

A WEIRD CALM AT THE EDGE OF THE ABYSS

ON THE SOUTH SIDE OF THE RIO GRANDE SITS **JUÁREZ**, ONE OF THE MOST VIOLENT CITIES IN THE WORLD. A HUNDRED YARDS AWAY, ACROSS A CONCRETE EMBANKMENT, IS **EL PASO**, ONE OF THE SAFEST CITIES IN THE U.S. WHAT MAKES ONE SIDE SO DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHER?

BY **LUIS
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Every Sunday during the summer El Pasoans gather in Chamizal park, down by the river, where they dance late into the night at an event called Music Under the Stars. Tonight's entertainment is a reggae band called Border Roots. The crowd swells to 8,000 bodies in the waning heat. Moms drink Schlitz, and happily buzzed grandpas dance with five-year-old kids. Badass *vatos* with gang tattoos hug on their women; whites, Mexicans and blacks share blankets; and in the dance pit *mujeres muy calientes* do languid snake-hip dances before the stage.

Across the river, no more than half a mile away, the Mexicans have put up a giant Mexican flag—psychological warfare, really. You can see it from the park. It's so big it seems to flutter in slow motion in the darkness beyond the stage. Under that flag seven citizens of Juárez are murdered every day. This night, as we dance and drink in the park, narcos capture a young man and commence to mutilate him. They strip him naked, cut off his ear, then saw off his head. They wrap his corpse in sheets—being careful to mount the ear on his chest. His head, in a white plastic bag, is placed beside his corpse for maximum impact when people find him on the street in the morning. This all happens within earshot of the concert across the river. He might have died hearing the El Paso reggae fans chanting, "Love! Love! Love!"

As El Paso parties to its cerveza-loving border beat, the slaughter escalates in Juárez, where 25 people are murdered in the first three days of August, which will end up being the bloodiest month in Juárez's history. A day in early September will see 18 gunned down at a drug rehab center. Unaccompanied children at the outdoor concert swing cheap plastic lightsabers, and drunk dads piss in the bushes. In the entire crowd we don't hear one voice raised in anger.

"Juárez's worsening violence is El Paso's problem too. Some 2,500 Mexican soldiers and federal police were deployed to Juárez in March, but the violence has not abated. El Paso is a safe city, but residents are becoming anxious. The local hospital has been locked down twice while doctors treated Mexican police officers who had been wounded. They were worried that gangsters would burst in to finish the job, as has happened in Juárez. Even if the violence stays on the southern side of the river, it casts a shadow."—THE ECONOMIST

In the past 20 months in Juárez drug-related murders have reached 3,000. Thousands of black-clad Mexican soldiers prowl the streets in up-armed Humvees—the Mexican surge. As if this weren't enough, the virtually



BORDERLINE
(Clockwise from top left): It's a thin line that separates the perils of Juárez from the tranquility of El Paso; a Border Patrol agent does her paperwork; a seismic sensor at the border; a Mexican army soldier and a federal policeman check vehicles at the border; a group of Mexican soldiers gathers on the Santa Fe bridge across the Rio Grande.



ignored murders of women in Juárez (some estimate that more than 700 women have been tortured, mutilated and dumped in the desert) may or may not continue: So many people of both sexes have been wasted in the narco war that serial killers and organ-swiping satanists are becoming passé.

Nobody knows why El Paso is at peace. Everybody has a theory. And many El Pasoans fear that the mind-fucking terror just across the river will come for them. They can hear it rumbling like the thunder that kicks north during July monsoons. The week before the Border Roots gig, the Chamizal rocked to a girl band while in Juárez a 20-year-old El Paso woman named Solangie Medina was stoned to death and left facedown beside her Chevy TrailBlazer. Total murders in El Paso that same night: zero.

It's a weird peace, all right. The day I arrive in town I cross the river to poke around. My host, Bobby Byrd, is publisher of Cinco Puntos, the venerable El Paso press. Byrd first drives me along the border fence to the West Side. Outsiders tend to find the squalid barrios and industrial waste of Juárez to be hideous. Many El Pasoans, Byrd included, find the fence to be the eyesore. Pointing through the wire toward Mexico, he says, "The neighborhood on that hill is really neat. Good houses." It's the cracked and sun-beat jumble you can imagine.

The river, channeled by cement walls to a turgid green flow, nestles between the Mexican mountains and the hellacious ruins of the vast Asarco smelter. It's *Mad Max* scenery, with flows of black slag on the desolate cliffs of the American side and highways, fences, water and Border Patrol vehicles packing the middle. Beyond, the utterly barren canyons of outer-edge Juárez.

You cross the river here on a thin wooden bridge. Local historians cite this spot as a favorite haunt of the terrifying Mexican ghost La Llorona. The sound of screaming women in this valley may not simply be the cries of a wraith. Border Patrol guys warn you to be careful. It's wise to check with them before you traipse across the bridge, or you will be pursued.

The vagaries of the borderline dictate that the other side in this sector is still American. The border veers away where the wall stops—all border walls stop at some point. In this case the Mexican border is a staggered line of about 100 whitewashed boulders. That's it. Byrd drives over the bridge, and we hang a left on the dirt road and behold a bend in the river where it opens up under various overpasses. The water is jammed with scores of Mexicans. You can hear their voices bouncing off the hills—some are families, some are men standing waist-deep in the water, eyeing the Border Patrol (continued on page 100)

NARCOCORRIDOS

Shortly after playing a concert in Reynosa, Mexico, singer Valentín Elizalde was murdered by mercenaries working for the Gulf drug cartel. Elizalde had made enemies with his song "To My Enemies"—a seemingly jovial polka with a catchy tuba line—and on the night of November 25, 2006 these enemies took exception to his song.

Welcome to Mexico, where musicians find themselves caught in a deadly struggle over turf. The corrido, traditionally a song of the heroic poor man, has since been appropriated by *narcotraficantes* to praise their own exploits. Elizalde hailed from Sinaloa, home of drug lord Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán. Dying proved to be a good career move for Elizalde—his record sales have increased, and he was nominated posthumously for a Grammy—but the current trend is to eliminate the musician altogether. Despite efforts by the Mexican government to ban such music, drug traffickers now create their own *narcocorridos* (with accompanying videos). For a variety of reasons, Mexican musicians—like Tupac and Biggie before them—are caught in the cross fire. As they used to say in Leadville: Please don't shoot the piano player. —Leopold Froehlich

EDGE OF THE ABYSS

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trucks on the other bank. Agents call it the “Mexican water park.” A few feet behind this bucolic scene a beat-up white car idles, three men in it seeming to watch the bathers.

A USBP truck is between us and Border Monument No. 1. This historical site is where Francisco Madero made his first revolutionary stand, forming a new government and crossing into the U.S. The agents watch us get out and frolic like tourists. There used to be adobe huts where the monument now stands, but there is nothing now, not even lizards. Red dirt, alarming cliffs spiking into a flat 104-degree sky. We sit on the monument, and the agents wave and drive away. They round the bend and are immediately gone from sight. It doesn't seem scary at all.

Then the white car from the riverbank creeps up almost silently. Byrd sees them first, the three men eyeballing us, and says, “Walk back to the car. Just walk.” The men ease their vehicle into a stand of salt cedars and slowly rise, standing in their open car doors, scowling and starting forward. “I don't want to be paranoid,” says Byrd, “but we need to get out of here.”

What kind of city can dance a hundred yards from Armageddon? It's a city that loves Pancho Villa's trigger finger. The finger is mounted on a board in the window of Dave's Pawn Shop in the heart of downtown El Paso, and it's for sale for \$9,500. Back in the 1990s you could have had it for \$350. Consider the missed opportunity. Someone allegedly hacked it off after Villa was murdered in Chihuahua. It might have snuck in through one of the hundreds of smuggling tunnels said to honeycomb the city's substrata. The finger is black and twisted—it looks like an old Slim Jim with a fingernail stuck on the end. It's pointing north.

Just around the corner, dating from the days when El Paso was known as the gunfight capital of the world, sits the Elite Confectionery Company. It's a former cowboy ice-cream parlor where Villa ate vanilla sundaes and is rumored to lurk in spirit, possibly looking for his finger. Who am I kidding? Everything in El Paso is haunted—every high school, every municipal building, even the sullied Rio Grande. There's a local radio show in the Art Bell mold, where you'll find out about those tunnels, that Bigfoot (the Desert Ape!) hangs in the blasted hills, that pterodactyls freak out miners in the Mexican mountains visible from any part of the city and that most Toys R Us stores in town have naughty spirits. There is also lost Spanish gold in the hills above the city.

Not only did Villa and Madero strut around El Paso, but spies, other Mexican revolutionaries, Chinese illegal immigrants, psychopathic gunmen and indigenous saints also swarmed the

streets. Even outlaws like John Dillinger and Cormac McCarthy brought the dark mojo. That was in the old days. Compared with the fear just a hundred yards across the Rio Grande (known on its southern banks as Rio Bravo), El Paso is now border heaven.

“The potential consequences [of Mexico becoming a failed state] for the United States are very serious, much more serious than anything likely to happen in Afghanistan or Iraq. The violence has already started to spill over the border, and it is only a matter of time before an American police officer or Border Patrol agent or judge is beheaded. The even greater danger is massive refugee flows, inundating the Southwest with unprecedented numbers of Mexicans fleeing violence, few of whom would likely return, regardless of changed conditions at home.”—NATIONAL REVIEW

One dude at the Take II bar muttered, “Juárez? Damn.” That seems about right: In 2008 the city saw 1,650 murders out of roughly 1.5 million citizens. Last year El Paso—with a population of 750,000—had 18 murders. This year Juárez is breaking all records: 248 murders in the month of July alone; 326 in August. There are so many appalling deaths—the newspaper lists such box scores as beheadings, mutilations and double-tap back-of-the-head executions—that the city is becoming a ghost town. Every month more people find it wise to stay inside and keep the lights off.

In contrast, El Paso relaxes. Fueled by funk and ferocious civic loyalty, poor yet unbowed, it is relentlessly upbeat. El Paso knows it's funny, but it refuses to be mocked. In Dave's Pawn—among World War II Nazi memorabilia, a shrunken human head and a mummified *chupacabra* corpse—is a mural painted by local maestro Luis Villegas: *Venus on the Half-Taco*. El Paso knows itself and likes what it knows. It's the redheaded stepchild of the Republic of Texas. Situated in the farthest western corner of the state, it was originally intended to be part of New Mexico. It is in an interesting geographical as well as cultural position. For example, El Paso is about the same distance from Los Angeles as it is from Houston. It's the same distance from Mexico City as it is from New Orleans.

From Dave's Pawn you can hop on I-10 at Cotton, where the Flowers Baking Co. unleashes white-bread-scented effluent, and a giant three-dimensional loaf levitates magically over Border Patrol-haunted freight yards full of grunting locomotives. It's a short hop to Concordia Cemetery, also allegedly haunted by cavalry ghosts and giggling children dead from a smallpox epidemic. In Concordia you will find the grave of gunslinger John Wesley Hardin. Wes, as he's known in Texas, lies inside a recently built cage of black iron bars to keep grave robbers from hijacking his bones. Bobby Byrd stands in the massive heat and addresses

Hardin. “Well, John,” he says, grabbing the bars, “I guess you're in prison now.”

Byrd and his family seem central to the El Paso mystery. They are a white family that came to town in 1978, and they live in a Mexican barrio (what neighborhood in El Paso is not a Mexican barrio?) in a house where vinegaroons clank in the basement like noxious Jurassic tractors. Byrd's daughter is in local politics, and they are all fiercely loyal to the city they love.

The whole boneyard entourage adjourns to one of the most remarkable examples of North American signage you'll ever see. The sign acknowledges Concordia history—Butterfield stagecoaches passed through here, and the original Fort Bliss lay hereabouts. As an addendum, the bottom of the sign informs visitors that on AUGUST 6, 1993—LATEST NITELY MURDER HAPPENED HERE WITH THESE ROCKS. A helpful arrow points to the murder weapons, still there in the sun, with lizards scurrying around them. Maybe El Paso has only recently become blissed out. The rocks still look splotchy; that can't be blood on there, can it? Nobody touches them. One of the Byrds says, “I don't think they'd be good in your garden.”

“Rosario Reta was 13 when he was recruited by the Zetas, the infamous assassins of the Gulf cartel, law enforcement officials say. He was one of a group of American teenagers from the impoverished streets of Laredo who was lured into the drug wars across the Rio Grande in Mexico with promises of high pay, fancy cars and sexy women. After a short apprenticeship, the young men lived in an expensive house in Texas, available to kill whenever called on. The Gulf cartel was engaged in a turf war with the Sinaloa cartel over the Interstate 35 corridor, the north-south highway that connects Laredo to Dallas and beyond, and is, according to law enforcement officials, one of the most important arteries for drug smuggling in the Americas. The young men all paid a heavy price. Jesus Gonzalez III was beaten and knifed to death in a Mexican jail at 23. Mr. Reta, now 19, and his boyhood friend, Gabriel Cardona, 22, are serving what amounts to life sentences in prisons in the U.S.”—THE NEW YORK TIMES

If you want to understand the El Paso Peace, you have to understand El Paso itself. The city welcomes outsiders while keeping a close watch on their receptivity and demeanor. El Pasoans have immense pride in the fact that they can walk any street in the city at night in relative safety. (Though overall burglaries are up 12 percent this year, boosters will point out that these are crimes against property, not persons.) You do have to pass a few tests. City council members like Byrd's daughter, Susannah Mississippi Byrd, will tell you that you have to love Chico's Tacos or you will be escorted out of town. That's a start.

Deadheads and hippies boast there is lithium in the water. This bit of urban legendry has historical roots. In 1971

Time magazine revealed a study that found higher levels of natural lithium in El Pasoans' urine, which a scientist attributed to the city's deep water wells. No convulsions in El Paso, and a general chill prevails. But there is clearly more to the city than municipal bongwater. If there is lithium in Juárez's water, for example, it's not working.

When you leave the small and tidy El Paso airport, you will find the largest bronze equestrian statue in the world, a rampantly heroic colossus of the Spanish conquistador Don Juan de Oñate. He and his steed are the discoverers of El Paso del Norte (the pass of the north, where the river makes its way through brutal mountains). Entering the record as the discoverer of a place is easy if you write the record yourself and happen to kill many of the people who already live there. (The tribes of El Paso were the Mansos, the Tiguas, the Apaches and the Comanches; now there are more blacks than Native Americans, more whites than blacks and more Mexicans than anybody else.) The statue of Oñate was supposed to be downtown, not far from Pancho Villa's ice cream emporium. But some El Pasoans raised such a stink about Oñate's genocidal proclivities, it was deported to a traffic island by the airport.

Music is big in El Paso. The local Spanish-language radio stations may give the impression the border is doing a brisker trade in accordions and tubas than in cocaine. These stations will teach you that El Paso exists in a paradigm-busting evolutionary zone where multilingual aplomb is the rule. In one car commercial the entire history of assimilation is represented linguistically, from Spanish to Spanglish to English, in 15 seconds: "Tu carro! Tu troka! Your SUV!" It isn't just words; we witness the piquant melding of concepts: A popular singer on the radio promises to sneak his dick under your miniskirt like a surfacing submarine, then pleads that you not hate him for liking Coldplay. Then you hear five men were found in an SUV on the outskirts of Juárez. One had been decapitated, and the assassins mounted his head on the vehicle like a bloody hood ornament.

Radio towers blink atop the imposing Franklin Mountains, which divide the city. (They're home to the rumored gold mines and a ghost monk who perambulates around with a phantasmal donkey.) The Franklins are bony and severe, and the police academy is up there just off the city's lovers' lane, where locals listen to cops shooting rounds into the cliffs and prom dates gaze upon the sparkling diamonds of late-night Juárez and ponder the slaughter. The Franklins preside over three main sectors of the city: West Side, Central and East Side. The locals' sentimental favorite has to be the historic Central district. After all, that's where Villa's ghost hangs out. That's where you'll find Segundo Barrio—birthplace of the Mexican Revolution—and the famous Tap Bar, where they serve baked potatoes with their Mexican dinners.

"Central, that's El Paso," Bobby Byrd says. "The West Side, the East Side, those

are just America," meaning that shopping malls and middle-class housing can be found there. The West Side and the East Side are not *rascuache*. Not, you know, funky, *rascuache* being, in true El Paso style, a kind of insult aimed at the lower classes that has become a term of pride and authenticity. Woe to anyone or anything that seems pretentious or arriviste.

Start by learning some of the language. And I don't necessarily mean English. Talk border, *ese*. Mexican slang dictates that words with *s* sounds in them reduce to words with *ch* sounds. So El Paso becomes *Pacho*, which becomes *Pachuco*, which becomes *Chuco*, which is as *rascuache* and funky as you can get—imagine a city in a zoot suit. *Chuco* is what you need to say, and if you wear one of the popular I HEART EL CHUCO shirts, you're in. And the people aren't really called El Pasoans—they're *paseños*.

"On March 25, CNN's Anderson Cooper 360° rolled into El Paso to report on Mexican drug-cartel violence. Cooper was one more in a recent wave of national news heavy hitters to parachute in, scare the pants off millions of viewers, then jet off to the next headline destination. Dressed

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in military green, Cooper furrowed his brow and squinted solemnly into the camera as the lights of the international border checkpoint glimmered behind him. Guest Fred Burton, identified as a terrorism and security expert with Stratfor Global Intelligence, was beamed in from a studio in Austin to paint a menacing picture of Mexican cartels invading U.S. city streets. 'It's just a matter of time before it really spills over into the United States unless we shore up the border as best we can,' Burton warned."—THE TEXAS OBSERVER

The haunted singer-songwriter and occasional movie actor Tom Russell lives outside El Paso, beyond the imposing mountain known as Cristo Rey, a mystical spot where three states (Texas, New Mexico, Chihuahua) meet. Cristo Rey, which upthrusts wildly from Border Monument No. 1, was once called Muleskinner Mountain because wagon trains from Mexico navigated by its peak. Today it features a great white Christ statue at the top that futilely calls Juárez to peace. Like everything in this river-bisected region, Russell has seemingly contradictory sides. Most people don't know that along with being a balladeer he is also a trained criminologist. "El Paso," he says. "The weird calm is probably because if it erupted in El Paso, we'd send in the

Army, and the narcos don't want to disrupt the flow of 2,000 guns a day going across the border."

Russell, like many *paseños*, is sick of the apocalypse. "Most Americans," he says, "have no clue about this thing in El Paso. Anderson Cooper came down here with CNN and stared through the fence like he was in Baghdad and in danger. Nobody is capable of seeing any kind of picture."

Interestingly, a supervisory agent of the Border Patrol agrees. American peace is the only way the Mexican crime wave can prosper. If they bring the madness here, they will be destroyed. (Still, Gloria Huerta Marmolejo vanished from her sweet East Side home and was discovered murdered days later in Santa Teresa, New Mexico, not far from the BP's dirt roads. Eerie tones of Juárez poisoning the land. Nobody pays attention when Jose Israel Solis Aldama is decapitated in Juárez—what, another?—but they really sit up and stare when a man is assassinated next door to the police chief's house in El Paso—at least eight bullets. The peace is not broken yet, but the cracks are groaning.)

"I would say, 'Go to Ardovino's Desert Crossing,'" Russell suggests. "Answers will appear."

"Quietly but systematically, the Bush administration is advancing the plan to build a huge NAFTA Superhighway, four football fields wide, through the heart of the U.S. along Interstate 35, from the Mexican border at Laredo, Texas to the Canadian border north of Duluth, Minnesota. Once complete, the new road will allow containers from the Far East to enter the United States through the Mexican port of Lázaro Cárdenas, bypassing the Longshoreman's Union in the process. The Mexican trucks, without the involvement of the Teamsters Union, will drive on what will be the nation's most modern highway straight into the heart of America. The American public is largely asleep to this key piece of the coming North American Union that government planners in the new trilateral region of the United States, Canada and Mexico are about to drive into reality."—JEROME CORSI, HUMANEVENTS.COM

Ardovino's Desert Crossing sits on the Russell side of Cristo Rey. It is perhaps the perfect paradigm for the modern border. It is a fancy Italian restaurant with a nice bar, an excellent maître d' and staff, a tasteful outdoor garden and a stage for light jazz. The food is definitely not *rascuache*, nor is the service. (It offers a fine Chianti and excellent calamari, which would seem hard to come by in the desert.) The restaurant sits on a stony outcropping about one eighth of a mile from the Mexican border and maybe a quarter mile from the village of Anapra and the extremely violent Juárez suburb of Lomas de Poleo. Lomas is a paranoid's dream: It seems a terminal for the often rumored NAFTA Superhighway that midnight radio shows decay and the federal government denies is being built in the Lomas-Anapra region. And the landgrab by the terminal's developers is rumored to be behind the torture, murder and civic violence in those Mexican hills. (Thugs in pickups are said to have torn the small Catholic church apart.)

Ardivino's is also a family compound. The Ardivino clan lives like pioneers out in the daunting desert in handsome Southwestern homes and shiny vintage silver Airstream trailers. Border Patrol agents skulk around the *ristorante* looking for illegals who are largely no longer there. Crossings are down in double digits along the entire border. As a sidelight, the nearby Santa Teresa station used to maintain a force of 30 agents. Since Homeland Security took over, the station has been flooded with 300 new recruits.

"We had 75 to 80 crossers a night," one agent points out. "But the numbers were dropping long before the recession hit. Now we are lucky if we get 75 a week. Or a month." In an unguarded moment he confesses, "The biggest threat to the Border Patrol now is boredom." And narcotics. As the number of crossers falls, the percentage of hardcase criminals rises and cross-border violence follows. That same week, an agent in San Diego is murdered and his pistol stolen. "All that being said," our agent notes, "for the first time in our history, the border is nearly secure. It's working."

In the pitch-dark of Ardivino's, a hot black wind is gusting. An alarmingly loud westbound freight train grinds around the back of Cristo Rey, above the parking lot. A single Border Patrol truck lights up the cars with a spotlight as they pass. When the train is gone, the agent drives onto the tracks and shines his light up shadowy arroyos. All you can see are his taillights and his white spotlight beam. He looks as though he's piloting a UFO in the dark. Then he sees something, parks, gets out and goes up the mountain. The only thing visible now is the small bead of light that is his flashlight. Hundreds of miles of black dread surround him. You can almost hear his big brass balls clanking.

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"We have doubled the number of DHS agents collaborating on looking for and apprehending violent criminal aliens, and we have, as you know, ramped up southbound inspections to search for illegal weapons and cash, adding mobile X-ray machines, license plate readers, more Border Patrol agents and K-9 detection teams to that effort. For the first time we have begun inspecting all southbound rail shipments into Mexico. We've seized just in the past few months \$69 million in cash, 2.4 million pounds of drugs, more than 95,000 rounds of ammunition, more than 500 assault rifles and handguns—and that is an increase of over \$34 million in seizures, 400,000 kilos in drugs and more than 57,000 rounds of ammunition. In other words, it's not just that we're seizing, but we're seizing materially more than we did at this point last year."—DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY SECRETARY JANET NAPOLITANO

"People said the strangest things to me," says homegrown novelist Benjamin Alire Sáenz, who is also a professor at the University of Texas at El Paso. "They told me to lock my car because El Paso had the highest car theft rates in America. Then the local paper printed a study that said El Paso in fact had the *lowest* car theft rate in America." (El Paso actually had the 17th-highest

car theft rate in America in 2008.) It is a pattern of anti-immigrant propaganda, he suggests. With a family that has lived in the area for many decades, Sáenz says, "I am hardly an immigrant." In his elegant apartment decorated with paintings and sculptures, humming softly with jazz, he lights candles and says, "It is part of the discourse making the border a frightening place."

Jaime Esparza, the city's district attorney and a friend of Sáenz, says the peace in El Paso is due to cohesion. "We have cultural, familial and neighborhood cohesion," he says. "We share responsibility for our city and the culture of our city. In spite of what some media will tell you, Hispanic and immigrant neighborhoods show a decrease in violence and crime, not an increase."

Sáenz offers another thought. "How many gay bars are there in Santa Fe?" he asks. "Zero. How many gay bars are there in Albuquerque? Two. Do you know how many there are in El Paso? Ten!" Stanton Street, the gay part of town, is by several accounts about to explode in its civic impact. "Gay culture," Sáenz says, "is any city's creative class."

Time to go to Stanton Street. John Dillinger stayed at a hotel around the corner from the bars. The Briar Patch is mellow and inviting; the Tool Box, maybe not so much. Susie Byrd, you might recall, is on the city council and is the daughter of Bobby. Her best friend, Veronica Escobar, is a county commissioner. They blow into the Briar Patch for a birthday party. People play pool in the main room, and out in the patio area handsome young El Paso businessmen and students from Juárez sip beers with mixed couples. The young man whose birthday we toast says, "We're a tolerant city. That's the secret of El Paso. It's live and let live. The gay community is strong here—look, we're not going to have big gay pride parades, all right? You know why? This is El Paso! We don't have parades for anything."

"It's the lithium," notes Commissioner Escobar.

Susie Byrd announces, "Midnight. Time for Chico's!"

In Chico's Tacos it is evident that nothing flusters *paseños*. A dwarf in a jumpsuit goes from booth to booth, yelling, "High five!" to deadly tattooed *vatos* who slap hands. Nobody even looks. A single order is three tacos floating in sauce and buried in about six pounds of cheese. A double order is a clearly fatal dose of six. "The secret of Chico's," Susie Byrd says, "is I think that this might be government cheese!" Escobar adds, "It's that good welfare flavor." The black security guard stationed beside the jukebox has a name tag that says A BLACK.

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Meanwhile, in Juárez the Fear continues. A nine-year-old boy is shot on his porch. Six gunmen enter Bull's billiards hall and shoot five men and one woman to death. Two men are shot to death in front of a disco on Avenida Abraham Lincoln.

The Spanish-language paper reports museum attendance in Juárez is down by 90 percent and suggests this is due to more Mexicans going on summer

vacation. The Mexicans have figured out the U.S. will allow museum-hating shooting victims to come into the country in screaming Mexican ambulances. They have delivered 23 shooting victims to the University Medical Center this year. Fifty of these visitors cost the county-owned hospital \$1.4 million in 2008.

Juárez wants you to think there is hope. The mayor of the city dreams of creating a safe area for American tourists—a closed-off green zone with direct border access so armed guards and walls can keep visitors alive and nobody will have to see actual Mexicans in the street. You could drive right in, shop and get the hell out. When he takes El Chuco politicians to the area, armed guards with machine guns check every doorway and every corner.

Radio La Chusma rocks hard. It is a polyglot collective that plays rock reggae Afrobeat cumbia music. The members are fiercely *paseño*. Led by dreadlocked prophet Ernie Tinajero, they preach border love and Chuco-Rasta uplift. Ernie, however, is not above interrupting his ecstasies to dedicate songs to “that lady with the big booty right there.” He dances his guitar around, high stepping like a wizardly sex tarantula. After the gig, Ernie exudes the peace of a ganja Sufi. “We could only happen in El Paso,” he says, “in the cultural richness of our border. The border is collaborative, full of creation. When two huge forces like our two nations meet, great energies are unleashed. Something beautiful erupts.”

It must be said that in spite of all this, El Paso is no New Age mecca. There are plenty of billiard halls where men wear derringers on their belts and locals say “You don’t want to go in there.” There is a baddest of the badass gang in town called the Barrio Azteca. The Barrio Aztecas are so bad that when one is transferred from court to, say, jail, snipers line the roofs and FBI agents stand on corners. The South Side has heroin, and the Devil’s Triangle in the northeast has crack. There are any number of excellent places in El Paso to get your ass stomped into the hardpan. Still, the city abounds in scenes like this: 100-degree heat. Freeway underpass. Anglo homeless guy with the obligatory cardboard sign. A pickup full of burly Mexicans speeds up and slams on its brakes. The driver hands the panhandler a burrito and drives away.

“As many as 75,000 people will move to El Paso in the next three years because of growth at Fort Bliss, military officers estimated Thursday. Counting soldiers, their relatives, civilian employees, military contractors and retirees, 125,000 to 150,000 people will be added to the region through an expansion that started in 2005, said Colonel John Rossi, the post’s chief of staff. About half of them have arrived, and they are already figured in El Paso County’s estimated population of 742,000. Most of the newcomers will not be bilingual.”—EL PASO TIMES

On our last drive through the city, Susie Byrd knows every street, every

building of every neighborhood. She knows which hotels rent rooms by the hour, which nudie bars are servicing men with blow-job-augmented lap dances in the back rooms, which neighborhood has what school, park, diner or community program. Stats fly off the top of her head like bats in strong wind.

We drive late at night into the Devil’s Triangle, the hood that scares people because of its crack and hookers. The streets are bracketed by apartment buildings with enclosed courtyards, shadowy crime gardens. But it’s also here that the city maintains a midnight basketball league in the brightly lit Nolan Richardson Recreation Center. Kids from the barrio play b-ball till midnight. Moms of every color gather in the bleachers to shout for their boys. “C’mon, Blue! Hustle! Show ‘em what you got!” Outside, bad boys smoke. As you pass, they mumble, “Good night.”

Susie says the great worry in El Paso now is not the narcos or the alleged immigrant influx or even the drug culture. What the city is worrying about right now is Fort Bliss. The great military base on the Northeast Side has brought in much money, created housing developments and accelerated the multicultural aspects of the city. Asians and African Americans are found in greater numbers near the base. All this is good. Even the nightclubs and titty bars aren’t too bad. The traffic, the fights, the drunk driving, the motorcycle crashes are problems.

But what worries the *paseños* most are the 33,000 new troops scheduled to come in soon. Thirty-three thousand outsiders, strangers who don’t get the Chuco vibe at all, who will bring in big-city violence

and Iraq war anger and strange new military gangs and unwelcome *otherness*. That’s what scares El Paso.

Music Under the Stars. It has been brutally hot, and *paseños* hustle in the dark into Chamizal. Lots of cold beer is flowing. Nice desert breezes carry echoes of music into the darkness of Juárez. The funky Border Roots play tight reggae grooves over the blissed-out thousands at their feet. Little bats zoom in and out of the spotlights like nervous comets. Maybe it’s the reggae. Across the river the homeboys have bent to their work, sawing away with big butcher knives.

Cops sit at side streets with their lights throbbing—it’s a free light show in sync with the Roots jam. Bodies crowd in everywhere. A high school girl stretches back across the belly of her girlfriend; the girlfriend grabs her breasts. She slaps the hands away and their gay boyfriend laughs. Dancers. The Byrd family. Barrio Aztecas. Off-duty Border Patrol guys in giant shorts and flip-flops. Narcos taking a break from exterminating the population of Juárez. High school kids. Grandmothers in lawn chairs.

The towering singer of Border Roots looks out at the crowd.

Someone says, “That’s the tallest Mexican on earth.”

He gazes at us. He raises his arms. He might levitate.

He shouts, “Border love! All is peace!”

For a moment, those of us on this side of the river believe him.



“No, seriously...Indians!”