

## Guadalajara

I was in a state of shock as I sat in the back of a beat-up taxi weaving its way down dark streets in a foreign mega-metropolis. I had arrived only the day before, and my brain seemed to be overloaded with the staccato sounds of the Spanish language, the confusing sights of a new country, and the acrid smells of a new city. It was late, and I was scrunched in between two giant suitcases and two equally large Americans. Despite that discomfort, I remember almost nothing of the ride that would take me to my new home for the next four-and-a-half months. When the car stopped, the American who used to be a basketball center and whose leg probably weighed as much as I did, started speaking in rapid fire Spanish, and the cab driver responded in kind. Given the fact that I only understood every fifth word, I tried to regain my bearings and stretch my cramped legs. We had arrived at the end of *calle Heroes de la Independencia*—a small side street near downtown Guadalajara, Jalisco. Because we were surrounded by larger avenues, I could hear the constant honking of horns and steady travel of traffic coming from three directions, but our pothole-ridden street which ended in an ancient Catholic cathedral received almost none of it. Looking across the main thoroughfare one could see a statue to *el Angel de la independence de Guadalajara*, which watched over us and the Arandas Strip Club at its base.

The American who had finished haggling with the cab driver, easily hoisted a suitcase with one hand and pulled out a massive ring of keys with the other. I looked around to see if there was a house in the vicinity, but there was only a small hotel, a convenience store, and a wall of shut storefronts. Struggling to take the other suitcase, I followed close behind him to what looked like the closed entrance of a pharmacy—complete with lurid green window tint and barred glass walls. I watched as he undid three different deadbolts and ushered the rest of us inside. We did not stop on the first floor but instead climbed to the second which finally looked

familiar with its rows of numbered doors and landing areas. Two more deadbolts and a doorknob key later, and we were in.

Upon entrance, I was struck by the starkness of the space. It was essentially a glorified grimy hallway with desks on the sides, piles of pamphlets on the floor, and an area to sleep at the far end. The mattresses looked as if they told the whole history of human life; there was enough evidence for biologists and anthropologists to determine that someone had been born on, lived on, and then died on the mattresses that we were supposed to sleep on. The bathroom was a maudlin pink with a hole in the center for water to drain. While it was a good idea in theory, it rarely worked, and sudsy water pooled on the floor every time someone showered. Even armed with Clorox and mops, it was a losing battle and the filth and fungus that watched us from the corners of the bathroom walls seemed to be amused that we would even try. We kept a pen by the showerhead because it clogged so frequently that only one sad stream of water would trickle out unless we repeatedly attacked it like psychopaths with vendettas. The water itself was so frigid that we would have to turn on the boiler for thirty minutes before it was even conceivable to enter that forsaken chamber, but this too came with risks. On Christmas Eve morning, before going to Sunday services at the local chapel, I left the gas on too long and singed off my eyebrows and eyelashes when I lit a match.

I fought that apartment like a character from a Charlotte Perkins Gilman short story. It wasn't a battle against dirt or dust; it was a battle for my sanity and humanity. It was a mental game I played every time I returned home from long days which were completely empty. I felt myself losing my identity, and my psyche was as lost as my feet were when I walked around the city. So, I struggled to reorganize, rearrange, reposition, or remove anything that would help me feel more like a human and less like a person—homeless—inhabiting a transient hole in the wall.

The words of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins rung in my ears: “To seem the stranger lies my lot, my life / Among strangers. Father and mother dear, / Brothers and sisters are in Christ not near / And he my peace my parting, sword and strife... This to hoard unheard, / Heard unheeded, leaves me a lonely began” (“To Seem the Stranger”). For over four months, I tried to establish myself in that barren soil and wondered when God would “send my roots rain” (“Thou Art Indeed Just”). I never quite managed to flourish in that small apartment on the second floor of a Guadalupe side-street, but looking back, living there was the vaccine that inoculated me and allowed me to flourish after leaving the area. I’ll never forget how I felt when I locked the apartment up for the last time—now on the outside—and felt free for the first time in months.

Two weeks shy of an exact year later I found myself back in that same area of downtown Guadalajara with tattered shoes and a sure stride. This time I was accompanied by a brand-new American who had only been in Mexico for a day. His last name literally meant *gringo* and whenever someone asked him something in Spanish he would smile and nod, and then quickly look at me for confirmation. I would usually laugh and tell them that he did speak, but only when he had something important to say. As I ran from place to place trying to cram in as much as we could in a few short hours, I pointed out the hot-dog stand where I learned to haggle, the corner I learned to avoid after an attempted robbery, and countless doors where I met with families and individuals, each unique in their own way. In fact, we were only there because we were scheduled to meet up with the burly American who had introduced me to Mexico all those months ago and to attend the service of one of the families who had become an unforgettable part of my time in downtown Guadalajara.

It was a strange feeling to look back, because we too often idealize the past when it is a safe distance. I could still remember getting sworn at, rained on, ostracized, and ignored, but in a

funny way everything that came after was much more bearable after that baptism by fire. I felt as if I had been reborn and wanted to echo the triumphant sonnet that Hopkins wrote after passing through his own crucible.

A heart's-clarion! Away grief's gasping, | joyless days, dejection.

...I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am, and

This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,

Is immortal diamond. (“That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire”)

I saw my “joyless days, [and] dejection” burn away like dross to leave me with memories of immortal diamonds. To this day I am glad that my sorry being was broken like a poor potsherd on the streets of a Mexican city, and that the person who I had to put together became one who saw the beauty in cobblestones and Coppels, in dilapidated cemeteries and soaring cathedrals, in plowed farmlands and “the features of men’s faces” (“As King Fishers Catch Fire”).