

## Agua Fría

JEANNE SIMONELLI

Department of Anthropology  
Wake Forest University  
P.O. Box 7807  
Winston Salem, NC 27109

In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it.

—Oscar Wilde

"Where do you live?" asked the lady at the customs desk in Atlanta's International Arrivals hall. She was leafing through my passport, studying my face. I had 45 seconds to give her a convincing answer. She had 45 seconds to make a snap decision about whether I seemed like the type who would maneuver a huge aircraft into a tall building in some major U.S. city.

*Where do you live?*

The clock was running and I was stumped. Ask an anthropologist any other "returning citizen" query and the answer is easy. But after ten months in the field in southern Mexico, it just wasn't a fair question.

Customs lady flipped through the well-worn pages of my passport—nine years of visas and entries from international trouble spots all over the globe. Ten seconds gone.

*Where do you live?*

I thought about a woven hammock swaying lazily in a small room in Chiapas, in the house that old Antonio Sanchez shared with three generations of women. The wind was soft on my face and Antonio was walking over to chat.

"There are owls and then there are owls, *pues*," he said casually, settling onto a short-legged wooden chair. On impulse, I handed him a brown-and-white-striped feather, and he turned it over and over in his wrinkled hand, murmuring quietly in Tojolobal.

"Truly?" said Mathew, my sometime fieldwork partner, urging the aging Maya to keep talking. He shifted in his seat, trying to get comfortable. Though not tall by American standards, his legs were still too long for these tiny hand-made chairs.

"There are owls that are of this world, and then there are owls that come from the other place," said Sanchez, handing the feather back to Mathew.

"And this one?" Mathew asked, rotating the feather slowly, massaging the silky shape of the round-tipped plume.

Antonio shrugged, reaching down to take a few ripe mandarin oranges out of a cardboard box. He handed one to each of us.

"I can't tell looking," he said. "You tell by the smell. Those underworld owls, they smell different."

Mathew moved to the edge of his chair. I began to peel my orange, trying not to seem unduly interested.

"What do they smell like?" asked Mathew, adding a few words of Tojolobal to his perfect Spanish, encouraging the old man's reminiscence.

"Ah, Mateo. You know," said Sanchez. "A little like fox farts."

We nodded knowingly. I searched my memory quickly, and tried to remember a moment when a wandering red fox might have passed gas in my presence. I caught Mathew's eye and could see him retracing his own steps through rural

forests, looking for a comparable scent. We hadn't noticed the odor when we encountered the owl lying face down and freshly killed on the road about five miles from a military checkpoint in southern Chiapas. We were more concerned with getting the bird off the road and giving it a decent burial before the next line of Humvees and missile launchers rumbled by the scenic overlook, the place where Mathew burned incense and candles in honor of the deceased bird. I was more taken by the bird's face and talons, the rugged curve of beak and claw that resembled my own Mediterranean nose, than the owl's smell. Perhaps it was the lack of smell that struck us. Death, if it was death, had been recent. Mathew laid the bird to rest with suitable ceremony, while I created a diversion by shooting pictures of the view, an activity fully authorized by our Mexican tourist visas.

In truth, there were few tourists on this stretch of Chiapas highway. Neither Altos nor jungle, it looked immediately south to Guatemala, where the military from that country had streamed across the border 15 years previously in murderous pursuit of their own Maya population. The Mexican army was less obvious, monitoring the flow of traffic along main arteries, maintaining an insidious war against its own people. They kept track of people like Antonio Sanchez, whose main offense was remembering the smell of fox farts and the colors of his Maya clothing now replaced by polyester pants. It was these neglected, second-generation Mexican-Mayas that I was interested in, moving around in a section of Chiapas that even the other anthropologists ignored.

Mathew was a perfect research partner. He had instant rapport with the people, a great facility with languages, and, when needed, could provide comic relief. If any Gringo could nose out an underworld owl, it would have to be Mathew. On the other hand, I had good organizational skills, but tended to hit the ground running, driven by passion rather than common sense. Hence, my inability to answer the current question.

*Where do you live?*

The customs queen was reaching the end of my passport pages, still waiting. Twenty seconds gone.

I was thinking hard. Last time, they asked how long I'd been out of the country. That was easy. You remember how many months somebody else fed the dog, paid the bills, kept track of the kids. A 15-second answer. No problem.

But this one was a stumper.

*Where do you live?*

I'd relocated to a new job in August, left a place I loved, renting out my house, with plans to return. So where did I live? There was the hammock in Chiapas, the rental up north, and the house down south that held my stuff. Twenty-five seconds lost in philosophical musing.

I looked at the customs lady curiously, disoriented by jetlagged sleep and a round of multi-image dreams that came somewhere between the movie and the bistro bag on a non-stop flight. I wrinkled my nose, straining to make sense of the question.

I thought about my two daughters, now grown and living in the Southwest. Both had spent formative years as anthro brats, living in the field in Guatemala. In fact, the younger daughter was conceived there, the only child of my graduate school anthropologist-spouse. He'd disappeared from her life almost fourteen years ago and was rumored to have returned to the other side of the border, like me, to Chiapas. My own parents were dead. So there was really no home, no hearth. I seldom stayed put for very long.

*Where do you live?*

The clock was ticking and she really was staring at me. Get this one wrong and they'd be into my bags, which were crammed with bottles of coffee-flower honey,

and seeds from the peach colored hibiscus in front of the house in the jungle, where the chickens pecked and ducks pooped, while my customs form swore that I hadn't set foot on a farm. Never left the city. No five-hour journeys into the jungle.

Thirty-five seconds gone, and I was back riding on a battered microbus down a rutted country road. The bus hit another cavernous rut and bounced me out of my seat and into the roof.

Landing, I looked across the aisle and marveled at the fact that Mathew was still asleep. These ten-day trips to the field were exhausting from the outset. We had flown into Mexico City, then to Chiapas, continuing on in predawn darkness.

It was misty as we headed towards the Rio Chayote, with air so moist that the windshield fogged, rivulets of condensation dripping down the jagged cracks in the glass. The driver nodded to his companion, and the man hung out of the space where the door should have been, leaning across the front of the bus to clear the panes. Instead of a windshield wiper, a wiper of windshields; the device cost more to fix than the people. I sat quietly and watched the small villages get smaller, the road detours get sharper, and the people fewer.

We climbed the last sharp incline before the road plunged down to the river and the community of Cerro Verde where Sanchez and his family lived. We were at the edge of the jungle, and yet the slopes were so devoid of vegetation that it might as well be Ireland. Farmed for almost two thousand years, the last twenty had been an environmental nightmare. Beef cows grazed where once there had been trees; corn grew only in tiny *milpas* clinging to angular parcels of over-worked land. The bus made a metal-on-metal downshift, and I leaned across and nudged Mathew awake, looking across the hills, searching for signs of trouble. On the way in from the paved road, we'd passed one convoy of troops, and another three truckloads of blue-clad *Seguridad Publica*, the state's Security Forces. Yet the valley seemed peaceful with no overt sign of problems. No smell of fox farts.

The micro pulled up to what served as the bus stop in the village of Cerro Verde. I was astounded at the availability of public transportation in Chiapas, something sorely lacking in the rural U.S. We grabbed our packs and jumped down, walking through the soft mud toward the Sanchez compound. The path wound past the tiny *Clinica Autonomo*, a health center established and staffed by the community when it became a Zapatista support base. Though the families we were working with were not armed rebels, they were clearly in resistance. They rebelled against inadequate or nonexistent services and the way their access to the markets and education was blocked, things that might make a difference in their lives.

We cut through the last hundred feet, through a thick grove of bananas and mandarins, with coffee growing in the deep shade. As we walked into the cluster of houses, a chorus of dogs began a haphazard warning call, a bark-over-bark announcement of our arrival.

"*Cayate Cleenton!*" a voice yelled out in response. The dogs refused to shut up. The barking got louder as they broke through the brush. The first to emerge was Clinton, a gaunt long-hair with just a hint of golden retriever. He was followed by his look-alike son, Zedillo. Rounding out the presidential pack was Albores, the female shepherd mutt named after the state's governor. Bringing up the rear was her latest pup. Roly-poly and awkward, it was still unnamed. I looked around for Monica, the fat black duck that had imprinted on Cleenton right after her birth. She was seldom far behind.

The dogs quieted as we reached the house, and we saw old Sanchez moving out to greet us.

"Don Antonio, how are you?" Mathew called out. We dropped our packs.

The old man's eyes sparkled with satisfaction. It was our third return to the community, and we were more or less on time.

"Where did you come from?" he asked me, in greeting.

"Virginia."

He nodded. "Very far, no? Did you walk?"

The first time a Maya in Chiapas asked me that question I'd looked at him like he was nuts. But I learned that it was a cosmological question, not a travel query. Human beings can walk to their destinations over land. Underworld beings can travel through water, or by analogy, through the sky. The bus was an acceptable substitute for foot travel.

"We came on the micro," I said, skirting the issue of the first part of our journey.

He seemed satisfied and crossed over to pat Mathew on the arm in greeting. He led Mathew towards his small porch and the three short chairs. His voice changed slightly, shifting into storytelling mode.

"There was a jaguar came into the village," he began. Mathew caught my eye and winked. Now that we had returned, it was as if we had never gone.

I was left standing with the dogs and the backpacks, and bent to pick up the packs. As I stood, an old hand reached out to stroke my curly, brittle hair. Antonio's wife, Dominga, had appeared silently.

"How are you, Tiná?" she asked, accent on the final "a." She looked at me with curiosity, stroked my hair again and nodded to herself, knowingly. I wondered if there was a Tojolobal equivalent for "bad hair day."

"I have some tea," she said, moving me towards the house. "Plants from the mountain."

We went into the cramped, smoky kitchen area and I sat at the rugged table. On the interior hearth, the ever-present pot of beans simmered. The earthenware *comal* pan was over the coals, heated and ready for new tortillas. Coffee boiled in an old bucket; water in a small pot. Dominga reached onto a shelf near the table and took out a bundle of dried herbs. She was a midwife and a *curandera*, skilled in the healing ways. She threw some plants into the water, let them brew for awhile, and then put a cup down in front of me. I looked out the door to where Mathew and Antonio Sanchez sat, deep in conversation. Taking a few sips of my tea, I went over to the fire and dipped out a cup for my companion.

Dominga was right behind me. She took the tea and emptied it back into the pot, pouring Mathew a cup of coffee instead. I got the message: the tea was meant for me.

On arrival, the enclave had seemed empty, but now family members began to emerge. I saw Domingo's daughter Luz come across the cement patio where they dried their coffee, heading towards the kitchen. Luz had been my point of entry into this community. We were working with her to help the women set up a cooperative bakery on a small plot of communally owned land. Her husband, Rodrigo, and the other men would supply the labor to build it. Mathew was also talking with them about their plans to market their organically grown coffee.

I stood up as Luz entered and we hugged each other.

"Things seem quiet," she said, an oblique response to the unspoken question lingering in the greeting. Then, more explicit.

"The convoys come through with less regularity. There are *Guardia* in the village; some we recognize and some we don't. These we fear more, since they don't know our faces."

I thought about the implications of our stay in their community. The paramilitary *Guardia* didn't know our faces either. All foreigners looked alike. All foreigners were a threat. We'd talked about this at great length with Luz and

Rodrigo. Mathew's long conversations with Antonio in which he gathered the oral histories of the Tojolobal served two purposes: they recorded an old man's recollections, and they served as a neutral reason for our presence.

"Any news from the *Comandancia*?" I asked Luz.

The Zaps were into one of their long silences, when they kept their counsel in order to make a political point.

"Not an official word," said Luz, taking a cup of coffee. She sniffed at the tea boiling beside it, then took a long, appraising look at me. Turning, she did a quick two-step as Monica the duck waddled underfoot looking for tortillas scraps. The black puppy followed close behind.

"Did you name that puppy yet?" I asked her.

She laughed. "We're waiting to see which candidate wins the presidential election. It will certainly be another dog."

Luz finished her coffee. There was a blue plastic basin on the table next to me filled with *masa* corn dough. She took a small ball and began to press out a tortilla. It was automatic with her, the arrival of guests followed by the preparation of food. I could see her thinking about supper and a couple of extra gringo mouths to feed. I reached into my pack and took out a bag of shelled peanuts, some rice and a kilo of white cheese.

"Please, no chicken, Luz," I said, trying to head off the sacrifice of a good laying hen in honor of visitors. Our eyes locked and I hoped I hadn't insulted her. It was like refusing to eat even before the meal was prepared. She was silent for a moment and then grinned.

"Monica, *pues*?" she suggested. I waved the suggestion away.

"Too fat!" We both laughed, and she reached for the bag of rice and added some to the pot of black beans.

I drained my tea and made a face, wondering what the herb was, wondering what the affliction was that Dominga had diagnosed with one touch of my ailing hair. I rose, walking into the dining-meeting area outside the kitchen, getting ready to wash the day's dirty dishes. As I did, two of the younger boys came in through the brush, running over to where Mathew and Don Antonio were talking. Rodrigo sat with them, mending an old leather saddle.

"Papa! *Militares!*" called Moises, the older of the two boys. He was a handsome teen, with straight black hair, tied back in the typical red and yellow patterned *campesino* bandana.

I looked past the hibiscus bordering the cement patio. Though the road was at the bottom of the hill, the sound was unmistakable. The deep rumble of heavy vehicles broke through the heat of the spring afternoon.

Stillness settled over the compound, as if by not moving we could will the convoy to continue north along the road into the true jungle, the road to Realidad, the Zapatista stronghold. Instead, the engine noise stopped, and the dogs began to bark.

I saw Mathew's face change and he came quickly to where I stood, taking up a lazy but protective stance. I slipped behind him. I learned early in our field travels that a conflict zone was no place for me to practice feminist assertion. Passing through military and other official checkpoints, I had learned to keep my mouth shut, offer no papers or unsolicited information, and let Mathew do the talking. We would give them the relationship they expected, the invisible woman, mute and innocuous.

Rodrigo abandoned the saddle and prepared to play the same protective role for the rest of his household. He brushed his unkempt hair out of his eyes, and shifted his weight as he stood a few steps to the right and in front of Mathew. I could see his attitude shift with his body, like a faint breeze ushering in four

centuries of conditioned response. It was not a sell-out to past patterns of exploitation and interaction, but a tactical decision. The human species survived by picking its battles. Rodrigo knew it. We knew it. Old Sanchez knew it.

Rodrigo turned to Moises.

"How many?"

If Rodrigo was apprehensive, he didn't show it. In spite of the cadre of political dogs, I didn't think he had reason to be. Though clearly opposed to government policies in Chiapas, they'd learned non-violent resistance from the Catholic Church.

Moises lifted a hand and began counting. "Two hummers," he said, pulling back two fingers. "Two tanks. A truck filled with soldiers." He was out of digits.

The dogs were really barking now, and it was clear that the strangers were headed our way. We heard the sound of heavy boots and looked up to see six soldiers coming through the trees. They crossed the patio and lined up in front of our lines. The expression "Mexican standoff" ran through my mind. The closest extended his hand in effusive greeting.

"Good af-ter-noon," in English. He switched to Spanish. "This is how you say it, no?"

Mathew nodded, eyeing the M-16, side arm, night-vision glasses, and Bowie-knife. The lieutenant took off his reflector sunglasses so we could stare at each other, eye to eye. His use of English let us know that he was not surprised to see us. After a long silence, I saw Rodrigo's hand reach back slightly to touch Mathew's arm, and he whispered a simple, guarded warning, "*Mateo . . .*"

Before anyone could move, old Antonio was talking.

"A jaguar came into the village," he began. "Papa! Papa! Get the arrows, the ones with the big tips."

This time the old man was not telling a story. I recognized the expression in his eyes, the old-timer madness I'd seen during my late mother's Alzheimer's dementia. Yet Sanchez was sharp. This, too, was tactics. Performing for the military, he was an old man, no longer functioning in the real world. A sad family. So what if there were a couple of gringos? The tension defused like the air leaking out of a deflating balloon.

"*Soy Teniente Martinez,*" announced the lead soldier. "I'm Lieutenant Martinez, in charge of the reforestation project, over at the base." He cocked his head, nodding vaguely in the direction of the road towards Comitán. "I was wondering if you could help me, provide some assistance, give some advice, on how to grow trees, replenish the jungle?"

I looked at him like he'd now sprouted a second helmet. I could feel Mathew looking at him from in front of me. He turned slightly.

"Tourists. Cultural exchange," Rodrigo whispered to both of us.

"I don't know anything about reforestation," Mathew said. His American accent was thick over his perfect Spanish. "I'm trying to record some old stories from the old folks in this valley, before their culture is lost." He highlighted the word old, and the word culture. Moved the conversation away from ecology, made sure it never even ventured towards human rights.

Playing his role, Teniente Martinez seemed vaguely disappointed. No one to help him plant his trees.

"Well, then, remember. I'm Teniente Martinez, at your service. I'm just over at the base. If you need anything, night or day, just come get me."

A flash of crazed imagery passed through my mind. They knew where to find us—that was negative. They really knew nothing about us—that was positive. They thought we were environmentalists—nobody understands what anthropology is anyway. That was neutral.

The air was a touch lighter, and Rodrigo elevated it to the next level of innocent cordiality.

"No quiere café?" he asked, turning to Luz and me with a "get lost, go get coffee" look.

We both began to turn and head back to the kitchen.

The Teniente sighed. "Ah, si," he said, giving the proper response as a civilized guest.

Luz brought him a big mug of sweet, dark liquid. He drank it fast and a pained look came over his face.

"In fact, I drank three cups already this morning," he whispered. "In fact, I really need to use your latrine."

I felt Luz freeze for an instant. We shifted uneasily, all of us. The Teniente had to piss. We looked at each other, maintaining the easygoing charade. It was not just the dogs that had political referents in this household—deep in the coffee grove was a rudimentary latrine, where the toilet was also named after a Mexican president. The graffiti on the wall invited all deposits in the mouth of the dominant party. It also cautioned users to clean it carefully after each use, lest some of the shit rub off. It was painted brown, red, and black, Zapatista colors. The latrine had blown any naïve illusions I might have had about the community's politics.

"If you think these folks are neutral, Tina," Mathew had remarked, chuckling after his first contribution, "I think you probably should go take a good look at the *Zappa Crappa*."

Now, Rodrigo lifted his left hand slowly and slapped himself on the top of the head. "A pity, señor, but we only have these bushes. The latrine filled, and we're in the process of digging another one." He waved at a shovel leaning against an orange tree.

Martinez looked truly crushed. It was not a ploy. The man really had to go, but it would be unacceptable to pee in the bushes in front of all these women. He was a lieutenant after all.

"Ah, well," he said, looking distressed. He held out his hand again, and both Mathew and Rodrigo took it.

"Good luck with your tree-planting project," Mathew told him.

We exchanged *vayas biens*, wishing each other well. The Teniente turned, ambling slowly back toward the Hummers, trailing his troops. A final wave.

"Just over the hill," he reminded us. "Anything. Night or day." An unspoken *mi casa es tu casa*, my house is your house, hung in the bright afternoon.

We stood quietly for a few minutes, listening for the sound of the Hummers moving up the road. I hoped the Teniente's bathroom needs took them away to the next enclave really fast, before he had time to analyze the whole interchange.

"Well?" Mathew asked Rodrigo.

Rodrigo shrugged. "The *Clinica* is autonomous; the *Municipio* is in resistance; but half the village is PRI. We've lived together here for thirty years and we've one thing in common. We're all screwed. We're all poor. Look at us. Mayas who don't speak our language. Look at them, Mexicans who are really Mayas. They can't read; we can't read. Our children die of the same diseases. We're the true forgotten of Chiapas. We don't wear pretty clothes like our cousins in the highlands. Even you anthropologists aren't interested. Trust me, Teniente Martinez will forget us, just like everybody else. And Mateo, by the time they remember us, we'll have the coffee cooperative and the bakery, and the women will be buying aprons from the PRI ladies and honey from the PRD beehives, and all of our children will go to school. Together. This I believe."

I wanted to cry, listening to him. I couldn't think of anything to say, and even Mathew was silent. Their faith made my hair go limp and the air smell like owls. Old Antonio broke the impasse.

"A jaguar came into the village . . ." he said, looking toward the river.

We all followed his distant gaze, marveling. It was a damned big cat, but even Cleenton wasn't barking.

The smell of copal incense was thick on Mathew's clothes as he came into the small dirt-floored room where we slept in woven hammocks. He put a striped net bag down on a palm mat, sat down, and rubbed his eyes.

"Tired?" I asked.

The day had been exhausting and enlightening. The army's visit was a way of letting us know that they knew we were here. The roundabout and seemingly benign content of the exchange meant that "they" did not see it as a threat. We were trying to do community development within the existing power environment, rather than work against it. Long conversations with Rodrigo during each visit reassured us that the community felt the same way. Yet the whole conflict was tricky, lying somewhere between war and not war. The overt conflict between the Zapatistas and the government forces made space for a covert war between support communities like Cerro Verde and the existing structure of marginalization and exploitation. The visible conflict diverted attention from quiet attempts to make change on the level of immediate survival.

Mathew nodded, shaking tiredness out of a tight back. We'd helped with the household chores—he in the milpa garden and me in the kitchen—as we always did. As anthropologists, we entered into our field experience with certain research problems in mind, yet no amount of direct questioning could ever match the sudden downpours of insight that came unexpectedly as part of the daily routine.

Mathew's day was even longer than mine. Just before dusk, he and Antonio hiked to a cave high above the village. The old man had tremendous energy, and seemed to be drawing additional strength from his story-sharing sessions with Mateo.

"Antonio did *costumbre* regularly at one time," Mathew said, referring to traditional Maya ceremonies.

As if to illustrate, he took four thin white candles from his net bag and arranged them on a flat stone to one side of the room. He lit a small lump of copal resin.

"He still does, at times, but it's only he and Dominga now. It's been a long time since he's had anyone to do it with. His ceremonies are different from what I learned, but close enough. So is the language."

Mathew began some low prayers in Maya, at the same time dribbling clear liquid from a small plastic bottle between the candles and onto the floor. He took a long drink and turned to pass the bottle to me.

*Agua fría.* Maya moonshine. The 200-proof sacred alcohol that went down with deceptive ease, leading to an intoxication like no other I've ever known. I took the bottle from him, inhaled the wafting copal smoke, and took a long drink. The liquid hit me like a winter storm, an anesthesia of my interior. The cold, cold water stilled the sounds of the exterior day, leaving me somewhere else. I felt it like a stiff wind blowing from an unknown source.

Yet the room hadn't changed. I reached over and began to massage a tight knot between Mathew's shoulders.

"How you doing?" he asked.

These late-night debriefings were one of the plusses of doing fieldwork with a companion. We were there for each other at the end of the day, for conversation and multi-dimensional reality checks. It was my turn to reassess the day.

"Dominga has her own skills," I said thinking about the tea. As a midwife, she was less cut off from her old skills than her husband. Women continued to come to her for help with their pregnancies. She was no threat to Christianity and had not been forced to take her talents indoors or underground, like Antonio.

As if on cue, the blanket covering the doorway pulled back.

"Tina," Dominga said, bringing a large pitcher into the room. I could smell the tea, almost as strong as Mathew's copal. "All of it," she ordered. "Before you go to sleep."

I groaned. Not only did it taste foul, but before the night was out, I'd be joining Teniente Martinez in a cosmic search for the ultimate latrine.

Clinton was barking again. I woke up disoriented and stared into the darkness. The smell of copal still lingered in the windowless room. There was a man standing over me.

"Mathew!" I called, startled. He rolled over quickly and sat bolt upright.

"What? What?"

The figure was dressed against the early spring chill—blue jeans, dark sweater, ski mask.

I looked again, as my night vision sharpened. *Ski mask*. Maybe it was just cold out.

"You need to come," he said, a simple summons.

"Come? Come where? Go where?"

"Further in. To the jungle."

"To do what?"

"I don't know. I'm just the messenger."

I looked around at Mathew. He'd put on his glasses and was sitting up.

"The man says you need to go, Tina," he said.

He could see better in the darkness than I could and after his initial wake-up, didn't seem disturbed by the visitor.

I looked around, helpless. I was used to the unexpected in this work, but it was the middle of the night, and the wind was blowing, and I wanted to go back to sleep.

"Five more minutes," I said, pulling the covers over my head and burrowing back down into the cocoon of my hammock. "I'll get up in five minutes." It seemed like a reasonable response to an unreasonable request.

"*Chinga!*" said the stranger. "You think I'm some kind of snooze alarm?" He threw his arms back in resignation. "She wants to go back to her dreams!"

I heard him sigh as he walked over to the door and sat on one of the short-legged chairs, waiting.

When I crawled out from under the covers, he was still sitting quietly. Mathew was up, and he tossed me my pants and my jacket. I was supposed to get dressed. I was supposed to go out into the night with a masked man.

I found my water bottle and my flashlight and put them into my pack.

"Okay, I'm up. Let's go," I said to Mathew.

He was leaning against the wall, close to where he'd burned the candles. He came over and patted me on the cheek and handed me the plastic bottle with the remains of the *agua fría* we'd drunk the night before.

"This one's for you, Tina," he said. "You have to go alone." He nodded toward the north, in the direction Teniente Martinez had gone earlier in the day. The road to Reality.

The sky was filled with ten thousand stars, endless, beyond counting. We went carefully through the silent enclave, into the moist green curtain surrounding the trail down to the road. A pick-up truck was parked near the Clinica, and two men

dozed at the wheel. As we approached I saw them reach up, and one pulled a mask down over his face.

My escort pointed into the bed of the truck and then, on second thought, helped me up. He followed quickly and sat beside me, throwing a stained blanket over our legs. When I didn't take my end, he bent across and tucked it around me. The ride would be long. The ride would be cold.

We started to move slowly along the rutted dirt. As the truck lurched forward, I felt something moving under the blanket, something moist and alive. Pulling the blanket back, I recognized the pointed coyote snout of Albores the dog. She licked my face quickly, then walked over and planted a sloppy dog-kiss on my new companion.

"*Pinché Albores! Skivvy!*" he exclaimed, knocking the dog away, but letting her remain in the truck. He knew the dog by name, and the dog was allowed to come.

"You like dogs, no?" he said.

"I like dogs. Where are we going?"

He waved into the night. "Further in," he said again.

I bent my head back to look at the stars, the Southern Sky, the Maya cosmos. There was a dark band immediately overhead, the Milky Way lying flat, the black place of dreams. It was March, almost the equinox, and I looked for the bright stars of the three-stone hearth.

"What's your name?" I asked my companion.

"Ximi," he said. Jimmy? *Camé?* It sounded like a little of each. I settled on Jimmy, the more familiar. He burrowed down under the blanket, getting closer, Albores between us. He closed his eyes, and I did the same. Sleep seemed like a good idea.

The truck came to a screeching halt. Screeching, because the bald tires failed to catch on the silky mud. Screeching because I screamed as we careened out of control. Screeching, because an owl shrieked as we came to rest inches away from its arbor perch. I was wide-awake, and so was the camp. The air smelled like wood smoke, and damp soil, and the essence of owls. Why was I not surprised?

Albores jumped out of the truck and ran up to greet yet another ski-masked Maya. In all the years I'd spent in Chiapas, I'd never seen a full-blown Zapatista. But here they were, and here I was, in the middle of the night, in the middle of the jungle. I climbed down and took a long look at the man walking toward me. He was awfully tall for a Maya, and towered over Jimmy.

"This is Eduardo," Jimmy told me. Eduardo mumbled something, barely audible, and led me past the fire to the other side of the camp. There was something familiar about the way he walked.

The fire was a cook fire, a small hearth built up high, with the usual clutter of pots and buckets surrounding a round comal pan. I seldom saw campfires in Chiapas, the sit-around-and-sing type that created camaraderie and ate trees.

We settled on low log seats, out of range of whatever warmth the fire might create. There was a woman near us, the first I'd seen. Her hair was dark, streaked with a little gray, and she reminded me of Dominga.

Eduardo lit a cigarette and in the bright surge of flame I saw that his eyes were green. They stared out from under the ski mask, over a long aquiline nose. He was really tall, even by European standards. He took a deep pull on the cigarette, dropped the ash, and looked directly at me.

"So what do you think you're doing here, Tina?" he asked. His Spanish had a slippery feel, a faint British accent.

I was sitting a little hunched over, huddled against the cold. Now I sat upright. I knew those eyes. I knew that accent. I'd been married to that voice for ten years. That voice had asked me that question countless times. *So what do you think you're*

doing here, Tina? That voice had walked out of his daughter's life and into the Rebellion.

"Edward. I should have guessed. Don't tell me you're Marcos?"

"No, no. Of course no," he said, condescending as always. "I write the communiqués."

What else did I expect? I looked around the campsite, the low ochre light, the 4 A.M. silence. My ex-husband was a ghostwriter.

"Your daughter always thought you were Marcos, you know. Saw a hero in her missing father."

"How is she?" Eduardo asked.

"It wasn't easy. She had some rough times. We had some rough times."

Now, the old woman turned to me, full face. "What did you expect, Tina? You get back what you give. I always said you'd have a daughter who'd treat you like you treated me."

The mother's curse. It was deep in the night in the heart of the jungle, and an old woman was uttering the mother's curse.

I stood quickly, tripping as I did. I knew that voice, too. I knew that face. I stared through the fire, looking for Jimmy, or Ximi or Camé. Looking for Albores—something I could touch.

"You don't look half bad for a dead person, Ma," I told the woman.

"You should only know. You never saw me dead. You were here. And for what?"

She was right, as usual. I didn't know what a dead person looked like. She'd died two years ago, during one of my quickie field ventures. I'd talked to her last from a phone booth in Comitán, told her I loved her, yelling over the chants of Zapatista supporters gathered in the plaza. *Zapata vive!* . . .

"It's my work, Ma. It's what I do."

She breathed deeply. "It's all a bunch of crap!"

That grabbed me. She'd used that same phrase 40 years ago, when my grandmother died and I took comfort in her trip to heaven. It's all a bunch of crap.

Eduardo snorted. "What do you know, Tina? You were always middle class."

I stared at him. Planted myself in his face. "This isn't about me, you know, this conflict."

"Of course it is. It's all about you." They were a Greek chorus.

"A latte liberal," my mom said, agreeing with him.

I looked from one to another. "Whose side are you on, Ma? You never liked him to begin with. Besides, you're dead, for God's sake."

She stared down her nose. She still had that demented look in her eye; the end-stage Alzheimer's gaze when all the mental ordering disappears and the space-time continuum dissolves.

"My side. I'd like to get some peace, you know, but you won't let me rest. Running around the jungle, trying to save the world. You couldn't even save your own family. What are you doing here, anyway? Didn't you read that David Stoll book? Rural guerilla strategies are an urban romance. The Revolution's over."

I looked at Eduardo. After 13 years in the jungle, he couldn't let her get away with this kind of attack on the socialist dream. Or could he? Mom was on a roll.

"It was all the fault of that Guevara character."

I scanned the campsite. At the rate we were going, I expected to see Che drinking shade-grown Chiapas coffee on the other side of the fire. Malcolm X. Jimmy Hoffa.

"You had to invite those Cubans into my living room when you were in high school. Upset your father, right after he voted for Goldwater."

"She's right," Eduardo said. "Nothing but infantile rebellion with you. What do you think you're doing here?"

"Community development."

"That's very considerate of you," said mom.

Eduardo wasn't impressed. "Look at these people." He walked to the edge of the clearing, gazing out toward the river. I assumed it was still the Rio Chayote, but who could tell.

"Look at these people," he said again. "It's real for them. You go home. You go home and leave the residue of your do-gooder anthropology for them to step in." He paused and took a long look at me. "What did you do to your hair? It looks like shit."

My turn to get pissed. "What did I do to my hair? You slipped out on a kid who only wants a card on Christmas and birthdays. What did I do to my hair?"

I whirled on my mother. "And you. You slipped out while I was gone. A mother thing, if I ever saw one. An eternal last word. And now you refuse to be dead. You talk about peace. What about me?"

"It's all about you."

The Greek chorus again. We'd come back to that point. It was like a kaleidoscope, the pieces shifting, creating a new pattern, moving again, rearranging, back to start. It's not like I was oblivious. I realized that I brought my own problems into the field with me, and I needed to separate what I was doing for the community from what I was doing for me, or at least be aware of it. I didn't need Mom, or Eduardo, or Jimmy, or Che Guevera's ghost to remind me of my ethical responsibilities. Perspective, though, that was something else. I could use perspective.

I looked through the orange flames of the hearth fire. There was a man sitting on the ground, one hand hugging his knees. In the other he held a huge cigar, and its smoke danced circles around the hearth smoke. He looked small and agile and a lot like Mathew. But he looked so old; in fact, he looked ageless. I saw him pull out a small flask and salute me, taking a long draft of clear liquid. Agua fría.

I remembered my bottle, took it out of my pack, and drank. It went down smooth, like it always did. I could feel the cold, cold winter slide into my belly, the lazy jet stream "V" that was hot and icy at the same moment. I felt it like pain and passion and misplaced emotion and loneliness and endless longing for the hearth of the earth. Time spread out slow and thin, like silly-putty in the hands of a child. I could see Mom waiting for me to respond, and she had all the time in the world.

"Why did you bring me here?" I asked Eduardo.

He laughed, a deep guffaw I remembered from our marriage. "You brought yourself here, Tina. It's spring break and you could have gone anywhere. You could have gone to see your children or your sisters or the friends you left up north. But you came here. Make the best of it."

I knew it was all supposed to be significant—deep and meaningful commentary on complex interpersonal relations, global inequities, the sorry human condition. But the dog was named Clinton, the latrine was named Zedillo, and the air smelled like a bean-eating fox. I had a mother who reclined in time like she was stretched out on an Acapulco beach, going nowhere. What else?

We were on Maya time, in Maya timelessness. First you read the signs, and the signs take you to a place where you're supposed to get the message. I'd been taught that owls were a deadly message, but Antonio made it clear that there were owls and then there were owls. They just brought the message. It was up to you to figure out how to interpret it.

I saw faint movement out of the corner of my eye, and there was a huge rock lumbering toward me. It looked a bit like a dinosaur, keen-eyed and intelligent; white quartz flecked into dark gray, a ribbon of pink cutting across its midsection. I reached up and touched it on the cheek. The rock sighed and the sigh was soft moss under my hand. Maya timelessness.

"How ya doin'?" I asked. The rock smiled, all moss now, the gray turned green, the quartz flecks turned into white sprigs of baby's breath.

"Fine. We're all just fine."

I was less disconcerted by talking to a rock than I had been by my conversations with my mother. Rocks were alive. They just functioned on a much slower time frame than did most other living things. Their life cycle was different from our life cycle in the way that ours differed from a ladybug or a firefly. The *agua fría* allowed the silicon giants and me to breathe on the same schedule. And then there was Dominga's tea. Maya timelessness.

But Mom, on the other hand, was dead. Why was it that she was swimming in the long moment of time?

The rock smiled happily. Swaying, like Ray Charles at the piano. Did it sense a kindred spirit in me? Solid like a rock, a boulder, a cliff?

I thought about my children, my siblings, all the distance between us, all the love gone up in more smoke than a copal fire, frozen worse than a northeast blizzard.

*Where do you live?*

I caught Mom's eye. "You shut me out," she said.

"You left me," Eduardo noted.

The moss mountain stretched and shifted. Something was changing. Now it was made of pyrites like the mirrors of the ancients, and I could see myself reflected. It was message time. In fact, it had been message time for this whole Chiapas visit. Mom, and Eduardo, and Mathew grown ancient behind a big cigar. Luz and Rodrigo and their dreams for Cerro Verde. Teniente Martinez and his three-cup bladder. As the mountain moved, I saw a hard ball of granite rolling purposefully down the cliffside, a treacherous drop. It rolled and rolled, protected by its shape and substance. All the way down it crushed flowers, ants, bushes, pebbles, but the rock emerged unscathed.

What was I doing here? Was it research or advocacy or activism? Or was it a loosely disguised professional undertaking designed as a cover-up for all my confused personal interactions? Was I leaving a wake of disaster in my own science-protected path through life?

It was time to examine my own values and agendas. Was I thinking through the implications of my presence in communities that would have to face the consequences long after I was gone? We anthros were no longer impartial observers. The production of cultural knowledge was no longer an insulated undertaking. Our work was open to multiple levels of public scrutiny, and the insights that made it valuable to some made it dangerous to others.

Mom was still smiling at me, the same vaguely disapproving smile of my childhood. So much left unsaid. But she seemed to be fading, blurring at the edges. I reached into my pack and took out the magic bottle, lifted the *agua fría* toward my lips. One of the men who had been lingering quietly at the edge of the encampment caught my action and lunged at me, reaching for the unmarked bottle of clear liquid.

"It's not a Molotov," I yelled at him. "Please stay back!"

But he had moved into the smoke-lit ring of the cook fire, jumped between Eduardo and the moss creature and Mom. Broken the moment. The rock ceased moving. Eduardo dropped his cigarette and Mom began to disappear.

"Mama!" I called, reaching out to her. "Mama!"

She was disappearing fast and we hadn't said anything, hadn't talked about her and me and our legacy with my own daughters. We hadn't solved it or resolved it. But it was okay. I'd stood facing all of my ghosts, another Mexican stand-off. I knew where to find them, and they knew how to find me. The time they dwelt in was the inside time, the time of the heart, immeasurable on clocks or Roman calendars. Maya time. Mom would continue to be there and now that I'd seen the door, I could join her. We could work it out and in turn, I could work it out with all the others I loved, or had loved, or thought I loved. I'd found the starting point, the cave door to the other world.

*Where do you live?*

Chiapas was something else. If I wanted to continue to be an anthropologist working in a conflict zone, I needed to be upfront with my own intentions; needed to reclaim a little of that good old-fashioned social-scientific objectivity without positioning myself beyond the fray. But as a human being, I couldn't disregard the fallout of my own emotional protections either. Yes, it was important to separate out the fieldwork from the soulwork, but one task was no less important than the other. Honesty in one realm led to honesty in all realms.

Light was beginning to rise in the eastern sky. Eduardo gathered up his gear, moving fast toward the edge of the jungle. His long legs carried him away quickly, and all the others were leaving, exiting vampire-like in the fading night. I looked through the cook fire. The old man was gone, too.

"Eduardo!" I yelled after his retreating figure. "How do I get back?"

He turned and waved at me in dismissal. "It's a dog's life," he said.

"Write to your daughter!" I called into the empty dawn, a useless last word. "Tell Marcos to write to his people," I added.

Albores was sniffing at the remains of black beans, looking for an old tortilla. He was the only living thing left in the place. I picked up my pack and followed the dog down the hill.

I woke up in my hammock, my blankets in a mound on the floor below it. I heard the early micro grind to a stop at the bottom of the hill, pausing long enough to load crates of mandarins and bananas for the market in Comitán. It was going to be a hot one.

Rodrigo and the older boys were tying tools and food onto the saddle of the old packhorse, starting out for a day in the milpa. The younger kids would spend the morning in the one-room school.

Mathew and Albores were sound asleep. They snored in tandem, heavy, exhausted out-breaths oblivious to the sounds of the waking enclave. I went towards the kitchen, picking up a clean mug from a mound of recently washed dishes on one of the outdoor tables. Luz was standing over the comal, flipping tortillas gingerly with practiced hands. I took the metal dipper out of the coffee bucket and started to pour myself a cup.

"Mom left you this cup of tea," she said, taking the coffee from me.

I was on day two of the odious liquid. I took a slow sip and realized that this was what fox farts tasted like. No amount of honey or sugar could disguise the taste. I reached up automatically and touched my hair. It still felt brittle and tired, and I realized that it would take a lot of care to make it healthy again.

"Did you sleep well?" Luz asked me.

I had a disoriented feeling, a sense of wind and smoke and stone and cold, cold water. Had I slept well? Had I slept?

"Luz, are you and Rodrigo comfortable with this project, with the bakery and the coffee cooperative? After yesterday . . . suppose the Guardia comes after we're gone?"

It wouldn't be the first time. And it seldom took much of an excuse for the military to target and to destroy. The Sanchez family and the Cerro Verde community did a delicate dance trying to navigate through a political third space, a space between conflict and capitulation.

Luz stopped turning the tortillas for a moment, and rubbed her fingertips together, working out the heat.

"*Tabueno, Tina,*" she said, finally. "It's all right. The NGO people come and they go and they make promises and nothing happens and we feel burned and saddened and still we dream. We have nothing to lose."

I looked out at the patio at the peach hibiscus and red bougainvillea. One of Luz's sisters was sitting on the other side, nursing her baby. Dominga was in her own house, getting ready to walk to the river to do the laundry. Clinton was gnawing on an old chicken bone while Monica moved in and out under his legs. Albores was finally awake, her tail slapping up and down on the pavement as she watched Mathew begin to stir. Antonio had his walking stick and an old back pack and was waiting to climb to the milpa with his new-found biographer.

I reached into the blue basin and took a handful of masa, rolling the ball around in my palm, feeling the sticky corn absorb into my skin. I thought about my daughters on the other side of the country, the insane pace of my life and my struggle to see my own dreams. It seemed like there was a lot to lose here—family, community, and a way of life that fit inside the landscape—but it wasn't my place to say. Even if I stayed a year, I'd still get to leave. For Luz, a risk seemed better than no dream at all.

"Trust," she said simply. "For all of us, there is nothing left but trust."

Mathew ducked into the kitchen, gulped a cup of coffee, and took a handful of tortillas.

"I'm off," he called, joining Antonio outside.

"There are jaguars and then there are jaguars . . ." the old man said as they started into the hills.

I drained the rest of Dominga's tea. The liquid warmed my belly, the flip side of the agua fría cold. I was hanging from the hot edge of a steep stone face, two hands, then one hand, four fingers and then, none. Trust.

I was back in International Arrivals, the long lines of returning travelers snaking out behind me, as customs lady waited for my reply. Forty seconds gone.

*Where do you live?*

I live in my heart, in all the distant corners of my soul. In all the vivid memories of children and parents and lovers and friends, in the places where our lives meet and at the crossroads where our lives go their separate ways. I live in the DNA that connects us back to the first moments of creation, to the entire human family, to all living things. My work is the chronicle of people's hopes, and I am alive where people dream and struggle for their children and grandchildren, for seven generations dancing into an unknown future. Wherever I am, I am blessed with life.

Forty-two seconds. I smiled at the memory of predawn visitations in the Chiapas jungle, but the U.S. government wasn't interested in my personal and professional musings. They wanted something tangible, the location I'd entered on the form I'd just handed to the woman at the desk.

"Richmond, Virginia," I said, giving her my most recent address.

She took a quick look at the form, glanced at the computer and then at my hair. Satisfied, she stamped my passport.

I felt a faint dropped beat, a small tickle deep in my heart. Forty-five seconds in Maya timelessness, and I was back.

"Welcome home," said customs lady, risking a small smile.

She had no idea.

*Acknowledgments.* Truth is stranger than fiction and the fabric of ethnographic detail is more vivid than any imagined cloth. Thus, small snippets of dialogue and description in this story also appear in writing about my fieldwork, especially "The Scent of Change in Chiapas," in *Personal Encounters: A Reader in Cultural Anthropology*, Linda Walbridge and April Sievert, eds., pp. 46–52, McGraw-Hill, 2003, and "Meeting Resistance: Autonomy, Development, and 'Informed Permission' in Chiapas, Mexico," *Qualitative Inquiry* 9(1):74–89, 2003. These excerpts are woven into this piece in a whimsical way, and the rest of the story is just the meandering of an early morning dream.

Many thanks to Wake Forest University for its financial support of my forays into the jungle, to the people of the community of "Cerro Verde" for their patience and guidance, and to the Zapatista rebellion for its continuing hope, insight, and incorporation of the absurd.