

WHEN THE LIGHTS GO OUT

RICHARD SYMANSKI

When I was a young man, a teenager, I don't recall ever thinking or telling anyone that I thought I was immortal. Or, for that matter, claiming to be immune to the consequences of high-risk behavior. But thinking and telling are not the same as doing, and on the issue of behavior I was—and at times still am—perhaps no different from all those for whom words and deeds concerning the immortal or invincible self are one and the same. Recently, I was poignantly reminded that I have often not exactly assessed risk in ways meant to keep me out of harm's way and that the clutching hands of the Grim Reaper are unforgiving of serious miscalculations.

I first went to Tijuana when I was seventeen. I hopped a freight train in San Jose and didn't get off until I reached Los Angeles. I hitchhiked to the border, walked across, and got hustled by pimping taxi drivers. Soon I found myself in the red-light district. For \$3 I got laid in a small, dark cubicle in a back alley by a Mexican woman whose round face and stumpy shape are unrecoverable. When I left the whore and returned to the alley, two Mexicans confronted me and asked for all my money. I pulled out a large hunting knife, waved it in front of their faces and shouted some obscenities, and then ran as fast as I could.

Except for a couple of brief visits in the 1980s, I didn't return to Tijuana until the fall of 1996, almost five years after moving to Southern California. Then I started going there on a fairly regular basis, initially to shoot only black-and-white photographs. Along about my tenth or eleventh trip, I switched to color print film.

Almost all of my trips have been to a small, busy, and noisy area known as the "Zona Norte." To some it is known as the "Zona Roja" (Red-Light District). The designation is accurate, for the Zona Norte contains most of Tijuana's street whores and brothels. But the Zona is much more than just a place to temporarily placate the male libido. It's a receiving area for migrants from all over Mexico. It's a jumping-off point for those about to illegally cross into the United States. It's home to the *coyotes* who rip off and guide the hopefuls under and over the fences. And the Zona is where, in all of this sprawling, hilly, unplanned city of considerably more than a million people, you're most likely to find petty drug dealers and addicts, alcoholics and down-and-outers.

The Zona Norte is also home to roaming young children who play with a toy in the gutter, who sit on the curb or in the middle of the sidewalk and eat ice cream, and who smile and gaze with befuddlement and amusement at a tall gringo in a baseball cap who takes their pictures. If there were nothing more than these children in the Zona Norte, I would go there solely to photograph them. But the attractions of the Zona Norte are many: the closed and tight spaces; the suspicious,

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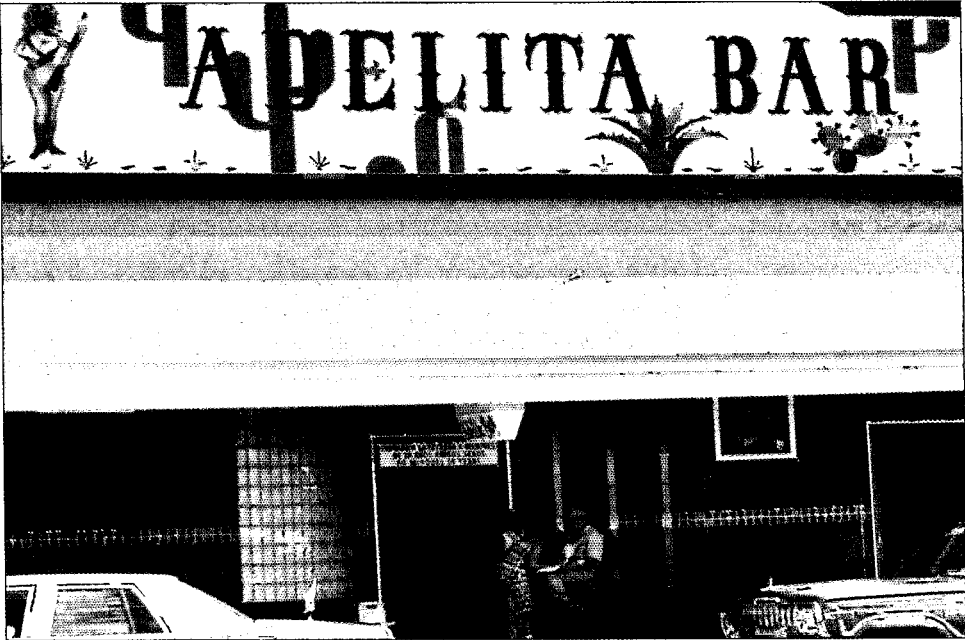


FIG. 1—Prostitutes checking in for their shift at the Adelita Bar. Hundreds of young women from all over Mexico work in this famous Tijuana brothel, which is open eighteen hours a day, seven days a week. The young women make about as much in a half-hour with a client as they would make in a week working as a secretary or in a *maquiladora*. (Photograph by the author, 1997)

sometimes threatening glances; the crackling sound of frying food; the spice-saturated air; the visible suggestions of illicit transactions; the lurching, grabbing hand and the begging solicitation; the sense of uniqueness, diversity, Mexico. And the often-felt hunch—maybe unavoidable—that for most of these habitués of the street and the alleyways and the cheap rooms for rent this is home and always will be.

The Zona Norte is chockablock with blaring bars and dark, dank dance halls and honest street vendors who cook food and shell clams and prepare incomparable tacos. The Zona is crowded with small-scale entrepreneurs who shine shoes and work wood for coffins and leather for belts and hats, people who cut hair and sell vinegar potato chips and second- and third-hand axes and cheap pottery and mournful portraits of a dying Christ in an iced bed of stork-necked Dos Equis. On several of the streets in the Zona Norte there are those who bark that the bars they stand in front of have the cheapest beers and the nicest and prettiest girls, if you'll but follow the beckoning hand and take a peek. There are those who evangelize about the everlasting love of God and pray endlessly for lost souls and new conversions, all right next door to the largest, most active, and perhaps most renowned whorehouse south of Fairbanks and west of Denver: the Adelita Bar (Figure 1).

After I'd made several photographic forays into the Zona Norte I searched the Internet for what I could find on Tijuana and the Zona. I found good and reliable

descriptions of the Adelita Bar and the Chicago Club—another brothel of some renown—and also a good bit of advice about being careful in the area around these whorehouses. The streets, it was said, are dangerous, a real thieves' lair, and the most dangerous spot of all is little more than half a block from the Adelita, an eastern patch of Constitution Avenue where chances of getting mugged are good. More specifically, according to the Internet, you'll be grabbed from behind with a professional choke hold, and unless you're large and very skilled in the ways of self-defense, your breath will be taken away before you have any chance of breaking loose. You'll find yourself unconscious. If you're unlucky, if something goes wrong in the choking, you'll find yourself dead.

I read this warning with a great, if clinical, interest, and I knew precisely the location. I had no reason to doubt that such assaults occurred. But I told myself that because I'd been there so frequently, day and night, and without incident, and because I was as cautious as I could be about guarding my backside—as much as possible while looking for good street shots—getting victimized by one of these deadly choke holds was, well, not too likely. I also wondered—appealing to the standards I have so often used in my research and writing—about the reliability of this kind of Internet information. I tell students in my university writing classes not to use the Internet for their research papers unless they know something about the source of the information. And yet, after reading that account of choke-hold thefts and squaring it with imagined possibilities of what I knew—and didn't know—about the streets of the Zona Norte, I told myself that henceforth I'd redouble my efforts to watch my back. I'd pay more attention to whether I was being followed. I'd try to avoid that tagged space on Constitution. And when someone called me "*hijo de puta*" for aiming my camera, I wouldn't stand around to find out what my accuser had in mind for round two by way of words or worse.

One day at the bar in the Adelita, I met an Alaskan geologist who said he came to Tijuana once or twice a year to rent a room in the Hotel Coahuila for several days to sample the offerings. Rambling, he reiterated the warning I'd read on the Internet. He told me that it was unwise to walk the streets alone, day or night, and that I ought always to walk in the middle of the street. He was younger than I was, and his air was paternalistic, all knowing, but well meaning, I thought. I waited for him to tell me about a bad experience he'd had, but none was forthcoming. He kept returning to what we'd both read on the Internet. I didn't tell him that I'd walked the streets of the Zona Norte alone and day and night fifteen or twenty times without incident. I didn't tell him of my own vague sense of probability, obviously quite different from his. More than one girl working at the Adelita had told me how those who do not live in a room above the place come to work by taxi—and leave the same way. Even in full daylight they won't walk the two or three blocks to Revolution Avenue, where they can get a cheap collective taxi to take them to their apartment or *colonia*.

One day I drove to Tijuana to collect twenty-two of my framed 11-by-14-inch chromogenic Cuban prints that had been on display for two months in the upscale

Grand Hotel, a high-rise lodging and shopping complex several miles south of the Zona Norte. I arrived at the hotel about midafternoon and was unable to find the person who had arranged for the showing of my prints. I returned at five, wrapped and boxed my prints, and headed for the border. But on a whim—one of those spur-of-the-moment decisions that in retrospect look much like the purposeful guiding hand of that evil god who enjoys nothing so much as a rousing satanic laugh—I decided to detour to the Zona Norte. I wanted to shoot a roll of Fuji Astia slide film that I'd then have cross-processed, developed as negative print film. The colors that result can be freaky, eerie, even revealing, especially if you do your own color printing, as I do. I have 1,500 or so negatives in black and white or color of the Zona Norte, but not a single roll of cross-processed slide film from this geographical and sociological fascination of mine.

Once in the Zona, I saw that the parking lot where I normally left the car was full. So I went around the block and found another lot, one I'd never used before. It seemed safe enough. There was plenty of light, and two attendants said that they'd be there all night and that I needn't worry about anything in my car. My instincts said: okay.

I walked south, my camera bag around my waist, with a 35 mm Canon, two telephoto lenses, and several rolls of film inside it, but decided to use only my son's tiny Yashica point-and-shoot camera for the roll of slide film I wanted to take. The camera is easy to handle; I like its lenses for busy, pinched street shots; the Zeiss glass is unusually sharp and gives very good prints when blown up; and I wanted to see how the light from its small flash would work at night when pointed at flickering neon signs.

A block directly west of the Adelita, I headed out into the street to avoid being caught in the tight and unpredictable crowd on the sidewalk, along a street that long ago I'd named the Street of Hardwares, because of all the secondhand tools and kitchen appliances and boxes of odds and ends and nuts and bolts and just about anything you might find in a run-of-the-mill, ragtag hardware store. When I reached Little Coahuila, a street half the width of its big sister to the north, where the Adelita lies, I turned east into the Zona's irresistible, adrenalin-rich gauntlet—a nerve-tingling, unpredictable swarm of food vendors and stoop-eyed druggies and boisterous barkers and barfing bums, and plenty of spirited street whores. I could always count on three or four of them grabbing my arm or blowing me a kiss, smiling solicitously as only they can along what I called the Street of Whores.

At the end of the block-long Street of Whores, I found myself at Constitution Avenue. From there it's a short half-block north to Coahuila, then west for a block past the Adelita before I would again turn north for a short half-block stroll to the car. I started toward the corner for the shortest route to the car, but suddenly my eye caught an Indian-looking woman preparing food; she was holding up a batch of onions beneath some stark lights bouncing off a steel hood. I couldn't resist taking several shots of her before she became aware of my presence. Then, without giving much thought to what I was doing—that instant when your mind slips out of cau-

tionary mode and you momentarily forget everything you knew you'd never forget, I weaved between two double-parked cars, let a couple more honking cars pass, and then stepped into that deadly choke space about which I had read and been amply warned.

I do not even remember turning my back. I only remember suddenly feeling something like a huge rope or strap around my neck, pulling me upward and backward and choking the life out of me. I gasped, and as hard as I could I tried to pull loose. I violently swung my left arm backward, trying to hit my assailant. I may have tried to ask for help, or shout, but I'm not sure that anything came out—the pressure was that full and powerful. I remember seeing a face only a few feet in front of me—but then, as now, I have no idea whether he was an accomplice or an indifferent passerby enjoying the free show. I also remember someone tugging at my camera bag, and I tried to hold on with my free right hand. But the arm was as good as paralyzed, for at about this point the lights across the street blurred. And that, in the only memory I have of the moment, was it: The colored lights—no quick run through black and white—were out.

I raised my head and for a brief moment thought I was waking from a dream. But a couple of seconds later—I doubt it was longer than this—I realized that the red and blue lights flickering in the black sky were those of Constitution Avenue, and that I was lying flat on my back. I got up slowly and saw that I was in a narrow, dark alley with high walls. I was not 15 feet from where I'd been choked into unconsciousness. I had on my pants, my short-sleeved shirt, and my shoes. But I'd been stripped of everything else: my camera bag and all that was in it, my wallet with money and driver's license and credit cards and all kinds of other useless cards, the \$70 I had in my front left pocket, a new watch, an expensive pair of prescription glasses I had in my shirt pocket, two sets of keys (one, an extra set I always carry when on the road in case I get absent minded), even a cheap 75¢ comb and a handful of mint cough drops I'd had in another shirt pocket.

I felt around my chest and midsection, looked at my legs, stroked my face. Something long and thick ran the length of my jawbone on the left side of my face. I had no idea what it was. But I could see no blood on my arms or hands or pants, and the only places that hurt were my neck and my tongue. Especially my tongue. It felt as though the whole left side had been cut off.

I started to walk the few feet to the street, into the middle of all those denizens of the early night going about their business of hustling and hoping, when I turned and saw a tall, thin Mexican with a tan baseball cap holding my son's Yashica. "That's mine!" I shouted in English, and grabbed it out of his hand. He didn't resist or say a word, and he disappeared before I could gather my senses enough to wonder whether he had taken any of my other possessions, whether he had been one of the muggers.

Now, standing at the very spot where I'd been choked and dropped, and where perhaps as many as eight or ten people within a dozen feet had watched the assault, and where several of them must have seen me dragged into the alley and stripped of all my valuables, and where several of them must have seen me lying there uncon-

scious and did nothing about it for I know not how long, I suddenly felt rabid, wildly insecure. As if everyone were a threat, about to attack or to choke the life out of me once again. I remember turning and turning, screaming inside, "GET THE FUCK AWAY!" I knew the next attack was just seconds away, and nothing I did would prevent it.

This fear of a repeat choking, I think, lasted less than a minute, maybe half that long. And then I found myself crossing the street, walking briskly past the Adelita. Just beyond the restaurant where all the whores eat and snack when not hustling or fucking, in front of the evangelizing church where bums beg and sleep on the pavement, I stopped and thought: "I'm lucky! I'm alive! I'm now on my second life. Or is it number three? Four? Who knows. . . ." "Very lucky," I said to myself, thoughts now running rampant in my head, assuring me in some perverse kind of way that for however long I'd been out of touch with reality my brain was still more or less intact.

Soon I was at the parking lot where I'd left my wife's Toyota Camry. The back seat was crowded with the boxes of my Cuban prints. I told the attendant, in a mixture of Spanish and English—unusual for me, but I was suddenly incapable of speaking only in Spanish—what had happened and asked him to help me get into my car. No, he couldn't help me. And no, he couldn't give me 40 centavos to make a phone call, either. Less than an hour earlier I'd given him a \$5 bill.

I went into the middle of the street and stood there as though I were asking to be run over. I stayed there until a police car with three cops inside came along. I related what had happened, again in unusually bad Spanish, making me wonder whether oxygen deprivation had in fact affected by brain, or whether in that one brief traumatic event of indeterminate length I'd had enough of Latin America forever and an inner voice was demanding that I assert the superiority of my native tongue.

The woman cop who was driving and had no interest in pulling to the side of the Mormon-wide street told me to wait right where I was; they'd return very shortly. Twenty minutes went by as I sat with my back against the stark parking wall on the half-lit street, waiting. I felt numb, indifferent, suddenly unassailable. "Go ahead, try again, there's nothing worth taking," I thought.

The cop car or other cops didn't come around, and now it occurred to me that all I wanted was to get in my car, cross the familiar border, and go home. I walked back to where I'd been choked. Danger or no danger, I wanted one set of keys. But standing on the west side of Constitution, a mere 25 feet of pavement and cars and brown faces and tight, short skirts from where I'd gone down, I lost my nerve. So I turned and explained to a fat barker sitting on his butt that just across the street I'd been choked and robbed. Would he be kind enough to accompany me and look for my keys in the dark alley? No, he couldn't do that, he said; he was working. Then I stuck my head inside a parked taxi and went through the same routine. But before I could see whether there might be at least one good Samaritan within shouting distance, I saw three stubby cops with billy clubs walking into view. I waved and shouted and went to them, told my story, and said, "Come with me to that alley." I pointed. "I've got to find my keys."

All we found was one of my mint cough drops. Frustrated, I went back to the sidewalk, to where I'd been choked. With the cops at my back, I asked one, then another, streetwalker whether she'd seen what had happened to me. Yes, the first one said. She had, and there were two of them. She couldn't, however, remember what they looked like. Nor could the second heavy-hipped whore. Nor could a stooping scavenger in a Texas straw hat provide more than incoherent mumbling in response to my questions. In these answers and nonanswers, in their faces, in their postures was a deadness, a dreary indifference. As if they were saying to me, I would later reflect: "Hey, everybody's in for a good choking, it was just your time."

I convinced the cops to return with me to the car, and for the better part of ten minutes one of them tried to get the left front door open with a crow bar and a coat hanger. He fumbled, he tried, he had no luck. So he tried the right front door for all of a minute. Then he gave up.

"What am I going to do?" I asked.

Shrugging shoulders and silence were my answer.

We again walked past the Adelita, this time on the other side of the street. We crossed Constitution, 20 yards from where I'd been throttled. Some 20 yards or so farther on we entered what one cop called a *casita*, literally a small house, but in this case a neighborhood police station. It was a small, one-room, well-lit office with bare white walls, one desk, and two, maybe three, chairs. On top of the small desk were a few papers and a typewriter. A fat-faced, round man with a lot of teeth and no hat and a sea of black hair going every which way was typing something. The *jefe*, the man in charge, I assumed.

I tried to tell him what had happened. He showed little interest. No, he showed no interest. He would not take down my name, or note what had been stolen. And when I said that I'd like something on paper, a note on a scrap of paper about what had happened that I could give to my insurance company, he told me he wouldn't give me anything. He insisted that if I had a complaint about a robbery then I'd have to go to the central police station. He told me where it was; I couldn't, or didn't want to, register the address. Suddenly, all I could see in front of me was another crooked Mexican cop wanting me to hand him a \$10 or \$20 bill.

"Did he do it?" one of the ten or so cops standing around and doing nothing finally asked me. He pointed to a tall, muscular kid of maybe twenty-five or so who was standing in a corner opposite the useless, toothy jefe at the desk. The kid had large arms and an army haircut. He looked more Anglo than Mexican, and a little scared. He was plenty big enough to have strangled me.

"*Yo no sé*," I said. Other than the face—now anyone's face—that I'd seen as my color world went fuzzy and then was gone, I had no idea who, or what, had attacked me. For all I knew, it was an alien force never before described.

I returned to the jefe's desk; he was busy typing something. "Is he a suspect?" I asked, pointing back to the bulky kid.

"I don't know," the jefe said, barely raising his head.

"Can I get a piece of paper, anything to show that I was robbed?" I asked again.
"No."

I went outside, into the middle of three or four more cops milling about, apparently with nothing better to do than form a square, or rather a triangle, around the one female cop I saw at the casita. One of the men said, "We can't catch them. We go up the street, they do it down the street. We go down the street, they go up the street."

"Why, then, are there ten or twelve of you standing around doing nothing, an easy stone's throw from where I got mugged?" I wanted to ask, the anger nothing like what it would have been if I hadn't felt so numb. Lost.

Again I went to the jefe at his desk. "Will one of you guys give it another try on opening my car? We can worry about getting it started after I get in."

"All we can do for you is break the window," the jefe said.

"Forget it," I muttered, and headed back out to the cluster of deadbeat cops who were rubbing their hands.

Earlier, while they were trying to get into my car, I had found a little over a dollar in nickels and dimes in my left blue jeans pocket. The change must have been too much trouble to dig out. Now I brought the coins out and splayed a hand and said, "Will one of you give me 40 centavos to make a phone call?" No one responded, and I repeated the question, shoving the money at them. They looked at me as though I were a con man.

I called my wife collect and said I was okay, I had been robbed of everything, and could she come with another set of keys so I could drive home. I gave her directions: two, three, four times. I got the message that driving across the border at eleven or so at night and into an area that wasn't known for being particularly safe was unsettling her. And she'd had a glass or two of wine, she said, waiting for me to arrive.

Now she wanted to know if I could get a motel with a credit card number she'd give me. This way if she got lost she could call me. I explained that that'd be hard, or maybe not as easy as my mind now imagined. Tijuana and all the people around me were looking more than just a little unfriendly, and not exactly helpful. I said, "Okay, just meet me at the border. As soon as you come across, I'll be standing there."

"Where?" she said, her uncertainty, her fright, obvious.

"As soon as you roll over the spikes. I *will* be there."

I cajoled three of the do-nothing cops into spending five minutes to ferry me to the border. I walked through the late-night food vendors and die-hard trinket sellers, then over the arching bridge that would take me to U.S. customs. Just this side of the warning signs about those nasty things you'd better not take across the border, I saw three customs agents huddling at the edge of the motor runway. I told them about the robbery, then asked if one of them could take me over to the car and try to get it open and started.

They looked at each other; it would have taken an idiot to miss the indifference. "Shit," I said, and headed toward customs.

At McDonald's I bought a cup of coffee with the fortune in my pocket, then went to a mirror and saw that my tongue was intact; it was just that the whole left side now looked about twice the size of the right side. But there was more good news. I had no missing or broken teeth, and the slice on my face wouldn't need any stitches.

For something like two hours I paced back and forth near the gates where cars cross into Mexico, waiting for my wife to arrive in my pickup. I shivered, again and again, and I realized that it wasn't just because of the late hour and the short-sleeved shirt I was wearing. I was picturing the choking, the meager fight, going out, and each time the focus sharpened I felt a chill run from my head into my lower legs. Each time, I wished there were a way to turn off the autofocus in my head. No such luck.

I thought of the trauma of an event that just wouldn't go away. I thought of justice in a way I couldn't ever remember thinking about it before. I thought of gathering information in 1987 for an essay on Aborigines in settlements around Alice Springs in central Australia. I'd heard of the justice they meted out: An assailant breaks a leg; that gives the victim the right to break the leg of the perpetrator.

While watching the unrelenting stream of honking, Friday-night cars pour across the border, some headed for the very streets where I'd just been mugged, my thoughts focused on the rights of victims. It occurred to me then—and I've not changed my mind since the choking—that it ought to be the social and legal right of a victim to be able to administer like justice to the person who attacked, or stole, or killed—whatever. Yes, Aboriginal style, 'a Stone Age cultural rule perfectly appropriate for so-called civilized societies in the twenty-first century. Call it the Principle of Equal and Proportionate Justice.

Now that I've been choked until unconscious, I want the right, legally and socially sanctioned, to have my assailant—if caught—put in a dark cell where, at times of my choosing, I can surprise and choke the son-of-a-bitch until he's unconscious. I want to do it repeatedly, until his body trembles uncontrollably at the thought of my arms around his neck.

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