

The New York Times

The Sting of Fear

By Wendy Lichtman

"IF you get stung by a scorpion," our instructor tells us the first night of a weeklong women's yoga retreat in Yelapa, Mexico, "you can suffer from respiratory failure. So don't forget to shine a flashlight on your sandals before you put them on. Scorpions are nocturnal and they'll be frightened by the light." Our teacher gives this information in much the same tone that she has told us what time breakfast is served, how to make a telephone call, and where to sign up for a massage.

There are 20 of us sitting in the dining room and, as I look from table to table, I notice that the other guests are still enjoying their dessert. They're eating creamy mango flan, and they don't appear to be upset about respiratory failure. I seem to be the only one who, now that I think about it, is already having a little trouble breathing. Earlier that day I'd fallen in love with Yelapa, a small fishing village about an hour's boat ride from Puerto Vallarta. I was taken with the coconut trees, the waterfalls, the parrots flying overhead, and the color of the jungle: purple, orange, red, yellow, every possible green. On the walk from my room near the ocean to the retreat center, everyone I'd passed -- children with backpacks, adults with baskets and burros -- had greeted me with a nod and an "hola." And after only one day of yoga classes, the pain in my shoulders and neck was fading. But now that I've found out why all the beds in Yelapa hang from the thatched-roofed ceilings on rope, my love affair grinds to a halt. Tell me I need to spend the night hanging from the ceiling so scorpions can't crawl

up the legs of my bed while I sleep, and I start looking for the doors. But there are no doors around because, like most of the structures in Yelapa, the dining hall has no walls. There's also no electricity, but until this moment I hadn't missed that, either -- I was enjoying the cool night air and the candlelight from the lanterns on each table. The walk to my room is no more than half a mile from the retreat center, but because I'm afraid to step outside the beam of my flashlight, it takes me a while to make the trip. Also, I'm startled by the noises. I'd thought that a town without cars -- without horns honking, motors gunning, tires screeching, alarms blaring -- would be quiet at night. But I'm a city girl, so I hadn't factored in animals. In Yelapa people keep hogs chained in their yards, and the hogs snort and squeal. There's a parking lot for donkeys in the big field across the path, and the donkeys bray. And the jungle animals -- frogs, crickets, monkeys, whatever else hides in the darkness -- are never put on mute.

As I walk head down, studying the dirt and listening to the sounds, a sharp pain returns between my shoulder blades. Assuming I'll awaken in the middle of the night, I put a flashlight next to my pillow; actually, I put two flashlights -- one on each side of the pillow. But I somehow sleep perfectly well in my bed, which hangs about two feet off the ground, alone under its small palapa.

I wake up to a remarkable morning: the roosters crow, the sun rises, the air smells both sweet from flowers and salty from the ocean, and I show up for yoga surprised to feel so happy. "Open your heart to the morning sky," my teacher suggests, and this isn't hard to do when both arms are stretched back, the chin is raised, and in the cloudless sky above, seven large yellow birds fly from the jungle and head toward the ocean. Each day the women in my group do yoga in the morning and something wonderful in the afternoon -- we swim, write, draw or hike the burro paths to hidden streams. One afternoon, our teacher tells us that the schoolchildren in the village need supplies, so we go through our suitcases and fill a bag with notebooks, pens, markers, tape, scissors and magazines. The next afternoon, a group of 9- year-old boys comes by the retreat center to recite a poem of thanks. I don't understand Spanish,

but I've had a 9-year-old boy of my own, so I easily understand the clearing of throats, the elbow of one child into the ribs of another, the fit of giggles.

The large stone patio where we practice yoga is about 30 yards from the dining hall, and during the pre-dinner classes I tease myself by trying to smell what they're cooking. In cobra pose one evening, I raise my upper torso and head toward the kitchen. Might be stuffed peppers, I think hopefully. And late each night, as I follow the path of my flashlight back to my room, I tell myself I'm less afraid.

Look, I didn't even flinch when that rock fell, which made the dog howl, which made some birdlike thing above me screech. I take some pride, too, after a few nights, in being able to sleep with only one flashlight next to my pillow.

And then, at 6:20 in the morning on the fifth day of my visit, when, barefoot and naked, I'm about to get into the shower, my scorpion appears. Shaped like an itchy-bitsy lobster, he creeps across the straw mat I'm standing on, the dark brown needle of his poisonous tail about 10 inches from my foot.

My sandals are right behind me, but I don't reach for them; I don't move at all.

I hold my breath and stare and pray for the animal to keep moving. I stand frozen until he slithers behind the toilet.

Then, unshowered, I dress and rush down the path to class eager to tell my story. "Hola! Hola! Hola!" I chirp to everyone I pass.

UNFORTUNATELY, by the time I get to the retreat center, yoga class has begun -- the other women are already bowing to the sun. Quietly I unroll my mat, stretch, and plan what I'll say. I was, quite literally, scared stiff, I'll tell them. It was, what, eight inches away? I'll ask, showing the distance with my hands.

For one of the poses we work with a partner, and before we begin, I tell her about my morning adventure. "Are you O.K.?" she whispers, resting her hands on my back. "I am," I say, and as she adds pressure between my shoulder blades, I'm surprised that it doesn't hurt there -- not a bit. I'm more

than O.K., I realize. I am, to tell the truth, absolutely delighted to have seen a scorpion.

That evening, two women walk me part of the way back to my room on their way to Gringo Night at the dance hall. We listen to something that sounds like the humming of a huge generator, curious about what it could be until one of the women identifies the sound as a chorus of frogs mating. There's a full moon and we wonder if that's related to the frog songs, and as we speculate on reasons for the frog orgy, I realize that I've forgotten to turn on my flashlight. The moon is very bright, and I can see just fine, but still it surprises me that at this late hour I am not examining every segment of the path before I step on it. The last afternoon of my visit, a few of us go to see a woman in town who sells the yarn paintings and beaded jewelry of the Huichol Indians.

One bracelet I particularly love has a scorpion woven into it, the tiny tail and pincers made of white beads, the background gold and green. "What's the symbolism of this one?" I ask. "Facing fear," she says, as she shows me other beautiful bracelets with peyote flowers, long beaked birds and flashes of lightning woven into their patterns. But I have already fastened the beaded loop around the button that closes the scorpion bracelet and am counting out my pesos.