

THE UNFORGETTABLE FROZEN CHICKEN GIVEAWAY AND WHAT ENSUED

1.

They're anything but hapless masses herded across the border, the *mexicanos* we distribute food to. Their presence here in the Inland Northwest is voluntary, to say the least. Knowing they'll be a long way from home, exposed to the least twitch in weather systems, in international prices, they show up, and hang on. They live on a margin too thin to permit an excess of anything but a certain kind of laughter – the corrosive, liberating stuff that keeps you alive.

My friends M and T and I barely knew each other, ten years ago, when we agreed to distribute surplus food which came free from a warehouse in Yakima. But over the past ten years, while filling out so many forms that we got each others' dates of birth and social security numbers memorized, we've come to share the oblique stuff which people who have to trust each other share: peeves and recurring dreams, allergies, saints' days. For a while, tongue in cheek, we even addressed each other, Cuban-style, as *compañero*. By now we find our feelings for those we serve and for each other equally binding, intimate but not intrusive, and necessary, truly necessary.

A blend of the comic and urgent took over the very first time we three *Compañeros* distributed food. It was mid-June when the County Action Council phoned in a panic. They had to get rid of twenty boxes of frozen chickens, stuff which had started to thaw when something malfunctioned. M made some phone calls, T gave a few rides, and less than an hour later a hundred families stood at the Council's front door, everybody flat broke, and it was dinner time.

T had ten boxes stacked before the crowd arrived. Now he pirouetted a hand-truck into place with the last ten boxes. When M lifted her ballpoint pen to start taking names, T opened the top box, and then stood there blinking. The ten chickens in the box had half-thawed and then re-frozen. Now they glommed each other in what looked – except for the ice – like a raw, pink, chicken-orgy enthusiasm. Imagine a creature all elbows and goose bumps. Those chickens clutched each other so tight you couldn't break them apart – maybe with a hammer, but forget it.

"We better distribute this stuff a box at a time," M decided. "Five families to a box," T called out to people waiting in line.

And so we brought it off. But talk about a conflict of perspectives! Because from perspective #1, the public driving by notices whole households nodding thanks, calling back over one shoulder, "*Que dios se lo pague.*" But then perspective #2, a close up, reveals those very same *mexicanos* shrugging, elbowing each other. "*¿Y para quebrar esta paleta de pollo?*" This chickensicle – how you bust it up?

Note the difference. Try to measure the distance. Perspective #1, the panning shot, shows the grateful poor getting fed like sheep, while #2, the close-up, reveals the same people, nonplused but nonchalant, strolling off as if they were used to getting handed twenty-five pound lumps of frozen chicken. While each is accurate, as far as it goes, the two perspectives are truly incompatible. What does it matter that both versions really exist? They do so in different mental time zones. Mutual invisibility nearly guarantees the result. They're sealed off from each other by traffic patterns of thought, speech, habit.

And Los Tres Compañeros? We marveled at how far it was from one perspective to the other. Even after we got to feeling like veteran commuters, the view remained breathtaking. Part of the closeness we shared owed to our constantly negotiating hairpin curves of culture, family, language. We've secured space in the Old Boiler Plant of the local university by now, but all three of us still believe that the comic and the urgent do balance. Though sometimes, we admit, you have to wonder.

2.

A middle-aged man with a quiet voice, with searching, deliberate speech patterns, Compañero T climbs behind the steering wheel and closes the door. It is bright and windy. Compañero T is setting out to visit campsites and trailer courts up and down the river. He and I plan a laid-back day of taping flyers to laundromat windows, of shaking hands and hanging out, of hearing the same old stories about poor people a long way from home, tales that feature the athletes-foot optimism of immigrant life.

T hasn't worked in five years. He no longer needs the crutches he used when he fell off a ladder, twelve feet onto concrete, and lit on the small of his back. But anybody can see that his body still rings like a bell. He crosses his kitchen floor with icy-sidewalk steps. The soles of his feet burn and itch, he says. Even now, he dreams he is falling, and wakes with his back knotted.

It was four years ago that a balding Anglo doctor confessed, with sad eyes, to seeing nothing in x-rays to account for the pain which threw a person breathless on the couch after five minutes of dish-washing, the cramps that climbed both shoulder blades when lifting a gallon of milk. Ever since the week he got hurt, T's family has lived off what his wife earns by cleaning rooms at a freeway-exchange motel, a drab, two-story job that sits downwind from a feeder lot.

T's days shrink with chores like driving his children to school, patching window screens, plucking trash from the gravel paths that wind through the trailer court out his window. Day after day at the kitchen table, with a lunch box full of unpaid bills, his chainsaw and hard-hat and boots in a pile at the back door, pruning shears rusting in the pickup bed, his only relief has been this: leafleting and listening, campfire to convenience store, pool hall to laundromat to auto parts. Up and down the banks of either river – Yakima or Columbia – hard-luck stories fly like pollen.

We're down the road. An oily rainbow straddles the freeway entrance, sagebrush whips by, and the pickup motor whines. At the tip of a phone pole, a hawk looks like something stamped on a coin. Gulleys, gulches, dry-washes, and ravines – and then, at Ryegrass, the land dips toward the river. Seagulls perch on a bridge girder.

Sagebrush, small town. One more peeling Sumercado sign. When T thumb-tacks a flyer to the bulletin board, a teenager sidles up in denim jacket and baseball cap. "*Don T, buenas tardes.. Disculpe la molestia, es que venía pidiendo una cooperación..*"

The youngster is raising money to ship what is left of a run-over uncle back to get buried in Uruapan. T hands him a dollar, then asks the young fellow how he himself is bearing up. "*¿Yo? ¿Cómo estoy aguantando? Pos' la mera verdad, yo ando más aguamiel que pulque.*" The kid fights tears. T listens, equal parts reserve and resolve.

This happens a lot. Troubled, frightened, injured, strangers appear out of nowhere to talk to my friend T. He doesn't appear to say much, but people respond to his light, fluid touch, *la política de escuchar al callado*. A politics of listening to people who don't talk much.

By late afternoon, re-crossing the bridge, the sagebrush a horizontal streak, T is recalling that his life on this side of the border dates from 1978, the year when thugs of a newly imposed governor back in Guerrero nabbed his uncle. When a neighbor knocked at the door one afternoon, he and his aunt and his mother raced to the jail.

"Uncle I. never had a chance," Tsays. "The cops hated him. He was the kind of guy who settled any dispute at night on back-roads."

"We hurried around back to the squad room. Just in time to see him pitched into a car trunk. My aunt turned to *el comandante* – who surely would have the goodness to spare a poor man's life, would he not?"

"What did the guy say?"

"Nothing. You know when time slows down? She kept repeating the same words, but after a while her voice was squeaking.

"Squeaking?"

"*Crujía*. Think how you cut a cardboard box."

"¿Y *el comandante*?"

"Finally the *comandante* shrugged, and the car drove off."

"What did you do?"

"Well, neither the lawyer we hired nor the judge we bribed found out a thing. So we held a month-long vigil. Right in front of city hall."

"Did it make any difference?"

"Sort of. One day I got off my shift at the gasworks, I found two guys in loose-fitting shirts waiting out front. When they followed me in a tinted-windshield SUV without license plates, I bought a pistol, and hid out in my sister's house for three months. Finally, I figured I better head north."

And that is absolutely all. T has nothing more to say about how he got here. The rest of it isn't worth talking about, he says. More questions evoke only a low hiss and backward flick of one hand – the gesture with which a sidewalk vendor waves off mention of imperfections in detail.

The hiss-and-flick dismissal is really a *mexicano* default setting, a southpaw subjunctive, a high sign acknowledging and dismissing whatever triggers it. It is neither admission nor denial. Not even *no comment*. After thirty seconds of silence, T changes the subject.

"Hear about R and his church?"

"You mean that congregation out on ...?"

"That very outfit."

"Well, I know he attends mass there, has for a couple years. Except when he goes back to Oaxaca."

"Pues, *fijate*, last winter in Oaxaca, his wife died, *la pobrecita*. So he got some *maestro* back there to make him a *Virgen*. Wanted to commemorate his wife."

"Uh-oh."

"With all clothing, the detail work, it set him back a thousand, maybe more."

"And I suppose he donates *la Virgen* to that Yakima congregation he worships with?"

"Of course he does."

The pickup finally slips through a cut-bank, down toward the streetlights, 700 feet below, where we live.

"So how long did that arrangement last?"

"It was a couple of months before a janitor broke the news to him. Turned out *La Virgen* sat on the altar only during the mass they said in Spanish. Otherwise, they kept her in a broom closet."

The gesture makes a big difference. Who knows why it works? You make a sound like a tire losing air, you raise one hand slow-motion, like drawing burned fingers back, and life goes on without interruption.

3.

A bronze plaque on one wall says the Boiler Plant dates from 1947, but it feels independent of time. Here I am deep in the guts of a state institution, huge maroon vats and sheet metal ducts, and shadows that never move – nothing to suggest all those weather-swings out the door, the turnover rate of heat and cold, plant life and human life.

The chocolate-colored floor tiles and walls of rust-red brick are absorbing light. The cream-colored plaster ceiling, twelve feet high, holds a single seventy-five watt bulb every twenty feet. Up and down the corridor, from first aid kit to water cooler, from the door entitled Carpentry Shop to the cork board labeled Union News – everything smells like floor wax and disinfectant applied right on schedule, year after year, by nameless guys with state jobs.

Out the room's single window lies a foreground of juniper bed, the high-rise dormitories and parking lot of a regional university, then a spruce-bough horizon, a shortgrass ridge. Between the boughs and the ridge -- you can't see it from here -- the Yakima River twists down through basalt canyons and into the open.

It is 9 a.m. I get a kick out of putting in hours with M on these quiet weekday mornings. Her attitude always picks me up. Feisty, tireless, with long memory and short temper, she is a dear and squirmy friend, nettlesome but cuddly, exasperated, exasperating. She opens an Exacto knife, and cuts a fifty pound sack of *masa*, and seizes a half-gallon plastic scoop. I spread open a Ziplok bag and, oops, spilled *masa* clouds the room. M sneezes.

"Salud."

She blows her nose in a wadded Kleenex.

"Gracias."

Urgency sharpens her voice. Gotta be the stress of being a single mother, of caring for invalids three nights a week to pay rent. Of average height, slender, with short hair, she wears sensible shoes. Her eyes are large and far apart and expressive. She could run you out of a room with those eyes.

We met six years ago. "What a grim sense of humor God has" -- she said over restaurant coffee -- "stranding us here among a bunch of people every bit as stubborn as we are." She was straightforward how she needed to serve the *mexicano* community. *"Mi pasión es el trabajo social."*

M is, first, a survivor -- if only because her own mood changes are part of what she has to survive. Her life takes demanding angles: six kids and a couple of husbands, and then, twelve years ago, moving 3000 miles north to a new life in the Yakima River watershed. She veers from resentful to adulatory and back in one warp-accelerated moment, from growly to giddy, from pouring out her heart to issuing airy denials. But when shy newcomers cluster at the food-bank door, a circus-barker note enters her voice. She calms the timid with the tone of a droll M.C. at a bingo parlor, a sidewalk *varillero* vending powders and snake skin.

Like few people I know, she has created herself. She radiates a willfulness of the most basic kind. It luxuriates in its own reversibility. Smart and easily bored, she has uncanny recall for details, but forgets to fill out her Time Sheets. Her tones change in a gear too low to be heard by the human ear. When caught between two of her feelings, I think of

how local walls growl at over-stressed basalt 100 miles away.

And yet, because I see a lot of what happens to me as an accident, a minor dust-up at the intersection of Comic and Urgent, I zoom in on the conflict of perspectives the three of us generated that afternoon we gave away the chickens. It is obvious, in retrospect: the three of us struck a deal. Somehow, we gave each other the high sign, and started trusting – each drawn to the other two by something like the mutual flinch that binds those who survive the same earthquake or flood.

What we survived was a *mexicano* invasion. I recall how local Anglos stared, years ago, when the first families arrived. Teenage *mexicanas* got so tired of remarks about having *the prettiest hair*, while their mothers learned to ignore the supermarket checkout-line double-takes – at someone buying tripe, not ground beef, limes instead of lemons. Life got pretty intricate for a while. Any bag-boy who ever took a year of high school Spanish wanted to see if the stuff really worked.

And yet, over time, the steady arrival of immigrants has had a broad, subtle effect on immigrant life. Before long, the newly arrived become a yardstick, a way to measure how well it is that you yourself have acclimated. Still, no matter how relative the status of *newcomer*, when the newly arrived observe the even more newly arrived, they see a rawer, purer version of themselves, an opportunistic innocent baffled by electric garage doors, by garbage compactors and answering machines.

I represent a very different perspective. What I represent is a buildup, something like metal fatigue, the basic friction between specifics and staying power. Employed for thirty-five years at the local seat of higher learning, I grumble as much as I did when I got here about the weather – which is to say, about life itself – specifically about the various tricks of wind and sunlight which pass for a climate here. Talk about unpredictable. Not to mention heavy-handed, unruly, even vindictive. Everybody knows that Badger Pocket ranchers have a growing season ten days shorter than neighbors 100 feet lower. Or is that Hungry Junction ranchers?

There's a wind, year-round, monotonous. It forms the only constant in a valley otherwise all after-effects: drought or blizzard, flood or forest fire. A light snow pack dries up reservoirs and wilts corn, one year, and the next, half an hour of hail trashes a cherry crop. And yet, if the climate cuts ranchers and farmers very little slack, it is even more demanding on the *mexicano* families who show up to work in – warehouses, in fields and orchards, in one of five county plants that press timothy hay, in the local freezer plant. *Mexicanos* arrived here so fast that, by the end of the twentieth century,

more than a thousand of them depended on a makeshift food bank in a back room on the university campus. It is where M and I are bagging food this morning.

The people who receive the food will show up in rusted pickup-camper combos, or gas-guzzlers twenty years old with bald tires. They are the kind of folk who pull into town, reach behind spare tire or toolbox, pull out trash bags stuffed with clothing, and change clothes, and eat a sandwich, and hunt work. Many show up not expecting to stay, though some in fact find year-round work. They stay at least long enough to watch their kids board a yellow school bus and come home speaking unaccented English. Even with twenty people sleeping in shifts in a two-bedroom trailer, even sleeping under plastic tarps in a rest area, the newly arrived keep reassuring each other – *ni modo, que uno se acostumbra* – that yes you really do get accustomed to life here.

Anyhow, ten years into the project, with perspectives still accumulating, the same old sunlight inches across the floor. It is a weekday morning. Compañeros M and F do battle with half a ton of rice and beans. Two and a half scoops to a bag. Eighteen bags to a shelf.

4.

Every September, people get together on Mexican Independence Day to do a year's worth of unwinding. One particular year, M got permission to celebrate at the Catholic church, the three of us drove down river to buy a pig. It must've been the year the Princess of Wales died in a wreck. I remember M rolling her eyes when the televised flowers hit that televised hearse.

In a taco truck at an intersection, where we stopped at to ask directions, a heavyset Sra. dabbed her eyes and chopped parsley, a tv set at her elbow. "*La pobrecita.*" We stood there and shook our heads. Sliding off a black fender, flowers yellow, white, pink. La Sra. blew her nose, and pointed down the road at a corner.

T turned at that corner, and parked by a corrugated metal roof nailed over 2x4's, shading sweet corn and cantaloupe, honeydew and watermelon, tomato and tomatillo and jalapeño, stuff plucked from fields so level they broke only at willow-lines where the creeks flowed. We shook hands with four *ancianitos* – senior citizens missing teeth, gray-haired, in t-shirts and huaraches. The guys had installed two living-room couches under a tree, and strung up a tarp, and nailed a hammock in the shade. Now they were presiding over tons of produce, not to mention a pen of pigs and goats. Innumerable grandsons and nephews jumped at every nod and monosyllable the guys emitted.

Our wad of bills vanished, and a glance sent a sow to her death. She collapsed on a plywood slab on the ground, and knives freed the hide from fat snick-snick. I kept swiping my baseball cap at chickens that gathered, fluttered away, re-gathered.

T drove to the Mobile Home Park, to the trailer of R, who produced a propane burner and a big, hammered-copper *cazo*. He started the *chicharrones* sizzling, then added a gallon of lard, salt and pepper, a bottle of Coca Cola, a stream of Pet Milk. He stirred it all with a piece of lath, and sat on a kitchen chair, and twisted a beer open.

“Today she would’ve turned sixty.”

I flinched. R was still recalling how hard his wife fought cancer before she died. T and I studied the lumps of pork bubbling at our feet.

Eulogizing a wife who struggled so long that her medical bills finally cost him all three houses he owned, plus his butcher shop, R’s voice never broke. ¡*Cómo aguantaba* ! Her capacity for discomfort – no two ways about it – he admired the staying power which left him in exile in *El Norte* working for minimum wage.

Producing a pair of tongs, R began plucking squares of pork from the *cazo*. As if to change the subject, he cleared his throat. He seemed to be choosing his words.

“That princess on tv” – no expression whatever crossed his face – “she died fleeing photographers, not cops, not even *migra*.”

T and I were wrapping pork in tinfoil. R smiled and let the irony build. I was ready for him to contrast the flowers sliding off the princess’ hearse with the weedy plot his wife lay in. Ironies bristled all around us. I expected a dose of that numinous itching powder people call *belonging*. But no, the words he finally uttered were nothing special at all, except of course for their tone: dense with grief, ventilated with wry asides, a tone enough at ease with itself to append the moral that all our lives are in God’s hands *ni más ni menos*.

By 8 p.m., in the church basement, teenagers had the rug rolled up, and the *banda* music throbbing. Grasping each other at arms-length, boys and girls danced with loping, determined strides. In straight-back chairs, dressed in black, grandmothers and widowed aunts let fly with commentary behind one hand. Under a bunch of K-Mart red

and green and white balloons, T and M stood slicing pork onto paper plates.

That was when M cleared her throat, and asked point blank, “¿*Qué tal eso de los pollos , los congelados?*”

I gave her a blank look.

“I mean, you know, *aquel bisnes* that you, our chronicler, El Maestro Felipe... anyhow you said you were going to put all this a book that you were writing.”

“Oh. That.”

“Said you meant to call it – that chapter about the food bank – The Unforgettable Frozen Chicken Giveaway of August, ‘95.”

“*Ya estuvo,*” I sniffed. Already got it written up, thank you.

Although that wasn’t the truth. Not at all. What I didn’t tell La Compañera was that, well, I continued juggling perspectives. It wasn’t easy to find the right wide-angle blend of tones to register the feelings my friends underwent this far from home.

It came down to this: no matter what, they couldn’t dodge a phrase which they themselves used to describe what was, at once, the best and the worst of each other – *el pinche mexicano*. You heard it everywhere, that phrase, followed by a head-shake, to indicate extremes – to indicate great excess, whether of self-sacrifice or greed, of willpower or apathy. And the attitude or conduct in question? It might inspire or dismay the head-shaker, but either way – swallow-flight triumph, or dog-shit shame – what was getting acknowledged was a collective appreciation of excess, and therefore of limits. A 90 year old woman getting married, a teenager returning from Iraq with a Purple Heart – *mexicanos* shook their heads at all that people just like them were capable of. That was when you heard the phrase *el pinche mexicano* take on life. It could turn self-parody to fighting words in milliseconds. It exposed a state of mind cursed and blessed and truly indelible.

As *mexicanos* talked to each other about *el pinche mexicano*, stories overlapped, and a caricature wiggled free, an authentic folklore phantom, a rhetoric trajectory. *El pinche mexicano* rebounded from one role to another – passerby, butt of jokes, holy fool. One tale had a whole family lying still as quail in long grass by a freeway, the boots of the *migra* so close they smelled the shoe polish.

As daily life condensed, then evaporated, *el pinche mexicano* became the offspring of asymmetries, of traits arbitrarily linked, the hybrid of stereotype and observation that

flashed through *mexicanos* when observing each other. Scrawny, with quick wits, 35% sense of humor by body weight, forever either too proud or too meek, improvident but tough, a songbird of a person, someone that worked insanely hard. With an address written in ink on one palm, *El Pinche Mexicano* navigated unpronounceable place names. And, therefore, got invoked wherever people sat down to unwind over stories about how out of place a person felt, how isolated. After all, there were only ties of blood and marriage and time – mainly of time – binding people 100 miles apart into a neighborhood, a net of needs and memories two days drive from the Mexican border.

But writing about *el pinche mexicano* was tricky. Noting in English what stuff happened to my friends was easy. What was hard was registering the tone of voice they reacted to it in. English had no equivalent, no counterpart to a very specific attitude my friends aimed at each other. You simply could not make English make the sound that came from R when he spoke of life in the U.S..

And I was out to catch that tone, the attitude my friends responded with – not to migrant life, but rather to what had become a *de facto* exile. Everybody agreed: after September 11, 2001, Border Patrol surveillance intensified so much that would-be illegal aliens, merely to get across the border, had to hire a professional guide, some *pollero* or *coyote* to lead them on three and four day treks through the desert. It cost about \$2500 a head to get smuggled across the border, nowadays. Migrants like R became immigrants. Without the money to visit hometown and family, immigrants quit talking about home, or mentioned it with resentment. They felt they fit in nowhere, trapped between one landscape and another, a history random as that set of volcanic high-jinks we call the horizon.

O.k., if I wanted to feature the tough glee my friends treated each other with, their calculated merriment, how about recalling the time that four of them opened a restaurant in the spirit of *empresarios*. – plus how they went broke in the spirit of St. Lawrence asking the Roman torturer searing his flesh to flip him, hamburger-style. Tough glee it was, o.k., but with a warning label. If *mexicanos* received frustration or disappointment with what sounded, when put into English, like blunt fatalism, it wasn't because they saw themselves as victims. They saw themselves, on the contrary, as part of a boisterous, highly verbal community, one with a set of clichés to be shared, antique expressions to be maintained.

Life was heirloom figures of speech that came with a built-in tone of voice, in short. Whatever kind of book I wrote, attitude would matter more than people's poses, or

their candor. Bus station-snapshot lives like those of Jose and Jesse – and in that same, corner-of-the-mouth tone of voice, centerfold composites named Alma and Lalo, Arturo, Nieves.

One thing I didn't know beforehand, though. I had no idea the *pinche mexicano* in me, at book's end, would want – no, would outright demand! – to dwell on the sorry finish of our Independence celebration. Years later, it's easy to speak of a glaring imprudence on the part of us three Compañeros. Call it a blithe lack of foresight, but taking a certain, simple precaution never occurred to us. After all, sooner or later, one of that pack of kids howling through the halls was sure to yank a fire alarm.

The sound was unearthly. A huge mechanical grinding shook the walls, a racket that swallowed the voices of people five feet away. Penetrating, abrasive, it grated every bit of inflection from M's followup question about my book. Finally she threw up her hands, and T dialed 911, but the Fire Department said to phone the parish.

After maybe twenty minutes, a priest with a trench coat over pajamas stepped through a side door, and flipped a switch, and quiet settled like parachute silk. The priest glanced around, and his eyeglasses got dark. Everybody knew exactly what that fellow wanted to say – something about thick makeup and greasy food, something about your accent and your mustache. Even though all he did was shrug and walk off, he definitely had the look of a guy ready to run somebody naked out of paradise.

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