It was 105 degrees. I immediately put cold towels on him and checked for appendicitis, but other than the fever, I could find nothing wrong with him. I told James to instruct them to put him to bed with only a light covering and to give him plenty of water through the night. “Find out where they live, and we will go to see him in the morning.”

James did as I instructed and helped the boy off the table. The boy was feeling better and went running back down the hill with his brother. The father, however, stayed and asked to have his Blood Pressure checked. I took it and found it to be in the normal range. “Tell him he is fine.”

“Y entonces, ¿puedo tomar una copa esta noche?” he inquired.

“What did he say?” I asked James.

“He wants to know if he can have a drink tonight?” he responded, jokingly.

“Tell him that a drink never hurt anyone,” I answered carelessly as I locked the clinic door.

I slept well that night, feeling that I had finally found a place to belong again after months of searching. I awoke to the sounds of hands rhythmically patting and of roosters crowing, which I didn’t understand until I smelled the tortillas roasting on the open fire stove. There was also a faint scent of pine trees, making it feel like Christmas.

“Let’s go see the boy with the high fever,” I told James after breakfast. I grabbed my medical bag, and we headed downhill toward the location they provided. As we neared, I saw the boy outside the house, which disappointed me since they hadn’t followed my instructions. “Please tell him to return to his room so I can examine him,” I requested, somewhat sternly.

I followed them into the house and was surprised to see pine needles spread over the floor and what looked like a coffin in the corner of the room. “What is this all about?” I asked.

“Their father died last night,” James explained.

“Well, if he was sick, why didn’t they come for me?” I asked, feeling suddenly unessential.

“He did, and you told him it was okay to have a drink, when all of the other doctors told him another drink would kill him because of his liver.”

I felt really bad about it and tried to apologize, but no one seemed to blame me for causing his death. Still, here was a mother and five children with no means of support, all because he trusted my advice. For the remainder of my time in Yocón, I employed her as my washing lady and assisted her children when I could.

Christmas was not celebrated the same way I was used to. They stayed up until late on Christmas Eve, shooting off fireworks and guns as the clock struck midnight, much the same as New Year's. There was also a tradition of having close friends over for the evening meal, and every Christmas, I was invited to the family's home as a special guest. On my first visit, I was given a large bowl of Dried Fish Soup, a delicacy that even the world's best chef could not make edible. I thought it strange that no one else was eating the soup with me, but if this were tradition, I would go along with it. I nearly gagged, but forced it down and told their mother how much I enjoyed the meal. I didn't have the heart to tell her the truth.

For several years, I was invited to their house on Christmas Eve for the exact same meal, and each time I lied and said how much I enjoyed it. In the eighth year, however, I "accidentally" dropped a large piece of the fish to the floor, hoping the dog would eat it, but he didn't, and when she noticed I had dropped it, she offered me another piece.

"I am sorry, but I lied," I blurted out. I put the bowl down on the table and confessed. "The truth is I can't stand it."

The whole room broke out in laughter, "We were wondering why you liked it so much because none of us like it either."

For the rest of my time in Honduras, I looked forward to celebrating Christmas Eve activities once more, free from the fear of that awful meal. I have stayed in touch with some of the children, now adults, who are thriving outside Honduras—in Spain, Canada, and the United States.

THE DOPE AND THE ROPE

Things went smoothly during that first year. Even though I didn't speak Spanish, I could still run the clinic because Hondurans often used gestures along with words, which helped identify most medical issues. James was there to assist with the more difficult cases, and I observed that the village children learned English much faster than I was picking up Spanish. My experience as a psychiatric nurse, Navy hospital corpsman, and Marine field medical technician gave me the essential skills to manage the clinic. Plus, my combat background in Vietnam gave me the confidence to handle emergencies like amputations and serious injuries from machetes or gunfire. For unfamiliar medical conditions, I mainly used "Where There Is No Doctor" as my guide. Also, the local people's faith—though not mine—significantly contributed to my convincing role as a doctor.

It is hard not to look down when people put you on a pedestal. The villagers had knowledge far greater than mine in many areas. They did things by hand that I didn't think were possible. Things I would not even know how to begin. One of those times was when it was decided we should dig a water well at the new clinic, and a man with a wishbone-looking stick was called from a neighboring village. He walked around the property until the stick suddenly pointed down. "Aqui," he said confidently, and the digging began.

The hole was just big enough for one man to stand in, and by the first day, he was in over his head. By the fourth day, he was so far down that we needed a flashlight to see him. On the fifth day, I heard him shout up, "Agua!" I looked down and saw the tiny man at the bottom of the well, with the sides of the hole caving in around him. I was relieved to see him finally pull up and out of the well, and to have that risky part of the project finished... but it was short-lived. Nothing could have prepared me for what would happen next.

While the man who dug the hole took a break, the other men began rolling several cement tubes closer to the well. "How are they going to get those heavy tubes in the hole?" I inquired of James.

"With a rope." He responded.

“But who is strong enough to hold the rope?”

“Well, you are the biggest man here.” He said, jokingly, I assumed.

I watched as they tied a long rope around the tube and then fed the line through a pulley on top of a large bamboo pole. They wrapped the rope around the pole several times and handed me the end.

“Here, hold this while we get the tubes ready,” James instructed.

They completed moving the other tubes nearer to the hole and then lowered the worker back inside. I wondered if he had forgotten something, but once he reached the bottom, they pushed the first tube over the hole. I panicked, because I was the only one gripping the rope.

“WAIT, WAIT!” I shouted as I held the rope tightly, but to my surprise, there was very little tension on it. The tube swung gently in the breeze above the hole.

Everyone laughed at my panicked outburst, including James. “Just release the rope slowly,” he instructed.

I followed his advice, and the tube easily descended into the well. One by one, the other tubes were lowered, and I breathed a sigh of relief when the last tube was put in, and the worker finally exited the hole.

There were many more lessons to be learned, and at times I felt more like a dope than a teacher. That I survived at all had nothing to do with any intelligent decisions I made — in fact, it was most likely my ignorance that made people feel sorry for me and want to protect me.

Yocón was a dangerous place to live. Most of the men, some of the older boys, and even a few women wore holstered guns, and everyone had access to a machete — most kept sharp enough to shave with. I had never sutured anyone before arriving in Honduras, but I realized within my first week that I needed to learn fast, because machete wounds would become my specialty. I treated everything from amputated fingers on children cleaning sugar cane to amputated hands on men caught stealing. The most memorable — and

painful — case was a man gored by a bull who required twenty-seven sutures in his scrotum.

Tropical infections were the second most common complaint. That part of the world is also home to the human botfly, which attaches its eggs to biting insects. When the larvae hatch, they burrow into the skin through the bite wound, eventually forming a large, maggot-filled boil.

I didn't treat many gunshot wounds because most men carrying guns knew how to use them well and rarely missed. One exception was a man who asked me to remove three bullets from his body. He had been shot seven times through an open bedroom window while sleeping—an attack that happened before I arrived in the village. It was one reason everyone secured their wooden shutters at night. I managed to remove all three accessible bullets but hesitated on the last one, which was dangerously close to the coccyx. No other doctor was willing to touch it. I told him honestly that I was not a professional doctor and lacked experience with such cases, but he insisted—regardless of the outcome—because he couldn't ride in the saddle with it still lodged in his buttocks.

I never understood the rule about closing the windows at night. Without electricity, the nights were often brutally hot, and shutting the shutters cut off what little airflow there was. No matter how much I complained, the others in the house held firm. When I pointed out that I had no enemies who might want to shoot me, they told me that wasn't the only reason.

“What is another reason?” I asked.

“The headless horseman!” they said in unison.

“Headless horseman? There is no such thing.”

“Yes, there is,” one of the boys replied. “Sometimes he comes to the village at night and stands by the window. We have all heard him.”

“So, you heard a horse outside your window and assumed the rider had no head? Has anyone ever opened the window to check?”

“No! Because if we did, he would cut our heads off.”

“That’s a story for small children,” I said. “You’re grown-up people.”

I went back to fanning myself with a notebook and settled into living inside their reality.

Yocón was peaceful most of the time. With no electricity, the village quieted the moment darkness fell. The nights filled up with the sounds of nocturnal animals, and if you lay still and closed your eyes, you could sometimes hear water moving over rocks in the river where the women washed clothes during the day.

It was on one of those nights that the sound of a horse came galloping into the village. Late riding wasn’t common, but I didn’t give it much thought — until one of the boys whispered, “He’s here.”

“Who’s here?” I whispered back, not sure why I was keeping my voice down.

“The headless horseman. Be quiet so he doesn’t hear us.”

“Not this again,” I said. “I told you, there is no such thing.”

“Shh. Listen.”

Everyone sat up in their beds. I stayed quiet and watched with mild amusement as they stared at the window. We could hear the horse coming closer — clip-clop, clip-clop — and then silence, as it stood at the window of our neighbors. Eventually, it stopped just outside our window. Its breathing was heavy as it snorted and pushed its nose against the wooden shutters.

I almost laughed out loud when one of the younger boys screamed, but I managed to hold it in because for them, the demon outside was very real. “There’s no one out there, guys. It’s just a horse. There’s nothing to be afraid of. There are no headless horsemen.”

I got out of my bed and started for the window, intending to open it to prove my point; however, as I reached for the latch, the horse snorted again, as if knowing I was there, and I foolishly jumped back into my bed.

There was laughter in the room, and, as if knowing it had made a fool of me, the horse, and possibly its rider, moved on to the next window.

THE BOY WHO FELL FROM HEAVEN

Honduras is predominantly Catholic, though it also hosts numerous Christian missions. Most Hondurans are born into the faith and prefer to remain Catholic throughout their lives. However, during their journey, some may encounter Christian missionaries who earn their pay by converting new followers, offering free items in exchange for attendance. Meanwhile, priests generally have more frugal attitudes toward their funds and often anticipate rewards for their services.

When I first arrived in Yocón, I saw the Catholic chapel at the town's center. It was in poor condition and needed repainting. I had come to Honduras with a Baptist missionary, and although I was familiar with Catholics, my upbringing influenced my view, and I saw them as idol worshipers. I asked why they didn't use the priest's money for the paint, and they explained that he told them it was their own responsibility. As a devout Christian, I then helped them, hoping my efforts would lead to eventual conversions.

The old Catholic priest assigned to that area rarely visited, except to collect the monthly dues. Occasionally, he appeared on a Sunday morning, and when he did, he announced his arrival with a loud blast on his trumpet. The first time I heard it, I thought the Rapture was occurring because it sounded so out of place. He disliked the Baptist missionaries who had entered his territory and told the people to take everything they could from me but to ignore everything I said.

At one point, he surprised me by showing up at my clinic — alone. He had run out of his heart medicine and was wondering if I had anything I could give him until he could get back to the city.

“With or without a sermon?” I said jokingly, as I handed him a box of something similar to the medicine he had shown me.

He had a puzzled look on his face at first, but then smiled as he realized someone had told me about his instructions. We shook hands, and I thought, at the time, that it could be the start of a new relationship. However, a few weeks later, he drowned while trying to cross a river during a downpour. Supposedly, his jeep got stuck, and when he got out to engage the four-wheel drive, a log struck him in the head, causing him to lose his balance in the rising current of the river.

Living in a small, remote village is much like living in a dormitory. There are no secrets. It was difficult at first, but eventually I became less aware of our differences and more aware of our similarities. I realized that those I once thought of as idol worshipers — because they prayed to a statue — were no different than me, who prayed every night believing that my prayers could somehow penetrate the ceiling of my room and reach the ears of an old man who lived somewhere up in the stars. That awareness allowed me to look more seriously at spirituality, both mine and theirs.

I have always been a big believer in miracles, and that fits well with the Catholic culture. The only problem is that people who believe in miracles tend to be susceptible to con artists and magicians.

When I first arrived in Honduras, I was taken to see the Virgin of Suyapa, the patron saint of Honduras. At the time, she was kept in a small temple, but they were building her a new temple right next door. There was a problem, however: the new temple was years in the making and had gone way over the original budget. Pleas for more money had gone out, but people were tired of giving and giving. It was estimated that \$1,000,000.00 was needed to finish the job.

A few weeks into my stay in Honduras, the Virgin figurine was supposedly stolen from the temple, and a massive search was undertaken. Literally every car in Honduras, including ours, was searched until she was finally found in

the men's bathroom of a gas station. There was much jubilation throughout the country; however, the bad news was that she had been violated, and her diamond-studded dress was missing. Restoring her and having a replica dress made was estimated to cost \$1,000,000.00. The money was raised in just a few days, the small figurine was returned to her chapel, work on the new temple was completed, and, to my knowledge, no one ever questioned the incident's validity.

On another occasion, the newly assigned Catholic priest came into our village, announcing that there would soon be several days of complete darkness in the world. Flashlights and even candles would not work during that time; however, special candles blessed with holy water would work, and every household needed them or risked evil spirits entering their homes. I was one of the few households in the community that refused to buy his candles. The darkness never came, but to my knowledge, no one had ever asked for a refund.

Just outside Yocón lived a very devout woman who kept a statue of a small boy saint on the mantel of her fireplace. She had prayed to it for many years, and over time the paint began to fade, and parts of it were damaged by children touching it or, on the few occasions, by its being knocked to the floor by accident. She would, at times, announce a special celebration for her saint, and people from the village would respectfully come to pay homage to the statue. Usually, they would leave some money at the altar, but over the years the donations grew less and less because of its worn appearance.

One day, she came running into the village, all excited, and told everyone that God had taken the saint back into Heaven. She had seen it with her own eyes as the saint ascended into the sky when she returned from her afternoon walk. Everyone ran to her house to see if she was telling the truth. When they got there, they found the statue missing from the altar and therefore assumed that a miracle had indeed occurred.

A few weeks later, she came running into town again, but this time she said that God had sent her a new saint. She saw it descending from Heaven when

she returned from her walk, and she had to run to catch it before it hit the ground. All the villagers ran back to her house to see if it was true. Sure enough, there it was: a brand new, brightly colored statue of another little boy. Everyone crossed themselves and offered prayers, dropping their money on the altar as they left the house. Even the boys who lived with me were excited about this miracle and couldn't stop talking about it all afternoon.

That night at the dinner table, I asked them what they really thought of the incident, and all of them remained very convinced it was real. So, I asked them this question: "If the statue really came down from Heaven... why would there be a MADE IN GUATEMALA seal stamped on the base of it?"

Needless to say, it ended the conversation and perhaps shook their faith in miracles. But because of this incident, they were forced, from that day onward, to start looking at things more critically.

They say ignorance is bliss, and perhaps that is so, but often the ignorant are misled by men or women with selfish motives. I am convinced that miracles do still happen, but I suggest looking for the MADE IN sticker before you put your trust in one.

EERIE COINCIDENCES

Yocón was a community of ordinary and extraordinary people alike. There were no telephones or modern communication devices — only walkie-talkies and a few companies with shortwave radios. Whatever news you received came straight from the mouth of someone who had seen or heard something worth sharing. There were few secrets in town, and those that remained hidden were better off staying that way.

Thanks to the Spanish conquistadors, who centuries earlier had killed the men and violated the women in the name of Christianity, to what they deemed uncivilized tribes, Honduras had become a predominantly Catholic nation. Its

people were, and remain, strong believers in a God of love and miracles. At the time I lived there, I was a Christian myself — though teetering on the edge of losing my faith. For that reason, I sometimes found certain local beliefs difficult to accept, dismissing them as little more than superstition. And yet there were moments, certain events, that left no room for easy explanation. Moments where the only word that seemed to fit was “miracle.”

As one of only a handful of gringos who actually lived in Yocón, I quickly got to know the people who mattered in town. Because I offered free medicine at the clinic, I eventually met folks from neighboring villages as well. Among them was an older woman who made her living selling eggs. I bought a dozen from her on two occasions, but each time half of them were old and rotten, so I stopped. After that, whenever I saw her coming down the path, I did what most of the townspeople did — I found somewhere else to be. I felt sorry for her, but not sorry enough to keep buying bad eggs. She lived alone in a small shack just outside of town, an ordinary woman largely ignored by the community — until the night of the miracle.

Stevey was the nine-year-old son of my neighbor. I hadn't known he existed until I stopped by one afternoon to drop off cough medicine the family had requested for him. Stevey had muscular dystrophy. Because he required constant care, his father rarely worked outside the home; instead, he ran a small bar out of their house—a place for local men to come in and knock back a shot or two of homemade brew before heading home to their families. Stevey lived in his own quiet world, content to crawl along the dirt floor and beg for scraps of food. Most of the time, he went unnoticed. I don't believe he was ever mistreated, and though it may sound harsh to say he spent his days on a dirt floor, he never seemed to mind it. He rarely sought affection from anyone, and little was offered in return — with one exception.

Maria was a middle-aged woman who lived in the house directly across from the tavern. A single mother of two, she was a strong and outspoken voice for women's rights in the community. Her husband had been killed in a gunfight a few years before I arrived. She was respected by most and quietly feared by a

few of the more aggressive cowboys who were known to take their frustrations out on their wives. Whenever Maria had the time, she would cross the road and sit with Stevey, offering him the kind of tenderness that few others bothered to give. If I'm honest, I think she needed those visits as much as he did. Stevey spent the entirety of his short life on the floor of that tavern — until the morning of the miracle.

A cancer diagnosis is devastating, no matter where in the world it falls. In the United States, it means months of testing, bloodwork, specialists, and treatment plans — and enormous expense. In Honduras at that time, the protocol was far simpler and far more brutal: go home and die. I had already watched one of the older women in Yocón starve herself peacefully, her family gathered around her until the very end. I had offered intravenous fluids, and she had smiled at me with genuine warmth and declined. She didn't want to prolong things any more than necessary. That kind of quiet courage was not easy to witness. It was even harder to accept when, a few months later, Maria received the same diagnosis.

Like the woman before her, Maria faced the news with a stillness that I found both humbling and heartbreaking. She stopped eating but continued her work as a community advocate for a few more weeks. I would stop in to visit her on my way to or from the clinic. She had already made arrangements for her two children, but her thoughts kept returning to Stevey. We talked about getting him a wheelchair or perhaps building him a small enclosed play area in the yard. Every conversation circled back to the same unanswerable question: who would love him the way she did? I tried to offer encouragement. We both knew the answer.

They came for me at six in the morning and told me she had had a terrible night and was asking for me. I went to her before heading to the clinic and sat with her for a while. She drifted in and out of consciousness but acknowledged my presence. At one point, she drew a slow, deep breath and opened her eyes.

“Wayne,” she said, “I have decided — when I get to Heaven, I will go to God and tell Him I want Stevey with me.”

I smiled, imagining her doing exactly that, marching up to the throne with her hands on her hips.

“I am sure He will listen to you,” I said.

She closed her eyes again and whispered, almost to herself:

“I will make Him listen.”

She never regained consciousness. She died later that morning. After finishing at the clinic, I went to the house and spent the entire night there, along with most of the community, as is the custom in Yocón. The following morning, the whole village walked her casket through the streets and laid her to rest in the cemetery on the hill overlooking the town.

It was nearly noon by the time we returned, and everyone was exhausted and ready to sleep, when the death bell tolled again. Stevey had been found dead in his bed — the bed where his family had left him while they attended Maria’s funeral.

Coincidence? An act of God? I still haven’t decided. But as sad as this story is, it doesn’t end there.

Remember the egg lady?

We gathered again — this time at Stevey’s house — to keep vigil through the night, as custom required. The house had been hastily prepared: benches carried in from the school; bed sheets hung along the walls to section off the bar and cover anything that seemed out of place. People filed in quietly and took their seats. Coffee was being prepared. Everyone was running on almost no sleep, and the room had fallen into a heavy, subdued silence. Someone yawned, and it spread around the room like a wave.

The egg lady stretched out her arms and leaned back — into what she clearly assumed was a wall. It wasn't. There was a thump, and then two legs appeared in the air, waving.

The whole room said Oh! in perfect unison — and then, to everyone's surprise, including their own, broke out laughing.

The laughter died down quickly, and people composed themselves, relieved that she wasn't hurt. But something had gotten into me. No matter what I did, I kept breaking into laughter again. I'd get myself under control, and then another wave would hit. After about fifteen minutes, Stevey's father came over and quietly suggested that perhaps I didn't need to stay. I left, red-faced and thoroughly embarrassed to have been, in effect, removed from a child's funeral.

In the days that followed, whenever the egg lady came around, I bought every egg she had — partly as penance for my foolishness, and partly because I had genuinely felt for her all along. The extra income allowed her to buy more chickens, and before long, she was selling fresh eggs regularly. Her life improved, in its small way.

I suppose that counts for something.

PISTOL PACKIN' GUARDIAN ANGEL

I can still remember the reaction I got during a conversation with a long-term missionary from the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) shortly after moving to Yocón. It was a Sunday morning, and I was in Tegucigalpa to buy supplies. I spotted the church just around the corner from the Boston Hotel, where I was staying. I had been raised in the CRC. Although they had turned me down for mission work because of my lack of biblical training and inability to communicate in Spanish, I still held on to that identity.

I introduced myself to the American missionary and told him I was from Grand Rapids, Michigan.

“Are you from the Mission Board?” he asked cautiously. I would later learn there was a reason for his concern. The native pastor was trying to take over the congregation, and missionaries were losing control. If donors found out, it could result in a loss of funds or a reassignment.

“No,” I responded. “I am starting my own mission.”

“Here in Tegus?”

“No, I’ve opened a clinic in Olancho.”

“That’s a very needy area, I hear. I’ve been in Honduras for 10 years, but I’ve never had the chance to visit. How often do you go out?”

“I live there,” I said. “I’ve been out there a couple of months.”

“You live there?” He appeared shocked. “That’s a very dangerous place to visit, let alone to live. You’d better be very careful.”

Time would prove him right, although I never really felt that much in danger while I was there. I suppose my ignorance had something to do with that — or stupidity, as I look back on some of it now.

Contra soldiers were living in Olancho. They didn’t make their presence public, but people were well aware of it. One day, a man came to the clinic and invited me to join a team heading to the border to support them — he wanted me to bring medicine and bandages to treat the wounded. I genuinely wanted to go, but I was warned that if I got caught, I’d be thrown out of the country. I decided against it.

I didn’t see the Contras as much of a threat at the time, but later realized even the U.S. military was wary of encountering them. That became clear early one morning when some of the local boys woke me by knocking hard on my bedroom window.

“¡Vamos, Vamos! ¡Hombres con rifles! Pies grandes, nariz roja. Hablan inglés.”

“What?” I called out as I hurriedly got dressed. I could see they were alarmed, but couldn’t make out what they were saying. “James! What do they want?”

He had heard them too and stepped into my room. “They want us to follow them — there are men with rifles nearby. One has very large shoes and a red nose. They only speak English.” He paused. “I will get the truck.”

We drove about a mile out of town to a clearing on the river’s edge, where we found three heavily armed American soldiers and a large man dressed in a clown suit.

“Good morning!” I said, stepping out of the truck.

“God, are we glad to see you!” the clown replied, reaching out to shake my hand. “We’re stranded. They dropped us off here to hand out invitations to local children about a medical team coming tomorrow morning. We were supposed to be picked up by search and rescue after fifteen minutes, but they can’t find us.”

Two of the soldiers were hunched over a map, radioing back and forth with the recovery team in obvious frustration. I glanced at the map and noticed they were holding it upside down. When I pointed it out, they directed my attention to the mountain range in the distance and the marked drop-off point, which they thought was their location. I took the map from them, oriented it north to north, and told them the marked position was on the other side of the mountain. Once they had the correct coordinates, the rescue crew arrived within minutes.

They were deeply grateful. “You live out here by yourself?” the clown asked as they prepared to leave.

“Yes, in the village.”

“Well, our maps show this as a hostile area. Be careful.”

Beyond the Contras, there were gangs and guns for hire. I was told there was a man in the area who would kill anyone for twenty dollars. He had become something of a local legend, rumored to possess supernatural powers drawn from a medallion he wore around his neck. He was wanted for several murders and had reportedly slipped through police ambushes multiple times — always thanks to the medallion. He eventually met his end when someone discovered his secret bathing cove on the river. They tipped off the police for the reward; an ambush was set, and he was shot as he removed the medallion to bathe.

The gangs primarily consisted of family members who believed they deserved more from the world. They carried guns and appeared tough, but their main motive was often money or jewelry, and they rarely killed victims unless provoked. Once, they robbed a Coke truck after its deliveries, and the driver's guard mistakenly shot at one of the bandits, leading the gang to fire back, killing both him and the driver. Finding replacements took nearly a month, so no cold drinks were sold in the area during that time. Luckily, plenty of Chatamuskas — frozen Kool-Aid in plastic bags — was available to help beat the heat.

Then there were revenge killings. These were the hardest for me to witness, because they so often claimed the most promising people in the community. When there was a gunfight — and there were many — the best outcome, strange as it sounds, was when both men died. If only one survived, it became the solemn duty of the deceased's family to retaliate — and not against the survivor himself, but against the most prominent member of his family. It was a cycle with no clean ending.

When I first arrived in Yocón, the only school—a modest building behind the Catholic church—offered classes only through third grade. Attendance was limited to children from the more prominent families, and further education seemed unnecessary in a place where life rarely extended beyond the canyon walls. An occasional truck with supplies, a bus that disappeared over the

mountain and returned with stories of the city, or a foreigner speaking a different language were the only hints of another world.

With help from friends, I raised enough money to hire a new teacher, extending classes to sixth grade. Suddenly, education became important. Within a few years, children could continue through high school. Among those who saw education as a ticket out was David. He wasn't wealthy, but he carried himself with quiet confidence. Teachers admired his ability, boys respected his calm, and girls found him charming. Beneath that charm was determination—a desire to rise above the canyon walls. For a time, David embodied the hope that education could change everything.

Not all of life's lessons are learned in classrooms. One afternoon, the silence of siesta was broken by shouts and a girl's cries. David had been discovered with the daughter of a wealthy family in an abandoned house. The girl was sent home, but David was dragged to the school, where leaders decided he would no longer be allowed to study. Afterward, he vanished into the mountains with his older brother, who had a defective right eye.

Rumors spread quickly. Some said they had purchased guns from the Contras; others said that David swore revenge. Soon robberies began—cars stopped on the road, travelers describing a young man and an older one with a bad eye. David's legend grew. He once held up a bus, lining passengers up and demanding their valuables. When an older woman hesitated to surrender her wedding ring, he smiled and let her keep it. But when an off-duty soldier resisted, David stripped him of everything, even his clothes, before vanishing into the forest.

Whispers claimed David had gotten married; a young woman sometimes appeared at my clinic with a malnourished baby, and people would murmur, "That's David's wife."

David had once been a friend and would come over to my house after school. He had a "Fonz"-type personality but also showed a sensitive side. I never formally met his cross-eyed brother, but there was a time, before the killings

started, when he and David stopped to talk with us on the road. A few weeks later, the brother killed a man for staring at him. That was the point of no return. After that, they were blamed for every unsolved murder in the area, and they went into hiding. However, the physical condition of his wife and baby indicated they were not making much from their holdups, and I would usually give her money to buy milk.

One evening at sunset, a rifle shot shattered the calm. A man ran breathless onto my patio, whispering urgently to two brothers: “Quick, come with me. David just shot your father.” I followed with my medical bag. Juan, their father, lay bleeding; most of the flesh from his upper arm was gone. His wife held his arm while a belt served as a tourniquet. I fashioned a sling and insisted he be taken to the hospital in Juticalpa, four hours away. Despite fears of an ambush, someone volunteered. Juan survived, though his arm could not be saved.

Weeks later, police surrounded David’s hideout. His brother was killed, and David gave himself up. They brought him to the village, chained in the back of a pickup like a wild animal. His eyes stared into emptiness, refusing to make contact with me or anyone else he once called a friend.

Other gangs would rise and fall, but none matched David’s notoriety. Rumors persisted—some claimed he died escaping prison; others insisted they saw him nearby, waiting to ambush another school official. My favorite story was that he crossed into the United States and, like many other illegal aliens, was able to change his life.

Looking back, I realize some of my actions were careless. I often carried large sums of money, but I was never robbed. Years later, in the United States, I met someone from Honduras who explained why: “Everyone was afraid of your bodyguard.”

Confused, I replied, “Bodyguard? I never had a bodyguard in Honduras.”

He smiled. “Then who was the big man with the gun who followed you every time you exchanged money?”

I never saw the man that they saw, and I don't believe in Guardian Angels, but then, perhaps they can only be seen by those who would do us harm.

THE JUDA IN THE TREE

Looking back on the twelve years I spent in Yocón, Olancho, I sometimes think my greatest contribution to the community was the laughter my naïveté inspired. When neighbors asked for some of my old clothing, I assumed they wanted rags for cleaning. I gladly handed over a pair of worn blue jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, never imagining they had something else in mind.

The village was already buzzing with preparations for Easter. Streets were swept, courtyards scrubbed, and every home seemed to hum with anticipation. A week before Holy Week, I wondered why the cleaning began so early. Later that day, children ran to meet me, their faces alight with mischief. They led me to a tree in the center of town, where I stopped in shock: perched among the branches was a straw-filled dummy dressed in my clothes.

“¡Juda, Juda!” The children shouted as they danced around the tree. “Wayne is the Juda!”

In Yocón, Easter is unlike anywhere else. It is a living tapestry of faith and folklore, where sacred rituals intertwine with playful dramatizations. The effigy of Juda—representing Judas—sat in the tree as a silent witness to the week's events, absorbing the community's sins and sorrows until his final destruction. The days that followed would unfold like a communal drama. The Passion Play would be enacted in the streets: Jesus would be marched through the village carrying a heavy cross, mocked by the crowd, and “nailed” to it on the football field. Though the nails never pierced his skin, the spectacle would be convincing enough to stir unease.

The next morning, shrieks filled the air. I opened my window to see masked figures in riotous colors chasing children, throwing them to the ground,

rubbing dirt into their hair. “¡Judíos, Judíos!” The children cried, warning others of the persecutors’ arrival.

The Judíos embodied betrayal and persecution, yet their antics blurred the line between terror and laughter. They stormed the streets several times a day, their identities kept secret, their costumes dazzling. Children fled to my house for refuge, knowing I would give them coins to pay off their tormentors.

On Good Friday, the crucifixion was reenacted with solemnity. The entire village followed Jesus to the football field, where the Judíos vanished, leaving only the effigy of Juda in the tree, watching silently.

Easter Sunday began before sunrise with a grand procession celebrating the resurrection. The air was thick with emotion, yet I felt uneasy seeing the Juda (Dressed in my clothes) still seated in the tree, a reminder of betrayal amid joy. I kept my thoughts to myself.

Later that day, laughter erupted once more. In the courtyard, figures appeared—older men in trench coats wielding whips, accompanied by young appearing women in high heels, heavy makeup, and short skirts. “The Muigangas,” James explained. The women flirted shamelessly, enticing young men to run away with them, only to be chased by the whip-bearing elders. The procession wound through the village, poking fun at households and local figures, until it ended at the tree where Juda still sat.

A donkey was brought forward, and the effigy was tied to its back. With cheers and shouts, the animal was whipped until it bolted from town, straw spilling from the dummy as it broke apart. The symbolism was clear: Juda had absorbed the community’s evil, and his destruction carried it away.

As the sun set, I returned home exhausted. One of the older boys who shared my house emerged from the bathroom; his face and lips were still streaked with makeup. In that moment, I realized how carefully guarded the performer's identity had been kept.

Easter in Yocón is not confined to the church. It spills into the streets, into the laughter of children, into the creativity of masked figures and effigies. It is faith

expressed through drama; devotion mingled with play. The Juda, the Judíos, and the Muigangas are not mere folklore—they are living expressions of identity, transforming Holy Week into a communal celebration where sorrow and joy coexist, and where the sacred resides in everyday acts of community.

THE CLINIC

The clinic stood about one kilometer outside of Yocón, on the main road to La Unión, a slightly larger village nearby. Few families owned cars, so transportation depended on supply trucks and the single bus that left for Tegucigalpa one day and returned the next. There was no electricity, no telephones, and no televisions.

We did have ice-cold Coca-Cola — a commodity found in every corner of the world — kept cold by kerosene-burning refrigerators.

As our clientele grew, I hired Christina, a local nurse, to help me. We worked well together. If a mistake was made, she took the blame — and I was, at that time, the kind of man who let her do it. She knew most of the people who came in for treatment and would share their story if they were poor, or warn me of danger if she suspected they were gang members. We tried to stay neutral, since feuding families often ended up in the waiting room together.

Machete cuts were common, and we had to close them up several times a week. Sometimes they were accidental injuries, like a child using his father's machete to strip sugar cane. One wrong move, and he was missing a finger or two. Other times, it could be a thief with one or both hands cut off for stealing a cow, or a man with his scrotum ripped open by the horns of an angry bull, or a father with a deep machete cut across his back — a wound his daughter had inflicted to protect her mother from his abuse.

Boils ranked high among the challenges, some caused by infection, others by Bot fly larvae—both required time to treat. When draining pus, it sometimes bursts out under pressure, hitting us with the hot, foul-smelling substance, even in the face. Maggot removal was more complex because the maggots had to be extracted alive, which involved applying lubricant to the breathing hole and waiting for the maggot to protrude enough to be plucked with tweezers. Each day brought new experiences, and almost every day had a story worth telling.

On some days, Christina acted as my trainer, pulling on my leash when my ingrained arrogance surfaced. One of those times was when a father from one of the hill tribes brought his ten-year-old son in with a high fever. The boy looked malnourished, and the father said he had been sick for several days. I had him lie the boy down on the exam table while Christina took his temperature. When she said it was 105 degrees, I knew we were in trouble. I gently touched his lower stomach. He winced and cried out in pain.

“Appendicitis,” I murmured, glancing at Christina for support. “He needs to go to the hospital right now.”

As we discussed the possibilities, the bus going to the paved road was dropping off more patients.

“Christina, stop the bus and put the man and his son on it.”

I gave her \$25.00 to pass on to the father and told them to hurry. I was relieved when the father climbed on board, and the bus sped off down the road.

The following morning, I brought the incident up with Christina, and she informed me that the man had gotten off the bus just out of sight of the clinic and brought his son home, where he died during the night. I knew that was a possibility; still, I held the father accountable for not trying to save him with the money I had given.

Two weeks passed, and a man brought in his sick little daughter. Christina took her temperature as I started my examination.

“That is the father of the boy who died,” she whispered, cautiously.

“Oh! So, you think you can get more money out of me by bringing another sick child?” I stopped my exam and looked straight at the father, who stood humbly staring down at the floor. “Who do you think you are, coming back here? I’m not giving you any more of my money!”

“Ssh,” Christina interrupted, as I was preparing my second round of abusive outbursts. “Let him talk.”

The tearful father explained he was grateful for the money, but he had never held that much in his life. He had six other children at home who would benefit more if he used it to buy food. He chose to sacrifice his son so the rest of his family could eat.

He left the clinic that day with enough vitamins for all of his children and more money for food.

Many of our patients were regular visitors. Some came to get out of the house and socialize for a few hours. Others just needed some attention and were reassured they were okay after their vitals were checked. One grandmother from the other side of the river would bring her two lovely grandchildren in when she wanted her blood pressure taken. Both children were exceptional: a nine-year-old girl and her cousin, an adorable four-year-old boy. The two of them always kept the waiting room entertained with their wit and charm.

When it rains, the river rises, and at times it takes two or three days for the water to reach a safe level to cross. Such was the case for the grandmother when her granddaughter developed a high fever. By the time she got her to us, she had become unresponsive and was very close to dying.

I put cold towels on her head and chest to bring the temperature down, but I didn’t hold out much hope. The grandmother pleaded with me to save her, and all I could think to do was start intravenous fluids. As I put the needle in her arm, some of the other family members joined us, and we waited for death to take her. It was late afternoon, and there was no change, so the family decided to take her home to die. I was told the following day that she had

survived the night and was talking, but was unable to walk. I was surprised by the news and hoped the inability to walk was not the result of permanent brain damage.

It was nearly a month before I saw the grandmother and her granddaughter again. The grandmother looked haggard as she walked through the door, and when her granddaughter followed her in, I understood why. The child seemed to have suffered brain damage from the fever. She walked with a limp, and her left arm hung by her side. She moved around the exam room, touching everything, and ignored her grandmother's requests to sit down. Something within her had changed. Her personality was the exact opposite of what it had been before.

The following week, the news hit me hard. We learned that the granddaughter had taken her uncle's gun and killed her four-year-old cousin. The boy's father said he would kill the girl as soon as the funeral was over, forcing the grandmother to go into hiding with her granddaughter. I never saw them again.

I don't regret my attempts to bring her back from the dead, but I cannot help feeling partly responsible for the ripples it created.

Some in the village believed that near-death experiences could open the body to malevolent spirits. I doubted that, but on another day, three intoxicated men brought in one of their friends, who was unresponsive to any stimulus. As they laid him down on the table, Christina shot me a look that told me these men were not of good character.

I began examining the man while Christina translated their story. A stop at a local outdoor Sotol bar had led to a drinking contest to see who could consume the most of the highly intoxicating brew. Sotol is a spirit distilled from the desert-spoon plant, and in unregulated batches it can contain dangerous levels of methanol alongside the alcohol — enough to cause seizures, blindness, or death. Their friend had been the first to start and was already on his third shot before the others had finished their first. He went into

convulsions and passed out. When he failed to respond, they brought him to the clinic.

“Javier,” I said, as I looked into his dilated eyes. “Do you know where you are?”

There was no response, so I continued taking his vitals.

“No,” he whispered.

I wasn’t sure if his delayed response was to my question, so I asked him if he could see me.

“Yes, but you are far away,” came his slow, delayed response, suggesting that his spirit might be outside his body, perhaps in that space where malevolent spirits reside.

He stopped responding after that. I told his friends there was nothing more I could do — they could take him to the hospital or take him home. They chose to take him home, where he died a few hours later.

BEYOND THE MOUNTAIN

My final day in Yocón came as a complete surprise to the community and to me. I packed my bag for the once-a-month trip to Tegucigalpa to buy medicine. I planned to spend the weekend with the university students I was sponsoring, so I brought two changes of clothes.

As I was preparing to leave the house, I heard a noise in the boys’ room. Everyone was supposed to be in school, but when I opened the door, I found Ricardo sitting on his bed.

“No school today?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“I have a headache.”

“How do you expect to make a living if you don’t go to school?”

“I will go to the Estados Unidos and get a job.”

“That is a fantasy, Ricardo. You don’t have money, and you don’t speak good English. That was the problem with the others who tried. They got all the way across the border, and when the border patrol asked them a question, they responded in Spanish and got sent right back. If you ever did make it across the border, remember that. If someone stops you, answer in English.”

I flipped him a 50-centavo coin, a small token of encouragement, and walked out of the room. “We’ll talk about this when I get back.”

As I walked out of the house, I was surprised to see Noel waiting for me.

“Another one not in school—how come?”

“I want to walk with you to the clinic.” He reached out his hand, and as we walked together out of town toward the clinic, we shared some small talk along the way. As we neared the clinic, he asked with some concern, “Are you coming back?”

“Yes, of course. I will be back on Monday. Why do you ask that?”

“Because you told us last week you want to go to Vietnam.”

My mind flipped back to the conversation I had with some of the boys after seeing an article in “The Banner”, a CRC publication I received because I was still considered a professing member, since I received \$100 a month from my home church in Bauer. The article mentioned the CRC opening an office in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, a country like Vietnam that had been closed to foreigners for many years. I remembered saying at the time that I had originally wanted to go to Vietnam, but because it was closed, I went to Honduras instead.

“Ahh, yes. I remember saying that, but I was only thinking out loud, Noel. I am way too old to do it now.”

I gave him 50 centavos to buy himself a snack. “I have to work now—go back to school, and I will see you when I get back.”

Fortunately, there were not many patients to see, and we were finished before noon. I told Christina she could leave early if she wanted. She finished cleaning up some of the instruments we had used and then started for the door, but stopped for just a moment as if she had forgotten something, and then asked with some concern, “Are you coming back?”

“Yes, of course. I will be back on Monday,” I answered, a bit confused about why she would ask the same question as Noel.

It was true that I was feeling a bit burned out, but I had gone through that before, and even though new doctors had moved into the area, we still saw many patients every day. I knew they were upset that I worked for free because it prevented patients from going to them. I wasn’t aware of their resentment, however, until only recently, when the Head of Medical Services in Olancho stopped to warn me that there had been some complaints. He gave me some advice in case I accidentally killed someone:

“Get them buried in the ground before an autopsy can be done. These people are very superstitious and would never dig up a grave.”

I wasn’t sure whether he was joking or if that was just the advice, he gave all his doctors.

I finished locking up and headed for the bus stop. There was no one there yet, and as I looked back down on the clinic campus with the coconut grove and the green manicured lawn, I thought about how it was when we came. So much had changed over the years.

I remembered the village before the road connecting us to the other side of the mountain was completed—an isolated village that few people ever had a desire to leave. An alarm clock wasn’t necessary because the rhythm of the morning activities kept the time. At four-thirty a.m., the patting of the tortillas could be heard in every house. At five o’clock, the roosters started their crowing, and at five-thirty, the men left for the fields with their freshly made hot tortillas. Sunset marked the end of the day: a candlelit dinner, and perhaps some stargazing while talking with friends before bedtime.

The new road created an opening in the walls that surrounded Yocón, allowing for opportunities to explore what lay beyond the mountain. We took some of the older boys to see the ocean at La Ceiba. They couldn't believe their eyes when they saw it stretched across the whole horizon. On the way back, we were lying down in the bed of a pickup truck. One of the boys asked if the moon in the sky was the same one we saw in Yocón. The trip had exposed their ignorance, and for many, education became important; several even went on to university.

The new road brought electricity. Homes filled with light; fans stirred the air; refrigerators hummed; and televisions flickered with distant stories. It was called progress, yet something quiet slipped away. The stars faded behind streetlamps, and evenings once marked by gentle reflection became noisier, less serene. Wives lingered past midnight with Mexican soap operas, while mornings no longer began with the tender rhythm of hands shaping tortillas. Instead, roosters announced the day, and doors closed too sharply as husbands sought the warmth of traditions that had begun to fade. Progress illuminated the houses, but dimmed the stars.

My reminiscing was interrupted by an older woman descending from the mountain trail. I recognized her as one of our regulars, and we exchanged greetings. She then walked over, took my hand, and said concernedly, "We are going to miss you."

I thanked her and assured her I was not going anywhere, but I don't think she understood. I watched as she continued down the road, wondering why so many seemed certain I was leaving.

As if on cue, the bus arrived, and I boarded. I paused briefly on the top step, feeling as if I was leaving something behind, and looked back, but saw nothing on the ground. Fortunately, there were empty seats, and I chose one next to the window. When we reached the top of the hill, I looked back at the small village with a river flowing through it. The idea of leaving hadn't even occurred to me until Noel brought it up.

I was 52, too old for a new beginning, yet the thought kept circling. Over the next five hours, I formulated a plan. When I arrived in Tegucigalpa, I went straight to the travel agency and booked a flight for the following morning. Back at the apartment, I told the university students about my plans. They didn't believe me until I made a poster explaining my departure from the village. I also transferred ownership of the house in Yocón to them so they could sell it and use the proceeds to pay for their education. The next morning, I left the house with instructions not to follow me to the airport.

“Next!”

The word cracked through the terminal like a rifle shot. My head throbbed, thoughts spinning in a loop.” Are you sure about this?” The guard's voice rose again, sharper this time, forcing me to make a decision.

“Lo siento mucho, aqui esta mi pasaporte.” I responded as I walked through the departure gate.

My time in Yocón had come to an end. I left silently, with only a small bag, but carrying a heart full of gratitude for the people who welcomed and questioned me, each helping to prepare me for departure in their own way. The same road that brought me to Yocón now took me away, yet the spirit of that village stays with me—a reminder that it is presence, not permanence, that truly defines a meaningful life. Even now, at dawn, if I hear a rooster crow, I think of Yocón and realize that a part of me has never truly left. It remains at the bus stop alongside of the road that goes beyond the mountain.

AFTERWORD

It took me six months to get to Vietnam, only to find it doing quite well. I decided to try the Philippines and found a beautiful community working with

the Aeta people around Mount Pinatubo. It was there that I learned that Ricardo had hitchhiked across Mexico and found his way to my family home in Michigan for Thanksgiving Dinner. He told the story of how he had just crossed the Rio Grande and was looking for a public telephone. He felt a hand on his shoulder. It was a border guard who asked him what he was doing. He remembered what I had told him and responded in English: "I am looking for a pay phone, sir." The guard gave him a card and let him go. That card had a date on it, and when victims of Hurricane Mitch were granted green cards, they had to provide proof of their arrival in the country. He presented the card and was given a green card. Many other children from Yocón have left the village and now live outside of Honduras, and are doing well.

Though I enjoyed my time in the Philippines, I felt compelled to return to Vietnam. I flew to Hanoi, but nothing came of it. Frustrated, I told a missionary there, who suggested Cambodia. Although I had heard the country was unstable, he said his brother was there and assured me it would be fine. When I landed in Phnom Penh, I sensed I was exactly where I needed to be.

The clinic on the road to La Union was never just a place of medicine. It was a window into a world where survival and sacrifice were not abstract concepts but daily calculations. A father chose six living children over one dying son. A grandmother's love carried a child across a flooded river, only for that same love to become the source of an unbearable grief. Men drank themselves to the edge of death for sport, and a young girl came back from the brink of death, as someone none of us recognized.

I arrived in Yocón with some medical training and, I now realize, a good deal of arrogance about how the world works and what it owes to reason. The clinic slowly dismantled both. Christina kept me honest when my instincts failed me, and the patients kept me humble when my judgment failed. What I could offer was often not enough, and what I thought I understood about people — their choices, their values, their relationship to life and death — was regularly turned on its head.

Some of those I treated lived. Some died. A few lived in ways that made me question whether I had done them a kindness. I carried each of them with me when I left, and I carry them still.