

TYPING LESSONS

Sometimes the most important things are learned on a dirt road and over kitchen tables

by Amy Kunz

"Doña Chenta thinks you are trying to steal her husband."

With that I knew that I had just made my first and only woman friend at my Peace Corps site —Los Mixcos, Guatemala.

Betty told me Doña Chenta's opinion of me soon after I met her on the dirt road between her house and mine. She had worked up the courage, she told me later, to call to me with a persistent "*chiit!*" *chiit!*"—the noise men used to get a look from me in the capital city and everyone, men and women alike, used to get a waiter's attention. I usually ignored it, not wanting to hear the "hello, baby" or "*hola, muñeca preciosa*" that inevitably followed. Betty's *chiit* sounded different, higher pitched and more urgent than the others so I turned toward it instead.

There we were: me in my mud-caked pants, clunky leather hiking boots, and Syracuse Chiefs' baseball hat hiding my dirty, sun-bleached hair and her in a modest, feminine, flowered dress that fell about mid-shin, her long, black hair in loose curls on her shoulders. It was the dry season so the dust clung to my boots and her jelly sandals as we talked. She looked me dead in the eye while trying to quiet the little girl pulling on her skirt and tugging at her hand, shrilly whining for her mother to keep moving toward home. The skeleton of a family dog, or *chucho*,—more security system than beloved pet—snapped and growled nastily from a few feet away, daring me to cross his imaginary property line.

Betty (preferring the nickname for Beatriz, her given name) decided she would see if I had time to help her. She didn't want to learn how to build a tree nursery, hear a talk in my high school Spanish about the water cycle, or keep her soil from eroding during the rainy season. Betty ran a typing school out of



her home and she wanted to practice her English to improve her chances of finding a job in the capital.

Betty's intelligence about Doña Chenta's suspicions cleared up something that had confused me during my service. Now I knew why I never got past the threshold of Doña Chenta's house each time I showed up to work with her husband. She never invited me in. She never offered me so much as a cup of coffee or a piece of pan dulce to me, let alone a chair. She answered me in one-word answers and barely opened the front door more than a crack as she talked to me.

Once a week I sat opposite Betty in a small child's school desk so she could still keep a watchful eye on her typing students behind me. We simply talked in English. If she stumbled upon something, we dug further into it: irregular verbs, the concept of puns, homophones and how regional accents made English speakers hard to understand. Soon she started inviting me for afternoon coffee and sweets, then eventually for dinner and a nightly viewing of *telenovelas*—Mexican soap operas—until her husband would

come home and made it obvious that it was time for me to leave.

Betty taught me a lot in exchange for my English lessons. She made me *fiambre* on All Saint's Day and she told me the town gossip, maybe to prove to me that people talked about others besides me. Betty wasn't exempt from the rumor mill either. Once, gossip circulated about a romance between Betty and one of her teenaged students. Betty said she knew the boy had a harmless crush on her and she probably should have kept her distance, but she liked talking to him because he had so many ideas about his future. He reminded her of herself and she liked to talk about the possibilities beyond Los Mixcos.

Near the end of my service, Betty finally asked me why I wasn't married and why my mother had let me come to Guatemala to live and work for two years. She sat aghast as I explained that I hadn't really thought about getting married yet even though I had been seriously dating a Guatemalan man who lived in the city. She was especially surprised when I told

her that, now that I was in my 20's, my mother really didn't get a say in what I did anymore; I was basically on my own to decide my future.

The day I said goodbye to Betty, her daughter and Los Mixcos, I was both sad and hopeful. I told Betty to keep studying her English and write letters to me if she wanted to keep practicing.

"I hope you get that big job in the city one day," I said as I hugged her.

She laughed and blushed a little.

"Oh, Amy, I will never leave Los Mixcos. My husband set up this school for me here so he would always know where I am and so we could earn a little extra money."

She explained that her husband didn't even allow her to go too far off their road. She could go to the store two houses over but to no other; he didn't like the way men look at her in stores, in restaurants, at Mass. She could go those places with him, on his arm, but not on her own.

I stood there a little stunned for a moment but not entirely surprised. I had heard, or overheard, this from other Guatemalan women but I just didn't think my feisty friend would stand for it. I asked why she didn't protest, but she just shrugged, looking exhausted by the mere thought of that particular fight.

I hugged her again and stepped out onto the dusty road toward my waiting chauffeured truck ride to the city and the plane ride back to the U.S. Betty's chuchó followed me out of her yard, staying three paces behind me, head down, tail lowly wagging. Each time I turned back to wave at Betty and Scarlett, who were looking after me stoically, he would flinch as if in pain or as if some invisible fishing line were jerking him backwards towards home. He would start up his cautious pursuit of me only with my back safely turned on him. He followed me in that stop and start pattern until I got to the end of Betty's road. Then—having never been that far from home before—he sat and stared, not knowing where to go from there.

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