



TIJUANA BORDER CROSSING

VISITING GOMORRAH

TWO TALES OF TIJUANA

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PHOTOS BY PRESTON DRAKE-HILLYARD

I'M COMPLETELY AT THEIR MERCY, stuffed as I am into the back of a little blue Corolla, careening God-knows-where through the broken streets of a dark as death Tijuana. I've been here before—to TJ, that is, as a tourist, to drink a couple of beers, eat some tacos—but I grew bold, wandered off the tourist street and now here I am stuck on the Corolla's backseat hump as streetlights wash through the car like searchlights panning over my keepers: first Guillermo, then Sergio, then Delfino. As we bank each turn, centrifugal force rolls Delfino onto my shoulder; he can't hold on to the seats in front of him—he needs his hands to talk.

"Where do you want to go? Is there anything you want to see?" Delfino had invited me to come to Tijuana, said he'd show me the real city; tonight I'm his guest. "We'll go to a concert," he'd told me, "classical music, there's so much culture here, great restaurants and sports teams, too."

Delfino—Professor Rodriguez—teaches classical guitar

at the Autonomous University of Baja California. I met him a couple of weeks ago sipping coffee in a little coffee shop, a converted house with old, oiled-pine floors and paint-crusting walls. Mexican boleros looped softly from hidden speakers. I sat with Delfino and Sergio—a composer trained in Florence, who tonight is riding shotgun turned sideways in his seat animatedly hyphenating his nouns with slurred Spanish swear words. He and Delfino talked to me about Tijuana, springing effortlessly back and forth between English and Spanish, always reiterating that Tijuana doesn't deserve its reputation as a sleazy south-of-the-border Gomorrah.

"Well, what do you want to see," they press me in the car tonight.

But I just don't know what it is I don't know. Tijuana's sordid reputation is known the world over, but these guys promised me something different, the "real Tijuana."

"Take me someplace tourists never see," I respond.

"La Coahuila!" they chorus. Guillermo guns the car ahead, swerving around potholes racing toward *Callejón Coahuila* in the heart of the *Zona Norte*, Tijuana's red light district.

Of course, to most of us, Tijuana virtually means red light district; the first thing that comes to mind are bars and brothels. And it's not just us north of the border that see it as a morally degenerate cesspool of debauchery, corruption, and violence—that opinion is universal, it seems. Indeed, even mainland Mexicans regard Tijuana as a bastard child of the U.S., the forgotten dark-haired sister city to sun-bleached, blue-eyed San Diego. A guy I ran into in a Tijuana Starbucks this morning, Luis, a corporate recruiter with a surfer hat and matching jacket, bemoaned the difficulties he had luring professionals from central Mexico to Tijuana, the futility of overcoming the negative stereotype of the city.



PEOPLE PEER THROUGH THE SPINDLED METAL BORDER FENCE THAT SEPARATES TIJUANA AND SAN DIEGO

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“Go to any other Mexican city, man” he told me in California English seasoned with mans and dudes, “and you will see only half a page of want ads in the paper. Here we have page after page; if you have skills and training you can do anything you want. In Tijuana there is mobility.” The people of Tijuana, everyone I’ve met, hold their city in the highest regard; as hard as this shabby city is on the eyes, and for all the negative stereotypes, they seem to love it.

This Starbucks here in Tijuana, full of suits with laptops and cell phones, assembly-line art and blonde wood, in the shopping mall by a Burger King, is a worm hole in the fabric of the corporate universe: walk through the door and you are transported to a place completely placeless. You are no longer in Tijuana. The pimple-faced kid behind the counter tolerated my Spanish long enough not to be rude, then eased me back to English, taking my dollars and handing me my coffee like any kid behind any counter in any Starbucks in any town in America. Nothing about the scene was Mexican.

Mainland Mexicans resent Tijuana’s affinity for America, their corruptions of the Spanish language, their Spanglish salted with American curses and spiced with Anglicisms so that here along the border auto parts aren’t *refacciones*, but *auto partes*, pickups are *trocas*, and the midday meal is *lonche*. English is widely spoken, too—like that kid in Starbucks, for example, or Guillermo, in whose blue Corolla we are speeding across town. He says everything to me in Spanish, then repeats it again in English. Likewise, Sergio, who to my ears garbles his Spanglish incomprehensibly, slips casually into textbook English when he wants me to understand. So many Tijuana’s actually live on both sides of the border, many having attended grammar school or

high school in San Diego and returning south at night, that national identities have blurred.

Minutes before I met Delfino and Sergio the other night, I had spent an uncomfortable, intimidating couple hours pinned in the corner of a back-street karaoke bar while hard, tough-looking Mexican cowboys crooned *corridos* to blaring recordings of accordions and tubas. One rough character, his taut face stubbled with a week’s growth, a bucket of drained bottles on his table, prodded me to sing, forcing a worn songbook into my hands. Finally, frustrated with my reluctance, he leaned over, his eyes shaded under an enormous hat, and joked in perfect, accentless American English, “I used to be nervous about singing, but you gotta just picture everyone in the room in their underwear, you know? Like that episode of the Brady Bunch, remember that one? Everyone knows that one!” Yeah, everyone does know that one, I guess, including this drunken karaoke cowboy in this broken-down back-street bar. I never did sing, but I had a bond with this guy now, a Brady Bunch bond, so I relaxed and had another beer.

GRINGOS LIKE ME don’t get out to Tijuana’s backstreets much, the grid of neighborhoods that fill the downtown. We stick to *Avenida Revolución*, the tourist drag, pawing through piles of kitschy crap in the countless curio shops, where velvet Elvises and ceramic Bart Simpsons stand for sale alongside switchblades, nunchuks and pot pipes. All along *Revolución*, pharmacy after pharmacy push prescription drugs—Viagra, Cialis, Oxycontin—by the pill. Billboards pimp tummy tucks and lap-band surgery. Tijuana Zebras—donkeys painted with zebra stripes—wait for photos with sombrero-wearing

tourists.

I began coming south of the border in high school with my unruly group of friends, like so many other young Southern Californians; we were underage and here to drink and dance in the more than eighty TJ bars and nightclubs stacked three and four high along the dozen or so blocks of *Avenida Revolución*. Tens of thousands of teen drinkers swarmed *Revolución* nightly. Mike’s was our bar, a functional, barebones place with a gray-eyed old German at the door whom I always assumed was “Mike,” though it never occurred to me to ask. Up a few flights of crumbling stairs was Club Regine, a late-night hangout with throbbing techno and staccato strobe lights, walls painted charcoal black. After a few shots of tequila and some beers, my friends and I would head up the stairs to Regine’s—by midnight the place would be packed with writhing young American chicks.

We had one rule, back in those days: Do not drink your last dollar. You must save one dollar for the taxi ride back to the border. I came into the habit of stuffing a dollar in my shoe before I crossed into Mexico, having learned from experience how unpleasant the dark, drunken stumble back to the border could be. One time, broke and walking blindly back north, we missed our turn, the turn to take us to the border. Tripping over the broken sidewalk, we wandered past the last streetlight. Suddenly, ahead of us, an opening door poured red light into the street. Silhouetted there stood a woman—how old was she, 40? 50??—her dress lifted above her waist, her thick dark patch shadowed under her round belly. She cackled and waved at us with a strange Medusa-like gaze, enticing us forward. I avoided looking at her, avoided her voodoo, juju stare. We were lost in some other



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Tijuana and had bumbled, I came to realize, into the frayed fringes of the infamous *Zona Norte*. We turned and ran, bolting back to the familiar security of Mike's and Regine's and *Avenida Revolución*. That was more than twenty-five years ago.

Speeding down *Revolución* with Delfino and the guys tonight, we pass Mike's and Regine's—or rather, what's left of them. The building is a charred and burned-out hulk, a shell, recognizable only by the remains of the sign, 'Club Reg...' I say nothing as we whiz past—it turns out that Mike's and Regine's spent their last days as gay bars, Regine's featuring transvestite hookers. Driving down *Revolución* you can still hear the bump, bump, bump of the few remaining gringo bars pulsing in the night air. The dozens of others, however, have flat lined, silent. *Revolución*, the only Tijuana most Americans will ever know, is all but dead.

TIJUANA WAS BORN HERE, really, on *Avenida Revolución*. In 1911, Los Angeles, as a prelude to the coming prohibition, banned bars and horse racing and Tijuana, then barely a town, stepped in to take up the slack. By the 1920s, Tijuana was essentially an American town. During the dry years of prohibition, American drinkers swarmed the bars on *Revolución*—then mostly American-owned enterprises that had been picked up and moved south of the border. The Hollywood elite virtually relocated to the swank and exclusive hotels, clubs, and casinos of Tijuana. By the end of prohibition, nearly 70 percent of the businesses in Tijuana were involved in the sale of liquor. Tijuana, on the strength of its vices, weathered the Great Depression only to begin serving sex to hard-up San Diego sailors and World War II GIs. And for decades since, *Revolución* has been the street where American revelers and lechers, drinkers and drunks have partied and puked, fought and fucked.

Driving along *Revolución* tonight, I can see little of what made this street so infamous. Even during the day, the souvenir shops that line the street are closed or going out of

business; the Tijuana Zebras hang their heads, asleep. The hawkers and hucksters have abandoned their famous hard sell—these days, they practically plead for business. Earlier in the day one beseeched me: "Quit just walking, have a margarita, buy *something!*"

The tourists and the teenagers, the American drinkers and hard-up sailors just aren't coming to Tijuana any longer. The stories of the violence in the city keep them away. A procession of bullet-riddled bodies, headless bodies, bodies dissolved in drums of lye, gruesome images of horrific brutality flicker on TVs in American living rooms every night. Daily headlines scream 'A Dozen Dead Dumped near a School Yard,' or 'Couple Executed' or 'Man Killed in Crossfire.' The effect on the partiers and revelers is obvious: they just stay home.

The murder rate in Tijuana has crescendoed in recent years with thousands dead since the escalation of violence. The danger to tourists, however, is really quite low. The mayhem making the headlines here isn't directed at tourists or even the average Tijuana citizen—this is gangland-style turf war with gun battles between rival gangs and police. And the violence here, as spectacularly brutal and gruesome as it is, has yet to approach the murder rate of some American cities, like Baltimore or New Orleans or Detroit, even at its peak. But here, unlike those American cities, there are no 'bad neighborhoods,' no particular areas you know to avoid—in Tijuana, in fact, most of the gun battles occur in middle and upper class parts of town. They can break out anywhere, at any time of day or night.

The violence strikes like lightening and while those who live in the city know that the odds of being hit by an errant bullet are astronomically remote, you feel those odds whittle away, pared down every time you go out—the odds were a million to one, then a million to two, then three, then four, until over the weeks and months you begin to feel the odds tipping away from you and you change your behavior, you stay home, you worry.

The thing is, for the people who live here, there's more than just the fear of being shot in gangster crossfire. The risk of kidnapping—being snatched out of your car or your home and beaten, starved and tortured for a few thousand bucks—haunts the average middle or upper class Tijuanan. In the block and stucco houses filling the grids of streets in the city's center, bars now cover windows, gates bar doors, knocks go unanswered. The people are afraid. Stories abound today of banditos kicking open doors or bursting into restaurants, or nightclubs, or theaters, and grabbing convenient victims. The result is that many people barricade themselves in and simply refuse to go out.

At the *Antigua Bodega de Papel*, the restaurant where I had dinner with Delfino, Sergio and Guillermo on *Avenida Revolución*, we easily got a table on a Friday night. In fact, all the restaurants I visited, often bustling during the day, sat largely empty at night.

DELFINO HAD INVITED ME to Tijuana tonight to attend a guitar recital, the second evening of Tijuana's weeklong festival of classical guitar. Many of Delfino's university colleagues as well as his guitarist friends and former students were in attendance. Tonight's recital was in the *Centro Cultural de Tijuana*, the concert hall and cultural center built by the Mexican government to reinforce Tijuana's Mexican identity, to remind Tijuans that they are not gringos.

When the lights dimmed, a tuxedoed man strode out onto the stage, sat in a straight-backed kitchen chair and plucked his guitar's nylon strings for two hours. Delfino was enthralled by the performance. "I think I'm going to cry," he'd exclaimed while I perused the schedule of upcoming performances. I admired the woodwork of the auditorium. I stared at the Spartan stage. I watched the musician through the spindled paper program. I struggled to stay awake. This was a glimpse into the city's arts and cultural community Delfino had promised, a part of Tijuana life I hadn't seen before, didn't even know existed.

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After dinner and a couple of beers at the *Antigua Bodega de Papel*, we scrunched back into Guillermo's little Toyota. Save for the occasional shadowy streetlights panning through the car, late-night Tijuana is dark; but as Guillermo eases the car around the corner onto *Callejón Coahuila*, the heart of the *Zona Norte*, the bright lights and flashing signs sting my eyes. This street, an alley really, one lane wide, one way only, bustles with loud ranchera music, Mexican polkas. Shouts and laughter resonate from the tiled walls, mustachioed men walk the terrazzo sidewalk popping in and out of bars. It's Friday, payday, and pesos fill pockets. A queue of cars perhaps half a mile long crawls along the alley, the drivers and passengers concealed behind the pulsating lights reflected in the silvered glass of their windows.

Prostitution is tolerated throughout Mexico, but here in the *Zona Norte* it is perfectly and completely legal. This is a formal *zona de tolerancia*, an officially designated tolerance zone, where whorehouses and hookers are permitted to do business. Tijuana has made efforts to clean this area up, to make it more respectable, to compel the prostitutes—here called *paraditas* or 'little standers'—to solicit from inside a hotel, bar, or brothel. In fact the city banned actual street-walking for a time in 2004, but protests erupted, including a march on city hall by about 200 prostitutes threatening to strip on the capitol steps if the city didn't relent and lift the ban. Ultimately, fully clothed, the prostitutes prevailed.

On *Callejón Coahuila* tonight, we creep past the *paraditas*, standing elbow to elbow, lining the street, both sides, for blocks. Hundreds of them. Young women—girls—in three-inch platform pumps and little tank dresses. They are teenagers—just children. They certainly don't fit my conception of skanky Tijuana whores; they're nothing like the heavy-hipped matron who flashed me on that dark TJ street all those years ago. There is an unexpected innocence in their look, a sadness, really, melancholy. These girls look like anyone's daughter or little sister, tarted-up as a masquerade.

Mexico, contrary to popular misconceptions, is not a poor country. It's a middle income nation, middle class. Its economy is larger than that of Australia, Canada, or South Korea. And Tijuana, in comparison to the rest of Mexico, is booming—it has an unemployment rate of only about one percent. No longer are the masses of migrants coming from mainland Mexico to Tijuana only to use the city as a staging ground for a bolt across the border. Tijuana's population is still growing uncontrollably, straining systems and services, but these new migrants are coming for jobs right here in the city, jobs in the *maquiladoras*, the assembly plants that dot the U.S.-Mexico border.

Unemployment rates are deceiving, however. On average, maquiladora jobs pay about \$11 a day—far less than you'd need to live in this city, expensive as it is by Mexican standards. Prostitution can pay 10 or 20 times that wage.

Looking out the car window at the *paraditas* along *Callejón Coahuila*, I think of them arriving in this city, full of hopes for a better life, attracted here for the jobs in the *maquiladoras*. These girls ended up here, I imagine, destitute and dejected, desperate—or maybe that's just me, the bleeding heart liberal, projecting a story on them. I stare out the window, mouth agape while the guys watch me and laugh. I want to ask how much, you know, how much it costs, but I don't want there to be any mistake. I don't want any of these guys to take my curiosity for any other interest. Instead I just gawk out the car window at the blank faces of the *paraditas* lined up along the alley, one after another after another.

Delfino, Guillermo, and Sergio brought me here to *Zona Norte*, I realize, to try to shock me, as it shocks them. And I am shocked, shocked by the sheer numbers of *paraditas*, by their young age, their innocence. But really, for me, up until today, Tijuana was hookers—middle-aged whores on dark, desolate corners—as well as mixed-in-your-mouth margaritas and two-for-one tequilas and tourists in sombreros on zebra-painted donkeys. Tijuana, this Tijuana,



A CHILD STOPS TO EAT ON AVENIDA REVOLUCION

it turns out, is as strangely foreign to Delfino and the guys as it is to me, perhaps more so. I, at least, always sort of knew this place existed. This is TJ, after all—Tia-Juana as we gringos call it—Tijuana's evil alter ego. It is different from Tijuana, as different as Vegas, the what-happens-there-stays-there place, is from the neighborhoods of that sprawling Nevada city. Like Vegas, there are two Tijuanas, twin cities: Delfino's and Sergio's and Guillermo's hometown with its classical concerts, Starbucks, and salsa clubs, and its infamous sister city, America's grubby Gomorrah, the world capital of vice, debauchery, and corruption.

As we round the corner at the end of the alley, Delfino points at the *Callejón Coahuila* sign post and shouts, "Someday I'm going to have my picture taken right there, under the *Coahuila* sign, with my guitar in my hands!" I laugh. I'm envisioning not some metal-head, his fist raised, a rock and roll ax around his neck, but instead Professor Delfino Rodriguez, in a tuxedo and a straight-backed chair under the street sign, Spanish guitar on his knee. I can't stop laughing—Maestro Delfino on this corner in Tia-Juana, dolled-up hookers and drunks and johns behind him. I think about that TJ whore who flashed me all those years ago, and all the *paraditas* here tonight. They go home after work, they punch out and leave Tia-Juana after their shift is done. And like Delfino and Sergio and Guillermo, these daughters, sisters, mothers, go home to their families and their friends and their homes and continue their lives—in another Tijuana, a Tijuana I have only just begun to see. •