

Scot Sothern

Borderline

Every Sunday night I drove Dashiell down to La Jolla and surrendered him to his mother. Hugs and kisses for Dash. Overdue child support, acrimony, and fuck-you-too for Sylvia. It wasn't easy, saying goodbye to Dashiell; he clung to me, teary-eyed, as though I was going to leave and never come back. Sylvia blamed me. I'd been an absent parent for three of Dash's five years, working at faraway locals, and then leaving for good when she and I broke up. She said it was separation anxiety because he couldn't trust me. I said, it was because he didn't want me to leave him with her, because she was a bitch.

South from La Jolla's ocean-view opulence, through San Diego's well-scrubbed middle; thousands upon thousands of white republicans in running shorts and baseball caps, lower and lower, to Alamo stucco and down, down, to border town, Tijuana, Mexico.

In my wallet: four hundred dollars and three fat joints. In my backpack, my Nikon with a 28mm lens, two Vivatar strobes and six extra AA batteries, an extra 9-volt camera battery and ten rolls of Kodak Tri-X, a small Ibuprofen bottle with four Vicodins mixed in, four packs of Kool Kings and six condoms.

In San Ysidro, a San Diego suburb hinged to the Mexican border, I parked in a large numbered parking lot and paid with enough quarters, dropped into a slot, for two days. I sat in the car and smoked half a joint, put a hundred and sixty dollars in my pants' pockets, and the rest in my socks. I locked up the car and went walking.

San Ysidro, at least the part going into Tijuana, was a kinetic mass



of cultural mutts. Adverts on every surface: dog racing, jai alai, bull fights, dance clubs, Mexican car insurance. I stopped at a McDonald's and fueled-up with burgers and fries.

Two or three years back an angry man with an Uzi, a shotgun, and an automatic pistol, walked into a San Ysidro McDonald's and murdered twenty-two people. With little time to contemplate the enormity of his spree, the guy died when the San Diego Swat Team took telescopic aim and put him down. Could this be the same McDonald's? I imagined everyone in the place dead on the floor.

At the border crossing, long impatient lines going North, and all clear going South. Mexican border police waved the Americans onto their foreign soil while the border police on our side gave everyone a hard time, as though they deserved it. When an American crosses a foreign border he or she feels superior to the natives, it's an inbred response. Collectively we believe we are not just better, smarter, more sophisticated, but somehow more human;

our pain sensors more sensitive, our cognition less abstract. What a bunch of assholes we are.

A corkscrew foot bridge crossed over to the other side, poverty and piss stink, bruised Detroit clunkers and yellow cabs bouncing through potholes, maneuvering around pedestrians. I donated my coinage to leather-faced old women, on bended knees, and tatterdemalion kids hawking papier-mâché pinatas. I wasn't improve anyone's living conditions, but still charity was soul cleansing and a pocketful of change was better than a rude gesture.

My first trip to Mexico was in nineteen-sixty-eight, when I was eighteen years old, and still had youth as an excuse. America was coming apart at the seams and while my political rhetoric called for Molotov cocktails and Bob Dylan songs, my contributions to the revolution amounted to not getting a haircut, not getting a job; shoplifting, drug usage and the constant pursuit of all things sexual. I had ditched Missouri for good and was bumming room and board from a friend in Santa Monica; not much different from the way I was living now, nearly twenty years later; bumming from another friend in Santa Monica.

My friend, Kelly, and I, bored with loitering and panhandling on the Sunset Strip, decided to thumb to Yuma, Arizona, where we could bum off another friend, Steve, and cross the borderline to San Luis, Mexico.

I had met Steve a couple of times before, in Los Angeles, and, for me, it had been love at first sight. Not gay love; there was no lust involved. It was all about idol worship. I wanted to be Steve. Steve was dark and tall and thin with broad shoulders, long black hair, a beautiful chiseled face with the straightest and whitest teeth I'd ever seen. He smiled a lot. He rolled perfect joints with a twist at each end which he would bite off with an audible pop. He wore a Mexican serape, tight jeans and stovepipe boots. Steve was a desperado who smuggled kilos of pot into the US of A. He was the ultimate new American hero.

Our first day in Yuma, Kelly and I met Steve's best friend, also named Steve, who had just been released from prison where he had done nine months on a burglary and assault rap. Now he was partnering up with Steve as a marijuana sales and service rep. Steve the jailbird was big and ugly and scary.

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Steve and Steve represented a great misconception of mine, of the times; they flashed the two-fingered peace sign and raised power-to-the-people fists. They were into acid rock and protest songs. Steve the idol, drove a funky 1949 Ford Woody Station Wagon with a bumper sticker advising LOVE IT OR LOSE IT! Steve the jailbird had a great droopy mustache and wore tie-dyed shirts and a fringed suede jacket. But, a year from now, Steve the jailbird would be back in lock-down with a double life sentence. Steve the idol would become a junky on the skids. His white teeth turned grey. This was the swinging sixties that I found early on, criminal intent and moral vacuity rationalized under a banner of peace and love. But I was still caught up in the romance when Steve the idol suggested we go to Mexico and smuggle a couple of kilos of pot back across the border. Fuck yeah.

That night we crossed into San Luis, Mexico, in Steve the idol's Woody. Steve and Steve in the front, Kelly and I in the back. We went from two-lane blacktop to dirt and ruts and back through time down a main street of saloons and Mexican cowboys and poverty beyond any I had seen in my still somewhat inexperienced youth.

In Tijuana, nearly two decades later, I engaged my radar and walked through a gauntlet of black velvet paintings--matadors on tippy-toe butchering bulls, naked Mexican maids with pink DayGlo nipples, a surprising absence of Elvis portraits. Three-walled stalls selling leather sandals, boots and jackets, ceramic kitsch. Five minutes of walking brought me to a red-light neighborhood of ramshackle discos and bagnios, garish in primary colors and flickering lamps. Whores, pimps, pushers, corruption and vice. The busy weekend foot traffic was mostly gone but business was still open and at bargain prices. Beautiful sad-eyed women hawked souls and holes from dark doorways.

In a small nondescript bar, I creaked a barstool, and ordered a shot of tequila and a beer. Other than the bartender, and me, the place was empty. He pushed a buzzer and, from a swinging door at the end of the narrow bar, a working girl came out. She sat next to me and we grinned at each other.

She scooted in close, rubbing her body against mine, and asked me, in Spanish, would I buy her a drink? I motioned to the bartender, who brought her a beer. We clinked containers and toasted circumstance. The low-grade

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tequila kicked and clawed all the way down. I gritted my teeth and held onto the bar.

The girl was young and cute and kind of shapeless. She wore a belted leotard with a ruffled flounce at the hips, and shining white tights. On her cheeks she wore round, red, circles of rouge like on a toy soldier. I inquired as to the price of an orgasm which she told me was a steal at fifteen dollars.



She led me to a small room with a single bed, a roll of toilet paper on the headboard, a couple of holes in the wall. I negotiated a photo session which she allowed but only fully clothed. I took three pictures, two of her standing next to the bed and one standing on the bed, her arms aerodynamically flat to her sides. I proposed sexual intercourse and took off my pants. She had snaps at the crotch of her leotard which she unsnapped. She fitted me with a rubber then, on the bed, on her back, she offered me her only exposed area. We had no-frills animatronic sex which didn't work for me so I used my hand to finish up. I tipped her an extra five, said adios, and took my leave.

In my youth, in San Luis, Mexico with my friend Kelly and the two Steves,