



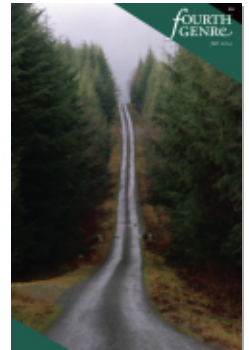
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How I Saved the Indians

PABLO PIÑERO STILLMANN

“You know nothing,” she said. “You feel nothing. You are locked in a most savage and terrible ignorance. I despise you, my boy, mon cher, my heart.”

—Donald Barthelme, “The Indian Uprising.”

They rose up on the dawn of 1994 in the jungles and villages of Chiapas, a forgotten state—forgotten by the government as well as by God—in southeastern Mexico. We knew they were Indians because their ski masks revealed their black eyes. We knew they were Indians because the hands that held the cheap rifles were brown, darker than the rifles. We knew they were Indians because they wanted to make sure we knew they were Indians: “We’re Indians!” they said. “And we’re tired of this shit!” It had to happen sometime.

Ask me where I grew up and I’ll say Mexico City, but I’ll be lying. I grew up in Tecamachalco, an affluent Jewish neighborhood in the suburbs of Mexico City. *Jews in Mexico?* Yes. There were temples and Jewish schools and sometimes, on Saturdays, one would get a glimpse of an orthodox family, hats, beards, peyot, wigs, etc., walking in their heavy clothing under the Aztec sun.

The hook and the genesis was Marcos. El subcomandante Marcos. Why not just comandante? Because he was white and it wasn’t good PR to have a white man leading the Indian uprising. At the beginning we knew nothing about him, but as time went on, little bits and pieces started coming to light.

Name: Rafael Sebastián Guillén.

Occupation: Mid-level professor (of agronomy? philosophy?) in a mid-level public university in the heart of Mexico City.

The government was proud to have figured out the identity of the man with the ski mask and the pipe who'd gone down to Chiapas to get the damn Indians all riled up. The secretary of defense or the chief of police went on national television. He held a picture of Rafael Sebastián Guillén. Then he took another photograph, one of a ski mask with the eyehole cut out, and placed it on top of the Rafael Sebastián Guillén photograph. Voilà. It's el subcomandante Marcos.

Fast-forward to 2003, nine years after the Zapatista uprising. My hair's down to my shoulders, and I'm thrilled that the little facial hair that I have grows in a pattern similar to Che Guevara's. (One day I hear someone on the radio say that Marcos developed asthma due to his obsession with the asthmatic Guevara.) I wear an army jacket to my college classes. I lecture my mother on what a crime it is to live in a three-story house hidden in the bubble of a gated community when out there there's so much poverty. She's not amused. She enjoys having dinner parties and servants—servants whose skin looks a lot like the skin of the Zapatista commanders: la comandante Ramona, el comandante Tacho. If there's a picture of Chomsky in the newspaper, I cut it out and tape it to my bedroom wall. I read the conservative newspaper and get angry. I read the left-wing newspaper and get even angrier. I fantasize about The People breaking into our mansion and robbing us to buy Kalashnikovs and rice.

“Take me with you!”

“But you are part of the oligarchy!”

“No. It's not my fault that I was born into this. Can't you see my hair and clothing? I've changed! I'm ready!”

An anthropology student, a senior, walks into one of my classes. She tells us there's a new and exciting way for us to fulfill our mandatory hours of social service. Instead of working the phones at a retirement community, or helping government office X update their database, we can now go somewhere outside of the city for a semester and do some actual *work*. We can give our time to a cause. Get out of our comfort zone. (I *hate* my comfort zone. I blame most of my anxiety and generalized sense of discomfort on my comfort zone.) This anthropology student had worked in an orphanage in some corner of the country and it changed her life. There wasn't any electricity, and running water was scarce. It was great. She shows us pictures.

At the end of her presentation, she hands us a trifold with the several different options we have should we embrace this plan: Alphabetize the Tarahumaras! Build houses in Recondite Village, Oaxaca! Work with a not-for-profit in Ocosingo, Chiapas!

Where have I heard that name before?

Yes. Ocosingo. You see, el subcomandante Marcos is now, officially, My Hero, so I know a fair bit about the Zapatistas, and I know that on January 1, 1994, the day of the Indian uprising, the bloodiest battle took place in the Ocosingo market. The rebels were inside and the army shot at them from the outside. The battle ended with the rebels, hands tied behind their backs, shot execution style. It was a massacre. La masacre de Ocosingo.

“For how long?”

“Five, six months.”

“Ocotlán?”

“Ocosingo.”

As I discuss this with my mother, one of our servants brings us the food—salad, meat, mashed potatoes, hibiscus water, cake, coffee—while the other one irons my underwear.

“Won’t you get bored?”

“I’m not going there to have *fun*,” I say. “I’m going there to help people.”

“But you get bored so easily.”

The program requires I meet with one of the university’s psychologists before leaving. This is nothing new for me. Hyperactive and severely undisciplined, as a child I was frequently sent to the school’s counselors and psychologists.¹

The university psychologist is in her fifties. She wears a skirt and a jacket, has dyed sandy hair. *So* middle class. She has me, a revolutionary, draw a tree. She has me draw a house. The whole thing reminds me of that child psychologist I went to after the divorce who played board games with me and had me draw my family on white sheets of paper.²

“The only thing that worries me about your semester in Chiapas is that you seem to be a little too much of a dreamer,” she says with the authority of a Tarot-card reader.

I give her a smug smile. Of course she thinks I’m a dreamer. She’s not used to dealing with revolutionaries.

Here's the fantasy: Hundreds of torch-carrying Zapatistas follow Marcos and me, each riding our Arabian horse, into Urban Area. The Zapatistas are chanting something. They wave anarcho-syndicalist flags, communist flags, upside-down Mexican flags. We're here to meet with government officials. We want This! We want That! We want That Other Thing No One Dares to Ask For! We are so fucking bold. The status quo shakes.

Reporter A to Reporter B: "Who's that young white man riding next to the subcomandante?"

Reporter C: "Why isn't he wearing a ski mask? He looks important."

Reporter B: "I see *The Grapes of Wrath* sticking out of his jacket pocket. Maybe he leads the intellectual arm of the movement."

Reporter A (to Photographer): "Take a picture of him. This is running above the fold."

I fly to Chiapas's capital city of Tuxtla Gutierrez and take a cab to the bus station. The list of destinations behind the counter has Ocosingo spelled Ocotsingo, with a "t." The clerk hands me the ticket, and there it's spelled Ococingo, with a "c."

I spend the two-hour bus ride reading from Martin Amis's *Money* (*Dinero*)—which a friend gave me as a going-away present. Or maybe I'm reading that Bukowski book I asked my mother to get me on her trip to New York. I'm really into Bukowski. He hated people and was unapologetically bored by *The Classics*. He drank, smoked, bet on "the ponies," fucked ugly broads, and wept to classical music. I decide that when I grow up I will be Bukowski.

Suddenly, for no apparent reason, the bus parks at the side of the highway. The driver doesn't move. I go back to my book, and only after ten, fifteen minutes do I look up again. The driver remains still. Nobody seems to mind this absurd stop. The rest of the passengers are sleeping, whispering, reading the Bible.

The bus station is only a few meters from where we've stopped. If the driver were to turn on the engine and drive forward, we'd reach our destination in less than a minute. I half stand, crane my neck. It's a fight. People are running around in the middle of the highway throwing rocks at each other. *Rocks.*

I will later learn that the two groups are rivaling taxi unions. Taxi Union 1 was working Ocosingo, and Taxi Union 2 decided they also wanted to work Ocosingo. Rock throwing ensued.

When I decided to leave Mexico City to help the people of Chiapas, my friends and family divided into two camps. The first camp had passed through Ocosingo, or knew someone who had passed through Ocosingo on their way to somewhere else, and said, or had heard someone say, that it was the ugliest piece of shit city in the world. The second camp knew nothing of Ocosingo, had never even heard its name, but said it sounded like the ugliest piece of shit city in the world.

As I'm riding the taxi to the not-for-profit I'll be working at for the next five months, I realize both camps were right. I look out the window: Bootleg CD Store→Fake Soccer Jerseys Store→Stuffed Animal Store→Shoe Store→Bootleg CD Store→Pharmacy→Fake Brand Name Clothing Store. Commerce, commerce, commerce. Intense heat. No signs of revolution.

Guess where the not-for-profit is located, though. No, really, guess. You just might get it.

The not-for-profit is a little white house that stands directly in front of the market where the Mexican army tied the rebels' hands and shot them execution style. But it turns out that in the past ten years, the bodies have been removed, the puddles of blood cleaned. Women sell corn. Women sell fruit. Men prepare tacos. Now it is, in fact, just a market.

Head, a short Indian man with a big belly and a cowboy hat, welcomes me with a smile. Then Vice-Head appears, a short man, also Indian of course, a woe-is-me type of guy. The office is dark—they don't have the money to spend on wasteful electrical bills—and reeks of sweat. I myself reek of sweat and airplane A/C and bus A/C. My long hair is dry and frizzled; my beard gleams.

I look out the office window at the beautiful bright yard that ends in a chain-link fence that divides it from the jungle. That is the exact moment when I think to myself, *What have I done?*

Head is telling me about this community called New Palestine where they just had this big meeting about this and that and. . . He stops talking, looks me in the eyes, smiles. "Don't be afraid," he says.

I want to be clear about something. My Marcos obsession, as ridiculous as it was, was by no means unique. He was a mestizo who, in 1984, left the city

and went to the jungle, traveled from village to village recruiting Zapatistas, fed on snakes and rats, and then, ten years later, led the Indian uprising. To say he was a charismatic figure is quite an understatement. The Left, angry and cynical, is always looking for a Christ figure to save them. Marcos fit that role perfectly: a handsome, intelligent, charming young man of great sacrifice—a servant leader—who battled the sins of our country.

Head takes me to the room he's arranged for me to stay at only a block from the not-for-profit and the market where the army once massacred the rebels but that is now just a market.

The door to my room is a thin wooden board with a little latch for a lock that I'll have to buy. I buy the lock, but all anyone would have to do to get in would be to punch a hole through the door, a feat that could be achieved by any average-sized adult. The floor is pure concrete, and the only furniture is a wooden board with a dirty army-style mattress on top of it. I think there's a window. The Ocosingo streets are noisy, and so is my room.

I give Head that month's rent money—the equivalent of two beers at a Mexico City bar.

"Watch out for the man of the house," says Head. "He drinks."

I go to the supermarket and buy some bed sheets. People stare at me. Children cry, children smile. I feel a huge knot in my stomach. I email my sister from an Internet café: *How do you clean a concrete floor?* What I really mean is, *Guess what? Your fuckup of a brother has fucked up again.*

I call my mother from a pay phone. With us there is no nuance. "I'm scared," I say. Literally, that's what I say. *Mommy, your lil' revolutionary's scared. Can you come pick me up?*

Head was right. The man of the house drinks. And he's what my college friends and I call "a fun drunk." He gets home in the middle of the night, walks by my door, and immediately starts screaming. He growls; he hits his wife. His wife screams. As if this weren't terrifying enough, all the shouting and screaming and growling is done in some pre-Columbian language that covers the experience with an unreal, nightmarish veil.

On Friday I take a bus to San Cristóbal de las Casas, where I've decided to spend the weekend. San Cristóbal is a quaint little colonial town loved by Mexican New Age hippies, pretty gringas who've decided not to shave their armpits or legs during their vacation, and globetrotting Europeans. I go into

a hotel lobby restaurant and have a glorious sandwich and a glorious beer while reading *The Economist*. This is glorious, I think to myself.

After dinner I'm walking around the central plaza, under the glare of a beautiful cathedral, when a man approaches me, asks me if I want some pot.

"How much?"

"Twenty-five."

I take out a 50-peso bill.

"Damn," he says, handing me my change. "If I'd known you were rich I'd have charged you more."

So he'd thought I was poor? Dreams *do* come true.

Saturday morning I go out for breakfast and then lock myself in my hotel room to smoke half of the joint I've very carefully rolled. I look at myself in the mirror as I exhale the thick smoke. I smile. I look like a subject from one of those 1960s black-and-white photographs of a college student at a sit-in. Wait, maybe in the '60s there was already color photography. I put on my army jacket. The revolution will not be—

Then it hits me. Like a kid who bounced his tennis ball on the ground so hard that it smacks him in the face on its way back up. This is not your average weed. This is jungle shit. Purple shit with blond hairs. Shiny weed, the same weed that was smoked by the men of clay who once roamed the earth. I panic. The whole room reeks of it. (Does it reek of the weed or does it reek of my panic?) My heart's beating way too fast. I hear distorted music. The Summer of Love. The Prague Spring. *Soyez réalistes, demandez l'impossible!*

I bolt out of the hotel room convinced that the hotel staff has called the police and they're on their way. What will they do to me in prison? What will they *do to me*?!

From an Internet café I write my mother a long email. Usually my missives are curt and clever, smug, but this one is soft and loving. I thank her for being a good mother just in case I'm dying or something. Of course I don't mention the weed, but she'll realize something's up when she reads it. I sign it *Abrazos, Pablo*. The email makes me feel a little better. Maybe this is the lesson, I think. Be kind.

"I'm moving to San Cristóbal."

Head is confused. He takes off his hat and wipes his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt. He has funny hat hair. "Moving?"

“It takes me three days a week to finish the work I do here. I’ll commute on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.” Actually, to this day I don’t know what type of work I was supposed to do at the not-for-profit, why they requested a volunteer from my university. My best guess is that they wanted someone to help them out with computer-related stuff. I’ve always been horrible with computers.

Vice-Head comes in, asks what’s up.

Head says, in their Mayan language, that I’m moving to San Cristóbal. To me it sounds something like, “Tic tic chic tic San Cristóbal.”

“Chic tic tic?”

“Yes.”

“You’re going to San Cristóbal?”

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

“Permanently. I’ll come here three times a week.”

“And where are you going to live?”

“In San Cristóbal.”

It’s not that Head and Vice-Head are dumb, of course—they are just dumbfounded. These are people living in extreme poverty. To them, a trip to San Cristóbal is A Trip to San Cristóbal. They’d plan it maybe a month or two in advance. And here I am telling them that I’ll do it thrice a week.

Later that day Martina, a redhead from Guadalajara, the only other student volunteer at the not-for-profit, asks me if it’s true. Martina despises me. Once she overheard me telling someone with a headache to take an aspirin, and almost stabbed me in the heart with a pen. She actually *does* things around here. She’s part of the community.

I tell her that yes, it is in fact true.

The bus drops me off in San Cristóbal and I make my way to Nico’s apartment. I know Nico because we’ve taken a couple of classes together. Or maybe he took a couple of classes with a friend of mine and we know each other through that friend. At school, before leaving for Chiapas, I ran into him, and he told me that he was also, what a coincidence, going to spend the following semester in Chiapas. He’d be there organizing some sort of an art show for Indian artists.

Nico’s apartment is beautiful: purple on the outside, white on the inside. It’s got French doors, two bedrooms, a living room, cable television, and

windows above the kitchen sink that look out to the cobbled street.³ The second bedroom is occupied by María, a wide-eyed, wide-hipped pseudo-intellectual with hair a bit shorter than mine and a soft voice. We smoke some weed and drink some beer. We listen to The Strokes. (This is 2003 and I am *very* much into The Strokes.) I haven't been in a social setting like this in a while, so I go into a full-out standup routine about hideous Ocosingo, the guy who beats his wife, the young woman from Guadalajara who hates my guts. I feel like I've just been released from prison.

Is María making eyes at me? I mean, Nico and María sleep in separate rooms, but I'm sure they're. . . . No, no, Nico has a girlfriend back in Mexico City (good ol' Catholic psych major who bores the hell out of everyone in a two-kilometer radius). Wait, yeah, definitely. María *is* making eyes. She's smiling at me and laughing at my jokes too hard. There's no way I'm that funny, not even now that we're all stoned and drunk.

At some point, Nico figures out what's going on and says he's going to "hit the hay."

María asks me where I'm staying. I tell her I was planning on getting a hotel room or something, there's actually a place that's—

"You know," she says, "you could stay with me if you like."

The status quo has changed dramatically. Now I'm living in San Cristóbal, falling asleep in María's bed to dubbed episodes of *The Simpsons*. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday I get up at six, eat the corn-tortilla quesadillas María made while I was in the shower, walk to the bus station, ride the bus to Ocosingo while a Jackie Chan movie (or something like it) plays in the television above my head, spend the day at the not-for-profit, ride the bus back to San Cristóbal, go out to a bar with Nico and María.

What do I do at the not-for-profit? Not much, really. I work on a very dramatic newsletter for the indigenous communities about the dangers of neoliberalism, the evil empire that is the United States, the kindness of Hugo Chávez, and the rampant corruption in the Mexican government. When it comes time to print the newsletter, it turns out we don't have enough money. I also help a young Indian edit the not-for-profit's tenth anniversary video. I spend a bunch of time hanging out with these two little kids, brother and sister, who are always out in the backyard. The mother tells me one day that Francisco, the three-year-old, has been asking her why I'm not there every day like before.

“I live in San Cristóbal now,” I say. It hits me that maybe I should’ve volunteered at a daycare. I may be more babysitter than revolutionary.

“What do you mean?”

“I live in San Cristóbal. I come here three times a week.”

She makes a face. With the money I spend on bus trips on any given week, she’d be able to feed her kids for a month. “You come here from San Cristóbal?”

“Yes.”

“Three times a week.”

“Yes.”

“But where do you live?”

Had Gonzalo been born in the ’30s instead of the ’70s, he would’ve for sure met Fidel Castro, and the young Cuban would’ve for sure included him in that little boat, the *Granma*, that took the revolution from Veracruz to Cuba.

Gonzalo is the polar opposite of me. His skin is white, like mine; his hair is even lighter than mine, sure; and, like me, he has a beard, OK; but he’s committed to The Cause. He’s in his mid to late 20s, originally from Yucatán, and he appears at the not-for-profit every once in a while to check up on things. People at the not-for-profit love him. Head and Vice-Head see him as a brother. The Guadalajaran redhead thinks of him as a role model. To me, he is my guilt incarnate.

I bump into Gonzalo at the office one Wednesday as I’m getting ready to leave for San Cristóbal. If he knew I’d moved out of Ocosingo he’d think I was such a pussy. Maybe he’d even say it to my face. *Can’t you see these people have been let down for 500 years? They don’t need a little rich kid from Tecamachalco coming all the way here just to let them down again.* Maybe Head already told him about my move and they laughed at my armchair Marxism.

Gonzalo hands me a DVD case. “Can’t believe I found this,” he says. It’s a bootleg copy of Derek Jarman’s *Sebastiane*, a film about the life of Saint Sebastian that, I’ve heard, straddles the periphery of gay porn.

“I don’t know this one,” I say. I look at the cover: a beautiful naked man tied to a pole with a couple of arrows sticking in his slim torso.

“I thought you said you were into film.”

“I am.”

“Just not Derek Jarman.”

I like Woody Allen, Quentin Tarantino, and the Cohen brothers, but I wouldn't dream of confessing this to Gonzalo. "Haven't gotten into Jarman as much as I'd like to."

He shows me some new books on military strategy he got in the mail.

An Indian with a Milwaukee Brewers cap sticks his head in. "Trucks are ready," he says.

Gonzalo raises his arms in victory. He turns to me: "You coming?"

"I, um, was actually on my way to . . . Where? Coming where?"

"We're going to a *caracol*." He takes a hard-boiled egg from a Tupperware and bites half of it into his mouth. Little pieces of yoke get tangled in his beard.

I raise my eyebrows. A *caracol*? I'm invited to a freakin' *caracol*?

The *caracoles*—Zapatista governing hubs—are a huge deal. Being a horizontal organization, the EZLN doesn't have what would amount to a capital city or even a central nervous system.⁴ (Remember, their leader is a subcommander.) Instead, the Zapatistas have subcapital cities that are there to make sure the communities run smoothly. The *caracoles* have romantic names like "The Sea of Our Dreams," "Resistance toward a New Dawn," and "Whirlwind of our Words."

As our denim butts bump on the bed of the pickup truck making its way through a dirt road, Gonzalo tells me about the time he was in prison.⁵ He'd gotten into some shit with the government of Yucatán and ended up in jail. After he'd been behind bars for a while, the newspapers started to write about him, and the governor got some bad press. Some of the governor's thugs visited him in prison and made him an offer: if he signed a confession, he'd be back home that same day. He refused to do it. Confessing to crimes he didn't commit would be lying. He wasn't a liar. So he served his full sentence. As Emiliano Zapata famously said, "I'd rather die on my feet than live on my knees."

Every minute that passes we are deeper into the jungle, further away from civilization. Now the only vehicles on the road belong to the army. Soldiers stare at our white, bearded faces. We stare back. Gonzalo cackles. "Motherfuckers," he says.

He tells me a story that took place in Chiapas. The army was harassing a village. Maybe this particular village had particularly close connections to the EZLN.⁶ So the army lands a helicopter in the middle of this jungle village and

literally blows the roof off this woman's store. Or home. This woman had a structure with a tin roof, and the army's helicopter destroyed it. So Gonzalo, after trying to reason with the soldiers and finally just telling them to go fuck themselves, gets this woman in his VW Beetle and drives her to the army base.

"We need to talk to the Colonel," he tells the receptionist.

She asks them their names, what they're there for. "Take a seat," she says. "He'll be with you in a minute."

Gonzalo and the grieved woman wait patiently in small plastic chairs. They wait for hours. Then they wait for a few more hours. Then finally the receptionist tells them that unfortunately the Colonel can't see them that day. He's in a meeting that went long and then he has another meeting. And then another meeting. He's ill. The Colonel doesn't come in on Wednesdays. The Colonel? I don't think I know any colonel.

So they get back in the Beetle, and at the first curve they drive straight into a ravine. The soldiers had cut their brakes. Gonzalo smiles as he tells this story. He likes a challenge.

"Shit," I say. "What happened to you guys?"

"Nothing. A couple of broken bones here and there."

The hand-painted sign that welcomes us to the *caracol* is a sign that has appeared in my dreams: SOLDIERS AND REPRESENTATIVES OF THE GOVERNMENT ARE NOT PERMITTED BEYOND THIS POINT. THIS IS AUTONOMOUS REBEL TERRITORY.

The *caracol* itself, however, is not the *caracol* that I'd dreamt of in my Tecamachalco bedroom. It's basically just a bunch of scattered huts surrounded by mountains. Gonzalo, by the way, is very disappointed by the *caracol*'s location. He says it's strategically unsound and points to the tops of mountains: "You can't see them, but they can see you."

The *caracol*'s school is decorated with a colorful mural of Emiliano Zapata and corn and freedom. I wish I had a camera.

Someone tells us that the Council will see us in an hour or so. Gonzalo, the Indians, and I walk into one of the huts, where we're served lukewarm beans and hard-boiled eggs. We drink lukewarm coffee.

Who knows how long we wait. Time in Chiapas is warped. Like I used to tell Nico jokingly, instead of "slowly but surely," in Chiapas the saying should be "slowly but slowly." Finally someone comes to get us and leads us into one of the larger huts.

Five Indians sit at a long, clothed table. Subversive flags hang all around us. In the corner there is a computer still in its box. Surely a gift from some Americans or Europeans. We sit in plastic chairs. Gonzalo introduces the Indians that have come with us, says which communities they're from; then he introduces me, and says I'm from Mexico City. The Council nods, records said information in a log.

The topic of the meeting was not about a plan to kill the president or set a bomb in the army base; instead it's about some sort of a conference Gonzalo wants to organize with the Indian communities. There will be meetings, speeches, classes, workshops, and it'll all end with a huge party. The Council smiles. They like parties. Parties in Chiapas last for two, three days.

We make our way back to Ocosingo in the dead of night. The half a dozen villages we passed earlier have now disappeared in the darkness. (I remember reading once that although x percent of Mexico's electrical power comes from Chiapas, y percent of Chiapas doesn't have electricity.) We stop and piss on the tires. We make fun of those who sleep.

The pickup truck leaves us at the not-for-profit, and as I stare into the dark market in front of me, I see a ghost of the battle walk calmly with a rifle in his hand and a hole in his head. I realize that ghosts do exist—we just have to go to a place that's dark enough for us to see them.

I'm exhausted. It's been a long day, and yet I still have to (a) walk to the bus station, (b) wait for the 12:30 a.m. bus, and (c) ride the bus to San Cristóbal.

"We're going to a community center tomorrow," says Gonzalo as he stretches in the middle of the street. "Meet you here at eight tomorrow morning?"

I look down. "I have to go back to San Cristóbal."

He smiles the smile of a frequently disappointed man. His smile says, I was right about you. It says, You're one of those Mexico City posers who wears Marcos on a T-shirt and lives with his mommy. He lights a nonfiltered cigarette, chuckles, and yes, he disappears into the night. I will never see him again.

It's during one of those many bus rides that I decide I need—*need*—to break things off with María. She's unstable. Heck, I'm unstable. I mean, not as unstable as she is, but unstable nonetheless. What if I get her pregnant? *Pregnant!* Imagine, I tell myself, you fucking idiot, the repercussions of impregnating her. For all you know, there's already a little you developing inside of her. Nice job. Now you'll end up working as an insurance adjuster

while crazy María takes care of your son, and your parents, weeping for your situation, dump money into your bank account so at least you won't have to worry about *that*.

Or what if she has an STD? Oh god. Am I going to get herpes? AIDS?! What if I have both herpes *and* AIDS already? *And* she's pregnant?7

I am, however, able to convince myself that the breakup will be painless. "Like a Band-Aid! One motion! Right off!" Seinfeld dixit. I'll just tell her we need to salvage our friendship. Our friendship is too valuable to risk it for our stupid horniness. That'll be that. We'll still share a room and a bed, but it'll be a purely platonic relationship. We'll fuckin' be there for each other.

So I give her the spiel one night after watching *Los Simpson*. She makes that crazy face that scares me so much—her eyes pop right open and her mouth is kind of distorted. She walks to the living room where she will spend the rest of the night sobbing.

María disappears. Nico tells me she's probably staying with Doug, an American slacker/fish vendor/shroom dealer who dreams of moving back to the United States and working for the CIA. I dream of Doug appearing in my room in the middle of the night and slashing me open with a U.S. Marine Corps fighting knife. One evening María and Doug do appear at the apartment, and the three of us eat pasta together. Then María disappears again. She'll reappear days later and kick me out of the apartment. I'll end up in a studio with a gas leak.

Head scrutinizes the paper through his glasses. He breathes in, out, wipes spit from the edges of his mouth. For good reason, people around here are wary about signing any document.

"So this is . . ."

"My letter of completion," I say.

Of course I'm embarrassed. This whole thing was a sham. Head knows it as well as I do. He signs it, sticks it in the envelope, licks it once, licks it twice, seals it. Vice-Head walks in. Martina appears holding an Indian baby. Gonzalo and Marcos sit in the corner sharing a pipe. The university psychologist is here. So is my father.

Obviously, the subcomandante Marcos I had in my head was a fantasy, but I suspect the subcomandante Marcos in Rafael Sebastián Guillén's head is (or was) a fantasy as well. We all, of course, keep a fantastic version of ourselves in the pocket of our brains. Are revolutionaries, oligarchs, politi-

cians the men and women who do all they can to bridge the gap between their real self and their fantastic self?

Looking back at it, I realize the obvious: my foray into the Indian uprising was an attempt to make fantasy a reality. But that's no way to find oneself. The real trip, the real revolution, always lies inside of us.

NOTES

1. My mother, a psychologist herself, would coach me for these meetings in hopes that I would appear normal.
2. To this day I don't know what the child psychologist's deal was. Did he have a strategy? I know he was sort of famous and charged a lot, but I don't remember us ever having any breakthrough. Whatever he was trying to achieve with me obviously didn't work. I remember only one of our conversations distinctly. We were walking from his office to the corner store to buy a candy bar:
HIM: What position would you play if you were a professional baseball player?
ME: Pitcher.
HIM: Really?
ME: Of course. He's the most important player.
HIM: I'd be a shortstop.
I have no idea why this conversation is still in my brain after all this time, much less why it is the one I'd remember the clearest. Maybe it was an important interaction for my child self, someone actually taking my interests seriously.
3. The street might not have been cobbled. Maybe the sidewalk was cobbled. Maybe nothing was cobbled. Why are you making such a big deal of the cobbled vs. non-cobbled debate? Let. It. Go.
4. Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN).
5. Gonzalo wasn't the exception, but rather the rule. Most of the men in the not-for-profit, including Head, had been in prison for fighting the army or their local governments.
6. I wish I knew how tied up Gonzalo was with the EZLN. I don't. Never had the balls to ask. What I really wanted to ask was, had he met Marcos? Now I'm sure that he had.
7. During those bus rides I also often freaked out about a wisdom tooth that was growing straight into a molar, thus fucking up my whole mouth. I spent countless bus kilometers surveying that part of my mouth with my tongue. When I finally visited a dentist, she told me that wisdom tooth I thought I had did not exist. It was all just a fantasy.