

DOS ERIZOS

by owen mould

Señor Don Luis Guadalupe Erizo lived beside the field that bordered the Old Beltline facility where the maintenance buildings used to be. The Beltline had basically ceased regular operation some twenty years ago and now weeds occupied the yards and the siding and even the gutters of the sheds. A tree grew from the roof of the flat-topped one and the yards themselves were strewn with the casual ironmongery of this and that item laying just where it had been last thrown to rust away into unrecognizability. The security fence was in poor shape and in need of mending, grasses choked the old siding, and unkempt fields within the boundaries of the fence, itself in significant disrepair such that earthworms and bugs slithered and clattered under the stones.

The only train that came through was a weekly donkey engine that ran between the Cannery at the far end of the Island where this place lay, and the warehouses by the water. Each time, the train tooted, came to a stop at the old gate, and huffed as the engineer climbed out to release the padlock and so allow the little yellow engine to cross the road, where it stopped again so that the engineer could walk back across and refasten the padlock. Save for this brief interlude, the train did not stop there any longer.

One time the engineer noticed the eyes of Señor Erizo peering from under a lumber pile there and he threw the remains of his lunch out onto the concrete of the old yard before going. There was a bit of carrot and a celery stalk among this and that was good.

On the whole it was a perfect heaven of a spot for an hedgehog.

There, in a burrow snug and lined with dry grass, Señor Erizo kept his bachelor apartments, safe from the rain, the clumsy human footstep and the errant poodle. And he lived there many a day plus a few years, happily munching that which scampered within reach or the occasional peanut from trash thrown over the fence. The odd vagabond squirrel passed through from time to time, and one time a family of rabbits, who settled down the tracks away from the sheds, but that was all for company this hedgehog had, and he preferred it that way. Plenty of room and no one to tell him what to do.

Contrary to popular belief, hedgehogs are neither pigs nor porcupines, being far less aggressive than either. They like to munch damaging insects – for which reason the wise farmer shields them – but do not mind enjoying a nice

salad or two. This particular hedgehog was retiring, modest, not inclined to violence, a great lover of personal freedom, and was especially appreciative of his privacy.

After the Cannery closed down, the men there all found work somewhere else, if work could be found, and the passage of the donkey train became more infrequent, otherwise life continued pretty much as always.

But this country in which he lived was changing about him all this time. One day another hedgehog came through the fence and wandered into the yard. This was a strange hedgehog and not like any other this hedgehog could remember having seen. For one thing, this hedgehog was not a boy, but a girl, and this irritated the bachelor Señor Erizo very much for he preferred his solitude.

For another thing, well, this hedgehog spoke as follows, *Alors! Comme ça va?*

You are French, the observant Señor Erizo remarked flatly and the other assented. How did you get here?

The girl hedgehog cocked her head, appeared to think about it, then responded, *Par avion*. A bloody scratch on her ear indicated some travel contretemps.

I mean, said the increasingly irritated long term tenant of the yard, To this yard.

Le Metro, she said cheerfully. *Et l'omnibus*.

Why? asked Señor Erizo, despairingly.

Hein?

Why are you here? He demanded.

Vous et une Philosophe?, she queried.

Arrrrrrrrgh! In disgust he huffed off to his burrow where he angrily tidied the straw, which needed no such attention, peeking out every now and then to see if she had gone, only to note her busy about the place, gathering up materials to make a burrow of his own. Seemed that he would have a new neighbor, and this displeased him a great deal.

Well it is difficult to go about one's hedgehog business entirely avoiding one's hedgehog neighbors, ignoring and disdainning them completely, but as with people, so with hedgehogs and he managed to work out his routine so as to minimize objectionable contact. One thing he missed greatly had been his habit of sitting in the open space of the yard, one time each month, and there to gaze with studied delight upon the face of the beautiful full moon as she blessed the yard with light, silvering the grasses and glinting off of the fence and such machine parts not made dull with rust.

As he sat there one night, gazing for untold hours at the great wheel of the stars and the moon's traverse, he heard a voice near him, *Ella esta hermosa!* I have never seen her so beautiful.

Well, it seemed IT was beginning to learn how to speak properly in the regional dialect. Still, he went off to his burrow and did not come out to look at the moon again next month. As it turned out, he would not get a second chance, for

the Way of the World is hard and for little creatures like hedgehogs, change comes hard indeed.

It had been some time since the little yellow donkey train had passed, and the decision had been made by Higher Ups to do away with the train tracks entirely as they were not needed and land was a valuable thing. Men came to open the gate and tear up the railbed, loading all the ties and rails into trucks, and so they took them away and that was that. Next, the men came back and started knocking down the old sheds and carting away the ironmongery. In consternation, the hedgehogs huddled in their burrows as jackhammers began pounding up the remains of the yard asphalt.

That night the two of them crept out to survey the devastation. The sheds were gone, the machinery and lumber was gone, the yard was all broken up. But at least the grasses and low scrub remained, and the field, and perhaps the humans would be content with that for the fence remained as well.

For the next few days, they were not bothered in their reconditioned home, but down the tracks -- or where the tracks had been, a fume of smoke arose, and the sight of more humans and much activity. Going further from his burrow than he ever had gone before the hedgehog scurried along the still mounded embankment stripped of rails to see the men were laying down a blacktop walking trail and burning the grass as they did so. The family of rabbits came tearing along, madly in terror, and passed him without speaking, leaping over an hedge and disappearing from view.

He scurried on back to the safety of his own brushy area to find his neighbor peering through some brush near the gate. She was still and tense.

He crept up beside her and looked out to see the intersection of the little road the donkey train had crossed and a big, wide, dangerous, open expanse of asphalt, beyond which rolled green fields and a copse of trees. He was looking at the grounds of the Community College across the way of the divided road that entered this area from a tunnel, but he did not know that. He knew only that all but one of the rabbit family had made it across this vast desert to the other side where they all stood looking at the poor fellow who lay there, as it happened, in the third lane going out to the tunnel. His legs had been crushed by one of the automobile machines and he lay there, unable to move, yet still alive, calling out, "Eee! Eee!"

They could do nothing but watch. Eventually, the rabbit lay his head down, sobbed and was still and one only hopes he was already past awareness when the next machine ran him down and put him into that other world where humans and rabbits and dogs and hedgehogs all go after death.

That night was somber and sleepless. Each of the hedgehogs had the image of that rabbit pinned down on the highway, like a soldier sent to some stupid foreign war for no real purpose, and left to die by some uncaring Central Authority. It is always the little people who suffer when the Big Ones decide to stomp around in great big boots.

The next day began with the scent of burn. The two hedgehogs came out and all the world was aflame. Fire came down on them, merciless and hot. They

ran to the edge of the divide. Others have names for this thing: *Die Todestrecke*, The Road of Death, *Alameda de los Muertes*. All around the world the condition is the same and has continued down through generations. People fleeing the fire and confronted with that last border across which only a few come alive. It has become the icon of our age, made solid by decisions made far away and removed by the uncaring and the diffident. There has always been a Road of Death for it never goes away.

A smell of chemicals hit them both and the fume of smoke increased. They could not hide in their burrows any longer; there, they surely would be burned alive or suffocated. There, they would surely die.

There remained only the wide stretch of the border road that separated them from safety. The road and the rabbit.

J'peur! J'peur! Mon ami!. Tiene miedo, compadre. I am afraid!, she said.

He saw the machines ran in groups, periodically. Between each group, there was a little time. Perhaps enough.

The smoke curled about them. He froze, unable to move, a small animal doing the only thing it knows how to do when afraid. It was she, she who broke this animal spell, by crying out as the flames approached, *Maintenant!*

Maintenant! Now! Now!

They bolted across the two lanes of the road to the divider with its greenery and cedar chips, and paused panting under an azealea as the death machines passed on either side. The body of the rabbit remained there in front of them. He had been mashed down into a mass of fur and reddish muck, a living

thing reduced to meat. By act of war or simply inattention. For a long time they stared at the rabbit and the cars, and the remaining two lanes between them and freedom until he recollected himself. Timing. We have only a partial chance on this side. They come through in a group, but there are stragglers. If there are no stragglers, then we can make it.

Je te crois. She said. I believe you.

At the given moment he gave the word and they rushed across. The first lane a long stretch of asphalt rolling boundlessly away to the vision of distant hedges and trees far over the horizon, and the last lane a longer stretch with its shoulder as the headlights of a straggler truck pushing the Limit for the last few meters of allowed 45mph came up over the tunnel rise, a roaring immense roadkilling smashing, behemoth juggernaut of a truck with great big hedghog crushing tires.

The truck blotted out the sun as he tumbled into the sedge off of the shoulder in a spray of wind-flung gravel and he gasped for breath in the reeds of the Community College, his eyes tightly squinched shut.

Alive! Yes! He had made it and he was alive! But she? Where was she?

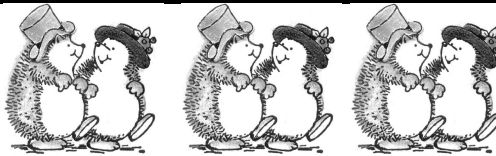
Cautiously he opened one eye and then the other, not hearing any of that inane foreign patter which he had, once upon a time found so irritating. Would he have to live now in this foreign country all alone? Across the border, back there, he could see the flames and the smoke, his former home, a distant land now, a land of memory and sorrow, much like any other land around the world suffering through an agony no special fault of its own.

But then he saw her. There she was, hanging by two tiny fists from the twig where she had thrown herself with one gargantuan hedgehog leap propelled by animal fear, a leap that, in other circumstances would have been recorded down through the ages for all posterity in any number of sagas told by the epic *vates* of old.

Yes she was safe, and she dropped down the full six inches or so to rest beside him. For a while they lay there beside one another, breathing, before getting up.

They ambled down the sward and found a nice brushy place near the main building and there the two live today in one burrow. Two hedgehogs marching fearlessly down the road of life together. And every month they have the entire college quad all to themselves – and a few rabbits – so as to gaze up at the moon.

(Excerpted from Island-Life 2007)



COPYRIGHT 2007 by owen mould. All rights reserved. Additional information can be obtained by contacting the address listed below.

OWEN MOULD
PO BOX 1303
ALAMEDA, CA 94501
OWEN@ISLAND-LIFE.NET

ALL CHARACTERS DEPICTED HEREIN ARE ENTIRELY FICTIONAL. ANY RESEMBLENCE TO ACTUAL PERSONS OR HEDGEHOGS, WHETHER LIVING OR DEAD IS PURELY COINCIDENTAL.

DOS ERIZOS

owen mould

