

*fried butter*

A FOOD MEMOIR

ABE OPINCAR

**SOHO**

With one exception, the chapters all appeared previously in the  
San Diego *Reader* under the pseudonym of Max Nash.

Copyright © 2003 by Abe Opincar.

All rights reserved.

Published by  
Soho Press, Inc.  
853 Broadway  
New York, NY 10003  
www.sohopress.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data


Opincar, Abe, 1961–  
Fried butter : a food memoir / Abe Opincar.  
p. cm.  
ISBN 1-56947-334-X (alk. paper)  
1. Opincar, Abe, 1961– —Biography. 2. Cookery, International.  
I. Title.

TX649.O63A3 2003  
641.59—dc21

2002042911

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For my father and for my brother,  
may their memory be always for blessing.*



hippies were said to hold orgies in Golden Gate Park. Jeffrey could imagine them chanting, "Make love, not war!"

He knew that down in the East Village, hordes of barefoot, middle-class kids crowded the sidewalks. They thronged the Free Store and the Psychedelicatessen. The Fugs performed at the Players Theater on Macdougall Street. Lethargic Jeffrey imagined himself down in the East Village, wandering barefoot in tropical heat. He imagined sweaty, long-haired girls, flimsy cotton clothes clinging to damp, braless bodies. He groaned and buried his head in his pillow and dozed off.

"By the end of August I'd lost forty pounds," he told me, mournfully, "I looked great. I didn't have a girlfriend. I'd slept through the Summer of Love."

## chapter nine

**B**Y THE MID-1970S, WHEN the Teamsters began making inroads into the United Farm Workers union, Lila, my doctor, felt she had been marching in demonstrations for too long. She felt frustrated. She was tired of *La Lucha*, The Struggle. So, twenty-five years ago she took a bus from Los Angeles to San Diego, and another bus from San Diego to Tijuana, and another from Tijuana, heading south to the state of Guerrero where, Lila hoped, she could lie on the beach, relax, and forget.

The red-and-white bus drove through deserts and forests, and

down, slowly, to a barren, sea-level expanse called *El Infiernillo*, Little Hell, where the Mexican government had dammed the Rio Balsas and was building an enormous hydroelectric plant. Close to the coast, the bus passed through miles of coconut groves, and through a town called *El Naranjito*, Little Orange Tree, where, standing in front of a palm-thatched cantina, beautiful transvestites in shimmering dresses waited to entertain construction workers from the hydroelectric plant. The transvestites were more beautiful than the women of Guerrero.

Lila rented a hut near the beach from a man named Valentín. She dozed in a hammock. She swam. She ate papaya and spat the seeds onto the ground in front of her hut, where, in time, they began to sprout. Weeks passed. The same dry heat. The same blinding glare off the water. The same sound of the sea, day and night. Lila began to feel more hopeful and one morning she woke up, rolled out of her hammock and, reaching for her white tennis shoe, felt a searing pain in her little finger. It felt like someone had shoved a red hot needle through the skin, right through to the bone.

She looked in the shoe and saw a small brown scorpion staring back at her. Careful not to crush it completely, she thumped it with a magazine. Her palm was already numb when, a few minutes later, she showed the brown scorpion to Valentín.

"My God, baby," he said. "The nearest doctor's an hour away. Your only hope is to see Doña Toña."

Doña Toña, Lila recalls, was an ugly name and it belonged

to a medicine woman who lived in the sandy hills, a thirty-minute hike from the beach. Lila had no choice. The numbness had already spread above her wrist and was on its way, she knew, to her heart. Choking on white powdery sand, she followed Valentín up into the hills.

Doña Toña, a squat brown woman, was feeding chickens when Lila and Valentín arrived.

"Oh, my God," she said when Valentín showed her the scorpion. She looked at Lila, who was feeling light-headed. "Come inside."

Doña Toña's shack was made entirely of palm fronds. She'd filled it with candles and oil lamps. Bundles of herbs hung from the ceiling. Sooty statues of saints and photos of dead people crowded makeshift shelves. On a small table sat a bowl in which Doña Toña had stacked a perfect pyramid of yellow limes, what Americans call "Key limes," smaller and much more fragrant than the Persian variety grown in California. Lila could smell them from where she stood. In the dim shack, they seemed to glow. Doña Toña examined each fruit and chose one and cut it in half. With her finger she scooped out some pulp and studied it carefully. With a bit of old muslin she tied the halved lime to Lila's little finger. She dipped a boar's-hair brush into an oil lamp and painted a line around Lila's arm, just below her shoulder.

"The poison won't go past that line," Doña Toña said. "And whatever you do, don't let the lime fall off your finger."

"Are you sure this is going to work?" Lila asked.

Doña Toña looked at her as if she were deranged. "Of course."

Valentín guided Lila back down the hills and by the time they got to his house, the numbness had reached the line drawn in oil on Lila's arm. Valentín's wife helped her into a hammock. His five children came to stare. Lila was waving her hands in front of her face, grabbing at something invisible in the air before her nose.

"I'm growing a trunk," Lila told Valentín. "Like an elephant."  
 "Una trompa? De elefante?"

This was the most hilarious thing Valentín's children had ever heard. They cackled. "I'm an elephant, too! I'm an elephant, too!" They ran around the room, trumpeting like baby elephants. Valentín chased them outside. He tied the lime tighter to Lila's finger. Lila fell asleep.

For the rest of the day and all night long she tried to grab her phantom trunk. She could see it clearly—the wrinkly tough gray skin, the bristly hairs—but it evaded her grasp. She dreamt she was in Africa. She dreamt of elephants who seemed very proud of their trunks. They taunted her with displays of skill, ostentatiously using their trunks to pick tiny yellow limes from tall trees. No matter how hard Lila tried, she couldn't make her trunk work. She couldn't even touch it.

Late the following day she woke up. The lime was still tied to her finger, but her trunk had disappeared. Valentín's wife brought her fresh coconut milk, and in the afternoon Lila returned to her hut. The next morning the sun rose as it

always does in that part of the world, dazzling and relentless. Lila felt fine.

Valentín took the scorpion to the transvestite cantina in *El Naranjito*. Impressed by Lila's story, the owner had the scorpion laminated into the bar counter. In Lila's honor he changed the cantina's name to The Elephant Bar, which, the transvestites complained, wasn't an elegant name at all.



LILA'S FRIEND ROSARIO never had a mind for politics. She was from a large and poor family that lived miserably in Mexicali, a city just across the Mexican border, one hundred and ten miles east of San Diego. By the time Rosario finished high school, two of her fourteen cousins had died of cirrhosis and the rest were aspiring to careers in petty thievery or drug peddling. Rosario wanted to be a doctor.

"I'm never coming back," Rosario told her mother the day she left to study at a San Diego university that had awarded her a scholarship.

Her mother said, "Good luck."

Rosario did well in school. She discovered she enjoyed the study of parasites and diseases of the lower digestive tract. In 1972 she received a grant to participate in a World Health Organization project improving the living conditions of Brazilian Indians who lived on a tributary of the Amazon. Rosario was

excited. She knew the Indians had many stomach problems. She'd never traveled before.

On her way to Brazil she stopped to investigate a viral gastroenteritis study conducted in the Guatemalan highlands. She then went to El Salvador to visit Tomás, a boy she met at her university. Tomás wore his long black hair in a ponytail. He was completing a thesis on Salvadoran agriculture, which, as far as Rosario could tell, consisted mostly of corn.

Once she was south of Mexico, Rosario ate a lot of corn. In Guatemala and El Salvador people didn't eat thin soft tortillas, but thick stiff *gorditas*, corncakes, the size of her palm. Even in the swampy heat of coastal El Salvador, people rose in the morning and drank *atol*, a sweet dense drink made from ground corn. Men sold boiled corn on the streetcorners of La Libertad, the coastal city where Rosario and Tomás stayed. Endless cornfields lined both sides of the sandy road between La Libertad and Zumzal, a small town farther down the coast, where Rosario and Tomás went to eat *arroz valenciana*, a rice dish made with chunks of fish, shrimp, carrots and, of course, bright yellow kernels of corn.

One day Tomás took Rosario to the cornfields to show her, he said, how corn worked. He showed her the male flower, the tassel, at the very top of the stock, and, way down below, the silky female flower that caught pollen blown by the wind. Tomás, Rosario could tell, loved corn as much as she loved parasites. Tomás also loved El Salvador. He grumbled that things in the country weren't right.

Rosario heard other people grumble, too. While Tomás worked on his thesis she lay on La Libertad's black sand beaches and eavesdropped on lithe girls from the capital who sunbathed around her. The government, they complained, had shut down the universities. The government, they said, had arrested the recently elected president and vice president.

Rosario studied her parasitology textbooks. She sipped cold beer. Tomás worked harder on his thesis, sometimes not stopping to eat. One late afternoon Rosario went alone to Zumzal for *arroz valenciana* and stayed too long at the restaurant. She watched the way the sunset shined on shiny black sand. She missed the last bus to La Libertad. It was only seven miles away. She decided to walk.

Twilight is brief at that latitude. Rosario started down the empty road. The sky grew dark. She heard a car approaching slowly behind her. She turned and saw a white Mercedes with a mustached man at the wheel. He drove up beside her. He asked if she needed a ride. "I can take you anywhere you want to go." Rosario said no and kept walking. The man pulled his car in front of her, blocking her way. She turned and ran. She fell. When the man grabbed her and dragged her back to his car, she picked up a handful of sand. With his hands around her neck the man tried to force Rosario into his car. She struggled. She fell. The man kicked her again and again. She watched his snakeskin boot pound her ribs, but she felt nothing.

"Stop," she said. "I'll go with you. I want to kiss you. I want you to fuck me."

He let her stand. She threw her handful of sand into his eyes and dashed deep into the cornfields. The leaves cut her face and hands. She lay down in dirt. She heard the man drive away, and then nothing except the buzzing of a thousand mosquitoes.

Tomás took Rosario to the hospital. He asked her if she would recognize the man if she ever saw him again. And she did, a week later, at the beach, where he sat with a woman and two children. Rosario ran and told Tomás who ran and found his friend Victor, who hunted iguanas and had a rifle.

“Just give me the word,” Tomás told Rosario. “We’ll kill that rich bastard.”

Victor nodded. “*En este parte del mundo, la muerte es banal.*” In this part of the world, death is banal.

Rosario looked at Tomás and realized he’d been in El Salvador long enough to absorb the country’s ethos. She told Victor to go home. Two days later she left for Brazil.

Tomás stayed on in El Salvador. He wrote Rosario saying that every time he traveled between La Libertad and Zumzal he thought of her. When Rosario returned to the States, Tomás’ letters were few. He wrote of massacres and death squads and bodies left to rot by the side of the road. Rosario suggested he leave El Salvador. But in time his letters ceased.

## chapter ten

**F**OR MANY YEARS I couldn’t stand the taste of cinnamon and chocolate. During a *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* period of my father’s life, he lived in Mexico where he learned Spanish and became an aficionado of Mexican food. In our home hot chocolate wasn’t Nestlé, but Ibarra brand chocolate, Mexican-made and spiced with cinnamon. At my father’s insistence my mother whipped the chocolate to a froth with a wooden Mexican whisk, a *molinillo*, which he taught her to spin, in the Mexican manner, between her palms. Back then, *gringo* supermarkets didn’t