2009 Honorable Mention Personal Narrative/Essay

Living

I woke to find myself shivering uncontrollably, wrapped in a sponge that had once been my sleeping bag. The river flowing beneath our tent was friendly, meaning it lacked respect for personal space and thought it was doing me a favor by sharing its moisture. I knew that things weren’t that bad; after all, I could always turn on the car heater if things got unbearable. The hypothermia that I faced was largely contrived, and I knew my escapades would be praised by my mother at our kitchen table over pizza the next day. Boy Scout trips are like reality television: if worse comes to worst you can vote yourself off of the island back into the dining room. Camping and living aren’t supposed to be the same thing.

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The runoff from the bucket shower mingles with waste from the latrine about fifteen yards from Nahum’s house. His mother is the pendulum on a grandfather clock: swinging slowly between the griddle in the driveway and the sewing machine that sits in the dirt under the big oak tree. She feeds her kids by selling homemade clothes and corn tortillas to the neighbors. Nahum’s father drives truck. Sometimes he brings home used fabric for his wife’s sewing endeavors, but the majority of his pay goes towards the marijuana he smokes behind their shack in the evening.

Nahum and his siblings cycle between intense games of trompo (tops) in the yard and their daily dose of El Chavo on the 8-inch black and white. School ends by noon, so Nahum and his younger siblings often help with the sewing, pumping the foot pedal with tanned, dirty feet. Their mom makes them all take a break when we stop by; the lack of luxury is no excuse in her mind for the deficiency of high morals. The only thing missing in their lives is everything money can buy, but they seem content. David and Nahum are the only
members of the Church in their family, but their ironed white shirts (gifts from the branch president) are seen every Sunday next to the other thirty members of Joya de Ceren. Nahum hopes to serve a mission in a few years so that he can get out and see the world. He may be shocked to learn that an hour-long bus ride really isn’t that far away.

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My family took a trip to Belize to visit my brother’s old investigators and see the sights. By the second day my whining from the backseat had convinced Dad to rent a van with air-conditioning. I was coaxed from the car at the tourist sites, not willing to trade my cooler for a sauna. The sun lay on the jungle paths as if shone through a sheet of green plastic wrap, and the remnants of Lamanite society whispered of times far gone and secrets unrevealed. I wiped the sweat from my face with the thought that a dip in the ocean and a cold shower would melt away my troubles. We’d planned a vacation, but instead we’d gone camping.

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No water fell for four days straight. I smiled as I emptied yet another garrafon of drinking water into the bucket so that I could get cleaned up. This would make for a great journal entry; I could see my mother’s face contort as she read of the horrific sufferings of her sweet and innocent child. (I wouldn’t tell her everything: just enough to ensure that my next care package included a box of Cap’n Crunch and some Cadbury milk chocolates.) Never mind that our two showers cost the equivalent of a coffee picker’s daily wage… we couldn’t go without bathing! Besides, the mission office paid for our drinking water, and they wouldn’t miss an extra three dollars. I wonder how everyone else got by.

Months later and cities away we knocked on a door to avoid the drunks at the end of the street. The man who answered must have only recently left their company. His sister was home, and she managed to smile through the entire lesson in spite of her brother’s awkward questions and occasional outbursts of “The Bible is God’s word!” She said that her husband might be interested, and Brother Aquino soaked it all in on the next visit. An occasional trip to church replaced an occasional beer, and their struggles culminated in the healing waters of baptism. Their new faith was still scorned by family members, but happiness is hard to hamper.
“The branch has been split, and we are working hard to keep it growing.” Over a year had passed since my time in Joya. “Nahum comes to church once in a while….you heard that their shack collapsed, right? …A lot of the adobe huts fell in on themselves during the seasonal rains and a few days of strong wind….They were pretty traumatized, actually. Elder Call and I visit them every now and then, and the branch president is trying to help. What else can we do?”

After a year and a half I realize that the kids in those “help with just a Dollar-a-Day” commercials are living pretty well compared with the plastic-covered reed huts here in the carrizal. At least Joya was by a major highway, this canton (village) is a twenty minute hike through a ravine. The sound of dusty footprints seems to echo the wails from the little evangelical church. After the service the women will return to help their husbands weave tomorrow’s lunch. At least they have soccer. Everyone lives for the Saturday matches on the sloped, open patch of dirt they call a field. Well, everyone except for the two players that got shot during half-time last week. We heard the gun go off on our way out. Two more dreams of getting out by playing for a semi-pro team shattered by the reality of this place.

Past the ravine and around the volcano, Sister Lyon drove her Suburban like she was playing bumper cars. They all spoke English, and their favorite phrase when we said that we had to go was, “No, we already compramos la pizza.” I was shocked by their high-speed Internet and leather furniture, and even more shocked to realize that it all used to be normal. The nice part of San Salvador was not the rest of the country. Did they not grasp that the majority of their countrymen were getting robbed on the bus—or were being forced to pay extra “rent” by the pandilleros—while they sat around watching reality TV? Blissful in spite of the suffering around the corner, and yet they didn’t seem any happier with their Persian rug than Nahum did with his dirt floor.

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I lean my head against the bedpost and feel a little depressed as I reread some old journal entries. I just got finished watching my first movie in two years: “Bolt: Super-dog.” I sat on the floor of the living room, grateful my disconcerted face was hidden in the semi-darkness. My little brother got upset because I didn’t
laugh as much as I should have. It was funny, but it felt like such a waste of time. I just want to be back on a bus handing out a Book of Mormon while my companion gets his phone stolen. I miss seeing the light in people’s eyes as they realize that our message of Christ is designed to lift and strengthen, skipping the standard plug for a “collaboration”. I need to sit under a tin roof and feel the love of the Lord as I eat beans and tortillas that would have fed the family that I’m visiting, but that they gave to me. My clutching thoughts are interrupted by Mom’s invitation to go shopping. I slip into the car, hating myself for enjoying each new pair of jeans, knowing that they are taking me ever farther from who I thought I’d become.

“Moving on” they call it. I’m back at school pretending to study while getting ready for “the next big step.” Mom makes up for two years of lost phone conversations: “Have you met any nice girls in your ward yet?”; “What about that blonde that you took dancing freshman year?”; “Make friends!”; “Get good grades.”; “Remember what you’ve learned, but think of your future.” But the way ahead seems so backwards, and all I look forward to is thinking back.

And so I go through the list one more time, making sure to forget nothing: charcoal, hatchet, flashlight, Ramen, hand towel…. The backpack has enough room for the S’mores and the thermal underwear, both essential. A grin of memory flashes across my mind as I stuff the waterproof tarp next to the flour tortillas. The squirrels won’t care if my hair is messy, or if I’d rather read than talk to them. They might even understand my Spanish, or at least share my food. No one will gawk at me when I lick my fingers or take off my shoes. This weekend: I’m going camping.