

WE'RE IN CANCUN BABY!

Exhilaration at feeling the vibrations of a new place for the first time travels through my head, up my feet to my heart which expands. Yes, we are, replies Lili flashing her dazzling smile. As usual she is scrumptious enough to bite into: radiantly smooth chocolate skin, wide eyes impeccably made up, pulpos indigo-blue painted lips to match her bobbed hair. She is a pleasure to behold and I'm happy to be graced with her company on this trip.

At the airport in Cancun the customs officer wants to know what my lunchbox contains. Just my lunch, I answer in Spanish and show him. "No se preocupe señor, voy a comerlo ahora mismo." (don't worry sir I'm going to eat it right now). Stepping aside I produce a fork and start eating with gusto the delicious grilled lamb and Greek salad purchased between planes at the airport in Houston.

The customs guy would like to throw my lunch in the garbage-can behind him. He keeps pointing at it then pointing at me while Lili highly amused teases: "Come on girl you know he wants to eat that food, now you know he's not gonna throw that food away okay? Just give it to him girl!"

"No se preocupe señor, voy a terminarlo todo." (don't worry sir, I'm going to finish it all). It's the meat he seems to object to the most, the meat from Texas. I eventually hand him the empty to go box. The entire exchange in no way disturbs the meagre flow of straggling travelers who have nothing to declare.

We drink from our water bottles and inquire about the bus to Playa Del Carmen, happy to practice our haphazard Spanish, cobbling together these basic sentences but knowing that understanding the answer at 20 miles a minute is another story. At the bus counter a family of four is buying tickets to Playa and we're next. We pay 12.00 USD for each one-way ticket and follow the family out the door. It's a small open-air bus terminal and all the coaches' destination signs are permutations of the acronym for the bus-line we seek. Confused we make a few false starts, zigzagging along dragging our now heavy bags (okay okay pack light pack light pack light next time). Lili and I both suffer from the desire when travelling, to change clothes frequently. This time, knowing we'd have to walk, we consciously whittled down our wardrobe but much more effort is needed, obviously. A uniformed guy grabs my bags and leads us to the right place. The family of four ahead of us has to wait for the next bus in 20 minutes because on this one only two seats are left.

I hang on to my backpack and secure it in the overhead space where it fits snugly so my laptop will be safe. I'm bringing the best vacation homework I could wish for: I am to translate from English into Haitian Creole Denize Lauture's delicious short tale titled *Lowò* (Dawn), the name of the main character, a young boy living in the mountains of Haiti during the 1920's. He seeks to destroy what he considers to be superstitions: the myths of his region. Most interesting premise for this translator who believes in the necessity to preserve our ancient human myths and a challenge to any translator for being in free verse, a short story in poetry form, using typically Haitian story telling devices such as repetition and onomatopoeia plus the format that makes a text more accessible to young readers for whom it is intended.

I open the curtains darkening the interior of the air-conditioned bus and look out into the heat. The road shimmers and reveals nothing but thickets, green walls on each side opening onto private entranceways, leading to imagined fairy tale resorts by the sea. I dream wide awake then we're in Playa.

Bus station behind us, we're overcome by the bustle and jostle, the crowd of scantily clad tourists the vendors the tour guides the food stands and Lili spots a booth selling ferry tickets. Two round trips to Cozumel for 20.00 USD each. Pulling our now very heavy bags (travel lighter next time travel lighter next time but meanwhile put your woman on and pull push lift shove those bags because it's the only work-out we're getting today). In Spanish we ask for directions at every corner and follow the pointing fingers. Right as we get there the ferry is leaving. We have to wait an hour for the next one.

One of the tour outfits lining the pier has installed a couch on the planks. We ask permission which is graciously granted to sit there. We relax into a moment of euphoria and make small talk in Spanish with the other waiting passengers. We learn there are two ferry lines going back and forth from Playa Del Carmen to Cozumel, that ours comes slightly later but costs 3.00 less and that both make the trip every hour.

It's the perfect time to call our friend Lane Sky and let her know we're arriving in Cozumel. She supervised our trip by phone and internet, told us which airport to fly into, which bus and ferry lines to take, how much time and money it would cost. She is the very charismatic creator of Gorgeous Goddess Productions, a travel designer who customizes trips to fit your budget. She arranged our stay at the family owned hotel where she'd been living for the past year and got us the kind of prices we could not have gotten without such a reference.

Looking back at the embarcadero from the pier in Playa the grand white beaches across the way from the big hotels are deserted. Red Sargasso seaweed has invaded the coast here and caused the graceful arabesques of sand to lose their appeal. This is happening all over the Caribbean we're told. A casualty of global warming.

"This is not good not good not good at all." moans Lili as the boat pitches right then left then right again and finally rolls from front to back. Breathe deep, breathe deep, breathe deep I whisper holding on to my head. Once we've left the harbor and the lights of Playa, it calms down. Forty-five minutes to Cozumel and the sun is setting. Lane is to meet us on the sidewalk in front of the pier. I haven't seen her for ages. She's been in Mexico three years already after a three-year stint in Haiti doing P.R for Le Perroquet Hotel which she and her partners during her tenure there turned into one of the most happening places in Petion-ville.

Sitting on the white seawall taking in the clear water the lit up pastel-colored facades the horse-drawn carriages the metal sculpture of three circling swallows which we later learn is the emblem of Cozumel, we finally see Lane sailing towards us with her characteristic high fashion model on a fast runway stride. We wave our arms and she is here. Hugs kisses exclamations our excitement bubbles over. Lane grabs two of our bags and starts berating us all the way to the car for bringing too many things. Why girls why why why? In her Russian-British accented contralto: What do you have in there? Good morning! What are you doing? People don't dress up here at all girls! It's a beach town! But we don't care.

She introduces us to her Native American friend from Arizona, TM, the strikingly beautiful producer of the first ever Cozumel international film festival due to open in two weeks. Lane has been handling some P.R for her, recruiting sponsors a few of whom we are on our way to meet for dinner at a local

restaurant called Olana. In passing she points out the corner with a huge sign Viva Mexico that marks the way up to our hotel. We leave the seafront and through a lacework of narrow streets lose all sense of direction.

The place is small, festively lit with a tiny terrace where we install ourselves after meeting the owner and friends at the bar. We are offered the famous peanut butter margaritas but I opt for a lime one and Lili for her signature fruit-infused vodka. We're famished by now. The menu looks good and when it arrives the food is fresh, delicious. The Margarita packs a serious punch and that's no lie. Enthusiasm is high for the film fest and conversation lively. Elated we drink and talk and laugh.

The street alongside our hotel is closed to traffic and deserted at this time. Lane knocks at a double glass door. From above a security guard answers leaning over the balcony. Soon he opens for us and we meet Eloi who takes my bags and leads the way to the second floor reception desk. Family photos line up but no one's there. It's almost midnight. The night host has gone home, the owner/manager has retired to her quarters and Eloi disappears to fetch her.

Lili half reclines in an armchair and I sit next to her. TM has joined us again after parking and is standing with Lane at the counter when the lady of the house arrives on Eloi's arm, looking like a drowned Ophelia in a long white nightgown with waves of her black hair uncoiling past her shoulders. She is deposited on the high chair behind the counter. Carefully she hands us the forms to fill out but visibly still half asleep, slipping down her chair her hair sliding around her upper arms, getting propped up again and again by an extremely solicitous Eloi, she takes a good hour more to get us sorted out. She got mixed up about our arrival date and our rooms will not be ready 'til tomorrow but we can have two rooms just for tonight. She has to be coached by Eloi every step of the way and everything repeated to her four or five times at least before she makes a decision and we're finally allowed to pay. By then Lili is annoyed back in the armchair, I'm patiently repeating myself at the desk and Lane is impatiently wondering why the hell Ophelia didn't write down our arrival date. Only TM is smiling slightly and we can't help but smile a little too.

This surreal introduction has slightly well very much freaked us out but we're too tired to say anything. The reception desk is one floor above street level, two flights of stairs connect each floor. I'm on the third floor and Lily is one floor below me. From Oakland she had ordered air-conditioning and gets it; a corner room overlooking the entrance to the square and a glimpse of the sea but she promptly shuts the curtains. She likes it dark. I had asked for a fan, a wide window I can open, framing the sky or a tree. I get the windows the sky and the shadowy tree, but no fan just air-conditioning TM turns on. It works. The panicky feeling of not being able to breathe properly, brought on by the intense heat and humidity, recedes and I open the curtains. The sky is there.

Lili's room is much cooler now but we're still sweating copiously after all these emotions. Lili very dramatically unveils what she claims is a bloodstain on the sheet. Covering the offending tiny stain with the bedspread she immediately unfolds her yoga mat on the other double bed which thank Goddess passes inspection. I feel I am in a movie from the fifties and should get dressed up right away but I'm too tired. In my room I choose the bed closest to the window and have to move the other one sideways to

have free access to the closet where I deposit my things in a heap. I sit there unable to move, drink from my water bottle while Lane and TM keep on plotting. So far I understand that Lane doesn't really like movies and couldn't care less really about the cinema per se but wants to contribute to the film fest by getting sponsors. Her agenda is to provide after parties at the end of each day's events during the festival. Parties animated by deep house music D.J s Jeff and Avroum Gold, from Montreal, both internationally renowned and both willing to work gratis in exchange for round-trip ferry tickets from Playa, in-island transportation, hotel accommodations, equipment rental and most important of all, publicity in the write ups for the film fest. Considering that most D.J s charge from 300.00 USD per hour, that seems like a pretty good deal but TM doesn't appear very enthusiastic. She wants Lane to bring in the sponsors, yes but she doesn't really like deep house music and she thinks she can just use her own play list. I don't think I like that kind of music either. It makes me feel like breaking down and doing push-ups and sit-ups. Now I'm buzzing with the kind of exhaustion that leaves me barely enough energy to brush my teeth in a quick shower before sliding between very fresh smelling sheets. The bloodstain scare recedes the Ophelia episode slips out of focus the bed is firm, I've opened the double window and the curtains to the night sky and I am happy.

I wake up at six to take a picture of my first dawn in Cozumel blushing and rosy as I could ever wish. By eleven the sun is blazing and the air conditioner stops by itself. I have to go to the reception and inquire about a fan. Last night's slippery haired Ophelia has morphed into a pert business woman with a bun who informs me that Lili and I will have to move immediately into our reserved accommodations. She hands me a proper receipt I have to sign. I ask her to speak to me in Spanish so I can practice and she slows down her speech for me. I go upstairs to alert Lili but she refuses to move.

I gather most of my things in my arms, some trailing behind when Lane breezes up the hallway from downstairs. She loads herself up with the rest of my stuff including those I had already unpacked and we make it unsteadily to the floor below. She's still harping about the art of packing light and I feebly defend myself. I have the exact same room but one floor down, the view slightly different, the sea no longer visible but still the sky and the tree below in the green yard next door. Lily's new room is right next door to mine, she only has to cross the hallway. Pigeons roost outside my window in the disaffected air-conditioning unit. I hear them coo. I have a fan, a refrigerator and a perfect cross-breeze from open window through open door. Yeah.

I love arranging my things in a hotel room. This one is a throwback to the fifties. Cream-colored and gold laminate dresser with roomy drawers and a wide, curvy mirror. An antique cross-stitch bench against a recess near the door, a plastic chair in one corner. I throw my blue yoga mat over the rust-stained mini fridge after Lane helps me carry the T.V out to the corridor where it is abandoned. The tiled bathroom is old rose, a bubble of exquisite light that shrouds me in beauty when I open the glass slats of a narrow horizontal window. Everything is ancient. Despite floor tiles a bit pockmarked, bedspreads, sheets, curtains bearing at least one tiny stain and a threadbare spot, the place has undeniable charm and I am charmed.

To think I woke up in Oakland a month ago after Bad News at The Dentist, with the sinking feeling that my vacation was shot. I had gone for a check up to a high-powered highly awarded San Francisco dentist who determined I needed two crowns, one filling under one crown and a partial all to the tune of over three thousand dollars. My regular check-up at UCSF confirmed I needed one new crown with a filling for a cavity underneath, a partial and one more cavity-filling. The second crown prescribed by the oft-awarded San Francisco dentist was not necessary at all they said. Still, pay two thousand dollars please. Okay, I had two opinions now. Who to believe, who to seek? My vacation plans were unraveling fast and the blues setting in. A flash of the Spirit got me out of bed the next day and on the phone to Lane: "Do you know a dentist in Cozumel?"

"Darling, she replied in her gripping voice, I have just gone to one who was recommended by the film festival producer I'm working with. She has been going there for two years now and is very satisfied with the work. I will get you the phone number."

On my first morning in Cozumel, Lane has four dentists lined up but I decide to go see the first one. I have a good feeling. Lane calls and makes me an appointment for the next day. My vacation is on. Yes!

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