

Marked and Branded, by Holly Ferrette, 11/30/2021
On the occasion of her retirement from USAID

Marked and Branded and care of the American People,
I slide through airport turnstiles,
black passport in hand,
roaming the world like the B-52s.
Out the plane window, Mother Earth's dress, styled in greens, browns and blues,
becomes forests, deserts, *altiplanos*, seas and lakes when I land.
The unforgettable smell of cloves, garbage, and possibility as the airport doors open.

Marked and branded.

The office shuttle waiting to whisk me to the
next four years of my life.
Development, diplomacy, humility
and a "bureaucratic black belt" in hand,
I inherit the work of Sisyphus
with the best of intentions to do well.
Always a beginner in expert's clothing.
The components of a language not my own tangling my tongue,
hampering communication, confidence and competency.
Inundated and overwhelmed,
the reality not cooperating with our policies and strategies.
So many threads to follow but which one to pull?
Always looking for the sweet spot
where data, desire and directives meet.
Each point of light a human face, a family, a village.
The change not always catalytic,
but dignity, whether of one person or many, doesn't have a price.

Marked and branded.

I am the Voice of America
coming to you live and in person.
Available worldwide.
My presence a Rorschach test.
Do they see the sins of my country or its promise and humanity?
I am a walking, breathing symbol
of impressions I cannot control.
I am all that they believe and none of these things.
I occupy the space between home and abroad.
The third culture.

Marked and Branded.

The Program Cycle and my life cycle become one.
Foreign Service *is* the family business.
Babies slung in slings, the sweet murmuring of Arabic or Aymara in their ears.
Partnerships and friendships lost and gained.
A stroke of insight about love.
Learning that home is where the heart is and not a fixed address.
Which indicator to use to measure the steps on the path less traveled?

Marked and branded.

Learning on the job things *not* taught at school:
That the weight of an onion garland around my neck is not insignificant.
That manatees can become mermaids in simultaneous translation.
That there are softer ways to say no: *belum, inshallah, quizás, tal vez.*
That peace, security, freedom and democracy cannot be taken for granted.
That mastering the rules can help you to bend them.
That you can pack your most important possessions in one small bag if you have to.
That teachers will appear when you need them if you pay attention.
That work-life balance is a myth.
That a high tolerance for risk in the TSP can pay off.
That a city of garbage can be a beautiful and hopeful thing.
That you can have culture shock in your *own* country.
That the best memories are not captured with a camera.
That ancient rainforests can become barren deserts in the blink of an eye for an ounce of gold.
That it is better to learn from mistakes, failures and regrets than to dwell on them.
That seeds planted in the harshest circumstances can grow when the conditions are right.
And, that magic still exists in this world.

Marked and Branded

A life's work documented in files, in my memories,
and in the growth charts of my children.
My identity, always certain until now,
by tomorrow is undetermined.
My password is expiring soon.
Anxiety and excitement battle it out in my brain,
swirling around one crucial question:
Who will I be when I am no longer
Marked and branded in red, white and blue?

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Contract