

**SAN MIGUEL de ALLENDE:
A PLACE IN THE HEART**

Expatriates Find Themselves in Mexico

by

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CHAPTER ONE

I HAD A DREAM

LINDA VANDIVER

Is there any reason to pay attention to a dream? Not the kind Martin Luther King spoke of, where the word really meant *hope*. I mean a nasty, gritty, in your face kind of dream that threatens to upend every part of your life. A dream with a lethal message spoken by a strangely dressed messenger who walks up to you without warning while, of all things, you are window shopping with a friend.

“The reason I came here is because I had a dream,” says Linda Vandiver, as we sit in the studio she shares with her son Kelley, who, like Linda, is a painter.

“We all have a dream,” I respond, not unkindly, thinking of a heartrending, soul-bearing interview that might be just over the next hill. That’s my dream.

“I mean a *real* dream,” she says bluntly. “I was supervisor of histology and cytology in a huge hospital in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I had a tremendous amount of responsibility, and I had a dream that I was walking down the street speaking with my best friend, and I was complaining about all the stuff that I was having to do at the hospital, where we had just moved the histology department. That involved working twenty-four hours a day and keeping the department running as we moved it.

“I had a federal inspection coming up in a month, and I was complaining that, oh my gosh, this is hard, and she said to me, in the dream, what would you have to do to move to San Miguel? And I answered as we were kind of window shopping while we moved down the street, ‘I’d have to give up my retirement since I’m not vested at this hospital—it takes ten years—I wouldn’t have health care anymore, and I’d have to sell my house and my car.’ Right about then this man came walking toward me right in front of me. He was dressed as a Hassidic Jewish rabbi, which you don’t see in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

“I was looking at him and I moved to let him by and he moved over in front of me. He put his hand on my arm and it was icy cold and he said, ‘Are you Linda Vandiver?’ I said ‘yes,’ and he said, ‘I have a message for you.’ I said, ‘Is it that I should go to San Miguel?’”

“He said, ‘That’s not my message. My message is you have only seven months left to live.’”

It is the highly specific nature of the message that freezes me in my chair. It’s not a voice borne on the wind, it’s a rabbi with a beard and long black coat and hat standing on a Tulsa sidewalk. The prediction is not, you’ve got maybe a year or so, maybe more. It’s a flat seven months. Why seven? It’s as if the man truly *knows*.

Linda was fifty-two on that night, and she is not Jewish. She was raised Catholic and has never been an Old Testament scholar. In college she had a double major in art and biology, thinking to be a medical illustrator.

“I woke up scared to death. I went to work and I kept thinking all day, seven months is a strange amount of time. I came home from work and I meditated, maybe ten,

fifteen minutes, and I had the realization that if this were true, and I only *had* seven months to live, would I live like I was living? I knew the answer would be no.”

Her voice trails off here and she is looking, not at me, but over my shoulder, back at one of those rarely identifiable true turning points, a pinpoint in time, where you can say, “After that day everything was different.”

“I realized that it wouldn’t matter if I had health care, it wouldn’t matter if I sold my house and my car, that what would matter would be doing what made me happy, and not working so hard. If I really only had seven months to live, then I’m going to live my life as if I had only seven months to live. I took about a month and painted and fixed up my house and got it ready. I had been divorced in the 1980s. I had bought this little house in Oklahoma, and I’d be owing money on it until I was seventy-six years old. It just hit me that day that I’d have to *work* until I was seventy-six years old.

“I wouldn’t want to do that, I’d want to be free. I’d want to live my life differently. It was a big, important dream in my life. I put my house on the market and at the first open house it sold. The people were from San Luis Potosi, Mexico.”

The funds for the transaction had to come from Mexico, and they were going to take a while to process. At this time Linda was working for eight pathologists, and she said nothing to them for two months. When everything was approved she gave four months notice.

“They all said I was crazy. It *was* a frightening thing to do.”

But did her family support the idea?

“Everyone was pretty shocked. My father had Alzheimer’s Disease. My mother felt like I was deserting her. My kids were upset with me.”

Linda is the only girl among three siblings. It would be her traditional role to stay close to home and help out, and she might have done that if she hadn’t been under a death sentence.

“I explained to my mother that my husband had been military and I’d moved all over the world all the time and I’d never really done with my life what I wanted to do. It seemed imperative at that age that I could. I knew since I’d sold my house I could give my youngest son [money] for his last year in college. Then I could come down here and begin all over. “It was a pretty scary thing to do because I only got \$250 a month from my ex-husband’s military retirement.”

Just before she left her job she decided to have a physical exam while she was still covered by insurance. Doctors discovered a tumor in her breast. It was December of 1993. Six months after the dream, it suddenly looked like the rabbi had been right.

“At first I was terrified because it looked like it was going to be true. Then I realized, you know, I’m really lucky. I’ve sold everything, I’ve given away everything I treasured. If it’s malignant, I can travel and do whatever I want. This was meant to be. So I was totally at peace with it. I just decided that whatever it was, it was going to be all right.

“It was a pre-malignant tumor, not malignant yet, but I’m sure it would have been.”

The tumor was removed, so small she wouldn’t have found it herself.

Linda had known about San Miguel since the 80s, when she had come down with a doctor she worked with who had been given the use of a house here for a week. Linda found that she loved it. It was an artist’s colony and it reconnected her with her old dreams of painting.

“I made the joke that when my kids were out of college I was just going to be a hippie artist. Later I came in the early 90s with my son Kelley to visit, and that reinforced the fact that I thought this was what I wanted to do. Then my uncle retired from the Medical College of Virginia and he came here to live. That was another inspiration, that I would have a little bit of family here.”

The uncle knew about San Miguel because Linda had told him after her first visit. When she arrived his place served as a base. “When I first came I stayed with my uncle until I found an apartment that I could afford. It was hard because I had for so many years lived on a schedule, be at work at five A.M., go to breakfast at 8:30, go to lunch at 12:00. You have fifteen minutes for the coffee break. I’ve lived my life like this. When I first got here I made myself work [at painting], like from eight in the morning until noon. Then I’d make myself work until five. I disciplined myself, I just really lived by my old rules. The hardest thing for me was that I didn’t have any friends, I’d left all my family.”

In January her youngest son slipped on a patch of ice and tore ligaments in his knee. She didn’t have the money to go back and be there for him, and he ended up staying with his roommate’s family. It was the same month she arrived. “I felt that everything happens the way it’s supposed to, I just have to deal with this, he has to learn to grow up and I have to learn to let go.”

Now, fifteen years later, she is something of a hermit, not connected much with cultural or volunteer groups. While she has friends in both the American and Mexican communities, the casual contacts she enjoys most are the conversations with visitors who come into the gallery.

She lives in a Mexican neighborhood called Obraje, where for many years there was only one other American. She bought a lot soon after her arrival with money she had left from selling her house, thinking it might be an investment. Five years later, she returned to the States to work for ten months back at the hospital in Tulsa, living at her mother’s house. The woman who had replaced her had contracted cancer and they were desperate. With the money she saved during that period she was able to build a house on her property when she returned. A small house doesn’t cost much in Mexico, and she’d been paid well to return.

“I think the first month I was there was probably the most horrible of my life. It had been five years, and I couldn’t remember the computer codes. I had just totally shut the door on it all. When I left there had been 22,000 cases and seven techs, and when I came back I had four registered techs and two that were learning, and we did 38,000 cases. It was hard, but I did it because I wanted to earn the money to build a little house.”

I raise the issue of whether that experience might have revealed more to her about the States after being gone for five years, or about her life in San Miguel.

“It was both. What I realized...was that I had gotten myself in a place [before] where I owed on my house and on my car and...you just spend all of your money on *things* and you don’t realize it. It’s a way of life. And it’s a choice.

“Down here I got up when I wanted, I went to bed when I wanted. I joined the Unity Church when I got down here to meet people. I think I was here three months when I met a woman at Unity Church who was beside me who was teary, and I hugged her. The next day, on my lunch hour that I allowed myself, I was just outside my door when I ran into this woman. She hugged me and she said how important it was that I had hugged her and did I have time to talk to her. I felt myself really torn, [thinking] oh, I only have an hour, I just can’t, and then I knew I should.

“I invited her in and she was in my house three hours. I ran my errands after she left; I rigged up some lights, and I was able to continue working my time for that day. When I went to bed I had this realization that everything had unfolded the way it was supposed to. What was I doing? When I got up the next morning she had written a poem to me that was slid under my door. I realized that life was too short to do what I was doing, that I was continuing my hectic United States pace, and I didn’t need to do it.”

It was at this point that the measured pace of Mexico took over her life. She had already stopped paying much attention to U.S. news. She didn’t own a TV set and found herself being more peaceful and happy being out of the loop. It was as if it was all on a need to know basis, and she didn’t need to. In this year of presidential politics she has, at least, followed the primaries. Now, after 15 years in San Miguel, she watches news on her computer. “I get disgusted still, I don’t understand the United States, but that’s about it. I hope there can be a change. But I’m *here*.”

I ask Linda to amplify the part about not understanding the U.S.

“What I don’t understand is the fear people had from 9/11 on, including one of my sons, who was a marine. To me it’s just against who I am. I don’t want to have fear, and I don’t want to live in fear. That, plus the materialism. You know, when I was at the hospital and watching my friends, I said, ‘you all have got to pay off your bills so that you’re free. You can’t leave, because you owe.’

“I can live on my social security here, and I took it at sixty-two I don’t have health insurance; it doesn’t bother me in the slightest. I’m just happy.”

It seems pointless to ask, but does Linda know of anything that would make her go back to the U.S.? Possibly some change in Mexico that would make her feel unwelcome or insecure? All I get in response is a vague shrug. Mexico is home.

“I feel safe in my neighborhood. You can tell, there’s a family or two, the young ones, they don’t like Americans. But the parents are not that way.”

Where would she be, if she weren’t in Mexico?

“I might be in Tibet, volunteering. I might be in Peru, doing the same.” She laughs.

By being here she feels she has only given up the closeness of her family, and seeing her grandkids more often. Nothing else.

Linda’s studio is in the *Fabrica la Aurora*, a former textile mill that sprawls informally over a number of acres on the north side of town. Her back wall is a traditional Mexican stone design using large flat irregular stones set in mortar with small stones embedded around them. Walls like this are attractive but not water tight. Now moisture seeps through from the recent heavy rains, and a ceiling fan runs as we talk.

Her paintings are large vivid floral subjects realistically rendered. The big mullioned window in front faces a sunny concrete plaza within the old factory. Other studios are visible, a covered coffee and sandwich shop run by three attractive young Mexican women, and the back entrance of an upscale furniture and accessories store. Other shops offer Mexican antiques and religious art. In the center is a small bookstore, focused on design. There is a village feeling to the complex. Outside is a large parking lot, something almost unknown in this town other than at the few big box stores at the outskirts. At the end of the parking lot is a fenced area full of ducks of several varieties with their own pool. It doesn’t provoke much comment although the reason it’s there isn’t obvious.

While she feels this environment is a good fit, Linda also knows she is different from many Americans who live in San Miguel. “I don’t have very much money. I have a little adobe home. I live in a Mexican neighborhood, I live on my retirement, on social security. Many of them, when I first came and I was invited to parties, recognized I didn’t fit. I’m not a drinker, I’m not a partygoer. If I go to a party I want to meet people I have something in common with. I want to talk to them about things that are important to me, not food, not houses.”

Her social set tends to be other artists and what she calls, “spiritual seekers.”

“I was in a women’s group for years, and they are basically very spiritual women. Some are Mexican, others are different nationalities.”

She has some Mexican friends, although her best Mexican friend died this year. She agrees, however, as others have said, that none of these friends are in the first tier of her relationships. I ask if she knows why.

“I guess there’s an issue with us, that they don’t trust us.” She agrees that it might be the many years of bad history between the two countries.

“My Mexican friend who just died had an American father, so she spoke English and Spanish. She lived here all her life. I didn’t have that problem with her, she was my best friend. My other Mexican friends, they would do anything for me. I don’t feel a separation from them as far as that they judge me. I don’t know what it is, unless it’s that we don’t have a tremendous amount in common. I don’t know.

“I don’t have much of a social life. I have dated. I used to go to all the Mexican functions downtown and now it’s like it’s not high on my list. When I first came a friend of mine invited me to La Fragua [a restaurant bar, near the *Jardin*, our central plaza]. I went, dragging my feet the whole way, and actually I loved it. Americans went on Friday night; there were a lot of Americans there, a lot of Mexicans. It used to be the *Romanticos* [a trio playing traditional Mexican songs] were there. I just loved them, they’re my friends. I love to dance and I used to go there and dance every Friday, Saturday and Sunday night. Saturday night was Mexican night, almost all Mexicans. “Sunday night I would go with an American friend of mine who was a really good dancer who’s been here longer than I have. That used to be my social life, and it was really fun.”

I ask how, as a long time resident, she relates to the American tourists she encounters.

“I have a lot of tourists come in here. There are different kinds. Some are wonderful people that I love to connect with. Usually they’re people who want to know why am I here? How is it different? What makes me happy here? It’s a real pleasure to talk to those people because they’re also waking up and realizing, what am I doing with my life? I’m spending everything I make on more *things*.

“Part of having a gallery for me, in fact, the reason I still do this, is because I meet a lot of wonderful people, and I feel that I’m able to touch people many times. It might only be one person a month, but it’s somebody that will sit down here and say, why are you here? What makes you happy here? Then you know you’ve actually spoken your heart to someone. Mexico, for me—I can get off the plane coming from the States having had a wonderful time—two weeks, three weeks is max, and I want to be home. As soon as I hit San Miguel, it’s like [she exhales enormously, as if a weight has been lifted, her neck and shoulder muscles suddenly loosening] I just relax, and I recognize it; it’s almost an instantaneous feeling. Wow, I’m home! It just feels that way here to me.”

What kind of journey is this? From the high intensity pace of running a histology and cytology lab for a major hospital to running a small studio/gallery in a middling Mexican hill town. What changes have come about in Linda Vandiver herself along the way?

“I live for my heart now. I am able to ask myself, how do I feel about this? What should I really do? What’s important to me? What matters? Before, I was in a rat race. I didn’t have time to ask myself those questions. I didn’t have time to say, if I had only six months left to live what would I do with it? It never occurred to me. I was busy; I didn’t have time to smell the roses.”

She thinks back to her first year here. A problem for many of us is to understand what we are seeing, since so much of it is unfamiliar. Everything is foreign in this place that is right on our border, but a world away in its thinking.

“I was still living with my uncle and the neighbors invited me for a special dinner. He was a mechanic and she sold little things when school got out [a vendor of snacks at the edge of the school grounds]. She had three children, and we were all around the table having dinner. It was a very special dinner she had cooked, and I felt so honored because I knew they were poor. While we were eating dinner someone knocked at the door.

“She answered the door and an old lady came in and was asking if they had any extra food. My neighbor pulled another chair and brought the lady to the table and sat her down. She got her a Coke and brought her a plate of food. And I went home and I cried. I still cry because it touched me so much. That’s when I realized that this is where I ought to be. I knew I would stay here.

“You know, after I quit my job I had two different, really significant job offers, that any time before I quit I would have really wanted to have. It was almost as if the universe was testing me to see if I really was going to follow my heart.”

I believe that Linda Vandiver was so deeply *embedded* in her Tulsa life that she was unable to consciously ask the questions that came up in her dream. The demanding job, where finding a replacement for her skills was nearly impossible, the role of single parent of four children, where she had been their principal emotional and financial support, had long made the concept of change inconceivable. It was only after the rabbi condemned her to death that her constraints receded and she was able to confront the issue on a conscious level.

Linda’s question from her meditation on the day after her fateful dream stays with me. “If I had only seven months to live, would I live like I was living?” Take out the words, “seven months,” and insert the words, “the rest of my life.”

It could apply to any of us.

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