

México Profundo

What matters in life is not what happens to you but what you remember and how you remember it. - Gabriel García Márquez

A man dressed entirely in white – even waistcoat, tie and shoes, walked around from behind, faced and kneeled before me, and offered, “May I bring you something?”

“What?” I was perplexed.

“May I bring you anything? Perhaps something to drink? A Coke, a *cerveza*? Something to eat?” A pause. Then, “A woman? Perhaps a boy? Whatever will please you.”

Since it was morning, I sat on *Playa Caletilla* (beach on the little cove) rather than Playa Caleta (small cove) because it was better for catching the morning sun in Acapulco. Caleta was for viewing sunsets in the evening. I had been advised to do this by my newfound friend Rodolfo Susarrey in México City.

Hardly resembling a wealthy tourist, I looked more like a hippie with my long red beard and hair. At least, that was what the border guard at Nuevo Laredo thought when he denied me entry into México in 1970. But this was the low season; everyone wore minimal beach attire, and the gentleman procurer in white with perfect American English needed a tip. Only later did I learn that these beaches were for aristocrats. If my skin had not been white or had I been dressed in my beatnik clothes, I would have been unceremoniously escorted away.

Acapulco was a side trip, a divertissement from my primary destination, the Museum of Anthropology (*Museo de Antropología*) in México City. A friend in St. Louis had read in the New York Times about the wholesale transformation of México City, mainly due to the Olympics, and suggested I visit the great new museum of pre-Cortésian art. The weather was cold up north, and not having much to retain me, I pocketed \$45, packed a knapsack with a change of clothes and a blanket, and set out hitchhiking my way to Laredo, Texas. I figured that the amount was sufficient if I spent an average of one dollar a day for 30 days, and allowed \$15 for public transport to places too far for me to walk or too sketchy to hitchhike.

From 1940 to the mid-1970s, México was the economic growth envy of the world. Real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew at an average annual rate of 3.1% per capita, never below 3%. Economists label it the “Mexican Miracle.” In the midst of the unprecedented prosperity and with an eagerness to signal to the world that it was now a developed country, México petitioned and won its bid for the 1968 Olympics held in México City. These were the seminal games in Latin America and the first in a Spanish-speaking country. The city seized the opportunity to rebuild a great deal of its infrastructure.

General development across public and private spaces had already begun. Major construction projects had been constructed for decades for the economic growth to proceed. With the Olympics, the planners decided to separate the venues so that the benefits of the new infrastructure could be spread throughout the city. Six new streets were built, and boulevards and avenues were rebuilt to gain access and connect the sites for the competition.

All this construction required excavation on a massive scale. Modern México City is built upon the remnants of five major civilizations that had prospered for millennia, mainly from the agricultural benefits of the temperate *altiplano* climate of the valley. Of course, ruins and major artifacts were uncovered. What to do with all these newfound archaeological treasures?

The repository of significant antiquities in México is the National Museum of Anthropology (MNA, *El Museo Nacional de Antropología*), whose roots stem from 1790 with the Cabinet of Curiosities of México (*Gabinete de Historia Natural de México*). The illustrious 18th and 19th-century naturalist Alexander Von Humboldt visited this precursor collection in 1803 by way of Ecuador and the port of Acapulco. In his *Diario*, Humboldt states, “There is no city in all of Europe which in general appears more beautiful than México. It has the elegance, regularity, and uniformity of structures of Turin and Milan and the attractive neighbourhoods of Paris and Berlin.”

By the 20th century, the museum was bursting with too many exhibits. Then came the unintended finds from the excavations that overwhelmed the institution. In the early 1960s, architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez was engaged, and a new museum was built on a propitious site in the expansive central park Bosque de Chapultepec (forest on the hill of grasshoppers.) The park, four times the size of New York’s Central, is situated after a sharp turn of the grandest boulevard, *El Paseo de la Reforma*, built by the French-imposed Emperor of México Maximilian as his Champs Elysée.

Having transited southern Missouri and crossed the endless flat plains of eastern Oklahoma and much of northern Texas, I hitched a ride south from Dallas. Riding through Austin, I was asked, “Are you enjoying the Texas hill country?” I asked, “Where are the hills?” The driver laughed and said, “These are hills for us here in Texas.” I guess that in every expansive plain, any considerable elevation change assumes an exaggerated importance.

Arriving in Laredo, I went promptly to the border, where the guard declared in broken English, “We’ve got enough of you damn hippies here in México already,” and denied me entry. I was not crestfallen for long, as a veteran border crosser told me, “Do not worry, just come back for the next shift.”

Now I had eight hours or so to kill, with hardly any entertainment options. The day was hot, so I sat on a stool at a dining counter in a five-and-dime and ordered an iced coffee. “We ain’t got no iced coffee,” the waitress told me, adding, “We’ve got iced tea.” I said, “Can you bring me a cup of coffee and a tall glass of ice water, heavy on the ice?” “Sure, we got that.” I drank the water, poured the coffee over the ice, added a little cream and sugar and had the pre-cursor to a Starbuck’s Grande Iced Café Latte.

I had an idea. Why not cool my heels at an air-conditioned cinema matinee? There was a triple feature at the local movie house of Godzilla films. I might even catch a few winks. Nah, the primitive ‘special’ effects were too loud. I went anyway. On the way there, I spied a curiosity. Fifteen guys hurriedly walked together down the sidewalk, training their eyes across the street. I thought that was ridiculous until I saw the stunning seven-foot-tall blonde beauty across the street, with the long strides appropriate to her stature. I joined them in their gawk. Me, too. One can imagine how the poor woman must have felt.

I crossed into México with the new shift and right away asked a pedestrian how to get to México City. He thought for a moment, then told me, “Take a train. It’s cheap, and you might even rent a sleeper compartment.” I bought a one-way ticket with a one-person cabin for \$7.00. I had to wait an hour to depart. I

purchased a used Spanish-English dictionary, hopped on the train, and entered the world of 1930-50s America. I was on the prestigious *Águila Azteca* (Aztec Eagle) with connections to the Texas Eagle to Chicago, the Lakeshore Limited to New York, and passenger ship to Europe - for a century the fastest route from México City to the Old World. The Mexican government had purchased unused U.S. passenger train cars¹ from the pre-1960s era. *El Águila* coupled first and second-class passenger seat coaches, a first-class reclining chair car, Pullman sleepers, private compartment carriages, a dining car, and, to finish the train, a round-ended observation car. My single berth roomette was in a central corridor sleeper with 20 compartments. Smoking unfiltered Mexican *Ovilados*, I played Humphrey Bogart in the drawing room car.

The carriages were plushly furnished in an Art-Deco motif with deeply cushioned armchairs and quality carpeting throughout. What a treat, particularly the elegant dining wagon with its gourmet food options and refined waiters, clad in starched white linen vests, always with a pressed white cotton towel draped over a sleeve. For me, the soups were affordable' besides, no food on a Mexican train surpasses the quality of the soups. Growing up as a working-class boy from the Midwest eating Campbell's canned soups, I had never tasted such *caldos* (broths) and *consommés*. (Rail trips in México are memorialized by the travel writers Sybille Bedford in *A Sudden View* and Paul Theroux in *The Old Patagonia Express*.)

Our 750-mile journey was scheduled for a leisurely 18 hours, with stops in the major conurbations of Monterrey, Saltillo, San Luis Potosi, San Miguel de Allende, and Queretaro, in that order. We must have been on the local, for we stopped at innumerable small towns, villages, hamlets, and even some platforms in scorched solitude, no habitations in sight. One memorable town had named in English, the Tropic of Cancer. This meant that for the 1st time I crossed into the equinoctial region known as the tropics. On the train, I learned my 1st words in Spanish: *Es tarde?* (It is late?) Answered by *Siempre* (Always.) *Porque?* (Why?) or *Cuando?* (When?) were answered with a shoulder shrug. What with the many fits and starts, we arrived 38 hours after our departure.

The slow train afforded long and studied views of the variegated landscapes of México, from the lush to the desiccated, from tedious plains to vertiginous mountains, and richly verdant cultivated fields and grazing meadows. Many sidings were colonized with squalid villages fashioned out of disused boxcars, which poor Mexican families had made into makeshift bungalows. Although the windows were oilcloth curtains and the torch-cut doors were mostly raw to the elements, all were painted in gay colors and cheerful with well-tended and overflowing flower boxes.

At each stop, through opened train windows, food vendors sold every craving that a traveler might have: *refrescos* (soft drinks,) *helados* and *nieves* (ice cream and flavored ices,) *empanadas*, *elotes* (roasted corn on the cob,) *salchichas secas* (dried sausages,) *bolillos*, *raspas* (grated corn meal formed and baked or fried.) Add pumpkin seeds and nuts, sliced mangoes doused in chamoy, countless other chile-flavored, freshly-peeled and sliced exotic fruits, *dulces* (candies), *gummy bears*, *fruit cups*, and *beer-less* micheladas, even fresh flowers.

Finally, over a last rise, under an immense sunlit sky, lay an enormous meadow lush with sugar cane and corn - the richly tropical emerald Valley of México. It was easy to understand why it was the longest continuously populated city in the Western Hemisphere. I disembarked at the Buena Vista train station, misnamed for it had a disheartening view. Fortunately, there was a sufeit of low-priced hotels from which to choose.

¹ For intra-city transport, the Mexican government also purchased all our streetcars.

Here was México, teeming, impudent, vibrant, raucous, vivid; every sensation intensified and sharpened by the 7,200' high atmosphere and vertical mountain sun. Here were the people blended from Caucasian by Amerindian. To Sybille Bedford, the Mestizo population had "complexions either café-au-lait, nourished chestnut, glowing copper, or milky mauve." Everyone had the blood of Cortéz and Moctezuma. After about one hundred years of occupation and miscegenation, one of the white Spanish Conquistadors exclaimed, "My God, they are us." I joined the early imperialists in their admiration of high cheek-boned, dark-eyed Amerindian young women.

Here was the exotic and unknown. Add to all that a visit to a museum of artifacts from five millennia of ancient and wholly alien cultures?

The monumental Modernist *El Museo Nacional de Antropologia* comprises five giant blocky rectangular exhibition halls surrounding a massive central courtyard. At one end, the patio is sheltered by an imposing horizontal roof (*El Paraguas*, 'for waters,' umbrella as opposed to *parasol*, for the sun.) *El Paraguas* is supported by a single decoratively sculpted column, protected by a circular fountain; the waters splash directly from the canopy to the pavement below. The opposing end of the plaza is relieved by a large rectangular reflecting pool open to the sky.

Together, the galleries comprise some 900,000 square feet of exhibit space. Each of the five halls contain the artifacts and treasures of one of the five great pre-Cortézian civilizations, in chronological order of prominence: the magician Olmec (1600-350 BCE); the obsidian-trade-based, surprisingly egalitarian Teotihuacan (100-450 CE,) builders of the Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon; the mathematician genius, astronomer Maya (250-900 CE); the artisan Toltec (950-1150 CE), and the imperialist Aztec (1325-1519 CE,) whose language (Nahuatl) is still spoken by 140,000 Americans to this day.²

Thankfully, the museum buildings are separated by tranquil gardens, but even they are challenged with car-sized carved stone sculptures. One is the immense Aztec rain god Tlaloc, the monolith discovered by excavating an irrigation canal in a neighboring valley municipality of Coatlinchan. At 168 tons the monstrous sculpture stands 23 feet tall. When it arrived at its current site during the dry season, the truly angry Tlaloc released the heaviest rainstorm ever witnessed at that time of year.

The museum is so vast that it cannot be appreciated in a day. I resolved to spend a day in each. Resting on the second day on a bench in the stark courtyard, I was approached by a middle-aged gentleman, casually dressed in a conservative sports coat and tailored slacks, who courteously inquired, "Please do not be disturbed. I only wish to practice my English. Do you mind if I take a seat?" Rather missing the English spoken word myself, I thought I might learn a little Spanish in the bargain. He introduced himself as Rodolfo Susarrey, a semi-retired architect. Meeting him was fortuitous, for he proved a wealth of information and, later, a colleague.

To spend more time practicing English, and because he was a naturally kind and helpful person, Rodolfo offered to escort me on what he called his 'grand walking tour of México City.' Since he was 54 and I was only 23, I was surprised when he warned me that I would not keep up. Inwardly, I scoffed at his boast. It was Saturday. Since the museum was closed on Monday, we resolved to meet that morning at 9:00 in *El*

² And so do you. Common English words derived from Nahuatl are tomato, potato, coyote, chocolate, avocado, mesquite, chile, ocelot, chipotle, chia, guacamole...

Zócalo,³ the grand central square of México City, the site of the enormous Metropolitan Cathedral.⁴ Built over 250 years, it fuses three primary styles: the Gothic, the Renaissance and the Baroque. Particularly elaborate is the *Sagrario's* (Side Chapel's) *retablo*⁵ façade with the ultra-baroque Mexican variety of the *Churrigueresque*.

To say, "Let's meet at the *Zócalo*," is like saying that we will meet in a 14-acre park. At 240 meters on a side, it is the largest plaza in the Americas, and a definitive rendezvous place has been established, a meeting point *a pie* (on foot), at the southwest corner of the cathedral.

Rodolfo guessed that I was on a restricted budget. He suggested that I occasionally grab a filling *torta* sandwich at what he described as the best *tortería* in the city, just north of the historic center. What a find! Above and behind the counter were four drawings: one of a pig, the others of a lamb, a calf, and a goat. Each drawing was portioned according to the cuts on offer – whether they be the tongue of the calf, the belly of the swine, the shank of the lamb, or the loin of the goat, your choice – each cost the same. The *tortas* were made with a crusty French bread *bolillo* or half-loaf from which the soft white center was scooped out and discarded. One could have a black bean paste spread on one half and perhaps mashed avocado on the other, the meat of your choice covered with any of a manifold array of sliced chiles, radish, diced onion, always cilantro, and lime, and your choice of salsa or without (*sencillo*) - a nourishing meal for one peso, eight equivalent U.S. cents.

Further taking Rodolfo's advice, I registered at the considerably affordable Hotel Monte Carlo, 69 Uruguay, only three blocks from the *Zócalo*. Assuming I was an educated American student, the hotel clerk asked if I might wish to stay in the room where D.H. Lawrence wrote parts of the novels "The Plumed Serpent" and "Mornings in México." With the *tortería* sandwich, a few pesetas for transport, a peso for museum admission (free to all on Tuesday), and the minimal hotel tariff, I was just under my one U.S. dollar-a-day budget.

Our appointment was kept on Monday morning, and we began to walk. And walk we did, and walk, and walk some more. We marched east of *El Zócalo*, where we found block after block of small shops, nigh, tiny shops, two to never more than three meters square. Each square block bizarre was dedicated to a different commodity, 100 boutiques to the building. Each of the first few *cuadras* was dedicated to a single foodstuff: small egg booths, lettuce, tomatoes, cherries, plums, and many blocks selling maize in its many forms and varieties, every imaginable fruit, grain, seed, pepper, bean, spice, coffee, fowl, cuts of beef, pig, goat, fish and lamb, pastry, hat, basket, incense, chocolate, wood carving, embroidery, knitted and woven apparel and plant-based products known to Meso-America. Potatoes, candies soft and hard, chocolates, of course, peppers and beans, on and on. Cloth and thread. Then leather goods: one for belts, then bolsas, jackets, then a saddlery, more tack. Next, shoes, sandals, and then *huaraches*, with their intricately woven (really macramé) peasant designs. Admiring the handcraft and their utility, I made the mistake of buying a pair.

3 One might suppose from its sound that the word has an Amerindian origin, but *Zócalo* is a Spanish word. Even so, an amateur linguist might attribute it to Arabic, but the word has the Latin root *soccus*, meaning plinth or base and the Italian cognate *soccolo*. Every town and village, every city in México has its *Zócalo*.

4 Naming the church, The Spanish Imperialists used elaborate oratorical flourishes stuffed with grandiose appellations to name the church, "The Church of the Assumption of Maria Santissima, the Holy Metropolitan Church of México, the Patriarchal Basilica of the Americas, the Archepiscopal See of the Distrito Federál, the First Christian Church on American Soil, L'Iglesia Mayor - the Cathedral of México.

5 A *retablo* (retable in English) is an ornate wall or screen behind the altar.

We saw everything imaginable. Buildings dedicated to selling toilets. Others for radios. It was as if we were walking through five of those endless Amazon fulfillment centers, but much grander, with everything on display. You could buy *anything*.

We soon turned to a district of innumerable blocks of 17th-century and 18th-century residences, then offices, every 200 meters a church – Romanesque, Renaissance, Churrigueresque, Baroque – from the 16th to the 20th century. I remember asking myself, “Why would anyone from the U.S. travel to Europe, with México at its doorstep, given its surfeit of well-executed 16th through 19th-century continental architecture, ancient pre-Cortézian ruins and artifacts from diverse advanced civilizations thrown in, and with a cuisine featuring sauces (*salsas*) that rival those of France, and for such a bargain to boot?”

We stopped for lunch at one of the multitudes of *loncherias*, one that Rodolfo knew, for he had planned and curated the detailed itinerary of our excursion. We visited eccentric museums, glorious small squares, monuments, excavated ruins – we saw everything. I tired, but did not want to confess weariness to this indefatigable perambulator, a man who had led the life of a flaneur.

Finally, I gave in and pleaded for respite. We stopped at a café for an espresso. On and on we went, through a district that seemed to be occupied chiefly by specialty schools, art schools, technical and trade institutes, and military academies. Office districts, flower sellers. All arranged together so that if you could find a particular district, you could narrow the path to your intended purchase. Finally, I relented. Rodolfo did not gloat, “I will accompany you back to your hotel.” But not on foot. “Oh, I’ll just catch a bus back. Which one is best?” Kind Rodolfo, “You’ll get lost. Follow me.”

Rodolfo and I had become friends. Rodolfo did not ask when I might next be free; he just assumed I would join him. He described a marvelous *restaurante*, Rosalia’s. This busy establishment specialized in a six-course *comida corrida*, a meal on the run. Now, how can you possibly eat a six-course meal on the run? Well, this is México, where life is slowed down. Where the Spanish *ahora* means “around now.” *ahorita* means “a little bit of now,” or just about now, and *ahorita mismo* means definitely, absolutely, right now, as in, “You better jump out of the car’s path *ahorita mismo*, or you will be killed.”

The service at Rosalia’s did not commence until two in the afternoon, so I enjoyed a few hours at the museum first. We were served fruit-flavored *aqua del dia* drinks in a carafe, a bowl of slightly sweet bread, fried tortilla chips and a tray of four dipping *salsas* – from red and green *muy picante* to *pico* to *suave* to the ubiquitous guacamole *hecho puré*. These were more *adornos* (adornments) than appetizers and did not constitute a course. First, we were served a soup, *un caldo* or a consommé, a few slices of *melón* and mango, then an *ensalada de cactus*, a one-egg *omelette*, a thin slice of beef in a red sauce, and, finally, the house specialty, *el plato fuerte* (the main course,) *Paella Valenciana*.⁶ Oh, I forgot the steaming corn tortillas; always corn. Of course, *un postre*, a diminutive dessert with espresso, gratis. Only one U.S. dollar, this cornucopian repast broke my budget for that day. I ate more than my fill, pocketed a couple of sweet rolls when Rodolfo went to wash his hands and resolved to let the meal serve for two days of nutriment.

When walking the streets, I noticed some citizens reacted to seeing me with repugnance, often offering the one-finger salute, others going so far as to rummage through a trash bin to find discarded fruit to hurl at me. I implored Rodolfo to explain what was happening and what caused the otherwise kind and friendly people I met to react with such disgust. Rodolfo explained, “It’s your huaraches.” This is what the peasants

⁶ Valencian in México generally comes with morsels of chicken, vegetables, rings of squid, shrimps, clams and fish (*con trozos de pollo, verduras, aros de calamar, camarones, almejas y pescado*.)

wore and could afford. To wear them mocked the poor. The people knew that I could afford the plastic sandals currently *a la mode*. I put them away and never had a problem with an adverse reaction to my presence again.

The city is, by necessity, purposefully horizontal, built upon an integrated series of man-made islands of a since-drained lake in a place predisposed to earthquakes. Every building is sinking.

What was so surprising was the 44-story, 166-meter-tall Latin America Tower smack dab in the middle of the *Centro Historico*, built in 1956. For 27 years the tallest building in Latin America, the design mimics New York's Empire State skyscraper; the same manufacturer supplied the steel for both towers. This anomaly, at least for this most horizontal of metropolises, was built atop 361 concrete piles pounded deep onto the firm volcanic rock strata below. Rodolfo explained that a pendulum down a central vertical shaft monitors the structure's verticality and is continuously leveled plumb by automatic mechanical jacks. In the year after it was completed, it proved its measure by withstanding the 7.9 Richter seismic scale earthquake in 1957 and, more impressively, survived intact through the 8.1 tremor of 1985. The modernist spire stands in blatant contrast cater corner to the pre-eminent performing arts theater in the nation, the 1934 Art Nouveau/Neoclassical El Palacio de Belles Artes (Palace of Fine Arts). The opera house is faced with white Carrara Marble; the tower, glass. As related by Rodolfo, the building originally was entered up a grand staircase, but decades of subsidence sank the building close to street level. Then came the miraculous tower cater-corner, whose weight lifted the magnificent auditorium accordingly.

It was my habit to explore the expansive city by taking some means of public transport to its terminus in a distant *barrio*, whether streetcar or bus or even cheap *collectivo* (communal) taxi or a combination thereto. In 1970, México certainly had a surfeit of traffic, but it was of buses and taxis and had yet to become Jim Harrison's "over-flowing public toilet" of Los Angeles. It was my habit to stroll aimlessly to discover what the city might reveal. With my stature, white skin, red hair and beard, the Indigenous, including Indios fresh from distant lands, found me quite the oddity, indeed a curiosity, a specimen. Groups of a dozen or two followed me as I walked the streets. Now, I was the Amazon I had followed and leered at in the streets of Laredo. The children were the brave ones who ever so furtively dashed across the street to touch my skin to test if I was real.

The specimen quality that I elicited from the people led to my kidnapping. A group of young guys enticed me to ride with them to a unique destination and then proceeded to drive me all over the city to show me off to their far-flung friends and relatives. After several hours, I tired of this, but they would not let me go. Only detained, but after several hours contained, I told them that I could find my way own way home, but no, I was kidnapped. I was afraid. My pleas for release were ignored for hours until I yelled out my anger. Even then, there was reluctance to part with their captive freak.

Having only experienced the cold waters of Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, I fancied a journey to the Pacific. Mr. Susarrey was enthusiastic. I must go to Acapulco, taking an overnight bus. The route was on a two-lane highway that negotiated the mountains of Morelos and Guerrero. Before our departure, I wondered at the bus driver clutching his rosary while whispering a prayer to the statuette of the Virgin of Guadalupe glued to the dashboard, crossing himself three times before releasing the brake.

I soon found out why. Night fell, the road was twisty, and there was a great deal of truck traffic and other buses on the road built without shoulders. The heavily laden *camións* labored up to the passes, considerably slowing our progress. For this, the bus and truck drivers had made a diabolical bargain. The bus began passing the truck in the lane carrying the opposing traffic and flashed its headlamps, which were answered by a flicker of the truck's lights. Both sets of headlights were then extinguished so that the lights of

oncoming traffic could be seen. The bus would accelerate, and once even slightly passed, the truck would flash its lights. The bus would quickly dart back to the proper lane, and both sets of lights would then be re-lit. The only problem was that sometimes the traffic from the other direction was doing the same thing. A horrendous crash would ensue with many casualties and deaths from head-on collisions or vehicles careening off the road, and all the world would shake their heads at the calamity reported in the next morning's paper. I bought a rosary in Acapulco for the return trip.

After the encounter with the servant dressed in white on the beach, I thought I might go for a swim. Plunged in, I headed for an exposed rock out in the cove, capped by a statue of what in Spanish sounds like the beer-gin. I tired and was unsure I would make it, but turning back was even more distant, so I pressed on. I grabbed the rocks for support and instinctively (oh no!) propped my feet against the stone below, impaling them upon the barbed spines of a colony of sea urchins. I was indeed injured. I took the time to catch my breath, and slowly swam to shore, where I hobbled onto the dry sand.

A man clad only in a swim trunk rushed over with a cigarette lighter and a bowie knife. I recoiled with horror. He explained calmly in English, "Do not fear; I am a doctor; I am here to help you." I relaxed. He heated and sterilized the metal with the flame from the lighter. He gently cradled one foot and cautiously explored the injured area with the tip of the knife. He soon turned to me and said, "I cannot help you. The spines will have to work themselves out with time. It will take about a week. You need rest. Where are you staying?" I explained that even the cheesy doss-house was too expensive for a week. The doctor Samaritan suggested that I rent a cheap room on a wide sunny beach a reasonable distance from the expensive 'action' of resort Acapulco - north by bus only 30 minutes to the village *La Pie de la Cuesta* (the foot of the hill.)

I gathered my belongings, limped to the bus stop, sat on the curb, caught the transport, and arrived at a broad and expansive sand beach that was, as promised, at the foot of a hill. I found bargain accommodations, although spartan: a single cubed room with one window, one naked light bulb, a ceiling fan, one window, one door, and a sand floor right on the beach – fine for a time, resting by the sea. Built of unadorned blocks for the walls and formed concrete for the roof, the blockhouse offered communal flush toilets and showers close by. A buck for the week. I could swim all day without walking far; the salt water would help to cleanse the wound and I could recuperate by the great, peaceful one – *El Pacifico*. If I were to find such a beach house today, I would add a desk and a chair, and have the perfect writer's cabin.

Food was everywhere, delicious and cheap, abundant. The fresh seafood was grilled over mesquite right on the beach: skewered *dorado o camaróns embarazado* (pregnant⁷ mahi-mahi or shrimp.) Fruit foreign to my experience but all the other varieties, too. Sliced papaya (for motility) and sweet mango were married to nubile *melón* for breakfast. Sometimes, I drank a blended *licuado* with fresh milk, freshly squeezed *jugo de naranja* (orange juice) and bananas. Adding a scoop of yoghurt or ice cream, and malt, and I had a *malteado*. Shade under the palms once plucked, provided fresh *cocos*, when chilled offered their refreshing milk. At dawn, the *pangos* (open seagoing outboards) fishermen drove right up on the beach with their morning catch. *Huachinago* meant Pacific red snapper, the entire fish scored diagonally across their bones and sauteed in a garlic-based, olive sauce called *mojo de ajo*. Sometimes in the early mornings the *pescaderos* motored their *pangas* off the beach, paying out their nets in a broad arc, returning to the *playa* to trap their catch. For the fun of discovering the many creatures caught, the tourists joined in the heaving of the reticules as the beach-grilling cooks anticipated their claims to the ingredients of their daily trade.

⁷, The skewered seafood was originally cooked *pescado en vara asado* but in the din of sea break, the phrase was mistaken for *embarazado*.

The sea was expansive, the breathtaking *olas altas rompiendo* (high crashing waves) awing, the *brisas* refreshing, and the gliding gulls, fast-flying boobies, and diving pelicans fascinating to a land-locked mid-Westerner. And the soaring magnificent frigate (*fregata magnificens*) birds entertained me. The “man-of-war” aerobic pterodactyl frigates boast the longest wing span (at seven feet) to weight ratio of any bird, conserve energy by steering with their deeply forked tails, show off by performing perfect barrel rolls and unless they are stealing from other birds, the constant flyers only dip their beaks into the ocean to catch small prey.⁸

The beachgoers were sparse but still an accompaniment. One day, there were none to be seen. I had the *playa* to myself and swam all alone. The solitude was flawless except for the annoying vehicle driving back and forth on the road beyond, bellowing a dissonant stream of indecipherable Spanish, obviously advertising some product. All week, I had saved plenty by gorging on beach food. That evening, splurging on a palapa-roofed restaurant meal, I met a couple of young guys from New York. In conversation, I was effusive about my marvelous solo swim that afternoon. They stared at me with horror. They understood Spanish. The truck with the obnoxious loudspeaker was announcing that a school of sharks was feeding just offshore and, that very morning had taken a young girl’s arm. I smiled with false bravado.

With them was a ravishing copper-skinned *mestizaje* beauty of 19. One of the men explained in English that she was available by the week for an astonishingly low price. At first, I recoiled at the prostitution, but I must admit that I had some envy. It was not sex that I craved. I wished to hire her as a model, upon whom I might gaze and learn her story and perhaps, after familiarity and respect, be amorous. Of course, this is only a veiled form of exploitation, too.

I met other young peers in Pie de la Cuesta: a couple of educated students from Guerrero had excellent English skills. They asked me wherefrom I came. I answered that I was from America. They countered, “You are in America.” “North America.” “You are in North America.” “The United States, then.” They said, “You are in the United States – *Los Estados Unidos de México*.” “Ok, then where am I from?” You are from the United States of America, *del Norte*.” I got back at them, “You are some smart-ass Mexicans.” “You call us Mexicans; to us, Mexicans are the Aztecs from the México City of *El Distrito Federal*, the federal state, much like your Washington, District of Columbia. For us, they are *Defeños*.⁹

“We oppose the federal government of the Aztecs,” and like much of the people of the sub-continent, they considered themselves belonging to a smaller Indigenous nation. They said, “We are Tlapanecs.” Their first language was Tlapaneco, their second Spanish, and now their third, English. And I took pride in the fact that I knew a few phrases in Spanish.

I challenged these Tlapanecs by asking why the people who were so oppressed did not revolt. Beans! As long as the people had beans and their bellies were full, there would never be a revolt.

7 These kleptoparasites are such good fliers that they prod and pester the other birds until they regurgitate their food, and the harassers whirl to snatch a meal in mid-flight. Truly unique, they mate only once every two years. The eggs are incubated for 56 days, and the fledglings do not leave the nest for 165 days or more. The females continue to feed the young birds for up to a year. Although they have webbed feet, they rarely alight the water, for their feathers are not waterproof and get sodden, and the birds die at sea. They never land on the sand since they cannot run fast enough to gain the lift necessary to fly. The avians are named after the lightly armed 18th-century fully-rigged sailing battleships. With their speed and maneuverability, they were used for escort, scouting, and patrol. These pelagians perch in trees, and sometimes the complicated wing-folding snags a wing in a branch, and they starve. Their empathetic brethren extend their lives by feeding them on the fly.

⁹ Pejorative, from the pronunciation of the initials *D* and *F*. México City has since become its own state, and the slang term has been replaced by Chilango, also derogatory, from the Mayan word *chilan*, which means ‘unkempt.’

Indeed, the Mexican city-state Federal Government recognized that the manifold small nations of the country were in no way united. Universal primary education was funded, free to all who could afford the three uniforms necessary to attend school. One was a standard day-to-day costume – itself unifying in its uniformity. Like parochial and other religious schools, there was no room for individual, non-conforming ethnic expression – every kid from every clan had to adhere to a dress code as all others in the Federal state. The second was a sports outfit, the same across the 32 states. Moreover, one day a week, every child had to wear a defined set of apparel that showed the colors of the nation’s flag – green for independence, white for the Catholic religion,¹⁰ and red for the union of the white Europeans and the Amerindians. Uniforms with two pairs of shoes were expensive for the poorest of the indigenous. To this day, many do not attend school, particularly in the impoverished states, adhering assiduously to their separate cultures and practices and inherited dialects, all of a different family of languages than Indo-European Spanish.

Back in the metropolis, I happened upon a swarm of appropriately dressed schoolchildren, running headlong away, escaping from the school jail to which they had just been released. For some unknown reason, I experienced culture shock, suddenly distressed and disoriented. It was as if I had been thrust into an entirely unfamiliar world, a place where I did not belong, from which I myself must escape. It was time to go home. More than anything, I missed the written word in *my* native tongue.

I said my good-byes to Rodolfo, but not before he directed me to a used bookstore with some titles in English, where I found a dog-eared copy of the newly-released and much-celebrated novel of the poet James Dickey - *Deliverance*. I thought the book might be too pulpy, but it was perfect.

The train had taken too much time. I bought a bus ticket to the border. Reading my book, I savored every paragraph, reading each twice over, devouring the English syntax, diction, and phrasing of a superb writer relating a stirring tale. The bus stopped regularly at *cantinas* for refreshments, victuals and commodious flush toilet rooms. In one cantina, I carelessly left my treasure on a dining room table. There was no going back to retrieve it, and I felt adrift, staring through the window at one of those endless agave plains on the route. All I had were caged ducks and chickens to hold my interest.

A speeding bus overtook us; the driver signaled for us to stop. From the other bus popped out my savior, who had seen me engrossed in the book, retrieved it and then implored *el conductor* of her bus to overtake us so that she could perform her minor miracle. Perhaps the rosary I acquired in Acapulco had magical powers.

Twenty miles from the border, we queued before a customs agent who checked, stamped and filed away our visas. I did not know that the visa was a document of great importance to the Mexican bureaucracy. I should have reported its theft to the police when it was stolen along with a few coins from one of my hotel rooms. Now, I was in a pickle. After a stern lecture, the border agent threatened me with jail time if I could not pay the steep fine. The defeated chagrin evidenced by my cherubic expression, coupled with my obvious innocence, must have welled up the mercy from within him. He grimly warned me again but, in the end, shook his head and set me free.

A few weeks later, in St. Louis, I thought I might accept Rodolfo's offer. Before I departed México, he confessed that he was writing a book about the stories of the old streets of México City’s historic center, *Las Viejas Calles de la Ciudad de México*, which he hoped to sell to wealthy American tourists. He had translated most of his *libro* into English but was unsure of its accuracy or readability. If I were to come back to the city,

10 Although, after La Guerra de la Reforma, it is illegal to wear religious garb in public anywhere in the nation.

I could stay free in the guest room of his apartment in the Navarte neighborhood on *Calle Xochicalco*. (*Xochicalco* is named after archeological ruins in Miacatlán, western Morelos state.) I took him up on his offer. Getting him on a phone took forever, which only happened after he received a telegraph from me. I retraced my steps and rejoined him in another month or so.

His apartment offered immersion into middle-class neighborhood life in the city. Early every morning the local high school's drum and bugle corps blared marching down the street. The cart-pushing fruit sellers followed. If not, tri-cyclers with their front wheels on either side of a basket. Fresh-baked pastry sellers. Then, those selling eggs, freshly squeezed juices, fruit and corn and corn masa – an Amazon Fresh instant daily delivery of prime essentials. Whole milk with cream at the top was delivered to your front door by a *lechero*. *Lechero* is a false English cognate. Or maybe it's not. Every week or two, accounts for milk purchased were settled. One afternoon, I watched as the milkman knocked at Mrs. Alvarez's door down the block. When sweeping her stoop or watering her plants, she always wore a drab house dress. But, when she answered the knock, let's just say that her standard attire was missing - altogether. *El lechero* did not emerge for ten minutes or more. Apparently, it was in the job description to have a willing virility. When I think about it, several of the kids in the neighborhood shared a likeness. Do you understand now that manifold services came directly to you, including “the seminal milk”¹¹ of human desire?

There were sellers of natural gas and knife sharpeners. Doctors visiting the sick. Everything came to you – no need to borrow a cup of sugar from a neighbor. Ice cream and flavored ices and *refrescos* welcomed the warmth of the afternoon sun. Cold cerveza flowed in the evening from hand-carted barrels on tap. And everything you bought could be touched, smelled, tasted, and haggled over, with the intimate human contact that makes life so grand.

Hop-on and hop-off streetcars ran down the center of every neighborhood's one-way, three-lane residential streets. Unnecessary were automobiles and their attendant garages and driveways. If one values the quality of life by having to spend half a day fighting traffic, driving to several big box stores to purchase more-than-necessary staples, trudging more than a kilometer in the process, and packing it all home to be stored, rather than having precisely the right amount at your doorstep the moment you might need it, yes, life in México City suffered by comparison.

For the book translation, I did little more than correct grammar, word choice and idiom. Often, I required an explanation of Rodolfo's intent. It was our collaboration, and he wanted to include me in the credits, but I had not contributed enough to warrant recognition.

Only two stories behind the street names do I remember. One was for the *Calle de la Condesa*. It seems that the narrow street was only one carriage wide, and the countess's coach met an opposing one of a gentleman, who, because of his, in his mind, dominant gender, refused to budge, and a three-day standoff transpired. It seems that the countess had a chamber pot, and she prevailed. With great difficulty, the gentlemen backed his horses down the narrow alley. Condesa still runs north/south for two blocks from *de Tacuba* to *Madero*.

The other chronicle was about *Calle de la Plata*. When his daughter married, the wealthy Mexican father of the bride showed off his wealth by paving the street with solid silver plates from the church ceremony

¹¹ “Sex contains all, bodies, souls,
Meanings, proofs, purities, delicacies, results, promulgations,
Songs, commands, health, pride, the maternal mystery, the seminal milk” – Walt Whitman in the poem *A Woman Awaits Me*

to the reception hall. After I left for the U.S., I never learned if the book had been published. Nevertheless, the experience was empowering.

Since my early trips to the great city, I have traveled to the county of México over thirty times, through 16 states and once on the overnight train from México City to Guadalajara and, after a few days, by bus to Manzanillo. I loved all the old beach and port towns on the Pacific, from Mazatlán to Puerto Vallarta to Manzanilla to Zihuatanejo, before despoilation by mega-resort. I enjoyed the deafening raw power of the swells of the Pacific Ocean collapsing on the beaches of Punta Mita and Playa de Oro before they were transformed into a 5-star resort and jumbo-jet runway, respectively. Those who have visited beach resorts and say they love México have never visited the country. There is a saying that the only difference between Cancún and Miami is that in Miami, they speak English.

The high culture lives in the *altiplano* of central México in the prosperous colonial cities inland: San Luis Potosi, Zacatecas, Guanajuato, San Miguel de Allende, Queretaro, Puebla, Morelia and best of all, Oaxaca, for its cuisine and particularly for the art. Monterrey is a tech town in the northern desert. Avoid the Chicago of the country, Guadalajara. And also, sadly, México City is now New York. Stay there only for the museums and colonial architecture. Do not drive the limited access toll-imposed *autopistas*. Never wear the unwelcome green.¹² Instead, immerse yourself in *México Profundo*, especially during the verdant exuberance of the rainy season. You will satisfy your “great longing to move, to hear another language, to eat new food.”¹³ You will discover a colorful land with perfect weather and gracious, dignified people. You will find variable landscapes, ancient ruins and artifacts. You will marvel at the exquisite, well-preserved architecture of the last half-millennia and contemporary, Neoclassical, and pre-Cortésian fine art, especially sculpture. If you require a guide, please consider me.

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¹² When the U.S. invaded México in 1846 to steal half the nation, the marines wore green uniforms. The battle cry of the bilingual Méxicoan defenders was ‘Green Go Home.’

¹³ Sybille Bedford in *A Sudden View*