





Unai Elorriaga

# Plants Don't Drink Coffee

Translated from the Basque by Amaia Gabantxo

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# Plants Don't Drink Coffee



# I

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Plants don't drink coffee. They don't like coffee, and neither do flowers or trees. Birds don't like it either. My aunt told me. I do. Sometimes I don't breathe while I drink my café con leche. One whole mug. It's a big mug. I down the whole mug every morning, without taking a breath. That's a record of mine. Maybe I'm the only one in the world who holds that record.

Yesterday I learned the recipe for café con leche. Aunt Martina explained it to me. I made some afterwards. By myself. And I made delicious café con leche, maybe the most delicious in the world. And the weirdest one as well, because Aunt Martina's mugs are green, made of glass, and the coffee came out

green, not brown. So I told Aunt Martina how my mother makes brown coffee, not green. My aunt said green coffee tastes better. And she was right.

This is the recipe for café con leche: first pour the coffee. The coffee is always in a thermos. Coffee is a very very black liquid that's brown at the edges. For children you only have to pour a little, but Uncle Abel pours more than that, and Uncle Simon more still, and my cousin Iñes too, so their coffee is darker than mine.

Then you pour the milk on top of the coffee. My aunt warmed the milk up, because to make milk warm you have to use the stove, and children who fool around with stoves go blind and burn their fingers and their fingers stay black for the rest of their lives. This is why Aunt Martina warmed the milk up, not me. But I poured it into the mug, on top of the coffee.

And when the coffee and the milk are in the mug you have to put a spoon in and stir. Or maybe not: maybe first you have to put the sugar in and then stir. I am not so sure how that goes because Aunt Martina explained the recipe yesterday and I have forgotten the order of things a bit.

Rugby too. I have learned everything about rugby. And that isn't so common. Because no one at school knows about rugby. About soccer, yes. Everybody knows about soccer, because we are always playing soccer. Knowing about soccer is nothing special. Everybody knows about penalties and yellow cards and corner kicks. And about red cards too. Even the stupidest ones know that. But only I know about rugby.

Uncle Simon explained rugby to me. Uncle Simon always

says that first you have to learn Latin and rugby, and then everything else. Everything else is math and school stuff. “First of all Latin and rugby,” Uncle Simon says, “then everything else.” Latin is a very very perfect language. Uncle Abel explained that to me. I asked him, what is Latin, Uncle? And he told me: a language, a very very perfect one.

I watch rugby on TV with Uncle Simon. You can watch soccer outside. Cycling as well. But not rugby. Rugby only happens on TV. And Uncle Simon talks a lot in front of the TV when a rugby match is on. He says: “He’s good, that Irish guy, number fifteen.” Or he says: “Please, please.” And that means that the player is not very intelligent. But more than anything else Uncle Simon says this: “He’s wrong, the linesman, he’s wrong.” My uncle says that in every match. And then he says he would make the best linesman in the world. And it’s true. Because there are many rules in rugby, many, and Uncle Simon knows them all. And when we are watching a match on TV he is never quiet, not even for a second. He referees the match and speaks the rules aloud:

“Offside,” he’ll say.

Or he’ll say “The English played dirty in the scrum.”

Or he’ll say “Only gangsters play like that.”

Or “They haven’t defended very well.”

That’s what he says. That’s how I’ve learned everything about rugby. Because Uncle Simon is never quiet when he’s watching it on the TV. “He’s wrong, the linesman, he’s wrong,” he’ll yell. Uncle Simon is always better than the linesman on the TV. That’s what he thinks. I think so too.

The players on TV almost always have band-aids on their faces and foreheads and fingers, and some on their legs as well, and they are always Irish or Scottish or English or Welsh or French. Once I saw Australia play a match. Australia is an island but I don't know where it is for sure, maybe in Africa or Asia.

Then there are insects. Insects are 200 million years old. My cousin Iñes told me that. Iñes knows a lot about insects. Maybe Iñes knows more about insects than anyone in the world. Insects are: butterflies, beetles, and dragonflies, and they are 200 million years old. That's why insects are so small, because they are very old. Old people are also often smaller than young people. They are not smaller than children, because children are the smallest people of all. Especially just after they've been born. But old people are also very small, compared to young people. Piedad is an old lady I know. And she is very very small, because she is old. My aunt told me Piedad is eighty-two years old. And insects are 200 million years old. That's why they are so small.

I go out with my cousin Iñes every day. We take the glass jars and the nets and we go every day. The insects go in the glass jars. After we catch them. Sometimes things break: butterfly wings, grasshopper legs, dragonfly wings. Beetles never break.

Afterward you have to put cotton wool balls into the jars, soaked in this liquid. The insects smell it and fall asleep. Afterwards Iñes pins the insects to a corkboard, with needles, with their wings spread. And if the wings are broken we do a jigsaw with wings. And if the wings are very broken Iñes says "We have to catch another one, just like this one." This means that

we need to catch another butterfly, one exactly like it, to pin to the corkboard, because this one won't do. Same thing with the dragonflies.

And she puts away the insects with the broken wings or broken legs or antennae, and I don't know what she does with them but I think that later, at night, when I am sleeping, she wakes the insects up with another liquid. And she throws them out of the window. But then I think that the insects have broken wings, so she can't throw them out of the window. Maybe it isn't right to throw insects with broken wings out of windows. But then I think that most insects have hard shells, especially beetles and dragonflies, so maybe it's not so bad to throw them out of the window. I think beetles might have the hardest shells of all insects.

Iñes explained it to me: "I have to hand in the corkboards in September." "September" comes just after the summer ends. There is another one that comes later, "November." But "November" happens in winter. Then there is another one, "May." But I'm not sure if that one is summer or winter.

The summer ends in September, and I don't know if I'll go back home when the summer ends or if I'll still be eating and sleeping at Aunt Martina's house, with Iñes. Iñes has to hand in her corkboards at school in September, and Iñes calls her school "college" sometimes, and sometimes she calls it "university," and I don't know if they are both the same or if Iñes goes to two different schools. It might be that she goes to two schools at the same time, because Iñes is very intelligent. Most of all about insects and about cats.

Some of the corkboards are white and others are brown. Uncle Abel brings them. Because Iñes is his daughter. Otherwise he might not give them to her. Or maybe he would. I am sure Uncle Abel would give a corkboard or two to anyone. I am sure that Uncle Abel has more pieces of corkboard than anyone in the whole world. He carries the corkboards in his truck. And sometimes he walks home with them under his arm.

Sometimes Iñes sings. But she spends more time talking than singing. She loves to talk, Iñes. Uncle Abel says: If only talking were a sport. And when Uncle Abel isn't home Aunt Martina says: If only talking were a sport, and she makes her voice sound a bit like Uncle Abel's. And with that they mean Iñes talks too much and she loves to talk so much it's incredible.

Iñes talks to me a lot too, and she tells me stories about insects most of all. And for me Iñes is a television, and the stories she tells are movies.

Yesterday she told me a story about butterflies. She said once some butterflies flew from Canada to Australia. "Some butterflies" means two million or three million butterflies. And there is an ocean between Canada and Australia, and you have to cross it to get to Australia, and that's a big adventure for a butterfly.

And she said they arrived in Australia at night. And butterflies don't like nighttime so much. Butterflies much prefer daytime, and light, especially. And they saw a big light at one end of Australia. And that light came from an athletics stadium with the stadium lights on. And it was during the Olympics, and all the lights were on, because of the Olympics. And the

butterflies flew towards the lights, but these lights are like fire. And the butterflies started to burn, the tips of their wings and the tips of their antennae burned. Iñes told me this, and then she told me that after being burned the butterflies were half asleep. The way they get when they go into our glass jars. And when they fall asleep butterflies can't fly, so they started falling into the athletics stadium. And there were two or three million butterflies. Iñes said it started to rain on the athletics stadium, but it rained butterflies, not water. And they stopped the Olympics, because there were two or three million butterflies on the ground and they couldn't very well run on them or do any sports on them. And they spent an hour picking butterflies up. And then the Olympics started again.

And Iñes said not all the butterflies flew toward the lights. She said some butterflies flew towards people, and there were maybe one hundred or two hundred butterflies on the head and all over the body of a child who was watching the Olympics, and the child was very happy, but his mother wasn't. His mother was frightened and started to scream and the butterflies flew away from the child immediately, because butterflies like light but they don't like screaming.

And these are the kinds of things Iñes tells me, most of all about insects. And things like these for me are like movies, or better than movies, and for me Iñes is a television. That's why I never tell her that she talks too much. Uncle Simon too, he never tells her she talks too much. Because Uncle Simon also talks a lot. And sometimes he has to drink a little water to be able to go on talking. Uncle Simon is Iñes' uncle and also

my uncle. But he is Iñes' uncle more, because he lives in their house.

I don't know what happened in the end with the butterflies and the Olympics. I think they picked the butterflies up off the ground and brought them to an Australian forest, so they could rest there before flying back to Canada. Because insects do that: first they go someplace, but then they come right back where they were before. Just like birds.

Iñes is never sick. Not even when she has a cough. When she has a cough she gets out of bed all the same and does the dishes and gets the bread. Her cough can be as loud as a truck and she still won't stay in bed. That's what Uncle Abel says: This girl's cough is as loud as a truck. But Iñes won't stay in bed.

My cousin Mateo has a pair of binoculars, fat ones, and 107 books in his room. Fat binoculars are better than thin ones. They say so at school. Mateo says you can see a mosquito on a blade of grass in the soccer stadium from the balcony at home. But when I go out with Iñes we don't catch mosquitoes because they are not as spectacular as beetles or dragonflies and can look a bit sad on the corkboards. Iñes says so. Mateo has 107 books in his room, some are on the floor and others aren't. I often go to count Mateo's books in his room. And there are 107.

Aunt Martina's soup is much better than the soup at home. Because the noodles are fatter, like the binoculars. Uncle Abel likes Aunt Martina's soup a lot too. And Uncle Simon, too. My cousin Mateo prefers the bean stew. Iñes, the bean stew and the salads. We all drink café con leche. My cousin Mateo too.

It's summer now and the elastic of my pajama pants is broken. Aunt Martina told me she would sew a new one on, but she still hasn't. It's summer now, until September.



# 2

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“Do you have a watch on you, Gur?” asked Simon.

“No,” said Gur.

“And what time is it?”

“11:17, PM.”

“And to think that some people want to go to the moon,”  
Simon.

“...” Gur.

“...” Simon.

“Can you cook on the moon, Simon?”

Simon had a ladder under one arm. And carried two plastic  
bags in his hand. Gur’s hands were in his pockets, and he wore

blue canvas pants. He had a beard. Gur and Simon were entering a pine forest. The night made the pine trees black.

“You know I don’t have an ID card, Simon?”

“What ID card?”

“*The* ID card. The one everyone has.”

“That’s impossible, Gur; everybody has an ID card.”

“Not me. And I’m not on the registry either. My birth is not documented in the civil registry. Go and ask. I was never born. I must be the only person on the planet who hasn’t been born.”

Gur and Simon came to a stone wall. Amidst the pine trees. Simon put the ladder against the wall and handed the plastic bags to Gur. Then he climbed the steps to reach the top of the wall, and stood there. Then Gur started climbing the ladder, but after the third rung he passed the plastic bags back to Simon and jumped down again. He said he didn’t need the ladder to climb the wall. But after climbing for a while he ran out of handholds for his fingers. Without the means to go either up or down, Gur had to jump down again. The wall wasn’t easy to climb. Gur’s fingers were swollen.

In the end he had to use the ladder. By then Simon was sitting atop the wall, waiting for Gur, happy. Simon was happy because he had known Gur since they were kids. And now Gur had a beard and wore blue canvas pants and was forty-two years old. And he had to use the ladder, in the end.

When Gur reached the top of the wall they swung the ladder to the other side and climbed down to the golf course. They were still surrounded by pine trees, but now they were on

the golf course grounds. There were only a few scattered pine trees, and in fifteen steps they were out of the forest and on the fairway. The grass was very very short, and gray at eleven thirty at night.

“Now we must find the right spot,” Simon said.

They saw a small flag at the top of a skeletal pole. “Twelfth hole,” it said. In English, of course.

Then Gur took an olive from his pocket. It was a very dry olive. He put it in his mouth and stepped three meters or so away from the flag. When he had eaten all of the olive flesh he took the pit in his hand. Then he bent down and placed it on his right shoe, on top of the laces. Simon was by the flag and the hole, watching Gur happily. Then Gur made a funny motion with his foot and the olive pit flew toward the twelfth hole. Because Gur’s intention was precisely that: to get the olive pit into the twelfth hole of the golf course.

“Did it go in, Simon?” asked Gur, looking at the hole three meters away from him in the dark.

“No.”

“How close was it?”

“Around thirty centimeters, I guess.”

Then, still standing on the same spot, Gur took a walnut from his pocket. This time, however, he put the walnut on the ground, not on his shoe, and using his right foot as a golf club, hit the walnut in the direction of the twelfth hole. The walnut knocked against Simon’s shoe and went into the hole. Simon’s shoe helped a bit. A lot.

“Did it go in, Simon?”

“Yes.”

Gur bowed to an imaginary audience’s applause and blew kisses right and left. Then he put the olive pit and the walnut back in his pocket.

“Now we have to find the spot, Gur.”

So Gur and Simon went to look for the spot, and moved from the twelfth to the thirteenth hole.

“What sort of length are we talking about here, Simon?”

“144 meters.”

“And width?”

“80.”

“This is going to be difficult.”

“It won’t be difficult, Gur. Not on a golf course.”

Simon said that his brother Abel had told him that there are great distances between the holes on golf courses.

“They call them fairways,” said Simon. “The distances between holes. Abel explained it all.”

The fairway that ran from the twelfth to the thirteenth hole was long, yes, but too narrow, because there were trees on both sides. Besides, there were little slopes here and there. It wouldn’t do for the purpose. Simon needed a flat surface.

They walked on until they reached the fairway between the thirteenth and the fourteenth holes. It was long and flat and wide, but it had a pond on one side. And two sand bunkers on the other, near the green. And Simon needed the green to be clear.

And then Gur and Simon reached the next fairway, the one that stretched from the fourteenth to the fifteenth hole. It was

perfect for Simon's purpose. And the stone wall was nearby, which would be useful if they needed an escape route.

But although the fairway looked long and wide enough, they had to measure it to make sure. And this was the reason why they had gone to the golf course in the middle of the night: to find the right place and measure it precisely. And since half their job was done, that is, since they had found the right place, they decided to take a rest before measuring it.

They sat on the grass and took out their sandwiches. Every time Gur and Simon ate sandwiches together they held the same competition: they'd spread out one newspaper each on the ground to gather their breadcrumbs. Each his own. That was the competition. Afterwards they would weigh the breadcrumbs. Simon carried a pocket-sized precision balance in his bag for this purpose only. First they weighed Gur's breadcrumbs and then Simon's. Gur's were heavier, by far.

Gur bowed to the imaginary audience again and blew kisses right and left, and put his hand to his heart, and that meant he had won again: he had won the breadcrumb competition. This was Gur and Simon's twelfth breadcrumb competition.

Simon put everything away in plastic bags and, turning to Gur, said "We'll have to start measuring." Then Gur stood up. And he walked toward an edge of the green and started measuring its length. They needed 144 meters. Their measuring tape was 1.5 meters long.

But Gur could never stay quiet for long, not even while working.

"Who invented tennis balls, Simon?"

“Some English guy, I’m sure.”

“And why did he make them hairy?”

“... hmmm?”

“Why did he give them all wigs?”

“Maybe because of the cold.”

“I don’t think so,” said Gur. “It must be a question of aesthetics. Have you ever seen a hairless tennis ball? Have you ever removed the fuzz from a tennis ball?”

“No.”

“They are ugly. Very ugly. Embarrassingly so.”

“What’s underneath then?”

“Plastic. This very sad-looking plastic.”

“Sad?”

“Sad. This is the tragedy of tennis balls. Here and also in Wimbledon.”

“How many meters have we measured up, Gur?”

“Thirty-seven point five,” Gur could talk about tennis balls and measure lengths at the same time.

“We still need another hundred and something.”

“One hundred and six point five.” Gur was being precise.

“One hundred and six point five,” repeated Simon.

“Isn’t there a guard here, Simon? Can people just walk in here at night and do whatever crazy thing they want? Is there a guard, or what?”

“Only one.”

“Where?”

“In the clubhouse. Near the entrance to the course.”

“Doesn’t he ever walk around?”

“Rarely. Very rarely. He is this fat guy. Enormously fat. Abel told me. By the time he gets here we’ll be in Paris. And he carries a flashlight too, the dumbass. Abel told me.”

“We should leave the ladder by the wall. Just in case.”

“What? Are we afraid now?”

“Eighty-seven meters,” offered Gur.

“ . . . ” Simon.

Gur was never out of breath. He went on:

“Have I told you, Simon, that I’ve had a call from Cambridge?”

“Cambridge? What for?”

“To give a talk.”

“What sort of talk are you going to give?”

“A talk. At the university. That’s what they’ve asked me to do.”

“But you’ve never been to university. What sort of talk can you possibly give?”

“I haven’t been to university, but my two brothers have. Fidel and Felix.”

“Fidel dropped out,” said Simon.

“But Felix didn’t. The Cambridge people asked for Felix, but I’ll go instead.”

“Lucky man, this Dr. Gur.”

“I’ll give it in Latin.”

“In Latin?”

“Or maybe in Greek. It’ll depend on the audience.”

They were measuring up the last few meters. When they reached meter 144 they made a mark on the ground, like the

one they made when they started counting. The fairway was longer than 144 meters; it was at least 200 meters long. They had plenty of meters to spare. But they still had to measure its width: they needed eighty meters.

They started measuring, and Gur, of course, started talking again: "How is Erroman doing, Simon?" Simon's face didn't move, but he answered "Not well." Then he continued: "We brought Tomas home with us," and he said that while Erroman remained in the hospital they would keep Tomas at home with them, with Martina, Abel, and him. Then Gur asked "Who's Tomas?" and Simon, sounding a bit surprised said: "Tomas, Gur, Tomas: Erroman's son." Gur reacted quickly. "Of course, Tomas, yes, Erroman's son. The little kid." Afterwards Gur and Simon were quiet for a while.

They had measured thirty-six meters by then. Thirty-six meters. Gur didn't like the number three or the number six. He didn't like eight either. They continued measuring.

"Do you know who I'm thinking about, Simon?"

"Who?"

"Jonathan Davies . . . remember him?"

"How could I forget? He was out of this world, Jonathan Davies."

"Clever."

"And Tim Horan? Remember him, Gur?"

"Him too. He was an artist."

"He was born in Darlinghurst, Tim Horan."

"Done," Gur made a mark in the ground. "Eighty meters exactly."

They had finished measuring the width. The fairway was much wider than eighty meters. Simon and Gur needn't look any further. They had found the place.

"Done," said Gur.

"For today, yes, we are," answered Simon.

They put everything back in the plastic bags and walked to the stone wall. Within forty-eight seconds they were on top of the wall; after one minute and forty-two seconds they were outside the golf course. It was time to go to bed. Although it was summer.

This time Simon spoke first. And Gur agreed with what he said:

"Next time we come here our mission will be to paint the lines."