

Jan. 5, 1978 6 pm

We are 58 kilometers south of Mexico City, at the Pyramids of the Sun and Moon at Teotihuacan. The breeze chills at sunset. My wife and I dip snuff as our friends, approaching us from a tomb too distant for us, in our weariness, to walk to, gradually enlarge. We four hurry to our bus stop.

Smiling heavily at us as we wait is a red-lipped conchita. A cab driver approaches us. We insist that we want to take the bus back to Mexico City and ask him when it will come. It may be along, he says, in thirty to forty-five minutes. We believe him since we were told in Mexico City that buses leave the Pyramids for the City every hour until 7 P.M. But the sky is darkening.

A Spanish family stands near us. The daughters tease and kiss the father, who passes a loving arm around his wife. But in a moment they are gone, taken off by a car that arrives for them. We alone are left to wait for the bus which still hasn't come. When the family leaves, it is as if a sweet dream is fading and a nightmare has begun, because it is dark now, no bus, and we are stuck 58 kilometers south of the City, no way home.

We decide to walk to the highway. As we leave, I glance back. The conchita and cab driver, formerly standing apart and apparently strangers to each other, now walk away from the bus stop, together. It begins to seem like some plan unfolding.

We near the highway to Mexico City, but we don't know the direction. We stop a bicycling Mexican. We can't understand his directions -- our Spanish is too feeble. Deciding to return to the bus stop, we see the electrically-lit tombs in the distance, where night tourists are being guided, lectured to about Aztec priests who literally tore the hearts from the chests of the sacrificed. These tourists will soon ride buses back to the City. We want to be on one of those buses. As we walk we hear the voices of Charleton Heston and Vincent Price, amplified to an audibility range of more than a mile, telling the stories of the Pyramids in English.

A car stops ahead of us on the road. The engine is turned off and the car just sits, its taillights red ovals. There is no one else around. I suddenly remember another time on another night road when a car stopped ahead of me; I got in, and was later beaten in an isolated corral. We turn and walk back toward the highway.

Some minutes later another Mexican on a bicycle takes us to the exact spot on the highway where we can flag a bus back to Mexico City.

A lot of what happened in Mexico upset me, though not in the usual way. Rudeness, misunderstandings, and seeming lies become exotic and inexplicable in a foreign country, mediated by an alien language. Experience portions itself out as a sequence of tales, a mesh of patterns to decipher rather than judge. I hold that attitude now. At the time of the Mexican journey, I reviled the continual aggressiveness of casual strangers towards us.

After all, I would tell myself, I only wanted a chance to gawk at Mexico's novelties without being stared at myself as a human novelty. But as I would gaze into shops whose faces opened onto sidewalks, I found myself gazed at for my beard and baldness, neither feature Mexican. Only once was it fun. In the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, pausing among stone monkeys and mute calendars, I am approached: a Museum of Anthropology guard tells me in a carefully-wrought sentence: "You looook like Maxi-Millian." (He was an Austrian duke who ruled Mexico for five years at the invitation of certain Mexican aristocrats, described by one historian as having a long beard and a weak but handsome face. Eventually his government was overthrown and he was shot.)

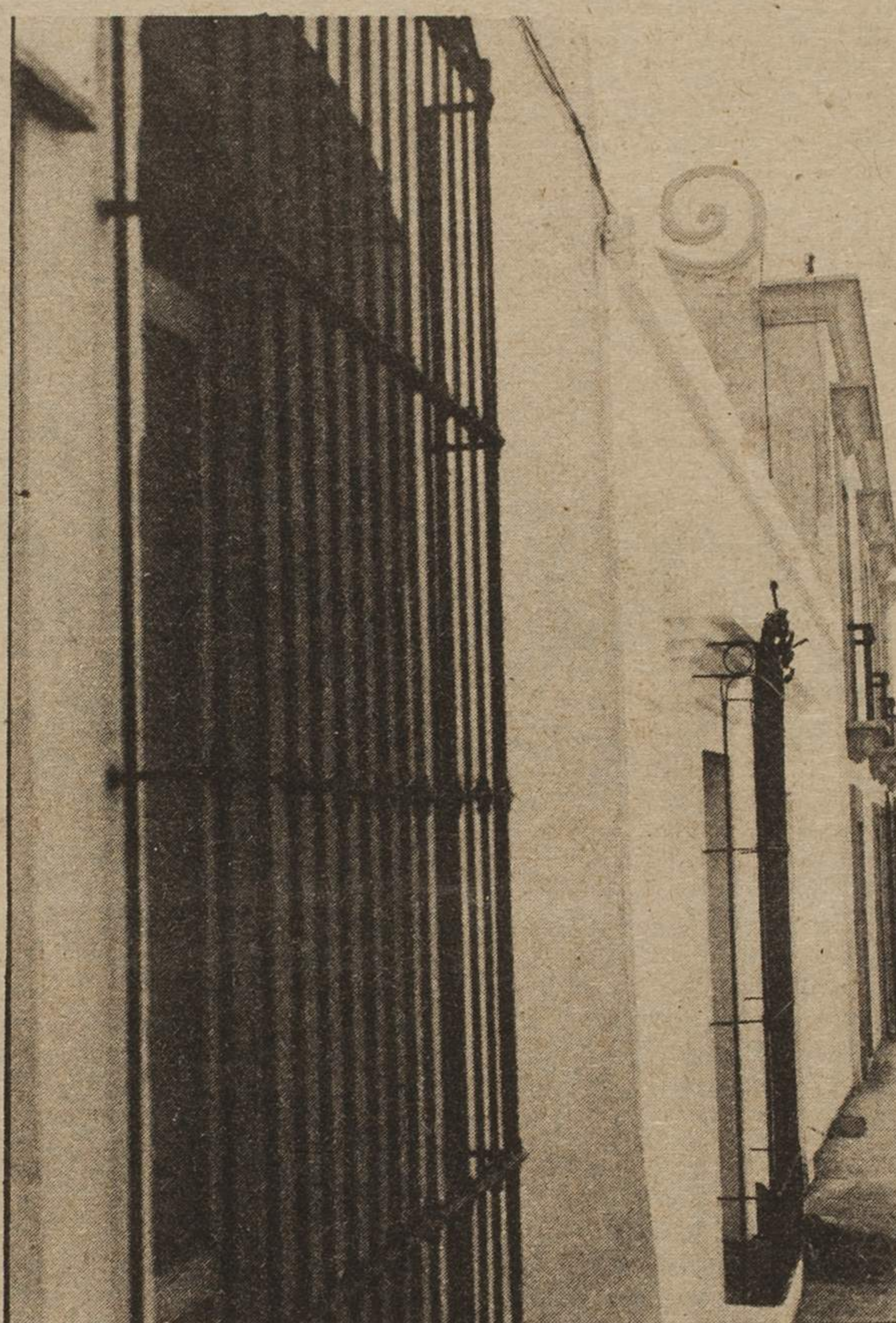
Jan. 7, 1978 8:10 am

Two minutes after we enter the train station cafe in Oaxaca (WAH-HA-KA), armed soldiers enter. We pay the five pesos for our coffee and catch a bus to the town square, the zocalo. We spot the Hotel Plaza, the four-star Oaxacan inn according to Mexico on \$10 to \$15 a Day, the bible for apostles of the Cheap Mexican Adventure. A bonded gentleman runs this place, and we feel lucky to get a room.

One daughter is busied with squeezing orange juice; another will deliver it to our room, along with coffee and sweetbreads, in the morning; a son letters a sign in English warning of market pickpockets. The price of this attention? \$6.50 a night.

# MEXICO: on a few hitches a day

BY JACOB FLAKE



The rooms are arranged around a central square. One son waters the plants that decorate its borders. Sunlight showers the stones that are the floor of the square.

My wife and I go out for breakfast, then retreat to the hotel. There, I bury money in my shoe, slip it in my wallet, tuck it in my underwear. In Mexico, I always keep money in three places on my body. We are hording it to loot the market tomorrow of rugs, shirts and cheap beauty.

Again on the street. Military trucks slice around the square on deep-tread tires. Soldiers slouch on corners everywhere since demonstrations by the student communists last week. Another tension source: Oaxaca is a dope town to American hippies. Mountain Indians near Oaxaca sell them pot in the mountain dark. The dealers are sometimes shot. One was found with a knife twisted in his pectoral muscles and bullets peppering his back.

In this ambience, I practice the art of sitting still. Then I feel vulnerable only in the 180 degree area in front of me and to my sides, rather than feeling exposed in a full 360 degree circle, as is the case when I walk.

Jan. 7, 1978 7 pm

We stroll to drink Margaritas someplace in the dark blocks that maze outward from the zocalo. A Mexican striding past us looks back. He waves at us to follow him to the cafe down the street where he and others will tonight perform regional Mexican folk dances. He asks, "Kansas?" Our group members look at each other; how does he know we're from Kansas? Or have we mistaken a Spanish word for the name of the state of our origin? We

lag behind. Eventually, though, we arrive at the same cafe. We sit at a table and wait for twenty minutes as an eight-year-old boy tries to concoct Margaritas. He finally brings us glasses of what we guess is iced triple sec. We don't wish to see the dances, so we return to the zocalo.

Sitting at a corner-of-the-square cafe, we once again order drinks. We taste them. These contain no liquor at all. Margarita mix, we protest to the waiter, doesn't make a drink. He shrugs his shoulders in denial.

An American woman, gesturing to the waiter, commands him to bring the drink to her table. We're aghast as she sips from our glass and declares, indifferently, that the drink contains no liquor. It is returned to our table. A couple of our group finally barter their "drinks" for beers, inside the bar.

A few days later, when an order of bread we request several times never arrives at our table, I will deliberately pour coffee on the floor of an airport cafe. It is a belated tantrum -- a slap at the Oaxacan rudeness. I am so fettered in my politeness self-image that instant anger is difficult. And so I, too, become perverse.

We decide to buy a few cans of beer at the grocery next to the cafe and take them to our room to drink. When I exit from the store, our group is listening to a story told by a blond and buckskinned Canadian kid.

He's been 200 miles out of Oaxaca on a motorcycle. A carload of six men drove up beside him and ordered him to pull over. They said they were federales. The kid noticed the car had no plates. He was led into a field, tied, beaten, thrown in a ditch, money taken, cards, motorcycle. "I hitched back to Oaxaca," he said. "Got rides from wonderful Mexican people the whole way. The thing is, I've been having a great time down here. A family took me in for Christmas. I even speak a little Spanish. I want to stay in Mexico, that's the thing. I don't know where I'd get money to get back to Canada." We suggest he try the Canadian embassy; they would phone his parents anyway.

We hand him a few pesos. It is as if he is telling us about a wierd thing his teacher tried to do to him one day when he was kept after school. We are astonished and frightened. The whole scene might be a chapter from an imaginary adolescent novel, Nancy and Johnny's Adventures in Old Mexico. We retreat to our rooms, sit slumped in chairs, our relish for this trip gone. I drink mescal and suck limes, swearing I'm going to leave Mexico five days ahead of schedule. I'm sick of shit stories.

Jan. 8, 1978

Today we go to two markets. The small, Indian market is the more aggressive. Men hang rugs in front of me and ask, in English, "What is your price?" I say "No thanks" ten times, then lapse into a fruitless English language defense of my inability to name a price. I explain courteously (so liberal of me!) that I don't buy impulsively and I don't know the price scale in Oaxaca yet. The hawker, eyes worried, repeats, "What is your price?" I tug on my wife's arm to leave.

In the other market we stroll through narrow aisles, beneath tent flaps. We stare at rugs on which two birds peck the head and tail of a fish; lay our heads back to stare up at rising columns of embroidered shirts; boggle at piles of fish breaded in rock salt, pickling in the spiky sunlight; eye handkerchiefs of red, gold, chocolate and orange spread on countertops. Oaxacan black pottery hides in the shadows of unattended shops. And we know that much here is unseen to us.

A man beneath an arched doorway beckons to me. I stand beside him, and he points to words in a little book, American words, asking me to pronounce one particularly useless one, "fulsome," and pronouncing it after I do. He thanks me and we walk on.

To my side I notice smiling Indian women dropping their hands beneath their chins, indicating my beard's length to each other. One boy draws me over to his booth. He tries to explain something to me in Spanish. Giving up on me, he holds a piece of woven material sewn on his shirt cuff up beside my beard, communicating a resemblance he sees between the two.

I feel a tap on my shoulder. I turn around and face a kid. He makes a sawing beneath his chin with an imaginary knife, indicating his idea of what I should do with my beard. He laughs. I laugh. He signal a friend. The friend is carrying a long knife. I make