Red Rose

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Red Rose

Abstract
Red Rose follows the narrator’s innermost thoughts and feelings of abruptly being immersed into a culture very different from her own. While hiking with her brother, a second year environmental Peace Corps volunteer, to visit the home and garden of a Nicaraguan native, she reflects on the changes she sees in her brother and her inability to communicate in a foreign country. She struggles to overcome her feelings of linguistic isolation while still being fascinated by the culture around her. The piece ends on a lovely image of universal understanding.

Keywords
travel, international travel, Nicaragua, family relationships, siblings, language, language barriers, Spanish, Peace Corps, Central America, sustainability, nature, gardens, hiking, cultural diversity, creative writing

Disciplines
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Red Rose

My foot slipped on the rock in front of me, and my hand sunk deep into a pool of mud. Having just prevented an embarrassing fall that undoubtedly would have ended in disaster, I straightened up and wiped my right hand on the closest tree trunk.

“You all right?” My brother’s voice came from somewhere in the trees ahead of me. I took a few more steps, careful to avoid the most slippery slabs of rock in the increasingly slanting forest path, before he and his friend, Xavier, came into view.

“Yes,” I said, returning a reassuring smile, “all good.” The remaining mud on my hand had already begun to cake in the August heat. I picked it off absentmindedly as we continued up into the trees and onto the mountain, enthralled by my surroundings if not my current hygienic state. I hadn’t showered in days, but a little more mud under my fingernails wouldn’t hurt.

It wasn’t my first time in Nicaragua. In the spring of 2011, I toured with my College Choir up and down among the cities of the country’s west coast, staying with host families and singing for school children. Over the course of ten days we drove through the capital city of Managua, slept in the nation’s intellectual center of Leon, and visited the country’s southwest regions of Masaya and Granada. I ate great food and saw big volcanoes along the way, but I was traveling with a group of fifty very Americanized college students, many of whom, I gathered, did not fully appreciate the culture through which we were traveling. I got gipped. I never felt like I got the true Nicaraguan experience.
So I jumped at the chance to go back and visit my brother, Greg. Just three years older, he was a second year environmental Peace Corps volunteer, living at the edge of a small town tucked away from the larger cities of the west coast, in the municipality of Santa Lucia in the rural countryside. His house was modest in size by U.S. standards, although his four rooms could have easily housed a Nicaraguan family of six or more.

Sitting on Greg’s lumpy futon with its broken, middle bar digging into my backside, I could look into every room; there were no doors. Stained t-shirts, which I assumed he had been wearing continuously for the past two years, hung on a pole in a corner of the bedroom. He called this his walk-in closet. His yellow mosquito net draped from the ceiling over the double mattress. Through an opening in the wall to my left was the kitchen with its cement sink, rickety stove, and mini-fridge imported from Managua. Not everyone in Santa Lucia had a fridge. There was no running water between the hours of six a.m and six p.m. Sometimes it didn’t even turn on at all. The bug near the broken and brown toilet watched me with skeptical eyes. Bats flew around his house at night, peeing and pooping on just about everything. And when it rained, it really
rained. It was impossible to even hold a conversation across a room as the rain hit loudly against the tin roof that wasn’t even connected to the walls of the house.

I wasn’t allowed to pet the dogs outside. I couldn’t drink the water. Everything was dirty. And I loved it. I was finally experiencing Nicaragua, but I also knew I don’t quite belong. The only thing reminding me that Greg wasn’t a true Nicaraguan himself was his laptop sitting open next to a plastic bag of rice.

The mountain path continued to slope upwards. I was careful to avoid the tree roots reaching out to trip me. It was my second day in Santa Lucia, and we were on our way to the house of Inocente Mayorga. For over thirty years he and his wife had lived on the side of one of the mountains surrounding the capital town of Santa Lucia. Greg had been helping Inocente build a garden on the steep hillside next to his house. I was eager to see it, but it was a long hike. Instead of taking the narrower path meant strictly for humans, we walked the slightly wider one designed for pack animals. I was sure this was to accommodate for my lack of surefootedness on the unfamiliar terrain. It’s amazing that women, even pregnant and in flip-flops, could do this daily.

Xavier was out in front. His long legs carried him gracefully up over the rocks jutting haphazardly from the ground. Xavier was a native Nicaraguan and spoke little to no English. Although we could communicate through the use of rudimentary hand gestures, true direct conversation was essentially impossible without my brother to translate. Greg walked behind him, impressive in his own ability to jump up from one boulder to the next.
Greg and I used to spend a lot of time together in the woods as kids. At the ages of six and nine, the trees surrounding our childhood home became our playground. The trunk of the hickory “Y Tree”, named for its shape, our slide. The “Vine Fort”, a tangled mess of shedding bark and vine, our jungle-gym. The low hanging branches in “Fern Valley” our monkey bars. “The Mossy Place”, an outcrop at the top of a small hill covered in nature’s shag carpet, was where we would lie at the end of the day with a picnic and look at the clouds. We used tree stumps to carve arrowheads from slabs of rock we pulled from the ground. We dug holes in our paths and covered them with leaves in places only we would remember; this was obviously to keep out any unwanted burglars. Greg even drew maps, immortalizing the intricate world we had created. Hiking in the woods together was nothing new, but we had both grown up, and I found myself a stranger in his new playground.

As a member of the Peace Corps’ Environment Education and Awareness program, Greg was responsible for helping the community of Santa Lucia manage their natural resources and promote environmental education. He weekly visited elementary and secondary schools in the surrounding areas, teaching about soil conservation, forestry, and sustainable gardening practices. He was in charge and oversaw organizational development of environmental groups. He built friendships with the children and other teachers. He built relationships with the people and families living around him. He built himself a community, gaining fluency in a foreign language and coming to experience a deep cross-cultural understanding.

Two years had really changed him. In 2010 he couldn’t speak Spanish, he hadn’t yet befriended then slaughtered his own turkey, and had never before owned
his own machete. He didn’t know then that as a Nicaraguan Peace Corps volunteer, he would spend much of his time teaching children in the countryside’s rural schools about the importance of recycling, gardening, and sustainability. He didn’t know then that he would head a project dedicated to building and installing seventy eco-friendly, wood-burning stoves within homes throughout the greater Santa Lucia municipality. Greg didn’t know he could really make a difference.

I adjusted the bag on my shoulders that held my camera and the bottle containing the last of my few precious drops of boiled water, and I scurried along behind them. I was far less stable. I was afraid I was slowing them down.

After several hours amid dense trees, flourishing shrubbery, and the sounds of unfamiliar birds, we crested a hill. The path evened out, grass spreading tall and wild on the brief plateau of the hillside. I caught my breath, daring to take a sip from the bottle on my back, and turned around. The rural landscape of Nicaragua stretched before me under a broad expanse of blue sky. I could see for miles, straight through the valley to faraway mountains. Almost everything was green. Slow moving clouds cast long shadows over the tops of the sea of trees. In the far distance was the dust road I had
ridden on by bus to reach Santa Lucia, a small snake winding among foothills. And there was the town of Santa Lucia itself, the sun glinting off its rooftops.

“Lista?” Xavier asked, eventually breaking the silence. Greg translated with a quick “ready?” and I nodded, throwing the tail of my braid over my shoulder before heading up the last hundred yards to Inocente’s house.

Inocente, a middle-aged man with dark skin and kind eyes, spoke fast Spanish to both Xavier and Greg as he ushered us out of the sun and into his modest home. His blue and red striped shirt showed stains around the collar and on its belly. A red cap hid his dark brown hair. I took a seat in a dusty plastic chair by the door. I caught a few of their words, but I was essentially linguistically lost. Looking to Greg for help, I found he was deep in a Spanish conversation I didn’t understand, leaving me to observe the house in which we had been thoroughly welcomed. The main room was no bigger than my own bedroom at home. On one side sat a small, yellow-painted hutch holding overused toys and dolls with skin the same dusty color of the dirt floor. On the other a multicolored mesh hammock hung from the ceiling. The walls were lined with newspaper, covering holes and cracks in the wood. A mangy dog skulked under the table along the opposite wall while chickens ran past my feet. A faded floral bed
sheet hanging directly to the right of Xavier acted as door to the bedroom. It was as warm in the house as it was outside in the sun. I was really thirsty. But I pushed the thought away. I was finally in Nicaragua.

“Inocente’s wife has prepared food for us,” Greg finally said to me in English. “It’s customary to serve guests, especially if they have walked a long way. Xavier even brought them a chicken in premeditated appreciation.”

“Cool. Do you know what it is?” I asked.

“Probably some sort of meat and gallo pinto.”

“Alright! I love rice and beans.” I crossed the room at Greg’s beckoning, dragging my chair along with me and smiling shyly at Inocente lounging in his hammock, to sit at the room’s only small table. I noticed neither Inocente nor his wife sat with us. I wondered if the chicken I was served ran through the house only that morning.

I was thankful to have something to look busy with. Rather than blatantly gazing around the room, I was able to stare at my food, pushing the generous helping around the edges of the chipped ceramic plate with my fork. It was delicious, but I became aware after only a few bites that I wouldn't be able to eat it all.

“Greg, I won’t be able to eat all this.” I worried about being rude.

“Don’t worry.” Having been joking with Xavier, he switched back once more to English. “They’ll understand. When I first got here, I couldn’t eat everything either. Their food is so heavy and rich it just sucks the moisture out of you, I know.”
And have you noticed they don’t drink anything with meals? That definitely took
time getting used to.”

“Yeah, I noticed. I’m so thirsty.” I took another sip of my water, but not too
much. It was almost gone. I took
one last bite of rice as a chick ran
over my sneaker under the table.

Once we were done
eating, it was time to see the
garden. A short distance from the
house, the rows upon rows of
fruits and vegetables were
planted on what looked like a
forty-five degree angle. The slope was incredible. I wondered at the amount of
dedication and time needed to complete a project in such a remote location. What
tools were used? How did they prepare the land? What did they plant? Did they use
organic pesticides? So many questions ran through my head, but the three men were
conversing again in Spanish, balancing on the hillside. I watched them, especially my
brother, envious of his newly acquired fluency of a second language. He could see
and understand aspects of Nicaraguan culture that I couldn’t even begin to
comprehend. My own language felt foreign and intrusive in that beautiful place. I
stayed silent.

Staring out over the garden and down into the valley, I was reminded of a
previous hike during the summer of 2004. Having already spent the previous two
days on the Appalachian Trail, Greg and I took a short detour and climbed Mt. Monroe, located in the southern Presidential Range of New Hampshire’s White Mountains to watch the sun set behind white clouds. At the ages of thirteen and sixteen, we didn’t have much in common and had little to talk about. But we joked about our parents, quoted *The Lord of the Rings*, and threw rocks over the edge of the mountain. At the time, I had been reading Michael Crichton’s *Timeline* where a group of history students travel to and are trapped in fourteenth century France. Together we talked about the story and how scary it must be to find yourself lost in a world you know you don’t belong. I had forgotten this conversation until I was standing, lost but not quite alone, on a mountain in a world that wasn’t mine. It was almost dark when Greg and I finally made it back down to Mt. Monroe’s base that night. Although that hike was a short one, it was the last I could remember that he and I took alone. At most, it was a short forty-minute excursion, but it had been just the two of us. Eight years later, Nicaragua and Inocente’s mountainside garden instantly became more special.

I bent down to examine the plant growing at my feet.

“That’s *ayote,*” Greg had come over to join me.

“It’s what?”

“It’s a squash kind of like a pumpkin. *Pipian* is just regular squash.”
“Pipian and ayote,” I tried out the words, “Ok, cool. So what are these?” I pointed to the trees to our left.

“There are several variations of platanos here. Platanos are plantains. You know, they are a bit like bananas. We also planted cebolla, onion, papas, potatoes, and tomate, which are obviously tomatoes.” He showed me each in turn as we walked, carefully winding our way in and out of the rows. I might have stepped on a tomatos while I practiced the other plant names under my breath.

“So, Greg, what exactly did you do to help build this?” We stopped next to some papas.

“Well, it’s Inocente’s project really. He did most of the work in the beginning, but, specifically, I planted all the maiz. That’s corn.”

“Yes, thank you. I did know that one.” He smirked at my sarcasm.

“I bet you won’t know this, though. Ever heard of a jicaro?”

“No.” I shook my head, feeling sweat drip down my forehead. He went on to explain that jicaro was a type of tree used to make a cumba. “What’s a cumba?”

“It’s a hollowed out piece of fruit from the tree used to plant maiz. You put maiz in it and attach it around your waist with a strap. After poking holes in the dirt with a stick called an espeke, you drop in three pieces from the cumba. That’s what I did, except I used a plastic cumba rather than the traditional jicaro one.”
“Very cool.” I realized again, more harshly this time, that there was so much I didn’t know and couldn’t understand.

I was sweating through my shirt as we walked around to the opposite side of the house, where lemon trees were growing beside a basin of water. I was thankful for the shade. Inocente picked three pieces of fruit from the branch above his head and gave them to Greg.

“Muchas Gracias, Inocente.” Turning to me, he said, “We can make lemonade out of these later,” before dropping them into the small pack on his back.

Inocente pointed animatedly to the basin filled with sparkling clear water. I couldn’t understand him, but I smiled and nodded back at him as he spoke, his dark skin crinkling around the eyes. Greg translated as fast as he could under his breath, taking care to wait for Inocente to complete a thought before continuing on.

“He’s saying that there’s a naturally occurring spring up the mountain here that feeds into a stream... He tapped it at its source and ran a series of hoses and tubes down the hill... The water runs by gravity and fills up the concrete basin.”

I continued to nod and smiled, looking directly at Inocente rather than Greg. Regardless of the language barrier, direct eye contact somehow made it all easier to understand. My mouth became instantly drier, though, when I looked at the clear water glinting with sunlight through the lemon trees. I became fully aware of my dehydration. But it didn’t matter. Even though Inocente’s house was wallpapered with newspapers covering holes in its wood, he had manually diverted a steam to use as his own personal spring on top of a mountain. Amazing. I swallowed my saliva.
Inocente began, if it was even possible, talking more quickly. Greg told me he was describing a coconut tree that once grew by his house. The story went by too quickly for translation at the time, so I made a mental note to remind Greg to tell it to me again later. It wasn't until I returned to the States, though, that I asked Greg for the story. He responded with an email with both a Spanish and English translation:

Sara-Here's the iNoCeNtE sToRy:

Hubo un palo de coco gigante que crecía en las orillas de la montaña cerca de la casa de Don Inocente Mayorga. Inocente había sembrado el árbol hace treinta años atrás cuando él llegó al terreno donde se construiría su casa y se criarían sus hijos. El palo era recto y alto y le dio muchas frutas durante su vida noble. Desde las alturas del palo cayeron cocos hermosos llenos de leche refrescante que la esposa de Inocente solía utilizar para preparar la comida. Por la protección que proveyó el árbol magnífico y elegante, el viento terrorífico que a menudo sopla en la montaña durante la temporada lluviosa casi no llegaba a molestar la casa.

Un día hubo una tormenta furiosa en la montaña, y entre la bulla y el alboroto de la lluvia que golpeaba el techo, los truenos que resonaban en el valle abajo, y los relámpagos que destellaban intercedentemente, cayó un rayo sobre el palo de coco valiente. La mañana siguiente cuando se había terminado la tormenta violenta, Inocente encontró el palo caído y lloró por la pérdida del amigo que había sido como un parte de su familia por tanto tiempo.

There was a giant coconut tree that grew on the side of the mountain close to Don Inocente Mayorga’s house. Inocente had planted the tree thirty years back when he came to place where he would build his house and raise his kids. The tree was straight and tall and provided him with many fruits during its noble life. From the heights of the tree fell beautiful fat coconuts full of refreshing milk that Incoente’s wife often used in her cooking. Because of the protection the magnificent and elegant tree provided, the terrifying wind that blows in the mountains during the rainy season barely affected the house.

One day there was a furious storm on the mountain, and in the noise and confusion of the rain that pounded the roof, the thunder that resounded in the valley below, and the bursts of lighting that flashed
intermittently, a bolt of lighting hit the brave tree. The following morning when the violent storm had finished, Inocente found the fallen tree and cried for the loss of the friend that had been like part of his family for so long.

I wondered what Inocente was doing as I read the email and was reminded, even more poignantly this time in the comfort of my own familiar surroundings, how very different and special life in Nicaragua really was.

It was a strange feeling having to leave Inocente’s house so soon that day. Although we had been there for several hours, I felt as though there was so much still to see. The sun had even started to sink, just cresting above the tip of the mountain. How was it that it was still so hot? And I had only just begun to feel comfortable enough to try communicating directly with Inocente. My attempts, though, were essentially futile. I tried saying something in the vicinity of Spanish that I hoped sounded humble and gracious as we made our way back in front of his house.

“Muchas gracias por... comida... y limones... me gusta tu casa y... con, con...” I trailed off in embarrassment, and we instead stared smiling at each other after that awkward and brief effort. But Inocente just picked a red rose growing by the side of his house and placed it gently into my palm. I smiled up at him again at this simple gesture. Some things are universal.