

What do you want from our village?
Second Place Prose Tie 2004

Rough hands scraped the nylon wall next to my head. I awoke to a soft voice loudly whisper, "Doctor! Doctor! Mi nina esta infermo! Por favor, doctor!!!" I roused from my sleeping bag and unzipped the tent door. A full moon illuminated a woman holding a child. The woman wore a tattered dress, layered with sweaters and shawls. Her arms supported a brightly colored, handmade papoose, in which lay a sick girl. My headlamp cast across the child's face, revealing weathered, sun-damaged cheeks and a runny nose. The child stared blankly at the sky. Occasionally a raspy cough shook her body and showed strain across her face. She was not crying.

The few medications we had were in our expedition's first aid kit. The kit was mostly pain medications and first aid supplies, but we did have some old antibiotics. However these were in tablet form and adult strength. As I fidgeted in the dark with the tablets and a Swiss Army knife, the child had a coughing fit. It lasted a few minutes. By the time the toxic-appearing girl caught her breath, her lips, though sun-scorched and dry, were clearly blue.

We spent the morning drinking fresh coffee and asking for seconds on omelets. We showered, got dressed and checked out of our rooms. Our outfitters carried all our bags, as custom dictates that loading your own gear is rude and implies that one's "staff" is weak. We watched, lazily, as they lashed duffels of expensive gear and crates of food onto the top of three Toyota Land Cruisers. On the way out of La Paz we napped behind \$100 dollar sunglasses and listened to personal CD players. Occasionally we would stop and take out our auto-focus cameras to take photos of the dramatic scenery. A colorful marketplace. A woman washing clothes in a river. Children playing soccer.

The dusty road to base camp winds across the Altiplano, or "high-plain." There's very little water and not much sign of life, other than an occasional small herd of llama. On the horizon are the magnificent peaks of Bolivia's Cordillera Real, our climbing objective. Over 20,000 feet in elevation, their granite shoulders are draped with hanging, blue glaciers leaking fine ribbons of meltwater from their snouts. The only settlement on this route is the small agricultural village of Chunavi. The entire town shares one car. It has no tires. There is no running water. One building is wired for electricity, but there's usually no power. There are no phones. No doctors. No market. It is a cold, sad town, 15,000 feet above sea level with not a tree in sight to protect it from the howling winds that scour the plains on their way to the Andes.

We pulled off the dusty road, down an alley between two rows of crumbling, adobe homes. In the schoolyard patients were already waiting. They were all women and children. The women were dressed in ornate, colorful, traditional garb. They talked, breastfed or spun alpaca yarn while they waited for the clinic to start. Out of the school, which had been closed this week to allow its use as a medical clinic, came the village mayor. His face was badly scarred. He smiled and shook my hand. He spoke to me in Quecha, a pre-Inca language, which I did not understand.

A high wall surrounds the schoolyard. It was cracked and dry, with the tails of reeds in the adobe mixture poking out between the blocks. A few blocks were missing, leaving a hole. Through the hole, I saw a group of men walking across the adjacent field and toward the school. "The village leaders," Carlos, my Bolivian contact, whispered to me. They entered the schoolyard and surrounded me. Suspiciously, and through two translators, the mayor spoke.

"What do you want from our village? Why do you want to help us? What do you demand in return?" At first I was surprised. I expected a warm welcome, not skepticism. Then, I glanced across the courtyard at our three shiny SUV's, loaded high with gear and food. I looked at the work-hardened faces of the men who surrounded me. I looked down at my boots. I was embarrassed.

"This is your land. Your mountains. Your Altiplano. We climb here. You live here. We are your guests, and would like to offer a gift. We bring a doctor, a nurse and enough medicine to treat your village." The men mumbled, exchanged looks and broke out in laughter. They closed in on me and ruffled my hair. The mayor raised a steer horn and pressed it to his lips. He blew it into the sky. Within 15 minutes there were three hundred people in the schoolyard playing ball, chatting, waiting to see the doctor.

The school was one room. It held two handcrafted benches and a table. The walls were adobe and the roof was thatched with reed. Carlos' nephew, a neurologist from La Paz, was helping us with the clinic and translating. The two of us worked while giggling children kicked balls and drew with crayons in the courtyard. The "triage table" was littered with stickers and candy, brought by our team.

Within a week we treated the entire town. Parasitic infection, fungal infection, tuberculosis, low back pain. Some things we could treat. Others we couldn't. It was frustrating. As doctors we want to heal. We want to cure, but sometimes all we can do is examine and listen. Often pain control was all we could offer, and this was understood. They townspeople were incredibly grateful, often asking when we were returning. They hugged us and thanked us.

Before we left, the mayor and his advisors again circled me in the courtyard. They presented me with an ornately decorated, notarized letter from the Government of Chunavi. Translated, the letter read "Your gift was like that brought to the children on Christmas. We feel like we have been visited by Papa Noel." As we loaded into our trucks, one of the townspeople, Jose, approached me. He had walked six hours through the night to ask for our help. He urged me to visit his wife before I left. She was too ill to come to the schoolyard. She had been sick for a year and had never seen a doctor.

We drove across the plains for an hour to Jose's one-room home. We entered, walking past a rusty, tireless bicycle, a hitching post and a mule. In the corner of the room there was a tattered single mattress. Jose's six family members shared this bed. It had no sheets. On the bed was a woman, lying perfectly still, wrapped in soiled shawls and blankets. She made eye contact with me and then looked away. I approached her. As I eased onto the corner of the bed the mattress shifted, moving the woman very slightly. She wailed in pain. As a tear ran down her cheek, her husband dashed to her side. In Quecha, he told me: "She went blind a year ago. Her arms and legs hurt so badly she can't move them. She has trouble breathing and won't eat. And this has happened..." He unwrapped her dry, cracked hands to reveal them. Her fingers were severely subluxed, characteristic of rheumatoid arthritis. As I gave her steroids and explained her disease to her, a gust of cold wind sliced through the house and rattled the uninsulated tin roof over the woman's bed.

After the clinic we sent all leftover medications back to La Paz to be donated to a hospital. I hadn't anticipated a woman bringing a one-year old girl with pneumonia ten miles up the trail on a mule, through the night, to seek the help of the nearest doctor. Feverishly I crushed tablets and stirred Gatorade mix to create a makeshift antibiotic suspension. We force-fed it to the child, gave a Ziploc bag of the concoction to the patient's mother and crossed our fingers. The child stayed overnight at camp and was taken on muleback to town in the morning. A week later the mother reappeared, in the afternoon this time, with the girl in her arms. She approached me and held out her child. The young girl smiled and giggled.

We plodded up the glacier as the sun rose over the Amazon Basin far to the east. It flicked orange light onto the summit of the peak across the valley. In the crisp morning air I could see each breath as I heard the metronome of my pulse deep inside my ears. I thought of the people on the Altiplano, already working in their fields. I pictured a sick woman on a bed. A woman washing clothes in a river. A rusty, tireless bicycle. And a little girl with blue lips.

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