

# La Guirnalda Polar

La Redvista Electrónica de Cultura Latinoamericana en Canadá  
Los Tesoros Culturales del Mundo Hispanohablante

## Prayer for Lupe

Artículo por Steven Byrd

I jogged through the open fields of Cholula, the ground still moist from the afternoon rain -- the cool summer humidity welling up off the dirt road as I enhanced the velvety Mexican sunset. The evening was calm and quiet -- just an occasional car passing on the lateral. It was a post-card perfect view of the night lights in the nearby city of Puebla. The big yellow church on la pirámide in Cholula looked utterly fascinating -- a joining of the ancient Aztec culture with the conquering Spainards. I felt a bit of history in my soul, strange and mysterious.

I had only been a week in Mexico, but it seemed like a long time. I spoke only a little Spanish, and understood less. Of course, the people treated me great, but there were still things that I didn't comprehend, that I couldn't comprehend about this foreign culture. It wasn't just the language, it was the attitude and the caste system that wheeled it.

At the time, I was living with the upper-class Reyes family, very proud of their noble Spanish decent, whose business was housing foreign students for the Universidad de las Américas. I was just another 'average Joe' that walked in the door looking for a place to stay for the year. They didn't really care about me, or any of their over-worked, under-paid maids, or anyone besides their impeccable family. They just wanted their one thousand pesos for the month and a daily complement on their food. I guess not too much to ask for. Nevertheless, they tried to appear hospitable and generous to this gringo; for a price, of course.

Upon reaching my house after my nightly philosophical jog, first I had to ring the doorbell, hidden on the many dirty, red bricks and barb-wire that encased the paradise within.

'¿Quien?' they asked through the small, black metallic box.

'Steve' I said in my Gringo accent.

'Ah. Momentito, joven.'

Breathing hard, covered with perspiration, I walked into the beautifully constructed Spanish-style house, the hand-crafted talavera tiles and many tropical plants greeted each and every customer at the door. I limped upstairs to my bedroom, grabbing the winding iron rail to reach the second floor. After entering my room, I noticed that my bed had once again been made with army precision -- the cross of Jesus resting neatly on the wall above. The day's dirty clothes had also been neatly folded and stacked on my arm chair as if they were laying bricks.

Laughing to myself and feeling a little embarrassed by the service of the maids, I went to the bathroom to wash up and relieve myself. Since the door was slightly ajar, I paid no mind to the fact that someone was inside.

Opening the semi-squeaky door, I saw the senora's maid, Lupe, squatting on the bathroom throne. Shockingly, I was more appalled than she. Nonchalantly, as she pulled down her skirt -- the only piece she was wearing as

a bottom of her ragged outfit

-- I noticed the many bruises and scars that ran down the thighs and shins of her skeleton legs from the hard work and physical abuse that she had endured over the years.

Immediately pain overcame my mind. I wanted to ask: Where did you come from? What happened to you? Yet silence held my lips tight. From the look of her leather scarred body, Lupe certainly didn't have a pleasant past, and probably wouldn't have a pleasant future.

Thinking of all the possibilities of what had happened to poor Lupe, I suddenly had a flashback of something the day before when I overheard a conversation between her and the señora -- `¡No olvides de bañarte hoy!

¡Hueles como pinche perra, Lupe!`

I don't know why I had felt compassion for her, but maybe it was because nobody else had. This compassion grew stronger each and everyday.

Having known her only for a week, I once saw her watching the nightly soap operas on TV. Not just watching them, though, but being completely absorbed and fascinated by them. I even saw her weeping once at the end of a program where a young girl began to cry after being beaten by her father in a ridiculous, overly dramatized scene. However, I sensed a humbleness in this young lady of 18 that I hadn't seen in any girl I had met before in Mexico, or in my life for that matter. It's not that this sort of person doesn't exist where I come from, just never in the same household as mine.

When she walked out of the glistening tiled bathroom, I saw that she was staring at a small tape-player/radio that I had brought from the States.

Leaving the room, she curiously asked me in a rough campesino accent from Veracruz:

`¿Usted sabe cuánto cuesta este radiocito? ¡Cuando tenga bastante dinerito, quiero comprarme uno así!` She said very emphatically.

Like solving a calculus equation, I stood with with my eyes open trying to decipher what was just spoken to me. After a few seconds of thought, I figured she was asking about the price of my radio, but wasn't sure exactly of the second half.

I replied, `No sé, Lupe` knowing this was a safe answer to any question. However, still thinking about the final jeopardy question from Lupe, my brain finally kicked in as to what was said. `¿Por qué?` I asked so as to make minimal conversation with the intrigued girl.

`Pues, es que después de este mes, voy a tener bastante dinerito para comprarme un radiocito como el suyo. Siempre quería uno, pero siempre me faltaba la lana.` Ya la señora me está pagando 30 pesos cada mes. Yo creo que ya he ahorrado bastante para comprarme uno, ¿no?`

From her fast, heavy accented slur, I think I managed to pick up that she had finally saved enough to buy a radio that she always wanted from the whopping 30 pesos, about \$5, she was making a month. Of course, I wasn't sure of all this discourse, but I think I was close.

Looking sarcastically at the piece-of-crap-dust-collector radio that amounted to no more than \$20 American dollars, I wasn't sure how to answer Lupe on the equivalent Mexican price. Not only this, but the thing needed a cord which had been lost during my exodus into the capital of the New Spain.

I wasn't exactly sure how to tell her that it was missing the plug-in part though, but that I would gladly give it to her for

free. `Pero no funciona, Lupe. Falta el enchufe. Nada más déjeme buscar uno para que funcione, y es suyo. ¿Sale vale, Lupe?` I improvised.

`¡Oh sí! ¡Entonces usted me lo regala! ¡Gracias! ¡Gracias! ¿Pero porqué usted me habla en usted? Nada mas soy una maldita sirvienta. No necesita hablarme en usted,` she added in an amusing sounding voice.

Again with my mental calculator at hand, I attempted to solve this word problem. Don't get me wrong, I always loved chatting a bit with Lupe, but she was sure hard to understand for this poor gringo. Thinking to myself, I was pretty sure that she was happy about the gift of my cheap radio, but wasn't sure why she didn't want me to talk in `usted` to her. I was just trying to be respectful. Just like saying `sir` or `ma'am,` wasn't that the way to say it?

`Bueno Lupe, el radio es tuyo. Mañana yo voy a comprarte el enchufe,` I told her calmly about buying the plug tomorrow for her new radio.

`¡Muchas gracias! ¡Usted es muy amable!`

`De nada, Lupe,` as I smiled to her.

## II

Walking through the Mexican market place was always an interesting trip within itself. You could find live animals, dead animals, dying animals, and newly-born animals, among other things that could be of practical use.

You never knew what to expect at the Mercado Zaragoza each and every time you went, except that it would probably reek of some ungodly stench that you prayed was uninfectious.

Ducking down under the several clothes, toys, and everything you could possibly imagine in México that hung in the tiny corridor-aisles of the mercado -- the little `chaparritos` shouting `Pásale Güeero, Pásale` at me like I was the main attraction of the day -- I began my quest in finding the stolen electronics section so I could buy a cord for Lupe's new radiocito.

Finally finding my man, I asked about his selection of the latest electronic equipment to compare prices with the States.

Of course, all of it was a lot cheaper, but how much of it was legitimate was my dying question. I didn't ask, but certainly had the urge.

After the stereo chit-chat was over, I finally bought an old, brown crusty-looking cord for 8 pesos, about \$1.15

-- not too bad for a hot cord, I suppose. I must say that my man seemed pretty happy about the deal. I then hunch-backed out of the mercado, but not until stopping to buy my favorite peach milkshake, or `licuado de durazno` as they were called there. They certainly were the highlight of any trip to Mercado Zaragoza. They were the best of Mexico in my opinion. Plus, the old, wrinkled Indian lady was always pleased to serve her favorite Güero. Well, I don't know if I was her favorite, but I always seemed to get a little-kid smile on her face whenever I happen to show up at her `licuado` and fruit stand in the market. I don't know if it was drinking the `licuado` or just the fact that I wanted to help her somehow?

Feelings and emotions are always very strange. I don't think they are meant to be understood, but what would you do without them? People are people no matter what the country, language, or race.

I probably looked kind of strange to the Mexican people (especially the `licuado` lady) leaving the market with an ugly, brown cord in my hand, but what was I supposed to do? Nevertheless, I kept sauntering down the narrow Mexican streets trying to avoid serious injury at all cost from the passing cars. I always prayed when cruising the streets on foot that nobody was upset had the sudden urge to ice a Gringo in his car. I'm sure it never would have happened that drastically, but every foreigner has that homicidal fear. Especially traffic homicide. Maybe we're all insane in a foreign land?

Who knows?

Running across the street, bobbing and weaving through all the afternoon traffic like Barry Sanders, I safely reached the bus stop on la calle 31. And thank God! It was time for the daily 3:00 Puebla shower. In the summer, it didn't matter if you woke up with the bluest sky in history, by 3:00 it was raining like you wouldn't believe. Not just raining, but pouring.

People usually ran -- umbrella or not. That was the rain. Good thing I beat it today. I got on the bus just as the sky began to roar.

Getting thrown off the bouncy, red rickety-old Jalopy-of-a-bus by the casa, I sprinted across the street in the torrential rain and went inside to test the radio to make sure the plug fit. I didn't want to give Lupe a bum radio, of course.

I was walking up the stairs to dry the drops in my hair when the señora intercepted me at my room and asked me where I had been.

`¿Adónde fuiste?`

`Yo fui al mercado,` I answered telling her that I went to the market.

`Ya tienes hambre, ¿verdad? ¿Quieres comer?`

I was feeling a little hungry from the day's excursion, but not starved since I had eaten the licuado. Just to be polite, I

accepted the offer.

As usual, the señora was dressed in her expensive Bloomingdales` clothing and large diamonds with all the trimmings. From her upper-class accent and impeccable presentation, she seemed real nice, perhaps too nice.

In fact, so nice that it seemed artificial, if that makes any sense. She`s the kind of person that tried her best to please, but did it in a businesslike way. I was skeptical of her from the first minute I met her. I don`t know why, but she certainly didn`t seem like the person that invented the ideology of `mi casa es su casa` -- she just merely acted out the part.

As we sat down to eat at the table, I attempted to ask her a little about herself since I didn`t really know her that well, and how she got where she was in life. Of course, I assumed that she was just a housewife who recruited students to live in her magnificent house, but I figured that there was at least something interesting about her that was worth some conversation during supper-time.

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Este Documento es parte de una publicación literaria por parte de:  
- "La Guirnalda Polar"

Redvista Electrónica de Cultura Latinoamericana en Canadá  
Redvista es: (una "revista" que se publica en el internet)

- Número de la Publicación: 15
- Título de la Publicación: Acteal, cultura chicana y filipina
- Titulado: Prayer for Lupe
- Género: Artículo
- Autor: Steven Byrd
- Año: 1998
- Mes: enero
- URL: <http://lgpolar.com/page/read/111>

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