

## Wedding at San Nicolas

Just past twilight, it was a high-pitched human whistle that stopped the truck in which we had been riding for about four hours. The truck was huge with a wood railing around the oversized bed. A real "beater!" The man who was driving swung nimbly down from the cab and walked unconcernedly toward the rear of the truck. Curious, and needing a chance to stretch, we followed. A figure was herding four young goats toward the back of the truck, where they would share the spacious truck bed with a huge water tank, a guitar, and the baskets containing our changes of clothing and a few provisions. The unwilling hitchhikers, pitifully voicing their insecurity, would be received at a spot along our way that the driver knew. I suspect that any vehicle making the trip from one village to another was open to transporting, if possible.

We were on our way to the village of San Nicolas, in the Costa Chica, south of Acapulco, having been invited to a wedding there by the godparents of the groom, Dr. Eduardo Diego, and his wife, Chelo. Dr. Diego and his wife made regular trips from Acapulco to give medical treatment to the people of Costa Chica. In a Volkswagon following the truck, were Eduardo's brother Pepe and his wife Yolanda. They had lived for five years on the ranch where we would stay. When we came to the end of the paved road, the VW had to be left with friends, and we all piled into the truck, the three women in the cab and the men in the company of the four goats. We three women and the driver could fit, although tightly, in the extra wide cab.

Shortly after leaving the pavement, our senses were aware of a delectable foreignness. The invigorating air, moving subtly, brought sweet, pungent smells of the brush and trees to us. In mud-lined gullies and on sudden inclines, the truck struggled to maintain equilibrium, then laboriously continued in the two ruts which stretched across the plain.

It was hard to accept the geographical fact that we were on the west coast of Mexico when our senses said this was Africa. Someone said that the only thing lacking was the lions. The majority of the people of Costa Chica are descendants of the Africans who were forcibly transported and brutally transplanted on this continent. It is not surprising that when these people attained freedom they settled in this area, which so resembled their native land.

At first, the purity of the atmosphere permeated us, producing tranquility into which conversation would have been intrusive. But after a while, curiosity collaborated with imagination, and I began to ask Yolanda numerous questions about the five years she and her family had lived on the ranch.

Along our way, a distant lightbulb competed with the moon and stars, but Yolanda said electricity is a novelty here; no one had it until just a few years ago. By the time we would reach the ranch, she told me, we would have been traveling two hours since we left the paved road, slowly tacking across the plain. They used to make this trip to buy provisions every 15 days by tractor, which is still the most practical means of transportation in this area. In the rainy season, there were times when the trip was not possible, or once started, the tractor had to be abandoned, and they went back to the ranch on foot. Of course, they were partially self-subsistent, having a herd of milk cows, raising chickens, and growing corn and other vegetables.

I was fascinated by some of the local beliefs which Yolanda related. One requires that a newborn child be placed on a pile of ashes immediately after birth. The first animal to pass by donates its soul to the child and this animal's characteristics will always be evident in that person.

The truck rolled to a quiet stop. Quickly, I stowed my imagination for another time and entered the present reality. We had finally arrived. At the ranch, the soothing sensation of tranquility was even denser, like a rolling enveloping fog. Relaxing in the hammocks, hung from the high coverage of the porch that surrounds the ranch house, we sipped water that had been filtered in an earthen pot and listened as the caretaker couple spliced together

recent history. Soon, we went inside to sleep. The knot in the net *pabellon* over the bed was left tied; in this season, not even the mosquitoes dared interrupt the peace.

At about six the next morning, fully rested, we arose with a feeling of quiet excitement. Yolanda had already started the fires in the hollows of the hewn-stone outside cooking area. Chelo and I chopped *chile*, tomato, and onion, then ground them to *salsa* in the *molcajete* (stone mortar). A bucket of pure, freshly ground corn appeared, which was deftly kneaded on the *metate* (inclined stone plane where a long, stone cylinder is rolled to make the *masa* for *tortillas*). Almost immediately, the combined odors of baking *tortillas*, spicy *chorizo*, and coffee drew the men. A moist, homemade white cheese, *queso fresco*, and a bucket of fresh milk made our breakfast complete.

After breakfast, the pump which brings water from the storage tower to the house was turned on. We each showered hastily, careful not to waste water, and put on our other change of clothing. Knowing that weddings usually start at about 10:00 am, and allowing for approximately a one-hour drive over the same route traveled the night before, we took our places in the truck and were on our way before 9:00 am.

In the Costa Chica, the mere knowledge that there will be a wedding constitutes an invitation. Our truck automatically converted to a communal transport, making stops at farmhouses and small communities just long enough for passengers to scramble aboard. A mother with her baby wedged herself into a corner of the truck bed in such a way as to minimize the erratic jolts of the truck and offered a full breast to her little one. Anticipation for the day's festivities became epidemic by the time we arrived in San Nicolas.

We were greeted on the main road of the village by the groom's mother and were invited into the welcome coolness of their block house. In San Nicolas, there is still a remnant of round, thatched roof dwellings made of branches and earth, but most have been replaced by more modern construction. Another detail of the groom's house, by which the level of family prestige could be judged, was a giant speaker on the roof. On this day, the village communication system was broadcasting the locally popular music of tropical tempo.

Inside the house, a temporary curtain on one side of the room formed the dressing room for the wedding party. At closer and closer intervals, the music was interrupted by a loudspeaker summons for the bridesmaids to please come and start dressing. Sitting opposite the dressing room, we chatted and watched the curtain become alive with protrusions caused by the excitement and inevitable minor catastrophes of such occasions.

As we followed the wedding party out of the house and into the baking sunlight, the other villagers, alert to an inaudible signal, flowed from their houses. We walked as one body, slowly and with dignity, the short distance to the church. The church was a roof of palm fronds that sheltered its modest altar, a small table covered with a white cloth. Strings of intricately cut, white paper flowers streamed from various points in the thatching. A few chairs had been brought for the parents and godparents, but it was obvious that in ordinary religious exercises, the participants were accustomed to standing. There was room for almost all the guests to stand in the shade of the fronds.

While waiting for the bride to arrive, many children and some adults sucked popsicles to counteract the heat. We watched some boys nearby meticulously arranging firecrackers on crude tripods made of sticks. With that, the preparations were finished.

As soon as the bride arrived, escorted by her father, the simple ceremony began. Using the unsophisticated language of the people, the priest gave the couple the most basic counsel concerning the practicalities of everyday cohabitation. While he talked, some young girls, still licking popsicles, meandered among the crowd, distributing rice packaged in handmade, miniature heart-shaped pillows. The atmosphere was one of naturalness, completely lacking the artificial reverence typical of some weddings. The ceremony ended with the godparents placing a circular string of flowers, twisted once to form an eight, over the heads of the bride and groom. Immediately, it rained rice and the cannon-like booms of consecutive firecrackers marked the beginning of the celebration.

Almost considered part of the religious ritual is the partaking of hot chocolate and *pan de mujer* (bread of woman, literally). Under another frond-covered area, near what I thought must be the center of the village, two long tables had been set. A complete and eclectic collection of the villagers' chairs and benches lined the perimeter. Because we were with the godparents of the groom, we were in the first group to be invited to have bread and chocolate. The *pan de mujer*, a coarse, barely sweet raised bread with an incomparable flavor, was served from barrel-sized baskets. Made from fresh milk and locally grown cocoa, the hot chocolate was also delicious.

About this time, just as several young men were carrying in cases of iced cold beer, we became aware of a serious problem. The *conjunto* (band) had not shown up. The family of the groom, who is responsible for the wedding, was extremely embarrassed and tried to compensate by offering to play records over the loudspeaker. That way, at least the guests could still dance. Unfortunately, the predicament was not so easily remedied. Although various cajoling emissaries were sent to him, the father of the bride, indignant and determined that the groom's family be duly shamed, declared that there would be no music at all.

The crisis had passed, and the murmurings quieted, but we did not lack entertainment. Spontaneous laughter erupted from various integral groups as jokes and stories were shared. The children sifted unnoticed through the adult atmosphere and amused themselves in the immediate outskirts. The young men who volunteered to serve the guests were so attentive that one beer was never finished before one replaced it.

But, for Matatoros, all this conviviality was still lacking something. He knew that a few more *tragos de mescal* (sips of mescal, a liquor less refined than tequila made from the maguey plant) would bring inspiration. And, his prescription produced results. With his head cleared, it was obvious that this occasion merited an infusion of beauty, fine art, and an expression of human sentiment. And so, Matatoros, the village poet, recited and extemporized. He was a volcano of arduous feeling. Sometimes, between eruptions, he felt the need to re-clear his head with a few swallows of *mescalito*. I think it was after one of these intermissions, I realized he was addressing me with a poem that started something like, "*De donde apareciste? Del cielo?*" (From where did you appear? From heaven?) It continued, flatteringly and respectfully. Self-consciousness kept me from remembering the words, but I told him I was honored by his poem. Of course, such outbursts of spirit are extremely exhausting, and after a few brave attempts to continue, even Matatoros had to lie down to rest for a while.

At about three in the afternoon, the unpretentious tables where we had eaten pan and chocolate became heaped for feasting. I was amazed at the organization required to serve such a party with so much attentiveness and efficiency. There were no audible commands, no one person seemingly in charge. Yet, there was a smooth, if invisible, coordination among the wedding couple's neighbors who served us. From various contributory ovens, the food was brought, steaming hot to the table and numerous consecutive shifts of people were served with every attention.

There were deep pans of chicken in dark, rich mole sauce, which contains several types of *chile*, chocolate, cinnamon, and at least 20 more ingredients. It is a tedious dish to prepare, but a delicious specialty. The pans of chicken were alternated with mountains of fluffy, plain white rice, tall stacks of hot *memelas* (thick, handmade *tortillas*), salsa, and platters piled with *barbacoa*.

*Barbacoa*, or Mexican barbecue, involves an exotic technique completely distinct from the North American concept. The meat (usually lamb, goat, or beef) is wrapped in the leaves of the maguey plant, banana leaves, or those of other plants, depending on the desired flavor. Then, it is slowly roasted all day in a pit in the earth. The flavor and moist tenderness are indescribable.

Each group of feasters took their places at the table. Unhurriedly they ate while talking and laughing. The platters of food, miraculously, did not noticeably diminish. As the chairs were vacated and refilled, the cycle began anew.

Late in the afternoon, a previously underground plan emerged. Because of the irreversible decision of the father of the bride, barring music, we would all continue the festivities in Colorado, the next village past San Nicolas. There, the celebrants could dance to music, as the occasion required. The remaining cases of beer and all the wedding guests the truck could hold were loaded into the back of the truck, and we again began the cumbersome maneuvering across the plain.

At this hour, Nature ridiculed man's clumsy transport even more by masking gullies and shadowing inclines with her twilight. Several times, the overburdened truck leaned precariously to one side, leaving its human cargo breathless for a second. Then, it would regain its balance and hobble on. During the hour and a half that we rode like this, I felt a closeness, besides the physical proximity, with my fellow passengers. The ceaseless flow of stories and jokes, the uninhibited laughter, and spontaneous songs were now intensified by alcohol and other more abstract spirits.

Colorado was even smaller than San Nicolas and showed fewer signs of modernization. Except for the house at the village entrance, with Colorado's record player and speaker on its roof, there was no other evidence of electricity. The village skirted an oblong clearing which was the predecessor of a road. The relatively modern part of the village was bordered by an irregular line of round, earth, and twig huts. After those dwellings, the interruption in the plain ended, surrendering to its natural state, and herds of milk cows grazed freely on the wild land.

The love and esteem the people had for Dr. Diego, who had made numerous trips over the years to treat the villagers, was evident wherever we went. Upon arrival, at the house of the record player, we were offered a hearty soup of tender goat meat and tortillas. Although we were still feeling quite satisfied from the midday feast, there was no inoffensive alternative.

Meanwhile, the festivities were instantly resumed with a second-wind vigor. A ceaseless succession of 45 records was played at maximum volume, interrupted only by short, but sincere dedications. The majority were for Dr. Diego and his wife with an indeclinable request that they dance. In a concentrated group, we danced and celebrated in a small area lined with benches and a few tables. The intrinsic rhythm of the dancers and the originality with which they released their feelings were beautiful to watch. With envy, I saw that their bodies were totally possessed by the music. It shook and twisted, rolled and jerked them exactly to its beat; the movements were reflexive, devoid of conscious effort.

We drank the warm beer courteously, although it tasted harsh and was not very refreshing. The local people, for whom refrigeration was still a luxury, were accustomed to it and made no apologies as we were constantly offered another from the inexhaustible supply.

Suddenly, the music stopped. There was a hush, followed by a deafening rally of firecrackers. When the music and dancing resumed, it was with frantic, wild abandonment. Without knowing why I assumed this must be the climax of the celebration. With a strong, proud voice, the mother of the bride said, "I know what I have in my house!" Yolanda must have read my confusion and explained. The groom, having initiated his new wife, was happy to announce that, by local social norms, he had found her to be a virgin. As the couple now approached the dance area, the other dancers filtered to the perimeter. The music was changed to a slow, romantic song (perhaps out of deference to the bride), and they danced in dreamy oblivion, swaying smoothly, as one body. But, as soon as the wedding dance finished, the tropical cadence again took precedence.

A mood of healthy hedonism reigned. The day and night of uninhibited celebration was a welcome and deserved respite for the villagers. Daily, they struggled against Nature; or at best, they had developed a delicate cooperation with their natural habitat. At the height of a wedding celebration, the serious realities of life were forgotten or talked about in jest. A wiry little woman, vivacious despite her years, offered *una copita* of brandy to Yolanda. Graciously, Yolanda explained she was drinking beer. The woman poured the brandy and placed it next to Yolanda's beer. Laughing gaily, she said, "What does it matter? We all die sooner or later."

Yolanda was rescued when one of the men with whom we had ridden in the truck approached, motioning to us. “*Vengan a comer.*” (Come and eat.) We found out that upon our arrival, he had hurried to his hut and ordered his wife to kill two chickens - there would be guests for late supper. Surprised, and again without alternative, we followed him away from the light and noise of the fiesta.

I felt the humble, unlimited hospitality as I entered the circular dwelling. A lithe, young black woman, standing in the background, simply nodded her greeting. Her husband spoke for both of them. He quickly made Chelo, Yolanda, and I comfortable at a small table and bench, which were their only pieces of furniture. The men were accommodated on the floor on a *petate* (woven mat). Immediately, the silent woman placed a bowl of steaming *caldo* (soup) in front of each person. The rich broth had whole chicken parts, chiles, and various herbs served with a continuously replenished stack of handmade *tortillas*. The young woman’s complete obedience to her husband seemed compatible with her self-respecting dignity, evidenced by her erect posture and demeanor. We ate quietly, following the example of our hostess, while the men talked and laughed among themselves. As we finished the warm *caldo*, increasing tiredness crept over us. We expressed our gratitude to the couple and returned to the festivities.

Although the party had diminished, the music had not ceased and the remaining dancers were indefatigable. Then, we announced that the truck was ready to depart for all destinations on our route. There were fewer passengers, so we did not have to stand in the truck bed. Each one settled himself, his woman, and children, and dozed or talked softly. After making numerous short stops to unload sleepy children and exhausted parents, we finally reached the ranch around 1:00 am. I remember hearing a guitar played softly by the caretaker, as I fell heavily into bed, easily surrendering to sleep within minutes.

We awoke refreshed early the next morning. Perhaps the gentle coolness of the nights or the sweet air of the Costa Chica makes it possible to be renewed with just a few hours of sleep. Each of us chose our form of relaxation for the first part of the day, as we had decided to wait until after the heat of the day to leave for Acapulco. We passed the day exploring the area, chatting, and singing.

We had all sworn the night before that we would not need anything to eat after the marathon consumption of the wedding day. But, in the early afternoon, two unsuspecting chickens met their fate. During the quick killing, I was only a spectator. But, from that point on, the women extended my urban education. I was taught to dunk the chickens in hot water, how to pluck the quills, and how to dismember them and discard the refuse. Then, we put them to boil with several spices and added vegetables last. Rice and fresh cheese complemented the meal.

Reluctantly, and with a pleasant sadness caused by the coming twilight, we placed our few belongings in the truck. We also loaded bags of sesame seeds and two prize cocks destined to fight in Acapulco on the truck bed. Riding in silence as the twilight slipped into night, I collected and reviewed the events of my short introduction to Afro-Mexico. Although I knew this experience had considerably expanded my perceptions, my impressions and abstract feelings were not yet ready to evolve into words.

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First written in 1978, revised in 2022

Submitted to website Jun2, 2020

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