

# SHE'S MY SISTER

by Dalia Wheatt

I had heard about the so-called global village, but a trip to the Dominican Republic showed me just how genuine the camaraderie could be.>>



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It was a mere 5:45 a.m., but who could sleep now? On the street below, roosters had already announced the new day, and mopeds were at full blast. I stretched out on my wobbly metal cot and cautiously opened my eyes. Sunlight was already sifting through the sky-blue mosquito netting and stroking my face. I smiled with relief. It hadn't been a dream. Just eight days after my high school graduation, I was waking up in the Dominican Republic. Maybe Spanish class would come in handy after all.

In the bed next to me under a veil of yellow netting was Patti, the youth director's wife, still fast asleep. She'd be up in an hour, followed by the rest of the youth group, and after breakfast in the convent we'd all head to the work-site. It was day one of our church mission trip.

For over 20 years, our church had been helping to make hungry families more self-reliant by donating farm animals through Heifer Project International. Prior to the Dominican Republic, the youth group had gone on several other Heifer Project trips to Kentucky and Wisconsin. But nothing could compare to our current overseas adventure, where panoramic mountains garlanded with palm trees set the backdrop. Some of my friends' parents wouldn't allow them to go; what did anyone really know about this modest little country that got attention only on those infomercials about starving children? But I wasn't afraid. I was easily adaptable and could feel at home anywhere.

several Dominican men began making catcalls at the women of the group. The other girls fought back with nasty looks, but I didn't have to. The instant a stranger approached, Eduard shooed him away. "Esta es mi hermana," he said. This is my sister.

He's so right, I thought, concealing my smile with a cone full of chocolate ice cream as we strolled farther into the park.

It's been three years since I danced the meringue with Eduard and ate mangos with Humberto, and I often wonder what they're up to. But I never worry about them. The people of this world have a way of looking out for one another, like family.

As for me, I keep a photograph of my Dominican "sister" Yeseñia next to my bed. Years of staring at it finally caught up with me, and I applied to graduate school to become an educator. Lord willing, two years from now I'll be teaching English as a Second Language and Spanish, helping others to expand their definition of familia.

For two weeks, our group of 11 suburban teenagers and four well-intentioned but non-Spanish-speaking adults lived in a convent in San Juan el Cercado, near the Haitian border. Every morning, we trekked up the mountainside to build corrals. Heifer Project would supply the cows and sheep that were so vital to rural Dominican families, but first proper animal shelters had to be in place. Although quite inept at using a hammer, I found myself in a position of vital importance: I spoke decent, high-school level Spanish and happened to be the only African-American on this trip to a country where 84 percent of the citizens are black or mulatto—a mix of black and white. I could connect with our new acquaintances in a way that my peers could not.

So while the others dug postholes and tightened barbed wire, I translated instructions, moved rocks with a woman named Yeseñia and danced to "Padre Abraham" with my new amigos. The next day an onlooker called Humberto insisted that I meet his mother, who lived on the other side of a creek. He had spent a few days hanging around our work-site, and both the Dominican community members and my American chaperones felt at ease with him, so I felt comfortable enough to venture across the creek with my new acquaintance. An aptly placed tree trunk served as the only "bridge" across the water, so with outstretched arms I teetered my way behind Humberto to his mother's home, a two-room cabin with dirt floors and an aluminum roof. She was a short, curvaceous woman with a steady gaze in her eyes and bright blue thong sandals on her feet, and she'd been expecting me. I sighed with relief for having made it across the tree trunk intact, and the next thing I knew I was sitting by the creek in a dusty green chair, chatting with Humberto and his mother, my fingers sticky with the juice of a freshly picked mango. Ten minutes ago we'd been complete strangers, but now I felt like the prodigal

daughter returning home.

Everywhere we went, people gawked at our group. As we walked in a herd through a downtown marketplace, shouts of Gringos! and Americanos! were hurled at us from all sides. I was confused and frustrated but not altogether uncomfortable. Having attended a predominantly white school in a predominantly white town, I was used to being in the minority. It was easy for me to feel comfortable here.

But something left me unsettled. Apparently, the only thing rarer than a pack of gringos in the Dominican Republic was a non-gringa at the nucleus. "¿Por qué estás con esos americanos?"—Why are you with those Americans?—I heard them shout. What do you mean, those Americans? I thought. I'm an American, too!

Ohhhhh. I get it. They thought I was Dominican. And why wouldn't they? I had the cocoa skin, thick black hair and ample derriere that are characteristic of las dominicanas. Maybe I wasn't technically a Latina, but the Dominicans could see that God had made us from the same mold. I was their sister.

A few days later, following an afternoon of sweaty labor, the youth leader announced that there was a special treat planned for after dinner: meringue lessons! Our Dominican driver, 24-year-old Eduard, was a self-proclaimed meringue addict, so I was excited for him to show us a few moves. That evening in one of the convent's Bible school rooms, we pushed aside the desks and let Eduard's tropical music electrify the warm night air. He circulated around the room to see how our footwork was coming along.

When the time came for my lesson with Eduard, I went stiff. My body was tense; my feet struggled to keep up with the beat. But Eduard was relaxed, effortlessly swiveling to

the sound of horns and drums. "Tú tienes que bailar mejor que todos, porque tienes la piel..." You have to dance better than everyone, he told me, because you have the skin...

Perhaps I was being held to a different standard than my Caucasian counterparts. I wasn't just another tourist; I was Eduard's prodigy, the Dominican-looking girl who happened to be from the United States. I decided to enjoy myself and let the music tell my feet what to do. By the end of the night I had mastered the basic steps. In this makeshift dance hall, where posters of Jesus and the Pope plastered the walls and nuns were nestled in their beds upstairs, I was moving with a grace that almost felt natural. More importantly, under all of that sweat, I was having the time of my life.

I began embracing my newfound kinship with Eduard, sharing jokes at the worksite and translating the group's dinnertime conversations each evening. He reminded me of my older brother, who was around the same age. So what if Eduard and I weren't blood relatives? We were a part of a larger global family.

More and more, I was assuming the role of la dominicana. I helped the nuns prepare meals for everyone in the convent. I started singing along to Luis Miguel's "Bésame mucho" every time it came on the radio. In the marketplace, I managed to get better deals on souvenirs than the rest of the group because the vendors viewed me as one of their own.

Toward the end of our trip, as the novelty of the region's sweltering temperatures was wearing off, ice cream became a daily dietary staple. At the ice cream shop, Eduard would explain the flavors in Spanish for me to relay to the group. One evening while enjoying our treats in a nearby park,