

Note 4

Tepito, Mexico City, Tuesday, June 20, 2017.

I arrived on time for my appointment with Ivan at 12 o'clock midday. Once again it was a Tuesday and the neighborhood was practically deserted. That was not the only repeated feature. Once again I got to the graffitied corner and Ivan was not there. I wandered around the area thinking that it would be a lost afternoon, until I noticed Beto at the metal stall with a teenager I had not previously seen there. The kid must have been close to 17, of medium height (5 foot 5), and very skinny, with quite dark skin and very yellowish eyes. He was wearing gray jeans, a cotton T shirt, a black sweatshirt with a cap and roller skates. He was playing with a spinner.

I came up to the stall and greeted them in a friendly way. I asked for Ivan but Beto told me that he had not seen him at all and I replied that I would wait for him for a while with them. I tried to make casual conversation as I passed the time. I then realized that it was the first time that I found myself with someone at the corner other than Ivan as the key player in the meeting. I asked them about the stall, whether it was really abandoned or whether it was

used at some time for selling. They confirmed that it was abandoned “fucking ages ago,” that nobody sold there any more, although it still functioned normally, for example the whole structure still had electricity and this was one of the reasons why it was a favorite meeting point, because they could always charge their cell phones and as some of them were among the youngest members of the street, they could carry on chatting by WhatsApp or Facebook, or listening to music.

The teenager asked Beto if he worked Tuesdays and he said he did not:

—I just smoke; and that’s because I love money—he added. He also told me that he was very hung over and I asked him what he was drinking the night before. He looked at me strangely and told me he did not like to drink alcohol, he was feeling bad from a night of smoking crack. Judging by his yellowish eyes, his mouth by all appearances dry and his tired look, he must have felt as if had an alcohol hangover several times over.

Maybe to try to ingratiate himself with Beto and to feel part of the clandestine life of the corner, the adolescent began to tell us the reason why he was at the corner that morning:

—I’m waiting for a guy to come in a blue Jetta.

—Ah, the fucker —Beto replied.

—Yeah, he’s going to take me to work.

—To distribute “things” in the stores?

—Yes.

The euphemism was there again, because it was clear that the things the adolescent and his boss for the day were going to distribute were illegal. Something similar was going on with the “store” concept, although it should be remembered that during the “war on drugs”⁶ period the media popularized the notion of the “narcostore” applied to points of sale for small quantities of drugs, maybe also promoting the fact that many of these places were at the same time commercial establishments of other sorts, such as ordinary everyday stores or distribution places.

With great dexterity, Beto rolled a marijuana cigarette that was thick enough to pass for a small cigar and he played with it passing it between his fingers. He did not light it and it made me think he did not want to smoke in my presence. Another youth came towards us; he had been eating at the stall of Doña Tere, and Beto greeted him saying: “What’s up fatty?” The young man responded to the name of Fer. He was tall, maybe a little more than Beto,

⁶ This was the name given to the strategy of President Felipe Calderón to combat the drug trade between 2006 and 2012. Its main focus was the use of force and it manifest itself in direct confrontations with the army throughout Mexican territory, whether to capture drug traders or to guarantee the safety of the population in environments where confidence in other security agencies had completely evaporated. Although there are differences in emphasis and intensity, the policy has remained in place up to the present.

He must have been pushing 5 foot 9, with light brown skin and one of those physiques that made him look strong rather overweight (he might have weighed 200 pounds or more); his hair was very short but it was still possible to tell that it was curly. He was wearing gray pants, an orange T shirt and he had a white colored man's bag crossing his chest; he also had tattoos on both arms.

The first thing Fer did before greeting us with a hand and fist bump was to burp loudly, he took his cell phone out and told us that he was waiting for a call from one of his customers, he wanted to know if he was going to buy weed or not. It then occurred to me that neither Fer nor the teenager who spent time with us knew who I was, and maybe because of that they spoke with a lot more freedom about their illegal activities. Fer asked if he had already told us of the days exploits with the rock,⁷ and he explained that he “lucked out” because he sold seven grams (1/4 ounce) of crack and earned 800 pesos (\$42 US dollars), “just for going three blocks from here”:

—Eight-hun-dred-pes-os —said Fer pausing on each syllable with a big smile.

—Wow —replied Beto nodding.

⁷ Crack is also known as *piedra* (rock). It consists of a mixture of cocaine hydrochloride with sodium bicarbonate and it is smoked, unlike powdered cocaine which is inhaled.

—800 pesos! —The teenager said to me.

—Well yeah it's a change —I replied— and a little later.

—That's how this business is —replied Beto. And since all of us were waiting Fer began his tale.

—So this asshole in a car pulled up and said to me straight up: “I want rock, how much is it at?” And I told him: “At 350 a gram (equivalent to \$530 US per ounce).” He said this was expensive and I replied: “I'm going to give it to you at 300 (equivalent to \$450 US per ounce), but how many grams are you going to want, and he told me seven. As he had the car I said I told him to get me closer to home, he gave me the money and I got out of the car. At the entrance they said to me: “What? What? Where are you going?” and I showed them the money: “To buy, bitch,” and straight away they said: “Fuck, go on then.”

Fer added that with his generous profits he had gone to buy new clothes: Pants and a T shirt. The logic of the “errands” was becoming increasingly clear: neither Fer, Beto nor even Ivan were the “stores,” rather they served as links between these. It is worth taking a look at the mathematics in the particular transaction related by Fer: seven grams of crack at 300 pesos (\$15.70 US dollars) giving a total of 2,100 pesos (\$110 US dollars) of which Fer kept 800 (\$42 US dollars), or nearly 40% of the total for serving as the

link. In other words the store kept 1,300 pesos (\$71.40 US dollars) and the direct cost of the crack for them was a little more than 185 pesos (\$9.80 US dollars). Although safe as in Fer's anecdote, few people can enter the store directly and make the transaction, and to do so places them at risk, which is why they require the service of intermediaries, in other words someone to "run the errand."

An extremely thin woman scavenger came over pushing a shopping cart; she had obviously been collecting PET bottles. She greeted us and told Beto that Ivan had passed by early, had been asking for him and had waited for him, but as he was not there he had left. It was absolutely clear that Ivan had stood me up again, but I thought it was not deceitful as Tuesdays were his days for tidying up any loose issues. I told Beto that I would return in an hour, just to make sure that Ivan had not returned and in case he thought it was me who had not made the appointment. He said sure, if he turned up, he would tell him that I had come by looking for him. I said goodbye to the three and I moved on.

An hour later I was back and I found myself once again with the teenager, Beto and Fer, who was charging his cell phone on the metal stall, and was showing them videos on his Facebook account. Given their slow speech reactions, it was at least clear that Beto and the teenager had been

smoking a marijuana cigarette shortly before. Beto told me that there had been no sign of Ivan and that maybe it was unlikely he would appear on the corner before nightfall, when he came back to say hello and sometimes to smoke, as he had told Mariana the week before. Despite this I told them that if it was alright I would stay a while and they told me it was no problem. I sat on the sidewalk next to the stall.

The man in the blue Jetta who was going to give the teenager work had turned up at the corner. The kid asked Beto for the time, he looked at his watch and replied that it was 1.30 p.m. This gesture really caught my attention because the kid was wearing a fashionable silver Casio watch, but I realized that the watch showed 4:28 p.m., I guessed that it was not working well and that maybe the kid was only using it as an accessory. The teenager said he was going and he said goodbye to us with a bump of the hand and fist.

There was a whistle and a shout, although it could not be heard clearly. It was a woman from the next block, she was looking towards us and gesticulating. Beto was almost sure that she was looking for him. Fer told him:

—I didn't catch what they said, because I had my headphones on.

—And I didn't see, fuck knows —replied Beto.

Beto decided to go and find out, to walk over to the woman, it seemed he was right. Fer and I were left alone on the corner. I was standing next to the

metal stand, he was seated inside, charging the battery of his cell phone and watching videos.

A very thin man who looked like a laborer with work boots, jeans and a lifting brace came up to us and said to me:

—Bro, do you have anything to sell, even just a toke? I only have 10 pesos (50 cents US) on me, two five coins.

The situation took me by surprise and I just moved my head to say no. I looked at Fer and gave him a gesture as if to ask whether he had anything to say to the man's request. Fer also shook his head but he rejected him with a movement of his wrist while he shook his right index finger to say no. The man went away disappointed. I made the most of the opportunity to speak to Fer about his response:

—Weed right? There is some?

—Yea there is weed.

—But what? It was too little?

—Yeah the bag costs upwards of 50 pesos (\$2.60 US dollars).

—And how does it differ?

—Quality and quantity obviously.

—How about you, what do you recommend?

—I don't recommend anything, people always come to buy from me for 100 pesos (\$5.2 US dollars).

I took a 50 peso note from my trouser pocket and I offered it to him, I said that Ivan had stood me up and I wanted to make the most of my trip to supply myself. He smiled and took the note, but as we spoke he kept his eyes glued to his phone.

—I'll bring it to you right away —and then he spoke to me as he showed me the screen of his phone —look at this video, it's sick!

It looked as if we had finally broken the ice. The video which someone had shared to his Facebook profile showed a man doing an enormous and colorful graffiti in huge letters. Fer told me that in street slang it is called a “bomb” and he told me a little about how they were done, contrary to many other painting techniques, the first part of the graffiti that had to be done was the filling of a piece and then the outlines and other details. A small mark on the screen reminded him that he had 357 messages waiting in WhatsApp in more than 30 conversations; it seemed like he was a very popular kid.

He disconnected his phone and left the stall. He said to me: “I'll leave you my charger,” and he walked off slowly in the direction of the store till I lost sight of him. I decided to sit down again on the sidewalk by the stall, but paying attention to his phone charger. Although the street seemed to be empty,

there is never a lack of incidents. Fer took 15 minutes to come back and the first thing I said was about that. He explained as he pointed to the “store” I had seen the first time Ivan had stood me up:

—They sell weed there but it is really crap. I’ve brought you a good one, it costs 10 pesos a gram (equivalent to \$15 US dollars an ounce). You will see, I’ve sat down with two or three dudes who think they are real potheads. A small toke will get you high.

Fer gave me a small bag containing the marijuana and he asked me to smell it. I held it to my nose and smelled it but he told me: “No open it and smell it.” I did as he said. The marijuana was very aromatic, and had a slight citric smell. I told him the smell was good and he seemed to be pleased with his choice. I put the bag under the hem of my boxers remembering that I would have to go back past two police check points. Our casual conversation continued and I asked him if he lived there. He looked at me with surprise and I told him I lived in a unit a few blocks back; he asked me which and I gave him the directions. It seemed that I passed the test because he dropped his look of surprise, although he still did not answer me.

The door of the unit to the left of the metal stall opened and a mature man appeared. He must have been over 50 as he tinted his gray hair. He was

formally dressed, with pressed trousers, long-sleeved beige shirt and moccasins. In a friendly voice he said:

—Hey, Fer my mother says, could you help her to unstick one of her windows? —then he looked at me and said—I don't think we will take long, if you want to wait for him, he'll be back in a minute—. I said to him, don't worry, in any case I was about to go. I said goodbye to Fer and left.