

# The God at Ixtlan del Rio

By

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White dusty road for two hundred kilometers, all the way from Ixtlán del Rio to Guadalajara. People on foot glancing up with guarded eyes, shifting hurriedly to the shoulders of the road. The sun like a blowtorch, its dazzle reflecting from every surface. Occasionally a truck or a donkey-cart blocks the way. Light and heat and dust . . .

Ixtlán del Rio had been the last stop on our itinerary. We'd visited the circular temple of Quetzalcóatl, the famous feathered serpent god of agriculture. It hadn't been much of a site, just rubble on a hillside, almost lost among the pines. But the story we'd been told by our local guide – that was the most fascinating thing I'd heard on the whole tour.

But was it true? I knew it didn't feature in any of my three comprehensive guidebooks. As usual, I'd consulted them in advance. But I hoped to find a version in a more detailed book on Ixtlán del Rio.

That's why I headed for the tourist stalls as soon as we emerged from the site. The stalls were flimsy trestle tables under canvas awnings erected all around the sides of the square. Our coach was parked in the middle of the square, with two other coaches alongside. Camera-toting tourists milled around like clacking hens.

My own party had already divided into its usual clusters: the Bullock family, the Rosenheim family, the young Australian couple, the three sisters from Canada and the gaggle of four leftovers. They rushed to buy postcards, scarves, figurines – all the typical tourist junk. They were always far more excited by the souvenirs than by the site itself.

I kept as far away from them as possible. I worked my way from stall to stall, examining the books on display. Disappointing. There were countless copies of *Lost Temples of Mexico, Architectural Wonders of Mesoamerica, Aztec Civilization: A History in Color* – the standard glossy photo-books on sale everywhere. But nothing scholarly, and nothing specifically on Ixtlán del Rio.

Then I found a stall with a more promising selection. I inspected the contents of each book. The stallholder jabbered at me in a mixture of English, Spanish and the local Indian language, Huichol. She was a short stout woman with eyes like tiny black berries. I paid no attention to her non-stop patter. She obviously knew nothing about the books she was selling.

The most likely-looking volume bore the title *Myths and Legends of Nayarit and Jalisco*. It contained a long chapter on the Quetzalcóatl site at Ixtlán. I tried to skim through and see if it described the legend that interested me. But the woman spread her dumpy hands in front of the pages. There was no alternative but to negotiate a price.

Serious haggling takes time. I put the book back on the table, playing casual. I browsed idly through a few more volumes.

The Bullock family went past behind.

'We're going back to the coach,' said Ted Bullock in his Texan drawl.

'Everyone's done now,' added Sharon Bullock, cradling a dozen soapstone figurines.

I nodded. Of all my fellow-tourists, Sharon Bullock was the most irritating, with her nonsensical Chariots-of-the-Gods beliefs. But I remained polite.

They continued on their way and I faced the stallholder again. I knew from experience that the coach wouldn't leave for a while yet.

The stallholder had worked out that *Myths and Legends of Nayarit and Jalisco* was the book I really wanted. She held it towards me.

'Three hundred pesos,' she offered.

I shook my head with a smile that suggested her price was ridiculous. Which it was.

'How much?' she demanded. 'You say.'

I shrugged. 'Twenty pesos.'

She snorted. My price was equally ridiculous.

'Two hundred and seventy,' she said.

So we negotiated. I broke off whenever other tourists came clustering around. Some paid absurd sums for their purchases. I knew she'd be less willing to drop her price when others might learn from my example.

Little by little, her price went down to two hundred.

'Senor Martin, we are going now,' said a voice in my ear.

It was Miguel, our overall tour leader. He put a hand on my shoulder as if to draw me away. I shook it off brusquely.

'In a minute,' I said.

I didn't like Miguel and his slippery-soft manners. But still he plucked at my sleeve.

'We are going. Now, now.'

'When I'm ready.'

Hell, I'd waited often enough while other members of the tour party dawdled over their purchases. How many times had we run late because of the Bullock family or the Canadian sisters? They could wait for me for a change.

'Thirty-five pesos,' I said to the woman behind the table.

She rolled her eyes scornfully. But then she dropped her price by a whole forty pesos. I could guess at her calculation. She was worried I'd have to leave before buying. I played on her worry.

'Thirty-seven pesos,' I said. 'You can see I have to go. Take it or leave it.'

'No, no. Hundred and fifty. Bargain for you.'

I had her flustered now. Perhaps I could even beat her down below fifty? A dozen times I made as if to depart. 'Okay, doesn't matter, I have to go.' A dozen times she lowered her price again. She was desperate to make the sale, yet every peso counted for her. I kept turning the screws.

'I'll give you forty-five,' I said. 'Last offer.'

Of course, it wasn't a genuine last offer. I expected her to come down from seventy-five to seventy. But suddenly she pushed the book into my hands.

'Okay. Forty-five.'

'Forty-five?' I could hardly believe the size of this last drop.

'Yes! Give me now!'

I counted out the notes and she snatched them from my hand. She didn't even bother to check them. For the first time I realized she was worried about something much more than my departure. She had her own reason for being in a hurry.

I turned around and discovered the reason. The square had changed behind my back. No more milling tourists – now the open space was deserted. The only bustle was the bustle of stallholders frantically dismantling their stalls. They were pulling their tables and awnings back into the shelter of the buildings, back inside arched doorways all around the square. Heavy shutters came rattling down over the doorways.

I was so surprised, it took me a moment to register the greatest shock of all. The coaches had gone. My coach had gone. They'd left without me!

I took three steps forward in the direction where the coach should have been. I couldn't believe it. I looked out beyond the square, beyond the roofs of Ixtlán. There in the distance was the road to Guadalajara winding its way up a hill. Three coaches moved slowly along that road – and one of them was mine!

I could hardly breath for rage and mortification. How could they do this? They'd waited for the Bullock family, they'd waited for the Canadian sisters. Okay, so maybe I wasn't the most popular member of the party. But to leave without me?

A loud rattle sounded behind my back. I spun around. The old woman and her stall had vanished. There was only a doorway and a metal shutter coming down.

'Hey!' I yelled.

I ran forward and thrust my foot under the shutter, just before it touched the ground. I banged with my fist on the metal.

'Hey! Open up!'

A sudden blow knocked my foot backwards. It was as if the toe of my shoe had been struck by a mallet. As I hopped away, the shutter descended the last few centimeters. I heard the noise of bolts sliding home.

I turned again. Now every single stall had vanished from the square. Most of the shutters were already closed. How had it happened so quickly? The whole operation seemed almost impossibly smooth and efficient.

I ran towards a doorway where the shutter was still open. I waved my arms and shouted. But the people inside averted their eyes as though I didn't exist. They reached up and pulled down their shutter.

I hurled the only available missile – my book on *Myths and Legends of Nayarit and Jalisco*. It bounced off the shutter with a resounding clatter.

I let it lie where it fell. I halted in the middle of the square and looked in every direction. The last shutters came down even as I looked.

Then silence. A terrible stony silence.

The square had been transformed into a very alien place. Without the colorful bustle and the tourist traps, the blank walls spoke a different language. Or no language at all.

Why was everyone hiding? What were they waiting for? I was sure they were all peeping out. I wished I could hide too. I felt suddenly very exposed in the middle of the square.

There were only two gaps in the surrounding buildings. On one side, the exit to the town and the road to Guadalajara. On the other side, the concrete arch which served as entrance to the archaeological site. The arch was painted in gaudy red with blue lettering:

#### TEMPLO DE QUETZALCOATL

The temple of Quetzalcóatl. But if the story told by our local guide was true, it wasn't simply the temple of Quetzalcóatl. It had been built for Quetzalcóatl, but Quetzalcóatl wasn't the god who'd come. Instead, when the temple was finished, some other power or presence had arrived.

Remembering what our guide had said, I began to see the story in a different light. Previously, the idea had seemed quirky, almost comical. They'd tried to invoke a god and got the wrong one! In less than a year, the temple had been abandoned.

But now the story showed a sinister side. What kind of god had they actually invoked? Why didn't the guide give him a name? Was he even a god in the Mexican pantheon at all?

I stood staring at the entrance arch. The ticket-seller's booth was deserted. The path to the site wound up the hill through stands of pine. The site itself was screened from view.

Then someone appeared on the path. A single belated tourist? He was very tall and dressed in flapping white linen. I thought of him as male, though his clothing wasn't obviously masculine or feminine. It suggested a loose wraparound style from India. An Indian tourist in Mexico?

But here at least was someone to talk to. My first reaction was relief. Perhaps he too belonged to one of the coaches that had driven off? I raised a hand to draw his attention.

He descended the path and came out under the entrance arch. I couldn't exactly describe his hair or features, but I had an impression of extreme blondness and fairness of complexion. He no longer seemed like a tourist from India, more like a tourist from Scandinavia.

He turned his head this way and that, as if sniffing the air. I dropped my hand. He seemed to be searching for something. Then he fixed on me.

My heart was beating fast as he came towards me across the square. He moved in a loose floppy way, veering and tacking from side to side. He didn't look straight at me and I didn't look straight at him.

I knew – somehow I knew – that he wanted to ask me a question. I also knew I didn't want to answer his question. I shook my head, hoping to discourage him.

His response was to shake his head as if imitating me. What was that supposed to mean?

More and more, I dreaded the thought of any form of communication with him. Dreaded it with an absolute inexplicable fear. But I strove to appear calm.

I shrugged and half-turned away. Immediately he too shrugged and half-turned away. And yet he was still coming towards me!

I spun back to face him. I raised my arms defensively and he matched the gesture. He was copying my body with his body!

'No!' I cried.

Meaning that I didn't want to hear, I wouldn't answer his question. But he opened his mouth and asked it anyway.

Or he opened what he had in place of a mouth. It was a vertical slit that gaped suddenly in his neck. It expanded up through his face and spread down towards his chest.

The loose white clothes unwrapped and fell away. The linen opened up as his entire body opened up. The slit ran down through his midriff, branched out all along his arms and

legs. His flesh was like a fruit splitting open, wider and wider apart. All mouth, nothing but mouth! And the interior of that mouth –

It stunk with an indescribable ripe smell! It was hung with organs, with bulging glistening bladders and sacs! Purple bladders and red-veined sacs! And interspersed among the organs, a dozen rows of curved yellowy teeth!

I couldn't move a muscle. The mouth was matched to the angle of my body, the position of my arms and legs. It was like a cloak of flesh sweeping forward to enwrap me!

Up to me, over me, past me! I anticipated the stab of the teeth, the loathsome contact of the organs. But there was no pain, no sensation of any kind. In the blink of a second, the mouth swept over me and was gone.

I twisted around in amazement. I expected to see the figure behind my back, reconstituted on the other side. But the square was deserted. I was alone.

What had happened? The figure had seemed so disgustingly physical . But it must have been some kind of vision, a non-material manifestation.

I examined my arms and legs, I touched the skin of my face. Whatever the nature of the manifestation, I had been spared. I felt an enormous exhilaration welling up inside me.

I laughed and scanned the shuttered doorways around the square. The stallholders were still hiding. Didn't they know that the danger was over? In the silence, I could hear them whispering to one another. They were peering out through cracks between the shutters, scarcely daring to draw breath.

Should I wait for them to emerge? But I wasn't in the mood for waiting. Besides, I had more urgent business to take care of. I remembered my party of tourists, the ones who'd left without me in the coach. The Bullock family, the Rosenheim family, the young Australian couple, the Canadian sisters, the four leftovers. And Miguel and the driver . . .

I've been picturing them in my mind ever since. For two hours now, I've been loping along behind the coach. It didn't take long to catch up. But I haven't revealed myself yet. I've kept out of sight in the dust of their wheels.

Very soon they'll make a toilet stop, probably at a service station. They'll be looking for drinks too. But I won't give them time to step out. I'll climb aboard the coach and ask them my question.

'Did you forget about me?'

Then their faces will change. They'll look into my eyes and see what's written there for them. No arrival in Guadalajara, no more tourist sights, no more souvenirs.

I can almost smell the scent of their blood. The thought refreshes me.

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