

Pakuwon City
by Ricker Winsor

Excerpt from opening chapter
Mexico 1962 and Europe 1964

Mexico
1962

In boarding school I heard that an upperclassman had gone to Mexico and stayed with a Mexican family to learn Spanish. My teacher, Mrs. Baxter, of whom I was fond and she too of me, thought it might be something good for me. It seemed like a cool idea and I had a sincere interest in the language and knew my parents were easy to convince regarding “educational” opportunities. It was a slam dunk. And so, before you could say “Vaya con Dios” I was there.

Guadalajara in 1962 will bear no resemblance to the Guadalajara of 2009, I am quite sure. So sure, in fact, that I would never go there now. “You Can’t Go Home Again,” my mother said quoting her favourite author, Thomas Wolfe, as she warned me away from a visit to Evanston, Illinois for that same reason. I was born there but my memories are good ones from the Evanston of 1945-50 when I knew it. That no longer exists. And when I pass by the place we lived subsequently for most of the family days—almost fifty years, Pelham Manor, New York—I am always dismayed by the way it has changed, comparing the then to the now and coming up short.

At 17, and never farther from home than summer camp and boarding school, I met Mexico with all senses open and no expectations—a blank slate. Everything looked different. Stores did not make sense and I couldn’t read the signs. Even though I had studied a couple of years of Spanish I was lost. People talked too fast and I couldn’t understand them anyway. Smells were totally different, funky, interesting, pungent.

The sister of a close family friend picked me up in Mexico for a few days’ orientation before I went on to Guadalajara. Her name was Margaret. That softened the culture shock. She and her husband took me around and taught me some of the Spanish words and expressions used in everyday life. She later died mysteriously and no one ever investigated. The rumour was that her husband did it, that he had a Mexican mistress and wanted her out of the way. Some insurance or money from a will was involved. I remember all that because I liked the woman very much and her husband much less and, even at seventeen, I was outraged to understand that nothing would be done, that in a foreign country you could kill your foreign wife and get away with it. And I remember it because when I heard about it later, after I had returned from Mexico, it just struck me as being true. Whatever psychic information I picked up from being with them those few days corroborated the notion that murder was involved. It still bothers me.

I travelled on to Guadalajara. The University of Guadalajara and some American University I can’t remember ran our program and I was placed in a Mexican family living on La Avenida de La Paz, a big suburban street with nice houses and trees and plants, a sprawling esplanade of a street. There were several other boarders, some with our program—students like me—and a couple of others just boarding there and working in Guadalajara.

My roommate was a big gangly guy from Oklahoma, a Forrest Gump type of guy I realize now, maybe slightly retarded and a very nice person. Not all retarded people are nice; I have worked with them, but many of them are. Maybe you have to be smart to be mean. His “teacher” had brought him down here. She was sort of young, maybe in her 30s, and I could never understand what their relationship was all about. I guess she taught Spanish in the school where he went. Maybe there was no hope for him passing Spanish. In the old days you would not pass to the next grade or graduate if you could not fulfil the language requirement, so if you were dyslexic—which was not a word then—or just handicapped in the learning of language, you might not get out of high school. Anyway, he referred to her as “my teacher” and she had an obvious attachment to him. He was lanky; well over six feet tall, and strong, wiry. He had one of those crew cuts made popular by patriotic Americans, FBI agents, and high school bullies with white socks and loafers, cigarettes rolled up in their tee shirt sleeves, and cops. Very un-preppy! His name was Harold. “Do you like to wrassle,” Harold asked. “Only when I have to,” I replied. “I love wrasslin,” Harold offered. “I’m a good wrassler.” I am thinking to myself, as an image of Lenny from “Of Mice and Men” flashed through the movie screen of my brain, I am definitely not going to “wrassle” with Harold.

The other guy I remember very well aside from the people in the host family was a Chinese-Mexican named Aurelio. He was 30 and really interesting. He worked in a bank and had some plans to save money and go back to school in China where he had family. In between he studied the Jewish conspiracy to take over the world and had volumes of books about it. He tried to help me understand that the Jews run everything and control all the money. As a New Yorker I already had heard about all that—the standard Nazi line—so I wasn’t the student he was looking for and we were able to talk about a lot of other, more interesting things, such as women and how to have your way with them in the houses of ill repute here in good old Mexico! Ok! This was a topic I could swing with! Full attention. Another guy in the program was from Texas and on his way to Yale the next school year—very exciting. He and I, along with Aurelio, became running buddies in the woman department.

But before we got started with all that, that we established ourselves with the family and their life, eating meals together around a very large rectangular table, and talking Spanish, learning words and absorbing the culture. The big meal was at noon and after that the man and woman of the house, people in the grandparent age group, would get into their jammies and hit the sack for a couple of hours. Even if you didn’t go to that extreme you just laid back those couple of hours. Even the businesses were closed until four in the afternoon. I bet it is not like that now. The old ones, Senora Gil and her husband, had a daughter Magi, and cousins down the street about half a mile. One of the cousins was nineteen and her name was Guadalupe Ramiriz Gil de Gil, or Lupita for short. She was kind of big and tall without being fat and kind of pretty and voluptuous, but most of all she had a great voice and an upbeat personality. We liked each other and I heard her tell Magi that she thought I was handsome.

Growing up in the culture I did, I was getting tired of all my romances going nowhere from the male perspective. Dating would wind up being about the male trying to get as much sex as possible—very little—and the woman trying to prevent him from getting even that much. It worked because of the fear of pregnancy. If you knocked someone up your life was over. Where

I grew up we saw examples of this teen love gone bad. It was sad. Those people were isolated from the rest of the gang and happiness for them became very remote, so it seemed.

The whole dating thing was frustrating. I know some men were doing fine in high school in the late fifties and early sixties where the pool of women was larger and there was more socioeconomic diversity. But I was in boarding school and our preppy girl friends from the girls' school were under their own control, the school's control and their parents' control. Lots of control. So back in Mexico, in our program at the University of Guadalajara, when a girl from Illinois wanted to befriend Bill, the Texan, and me we gave her the cold shoulder. Who wanted another friendship with a few kisses and another case of blue balls!

And that's how I felt, or wanted to feel, about Lupita. But, for a romantic such as I am, someone steeped in fairy tales, it is not entirely about female anatomy and, of course, the women were busy weaving their lovely webs. There is a beautiful tradition in Mexico where on an evening, a Friday night, in the town square, the young eligible men walk in a circle in one direction and the women in another. If one of the women likes you she will give you a flower. It used to mean you were engaged, "novios," but even in my time things had loosened up and it was more like boyfriend/girlfriend. I forgot who convinced me to go to the central square and be a part of this and I am sure I had no idea what was going on which has never prevented me from moving forward in any case. So here I was in the crowd and walking around and wondering what's going on and Lupita appears out of the circle and hands me a flower. It was very beautiful and moving and very Mexican. I liked that a lot. And so we started making sure we were together as much as possible from then on. Of course the "moscas" were always there—chaperones. Usually that was Magni, who, at about 30, was unmarried and enjoying the budding relationship between Lupita and me. I had a guitar, as always, and she played some too and I taught her "Silver Dagger" an old song done by Joan Baez, and she taught me "Los Ojos Verdes" and "Guadalajara." It was nice, very nice but, of course, frustrating. The social dynamic of that era was described powerfully by Tennessee Williams in *Splendour in the Grass*. I was so affected by the film of his story that I have never been able to watch it again. No doubt the subtext of his message had to do with homosexuality—forbidden love—but it was true enough in the heterosexual world of that time. Shame, guilt, pregnancy, more shame, more guilt. What a way to handle the needs of the body and soul for contact and warmth and passion!

And so, while I was "courting" Lupita and she me, Bill and Aurelio and I were working up the courage to investigate the other aspect of human love, love for sale! Bill and I knew enough Spanish to function and ask the cab driver to take us around and we had heard about a place called Rosa Maria. We went there first by ourselves without Aurelio. Our driver took us somewhere on the outskirts of town to a place where all of a sudden there were many cars, nice ones with sunglassed rear windows, things dangling from mirrors, low riders washed and waxed to perfection. There was a friendly buzz around the place and, at the door, a peep hole so they could look you over before letting you in. Once inside, it was a big club with a long bar and dance floor and a lot of women and quite a few clients too. A man pushing another man in a wheelchair moved across the scene. A hunchback was there; people who would have a real problem "outside" trying to entice a girlfriend. Even at my young age I saw compassion in this. And the women were beautiful.

Any place where there is real poverty, real need, women get into action to sell what they have—their natural resources. Today we hear a lot about trafficking, about sex slaves and all sorts of horrible stuff controlled by the nastiest types of criminals but that was not the situation I found in Mexico. And in this place everyone was on their best behavior. No drunkenness, no fighting, no violence. In the Mexico I knew men were very respectful of women, even these women of ill repute. They dressed up, combed their hair, and splashed cologne as if going to a dance where they hoped to find a girlfriend. Only here a success was guaranteed!

Anyway we were in! And probably we were the youngest ones there. I don't doubt it and even though we didn't know what to do or how to go about it, we were keen, two smartasses really when I think of it. Bill got busy trying to negotiate for a blow job and I was approached by an older maternal type who made me feel comfortable so I negotiated with her. "Cuantas veces en media hora, Senora. Yo quiero tres veces en el tiempo que tenemos juntos!!" "How many times in a half hour, Senora," I queried with youthful optimism. "I want three times in our half hour!" Now that is optimism! "Como quiera guapo," she said. "As you like." So off we went and in the interest of humility I want to confess that I was not able to fulfil the terms of the contract. I remember hearing two guys talking back in the hills of New York State where we lived at one time. The one guy said, "I got a little behind in my fucking but it's amazing how fast I caught up." Oh well, youth lasts longer than we think and maturity comes late in life if ever.

This kind of recreation added spice to our student life and actually made it more possible for Lupita and me to have a real friendship and romance although, of course, I put as much pressure on her as I could, feeling it my male duty I guess. All our doings were closely monitored. In her father's eyes (he was a veteran of the revolution) I could see myself reflected as a wild animal bent on the destruction of the family. Still, they allowed us to have time together, go riding, and visit their place in Chapala—a quiet beautiful place at that time—and dance together on the top floor of the tallest building in Guadalajara, about fifteen stories then. "Dancing okay but no sandwich please!"

Two years later I toyed with the idea of going back to Guadalajara. She had "found the boy with whom she would make her happy home." The news pulled at my heart but she wrote me a beautiful letter which I put away for many years until, at a monastery where I was once again discerning a monastic vocation, I read it over, translating it better, knowing Spanish better.

[Letter in Spanish followed by translation into English]