THE VISIT by Laura Gomel

I thought for sure I would fall off the back of the motorcycle and tumble down the mountain.

The mountain is in a region called Sikka on the island of Flores, Indonesia. I am en route to a small village in the community of Nua Mbalu to visit a child I have been sponsoring for the last two years through the Plan USA Childreach program. I am on this motorcycle because, after driving 3 hours in an SUV from Maumere through magnificent lush landscape, the road ends.

I have one arm firmly clutching the waist of my driver Teddy, this district's Plan representative. My other arm holds a large bag of rice I bring as a gift. My backpack is stuffed to its limit with cooking oil and school supplies. This may be part of the reason I am falling off this motorcycle. The other would be, this is not actually a path, but a rain indented crevice, naturally cut through the dense jungle and enhanced by the foot traffic of the occasional villager. The air becomes crisp and smells of earth and green as we ascend the mountain for the next hour in our convoy of two bikes—ours and another carrying my translator, Tirza and her Plan associate, Tony. Except for the occasional call of a bird, there is no noise other than the motorbikes, but as we near the village Teddy and Tony begin to honk the horns. This is meant as a 'heads up' to the villagers who know we are coming and have prepared something special. Now I hear the sounds of unfamiliar music and excited voices. I'm a bit nervous!

The village is nothing more than a group of 20 small huts scattered comfortably between trees as if they had always been there. It has been decorated in my honor. Two huge palm fronds at either side of the entrance meet in the center. Blue and white crepe paper twirls across the middle. The entire population stands at the other side in expectation. Huge eyes follow my every move. I try to smile, and they stare back in fascination. I am the first westerner they have ever seen!

My 10-year-old sponsored child stands at the front. Her name is Yenimia Yansivia Nona Jata. Tiny in stature, she is very beautiful with giant brown eyes. She is wearing her finest traditional garb, consisting of a colorful hand-woven sarong and pink blouse. She also wears a small rhinestone heart necklace, a gift I sent on a previous Christmas. A completely serious, if not horrified, look is on her face. Yenimia is nervous too.

Her family—father Blasius, mother Caroline, Grandmother, and 2 brothers—surrounds Yenimia, called Yansi by her parents. A week before, Blasius had traveled to Maumere, seven hours each direction via public busses, just to make sure I was still coming. He had to make the trip this way. This village has no telephones or electricity. Now his smile is beaming, and I find the whole family substantially more attractive in person than in the somber photos I had been sent.

Standing next to the family is the village Shaman (medicine man). Picture a saronged and turbaned psych ward patient with intense beady eyes. He holds a hollowed coconut filled with ceremonial oil, as I must be blessed before I am allowed to enter. Though it seems I've been suddenly transported into a third world David Lynch movie, I'm not afraid. These people mean me no harm. They are here to welcome me to their world.

A hush falls as the oil is put on my forehead with a section of palm frond. Secret words are uttered. I am in! Everyone becomes very happy and the band, consisting of drums, wooden flutes and Sprite bottles with spoons in the top, kicks it up a notch. I'm still not sure what I'm supposed to do, so I kneel down to try to connect with my 'child' who is being pestered to give me a hug. She does, half-heartedly. At the instruction of her parents, she reluctantly takes my hand and leads me down the path towards the family's hut. The wide path is lined on either side with the local school children. They are dressed in white short sleeve shirts, red shorts and the matching red baseball hats of their uniform. Classes have been cancelled today in my honor. The children sing as the band plays on.

The bamboo and thatched roof hut has been transformed into a primitive VFW hall. The focal point, where I sit, consists of 5 plastic chairs facing out toward the center of the village. A small table in front holds individually wrapped waters, hot chocolate, and some seedpods. A blue plastic tarp has been erected overhead and 10 feet away are more chairs holding the village elders. The rest of the population spills out into the surrounding area. They are all facing me. There isn't a space I can turn my eyes without eyes staring back. My Plan companions have been escorted to a spot on my right so I sit alone between my child and her parents. The Grandmother sits to our left. She has the largest hands I have ever seen. I have an instant flashback from the Seinfeld show. I'm sure this is a completely inappropriate thought!

I sip the chocolate and someone demonstrates how to eat the seedpod. "You don't have to," they say. "It's ceremonial." I take a big bite and immediately grimace at the taste. But I think it's good that I tried, because I see in some of their eyes a glimpse of respect. I am starting to gain trust.

Next the women practically herd me into the backroom of the hut, changing me into traditional clothing by fitting me with a sarong and blouse that I suspect was made especially for the occasion. They take great care in brushing and retying my hair. I feel totally comfortable with these women in this tiny, dirt-floored room. I have felt this way many times in my own country. In essence, we have just all gone to the ladies room together. Some things are universal!

Finally, I immerge as the new me. This makes the spectators very happy, and smiles abound. We sit and the speeches begin. I actually understand what is being said. They are proud I am here. It makes them feel special.

The children begin to sing and dance carefully choreographed numbers. One is very special and stars my child, who clutches a small piece of paper in one hand and looks even more nervous than before. She steps away from the rest of the group and begins to read what she has written. This time I don't understand what she is saying, but I notice her mother begin to cry. My translator tells me Yenimia is thanking God for me and hopes we will always be together. Now I start to cry. My translator starts to cry. The men start to laugh. All women are the same! We too start to laugh, and soon we are all laughing and crying together. It is a wonderful moment!

Now that we are all family, it is time to eat! A HUGE feast is laid out inside the hut. The whole village partakes. Local moonshine, arak, is also presented and I am given a large glass. "Cheers!" I shout, taking a giant swig. The delighted elders almost fall out of their seats in hysteria as I practically choke from the potency!

As supper ends, we exchange gifts. They give me some wonderful weavings and baskets handmade by Caroline and tell me the clothes I am wearing are mine to keep. I am overwhelmed by the generosity of these people who materially own nothing, yet have so much.

"You must see our latrine," I am told. Why must I see their latrine? But I say, "Okay," and off I go. Then it dawns on me. This is the first latrine in town! My money built this latrine! This is my latrine! I immediately volunteer to christen it. The entire village waits outside the door!

I am heartbroken this day must end, and so are my new friends. "We would be honored if you stayed the night," they say. "Not possible." say my companions. "We must get down the mountainside before dark."

As we ready ourselves to leave, my child, now my friend approaches me. "Terima kasih banyak." she says. "You're very welcome," I reply. "I will see you again." Yansi finally smiles. It's as if the sun is rising at daybreak. She steps forward and gives me the biggest of hugs. This time she doesn't need to be asked.

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