

WHEN THE LIGHTS GO OUT

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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 jump-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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