

The Farm

Hernan was up early as usual. Not that he enjoyed being up before the first rooster crowed. Nor would he have chosen to feel his way through the dark for his sandals each morning, always realizing only later when he was wearing the right on his left and left-rightsa. His family had been farming poultry for as long as he could remember, and his father was in charge of managing the different farmers throughout the community. When Hernan turned 10 years old his responsibilities grew, and so for the past five months, he woke each day when it still more closely resembled the night, and began his chores by feeding the hundreds of chickens that roamed across the land - free, but destined with miserably short lives.

The chickens were restless, Hernan thought to himself, as they clucked and clacked louder and more fervently than most morning-nights. In one particularly frantic cluster, Hernan found a bloody carcass and quickly realized it was one of the farm's chickens. Before long, he found four more, plus that of one of the family's baby goats. They have always had trouble with foxes, but this was different. Foxes usually took the chickens away, and Hernan would come across them, dried and dusty, whenever he was off with the neighbor's children playing and running in the surrounding hills. These were still there, still among the living, having been eaten on the spot, and left as a reminder to all the others that their miserably short lives could be even shorter.

That night, Hernan decided to keep watch. Although his father told him not to worry, that it was simply another fox attack, and to get some sleep or else he would surely fall asleep before chore time. Hernan agreed with his father, and then quietly snuck outside beneath the morning-night's not quite full moon. Before long, his eyelids grew heavy so he tried to keep himself busy, and as a result of the busy-ness keep himself awake, by trying to count stars in groupings of bright, not-so-bright, hardly-any-starlight, and his favorite-flickering. He woke to an unfamiliar sound, like a squeaking but far more sinister followed by a strangulated, almost gurgling, kind of clucking and clacking. He rubbed his eyes and peered out from the perch he had taken atop a little mound where he could see all the chickens as they slept across the land - free, but dreaming of their miserably short lives.

What Hernan saw was like nothing he had ever seen in all his years of remembering being able to see. They must have been at least a full meter in length, not including the tail! There were at least eight of them, and two of them had already found their prey. The death calls of the two fallen chickens had woken the others, and sent them frantically running in no particular direction, making it more difficult for the remaining predators to secure their kill. Though well out of range of what looked like rats, though they couldn't be rats because of their size, he thought to himself, Hernan began to shiver with fear and ran home faster than he ever ran in all his eight and a half years of remembering being able to run.

He burst through the door of his parents' room, screaming, "Grande! Como ratones, pero no es possible! Los pollos!" His parents woke and tried to calm him down, but he

grabbed his father's hand and began trying to pull him up and out of bed to show him what he had seen. His father rose, found his sandals in the dark, put each on the correct foot, and let his son lead him out to the field. What he saw sent him stepping backwards several feet, almost losing his balance, "Que ratones grandes!" he said and with Hernan in tow returned to their home. By sunrise the word was all over. Other villagers had seen them - had found the bloody carcasses of their chickens scattered about their land. They were definitely rats, but they were too large, and they were everywhere. The community council called an emergency meeting, and it was decided that the authorities and the large gringo agribusiness in Quito that owned the farms had to be informed immediately.

The next day, Hernan woke to what sounded like large vehicles rumbling through the village. He went outside to find a mix of Ecuadorian military police and American Gringos arriving in a dust storm of what must have been ten jeeps. Hernan recognized a few of the Gringos from the agribusiness that owned the entire poultry industry in the area. Known by farmers throughout the community as "La Compania," the elders told of how La Compania bought the land they had lived on for as long as they could remember from the government and immediately put a stop to the subsistence farming upon which the villagers lived. Rather than growing enough for their families and a little surplus to sell in the market, the villagers found themselves raising chickens, seeing their cropland dwindle, and making big money for La Compania while their livelihood suffered. Hernan remembered them as the ones who came to the farm every month or so to give the new chickens their "vitaminas."

He never liked these men, with their sweaty, pink faces and the disrespectful looks they made towards his mother. He heard the sound of machine-gun fire just over the hill and realized what the military police were sent there to do. He ran over to take a look. They were flushing out the rats and exterminating them. After rustling five or six out from a hole, or from under a bush, one spray of bullets would tear apart the whole group. When he returned, Hernan saw the Gringos in one of the chicken coops, examining the chickens and speaking in low tones amongst themselves. He also noticed that they had collected some carcass remains and chicken waste in clear plastic bags that were sitting on the ground next to one of the jeeps.

The routine was the same over the next several days. The Ecuadorian military police and the American Gringos from the La Compania would arrive, kill, collect, and leave; until the day when the villagers ceased finding what was left of their chickens in dusty, blood-stained piles. One day, soon after, a call came to the local telephone post for Hernan's father. It was the Gringos from La Compania saying they wanted to speak to members of the community council to explain to the villagers what they found out about the mutant rats that were attacking their chickens. A week or so later, three of the American Gringos came to the village and addressed the members of the council. They began explaining through an interpreter how lucky the community was for the increase in labor and wealth provided by La Compania. The word "wealth" had the members glancing sideways at each other and shaking their heads, each wondering whether these Gringos saw what they saw; the dirt, poverty, lack of basic necessities, and disease that were etched like wrinkles into all of their faces.

The Gringos continued patting themselves on the back for another few minutes and then began telling the council about the results of their findings. “The chickens,” they said, “were special because they had been given ‘vitaminas’ in order to make them bigger, stronger, and meatier. After these ‘vitaminas’ were injected into a chicken, they would be absorbed into the chicken’s body. Remains of the ‘vitaminas’ would then pass through into the chicken’s bowels and be eliminated as part of the chicken waste.” The villager’s began to look around again, slowly, as if not comprehending. But they did comprehend, and they knew what was coming next out of the Gringos’ mouths. “So, what was happening was that the rats were eating the chicken waste that still had some of these ‘vitaminas’ in it. And since rats have short generation spans, the ‘vitaminas’ were affecting them very quickly and intensely. So, all that was happening was that these mutant rats were really just eating shit that was making them bigger and more predatory due to the ‘vitaminas’ inside it. Any questions?” One of the particularly keen elders who had a reputation for challenging La Compania over the years, rose and spoke with an agitated voice, “If the rats are being affected by eating just what’s left of the ‘vitaminas’ in the chicken waste, then what are we supposed to think about eating the actual chicken that has been filled with this thing?” The villager’s were all nodding their heads, looking around at each other and then back at the Gringos. “Don’t worry, there’s nothing to be concerned about,” was the only response the community received before the Gringos ended the question and answer session after one question and not quite an answer. They thanked the villagers for listening and for all their hard work, got back in their jeep, and drove off.

Later that evening, Hernan sat by himself up on the low hilltop and thought about what the elder asked at the council meeting. He thought about the pollos, the vitaminas, the ratones, and the sneaky Gringos who he knew wouldn’t actually do anything to change what was happening. Maybe the military police would just keep coming back to exterminate the rats whenever they started killing La Compania’s profits again. He heard his mother calling out to him that dinner was ready, and he went running home. Bursting into the house, he hurried to the table only to stop himself at its edge. As he tried to catch his breath, he stared at the bigger, stronger, meatier chicken leg sitting in the middle of his plate...