

Chapter X

Tripping on Grace

It had been about a year since I'd quit my career in advertising. During that year I'd spent most of my time struggling to write a novel, plowing driveways, building log furniture, mountain biking, and trying unsuccessfully to quit smoking pot. And not necessarily in that order. The opposite order, actually. My lack of discipline, which hadn't been much of an issue when I worked at ad agencies and had deadlines and people counting on me to meet them, was now getting the best of me.

We'd continued going to church at Lookout semi-regularly, by which I mean whenever we didn't have something more fun to do on Sunday morning or when our Saturday night activities didn't require some Sunday morning recovery time. Peter continued to preach the message of grace pretty relentlessly, and it was really beginning to affect me. The more I came to understand and believe in grace, the more I wanted to live my life in the middle of it. Believing that God loved me unconditionally, and that his love for me wasn't dependent on how good of a Christian I was, opened up a whole new world of faith for me. I wanted to know more. I wanted to go deeper into a relationship with God. I didn't know exactly what that might look like, but I began to pray that God would take me deeper into knowing him and experiencing him.

One Sunday morning in March of 1996 I was sitting in church thinking about *Hogan's Heroes*, as I often did during the announcements, when I received a message from the ether. Aram was saying something about a trip to visit "our sister church" in the Dominican Republic. I wasn't really paying attention, because I didn't think it was anything that applied to me. But just then, sitting there in our usual spot toward the back of the church, I felt a word invade my thoughts. The word was simple, and it was clear.

Go.

That's it. That's all I got. Not very profound, I know.

I didn't know what to do with it at first, because it didn't make much sense to me in the context of the moment. I tried to shrug it off, but it had come into my mind from the outside somehow, like a speck of dust that had infiltrated the hermetically sealed room where silicon chips are made. I didn't know how it got in there, but somehow it had, and it had knocked my train of thought right off the tracks.

“We still have a couple of openings for the trip,” Aram continued, “so if you have any interest in going we’ll be having a meeting next Sunday after the 11:00 service.”

Go.

There it was again. What the hell *was* that? Was that God? Was he trying to say something to me? But why would he be telling me to go on a mission trip?

I mulled the idea around in my mind for the rest of the service. What business did I have going on a mission trip? I was far from being the type of Christian who would do such a thing. Mission trips were for people who were really gung ho on going to other countries and converting the natives, weren’t they? That certainly wasn’t me. And besides, what would Dana say about me wanting to go, even if I did? Here I was, trying to write the Great American Novel and hardly making any income, living off of what Dana earned at her job. It was hardly fair to go on a trip to the Caribbean while Dana was out working to put bread on our table, even if it was called a mission trip.

Regardless, I couldn’t seem to get it out of my mind. The way the word had popped into my head had seemed so, well, un-me. It seemed like it had come from somewhere else, and I wasn’t very used to that. It seemed sorta like when I had that weird sense a year earlier that God was telling me to quit advertising and quit smoking pot.

About that. I had done well following through with what I thought God had said to me on the first matter, and had quit advertising almost immediately. But here it had been almost a year, and I was still having a hard time giving up the pot for good. Even though I’d always believed that pot wasn’t physically addictive like crack or heroin, I was beginning to recognize that maybe I really was addicted to it, at least on some level. After all, I was having a hard time controlling it. I could quit for a period of time, but eventually I’d let myself do it again, just a little bit. The little bit would turn into a lot, and soon I’d be sucked right back into it even more obsessively than before.

I knew I could stop long enough to go on a mission trip for a week; that was nothing. But I also knew that stopping for a week wouldn’t change who I really was. And I was hardly the kind of person that should be going on a church mission trip.

In spite of all that, I decided to float the idea by Dana in the car on the way home from church.

“Um, something kinda weird happened to me in church today.”

“Oh?” she said, curious. “What was that?”

“Aram was making the announcement about the trip to the DR, and all of a sudden this word just came to me out of the blue, like someone had stuck a syringe in my brain and injected it in there. The word was just ‘go’. That’s it.

Just 'go'. I spent the rest of the service wondering if it meant that I'm supposed to go on the trip to the DR."

Dana thought about it for a minute, and then answered. "I think you should go. Maybe it will be good for you."

I spent much of the next week thinking about it, imagining myself as an altruistic adventurer, the love child of Marco Polo and Mother Teresa who traveled to exotic countries to help the poor. I envisioned myself pounding nails into two-by-fours, turning occasionally to smile at the unbelievably grateful poor family that huddled behind me, gazing upon me with wonder and appreciation. Of course, I'd never actually seen a poor family and therefore didn't really know what one looked like, but I conjured up something in my mind based loosely on what I'd seen looking through *National Geographic* magazines in the waiting rooms of doctors' offices.

The following Sunday I got up the nerve to go to the information meeting. It turned out that there were a couple of people I knew that were going on the trip, a guy named Dan and a woman named Julie. I'd known Dan for years; he and his wife Cathy had been part of a small group we were in at a church we'd attended when we all lived in central Denver several years earlier. Julie was part of Dan and Cathy's new small group at Lookout, which Dana and I had attended for a few months but ultimately had stopped going to because we were the only couple that didn't have kids. All that the rest of them ever seemed to talk about was kids, and we got kind of tired of being the odd man out. So we stopped going.

The meeting for the DR trip was held in a room in the church basement that was one of the children's Sunday School rooms. There were two tables pushed together to make a big square table, and small child-sized classroom chairs were lined up on all four sides of the table. I felt silly sitting in such a tiny little chair, but Aram was sitting in one and weighed quite a bit more than me, so I figured that no matter how silly I looked at least I wouldn't look as silly as Aram. I took a seat across the table from Aram, in a place where I could have empty chairs on both sides of me. I wanted to keep some space between me and everyone else, for what reason I wasn't even sure.

Just before the meeting started, an old man walked in and sat in a chair right beside me. The old man was Dan Hiett, the father of Peter Hiett, the senior pastor of the church. While I had never actually met him, I knew a little about Dan from being around the church for the last three years, and hearing Peter tell stories about his dad in some of his sermons.

Dan was a retired Presbyterian minister, and, according to Peter, had played a part in founding the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, the denomination to which Lookout belonged. According to Peter, Dan had been

unfairly booted out of two different Presbyterian churches for being too conservative, which according to Peter meant preaching Jesus and not watering down the gospel message. Apparently the EPC was started when the mainstream Presbyterian denomination, the PCUSA, started drifting toward liberalism by doing things like accepting gays and lesbians in leadership positions.

Although Dan didn't receive a salary at Lookout and had never been a pastor there, he was listed in the bulletin as "Pastor Emeritus." I didn't know exactly what that meant, although I did know that Dan was usually the one who led the congregational prayer, the main prayer of the service which always took place right before the offering plate was passed. Hunched over at the shoulders and unable to lift his feet very high off the ground, Dan would shuffle over to the platform, carefully summit the two steps to the top of the platform, and then turn to the congregation and say with an enthusiasm that almost always startled me, "Let's pray!"

Every time he opened his mouth to pray, I was amazed at what came out. Not the content so much as the delivery. Here was this feeble old man, barely able to ascend two steps, but when he spoke into the microphone what everyone heard was not the voice of a feeble old man but rather the deep and powerful voice of a prophet. His prayers were always full of grace, wonder and reverence for God, and when he spoke in his deep, rich voice it almost seemed to me to be the voice of God himself.

After Dan sat down next to me, Aram called the meeting to order. He opened the meeting with a prayer, following the protocol that is apparently written somewhere in the Bible but that I'd never been able to find. For some reason, it seems standard procedure to always begin any meeting inside a church building with a prayer. Why, I'm not exactly sure.

After a mercifully short prayer, Aram started talking about the purpose of the trip. This was the part where I started freaking out.

Aram made it perfectly clear that this was not going to be the type of trip where our group would go down and build a home for a poor family or do some other kind of altruistic activity. Rather, the focus of this trip was to be all about relationship. He mentioned that Harvest, the organization through which our partnership with our sister church had been established, was adamant that the partnership not be about us providing material resources to the people in our sister church, no matter how poor they might be. Harvest's philosophy, which after thinking about it I determined to be a good philosophy, was that they didn't want the partnership to create a dependency, where the church in La Victoria came to see Lookout as one big wallet, a wallet which they could open whenever they had a need. Instead of a partnership that was based on us throwing

resources at their needs, the partnership should be based on relationship as brothers and sisters in Christ.

As much as I believed that the philosophy was a good one, I began to be less and less interested in going on the trip as the meeting progressed.

At one point in the meeting, Aram asked if anyone had thought about the invitation he had shared at a previous meeting. Apparently, he had invited group members to think of things they might be able to offer to the church in La Victoria, apart from material things. Dan the younger said that if there was any interest from the men in our sister church, he would be willing to teach a basic course on welding to men that might want to learn it as a vocation. Julie, the woman from Dan's small group, said that she had found some MOPS materials in Spanish, and suggested that she could give a mini-seminar on the challenges of parenting young kids to some of the "Mothers Of Pre-Schoolers" in our sister church. A few other people in the group threw out some suggestions of what they might bring to share with the people of La Victoria.

When the meeting ended, Dan the elder introduced himself to me and asked if I was excited about the trip.

"Actually, I don't think I'm going to go after all," I told him.

"Oh? Why not?"

"I really thought it was going to be the kind of trip where I could swing a hammer and we would build a school or a house for a poor family or something like that," I explained. "This trip sounds like it's all about just hanging out instead of doing something tangible, and I don't think that's the kind of thing I'd be into. Besides, other people have stuff they're going to bring to share with others down there, and I don't have anything to offer. I don't speak Spanish and all I know how to do is write ads, and I don't think there's much of a need for that in La Victoria. So, I just don't think I have anything to give."

Dan looked at me with a great big smile. "Well, you can give LOVE, can't you?"

I looked at him with raised eyebrows. Was he serious? Give love?

"No," I answered, chuckling. "I don't think I can." I wasn't kidding.

"Well, you still need to go, despite thinking that you have nothing to offer," Dan said warmly, with a very kind and genuine smile. "You just need to let God lead you and see what happens. If I were you I would just trust God on this and stop coming up with reasons why you don't think you should go." He paused, tilted his head in thought, and then asked me a question. "Do you think you're supposed to go?"

He had me there. I sighed. "That's the weird thing - I think I am," I admitted.

“Ok then!” he said with great enthusiasm. “So it’s not what you thought it was going to be. If people only did the stuff they thought God was calling them to do when it was something they really wanted to do, no one would ever do anything for God and we would all miss out on some really wonderful things God has for us. God seems to want you to go, so just trust that he’s going to do something wonderful for you on this trip.” With that voice, that deep, gentle, God-like voice of his, I found his logic very hard to resist.

So I went.

A couple of weeks later I found myself at DIA, Denver’s shiny new airport for which I had written a lot of the advertising stuff related to its launch. Our group was made up of about 12 people. Dan McNeil, the younger Dan of the group, the one I’d known for several years, had graciously offered to be my roommate on the trip. That was about the only anxiety-alleviating part of the whole deal for me. Apart from that, I was as anxious as a drug smuggler in a room full of German Shepherds.

Whenever I’m around a group of Christians I don’t know, I’m always a little skittish at first. I’ve been attacked by other Christians so many times for so many different things that I’ve developed the spiritual equivalent of a nervous tick. I’ve been confronted about the way I dress, the language I use, doubts I’ve expressed, opinions I’ve shared – I’ve been critiqued and condemned by total strangers and friends alike. It’s happened enough that I’m not really surprised by it anymore, but at the same time I still try to avoid it whenever I can. Like most people, I don’t like having my faith questioned or my lack of virtue brought to attention, so what I’ve learned to do is keep a distance initially, and then slowly lean in to relationships once I determine that they’re safe and I won’t be judged.

Not knowing the other people in the group very well, I decided to follow my usual pattern of just keeping to myself, and not reveal much about the real me. After all, it seemed like all the other people in the group were Good Christian Folk, the type that were supposed to go on mission trips. Me? I was an unemployed pothead living off of his wife’s income. It would definitely be best for me to keep my mouth shut and just be an observer.

Unbeknownst to me, God had sent a few covert operatives to thwart my plan.

First there was Dan Hiatt. The old man wouldn’t leave me alone, and I mean that in the best way possible. He literally would not allow me to go through the experience alone. He kept finding ways to sit by me or stand by me, and I started to get the feeling that he sincerely just wanted to get to know me. The more I talked to him, the more I started to feel this strange and new vibe coming from him that I had rarely gotten from anyone, Christian or not; one that

was devoid of any judgment or insecurity whatsoever. For lack of a better way of describing it, I guess maybe you could call that vibe that Dan exuded pure, 100% natural love. It was like Dan was so comfortable in his own skin that he had absolutely no need to make himself look good or to make anyone else look bad, which freed him up to truly love people. The more we talked, the more I felt like I could confess to him that I was a psychopath who'd been stalking his daughter and he still would have wanted to be my friend.

Then there was Peter Conti. Peter was about the same age as me, and was also a little socially awkward like me, or at least he seemed to be. He was at a crossroads in his life, and told me that he was thinking about going from being just a slumlord who owned and managed a bunch of apartment buildings to trying to become a motivational speaker who would actually teach others how to invest in real estate. He mentioned to me at the beginning of the trip that he was hoping that maybe, somehow, God would use the trip to speak to him and give him some direction about his future.

Peter didn't speak in a lot of religious language like many Christians are prone to do when they're around other Christians, and seemed to be as unsure about why he was there as I was. Quite frankly, he seemed a little out of place, which made me particularly glad he was on the trip. The trip ended up being a turning point for Peter, and in the years that followed I would watch him become quite the real estate investment guru. He even wrote some books about real estate investing that ended up on some *Wall Street Journal* bestseller lists. Peter and I ended up becoming friends on that trip, and still keep in contact even though he now lives on the East Coast.

Then there was Rick Hagaman. Rick was a retired CEO of a large company, a division of the railroad conglomerate Burlington Northern. Rick was a burly guy in his fifties, and wore black jeans, black boots, and a black Harley t-shirt. He also wore some thin, black gloves, ones that looked like driving gloves, at what seemed to be some very strange times, like when he was checking his bags at the ticket counter. He later told me that he had some kind of nerve condition that made it so that he couldn't feel anything with his fingertips, making it hard to do something like picking up a piece of paper without wearing gloves. The disability had forced him into early retirement, but I got the impression he was pretty well off financially.

Rick was so quiet and stand-offish with others in the group that he made me look like Richard Simmons. He'd stand around with his arms folded across his chest, and any questions that were asked of him were mostly answered by yes or no answers. This made me all the more curious to get to know the guy. Like Peter, Rick became somewhat of a friend on the trip, and a couple years later would play a key role in helping me head up an effort to provide hurricane

relief to the town of La Victoria. A year or two after that he would be found dead in his home by a sheriff's deputy. The coroner would determine that he died of alcohol poisoning on Christmas day, a week before the deputy found him in his home. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Thanks in large part to enjoyable conversations I'd had with Dan, Peter and Rick in the Denver and Miami airports, by the time we were on the flight from Miami to Santo Domingo, I was feeling pretty safe among the group from Lookout. Everyone seemed to be pretty laid back and open, and as far as I could tell there wasn't a judgmental one in the bunch. So that was good. But what about the people in our sister church? What were *they* going to be like? Aram had warned the group that the church in La Victoria had some pretty conservative beliefs, like believing that Christian women should not wear jewelry or make-up or pants. I should clarify. They didn't believe that women should walk around naked from the waist down, but rather that they should only dress in skirts or dresses and not slacks or pants.

So although I had so far made it through the German Shepherds from Lookout without anyone sniffing me out, I still had a fair amount of anxiety about these "brothers and sisters" in La Victoria. Not wanting to think about it, I lost myself in my *Spanish for Beginners* book, trying my damndest to learn the language before we touched down in Santo Domingo.

What happened next was one of the weirdest experiences of anxiety and grace I've ever had in my life.

I have a tendency to be a little scatterbrained at times, something that Dana hypothesizes is one of the long-term side effects of all the brain cells I've destroyed over the years with various chemical substances. In addition to being a little scatterbrained, whenever I'm in a new situation where I'm expected to do things a certain way, I like to observe others doing them first as much as possible, so that when it comes my turn, I have a reasonable idea of what I'm supposed to do. I usually try and pass it off as humility, like I'm "letting" others go in front of me. Little do they know, I'll actually be a little pissed if someone else insists on letting me go first. As I'm sure you're thinking, it was much more about control than humility.

My control issues stem not so much from a craving to get other people to do what I want, as from a fear of being in situations where I'm not in control of my own destiny. My brother-in-law, Rob, who also knows my sister and younger brother, refers to it as the "Larson Fear of Embarrassment."

So as we moved through the Santo Domingo airport, my control issues inspired me to hang toward the back of the group so I could watch everyone else go through the process first. I brought up the tail of the group as we made our way down the hallways, and I brought it up again as we waited in line for our

turn to go up to the immigration desk and show our passports. The whole Spanish thing had me on edge a little, so the more I could watch how others did it first, the more comfortable I felt when my turn came.

We then went to baggage claim to pick up our bags, and by sheer coincidence, my bag took longer than anyone else's to come out on the conveyor belt. I watched from baggage claim as some of the others in our group passed through customs, which looked like no big deal. But as more and more of our group passed through customs and disappeared around the corner, I became increasingly anxious. By the time my bag finally appeared, I looked up and saw the last person in our group rounding the corner on the other side of customs. Everyone else had already gone through.

I handed my customs form to the person collecting them, and she indicated for me to put my suitcase up on the counter for inspection. I hadn't seen anyone else from our group have to do this; they just handed in their forms and were waved right on through. I wondered what it was about the way I looked or how I filled out the form that made her decide to have my bag searched. Was the fact that I was a drug addict that obvious to people?

I had nothing to hide, thankfully, but being the invisible person I try so often to be, I worried that by the time I exited customs the group might have already taken off without me, completely oblivious to the fact that I wasn't with them.

The customs guy finished going through my bag, but before I could pick it up off the counter another guy in an official looking blue shirt grabbed my bag and put it on a dolly. I hadn't seen anyone else in our group have to do this, and I wondered for a moment if I was being taken off for interrogation somewhere. He motioned for me to follow him, and that's when I noticed the queue of other guys in blue shirts lined up with their dollies. He wasn't a customs official; he was a porter. He wanted to carry my bag outside for me in return for a tip.

More than wanting to save the price of a tip, I didn't want to be the only guy in the group who needed to have his luggage carried out by a big, strong man. I grabbed my bag off of his dolly, shaking my head and saying no. He started yelling something at me in Spanish, which obviously I didn't understand in the slightest. Finally he waved me off and turned around, and got back in the line of porters.

Anxious about catching up with the group, I hurried out the door. I wasn't prepared for the chaos I encountered outside. I walked down a long ramp, a seeming gangplank at the end of which was a sea of black and brown faces, waiting for arriving passengers. The sight of all those black people shouting and waving startled me. I wasn't used to being around black people. Rochester, Minnesota, the city where I lived for most of my childhood and youth,

wasn't the most ethnically diverse place in the world. In my graduating class of 604 kids, there was only one black kid, and I'd managed to get all the way through high school without ever talking to him. The only thing I knew about black people was from what I had seen on *Roots*, *The Jeffersons*, and *Boyz in the Hood*. If black people were anything like what I'd seen in those shows, I was going to fit in about as well as Rush Limbaugh at a Black Panthers reunion.

I swallowed, took a deep breath, and gently pushed my way through the crowd of people. As soon as the crowd began to thin, an older black man in a brown shirt tried to grab the suitcase out of my hand, saying "Taxi?" at the same time that he was trying to take my bag. I told him no, and kept trying to spot someone from our group.

As I was looking to my right, suddenly there was yet another black guy grabbing for my suitcase from my left, this one a younger guy dressed in a white dress shirt and a red tie.

"No," I said to him, shaking my head with a scowl on my face. "No taxi."

"Si," he said, smiling at me and nodding his head, not letting go of my suitcase. "It's ok," he added, in English.

"No," I repeated emphatically, trying to grab my bag back from him. He wasn't letting me.

Finally I saw that he was leading me toward the area where others from our group were standing around, talking with Dominicans who were dressed much more formally than all of the others I'd seen so far. I let him continue ahead with my bag, and he threw it into the back of a bus with a bunch of other suitcases. I recognized a tag on one of the bags as belonging to someone else in our group, and breathed a sigh of relief.

Then it happened.

As soon as I turned back toward the place where the rest of our group was congregating, I found myself being hugged by a mob of black people, people I'd never met in my life, all of whom were saying things to me in Spanish that I didn't understand. Each one of them, at least a dozen in all, gave me a very convincing hug accompanied by a great big smile, and somehow made me feel like I was a long lost brother returning from a trip around the world.

The out-of-control anxiety that I had been feeling just a few minutes earlier dissipated in a matter of seconds, and all at once I found myself feeling safe, welcomed and accepted. It felt like what grace would feel like if grace were experienced as an action rather than just being a theological concept. Maybe grace is actually supposed to be like that – more something that we do and experience, and less something that we just believe in conceptually.

One of the Dominicans, the guy in the white shirt and red tie, addressed me in English. "What is your name?" he asked, pronouncing each word carefully.

"Tom," I answered. "Tomás."

"Ah, Tomás," the guy answered. "It's nice to meet you. My name is David," he said, pronouncing the name as Dah-BEED.

After all the introductions, we piled onto the bus and slowly made our way along the coast toward Santo Domingo. The air was heavy with humidity, as if it were on the verge of changing from a gas to a liquid at any moment. The bus was warm and sweaty inside, even though it was nine o'clock at night and all of the windows were open. There was a friendly banter floating around the bus, animated conversations between Dominicans and Americans who were trying to communicate mostly through hand gestures. A few in our group spoke some Spanish, and they were each immersed in conversation and laughter with people from our sister church.

At one point the Dominicans started singing what was obviously a Christian song even though I had no idea what the words meant. After two or three songs they asked the Americanos to sing a song, which of course went badly and was slightly embarrassing, because we couldn't even come close to matching the joy and enthusiasm and confidence with which the Dominicans sang.

We made our way through what seemed to be a significant chunk of Santo Domingo, and then suddenly we were barreling down a two lane road through the countryside. Although it was dark, I could tell that the land on the side of the road was some kind of farmland, but the only cows I could see all looked like they were malnourished and depressed. Random burned-out car bodies lined the edge of the road we were driving down, looking like they were abandoned in flames by their former owners.

We were only in the countryside for about 10 minutes when we came to a small town, which was eerily dark.

The bus made its way through town, and I was fascinated by what I saw. Black people everywhere, looking even more black than normal in the absence of any kind of artificial light. There were people sitting in chairs on the sidewalk, drinking beer and playing dominos by candlelight. There were young people standing around outside what seemed to be a disco with no lights or music; the kids laughing and yelling loudly all the same. There was the sound of singing coming from what was apparently a church, albeit a very dark one, accompanied by some kind of loud, jingly percussion.

The bus came to a stop, and Aram announced to the group that we'd arrived. "Welcome to Hotel Rossy," he said with a laugh, as if it were an inside

joke. “Your home away from home for the next week. And, starting things off appropriately for the DR, the electricity is out!”

The hotel was a one-story, L-shaped concrete building that looked more like a dog kennel than a hotel. Around the perimeter of the property was a tall cinder block wall that was topped off with shards of broken glass that had been set into the cement before it dried. Looking at the hotel, I couldn’t imagine why anyone would ever want to scale the wall to get in. Getting out? That was a different story.

You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave.

After we piled out of the bus and unloaded the suitcases from the back, several of the Dominicans from the church went off looking for candles. Meanwhile, all the Americanos pulled small Maglights or REI headlamps out of their backpacks. Aram had suggested we bring them, and already we understood why. We grabbed our luggage and were shown our rooms by members of the church. If the hotel had a staff, they were nowhere to be seen.

Our room was tiny, but I was relieved to see that at least it contained two beds. There was a full sized bed pushed up against the walls in one corner of the room, and there was also a twin sized bed, which we later learned was loaned to us by a family in the church. Each of the rooms had been outfitted with an additional bed that different church members brought to the hotel, except for the room that was occupied by the one married couple in our group. In between the two beds in our room there was barely enough room to walk, and our suitcases took up most of that floor space.

Dan was at least six inches taller than me, so I insisted that he take the full-size bed. He didn’t put up a fight.

We were just beginning to unpack when the power came back on, accompanied by a cheer from everyone in our group. With the single incandescent bulb in the ceiling fixture now illuminating the room, we got an even better perspective on our accommodations.

Adjacent to the bedroom was a small bathroom, which was barely more luxurious than a Porta-Potty. There was a small sink that was about the size of a thick metropolitan phone book, and there was only one valve on the sink – cold. I turned the handle, but nothing happened. Next to the sink was a toilet, which looked like a regular toilet only it had no toilet seat. On the other side of the toilet was the shower stall, but half of the stall was taken up by a huge, pink, plastic garbage can that was full of water. Floating on top of the water was what looked like an old, plastic, one-gallon milk jug, which had had the very top of the jug cut off. There was a valve sticking out of the cement wall at waist level, and up above was a simple copper pipe protruding out of the wall about six inches or so. I turned the valve, but just as with the sink, no water came out.

To complete the effect, there was no door on the bathroom; there was simply an opening in the cement wall between the bedroom and bathroom. So much for being able to hide this week.

The bathroom was painted the same color as the bedroom, a bright but faded pink, but with the light on we could now see that parts of the walls in both rooms were covered with smudges and dirty fingerprints. Taped to the wall above Dan's bed was a handwritten sign, in Spanish, that looked like it was some kind of formal notice from the management.

David poked his head into our room to see how we were doing and if we needed anything. Since his English was pretty good, I asked him what the handmade sign said. He looked the sign over quickly, and then grinned.

"What?" I asked.

"Oh, it's just a note from the manager of the hotel," he said, hoping that I would let it go at that.

"What does it say?" I asked, now even more curious.

David held his hand up to his forehead, as if to hide his face in mock embarrassment. "It says," he started, shaking his head as he laughed, "it says, 'If you are here past 12 o'clock in the night, you will be charged for the whole night.'"

Dan and I looked at each other and laughed. Home away from home. "Wow, I've never spent the night in a *brothel* before," Dan said, sounding genuinely pleased to be able to say it. "Cool."

Aram came to our door and smiled, asking how we liked our accommodations.

"Fabulous," Dan answered. "Five star. Thanks for talking it down so much; I appreciate it much more than I thought I would. I was expecting to camp for a week, but this is better than camping." Looking up, he added, "I especially appreciate the geckos on the ceiling directly above my bed."

I looked up, and saw two small lizards hanging upside down from the ceiling, looking like they somehow got stuck there and were now afraid to move, lest they plummet onto the bed below them.

"Oh, there are mosquito nets on your beds," Aram said, triggered by Dan's comment. "You just need to figure out how to attach them."

I began to unfold the mosquito net that sat on top of my bed. Meanwhile, Dan reached into his bag and pulled out a roll of nylon string and a roll of duct tape. "Never leave home without it," he said.

Aram then gave us a wonderfully informative explanation of Dominican bathroom etiquette. The plastic milk jug in the garbage can was for taking bucket showers, as the water in La Victoria was limited and very sporadic. When the water did come on, it would fill the trash can sitting in the shower

stall. Besides using the jug to take showers, it could also be used for putting water in the toilet tank in order to flush it. If we were talented, Aram said, we'd be able to flush the toilet by simply pouring one jug full of water directly into the bowl, with precisely the right aim and velocity. He also suggested that we use the water sparingly, and flush the toilet only when there was crap in it. He said it was the Dominican way, and even offered us a nice rhyme to help us remember it. I had never heard it before, but as soon as Aram started reciting it, Dan joined in: *If it's yellow, let it mellow; if it's brown, flush it down.*

After finishing his explanation of how to use a bathroom, Aram let us know that the women of the church had prepared a small snack for us in the patio of the house next door to the hotel. Even though it was already after 10:00 pm, they wanted us to feel welcomed and not have to go to bed hungry. We made our way to the patio. The place was hopping with activity, and it seemed conversations that had been started on the bus between the Americanos and the Dominicans had picked up right where they had left off. We snacked on cheese sandwiches and drank some kind of fresh, homemade juice, and after about another hour of chit chat, we finally made it back to our rooms to turn in.

What a long, strange trip it had already been. It was hard to believe that I had woken up in my own bed in Colorado that same morning. I lay in bed waiting for sleep, trying to ignore the roosters that were crowing somewhere in the distance, even though it was nowhere near dawn. One thing I knew: If the rest of the week was as unusual as today was, this might end up being one of the most bizarre trips I'd ever been on. Hallucinating or otherwise.
