



In an Indian Village  
in Southern Belize . . .

Two women sat in front of a wooden thatch-roofed hut in the late afternoon of a hot, dry-season day. The younger of the two was seated on a low stool, shelling dry corn onto the ground in front of her. An assortment of varicolored chickens and a family of black ducks scrambled to snatch the kernels as they fell. Dominga's sleek, black hair was combed back from a low hairline and tucked under a white veiling. High cheekbones, almond-shaped eyes, and full lips revealed her Mayan Indian heritage. Her bare feet were tucked under the skirt of her plain blue dress. With her short brown fingers, toughened by use, she flicked the kernels expertly off the cob.

Dominga's companion, her aunt, Francisca, was seated slightly higher on a rough homemade bench. She had grey streaks in her hair and was considerably heavier. Similarly attired, she sat with her bare feet planted wide apart on the ground while she used an orange towel to wipe beads of perspiration from her smooth brown face. She lived in a neighboring village and had come to visit.

"Did you wash this morning?" Francisca asked. She waved her orange cloth idly in front of her face and let out a heavy sigh. It was very hot.

"Yes, I washed two buckets of clothes today."

"Well, you have lots of children. When all my children were at home, I had to wash three buckets every day, and my first three were boys, so I didn't have any help." The heavy woman pressed her lips together and shook her head at the memory of those difficult days.

"My little girls help me already," said Dominga. "They wash the small things and the baby clothes."

"That's good. That's good," approved Francisca. "So many girls don't learn to work. When I was growing up, there were thirteen children in our family, so we had to learn to work. Back then we ground our corn by hand. It was hard." She shook her head again and flicked her cloth.

The two women exchanged more news. While they sat visiting, a white lady walked by on the road in front of the house. She smiled and waved, and the two by the house waved back.

“That’s Sister Miriam,” explained Dominga. “They live in San Marcos. They are visiting our village today. She stopped by this morning. She is a very nice lady.”

“Yes, she is a nice lady,” Francisca agreed after a moment’s hesitation. “She was in my house last week one day. She’s nice, but she has never learned to make tortillas.”

Dominga went on shelling corn, making no comment.

Her aunt kept talking. “I was making tortillas, and she wanted me to show her how.” She clucked her tongue and shook her head. “She tried, but it took her a very long time to pat just one, and then it wasn’t nice and round. She is nearly as old as I am and she is only now learning to make tortillas.

“And she said she wouldn’t know how to start a fire with wood. She has only a gas stove to cook on. You can’t make good beans or tortillas on a gas stove. I don’t know how those white ladies manage with no fire hearth. Why, how would they dry their pepper and cocoa? How could you cook a big tub of *caldo*<sup>1</sup> on just a small stove? I told her she should build a fire outside so she can use it when she needs it.” She nodded her head and waved her cloth.

“I asked her how many buckets of wash she does every day,” said Dominga, “and she said she has a washing machine, so she only washes twice a week.”

"That's true, I think. Those white people don't know how to wash clothes. They use a machine.

And Sister Miriam admitted to me that sometimes the machine doesn't get the pants clean. If she would scrub them on a rock with lots of soap, they would get clean.

"Maybe she is sick," suggested Dominga. "She is so very thin."

"All those white ladies are thin," said Francisca in a condescending voice. "I think they don't eat the right foods, that's what I think. They eat so much cow meat, you know, and everyone knows that cow meat sits heavy in the stomach. And they eat bread. You can't get strong on bread. You know how our men say they have to have corn tortillas when they chop in the field. It gives you strength."

"I think they eat a lot of cake and cookies too," supplied Dominga.

"Yes, that too. If they would eat tortillas and beans and chicken and fish, they would be fatter and stronger. You notice she wore shoes?"

Dominga nodded.

"Their white feet are so soft. They need to wear shoes all the time. I could not stand to push my feet into shoes." She lifted her short, stubby feet and stared at her wide, spread toes. "I couldn't walk very far either if I had to wear shoes."

"She doesn't have to walk," Dominga pointed out. "They have a truck. They can drive to the next village or to town."

“Humph, that is true. They have lots of money. They can afford a cement house and a stove and a washing machine and a car.”

“It must be nice to have lots of money,” said Dominga with a sigh. “You wouldn’t have to worry about where to find the money to buy the school-books for the children, or the pants for the boys. You could buy rice every day if you wanted and go to town on the bus.”

“You’re right.” Francisca was quiet for a moment, contemplating the prospect of having lots of money. Then she started again. “But I really wonder what those white ladies in America do all day? They don’t wash, they don’t cook very much, they don’t have to sweep their whole yard, they don’t have to shell corn, and they don’t go to the plantation to pull beans. What do they do, I ask? They are so different.”

“She said she has only five children,” said Dominga. “They are all grown, and four are married. She has six grandchildren.”

“Too bad,” commented Francisca. “Five children is not a very big family. I wonder why she didn’t bring one of those grandchildren to Belize with her to keep her company. She is all alone when her husband is gone. But then, I don’t think they have the same feelings for their children as we Indians do. We always work together in families. How can they just leave their children and go far away for years and years? I would never leave my