

The dissatisfaction of Zaniyah

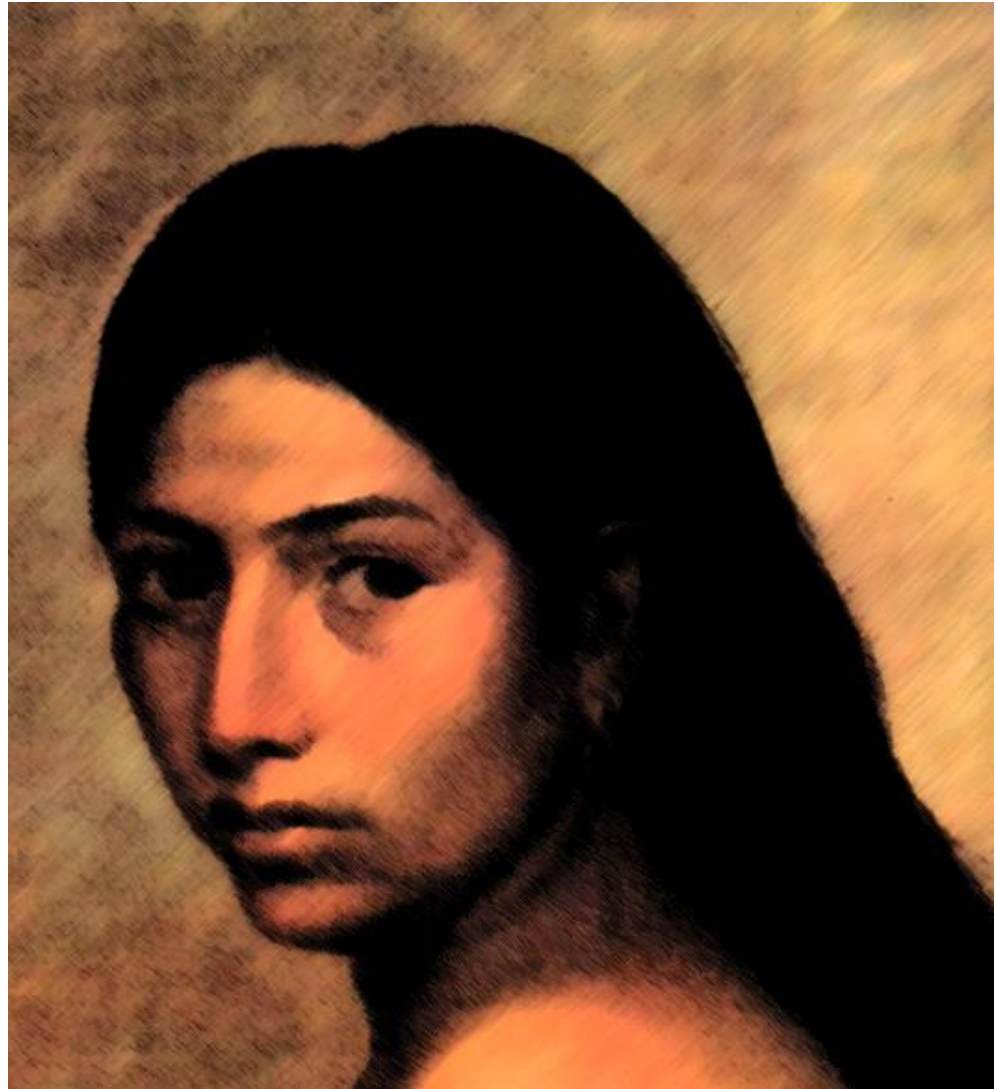
Scholarly sources:

Lewis, Oscar (1978). Tepoztlan: Village in Mexico. In George and Louise Spindler (eds) *Cultures around the World II: Four cases*. Fort Worth, TX: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Lockhart, James (1996). *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Meet Zaniyah

Zaniyah Sierra was a fourteen-year-old Nahua Indian girl living in Mexico in 1948.



She lived in the town of Tepoztlan in the state of Morelos.



Tepoztlan was located in the foothills of the beautiful Tepozteco Mountains just sixty miles outside of Mexico City. The charming town had a central square with a park, bandstand, trees, benches and public buildings.

But Zaniyah had little appreciation for her town. She longed to be somewhere else.



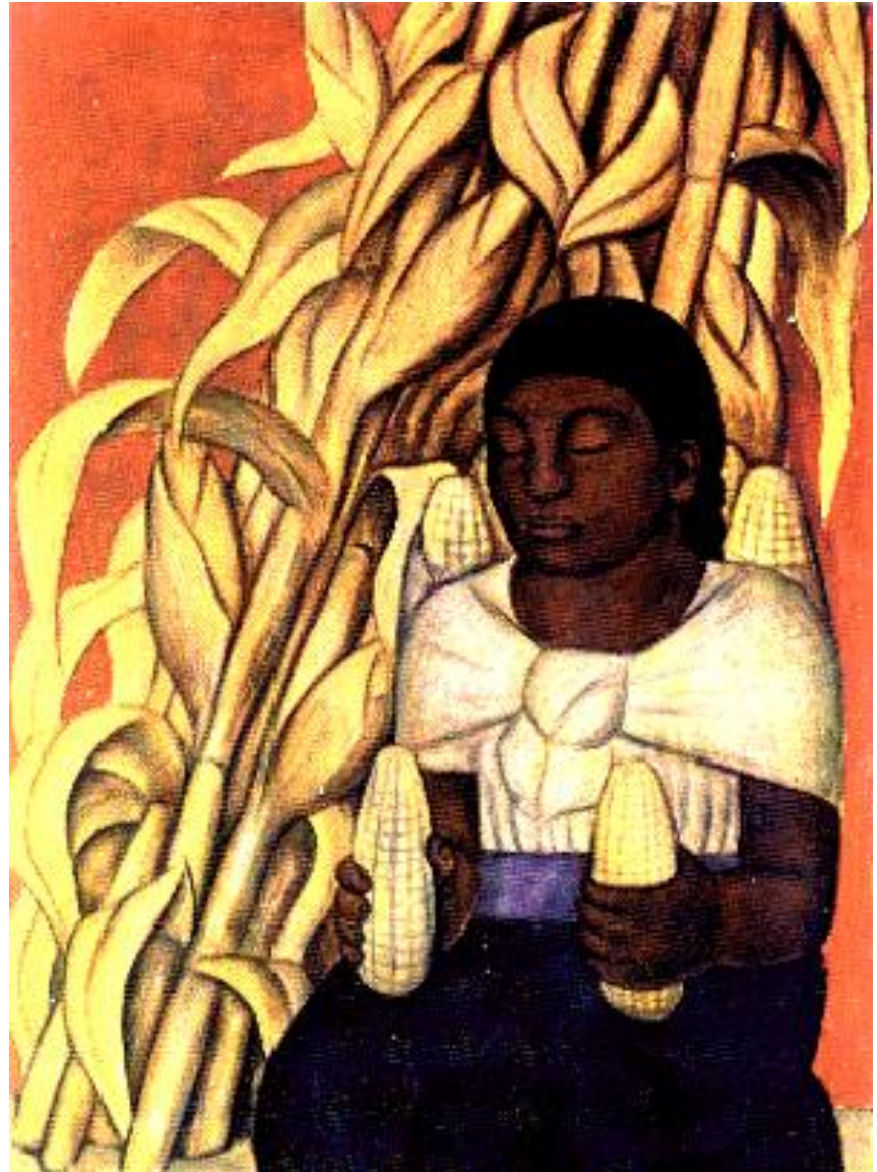
Oh, it wasn't that her life was so bad in Tepoztlan. She lived with her parents and two siblings in a house with adobe walls made of stone and mortar—a house much larger and nicer than many others in the town.

Of course it had no electricity or running water, which meant Zaniyah and her siblings had to haul in water from local springs every day.



The house had a nice vegetable garden of healing herbs, coffee, bananas, papayas, mangos, and prickly pears.

In Zaniyah's Nahua culture, the women were expected to work in the home or house gardens, but the men were expected to work in the fields. Zaniyah's father farmed corn and beans on communal lands outside of town. Because the lands were owned by everyone in the village, her father did not have to pay rent or taxes for the land.



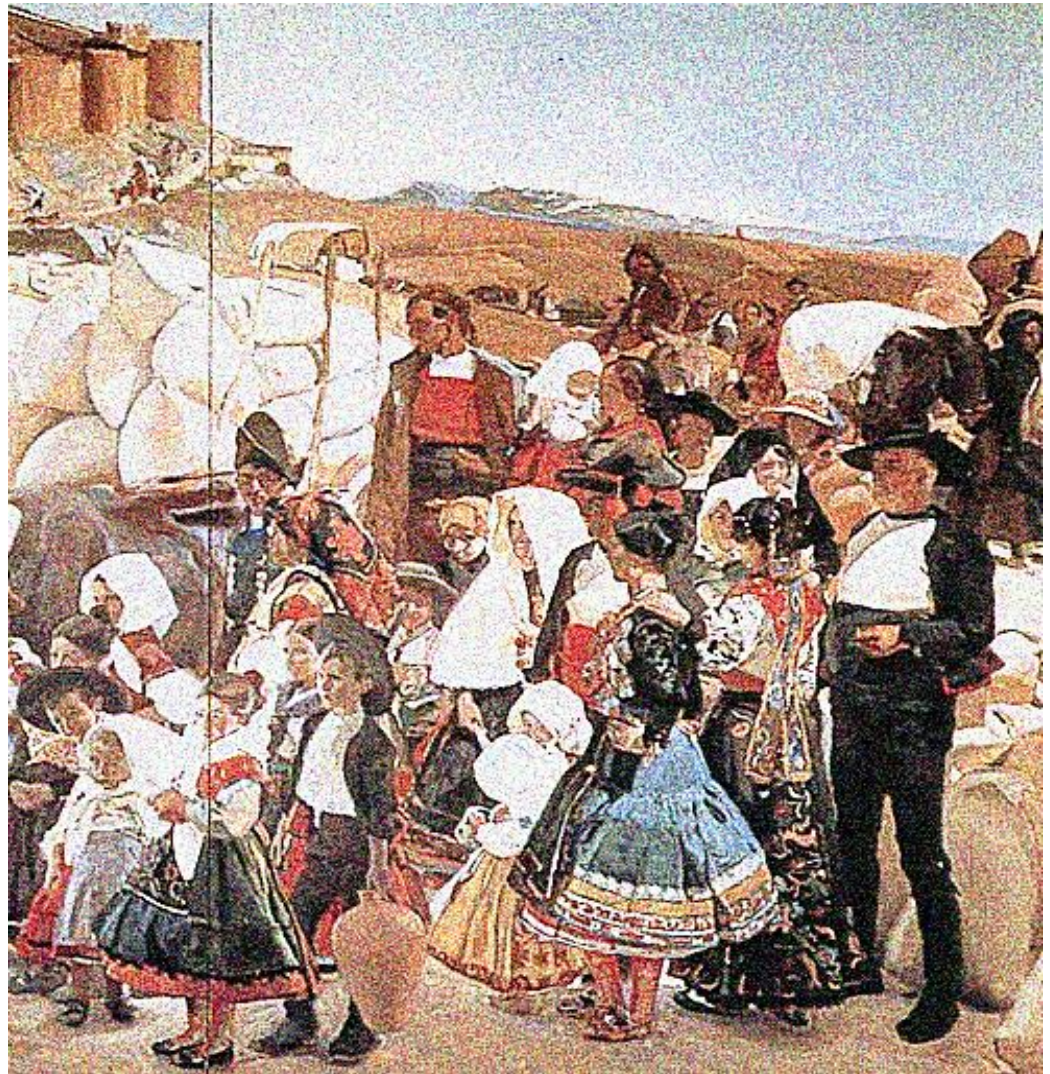
Because of the free land, Zaniyah's family was reasonably comfortable. Zaniyah had grown up with decent clothes and a good number of puppets and dolls made by her townspeople. She and her friends would play house with the dolls, pretending they were the dolls' parents.

But Zaniyah was unhappy that her family did not have other things—like electricity so they could play a radio.



Her mother would criticize Zaniyah for not being grateful for what she did have.

"Think of our festival days," her mother would remind her in *Nahuatl*—the ancient language of the townspeople. "You always have fun then."



But Zaniyah continued to mope. She resented her responsibilities more and more as she grew older.

Zaniyah was the oldest child in the family. As in most households in nearly all cultures, this left her with considerable responsibility for the care of her two younger siblings.



In fact, her mother took Zaniyah out of school when she was in the fifth grade to help out at home.

Fortunately Zaniyah had learned to read and write in Spanish. Now all Zaniyah wanted to do was read.



But Zaniyah didn't have the opportunity to do everything she wanted. Zaniyah was going to turn fifteen next year. This would mark her passage into womanhood. She'd receive a pair of shoes, an apron, earrings, and a brightly colored dress.

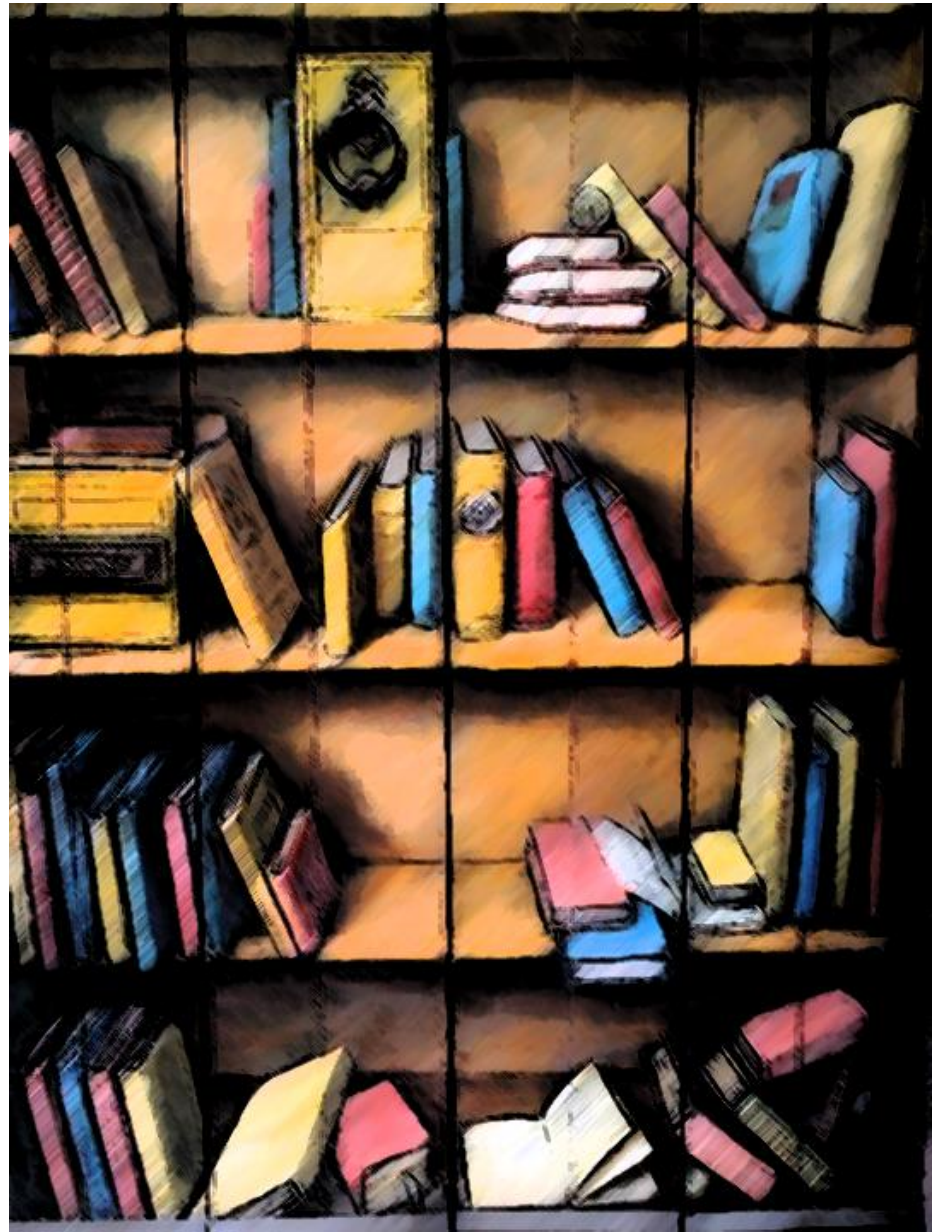


But at age fifteen or sixteen the girls of her town were also expected to be married. This she did not want. It wasn't that the boys in her town were repulsive to her. In fact, there were several that she liked a lot.

What Zaniyah resented was this: A marriage would mean she'd be stuck in Tepoztlan for the rest of her life.



See, Zaniyah took out books from her old school every day. She constantly read about places outside of Tepoztlan—places as far away as China.

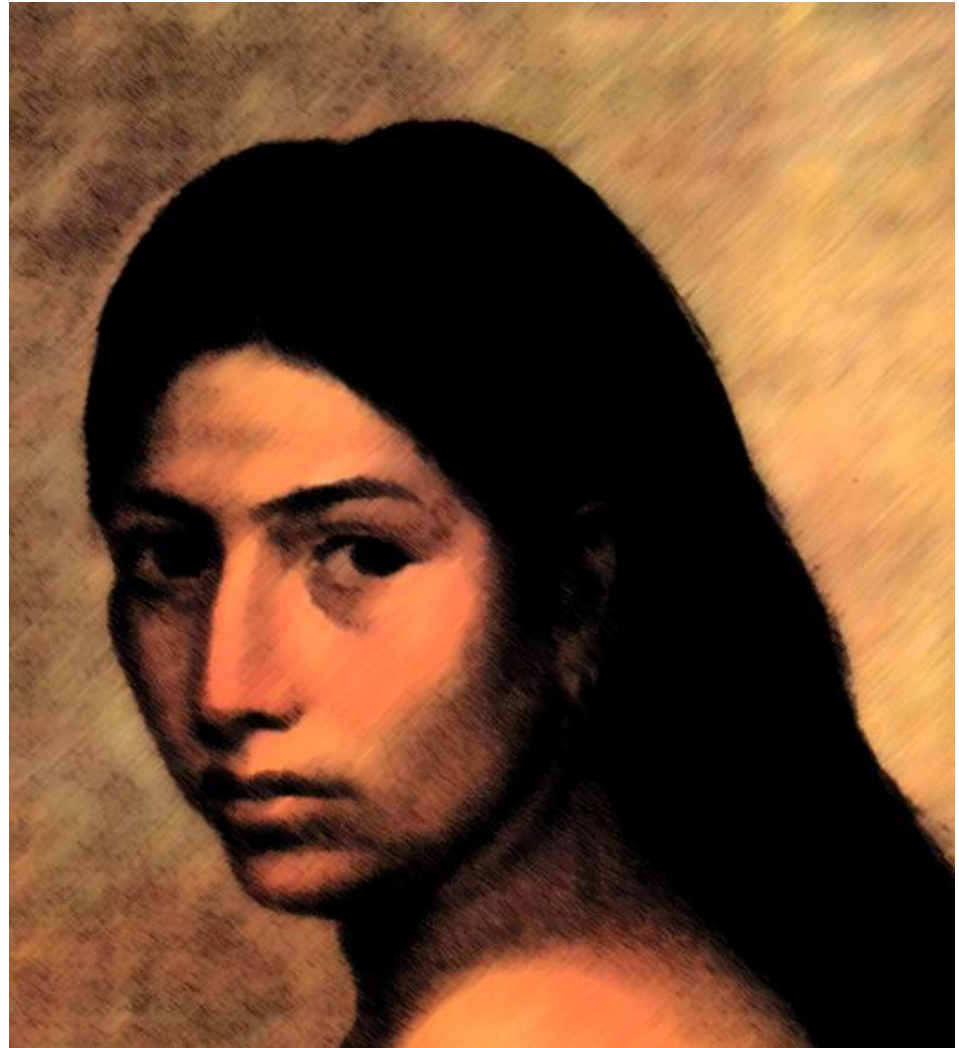


But the country that really intrigued Zaniyah was the United States. She dreamed every day that she could live in America where everyone had wealth and especially radios.

Little did Zaniyah know that she was about to meet a group of people who actually lived in the United States.



This would happen in the summer of 1948. And the encounter would forever change Zaniyah's attitude about her home town.



The encounter

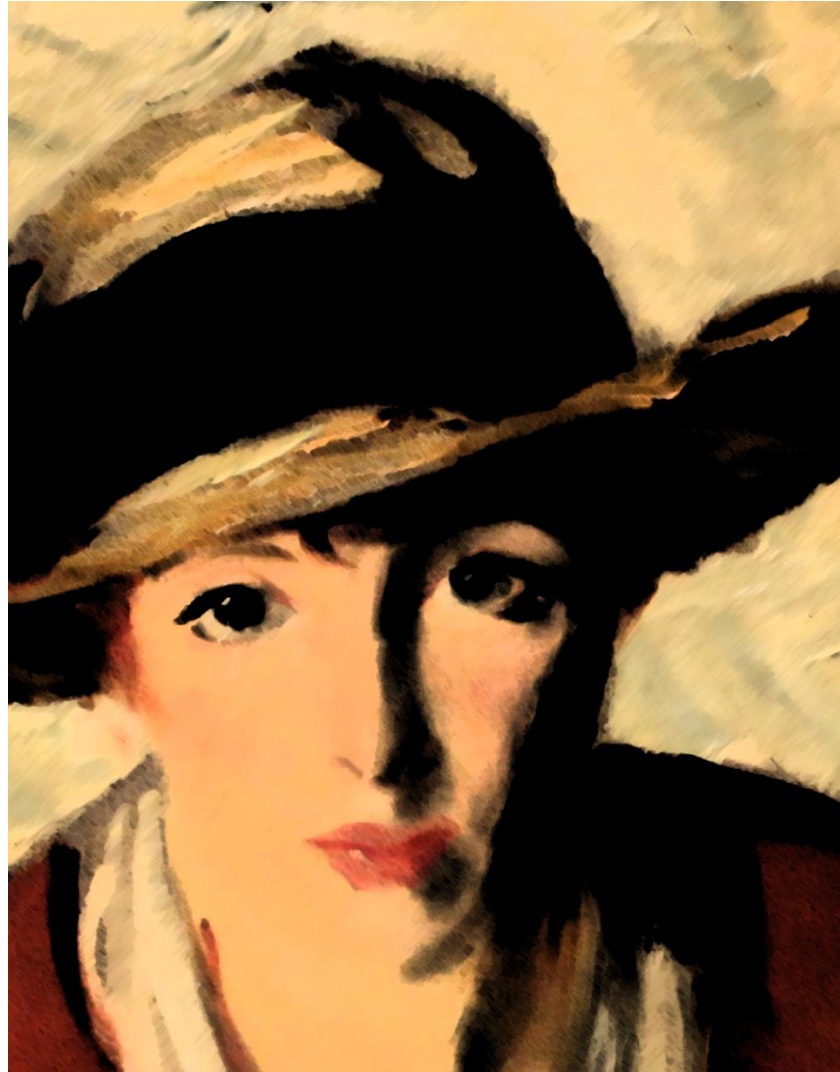
It was late in May when she heard the news. A university in the United States was conducting an archaeology field school in the Tepozteco Mountains, They were there to learn more about the Aztec pyramid of El Tepozteco -a favorite spot for Zaniyah and her friends to play hide and seek as young children.

The archaeologists and their students were staying at an inn in town.



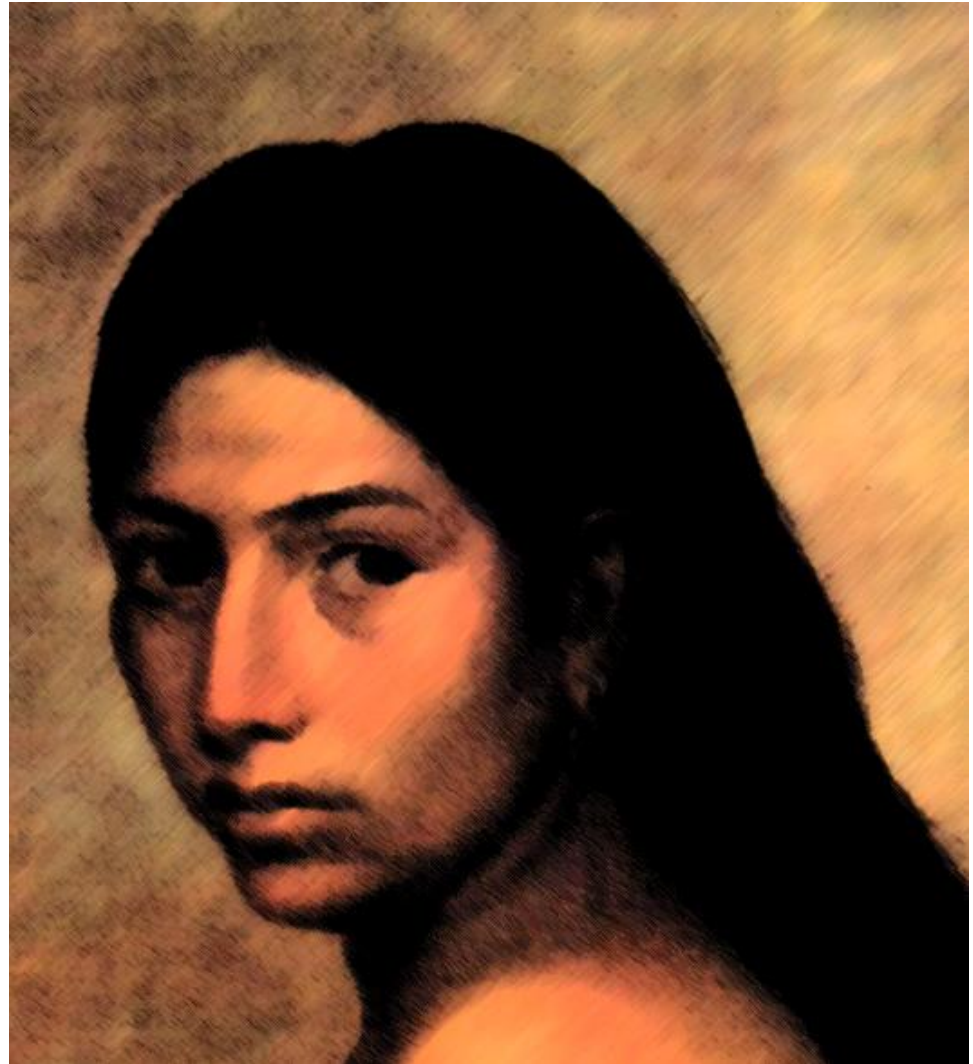
One of the students—a girl named Casey—had visited Zaniyah's old school asking for someone to help her with languages. She already spoke fluent Spanish and was learning *Nahuatl*.

The teacher got her in touch with Zaniyah.



They met the next day.

"I don't know why you'd want to
learn our native language,"
Zaniyah said to Casey in Spanish.



"Why indeed!" snapped Casey, also in Spanish. "Why it's only one of the most historic languages there is on our planet. It was the language of the ancient Aztecs!"

Zaniyah grunted.

"By speaking their language I can feel I am communicating with this great people."

Zaniyah, who had Aztec ancestors, again grunted. All her friends in town just wanted to speak Spanish so they would seem less Indian.



But Zaniyah agreed to help Casey learn *Nahuatl*. So for two hours each afternoon Casey and Zaniyah just walked about the town and the foothills, practicing phrases.

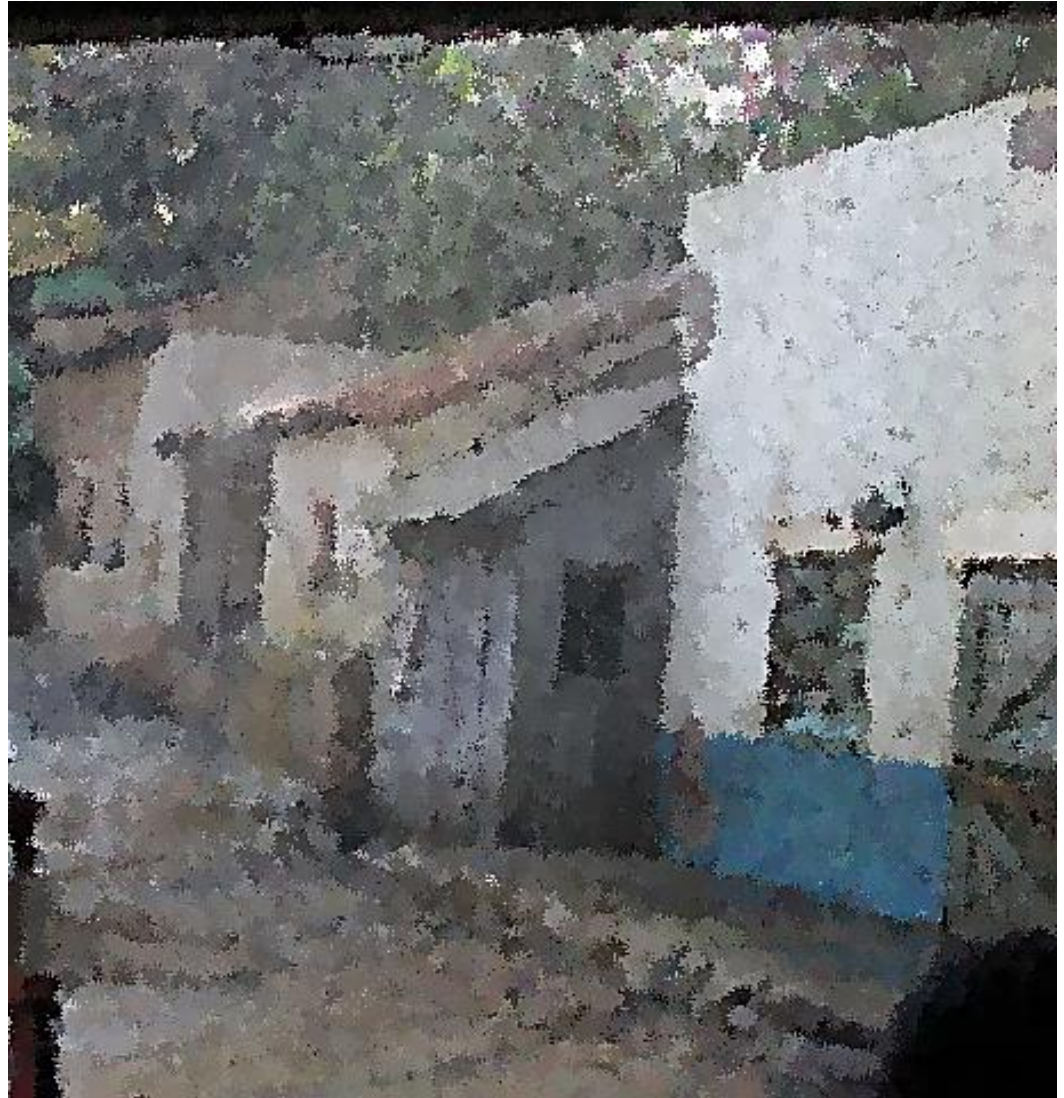
"It's very beautiful here," said Casey in broken *Nahuatl*. "In America I live on the plains where you never see hills or mountains."



Zaniyah grunted. She'd seen beautiful places in photos in her books on the United States.

"And the weather here is always perfect—never too hot or too cold," added Casey.

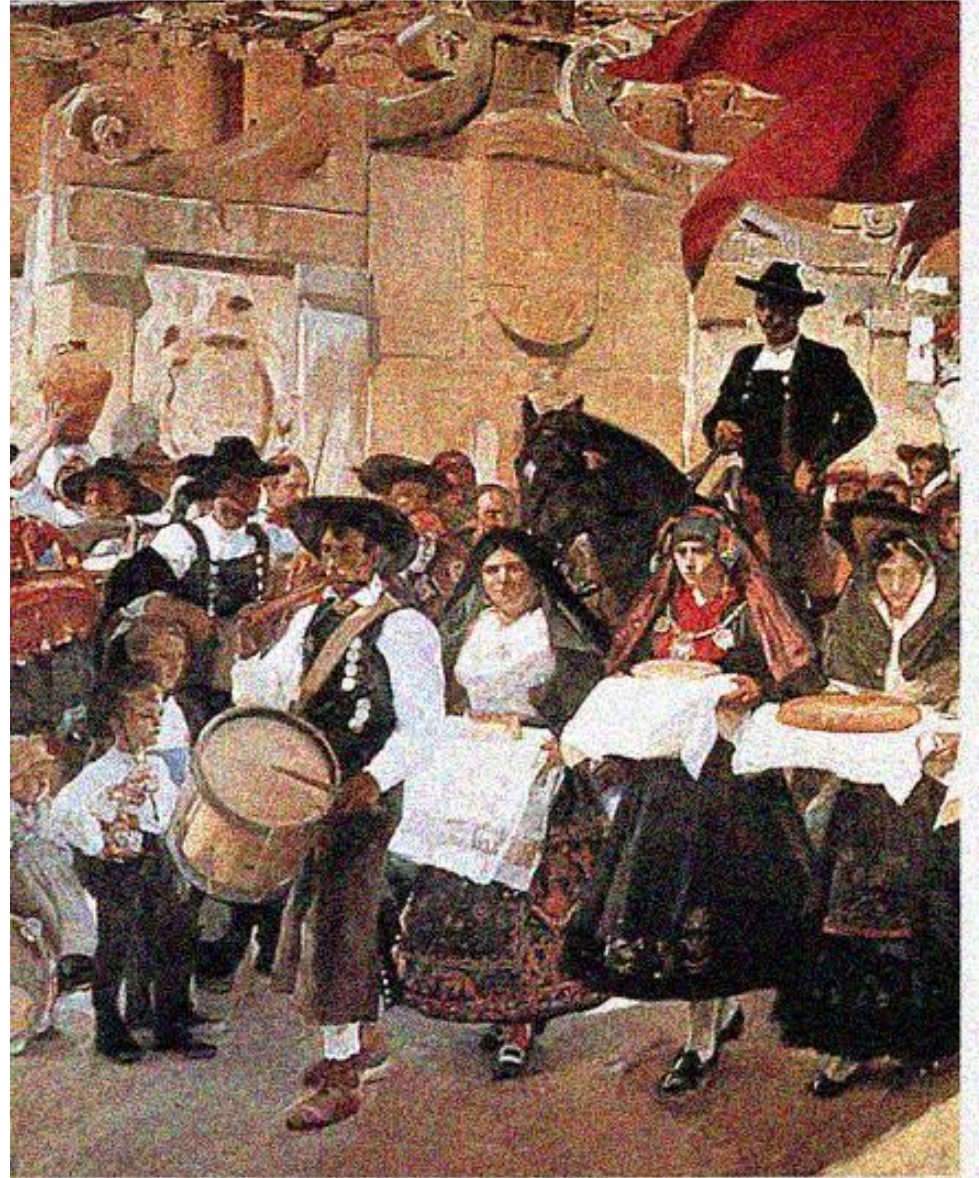
"It rains all summer," responded Zaniyah. "You'll see. Just wait."



And it did rain that summer, but Casey didn't care.

One July day, Casey and Zaniyah were in the market. "You seem to have fiesta days all the time," she remarked, now in much improved *Nahuatl*. "How often do you have them?"

"We have 140 days of fiesta," Zaniyah responded. "But we have no electricity so we can't plug in radios."



Casey could only shake her head. "In America we have only one day where we have street bands and fireworks and rodeos and all the picnics. That is the Fourth of July. In America we are expected to work all the time."

"But you have radios."

"And no time to listen to them," replied Casey.



One August day when Casey's language skills were even more improved, she asked Zaniyah about the feathered serpent. "I have been studying a lot about the diety Quetzalcoatl. Do you and your people still honor him?"

"Sort of," said Zaniyah. Her townspeople were Roman Catholics but did keep many of their traditional beliefs too.

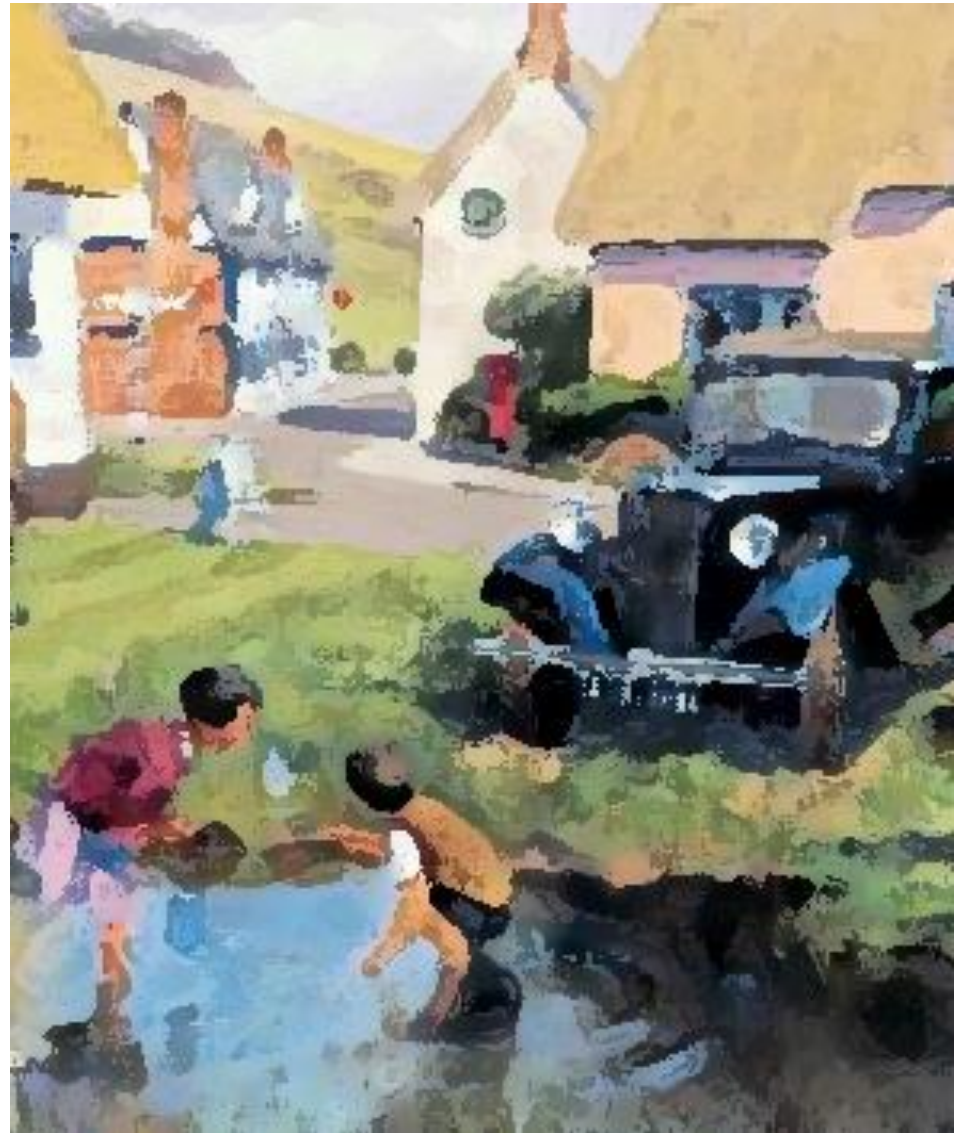
"He originated in Tepoztlan," stated Casey.

Zaniyah nodded. She knew that.



"That kind of makes Tepoztlan a
Garden of Eden, doesn't it?"

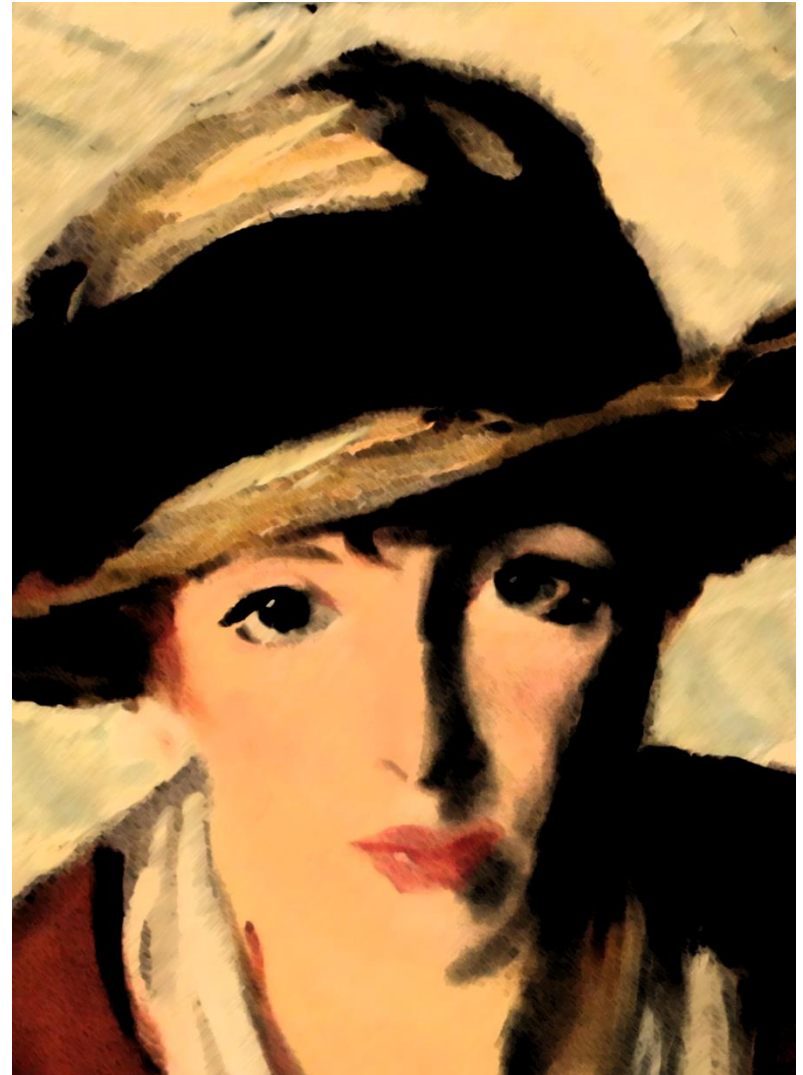
Zaniyah again grunted.



It was only two weeks after that when Casey announced to Zaniyah that she planned to return to Tepoztlan to live when she finished college.

"Here?" shrieked Zaniyah. "But why?"

"The beauty, the people, the peace, the fun, and surely the history," said Casey.



She continued. "See, the other day, I stood on the pyramid of El Tepozteco and felt like I was part of ancient history. I looked down at Tepoztlan and was overcome by the fact that it had existed many centuries before Columbus came and was the birthplace of Quetzalcoatl."



“And to think that this was also once part of the great Toltec civilization with the mysteries of its rise and fall.”



Casey continued. "Yesterday I also walked through the temple of the Aztec god Tepoztecatl and wondered what it was like for people to make pilgrimages for hundreds of miles to do homage to this deity.

"And here I am right here, right now."



In three weeks Casey left Tepoztlan to return to the United States to finish college. She vowed to return.

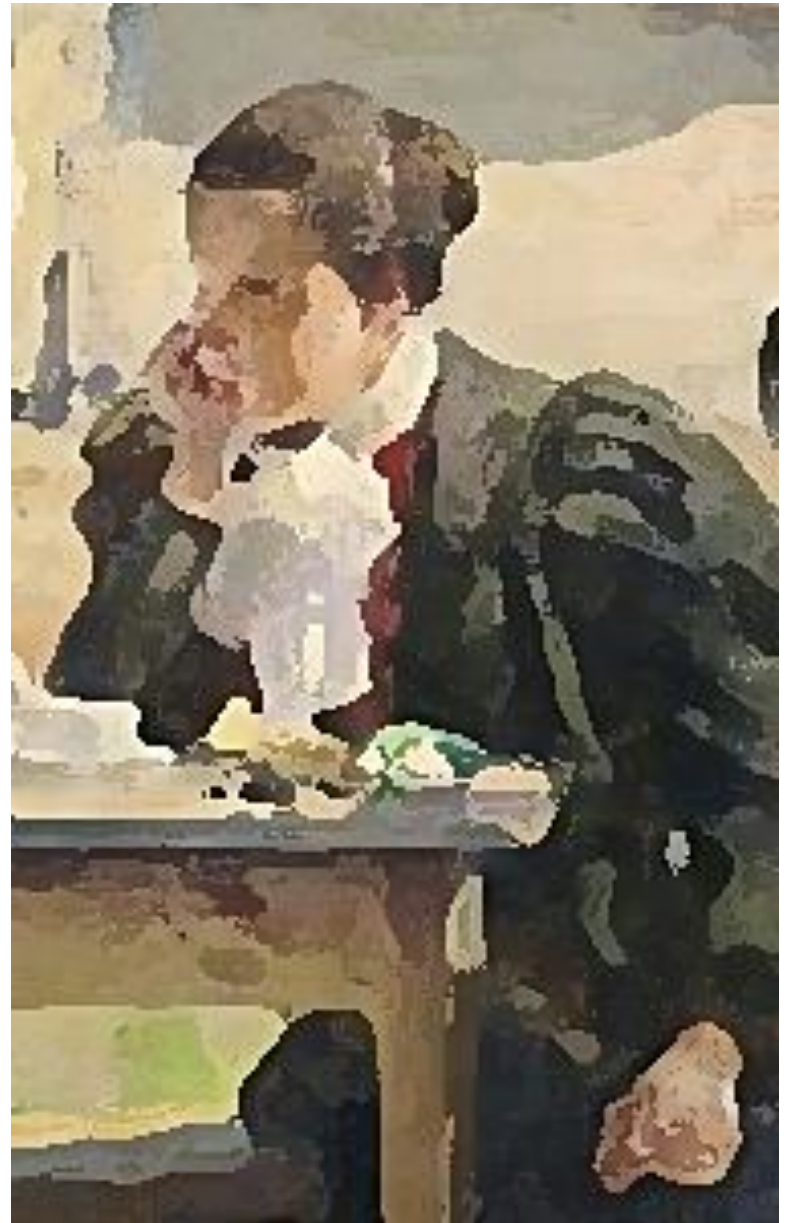
Zaniyah just wandered her streets trying to understand how she was feeling. She stopped reading her books about America.



Then one day her old teacher came to visit.
"Why do you not read anymore, Zaniyah?"
she asked.

"I guess my interests have just changed,"
the girl responded.

"Well, perhaps there are books on your new
interests," suggested the teacher.



"Do you have books on Toltec or Aztec culture?"

"Why certainly," smiled the teacher. The next day she returned with a pile of books on ancient Mexican civilization.

And Zaniyah read. And read. And read.

In time she knew exactly where she wanted to be for the rest of her life. Tepoztlan.



Within two years Zaniyah married a local boy. Casey returned in time for her wedding and then settled in town to write books about Tepoztlan.

In time, Zaniyah and her husband built a new (and very large) adobe house on her parents' block. There the couple eventually had seven children.



All of the children were educated by their mother and "auntie" Casey on the wonder-filled history of Mexico and their own home town. Casey became the godmother (*madrina*) to two of them—a very important role to play in their lives.

And guess what? Zaniyah's children and grandchildren never left Tepoztlan.



The end

Let's talk!!!!