

Three Squares, Three Pesos



By the time we had lived in México for close to two years, we had come to realize that our intestinal fauna hadn't completely adapted to a totally different cuisine and we were still subject to fairly regular episodes of *La Turista* a.k.a., Montezuma's Revenge, Green Apple Quickstep, Sharts, Squirts, Screaming Mimis, or my personal favorite, the Peace Corps unofficial term amongst volunteers, *Splatterfoot*. The Peace Corps' recommended antidote, *Pepto-Bismol*, in my experience does absolutely nothing except taste like *Black Jack* gum, due to the anise content, and turns your tongue and effluent black. Not pleasant, but had to be said.

One of our Peace Corps colleagues even made the claim that he had been in a permanent state of Splatterfoot for his entire two years of service in Mexico. We all found it rather odd that our friend remained surprisingly healthy looking and even put on some significant weight over the two years. Another volunteer claimed she was "visited" at two week intervals. According to her it made absolutely no difference what she had been eating. Blam! But based on our experience, it can hit frequently.

Throughout our time in Mexico, periodically Sonya and I would be lured into eating Mexican "road food," which was always incredibly tasty, not unlike our fast foods but usually much healthier. Usually. We would be on a trip and stop at a roadside taco stand to eat a plate of tacos or carnitas, occasionally washed down with a liter of beer if the work day was over. Carnitas and beer were a standard at our local *Mecado La Cruz* (photo of ceramics queen) on Friday nights.



Unfortunately this moment of temporary gastronomic ecstasy often came with a larger price tag and sometime that night one of us would be balled up in the fetal position, shaking under the covers with a chill or draped over the porcelain beast in our tiny bathroom. Curiously, both of us were never affected simultaneously. The fortunate thing about Splatterfoot was its' short-life span. In 24 hours on a regimen of tea, bananas, saltines and sleep, you may be weak but recovered. At times, its onset could strike blindingly fast with no warning, and depending upon where you were at the time, could be problematic. This brief story is about one of those memorable moments.

Sonya and I often took the bus together across town to our work at the SEMARNAT state office. Depending on the traffic and the maneuvering skills of the bus driver, it usually took about 20 minutes to make the trip. On a particularly beautiful spring morning in 2009, we had planned to stop en route at Alameda Park, located along our bus route and one of the most beautiful of all the parks in the city because of its giant old shady eucalyptus trees. Our plan was to help our SEMARNAT colleagues with an annual environmental education fair for school children sponsored by our office. SEMARNAT has a major nationwide environmental education responsibility which was the reason for our involvement. Environmental education of school children is a big deal in Mexico. Oddly, it seems to be a much bigger deal than in the States. That isn't to say that it makes a significant difference because the vast majority of Mexicans are extremely poor and environmental responsibility is not a top priority with those millions who have had to avoid school to make a few dollars a day. Furthermore, the infrastructure, such as regular trash collection, rarely exists in the small communities and even many of the urban cities. But I do believe their environmental awareness, even in the villages, is impressive. On more than one occasion, I had very sophisticated discussions about climate change or biodiversity with people I would have never guessed would have had a clue or an interest.

We had been told by our Mexican colleagues that the fair had some relevant environmental education material, but also, maybe more importantly from the children's perspective, it was to have a number of large caged animals on display. It sounded more like a small traveling circus than an environmental fair. And, from the way they portrayed these beasts, I expected some rare or unique Mexican species, like the jaguar and panther. When we got there we were in for a not unexpected surprise; most of the animals on display not only were not native to Mexico they weren't even native to the western hemisphere. I saw one mangy Bengal tiger and a pacing, gaunt hyena. They did have a badly chewed up 9-banded armadillo, which is native to Mexico. Regardless, the kids loved it, and because saving Mexico's incredible biodiversity is an important goal of SEMARNAT, I guess having anything living was better than nothing. The common practice was to kill everything that runs, flies or slithers. It is hard to find anyone who doesn't believe all snakes are cobras and need to be chopped up with a shovel or run over several times.

Alameda Park was probably a 10 minute bus ride from our house. About 9 minutes into that ride on that gorgeous spring morning, I went into serious abdominal cramping. A minute later, When we reached the park stop, without time for an explanation to Sonya, I was off the bus and moving across the busy Zaragoza Avenue dodging traffic, toward Alameda on the opposite side. All the time, I was thinking that I might have to dive behind one of the big eucalyptus trees if a public restroom was readily accessible. I had left Sonya standing immobile and perplexed at the bus stop. Alameda is popular with lovers of all ages, at any time of day, and lots of senior citizens sitting on benches watching the lovers. Get the picture? Not many hiding places.

I moved into the cover of the trees as swiftly as my condition would allow, and as I did I grabbed some small kid who confirmed there was indeed a public restroom and pointed me toward it. *Gracias a Dios*, it was very close. Public restrooms in Mexico are not ubiquitous like they are in U.S. parks. In fact, they are rare as hell. If there is one, there is always a little old lady or a small child guarding the entrance charging a few pesos to get past her. In return, she gives you a few squares of toilet paper whether



you need it or not. Despite being cheap at the supermarkets, toilet paper is a rare commodity in public restrooms. I never understood why; maybe it had some black market use, like rolling marijuana joints. *Quien sabe?* Several convenient rolls or mega-roll in every stall was an unknown commodity in Mexico unless you were in a swank hotel. And what they dole out is usually barely enough for a frugal small child. Coincidentally, I had EXACTLY three pesos in my pocket, the charge at Alameda, and no more. After plopping down my pesos, I made it to the nearest stall, which fortunately was

empty. I needed an entire roll and I had three squares. Makes sense; three pesos, three squares. Single ply. So, with my pants wrapped around my ankles, I shuffled to the door, and timidly stuck my head around the corner. Fortunately, there was no one waiting in line but la señora, with lips pursed, hunkering behind her desk with her beady little eyes focused in my direction and her tiny hands protecting her tiny neat little stacks of three squares. Even with my protestations, it was clear she wasn't going to part with even one more square unless I produced more money. In my bad, and highly stressed Spanish, I explained that my wife was "just over there" and I could pay triplicate for the paper in a few minutes, but I needed a loaner of several stacks--- PRONTO! Her response? *Lo siento, señor, pero cuesta tres pesos por papel hygienico.*

She gave me no choice; I speed shuffled across the intervening space between us, lunging past her to steal several of her neat little piles. Fortunately and wisely for her, she chose not to chase me back to my stall. Maybe viewing my bare backside had something to do with it.

My day could only improve, and for the most part, it did. I was able to enjoy the fair in reasonable comfort with only a few more dashes to visit the señora. I had tipped her handsomely and Sonya had given me a pocketful of spare pesos so the señora could care less; she was making a bundle off of me. Besides, she was totally preoccupied with arranging her tiny piles.

As we left Alameda Park that day, as we passed by the public restroom, I noticed the señora was gone but I encountered what may be her next generation replacement with her mom, maybe getting early on-the-job training.



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