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CIEE Guanajuato (Liberal Arts)  
fall 2007

***Please, please let us in?***

Strange thing is, I'm not sure which performance we were waiting for. I went to more than eight shows during those three weeks of the Festival Cervantino in Guanajuato, Mexico; at least five of those were the free concerts at the *Alhóndiga* every night. Those free shows were particularly popular, so you had to get there early if you wanted a seat. My friend Kristin and I *had* arrived early, by nearly two hours, for this show. But we were kept waiting.

Why it is that I can't recall whether we were waiting for a tango group from Argentina or a folkloric dance group from Mexico City? My memories never seem focused on what they should be. When I think about the performance that evening, I can recall the movement on stage, and the colorful costumes, and the cheering, but those details are blurry compared to my sharp memory of the policeman standing before me, blocking my way in, avoiding eye contact with me.

*Señor, please, why won't you let us in? You let those other women in.*

I had come a long way since my arrival in Mexico two months before. After all, I was comfortable nagging in Spanish—and this in front of a police officer and the crowd of people behind me. I had no personal space. My every movement consisted of no more than a tiny shift in the angles of my feet. The policeman and I were nearly nose to nose, and both of us were a little uncomfortable. I used this to my advantage.

*We have people waiting for us! There are free seats, over there, in the corner.*

He gave me a half-smile. *There are no free seats, Miss. This place has been full for hours.*

*But there are*, I insisted. I was not even nervous, though this man wore a bulletproof vest. He half-smiled again, looked over my shoulder, and went back to ignoring me. I had never before wheedled a police officer. Prior to my trip to Mexico, I would have said that nagging authorities is not a good tactic. But things change.

That things change is not news. Of course things change when you cut out four months of your life to live somewhere you have never been before. But they are small changes that, in turn, can change you profoundly if you let them. Improving my accent may be a sign of change, but what I can also hear in my Spanish is the branching and looping and tangents that mark common speech. People in Mexico aren't in a hurry to make their points. I guess I'm glad that I don't sound like a total *güera* when I roll my r's, but I'm more glad for the fact that I appreciate how, in speech, taking the shortest route from A to B does not allow room for the complexities of the topic that wandering indirectly and allowing for spontaneity does.

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The free shows happened on the steps of the *Alhóndiga*, a massive square fortress close to the center of town. The Spanish holed up there during the fight for independence, but the local militia burst through the side door bearing torches. A wide, steep swath of steps descends from the building to an open plaza, where a stage is constructed every year for the Festival.

The yearly Festival changes Guanajuato. Hotels and hostels and restaurants are full. Visitors from other parts of Mexico (especially Mexico City), as well as from other countries, arrive in droves. Vendors walk the streets selling beer, cotton candy, necklaces, t-shirts, potato chips (over which they pour hot sauce and lime juice), and homemade sweets. The narrow, cobblestoned, one-way streets of the city might have looked like a map of a river basin from overhead: streams and rivulets crossed and converged; swirling pools formed around markets and impromptu street performances; and of course there was the

daily tide, when the population surged toward the Alhóndiga for the evening's free show. Not everyone could be pulled into this gathering, but we were all drawn there anyway, and those of us who could not get in dallied at its doorway, trying to gain entrance.

A minute had elapsed since I last wheedled the policeman, the one-man dam who stood at the narrow access. I didn't actually know whether or not our friends were waiting for us inside, but I thought he knew this, too, which made me feel better about my lack of total honesty. I was sure that we could find space, even if it was the set of steps in the corner where the view is bad. At least we'd be inside. The crowd breathed excitement, and I wanted to be a part of it. What's more, I felt that I deserved to be a part of it.

*Can we go in now?* I asked, not rudely, but plaintively. *Can we just go sit by the wall? We'll have seats there.*

Suddenly I lurched forward, pushed from behind. In my crowd-bound state, I could barely turn my head to look behind me. The woman who pushed against me was carrying her daughter in one arm and holding the hand of her son in the other. *My husband is waiting for me inside*, she explained to the officer. *Don't you see him over there?* She craned her head to look past me and stood on tiptoe to point over my shoulder, toward the center of the crowd. A man stood up, waving with both hands at his wife and at the policeman. The officer let her in.

*¡Ay, Señor! ¿Por qué no podemos entrar? Por favor, somos dos. Queremos ver el espectáculo.*

We both knew he was going to give in. He gave me a level look and wordlessly stepped back as much as he could—which was about four inches. Crowds are always more flexible than you think, and four inches was enough. *Gracias*, I said as Kristin and I squeezed by him and balanced our way through the throngs of people who already had seats. *I feel so Mexican*, I told her. She knew what I meant.

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We remember the important things, the things that are signs of how we are being profoundly changed even if we don't know it at the time. So it is with this memory. It's one thing to merely witness a performance on stage and to cheer on the dancers or musicians. It's another thing to have, for a few minutes, felt like *you* had a leading role in another kind of performance, one in which you demonstrate your own flexibility, one in which you show yourself that things have changed. My accent might slip away over the years. But that I had moments in which I felt truly *Mexican*? Those I will never lose.