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Mendel Abbe Reports from Mexico

Mo and Jo (by permission) Part II

How Mo got to Veracruz was a matter of much speculation on the streets of the famous port city. Peddlers, street sellers, students at the Naval Academy, stevedores and container crane operators in the shipyards, fishermen hauling their nets, marimba players, bus drivers, teenagers in the secundarias, women cleaning hotel rooms and those working the front desks of hotels and shoe stores, waiters, ice vendors and raspado sellers, indigenous women and their children selling shirts with typical native designs, newspaper hawkers and radio DJs, all were overheard promoting their own theories of how a pigeon—a talking pigeon—had made it all the way from Jalisco down to the stormy eastern coast. And through it all Mo, garrulous by history though he was, never said a word. He wasn't talking.

Jo, moreover, was there too, but he was in the shadows, incognito. No one knew he too could talk, whereas with Mo word had got around. Jo spoke only to pigeons and never a word to the humans he encountered. Are you surprised? Jo, the smarter bird, saw the writing on the wall. He had noticed the graffiti that said: "the end of the world is coming. Atone now for your sins and be born again in Jesus." It was a big fat sign right across from the Aloha hotel they were staying at.

This was no single-can spray-paint job, but the work of an entire crew of graffitistas. Although he had become a proficient reader, Jo had no idea what this meant. And so it had frightened him because he understood "end of the world" in literal terms in English and Spanish.

If the humans wrote “the end of the world is coming”, it could be true or worse. They were very powerful; it could reflect their intentions for him. Weren’t they the ones who coined that phrase “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush”? He’d seen enough cousins go to the ovens behind that one. So on the linguistic plane Jo was metaphorically naïve but smart enough to steer clear of humans, happily eating crumbs from the bird lady on the Zocolo and cooing with deferential delight when he wasn’t pecking insects and seeds. Jo was underground.

Had it not been for Mo then, Jo might have continued this idyllic existence for a very long while. But Mo had taken to silence too late. He was the talk of the town and the object of propitious legends and a capture-on-sight, orange alert.

For, you see, times had changed since the Jalisco days. Big brother Fox had been El Presidente now for some time and having some trouble with his older and bigger brother, bald-faced Eagle, in the North. Brother Eagle had trained brother Fox and they had “ties that bind”. Still, brother Fox had to remonstrate regularly against the encarcelimiento and derotando of all of his charges who crossed the flacco border. What else could he do? The cruceros became play toys for the Paz y Justicia crowd of the Peregrines y Perromigras whose joy in life was sustained by mordiendo las piernas of the humans whose tracks they sniffed out interminably along the endless margin from el Pacifica to el Rio Grande land dividing Gringolandia and the underworld of the serpiente, agila, aula y miercelagos. An even bigger problem for the Fox trotter was that the new Rey of Bald-Eagleland was deep into S & M (ondo y ancho). He loved the pena de muerte, especially for Xicanos y Negros. Besides the humiliation of this for brother Fox, murder was also considered murder by most of the naciones del mundo including the land of the serpiente, agila, aula y miercelagos. So no Fox worth his tail could avoid a degree of shouting

and pouting while dovening to the Gods of the great warriors of the North. But enough of that and back to Jo.

I ran into Jo at the old Fort, the baluarte built on a barrier island by the Spanish invaders to protect their port at Veracruz from pirates. Ironically, San Juan Ulua was completed long after pirates had disappeared from the Caribbean scene and it functioned mainly as a preventive defense against a threatening invasion by greater powers, the British and the French, as well as an inspiration for Walt Disney's Pirates of the Caribbean. I poked my head into one of the cold dank 3 foot thick-walled dungeons. It was one of the small ones, just big enough for a single man. As it happened this cell was where El Presidente, Benito Juarez, had been held. My eyes became accustomed to the dim light slowly and a form emerged sitting on a stone slab jutting from the wall; a slab which had served as a palate. It was a pigeon. "You look familiar", I said in my broken Spanish (me parece familiar). The bird did not recoil to these words as most pigeons might, but responded, "cooo, crroooo."

"Don't you remember me? I'm Mendel. We met at Tlaquepaque and later in the Grande Hotel. I swear you're Jo. I wouldn't mistake that scar on your beak for any other bird." Again, "crroooooo, crrrrroooooo".

"Have you lost your voice then Jo? Or are you frightened?" A moment of silence passed.

"Yes, I'm frightened, Mendel," the bird spoke distinctly. "I'm frightened of the terror, the terrorism. Swear not to tell anyone that you know a linguistically abled pigeon. They'll capture and kill us."

"Ok, Jo, I promise I won't tell anyone without your permission. But who are the terrorists who are after you and why?"

“I trust you Mendel, so I hope you can help us. It is me, Jo, the malcriado.”

“I’ll start back in Guadalajara. Mo and I had set up classes to teach pigeons how to speak and then read. Our classes went so well they were always oversubscribed. Soon those we taught were spreading out and teaching others and some began to insist that we set up a language school for pigeons. Many of the newly language enabled pigeons wanted to become teachers too. And the demand continued to grow. Still others began to argue ‘why stop at Spanish? Pigeons,’ they claimed, ‘were smart enough to learn many languages. We all have sisters and brothers throughout the world in every city. They all need to learn’.

“So there was a big meeting one night in June in the belfry of the Cathedral on the Zocolo where we, Mo and I, were assigned to form a faculty of language and begin the first pigeon university. Sad to say, that was the beginning of the trouble though we didn’t know it at the time.”