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The Mask of Red Death

by Rich Wright

Thursday night I went to Juarez .

I took some extra precautions. I took my credit cards out of my billfold, and ditched a pay stub. I wore faded blue jeans, to not look too well off, and a respectable snap front Western shirt, to not look expendable, and running shoes, in case my costume didn't work. The weather was ambiguous. I wore a lined flannel shirt for a jacket.

Only three soldiers were obvious at the foot of the pedestrian bridge. At least one other held the roof. He faced Juarez , an assault rifle slung on his back. I carried my shirt-jacket over my shoulder, draped over my backpack. The soldiers, five-six, and dark, didn't look at me.

I turned right at the toll booths, and slipped up a side street, past empty hulls of commerce, past the old Atomic Bar, where, in a previous life, the notorious Puente Negro gang scratched street names into the broken bathroom wall and the pool table was half covered in torn felt. The other half was naked slate. A couple of block down a grocery store, decorated in cardboard and lit by fluorescents, enjoyed the tepid business of evening regulars. Next door a barber sat in his own chair.

It was the day the journalist got killed, shot, in his car, in front of his home. Armando Rodriguez worked the police beat for the Diario. I'd sifted through his recent bylines in the on-line archives. It was typical Mexican police reporting, long on the what, but short on the who and why. The day before he had reported on the gangland style shooting of two police officers sent to Juarez to investigate gangs. A week earlier he'd covered the decapitated corpse hung from a bridge. The head to that torso was recovered in a plastic bag at the foot of the monument to journalists. Maybe that message was too subtle.

I went to my favorite liquor store and picked up a bottle of sotol -- in the front door, out the back -- and crossed two blocks of newly bulldozed vacant lots. The renovation hasn't started, but the demolition has metastasized. I cut the corner, under the canopy of the old Pemex station, and turned right onto Mariscal.

The hookers weren't out yet, but the clip joint hawkers were working the sidewalks. I mostly ignored them, shaking my finger without raising my arm.

I was relieved to see the metal shutters rolled up above the doors to the Arbolito. Business morbidity is epidemic. And the Arbolito is caught between the hammer of an economic downturn and the anvil of civic reform. You can't fight city hall. Someday I'll show up and the shutters will be down and the windows dark, if the deconstruction machinery hasn't already leveled the place. But so far we've dodged that bullet.

Sergio sat at the end of the bar, and Conejo poured. I took the stool next to Sergio, and ordered an Indio and a sotol.

Before I finished sipping my shot, Vikingo came in. He's older now, but he's kept his wrestling name. Viki, the guys call him.

Dejame invitar un shot para el campeón, I said.

There's a xerox picture of El Vikingo behind the bar. In it, he wears his world championship belt. He must have been a welter or middleweight, and he's not far off it now.

Sergio moved heavily from his barstool with the deliberate inevitability of an avalanche and poured Vikingo a shot

of tequila, the good stuff, and himself the chuchupaste. We toasted, and sipped our liquors.

Down the bar the conversation turned to extortion, the city's largest growth industry.

Who's doing it? I asked.

Quien sabe. Malandrinos.

Here's the word on the street: Who knows. Restaurants get torched. Some bars on the strip are paying, a thousand bucks a month. The used car lots have all closed down, in protest, or recognition. And who's doing it, who knows? Displaced drug industry workers or criminal entrepreneurs, taking advantage of the lawlessness.

People don't talk about the killings very much. That's probably a good idea.

I settled into my beer, and sotol. A guy came in and greeted Vikingo.

This is the guy I was telling you about, Vikingo said in Spanish. The violinist. Roberto Valdez, the brother of Aquiles.



Everyone knows, I said, that Aquiles is the best guitar player around here.

Ya viene, Roberto said. His blue eyes glistened in his animated face. He laid a soft case on a vacant table and took out his violin. He drew his bow, and the violin cried transcendental and laughed metamorphic. The violin talked with a woman's voice. I wanted to cry. Instead, I drank.

Then Aquiles came in. He took out his guitar, and set up his little foot stand, and played fills, runs and riffs, accompaniment to Roberto's violin. They played a couple of songs I recognized, and more songs I'd never heard, gypsy music, pizzicato. Roberto doubled up, and stuck two notes where only one was before, and then four. He strutted, working the room and my video camera.

Outside, police cars drove past with their lights flashing.

Roberto taught last at the Caracas Conservatory and now at the conservatory in Juarez , in the old ex-presidencia, the presidio behind the cathedral.

Tomorrow, perhaps, we'd read about murders in the paper. The blood of the innocent and less than innocent pooling indiscriminately in the gutters amongst macabre displays of animalistic savagery. Commercial terrorism and human sacrifice. Tomorrow we could face the devil, in the news and in the mirror. But tonight we had two world class concert hall musicians in a little dive bar cantina on a disreputable side street in downtown Juarez .