

BORDER EPISODES

ON THE ROAD FROM MATAMOROS TO TIJUANA, BEAUTY MEETS SQUALOR, AND A STUNNING INDIAN GIRL IS RAPED BY SMUGGLERS

ARTICLE BY PIETRO DI DONATO

Gloria, the young Mexican maid, was at the picture window of my brother's place in Los Angeles' Studio City on a high hill that overlooks Italian cypresses, green slopes, ostentatious cardboard homes, spiraling roads, cars and the San Fernando Valley.

Below was Ventura Boulevard, with the supermarket that also feeds neighbors Ernest Borgnine, Ralph Bellamy and other make-believers of the movie mills; the Sportsmen's Lodge Hotel; the Queen

Mary, featuring female impersonators; massage parlors; porno flick houses; The Swing, where wives are bartered.

The mesmeric Tarahumara girl and I passed through yearning moods of day and weather—granular rain and the spectacle of a hailstone shower under the bursting sun. Gloria, with the jet Indian hair, coppery velvet skin, melting brown eyes and meaningful hips, said, "Mira, mira, this is not my village of Umira, OK? Mexico is in me,

yes, Los Angeles, no. Your land has the cosmetic smile of a corpse, the unreality of a dream. That sun dying behind the skyscrapers and the mountain is from a postcard."

Mexicans shorten Estados Unidos to E.U. Gloria said, "I am here in the Ay Ooh to get the pesos for the security I will gusto where my heart is, sacred Umira above the Urique canyon. OK, gringo?"

The night we contemplated the myriad electric lights of Los Angeles she said, "It is

the sea mantled in *las luciernagas*, fireflies. No, it is the *candelaria* of the penitents in purgatory, each bearing a burning confessional taper."

With glowing countenance, she told me about her Umira—of a nomadic life in the mountains and of the mountains' incredible beauty, as far as the eye could see. The Tarahumara were never conquered by the Spanish. The girls married extremely young, brought in the firewood, wove wool blankets and



BORDER EPISODES *The Southwest has a million chicanos who have sneaked across from Mexican border towns; many perish attempting a canal, river, desert—or are robbed or murdered by smugglers.*

braided baskets while watching the flocks graze. They made clothing and clay pots. The women bore children alone in the forest. When people died, the tribe feasted and drank much *tesquino*—a corn liquor—danced the *tutubi* and *yumari*, sacrificed animals and did the ballet of the matachinas.

"Los Angeles is not Umira. OK, gringo?"

Gloria, unasked, acknowledged herself an illegal alien without the proper *papeles*, papers. She was a *mojada*, a wetback, and lived in fear of being apprehended and taken back across the border. In the *Los Angeles Times*, there was always news about border hoppers: "HUNDREDS OF COYOTES TRAPPED" (coyotes are smugglers of human cargo). "60,818 WETBACKS SEIZED." "ALIENS FEARFUL OF DETECTION ARE EASY PREY FOR UNSCRUPULOUS PRACTITIONERS." And on the Spanish-speaking radio, a commercial: "You never know when Immigration will come to knock on your hide-out door! Quickly call today to Carlson and Kaplan for a free consultation, before it's too late!"

Gloria did not return from her weekend pad in some chicano ghetto. Other wetback domestics along my brother's fashionable sun-swept drive hinted that probably she had been ratted on by a jealous rival or a spurned suitor and had been carted away to Tijuana, where Immigration usually dumps *los desautorizados*.

I went to the pleasant bracero-packed town of San Fernando looking for Gloria or information. No use. I searched the Mexican district around drab, industrial, bum-ridden Los Angeles Street and talked to the unemployed, to bartenders and to priests, who shrugged, feigning not to know English.

Gloria's meager worldly goods were in the maid's room. Under trim cheap slacks in the dresser drawer, I found her reading matter: photo *novelas* of seduced virgins, spurned by their beloveds' aristocratic families, who seek refuge with God in monasteries; of frustrated Romeos and Juliets setting themselves on fire with cleaning fluid. And there were sensational magazines such as *Vida Verdadera* and *¡Alarma!* with headlines blazoning: "¡DROGAS! ¡PLACER! ¡ALCOHOL! ¡ORGÍAS! ¡CASA SATÁNICA! ¡PERVERSION! ¡MISERIA HUMANA! ¡VILEZA Y INFAMIA!"

Cause for wonder: There also were worn paperbacks of Jorge Luis Borges, Leopoldo Clarín, Juan Goytisolo and Horacio Quiroga; Pedro de Alarcón's *El Sombrero de Tres Picos*; and *¡Veneceremos!* by Ché Guevara. In the Borges

book—*Labyrinths*—Gloria had marked passages with ? and !, particularly in "Funes the Memorious" and "Story of the Warrior and the Captive," which told of an English girl who had reversed the process of civilization and had become an Indian savage.

Letters stamped CORREO AEREO/ENTREGA INMEDIATA were trapped in perfumed panties embroidered with hearts and lips. She was Gloria Haydee, and the other last names she used were Davila, Gonzalez and Mendoza. The Mexican identity card said she was 25, *soltera*, single, lived in Tijuana on the Avenida Revolución and worked in a private office. There was her letter from Umira in the state of Chihuahua to a Rafael Mendoza on Flower Street, Los Angeles: "Remembered and unforgettable *señor*." The immigrant's communication was rife with concern for scarce *dinero*. There was trepidation; there was hope. And the letter ended with the imprint of her lipstick mouth and drawn hearts joining their names, one containing the words *amor y paz*.

A ten-page letter from Rafael Mendoza, with the greeting "Remembered and unforgettable dearest little cunning heart of mine," gives infinite advice and directions from the bus stop in Chihuahua to the terminal in Tijuana:

Engrave on your mind to take not the Flecha Amarilla bus line but the Tres Estrellas de Oro—the machines are newer and better. In this callous world, trust no one. In this devil's age, character, truth and principles are abominated! OK? Say with presumption undaunted that you are going to an uncle who is influential with the authorities—OK? Enclosed are 150 American dollars; change to pesos just enough for your trip. Watch even a centavo. Take *asperina* and peyote or calming pills and pray to our charitable patron, Señor de Esquipulas. OK? Tell the taxi to bring you to the Hotel Lafayette in Tijuana. I enclose the phone number of my employer in Los Angeles, the coyote who will smuggle you across the border, who will bring your ineffable treasure of a self to my loving arms. I regard your three little children as though sprung from my very own seed. Our two hearts are eternally bonded.

*Tu esposo,
Rafael*

After Gloria's disappearance, two letters came from Umira, one written by herself, stamped REHUSADA—REFUSED.

It was an ardent message to a young Edgar Oliverio Gutiérrez in which she expressed sorrow at being away from his embrace: She will be his, body and soul, until death—even though he is about to house himself with another. Will he kiss her children for her, provided no one suspects their carnal association? Making money in the Ay Ooh is not as magical as one had imagined.

The last letter, written in naïf peon's hand, was from Gloria's father, Antonio:

Gloria, I tell you that your venture to the E.U. has gained nothing. It is better you return to Umira and the care of your three children. When you worked on the Sierra Madre slope, your children ate corn and beans and a blessed bit of pig. Now they are shrinking with hunger. What you have done to your old father and mother is a blight before God. Palaver is not needed. This letter should have been put together solely of the words Send money or come yourself to care for your children. I write no more.

The Southwest has a million chicanos who have sneaked over from Mexican border towns; many perish attempting a canal, river, desert—or are robbed or murdered by coyotes. Chicanos with papers, union power, unemployment insurance, welfare and civil rights are hostile to their wetback brothers who allow a rancher or a restaurant owner, a hotel, garage, construction or sweatshop boss to piss in their hands and deny workmen's compensation and all the benefits proletarian heroes have fought and died for.

A Los Angeles-born chicano said, "Jesus, man, we break our humps in the lettuce and cantaloupe hassles to make and keep decent conditions and the naked wetbacks come in like termites and undermine us! All right, all right, we're the good guys and they're the bad guys; we're *auténticos* and the poor *paisano* slobs are *los transgresores*. The setup is like a lifeboat in a storm: Too many get in it and everybody's swamped! Ask the Saint. He'll tell you no different. The same. Ditto! OK? And you want to know something? The animals—Murder Incorporated in Washington, D.C., that zapped King and the Kennedys—they're going to kill *him*, too. Wait and see!"

The Saint is César Chavez. He and Peter C. García subscribe to the traditional unionist line, busying themselves with the plight of their own workers, not all the (Continued on page 92)

BORDER EPISODES "You gringos make your own obstacles; you don't know whether you're coming or going. Mexicans are Indians; Indians are rocks that don't change. We refuse to admit problems."

(Continued from page 82) workers of the world. Chavez complains that Immigration bends to the demands of the monster conglomerates that exploit the wetbacks, frequently closing its eyes to the illegals.

Then there are the chicano idealists: Tijerina, Corona, Gutiérrez, Gonzales and García. Reies López Tijerina, the New Mexico militant, organizer of the Alianza Federal de Mercedes, the Federal Alliance of Land Grants, told me that all chicano problems can be traced back to the days when Anglos cheated the Mexicans out of their land. Tijerina's Alianza seeks to reclaim those lost lands and to establish a confederation of free city-states in New Mexico.

He said, "You crazy arrogant gringos reinstituted the scattered Hebrews in Palestine at the cost of billions twenty centuries after they were forced out. Is it too much to request the return of the great southwest territories you recently stole from us?"

Bert Corona, the Texas activist, said, "You ask me what I think of border places? All working people everywhere have common interests and must confront the oppressor. The so-called American-Mexican border is a dubious one. It is merely political—an arbitrarily drawn abstract wall. Corporations don't respect it. The economy is united; look at mining, cattle raising, the agribusiness and the history of railroads in the area. If the border is to be closed to people, then why is it not closed to corporate goods as well? The economy dictates the flow of people across the border, but the immigration laws don't."

José Angel Gutiérrez, youngest of the new leaders, founded La Raza Unida, The United People, in Texas. Fiery Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales organized The Crusade for Justice in Denver; he advocates chicano nationalism and a revival of the legendary Aztec homeland.

In Brownsville, Texas, I went onto the bridge that spans the Rio Grande to Matamoros. Walking alongside me was a peaches-and-cream hippie nymphling with yellow-speckled eyes and the same color yellow hair. Her name was Robin. She was from, she said, "a place nobody ever heard of, a nothing town, the asshole of Montana: a good place to die." And she wanted to live it up. She was hitchhiking to Tijuana to buy \$20 worth of dope and make \$500 from it in the States. She did not have a cent and wasn't worried. Robin chewed gum and her nails; she was too young to give anyone a hard time. I didn't look the

gift in the mouth. I assured her I'd see her to Tijuana and so forth.

Even on the bridge, the moment you leave the Stars and Stripes and encounter the handsome green, white and red flag with the golden eagle clutching a furious snake in its talon and beak, you are in a vastly different world. Mexico has its own sun; and the wind comes suddenly and violently from nowhere, kicks up the alkaline cementlike dust into the arid air and goes petulantly back to nowhere.

In the *central de autobuses* at Canales and Luis Aguirre Streets in Matamoros, I bought tickets for the 1500-mile trip to Tijuana. The ticket clerk had been reading the Spanish-language Jehovah's Witnesses Watch Tower Bible. I said it was a fucking good book and that I had a copy given to me by Gladys Brown, my fish-market woman back home in Port Jefferson, Long Island, and that as far as I was concerned, the best part was the Apocalypse.

He said, "Brother, do you believe in Christ crucified and risen? Do you know the world will end in three years?"

I asked by what means. My bus was sounding the departure warning.

The Mexican Witness said placidly, "By the red horse and rider from the East." I told Robin.

The kid said, "Three years is a long time; you can have a hell of a lot of fun in three years and then—wow!"

We boarded a splendid made-in-Mexico DINA bus of Autotransportes Tres Estrellas de Oro. Signs said CLIMA ARTIFICIAL and SANITARIOS HIGIENICOS PARA DAMAS Y CABALLEROS.

Seats one and two behind the *piloto* were reserved for personnel—the relief *piloto*, always a good-looking young Indian absorbed in comics; or the driver's wife and children, drinking Coca-Cola and watching poppa show off at the wheel. The best seats, then, are three on the aisle and four by the window—for leg room and the view.

The *piloto's* section was a veritable chapel: The transparent plastic handle of the gearshift had an illuminated Madonna breast feeding a fat Mexican infant on it; there were scapulars and rosaries hanging from the overhead mirror; and an American Greyhound bus placard—

YOUR OPERATOR
SAFE...RELIABLE...COURTEOUS

—held to the wall by nails through the hands and feet of a silver crossless Christ.

Leaving Matamoros, we went past the new bull ring on the right and spacious fields of corn, sorghum and

cotton. I bullied a peon out of seat three and maneuvered the pussyette, Robin, into the seat behind me, her Wrigley going like a suction pump. A Mexican grandmother was next to me: Luz María, born in Tijuana. She walked across the border as a girl and lived and worked in San Ysidro, where she could see the lights of Avenida Revolución.

"Put this in your story: You green-grow-the-lilacs greedy gringos killed, violated my people and stole our lands. Your guilty conscience makes you treat us the same as the Orientals you fear. You subsidize Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Filipinos and Vietnamese refugees to live lazy criminal careers, and our chicanos, who are law-abiding and gentle, have to do all the hard, dirty, insulting labor the blacks disdain. The name chicano is a stigma: We goddamn well don't like it. The blacks act superior to us. My friend, do you know what we call in Spanish among ourselves the blacks? We call the blacks *moyate*—you know, the black bees that eat shit?"

"I figured how to screw Uncle Sam long ago. I made sure my children and grandchildren became citizens of the United States. We earn our money on one side of the boundary and spend and enjoy it on the other side. We buy property around Tijuana and have nice *rancheros*; we work six months and then collect six months' unemployment insurance and enjoy the best of *ambos mundos*—that means both worlds. I just got my Social Security, my company pension and Medicare—my husband too. OK?"

"You gringos make your own obstacles; you don't know whether you're coming or going. Mexicans are Indians; Indians are rocks that don't change. We refuse to admit problems. We don't see them. So nothing bugs us. If you know one Indian, you know the whole secret of Mexico."

The highway was a concrete ribbon, sometimes an asphalt reel, in places a merely reddish hardpan path; and you didn't believe the oncoming tractor-trailers would get by. When buses approached, the *pilotos* flashed headlights, punked horns and gave each other a swift straight-armed hail.

The windshield was a Technicolor-movie cyclorama bringing in terrain gashed with dry gullies and washes, stream beds, sunken deserts, dreary levels, bold buttes, picturesque mesas, bits of green valley and chromatic tones of ochre, brown, blue, purple, yellow and white sandstone, shale and clay; and you (Continued on page 116)

BORDER EPISODES *In Ciudad Juárez, the Rio Grande is a concrete culvert. There are no Hollywood-movie waves; in fact, there is no water—just damp stains. Ragamuffins use it for playing and pissing.*

(Continued from page 92) found it otherworldly and weird, but you knew it was the happy, cozy domicile of iguanas, snakes, scorpions, cacti and Indians and—though the bus was air-conditioned—windows were open and let in hot calcium carbonate-tasting currents. Sheep, goats and cattle grazing along the edge of the road moved not a hair as our bus bore down. Peons tilling with crooked-stick plows hauled by oxen and burros aided by girls and women brought you instantly to a primeval time.

Outside one village was a pretty walled burial ground, where cheerful peons were drinking and dancing in celebration of the *Día de los Difuntos*. Near the entrance gate, there had just been an accident. A late-model Mustang had catapulted into the waterless irrigation ditch and was squashed; the police had enlisted a mule to pull it back up. The victim, a heavy-set *padrone* wearing the fancy white-on-white shirt-jacket of the ruling class, had been thrown clear, and was extended comfortably on the bottom of the ditch amid broken bottles of the best tequilas.

Our *piloto* said, "*Mucha tequila, muy borracho; ahora muy muerto.*" People from the cemetery came over to the bus, eating candy skeletons and skulls.

In the desolate wastes, there occasionally are the remains of a horse, steer, dog or cow, never unattended, the repast of healthy vultures; but they are outnumbered by rust-bleeding, peeling, lonely, defiant cadavers of senselessly murdered Fords and Chevrolets. There is a radiance of soul in everything. The desert is without the ridiculous self-inflctions, bourgeois torments and masturbations of such meretricious and impertinent things as progress and civilization. It speaks of the nature god. It is calming and silence is its dignity.

The *piloto* played stereo tapes. He sang along with *Indiecita Mia*, *My Little Indian Maiden*, and the peons joined in.

At bus stops, we got out to piss, drink papaya juice with raw eggs and snack on *burritos* and *tacos* with chili.

Campesino passengers were regarded as family by the *piloto*; he patiently stowed their produce and small livestock in the luggage holds. *Campesino* men wore straw sombreros with tassels in the back and thongs to slip under the chin when the wind blew; they carried serapes—native blankets that are sleeveless cloaks. The women wore *rebozos*—eye-catching shawls with which they entwined their babies. Most everybody wore *guaraches* with rubber-tire soles, and socks were quite unheard of.

Ciudad Juárez, with El Paso staring at it, is a big city with the feel of a Latin Los Angeles. The Cordova Bridge connecting the two cities is only a gesture, inasmuch as the Rio Bravo, called the Rio Grande, Great River, is simply a concrete culvert. There are no Hollywood-movie waves; in fact, there is no water—just damp stains. Ragamuffins use it as a playing-and-pissing ground.

We were halfway to Nogales. It was midnight. The passengers were asleep; they did not snore the way gringos do. In the close quarters, the Indian body smell is assertive, like wet brown metals or the crushed bedbugs that I can't forget from my Hoboken tenement childhood—a smell that attracted and repelled.

We stopped in a small pueblo. I saw the sign of a hotel. I asked the kid if she would stay over. She said why not.

The hotel was a stark affair—an adobe house with a few extra rooms in the rear. There was an urchin at a makeshift desk. He said he was the *administrador* and a room for two would cost 20 pesos—less than two dollars. We followed him through the kitchen. In the family room, his ailing pregnant mother was on a couch. Her ten children stared at us. Three of the girls were knocked up. The mother got my situation without ado and said firmly that the room would be 50 pesos in advance. I said I wanted to register our Mister and Missus and address—because one never knows. She ripped a piece from a greasy brown-paper bag and said I could write what I pleased, and she would put it in a safe place.

The room was on a sort of open-to-the-sky corridor—like a painting of time and space. The bed was enormous and solid; an old light bulb hung from the ceiling. The door was of sheet iron and had an ancient lock and key. It would have been unrealistic to ask for soap, towels and toilet tissue. The kid wanted something to drink and said that, if I went and got it, she'd wait for me.

The Mexicans make night into visual, touchable life-size poetry. They were outside with their families and animals at open-shack restaurants, eating by the light of kerosene lamps: fried pork fat; black beans; soup with onions and shrimp; soup of male goat; tender baby cactus; fruits—sapote, mamee, mango, avocado; and tortillas—maize softened in warm limewater and then ground flat and thin on a stone called a metate and baked on an earthenware griddle over a wood fire. In the occult night, humans

and beasts and eucalyptus and bougainvillea and flesh cooking made you feel as though you were, are and shall always be. Clocks do not exist.

The Mexicans speak low, uncomplicatedly, and summon with a mellifluous "Sissst. . . ! Ppissst!" I peered avidly at pubescent barefoot girls whose faces were naked shining jewels, and their elders casually comprehended. I said to myself this should be the *mea summa*; why am I dashing my fucking brains against synthetic democracy? Why don't I cut the crap and go native with these *campesinos*? And as the Mexican grandmother on the bus, Luz Maria, Light of Mary, said, "Live in a hidden Mexican village on your Social Security and writings and be a white god like Cortes. Take an Indian virgin. And her sisters. And then another little girlmate and her sisters, too." I saw not one expression of chagrin for living. Hideous worry does not fit their childlike faces.

In the shadow of the 17th Century Spanish church, on the corner of the arcaded plaza, was the village bar. You will not see a woman in a *campesino* saloon. Penniless young peons were drinking pulque and mescal, the offering of a richly attired silvery-haired don who was singing to the music of a hired *mariachi* band. The bartender shook his head, opened his mouth, rolled his tongue about and whispered, "*Mujercilla . . . afeminada . . .*"

In the angle of the barroom was the toilet, a hole in the ground, closed off from the bar by a crotch-high partition. In that nook, on the wall above a peon pissing, was a votive light before the *Immaculata*, and looking directly at Our Lord's mother from the opposite wall was a fading page from a magazine: the gorgeous nude of Marilyn Monroe that was in the hymenal issue of *Playboy*. After a bunch of Tecate beers, I bought a fifth of Sauza tequila.

In the morning, I asked the kid from Montana her age.

"Fourteen," she said, grinning.

I accommodated her and put her on the first bus. The early sun rooted out the juices of day and the rural Mexican morning had a pervading vaginal odor. I went into a shabby barber's and, by God, the Indian gave me the best haircut of my life—a masterpiece—for seven pesos, 56 U. S. cents.

By nightfall, my bus had gone through the border town and desert area of the two Nogales. At Sonoita, the officious ("¡Señor! I spick Ingleesh!") Mexican customs officer raked unnecessarily

BORDER EPISODES *The fat tourist bellowed, "What the hell kind of place is this? I've just been ripped off in broad daylight, deliberately jostled and goodbye wallet with five hundred bucks."*

through luggage and papers, hinting for gratuities. Some suckers fell for it. I wandered the few paces to the border, dubbed Gringo Pass, and rapped with a tired, disgusted border-patrol officer who said that trying to stop wetbacks was like counting grains of desert sand and that the border patrol had nabbed two donkeys loaded with bales of grass, nonchalantly traversing the border. It was the first time in Immigration Service history that two asses had been arrested and booked.

Along Mexico Highway 2, from Mexicali to the mountaintop pueblito of La Rumorosa, is the setting for Dante's ascent from the Inferno: guts of extinct volcanoes, sterile Titans, eerie seas of lava and ashy pulverized rock. A lunar landscape.

As the *piloto* raced up around each tight hairpin curve, he kissed the rosary and made the sign of the cross. The driver of a bus coming toward us gave our *piloto* a message. Our *piloto* said over the speaker, "Accident ahead. Carnage and fire. One is not obliged to look."

A pickup truck and a camper had met head on. The driver of the camper had been sheared in half from head to foot. The pickup truck, packed with peon families and bringing home tins of gasoline, was all fire and smoke.

At the grimy Tijuana bus terminal, a sign read

WELCOME TO THE MOST VISITED
BORDER TOWN IN THE WORLD, AN
ADMIRABLE MOSAIC OF THE REGIONS
OF THE MEXICAN REPUBLIC. AT THIS
FRONTIER BEGINS THE FATHERLAND.
NUESTRA CASA ES SU CASA. OUR
HOUSE IS YOURS!

You can walk along Avenida N. Unidas or Boulevard A. López Mateos to the border. On the way, there are vendors of pottery, leather, copper, shawls, no end of auto painters and repairers, and many lawyers' shacks with signs saying INSTANT MARRIAGES AND QUICK HAPPY DIVORCES.

Hundreds of young braceros in jaunty sombreros and pointed boots or sandals, their possessions in cardboard boxes or shopping bags, lounge longingly by that magical line they can actually touch—the border. The large concrete border marker proclaims

BOUNDARY OF THE UNITED STATES
TREATY OF 1853 RE-ESTABLISHED BY
THE CONVENTIONS OF 1882-1889. THE
DESTRUCTION OR DISPLACEMENT OF
THIS MONUMENT IS A MISDEMEANOR
PUNISHABLE BY THE UNITED STATES
OR MEXICO.

They look at beacons in the gringo Promised Land of milk and honey, the big 76 gasoline advertisement and the huge McDonald's hamburger sign, and they can see the Valli-Hi Motel and the Valley Shadows Restaurant, and to them, the people who are permitted through the guarded passages and into the Estados Unidos de Norte America on the other side of the hurricane fence have divine privilege.

At night, particularly in fog, they'll try it—what have they to lose?—scampering like frightened chickens through the red shank and manzanilla brush by border marker 255 or through the concrete drainage tunnel under Interstate Route 5.

A border-patrol agent said, "We're all kids playing cops and wetbacks: Tag! You're it! We gather them, write down a lot of crap and put them up in hotels that charge the Government an arm and a leg; even the county jails soak us. We cart them back across the border, and the next night we catch the same poor bastards all over again."

My curiosity sometimes leads me a fool's chase; on a sidewalk, written in chalk, was ¡ATENCIÓN! SEGUIR LAS FLECHAS PARA LA VERDAD. Follow the arrows to truth. I followed the arrows for blocks; at the end, inside a chalk circle, was a pile of dog stool, and it was labeled ¡PRES. GERALDO FORD DE LOS E.U.!

At a newsstand, I asked the guy for the best paper. He said, "*Excelsior, el periódico de la vida nacional.*"

I said, "Do you have a communist paper—or a socialist one?" A terrified look came over his face. He was relieved that no one had heard me ask. He said, "*Señor, do you want information or propaganda?*"

On Avenida Revolución, the main street with all the folkware for tourists, is Woolworth's. At the lunch counter, I scanned the menu. The American sitting next to me said, "Pal, what you want is a cup of honest-to-goodness java and the old never-failing ham and eggs, without chili and *tacos*!"

He had been married five times—today's children were unpatriotic, downright subversive. He was in Mexico to save the U. S. from enemies.

"Buddy, do you know what I did to Papa? I knocked the big fairy on his ass! You should have seen Hemingway's face when he came to!" The guy was smoking, drinking coffee and laughing hysterically at how Hemingway sat on the floor looking up at him; then he choked—and threw up the coffee and his dentures.

He flattered me about my novel *Christ in Concrete* and had me hooked until he said he remembered the story because it was all about the Christ of the Andes statue.

El Moreno informed me, "Woolworth's is his beat. That character told me he was with the CIA. He's a fart in the windstorm. We call him John Wayne."

El Moreno is a timeless Yaqui with a hard, remote face and white-leather skin. He was born in the border town of Piedras Negras and went across the Rio Grande to school in Eagle Pass, so he speaks Spanish with a Texas drawl; but he's been in Tijuana a lot of years and is the man about town.

When we first met, he declared that the wild, evil Tijuana was gone; today it is a model community with no crime to speak of; and if there were any whores and deviates and criminals, they were contraband people from places across the border like Dago—San Diego—and El Ay. Just then a policeman and a porcine American came up to us; the cop pretended not to understand English. The fat tourist bellowed, "What the hell kind of place is this? I've just been ripped off in broad daylight, deliberately jostled and goodbye wallet with five hundred bucks and my goddamn documents!" Soon there were two more tourists who had been robbed. El Moreno whispered to the cops to get with it and see that the wallets were brought to him within the hour. The wallets showed up on schedule—without the money. Alone, he said the pickpockets had hungry families and more need for the dollars than did the gringos.

I wanted the formula for his longevity and tough condition. He said a man was what he ate, happiness was what you didn't eat, and his diet was the same as the ape's—fruits and vegetables. "And I chew the peyote cactus and damiana."

Peyote is a buttonlike cactus that grows only an inch aboveground; it is eaten by the Cora and Huichol Indians to cure sickness and during religious ceremonies. El Moreno said it would make me psychic—a better author—and protect me from Montezuma's revenge, dysentery; damiana is an aromatic yellow-flowered shrub with aphrodisiac properties.

Having done his virtuous Tijuana public-relations routine, El Moreno said he would take me at night to a house where no holds are barred—everybody did the whole works before your eyes. Also, there would be a platform with a line-up of girls who brought their cunts mouth-high (Continued on page 120)

BORDER EPISODES *The nude girls were beautiful. They swarmed and battled over the customers, wrapping arms and legs around them, grabbing their flies, patting their wallets. It was only midday.*

(Continued from page 118) to the clients; you could go along as if blowing a harmonica, sampling for free—kissing, tasting, fingering, licking and sucking your heart out.

I inquired about cock-, dog- and bull-fights. He said, "A man doesn't go; only cowardly overgrown kids go. In the Plaza de Toros, they sever the vocal cords of the picadors' horses, the bull slams his horns into the light padding on their sides and breaks their ribs and the innocent creatures scream their agony in vain. With his lance, the picador cuts the bull's neck tendons and the bull cannot raise his head to see and gauge his reprisals against his tormentors, so the *torero* easily kills an almost-blind bull. It is rotten and one-sided; the bulls, cocks and dogs are the victims of the worst of all animals: the human spectator.

"You gringos are barbarians and don't know your asses from a hole in the ground about us. We were the Oriental Olmec civilization that migrated trans-pacific to Ecuador ten thousand years ago and moved north to the Gulf of Mexico—Veracruz and Tabasco—and west to Guerrero, Oaxaca, Chiapas and Guatemala. Our Olmec god, the were-jaguar, is the precursor of the Toltec and Aztec feathered serpent.

"You want to know when the Castro revolution is going to happen in Mexico? Probably never. Reds want to be capitalists, and reactionaries are Communists turned inside out. *Amigo*, right and left are Siamese twins of technology—belt-system by-products. Our peon negates

and defeats the age of science. We still come out of a female's wet vagina. The peon communes with night and is immobilized by day. He snacks, drinks tequila, puts chili in his Coca-Cola and fucks around the clock. By remaining a child, he has no social liabilities, no neurotic realities. The peon can do without the cancer of democracy and the constipation of a Red dictatorship. I got news for you: Castro didn't win by fighting; the old regime fell from the weight of its corruption, the way a leper's prick falls off. OK?"

We stayed out very late doing the night spots. He recommended the Cesare Hotel.

"Hector, the night manager, is my friend. I'll send you an Indian. She won't roll you; you'll be as safe as if you were at your dear mother's breast."

The room cost eight dollars. It wasn't too bad. But I was awakened by a woman crying, "*¡Ayuda! ¡Ayuda!*" I called the desk and said a woman was yelling for help. The desk said nothing was wrong; she was a drunk from Chicago who wanted to be screwed—the night porter would come up and take care of her.

It is the weekend and hygienic Norte Americanos in droves pound the beaten path, the ten blocks along Avenida Revolución. The Indians with flat copper faces, barrel bodies and stubby little hands and feet sell splashy paper flowers, balloons and knickknack souvenirs to them. And the *turistas*—astride striped burros with white rings around their eyes or in peasant carts with shawls and

blankets and exaggerated sombreros or with gun belts and rifles and sabers and neckerchiefs posing à la Pancho Villa and his field women—have pictures taken with a Matthew Brady-vintage camera. They are steered through malls and bazaars to Woolworth's, Sambo's, Denny's and Sanborn's—bleached Bing Crobys and Doris Days in polyester fabrics, Hush Puppies and sunglasses; they never left the bingo hall and Disneyland.

The Midnight Guitar and 77 Sunset Strip stand side by side, flanked by marriage/divorce factories. The one-armed pea-eyed scarf pitching for The Guitar goes "Psssst . . . sssst. . . !" And says in oily pandering falsetto, "Hey, *señor*, beautiful pussies, girls topless and bottomless: Take a peep. You see heaven with the hair around it. Beer cheap, seventy-five cents; sexy music from U.S.A. Take a peep. Cost nothing to peep!"

After passing a few times, I thought I'd take the peep that costs nothing. The pimp was right: The nude girls were beautiful, all Glorias. They swarmed and battled over the customers, wrapping arms and legs around them, grabbing their flies, patting their wallets. And it was only midday.

Two blocks from the Tres Estrellas de Oro bus terminal and to the right on Avenida Revolución, running into Puente Mexico, the exclusive domain of the poor begins startlingly. At the edge of the world's worst slum, the sidewalks are jammed with carts and stands outside native bars and singing cafés.

Radios, TVs, generators, auto parts, broken boxes of Kotex, scabby medical supplies, battered chamber pots, sundry appliances, ragged clothes, shamefully worn-out shoes and items useless beyond redemption are tumbled with collectors' handmade adzes, picks, pinch and crow-bars, chisels, archaic scutch hammers, planes, manly knives, embossed machetes, massive mattocks. And what made my throat catch—being symbols of my strange life—were a gleaming, exquisite 12-inch Rose bricklayer's trowel with a slick bicycle-grip leather-on-wood handle and an untouched ivory IBM portable typewriter without a case—both undoubtedly hot. I paid \$6.50 for the lovely trowel and \$35 for the typewriter. I said to Pietro di Donato, "Now, you son of a bitch, you'll write the novel *Elena* on that sweet IBM and keep the rust off that ringing Rose blade because you may have to rebuild the world!"

Like Antaeus, Mexicans have an affinity with the lowly earth—squatting,



spawling, as if on silken sheets. A woman sits askew on the ground peddling herbs, simples, potions, words on paper that will transform you into a *divinador*, seaweeds, dried insects, crystallized placentas and snake oils—all of which will cure cancer, piles, indigestion, ill humors, evil eyes, impotence, infertility or any disease or affliction you could name.

A young derelict with the butt of a joint behind his ear has just died of alcoholism. They walk over his body imperturbably. He had the right to leave all this in his own way, and in the meat store facing the dead youth, legions of fearless flies park on the pork. The sign says *LAS MOSCAS VENCEN*, the flies win.

Stands and booths just wide enough to seat one or two or three people are frying—in turgid simmering fat—lungs, brains, sweetbreads, intestines, clusters of shell-less eggs freshly yanked from chickens' bellies, animal feet, livers, gizzards, testicles; roasting pigs' ears and tails and scalped goats' heads with gaping eyes on lively charcoal. Grown men bite the fiber off sugar-cane stalks and eat the cores with drooling pleasure. There are seafood stands with mollusks, thick glasses filled with cold shrimp, lobster, oysters, conch, crab meat and baby crawling crabs in chili, broiled shark steaks, cumbersome pismo clams with lime juice on the brown insides, saffron-steaming caldrons of *paella Valenciana* (disappointing), beans and peppers of many colors, melons, *garbanzos* in sticky verdant pods, a candy made from orchid bulbs and everywhere the cheesy groiny reek of tortillas. All foods without exception are lorded over fiercely, nervously, by fly squadrons.

The fabulous filth, destitution and squalor of the shack homes are so utter and organic as to be godlike. A genius could not assemble the collages of trash, the impromptu patterns and graffiti of junk, ideographs of contempt for order rendering the serious comic—a futile barrier of bedsprings, TV antennas, car seats, a Mercedes chassis, oil tanks, bottles, cans, crumpled auto hoods and twisted doors—exceeding in existentialism, nonsense and surrealism the best of today's scrap art. Shanties, contrived of moldy crates, pieces of truck bodies, thatch and wattle, sheet plastic, corrugated tin, mud adobe and papier-mâché, lean and hold one another teeteringly up in continuous rows. They are on lanes with grandiose, progressive names: *Insurgentes*, *Victoria*, *Reforma*, *Idealismo*. Each home is numbered and the inhabitant's name glaringly scrawled. There are simulated arrangements of inner courts and patios, and the alleys are so emaciated that you could piss easily into your neighbor's windowless sty.



Kids sit and yak in dishonored, abandoned cars that have forgotten motion, glass and wheels. Men are doing something to jalopies with a frenzy, as if fucking them. What woman isn't pregnant?

And what man works? Men recline in the shade with that peace that surpasses understanding, inscrutably watching little girls and boys and old women staggering determinedly under loads of brushwood or clay jugs or, with a shoulder yoke, five-gallon tins of sallow water from a streamlet, church fountain or town tap. The females wash clothes by hand in stone tubs as doggedly as Sisyphus and somehow they hang radiant laundry; their offspring are as clean as angels. Tykes lack covering for their behinds, but their gold and diamond-speck earrings sparkle in the sun.

I went to the address that was mentioned in one of Gloria's letters. The

garden wall was an enfilade of bald bus tires. The shack had two levels. Above was a tiny wood-box balcony with children, dog, cat, canary, cans of flowers, a woman suckling a baby. Downstairs there was a crude sign: *CUARTOS PARA ALQUILAR EN LA PLANTA BAJA—NO NINOS*, lower quarters for rent—no children, and as an afterthought in small letters, *economical—sanitary—attractive—secure*.

Yes, of course they knew the romantic Glow-ree-ah. While trying to cross the border, she had been gang-banged by the coyotes. That was not nice. The police got them. The picture of the rapists was in *¡Alarma!* Of a certainty, Gloria of Umira is in Los Angeles.

As I stepped out into the foul rutted road, a woman pushed aside the rag curtain of a doorway and hurled a tin can of piss and shit, just missing me as I swerved—I'd rather be hit by a

BORDER EPISODES *Sitting on the ground by the fence were a peon and his young daughter. Their faces were hunger. A few feet away, officers of the gringo border patrol were drinking coffee.*

baseball bat. The pretty woman and children on the balcony laughed, and the woman called down to the hag with the dripping can in her hand. "*Gringo. Amierda-cano. Muy delicado. ¡Mieda mierda!*"

Time and desert heat petrify putrescence into jewels of reconsideration. Mexico's cloacal spoors, anal/uterine/wombal aromas arouse taste buds; it is an olfactory experience you later miss. Human piss and excrement, old and new commingling, seasoned with food leavings and animal offal, baking, frying, broiling, toasting and pullulating in the passion of Montezuma's blazing sun is the most stirring and indelibly memorable queen of smells.

Around the corner, on Avenida Calleón Revolución, is a carnival, put on by Atracciones Alvarez from the state of Michoacán. The Whip and the Ferris wheel are being whirled as crazily as the Mexican drives his car, but the carousel mares are still being screwed to the turntable.

A policeman is smoking a cigar and reading a Spanish Mickey Mouse paperback. I ask what holiday it is. He says, "*Santa Cruz, patrona de los albañiles,*" patron of bricklayers. Construction jobs are being blessed with food, drink and big flowered crosses.

Peons come in from the countryside by bus, on foot, in pickups—or trot in on asses' haunches. Any show or display is an incalculable treat. The peons watch openmouthed as the explosives hiss and boom and screech and twirl and racket. Monkeys and miniature alligators perform professionally. The hokeypokey man busily scrapes ice and soaks it with syrups. The air is thick with piglet roasts. The flies are enjoying themselves, too. There are Indians in their tribal outfits of beads and feathers and tassels and ruling dons and their *señoras* in stunning *charro* costumes on fine mounts, and these contemporary conquistadors sport loaded pistols and cartridge belts with real bullets.

Dwarfs from a visiting convention elbow and butt among people's legs; they permit children and awed peons to fondle their oversized heads and reticent little limbs, and they are wisely amused. Hurdy-gurdies grind and drone, and the carousel calliope flutes nostalgic music. The peons look about like actors coming onstage for the first time, partaking with felicitous countenance of idiotic loving-kindly beatification. When Jesus Christ crosses the border and comes to this market place, these chil-

dren will not let him down. He will pipe and they will dance.

I go with them from the carnival to the bars, and there is bar after bar after bar, each dark and overfilled, no bigger than the average room, and always without gringos—who fear for their hypocritical blanched skins. They begin with margaritas in tall thin glasses and alternate with beer from nearby Tecate. I drank mescal from Oaxaca in a black clay vessel with a pouch that contained salt and *gusanitos de maguey*—the white worms that are found around the heart of the century plant.

Within the broad adobe walls, the *mariachi* rhythms cut you open and fuse into your veins and arteries. The Mexicans dance hypnotized and slither like snakes, rubbing and rotating crotches into one another. And the girls have that genital, tongue-provoking, Indian smell that coats your mouth, nostrils and throat to pungent, cloying salivation. It is a sanctuary of entrancement, a fetal lair you should never leave. You say to the stupid absurd world, "Go fuck yourself; go shit in the sea!" Here there is no generation gap—because decrepit crones let their hair flow down to their asses like teenagers and they are painted and have all the dreams of youth, and no one condemns, and criticism dies on the vine, and care has no place. These folk are the obviators, the nonaccusers—each an autonomous planet serene in the ageless cosmos of innocence. They do not recognize sin, hate, repression. I saw not one bomber pilot. Something whispers into their souls and tells them no one fools nature or death, and all exit with less than when they entered. Sublime is the word.

Cocks on the hills of Tijuana are crowing. It is dawn at the border. The morningtide routs shadows; light floods the dew-wet galvanized wire fence that divides Americans from the children of the sun. El Moreno said his people played at being Christians and thought no more of the foreign Semitic God than they did of dolls. They were at home only with the ancestral deity; they worked it out from nature: the miracle of day drawn from the black bowels of night. They committed human sacrifice not for evil kicks, but because they believed the sun-god needed blood to give him strength for his daily return from the far region of death.

Sitting on the ground by the fence were a peon and his young daughter. Their faces were hunger. In their booths a few feet away, officers of the gringo

border patrol were drinking coffee from a Thermos and eating doughnuts. The girl was looking at America. She put her fingers through the webbing of the fence and caressed America. They were a barefoot primitive pair. They needed a Samaritan, and I could not decide. What Indians were they? I know of at least 30 tribes. Were they Chinantecs who speak by making sounds with their mouths closed? Mazatecs who dance the *huapango* and the *bamba*? Cholutecans from the Holy City, Cholula? Zapotecs? The vegetarian, Otomis? Or, like Gloria, Tarahumara Indians from the canyon caves of the Sierra Madre Occidental in the state of Chihuahua?

I meandered some miles along the border, but the girl's being came with me—the statuesque shoulders, the way her sitting graced the earth, the nigrescent sheen of the high-cheek-boned wide lava face, the purest look from the wild doe's obsidian eyes.

Fifty dollars, four hundred pesos, would feed them and keep them alive for a month. Maybe they'd make it across the border and eventually become gringoized chicanos, and maybe she'd work for my brother Giovanni in the big house with the picture window and swimming pool in Studio City and we'd talk about the past. Or maybe they would flee and, with intelligent instinct, like birds, return to the rain forest, the sheltering cave, to nature.

When I mutely handed her the pesos, our finger tips touched and the world was created. ■

THE REDOUBTABLE OVERCOAT Further Fashion Information

Pages 52 and 53: His scarf by Cisco, Inc.; her tweed cape (\$250) and culottes (\$95) designed by Victor Joris for Cuddlecoat; pumps designed by Susan Bennis / Warren Edwards for the Couture Collection at Chelsea Cobbler, New York. Page 54, top left: His shirt (\$18.50) by Yves St. Laurent Shirts, tweed trousers (\$65) by Bill Kaiserman for Rafael; her coat (\$250) by Daniel Hechter, Paris. Top right: His shirt (\$35) by Bill Blass for Gates Shirts, tie (\$15) by Cerruti CXIII, shoes (\$75) by Charles Jourdan, hat (\$48) by Eileen Carson. Bottom: His black-silk evening tie (\$20) by Jacques Bellini; her bra (\$15) by Fernando Sanchez, hat (\$35) by Lipp. Page 55: His jacket (\$115) and trousers (\$40) by YSL Men's Clothing, shirt (\$18.50) by YSL Shirts, with Charles Jourdan shoes and an Eileen Carson hat (\$48); her gabardine suit (\$280) designed by Bill Kaiserman for Rafael, with a vest by Calvin Klein, shirt (\$50) by Daniel Hechter and shoes from Chelsea Cobbler. That's fashion!