

Big Alley
and Backstreets

El Callejón

Judith Ravin



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Big Alley and Backstreets | El Callejón

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Dedicated to childhoods lost and stolen through armed conflict, internecine warfare, raging gang violence, and global hotspots of food insecurity – the true backdrop against which I craft these tales, taking momentary refuge to recharge from the surrounding cries for justice.

Except for the Jehovah's Witnesses in conservative billowing skirts below the knee, fashions on these streets are intensely flesh-favoring. Women and pubescent girls sport tops and bottoms with cut-out elements and spray-on fittings that contour the body closely, whatever the body type, thick to thin.

Into the Wind

If my former life in India were turned on its head – high-profile job, security detail, leadership role with broad responsibilities, ample residence, 24-hour office access – it would still not approximate the change in winds that my present reality represents as I lean into a new tack, living and working on the backstreets of a small Dominican town in a hard-core crisscrossed neighborhood of mixed Dominican and Haitian-heritage communities sharing challenges and space side by side.

Cabarete, “capital of waves and winds” on the Dominican Republic’s northern (Atlantic) coast, offers the casual visitor a version of itself that glosses over inequities and complex, deeply rich cultural fusions. For the longer-term resident such as myself, interested in the “DR” unvarnished, this spot on the map offers stories from the backstreets and alleyways, surrounding fields and hills, informing my days and vision. When in 2010 the last census of the town was completed, it had a population of over 14,600. From then until now, the number has grown, with others and their issues absorbed into the fold.

Decibel levels run high on the backstreets of Cabarete. Music blasts at all hours of the day and night. Even tiny shopfronts and sidewalk setups with no interior space for customer walk-ins project their ambient music onto the street, moving the neighborhood to the rhythms of bachata, merengue,

salsa, and kizomba – all equally pulsating genres set to LOUD. The positive charge of these sounds overtakes any needs sleeping babies, the infirm, or the elderly may have.

On Saturdays, a sound-wave ceasefire goes in effect while the choir and voice of a featured female vocalist fill the air from the open-door meeting in the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses. During these early morning hours, music from the Hall dominates a decent radius, giving way to the renewed sound counteroffensive only when the congregation empties out and movement in the street picks up.

Almost every block has a small barber shop on the crooked narrow main street running north-south. I staked out the venue I will use when the time is right for my first local down-to-the-blade haircut. The barbers in this shop did not flinch during our preliminary discussion. They were in their twenties, sported sleeve tattoos running the length of the forearm, and not only wore but had created far more revolutionary hairdos and haircuts than my own.

Colmados, or small grocery stores, are another block-by-block institution of the backstreets stocking household essentials: pulses (beans, lentils, peas), avocados, plantains, bananas, green limes, cassava, edible gourds, papaya, mangoes, potatoes, personal hygiene products, household cleaning fluids, simple tools, dried/salted fish along with every imaginable variety of Dominican rum – a critical item always in stock.

Throughout the alleys and passageways, who you know determines how you survive. Relations are everything and a currency unto itself, as is good-humored

small talk. You greet your neighbors whether they are neighbors in domicile or livelihood. Though they may leave daily a sandy gray slush of mixed cement blocking the driveway and path leading to the street, they are neighbors. Though a portion of the sidewalk may be claimed by a woman selling hard-boiled eggs cheap to hungry young men waiting for the construction site foreman to arrive to begin another day of hard labor in the searing heat, they and she are neighbors.

Except for the Jehovah's Witnesses in conservative billowing skirts below the knee, fashions on these streets are intensely flesh-favoring. Women and pubescent girls sport tops and bottoms with cut-out elements and spray-on fittings that contour the body closely, whatever the body type, thick to thin.

From the open-air terrace, an extension of my rooftop apartment, low green hills are visible on one side beyond floppy banana leaves and dried coconut fronds. A wire clothesline runs the length of the terrace and is strung high, almost above my reach. On tippy toes, I hang to dry in the alternating sun drench and downpour the few clothing items I brought with me to the Dominican Republic and three T-shirts branded with the DREAM Project logo or that of a partner organization. The T-shirts (with jeans) constitute my work "uniform." Minimalist furnishings in my apartment and limited personal belongings keep me focused on other considerations.

Before my alarm clock has a chance to ring and an hour before sunrise, the crowing of roosters wakes me. At night I am "lulled" to sleep by live music punctuating the evening, carried to my windows on the breeze. These two elements from the backstreets remind

me of where I am and give localized structure to days of intense observation and listening as supervisor and peers explain the makeup of the community and field work that lies ahead.

Fake Nails

At seven years old, her strongest wish of the moment is to get her nails done like the photo she pulls up on her grandmother's cell. The page pops up automatically. She has viewed it many times.

"See?" she extends her arm to show grandma the pink nail polish design on a perfectly manicured set of adult fingers, each ending in a fake nail extending an inch beyond the natural fingertip below. Extra sparkling tones of pink crest the nail upper tip.

"We'll see. Tomorrow we're going to visit your dad," the grandmother reminds her granddaughter. "You don't want to see your dad?"

The granddaughter grimaces, contorting her face into a predictable renunciation of her obsession with getting nail extensions like her mom's (probably not the first time she has asked) and knowing that seeing her father is part of this last weekend of summer before school begins on Monday. It is also the reason she made the four-and-a-half-hour trip from the capital of Santo Domingo to the country's north.

She and I are spending the better part of an hour together though we just met. My white plastic chair is positioned to the right of hers. To the left, a few feet away, her grandmother toils under a fan pointing in the direction of her sewing machine and the back of her neck. Grandma tailor is trying to find a solution to my shapeless regulation T-shirt to demonstrate I have a female body underneath. It is a size too big though

the label says it is small. Small relative to what and to whom, I wonder.

At lunch time that day I stopped by for a pre-consultation. The self-taught seamstress told me to pick up one yard of very thin elastic and another yard of two-inch elastic at a store in the neighborhood. She does not tell me the name of the store or its location. She refers to it by the owner's name. It takes me two tries to find it. Her alternative precision works. The other women store owners know their competition by owner, not store name, just as she does.

When the store owner, who sells "a little bit of everything," is about to cut me a piece of black elastic I ask her to switch to the batch of options in white. Black elastic, wherever it is placed, will only call undue attention to itself underneath white material. It is bad enough I have to make a mess of a polyester T-shirt to consider it wearable.

The store owner looks through the batch of white elastic bands and prepares to measure the dimensions I noted. She stretches out her arm to the side and cuts a piece accordingly of the thinnest elastic band.

"Very scientifically measured," I note. She laughs and uses the same system for one yard of the wider elastic band. She is short in stature. I consider her arm's length and mine may interpret a yard's length differently.

After work I return to the tailor shop with the two pieces of elastic band and wait for the tailor seated at the sewing machine to complete an inseam she is fixing for a woman. The client and a little girl in pink patterned overall shorts sit side by side in plastic chairs. I assume they are together.

The tailor instructs the girl to bring out a plastic chair for me, by which I understand there will be a wait and that the girl is familiar with the shop and where everything is kept. Three plastic chairs, a sewing machine, an eclectic display of mended items against a wall, a rack of empty plastic hangers in the corner by the storefront window, and a tall counter piled high with folded clothing max out space. When the little girl walks behind the counter to retrieve a chair her head is no longer visible.

Just before the pants for the first client are completed, the tailor asks permission to grab something to eat. She has not eaten yet, she tells me. As they say here, "full belly, happy heart." I tell her yes, please go get something to eat first. I am left minding the shop from my white plastic chair along with the little girl, who has been picking up from the floor scraps of dark blue rounds of cloth, tying them together through loop-work to make a cloth chain.

"She is very intelligent. Seven years old going on ten," the tailor tells me before disappearing to bring back food from a local outfit.

The girl is swaying the looped cloth back and forth wondering what to do with it next.

"You could hang a little bell from the bottom so it sounds every time the wind blows," I suggest.

"I don't have a bell," she counters.

"How about bamboo, pieces of sea glass, or dried coconut wood?" She is disinterested and has greater plans for the strip of hitched cloth.

The tailor returns with food. Girl and tailor disappear behind the curtain to share spoons full of

whatever hot food was brought back. I am now certain that girl and grandmother go together.

“She won’t eat unless I eat also,” the grandmother tells me. The girl’s rounded figure makes me doubt that, but this may be the case when she is visiting away from her home in the capital.

The grandmother returns to the business of helping me. It takes multiple tries. While we are talking, the girl is busy on the sidewalk turning her cloth-linked strip into a whipping line in front of the shop. Between whippings and near-misses with a dog that is sleeping off the heat on the shared piece of broken sidewalk, she wiggles provocatively to the beat of music filling the street from across the way.

“Careful. There are men out there,” her grandmother cautions.

I do my part to remind the girl that if her whip takes out my eye, both she and I will regret it. There is no extra sidewalk space for the snapping of cloth whip between my chair inside the shop entrance, outstretched dog shading itself, and the two men seated on the limited slice of pavement in front to the left.

The grandmother agrees with me and tells her granddaughter to stop the whipping.

The girl begins counting, hesitating each time she finishes a group of ten numbers. She looks at me for the OK to continue, to which I happily give her a nod to do so. As she completes sixty, I interrupt.

“Do you know how many seconds there are to a minute?” I test the boundaries of her seven-year-old private schooling in the capital.

“No.”

“Sixty. Each minute has sixty seconds,” I hope she is following the thought line from rote abstraction to practical numerical application.

“Do you know how many minutes there are in an hour?” I ask, further modeling patterned analysis.

“No.”

“Sixty,” I confirm.

She looks at me in wonderment.

The grandmother is happy and says public school would never draw these parallels. She gives me implicit permission to continue with our client-to-granddaughter small talk.

“How many are you in your home in Santo Domingo?” I ask.

The girl is uncertain. She begins to count but cannot decide if there are four or five at home. She reviews the answer out loud multiple times and recounts with her fingers.

“My brother, my sister, daddy, and mommy. Four.”

“Plus you,” I correct her.

“Five,” she says, and now realizes why she could not get the answer right.

With all of the interim distraction and conversation, and half an ear attentive, the grandmother holds up the T-shirt and sees she has put the elastic band on the front instead of the back.

“Let me try it on. You never know. Maybe it will look good,” I offer.

It does not. I come out from behind the open curtain where I did my best in the tight public-private fitting area between the sink and cleaning items to slip on the partially mended T-shirt with my back to the

street, avoiding the mirror that likely gives passersby an added advantage.

The grandmother pulls out all the stitching and affixes the thicker elastic to the back with one strip of stitching as a test only. She keeps repeating it is the fault of the elastic band. I notice she does not use measuring tape to determine at what height my waist positions inside the T-shirt.

When I next try on the T-shirt in the dressing area, with the elastic at the back, two teenagers have already entered the store, unhappy she has not mended the jeans one of them had left. He is tall and very skinny. She explains the delay to him – the storm, closure, and so on.

“It looks like I am pregnant from the back,” I announce, appearing anew from behind the curtain just as the two young men are leaving. With each try-on, my body accumulates a new layer of sweat inside the ill-conceived polyester T-shirt. The fan remains aimed at the sewing machine and work in progress.

I return to my seat next to the girl.

“How many people do you live with?” she asks me.

“I live alone.”

“Alone?!” she repeats, astounded.

“Not exactly,” I explain. “I live with my dreams, thoughts, aspirations, worries, creativity. So you see there are many of us. I’m not really alone.”

She looks at her grandmother, who nods approvingly. She, too, lives not-alone.

Several more trial runs and accompanying streams of sweat follow at each try-on. The T-shirt now has tailored mini puff sleeves and the backward pregnancy effect “corrected” with a double parallel line of stitching.

“Her mother is studying English,” the grandmother tells me. I gather the mother is the tailor’s daughter-in-law.

The grandmother tries out a bit of English on her granddaughter.

“How ah yoo?” she tests.

Frustrated, the little one blurts out, “I don’t know anything about any of that!”

“What’s yo nay?” the grandmother does her best to enunciate.

The girl gives her name. She knows this answer.

“How ah yoo?” She tries again.

“I love you,” the granddaughter translates dutifully into Spanish, realizing by our laughter that she is caught guessing.

“I lo’ yoo,” the grandmother says, providing the “correct” answer.

It is time for me to go. There is nothing more that can be done to salvage the reworked T-shirt whose character design on the back is now scrunched by a broad white interior elastic band that accentuates my waist in compensation.

The girl asks her grandmother to borrow her cell phone and again pulls up the promotional ad for fake nails. She asks one last time if tomorrow, Saturday, she can get her nails done and mentions how pretty they look in the photo.

I encourage critical thinking as the grandmother’s only adult ally present.

“Did you ever think of all the things you won’t be able do with nails like that? You can’t play volleyball, wash dishes, or use a cell phone easily” – all activities I learned during the course of our time together that she likes to do.

Exasperated, she gets up, walks to the sliver of sidewalk left in front of the store and shakes her seven-going-on-ten-year-old body provocatively, to the best of her ability, to the merengue blasting from across the street in the setting sun.

“¡Cuidado que hay hombres!” her grandmother reminds her again. (Watch out! There are men around.) Body going on ten, she thinks.

“I am like a bat,” the grandmother confides in me. “When it gets dark, my granddaughter and I leave the store and return home.”

Orange Tree Thorn

The *guagua* was to drop me off at the crossroads to Caraballo but continued straight ahead, without stopping, until I noticed a large sign that read “Montellano” and realized the driver had overshot my stop. I asked to be dropped off wherever it was convenient for him to pull over.

A fellow passenger was concerned that I had to cover on foot more terrain than was necessary, but for me walking back simply meant an opportunity to see shops and street life close up that had buzzed by in the overcrowded minivan.

“You should have told the driver where you were going,” another passenger chided.

“Right. In fact, that was what I did as soon as I boarded the bus,” I informed him, heading off – I hoped – his assumption that I was a scatterbrain.

It was so hot inside the collective transport van that, despite very short shorts, my thighs were slippery with sweat, and the residual wax in my ears had melted, causing a strange echo chamber to form around each of my words. Do what I may to try and shake off the echo effect, I could only succeed in speaking through it.

Once I stepped out of the van, I tried shaking loose trapped droplets by cocking my head in the direction of the echo chamber ear and snapping my head hard to the side twice, as if coming up from the ocean’s depths to the surface after a dive. Still, the phenomenon persisted. I hoped the blast of unfiltered hot air on the

street and direct sunlight might air-dry my legs and cause evaporation within the tiny pool of my eardrum while I walked back to the missed turnoff.

The day's excursion was a trial run in my newly purchased cloth-strapped hiking sandals. The contoured footbed was to take me through sandy and rocky outdoor terrain. The unpaved route toward Caraballo felt like the perfect surface for my new breathable, hot weather footwear. The sandals propelled me forward, retaining a good lightweight strapped grip on each foot. I felt proud about having put aside the usual considerations of the shoe's weight and appearance to prioritize walking extensively in comfort. The sandals provided a thick cushion against uneven terrain.

On the geographic front, I did not know exactly where I was going. Openly consulting Google Maps every two minutes in a sparsely populated area made bad street sense. Anyway, I had forgotten to purchase extra data for WiFi coverage as I passed through town from the drop-off point. I was operating under visual flight rules (VFR) without proper training.

On the long path to Caraballo, cows grazed on the roadside, a motorbike passed every 20 or 30 minutes, and scattered horses and chickens did what horses and chickens do when there is intense sun and dust – minimize movement. At a fork in the road, younger and older men gathered under the shade of a huge tree. The road leading up a slow hill to the left did not look promising. Guessing, I remained on the wider road that continued straight until an oblique fork to the right further ahead.

After an hour or so under the baking sun, I reached Caraballo. There were a couple of tiny all-purpose stores of the type that allow patrons to sit in the shade and

down an adult beverage. A few houses were scattered around the town, and a dirt-and-gravel road led up a sharper hill to the right.

After verifying that I had reached the town's center, captured in an eye-blink, I began the walk uphill. My sandals were still holding up, as were my feet. I was not yet ready to stop and take in some water (mistake number one).

The landscape turned uneven and evocative. A couple of hefty black bulls, almost immobile, were penned in by a wooden-slatted fence close to the road. I averted making eye contact to avoid provoking them.

The further I walked, the more turns I encountered until I reached a high point from where dozens of vultures circled overhead. A public signboard advised that the large piece of property was closed for sanitary violations. The odor permeating the air and the large number of birds of carrion in constant rounds of taking off, gliding, and landing underscored that cleaning was indeed needed. The area smelled like an overpopulated, under-cleaned chicken coop.

I chose to take a right turn, down a path leading away from the failed health inspection site. At this point, neither cars nor motorbikes were visible. A breathtaking view emerged in front of me – a steep hill downward followed by another steep hill upward, with stones and path sun-bleached nearly clear of color. The view pulled me into its frame. My new sandals gave me confidence. The lack of shade offered no better alternative in any other direction.

By the time I had descended one hill and moved halfway up the next I realized visual flight rules were failing me (mistake number two). I could barely take

another step and knew it could be a sign of heatstroke, sunstroke, or both. I perched my bottom on a tiny pointed rock in a thinly shaded piece of roadside. I would have fainted had I done otherwise, which would have been the worst of the minimal options available.

After a few minutes I was able to stand. I acknowledged the small victory of not having lost consciousness. If I could make it five yards further up the hill, I could stop again, continuing this stop-and-go rhythm until I reached the top and land of vultures. A left-hand turn from there would slowly wind down to the town's one-block-long center.

In town, I requested a bottle of room-temperature water from a young woman operating a tiny kiosk with a shade tree at the town's entrance. The woman confirmed she had no bottled water left at all. She pointed to a larger shop across the way, sunk about a foot below street level. The shop owner there was able to sell me a small bottle of water for 15 Dominican pesos, a purchase I should have made before beginning the ascent.

I carried the bottle of water to a wooden bench of four equal parts forming a square that surrounded a tree occupying two-thirds of a small outdoor patio at street level, one high step up from the store. I could not move. My feet felt heavy and my throat, parched. I needed room temperature (hot) water so I could consume the liquid slowly, giving my body time to assimilate it and replenish the void. Whatever ringing in the ear I had experienced hours before had long gone without my noticing how or when.

I was relieved to hear the elderly store owner confirm he could recycle the plastic water bottle because

my long walk to and from the hilly area above the town made it evident that garbage collection was a challenge.

Oncoming clouds threatened rain. Just as I had this thought, a few boys speaking in Haitian Creole interrupted their conversation so one could pronounce in Spanish what I preferred not to hear.

“Va a caer agua.” (Water's going to fall.)

That is what it looked like, that water was about to fall in sheets.

I dragged my feet to the start of the long walk back to the crossroad with the main highway. I did not know why my feet hurt so. I thought the outward-bound sandals would protect them.

As I began to walk down the stony road, a pickup truck passed by and slowed down. A woman in her thirties or forties leaned out the front seat passenger window, asking if I wanted a ride to the main road. I did. Every part of my body needed that ride, particularly my feet.

She, her husband, and teenage daughter were friendly. The wife lived in the area. She was foreign and retained a hint of her native accent as she spoke in Spanish. I could not place the accent with certainty.

When they dropped me off, I thanked them profusely. For good measure, I bought from a street-side vendor at the drop-off point on the main road tender coconut water, which I downed immediately out of an unripe coconut before walking ahead toward the area where the inbound transport might pull over so I could board.

A van heading east along the coast came by shortly, picked me up, and packed me in. I had the good fortune of landing a van offering air conditioning for its overstuffed passenger load.

When I alighted from the van across the street from the point of my original departure, I still could not walk easily. I could barely climb out of the van or stand firmly on my feet.

Once in my apartment I peeled off my sandals. To my horror, I had two huge blisters on the outer side of each foot. This meant that every step I had taken contributed to furthering the friction and pain. It also explained my inability to move at several points during my sun- and sweat-filled adventure.

Five days later and still suffering from the ordeal, I sought the advice of a pharmacist and (my luck) his visiting nurse friend taking her lunch break at the pharmacy when I entered. With her concurrence, the pharmacist prescribed a sterile syringe perforation, which I was to perform on my own that evening despite my fear of needles.

After work I summoned the courage to carry out the procedure as prescribed by the health experts. I then bathed both feet in the Dominican Republic's answer to everything that needs disinfection – *jabón de cuaba* – a type of laundry and bath soap that every household, including my own, keeps on hand.

“Do you have *jabón de cuaba*?” the pharmacist had asked me that day at noon to make sure I could follow up the procedure with the final process of sterilization.

“Yes, in both bar soap and liquid formats,” I answered, duly impressing him with my local cultural adaptation.

The next day I recounted the most recent development to a colleague who had been following my travails and week-long usage of flip-flops running counter to the dress code on premises but the only

footwear I could slip my feet into. Her adult daughter, who had stopped by to visit, was listening to our conversation. She voiced her disapproval and asked why I had not used a thorn from an orange tree to perforate the damaged skin. She noted the thorn's medicinal properties in accelerating the healing process. However, she did not mention how or through whom I might access the special thorn on such short and desperate notice. Nor did she consider how immediate my need for a solution was. Her point was I missed out on seeing local natural medicine and flora in action.

Though not holistic, the sterilized instrument and common soap were basic, inexpensive solutions that provided immediate relief and swift healing. Had I paid closer attention sooner (mistake number three) as to why I could not put one foot in front of the other without pain while walking, I would not have needed either a sterilized syringe or orange tree thorn.

I now know the combination of friction and heat causes an ailment so prevalent in the Dominican Republic that even unschooled parents are attentive to the needs of their children's little ailing feet and ready, at a moment's notice, to deploy a home remedy plucked from a thorny orange tree, be it theirs, borrowed, or beyond.

As the final shift of extended lunch hours was about to end, two dates remained in the original packing. I turned to a young colleague who was excited to discover through me that her mother's date palm in the backyard could become a fruit-bearing tree.

First Date

Tough week. A bit disjointed. Time to sweeten team dynamics. As no one else stepped forward with a gesture of entente, I took the opportunity over the weekend to scour locally produced goods stocked at a mini “super” market on the main highway for an item to bring to an upcoming weekly meeting and found dates – potential source of local pride; loaded with symbolism of sweetness, peace, triumph, and resilience.

The small market had three boxed sizes of dates produced in a distant province of the country. I calculated five or six dates to be consumed per person, factoring in every staff member whose desk I would pass by on my way to the borrowed meeting space in the main office. I did not consider hesitation or fear of the unknown.

At each workspace in advance of mounting the staircase to the first floor of the principal office, I opened the box of dates and assumed eager fingers would grab a bunch to combine with a morning cup of coffee or save to eat afterward as a mid-morning snack. Instead, hesitation, perplexity. Questions, for which I was unprepared, intercepted the taking.

“What is it?” they asked of the brownish-black wrinkly dates, before agreeing to take one.

“You eat them, like dried fruit,” I encouraged. “Like you would eat a prune,” I filled in, scrambling for a recognizable analogy. “Only they are much sweeter and filled with the symbolism of regions where

date palms grow in abundance and their fruit forms the basis of important social bonding and economic contribution.” More blank stares in return.

“Try one. They’re delicious. I brought them to sweeten our morning. Be careful of the pit.”

I had no idea I would need to work so hard on advocacy for this first date. By lunchtime I had refined my pitch, and few of the 50-ish dates remained in the original container. Only one colleague knew what a date was – THIS variety, not the one you get dressed up for, wary of erroneous first impressions and full of wonder about who will break the ice and what new quirks the individual might bring into your life. The colleague, hailing from Europe’s southern shores, was thrilled to take a single date and partake in the outer-regional gastronomic excursion.

With every other proffer, I instructed to avoid eating the pit. I did not want to be responsible for broken teeth or the resulting dental work. After the initial date was carefully extracted from the container as if misfortune might descend upon members of the household for generations, I offered a second helping beyond the single tentative date. Without exception, my other colleagues politely refused to scoop up a few more dates. Clearly, I was trampling outside a common comfort zone.

I learned that Dominican preferences (prejudices?) in the kitchen run deep. Straying outside familiar flagship dishes – fried chicken, legumes, *la bandera dominicana* (white rice, beans, and meat), root vegetables, sweet-and-spicy *aji cubanela* – might be more enticing for the tempter than the tempted, much like classic failures on a first date.

As the final shift of extended lunch hours was about to end, two dates remained in the original packing. I turned to a young colleague who was excited to discover through me that her mother’s date palm in the backyard could become a fruit-bearing tree. To her I offered the last two slender dates: one for her and one for her mom. She willingly accepted the extra date – double-dating, breaking further boundaries.

“Be careful of the pit inside,” I reminded, as I had for others.

She bit into one of the dates. “There’s no pit inside,” she reported.

All morning I had warned against biting into the pit and only now discovered, despite no mention on the packing label, that I was offering pitted dates, a less authentic experience but one even more tailored to the novice.

As a rose by any other name would smell as sweet, so, too, this act of sharing Dominican dates with the Dominican people at least ended on a high note. The last remaining date would be offered by daughter to mother, touching home directly, and consummating a shared desire that with proper administrations the exotic date palm in the backyard might grow to join legions of other fruit-bearing palms far and near, expanding economic potential and strengthening the social fabric.

I haven't yet accepted her offer of water because I do not want to impose. I still think I can hold out until I reach the town. Having a place in the shade where I can sit and wait for eventual transport to pass is already a godsend.

Sunstroke

“Hey you! You should be walking on the other side,” she calls out to me as I am already crossing over to her side of the winding narrow highway. This I had done, each time there was a blind curve, unless I could hug the innermost border, if there was one, with the oncoming traffic visible. It was safer than walking with my back to motorcycles, buses, and cars headed my way.

“Have a seat. It's free, and I don't charge tolls. Where are you walking to? Can I get you some water? Why aren't you wearing sneakers? Where are you from?”

I did an immediate sorting through the barrage of questions and cherry-picked the one about where I was headed on foot, answering with my own set of questions.

“How far is it to the center of Gaspar Hernández?” I inquired.

I had been walking for about two hours, with many detours and visual distractions requiring my undivided attention. This succeeded in prolonging the route toward the town's center, one town over. I had noticed both sides of the road were becoming increasingly rural, with nothing as far as the eye could see that suggested a break in greenery or the beginning of localized commercial activity.

Gaspar Hernández, a small provincial city buzzing with commerce once you reach its core, sits on the Atlantic coast of the north-central province of

Españolat. Fresh vegetables spill out onto the street in colorful overstuffed wooden crates captivating the olfactory attention of potential customers as they pass by. New and used articles of clothing swing off hangars, further limiting available sidewalk space, or are stretched across mannequins whose figures burst through plastic-molded flesh making the jeans so tight around the mannequin that the uppermost portion of the zipper is often left open. A hidden clothespin in the backside tucks in any extra fabric to accentuate and mimic a tiny waistline to offset ample plasticized hips and generous buttocks.

At Caño Dulce (meaning “sweet channel”), where I receive the friendly scolding by this local resident, horses, cows, birds, and foliage are the scenery as far as curves in the road permit extended visuals. Far off the main road, construction on modest one- and two-story homes is in full swing, despite this being a weekend.

“I like the quiet here,” the woman shares, channeling me into her orbit.

“I’ve been walking for so long I have lost track of distance and a sense of time,” I tell her.

“Gaspar Hernández is far. You can’t walk. It will take you an hour. But the sun will kill you on the spot. The sun is too strong now.”

I think her assessment is a lot to presume about me and my stamina, having just met. But she seems willing to engage and clearly knows the area as a resident of the house whose wall gives support to a collection of white plastic chairs. They are all leaning against it, including her own.

“Have a seat,” she orders and points to an empty chair matching hers.

“Do you know how far the town is from here in terms of kilometers?” I seek facts, not opinion.

“Five, six,” she guesses.

“Oh, not so far in that case,” I counter.

She then screams over to a neighbor I cannot see, breaking the general silence she loves. “How many kilometers is it to Gaspar Hernández?”

“Twelve,” he shouts back.

“Twelve,” she repeats as if I am unable to hear the relay of information at top volume.

“You can’t walk. The sun. It’s the worst time of day,” she insists.

“Good point. The heat of the sun.” I say and settle into one of the plastic chairs.

“Look at me! I’m fat but staying cool in the shade. If I have to move at this hour, you won’t find me walking. How much will it cost you to get where you’re going – fifty pesos?” she asks. “You don’t have the money?”

“A public bus would cost thirty or thirty-five pesos from here,” I correct her.

“That’s right. Thirty-five. You don’t have money?” she repeats.

I laugh. I try to explain that walking is more informative than taking a bus, watching everything whiz by, losing the intricacy of detail in the landscape. But she is right. Sunstroke is almost certain if I continue on foot. I haven’t yet accepted her offer of water because I do not want to impose. I still think I can hold out until I reach the town. Having a place in the shade where I can sit and wait for eventual transport to pass is already a godsend.

“I have thirty-five pesos,” I reassure her. “I am headed into town because I like the natural honey they sell there. It is direct from the farmers.”

I also want to dispel any notions that I am indigent, cheap, foolhardy, or reckless. I always bring with me what it costs to cover my own transport needs and any items I might decide to purchase en route.

She nods, knowingly.

To everyone who exits the main door of her home I offer the one empty plastic white chair positioned on the opposite side of the open doorway. Our idle chatter sparks curiosity by her elderly mother, her brother, and a neighborly *comadre*.

Her answer is always the same: “Stay where you are!” she tells me, insisting. “Don’t worry. We have lots more chairs inside. Take a look for yourself.”

I turn my eyes to the open doorway yet cannot see anything. Darkness fills the narrow hallway. At the end of it, I can only make out a couch that would have to be shimmied back and forth through the passage to constitute seating on the tiny front patio adjacent to the road.

At that moment, a neighbor across the street carries a beaten-up bright yellow plastic chair from inside her home to a pile of garbage that includes an unidentifiable shiny-blue object. The seat of the chair is punched out. She deposits it to the side of the pile.

My streetside host confers with her *comadre* in a hushed tone, scandalized. There is something about throwing out a chair in this home with many chairs to offer that runs counter to her world order. I hear her comment unapprovingly of the discarded chair.

Maybe there are not so many chairs inside her home after all, even though she assures me they are bountiful each time I offer my seat to someone from the house who steps outside onto the front patio. Or maybe the

household chair collection is from previously discarded chairs left on the roadside as toss-aways.

For some reason I feel the need to defend the neighbor across the street and note that the chair now adjacent to the garbage heap on the opposite side of the road is missing its supportive middle portion.

The large woman who does not like to walk moves to the topic of where I am from. I explain briefly my origins and note I now live further west of her in one of the small towns that dot the coastline, and that I work for a local non-governmental organization focused on education and youth leadership.

Her daughter lives in a town adjacent to where I work. The woman notes she is familiar with that area, though not the NGO itself.

The *comadre* sitting next to her rubs her calves in pain. I notice her varicose veins close to the surface of the skin on her legs.

My host instructs her neighbor on proper application of coconut oil, demonstrating in slow circular motions the massage she should perform once she applies the oil to both the affected area of her lower legs as well as within the soft part of her shoulder where it joins the chest. She recommends her doctor to cure whatever ails the *comadre*, including the varicose veins visibly straining fuller circulation of blood.

“I have a great doctor on TikTok,” she tells us both. “He cured me.”

“You used a doctor on TikTok!?” I repeat, incredulous. “How do you know he is for real, or that he has medical credentials?”

“I am cured,” she says definitively. With that comment, her *comadre* is also sufficiently convinced.

Our host tries to quickly locate for us the TikTok doctor on her cell phone, but all variety of extraneous videos pop up on her screen instead. She gives up – not that I need or asked for proof.

I am about to turn to the left to apologize for giving my back to the brother, the last relative from the home's inside quarters to occupy the white plastic seat on the far side of the door against the outer wall of the home, but he has already slipped inside, leaving behind the empty chair.

“These men eat all the time, and they eat a lot,” my host pronounces. She does not mention what is being prepared for lunch. She does mention eating is next up on the day's agenda.

I tell her I want to keep my eyes half fixed on the road. I already missed a minibus headed toward Gaspar Hernández, and transport is few and far between at this time of day on this section of the coastal road.

A minute later a tiny white “public” (private) bus races by. The three of us – my host, the *comadre*, and myself – rise from our seats to flag down the bus.

“*Güey!*” she calls out to the driver, louder than the two of us.

The driver recognizes the meaning of three women yelling in the direction of his vehicle and pulls over a short distance ahead, as braking permits.

Having had a decent shared conversation to while away the intense heat of the day, the three of us have bonded and are all smiles. I thank the two of them and sprint toward the bus. The extended kindness to wait for a driver working the informal sector along a sparsely populated Saturday route cannot be overstated.

In town, in the compact store where I intend to buy honey mixed in with the honeycomb, an employee

there recognizes me and tells me he has run out of fresh honeycombs. Those he has in stock can no longer be consumed, he notes, although they remain on the shelf. He recommends instead that I buy a gallon jug of fresh honey obtained directly from the beekeepers, a special treat.

He is unsure from what flower or tree this batch of honey is made but recites a list of possibilities, including acacia, whose unique canopy I had photographed during one of my distracted earlier off-routes that morning.

I buy the large jug. It costs me four times the price of the honeycomb and will last ten times longer. Like the meandering route I walked, open conversation on the front patio, unscheduled bus route and its random stops, the visit into town and the market come with a welcome bounty of the unexpected.

Holding them overnight in a forgotten small-town police cell designed for more serious offenses committed by adults did not seem to be a commensurate course of action. Who knew what additional injustice might befall them there.

Prayers

I failed to make it onto the first mini-van departing Las Matas de Farfán (San Juan) for Bánica (Elías Piña) via interprovincial informal-sector transport. The van's driver pointed to the overloaded sacks on the ground not yet mounted on top of the van, insisting he was at full capacity. What was missing were the passenger-owners of the sacks, apparently on a foray into a nearby sprawling market to stock up further. The driver had given his word he would wait for their return and was committed to keeping his promise.

No one would provide me with a straight answer about the next departure for the same destination or where it would load. I approached a pre-teen who looked sharp and attentive to his surroundings. His charge was to prep goods for the hand-off to an older individual who, balanced on a steel ladder fixed to the side of the vehicle, secured the bundles within the metal rack at the van's top.

The boy knew which of the waiting vans would depart next, where it would load, and who was the driver. I thanked him for being so informative. My go-to expert ... all of ten or twelve years old. I approached the driver he identified for more information.

Driver of soon-to-be-departing van number two instructed me to sit up front in the passenger seat and place my bag there to reserve the spot. Since my tiny sports bag contained little but all I needed for travel,

leaving it unattended was not an option. I sat up front with compact, dark blue bag on my knees and tried to roll down the window. I had to hold the glass as I cranked the handle so the pane would not detach from the inner groove. From that position I watched extensive movement of passengers on the adjacent sidewalk waiting for driver number one to eventually put his vehicle into gear and depart.

Two young friends traded off taking portraits and selfies, preferring a slate-gray metal door as backdrop for their verticals, by-passing a beautiful pastel-colored wooden exterior whose horizontal slats would have added subtle texture to their background. The friends removed their sweatshirts, pumped their chests, sported colorful T-shirts, flashed their best it's-almost New Year smiles, and provided to each other staging instructions in Kreyòl for the improvised photo shoot.

The more it became obvious that driver number one was undecided about departing or allowing any new passengers, the more my van began to fill up. Passengers entered the vehicle to reserve their seat and milled about on the adjacent sidewalk to keep an eye on their bags inside the van.

Four boys, who looked to be 14 or 15 years old, arrived together. Similarly, they requested to go to the market and return. They asked driver number two not to depart until they were back. The market at Las Matas de Farfán had everything imaginable, whereas the town where we were headed most certainly would not, even on market day. Whether their foray was for supplies, breakfast, or seasonal holiday gifts, driver number two granted the request and gave his word he would not take off until they returned. Besides, every

new bag loaded onto the van represented a fare unless it took up no extra space.

The return of the four boys became protracted. Transport van number one had already departed. Passengers in van number two were becoming antsy. They did not get up early, before the sun rose, in order to leave late.

Driver number two began making calls on his cell phone to see if anyone could help locate the four youth and summon them back to the narrow side street so we could depart on our journey northwest. Finally, the four rounded the corner and packed themselves into the back of the van – now quite full.

The driver held on to the glass pane to the left of his seat and rolled down the window. The window mechanism did not function properly on his side either. Watching him, I reaffirmed the technique I had used was the only way to open or close the side windows up front. Other elements of the van were in a similar precarious state, though functional.

The good news was that driver number two had his limits and maintained order. He did not operate on the principle that there is always space for one more. He evaluated the route, distance, weight of his vehicle's load, condition of the road, weather, and tires. Once he made the determination that the van was full, there was no space for negotiation. He did not add a third person up front with me, for instance, which was highly atypical as well as a good sign. He liked assuring his own space to operate the vehicle more comfortably. No shifting gears under or around the legs of two extra passengers.

Before pulling out from the curb, a passenger in the belly of the van asked another passenger to remove his

yard-long machete. By so doing so, he encouraged, we could avoid any “problems along the way.”

From my seat, as I half turned around, I saw how the farmer unknotted two coarse ropes from the back of his pants that tied the machete close to his body. He passed the machete to me in the front for safekeeping. I placed it carefully to the left of my dangling legs, out of his reach.

“That’s better,” said the other gentleman. “Now we can avoid any issues. And when you reach your destination, you can take the machete back and be on your way.”

The man was agile in persuading the farmer to surrender what has historically been used, in addition to its field application in the countryside and more rural communities, as a gruesome way to settle matters, particularly in crimes of hate and/or impassioned revenge. For the tranquility of the rest of us, I inwardly thanked his skill in diplomacy. It is not easy to separate a man from his machete.

Very quietly to himself just outside the van, as the passengers jostled in the back, the driver said a first prayer for our safe journey. With that, he climbed into the front seat and steered the sagging van over a deep dip in the road before turning immediately left onto the interprovincial highway that led out of town. As we turned left, in a second whispered prayer he wished that all passengers would reach their homes safely.

A dozen or so blocks later, the urban stir of Las Matas de Farfán receded into the background. The landscape turned green and rural. We continued on a trajectory north and west, toward the border with Haiti.

The driver was careful. He anticipated all the quirks of the road. He told me that in the end it was best I did not take the first van. He did not wish to elaborate further. I assumed it was a judgment call when he had directed me into his own van. Now I was thankful I did not fit in van number one. The driver knew how to maneuver his vehicle and did not make matters worse when traffic slowed to a crawl, moving through an apparent crash site further ahead.

As traffic snaked in disorderly anticipation of navigating around the site of the crash, the driver leaned out the window and called out to the driver of an oncoming black Sedan with his polarized window down.

“*Hay muertos?*” (Are there any dead?)

I did not understand the response of the driver as he was out of range of my hearing but was struck by the specificity of the single question and how pointed it was.

As we neared the crash, it was evident the driver of the huge flatbed truck must have been crushed to death. The vehicle had flipped over 180 degrees and lay flattened, smashed downward on the road’s shoulder, having brought down an electrical line with its impact. The truck’s carriage lost its three dimensionality. Impossible that the driver’s life could have been saved, I thought. No ambulance was among emergency rescue and response equipment or vehicles on the scene.

Cabbage, green squash, and half-filled wooden crates were tossed about everywhere, on and off the curve in the road. The residents of this portion of road looked economically underserved. Still, no one touched any of the strewn vegetable crates or produce. Death now inhabited the area.

Some sixty people stood around in separate groups of ten or fifteen at different points of the site where disaster had struck and the belly-upside-down truck spilled onto their property and lives. Our van streamed forward slowly, mood somber among us from the reminder. Life and death trade places in a flash. I did not hear the driver pray, at least, not aloud. He focused on the road.

Three quarters of the way toward our destination an issue developed when it became known that the four young boys in the back of the van could not pay the full fare of where they asked the driver to take them. Their intended location was remote. There was no other way to reach it, particularly, with the extra baggage and packages that accompanied them. The youth said they were due money from their employer but that on the day of travel they were told they would not receive payment for their work until the following Monday.

Passengers had different views about the developing scenario. If we dropped off the youth in the middle of this unattended crossroads, they had no way to reach their actual destination. Some wanted them left to their own fate on the side of this desolate stretch of road. On the other hand, if we accompanied them, we all went on that same excursion to/from the main road while the driver lost out on the extra payment that was his due.

Some wanted to teach the four a lesson. Being transparent and honest was part of learning to be responsible for our actions. Taking advantage of a driver doing his best to make ends meet was also disrespectful. Some sought an outlet to vent their unrelated pent-up anger, and this provided a useful opportunity in passing. Luckily, the machete remained up front still in its leather sheath next to my leg.

The driver was upset the four had misrepresented their resources. He asked them again to pay the remaining fare for the extra trip. They repeated their alibi and that they could not complete the fare.

The driver pulled over where a tall, well-built policeman in uniform was on duty. He explained the circumstance. The officer stuck his head into the van and ordered the four skinny youth out of the van – once, twice, three times. The four refused to budge from the far back of the van. Two rows of a crowded van offered a buffer of protection from easy access by the local authority.

I knew by a previous discussion I had overheard the four have with another passenger that they possessed no national identity documents and did not understand the importance and rights that came with these. This opened up a new set of vulnerabilities.

In sticking together and refusing to move, the four looked even younger than when I first spotted them wandering off to the market before entering the back of the van.

I tried to infuse logic to the buzz of opinions. Turning around, I asked aloud to no one in particular, “I think they’re minors, no?”

I wanted the others, including the police authority, to understand my line of thinking regarding the grave import of their suggested actions. Holding them overnight in a forgotten small-town police cell designed for more serious offenses committed by adults did not seem to be a commensurate course of action. Who knew what additional injustice might befall them there.

Our driver continued as a firm believer in his God. To the surprise of everyone in the van except me, as I

had already overheard his transactions of faith twice, he did not insist on further police pursuit. Instead, he restarted the engine of the van and turned onto the extended unpaved road to take the skinny bunch of four to their distant location even though they could not pay for the favor. Everyone remained quiet. The road was dusty, dirt-filled, rocky over uneven gravel. No one wanted a busted tire to add to the day's events.

When the four boys dismounted at the end of this twenty-minute off-road excursion and free drop-off, the farmer in the first row behind me also climbed out of the van and asked me to pass him his machete. He deftly strapped it back on, mounted the rear end of a motorcycle waiting for him as passenger, and was on his way.

I am not sure if the four boys thanked the driver, though I am sure they were grateful. They had survived a significant fright and near-miss with an authority looking for action.

We then took the same twenty-minute slow-moving unpaved rocky path back to the main road. As we crunched over uneven terrain, I heard the driver utter a third prayer, again softly to himself. May God find a way to return this favor and repay him the four missing fares he was unable to collect.

I thanked the driver for his maturity and calm, and for remaining level-headed. When we reached the main road, turning left again to continue north for the last stretch, he prayed a final time that nothing should befall any of us for the rest of the journey.

Having reached my destination before noon, I set out on foot to explore the area, surrounding roads, and a neighboring town separated by gentle hills. Ahead of

sunset, I arrived at the border town of Pedro Santana and ended up in extended conversation with a local grocery store owner. When I recounted the story of the flattened truck we had passed on the highway, he was already familiar with the day's news of the crash as well as with the road conditions where it occurred. Everyone knew that this part of the road was the curve of death he told me. Everyone, that is ... except for me.



By keeping company with this tiny boy named Banyan and the outward-growing roots and branches of his nurturing family of scientists, my wisdom has deepened. When I bid the family, guides, park ranger, and bone field of Enriquillo Lake National Park good-bye, I feel light and enlightened.

Bone Field

Stark, bare branches reach out to nowhere, their truncated lives an open documentary to the level of water that once was until it descended, leaving sunken crops and abandoned livelihoods in its wake. Ten years on, the bone field of branches and skinny, spineless trunks tell a story of the present water level, lowered and exposing an expanded shoreline.

Lago Enriquillo, the largest salt-water lake in the Antilles, is home to an eco-register of crawling and tail-propelled reptiles – iguanas, lizards, crocodiles – plus a variety of birds taking off and landing in the quietude of momentary need. Ancient pieces of sun-saturated coral, strewn everywhere, lie among uneven pebbles and broken white-gray rocks delineating an irregular border along the water's edge.

It is early morning, before the sun's heat can further bleach the desolate still life. I photograph two women in the distance moving slowly inside the bone field. Their relative size serves as a reference point for the height of the original lost treetops. As I approach, I overhear their observations identifying elements of flora, fauna, and habitat. They label in whispers the blue-breasted this, black-necked that, yellow-footed other alighting from a branch sticking out horizontally across the water.

We self-introduce. Their accents are American. The conversation takes off in English. It is clear they

are steeped in vast scientific knowledge to assess the landscape and its creatures. Humans feel small within it, late-comers to ten million years of geological history.

A man (husband of the younger of the two women) and a boy child (theirs) approach. More greetings and self-introductions. I learn that the older of the two women is a scientist and family friend visiting from abroad and that the younger woman's husband has a background in geology. The younger woman has various areas of zoological expertise. Their three academic affinities are complementary.

The child bears a majestic name: Banyan. Given the family's grasp of our surroundings, my assumption is that this trip of discovery is part of Banyan's upbringing and likely one of many such excursions. I phrase my question accordingly.

"You are named after a beautiful tree. I bet you already know that," I comment to the boy.

He confirms he does and says he has seen a banyan tree more than once. I tell him he is lucky to have such a magical name and that the banyan is one of my favorite trees. He is four years old but has the attention span and quick wit of an older child. He bends down, inserts under the fold of his top lip two cone-shaped pieces of loose white coral then turns around to show me his new-found Dracula fangs.

The adults and I arrange to share the same narrow motorboat for an excursion out into the lake. The park's administration informs us the boat captain is "on his way" which, in the cultural context, can mean anything from he just woke up, is having breakfast, and will depart shortly, to we can count on his arrival within twenty to ninety minutes. The transplanted nuclear

family of three lives in the Dominican Republic. Like me, the parents understand time is elastic here.

"When is the captain coming?" the little boy asks.

A park ranger motions toward a flight of stairs near the visitor's entrance area and suggests we take in the view from the top-floor lookout point of the old wooden-slatted structure built in traditional style. The raised terrace wraps around half of the visitor information hut.

We all mount the stairs and look out onto the lake, though the view is not without obstructions. The boy's height keeps him from seeing or imagining what can be seen. He becomes restless.

"When is the captain coming?" he asks again.

I comment to his mother that sending us up to the lookout area was a patience ploy by the park ranger to distract us from the extended delay in beginning our boat ride.

"The Dominican Republic is a patience ploy," the mother responds as she smiles with total absence of malice.

Banyan tells us his favorite type of animals are birds.

"Is that a mocking bird? Is that a mocking bird? Is that a mocking bird?" he repeats playfully, over and over in sets of three.

Very sophisticated humor for a four-year-old, I think and wonder if he knows the meaning of "mocking," picked up the parody from a Disney movie, or heard the snippet from a viral meme circulating on (parentally supervised) social media sites. Either way, he is hooked on the sequence.

The family friend notes she finds his repetition annoying.

“Annie says I am annoying,” Banyan reports back to his mother.

“I think you are funny,” I offer in his defense. He has been patient and a real trooper. I also want no part in deflating the developing ego of this small, bright child.

Finally, news reaches us of the captain’s imminent arrival. Before we descend the porch stairs to put on our bright-orange regulation life jackets, the mother points out there are iguanas on the roof. Although we cannot see them, she can identify them by the swish of their tails. At ground level, they roam freely everywhere.

As we look for life jackets approximating each of our sizes, I suggest Banyan reinsert his fangs for added protection against the crocodiles in the lake. He does not find this funny.

When the park ranger zips Banyan into an adult-size life jacket, I point out that it looks too large. The jacket bottom hangs below Banyan’s knees. The mother notes the boy’s entire body can slip through one arm hole. She is about to replace it with a life jacket they left in the car when the park ranger pulls out from the pile a kid-size vest.

Captain and guide arrive on scene, wear no life jackets at all, and prove very knowledgeable about the lake’s environment. They are university students. Once in the boat, they ask the boy in English if he speaks Spanish. He avoids eye contact and nods “yes” with his head. It is evident the real answer is no.

We move through crocodile waters. Their snouts glide silently through the water’s surface as the guide explains in Spanish (to Banyan’s mother and me) that the alpha male is the strongest of the group and the one

in charge of protecting the turf within which 20 to 30 female crocodiles circulate. The females in his harem mate with him only.

I can tell subliminal parallels are brewing in the minds of the two local twenty-something year-olds and suggest this is not a social model to follow among human beings, as legendary as Dominican male sexual prowess may be. Due to the use of Dominican slang, this tangent is only understood by the two guides and me. We keep it so, discreetly. All other eyes are focused on the crocs.

In the small, slender boat we discuss the wingspan of birds, width of crocodile snouts and gender indicators of the tetrapods, whether penguins are considered birds although they cannot fly, environmental and economic migration due to the lake’s rise and fall in water levels, volcanic beginnings of supercontinent Pangea, geologic shifts, the salt- to fresh-water internal filtering system of crocodiles, and nest-specific temperatures that determine whether crocodile eggs hatch male or female.

By keeping company with this tiny boy named Banyan and the outward-growing roots and branches of his nurturing family of scientists, my wisdom has deepened. When I bid the family, guides, park ranger, and bone field of Enriquillo Lake National Park good-bye, I feel light and enlightened, fascinated by the biodiversity of creatures with whom I share the planet.

Enter the Qualitarian

He informed me that fruit was more important to hydration of the human body than water itself, that the higher the fruit dangled on the tree the more nutritious its essence, that one could improve the utility of water to the human digestive system by squeezing lemon, lime, or passion fruit into the glass.

A love child of the Caribbean, conceived in Haiti and born in New York City to Jewish-American parents who had married on the fly many years earlier, my neighbor is conscious of the past while focusing on the present and future of the Earth.

His parents' marriage occurred on a moment's notice by securing the services of a friend willing to act as justice of the peace, making his way through pimps and whores on the fringes of City Hall in Manhattan's Lower East Side to conduct a quick ceremony that ended with the placement of a non-traditional *faux* wedding ring, pulled out of a Cracker Jack box the same day, onto the traditional left-hand ring finger of the bride.

The couple first met not long before on a blind date arranged by a mutual friend whose name in its composite form approximated each of their individual first names – a promising Kabbalistic sign, though only in hindsight.

Kindred spirits, when fate threatened to drive a wedge into their relationship, the couple chose to exchange vows of “til death do us part” to overcome the 3,600 miles that stood between them and a fully paid academic exchange scholarship in Peru awaiting the young man's other “yes, I do.” With the Cracker Jack knot tied in NYC, boyfriend and girlfriend, now husband and wife, departed as newlyweds for South America. Remove slide of New York City. Insert slide of Lima, Peru.

Passionate and committed to humanitarianism and the field of health, the career paths of the young couple began to germinate, opening wide global doors of opportunity for these two Big Apple, big-hearted Baby Boomers.

My neighbor, a self-proclaimed Age of Aquarius love child, was born into the family many years after his two elder brothers, a late gift to his spry but aging parents. In an air sign such as Aquarius, planetary convergence occurs only once in 800 years and ushers in hope and innovation, inspiring humans “to find commonality across what it means to be human” (Suzanne Scott in *Vogue India*, January 30, 2021). These concepts ring true for my neighbor.

Although he moved in next door after the New Year, we had exchanged substantive views only once before. This time our meeting occurred as I mounted the stairway to my apartment, and he was about to descend the stairs from his. I carried aloft in the palm of my hand over my right shoulder a large, ripe papaya. Seeing my deep orange-colored fruit, he opened the conversation with an overview of the bioactive properties of fruits, seeds, and nuts (the edible kernel variety as well as the human variety).

He informed me that fruit was more important to hydration of the human body than water itself, that the higher the fruit dangled on the tree the more nutritious its essence, that one could improve the utility of water to the human digestive system by squeezing lemon, lime, or passion fruit into the glass.

At some point our conversation parameters widened, and he provided in a nutshell his view of ancient and contemporary history, the connections between

spiritualism and psychology, his wandering attention span as a child, and world view as a “qualitarian,” a term I was hearing for the first time.

Within this rubric, he covered a breadth of topics, moving from the dark web to pedophiles on Little Saint James (so-called Epstein Island); Freemasonry; El Salvador’s “successful” experiment in adopting crypto currency as legal tender (my note: unsuccessful as far as its stated goal of financial inclusion); the 9/11 advance knowledge conspiracy theory joining in a complot the Central Intelligence Agency, Mossad, and Saudi Arabia along with informed investors registering a high level of options trading prior to the synchronized attacks on U.S. soil of September 2001; colorism; vegetarianism; neocons, neo-Nazis, neo-liberals; and a categorical decoupling of citizenship from accompanying responsibilities such as the obligation to pay taxes.

The love-child qualitarian focused rather on connection, vibrations, biodynamics. His circles tightened or lightened based on these and other related indicators.

Very intelligent, with the ability to expound at length eloquently on any one topic, he sprinkled in facts and data though sometimes losing the finer details in a slip (mistaking Hutus for Houthis). With my goal that Saturday morning merely to satisfy a biodynamic urge to hydrate with fresh fruit, I obtained more than a mouthful during the ensuing conversation.

When our exchange neared closing three hours later in the fortunate shade of a shared terrace, my Age of Aquarius qualitarian love-child neighbor suddenly announced he would be back in a flash. He rushed into his apartment, returning with a papaya in hand of equal size to mine, with similar coloring and ripeness.

I proposed we raise a toast to our conversation by clonking the oversized papayas against each other, symbolically ending an incredible journey of cross-generational communication. Seeing the similarities in the two fruits, he asked me how much I had paid for mine. Informal transactions in the hood operate on a sliding scale of relative availability, needs, and relationships. We compared prices, establishing that he had gotten a slightly better deal on his purchase.

Though looking forward with eager expectation to this moment in the cosmos, my neighbor was also a child of the soil and ethno-cultural product of New York City's Lower East Side where teachings of ethos and pride converge to drive a hard bargain.

Triangles and Sweet Tamarind

Three women prepare breakfast and morning snacks. They slice and dice and are visible from the sidewalk although the shop is not yet open. I approach to ask directions to El Samán, a small community, and receive three different responses including the comeback question of which El Samán. There is more than one.

Before clarifying which of the same-named communities I am searching for, I compliment the senior-most woman on her large, metallic, triangle danglers. The earrings flatter and frame her face. Her black hair, pulled off her neck, is tucked up into a *tubi* hairnet. Once she removes the net, her mane will hang perfectly straight from having been wrapped around the circumference of her head and pinned inside the *tubi* for hours. What used to be a woman's sleep gear is now flaunted during broad daylight as an accessory.

I explain to the three cooks I am looking for *gagá*, a traditional troupe of Haitian-Dominican musicians accompanied by dancers. Since early morning they are set to begin Holy Week rounds in El Samán.

"Take a motorcycle taxi to Montellano," one of the women directs me. "To the *other* El Samán."

I know that where I am is the correct El Samán because it positions behind a small kiosk famous in the area for its *empanadas*, so much so that the bus fare collector called out my stop as "*empanada!*"

One of the cooks says she heard *gagá* music toward midnight the evening before. She knows it was coming from the direction of Montellano but has no idea from which exact neighborhood. She smiles in recollection and asks if I like *gagá*.

“Very much so,” I tell her.

The woman with the large triangle earrings says she knows which El Samán community in the area I am talking about.

“You need to take a motorcycle taxi,” she also commands.

I note under my breath that not everything must be accomplished on motorbike taxi and ask how far it is to the seaside community.

“Two minutes on the opposite side of the main road, just after the new bridge. Take the road in the direction of the beach. Ask there.”

She proves my point and I commit to walking.

I thank the three women for orienting me and know this will not be a single-stop excursion. At the corner after the bridge, a curvaceous woman in a neon orange, water-tight, sleeve dress with suggestive apertures in the fabric near her breasts and hips shines like a beacon out of the morning lethargy. Her eyes are fixed on passing cars along the highway. This is her corner, and she is working it.

About a dozen yards into the turnoff, a small crowd is gathered in the shade. Two young men remain mounted, straddling their motorcycles. I address all of them, moving my gaze from set of eyes to set of eyes, while all eyes are on me. I am not yet sure who will have the information I seek.

“Have the *gagá* come out yet?” I ask.

“The *what?*” a few voices respond simultaneously. Here begins a new discussion.

A middle-aged woman explains for the benefit of the rest the meaning of the term *gagá*, then turns to me and declares authoritatively that the *gagá* are not around due to Holy Week.

This leaves me in the uncomfortable position of having to correct her publicly and clarify for the entire group that precisely because this is Holy Week the *gagá* are sure to perform, even gain permission from the local authorities to do so as they are an important syncretic cultural manifestation. Someone in the back of the crowd says I am right and that I seem to know what I am talking about.

New theories from the group emerge: that the *gagá* already played Monday, that they only play at midnight, that they will come out on Easter Sunday. I know what I know, but I also do not know what I do not know so take it all in. I re-pose the question of where the *gagá* are likely to perform. With that information, I can ask elsewhere directly. By some of the disparaging terms used during the course of our conversation it is evident this group is not a fan of the roaming musicians.

“Go to Montellano. You will have to take a motorcycle taxi to get there,” the chorus line returns.

The two young men astride their motorbikes perk up at this command. One immediately offers to take me to Montellano.

I point to my long legs, which have taken me here, and note they will take me there. I thank him for the offer. He repeats it three more times.

I ask for more specifics, such as locality names. The two repeated by more than one voice are the

communities of El Triángulo (Triangle) and El Tamarindo (Tamarind). I now take the exchange about the triangle earrings as a good omen.

An elderly man who has been silent throughout tells me in soft French-accented Spanish to head for El Tamarindo. I am certain he knows. I thank him expressly and spread a round of general thanks to the others.

On foot, about 30 minutes later, I spot a turnoff to the left from the main road near a huge tamarind tree. Bingo! Another positive sign. Under the tamarind tree customers are sorting through cut-up fish for a traditional Good Friday meal. I approach the group and direct my question to a big-boned woman whose hair reaches the middle of her back in continuation of thickly braided cornrows. Between Spanish, French, and Haitian Creole, I ascertain she knows nothing about *gagá*.

“It’s like *Rara*,” I clarify.

She lights up. This is simply the first time she is hearing the term in Dominican Spanish. She does not know where, or if, I can find *gagá* nearby. A well-built young man to my right tells me to go to El Tamarindo. Information is aligning.

“You need a motorcycle taxi to get there. Hop on. I’ll take you.” He points to his motorbike.

I am thrilled to be making progress. The tamarind tree, the fish, Good Friday, a term that means something to someone, and an individual who corroborates where I need to head. I am beaming but decline the offer of a ride.

“It’s far,” he warns. “Go straight. At the end, turn left,” he says while motioning to the right. The terms “right” and “left” are precarious in the Dominican Republic, but a hand movement is free of ambiguity.

As I make my way down the long road before turning right, the same motorbike driver passes by with the big-boned woman on the back as his fare.

“To the end, then this way,” he shouts, again motioning right.

Every few blocks small fish stall vendors sell the fresh catch of the day. The walk offers lots of activity on the shady side. At the corner where I am to turn right, I pop my head into a small café with two small tables. One is empty. A man sits alone at the other spooning a thick soup. I wish him *¡buen provecho!* and ask the woman behind the counter if it is here that I should turn right to El Tamarindo.

“Yes. Turn right here, then continue straight. El Tamarindo is after El Triángulo.”

At an unexpected fork in the “continue straight” direction, I ask a man selling long stalks of sugar cane out of a wheel barrel which road leads to El Tamarindo. He, too, says to continue straight, although the fork ahead offers one road curving left and another curving right. I again decide to take my cue from the hand motion, which was more of a right straight than a left straight. I take the road curving right. Small wooden fish stalls abound, while men, women, and teens lounge separately to street-watch.

Sensing I am nearing the neighborhood as the road narrows, I ask a man if El Tamarindo begins here.

“Right here,” the neighbor confirms, pointing to a grass divider a few yards ahead in the small road and tells me to turn where the white jeep is parked on the corner (i.e., turn left).

I memorize every landmark on the way – a park, graffiti, pastel-painted façades, the trash collection site

near where the jeep is parked. I will need to find my way back.

The entry point to El Tamarindo lies across a makeshift plank where the paved road meets dirt. There is a small bar-café at the juncture. I ask a teenager tending shop if the *gagá* have already come out and performed.

She moves swiftly across the street barefoot, offering no explanation. She crosses a smaller, more precarious plank, and enters the private courtyard of a family. I follow her because her steps are intentional.

In the courtyard, four older women are braiding each others' hair and involved in various stages of personal grooming. A little girl accompanies them. She is the first to greet me.

¡Hola! she shouts.

I move into the inner-inner yard and offer a round of greetings. Since the skinny girl who led me there has disappeared almost at the same time as she arrived, I explain my reason for visiting the neighborhood and ask after the troupe of *gagá*. I compliment one woman who sports a boldly ornate, two-toned braided hairdo. She smiles back.

The oldest woman nods her chin in the direction of the area where I entered. There, the teenage girl is talking to a young man sitting on a motorcycle streetside. I look back at the woman. She signals again with her chin. I walk over to the two youth and finally get it. This super-efficient teenager called to the scene one of the local *gagá* musicians.

The young man tells me he plays bass drum and that the *gagá* will "light up" at 4:30 in the afternoon today. I calculate all the time it took to get here, including the

wait for erratic public buses on a holiday, what it will take to get back home, and how I will make my two virtual meetings halfway around the world, the first of which begins at 5:30 in the afternoon local time. The logistics do not line up. I am deeply chagrined and explain that as I was originally told the *gagá* would begin early morning, I thought I could manage both commitments. As I say good-bye to the teenager and the women of the courtyard, the littlest girl shouts across the yard an "*¡adiós!*" as loudly as her initial "*¡hola!*"

I cross the plank carefully to exit, guessing where it may be better anchored, and find the base drum player conversing with another young man. He informs me there has been a scheduling change due to birthday considerations for the musician friend with whom he is speaking. The *gagá* will begin at 2 pm. It is now 10:30 am.

"Just hang around until then," he suggests.

I look at the time on my cell again and fumble to calculate how many hours remain between then and now. It feels too extended a time block to walk around in the hot sun.

"Four hours," someone who just joined the conversation offers.

The birthday boy, whose forehead hairs are being groomed back in their place by the bass drummer with an exposed razor blade, counts on his fingers.

"Five hours," he announces.

I tell him I also need to use my fingers to count. What I don't tell him is that my fingers and his came up with different totals. But whether the span is three-and-a-half hours, four, or five, I ask the more important question.

“Do you mean a start time of 2 pm Dominican time or U.S. time?”

The bass drummer cracks a smile. With the way the group is operating, it is impossible that 2 pm means 2 pm. I factor in a one- to two-hour delay. I am still left with arriving home too late to attend one or both virtual meetings with important contacts halfway around the world and potentially negative consequences for my future.

The young man gives me his name and number in case I change my mind. I am grateful and tell him I prefer tomorrow, Saturday, when the *gagá* is set to begin at 11 am. That gives me two hours lead time to reach the area.

Saturday morning, rainfall is heavy. By 9 am, clouds hang low, and rain forecast throughout the day vacillates between 70 and 80%. I send the young musician a message noting I assume the *gagá* will not come out as no musician wants to get his instrument wet. He confirms it is also raining where he is and that the instruments cannot get wet.

In his WhatsApp display photo, his clothing reveals significant tattoo coverage and a carved eyebrow. He is smoking at once two large hand-rolled cigarettes (or whatever!). The photo makes me feel sad. I am not sure why.

In the chat he asks twice if I am sad. I do not know how he senses this, unless he means the fact that I will now miss out a second time on seeing the *gagá* perform. Maybe the tone of my words has conveyed this unspoken sadness.

Easter Sunday he sends me a message informing the troupe is going to perform “an act of providence”

and asks if I want to join. He stresses twice, “come prepared!”

I barely have time to depart, arrive, and have no idea what he means by coming prepared but tell him I will be there in an hour, knowing full well it is physically impossible to do so. It is the best I can offer on such short notice. I race out of my apartment minutes later.

His little sister greets me again in the courtyard. I am late ... but so are all the musicians. I join the *gagá* as they round up other musicians, bandage broken instruments, secure a vehicle and the group’s director, synchronize styles and rhythms, and “light up” in the middle of a baseball field before taking their driving sound and retinue to a nearby community.

Wherever we go, an increasing crowd of frenzied followers add to our swollen ranks. We all manage to move through the tiniest of alleyways, impossible crevices of almost-touching sides between rows of precarious housing. *Gagá* drums, cornets, fat bamboo-style plumbing pipes, and whistles spread providence where it is most needed. It is a balm for my soul of broken triangles and sweet tamarind.



While Asher relentlessly pushes the limits of his known environment by exploring the physical and intellectual expanse of the world's wonders, a quiet, sensitive Adrian – four blocks north – fills his own wingspan with resourcefulness, living out fantasy and fiction in the rough-and-tumble immediacy of whatever is on hand.

Wingspan

To reach my apartment, I file past young men chatting quietly in Kreyòl on a broken piece of pavement, elders sipping coffee or adult beverages from plastic cups under the shade of a corner store awning, a food truck taking up more than its share of space, a delivery van unloading goods to a warehouse squeezed in alongside a dumping ground; and a dozen small children involved in various endeavors including dragging a beaten blue plastic kite along gravel, establishing turf on an abandoned stairway leading nowhere, and switching out balls for bikes in the early evening hours before the curtain of night descends on playtime and they are summoned inside for dinner.

Four-year-old Adrian (name changed) is among the gang of kids. He fancies himself a Major League Baseball (MLB) player, daredevil cyclist, and motorcycle racer. He likes to talk tough and play hard. In his imagined identities, he makes use of props he finds laying around or can finagle from his older brother. His brother, named after one of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, is barely his senior. When at play, Adrian remains laser-focused, taking his downtime seriously.

I cross through the property of Adrian's family to reach my apartment. In these limited surroundings, he is in his element. In truth, despite his daredevil illusions, when Adrian moves beyond the confines of his driveway and contiguous patches of scratchy property, I see fear

on his face. To cross the street in front of his home, Adrian holds on to his brother's hand tightly, alert to the threat of movement coming from any direction.

For the first three or four months of our almost daily encounters, Adrian did not greet me. My foreign appearance may have stood in the way of building trust. On occasion I would hear him in the back corner of his family's store, sobbing behind a low, grated door facing the driveway. If we made eye contact, I would assure him everything would be alright. Sometimes I pretended not to notice to respect his privacy.

We are now many months into our on-and-off neighborly relationship. A few times Adrian has careened down the driveway on a bicycle, imitating the roar of a motorcycle engine, almost running me over. In his mind, he is driving a motorbike. I do not let on that I can tell the difference between a bicycle and motorcycle but step aside to let Evel Knievel whiz by. He deliberately avoids eye contact, putting on a determined look. Riding a huge motorbike is serious business.

Once, as I walk home from work, I see Adrian mounted on the tip of a motorcycle seat in front of his father, the driver. His dad maneuvers at a decent clip a cut-up road running perpendicular to the east-west coastal highway. Adrian takes on the wind as if he were a windflower and cannot get enough of the oncoming element. His body registers with glee every bump, pothole, and vibration. A blissful radiance is painted across his face. At this moment he is who he imagines himself to be, a master of the road. He surrenders to the exhilaration.

In his tough-guy persona, Adrian is the one who decides if he wishes to greet me or share a smile.

It may be due to his brother's influence. One time I encounter the two of them, out walking with their grandmother before sunrise. The older brother, startled to see me, runs in the opposite direction to catch up to his grandmother. Adrian glances back to see what causes his brother's desperate sprint, and scrambles to join him and the safety of his grandmother's bulk. I am not an evil spirit of the dawn but rather returning from an energizing pre-dawn swim.

Usually, Adrian is doing important things when we cross paths, such as scooping up dirt or sand with a plastic fork, swinging a swollen-plastic red baseball bat at a crushed empty PET bottle that he tosses in the air, or faking wheelies with the front wheel of his bicycle barely suspended in the air for a split second. Again, I respect his very public privacy.

Sometimes, not letting on that I am watching out of the corner of my eye – to avoid getting run over as he races by, if for no other reason – I cannot but smile inwardly because he is so quintessentially Adrian at play. One day, I find him up at bat, swinging at loose pebbles with his grip closed around the handle of a discarded umbrella. Up at bat with a broken umbrella. Hmm, maybe not yet MLB material. Another day, unexpectedly, he flashes an irresistible smile while saluting me four times in a row, to show off that he can carry out the maneuver of a salute with his right-hand while his left hand maintains control of the bike handlebar.

Asher (name changed), a differently wired neighborhood five-year-old, carries a name derived from the Hebrew for "my struggle." He lives his life out loud and does not pretend to champion tough love.

Antsy, typically found sitting on a low wall watching the neighborhood go by or banging on an overturned plastic paint bucket, Asher is a powerball of energy exploding in every direction. I observe him for months before we meet face to face in a random encounter in his mother's store.

Asher's mom dresses conservatively, modestly – ankle-length dresses, skirts that fall way below the knee, button-up blouses. She runs a shop the size of half a lottery counter, stocking cold soft drinks, packaged juices, fruit in season, presoaked beans, purchases for which one need not plan ahead. On my way from work to home I spot her shop, note a stalk of ripe bananas hanging over the sidewalk in front of the store, and step inside to inquire about pricing. Asher is busy tearing the head off a plastic giraffe doll after first shaking it back and forth mercilessly. I make the connection between him and the boy I often see sitting on top of a half-wall, swinging his legs.

Before his mother can answer me about the cost of bananas, Asher peppers me with questions.

“How much is four times ten?” he tests.

“Forty,” I answer.

“If you want six bananas that sell for fifteen pesos a pair, how much do you pay?”

“Forty-five pesos,” I reply.

“How much is eight hundred plus fifty-eight? he shoots back, pronouncing *eight hundred* as if it were the biggest numeral he can summon in his little head. He is certain I will fail to solve this final problem.

“Eight hundred and fifty-eight, obviously,” I say. With this, Asher is duly impressed. I am floored by his tenacity to push limits. Nothing escapes Asher.

Now that my credentials are established, Asher opens to the topic really on his mind.

“What is the largest bird?” he asks. He is no longer quizzing me. He wants to know the truth.

I put off the purchase of bananas for the time being. Prices can be negotiated later. Asher's time and attention cannot.

“It depends,” I begin carefully. “Do you mean the largest of the birds that fly or of the birds that do not fly? The ostrich, for instance, is a very large bird but does not fly, and the albatross, which does fly, can cover large distances in flight over the ocean. The albatross may have the largest wingspan, though I am not sure of its body size.”

“I think it's the eagle,” he answers his own question and side-steps a major categorical division between bird types. I can tell he wants the eagle to be the largest. The bird seems to fascinate him.

“I'll get back to you after doing some research tonight.” This answer satisfies him ... for an instant.

“At what velocity does the eagle travel?” Again, he is in the eagle's camp and demonstrates an unusually high-level of vocabulary for his age: *velocidad* (velocity).

“I have no idea, but I will look that up, too,” I assure him.

Asher makes me promise I will return to the store tomorrow with all the answers.

“*Te lo prometo.*” I promise.

I have work I need to do that night but put it aside to dedicate some time to ornithology. I use Audubon Society, National Geographic, and other credible sources to obtain facts in addition to illustrative photographs I screenshot to underscore my points in

case Asher demands proof. I discover the ostrich, in fact, is the largest bird (among those that do not fly) and can measure over 3 yards in height, weigh more than 353 pounds, and run more than 49 miles per hour. I look for facts to support the eagle as the largest bird, but it only comes close. Instead, I find it is the condor that has the largest body mass. The albatross, with a wingspan of nearly 4 yards, tops the condor and eagle. Still, the eagle is *among* the largest birds that fly, which should satisfy Asher.

I take the time to find other important facts about the eagle – its symbolic use for the federal government of the United States of America, its function as a solar symbol and sky god; and stand-in for inspiration, victory, honesty, vitality, power, and freedom. This, too, should convince Asher that the eagle is an important bird and, because of its grandeur, easily confused as the largest and fastest of the skies on Earth.

When I return to deliver the facts to Asher, he is as radiant with my report-out as Adrian was at the helm of his father's motorbike. As a bonus, I ask Asher if he knows who and what he is named after. I show him ancient illustrations of the 12 Hebrew tribes. He already knows the origin of his name. His older sister, also in the shop, nods silently. Asher begins to recite the names of everyone in his large, extended family. All names invoke biblical references. I lose track of the connectors between relatives but not his capacity for memory recall.

Talents of children are constantly in the making. Cultivation of their uniqueness, and opportunity permitting, I have hopes that Adrian and Asher will have fulfilling lives. While Asher relentlessly pushes

the limits of his known environment by exploring the physical and intellectual expanse of the world's wonders, a quiet, sensitive Adrian – four blocks north – fills his own wingspan with resourcefulness, living out fantasy and fiction in the rough-and-tumble immediacy of whatever is on hand.

Unlike the Israelite tribes in the Land of Canaan, the river dividing the two small boys, their families, and the world inside their heads are pools of stagnant water that flood the torn-up streets and settle, following near-daily rainstorms, in the midpoint between the four blocks.

At any given time, Clara could look to be in her thirties, forties, or fifties. When she wore a short, summery, pastel-colored shift and danced merengue, she shed decades of her life.

Before the After

Before we knew what the future held, many noted subtle changes in Clara's routine and expressions – evasive when she would otherwise pry, attentive when she would typically prefer solitude, seeking closure from playful taunts that could be misinterpreted. Before the after, before Clara left her body and we could reach her only in memory and collective reconstruction, her acts of kindness were a daily given during our nine hours of cohabitation at work. If one listened carefully, however, warnings were present. The after could come at any time, moving swiftly like a downward pull of water below the river's surface. Periodically, Clara complained of aches and pains, limits her body imposed, signs of caution.

After Clara's passing, we began putting the pieces together of a patterned intentionality. Was Clara saying good-bye?

The morning the news reached all staff of Clara's definitive departure was to have been a large group outing riverside, with barbecue, music, pool, dominoes, and hammocks in the shade. Word spread fast, the trip was cancelled, life (and death) had intervened. Our mood dialed back.

Clara was the principal chef of an outdoor power-kitchen trio at my place of work, a non-governmental organization (NGO) in the north of the Dominican Republic. From an initial staffing pattern of three at its formal launch over twenty years ago, employee ranks

at the NGO now burst at the seams with over 120 employees. When youth groups visited from abroad or regional conferences were hosted on premises, the number of hungry bellies to fill swelled further. One time we ran out of plates. The kitchen staff miraculously held steady at three regardless.

At any given time, Clara could look to be in her thirties, forties, or fifties. When she wore a short, summery, pastel-colored shift and danced merengue, she shed decades of her life. Hard at work, in command of the kitchen, she assumed wisdom across the ages. She knew how to adapt to her customers, whether three years old or seven, teenager or young adult, teacher or foreign visitor. She led her staff with aplomb and fed us all.

Pleasing the palates of youth is tricky. Their tastes and moods can be fickle. Today they like this food and tomorrow they do not. They reject unfamiliar textures and may retain earlier childhood associations or prejudices. Clara faithfully remembered dietary restrictions, be they biological or philosophical, and figured out alternatives. If her staff confused who ate what, she reminded them gently.

Happy to get in one square meal daily as I live off fruit in the morning and vegetables in the evening, Clara's alternating menu of local staples worked well for me, including the flagship Dominican platter of rice, beans, and chicken or dishes anchored in lentils, cassava, plantains, avocado, salted codfish, or an ever-present side of shredded raw cabbage in vinaigrette.

When Clara was under the weather from any one of her underlying physical conditions, and only if one asked directly or looked hard, the strain on her body was apparent.

One month as we entered summer, Clara launched her fatten-up-Judith campaign. Even colleagues noticed my plate was visibly bountiful. That was the only time I asked for redress. Out of respect, I ate the brimming serving of rice and beans then pleaded with the kitchen crew to have mercy and reduce the serving portion. I could not perform this miracle of digestion more than once in a lifetime. Clara instructed her team to trim on the heapings, and although she was displeased to renounce her hopes for a larger Judith, she acquiesced.

Two days before the after, I showed Clara a gallery of family photos from a recent trip to the United States. She reviewed the photos, but her mind seemed distant. This was unusual. Clara was a people person with sincere curiosity about others' lives. Was she seeing her own family receding? She perked up only at the last photo, the one of my younger cousin holding aloft a coconut.

"You have a hippie in the family?" she inquired, smiling. She has a few in hers.

"Yes," I affirmed. The distinction between twentieth-century anti-war activist and twenty-first-century mindfulness was not an appropriate conversation for the moment.

A colleague recalled Clara requested an embrace the day before the after, providing closure to ongoing light-hearted provocations, an endnote of unambiguous warmth. That same day, Clara did not take the quiet, back route homeward she usually did at the end of the workday. Instead, she took the road that passed in front of the bachata music academy, a sister building and part of the NGO, enabling her to greet young musicians and staff coming and going per their extended hours into the evening.

Early morning the next day, the curtain fell. Co-workers and I then raised it, along with Clara's family, friends, and neighbors, to mourn together and to praise Clara's myriad ways of comforting, counseling, and nourishing the souls around her. Her memory in the afterlife will do the same.

Line in the Middle

The coach-size bus pulls up to the curb where a small group of teenagers stand ready to board per prior arrangement. Some load suitcases into the undercarriage storage. Others move into the bus's interior rear, stuffing backpacks and shoulder sacks into the overhead bins along the way or settling them onto knees once seated. At this pre-dawn hour of the Caribbean winter, it is chilly. Bulk baggage positioned close to the body adds warmth. More room will be needed still for passengers and their bundles, added at another dozen stops between here and the Cordillera Central, a central mountain range in the heartland of the Dominican Republic, and our final destination within a region whose name means "a place of many waters."

Sparse movement dots the road. I am thankful for this and that the limited activity evident there is enveloped in the silhouetted, near total darkness of the hour. Our young passengers in the seats up front, who would otherwise be able to make out the movements of a woman some seven yards away, return to dozing off, giving in to the exhaustion from rising extra early for bus pickup times.

Only the driver and I are privy to behold the unpleasant scene of a large woman in sullied brown-and-black rags positioned ready to relieve herself in the gutter, in full view of anyone on or near the road. Our busload of sleepy peeps, fortunately, are oblivious. The

woman challenges our stare in her direction. She does not seek to be discreet. It is almost a deliberate dare, forcing us to acknowledge the unbridled indignity of her existence. The coach bus fans out closer to an inner lane at the traffic light, widening the gap between us and her energy.

This is not the first time I come across the wandering woman or unintentionally close in on her territory. This bus stop bench in town is practically hers. She frequently sits there, staring out into nothingness, barely shaded by a broken top overhang as the sun burns off the morning hours. Awaiting passengers at the stop know better than to share the space she claims, not even a slice of the partial shade.

One day as the sun careens toward high noon, I wait for a public bus on the main street, about half a block from the official stop. As a reflex, I look back toward the bus stop. There, on the slender metallic bench within the tiny hut with the broken roof covering, I see the woman's legs in black Lycra stretched out on the boards. I have no idea how she maintains her balance. The width of the bench is but a tiny percentage of her bulk. Maybe the sun is playing with my vision. Has this really become her home, in the blazing midday sun?

After these multiple sightings of the woman walking up and down the street where I live and work, once witnessing her demanding water aggressively from a shopkeeper in the searing heat, and at another occasion competing with a street dog for space in the entranceway of a Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Hall, I ask a colleague at work if he knows her story.

"Yes, they call her *la loca de cinco*," he tells me.

Probing further into the origins of the moniker, he explains she earned it from constantly asking people to "give her five" (a Dominican five-peso coin). With inflation, I cannot imagine her needs hold steady at five, but the nickname sticks and does not increase to twenty-five as she attempts to survive and have her demands met. *Cinco pesos* nowadays can barely cover the cost of a thimble-full of baking soda.

According to my colleague, the drifting soul used to be married and led a so-called normal life. One day she left it all behind and took to the streets. Since my arrival in town over a year ago, my neighborhood and its surrounding streets are where she peregrinates.

From bus bench to bed, the two imitation-wood, lightweight, ten-inch metal boards that stretch out to half the length of a human being of average height provide "comfort" and drive-by shelter to an oversize shadowy figure on the move who has long since ceased to be the publicly acceptable version of her former self. Though she may blend into the urban setting unseen (for those who choose to not see), she continues to be an anomaly of normalcy, equitable economy, and expectations of human dignity.

The hyphen, that line in the middle between date of birth and death, carries vastly different meaning and potential for the range of souls subsumed into the complex web of humanity.



Inside my cable car, we were six twisted necks, busily trying to make out details of the landscape. As I alighted from the car, the feeling of being part of a mass pilgrimage began in earnest. Multiple flights of rain-swept and time-worn stone steps remained before reaching the temple, still hidden in clouds and mist.

India Beckons

India beckons, building momentum within me to return east. I devote time and effort to the unfinished business of determining where to continue exploring a country of infinite offerings. Two months later I board a flight to Miami, another to Doha, a third to Ahmedabad, and eventually land sandals on the ground in the Indian state of Gujarat, the largest of the country's 28 states and 8 union territories. An Uber request for a three-wheeler at 2:30 a.m. brings to the curb in minutes an open-air auto rickshaw. Traffic-free conditions make the ride from airport to a hotel in Ahmedabad's old city doable within 20 minutes, maybe less. Hard to tell under the fuzzy influence of much lost sleep.

On the first of the three flights to my destination, two siblings sat directly behind me, an aisle over from their parents. The big sister, a role evident by the self-granted authority of her declarations and admonishments as well as the confidence in her voice, was ever vigilant. I had no line of sight to the row behind me, but she sounded to be approximately six or seven years old. She spoke English to her younger brother and Arabic to her parents. Her little brother had boundless energy. He second-guessed all her directives. His pronunciation was clear, and his enunciation was unusual for his age.

Big sister: "Put it there [referring to a toy]."

Little brother: "Is there *here*?" a clever way of seeking location specificity.

Big sister: "Put your seat belt on."

Little brother: "Why?"

Big sister: "So you don't die." The boy did not argue, nor did he ask what dying meant. Surprisingly, he accepted her jarring answer.

Little brother: "Is the airplane in the sky?"

Big sister: "Yes, we are in the sky now."

Little brother: "We are in the sky! Will we stay in the sky?"

A second later, as the plane reached cruising altitude and the boy perceived a leveling-off of what had been upward movement of the airplane, he was puzzled and asked: "We are going down. Why are we going down now?"

Change of topic by big sister: "I am cleaning up your garbage."

Little brother: "Why?"

Big sister: "Because it's not nice to leave your garbage all over the floor."

Little brother: "OK," acquiescing with a simple response, giving in to logic.

I closed my eyes and prepared for a three-day wait until the final landing. This amount of flight hours – going up, leveling off, going down – is why the early morning breeze rushing in from all sides of the auto rickshaw felt so exhilarating.

In addition to exploring the community housing *pols* within the walled old city of Ahmedabad, I branched out southeast to Pavagadh, Champaner, and Vadodara. On another day, I headed north/northwest to Mehsana and Patan districts.

Between heat, dust, and traffic fumes, the driver for each full day of excursion travel made rotating use of

outside AC (windows down, air conditioning off) and inside AC (steady chill, though I negotiated a reduced difference between outside and inside air temperature extremes).

After noon, the day of the south circuit, I traveled to Pavagadh Hills, Panchmahal district, where Pavagadh Temple has stood crowning the hilltop for over one thousand years, 1800 steps up (about half a mile) from the base. Prevailing weather conditions during my visit alternated between hard rain and drizzle, keeping the temple out of sight until the final stage of ascent. My right foot, ailing from a strain a few days prior, was not likely to survive the climb up or down, let alone round-trip. I made the decision to take "the rope." The ropeway, opened in 1986, is relatively new to a temple standing as a pilgrimage site since the tenth century.

Waiting one's turn in line for "the rope" was a memorable experience. There, from a young couple behind me, I was relieved to learn that the "rope" was not a rope but, in fact, a cable car pulled along by sturdy cables strung up and down the hillside. The system had undergone routine maintenance earlier in the week.

The line moved slowly. Only once we reached the boarding station would we be whisked into a six- or eight-seater cable car to the one-and-only stop in the steep upward climb. From there, the rest of the journey could only be made on foot, at some point barefoot, over ancient stone steps. Those making the trip by cable car were equally exposed to the elements, stepping through or, where possible, around muddy puddles. Conversation – the great equalizer – helped passionate and casual pilgrims alike pass the time.

The couple and their parents in the snaking line turned out to be from Madhya Pradesh, in central India. The recently married couple, parents of the boy, and parents of the girl were making this Sunday afternoon temple visit together.

The family and in-laws were quite open to chatting with the foreigner in their midst and peppered me with questions. They felt further at ease when they found out I had previously visited many historic sites and towns in their home state.

The opener from the father of the bride was direct. “Why did you cut your hair like that?” he asked bluntly. In the endless line of temple-devotees, I was the only woman with a barbershop short cut.

“Why not?” I countered with a smile, then followed up with, “Why did *you* cut *your* hair like that?”

Fortunately, he understood the irony of my comeback question, finding it funny and logical. He repeated in Hindi to his wife his own question along with my question-answer. His wife gestured to me that she spoke no English. She and I exchanged smiles. She showed me how to skip through a seriously flooded area, advancing by using as tiny dry islands the tops of five large stones sticking out of the submerged route to the ropeway.

When I pointed to a large female pig, snout busy sniffing through the mud, and a donkey scouring mud, muck, and garbage to find edibles on the margins of a stagnant pool off to the side of the ever-nearing onboarding station for cable car transport, the mother of the bride looked at me and said “pig, donkey.” Her proficiency in English farm vocabulary surprised me, though she could not string together a single sentence in the language.

The family and I were separated once we reached the cable car loading dock. Their party had enough people to fill two cars without any need for strangers. Handlers divided passengers by weight, keeping together families and friends where possible, but re-arranging seating within the car according to size and weight.

Inside my cable car, we were six twisted necks, busily trying to make out details of the landscape. As I alighted from the car, the feeling of being part of a mass pilgrimage began in earnest. Multiple flights of rain-swept and time-worn stone steps remained before reaching the temple, still hidden in clouds and mist. At one of the landing points, I shelved my soaking wet sandals and climbed the rest barefoot.

At all stages of the sacred climb, visitors left their shoes. Some left their shoes at the base, 1800 steps downhill. Shoe racks along the steep ascent were exposed to the elements, so any footwear stored there would be returned even wetter. This eventuality ceased to matter to me. The sacred embrace of the enclave was drawing me forward toward the final landing atop the final flight of steps, where ornate carved columns and the exterior of the temple dedicated to the goddess Kali Mata (Dark Mother, Divine Mother) began to be discernible, though shrouded in mist.

Inside, close to the inner sanctum, there was pushing and shoving. Each visitor wanted eyes on the powerful goddess – her energy part of the blessings bestowed. Little kids were hoisted onto shoulders and cell phones held high clicked from any angle, hoping to immortalize an already immortalized Kali.

As I departed the temple, the mist began to dissipate and the rain paused briefly, affording me

time to appreciate the building's design, structure, and aesthetics. The intense wind was a relief and, though drenched, I felt lighter.

Hundreds of oncoming visitors, the next wave climbing the final few flights of steps and moving through the rain, edged toward the temple on the ascent side of the guard railing. Some carried babies in their arms or led small children forward by the hand.

Two older women, who could make neither the uphill nor downhill climb themselves, were each transported up the temple steps in folded canvas hammock stretchers by teams of paired porters who bore the weight of their passengers with the aid of long wooden beam supports. The difficulty of their task up and down, over 3600 slippery rain-washed steps, was unimaginable. I hoped they, too, would receive blessings from the goddess for their labor and service.

When India beckons ... when Kali Mata beckons, although one may not cross easily into these significant fields of energy, one does exit with a renewed lightness of being.

Player

When you pass a ball of yarn from person to person, unraveling only segments at a time, it is not long before knots form, threads get caught on jagged edges, and snag. Such is the fate of those who move against the elements, renouncing personal responsibility until the tug and momentum that forms are so strong, "what if" becomes a lesson that should have been learned yesterday.

Rain patters and pounds, on and off for weeks. The signs that drainage on the property will not hold up are everywhere, from the pyramidal heap of tossed Styrofoam take-away containers, to waxed coffee cups in open trash, irregular-cut wood slabs, strewn beer bottles, and cement-mix debris.

Usually, I find the sound of strong rain against my terrace roof exhilarating. When the wind is fierce and causes the rain to lash in bucket batches on the zinc, I sometimes worry the covering may not hold and blow off, removing important protection.

This time it feels different. There is no let-up to the sustained bouts of heavy rain. Water accumulates in patches surrounding the building. They eventually join, then rise. The sun does not return to burn off pools from the night's rain.

Though it is still dark, I am awake much before sunrise. I have an eerie feeling the silence between rainfall has meaning. I walk out on my terrace, peek over the railing down a flight-and-a-half of stairs, and

make out reflections and movement in water ... where there should be land.

I go back to bed, not to sleep but to ponder. What if? What if the depth of this water means I cannot leave my apartment, as the water is lapping where the last couple of steps should be? What if I cannot restock my refrigerator, already almost on empty, with a few essential items to assure the next few meals. What if I cannot get to work?

The answers do not take long to emerge. Rain clouds continue to form and deliver, on and off. Thunder and lightning exchange protagonism. In the gray daylight of a new visit to the terrace edge, I confirm my suspicions. I am going nowhere.

A neighbor from the settlement to the right of my building walks very slowly through dark waters reaching above his knees and the entry point of his slatted wooden door. An eerie silence descends on life among still waters. The homes of these neighbors are more vulnerable, more precarious. I may not be able to leave my apartment but inside I am dry. No water has come through the roof, the walls, or up from the floor. A mind-game of relativity re-aligns my perspective. Usually, I try not to look too closely at these homes because I do not want to make anyone feel self-conscious or judged. Today is different. We are connected by water.

I telework for two days, living off stirred oatmeal and water (lunch), and vegetables and plantains (dinner). My seasoning is one raw purple onion – half one night, half the next.

On day three, the sun makes an appearance by early morning. Lots of clouds are visible forming in

the distance but not yet overhead. I know enough to understand this is my window of opportunity. Some others have already begun walking through the flood waters to get things done. I psychologically prepare to do the same.

Sunshine illuminates the bottom of the accumulated water, which means I can take every step thoughtfully. My feet are heavy with the water that fills my flip-flops. I have no other footwear logical for this quantity of wetness. From above, I had already seen a bloated dead frog belly-up. I imagine everything else that accompanies me in the water. Step by step, focused.

Finally, at the muck-and-water's edge, the thread of tension and unpleasantness breaks, and the unraveling can begin. This is not just a force of nature. It is the result of human folly.

I am on the other side among dryness, yet others are still swishing through flooded homes or busy keeping small children away from a doorstep plunge.

Drainage of the area is down to zero. Although a crew of two men (three days into the flooding) have just appeared on the scene, entered the water in rubber boots, and turn on a water pump, there is no visible tubing leading out of the affected area. It is a Sisyphean task – futile at best, foolish at face value. Two men, a tiny pump, and three isolated refuse-laden swamps joined into one.

My efficiency plan comprises four errands to be accomplished before the rain resumes and water rises further. Obtaining food tops the list.

A couple of blocks from my home is a family-run neighborhood store that usually stocks a limited but predictable supply of fresh vegetables and tubers. Due

to ongoing inclement weather, local produce supply trucks have not been able to make their rounds, and the offerings are slim. I buy enough, based on a simple menu, to last me a few days, with potatoes to spare. Other neighbors stop by for small purchases, or just to hang out. Many make their purchases on an honor-and-credit system.

As I depart the store, a tough, young, bad-boy type looks me up and down. All customer eyes turn toward us.

“You looking for a *tiguere*?” he asks me.

I barely have returned to life beyond flood waters, and this player is hitting on me in a brief window of sunshine.

“Not really,” I answer with brutal but good-natured honesty. This only succeeds in egging him on further.

“A motorcycle ride?” he inquires, patting the place for me to install myself behind him on his bike.

“No,” I reaffirm.

By this time, those inside and outside the store are in suspense, wondering what the young man will do next, what I might do, and who will out-smart-ass whom.

“A massage?” he offers.

“Nor a massage. Although what a luxury it would be!” I say, incredulous that his self-esteem is so hard-wired. I then break into unbridled laughter, signaling to those waiting for the duel to end that I win, releasing stress from endless rain, block-by-block flooding, and ongoing convergence of storm systems. By calling his bluff and dismantling his façade of entitled macho dominance he has suffered an ever-so-slight public put-down.

I walk away, continuing toward the cross-street and, in my mind, on to errand number two. Just when I think I am out of the clear, bad boy pulls up alongside me on his motorbike, slows to a stop, keeps the engine running, and gives it one more try.

“Want a free ride?”

I flash him a smile.

He is happy. Two smiles gained. Maybe he won after all. He drives off a player, through and through.

One unsuspecting day I received a WhatsApp message from Anne. By way of explanation, her text indicated she “wanted to be part of the conversation,” an adorable confession from a ninety-something-year-old that led to other messages.

Messages Across My Screen

In memory of Anne Ravin Troum

It was hard to tell the mentor from the mentee in my relationship with Aunt Anne, which only began to develop and blossom around the time my mother found her steady footing as a divorced and independent woman redefining her own tastes and rhythm. It was she who first reconnected with Anne, her former sister-in-law by marriage to my father’s brother. Through my mother’s networking efforts, I followed suit.

At that time, I was already a largely away-from-home daughter. Before long, I was away from country, then continent. Paradoxically, this is when I also began an active correspondence with Anne. It started through my writing – her window into my world and my discovery of hers. Her intellectual curiosity had always been robust. That entire side of the family was filled with over-achievers – the musically gifted (including one PhD holder), niche lawyers; connoisseurs of chess, theater, wine, and jazz.

I saw in Anne qualities I greatly admired. She had the strength to live through a difficult divorce, a taboo at the time and life event my grandmother would only discuss in hushed tones. Eventually, it became commonplace and ran deep in the family, splitting in two acts as well the life of her youngest son and others. Anne survived the loss of her 21-year-old first-born, by all accounts a son poised for continued distinction, through imminent military service (Naval Reserve)

and academic pursuits in law. At least outwardly, she came through and managed her own reinvention as a divorcee, wife remarried, then widow.

Through it all Anne remained sharp, attentive, a snazzy dresser with political acumen and love for the arts. She gave back to three generations: her children, children's children, and children's children's children. She and I did not know what to call one another, with all the intervening breakups, divorces, and remarriages, but settled on "aunt" and "niece" to simplify matters when speaking about one another to others. Face-to-face we were simply Anne and Judith.

Anne flaunted her individualism and lucidity. Only once did she fall asleep on the keyboard, on camera right before my eyes in mid-conversation. It was a sign of turning points to come. She was a cheerleader for my lifestyle and offered unsolicited support for whatever unusual turn my life was taking at the time. Of these, there were many, including discovering my ex-husband had children in the plural, begotten through other wombs during our marriage, and my subsequent surreal divorce. So much for coherence in the madness. I, too, was finding my way.

Over the last couple of years, as Anne's mobility became challenged, she moved out of her home to have more hands-on and on-hand assistance. It signaled a sacrifice in her full independence. In this new context I tried to match up our waking hours to speak across a nine-and-a-half-hour time difference while I juggled the responsibilities of a high-powered position in India.

When passing through New Jersey in the summer of 2023, I visited Anne at Winchester Gardens, Maplewood. I found her sitting outside looking perky

by a grassy area during the golden hour before sunset. She sported her characteristic bold silver jewelry – each a unique collection-worthy piece – with a new twist: wildly patterned palazzo pants. She retained her personal style and willingness to learn.

I spoke to her about accessing various social media platforms that would help me locate her as my residences continued to turn with the globe. She did not let on she had a plan in the works. Either someone in the family came through to help her connect to the world digitally or a nurse's aide, with a bounty of kindness and extra time to kill, filled in.

One unsuspecting day I received a WhatsApp message from Anne. By way of explanation, her text indicated she "wanted to be part of the conversation," an adorable confession from a ninety-something-year-old that led to other messages from Anne floating across my screen unexpectedly from any number of platforms or devices – WhatsApp on my two different country-specific cell numbers, my laptop via FaceTime, and email on all devices. Sometimes I could not remember where I saw the "Anne Troum" screen floater message preview. Always, I would reciprocate within a day or two. At her advanced age, I could not take time for granted.

Anne and I spoke by phone early November 2024. She told me she had voted in the nation's November 5 presidential elections despite not feeling well at all that day. Exercising her civic duty as she had done all her life once she became of voting age was important to her. I noted I felt the same and had cast my vote in late September through an absentee ballot then mailed to the United States through diplomatic pouch from abroad.

We discussed our respective Thanksgiving plans. She was unable to commit to joining the family in New Jersey for a meal. What if she suddenly felt unwell or needed to lie down in her own bed? What if the malaise returned, she wondered aloud. I suggested other residents at Winchester Gardens might similarly feel hesitant about leaving the grounds but might appreciate sharing a table and traditional meal. I informed her I would spend Thanksgiving in south Florida with my sister, brother-in-law, nieces, nephew, and their respective spouses/partner – my first Thanksgiving holiday dinner in three decades among family.

The Sunday after Thanksgiving I barely made it aboard my flight back to the Dominican Republic. I could not call Anne from the airport in Miami. For three hours the airline agent refused to grant me permission to board the plane. By the time the Dominican government gave the green light to issue me a boarding pass, my sole focus was to get through immigration, security, and make it to the gate on time. I arrived twenty minutes before boarding and only exhaled once seated on the plane.

When I reached my apartment in the DR, a message from Anne floated across the screen off my laptop. I did not see it during my brief stay in Florida. “Thinking of you,” is all it said. It was sent on Thanksgiving, November 28, at 9:44 pm, a time I did not realize she would be awake. Already twice during our previous conversation that same month, she exclaimed: “Can you believe I am going to turn 98 in March?!” Was there an urgent subtext in this last exchange?

“Happy Thanksgiving, Anne. We managed to get the family assembled,” I replied by email a day later,

uploading a photo as proof. The family photo was taken outside, before dinner, against rows of palm trunks wrapped in tiny white fairy lights.

My subsequent attempts to reach Anne were met with a recorded outgoing message. No new messages from her floated across my screen.

Today, December 15, Anne crossed over to the other side. She had aged with dignity, supporting subsequent generations, clear about her priorities until the end. May we all hope to do the same, through whatever portion of a century’s historic changes, world events, and personal challenges we are meant to live.

The fisherman and I discuss his catch of the morning at greater length. He tells me he used to toss back into the water this flopping, dark-black, crested fish. That was before his neighbor told him he could sell this fish and that people would pay a good price for it.

Catfish

In the stillness of early morning neither insects nor birds have begun to stir. Only the dogs are vociferous, defending turf and blocking paths as I take turnoff after turnoff. A local resident offers to keep his canine in check, allowing me to traverse his property and the final segment within sight to reach the backwaters. The muddied path hugs the lagoon's edge and leads to a narrow wooden-plank footbridge, some six yards in length, that crosses the water at its narrowest point.

The dog on that property, sporting a coat of black-and-white fur patches, is comfortable with my presence, follows me wagging its tail, then takes the lead by crossing over the footbridge – no barking, respecting the morning calm.

I spot slow movement approaching in the distance in the otherwise stagnant lagoon waters. An opaque black film over the brackish surface does not permit me to gauge whether there is bio life within or what the water's depth may be.

As the movement nears, I make out a thin male figure up to his waist in lagoon water carrying an irregular-shaped rice sack. He aims for an opening in the broken barbed-wire fence, slides himself under, pushes through his tiny foamboard boat, tosses the medium-sized jute sack onto a grassy embankment nearby, and pulls the rudderless boat out of the water.

He and I are now within talking distance. Without my asking, he informs me he has nine fish in his sack. He heads for the embankment and removes one for me to inspect.

“See?” He holds up a wiggling, flat, dark fish.

“My neighbor tells me it’s called a *pez gato* and that it fetches a good price in the market.”

The fish barely surpasses the size of an adult hand and does not look like any catfish I have ever seen live or in photos, but my experience is limited and I have only eaten catfish once. I have never lived among backwaters nor maintained a diet based on bottom-dwellers.

“Yes, I know the fish,” is all I can offer as encouragement.

Visible from where the lagoon fisherman and I are standing, a brownish-blond horse stands near a garage swishing its tail, aloof to our presence. The owner of the garage and surrounding green fields is nowhere to be seen.

The fisherman and I discuss his catch of the morning at greater length. He tells me he used to toss back into the water this flopping, dark-black, crested fish. That was before his neighbor told him he could sell this fish and that people would pay a good price for it. With that comment, I understand he has been leaving the tasting to others. As long as they are willing to buy the fish, he is willing to sell.

We part shortly after this explanation. He then turns around and calls after me.

“Hey! Today is my birthday.”

“What age are you turning?” I inquire, since he looks anywhere from 35 to 60.

He thinks about the answer, does some mental calculations, then announces, “42.”

I congratulate him and wish him a sale of 100% of the contents in the sack.

“May you sell all nine of the nine catfish and return with pockets full of money and an empty sack.”

He smiles. With that he drags his fiberglass paddleboat slowly across the yard by a rope toward the horse, keeping the recycled rice sack swung close over his shoulder, to see if he can make good on my best wishes for his birthday.

Meanwhile, it has taken the daughter three-quarters of a day to trust me, having answered none of my questions in words. With official processing behind us and the interview over, I take the opportunity to ask how she feels. In her family of ten, only she and her sister are literate. The daughter manages to let me into her orbit and responds with a single word.

One More Hour

A driver and I depart for the provincial capital of Puerto Plata from the Cabarete-based non-profit where we work. We leave as early as regular working hours permit to avoid clocking in overtime and pick up three pre-scheduled passengers – father, mother, preteen daughter. Given coming and going of two-way traffic and narrow streets made narrower by illegally parked vehicles and those temporarily unloading passengers such as our own, the drop-off point in Puerto Plata is on a corner opposite the Office of the Civil Registry.

By the time we reach inside the Civil Registry, authorized operations are in full swing. Six rows of connected metallic benches buzz with conversation and movement. The crowd has had two hours to arrive and fill out 98% of available seating. Some fifty people have their ticketed slips in hand from a machine in the waiting area assuring transparency in honoring order of arrival according to service provided.

I ask a young couple to shift one seat to the left so the family of three and I can make do as a party of four occupying seating for three. The twelve-year-old daughter is stick-thin. She and I have no trouble fitting into the space of a single seat. I use this as a bonding opportunity with the family, double-checking they have with them all original documents outlined by phone, left as a voice message reminder two days before, reiterated from a half-opened door of the minivan this morning,

and cross-checked the day prior in a WhatsApp exchange of photographed sample documents.

I reexamine all originals, particularly the reissued baptism clearance certificate from the Catholic Church, after the initially signed and sealed version was found to include an egregious spelling error in the daughter's name. As neither parent is literate, the mistake went unnoticed until I received a snapshot of the document and spotted the discrepancy.

Their child, age twelve and soon to be thirteen, is the reason we are waiting our turn at the Civil Registry. She is the only child of eight whose birth the family has not registered. Somehow the years passed with priorities pulling efforts and attention in other directions.

Current Dominican law allows for legal birth registration within 180 days from birth. It also lays out a process for late registration. However, the longer one waits the more potentially complex the process. Key persons for the declaration may pass away or lose interest in affirming family ties. Documents are lost to floods or remain shackled to the vagaries of decades-old clerical errors. Some papers are rendered fragile and illegible by endless folding along the same crease lines. Through it all, undocumented families get by as best they can. In the Dominican Republic, a generalized culture of underdocumentation has fueled cycles of intergenerational vulnerability for decades. Meanwhile, without a legal identity nicknames predominate.

To establish birth, identity, and citizenship through a formal process of delayed birth registration later in life, the case is constructed upon a jigsaw puzzle of hospital records, birth-at home testimonies, vaccination and school records, national identity cards,

passports, migrant residency cards, death certificates, burial records, marriage or divorce certificates, and whatever else may be needed plus an interview with the competent authority.

The family I accompany in the birth declaration and registration process is third in the digitalized ticket system for their category of service. They require an interview and a wait. With time to kill, I observe the cross-section of denizens in the waiting area.

The dress code is all over the place, with the wedding party being the most spectacular. A woman in light-rose pants and matching halter top has every curve and bulge in her manufacture accentuated. A woman who appears to be a mother figure or aunt sports a glove-fitting, solid black, off-the-shoulder dress with a thick visible on-the-shoulder "transparent" bra strap keeping her front load from falling forward. A younger woman (niece, daughter, or cousin, I conjecture) wears a full-length glittering, smokey-blue, tube dress with a defiant leg-splitting slit and thin trail of braided hair, thanks to extensions, that reaches her upper thigh and positions in front and to the side as part of her statement outfit. The bride arrives an hour late to her wedding, not subduing in the least the jovial mood of the group-photo in-waiting nor the wish of the wedding party to capture in still and moving images a civil signing ceremony that barely features movement and will be over in minutes.

Others biding their wait time include a young man in a heavy metal T-shirt brandishing "Choose Your Savior" in blood-dripping type. As if to hold this message accountable, another T-shirt wearer, searching for an open seat, warns "Heaven Is Waiting." Only two T-shirts bring me momentary relief: "Exhale" and

“Better Days Ahead.” Since second-hand and nearly new clothing are common in these parts, the two garments may be holdovers in concept and design from COVID times, when such reaffirmations were welcome.

A family of three holds an animated conversation in sign language. In white lettering against solid black, the adult daughter’s cotton T-shirt reads “Normal People Scare Me.” She is tall and large-boned. Her interlocutor could easily be her brother based on his similar build and looks. The two exit, signing all the while, and re-enter an hour later. In a public venue like this, where the guard periodically must remind the crowd to keep quiet, their three-way silent chatter is the exception.

A man in his thirties, with a well-developed belly, pushes out his message in a subtle font choice allowing the reader to take in not-so-subtle phrasing. In white-on-black his T-shirt reads “I Hate People,” though he is extraordinarily friendly and jokes constantly with a strong, rock-solid woman who stuffs her hand down the front pocket of his Bermuda shorts, fishing for his wallet. He laughs, neither giving in to her search nor putting a stop to it. Maybe he does not hate *all* people.

When our number is called, we move to an inner office where the official will handle the family’s case. A couple awaits authorization to depart the same office. Another woman enters and exits at will. The officer is multitasking. I assume the person she has on speaker phone is unaware an eclectic group of seven total strangers are privy to her conversation.

The officer prescribes to the woman’s voice on speaker phone (and person we do not see) a magic potion of watercress and milk as an expectorant for

accumulated phlegm. She notes the individual’s doctor will surely prescribe antibiotics for bronchitis but that this should not stand in the way of the natural remedy she has dictated over the phone and should be taken several times a day without fail. She references in passing another remedy to empty out everything in the woman’s system, which sounds drastic to me, does not appear to be case-specific, and leaves unstated whether the good will be removed along with the bad.

We all wait patiently for the exchange about personal ailments and remedies to end, sharing an overriding interest in the official proceedings. The officer bids good-bye to the two people seated in high-back, plush chairs nearest her desk. She is good at her job and knows how to put people at ease, waving my group to settle into the same seats alongside her desk, offering a bathroom break if needed, and a chance to take in the surroundings. When she opens the conversation, working her way to more pointed questions, her interlocutors are caught with their guard down and forced into the immediacy of honesty. Whether they speak or not, their body language sends out additional cues – signs the officer picks up on and circles back to when the time is right in the interview. She knows inconvenient truths sometimes surface amidst a contradiction in facts.

“And what about these two births within five days of one another?” she asks.

The wife/mother points her index finger at her common-law husband. She has no words to release the feelings inside her.

“*Es un lío*” (it’s a mess), the husband/father blurts out matter-of-factly.

I consider how painful it must be to give birth within days of another woman seeded by the same man. The young daughter is present all the while.

As if saving everyone from agonizing further over the unspeakable, the officer releases the tension by saying, “no one gets knocked up, and delivers within the same five-day period!”

When the interview is finally over, the family moves to biometrics, waiting their turn for fingerprints, photos, and a signature. I cross-check that all data entry is correct and sign off as an official witness.

Meanwhile, it has taken the daughter three-quarters of a day to trust me, having answered none of my questions in words. With official processing behind us and the interview over, I take the opportunity to ask how she feels. In her family of ten, only she and her sister are literate. The daughter manages to let me into her orbit and responds with a single word.

“*Feliz*” (happy), she admits.

I see in the flushed swell of emotion on her face and in her watery eyes that she is more than happy and reach for her hand. I address her by her full formal name, which she is soon to see in print, for the first time, on the most official identity document she has yet to behold about herself.

“That you feel happy is more than enough,” I assure her.

Impatient with the passage of five hours at this point, and another hour still to go before issuance of the receipt that allows for future retrieval of the official late registration of birth, both parents suddenly become antsy. Each asks aloud if they need to stay.

“You waited 12 years to register your child,” the biometrics officer points out. “What’s one more hour?”



Untimely Juxtaposition

The exceptional four-wheeler visiting the road weekly is the chicken-coop delivery truck, open-backed and piled three-stories high with plastic crates where red-crested heads stick their nostrils out for air (or fear).

A new tourist on visitation to “the zone” is making her presence in the neighborhood felt and her voice heard. She wears oversized sun dresses, in bright colors and bold patterns, that end at mid-calf in pointed pieces, handkerchief-style. Her voice carries from the street to the thin strip of balcony that serves as a catwalk to my clothesline as she chats up several stray dogs. To these three whose turf is closest to the street-level entry gate of the apartment building where I reside, she shows favoritism. These are the dogs least likely to bark or budge from where, at other moments, they sprawl listless, mangy, content to be left alone in their favorite ditch of the road to absorb the cool of night or first hours of dawn before the sun’s arc drives a heated wedge into the asphalt.

“¡Hola, señorita Rubia!” she greets one of the dogs cheerily, in heavily accented Spanish with a topping of see-through American English.

It is approximately nine o’clock Saturday morning, before activity at the domino table picks up. The chicken-pluckers have been busy for hours defeathering the birds, extracting their naked bodies upside-down from huge metal cauldrons, then passing them in white plastic buckets to the butcher awaiting their arrival across the street.

Every day, like clockwork, cats, dogs, and one lamb wait their turn for scraps. The felines get first dibs. The tourist is oblivious to this scene before sunrise, when

the one-block-long piece of road experiences hyper-localized activity. Through-traffic is light – pedestrians and motorbikes. Two cars passing in opposite directions at the same time do not fit.

The exceptional four-wheeler visiting the road weekly is the chicken-coop delivery truck, open-backed and piled three-stories high with plastic crates where red-crested heads stick their nostrils out for air (or fear).

By the time parents and siblings use the road to escort younger children to pre-school or elementary grades, the truck and its plumed fumes are long gone. In its wake remain pungent, red-stained pools floating through the side gutters, filling our own nostrils with what is left of the Gallus who lost their lives to livelihoods.

The first time I notice the American woman in the shapeless sundress occurs five days earlier, in the transition between end of week and beginning of weekend.

Loud conversations are commonplace and run the entire length of Callejón de la Loma, one block away from my digs and a main street bordering older housing settlements of Cabarete. On any of the streets branching off it, however nameless or abbreviated in length, loud exchanges and louder music are equally standard. People engage in conversation with others in highly animated tones.

The visitor in her red-and-white-blotched sundress, however, is speaking on high volume to canines. Though the reality may escape her, in pushing plates piled high with food in the dogs' direction and smiling to all who pass as if to say "see, I am a good neighbor," she is causing a scene.

"Hello," she calls out to me, in English, seeking to solidify a relationship with someone since others are politely ignoring her. Not everyone in my immediate neighborhood has three square meals a day. I speak here of humans.

I greet the woman back with a distracted "hello," my mind caught up elsewhere, in an unfortunate and untimely juxtaposition of circumstances.

Just that morning, I finally manage to have a chat with a neighbor in the expanded community who I notice on multiple occasions walking aimlessly up and down the bordering through-street. On any given day any other week, I typically find her behind the counter of her corner store, tending to the erratic arrival of customers, entering sunset with a final round of boiled eggs for sale placed neatly in a plastic basket balanced on her head, running a quick errand by bike, or minding her young children within the store's confines.

This week is different. All seven days, morning to evening, the shop door is shut. In irregular hand-painted script, the ten or so main items in stock are listed vertically on the door's exterior. No chance this week of my sneaking in a wave as usual to whomever – including her children – may be temporarily looking after the tiny business while the storeowner mother is out briefly and justifiably. This usually entrepreneurial mother is now rudderless. Her children are out of the picture, no longer snuggling together on a small cloth remnant placed for them on the floor.

I am worried about her and tell her so. I am also concerned about her children but keep that part to myself. Who is looking after them now or feeding them? I remember seeing the two unaccompanied kids

earlier in the week, walking hand-in-hand toward the main street.

After my words of concern, I pull out of a cloth tote bag a woman's garment and extend it in her direction, noting she is tall and skinny like me.

"You and I are definitely the same size," I say as I pass it to her to inspect and keep.

My gesture produces her first smile in the conversation. She hugs me spontaneously. The hug stays with me all day. Joy in sadness. She confirms her store has been closed for a week. She is getting by with the money people give to her – ten pesos here and there, she says. Ten pesos can buy a medium-size banana or a single wafer-width scouring pad. It does not provide for a family of three.

When the foreigner, in her ecstasy of feeding street dogs on the side of the road, gives me a pass for my simple "hello" in return, these are the thoughts that rush to mind. This and the confession hours earlier by a schoolboy that he goes hungry most days and finds it hard to keep his concentration from wavering while in class. His mother cannot be bothered nor depended upon to feed him, he explains.

My mind is at a standstill. I know the dogs will fend for themselves with chicken scraps and continue to lounge away their lethargy, as they always do, in the same cool pothole. I am less sanguine about the children and adult neglect for their basic needs. These are the raised voices that would be more useful.

Uncommonalities in Common

A mural of a young man fills the dimensions of a side-alley wall. I intuit it is a memorial tribute to his likeness and the fullness of youth unfulfilled – street smarts in the boy's style of dress and a painted face bereft of grooves or lines etching experience into who he might have become. A truncated life, too short for environmental stressors to show. The one-story-high figure is erected within shouting distance of a juvenile correctional center.

A neighbor sees me staring at the street art and asks if he can be of assistance. I inquire about the origins of the piece and who it depicts. He tells me the portrait is of his friend, whose life ended eight weeks earlier at the age of 18. Each day the image reminds him of his absent *pana* and his own personal loss. The commemorative portrait rises tall, meeting the tops of other buildings on the same street where his family owns multiple properties. The spot is an intentional reminder that death is never timely.

I express my condolences and appreciation for the community gesture to the memory of his friend. Its impactful size and presence are the reasons I backtrack to the alley in the first place, before my scheduled appointment with adolescents in conflict with the law, taking stock of the neighborhood and potential to disclose uncommonalities in common.

* * *

In exchange for a tip, a well-built member of the community in his forties assists me on occasion by shouldering a five-gallon jug of water up two flights of stairs, depositing it outside my apartment door whenever convenient for his erratic schedule. I am thankful for the resilience of his upper-arm muscles and his willingness to rise to the task. His strength performs what mine cannot. Except when a bender takes him off the streets and removed from view, my neighbor maintains a presence on the unbroken portion of a broken sidewalk along a predictable segment of the road where afternoon shade is also available on the opposite side as the sun follows its arc beyond noon. Each time we cross paths, I greet him by name.

This morning, S chooses the side of the street offering shade. It is still early. I find him seated in a plastic chair, balancing a blender on his knees. There is no “for sale” sign, but it is obvious this is his intent. He is at once display case, advertisement, and customer service representative.

Two months later, S moves his position further inward from the curb, affording added display area. Sale of the blender must have gone well. Three white toilet bowls now position to his right, followed by a trail of white ceramic water tanks tempting seasonal shoppers on the lookout for holiday home improvements and a bargain. During the final major-shopping days before the Christmas holiday, the S collection expands to include an apricot-colored porcelain sink and a dozen plastic fan blades in assorted colors. In the four minutes it takes me to walk to and return from my office up the road, the pale-orange sink is gone. Sold, I presume. S knows his clientele and their needs, providing

personalized attention, convenience, and a cold-sell strategy of blocking the sidewalk with items for sale.

* * *

Near this same spot where S has his open-air “shop,” young men gather on an improvised bench crafted from a sandwich of downed wooden utility poles tied together with tree trunks sliced the long way. One of the men calls out to me.

“¡Mami!” he shouts in my direction, testing the waters. For some reason, I am inclined to respond and do so.

“Mami is not my name,” I tell him with a smile, understanding what he and I both know, that this is a game. In the local context, and at my age, it is a way to see if he can drive my attention in his direction, then observe my reaction and recalibrate how far he can go without crossing over to rudeness or vulgarity.

He sees me walk by this tree-bench-improv far more often than I notice him sitting there. It is unavoidable to get to my place of work or home without passing directly in front of the location. Usually, I avoid eye contact deliberately to let the group enjoy their public privacy without onlookers.

My quip repels his attempt at flattery and compliment while offering a soft landing for his ego. He delivers another, with more of an edge – a separate repertoire.

“¡OK *alicate!*” he snaps, referring to my long legs in short shorts by using the word for “pliers” in Spanish.

All my life I have heard variations on the theme, including total strangers sending cries in my direction of

¡Olivia! – referring (in Spanish) to the tall, long-legged, skinny character Olive Oyl, the object of Popeye’s desire in the American cartoon series of the same name.

The slight transports me back in time. A second genuine smile escapes me. In the dare to flee, flirt back, or fight, he wins.

* * *

Among a young Deaf community at a local non-profit school for children with a range of hearing disorders and challenges, I acquire a novel nickname. As I introduce myself at the opening of an interactive engagement session to involve children in the arts, having made the effort to learn by heart the spelling of my first name letter-by-letter using fingers, fists, and palms, in the nervousness of the moment and unfamiliarity of the American Sign Language fingerspelled alphabet, I mix up the letters. An instructor comes to my aid and spells out my name correctly and formally for the children.

The children are polite. All nod to her clearer rendition. My first name sticks for a few seconds, yet the group already has other plans for my identity. As a community of Deaf youngsters, by making use of additional senses they prove to be keenly observant.

The teacher explains they have assigned me a new name. According to the school’s tradition, the children choose the name by which each visitor to the premises will be called, a defining reference or concept more easily rendered in the fluidity of sign language motions and one that captures a salient feature of the guest.

“What’s my name?” I ask, half curious, half marveled.

“Broken brow,” the teacher informs as she paints it in the air then deconstructs the motions for me into a verbal phrase.

I am floored. This is the most subtle and perceptive name among the many others I have been called. It takes an attentive eye to notice a tiny break in the eyebrow continuity above my left eye. It is so hard to discern that, only weeks before, as I stared into the mirror, I wondered if the break in my brow was real or my imagination. A slit in the eyebrow is a rebellious fashion statement adopted by Dominicans from 1980s USA hip-hop fashion. In my case, it is an entirely natural discontinuation of the brow.

The visit is packed with shared learning. During one of the art exercises, we blast through the speaker system a musical selection with a strong Brazilian percussive beat while the children draw with colored crayons whatever comes to mind. Some children hear nothing despite the augmented volume.

Two boys, identical twins and both Deaf, fill their respective sheets with similar dots. The dots, I realize slowly, are the becoming of the percussive *batucada* vibrations they can *feel*, a syncopation they translate onto the two-dimensionality of the paper in three-dimensional color. Who is teaching whom, I ask myself, during this unique visit to a school for Deaf children in Puerto Plata, with more life lessons than I can anticipate.

He and I usually cross paths early morning before sunrise or just prior to sunset. He addresses me always as *mi amor* (my love), though he and I know this is not true. The exchange sweetens the beginning and end of the day.

Neighbors

I step out to buy vegetables midway into Holy Week. An open-backed truck less than half a block away pulls up close to an adjacent wall along the narrow one-block street where I live. He showcases the day's produce to interested households in the neighborhood, where livelihoods and passing the time converge.

As the roving greengrocer exchanges small talk with his customer base, I peer into the back of the truck. At this time on a weekday, were it not for a federal holiday, I am usually at the office, a seven-minute walk northward over cracked road and crooked sidewalks that end upon intersection with the ocean drive.

A grandmotherly-looking woman in a light cotton housecoat leans against the truck, eager to promote the driver's goods and services. She informs me he makes his rounds in our neighborhood three times a week.

A shirtless man with whom I have frequent interaction hangs around the truck as well, seeking to be helpful. He and I usually cross paths early morning before sunrise or just prior to sunset. He addresses me always as *mi amor* (my love), though he and I know this is not true. The exchange sweetens the beginning and end of the day. Sometimes he yells his greeting upward, where I am visible on the second-floor landing hanging my laundry out to dry in the intense heat or occasional breeze.

“*Mi amor, ¿cómo estás?*” (My love, how are you?), he shouts from below.

Today he wears his hair in a thick twisted twirl, set off-center. The big, black braided bun falls suggestively to one side of his head.

I offer him a freshly cleaned, now-empty cooking oil jug, having previously researched and confirmed the recyclability of high-density polyethylene (HDPE). It can be repurposed for many common needs. *Mi amor* is happy to receive the sturdy container and hides it quickly in a corner of the hangar behind him where he also helps the poultryman with errands and ad hoc tasks, including shuttling in large buckets freshly killed chickens from chicken coop to the butcher shop across the street.

The butcher and his wife own a pet ram lamb not destined for slaughter. The animal keeps company with the children playing outside. Like the dogs and cats waiting to receive tossed-out chicken parts from the bustling coop, the lamb divides his time between the children, dogs, and sniffing around for scraps of food. There are no others of his kind. For the lamb, children, dogs, and cats within a two-block radius are all potential playmates.

Mi amor randomly picks up vegetables from the truck and pushes them toward my face. Not always knowing the proper name in Spanish for the goods, he asks simply, “this? that?” to ascertain my preferences.

I set aside a large pale-green chayote, three sweet red peppers, carrots, tomatoes, and a stalk of celery, then ask where I can weigh the selection to complete the purchase. There is no scale in sight. No one answers my question.

I am eager to pay and be on my way. This is the first of several errands planned for the morning. On the task list is also a hunt for avocados, scarce and hard as a stone as we near the end of avocado season.

Equidistant between the two extreme corners on the block, a modest corner store stocks everything a local household requires on a daily basis, from tiny packets of laundry detergent to salami, beer, milk, and a limited selection of vegetables and seasonings (onions, tomatoes, Cubanelle peppers, ginger).

Mi amor sprints toward this corner store, where I make rare purchases. I prefer to walk farther, supporting store owners and family businesses that appreciate the social value of a smile. I once called out the helper’s grumpiness to the owner so he understood a negative attitude can negatively affect business.

As *mi amor* and I enter the store, I mention that using the scale from another business is a conflict of interest. After all, this store sells tomatoes, too. Why should the store lend its scale for someone else’s merchandise? *Mi amor* removes only the sweet peppers for weighing as they are not among the limited vegetable stock for sale there. The grumpy assistant is tending to another customer and does not entertain multitasking. As usual, he averts eye contact and emanates an unwillingness to engage.

Mi amor rethinks our prospects at this locale, returns the peppers to the bag, and rushes into the butcher shop on the same side of the street, two doors down, with me in tow. He begins to arrange our items on the butcher’s scale. The owners are willing to accommodate us. Still, I apologize, noting I had no idea I (we) would be imposing on others to complete my purchase. I see they are busy this holiday morning.

One by one, *mi amor* struggles to guess the per/kilo price for each item so the butcher can plug in the data and obtain the cost. But as *mi amor* is only an ad hoc assistant and does most everything on the fly, he has not jotted down any of the prices for any of the items on the scale, making calculating the total impossible.

By the time *mi amor* pulls out the celery for weighing, I stop him halfway and return it to the bag.

“This part is negotiable,” I say firmly so we can leave the butchers in peace to do their own business. One of the customers agrees with me.

“She’s right. That’s negotiable,” he affirms loudly, as if everyone knows the charge for celery is discretionary.

Four clients await their turn, filling the small, crowded space that serves as a waiting area.

Back on the street, at the side of the truck, I try to recall the verbalized totals for each item off the butcher’s metal scale. *Mi amor* has jotted down nothing and committed even less to memory. I remind the greengrocer to hand-calibrate the cost of celery. The total comes to 2,80 Dominican pesos (about \$4.70).

I look at the disarray of vegetables tumbling out of the truck. A lot of collaboration has been invested in the purchase – *mi amor* as vegetable-runner, the housecoat woman detailing the truck route and hours, the patience of the butcher shop owners and customers.

“Since the total comes to 2,80, let’s just round it off at 3,00 pesos,” I offer, in compensation for the many inconveniences.

Unexpectedly, truck owner and I lock eyes over cucumbers, topic of our initial exchange about how they are often all texture and no taste – always a gamble

between refreshing and disappointment. He is up for the gamble.

“How about a cucumber?” he asks, knowing this will put his produce to the test.

“How about two cucumbers?” I ask, calculating (again) the intervening inconveniences as I follow *mi amor* from scale to scale, shop to shop, compromising my reputation in the neighborhood, and helping the helper help me.

The vendor smiles. By all calculations – sighted, weight in hand, and banking on a return purchase by me, this solution makes sense. Into my cloth bag go the additional two cucumbers – a collaborative purchase if ever there was one.

I begin walking toward my apartment. In the middle of the narrow road the pet lamb positions and begins to mount a dog from behind. Unable to locate the orifice he is searching for, he knocks off his bid of biological urgency, and dismounts.

The poultryman’s official helper stops what he is doing, stares at the spectacle of the two mismatched beasts, then at me. He summarizes aloud the scene before us.

“A sheep with a dog, both male,” he remarks in stupefaction, resigned to the constant open intimacy of neighborly relations and the shared lives of our shared neighborhood.

A man slaps a few coins onto the counter separating store interior from street to pay for his next downer. Trading in a near-finished bottle for a new one, he is on his tenth beer of the day. It is 8:45 in the morning. I ask him if this is breakfast. “Every day,” he confirms.

Big Alley and Backstreets

The fresh pink hibiscus framing one side of her face is wilting. She can buy it fake in forever-fresh plastic from a cash-only Chinese store further down the street where we work, but she is not tempted in the least. “It lacks the vibe,” she explains. I recount for her the story of legendary jazz vocalist Billie Holiday, whose tradition of beautiful gardenias tucked behind her ear began as a cover-up for her botched, burned hair. Lady Day’s signature flower tuck is the stuff of history, indelible as her voice at the top of jazz charts.

The teenager with the retro hair accessory, mature-looking for her age, incorporates in her work clothes essential-only hints of conservatism. Once she heads for the nocturne scene, she is all Lycra, halter tops, and outfits in mini, living for the day turned night. Offerings proliferate on Callejón de la Loma, but the real catch is the main street above it, where the socioeconomic level shifts upward but the larger context does not.

In my case, I spring alive at daybreak, often earlier. With roosters’ crowing and dawn about to lift, I am up and out the door, walking through tentative haze and clouds streaked with the possibility of light. Dogs bark, horses graze in the shadows swishing their tails, bats dart above. A cricket-like buzz presages the onset of dawn. Every day, this communion with the elements provides me with fortitude, for age does not arrive alone. With the bounty of good health comes a feeling of good fortune.

During my early morning walk around the disjointed, tightly knit neighborhood of El Callejón (the big alley), anything can emerge, even at that hour. Though life is on lease via one-way ticket, I manage to curate a wildly multidirectional timeline with lengthy global stopovers and points of intersection.

I keep track of T-shirt sightings along the big alley and backstreets to remind myself of the pros and cons of globalization, as wearers do not always understand the import of content they bear. A sampling:

I don't need luck. I have charm.

Here for the beer

Better Your Best

I got it from my Dad

Kindly fuck off

Sorry ladies, I'm the night's watch

This is what a cool grandpa looks like

Underarmor (type aligns with bra underwire)

Blessed

Nettoyons Montréal

The adolescent girl wearing the *Blessed* T-shirt confirms she does not know what her shirt says, as if it were written in the Chinese characters of the real name, used by the owners and not made public, of the cash-only shop where El Callejón tapers off toward the low-rise hill for which it is named.

As for the *Nettoyons Montréal* (Let's Clean Up Montreal) T-shirt, it barely covers the distended belly of a lost soul who spends her days roaming endlessly on foot and is frequently spotted defecating unabashedly in the gutter. So much of our private lives in and around the big alley and backstreets of El Callejón are open for public viewing.

Heading back to my apartment after walking-swimming-walking, a young man balances on a low-rise ledge of an unfinished outdoor retaining wall of his home under slow construction. He is focused on meticulously removing the hairs from his calf with a bare razor blade. I recognize him as the salesman at a store on the main road where I bought a straw hat. At the time, when he provided change from his overstuffed wallet, I spotted a Gillette blade.

Not all grooming occurs out in the open, and some topics are culturally taboo. At a public school, while awaiting directions to the location where I am about to give a presentation on human rights to three sections of a middle school crammed into a single, small classroom, a male teacher bursts into the director's office, announcing suddenly "code red" is in effect for three girls. Later I understand the predicament of three girls trapped without proper feminine hygiene products to address the untimely arrival of their periods on a school day, when classes are in session. I assume (and hope) the school has a stash of supplies for such emergencies. Everyone seems to be living their most private moments out loud.

To reduce the stress level of receiving a class by a foreigner with an accent, I personalize my interactions with students by trying to memorize their names. Unhelpfully, some of the unusual first names are difficult to retain, undermining my efforts: Sheloves, Heyyou, look-alikes David Elías and Elías David, fraternal twins Sander and Alexander.

Operating on a level of reciprocal trust within El Callejón, words can still be lost in Spanish-to-Spanish or French-to-French translation. An elderly worker of

Haitian descent, who answers “*bien*” to almost all my questions and whose craft is shoe-mending, asks me out of nowhere if he can come up to my apartment to “keep warm with me.” Platonic cuddling is not in the tone of his proposal.

I continue to gain multiple returns on life’s ticket. My present environment is no exception. Couched in the colorful, direct language of Dominican proverbs, a neighbor recites a well-known adage as customers keep up constant chatter and congregate outside his busy corner store.

“*Plátano maduro no vuelve a verde*” (A ripe plantain doesn’t turn green), he pronounces. Time does not move backward.

A man slaps a few coins onto the counter separating store interior from street to pay for his next downer. Trading in a near-finished bottle for a new one, he is on his tenth beer of the day. It is 8:45 in the morning. I ask him if this is breakfast. “Every day,” he confirms.

At night he suffers *empacho* (indigestion). His Spanish has English words mixed in, and he is unable to retrieve words when he needs them. He seems to say he has been living in Dubai, but that is far from a typical destination for Dominicans working abroad. He is excessively thin. I line the countertop with my green-on-green purchase – pale-green elongated peppers, a stalk of celery, avocados, okra. I pay, pretend he does not notice the disparity in our purchases, and wish him well as he downs his daily liquid power breakfast.

These final days in the Dominican Republic’s coastal north constitute a decisive inflection point on my non-linear roadmap. My work this past year is steeped in legal frameworks, bureaucratic processes,

and terminology used to document and establish legal identity. I learn, for instance, that in procedural law the period between notification and final deadline – *días francos* in Spanish – extends between initiation of a process and its termination. Extrapolating to a non-legal context, *franco* can also be translated as “frank, candid, honest, sincere.”

From commencement (my arrival in-country) to completion (imminent departure), the two years of literal *días francos* in the Dominican Republic have been refreshingly unguarded. Living and working within the community of Callejón de la Loma and the intense unbridled candor of the Dominican people has cut to the chase, exposing our public private lives, keeping us afloat together, releasing tension, and generating connection.

As a Dominican colleague at the non-profit where I work observes, “The Dominican knows it all ... even when he doesn’t!”

About the Author

Following a twenty-year career in diplomacy for the U.S. Department of State, Judith Ravin entered the development sector, serving vulnerable populations as a Fellow at DREAM Project, a semi-private educational non-profit in the Dominican Republic where she focused on human rights and documentation, advancing the fundamental human right to a legal identity. Her first year at DREAM was dedicated to at-risk youth development and leadership as well as building writing skills through youth journalism. She is currently an international volunteer collaborating at the intersection of education and innovation with Fundación Simón I. Patiño, in Bolivia. Judith is the Harvard W3D (Women in Defense, Diplomacy, and Development) Board Communications Chair as well as Strategic Partnerships Advisor for Mausum Mahool Protection Foundation, a Pakistani civil-society organization focused on climate adaptation and climate awareness education. Within the mosaic of an unconventional cross-cultural career path, the stirrings of her global leanings were forged over many years in publishing, translation, and journalism in Asia, Latin America, and Africa.

Judith holds a MA in Romance Languages and Literatures (Harvard University) and BA in Spanish (Brandeis University) plus study in Spain and France. She is fluent in Spanish and French. Her published works include *Peru After Chamba* (2022), *Ballet in the Cane Fields* (2nd edition 2022, 1st edition 2014) and, as co-author, *Beyond Our Degrees of Separation* (2017).





The 21 short stories of *Big Alley and Backstreets / El Callejón* reflect the dialed-back pace of small towns and remote communities along the northern coast of the Dominican Republic, taking the reader to spaces of conversation and discovery. El Callejón, *the crooked narrow main street running north-south*, is subject, object, and metaphor for the divide between hinterland hoods and the global convening power of wind, waves, sun, and surf. *Offerings proliferate on Callejón de la Loma, but the real catch is the main street above it, where the socioeconomic level shifts upward but the larger context does not.* Personalities along the big alley and backstreets embody struggle and vulnerability but also resilience and resourcefulness. They share protagonism with *tígueres* of macho entitlement and children living life out loud in the rough-and-tumble immediacy of whatever is on hand. With a keen eye for detail, the author depicts the constant open intimacy of neighborly relations and shared lives of a shared neighborhood.

It is approximately nine o'clock Saturday morning, before activity at the domino table picks up. The chicken-pluckers have been busy for hours defeathering the birds, extracting their naked bodies upside-down from huge metal cauldrons, then passing them in white plastic buckets to the butcher awaiting their arrival across the street. Every day, like clockwork, cats, dogs, and one lamb wait their turn for scraps.

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