

A Good Day

Once, when we were bored and irritable in our apartment in Mexico City, the four of us—Ernesto, Dianne, Carolyn, and I—got into the Renault we had bought the previous week and risked the rough and sometimes unfair roads that wound to Cuernavaca. We were happy in the car when we left and happier when we drove into town and discovered a fuchsia-like vine with red-flamed flowers. Carolyn took pictures of the vine from the car window—a vigorous vine that seemed to grow everywhere, on the houses of the poor as well as the rich. Dianne remarked it was the most beautiful flower she had ever seen.

We had lunch and lingered over dark beers, comfortable in the warm sunlight that slanted through an open window. We walked the *zocalo* where we bought trinkets from a child and visited a small museum in which the most interesting display was of rusted pistols and the sepia-colored photographs of those who had owned—or were killed by—the pistols. From there we went shopping: Dianne bought a belt for her niece and Carolyn turned over for the longest time silver charms that she hoped to add to a bracelet back in California. She chose an Italian flag and, with Dianne's help, argued over the price with the young woman behind the counter.

After shopping we drove outside the city in search of a

nursery, to make our apartment more lush since it was uncomfortably bare: A dining table with chairs, an empty bird cage, two mattresses, and an ironing board that doubled as a writing table. We found a nursery and Ernesto and I haggled over ferns. In the end we paid what was asked and paid again when a boy helped us prop the plants in the trunk.

At the suggestion of a schoolgirl who had watched us shove and twist and grunt the plants into place, we drove farther along the road to a pond that was pressed small by an arena of jagged rocks and wispy trees that were filled with birds. We walked along a leaf-littered path, paired off into couples looking very much like the tourists we were, until we were in view of divers approaching onlookers for a few pesos. We stopped and leaned against a stone fence, first to take pictures of the divers, and then of one another gazing into the distance, in the mock concentration of would-be free thinkers. Finally one diver who had counted and recounted his money stepped out onto a rock that jutted over the water. He took a deep breath, then released it. He took another deep breath, spread his arms, and leaped into the gray water that broke white as his body hit the surface. He came up smiling and pinching his nostrils. The onlookers clapped and smiled at one another.

We walked slowly back to the car, none of us looking forward to the drive back to the city, especially since the afternoon rains would soon start, so instead we started on a walk that ended only twenty feet from the car. Ernesto pointed to a harp player, a blind man who was very handsome in a felt hat and a crisp, white shirt. We walked in his direction behind Ernesto who, after a few minutes of casual remarks about the day, struck up a conversation that led to how the man had come to play the harp.

The story was that a group of Indians had come upon the wooden harp, stringless and warped, on a river bank.

They turned it over in their hands for a long time but couldn't figure out what it was. Intrigued by this piece of wood, they carried it from the river up some difficult hills and into their village. One of the men carried it on his shoulder, like a slain deer. He was first greeted by children, then women, then the other men, and finally the head of the tribe who, baffled almost to the point of worry, banged at it with his fist. That night talk filled the air. Some said it was a suitcase. Others said it was a boat for very small children, and still others argued it was a loom. One said it was a washboard. Still they couldn't decide, so the three men who had found the harp took it back into town to sell it. But no one was interested in that piece of wood.

"But when they came to me, I knew what it was," he said. "When I was a child in Morelia, my uncle played one, a very beautiful one inlaid with ivory and all glittery. That's when I could see and didn't need these hands."

He went on to tell us how the Indians had laid the instrument on his lap and he had run his hands over its body, recognizing it immediately but not revealing his happiness because it would have meant a difficult barter. After a few minutes of friendly haggling, the Indians walked into the countryside and up the hills with a frying pan and pocket knife, very pleased with the trade.

"Young man, I'll play for you—and for your friends of course," he said, wetting his lips and propping the harp against his shoulder. "It's a love song—*Mariposa en la primavera*." His fingers started slowly, like the butterflies of spring, but soon they plucked vigorously at the strings. He stopped once to cough into his sleeve and another time to wipe his brow, pausing for such a long time that we thought he had forgotten we were there. But he continued and when he finished we clapped and could think of no finer music as we looked at one another, moved by the song and this man who seemed so innocent despite his

age. We thanked him and, as we were leaving, Ernesto tried to give him a few pesos. He refused them with a wave of his hand, "It's nothing, young man. Be a Mexican and go on."

We returned to the car, paired in couples and kicking at leaves and thinking how lucky we were. I started to hum. Ernesto joined in, and our wives pushed us away to cover their ears and make faces. We hummed louder, but when they picked up handfuls of leaves and twigs to throw at us, we stopped and mockingly opened our arms to them. Leaves fluttered in the air, and we chased them humming all the way down the hill to the car.