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Chelsea and Brianna Hartin

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A Narrative on the Heartbreak of Goodbyes

Chelsea and Brianna Hartin

Is this really happening? Are we really saying goodbye and leaving behind the children that have been such a huge part of our lives for the last eight months? When we first came to the small jungle village of Francia Sirpi, Nicaragua, serving as student missionaries to the native Miskito people, we immediately hit a brick wall of homesickness. We had grown up in a small town in northern Maine where we were secure within our comfort zone. Never before had we traveled to a foreign country, and we certainly had never been so far from home for such an extended period of time. As twin sisters and best friends, we had each other for support, but nothing could have prepared us for the type of year we would have. Each time we faced a new trial, we dreamed about the day when we would finally leave to go home. We envisioned it being a day solely of relief and excitement. We had no idea how April 30, 2012, would actually feel.

Eight months passed – sometimes dreadfully slow. Right when we felt as if things could not get any worse, they would. Right when we thought that emotions could not become any more overwhelming or intense, they would. Sometimes it felt as if every day was a challenge – one that we could not escape. There were days when simply getting out of bed was a struggle. It was as if we were in a boxing ring, taking one blow after another, just waiting for the match to be over. We faced mental, emotional, and spiritual battles that pushed us to our breaking points. On top of these individual, yet shared struggles, we missed our friends and family and the normalcy of life in the United States. We felt as if nothing that Francia Sirpi, Nicaragua, could offer us would ever be able to fill that void – until little, wild, misbehaved, obstinate, adorable, loving, precious Miskito children began to creep their way into our hearts. Every day, we fell more and more in love with these children, and our hearts became more and more involved. Now, after eight months, this had proven to make our goodbyes incredibly difficult.

Our first encounters with the children seem as if they were yesterday. From the moment we arrived in Francia Sirpi, the children were intrigued by us. Not only was our skin pale and our hair blonde, but we looked just like each other. Any time that we would walk through the village, we would hear children holler “Sutki!” which means “twin” in Miskito. A swarm of children would bound out of their huts and gather around us. We could feel their little hands touch our hair and play with our fingers as they took our hands and led us down the dirt road. They had no agenda or destination; they walked with us simply because they wanted to be with us.

Jhelma, a bubbly five-year-old who lived in the hut right beside our mission complex, was the first little girl that immediately won our hearts. She had deep brown eyes and a smile that lit up her entire face. On our first day in Francia, we passed by her hut as we walked through the village. We glanced up and smiled at the women sitting on their porch, and before we knew it, Jhelma was between us, clasped onto both our hands. There had been no need for introductions or formalities; she was teeming with love and was not hesitant to give it.

From that day forward, Jhelma walked with us anytime we passed by. We would pick her up for school and take her home. On rainy nights when we would walk a half mile to church for night service, she would climb onto one of our backs and cling tightly to us as she sought protection from the rain beneath our umbrella. Her little four-year-old sister Zulema would race behind her in our direction, with her crazy, curly hair whipping in the wind as she climbed onto whichever one of us had a free back. Our feet would get covered in mud and our skirts would dampen as we would walk the path to the church, but it would never phase us. We were too busy singing songs and giggling with our precious little friends to notice. Those were the moments when our hearts grew increasingly more invested.

However, they did not just become invested in one little girl; they became invested in many children. Each day that we would go to work at the pre-school, we were welcomed by an energetic group of four- and five-year olds racing to see who could sit on our laps first. We would scoop them up in our arms and spin them around as they giggled uncontrollably. Our relationships with them grew stronger with each passing day; even the misbehaved students worked their way into the deepest parts of our hearts.

One little boy named Eldo was the epitome of a class troublemaker. He would always show up late to school and had a tendency to talk back whenever things did not go his way. He was very big for his age and stood nearly a foot taller than most of the children. The first time that we had ever seen Eldo, he was running around the village in just a pair of red underwear. He was shameless and full of energy. Sitting still was always a challenge for him; he would much rather be playing games or talking to his friends. He knew exactly what buttons to push to test the limits of our patience. However, each time he would get in trouble, he would always come to us later and burry his face in our stomachs and give us a big bear hug. Our frustration that had built towards him dissipated almost instantly. He may have been a poorly behaved student, but we loved him.

It was not until four months into our time in Francia that we met the sweetest little four-year-old boy. Marlon was our village sweetheart. He had short legs and a round belly that always poked out from underneath his shirt. His hair was combed over to one side, and he had a big smile that formed the two most precious dimples in his cheeks. Even while all the other boys at school pretended to play it cool, Marlon was not afraid to be our little shadow. He loved to be picked up and was content to just sit on our lap as long as he could. We would tickle his belly as he would let out a stream of giggles. All he had to do was smile, and we would melt.

Countless other children embedded themselves into our memories as well. A five-year-old boy named Eker had always been our faithful friend at church. The first time we met him, he had bashfully walked over to our church bench and sat down on the very end. As the worship service continued, he slowly inched his way closer to where we were sitting as he continually glanced up, made eye contact with us, then quickly looked away. Pretty soon he was nestled closely under our arms holding our hands. It was not long before we saw a little head peak up behind the bench in front of us. There staring at us with crossed eyes and dimples was Eker's friend Basler. He was wearing no shirt and held a homemade wooden toy gun that was strapped

around him with a dried palm leaf. From that day forward, Basler's crossed eyes and dimples became the object of our affection and the topic of conversation whenever we saw him.

Among the spunkiest of the children we grew to love was Flor, a stinky little five-year-old who was missing her two front teeth almost the entire time we were there. Literally translated into Spanish, "flor" means "flower." We always thought of her as a rose – beautiful and sweet, but if you mess with her, she has some thorns for protection. She was a spitfire and always seemed to possess a spirit of invincibility and confidence.

Our favorite memory of Flor took place one day when we were painting in the school. There was a group of little boys who would not stop harassing us. They were throwing rocks on the roof, kicking the door, and yelling things at us in Miskito. We went out several times and very sternly told them to stop, but they would not listen to us. Finally, we let Flor and another little girl come into the school, and we just looked at Flor and pointed outside. "Flor, tuktan nani. Saura. Aisas 'Aisabe'". Clearly, that was the epitome of horrible Miskito, but literally translated it meant, "Flor, children. Bad. Say 'Goodbye'". She got the point. She nodded her head and continued to play until we heard the sound of another big rock hitting the roof. Flor sprung from her seat and immediately stormed outside with a strut that told everyone around she meant business. All of a sudden we heard a burst of disgusted Miskito words, and as we looked outside, there was Flor, chasing the boys away. Our dainty flower was showing her thorns.

These children brought joy and laughter into our lives. They helped ease our transition into the mission field during our first several months in Francia. The love that they so easily poured out upon us was our sustenance when the days were difficult. Each one of them had their own special way of reaching our hearts. However, it was not until our fourth month in the village that God sent us a blessing that would impact us the rest of our lives.

During the first four months, we had faced trial after trial. We discovered that the mission field is not an asylum from life's problems, but instead, it seems to be the devil's target of choice. He is threatened by imperfect people who want a perfect God to work through them, and the devil attacks those by whom he feels threatened. Those attacks from the devil were almost enough to send us home at Christmas time. We were worn. Homesickness, heartbreak, culture shock, and a spiritually and emotionally oppressive environment had taken its toll on us, and when our parents came to visit in December, we were convinced that we would be going back to the United States with them on a one-way flight. However, God had different plans. He still had reasons for us to stay, and they all shared the last name Seballo. The Seballos were the blessing we almost missed.

We met the Seballos about the same time that our parents came to visit. We were at church teaching the children's Sabbath school, and we noticed three children that we had not seen before. There was an older brother and two younger sisters, and it was obvious that they all loved each other very much. They were quiet, but they had big smiles and manners that were very uncommon for the children in our village. We immediately bonded with them and marveled at how set-apart they were from other children their age. It was not until a couple weeks later that we discovered that there were not, in fact, only two younger sisters, but there were three.

Although we immediately knew these children were special, we had no idea how much these four children would change our lives.

Enrique was the oldest of the Seballo children. He was only twelve, but he possessed wisdom far beyond his years. He and his sisters moved to our village to live with their grandma, and thus Enrique resumed the role of the man of the house. Many days he would have to skip school so that he could go work in his plantation to provide food for his family to survive. He was forced to grow up very fast as he became the provider and protector of his family, but he was nonetheless always smiling and was never seen complaining. Although he was approaching his teenage years, Enrique never acted like he was too cool for us. He had found such a good balance between being so grown-up and yet still being the twelve-year-old boy that would randomly sing songs with his little sisters and us.

Enrique possessed a spirit of selflessness that was foreign to the culture of the people in Nicaragua. Thinking of others first was his natural instinct. One time one of his sisters broke a plate, and their grandfather was very angry. When he went to punish the child who broke it, Enrique stepped in and took the blame. His grandfather poured water on Enrique's back and whipped him with a belt. We sat outside the hut and held the girls as they cried for their brother. We could hear quiet moans come from inside, but there was nothing we could do. Several minutes later, Enrique emerged from the hut carrying the bucket of water. His swollen eyes were proof of the pain he just experienced, but he still wore a small smile as he assured us he was okay. He did not seek sympathy or attention; he handled it with maturity greater than that of many grown men.

Not much younger than Enrique was the oldest sister Melba. She was nine years old and had one of the most loving hearts we have ever encountered. She had the most beautiful smile that radiated with sincerity and joy. When we first met her at church, she was very shy. She explained to us how she had moved to our village to live with her grandmother and how she did not have any friends. We assured her that we would be her friends and from that point forward, she was no longer the shy, quiet girl we had first met. She was bursting with energy and love.

We spent countless days with Melba, and she became the little sister we never had. She drew us pictures of heaven with Jesus at the center of the picture. Beside Jesus, she drew each one of her siblings holding hands with the three of us. "This is us in heaven. One day we will all be there," she told me in Spanish with wide eyes and a big smile. She proceeded to explain how we would all share one big mansion and live together forever. Her heart was open to anyone that pursued it, and when she loved people, she loved them with her whole heart.

Monica was the second youngest Seballo child at five years old, and she looked as much like an angel as she acted like one. She had the most adorable high pitch voice that made us smile whenever we would hear her talk. Sometimes we would just sit and listen to her as she rambled away in Mosquito, not because we knew what she was saying, but because it was so precious just to hear her little voice. She had long, wavy, black hair that fell to the bottom of her back, and as she ran around and played, her hair would take on a life of its own. Whenever we would walk back from school, Monica always insisted that she carry all of our bags. Because she

was just short of three feet tall, this often meant that our bags would unintentionally be dragged through the mud all the way back to her hut, but we did not care, nor did we have the heart to stop her.

Just when we thought that the Seballo family was perfect and complete with one boy and two girls, we learned that there was another little sister Dayana. Dayana was the baby of the family. She was three years old and had an enthusiasm for life that was contagious. As we walked to school in the morning, she would be the first one to spot us in the distance and run toward us as fast as her little legs could carry her. She was so little that we could pick her up and just toss her into the air as her laughter echoed all around. She had crazy, curly brown hair that suited her personality perfectly. Whenever we were having a hard day, Dayana's innocence and love for life would seem to simply melt our problems away. She loved with a capacity that knew no limits. It did not matter if we did not speak the same language or if we had only known her a couple of months, Dayana welcomed us into her life without hesitation and made us feel like family.

It was this new relationship and bond that we developed with the Seballos as well the other children that made us dread the time when we would have to say goodbye and leave our village. We had been preparing for goodbye several weeks before we left. We took advantage of every minute we had with our children, and whenever moments of sadness would arise, we would hold on to the fact that "we still had more time." But time is such a funny thing. It does not cater to our circumstances or show mercy when times are hard. It does not slow down or speed up no matter how much we will it to. Time simply passes.

The goodbyes started a couple weeks before we left as we shared our final interactions with our close friends from neighboring villages, and they never got easier. We knew that our hardest goodbyes would be with the Seballo children. Because we knew those goodbyes would be so difficult, we spent as much time with them as possible.

On our last Friday in Francia, Enrique and Melba led all of us student missionaries through the jungle on an adventure to the Rio Wawa despite thunder, lightning, rain, and mud. Our fellow student missionary Camrie and we spent several afternoons just playing with the Seballos in their hut – laughing, tickling, joking, even snuggling up and napping with the girls on their floor – all things that we would not be able to do after April 30.

Before we knew it, the day of our departure came. We were all packed the night before, and that morning we crawled out of our mosquito nets for the last time. We got ready as quickly as possible so that we could go down to the school with the children for an hour before we left. Camrie and we walked hand-in-hand with the Seballos down to the school, each of us acknowledging in our minds that this would be our final walk together down the road that we had traveled so many times before. Edda, the native Miskito teacher who became one of our dearest friends, waited for us at the preschool where we had spent our year teaching. She decided not to have normal classes so we could spend time with the children and soak up our final moments with them. We played and laughed, but there was a dark cloud looming over us the

entire time as we knew what was going to take place in just one short hour. When tears threatened to fill our eyes, we held them back. “We still have more time.” But then time ran out.

As our mission director came by in the vehicle to pick us up, Enrique looked up at us and said in Spanish, “It’s time for you to go now, isn’t it?” Lumps formed in our throats, and words could not make it out of our mouths. We just nodded. We scooped up our little preschoolers and hugged them one last time as we looked at them through teary eyes and reminded them in Miskito how much we loved them. “Yang uba mai wantsna.” Many of them probably did not entirely understand what was happening – that after today, heaven might be our next meeting place. However, they knew that something was wrong because it was the first time that they had seen their “maestras” cry. No amount of emotional strength or will power could have held back the tears that forced their way out of our eyes and down our cheeks. Class was dismissed, and we watched as all the children filtered out of the school. All except the Seballos.

Camrie and we walked outside with them and picked up Monica and Dayana for the last time. “I love you, Dayana.” She managed a small smile and looked up. “I lub you.” Those precious words will forever be engrained in our minds. Monica began to cry as she covered her eyes and burrowed her head into our shoulders. Although she was young, she understood. Melba was staring at the ground through tears, as if by not looking at us, she would not have to acknowledge that we were leaving. We pulled her close and managed to whisper in a cracked voice, “Te quiero, mi hermana,” which in English translates, “I love you, my sister”. After a long pause, Melba repeated the same words. We looked over at Enrique, the strong, mature boy who had been the protector of his family, and watched as he also allowed tears to well up in his eyes. He kissed each of our cheeks one last time as we hugged him closely, and we reminded him also that we loved him and that we would never forget him.

The seven of us came together in a group hug, and we prayed a final prayer asking God to watch over and protect the children that had come to mean so much to us. We crawled into the back of the vehicle, and as we closed the door, we realized that we were closing a chapter of our lives. We watched them through the back window as they got smaller and smaller until we rounded the corner and could no longer see them. We literally felt the pain of leaving them behind, and we surrendered ourselves to the tears. The moment that we had been dreading for weeks had just happened.

You see, we not only left the children, but we also left a very big part of ourselves with them. We could not take them with us; we could only take with us the memories of them. Never again will we see these children as they are now. Their lives will go on, and they will grow up. Never again will we pick up Marlon and spin him around as he giggles uncontrollably or piggyback Jhelma to church in the dark. Never again will Eldo bury his head into our stomachs with a big bear hug or Basler stare at us with big crossed eyes. Never again will Flor flash us her big smile with her two front teeth missing or Eker take our arms and wrap them around himself during church. Little Dayana will never fall asleep in our laps in mid-sentence again, and Monica will never again weigh herself down trying to carry all of our bags back home from school. We

will never see Melba bound out of her hut again to come color or do gymnastics with us, and Enrique will never again have to get on his tip toes to reach up and kiss our cheeks goodnight.

We have had eight months to be an active part of these children' lives. We could hug them and laugh with them and get them excited about Jesus face to face. We could protect them to the best of our ability when we knew there were problems, and we could be there for them when they were having a rough day. We cannot do that anymore. The control is no longer in our hands, and as hard as it is, we have no choice but to leave them in the hands of Someone much greater than ourselves. These children who have been there with us through the hardest times of our lives will never fully know how much they have impacted us. Though time will continue to pass and our lives will continue to change, the children of Francia Sirpi will always have a piece of our hearts. It is our most earnest prayer that we will see them again – if not in this life, then in the next with Jesus in heaven.