

Vallarta: My Healing Place

BY WANDA ST. HILAIRE

(Part 1 of 2)

Last January, I had recently returned from a one-month Christmas vacation in Vallarta when I began to plan a celebratory trip with my best friend. At the tender age of 29, I'd had breast cancer, and last summer would have marked a 20-year cancer-free triumph. In February, two soul sisters (my friend had been through breast cancer 5 years prior) booked a "celebration of life" trip to Italy for the fall.

Two weeks later, I found a lump in my other breast. I booked an emergency mammogram, after which the doctor advised that the x-ray did not look promising. I left the concrete institute stunned and confused. After all of this time, I was sure I would never need to experience the lesson of cancer again.

On the way to see a client, I passed a beautiful field and for a moment, a calm lucidity fell over my mind in the midst of a sea of panic. I asked myself - my heart, not my head - what I would do if it were cancer. The first "order" came loud and clear: go back to Vallarta for chelation and holistic treatments before any allopathic intervention. I knew my spirit was not prepared for whatever lay ahead if I were diagnosed, and I felt my body needed immune boosting.

Mexico had been my healing zone; upon my divorce in 1993 after a short-lived marriage, I had severe back spasms and grief that threatened to overwhelm me. I booked a flight to Vallarta with two friends and one day, while sitting alone on the beach in the early morning, something came over



me telling me all would be well. The next morning, the back spasms had vanished and each day, the beauty of the Bay of Banderas helped to dissipate my sorrow.

Three years later, I found myself alone in France after a devastating break-up with a Frenchman. As I wandered the streets of Paris wondering what to do (I was on a six-month leave of absence from my job), I knew I had to return to Vallarta. The cold gray of Europe in November and the anonymity would not suffice. I needed the sun, the sea, and the people of Mexico to mend my wildly out-of-control heartbreak.

I rented an apartment in a small Mexican hotel in 5 de Diciembre. Awash in the bewilderment of a third catastrophe within a five-year span, I walked the hills of Puerto Vallarta each day and the shoreline each sunset. My eyes must have belied my condition; kind and concerned Mexicans would stop me to ask if there was anything I needed, anything they could do to help. Even the unkempt homeless man on my street stopped me one day to offer a chocolate muffin he'd just received. It was a gift I will never forget.

Slowly, the sun and energy of Vallarta erased the dark clouds. I took Spanish lessons from a scholarly Mexican man who was, ironically, married to a French woman. The couple took me under their wing and had me over for lively dinners with exquisite classical music. I painted in Pueblo Real with a quiet, talented artist. The waiters and owners of the restaurants I frequented accepted me as family and always took the time to chat or play a game of dominoes. They knew I needed TLC and did not shy away from my air of sadness. After five months in Puerto Vallarta, I returned home to my Canadian life, healed and filled with gratitude for the time I was granted here.

Back to last year ... in March, I was diagnosed once again with breast cancer. I immediately did my research and booked an emotional voyage to my beloved second home, PV. That was my 27th trip to Mexico and for an entirely different experience.

I came here purposefully alone and had chelation treatments with a firm but compassionate doctor, along with other daily holistic treatments. Placed on a strict cleansing diet, I was easily able to find fresh and delicious food in the *mercados* and the restaurants. I walked everywhere, journalized, and read seaside each day.

When people discovered the purpose of my trip, the kindness of strangers was unexpected and extraordinary. I bought freshly squeezed juice from a man on my street each morning and, one day, he wrote out a healing recipe for me. When I returned the next day and apologized because I didn't have the time to find everything with all of my appointments, he smiled and nodded. The next morning, he handed me a bag with all of the ingredients he'd picked up at two *mercados* for me. No charge.

After one month in PV, I went back to Canada feeling strong, cleansed, and healthy with my spirit fortified for the challenge that lay ahead.

In between surgery and radiation, I spent a month (another heart-directed self-promise) with my sister in the

beauty of British Columbia. There, I soul-searched about the path my life was taking. I'd lost my sales contract, without benefits, due to the time off I'd needed for my illness. After considering many options, it was clear what I would do after treatment. For the previous two years, a voice had been nagging at me to quit my sales career, which had become stressful in the midst of the economic downturn, and go to Vallarta to write. I'd made all manner of excuses, all logic-driven. This time my heart led the way. I decided that life was far too short not to do what I love, where I love. After receiving a clean bill of health from my oncologist, I subleased my apartment in Calgary and moved to Puerto Vallarta on December 1st to write my second travel memoir.

When I landed, I stayed for a month at my usual little hotel and fell into a funk. After being on one mission or another to get well and plan a new life, I was lost without an assignment to immediately attend to.

My arrival was specifically planned to coincide with my favorite Mexican celebration, the Festival of the Virgin of Guadalupe. I visited *el centro* nightly to watch and to nosh at the many stands bearing the best of the local women's cooking and baking. The spiritual energy of the processions, which build momentum to the finale of the Virgin's birthday on December 12, fed the part of my soul in need of reassurance after a daunting year sometimes darkened with doubt.

(Continued in next week's issue)

Canadian Wanda St.Hilaire is the author of *The Cuban Chronicles*, the *Circle of Life* series, and a poetry/journal written in PV called *Of Love, Life and Journeys*. She is currently writing her next travel memoir about the "French Fiasco" as mentioned above. You can visit her site at www.wandasthilaire.com and find *The Cuban Chronicles* at *El Sofa*, *Casa del Libro*, *Las Mujeres de Villa* and *Gringo Books* (Bucerias), or visit the author at the weekend farmers' markets.