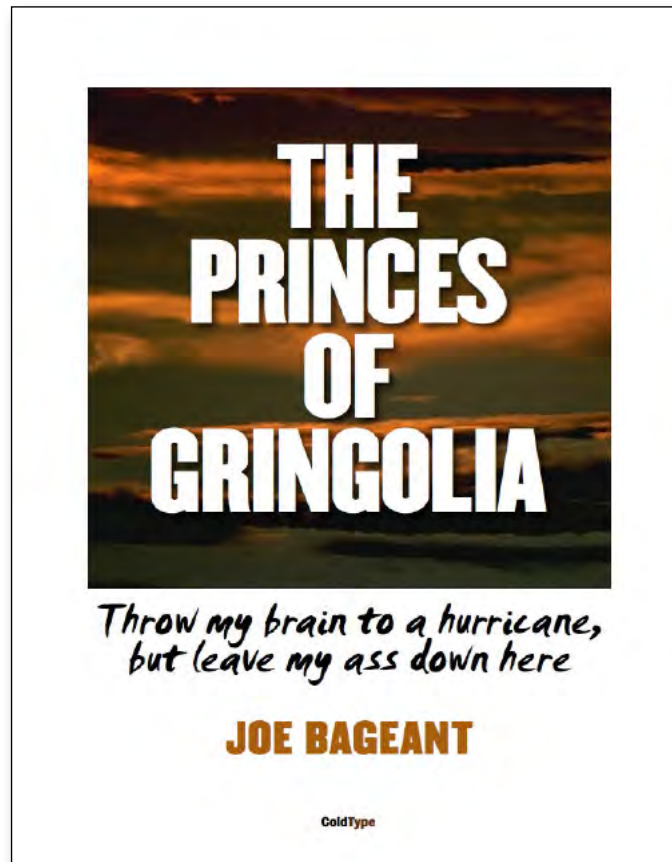


THE PRINCES OF GRINGOLIA

*Throw my brain to a hurricane,
but leave my ass down here*

JOE BAGEANT

ColdType



Joe Bageant is the author of the recently-published book, **Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War** from Random House Crown.

A complete archive of his online work, along with the thoughts of many working class Americans on the subject of class may be found at <http://joebageant.com>.

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JOE BAGEANT: THE PRINCES OF GRINGOLIA

HOPKINS VILLAGE, BELIZE – Right now I am doing something only someone as fucked up as an American-style lefty could possibly do: waiting for Hurricane Dean to strike my rickety shack and masturbating an indignant essay about “the global class struggle.”

It seems we Americans as a people are much given to personal indignation, if not national action, excepting perhaps aerial bombing and mass surveillance. But the poor of these Caribbean villages struggling for merest daily sustenance – the money for which is so often doled out by a well-scrubbed white hand much like my own – cannot afford open indignation much less “class struggle.”

Meanwhile, two gecko lizards are staring at one another on the wall above my laptop, as the small TV in my cabana blares an update on approaching Hurricane Dean. But the rain hammers the tin roof so loudly it’s impossible to hear what is being said, even with the sound turned all the way up. So I watch the hot blonde, the satellite pics and blurry shots of storm tortured palms and hope for the best.

Thanks to Hurricane Dean, for the next few days this Garifuna household of six, the Castillos, is sleeping several to a bed with the Rubio family, including this old gringo, who is most grateful to have drawn an older boy, not a little one still pissing on the sheets. The Rubios are a fishing family, evacuees are from the black “bakkatown” (back of town) shacks out on the reefs, which usually get smashed in such storms, even when not struck by the ‘cane itself.

Every plastic jug, pot and pan is filled with fresh water, and we cook the hell out of tortillas, beans, rice and everything else in an already near barren cupboard, stretching food between us and waiting for the power to go out – which also shuts down our meager trickle of a water system – a certainty given that it happens a couple times a week anyway without the help of a storm. So far, there is not a trace of panic. Between the hammering squalls, the sun cracks open brightly, the guy across the road goes back to work on his roof, and the lady of our house, Marzlyn, stands under the mango tree mash-

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ing plantains with a 4-foot wooden mortar and pestle. And Hurricane Dean just blew through Jamaica and past the Cayman Islands at 150 miles per hour. Look out, Cancun.

By the second day it's beginning to look like we're far enough south to miss the eye of Dean, if not some torrential rains and high winds. With luck we will not get enough rain to blow out the four-mile dirt road to the main highway (3-foot deep stretches forty feet across are not uncommon this time of year), and high winds will not strip our mango, lime, plantain, soursop and bread-fruit trees – important staples – of their not yet ripe fruits.

At the same time we may get nothing more than a severe rain storm, severe here being in a whole other league than in the United States. Picture 8 inches in an hour. Such is middle-class life in the hundreds of Caribbean villages you never see on American TV, even when they are wiped off the map by hurricanes, places with names like Seine Bight and Monkey River Town. Places that provide the groundskeepers and table wipers for the destination resorts such as Caye Chapel island golf course (\$200 and up to tee off) where the likes of Bill Gates fly in to enjoy 'round the clock concierge, what has got to be the most challenging windage factor in all of golfdom, and disciplined black or Hispanic attendants to their every whim, in a country where the minimum wage is USD \$1.50 for those lucky enough to find employment that actually pays it. All this happens without so much as a whisper of the subject of class on anyone's part, black or white.

The poor cannot afford open indignation, much less class justice. Granted, I tend to see class issues behind every curtain because of the powerless redneck class that shaped me from birth. Anyway, the leopard does not change its spots, so I still smoke, cuss, put too much salt on everything and have enough class anger to burn down every gated community and refurbished Manhattan brownstone and university in the country (sparing maybe Evergreen up there in the Northwest).

But that is because I can afford financially to be angry. Even though I voluntarily live on \$4,000 a year, an economic penitent if you will, I am nevertheless among the 6 percent world's rich and white human beings called Americans. Last week my neighbor, a middle aged barrel-chested man working as a resort security guard, sat on my porch and told of his dream of a national union for resort workers. We both looked down from the porch at his wife and daughter and his yet unpaid for house.

Nobody had to say aloud that the risk was just too great, or that the resort owners, U.S. speculators and the foreign shadow governments such as the

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U.S., (and increasingly, the Taiwanese buying up Belizean property and investing toward a soft landing when they are finally booted from their island stronghold) will never let that happen. Class struggle does not happen in Belize for the same reasons it does not happen in the U.S.: Fear. The global issue of class is however starting to be dealt with, and not-so-small fires of liberation are breaking out all over in Venezuela, Bolivia, Oaxaca, the Philippines, Indonesia ... and other "terrorist states unimpressed by Kevlar-clad GI Joes or the latest or the antics of Paris Hilton. Class will one day be dealt with in America too.

In fact, it's starting to be discussed by people other than internet socialists and old greybeard Jewish lefties in musty apartments in Patterson, N.J. Even the GOP is scouring the bushes for someone among them who can make populist noises into a microphone. And at this point, for reasons too numerous to go into here, they have a better chance of coming up with such a person than the Democrats. Populism is the newest term being used by both parties and the media to avoid the nasty C word, another brilliant cooption of liberal language for conservative purposes. It's hard to argue with the fact that we are all people (except for Muslim Americans, of course).

The term carries echoes "of the people, for the people and by the people." You don't revolt against the ghost of Abe Lincoln. Yet, were there to be a class revolution in the U.S. next week, and the old folks looted the drug stores (I'd be right there with 'em, though probably not for the same drugs) and even if that pack of Gucci whores at the Fed said: "Fuck it, let's spread all the geet we've looted equally among every American," we still will not have begun to touch the core of our national disease, our uniquely American supersized version of a universal one — individual greed. The national mindset of "I want all I can grab for myself and I want it now, even if it has to be on credit," constitutes a much bigger crisis than class in and of itself, and is the driver of our unfolding national catastrophe.

Garden variety personal greed may be a human constant in history — and we certainly have our share of it here in Hopkins — but it has been dangerous only on the part of the rich and powerful. After all, when was the last time selling someone a lame camel, a rotten mango or a quarter ounce of ditch weed oppressed millions? But few civilizations have ever upheld greed as the highest common virtue and civic responsibility as the American culture has. We do this under such false labels as self-advancement, opportunity, success, national economic good, or entitlement, but mostly because "I fucking want one of those!" The wanting is not the problem. The problem is that we get

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what we want. Or more correctly, we get what we are told to want, and are told to want more of everything from Louis Vuitton purses to Gameboys, depending upon our class, while the families such as the two piled into this household tonight are told to expect nothing. Is American economic culture inherently cruel and oblivious? Well, yes. Are Americans themselves moreover cruel or oblivious? This time last year I would have said that, granting the obvious exceptions to any generalization, yes. I have come to understand that, although we may well be conditioned to obliviousness by our market culture (our culture IS the market), and more recently, kept in a state of fear by a corporately backed criminal leadership, we are by no means especially cruel. In our socially alienated market society, in which we don't need each other so much as we need money to insulate ourselves from each other (what the fuck, poverty and bad taste might be contagious!), we are simply denied any real opportunity for face-to-face, on-the-ground compassion and service to our fellow man. Instead, our altruism is channeled through BIG BROTHER CHARITY INC, the United Way, the Red Cross, the Sierra Club, or any of the American Christian Syndicate's save the children rackets. What changed my mind? Living (as much as possible at least) in Hopkins. But before I again inadvertently unleash a flood of email enquiries regarding the Belizean coast as an expat paradise, let me say this: As I write this, I am watching the influx of fairly rich American assholes escaping the coming economic disaster up there in Gringolia. They are building their sterile fortified communities on either end of the village, stealing and bulldozing many Garifuna-owned acres, including the village's heritage-laden graveyard (illegal as hell, outright brazen theft, but as Old Charlie the Garifuna fisherman told me last night over a beer, "The man has not yet been born in this village who can lead us against this thing that is happening." We've got the same problem, Charlie.

But for every U.S. bloodsucker I've encountered here, I have also met an American, usually a young backpacker — but sometimes a retired couple having what they know will be their last ruggedly romantic adventure together — give their last damned dollar to a villager in need. Sometimes they keep back only enough for bus fair for the 35-mile ride into Dangriga to punch the ATM for cash on their Visa cards, knowing it is going to hurt like hell when they get home to pay the tab on a fixed income. They are never the rich, who don't come into the village, anyway, except to hire a house slave or two.

In my experience the generous and compassionate older Americans are nearly always working class or old hippies. The last American I saw do it was a retired machinist. And sometime in the next few months a Nashville librarian

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and her husband are coming down to explore the possibility of building a children's library with their own meager savings. When I meet such Americans, I get choked up inside and am released from some part of my cynicism about my country. Little do they know that when they give to others, including jaded old American writers who, as inveterate observers of life, are too often lost in the horrors they have witnessed — even helped create — and have been too unaware of the compassion that often flowers before them.

Helen and Bob and the suicidal Hindu

The Great and Glorious World Money Machine! The Enlightenment's gilded engine of commerce, sprung gloriously and fully formed from the womb of ration! It may have delighted the hell out of Alexander Hamilton and Adam Smith but has created a thousand hells for non-European peoples and still creates new ones daily. Even when the system functions peacefully, assuming it ever has, and to our maximum prosperity, the gauge of which now seems to be obesity (someday there will be a Sumo-style weigh-in to qualify for U.S. citizenship) we are made willing fools, not to mention unconscious instruments of orchestrated global cruelty.

One small example: We find ourselves turned into walking signage for the system itself, wearing Nike or Old Navy or Izod shirts made from Indian cotton produced by small farmers forced to use expensive Monsanto pesticides and seed bought on credit (many of whom committed suicide when this mounting debt cost them their traditional family plots of land. If you missed that on CNN, it's because it was never there and never will be). We do not know those Indians' names or the faces of their children. Then again, they do not know ours, which matters not to us because there are umpteen millions of the wretched fuckers over there where life is cheap. We, on the other hand live in the land of the rich and the free, and we've got the Indian cotton T-shirt to prove it. Pass the Doritos. And when the T-shirt is tossed a couple months later, it ends up in one of those rag bales shipped to the Third World. Thus the world traveler is treated to the bizarre sight of a malnourished fellow human lying on the sidewalk in Mexico City's Zocalo — most likely an Indian or mestizo — wearing a "What Happens in Vegas Remains in Vegas" T-shirt. The small grimy hand lifts in supplication for a few pesos. Helen and Bob, vacationing on their credit cards, look away, partly because we've been taught not to stare at the poor (conveniently not noticing inequity) and partly because Americans are at least still capable of inner embarrassment at the inequity they

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are conditioned to avoid. In the end, though, both the beholder and the beheld have been standardized and depersonalized by the division of labor and mass scale inherent in America's free market capitalism, which Chomsky says, "... historically, we've never honestly practiced even once."

He mi iduhe!

Meanwhile, there's that approaching hurricane ... Among the Rubios staying with us until Dean passes is their 12-year-old adopted child, Julian. Through my high kitchen window I can see him joyfully helping his mom remove billowing bedsheets from the clothes line. And when he is not doing that, he is running to help his dad with every task. His adoptive father, Labon, is a stern one, hard as nails by American standards, quick to laughter and affection with his family. But what drives Julian's eager cooperation is his deep admiration for his adopted father, as his model for a strong manhood. Boys think about becoming men here, the same as everywhere else, I suppose, but much more so. I've spent time with the Rubios on a solitary atoll out in the reefs and watching the interplay of Julian and his adopted parents. Normal as it is to them, it remains one of the most beautiful human family experiences I've ever witnessed.

Nor is it particularly unique. His cousin in our household, Kirky, does the same. To Kirky, his smiling, hard-laboring father, Luke, who admonishes me for buying the kids such things as soccer balls, "Spoil the pickney, spoil de man" (pickney is not a derogatory term here among the Garifuna, who were never enslaved), represents for Luke, as Labon does for Julian, all the dignity any man can ever hope to possess. Being allowed to sit among his father and other grown men late into the evenings is an achievement, proof of one more small step toward manhood. During the day when Kirky is not riding herd on the toddlers for his mom, Marzlyn, he voluntarily rakes the sandy yard clean, flat and white because it needs to be done every day, and because it will save his dad an hour of doing the same when he returns home from his job at the resort. And because it is what a grown man does — works, serves and honors family blood. Blood is thick here.

When Julian showed up with his family to wait out Hurricane Dean, both boys were movingly overjoyed to see each other because, "He mi iduhe!" (cousin). And from what I can hear through the floorboards of my cabana as they linger in the shade below, they share the secrets of young boy's souls.

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Then go running off to shoot marbles in the wet hot sand. Neither has ever played an electronic game or has any notion of what a gameboy or an Xbox might be (though I'm sure there must be a few here among those villagers who've returned from working in the States). Tradition, community and clan, though rapidly declining, is the animating force of what's left of the old Garifuna culture that still exist along this coast, mostly in the villages. It's stubborn stuff. Right now I can hear the drumming of a Dugu (the traditional ancestor-based African religion of the Garifuna) coming from the long grass temple on the beach, not because there is a 'cane approaching, but despite that, there is one coming. Luke says they already had a ceremony planned and a little thing like a hurricane threat would never stop them. "The old ones, dey are stubborn!" he laughs. Stubborn or not, all of us feel how the drumming animates this night with the traditional Garifuna spirit. Cultural and spiritual cohesion is a bit easier for the Belizean Garifuna, given there are only a few thousand of them strung along the coastline.

Since most families here never get split up or scattered, their human energies remain collective (if for no other reason than sheer necessity) in a manner utterly impossible amid the astounding diversity of the American people. Our only tangible national commonality, regardless of bullshit and rhetoric, is basically the currency and its transaction and accumulation. Consequently, American culture's animating force has always been the financial transaction. Even Tocqueville noted that Americans seemed driven to buy and sell everything they touched, apparently for the sheer hell of it. Two centuries later we find all collective human energies being directed toward purchasing and working to purchase cell phones, beanie weenies, spec houses, Dale Earnhardt crock pots and Korean-made electric ass scratchers, plus storage lockers to cram all this needless stuff into.

Even Christianity gets into the act with hundreds of "Christian mortgage companies" and, honest to god, a "faith-based quick lube" auto service in my hometown of Winchester, Va., which doubters may Google in the Winchester Star newspaper. All of which is not exactly a recipe for producing a nation of high-minded intellectuals and altruists. What it has produced is this: 3 billion pounds of money-blinded human meat — 400 million pounds of which is lard — straining under the common corpo-military-financial yoke in order to pay for and consume 30 times what it takes to meet its basic needs. We've so far exceeded basic need that obese 18-year-old kids are dying of heart attacks. And all this at ever-escalating high cost too.

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Even leisure, relaxing and doing nothing, is among the most expensive damned things in the country. When it comes to leisure, our benevolent system provides two whole weeks a year (count 'em, folks!) but only to those with job security and the "discretionary income," left on the plastic to cough up for synthetic experiences (hallucinations, really) at "leisure destinations," such as the expensive gringo resort just outside this village. Last night an old expat owner of a modest beachside inn here told me of a tourist guest who had changed clothes in the car on the way down, then stepped out of it in a leopard bikini, spike heels and dark glasses. It's no mystery why she equated rustic little Hopkins Village with Cannes. In the travel industry's hallucination generating department, anyplace with sand and sun is Cannes, or at least Maui.

*If we only had a brain
With the thoughts you'd be thinkin'
You could be another Lincoln
If you only had a brain!
—Dorothy, Wizard of Oz*

The truth, however, is that, regardless of income, most Americans work too much and have too little time to experience true leisure, let alone time to develop a genuine intellectual and inner life. And that is the underlying horror of the consumer state and the source of that haunting sense of meaninglessness amid all the white noise and bright lights and toys. No functional sustaining interior life. No private mind-soul garden to cultivate, no psychospiritual inner home. No stable center of being. That sounds arrogant as hell, but I'm saying it anyway. If we had such a thing as a cohesive national moral and intellectual life, we surely wouldn't be the society of engorgement, not to mention the international thugs that we now are. Or at least not as much so.

But very few Americans, not even university professors, book editors, authors, theologians, all sorts of people one would expect to have a thriving intellectual life, have one. Zilch. Sure, some study rigorously, and possibly as many as a quarter of Americans buy, read and discuss "important books" and go see "important movies," (which I don't believe exist, but that's another matter). However buying and reading the best books does not necessarily, or even usually, have much to do with an interior intellectual life, the real kind that comes from spending countless unencumbered hours alone thinking about the

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world in our own internal and completely personal language, contemplating what we and our fellow man experience, thus bringing forth the unique elements of individual human comprehension and discovery. There is a word for the ongoing interplay and cultivation of these things, the cultivation of this mind-soul garden – spiritual. Predictably enough, the cartel that provides for every human need from Cheetos to iPods and self-help videos, is willing to sell us an intellectual and spiritual life, too. So we buy and read those “substantive” books, most often written by people working too hard at writing substantive books to experience much of the world’s substance. Buying and reading books, which damned few Americans do anyway, is the mark of the “thinking classes.” And a degree certifying they’ve read the state-sanctioned cannon for their narrow slot in the economic machinery certifies them as intellectuals. No room exists in the machinery for an Eric Hoffer, Thoreau or even an Aristotle, none of whom could get published today. Sorry Ari, no profitable demographic segment. Gandhi, however, might find a niche with the New Age crowd, providing he threw in a bar of Ayurvedic soap with each book sold.

Needless to say, good books are delightful and profound departure points to new avenues for an enlightened mind. It would be hard for a Western person to imagine an intellectual life without them. But they are certainly not the cause of one. Of the three living persons I admire most for their deep, graceful intellectual life and insight, two are famous, well-paid and surely among the most well-read people anywhere. But the third is an all-but-illiterate old Garifuna fisherman. Our practical relationship is based mostly on my sharing a few groceries and beers during the off tourist season when he cannot work as a fishing guide. As a younger man, he saw death and storms at sea, suffered daily abuse and insult under the British colonials who once ran this country and even today spends half of each year wondering where his next meal is coming from. Yet he manages to retain piercing intellect and insight (often beyond words), and though he is visited like the rest of us by the soul’s miseries, he lets joy blow through his inner self as casually as the Caribbean breeze in which he’s lived his entire life.

There is much to be learned from the poor, so much in fact that we should be their students, not they ours. I’ve been told that Einstein once said that intelligence equals the ability to find happiness. Some Einstein scholar will surely write me that Al said no such thing. If not, then he should have. If happiness and moral rightness were to be found within the self, then as the most self-centered people on earth, we would be the happiest and most enlightened.

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And if “American style individualism” were the hallmark of freedom, there would be no Department of Homeland Security, no government satellites scanning every single email we send and we would be free to visit Cuba.

Another round of elections are coming up both here in Belize and in America, and the serious political junkies at both ends of the Caribbean (in other words, the suckers who believe “change can be effected within the system) are all worked up into slobbering fits. Belizeans of late have gotten slightly more from the system, a modest social security program, and, at long last, free school books for the nation’s kids, written by the same incompetents who made fortunes on royalties from the old ones in a political fixed textbook publishing racket, similar to our own corporate one in the U.S. But despite having a far freer and more varied press than the U.S. (in a rather strange twist, lack of libel laws actually works for the people’s interests most of the time) Belizean national elections are the same as those in the U.S.

This is to say an elite game of political musical chairs, except that the stakes are astronomically higher for the princes of Gringolia. The upper-level candidates in both countries are wealthy and visible elites at the service of invisible ones who prefer to remain that way, thank you. The top dogs have pictures of themselves with prime ministers and presidents on their walls. As a veteran Washington reporter once told me, “If you are the kind of politico who likes pictures on the office wall of yourself with shaking hands with presidents, you ain’t a player, you’re just a useful pawn to a bigger pawn.” It doesn’t take much to be useful and get one of those photos. I have a framed photo of myself with Bill Clinton — yes, I was suckered into the Clinton personality cult — and all I did was deliver a couple of fake “foster children” to a campaign appearance so he could mug with them for the press. I long ago took the photo off my wall and buried it in the back of my files. But I’m probably going to hell for it, anyway.

In the end, no political personality cult or party, no “economic system,” no ism, Marxism, capitalism nor even the most compassionate socialism is going to satisfy that inner void, that vacuum that is the source of the phenomenal greed that enslaves Americans. The void we keep stuffing with noise and spectacle and the gulag-made goods that produce so much of the world’s misery because we are told to do so 24 hours a day. Believe it or not, as I write this and watch footage, Hurricane Dean’s barreling our way, and frightened villagers trundle bed clothing and food toward more affluent neighbors with concrete houses or wait for the last bus to hurricane-proof Belmopan.

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George Foreman flickers on the screen trying to sell me a smokeless electric grill, followed by a gringo-targeted Nationwide ad for increased home insurance. There is no geographical escape from America. But there is a spiritual one, sometimes born of intellect, but always nourished by compassion, which in truth does not seek to escape the world, or to own the world, but to embrace it for what it can teach us in the brief span we are granted that opportunity. When it comes to filling our disastrous national void, not to mention saving our own asses from ecological and economic disaster, we can learn more from the world's poor than they can ever learn from the "American experience," or gain from the "American lifestyle" or national ethos of greed.

Dog fights, scorpions and paradise

This little village in this little country is not paradise, not even close. This is the land of the agonizing sand flea, the scorpion and the swarming sting rays of the night tides. It is a place where no wallet can be opened in a store without a dozen covetous eyes locking onto its contents and where dogs fight brutally in the yards. Last month our dog Hero killed a neighbor's dog in front of the whole family. And amid the screaming and crying, not even the powerful-bodied Luke could break Hero's death grip on the intruding dog's throat, brutally demonstrating the truth of planetary flesh from Palestine, to the Sudan, and even in America for the several millions in the unseen ghettos of the national machinery.

This is also a place where, sooner or later, with no small help from global warming, the village's tiny houses will be blown off their stilts and tumble into a hurricane's deep "surge waters," rolling over once, maybe twice, before becoming a pile of splintered boards, while the palm frond houses of the poorer families are atomized into grassy shreds amid the airborne cooking pots, baby clothing and cheap Taiwanese boom boxes. It also is where hypodermic needles turn up on the beach (hopefully illegally dumped medical waste drifted down from Mexico), where cocaine is dirt cheap for the minority who use it and where at least a couple of crackheads dwell and several more drift back and forth between here and Dangriga, 35 miles up the only paved road on this side of the country.

Yet the village is still a place where matrons bake coconut birthday cakes, kids shoot hoops by the sparse streetlight and adolescent couples walk bashfully holding hands under swaying palms and a silver pie pan moon. Since I started this, Dean has become a cat five 'cane. So the whole family has packed

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for that mountain-bound bus that won't be here because it is stuck in the already traffic-hammed road to hurricane-proof Belmopan. Generously, the brawny resort guard, who lives in a concrete house next door, has taken our family in for the night. Like I said, it ain't paradise. Just a spot on the planet where a man has time think and peck at a keyboard and pour bedtime orange juice for sleepy, well-scrubbed kids just before the moon comes up. Dean will come and go. But some things are eternal.

***Note:** Hurricane Dean spared the village of Hopkins entirely, and miracle of miracles, even the power and water were back on by noon next day. It may be simply my writer's imagination, but I could swear there was a knowing twinkle in the eye of the old Dugu drummer down at the vegetable stand this morning.*

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