

Gunplay in Guadalajara

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I was a 16 year-old high school dropout, had a three-day growth of black stubble covering my face and was staring drunkenly into the bathroom mirror. I'd been reading an interview with Shel Silverstein in *Playboy*, where he'd spun some stories about Mexico. I had a brown Mexican cigarette called a Negrito hanging from my lips, and I liked the guy looking back at me in the mirror; I couldn't be him where I was, but perhaps in Mexico.

A few months earlier I had met my father, whom I hadn't seen since I was eight, at my grandparents' apartment in New York. He'd been living in Mexico for the past six years and was in New York trying to sell some Pre-Columbian art. My father seemed cool. He let me smoke and drink, and he had invited me to visit him in Guadalajara. I was ready to go.

I told my mother about my plans and wrote to my father telling him that I was coming. There was no answer. I wrote again, and still no reply.

My mother wasn't happy that I'd dropped out of school, and she wasn't thrilled with the idea of her 16-year-old son disappearing into Mexico. But as a single mother of two, back then when there was no sort of government aid, or much societal help, and struggling to survive and succeed, she was overwhelmed by my lifestyle choices, which included demonstrating for civil rights, having a 20-year old African-American girlfriend, hanging out in the projects with dubious characters and getting arrested for minor consumption. So she relented and sent my father a telegram. He didn't answer that either.

Undaunted, I packed a bag, went down to the Greyhound station in Phoenix and climbed aboard a bus bound for the border town of Nogales, Arizona.

Crossing into Mexico I bought a bus ticket to Guadalajara, via Las Mochis and Mazatlan, and headed to a little café for a taco and a few beers. Taking in the spicy smells and the aura of dust and sunlight punctuated by darting black eyes, I sensed what could be the beginning of a fantastic adventure. I enjoyed the slight sense of disorder. Things seemed looser, and it was good to be sitting there ordering beer with impunity. I felt like an adult; I felt free, and I felt great.

On the ride down to Mazatlan I happened to sit next to the only other American on the bus. He was in his early twenties, and with his sandy blond hair hanging down over his forehead he seemed easy-going and friendly. I listened transfixed as he told me that he was on his way back to La Paz where he had been hanging out on a ranch with someone named Timothy Leary, experimenting with this stuff called LSD.

This was 1965; I was sixteen years old, and although I'd been hanging out with "cool black cats," drinking and going to jazz clubs, I had never used any drugs. In fact when it came to drugs my head would play a tape of an old "Armstrong Circle Theater" program I'd seen on TV when I was about 11. In it this kid's big brother, who was a jazz musician, started smoking marijuana and ended up hooked on heroin. In my mind, drugs, any drugs, meant addiction, and marijuana was a well-advertised gateway to harder drugs and hard times.

But my seatmate was telling me about playing softball while tripping on LSD, and how he could see every stitch in the ball as it left the pitcher's hand and traveled toward him in slow motion. I don't remember much else of our conversation, except that he also made marijuana sound very intriguing.

Just days ago I'd been a teenager in the Phoenix suburbs, now sitting on a bus rolling down the Mexican coastline my whole world was changing. Listening and somehow relating to this guy, my resistance and disinterest in drugs crumbled. "Where could I get some of this marijuana?" I asked him. I remember him saying that when I met some Americans living in Mexico he was sure I'd find some.

When I arrived in Guadalajara I discovered my suitcase wasn't on the bus. I reported it to the bus line's office at the station and was told it probably didn't make the changeover at Mazatlan, and it would arrive soon. Carrying all I had, a small wooden art box filled with brushes and paints, I got on a local bus from Guadalajara to Zapopan, where my father lived.

I was shocked to find out that the address I had for him, Poste Restante, Zapopan, Jalisco, Mexico, wasn't an address at all. It just meant for the Post Office to hold his mail until he collected it, and he hadn't picked it up for almost a week.

Zapopan was a rather small village. The Post Office was just off the plaza, which was centered in front of the Catedral de Zapopan, which was the home of the Virgen de Zapopan, the second most famous virgin in all of Mexico, and the site of a rather large annual pilgrimage.

The plaza was the center of village activity. The ornate cathedral lined one side, the others were filled with restaurants, bars and shops, and the sidewalk, as well as the small park it surrounded, was full of people sitting on benches, strolling or buying roasted ears of corn, fresh fruit, or other treats offered by the many vendors. In the evening couples, young and old, would stroll arm in arm.

I had no idea how to find my father. My Spanish was almost nonexistent, and being an ignorant 16-year-old, my idea of a Mexican was someone with dark skin, hair and eyes and the typical combination of Spanish and Indian features. So, when I saw an older man, with white skin and European features, dressed in a white shirt and dark slacks, I approached him, speaking English. To my surprise, he answered in Spanish, and then in heavily accented, broken English.

After I explained my dilemma to him, he suggested that I check out nearby Colonia de Seattle, where many *gringos* lived. He was kind enough to give me directions.

Not knowing where my father lived, or even if he was still in Mexico, and only having less than a hundred dollars to my name, was worrying, but I shrugged it off. Everything was new, and I was excited to discover what lay ahead.

When I jumped off the bus in Colonia Seattle, I found myself in a sprawling neighborhood of adobe residences, most surrounded by walls and gardens. I set out walking along the dirt road when I heard someone call out to me in English, "Come and join us."

There were two couples, at least my father's age or older, sitting around a patio table enjoying the fine weather, each other's company, Tequila and sangria. I was pleasantly surprised when they offered me a drink. They didn't know my father but said that Salena would soon be there and maybe she knew him.

Salena, who soon arrived and joined us for a drink, was Salena Royle, a respected Broadway actress who had appeared in many plays. She acted in a few films in the 1940s, playing Ingrid Bergman's mother in the 1948 movie, "Joan of Arc;" It was Salena who introduced Spencer Tracy to producer George M. Cohan.

Salena played several roles on television in the early 1950s, but her acting career never recovered from her refusal to testify before Senator Joe McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee in 1951.

What was more important to me at the time was that Salena did know my father, and she knew where he lived. It wasn't long before we were in her car bumping along the dusty, dirt roads of Colonia Seattle heading back to Zapopan.

We pulled up in front of a bar called "La Club Zapopan," which looked almost directly across at the stately cathedral on the other side of the village square. Salena and I entered a gate in a wall beside the club, crossed a little brick courtyard and knocked on the door of my father's apartment. After knocking several times and receiving no answer, Salena spoke in Spanish to a man going back and forth from the club to another home at the rear of the courtyard.

"He says your father hasn't been home for several days," she told me.

In my mind I didn't really have a choice. I told Salena that I'd just wait for him. As she drove off, I sat down in a chair beside his door, and waited.

I could use the bathroom in the club and sleep on a bench in the Plaza; two days later I finally saw my father enter through the gate, walk toward his apartment and then see me sitting there. He said that he almost had a heart attack, and that may have been true. He

was certainly surprised. It's funny, because at the time I don't think I understood why. I mean I had told him I was coming. I'd sent two letters and a telegram stating as much.

The apartment was small and funky. It had two bedrooms, so I had a place to stay. The disorder and uncleanliness was probably a sign of my father's unsettledness. A German Jew, who had escaped from Hitler at the age of 16, giving up a rather plush life in Hamburg to work in a zipper factory outside of London, he had been scrambling to gain a foothold somewhere ever since.

His aura of culture and charm belied his lack of formal education, and his facile intellect and quick parlance masked his desperate longings. Insignificant jobs had come and gone. Stabs at artistic endeavors fell victim to that same lack of self-discipline, patience and perseverance.

Mexico had offered the chance to follow a Bohemian trail, perhaps to write, or get swept up in a romantic vision. He hadn't been that lucky. Some short stories sold, but the rejections had worn away much of his meager drive.

He had happened into an opportunity to acquire some Pre-Columbian Art, which he took to New York and sold. This had been quite profitable, and had at least eased some of the financial insecurity and stress. Finding a life that could satisfy his ego was another story.

My father told me that his girlfriend Alice, who some years later became his third wife, was out of the country. "She wants to get married," he told me, "I don't want to do that, but I don't know what to tell her."

"Why don't you tell her the truth?" I asked. "You can think of a good truth," I smiled. My father thought my quip was witty, and he began to feel a little more comfortable about my being there.

Among the first of my father's friends that I met were Allen and his wife Beverly. Allen was an artist. He looked like a beatnik or incipient Hippie and had a very cool house out in Ajijic near Lake Chapala. After touring the house and taking in his artwork, we went up on the roof. I don't remember the conversation, but there was a great view out over the lake, and I got totally smashed on Ponche made from fresh strawberries and 190 proof pure cane alcohol.

When we got home, remembering what my seatmate on the bus had said, I asked my father if he thought Allen might have some marijuana. My father laughed and asked why.

"I'd like to try some," I said. He laughed again. "I've got some," he replied, smiling like the Cheshire Cat.

He prepared a couple of joints. Never having done drugs I was expecting a sensation more akin to getting drunk, and when I first got stoned I didn't even realize it. "Do you feel anything?" my father asked. "I don't think so," I answered, "but I'm really hungry."

My father cooked some pork with a sauce he made from condensed milk and tequila. It tasted like the best food I'd ever eaten. We sat there listening to a tiny transistor radio, which was hanging from a nail in the wall. I felt as if I was hearing a fantastic concert and consuming a gourmet meal. I was stoned. This new sensation was one that would continue to enthrall, inspire and nearly destroy me for years to come.

Mexico enchanted me. This was the beginning of my love affair with the third world, which would carry me throughout Asia and the Pacific in years to come. I loved the colors and clarity in the unadulterated atmosphere. The combination of primitive and modern and the lower economic standards made things feel less threatening and more accessible. My resources were severely limited, and being able to buy a taco for eight cents, a beer for less than a quarter and cigarettes for a nickel made me feel functional. I could stroll through the marketplace or around the plaza and buy some fresh fruit, stop for a beer, walk into a restaurant and order a meal, or pull up to a bar and order a drink. It was as though I had a life.

I met Romo at Rocky's house. Rocky was an American studying medicine in Guadalajara, and almost every time I hung out with him and his friends they all said, "you have to meet Romo."

It now turned out that they had been telling Romo that he had to meet me. Romo was also a medical student. Rather than another *gringo*, however, Romo was Mexican, and he spoke perfect English.

He said that he knew of a great party being held in Guadalajara. So the three of us got a bus and headed off for the city.

The party was being held in a club that had been closed to the public for the event. Smoke swirled through the darkness, which sparkled with bright dresses on pretty girls and echoed with tinkling glasses, music and happy chatter. It was like a movie to me. I had finally joined The Rat Pack.

Although it was a private party, the bartender was selling drinks. But as far as I was concerned, it was at Mexican prices, which seem a low tariff to enter this dream world. Soon I was drinking and dancing with a beautiful girl, her agate-colored eyes were sparking and my desire was blazing.

Suddenly a loud gunshot made everyone freeze, Commotion broke out, and panic started to spread.

"We've got to get out of here," Romo said, as we hurried through the terrified crowd.

"What happened?" I asked.

“Someone pulled a gun on the bartender because he was charging for the drinks. We’ve gotta split. The cops are coming.”

I grabbed a bottle of rum from a table as we raced for the door.

Neon lights were flashing in the Guadalajara night, as the flood of frantic people poured from the bar. Everyone was calling for taxis and running to cars as police sirens drew ever closer.

I followed Romo as he ran to an Aston Martin parked at the curb. He spoke quickly in Spanish to the driver, a dapper young man, who had just jumped behind the wheel. A passenger occupied the other seat in the small, hot car, but Romo said, “come on,” and the three of us climbed on the trunk, sitting with our backs against the rear window and our feet down on the bumper bar, we took off through the neon-smear city streets.

I should have felt frightened and unsure. I had felt that way, although I rarely if ever showed it, most of my life. But that was when I was in school, or had to contemplate how to forge a future in the world. In situations like this, or when I’d been drinking and partying with my African-American friends in South Phoenix, I was most comfortable. The unfamiliar always offered me hope. Even when it may have seemed dangerous, I was eager to find something new and different.

Laughing and passing the bottle of rum between us, we careened along the Guadalajara streets until we pulled up in front of the imposing façade of a grand old house.

A beautiful woman, dark hair cascading onto her shoulders, which were bare above the low-cut red dress that also revealed the upper half of her soft, café-con-leche-colored breasts, greeted us with a welcoming smile. Gently embracing the owner of the Aston Martin, with what seemed like genuine affection and great familiarity, she was soon joined by three other girls, equally beautiful although much younger than our hostess.

The three young ladies, smiling and laughing, took our arms and led us to an adjoining room, where we were ushered onto comfortable couches. Soon two other girls arrived, each carrying a large tray, from which they placed bottles of various liquors, glasses and plates of tantalizing treats on an exquisitely hammered brass table.

“Where are we?” I asked Romo. “It’s a bordello,” he said, “one of the best.”

My immature ego responded immediately, “But there were so many fine women at the party. We don’t need to come here.”

In my 16-year-old mind the only reason a man went to a hooker was because he couldn’t get a woman.

But Romo said, “It doesn’t matter. This is a time for the men to drink and talk; the girls are just here to serve us.”

Watching the beautiful women topping up our drinks, replenishing the snacks and hovering over us as we sat talking and laughing on the comfortable couches, I felt a little like the guest of an Arab sheik.

The fantasy came to an abrupt end as several policemen flung open the door and rushed in to surround us. Shouting at us in Spanish, they ordered us to stand and put our hands above our heads. I didn't understand them, but just nervously followed whatever Romo was doing.

Another higher-ranking policeman sauntered in. Circling the room, he looked each of us up and down, and barked a command. The other cops started to frisk us.

"What's going on?" I asked Romo. "Don't worry," he said, "They are just looking for weapons."

By this time I was pretty drunk, the whole evening had been almost dreamlike, and while the policemen were all armed and had the authority to arrest us, their deportment was also comical. In my mind I had dubbed the chubby head cop "Sgt. Garcia," after the portly character on "Zorro."

Romo's calm put me somewhat at ease. That changed as one of the cops reached under the jacket of the driver of the Aston Martin. He immediately called to Sgt. Garcia and pulled back the sport coat to reveal a leopard skin shoulder holster. Holding his own gun on Romo's friend, the young cop pulled a Beretta from the holster.

The owner of the Aston Martin smiled at the sergeant who was puffing himself up with a sense of officiousness and authority. There was a quick exchange in Spanish. The suave young man held back his other lapel and nodded to the sergeant who gently removed a wallet from the driver's inside pocket. He opened the wallet. His chest seemed to deflate in reverse proportion to his eyes widening.

Suddenly, he clicked his heels and brought all of his men to attention. Saluting our host, he handed the wallet and the Beretta back to him with a bow, and marched his rag-tag troop of officers out of the room.

"What the hell is going on?" I stammered.

Romo was laughing as he told me the story. It was simple. Our host had seen the movie "Goldfinger," and he wanted to be James Bond. His father was one of the richest men in Mexico, and he'd pulled strings and had his son made a member of the Mexican Secret Service.

"He doesn't really do anything for the secret service," said Romo. "He just has the Beretta, the Aston Martin and the credentials."

And so my night of fantasy-tinged reality ended with the clinking of glasses and the loose laughter of relief.