

To San Luis Potosí, ~~my~~ home?

Spike-like cobble stones, set with undulating irregularity, pave most of San Miguel's streets. I rattle the car off towards Dolores Hidalgo shortly after sunrise. Through the waking town, dusty and dismayed, a few of the people shuffling out-of-doors, wrapped against the night chill, a people who seem to expect little and to suffer a lot. With endless shakes the road finally comes to the edge of town - pavement and speed.

I'm off, almost the sole car on a secondary road, sometimes a straight strip rising and falling over the hills, sometimes sharply curving down into and up out of a deep ravine. Next to the paved ~~top~~ surface on each side one sees dirt paths for burro and wagon, walkers, some bicycles, an occasional tractor throwing up dust. People seem strangely to simply stand, transfixed, in odd places.

Just before Dolores Hidalgo, I must turn east on another secondary road, driving into the rising sun. The road is semi-paved for much of it, covered with a fine gravel that generates much dust. Traffic builds slightly - farm trucks, rancher's pick-ups, some fast some slow. The land is sparsely cultivated relative to its extent, but one suspects the cultivation is intense relative to the land's

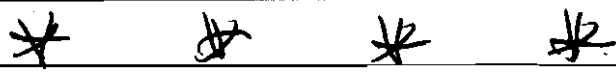
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capacity to bear fruit. The road is generally straight and the kilometers pass quickly, almost two a minute and after the first hour of the trip I come to the main autoroute - 57 - and turn North to San Luis Potosí.

To begin, it seems easy - the road is wide and traffic sparse and it all seems to move on the flat terrain at about 110 kilometers per hour, 65 or 70. ~~But then the terrain~~ I begin to think how simple - Carlos must have fallen asleep to have had the accident. But then after 10 or 15 kilometers the road begins to wind in more mountainous country. Heavily laden trucks slow markedly on the rises - trucks, trucks, and more trucks, big ones - a tractor and two trailers, each longer than any I've seen in the States. In the midst of the trucks rush buses - sputtering kind-class ones looking like beat-up school buses - and big, fast first-class ones. Everyone tries to keep their speed up as high as they can, passing whenever there is a crack of an opportunity - flick on the headlights, charge out into the other lane, make oncoming traffic squeeze to the right for the road is made wide precisely for that.

With such jockeying going on relentlessly, it is hard to figure exactly where the accident must have been, but it is hard to see how my first hypothesis could have been true - the

curves, the grades, the traffic would all demand alertness. There, as one turns a big, slow bend to the right, is the road to Santa Maria del Rio - I must have just passed the place where Carlos was killed and mother so badly injured. Well, my first phobia is over - I got past where their trip ended. Then the added irony - a kilometer or two later, four-lane highway begins and from there it was an easy drive to San Luis Potosi.



Papers - never have I had so many officious papers. Car registration and title along with the certificate of insurance: all these seemed to represent reasonably rational American bureaucracy. But then there were the Mexican documents.

First, mother's tourist card, which expired yesterday and which concerned, not so much her, but her car - it was to be out of the country in 180 days from November 10th, 1983, and it now lay a total wreck in some pound. Then there second, my "Carta poder," drawn up by Señor Magante, a striking tall young lawyer, witnessed by Señor Carballo, a self-conscious young notary. With it I had the power to turn the wreck of my mother's car over to the Mexican authorities as if it were somehow at my disposal.

Third, the official report of the accident, two pages of pertinent information and a third with an annotated diagram.

Why the problem? One who enters Mexico with a car must have with it. I must get the State of Mexico to accept the wreck. Peggy Syndelaar, a story in herself, Consular Agent in San Luis Potosi, had equipped me with the accident report, briefed me on what needed to be done, and sent me off to the Registro Federal de Automoviles on the outskirts of town. I remembered how Carlos distrusted the Pennsylvania Highway authorities when he went to get his license there. The architecture was somewhat the same - inexpensive bureaucratic modern. I entered and haltingly explained my purpose to an aging usher - tall, at once slim but pot-bellied, with a well-manicured face. He told me to go behind the counter to the one secretary there - could my luck be so good that I would immediately get the requisite documents?

Again, I haltingly explained my purpose. She smiled and said she would get someone who spoke English. Out came the assistant sub-director, a short, stocky, tough man in his late fifties with weathered face and eyes that had seen ~~too~~ too much, a man who nevertheless seemed still to have heart despite the pearl-handled

45-automatic struck not quite discreetly into the belt of his well starched uniform. He looked at the papers without reading them, noting this or that, however, expressing vague recollection of the accident that had happened four weeks before. Slowly he absorbed the situation through a kind of discovery learning - ah, the driver was killed, your mother is 80, three weeks in the hospital, the car is a wreck.... The more he grasped my purpose, the more he ~~became~~ uncertain he became about what to do. Soon he disappeared to consult with the subdirector, who I could see through the door to an inner office, a man of kindly but weak ~~countenance~~ countenance with a spreading paunch of late middle-age, dressed in the beige pants and knitted T-shirt common among Mexican bureaucrats. I heard him disperse - we must ask the jefe, and the assistant subdirector returned with the news that the boss would soon be in to decide what was to be done.

Business was not heavy and with each new person who entered my hopes rose - here was the jefe. Most ^{were} seeking a stamp on this or that paper. ~~He distinguished deskings, already that came~~ ~~of, seeking to have his ~~sub~~ sub, following~~ ~~familiarly with the ~~other~~ other~~ A robust handsome type on crutches, his foot in a cast came back and the assistant subdirector started to explain

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the case. I joined in, pointing to his cast explaining that my mother had the same on her good arm and hence had to sign with her thumb print - she was 80 and wanted to go home to Pennsylvania on Sunday - today was the Mexican mother's day and I wanted on it to get her release from her car so that on Sunday, the North American mother's day, she could go home. They all seemed much on her side - subito, bueno, wait a little, the jefe will be here. In a while a distinguished elderly man, white haired, with a sensitive, intelligent face, came in and started talking familiarly with the usher, getting briefed I thought on what was what this morning in the office. Soon he would come back, I thought, and humanely take care of my case. But no one else seemed much attentive to him and soon he left, not the assisted jefe at all.

Suddenly there was a stir; everyone became alert. A tallish, lean man in pressed military fatigues with no trace of markings, swinging off a shoulder-holster of fine black leather, seeming to bark at everyone at once, swept by into the director's office behind me. He was tanned with a long dark mustache, curly dark hair, his elbows strangely looking pigmented as if he had patches on them. There were two matters on the docket of which mine was one, but the one clearly second in priority. The other

is still obscure to me - perhaps tomorrow I will learn more of it. For today, the chief secretary was summoned with an armful of folders and a young subaltern of the office. Something had been done wrong - my Spanish was not up following the details, yet the tone was clear like one of Hitler's orations to anyone who knew no German.

After berating the first priority for twenty minutes, the jefe suddenly turned to the second priority, my petition. The sub-director was called from his office on the other side with a shout from the director's office behind me and as he passed he gently put his hand on my shoulder, as a priest might in saying 'take heart my son; may god be with you.' I heard the situation explained behind me and then the question snapped, "Where is the car?" with the answer, the judicial authorities. Bueno and I was summoned to enter.

"Do you speak Spanish?"

"Un poco."

"Bueno, I will explain in Spanish -"

"But you probably speak better English than I speak Spanish."

"Oh, I explain in English. You want a release from the car for your mother. It was destroyed in the accident. She has been in the hospital. You want to take her home. I could

have the letter for you in five minutes. I have one problem. I do not have the car. The judicial authorities have the car. When the judicial authority releases the car to me, you can have your letter in five minutes. We telephone. Sit down."

I sat in the place indicated and the jeep turned back to the first priority. I began to understand the problem a little. An airplane used in smuggling had been in their custody - the subaltern had been responsible for registering it to the office, photographing and describing it. The plane had been without markings, which had been duly noted, but the recording of identifying marks had stopped there. The plane had been released to some other authority and now, through a tug here and a pull there by powers unknown the plane was no longer a solid piece of evidence for the description of the plane that had been taken was not sufficiently exact to establish that it was now indeed the plane the authorities now possessed. Round and round the book on standard operating procedure was intoned as if holy writ. The authority of the state required that its procedures be followed to the letter which entailed uncovainy, unique descriptors, serial numbers on the engines or other parts. How could such a report have been entered? How could it have been typed without

further clarification? Buzz — Who is it?
 Ah the judicial authorities and the jefe grabs
 the phone, the sub director reappears. The
 jefe speaks a whole oration into the phone,
 several sentences to each separate breath.
 He then listens for a moment — bueno and
 hangs up. "You must get a letter to me from
 the judicial authorities stating that the car
 is in the jurisdiction of the Federal Registry.
 Then you will have your letter from me in
 five minutes. I know a lawyer who can help
 you get the documents."

The counselor agent had told me that
 if I ran into difficulties to call ~~her~~ her.
 "Por favor. My mother is 80. She has been in
 the hospital for three weeks. She cannot walk;
 her arm is in a cast; I want to take her home.
 I am a professor at Columbia University
 and I have only been here for a few days
 and I am not sure what to do. Here is the
 number of the counselor agent — would you
 call her and explain the situation?" "Si!
 bueno!" The sub director took the number to
 have a secretary dial it and a moment later
 the jefe was banking his speech to the
 counselor agent and then I was sent off to
 find her to get the letter that was so sorely
 needed.

* * * *

An hour later we are waiting in the anteroom of the judicial authorities along with a late middle-aged man who was still recovering from severe burns to his head, without ears, no eyebrows or hair, and strange bulbous scars all over his ~~skull~~ cranium. We wait. Most of the staff is off because of mother's day. I want to get back to the federal registry of vehicles ~~by~~ before it closes at three. It's 1:15, 1:30, 2:00 - will anything be done? ~~At~~ Finally at 2:15 we enter the office of the judicial authority. He looks at the papers and asks that I return tomorrow with five copies of them. They are short handed on account of mother's day and must turn two prisoners over to the jail authorities. Tomorrow they can attend to the case first thing at 9 o'clock. I have my five copies....