

OF MYTHS AND LEGENDS

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“For it is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God Himself, and unless and until the hearers find God in personal experience, they are not the better for having heard the truth.”

—A.W. Tozer



arrive in a small Paraguayan village not far from the Brazilian border with a backpack full of books about sustainable agriculture, a cursory understanding of beekeeping, and a robust Messiah-complex.

The residents of Tuna, Caazapá are decidedly less impressed. I can barely speak the indigenous language, Guaraní, and the villagers don't seem to find any prestige in my literature degree from New York University. My host family offers to let me sleep on their floor and it takes me approximately a week to hate just about everyone in town.

I identify a dilapidated shack on the outskirts of the community where I can live alone and begin a meticulous program of snubbing village leaders. My only friends are the local pariahs: transients, drunks, squatters. Conversations almost always involve some permutation of the same exchange: Do I have a girlfriend? No. Am I interested in visiting local whorehouses? No, but thank you. How many souvenirs will I leave in Paraguay (a favorite joke about how many illegitimate children I will father)? I snort my best fake laugh.

The only regular visitor who isn't fixated on my sexual predilections is the local Huckleberry Finn, a 12-year-old boy

named Édén whose kind, pleading brown eyes are difficult to reconcile with his solid reputation for stealing, smoking, and drinking. My attitude toward the village establishment has made me his hero and he follows me around everywhere. I teach him chess and we play late into the evening, eating beans and manioc, listening to pirated CDs I bring from the capital. We gossip about village life: Brazilian soy farmers burning down squatters' houses, Evangelicals accusing Catholics of devil worship, violence at a local card game. Occasionally, gossip involves mythological creatures.

Édén firmly believes in the existence of a pantheon of Paraguayan forest goblins. Of particular concern to Édén is the Kurupí, who is distinguished by his long, prehensile penis, which is wrapped many times around his waist like a belt. The Kurupí's serpent-like member is said to impregnate young virgins while they sleep. Édén can list all the local girls who have fallen victim to the diminutive troublemaker.

I try explaining that the Kurupí is just a myth, but Édén insists that the pregnancies are *prima facie* evidence of goblin tomfoolery. In rudimentary Guaraní, I attempt to distinguish myth from legend: The Kurupí is a myth; the girls in town impregnated by the mythic creature are legends. Neither is *actually* true and the only way to get pregnant is from a real man.

Édén is unconvinced, citing the *La Virgen* as proof that I am wrong. I do not have the heart to tell him that the Christ story is also a legend.



No one is even remotely interested in beekeeping except for the visitor everyone calls *Felix Tavy*, Crazy Felix. Felix is my age, though a lifetime working outside has left him looking much older. He is easy to like with gentle, squinty green eyes and a quick laugh that reveals a row of missing front teeth. I am desperate to

make a friend who wants to do more than just drink or speculate about the activities of horny forest goblins; thankfully Felix has a singular aim: he wants to harvest honey.

I pledge to make Felix's wish come true, though it does not occur to me that an English degree and three months of cursory beekeeping training might not have adequately prepared me for the rigors of capturing colonies of killer bees from the Paraguayan jungles.

Our first attempts to capture bee colonies from the wild are astounding fiascos, involving long days of getting stung repeatedly in the stifling Paraguayan heat. We sift through heaps and heaps of killer bees—tens of thousands of them—looking for the queen. The queen bee, slightly longer than the rest, sometimes of a deeper hue, is the key to success: If we fail to capture her in a small matchbox, the bees swarm in unison, an amorphous shadow rising in the sky spectacularly punctuating our failure.

But Felix is steadfast and his persistence pays off. We get the hang of it and before long he has a dozen hives on his tiny plot of land, an unfarmable two hectares of marshland full of cattails and scrub brush. I am not eager to return to my role as host of the misfits' club, so I continue to spend my days with Felix; and he welcomes me—whether we have beekeeping to do or not.

Having no arable land except for a small garden, Felix engages in various projects to provide for his very pregnant wife and three children. For a pittance he helps his neighbors harvest their cotton and yerba mate. Sometimes he cleans wells or latrines or tends to an enormous earthen oven full of wood that is cooked into charcoal. He sets traps for doves. And he has his beloved bees.

It is an endless source of amusement for Felix when I cannot seem to do the sorts of things even women can—things like splitting firewood with an axe or collecting cotton without bleeding from

the thorns. We have an inside joke for those moments—a saying that he has adopted because I say it so much: *Es complicado*—it's complicated. It has become a refrain in our conversations—which range from the daily minutiae to our dreams, fears, loves and losses. *Es complicado* is what I say when I find that I cannot explain why I have made certain life choices.

Why don't you want a wife, Pedro? *Es complicado*. Why you are not content, Pedro? *Es complicado*. Do you believe in God, Pedro? *Es complicado*.

Es complicado will not suffice for the night that I am roused from my sleep by Felix's oldest daughter Teresa. She tells me to come quick. I run with Teresa through the sultry night to her house, and find a sweet, fat newborn baby and an exhausted mother sleeping in bed. Felix brings the girl to me and shows me the baby's feet. They're clubbed.

What do I do, Pedro?



My only reprieve from the devastating reality of subsistence farming is the monthly trip to the nearest city, San Juan Nepomuceno, where I collect my \$100 Peace Corps *sueldo*. San Juan is the municipal seat and arriving there requires a four hour bus trip on a rutted dirt road that is only passable when it is not raining.

In San Juan I can forget the miserable drunks who frequent my hut, Édén's sweet hungry eyes, Felix's crippled baby. In San Juan I spend my days with a local missionary, Brad Word, who lets me gorge on American cereal and peanut butter. Brad is a big, balding, freckled Okie with piercing blue eyes that twinkle when he describes imminent eschatological horrors. He knows I am Jewish and assures me that I will have a special role in the apocalypse. When I have eaten my fill, he foists poorly written

Evangelical screeds upon me, which I accept only because I know my appetite for American cereal will return.

My evenings in San Juan are spent in a dumpy local inn, Motel Ña Mirta, where the proprietor's daughters flirt with me while I get drunk on cold pilsner.

I am half-drunk in the lobby of Ña Mirta when I lose myself reading A.W. Tozer's *The Pursuit of God*. The first line grabs me: "In this hour of all-but-universal darkness one cheering gleam appears..." I finish the book in one sitting. I have never read anything quite like it—part exhortation, part achingly intimate invocation—prose flowing seamlessly into metered verse—reveling in mystery and mysticism.

The rest of the night I lie awake in my stuffy motel room, unsure how I will satisfy the new hunger I am feeling. I want more of it—whatever it is.

The next day I arrive at Brad's house early, asking if he has anything else like the Tozer book. After much searching, we find nothing. Given my general distaste for everything else he has given me, it seems appropriate that there is nothing in his library quite like it.



I have no words for exactly what I like about Tozer, but one line sticks with me: "Self is the opaque veil that hides the face of God from us."

I begin reading anything that I can get my hands on that speaks to the idea that there is a mysterious spiritual realm just beyond our grasp. Fortunately, the Peace Corps library is a veritable treasure trove of books on world spirituality. I read the entire Bible cover to cover, the Bhagavad-Gita, an English translation of the Quran, the complete works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the poet Rumi. I write long treatises in a leather-bound journal on subjects like the "over-soul" and "transcendence."

I make friends with another Peace Corps Volunteer, Daniel, a farm boy from Iowa who is the only person actually willing to talk about the strange things I am reading. Daniel participated in Nevada's Burning Man festival several times while he was in college and says it is the most important thing he has ever done in his life. He describes the event as a week-long, multi-sensory feast for free thinkers and creative types. Daniel thinks that the folks at Burning Man would really dig the stuff I am reading.

Daniel also thinks I ought to consider consuming hallucinogenic mushrooms, which are plentiful in rural Paraguayan communities. He tells me how to identify them—on cow patties after a good rain—and says that they'll help me plumb great mysteries of life.



I am with Felix when I carefully pluck a small cluster of hallucinogenic mushrooms from the top of an old cow patty.

"Why do you gather those?" Felix asks in Guaraní.

I tell him the truth. Felix stops in his tracks.

"Pedro, those are *drogas!*" he says.

I tell him that they are not *drogas*; they're *medicina*—they'll help me see things differently, maybe better. I use the term I learned from Daniel—psilocybin—because I think it sounds more clinical, more scientific.

We argue for quite a while about the difference between *medicina y drogas*. "Pedro, do you know why they call me *Felix Tavy?*" he asks, exasperated. "They call me Crazy Felix because I went crazy for a while. My woman left me to go back and live with her parents and took Teresa, who was a baby then."

Felix's gentle green eyes are glassy, tears running down his craggy face. I don't know what to say so I put my hand on his shoulder and look away.

“Pedro, I used to see things that are not real—like with those mushrooms—and it is the devil. I am just a poor farmer and have not read many books like you, but I know this. It is only thanks to God that I regained my sanity. Please, Pedro, don’t take it.”

I drop the mushrooms in the dirt.

“Thank you, Pedro,” Felix says wiping his face.

I feel awful and try to think of something to say that will make me sound slightly less like a spoiled American who is not grateful for his own health and sanity.

“I read something,” I tell Felix finally, trying my best to translate my favorite line from Tozer. “‘Self is the opaque veil that hides the face of God from us.’ I guess I thought that the mushrooms might help remove the veil, you know?”

“You want to know God, Pedro?” Felix asks.

I nod, realizing suddenly that this is the source of the longing I feel, a hunger for God.

“Let me tell you how to pray,” Felix says.

And I listen.