

Alisa Bohling

Script for the Guatemala Radio Project (translated from the Spanish original)

Reported and broadcast in April 2008 on various community channels in Guatemala

**NARRATOR**           The high cost of living is nothing new, but the severe increase in gas prices that has been seen in Guatemala in recent months has gotten the attention of the whole country.

**MANAGER**           All of a sudden, overnight, propane went up, oil went up. . . before it was, a month ago oil was 11 and right now it's 18. Propane is 126, oil is 18, corn already went up. Just like chicken, which is 11, or rice, which was 3 but now it's 3.50.

**NARRATOR**           A restaurant manager in Quetzaltenango explains her efforts to balance the necessities of her business and those of her clients.

**MANAGER**           I haven't raised the price of food, well, because. . . I raised it one quetzal, no more, but it pained me.

**(market sounds)**

**NARRATOR**           Of course, there are many factors that cause the cost of staple foods and other goods to rise, but the elevated price of fuel is one of the most influential: if you have to move a product away from where it's produced in order to sell it, its price will reflect transport costs. A farmer from Almolonga explains it this way:

**FARMER**           I, from my work, have to recover what I spend, on propane, on gasoline for the vehicle.

**NARRATOR**

It's likely that recent price hikes affect the people of Guatemala even more today than they would have a few years ago. According to a 2007 United Nations report, petroleum consumption in the country has doubled in the past ten years. The same report states that since 2002, Guatemala's total expenditures on the importation of petroleum products has increased 87 percent. *El Periódico* reported that in 2007, Guatemala imported more than 29 million barrels of fuels derived from petroleum. On April 17 of this year, oil was selling for 115 dollars a barrel.

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**Sounds of the bus station: horn, engine, brakes, driver calling  
"San Marcos! Where to?"**

**NARRATOR**

Juán Molón Siquinoa has worked as a bus driver on urban routes for three years. Siquinoa says he was forced to add two extra hours to his workday to compensate for the high cost of fuel.

**SIQUINOA**

Right now, with these prices, the trips don't pay off. Almost all the profit is going to pay for the diesel. We start at six in the morning and work till eight at night. Before, we worked from seven to six.

**NARRATOR**

For now, he still charges 1 quetzal for fare, but he is thinking of raising it to 1.50Q.

Although the use of gas is a modern habit, those who work in a profession with a long tradition have not escaped the effects of the increases, either.

**ZARATE**

For example, the wool that gets brought to us. . . they pay more for their fare. So the wool, the material that we use, goes up a lot. So, as a result, we cannot compete with other markets that are factory-made.

**NARRATOR**

The situation of Rosa Zarate, a weaver from Momostenango, and her husband and weaving partner, Ramiro de León Cobux, shows how the high cost of gasoline can complicate the circumstances of those who are fighting the flood of products from other countries, effects that were felt after the free trade agreement was signed.

Says Cobux:

**COBUX**

Artisans consume gas. For example, when we make our colors, we use a little gas. Therefore, in order to make our colors, our fabric, well, the price goes up. So, our prices go up, and there are people who don't want it anymore because it's very expensive.

**NARRATOR**

When I met the farmer from Almolonga, he was carrying a bottle of chemical fertilizer. He told me that only two weeks before, the same fertilizer cost 25 quetzales, but that day it had cost him 35. This expense also reflects the increase in petroleum prices: chemical fertilizers are one of the many products that are derived from this "black gold."

The critical economic situation provoked by the high cost of gas

also aggravated a problem that was already serious in Guatemala: hunger. As Zárate from Momostenango explains:

**NARRATOR** In Guatemala, they call us people of corn, and the price of corn is very high. So, therefore, there is a lot of hunger here in Guatemala. I, as a woman I am fighting, I am a volunteer. I don't know, but, I have . . . it makes me ashamed—the people, the poverty, the extreme poverty. Right now we want to make a memorial to bring to the president.

**NARRATOR** There are others who, like Zárate, are looking for solutions to problems that arise when it becomes difficult, or impossible, to buy a resource that is so wrapped up in the materials of daily life. A coffee farmer and member of the cooperative finca Santa Anita la Unión discussed the advantages of the organic agricultural techniques used on his farm.

**COFFEE FARMER** For the past ten years, we have not applied chemical fertilizer to our land.

**NARRATOR** In this matter, at least, they are independent of petroleum.

**COFFEE FARMER** Organic agriculture uses little and produces a lot, that's the concept, you see? From a little to a lot, and chemical agriculture is from a lot to a little, it's the reverse, or from the big to the small, and organic agriculture is from the small to the big. Why, why do we say this? Because the plants, especially the plants that use chemicals, the farmers that use chemicals, the plants become

addicted to the chemicals. They are plants that live on drugs.

This, then, is obligating humanity and life in the future to chemicals, so that without chemicals it won't be possible to live, and there will not be harvests of corn, of tomato, of cucumber, of vegetables, of anything, of coffee or bananas.

The current problem is that the chemical is much more expensive than the price of two quintals of corn. I'm talking about two quintals of corn. So, if the quintal costs you 90 quetzals or 110 quetzals, imagine the fertilizers, depending what type of fertilizer you are going to use, is going to cost you around 180 to 200 quetzals, depending on where you buy it, plus your bus fare, plus it takes all day to get it. All of this is what the campesinos are facing right now. Nevertheless, Santa Anita la Unión has not faced this problem. Santa Anita la Unión, what we can say about it, is that its land is more fertile every day.

LOGIN

Fri, 5 February 2010

Podcast  **The Shorts -- Trekker's Blues**



Alissa puts pen to paper and imagines a pain-free life for Paul. If we write it down does it become true? I hope so.

More people reach the top of Mount Everest than hike the entire length of the Pacific Crest Trail. It asks a lot of the human body. When writer Alissa Bohling and her longtime boyfriend Paul set out of the trail, they thought a trip of that significance would leave a mark on their relationship. They didn't foresee that it would leave Paul hobbling and struggling to get healthy years after they reached the Canadian border.

In today's Short,

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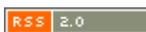
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Fri, 5 February 2010

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## TREKKER'S BLUES

By Alisa Bohling

Audio available at <https://dirtbagdiaries.com/shorts-trekkers-blues/>

Almost every night for the past four years, I've woken up to the sound of Paul pissing into the plastic bottle he keeps on his side of our bed. It's basically a modern chamber pot, or a glorified bedpan. It's meant to protect the tendons in his feet, which tighten so much in a few hours' rest that they can barely take the weight of his body on a midnight walk to the bathroom. The sight of the bottle in the morning, brimming yellow with a black *x* marked on the lid, makes our bedroom feel like an infirmary. Sometimes, I look at the bottle and wonder if our relationship has changed forever.

On our first date five years ago, Paul and I parked his car on a logging road, marked the spot on his GPS, and set out on foot, trying without success to get lost as the spring snow left shallow drifts in our tracks. From then on, our relationship grew up around our adventures. So when he invited me to attempt a through-hike of the Pacific Crest Trail, I wasn't surprised or flattered. I simply accepted, with a nonchalance only possible for someone who has no idea what she is agreeing to.

If you look at a globe or a world map, the seventeen degrees of latitude the PCT covers between Mexico and Canada doesn't look like much. But a 2,600-mile trek is still asking a lot of the human body. Maybe it's not a coincidence that fewer people have finished the PCT than have summited Everest.

Now, Paul goes to physical therapy every summer, when he gets health insurance through his job as a park ranger for the state. But it's hard to heal seasonally. And after four years, it's hard for me to remember that his feet weren't always like a couple of jealous ex-lovers, monopolizing his attention and doing their best to come between us.

I try to remember how, in our pre-PCT days, Paul and I once waded through knee-deep clay to reach a secret hot spring. How we followed a game trail for miles and found the perfectly intact skull of a bighorn sheep and set to arguing over who had seen it first and, more importantly, who would have to haul it out. I try to remember that Paul's feet will heal, even though sometimes it seems like they never will.

When we took our first steps on the PCT to the angry rhythm of the helicopters patrolling the border wall in Campo, we figured our packs were light enough. A fifteen-pound base weight hardly registered after carrying seventy pounds as field staff for an outdoor program. But now, I regret that I didn't insist on going even lighter to protect our bodies just a little more.

There were plenty of ultralight fanatics on the trail that we could have taken cues from. The week we left the border, we met an ex-con whose entire first aid kit consisted of a small wad of duct tape—he reached the northern terminus over a month ahead of us. A friend of Paul's who's done multiple through-hikes pays for his trips by squatting in condemned buildings and dumpster diving for his meals even as he works full-time; meanwhile, he doesn't hesitate to throw down for gear that looks more fit for an astronaut than a long-distance backpacker.

But even with our packs weighed down with extras like adequate first aid, Paul and I tried to be kind to our bodies in other ways. The twenty-mile days we put in were considered almost suspiciously moderate by some of the other hikers, who would pass us by as they laid down forty miles, sporting enviable trail names like Freight Train and Bloody Knuckles.

Our moderation was also matched with plenty of luck. When we crossed the Mojave Desert, strong winds kept the temperatures low enough to walk during daylight hours. When I took a fall scouting a route over a sketchy ridge in the San Jacintos, the huge rock I loosened on my way down landed nearby, sparing my leg by less than a foot.

But Paul and I soon learned: The demons of the body can only be appeased for so long. Nine hundred and forty miles in, at Tuolumne Meadows, he started to complain nearly every day about foot pain. Still, I never doubted that he was as committed as I was to finishing. We pressed on. By the time we'd put in another 650 miles to reach the Marble Mountains in Northern California, he likened the pain in his heel to a hammer striking his bone each time his foot hit the ground.

I'll admit I developed a habit of tuning Paul out sometimes when his foot trouble was too much of a downer. Sometimes I would make jokes, the kind you use to test a reaction to something you might suggest in earnest if you had the nerve: "Maybe you should get off the trail," I'd say. "I can go through the North Cascades alone. They haven't spotted a grizzly up there in years, anyway. . ."

Needless to say, I didn't encourage Paul to think about setting his dream aside in favor of his health, and I'm not sure he would have been persuaded. He still walked faster than me, but he was consistently miserable and had wryly begun to refer to his feet by a pair of nicknames: Hoof for his left, and Morty, short for Morton's Neuroma, the enlarged nerve in the ball of his right. This new ailment compounded the agony of worsening plantar's fasciitis, which was the original culprit. In Oregon, just south of Mt. Hood, a rash of red sores bloomed on his left shoulder blade. It was a stress reaction to the chronic pain.

In Washington, the colder days seemed to help—I could no longer set my watch to the anti-inflammatory pills that usually came out of Paul's pack every four hours, shaking in

their plastic bottle with a sound I had begun to think of as a death rattle. It felt good to be living in the mountains in October, like stowing away on a vast, wet ship. That far north, we dared to mention Canada, no longer afraid that speaking the word might jinx our chances of actually making it there. Paul even talked about getting a desk job when we finished, something where he could still be productive while giving his body a rest.

But a desk job proved to be a tall order, and so did health care. Aside from the modern chamber pot, the best remedy Paul has come up with is to sleep wearing a sort of tube-sock-inspired torture device with a Velcro strap running from his toe to his knee, keeping his foot in a permanent flex. He chocks up his feet on a piece of plywood to stretch them while he washes dishes, and at breakfast he rolls his arches back and forth over a ball studded with rubber points that make it look like a scaled down version of a medieval weapon.

If I want to go on a longer hike, Paul only rarely feels well enough to come along. I go alone or with friends, sometimes returning to find him on the porch, sculpting one of his bonsai plants. This is a post-trail hobby, fitting for a naturalist like him but spooking me all the same. I feel sorry for the tiny trees, trapped in their shallow pots, their branches wrapped with wire. Sometimes I'd give anything to be back on the trail, listening again to the one word of my left foot and the one word of my right, trusting that simply by walking with Paul, I can lessen his pain.

Paul recently suggested, only half-kidding, that I try inventing a cure for his feet in my writing. We've tried everything else, so here goes: Tomorrow, Paul wakes up and uncaps the plastic bottle next to our bed. He empties his cold piss onto his foot-bondage tube socks, onto his rubber ball, onto his plywood chock, and throws it all into the fireplace. There's already a hot blaze going and soggy as the heap is, it ignites immediately. The smoke rises from our chimney to join the haze already curling above the roof next door. It smells foul and up and down the street, our neighbors, mystified and overpowered, drop whatever they're doing. But Paul and I don't notice anything, because we're already out the door.