



Sweet Refuge

a place to slip between the unbearable past and an insecure future

For these women, an unassuming cottage on a quiet river is
By Gabrielle Bauer Photography Ruth Kaplan

A question follows them every day: Can I stay or not?

Before I even learn her name, she gives me a bear hug. “You came at the right time, we’re just preparing dinner,” says the sturdy woman with an open face and a soft Latin American accent. “I’m Carolina, from Chile.” The others gather around me, smiling and extending their hands. “Come in, come in,” someone says. “Welcome.” As I return handshakes and a few more hugs, it occurs to me that it should be the other way around: I, the local, should be welcoming them, since they come from all over the world and are still finding their way around the English language. But there’s no arguing with their warm greeting, or with the robust aromas wafting through the cottage’s window screens.

After setting down my overnight bag, the air crisp from the downpour that just ended, I take a moment to look at the cottage itself. Dark brown and crooked in all the right places, it blends seamlessly into the glistening foliage encircling it. A motley assortment of bunkies and tents—one of them my home for the coming night—rings the cottage, and just ahead, a narrow, zigzagging path plunges down toward a grassy clearing by a river.

Inside, a flurry of preparations is under way—potatoes being peeled, meat pierced for doneness, cutlery placed on the plastic tablecloth. As befits a cottage, all the action takes place in the living

room slash dining room slash kitchen, with three tiny bedrooms and a bathroom adding little to the square footage. Everyone has an assigned duty except Franceska, a young woman from Haiti, who’s lying on the couch and clutching her pregnant belly. Every once in a while she moans softly. The unspoken agreement in the room, which will persist throughout the weekend, seems to be: Let this weary woman rest.

The women spending the weekend here in this enclave on the York River near Bancroft, Ont., are refugee claimants, awaiting the government’s verdict on their cases. They’re here to get out of Toronto, to put the question that follows them every minute of the day—Can I stay or not?—on temporary hold, and to get a taste of cottage life. It’s not their cottage, of course. It belongs to Sanctuary North, a non-profit organization devoted to bringing refugees and their local hosts together in a community-building, authentically Canadian experience.

The brainchild, in large part, of social activist Lee Creal and her husband, Michael, Sanctuary North got its start when the couple’s church came into some unexpected money and Lee developed the idea of a cottage for refugees. “We wanted a rustic retreat, nothing prettified,” she explained. “The church approved our proposal, we raised more funds and acquired the property, and here we are.” Volunteers and refugees refurbished the cottage, cleared the swimming area, and built platforms for tents, readying the property for its first refugee group in August 2002.

Every summer since, Sanctuary North has partnered with five Toronto refugee centres to send groups to the cottage for short trips. Some groups are co-ed, while others, like this one, comprise only women and children. The refugees aren’t just there as guests, says Creal. “They contribute on all levels, even maintenance, so they take ownership of the experience.” Maintenance loomed especially large this year when a roofer discovered bats, which led to a \$7,500 bill for roof repair and bat removal—a sizable dent, given Sanctuary North’s annual operating budget of \$5,000. “But, hey,” Creal says philosophically, “what’s a cottage without a few critters to keep you company?”

Hosting this weekend’s group are Loly Rico and Francisco Rico Martinez, a contagiously effusive Salvadorean couple who run the FCJ Refugee Centre in Toronto. Refugees themselves when they first arrived in Canada 19 years ago, on a snowy night in mid-January, Loly and Francisco have dedicated their lives to helping refugees and refugee claimants navigate Canada’s complex immigration system and adapt to the country they hope to call home. Holding forth among their charges with a barrage of good-natured ribbing punctuated by belly laughs, they behave more like clucking parents than administrators. There is no way in the world not to like this couple. >>

Leaders on this weekend, Francisco Rico Martinez, a human rights lawyer in his native El Salvador, and his wife, Loly (opposite), were compelled to come to Canada as refugees 19 years ago. Now they run a refugee centre in Toronto, where they try to help claimants feel safe. “When refugees arrive, they’re completely uprooted,” Loly says. “A place that feels like home gives them strength.”





New experiences, different reactions: Carolina is unfazed by a chilly northern river, but Francesca (below) declares campfire-toasted marshmallows “too sweet.”



Half-hidden in Francisco’s protective shadow, Bongani tries his hand at grilling on the back deck (above). Vilma gets her groove on in the kitchen.





All choose one word for
this weekend: peaceful

Five of the claimants here this weekend hail from Latin America, two from Africa, and one from Haiti. Swaziland-born Ntombi has brought her four-year-old son, Bongani, with her. Her round face shows fine wrinkles, but only at certain angles, making it impossible to guess her age. For the women in this group, the calling card—the shared experience they carry with them wherever they go—is violence. They come to Canada facing the daunting task of proving they’ve been abused, whether for their beliefs, their lifestyle, or just because. The glacier-like speed of the claims process means they will likely spend a year or longer in limbo, wondering whether to put down emotional roots or to steel themselves for a return to abusive husbands, taunting fathers-in-law, or anonymous, threatening phone calls in the dead of night (see “The Waiting List,” this page).

This weekend offers a chance to escape from the worry, the morass of forms to fill out, the intimate details to disclose, all for a shot at staying in this country. The fresh air, novel experiences, and steady pace of activity allow the group members to lose themselves in the present moment—a near impossibility for these women, who talk of being trapped between past and future, between the devil they know and the one they don’t. As expected, cottaging takes many of them by surprise. Precious, hailing from Zimbabwe by way of North Carolina, will later admit she had “no idea what to expect—I thought we would each have our own cottage. Can you believe it?”

The dinner the group worked so hard to prepare is a classic Canadian meal—barbecued roast beef (or “roast cow,” as Francisco calls it), mashed potatoes, and mixed salad. Carolina declares the tomatoes tasteless: “You should try the tomatoes in Chile—there’s no comparison.” Young Bongani has no complaints, though. “This is great,” he says, spearing a hunk of beef with his fork.

Everyone seems to get along in the convivial, egalitarian way that people who share a common enemy—in this case, persecution—often do. I think I’m blending in nicely, until Carolina tells me that I flinched when she gave me her welcome hug. “I did?” I ask, honestly surprised. “Yes,” she says wistfully. “People in Canada are nice, but not warm the way they are in Chile. It’s hard to explain.” As much as she fears returning, she says, she aches for her homeland.

Alicia agrees. With three grown children and seven grandchildren back in Mexico, she tells me that e-mails with photo attachments only go so far. The strain shows clearly in her fidgeting black eyes, in the terseness of her smiles, in the cigarettes she always keeps close at hand. “The pain will never leave my heart,” she says, glancing down at her cigarette pack. “That’s why it’s so hard to quit.”

When I ask the women to describe the unfolding weekend, all choose the same word: peaceful. Franceska, finally coming out of her shell a little, worries constantly about deportation since her work permit expired. “I heard they might have the right to keep my baby here and send me back,” she adds dully, her withdrawn demeanour suddenly making sense. “Sometimes I get so scared I can’t eat.”

{Continued on page 122}

The waiting list

People from other countries can apply for refugee status in Canada if they have a well-founded fear of being persecuted, whether for personal or political reasons. Claimants must prove they would likely face torture, risk to life, or cruel and unusual punishment if they return to their home country. They must also show that these dangers don’t arise from inadequate medical care, that the persecution isn’t embodied in government laws (unless the laws violate international standards), and that their home country is unable or unwilling to protect them.

As 2005 drew to a close, just over 20,000 claims awaited hearings. By the end of March 2009, the number had swelled beyond 58,000. With an estimated two and a half years needed to process the backlog, the gap between pending and finalized claims continues to widen.

Even if they’re granted refugee status, many claimants find it a bittersweet victory. The *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* excludes family members from sponsorship if they weren’t examined by an immigration officer when the sponsor arrived in Canada. As a result, some refugees face indefinite separation from their children.

The clearing near the small dock is both a spot for doing nothing and the place where Francisco and Loly cajole their group into a morning calisthenics session. Lee and Michael Creal (bottom) spearheaded the idea of a cottage for refugees when their church had some money in need of a worthy project.



SWEET REFUGE

{Continued from page 81}

"In the city, I have a lot of stress from my welfare worker," Ntombi offers. "I can feel it on the phone—she just wants to get rid of me." When I inquire about the reason for her claim, she politely dodges my question. "It's hard to talk about it," she says softly. "Maybe the next time."

Clearly a large part of their lives, fear continues to stalk some refugees long after they've arrived in Canada. One South American group declined to take part in this article, afraid the attention would invite violent reprisals from their homeland, thousands of kilometres away.

After supper, each participant (except Franceska, who returns to her supine position on the couch) does her assigned cleanup job. There's no complaining about the chores, just some discussion about the upcoming activities—bonfire or indoor games? Finally, a consensus: The rain-free interlude will probably hold up for the evening. Bonfire it is, then.

We all take the steep path down to the riverside clearing, where Loly lights a fire with practised ease. Franceska tries a marshmallow—her first ever—and judges it too sweet. Bongani's clearly a convert, though, popping one after another into his mouth. Entranced by my trick, known to every Canadian, of "skinning" a marshmallow after roasting it, he plants himself by my side and hands me new marshmallows to put on my stick. "Do it again," he says. "I like the gooey stuff." Just eight months in Canada, and he already speaks English with confidence, especially in matters epicurean.

Always on the lookout for a good story, Francisco asks if anyone has a native legend or folk tale to share. One woman, her face in shadow, raises a shy hand. In a lilting accent, she tells the story of *La Llorona*, the Weeping Woman, who drowned her children to be with the man she loved. When he rejected her, she ended her own life. If you go near the lake and listen carefully, you can still hear the faint cries of the mother's ghost: "Where is my baaay-by?" Bongani's eyes are huge.

After dousing the fire, we head back to the cottage, where a batch of margaritas materializes in short order. After the second one, my rusty high-school Spanish

comes out of hiding and I accept Alicia's offer to migrate to the screened-in porch for a cigarette. As we take our seats the rain starts up again, cocooning us in its gentle sound. Trapped inside the porch, a couple of moths flutter around the overhead light bulb.

In Spanish, Alicia tells me how, as a teenager, she got married to a man who soon turned alcoholic and violent, one of his blows resulting in a miscarriage. Already denied refugee status once ("insufficient proof"), she is preparing to reapply with help from Loly. Her grown kids report that her husband, who doesn't know her whereabouts, would like her to come back to Mexico. "I've become stronger since I came here," she says. "I realized I didn't have to live the rest of my life being scared. I'm afraid that if I go back to Mexico, I'll go back to the way I was. You know?"

My tent proves its mettle during a night that wrests an uninterrupted torrent of rain from the clouds, and the next morning unveils the type of intense blue sky one can only find after a marathon downpour. Francisco declares it's time for calisthenics, which elicits a collective bout of grumbling. "Do we have to?" some of the women whine, like children who've been told to take a bath. Precious finally steps out of the bathroom in a hot-pink sweat shirt and black leggings. She and a few others trudge down the path to the clearing, blaming their sluggishness on yesterday evening's libations. Why calisthenics, anyway? "They need a push," Loly confides after the group has left. "Otherwise a lot of them would just sit around, which doesn't help their morale. And you can't really experience the Canadian outdoors if you sit inside, can you?"

The groans haven't quite subsided when I join the group down at the riverside clearing. Undeterred, Francisco bursts into song and gets everyone clapping to the beat, then leads the group through a series of jumping jacks and sprints. Pretty soon everybody is laughing while scurrying from tree stump to tree stump. Everybody except Carolina, who has found her way (for probably the fifth time this weekend) to the chilly river water, where she bobs up and down like a dolphin. After the calisthenics, a couple of women lower themselves into a

canoe, giggling as it begins to wobble under their knees. "Some of them have seen canoes used for transportation," Loly will explain to me later, "but the idea of canoeing for fun is foreign to most of them." If the squeals floating across the river are any indication, this duo is getting the hang of the fun part.

Andrea comes to join me on the dock, her close-cropped hair still damp from a swim she took earlier, and we start talking. In Canada for just a month, the soft-spoken Chilean native tells me she studied aviation technology in Miami before returning to her homeland. That's when the trouble began. "I had a girlfriend in Chile," she tells me. "We tried not to show it in public, but people began to suspect. My girlfriend's father called me every day for a year, threatening to kill me. He also threatened my family. Once he assaulted me and hurt my ear, so I can't hear well on that side." She shrugs. "The doctor told me surgery might help." Finally she told her girlfriend she couldn't take the stress anymore. They split up, and now she's here. Waiting.

Transformative experiences are lived in the moment but digested in hindsight, in memory. A few weeks later, Precious and Ntombi have become closer, and Carolina has taken Andrea out for a birthday dinner. Carolina reports having more energy for working, and even Franceska has lost some of her dreamy preoccupation. "These women don't have many friends," says Loly, "so the bonds they form on these trips mean a lot to them."

The women all give top marks to the river, with its undercurrent of adventure, and to the bonfire. Above all, to the silence. "Where they come from, the bush isn't a peaceful place," Loly points out. "They learn here that nature can be a place of healing." 🐾

Since their cottage weekend last summer, two of the women have had their refugee claims resolved: Alicia's claim was rejected late last year and she went back to Mexico, though Loly Rico reports that she has not returned to the area she left; Vilma's claim was accepted in April. The other women are still waiting. Franceska had a baby girl, who arrived on Christmas Eve.