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—Arthur Flowers

Author of *Another Good Loving Blues*

Enchiladas, Rice, and Beans

*Tales from Tecate, a Baja border town where
miracles happen every day in ordinary lives....*



DANIEL REVELES

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*Enchiladas,
Rice, and Beans*

DANIEL REVELES



Ballantine Books
New York

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A One World Book
Published by Ballantine Books

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This is for Harriet-Nicol,
recordar es volver a vivir.

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—D.R.

Tecate, B.C., Mexico

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APERITIVO

I live behind the adobe curtain and I bring you a plate full of *chismes*. In your country you call them tales. As the teller of these tales it is my duty as a *caballero de palabra* to warn you that what follows may appear some distance from the truth. It is said that in Mexico we defy all the natural laws of physics—what goes up stays up, and water runs uphill.

Tecate, Baja California, is a dusty little border town stippled with Easter-egg-colored houses where two sovereign nations meet *panza-to-panza*. They are separated by four thin strands of rusty barbed wire. On Mondays, Señora Mendoza uses it for a clothesline. On a windy day I've seen her crawl through the wires and retrieve her underwear which has entered the United States illegally. At six in the morning I watch armed border guards raise the Stars and Stripes and unlock the tall gate—and the two nations become one. Mexicans drive into the U.S. to get to their jobs, Americans drive into Mexico to attend to their businesses and factories. Mexico is "business friendly." This means cheap labor and no IRS. By eight o'clock a small herd of

Enchiladas, Rice, and Beans

giggling school children who attend the Mission School in the U.S. begin to walk through the gate. They carry their passports in their lunch boxes. They take them out and show them to the grim guard at the gate. I see little Juanito will be late for school this morning. He forgot his passport. He'll have to go home. His mother will scold him.

It would give me great pleasure to show you around the pueblo of Tecate. Join me—at my corner table at La Fonda—and watch the human drama unfold while mariachis garnish the air with music. Later, we can take a shady bench in the main plaza. Look, here come the hawkers . . . the balloon man, the awesome fire-eater. Pay no attention to that man walking toward us. Do you see what's in his hand? He's holding a jar crawling with bugs. For a small donation he'll take out a caterpillar and eat it. See that little yellow bird flirting with us from his wire cage? He earns a good living telling fortunes.

Tecate's pageant of characters is endless. Listen to a young woman explain why in Mexico she is far better off as "the other woman." And you just have to meet Doña Lala, the village witch who sees more patients than the local doctor. But you must also be prepared for a few surprises. Culture shock, like mumps and measles and other childhood diseases, is probably more severe in adults.

Only a few months ago I was sitting in El Taco Contento, a small but popular twenty-four-hour eatery on Tecate's alleged main boulevard. It was packed nearly to capacity. This means about eleven people (all men). But you could hardly improve on the scene this warm Saturday afternoon. Everyone was in party spirits. Linda Ronstadt, the sweetheart of Mexico, was singing "Por Un Amor," and the tacos were delicious beyond all praise. The door opened, and an American couple breezed in. They were dressed in

high fashion shorts, she in Dockers, he in Bugle Boy. They were fortyish, the color of milk glass. I caught only the last line of a conversation that no doubt had its beginning on the sidewalk.

"We're on vacation, Harry, lighten up."

Harry showed no signs of doing so. His face was that of a man who had just bitten down on an unripe lemon.

Mrs. was clearly in charge of the tour. She marched up to the young man behind the counter. "Two tacos, please." No, that isn't quite accurate. She spoke in Dayton, Ohio, Spanish. "*Dos tacos, por favor.*" She held up two fingers, for her benefit or his wasn't clear.

The exuberant brown face gave her a luminous smile the width of the Republic. "*Sí, sí, señora!*" and he removed a white cloth with all the pride and flourish of Antoine of Paris, revealing a neat row of leering calf skulls. The eye sockets were dark and empty, but the huge heads seemed to be smiling, and they had rosy cheeks. He didn't say "*Voilà!*" he said, "Scalp, cheek, or tongue?"

"Aaaauugh!"

"Brains if you prefer, señora. We still have a few eyes."

"Aaaauugh!"

No sound issued from her husband. He appeared to be in a coma.

"Harry, do you see that?"

Harry found his voice. "Let's get out of here, Martha."

I recall another recent incident during a colorful two-day festival in Tecate. The stadium was packed with locals and tourists. It appeared that municipal police (in tan) and state police (in green) could not agree on who was in charge. Their discussion began with just some name-calling, which, we all learned as children, can break no bones. But soon they were at it with sticks and fists, and these we

know can cause major damage. When negotiations reached a stalemate, the two branches of law enforcement decided to shoot it out. At this point someone thought it advisable to call more cops. In a matter of minutes the Federales (in khaki) arrived on the scene, and hauled all the policemen away. If you find this anecdote puts undue strain on your limits of believability, I understand. I wouldn't accept it myself if I hadn't been there that Sunday afternoon in July, cowering under the bleachers to avoid the cross fire.

Then there is Obdulio, to give you another taste of what I mean. He's my nearest neighbor, from a rancho two miles or so down the road. He comes by on occasion to exchange news, and pauses for a sip of José Cuervo. But when dusk comes, and we see the first owl flutter clumsily into the tall oak with its mournful hoot, he tells me that it is Lola Santa, a wicked sorceress who bears him ill and transforms herself into an owl. "To what end?" I ask. And he says, "To put a curse on me," and he leaps on his horse and bolts for home.

Rattlesnakes are abundant in these parts, and prudent people go to great effort to avoid their society. Salvador Ramos, the local wood-carver, sees them as a blessing sent by heavenly agents. Judging from the age of his children, Salvador is probably in his mid-fifties. I have watched him snare a rattlesnake, sever its head, and tilting the headless serpent to his lips like a bottle of tequila, drain it of its blood. I claim it's disgusting. Salvador claims that the fresh blood of a rattlesnake inhibits the aging process. The interesting thing is that Salvador looks to be about twenty-five.

The reader who expected to find in these pages common clichés and stereotypes, those exaggerated caricatures of Mexicans that don't really exist except in popular parodies, will be disappointed. I want to introduce you to *real*

Mexicans, people you might not otherwise have the opportunity to meet. I want to take you into their homes, their offices, their cafés. You'll meet the rich and powerful as well as the poor and humble. You'll catch them all in the very acts of everyday life.

One more thing. If you are an American reading this, you may find the chauvinism of the men and the submissiveness of the women somewhat exasperating. I do too. That is when I have to remind myself that all societies do not develop in parallel. Mexico abolished slavery before America, but didn't get around to giving its women the right to vote until 1953. Can equality be far behind?

Like life itself, these stories have their moments of laughter, irony, and sometimes tears. They are as unlike as tacos and toast. And yet they seem to go well together; thus I have served them on the same plate as Enchiladas, Rice, and Beans.

—Your Servidor

Of Time and Circumstance

“*Kee-kee-ree-kee!*”

I was still safely behind the gates of sleep where cares cannot gain admittance. I parted my heavy eyelids and listened again.

“*Kee-kee-ree-kee!*”

Everything I really needed to know about roosters I learned in kindergarten years before I could understand Fulghum's uncommon wisdom. And that was that roosters always say “cock-a-doodle-doo.” Open the pages of any storybook and confirm the fact for yourself. It's always been “cock-a-doodle-doo.” But El Gato was right. Here in Mexico the roosters definitely crow in Spanish. And if it weren't for El Gato, I wouldn't even be here.

“*Kee-kee-ree-kee!*”

Time? It didn't matter. It was still dark, still cool. Soon night would yield to day, the sun would warm the edges of the morning. The date? That didn't matter either. There was no calendar here. And even if there were, it would be blank. This day belonged to me. I was in paradise.

Of Time and Circumstance

The entire episode really began several years ago when I went to David with an urgent errand. I ran up the three flights of rickety-rackety stairs two at a time. The crumbling Hollywood Producers Building on the boulevard of the same name had an elevator, but you'd have to film it in time-lapse photography to perceive any motion.

I had three months of my life and countless sleepless nights under my arm in two reels. We had shot 25,000 feet of film in a dozen Turkish towns and villages from the magnificent ruins of ancient Troy to Mount Ararat, where Noah ran his ship aground. It was my job now to put all the elements together and produce one hour of television entertainment. I had scenes that ran too long, others I couldn't extend to accommodate narration, great music and no place to put it.

I saw David's door as soon as I reached the landing. David Zimmer, thirty-one and single, was one of the best film editors in Hollywood and one of the busiest. The sign on his door read:

POST PRODUCTION TRAUMA CENTER
EMERGENCY ENTRANCE

David, whose crazy blond hair and zany mustache made him look like a blond Groucho Marx, turned off his Moviola and looked up at me through thick lenses. "My God, you look wasted! What did she do to you?" He vibrated his eyebrows.

"I'm exhausted, I worked all weekend."

"Yes, I recognize the symptoms of postproduction syndrome. There's what you need." He rolled his eyes to direct my attention to the wall behind his editing bench, a collage of wholesome erotica, nudes adorned with cherry blossoms,

summer flowers, and autumn leaves. One brunette was dusted with snowflakes. "I scored a music track for my artwork. Listen to this." He hit a button and the luminous strings of Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" poured into the room from four giant JBL speakers.

"I don't think that's what the good father had in mind, but it does seem to work." I returned to the subject at hand. "I had to rewrite the whole show. But you can now cut a final to this." I handed him my mutilated script.

"What's this? Tearstains!" He laughed at his own joke. "When do you go on the air with this?" David went to a calendar on his wall. It was the size of a bed sheet and displayed every day of the year at a glance, courtesy of Hollywood Film Laboratories. Every square representing one precious day of life of an unknown number was marked with X's and scrawls and circles and notations. It looked like a bus bench in the ghetto.

"Look at your calendar, David! It looks like mine. The deadlines are killing us! We're pawning our future, we're selling away our very lives! Why do we do it?"

"Car payments." David wiggled his eyebrows up and down. "I thought you were going to buy that little piece of paradise down in Baja and get away from all this."

"Believe me, I am. I just can't find the time to stay down there long enough to find what I want. You'll know when I do, David—you won't see me!"

"Hey, I've got a friend in Tecate, he's a lawyer. He could probably find something for you."

"Really?"

"I'm sure of it. He's got connections all the way to Mexico City. I've got his card here somewhere." He shuffled through scripts and film cans and finally produced it from his wallet. It looked like a very used Kleenex cut to the size

of a business card. "Here it is, Felix Fernando Espinoza Gil. Geez, look at all those names! They call him El Gato in Mexico. The cat?"

When George Herriman conceived Krazy Kat and named the protagonist Felix, he couldn't have known that long after his comic strip would be forgotten, little Mexican boys baptized Felix would forevermore be known as El Gato. "You really think he could do something?"

"Oh yeah, I'm sure he can. And he's a helluva nice guy. Tell him you're a friend of mine. He's a million laughs. Ask him if he's still delighting the pretty ladies."

That same afternoon, I put the wilted card in front of me and picked up the phone. I was born, raised, and schooled in Los Angeles by my Mexican parents who had fled the bloody revolution of 1910. And like so many Mexican-Americans that I know, suffered an irrational sense of insecurity in the presence of a "real" Mexican. My language was badly rusted from many long years of disuse and abuse. I didn't want to sound illiterate or ill-bred. I put the phone down and did a quick rehearsal. Satisfied, I dialed again and listened to the phone ring in Mexico. It was more a nervous beep, rapid beeps, coming two at a time.

"¿Bueno?" A female voice.

"Is Señor Gil in the office?" It's pronounced "Heel."

"On whose behalf?"

I gave my name and she said, "*Un momento.*"

"¡Bueno!" A masculine voice this time.

"Señor Gil?"

"Felix Fernando Espinoza Gil, your *servidor.*"

It was the carbide steel voice of the headmaster with hemorrhoids and a migraine on the way. It was not the voice of a man who could evoke a million laughs. Even the obeisant *your servidor* did nothing to ameliorate the case-

hardened edge. Sweet Jesus! I recognized my error at once. I called him by his mother's maiden name. His surname was the first one, Espinoza.

"Gracias," I replied to the courtesy.

The frosty voice continued. "Perhaps if you would have the kindness to state your needs, I could tell you to what extent, if any, I could lend my assistance."

I didn't like him. I didn't object to the formality, it wasn't that, but his elitist manner was too cold, too severe for a project so near my heart. Now I chose my words carefully so as not to commit some horrid grammatical error. "I'm calling from Los Angeles. I'm a friend of David Zimmer, who suggested that I give you a call."

"Well, señor, you are not too selective of the society you cultivate, but I will not hold that against you. How can your *servidor* be of assistance?" The steel voice didn't soften, but I caught a glint of humor.

Maybe he wasn't so bad. "I'm planning on building a modest vacation home near Tecate, and I thought, that is, David thought you could help me locate something suitable since it isn't easy for me to get there."

The tight voice now loosened perceptively, but without loss of social precision. "It would be an immense pleasure for me if I could help you succeed in your endeavor. What are you looking for?"

"Just a few acres where the phone doesn't ring and I can have some peace and quiet."

"Sí, I understand perfectly." Warmer now, and sunny as a morning in May. "Where you can keep a horse perhaps, a big sorrel with flaxen mane, a noble beast who comes galloping to your side when you give that special whistle. And you can ride through endless valleys scattering your cares along the way . . . in the arms of your mistress, the wind."

The brittle formality laced with doilies of poetry made me smile to myself. I was beginning to like him. "Sí, sí, you have the idea."

"You'll need a few chickens to deliver the morning eggs, of course. And a rooster to command the sun to rise and shed its soft pink promise of the new day—and summon you to life itself!" Was this the same man who answered the phone?

"You've got the picture. A big red rooster that tiptoes on the fence and cries cock-a-doodle-doo!"

"Cock-a-doodle-what?" The voice tightened.

"Cock-a-doodle-doo." Now I felt silly.

"Is that what roosters say in English? Down here they sing *kee-kee-ree-kee*." He put everything into his imitation and I'm sure I heard the secretary giggling in the background. "Our dogs say *guan guan*. What do American dogs say?"

"Woof woof."

"Now that we have that important piece of business addressed and set aside, let's put down some specific guidelines. About two *hectarias*?" He must have concluded that my education was not complete, and he added, "One *hectaria* equals two-point-five American acres."

"Yes, that would be perfect. I suppose we should discuss fee. I also expect to cover your expenses."

"It is much too early to speak of that now, so please, you must put that thought out of your head. By the way, how are things in that great world power to the north?"

Was he serious? "Oh, fine, just fine."

"Do you still have traffic jams in Los Angeles?"

"There are three and a half million cars here. Even finding a place to park is a nightmare. That's one reason I want to go down there."