

What I Saw in Mexico

by Kitty Boots

"Nacio's cousin Florinda had a retarded, deformed baby because she worked in a *maquiladora* down there," was Gloria's response when I told her I was going to Matamoros for the weekend. She turned away and dusted the furniture a second time. Leaning against the doorframe in my office, Gloria's husband, Nacio took off his sunglasses and said, "*Guera*, whatchu wanna go pokin' down aroun' there for?"

Their concern was justified and it touched me. Several weeks earlier the dismembered body of a missing college student had been found in an iron caldron on a desolate ranch outside of the city. He had disappeared during a spring break trip and the emerging details were horrific. More bodies, a Narco witch-priestess, Santaria, voodoo, a homosexual hit man...it was all everyone talked about.

How could I explain my curiosity? I wanted to go to Mexico and see cities whose names sounded like sad sighs...Oaxaca, Guanajuato, Reynosa, Camargo. I'd read *Under the Volcano* and *Like Water for Chocolate* and I wanted a taste. Not the whole chunk shoved down my throat, just a thin slice to tuck away and pull out to nibble on. And I wanted blankets. Striped Mexican falsa blankets to drape around the apartment. I wanted to haggle for silver from Taxco and Talavera pottery. I wanted to stroll around the marketplace, drink Mexican beer, eat street food and watch people.

Earl took me there. Texas born and bred, the son of a son of pioneers. His green Jeep Cherokee devoured the shimmery miles of highway, past mesquite, catclaw acacia and prickly pear. When we slowed down to get in line at the Sarita Checkpoint he asked if I had anything with me I didn't want the border agents to find. I told him no, and he mentioned he'd removed the .45 he normally carried in the glove box. Oh, great, I thought, no protection, but, come on, isn't

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this what you wanted? Adventure? A little dose of fear? The border agents waved us through with barely a glance.

The Rio Grande Valley spilled out in *resacas*, citrus groves, palm trees, money-changing shops, and RV parks full of winter Texans. Cheap prescription medications, half-price dentures, cheap cigarettes, and even cheaper liquor pulled them in.

Washington Beach, Bagdad Beach or whatever the hell they call it now was patrolled by young soldiers with automatic weapons. Old pickup trucks full of families lined the shore. The women and girls swam in their clothes while the men fished in the surf.

We walked to a small restaurant perched on a pier over the dunes and ate fried fish with fresh squeezed limes. Not the big green steroid-infused limes you buy in the grocery store, these were the size of a ping-pong ball, yellow-green, and they made everything taste wonderful. A boom box powered by a car battery blasted *Ranchera* music. Earl said the music gave him happy feet.

The restroom was in back of the restaurant at the end of the pier. Squatting a few inches above the wooden seat I watched my piss stream into a hole in the sand.

An old man approached us as we were leaving. Sunburned, unshaven, bare feet and torn clothing, he held out his hand. A waiter rushed up to him with a plate of fish and led him outside like a dog. I told Earl I thought it was kind of them to feed him because he looked homeless and sick. Earl looked at him with disgust and said, "He's a homeless bum. Even in this shit hole they don't want him around the customers." I looked at the man being led away and decided, yes, he is a bum and he's also shit himself.

The marketplace was lined with tourist shops and I looked for blankets. Ducking into a leather shop I thought, maybe a pair of

hand-tooled cowboy boots? Shelves were lined with handbags made from whole armadillos, lacquered Mariachi frog bands, walking sticks and change purses made from every kind of bovine genitalia you could imagine. Who buys this shit?, I wondered.

"Where to next?" Earl asked. I told him I wanted to get away from the tourist traps and see the real Mexico, a marketplace where the locals shopped and I wanted to see *La Zona Rosa*. Shaking his head he asked how I found out about the *Zona Rosa*. "Paul Wimberly told me. He said he used to come down here to see the *putas* and visit the whorehouses." Paul, a co-worker, was as rich and crude as the oil bubbling out of a Texas oilfield. I loathed him.

"Well, come on, let's find you some whores to look at," he said and we began walking away from the city. Several blocks away the touristy look faded and everything got shabbier and dirtier and quieter. Vendors spread their wares on blankets in the square. Withered vegetables, fruits, live chickens and baby goats. Butchered carcasses covered with flies hung from a rope suspended between scrawny trees. A thin young woman nursed a baby. The baby turned to look at me and I saw it's cleft palate. So, I thought, Gloria was telling the truth. The *maquiladoras* sat on the horizon, boxy factories shielded by haze, but I still saw the poison billowing into the sky.

In a small wooden stall at the end of the market was a *curandero* and his wares caught my eye. Our Lady of Guadalupe candles, colored stones, bags of herbs and seeds, small bottles of oil, rosaries and statuettes of Jesus Malverde. The *curandero* spoke good English. He asked me if I was sick, or if I wanted a love potion, or if I needed a curse put on someone. "Perhaps, he asked, you need a curse removed?" No, I replied, but ever superstitious I asked for a good luck amulet. He waved his hand over a row of brilliant dead hummingbirds.

Earl hunted down a couple of beers and we walked a few more blocks to the *Zona Rosa*. Most of the buildings had been torn down and what remained was occupied by squatters. No electricity, you could smell the wood smoke from cook fires. "There's your whores," Earl said, pointing his finger at a corner across the street. *Mariposas*. Pretty boys made even prettier with black market hormones. They giggled among themselves and thrust their breasts and asses at us.

"Curiosity satisfied?", Earl asked. I nodded and we started back to the city. Something moving caught my attention and I thought it might have been a stray dog, and I prayed it wasn't because the last thing I wanted to contract down here was rabies. It was a small boy and he shadowed us until we stopped to light a cigarette. Standing in front of Earl, he held out a small, dirty hand. Earl waved a fist at him and told him to get lost. "Don't be so mean to him, I said. Give him some money." He was filthy, but adorable and I wanted to help him. "If I do that, Earl said, a dozen others will crawl out like cockroaches and we'll never get rid of them."

The *chico* followed us back to the gaudy marketplace. I bought my blankets. I tried practicing my Spanish by asking his name, but he wouldn't talk to me. I asked Earl if we could pay him to carry the blankets for us, he said no.

He followed us to the International Bridge. By this time I was practically crying and pleading with Earl to give him some money. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a quarter and flipped it to the boy. The *chico* caught it in mid-air and turned it over in his palm. Looking up at Earl he said, "Cheapskate son of a bitch," and disappeared into the crowd.

