It is mid-morning when the hunter returns. Shakay, the Achuar chief, approaches the center of the village with his prize: a peccary. As he unshoulders the wild boar, it rolls onto a mat of banana leaves. Like mosquitoes drawn to light, all of us—his wives, his children, we visitors—encircle the animal as Shakay rests his shotgun in the mud and sets himself on a hand-carved chair: a king on his throne. With one hand he runs a yellow comb through his long black hair; with the other he balances a bowl of masato to his lips, drinks down the thick swill, and spits out the unstrained yucca. This is his celebratory cocktail: a fermented beverage of chewed yucca infused with the saliva of his wives and daughters. Earth to earth.

Safer than drinking river water, I suppose.

Shakay’s work is done for the day. His sons and daughters will proceed to gut, skin, and butcher his kill. It feels like a jungle version of an operating room, and not surprisingly, my surgical instincts kick in. I want to be the one yielding the machete. (Maybe I was a butcher in a former life!)

As a physician assistant, I can prescribe a tonic of ibuprofen for Shakay’s arthritic knees; I can excise a thorn the size of a bobby-pin from the bottom of his daughter’s foot; I can provide medicine to kill the parasitic worms in his son’s intestine, but I am no huntress.

Your baby has a cough? I can diagnose bronchitis and inject penicillin in her rump. Feeling weak and dizzy? You’re probably dehydrated (from drinking too much masato). Or maybe you’re anemic and malnourished. Here are some oral rehydration salts, iron supplements, and multivitamins.

I can give you all the Western medical advice you crave, but it would be impossible for me to locate a peccary in the big wide dense jungle. In fact, I’ve just learned today what a peccary is, and I’m profoundly humbled. Would I have what it takes to hunt one down in order to feed my
family? If I was lucky enough to track one, would it charge at me? (I've heard wild boars can be mean.) Where do I aim? Could I truly kill a wild animal? And what about transport back to the village...do peccaries carry diseases that can infect humans? Should I wear gloves before touching it? Perhaps I should don my sterile surgical mask and gown as well. How long will it keep without refrigeration? Shakay does not share my worries; tomorrow he will hunt again.

We will leave shortly, taking with us our antibiotics and IV fluids, our polyester tents, rubber boots, bug sprays, rain ponchos, water filters, kerosene stoves, and digital cameras. We're also leaving with some choice cuts of wild boar.

Today's medical advice: eat more peccary.