

The Eye of the Beholder

Charles Bagley glared at his papaya juice. It sat there innocently, unaware of the secret hate with which a certain Englishman was considering it. He sighed and pushed the glass away. The juice itself wasn't offending him. Perhaps it was that, just past the twinkling rim of his cup, he was presented with a breathtaking view of colorful sloping rooftops haphazardly appearing here and there among the dense, dewy emerald of the trees. Or it might have been that in the next room, his good friend James sat making cheerful music on the old grand piano. But it was most likely the little girl seated next to him at the table. Her short legs swung lazily from the chair, knocking against it rhythmically. Her dark hair was tied back into a neat braid, and her little brown hands were busily buttering a scone.

“Do you think you could stop that racket?” he asked irritably, and her legs stopped swinging. Charles rubbed his temples, wondering why he had ever agreed to this. He was fed up with James' entire plan. Sailing halfway across the world to some exotic island was probably the least likely thing that Charles would have thought of doing, but here he was.

The little girl had started swinging her legs again, unconsciously keeping beat to the lively tune James was tackling in the other room. She reached for the strawberry preserves, and Charles swatted her hand away.

“Stop that noise,” he said, more forcefully than he had intended. The girl rolled her eyes at him and reached again for the preserves, ignoring his glare. Her feet had

stilled. Feeling slightly guilty over his tone, Charles eyed the little figure and asked gruffly, “What did you say your name was?”

She went on fixing up her breakfast as though he had asked no question. Charles wondered for a moment if she were deaf, and then realized that she probably didn’t speak English. He knew only a few words of struggling Spanish, but he decided to give it a try.

“*Llamo?*” he said asked uncertainly, forgetting to pronounce the beginning with a “y” sound. The girl looked up at him and laughed. Charles frowned. Apparently he was rusty. He paused and then snapped impatiently, “Well?”

She lifted one eyebrow at him imperiously. “Esperanza is my name. It’s all right though if you can’t say it.” She reached over, seized his abandoned juice, and took a long gulp.

Charles had no response to that. Lucky for him, at just that moment, James waltzed into the kitchen like a ray of sunshine. He had this vexing way of always being so happy that no one around him could maintain a bad mood. It was as if his sparkling smile and tall, gangly figure radiated cheerfulness, and anyone that came too close to that golden man would become just as good-natured. Charles, however, had known James long enough to know how to keep his own sour mind-set intact.

James breathed in deeply as he looked out the window that had irritated Charles earlier. “What a glorious morning!” he said with so much zeal that even Charles had to look out the window with a little more appreciation. The sun was just high enough to have burned off lingering mists, and the air was a clean, pure blue that practically tingled with light and birdsong.

“Now that, my friend is what you need to be writing about. Capture the color of that sky, and we’ll talk about selling that book of yours,” James said as he seated himself and began to fix his own breakfast.

Charles also didn’t have anything to say to that. James had been so excited about making this trip after his sister had returned from being a missionary. He couldn’t get enough of the pictures she had painted: the colors, the landscape, the people. That was James’ way; when he got a taste of something he liked, he wouldn’t stop until he had all of it. So he roped the unsuspecting Charles into his brilliant plan for inspiration, clean air, and a dramatic change of scenery. Costa Rica had held its own charm for Charles. The worlds themselves seemed rich with beauty, and he, like James, could use his imagination to smell the salty sea air and the damp jungle breezes.

What he hadn’t expected was the fishy smell that came wafting along on those sea breezes when they had arrived on the coast, and that the lovely damp air from the rainforests that he had envisioned crept into the cottage and made everything sticky and dank. The Costa Rica in Charles’ head didn’t match up with the real one. He was sunburned, always hot, and his journal was as empty and blank as if he had been in foggy London. But he couldn’t tell James all of this when his friend was up burning the midnight oil, scribbling up bits of music that somehow turned themselves into a song—a lovely song—like he was some kind of bloody Beethoven.

“Where have you gone off to?” James chirped, poking Charles lightly with the end of his knife as he started on his eggs and soldiers.

“Nowhere,” Charles replied in a grumble.

“Esperanza, where are you and Uncle Charles going today?”

Charles sent James some very evil glares that would have withered James' good intentions if the damned idiot would only look over. But the git just stared fixedly at Esperanza, who was licking the strawberry jam off of her fingers. She was the housekeeper's daughter, whom Charles had been commissioned to baby-sit. It happened much like anything else with James...Charles had unwittingly stepped into a trap, and before he could back-pedal his way out of it, he was in over his head. The young woman looked so grateful to have someone watch her daughter that he didn't know how to tell her that he didn't know the first thing about children. For all he knew, eight-year-olds still wore diapers and needed to be burped regularly.

"I don't know," Esperanza replied, looking thoughtful. "Where would you like to go, Mr. Bagley?"

Charles glowered at her politeness and her smooth way of speaking English. James had thought Esperanza could show Charles around the island, and maybe he could get some writing time in. Meanwhile, the young mother would clean and cook and probably get the full effect of James' charm and talent.

"We shall go wherever you lead."

* * *

The rolling hills of Monteverde were no less breathtaking in the high noon than in the morning, but it was a good deal warmer than it had been at breakfast time. The April sun that was so watery and mild in England beat down in unforgiving rays on the two figures and their mounts.

“So, ah, this is what you do for fun?” Charles said, uncomfortable on the back of a stubborn and peevish mule that didn’t seem to care much for its rider. He mopped his forehead again with an already wet handkerchief and swatted away at the mosquitoes that seemed to want to eat him alive.

Esperanza looked over her shoulder at him and then back at the trail in front of them. She looked perfectly at home perched on her mule’s back and wearing some silly-looking dress in an embarrassingly bright shade of tangerine. “This is the best way to see the forest.”

Charles was always slightly surprised when she spoke. He expected the voice and wisdom of someone three times her age, but instead came her high little voice, beautiful in its way, but not the smooth, liquid voice his ears expected to receive. Her simple and ambiguous statements seemed beyond her years, but Charles figured that their brevity was due only to the language barrier.

“Where did you learn to speak English so perfectly?” he said, voicing his thoughts. There was a long pause, and then, “Mama cleans a lot of houses.”

“Oh, right.” Very helpful.

More silence followed as Charles tried to take in all of the beauty of the cloud forests at once. Sunlight filtered through the thick canopy and threw speckled shadows across the dim forest floor. The noise of the birds was deafening, and once in a while, in his peripheral vision, Charles would see a swooping smudge of color against the dark green trees, but it was always gone when he turned his head. There were thousands of rustles and cries that could not be attributed to the birds, however, but lizards and monkeys and other terrible things that Charles could only imagine. In fact, at the moment

he could almost see heathens flitting in and out of the trees like shadows, covered in paint and ready with poisoned darts. Such is the burden of an over active imagination.

The entire forest was just too much to take in all at once—it was a blow to the bland English senses, and Charles felt sure he would never quite recover from the blatantly bold and aggressive scents and sights of this place.

“What do you write about?” came from ahead of him.

“Hmmm?”

“Mr. Huntington says you write things. What do you write about?”

It was the first time Charles had heard her say an entire two sentences. “Er...I suppose I write about all sorts of things.” He paused, thinking very hard, when he felt another mosquito take a bite out of him. “Ouch! Ah...life, love, hardships, beauty.”

“Which one of those things will you find here?”

After hours of silence, the girl starts to talk, Charles thought. And she was a tough one.

“All of them, I suppose. Beauty perhaps...it’s probably the real reason James and I came here.” Charles responded.

“Do you think the forest is beautiful?” She asked, reining the old nappy mule in.

Charles looked around. It was too beautiful. It was so beautiful he didn’t know what to start to take in first. It would take a lifetime to learn just how brilliantly gorgeous this place was.

“Yes—yes. It’s just overwhelming.”

Esperanza looked off into the distance. “Is beautiful the same in all countries, Mr. Bagley, or does it change? Some people go looking for it, but I know I could find it

anywhere.” Charles’ mule stopped of its own accord, and started to nibble on the rump of Esperanza’s mount.

“What do you think is beautiful?” he asked out of curiosity. He wondered what this little native girl with no education in art and literature, no knowledge of civilization, could find beautiful.

“Oh, I don’t know.” She looked around lazily. “Do you see that great big fern over there? That’s beautiful.”

“It’s just an old green plant. I didn’t come halfway around the world to see a fern. I’m pretty sure I’ve got one growing in a pot on my window sill back in England.”

Charles was aware of his biting words, but couldn’t find the heart to soften them, even for this girl.

“But look more closely, Mr. Bagley. See how the rain drips off the leaves into a little puddle at the bottom?”

It was true. Little drops of glistening liquid trembled at the ends of the fronds until the slightest breath knocked them into the pool below, where the black water was gathering in a pile of deadened leaves.

Charles looked hard at the lopsided and pitiful fern resting on the forest floor. He could see some of what the girl said, but it was just so plain. Something that he could find back home didn’t strike him as beautiful in this land of unabashed color.

“What else?” he asked skeptically.

She looked thoughtful for a moment. “Look at Adelio,” she said, giving her mule a pat. “His name means ‘noble.’”

“And what of it? He’s nothing but an underfed, patchy mule.”

“Why do you shut your eyes before you look at something? Look at his face.”

Charles looked close. The animal’s eyes were liquid black pools and the eyelashes were almost delicate. The beast’s nose was overlong and covered in thin, mangy hair, but there was a certain elegance to the obstinate way he held his head. But this wasn’t beauty. Michelangelo was beauty. A sunset was beauty. A dense forest blooming in riots of color was beauty. Beauty wasn’t found in plain and ordinary places. It was rare, special, and unmistakable. You had to go looking for it in exotic tropical countries. That was why he was here, wasn’t it? “And no, this isn’t what I do for fun,” she said quietly, breaking into his thoughts and kicking her mule lightly.

“Hmmm?”

“You asked me earlier, what I do for fun. I dance.”

Charles just shifted uncomfortably on his beast and wedged a finger between his tight collar and the hot skin of his neck.

“Come on, let’s get home. It’s almost time for tea.”

* * *

“What do you think about this?” James said excitedly later on that night as he poked his head in Charles’ room. He was holding some sort of large gourd with notches cut into it.

Charles looked over distractedly from his little desk. “What?”

“It’s called a *guiro*, a man at the local market sold it to me today,” he said, sounding ecstatic over his find. His messy blonde head bobbed into the next room to try it out.

“That’s lovely,” Charles responded absently. He turned back to his candle-lit, rickety table he called a workspace. It was littered with crumpled papers and ink spots. Charles was facing the terrifying prospect of the open, blank journal. It beckoned him, taunting him to write something down—anything. It just sat there, and Charles had never felt more lost. Nothing in his head was good enough to put down on this paper. Was he losing his touch? His Oxford professors had issued effusive praise over his essays and writings. Why couldn’t he do this now? A monkey—or perhaps an armed heathen—called loudly from the jungle and broke into Charles’ thoughts. He sat back and tapped his pen against the edge of the desk pensively.

“James?”

“Yes!”

“Do you think ferns are beautiful?”

James popped back into the room, still carrying that ridiculous gourd like it was his firstborn. “Ferns? Well sure, I suppose. Everything’s beautiful if you look at it the right way. True beauty is in the eye of the beholder, remember? Listen to this! Have you ever heard such a thing?”

He ran a wooden stick across the notches. A hollow sort of sound echoed through the little room. At that moment, Charles envied everything about his friend, from the tattered hems of his trousers to the patched shirt and suspenders. He could not have made a more comical picture—a scruffy, gangly young musician standing in a dark doorway playing some ludicrous excuse for an instrument. And yet Charles wished with all his heart he had James’ extraordinary ability to appreciate everything he came into contact

with. He knew how to love each person and thing for exactly what he, she, or it was capable of. He saw the good and the beautiful in all people.

“No,” Charles murmured. “I’ve never heard anything quite like it.”

* * *

When the housekeeper and her daughter arrived the next morning, early, Charles was still asleep. He woke to an unfamiliar smell drifting into his bedroom. By the time he roused himself enough from sleep to walk into the kitchen, the sun was well up and shining through the trees to make dancing patterns on the teal walls of the room. Esperanza waved at him with a cheery smile, and the housekeeper looked startled and then became nervous.

She was quite pretty, and too young to be here in this kitchen cooking for a couple of English blokes on vacation. She began to wring her hands unhappily, as if she were caught doing something wrong.

Suddenly, a string of Spanish burst from her lips, and she appeared to be apologizing repeatedly. Dumbstruck, Charles just stood there, having no idea what to say or do to comfort the poor woman. Most surprisingly, Esperanza came to his rescue.

“Mr. Bagley, she apologizes for not cooking the breakfast that you usually eat, but she says she wanted to cook you and Mr. Huntington something special this morning. Something from our people.”

Charles eyed the stove warily. “What is it?”

“Mango, eggs, *gallo pinto*, and coffee,” Esperanza replied.

The watery and desperate eyes of the young housekeeper watched him carefully, as if she expected him to pounce on her for not cooking the usual bangers and eggs.

“Tell your mother that this breakfast looks wonderful,” Charles told Esperanza, giving the woman what he hoped was an encouraging smile.

He desperately wished James were here. He was fluent in Spanish and had a comforting air about him when women got teary.

Even as the thought formed in his head, James came through the door as if he had just conquered the world.

“What’s this lovely smell?” he asked grandly.

The young housekeeper looked up hopefully and spoke to him in Spanish. He smiled and apparently replied with something witty, for everyone laughed. Except, of course, Charles, who knew very little Spanish.

Charles found that once he got past the initial shock of eating something new, he quite enjoyed the breakfast. He couldn’t eat it every day, but it was a nice change from his typical breakfast. Even the coffee was tolerable, although he much preferred tea.

After breakfast, Charles ran to fetch his journal, and he and Esperanza set out again. This time, Charles was determined to delve into the little girl’s mind and maybe, in the process, he would release this terrible block that had descended upon his mind.

“Esperanza, whenever you see something beautiful, will you tell me?”

“Yes I will.” She was walking ahead of him again on the dusty path, leading the way to the village market. Charles had expected to wait a while for her to find something to point out, but she took him off guard by immediately starting on a long list of things in their immediate surroundings.

Charles began to scribble them down as fast as he could, for examination later. The flow of words was never ceasing, but when it slowed down, he took the opportunity to ask her another question.

“So you learned English in one of the houses your mother cleaned?”

“Yes, a long time ago a rich man came with his family, and there was a nanny that already knew Spanish. She taught me most of English that summer, and after that I picked it up from the other houses Mama cleans at.”

“Ah. And do you think you will clean houses when you grow up?”

Esperanza stopped dead in her tracks. Her excessively pink-garbed figure turned to face him. There was so much hope and earnestness in that face no one could have looked away from her.

“No! I will be a writer—like you—or a dancer, a singer, anything! I am going to travel the world all over and see everyone and everything there is to see. If I have to clean houses first to get me there, I will, but no. No I will not clean houses like my mother.”

* * *

When they returned home from their outing it was well after teatime, and twilight was approaching. The little cottage stood nestled against the hill, lit up from the inside and glowing orange and yellow. It was a relief to step inside the door and smell food cooking and hear music playing

James was playing a lively and fast song on the old piano that had long since seen its prime. The damp air had caused it to go out of tune years ago, yet James could still make it sound like it belonged on a stage in New York or Paris. The song tonight was a

new one that had a Latino feel to it. When Charles and Esperanza arrived, Esperanza's mother was standing beside it, singing in the loveliest voice.

It was upbeat and warm, and her clear voice rose above the piano in the crisp and precise words of the Spanish language. Charles didn't understand a bit of it, but he figured that wasn't the most important thing. He stood watching from the doorway, entranced by the change that had taken place in the young woman. No longer did she look tired and world-weary, but young and fresh. Something in her eyes had lit up for this brief moment. Esperanza excitedly ran to her mother, picking up the words effortlessly in the shared song.

"Charles, grab the *guiro*!" James cried with a grin and a laugh as his hands swept over the ivory keys.

Charles felt ridiculous joining in on this close-knit personal moment, and even more ridiculous taking up the over-grown gourd. But he gave it a try. To his surprise, it sounded good. It sounded perfect. And so the four of them shared that song and that night. Charles didn't see that Esperanza's dress was patched and worn, he didn't see that her mother's hands were cracked from cleaning, and he didn't see his own frayed cuffs or muddy shoes. Looking at the way Esperanza's mother watched her child move across the floor in rhythmic dance, and hearing the way their voices melted together in harmony, and feeling the steady beat of the piano and tapping feet, Charles knew that Esperanza was right: there was beauty in every single blessed moment.

* * *

Charles used to think that beauty was in order, and in dignified, worthy things. But here in this lush and tropical land he saw that beauty was chaos; it was uninhibited,

unashamed of color, unheeding of pattern. It spilled out over the edges and ran out from between the cracks, refusing to be contained.

It was in this manner that the days turned into weeks. Charles spent his days trekking around the countryside with Esperanza, sketching and painting pictures of the abundant wildlife and stunning flowers. The little girl was truly gifted musically, for she could play or sing most anything. But her mind was also more fascinating and complex than Charles ever could have imagined.

The pages of his journal were slowly filled until he had run out of room and he had to buy a new one at the local market. He even bought one for Esperanza to start writing in, thinking that with her intelligence, she might well make something of herself. His joy was so great at being able to write again that he scarcely thought of soon leaving. But time exacts its revenge on those who are foolish enough to forget its presence.

One morning at breakfast, Charles was enjoying his now customary glass of papaya juice and rice with relish sauce, when James entered. Not in his usual, self-assured gait, but in a slower, heavier walk.

“What’s wrong, mate?” Charles asked with his mouth full.

“Perhaps you’ve forgotten, but we have to leave for the shore tomorrow morning, so that we can meet the boat on time.”

Charles stopped chewing. “We’re leaving?” he asked, his mouthing hanging open in disbelief. “Already?”

“*Tempus fugit*,” James reminded him, sitting down. “Time flies. And I can see all of your eggs and toast. Shut your mouth.”

Esperanza's mother was given the day off, so neither she nor Esperanza had come that morning. After breakfast, each gentleman retired to his room to pack his belongings. Charles sat contemplatively on his bed, staring at the yellow wall opposite him. He used to hate that color. He had thought it was an awful shade—just too bright and brilliant. He had also hated the teal of the kitchen, the red of the common area, the blue of the dishes, and the orange stencil patterns around the front door. But now he couldn't bear the thought of leaving any of them.

Slowly, slowly Charles packed his things. It was with increasing misery that he placed away each brightly colored trinket that he had acquired. He neatly set his multiple journals on top, marveling at the fact that each one was filled with words that he had written. The last thing he had to do was say goodbye.

He ventured down to the village to seek out Esperanza and her mother. He knew the general vicinity of their house, for sometimes he and James had walked them home after dark. When Charles reached their doorstep, he paused. He had no idea what he was going to say to either of them, but he knew he had to do it. He walked through the doorway and into their home.

It was very small and sparsely decorated, but was very clean and carried the smell of soap with it. It seemed that everything that either of them owned was worn but neatly patched and clean.

“Hello!” he called out, and immediately heard a crash coming from somewhere in the tiny house. He sought out the source of the noise and found the young mother bending down picking up shards of broken glass all over the floor.

“Oh! I’m sorry. I had no intention of startling you.” Charles felt terrible, so he crouched down and started picking up the pieces with her. She had yet to look up at him, but he noticed that her slender hands were trembling as she picked up the remaining pieces of the broken plates. She was picking them up so quickly that she cut herself on a particularly sharp edge.

“Careful now,” Charles said, not quite sure what to do. He became even more unsure when the young woman sat down with her back against the wall, weeping. “There, there,” he said, patting her very awkwardly on the arm. He had no idea how to comfort a crying woman.

“You leave tomorrow,” she said in broken English through her tears.

“*Si, senora,*” he replied in equally stalled Spanish. He reverted back to English.

“You remembered what I didn’t.”

When the woman looked up at him, suddenly everything became clear to Charles. Her dark eyes were riddled with pain and sadness and broken dreams. This girl couldn’t have been over twenty-five, but her life might as well have been over. He now understood why Esperanza would not clean houses—her mother had had the same hopes and dreams, but they withered under the onslaught of life. No one wanted to carry the weight of un-lived dreams. But this woman had to bear the burden not only of that, but also of raising a child by herself and with barely any money.

“What’s your name?” he asked, realizing that he had never thought to ask. “*Tu llamo?*” He remembered his pronunciation this time.

“Aletta,” she replied.

If Charles had his translations right, it meant “winged one,” and Esperanza meant

“one with hope.”

“I have an idea,” he said suddenly.

Her eyes caught his with a questioning look.

“Can I take Esperanza with me to England? Adopt her?” When the mother failed to understand this, Charles made motions and repeated himself, throwing in the little Spanish he knew for good measure.

When he finally got the point across, she covered her mouth with her hand and her eyes closed in submission. Tears seeped through her eyelids even faster, soaking her sooty black eyelashes.

“No, listen, I could take such good care of her. My mother loves children, and I would pay for her to have dance lessons, to be taught in a real school with other boys and girls, I could give her so much, if it would lighten your burden or hers, I would gladly do it.” He knew at this point that the mother could no longer understand him, but he felt as if he must keep talking. “She would have the finest education in all the arts—she’s a smart girl, and I know she could go somewhere and do something with her life. She wants to see the world—and I could help her see it. Please...”

“No,” the woman said with a shake of her head, and Charles heart plummeted like a rock to the bottom of his stomach.

But then, “Esperanza will decide, not me. I no can choose.”

A slight shuffle made both of their heads turn, and two pairs of eyes rested on the figure of Esperanza, clad in a vivid blue and twisting her shell necklace nervously.

* * *

The next morning, the sky was colored a dramatic pink-tinged yellow, and the air felt cool against James and Charles as they saddled their mounts. They turned around and waved before mounting their mules for the trip out of the village. Two figures stood on the hill, waving back.

“Well,” James said somewhat gloomily. “What was the best thing that came out of this trip?”

Charles turned around once more and looked at the two people standing in front of their cottage. The smaller one was dressed in a bright, yellow, patched dress and was twirling in circles. The coarse yellow fabric billowed out so that she looked like some dancing flower or fairy girl against the backdrop of the lush Costa Rican mountains. Her dress might have been made of the finest silk, and her plain twine and shell necklace could have been encrusted with diamonds and rubies. It didn't matter.

“Well, I have an idea for a beautiful story.”

