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Negritos

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Dear Peter,

Literally, the term negrito means "little black thing" in Spanish. But in Mexico, it is more commonly used to speak of a short story or joke that shows the "black" or less favorable side of a person or group's character. What follows are brief accounts of three personal experiences. They are negritos; two show some of the blemishes of the Mexican people. The third speaks of the savagery of Mexico City.

I found it very difficult to write this series. It is a type of writing that I have never before attempted. But, what made it even more problematic was my own "Mexicanization", my identification with the Mexican people. Latin Americans say that one should wash one's dirty laundry in one's home. Since the Mexicans have made me feel very much at home in their country, in some ways, more at home than in my own, it was difficult for me to hang part of their soiled fabrics in public light.

Negrito Uno

Throughout the year, Mexico's main square, the Zocalo, is packed with people paid by the government to raise their voices in support of any one of many "revolutionary causes". One of the few times it is voluntarily filled with a crushing crowd, however, is the night of September 15th. On that same date 172 years ago, Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla went to his parish church in Dolores, Guanajuato, wildly rang the church bells until the townspeople gathered, and publically declared war against Spain. So began Mexico's fight for independence. To commemorate this heroic feat, each year, the President of Mexico repeats the "grito" - the cry for independence - usually from a balcony at the National

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Palace in the Zocalo.

Despite my two years residence in Mexico, I had never gone to the plaza to witness the "grito". While excited by the prospect of taking part in such an important national tradition, the fears that had kept me away before also kept my enthusiasm in check. I had been told of bawdy crowds, aggressive drunks, bottle throwing, and relentless pickpockets. To reduce my chances of falling victim, I decided to wear dark clothing and carry only a minimal amount of money.

We left my apartment at 9:30P.M. Since the President wouldn't make his appearance before 11:00, we decided to first stop for some pastries and coffee at the Cafe Tacuba. "We" consisted two British journalists and myself.

The Cafe Tacuba is located in the center of the old part of Mexico City, about 4 blocks from the Zocalo. As we neared the restaurant, my fears about the evening's events began to subside. The streets were not filled with suspicious-looking, loud-mouthed drunks. Instead, there was a mixture of peasants wearing ponchos, straw sombreros, and sandals; working class couples with chains of children clasping hands on either side; and, blue-jean clad students, of both high school and college age. The students tended to travel in groups of five or six people.

No one was in a rush to get to the plaza; there was too much to be seen along the way. Hundreds of vendors lined the streets, selling everything imaginable: ornately adorned paper hats; whistles; pancakes spread with sweet fruit jams; gaudy multi-colored plastic hair combs; wooden soup ladles; popcorn; plastic horns; corn-on-the-cob; and big bags of confetti were just some of the items sold.

While my two British friends were busily conversing, I slipped behind, and bought a bag full of confetti-filled egg shells. Then, before either had a chance to protest, they both had smashed egg shells in their hair and confetti falling in all directions. This will be a great night, I thought to myself.

Being so near the Zocalo, I assumed the Cafe Tacuba would be packed. As one of Mexico's oldest and finest cafes, however, its prices were well out of the range of the people we had seen in the streets. And, since the "grito" was not an event taken in by the restaurant's normal clientele, there were more black-uniformed, white-apron clad waitresses serving than there were people to be served. Still, in keeping with the evening's festivities, the restaurant had hired a man dressed in 19th century Spanish garb to sing ballads. Despite his deep and melodious voice, his performance was irritating. He sang extremely short songs which he followed with long periods of asking for contributions.

As we stepped out of the cafe into the cold, brisk evening air, I looked up at the thousands of stars that filled the sky. I was still concentrating on the stars when the first handful of confetti hit my eyes. The small, hard chips of paper smarted. I could hear the giggling of teenagers just behind me. Not wanting to seem a poor sport, I forced a smile.

But barely had I got the first bits of colored paper out of my tear ducts when another handful arrived. More giggles; this time my aggressors were a young couple. I took refuge between my two friends. That was a mistake. On Independence Day, anyone who has the coloring of what Mexicans assume was the coloring of the Spanish colonialists is an honorary enemy for

of dark complexion, the Mexicans think of them as a light-skinned people.

Even though blue-eyed and freckled, at least I am a brunette. My two "bodyguards" were six foot tall blonds. And, being so tall, they caught the attention of many potential aggressors along the way. Despite our attempts to dodge our pursuers, it was almost impossible to know who would attack next. The principal tactic was to come up from behind, rapidly place their hand just below the victim's face, and with the flick of the wrist, deposit the confetti in one's mouth, nose, and preferably, eyes.

The first handful was amusing, despite the sting it produced. By the fifth, I found myself losing patience. By the tenth, the pain was so great that I was virtually incapable of opening my eyes. With my mouth shut, and my hands cupped over my eyes, my friends led me forward. Being much taller than I and the Mexicans, my friends were less easy targets.

Finally we reached the Zocalo, and there, I found relief. We came upon a woman with a small tray of plastic visors made especially for the occasion. Visor is really a rather elegant term for this small square of plastic with its thin elastic band. Even before the 10 pesos had been paid, I had placed the plastic over my eyes. My temporary blindness, however, was only partially cured. I still couldn't open one eye, and the other continued to tear. My friends led me on.

In that entire crowd of 500,000, there was probably no one as glad as I to see the President appear on the palace balcony. With his arrival, all interest in getting the "guachupines" the popular term used to describe the hated Spanish colonialists - was lost. And, for those who could see it, the sight was spectacular. Bright flood lights shone on Mexico City's immense nineteenth century cathedral, as well as on the burgundy colored palatial buildings which line the other three sides of the plaza.

The President's arrival was greeted with an uproar of clapping, horn blowing, whistling, and loud cheers of approval. In the months preceding the event, President Jose Lopez Portillo's popularity had plummeted. Over one million people had already been laid off since January, many industries were on the edge of bankruptcy, and inflation had soared to one hundred percent. But on this night, the President of Mexico is not viewed as a particular individual. Rather, he is seen as the embodiment of the nation. To applaud him was tantamount to a salute to Mexico, and indirectly, to the very Mexicans applauding.

Despite the gigantic loudspeakers which lined the plaza, most of the President's words were incomprehensible. It didn't matter; there were only three phrases that the public had any real interest in hearing.

"Mexico ha vivido! - Mexico has lived," Lopez Portillo proclaimed in his deep, baritone voice. In chorus, the people boomed back the phrase.

"Mexico vive! - Mexico lives!" Again the people echoed the President's words.

"Y Mexico vivira! - And Mexico will continue to live on!"

There, intermingled with cheers, whistling, and horn blowing, the patriotic litany ended, and the fireworks began. Hundreds of skyrocketed streamed through the air. Man-size pinwheels spun brightly on the roofs of two of the palace buildings, while a waterfall of colored sparks fell down the side of the third.

There were estimates that this year's display was at least two if not three times larger than last year's. Perhaps it was meant to cheer up President Lopez Portillo in his last days of office. Or perhaps it was a bit of the old "bread and circus" formula, a means of keeping the common people in line, in spite of the country's economic crisis.

My eyes were finally beginning to feel better, and with my assailants' attention distracted by the firework display, I was able to stand mask-free at last. Even though the physical pain had diminished, I was still very much upset by the attacks as well as by my own aggressive reaction. Americans wouldn't have done something like that, I found myself thinking. It would have been one thing if it had been children throwing the confetti, because they probably would have been naive to the pain they were causing. But these were teenagers and young couples! Furthermore, their post-attack cackles carried a tone of malice.

It was this viciousness that left me wondering. Many members of Mexico's upper class are also light skinned. Maybe these people were carrying out their own mild version of class war.

The fireworks display wasn't over yet, but I suggested that we leave. So far I had kept my anger to myself. And I wanted to keep it that way.

### Negrito Dos

The day was warm, overcast, and for Mexico, exceptionally muggy. It wasn't the day one would pick to go to an outdoor market, but it was the one day a week that Toluca's farmers market operates. I had planned to leave at 9AM for Toluca, the capital of the state of Mexico, but several had-to-be-done errands had delayed my departure by three hours. For a few moments I debated going at all. Since the car that had been lent to me might not be available the following week, however, I grabbed my shopping bag, my wallet, my Canon AE-1, and headed out.

What luck, I thought, a full tank of gas. Mexico's gas stations are almost always packed with Ford Galaxies, LPDs, Valiants, and other gas guzzlers which take forever to fill. Even with Mexico's deep economic crisis, the government continues to subsidize heavily gas for car consumption. Consequently, Mexicans tend to use large cars, and drive rather than walk even the shortest of distances. On any weekday, an estimated two million vehicles crowd the capital's streets, most of which were built to accommodate last century's horse carriages.

I pulled out of the side street onto Avenida Reforma. As a New Yorker, I usually refer to this wide, tree-lined boulevard as the "Park Avenue of Mexico". More accurately, it resembles a mixture of Park Avenue, Fifth Avenue, and the portion of Massachusetts Avenue in Washington, D.C. which is known as Embassy Row. Right near my house in the elegant commercial section, where prestigious office buildings, exclusive boutiques, and many of Mexico's finest restaurants are to be found. Heading further west, the beautiful old embassy buildings begin to appear. About two miles after these start the palatial residences; almost all of these are hidden behind

high, thick walls, protecting them from the gazes of the less fortunate.

I was still in the business zone when I noted a slow down in the traffic. It was not an accident, nor a traffic jam, but rather a police-manned tow truck. Parking is absolutely forbidden on Avenida Reforma. Yet, as there are many businesses along the way there is a contest which takes place between those people who have to see someone for five minutes or deliver a package, and the local police who are poorly paid and thus prone to payoffs.

The quick deals don't cause the traffic jams; rather, it's when the driver has left his car. The police, in an effort to get the word passed back to the driver, begin to hitch the unmanned car to their tow truck. They take their time about it, since they really aren't interested in moving the car but in removing some bills from the driver's pocket.

It was just one of these cases that was blocking the way. One policeman was holding up the traffic, while the other slowly backed the tow truck into position. Of all the government's civil servants, no group is as openly despised as is the police force, I thought while waiting impatiently. Despite their crisp blue uniforms, smart black leather jackets, and knee high boots, no one is fooled into respecting them. In fact, during the annual Independence Day military parade, all the government forces are cheered energetically by the crowd; all that is, except the police. They are openly booed. And, to drown out the people's disparaging cries, the police loudly play their car sirens.

It's one thing to boo a policeman when he is marching in a parade and can't do anything about it. It is quite another when he is on duty; honking a horn under these circumstances could have a price tag attached. The backed-up cars waited in silence. After five minutes had passed, the car's owner finally arrived. With their backs to the traffic, he and the officer shook hands. The policeman's hand then went directly into his pocket, depositing the requisite fee. The car was immediately unhitched from the tow truck, while the officer, wildly gesticulating, made empty threats about what he would do next time.

It felt good to be out of the commercial section of Reforma, and into the embassy area. There the air tends to be fresher, and the stoplights fewer. At each stoplight, however, a barrage of men, women, and children are waiting to sell you kleenex, candies, flowers, cookies, and a wide variety of miniature stuffed toys.

At one of the intersections, the stop light turned red. A small Indian child approached my window. She couldn't have been more than eight years old. Her white smock dress with satin ribbon border was slightly torn at the waist, and soiled from many days use. Her two tight braids were tied together at the back by a piece of string, and she walked barefoot.

"Chiclets, caramelos, chocolates?" she inquired with a whining voice and big sad eyes.

"No mi hija" - No my child.

"Well then can I have a peso for food?"

The light had turned green. The car behind me was honking.

"No I'm sorry," I said as I pulled away. And I was sorry for at least twenty or thirty more minutes. It's an old dilemma. If you let a child make a better living as a beggar than as a merchant, perhaps you are deforming his values. Or, taking the other side, if you don't provide the few free coins that could make

a good meal possible. Some days I support one thesis; others, the other. The next stoplight child would be in luck.

I passed through the residential section and onto the Mexico-Toluca highway. Highway is a rather elegant term for that narrow windy patch of road, but at least one could go faster than on Reforma.

Breezing along at 60 m.p.h., I gazed down at my watch, and started to calculate my estimated arrival time in Toluca. If all goes well, I thought, if I can keep going at this rate, I should be there in another hour or hour and a quarter. That will give me plenty of time to talk with some of the truck farmers about this year's harvest, as well as pick up some wild mushrooms, and a dozen blue corn tortillas.

Turning a bend, my savory thoughts were swept away by the sight of traffic backed up at least a quarter mile. I couldn't see where it ended because of a bend in the road. If it only lasts until that bend, I speculated, then I should still be able to make it in two hours. That would make it about 2:30 PM when I'd reach Toluca. Let's say it takes me another 20 or 25 minutes to find the market....that's cutting it pretty close. Then again, you've been waiting all week to go to the market; it would be a shame to turn back now.

Ten minutes passed. We has barely inched ten car lengths. I had the further misfortune of being right behind a soot-belching bus. Each time that it shifted from neutral to forward, a bellow of smelly blackness was thrust towards me. I didn't have much choice; it was that or switching to the other lane where I'd be behind a PEMEX oil truck. No, better to stay in the "fast lane". At this rate, even if the accident or detour or whatever is just beyond the corner, at best I'll make it by 3:15; many of the farmers will be gone by then, but there should still be some around. I gave an occasional honk of my horn.

Another ten minutes, and again, another ten car lengths. I, like my Mexican counterparts, was now leaning on my horn at regular intervals. Damn this traffic, damn it, damn it! If it's not the traffic that's getting you down, it's the unbreathable air, the corrupt cops, or the impenetrable bureaucracies that make even the simplest paying of bills into a major ordeal. Sixteen million inhabitants in this monstrous city, and over two million cars. Many people now say that it is the most polluted city in the world. And as far as bureaucracies go, it has got to be up there amongst the most corrupt. Not only do you get less done in this city, but you're poisoning yourself in the whole inefficient process! Damn, damn, damn.

As the car's radio was broken, I found myself staring long and hard at the couple in the next lane. The man was driving a big burgandy Landau. He sat tall in his seat, and must have been at least six-foot. He, with his checkered shirt and gold-buttoned sport jacket, and she, with her long platinum-blond flowing hair and high-necked ruffly blouse, looked like something straight out of a Mexican beer commercial. That is, if they hadn't been fighting. It was hard to tell what it was all about. She would gesticulate madly, sometimes pointing at him, other times forward, and in what seemed the moments of most desperation she'd run her fingers through her hair. The man hardly spoke and rarely turned to look at her. Instead he seemed to lose his eyes just beyond the dashboard.

The afternoon sun was hot and the air foul. After another twenty minutes we turned the corner. For as far as I could see, traffic was backed up and barely moving. There was a turn-about fifty yards further up the road. All right Mexico City, I thought, you win. Despite the sign stating that such turns were illegal, dozens of cars were making their way back to the city. There were no policemen around. So, what the hell?

By the time I reached the turn-about, I had already spent two hours in traffic to come the ten miles from my home. Perspiring from the sun's rays, and feeling intoxicated from my stay behind the bus, I gripped the wheel hard, put the car in third, and barreled forward. The traffic was light on this side of the highway and, cutting from lane to lane, I tried irrationally to make up for my wasted time. In the States, such insane driving behaviour would be disgraceful. But in Mexico City it is the norm. And perhaps it is a psychological necessity: a desire to fight back, to try to beat in a small way a totally unconquerable and all-too-often irrational system. You don't win big; but expectations are low here. As the Mexicans say, "El poco que sea, ya es ganancia" - However small, it's still a gain.

Rapidly, I wound through Reforma's residential sector, down through Embassy Row. Then, again the inevitable traffic. The National Auditorium, a huge modern steel construction, was off to the right. Picking a short cut used by many Mexicans, I cut off to the right into the Auditorium's driveway, which runs parallel to Reforma, and came out again into the traffic about 30 cars and 300 yards closer to my destination. I nosed my way back into Reforma's line of backed-up cars, in front of a black Dodge Dart. But the driver had made up his mind not to let me in. Perhaps he didn't realize that I already had my bumper in front of his; or perhaps he had decided that his car would remain unscathed. For whatever reason, when the traffic ahead moved, he accelerated. Screech! My plastic bumper guard fell off immediately, uncovering a piece of metal which made a long scratch from end to end of his car. Hearing the horrendous sound, the driver slammed on his brakes; and, leaving his car blocking one of Reforma's three lanes, he headed right for me, not even bothering to examine the scratch.

"What the devil did you do that for!?!"

"I didn't do a thing. It was you who moved," I said, applying Mexico's common law traffic code - "Lo que pega paga" - the one who hits pays. He had hit me so, the logic went, he was responsible.

"But you were being mischievous. You cut the traffic line by going on the Auditorium driveway!"

"So what?" I replied. "That's not illegal."

"But you shouldn't do it."

"And you shouldn't hit my car."

"But it's my car that's scraped."

"That's your problem. You moved, not me."

With that I picked up my bumper guard, got into my car, and swerved into a gap in Reforma's traffic. I was on the edge of tears the rest of the way home. I hadn't been able to accomplish what I had set out to accomplish in Toluca. Getting the bumper fixed would cost money, and perhaps my friend would never lend me the car again. But worst of all, Mexico City's traffic had gotten the better of me. It had made me aggressive, inconsiderate and obsessive about "getting there."

It is a savage, dehumanizing city; and it had turned me into another of its many predators.

### Negrito Tres

"May I lead you to your seats?" asked the theater attendant.

"Yes please," I replied.

They weren't very good seats. We had only bought the tickets that morning, and all they had left were seats in the far wings of this theater, the National Auditorium. I had never liked the Auditorium, so huge and cavernous, with ragged carpeting in the aisles and rarely-cleaned floors sticky with spilt soda-pop. It could seat 5,000 people; and the sound system was usually set too loud. Oh well, I thought, at least this is better than the City Theater; there I usually get stuck behind one of the many columns that sustain the old structure.

Even though there were less than ten minutes until curtain time, at least a quarter of the Auditorium's 1,000 or more most expensive orchestra seats still weren't filled. Mexicans, I thought, they really don't place any value on punctuality, do they? I had been brought up in a household that maintained that people who don't respect punctuality were selfish.

It was a Cuban folk concert. The singer was Silvio Rodriguez, one of Cuba's most celebrated post-revolutionary singers. At exactly nine o'clock, several hundred concert-goers started whistling, clapping their hands, and stamping their feet.

"Ya empieza! Ya empieza!" - Let's get started! Let's get started!

After five minutes, finding that their taunts and raucousness went unheeded, they finally quieted down.

"Excuse me, could we please get in?"

"Yes, of course," I said, standing up to let a couple pass to their seats. The woman, about forty years old, was wearing a beautifully embroidered huipile - or smock - from the state of Oaxaca. Because of its large, brightly coloured flowers, I guessed it was made by the Zapotecos, a tribe which lives in the centre of the state. The man with her wore one of the dark blue cotton shirts that are embroidered by the Guatemalan Indians.

Yes, I thought, these people belong here. Cuba's post-revolutionary singers draw a crowd in Mexico that is similar to those Pete Seeger and Joan Baez used to draw in the United States. While the majority tend to be left-leaning college students, there are also many middle-aged professionals and intellectuals. Jeans were the uniform for U.S. protest concerts; here they wear embroidered Indian shirts and woven leather sandals - and jeans.

At 9:15, a voice boomed out over the theater's loudspeaker system: "The use of flash cameras and recording machines is strictly forbidden...We are pleased to present Silvio Rodriguez!"



The Auditorium's lights were lowered. Suddenly, as if a signal had been sounded, hundreds of people flooded the aisles. All were looking for that prime group of seats in the orchestra section that had not yet been occupied. In the rush, these squatters jostled and trampled each other. In the midst of this stampede, Silvio Rodriguez, a fragile, balding, forty-year-old made his entrance from stage left. Cameras flashed, and dozens of concert-goers moved forward to place their tape recorders on the edge of the stage. He had no sooner sat down and picked up his guitar than the screams began.

"Play Gracias a la Vida!"

"Play Mi Unicornio Azul!"

"Play Dias y Flores!"

"Play....."

"Shut up! Let him decide!"

"Play Mucho Mas!"

Silvio flipped through his many loose sheets of music. Finally, he settled on "Playa Giron" - the Bay of Pigs. There was wild applause, drowning his words.

He has a quiet, rather high pitched and melodious voice. Most of the songs he sings are of his own composition. Some of them speak of fantasy, others of love, and still others of revolution, both in Cuba and elsewhere. He almost always sings alone, delicately accompanying himself on his acoustic guitar.

Playa Giron had long been one of my favorite songs, but that night it was difficult to enjoy it. People arriving late with expensive tickets began to claim their seats. The squatters resisted. Each seat required a separate negotiation, with the theater attendant playing the role of arbitrator, moving her flashlight back and forth between the two sets of tickets and finally exhorting the seated to sit elsewhere. Everyone had to stand up each time to let the squatters out, and remain standing until the legitimate occupants were in place. This was repeated again and again during the first quarter of the concert.

Silvio had barely finished the final line of his first melody when the screams began again.

"Play Companeros Poetas!"

"Play....."

"Shut up!"

Silvio played another three songs, ignoring the crowd's demands. Each time he finished, the shouts sprang up again.

"You have seats G18 and G19," the theater attendant was saying loudly to a couple of late-arrivals standing by my side. She examined their tickets once more and added, "Yours are these two here by the aisle."

I looked up incredulously. She was pointing at our seats.

"There must be some mistake. These are ours," I said defensively while searching for our ticket stubs.

"Stop kidding around. You're just squatting and you know it. Now go peacefully," retorted one of the latecomers, an overweight, stubby man.

"We're not squatting, and I'll prove it to you."

With that I produced the slips of paper that had been stamped out by the theater's computer ticket machine.

"They too read G18 and G19," agreed the attendant.

"When did you buy them?" the latecomer asked aggressively.

"What does it matter?"

"We bought ours a week or more ago, surely way before you did."

It was too much. Between the raucousness of the crowd, the rudeness with which it had treated Silvio, the repeated camera flashes, the stickiness of the floor....

"Let's go," I said to my friend. "I've had enough."

"I could give you some nice balcony seats," said the attendant apologetically.

"Many thanks, but no."

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