

# THE VILLAGE OF MELONS

*Impressions of a Canadian Author in Mexico*

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**A**SKED SOME YEARS AGO as to my most memorable impression of my months in Mexico, I involuntarily and with lingering fear recalled the village of melons.

It was an arid village, somewhere south of Tepic along the west coast of the country. We drove into it late in the afternoon. We had driven since dawn without food, and were looking forward to a family meal and a rest from the heat and highway stress of the day. Entry into the village was through a narrow lane surrounded by peeling adobe walls enclosing shops and houses. The lane was cool and gloomy, sheltered overhead by palms and banana fronds. Then suddenly the lane ended, and we entered the dazzling light of the village square, crowded with stalls of melons. There were all manner of melons — from vegetable squash to sweet pumpkins, gourds, honeydew, musk and watermelons. On the far end of the square beside the steps to the church, a small cluster of stalls displayed vegetables. But these stalls were dwarfed by the melon stalls in the square. That was my first impression on entering the square.

The second was fearful. For the stalls were run by women and children with distended bellies and blank faces which revealed no animation whatsoever. Despite this cornucopia of melons, the people of this village were starving to death.

I drove quickly out of this village, over the protests of my children, for I was chilled by a spectre I was in no way prepared to face — that of a slow death within an illusion of wealth and abundance.

Over the days following, and over subsequent years, this impression became a disturbing metaphor. It troubled me for a variety of reasons, both personal and sociological. No sooner would I reconcile myself to one face of this image, then another visage, more gaunt and distressing than the first, would turn to confront me with contradiction of the spirit.

Personally, I was distressed by my initial but enduring horror at the seeming inevitability of things. And the dawning realization that I on my own could do nothing to alter events shaping before my eyes. Coming out of a culture whose paramount feature is mobility — the ability to change geographic location easily

in pursuit of self-betterment — as well as the ability to flee horizontally from disaster — what I had seen that afternoon was unthinkable. I could not reconcile myself to such fatalism. To the death of will, or so it seemed to me.

Yet even in those moments in the village, serious contradictions began to bedevil me. I was old enough and travelled enough to realize that a purely mechanistic approach to problems of cultures and traditions was immature and prone to miscalculations. Perhaps I had only half-seen the village and its calamity. Or maybe I had seen more than was really there — and had added details to observations singularly my own. How could I tell?

The fabric of commerce, culture, and spiritual values in an ancient landscape is dense and extremely complex. From the standpoint of my own references, which are historically so youthful as to weigh lightly in such matters, the problems in the village of melons appeared quickly evident and easily resolvable.

Simply this: the agricultural soil off which the village survived was either nutritionally depleted, or seriously contaminated and therefore no longer capable of providing nourishing food. Therefore the village should, for reasons of survival, abandon the fields and village and migrate elsewhere to re-establish another village and farmlands from which they could produce health-giving vegetables, cereals, and fruit. It was a simple and practical solution, evident to anyone coming from a nation of people to the north where each individual can change geographic and provincial residence twice in one year in pursuit of career, education, or satisfaction of restless whims. Where it is not unusual to meet people daily who have bought and sold homes four or five times in their lifetimes — and who, when asked, would define “home” as a dimly remembered address on a dimly remembered street of a city to which often as not they had only the vaguest stirrings of affection or belonging.

The village of melons had likely existed on its present site for five hundred or a thousand years. In all probability it was built on the ruins of one or more previous ancient villages of which there is no longer memory or record. The cobbled streets over which I had driven so quickly would hold some memory of my passing, as they harboured the mute echoes and minute imprints of ten million footfalls of people and animals relentlessly coming and going through the nights and days of a hundred and a thousand years. And in antiquity prior to that. Here people had loved, laboured, murdered, fled pestilence and returned, died and been reborn in a baffling panorama of time and history which I could only guess at. The stones and fields were hallowed by the endless procession of people, shaping and reshaping the earth to survive. All this I could only guess at, from evidence no more substantial than silent echoes of the walls.

So the simple resolution was meaningless. Even measured against the horror I had seen, the death of history would be far more profound than the possible extinction of a hundred villagers through starvation. It would be an outrage to

suggest these villagers had arrived at this decision through considered personal choice. Had there been a choice, the village might have been abandoned when we came.

SO I HURRIED OUT of the village of melons, while the villagers remained, numbed and bloated, victims of vague and complicated emotional and spiritual interactions of which I knew nothing. I parked on the outskirts of the village, listening to complaints of my children and watching a bent young woman approaching on the dusty road, leading a burro laden with dried corn husks.

And as I watched her approach and move past our vehicle, the nature of my visit to Mexico changed. I was a writer, but this time I was not researching or writing. I had come for the sun and a rest, leaving behind all my notes on pending work. My family and I had already swum in the warm waters of Mazatlan, had seen our first shark, had tasted our first fresh coconut, which had fallen overnight beside our van in the campgrounds. But actively writing or not, I was still busy harvesting impressions. On the outskirts of the village of melons, I was confronted with a dilemma which required all the resources I had honed over the years as an author before I could go anywhere ever again.

Confronting me was a conditioned reaction rising out of my own culture, which is so ego-centred with the maintenance of physical comforts. Posed against my welling emotions was a different cast of mind and spirit — one which appeared to willingly accommodate frailty, aging, and eventual death of people and things as inevitable and necessary. With the village smoldering behind me in the heat of late afternoon, I struggled against the deepening sensations of moral helplessness and pain.

In my mind I scrambled into my own early country unbringing — knowing that a village must have a well for water and surrounding fields for an economical supply of food. That would suffice in Canada. Our prairies are dotted with such hamlets.

But in Mexico, the village square and the church are equally essential, for this civilization is more gregarious than mine. Man and God live in close proximity here, in a natural relationship which northerners find disturbing, but somehow reassuring. People walk in this hot desert country, covering distances slowly. They carry burdens on their heads and shoulders. The aged and very young share much in common — know of each others' existence and shortcomings. The old person lifts the infant to its feet for the first time. The infant in time leads the old person through the streets by the hand, conscious of the elder's faltering footsteps and declining days of life.

Despite this reduced alienation of people from people, life is far from benign. Only a fool or insensitive brute would fail to notice drudgery, minimal schooling,

inadequate health care and other social shortcomings as highly visible components of the landscape. I marvel to this day at how a well-fed, indulged northerner in good health can sit in a cantina and stare into the street through an open archway and see virtually nothing except that his money buys more than at home. This indifference and detachment separating us from them has entered all too easily into popular myth.

It is not the role of the writer to deepen such divisions created by ignorance and calcified personality traits. The world is better served through facing and carefully exploring the reasons for such differences, even if such an exploration creates personal cultural or moral distress. Again, one does not choose the time or place for such decisions. One is thrust upon them willy-nilly, and seldom in the best of circumstances. To flee from such turmoil and confrontation of the spirit is not admirable, unless one has already opted for a gloomy and cynical withdrawal from faith in human potential.

Responding to my own cultural conditioning, my first impulse was to flee from the village of melons. But pausing on the outskirts of the village, I could not escape the metaphor of this chance encounter with devastation and what it implied. It was not something as isolated and alien to me as I would have wished it to be. There were many parts of the scenario I already knew of, yet dared not assemble, concentrating instead on better craftsmanship in my work.

From my craftsmanship I had learned long ago that studying another language strengthens understanding of one's own language. Extending that truism further, it should be possible to comprehend ones' own culture in a new way by entering another. Particularly an ancient culture, so close to us geographically. Yet as I write these lines, I am deluged by recollections of acquaintances who went to Mexico over the years, and the surprisingly narrow focus of their observations, their tastes and preferences. They spoke highly of the whore-houses in the border towns, the spicy food, the beggars, the availability and low cost of textiles and leather goods.

Even Malcolm Lowry can be faulted for a consumer fascination with this ancient world, even though his consumerism was tortured and burdened with heavy demons of the heart and mind. Unlike Lowry, my friend the bee-keeper settled for one good dinner and getting himself laid. Hardly a seasonal accomplishment, yet complete in its own dimension. So what is left to do then? Turn the car around and head for the American border and the familiarity of the Western Hotel chain? And on return home, add to the restless myth dividing peoples by dwelling in conversations on the other's poverty — making that the total distinction between ourselves and them on racial, economic, social — and eventually human worth values?

It is such a simple and unfulfilling tack to take. Repeated over the years and generations, it must invariably lead to a deepening gulf between civilizations. An

indifference and a faltering of curiosity which enters into the very language that we use. The designation “banana republic” is not so much derisive as it is cynical. For it implies that some people are capable only of producing bananas. Their languages, songs, what they think and feel, count for nothing. Such a dismissal of human worth may have little effect on the peoples against which it is directed, for human worth matters little in economic exploitation — either for its architects or its victims. But it is a disastrous reflection on the cultures from which it originates, for it tarnishes them with decadence and raises the spectre of another kind of eventual decline and death.

An artist in our time can turn and flee from all this — rush away to some patch of earth reasonably insulated from the drumbeats of ongoing history. Here you can, if you wish, select the birds you wish to sing in your trees by shooting down those whose songs you do not wish to hear. You can build a house with irregular walls if you wish, and spray-paint your lawn some different colour from the universal green. All it takes is money and an extra burst of energy, both of which we have in abundance compared with the villagers in the tropics. You can create, with modern technology and some electrical current, your own environment of sound and light to mirror the growing madness festering in your skull. Yes, you can turn and flee. Flee from the village of dreadful illusions. . . .

**B**UT THAT IS NOT THE ONLY choice. There is another method of approaching this uncompromising dilemma. And that is to continue on into the desert, accepting what is there as a distressing fact of life, and losing garments of personal culture in the process — memories and attitudes — all the real and cosmetic dressings of what I and you once were — approaching nearer and nearer to the abyss of revelation about what it is to be human in a universal sense. It is not a journey for the timorous. One must brace for anguish and self-denial. One must be free to receive — to allow new language and metaphor to filter into oneself through osmosis of food, climate, pacing, humour, fear. Even the theft or loss of personal possessions and surface trimmings on the vehicle you drive are inconsequential. They were only surplus acquisitions to begin with. And they will be replaced by late night rituals and processions of worship as alien to the national catholic church as they would be to any foreign influence attempting to penetrate and redirect one of the world’s oldest civilizations. You will hear folk songs whose language and nuances reveal a new dimension of dramatic and emotional expression. You will discover explosive humour and profound introspection. You will experience legends such as those incorporated by the folk writer, Azuela, that transcend death in moving the human personality into a nether-world populated by the spirits of those departed and those to come in a complex and dynamic

relationship, struggling out of the morass into something more just and moral than the life of streets and fields in the endless procession of nights and days.

You may, if you are fortunate, stumble into a primordial darkness of spirit. And engage in spiritual and physical slavery wrestling with yearnings for fascism, socialism, a craving for vengeance against the oppressors who came with Cortes. And left only yesterday morning in a Toyota Celica, its trunk loaded with crafted Tasco silverware which they acquired for less than the market value of the metal.

You will bear witness to the darkness and the light, the skies crackling and exploding as faceless horsemen and their women appear racing from near shadows into distant gloom, the horses trailing sparks beneath their pounding hooves. Celebrations of simple food and passionate discussions, laced with timeless hatred for the mendacity of those who rise from among the people only to betray their trust, race, and history.

And through this fierce vortex will pass the men with rifles — the robbers, the corrupt police and militia — the warriors cut loose from command or personal discipline, surviving on the fear they generate. Through this fierce vortex will pass the revolutionaries, bandoliers across their shoulders and guitars in hand, linked to the people more through emotion than political consensus. Brilliant, god-like, tragically foolish — all grouped into a common body of fatal heroism from which the legends and folksongs of the future will erupt.

Through it all I recall how the light pales and darkens. In the fields, the corn matures and is gathered by the shawled, black-clad women. In a small town where I lived a while, the most beautiful young woman I had ever seen is scandalized by her husband, her children taken from her, and is driven out to survive in the streets as a scavenger and a whore. It was all a brutal joke. The entire town became smaller for it. While in the fields, the corn aged and was gathered.

And in the mountains, young boys wearing large sombreros — my sons among them — poach wood, returning home under cover of darkness. I sit in a doorway with my friend and watch them pass by silently, their slight shoulders burdened with bundles of twigs and branches. They vanish in the darkness and my friend and I speak of Emilio Zapata, who could not read or write — and Hidalgo, who could. And my friend sings two fragments of songs he remembers of the time.

I HAVE NOT RETURNED to the village of melons. But in a way, I have never left it. My seasons in Mexico altered me, more profoundly than any comparative event of like duration in my entire life. I abandoned my intent at a holiday and began writing again, feverishly and late into the night. Around me in the darkness, the restless animals in the hamlet called to each other. Children cried fitfully in their sleep. Drunkards sang raucously and off key and rang the

churchbells in the square. I heard the cries of birth and the low moans of the dying as I completed final work on *Paracelsus*. Then in a happier state of mind, began writing *A Portrait of Angelica*.

And as I wrote and listened in my pauses to the sounds of the dusty streets around me, the village of melons took its place in a deepening mosaic of observations which defied the sequences of time and chronology. Pressing new questions began to preoccupy me: since life and human destiny were so uneven and full of surprises, what validity should I give to the traditional demands of order and progression in my work — particularly my dramatic writings? Was not life itself a revolutionary process, with its own fluid and everchanging discipline? Did I not learn this from the folk procedures of Azuela, when he took my imagination into impossible places with the authority and ease of someone documenting a commonplace event?

On our return to Canada, I was startled by the austere visions I had somehow acquired during my time away. And reminded in a different way of the village of melons. For here food was overabundant, housing sumptuous and airtight. Our own home was suffocating with the clutter of needless accumulations gathered as a family over the years. These illusions of plenty baffled even my children, and for days we wandered through rooms and over grounds of our garden. We missed adversity, and the fine edge of despair which made all the seconds and minutes of life so precious and memorable. We had everything we needed once again, and yet we collectively experienced the haunting realization that we had nothing. All this surrounding us was transient, destructible and a purely material and cosmetic assurance of security against a savage climate and the loneliness of a young culture barely finding its own feet. We had yet to rediscover the medical and social security systems of our country — those great and reasoned achievements of our society that commit us to help one another in times of hardship.

Some days later, I was called by Judy LaMarsh to appear on her radio talk show in Vancouver, to speak of my impressions from my visit to the south. She was a representative of the Canadian establishment — authoritative, confident, glacial in spiritual inflexibility. I have my problems with establishment, not unlike problems I have with God: namely — with such credentials, why are they so prone to mistakes? She questioned me, and I recalled with rising animation what I had seen and confided my conviction that despite all the problems of poverty, armaments and the oppression of peoples, the human will to live and perfect itself would prevail. Even as I spoke, I was aware she had become distant and dull eyed. . . .

And in the parking lot of the radio studio that morning, I again remembered the village of melons and the vendors I had seen, starved of will, staring uncomprehending at something distant and visible only to themselves.