

Scents of Memory: Oaxaca 1988

In the morning we awoke to the echoing of the maid's worn flats walking on aged tile in the courtyard. We arose, our family departed, the macaw in the lobby chattering to us as the manager bid us good day and pinched my sister's cherubic cheeks, "Buenos dias". Stepping into the sun and the street, we set out on our new exploration of Oaxaca, backpack on Dad and fanny pack on me. Black haired children stared, mouths agape, at my dad towering over the other adults in the street. Dogs trotted along the roads, darting out of harms way, begging at the butchers, and occasionally finding a morsel of rubbish to chew on. Diesel fumes from the busses and a lingering stench of refuse and shit in the streets mingled with the tangy sweet aroma of the fresh pressed pineapple juice in my glass. The smell of the streets was intense, but overcome as I sipped the juice, that nectar, each morning.

Evenings were magical as the square came alive with musicians and artists, lights flickering and Indian women selling their crafts around the white filigreed gazebo. One artist painted visions of fantasy using nothing but spray paint. The toxic odor of aerosol and wet paint drew us to him, and his fast-paced weavings of galactic imagery kept us there, watching for hours as his paint cans emptied, and the sharp tinny jingling of the shaken cans rattled in our brains.

Before bed we wandered through the lit alleyways with late-night markets. We stopped at one corner where there were bags of cocoa beans as tall as me. The air was choked with the density of fresh, unrefined chocolate, rich and heavy. A man sensed our curiosity and delight, and made up a fresh hot mug of chocolate. He used an instrument

carved from a single piece of wood which had rings and radially symmetric nodules carved around the length. He placed the instrument between his palms, lowered it into the hot water and chocolate and vigorously twirled the wooden mixer until the chocolate had dissolved. We eagerly tasted the chocolate drink, and were surprised, perhaps not pleasantly, that it was so unlike the milk and dark chocolate we ate in the States. It was grainy, thick, and dry, but distinct and wholly fascinating. My mother bought a bag of the chocolate and a Oaxacan chocolate mixer of her own.

Back home in Kentucky, no pineapple juice compared with the divine pulpy stuff I'd quaffed each morning in Mexico. We were back to the comfortable land of relative sterility where there is little opportunity to breath in rotting trash, open sewage, exhaust-billowing diesel busses, and arty spray paint floating on the air. Not that we minded that, but we did request the chocolate every so often over the next year or so. We wouldn't necessarily drink it all since the taste was so disarming and unfamiliar, but the smell wafting in the kitchen and the sound of the wooden mixer between Mom's palms would take us back to the evening bazaar near the white-washed iron filigreed gazebo in Oaxaca. Magical spray-painted galaxies and all.