

Sex Education

The church bells rang noon. Aleta, Cal, and Brigit loaded Padre da Rimini's jeep then stood around waiting for him to finish in the church with a last-minute suppliant who had wandered over tipsily from mid-week market now winding down in the sun-bleached plaza. Anything that did not go according to the priest's plans, Aleta knew, would make him tense and sharp-tongued, and Cal and Brigit were spooky as the pigeons strutting around on the church steps. Aleta had spent a year as an exchange student among the Catholic school girls of Boston and was viewed by church insiders despite her youth as something of an expert in the assessment and management of gringo do-gooders: wise beyond her years, virtuous, and unflappable (this per Aleta's mother's best friend, dean of the cathedral in their neighboring town, her mother's chief prop since her father's death).

A month now of week-days living with Cal and Brigit had not solved the mystery of Cal. He was slender, blond, sincere, not bad-looking behind his wire-rimmed glasses, and apparently miserable as a Peace Corps volunteer. Aleta's best guess was that he was here avoiding American's ongoing war in Vietnam, though he didn't have the earnest self-righteousness of gringos in general nor the usual slothfulness of draft-evaders. The physical description fit Padre da Rimini as well, of course, except that the priest was Italian and very good looking indeed. He was also an energetic do-gooder. He swept Cal into his various projects like extra hands from God and had hired Aleta as social worker and translator because she spoke Kakchiquel, the local Mayan dialect, and knew the kinds of things social workers are supposed to know. Most particularly, how to con people into coming to the priest's endless array of classes.

Brigit, Cal's wife, was something of an afterthought (to the Peace Corps, apparently, as

well as Padre da Rimini). Other than reasonable Spanish and a wryly observant sense of humor, (which seemed, unfortunately, to have attracted Aleta's brother Miguel) Brigit seemed to have no particular purpose here until, last July, Pope Paul had declared the acceptability of limiting family size by the use of natural methods. Given that standing up and talking about sex to a group of strangers, even if they were just Indian women, was something the padre seemed to think better suited to a married gringa than a nice local girl, Aleta had been ordered to recruit Brigit for this new project. Today was Brigit's first go, and the prospect seemed to have unnerved her. She stood now propped heavily against the side of the jeep, unrolling her teaching posters, staring at them, rolling them up again. And then a few seconds later, doing it all again as if she had never seen them before rather than having made them herself from Peace Corps materials and a couple of Miguel's pre-med texts. (Aleta would be the first to say that she didn't know anything useful about marriage, but Brigit lit up like a candle around Miguel, which didn't seem like a good sign. Meanwhile, Cal, her husband, wandered around in his own chill fog.)

Aleta threw a rock at the pigeons and watched them rattle up into the sky. The more she thought about it, the angrier she got at the priest for cooking up this silly scheme. What on earth was he thinking? The whole proposition was absurd: going out to a village where the women had even less contact with the modern world than those who lived here in town to teach a process that depended on keeping track of time in a stone-age language that didn't distinguish between 'now' and 'all day long.' Not to mention having control of their lives, being able to say 'no' to their husbands, in a way that was impossible. And no way she could say any of that to a priest, even as odd a duck as Padre da Rimini. She watched the birds settle again. *Virtuous, huh?* She knew what that meant. It meant, in the view of a gaggle of old village biddies, that she was unlikely to snag a good husband and too proud, too conscious of self and family, to do anything irretrievably stupid to get one.

Padre da Rimini appeared at last, wearing a broad-brimmed white hat and looking surprisingly cheerful, no soutane, just trousers and clerical shirt, sleeves rolled jauntily above his elbows.

“Cal shall sit in front with me,” he said, smiling. (Aleta didn’t think she had ever seen him smile before. His face, relaxed, was beautiful.) “His legs are very long.”

Aleta and Brigit clambered over the seats and slid onto to the narrow metal wheel-bed benches in back among the tools and sacks of fertilizer and flour they were bringing as thank-you gifts to the men whose wives would be coming to the class. They had wedged the box for the priest’s precious battery-powered filmstrip projector among the sacks and now set their knees against it and reached up for hand-holds on the canted metal pole that framed the canvas top, Aleta behind Cal and Brigit behind the priest.

“Ready?” From where she sat, Aleta caught the glint of the priest’s round gold glasses in the rear-view mirror. He reached for the key, then paused and handed his hat to Cal with another of those amazing smiles. “It’s good for the sun,” he said, “But it gets in my way when I drive.”

The road was hardly more than a two-track winding down narrow, forested cuts through the foothills, along the lip of a minor canyon, and then out onto lower, broader, cultivated folds. The priest drove surprisingly well. Aleta watched his face. He pushed the jeep to the limits of the road, but for all that, she felt that he knew the machine exactly, exactly what it could do and could not do, that this, alone among the strictures of his vocation and his comedic enthusiasms, was one physical joy he allowed himself. (Miguel called him the Italian butterfly. She had gotten angry with Miguel about it. *You’re full of university nonsense about priests*, she said. *You’re just jealous. He’s much better looking than you are.* He snorted. *Don’t be ridiculous. Pay attention. You don’t see because you don’t want to.*) She saw now: saw the curve of his lip and jaw, the backlit gold of his skin. Shocked and a little breathless, she looked away, glad for the noise and

the grind of the canvas against her gripped knuckles and the pounding of the frame against her back. She wasn't sure what she had seen, only that it was the most important thing she had ever seen or felt. She glanced at Brigit, afraid, suddenly, of being visible to Brigit in the same way that Brigit with Miguel had been visible to her. She needn't have worried. Brigit was staring forward at her husband, her face blank. She blinked slowly against the veils of red dust swirling around in the back of the jeep and turned her head to gaze out the back window.

Outside, the patchwork landscape rolled by: yellow-green squares of new-growth cornfields, the edges laced with golden mustard bloom and tacked down at the corners by pines so tall and old that their needles looked black against the cold blue sky; the mottled red of a tile roof nesting amidst the shuffling corn; bent figures—a hat, the curve of a back—of men and boys among the planted rows. Aleta had been taught all her life that personal was not the same as important. The only things that were important were faith in God, family, and the life of the community.

With the feeling of putting her shoulder to a door and shoving it closed against a storm, over the wild chatter of the canvas top, she shouted at Brigit. “Look, why don't I do a little intro for you, tell the ladies their husbands space the corn plants to give them room to grow. If you space children, they grow better. And you're here to tell them how to do that. How about that?”

Brigit's blank face hovered in the dust and then bloomed with relief. “God guard us. Perfect. They said things like that in training, about spacing and such, but I couldn't think. I've been so worried about the technical details.”

Even without knowing much about the technical details, Aleta guessed that, in these women's lives, those details took care of themselves. She did not say that, however. She had enough to worry about. *We're all so young*, she thought, *all four of us. Expected to know so much and knowing so little. Even Padre da Rimini, who's supposed to know everything.*

The school stood beside the road at some distance from any identifiable village center, to draw from as many surrounding households as possible. The afternoon sun slid now slow and amber across the cornfields; the school verandah cast a deep purple shadow. Aleta recognized two elders from the padre's negotiations for this session. Several younger men rose from where they had hunkered down to smoke. Aleta translated greetings and opening speeches. She had to make up most of Brigit's and all of Cal's. Maybe not down yet from his driving high, Padre da Rimini was verbose, almost giddy. Aleta cut out the silliest bits but keep talking long enough not to make her edits too obvious. Finally, they were ushered into the school's cool dim anteroom. A rough table against one wall had been covered with a red patterned oilcloth and set with a dozen tiny white enamel cups of green Kool-Aid and a plate of sugar cookies dusted with pink candy sprinkles.

Through the door to the classroom, they could see their audience. The desks were stacked to one side, and a dozen women, side-lit by the afternoon glow through the single window, knelt on the tile floor in the same way they would have knelt to weave or to nurse a baby. All faced forward, toward the chalk-board, backs to the anteroom. All wore their braids wrapped around their heads, signaling that they were married. All were dressed in their Sunday best: ankle-length dark blue skirt; the heavy, hand-woven, red-shouldered blouses typical of the district, one tucked in and one over that worn loose. All had been selected by Padre da Rimini and the elders for having at least three children and being therefore eligible now to space their children in accordance with Church teaching. And each had folded her rainbow-striped shawl and set it tidily on top of her head.

"Well," said the priest, stopping abruptly in the middle of the room, "Calvin and I will distribute the tools and the fertilizer." He made a little shooping gesture. "Your class appears to be ready for you. If there is time later, we will show our filmstrip."

Aleta thought she was going to have to shove Brigit into the classroom like a balky donkey. She thrust the easel for the posters into Brigit's arms and herded her down the narrow aisle along one side of the room. In front, Aleta turned to the group, thanked them for coming, thanked them for the refreshments, hoped they would enjoy the talk. Behind her, she could hear Brigit getting the easel up, clipping her stack of posters to it. Aleta glanced at the first one, an entirely unexceptionable sketch of a local family: man, wife, half-a-dozen cookie-cutter children.

"Families," Aleta said, "Are like cornfields. If you space the corn plants, they all get water, they all get sun. If the plants are too crowded, they become sick and die. It is hard to take care of children who come too close together." She looked out over the group. *Miguel says 'pay attention,' but what does that mean?* What does anybody really need to know? Want to know? "You have all lost children. Your own, your sisters or brothers, nieces and nephews. This does not have to be. My colleague will help you understand how this is."

Aleta looked at Brigit. "Show time. I've told them you're going to tell them how to space their children. Like corn plants."

Brigit's nostrils flared. She looked out at the group. "Good afternoon," she said in passable Kakchiquel. "Thank you." She uncovered her second poster. This was a sketch of a woman in local dress, her sash slung under an obvious pregnancy. Brigit went on in Spanish. "Once a girl starts having menstrual periods, if she has sexual relations with a man, she may get pregnant."

Translating, Aleta said, "As you know, once a girl has had her coming-of-age ceremony, if she lies with a man, she may end up with a baby."

Brigit said, "This doesn't always happen, but if you have had one baby, you know that it can happen and can keep happening until you no longer have menstrual periods."

The women had been quiet before. Now they were silent, motionless, watching, their eyes tight and still, their hands knotted into the hems of their over-blouses. Aleta said, "If the wife is

barren or the man is weak, they will not have children. Otherwise, the wife can bear until she is old and her moon-bleeding stops.” A titter sounded from the back of the room. One slender brown hand lifted to cover a smile.

Brigit was staring at her poster. Maybe she hadn’t noticed. She said, “For most of a woman’s month, if she has sexual relations, she will not get pregnant. If you know when those times are, you can use this information to avoid or delay pregnancy. But you have to know a little bit about how the body works.” That all translated pretty straight, and the titterer in the back of the room seemed to have pulled herself together.

Brigit uncovered her next poster. This was a sketch of a woman, just a curve of underarm, waist, hip, quick lines and dots to suggest breasts and bellybutton, and then, in more detail, as if these had the greater reality, ovaries, tubes, uterus, and finally the vagina dropping to the single line denoting the closed thighs. Aleta had seen the pictures before, of course. Still, the feeling of looking at them now was new, electric, and for the first time in her life, she knew why. What it might have meant to her in a different world. *Oh God*, she thought. *Oh God*.

Brigit’s eyes were fixed on her drawing. She seemed unaware of the soft ticking sound that ran through the room—wind through a cornfield; something between a hiss and a clatter—as one by one the women understood what they were seeing. “These are the organs that any normal woman has. We all have these.” She listed the organs, pointing them out on her poster and gesturing vaguely at herself. “Once a month, one or the other ovary releases an egg.” She was supposed to pause here for Aleta to translate but rushed on. “Over the next few days, the egg travels down the tube to the uterus. If in that time, the woman does not have sexual relations, the egg passes down the vagina with her normal secretions and then about two weeks later, she has her period.”

She stopped for breath and Aleta broke in. “We have eggs,” Aleta said. “Kind of like

chickens except no shells. Once a month, we lay an egg. If no rooster comes, the egg never hatches and the moon bleeding happens.”

The titterer in the back of the room collapsed. Giggles leapt like fire through thatch from one woman to the next. Brigit was half turned away now, fiddling with her posters, talking again, apparently oblivious.

“During sexual relations, sperm from the man pass from the vagina up into the tubes where, if an egg is there, the sperm joins with the egg and, if everything else goes normally, nine months later, a baby arrives.” Brigit was fumbling with the drawings, trying to clip the one of the woman side-by-side with the one underneath. This was the man—penis, *huevos* and all. For a moment unable to think of a single word in any language, Aleta reached out to help her. They secured the posters to the easel with clothespins and turned back to their audience.

Every woman in the room had unfolded her shawl over her face, covering her eyes. The room was a crazy-quilt of red and green and blue and orange and yellow stripes and hands pressed against giggling mouths. Aleta thought, *at least they're laughing. But you can't make people see things.*

“I think,” she said to Brigit, “we need to finish up.” Brigit’s face was so pale its bony edges were green.

Aleta said a few final words of thanks, gathered up Brigit and her easel and her posters and got them all out into the anteroom. She thrust a cup of juice into Brigit’s hand. “Drink,” she said. “If it kills you, you will go to heaven. I promise.”

She looked outside for the padre and Cal. The two elders were still there smoking in the shade, each now seated on a bag of fertilizer and with a new mattock, obviously enjoying this moment of profitable indolence. “They went to see the new mission chapel.”

Aleta checked back inside. The women from the class were gathered around Brigit,

smiling, reaching to touch her skirt, her sweater, the freckles on the back of her pale wrists, the tiny diamond on her left ring finger. Brigit looked over at Aleta. “Thank you,” she said. “If I live long enough, I expect this will be all have been very funny.” For reasons that made no sense at all, Aleta saw not a spooky pigeon but a little brown bird, standing in the doorway of its cage, about to fly away.

Relieved, and suddenly liking Brigit a lot, Aleta grinned at her. “I’m going to go find the Padre and his damned jeep.” She needed to be out, like that little bird, away from walls and contained spaces, flying, maybe, or even just pecking on the ground in peace.

Outside, she asked for directions to the chapel. “Follow the track,” the old men said, waving her across the road.

She was aware of their eyes on her back as she followed the red gash of road up to where a faint track of crushed tussock grass, broken stems, and skewed stones led up to the left across the mountain skirt. Puffing as the track got steeper, she slowed and thought about what the old men had said. Not really *follow the track* but *follow the path*. She thought about Miguel: *pay attention*. She looked up across the slope, slowing her gaze, waiting for the landscape to speak to her. Maybe a dozen meters above her, a pale ribbon of trail wound across the hill face toward the descending edge of forest. Using hand-holds of woody scrub and boulders and scrunching her toes to hang on to her shoes, she scrambled straight up and came out onto a thin, old, foot-worn path. She glanced back down toward the school. It seemed so very far below her. From under the shade of the verandah, she thought she saw an arm lift in salute.

She followed the easy slope up into the pines. Until she reached the forest, she would be visible all across the valley, but she stepped silently, respectfully. She would need to be careful. There would be an altar up here somewhere, maybe close, in a clearing in the pines that overlooked the valley or maybe farther up, tucked into a mountain fold and giving direct access to

the owners of the hills, the old mountain gods. She didn't believe any of that stuff, of course—even her Kakchiquel grandmother had rarely worn traditional garb—but the old men had trusted her with this path. This new mission chapel site must be on the far side of the slope, above the cluster of houses that would make up the sub-village farther down the valley. She hadn't heard about this chapel project before. That worried her. Maybe another of the Padre's chancy dreams? Watching where she put her feet, aware of the little stones rolling under her thin soles, the hum of the air through the tall pines and their bright, spicy smell, she didn't see the opening through the trees until she was in it.

She was right above the building site. Her first thought was, *oh God, does the Padre have a clue whose land this is?* It probably had fifteen claimants, all angry at each other. There were no workers now, but building had begun: a block-making pit to one side, stacks of drying adobe blocks, a dozen wooden block frames leaning against one half-built wall. The door and window lintels and the tie-beams were in place, and the verandah had been framed. The end gables hadn't been started though, and it wasn't clear what they were going to do about a roof. She was looking down into the roofless rectangle.

Padre da Rimini and Cal were there, fighting, arms and bodies moving frantically against each other. Then they split, standing, facing each other. Their faces were flushed, and she could see their chests heave. Then the Padre reached up and wrapped one hand around Cal's head. His thumb brushed Cal's mouth, and Cal dropped his head against the priest's chest. Their arms wrapped around each other again, more quietly this time. Aleta couldn't breathe. The two men stepped apart again. The priest waved Cal ahead of him toward the door. Inside, they had been shaded by the walls. In the doorway, the afternoon sun gilded Cal's face. Aleta was holding her breath again, waiting for horror and disgust to kick in. It wasn't happening. All she could see was the happiest person she had ever seen, relieved, at peace with himself and, momentarily, the world.

He stepped through the door. The priest followed, his face every bit as beautiful as Aleta remembered him but sad, as if he were reading a future that Cal, in his moment of joy and relief, could not yet see.

They were walking away from her, down the slope toward where the jeep was parked. Aleta turned and ran away down the forest path, her feet rolling under her as her ankles gave against the little stones. At the far edge of the forest, breathless again and weak-kneed, she sat down on a boulder. *What do I do? I have to tell someone. This is a terrible sin. And a priest, too. Oh, God, help me. There is nothing worse than this. What do I do? What do I tell Brigit? Her mind stopped. She stared at the ground, folded up, crumpled against herself. Do you suppose Brigit doesn't know? Or at least guess? Pay attention.*

A few inches from her shoe, a bug struggled to roll a lump of something bigger than it was up the hill. And then, a few inches farther on, a stubby juniper clung to the slope. She smelled smoke: copal, Mayan incense. *Oh, no.* Now she was intruding on the old gods as well, someone up at the mountain altar. She lifted her head. She couldn't see anyone of course. Not up here. Just the forested shoulders of the hills. Down below, in the valley, the padre's jeep appeared around the knee of the mountain and turned onto the road toward the school. She had to get back. She stood up. And she thought, *the mountains don't care. And they're right.* The only thing that mattered was what she had seen on those two men's faces. And she thought, *Will I ever be so lucky?*