

Imagining Tijuana

by William Hillyard

Where do you want to go? Is there anything you want to see? They put me on the spot as we cruise around a sleeping, late-night Tijuana on a Friday night. They ask me because I'm the tourist, the one out-of-towner, the sole gringo squished into the back seat of this little blue Corolla zooming through these shadowed streets. Streetlights wash over us as we pass under them, panning through the car like searchlights. As we bank each turn, centrifugal forces roll Delfino onto my shoulder; he can't hold onto the seats in front of him—he needs his hands to talk. Delfino had invited me to come to Tijuana; said he'd show me the real city. I'm his guest tonight, I guess. We'll go to a concert, he'd told me, classical music, there's so much culture here, great restaurants and sports teams, you know, and you're close to San Diego and the Padres and Chargers games.

Delfino, Professor Rodriguez, teaches classical guitar at the Autonomous University of Baja California. I had met him a couple of weeks ago sipping coffee in a little coffee shop, a converted house with old, oiled pine floors and paint-crusted walls. Mexican *boleros* looped softly from hidden speakers. I sat with Delfino and his friend Sergio, a fellow professor and a composer, trained in Florence. Tonight he rides shotgun, turned sideways in his seat animatedly hyphenating his nouns with slurred Spanish swear words. They drift effortlessly between English and Spanish talking to me about Tijuana, about the violence – 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.

“Take me someplace tourists never see,” I respond, not really knowing what it is I've been missing, but wanting to understand the city that these men love so much. “La Coahuila!”

they shout as Guillermo guns the car ahead, swerving around potholes. La Coahuila is Tijuana's *Zona Rosa*, the Red Light district.

Of course, to most of us, Tijuana 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 who 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 at Starbucks this morning, Luis -- a corporate recruiter with a Hurley 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.

"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 here. 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, they seem to love it. "Tijuana is the happiest city in Mexico," Luis added, quoting a poll or something he'd read somewhere.

This Starbucks here in Tijuana -- that sits in a shopping mall by a Burger King full of suits with laptops and cell phones, assembly-line art and blonde wood, is a wormhole in the fabric of the corporate universe. Walk through the door and you are transported, teleported to that placeless place that's like a mirror reflected in a mirror reflected in a mirror. You are no longer in Tijuana. The pimply-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.

And that's the thing, Tijuana snuggles so close to the US that from the air it looks as if it had been cut in half, its other half, its better half, on the other side of the rusty metal border fence. Tijuana's views are all to the north. This it owes to its geography. Tijuana sits at the very north-westernmost edge of Baja California, the dry, dusty, thousand-mile-long peninsula gripping the underside of the United States. Baja shares nearly 150 miles of border with the US; Tijuana lies along fifteen of those. Yet Baja California, separated from the rest of Mexico by the Sea of Cortez, is attached to the Mexican mainland by a mere 50-mile-wide strip of wasteland, the marshy no-man's-land of the Colorado River Delta. And while there are four land crossings into the U.S. from Baja, two of them in Tijuana (and two more to be built over the next few years), there is only one road linking Baja to the mainland. One solitary thread ties the wayward child to the motherland.

Mexicans resent Tijuans' affinity for America, their corruptions of the Spanish language, their Spanglish salted with American cuss words 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. Guillermo, in whose blue Corolla we are speeding across town, 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 Tijuans live on both sides of the border, many having attended grammar school or high school in San Diego--returning to TJ at night--that, in some respects, 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, rough-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. 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 don't get out much to these backstreets, the grid of neighborhoods that fill the downtown. They stick to Avenida Revolución, the main tourist drag, just as I always have for the most part, coming down here with no other aim than to drink beer and get drunk. I started coming to Tijuana underage, like so many young Southern Californians, to party and carouse in the dozens of bars and nightclubs stacked three or four high along Revolución. Thousands upon thousands of teen revelers converged on the street every night back then to drink and dance. Tequila and beers, two-for-one on Wednesdays, and masses of people on Fridays and Saturdays, margaritas mixed right in your mouth. Mike's was my bar, a functional, bare-bones place with a gray-eyed old German guy 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, some beers--two for one at Mike's--my friends and I would head up the

stairs to Regine's—by midnight the place would be packed with chicks. Young, American chicks. That was more than twenty-five years ago.

Speeding down Revolución with Delfino and the guys, 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—I had read just a few days ago that Mike's and Regine's spent their last days as gay bars, Regine's featuring transvestite hookers. Driving down *La Revu*--as the locals call this street--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 flatlined, silent. Revolución, the only Tijuana most Americans will ever know, is all but dead.

* * *

The city was born here, really, on this street. In 1911, Los Angeles banned bars and horse racing and Tijuana, then barely a town, stepped in to pick up the slack. Tijuana existed prior to that, of course. About 180 years ago, an embryonic Tijuana known as Rancho Tia Juana, Aunt Jane's Ranch, gestated on this spot, a dry and lonely little coastal hamlet halfway down the Pacific coast of Mexico. In 1848, however, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the two-year Mexican-American War and redrew the border line due east from the point on the Pacific coast one nautical league south of the southernmost tip of San Diego Bay. San Diego and the territory north of the border including all of California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming became U.S. property. But Aunt Jane's Ranch remained in Mexico. Attempts were made, however, to take Tijuana, to make it part of the United States. For example, during the Mexican Revolution -- the war for which the tourist street was named-- American mercenaries captured the town, occupied it, looted it, but left the bars and curio shops

lining the road untouched. From that time on, forces north of the border were to steer Tijuana's future. During the dry years of Prohibition, for instance, American drinkers swarmed Revolución, frequenting the bars--then mostly American-owned enterprises that had been picked up and moved south of the border. The Hollywood élite virtually relocated to the swank and exclusive hotels, clubs, and casinos of Tijuana. The war years and after saw hard-up San Diego sailors crossing, and coming down to Tijuana to drink, fight and fornicate, and for decades since, La Revu 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 shops lining the street selling the ceramic Bart Simpsons and Velvet Elvises are closing, going out of business; the zebra-painted donkeys, the Tijuana tourist icon, hang their heads, asleep. The hawkers and hucksters have abandoned their famous hard sell. These days, they practically plead for business. The other day, one beseeched me, "Quit just walking, have a margarita, buy *something!*"

It's because 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 acid, gruesome images of horrific brutality flicker across living room T.V.'s 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, with more than 600 people killed so far this year, but this extreme of violence is only now reaching the level of American cities like New

Orleans or Philadelphia or Dallas. And like those American cities, the danger to tourists is really very low. The mayhem making the headlines here in Tijuana 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. But here, unlike the violent cities in the U.S., there are no "bad neighborhoods," no particular areas you know to avoid. In Tijuana, most of the murders occur in middle- and upper-class parts of town. Gunbattles can break out anywhere, at any time of day or night. The violence strikes like lightning 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 a restaurant or from your car and beaten, starved and tortured for a few thousand bucks, haunts the average middle- or upper-class Tijuanan. Stories abound today of banditos bursting into upscale restaurant, or nightclubs, or theaters, and grabbing a convenient victim. So many people simply refuse to go out; they are imprisoned by fear in their homes. At the Antigua Bodega de Papel, the restaurant where we had dinner earlier, we'd easily gotten a table on a Friday night. Antigua Bodega anchors the southern end of Revolución and salsa maestro El Gume used to pack the place on weekends with crowds of dancers and partiers from all over the city. El Gume still comes, but the people don't. In fact, all the restaurants I visited, often bustling during the day, sat largely empty at night. Many affluent Mexicans have simply left town, moving across the border to the San Diego suburbs. Areas like Eastlake in southern San Diego County have become little ghettos of wealthy

Tijuanans with shops and restaurants imported whole and intact from across the border. Some Tijuana restaurants, like Romesco, have cloned and relocated themselves a few miles north of the line. On the night I ate at Romesco in San Diego, mine was the only table speaking English. At the other tables, jacket-and-tie-wearing men and formally dressed women murmured Spanish under the soft strum of a musician's guitar. Mexican nationals all, I'm sure; exiles, many of whom, no doubt, commute to jobs in Tijuana by day and return to the relative safety of San Diego by night.

That the restaurants sit empty is no insignificant thing. These restaurants were the pride of Tijuana. Its Baja Cuisine movement, fresh local seafood, beef--lots of beef--quail and pheasant, the crocodile tacos and corn fungus enchiladas, agave worms and *Chapultepec*--grasshoppers—put Tijuana on the world culinary map. But while the high-end restaurants suffer, the mom-and-pop-taco shops, *torta* stands, and hot dog carts catering to a more diverse clientele still plod along. You feel a little safer eating on a street corner, I guess, out in the open, as counter-intuitive as it sounds. There, you eat on your feet, obscured at least partially by the thick wafts of charcoal smoke, escaping the eye of would-be kidnappers. There's something comforting about the dark of night, too; step back from the light of the cart and you disappear into darkness. The hot dog carts are a late night experience anyway, materializing in front of bars and night clubs in the wee hours, the cook's disembodied face floating in the green glow of his propane lamp.

I had a hot dog earlier this evening, in front of the Cultural Center in the River District. Hot dogs are a Tijuana phenomenon, an amalgamation of American ingredients transformed by alchemy into a Tijuanan tradition. These little pink dogs, always wrapped in a thin slice of bacon, are fried crisp on a thick slab of steel. You'll get your dog on a spongy, steamed bun, too

hot to hold. At their best, the cook smears the doughy bun with a layer of mayonnaise and proceeds to fry that too, toasting it to a crusty brown. He'll top it with a squirt of mayonnaise, ketchup, chile sauce, onions, tomatoes. One dollar. The result is an interplay of flavors and textures, sweet and spicy, that shames the American original. I ate my hot dog this evening, hiding in the shadows, waiting for Delfino.

Delfino had invited me to attend a guitar recital, the second evening of Tijuana's weeklong festival of classical guitar. Tonight's performance was the capstone of a day of master classes and lectures attracting a Who's Who of Mexican and American guitarists. Delfino, while conscious of the dangers of the city, refuses to alter his life out of fear. Others are not so brave. The concert hall, sold out in past performances, was only half-full. Attendees carrying guitars in worn cases addressed each other as *maestro*. When the lights dimmed, a man strode out onto the stage, sat in a straight-backed kitchen chair and softly plucked his guitar's nylon strings for two hours. Delfino was enthralled, "I think I'm going to cry," he'd exclaimed. I struggled to stay awake. This was a glimpse into the city's arts and cultural community, a part of Tijuana life I hadn't seen before. But this evening that begun with the concert, then dinner while listening to salsa-master El Gume, has rapidly degraded into a kind of after-concert boy's night out.

* * *

Guillermo eases the car around the corner on to Callejón Coahuila, the heart of the *Zona Rosa*, and into the bright lights and flashing signs. This street, an alley really, one lane wide and one way only, bustles with loud *ranchera* music, trumpets and accordians. Shouts and laughter resonate from the tiled walls, men walk the terrazzo sidewalk, popping in and out of bars. A

queue of cars perhaps half a mile long crawls along the alley, the occupants concealed behind the pulsating lights reflected in the glass of their windows. Prostitution is tolerated throughout Mexico, but here in La Coahuila it is perfectly and completely legal. This is a formal *zona de tolerancia*, an officially designated tolerance zone, where whorehouses and hookers are condoned. Tijuana has made efforts to clean this area up, to make it more respectable, to compel the streetwalkers--here called *paraditas* or 'little standers'--to solicit from inside a hotel, bar or brothel. In fact the city banned 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, 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 slutty three-inch platform pumps and slinky little tank dresses; they seem, if I had to guess, about 20 years old on average. They certainly don't fit my conception of skanky Tijuana hookers. There is an unexpected innocence in their look, sad really, melancholy. These girls look like anyone's daughters or little sisters, tarted-up as if for 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 using the city as a staging ground for a bolt across the border. Yes, Tijuana's population is still growing uncontrollably, burgeoning in fact, 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 \$15 a day—far less than you’d need to live in this city, expensive as it is by Mexican standards. Prostitution pays ten or twenty times that wage.

Looking out the car window at the *paraditas*, I think of them arriving in this city, full of hopes for a better life, and ending up here destitute dejected, and desperate. Maybe that’s just me, a bourgeois liberal American, projecting a story onto them. I can’t help, though, thinking about their name; *paraditas*; *parar*, the root verb, you could translate as ‘to end up.’ And the *paraditas*, then, could be those who ended up, ended up here in La Coahuila. The guys watch me and laugh, laugh at the look on my face. 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 kind of interest. Instead I just gawk out the car window at the blank faces of the girls lined up along the alley, one after another after another. I’m not appalled; you’d think I’d be appalled, but in a way, this is the Tijuana I expected, the underbelly, maybe, but the underbelly of the Tijuana I always thought I knew. Delfino and Sergio and Guillermo, and Luis and all the bright young things on computers and cell phones in Starbucks, and the restaurants and the karaoke, somehow don’t stand in opposition to La Coahuila or *La Revu* or even the violence, but exist with it, commingled and intertwined. As we round the corner at the end of the alley, Delfino points at the 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 metalhead, *Rock On!*, fist raised, with a rock and roll ax around his neck, but Professor Delfino Rodriguez, *el maestro*, in a tuxedo, seated under the street sign in a straight-backed chair, Spanish guitar on his knee. I can’t stop laughing. *Maestro* Delfino on this corner, dolled up hookers and drunks and johns behind him. Man, this is Tijuana.