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FREE

## MORNING IN MEXICO

by

Simon LANE

"We talk so grandly, in capital letters, about *Morning in Mexico*. All it amounts to is one little individual looking at a bit of sky and trees, then looking down at the page of his exercise book."

DH Lawrence: "Mornings in Mexico"

And here I find myself, a part of *Morning in Mexico*, looking down at my exercise book, on the terrace of a house in Oaxaca, a city which Lawrence and so many other writers, some good, some bad, found and still find so conducive to the solitary art of scribbling. And whatever I happen to write, it still amounts to the same thing, even though Oaxaca is now a little bigger than when Lawrence lived here and even though I am probably a little taller than he was.

My "bit of sky" is expansive; I have more light than anyone could possibly need and I also have "some trees," one of which rises up some sixty metres into the sky beyond the walls of this house, giving shade to the verandah next door and towering, at night, a cloud of green which, when struck with moonlight, appears as a mute witness to the



Simon LANE is an author: His short stories, essays and articles have appeared in a wide variety of publications, including "The New York Times" and "Bomb Magazine" in the USA, "Lo Spazio Umano" in Italy and "L'Ennemi" and "La Revue des Deux Mondes" in France.

His first novel, "LE VEILLEUR" (Christian Bourgois Editeur) was published last year in Paris. His second, STILL LIFE WITH BOOKS, is to be published by Bridge Works Publishing, New York, in September, 1993.

passing of the centuries, to the complex, enigmatic and violent history of what is now Oaxaca de Juarez. I like this tree. It has endured the rigours of time, the earthquakes, the sieges, the occasional bolt of lightning. It puts everything into perspective, not least myself, an alien being wrestling with a common problem: how to describe this place?

Lawrence did a fair job, although I would have to talk grandly of *Morning in Mexico*, a morning which seems as if it could last forever but which will, eventually, become a shadowless thing, a little too hot for ambling about, but just about perfect for my first sip of Mescal. I have my friend, Rodrigo Diaz Cervantes, with whom I can discuss the finer points, the never ending details, of that terrifying, transparent liquor: yes, a thimbleful would most certainly put *Morning in Mexico* on a grand scale, but I will postpone such a diversion until at least half way through this little exercise. One mustn't rush into things. After all, I have at least to try and make sense. I nevertheless pick up the fresh bottle of "El Cortijo" and invert it, to check whether there is a ring of bubbles, *un collar de perlas*, lining the upturned meniscus. Then I put the bottle to one side, safely beyond reach for the time being, on the far side of the table.

Lawrence, of course, was not the only author to pass the time of day in Oaxaca, wondering what it was that made the place tick and what made him tick so well within it. This strange, bearded figure, was always the unknown quantity, revelling in the hidden splendours of his surroundings, the more exotic, as far as he was concerned, the better to pursue his art. There is a charming lady who runs a shop down the road, whose father, it seems, was his doctor. Yes, even mythological characters need a good doctor in Oaxaca, one who will obligingly remind them that "Para todo mal, Mezcal y contra todo bien, tambien!" The editor of this newspaper also tells me that the most effective antidote for "amoebas" is a swig of Mezcal to intoxicate them and then a spoonful of sand to blast them to Kingdom Come. One almost sympathizes with them; but not for long.

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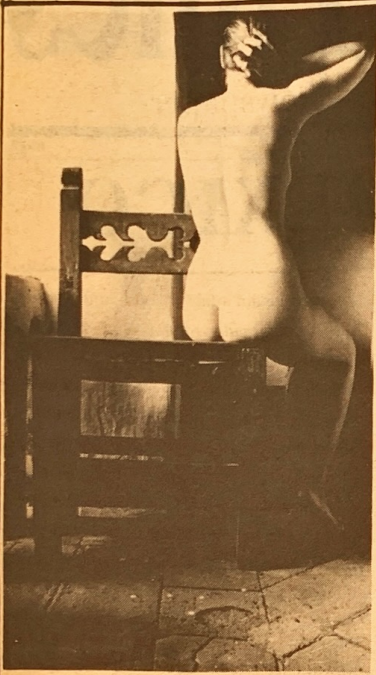
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# MORNING IN MEXICO . . .



Mallery LANE is a photographer, most recently specialized in portraiture. She and her husband live in Paris and are currently on "sabbatical."

What of all the others, that inventory of dusty scribblers, who appear from the four corners of the globe, pouring off buses, trains and taxis, note-books in hand, waiting impatiently to fill those virgin pages with their own views of this place, remarking, perhaps, upon the greenness of the stone in this Emerald City, the preponderance of ornately decorated churches, the ridge of mountains which so neatly encircles the metropolis or the mysterious light of early evening, when the Zócalo comes to life, transforming itself, to the accompaniment of a waltz carried in the air from the imposing bandstand, into a large, open theatre in which every passerby becomes not only a spectator but also an actor of sorts, repeating a role so often played in the past and always to a packed house, so that even the casual tourist finds himself being applauded by a veteran of *Morning in Mexico*! He looks around, carefully, and catches his reflection in the face of a complete stranger seated at an adjacent table, who is doing precisely the same thing. Where are you from? says the first. Where are you going? says the other.

All these people, individually, in gangs or in gaggles, happily pursue their fantasies and are somewhat perturbed to find that their fantasies then pursue them, as they walk the streets, linger and loiter, before returning to their hotels or their houses and endeavouring to compare fact with fiction, the former constantly intruding upon their imaginative processes as they lay down their weary heads and take a rest from the life of a foreign city. And the writers? What do they do? What possible order can they attach to the things they see and feel, so that it all makes sense, somehow?

I prefer Aldous Huxley to Lawrence, which is probably letting the side down, although I am still being remarkably patriotic for someone who has spent a number of years travelling far and wide looking for Oaxaca and, in the process, lost his bearings a little.

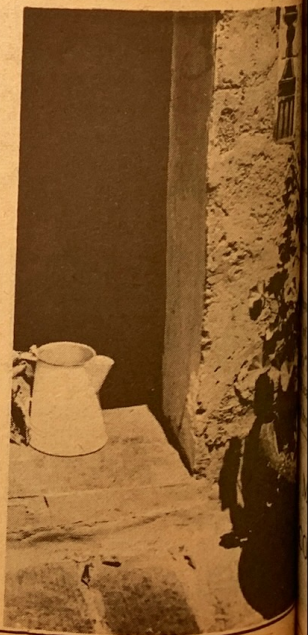
Huxley, forever the intellectual, the lofty, myopic genius, sought in this valley high above the sea, a transcendental experience, a way of seeing inwardly; his experiments with hallucinogens must have brought him closer to many things, not least some form of understanding of the people who made this place, from nothing, long before planes scratched lines in the sky or the strange beings (actually soldiers on horseback) descended from the north. But that's another story.

Huxley's reactions to Oaxaca, well documented in his *Beyond the Mexique Bay*, find resonance sixty years later. "Yes, Oaxaca is a fine place," he declares, "A stately city!" and Santo Domingo is "one of the most extravagantly gorgeous churches in the world." He was naturally astounded by Monte Alban, describing the site as "incomparably magnificent ... Imagine a great isolated valley at the junction of three broad valleys; an island rising nearly three thousand feet from the green sea of fertility beneath it. An astonishing situation. But the Zapotec architects were not embarrassed by the artistic responsibilities it imposed on them. They levelled the hill-top ... few architects have had such a sense of austere dramatic grandeur as these temple builders of the great Toltec tradition. And few have been given so free a hand."

He also had some interesting things to say about Lawrence, noting, a little haughtily, "the attempt to return to primitivism is impractical and ... wrong." One is sure that that was, indeed, Lawrence's intention. Strangely, there is no mention of Mezcals in Huxley's reflections, although he devotes a great deal of time to the discussion of "handicrafts," with which he is particularly impressed, although he does not mention the stonework at Mitla, likening it to "petrified weaving."

One must take it all, of course, as Lawrence does Mezcals, with a pinch of salt. After all, Lawrence's *Waters*, in *Mexico Mystique*, is not Monte Alban to be only fifteen hundred feet above the valley. I suppose it depends on how you get there. And how tall you are.

For my part, I have never been interested in pots and rugs: I am entirely lacking in condescension, I have no pretensions to return to the primitive, or, for that matter, to a house full of bric-à-brac. A relic of a product of an age which someday someone else might find interesting, I acknowledge the fact that I can never integrate myself into the am forever an interloper and that I have not the required aesthetic faculties to judge what is called "indigenous art." But I can still see To





# MORNING IN MEXICO....

drink with a stranger and laugh in any language, I am still obsessed with the idea that, in microcosmic terms, we are all human, all equal, a delightful reduction to absurdity of "homo sapiens," capable of creating and destroying beauty in the time it takes to swig a mouthful of "Dos Equis." What we actually become strangely insignificant when we are taken out of our context, held up to the light and briefly examined before being set down, once again, onto the corner of a pavement. It could be confusing. And it is. But I digress: "El Cortijo," just slipped a few inches towards me.

I enjoyed immensely the opening story to the book of Italo Calvino's last books, "The Jaguar and The Sun," in which he alludes to the unusual pleasures of Mexican food, seated at a table in the ex-convent, now luxurious hotel, Presidente. Perhaps I am too epicurean by nature: I find it easier to digest the beauty of a strange culture with a knife and fork or a glass cup, rather than through the darkened lenses of my sunglasses. One takes what one can on a visit to Oaxaca and one has to sit on one's suitcase in order to close it upon leaving. Mine will contain many things, a myriad images, a myriad bottles, half-empty, half-full; my intoxication will linger and I will see everything so clearly the minute the plane lifts off the ground. Oaxaca will become smaller and smaller and I will be able to hold it in my hand, like a post-card, its reversed image that of the grandiose, extravagant mountain shaped to fit an architectural fantasy. Then I can say that I wish that I were here, amidst the great Mexican landscape, instead of here, walking the aisles of a distant airport, trying to find my luggage and a spot to smoke a cigarette without being arrested.

Huxley's fiction ("Eyeless in Gaza") like that of Graham Greene ("The Power and The Glory") benefited, unquantifiably, from that landscape, one which was never simply a backdrop but which seemed to seep into the

very blood of their protagonists, that mixed bag of characters who found themselves so subordinated by the air they breathed and by the breathtaking richness of this exotic land. Their creators should have been grateful for the inspiration and they doubtless were, for this is a writer's paradise, twenty-four hours a day, or, at least, not just in the morning.

"I do profoundly think," wrote Malcolm Lowry (a different kettle of fish altogether) in a letter to his friend, Juan Fernando Marquez, in 1937, "That the Oaxaquenians are among the most courteous, sweetly gracious and fundamentally decent people in the entire world." Known for his excess, his hyperbole, his waywardness and an almost pathological desire to court disaster, Lowry could have been exaggerating, carried on a wave of emotion, or of Mezcal, for he was partial to a drop himself. Not a bit of it! The ragged rascal was thrown into the local slammer more than once, so one might say that this was praise indeed, as opposed to the platitude of a well-mannered guest, however welcome, or unwelcome, he may have been. Of all the English writers of this century, he was the one to dig the deepest into Mexico; and he very nearly dug his grave. Which is not to say he didn't like it, either: he found his exegesis here, his *paradiso* and his *inferno*. The *purgatorio* happened, oddly enough, in a cottage in Ripe, Sussex, many years later. Dante is everywhere you like to find him.

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# Children

for Frida  
from Simon



MICHAS LRAUAS YOLANDA

Shakespeare called dreams "the children of an idle brain," which I think says a good deal more about children than it does about dreams. I see children as the key to something lost, to a door labelled INNOCENCE and I see dreams as the product of an unfettered imagination, an imagination let loose every night, so that we might be permitted a glimpse of that bright yellow room we inhabited in a former life, when our vision of the world had a purity to it, forever lost. We try to regain that innocence, nearly succeeding, always falling short of our target. With what longing do we then look down at an infant! How much would we give to recapture, just for one, fleeting moment, the inner vision of a sleeping babe.

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## MORNING...

I am as overawed by this city as he was: I can feel its beauty, I can sense its beguiling, elusive quality, but I cannot really get the measure of it or find the means of defining it, which is probably why it so impresses me.

We, the outsiders from a spoiled world up north, are rather self-conscious, we like our teas crossed and our eyes dotted. Sometimes, it is a pleasure in itself not to understand, not to know, to allow an atmosphere which is almost palpable and certainly unique to remain unidentifiable. Why? When? How old? How much? are the questions which fill the air, in interrogatory bubbles, above this great valley. And what a delight it is to be told that "we still don't know," in answer to another, anxious question related to the orientation of an ancient structure or to the manners and customs of a people who could be friends one day but who would never knowingly give away too many secrets!

I can neither add nor subtract from it all, from all the things that have been said or written about this place. A modest scribbler, another one, from England, I arrived as a result of a premonition, or a dream. I am staying in a four hundred year old house with its own Garden of Eden, a patch of rich, tropical green, full of ghosts and birds, either mating or fighting or trying to do both at the same time, singing and shrieking and screeching in rehearsal for some unsolicited musical programme or peep-show. Some of them have nested in my study, they occasionally interrupt my work, but they never really bother me: they have things to do, perhaps they think I am interrupting them? We get along quite well, actually, doubtless because we are all strangers in the same place.

I spend my days in this hermetically sealed paradise, repeating Lowry's refrain to be found, on the last page of his novel, "Under the Volcano:"

"Do you like this garden, that is yours? We evict those who destroy!"

I like this garden which, for the moment, is mine: the sky above it is constantly blue; the birds awaken me so that I no longer have to buy batteries for the alarm clock I long since banished to a corner cupboard; the stars

**MONTE ALBAN:** 10km (6mi) west, on an artificially flattened mountaintop. One of the most important archaeological sites in Mexico. Large ceremonial plaza surrounded by the ruins of religious and public buildings. Small museum, cafeteria, shops. Tues-Sun 8 a.m. - 6 p.m.

**SANTA MARIA ATZOMPA:** (or Atzompa) about 8km (4mi) northwest, a short distance off Hwy. 190. The village produces a green-glazed pottery and unglazed pottery figures.

**NOTE:** Here, and at other craft-oriented villages, stop at any home or shop that gives indications that the craft is practiced within, or simply ask the way to artisan's homes.

**CHUILAPAN DE GUERRERO:** About 14 km (9 mi) southwest on the Zaachila road. Contains what was once the Dominican Monastery of St. James the Apostle, begun in 1555 but never finished. Much of the structure stands roofless. Daily 10 a.m. - 6 p.m.

**Zaachila:** 5 km (3 mi) beyond Cuilapan. Zaachila was the Zapotec capital when it fell to the Spanish in 1521. Little of the archaeological zone has been explored, but a palace and two tombs can be visited. Daily 8 a.m. - 6 p.m.

**SAN BARTOLO COYOTEPEC:** (or Coyotepec) About 15 km (9 mi) south on Hwy 175. The village is famous for its pottery. Valente Nieto, the son of Dona Rosa, who is credited with the black pottery, still practices the craft and gives demonstrations for visitors Fri. 9 a.m. - 2 p.m.

**SANTO TOMAS JALIEZA:** About 10 km (6 mi) beyond Coyotepec, off Hwy 175. A center for the weaving of cotton belts, sashes, table runners, place mats, and other items. The products are sold from a central location across from the village church.

**OCOTLAN DE MORELOS:** About 17 km (10 mi) beyond Coyotepec on Hwy 175. Market town and the home of the Aguilar Family, producers of clay figures painted in bright colors.

**SANTA MARIA DEL TULE:** About 14 km (8 mi) east-southeast of Oaxaca on Hwy 190. Its main attraction is a gigantic Ahuehete, or Mexican Cypress, in front of the village church. The tree is estimated to be about 2,000 years old.

appear, on cue, every evening; and the moon changes its shape, from a sliver to a neat circle and back again, so that I might enjoy a different view of it, wondering why it was that man decided to go for a walk on it, when it looks so appealing from afar. For all this I am grateful.

And, as for *Morning in Mexico*, it has now slipped past me. There will be another, which I know, in advance, will be identical to today's, for me to savour tomorrow. The time slips past, but if I wish, I can stop it, by reminding myself that I am in Mexico, in

## BEYOND THE CITY

Attractions are listed according to their direction from Oaxaca.

**TLACOCOAHUAYA:** About 23 km east-southeast of Oaxaca off Hwy 190. 16th century Church of San Jeronimo decorated by native artists.

**TEOTITLAN DEL VALLE:** 2 km (1 mi) north of Tlacoahuaya and about 3 km (2 mi) from the highway. Main wool weaving center of the state. Local crafts people produce ponchos, shawls, tapestries in traditional and modern designs.

**TLACOLULA DE MATAMOROS:** About 3 (mi) beyond Lambiyeco. Principal attraction is the 16th century Church of Our Lady of the Rosary.

**YAGUL ARCHAEOLOGICAL ZONE:** About 2 (mi) farther along Hwy 190 and 1 (mi) off the road. Large archaeological zone. Includes a large ball court and the Palace of the Patios. Daily 8 a.m. - 6 p.m.

**SAN PABLO VILLA DE MITLA:** (or Villa de Mitla) about 5 km (3 mi) beyond Yagul. (on Hwy 190. Then 4 km (2 mi) down a turnout. Artisans for lightweight woolen and cotton weavings, which are sold in a large market area below the church. Center for the production of mezcal, an intoxicating drink distilled from the leaves of the maguey plant.

**MITLA ARCHAEOLOGICAL ZONE:** (or Mitla) Remains of a large Zapotec population center that had been influenced by the Mixtecs. Destroyed by the time of the Spanish conquest. One of the largest groups of ruins, the most interesting are the Group of the Columns. Group of the Columns open daily 8:30 a.m. - 6 p.m.

There are several villages outside the city of Oaxaca which are famous for their mezcal. Even if you do not intend to buy anything, a visit to any of these villages can be a fascinating experience as each village is unique and offers something different to offer.

There are various ways to get to the villages. You can catch a bus at the second class bus station, which is located next to the Mercado de Abastos. Or, you can take a collective taxi. Collective taxis are also located at the Mercado de Abastos. A minibus service is located on the sixth block of Armenta y Lopez. The minibus goes to Ocotlan, Coyotepec and Miahuatlán and Santo Toma's Jaliciza. Every day of the week there is a market in one of the nearby villages.

Oaxaca. I can then restart my own, twenty-four hour cycle of existence, inaugurating it in celebratory fashion, with that drop of Mezcal I promised myself a while ago. I will keep the "amocbas" at bay, strictly for medicinal purposes.

Be warned, however: the "pearl necklace" is not a definitive guide to quality. Appearances, after all, can be deceiving. This is something for which we should all be eternally thankful.



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## Children ...

share in its dreams and leave all that we have ever learned and ever experienced behind us, trapped within that form looming above the cradle which is us, older, wiser and a little jaded perhaps, weary of a world which we have grudgingly accepted as ours, a great big ball of trouble turning at speed around our busy heads! The momentary fears and insecurities of a child, that leering figure staring into its eyes from afar, the pangs of hunger which it might not associate with the bottle being prepared behind its mother's back, yes, these things mirror the fears of later life, but how transitory they are, how simple, how sweet! That little person so perfectly lost to itself, so complete, so free from the constraints it will later have to adopt and deal with! We giants, we larger-than-life things, so conscious of everything implicit around us, so full of associations, meanings, symbols and so hampered by the language that can only be an approximation of how we feel! That tiny child, liberated from the constraints of words, dreams on, rescuing an "idle brain" from all its dizzy meanderings and reminding us that small is beautiful. And the smaller the better!



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Those interested in learning Spanish in Oaxaca should know there is only one ICC, at M. Alcalá # 307-12, 2nd floor. Accept no substitutes!



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