

The summer of 2010 was auspicious in two ways: one, I made my first trip to Central America, in that I went to Guatemala in late June, where I crashed the Kaqchikel course that Judie teaches there for a week. Prior to this, I had never been further south than Venice, LA (rest assured that I have been all over Europe, so I'm not so deprived in the end). Two, the end of the summer marked my first foray into camping since an ill-fated trip to Deeks Lake in coastal British Columbia with a couple of friends over Labour Day weekend in 1996. That trip resulted in a twisted ankle for all participants, and of course I cut myself pretty badly. Because it's not a camping trip till I've had to pull out the first aid kit. My return to the backwoods was triumphant, to say the least, though I'm fairly sure that I've been asked to write this as a way of gauging the accuracy of my stories about the adventures I have conducting linguistic research in rural Louisiana. Anyway, on to the tale.

We left on the 15th (a Sunday) and drove all day to get to Cherokee, NC, right on the edge of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Judie insisted that we drive all over town till we found the old motels along the river. So we had a motel room right by the riverbank. I approved of the plan to avoid the casino and the new, fancier motels. My students can attest to my love of "lesser" motels. Anyway, for various reasons that were somewhat vague to me, Judie and Ajpub' decided that we should have a ceremony right then and there. I was game for adventure, of course.

So the three of us climbed over our balcony railing and down the riverbank in the dark (good thing I brought the flashlight along) and we had the ceremony down by the river. This meant that we stood there smoking cigars in the dark and blowing smoke on each other while Ajpub' said things in Kaqchikel that I didn't understand. I had one cigar and then felt dizzy and had to sit down. I was pretty sure I was going to throw up.

"IxNatalia," Judie began, using a name that I earned myself in a moment of what can only be described as inspiration in Guatemala, and I grunted a response as I sat with my head on my knees .

"If you see anything while you're feeling dizzy, you should talk."

Great. About the last thing I needed was hallucinations. Fortunately, I didn't have any. But who knew tobacco could have such an effect? I miss all the memos. Later, when we got back to the room, Judie told me you could also blow into the cigar to burn it down. I've filed that piece of information away for future reference.

The next morning, we were up at some ungodly hour. I think it was 5:30. I could still taste cigar in my mouth, even after my second tooth-brushing in 10 hours. After a brief stop for food and to secure a camping spot, we were off to Chimney Tops, a peak Judie had climbed often as a child. The good people at the visitor center warned us of the "rock scramble" at the top, but Judie mocked their concern.

Upon arrival at the trail head, we walked up the Little Pigeon River just out of sight of the bridge by the parking so that we could conduct another ceremony, this time for

Judie's parents. We were at the spot where she'd deposited their ashes (mixed together) five years ago. I declined to smoke this time. I figured getting dizzy and having a nasty taste in my mouth right before a hike was a bad idea. But just sitting down for a few minutes made me want to take a nap. I'd had little sleep over the past four days, and I was tired. Great condition to be in for a hike.

Also, I had brought along my camera and, upon further contemplation, my phone, so that I could take pictures with it. Besides, there were multiple signs telling us to take all valuables with us up the hill. I figured theft was probably rampant. The sun was shining and it was a pleasant morning.

So up the trail we went. And all was well until we were just near the top, when it started to rain. And with the rain came a nice cool wind, at that elevation. We were on a narrow strip of land that dropped off several hundred feet on either side of us, but we managed to hide behind the trunk of a large tree to block most of the wind, and we had some lunch. I was still freezing. I also decided to put my camera and my phone in Judie's backpack, because my bag is made of cloth, and her backpack is made of the usual semi-waterproof material. I put it in the innermost pocket, where I figured it would be protected by several layers of semi-waterproof material.

While we ate, waiting for the rain to stop, a squirrel watched us and finally gathered up the nerve to approach us to beg. I had to share my sandwich with him, clearly. It was very, very cute. Not so cute was when my sandwich was done but the rain was not, and we continued to sit in the shade of the tree, though by now my back was soaking wet from the rain, and the squirrel became irate that I was no longer feeding him, and also increasingly bold, and now he was hopping up onto my leg demanding food. His claws, unlike those of my cat, were not clipped. Eeek!

Anyway, the rain started to taper off, and though it was still freezing, Ajpub' got tired of waiting and just started up the open rock face to the peak. It was maybe a 60-foot climb, up a small projection of open rock, hanging over a valley, to the top. I stopped about 30 or 40 feet up when I hit a point that required me to do some serious climbing, without a rope to catch me if I slipped. It was terrifying. But at the very least, the rock was a nice dark shale that retained heat well. It was actually warmer than the spot behind the tree, though the sun was not back (though the rain had stopped entirely by this point).

A few feet beyond where I'd stopped, Ajpub' and Judie also came to a halt and decided we should try the small trail that looped around the peak instead. That path, incidentally, was closed, though someone had marked in sharpie, dated July 31, 2010, that it was still the best way to the top. Ajpub' and Judie were clearly bound and determined to get to the top. We slunk around the barricade.

"Is that lightning?" a fellow hiker, aged perhaps 14, asked from behind us on the trail.

"Good idea," Judie commented, "Climbing a bald mountain in a thunder storm." But she also didn't suggest we turn around.

The path looked like it was made of part of the mountain that was peeling away from the rock. Trees hung off at 90 degree angles. I tried not to think about what would happen if the path gave way. Judie yelled at me to not mention it, in fact. In the end, we still had to rock climb, up the front edge of the rock overhang we'd been on top of before. Ajpub' apparently lacks a proper sense of fear, and he went first. Somehow I managed to get the courage to follow him before Judie did, though at the top, she decided to scare me shitless by hopping out toward the very edge. I took one or two pictures of her and Ajpub' and then refused to look at them, perched on the edge, again. Instead, I found a spot on the nice hot shale that allowed me to sit as though I were in a La-z-boy, and I contemplated the drop of hundreds of feet that lay not fifteen feet away from me. I also contemplated the very pretty mountain tops in the distance. I contemplated asking for my camera, but that would have required moving to even scarier spots, and once again looking at Judie and Ajpub' on the edge, so it stayed put. Anyway, it started to spit again as we were up there, so I insisted that we climb down before it started to rain again.

We made it back to the forest just in time for it to start raining again, this time in earnest. Just as my shirt had started to dry, it was soaked. I mean, SOAKED. It was like I was taking a shower. As we descended, the rain got worse, and I finally gave up trying to keep my shoes dry and just accepted the water pooling inside them. I was glad my camera and phone were in Judie's bag, as my cloth bag could not possibly be wetter. I ran ahead of Ajpub' and Judie because if I slowed down, I was going to be cold. I was already cold. But hypothermia was not on my agenda of things to do. As I passed a father and son on the way down, they commented that they wished they had soap, so they could take a proper shower in this rain. And seriously, I have never been wetter in my life unless I was coming out of a pool or some other basin of water.

Back at the car, I passed the family, including the 14-year-old hiker, who had joined us at the top. They asked if we'd made it to the peak. I told them I wouldn't take my kids up there, and that satisfied their fear that they'd missed something totally awesome. I changed into my hooded sweatshirt, but there was no way to take off my bottoms without a serious loss of dignity, so I just had to sit there in soaking wet shorts. I sat on my raincoat, which had helpfully been in the car all this time. Who knew it would rain?

Judie and Ajpub' showed up five or ten minutes later, threw everything into the back and hopped into the car. Judie wanted to check back into the motel, given the rain, and while on some level I was all for this, I told her we should at least wait till 6 PM before we went back to the motel. I suggested we check out the kitschy crap shops in town to pass some time. This suggestion was met with enthusiasm.

So into town we went, and Ajpub' bought himself some gear, Judie got some thimbles, and I got a back scratcher with a black bear's head on the top and a claw for a scratcher and a whittled wooden wolf whistle keychain. I also discovered rain ponchos emblazoned with bears and the words "Great Smoky Mountains" on them. They were only \$1.50. We each got one.

By now it had stopped raining, and as we left, Ajpub' pulled Judie's backpack out of the trunk and started pulling out the contents.

"Oh no!" he said to me, in Spanish, "Your camera!"

And indeed, my camera was a bit damp. He pulled out his own, equally wet, as well, and I told him I had a phone in there, too. Things didn't look too bad, though. Such illusions! As it happened, the bag was apparently holding water inside it. The batteries in my camera were rusted by the time I pulled them out, and the phone was totally dead. The little white patch inside my phone that alerts you to the fact that the phone has gotten wet was bright purple. Indeed, my phone was soaked. I dried it off, to no avail.

And then we got to the campsite and learned that our matches were also all soaked, and we had no pegs for the tarp, so I went into town to buy matches, pegs, and a hatchet for chopping up firewood.

As it happens, Cherokee does not have a hardware store. Or an outdoors store. Or anything, really, except places selling tourist kitsch. I discovered the Family Dollar, where the manager gave me some pegs for holding up merchandise for free, and I bought some matches and also marshmallows, which we'd forgotten earlier. I picked up three bundles of wood on the way back. Wood is super expensive, too: \$3 per bundle. The bundles aren't large. I returned to find the tent and tarp set up.

Sadly, I returned hatchet-free. So I borrowed a hatchet from a neighbour and discovered that wood is really hard in the Smokies. Some of the pieces wouldn't chop, no matter what I tried, and my hatchet just bounced right off them. The Pacific Northwest, this was not. But I managed to get enough of them small enough, and then I used my jack knife to cut some shavings, and I started the fire with a single match. I was very proud of my matchless fires.

Following some confusion with the jackknife can openers, Judie made us an excellent dinner, and I managed to get the fire blazing while she cooked, so we hung up our clothes on the tarp support ropes. I still had to light the lantern, though, which I accomplished while eating dinner, so that finally -- finally -- everything was in place and ready to go. Lighting the lantern involved burning the new mantles first; it was quite the endeavor. But things were looking up.

Several hours later, however, my shoes had still not dried, so Ajpub' got the brilliant idea to put them into the actual fire pit to dry. This worked pretty well, and they were only damp by the end of the evening. And then it was blazing hot in the tent all night, and the ground was hard and I hurt in eight different places the next day, but at least I was catching up on sleep! Somehow, I ended up with a side spot, which was odd because I was the tallest so by all rights I should have had the longest, middle spot, but instead I had this side spot and my feet were rammed up against the side of the tent and all night I was dreaming that my feet were hitting up against a deer outside the tent, and then in my dream the deer were biting at us through the tent...anyway, back to the story.

Though it was fairly clear, if chilly on Tuesday, the forecast was for a 60% chance of showers. The dew, meanwhile, had wet everything again, so I threw my sneakers into the car to finish drying and decided to make that day's hike with my flip flops. They were fairly sturdy, thick soles with double straps, but flip flops nonetheless. We opted to hike, on the rangers' recommendation, to a place called Charlie's Bunion. It was a three mile hike. So I hiked six miles in flip flops, and of course it rained, most of the day, so I did this all in the rain. Several people on the trail commented on my footwear. We all pulled out our rain ponchos, which solicited a "Bless your hearts, you have your Great Smoky Mountain ponchos" from two old men, seasoned hikers. I took the opportunity to ask them about the berries I'd been noticing, which looked like huckleberries, or at least the bushes did, but they were too dark to be huckleberries as I knew them, and the shape of the berry was a bit wrong. They confirmed that they were huckleberries, so I contented myself by eating them whenever we passed them.

Anyway, Charlie's Bunion was a typical hike to a jutting rock overhanging a drop of several hundred feet. Again, Judie and Ajpub' scared the living shit out of me by heading out to the edge of the precipice. There are photos. Fortunately, it cleared long enough for us to actually see the vista rather than some clouds. At the bunion, we met some amusing fellow hikers, a young father and his young son. They heard Judie and Ajpub' speaking Kaqchikel and asked me where "you", which I interpreted as me, were from. I didn't even realize they were asking because of the language until I told them New Orleans and they said, "So what is that, French?"

Which of course was hilarious to me. I corrected them.

"But they do speak French in New Orleans, right?"

Cue lecture on that subject.

"But there were a lot of French settlers in New Orleans, right?"

"Yes."

We, by which I mean Judie and I, were both sore from the day before, but we survived the hike alright. Walking cleared up the stiffness and pain in no time. Still, we were a little more sore on our return to the car. Six miles will do that to you. The hikes around Vancouver are much more steep than these were, but ours also lack the death-defying trails that hug the edges of cliffs.

But the first two days were largely without such terrifying precipices. It was mostly trekking through the woods, though occasionally on a narrow ridge, till you got to some death-defying outcrop that marked the end of the trail, and possibly your life, if you slipped. The hike to Charlie's Bunion wasn't particularly steep, but it was a pretty tough trail. In fact, it's listed as being very challenging, as it turns out. Lots of bumps and roots and rocks and slippery mud. I'm surprised I managed to not twist an ankle or even fall. Not once! In flipflops! In the rain!

Either way, after our six mile flip-flopped ordeal, we returned to town to eat burgers (because it just wouldn't stop raining and we were NOT setting up the camp stove in the rain), and it was from the window of the Burger King that I saw the mechanical bull in front of the crap emporium next door. Clearly, I had to ride, and we went over after lunch. When I asked how much it cost to ride, the woman running it asked how old I was. I actually laughed as I gave my age (34, for those playing the home game). What was the cutoff for the lower price, you ask?

Seventeen. Yes, she was wondering if I was 16 or younger. It might have been the funniest moment of my life; I'm not sure.

Judie took pictures of me on the bull, and falling off it. I came away with a bit less skin on my right elbow, and a little bit less dignity. But a lot more fun.

We then visited the Cherokee museum and discovered that Cherokee also has no drug stores, in addition to its lack of hardware stores, when Judie and Ajpub' wanted moleskin for their blisters. They had to make do with this bizarre spray called NuSkin, which I'm convinced is a miracle product, and some cushioned bandaids.

We kept the fly open that night to keep it cooler. I did not dream about biting deer this time.

By Wednesday morning, my body was in full-on rebellion mode. I ached so bad from the hiking that I could hardly walk. But Judie's plan was to climb the tallest mountain in the Smokies, so it was off to Mount Le Conte. We took the Alum Bluffs trail, which the rangers said was the prettiest in the park. I was incredibly skeptical of this claim, sure in my grumpy, aching state that it was just trees up to some rocky outlook at the top. And it was cold at the trailhead when we started out. And my body ached. I mean, *ached*. I very nearly turned around half an hour in and refused to go further. But of course, I'm glad I went after all.

For starters, for once, the weather held and we didn't get rained on (while hiking, anyway). And the trail wound along precipices on mountainsides and passed by some amazing yellow caves.

I amused myself by eating every blackberry, huckleberry, and even blueberry we passed. I had also forgotten my water bottle, so I drank from every creek we crossed, and the water was quite delicious. I figured if I can drink the creek water in BC, and people can drink rainwater down in Pointe aux Chenes, creek water in the Smokies is surely clean enough, too.

At the top, there was a lodge, where we bought drinks and also a "bakeless brownie", and we were constantly warned that there were bears in the area. Be careful! On and on. In fact, campers have to sleep in a bear cage thanks to thoughtless campers of years gone by who fed the bears. We saw evidence of their passing. The crest of the mountain featured a man-made flat rock pile, so we added our rocks to the pile. Then Judie insisted on going

out to the clifftops for the view, and I don't know how she still had the stamina to do this, because my legs were killing me by this point, and so Ajpub' and I sat in rocking chairs on the lodge porch and had a nap instead. It was cold enough to wear sweaters at the top, but it was warm on the porch in the sun. The lodge is cut off from the world. No phone, no Internet, and everything is brought up by llamas.

Anyway, we were maybe 200 feet into our descent when we passed a guy on his way up who told us there was a bear in the bushes around the bend. So we advanced cautiously, only to see the bear emerging from the bushes and onto the path as we approached. Naturally, we all stopped, and Judie and Ajpub' pulled out the cameras while I was confused by how small the bear was because all the bears I've seen in BC were bigger, and then the bear started walking our way, and we had some minor panic because this bear, who could not have cared less that we were there, was headed straight for us. Fortunately, he found himself (or she found herself; who can say?) a patch of blackberries inaccessible to the likes of me, and we passed by not six feet away, unmolested. I figured if all the bears in the Smokies were that small, I wasn't worried about anything. That was probably foolish thinking, but then, you don't see me feeding them, either. That squirrel taught me a lesson.

Walking down hurt like hell, and in fact, after sitting for a few minutes I tried to get up and nearly fell over when my muscles refused to co-operate. I was done. On the way down, I threatened repeatedly to go tubing the next day if the weather held. Tubing on the local rivers is advertised all over the place. It looked like great fun.

Of course, the weather didn't hold. It held long enough for us to eat our food and have our fire and go to bed, and then in the night it started raining and we had to leap up to close the fly, and when we got up in the morning it was still raining, and we had to pack up everything in the rain, and we had all had more than enough of the rain. The clothes that got wet the first day never dried. Even after we put them under the tarp. Even after we held them by the fire. They refused, outright, to be anything less than damp (though my shoes did dry, as did my bag; I was able to wear my sneakers up LeConte, thank God, because flip flops would not have cut it on that hike). The place was like a Vancouver camping nightmare with the rain.

So we packed up and drove south, to Pensacola and the beach, where we figured it would be hot and awesome. Along the way, maybe two hours into the drive, Judie drove over a piece of blown out tire and blew out our own tire in the process. Of course, the tire blew just as it started to rain, and to get at the donut we had to pull everything out of the trunk, so our stuff was sitting out in the rain, which was fantastic. And of course we have the worst luck ever and the sidewall had blown, so one brand new tire later, we were good to go.

We made Pensacola Beach by nightfall.

I was fine and could have kept on going. I had been driving since Cleveland, TN, because I missed my calling as a truck driver. But the others had had enough of driving. So we checked into the Days Inn on Pensacola Beach.

Ajpub' and I went for food while Judie went for a walk on the beach. As we ate our subs from the only fast food place on the island, Subway, Ajpub' thanked me for bringing us to Pensacola.

"Otherwise," he said, "we would have had to climb another mountain!"

The next day we hit the beach. I bought a boogie board for \$3.99 in the morning and Ajpub' and I had some fun riding it on the waves and collecting shells. I am also here to report that there is oil aplenty in the Gulf, though the beaches are open. I found a shell covered in a nice tar ball and I gave up on the water. I took a swim in the motel pool to wash off any benzyne, and didn't notice till afterward that there was oil on my skin that wouldn't rub off. No matter; a nice shower with Dawn took care of that. We figured if it's good enough for otters, it's good enough for us.

So there it is. A good time was had by all, I'd venture to guess. At least, I had a good time. While I didn't get any blisters nor did I sprain an ankle, I apparently gave myself plantar fasciitis on my left heel, and I appear to have done something to the first two fingers on my left hand. I lost some skin to the mechanical bull and I burned my arm on the fire pit (thus necessitating the traditional opening of the first aid kit). But no limbs are missing! Success! I did manage to buy a hatchet on Tuesday from this incredible junk and trade store called the Cherokee Trading Post. I hope to someday visit that store again.