

Short Takes

to Carolyn

Last night Ernesto, Dianne, and I sat at the dining table playing cards and drinking while Banjo went from one to another licking us. Poor dog, all day he was locked in the third bathroom because Ernesto had relatives over and, as you know, he has that nasty habit of pissing on the feet of strangers. Reluctantly, Ernesto had lured Banjo into the bathroom with a handful of dog chow. He leapt up amazingly high for such an old dog as he followed Ernesto's open palm with its gritty treasure. He made eating noises behind the door, then scratched to be let out, whined, and barked something like, "Come on, come on"—two syllable bursts that went unheeded, although I did slip a piece of meat under the door and wiggled my fingers for him to sniff and remember me.

We played cards, drank, and later watched Johnny Carson until the electricity failed. We lit candles just to see one another. The night sky helped out now and then with blue cracks of lightning. We told jokes—or more accurately—I told jokes and Ernesto and Dianne made sounds that could be considered laughter. Eventually Dianne, flushed from wine and wobbly as a restaurant chair, excused herself and went to bed while Ernesto stayed and begged me to go on—Ernesto, the most polite person I have ever met. Such sweetness. But finally he, too, trudged off to bed and I, not quite through with the night,

went out onto the balcony to look at the roofs of other houses where I imagined laughter was breaking like the sea with every joke, funny or not.

And what did I do today? I woke very slowly with a book, had eggs and coffee, and went to work with Ernesto who wanted me to help translate some speeches of Portillo—speeches that he's going to give at the United Nations. They were all about oil: Oil and the Third World Countries, Oil and the Coming Years, Oil's Technological Prophecy, etc. But first we stopped off at the pharmacy near the *panaderia*, where I got an injection of penicillin. I've had a sore throat the last few days and have been tired. It wasn't my idea but Ernesto's. He's at the pharmacy all the time—or so the woman behind the counter mentioned with a tsk tsk. She waited on a boy who couldn't decide on Life Savers or cough-drops before she waved me into the back room where I was asked to drop my pants as she searched, on tip toes, among a row of tiny boxes for the penicillin. Before she found it a customer called her away and I was left with my pants down, feeling ridiculous. She returned and searched some more among the boxes. When she found the penicillin she poked a needle into the bottle, shook it with a shiver of her wrist, and then turned to me, shooing her hand at me to bend over. "*Mas, joven! Mas, mas,*" she scolded me like a mother. I bent over until my shirt raised like a curtain, revealing my birthmark—that pirate's patch on the left cheek—and felt the sting.

When we got to the office Ernesto greeted his workers with smiles and handshakes, introducing me as a poet and professor. They shook my hand stiffly then stepped back with nods of respect that embarrassed me. He showed me the office where we would work. It looked out on that busy street where we once shopped for shoes. Ernesto left the room and returned with a folder under his arm. He took a seat, opened the folder on the coffee table, and

began work by giving me a rough (but sometimes very accurate) translation of one of the speeches. At first we worked faithfully with the original but after awhile we got so sloppy we added words and phrases that weren't there and crossed out pretentious quips about how the poor, the noble Mexican poor, are the promise for the future. The speeches were real; they had been delivered in small towns on the frontier or in the interior while he was campaigning for the presidency. The rumor is that the mayor of each town had the streets swept, store fronts painted, and the terribly poor run into the countryside, before Portillo stepped off the plane and rode down an avenue lined with rouged girls who flung rose petals on tip toes.

We worked for five hours before we sent out for a pizza, only to return and make up some more speeches.

The day before you left, while you were out shopping for lacquerware at the national museum, I carried Mariko the five blocks to Chapultepec Park, past that pudgy policeman who usually whispers, "Here he comes, that young Mexican with his Chinese baby." He said it again to the hangers-on at the corner, and I smiled at him, then at Mariko, and crossed the street into the park looking for a quiet place to sit. But there wasn't any such place. If there weren't lovers pressed to trees, then there were kids with balloons or bright candies in their hands. If there weren't students from the Instituto Arquitectura talking in their sing-song voices, then there were cars honking, tinny transistors, and laughter from distant rowboats.

We finally stopped at a felled tree, a relief to my arms, and I let Mariko crawl in the grass and jab ants with a stick, her drool confusing them as they raced hysterically to get out of the way. Some got away, but some just kicked their feet in her drool, utterly bewildered I suppose at what was happening to them. She played happily with a handful of grass as I thought about her, how when

we first arrived in Mexico her skin broke into a rash: Banjo nuzzled and licked her neck, and so started the rash that started the eczema that spread like fire and, I imagine, was a fire that she hoped to stop by scratching. But the eczema spread, some patches breaking with pus. You washed them daily, rubbed ointment the doctors prescribed, and still they teared like the eyes of small children. But the pain was ours, not really hers, because in a way she was like those ants—alive but not fully aware. At fourteen months she was only confused at why she hurt at her ankles, knees, elbows. Years from now she won't remember the pain that kept her up that one night crying but wanting so badly to be happy that she clapped pattycakes, her face smeared with tears and snot. Remember? I rocked her at the dining table as you tried to sing, coo, and clap her into happiness.

At the park I let her crawl with those harmless ants. Later in a rented rowboat we drifted like so many others while Mariko greedily sucked a snow cone, something I shouldn't have bought for her but did anyway. From there we took a taxi home, but instead of going inside I carried her around the block, bouncing her quietly in my arms as I told her how I was going to miss her, how I loved her. She smiled, made noises. She played with a button on my shirt, squirmed to be let down, and said "flower," a new word for her, when she saw a balloon in a child's hand. "Flower, flower," she said, legs kicking with happiness. Not a bad guess, for such a little one.

Today I met with Carmen to practice Spanish. Afterward I went alone to the Restaurante Gato Azul. Do you remember the place? I went there once with Dianne's family who were shocked when, after a graceful lunch of soup, sopa, and steak, the waitress hurried over with the bill, pulling out bananas from her pocket as she came. She offered them as dessert and, not knowing what to do, we

took the bananas and held them like candles. Feeling silly, we peeled them and ate them with big smiles. This afternoon I had custard for dessert. Later I walked to the Biblioteca Benjamin Franklin where I looked at magazines and at people, mostly Americans but some Japanese, who came and went with anchors of books under their arms. Some looked so happy and so bright that you could read from their exuberant faces, while others were gray, disheveled, and sad as crushed hats. But I found it difficult to concentrate, so I slouched in the chair, eyes closed, and tried to recall something beautiful, like an aria or our old apartment in Laguna Beach. I rested my eyes, then left the library and walked toward the Metro, stopping occasionally to look into shop windows, since I had time to kill and the rains would not start for another hour.

At home I opened a beer and joined Dianne at the table where she was playing cards and nursing a glass of wine. We played solitaire and talked, first about Lindsay, her hometown, and then ways to make money. A restaurant, we first said. Something in Iowa City, where the bored were as numerous as corn. But we figured it would be too much work, though we were on the right track, since most people make their best decisions with their mouths, not their minds. Ernesto came home, beautiful as ever in his tailor-made suit, and joined us at the table. He suggested that we make popsicles, natural ones filled with slices of banana and apple, pinches of coconut, juices squeezed from real fruit. He told us how his uncle in Mexico once made and sold popsicles. As a kid he'd sit on top of his uncle's truck and call out, "Helados, muy deliciosos helados," to the kids who were, no doubt, like those from my own childhood: Brown, skinny, and crowned with spiky hair. So we talked and made sense; with beer and friends things are so clear that wealth is possible, even in the abstract. We could sell what we know, and isn't that what I am doing now, teaching I mean. A few

books read, some theory or other dissolved like sugar in your speech, and you're pushed in front of a classroom where students believe at least half of what you say.

The truth is, I am unsure about where we will be in a year and what life we will wake up to; we've had close calls in the past when our passbook read close to zero. Anything is possible. Just a few days ago, while I was walking Banjo, I saw a mother and daughter who were absolutely filthy and in rags not even the dead would wear. They were walking up the street, with mother carrying a sack of things and the daughter with a soiled blanket across her shoulder. They were not your typical Mexican poor because their clothes were, from what I could tell, once fashionable; once in style. The mother had on a polyester pantsuit and the daughter wore a mini skirt and red patent pumps that were cracked like mirrors. They passed me without looking up and made their way to the end of the block only to look left and then right, and then started back up the street. When they passed me again, the girl's face met mine and I saw a fear so great that it made me step back. I was shaken because they seemed so average, in both looks and dress (if their clothes had been clean and less tattered) and in most ways aren't we average? If poverty could happen to them, then are we far behind from that day when we'll carry all our belongings in a sack and call a blanket in a doorway our bed? When we look up, we'll have the power to make people step back.

We drank and talked. The way to make money is by way of the palate, or so we think.

Remember my jacket, the leather one the Guggenheim people paid for? A Mexican cop is wearing it today, feeling perhaps handsome and smug at a street corner in this crazy city. It's gone, that fine jacket that smelled of ham and was so unhumanly new.

Late yesterday Carmen and I had beers and taquitos at the restaurant in Chapultepec Park, where we talked in English (it was her day to practice). Afterward we returned to her car and were about to drive away when a man stepped up to the car window, knocked on the glass, and held up his wallet for us to look at. Carmen rolled down the window to ask, *Que paso?* He said he was a policeman and that he wanted to warn us that there were thieves in the park, especially at night, and that we had better leave. But not before we proved, of course, that we were not thieves ourselves. He asked for the car registration, then Carmen's license. When I showed him my license he stopped chewing his gum as he read my name, street, and give-away-state, California. He looked down at me, eyes narrowing like a dog's, and began very quietly to accuse me of "eating" cocaine.

"*Los californios son 'jipis' y jotos, no?*" he said.

I tried to be jolly as a good friend of his, and I told him that he was mistaken, that we had had a few beers but most certainly not cocaine. He accused me of smoking marijuana, of being a hippie. Suddenly he pulled a gun from his waist, shaking it and ordering me out of the car. Carmen stiffened with anger and I got out without saying anything. The cop came around, yelled at me to place my hands on the hood and spread my legs, and it was like a scene from a movie made for TV. He patted my jacket and pants and then pushed me in the direction of his car where the door opened and a fat, very fat, cop got out with a taped stick.

When he said, "*Cabron*, we're going to do what American cops do to our people," I knew I was really in trouble. The one cop with the gun drove like a maniac through the park. Fat Guy took my wallet, which he greedily opened like a sandwich, and pulled out pesos and credit cards and even my library card—anything that looked like money to him. I emptied my pockets and handed over comb,

Chiclets, and metro tickets. When he ordered me to pull down my pants, I played dumb and shrugged my shoulders. But that didn't help. He poked my stomach with his stick. Screamed: "*Andale, pinche cabron. Jipi shit!*"

I unbuckled my pants to show him that I wasn't hiding anything there. Disappointed, he made me roll up my sleeves, unbutton my shirt, and take off my shoes and socks. A real thorough guy. He even tousled my hair to see if I was concealing money up there.

By then we were driving up Reforma where we stopped for a few minutes at a corner that was so gaudy with neons and Christmas lights it was like a poor man's fair. And the poor were there, along with children and the crippled selling lottery tickets, flowers, cough drops, peanuts, and balloons. Fat Guy got out to talk to someone at a *taqueria*, then got back in. We drove from there to a residential area, Lomas from what I could tell.

I was scared because I thought they were going to shoot me. A routine bang in the head. I was shaking and thinking of you and Mariko, forever gone, as I waited for something to happen. What happened was that Fat Guy asked me to turn my pockets inside out. He grabbed my jacket, which I gladly took off, and searched the pockets. Again he was disappointed. He crumbled it on his lap and turned to the driver. They spoke softly as drunken priests and, without warning, screeched the car to a halt, throwing me almost into the front seat. I was ordered out of the car with no fanfare or final threats, though I did have to jump back when the car revved its engine and roared away. I walked backward, almost on my heels, feeling so relieved that I thought I was a reborn Catholic.

I walked for a while, giddy with life for you and Mariko, before I flagged down a taxi and made it home to kick off my shoes, open a beer, and sit in the dining room with Ernesto and Dianne, to again turn over ideas about making money without so much as leaving the apartment.