

EXCERPTS FROM A VERA CRUZ NOTEBOOK

MARY WILEY

This, then, according to my father, was the last outpost of civilization. I shivered slightly in the sticky night air as I gazed around the desolate station of Rodriguez-Clara. Two months of voluntary exile followed, two months with no escape, on soil where no white woman had lived for thirty years.

There was a train that ran from Rodriguez-Clara to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. We were to go on that as far as we could, and the last fourteen miles we were to travel on a private mail car that struggled daily from Cuatatalapam to meet the main line.

The train we boarded there in Rodriguez-Clara was a two-coach, narrow-gauge rail car. I was told that there was only one distinction between first and second class passengers: when the train stalled the first class only had to shovel wood into the engines; the second class had to get out and push. The train had exceedingly hard, slatted, wooden seats; no pullman facilities. There were no screens in the windows, which were for the most part flung wide to capture any passing breeze. Mosquitoes were so thick that even the hardy had given up slapping them. My dauntless mother produced from nowhere a huge exterminator, and as long as her energy lasted, before she, too, succumbed to the heat, sprayed the air to a saturation point with Flit.

Our solitary light consisted of an oil lamp hung dangerously in the middle of the aisle and swinging madly as the train lurched. The cars were crowded, so filled to overflowing with peons and their wives and children that we could not find seats together.

I sat next to an Indian woman nursing a small child. At my feet was a large

crate of aroused hens, and across from me sat a meek-looking man in soiled white—a doctor traveling to the interior. Mother and Dad had as companions two swarthy half-breeds with a full bottle of cheap whiskey yet to go between them. One passed the bottle to my mother, who declined with as much courtesy as fear and repugnance would allow.

It was well after midnight when the train sweated to a halt, letting us off at Cuatatalapam. I had a queer sensation as of being deposited at the jumping-off place and told to advance. Our track car was waiting for us, and by the dim light of the lanterns, and the more familiar light of the moon, we got in. The car was nothing more than an open platform with trolley-car wheels and an old Ford engine motor. The regular night crew was aboard, armed with pistols and machetes, (the long, curved knives used for cutting cane), They were all dark-skinned silent Toltecs, save for one equally silent negro. No one spoke. The only sounds were the slapping of the underbrush against the sides of the car, and the muffled effort of the Ford engine as we advanced.

We arrived in Cuatatalapam proper about two o'clock. Tired to exhaustion, I only remember stumbling home in the dark stillness by the intermittent flicker of a pocket flash.

Cuatatalapam was a sugar mill in the interior of Vera Cruz, in the heart of some of the richest sugar cane land in the world. The inhabitants were entirely native Indians, with a few Mexican underhands in the office. Many of the Indians had never seen a white girl, let alone a barbaric American one.

In Cuatatalapam the women wore four

petticoats and went barefooted the year around. Disease was rampant, but there were no hospital facilities, and the only substitute for a doctor was a pharmacist maintained by the company. There were no electric lights, except those connected with the manager's private generating plant—and that only from eight o'clock until eleven. There were no telephones, no wireless, and only two radios. There were no sidewalks in town, not even any roads other than the paths worn by mules and cane carts. The only method of transportation was by horseback. During the rainy season the most-traveled roads were continuous mud streams with gathering algae mats on top.

There was a piece of property comprising about four acres given over to the manager, on which there were two houses, known by reason of their size as the big and little "gerencia". These were situated outside of the pueblo itself, and were surrounded by spacious, cultivated grounds, the whole of which was enclosed by high barbed-wire fences.

Immediately separating the two houses was a rose garden and a profusion of orange trees bearing beautiful bitter fruit. Several gardenia plants that flowered daily grew wild in the yard. Of the two houses, one was one story high, fairly compact, the other two stories high, monstrous, and painted spasmodically in blue and green. Both were wooden, built up about three feet from the ground on stilts, surrounded by verandas, and in a total state of disrepair. We, by preference, lived in the smaller house; our only occasion to use the other was to invade the rotting library that the former manager had dedicated to the worms. In the two months I was there, I left the premises twice.

In our house, which had been untenanted for some while, there were bats breeding in the attic and rats nesting in the

closets. The rats were so wild that they invaded the living room as we listened to the ten o'clock broadcasts, and they marched on the kitchen at midnight. Once we had to tear down an entire section of the back bedroom, because in our innocence we poisoned the rats. When they died they fell down between the walls. But the bats! They beat their wings on the roof until they made a nightmare of sound.

Through the month of July it rained daily; regular cataracts of water would pour from a black sky for an hour, and as soon as the pelts of rain struck the hot earth they rebounded as steam. The weather was the one sure topic of conversation in Mexico at the time.

When the rains came, the vegetables all rotted, and from July to October it was impossible to secure any. We brought enough canned food stuff to last us through those summer months. We made soups of herbs, and raised chickens for meat and eggs. Occasionally our table was supplemented by turtle and wild game.

But scarcity of vegetables was not our chief dread: with the rain came the mold. Overnight it spread like the plague through cupboards of linen and closets of clothes. If we left the closet doors shut, the next morning our shoes would be covered by a filmy, greenish mildew. Clothes and linen we were forced to air daily. Even books were not safe, but had to be scraped and sunned.

Moreover, the river rose with the rain sometimes as much as ten or twelve feet, and often overflowed. There was a precarious wooden bridge spanning the river, which was carefully taken apart each summer, and stored in the mill, to be rebuilt in the winter. They judged the time for removal of the bridge when the water snakes began their exodus from the low river bank.

Cuatatolapam will always bring the

memory of quick thunder in the sky, heat intense and enervating, flaming sunsets and flambuoyant trees. Then there will be wiry, brown-skinned Indians in thatched huts, with pigs, and mud, and flies. There will always be the startling contrast of the poverty of man against the abundance of

nature; the sight of bread fruit and papaya growing wild, and children dying of diseases of filth and malnutrition. This much I shall never forget. It lives no longer as a reality even in my memory, but it remains indelibly as a glimpse of life at once novel, exotic, and disturbing.

Recall

OF WANTING

ROBERT PACE

. . . of wanting, of wanting, of searching, seeking, desiring, utter nakedness of desire, utter shining whiteness of naked want

. . . of forever seeking, forever the alone, the torn, the beaten, the ravaged of thought

. . . of always walking in shaded streets, of stopping in darkness and staring into lightness, all gay, happy, golden light of easy fulfilment

. . . of standing and staring and of wanting, and of turning at last back into the shadow and walking on

gone
. . . of crying aloud into the unheard ear, of waving frantically at the unseen eye, of pounding and clutching desperately the unfelt hand

. . . of no escape, not even the solace of the martyred, of not even the clean-sheeted bed of the invalided, not even the padded cell of the labrynthed

. . . of only a dusty room on a darkened street, only a padded couch, only the stupid frantic ticking, ticking, ticking of the kitchen clock, only the stupid staring antimacassars

every day toward
. . . of not even a cat to rub, nor a dog to kick, nor a book to read

. . . of at last going to bed and lying, turning, twisting, and of at last going to sleep

. . . of at last going to sleep and of not even dreaming, never, never, never ever dreaming.

*def. rhythm
rep. for effect
form - conventional
pattern - no
no - capitals
universal
almost
in life
massed confounding
enforced*