

CATEGORY: HOLIDAY MEMORIES

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Two women who cared

Nosing the bow of the sailboat into the lee of an outcropping of rocks, we dropped the anchor. Safe from the ocean's swell, off the west coast of Mexico, we would spend our first Christmas away from home.

Christmas for me had always meant sitting by the fire with family, watching the snow fall, and enjoying the sweet aroma of a turkey in the oven. Bobbing at anchor on this Christmas Eve, I was surrounded by palm trees and warm breezes, and filled with a bitter sweet apprehension and longing for the old routines.

We hung our Christmas stockings with clothes pins from Nanook's railings. I decorated a miniature artificial tree with tiny seashells and tucked it snugly between books so it wouldn't topple over. Listening to Christmas carols on a cassette tape we watched the sky turn orange and then purple. Dolphins played with the stern anchor line and we spent a peaceful and solitary Christmas Eve.

Christmas morning we sipped coffee in the cockpit and waited for the cinnamon rolls to rise in the warmth of the sunshine on the cabin's rooftop. When the sun was high in the sky we lowered our dinghy into the water and with the outboard motor clamped to the transom, headed for shore. Landing the dinghy on the beach, we dragged her high

above the surf and stepping over uprooted palm trees we walked the half-mile to Melaque.

At this spot 10 weeks ago there was a devastating earthquake. When the ground ceased shuddering and the aftershocks began, the waters of Bahia de Navidad roared out of the bay into the Pacific Ocean and returned, a monster the height of a two-story building. An earthquake this close to the sea frequently causes a tidal wave and that is what happened. Restaurants, hotels, homes and shops that were still standing after the quake were washed clean or leveled by the powerful force of the tidal surge that overpowered the beach front towns.

The scratchy strains of recorded Christmas music wafted from a home with no doors or windows. The only other sound was the distant cadence of waves on the beach and the voices of neighbors going about their daily routines. A few shops were open and a restaurant had set up make shift tables in the alley.

Carefully navigating chunks of disconnected walls protruding from what had recently been stores and homes we made our way through the town. Villagers swept the dusty streets and picked through the fragments in an attempt to rebuild.

An overloaded wheelbarrow of collected debris slipped past us, propelled by skinny brown arms. A forlorn Christmas bow, faded red and dusty, hung crookedly on a rare intact window. Villagers smiled as we passed and waved, calling, "Feliz Navidad," and we replied "egualmente!"

A 30-minute bus ride delivered us to Cihuatlan, the epicenter of the earthquake. Slabs of concrete lay at odd angles where the sidewalks had buckled and buildings caved in. But business continued. We bought lemonade from a makeshift shop adjacent to the

crumbled “bodega.” Children played. Mothers swept. Men sat in plastic chairs and simply observed.

As we wandered, we handed out gifts from the Santa’s bag of treats we had brought for this purpose. We gave candy, crayons and tablets to children and lipsticks, cigars and toothbrushes to their parents. We walked and were greeted with choruses of, “Feliz Navidad.”

In the fading sunlight we joined a parading stream of villagers. We were the only white faces in what seemed to be an impromptu candlelight procession. They sang Christmas tunes that we recognized, in an unfamiliar language. We hummed along and tried to move unobtrusively, giving away the trinkets we had brought.

The surging movement stopped in reverent silence at the once proud church. Her red trimmed white stucco spire listed and the cracks in the walls were large enough for sea birds to fly through. .

We stood in the entry of a temporary chapel between earthquake-toppled buildings. Children smiled at us shyly and accepted the last of our small gifts. A woman dressed entirely in black, from the knitted shawl that covered her head to her scuffed shoes, gazed with adoration at the crucifix in the front of the makeshift church. She was no taller than my shoulder and leaned on a cane roughly whittled from a tree branch.

She must have sensed my presence because without turning her head she began speaking quickly in a rapid Spanish that I couldn’t understand. When I didn’t respond, she lifted her chin in my direction, gesturing toward the cross. Dark eyes sparkled in her lined, walnut hued face. I smiled and gestured with a shrug that said I didn’t understand. My limited study of Spanish wasn’t enough. I felt despair that I couldn’t talk to this little

woman who had so much to say. We had neither a mutual culture nor a common language.

But without words, we shared something. She reverently patted my nearly empty bag of gifts and we turned to each other in a warm hug. Looking into each other's eyes, we somehow knew that, as women, we had already communicated. There are moments when souls touch without words.

She couldn't tell me her story, and I couldn't tell her mine. But our hands clasped, and we spoke without words. I looked down into her wizened dark face, brought to life by her teary black sparkling eyes and she looked up into my blue eyes. We were the same. Two women who cared.