

## **Note 5**

*Tepito, Mexico City, Friday, June 23, 2017.*

Since Ivan had stood me up again I began to wonder whether in fact he did not want to speak, that he was playing a double game with the trust that was so essential on the corner. His friendship with Baldy had obliged him to carry out the interview, but in reality he knew the risks that were entailed with speaking out about the matters they were dealing with. Given the obligatory nature of the meeting, he could hardly turn it down directly, but he could keep me waiting a long time hoping I would eventually give up. This is just a hypothesis to explain the events, but it does not seem outlandish to me.

Another possibility was that Ivan was disposed to grant the interview but that he was genuinely busy with his workload and personal life. Although we knew we needed time and some privacy to do the interview the situation simply did not play out in our favor. To this we could add at least another couple of factors: the first is drug consumption, which raises issues of addict behavior in relation to substances in general. Nobody seemed to be able to stay sober on the street corner, but neither did anyone see that just a few hours

of unconsciousness could have a major effect on their interactions; their state of consciousness does not prevent them from agreeing to plans in the near future. This was how I was led into the paradox that Ivan set out when he suggested that perhaps it was more convenient to look for him at night, because he seemed to be contradicted by the facts. By nighttime he was not in a good state to reply and the atmosphere of the corner became more sordid and risky, which outweighed my desire for information, at least in the form of statements.

The second factor is concerned in some sense with the subjectivity of Ivan himself, in a complex sense of the concept. It is as if these hard men of the street corner were deprived of history and the in-depth interview was a means of making it understandable. Participation requires emotional strength and often a certain amount of privacy is required in the interest of protecting the informant; none of this sounds like a problem that an old fox of the neighborhood could not resolve. It seemed to me that during the two short moments that Ivan opened up could be an example of that: first when Ivan told of the act that led him to live in the street and the cause of his hardest fall into addiction, which was his mother's death; and second when he described the type of vendetta which led him to prison in the interest of freeing a relative from the extortion of a "godmother" who worked for the DIPD.

I decided to spend a couple of days without pressuring Ivan, and I came back the following Friday. Ivan was on the corner formed by a type of delta where the Virgin Mary was located; he was eating *chilaquiles* for breakfast on the bonnet of a truck. He had a white T shirt with an enormous St. Jude Thaddeus. Beto was with him and was noticeably drugged, sending messages by WhatsApp and the teenager who smoked hashish on my first visit was there, once again with his surfer look, and he was seated on the folding metal chair with a lost gaze, as if looking at us from a distant beach elsewhere on the planet. On the opposite corner there were some police agents getting out of their truck to eat breakfast at a stall similar to Doña Tere's.

I greeted everyone in a friendly way and said to Ivan:

—Now you see! On Tuesday you left me *plancha*!<sup>8</sup> —my choice of words elucidated a loud laugh from Beto.

Ivan's tale was much the same as the previous week: he had to leave to deliver something and he did that at 11.30 a.m., he stopped to eat breakfast with Doña Tere, and I should have asked her if he had been around. I told her that it had not been necessary because thanks to a scavenger we had found out he had left the neighborhood.

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<sup>8</sup> I said I was left *plancha* (griddled) by Iván, a play on *plantado* meaning stood up.

I suggested a new agreement for the fieldwork, the result of my reflection. It seems that the only thing that produced a result was to get brief responses to precise questions and this could be achieved in a tightly defined time and space. In this way I could go to the corner and interrupt his activities temporarily on successive days, or if he preferred, on non-consecutive days. Ivan thought that this was a good idea. Once again he suggested to me the same night but almost straight away changed and asked me to come on Saturday morning since it was a day on which everything was very calm on the corner. He seemed to have intuited that I did not want to come at night, and frankly his intuition was right.

When we were on the graffitied corner I was always curious about the building opposite us. It is on three floors and is covered in graffiti, and at least on the side facing the street there are no windows, which could give the impression that it is abandoned, but on occasions I had seen people walk into it. I asked Ivan about the building's status and with a surprised gesture he replied that it had no owner, and in fact it was abandoned apart from a gymnasium occupying the top floor, which was visited by the people from the neighboring blocks, and that just on the side we could see there were rooms used by the gym owner and his son.

—But, is it accessed from the other side?

—No. You enter over there, that’s the bell —he said pointing to a big metal gate with graffiti of faces with a highly realistic finish—, but the door also opens with a strong kick, because they’re always fucking slow to open it. This is also useful if someone’s chasing you, you kick it and get in: it’s your *tuza*.<sup>9</sup>

Ivan explained to me that the wall next to the door had another use: “the wall of the gang’s fronton court,” with standard measurements from the castle next to the door; each end is guarded by graffiti: two silhouettes of boxers. Each of the figures looks at the other as if they are just about to start fighting.

This detail led me to speak about the graffiti which cover not just the corner by also the neighboring corners, because I like all of them and generally they seem well done to me. Ivan told me that he had commissioned them. I asked him who the artists were and he told me that they were his friends, they are not Mexican and that and that is why the left part of the door featured a bubble which served as a signature and this had six colors inside of which only three were from the national flag. It seems that a bi-national crew were responsible for all the graffiti on the building we were speaking about and in the block we were in, the same as the faces on the neighboring buildings.

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<sup>9</sup>A hideaway.

Our discussion about graffiti was interrupted by the appearance of an automobile. It was a silver Lupo which had its windows wound down and from which you could hear the fashionable Ricky Martin and Maluma hit at a volume to make the street shake. The driver was a man aged around 40, with white skin and black hair and mustache, although with a few gray hairs, and he wore Ray-Ban pilot glasses. He turned the volume down a bit to say hello, shouting:

—The *mona* has arrived,<sup>10</sup> in person! Everyone laughed and Ivan commented:

—You're a sucker! —Practically at the same time Beto went forward nimbly to the passenger's side window and put his hand in, taking a 50 peso note from the empty seat, and he went for the goods. The man shouted at Ivan:

—That's how I am and I'm not gonna pull myself together now! —And once again he provoked noisy laughter from those present. Beto threw a small packet onto the seat and the man turned up the volume of the music again and he was off.

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<sup>10</sup> *Mona* is a play on words, which can mean pretty girl, but is also the name given to the commonest form of consuming inhalants, using a small piece of linen cloth soaked in thinner. It is used frequently by carpenters, painters and in car paint workshops. It is used to remove paint with a vigorous movement of the wrist (*muñeca*, shortened to *mona*.)

Ivan got back to the conversation about our next meeting and the difficulties we had experienced carrying out the interview and he said to me:

—Between you and me, I have a very hectic life. Now you see me eating breakfast, but I am just waiting for it to settle and I'm off. Very soon I have to be carrying messages, money and things. —He said that nearly always they are errands inside the neighborhood limits, but on occasion he can go to other parts of the city. We agreed to see each other the following day, Saturday, at 11 a.m. I said a friendly goodbye to everyone and left.