

# Hacienda

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There was something *wrong* about that old hacienda. From the gravelly shore of Lake Chapala, beyond a rusting hog-wire fence, I could just make out the main house brooding in the afternoon sun at the back of the big lot. Mango and banana and lemon trees and clinging bougainvillea and jacaranda and weeds blocked a clear view of the veranda from the water.

Access was through a wrought iron gate on the cobblestone street on the other side. Passing through that creaking gate was like entering a shadowy jungle of forgotten opulence and hope. Someone no longer remembered had built the single-story dwelling with its Spanish terra cotta roof and all the rooms opening onto a broad veranda of red tiles that faced the lake. But now the floor tiles were dull and worn. Window panes were cracked. Screens were torn. Something broken and dark and sinister lurked beneath the cracking plaster and crumbling mortar that bound together those ancient adobe blocks.

When we took possession (or maybe the hacienda took possession of us), we thought we could bring it all back to its glory days. Exorcize the brooding *espíritus*. But that all came later. In the beginning, we lived across the cobbled street from that wide, prison-like gate and had no idea what lay behind it.

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Ours was not lake-front property. Charlize and I had purchased, sight unseen, a two-story adobe and brick house on Calle Independencia in Ajijic, Jalisco, Mexico. Charlize was my wife. The purchase was on impulse. We had each received college diplomas and were biding our time in Berkeley with part-time jobs before committing ourselves to careers, when our next door neighbor leaned out of the upstairs window and asked if we wanted to go in with them on buying a house in Mexico. A friend of his was selling it. It was cheap, he said. Our share, two-thousand dollars. One thousand down, and five hundred a year for two years.

It took us a while to get our minds around the concept, but we decided we did want to go in with them. We wanted to buy a house in Mexico. Hell yes, we did!

We arrived in Ajijic on a January evening of our fifth day of hard driving, most of it through a strange new world. A wheel bearing in our overloaded trailer had failed as we climbed the mountainous highway from Tuxpan to Tepic. That had cost us half a day. And Charlize was sick with diarrhea and vomiting when we finally located the house and pulled our rig up tight against the adobe wall on the street. The structure sat empty and overgrown in the gloaming like a forgotten archeological ruin.

Pancho, our three-month-old German Shepard puppy, woke up from his long torpor, shook himself on the cobblestones, and began sniffing around his new yard. Neither the running water nor the electricity was functioning. By flashlight I found a bare mattress on the floor of the

upstairs bedroom while Charlize found the toilet. It was a dark hour.

On the stained mattress upstairs we spent a restless night beneath a sweaty sleeping bag. In the morning light I got my first view of our new home. While Charlize slept, I inspected it inside and out. The bedroom ceiling was covered with woven petate mats. The walls were exposed beige brick. The floor tiles were strewn with brittle dead carcasses, mostly cockroaches, but a couple of tiny amber scorpions too. A doorway opened out onto a small, red-tiled upstairs patio, where a concrete water tank perched at the corner of a low masonry wall. Next to the tank was an unfinished room with an unglazed window. In the sunlight of a new day, it all felt quaint and cozy.

A steep, naked-brick staircase with no banister descended into a small livingroom with plastered walls painted a brilliant white. An arched brick fireplace was inset into the front wall. Overhead were shallow arches of smooth red brick. Large red tiles covered the floor. Through a broad white plaster arch was a sun-bright kitchen with its red tile counters, a hand-poured concrete sink, a small electric stove, a refrigerator with its door propped open, and an empty rack for a bottle of purified drinking water. The final quadrant was occupied by a large bathroom with a petate mat stapled onto a wooden frame for a door, a bare concrete tub, and a toilet. We had already filled the toilet, but without water, could not flush it.

Pancho had pushed open the flimsy front door and was scratching his belly with a hind leg on the brick pathway. I stepped outside and patted him on the head.

It appeared as though the brick upper story and patio had recently been grafted atop the two-foot-thick adobe walls of a more ancient structure. My degree had been in architectural engineering, so I couldn't help examining the construction with a technical eye. Steel I-beams had been notched onto the old adobe walls, and arches of brick between the beams now formed the ceiling of the lower story and the floor of the upstairs bedroom and patio. But the steel beams were apparently not tied together. I found no trace of a perimeter band of steel or reinforced concrete to keep the beams from spreading. Adobe is nothing more than dried mud and straw. In the event the walls spread or crumbled or melted in the rain, the brick ceiling would come crushing down.

I supposed it wouldn't matter much unless an earthquake struck.

I was learning the calculus that earlier gringos had grasped when they first found their way into this peaceable Indian fishing village. They were free to build wherever they liked. Whatever they could afford. At whatever risk they were willing to take. Labor and materials were cheap, and no one bothered much with architectural plans or building codes. And if a Chapala building official or a town policeman made a call, a little *mordida*, or bribe, would take care of it. A few pesos would always set things right. It was the Mexican way.

Our lot was narrow and deep. The windowless south wall of our house covered half the street frontage. The other half was blocked by a high adobe wall with a narrow opening for a rickety wooden gate that led down two steps to the cobblestone street.

The west wall of our house was a common adobe wall with our neighbors' abode on that side. A family of three or four generations subsisted there, including a brood of half-naked infants who were destined to inherit their parents' fate. The men appeared to be farmers by the tools they carried over their shoulders each morning as they marched off to work, but where they might have farmed I had no idea. After they were gone, an old woman in a black shawl, bent and

frail, would sweep the dirt floor of the house with a straw broom while a yellow dog followed her around. From our common adobe wall a new brick wall had been constructed on our parcel back to an ancient adobe shed, or casita, with its sagging tar-paper roof and vacant openings for doors and a window. The casita marked the front half of our property as a courtyard. We saw and heard little of those neighbors from behind the thick adobe and brick barriers.

A deteriorating six-foot-high adobe wall on the opposite side completed the enclosure of our courtyard and separated us from our neighbors on the east. Half-way back was an opening in the wall created by an old, hand-dug well, which we shared with them. Having been forewarned, we had brought down a new electric, shallow-well pump to replace the rusting relic propped up on bricks against our side of the wall. Our neighbors continued to draw out their water with a leaking wooden bucket to quench the thirst of their family and their pigs and chickens and roosters and dogs and burros. Their hovel of adobe and plywood and sheets of corrugated tin squatted at the far back corner of their lot.

None of our adjoining neighbors spoke a word of English.

The courtyard lawn was overgrown and the surrounding garden beds unweeded. The back half of the parcel was a wilderness of waist-high grass and weeds enclosed by a rusting hog-wire fence. It stretched another hundred feet or so to a stone wall as it climbed the slope away from the lake.

By the time I returned, Charlize had made her way down the steep brick staircase to the livingroom and was slumped in a sagging pigskin equipali chair wrapped in a wool serape. Her freckled complexion was wan and puffy and her usually bright waist-long red hair hung dull and clumped and matted against her neck.

“How’re you feeling?” I asked.

“I think I’m going to live. Cramps are gone. Hoping the worst is over.” After a pause, she added, “The toilet’s full.”

“I know. I need to get the electricity going and the pump installed.” I was studying the arched-brick ceiling.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” she said.

“What is?”

“The bricks. The arches. They’re beautiful.”

I grunted and told her about my structural misgivings. I concluded, “If those steel beams were to separate . . . say, in an earthquake . . . we’d have tons of brick crashing down on our heads.”

Her mouth had turned sour. “*Please*, Ben, don’t do this now.”

“Do *what*?”

She looked like she might start crying. “Don’t ruin this for me. I can’t take it right now. Just get the toilet to flush, okay?”

I commandeered the wooden bucket that rested on the opposite rim of the well and lowered it by its fraying rope, which threaded through an overhead pulley hooked to a wooden beam spanning the gap in the wall. The water was no more than eight feet down. From the back of the next lot, a stocky *campesino* in an sweat-stained, sleeveless gray T-shirt watched me with sullen eyes, but said nothing. I waved to him, but he didn’t return my greeting. He just watched as I spilled the water into a galvanized pail I had found in the casita. I carried it inside and

poured the water into the tank on the back of the toilet. It flushed. One catastrophe averted. A dozen more to grapple with.

The electricity was no problem at all. At a small office off the main plaza about five blocks away, I wrote down the street address and signed some paperwork I couldn't read. As I was beginning to unload the trailer, a young Mexican showed up at our gate carrying an extension ladder over his shoulder, extended it, and hooked it over the bottom strand of the overhead wires that ran down our street on concrete poles. I watched as he hand-twisted the exposed ends of two wires sprouting from our meter onto the bare bottom strands of the live power lines, one after the other. No tools. No bucket lift. It took all of two minutes. "*Hay luz,*" he grinned at me, as he folded his ladder. *There is electricity.* We were connected.

Installing the new water pump took a little longer. Reading the instructions that came with the pump was the most time-consuming part. I cannibalized the black PVC intake pipe and band clamps from the old pump and connected them to a new footer valve and the new pump. Electrical feed wires and the underground water line to the house were already in place, so I connected them and started the pump. Water was sucked from the well and spilled into the tank on the wall of the upstairs patio until it overflowed through a spill pipe into the garden. Cold water now ran from the sink faucet and the shower head. The toilet flushed, refilled, and flushed again.

Charlize was dying to take a shower. I found what appeared to be a wood-burning water heater mounted on the outside adobe wall of the bathroom. In the casita I had seen some old newspaper and a cardboard box filled with wooden slats and twigs that had been snapped into foot-long lengths. I lit a small fire and waited anxiously from a distance to see if the contraption would heat the water or blow up. It creaked and banged and popped with increasing violence as the fire crackled. I added scraps of wood until bursts of steam and water spurted from a pipe on top.

"I think your water's hot," I called inside. "Try not to get any of it in your mouth. It's well water."

I kept the fire going, pumped a little more water into the tank, and after she was done enjoyed my own hot shower. There wasn't much pressure, but the flow was good. The cleansing made us both feel a whole lot better. Charlize was cheerful and smiling as she bent into the sunlight brushing her straight red hair with long inside strokes. I loved to watch her brush her hair.

### 3

Those first days were busy ones as we tried to turn that house into our home. We swept up dead varmints and washed the floors and wiped down the walls and surfaces and began hauling our stuff in from the station wagon and our trailer. I reinforced the front gate with an old board to keep Pancho in the yard. We found the village market, where we bought vegetables, and the supermercado on the plaza for everything else. We lugged home a giant bottle of purified water and installed it in the rack in the kitchen for drinking and cooking.

In the process, we began to meet some of our neighbors who, like us, were expatriates from the United States. *Norteamericanos*, the Mexicans called us. Or *gringos*. In our

spectacular hubris we referred to ourselves as “Americans.”

Lona, a loud, crusty, irascible old retiree from down the block, insisted that labor was cheap down here and we really needed to support the local economy by hiring some help. Later that day, unannounced, she led a male and female Mexican to our front door and demanded that we interview them while she translated. Lona’s Spanish was pitiful, but that didn’t faze her.

Ophelia was a small, dark, smiling young woman who needed a little extra money to help her husband, a laborer, make ends meet for the family. She offered to do the housework and the laundry a couple of hours each morning. Towering beside her was a tall, gaunt, middle-aged man in huaraches, khaki trousers, and a long-sleeved white shirt. His jaw was square and bristled with graying stubble. His body seemed bent unnaturally to his right as he clutched a straw sombrero nervously in his gnarled fingers. Manuel, Lona explained, spent much of his time tending his goats in the hills above town. He had injured his back in an auto accident, but would still be able to work for us as a part-time gardener three days a week. They would both be happy to work for very little.

We ended up hiring them both.

None of this was what I had expected. For one thing, I had never been outside the United States, and rural Mexico in those days was about as foreign as foreign gets. I didn’t speak a word of Spanish. Couldn’t even count to ten. But word by word, phrase by phrase, I began to learn. Gentle, shy Manuel became a patient teacher and a companion as he raked leaves beneath the spreading mango, mowed the grass with an old push mower he borrowed from Lona, weeded the garden and flower beds on his knees along the brick pathway and bare adobe walls, and stood watering everything from an old coil of hose we found by the pump. Sometimes we worked together at odd jobs around the yard, mended fences, or planted a vegetable garden in the back of the lot.

Charlize had taken a little Spanish in high school and adapted more readily. She was soon chatting in Spanish and laughing with Ophelia each morning as the young woman washed dishes and swept and mopped the floor with petroleo-spiked well water to keep the scorpions at bay. On Tuesday each week, Ophelia would carry a bundle of our dirty laundry down to the lake shore where she would wrestle them against the rocks while she gossiped with the other washer-women, then hang them on a clothesline Manuel and I installed in our yard.

Soon the house felt clean and bright and comfortable. The courtyard became a green, manicured garden oasis, like so many others in town that were hidden behind the stark adobe walls that lined the streets like walls of a canyon. The cobbled streets of Ajijic reflected the drab earthen tones of adobe and brick and, in newer construction, reinforced concrete blocks. In contrast, the plastered store fronts near the plaza were brightly painted in broad swaths of reds and yellows, greens and oranges and even blues, often inset with vivid ceramic tiles. Seldom was architectural wood exposed. Lumber was expensive and had to be imported.

Pancho was thriving in his new environment. I had brought a book on German Shepard obedience training and began putting him through his paces each morning. *Sit! Stay! Come! Down! Heel!* He loved the attention and tried hard to please me. Or at least as hard as a puppy’s fractured attention would allow. We were beginning to bond. On the streets, however, I still carried his thick leather leash and had to use it often. “*Morde?*” children would whine as they cringed away. *Does he bite?* He frightened many adults too. Though still just a puppy, Pancho

was a very *big* puppy, and I learned to reply, “*No. No morde.*” He was more likely to lick them to death than bite.

As those first weeks wore into months, I got my hands into a dozen different projects, major and minor. First, we had to keep Pancho in the yard when we left him alone, so I rebuilt the front gate and anchored the frame into the adobe wall with long lag screws and mortar. A two-by-four dropped into place to bar it securely. From the outside, a rope through a hole in the gate allowed the bar to be raised, unless a wooden wedge had been inserted to prevent it. Manuel found the mechanism very clever. *Muy listo.* Then I blocked the openings in the casita with rough wooden shutters and strung hog wire with a gate to close off the back of the parcel. Manuel helped me with the fence.

I also fashioned sturdy new double front doors for the house, with little screened windows in them. Manuel told me where the lumber yard was in Jocotepec, and gave me some other tips, like how to stain the finished doors with old motor oil free from Lupe’s garage. I hauled boards and sawed them and glued and screwed them together and sanded them and finished them by rubbing in the motor oil and coating the finished product with polyurethane. Manuel admired the new doors. “*Dos puertas,*” he called them. “*Muy bonitas.*”

I built a dog-house cover for the well pump and an electronic bell ringer to let us know when the water tank was full. I hammered together a low platform for our mattress and we made a canopy out of a sheet and hung it over the bed to keep scorpions from falling on us from the petate ceiling. Working with Manuel, I dug and turned the soil and planted and irrigated a small vegetable garden behind the casita.

We settled into the rhythm of Mexico, accepting routines that seemed so alien at first. Like shaking out your clothes and knocking your shoes against the floor before putting them on, lest there be scorpions. Hauling in the big glass bottles of drinking water and returning the empties to the supermercado. Running the pump whenever the water tank ran dry. Kindling a wood fire for a hot shower. Buying a burro-load of firewood whenever the old Indian brought his heavily laden burros down from the hills. Having no telephone or television for distraction. Little things that seemed so strange and onerous in the beginning grew quaint and charming as the time wore by.

4

Ajjic was a popular place for Americans to retire, so there was plenty of English spoken around us. Many of the retirees were ex-military, whose pensions went a lot further in Mexico. But there were others, surviving on social security or living on the interest of a small inheritance or a lifetime of saving, who found they could live more comfortably down there. And then there were the ostentatiously wealthy, who lived a luxuriant and secluded lifestyle behind locked gates on the lake front or in the hills above, and the merely ostensibly wealthy, like the Brinkerhoffs.

Mitchell and Vivian Brinkerhoff had purchased a small rancho just outside Ajjic. They entertained a lot and invited us to one of their parties almost as soon as they heard through the grapevine that we had arrived. Mitch was overweight and pallid and flaccid and loved to drink martinis in the afternoon and tell stories about himself. Vivian was a mousy little thing with died brown-red hair who never seemed to get drunk or lose control, no matter how much she drank.

She kept Mitch on a tight rein. They loved to collect healthy young men and women around them for an audience, and I guess that's why we were there. Especially Charlize, who would light up the old man's eyes just by walking into the room. Vivian accepted it. She'd seen it before, and nothing could possibly come of it. And the jealousy it sparked made *her* feel younger too.

The Brinkerhoffs had a stable full of horses on their ranch. Thoroughbreds mostly. Mitch soon invited Charlize to help exercise the horses whenever she felt like riding them along the lake shore or into the hills. Charlize was ecstatic. She took him up immediately and often. Occasionally I would ride with her, but less frequently as time passed. Mostly she rode alone or with her new friend Anita, a blonde California-born girl who had grown up in San Miguel de Allende with her expatriate parents and then, to their dismay, had married Javier, a bright and bookish young Mexican from Ajijic.

Charlize' favorite was a thoroughbred mare named Lucera. Lucera was lean and muscular, but a little too high-strung for my taste. When I rode, I would pick Lazaro for my mount. Lazaro was a gelding with the same thoroughbred color and markings as Lucera, including the white star on the forehead that gave the mare her name. But there the similarity ended. Lazaro was plump and lazy and easily led. The only time he showed any enthusiasm was when we would turn back toward the barn, where fresh oats and hay awaited. But that was fine, since I was an inexperienced rider. In fact, most of my riding had been on Lazaro, alongside Charlize. Sometimes we took longer rides, like when the moon was full and a small mixed group of gringos and Mexicans rode into the hills with bottles of tequila for a Lunada. We always let the horses find their own way back on the dark, narrow path down the ravine, while we riders laughed and sang and swayed drunkenly in the saddles.

Plenty of other Americans passed through Ajijic too, or stayed for a while before moving on. Younger ones, far from retirement, who still needed to earn their daily bread, by hook or by crook. Some, like Anita, had been brought there by their parents and attended Mexican schools, where they easily picked up fluent Spanish. But there were others, like us, who just wanted the adventure of trying something new as we pissed away our meager savings. We gravitated to Bob and Mary Goldberg. They were a couple of years older than we, but we hit it off with them from the first. They had opened an ice cream parlor just off the plaza they called "Helados Alohas." We spent many pleasant hours there at the metal tables on the open deck reading the English newspaper from Mexico City and bantering or gossiping or discussing world events or philosophy with them or else playing chess with our other young friends and a few English-speaking locals.

The most precious thing we had there was time. And the most mysterious. Mexican time. Time to explore. Time to learn. Time to agonize. Time to reflect and create. Time to make love. Quiet time. Busy time. Idle time. Six months passed before I really began to feel relaxed. Relaxed like I hadn't felt in all my adult life, buffeted as it had been by formal education and part-time jobs. We fell into a rhythm. Into a groove. Charlize developed her routines, and I mine. The days went by and our lives grew deceptively tranquil.

Charlize had a thing about animals. All kinds of animals. When I first met her, she had a yappy little poodle mix named Buggy, who always seemed to be underfoot. Sometime before we were married, Buggy disappeared. Maybe he ran away or maybe he was dog-napped for a pet or for medical research at the university labs. We never knew. Charlize, of course, was heartbroken and wanted another dog.

I held out, but ultimately realized that domestic tranquility required compromise. Finally I gave in, but only on the condition that I could participate in the selection and training of the animal so we would end up with an intelligent and well-trained companion dog. A German Shepard was my suggestion, and I helped choose a puppy from a breeder in northern California. By then we had committed to the house in Ajijic, so we named him "Pancho."

And there were the cats. A black-and-white stray gave birth to five kittens in the casita shortly after we arrived. Charlize insisted on keeping them all. Each morning she would walk down to the lake, or send me if she was too busy, to buy a bowl of *charales*, sardine-sized little whitefish, from the fishermen as they were hanging out their nets to dry. A peso's worth of *charales* fed them all for a day. Eight cents. But other strays showed up and the kittens had kittens of their own, so by the end of summer we had nineteen cats in the yard and a five-peso-a-day cat food bill. One morning the Mama cat was missing. I found her floating in the well. Then a plague of some sort swept through the rest of the cats and pared them down to three. We buried the dead cats in a mass grave in the back of the lot, alternating corpses and soil like layers of a cake. Charlize was in tears.

So I shouldn't have been surprised when Charlize came home one afternoon in the early fall and informed me, "I'm going to buy Lucera." The Brinkerhoffs, she explained, were moving back to Oklahoma and were planning to sell off their horses. All of them.

"When?" was my knee-jerk question.

"Right away."

"How much?"

"Only two hundred dollars."

"American?"

"Yes, American," she replied frostily, as if she had been anticipating my obsession with detail. She saw it as obstructionism. "But it doesn't matter. I'll use the money my parents gave me for graduation."

That money had already been spent or commingled with our dwindling investments, but I saw she was in no mood to argue the point. "Where would you keep a horse?"

"In the back of our lot. We have plenty of room we're not using back there."

Some things present themselves as inevitable. Irrefutable. You know you are powerless to oppose them. Like aging and death, although neither of us yet paid much attention to those. At least she didn't propose to buy Lazaro too. I let out a deep sigh and resigned myself to adding a horse to the family. Who was I to say no?

With Manuel's advice and assistance, I constructed a rough *caballeriza*, or horse shed, on the back of the lot. It was a shoddy, make-shift affair, cobbled together from wood and corrugated tin and tar paper, but it did the job. I attached a lean-to, enclosed by a smelly canvas



tarp, to hold a couple of bales of hay and the tack. And sometimes, in the evening mostly, with the shadows lengthening and the cicadas suddenly still, I would stand out there beside Lucera with an arm across her warm, sleek neck, without speaking, just she and I, and feel entirely at peace with the world.

6

In mid-November Ajijic celebrates its biggest fiesta honoring San Andres, its patron saint. For two weeks the streets were swept and booths built on the plaza and a scaffold-like *castilla*, a huge fireworks display, was erected in front of the church. Friends of ours from Berkeley happened to fly down to visit us at the same time. The night of the big fiesta we met local friends on the plaza and drank tequila and bottles of beer and smoked some marijuana someone had scored from the drummer in a Mexican band. Some American students visiting from Los Angeles had managed to bring along a tank of nitrous oxide. In their apartment we would turn the valve on the big tank and suck in the laughing gas until everything became unreal and loud and bright and skyrockets exploded in the night sky and bells rang and mariachi bands pumped out Jaliscan rhythms and everyone danced and swayed and fell down and got back up again and pretty soon I was throwing up in the bathroom of someone's apartment and then going back outside again to sing and wave my arms and shout out my youth.

Charlize and I both felt awful the next day as we drove our friends back to the Guadalajara airport. We had been in Mexico almost a year and had gotten into the habit of drinking too much, which we had sworn we would never do. Maybe not every day like so many of the older alcoholic retirees, but we would binge hard when we did. We needed a break. We needed a change.

As our first-year anniversary in Mexico approached, Charlize and I decided to take a month-long tour of the southern and eastern regions of the country. It was to be a sort of celebration. A time for reflection and evaluation. Our long sojourn in Mexico had brought with it habits and patterns and attitudes and a subtle stagnancy that needed to be aired out. Allowed to breathe. Shaken up. The deck needed to be reshuffled. We agreed that it would be good for us to get away by ourselves and reconnect. Ophelia would look after the house and Manuel would tend the garden while we were away. Anita agreed to ride and feed Lucera.

We visited the *Museo Nacional de Antropología* in Mexico City and the ruins of Teotihuacan, then spent several days at the Mayan jungle ruins of Palenque. I liked Palenque because the tourists were so few and Pancho was free to explore unleashed. From there we drove to Merida in the Yucatan, where we rented a hotel room on the unexpectedly European central plaza, and explored the ruins of Chichen Itza and Uxmal and a dozen other archeological sites. One night we slept on the white sand beach below the ruins of Tulum. Then we dropped down through the Olmec sites of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and spent a week visiting the remote Indian village of San Cristobal de las Casas and Monte Alban outside Oaxaca.

Charlize and I rediscovered the intimacy that seemed to have been evaporating in Ajijic. "I'm like a kite," Charlize said to me one night as we were snuggled in a lumpy motel bed on the outskirts of Oaxaca. "Always blowing with the wind." She smiled at me. "And you are my anchor. You keep me from flying away. We're bound together."

That whole first year we had paid little attention to the empty, brooding hacienda locked behind the iron gate across the cobbled street. Except for a couple of initial exploratory trespasses, when we explored the grounds out of curiosity. But one day I noticed a scratched and faded white ford van parked behind the gate of the lake-front lot. A day or two later, as Charlize and I were closing our front gate on our way to the post office, the beat-up old van rattled down the cobblestones and pulled up in front of us. A thin young man jumped out of the driver's side and walked over to open the iron gate. He appeared nervous, with wispy blonde hair and a scraggly attempt at a Fu Manchu moustache draping down from his pale lips. Pancho was straining on the leash to make a new friend, but I approached the fellow cautiously. "Hi," I said. "We're your neighbors. Ben and Charlize. And this is Pancho."

"Howdy," he replied, turning to greet us with a broad smile. Obviously not a dog person, he was doing his best to ignore, yet stay clear of Pancho. "My name's Ken. And that's Betsy in the van. Ken and Betsy . . . Thornton."

Charlize offered him her hand. "Nice to meet you." I thought for a moment he was going to kiss it. But he took it gently and nodded with a sort of bow.

"I met Betsy in the market yesterday," Charlize said. "But I thought she said her name was *Thorn*. I remember because I have a cousin named 'Rose' who married a man named 'Thorn' and I always thought it was funny, you know, Rose and Thorn—"

"No, *Thornton*. Ken and Betsy *Thornton*." Ken glared at Betsy through the windshield. "Thorn-ton," he emphasized to her. I thought at first we might be witnessing some sort of lovers' spat. Only they felt more like co-conspirators than lovers.

Ken pulled the van through the open gate and we followed it inside. While Charlize was helping Betsy carry bags of groceries through a brick arch into the courtyard, I hooked Pancho's leash on the gate and approached Ken. He was standing by the van's open door, lighting a cigarette. "Say, Ken, I was wondering if you've got some space where we could park our trailer over here. We've got no place to put it. The street's so narrow out there. I don't like the way our house juts out into it. More than any other house on the block."

He calculated for a moment, then smiled broadly. My impression was that of a slick used-car salesman about to make us a special deal we couldn't refuse. "Sure, bring it on over. I don't see why you couldn't stick it over there behind that wall, if you don't mind the weeds."

"Hey, that's great. Thanks. And we'd be happy to give you a little rent for the space."

He waved the idea away. "No need. I'm sure we'll figure out some other way to return the favor. We're neighbors, right?"

"Right." I searched for something more to say. "So . . . do you own this place?"

"No. We're renting it. Our friend Bobby found it for us. He's a Mexican national. Knows lots of people here and how to get things done."

"How long have you been living down here?"

I saw a flicker in his eyes that told me he didn't like being interrogated. Especially about personal matters. "Not long," was all he said.

It took me about ten minutes to hook up the trailer, pull it through the wide gate, and back it carefully into the weedy corner by the wall. No one was around to help me. Not even

Charlize. But I managed. I wheeled the station wagon back onto the street and parked it. Pancho I left in our yard, where he whined softly to himself at the unfairness of it all, as dogs do.

I found my way back through the iron gate and closed it behind me. Through the brick archway Charlize and Ken and Betsy were seated in broken and torn equipali chairs on the dirty tiles of the veranda, chatting and laughing and passing a bowl of tortilla chips. I joined them without adding much to the conversation.

The front wall of the old house and the brick wing walls on both sides defined the inner courtyard, which had obviously once been well planted and tended. Banana trees splayed their broad leaves beside the brick walls. Once the view had been open all the way to the lake. Now it was overgrown and secluded. Weeds and grass and vines were left untended. The windows of the house were cracked and hadn't been washed for a long time. Neither Ken nor Betsy seemed to take much pride in the hacienda or the grounds. It felt to me that their stay was more like an overnighiter in a grim hotel. Like they were just passing through. Maybe like they had been running away from someplace else far worse.

We didn't stay long. Just long enough for me to confirm my first uneasy intimations about that hacienda. And of Ken and Betsy, for that matter. Something was fundamentally *wrong*.

As we retrieved Pancho and walked toward the plaza, Charlize filled me in on what she had learned while I was parking the trailer. Betsy was the talker. She and Ken had come down from somewhere in the Los Angeles area a month ago. They had relocated quickly with only what they could carry in their van. Their friend Bobby had told them about Ajijic and had arranged for the rental. Bobby was intending to join them soon. Bobby and his girlfriend Sharon. Or maybe she was his wife. They had all been very close back in LA.

As the days went by, we would spend time with Ken and Betsy. On their veranda or in our own front yard. Talking. Drinking tequila or beer. In truth, I didn't like either one of them very much. There was something peculiar about Betsy. Something immature. Almost childish. She was too high-energy for my taste, as if those blond curls were wound too tightly around her pale head, squeezing her brain. Betsy was a few years younger than either of us. In her mid-twenties, I would guess. It's not that I actually disliked her. It's just that I wasn't overly fond of her. She was slightly built and skinny and had done lots of drugs before settling with Ken in Ajijic. "Heroin," she once boasted, showing what she claimed to be needle tracks on the inside of her arm. Myself, I couldn't make them out. And speed. Betsy had done lots of speed, she said, and I believed her, because it seemed to still be running riot in her system.

Ken I liked even less. Something blatantly amoral and selfish about him put me off. He was a something-for-nothing kind of guy. The center of his own universe. He felt the world owed him a living. A couple of years older than Betsy, he ran the show. No, I didn't like him one bit, even before all the trouble started.

With the coming of the New Year things seemed to enter a new phase. Our five-hundred-dollar payment for the house had come due, and I was surprised to see how much of our nest egg we had managed to burn through during that first year. We had never really planned beyond that

first year. We were young, with more enthusiasm than wisdom. I supposed all along that we would return to California when our money ran out and resume whatever it was we were destined to do there. Maybe return to Mexico as time and money allowed. Charlize and I hadn't talked about it much.

Charlize had fallen in love with Mexico. Back in California, she was just one more woman in a sea of young women. But in Mexico, she was special. She was a *Norteamericana*. All the young Latino men, with their tawny skin and brazen *machismo*, were drawn to her. And she finally had the horse she had always wanted since she was a child, and the time to ride it. She rode through the streets of Ajijic like a princess. Mexico seduced her completely and she didn't want to think about leaving.

I felt a specialness there too, but not in the same way. Not so deeply. I felt more like Hemingway and the other expatriate artists must have felt in the coffee shops of Paris. I had taken up writing short stories in the mornings while Charlize went out for her rides. I played basketball with my new Mexican friends and chess with our compatriots at Helados Aloha. But I couldn't shake a realization that things were coming to an end. There wouldn't be much left after the mortgage payment.

Neither of us wanted to pack up and go, but we had trouble discussing our options. As the days wore by and money was spent, I knew we had to discuss them. Time, which once seemed so boundless and promising a landscape, had grown constricted. I now felt cramped with the furniture of our daily habits and routines and compressed by a cloying dread. Charlize was the kite, blowing with the breeze, enjoying life without worrying too much about the details. I handled the details. I was the anchor that bound the kite string.

One morning as I sat at the kitchen table and Charlize fried eggs and bacon at the stove, I knew it couldn't wait any longer. "Charl," I said, "we need to talk."

She acted like she hadn't heard me. She turned the eggs and pressed the sizzling bacon with the spatula. Early morning sunlight beamed through the window.

"Charl?"

She lifted out the strips of bacon and laid them out on a paper towel to dry. Her jaw was set.

"We need to talk," I repeated. "Charlize?"

She brought over the loaded serving plate and slammed it down hard enough to break open one of the sloshing eggs. Yoke ran over the rim onto the pig-skin surface of the table. She faced me squarely. "So what do you want to *talk* about, *Benjamin*?"

"Nothing," I started to say, but checked myself. I drew a deep breath. "We're running out of money," I said. "We haven't even made our mortgage payment. This can't go on."

She glared at me. "What are you proposing?"

"We can't stay here."

Her eyes blazed. The muscles in her jaw stood out.

"We have to make plans to go back," I continued. "Maybe we can work for a year, make some more money, and if you want to, come back for another year."

She threw up her hands. "Why do you *always* have to do this, Ben?"

"Do what?"

"*What you're doing!* Ruining *everything!* It was such a beautiful morning. I was

watching the sun sparkling in the dew drops on the grass. And you had to bring *this* up again and ruin everything.”

“But we have to—”

“*You* go back if you want to. I’m not going. I’m not about to give this up. All *this*. Just to be a substitute teacher in the ghettos of Oakland. Do you have any idea what that was like?”

I shook my head.

“I’m staying here,” she pronounced.

“But—”

“I’ll figure out a way,” she said, closing the dialogue.

So we held off writing the mortgage check. Charlize found a job as a salesperson in the gift shop at the looms. The *telares*. Where the local indigenies wove blankets and serapes for well-heeled tourists to buy in the store. The base pay was a pittance, but commissions were good and tips could be generous. I tried my hand at selling real estate from a small, bleak office near the local posada. It was purely on commission, and few tourists ever stopped in. I never made a sale.

9

One afternoon in late February I climbed the step and tugged on the rope to open our front gate. Nothing happened. The bar clacked, but would not rise. Pancho barked behind the wall. I stepped back down to the cobblestones, my basketball hooked beneath my left arm, and let out a deep sigh. I was tired and sore and wet from sweat and a sudden afternoon thunderstorm, an unexpected orphan of the departed monsoons. Ajijic had just lost an important game to neighboring Jocotepec. It had been a physical struggle on the concrete court behind the church, and I hadn’t played well. Any advantage my height should have given me had been neutralized by the bruising play of our opponents. My lip, split by a flying elbow, was swollen and throbbing. I was cold.

And now the front gate was locked from the inside.

“Charlize!” I yelled and clanged the little bell. “Charlize!”

I heard the front door open. “Ben?” Charlize called softly. “Is that you?”

“Of course it’s me. Who else would it be? Open the gate.”

She pulled out the wedge and lifted the bar. “Quietly,” she admonished.

“Why?” I bulled my way into the yard. “What’s going on?”

“Oh!” she said, seeing my lip. “What happened to you?”

“S’nothing. I took an elbow. Why did you lock the gate?”

“Hush,” she said. “Betsy’s inside. Lying down. Ken beat her up last night.”

“Ken did? What for?”

She restrained me by the arm as she replaced the wedge to hold the bar. “I think you should stay outside for a little while. Okay? Betsy needs a little peace and quiet.”

“How bad is she hurt?”

“I don’t know for sure. She has a black eye and her face is swollen. Ken knocked her down and kicked her. But I don’t think her nose is broken. I think she’ll be all right. I just don’t know.”

Charlize brought out my sweatshirt and a beer. I swapped the sweatshirt for my wet T-shirt and sat in the afternoon sunlight sipping beer and thinking things over. The basketball fiasco was forgotten. Spousal abuse was new territory for me. I couldn't understand it. From either perspective. I had seen some bruises on Betsy's arm and the side of her neck a while back, but figured it was none of my business. Now it *was* my business, and I was unaccountably angry. The police seemed like a bad idea in a foreign country. I had no idea who else to call for help.

Suddenly the bar on the gate clacked. It clacked again. Then again. "*Betsy! Are you in there?*" It was Ken calling. "*Lona saw you come in here. Betsy!*"

Pancho, no longer a puppy, growled low in his throat. His big ears were locked on the gate as he started to get up. "*Down!*" I rasped. "*Stay!*" Something in my tone must have conveyed my seriousness. He sank back onto the grass.

As I walked to the gate, I drew a deep breath, then exhaled slowly, removed the wedge, and pulled it open. Ken was looking up from the street below and tried to climb inside. But I blocked his way.

"Betsy's in there," he accused me. "I want to see her."

"Betsy doesn't want to see you right now," I told him calmly.

For a moment I think he considered trying to push past me. We sized each other up. He was a scrawny little fucker. But dangerous. I outweighed him by thirty pounds and held the high ground. He noted the bottle in my hand and heard Pancho's low growl from across the lawn. Then he saw my swollen lip, and thought better of it. "She's my wife," he demanded. "I want to see her. I have a *right* to see her."

"Not if she doesn't want to see you."

He glared at me. I saw that he was capable of violence. But I had just warmed up with a rough-and-tumble basketball game, and I was ready. My heart was pumping and I was angry. "This is our property," I told him at last. "And you're not welcome right now." I pushed the gate closed in his face, barred it, and inserted the wedge.

"Tell her I'm sorry," wafted over the adobe wall. "*Please!*" he pleaded. "Tell her it won't happen again."

I never saw Betsy's battered face that day. I walked out back to work off my pent-up anger with the hoe in the vegetable garden. By the time I returned to the house, Betsy was gone.

"She went home," Charlize said.

"Back to Ken?" I asked, astonished.

Charlize nodded. "She's sure he loves her. Down inside. That's what makes him so jealous."

I didn't see much of them after that. Betsy no longer stopped by our house or invited us over to theirs. She would chat with Charlize when they ran into each other at the market, but always with a wary eye out for Ken. Ken didn't want her anywhere near us. Betsy always seemed to have fresh scratches and bruises on her face and arms. The few times I encountered Ken driving his van down the street, he would look the other way. As if he hadn't seen me. I began to understand that he didn't like me any more than I liked him.

And then one day Betsy was gone. We never saw her again. The rumor was that she had run off with a young Mexican guitar player from the local band whom she had met just a couple of weeks earlier. I didn't blame her. In fact, I applauded her and hoped things worked out.

For a week or so Ken moped around, haunting the streets in his battered white Ford van and drinking heavily at the hacienda across the street. Bobby and Sharon filled the vacuum by moving into the main house with him. Trying to raise his spirits, I suppose. But it was of no use. That old hacienda had won.

Then Ken too was gone.

Bobby and Sharon moved in permanently. Into the hacienda across the street. Behind the wrought iron gate. Our relationship with them was cordial, but never close. We did spend a little time with them on their veranda. Quiet time. Drinking a beer or *Cuba Libre*. Never really getting drunk. Bobby seemed uncomfortable at our house. Somehow we didn't fit into his vision of who he was and where he was going. He was a *Chicano* renegade. Perhaps we were a little too straight. A little too establishment. A little too *Norteamericano*. I understood.

I liked them both. Sharon was an attractive, well-built woman, taller than Bobby. Like a showgirl. But she was quiet and didn't reveal much about herself. Her scant conversations were directed to Charlize, not me. She claimed to be married to Bobby, but I had my doubts.

Bobby was fluent in Spanish and English from having grown up in Los Angeles in the home of illegal immigrant parents where only Spanish was spoken. He had relatives in Jalisco and had visited an uncle in Ajijic many times over the years. Ken and Bobby had become friends in high school before they both dropped out to engage in private enterprises which were never specified, but which I assumed were illegal. Ken had gotten into serious trouble, again unspecified, and had taken Betsy with him on the run. Bobby set them up in Ajijic. Bobby confirmed that Betsy was living somewhere near Mexico City and that Ken had returned to Los Angeles. Neither was planning to come back.

Time wore on. The weather grew hot and dry and the cicadas screamed from the trees. And then one day Sharon too was gone. She had run off with another Mexican from town. Bobby was stoic about it. He shrugged and headed back to Los Angeles to start over again.

The old hacienda lay empty. Waiting. Beckoning us. Offering a crazy solution to our catastrophic financial woes.

So we put our house up for sale and rented the hacienda across the street. The one abandoned by Betsy. And Ken. And Sharon. And Bobby. It was a bittersweet moment. Bitter for me, who had built all the amenities of our first home lovingly with my own hands and hoped someday to return. Sweet for Charlize because it would buy us another year in Mexico, even after we payed off the mortgage and split the profits with our neighbors in Berkeley, who had since migrated to Portland in pursuit of promising career plans and abandoned their Mexican dream.

We began fixing up the main hacienda by re-coating the dull walls, inside and out, with

the fresh white lime-and-chalk whitewash the Mexicans call *cal*. By replacing the tattered screens and a few broken windows. By replacing the frayed wiring that hung from loose staples on the walls. By trimming back the encroaching vegetation. By sweeping and dusting and hauling away the accumulated trash. And by polishing those worn red tiles with a mop and water with a splash of petroleo. Manuel helped tame the garden. Ophelia helped restore the house.

We had priced our old house for a quick sale, and it sold quickly. Even so, the paperwork required three trips to the Notary in Guadalajara and the proceeds were not released to our account for what seemed like months. The money was less than we had hoped, but enough to survive on for a while. We had to let Manuel and Ophelia go. We couldn't afford them any longer. And without them, something seemed to go out of our lives.

We discovered an abandoned adobe casita hidden in a grove of lemon trees and converted it into a *caballeriza* for Lucera. The property provided for all our needs. But there was an emptiness there. A loneliness. At night the rooms felt disconnected. In the dark you could sometimes hear the waves slapping the rocks on the beach. We would light the room we were in and let the spirits have the run of the others.

In June the rains came and settled the dust. The days were cooler. In the mornings Charlize rode her horse. I moved my writing into an unfinished spare bedroom. Charlize worked at the telares in the afternoon. I sat in the real estate office and read the newspapers. I played basketball and chess and took Pancho for long walks into the hills. We shopped at the markets every day. We chatted with our friends at the ice cream parlor. Friends from California flew down to see our new digs. In the afternoon we sat in the shade of a mango and watched the silver waters on the lake and the pale, distant desert mountains rising on the other side. It seemed to me we were like passengers at an airport, waiting for our final flight to depart.

12

One fall day, sometime after the rains had stopped and the fragrant bougainvillea was in bloom, Charlize failed to return from her horseback ride. It was beginning to grow dark and the hacienda felt hollow and empty. I rooted around in the kitchen for something to eat. This was not like her. Maybe she had fallen off her horse and was lying hurt somewhere. Or maybe it was something more sinister. I tried to put those thoughts out of my mind, but I couldn't. Just as I was preparing to go out in search, I heard the chain on the gate jangle and Charlize led Lucera into the yard.

"Are you all right?" I asked. "I was worried about you."

"I'm okay." She reached down to the horse's right foreleg. "Lucera threw a shoe. Up on the mountain. I had to walk her back down to the farrier and get it replaced."

"Were you by yourself?"

"Anita was with me." She turned and led the horse back to the tack shed to remove the saddle and feed and curry her. It all seemed to take a long time. Full darkness had fallen by the time she returned to the kitchen.

"You sure you're alright?" I asked again.

"Fine. How about some tacos?"

We ate in silence. Something was on her mind. I would wait until she was ready to talk



about it. That night Charlize was uncharacteristically aggressive in bed. I did not know what to make of it, but somehow it felt ominous.

I did not sleep well that night, but the next morning everything seemed clearer as we followed our usual routines. The sunlight had a wonderful cleansing effect. Before leaving for her morning ride, Charlize called to me, "Don't forget that we have that party at the Joneses tonight."

"The Joneses?"

"Yeah, they're that new couple in the house up on Ocampo. We met them at the market, remember? I'm dying to see how they've fixed the place up."

"What time?"

"After dinner, I guess. It's an open house."

I was not feeling particularly game that evening. Still brooding, perhaps, over Charlize's mysterious late arrival home the night before. After a couple of quick shots of tequila, which didn't seem to improve my mood, I chatted with the host and hostess and listened to their stories that I didn't really care much about, just passing the time until we could go home and maybe get things sorted out. I remember the sweet smell of mesquite firewood from the *chiminea* on the outdoor brick patio. A mariachi band was playing beneath the broad leaves of the banana trees. A few people danced dreamily. I looked around at the expensive wrought iron furniture and the table spread with Mexican cuisine and the brick arches and the brick walls and the jabbering guests. I couldn't see Charlize anywhere.

Then I glanced up to the brick-walled balcony overlooking the festivities, and there she was, leaning over the railing beside a slender young man who had his arm around her waist. They saw me, and he quickly withdrew his arm and opened a space between them. Suddenly something choked in my chest and I felt light-headed and my breath came short and my heart was pounding and a cold sweat prickled my arms and neck. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I didn't want this to be happening, whatever it was.

My eyes found an arch with a brick staircase inside rising toward the balcony. The noise and clatter of the party seemed to recede like an ocean wave shushing away on the sand. My whole being was focused on that stairway. Without willing it, my feet carried me across the patio, oblivious to the milling crowd, and began to climb the curving stairs. At the top I found the door onto the patio. Charlize and her friend had turned with their backs to the brick wall to watch me arrive. I stepped through the doorway.

The fellow was thin and sallow and nondescript, by appearance younger than either of us. He moved nervously away from Charlize, before realizing he had placed himself in front of the low railing with a ten-foot drop to the brick patio below. So he quickly reversed course and edged behind her toward the door. I let him pass.

"What's going on?" I heard myself asking Charlize.

"What does it look like," she responded, her lips pursed in defiance. Haughty.

"I'll just give you two some space," said the inconsequential young man as he disappeared out the doorway.

"That's who you were with yesterday," I said. "Isn't it?"

"Yes." Her eyes blazed, unafraid.

"And the two of you . . . ?"

“Yes.” There was no compassion in her eyes. No plea for forgiveness. She stood her ground. “So what?”

I didn’t reach for her hand. Didn’t try to lead her home. Didn’t touch her at all. For that bewildering instant I was my father, or the person I imagined my father to be, and doing what my imagined father would have done. I said to her, “I’m going to have to leave you.”

“You do what you have to do,” was all she replied.

I don’t recall descending those stairs or pushing my way through the crowd. In blind confusion I fled the fiesta, through the front gate, stumbling down onto the dark cobbles. A massive earthquake seemed to have rearranged the geography. Abrupt. Devastating. Nothing was recognizable. I was disoriented. Lost. I couldn’t comprehend what was happening. Charlize was the fabric of my life. I loved her. I hated her. These were the warp and weft of my being.

But for instinct, I might not have made it back to the hacienda. With one foot following the other on those obscure and uneven cobbles, seeing nothing around me, I found my way to the iron gate where Pancho slept with his snout lying across the lower metal strap. He barked once before recognizing me, then jumped up and tried to insert his nose into my hand as I closed the gate behind me. Like a sleepwalker I led him into the kitchen and scooped a cup of kibble into his bowl, but he ignored it. Pancho sensed that something seismic had happened.

*What was I going to do?*

Pancho followed as I wandered from room to room, discovering an album Charlize loved and plates drying in the rack and a wall hanging from Oaxaca and her clothes folded across an old equipali chair. They all meant nothing anymore. Nothing. Meaning itself no longer made any sense. I could not seem to cry or laugh or scream out the pressure building inside. And I could not quench the overwhelming ache.

I sat on the veranda and rocked and waited for her to come home. Pancho waited with me, patiently, his chin on his paws, knowing something was dreadfully wrong. Fifteen minutes. An hour. I gave her time to sort things out in her own mind. Discover the right thing to do. In my mind I ran through the dialogue that would have to be said when she arrived. The imagined dialogue my imagined father would have uttered. I listened for the gate to open and clang shut. The night grew cold.

Shivering, I went inside and waited a second hour at the kitchen table with my head in my hands as hope drained out of me. Then I laid on the bed, fully clothed and ready for the impending confrontation, and tried to catch a little sleep. But it was no use. Real sleep would not come. Just swaths of dark delirium. I would doze, then wake up to a living nightmare from which I knew I would never fully awaken. Charlize had turned her back on me. Abandoned me. She to whom I had opened myself completely. She who knew me better than any other living soul. She had found me unworthy. Fled from me without a word. Without even enough respect to come home and talk over this obscenity that was taking place. She didn’t care that it was over. She made no effort to try to make things right again.

Not that things could ever be made right again. The trust was broken. Humpty Dumpty lay in a million pieces at the foot of the wall, and I was eternally damned. Like this cursed hacienda. I gave up trying to sleep and walked out under the blazing stars. Familiar stars, but so remote and cold!

Everything else had grown unfamiliar. Of another time. Another place. An owl hooted from the direction of the lake, and for a moment I wondered if it might be a sign. But I knew it was no sign. It meant nothing. It just *was*. Meaningless and empty, like everything else, it just *was*.

This was not my land. These were not my people. I had no land. I had no people. And this ancient, brooding hacienda, lying like an open sore beside the lake, was not my home. I no longer had a home. Charlize had been my home.

Numbly I began to pack my things. Haphazardly. My clothing went into a suitcase. My toiletries into my shaving kit. Odds and ends into a cardboard box. Common things I used every day. *My* things. I began carrying them out to the station wagon and tossing them in the back with no sense of order or reason. Then I reconsidered and folded down the back seat to make room for my sleeping bag and a foam pad and shoved everything else to the other side. I would need to sleep somewhere.

Pancho followed me back and forth, his little whines asking if this was the right thing to be doing? Or all a mistake? But I didn't know what was right anymore.

This is what my father would have done. He knew what was right and what was wrong. And Charlize had been dead wrong. *I'm going to have to leave you*, I had said to her. *You do what you have to do*, she had replied. I was hemmed in by our words. My threat, her reply, both so quickly uttered. Thoughtless words. If she had come home then, things might have unfolded differently. But she did not come home, and that was the loudest statement of all. The die had been cast. I really had no choice.

Our important papers were in a dresser drawer, and I rifled through them. I shoved my visa and my passport and a few other records of my own affairs into a spare pillow case. Then I wrote myself a check for half the balance in our account and left the checkbook on the kitchen table.

One last time I walked through those rooms that had been my home, without, I now knew, ever really being my home. Looking one last time for things I should take with me from among all the other things I would leave behind forever. That was the hardest part. That's when the truth sank in. That's when I knew it was all over.

When I returned to the station wagon, my eyes were finally wet. Pancho was crouched down in the passenger seat, afraid I would leave him behind too. I could offer him no comfort. I would have to leave him. Charlize was the one who wanted a dog. As the sky began to lighten and the stars fade for the last time, I drove the station wagon out onto the cobblestone street. Then I led Pancho back inside, unhooked the leash, and closed the gate on him. He whimpered through the bars as I gazed back.

There was something *wrong* about that old hacienda. I could just make out from the cobblestones outside the wide prison gate, through the brick arch of the inner courtyard, the main house brooding like an unhealed wound in the ghostly gloaming. Something broken and dark and sinister lurked beneath the cracking plaster and crumbling mortar that bound together those ancient adobe blocks.

Pancho's sad brown eyes held mine through the squares of cold iron. How could I leave him behind, they asked? *I* was his master. His protector. His dearest friend. *I* had trained him, not Charlize. Reason and emotion tore at each other. I would be on the run. What was I going

to do with a big dog? Yet how could I leave him there in that abominable hacienda?

In the end, I just couldn't do it. So one last time I pushed open the gate and drew it closed forever as Pancho scrambled into the station wagon for the long, painful journey with me into a new country that I could not begin to comprehend.