

## All's well that ends soon

*(There once was an '80s indie band called Big Black who were led by a bit of an asshole named Steve Albini. But even if he had some memorably offensive ideas he did have the virtue of being honest. They made a good album called Atomizer, and then they made another one that was less good, so he saw to it that every copy bore a sticker reading, "Not as good as Atomizer." I bring this up not because I think it was a very admirable gesture on his part, though I do, and not because this dispatch is also not as good as Atomizer, which after all has "Kerosene" on it so what do you expect, but because after giving this thing a final read-through I think it's not as good as the others I've sent out. After two months of nothing I'm fairly bored and unexcited, and I'm afraid that shows in the writing, sorry about that. I expect that'll change at the end of this week once I actually have something to do. But if that warning doesn't daunt you then read on, this one does contain fire, machetes, and a novel use for feces.)*

I know what I can do if my kid ever complains about having to mow the lawn. I can have him do half the job with a machete, and then he'll forever be grateful for the fickle blessing of the internal combustion engine. Or he'll just hate me.

(After my last dispatch Mary Ann told me that these are public enough that I probably shouldn't use the real names or even the war names of Zapatistas. The standard practice in journalism is to give people ethnically plausible first-name pseudonyms, and, junta willing, I'll do that in my columns where I only need to refer to a couple people. I've got a very nice column about the vaccination campaign two weeks ago that's awaiting their approval. But if I called one of the clinic coordinators José, I might get confused because I already know two Josés and may meet five more before I leave. So I'm just gonna use a bunch of Russian names because after two months of uselessness I'm feeling kind of down, and Russia's the obvious bleak downer place with distinctive names, right, Lucas?)

A couple weeks ago Vladimir, one of the coordinators of the clinic, gave me a machete and told me that I should cut the grass. So I spent the next half hour embarrassing myself and proving to the mild surprise of several born-and-bred *Chiapanecos* that a man can get all the way to the age of 22 without knowing anything more about a machete than which end is the sharp one. When I asked, Vladimir said that 12 is a normal age for a guy to start chopping plants, and I'd bet my soon-to-be-functioning-again baby iPod that it's a main component of masculinity here. In Garrucha, and I expect in most other jungle communities, chopping plants with a machete is what an ordinary man does on an ordinary day. Any morning (except Sunday?) I can go out to the road between six and seven and see dozens of men on their way to work, from their teens to their old age, singly or in twos, threes or fours, mostly in one-piece rubber boots without buckles

or laces, and of course carrying machetes. When I asked Pasha, a health promoter who's unusually American in that he has only two children and has high blood pressure because he eats more food than is good for him, he said that a man retires from working with the machete when he gets too old to swing the thing. When I asked him to put a number to that he said 90, which I would guess is a bit of an exaggeration, the statistician in me often grumbles about the vagueness of the numbers I hear here. Didier (see below) sold me he asked a man how far it was to the store, and the man said eight meters. Didier said do you realize that eight meters is from about here to that tree, and the man said, oh, okay, then I guess it's about 80 meters.

Anyway, you use a machete to harvest your corn, to harvest your beans, to clear your field before you plant those things, to trim the fence hedge plants, and to defend the road against underbrush. You also use it to make the boards of a building slot together by trimming opposite corners off the boards' long edges. I even saw a guy using one to trim one end of a post to a point so he could drive it into the ground; he obviously didn't have a post hole digger. On the wall of the school they've written the things the Zapatistas demand, with accompanying symbols: "education" with a book, "health" with a medicinal plant, and so on. The symbol for work is a machete. When I told Boris, the other clinic coordinator, that in the States one person could mow the entire central Garrucha lawn in afternoon with a lawn mower, whereas here it took a half dozen guys several days of intermittent work, he evinced little interest. I asked Pasha, an unusually portly and amiable promoter rotating through the clinic, if anyone ever used a scythe or sickle (*hoz*), but he didn't even know what I was talking about until I said, come on, you know, the communist symbol is this thing and a hammer? And then he said, oh yeah, that, no, why would we use that when we have machetes? Work means machete.

For me it also means blisters, though not the second time when I thought to put the band-aids on before I started. I think I've got it at least partially figured out now, going into tall grass your cuts should be arcs about a foot and a half wide but only like an inch deep. That way you cut just with the very tip, where you've got the most centrifugal force, the grass doesn't stop the blade and it's easier not to hit the ground. By analogy I'd say I've learned to type with two fingers, which of course is painful to watch for somebody who can type as easily as thinking, but I'll probably have lots more practice in the next six months. My predecessor told me the teaching job is only three days a week. If that's what I end up doing in San Manuel.

I haven't spoken with another American since before I came to La Garrucha. A lot of outsiders come through, but they're all Mexicans and Europeans. I met a professor of something like biochemical ethnobotany from Mexico City, and she told me that Tzeltal speakers have a tendency toward certain characteristic Spanish malapropisms like "I very can't" (*no muy puedo*), which doesn't work any better in Spanish than English. I met a toothless old Italian Leninist, Freudian psychoanalyst, and jazz aficionado, every inch a man of the twentieth century. Like some other Italians I've met here, when he didn't know a word in Spanish he would just say it in Italian and expect to be understood, and he claimed that he once met John Coltrane and that his eyes were green. I met a Belgian

couple who are bicycling from the house of the husband's brother in Guadalajara, Mexico to the house of his other brother in Bolivia. That's not as dangerous as it sounds because they take buses for really difficult or dangerous parts (like, well, Guatemala) and because in San Cristóbal they adopted a formerly half-starved but extremely friendly and rather intelligent young mutt who's now their watchdog. I met a 20-year-old German kid nervously waiting to find out which university he's gonna attend, and a lefty development professional from New Zealand who'll be coming back with Mary Ann when they get in on Friday.

The most educational for me was a Frenchman named Didier from away down south in the foothills of the Pyrenees, and he said that in Chiapas if he ignores the people and buildings and just looks at the terrain he thinks he's home. They've got a lot of pine-forested hillsides here, which surprised me as well as him, but it sure does make Garrucha beautiful in the morning when the sun starts to burn away the wisps of mist between the ridges. Anyway, Didier came to proselytize about dry toilets (*sanitarios secos*). According to him, or rather to some scientist he was citing in his presentation, in a year the average person excretes enough carbon and nitrogen to fertilize almost enough grain crops to feed that person, but most of that free fertilizer goes to waste because people just want their poop to go away down the toilet and not think about it again. But he says that if you use a dry toilet, which is not quite like an outhouse because it's all aboveground to allow airflow through the crap chamber, and you occasionally add some dry plant matter and stir, then it doesn't stink or attract flies but it does make a dandy fertilizer (*abulto*). He said this is very common in China, and is becoming more so in several places in Europe and Latin America, and that there's a small city in Switzerland that actually outlawed the construction of wet toilets, though the existing ones are grandfathered in. If he's right I think it makes a lot more sense than the American method of making nitrogen fertilizer. (You need nitrogen fertilizer because it's unnatural to harvest plants, in an ecosystem without humans they'd die, fall on the ground and rot, letting their nitrogen go back into the soil to be used by some other plant.<sup>1</sup> This doesn't happen if you take them away and eat them.) The American solution to this is the Haber-Bosch process, a hellu fucking endothermic chemical reaction where you actually go to the trouble of breaking the triple (!) bond of diatomic nitrogen from the atmosphere, which requires us to generate an enormous amount of energy, which requires emitting lots of greenhouse gases. (Endothermic means you have to put energy in to make the reaction happen, it's not spontaneous.) Ah, thank you, Wikipedia, deceptively precise quantities from an unreliable source are probably better than just swearing lazily to vaguely express bigness. The Haber-Bosch process produces 100 million tons of nitrogen fertilizer annually to feed 40% of the world's population, and in so doing it consumes 1% of the world's electricity. That's a whole great big *chingo* of energy that – according to Didier – we don't really need to expend or generate. So anyway, Didier had come to tell the Zapatistas about this free, low-tech fertilizer they could have if they'd throw dry

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<sup>1</sup> kmkat: I think he is wrong here. When plants decompose the stored nitrogen is released back into the air. One must plant legumes – plants with nodules of nitrogen-fixing bacteria in their root nodules – to get the nitrogen back into the soil. Or something like that.

plants instead of ashes into their latrines. But he lost close to two weeks in San Cris waiting for replies about where exactly he should go to spread this gospel, and then he spent some time waiting around Garrucha to talk to the junta, and then awaiting the arrival of the *compañero* who runs the latrines. And when they finally went out and toured rural communities he only ended up being able to give on workshop, oh, the *compañero* you want is out working with the machete now, and he will be tomorrow as well. So I don't know if his visit did much good, especially because when I mentioned it to Antonio, the very, very experienced old health promoter who's now church deacon, he just said, oh yes, dry toilets, and already knew all about the concept. If the idea is sound it could be damned useful just about everywhere, though it's probably a bit labor-intensive and is rather icky when you first think about it, which may be why it's not more commonly implemented.

Anyway among all these outsiders who come through I haven't met a single American, not even a Canadian. What the hell's wrong with America that no one wants to come through La Garrucha and go do human rights observation? Now some small tidbits in short paragraphs before the big interconnected last part.

Once a *compañero* who was at the clinic temporarily came into the room where I sleep and asked if he could use the television, pointing at the microwave. The permanent staff thought this was pretty funny when I told them.

When I meet new people and they ask me how old I am, I've taken to asking them how old they think I am before answering. They mostly say 30 or 32, one guy said 35, one said late 20s, and exactly one guessed below 25. (I'm 22.) It's the beard; men here are just not very hairy. Since I came to the clinic I've only seen one indigenous Tzeltal-speaking guy with a full beard, and that was a gray-bearded elder interviewed in a documentary about the loss of the old ways.

Fyodor, a health promoter with an aura of wisdom and a deep interest in herbal medicine, told me that my name in Tzeltal is Lexo, pronounced "lay-sho," and several others agreed, which is weird because try as I might I can't see any resemblance to the Spanish Andres.

Last week I followed the example of Pasha and Vladimir in stripping to my underwear and going outside during the afternoon storm to use a hard rain as a cold shower. I thought it was great fun; too bad the rainy season's winding down.

When I left the States I was 30 pounds overweight. Then I lost 30 pounds in 80 days, one pound every 64 hours, and then I abruptly stopped losing weight. I think this is largely because once I told Vladimir about my drastic weight loss he started pushing food on me like a doting grandmother. And then when I told him I felt like I was at my grandparents' house everyone cracked up and started calling him Grampa Vladimir, but I can't give the Spanish original of that because it would have his actual name in it.

In my time at the clinic I've only watched two examples of the Mexican *narcotrafico* genre of low-budget movies, which are about drug traffickers driving around in white pickup trucks, calling each other bastards (*cabrones*) and shooting each other over a dramatic soundtrack, but they both gave ample support to the idea that in Mexican culture the ideal woman is a torted-up bleach blond who's good with a gun. (And they were both more fun than dull, pretentious crap like *Lost in Translation* or *Waking Life*.)

One night at dinner a representative from a civil society organization asked if I wore my weird haircut<sup>2</sup> because of my religion, and I laughed so hard that everyone else started laughing too.

I've taught myself a basic vocabulary of medical Spanish by reading the clinic's copy of *Where There Is No Doctor* slowly, looking up and writing down the words I don't know. The funniest one was "groin," or *ingle*. If the singular is *ingle*, then the plural is *ingles*, which is only an accent mark away from *inglés*, "English." So you all almost speak groins.

In addition the machete bit, Boris and Vladimir made another other failed attempt to find a use for this gringo without medical training that the junta dumped on them. Boris told me to build a fire to boil some beans. At first I thought, oh boy, starting a fire is one of my favorite things in the world to do. But failing to start a fire is not. At first I thought it was just that I was used to using newspaper or dry leaves for kindling, but there weren't any. So I couldn't get any wood bigger than a splinter to catch until Aleksey the lab tech told me something everyone else already knew: to start a fire you use this special kind of pine called *ocote* that burns like it's soaked in motor oil. But then I still couldn't get it started for three reasons. First, Garrucha's 700 meters of altitude might make it a little bit harder, but not much. Second, after they split their wood they leave it sitting out because they don't have a woodshed to keep it dry, so it was damp with rain. But the main thing is that the wood is just too damn green to burn right. Even when Boris got impatient with me and got the fire going it still didn't burn well, it smoked and smoked and smoked like a good fire only will if you throw a pile of wet leaves on it. And even worse I could always hear that reproving *ssssssssssssss*, the sound of kilojoules of slowly stored chemical energy going to waste boiling sap out of the logs instead of boiling beans in the pot.

I think what's going on is that poor people in the jungle here don't have the economic cushion to cut wood, split it, and then wait two years for it to dry out and actually be ready to burn. That's a luxury I got used to in Wisconsin. As far as I can tell poor *Chiapanecos* cope with this problem of green wood in two ways. One is that they improve the surface area to volume ratio by splitting it really fine, like I watched Nikolai

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<sup>2</sup> kmkat: Before he got the weird haircut (sic), Andrew's hair was halfway down his back and wavy. In preparation for living in the steamy jungle he had me chop it off right above the elastic band that held it in a ponytail at the nape of his neck. After wearing it like that for a few days, he had a hairdresser shave his head from the lower hairline to his temples but leave the topknot long. That is how it is now, although presumably the shaved part has grown out some. So, yeah, it *is* a weird haircut.

the singing health promoter with six kids split a 15” log into eighths which would have been ready to burn in Wisconsin once they’d dried, and then he split each of those eighths into another six or eight splinters.

The other way they cope with it is by getting sick. When you burn wood that’s full of sap you get a lot of smoke, and if you’re making tortillas over that fire you get smoke in your lungs, hence various respiratory infections, and also in your eyes, hence conjunctivitis. But this hazard isn’t distributed randomly. Who makes tortillas over smoky fires? Poor women. And their young daughters, starting around or a bit before age 10, according to the ones I’ve asked. Now, the Zapatistas generally make an effort to be good feminists, and according to Clelia the genius I met at the *encuentro*, they’ve been quite successful in fighting what she called *machismo*. They’ve been able to drastically decrease rape and domestic violence, partially by prohibition. Zapatista country is dry country, I came in to Ocosingo to use the internet and had my first beer in almost two months. But Clelia argued that *patriarchy* is a much more pervasive evil to extirpate, how can you get rid of these unequal and unequally confining gender roles anyway? On the plus side I’ve seen lots of men doing cooking and cleaning chores, but on the other hand I’ve not met a single female health promoter with years and years of experience, and I suspect it’s no coincidence that all the female health promoters I have met are young, lightly experienced and childless. (I realize that I’m using “machismo” and “patriarchy” rather glibly, without defining them, in order to set up a simplistic dichotomy, and that that’s a bit of compounded intellectual laziness mixed with ignorance and theoretical inaptitude for which several people on this list could castigate me with righteous sophistication, starting of course with Emily my gender theory TA.)

Anyway according to Mikhail, a health promoter with 12 years experience, all the men (or all the male health promoters?) had to learn how to make tortillas because if the women always do it then that’s injustice, no? So Mikhail said this, and then he said, hey Aleksey, when we did that you were really good at making tortillas, weren’t you? We were in the little tortilla-making room when Mikhail said this, and he and Aleksey both laughed as we all three lounged around, and the two *compañeras* who were at that moment making tortillas also laughed, imagine, Aleksey’s good at making tortillas. Then the *compañeras* kept making tortillas, and me, Aleksey, and Mikhail kept lounging around. But normally Aleksey and Mikhail are working; I’m the only one who spends most of each day idle. That’ll finally end on Friday when Mary Ann from the Chiapas Support Committee comes to town and can sort out my misunderstanding with the good government junta so I can at last go to San Manuel and actually get to work.

I wouldn’t call my time in La Garrucha a waste of two months: at the clinic I’ve become functionally bilingual and had the privilege of observing the Zapatista health system up close. Observing is the key word though, not assisting or building or contributing to. So while I wouldn’t call this time a waste of two months, I would call it a waste of the better part of one month. I’ve been spinning my wheels for far too long, and I’m more than ready to leave. That’s from my point of view. From the clinic’s point of view I would think it’s just a straight waste of two person-months of food. So because the clinic staff have fed me, housed me, answered my questions and generally been friendlier than

they had any reason to be to an idle mouth, just before I leave I'm gonna give the clinic \$183.48, or \$2,000. (Mexicans and Americans use the exact same symbol to represent our respective currencies, even though it's like 10.9 pesos to the dollar, so when we crossed the border to come to the *encuentro* my traveling companion Prita was needlessly freaked out when she learned she'd have to pay a \$240 exit tax, which is barely twenty bucks.) That donation will make me less of a freeloader, at least in my own mind, though I certainly didn't ask to be denied permission to go to San Mañuel. Based on various conversations I think what I'm giving is between a month and a month and half's salary for an agricultural day laborer making the minimum wage, or the approximate price of crossing the northern border illegally. So that's about it. Now it's nearly time to party. Thursday will be the *fiesta* of the virgin of San Francisco in La Garrucha, and then on Friday I'll go to San Mañuel for the celebration of the change of the autonomous council. And then I can finally get to work.