

Dinner in Mexico

by Andrew Fink

As I drove through a small village on a deeply rutted dirt road, Antonio exited an alley on his bicycle in front of my truck. Both of us swerved, and I barely missed both him and an old woman sitting outside her house, stroking a cat. She leapt out of her chair, far more smoothly and quickly than I imagined she could. From her doorway, she cursed at me in loud Spanish—most of it impossible to understand because of her missing teeth, and then hobbled off after her cat, the moment of grace now past. I fumbled open the door, and directed my humiliation at the young man on the ground, but despite my angry yelling, he was so thankful that I had swerved to miss him, that he demanded I come to his home for dinner. Unwilling to accept my refusal, he put his bicycle in the bed, and directed me through the narrow streets to his family's house.

Inside, I was quickly introduced to his mother, father, aunt, uncle, and two sisters. I do not remember their names. He left me to practice my meager Spanish with them while he disappeared out back with his uncle. I did not hear the muffled thunk and distant screech of the chicken they murdered. However, I did see them carry it in from the backyard, neck oozing blood onto the dirt floor, wings still spasming as nerves tried to decipher what had happened to their headquarters.

I was, and am, a vegetarian, for the sake of morality. I cannot stand to see fellow creatures in pain. However, before I could object in horror, his aunt smiled at me, and said that, for many years, the chicken had born them eggs for the men's breakfasts, and that she was glad it could be used to mark such a grand occasion. Antonio's mother swept up, dust billowing from her skirt, took the chicken, and began to pluck it on a bench outside the front door. Occasionally, a feather would blow in, wheeling through the air until it settled among the dirt, and I said nothing.

Antonio brought me outside so I could talk to him while he built up the fire. He asked me about life in America. I told him I was

a teacher, and that I had decided to spend my summer traveling from town to town, looking for ways I could help. He told me about how the Peace Corps had built them a small school, but that it was empty now, because the town's teacher had died and no one knew enough to replace him. He himself could not read, but he did not believe that he needed to learn. He spent his days in the strawberry fields, picking fruit that he would never eat. All of the harvest was loaded into large crates, and shipped away to the United States. He rode his bike twenty miles for the equivalent of less than one dollar each day. His father and uncle worked there as well, but earned less, because they could not fill the flats as fast as he could. The sisters, because they were still pretty, were able to work in a hotel about fifty miles away. They were only home for two months out of the whole year, when the tourist season slumped. These are only the things I could understand, and which I still remember. He spoke like he moved, with an endless flow of fluid movement. If he had not just decapitated a chicken, he was a man I could have loved.

He set a grill across the flames, and threw the entire chicken, slippery with lard, onto it. When the skin began to crackle, I excused myself from the fireside to help Antonio's aunt set the table. What seemed like a hundred candles had been lit in the late afternoon, throwing shadows into the corners of the room. The table was not big enough for all of us, but Antonio's uncle had spent the early evening scouring the town, and had returned with a sheet of plywood and a rickety sawhorse. With the extended table set for eight, his mother and sisters brought in heaping bowls of rice and black beans also cooked over the fire, a pile of tortillas prepared that morning, and the charred and blackened chicken on a tarnished and dented silver tray. Silence fell. Antonio led his family through grace, thanking the earth and sun for their food, Jesus for their salvation, and me for his life. His father cut the bird apart, put a thick slab of breast on a plate and handed it down the table to me. I thought about refusing, but they waited until I took a bite and forced a smile before eating their own, smaller servings. I had not tasted flesh in such a long time, and my stomach turned with every piece I

choked down. I could not help but mourn the life of the animal I was eating, but I could not deny this family their joy.

Later, in the outhouse, I vomited my repentance, and prayed to God to forgive me for my trespasses, for I had only done what was necessary. Outside, everyone was around the fire only a few feet away, but I thought they would not hear me. Antonio had taken out an old guitar, and sang with a lilt one would not have expected to emerge from his scruffy lips. However, the music died as I gave a final heave, and when I stepped out, all I met were their stares, naive and blaming. Without knowing how to salvage my reputation, all I could do was thank them for dinner, and leave.

Alone in the truck with the windows rolled down, my tears fell for the chicken, for the family, but more than anything, for my cowardice. Even though night had come, and driving on back roads in the dark was hardly safe, I could not stop for there was nowhere to go. I was lost in an old world I was not designed to see. I thought about the old woman who had leapt with the same grace as her cat. Of the strawberry fields I passed in the night. But in the silent dark, all I could hear was the crackle of charring skin.

