

## **Note 2**

*Tepito, Mexico City, Thursday, June 8, 2017.*

Baldy and I greeted each other and we crossed the street nearly straight away. We met up with Ivan and the young man who looked like a rapper, who we had met the day before. He was called Beto, and in some way he is Ivan's right hand. Beto is tall, he must be approaching 5 foot 6 inches. His physique could be that of a sports person, his head is shaved and he looks very much like a young Afro-American. He could easily pass for a much shorter version of LeBron James, the well-known American basketball player. His skin is dark, although with a slight yellowish tone, which is usually a sign of drug addicts. He was wearing basketball sneakers, baggy jeans and a black sweatshirt with a back cap that had buttons on the front.

This time they were not on the graffiti corner, rather they were facing it, on the site of an abandoned food stall right in the middle of two housing units, also covered with graffiti. They hung out at the stall: Beto sitting on one of the sides, resting his back against the wall, Ivan standing in front of the stall talking to him. He was wearing an ostentatious purple colored polo T shirt.

Both were breakfasting on sandwiches and coffee, like a lot of the other traders. We greeted them and after taking a bite Ivan told us:

—Didn't we agree 10 o'clock? —As he looked at his watch.

—In reality we agreed 9 o'clock—Baldy replied, getting a laugh from the four.— I need to go to work, but I'll leave you, yeah? —He said to them as he gave me a slight nod of the head.

—Yeah, leave him here. We'll look after him.

Baldy said goodbye and walked off in the direction of the street market. Ivan kept eating and asked me what we were going to do. I replied that we could start to speak; I switched the recorder on (and that was how it stayed for the rest of our meeting) and I kept it in the left pocket of my jacket. Ivan told me a bit about his daily routine. He told me that he usually arrived at 9 o'clock in the morning and that his journey was very short because he lived in a hotel just a few blocks away from his place of work. It seemed an interesting topic so I kept asking him about it.

Ivan told me he was 54 years old and a native of the neighborhood. He was born and raised on Calle de Tenochtitlán. He repeated to me that he had lived on the street for 12 years out of the last 20 years and the rest in a hotel which served as his residence. Our conversation was interrupted by a young man who had just crossed the street and came over to say hello. Hi nickname

was Doll and he must have been 30 or younger, of medium height, 5 foot 5 inches, light skin and visibly muscular. He wore jeans and a pair of Adidas sneakers, red and white T shirt with a cap he played with and a fitted black riding jacket. His gaze was what most attracted my attention, because of two details: 1) his eyes were yellowish, which is a common characteristic of addicts and 2) he had a series of spills which seemed to show that he was up from the previous day.

Doll greeted the three of us: Ivan very respectfully, speaking out his name and nodding his head; he called me “bro” and did the classic hand and fist bump. And he spoke to Beto warmly: “Get the *chicharra* out bitch!”<sup>3</sup> the hand bump was very much louder and therefore more affectionate. Beto refused and his gesture made the four laugh. Doll told us about his frustration. The night before he had bought a bag of marijuana at “25 pesos a gram” (equivalent to 37 US dollars an ounce) and he had “lucked out” because the seller had given him a full bag, and then he went to a nearby district to do exercise and he lost the bag. He ended his story with the thought that the bag would be a prize for the lucky person who found it and he bade it farewell with an exclamation: “Now we can smoke!”

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<sup>3</sup> Remains of a marijuana cigarette that can be saved to be smoked later.

Beto stated that he and Doll are both “fucked off,” because the story reminded him that he too was carrying a bag of marijuana and could not remember where he had left it. Ivan said that he had left his inside the unit, and that he only had a gram with him (1/28th of an ounce), and he normally smoked that in one go. He explained to me that each gram of marijuana makes approximately two cigarettes and that his routine was to smoke the first during the day to pass the time and the second at night to sleep:

—I sleep like an angel! As if I owed nothing to anyone, thank God! —  
He also told me that the weed that The Doll had lost what was known as “mango gum,” a type of pleasantly flavored high quality marijuana. He then shouted at a youth who was walking on the opposite sidewalk: —Piece of shit!  
I went to the bar<sup>4</sup> yesterday and you weren’t there, fucking liar!

A teenager came over to the metal stall, at the most 15 years old. He was very thin, dark skinned and short. He must have been less than 5 foot 3 inches because he was shorter than Ivan. He wore a black cap, white vest, red surf shorts with orangey details and a pair of basketball sneakers which looked enormous against his thin legs. He carried a square black synthetic leather man’s bag strapped to his chest. This type of bag is very popular among the

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<sup>4</sup> Place for working out, which usually just has bars and handrails for doing calisthenics. They are very popular among the males of the neighborhood.

men of the neighborhood, particularly traders who usually use them to keep money from their commercial transactions, but other men also use them to store personal items such as cell phones or also drugs, for personal use or for sale. The kid was obviously drugged and given his drowsiness he seemed to be under the effect of marijuana.

The greeting ritual was practically the same as I saw earlier in the morning. The kid called me “bro” and he greeted me affectionately, also Ivan, to whom he said something nonsensical, the sound coming out of his mouth nothing more than babble. He drew a breath and he was able to speak more clearly. He told Ivan that he had bought a ball of hashish and asked him if he wanted a smoke. Ivan replied sharply that he did not. A passer-by strolled past casually and gave a friendly greeting. I observed the ball of hashish in the right hand of the adolescent. A ball of dark brown resin. He took it out of a plastic bag and in the other hand he was holding a normal dropper, from which he started to remove the plastic head.

I asked Ivan if the hashish was more expensive and he said it was not, but there was something about his body language which told me not to pursue the topic. Almost immediately a very luxurious black automobile appeared with its windows wound down. The traditional sound of the accordion in a *norteño* song could be heard. A tall man came out of the car. He must have

been at least 5 foot 9, he was thin and his hair was practically shaven; it was gray indicating that he must have been over 50 years of age. He was very elegantly dressed, with gray pants, a short sleeved shirt with a colorful combination of turquoise and pink squares, with perfectly shined brown Boston leather shoes. On his left wrist he wore an impressive silver watch, and on the right a thin gold chain.

The man asked Ivan if his female friend was around and he asked him to call her by telephone. Apparently he was given the go-ahead to enter. He nodded his head a couple of times as he looked at Ivan, who asked me to wait for him because they “had to go, but would not be long.” From the serious atmosphere of the exchange I imagined that they were talking to someone important, with one of the individuals Ivan worked for. Ivan and the man entered a nearby dwelling unit. I stayed on my own with the teenager, who carried on preparing to smoke hashish. He had pulled off a small piece from the ball and he was molding it with his index finger and thumb to make a small ball which he tried to place on the narrowest point of the dropper since it was only a thin plastic tube.

I asked the teenager how much his ball of hashish cost, and guessing that I wanted to buy one, he warned me that he had not bought it on the street corner, but rather in the vicinity of the Torre Latino. It seemed to me to be an

incredibly busy place and a rather bizarre place to buy drugs, although I imagine that sometimes the best way to hide something is in plain sight. I carried on asking whether these transactions took place in middle of the street and how it was possible to tell whether they were going on. The adolescent summed it up in a phrase:

—If you're hooked you'll find it—and as this simple logic made me feel a little stupid, all I could say was:

—Yeah man.

From what I could see, the procedure for smoking hashish was not going too well. The kid was trying to burn the resin with a lighter to turn it into smoke in the dropper, but he was not having much success. He appeared to be looking for something from his movements, but he continued our conversation, adding that the price of hashish varied between 70 and 90 pesos per gram (between 140 and 134 US dollars per ounce), and that was how much his little ball weighed, one gram ( $1/28^{\text{th}}$  of an ounce). I asked him if it was much stronger than marijuana and he said he thought it was not, since in the end it comes from the same substance. According to him hashish is marijuana resin as can be seen from some of the everyday processes of consumption, like breaking it up in a grinder, where a large amount of resin

can accumulate depending on the quantity of marijuana, which then turns into a moldable dough when mixed with water.

Ivan returned to the stall and interrupted the conversation. He said that his workload was going to increase with a greater number of interruptions, because he was going to run errands and could not stay in one place. I guessed that this cut across our interview agreement. In fact it seemed that he had the same preconception of the framework as any social science professional; we would sit down to share a drink, while I turned the recorder on, and we would talk without interruption. He suggested that we should think of another time and date to finish it.

At first Ivan thought that the night might provide a good backdrop because he was practically free of duties at that time, but then he remembered that a lot of rain had fallen in the evenings that week. We thought about another day and he suggested Tuesday which was technically his day off, because Tepito remains closed on that day. He said that on Tuesday we would be able to sit down at the small row of stores in which he normally lived and we could talk more easily. Despite this Ivan did not ask me to leave, he took a folding metal chair that was on its own in the street and he sat down, and I decided to sit on the ground next to him.



A few neighbors passed in front of us and greeted Ivan in a friendly manner. He told me that this was something basic, that “everyone knows me” as a native of the neighborhood, and that this made his statements more valuable. The elegant man was back on the street and he interrupted us to say goodbye: “We’re off Ivan my friend,” and he got into his car effortlessly. Ivan told me in a low voice that he was a commander of the federal police who loved coke. I told him that he would have to be high up in the agency to have a car like that and to look like that. I then asked him about his relationship with the police in general and he replied that they were bought, which is why they did not trouble anyone, so long as they received their “soda money”, which amounted to around “100 pesos a week” (just over five US dollars).

This seemed to be a microscopic bribe but when you consider everyone involved with the stupefacient trade and other illegal activities in the neighborhood contributing similar amounts, this could add up to good sums of money through simple accumulation. Ivan believed that this information was very delicate and he thought he should think twice about making it public despite the fact that it was suspected or even known about in the media. Maybe for this reason he thought we should focus on a much more historical perspective, namely his personal history. All told he had served a 15 years in

jail and several more in different prisons of the capital. He advised me to bring a notebook to take some important notes.

A woman came over to ask Ivan if he had been able to take the garbage out the day before and he said he had not, and that the strong rain had stopped him from completing the task, but that he would sort it out by the end of the day. A little later a police truck passed right in front of us driving slowly. The two agents greeted the seated Ivan and raised the palm of their hands. Ivan did the same and the truck continued on its way. Ivan laughed a little and said to me: "See that?" when it was obvious that the scene was powerful confirmation of what he was saying about police collaboration.

We continued our discussion and I reminded him that the day before he had spoken about his intention to write a book about his life. He told me that it was a project that in fact he had been thinking about but had never been able to bring about, that he had just fucked around. He told me that he left prison in 1999 and that his mother, who was his sole connection to his family, had died of a heart attack soon afterwards, and that he began to live in the streets. A man interrupted the conversation to ask Ivan if he had seen the gas truck, he said he had not, but judging by the time of day it would not take long.

Returning to his life story, he said that the years he lived in the street were tough, above all where addiction was concerned. He stated that in those

days he got to the point of consuming up to six different substances throughout the day, which he listed as: 1) marijuana, 2) *chochos* (ecstasy), 3) cocaine, 4) crack, 5) uppers and 6) alcohol. He added that he kept up this level of consumption all the time he lived in the street, for approximately 12 years, and that the longest he stopped eating and sleeping while consuming drugs was for 16 days. I asked him if these were for sale in this street and he reminded me that in the street we were in, there were multiple sales points, which led to the district government labeling it a “red zone.”

I returned to the subject of addiction to ask him how he used to acquire the substances, such as the *chochos* or the cocaine, which might have been more expensive than the marijuana and the uppers. Ivan told me that he was given them, that the people who sent him on errands gave him the choice of how he was paid: in money or in drugs. He told me that he always got close to important people, to the people who imposed respect on the neighborhood. A woman who came out of the dwelling unit told Ivan that somebody above was asking for him; he got ready to go, but the woman said it was just a joke, she laughed and he told her: “You’ll see bitch!” Ivan repeated his intention to help me to share his story, intuiting that it could be well received in academic circles. He believed that he would surprise people, that they would ask how I managed to get into the neighborhood and how I met the right person.

We agreed a new date to do an interview, the following Tuesday at midday. He pointed out a food stall that could be seen two blocks ahead, and he told me that he usually ate there when he was resting, that it was very safe to meet there. Ivan believed that we would be able to talk at that place, at the bar or even to walk around the neighborhood looking at the communal places, such as the spaces for afternoon events and gymnasiums. He told me not to worry, that everything was under control in these streets: “the guys won’t give you any trouble.” Before we said goodbye he told me that with everything that was going on he had forgotten to ask my name. “My name is Jovani,” we shook hands and I slowly walked off. Beto, who we had lost sight of, came over slowly on an old turquoise bicycle and he said goodbye to me with a handshake.