

The Mushroom Seekers

Brother John and I ascended the steep mountain pass in a series of circles and switchbacks as if we were taking a drive around the sun – the road bit its tail so often that the sun was below us, then above us, then beside us, then behind us like a family of identical siblings.

The darkness finally fell upon us and we were stuck yet again between a rock and a hard place – the sheer wall of Scylla to the right of us, and the sucking whirlpool of Charybdis to the left. The treacherously narrow pass continued to coil forever up the mountain like a crooked spine; its misshapen vertebrae clung to the body of the slope as if it were the fossil remains of a prehistoric monster. As we bumped along over stumps and around boulders and the dense fog slowed us to a crawl, I realized we were low on gas and we no longer had control of the daylight. I dreaded having to pull over and spend the night on the devil's backbone.

We didn't. We advanced through the darkness, digging up the unpredictable and brushing away the miles with an archeologist's toothbrush diligence and pace. The potholes soon widened their gape. The hunchback of the road snapped here and there and dropped into the abyss leaving only a single wavering lane to follow. Dark clouds. No moon. No power lines or electricity of any kind, the night dropped its black. We could only see as far as the next ditch. Both hands on the steering wheel, I dedicated all my mental strength to maneuver around these holes. Successfully. They were deep. I'm talking moon craters

here. But following every success was a hairpin turn that left us teetering on the brink. Thank God Brother John was on good terms with St. Christopher, the patron saint of travel.

This went on interminably and so did my apprehensions. But I was riding with a priest, so that should give me some sort of insurance, shouldn't it? Now this thought could travel along the neural highway in two directions – diametrically. It could mean I was protected in a hierarchy of all the saints, the Virgin Mary, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost. Or it could mean, if anything 'did' happen and 'I' were to give up the ghost, that I would have a priest ready at hand to perform my last rites. Very convenient. I was trying to be optimistic.

After hours of rugged road we finally reached the top of the mountain path and began our descent into the heart of things. Once desensitized and numbed by the jarring ride we could relax and have some decent, uninterrupted conversations.

“Do you think the Beatles and The Stones took this road in?” I said.

“I don't know, but I find it unlikely, since this pass was probably in much worse condition in the 1960's, if it existed at all. They probably flew them in over these mountains by helicopters.”

“Wow, it’s amazing such famous people would travel half way around the world, drop from the sky in giant machines upon a wee village, just to meet a wee Nun, the old curandera, Maria Sabina, and taste her wee mushrooms.”

“Pull over,” John said, “I have to take another wee. Just kidding...Yes, but they were no ordinary mushrooms and she was an extraordinary woman. Those years were an incredible time to be alive. So much was happening; a thundering shift in energy. You could feel it in the air you breathed. The old world and the new world simultaneously clashed in war and embraced in peace. Vietnam and the Love Generation. The outer and inner worlds were two opposing forces joining in a sensitive and unusual new way. The powers of western civilization, those old conquerors and masters of the material world, were meeting the force of the divine, the power within. And for the first time in centuries we could have real communion – the personal and direct experience of God. Not just the symbolic leftovers from a culture obsessed with dead things. For the first time we could partake in the real *sacraments*, not just an empty wafer. Eat the real body and blood of the Holy Spirit. We could taste God, see him, feel him, touch him. Just like Tommy. A rip in the eternal darkness opened for a brief moment and let the light in. It was music and dancing in the streets. This was the light of Love and it was everywhere trying to plant its seeds and take root. But the forces of evil quickly stitched it shut. The leaders of America, uptight and mean-spirited, kept warning the public that Elvis and rock and roll would bring on the end of civilization. And they were correct! They had every reason to fear. Because the new generation would end the world as they knew it. And things haven’t been the same since. They’re still trying to stop it. But somehow all the king’s

horses and all the king's men can't put Tricky Dicky back together again. And here were the Beatles, the diplomats for youth and love, visiting this enchanting old woman in some remote village. She was the high priestess of the new world, herself a diplomat for the divine, showing us her generosity and sharing her knowledge. Opening the doors of perception to the West and allowing its children to open their eyes. Well! That didn't last long. They threw her in jail for two years. And it wasn't even the Mexican government who did it. The Mexicans tolerated their indigenous people and left them alone, accepting it as part of their culture. It was pressure from America, flexing its mighty muscle for all countries to enforce its strident drug policy."

"Do you see the younger generations today pulling their own weight?" I asked, always enjoying a few wise words from any smart thinker whose reflections have become insightful only from having put in the mileage, bumping over the wreckage left by ignorance.

"I do!" Brother John said, "But then I'm an optimist. These kids hold the future in their hands and in their hearts. And they are far more resourceful than the hippies. The sixties produced a generation of well intentioned but pitifully naïve individuals. Today these kids enter the workforce straight out of collage expecting a bigger slice of the pie. They are empowered; they are aware of their environment and try to help preserve it; they have more control over their destiny; and they make wise, informed decisions."

He stopped for a moment to reflect and then continued, “You see, in every age there are pockets of illumination and darkness. As the sundial spins its shadow finger around the centuries, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance battle it out in an eternal struggle. At any moment through history there have been advances in science and retreats into fundamental gloom – knowledge and ignorance living side by side – traveling on the Chinese silk roads, paved with enlightenment, from the muddy back roads of a dark Europe. I believe the light will triumph. But at the same time you can have Gandhi and Lawrence of Arabia, you have the Nazis, or even worse (for India and the Middle East at least), the British imperial government. You know that Churchill, after the war, told his parliament upon returning from Iranian oil fields that, ‘the East holds for England an untold wealth from fairyland.’ Today you have an army of young material kids, headed for Wall Street and the banking industry, arrogant, cocky as all hell, and insensitive to the needs of the rest of the world – unless of course there is something in it for them. But you also have the kids we met earlier at the conference: thoughtful, considerate, and conscious of every act lest it cause an undesired effect. Night and day – entire worlds apart for that matter! We live in the midst of chaos and violence. I mean, take a look at how we arrived here. The universe was born from a catastrophe, a massive explosion beyond imagination. We exist because a violent event created us. Maybe, in the beginning, before the big bang, Jehovah did have a wife. But she turned out to be too much for him, so in a drunken fit he torched the place. At least that’s what the Gnostics believed – that our universe is governed by a local, petty, drunken god. You see, the force of *love* is so much stronger and drives, through the violence, a penetrating stake made from the leftover shards of light and the power of compassion.”

The first sign of life was a sprinkle of lights along the steep slopes. Initially we thought these isolated dots of illumination, flickering and so far away, were fireflies or stars low on the horizon. But as these lights accumulated into small nuggets and then larger clusters, we were able to see for the first time after a dog-day afternoon, the outlines of the landscape like a Ferris wheel of orbiting bulbs unraveling along the ridges. It revealed a staggering number of mountain peaks and valleys. Were we in the shadows of the Valley of Death? Nope! It was A Small World After All. The only thing missing was the annoying song and the boat full of screaming kids. I'm sure this must be where Disney got the inspiration. The fireflies and the stars slowly transformed into a toy world of miniature dwellings tenaciously attached to the slopes by sheer will and the devil of intent. As our eyes grew accustomed to our amusement park for the visual cortex, we could now detect the movement of a lone truck here and there and a scatter of families walking home from the cornfields.

As the traffic increased we were alarmed by the incongruous appearance of BMW's pulling into swank haciendas. So even here, as elsewhere in the world, one finds the lumpy misdistribution of wealth. But once we drove up the windy cobblestone road into the center of town, the lumps got lumpier. The village was amply lit like Las Vegas before Luxor, before Disney Family Entertainment, before the Mafia converted seedy into cheesy. The blaring lights brought out the eyes of the rats on the roofs and the dust and grime glistening down the unpainted walls of everything. I had the immediate feeling we had entered Transylvania. The "vampires" descended and swarmed our car. "*Ongos!*"

Ongos!” They screeched, displaying their Magic Mushrooms. Aggressive little creatures. One arm flew in through the car window with a hand at its end that stopped in front of my face at mouth level. I saw in its palm a grungy old banana leaf folded over. When the flap was removed, lo and behold, there before me like some evil apostles were a dozen foul, black, moldy mushrooms! The last thing I needed in front of my mouth at the center of nowhere.

“No, gracias,” I said politely, and drove on.

We pulled up to the first hotel that had been recommended by some of the conference participants who had been to Huautla years before. They warned us there would only be two hotels in town, but there turned out to be quite a number of them. We walked into the lobby and a tired old husband and wife disappointingly informed us, “Yes some Americans are here but they are up in their rooms sleeping and unfortunately we have no other vacancies. And the night clerk has taken the registrar, so we don’t know the names of the Americans staying here.” But they were loath to recommend another hotel when we asked. I know the competition is fierce out there, but hey, help out a stranger in the night. Not even a stable with a manger for the two wise guys arrived from the West? So Brother John and I walked down the street to a place that didn’t look too shabby. I stepped up to the lobby’s dimly lit reception desk – a Port-a-Potty has better light. And I swear to God, something half human walked toward me. It was very small and I thought it suffered from dwarfism. It had wide set eyes and a mangled beard that wrapped around its face like a turban and looked like it had been used to thrash other animals. And then

its voice gave me the chills. I know my Spanish isn't great but it responded to my question in *Grasshopper* – regional *Grasshopper*. As much as I strained my ears I couldn't make out a single word of its gibberish. It looked like one of the Troglodytes from The City of Lost Children. He stepped out from behind the desk to show us some rooms and I'm not making this up: he had a super-sized ring of old rusty keys and he walked with a limp. The limp got to me. Suddenly my compassion kicked in and I felt sorry for the small fellow. I realized it had to be a man because there was far too much body hair for it to be a woman. Señor Igor led us down some pretty scary passageways. The doors to the rooms were made of iron. Any moment I expected to bump into the Bride of Frankenstein having her own bad hair day.

The rooms weren't bad. They smelled good. The beds were well made and clean. But Brother John and I still wanted to find our friends, so we said thank you and suggested we might be back. There was only one road that snaked through town, winding around the buildings, which were above and below each other like terraced farming on the side of a mountain. We finally arrived at the 'Luxor' of Huautla, painted in loud white and brightly lit. The lobby light was so piercing it could have been used as an interrogation room. At the front desk was a young man flirting with a *muy simpatica señorita*. He was so enraptured by her dark charms he barely acknowledged us. I had to be bold in asking for a room and he reluctantly recited the hotel formalities while continuing to ogle the girl. I happened to glance at the guest's register and noticed that at least two of our friends were staying here. That was reassuring. Begrudgingly, the clerk showed us our rooms, walking in front of us with the girl, still bragging away about owning the hotel

one day – the usual ‘impress the woman before banging her’ type of braggadocio. He guided us down a steep, spiraling staircase, the light doubling in intensity as we descended because now the twittering florescent lights had no covers. Down and down we went, no end in sight. How many floors could this place have? Finally, having reached the bottom of this abyss, he handed us the key and ran off to get laid.

But unfortunately, not the maid! The overwhelming reek of some chemical accosted us as we entered the room. Industrial floor cleaner doesn’t have that kind of kick. I turned on the lights. Ouch! I had entered the real interrogation room. The light hit me like a bat. Then I heard Brother John say, “Oh God, please, this is just plain rude!”

I looked over to see the sheets hadn’t been changed from the previous occupiers. So I hurried up the stairs to catch the guy before he slid into home plate. He was miffed that I would ask him to have the beds made. So, suffering *coitus interruptus*, he trudged off to get a maid. As the room was being sprayed and the beds were being made, I heard Brother John using the Lord’s name in vain.

“!#%*&, I can’t believe this place! Have the lunatics taken over the asylum? There’s no toilet seat. Do you think having something to sit on besides porcelain costs extra?”

Up the down staircase. I didn’t know the word for toilet seat in Spanish. “¿Tiene usted algo redondo para sentarse en el cuarto de baño?” I asked for the round thing you sit on in the bathroom, explaining there wasn’t one currently installed. He looked at me with, “Is

there a problem with that?” kind of attitude. I told him the other hotels ALL have toilet seats. He quickly rummaged through some shelves, found a toilet seat next to a cowboy hat, and handed it to me. I had to laugh. *You’re* installing it buddy, not me. You don’t hand your guest the toilet seat, not even in Mexico. He shrugged his shoulders, put on the cowboy hat and walked off with the cheap plastic toilet cover under his arm. I asked him if he was expecting rain, pointing to the hat. He said no, but you never knew when the plumbing might explode. That was reassuring. Now I knew why the cowboy hat leaned next to the toilet seat on the shelf.

Brother John had given up swearing, but he did point out to me that due to the young man’s artful exertions of attaching a simple toilet seat with two little bolts, the floor was now completely trashed with dirt and heavy black tread marks. I looked in to see for myself. It looked like a porno film crew had been in there. I have never seen so many footprints in one place. It was a veritable idiot stampede. He had even besmirched the walls and the shower tiles – a shower stall, I might add, which was level with the rest of the floor and no door separating the two.

Back up the flight of stairs. I could feel the fiber in my skinny legs being churned to muscle. He was sitting behind the desk looking very melancholy. I guess he had struck out after all.

“Look,” I said, point blank, “you need to come back down and clean the mess you’ve left.”

He looked at me with a dumbfounded expression. He understood the words but he couldn't figure out their meaning. I had to physically grab him by the arm and lead him down the stairs. I told him to go look at the bathroom floor. He stood there staring at the floor for a long time. Then he looked at me quizzically with a face that said, Yeah, so? What's the problem? After recovering from my disbelief, I put it to him, as any parent would have in explaining bad behavior to their five year old.

“If YOU were traveling on a long journey and you arrived at the hotel tired and wanted to take a shower and the bathroom floor looked like this, would YOU take a shower? Would YOU walk into this bathroom barefoot?”

The words took a slow cruise through his nervous system and when they finally reached his brain, an air of lucidity brightened his face. I could see why this guy's seduction techniques had failed. Maybe it was just that the girl being seduced had stepped barefoot onto the bathroom floor of this burgeoning hotel mogul. He ran off to get a maid.

“What's that horrid chemical smell?”

“I don't know but I think it's coming from the bathroom.”

I walked over to the toilet bowl and lifted the rickety new seat. The tank was uncovered. I immediately noticed, not one but two deodorizer bars, one in the tank and one in the

bowl, held in place by a wire as ratty and misshapen as a chewed dog bone dangling from kitty yarn. The deodorizer chunk left in the tank was plutonium-blue and the one in the bowl glowed Chernobyl-green and the fusion of the two generated a portable nuclear reaction that made it impossible to breathe and remain in the room. I grabbed both lumps by their spindly, twisted lines, walked over to the window and ejected them like warheads down the twenty-story side of the building. They left blue and green light trails in the darkness as they descended and when I looked down the side of the cliff on which the hotel was attached I could see a small blue-green mushroom cloud rise up from the night-blooming fields of psilocybin.

Then I slammed the window shut, relieved to be out of harm's way. We heard a loud explosion but it wasn't coming from the nuclear chunks. There was yet another socialist antigovernment rally going on in the churchyard and the speakers boomed like sonic jets in battle. The windows began to rattle. Even earplugs were rendered useless. We were forced to evacuate the hotel room. But we didn't mind. We hadn't eaten all day and were starved.

We walked around exploring different restaurants but nothing looked very appetizing. It was all greasy fish and soggy vegetables and grimy settings.

Then we stumbled into a little hole in the wall that was fairly well lit. At least lit well enough for us to see that the place settings were clean and respectable and the tablecloths spotlessly white. But the real deciding factor was the silverware sealed in tight plastic

bags. That much care and attention to detail in a restaurant was reassurance enough. We sat down happily and began to browse the menus. Everything was looking good.

Until we both happened to glance in one dark corner and notice two old women sealing the silverware into small plastic units using a simple heating device. Upon further observation, though, as the two women continued methodically stuffing the knives and forks and spoons into these antiseptic bags we were gradually made aware that occasionally one of the spoons would fall to the floor or they might notice a tortilla crumb on a fork edge. In either case they would bring that spoon or fork up to their old eyes for closer inspection. Spotting the unclean area they would position the utensil near their mouths, breathe vapor onto its surface, rub it to sheen on their soiled aprons, return it to their squinting eyes for re-inspection and, finally satisfied, seal their germs tightly within the germ resistant bags.

Before the next spoon hit the floor,

John and I flew out the door!

We made our way back up the winding road where the stench of dead things lingered in the air from the discarded remains of that day's outdoor market. Through poorly lit warrens and a succession of cobbled alleys, whose dim lanterns dangled from wires just above our heads, we arrived on the main strip at the center of town. Everything was closed except for a taco stand. It was attractively ornamented with colored lights and served up a balanced grill of meats on one side and vegetarian on the other. Perfect for

Brother John's German ancestry of heavy meat eaters and my adopted whimsical diet of lean vegetables. The entire stand gleamed under the lights from recent polishing and loving care, and the grill surface was squeaky clean. It began to drizzle so we sat on the stools in front of the taco stand under its copious awnings. The warmth from the grill was comforting and the girl behind the grill was friendly and accommodating. She had a beautiful smile; gleaming white teeth, as well polished as her taco stand; and her almond-shaped eyes were large and profound. She was shy when we spoke with her and often looked skittishly away. It's a good thing or her eyes would have penetrated our history-deficient-gringo-souls with their ancient depths and native innocence.

Brother John pointed out that the napkin holders were shaped like mushrooms and one of the menu items was a *Maria Sabina Mushroom Omelet*. The young woman acquired a huge smile, pleased with our appreciation of her purposeful display – set for John and me as it had been set for the hundreds of yearly tourists before us – lookie loos, curiosity seekers and adventurers who visit this remote village with the same intent as ourselves – be it noble or nefarious. She possessed self-confidence and fortitude. I had the feeling she owned the stand, which was substantial and favorably located. When I asked, she said she had saved her money and bought the stand in Oaxaca, two years ago, from a retired man. She multitasked the orders lightning-fast, both hands moving skillfully and independently with firmness of purpose and a final resolution to perhaps retire young as a wealthy woman of the town – lots of kids, land, gold, and wisdom. Her name was Sophia.

John worked me like a prospector panning for nuggets. He had a hundred loaded questions for me to ask Sophia, all related to understanding her culture.

“Was the church used for other purpose than demonstrations?”

“Oh, yes,” she volunteered joyfully and with an abundance of enthusiasm, “but tonight was a special meeting of the union of farmers. It was very serious stuff. The night before, one of the union leaders, a poor farm laborer, had been shot. And they believed it was the land owners who had killed him!”

John was delighted by her gusto. “I guess people don’t get shot very often around here. Daily life must be routine and boring. What did the church think about all the shamans and their use of mushrooms in religious ceremony?”

For this inquiry, Sophia was more guarded and looked away. We didn’t think she was going to answer the question. I thought of a clever use of rapport. So I spoke with her genuinely. That’s how I speak with everyone anyway, from the heart. Otherwise I wouldn’t have had any effect on her in eliciting sacred information. Her culture had been burned too many times by the West. I said she didn’t have to answer if she didn’t want to but we were curious aficionados of her culture and the very old, pre-Christian use of magic mushrooms. I think my earnestness reached her heart. She slowly began to reveal the secrets.

“The church approves the use of the mushrooms in ceremony because the shamans are all Catholic. Everyone in the town is Catholic. So when the shamans perform the ritual, they pray to the Virgin Mary and to Jesus to guide them. The altar is encumbered with Catholic paraphernalia: images and statues of the saints, the Virgin, and Jesus on the cross. The church is very pleased by this.”

And Brother John was very pleased as well. His suspicions had been confirmed. He expounded at length. “For all the wickedness the Catholic Church has executed over the centuries on these poor people, the Church has been far wiser than the Protestants. The resolute evil of the Puritans has wiped out all the indigenous cultures they encountered, erasing from the face of history whole languages, customs, and identities. They yanked the native children away from their parents so that their long lineage of education and religious initiation has been ruptured forever. The American Indians have had to research the Smithsonian Institute to recover a paltry handful of their original songs, dances, attire, and tools that a few decent White Folks actually took the time to preserve. And look at this sweet woman. She may be wearing Nikes, blue jeans, and a heavy metal T-shirt under her apron, but she and her culture have remained intact. If religion and MTV hadn’t intruded she might still be proudly wearing tribal moccasins on her feet and feathers in her hair like her great grandparents. And instead of serving tacos she might be roasting our white-boy heads on a stick.”

I had a good long laugh.

Brother John continued. “But when was the last time you saw a family of Sioux or Hopi selling their wares in a major American city? Systematically, they have been ethnically cleansed from the puritan society who confiscated their lands. I went to visit a reservation recently. In the richest country in the world, the Native Americans still live in dire poverty in concentration camps. And America is spending billions to spread *freedom* in the world? Why not first take a look in your own backyard, buddy?”

Sophia understood not a word of English, but she felt the sentiment in Brother John’s heart and her eyes softened to embrace him.

“Ask her if she has ever eaten magic mushrooms and participated in a shamanic ritual?”

Upon receiving the question, Sophia went about scraping her grill clean for the next order. She became very quiet and was seemingly reluctant to share the answer. But we gave her space as we ate our savory tortillas: John’s filled with a fresh variety of local meats and mine filled with tomatoes and corn and cactus greens and avocado. The corn tortillas themselves were handmade and sweet. After a while, she offered up her generosity and said she ate the mushrooms once or twice a year as medicine. But she did it only under the supervision of her shaman. She said it cured any physical ailments she may have and gave her spiritual clarity and wisdom to run her business and raise her family.

The Food and Drug Administration only needs ten years to study a new drug. Her culture had been using ritualistic mushrooms, which grew naturally in the surrounding hills, for thousands of years with no history of two-headed babies or rehab clinics. That is the true litmus test for safety.

John was so moved I could see his eyes watering and I got all mushy too. We continued to talk and exchange information until she closed up for the night. She was equally interested in Brother John and me and our culture. Where we live and what we do. But enough about us...

We walked back to our hotel and as soon as our heads hit the pillows we nodded off like sailors after the storm. The political racket had died down and finally all was quiet in Mexico.