

The copal fumes had become very thick in the room, and by the time we turned and left a fiddle player outside was playing go-faster, cheerful tunes.

We followed the path of glowing marigold petals that showed us the way through the yard. Here, it met the thicker trail in the lane. This would lead out of Las Brujas to join the track that led to the cemetery

The moon was rising in the trees and the relatives were growing merrier.

In silence, Dolores walked with us to our gate. As we hugged each other goodnight she left in our hands two *calaveras*. On each forehead, our names had been piped in green and pink icing.

Dolores was smiling and we noticed a spring in her step as she returned home.

Following the iridescence and distinctive smell of the *cempasúchil* petals, the souls of the dead would be able to find their way home.

That night was for *los niños limbos*, when the souls of infants in limbo visit. These are the babies who have died before being baptised.

In each of the seven barrios the bells of the churches were ringing, as if to hurry the visiting dead.

Returning home, we saw our bookshelves as a meaningless pastiche. Carefully, we placed Dolores' skulls either side of the *Last Supper*, reinstated the family photos, and hoped that nobody had noticed that we had tried to imitate *la ofrenda*.

### OCTOBER 31ST

The next morning, we bought not only a basketful of *pan de muertos*, but also some small salt loaves that were in the form of human figures, bulls, lambs and flaming hearts. The dough had spread in the baking and given them a prehistoric look. They had been adorned copiously with tears, buttons, bows, and, where appropriate, flaring flames. Each little decoration had been dyed scarlet with cochineal.

Prudently, we bought more candles. In all the shops, supplies were running low.

We dawdled down the hill, thinking that we would at least come across the woman who everyday had stood at the end of the lane cooking and selling tacos. There was no sign of the wayside grill. We passed nobody on the road, and the Calle Emiliano Zapata was just as deserted.

Everywhere was quiet, nobody could be seen going about their daily business.

The collective preparations for the fiesta were a fully absorbing occupation.

There was something in the air. While I couldn't exactly pinpoint the feeling, it became too difficult to ignore.



It took some time before we could admit that neither of us felt like working. Even though nobody would have minded if we had carried on, it became too irksome to do so. So we wandered around in a desultory way.

Not that we had been at all excluded, but neither were we involved. Dolores would have been only too pleased if we were to spend the next few days sitting in her yard, where she could keep the usual eye on us and make sure that we did not become lonely. But while we were worried that we might intrude on her privacy, she was still anxious that with no souls to visit us, we would be sad.

We sat in our garden trying to concentrate enough to read. Out of

the corner of my eye I saw that Dolores was fully aware from our aimless movements that she had been quite right, we had become very sad. Anyway, I'm sure she thought reading books to be a pastime for the miserable. We divided the *pan de muertos* and candles into three piles.

It was well before dark that, together with one bundle of candles and a bag of bread, we were at the gate of Dolores' yard. And she welcomed us in so warmly that our English hearts were almost overcome.

The curtain that usually closed the entrance to the bed and shrine room had been removed, leaving the copal smoke to disperse more easily. Our little loaves were added to the piles of food on *la ofrenda*, and the candles put on those neatly stacked beneath.

The photograph in the Florentine frame from the night before had gone. In its place was pinned the new embroidery of Christ that I'd seen being finished a couple of days before. From under a crown of thorns, he was pointing with an index finger to the bleeding fiery heart on his white tunic. Tears sewn in silver thread glittered as they flowed from his rheumy eyes.

It was a relief not to be confronted with pictures of the dead children in this family. At the same time, I began to feel the greater responsibility of being *la madrina de fotografia*.

Toy trucks, small dolls, wheeled horses, doll's tea sets, and little mugs and bowls were all arranged between piles of tamales and sweets. Big bottles of fizzy pop stood on each corner of the table.

At dusk, the eerie singing began. All at the same time, from every yard, ethereal sounds wove and rose into the trees. The music was thin and heartrending. It seemed to come from nowhere I knew. It was as if these were passionate songs in defiance of the repressive conquistadors.

A moment later, the bells of seven barrios rang out, rockets burst all over the sky and the heavy fumes of incense drifted in layers of smoke through the orchards.

This was the day the souls of children – *los angelitos* – visited.

## NOVEMBER 1ST

The bells had rung all night and were still ringing when, in the early morning, Dolores appeared out of the lingering copal smoke. She was carrying some *tamales* and a dish of preserved fruit. She seemed breathlessly busy. *Los angelitos* would be gone by noon, and everything had to be ready for *las animas*, the souls of adults, who were expected to arrive soon afterwards.

But she lingered with us on the veranda, and while we all picked at the crystallised fruit she talked of her dead. While she didn't know many people who actually saw their dead loved ones, the feeling that they were with you was so strong and powerful, it soothed the grief and lifted your heart.



Being souls, they cannot eat the food or take the gifts, but they greatly appreciate the offerings. What is left, is shared with family and friends.

Dolores then darted off to reassemble the shrine to welcome the new influx of adult souls. We had never seen our friend so invigorated.

Even if we had been in the mood, it didn't feel right to ignore all that was going on around us and try and work. So we packed the *tamales*, the preserved fruit and a bottle of water in a bag, and set off up the mountain. We hoped to get beyond the mirador and escape the incessant striking of the seven bells. Until we were out of earshot of the ringing, I could not think coherently.

Up and up we scrambled, along the little tracks that must have led somewhere. Higher and higher into the Chinese landscape that had been our initial impression of the Village in the Valley. We did not meet a single sheep or goat, so we assumed that even the shepherds were at home with their animals corralled.

We rested in a field full of flowers and watched them being pollinated by the butterflies and bees. Out and over the seven barrios spread the most spectacular sunlit vista of lush vibrant greens. Birds sang and the warm air was occasionally stirred by a breeze. Noises from the faraway barrios were very faint, but reassuringly familiar.

It was like a dream. Like a perfect dream, as we lay back and watched the buzzards wheel about against the celestial blue sky.

But at the same time there was sadness about us. You cannot live for fifty years and not have something that saddens you. Richard must have

been thinking of his mother, who had died when he was young. Maybe I was thinking of mine, who had expired before her time, too.

And that is when I learnt to feel happy and sad at the same time.

If this was 'the dream', what was England? But I could no longer see that part of my life at all clearly.

By the time it was dusk, we had returned. Las Brujas was shrouded in dense copal fumes, and the sounds were muffled by this fog.

As we walked up the lane from the fountain, every doorway was wide open. Every home had opened its doors so that their shrines were visible. In each, a magnificent *ofrenda* glowed in warm yellow candlelight. And each opening was an invitation to linger and look. There was quiet singing to the rhythm of the tortilla patting. Dark figures loomed up as silhouettes against the light, before vanishing in the shadows.

For a moment as we passed one doorway, we caught a glimpse of a tableau of young girls dressed in white satin, with wings of white feathers that seemed to spring from their shoulder blades. They knelt, a symmetrical host of angels, before and up the sides of their *ofrenda*.

Not only were Dolores and her family in the yard, but several other relatives were milling around, waiting to be introduced to us as we came through the gate. New candles and more copal had been lit, and we added our contribution to the quickly growing piles around the room. A cluster of framed photographs lined the back wall of the shrine.

I had been introduced as *la madrina de fotografia*. I was the photographer whose pictures would sooner or later end up on the back wall of *la ofrenda* on the Day of the Dead. Now I began to feel the weight of the other part of my responsibilities.

Pulque, mezcal, beer and cigarettes had replaced the toys. There were also piles of chilled *tamales*, bread and chocolate. A new machete and a gun lay beside a chair, on which was a pile of new and neatly folded clothes. An embroidered blouse and a shawl were ready for a woman, and a tall white hat for a man.

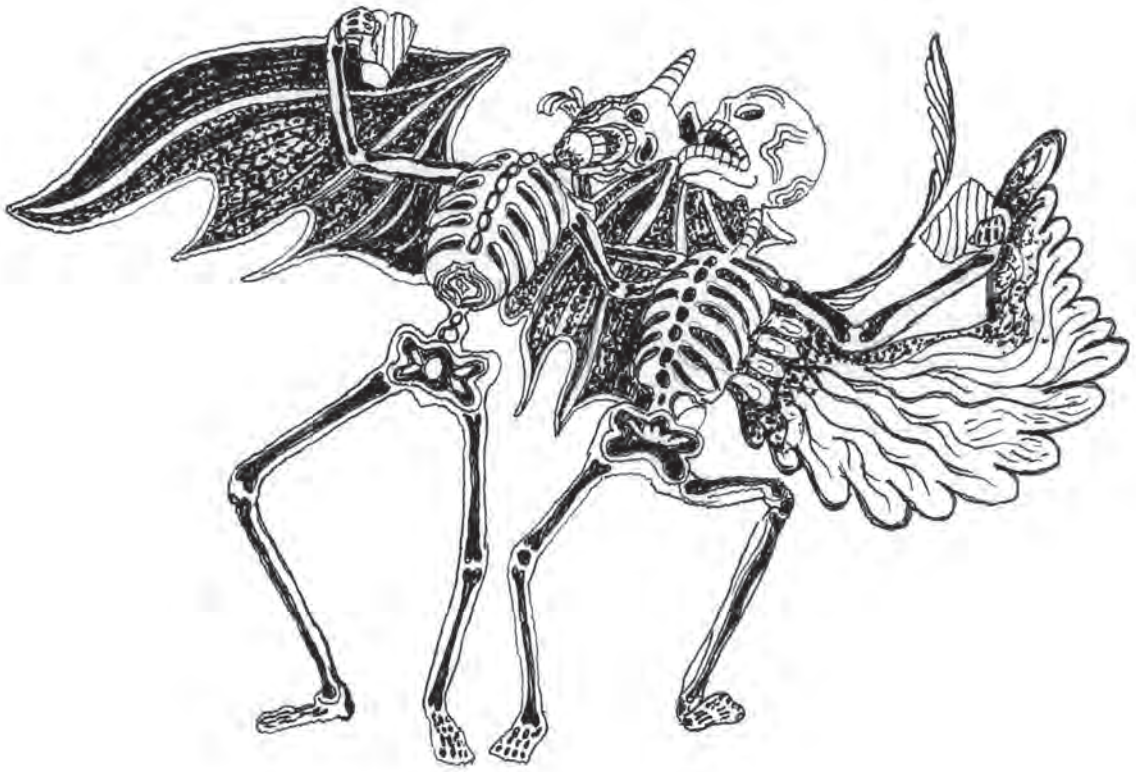
By the time the fiddle player struck up the tune for the eerie songs, everybody was totally engaged in this extraordinary ritual. It was as tender as it was beautiful. But we had not known the dead when they were alive.

Although we had been invited, we felt like intruders. So we kept to the shadows of the yard before sloping away.

The church bells valiantly continued to toll, and rockets continued to decorate the sky. The moon shone through chinks in the roof tiles, sprinkling the room with little shards of white ghostly light.

We thought of Dolores, her stillborn child, her vanished husband, and all the other sad things we did not know about her.

We thought of all the sad things she did not know about us, all the



sadness we did not know about each other.

But we did feel this wonderful feeling of collective grief. It was not embarrassing, it was not coy, it did not gush all over the place, nor did it masquerade with a stiff upper lip. It drank and it laughed.

It was perfectly acceptable to be sad.

#### NOVEMBER 2ND

We spent the afternoon sitting on the veranda drinking tea, and eating bread and honey while we watched the grand exodus. Everyone in the barrio leading every available mule and donkey passed by.

It looked as if whole homes were on the move. Not only food and drink, but firewood and kitchens, chairs and bedding, vases, flowers candles and framed photographs, were piled high on the backs of the animals.

We waved until the last stragglers headed towards the road. They waved back, beckoning and insistently pointing in the direction of *el camposanto*, the cemetery.

Almost alone in the barrio, its emptiness and quiet made us feel uneasy.