

## Artist in Mexico

by

Tara Waters Lumpkin

Published in *Buffalo Spree*, Volume 24, Number 4, Buffalo, NY,  
Winter 1990

—twenty-two years old—

"In Mexico one develops strange powers," Paul said.

Kate and he were drinking coffee hunched next to a fire. The room's whitewashed walls were luminous as onion skin. Through the window she saw the sun descending orange upon dry land the color of clay dust. The room was lit with candles. Everywhere. On bookshelves. On windowsills. On the floor. In corners. On his desk. Flickering, flickering, flickering—like bats in early evening. Dive bombing. Wavering. Growing. Shrinking. Bending with puffs of wind.

"Strange powers." He nodded his head. "Strange powers, Kate, that no one would believe."

"What sort of strange powers?" she asked.

He looked at her questioningly.

"What strange powers?" she asked again.

Paul poked at the fire embers with the end of a stick, staring, then folded his hands, and looked straight at her. "You won't believe me."

My God, he's handsome, she thought, intelligent too. He would be a tough one to trap; the challenge, that's what made the game worthwhile. All she had to do was keep cool. Somewhere he had a crack. If she was patient, she'd find it, then she would move in for the kill. Kate flexed her hands the way she did before rock climbing, opening and closing them, imagining laying them against hard rock. She could almost feel the rock hum. Her fingers searched for cracks and tiny ledges, any hold.

"I'm telepathic. I can read your thoughts," Paul said all of a sudden.

"What? What are you talking about?"

She didn't know why, but she partly believed him.

"You don't believe me, no one does," he said. "It's true—I can hear people think. I heard what you were thinking just then."

"What was I thinking?" Kate asked, realizing he was playing a joke.

"You know what you thought," he replied. "You want to control, don't you?" Paul stirred the embers with his stick. He seemed to be considering whether or not to go

on. The feeling came over her that he was capable of any response, any action, and she was a little afraid; some instinct warned her to retreat, yet she remained spellbound. He looked up from the fire.

"You're beautiful," he said.

Her face flushed hot; the dangerous part—this was what she liked.

"It's been a long time since I've said that to anyone," he added.

He walked over, crouched in front of her chair, and looked at her face, his bright, bird-like eyes darting back and forth. She deliberately kept her face expressionless. He was more dangerous than she had thought; he knew the game. His hands moved to her knees. Long tapered fingers. Narrow palms. Prominent joints. They glided up and down her thighs. Then he placed his right hand on her breast—the nipple hardened. He pulled her from the chair. This is crazy, she thought. His body was bony; the bones cut into her. His muscles were long and sinewy, delineated like those of a marathon runner. There was no fat, not an ounce of it, anywhere. He was sawing her in two. When it was over, he rested staring at the ceiling. His stomach settled concavely beneath his rib cage. She traced the outline of each rib with her fingers.

"It's nearly dark. You'd better go," he said, and then—"Listen I don't want you to think I'm going to be your boyfriend just because we went to bed."

"I haven't asked you to be my boyfriend." Why was he trying to hurt her? What had she done to him? Well, two could play this game: she, too, could feign disinterest. "Okay, I'll leave then" She dressed, expecting him at any moment to try and stop her, but he didn't. He didn't even kiss her goodbye. He just stared at the coals in the fireplace as she left.

Kate followed the road down the mountainside into town. Don't worry about it, she told herself. He's the sneering type. He thinks he's better than you, because he's got something you haven't—talent, he can paint. And maybe he's even psychic. Well, it doesn't mean anything. But he was better somehow. She knew she'd never be any good at painting. Here she was in this perfect town and still she couldn't paint. The cobble-stoned street was wet and shone like a river of mirror. In the town square, people sat on benches, looking around, gossiping, and reading newspapers. Birds chattered in the trees above them and fought for peanuts and popcorn that had been dropped on the ground. On one side of the square was an adobe church with a wooden steeple and stained glass windows of blue, red, and purple. Inside, day and night, hundreds of candles flickered, yet the church's corners remained dark as a womb. She went in there occasionally to think things over amidst the smells of incense, beeswax, and women's face powder. It was early evening and the sun knelt on the mountains. Birds cackled loudly. A flock of young women descended upon the square for their evening stroll. The young men came too, packed tightly in borrowed cars, honking and whistling at the girls. A flower woman sold bunches of yellow daisies, and children chased each other, screaming and shouting. Behind her was the *barranca* where Paul's house stood like a sentry overlooking town. Kate was thinking so hard that she walked by the *panaderia* and then had to retrace her steps. She unlocked the heavy wooden door, pushed it back, and stepped inside. The bakery was cool and dark and smelled of sugar. Cookies, cakes, and breads were

piled on shelves. She walked into the courtyard and turned right into the dining room. The other two boarders were already eating dinner.

"We saved some mole," one said, passing her a blue ceramic bowl filled with chicken steeped in a deep, rich chocolate sauce.

"Thanks," she said, then cautiously—"Does anyone here know Paul, the art teacher?"

"I've heard he's eccentric," the other boarder commented, "but I assume he's a good teacher."

"Why assume that?" the first one asked. "Down here he probably gets paid in pesos. That can't amount to much."

It didn't matter if he were a good teacher or not—Kate signed up for his class. Paul made a point of ignoring her. He behaved as though nothing had ever happened between them. She felt him sneering behind her back as she painted. She felt him grow angrier and angrier. She knew he liked her—she could feel the energy he expended in hating her. He's as obsessed with me as I am with him. He would stand behind her, watching her sketch. "There might be some talent here," he'd say, disdainfully looking at her work. "Try to free your mind; it will free any talent you might have." What did he mean? How to free her mind? Was her mind frozen? She thought not. No, her mind was watchful, waiting. He did not understand waiting. When would he ask to see her again? She knew he would, if she kept quiet long enough.

"How do I free my mind?" she asked off hand, trying hard not to let him see she cared.

He looked at her as if she were stupid. "Break free," he said, "Break free."

But she had no idea what he meant. She watched him circle the studio, placing his hand on other women's shoulders, but never on her own. You've slept with every woman here, she thought. You bastard, touch me, touch me, she almost shouted. She would show him: she, too, knew a trick or two.

There was a showing at the *Instituto*. Kate prepared for the kill, bathing in water sprinkled with sage, rinsing her hair with cold chamomile tea, even standing on her head for ten minutes to give her face a healthy glow. Then she dressed in a blue silk dress, its thin material wrapped tight around her buttocks and thighs. Tonight she would be noticed. It was warm out, and stars were folded into the soft night sky. A breeze wrapped itself around her like a purring cat. As she walked her shoes rang out against the cobble-stoned streets. She felt as though a ball of fur had curled up in her stomach. The *Instituto* was awash with light. From within the gateway came voices and laughter. Kate applied pearl lipstick, pink and shiny, then squared her shoulders, tilted her pelvis back, shook her hair, and entered. The courtyard was filled with women in bright, colorful dresses fluttering like moths. A fountain with goldfish bubbled in the center of the courtyard. There were flowers and *pinatas* and tapestries and paintings and sculptures, but no Paul. Kate went into the main gallery. People sipped white wine looking at paintings. No Paul there either. She could feel people's eyes on her as she looked at the paintings. For a moment it bothered her, then she reminded herself that that was what she'd planned. She had transformed herself into an object, had tried to become a piece of artwork. She circulated drawing attention.

Only a few other women—those like her—understood; they exchanged glances with her, then looked away, each woman silently marking her territory.

Returning to the courtyard, Kate chatted with some friends, smiling, gesturing, making sure to look them in the eyes, but all her senses were engaged in the search for Paul. Where was he? She was tired of the cocktail party—it smeared before her eyes into a sea of bland faces. She excused herself and went to the food table where she picked over the guacamole in a desultory fashion. Then she saw him. He was leaning against the fountain, his profile to her, wearing a lightweight cream jacket and blue jeans. She turned her back to him, pretending to concentrate on the food. The drink table was closer to him. Averting her eyes, she worked her way over to it.

"Margarita," Kate ordered. Damn the white wine. Full speed ahead. Spinning about, feigning confusion, "Oh, Paul, you're here."

His face wore an amused expression. "I do teach painting. I am showing. I am here."

"I saw your work."

"And?"

"I liked it."

"Of course."

"Well..." she looked around.

"Why don't you sit here," Paul suggested, patting the edge of the fountain.

"Okay."

The goldfish swam, flashes of orange. Light reflected off the water's surface. Cigarette butts floated in the fountain.

"So, it's been a while since we've had a talk," he said.

"Has it? I hadn't really noticed."

"Shall we go to *La Fragua* for a drink, or shall we have a cognac at my house?"

"Cognac." What am I saying?

They walked up the mountainside to his house. Paul poured the cognac from an old glass decanter, and they sat in the dark on the couch.

"I didn't think you'd come," he said.

"No?" she asked. She felt strangely like an actress in a play. The surroundings seemed so unreal. Paul was the director and she was the actress and she had forgotten her script. What role had he chosen for her to play? She couldn't remember.

"Take off your dress," he said. His hands were shaking. The cognac sloshed back and forth in his glass.

She stood up and slowly unwound her blue silk dress. He kissed her; She fell back onto the couch.

But this time he was impotent.

"It's your fault," he blamed her.

My fault? How? Could it be?—this had never happened to her before. She rose from the couch, picked up her glass of cognac, and went to the window, lighting a cigarette. Was he serious? Was he sane? Was this some sort of crazy test? Was it her fault? The cigarette calmed her. She stared out the window at the night sky riddled with stars. A blue crescent moon hung over the church. Paul took one of her

cigarettes and lit it. The end of it glowed in the dark. Then he turned on the light. The stars snapped out.

"Paul, let's forget about it," she said.

He came up behind her. He's forgiven me. He's going to hold me. Instead he grabbed her arm. She dropped the cigarette.

"Stop it. You're hurting me."

His fingers pressed into her flesh.

"Let go."

"Get dressed and get out." His voice low.

She dressed in a hurry, thinking: I'll kill you, you just wait, I'll get even. She wanted to hit him but knew she would never get away with it. He would grab her and throw her off the porch. She would spin through the air (knowing she was going to die) and splatter on the ground like a ripe watermelon. She waited until she was dressed to shout: "You coward, you're afraid to love." She was poised for flight. He leapt up, grabbed her arm, opened the door, and threw her out. She began to cry. The points of the stars slid in the sky. She wiped her face with her hands. Then she took off her shoes and walked barefoot down the mountainside, thinking over and over: there's got to be a way, there's got to be a way to make him love me. Her footsteps were silent as a cat's. There had to be a way. He had actually thrown her out. She sat down on a bench in the square dimly lit with moonlight. The birds were quiet now. An old man with white hair shuffled by, his gaze to the ground. The breeze felt moist; rain was on its way. Don't do it. Don't do it, an inner voice warned her. Don't bother with him; he'll drive you insane. But the power, another voice argued. I want power over him. The power will only control you. Give up. She looked up and saw the stars. They were white and cold and real. Paul was nothing. No genius. Just a man with problems. The stars were so clear. The moon sailed westward in the black sky. She went home to bed.

In the morning it was raining. Shiny puddles burst, concentric rings spreading outward from each raindrop. A rooster crowed. The church bells rang for morning mass. The fresh breeze entering her room smelled of clean stone and earth. Kate left her window and sat down before a mirror. In front of her was a tray of eye-shadows, a palette of over twenty different colors. She was an artist—why did she doubt that? Her face was a blank canvas upon which she could paint her own self-portrait. Staring into the mirror, she applied gold to her lids. Gold the color of money. Gold the color of love. Gold the color of success. And tell me now, she asked the face in the mirror, just how long can Paul resist? The face smiled back. She hummed a tune. Just how long? After all, she, too, was psychic and not unwilling to take a few risks. Paul would be hers. Yes, she thought, in Mexico one developed strange powers, strange powers that no one would believe.

—The End—