

SOUL OF THE HOME

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PARICUTIN (PAH-REE-KOO-TEEN), A blunt-topped cone rising some 518 meters above the valley, is a dormant volcano that sprang from a cornfield in 1943. During its brief period of activity, Paricutin destroyed two villages and forced more than 4,000 people to abandon their homes.

The weird, blackened landscape is approached after a 38.75-kilometer drive from town. The volcanic cone and the lava fields around it are accessible on horseback; guided trips may be arranged in Angahuan.

Travel Guide to Mexico, 1982 Edition,
American Automobile Association

I planned our sightseeing trips in Mexico every weekend, in the summer of 1982, relying mostly upon the AAA Travel Guide. There were more exotic and discriminating guidebooks than this, but AAA let me know of only such adventures as were comfortable and safe. Theirs was the practical research; we would not ever be desperate or stuck. I love the matter-of-factness of the AAA tone, even when talking about a horseback ride to a volcano. Except for the coaching in the word "weird," that tone lets us know that we must make of an experience what we will. AAA guides us through the ordinary; the extraordinary is up to us.

I'm more apt to find the extraordinary in museums than on horseback. I'm better in town. It was fine with me that we were staying in Morelia, Michoacan for the summer. My husband was doing some research, and I went along to take care of the children and see what I could see.

Morelia's center is a perfectly preserved colonial city. In the high, cut stone walls along the sidewalk, lines of tiny pebbles embedded in the mortar trace the outline of each stone. Behind the tall, carved front doors of each old home is a fully enclosed, tiled patio, with

benches and potted shrubs. Lining the patio on two sides are high-ceilinged rooms, their wide, windowed doors opening directly to the mountain sunshine. I liked the orderly shelter of the urban patio in the house where we stayed. It would have been enough for me, I felt, just to sit there. Maybe read a little. Just have a little time to think. But a day-trip featuring horses and a volcano was irresistible to everyone, even me, so I made the plans.

The road leading southwest out of Morelia toward the area of Paricutin was wide and smoothly paved, an engineering achievement in this country of rock hills and pines. Our Oldsmobile Vista Cruiser station wagon rode like a limousine. Past the coffee and banana plantations and orange groves beyond the lovely, lava-paved city of Uruapan, we found the rutted turn-off for Angahuan, where we were to rent horses. We stopped to inquire of some children playing in the dust beside the road.

Ed turned off the engine and, of course, the air conditioning, and as we rolled down our windows, we were surrounded on both sides by dusty, grinning dark heads, each one trying to thrust itself inside. The car filled immediately with the rancid, fruity smell of unwashed flesh which neither Ed nor I was willing to acknowledge. I placed my hand on my purse beside me on the seat, and our own children shrank away from the windows, huddling together and murmuring urgently to their father to get out of here.

Our chattering hosts had the short, blocky stature of their Tarascan forebears. They were staring and commenting loudly to one another in words we couldn't understand. None seemed to understand Ed's Spanish, either, although a boy, the tallest one, with very few teeth, worked his way through the shoving and pushing to Ed's window, and shouted in his face.

"Paricutin?" Then he repeated, "Paricutin!" He straightened up and stiffened, pointed his finger skyward, and said something that sounded like, "Wait!" He started away, stopped, turned to look back at Ed, held up his finger and again said, "Paricutin! Wait!"

Hearing the boy accent the final syllable of Paricutin, I checked my Travel Guide. Sure enough, bless the researcher's anglo heart, or ear, there was a mistake in the book. It was spelled phonetically as "pah-REE-koo-teen," when it should have read "pah-ree-koo-TEEN."

"Just so they got the part about 'dormant' right," Ed said when I pointed it out to him, and gave me a swashbuckling sideways grin. He has always liked the idea of playing with a little risk, while I'm more comfortable with predictability.

"Unless they meant to say 'extinct,'" I said, "which would be fine with me."

I've always been puzzled that other people seem to settle into a place where there are natural threats like hurricanes, or tidal waves or fault lines or volcanoes. But looking back at how I grew up in tornado country, familiar with the hot yellow stillness that meant we should be ready to head down into the basement when we heard the fire whistle, I've come to realize that, however large a threat is, when we live with it so long, its very constancy makes it ordinary. Fresher, more fleeting threats preoccupy us, inconvenience, gossip, or pain. Natural threats are in the background. Snow-topped Popocatepetl, its violence well in the past, makes as serene and lovely a backdrop for many of my Mexico snapshots as it did for the nineteenth-century landscape painter Velasco. While Velasco painted, justice for individuals was dissolving in the interests of social order. Had he guessed the future, the revolution that kept erupting and erupting throughout an entire decade of the early twentieth century, he might have concentrated on the volcanoes instead of the valleys. What I see is a lack of respect for the power of the forces below the earth, and for the passions of those people at the bottom of the social order. As for the passions of the people themselves, their passions are their constant preoccupation, a cause for the celebration of the proof of human existence, and usually they, too, take the volcanoes for granted, as just a part of the landscape, just background.

"Dad." our oldest child was pleading through gritted teeth. I realized I was holding my nose by breathing through my mouth. The heat and smell made the waiting close to unbearable.

"Their mothers love them," I probably said, for this was our family code for respect toward other children who annoyed our children, caused them pain, or seemed too stupid or ugly to matter in the juvenile caste system. Our children accepted the signal then. Now that they are older, I don't say it anymore. The last time I said, "Their mothers love them," one of the children replied, "Maybe so, maybe not."

A man in blue work clothes was approaching. He shoed the children away and, with the boy who fetched him leaning into his shoulder and hanging on every word, arranged with Ed in a very few minutes for us to meet him in town, straight ahead.

We left the windows open to air out the car as we started toward town. Dust swirled in and formed a thin film on the dashboard. We were looking in every direction for a sign of the volcano, but all of the tumbled, rocky peaks in the near distance looked alike to us. The road started a slight descent, and the narrow-peaked roofs of Angahuan made a tranquil cluster in the middle of a green space below. On the edge of town, split-rail fences separated neat, small fields of corn. In

the larger fields, a few cattle grazed. We stopped so that I could take a picture. While I was involved in the intricate calculations of adjusting to the bright light of the high altitude, my husband said, "There it is. Paricutin." He tried to sound matter-of-fact, because of course down deep he was thrilled to be the first to spot it, and yet he knew that I was, as always, at a disadvantage because of my job with f-stops and apertures, or with maps and odometers and signs for the turn-off, at other times. When I was a child, I loved being first to spot something on trips, and my acuity was the best in the family. When I took responsibility for my own children, though, I had to teach myself to find satisfaction in seeing what I could whenever I had the chance to look up and look around. I don't believe now, as I may have believed then, that this practice was self-sacrifice. I've come to believe in the sturdiness of my imagination. I'll eventually see what matters.

I scanned the irregular brown and green skyline above the peaked roofs of Angahuan. In front of the line of mountains straight ahead of us sat Paricutin. It had been there all along, a perfectly round cone, black and fat. The blackness of it was lusterless, an unrelenting black, a deader black than anything surrounding it. Its top had the saucer-shaped scoop of old, violent explosions. It didn't look ominous. It looked like a monument to ominousness. Still, I wished the book had said "extinct" and not just "dormant." Paricutin's presence was imposing. I didn't think it was meant to be approached, mounted, looked into. I didn't feel I needed to become familiar with this volcano any more than I had to smell the dusty Tarascan children to appreciate the unjust disparity of their lot with the lot of my own three, sitting scrubbed, with shoes, in a Vista Cruiser that rode like a limousine.

When we reached the plaza of Angahuan, a barely-controlled melee of men and horses was waiting for us. The men were short and blocky, dressed like working cowboys. The horses looked just this side of wild, their solid colors simple variations of brown. Each man seemed to be holding a horse, and when Ed got out of the car, they descended on him, all shouting at once, pulling the horse bridle with one hand and gesturing with the other, holding up three fingers, then two, glaring earnestly, insisting, "Señor! Señor!"

The man we had met up the road appeared at last and parted the crowd. He had changed into slacks with a leather belt, a sportshirt, leather riding boots, and a billed cap. A bandanna was around his neck. He would be our guide, he said. The others did not speak Spanish well enough. They were *indigenes*, Tarascans. He was Tarascan, too, he said, but he could speak Spanish. Would we like to ride to the lava-smothered village of Paricutin, to see the two roofs and bell tower still visible? Imagine riding your horse into the bell tower of a

church, señor. Or, would we like to ride to the volcano itself and hike to the top? He bowed to me: Don't worry, señora. It is perfectly safe for niños.

I bowed back, of course, acknowledging that in Mexico, at least, the children were more my concern than Ed's. I found the responsibility slightly suffocating back then, surrounded as I was with my young children and with all those images of women swaddling babies inside their shawls, the protective gesture of mothers everywhere, whether presiding over a tray of snacks for sale on the sidewalk, or waiting in the front seat of a pickup truck, or simply sitting on a bench in the plaza, watching the *paseo*. I wanted to resist this mainstay of even the earliest art. I saw the stone icons of mother with child as prescriptions for me, not celebrations. I never liked it when our daughter, our middle child, was addressed affectionately as "mamacita." Little mother. I wanted to say, "Maybe so, maybe not."

The crowd of men with horses moved restlessly and, with defiant glances toward our guide, began to address my husband again. Ed directed the guide to choose horses for each of us. He would negotiate the price of the entire trip with the guide, and we would pay at the end of the day. The guide could settle up with the men whose horses had been hired for the trip. We were going to the volcano.

I've always enjoyed watching my husband negotiate man-to-man in Spanish. He is lean and blond, with the high cheekbones of European nobility. His wire-rimmed glasses betray his vocation, college professor, and his rough hands and hard-muscled forearms furnish proof of his manly capacity for hard work. Face-to-face with the square brown Indian, Ed had just the right combination of educated superiority and earthy toughness to ride out bargaining rituals to the satisfaction and pleasure of both sides. He always was a natural in the culture of machismo, freer and strikingly effective, somehow, in a way that gave piquancy to his personality. Our deliberations at home, as we ironed out the assumptions of an egalitarian partnership, also ironed out that Latin vigor we both knew in Mexico.

The Tarascans were sizing us up. Exchanging chunky explosions of sound borne along on an uninterrupted current of sibilants, they inspected our bodies, then the bodies of the horses, and helped us mount up. They looked bold as brass, Indians unbowed, to me then. Now I know, because I have read a little bit about them, that they were part of an independent nation at the time of the Spanish Conquest, one of the few that had remained unconquered by the Aztecs. I know, too, that their origins are obscure, and that their emergence as a clan has not been described, since few remnants of the Michoacan Empire, founded by a Tarascan whose name was Tariacuri, have been located

and researched. Archeological interest has dwelt instead on the valleys, the "valley of Mexico" which was the center of the Aztec Empire, and the low, coastal regions of the Maya in the Yucatan.

The horse they gave me was the color of watery oatmeal. She smelled just horsey at first, but when I lifted my hand to push the hair from my face, that rancid, fruity smell again filled my nostrils. I tried not to touch the saddlehorn at all after that, and I assured myself that I'd remembered to stuff a pocket of Ed's backpack with Wash'n'Dries, which I would unpack with the lunch. Those were automatic, practical thoughts then: Wash'n'Dries, lunches, shoes, the camera. Anticipating needs usually seemed to represent clearing out thoughts of my own. I have more respect, now, for what I was doing.

We started out of the town square. We passed the principal buildings painted pink and blue with white wood trim. They ranged around the plaza. Empty today, and just a bare stone platform, the plaza would be lively only with people in it, on feast days, or once a week on market day.

A narrow, cobbled road led away from the plaza, and soon we were in a dirt lane, moving through pine groves, where the guide leaned into them and plucked some needles and stuffed them in his pocket. Then we were entering into a long, cool tunnel of live oaks, along large bean fields and open pastures. Ed and the guide rode side-by-side while the guide's son, a miniature version of himself, walked beside them. The horses of our children followed obediently enough. "Oatmeal" and I brought up the rear. I wanted to take pictures of the family on our trip.

I can still see the back of our youngest child, four years old. He rode right behind the guide, who held the reins of his horse. He wore a miniature facsimile of a red football jersey, its large white numerals partially hidden by the Mexican farmworker's straw hat slung on his back. He is our jolly, sweaty child, the one with curls. He wasn't supposed to happen in our careful plans, but insisted on happening anyway at the time of, or perhaps because of, the unwelcome death of Ed's young brother. I don't know when I accepted this coupling of death and life. What is in me now, though, is a fierce, delicious love I wouldn't have known otherwise, although I cannot pinpoint the origin of the knowledge, or of the love itself. I'm beginning to understand the persistence of the belief that out of death comes life, even as I resist the view of myself as a vessel in the service of that belief.

As our caravan followed the edges of the fields, we lost sight of the volcano from time to time. When we did manage to catch glimpses of it, it did not seem to be any nearer. I didn't feel its presence at all.

Nevertheless, I told myself that the horses were moving us steadily toward it, and I expected to encounter evidence at any time that this was no ordinary ride through the cultivated countryside. We were heading to one of the earth's recent reminders that human beings, with our bean rows and fenced pastures, do not matter to the forces of the earth. She lets us dig and hoe on her dry and shallow skin, then on a day, any day of our intricately calculated calendar, she explodes in searing gas and foaming rock. What erupts can smother our cozy towns. It covers our puny claims to place. It drives us sway even from the sites we have marked out to be buried when we die. Under it, our already-dead are buried twice. Paricutin used to be the name of a town. Now it is the name for "a blunt-topped cone rising some 518 meters above the valley"

We entered an open area of high pasture planted in corn. The volcano appeared to be just behind it. White mist swirled around it at its height, and above us was a line of dark clouds. I retraced mentally the locations of the vinyl ponchos. Assured that there was one tucked into the saddle behind each rider, I looked again across the field of corn.

This time, the view was different.

The rows of corn led away from the path at right angles. Instead of reaching all the way to the fence on the other side, however, their long lines stopped at the base of a black wall. The wall was as high as a single-story building. It was erect, and stretched its rough face beyond our view in both directions. Behind it rose a rock-solid plain. The lava had stopped, right in the middle of this high pasture of corn, forty years ago.

The lava fields served as a kind of dais below the volcano, and soon we were riding along the base of the rough wall, looking for the path that would get us up above the corn. The path appeared to me to be just another narrow cleft in the rock, but the guide, then Ed, then the children, seemed to take their horses confidently upward. Oatmeal began scrambling up as soon as the way was cleared, and I grabbed the smelly saddlehorn with both hands as we tilted back. I leaned forward until my chin was touching her thin mane, and I squeezed my knees mightily into her ribs. She was clearly in charge. And while I was thinking that I had no business riding horseback, she was drawing conclusions of her own.

The top of the lava bed, as it turned out, was not flat at all, so she had to take me up and down several steep ridges, formed when the molten rock hardened on top while the rest of the flow continued under it, tumbling it, and smoothed out into a low path like a streambed around it. Into that arrangement was tucked an equine

reward. One bush in particular, medium-height and global, with yellow-green leaves, grew in the ashes and dirt that had settled in the crevices around these ridges. Oatmeal must have decided that, since I was reluctant to tell her what to do, she could stop for a nibble whenever she liked. I could see these greenish globes, which I took to calling "horsenip," everywhere on the trail ahead. I had to take charge of this horse.

Our progress through that part of the trail was an argument: she couldn't eat; I couldn't relax. A bush would approach, she would head toward it, I would rein her in sharply, and she would rear back and away from it, but not before taking a toothy swipe at the horsenip or sometimes at me. We did not fall too far behind, but we were both a bit testy when the trail finally opened out into a broad field of black, cindery ash, newly planted in pines, one foot tall. Ed turned in his saddle and called back, "El gobierno." The government. An organized effort to bring something living from the ashes.

We skirted the tender plantings. Ed dropped back to ride beside each of the children from time to time to explain the geology of the place, or point out the views. I wasn't much in my role of rear guard, I'm afraid. I was either setting the f-stop in spite of my cranky horse or on the lookout for patches of horsenip.

The guide and his son had been taking turns walking. Through this volcanic field of pines, however, neither could make much progress on foot. It was like walking in dry sand. Their heels dug into the grains of black glass and it shifted, pushing against the arches of their feet, preventing their toes from rocking forward. Both the guide and his son had to mount the horse, and to ease the burden of the extra weight, Ed slowed his horse, and told the children to slow up a little. Our oldest child, ten years old then, was just ahead of me. His mount was an old, rust-colored mare, who was only too glad to slow down. She'd been lagging and lagging. Our son would urge her on with his soft-soled Nikes, and she would lurch forward for a few yards, then slow up again.

It was this child who reminded me of the habits of his rust-colored mare a few years later when he was ready to take his own trip to Mexico. I pulled out the old 1982 AAA Travel Guide, and the photo album and the map. I showed him the outlines of our summer stay, but he reminded me of all the details of that day-trip, our smelly hands, the lunch I packed, the color of his horse. This child, with shiny eyes and the earnest look of his father, is ready to leave home. I always thought I could give him up, to college, to love, to the freest of lives. I thought giving him up would come reasonably and naturally, as a normal part of childrearing. It doesn't. I still want to

look at him every day. I wonder what he will remember about his childhood, and if it will make him glad.

On the part of the trip among the newly-planted pines, Oatmeal was irritated at the slowing of the caravan. Already annoyed at being denied her horsey snacks, she took aim over and over again at the rusty rump ahead. Then she raced ahead, charging and nipping as she passed, urging everyone along.

The volcano was much larger and closer now.

The blackness of it looked just as deep, just as dull, just as thoroughly inert as it had from a distance. But there was movement around its crown. White clouds still swirled there, and above them the dark storm clouds began moving toward us and over our heads. Rain began to fall all at once, a fine, dense mist without thunder or lightning. Ed and the guide dropped back to help the children with the ponchos I had packed, and soon we were a tranquil caravan again, each rider under a private tent. Ed's poncho was blue. Alongside him, the guide and his son huddled under a single large blanket that covered the flanks of their horse. The youngest child followed, a human triangle of safety orange. Our daughter, behind him, wore slicker yellow. Our oldest, behind her and ahead of me, wore school colors, maize and blue. I thrust my hand out of the folds of my own sage green poncho, and, in the unreasonable hope that in this light it would turn out, snapped a picture. It did turn out, and it is my favorite of the trip. It shows the line of riders moving ahead of me through the thin mist, heading straight for the volcano's wall, which fills the entire backdrop of the photo. The bright colors seem to be the only living thing in the black landscape.

As we approached, we saw that we would have to go up on factory-high piles of cinders surrounding the cone at its base. The piles were steaming. For a moment, I wondered what "dormant" really meant. I saw evidence of heat, and I began to be concerned about how predictable eruptions might be. The feeling of menace subsided only slightly when I realized that I was seeing evaporating rain, and not a volcanic vent of steam from deep within the earth. I wondered what we thought we were doing there, around a volcano that was not extinct but dormant, or, as another theory puts it, "quiescent."

Although the outer shell of the earth is solid rock 1800 miles thick, a trapped reservoir of molten rock underlies the Paricutin region. There is no single theory that explains the presence of this magma beneath Paricutin. All theories agree, however, that the crust above the chamber continues to exert pressure on the gases released by the molten rock below. The gases follow a channel of weakness in the

crust and when they find a fissure or a fault, they plume sky-high, exploding rock into dust and ashes, launching huge fragments of incandescent lava called "bombs" into the clouds. Foaming rock-on-fire flies upward and falls, cooling into clinkers as porous as coke. The cone of ashes, cinders and bombs grows. It grows on the skin of the earth. It is the enduring fruit of a deeper earth than the seasonal fruit we call corn, or beans, or the human life which sprang up in a gentler eastern garden.

It was ridiculous to doubt good old AAA, but how much can you really trust books to tell you? At their zenith the Aztecs destroyed the old histories and designed new ones enhancing their past. The designs show two-dimensional figures on their travels from the legendary island of Aztlán toward the "mountain from whence sounds come." The drawings of the volcanic cone give it a drooping peak, like whipped cream before it is stiff enough, and there is a god inside, who is making sounds. The sounds are indicated by a string of candy-cane shaped balloons coming from his mouth. In the Aztec codices, any speaking, singing, or shouting, any human or godly or animal noise, is indicated by this string of hollow candy-canes. Language was recorded as just one more candy-cane shaped balloon. The Aztecs didn't err in seeking the volcano; their destruction was not a natural one after all. But I felt just then the rightness of their drawing gods inside volcanoes. "Quiescent" is just a word in a theory in a language to be swallowed up in the noise of the monster it is claiming to describe. The underground gases of the earth can spring up, can blow through a fissure at any time with scant warning.

On February 20, 1943, a Tarascan farmer named Dionisio Pulido and his son were goading their ox, turning furrows for corn. The earth in the region had been trembling for a week, but on this day they heard a low rumble, as if something underground had growled. Behind the furrow rose a spiral of smoke. All ran, the man, the boy, the ox.

That night the townspeople watched the luminous spiral above Pulido's field. By the next day, there sat a cinder cone, fat and black and twenty-five feet high. It began belching rocks at noon. In ten weeks, the volcano was 1100 feet high. From its crater, masses of vapor rose three miles into the air.

Lava did not flow from it. All of the lava left its underground chamber by explosion. The wall of it landed and began a viscous movement across the cultivated fields. It smothered the village of Paricutin, hurriedly abandoned by its citizens. The lava filled the orderly stone streets of Parangaricutiro and hardened there, changing the civic landscape forever. The cone grew to 1700 feet above the

surrounding valley before it stopped erupting. It was short-lived but industrious, driving 4,000 people from their homes. The villagers called it "el Monstruo," the monster.

Our caravan halted at the base of one of the factory-sized piles of cinders. It had stopped raining. The guide tied our horses to the bushes and suggested we eat lunch. We exhausted the supply of Wash'n'Dries and passed around sandwiches of sliced ham on bobbin-shaped rolls called *bolillos*. I liked this lunch. I liked the smell of the rinsed air. I liked the simplicity of the ham sandwiches. I liked drinking the *sidral* warm. I liked just sitting on my jacket on the ground, eating lunch with my husband and children. I do not mean to ignore the extraordinariness of the place. But I want to remember how good familiarity seemed at that moment, when so often, in those days, the familiarity could be so inescapable and demanding.

I was laboring under a misconception, too, because my Spanish was new. My anglo ear that summer heard the Mexicans referring to me as a housewife, an "alma de casa," which I translated literally as "soul of the home." I never wanted to be a housewife then, or the homemaker, either, and the work was hard for me during our stays in Mexico. But I didn't know until I had time to read Spanish a few years later that the word wasn't "alma" but simply "ama." A housewife was a housewife. Now, I find myself wanting to romanticize a little. I would just as soon be called "the soul of the home." I think it's because that seems less like a yoke to me now, and more like an accolade. Watching my family enjoying what I'd packed for that extraordinary place in 1982, though, I remember feeling, just for a moment, the pleasure in being "soul of the home."

We left everything behind, except the camera, for the scramble up to the first level. The guide waited for us at the top, a grin of something like anticipation on his face. His face was handsome, with a well-trimmed moustache like a dramatic actor. He looked like Errol Flynn. When we had all gathered on top, he drew out of his pocket the pine needles he'd plucked from the pine grove early in the trip. He knelt down over a rough pile of rock and held the pine needles in front of a small ledge. The pine needles didn't change at first. Then they began to smoke. Then they began to glow, and kindled into flame.

"Gaz," he said, and grinned expectantly.

The children probably said, "Wow?"

Then he stuck a cigarette in his mouth and leaned his face down to the ledge. He drew on the cigarette and it glowed. He offered it to Ed proudly, but Ed simply shook his head. *Magnifico*, he may have said. Amazing.

The guide looked at me. I really didn't like the little concocted show of playing with fire, but I felt I should acknowledge his eager efforts, so I leaned over the ledge and rubbed my hands together as if to warm them. Although I meant just to politely play along, the warmth felt good on my hands.

I've seen only one erupting volcano in Mexican art. In paintings of the revolution, it is the blood of the martyrs that is gushing instead of molten magma, and the firearms, not the mountains, spout smoke. The volcano I've found is a detail I spotted in a mural painted by Diego Rivera. This part of the mural seems to arrive at what the volcano might mean to the idea of modern Mexico. Rivera, one of the most important seekers and keepers of Mexican cultural identity, a leader in the twentieth-century art that concerned itself with both the revolution and the post-revolutionary impulse to modernity, called this mural "Fruition: the Fecund Earth." A naked father, child, and mother are in the foreground, their backs to us. The mother is watching as she reclines in the shallow scoop of a low rock. The child is holding up a wire in each hand. The ends of the wires spark because of the electrical connection between their points. The father is standing with an arm outstretched toward what is being offered from the very important background. The very important background is a volcano. A Promethean figure leans from its mouth and gives the man fire. Fire as electricity.

"Shall we go?" Ed said to me, and looked up at the side of the volcano.

We had only about 800 feet to climb. Since the natural slope was about thirty degrees, we would have to turn sideways, digging the sides of our feet into the slippery cinders. The guide and his son went first, then Ed, then the boys. I took the hand of my daughter, who was six then, and I tried to keep her from sliding, so that her feet, clad only in sandals, would not get scraped by any sharp-edged clinkers. It was not exhilarating or frightening or uncomfortable. It was simply an awkward climb up a huge pile of cinders. It was slippery work.

"My sandals are getting ruined," my daughter said.

"It's worth it," I told her, not knowing exactly what I meant, but knowing she would take my word for it.

The boys were taking turns sprinting up several yards and sliding down, uninhibitedly sacrificing their Nikes to the joy of the climb. They reached the top and waited for us, watching for our first horizontal step so that the older one could cry out, "What took you so long?" and the younger one could echo? "Yeah, what took you so long?"

We walked over to the rim and looked in. I wish I could say that this

was the highlight of the trip. After all, this was what we were aiming for. What we saw, though, was just a deep, wide empty hole, a hole in a pile of cinders, thoroughly inert.

I looked out across the plain of lava at the high ridges we had ridden over and the low, flat flows around them that resembled streambeds. The patches of horserip were green and lush. I saw the place we'd eaten lunch, the horses tied to the bushes, the ponchos spread out on the ground to dry. I wouldn't use the guidebook word "barren" for the miles of volcanic plain that covered this region of the earth.

And I would stick to my first impression of the cone itself when I saw it from a distance: monumental. The cone on its dais of lava is a monument to the deep life of the earth. That we survive on the skin of the earth is luck, the accidental tolerance of natural forces deaf to our frail-webbed theories and blind to our bonds of affection.

We spent a good bit of time taking pictures: Here we are on the top of a real volcano in Mexico. In most of the pictures, we have our arms around one another.

I didn't foresee any particular pain or loss on that mountaintop. They've come since, the foreseen and the unforeseen, as they come to any family. Creating a family is itself a celebration and a risk.

And I couldn't predict in what ways the trip would matter to my children. As it turns out, I learned how aware they always were of me, for they made my prowess with that cranky horse the subject of family legend. Their favorite story is how their mother took control of the wildest horse in the bunch. Who'd have thought it?

The boys raced down the mountain, and the guide hurried after them. Ed went on ahead, too, while my daughter and I took the slope with stubborn caution, as before.

Once on horseback, I rode first, because Oatmeal resumed her nippy ways, and none of the other riders wanted to expose their horse's rear flank. All the horses were moving faster now, anyway. They knew they were on their way home.

Once I looked back and saw my daughter, smiling, her eyes closed, riding calmly along in her little red jacket and scarred sandals.

"I'm a princess," she replied when I asked her if she was all right. "My horse's name is Beauty." None of these Indian horses had names. They would have been referred to as "the brown one," or "Dion's mare," or "the wild one."

"I like that name," I probably said. My daughter's imagination was already sturdy then. May it ever be so.

The sun was going down as we re-traced the edge of the government's volcanic field of pines. Watching the sky change color, we moved like experts now over the ridges of lava and down along the

low arrested flows that looked like streambeds. We found ourselves back beside the corn and beans and open pastures. We moved along the lane bordered by live oaks. We paused to look at the black, scoop-topped silhouette against the violet sky. It seemed to me that we had not been there at all. We moved through the dark pines and into town.

The only light in Angahuan was that of candles. Riding on horseback into the dark town was suitably romantic, but what had happened was a power failure. There was no functioning electricity in the village. Rural and isolated, the residents expected to wait at least three days for the power to be restored. But with nothing else to do, the women stood at their doors along our route with candles, watching for us to come along, shushing their dogs and children, calling out to our guide: Hello. Have you heard? The power is out.

At least, I imagine that is what they said.

