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Secrets Behind the Walls: Of Mexico, the Beats & Love

I knew her only a few weeks, but it was long enough to make an impression that would last a lifetime.

I was eighteen. Filled with ambitions to become a writer. I traveled south from my home in Alabama to a place very strange to me. I had no idea that my first summer on my own would include meeting the premiere Beat writers of that generation.

I caught a passenger train, the *Southerner*, from Tuscaloosa to New Orleans, where I boarded the *Southern Pacific* to San Antonio, where I paid a taxi driver five dollars extra to rush me to a station across town, where a steam engine and two cars were ready to pull out and head across the south Texas desert to Laredo, where I climbed onto the *Aztec Eagle* and upgraded to a first-class Pullman berth for \$14.

When the *Aztec Eagle* stopped at the remote depot at 11 a.m. the next day, I stepped down with my two bags and portable typewriter. I was suddenly surrounded by children chirping like hungry, excited birds, all reaching toward me, grabbing eagerly at my bags.

"No!" I said, "Get away!"

When they persisted, I slapped at their dirty little hands.

"No!" I said.

They continued, grabbing and pulling.

As the train disappeared down the tracks, the tattered children carried my bags away. I ran after them, thinking my bags would disappear and I would be left without clothes, books, or typewriter.

When I caught up with them, they were placing my bags into the trunk of the only car in the dusty yard. Next to the car stood a driver who asked in broken English if I needed a taxi. I looked around, saw no building other than the depot and no other car, I nodded.

The children surrounded me. They poked their open palms toward me. Their large dark eyes stared at me hungrily, like baby birds at feeding time. I looked toward the driver, who ignored me.

While the driver slid under the wheel of his old car, I reached into my pocket, pulled out a handful of change, and tossed it toward the children.

I scrambled to get into the backseat while they fell to their knees and grappled for the coins.

“Casa Jorado, por favor,” I said.

The driver started out across the desert. No town in sight. Nothing but flat brown desert and hills in the distance.

Then came a shout from somewhere behind us.

The driver slammed on brakes. The car slid to a stop.

I wanted to shout, “Go!” but I had already exhausted what little Spanish I knew. I felt helpless. I twisted and saw a man running toward us. He was saying something frantically. I had no idea what his words meant. He opened the door and slid inside. He turned and grinned and said something. I nodded.

The driver released the clutch and off we went across the desert in a cloud of dust.

Instantly, I wondered if I were being kidnapped. These two Mexicans were in cahoots. They would take me out into the desert—a strange, desolate place to a boy who had known the open pastures, thick forests, cottonfields, and friendly villages of the South. I had never been away from home alone. Once, when I was a child, I traveled with Mama and my little brother by train to New York, where we lived near the Army post where Daddy was stationed on Staten Island. In the summertime of my youth we would travel as a family to Florida or the hills of east Tennessee. I had gone with friends to Panama City Beach where we’d gotten drunk and acted fools, staying for five or six days. But I’d never been away for an extended time, and certainly never into a foreign country where I couldn’t speak the language.

I was scared.

Then the car turned eastward. In the distance, spread out over a hillside, was a town. White buildings glistened. In the middle of a labyrinth of pastel plaster walls shaped in various-sized rectangles was a giant pink steeple reaching high into the bright

blue sky. I recognized it as the centerpiece of the photographs of the town of San Miguel de Allende I had seen in brochures advertising the Instituto.

At the entrance to *Casa Jorado* I passed through a large wooden door into a dark hallway where walls were covered with old photographs. Standing there, staring at the shadowy, faded faces of Mexicans from past generations, I heard brusque sounds of "Malaguena" being played allegro on a slightly off-key piano.

At the end of the hallway the hacienda opened to a sunny garden with colorful jacaranda blooms, lemon trees, bougainvillea, and other flowering plants. To the left, through a high doorway, a young woman sat at a baby grand piano. She played the notes of "Malaguena" with verve, turning her dark head from side to side as though she were entertaining thousands in a huge concert hall. She was lost in the sound. When she stopped, halfway through, I applauded. She glanced toward me. Her face flushed pink. She ducked her head, turned, and fled to the far side of the large room.

"Senorita?" I called. But she was gone.

Behind me, from a dining room emitting the delicious fragrance of a Mexican *comida* with garlic and coriander and onion, stepped a gray-haired woman. Short, with prominent nose and high forehead, she introduced herself as Dona Jorado, the mistress of the house.

She led me onto the patio, pointed out the honor-system bar, took me to my small room, and gave me serving times for breakfast and *comida*.

2.

In my spartan room was a single bed without springs. In an old-fashioned chifforobe I hung my clothes. I situated my portable typewriter on a small wooden desk beneath double windows. Here I placed three books: a tattered paperback of *From Here to Eternity*, a well-worn hardcover Viking *Portable Faulkner*, and a paperback Webster's. Then I ventured out to explore the territory.

After I passed several peacocks loitering lazily in the garden, I walked down the cobblestone street toward the Instituto. As I strolled by high walls hiding a very large building with a dome, I

noticed wooden doors even larger than those of *Casa Jorado*. A gigantic padlock fastened the doors shut. The significant lock intrigued me and made me wonder what was behind those walls. It looked like a church. But most churches in Mexico were open to parishioners twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

I soon learned that in almost all of San Miguel, like many Mexican towns, the streets were lined with walls. Wooden doors opened to houses or stores.

At the Instituto, after signing papers, I was introduced to a tall man with thinning gray hair and piercing eyes. Stirling Dickinson had come from Ohio to Mexico twenty years earlier and had started an art school. After World War II he joined with a former governor of Guanajuato to establish the Instituto on the estate of the Canal family, which owned the first building of the compound first constructed in 1735.

In his soft Midwestern voice, Dickinson told the story of how Fray Juan de San Miguel walked barefooted from the valley of Mexico where Mexico City is now located to this hill one-hundred-and-fifty miles north. He built a shrine near the train station where I had arrived this morning.

By 1810, after Spanish-born political bosses ruled the country for two-hundred years, the Mexican-born Creoles, led by a handsome young landowner from San Miguel, began to talk of rebellion. Ignacio Allende started a club called the Society for the Study of Fine Arts in which the idea of freedom was discussed. With him was Father Miguel Hedalgo, a priest from nearby Dolores. Together, they organized the rebels. Father Hidalgo issued his famous *Grito*, "Long live Our Lady of Guadalupe! Long live independence!" which can still be heard on the streets of San Miguel every September 16th. For Allende, Hidalgo, and several other leaders, the revolution was short-lived. They were captured and beheaded. Their heads, on public display in iron cages, withered away for ten years in Guanajuato, until another great Mexican leader, General Anastasio Bustamante, who later moved to San Miguel, took them down and buried them with honors.

Dickinson told the story as we sat on a patio behind the school looking out over the town. The view up the hill was breathtaking: the spire of the central church, La Parroquia, pointing high into

the sky, several domes with multi-colored mosaic-style roofs, layer upon layer of earthen-shaded rectangles, all fit together like a huge cubist canvas.

After *comida* of boiled chicken, potatoes, a stewed cactus-type vegetable, and well-buttered *pan*, I lay on my cotton-filled mattress and listened to song birds and fell asleep. After waking, I reread a scene from *From Here to Eternity*, my favorite novel. In the quietness of late afternoon I listened once again to the first twenty or so bars of *Malaguena*, wondering if she would ever learn more of the tune.

Later, as I started out, first gazing at the ancient faces of the people of yesteryear in the entrance hallway, I heard once again the sound of the piano playing the song I was beginning to hate. I looked through the antique-filled parlor and saw her smooth high-cheeked olive-shaded face lighted by a brass lamp. My first thought: *She's gorgeous.*

She glanced up, her eyes catching my stare, and she cast her vision downward quickly.

As the song started again, I moved out the door and started toward the center of town, the *jardin*, where I knew I would find the *La Cucaracha* bar where I knew *gringos* hung out.

Four years earlier, hospitalized in a Birmingham children's clinic for surgery and treatment of scoliosis, the result of infant polio, I had read an article in a men's magazine: "How to Live in Paradise for \$100 a Month." It described San Miguel as a writer's haven and told about happenings at the *Cucaracha*. It was written by an ex-GI named Richard Magruder, whom I would meet forty years later in the Mexico City airport. We became friends, spending time together in Atlanta, Acapulco, and San Miguel, before his death a few years ago.

At the *Cucaracha*, I met a number of so-called writers. Most drank more than they wrote. And they liked to talk. Before the end of my first night, one of these writers said he was friends with Jack Kerouac, and he knew that Jack and his Beat friends would visit San Miguel soon.

3.

I went to class at the Instituto. I wrote. I read my stories in class. My teachers did not like my Southern way of writing. They chided me for having my characters “yell” or “holler,” and their faces soured at some of my descriptions. I was too country. They instructed me to read F. Scott Fitzgerald’s stories about growing up. All of these teachers were from the Midwest or West or New York.

By the time the Beats showed up, I was totally frustrated with trying to write clear, unobstructed prose without southernness.

Allen Ginsberg, an overweight, bearded poet, spouted philosophy at the top of his shrill voice until he disappeared the first night with a friend and didn’t show up again until the others were ready to leave.

Neal Cassady was a square-shouldered, athletic, sharp-faced railroad brakeman with sunken, brooding eyes.

On that first afternoon, Ginsberg announced, motioning toward the pale high-boned face of Jack Kerouac, “We all worship at the feet of this great Beat god.” As he unfolded from the forest green five-year-old Mercedes Benz, Kerouac’s fine-boned face was haloed with the bright Mexican afternoon sunlight. With downcast eyes, either shy or trying to hide from the sudden brightness, our mutual friend introduced us. I offered my hand, and he gave me a shake as limp as an earthworm. I was surprised. I had expected a good, strong, manly handshake from the Dharma bum whose writing I admired especially for its powerful drive that seemed never to cease as it grabbed the reader and carried him along at breakneck speed, riding the rails or the highways, as vast as America. There was no power in his touch.

As he chewed his cud like a benevolent cow from a Buddhist pasture, his light, bright blue eyes seemed to focus beyond me on something halfway between here and there. I suspected that he had been gnawing on something that settled his mind on a never-never land far, far away. “Hey, man. I want to meet Montezuma and climb into that soul where something fitful is happening NOW!” He exploded with a sweet gentle loudness.

From somewhere in the depths of the Mercedes appeared a skinny naked girl with breasts the size of small pancakes and stringy dark hair and ribs that showed pitifully. Her name was Callie, but they called her Sunshine, and she'd been hitchhiking from some small town in the upper Midwest. Somewhere between Nogales and San Miguel she had lost her clothes. She found a pair of shorts and a halter and sandals. But when she stepped out onto the street, our friend Bill Evans, an adventure writer who had lived in San Miguel for several years, warned: "You better find some more cloth to cover yourself. The police will have you behind bars in a minute, dressed like that. Or undressed like that."

"What's wrong?" she asked incredulously, looking down at her scrawny body.

"This isn't Acapulco or some beach resort," Evans said. "They frown on women wearing pants here. If you walk downtown like you are, you'll be arrested. They have very strict laws."

She shrugged, crawled back inside, shucked off her shorts, snapped a knee-length skirt around her waist and pulled a peasant's blouse over her head.

Minutes later we were all sitting in the outer room of the *Cucaracha* drinking. Kerouac sat in the largest chair and leaned back and gazed up at the ceiling where Bill Evans was pointing out the three chipped places where movie star Robert Mitchum had shot his bodyguard's revolver, leaving his "autograph" in the early 1950s while shooting *The Big Country*. Gazing upward, Kerouac said, "I wish I had a gun," and someone volunteered. "Chucho's got one."

Chucho was a rotund Mexican descended from the early *Chichimeca* Indians who first inhabited the area more than a hundred years before San Miguel became a town. He was especially friendly to his *gringo* clientele and before the summer was out invited me and several others to his ranch where we rode horseback into the hills and viewed his latest fighting bulls.

Neither Chucho nor the gun appeared. Ginsberg began talking about Jack Kerouac as Saint Jacque, navigator through the wilderness of stars. Kerouac smiled. It was all so much fun: the cosmic joke and jokester, the forerunners of Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters, who would come later to San Miguel

in their psychomobile fashioned from an old Bluebird schoolbus. These ancient mariners were paving the way, like the literary Columbus or Magellan, watching the horizon for new territory to explore, knowing they were the Huckleberry Finns of the twentieth Century.

“Saint Jacque led us to this nirvana, man,” Neal Cassady said. “It’s the place where I’ve been wanting to be all my life. I mean, like I was in Denver doing boring shit, man. Major boring! But now, here we are in paradise with the Minerva of Madness, this doll-chick Sunshine, who is light, all light.”

Sitting in a corner with Sunshine, sipping my *Cuba Libre*, I listened to Sunshine ramble on a long monologue about how she spent last summer with a bunch of guys in the mountains of northern California. “We were seeking God in the wind,” she said. Kerouac said that was a good place to find Him. If you’re quiet enough and have patience, you will find the jazz brain that you need to carry out the essence of being,” he said, and Sunshine tilted her head to one side, her eyes lighting, saying, “I’m aware.”

Listening on and on, I wondered if they really knew what the hell they were talking about, and later Kerouac, without being prompted, spoke loudly: “Ride your bicycle upside-down into space and hear the howling of the prophet Allen who sits on yonder throne, sharing the universe of Ignorance that can only be a Karma dream.”

After listening late to the talk, I awakened early next to Sunshine on the floor of Bill Evan’s fourteen-dollar-a-month apartment high on the hill above town. Just before dawn we all rode out to Taboada hot springs on a rocky knoll. We undressed and stepped into the steamy fog of the waters while a silver sun sparkled over the edge of distant hills to the east.

After the soothing baths, we lazed in the early morning sun, bright now and warm, and we went to the nearby village of Atotonilco, the Nahuatl Indian word meaning “the place of hot springs.” A dark, foreboding cluster of buildings, the Sanctuary of Atotonilco, with six chapels separated by patios and walkways behind high walls was built in 1740 by a priest who had inherited great wealth. He spent his entire fortune building the primary chapel, Our Lady of Health, and its surrounding counterparts to

celebrate penitence. The priest worshiped by whipping himself with thorny branches of cactus plants, a practice which he passed on to his parishioners.

That morning we entered in silence. I stood next to Kerouac as we stared up at the wall covered by the shadowy figure of Christ carrying a cross on bloody shoulders. Inside the sanctuary was another portrait of Jesus bleeding profusely. Thorns punctured his skin at numerous places, even the cheek, forehead, side and thigh, from which the blood flowed.

We moved silently, our eyes scanning the scenes: Seven Deadly Sins and Seven Cardinal Virtues. Kerouac, whose eyes seemed dilated as he gazed upon the paintings, gasped at the brutal grace of the bright, clear violence.

After Allende and Father Hidalgo were beheaded, the rebels who continued to fight against the Spanish used Atotonilco as their hideout. Under the shield of night, from 1810 to 1820, they rode out to attack the trains carrying silver from the mines at Zacatecas and Guanajuato.

When Spanish troops captured the village, the priest was arrested and sentenced to be hanged in the morning. They marched him down the dusty street and locked him in the shrine. That night, according to local legend, the priest escaped through a tunnel that led him to the basement tombs of La Parroquiain the center of San Miguel. When the Spaniards returned, they thought the arrested priest had actually vanished or had been taken away by angels.

Outside the sanctuary, Kerouac said, "It is joy we are witnessing. It is the love of hurt. It is what life is all about."

I looked back toward the strange place. I had not seen the same thing. But I shivered with a weird feeling.

In the next several days I learned that *On the Road* had been written in "the long night of life" without stopping on a single roll of paper, "banging on the typewriter like it was a brain-drum," the author said, "beating it out to the tune of the night and the morning and the noon-day sun, man, like letting my brain find its own rhythm, because that is the Dharma and the Karma, and it makes all the difference in the world to have Buddha sitting on your

shoulder, conducting the orchestra of your writing, letting it flow. Every day is like today, and it is Saturday."

I, the realist, said, "No, it isn't: it's Thursday."

But he said, "Every day is Saturday, and there is nothing to do."

I went to my little room and wrote his words in my journal, another habit insisted on by my new Midwestern teachers: Fitzgerald kept a journal, therefore all young writers should. At the downtown corner bookstore I bought a paperback of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, which was not recommended by the professors but which I wanted to reread anyway.

During the next few days I heard Maria Elena Jorado play her first twenty bars of *Malaguena* at least a dozen times. Standing in the shadows of the hall I watched her intense dark eyes concentrating on the keyboard, making her music, and I wondered what was wrong in her world that caused her deafening, maddening repetition.

The next morning, after spending hours the night before with Kerouac and Cassady, I awakened abruptly to the screeching sound of a peacock's cry.

Moments later I heard Maria Elena's voice, frightened and angry. "No!" she screamed. Then came the staccato sound of a slap.

I rushed to the windows. Looking out across the green lawn glistening with dew in the morning light, I saw the girl caressing her high-boned cheek. Tears watered her over-sized dark eyes. Before her stood a tall, distinguished-looking, gray-haired man who turned quickly and stiffly, like a soldier, and strode away.

The girl's eyes lifted and roamed. When she saw me, she lowered her eyes instantly. She too turned and walked quickly toward the house.

4.

That evening at the Cucaracha, Kerouac talked: "There are empty shapes and empty dreams wandering through the heads of youth. Don't accept reality, don't take it at face-value. Forget what any creative writing professor ever tell you. Regurgitate life."

Later I asked him about John Steinbeck, and Kerouac shook his head almost violently. "Don't believe that ragged, stupid nonsense, a Dust Bowl mentality that reeks of dishonesty, written with the heart of a historian. You can't believe history! Never! History filters down through the academic world of the intellectual fools who sit in red-brick ivy-covered towers and breathe the tainted air flavored with the tangy taste of money, believing only in their own superior intellects. History can only be told by those who lived it, not by wretched professors who study it. Believe the love letters of saints and whores, not the texts of pampered professors. Believe the weeping, moaning, tear-stained outbursts of mothers whose children have died in front of their eyes, not the dry-heaves of historians. Did John Steinbeck suffer? Did he die a dozen deaths on a flight from Oklahoma to California? No!" Kerouac ranted as I watched amazed and slightly alarmed. I was eighteen, a child of the Alabama backwoods, and I had seen religious men fling their arms and had heard them shout emotional cries of the spirit. I thought I would hear better from a man whose writing I admired. Saint Jacques of the Beatniks said: "Steinbeck listened to the words second-hand, read about the troubling times, but he never felt the hunger eat at his belly. He was never Tom Joad."

Later, Neal Cassady walked with me out of the *Cucaracha*. "Don't worry about what Jack says," he said. "He gets all cramped inside. The joy of the road turns sour sometimes, especially when he gets all wound up inside. After a trip like this, Jack locks himself in a room away from the world and does as he preaches: regurgitates life. And then he becomes whole again. The creativity is part of the whole, but to find the source of creativity, he attacks the world like a soldier attacking the enemy."

I went to my room at *Casa Jorado*. I lay awake and thought about Kerouac and Cassady, about Sunshine and Maria Elena, and I felt deep-down lonesome, empty inside.

The next morning I read Steinbeck's words in *The Grapes of Wrath* and loved them again. I felt the emotions of the scenes. I started a short story about a cousin back home in Alabama, a Southern boy who had Southern ways and loved his coon dog more than money.

Several days later the Beats went on their way. Through the years I read more of Kerouac and liked his work in spite of my memories. I even cried when I read that he had died in a little ordinary house in retirement Florida. And I also cried when I read that Neal Cassady had gone back to San Miguel to find a girl not unlike Sunshine. He started walking the railroad tracks from the depot to Celaya and joined an Indian wedding party and drank *pulque* with them on top of Seconals and other drugs. He sang with them and danced off into the night, counting each rail. The next morning his comatose body was discovered near the tracks, and he died in the hospital at San Miguel.

5.

Early on a July morning after I finished reading *The Grapes of Wrath* I was awakened to the loud pop of a gun firing.

In the garden Maria Elena Jorado stood in the brilliant early morning sunlight with a long-barrel revolver hanging from her limp hand. Her face was tilted forward, her dark eyes streaming with tears.

On the perfectly manicured green slope lay her father, Don Alejandro Jorado, the scion of a Creole family that had dwelled in San Miguel since the days of the first revolution.

I heard a near-silent gasp and saw Dona Jorado float in her sheath of loose garments toward her daughter, enveloping the girl into her arms and leading her away from the body upon which she cast a quick and disdainful glance.

By the time a team of medical people arrived, Maria Elena had been whisked away into the bowels of the residence.

Over coffee, another guest who had lived at the hacienda for years said, "She finally did it."

"How long..." I started.

"Over a year," he said. "She tried breaking it off three or four months ago. He wouldn't. When she cried out to him, he beat her. Sometimes unmercifully. I would hear it, but..." His voice trailed off. Then he spat, "His own daughter!"

Don Alejandro lived. Maria Elena was taken to Mexico City to live with her aunt, her mother's sister, who had married an industrialist there. I later heard that the girl had entered a convent.

6.

Late that afternoon I wandered high on the hill in the maze of narrow cobblestone streets lined with walls shaded in yellows and reds and browns and hews of green. I passed a little gray adobe hut built precariously high atop a stone embankment. It seemed sort of twisted, slightly off-square, like it was ready to slide and topple.

From a cluster of rainbow colors in a triangle of hanging pots, where brilliant rays of late afternoon sunlight shone like a powerful spotlight, I heard a high-pitched lilting sound. At first I thought it human, then — as it swirled up an octave, like I imagined a nightingale might sound — I knew it could not possibly be a person. It was too perfect.

I gazed up from the cobblestone street to the tiny suspended porch. Beyond the triangle of stone pots draped with colorful flowers was a small bamboo cage holding a yellow bird no larger than my forefinger. Perched on a miniature swing, the bird opened its black beak, and a warbling yodel filled the air. A streak of red across its throat vibrated like an instrument of percussion. I stood in the middle of the narrow winding street and took a deep breath and felt a sudden renewal of strength and wonder. I watched and listened.

When the small round face of a child appeared on the porch, looking down, a hint of embarrassment touched me, but I smiled and said, "*Buenos tardes,*" in my Southern drawl, and she gave a similar greeting as I strolled off on my way to the top of the hill to look back on the sunset as — in the distance — the bird kept singing the wordless tune.