



A man wearing a light-colored jacket, tan trousers, and a wide-brimmed hat walks from left to right. He carries a large white and green striped bag over his shoulder and a black plastic bag in his hand. The background is a red wall with a white rectangular frame around a closed red metal shutter door. The scene is brightly lit, casting a shadow of the man on the wall.

Robin Bayley heals a broken heart  
in Mexico. Pictures by Francesco Lastrucci

# THE CATHEDRAL OF DAILY LIFE



**I ARRIVED IN OAXACA IN THE** half light of an early April morning. Still stiff from my journey, I stretched out on a bench outside the bus station and watched an old man walk by, bent double with the weight of the basket of pineapples he was carrying on his back. Small clouds of dust rose from his every sandaled step, as though his feet were disturbing spirits desperate to be released from the earth.

I arrived in Oaxaca shattered and broken-hearted; damaged after a 30-hour bus journey away from Juanita, the Guatemalan girl with whom I saw my future; in pursuit of the ghosts of my past.

Even years later, I cannot fully explain what compelled me to make the decision to leave Juanita and follow in the footsteps of my great-grandfather through Mexico. It certainly didn't make any sense to me that morning; I was too exhausted and bereft of understanding to appreciate being anywhere.

En route to my hotel I passed a cemetery, its giant tombstones like a skyline of gothic skyscrapers. Even at that early hour, I saw people replacing flowers and dusting headstones. It seemed fitting to begin my Mexican adventures in a town famed for its celebration of the departed; a place where the past is not so distant from the present.

I slept until mid-afternoon, when I was woken by an earth tremor. There was something ghostly about the low groaning rumble from beneath the surface

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of the earth. In my sleep-hazed state I wondered if Juanita was sending me messages through the elements. Or if someone else was.

Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I opened my bedroom window onto a meadow of roasting roofs and domed towers glinting in the sun. There was hardly any breeze, and the heat of the afternoon had the hue and unhurriedness of treacle. There was something both unsettling and reassuring about being woken from a heavy sleep to find the wakeful world not so different from the one I had just left.

I spent a couple of days visiting Mitla and then Monte Albán, the ancient capital of the Zapotec people, for which Oaxaca is rightly famed. These were both places that I knew my great-grandfather had visited. His sepia

**Previous pages:** Street scene in the colonial centre of Oaxaca.

**These pages (clockwise from top left):** Flower stalls in Ocotlán. A food market in Oaxaca. A market scene under greying skies in Ocotlán. A local market in Ocotlán. Selling flowers on the Day of the Dead, Ocotlán. A lady selling a rooster in a market in Ocotlán. A vendor sitting in his store in Oaxaca.

photographs of the headscarfed women standing in front of Mitla's mosaics had helped to colour my boyhood image of Mexico.

I felt no trace of his presence, though. The closest I came to a spiritual encounter was a fierce storm that whipped up such whirlwinds of dust and grit in the causeways in between the Monte Albán pyramids that the staff had to close the site several hours early.

The next day I visited several of the seventeenth-century baroque churches left by the Spanish. The air inside was infused with incense, cool and dark; the bright sunshine filtered by blue stained glass and weak candlelight reflected in gold leaf.

For all their grandeur, however, I found these churches more impressive than beautiful,



and more awe-inspiring than nourishing for the soul.

My search to discover my great-grandfather's secrets had so far led me to tombs and temples which had failed to move me. I had to try a different tack, or abandon my quest and return to Juanita. The next morning, remembering my favourite travellers' maxim, *if you don't have a map you can never get lost*, I left my guide-book at the hotel and set out into Oaxaca once more.

Opposite the hotel, a jacaranda tree had carpeted the street with purple. Whistling and kicking his way through the blossom confetti was a man carrying a tray of cigarettes and two flasks of coffee. I reckoned that anyone with anything to sell would gravitate to where people communed, so

These pages (clockwise from top left): A street in Ocotlán during the Day of the Little Angels, *Día de los Angelitos*. Having lunch in an Oaxaca market. Paying respects to the Virgin Mary in Oaxaca. Oaxaca's residents wearing ghostly masks at a parade during the Day of the Dead festivities. A truck parked in a back street of Ocotlán. Local mariachis sing songs in the Oaxaca Panteón, the main cemetery, during the Day of the Dead ceremonies. A girl dressed up for the spectacular Day of the Dead parade in Oaxaca.

I followed him down high-walled sidestreets, flowers reaching across telegraph wires like bunting, and on to wider *avenidas*.

I noticed a man with armfuls of washing-up brushes, and another weighed down with egg whisks, oven gloves and several dozen boxes of women's tights, and another pushing a wheelbarrow full of popcorn. All were heading in the same direction. They crossed a small patch of wasteland and weaved their way through a collection of vw *colectivo* minibuses that were gathered like cows congregated in the corner of a field. Beyond was a *tianguis*, an unofficial market in which people displayed their random wares on plastic sheets: second-hand self-help books, plastic guns, bird cages, coat-hangers, car batteries,



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spanners, keep-fit videos, and painted replicas of the Virgin of Guadalupe and what looked like the Seven Dwarves.

The *tianguis* morphed into an official market, with goods arranged on wooden stalls: net curtains, carpets, clothing, machetes, kitchen utensils, computer games and pirated DVDs, tethered goats and boxes of frogs.

On I walked, to the indoor market, housed in a giant tramshed of a building. I was greeted with the smell of roasting meat and powdered spices, shouts of “*Pasele, pasele*”, the rhythmic smack of the butcher’s cleaver, competing *mariachi* bands and a display of watermelon sliced open, the blood-red flesh crawling with bees. Beyond it were brightly illuminated pyramids of passion fruit, mangos and prickly pears.

Children in school uniform sat on the stall steps, doing their homework with satchels at their feet, or spooned their lunches from plastic containers as their parents negotiated over their heads.

I took a seat at a food stand in the heart of the market, run by a thickset woman with ruddy features, who stirred a vat of black *mole* with a wooden spoon the size of an oar. She passed me my order of *quesadillas*, which I ate happily listening to her sing along with a lone *mariachi* strumming his round-backed guitar.

The lyrics of their melancholy song cautioned a lover not to go back, but to follow his dreams. Sitting there, in that cathedral to daily life, I knew that my Mexican adventures were only just beginning.

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