INTRODUCTION

A SMALL TOWN IN MEXICO

IN GUANAJUATO, a small town in Mexico, in a house on the Calle de Pocitos, over a hundred years ago, a little boy sat on the stone flags of the courtyard watching a magic fountain.

He had been born in a town where the streets run underground, where pigeons roost in tunnels and trees sprout through air shafts, and where the dead were dug up and carried to the surface and set out in glass cases for public inspection. Among them was a baby girl, dressed in her best lawn gown and clutching her favourite doll. When children died in Guanajuato a hundred years ago, they were dressed up as though for a party and taken to the portrait photographer's studio to be photographed with their mother. When photography reached Mexico, this was one of the first uses people found for it. Then, after the photograph, the family were invited home and all the living children were dressed up and there was a party, with the dead child seated in a place of honour. As she was now, so would they be.

In a city where such wonders were current, where the living disappeared daily into the ground and the dead reposed in daylight, it was little wonder that the family fountain was enchanted. The fountain was placed above a large, semi-circular stone basin, built into the courtyard wall. Water fell into the basin through three lead spouts, each concealed within the open mouth of a stone-carved fish. The three stone fish-heads formed the base of another, smaller basin, set higher up against the wall, which was in its turn supplied with water through the open mouth of a carved hunting dog. The water trickled gently out through this hound's teeth, piped from a spring which rose somewhere on the steep hillside behind the house. The intricacy of the fountain was a celebration of the fact that

in a town which suffered from recurrent drought, this house had a private supply of running water. Yet the magic of the fountain lay not in its water but in that water's reflections.

Sitting on the cool flags beside the basin, the small boy could see the flight of steps leading to the upper levels of the house. On each of the two upper floors, enclosed by iron balustrades, an open gallery ran round the well of the court. Above the second gallery the walls continued to rise towards a central opening which pierced the wooden beams of the roof. And beyond that was the sky. So the small boy, Diego María, could tilt his head back and from his seat on the floor could scrutinise the spiral levels that led to heaven, where his twin brother Carlos lived. "*Volo al cielo Carlos María*" was a refrain in the family. "Carlos María has flown up to heaven." Then Diego María, still in pursuit of his missing twin, could mount the step of the great stone basin and, leaning over the edge, peer down into the clear pool and find himself once more gazing up to the gallery of the first floor and beyond to the second gallery and so deeper down and higher up until he once again reached the sky. And if, with his child's eye, by looking down into the fountain he could see up, so, when he returned to his seat on the floor, he might as well, by looking up, see down. In each case at the final level, the heights of the house led him back to the depths of the sky and to the path down which at any moment, one day, Carlos María might fly back. The small boy had all the time in the world to ponder these matters anxiously once Carlos María had departed and he, for some three years, assumed the privileges of an only child.

"The house of my parents . . . that small marble palace," as Diego described it many years later, was surrounded by a town which was built along a narrow valley on opposing hillsides above a ravine, the houses being crammed together in an astonishing jumble as though riding the waves of a perpetual earthquake. Inside these houses the rooms are assembled on equally obscure principles. The right angle is generally absent. The walls and floors are fitted together like some fantastic, three-dimensional jigsaw. The door lintels are crooked, the ground levels change from room to room, and the volumes, even within a room, are inconstant. The line of a wall sets out from the doorway assuming that it will follow a conventional rectangular path, only for convention to give up the struggle as the wall gives way to the angle of the ceiling beams or is forced off-course by the sharp tilt of a window-sill. One has the impression that each cubic foot of interior space has been fought for; that the houses have been squeezed by some unseen giant hand; and that what is left is the shape they sprang back to when the hand relaxed.

The problem of the interior dimensions of the rooms is carried through the outside walls and repeated on the streets. Warring bands of builders and city planners have clashed all over the city, and you can trace the history of their engagements in the grid plan viewed from Guanajuato's enclosing heights. Here and there patches of order become visible. The nave of a church or the walls of a fortress will shelter a pool of harmony, but it never lasts for long. The pattern dissolves as it spreads out from its source and is overpowered by some conflicting inspiration. Since the floor of the central ravine is wide enough for a road—but not wide enough for a street—someone had the inspired idea of building a road and then roofing it over, so connecting much of the original seventeenth-century town by this subterranean highway. The roof of this tunnel is the floor of the town. It is through the tunnel's air shafts that trees force their way to the earth's surface, their highest branches just reaching the level of the public benches on the plazas above. Around the plazas, the fretwork of buckled alleyways is first, with a rare ingenuity, knitted together, and then, by the walls of its asymmetrical buildings, forced apart. And so the fretwork continues to the town's edge, where the buildings are liberated at last and can rise up in terraces along the sides of the valley, stone construction giving way to more recent brick, and brick to adobe, until, at a certain contour, even the mud walls give out and the crumbling brown earth of the hillside continues up to the crags above.

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DOWN ONE SUCH STONY HILLSIDE, several folds back from the edge of Guanajuato City, on the evening of the Day of the Dead, 1994, an old man wearing a conspicuous white shirt was slowly picking his path, leading two donkeys, one grey, one black, and followed at some distance by a black dog. He was on his way to the Panteón Nuevo, the municipal graveyard and social centre, which he could see glimmering in the twilight below. He reached a precipitous stretch of tall grass, through which he descended even more slowly. As he drew nearer to the graveyard, faint sounds drifted up: the engine of a bus, radio music, and laughter from a group of policemen huddled together near the car park. Otherwise there was only the wind in the grass; no other noise disturbed the great amphitheatre of hills and fields around. Occasionally on his way down the old man passed solid-looking stone ruins or piles of grey-green shale, all that is now left of some failed silver mine. When he reached the Panteón Nuevo he tethered the donkeys and disappeared into the crowd. The

dog he left free to fend for itself, and it soon wandered off in the direction of the squatters' huts which had started to appear around the graveyard as soon as the first burials took place and an hourly bus service opened up.

The Panteón Nuevo is the graveyard of the future: Guanajuato's development zone, the place where most of the current population of the city will be buried. They have run out of space in the Panteón Municipal, the one where Carlos María was laid in some long-lost grave, so this new arrangement has been set up. At the Panteón Nuevo there is no work for gravediggers. The tombs are located inside three concrete blockhouses, laid out back-to-back like barrack huts. The blocks are pierced by five hundred giant pigeon holes, ranged on six levels, each destined to contain one coffin. After some years of tranquil residence, depending on demand, the coffins are removed, unless the catacomb has been purchased *"en perpetuidad."* Most have not. The parallel lines of concrete blocks make a bleak sight on their hilltop, even on the Day of the Dead. Without enclosing walls or living trees, there is nothing to protect the mourners from the emptiness and darkness of the abandoned hillsides. On that evening in 1994 there was the sound of the Rosary being recited in the dusk, but most families stood silent, some hunched and miserable, one group staring at a recently occupied grave as though still hoping that it might yet open and permit death to be reversed. Before another unmarked tomb a father played football with his sons on the flint surface of the ground while the boys' mother stood alone in front of the grave and prayed. These people were not resigned to death. They did not easily let go.

In Guanajuato in 1994 the fiesta of the dead started on October 31, which is sometimes called the day of the *angelitos,* or little angels, the day when families welcome the return of children who have died. I was seated at a café table in the Jardín Unión before a cold Corona Genuina Cerveza de Barril at midday when the doors of the town's infant schools opened and the children poured out, disguised not as angels but as devils, to celebrate this opening of the festival of death. The children's faces were painted death's-head white, they wore long black plastic fingernails, skeleton suits and devils' masks and red devils' horns that flashed, and they carried flashing red devils' tridents or Grim Reaper scythes. Seated before a cold Corona Genuina Cerveza de Barril in the Jardín Unión, I was an easy target. The first little devil to reach me got all the change in my pocket. Then she drove the others off with the point of her trident. For the rest of the day she and her companions rushed round the overcrowded town demanding ransom. The money she gathered was

intended for one of the churches, where it would be used to pay for a temporary altar to welcome the unawaited dead, the returning children of Guanajuato who had no one left to remember them.

On the following day, Todos Santos, All Saints' Day, the gallery by the original municipal cemetery which contains "Las Momias," Guanajuato's famous mummy museum, was doing steady business. The tour seemed particularly popular with courting couples. A notice on the wall of the gallery requested "Silence." The mummies responded to this request. The courting couples were less co-operative. The couples gazed at the mummies and the mummies gazed right back, even the eyeballs and hair being in several cases mummified. Their state is a natural effect of the cemetery's soil, discovered with some excitement in 1865 when, for the first time, space began to run out in the Panteón. A decision was taken to disinter a number of those who had been buried, and the mummies emerged. When the municipal authorities decided to conserve the mummified corpses, they extended the boundaries of Mexico's relationship with death. Over the years the collection has grown so that perhaps one hundred mummies now wait in the glass cases to greet their living visitors. The supply of mummies is constant. After five years all corpses which do not hold burial rights in perpetuity are removed and some will have turned into mummies. The curator is therefore confronted with a steady procession of candidates for his collection. Where he finds subjects whose features or attitudes are sufficiently unusual, he may put them on display instead of having them cremated. There are no moralising reflections engraved on the walls of the gallery, though at one point after turning a corner visitors are confronted with a reproduction of "la Caterina," Posada's famous cartoon of a young lady skeleton subsequently dressed by Diego Rivera in an ostrich-feather hat and a superb full-length white gown. As she is now, so will we be. The thought is just murmured to the visitor, in passing.

Outside the museum on Todos Santos the crowds were beginning to gather in the graveyard from which the mummies had come. It is a small, rather pretty cemetery, shaded by lemon trees, with flowers growing everywhere between the headstones, long-stemmed red or white gladioli and rose bushes, set out as though in a rich man's garden, the tall eucalyptus trees rustling in the wind. In front of the tombs, cut flowers were crowded into grocery tins which, painted green or white, served as pots. Most of the visitors seemed to have chosen geraniums or chrysanthemums, here as elsewhere the traditional flowers of the dead. Along the high walls of the cemetery, perhaps twenty feet high, the coffins are

stacked in columns of seven. The word *perpetuidad* appears much more frequently than it does in the new cemetery, even on some of the simplest graves. There could be no better incentive for paying the extra fee than the mummy museum. Was it, I wondered, a local curse—"May they dig you up for Las Momias!"

On the Day of the Dead families reassemble in Guanajuato, as they do throughout Mexico, to gather round their family graves. In the graveyard, parallel neighbourhoods spring to life once more. People who may be separated from each other by the width of the city for most of the year dress their graves and call out to each other, neighbours in these walks at least. Around one tomb a family numbering fourteen people aged from about eight to eighty were sitting peacefully, chatting, and eating a picnic. The ladder boys, who could be hired at the cemetery gates, were in brisk demand, their job being to place vases on the stone ledges in front of the higher niches on the wall. A man called out to a boy to carry a pot full of lilies up to a niche which was marked with the name of a woman who had died in 1945. Perched above, on the lip of a black marble vase marked "Lopez," a crow looked down on the ladder boy, then dipped its beak into the vase to drink. Beyond the crow a workman perched at the top of another tall ladder was whitening the dome of a concrete sepulchre.

Some of the graves bore foreign names, Pons or Stephenson, preceded by Spanish Christian names, evidence of some distant immigration. One headstone, in memory of James Pomeroy McGuire, who died in 1959, aged twenty-seven, carried no religious references, but it was marked with the word *perpetuidad* and with the lines from Robert Louis Stevenson beginning, "This be the verse you grave for me." The words were correctly cut in capital letters, though few glancing at the stone would have understood them. There were no cakes on this grave, no photograph, no candles, not even a vase of flowers. It stood beneath a yew.

By the main gates old Indian women were sitting on stools, selling the pots of water which they had filled and carried from some distant tap. It was their grandsons who were carrying the ladders. And on the cobbled roadway beyond the gates traders had set out their food stalls as they do at the approaches to a football stadium, and a girl was handing out leaflets. I took one. It was printed by a local funeral director and advertised discounted "specials." It was Charles Macomb Flandrau who wrote in 1907 that in Mexico death was not just a social occasion, it was above all a commercial opportunity.

The Mexican festival of death is by tradition the greatest fiesta of the year, but in Guanajuato there was no sign of the extravagant details with which it is still marked elsewhere. The dogs in Guanajuato were not muzzled to prevent them from nipping the returning dead. I saw no professional prayer-makers moving among the graves. Nobody carried to the churchyard the bed in which their beloved had died, and the ossuaries were not raided to decorate tombs with the skull and crossbones—an example of the poor being put to work for the rich even after they have entered the grave. But there was no need of these flourishes to emphasise the genuine communion which existed between the living and the dead. In the calendar of the Universal Church, All Saints' is followed by All Souls', when people remember those who died with their sins still to be purged. But in Mexico the two categories have long since been confounded. The Mexicans make no distinction between the saints and the rest of us. A fiesta is not just a feast day, and the Mexican festival of death is not just a commemoration of the dead, it is a reunion with them. There is no authority in Christian teaching for the idea that the souls of dead children return to earth on the day before Todos Santos. But this idea does recall the Aztec custom of dedicating the ninth month of the year to dead infants and the tenth month to dead adults. So in Mexico today the souls of dead children which arrive on midnight on October 31 depart punctually on November 1, to be replaced by the visiting souls of dead adults. These are beliefs, not facts. It is, however, a fact that at midnight on October 31, in my room overlooking the Jardín Unión, the windows blew open with a crash although there was no wind and they had been securely fastened. I began to feel part of the fiesta.

The Aztec festival lasted a month, and in many parts of Mexico Todos Santos is also extended through the whole of the month of November. The Aztecs then went on for a second month, but they did not have Christmas to prepare for. In Mexico even the most extreme enthusiasm for Todos Santos is brought to an end on November 30, the feast of San Andrés. The Mexicans cultivate a great affection for their dead, but they do not want them in the house all year round. It is usual to speak of the Mexican cult of death as reflecting both Christian and Aztec beliefs. But there is, on closer examination, very little which is obviously Christian about it. The Christian faith holds that the grave is the unavoidable path to eternal life, that the life to come is a life of the spirit, and that in the grave we leave everything inessential and outward. Eternity is identified with the immaterial. The Mexican festival of death takes place on church

property and makes use of the furniture of the Christian faith, but there are remarkably few priests in evidence at most of its ceremonies and much of its significance seems to be as much anti-Christian as Christian. The exhumation of the bones, the symbolic offering of food and toys to the dead, the deliberate confusion of the living and the dead are all in harmony with the Aztec belief in the continuous cycle of existence, but they serve only to distract attention from the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the soul. The Aztec civilisation was among the most sophisticated systems to be invaded and overthrown by Christianity, and the Day of the Dead confirms that it never was entirely overthrown. It was in the Jesuit church in Guanajuato, on the second day of the festival, that I realised the extent to which the Aztecs' original resistance to Cortés is still alive.

It was the time of evening mass and the church was full—though few people were following the service taking place on the altar. Two young women stood among others in the crowd before a black-decked Virgin, saying decades of the Rosary and holding up a tiny baby within the statue's field of vision. They wanted the Virgin to see the baby. Around them children still dressed as devils ran between the pillars of the nave. They were playing devils and lost souls, a game of tag in which the loser is condemned to eternal fire. They were making a game of the mass for the day. Outside the church a crowd of near-worshippers stood waiting in the gloom for mass to end. Through the open doors at the end of the nave they could follow the service, and two old men were on their knees praying, but most of those outside stood talking quietly between the pools of light that escaped through the tall, arched doorway. Among the young women, black and white seemed to be the fashion. Some were in full skeleton costume; others had restricted themselves to black-and-white-striped clothes of a more conventional cut. One young woman, heavily pregnant, was wearing a long, black skirt, a white blouse and a black and white waistcoat. After a moment I realised I was looking at a young, pregnant woman who, in order to join in the town's festive mood, was dressed as an image of death. "The Mexican is a religious being, and his experience of the divine is completely genuine," wrote Paz in *The Labyrinth of Solitude,* "but who is his God?"

Next morning, from the heights around Guanajuato, one could hear the noise of fiesta beating through the streets of the town. It was a blend of distant trumpets, a hint of tambourines, and the bellowing of leather lungs from the violinists singing with the mariachi bands. I had tried to enter the Alhóndiga, once a granary, then a powder magazine, but a

notice outside said that it was closed for reasons of *"fuerza mayor"*—force majeure—in other words, "Fiesta!" It was a wonderful evocation of the power of fiesta in Mexico, *fuerza mayor.* The building was closed because there was no one there to turn the key. There was no point in ordering the staff to work: you can't issue orders against force majeure. Everyone was in the cemetery, having a good time. So I sat outside the Alhóndiga de Granaditas, on a broad and shady stone ledge, among the Indian trinket-sellers who had turned up out of force of habit—an even stronger *fuerza,* it seemed. I was sitting just below the iron hook from which the Spanish suspended the severed head of the Mexican liberator Hidalgo. The cage enclosing his head hung on that hook for ten years. A Mexican dressed in jeans and a cowboy hat came limping up the hill from the direction of the bus station. He was a young man on crutches carrying a light satchel on his back, and he made his way past with the preoccupied air of one who is using his time alone to think deeply about whatever it was he wished to think about. Two and a half paces behind him, his wife had fallen into place, holding their little daughter by the hand, she in a red cardigan and black skirt and the girl in a yellow dress, both as neat as pins for fiesta. The ladies were not talking, although they looked as though they might have been if there had not been the risk of disturbing the man's thoughts. They had not chosen to walk behind; it was just that it was the usual position, a habit the woman had learnt in her father's footsteps when she had been the age her daughter was now. She walked there naturally, even though her husband on his crutches had recently taken to walking so much slower than before. It said quite a lot about their relationship, and about their society, the way they were grouped and the fact that they all seemed quite content about it. It was Wednesday, November 2, the Day of the Dead. I went on sitting on the ledge until a pigeon perched on Hidalgo's hook shat on my jacket, and I thought perhaps it was time to move on.

I reached the Jardín Unión to see the man on crutches limping into the Church of San Diego, the church where Diego Rivera once claimed to have lost his faith at the age of six. Under the trees outside the church, the noise of fiesta was no longer a distant murmur. Beneath my balcony the sound of the mariachis striking up yet again was enough to stir the cold Corona Genuina Cerveza de Barril in its glass. Luisa, who owned this house, had told me that the dictator Porfirio Díaz had once leant on this very same balcony railing and slept in the room I was sleeping in when he came to Guanajuato in 1903. Perhaps this explained why the windows sometimes blew open without a wind. His visit in 1903 was to inaugurate

the Teatro Juárez, the city opera house which stood more or less opposite the dictator's room. It was a triumphant moment for Díaz and for the rulers of the town. The little Teatro had taken thirty years of hard labour and profligate spending to complete.

Díaz loved Guanajuato, which was reputedly one of the most conservative towns in Mexico. It was in Guanajuato that he authorised a triumphal arch to be erected not to his military glory but to the glory of his second wife, the unfortunate Carmelita, who detested the elderly husband she had only married under duress. Carmelita's godfather was very angry about this marriage, and to soothe him Carmelita wrote a letter. "I do not fear that God will punish me," she explained, "for taking this step, as my greatest punishment will be to have children by a man who I do not love; nevertheless I shall respect him and be faithful to him all my life. You have nothing, Godfather, with which to reproach me. . . ."

Díaz visited Guanajuato again in September 1910. It was his last visit and the year of the centenary of the Mexican Revolution. The dictator had just arranged for his seventh re-election, and a new revolution was on the point of breaking out. In Mexico, wrote Paz, "a fiesta . . . does not celebrate an event: it *reproduces* it." And in Mexico in 1910 they celebrated the centenary of the Mexican Revolution by throwing another Mexican Revolution! But Díaz did not anticipate that. He had not read Paz. This time he came to inaugurate the new covered market, which was, and still is, the largest covered area in Guanajuato. Even today a large marble slab fixed to the wall by the entrance to the market records the occasion. The entrance looks like the archway into a mainline railway terminus, and the name of the architect was Ernesto Brunel. At the bottom of the inscription the carver has left a space to record the cost of the project in three different currencies, but each is blank. The Revolution arrived before the governor had finished counting, and after that nobody cared to give credit to an achievement of the *Porfiriato.*

Opposite the market there is a café, and on the day of my visit they had installed a family altar in the entrance hall. On the altar they had placed flowers and corn and fruit and little white sugar cakes each bearing the name in black of someone who was being welcomed back that day. Above the altar a sign read, "You would enjoy yourself more if you gave something for this altar, and so welcomed back all those who have died in Guanajuato." On the kerb outside the café the road-sweeper was sitting with his small son perched between his knees. The boy was propping up his father's long-handled broom and eating something white and sticky, a

treat, a little sugarloaf, shaped like a skull. The boy was eating a shrunken human head.

I walked down the Calle de Santo Niño, the Street of the Holy Child, where the right angles are always awaited, where the perspective is tangible and built into the stones, and eventually came to Pocitos and then to Pocitos 80. Today it is numbered 47. Here a plaque on the wall announces that inside Diego Rivera, *pintor magnífico,* was born. It was the Day of the Dead and the house was closed to the public. But I heard a door bang inside, and the sound of the radio playing, so I knocked and a woman's voice called out and I turned the handle and walked in.