
The idea of going to church probably came to me waiting in line to cross the border to go to work. Here in Mexicali, the line to cross the border into California might extend a couple of miles (or last nearly two hours) along a 12-foot wrought iron border fence made up of rectangular posts and tight woven chicken wire. There you are waiting in a line of about three lanes in 116 degree heat, and the fumes are pretty bad. Little kids and/or grown men walk in between the cars asking you to wipe down your windows or sell you candy and sodas. Old ladies that look like they are right out of a "Apocalypto" casting call try to sell you ceramic piggy banks or Mexican soccer team flags.

Next to me in the passenger seat was a black plastic 8x12 file box full of student essays that needed to be graded, and weren´t going to be looked at anytime soon. The previous night I did something that I had never should have done. I had sat down for a few beers and listened to stories from my Yaqui neighbor Luz de Maria. At ninety one, she has dry, tough skin and long silver hair that falls in a rope-like braid down the length of her back. She once told me that her people always took great pride in their long hair, but one time when she was a little kid she spent time with her family in Arizona, and the public school officials made all the Indian children cut their hair short. "*They just stick a bowl over our heads*," she explained, "*and then they laughed as they cut around it…"*

There is a rueful gleam in her eye now, but obviously she is still very proud her dry, arid coastal homeland of Sonora. In her time her people were intimate with the native fauna and flora of their land. They were devout Catholics but also steeped in ancient rituals and syncretic elements. They were followers of the constellations and astronomonical phenomena that dictate the marine currents and tides. They were also very poor. Luz herself was the mother of 14 children, and maybe thirty years earlier, the region began running out of water. Ranchers around the perimeter of Indian land had begun siphoning off the supply. Governmental agencies found it more profitable to redirect water over the land of nearby pecan growers and copper mines. Vegetation dwindled. So did jobs. The family made the decision to move to Mexicali with the prospect finding work in the maquilladoras. Tragically, four of Luz's kids never made it to Mexicali. One died of diabetes, and two of drug overdose. Rigid with enormous sadness, Luz couldn't bring herself to tell me of the fourth, and I didn't ask. I avoided the tears in her eyes, and kept my gaze over her shoulder at the wooden stand with candles and the painting of the Virgin in the kitchen window. Later I found myself in the same kitchen with three of her sons huddled around the stove. I had paid one of them 200 dollars to weld black iron bars to secure the windows of my house , and he had returned two hours later with an eight ball of ICE, and now I was bending my knees and tilting my head. "*Chupa, Jay*" they said. The blue flames danced in my eyes, and the glass pipe seared my lips. The three brothers smiled looked to me like primordial magicians flitting around an open fire. As my knees buckled and

my head snapped back, I saw the Virgen pulling back inside the blue fog clouding the kitchen window. I felt myself floating into a distant religion of light, wind and dust.

I don't think I slept the entire night. I kept drinking beer after beer with the three brothers to come down from my high, but by the time I realized it sleep wasn't going to happen, it was time to line up at the border in order to have enough time to make it to work . I found a half-pint of vodka in my freezer, and I thought if I could take my time with it, and things worked out, I might be able to pull over alongside an irrigation canal and close my eyes for ten minutes before class. There isn't much chance to relax in the line because it's always moving, and that means someone is always trying to sneak in front of you. I'm looking around. Cars are moving. Vendors are yelling. Music is blaring. And I must be a half mile or so from the checkpoint when I see these two young Mexicans a little up front and to my side going at one of the rectangular posts in the border fence with a hacksaw. They can't be more than fifteen feet away from me. One guy is down on one knee and he is furiously trying to cut through the steel while his partner stands look-out. Man, that's hard work to cut through steel. I'm watching the guy go at it. His elbow is jerking back and forth, and sparks are flying. I can't believe that any one guy is going to get through maybe six inches of steel by himself, but when I see them make this hand off where the second guy goes down on his knee and the first guy takes his place as a look-out, I can see that they are organized. I'm thinking, maybe if they could keep it going for twenty minutes or so, they just might do it.

It's crazy. Insane. It's the middle of the day, broad daylight, in front of hundreds and hundreds of people. It's like a jailbreak scene in a movie, but no one is doing anything. I look around and I can see that people from their cars are looking at the same thing I am. Some are shocked. And some are BORED. But really, what can you do. There is no one to tell. And you can't leave your place in line. So, I don't know exactly why, but I start laughing. I mean, I thought this was hilarious. Two guys who show up at the fence like they were going to work. I'm laughing so hard that I feel my eyes watering and my skin tightening, but that's when I see the guy on the ground suddenly stop and turn around. Suddenly he stands up. I'm in the middle lane, about eight feet from him now, and he looks tired like you would expect anyone to look like who has been hacking metal in the 116 degree heat. But he also looks angry. His baseball cap is turned backward. His face is smudged with grease. His shirt is ripped and drenched with sweat. And he is glaring straight at me.

I bend down and take my vodka bottle from underneath my seat. I feel the skin stretching across the tops of my cheeks, I drink the last third of the bottle in one hit. The guy with the hacksaw is coming my way. I feel my throat burn and my lungs constrict. I close my eyes. I know if I can close my eyes for just 10 fucking minutes on the other side, I'll be able to make it through the day. That's when I decide to go to church.

"I pray for you motherfucker," I say.

I pass through the check point. When I look at my watch, I realize it wasn't more than an hour this time that I waited in line. I'm not worried about border patrol. I have a feeling that they do worse things at night to stay up than I do. The guard that takes my passport is a young woman in her twenties. She's heavily made up. Her eyes are baggy and she has pasty skin. She asks me "*Que traes?"* which in Spanish means either "What are you bringing," or "what's your fucking problem?"

I'm not going to have time to pull over to sleep. I have 15 minutes to make it to campus. It's a straight shot. And in the time I spent waiting in line, I have shifted my attention to something Luz Maria told me the previous night about an outbreak of diabetes in Punta Chueca. I had never heard of anyone refer to diabetes as an epidemic. Like it's cough that you might pick up on a crowded bus. The disease stems from the body's inability to break down digested food

into glucose. Most people produce enough insulin to help glucose enter the blood stream, but in the case of diabetics, the pancreas isn't maintaining enough production. Cells starve while glucose builds up in the blood. The illness hit the family fast. In little more than a year, her oldest son Chapo had developed a recurrent skin infection around his lower throat. The pain was overwhelming. He had a hard time swallowing his food. Not too much later, he experienced bouts with extreme thirst and lost over 60 pounds in one month. "*No one really thought it was that bad a problem for Chapo to have,*" Luz de Maria said. "*I remember how he used to pass by the mirror and count the number of holes in his belt it took him to buckle up his pants.*"

I was surprised how Luz de Maria could laugh at the memory. She talked of Chapo's death and two more sons stricken by severe Type 2 diabetes in the same way she talks about the weather. In Punta Chueca less than four inches of rain fall per year, and the heat rises well above 100 for most of the year. Today on the Calexico side of the border I saw 121 when I passed the digital display of RaboBank. Any slight contact with the metal strips along the top of my car door sears the flesh. Hot air blows like a furnace through the open window.

From the border, tt took me 15 minutes to reach the campus and when I entered the class, I don't have to look at they way my students shake their heads and roll their eyes. I'm conducting a Cause and Effect lesson. It's something I know I can do without much thought. I teach six classes on three different campuses, and I stay pretty close to my plans. I have two columns started on the white board. The left-hand title says CAUSES, and the right-hand column says EFFECTS. In between I have a large circle, and inside I have written the words TEEN-AGE PREGNANCY in IMPERIAL VALLEY.

It's a problem. I know it. Somewhere floating out there is a statistic that everyone knows about. Imperial Valley ranks number two in the state in teenage pregnancy. More than L.A. More than San Francisco. They know it. Many of my students are 21, 22, 23 and they write about their kids in kindergarden and first grade. It's a problem that is way out of the sphere of my understanding. The number of teen pregnancies in this county far outshadow any other county in the state. Why is that? What are the causes and effects?

One girls raises her hand and mentions "lack of education." We break it down to be more specific. Are we talking about education and general, or sex education. Both this and both that. Many of the kids come from generations of poor, undeducated farmworkers. Either the parents don't have time to talk about sex, or they are unwilling to. The schools are horribly underfunded.

Another talks about drug and alcohol abuse. Yeah, and I know what's coming next. I can see a guy in the back of the room with his two fists placed one on top of the other and now he is raising them both to his mouth and making a sucking sound. Students are knodding their heads in agreement, that whatever a kid wants, he can find in five minutes once passing through the turnstiles into Mexico. I notice that the guy who made the gestures is now writing furiously. He ´s a big kid with a baseball hat turned backwards.

As they write quietly, I think about Chino's toes. In the final stages of Type 2 diabetes, they started to burn. They felt like they were on fire. He had stopped wearing shoes. One tequilla fueled afternoon, he cut them off with the same meat cleaver that his mother uses to chop carne asada. I stare over my students heads, maybe the same way someone looks out into horizon. Chapo was 5'7" and ballooned up to 270 before the disease hit. Luz de Maria explained to me that two of his brothers were even bigger. Outside, the air pushes the walls in. I feel everyone staring at my eyes. They're waiting to share their analyses of teen age pregnancy.

The number one answer to why kids throw away their lives: There is nothing else to do.

When I make it back across the border, I can't believe it's 121 degrees and raining in Mexicali at 5:30 in the afternoon. It's like being soaked with chicken soup. The streets, still wet and slick from an afternoon downpour, were packed with a continuous stream of people. Street vendors overwhelmed the sidewalks with their card tables displaying their wares. Those sellers with lesser means covered their spots on the ground with blankets or tarps. The smell of imitation designer cologne mixes with the aroma of hot *queso* and fried *tortillas.*

"***ESCOJALE!!"*** The vendors yell over the clash of cheap home stereos blasting a mixture of popular Mexicanartists and booming hip hop music. "***BARRATO!! BARRATO****!* I was headed towards the *La Catedral de la Virgen Guadalupe,* the city´s largest and most celebrated Catholic church. "***HEY GAVACHO..."*** The raspy voice came from a tiny, papaya-shaped man sitting atop a stone wall that separated the sidewalk from a narrow strip of grass and oleander plants. "***I THINK I GOT JUST WHAT YOU NEED***"

I stopped next to a table that featured flashing sirens, the ones you see on top of old ambulances or police cars in Pedro Infante movies, and kneeled down onto the fringe of a blue blanket, where laid out in front of him, there were buckets of wood chips, aluminium foil, glass pieces and sea shells. Looking up, I could see that the strange man speaking to me was busy with a pair of rusted tin snippers constructing folk renditions of the santitos. He had his work, ranging from 4 inches in height to 3 feet, arranged next to him along the top of the wall. The man had a thick black beard that covered the mango-colored pallor of his chubby cheeks, but not the grapefruit size goiter that grew out of the side of his neck. *"****LET ME SHOW YOU****"* he said. Next to him he had a display case of *milagros,* tiny metal arms, legs and hearts set against a black felt background..

I needed little explanation. On several occasions I have given Luz de Maria a ride downtown and noticed her clutching a finely woven bag made from the fibers of palm leaves. I remembered when her sister had become bedstricken with a mysterious cancer, she had gone *every day* to church. Not only did she pack a few *milagros* for her sister but often she put something down by San Judas Tadeo for her sister´s husband. He was doing his best to maintain a bold front, but it was clear to even me that watching his wife drift away each day was killing him. Each time she entered *La Catedral,* she would bend over to place the bag on the cold concrete floor and open the handles outward. She would wait a moment, as if to straighten out in her mind the task at hand, and then proceed to extract, pins, clips, tacks, mementos, pictures, Milagros. The act always reminded me of a magician pulling rabbits out of a hat. I would always imagine that finely woven bag with the hoop handles, as if it had no bottom.

Recently I had learned that one of my former students nearly lost her entire family driving home one late summer night from a family gathering in Algodones. I had read about it in the evening tabloid, La Centinela. A color photograph of the wreckage appeared right next to a bikini clad model and new of two bodies found floating in a city canal. It was a Sunday, the sky was colored brown from the burning of fields and clouds of dust below. In the distance, they could see flashes lightning color the sky and hear bolts of thunder. Her father who had not been drinking that much and was a very responsible family man, wanted to stop the car and urinate while everything was still dry, the trees gray, the Earth cracked. While he ducked behind roadside fig tree to do his business, a fruit truck driven by a blue-shirted stock boy cane around the turn and plowed into the Oldsmobile sending it halfway down the arroyo. Both fruit truck and Oldsmobile went up in a ball of flame and black smoke. Leticia was thrown from the car. Later that night in the hospital she learned that she had lost her mother and two younger siblings. Her four-month old daughter who she was holding in her arm died from head trauma and severe burns that covered nearly 80 per cent of her body.

Inside my shirt pocket, I had a three-page essay Leticia had written and submitted it days

before she died. I had assigned a “tuff stuff” narrative where my students would have to reflect on a difficult incident in their lives. Leticia was a mother at sixteen. That much I knew. She didn’t spend much time describing the father, but she wrote more about what she learned from the experience: “Having my baby was best thing to happen to me in my life. One day I was young and know nothing about living. But with my baby everything change. Every day I learn things from her that make me strong. I know now that every decision I do, I do is important for my baby’s future…”

Once inside the church, I was going to nail the essay to a post along side the Sacred Heart.

I didn’t know what I was doing. As I stood up from the blue blanket he shook his head at the thought of all the things that Luz’s family and Leticia’s family had suffered over the years. The old man had moved directly to my side and was waiting for a decision. He held one hand out, a sample of three or four *milagros* that glistened like tiny stars in his swollen palm In the streets, traffic was at a standstill. Suddenly, I noticed that we were no longer alone. Out of the shadows, short, dark-skinned indios approached the table. In their eyes was the same look I saw earlier in the morning along the fence. Right then and there. I told the man that I wasn´t sure anymore. I decided I wouldn´t need a *milagro* today.

“*Oye Gavacho,”* the man said. In the streets, traffic was at a standstill. At 5:30 commuters who worked in the business district were clashing with the Christmas rush of shoppers. Horns were blaring and people were screaming from all directions. I was already walking away when he heard the vendor´s voice rise above the din, “*Para el pinche tiempo que lo ocupes, ya va a ser demasiado tarde.”* By the time you know you really need it...it´s going to be way too late.



**Jay Lewenstein** lives in Mexicali, Mexico and teaches community college English on the U.S. side of the border. He´s a marathon runner, and each morning he runs along the fences and canals that separate the two neighboring countries. He´s developing an anthology of short stories for his M.F.A. thesis at UC Riverside that reflect the spirit and culture of border life.