

iViajes! iViajes! iViajes!

by Catherine Fortin

Lupe beat my shoulders, arms, and chest with a corn-husk bouquet. I stood in her garage with outstretched arms like a criminal being frisked. “¡Viajes! ¡Viajes! ¡Viajes! Travels! Travels! Travels!” she chanted as she hit the back of my neck. She was reading my energy fields. I took her seriously because Lupe was a Mexican faith healer, a *curandera*, whom I had just paid over one hundred pesos to tell my future and search out any destructive *espantos*, or fears, in my being. I stood in her official healing area two thousand miles south of my husband and three children at home in North Carolina. Lupe’s dogs trotted about, and the smoke from *copal* incense spiraled into the fresh air of the Oaxaca Valley of southern Mexico.

Did she know she was reading my most profound, persistent conflict? The ambivalence I feel for my travel is binary;

there is no middle ground of acceptance. At home, I furtively admit to travel plans when people practically beat them out of me, and I’ve been known to skip town sheepishly without telling anyone other than my husband. No other moms I know just leave and hop off to foreign countries. I blame my incessant travel bug on growing up in the rocky, confusing ’70s divorce of my parents, and I tie my continual acceptance of invitations from international hosts to my inability to concentrate on supermarket shopping and carpooling marathons. I had always been certain that it was my own global unsteadiness that brought travel my way.

Ibowed down to Lupe’s Zapotec Indian power, even though she looked young to be a respected local *curandera*, a folk healer who works in all realms—physical, spiritual, and emo-



tional well-being. Her coal-black, straight ponytail was scraped back from her soft Mixtec brow and her forehead reached my shoulder. My tour guide Lynn had brought me out to Lupe's, and she'd assured me that Lupe was the real deal. Lynn saw her at least once a week for everything from hay fever and bloat to her self-diagnosed manic-depressive lows.

Curanderismo combines the herbal healing of sixteenth-century Spanish medicine, the indigenous medicine of pre-Hispanic Mexico, Roman Catholic faith healing, and ancient indigenous homeopathy. Every village and town has a *curandera* who is regularly consulted before modern medical means. She is usually solemn, yet approachable. Seeing a *curandera* can be like visiting a trusted, middle-aged or elderly aunt who serves bitter herbal teas to you while you sit in a

lawn chair in the backyard. Or, you can find a *curandera de farmacia* who can sell you crushed roots and herbs in dark brown, unlabeled bottles suitable for whatever malady you have: insomnia, constipation, menstrual cramps, depression, or depressed sex drive.

I got out to Lupe's with Lynn, Oaxaca's favorite outrageous American expatriate. The owner of a small coffee shop in the *centro*, she was also a certified tour guide—a prestigious designation in Mexico requiring a vast knowledge of local ruins, ancient cultures, and Spanish colonial history. Federal guides are frequently evaluated through rigorous civil exams.

Lynn greeted everyone she passed on the *centro's* cobblestone streets with personalized gusto, “¡Muy buenos días, Hector! ¡Saludos a su mamá, Gilberto!” Her intense blue eyes shone as she heard tourists out on the niggling difficulties of

travel in southern Mexico: slow restaurant checks, whole villages devoid of English, and un-air-conditioned taxis. A salty blast of energy, she was always quick to launch into tirades about the rude *chilangos*, or Mexico City urbanites who poured into Oaxaca on weekends, and the revved-up virility of her Chihuahua, Paco.

I'd been in Oaxaca studying folk art for a week when I wandered into her coffee shop one afternoon. My pangs of homesickness for my family were acute even though in just a few days I would be plunging back into my life with them. I'd also return to my Spanish teacher job—a typical, upper-middle-class American woman's life that seems privileged, small, and bland when I'm home. When I'm abroad it becomes exotic and I crave it every waking moment. I wanted to tell my husband, Tom, about the best hot chocolate in Oaxaca while savoring it, and I wanted to hug the damp, newly shampooed heads of the kids before bedtime. My family pangs needed an antidote, and I was about to find it in Lynn's coffee shop.

Lynn was shouting in profane Spanish on the phone behind the counter. Tall, sturdy of body with ample décolletage, Lynn had long red hair and freckles. She was a *gringa* Amazon, striking in the land of smaller-scale, dark Oaxacans. I sipped my afternoon *chocolate caliente* while she harangued on the phone, and then I got up to introduce myself.

"I'm on hold," she said and waved me forward, "go ahead." She was slumped over the counter, cradling her head in her free hand, chewing gum ferociously.

"I just wanted to say hi. I'm Catherine."

"Hiya. I'm Lynn. How long are you down for?" Her eyes shouted I'm-up-for-anything! Her firm handshake crushed my palm. She started doodling and resumed her vigorous gum chewing.

"Well, I've been here almost two weeks. I just have a couple days left."

"Oh that's not nearly enough! Good! You'll be back. Make sure you eat some *chapulines*." I nodded and laughed

nervously. *Chapulines* are the tiny deep-fried grasshoppers that Oaxacans still eat as a condiment. Originally a prime source of protein for the pre-Spanish Conquest Indians, they are considered exotic and grotesque everywhere in Mexico outside of Oaxaca. A famous Oaxacan adage says that if you eat chapulines, you'll return to Oaxaca. "¡Sí!" Lynn barked into the phone, then she was off on a rampage about *papel higiénico*, toilet paper.

A couple of tour brochures were taped to the cash register proclaiming:

The awkwardness of ending our brief, artificially close relationship separated the three of us like a force field.

Off the Beaten Path! Authentic Cultural Experiences of the Oaxaca Valley! and *Personalized, Custom Tours!* I was dying to see the valley surrounding Oaxaca, and I hadn't found a tour that offered something beyond rug-studio hopping for *tapetes*, the rugs created by Zapotec artisans. I picked up a brochure and saw Lynn's name on it; she was the backwoods tour guide for me. She slammed down the phone.

"¡Pinche cabrones! I hate those guys. They try to screw me every time." She came around the counter and headed toward a table, twirling a dishrag.

"Are you taking any tours this week?" I asked her. "I'd love to see some of the valley."

"I sure am; let me check my schedule." She scrubbed the small table vigorously. "Cheapskate *chilangos*," she continued. "They never tip." She bounded back to the counter in three steps and looked at a calendar on the wall. "Okay, I'm doing the valley, kind of, when I go up to the springs at Hierve del Agua. Do you wanna see those? They're really cool."

"I'm up for anything."

Lynn cleared the counter of red-glazed coffee cups and bussed them to her kitchen. "All right," she called behind her back. "Let's see; I need to see

my curandera by the end of the week. Sure. We can stop by Santa Ana del Valle where she lives on the way back from the springs. The tour costs one hundred and ninety pesos. That okay?"

Lynn had truly gone native if she saw a *curandera* on a regular basis.

The next morning I was riding in Lynn's 1987 Nissan with a Colorado State co-ed and her visiting mother, a second-grade teacher. Lynn was at the wheel as our *guia*, guide, taking us up to Hierve del Agua on the Mexican highway headed out of Oaxaca. The co-ed, Sarah, was a bohemian beauty with a dark tan covering her young, ample curves, and her sun-bleached hair hung to her shoulders. She had been touring Mexico alone for the summer, trying to improve her halting, rudimentary Spanish. Her mother, Elaine, had met her in Oaxaca for the last few days of Sarah's summer in Mexico. We chatted amicably on the bumpy, dirt road up to the springs and then we spent an easy, pleasurable afternoon at the springs swapping sunscreen, Mexican catcall stories, and spicy girl talk. We hit Lupe's on our way back into Oaxaca.

I sat on a bench in Lupe's garage while Sarah and then her mother had their diagnostic sessions. Lynn sat beside me and chatted me up right through Sarah's turn about her neighborhood politics, her last lover—a ridiculously jealous and well-endowed Mexican policeman—and her mango trees. When it was Elaine's turn, I filtered Lynn out like I do my kids when they bicker in the backseat during rush hour. Lupe was heading into some heavy stuff with Elaine, pronouncing all sorts of hang-ups solemnly in Spanish.

"¡Espantos! ¡Espantos! ¡Espantos! ¡Mucho espantos!" Frights! Frights! Frights! Lots of frights! Lupe chanted in hissing whispers while hitting poor, nice, fit-as-a-fiddle-in-shorts-and-Birkenstocks Elaine. Oh no! How could this be? Elaine was definitely the type of mom who cut the crusts off of all sandwiches before serving them with a smile. I'm in for a real thrashing, I thought.

End of excerpt