

Mario and I were processed into the Juarez jail in no time at all. Apparently in Mexico they have never heard of anything resembling the Supreme Court's Miranda decision, concerning a prisoner's civil rights.

A guard grabbed me by the upper arm, turned me around and stood me against the white stucco wall.

"Stand there," he said. I stood.

"Open your mouth," the guard said, and when I did he looked into my mouth with a flashlight.

"Raise up your tongue!" I raised it.

"Now take off your shoes and socks."

A policeman stood by, caressing his nightstick affectionately, as these "rights" were read to us. Another guard collected our personal belongings into a small cloth sack. He looked into the bag, and with a face full of sympathy said to the one with the nightstick, "These bastards are broke." Then he flashed a hundred-watt smile at me and returned our cigarettes.

Nightstick pointed to Mario and said, "Take this one to cell number nine."

The smiling one with the sack marched Mario off down a hallway.

"You over there," said Nightstick, pointing up the hall in the

other direction. He marched me to cell number five.

I hoped Mario's hotheaded temper wouldn't get him into more trouble in his cell. It already had gotten us thrown into this hellhole.

We had sneaked across the border into Juarez from Fort Bliss, Tex., earlier in the scorching July evening. We had picked up our dates and walked them down the first street that ran parallel to the Rio Grande, perpendicular to the main street, La Avenida Juarez. Our walk ended at two park benches, situated about 10 feet from the street. The benches were about 20 feet apart and were partially secluded behind some tropical bushes.

"We'll take this one down here, David," Mario said. He guided his date to the bench that was closer to the border guard's shack.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," I advised him. Chelsea and I made for the bench nearer La Avenida Juarez. I don't know what Mario and his date were doing, but Chelsea and I began to fumble, fondle and kiss. I began working with the buttons on her blouse and she didn't seem to mind.

"Hey! Don't do that there!" one of the border guards yelled, in Spanish, from the nearby tower.

"Go to hell!" Mario shouted back, also in Spanish. Mario is Puerto Rican and, though not a hostile type, he does have a very quick temper.

"Come up here right now!" the guard shouted.

"I'm going to see what the bastard wants," Mario said, looking at me over his shoulder.

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My Night In a Mexican Jail

**The Rapist,
The Murderer,
The Dope Smuggler
And Me**

A True Story by David Whitfield

Illustration by Robert St. John

I noticed an alley about 25 yards up the street and a little voice inside my head said, "Run!" But I couldn't leave Mario alone with the Mexican police. At formation one morning, our company commander, a green lieutenant, had told us to do things together no matter what happened:

"If you go across that border, go with a buddy. Go over there together and come back together. I've heard some weird stories about the Mexican police. You stick together even if it means going to jail together."

The girls took off up the street in the direction of the alley, and my urge to follow them was almost overpowering. I heard the guard order Mario, "Call the other one up here."

"David," Mario shouted, "he wants to see you too."

I stood, indecisive. "Hurry up," Mario called again, "they want you up here."

"What if I don't come?" I yelled.

There was a mumble of voices from the tower and the ominous clicking sounds of a round being chambered in a bolt action rifle.

"He said it is better for you to come."

I didn't want an extra hole in my body, so I started in the direction of the guard shack. I tried to straighten my clothes on the way. I couldn't seem to get the buttons of my shirt lined up. My clothes were not completely in order when I got to the guard shack.

The guard had Mario's Army ID card in his left hand, and he motioned toward me with his right. With a staccato accent he said, "Give-me-your-i-den-ti-fi-ca-tion-pass."

I reached into my pocket, took out my wallet and fumbled around for my ID.

"You-are-tak-ing-too-long!" came the staccato.

I was stalling. I thought of the maxim we had learned in basic: "Never give your Armed Forces Identification Card to anyone." But the look on El Sargento Staccato's face, backed by the hunk of iron on his hip, swayed me to hand it over.

About that time an antique paddy wagon pulled up to the curb. The driver and his partner got out and walked to the back of the wagon. Both men were tall, well-fed and stocky.

The driver opened the back door of the wagon, looked at me with a big smile and said, "We are go-eeng to take a leetle trip to downtown Hwarez."

El Sargento Staccato handed our IDs to the second policeman and said, "Get-in-to-the-car." We got-in-to-the-car.

The back of the wagon reeked of a fetid odor that strongly suggested decomposed skunk. In Spanish, Mario asked me, "Phew! What's that smell?"

"Shut up," said the driver's partner.

We rattled down dark narrow roads and back alleys. The racket in the back of the wagon was such that we couldn't make out the communication on the two-way radio. Then it came on as we waited for a traffic signal. Two Americans had started a fight over a prostitute. Our captors laughed. They thought it was very funny. We finally arrived at "the best hotel in Juarez."

Cell number five was about five feet wide and a bit more

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than 10 feet long. The ceiling was maybe 10 feet high and was covered with some sort of heavy woven burlap; I could see sky and a few stars through the holes. As I stood trying to find a place to sit or stand on the hard concrete floor, a fat black rat skittered across the far end of the cell. He ran through puddles of vomit, urine and excrement, splashing himself and the prisoners.

"Cogelo!" shouted a trustee. "Catch him!" The rat was too quick and he disappeared down a hole leading to the Juarez sewers, but his flight across the jail floor livened up my gloomy cellmates. They cheered his escape lustily and with envy.

I had never seen a rat that big before. They didn't grow 'em that big on Chicago's South Side.

I had nine cellmates in that tiny airless hole. Two or three of the men were shirtless and shoeless. Some wore chocolate-colored T-shirts, which once had been white.

A sloppy fat man caught my eye and gave me a big smile. His stomach bulged like a pregnant cow's and he was sweating a profuse greenish sweat. He gave off the odor of an eight-day corpse, which the big metallic-green flies found irresistible, but he was very friendly.

"Muy buenas tardes," he said. "A very good afternoon." He tried to wipe the sweat away with a brownish T-shirt, which was worn out from too much wiping.

"Good afternoon," I said, still trying to find a place to sit. He made a space for me on the floor by the wall near him. I wished I had my service-issue gas mask.

Apparently none of my newfound friends had washed for months, but since there was no running water in the cell this was excusable. There was a tiny sink set into the wall but it was stopped up with vomit. At nature's various calls, my cellmates relieved themselves around the sink or in the corners on either side of it; one corner was used for voiding

"Why did you kill him?" It was the first time in my life anyone had told me he'd killed a man. "Or do you mind my asking?"

"Oh no, I do not mind. You see, he was making love to my wife. I walked in on them." He started laughing again. "I think they forgot to lock the door."

He took a long drag on the cigarette I'd given him and continued. "She was screaming so loud I thought someone was bothering her. They were both naked. I tried to kill him 10 times but. . . ."

He was interrupted by a blast from a steam whistle that sounded like a screech straight from hell. The whistle sounded an ear-shattering blast every 15 minutes, making it almost impossible to get any sleep. I put my hands over my ears but it didn't do any good.

I wondered what time it was. There was no moon and I could see only the pitch black sky through the holes in the ceiling. I had no watch and the whistle was the only indicator of the passage of time.

"Why do they blow the whistle?" I asked a dope smuggler.

"They do it to make sure no one sleeps," he said, full of emotion. "The one who blows that whistle is a—"


"Shut up!" yelled the cell bouncer. "In Mexico the jail is not a hotel. It is a jail and you don't forget it. You understand?"

"Yes, but—"

Again the bouncer interrupted. "You want to close your snout or do I have to close it for you?" He was in a rage now and used the word snout instead of mouth to imply a relationship between the whiner and a swine.

The dope smuggler lost interest in the argument. The bouncer was the keeper of the peace in the cell and when he talked everyone listened. He was big and fat. He wore a two-inch moustache under a nose that curved down toward his chin. He looked as if he could get very mean.

I hoped Mario didn't get himself into more trouble in his cell. His quick temper had landed us here in the first place,



"One of the border guards called the police on my friend and me for kissing our girls in public."

the bowels, the other for a barf pit. The odor of the paddy wagon paled in comparison.

From the graffiti on the concrete walls I learned that this was "the best hotel in Juarez." I learned too that one of the earlier inmates had had a political consciousness: "Viva Che Guevara." Other entries depicted unusual variations on the sex act.

I was uneasy and very uncomfortable, but not really scared. Then, from their conversation, I began to discover my cellmates were a diverse mixture of thieves, dope smugglers, rapists and murderers. I grew more uneasy. I wondered if I had been put in this cell by mistake.

One of the inmates was less than five feet tall and weighed at least 200 pounds. He asked me very politely in Spanish, "Would you please give me one of your cigarettes?"

I gave him the cigarette and lit my lighter. He guided the flame to the tip of the cigarette with a fat, nervous mahogany-brown hand. When the cigarette was going he asked, "What are you in here for?"

"One of the border guards called the police on my friend and me for kissing our girls in public." I was embarrassed.

He laughed so hard his fat stomach shook like a tractor going over cobblestones.

"Quiet down!" yelled the cell bouncer.

The short man's laugh trailed off into a fit of phlegmatic coughing. "I killed a man," he said at the end of the fit. "Shot the bastard three times." He hawked and spit a large glob of ropy phlegm in the direction of the sink.

and I hoped it didn't get his face rearranged for him.

We were due back on base in the morning, and I wondered who had jurisdiction — the Mexican courts or the U. S. Army. I had seen all I wanted of the Mexican penal system and, though I knew our company commander wouldn't exactly be happy with us, I much preferred whatever punishment he might hand out.

The night, punctuated by the hellish screeches from the steam whistle, seemed endless. Suddenly we heard a mumbling and scuffling in the corridor. In slurred English a man said, "Lea' me 'lone — gedger hans offa me."

The turnkey appeared, dragging an irate, bleary-eyed, drunk American civilian. He struggled against the policeman vainly, resisting arrest. They had worked him over a bit and he was bleeding from the head and face. He had vomited on himself, on his white short-sleeved shirt, light blue pants, and white buck shoes, worn without socks.

The turnkey got the cell door open and shoved the drunk inside, where the bouncer grabbed him and threw him through the air like a wet, wingless bird. He landed in a sprawling mass under the filthy sink. Three slimy rats scrambled for safety as the new arrival landed in the mess. He lay still where he landed and slept, though he served as urinal, barf bag and spittoon for the rest of the cell.

About the time we began to lose interest in the excitement of the new arrival there came a scream that sounded as if someone down the hall were being branded. I discovered the

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screams came from the "shower" cells.

Several bouncers had been given permission to use stiff brushes on the new arrivals, our bouncer explained. Each time a new prisoner was put into one of those cells, his clothes were ripped off and he or she got a waterless "shower." The shower cells were reported to be the bloodiest place in the Juarez jail.

I sat on the hard concrete floor smelling the stench and listening to the racket and looking at the still-unconscious American. I tried to amuse myself by reading the graffiti.

Suddenly, the murderer retched and blew lunch on the drunk. The drunk barely moved. His white shirt and blue pants were now multicolored — red from blood, yellow from urine, bile-brown from the vomit. I wondered why there was so much vomit.

When the gray light of dawn began to peep through the burlap ceiling, I found out. The jail cook came around. He wore the same brownish T-shirt and he had stringy, oily hair. "Desayuno!" he yelled. "Breakfast!" The cook carried a heavy kettle with three pounds of crud caked around the edges. The pot was half full of reddish beans, floating in grease.

The inmates who had on raggedy shoes took them off. Others used their hands as they gathered frantically around the bars at the front of the cell to have their containers filled with the greasy beans. Those who had to eat from their hands wasted over half their beans. By the time they could choke down those that made it to their mouths, the greasy cook was gone. He had other rounds to make. I wasn't hungry.

The dope smuggler asked me for a cigarette. As I drew them from my pocket the bouncer asked me for one too. I also gave one to the murderer, and the four of us lit up. The smoke helped cut the stench, but only a bit.

The bouncer began to talk to me for the first time. "If you

I never did hear the rest of this story because of a further interruption.

"Servicemen outside!" came the broken English of one of the guards. Through the cell bars I saw the legs of a U. S. Army officer. There was a black stripe running down the green legs of his fatigue pants.

The bouncer came near me and in a rapid whisper he said, "Remember what I told you about pleading guilty." Then the turnkey came and opened the cell door and looked at me with a big grin on his face. "Tu, afuera!" he said. "You, outside."

I was so nervous I wanted to run, but so scared I couldn't. On my way out the cell door I tripped and fell, and everyone in the cell began laughing. The bouncer yelled, "Quiet!"

I got up, dusting myself off, and came face-to-face with the military police officer. He was a clean-shaven captain, about six feet tall, and he wore black-rimmed glasses. He was quite stern-looking and he was angry.

"Good morning, sir," I greeted him.

"Get over there and face that judge, Private Whitfield."

The judge sat at a small desk at the front of the courtyard. He wore dark sunglasses and the prerequisite moustache. There was no sign of Mario.

I approached the desk and the judge studied some papers, written in Spanish, which he held in his hand. Finally he looked up at me; the moustache made him look vicious but the glasses were so dark I couldn't see his eyes.

"Culpable o no es culpable?" he asked.

"Culpable, Senior."

He directed me to the police desk where the MP waited.

"Do you have all your belongings, Private Whitfield?"

"Yes sir."

"See that Jeep over there? Get in it, Private Whitfield, and I don't want to hear one peep out of you."

"Yes sir."

Somehow I didn't feel very welcome when we passed the sign that said, "Welcome to Fort Bliss." I wondered whether I would be court-martialed for sneaking into Juarez without a

"I was so nervous I wanted to run, but so scared I couldn't. On my way out the cell door I tripped."



go to trial this morning, you must plead guilty."

"Why?" I asked. I thought he was crazy.

"If you say 'not guilty' you will be here for six months, maybe a year," he said emphatically. "You were only kissing your *chavala*. It is not a serious offense."

"What if I say 'not guilty'?"

"Then you will be sent back here for a second trial, and that takes too long, *amigo*. I hope you understand me, because if you don't you will regret it."

I thought about what he said. I listened to a conversation between the murderer and a rapist. The rapist, a janitor in a Juarez bank, looked at me and said, "I'm tired of this hole."

"How long have you been here?" I had to ask.

"Oh, about three months now. I have not had my trial yet," he said. "They'll send me to Chihuahua prison for sure."

The bouncer, wiping sweat from his face, stared at the janitor-rapist and said, "Juarez is full of whores."

"You can always go to a whorehouse," said the murderer, "but why buy it when you can take it?"

"Ah, she was a whore anyway," said the rapist. "The bastard guard —"

"Shut up!" interrupted the bouncer, standing up. "I do not want to hear any more of that. How many times are you going to repeat it?"

"We were only making conversation," said the one who had killed his wife's lover.

"I don't care! I don't want to hear it anymore," the bouncer said. He blew sweat beads from his upper lip.

pass and for getting locked up for "loving in public."

The best I could expect was some sort of nonjudicial punishment and an arrest record that would necessitate forever answering and explaining the question: "Have you ever been arrested? If YES, explain."

But whatever they did could not be worse than the night I'd just spent.

When we got to the company area my company commander stood waiting on the steps outside. "Welcome back, Private Whitfield," he said. "Get cleaned up, get dressed, and report down here to the first sergeant."

"Yes sir!" I said. □

Editor's note: The Army took no legal action against Whitfield. In fact, a short time later he went to Officer Candidate School and today is a major (O-4). However, there were other consequences.

"Each time I fill out an application," Whitfield says, "I hate the question: 'Have you ever been incarcerated or detained by a law enforcement agency? If 'YES,' explain.' That explanation is a permanent part of my record."

Whitfield recently visited Fort Bliss and talked to MPs there to learn if anything had changed since his night in a Juarez jail 13 years before. "They said the same thing still happens today, but it is worse now because of the marijuana and drug traffic. The Mexican jails are designed to punish.

"Incidentally," he adds, "God only knows what happened to Mario."