

Leaving Gracias

Esau's father, the preacher, drives a dirt bike. When he comes to claim Esau from this tiny adobe school in the afternoons, the dust from the street follows him through the giant door like a dirty fog, and he then whisks Esau away toward the towering mountain behind town, the bike's rumble fading to a thin whine.

Esau is six and shy, with round brown eyes like those of a kid on a cereal box. In class, his brain can't hold onto anything—we're nearing the end of the school year and he can't name the letter that follows A. It has become obvious to everyone but his father that he has a learning disability. Once, in confidence, Esau's mother told me that the father forced Esau to kneel on a bed of nails as punishment for his poor performance in first grade. The father is building a church just outside of town.

What's more, I have no idea what I'm doing. I'm twenty-three, American, and living in a boxy cement apartment in the mountains of Honduras, with no formal training in education. But here I stand, watching over these wild children on the playground as the sun seeps through the clouds, burning the night's dampness away entirely. While the days are still scorched and everything's still covered in dust, on corners of the cobblestone streets in this colonial town, men in cowboy hats and women in colorful dresses talk about the coming rain, the *cambio del clima*—the change in season. The *cambio del clima* is to blame and thank for innumerable ailments and phenomena, I've learned, and I'm waiting anxiously for what it will bring and what it will take away.

I landed in this country nine months ago, and after a confusing, day-long trek of broken-down cars and threats of pilfered luggage and the flash of an antique pistol, I finally settled down in the town of Gracias. Now, I clop up these uneven streets every morning, dodging horse droppings and old men on bikes; waving to the same women sweeping their stoops as they call out "*adios, Mister*"; and creaking open the door to *La Escuela Villa Verde*. In the center of everything waits the playground, where deflated plastic balls and small children and bright butterflies whisk around beneath two immense mango trees until the bell rings.

I hate to ring the bell and send the children scattering because Esau's smile all but vanishes inside the classroom. On the playground, he

plays like the other first-graders, blurring about in whatever game of tag they've invented today. He's careful, sometimes timid, but when he's at ease, a smile takes over his face so that it's hard to look away. In class, he's kind and sensitive, but his wide eyes show no flicker of recognition when we sing songs or recite the ABCs. Some days, I think I see fear in those eyes, but I can't be sure.

My father is a teacher. I am not. I came to Honduras with no teaching experience, no credentials. In fact, in college I worked to escape my high school guidance counselors' predictions that I would become a teacher like my father. I avoided all courses with the word "education" in their titles, spending my time instead studying writing. But as I neared graduation, I knew I didn't want to return to Appalachia, where my family has been holed up for over two hundred years; I wanted to be away, to explore, to find myself vanished in an unknown world. But to disappear, I realized, I needed to teach. My degree in English didn't seem to position me to do much else in Latin America, so I found this job online, my dad loaned me a book called *Chalking It Up to Experience*, and I scoured state guidelines to get a sense of what first-grade students should know. Before catching my flight, I felt ready.

But I hadn't—couldn't have—prepared for a classroom of children living at the foot of a cloud forest and wrapped in wisdom and anxiety and beauty and broken promises.

I'm the only man in the school. The other teachers, an even mix of Hondurans and Americans, are Misses and *profesoras*. I'm the only Mister. I've no doubt that some people in town believe *Mister* to be my given name (sounding more like Meester), as strangers freely call out to me—the only white man for miles—at every turn. This title carries with it a growing number of expectations: allowing students to climb on me like a jungle gym, handling playground soccer scuffles, changing the hard-to-reach lightbulbs. Last week, a fatherless fourth-grade student asked me if he could call me Dad when no one was around. My Spanish is comfortable and colloquial from classes and a long stint in Costa Rica, yet inside the walls of this school, I often find myself at a loss for words.

Early in the year, I met with a student's mother to discuss his hitting of other children on the playground; she scolded him and smacked him soundly upon the head. Yesterday, I met with Esau's father to raise the possibility of Esau repeating first grade; he scoffed and said he would deal with his son at home. Tomorrow, I will meet with another father because his six-year-old son has been habitually masturbating during class. Like usual, I have no idea what to say.

But at least I'll have a chance to say *something*. Many of the children in my class have no mothers or fathers to call on—they've all gone for *El Norte*. The irony doesn't escape me that these students' parents left Gracias for America in order to afford this kind of opportunity: sending their children to a private bilingual school. And thus the bizarre, uneven swap: the children lost their parents, but they gained me, Mister, dropping in from the mythical America to talk in funny voices and push them on the swings from 8:00 to 3:00.

My student Jairo has no memory of his parents. He lives with his grandmother and aunt and other children in a small house near the river. I visited them one night. There was no power, and in the darkness it seemed that an endless lot of children ran through the house. I couldn't quite see them, could only feel the air as they rushed by and giggled like happy ghosts.

His mother left him alone in an apartment in Tegucigalpa when she went for America. He was two. His aunt found him a few days later, covered in his own waste. Today, he is rail-thin, with a broad, gapped smile; he's something of a cartoon character, wiry and awkward. He falls often on the playground but pops right up, brushes off his knobby knees, sticks out his chest, and starts running again like a rooster fleeing the ax.

Wilmer, too, lives with an ailing grandmother and cousins and knows his mother only from letters and gifts. Every week he tells me that she is coming to Honduras for a visit. She isn't, but he imagines that she will pop in and take him away any weekend. She never fails to appear in his drawings: floating in the sky, sitting outside of a house, riding a lion.

Wilmer has raw, enviable soccer talent. Hondurans know soccer, and even unathletic children can strike a ball and understand the principles of the game. Wilmer, though, has marvelous touches and such natural form that he seems poised to join the national team in a decade. Of course, he's only six and this is a small mountain town in which Wilmer's skills won't likely be harnessed or nurtured. Still, on the playground and from the TV, he's learning to flop and grab his leg for a foul and sympathy. *Mister*, he calls.

The boundaries separating a teacher and guardian and friend are unclear here. Students sometimes appear at my apartment in the afternoons, and at school they pet me like a lazy dog. I'm odd, I realize—I have much more hair on my arms than evolution allowed Central American men, and while I'm barely six feet tall, I measure as a near giant among most men in town. When I sit on the bench overlooking the playground during recess, Mario is suddenly working his way up my

back, Luna is absentmindedly pawing my arm hair while waiting her turn at hopscotch, and Wilmer is pulling my other arm to play soccer: “Come, Mister.”

But I am leaving this town soon. When the school year ends, I will be yet another adult vanishing into the ether of America. Just another changing season.

Across the street from my classroom stands a seventeenth-century church, built when this land still belonged to the Lenca people. Today, their language is dead, and they live deep in the mountains or diffused within the people of this town. Their leader, Lempira, was beheaded just before the Spanish took control; now a profile of his head appears on Honduran currency.

The Spanish government is repairing the shambled church, perhaps out of guilty colonial conscience, but whatever the case, the project has started and stopped four times this year. The funds disappear within Honduran bureaucracy. No one is working on the church now, despite the half-finished roof and the coming rainy season.

The same Spanish project is renovating a nineteenth-century house alongside the church—the *Casa Galeano*—in order to convert it into a museum. For now, only hard hats are allowed inside, even though work entirely stopped some months ago. I snuck in recently with the help of an old man who cares for the botanical gardens. As we stumbled about in the dark, he shined his flashlight on the walls to reveal delicate and subtle hand-painted wallpaper—pink lines and flowers—and portraits of proud Galeano men painted directly onto the walls, falling away in flakes.

No one here seems to believe that the Spanish plans will ever be completed. In fact, people hardly seem to notice the intermittent work. A shared skepticism about any outside project imbues the town—people call the *Cuerpo de Paz* (the Peace Corps) the *Cuerpo de Paseo* (the Traveling Corps). They know no one stays for long.

Adios, a passing greeting in rural Honduras, floats around the street all day as people pass on their way to the market or the river; it’s meant to say “hi” and “see you later” all in one breath, yet lately when strangers call out to me—*adios*, Mister—I wonder if they’re stating the obvious, predicting the future.

Tourists sometimes drop down into this valley to hike up Mount Celaque, the tallest mountain in the country, throwing its shadow over the town. And every year, a tourist vanishes in the cloud forest atop the mountain, having left the poorly marked trail and been swallowed up

in the haze. The news floats around town for a few days, but then it, too, disappears.

While my students mention the possibility of my staying another year, they know the American teachers come and go. They wish I would stay but know I won't. I thought I might but now know I can't. I came here escaping the mountains of home; I'd been running from Appalachia for years: washing away my accent, attending college off in the flatlands, studying for months in Costa Rica. Yet, strangely, what I found here in western Honduras was what I left behind in western North Carolina: mountains worn down, people made nervous by outsiders, life reliant on the stubborn land. I found myself amid residues of home. Turned around.

As if finally stepping into the profession of my father—the job my teachers always said I'd take—has snapped me onto a predestined path, I now feel a genetic pull back to those hazy Blue Ridge Mountains my people settled in the eighteenth century. When my contract ends, I will return. And I will teach.

But as these parentless children tug on me day after day, I think about that loaded word the Spanish government likely uses when crafting renovation plans: responsibility. What can I give these children, what do I owe them? It took months of house visits and midday coffees to gain trust, to become Mister, but as the school year ends and the old church and Casa Galeano still stand in ruins, I wonder what I leave in my wake. What, if anything, is built up; what's ruined.

Everything becomes clearer at lunchtime. At the bell, the giant wooden door separating us from the dusty street swings open; mothers and grandmothers and servants and siblings file in under parasols, carrying trays and plastic-wrapped plates. They take over my classroom, and I fade into the corner like the interloper I am.

Before lunch, in their green-and-white uniforms, my students show few signs of poverty. But once the food starts coming, the line appears dividing the kids evenly between those on scholarship and those of affluent parents—a dentist, an engineer, a senator. The poor students get *baleadas*, tortillas smeared with beans and cheese. Jairo takes his passed from the street by a cousin, who slides the food through the bars of the window as if it's illicit prison contraband. The better-off students get meals richer than my simple fare of rice and beans: meat to sidle up against their vegetables, a little something sweet on the edge. Gracia, however, whose father is an engineer and whose mother is a pharmacist and whose uncle built ships used in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, receives

a Disney lunchbox filled with fresh fish or steaming stew or tender beef—and, once, a Happy Meal brought three hours from the city. The other children levitate from their seats, half-chewed food spilling out as they observe the wonders of Gracia's lunch. She blushes and folds her embroidered napkin across her lap.

Luna's lunch arrives floating high above everyone's head, her father, Mito, sweeping in like a tuxedoed waiter, a towel draped across his arm and the tray of food perched on his fingertips. He actually wears green cargo pants splattered with paint and holes, old combat boots, and a white undershirt revealing his soft belly and armpit hair—Mito's name translates to *myth*. Still, all eating stops to watch the grand reveal.

Mito, a painter, lives in a hundred-year-old house ten yards from my classroom's window. The Casa Galeano belonged to his great-grandfather, and the grounds of Mito's house take up the entire block perpendicular. The gardens within the eight-foot-tall adobe walls are better kept and livelier than those of the botanical gardens one hundred meters away—toucans often perch just outside his kitchen window in the afternoon. As I walk to school every morning, Mito sits on a stool in his cluttered front room, his balding head and ponytail facing an easel positioned for anyone passing to see.

His lunchtime shows may receive more attention than his artwork: the children *ooh* and *aah* over Luna's bowl of circled strawberries with whipped cream forming a cloud inside or tortillas wrapped like stems with lettuce and cheese sprouting from within.

On the playground and in class, Luna is all smiles—floating about like a fairy, her long wavy hair lifting with each easy step—but at lunch, she frowns in embarrassment when Mito sets the bright spread of food in front of her with a bow. All of the children ask, *you don't want it? You don't want it? ¡Qué rico, Luna! Give it to me.*

Children aren't allowed to trade food. Kind, embarrassed kids like Luna would give everything away; timid, poor ones like Jairo would shrink upon realizing they're eating something no one wants. I'll admit that after months of eating beans and eggs and rice and tortillas, I sometimes find myself gravitating toward Luna's and Gracia's food, too. But I maintain my Mister role, and we sit at our separate desks and eat. As we do, I look over the classroom and try to imagine the lot of them as adults. I wonder if these food lines—the beans and the Happy Meal—will predestine them; I wonder what this class, and my brief time as their teacher in it, might allow them.

My education freed me from my mountains—led me to college, opened up a world beyond the constricting land and stereotypes of

Appalachia. Looking over these tiny people in this tiny place nestled in the mountains, I wonder if this private bilingual education will likewise send these students bolting from the highlands for work in the city or chasing after ghosts of parents in America. Am I here preparing them to leave?

Yet here I sit, thousands of miles outside of my mountains, a worldly perspective and a private-school liberal arts degree in my pocket, and I feel nothing but tugged back to the simple land I once only wanted to escape. Maybe—somehow—this classroom and our field trips to the botanical gardens and ancient churches and hot springs will give these children reason to stay, to persist on this land named centuries ago by the Spanish explorers, who, relieved at the sight of a flat patch of land amid the never-ending mountains, stopped here, raised their hands after days of wandering, and said *gracias a Dios*—thanks to God.

Before long, I take over the classroom again; we wipe the desks clean of the evidence and return to the ever-equalizing playground. Esau, a grin covering his face, chases Luna past the swings; Gracia tags Jairo after he trips in a poof of dust beneath the monkey bars.

On the bench above the playground, I have another conversation with Zoila, the school's custodian, about the United States. She plans to go soon, knows someone who can set her up with a coyote, she says. She tried once before to make "the swim," but a crooked coyote left her stranded in Guatemala, and she came home. She asks again how much janitors make there, and her eyes beam when I share the federal minimum wage.

Pretty soon the other grades appear on the playground, too. Zoila's son, a second-grader, runs smiling past her, chasing Wilmer and the soccer ball. Her son receives a scholarship to attend our school, and her husband appears involved and kind. Yet Zoila is consumed with visions of hundred-dollar days in *Los Estados*, no matter the cost of leaving her family and her charmed, dusty hometown. It's her responsibility, she believes, to make more for her family, to break free of Gracias. During our chats, I try to suggest that her life is better here, calmer and simpler, but who am I to talk, mere months away from catching a plane to a comfortable bed and a teaching job in North Carolina and something other than beans and rice for lunch? Still, I wonder if Zoila won't feel what I feel once she leaves: the natural pull of the mountains of home.

A few fourth-graders on the playground take our attention when their eternal soccer match stops. Shielding their eyes, they point toward the cloudless sky: "*un jet! un jet!*" they call. I follow their point-

er fingers to find a silver flick of an airplane, leaving contrails across the usually open sky. The life on the playground stills—jump ropes lie limp, swings swing empty. Some kids wave at the glint of metal, holler *hola*. Others guess where it is going. New York. China. Someplace else. Always someplace else.

After I leave Gracias, a new American will appear, filling my spot and the perpetual hole of vanished parents. I will begin teaching Latino immigrants in the elementary school I attended as a boy. The teachers there who once taught alongside my father will sometimes call me by his name by accident; I will stop correcting them. I will hear the students' stories of crossing rivers and trekking through deserts and finally landing in my classroom, and I will put my arm around a boy who cries when he sits down at a computer for the first time. I will feel helpless as a father raises money to reclaim his wife and daughter held as ransom by coyotes along the border and will be overjoyed when a Honduran student finally receives a lifesaving heart surgery he never could have received back home. But before I fly away and before Zoila decides to go for America and before Esau's father removes him from the school, I take my class on a final field trip. We trudge up the hill behind town, working our way to the now-faded nineteenth-century Spanish fort built to fight off the Lenca—*El Castillo*, everyone says.

Earlier this year, a puma descended upon *El Castillo* after farmers' fires on the mountain spread. All morning, the displaced giant cat circled the cannons and guard towers; schools closed their doors tight, and the radio urged everyone to stay inside. But by the afternoon, the puma finally crept back up the mountain and life resumed. That evening, we heard its cries in the still-smoky distance. A local naturalist told me the frantic calls were surely those of a mother searching for a lost cub somewhere in the mountains.

But on this day, only a hairy American named Mister and twenty-two bouncing Honduran children conquer the Spanish towers. There, above all of Gracias and beneath the giant mountain and amid loaded history, I ask them to draw what they see. Wilmer colors his mom sitting and smiling above the shambled church, and Gracia sketches a practiced Mickey Mouse dancing through the park. Jairo's paper is colorful and jumbled and spilling off the page, while Luna's is detailed with myriad birds circling Celaque's bright green peak. Esau is meticulous in getting down every soft cloud above town, but as he sketches one, it floats away, and he erases and starts over.

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