

San Miguel at First Sight

I remember the still dark morning we walked across the tarmac in the bitter cold of January in the high desert of Mexico. We had spent several hours barreling through the blackened sky in the company of seven screaming babies in the rows in front, behind and beside us. In the darkened cabin we had burrowed into our paper-covered pillows, but as the mournful howls reached crescendos all around us, we peeked at each other and started laughing at the absurdity of attempting to sleep in a bucking plane full of so much misery and hysteria. We tried instead to remember the last time we had stayed up all night, and decided it must have been at least twenty years since we had perched on the edge of a bathtub holding the head of a green-faced child draped pathetically over the toilet bowl. The memory made us grateful. At least these babies were not ours to quiet. We were free of such responsibilities, an idea for us as incomprehensible as that huge steel plane being held aloft by thin air.

I remember the rapid-fire stamping of our passports in customs, and being greeted by Jose, who had come all this way at five AM to shepherd us to our destination. I remember nodding off in the back seat of his car after giving up on seeing the terrain that kept its secrets from me, taunting silhouettes of hills against the vast starry sky. Eventually city lights began to twinkle in the distance and Jose pointed to his home town with promise. As dawn broke, cobblestone streets beneath our wheels jarred us out of our sleepiness. Peering out the window I remember seeing ground fog nipping at the heels of people scuttling along the narrow sidewalks, bundled up as if to keep their bedclothes with them just a little longer.

I remember my first glimpse of the building colors in the lightening mist: ochre, peach, rose, yellow and bright blue. Balconies billowing forth from second floor windows, laden with greenery and bougainvillea. The doors, the windows, the colors, the narrow streets appeared exactly as I had pictured them all these years, and just in this odd misty way, not quite solid, not quite real to me even still. Suddenly my eyes welled up, the years of desiring so deeply to be here finally finding outlet. I hid my unexpected tears from my husband's view, not wanting to have to explain them.

How could I explain to him, or even to myself, my long denial of such an innocent desire? And then a fleeting fear shot through me, as I wondered how many other dreams might lie bound and gagged beneath the surface of my quiet life? And how long a dream can be deferred before it turns sour and poisons my existence?

I remember that as we arrived in the center of town, the bells began to ring from churches all around us. Not the beckoning melodic peal of church bells at home, but a discordant clanging hard and long that would not take no for an answer. Wake up! Wake up! Remember...

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