

Mexico

Driving all the way to Guadalajara in a brand-new car was cinematic. The combination of the automotive luxury and the rarity of it had keyed me up for adventure. I was an avid reader of exotic stories and travel books. Jungle comics, Tarzan books, Halliburton's travel wonders, space-travel pulp fiction. One of my favorite radio shows was 'Clyde Beatty's Bring 'Em Back Alive' in which the famed circus man went to faraway lands and captured dangerous wild animals. My absolute favorite movie was "King Solomon's Mines". So every stage we passed in climate, vegetation or culture was new reason for fantasy. I loved that experience every day. I think it started rolling for me in Arizona, when we stopped so I could walk around the giant saguaro cactuses. Just like the Western movies!

Once we crossed into Mexico at Nogales, we were creating a movie of another kind. The sky-blue futuristic Ford, a *Galaxie* no less, fairly shouted *Gringo* to all the surroundings. In 1954 there were not many American car travelers and most of the towns we passed through were still in a wonderful adobe quietude. Burros were in use everywhere and many people still wore the simple cotton shirts, sombreros & serapes of the old world. A carpenter's family from California became like royalty dispensing alms and attracting urchins on every street. This was hard to absorb. I was used to my station in my hometown ...we were in the bottom third of families by economic rank. Even after the lawsuit bonanza. One town in particular stays in my mind. *Tequila* it said on the map. My Dad figured it had to be a brewery town and he had to go see. We drove off the main road ten miles, and as we approached the little village, kids in ragged clothes spotted us and ran up to the car. In a minute we were mobbed. We slowed to a crawl, and the kids were frantically begging us, hands out, imploring, heedless. It was frightening. We were out in the desert plain, a dirt road, no discernible township ...my father decided he didn't need to find the brewery, and, yelling at the kids, turned around and

drove off literally leaving them in the dust. What that car must have looked like to the people of Tequila...

I sat in the back seat always and had hours and hours to simply stare and fantasize. Sometimes we'd stop just to look around. Once we passed through a road cut and it looked like lava to me, so I asked to stop. We got out and discovered it was not just lava, but obsidian! The road cut through a massive flow of volcanic obsidian. I had a rock collection at home and obsidian was one of my favorite substances, something rare, like a gem to me. And here it was, limitless! I had brought my geologist's hammer 'just in case' so I chipped off big chunks...one of which I still have.

At night in the desert I suddenly saw a movement in the air of a large creature. *What the hell?* Something as big as a dog had risen with a squid-like motion just off the road, going straight up in the sky. To get an idea of what my fantasy life was like in those days...I immediately felt I was seeing a creature *Not of This Earth*. I'd always believed in 'Martians', had spent hours and hours drawing probable likenesses. Usually I had them with tentacles, so this creature's pulsating movement convinced me in a flash. *It's true! I knew it!* I felt that it was intelligent but not technological. Just an "entity"...as the scariest sci-fi stories would have it. *Oh man, what should I do?* I froze up, I couldn't tell my parents, because now we'd gone past the place, and how could I explain it? As miles went by, I decided it was my secret. That someday I'd be proven right. Some day I'd tell everyone and there'd be other proof. *Outer space beings are here and they can fly in the air like squids do in water.* This secret burrowed deep in me that night in the back seat, charged me with messianic shadowing. In fact, today is the first time I have revealed it to the world. The world of course may want to say it was an owl...but that's the world's business, that's how it always talks. *Oh sure, an owl? Right in the middle of my outer space?*

The north-south highway was still unfinished, and occasionally we'd come to places with road crews and gravel road. The best of these was a river that still had not been bridged. The crews assured us that it was shallow and that other cars had forded it all right, so we eased that shiny new car into a

muddy river feeling like the other side was now only for the most adventurous Americans.

We stopped in Guaymas to watch people try to fix a broken water main. My father needed to get a foreman's look at it, walking right up to the spouting hole and talking with the men desperately trying to cap it. He came back impressed with their imperviousness to mud and drenching. This theme was sharply underlined when we picked up a hitchhiker, a young laborer wearing sandals and carrying a cloth bundle. When he got in, he slammed the door on his thumb. He made no sound and we didn't realize it until he had re-closed the door. He held out the thumb to my mother and she gasped; it was bleeding and torn up pretty badly. She wrapped it in a handkerchief and the man steadily gestured that it was okay, nothing serious, don't worry. When he got out, there was a discussion of the great stoicism he'd displayed, something you just wouldn't expect of an American. I was deeply impressed. I'd seen the thumb clearly and knew from experience how painful a car-door slam could be.

Below Guaymas we drove inland to the little town of Alamos. My parents had heard from left-wing friends that there was a modest exile community there and that the town was interesting. We spent three days at a genteel inn called Los Tesoros. It was impressive to us, in an old world hacienda style. We ate at a long table and the food was gourmet stuff which I was expected to take in stride. Squab for example. I was seeing it all as exotic wonder. *I ate a squab!* I could tell my friends back home.

I have fond memories of this stay in Alamos. I think my parents were quite happy there, and they did some fine things to give me a step inside the village life. One was when my father noticed some kids playing softball. He walked me over and then suggested I might ask to play. Baseball was a passion for me then...I was playing Little League and full of the dreams and ambience of baseball. I was a little shy but intrigued. By gesture and simple words the Mexican kids got the idea and happily included me. I remember they asked me *what position?* and I was able to say "segundo" and was sent right out to second base. The striking thing was the shabbiness of equipment. There were no mitts, and the ball was coming apart. The one bat had been used to hit rocks

and had chips in it. And the field was just a dirt field with rocks and roots in the way. *But*. It certainly was baseball, and I fell into it dreamily, catching a few grounders and getting my ups with satisfaction. I was hyper-conscious of my superior clothes though, and felt the gap of being a princely gringo. We had a nice farewell after the game, and I had that threshold feeling of ... maybe *this* kid would be my friend.

There was a girl who lingered by my family, and my mother engaged her a little. I thought she was beautiful, and we glanced at each other. Later my mother told us that the girl, Teresa, was fourteen, three years older than I. She was painfully thin, and slightly marked in the face in a way that suggested disease. My parents thought she had not had enough to eat in her childhood. This pierced me. I knew that no girl in my town at fourteen would look so gaunt or small...nor so *deep*. I was fascinated, and the next days saw her a few times. We had bashful conversation in the sixteen words we could recognize... and walked around a little together. Another room had opened up in my dreamscape of this trip.

The other considerate thing my parents did was to pursue what they heard about the mineralogical interest of the area. There was a prominent geologist, Alberto Maas, who lived in Alamos. They found out where he lived and that he had an open house for people interested to see his collection. This opened up an unforgettable thing for me. His hacienda had a large courtyard and it was heaped with stones. Maas came out and showed us around. His English was good and I was able to have a real talk with him about the particular minerals he was collecting. The region had unusual obsidian formations called 'peanut rock' – in which jasper 'seeds' formed little round crystal inclusions in the obsidian flow. It was beautiful when cut and polished, and the geology world had named it 'almaacite' in his honor. He said we could pick out several pounds of anything and he'd charge us a token amount. I was beside myself, pawing over mounds of obsidian and amethyst in large chunks. What a dream. *Peanut rock*, found nowhere else in the World! I'd be the one to 'bring it back alive'.

The next day they had a Christmas pinata party in his courtyard for the village children, and I participated. I thought when my turn came that as a great baseball hitter I would destroy that pinata. I hadn't figured on the blindfold ... nor the guy with the other end of the rope jerking the pinata up & down. When someone finally did break it up, the thing that stunned me was the intensity of the children diving in for pieces of candy. It was another hint of the Difference. Those kids were *hungry*...and impervious to the pains and scrapes and dust in the mouth. Grownups urged me to go get in on it, but I hung back. I *wasn't* hungry. I didn't deserve it.

I went back to the ball game each day, and Teresa was there watching me. The day we left, my parents were talking about doing something for the people we had met. My mom gave some money to the hotel crew. And then to Teresa, discreetly. When we reached Navajoa, my father stopped at a general store. He went in and picked out several baseball bats, some gloves, and a few softballs. Then he explained to the manager that they should go to 'the boys of Alamos'. *Maybe send them to the Hotel with a note?* Everything was arranged and we left. This was stupendous to me. What a graceful, anonymous, cool thing to do! I felt he was doing it in my name, that it was my parting gift to my *beisbol* friends who so obviously needed equipment. It capped an experience of feeling the Difference and then doing something consciously to speak to that and soften it.

Further south we made a side trip to San Blas, a little town on the coast. We were told it was next to a mangrove swamp, a true Jungle, and I was dying to see it. There were canoe trips offered along the river and off we went with a guide in a big carved canoe. I was thrilled. The setting was just what I'd imagined, hanging vines, mangrove roots, murky river, crocodiles by the shore...even an abandoned banana plantation! At one point we slid beneath a horizontal limb and right above us was a big iguana. When we returned, the canoe eased up to the dock amongst the other boats, and I had a finger over the edge as we bumped one. This really hurt, but I instantly clamped down on myself in memory of the man who had smashed his thumb. It was bleeding a little and clearly bruised so I showed it to my mother. There was a flurry of upset, the guide was concerned, wrapped it in a bandage...and then praised me

for being so cool-headed. *Abb.* That felt great...to be in the same league with the laborer and his thumb. My Dad was very proud. He loved it that the Mexican guy had praised me.

We stayed inland in Tepic, and my parents were impressed with its cleanliness; the contrast with the little towns we'd been stopping at was sharp. We stayed next to the central plaza and there seemed to be a festivity planned for the evening. My parents had seen something attractive in a distinctly adult dimension. Something about its urban feel that, as San Franciscans, quickened them. After dinner they told me they wanted to go to the fiesta and explore the city at night and I would stay in that hotel room. *Okay?* It wasn't something I could argue about and I had to seem grownup enough not to need a *babysitter*. But after they were gone, I stared out the window as their shapes vanished in the plaza and felt myself get lonesome and scared in mounting degrees. I started imagining disasters. Something would happen to them and I'd just be this kid in a strange city in Mexico! Or, some one at the hotel knew I was alone and would kidnap me for ransom! *Shit.* This was serious, and I had a hard time stifling it. I think I just sat there staring out at the plaza festivity for hours. I couldn't go to sleep. When they finally did come home I was seriously aggrieved. They said the usual things and were too happy to care about my grump. *Oh get over it...* was the tone. I think it was that other side of their parenting, the expectation that childhood was something one passed through quickly and that a child could take a lot of buffeting and come up stronger for it. The Darwinian Left. They could be so kindly and thoughtful of my interests on the one hand, yet have this blind spot about my sensitivity. But then, look at those Mexican kids, in Alamos, would Teresa have been scared? Maybe I was just a spoiled American princeling. But there was another level of lesson going on there. My parents had revealed something of their romance. And something of what an adventure it was to be a grown-up and have a lover you could just waltz on out into the Mexican night with.

Guadalajara was the end-point of our trip and we stayed there several days. Mostly it was fun. We went to markets and museums and became regular tourists. Some things stood out for me. One was the interest my folks had in the murals. As lefties they were quite aware of the mural movement and my

father loved Sequeiros...predictably, for his superior violence. We saw as many as we could, and although I had no art knowledge, I was excited to see them. Orozco was wonderful to me, the storytelling imagery very potent to a kid so in love with comics and adventure books. We also went to Chapala on the lake and toured the workshops. The one that stood out for me was the glass works. We stood near as men blew glass goblets and some worked on elaborate glass sculptures of bulls. Again, a cue from my parents about the hard work, the great skill, the humble surroundings and clothes of the artisans. I also liked a ceramic shop very much, and still retain a lesson given me by one of the glaze painters. He was working on a stack of plates, sitting on his haunches by the stairs to the courtyard. He knew a little English and was showing me that as he painted a design, he always turned the plate so that his strokes could be away from him. That way he could always keep his eye on the brush tip, his hand or shadow would be out of the way. I never draw anything without thinking of his advice.

Guadalajara had the second-most important bull ring in Mexico and we got tickets for a bullfight. Everything about it was exciting. The arena, festivity, the great intensity of the people around us...and the preliminary trumpeting and parading. We saw on the program for the day that the first event was Portuguese-style fighting, which was from horseback. When it started we were all riveted by the power of that bull. It was no goddamned joke this bullfighting. It came in the ring snorting and bucking in anger. How could *anyone* want to get near it? I'd read about bullfighting a little and thought I knew what was coming, but...I was scared. The horse from which the fighter worked was elegant, a special breed it seemed, and gaily decorated. Something about it was unfair though, it didn't seem right for a man to sit way up on a horse who would dash in close so he could drive a spear into the bull. Then there was a sudden charge by the bull that caught the horse off-balance, and hit it broadside. With a sickening thump, the bull slammed into the horse and gored it under the blanket protector. The rider struggled to spear him, but failed, and the bull actually lifted horse and rider off the ground momentarily while it repeatedly lunged its horns upward. It was truly awful. Finally the diverting crew got the bull away and the horse was seen to have dropped its

entrails from the wound. *Oh god, it's been killed.* They had to quickly get it out of the arena and end the fight. I turned to my dad...and he had gotten up and pulled on his coat. My mother asked him where he was going. He said something grave, like he couldn't stand it. ...and started walking up the steps. She called after him with a scolding edge. What happened next was probably the end of the marriage, and a deep cleft in my relationship to both parents.

My mother said to me: "why did he leave? This is just the way people live here, this is the truth of it, you have to keep your eyes open and go with it. Do you understand? Now they're going ahead with the rest of the bullfight and I want to see it. We came all this way, and I don't want to miss this. Will you stick it out?"

I said I would stay, but I was very upset. In truth, I felt both ways. I was so disgusted by the goring that I wanted to go far away and throw up. And I was feeling sympathetic to my father. He was making a statement, that this was barbaric and not worthy of participation. But then there was my mother's challenge to see the world for what it is. It's brutal too, it's wild. Look at people all around you, are they beneath us? And just maybe you would miss something great, something that explains why people are still here. The worst of it was that she was letting me see her contempt of my father. *Was he a coward?*

We stayed and saw a real bullfight, with picadors and banderilleros and even a masterful matador performance. Which was thrilling...until the kill. I was not ready for that, to see a man plunge a sword up to the hilt in a bull's body. And then the huge blood spurts it coughed up as it fell. I was shaken, but my mother kept up the mental beam on me; *this is what it is, this is Real Mexico, you saw it, no squirming away now...*etc. All I was thinking about was whether we'd ever find my dad again. *Had he just left Mexico or something?* But we spotted him at a bar outside the arena. He was drinking seriously and was not able to talk with us. I don't think we talked about it at all after that. It lodged in my spinal cord, the miasma of that gulf between us three. My mother rubbed it in occasionally by waxing eloquent about the bullfight he missed. And it

hovered there, that I'd stayed with *her*, that he'd been alone with his act of retreat.

Twenty-five years later, when he was trying to quit drinking, he told me what had happened. "When that bull gored the horse, I blacked out. All I could see were those damned headlights coming right at us out of the night, the moment before my accident. Can you understand? I was frantic to get the fuck out of there. I had to drink immediately, hard liquor, an ice-pick to the brain. I *know* that's when it started, that's when I got really hooked. I needed something that would stab inside and douse those headlights..."

It wasn't until I wrote this that I realized something uncanny in my psychic life. It had been nearly four years earlier that I'd had the dream of the furious bull, the one I told my therapist. There hadn't been much doubt between us that the bull in the dream was emblematic of my father, and perhaps a distillate of that incident with Jack. How strange... that it was at a bullfight several years later that something in his spirit was broken. Watching helplessly as a *real* fighting-bull gored a beautiful horse over and over. *As a big Buick came screaming up out of the pavement at him.* I feared him less after having seen him in fear.