

“Where is Sparta?” I asked, hanging up the phone.

“It’s the high school across the street from the nursing home where I used to work. Why?” my dad asked.

“There’s a job opening there...teaching Spanish. Douglas, Georgia is the only other system with an opening right now. Where is Douglas located?” I asked.

“I think its South Georgia, near Valdosta!” my mom hollered from the kitchen.

“That’s too far away from civilization!” I quickly replied. “I haven’t heard back from any of the Mexican private schools and the Department of Defense Schools don’t hire first year teachers. But the Peace Corps still looks like an interesting opportunity.”

The truth about the Peace Corps was that I was scared I’d end up in Africa. I’d read several stories enclosed in the application that bothered me. Some volunteers ended up in remote regions of the continent. They were so remote that there was no electricity, no running water nor any nearby medical facilities. Occasionally, a volunteer would become so homesick that they would leave before they completed their two years of service. Without much stretch of the imagination, I could see myself in their shoes. I really wanted to live overseas in a Latin American country, but the disclaimer, “we cannot guarantee you’ll be placed in the region of your choice,” cast such a strong shadow over the whole idea, that I just wouldn’t take the risk. During my workday at the local health food store, I’d imagine living in some small town somewhere in Chile, Venezuela, or El Salvador. Next, I’d see an African shack, the kind shown on National Geographic specials with no running water, and I’d cringe. I was certain that’s where I’d end up. I could see myself sleeping on a dirt floor and waking up covered in mosquito bites.

Finally, after several weeks of pondering the options, I called both high schools and scheduled interviews. I went to Sparta first. When I entered the board office I was a little taken aback. Everyone was black. The assistant principal interviewed me.

“Hello, Miz Tollman. Just have a seat right here.” I sat down in a chair across from him. He looked at my resume and then asked me a typical interview question. While I gave a typical interview answer, his eyes never left my resume. Later in the interview, he asked me what I thought about history. *I hate history!* “Well, (I paused for 5 seconds, and during those seconds I examined the benefits of telling white lies.) I like it all right,” I replied. My answer didn’t seem to deter him. Without making eye contact, he offered me the job.

I was amazed at the variety of skin colors that entered my classroom. As they filed in, I heard under someone’s breath a comment about Mr. Gonzalez, the Spanish teacher, who had left at Christmas. I called the roll and mispronounced many of the names. The students didn’t seem to mind. After just a few days, my fear of the new and different was replaced with affection and concern for my students. A set of twin girls became like little sisters to me. One day they came to my classroom after school, hoping for a word of encouragement.

“Miss Tollman, we want to go to college. We’re in an SAT prep class and our teacher said that we haven’t had the right courses.” One of the twins asked, “Why doesn’t our school offer physics?” I reacted, forgetting the professional distance, “What?

You don’t have physics here?” The only help I could offer was simply to listen. Periodically, a student would ask, “Are you going to stay?” *What a bizarre thing to ask your teacher!* “Of course I’m staying!”

One day in early February, all faculty and students reported to the gym for a school-wide assembly. While students entered, I panned the crowd from my nosebleed seat, and noticed that I was the only white female in the entire building. Minutes later, the elementary school filed in and 10 ghosts caught my eye. “So, they’re eleven of us here.” I thought to myself. The speech began. The speaker was the first black probate judge in Georgia and I was eager to hear her. About 20 minutes into the speech, she declared, “white teachers can *not* lead black children.” A tremendous roar of approval came from the student body. I kept my eyes on the principal and superintendent, who stayed seated. The audience increased its roar and sections of the crowd rose to their feet. I focused on the administration, seated right beside the speaker. The assistant principal slowly rose and began applauding. The speaker shouted over the applause, “...and what this school needs is to get rid of all the white teachers!” The cheering increased and I felt my seat vibrate. Soon the entire gym was filled with the cascading thunder of stomping feet. The only black person still seated was the superintendent. The storm inside that gym seemed to be waiting for its final victim. He finally stood up. I wanted to slide through one of the cracks under my seat and drop to the floor. Then I could run towards my car. The last thing I remember is watching several well-dressed black men wave their fists in the air.

I went back to my classroom carrying an invisible lead blanket. I wanted to lay my head down on my desk and cry. But I couldn’t. I had three more classes to teach before I could leave: *three histories*. I didn’t see a face, but I heard someone ask, “Are you still gonna stay?”



KATHY T. CAMP is a high school Spanish teacher. She was born and raised in Atlanta and is a current resident of a small western Georgia town called Bowdon. Her passion is in writing. Kathy discovered that tragedies make the best story and therefore incorporated dark chapters of her life into her collection of short stories. Kathy enjoys playing the guitar, reading, writing and painting.

CONTACT: kathyiamnotgod@hotmail.com

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