



The Walk

We came over the ridge as the sun was rising. A vast river of humanity moving towards San Juan de los Lagos. Tens of thousands of pilgrims on their way to beseech or thank the Virgin at her shrine in this small town in central Mexico.

I'd been on the road for nine days since leaving San Miguel one morning in late January. I hiked around the lake in the wee small hours and joined the main body of the pilgrimage, a huge swarm of people from all over the country, many from as far away as Mexico City. Some had been on the road for twenty days and more. Most were regulars, whole families celebrating an annual ritual that gave meaning to their lives. We walked for ten hours a day across open fields, through valleys and over hills and mountains. The terrain was rough, stony, and dry. It got cold before dawn, but later on the sun beat down unmercifully. Dust caked my sweaty face, scratched my eyeballs, parched my throat. My knees hurt. But none of that mattered. The myriad concerns that usually occupied my thoughts were absent and my inner dialogue was still. Uncluttered as never before, my mind was alive with a new awareness.

Our first stop was at Xoconoxtle, where we made camp in the early afternoon along a dry riverbed, a great flock of pilgrims taking refuge from the heat of the day. Girls from the village came bearing delicious *gorditas de horno* and sweet *tamales*. Wiry children hovered around the tents and cooking fires, watching everything with sharp eyes while we rested. Shortly after midnight, stiff from the cold and lying on the hard ground, we were off again, our faces ghostly in the moonlight, the embers of a thousand fires glowing in the dark behind us.

By the fifth day the terrain had taken its toll and my knees were swollen and painful. I fashioned walking sticks from sturdy branches and limped on. A *curandera* offered to help, rubbing alcohol into my sore joints and muttering prayers to *Jesusito*. The pain abated enough to get some sleep but was back as soon as I re-joined the endless column of people snaking its way from one horizon to the other. There were makeshift food stalls here and there where I stopped for a cup of fresh orange juice, squeezed by hand, four pesos. Or a bowl of hot maize *atole*. Or a *caballito*, a mug of coffee with a shot of tequila for medicinal purposes.

Now, as we crested the ridge overlooking San Juan, a new energy was buzzing through the crowd; everyone was anxious to bring their journey to a climax. In a haze of pain and anticipation I hobbled into the basilica for an abbreviated mass, crammed together with my fellow pilgrims. The church was taking them in shifts, a few hundred at a time, and would continue to do so for the rest of the day. Standing shoulder to shoulder in the dusty crush of humanity, I heard a rushing in my ears and felt my head rise up towards the ceiling, bathed in the golden light filtering through the stained-glass windows. I heard none of the service, but when it was over, we all embraced one another, smiling and weeping. Barely aware of my physical body, I was swept along by the joyous throng surging through the large doors and spilling out into the courtyard. We walked past a pile of discarded crutches and walking sticks, hundreds of them lying in a disorderly heap. It was then I noticed that I was carrying my sticks across my shoulder and walking normally. My legs were stiff, but I felt no pain. I tossed my sticks onto the heap and laughed. Then I walked up the hill to catch the bus back home