

The U.S.S.R. is ancient history, but you can still encounter “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” Try Mexico.

Attention Students!

Study Abroad!

Full-Immersion Spanish!

Bail Pre-bonded

Word count: 8,000

The legendary Murphy was wrong. His law, that if anything can go wrong it will, is disproved by almost all post-accident investigations of large disasters. These investigations repeatedly point out that “it was lucky it wasn’t worse.”

—Charles Perrow, *Normal Accidents*, New York: Basic Books, 1984, p. 111

Part One

I admit it: The cops, the federales, the authorities—whatever these agencies call themselves in Mexico—have scared me a few times, but so far they haven’t sent me to jail.

Actually, this damned trash thing didn’t get me close to jail either, but I suppose it would have if I had gotten much angrier. My wife was no help: She didn’t take the matter seriously, and she kept adding to the incriminating character of the family trash long after it had become clear, to me at least, that we had to cinch things up; the trash people, I’ve always believed, were ready to go after me on far more than one count. At the very least we had to purge our trash of any lingering evidence that might identify us, might link us to it in any way that did not preserve deniability. As J. Edgar Hoover discovered back in the ‘sixties, when he became an involuntary subject of a trashology research project, this is hard to do even when you try. (He was heavily into Maalox.) And my observation is that most people, most of the time, don’t give a damn whether their trash identifies them or not.

Nowadays, I am among the few who care. I once read about a culture in which, if your enemy were to find, say, your hair clippings or some other disposable part of your body, he’d be able to perform the appropriate rites and thereby gain the power of life and death over you. As far as I’m concerned, my most wretched refuse leaves me with exactly this sort of vulnerability.

As it turned out, the trash in question definitely had the requisite wretchedness. Long before the people’s exhibit, the damning evidence, dropped with a thud before me, I sensed that I was in semi-serious trouble and that my traditional fantastic luck in playing around with Mexican law enforcement had finally run out. And I felt that way—I had that strong feeling of vulnerability that assails so many gringos—until the moment my landlord José Luis

Vásquez more or less came to the rescue. Once again my good luck rattled back from a long run of down days, finally making a slight correction just like the Nasdaq.

But in the days before José Luis got to work, while I felt lost and abandoned in the depths of my trashological tribulations, I needed something, anything, any subtle sign that Western Civilization had not fallen into total madness. And then, suddenly, good fortune returned: I stepped into the bus-ticket caper. One of my students, to be sure, had very nearly done me in, but I managed to dodge this particular bullet with considerable deftness, courtesy of the same student. And the timing was perfect, giving me a little respite from my trash problems, a few escapist days, at a moment when José Luis needed to mobilize himself and think about our defensive strategy.

Part Two

The student had bought a bus ticket to Mexico City, paying a reduced student price. A day or two later I ran into her on the street in front of our apartment, at one of the conference centers surrounding our local taco stand, and I found that she had decided not to use her ticket. She sold it to me at the same student price—and it was precisely at this instant that, although I didn't even realize it, Mephistopheles had gotten his bloody hooks into me: Big Gringo shows up at bus station with fraudulent discount ticket; Big Gringo, obviously too old and semi-rickety to be a student, gets caught; Big Gringo gets put away for a long time. Nobody believes BG when he claims that throughout this criminal act—purchasing and taking delivery of illicit goods, from inception to consummation—he was totally distracted by the raptures of a pair of fish tacos. Hell, nobody even realizes that this is one of Mephistopheles' favorite techniques, that he relies on it heavily: A *huachinango* filet, lightly fried to perfect flakiness, with appropriate vegetation and a good measure of *cilantro* in a spicy, runny red sauce, placed in a soft, pliable, reliable, steamed tortilla from the factory two blocks distant. As always, Mephistopheles knows the culture.

So: Although Mephisto had not yet revealed the quid pro quo, this was a supernatural setup of first magnitude, and it is plainly a miracle that I escaped. Actually there were several miracles, the most important of which I'll get to in a moment. An important subsidiary miracle, however, was the fact that our good friend Socorro, an MD of some repute and a *curandera* of substantial talent, had given me a complete rubdown with slightly rancid coyote grease—I had a sore neck—the day before I showed up at the bus station, and I believe that this powerful ritual helped to insulate me for many weeks against the subtle seductive machinations of Mephistopheles, not to mention my wife. I also had recently used the services of a *curandero* in a little town made famous by a movie called *Romancing the Stone*—the town's name is Xico, and I recommend it to tourists—and this gentleman had sacrificed his favorite french doors by insisting that I hang from them while bobbing up and down.

NB: A badly contorted crash to a tile floor accompanied by a french door is probably a more effective cure for neck pain than name-brand coyote grease, not to mention the

traditional egg rub that I had received from Socorro's mother. Incidentally, Socorro had been a straight scientific medical doctor until her dad took her to a witch doctor in Tampico, who more or less helped her get over a more or less boyfriend. Her witch doctor was pioneering an avant-garde therapeutic technique involving a dead chicken—or, at least, a chicken that was strongly encouraged to die, in a bathtub, as a result of the treatment. My chiropractor in San Antonio says that if you can remember all this stuff—especially the part about hanging from a french door or some other suitable appliance—you'll never suffer any back pain, lower, upper, middle, left, or right. A free egg rub to anybody who can prove otherwise.

Part Three

What happened at the bus station was an authentic miracle, as I promise to show. By contrast, the great "Grass!" bust, which intervened just before the bus-ticket situation had resolved itself, was a straightforward process of explaining the who, what, when, where, why, and how of my existence several times until my interrogators satisfied themselves that I was telling the truth. No luck involved here; just consistency, and an honest face. Although my wife says I have an under-eyed look, and need an eye tuck.

I had just arrived, weeks before, at the sweet little seaport town where my wife was running our do-it-yourself Spanish language training school for Gringo grape-strike organizers, and I've always suspected that this particular setup was perpetrated upon me by the Fresno Chamber of Commerce, as opposed to (and hopefully, by) Mephistopheles and other elements of the supernatural. The C of C point man, whom I'll call Pepito simply because I've forgotten his name, was a guy that I had kindly and thoughtfully sprung from the Baja California territorial prison up near Tijuana as a birthday present for one of our teachers, Esperanza, a charming advocate of the old rap-the-knuckles approach to teaching who was pioneering the technique of eating entire meals using nothing more than a single tortilla as her main utensil. (Good preparation for grape strike organizers.) As it turned out, Esperanza had disastrous taste in men—she was much better at selecting tortillas—and this young man had cost me 120 dollars—*dollars*, not pesos, although this is a good price—plus a legitimate bus ticket. Also, since the little s.o.b. arrived F.O.B., I had to pop Esperanza a trip to Tijuana, which added considerably to transportation and handling.

I'll do just about anything to keep the teachers happy. Anything legal.

So, the guy shows up for a fiesta, along with Esperanza. This party, serving as a birthday party for Esperanza, an arrival party for Pepito, and a going-away party for the wife and me, was expected to last a night or two.

After we drink a very large quantity of *Presidente* brandy and a reasonably large quantity of our three-day supply of *caña* (the Mexican equivalent of "grain"), Pepito's a little sauced up and he starts talking grass. Specifically, he asks whether we want to buy some. Now, my understanding of Mexican etiquette is that one never makes an unequivocal rejection of a friend's, or a friend's friend's, offer of sale, so I cagily said something to the effect that we had no compelling current need for marijuana* but that, if a need should ever

arise, we surely would keep dear Pepito in mind. This is a most judicious reply according to the grandest Mexican traditions. Noncommittal, saying everything and nothing, simultaneously: This, I believe, is why Spanish is the language of prayer.

The next morning around 10 a.m., having decided unfortunately to put off my Mexico City bus trip for a day or two, I walked up to the corner to buy a newspaper, and on returning to our apartment I noticed a middle-class Mexican, big, hatless, about thirty-five, clearly a stranger to our neighborhood, standing out front at our main taco stand, trying to eat a jumbo *huachinango* taco while wearing a Hawaiian shirt that tended to flap around in the wind like a flag. One tries not to stare at this sort of phenomenon, but I did notice another chap, also middle class in appearance and conservatively dressed, not in the basic Hawaiian style, standing on the corner fifteen or twenty feet away from our taco stand; he didn't belong either. I repaired to the apartment and began reading my newspaper, and after a few minutes there came a soft knock at the door. I opened it, and there stood the taco-sauce splash of colors—colors of earth, air, fire—the Hawaiian shirt, looking more or less neighborly. “How are you?” he asked in Spanish. “Do you have any cigarettes for sale?”

Now this approach, from a neighborly stranger at one's door practicing what sociologists call pseudo-Gemeinschaft, does not require cordiality, and I simply replied, “*No, no tengo cigarros, no fumo,*” and began closing the door. He then insistently repeated the same question, two or three times, leading me to believe that something must have been wrong with my Spanish. But since the word “no” is more or less understood by everybody except for the guys who date my female students, he decided to modify his approach, so he said “*entonces, ¿quiere usted comprar cigarros?*”—did I wish to *buy* cigarettes? At this point I knew something was amiss and I was starting to show signs of irritation, but my interrogator still felt compelled to repeat this interesting new question another three or four times. This was not a Mutt-and-Jeff routine: It was Mutt, Mutt, Mutt, and more Mutt. Same answer—and I was beginning to wish that we could get to the multiple-choice questions. At this instant the second chap, the partner, hiding in the doorway of an adjacent apartment, springs into view like a lively funhouse figure modeling the latest in cheap penitentiary attire, and the man of strong Hawaiian traditions, flashing his identification at me, yells as loud as he can in his best Honolulu English, “Grass, man!” Thank god he didn't yell, “*¡Marijuana, hombre!*”; it would have ruined my image with all the neighbors and, more importantly, with our local taco man.

I did a double take on the identification folder, thinking that it might be a string of joints tied together like those little packets of firecrackers that kids thrust at potential buyers all over Mexico. The cop must have thought I was trying to read the damn thing; he tucked it away quickly, as an expression of extreme anger flashed across his face. Immediately I realized that I had been turned in by our friend of the night before simply because I had not told him to peddle his pot elsewhere, and my interrogators and I entered into a litany in which I affirmed many, many times, that (1) Pepito, whose mind floats in caña the way baby Moses floated in the canebrakes, didn't know what the hell he was talking about—they, of course, allowing that they had never heard of anybody named Pepito; (2) that all they had to

do was to look at me, and talk to me for a while (which they were definitely willing to do), and they would see that I was not likely to be caught up in drugs; (3) that I did not even have a car with me this trip—a crucial factor that ultimately worked strongly in my favor, since their assumption seemed to be that big time traffickers usually brought along some form of transportation; (4) that I was on the scene for legitimate purposes having to do with a language school, four or five blocks away—they could check it out for themselves if they wished, perhaps improving their English in the bargain. (That is not exactly the way I put it.)

After a long while, they left. In our country, if the cops hover for half an hour or so, we can almost always count on them to try to come in and roost. Thank god these gentlemen did not invite themselves in for a search, because our dear and accomplished and accommodating star teacher, thinking that her beloved and freshly re-discovered Pepito had hinted the night before that he might like to smoke a joint or two rather than sell a shipment, had produced one from some hidden place within her generous undergarments—uh, make that *copious* undergarments. Because Pepito and I had decided at that very moment to repair to our downstairs liquor store, she had inadvertently left her offering on the coffee table, within full view, in this morning's brightness, of the Mexican drug-enforcement stalwarts.

About twenty-seven minutes later I found Esperanza walking down the street with my wife, and I believe she lost about a pound for each minute it had taken me to find her. She wasn't especially apologetic—her knees never hit the pavement, and my wife had a deplorable way of intervening on her behalf—but on the other hand she would soon suffer from the infuriating realization that this man too, our sweet Pepito, the glory of the Baja pen, one of the top ten tortillas of her entire life, had only tried to use her—not to mention my \$120.00. This was definitely chicken-tub time, and I decided to give the poor woman a break. Besides that, my wife was right: Esperanza did not yet feel fury; at the moment, all she felt was the hurt, which was cutting her to the heart.

I hope my investment is still doing good things for Mexico, but Pepito's story, as I knew it, is a little disturbing. Apparently, an informant—even a bargain-basement ex-con who had copped his sticker price down to a reasonable level—invites himself before the Mexican equivalent of the DEA with nothing more than a weak story about ritual courtesy, and he gets the full-monte response. After one reposes in a nasty cell for a few years, this is real power. Pepito knew full well that he was not about to sell me anything, and that I had received his offer as a matter of excess courtesy. Maybe he had thought in detail about his situation, his groovy new role as part of Mexican law enforcement. Maybe he was fully aware that he and his keepers were overreacting to an exercise in nothingness, and maybe this was his assignment, to look for casual attitudes toward the spirit of the law. Well, one hopes that DEA investigative procedures will not long survive in Mexico if the traditional forms of ritual cordiality are taken to be probable cause. Or perhaps, more likely, the traditional forms will go, and the American Embassy will chalk up another victory.

I heard that Esperanza ran into Pepito some months later, and he was definitely not in a position to make offers that she couldn't refuse. I still love to play Cupid, but not if the guy

costs more than a Virginia dollar three-eighty. I wish we could have taken Pepito back to prison for a refund. Nobody offered a rebate.

Part Two

If the non-search of our apartment was pure luck, the situation a few days later at the ADO (“Autobuses of the East”) bus terminal turned out incredibly.

It was a lovely, peaceful, cool morning, very early—*la madrugada* in the beautiful Spanish word—when I began walking toward the ADO bus station. The streets of our city at this moment were barely discernable in the darkness, and they extended without disruption into the distance in perfect three-sided symmetry, a simple view in perspective not yet filled with the hyperactivity that would define the coming day: Within a few hours these streets would be filled with beat-up old cars, scores of thousand-peso taxis and thousands of ten-peso taxis, all of unknown auspices, small trucks embarked upon unknown missions, monstrous trucks dedicated largely to beer and soft drinks and to the rattling of empty bottles, and huge obsolete buses—all these vehicles pouring forth exhaust fumes of the most vile and noxious and high-lead variety, all these vehicles pulsating through every street of the city like an aimless and all-pervasive lava flow, all these vehicles surrounded by thousands of smoke-drenched and dust-devastated pedestrians hurrying about their daily routines amid the unbelievable roaring noise of this country I love too much.

The wife was getting things ready for our trip to the states, and (in her opinion—mine too, eventually) I had to get out of the house. A few days in Mexico City, we thought, would be precisely what I needed in order to get my mind focused for the upcoming trash battles. The bus station, in contrast to the rest of the city, was already full of activity. After a short time my bus was ready for boarding, and the passengers formed a Mexican-style “line”—a small crowd crushing into a bottleneck—near the front of the bus, where our driver was checking tickets. Very, very carefully. Since bus drivers in Mexico are not sticklers for detail, I examined my ticket with reasonable and casual care, noticing the typical dot-matrix printing showing places of origin and destination, expiration date, price, etc., and it made me feel confident to know that our driver was deeply concerned not to allow any of us to travel to Mexico City if our destination happened to be, say, Monterrey or the delightful Salsipuedes—Leave-if-you-can. When my turn came I suddenly realized, at the very instant—too late—in which I was to hand over my ticket for inspection, that this driver was not at all worried about dates or clock time or prices or which way one was traveling relative to Salsipuedes. What our driver was up to, I now realized, was very simple: He was looking for discount tickets so that he could flip them over and check the purchaser’s signature—which I hadn’t even noticed before this moment—against the purchaser’s current identification, which I also had just handed over.

Now this sort of situation, in modern Mexico, especially if you happen to be a big quasi-cute and prosperous Gringo—my wife supports two of these claims—has every possibility of getting out of hand, of escalating fast. Prayer might have helped, but it never

occurs to me to enter into a conversation with the Deity while going about my business *in extremis*. A Northamerican can bargain for nearly anything he wishes in Mexico, but he cannot pull any shenanigans once a deal has been struck—and what I had fallen into, inadvertently, looked like classic shenanigans. I suspect that the Deity Herself subscribes to this grand handshakes-all-around tradition—was there a written contract with Adam and Eve?—and so do I: My good friend José Luis and I had made any number of agreements founded upon a handshake and a litre of Pete Domecq’s better or worse, and the concept of default, of renegeing for any reason short of actual or imminent death or violent illness or imprisonment of either party to the bargain, was unthinkable. My bus driver no doubt understood this part of the culture as well as anybody, believed in it strongly, honorably, and perhaps believed that *gringos cannot be trusted*—and for a brief, magical moment he may have believed that he had caught himself a live one.

Lo siento, amigo. Very sorry. Not this time.

Needless to say, the signature appearing on the back of my bus ticket was not mine. As the driver held the incriminating, damning documents—a tiny card in plastic laminate and a tinier ticket—side by side and contemplated the infinite subtlety, complexity, of their relationship, or lack thereof, I must have had the agonized appearance of the young man in the movie *Midnight Express* rotting away in a Turkish prison while occasionally banging his head against the plumbing, just to hold down the cobwebs. Then, suddenly, as I peered over the man’s shoulder while desperately trying to think of a quick provisional response to his anticipated opening question, my countenance brightened like a dozen exploding pinwheels on the first night of Mardi Gras in The Fabulous and Wondrous City of Veracruz: I quickly read the scrambled, nearly illegible encrypted letters that were to be my salvation. My student—the original ticket purchaser, bless her!—was named Brenda Simmons, and her signature was a mere approximation. My full name for official purposes is Bernie Simpson-Jones—everybody, including Mephistopheles, calls me Bern—and my signature was a worse approximation than hers. Immediately it occurred to me that I might have to explain the slightly different styles of sloppiness that characterized the two signatures, but apparently the driver felt that it was too early in the morning to get into these graphological esoterica. If I read his mind correctly, and I know I did, the real mystery for him had to do with the deletion of the surname—the anonymous “Jones” that had so endeared me to my wife—for he knew full well that Northamericans do not drop surnames. It occurred to me that a few words in Spanish might convey to him that I was truly into the culture, that I might readily introduce myself either as *señor* Simpson or *señor* Jones. I forget exactly what I said to the man—I know I said “señor Seemps-own”—but it must not have done the usual damage.

My few forgotten remarks served as a nifty distraction, and my man motioned for me to board the bus. Mexico City was great! The land of the free, the land of milk and honey and enlightenment!

Part One

The trash bust, on the other hand, reaching its climax the day before we skipped the country**, had progressed through its early phases in a most unenlightening way: I still had no clear idea what crime I had perpetrated upon our peace-loving community. I knew that, whatever it was, it had to be *heinous*; and I was especially upset when I found that the best translation for this word is *atroz*.

I had never had a chance to examine the *multa*—the official citation and proposed fine—on the morning it arrived at our apartment. José Luis brought it up to me. It must have been nailed to the front door downstairs in the style established by Martin Luther, and I wasn't given to loitering in the downstairs area because of the fact that José Luis usually had a small army deployed there, plumbers and stonemasons and bricklayers and carpenters and guys with compression hammers or coiled wiring, expanding and interlacing what was turning into a major apartment complex. In Mexico, it is entirely possible to live beautifully in the midst of a colossal condo development that is just getting under construction. You may need a little tolerance for noise, but you can get your rent down to a level that, in the U.S., would make it look like your wastewater bill.

When José Luis showed up at our apartment carrying the *multa*, he looked terribly depressed, and my initial thought was that there had been some sort of tragedy involving his family or his construction crew. He noticed our concern, and quickly showed us the *multa* and began to explain the significance of it. In essence, he said, it alleged that we had thrown trash into the streets, and that we were to be fined 14,000 pesos. At the time this was a substantial amount of money, although in later days, before the peso-to-dollar ratio re-worked itself, it would barely have served to lubricate a minor transaction.

It soon became clear that José Luis was upset beyond the usual demands of the illegalities of his finances, because, first, he could not believe that my family and I, unreconstructed hippies and ecology buffs, the kind of people who buy toys at stores named “Ringo’s Baby” just to keep Ringo out of deeper trouble, were throwing trash into the streets as opposed to keeping it all indoors; second, he and the workers downstairs had quickly realized that they themselves could have caused the crisis. I had asked them to punch a large window into our upstairs bedroom, not so much to open the stunning view of the snow-covered Peak of Orizaba—which, after all, was available line-of-sight no matter where you stood in the state of Veracruz—as to relieve the hot and motionless atmosphere inside the room, tightly sealed because of what PR men for the Mexican lumber and window industries call the “three little pigs” syndrome. José Luis had seen to the task with considerable dispatch. The problem was that another family’s roof, made more or less of thatch—these folks had not yet been worked over by the glass-and-timber men—was about twenty feet below our freshly burst window, and we all feared that a series of small masonry missiles could possibly have broken through. But my wife and I knew this family well, and we were sure that if missiles had flown we’d have heard about it long since, from them. Furthermore Don Fidel, our chief missile control officer, assured us that it was inconceivable that there

had been a single accidental launch—this meant that there could not possibly have been more than perhaps a half dozen sorties. But in any case, the neighbors would not have turned us in. They knew about Don Fidel.

This was a very difficult situation, because I had the feeling that José Luis was having trouble believing me when I assured him that I was no more likely to throw trash into the streets than was Don Fidel to launch a deliberate missile attack. But he soon convinced himself, somehow, that he could have full confidence in our denials and that, furthermore, he would represent me when I made my appeal downtown—which I fully intended to do, before heading north. José Luis, I believe, had once aspired to go to law school at the national university.

As it turned out, José Luis, in his own mind, built up so much confidence in my basic position that he had insisted upon going downtown, the first time, without me—my presence would have complicated matters—to explain to the authorities that it was unthinkable that his wholesome Northamerican tenant would pitch trash around randomly, and that the charge must somehow be erroneous. José Luis was willing to risk almost anything on my word, and when he returned a few hours later with what appeared to be incontrovertible proof of my guilt, I began to doubt my own ability to carry out a rational, conscious, deliberate policy regarding what I consider one of life's fundamental challenges, the control of one's refuse. I had no doubts about my ability to tell the truth: I had not thrown trash.

The public hygiene department had placed in the hands of my landlord a huge, padded manila envelope, stained with what appeared to be bacon grease, that had been filled with my mail and sent to me from the states. My name and address, José Luis said, were clearly typed on a label affixed to the front of it; there was no doubt that it was mine. Inexplicably José Luis did not demand a sample of state's evidence to take home, but when he described this particular exhibit to me I knew exactly what he was talking about. He said that there was more than just a single envelope, and that the remaining haul was in reserve until later. As I acknowledged my relationship to the damning evidence, José Luis became more and more upset as he realized that he had taken a serious risk to help a Northamerican whose reliability, even to him, was now slightly open to question; this is not a clever move for a young Mexican businessman. I too became upset because I had no explanation, no way of coming up with an alternative notion as to how my greasy manila envelope—and God knows what additional items—had fallen into the hands of the powerful public hygiene enforcement division.

By now I knew that I had to go downtown myself; I knew, for the first time in my life, the tortured feelings of Gary Cooper in *High Noon*. My wife did not forsake me, but for some inexplicable reason she began ranting about how and where one should dump one's bacon grease. Her angst, I soon realized, was my own fault: I had mentioned the cross-cultural stuff about hair cuttings and nail clippings and other bodily detritus, and unique personal possessions. So I smoothed it over, just like Gary Cooper: "Gee, baby," I said, "your hair and your bacon grease are two entirely separate and distinct orders of phenomena, with a few rare exceptions."

I delayed the inevitable day downtown so that José Luis would have time to work through the shock and humiliation of having to represent me in a situation where he now found himself out there twisting, turning—falling into the nightmare maw of a hungry dumpster. I knew—at least I believed—that, in time, he would be willing to face my horrendous destiny alongside me, that he would never forsake me. I did not know that in his role as faithful friend of a man whose essential innocence would clearly establish itself, he would have to suffer further humiliation, and that it was only his supreme confidence in himself and in me that would deliver him from a situation that could have been devastating. Could have been *atroz*.

When we first arrived at the center of town, José Luis was acting very much in the tradition of Grace Kelly, same movie. My recollection is that when the Kelly character first heard that her consort would be forced into a shootout, she reacted in two ways: First, she went into shock; second, she went shopping. I asked José Luis whether he was experiencing *el choque*, which to me means shock, but he thought I was referring to his recent history of traffic accidents, and we both knew that lengthy story all too well. I asked him whether he had ever seen *High Noon*, and he said something to the effect that he had indeed read many works by our great author O’Henry, and that he understood that he must now play the Cisco Kid. I told him that most of what I knew about the Cisco Kid came from the old radio version, and that in those ancient days Cisco had a partner named Pancho, who was a fairly amiable and vulnerable sort of fellow and not too bright. Apparently José Luis immediately cast me as Pancho—this became clear to me in the midst of my trial. I tried to get him to tell me the Spanish word for the medical condition of shock, but by this time he was looking around for the appropriate specialty shops, Grace Kelly style. After a fast series of forays in which he added substantially to the burdens borne by his illegal Texas credit card, we ended up swinging by a couple of his banks. This was a mistake: By this time we were probably under close surveillance, and it was unwise for us to give any indication that we knew the locations and purposes of financial institutions.

Nonetheless, my self-confidence did not begin to erode seriously until we finally arrived at the central municipal building, the inside of which I had never seen. It is near the edge of the town plaza; it is a huge, dark, crowded fortress built around a courtyard filled with neglected fountains and foliage, and it made me feel as if I had indeed been transported to fifteenth-century Spain and to the days of the Inquisition. After making a few inquiries we found our way to the department occupied by the trash enforcement division, and after being directed through several heavy-timbered portals each of which seemed to remove us further from the tenuous realities of the city outside, we entered what appeared to be the sanctum sanctorum wherein there dwelt the woman of whom José Luis had spoken, who was Torquemada. But we had gone full circle, and it turned out that the large room we had just entered was on the side of the building facing the city’s central plaza. As I continued to wilt with spiritual guilt, I noticed that José Luis, a handsome mestizo, was looking more and more like the Cisco Kid.

Now Torquemada, who in a strange twist of history had aggressively sent the young Luther to pound a notice on my door, was a very tough old woman. I prefer to call her “Big Mama” because at the instant of our first encounter I realized, or tried to persuade myself, that in a world as crazy and twisted and upside down as this, there must be at least one desperate man willing and able to make babies with this woman. As Havelock Ellis always said, anybody can find somebody. And, believe me, Havelock Ellis knew some hard cases—probably including Baron von Krafft-Ebing, who turned up even harder cases, before he began ebbing. Torquemada’s face, her unforgettable face, had the textures of a blown-out snow tire stuck in a muddy ditch. Alongside this woman the former unimpeachable military dictator of Panama, Mr. Noriega, whose subjects called him Pineapple Face, would have had the countenance of Cary Grant. Big Mama wore the gay, brightly colored, full-length, sagging *guayabera* favored by Latin American men in the heat of a Mexican summer—the taco-sauce Hawaiian look of the Mexican DEA was not for her—and the lovely intricate lace across the front of her *guayabera* made mine look cheap and understated—good news for me, since I was a candidate for a 14,000-peso fine. Big Mama sat behind her massive dark wooden desk, glancing at us from time to time with the quick, cold, necrophilous looks of impending damnation. It struck me that perhaps her *guayabera* was in truth an ecclesiastical robe that extended all the way to the floor. Torquemada! A towering tall, robed Torquemada! Throughout my trial, at least until the end, she never found it necessary to stand; for this I was grateful.

She was big on hand signals—if she ever wants a gig at the Chicago Board of Trade or decides that she would like to manage the Cubs, I’m prepared to recommend her. Remember: José Luis and I did not have a definite appointment with these sanitation folks, and as far as I know there was no clear basis for anybody’s having anticipated our arrival at any particular moment—it’s just like you’re showing up at the local bus station, where there may be a slight delay before you get out of town. Yet all Big Mama had to do was to snap her fingers a couple of times and to send out a few additional obscure hand signals that do not occur in mainstream Northamerican gesture language—exactly what the Cubs need—her eyes never leaving the paperwork on her desk except for a few quick glances when she wished to evaluate the victim, and her office quickly transformed itself into a courtroom with all the essential trappings and trimmings.

I had a subliminal sense that the furniture was re-deploying itself into a more formal juridical pattern—subliminal, because actually I was gazing through the windows toward the town plaza, scanning for the place of the post and the rope-and-fagot that would surely be my next destination, my next Salsipuedes. The most extraordinary change had to do with personnel: Suddenly there was a very young man who carried an ancient stenographic machine, and who seemed to be a sort of court reporter; there were two bailiffs near the entrances, armed, one of them wearing a credible uniform; there were officials bringing to the bench all sorts of relevant documentation; there were two men whom I thought I recognized as trash collectors from my own neighborhood, and they had installed themselves on either side of the bench apparently preparing to give testimony. We had a large audience too, most

of whom were seated in the great town plaza that lay in full view outside our large, now open, unscreened windows. Cisco, I now realize, must have anticipated this incredible transformation, because he immediately rose to his feet and prepared to approach the bench and address Her Big Turkey Mama Torquemada Honor. As for me, my adrenalin was beginning to flow, and when my adrenalin flows so does my Spanish. If Saint Peter speaks Spanish, if he wears an outrageous cigar-stained *guayabera*, if he tends to be a little peremptory in his style of decisionmaking, I'm home free. At least I'll get off a couple of good incisive sermonettes before he dispatches me.

Big Mama was suddenly off the rubber, and she commenced proceedings by slashing José Luis to the quick.

It had become clear that José Luis, my good landlord, intended to act as my legal representative, and Big Mama, mildly irritated by the prospect that the victim might have adequate counsel, asked José Luis a sort of rhetorical question that I still cannot believe. "*Entonces,*" she said, "*¿usted es sirviente del norteamericano?*"—so, you are a servant for this American? Needless to say, this insult infuriated José Luis; but it did not, in the least, weaken his resolve.

He began a detailed public counterattack, a denunciation of Torquemada Turkey Mama and all her works and all her ways, a persistent subsidiary theme developed in endless, tortuous, glaring, glorious detail. In brief he alleged—shouting, usually from a position close to the open windows—that Big Mama's misfeasance and/or malfeasance and/or incompetence and/or iniquity had permitted *montones*—vast mountains of trash—to accumulate all over our otherwise more or less spiffy town. Soon the sweat was pouring down Big Mama's spacious eroded mudslide cleavage accentuated by the unbuttoned split at the top of her *guayabera*, and José Luis delivered the coup de grace by pointing out that even on those few occasions when Big Mama actually had removed *montones*, she had neglected to seed the remaining bare topsoil—the seed unspecified. This, he said, was part of her job, apparently unknown to all except José Luis until this day, this moment, when all the world learned of it. In the meantime Big Mama, having a few weapons of her own, had summoned up the evidence to be used against me, and she was determined to strike back at us forcefully and, now, maliciously.

I never managed to count up the number of exhibits brought together by the prosecution, but each of them came neatly wrapped in a clear plastic folder, tightly sealed, carefully labelled. It seemed as if I were being confronted by every envelope, large and small and medium-sized, that I had ever received during our years in Mexico, but it also seemed obvious to me that even if a recalcitrant envelope or two had slipped from my hands unknowingly into the street, it was unimaginable that all these stigmata could have fallen into the possession of Big Mama and her functionaries unless she had some way of obtaining them that did not depend on my carelessness. That (I think) is exactly what I said to her, and in the general accusatory atmosphere that we had all carefully nurtured, and in her full awareness of the increasingly attentive audience outside, in whose eyes her image was definitely slipping, Big Mama went meanly on the offensive and directed one of her witnesses—as in France, she

was both judge and prosecutor—to explain to the world, in a voice close to a shout and close to the windows, how it had come to pass that my grease-stained iniquity had captured the attention of the city’s refuse establishment.

Within a few moments the witness and I were yelling thoughts back and forth regarding the corner to which I had been assigned for purposes of trash deposit, and I suddenly realized that not only was he conceding that, as far as he knew, my trash had always reposed on the appropriate corner, but he also wished to commend me for the high quality of my trashbags: fine, cool, blue plastic, 4 mil, very large, very carefully tied, very carefully stacked. In short, I had upsprouted on my official corner some of the finest trashbags ever seen or collected thereupon, and for this reason, as far as it went, I had won the admiration of all our friends and neighbors assembled.

To me, and I think to José Luis, there now came a strong sense, a Cisco-and-Pancho sense, of having recaptured the moral high ground, the only piece of first-class real estate I can afford. Excellent building site.

So, what was going on here? Was this some sort of conspiracy? I’ve lived in academe for many decades, and I therefore have a strong aptitude for paranoia. But all my enemies, at least the semi-serious ones, remain north of the border, east of the Mississippi—how could their tentacles possibly have reached me in a hidden little town in Mexico?

After a few quick moments of self-congratulations, I realized that this would be an auspicious moment, as a sort of diversionary tactic, for me to compliment the city on the extent and quality of its trash collection operations, ignoring for the moment the montón scandals. But my mind began to wander as I tried to remember whether the word *esquina* referred to an interior corner and *rincón* to an exterior corner, or vice versa. I knew it was one way or the other (I was leaning toward vice versa), and I had almost deluded myself into thinking that José Luis and I had finally turned the inside or outside corner, as it were, on this particular imbroglio, when it occurred to me that the witness, along with an equally vociferous colleague of his, was now warming up to an entirely new line of analysis that seemed to have something to do with *el día de los maestros*—teachers’ day. At first I thought they were proposing me for some sort of special decoration as a teacher and model citizen, but then I remembered vaguely that teachers’ day had already occurred, several weeks ago. Also, I noticed that José Luis suddenly was very sad, looking at the floor, shaking his head.

And then, in an instant, in an existential flash, it struck me: The witnesses were now proclaiming, for all the world to hear, the vicious, heinous, atroz, unspeakable character of my sin: *I had placed my unimpeachable trash on the correct corner at the wrong time*, for on the day of the teachers there is no trash collection at all and it is “unlawful”—*contra la ley*—to allow one’s trash to stand on the corner overnight. Dogs. Cats. Perhaps an occasional burro.

The quality of one’s trashbags is not an extenuating or mitigating circumstance—I tried it. When I recovered from the immediate shock of this announcement, this revelation, this indictment, I protested vehemently in my most eloquent and sincere Spanish, pointing out

that I *am* a teacher, and that I had no idea that a special day had been set aside in Mexico to honor our glorious profession. I pointed out further that in the United States we surely have a day of the teacher somewhere on the calendar, but that we would never dream of discontinuing major public services simply because we were intent upon honoring those who have charge of our children, those who will determine the ultimate destiny of our children, those who will re-create our great nation for posterity. (These latter points sound much more logical in Spanish than in English, at least to me.) I repeated the soliloquy, with stimulating variations, until in my estimation it was starting to take.

I'm not sure my arguments passed muster all around, but Big Mama suddenly stood up looking relieved and as if she wanted the festivities to end—in fact, they had already ended—and she took a large part of the paperwork from her desk and handed it to one of her men, perhaps two or three of her men, including the young Luther, and then she began another series of hand signals and she sat again to relieve herself of her weight, and in the now heightened activity of her upper body she signaled to everybody that the hearing had now closed, and I sat in the dock transfixed by the metronome movement of her massive cleavage to and fro with the hand signals, against the open upper edges of her *guayabera*. For, to me, this was the countdown, the countdown toward an execution, and it told the viewing community that the transitions of time were now rolling this trivial episode, with me at its midst, into the dustbin of history a full two meters, one hopes, below ground. In the resultant frenzy I failed to discern that Big Mama did finally see fit not only to give me a death reprieve, but to reduce my penalty to a mere 7,000 pesos. Perhaps she did not announce the decision aloud. Perhaps, again, it was all part of the ritual. And what's 7,000 pesos? She can use it to remove a few of her larger *montones*, including the one José Luis mentioned in passing, that smokes like a volcano.

José Luis and I spent half an hour seeking out the appropriate office for paying one's fines, I collected a bright red official receipt that looked more impressive than the finest ID card ever issued by Norman Thomas, and we walked out free men toward the central plaza where we joined the boisterous crowds celebrating, according to Cisco, *el día de los niños*—the day of the children. Cisco may have been jesting, but I took him dead seriously.

Along with all the kids, we felt that it was good to be alive. And Big Sweet Mama's kids, out there somewhere on the plaza, felt the same way.

*

I confess: I have smoked grass a few times. But I never exhaled.

**

Why did I not just take off for the U.S., and ignore the trash bust altogether? (Using a #2 pencil, mark the correct answer.)

To do so would have been unethical, evading and defeating the processes of Mexican justice.

Taking off is exactly what Mephisto wanted me to do, and he would have found some groovy new way to set me up.

By paying a significant fine, I could help to move the *montones* that will soon appear in this narrative.

This story would never have been finished.