



Translator on the Roof

In San Miguel Allende, time stands still but people can change. Nestled in the highlands of central Mexico, this town was built by the Spanish in 1542. Its narrow, cobblestone streets and colonial architecture give it a surreal quality that made me feel as though I had stepped into an alternative reality, a different place and time—as in fact I had. I arrived on a bus from Mexico City and by sundown had rented a place to live and enrolled at the Instituto Allende art school to take classes in ceramics and writing.

I had taken a sabbatical—what is now referred to as a gap year—from a career in advertising that no longer inspired me as it once had. In the throes of a midlife crisis, I was trying to reinvent myself, looking for something else to do, and San Miguel seemed like an ideal place to start.

Blanche—who took a gap year from being a New York theatre director and never went back—had lived in San Miguel for several years. We met through mutual friends in my writing class, and she invited me to join her translation circle. I grew up bilingual in Uruguay and had always been a de facto translator, but I'd never done any sort of literary translating. The idea appealed to me, and I accepted her invitation.

Blanche lived in a studio apartment perched on the flat roof of a two-story building a couple of blocks from the centre of town. The circle met on her terrace on Thursday afternoons, surrounded by bougainvillea on a trellis and bright red geraniums in rusted buckets, and, occasionally, a line of laundry drying in the sunshine. We had a clear view of the church spire on the far side of the plaza, silhouetted against a brilliantly blue sky. It was the 1970s and we smoked and drank strong coffee and life was full of possibilities.

There were about ten of us in the group, all working from Spanish into English. Two or three had taken courses in translation studies at American colleges, and there were occasional discussions about theory and technique.

But mostly we were newcomers to the field, feeling our way and learning from our own efforts as we struggled to do what proved infinitely harder than we had imagined it would be. We worked on poems and prose passages by Latin American writers we had enjoyed. We agreed that we would also work on texts drawn from popular culture and everyday life, believing that it was important to attune our ears to the vernacular of the street and hone our ability to capture the syntax of the common man. So we translated newspaper articles and posters, handbills and graffiti. I found the process to be utterly enthralling; it was challenging and satisfying in the manner of a good crossword puzzle, but on a far more exacting and intricate scale.

It was sometimes hard to pull away from the circle and we stayed on into the evening, switching from coffee to wine, and talking for hours on the terrace under the stars. Our free-roaming conversations inevitably led to ever-deeper reflections on the origin of language and the nature of speech. How did language originate, and why? We theorized that humans have language because the senses that evolved for our survival led to experiences that required expression. So, at what point was a guttural grunt just not good enough, prompting one of our ancestors to articulate a sound that was inextricably linked to a specific meaning? Questions begat answers that begat more questions in the comfortable company of colleagues who had become friends and fellow travellers on the road to new understanding.

Blanche—who said, “To begin anything with a certainty is to embark on a very short, uninteresting journey”—was never in a hurry for those soirees to end. Neither was anyone else. And there, on her terrace, I found new purpose as I took my first steps towards becoming a translator.