In a Land of Volcanoes

Months later, Kate Bowman sat in her study at her Lake Michigan home and remembered with an agony the appalling event that, like a splitting maul, cleaved her life into a divide of a before and after.

"You hooked me with that photo, Aunt Kate. You remember, the one of the four kids in the jungle village standing in front of that smoldering peak," Andrew Gustafson, age twenty-two, had volunteered as he hoisted their bags into the luggage weigh station that fall in the Miami airport. He stood a trim six feet tall with short-cropped blond hair and blue eyes.

"I've got to catch fire with something," he had said. "I've been lost since graduation and those damned sterile classes. Which is not like me. Too many classmates bragging about money and trophy women. A scene that I've got to trade for work that's going to mean something important to someone.

"Like the work you do," he had remarked.

Andrew would have been every aunt's favorite nephew, she thought, a young man born happy. Against her better judgment, Kate Bowman agreed to bring the forever smiling University of Illinois graduate on the journey to Talapa deep in the highlands of Central America. She had traveled on the aid mission twice before to the village in the land of volcanoes. The Christmas before, her parents, her husband, and her three grown children and their families had gathered for viewing of a slide photo show of her travels. Andrew and his parents had

driven from the family home in Chicago 230 miles north to Door County on Lake Michigan for a holiday meal and visit.

The young engineering student, due to graduate the following May, had declared his interest in Kate's next trip.

His father the dermatologist had registered his objection: "What kind of career move is that?"

"One devoid of the rank pursuit of materialism," Andy had replied with a friendly grin.

Kate Bowman was a statuesque redheaded beauty at five feet eight inches in her mid-forties, trim and also quick to smile and laugh. A wildlife biologist for the state of Wisconsin, she treasured life in the natural world, including at her northern Midwest farm on the peninsula by Lake Michigan and in the highlands of Central America. She strode with an arm swinging confidence of her place in the wilds with the hardwoods, evergreens, and creatures of the Great Lakes basin and with the mountain jungles in the land of volcanoes.

That October morning in Miami, she smiled at her nephew's comment as he sat himself midway back in the small Honduran jet amongst a group of Costa Rican teenagers returning home after a six-week student exchange at a Chicago high school.

"Better practice my Spanish," Andrew had said to her. Which he did, laughing at ridiculous jokes and kidding the strangers with whom he sat the entire four-hour ride to San Jose, his blond head bobbing and turning amongst all the black-haired ones. In his last five months at university, he had taken two language classes and reached a functional fluency much faster than Kate's grueling trip through mail order tapes the previous four years. She sat eight rows behind Andrew between two Central American teachers.

The layover in San Jose had lasted ninety minutes before boarding the flight to the coastal capital of the neighboring country, where they slept the night on the floor of an old crumbling church. Next morning at five a.m., they climbed aboard a mission supply and passenger bus and rode for almost an hour through the city and its outskirts past roofless shacks and slums. Twice they rode by dumps of mountainous garbage heaps over which entire families crawled to glean rotting food for survival. Military jeeps and windowless vans cruised seemingly everywhere, driven by heavily armed and angry looking uniformed men. Gradually, on roads barely fit for mule travel, the old mission school bus heaved, pitched, and crawled its way into the southern highlands for the eleven-hour ride to the mountain jungles and volcanic peaks of Talapa. By late afternoon, they had ascended into the chilled mists that swirled through the irregular valleys and around the numerous peaks. At about the time they became hungry, they found themselves in a downpour with headway all but impossible with nothing for visibility. Then the old rear duals for the bus became buried to the hubs in mud, until most of the passengers, some twenty-five in all, had to climb off and submit to a severe spattering to push the vehicle out of the mountainside muck.

Kate and Andrew and a teacher and a dentist from Los Angeles disembarked on a highland mountain road and met their guide and walked into the village six miles away just before midnight. Two doctors and one nurse from Minnesota had arrived three days prior and had set up the work and sleeping quarters for the entire aid group in four aged expedition tents hauled from North America. The fresh arrivals rolled out their bags onto four cots and waited for what their first morning would bring.

"The villagers are much more reserved. Far less friendly this year, Kate," the surgeon named Lundquist, a balding, portly man aged sixty-one, remarked over coffee the next morning. "The solders have frightened them with the attention they've gotten from us and other foreigners who've traipsed through here. I think the dictator believes we sew subversion amongst the Indians. And I suppose if we make a small difference in their lives, raising expectations of any decent life, maybe we are subversive. Believe it or not, the tyrant, religious fanatic that he is, has issued a not so secret decree that highland villagers over the age of twelve and caught in traditional clothing will be shot on sight. This little country has descended into madness."

Kate, but for her nephew the tallest of the foreigners, had divided her work in the village on prior visits between a water quality project and teaching Indian children and interested parents the first elements of reading. When the sun came out that afternoon for the first time in a week, she dumped a large pile of children's books onto a large tarp in the center of town. In a few moments, she found herself surrounded by over a dozen youngsters, several of whom she remembered from her previous trips. She sat in front of a thatched and mud daubed hut while small, enthusiastic hands helped her as she sorted through the many volumes.

"This is a *very* cool scene, Aunt Kate. I mean you with the kids. My dad would be lost here," Andrew had observed. "Of course, I admit I'm a little empty-handed myself," he added.

"Actually, I could really use you father's help. Look at the rashes on these two kids' backs. And I've seen two horrible looking skin problems on a couple of adults this morning. Maybe

he doesn't know it, but Peter would love working out here," Kate said.

"Give yourself a little more time," she had said to him. "You will find some work here."

A thirteen-year-old Mayan girl stood a few steps apart from the group of younger children and the two foreigners, observing Kate's book exhibit for a few moments.

Then she boasted, "I have been reading to them already. I have my own books that I got from the priest."

"Wonderful, child. What's your name?" Kate replied.

"I'm not a child," perhaps anxious to dispel that status in front of handsome Andrew Gustafson. "I learned to read from the priest who died two years ago. I have eleven books. Want to see them?"

She returned in only a moment to spill her tattered volumes onto the tarp by the morning's dying embers of a fire.

"My name is Flora Enriquez. I'd like to see your books," she announced.

Flora stood four feet eight inches in her white linen smock and flower-patterned dress extending three inches below her knees. She was barefoot and had a red birthmark the shape of an olive on the top of her right ear, which Kate glimpsed as the girl tossed her jet black shoulder-length hair away from her eyes and opened the first of Gustafson's modest traveling library. The early teen's dense hair framed a quite brown and serious seeming oval face, prominent Mayan nose, and black eyes. On the occasion when she saw something pleasing to her, a photo, a drawing, or a phrase, she flashed a quick smile revealing a straight row of gleaming white teeth.

Within moments, a book swap seemed well underway when Flora's father, somehow crippled with a deformity of both

legs, hobbled onto the scene and muttered words of the regional dialect to his daughter. Seemingly disappointed and disgusted, she gathered her texts and strolled to the family shelter two hundred yards away on the edge of a clearing. Three siblings, a sister perhaps a year older, and two brothers, eleven and fifteen, stood outside staring at the foreigners until an old-looking woman pulled them inside.

The North Americans spent the days as they had on previous trips, getting reacquainted with villagers and working full days at medical chores, assisting with weeding of crops, and hiking in the mountains. More gradually than the years before, Indian shyness and suspicion gave way to lines forming in front of the doctors' tents each morning. Vaccines were administered, minor injuries and infections tended, and occasional cases of tuberculosis or malaria encountered. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, the doctors would help the dentist with pulling rotten teeth.

Kate conducted drawing and reading classes for children in the mornings and literacy for adults in the afternoons. Early on, the foreigners noticed the absence of able-bodied younger men from the village, and were told by their womenfolk that they were away (for the first time of the mission visits) and over the mountains "working for the wage." At exactly what, they could not say.

Kate also noticed that, after an apparent discussion with her hobbling father, Flora only lingered at the periphery of Indian and foreigner interaction for virtually the remainder of the visitors' three-week stay. But Kate also thought that the child yearned for the contact, and especially for attention from Andrew.

Their third morning in country, the North Americans learned firsthand of the village fear of the military an hour

after sunrise when they heard the whopping of helicopters in a valley to the west. At the first sound of them, the villagers fled, utterly abandoning the visitors until the sun was directly overhead. None of the *gringos* had any idea where the Indians had hidden. The four gun ships had emerged from behind a jungle mountainside three miles way and had flown well past the community toward the volcano twenty-five miles away, a thin plume of smoke trailing northward from its crater peak.

Mid-day two days later, a column of thirteen soldiers with side arms and assault rifles walked into the town from the southeast. A young lieutenant and his stocky sergeant asked what the foreigners were doing meddling in the affairs of a foreign country. After checking their travel documents while the natives cowered in their huts, the soldiers departed and did not return for the remainder of their visit.

Kate remembered judging the tone of their behavior as very menacing. "I should have gotten us the hell out of there that very day," she said countless times later.

The following morning the cold, misty air registered 42 degrees F on the physicians' thermometers. The second visiting doctor, a skinny man with long red hair and a scraggly beard, pulled on his khaki pants and green flannel shirt and boots to cook breakfast over a fire pit in the village center. Fog drifted between the mangrove peaks around them.

Moments before first light, he loudly announced the availability of hot beverage, "COOOFEEEEE, coffee, COOOFEEEE, *GRINGOS!"*

"Oh, my word, how obnoxious. And embarrassing," Kate said with blinking eyes from her sleeping bag on the cot several feet from Andy.

After he served them breakfast, Mort Hale, a physician employed otherwise in a Northern California suburban emergency department, sat on an inverted bucket and chatted, wide awake, as though the sleep that he might have obtained was unnecessary. He wore an Oakland A's baseball cap, red curls of his hair dangling from beneath it almost to his shoulders.

He pulled off his smoke-scented sweatshirt and remarked, "Before we traveled here this time, I read a long article in the *Examiner.* It seems the dictator deeply distrusts any literacy campaign for his subjects. He views reading and education as a threat, as the importation of foreign ideas that jeopardize his tight-fisted control over his citizenry. Including these remote tiny bands of highlanders. The article quoted him as telling a neighboring tyrant to the south that he prefers a country of 'ignorant yoked beasts.' Easier to work them for profit in the new foreign factories."

On their fifth day in Talapa, Andrew woke Kate excitedly to announce his own plans for providing real assistance to the villagers.

"I've got it, Kate! I will bring them electricity! I will build a little hydroelectric facility in the stream a quarter mile up the mountain."

"Sounds pretty ambitious, Andrew. That would take a while," she had pointed out.

"Nothing to it," he proclaimed. "I'll just get a small turbine from the States. I'll build up the supports on the stream sides with the help of a couple villagers, install the unit, and bring the wires down the slope. Look, I've started some drawings. I can do this, Kate" Andy reported enthusiastically that early morning as he sat on his cot.

"And another thing. Dr. Lundquist says the stream is contaminated with parasites. So when I'm done with the power installation, I'll dig them a well. What do you think, Kate?"

"You overwhelm me, Andy. I'm exhausted hearing it all, and I'm still in bed. This will require several return trips," she had said.

"No doubt," Andy acknowledged. "I love this place. I could stay here forever."

The energies of the young man impressed the villagers, including Andy's thirteen-year-old admirer, Flora, who followed him at a shy distance on his many excursions the next two weeks up and down the mountain. He quickly located the site for his small hydroelectric project, and crisscrossed the stream many times with a pair of older male villagers to fell and trim the few trees needed for the turbine mounts. They worked ninety hours in ten days readying the site, driving pilings deep into the mountain soil and rock for the promise of the people's first electricity.

"I know just the unit, Kate. Saw it in a catalogue over a year ago. I'll go to the capital and make a bunch of phone calls to raise the purchase money. Then I'll get the thing shipped with all the accessories by the end of the month. I can have this village wired in no time!"

That night, the two of them sat in the highland darkness by a fire in the village center quietly talking. The North Americans' visit to Talapa was to conclude in four days.

"Andrew, we have a problem," Kate had said.

"I know. But I cannot go home with you, Aunt Kate. Not now. Not for a while. But I should not be all that long in getting this project completed. I promise I will come home before I begin the water works."

"Andrew Gustafson, I simply cannot leave you here. Your parents will find life intolerable with worry over you. There is a civil war going on in this country. Your father said to me that *none* of us belonged in the midst of this strife. Please return home with me, if just for your folks' reassurance. Then return here when you want," Kate had pled.

"Sorry, Aunt Kate. No can do. I've got the fire in me for this job now. But I promise I'll be home within three months. I'm a grownup now. This is my decision, and I don't want to be told what to do by Dad anymore. He just wants me to settle in town close by him and Mother and makes tons of money. I've told him many times that there is more to me than that. But he does not listen," Andy answered.

"Andy, he listens. They will be hopelessly sick with worry for you," she said. "You've no means of any communication with them from here, except for letters going out once a week on that old bus."

"Aunt Kate, I'll be fine. Peter and Elaine will just have to live with my adult decisions," Andy declared.

"And so will I, young man. So will you," Kate replied.

Six days later, Kate wept at the airport outside the large, filthy city. The metro sprawled across a coastal valley shrouded in a dirty, sunlit haze. As she climbed the stairs to the small airliner, she just made out the peaks of three volcanoes smoldering less than thirty miles to the east and to the north. In half an hour, they departed to the west over the ocean. She sat alone eleven rows back in a window seat and fixed her gaze on a tiny island a few miles offshore. On the bus ride down the mountain, Kate acknowledged that Andrew had indeed become his own boss and the engineer of his own fate.

The evening telephone call came to Kate ten days later, reporting that her nephew had gone missing in the highlands of Talapa. The aid tour director called that night from Chicago and reported hearing from the U.S. embassy that Andrew had disappeared three days previous. The embassy official mentioned something about the young man's involvement in a drug selling incident.

A hysterical Kate Bowman had responded, "IMPOSSIBLE! That's complete NONSENSE! That's the straightest kid the world ever KNEW!"

The embassy official also reported that the local authorities had closed the thirty square kilometers surrounding the village to all outsiders, including the prying eyes of the press, foreign and domestic.

That night, exactly a week after her husband Harold's diagnosis of testicular cancer, Kate made the most difficult telephone call of her life to Andrew's terrified, and very blaming, parents.