

You Can't Pick Up Raindrops

John Charles Miller

©2004

“You boys come into the living room. Mom and I want to talk to you about something,” said Dad. It is late February 1946 in our town southwest of St. Louis, Missouri. We are four, five and six years old; I am the oldest. We are so excited. Finally, we have a little sister, whatever that means. Rosemary Clare was born about a month ago. Mom is particularly thrilled, a little girl after us rough and tumble guys.

The living room, with dark wood trim and dark furniture, is gloomy; the lights are off. A mantled fireplace is framed by large, round, dark wood pillars, and inset with small, dark blue and green ceramic tiles. It is not a welcoming room at any time, but now it seems even less friendly. I remember every item in that room; the moment is burnt into my memory.

We stair-step three stand next to a little dark cherry-wood table with a lamp resting on a doily. There, at the west window of the old, white two-story Midwest farmhouse, the winter sun is not yet shining through the dark red drapes and gauzy curtains. The claws of a leafless elm tree scratch on the clapboard as the frigid wind shifts back and forth. Mom and Dad sit on a dully-flowered couch and start to cry. We have never seen them cry before.

Mom explains, “Rosemary had a hole in her heart, and died. The doctors couldn't fix it.” Medicine has not progressed far enough, she tells us. “That is why she came home from the hospital for only a short while after she was born.” Perhaps the many years as a registered nurse, seeing pain and suffering of others allows her to tell us what happened.

My parents married late in life, he thirty-eight and she thirty-seven. We three came along bang-bang-bang. Four years later Rosemary arrived, too late, I guess.

From youth to old age, Mom was a strikingly beautiful woman, one that men turned to look at. Both men and women still react to photographs of her. Many doctors wanted her hand in marriage; all were turned down. She was too busy with life and her profession.

Dad was an attorney, a balding, moderately good-looking guy, a bit stocky. I am certain that Mom found him to be quite entertaining, for he was friendly to the world and loved to talk to people. Just as my wife says about me, "You could talk to a fence post!"

My brothers and I often comment that we did not know Dad or his desires. Very closed to us, he always seemed to have a shield over his emotions and his past. On that dark February afternoon, however, he could not speak at all without falling apart. Mom did all the talking.

Later, I quietly climb the two-level stairs to the second floor. The little crib in the big room is empty. None of us recall having seen her. The fact that Mom had been a nurse may have been the only reason Rosemary briefly came home from the hospital. Most of her short life was spent there, not here.

As a young boy, I would ponder all of this. "What did she look like? Would she have liked us? What is a little sister supposed to do?"

Life went on. Mom was a strong, every Sunday church-going, no-meat-on-Fridays Catholic. She trusted in God. She moved with life, day by day, always there for us three boys and her husband, frequently softening the impact of our disciplinarian father.

In our family, birthdays and wedding anniversaries are important things. For me January 27 is a day I never fail to remember, Rosemary's birthday. I don't know if my brothers

remember, but for most of my life I pause a moment and wish her a good day, sometimes tears coming to my eyes, wondering.

Talking to Mom, years later, she said, “I regret not having a picture of Rosemary. At times I can see her, but the image won’t hold solid; it wavers and fades away.” She went on, “It’s like trying to pick up raindrops on a smooth cement sidewalk with your fingers and putting them in a glass. They just separate and move apart, no matter how hard you try. The whole of her little face never seems to pull together. With the years, she becomes even more elusive.”

§§§§§

It is now the spring of 1963, May 30 to be exact, and Memorial Day in the United States. It is also a special day here in the Dominican Republic. People are dancing, singing, drinking and partying. It is a day of celebration. Blaring radios in our rural community repeatedly play a meringue song, *La Muerte del Chivo*. This means, “The Death of the Goat.” Two years ago, Leonidas Trujillo, the US-supported dictator, was assassinated on a highway near Santo Domingo, the capital, much to the joy of the oppressed Dominicans.

“Bob, if they play that song one more time I am going to whack every radio to death with my machete!”

As Peace Corps Volunteers, Bob and I live on the second floor of the pale green, wooden *casa curial*, the parish house next to the small village church in way-off-the-road Puñal in the northern portion of the Dominican Republic. There is no electricity, running water or sewer. Rent is cheap, only twenty-five dollars out of the ninety-five we each get for our monthly allowance from the US government. You can buy a lot of rice and beans and Presidente beer

with the rest. We only have to stay out of the way on Sundays when the priest comes from Santiago de los Caballeros, some twenty-five miles away. The rest of the time we work on our projects: water supplies with hand pumps from CARE, English classes, and youth baseball teams. We introduce new varieties of cigar wrapper tobacco. The local men learn windmill and pump repair. We do anything to keep busy and to better the lives of the Puñaleros.

One of our projects involves working with fifteen-year old Manny, the oldest Fernández boy of one of the many Fernández families. Bob and I are part of a team introducing a new breed of pigs into the country. They are Hampshire-Durocs, reddish shorthaired pigs that seem to do well in the heat.

It seems absurd that the pigs have a concrete floor for their pen, while Manny's family lives in a house with a dirt floor and open-slatted, split palm tree walls, with tropical rain coming through during the heavy hurricane-related late summer storms.

After our breakfast of bread, fresh pineapple and strong Cibao Valley coffee finely ground and boiled in a sock-like bag, old Doña Aurora Fernández comes tapping on our door. She is queen of the big area-wide Fernández family. She knows what goes on with all of them. Bob and I laugh about it, saying, "It should have been called Villa Fernández instead of Puñal."

Aurora, way less than five feet tall and plump, her long, fly-away, black dyed hair with silver streaks tied back in a fat bun, looks up at us through her dark, brown-eyed years and her sun-baked wrinkles. She says seriously, "I have to speak to you, Juan and Roberto. Cirilito's baby girl died in the hospital after six days of something the doctor calls *colerín*. He and his wife, Dulce, you know, *la gordita*, want a picture before they bury her." These are Manny's parents.

“Dulce wants the picture to remember her by; they have none. They lost two other children and do not have pictures of them. Cirilito knows that you have a camera and asked me to talk to you.”

Bob doesn't want to do it and, being a philosopher, nervously comes up with all sorts of theoretical cross-cultural excuses not to go. I briefly tell Bob the story of Rosemary Clare and my mother. “They need this picture, Bob.” Yet, despite what I say, I feel strange also.

He relents and comes with me past Aurora's house with the women sewing and gossiping on a covered palm-thatch back patio. We wind our way down a twisting, narrow dirt path through a plantain patch, past running, squawking chickens and grazing goats, around big old mango trees, and through stands of coffee and orange trees. Chucho Fernández squatting in an opening by the side of the path, getting his rooster ready for the cockfights, waves with a toothy smile. At the tobacco drying sheds, Ramón and Eusebio look up from threading long needles through tobacco leaves ready to hang up to dry. Bob moves slowly along with his elevated bouncing and loping stride. At times he drags his feet, plough-like, not really sure that he should be coming.

Arriving at the house, we are greeted by the family. Cirilito and Dulce have eight children, ranging from about three to seventeen years old. There are five boys, Manny, Miguelito, Juan, Flavio and Mauricio, and three girls. Adela, the oldest child, is always giggling. She has a crush on Bob because of his blonde hair, blue eyes and six-foot plus height. The other two girls, like their mother Dulce, are so shy I don't yet know their names. Cirilito and Dulce are dressed up, not city dressed up, but in their best freshly washed and ironed farm clothes, the ones they wear to church.

Cirilito struggles day and night to support his family. Despite arthritic hands and arms, he works with his machete in his small fields, planting, weeding, harvesting or taking his few bony cattle from one grassy area to another. How can he support his family of eight children in Puñal? I admire the way that he and his older sons work together to provide for the family. He is a leader in the local country church, organizing the frequent religious processions that wind ceremoniously through the fields and pathways of the community.

Sadness fills his greenish-gray eyes and long sun-creased narrow face. He, like his father, old Cirilo, has the residual hawkish nose and high leathery cheekbones of pre-Spanish Hispaniola. Taller than most of the men in the area, he moves about with a determined walk, doing what has to be done.

He speaks to me briefly. My Spanish is getting better as I become more involved. However, the feelings coming out of his heart cannot really be translated into English.

“Juan, please understand that this is not for me so much as for Dulce. Our baby is beautiful, isn't she? Look at her blond hair and blue eyes. She will be the most beautiful little angel in heaven don't you think?”

The baby, eight months old, rests in a small white wooden coffin, dressed in her christening gown. Surprisingly, she has pale white skin, blonde hair and blue eyes. I have sometimes seen such eyes in the area, probably old northern Spanish blood. Some of Cirilito and Dulce's other children also have light colored eyes.

It seems as if death is not present. There is a lot of activity as kids run about, chasing each other and shouting.

Dizziness sets in on me while we sit there in the dark interior of the wood-slat house with its woven palm frond roof and small windows and low doorways. It is mid-morning, yet the

faces around me are dark except for the high points. I suddenly remember another dark room from long ago.

There are too many people in here at one time; it is oppressive and gloomy, I say to myself. Bob is getting to be quite restless; his feet kept twitching as he sits in the chair, ready to jump up and run off with a quick goodbye.

We finish the strong coffee and small tray of cookies offered to us as we sit in the best chairs they have. Working up my nerve, I say, "I guess it's time for the picture." Hoping to get out of the whole thing I add, "There is not enough light in here. I can't take the picture."

Cirilito picks up the light burden in her small coffin and carries it outside to the open front porch. "Dulce, come here and stand next to me. Yes, with the baby between us."

There they stand, coffin propped upright against the two of them. The baby looks at me with her blue eyes, her mouth open slightly. She is a waxen angel!

It is an old pre-SLR camera, but it has a high quality lens. It is the one that has traveled with me to many places. Looking through the sighting window, I frame Cirilito and Dulce with their baby, the rest of the family crowding into the picture from the sides.

Bob says in a low voice, "I can't believe what Manny and his brothers and sisters are doing." However, it is a natural thing; folks here love to have their picture taken. Cirilito and Dulce say nothing; he just looks into my lens with his solemn face and she with her sweet sad smile. Click. Then, a second click to make sure. Later I will give them copies of the photographs.

As Bob and I walk back along the pathway he keeps saying, "That was really weird. Did you see Manny and the others crowding into the picture? I wanted to shake them to pieces."

“Bob, there was more there than you saw. The living children were the loving frame to the sadness of Cirilito and Dulce. They did not care what was happening; they would be getting a photograph of the angel they would never see again. They will not have to try to pick up raindrops and put them in a glass. Their glass is full.”

“What are you talking about?”

I did not try to explain it to him.

§§§§§

In the late autumn of 1964, I am back from my two years of Peace Corps service. Mom and Dad met the Fernández family when they came to visit me on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary trip, so it was fun showing them my slides and pictures.

I tell Mom the story about Cirilito and Dulce and show her the pictures. Mom's expression can be hard to read. When I was studying for my Master's Degree, sometimes she and I would quietly drive around the Ozark Mountains of Missouri as I explained the science of geology. We never said much, just enjoyed it. Yet, her silence and pensiveness bothered some people; they thought she was arrogant or standoffish. I know better; she just thought a lot, internally. I drift into moods like this also.

This time, however, there is a slight, very pleased smile as I show her the photographs of the Fernández family. She smiles and her eyes sparkle with a bit of wetness. It is almost as if it is 1946 again, but different, better.