

Cuatro Nariz



The leg of a man bitten by *Bothrops asper*.

I

One July some years ago I was beating around southern Mexico, encumbered only with my small green backpack and large dark thoughts, and after several weeks in the Yucatan, I was now in Palenque, in Chiapas, on a route that would eventually take me to Tapachula, on the Guatemalan border. The Mayan ruins of Palenque are about seven kilometers from the modern eponymous town in which I was staying, and after a day visiting those cloud-shrouded ruins that crawl up from the forest, a few other days running the red dirt roads and cooling my overheated heels in the plaza, I felt I had one more day before I'd need to catch a bus and continue on the Road.

On this particular night I was in my twelve-peso room, readying to go out and see if the boiled chickens in *El Mirador* were as scrawny as they had been the night before, and the beans as whitened with lard. I was sitting on the lone hard chair by the lone small window, trying to read for the second time that day the local newspaper with my thirty percent Spanish. The editorials were dense, mythic, largely unintelligible, although I could sense in the elegant and ornate syntax matters which impressed with their innate dignity. The local crimes—a rape and two machete assaults—were covered with titillating outrage and lurid B&W photos. There was a story about two young brothers who had died in the local fields from snakebite, victims, apparently, of the same serpent, and another account of the resurgent unrest in San Cristobal: the Zapatistas were blockading the roads, and, four days later, I would walk past those blockades of burning tires when my bus was turned away, down into the lush pine-tropical valley into the heartland of the Chiapas revolution.

Understand this: in a handful of seconds my newspaper grew damp, limp, would not hold its crease; another minute of falling light elapsed as I tried to read, and then...a Nagasaki clap of thunder preceded the most intensely concentrated downpour of rain I have ever experienced. I will not even bother with the expected metaphors of rain falling in sheets or buckets; simply put, the rain was terrifying, and though an hour later the skies were clear, even after that hour, it sounded like liquid locomotives were tearing down every ravine, gutter, and drainage ditch in the vicinity, and the streets of the town were scoured, gouged, groaning. I'd say six inches of rain had fallen in forty minutes, and though you scoff, and though I'll lower the estimate to four inches, it was probably closer to eight, so *chinga usted*.

Though the lights had flickered with each flash of lightning, the power in Palenque never went out entirely, and when I emerged—hunger now a real issue—the shopkeepers were sweeping water out onto the streets in festoons, and the town—population 25,000?—was Open for Business. It was as I passed the plaza that I heard a voice call out to me, and how I met Martín and Ratso.

As related in the Palenque chapter of *The Smoking Mirror* (1996, unpublished) Martín and Ratso—after Ratso Rizzo, from *Midnight Cowboy*, whom he resembled—had spent the day, and probably many days before, in *el bosque*, drinking rum and smoking some of the fine ditch weed that grows happily thereabouts, until the deluge had given them the refreshment that a fine lady must feel after her nap, after her shower and luxurious treatment of salves and unguents over her marble, depilated body, before setting-out for a glamorous evening. But in the case of M & R, the refreshment included a flood-wall down their verdant, crawling ravine, a pounding in the trees and then soon a wave of brown foam that was entwined with trash, ribbons of coiling snakes, tropical detritus, and it was only with the most manly of efforts that Martín was able to pull Ratso up the bank and retain a grip on the rum bottle. It was Martín who had called out as I was passing, and though the Traveler knows that No Good Can Come of This, I went over to their bench, smiled at their wet, bedraggled selves, and accepted the raised bottle, three inches left. I here attest that there could be no finer aperitif than that slug of backwash cane rum. We then discussed: the storm; how many days on the bus it would take for Martín to get to Tejas—five days, I told him, at the least, at which he blinked soberly; what were the intentions of Ratso—clearly a simple fellow—regarding the plastic-handled switchblade with cobra motif he snicked open and closed compulsively. Martín told me that Ratso had just gotten out of prison in Saltillo, and Ratso, as if to certify this fact, rolled-up his sleeve and showed me the still-red scar on his forearm where they (?) had driven some implement through the muscle

and out the other side. In the event, I invited them to dinner, and we were soon pounding on those chickens, on those beans, on the baskets of grainy tortillas M & R kept the girl bringing, slathering everything with a fire-watery avocado and green chile salsa.

And I have never seen men so hungry. I ordered beers, more beers. More beers. “Eat while the eatin’s good,” seemed to be the operating principle behind M & R’s caloric intake, and as I put down thirty pesos and flicked a bit of chicken-foot from my teeth with matches Ratso had carved into toothpicks for each of us, the happiness settled. We lounged like roundly-rogered Emperors on the slippery red plastic seats; we observed razor-sharp Mexican cowboys boot-strutting with their Saturday-night *putas* down the street without the slightest envy; Martín cornered a triangle of dead flies in the window sash and dispatched them onto the floor as if he were Vercingetorix tasting a last dainty and in the grips of enervating *ennui*, ordering the beheading of a thousand captive virgins.

We took our party out and down to the plaza again, to welcome the last of the night, to toast with the last inch of *La Flor de Cana*. We sat, the unlikely three of us (consider this: I had sat as a student—from kindergarten to graduate school—for more hours in classrooms than the entire combined ancestral history of both men), and as Ratso played with his knife, Martín began a sleepy soliloquy, which was to continue even as the audience was leaving, and the themes he explored, as best as I could understand his increasingly personal Spanish, involved plans for his conquering of Tejas, heroic fornicative adventures, and the nearby beauty of *Las Cascadas Agua Azul*, which he would show me the next day. There was some kind of inchoate plan in place as I left the plaza and M & R lurched off to *el bosque*: I’d be at this bench in the plaza *a las siete*, and we’d catch a combi to see just one of his fine country’s astonishments.

I was at the plaza in the morning, but my *cuates* of the evening before were not. The ungrouted stones that led up to the cathedral were deep in leaves from the night’s downpour, were being pushed into sodden piles by a slow-moving gentleman with a palm-frond sweep. There was not much happening. There was a precisely and unnervingly timed echolalic screech from some far-off bird, and a tinged string of opalescent clouds over the mountains to the east. There was encouraging activity in the shuttered café, and a girl opened the grate, startled to see the gringo sitting there. She put a pan over her hissing blue propane, and soon I had hot water, a cup and an ancient jar of rock-hard Nescafe, which, when mixed with sugar, has saved many a Traveler’s dawn. When a gasping VW combi rounded the square, stopped, and the driver mounted a cardboard sign in the window that told me the van was heading into the mountains, I climbed inside.

II

We wound up and out of town, past the turn-off to the ruins, stopping to pick-up this villager here, that country couple there, all with arms hung down with plastic bags, and all rapping on the windows to signal a stop, getting off to the side of the narrow road to disappear up the trails to their *milpas*. There were wisps of burning evaporation from the night’s storm winding up through the canyons and trees, and into those canyons and through those trees the countrymen disappeared. On the lower levels just outside of town were flats of cornfields that at least looked gainful, cultivated by oxen and the straining hands of workers, but as the road passed up into the hanging forests, the fields were then

burned swaths, precarious triangles of red dirt that only a man, a woman, and the stillborn hope of a hardworking son could till, and there was clearly nothing much in the future for those enterprises. Therefore the ragged skirts of the women by the roadside tugging headloads of faggots into the forest trails, therefore the men, high-up, with a hoe raking channels into the hill to hold the seedlings of essential corn, therefore the mystery that anyone could make a living in these smallholdings, and hence the seeds of revolution sprouting in the tropical air.

We climbed up onto an overgrown mesa, to a place where the paved road was bisected by a dirt road leading farther up into the hills, and at this junction was an outdoor market consisting of three tables of tired produce and, beneath a palm-frond palapa, the eviscerated carcass of a cow that was dripping dark gouts onto the red gravel, covered with flies like a moving dusting of raisins, and at which a bare-chested man was busily sawing with a machete. A handful of men stood off to the side—I could see the flash of a bottle—and their women shouted at the butcher, who dropped pieces of meat into their white plastic bags. The men and women were outnumbered by dusty children, who played in the dirt and watched the combi pull-up with their eyes wide and their mouths filled with a thumb or fingers. It had been in Palenque, a few days before while on a walk around the town, that I had stopped before a funeral home and noticed with alarm the inordinate number of caskets, leering wide-open on display, that were the size of shoe boxes or not much larger.

After twenty minutes of further driving the combi pulled into a side road and soon stopped at the parking lot of *Las Cascadas Agua Azul*. The driver announced that the van would return from its destination beyond and pick me up for a return to Palenque at four o'clock, and I shouldered my daypack and stood aside as the van crunched over the gravel and left down the road. I walked towards the tree-fringe and towards the roar of water. The entire falls complex was perhaps seventy-five meters across, and stretched out of sight into the forest above and down into a gorge below. The river that poured down from the mountains had carved a series of limestone terraces—some a foot high and some twenty feet—and down through these terraces flowed dozens of rivulets, cascades, ripping currents the size of small rivers, creating a maze of pools, rooster-tails, mossy slides and frothy channels. Near the bank the water merely swirled, but there was nothing placid about that either. The name "*Agua Azul*" comes from the leached minerals that tint the water a sublime, swimming-pool turquoise, much like the water in Havasupai Canyon, Arizona. That at least was the way I had seen it in pictures; but the torrents of the night before had added millions of tons of sediment to the river, were still adding that sediment, and now the water was the color of chocolate milk but reddish, and peaks of cinnamon foam built and collapsed in the eddies.

There were a half-dozen Mexican families picnicking on the grass, and a few kids were passing a soccer ball. There was a *refrescos* stand with the expected Coca-Cola signage off to the side, and the requisite ice cream man stood ringing the bell on his hand-cart, as if anyone were buying, as if anyone cared. A plumping *novia*, with her shirttails tied-up under her ribcage, shouted mock warnings at her boyfriend who was climbing out onto the nearest overflowing terrace with his flashing teeth, cut-offs and hipster sunglasses, the water raising plumes up to his elbows where he held onto the rocks. By the water's edge there was, of course, this being Mexico, the offending trash and litter, perhaps something green and reptilian and dead.

What I noticed then was that the riverside also resembled a cemetery. There were perhaps twenty crosses, shrines—in one case only a driven iron pipe with a photograph affixed to it with a rubber band—all, as I discovered, to memorialize those who had been drowned or lost here. Because I had heard the stories, read the warnings in the guidebook: *Las Cascadas Agua Azul* is murderous, and over the years, hundreds of picnics had gone terribly wrong. In the shade of an immense tree that grew solemnly removed from the torrent, I saw a black wrought-iron cross with a glass-covered plate affixed to the center, with these words inscribed:

Heinz Lentengger~Suizo
El Agua da La Vida
Y
El Agua Tambien La Quita
Con amor de sus Padres y sus Amigos
1966-1990

Hans Lentengger—Swiss
Water gives Life
And
Also Takes It Away
With Love from his Parents and Friends
1966-1990

And chilling it is to think how a life of careful, deliberate consideration can end in a heartbeat, at the wheel, on the ladder, perhaps plugging the Toro electric blower into an ungrounded outlet on a wet day. Heinz was twenty-four, perhaps in the midst of a well-earned world tour or simple cheap vacation after graduating from the Polytechnic? After his first two years of graduate school? Heinz was a cannabis aficionado, a sun-loving hedonist who was selling his hash pipes and tie-dye and hemp stash bags, from the flea markets of Amsterdam to the beaches of Costa Rica? Heinz was a straight-arrow expatriate engineer working for Pemex, taking a day off from surveying the strata at a local site of interest? Was Heinz with his girlfriend (a winsome blond pre-school teacher from Montreaux, who wore those weird Euro-style flat tennis shoes below her perfect bronzed legs?) Did his girlfriend first giggle when she saw him edge out onto the ledge, then laugh outright as he slipped and fell into the water? And at what second did she realize that the slip was the entrance to a nightmare? Did she call his parents with her credit card? Was he alone? Did he go missing for months before Corporal Gomez drew a connection between the faxed Interpol bulletin that had been pinned to the cork-board since July in the muster room and the white corpse found by a *campesino* wrapped around the tangled roots of a Chernoyabib tree downriver in May? ¿*Quien sabe?*

Because *Las Cascadas* are *inviting*, at least on a hot Mexican holiday, when the water is at normal levels and tinged with the pristine turquoise that makes one only think of a blow-up floating chaise-longue—with molded drink-holder for the Styrofoam cup of strong

Margarita—that one pushes out from the tile coping of the neighbors’ pool, with the Bose® outdoor system playing some low-key and tasty Steely Dan. But the problem here is that you cannot—should not—take your feet from the bottom. Though it is possible to get literally blasted off the rocks should one attempt to traverse the channels where the water is conclusively savage, most fatalities at *Las Cascadas* occur in knee-deep water, or waist-deep, when one decides to swim, or stumbles, or steps into a hole, or unwisely decides to cool-off and play alligator on his fingertips, and the bottom is No Longer There. What happens is that simply you will never find your feet again. So deceptively and inexorably strong is the current that once you are afloat the river takes you, any attempt to stand or climb will be frustrated, and then the channel you were wading in or climbing around will join another, and another, and now the current is obscene and rocks are torn from your hands; you go over a ledge, are pounded—do you have a head injury yet?—and very soon you will be lost—either swept down and down and down the gorge or poured over a fall and pinned-down in the hole at the bottom, the highly oxygenated air perversely preventing any sort of buoyancy. Smiling children have been floated-off to a vaporizing doom only a meter from the arms of their mothers who are standing on the bank. World-class swimmers and climbers have gone from Bronze Gods to Dogmeat in seconds, and the crosses and shrines by the undercut edge of the water multiply each year.

I walked around the area for a few hours, climbing a bit out onto wet rocks that seemed safe; I sat and watched diurnal bats and swallows gambol in the mist; I played with the inch-long frogs that were everywhere underfoot; I ate my lunch of bananas and a *bollilo*; I gave the ice-cream man his first and perhaps only sale of the day. I decided to take a walk upriver.

III

There were paths on either side of the river, though the one on the far bank was impossible to reach, unless there were to be some sort of crossing or bridge farther up. I led off past the clearing where the road ended, and in just a matter of a hundred meters I was walking along a well-trod but empty trail under a canopy of trees, the river down the embankment to my right. After awhile I heard voices up ahead, and I came to a clearing up from the river; there were five or six shacks, and kids were playing soccer on the hard dirt. The soccer players, the women on their porches, all stopped and carefully watched my smile and greeting as I passed through. Just at the edge of the clearing one child ran up to me and tried to sell me an orange; then he tried to sell me a sub-Commandante Marcos flyer; then he spat. And perhaps I would have bought that flyer—being partial to the sometimes deadly, sometimes comic revolution being pursued by the Zapatistas—or even the orange, if only to establish local relations, but I only had in my pockets a peso and some centavos and the rest large bills, and I did not think it would amount to much good fortune for me were I to pull out a 50-peso bill and ask for *cambio*. After veering away from the river—perforce, because at this point the gorge grew steep—the trail wound up through a cornfield, and interspersed among the stalks were knee-high marijuana plants—and then a sign above a rough and gray board gate: *Ejido San Luis*. At the gate leaned a man with a rifle over his shoulder. I took the trail that led past this gentleman and seemed to return towards the river. I kept climbing, now slipping on the wet red clay, and then the

trail ended; then I was pushing through branches along the river course; then I stopped to wipe the sweat, and all was still save for a few raucous bird calls and the fast whisper of the river. There was not much point in pushing farther up the canyon. With no destination in mind, with the vegetation becoming increasingly impenetrable, I looked for a cool place to hang for awhile, and I found it.

About ten feet above the surface of the river was a sort of bench—almost a small patio—created by the root system and deep shade of a copal tree, with a diameter of perhaps eight feet, that soared above the forest floor. The clearing was edged with the rotting trunks of the same trees long since fallen, and I found I could sit on the buttressed roots comfortably, with a view through the lowest branches and vines that entangled them out to the river. I prepared to stay for a while. I took out my water bottle, compass, journal and pen; I enjoyed the view, the delicious sensation of Being Somewhere Completely Alone.

I started to write up my journal, but could not keep a sentence or thought coherent. I set the journal aside. There was then a weight of palpable humidity, and the individual notes of watermusic became an insensate dulling hum. Every leaf or bit of forest-floor duff that I focused on became sharply personal, and every shadow seemed to have moved just before I glanced at it. I remembered...

...There had been a thin and desert-brown 17-year-old kid wearing only hiking boots and an Aussie bush hat up some ravine in the far-out Anza Borrego badlands. Under the hat was a headful of Marin County blotter acid. A half-full gallon jug of water depended from his hand, and the wrist of that hand was encircled by a bracelet of orange and midnight blue glass beads. Tucked into a boot was a baggie with matches and a fat roach that had last touched the chapped, pouty lips of Hey Now Haley the Desert Princess, and dreamily had she bogarted that joint as they had watched the pancakes in the iron skillet, on the Coleman® stove, grow into patterning fungi in the ridiculous sun. A sinuous few turns up the ravine had led to a rockwall dead-end, nothing but granite up towards an arrowhead slot of wasted sky, and car-size boulders below, and the seething stillness, the immense, absolute silence, was distilled by the heat into a portentous moment that became hours. Every grain of sand, each fleck of mica or tourmaline in the granite rock was chattering in obscure winking ciphers; the olive-green leaves of the saltbush were curling, or were they uncurling?; and if there was one call of an unseen canyon wren, it called once nor did it stop calling. The boy drank from his water and the water quivered in his throat; a fist of expectancy was in his gut; all was desiccate and pure; the lit match a focus of fascination, the resinous roach-smoke lying in cartoon wisps in the hot vacuum air; memories of the past merged with memories of the future, and if there were any problem to be had with staying there forever, intact or scattered, they could not be parsed nor were they problems at all. There was a scaly wheezing off to the side, a chuckwalla dragging itself into a crevice and melding to the rock, pink and black and green scales, with the still-moving wings of a cabbage moth in its slowly chewing Mesozoic jaws, the lizard mouthing Taoist aphorisms in a dead-on-the-money Popeye The Sailor Man voice...And later, trudging under a grudging moon the last mile down the alluvial fan towards the camp site, already hearing "Down By The River" from the tinny speakers in Weezil's VW percolating across the desert floor, the doors open to make the car nothing less than a huge alien insect; later yet rubbing Intensive Care into the peeling shoulder blades of Hey Now Haley as she sat on the grimy tangle of sleeping bags, sifting sand between her fingers before a votive candle, eyes in the dark still carrying an after-acid spark; later still scraping the aluminum pot for a refried bean sandwich washed down with the last FedMart

Reidenbach beer that floated in a depressing wash of ice slivers, a flooded bologna package, and the odd larva-like Cheeto in the Coleman® cooler that some stoned asshole had not bothered to move out of the sun, for Christ sakes, not even under the shifting shade of a tailgate, his own shoulders, and arms, and even, yes, the too-exposed Johnson sunburned beyond belief, and even if Haley were open to offering some cool or warm cavity salve to any part of him, under the exaggerated, mocking stars, she was too stoned to know it...and then it had been...Dawn...

...I wrote: "Every shadow seemed to have moved just before I glanced at it." Yes. A sober sensation descended on my perch above the river exactly: it seemed quite simply that I was observing myself observing myself, and the moment seemed about to speak, and even the breaths I took, the sweat under my hat, the growing restlessness of my legs, and especially All Around, grew *psychedelic*, a hyper-real sensation that had triggered the remembered desert interlude. There was a hum that seemed to be a deep, cosmic tinnitus, an even sweeping and electric energy that trembled in the leaves, hovered above the water, caused beams of coherent sparks to fly from each sunsplash in the river. A kingfisher—with its cartoon, oversize head and beak—dipped above the current, flew-up into an overhanging branch, and cocked its head at me.

Something was crawling on the forest litter near my feet, and it turned out to be an undulating procession of leaf-cutter ants—*Acromyrmex*—which I had never seen before. The line moved as if it were one palsied organism. Though there were some of the brown ants that carried nothing—scouts? soldiers?—most held green semi-circles of neatly excised leaf tissue in their mandibles, held them high, to almost resemble tiny Spartan soldiers with the characteristic crescent-topped helmet. It was engaging to watch them proceed over the rough surface of the forest floor. I followed the ant stream with my eyes across the little clearing. When the ants reached a fallen log off to the side, the stream took a slight angled tack and flowed up the bark, to the top of the log, about a meter off the ground. I stood up and walked the step-or-two over to the log, following the ant stream over the top. I put both my hands on the log, spread out at waist level, to lean over slightly to see where the ants were going. The log was damp, covered with moss and leaves...

Though I did not feel anything with my hand except the leaves and moss, not even a slight vibration, there was something that had me glance down, to the puzzle of leaves and moss on the log just to the right of where my right hand rested. I saw, so close to my skin, the suggestion of an alarmingly regular pattern of olive green and brown, a delineating shadow that was too scale-like and stippled to be vegetable trash. Then I saw the half-hidden coils, the triangle of head and insensate obsidian eyes that at once were not looking at me and looking through me. I was convulsed with an oceanic surge of loathing. I ripped my hand away and sprung back away from the log. Then for many minutes every stick seemed to be crawling, every shadow a buried viper, my heart was pounding, and yet the snake did not move. I had come an inch from prodding it, a few inches from pressing down on its coils.

It was a hot day. All reptiles would be active, warmed to alertness in a quick-reflex range of temperature. And no doubt about my fate if the snake had stuck. It was *Bothrops asper*, the local disjunct population in Chiapas having the name *Cuatro Nariz* for the horn-like protuberances at the end of the snout. This is the most fatal snake in the Americas, the snake that had killed the well-known and experienced herpetologist Douglas March, the snake whose untreated bite causes a local necrosis that demands almost immediate amputation, if medical care is to be had. In most fatal cases the cause of death is

septicemia, intercranial hemorrhage, acute renal failure with hyperkalemia, metabolic acidosis, hemorrhagic shock. Or so the medical books tell me. In more prosaic but equally accurate language, if you are bitten by the *Cuatro Nariz*, you can kiss your thrashing ass goodbye, and there will not be a thing pretty or comforting about it. I was reminded of the *outré* end of the French naturalist Louis R-----, who in a moment of irrevocable carelessness, held a Gaboon Viper too loosely, was struck in the face, and calmly sat down to write a letter to his wife and children, knowing that his own death would arrive in perhaps three hours, and knowing also that he would be a screaming, convulsive, pathetic abomination for the last two.

As usually happens when one has a close call, when one should be dead or maimed save for an inexplicable matter of providence, luck or simple millimeters, I stood back and considered if I was doing anything else that was tempting disaster. I looked around, tried to decide if I had been careless and foolish, and decided I had not. I know well there are venomous snakes in every state of Mexico, and had, in fact, kept an open and reasonably wary eye on the trail, in the trees, and in the bushes during my walk up the river. I packed up my bag, not taking my eyes off the log. When I was ready to start down the trail—for, perhaps understandably, something had changed, which made any further attempt to really enjoy the forest impossible—I picked-up a five-foot dead branch and stirred-up the snake on the log. Immediately it tensed in a concentric muscling of coils and its head darted out dangerously, provocatively, the tongue flicking out and the body now preparing to lunge. I pushed at it again, and the snake struck the stick, the stick telegraphing the sickening click of the horny mouth and fangs up into my hands. The snake was perhaps four feet long. I prodded it over the edge of the log, the snake still jousting with the stick, until it rolled and undulated off into the grass by the water. Then I started down the trail.



As I arrived again at the parking area, a military vehicle was pulling onto the grass, a drab green pick-up with a bed-load of young soldiers, each with a carbine upright between his legs. The *commandante* got out of the passenger door and walked to the edge of the water. He threw a glance to the left and right, taking in the small groups of citizens who were busy with their beer, their smoking *comals*, their children, their naps in the shade. The *commandante*, from the way his face was equally resigned and kind and grim, was no stranger to tragedy here, had undoubtedly consoled several wailing mothers and covered their children with a rough army blanket in the back of his truck. The *commandante* looked at me off to the side, the only foreigner at the site. He blinked, turned and motioned for his men to get out of the truck to stretch their legs. Soon the soldiers were standing around, smoking, grabassing, talking in low voices. The talking stopped as the *novia*—she of the tied-up shirttails—walked out of her way to pass near the truck, which elicited a soft low whistle—too soft to be heard by the *commandante*—and this caused a little extra pouting and pleased plump in the girl's stride, all packed shorts and hips, and I thought that her boyfriend of earlier might be perhaps better off if he did slip into the current.

Only a few minutes before the combi made the corner and came down the road, a mud-splashed Ford truck was backing up to leave. There was a scream, a sharp squeal of brakes, then cursing and crying. A toddler from another family had darted out behind the

truck that was backing-up; the driver could have only seen a blur or shadow and had reacted on his brakes only in time. The child was wailing in his mother's arms, the driver was venting with the relieved panic of disaster averted, and soon the *commandante* was gravely wagging a finger in the abashed mother's face, while two uniforms looked for beer containers—or, more likely in this part of the world, a plastic water bottle refilled with *mescal*—in the driver's pick-up.

It was ominously clear to me that the day was terminally threatening, and I was loathe to gamble any more. On the return trip out of the hills I was sure a terrible accident awaited us, probably much like the one that had paralyzed a high school friend of mine. He had been in northern California, where the backroads were flailed by the same type of logging trucks as were here in Chiapas. The friend was also in a VW van—a little hippie dope wagon with madras curtains, incense burner on the dash, the Sons of Champlin on the 8-track stereo—and was just passing an oncoming logging truck on a curve when a telephone pole-size log rolled off the top and skewered the van right through the two-piece front windshield. We passed several of those trucks on the way back to Palenque, several loaded high and several on curves, and when we got back to town, the combi letting me off at the only stoplight, I decided to keep to the sidewalks and Take It Very Easy.

Martín and Ratso were not in the plaza when I passed though. I sat on an empty bench, and by the fading light wrote up the notes in my journal. The transition from day to night comes quickly at low latitudes. In a handful of minutes the horizon was dark, the white lamps in the plaza had begun to hum, and immediately each lamp was orbited by a cloud of insects. The doors to the cathedral swung open, and a priest stood in the aperture, hands on his hips. Behind him in the aisles of the nave, two large stainless steel floor fans were revving up, moving the stale air out of the church in anticipation of the evening mass, pushing out the billows of the priest's robes. When he turned to disappear inside, the waterwhite corpse on the altar crucifix beyond was just a bit too credible, rather too *trompe l'oeil* for my taste. As I was leaving for my room, a man in straw hat, grass-stained khaki pants and cheap black windbreaker stumbled up on to the stone patio created by the transept, unzipped while standing in the bushes, and unleashed his stream onto the wall of the cathedral. Whether he was oblivious or making a statement was unclear, but on a day when all seemed pointed and prescient, I was not willing to let any suggestion of danger, doom, the macabre or the glorious be worshipped in the temple of coincidence.

Wm Roemmich
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