

## The Pregant Man

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The secret to being accepted as a doctor by a rural population is to befriend the community's local healer or shaman. Only then will people begin to look to you for advice. Therefore, shortly after I arrived in Barichara, I found out who was the town's "*medical practitioner*" and soon went to the countryside to introduce myself to *Don Luis*.

"Good morning *Don Luis*, I'm-"

"Yes, I already know. I heard of you. Nice to meet ya *ditora*, and welcome."

That was all I needed.

One morning, a few weeks after having opened my practice, three *campesinas* appeared. An older countrywoman and two younger women. I later found out that they were *Doña Helena* and her daughters. I asked them the usual questions:

"Who are you?" and "what is wrong?"

But the older woman's answer was quite puzzling.

"No *ditora*. *Don Luis* sent us. He thinks that you can help us better than he can. My husband is expecting."

"Expecting...? You mean pregnant?"

"Whatever you say doctor, *pregant*..."

There is another thing you have to learn: not to smile, or worse yet, laugh at the answers given by the afflicted. Things like men complaining of *wind in their vagina*, women with *prostrate* problems, or *incubated hearts*.

"And what makes you think he's pregnant?"

“Oh, *dotorcita*, ‘cause he been *pregant* for close to nine months.

“You do know that men can’t get pregnant, don’t you?”

“Oh doctor, but they can when they’re possessed. He’s cursed.”

“Who cursed him and when?”

“*Dotorcita*, it happened when he went to work on a farm in Venezuela. He had a fight with a guy and, ya know, those farmhands are terrible, they’re so deep into witchcraft. Lil’ bit later he done got sick. His stomach started to grow and finally he couldn’t work no more. He came back to Barichara to the house and was really feelin’ bad with a gigantic stomach. Mark my words, he must be almost nine months along.”

When I asked her why she hadn’t taken him to the hospital:

“How can you even ask, doctor?! How could we tell the hospital’s doctor that my husband is *pregant*? Those people just don’t get it... but *Don Luis* said you would.”

After intensive questioning, I knew that the sick man was nothing but skin and bones with a large bulge in his belly. He didn’t eat anymore and:

“At any moment his stomach’ll burst and the creature’ll come out and he’ll die. Oh *dotorcita*, what should I do, what do I do?”

What a dilemma! What could I do? I already had a very clear image of a patient with late-stage gastrointestinal cancer.

“Well, I’ll have to see him regardless and you might have to go to the hospital so that they can do an X-ray.”

About three days later I walked along the pastoral pathways of the farm with his two daughters. When we reached the house, a picturesque country dwelling boasting

brightly coloured planters, I was greeted by many members of the family, including the men drinking beer on the patio. They invited me to join them.

“Have a drink, *dotorcita*.”

Before I could even take a look at the patient, I had to listen to the various theories around the wretched disease that had struck poor *Don Juan* while I drank a few more beers. Finally, I was led to a bedridden figure who certainly seemed to have one foot in the grave. However, when I examined his stomach all I could feel was an enormous ball of gas. I was able to convince the family that, on my bidding, the hospital would take an X-ray, no questions asked.

A few days later I had the X-rays in my hands, and as I had dared to hope, all that could be seen was a hugely swollen colon, undoubtedly overrun by amoebae and other parasites. Despite which, the family refused to accept my diagnosis. *Don Juan* was pregnant. I would have to show them the fetus, that creature born of black magic. Fortunately, they were satisfied when I showed them a dark spot in a corner of the X-ray. However, poor Juan’s life was hanging by a thread. He could leave this world at any moment.

“*Doña Helena*, what we’ll have to do now is give him a great deal of medicine to try to kill the cursed fetus before your husband’s insides rot away. You have to understand that his chances of survival are very low. Too much time has passed.”

Finally, after a flurry of accusations and laments, they left my office with the necessary instructions and medicine to start a long battle with the hope of winning. Which we did.

But this is not where the story ends. A few weeks later, a fairly surly farmer appeared in my office. He answered my usual questions with an outburst.

“They’re stealing my cassava!”

“Pardon me, your what?”

“My cassava, cassava, my food!”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, but what’s wrong with you? Why have you come to see me?”

“That’s why. So you can find out who’s guilty, who’s stealing from me. I’ve been told you’re a seer, and you can find stuff out.”

“Oh, no sir, what a shame. I can divine illnesses of the body, but nothing more.”

The man shot me a murderous look, stood up, and walked out.

And that’s how my fame as a witch came to an end.