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**GAVIN
CROSS**

DE LA SOMBRA DOMINICANA

Creative Non-Fiction

They carried us from the airport in a yellow school bus, like the ones in America. It smelled of fresh mold and walnuts, and in the front, old men with over-pressed suits and Cuban cigars chattered in crackled Spanish. A brisk rain crashed on the roof, rumbling like the crowd at that rock concert last week.

Don't think of home.

On the right, we passed by little shops with iron bars on the windows and doors. Islands of rust speckled their flat tin roofs. *Carnicería Santo Domingo*, *Panadería Elena*, McDonald's hamburgers y *papas fritas (más de un billón servidos)*. On the left was the gray moan of the ocean, the angry tide threatening to crash against the bus if it came any closer.

"How long until we reach our stop?" Stacy asked me.

"Another five hours, I think."

"You think that tarp is enough to keep our luggage dry?"

"No."

Stacy was a friend from home. I had lived with her family back in the States, and she insisted on coming with me this time. She returned to her notes, children's songs and games in Spanish that she had collected over the years. I returned to the window, pressing my nose against the cold glass, and watched the steam erase the gray ocean from sight.

After another hour or so, the stores on the right became sparser, separated by sugarcane fields and large tracks of boulders.

The ads in the airport had been deceiving, but then again, I had already known they would be. Large luxurious hotels with four pools, three parking garages, and a tall brunette in heels who brought orange juice and cereal to your bed each morning with a bleached-white smile. Maybe those places existed somewhere, but not here.

"I hope you enjoy your stay in the Dominican Republic," a lady attendant at the information booth had said to me with a practiced American accent as she handed over our bus passes. "C-12 to *Los Robles* will arrive shortly."

Stacy had been looking at the ads on the airport walls of different resorts and local brands of rum. The walls were white, clean, and the attendants wore white button-down shirts with blue blazers and slacks. "It's like a little America," Stacy said to me. Then the lights went out. She looked up. "What happened?"

The information attendant didn't have an answer.

"Power outage," I said. "It won't last long. Dominicans shut down their power plants from time to time." I slipped the passes into my backpack. "Better get used to it, I guess." The sky was just beginning to churn as I tossed our bags into the bed of the truck that was to accompany the bus to *Los Robles*. The bus had a sheet of yellow legal

paper taped to the window that read “C-12” in black marker, and the words “Children of the Nations” were painted on its side. There were no other buses in the dank parking lot.

Hours later, I backed off the window on the bus and rubbed the cold from my nose.

“Which song should we teach the team?” Stacy asked. “I think a lot of them only speak English.”

“*Más Amor*,” I said. “It’s simple enough.”

“Such an adult song. I was thinking about something they could use with the kids. How about ‘*Cristo me Ama*’?”

“We’re working with teenagers, mostly. They don’t want to sing ‘Jesus Loves Me’.”

“Not everyone will be working with teenagers.”

“It doesn’t matter to me. Whatever song you want.”

“Okay, but you’ll have to do the teaching.” She was flipping through her notebook, the spiral one with different colored loose papers folded and inserted into random pages. “I’m not good at that kind of stuff.”

“No problem.” I stuck my forehead to the window again, and glanced at the girl sitting behind us, the same blonde girl who had sat behind us on the airplane. She was reading a magazine. Flipped a page. “Hey,” I said, stealing her attention from *La Vida Dominicana*. “Natasha, right?”

“Yes!” She smiled at me. “And you’re Gavin. Gavin Lee Cross. From the plane.”

It was the first time I noticed the freckles dusting her cheeks.

“Yeah. Do you have anything I can read?”

“Sure!” she held out her copy of *La Vida*.

I started to open the magazine, and then turned back to her. “But weren’t you just reading this?”

“Oh, I don’t know Spanish. Lots of great pictures though.”

“Oh, okay.”

“I have this dictionary with me, but who’s gonna look up every word in a dictionary.”

“Right.”

“I speak French. Lots of similarities. I can understand some of the words.”

“Okay.” I nodded.

She was silent for a moment and then brought her backpack up from the floor. “But I guess I’ll let you get to reading.” She pulled another magazine from the bag. *Corazón del Sol*.

For a moment, I was intrigued by her hunger for a fresh conversation. She was like me, stuck in something too familiar, begging for an escape. Maybe she would find it in the magazines that she couldn’t read. Maybe I would find it in her. With Stacy, I had been stuck in a reflection of life back home, of what I wanted to forget, and even though I didn’t realize it just then, I was desperate for a new face, a new interaction. I should have said something then. I should have asked her

which Spanish words looked like French ones. I should have told her how soft and smooth her skin looked, but I sat back in my seat and glanced at Stacy before burying myself in the magazine.

A small sign of rotten wooden planks and hard, chipped paint welcomed us to *Los Robles* that night. Our bus was already emptied of all but the few of us who had come to work in the small Haitian *bate* village as volunteers. The rain had stopped, but streams of mud spilled underneath the bus. Dozens of tin slab homes zigzagged along the grass, and glassy drops of water dripped from the oaks.

People stepped out of their homes at the sound of the bus. Mostly children. The older ones waved, but the younger ones jumped out and ran after us with sunny smiles.

We soon reached the end of the village, where the missions team had built rooms for volunteers to stay in. The missions director, Jorge, came out of one of the rooms when we got off the bus. The ocean waves crashed nearby as I grabbed mine and Stacy's bags from the back of the truck. Stacy took hers and waved at me before Jorge took her and Natasha to their room. Natasha had come from the same mission organization in Tennessee that we had. Not incredibly uncommon, as it turned out. After they left, children squeezed in around me, laughing and reaching for my hands. I smiled and picked up one of the boys.

"¿Cómo te llamas?" I said. He didn't respond. He just stared at me behind crystal brown eyes, his tiny fist in his mouth.

"Gavin," Jorge called.

I set the boy down and patted his back before picking up my bag. But before I turned to answer, I locked eyes with another boy, a teenager. He was leaning in the shadows of one of the trees with a muddy baseball in his hand, staring at me. A gray stare. No emotion.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. "*Su alojamiento*," Jorge said. I followed him to my room as the moon began to peek through the clouds.

It was daytime on our third day at *Los Robles*, and I was on a water break from craft time with the younger kids. We had told them to draw pictures of what they wanted to be when they grew up. They all drew flowers. Under the pavilion, the teenage girls sang a song I couldn't catch the lyrics to, clapping their hands. The boys walked to the baseball field with gloves, balls, and bats in hand. And little children chased a flock of chickens down the mushy path, a mother scolding them from behind. The people here were beautiful. Dark, moist skin that soaked the light of the sun like a sponge, and silver smiles full of vigor and youth.

I turned and walked back to my room. It was unlocked. They told us not to let that happen, but I could never remember. Inside, a teenage boy sat on the floor, one of my granola bars half-eaten in his hand. It was the same boy from the first night. The one in the shadows of the

tree. He stood up stiff and stared at me without moving.

"*What are you doing?*" I asked in Spanish.

He didn't respond. I walked over to him and looked at which flavor he had stolen. Chocolate, the worst kind. I started digging through my bag. Once I found what I was looking for, I pulled it out. Strawberry. I handed it to the boy. "*This one's better. I promise.*"

His eyes frowned as he stared at the bar.

"*Here, take it. It's okay.*"

"*Why?*"

"*I don't need it,*" I said.

"*But I stole from you.*"

"*What's your name?*"

"*Estalin.*"

"*Nice to meet you, Estalin. I'm Gavin.*"

"*And you're not mad at me?*"

"*Not unless you don't eat this. You really need to.*"

I saw the first signs of a smile on his face as he took the bar and ran out the door. He wouldn't steal from me again, but I didn't care if he did. I had made a friend.

Stacy was crying. This was the first time in the five days we'd been here. And I had thought things were going so well.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I miss your brother, too." My heart silently trembled at the memory. His name couldn't find itself on my lips, in my mind. I stood over her as she crouched on the dusty tweed sofa. Her room was dark and windowless, with fewer cracks in the stucco than mine.

"But you don't understand," she said.

I smelled potting soil. Realized it was the sofa, and I knelt on the floor. Placed a hand on her knee. I really wanted to understand. The way she understood, though part of me knew I already did. "What happened?" I asked. *Los Robles* was such a stunning place full of beautiful people. It was enough to forget home for a while, to forget what had happened to him. To move on.

But Stacy couldn't forget. "That boy you were talking to earlier?"

"Estalin?"

"That's the one," she said. "Earlier today. And at first, it was okay. He was very nice. Kind of shy. Energetic, too. But then when he coughed, he beat his chest. With his fist. And I know a lot of people do that, but it reminded me so much of Justin."

"Estalin did do that."

"But the hardest part was I was so excited about it. I was thinking how great it would be when I got home and could tell Justin about it. And then I remembered, and..." Her speech faltered with her tears, and I sat down beside her. The couch made a rusty squeak as I sank into the tweed.

Stacy's brother had been dead over a year now. The last time I talked with him was before he left for culinary school in Los Angeles. We were home alone, and he was feeding the snake.

"I'm glad you're here, Gavin," he had said. "It'll make me feel better when I leave for school."

"How so?" I laughed.

"Because I know you'll take care of Stacy."

"Well, I don't know. She's kind of a handful. Might be asking a lot."

He opened the lid on the snake's cage and turned to face me. "Can you promise me you will?"

He left for Los Angeles in August. Stayed by himself in a house his family found near Seal Beach. It wasn't until Christmas that he got sick. So sudden, too. It was days before we knew he was dead.

From across the room, I looked into his eyes, seeing the fear for the first time, and my heart melted. "Yeah, of course I will."

He smiled. "I knew you would. Now hand me one of those rats."

"And he likes to play baseball, too," Stacy continued. "You know how crazy Justin was about baseball."

"Yeah, but everyone here plays baseball."

"I don't know. I just need some time to think. Maybe you should leave." She stopped crying and looked up at the door. I turned to look, but no one was there.

A silence leaked from the walls as I walked out of the room.

Natasha insisted on spending a lot of time with me. I didn't mind. She kept my mind off things, and she was incredibly intriguing in a backyard schoolgirl kind of way.

"Everything is beautiful here," she said. I couldn't help noticing how she looked at me when she said it. "Yesterday, there was a little girl with pretty braids in her hair, like coarse rope. She walked up to me and grabbed hold of my hand. She had the tiniest arms, but grabbed on hard, like she was afraid I was gonna float up into the sky like a balloon or something."

She stopped suddenly, her eyes holding mine, as if she saw something fresh in them, something that perhaps she'd been waiting for. We looked out over the ocean and said nothing more as the smell of wet mulberry and lime drifted to our lips.

"*You're leaving soon, aren't you?*" Estalin asked as he sat beside me at the pavilion. "*For America?*"

"Yes."

His smile faded.

"*But I'm not going to forget you guys,*" I said. "*I have a good memory. Don't worry about that.*"

He looked down.

“What is it?”

“You don’t understand,” he said. “Haitians are nobodies here. We don’t belong.” His eyes darted in several directions as he searched for the words. “No one likes us. They’re even afraid to touch us.” He surveyed my face for a while before apparently deciding to go on. “And then you come along, and you hang out with us like we belong. You give us gifts, watch our baseball games, and listen when we need someone to talk to. And then when you say goodbye, you give us hugs. Hugs! And you just don’t know. Maybe where you come from that’s not a big deal, but it means a lot to us. To me.” And then he coughed, and when he did, something extraordinary happened. He hit his chest with his fist. Like Justin.

Stacy was right. I had made a friend in Estalin. And tomorrow, he would be gone, along with all the other friends I had made here. Gone, like Justin.

“Maybe you could take me with you?” Estalin smiled. “On the plane?” I laughed. “I really wish I could.”

And then he hugged me. Tight. And I was reminded of what Natasha had said about that little girl with the coarse-rope hair. How she had held on so tight, as if she were afraid that Natasha would float off like a balloon.

And then, an image from home came to my mind, the first one in days. At a church on Middle Valley Road, I once saw a sketch of a little girl with an old dress that was blowing in the wind. She was crying, her hand stretched toward a heart-shaped balloon that was floating away. The caption read “I want to be loved.”

Estalin walked off, and I ran to the outhouse and cried.

We didn’t take bus C-12 back to the airport. The one we took instead was blue, the floor sticky and smelling of donuts and Hamburger Helper. The hot sun was high in the sky, piercing jagged lines through the glass, slicing against our necks.

“You gonna make Natasha sit by herself?” Stacy asked as I sat down beside her.

“I just need to talk to you for a moment.”

“Talk.”

“You were right about Estalin,” I said.

“Yeah?” Her skin was pale, showing no signs of the Dominican sun.

“I don’t want to forget anymore,” I said.

Her eyes were on mine, but she was no longer looking at me. For the first time since her brother died, we understood one another perfectly, and without words, she told me that she felt the same way. It was written on her face, in her warm blue expression. *Me neither*, it said. Her heavy eyes shimmered in the heat as she took my hand in hers. “But I’m glad you’re here, Gavin. It’ll make me feel better when we get home.”

I didn't say anything for a while. I didn't need to. "Will you be alright?"

"Yeah."

"Good."

She let go of my hand, and slipped a journal out from under her seat. "Rachel's coming to sit with me as soon as you leave. She wants me to teach her some Spanish. It's a lost cause, but at least it'll give me something to do."

I looked back at Rachel, who was waiting for me to move, and I smiled.

"Well, get out of her seat," Stacy said.

I got up and took gentle breaths as I moved to the empty seat next to Natasha. I was ready to move on, and perhaps she would help me. When I sat down, she had already fallen asleep against the window, the steam from her breath erasing the gray ocean from sight.