

The Woman Who Outshone the Sun The Legend of Lucia Zenteno



This tale is part of the oral history of the Zapotec Indians of Oaxaca, Mexico. It was adapted from a poem written by Alejandro Cruz Martinez, a young Zapotec poet. Martinez was killed in 1987 while organizing his people to regain their lost water rights.

The day Lucia Zenteno arrived, everyone in the village was astonished. No one knew where she came from. Yet they all saw that she was amazingly beautiful and that she brought thousands of dancing butterflies and brightly colored flowers on her skirts. She walked softly yet with a quiet dignity, her long, unbraided hair flowing behind her. A loyal iguana walked at her side.

No one knew who she was, but they did know that nothing shone as brightly as Lucia Zenteno. Some people said that Lucia Zenteno outshone the sun. Others said that her glorious hair seemed to block out the light. Everyone felt a little afraid of someone so wonderful and yet so strange.

There used to be a river that ran by the town, almost the same river that runs by there now. And people said that when Lucia Zenteno went there to bathe, the river fell in love with her. The water rose from its bed and began to flow through her shining black hair.

When Lucia finished bathing, she would sit by the river and comb out her hair with a comb made from the wood of the mesquite tree. And when she did, the water, the fishes, and the otters would flow out of her hair and return to the river once more.

The old people of the village said, that although Lucia was different from them, she should be honored and treated with respect. She understood the ways of nature, they said.

But some people did not listen to the elders. They were afraid of Lucia's powers, which they did not understand. And so they refused to answer Lucia's greetings, or offer her their friendship. They called her cruel names and spied on her day and night.

Lucia did not return the meanness of the people. She kept to herself and continued to walk with her head held high.

Her quiet dignity angered some of the people. They whispered that Lucia must be trying to harm them. People became more afraid of Lucia and so they treated her more cruelly. Finally, they drove her from the village.

Lucia went down to the river one last time to say good-bye. As always, the water rose to greet her and began to flow through her glorious hair. But this time when she tried to comb the river out of her hair, the river would not leave her.

And so, when Lucia Zenteno left the village, the river and the fishes and the otters went with her, leaving only a dry, winding riverbed, a serpent of sand where the water had been.

Everyone saw that Lucia Zenteno was leaving and that the river, the fishes, and the otters were leaving with her. The people were filled with despair. They had never imagined that their beautiful river would ever leave them, no matter what they did.

Where once there had been green trees and cool breezes, now no more rain fell, no birds sang, no otters played. The people and their animals suffered from thirst. People began to understand, as never before, how much the river, the fishes, the otters, even the trees and birds had meant to the village. They began to understand how much the river had loved Lucia Zenteno.

The elders said that everyone must search for Lucia and beg her forgiveness. Some people did not want to. They were too afraid. But when the drought continued, everyone finally agreed to follow the elders' advice. And so the whole village set out in search of Lucia.

After many days of walking, the people found the iguana cave where Lucia had gone to seek refuge. Lucia was waiting for them, but they could not see her face. She had turned her back to the people.

At first no one dared say a word. Then two children called out, "Lucia, we ask your forgiveness. Have mercy upon us and return our river!"

Lucia Zenteno turned and looked at the people. She saw their frightened, tired faces, and she felt compassion for them. At last, she spoke. "I will ask the river to return to you," she said. "But just as the river gives water to all who are thirsty, no matter who they are, so you must learn to treat everyone with kindness, even those who seem different from you."

The people remembered how they had treated Lucia, and they hung their heads in shame.

Seeing that the people were truly sorry for what they had done, Lucia returned with them to the village and began to comb out her hair. She combed out the water, she combed out the fishes, she combed out the otters, and she kept on combing until the river had returned once more to where it belonged.

The people were overjoyed to have their river again. They poured water over themselves and over their animals, they jumped into the river, and they laughed and cried with happiness.

In all the excitement, no one noticed at first that Lucia had disappeared again. When the children asked the elders where she had gone, the elders replied that Lucia had not really left them. Though they would not be able to see her, she would always be there, guiding and protecting them, helping them to live with love and understanding in their hearts.