

Sweet Jesus

Okay, I'd been planning to go back to San Mañuel tomorrow morning to teach, but it turns out there's no truck until 10:00 in the morning when I'm already supposed to be in class, so I'll have to leave early this afternoon, so I'm gonna write this one real fast.

On Saturday, October 7th, Mary Ann arrived at La Garrucha with two other people from the Chiapas Support Committee: Julie, a good-natured, no-nonsense physical therapist who brought me a Harper's with an excerpt of Naomi Klein's brilliant new book, and Michael, one of three genuinely radical doctors I've met, who in San Mañuel gave some consultations in Spanish with an excellent medical vocabulary and a horrible American accent. We talked with the good government *junta*, and everything went perfectly. I think the way it works is that each autonomous Zapatista municipality elects an autonomous council to three-year terms, and different members of these autonomous councils rotate through *junta* every two weeks. So it's completely luck of the draw who happens to be on the *junta* when you show up and what mood they're in. This time I finally got lucky. They said, Yes, you can go to San Mañuel, yes, we'd be happy to accept a donation of 2,000 pesos for the clinic here, no, we have no problems with this column about the vaccination campaign that you wrote and translated into Spanish for us, and yes, we even reverse that random decision of a previous *junta* that you need to present every column for *junta* approval before publication, write what you want when you want from here on out. And now if I'm lucky I won't need to have contact with a good government *junta* again before I leave Chiapas. Speaking of which, as a Christmas present my parents bought me a two-week round-trip ticket from Mexico City to Minneapolis, so if you'll be in the Twin Cities area between January 13 and 27, please let me know.

The next day we went to Emiliano Zapata, an absolutely beautiful community nestled by a currently very muddy and angry river at the bottom of a long valley between two gorgeous, completely undeveloped ridges. I tried to climb one of them last week and found a path that I followed for a very sweaty, sunny uphill hour through scratchy undergrowth during which I saw two spiders whose legs could have spanned the palm of my hand, but then I couldn't see where the path went. At that point I had the good sense to come back down. When I got back a guy told me that several years ago two Italian peace campers tried to climb the hill, got lost, and had to spend the night there and be rescued when the whole community took a break from machete work to go find and fetch them. Anyway, Zapata is the capital of the autonomous municipality of San Mañuel. There we gave out soccer and basketballs to a bunch of happy children, and then learned that this fiesta of the changing of the autonomous council to which we'd been invited was three days long. It was quite a party. They draped every truck they had with palm leaves and other decorations to put on what Michael called a Rose Bowl parade. They had a basketball tournament, which, as predicted, the Zapata team did not win. They killed a cow every day to feed people who'd come from all over the municipality, and it was some of the tastiest beef I've ever had. These cows are not only free of antibiotics, feedlots, overcrowding, and industrial cattle feed, they don't even have fences. They just wander around the main lawn of Zapata eating grass all day, and they're actually happy.

I've never seen happy cows before, but these ones occasionally romp and frolic and chase each other like puppies. (Julia, Michael and Mary Ann, they might not have done that when you were there.) Of course, they still end up with their throats cut, which if they were sentient would probably detract from their fun a bit, but they're dumb herbivores who haven't been exposed to natural selection for thousands of years, so what do they care about the future? Oh, and random fact: I've learned that "cow" is also a word in Tzeltal, but it means "horse." Anyway, we had a short meeting jointly with the new and old autonomous councils at which Mary Ann was confirmed in her expectation that they wouldn't really want to talk business during the fiesta. I didn't get my situation straightened out until the next meeting of the council, two weeks ago yesterday, when they said, Sure, it'd be great if you worked with the education promoters to teach the kids. But then before I could start I had to go to the big city of San Cristobal for a few days to renew my 90-day tourist visa. I'm officially a tourist, you see. It was frustrating to stand at the immigration office and think that, thanks to my August misunderstanding with the *junta*, I'd been here for 90 days and not accomplished anything yet. Then I came back to Ocosingo and spent some time with these evangelical Christians who've serendipitously become something like a host family for me when I'm in the little city of Ocosingo. (If you study abroad for real and not through an NYU bubble program, then sometimes, I think especially if you do it in high school, you stay with a local family, and they're called a host family.)

A few weeks ago a white VW Beetle (*bocho blanco*) broke down in the road in front of La Garrucha, and a couple guys from the clinic went to see what they could do with it. It was the car of Mañuel, an administrator at the hospital in Ocosingo whose job includes negotiating the financial relationship between that hospital and the Zapatista clinic, which sometimes sends patients there. The guys from the clinic brought me along even though I know nothing about fixing cars; that's my dad. In talking to Mañuel's wife, Ana, I learned she was cold, so I got my sweater for her to wear while they spent the night in Garrucha, and as near as I can figure, based on that she made a snap decision that I have a good heart and that she should be my mom while I'm here. They had given me their address in Ocosingo and instructed me to visit them the next time I was in town, so when I got back from San Cristobal I did. There was the usual stuff about, oh, where are you from exactly, is it true people don't eat tortillas in the United States, but then things got very religious. See, they're not Catholics, they're evangelicals.

Background time: I hadn't known this before these folks made me curious enough to read a bunch of stuff online last week, but evangelical Protestantism in Latin America is growing rapidly enough that it's possible to do demographic extrapolations showing evangelical majorities in some countries by the end of this century. The Latin American conference of Catholic bishops, or whatever it's called, estimates that on an average day 8,000 Latin American Catholics convert to one or another evangelical sect, most commonly Pentecostalism, the one to which Mañuel and Ana's family belongs. The Catholic Church has this problem in that there are endless millions of merely nominal Catholics that they can't defend against aggressive proselytizing. Like people who, if you ask them will say, yeah, I guess I'm Catholic, but they hardly ever go to church and don't feel much connection to it when they do. Also, it doesn't help them that priests must, 1)

never have sex; and 2) study theology for years in a seminary. So there's a priest shortage, and while the average priest in Mexico has 8,600 Catholics, the average pastor has 230 evangelicals. Literacy and a little training from the church is all you need to be an evangelical pastor, and people in San Manuel told me those pastors have a reputation for making out quite well for themselves with all those donations flowing through their coffers. So anyway, you get more attention as an evangelical. Another advantage is that because these Protestant denominations are all of foreign origin, they come in with less racism than the Catholic Church, which is deeply rooted in the white-*mestizo*-indigenous hierarchy of Latin American society. Also they have a strategy of going after the poor and the dregs of society that reminds me of how the Nation of Islam built itself in American black ghettos in the '50s. I read one pastor saying that if you turn a drunk or an addict into a pious Bible thumper, you don't just convert that guy, you also convert his entire family that had given that guy up as lost forever. Now, as progressive Americans you might be thinking, argh, it's bad enough that we have to put up with these gay-hating fundies at home, how terrible that now they're spreading south of the border, too, liberation theology was so much better politically. Which it was. But even so, it's more complicated than that for two reasons. First, apart from the usual Christian attitude of terrified loathing toward human sexuality, these guys don't necessarily reproduce conservative American evangelical attitudes on most political issues. Every single Brazilian evangelical church was against the Iraq war, and in Venezuela their strongholds are in the slums of Caracas, which means that evangelicals support Chavez, while the rulers of the Catholic Church are against him. My main political criticism of evangelicals would be that they're offering individual solutions to collective problems, they've got a reputation for drying out drunks and stopping wife beaters and such, whereas liberation theology priests and nuns got themselves murdered for organizing and agitating to end what they called the social sins of poverty, injustice, racism and so on. Second, if the fire of evangelism in Latin America is the crazy ecstatic shit I'll get to in a minute, then the smoke is the millions of Latin Americans falling for the first time into the wonderful category of No Religion ("It isn't hard to do"). See, it's a lot of work to be an evangelical; this family goes to church twice a week, is forbidden to dance, drink or smoke, all their music is about Jesus, they have to proselytize to bring new souls to the pastor, and they have to help organize a revival every six months. So it's fairly common that a lapsed Catholic has a dramatic conversion experience, lives the evangelical life for a while, and then drops out, at which point she may go back to being a nominal Catholic again, or may give up on religion altogether, hooray. There was a Gallup study in Chile that shocked evangelical pastors by finding that nearly half of people who've converted to evangelism never go to church. Guatemala is the most evangelical country in the region, with 25% of the population subscribing. But for like 10 years they've had that constant one fourth of the population co-existing with continually attracting new converts. Attrition. Okay, that's the background; now for the trippiest experience I've had since Bonnaroo.

I went to a church service with this family, hoping to gain some insight into why this stuff is getting popular after hundreds of years of the Pope and the Virgin, and whoa, man, whoa. When you repress most of your own sexuality, and you can never drink or smoke or dance, and you don't go to rock concerts, then I guess all that energy has to

come out somewhere. These people pray like they're on, dunno, some drug I've never done and probably wouldn't want to, maybe ecstasy? There were a very few words from the pastor, then a hymn, and then everyone broke up into small groups. The one man in a group of a dozen women said a few words about the meaning of a particular piece of scripture, and then came the main course: a frenzy of individual praying. They start calmly enough, sort of like the way you may have seen your religious relatives pray before dinner when you suddenly realize, oops, I'm not supposed to be eating yet. But then bit-by-bit they just get louder and faster and weirder and scarier, *hay poder hay poder hay poder en tu sangre, Jesus! hay poder hay poder hay poder hay poder HAY PODER HAY PODER HAY PODER! HAY PODER! HAY PODER!!! HAY PODER!!!* and so on for like 45 minutes. That means, "There is power in your blood, Jesus," which of course is a bit creepy, but at least it's a coherent thought, I think some of these Mexican Pentecostals were just speaking in tongues. Eventually in their rapturous excitement a thought sprang into my head unbidden: "oh, just come, already." I bowed my head and shut my eyes as a gesture of respect and a way of avoiding any more active form of participation, so sitting perfectly still I just heard these several dozen private crescendos interfering with each other and echoing through the cavernous church. What with the furious and ecstatic clapping and jumping of several dozen people moving in and out of sync with each other, eventually the sounds got to me such that I had the sensation of spinning upwards out of my chair and had to open my eyes to keep from falling over. I was surprised to remember that I hadn't ingested so much as a microgram of any mind-altering substance. I expect an anthropologist with experience among San peoples of southern Africa would say they were trancing, producing a trance state by rhythmic movement, clapping, and chanting. Shamans will do this for hours, like all night, in a group stomping around in a circle till they wear a groove in the ground, and then eventually they fall over catatonic for a while, afterwards reporting that they felt themselves transformed into antelopes leaping across the savanna. I'd expect something similar neurologically is going on here. Anyway, that was an ordinary service, but then the next night there was more of the same but with more people at the revival and the addition of an almost offensively clean-cut band playing happy Jesus songs approximately as bland and unoriginal as I remember from the little Christian rock music I listened to back in high school. And also with a Oaxacan evangelist who struck me as being every bit as smarmy, odious, and demagogic as an American televangelist. At the end hundreds of people were crowding the stage weeping and shrieking and leaping with their eyes shut, and he was dashing around the stage to touch people's heads one by one and yell, "Swallow!" I thought that was pretty random, so afterwards I asked Mañuel and Ana's son Julio why was he saying swallow, you know that's English for *tragar*. For a long time they didn't know what I was talking about, not until I'd given the whole context in which he was saying it, and then they said something like, oh, at such times an evangelist does not speak in a language of this world, he's infused with the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues, he's saying words that comes from no earthly language. Then I said, well, that's as may be but the fact remains that in English that word means *tragar*, and then fortunately they all had a good long laugh instead of being offended. They're very, very nice people apart from being completely crazy about the whole God thing (one of Julio's friends told me that the Antichrist is probably already on Earth, perhaps playing in an American rock band, and that the Book of Revelations predicted the 9-11 attacks

cuz there's a part where a ram with two horns stands next to a lake and gets killed by the wind, uh-huh) and I'm still trying to figure out what presents I'll get each of them when I'm home in January. Definitely maple syrup, the stuff in the grocery stores here comes no closer to the real thing than the phrase *sabores artificiales* way down in the ingredients. Only 6% of Mexicans are evangelicals, I forgot to say that earlier. It's more common in Guatemala and Brazil.

Okay, now it's about time to go catch the *camioneta* back to Zapata even though I haven't said anything about the kids I'm teaching. I've taught them the names of each continent and some basic facts about them, such as which one they live on, I'm making them memorize the multiplication table, and on Wednesday when I tried to have them read from this wonderful little cartoonist's biography of Ernesto Guevara called *ABChe* I got in San Cristobal, it was initially this very heartwarming revolutionary-consciousness-raising-type moment, until it turned out that of the nine kids in class that day only four know how to read, though they range in age from eight to twelve or thirteen. But don't worry, by the time I come back in April you'll be plenty sick of hearing about these kids. I really like them.