

Cast of Characters:

Marcus and Ann Pearson (Will and Amelia): The missionary family that have been serving here for many years. Marcus is the one directing most of the projects that I am encountering.

Nadia Vasquez: Former Director of the School of Little Benjamin whom I met during my last visit. I am staying with her while I am here. She loves movies and finds many things enormously funny. She also speaks English. She is part of the Bible Institute initiative.

Alexandra Mendoza: Current Director of the school. She is a gentle and gracious woman that I like very much. She loves the Lord and children and has taken to bringing me to church with her.

Yesthenia: Assistant Director at the school and closest to my age. She and I are becoming friends.

Carla: Secretary at the school. She is one of the women I have spent the most time with at the school. She, too, is part of the friendly group with whom I am most at ease.

Patricia: Custodian of the school. Quite the caretaker of people, too. She has a servant's heart and is also one of that group.

Leia, Rocky, Queenie, and Princessa: The four dogs whom I adore and who have taken to me quite well (even Leia who likes no one!).

“How Many Nicaraguans Does it Take to Fill a Bus?”

“One more.” So the joke goes. Having no car, the buses are my main form of transportation, providing endless amusement as we are stuffed like sardines into our own tin contraption (and here I thought I had escaped school buses when I graduated from High School!). Even taking the bus at off times (never, never, never take it at peak hours), I am often left with someone nearly in my lap or sitting on my shoulder, however the case may be. This last journey, however, I found

especially amusing, and so I know relate it to you.

I was returning from Granada, where I had been visiting Ann, Marcus, and the kids, when a man boarded the bus and began his auctioneer oration. This is not uncommon as more often than not there is someone on the bus extolling the hapless riders toward virtue or vice by selling one thing or another. This time, however, the man captured my attention. He was showing pictures of parasitic worms. What? Yes, parasitic worms of several varieties. Listening more closely to his rapid and songlike like presentation, I realized he was selling, on a bus, medicine to treat parasitic infections. Child and adult doses, of course. Here, for the health and welfare of your family, you can buy two pills that will take care of any of those uncomfortable symptoms you are experiencing (symptoms shall remain nameless). While I freely admit there are many prescription medicines available over the counter here (e.g. penicillin), this was too comical. I had visions of *Oklahoma's* peddler man pawning his wares. And to my surprise, the man made a haul. Alas, that is something I cannot bring myself to do: I will not buy medicine on the bus. The second man of note hopped on soon after the peddler man left. This gentleman stood in quiet reserve, robed what may have once been a tuxedo. Close to his chest he carried an accordion. With his long curled hair and full beard, he looked a bit like a rabbi. An accordion-carrying rabbi.

The Immediacy of God

Two weekends ago, on the 19th of July, I saw first hand why we are here. Like the Jesus film, this moment brought to mind the true immediacy of God. I have mentioned Valeria before. Her sister, Tita, is also here while on vacation from Seminary School in Texas. But this is their story only in periphery. Really, the story belongs to their grandmother. She is an ancient woman, now. Whether by age or experience alone, I do not know, but she seems as old as time itself. She has gentle eyes and speaks little as she lies in her bed. She is dying – the cancer has left her little time. She has one last request: to be baptized. And so, Marcus and Ann, with myself along, have taken their bathtub from Granada to Managua, where the abuela lives. In the small room that has become her world, Marcus prays and reads from 1st Corinthians. Her family, spilling out into the hallway, stand around her bed. The time comes and she is lifted into a wheel chair, which takes her around the corner to the wash patio where the bathtub has been filled with water (some heated for her comfort and to lessen the shock). Her sets her in the tub. She begins to struggle fearfully, and I wonder how long it has been since she has been out of the bed and if this is her first experience in a tub. As Marcus supports her head, she leans back, but will not completely submerge her head. With her free hand, even while Marcus tries to reassure her and asks her to lean just a bit more, she moves the water to her face. She has her last request – and in it, she demonstrated why we are here. We are here that Christ may be known to all people, that they may know the freedom and joy that takes us away

from the hardest times, in sickness, sadness, abandonment, and disappointment, and places us in the hands of the Lord, the only one who knows exactly what we are going through.

Reading, Writing, English: *Jane Austen* in Nicaragua

Aside from finding great comfort in my now familiar favorite, from novel to film, *Pride and Prejudice*, my return to this novel has inspired an exceptionally archaic notion: Book Reports! Hold the gasps – yes, book reports, the bane of elementary school students everywhere. I take a secret delight in now inflicting them on what are 6th, 7th, and 8th graders in the States. I came to Nicaragua in large part to teach English. Now that the newness of having a Gringa as a teacher has worn thin (3 weeks), good behavior has taken a vacation. These are part of the crème de la crème of Nicaragua in their opportunity to attend high school (grades 7-11) and they know it; but, they are kids. No, that is not entirely true. They are pre-teens, complete with the struggles of identity, coolness, and hormones. Nearly everyone has something difficult at home – illness, abandonment, anger, depression, too much responsibility, too little attention – and they live in an area where drugs, sex, and church are the available forms of entertainment. They are a strange mixture of age and youth, knowing things they shouldn't but having vivacity and flightiness of children. Another challenge is the lack of materials in the hands of the students. It is simply not fiscally possible for these students to have books in the same sense that we have them in schools. There is no

checking out textbooks (few schools can afford them, anyway). There are no work books and a minimal library (which there will soon be a wish list for on Amazon.com, for those who are interested). They have notebooks into which they copy the material the teacher writes on the board.

Sometimes, copies can be made of certain materials for a few cordobas. Learning is by rote: copy and repetition. For some it works; for others, it does not.

And so I found myself in a classroom of 33 students, about three of which were actually interested, another 10 respectful enough to pretend to listen, another 10 actively disruptive, and 7 annoyingly ignoring the class altogether (it was these that bothered me most).

How could these students not love English as I do! It is such a beautiful and functional language! And then I realized, the language they are seeing from these ESL books is certainly not beautiful. Really, it is dull. I am not convinced it's functional, either. My complaint is this: while it gives specific phrases that will permit dialogue between people, it offers little real material for actual conversation, for the ability to practice articulating substantive ideas in a new language. It is like having someone like you accent and asking you to say something.

Your minds goes blank. What do you want me to say? That is the problem. They have nothing they want to say, in English, anyway. And so emerged the idea of the book report: give them something to talk about and then, just maybe, they will talk about themselves. While the book itself will be in Spanish (I'd like to get them really reading), their responses and final

report/presentation will be in English. This is, of course, part of my rose-colored world plan. Some of the available books are translated from English (e.g. Charlotte's Web, Oliver

Twist, Little House on the Prairie); others are Spanish authors. (I confess a singular preference for those I've read, but the others may be an excellent way to force myself to learn Spanish!). Though that it sprung to mind after much prayer and a particularly good book (The Good Book will be our English reader), I know that this will be a trial of errors. This may be another in a long line, or it just might work. We are also working with song lyrics (pronunciation, rhythm). After all, the music I hear in the streets (blaring from houses and cars at damaging decibels) is as often English as Spanish. *Classes this week have been the best yet. Setting aside the curriculum has actually let more be accomplished and has made it a much less stressful environment for students and teacher alike. Pray that God will lead the classes so that all that needs to come of them will.

¡Bienvenidos a Tipitapa!

Tipitapa is uniquely itself. Before I came, it was described to me as the Alton, IL of Nicaragua (sorry for those from Alton, I don't think it was a compliment, *per se*). It is not the country, but a municipality of Managua, Nicaragua's capital city. Many have asked how people live here. I can give you only the brief glimpse of my own experience and of the lives of those I see most often.

Tipitapa faces the challenge of being largely at the bottom of a hill. This being rainy season, Tipitapa becomes a living lake. Navigating the dirt roads can be treacherous at best. Where the roads are paved (where the city is higher), movement is a bit easier. A hard rain keeps people home much like a sudden ice storm at home. This time

of year is their winter, and so there are people walking around in pants and coats, sweaters and long sleeves. There are also people in tank tops and shorts.

It is a small city and is set up along grid lines that make navigating by a general sense of direction a perfectly reasonable expectation. Alas, I do not have that sense of direction. People insist on telling me, "two blocks north", to which I blankly smile and go on my way. As if I knew what a block was, let alone my directions (it's nearly the equator, so checking the position of the sun is much less helpful at determining direction than at home. Thankfully, I have learned what a block is. I am still working on the compass rose. Natives, however, have no such difficulty.

Through Nicaragua, people navigate by landmarks: those there and those that once were. There are no street signs, aside from a few main streets in Managua, and few formal names of subdivisions.

The average day begins at six when the sun has just risen and the day is at its coolest. Sleeping in is unheard of, unless there is a rain that lasts through the morning, keeping the night air in place and the sun at bay (this happened today. Enough people stayed in, it seems, to warrant an early close of the school). Much of the work falls on the mother of the family. She cooks and cleans, often selling cloths or food out of her home to help make ends meet (assuming the husband works, which he may or may not. Regardless, she is expected to do all of the cooking, cleaning, mending, and child rearing. For him to do any of this would be unmanly). Each day, laundry is washed by hand on the wash board out back. The house is swept out and dusted (no windows and dirt roads with little grass anywhere yields a lot of dust. I can't imagine dry season!). Soapy water is splashed on the floor to keep dust

trapped, at least until the floor dries, and to freshen the air inside the house. Nicaraguan houses, in general, have few windows as they believe this will keep the house cooler. I am grateful that the one in which I am living is not of that design, thus providing some cross ventilation, though not nearly as much as I would like. Since few houses have refrigerators, and electricity is intermittent enough not to have people storing large quantities of meat and dairy products any way, breakfast must be purchased and prepared. Often times, it is simple red beans and cheese. Sometimes, when mixed with left-over rice from dinner, it becomes *gallo pinto*. Kids are then trundled off to school, where they attend classes for half a day. What happens in the meantime is a bit of a mystery to me as I am at the school myself. What their parents are doing, I do not know. Father and Mother may be working at the *Zona Franca*, a large garment making factory near Tipitapa. If so, the children will be coming home to older siblings or grandparents, hopefully. Some find employment running taxis or *capoteras*, bicycle taxis. Tipitapa is small enough to be easily navigated on foot, which I generally choose to do, but many prefer to take the *capoteras* and spare their shoes (as such, mine are disrepair! Oh, well!). Those who own their own bicycles will ride on those, often with passengers on the front and back. Front steers, back pedals. Those who do not work outside the home may have *Papurias* inside their homes from which they sell odds and ends, food products, soda, bath supplies, and the like. These are the corner stores where you buy what you have forgotten to purchase at the Pali (now owned by Wal-mart). After cleaning and washing, and sometimes while cleaning and washing, mom fixes lunch. Nearly everything is cooked on stovetop here, and usually in oil. Lunch is the main

meal of the day and is served between 11 and 12:30 usually. We often have rice and some variety of chicken (boiled, stewed, some kind of red sauce). If it is beef, it will be prepared in much the same way as the chicken. After lunch, the work day for students and teachers breaks. Some take advantage of the time for an afternoon siesta before church festivities begin between 5 and 6p. This is also the time to run errands: drop by the Pali, pick up something at the *Ferreteria* (hardware store), make copies, etc. When listening to music or watching TV, the volume is turned way up. As a consequence, since houses are all open at the very top, just under the roof, and there are no sealed windows, Tipitapa can be deafening: roosters crowing at all hours; children crying, laughing, and yelling; parades; car horns; bicycle whistles and beeps; dogs barking. The past few days have been a bit more somber as people are digging in. There has been no water since early Tuesday morning (this is now Friday) and we are only hoping today will bring its return. Our three barrels are, God be praised, not completely empty since the rain (only two are), so we were able to bathe sufficiently and prepare food, but the washing remains undone.

In the evenings, church people go to church. It may be the prayer service, the youth service, the children's service, an in house study (just a smaller church service), or the Sunday-night big service, but church people go to church. Really, I can understand why. There is little else to do. The streets can be dangerous at nights. They are not well lit and there are gangs of boys who congregate on certain corners, doing drugs and making trouble for passers by. I am lucky to have had no trouble myself as I tend to walk streets I shouldn't out of sheer ignorance. After all, how am I to know that after 6:30p this street becomes

territory? God has watched over me closely, Don't worry, Mom. I try to avoid those streets I now know are dangerous.

Other random bits about Tipitapa: the average income for an unskilled worker is C\$80 a day (a little under \$5); this is the tuition for the school at which I teach; time moves more slowly here as there is infinitely less to distract you from that time; tv is everywhere and played unedited; young people have little useful to occupy them, and so often end up into things they shouldn't be; the people are generally friendly; they are candid (to the point of tactlessness by States' standards); they are generous; there is dirt, grime, and burning trash; there are homeless and beggars in the park and near the Pali; it is brown in Tipitapa, though some of its houses are brightly painted; mosquitoes are everywhere (though not those carrying malaria or dengue); so are other animals (houses being open and all that); and I like it here.

In the Works . . .

Library in Benjamin: There is a bookcase in the school with a collection of books, to which we are trying to add more. I would like to make it even more functional by letting the books leave the school in the hands of the students. To do this reasonably, we need to set it up as a library, complete with a catalogue of books and materials for checking the books out (old-style, with the cards in the sleeves and everything). I am hoping that Harvester Christian Church's library ministry might be interested in being a part of this effort.

Women's study: This is still up in the air as we decide how and when this will best function. Please be praying that it will be God led and that if now is not the

time for it, God will put on the brakes very clearly.

Gabriella: She is a young girl in fifth grade who has recently undergone surgery to remove a tumor from her jaw. She will have at least three more, including one bone graft. Be praying for her recovery. Also be praying that she will keep up with her school work (and that the school will give her the materials she needs) so that she will return to classes and not drop out for the remainder of the year as is most common when several weeks of school are missed.

From Tipitapa,

Ami

Praise

-Ann and Marcus: encouragement and support, and the persistence to try to make me comfortable even when I won't say anything

-a place to call my own (it is a small room built by dry-walling a partition into the living room, which I will soon no longer be sleeping in!),

-students attending classes

-becoming accustomed to very different climate (while it can be hotter in St. Louis, the sun and heat is different here, as is the fact that it really never ends . . .)

. . . and Prayer

-Spanish language acquisition

-encouragement for Marcus and Ann

-understanding of how to approach the needs of the women and children here

-guidance for a women's study

-that the churches will take a more active role as shepherds

-strength and health for those living and serving here (nearly everyone has been hit by something)