

Everybody's Talking at You

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WE CAME BY BUS FROM OAXACA, arriving in the village in the early afternoon. The air was hot and still, and the dusty streets were deserted. We sat in the shade under the awning on the west side of the plaza. I shut my eyes against the glare, and when I woke up a man was talking to me, a huge grin all over his leathery brown face. He was saying, "My *tienda* is open now."

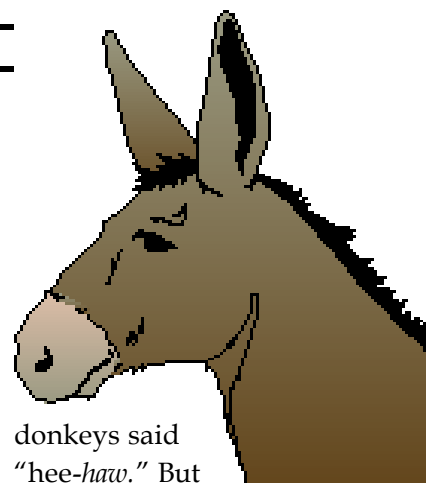
Inside the store it was dark and cool and smelled of corn and burlap. We bought three bottles of apple-flavored *Peñafiel* and drank them standing up at the rough wooden counter. The man asked what we were doing in Teotitlán del Valle. I pointed at Neal and said that he was a weaver who had come to learn from the famous weavers of Teotitlán. The man nodded, then looked at Donna. I explained that she had decided to call herself *Mariposa*, was searching everywhere for herself, and probably wouldn't be here very long. The man smiled, then looked at me. I told him I was a student of language and that I was here to listen to the sounds of the village.

"An excellent idea," said the man. "You will hear many, many things that will surprise you." And he told us that Olivia could give us a place to stay. Up the hill, to the left.

We strung our hammocks in Olivia's courtyard and settled into

the rhythm of the village. Most of the men were weavers. They spent their days working at the huge looms crowded into brick and adobe houses, talking and laughing quietly among themselves in the dimly lit rooms. The young boys looked after the sheep and goats, whispering and shouting at them as they rambled together across the barren, rocky fields. The women and girls cared for the crops and the mules, prepared the food for their families, and washed their clothes on the rocks in the stream. They were always in groups, and their chatting sounded like birds returning to their nests at sunset, their laughter as clear and bright as spring water from the hills.

At night, moonlight flooded the courtyard, and the air smelled sweet and warm. My hammock hung beside a rough mud-brick wall under the eaves of a tin roof. From where I lay I had a clear view of the wide open sky. On the other side of the wall was the mule corral. These mules were very sociable creatures, and it took them a while to settle down at the end of the day. They all had stories to tell about their adventures out in the fields, and I could hear them moving around, muttering and nuzzling, whinnying and chuckling. And haw-heeing. All my life I thought mules and



donkeys said "hee-haw." But they don't. They say "haw-hee."

Olivia's husband, Ismael, was a master weaver, an artist whose sarapes and tapestries sold for high prices in the finest stores and galleries in Mexico City. His inspiration came from ancient legends of the Zapotecs and Mixtecs who lived in this valley long before the Spaniards came. He looked for power and simplicity in his beautiful designs and used nutshells and onion, pomegranate, tree bark, and cactus to create natural dyes for his wool. "The earth talks through us if we allow it," he said. "Everything speaks in its own tongue, and the artist interprets so that others may understand."

I told him about the mules' conversations. "Yes, haw-hee is how they say it," he agreed, laughing. "Everybody gets it wrong at first, gets it backwards. I don't know why. I guess they just don't listen so good."

He'd seen me writing in my notebook and he added, "You going to write that down, about the mules?" I nodded. "That's good," he said. "You weave your words into stories. I'll weave my stories out of wool. Let's see if we are understood any better than those mules!" ★