

AND A SOUL IN EV'RY STONE

Soon after all the shrieky freaky evangelical Christianity that weirded me out last month came November 1, the Day of the Dead, which as they do it in Zapata struck me as notably less crazy than all that hysterical savior shouting. First everyone went to church for subdued prayers in Tzeltal led by catechists, who are local people with a basic theological training, and who I think are kind of analogous to the education promoters and health promoters. I've never heard of a jungle community with a priest, though there may be some. They lit candles for the *compañeros* and *compañeras* who died in the uprising in 1994, putting them in the church itself because those fighters generally don't have graves; during the 12-day war their bodies went to the dogs and the vultures. Then the whole community walked over to the cemetery. I asked Rowan, a guy around 50 who used to be the village cook at festivals, if I could come along and he said sure, you should, and I got the same answer from Renshu, who assigns people to make my tortillas. When we got to the cemetery Rowan showed me the graves of two of his children, which sudden solemnity, particularly when combined with his incongruously cheery manner, left me with no idea of anything to do but ask medical questions.

One, his eldest, died many years ago of some very hasty sickness that just jumped up and killed him in three hours. They never knew what it was, and of course back then no white doctor was gonna waste a perfectly good pair of surgical gloves on an autopsy just because some Indian kid died on a coffee plantation. That's what Zapata used to be 30 years ago, but then the plantation owner decided he could make more money raising cattle and so he kicked most of his workers off the land. In 1994 they came back, sent the master away, and then ate beef for several months. Rowan claimed back then some men would slaughter forty cows in a day, they had to make room for the corn and beans, you see. Rowan's other small grave came from a relatively rare case of a young child dying of a diarrheal disease after the Zapatista health system was set up, and the special circumstances are a little illuminating. He had unusually severe diarrhea, too bad for the health promoters to treat, so they took him to the hospital in Altamirano, but the doctors there did not have the necessary machinery to pump vomit out of his lungs (or maybe it was just broken?), and he died. 20 years ago he most likely would never have made it to any hospital. Rowan did not seem at all broken up talking about this. My overall read on him is that he was born into the bottom of a terribly unjust system and struggled all his life to turn it into a free and equal community like the one they've built in Zapata, and now that he's finally got it he's in a permanent good mood except when his arthritis interferes. Or maybe it's just that he's Tzeltal. Casilda and Jose-T. (see below) say that in comparison to Tzeltals, Tzotzil people away down south are way, way more serious all the time, they never flip their t-shirts up over their hairless brown bellies the way the guys here do when it's hot out.

When I first got to the cemetery I thought there were about a dozen graves, but when people starting giving each grave cups of coffee, pieces of sweet bread, cigarettes,

flowers, and cola I realized that, I assume because of the poverty of the families, a few of the graves just have blank ordinary rocks to mark their places. So it was more like two dozen. A catechist said another quiet prayer in Tzeltal, and then everyone just stood around talking for a couple hours. I thought it was a very appropriately tranquil setting, a quiet, forest-ringed meadow of tall grass and undergrowth with a high ridgeline overlooking it. There was a vibe of the dead returning to the earth and becoming one with the worms of nature, which was somehow not at all present in the manicured lawns of the cemetery outside Chicago where we buried my grandma, even though, of course, corpses there rot just as fully. The carbon cycle is inexorable. During those hours of hanging around and chatting, after a decent interval everyone took back and consumed the gifts they'd given the dead, except the flowers.

I talked with Rowan and learned I was still totally wrong about the number of graves. The same place was the graveyard back when the place was a coffee plantation, and Rowan thinks there are a thousand people buried there. Anywhere you step probably has a corpse under it, and when Renshu left the meadow to take a leak he went a good twenty or thirty feet out into the forest. (In a normal clearing I would expect a local guy to just stand near the edge and face the trees.) Lots and lots of people died in the bad old days, and, consequently, when for the first time I could see pretty much all of the village of Zapata in one place with no outsiders other than me, I couldn't see any old people. I asked Rowan and he said, yeah, our parents all died before '94, now we're the closest thing to elders around. That generational "we" refers to people in their fifties, of whom I saw like five out of 95 or 100 present. I couldn't resist the opportunity to do a little informal visual census, although Rowan told me not quite everyone was there because a few people were out of town and a few others were caring for a woman who's slowly dying of inoperable uterine cancer even though she's only 34. With those caveats it looked like right around half the community is under the age of 18, which according to my limited knowledge of demography means yikes, imminent explosive population growth. Also about half of the adults are men, which I'm guessing would not be the case in some non-Zapatista communities where the daddies have all gone to work in Cancun or Quintana Roo or the United States.

[There should be some sort of dull, obligatory transition paragraph here, so shut your eyes and imagine one.]

In a friendly meeting last month the new San Mañuel autonomous council approved me to teach in Emiliano Zapata. Zapata already has two education promoters, whom I'll call Dean and Gene, and I've been helping Dean. Whenever I'm teaching his eight- to twelve-year-olds in Spanish he's free to teach the little kids in Tzeltal, and then they don't just sit around poking each other. I've taught them the names and shapes of the seven continents, made them memorize the multiplication table, gone through conjugation of -ar family Spanish verbs in the preterite [simple past] tense, and started on basic geometry. Unfortunately that's only been four and a half days of work in the

five and a half weeks since I got there, and we'll have to review all of it pretty heavily because there's been so much down time for them to forget everything in.

The Empti'd School-House, or the Flight of Academus; Being a true and compleat Listing of all the three-day Monday to Wednesday Zapatista schooling weeks since my arrival in Emiliano Zapata on the 7th of October two thousand and seven, with attendant excuses for each where appropriate.

October 8-10: Fiesta of the change of the autonomous council. No school.

October 15-17: There was school, but I had to miss it to go to San Cristobal and renew my visa.

October 22-24: I taught a full three-day week of school. This is still a unique event.

October 29-31: If I'm understanding Catholicism rightly, these days were respectively a day with no religious significance, some minor religious holiday that comes before All Saints' Day, and All Saints' Day itself. But the Thursday of the week was the Day of the Dead, so there was no school all week.

November 5: Gene had to go to take his sister to the hospital because she's the one with uterine cancer. Dean, the other education promoter, taught Gene's class, and I taught Dean's older kids, and the little kids who only speak Tzeltal mostly sat around and made noises.

November 6: Gene was still in town with his sister, and Dean's little baby daughter was sick enough with vomiting and diarrhea that he let school out after only two hours to take her to town.

November 7: School canceled due to these sick relatives, but on the bright side Dean's baby has gotten better. Since she's only 9 months old so I'll go ahead and give her real name: Ramona. Isn't that cute?

(*Comandanta* Ramona was the second most famous Zapatista after Marcos. Someone told me she was the principal military commander in 1994, which, come on, no one outside the Zapatista high command really knows exactly who runs what in the EZLN, but I do know she was the one they chose when they got to address the Mexican congress. She died of kidney failure last year, and Marcos said, "The world has lost one of those women it requires.")

November 12-13: Meeting of all the municipal health promoters. No school.

November 14: Meeting of the Zapata health promoters with the community, an event Dean told me would include nagging at the families of the chronically absent. No school.

Which brings us up to now. Last dispatch I decided I wouldn't really write about teaching because I only had three days of experience at it and I hadn't really done enough or thought enough to write about it, and now that I've got four and a half days of experience I feel about the same. On all those days when I'm not teaching I've been pretending to be a construction worker, which is easy, I just decide that I'm gonna work. That's much less trouble than deciding that some 9-year-olds will work, why don't we just snatch Pablo's pencil to poke Pedro and then go play soccer instead? There's construction work in Zapata because a Basque NGO called Peace and Solidarity is paying to build a full clinic in the municipalities of the La Garrucha *caracol* that don't have them, and because Zapata is more or less centrally located it gets to be the capital and have the clinic even though it's not that big. There's no electricity in the village except for what comes out of a gasoline generator and what passes overhead in corporate power lines without ever descending to human use, and that means it's all hand tools, ten men working not very hard to do the work of one concrete truck. And it is all men, every single one, except for the boss Casilda, the skinny architect from Mexico City with frizzy brown hair who to the amazement of Basil the contractor actually pitches in and spatters her own clothes with concrete as she slaps bricks onto the edge of the growing ceiling. Basil gets a pseudonym because I know both of his main employees are Zapatistas so *ergo* he might be, though I haven't asked him. But in close to 20 years of Chiapan construction work he'd never before seen an architect or an engineer get their hands dirty; normally they just visit the work site and give orders.

To keep Casilda, Basil, and his three guys working laying bricks and covering the walls in concrete the crew needs a long tail of guys to make cement, filtering gravel twice and then mixing it with lime, water, and cement mix. Every three days except Sunday a new batch of a dozen or so comes in from a different community of the municipality. So every Monday and Thursday I've gone in the morning to introduce myself to the cook, explain that I'm a teacher here who is not working this week due to such and such, and then I contribute a bag of beans I bought at the collective store, eat with the workers, and spend the day shoveling gravel through a screen or mixing and watering powders to make the perfect glop. It's pretty satisfying work, actually. That's partly cuz it's easygoing manual labor out in the sun with very easygoing Tzeltal guys. I was actually getting a little antsy working the two-man sand screen cuz because I had to stop and take a little break whenever St. James from San María did, which was like every time he remembered we were working next to a pile of cement blocks he could sit on, and also partially because the thing will be a Zapatista clinic when it's done and thus, whether I'm hauling bricks to the bricklayer or turning over shovelfuls of unevenly wet concrete, it's all about health care for the people, man.

I'd worked with about five crews of laborers before St. James from San María came in with the other guys from Margarita, which is the other name by which San María is also known for some reason. We got along very well, which may have partially been him working up to the part where he asked me if I'd be interested in teaching in their community in addition to Zapata. I fairly jumped at the chance, shoveling is cool and

all, but I really do prefer explaining things to people. (Come to think of it, that's actually one of the main reasons I wanna have kids, which probably sounds stupid until you stop and think of some of the other reasons people have kids.) Now St. James from San María is emphatically not an education promoter; he told me the story of the time the contractor who was paying him to help build a bridge over a stream called him over to sign a contract, and he just said, sorry, boss, can't even write my name. So he said that he'd go home, talk to the education promoters, have a community meeting and then decide if they wanted to invite me to teach in their community from Thursday to Saturday, the normal Zapatista school week being from Monday to Wednesday. In which case they'd send someone to tell me. San María alias Margarita is a relatively good-sized place, with around 100 families, of whom half are Zapatistas, 14 are Oppdicas but they don't make trouble (see below) and the remainder are unaffiliated. So they've got three education promoters and like 85 students, and the idea is that I'll come in after the normal school week to teach relatively advanced material, as in middle and high school level, that the education promoters have never studied and thus can't teach.

The training standard of the two Zapatista education promoters I know in Zapata is one of those things where I've gotta step back, take a little breath, and remember that these people are exactly one inspiringly rebellious generation out of plantation slavery, and any grandfather here just might bear the mark of the lash on his back and certainly never saw the inside of a classroom as a child. (Although I recently heard that it was different in Tzotzil country, there weren't many plantations so they weren't slaves, and I know fuck-all about the Chol- and Tojolabal-speaking regions of Zapatista territory.) Anyway, Dean has the job of teaching kids to count, and he misspells four of the numbers between one and ten. If I remember rightly he writes *trez, cinco, nuebe, dies* instead of *tres, cinco, nueve, diez*. So the thinking was that I could come to San María and teach a bit of geometry, algebra, trig, chemistry, biology, world geography, history that's not just Chiapan, and so on to whichever of the older kids wants to study extra days to learn that kind of thing. Then Saint James from San María went back to Margarita and a new batch of workers came.

These came from a place called Pancho Villa. One of them, Arthur, is the only Zapatista I've met who's been out of the Americas. A Spanish surgeon flew him, his wife, and two of his kids to Spain for three months so he could have a certain kind of hip surgery and recover from it. A skinny, likeable, outgoing 18-year-old whom I'll call Luigi made friends with me, and then, as we were hauling rocks out of the river because that's a free way to get filler for the foundation of what'll be the health promoters' dormitory, he abruptly asked me when I was coming to see visit him at his house. Pretty soon I agreed to ride back with them and see their community, and that was when things started to get complicated. See, after I rode the truck back and forth up a switchback gravel road to the top of the mountain, hiked an hour from the road into the forest, ate chicken with exquisite gravy, and proved I still don't know how to play basketball, they plopped me down on a bench against a hut in front of the fire next to Cassius.

Cassius is 60. (At least he says he's 60, but old people here give their ages as round numbers more commonly than one would expect them to if they knew exactly when they were born.) Cassius lived most of his life in the bad old days when the community was a coffee plantation and had a harsh master about whom he didn't want to say much and who lived in the one structure in town to which an American would unhesitatingly apply the word "house." It's now empty, roofless, and overgrown inside with waist-high grass because after the revolution nobody wanted to live there. Anyone who's read Orwell's *Animal Farm* should be able to see that as a smart idea, eveyeryyyyyyone is a fuckin' Napoleon, but I won't go more into the community background now cuz I think my next column is gonna be a historical piece about the uprising on that particular plantation.

I'm coming to think that, though what I read before coming here was mostly about Zapatistas frightening tourists as they stormed San Cristobal and then inviting lefty foreigners to come ruminate on Marcos' brilliantly sidewise revolutionary rhetoric and what this all means for the global project of anti-capitalist liberation in our moment of postmodern neo-liberal whatevermajig, at least in this part of Chiapas the most lasting and fundamental effect of the uprising was a lot simpler than that and happened where there were no foreign journalists to write about it. The Zapatistas got rid of the plantation owners, and then they gave the plantations to their workers. I think that's the heart of it. "The land belongs to they who work it," says Zapata's classic maxim that's painted outside the office of the San Manuel autonomous council. (*La tierra es para quien la trabaja.*) Anyway Cassius has never been to school a day in his life and can't read or write so much as his name. He's thin, short, and leathery like most Tzeltal peasants I've met, and especially in the firelight's flicker, something in the gaunt lines of his face reminded me of Howard Zinn, and, hmm, I'm not sure how to say it. There's just something about the guy, a sort of deep inner wounding and bitter memory that manifests as moral authority and scarred wisdom, there we go. Basically he told me that they used to have an education promoter, Joe, but then he became the village *responsable*, so they chose another one, but he left cuz he didn't want the job. So their little community in resistance of 22 Zapatista families has been for two years without an education promoter. They've got an empty school, and he wants his grandkids to learn to read. It was way too moving to say no, but I was too possibly obligated to give him a clear yes, here's the complicated part.

(Sorry about *responsable*. Normally I think it's annoying and affectatious to season your writing about Latin America with italicized and untranslated Spanish words, oh, look at me, I can speak Spanish so I'm a better activist then you are, no, goddammit if you're gonna speak Spanish then speak Spanish and if you're gonna speak English then speak English. Unless you're with other bilingual people of course. So I translate *finca* as "plantation," *campesino* as "peasant" and *selva* as either "jungle" or "forest" depending on the place, though some people might say you shouldn't try to translate those at all. The only one I don't wanna translate is *compañero*. That's cuz in English "companion"

and “partner” have no political connotation, while “comrade” sounds totally Marxist, which the Zapatistas aren’t. But if you’ve noticed that the Spanish noun *responsable* looks a lot like the English adjective “responsible,” then you know just about as much as I do about the position’s concomitant powers and duties. I can’t translate it because I don’t know what it means.) [kmkat says: *Oh, crap, I’ve been italicizing every Spanish word in his dispatches because I thought that was how it should be and now I find out he has been doing it another way on purpose. In the interest of consistency and because I am anal I shall continue to do so.*]

The big community of San María was founded some time after the ‘94 uprising by the majority of the workers from the plantation that’s now Pancho Villa. After the revolution they left the old plantation to start their own community on different land, while a minority consisting of the current inhabitants of Pancho Villa stayed on what had been the coffee plantation. These two places that have both asked me to teach in the second half of the week are right next to each other, 15 minutes apart on foot. So the plan for Sunday morning after prayer was that me, Cassius, and Joe the *responsable* would go and talk to the *compañeros* in San María. I was expecting that they’d get together and have a talk like, oh, hey, uh-uh, this is our furry gringo teacher guy, oh, no, you don’t, we saw him first, the hell you did, last night he slept in the house of our health promoter, and so on, except in Tzeltal and much more friendly-like. Since they’re so close I don’t see why they can’t work out a nice compromise if I’m willing to work most of the daylight hours. But then while Luigi was showing me his cat and his brother’s bicycle, a guy came and started talking in Tzeltal, and everyone gathered around to listen gravely to him for five or ten minutes. Arthur asked a question in Spanish that included references to the middle of the stream and the two sides of the stream, and then Joe the *responsable* told me that something important had just come up and I would have to go talk to the *compañeros* in San María myself, all the adult men of Pancho Villa had to go somewhere else right now.

Now I’m gonna be optimistic and assume that I’ll never have a clearer prompt than that to say what Oppdic is. When the Zapatistas rose up on New Year’s Day of ‘94 the first instinct of the government was to send the army into the jungle to kill them and their supporters; up until then, that was normally how a repressive, autocratic Latin American government would handle a guerrilla uprising. But then hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated in the streets, in Mexico City most importantly, but many other places as well, to say, oh, no, you don’t, it’s not the ‘80s anymore, Mexico is not Central America, and you can’t just charge into the jungle with the guns Reagan gave you and start killing Indians. And then later a bunch of other stuff happened that I won’t explain, but the fact remains that for the Mexican government the obvious anti-guerrilla option of just putting all their McDonnell-Douglas toys into action in the traditions of Christopher Columbus and Jerry Bruckheimer is forestalled, ain’t solidarity beautiful? I sure think so. So here’s what they do instead to kill Zapatismo: the carrot and the stick. First, they bribe Zapatistas. Right now you’re living in a one-room hut made of pine boards with a dirt floor and a grass roof, but if you quit the

resistance and start voting for the PRI or the PRD you can live in a one-room hut of pine boards with a dirt floor and this tin roof that the local machine of that political party will give you. Second, they try to make life tough enough for Zapatistas that they'll give up, one family at a time. Toward this end they've set up this paramilitary organization that presents itself under the textbook-perfect Orwellian misnomer, the Organization for the Defense of Indigenous and Peasant Rights, commonly known by the Spanish acronym OPPDIC. Isn't that a pretty name? Your work will set you free, we don't torture, war is peace, freedom is slavery, and ignorance is strength. For a while when I was in La Garrucha we had to take 450-liter black plastic drums down to the creek and fill them with water to take to the village of San Marcos because the Oppdicas had cut the water line and the *compañeros* there had nothing to drink. That the Oppdicas' stock in trade: cutting water lines, cutting power lines, scattering or killing livestock, burning corn fields, that kind of thing. Not massacres and torture, which would bring lots of international attention whose avoidance is the whole point of the strategy. They've never even killed anyone, yet, cross your fingers, though I think they did shoot two Zapatistas a few months ago. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that none of them have attended the School of the Americas in Ft. Benning, Georgia. Oppdic does persistent, low-level harassment that doesn't bring reporters and has no open link to the state or the political parties.

Although the EZLN used to be an army that killed people with guns, since, um, I think several years ago, they've had a truce with the Mexican government that includes a state pledge not to execute the numerous outstanding arrest warrants against the Zapatista leadership. They don't wanna send themselves to jail by shooting Oppdicas and breaking the truce, so the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, despite the word "army" in its name, has to make nice and pretend like it's a nonviolent social movement that has to rely on foreign peace campers to live in threatened communities and intimidate the paramilitaries with their white skin and their rich country passports. Isn't that a wicked clever and damnably patient strategy on the government's part? Cuz, see, officially Oppdic has nothing to do with the government, they don't even cut utility lines, they're just defending indigenous and peasant rights, the radicals. However, my general sense is that Oppdic is now doing a substantially smaller quantity of nasty evil shit than they were six months or a year ago, and this was just confirmed to me yesterday by the woman in the Enlace Civil office. (Enlace Civil is an NGO in the big international Chiapan city of San Cristobal de las Casas that connects outside volunteers with work in Zapatista communities; they have continuous email access and an office in the city and they're experienced with the good government juntas out in the jungle. They'd be good people to talk to you if you've got any interest in coming down to get between a Zapatista community and the Oppdicas.) I've never seen any problems with Oppdic in Zapata. I figured I should at some point explain exactly what the communities in resistance are resisting from day to day, and as an optimist I'm gonna assume that I'll never have a clear reason to put it in one dispatch rather than another.

Hope I didn't just jinx that.

So anyway, even after I explained everything to several *compañeros* in San María/Margarita it's still not clear which community I'll be teaching in when I go back there next Thursday. My hope is for the one with no education promoter cuz that's the clearly severer deprivation, but I really don't think it's my place to decide such an impasse between two Zapatista communities, although Luigi was pushing me to do just that. We shall see.

I'd meant to talk about Jose-T. (hoe-ZEH-tee) between the part about the clinic and the part about my new job, but one just kinda flowed into the other so I'll tag him on here. Jose-T. is a freelance revolutionary journalist who has assumed the life mission of making documentaries about progressive social movements of Latin American poor people so that he can show and give them to members of other progressive social movements of Latin American poor people. Thus *compañeros* in different struggles can know something about each other, he'll tell the Zapatistas of Chiapas about the Mapuches of Patagonia and vice versa. He came to Zapata to visit his friends in the community and do manual labor with regular rank-and-file Zapatistas because he doesn't want to be a foreign intellectual who gets his understanding of the uprising from an interview with Subcomandante Marcos. He doesn't like intellectuals, except for Marcos, Eduardo Galeano, Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn. Jose-T. is the most devout revolutionary socialist I've met in my four months in Chiapas. That's really saying something; this place is always crawling with foreign radicals drawn to the flame. His gmail address incorporates the caliber of the bullets Zapata was known for using in the Mexican Revolution, and when I told him I was gonna be a doctor he immediately said, oh, that's great, you know Che Guevara was a doctor. Jose-T.'s a Catalanian with the anarchism of the '30s in his blood who nonetheless hates the way anarchists around the world sometimes romanticize Catalonia 1936-39 as the One Brief Shining Moment of libertarian socialist utopia snuffed out by the combined efforts of Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, and the Western liberal democracies. Which it kind of was, but that's no reason for rose-tinted hindsight.

(Footnote for an American general audience: "libertarian socialist" is not an oxymoron. It means the kind of socialists who, beginning more or less with the Russian Mikhail Bakunin in the second half of the 1800s, were and are against Marx and his followers for being too authoritarian. They're left anarchists, people whose ultimate goal is to have a socialist revolution and then immediately abolish the government instead of having a "dictatorship of the proletariat" where somebody follows Lenin's example and rules in the name of the people. That's what the word "libertarian" still means in Spanish and what it used to mean in English before capitalist intellectuals led by Milton Friedman stole the term in the 1960s, so, by American usage Ron Paul is a libertarian. Friction between Marxists and anarchists, or, as anarchists would have it, between "authoritarian socialists" and "libertarian socialists," is a potential source of stupid infighting in any good-sized, mixed gathering of American radicals. For various reasons I don't belong to either camp, but I tend to lean more toward the anarchists. All this is why anyone who says something like, "We oughtta shoot Noam Chomsky and every

other America-hating communist traitor” is obviously not just a conservative but a really ignorant conservative. Chomsky’s been a libertarian socialist for 70 years or something.)

In arguing against romanticism Jose-T. told me the story of a Catalonian worker with eight kids who built houses for rich people during the Spanish civil war. The anarchist political police (I think he said they were called the *Pepe* or *PP*) said, you bastard, you should build houses for poor people. He said, well, I guess I’d like to, but the problem with poor people is that being poor they don’t have any money to pay me with, and I’ve got these eight kids to feed. Then the anarchist police said that wasn’t their problem and shot him through the head. I mean Jose-T. is completely rooted in that anti-fascist struggle and is proud of his heritage and identifies with the libertarian socialist tradition and so on, he just doesn’t like people idealizing and mythologizing it by leaving out the nasty parts. After talking to him for a little while I thought, oh, great, a no-nonsense Catalonian radical who knows where he comes from, he’s the perfect person to ask what the best book on the Spanish civil war is. I’d been expecting he’d say, oh, yeah, how can you not have heard of this totally classic, canonical book on it by this martyred journalist historian guy who fought alongside the peasants in the POUM and then before being executed in 1959 wrote this history secretly by candlelight under the stairs in Franco’s Spain, hiding the manuscript in the toilet tank of his bugged apartment and communicating with his research assistant by encrypted citations scribbled on scraps of papers they later destroyed by rolling cigarettes with them, the fascists shot people for reading this book, and now that you speak Spanish you can get the real story. But nope, it turns out there’s no such thing; he said all the Spanish books on it are trying to argue for some particular problematic interpretation. He thinks the two best general accounts of the Spanish Civil War are both by Englishmen, George Orwell’s book *Homage to Catalonia*, which I’d already read, and Ken Loach’s movie *Land and Freedom*, which I’d already seen. Isn’t that funny? Also Jose-T. made his nickname by cropping his full name to make it look more like Ice-T.’s stage name. Isn’t that funnier? He didn’t think so and got all embarrassed at having to clarify his other email address for me.

In response to questions about the distance of the United States from one of the temporary workers, Sir Appius, the one who taught me how to mix cement, I got the globe out of the school and showed him. Jose-T. came over and immediately started teaching Sir Appius, here’s Bolivia, this is where Che Guevara died, the greatest Latin American revolutionary ever, you know he wanted to make all of Latin America one free country. And right now in Bolivia the president is a good and revolutionary indigenous man named Morales, an indigenous man became president, what do you think of that? And here’s Brazil, where *campesinos* have organized into the MST and taken over many plantations, just like you Zapatistas here. “Latin America is the only revolutionary continent right now. First we’ll liberate this,” running his finger precisely down the Andes and the Atacama all the way to Tierra del Fuego. “And then we’ll liberate this,” spinning the globe and letting his fingers lightly to graze all the bastions

of the capitalist system he happily hopes to doom. He's quite a character, that Jose-T. I really liked him even if he did generally make me feel conservative. The night before he left I stopped by his room, told him that in teaching the kids Latin American geography I'd like to be able to tell them something about what struggles are happening in each country, and that I only felt like I could tell them something worthwhile about Guatemala, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Cuba. Boy, did that ever put a nickel in him. Just as I'd hoped he talked nonstop for like two hours needing only occasional guidance from me of the type, "Okay, that's more than enough about Brazil, what's happening in Chile?" And then yesterday while I was on the way to a leftist bookstore in San Cristobal to see if they'd loan me some of his documentaries to show in Pancho Villa or Emiliano Zapata I just happened to run into the guy. He said, oh, hell no, the people in that leftist bookstore are a bunch of fucking capitalists, they'll charge you full price for those documentaries, why don't I just burn some pirate copies and get them to you through Casilda? He really wants Zapatistas to see his stuff, and would also like it if I could bring some home with me into the belly of the beast. So I gave him a little less than five dollars and now I'll receive a stack of his documentaries about various progressive social movements in Latin America that I can show to Zapatista kids who barely know there's a world outside Chiapas, how cool is that?

That's it except for one character sketch. When I'm in San Cristobal I stay in this fun little hostel that for some reason is called La Finka, which is Spanish for "plantation" with the C changed to a K, but despite that it's a great place for two reasons. First, it costs \$2.75 a night. Second, because it's so cheap it attracts a counter-cultural crowd of twentysomething bohemians from all over Mexico and Western Europe. So you can drink some beer, smoke some pot, play some chess, play with the proprietor's cute six-year-old daughter, watch Frenchies and Spaniards commiserating over racist anti-immigrant politics in their home countries, meet a Belgian of Malagasy descent with enormous impractical fingernails and the first Slayer shirt I've seen since New York, listen to a tall, skinny German guy work out the opening of Metallica's "One" on an acoustic guitar, dum-dum-dum-dum, dum-dum-dum-dum-DUH, that kind of thing. The interesting part is that that German guy, Marius, is hitchhiking around the world. Seriously.

He considers it a violation of principle to pay for a ride except when he absolutely has to fly to get over an ocean. He saved up a mere 7,000 euros and then took off like Magellan (except thrifty, terrestrial, and benevolent). From his native Germany he went east and then minimized his visa costs by avoiding the many international borders of the Central Asian breakaway republics, which he now seems to regret, unsurprisingly the guy's now got something of a fetish for passport stamps. He stayed in Russia all the way from Ukraine to Mongolia, which was the place he wanted to talk about the most, he thought it was the least developed place he'd seen. Apparently in much of the Mongolian countryside there are no roads. There's not much vehicle traffic and almost no vegetation, so people just drive on the desert rocks. And yes, he did get to see a little live Tuvan throat singing; a hostel keeper's son gave him a demonstration. (That's this

freakin' eerie and totally unique sound that some Mongolians can make by singing two different notes at the same time in such a way that the sound waves interfere with each other so as to make a third note, often one substantially above or below the normal human vocal range that sounds like a primitive and otherworldly woodwind instrument. It's worth seeking out if you've never heard it.)

[kmkat: you can hear a short example here
<http://www.music.sc.edu/fs/bain/atmi02/hs/playback/tuvan/artysayir.html>]

Then he hitchhiked down through China despite speaking hardly any Mandarin, and he said that as a rule that country had the best food of any place he's traveled through. Then he hitchhiked through Laos, Vietnam (where by two days he missed meeting a French guy who's hitchhiking around the world in the opposite direction), Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, bought a flight to the Philippines and hitched a loop around the archipelago before buying flights to Hawaii and then California. That brought him into the United States, which he hated because he says our country has the worst cops in the world for hitchhikers, but which he also liked because the people he met were so generous with everything that he only spent \$30 in the whole country. He hitchhiked north to Alaska, then southeast across Canada, crossed back into the States and came down the eastern seaboard to Florida, hitched the whole Gulf Coast and came circuitously all the way down Mexico to San Cristobal de las Casas. Next he'll hitchhike all through Central America, which is fucking gutsy, and try to hitch a boat ride around that wild place between Panama and Colombia where there are no roads and Jose-T. told me the right-wing paramilitaries will enslave you to clean their houses and shit. Then all the way down to southern Argentina, back up again into Brazil, fly across the narrowest part of the Atlantic Ocean to Senegal and hitchhike from there all through North Africa to Egypt, at which point he'll be nearly back in Europe. (He decided against sub-Saharan Africa.) He's currently in his 17th month, and after the U.S. legs of his trip he started a blog where you can see map of his trip so far:

<http://worldhitch.blogspot.com/>

(You'll find the dates of his entries confusing if you don't know that pretty much everyone else in the world writes dates as numbers in strictly ascending hierarchical order, day-month-year, instead of mixing it up month-day-year like we Americans do.)

That's all for now,

Andrew