# A Night to Remembers: My First Night as a Peace Corps Volunteer in El Valle de San Jose, Colombia

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My first night and a Peace Corps Volunteer in El Valle was stressful. I was fearful of scorpions and other "creepie-crawlies." I had been warned about them, and in fact, I would see many during the upcoming months. Childhood fears were ignited. I surveyed the room for spider webs and got onto the chair and used a sweep broom to break up the many cobwebs in the tall ceiling's corners. I was very conscious of every sound. I got undressed down to my shorts and t-shirt and carefully placed my pants and shirt on the wooden chair near the bed. I made sure that my clothing didn't touch the floor. I killed every moth that entered the room before I went to sleep. I also placed my boots and a flashlight near the bed so that I didn't have to walk barefooted if I had to go to the bathroom in the night. I considered sleeping with my boots on the bed but decided this was going too far. I would make sure to shake them before putting them on in the morning since I was warned that scorpions like to hang out in dark places. The silence in the room was powerful, making it difficult to get a good night's sleep. The room's mud walls were three feet thick so you could barely hear other outside noises until you opened the window. The silence was broken only by the powerful sound of the nearby church bells that resonated throughout the village and surrounding hills beginning at six o'clock in the morning. They sounded as if they were ringing in the next room.

In the following months, another threat to my sense of control would have to be dealt with. My room served as my bedroom, office, and kitchen. The room contained such un-refrigerated comestibles as rice, spaghetti, sugar, coffee, cereals, flour, bread, and cookies.

The food items caught the attention of the hoards of rats and mice living in the ceiling of the coffee grower warehouse's adobe walls. Rodents could crawl through a space of no more than half-an-inch. At night, I could hear them scratching around and honing in on the food in my room. I put some of the food in the small refrigerator. I placed some of it high on the bookshelf. I didn't understand that they could smell the food through cellophane and cardboard packaging. I tried to ignore the rodents but they were heavily on my mind as I went to sleep. I bought "snap" rat traps and placed them along the room's interior walls, with limited effectiveness. My concern, though, was to prevent the rodents' entry to the room, not killing them once they were inside — the one place in my new world that I wanted to control.

I went to bed with a flashlight on the chair next to the bed. When I heard the rats' gnawing through the dirt walls and their imminent entry was apparent from the noises, I pointed the flashlight beam towards the target spot. I bought extra batteries so I didn't run out. I needed to see the rats actually enter the room, although I didn't know what to do if I actually saw them in the room. I placed a straw sweep broom next to the bed so that I could sweep them out the door. I figured the best I could do was shine light on them and, thus, discourage their entry. That worked, even though it meant that I was unable to enjoy uninterrupted sleep.

I shared my problem with Antonio and Salomón. They suggested the use of rat bait that somehow made it difficult for the rodents to carry the poison back to their ceiling nests and die there. They would, thus, die in the outdoors, not in the building, which caused terrible odors. Fortunately, the rat bait was effective and enabled me to again get some sleep.