

# GREEN LETTER

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We begin with a report from Anne Barr regarding a very uncomfortable visit we made to 'hot country' recently:

"At the beginning of December Louise, her 6 week old baby Michael, Katie, Jenny and I went to Meta along with Gloria Cuartas, a fiery famous left-wing activist and now candidate for the Colombian Senate, plus the director of the National Parks of that area, his wife, a young Colombian documentary maker and a young Colombian ecologist. We were invited by the same group of women who had invited me last August to talk about resistance via food self sufficiency and then again in September to help them make gardens. They had organised a Seed Exchange Encounter with other women's groups in the area, which is an enormous territory that used to be part of the Demilitarized Zone where peace talks took place from 1999 to 2001 between the Colombian Government and the FARC guerrilla. The army moved into most of the former Zone in 1991 but they seemed to have forgotten about this bit and left it alone until very recently. However, at this very moment they are invading it and the people we met there have mostly left their houses to hide out in the jungle. There are reports of many peasants who have disappeared.

"The journey there is very long (about 12 hours) and very bumpy, dusty and hot. We went in 3 separate groups, each group of Colombians accompanied by one or two of us pale-skinned foreigners so as to lessen any aggro when going through the many army checkpoints.

"We all got there with little hassle but with very sore bones. One of the people due to speak at the two-day event was Jenny and on the second day of the meeting, she spoke to a packed open-air hall of about 300 people, men, women and children, many of them FARC militia and almost all of them FARC supporters, for they live in an area that has been well and justly run by the FARC for about 40 years.

"As long-time readers of the Green Letters will remember Tristan James, Jenny's grandson, and Javier Nova, her daughter's boyfriend, were murdered in July 2000 by FARC militia in Icononzo, Tolima. She spoke about this event very emotionally but without blaming the whole FARC guerrilla movement for these tragic deaths. The attention given to her speech was total, for open criticism in FARC areas of FARC lack of control of their people is not very common! And as a great proportion of the audience were militia, there was some discomfort amongst them for they naturally felt some of the blame fall upon them.

"After her long and moving speech, she handed the microphone over for questions from the audience. At first

people were reluctant to ask anything but soon warmed up and several men who had the look of guerrilleros about them asked pointed questions. One asked should we not forgive and forget and another asked were we blaming the whole movement for these deaths. Jenny answered that on the personal level, forgiving or forgetting was a psychological impossibility, but that on a political level, we understood what had happened, and she went into a great deal of detail regarding our various meetings and discussions with FARC leaders in the aftermath of the tragedy. I experienced it as a huge relief to be talking openly about this with this kind of audience. And when one of the elder women leaders stood up and talked strongly about the need to control young bucks with guns it felt like a small but important victory over the murderous machismo that infects this country on all levels.

"Jenny interspersed and 'punctuated' her talk several times by getting her two daughters, Louise and Katie, who were on stage throughout, to sing specific songs of their own composition, which they did beautifully and with such professionalism that many people assumed they were famous singers. She also handed the microphone to me on several occasions to add comments, information and my own experiences.

"I could feel that this talk had caused waves and sure enough in the days that followed, gradually the feedback trickled in. It was heartening to note that the main supporters of the way Jenny had talked were the strong women of the area, most of whom had formerly been guerrilleras. Many of them reported that they had argued in their homes with people, both men and women, who had misinterpreted Jenny's speech as wholesale criticism of the FARC. However, it was disheartening to realize that not enough of this kind of open discussion takes place.

"In the evening of the same day, our two girls put on a very amusing hour-long musical play which essentially took the piss out of town living and showed up the benefits of living in the countryside with Nature, which everyone loved and which sealed their fame in that area forever!

"After this series of events, we spent about a week walking around in dangerously hot sunshine and terribly degraded and deforested land visiting people who had invited us to their farms, or to see often depressing little gardens they were trying to make in this boiling land. I had given some workshops on compost and garden-making a few months beforehand but hadn't expected to be taken seriously as the climate is gruelling, the economy is almost entirely based on coca leaf and chemical use is extremely accepted and widespread. Sure

enough one of the gardens we had made had had weed-killer applied. I was furious and upset and refused to go and see it until several of the women said they had scolded and sanctioned the woman who had done it. But it's a tough climate for the likes of lettuces and carrots though one woman did manage to feed us on fresh lettuce from her tiny garden in the midst of her coca-leaf patch....

"After Jenny's speech, a lovely old hippy-looking woman had invited us, with a kind of urgency in her voice, to her house where she lives with her second husband, her first husband having been killed by the FARC in another area. Hers was a terrible but not uncommon story of intrigue, betrayal and the kind of twistedness that occurs in every civil war: her husband's own brother told the FARC that her husband was an army spy so that he was killed by militia. He then made it seem that SHE was his killer and she had to run for her life leaving all she had, her farm and her livelihood, to the husband's brother. But she is a fighter, and after settling in the area we were in, she fought for her good name and that of her husband and had their names cleared. The other man, her brother-in-law, turned paramilitary along with most of the area she had lived in formerly.

"This kind of betrayal within a family is not an unusual thing here, and I remember my grandmother telling me similar horrific stories about how families and close neighbours killed each other over a field or an old grudge during the Irish civil war in the twenties. Jenny tells me the same thing happened in the Spanish civil war. Civil wars seem to bring out the worst in people.

"The woman's second husband, a lovely man of 69, began to tell us his story and had us glued to the hard little stools we were sitting on for many hours in their simple but very pretty farm: He had been captured by the army in 1982 and tortured for 9 days, most of which time he spent in so much agony that he begged for a quick death. He was beaten very badly day after day and had sharp instruments stuck under his finger- and toe-nails and was threatened with being thrown into a pit where they had already thrown many other bodies, all to make him 'confess' to knowledge about the guerrilla that he didn't possess. He said that many of the lower rank and file soldiers tried to help him on the quiet and the pain was so bad that he even began to think about making something up. However he decided to stick to the truth, until finally, when they were about to take him to the torturer with the worst reputation to break him or kill him, he said that he sat 'concentrating on the mind' of this man for a long time in a final desperate attempt to get out of his plight, and just as his torture was about to recommence, the captain decided to set him free. Then, mind-twistingly, the same men who had tortured him all became friendly and offered him food. Then they brought him a long document to sign to testify that they had treated him very well... Of course he signed it to get out, and then he was told to spy on the guerrilla and to return every two weeks to town to report to the army. This would mean certain death at the hands of the guerrilla, so he moved away to another area leaving his pigs and chickens in the care of his neighbours, but he missed his home and decided to risk coming back, only to find his pigs and chickens and all his household goods had

been stolen by the same neighbours.

"Yet even after all these trials, there he was in front of us, healthy and keen to tell his story. His wife who lives from growing soya beans and making tofu and soya milk, was hopping up and down with impatience during his long and harrowing tale because he has never made formal complaints about how the Army treated him and she was insisting that he should still do this. He had also seen one of his neighbours beaten so badly by the army that the sticks they used were broken into splinters. This old couple had asked us to visit them so that we would tell their tale to as many people as possible."

**Guerrillas, lace hearts and government officials** (also reported by Anne)

"Once when I was in the house of a woman who makes her living as a seamstress for the guerrilla, amongst the long bolts of camouflage material they had brought her to make their tents, I noticed a lot of frilly, coloured bits of lace and appliqué teddy bears and sequined flowers and hearts. I asked what they were for and was left jaw agape as I was told they were for decorating the insides and the borders of the female guerrilleras' mosquito nets ....

"Later some guerrilleros came to have their measurements taken for new shirts. I was sitting facing the road whilst they had animated discussions about where to put the pockets on their new clothes and so I saw before they did that a government official who had never visited the area before was approaching. I warned them but they were cool and calm and basically didn't care. The government official pretended he didn't know who they were or what all the camouflage was for and they all engaged in small talk. Later there was a rumour that the army were invading and upon seeing the distress of the seamstress at possibly being caught with so much camouflage material around, the government official got out a spade and *buried it in the back garden....*

"Another anecdote from this very strange war: When I was travelling to Meta on a previous occasion, near the end of the long road we met a few dozen young soldiers, armed and dressed in protective gear to the hilt, panting and sweating as they ran away from a confrontation with the guerrilla. They warned the driver of the jeep I was in that we shouldn't go any further because of grave danger from the guerrilla, but the passengers for whom this was daily fare, urged him onwards as they wanted to get home. About half a kilometre down the road, we met a group of very young guerrilla fighters, shirtless and relaxed, drinking fizzy drinks. They hopped on the crowded jeep, hanging off it from all corners. Another two minutes down the road, we came to a full blown local party and football match with music so loud no-one had heard the battle..."

**The strange policy of the Colombian National Parks department for the conservation of national park buffer zones.** (by Anne)

"Our various visits to Meta were initiated by a programme

paid for by the Dutch government (to the tune of so many millions of euros that my head can't hold the figure), which is a part of the Dutch 'carbon debt', connected, I believe, to their signing of the Kyoto agreement. This money goes to the Colombian Ministry of Environment Parks Dept. supposedly to help peasants create lifestyles that do not involve destroying more jungle. The Parks Dept. then immediately run into basic Colombian-type political difficulties, as most areas where trees still exist in numbers worth saving are guerrilla-run areas, and most government functionaries are nervous about going there, as they are well-off city people instilled with media-inspired fears and, they believe, in danger of being kidnapped.

"So to get around this problem, they contract an agricultural trade union whose members are fiercely persecuted by the government to go into these areas. The peasants from these unions know that the guerrilla are, in the main, not the bogey men richer Colombians believe them to be. Most guerrillas are very talkable-to and negotiable-with although we also know to our cost that not ALL of them are like that, as if they were, our two boys would still be alive today.

"I have two good friends within the peasant agricultural union who know of our work, and it was they who originally asked me to go and run workshops on compost and gardens and how to eat vegetables, which I enthusiastically did. But then I discovered that the financing of my little courses was not officially part of the Dutch deal, and that my friends were paying for me to go there from their own salaries because they realise the importance of vegetables and compost. The Parks department have dedicated most of this grant money to bringing in thousands of animals – goats, pigs and chickens – most of who will sicken and die in the humid jungle heat, the rest will simply get eaten, and the coca trade will carry on as merrily as before for it is the only produce that sells easily. This is what you get when financing is handled by office people who have little or no idea of the reality of country living."

### **Geriatric Courtship** (by Anne)

And now for a little light relief:

"On one of our scorching walks around Meta, I was left alone one morning in a farmhouse with the father of one of my local friends. She had gone out to milk the cows. As soon as she left, her father, a silent old man of 97, suddenly came to life and asked me had his daughter really gone? 'Yes', I said, somewhat puzzled. 'Good!' says he, 'then we can go to bed, I haven't had a woman in two years.' This was not a request, you understand, but an order! I was somewhat flummoxed by the situation and tried politely to tell him that I had some notes to write up. This was disregarded and he grabbed my hand and started pulling me towards his bedroom. So finally I had to tell him I really did prefer younger men, at which he huffed and went away. Later when his daughter and his ex-wife came home, I told them of the incident, and they fell about laughing."

### **SOME BAD NEWS ABOUT THIRD WORLD PEASANT WOMEN** by Anne

"Most women I know, myself included, would not call ourselves feminists, because it is too glaringly obvious that both men and women share the blame for the awful state we've got this beautiful planet into. But there are moments...and recently there have been a lot of moments.... when I fully agree with my more vociferous sisters about the need for a feminist revolution. These moments have come about because of what I've learned over the last two years since I've been working more closely than ever before with peasant and Indian communities.

"These are some of the things I've been shocked by:

- Women with ugly scars on the neck and jaws, where their men have tried to cut their heads off in fits of jealousy or drunkenness. And more shocking even than the scars are the women's attitudes of acceptance, of not wanting to 'make a fuss'.

- Indian women who fully accept that if they weed or plant whilst menstruating the plants will die...and that's only the beginning of what they can't do whilst menstruating! Also their acceptance of rape – not by 'white' men but by their own people, an acceptance that they've integrated into their myths and tales by calling babies of rape the children of 'Mohan' - a big black dog that gets women if they go out late at night.

- Women accepting conditions in their kitchens of blinding choking smokiness and lack of the most basic cooking tools, that mean they very often suffer from serious respiratory disease as if they smoked 60 cigarettes a day.

- Watching as mothers load their daughters with work whilst letting the little boys do as they wish – which is usually make lots of unnecessary noise, get under one's feet, or play dangerously with machetes.

- Having to fight daily with 30 men because of them sitting around with their arms folded waiting while 2 or 3 women serve them their dinners, and they didn't even have the excuse of a hard day's work, as they were just attending a course. And even more shocking than fighting daily with the 30 men was that I had to argue daily with the 2 or 3 women who privately moaned and bitched about the men, but refused to stand up and speak out clearly and publicly. And when I humorously pushed the men to clean or cook, *the women rushed to the men's defence....*

"And a recent event has made me stop awhile and think about all this more thoroughly. Wherever I go, I take my astrology tables and tarot cards with me, as they are a wonderful tool for really getting to know people, both men and women, very deeply and quickly. So over these last two years I've done a lot of readings, which are really more like deep and honest conversations about the problems that we all universally experience in couple relationships and with our kids.

"One woman who came to me a lot to talk as she was in a bad way with a man whom she spent most of her time in agony waiting for, as he shared his time between her, his other

woman and child, and his mother, soon had me saying to her: never mind what the damn cards say, just get yourself out of that relationship and find someone new. Word of this practical and impatient attitude of mine got around and soon I was no longer welcome at that community... Widespread repercussions from that one are still going on and will be the subject of further reports in the future!

“Once I got over the shock of this ‘ban’ and took time to take stock, I came to the following conclusions:

“That there’s a lot of work to be done with Colombian country women to get them to stand up and speak out. If the women of any given community are not interested in this kind of work, then all one can hope to change are the superficial details, because the women hold the keys to change in many respects like:

- They allow their little boys to be raised to disrespect women, to be little macho brutes who then go to war as soon as they can.
- They have the power to change the basic and most important aspects of life like food, where it comes from, and how it’s prepared.
- They raise their little girls with the same attitudes of submission to their brothers and fathers.

Recently a peasant woman-friend told me that her boyfriend, with whom she’d recently split up, had told her that she must come back to him as *he was having to pay someone else to do his washing*. To her this was a romantic declaration of love. I was too stunned to argue.”

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### **An anti-President Uribe joke doing the rounds:**

A teacher told her pupils to compose a story about Uribe and his re-election.

When the children had finished, she told Pepito to read his piece.

He said, ‘I have a cat and yesterday she had five kittens and they are all Uribe supporters.’

When the teacher saw that Pepito knew that even the kittens were pro-Uribe, she suggested to the school principal that he call the Inspector of the Ministry of Education to come and hear the composition.

A few days later, the inspector arrived at the school and the teacher told Pepito to read what he had written.

And he read: I have a cat and a few days ago, she had five kittens and three of them support Uribe’s re-election.

Hearing this, the teacher said, ‘Pepito, the first time you read your composition, you said that all the kittens were Uribe supporters – what happened?’

And Pepito replied: ‘well, since then, two of them have opened their eyes.’

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**CHAVEZ DOLL** (Report taken from a Bogota newspaper ‘Hoy’ (‘Today’), 27<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2005

One of the best-selling presents this Christmas in Venezuela was a small model of President Chavez. ‘Chavecito’ (‘Little Chavez’) as its creators call the toy, is 60 centimetres high and dressed in the famous red beret, army uniform and boots. The doll talks. It says: ‘I am with you to do all that is humanly possible to be useful to the Venezuelan people in their dreams, hopes and efforts to become equal and free.’

This small version of the President caused such excitement that the toyshops where it is sold are still being besieged with requests. According to shop owners, the doll rapidly sold out. ‘In just one week, 1,500 ‘Chavecitos’ were sold, that is, more than 100 a day,’ said Douglas Bustamante, the manager of one toy shop in Caracas.

It was also reported that not only Chavez’ supporters but his opponents were buying the doll. The article didn’t explain what for....

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*Books on our community at: [www.deunantbooks.com](http://www.deunantbooks.com)*

*With best wishes to all our readers,  
Jenny James*