

American Gospel, the first collection of stories from Robert Paxton, presents disturbing episodes from the lives of common people who either seek out or exemplify the American Dream.

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American Gospel

A collection of fiction by Robert Paxton

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The revival was a big success. Many Hondurans came to Jesus that day. After Pastor Greg dismissed the crowd, JD helped pack the mission's tables, chairs and tent into the back of an ancient, yellow school bus. But he didn't return with the pastor to the mission in downtown San Pedro Sula. Elias, a convert, had invited JD to come pray with his family, so the young American missionary told Greg that he would get in by early evening.

They prayed on their knees in Elias' and Rosa's ramshackle home. After much thanksgiving they prayed for Rosa's daughter Claudia, who had missed the revival and had still not returned from school. When they were done, JD got up off the hard floor and gestured for Elias and Rosa to do the same. He wiped the sweat from his forehead, though he knew it would be replaced in a matter of moments. He would not miss the heat when his year was up.

"Father," he began in Spanish that had a Texas accent, "thank you for bringing me to the home of Elias and Rosa. Thank you for bringing Jesus into their hearts." Together they finished by saying amen, pronouncing it 'ay-men', rather than 'ah-mayn', as it is in Spanish.

"*Gracias*, JD." Rosa said. Like everyone else belonging to his church's mission here she called him "Yay-dee." His year here was almost over though, and now it didn't bother him.

"*Si, gracias* JD." Elias added, slapping him lightly on the back.

Rosa limped toward side of the room that served as their kitchen. "Café?" She asked, turning back.

"Yes, please" JD said, nodding. "Before I go."

"Me, too." Grunted Elias, sitting down at the table. "Even though I'm not going anywhere." He smiled. JD took a seat as well.

Rosa grabbed plates, spoons and cups, set water to boil on the makeshift, gas stove that didn't scare JD anymore, and generally shambled back and forth. Her thirty-five years looked like fifty or sixty. Life in Honduras wore people down more quickly, it seemed. Especially women. The limp was new but JD didn't ask about it. He suspected that Elias was responsible. The men here, even the Christians, were maybe a little too hard on their women.

"You are going back to the mission?" Elias asked.

JD nodded, looking out the window behind and to the side of Elias. Darkness was increasing at the expense of daylight as the Sun began to slip down behind the mountains to the West.

Claudia, Rosa's seventeen-year old daughter, came in through the front door, walking quickly toward the curtain that partitioned their home into two rooms. The bedroom was on the other side.

"You're late!" Rosa nearly shouted. "You knew we were going to pray with JD now. Where were you?" The last words she said after Claudia had already disappeared behind the curtain. Elias didn't speak.

"Hola, Claudia." JD said, raising his voice a little. He remembered to give her name its Spanish pronunciation, "cloudy-ah".

"I was talking to my friends after school and I forgot." They only heard her voice and the sound of movement. JD imagined she was changing clothes.

Rosa shook her head. "What am I going to do?"

"It's a difficult age." JD said, remembering that he was only six years older than Claudia.

"Did you see what she was wearing?" Rosa whispered, as if that might keep Claudia, only a few feet away, from hearing.

JD thought. Her clothes hadn't seemed any different than usual. Elias, a god-fearing man, had married Rosa six months ago after they met at the mission. He had immediately begun to set things right with Claudia - putting rules in her life, throwing away clothes that weren't appropriate, making sure she got good grades in school.

"Her clothes seemed fine." JD finally said. The dress went past her knees and had covered her bosom completely.

Rosa responded by tapping her own chest three times. "I've told her to throw it away." She said, putting her hands on her face. "And she wears it when a man of God comes to our house."

JD still didn't get it. It had been a long, hot day at the revival, even with the tent covering. He looked to Elias.

"The cross." Elias said, also tapping his chest. "She was wearing a cross."

"Ah." JD said, nodding in comprehension. His church's mission fought hard to wean people in Honduras from the practices of their pagan-Catholic culture, in particular the idolatry inherent in that perverted form of Christianity.

"You must continue to be patient with her," JD said. "You've seen how many changes she has made since Elias came into your lives."

"*Si*." Elias added. "And she doesn't believe in that cross anyway. She only does it to anger you."

Rosa, calmer now, poured boiling water into a cloth filter that held an ounce of fresh coffee grounds. The transformed liquid, now darker, more substantial, then poured into a chipped mug that waited below. She repeated the process above another waiting mug. After adding a little sugar, she took a bag

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of milk out of the small refrigerator next to the stove and dribbled some of its contents into the mugs before bringing them to the two men.

“At least she doesn’t worship the whore of Babylon anymore.” Rosa muttered.

“Hallelujah.” JD said. After the marriage, Elias had thrown out a picture of the Virgin Mary that once hung on the wall.

“Hallelujah.” Elias echoed, bringing the mug to his lips but, as always, not actually taking a drink. He blew several times over the brown, swirling surface. JD did the same, looking out the window. It would be dark soon.

Rosa now made herself a cup of coffee and sat at the table with them. Claudia came out from behind the curtain. She had changed into more relaxed, though still modest, clothing. A long skirt kept her legs from view and a purple blouse revealed only her soft, round, upper arms. JD could not see a cross but he did notice a delicate, silver chain against the cinnamon brown of her throat just above the neckline of her blouse. She had slipped it underneath her clothing.

“Hello.” She said, looking first at JD, then at Rosa, finally at Elias. “What first?”

“Clothes.” Her stepfather said.

The girl turned and went back through the curtain. They heard the back door open. The washbasin and clotheslines were kept back there in a space they shared with three other homes, none of them Christian yet. Soon, the three coffee-drinkers heard the sound of vigorous scrubbing.

“You’ve done miracles, Elias.” JD announced. “She’s turning into a good girl. Now she just needs something neither you nor I can give her.”

Elias and Rosa only looked at him, knowing what it was but waiting for him to say it.

“Jesus.” JD said, finally.

“Hallelujah.” Mother and husband said loudly together.

Claudia’s derisive snort could be heard even over the sound of scrubbing.

JD smiled, shaking his head, and took one last drink of coffee. He set the mug down. “I have to go.” He thanked them and stood up.

Rosa and Elias lived in an outlying section of San Pedro Sula. JD caught a bus that would take him back downtown. The bus was not as full as it would have been in the morning, or as the buses returning from downtown were right then, but there were still plenty of people on board. Their stink was something JD had gotten used to, but he would not miss it. He missed his own church, the Jerusalem Assembly. He missed Lubbock and he missed Texas.

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Giving up this sin would be the best thing about going back to the States. He felt like a hypocrite, going out to revivals with Pastor Greg and talking about Jesus, knowing that, at least once a week, he would take the wrong bus downtown to see Senora Menjivar, a young widow. She hadn't accepted Jesus into her heart when they met a few months ago, but she had told JD that she would accept him into her apartment any day of the week.

Once he got out of here, he wouldn't be susceptible to that temptation anymore. He knew some girls in Lubbock that would be dazzled by his missionary stories. And he had his degree. It was time to think about settling down, starting a career, having kids. Maybe he would enter the ministry.

Of course, he had considered staying at the mission, marrying a local girl, becoming his own Abraham, a man faithful to God in a foreign land. He had even thought of saving Claudia and marrying her, or vice versa. But that situation was just too complicated.

As it neared his stop the bus passed the cathedral. A number of people on board made the sign of the cross. JD shook his head. He was a sinner, but at least he wasn't an idolater.

Really, I ought to look at it that way, he thought, trying to cheer up. It wasn't so bad, what he did. It wasn't like he was a sodomite. She was a grown, healthy woman.

Besides, he always wore a condom.

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