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No Word for Welcome

The Mexican Village Faces the Global Economy

WENDY CALL

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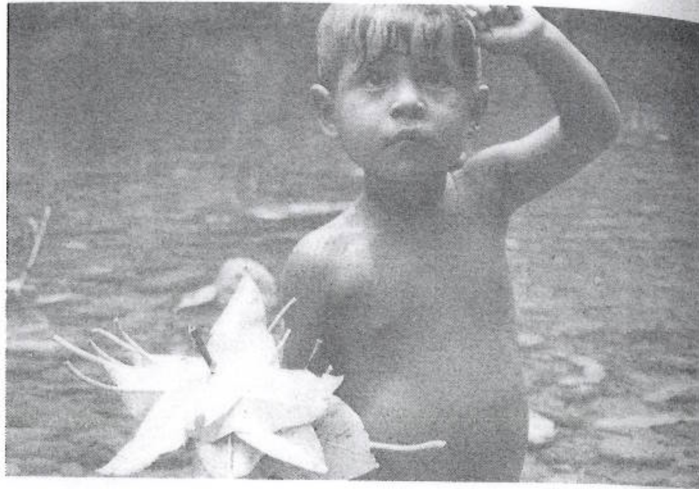
11

Gourd Full of Gold

Road-building dreams stretched from the Mexico City offices of Ochoa y Asociados to Facundo Martínez's municipal building and beyond, into the rainforest. The Chimalapas Mountains, visible from nearly every isthmus vantage point, curve on the horizon north of the Huave lagoons. "Todo viene de allá," the Huave fishermen would say as they sat on soft mounds of black netting in their fiberglass boats, gesturing with well-muscled arms toward the green hills. "It all comes from there." The fresh water that makes their lagoons perfect shrimp habitat pours from the Chimalapas highlands, as does nearly all the fresh water used by every istmeño.

The promise of land and timber has attracted outsiders to the Chimalapas, the heart of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, ever since the Spanish began cutting the forest's ancient trees for ship masts more than three hundred years ago. Spanish shipbuilders complained that istmeños they hired to do that tree-cutting were unwilling to work and prone to striking for higher pay. In the 1400s the Aztecs conquered several villages in the Chimalapas foothills that lay on the trade route between central Mexico and Guatemala. The longtime inhabitants of the Chimalapas, the Zoques—sister culture



12. One of Juana García's nephews, Primitivo, pretends to go fishing in the creek near his home in the Chimalapas village of San Francisco la Paz (2002). PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR.

to the Mixes—fled into their mountains. They agreed to pay tribute to the Aztecs in exchange for being left alone. After the conquest, the Zoques paid tribute to the Spanish. The name Chimalapas means "gourd full of gold" in the Zoque language. In 1687 the Zoque people paid exactly that: twenty-five thousand gold pesos to buy their forest back from the Spanish invaders who had claimed it. In the early twentieth century, North Americans snatched up land titles for swaths of forest handed out by Mexican president Porfirio Díaz. Chicago Title and Trust, New York Lumber Company, and J. Henry & Sons all lost their ill-gotten tracts of land after the Mexican Revolution. In 1967 the federal government officially handed over 1.5 million acres to the Zoques. The forest on about one-third of that land has been felled, replaced with cornfields, cattle pastures, marijuana plantations, roads, and landing strips for drug traffickers' airplanes. Nevertheless, the Chimalapas rainforest is the largest still standing in North America.

The Zoque people now compose only one-third of the total Chimalapas population of thirteen thousand. The original residents have made space for immigrants, refusing only to welcome the *talamontes*, the "forest cutters." The talamontes aren't necessarily loggers, but anyone turning trees into money: drug traffickers cutting landing strips, cattle ranchers creating pastureland, overzealous peasants looking for easy income.

The Chimalapas forest stands so thick and so vast that locals claim no one has ever crossed it. This has been the forest's salvation. In 1884 the engineer charged with building a railroad across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec wrote, "The solitude of these mountains and the isolation of the population centers there, because no road reaches them, are very contrary conditions for a fast and easy colonization, so the

initial challenges of setting up colonies will be greater than expected."

Roads reach more deeply into the Chimalapas every year, but still nowhere near its core. Rivers tumble down from the Chimalapas highlands on the north side, through the Uxpanapa region. Until the 1970s that region was covered by another half-million acres of forest that straddled the border between Oaxaca and Veracruz. That northern skirt of forest was razed by government plan. The rivers still flow through it, due north, toward the Gulf of Mexico. Those waterways run blue highways between the forest's mahogany and ceiba trees, allowing villagers to press farther into the Chimalapas than the roads do.

On one bend of one of those rivers, also called Uxpanapa, sits a village of five hundred souls called San Francisco la Paz. There are three ways to reach San la Paz, as the villagers called it, from the end of the nearest road: a five-hour hike and a swim across the Uxpanapa River, a four-hour horseback ride, or a two-hour ride in a motorized canoe. The first option requires good health and endurance; the second, an exceptionally sure-footed horse; and the third, several hundred pesos—more than most village residents earn in a month. In the dry season the river runs too low for the canoes. In the wet season the hike includes wading through knee-deep mud and crossing a roiling river.

Hardly anyone in San Francisco la Paz is Zoque. Nearly half are indigenous Chinantecs; a few are Zapotecs and Nahuas; and most of the rest are mestizos—the people, as the Chinantecs say, "who don't have another way of speaking." The first San la Paz settlers arrived in the 1960s after the area had been unpopulated for centuries.

As the Chimalapas community became heterogeneous, a new identity sprang up and people began to call themselves

Chimas. Indigenous Mexicans tend to identify themselves by the language they speak—or would speak if their language weren't dying out. Mestizos, those "who don't have another way of speaking," identify themselves by their hometown or home state. It's not so common in Mexico for a heterogeneous, multiethnic group to define itself as a collective, around the geographical terrain they call home.

Just as the Chimalapas forest sits at the geographic center of the isthmus, it also sits at the center of nearly every debate about the region's future. Even those pushing the Megaproject and the Plan Puebla Panama would mention the Chimalapas as the only possible loss worth noting. When I interviewed one of Veracruz's most powerful politicians, Fidel Herrera, he assured me that the Megaproject plans "didn't pose any threat to the indigenous cultures," but he couldn't say the same for the future of the Chimalapas. He admitted that the rainforest might not survive all the changes. In the end (or perhaps only short term) people are more adaptable than rainforests.

As the two years that I lived on the isthmus drew down to just a few months, I felt compelled to visit the Chimalapas rainforest one more time. Construction of one portion of the superhighway, connecting the isthmus to the state capital, was well underway. If that construction continued and the new trans-isthmus highway were built, the rainforest would face yet another threat to its survival even though the superhighway would not cross it.

On my first trip to San la Paz, I had traveled with a Zoque friend from another part of the Chimalapas and we had stayed at the home of Juana García. I called Juana to tell her I wanted to come visit a second time. Did she know of anyone headed that way who might share the trip with me? Talking on the only phone in the village, a government-provided

satellite line, Juana told me that Bishop Arturo Lona Reyes would be visiting her village in mid-February. "He's coming to celebrate El día de San Valentín with us." I was surprised for just a moment, having been raised to link February 14 with drugstore greeting cards and boxes of chocolates, not a third-century Catholic martyr. "Call the priest and see if you could come with them," Juana advised me, referring to the parish priest who was organizing the bishop's visit. Juana was the sort of person who wouldn't think twice about hitching a ride with a bishop. Inspired by her courage, I tracked down the priest. He thought over my request for a couple of days and then told me, yes, I could go along.

When Bishop Lona Reyes and I arrived at the parish priest's house on midday February 11, he loaded both of us and our backpacks into a rattling pickup truck. The bishop wore a denim jacket, cowboy boots, and a simple wooden cross on a knotted string. He looked far younger than his seventy-six years, his curly hair receding only slightly from his forehead. We drove for five hours, while the bishop told us funny stories about other village visits, until the road dead-ended at the Uxpanapa River. Dusk fell as the parish priest bid us good-bye and the bishop and I stepped into a dugout canoe outfitted with a small motor. Two men from San la Paz directed the canoe southward, carrying the two of us upriver into the mountains. Since long before the Aztecs named these boats *canoas*, Chimalapas residents have carved and traveled in the slim, elegant crafts. The Zoques are mountain people renowned for their nautical skills. Our canoe tunneled through an invisible world, the motor chainsawing through a moonless, starless night. Two hours after leaving the end of the very last road, the blunt bow nudged the riverbank near San Francisco la Paz. We had arrived.

Bishop Lona Reyes and I pulled off our shoes and waded

in the direction of impact. Warm hands grasped our arms and backs; a cloud of voices speaking both Chinantec and Spanish led us up the bank and away from the river. I dug a tiny flashlight from my bag as the circle of villagers closed around the elderly man who accompanied me. In the weak battery-powered light, the bishop struggled up the incline, planting his boots wide apart and pumping his arms to keep his balance. I struggled up the riverbank behind him, the mud pulling me forward, gravity tugging me backward. Thin legs, plastic sandals, grasping hands, and giggles accompanied the two of us through the watery darkness.

The land flattened and we reached a narrow footpath, a beige strip cutting across blackish terrain. I hung back so my flashlight could illuminate all our footfalls, though the bishop and I were the only ones who needed the light. The trail unrolled before us and ended ten minutes later at a house built of rough-hewn planks and lit by a single candle. I set our bags in the corner on a jumble of saddles and machetes, as our hosts pulled us into their circle, taking our hands, pushing out chairs for us, handing us plastic cups of lukewarm coffee. Everyone turned to the bishop, thanking him, thanking him again, then three and four times, for coming to visit their village again after eight years.

The villagers called him "don Arturo" or "señor Obispo." When he had last visited San la Paz, Arturo Lona Reyes had been bishop of the Tehuantepec archdiocese. The Vatican had insisted he retire when he turned seventy-five. He had left his post in late 2001, carrying a tradition with him: he was Mexico's last liberation theology bishop, replaced by a conservative preferred by the Vatican. The people of San la Paz had no idea that don Arturo was no longer officially señor Obispo. The new bishop was not the sort to visit villages like San la Paz, so there was no way for them to know of the change.

In Juana García's kitchen, which is one half of her two-room house, the bishop and I drank coffee and ate a late dinner of chicken soup: a rubbery, turkey-sized drumstick in a yellow, oily broth. Our hosts laid out plans for the bishop's two-day visit as the candle tossed shadows onto the wood-plank walls and uneven dirt floor. The electricity had been out for two days. Fragile power lines carried a jitter of electricity up the mountainside from the end of the last road. Wind often knocked down the lines, and, when it did, the villagers had to raise the money to repair them. Juana stood between the cooking fire and the table, keeping the coffee cups full and the conversation flowing—appearing to be a hostess but actually an organizer.

Juana's older brother, Constantino, stood in the middle of the circle of people; he and Juana smiled the same smile. They were both tall by local standards, though Constantino was leaner. Winking flames from the fire and two candles exaggerated their expressions, throwing the brother and sister into high relief, while the others in the room—including Constantino's wife, Aurelia, and Juana's husband, Telo—faded into shadows. Constantino told the bishop about another parish priest who sometimes visited San Francisco la Paz to baptize children. "They call him Father Rooster. He talks in Latin," Constantino said. He closed his eyes and raised one hand, mimicking the parish priest, rocking back on his heels. "Ble-o lo-o heh-lo-oo," he droned. Don Arturo laughed and Constantino opened his eyes. "We don't understand any of it."

Don Arturo nodded. "They say it's cultural preservation, but if something's no longer useful, why conserve it? That's what we're trying to do in the Renewed Church: keep what's useful and get rid of everything else."

Bishop Lona Reyes was well known on the Isthmus of

Tehuantepec as a pragmatist, as someone who got things done. After he visited a town or village, empty health clinics, half-built roads, and long-ignored schools would suddenly be remembered by the state government. His retirement, still an unintentional secret in San la Paz, had only increased his advocacy work: he didn't have to worry about the Vatican's disapproval and he had more time to devote to his efforts.

The bishop scooped unshelled peanuts from his jacket pockets and handed them to the children gathered around him. Juana occasionally interrupted the conversation, making sure her older brother didn't forget any of the things the village needed. A wish list took shape: corrugated metal for new house roofs, a better health clinic, a proper community building, and, most important, a road from their village into town.

The first time I'd visited San la Paz, six months earlier, I had arrived at Juana's house late on an August morning after several missed connections had stretched the trip from Matías Romero (by bus, then pickup truck, then horse) to twenty-five hours. Juana was my hostess because she was an organizer, one of those people who built bridges between her village and the world beyond it, between what should be preserved about her village's way of life and what could be improved upon. When I showed up in her kitchen, Juana pretended not to notice my sweat-stained face and mud-stained shirt, welcoming me enthusiastically and then politely inviting me to join her on the daily trip to the river. Without wells or plumbing, everyone in San la Paz took everything to the river for washing, then hauled back buckets of drinking water. In August it was a short walk but during the dry season the nearby tributary disappeared and everything had to be carried half a mile. Juana gathered three freshly killed chickens,

a bucket full of dirty dishes, and her three sons: Paco, who was six, Wilfredo, four, and Juan Pablo, three.

"A young man has asked for a young woman, and tonight they seal the commitment," Juana had said, by way of explaining the luxury of a chicken dinner. The young man was one of her cousins. "You can't accept a marriage proposal until the third request. That third time the man's family is supposed to give a dozen turkeys and eight loaves of bread and cartons of beer and soda. But since the girl is Highland Chinantec, they don't expect as much. We just took three turkeys and some soda and one carton of beer, and the señor was delighted." She shook her head in disbelief; the difference between the Highlanders and her people, Lowlanders, was just too much.

Only when speaking Spanish do the Chinantecs refer to themselves by the collective term *chinanteco*. The highland people call themselves *dzä jmiih* and the lowland, *tsa jujmi*; both mean "people of the language." The Lowlanders call the Highlanders *tsa ki*, "people of the mountain," while the Highlanders call the Lowlanders *dzä kïï*, "barefoot, bareheaded people."

Juana and I walked down the hill to the brook, her three sons zigzagging behind us. We joined Juana's sister Estela, sister-in-law Aurelia, and several nephews. The three women set down their loads and waded into the water, pulling off their shirts and skirts to bathe in bras and slips. I was accustomed to istmeña women who modestly waded into rivers fully clothed, long skirts ballooning around them, to wash clothes or dishes or even to go swimming. At the San la Paz brook, hair, bodies, whole chickens, dishes, and children all received the same treatment: soap, water, and a vigorous scrubbing. I washed my arms, legs, and face, then stayed on shore, just out of the splashing zone, on a flat rock that

warmed my bare feet. Aurelia's teenaged son, Manuel, came by on horseback to fill water jugs and she waded out to help him. Manuel joked with the women and boys, though he was too shy to address me. Juana and Estela's father came by, too. The women continued bathing as they spoke to him, pushing their soapy hands between their legs and around their breasts. Their words lapped back and forth in Chinantec and Spanish, the old man speaking only the former and the children only the latter.

While the women washed, their young boys went to work. Estela's son fished, prowling the shallows near shore, occasionally jabbing his fat hand into the water and pulling out a ficus leaf. He collected the yellow ovals on a sharp stick, pausing now and then to show off his catch. Juana's oldest son, Paco, built a dam with his cousin's help. They constructed walls of wet sand, moved them around, tested their dam's integrity by dumping buckets of water into it, and then reengineered: pushing, patting, and pinching the river cement. Once satisfied with the construction project, their small hands pulled it apart.

These children live where they do because of a dam. The Chinantecs began to move to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in the early 1970s, forcibly relocated by the federal government to make room for the Cerro de Oro dam in northern Oaxaca's mountains. The "Mountain of Gold" dam flooded the Chinantecs' villages and fields to provide electricity to urban Oaxacans. The government decided that rather than farm corn and hot peppers as they had for centuries, the Chinantecs should manage citrus groves, rubber plantations, and cattle ranches in their new isthmus home. In less than a decade more than half a million acres of Uxpanapa rainforest were razed, making way for these new agricultural enterprises. Biologists, anthropologists, and some local people refer to that

massive forest destruction as an "ecocide" and the relocation's impact on the Chinantec people as an "ethnocide." Thirty thousand people, who spoke different dialects of Chinantec, were installed almost at random into fifteen prefab villages on the northern fringe of the Chimalapas, just north of the Oaxaca state border in Veracruz. The settlements were so generic they'd been assigned numbers rather than names. Even twenty-five years later they are called Poblado 1, Poblado 2, and on up to Poblado 15. Extended families were separated, while people from lowland and highland villages were mixed together—rather like Spanish and Italian speakers living on the same street, attending the same town meetings, and sending their children to the same schools. The deforestation made the Uxpanapa climate hotter and drier, while the soils under the felled trees were—like most rainforest soils—nutrient-poor, rocky, and acidic. No miracle happened; most of the orange groves and rubber plantations failed. Meanwhile, the seeds the Chinantecs had brought with them from their old farmlands, adapted to chilly highland Oaxaca, refused to grow. The government left the Chinantecs to their misery. Many, like Juana's parents, left the close-jammed cinderblock settlements and moved south into the Chimalapas mountains, to places like San Francisco la Paz.

Juana, Estela, and Aurelia finished their washing at the river, then gathered up their children, chickens, buckets and soap. They climbed back up the hill, still wearing only bras and slips, winding their t-shirts into donuts to cushion the 30-pound buckets of water they carried on their heads. Back in Juana's kitchen the children collapsed into hammocks for long naps and she headed for the open fire in the corner. Clouds of steam rolled from a blackened pot and curled around a rainbow of plastic cups hanging on the wall. Juana smoothed her waist-length wet hair into a topknot. She wore no jewelry,

not even a wedding band, and her ears were unpierced. Her manner was unhurried but efficient; she had to finish dinner before her next task: coordinating an evening meeting.

"I put off getting married," she told me, as we watched her sleeping sons tangle themselves in fraying hammocks. She married Telo when she was twenty-four—a decade older than Aurelia had been when she married Constantino. I asked Juana whether she and Telo planned to have more children. She shook her head firmly: No, she disliked the social pressure on women to have babies young and to have a lot of them. She smiled at her three boys. "We had them fast because we were trying for a girl." In this way too, Juana and Telo were unusual: couples more often tried for boys, and too often didn't plan their families at all, ending up with however many children God intended.

Before marrying, Juana had spent two years in the port city of Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz, volunteering with the Catholic Church, and a year in Matías Romero working for an environmental organization. She had attended school only through the fourth grade—all the schooling that was available in San Francisco la Paz. She had wanted to continue to middle school but there was no money to send her to live in a town with a secondary school. There had been money for her brother Constantino, who was thirteen years older, but he had studied for only a couple of years before returning home.

I admired Juana for refusing to do what her village expected even as she carefully met community responsibilities. I admired Telo too: he had married a woman who was older and knew more of the world than he did. Their physical selves—Telo thin, wiry, and short; Juana taller, thick-waisted, and broad shouldered—mirrored their relationship: she was a more prominent participant in community life and an equal partner in family decisions. People came by the house

regularly to seek Juana's opinion and request that she mediate disputes. She would lean in the doorway talking to the guest, asking thoughtful questions and doling out careful advice, while Telo sat at the small kitchen table, reading a newspaper that had passed through so many hands its ink had nearly rubbed away. His lips moved as he worked his way slowly through the pages. When the visitor left, Telo would close the newspaper and Juana would turn away from the door. He would comment on the news and she would comment on the village problem; both their observations cut directly to the heart of the issues, whatever they were.

Juana's meeting that evening, held on the covered porch in front of the one-room health clinic, was for mothers receiving public assistance to buy food, a sort of rural Mexican WIC program. She sat behind a shiny plastic table littered with government forms with several dozen women gathered around her. Juana was the only one not holding a child's hand or nursing a baby or both; Telo was taking care of their boys at home. She went through the long, confusing forms with each woman, explaining them in Chinantec, joking at the administrative errors as she waved the papers around. "Well, you thought your name was Marta, but now you're mata (killing)." After two hours a cloud of insects settled into a halo around her damp head. Men arrived to accompany their wives home from the meeting; some thought it unseemly for women to walk around the village alone. Public space was male space; and until eight years ago in San la Paz, public space had been dangerous space.

Cheerful to the very last person, Juana stood to put away the table. The creases of her sweaty t-shirt unfolded and a slogan printed across the front appeared. In elaborate script it read in English, "Of course God created man before woman. You always make a rough draft before you make the

masterpiece." I asked Juana if she knew what the words said. She did not; she'd picked it at random from one of the truckloads of used clothing from the United States that are sold all over Mexico. I translated the slogan for her. One of the waiting men guffawed. Juana's round eyes widened and her face opened into a grin. "I have to put the translation on the t-shirt!" The man went silent, mid-bellow, his mouth slack with surprise.

Six months after Juana coordinated that mundane-but-important meeting, she orchestrated every hour of Bishop Arturo Lona Reyes's stay in San Francisco la Paz: daily Mass, a St. Valentine's Day fiesta, First Communion classes, meals hosted by village families, and, of course, a village assembly. Every important decision had to pass through the village's one-room assembly hall, where discussions drifted like the breeze through latticed walls.

As in most Mexican villages and towns, San la Paz's assembly hall sat right by the central plaza, along with the church, elementary school, and health clinic. Unlike most Mexican communities, this plaza was a wide green field whose fourth side was dominated by an ancient pyramid. Thickly covered with vines and bushes and obvious only by its geometric shape, the pyramid had been built by the Olmecs, southern Mexico's mother culture, thousands of years ago. After the Olmecs disappeared, it crumbled in oblivion.

The bishop and I arrived right on time at the assembly hall on the first morning of our visit. After a breakfast of chicken soup, eaten quietly in the home of a family too shy to speak to us, Bishop Lona Reyes had seemed anxious to get to the assembly hall. At 10:00, one hour after the village assembly was scheduled to begin, people began to file into the hall: women sat on the right, men on the left. Realizing

I'd sat on the wrong side, I scooted over to the right and a welcoming circle of women closed around me, patting my hands and gently tugging on my ponytail.

The bishop paced the front of the room as the hall gradually filled with the gurgles and whimpers of many babies, the soft scrape of leather sandals and rubber boots on the dirt floor, and hushed conversation. Don Arturo stared at an old administrative note written in Spanish on the chalkboard and then slowly rubbed the misspelled words out with his fingers and rewrote them.

The meeting began slowly, with the usual complaints about unfulfilled government promises and past failures. After perhaps fifteen minutes, during which only men spoke, the bishop turned to the right side of the room. "Let's have the women take the floor, so that later you won't say that we ignored you. A woman to speak? Don't you have tongues? Or don't you have permission to be here?" His questions came out fast. When the bishop finally paused, one woman said quietly, "We need the road, because it's hard to walk."

The bishop smiled. "Bueno, the women have started to talk; now we'll see if anyone can quiet them." Polite laughter riffled across the room.

Angela Méndez Escobedo, a mestiza woman and San la Paz's first resident, tried to steer the discussion away from the road. She stood, barely visible over the heads of those seated around her, a long gray braid curving down her back. Her face was firm and her arms were muscled, but her hips and legs looked soft, as if gravity had slowly worked on her body. "We need a central square in front of the school so that the children have a place to play," she said. I had considered San la Paz's green field so much more beautiful than the weed-filled cracked concrete expanses of so many Mexican villages, but for her, pavement meant progress.

A third woman pulled the subject right back to the road, insisting it was the most important thing: people needed it to get to the hospital, to take their harvest to market, to bring supplies to the village.

"Very good, would another woman like to speak?" the bishop asked.

A man stood up. "Unfortunately, I'm one of the people who's been struggling with the government for years to get this road." He went on, meandering back to the same point again and again. "What we want is our road, in concrete, now, hecho y derecho!"

The man paused after insisting they needed the road "done fast and straight," and the bishop said quickly, "Well, good, let's make sure that gets into the minutes." Don Arturo turned toward the village secretary, who sat in the room's front corner, his pen angled thoughtfully over a neat notebook page. The secretary nodded and the bishop turned back to the right side of the room.

The discussion braided through other needs and desires, then the president of the health committee stood to explain that the clinic had only some first aid supplies and the doctor visited only once every two months.

Constantino, former president of San la Paz, had been slyly moderating the meeting, even though the bishop was the one standing up front. Juana's older brother gently stopped people who tried to jump in as Chinantec comments were translated for Spanish-only speakers; his eyes traveled the room looking for people who wanted to speak. Late in the meeting he finally offered his own opinion: "If people could even just get some medicine that would help, let alone a visit from the doctor. I'm not sure if she's supposed to come every month or every other month, but it's going on four months now since she was here. Does anyone else have an opinion about this?"

The bishop stepped away from the front of the room, letting Constantino take control of the meeting. Juana stood up, her wide mouth pulled into a frown, and addressed the bishop: "What we most need is a person to attend to us, a doctor or a nurse. The last time she was here was in October. She didn't come in December because of the holidays, and then in January she claimed she had too much work left over from December. She'll give any excuse not to come. I guess we have to make sure to get sick whenever she's here!"

Like many of San la Paz's problems, lack of medical care could be partly ameliorated by a road to the village. Several times the state government had begun building a dirt road from the nearest town, Poblado 14, more than 7 miles away. Each time, the money ran out, leaving a useless quagmire. At the end of the assembly meeting the villagers arranged their requests by importance. The second priority was a new roof for the health clinic. The top priority was the road—ahead of reliable medical attention, new classrooms, potable water, local access to public assistance funds, and teachers who consistently showed up to work.

The meeting adjourned around noon, with every communal landholder signing the minutes. San la Paz's land was held in trust because it was part of the indigenous Zoque municipality that owned (at least on paper) two-thirds of the Chimalapas. Each head of household—all men, widows, and women who were still single at age eighteen—received the right to work a parcel. The *comuneros* lined up to sign or make their Xs, standing in order of their arrival to the village, with doña Angela signing first.

Though no road reached it, San Francisco la Paz might not have existed at all if it weren't for a road. Doña Angela and her husband had arrived at the spot now known as San la Paz in 1958. They came from Tapachula, Chiapas, a teeming,

smoke-belching city near the border with Guatemala. Her husband had followed the roads cut through the Chimalapas for logging and oil exploration. At road's end he had pushed farther, found a spot he liked near the Uxpanapa River, then brought his wife and young sons to live there under the canopy of mahogany and cork trees. The family cleared forest to farm but the rainforest soils bore meager harvests. Still, it was better than no land at all, and they survived thanks to the fish in the river and the deer, iguana, armadillos, and pacas of the forest. One year after arriving, they secured title for their homestead from the Zoque municipal government, naming it after a ceramic figurine of Saint Francis—patron saint of animals and the environment—that they had carried with them from Chiapas.

The elderly woman sat with me for well over an hour one afternoon, recounting village history. Her voice was sure, her turns of phrase added irony, and three of her sons added dates and details she couldn't quite pull from mind. Their family eventually grew to five sons and two daughters, "seven heads," doña Angela said, as if speaking of livestock. For the first fifteen years the Escobedo Méndez family lived in San la Paz. "It was a five- or six-day walk to the closest house," she remembered. Her husband died in 1969, leaving her alone with her children. In 1974 wealthy ranchers arrived, settling on the east side of the Uxpanapa River, within sight of the Escobedo Méndez homestead. The ranchers cleared land for their cattle and regularly tossed dynamite in the river—a lazy form of fishing. In 1979 the ranchers turned their cattle loose in the family's recently planted cornfields, destroying the season's harvest. In a place like San Francisco la Paz, where food was scarce, that amounted to an act of aggression.

By the mid-1980s San la Paz had grown to eighteen families.

Most came from what the government called "reaccommodated" Chinantec villages. Others were Nahuas, Zapotecs, or mestizos who had come from farther away after learning there was available land. All were welcomed by the Escobedo Méndez family, who thought there was safety in numbers. Meanwhile, heavy rains and flooding led to poor harvests and the river dynamiting decimated the fish population. As time wore on, it became clear that San La Paz's neighbors weren't just grazing cattle and blasting fish. The airplane landing strip they constructed on the nearby mountaintop, their many guns, and their odd nighttime movements could mean just one thing: narcotics. Conflict simmered between the peasants and the *narcoganaderos*, or "narco ranchers," across the river. The ranchers occasionally shot at the villagers and burned down their houses. Many families left in the early 1990s, having decided a drug-infested rainforest was no place for peasants. Some of the families eventually returned, unable to secure land elsewhere and fearing hunger more than drug runners. New families arrived, and something of a stable campesino village developed. The San la Paz residents grew corn, beans, and chiles that people tried to sell, along with bananas, citrus, tomatoes, yucca, and a dozen other crops for local consumption.

On May 29, 1992, doña Angela's youngest son, Pablo, left home early to shop in town, an errand that would take the entire day. Several people in Poblado 14 reported that they saw him carrying his groceries late that afternoon, but he never returned home. Though only eighteen, Pablo was in charge of local land tenure at the time he disappeared. It wasn't unusual for young people to hold such important positions; they were more likely than older villagers to have the essential skills of speaking, reading, and writing Spanish. On the isthmus, where land conflicts often turned bloody,

dealing with land tenure could be a dangerous responsibility. The police never formally investigated Pablo's case, in spite of years of pressure from his family. It was far from the only suspected murder connected with a land tenure dispute. But perhaps more relevant, investigating his disappearance meant challenging the narco ranchers, something few in the government were willing to do.

Two years after doña Angela's youngest son disappeared, her community finally won its battle with its erstwhile neighbors. With help from several Mexican environmental organizations, international agencies, and even a few government agencies, San la Paz pushed out the narco ranchers. The federal government hastened their departure with a compensation payment of more than four million dollars. Somehow, money could be found for these sorts of incentives but not for building village roads nor for improved medical care. In September 1994, San Francisco la Paz celebrated the departure of the narco ranchers and declared the land they regained an ecological reserve.

"We finally reached victory," doña Angela told me. "Then we could truly call ourselves San Francisco la Paz." It was an important moment, not just for the village's one hundred families but for people throughout the isthmus and across Mexico. Many people, including Bishop Arturo Lona Reyes, traveled from far-off Mexican cities, even from the United States, to celebrate with the villagers.

In the eight years between the bishop's two visits, some things had changed in San la Paz. The many Chimas, environmentalists, and human rights activists who worked together against the narco ranchers had opposed *both* of the interlopers' businesses. Drugs destroyed people and cattle destroyed rainforest. When the ranchers left, they took their cattle but left behind pasturelands of star grass, an invasive

plant that chokes out native groundcover. The villagers tried planting corn in the open pastures but the star grass strangled their crops, too.

The ranchers also left behind tantalizing whiffs of the ranching lifestyle. Buying a heifer, turning it loose on that star grass, and then selling it a few years later brought a five- or six-fold return on cash investment. For poor rural people with no assets but land, it was an extremely attractive prospect. In the years after the narco ranchers left, fires became more common around the village. Several villagers told me in hushed voices that some of those fires were set by people in San la Paz opening up new pastureland. According to the local constitution, the 120-acre plots that comuneros received were to be maintained as no more than one-fifth cropland and two-fifths pasture; the rest was to be left as undisturbed forest. Anyone who opened new pasture was breaking the law.

When Juana and Telo married, both had already become comuneros and received land grants. They decided to sell Juana's user rights and work only Telo's plot. Long-term land-use rights sold for about forty-three dollars per acre of workable land. With the money they received from the sale, Juana and Telo bought several cows. In seven years of married life they had worked their way up to thirty head of cattle. "What would I do with more?" Telo told me, shrugging his shoulders. If he and Juana sold all their livestock at once they would earn about sixteen thousand dollars—a colossal sum for a family that grew and hunted its own food and lived in a house with no running water, a dirt floor, two light bulbs, and two electrical appliances (a cassette tape player and a blender). Juana and Telo were richer than most of their neighbors; only about one-third of the village's families owned cattle. Most of them, including Constantino, owned

only a few animals. Still, the phenomenon represented a dramatic shift in the village: from subsistence corn farmers to small-time ranchers.

The pastures-in-the-rainforest system conflicted with the need to preserve the forest, but at the same time, San la Paz's small-time ranchers were the only real protectors of their portion of the Chimalapas. Had the villagers of San la Paz not been there to fight the narco ranchers, no one else would have done so. The mountain dwellers were both stress and salvation for the forest in which they lived. No one could deny that the slow economic shift from corn to cattle spelled doom for large swaths of rainforest, and yet I could not blame them. It is far easier (and less risky) to graze cattle than to plant, tend, and harvest corn year after year. Juana had worked for the environmental organization that fought the narco ranchers the hardest, and yet she and Telo owned cattle. For them, the point wasn't life in the forest, but life beyond it. They wanted their three boys to attend secondary school, which meant sending them away from San la Paz, which meant entering the cash economy.

On the last evening Bishop Lona Reyes and I spent in San la Paz, he watched television with a family—celebrating the return of electricity—and I visited the home of Constantino and his wife, Aurelia. I'd spent my first two nights on a cot in Juana's kitchen, but Aurelia insisted I spend the third night at her house. A few months earlier she and Constantino had stayed at my home in Matías Romero, while their son, Manuel, was treated at a hospital in my neighborhood. While getting take-out from the corner taquería, I had run into Constantino, his normally calm face tight with worry. I went with him to the hospital to see Aurelia and Manuel. Pale and shriveled-looking, Manuel lay in a neat hospital bed recovering from

a severe kidney infection; his parents had been sleeping on the tile floor of his tiny room. It had been nothing, of course, for me to hand over the key to my house, but Aurelia was extremely eager to return the small favor.

A nail pounded into their home's front door frame held a small cross and a rusted metal sign that read, "Message to Mormons, Jehovahs, and other sects—this is a Catholic home." Aurelia had no problem with "the people who didn't have another way of speaking," but she had no patience for evangelicals. The family's two-room house, one of the few in town with a cement floor, doubled as a community store. Five years earlier Constantino had cofounded a local cooperative to support low-budget economic-development projects, ones that took both people and forest into account. About one-fifth of the village's households were members of the cooperative. Their projects included teaching people to use green manures rather than chemical fertilizers; planting "improved pasture"—a far less invasive grass—rather than the narco ranchers' star grass; and running the community store. The store had come from an earlier, unsuccessful corn-growing project. When the crop failed that year, the farmers were stuck with the unpaid government loan. Since Constantino had encouraged his neighbors to join the cooperative effort, it was left to him to figure out what to do about the failed project. He and Aurelia donated the space in their home and their time for the store, selling staples brought from town by horse or canoe. They sold them at a small mark-up and the profits paid down the old debt.

I sat in the corner of the tiny store, part of their living room, as Aurelia and Constantino stocked the dustless, well-ordered shelves. My first question to Constantino was, Why cattle ranching in a rainforest?

"Because that's what people ask for," he replied, as he and

Aurelia lined up bars of soap, bottles of cooking oil, tins of powdered milk, and bags of sugar. Also, perhaps, because that's what the government would finance. Three months earlier the federal government had made a grant of $160,000 to support cattle ranching in the Chimalapas.

Constantino had an impassive way of speaking that made it hard to determine the feelings behind his words. To discern emotion I had to look carefully at his drooping eyes. When he answered my first question his eyes beamed disappointment and resignation. He was well known both inside and outside the Chimalapas as one of the "forest defenders." Even death threats had not dissuaded him. Still, he owned three cows himself; he could do the math as well as anyone else.

I asked him about the road, the village's highest priority. What about the new immigrants it would bring? The village assembly had decided that the forest couldn't absorb a significantly larger population and had made it illegal for anyone who wasn't descended from a current comunero to become one—a typical close-the-door-behind-us immigration strategy but one that indicated they understood their land had reached its human carrying capacity. What about the timber cutters who followed every available road into the Chimalapas, illegally felling the oldest and largest trees?

Constantino nodded. "Yes, it could be that on the one hand the road will save us, and on the other hand it will destroy us." He laughed thinly. "We are thinking about the people who have met with disaster, who got sick and needed medical care but died on the way." Here Constantino had stepped squarely into the paradox of living in a fragile, isolated, endangered habitat: Should individual well-being or long-term collective health take precedence? Should the needs of the rainforest ever come before the needs of the people who chose to live within it?

The next morning, the bishop and I rose before dawn for our canoe ride back to Poblado 14. The parish priest met us at the end of the road, where he had dropped us off, and drove us back to his home. Bishop Lona Reyes stayed on for a visit to another village; I headed home to Matías Romero. A collective pickup truck took me as far as Boca del Monte. The struggle of that village with PEMEX seemed so much more straightforward: the oil company had offices they could visit, employees they could talk to, and equipment they could force off their lands. The villagers had done all those things and had made real progress. PEMEX had moved far beyond offering one-time payments for long-term damage, and had begun to offer long-term compensation—including a revolving loan fund—for the 1999 oil spill.

I waited for the bus to Matías Romero. I noticed for the first time the words carved on the back of the huge wood-and-metal archway over the turnoff from the trans-isthmus highway. The back of the sign read, *¡El que no cree que en Uxpanapa se hacen milagros, no es realista!* ("He who doesn't believe that miracles happen in Uxpanapa isn't a realist"). I thought of the half-abandoned prefab towns that dotted the razed Uxpanapa forest. The sign bore the most haunting message I would encounter in all my time on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

One evening three months after my visit with the Bishop Lona Reyes to San la Paz, I sat at home in Matías Romero when my front door rattled with a sharp knock. It was Telo and the president of San Francisco la Paz, both dripping wet but smiling. They were stopping by to say hello after visiting Bishop Lona Reyes, who lived in the wealthiest town on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, a half-hour bus ride south of my house. The two men sat in my living room, shivering and

cupping mugs of Nescafé with pruned hands. They had made the twelve-hour trip from San Francisco la Paz to learn what progress don Arturo had made on their top requests: money for the road and a new roof for the health clinic. When they arrived at the bishop's home, he wasn't there. They decided to wait for him through nearly two days of rainstorms—the trip back home was too expensive to abandon their mission so quickly. In the end, they told me, their visit was successful: the bishop had spoken with them for several minutes as they stood on his porch. He told them the roof materials were on the way. Seventy strips of corrugated metal would be delivered to Poblado 14. From there, the villagers would haul them on horseback ten at a time to San la Paz. The bishop also gave them far more important news: the state government had allocated funds for the road.

Stunned by their fortitude, I sat silently as Telo went on to narrate other village happenings. A wealthy man from Veracruz had bought land-use rights from two comuneros, giving him access to 240 acres of San la Paz land. It was illegal, of course, to sell user rights to people not from the village. The man planned to clear all that land to graze cattle—doubly illegal. He made it very clear he wanted more of their land and had the cash to pay for it, saying he wanted to graze one thousand head of cattle, more than the total number owned by everyone in San la Paz.

San Francisco la Paz had struggled for years to throw out the narco ranchers. Pablo Escobèdo Méndez had likely been murdered because of the conflict. Constantino and many others had been arrested, shot at, beaten, or had their homes burned to cinders. Through it all they had stood their ground and tried, in their way, to protect their forest. Now the ranchers were back, with different names and different strategies, but the same result: cattle creating desert from rainforest.

"But, Telo, who would do this?" I asked, trying to keep my voice calm. "Who would sell their land, knowing that it would be turned to cattle pasture?"

Telo's answer fell on my ears like an axe. He stared into his empty coffee cup as he told me that half of the land had come from Manuel García, Constantino's son. Manuel had recently turned eighteen and become a comunero. As an only child, Manuel would someday inherit his father's land. Almost immediately the young man had sold the user rights to his own 120 acres. The rancher would pay over time, eventually handing over five thousand dollars for the land. With the first payment Manuel and his parents had bought a new refrigerator and a chainsaw.

Telo raised his eyes, meeting my shock with a stare that shifted from embarrassment, to resignation, to a sharp look that seemed to say, *you know how complicated all this is.*

Even as the residents of the Chimalapas have come to identify more with their forest home, calling themselves Chimas and learning how to mesh farming and forest management, they have also taken on the culture of other forest immigrants. More and more speak Spanish instead of Zoque, Chinantec, and Nahua. More and more leave for the United States and send back dollars, or don't, to their families. People have slid, or been pushed, ever closer to a cash economy—one in which forest has no place on the balance sheet until it is cut down.

One afternoon in San Francisco la Paz, the bishop and I had walked across the central plaza together. Although the village was only forty years old, several thousand years ago a settlement of Olmecs—mother culture of Mesoamerica's great civilizations, including the Maya, Totonac, and Zapotec—had existed precisely where the village had been founded. The

Olmecs, or "Rubber People," originated along the Gulf Coast of what is now Veracruz. Satellite maps of the Chimalapas show hints of their pre-Hispanic crop clearings, long before the Zoque people existed.

One afternoon Bishop Lona Reyes and I had taken a walk together in San la Paz. At one point he stopped to show me the ancient lay of the land. He put a hand on my shoulder and steered my gaze toward the peaks and valleys around us. He pointed out two pyramids buried deeply under bushes, small trees, and vines. I had not even noticed them before, taking them to be simple hills. In between the two was the depression of the ceremonial ball court. He commented on how strange it was that this place had been populated by the Olmecs, then abandoned for so long, then repopulated so recently by the settlers of San la Paz. That long desertion was probably the only reason the ruins had survived intact, he mused. It was probably the only reason that the forest had survived, as well.