**Where I Was**

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In thick afternoon heat I sat as still as I could in a plastic chair in the parking lot, turning my back on our dismantled minivan. I breathed in the scent of coconuts, transmission fluid, and hot concrete, preparing myself to be exactly where I was: beside the highway on the Guerrero coast of Mexico, thirty miles short of Acapulco, two days from the end of my spring break from teaching English at a university in Morelia.

Memo, the town mechanic, was repairing our transmission. Maybe. Memo spoke through little baby teeth that nibbled off parts of words; his round face and round belly and red soccer shorts made him childlike, and his eyes roamed, never looking directly at Peter as the two of them poked at the engine. His workshop was a spot of bare pavement speckled with chicken shit beside his mother’s house.

His sister Karin came out of the house with news. The family was going for a swim and a picnic, she explained in Spanish—the only language there. “¿Ustedes quieren acompañar?” I figured San Jerónimo must have a pretty nice beach.

Ah, but we were not going to the beach. Their swimming hole, Karin explained, was the concrete ditch that irrigated the palm orchard. I wondered what sort of fertilizers ran in that ditch, whether livestock used it too. But, of course, we would go.

The family hustled about, packing food and gear, climbing into vehicles, the children swirling in excitement. We were to ride in a cousin’s car with Memo’s cheerful brother Pepe, and the cousin’s small son.

Squeezed in the back seat with me and Peter, the boy cradled a tiny squirrel baby with a string tied around its ankle. He whispered to it, crooning a lullaby. It clung to his T-shirt; its little legs splayed out on his chest. “Yesterday I found it in the orchard,” his father explained. “It was alone, abandonado. We brought it for him to play with, but I explained that it is a wild creature; he cannot keep it.” The boy’s eyes filled with tears he didn’t let fall. “He must be a man. Today we will let the baby go. He came with us to say goodbye.” The boy’s hands tightened on the squirrel’s chocolate-brown back. He looked very grave.

In the palm orchard his father said, “Here is the tree.” He nodded to the boy. The boy released the string, then climbed out of the car. He stood for a moment whispering into the tiny ear. He kissed the squirrel’s head. “Ándale,” his father said. “Let him go.”

The boy placed the animal on the tree trunk, scurried to the car, looked out the other window. The squirrel scrambled after him, confused, then darted out of sight. As we bumped along the grassy lane its little head peeped out from behind the tree, appearing to watch us drive away.

The orchard was drenched in green and gold. The palms towered above, and, among the green fronds, coconuts hung in clumps of gold and green. Beneath the canopy, mango trees spread brilliant green limbs. The wandering cows were a sun-soaked golden tan.

The car stopped again. “Ven,” Pepe said, and beckoned us to come. The boy tagged along, and several cows detached from the herd and followed at a little distance. Pepe tossed each of us a white plastic sack. “For mangos,” he said.

Pepe assigned Peter to throw a coconut into the branches, shaking down a rain of golden fruit. “Don’t let the cows steal them all!” Pepe hollered.

The cows picked up the sleek fruits in their giant mouths, and chewed them with great sideways jaw motions, slobbering juice and crunching the big smooth seeds that lay inside.

These were the large mangoes of the Guerrero coast, big enough to fill your hand, smooth and silky. Pepe invited us to taste, biting straight into the fruit through the skin. The skins were warm and soft; the rich juice dribbled across our faces and hands.

When we had filled the bags and littered the ground with fallen fruit for the cows, we headed back to the car. “Now, to the ditch!” the driver announced. He pulled onto the highway for a few miles, then swooped onto a dirt road through rows of palms.

We found the family perched on the edges of a concrete-lined ditch, men along one side and women on the other. The women passed out crisp tortillas topped with canned tuna, canned green peas and salsa. Karin brought me a ditch-cooled white-and-blue can of cerveza Modelo. The men lifted their beers from the other side of the ditch, where Pepe was regaling Peter with some comical story.

I asked Karin how Memo had learned to be a mechanic.

“He didn’t learn,” she said. “He was always a mechanic.” He never finished grade school—he couldn’t learn school things. When he quit, he started hanging around a mechanic in town, helping out. He never got a job; he lived now in a trailer beside his mother’s house. He worked on cars in the parking lot, and people paid him a little.

“He is different,” Karin said. “We know him, he is our brother. But… es diferente. We protect him.”

The children floated the ditch in inner tubes, splashed each other and screamed and laughed; adults slipped in from time to time to cool off. Peter and I joined them, siding down the concrete bank into the stream.

The water sparkled, bright and clear. We were surely swimming in toxic chemicals. We were very far from Morelia, far from getting our transmission repaired, far from getting to work on Monday. We wouldn’t see the famous beaches of Acapulco.

None of it mattered. I’d rather sit by a concrete irrigation ditch surrounded by coconut palms and a family that enjoyed the afternoon sunshine together and let a baby squirrel go and protected their different brother.