

Waitin' for the frogs to fall

Since I was a kid I've been a pretty adventurous eater, happy when the occasion presented itself to try liver, squid, or a duck's foot and see if I liked them. Once I went dumpster diving with some friends and got some perfectly good bagels. (Once. Beth and Emily roll their eyes at the *faux* anti-capitalist.) But a couple weeks ago I finally came across something I just flat out refused to try. In La Garrucha there's a rather listless little girl of eight or nine named Maria Helena who has several sores on the left side of her chin and walks around selling various foods out of a bag: cooked ears of corn, cucumbers or a local fruit with a name something like *guayaca*, depending on the day. I usually don't buy what she sells because I'd rather eat for free [at the clinic]. I did offer to take her to Doc Angel and buy her whatever cream or ointment she would need to heal the festering sore on her chin, but I think there was a problem with either my Spanish or hers. Probably hers, actually; I'm definitely an advanced Spanish speaker now, though I wouldn't call myself fluent. I can now generally understand all of what I hear even from people I've just met. Except for small children. Ask them their name and they'll look away and mumble it at a high pitch and a low volume. Anyway, one day Maria Helena asked if I'd like to buy a *cachuda*. I said, oh, I don't know, that depends, what's a *cachuda*? Is it a kind of fruit? And she said, no, no, it's not a kind of fruit, come and see. So I went to her house to see the *cachuda*, and she brought me a plastic bag, inside of which was a beetle five inches long if it was a millimeter, which it was. It had jaws the size of a housecat's toenails that opened and closed furiously coplanar with the big flat part of its body (like if our jaws were rotated 90 degrees using the tongue as an axis). It had six legs of two or three inches apiece that it flailed ineffectually as she held it up for my inspection. The thing looked angry, and I looked so startled that Maria Helena's mother laughed at my expression. I said, well, thanks, but I'm sorry, eating insects is a totally foreign concept to me, and I have no idea what to do with this thing. So I left. But Maria Helena couldn't believe anyone with as much money as an American must have would be willing to pass up such a great big gorgeous *cachuda*, so maybe five minutes after I got back to the clinic she showed up with her little brother and the *cachuda* to show it to me again, look, isn't it big and tasty? The girl kept repeating her favorite word: a long, low, whiny "buuuuuuuuuuuuyit" ("compraaaaaaaloo"). I asked do you really eat this? And she said something like, "Oh, yes, it's very good, especially with chili, this is the part you eat," pointing at the thorax. And I thought, Jesus, I'm not gonna eat anything that has a thorax, at least not on my own when I don't even know how to kill it, let alone clean it and cook it. Before she finally gave up and left I asked her how much she wanted for the thing, and she said 50 pesos, which is like \$4.58. The clinic staff thought that was by far the funniest part of the story, imagine paying 50 pesos just for a *cachuda*, she must have thought you were really dumb. One promoter told me 50 pesos would buy you a whole chicken as long as you don't want one that was raised on corn. When I asked, several said, oh, yes, of course, we eat those bugs, they're very tasty.

I don't have to eat bugs, though. They feed me at the clinic, even though I don't really do any work beyond sweeping and mopping the *consultorio* in the morning, helping unload whenever a truckload of something comes in, and joining the bucket brigade at the river when the clinic water spigot quits working. Which has happened three times since I got

here, and I'd guess the power is out maybe 20% of the time, which is a damn sight better than Baghdad. Anyway, I guess they feed me 'cuz the junta dumped me on them, and they're used to feeding whoever happens to be around. One night there was a meeting of health promoters from every municipality in the *caracol* as well as some NGO people, and they had to make chicken stew for 50. We eat equally and communally, someone dishes up the beans and rice or the chicken stew or whatever in equal portions into bowls, and then everyone takes a bowl and a stack of tortillas. (I've wondered if this is how the apostles or early Christians ate, so if any of the Christians who get these e-mails could tell me I'd appreciate it.) We eat tortillas with everything. I usually run out of tortillas before I run out of the food in my bowl, and whenever that happens someone says, oh, there's more tortillas, you know, right there, you can have more if you want. Apparently it would be bad hospitality to force your guest to eat without even having a tortilla to pick up his food with. This went on for several weeks until I finally said, well, thank you very much, but you know I'm able to eat food with tortillas or without tortillas, either way's fine with me, I'm not a Mexican. Then everyone laughed, oh, yes, we Mexicans, we do need our tortillas or it's not a meal, ha ha ha. And then since that day they've gone right on telling me where the tortillas are whenever I try to eat rice with a spoon.

A breakfast of rice and beans or pasta and beans is pretty meager, and really that's good because then by noon I'm hungry enough to eat this stuff called *pozol*. For an untold number of poor Chiapanecos *pozol* is the difference between starving and stunting, but that doesn't make it easy to like, especially at first. To make the stuff you take a bucket of corn and add a little bit of lime (*cal*) – the mineral, not the fruit. (The fruit is for making a salsa with chilies and onions that makes boring food tasty.) Then you wash the corn by repeatedly filling the bucket with water, stirring the corn with your hands, and draining the water. Then you go to this hunk of steel apparatus that's built as solidly as a vise and called a *molino*, from *moler*, "to grind." It's basically a funnel that dumps into a thick screw that leads into two abrasive circular plates, one of which revolves with the screw when you turn a crank. So you fill the funnel and crank the handle, and the *molino* grinds the wet corn kernels into thousands of whitish flecks maybe a quarter of the size of a grain of rice. Except that mostly you can't see the individual flecks because they're joined loosely together sort of in the shape of the spiral scraps you sweep up after drilling holes in anything metal. This part is why I got to watch. Once *compañera* Ana had demonstrated a bit she said, hey, why don't you grind the maize now? Then once you've ground it all you mix handfuls of ground-up maize with palmfuls of water and knead and roll the stuff into spheres. It's a very handy food because one sphere less than a foot in diameter can supposedly feed 10 men. Ten small Chiapan men who are used to eating *pozol*.

To eat *pozol* you tear handfuls off the sphere, put them in a bowl, and knead them with water until there aren't any big chunks left. (This means that an untouched and a half-eaten *pozol* sphere, respectively, look kinda like the first and second death stars from the original *Star Wars* movies.) At that point you can go ahead and eat the stuff if you're so inclined and accustomed, which I'm not. The first time I had *pozol* I wrote in my diary that after adding water you end up with a tepid, tasteless gruel with the color of old milk and the texture of wet dust. Now I'd say that was a bit harsh, I actually kind of like it if I

put in a bunch of Lawry's seasoning salt and, like, seven fresh *jalapeño* slices. (Dad, fresh *jalapeños* are better than the wet ones in jars because they're a little spicier and a lot crunchier. You should try them if you can find any.)

For me, the overall effect of eating mostly *pozol*, beans, rice, beans and tortillas with occasional bits of chicken or cheese, and four or five bouts with amoebas, is that since leaving the States on the Fourth of July I've lost 26 pounds. By BMI I've come down from four pounds under obesity to four pounds overweight. I don't think I've ever lost or gained weight this quickly in my life. I hope my body knows when to stop. But for indigenous people here the overall effect is more serious¹. I have yet to meet a Chiapan taller than I am. I'm like five nine and a half, which I think is just about exactly average for an American male. On the bright side the shortest people are old people. I've met several little old ladies who don't rise past my breastbone, but I've met no adult so tiny in their 30s or younger. I would assume that that means childhood nutrition here is better than it used to be, but even so there aren't any tall people. Or actually there are tall people, in relative terms, it's just that the undernourishment shifts the entire bell curve to the left. I mean notably tall people look different than normal people, and not just in their height. There's something in their, uh, shoulders or neck or cheekbones or something. Like if you were to look at just a headshot of Adam Sandler's boss in *Happy Gilmore*, you'd be able to tell just from his face that he's a very big guy. I've met two men who sort of have that look, but when they stood up they turned out to be my height or a little less. So it's inexorable: even the tall guys are short.

Medically, I've spent a lot of time listening to Doc Angel. He likes to teach, and he also likes to complain. He complains that local people without medical training will use the word "cancer" to refer to any old abnormality of the skin (it's a cognate, *cáncer*). An old blister is cancer, a big mole is cancer, a bad bug bite is cancer, you've got cancer, I've got cancer, we've all got cancer, so what? But unfortunately cancer is not all zits and cold sores, cancer is also cancer, so this promiscuous abuse of the word that robs it of its rightful terror is harmful. Especially when combined with the popular fear of surgery. Someone's neighbor's uncle had a surgery once, and he died, so surgery is very, very dangerous. If a doctor tells you to get surgery then maybe you should go to an herbalist, they'll give you an herbal remedy with a nice placebo effect and they never recommend surgery. (A placebo effect is the curative power of the belief in the effectiveness of a treatment. In British people it shows up in brand-name aspirin being more effective than a generic even though they're chemically identical, and Chinese Americans with cancer born in a favorable year of the Chinese zodiac live four years longer on average than those with cancer born in an unfavorable year. What patients believe is important even if it's not true.) So anyway if Doc Angel tells someone that they have cancer and need to have surgery, they hear something like, "You've got this innocuous little problem that never hurt anyone, and to get rid of it you need to have this extraordinarily dangerous procedure that will probably kill you." So it takes some convincing. He'll tell them

¹ [added by kmkat] Andrew explained to once the different effects of famine vs. long-term malnutrition. In a famine you find people who are emaciated and/or with swollen bellies; chronic malnutrition produces a population of short stature.

repeatedly that they need to have surgery, that the operation won't be dangerous because the cancer's right there on the skin and easy to remove, and if they don't get it the thing will spread throughout their body and kill them. And then he'll leave and José Enrique will come in to say the same thing. And then Erica, Aña, Enoc, Alejandra, Marcela, Luis, whatever health promoters are at the clinic at the time, they all come through and give the same spiel. Then at the end of all that the person may agree to have the surgery, if they can afford it, which they probably can't. Annual health spending per person here works out to about \$53.30.

He also says that there's a nasty popular belief in Chiapas that goes something like, when you get sick, you take some medicine and then you get better. This makes it very hard for him to explain the concept of chronic, treatable, incurable illness. Asthma, diabetes, epilepsy – he has a lot of trouble convincing people that they'll have these diseases forever but that they can reduce or eliminate their symptoms by taking medications for the rest of their lives, but because they'll always have the disease their symptoms will come back as soon as they stop taking the medication. Thank gods, there's not much of an AIDS problem here. And these can be expensive medications by Chiapan standards; he says that one good epilepsy medication costs around \$17 a month, so after three months you pass the average annual medical expenditure and then you're supposed to keep paying that for the rest of your life. Or you can go pay a few pesos to an herbalist and keep having seizures. Epilepsy is more common here than in the States because it can be brought on by a certain kind of worms that you can get from undercooked pork, which are common here but not north of the border, or by head trauma during birth, such as a birth in the middle of nowhere attended only by a lightly trained midwife or by no one with any training at all.

There's also a popular belief in the curative power of injections as such, an idea that injections are just in general a good thing, better than other ways of administering exactly the same medicine. I interviewed a very experienced former health promoter named Nicolas for my next column, and he said that back in the bad old days unscrupulous outside doctors in the government clinics used to sell vitamin injections for pretty much any ailment. There's basically no reason to inject a vitamin rather than taking it as a pill, *Where There Is No Doctor* says that a third of the cases of paralysis from polio were actually caused by the reaction of an infected person's body to an injection, quite possibly an unnecessary injection. And these doctors were prescribing vitamins rather than antibiotics for bacterial infections, Jesus, just because the vitamin injections cost a little more. I mean what the fuck? Why did they keep their licenses? Because the government didn't regard indigenous people as human beings, they were just animals in the eyes of the ladinos. That's basically the answer I get to any "why" question I ask about the bad old days before the uprising. What's worse, there was eugenics here long after it had mostly died out elsewhere. At least I think it had, the last eugenic policy I heard of in the States was the Air Force paying bonuses to pilots that had more children until the mid-60s. (Eugenics is a kind of scientific racism concerned with improving the racial character of a population. It was very popular until Hitler gave it a bad name by carrying it to its logical conclusion with the Holocaust. You can get a fair idea of what it was about from both the Holocaust and from the idea that jet fighter pilots should be

encouraged to propagate themselves because they're the pinnacle of the Aryan race.) It used to be common that indigenous women here would go to a government clinic for some malady or other, and the doctor would say, you need to have this certain procedure. The woman would say okay, she'd have it, she'd go home and from that day forward she'd never be able to get pregnant. Eventually indigenous women talked with each other and put two and two together to realize the state clinics were sterilizing them without asking their consent or informing them afterwards. When I asked, Nicolas said there was never a case of a doctor being reprimanded for performing such a forced sterilization. I would assume part of the justification for the policy was that indigenous people then had such astoundingly large families, from what I've heard the norm was something like eight, nine, ten kids or more. But that's come down sharply since the uprising. It varies by community, but Doc Angel says in most communities the norm is down to five or six kids, and in some places as few as three is normal. It's like the Indian economist Amartya Sen has demonstrated in arguing against the Chinese one-child policy: by empowering women, especially with literacy, you can get declines in total fertility rate just as big as or even bigger than the ones you can get by evil coercive shit like the one-child law or forced sterilizations. Anyway, this eugenic history is a good thing to remember if you hear that Zapatista communities won't accept any aid from the Mexican government. (Not even medical aid? Well, yeah, not even medical aid, they can listen to their elders.)

One thing I've had some trouble watching is that in general the people here treat animals like animals. Reasoning that to be a place of health and healing the clinic should also be a place of cleanliness, they throw both rocks and kicks at the stray dogs and collectively owned pigs that wander in to beg for chicken bones or eat grass and corn cobs. You can get an idea of these dogs from the names I call them by: Ugly, Uglito, Soreass, Cyclops, Ashear, Batbone, Ribsy, Starvey, Macy, Hector, Greedy and Greedier. (Macy is **emaciated**; Hector has a pair of **ectopic** toenails growing halfway up his rear calves; Greedier is the only one who can deprive Greedy of a chicken bone he just stole from someone else. My favorite is Cyclops, a quiet, friendly dog with a decorative left eye who looks like he eats a bit better than the others and has now nearly forgiven me for trying to pull a tick off his shoulder.) I'd guess that the staff got this idea that people, especially historically oppressed and exploited indigenous people, deserve human rights, while animals can be treated like animals, partially by not living half a supply chain away from the source of their (very occasional) meat. The other day I watched three *compañeras* happily wring the necks of three chickens. (I never understood that expression before, but it really does look a lot like wringing out a wet rag.) It wasn't that strangling chickens made them happy, it was just that they were in a good mood and killing chickens for dinner was the work they happened to be doing at that moment. And I was glad to have the meat at dinner. I would guess that killing their own meat is part of why people here have such a utilitarian view of animals, but then after throwing a rock at a pig they also put on this disconcerting style as if to say, hey, I just caused a little suffering. This is certainly a better attitude than the stereotypical reaction of the kindhearted American racist who goes somewhere in the Third World and thinks, "Oh when workers here try to form a union the cops shoot them with American weapons, oh, well, but whateryagonnado, and here's all these malnourished kids with swollen bellies living in shantytowns, life's a bitch and then you die, but ohmigod these poor puppies! Let's start

an NGO.” But even though I like their attitude better than it’s opposite it still bothers me; it’s a great big cultural difference. A few days ago there was this half-starved dog standing on the bridge where the road goes over the river, and I watched a *campesino* on his way to the corn fields walk up, put his foot against the dog’s side and push it in just for shits and giggles. Then the dog swam to shore, and the *campesino* made that unnerving face with the self-satisfied smile.

An exception is three cute puppies and their mother fed by the ladies who mind the cafeteria, the place transient outsiders can go for a hot meal and Internet access. I let one of those puppies sleep on my lap for a while, and then I noticed that even when the cute puppy sat still, its fur didn’t. It has lots of fleas. So I decided I was about due for a shower and a change of clothes anyway, and fortunately afterwards I turned out not to have fleas. Then a few days later a tiny kitten, maybe six weeks but no more, randomly showed up at the clinic. The staff petted it, stared at it, fed it some rice milk, and then weren’t sure what to do with the thing. So it slept on my lap for a while until I took it to the cafeteria to see if they’d adopt it, which they did. And then I showered and changed clothes, but apparently not thoroughly enough. Over the next several days I killed one flea on my leg, two on my floor, one in my beard and one in a shirt when I finally realized I had to wash all my clothes at the same time. In my opinion they’re real ugly little fuckers, too, whole phyla away from the slow beauty of a spider instinctively weaving its web. I also sprayed my bedding with Deet and mopped the floor, and now I don’t have fleas anymore, which is nice. I hated having fleas because you never know where they are, or even if they are, until you find one, kill it, and hope it was the last one. Their bites weren’t very painful or itchy, though, especially compared to the bedbug bite I had that itched for a good two or three weeks. I was very lucky. I woke up in the morning to find I had this angry red bite on my belly, and I thought, oh, shit, I think to get rid of a bedbug infestation you’ve gotta like fumigate the building and destroy all your material possessions or something. But then I sat up and saw there was a squashed ugly insect lying next to the pad I sleep on. So I think that the bug was biting my belly, sucking tasty young blood and having a groovy old time, and then I just happened to roll over in my sleep and crush the little bastard before he could run off and reproduce. So I had fleas for a while, but I think I avoided a bedbug infestation by dumb luck.

One more bug story. A couple nights ago I was lying in bed (at least I sometimes think of it as a bed), struggling through *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and starting to think that maybe there’s a good reason why half of Shakespeare’s plays aren’t household names, when I turned my head, jumped up on my elbow, and thought, “Goddamn, that’s the biggest damn spider I’ve ever seen. Or, no, actually, it’s not really the biggest exactly, it’s just that its abdomen is so enormous compared to the rest of its body that it seems even bigger than it is. I wonder if it’s carrying an egg sac.” (Except I didn’t really think it in words.) The thing’s abdomen was about the size of half an unshelled peanut, and the rest of the body was smaller but with inch-long legs quickly articulating outwards. It froze when I jumped, just sat there motionless hoping that my eyes could only detect movement, or at least that it was camouflaged against the forest floor. Which it wasn’t because it was standing on smooth clean cement. I sat there for about ten seconds deciding that the difficulty of falling asleep knowing that that thing was in the room

outweighed the spider's possible imminent future as an eater of fleas. I lifted up my complete Shakespeare, let it fall, and boom, the floor was covered in dozens and dozens of tiny little spiders (*arañitas*) the size of pinheads, all scurrying madly under my suitcase to get away from their dead mother. It was like I'd sneezed into a spoonful of flour. What a weird way to come into the world, blown out of the egg sac as your mother's belly is crushed by the words "with line references to each occurrence."

That's about all for now, except to say that nobody knew that what I translated in my last email were pieces of "Howl" by Allen Ginsberg, "Ella's Song" by Sweet Honey in the Rock, and "This Land is Your Land" by Woody Guthrie. I thought the bilingual people on this list were a little better cultured than that, but oh well. Oh and one more thing: these emails I'm writing are apparently called "dispatches" now. Half a dozen people independently decided so, and I see no reason to disagree. Tomorrow we vaccinate.

Andrew