

10/21/11
Viernes

My darling padres,

¿Que pasa? That's the equivalent of "what's up?" here... I taught my first English class on Sunday & we were going over basic phrases & that was one thing they wanted to know how to say, haha. I'm writing this as a quick follow-up to my last letter. You'll be pleased to know I am quite comfortably settled in my very own home (one room). This will be the first time I've ever lived completely alone, I always had a roommate or a Warren in college but last night was my 3rd night here & I'm doing quite well! My host family still visits at least once a day to see how I am & to make sure I've managed to feed myself. They're very sweet, my first night they didn't trust my little tap light you gave me so they brought over one of their kerosene lanterns (a wick in a glass jar w/ a hole in the top). I'll try to figure out if buying kerosene is more cost effective than buying batteries... that's why I keep a budget.

The house approval process was no picnic, as you already know, my supervisor came last Tuesday. The Community Analysis went fine, there were 20-30 ish people (I would have liked more), I brought candy & 'chicha de avena' (sweet drink w/ oats & milk) which is always a good way to get people's attention, keeping it is the hard part. I would have liked more participation since that's the whole point of the meeting but things went smoothly so I'm not complaining. When Aimee checked the house she found all these tiny things wrong w/ it (ie the window's locks were wood & she wanted metal, etc.. so I had to buy 4 new locks (I only have 2 windows & 2 doors) & nail up 2 boards where there were "big" cracks between the walls & roof... we fixed everything the next day, that was the easy part, finding a cellphone that could send photos & enough signal to do it was the killer & Friday was the last day she was in the office before traveling again. Thursday night I couldn't sleep well after thinking of all the possible ways I could get her the photos in the next 18-ish hours. Friday morning I was determined to be more positive, for my host family's sake, they knew it bothered me the house didn't pass & I didn't want them

I'm almost
positive that's
a word

to think it was because I didn't enjoy living with them. To make the day even more irksome, the week before they had planned a mini house-warming party for me, complete w/ a "Felicidades Raquel!" cake for Friday night. My day ended up being saved by a Blackberry that one of the tecnicos brought (he's in charge of the school garden project & I always try to help out whenever they're working in it, so while he was working he gave me his phone & I ran around taking the photos, looking for service to send them, calling Anne who said some were too dark, retaking them, calling again & returning the phone... all done by 11 am but she had to check my form & said she'd call back later that afternoon, so I'm still waiting... By 5 pm my family's making my party dinner (yuca w/ chicharon, fried pig skins, not my idea, haha) but I still haven't got a phone call so I call her & she says she'll look at it now & I can call back in 45 minutes... 45 min. later we're about to eat but I won't be able to truly enjoy it unless the house is officially approved so I call back & finally get told it's approved so I get to have my cake & eat it too 😊 She told me I was the 1st P.C.V. in the group (21 of us) to get their house approved, on honor I worked my well-rounded butt off for. Long story... sorry, but successfully finding/moving into my own house is one of the first big challenges & it symbolizes our next phase as a volunteer.

Now it's time to work. While it's obviously a continuous process, our 1st 3 months are sort of set aside to get to know our community; we're not expected to start any major, long-term projects which makes a lot of sense since realistically you can only really work on 2 or 3 big projects so you have to choose things that a) the people really need, b) are interested in & c) can be accomplished or at least have noticeable results in a fairly short time. When you first arrive you don't know any of that & people won't always directly tell you so while it seems like I haven't been doing much all my "researching" is crucial. I have 3 project ideas I can start planning/getting started!

The Sinst is w/ an organic insecticide made w/ garlic, onion, hot sauce, bar soap & a leaf here called Palo... it was something I didn't really mean to start using but my 2nd month my best dad asked if I knew how to get rid of the bugs that were eating his rice, we were given the recipe in training so I figured I'd try it... it worked. Our Verma asked about her peping so I let her borrow my spray bottle & some of what we made & it worked for those too. Being young, white & female those early (small) successes are really important for building my credibility as an agri. técnico, plus Annee was impressed so I'll try to start teaching using the insecticide on a larger scale... I hope you don't mind having to use your Sp./Eng. dictionaries occasionally to read this ^{if} by the time you visit you'll be able to chat w/ all of my gente here.

October 24th, I meant to finish this days ago but now, even since moving I'm pleasantly surprised that I don't seem to have much down time. Tomorrow I'm visiting my training community, & I get to take one of those long, wooden canoes across Lake Gatun to do it... very exciting. I have to leave my house at 4:30 am to walk the 1 hrs. to be at the boat dock when they leave @ 6, after that it's an hour boat ride to La Chorrera. I'm looking forward to seeing the lake @ sunrise! Today was my first day harvesting cañi, which was fun, my neighbor's 5 & 10 yr old girls were with me & is there was a branch I couldn't reach they'd climb up & bend it over until I grabbed it... we made a good team. Then I was served rabbit (conejo) & verdura soup (remember the verduras... plátano verde, yuca, also ñame & ñame which are very similar to yuca, both tubers & starchy but yummy). Now I'm sitting on my front porch making sure my neighbor's chickens don't eat all the Srijoles in my newly made huerto casero. One thing I've discovered I love about agriculture is how exciting it always is when you can see the first little leaves of the seeds you planted break through the soil. My Srijoles are at that stage so right now I'm very protective of

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my garden & almost wish I didn't have to leave for 3 days so I could hover over it like a mother hen. This morning I planted two 'pilos' of zapallo (green/yellow pumpkin) which I'm excited to eat in the next 90-110 days when it'll be ripe.

Right now it's a sunny, breezy 3:06 pm, my cacao (which I finally peeled this morning & took me 3 days to do & my finger nails are broken & stained brown but it'll be worth it, haha) is drying, my plants are growing & I still have to pech & study (which I unfortunately haven't had much time for in days). Around 5-15h I'll make dinner, I can't wait until I have fresh veggies, neither man nor Rachel can live off starch alone, I really want to plant spinach & zucchini but no one here really grows them so I'm having a hard time finding seeds. I'm also thinking about planting remolacha (Swiss chard) which, as mom knows we've never had. I saw it when she made it for us, but they are rich in a bunch of vitamins. People here add them to potato salad which turns it a festive pink color, haha... you should try it sometime, I know mom would like it, just boil & drop them up w/ the potatoes. The sun's getting lower & I need to 'agrovechar' the light to pech & study so unless I think of something witty to say in the next 2 hours I have left to write it's been a pleasure. It makes me smile that you enjoy reading about my quiet little life here. I'm glad I have the opportunity to share it with you, my little trials & accomplishments seem more fulfilling knowing I'm, in a way, sharing them with you. Thank you, as always for being there for me, I know you may not feel like there's much you can do but just knowing I'm in your thoughts makes this whole experience so much more significant. It's odd but I'm closer to you now than I have for years, I think I can express myself better sometimes in letters. I love you all so much & can't wait to see you again!

Love always, your cacao peeling,
huevo making daughter,
- Rachel