

chrysanthemum holway

Chrysanthemum Holway appeared one day in Oaxaca, Mexico. She was over forty, surviving on medical disability checks inadequate even in South Carolina, but tolerable for Mexico. I never asked where else she had lived; I sensed she lived by escaping. Perhaps many times.

She was shaped like a plum tomato, but pink and white, and the name her parents had given her clearly had to do with her spray of yellow hair, maybe their joyful spiritual re-alignment after giving life to a creature so perfect. But it didn't last.

Her parents were southern Baptists who feared sins and sinners. Or non-conformity. But they had modernized. Instead of exorcism, after her second pregnancy they had Chrysanthemum lobotomized. I suppose they thought that would extirpate her sex drive, and clearly many teachers and preachers told them Chrysanthemum was a fabricator. A lobotomy offered a double solution. Chrysanthemum already had one illegitimate daughter, and a wide reputation. Post-surgery, she retained her libido and lies. What the surgery accomplished was to scare local Oaxacan medics who exclaimed, "Part of her brain is missing!" But that was later.

She began to hang out at the American library, where her reputation developed along its historic lines: liar, moocher, shameless. She called herself Cissy, a name a whole lot easier than Chrysanthemum, and one much less likely to be abbreviated to Chris, from which too many deduced Christine, anathema for an atheist.

I liked Cissy, although nobody could say why, including me. As for her lies, to me they echoed literature, maybe Mark Twain, tall tales and impossible events, like towering whirlpools and leaping frogs. Every now and then she would remark, “They killed my baby,” a reference, I believed, to her second pregnancy. But maybe not. She always spoke the phrase with some anger, and once she told me the baby’s name was Patrick. I deduced Patrick died during the birth process. But maybe the phrase referred to another loss.

I had preceded Cissy to Oaxaca by several years, so I helped her locate an apartment, and familiarize herself with the small city Center, which for many ex-pats centered on the American library. I myself couldn’t abide its stuffy ways. The library in those days was run by middle-aged gay guys who seemed bent on revenge against straight folks who had persecuted them; the parsimonious way they paid clerical help under the table to avoid giving benefits; the way they referred to their cleaning muchachas. But I wasn’t welcome anyway. My opinions didn’t hold with theirs.

Oaxaca at the time was confronting its first invasion of Spanish transnationals, investing in wind generators to provide “clean” energy for Walmart and whoever else sought to transform the campo to a money-maker big-time. The way they went about it was to hire men who spoke the local languages. These pimps told land owners they would receive the whopping sum of \$100 a year per acre, in exchange for leasing it for wind generators.

It took a while for the locals to catch on, but they did, and from then on the battle only grew, between investors and those protecting their land and way of life. I stood on the side of the old ways, because progress by forcing people into urban slums was not my thing.

I got a call to go down to Juchitán for my next article, and scope out the resistance. Cissy expressed an interest, and since for me traveling alone wasn’t fun, I invited her to accompany me, in charge of photography. She brought her camera.

I signed us into two separate rooms in a very modest hotel. I began to follow up accumulated contacts I had been given. Cissy, after taking photos of abandoned churches and priapic wind generators, began to follow her usual proclivities. We were traipsing across a field toward the columns of cement. Our guide belonged to one of the families heading the

land-defense movement. Roberto was maybe in his forties, trim and good-looking. Standing on the edge of the field gazing across the grass at the two by now distant figures, I knew Chrysanthemum had reignited her libidinous ways. How? Some angle of the man's body, a leaning over above Cissy who stood half a foot shorter than Roberto. His head inclined as if staring down a rabbit hole, wondering.

Roberto began to bus up to Oaxaca for the inevitable protest meetings, and stay overnight with Cissy. He had been selected by his community as lead organizer and protester. I never found out why he finally dropped Cissy, or she him. Perhaps his curiosity regarding the otherworld had been satisfied. Or maybe there was too much local work to attend. Or maybe Cissy was satisfied...

By this time, I had fronted Cissy into the circle of lefties I hung out with. As a circle, we supported one another, and hence Cissy was included. During the 2006 uprising in Oaxaca against the PRI, Cissy was primed. She connected with a photographer from Germany, and invited him to bunk at her apartment. This man was short, thick, blond and blue-eyed, the physical opposite of Roberto. Helmut was a splendid international photographer, known for on-the-spot photos of persons caught in self-explanatory situations. In his hired vehicle, Cissy rode beside him, and eventually steered him up to her apartment to shower, eat and sleep.

In one of Helmut's photos, a Oaxaca protester, wearing over his face a surgical mask against the teargas, runs downhill carrying a slingshot in his right hand. After I came into possession of Helmut's pictures I gave that one to the protester's daughter, as a reminder of her father's youthful vigor. By then of course the police had rendered him a cripple.

But what of Helmut? Surely free lodging and a guide were helpful. But there was more. Both Cissy and Helmut were of short stature and fair skin; I wondered if Helmut thought of her as a familiar from his German landscape. But with something foreign too, inexplicable, profound, opening to a strange landscape.

A few months after Helmut left Oaxaca for other battlefields Cissy came down with a massive urinary tract infection. So the photos he gave me were costly after all. Not because of Helmut himself, with whom I remained in touch, but because Cissy participated in our resistance group. We paid for her medical care. Finally, her daughter arrived and took on the

task of repatriating Cissy. Neither had money.

So when Cissy left the hospital, the US consulate deported her back to the USA accompanied by the daughter, and she signed an agreement of debt. A year later she returned illegally; she owed the US government for her transport home, which she would never repay. She returned twice more, by bus. The daughter waited in South Carolina for Cissy's grand finale.

Cissy's first re-appearance in Oaxaca indicated something gone wrong with our friendship. She shifted her allegiance to the old gay men right-wingers. They got along with Cissy; her signals were irrelevant. Meanwhile, my partner and I were good friends with a gay man on the left, since we didn't care about his sexual orientation, only politics. Alfie was murdered, and somehow the gay community decided that we were to blame for the death of one of their own, although neither general sentiment nor any incriminating evidence existed. Alfie, despite his politics, belonged to them, none of whom supposed we were grieving our own loss.

What happened was that Alfie had developed a friendship with a youngster forty years his junior. Alfie had rescued the kid by buying him out of prison. At first the boy's family was grateful. Then, whether for honor, age discrepancy, or some revelation of Alfie's sex life, they turned on him, pushing aside their initial good feelings. The father and uncle murdered Alfie. They shoved his body head downward into an unused well. The kid, now with a wife and baby, departed. The antiquated Oaxaca justice system endured, with no evidence that one person was guiltier or more innocent than another. No arrests were ever made.

The other grieved party was Alfie's biological son, who accepted the strange misinformation that the assassins were me and my partner. Why did the son believe that? Was it proposed by the gay community? Or his main informant was Cissy. Perhaps Alfie's son leaned over that blond shimmering well, dipping his hand into the warm petals. I received hate email from him, or from Cissy herself, for years afterward on the anniversary of Alfie's death.

By that time Cissy lived in South Carolina again. Her third deportation home was her last. The daughter to whom she had given birth alone placed her in a nursing home, ill with cancer. When I learned about it from one of the library men, I was relieved. I couldn't comprehend, and

felt tired of trying. Nevertheless, she stays with me: her yellow hair, the current swirling in what should have been stilled water.

