

## QUASIMODO IN MEXICO

We were bleary eyed from too many tequila shots and the thick smoke of Philadelphia's Mermaid Tavern. I stared at the Jose Cuervo bottle, finally able to pronounce "Cuervo" correctly, with a trilled rrr, and at the label of the smiling peasant with the big hat. I decided that we needed to go to Mexico. Neal agreed, and wanted to make detailed plans immediately, but after I poured the last two shots, and the fat worm resting placidly on the bottom of the bottle disappeared, we barely managed to walk out into the torrential rains of Hurricane Agnes.

Water poured off the tavern roof in sheets and we were soaked through before we reached the street. "I'll meet you in five months— noon, Thanksgiving Day, amigo, outside the San Diego Bus Station," he said.

"I'll be there," I promised. Then he got into his car and was gone.

The day after, I was on the road, maneuvering flooded streets and the remnants of Agnes's fury. I had burned my draft card, bought my house on wheels, tossed a mattress in the back, put Dylan on the tape player.

I brought along searchers and outcasts— Hesse, Kerouac, Melville, Hugo. I made no plans, had no goals, except to keep moving. But I didn't forget Neal's pledge, and the appointed meeting was a marker of time in the vast expanse of this beautiful and lonely country. So on Thanksgiving Day, 1972, I walked into the San Diego bus station. I took out my tattered, Hunchback of Notre Dame.

“Quasimodo, powerless in the face of so many enemies, trembling for the gypsy girl as he saw their furious faces coming closer and closer to his gallery, prayed for a miracle and wrung his hands in despair.”

“Hey man, Happy Thanksgiving!” I heard the familiar voice and laugh, and half-turning I saw the shock of red hair and his bouncy gait as he ran across the street to greet me.

We tossed his pack in the van and took turns driving as we headed for Tucson, where we would get a tourist visa for a month long trek through Mexico. I held up my calloused hands.

“I picked with migrants in Merced. I can still smell the tomatoes. The sun— damn, it was so hot in the San Joaquin that we had to quit by noon.”

“Sounds like an ideal hippy workday to me. I apprenticed with a housebuilder. I’m ready to buy some land and build my own place.”

He told me what he had learned about framing, becoming even more animated when he tried to explain rise and run and the bird’s mouth rafter cut. I had to stifle a yawn.

“In the valley, it was a hundred degrees, and the mosquitos, man it was nasty work — splattered with mud and pulp, fingers raw from ripping apart the vines to get at the fruit, for seventeen cents a goddamn bucket.”

“That sucks,” Neal said.

“Yeah, barely enough for the beer I drank under the Eucalyptus trees at Yosemite Lake. Then back again the next morning at 5:00 a.m., listening to the field bosses chant, “Diga me las tomates amigos.”

“Your Spanish does suck, Mike. It’s Dame los tomates, amigos.”

“Anyway, the farm boss acted like a big shot and drove around in his air conditioned pick-up. He never even talked to any of his workers.”

Neal shook his head in disgust. “He probably figured you were either an agitator or crazy. You should have paid attention to Señora Sanchez in Spanish class brother, then you could have organized a strike or something. Hey man, did you vote?”

“ I was going to send in an absentee, but what the fuck, it wouldn’t matter. I can’t believe that sleazy prick Nixon won though.”

“Shit, if everyone thought like you, Mike.”

“Hey Neal, it’s good to see you.”

We drove through the night, left my van at a long-term parking garage in Tucson, prepared our packs for trekking into Mexico, and walked to the visitor’s center to get our tourist papers.

A plump, middle-aged customs agent frowned and shook her head when she saw us. “You can’t come into our country looking like that.”

She wasn’t looking at my white shirt with its message in bold black letters.

She was staring at Neal’s hair tied back at his shoulders.

“Come back after you both get trimmed.” she commanded.

We found a barbershop downtown. There was an American Flag in the window next to the signs, “AMERICA, LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT!” and “WE SERVE PATRIOTS.”

I turned my shirt inside out. “You can still see the writing,” Neal said.

“These rednecks probably don’t read, and anyways it’s backward.” I entered cautiously. Neal followed.

There were three men inside. Two were sitting in regular chairs along the wall, enjoying watching their nearly bald companion in the barber's chair getting his head shaved. They eyed us with a mixture of amusement and contempt. Their scrubby domes looked as smooth as peaches. I noticed one of the two staring at my shirt, brow furrowed, frowning, trying to interpret the bold lettering, !WON ИOXИH HCAEPMI.

When I sat in the barber's chair, facing the large, wall length mirror, I suddenly felt exposed. I crossed my arms over the statement on my chest, relieved when my assigned barber-in training, an attractive young woman who nervously told me I was her first, covered me with a barber's cape. Her hands were shaking as she picked up the shears.

“How would you like it?”

“Short, I guess.”

We watched the mirrored reflection of our shearing and endured the guffaws as our hair, black and red, piled up thickly on the floor. We had grown our hair long as a protest against conformity, and yet I had never felt as out of place as I did at that moment— with hair so short I could feel the shape of my scalp.

Our customs agent smiled when she saw us and remarked on our good looks. “Now you will represent your country with pride.”

We crossed over into Nogales, and were instantly propositioned by two pimps, their hair slick with grease. “Sucky, fucky, cinco dólares.” The women hung back in a darkened doorway, looking disinterested, waiting for the next customers. We ran a gauntlet of street hustlers to the Greyhound station.

We traveled for two days by bus, fifteen hundred miles south to Mexico City. We played dozens of chess games with the portable set I carried. I'd win one, then Neal took the next. We passed the magnetic board back and forth in the seat. Neal studied the problems there as if his life depended on making the right choice, while I moved quickly on instinct. A knight jumped here, a bishop parried there, until we battled it out with kings and pawns while the bus barreled through the Mexican night.

Neal was staring at the board. "I think planning is way overrated, and takes you out of the moment, away from following your gut," I said, hoping he would get the hint and move.

"Hey man, I'm trying to concentrate," he complained.

"You know, like I might have a specific plan in mind, or maybe an idea of how things are supposed to be, and then miss all kinds of opportunities."

"More hippy bullshit," Neal said.

"The guy who discovered Penicillin, Ian Fleming, I think."

"Ian Fleming wrote James Bond, you mean Alexander Fleming." He eyed me impatiently.

"Well, he 'screwed-up' and left an unwashed petri dish in his lab."

"Yeah, yeah, I know the story. There was mold growing and..."

"Hey, I'm trying to make a bigger point here, If he had followed all the rules, and cleaned every last piece of equipment in that lab, or routinely thrown the mold away — no penicillin. Voilà! That's what I'm talking about." I sat back satisfied, feeling I was winning the argument I started, along with the chess game.

"Voilà yourself. It's 'Aqui tiene.' We're in Mexico amigo."

"Sure, whatever."

Neal looked up from the board. “You’re making a case for being a slob. And you’re making it sound like some solid preparation can’t have a positive influence on how things turn out. I brushed up on my Spanish which was already pretty good before I left, because I figured it would come in handy in Mexico. Maybe, instead of reading some crazy novel about Quasimodo— doesn’t that story take place in France — you should have, mejorar a tu español, mi amigo.”

I glanced at the board and said, “Your move amigo.” I saw he was in zugzwang and was afraid he might take hours seeking a move, when all his choices only further weakened his position. I sat back and closed my eyes. It would be a long wait.

In Mexico City we caught another smaller bus to Puebla, accompanied by peasants, their bronzed faces baked by the sun.. They men wore broad hats and white clothes. The women were draped in color. Roosters staggered up and down the aisle like drunkards, pecking the mud on our boots.

In Puebla we began our hitchhiking journey to Puerto Angel, on the West shore, south of the Yucatan. I had liked the sound of it, and the image I had — miles of beach pounded by huge Pacific waves, indigenous innocence in a tropical paradise.

In Atlixco, we slept in a church yard at the foot of a towering snowcapped volcano. The next morning Neal bit eagerly into an enchilada and immediately turned pale. Entering Izúcar de Matamoros, we saw three blacksmiths swinging hammers in perfect unison and Indian women building intricate pots by hand. Neal was now turning green.

“Bad luck,” I said.

“No, bad planning,” he croaked, running off to the side of the road every five minutes to relieve himself.

We passed through small villages and walked along roads which made hitchhiking an exercise in faith. We walked in scorching heat and went whole days without seeing any cars. The heels of my boots came loose and flapped with each step, breaking the silence as we trudged along. Neal pointed to his oiled and well-made leather boots with some comment about proper equipment. My feet were cracked and blistered. Each step hurt as the blisters became open sores.

We camped out in starry fields at night, too tired to speak. Still, we continued our slow southbound journey. We were fifteen miles from the small town of Acatlán and had been walking from sunrise until noon. A flatbed truck pulled over and we hopped on the back with six members of a Mexican baseball team. We were soon lightheaded and buzzing from the rum they passed around. One of the men stood and pulled an old baseball out of a dirty canvas bag. He grabbed a bat and sent the ball sailing in a high arc deep into an adjacent field. Neal and I each took a turn. The men laughed as we staggered each time the truck swayed. They held our feet while we flailed away, sending grounders skittering down the road. They patted us on the back for our efforts.

“Adios amigos!” they shouted in unison, when we arrived in Acatlán. We walked down the main street and entered a square bordered by a stately cathedral and neat adobe houses. The park contained shade trees, a statue of Juarez, and a fountain. We greeted an old man leading a burro.

“Buenos días,” he sang. There was no breeze in the midday heat. I removed my boots and stretched out in the park grass while Neal went to explore the town.

I decided to organize and sort my stuff and spread the contents of my pack on the ground. I was surprised to see the tin which I thought was lost. Inside was enough pot and rolling papers for half a dozen joints. I instinctively glanced around the empty park, then put the dope

back in the bottom of my pack. The dog-eared Hunchback of Notre Dame distracted me, and I began reading the last chapter:

“We have just stated that Quasimodo disappeared from Notre Dame the day the archdeacon and La Esmeralda died. He was never seen again, and no one ever knew what became of him.”

I always felt both anticipation and impending loss when I came to the end of a good book, but I plunged ahead: “He had apparently come there and died. When they tried to pull his skeleton away from the one he held in his arms, it crumbled into dust.”

I put the book down and looked up when I heard children’s voices. A group of boys had just left the cathedral. They immediately spotted me and approached without fear. More followed and soon there were over 30 kids, curious about the book I had been reading. They laughed when I tried to tell them, in half English, half Spanish what it was about. They showed me a book with a picture of New York City. Neal returned and helped translate.

“¿Todos los Americanos viven en casas grandes”

“ No, muchos estadounidenses son muy pobres.”

“¿Lo que pesa son sus paquetes”

“Recogerios y ver.”

We were surprised when a constable, wearing a blue uniform with gold buttons came into the park and tried to chase the kids out. They reacted like he was the village clown, pointing and laughing at him as he became more agitated and flustered, but when two men in street clothes approached us, the kids abruptly stopped their teasing and took off without a word. The

constable looked embarrassed, said a few words to the two men, and followed the kids out of the park.

We were alone with these serious looking hombres, their mustaches permanent frowns, eyes hidden behind sunglasses. They did not look at all like the smiling peasant on the Jose Cuervo label.

El Capitán quiere verte,” they said in unison.

They indicated we were to go with them, so I shoved Quasimodo into my pack, then covered him and the tin with my unsorted gear. A short walk across the main street brought us to an old building which looked like a miniature Alamo flying the Mexican flag. I felt a mixture of curiosity and mild worry.

Two sentries in uniforms, like the one the constable in the park wore, stood in front of the arched front wall, on both sides of wide wooden doors which were overhung with drooping ivy.

Inside, a ceiling fan with long arms spun slowly in the baked oven of the police station. Antique looking rifles, probably dating back to Poncho Villa’s time, lined the walls and I imagined bullet holes where the adobe was chipped away.

We were told to take a seat on the wooden bench in the foyer, and one of the detectives took our packs into an adjacent room. The other detective and three of the blue uniforms conversed quietly, looking us over from time to time.

I remembered the rumors we had heard in Mexico City about hippies being locked up for the smallest infraction, and for the first time I was thankful we cut our hair.

The detective who had taken our packs returned, and once again we were following him. He walked past the room with our packs and turned right down a short narrow hall. He opened a

door at the end of this passageway, stood to the side, and waved us in. We heard him lock the door and then his footsteps fading as he walked away.

“Holy mother fucker,” I whispered.

Our cell was small, with a single cot, a dirty toilet and one window covered with metal bars. It was hard to breathe in the stifling, still air.

“There’s nothing in my pack,” Neal said. “How about yours’?”

“Okay, don’t freak out,” I said.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“ I found a little bit of pot left over from a three day fast I did in the Painted Desert.”

“You took dope on a three day fast? Isn’t going without food weird enough. Why the hell would you do that anyway?”

“Look, there’s no point worrying about it, Neal. They could plant anything in there anyway. Let’s hope El Capitán is a decent guy. Hey, It’s not like we’re selling it.”

“Did you see the look on that fucker’s face when he put us in here?”

I nodded. Our jailer had been grinning, and it wasn’t— ha-ha-this-is-all-a-big-joke. It wasn’t—don’t-worry-everything-will-be-all-right. It was a big-ass-toothy-grin, a coyote about to snack on a couple of rabbits.

“We need to use this time to make a plan,” Neal said.

I looked at the closed door, the solid bricks in the floor, the lack of any means of egress, and waited expectantly. After rejecting several of Neal’s elaborate, and not very practical scenarios — overpowering the guards, pretending to have a contagious disease, offering a bribe to be set free — I agreed with this: Neal would do all the talking.

Neal began counting, making a line in the dust each time he reached sixty, then starting over. “Why bother,” I said, annoyed at his persistence. “The time will pass whether you count or not.”

“It was early afternoon when they brought us here. I figure they have to deal with us before they go home. We’re not going to drink toilet water and they can’t just leave us in this freaking heat.”

I shrugged. “They’re going to do whatever they need to do. Your counting isn’t going to change anything.” I stretched out on the floor, put my hands behind my head, and closed my eyes.

I awoke to Neal shaking me and the sound of a key in the door. Our coyote was back, this time no grin, all business. He took us to the room with our packs. A short heavysset man, around fifty, stood next to a large desk, his arms crossed on his barrel chest. The detective started to say something to him.

“Silencio!, Estoy realizando esta investigacion!” he snapped.

“What investigation?” I thought, as the detective stood aside.

El Capitán looked at us, and I waited hopefully, for any positive sign, a faint smile perhaps, or even a pleasant nod of introduction, but was disappointed. I could feel sweat beading on my upper lip while he studied us. I glanced nervously around his office.

A bronzed, four-foot-high Madonna snuggled baby Jesus in one corner, protected by five rifles on the wall above. Directly behind his desk, rosary beads hung from a large wooden cross holding the crucified Messiah. Resting on the edge of a narrow shelf just to the left of Jesus’s gaze, next to the rifles, and directly above the Madonna, was an open, nearly full bottle of Jose

Cuervo Tequila, with the beaming peasant on the label, and a swollen worm, unperturbed on the bottom.

A full shot glass was on the Captain's desk. I had to suppress the irrational, and potentially deadly urge to gulp it down and shout, "Viva la revolución!" Instead I concentrated on the ticking of the large clock on the wall above the door and saw that we had been in the cell for two hours.

Remember the plan — Neal will do all the talking.

El Capitán started with Neal's pack. He removed objects methodically and placed them on the brick floor by his feet. Out came a small sack for each category of clean clothing, a laundry bag, neatly arranged camp stove and gear — nested pots, ground cloth, tent — and food supplies in labelled plastic bags. I felt some hope that it was not a meticulous search. But then I pictured the tin of pot exposed on the bottom of my pack.

He looked into my pack. He tossed out the items one at a time, and my anxiety grew along with the mound of my scrambled possessions. He stood back for a second and peered intently. Then with a satisfied grunt, he reached in again. My heart was thumping.

He closely examined the book, then with narrowed eyes, looked up and shouted, "Esto es propaganda Comunista!" I was relieved it wasn't the pot, but then felt a growing dread as he waved the illustrated cover in front of us, with a defiant Quasimodo in a red shirt, protecting the gypsy Esmeralda, one of his large hands outstretched in front of her, the other balled into a fist.

As El Capitán continued to wave Hugo's masterpiece, and shout, "Comunista," I wondered what they did to Reds in Mexico. I had a sudden vision of Leon Trotsky, the Communist leader who thought he was secure in Mexico City, until he wasn't, with an ice pick buried in his skull, and I forgot the plan .

“Solamente libre.” I shouted, “LIBRE, LIBRE!”

El Capitán pounded his desk angrily and pointed a beefy finger in my direction.

Neal hissed, “You just told him, ‘only free!’” And he reeled off his practiced Spanish.

“No es propaganda Comunista, sólo una famosa novela. No es Comunista, sólo un libro de amor.”

El Capitán looked at Quasimodo with a skeptical eye, then glared at me and thumped his desk again for emphasis. At that moment, the bottle of Jose Cuervo tipped sideways off its shaky perch, tumbled onto the floor, rolled up against the Madonna and child, and splashed out a reverent offering.

El Capitán instantly snatched the statue off the floor, out of the gathering pool. He cradled it gently in his powerful arms, wiped it dry with his shirt, and then placed it, so tenderly, on his desk. After a moment he frowned, rescued what was left of the bottle, and turned to face us again.

I heard the slow whirr of the ceiling fan. I was holding my breath. El Capitán tossed the hunchback dismissively onto the floor, its worn pages instantly soaking up the tequila. He motioned for us to gather our things and said, “Tenemos un hermoso pueblo, y que son muy bienvenidos, mientras sigue caminando.

I grabbed the book and quickly stuffed everything back on top of the undiscovered tin. We departed his office without delay and jogged beyond the town limits.

We stopped on the crest of a small hill, breathing hard. I spotted the central square and the jail. The sun was now dipping below the horizon. An early star stood alone in the purple sky.

“Libertad!” Neal shouted, shaking my shoulder. “And it’s libro, not libre,” he reminded me, getting in a jab about superior preparation, before the tequila drenched Quasimodo, rescued and nestled safely in my pack, had time to dry up.