

The Road to Ensenada

by Gary V. Powell

Davis first drove this road in a sleek black BMW obtained through the auspices of the concierge at the Del Coronado. His newlywed wife—a beautiful woman with pendulous breasts, long limbs, and flashing, brown eyes—sat beside him, cool behind designer sunglasses. Now, he drives alone in a used Ford Taurus bought from a man the stink of whose sweat still oozes from the seats.

At the border, the guards ask few questions, welcoming Gringo money now no less than then.

South of Tijuana, he chooses the old coast road over the toll road. To his left mountains tower; to his right the sea pitches and rolls. Twenty years ago, squatters occupied pristine beaches, living in a ramshackle of lean-tos and broken-down vehicles. Today, the ocean view is spoiled by tax write-off resorts. His wife resisted that earlier visit to Mexico—a third-world country, dirty and unsafe, she said. But Davis was curious about the Baja. He insisted until she relented, agreeing to extend their honeymoon for a trip through Rosarita Beach and further on to Ensenada.

Driving with the windows down, he tries to locate the exact place along the road where Karen lifted her hips off the Beamer's plush leather, slipped out of her panties, and let fly. He goes hard remembering the urgent tug of her lips and the scent of her sex on his fingers.

The road signs still tout the Rosarita Beach Hotel. Old time movie stars stayed here—Robert Stack, Rita Hayworth, and Orson Welles. More recently, before the Recession, investors added time-shares, a spa, and fancy restaurants. Davis parks across the street. He is fifty-seven and has been out of work for two years. The firm that made him a vice president at age thirty-five and tethered him to the wheel for sixty hours a week no longer exists. His home houses another man's family. His wife and two teenage

daughters remain bitter and resentful because, after losing his job, he went on to lose everything else gambling online.

On that earlier visit, Rosarita Beach celebrated the Day of the Dead. Garish graffiti and effigies decorated streets eerily devoid of people; the grand hotel looked deserted and unexpectedly rundown. Karen refused to leave the car, saying the place crept her out. When he threatened to go inside without her, she relented again.

Today, like then, the sun rising over the mountains is nearly obscured by the marine layer's inland reach. Davis crosses the street and enters the lobby. His first time here no receptionist greeted him, the dining room lay empty, the tables perfectly set, yearning for Marilyn's or Bogie's return. Now, attractive women in expensive clothing await massages. The dining room is alive with the clatter of cutlery on china; waiters whiz past, carrying plates of food so lovely it appears painted on the plate. He pushes through, finds his way down a hall and out back, where stairs descend to the sea.

Huge boulders, the emaciated remains of a prehistoric cliff face, hunker in the mist, unmoved by the intervening years. Seals bleat offshore and waves break unseen in the distance. On that earlier morning, no visitors shelled, no children played; there was only Davis and Karen dancing in the foam, until out of the dazzling sun-fog four horsemen rode up, accompanied by a three-legged dog. The riders pulled to a halt, circled, and sat their horses, the animals panting and pawing the ground.

"Por favor," Davis said.

One of the men leaned over and spit long and dark next to where the dog lay curled. He said something about the *senora*, and the other men laughed.

Karen loosed the skirt bunched about her thighs, allowing the hem to fall to the ground and cover her bare legs. Davis took her hand and began to edge back to the hotel.

Two of the men dismounted, blocking their retreat. A third man slid to the ground and flashed a long, thin blade. Davis pulled

Karen behind him. The man with the knife extended his free hand and caressed the curve of her ass.

“No *panteleta*,” he announced, and the men laughed again.

Davis offered his wallet—credit cards and five hundred dollars in cash.

The man remaining on the horse accepted the wallet then spoke words Davis didn't understand. He nodded to the large diamond gracing the woman's finger. She clung to Davis's arm, her nails digging in. “Fuck you,” she said. When the man with the knife reached for her again, she kicked sand in his face.

In the end, Davis slipped the ring off her finger and handed it over. The man on the horse clasped it between his teeth, grinning wildly, and the other men laughed harder than before. Then, as suddenly as they arrived, they mounted up and disappeared into the whiteness, their hapless cur trotting behind them.

Years passed. Karen remained beautiful, and Davis replaced the stolen ring tenfold. Their lives became a frantic collage of the girls' school activities, Karen's philanthropic endeavors, and his daily work. She smiled through all the client cocktails and partners' wives' events. When she retold the tale at dinner parties, she claimed she would have fought for the ring, if Davis hadn't acted so cowardly.

This morning, the *banditos* have been supplanted by tourists with cranky children and the memory of a time when life stretched before him like an unspoiled coastline. He squats in the sand, sifting granules, remembering the guilt and humiliation of that earlier morning and the thousand reminders since. He's thinking how much cleaner life would have been if blood had been spilled.

