

## Seeing the Dentist in Mexico

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Despite the fact that we are employed and live in a so-called First World country, we don't have dental insurance, just like so many other people who live in this United States of Anxiety. The health care system, like so many systems here, is tilted in favor of the overly wealthy. So if you're like me and have already spent \$2000 on your teeth in the last six months and your fancy Westwood dentist wants you to pay another \$7000, you might, like me, decide to take a trip to Mexico.

And why not? It's only a two-hour drive along the coast. We're on a roadtrip and we're free to sing and shout and eat salty, cholesterol-full snacks. We can open the windows to feel the air ripping by as we streak through panoramic vistas as far as the eye can see. We're going to be medical tourists for the day and take advantage of the mighty dollar's heavyweight dominance of the puny Mexican peso.

Partially shielded from the eyeball-piercing sun by the car, I look to the left and am shocked by the cracked, arid landscape because on our right-hand side, the roaring waves of the Pacific Ocean beat the shore mercilessly with undrinkable water. Suddenly, I am reminded that there is an epic drought plaguing southern California but how would I know that when in my neighborhood on the wealthy west side of Los Angeles, the lush green lawns are watered daily. Often, the sprinklers leak all over the sidewalk too making my daily walk to work an obstacle course of jumping puddles, avoiding slipping and dodging water spray.

We pass places I've only seen on TV or heard about: San Diego, Irvine, the infamous Orange County renowned for housewives who live in mansions and drive million-dollar cars. But that whole reality TV franchise which fetishizes conspicuous consumption, diabolical wealth and vacuous people with a penchant for plastic surgery is only a small sliver of the OC according to an essay I am reading by

Rebecca Shoenkopf which says that the OC also holds the country's "largest suburban slum" - Santa Ana - and "one-third of OC's school kids are growing up in poverty." I take my eyes off the page to admire the brave-foolish surfers plunging into the frothy waves, fear be damned.

I am also thinking about this curious juxtaposition of wealth and poverty because I am reading Leon Trotsky's theory of uneven and combined development. When we arrive in San Ysidro on the American side of the border and park the car, I smile when I see a mural of Frida Kahlo, the exiled Trotsky's lover before he was assassinated in Mexico in 1940. Weird coincidences or maybe not so weird.

Borders always unnerve me but as we head towards la linea, I am at first overwhelmed by all the billboards advertising immigration lawyers in Spanish and English. The biggest billboard of all though says in English that if you advertise on it, eight million people a year will see your ad. We walk up a concrete ramp passing several seniors struggling with large bags but when we offer to help, they smile and shake their heads. It's close, they say in Spanish. I don't know what they mean because I can't see anything except for a glass door which we enter and then the ramp starts sloping downwards. I keep waiting and waiting to see la linea, I am expecting immigration officials and desks and passport control and checks and instead there are just a few men in official uniform lounging around.

Because apparently we are in Mexico! There are none of the typical border-crossing formalities like showing your passport, filling out forms to explain the "purpose of visit," explaining where we are headed, "destination." Nothing like that upon entering Mexico! There is a book title I love - *The Wind Doesn't Need a Passport* - but that's clearly unidirectional because getting out of Mexico is a whole different story and that contrast - the ease of entering Mexico, the difficulty of entering the US is the whole story writ small.

As someone who studies migration, I think to myself, wouldn't Mexico like to know that I am technically a medical tourist? One of Mexico's "comparative advantages" in a global neoliberal economy is that it has cheaper labor. On second thoughts, the Mexican government probably already knows that, so never mind, we have just crossed an imaginary line and walked into Mexico.

Just like that, we went from the sterile, hygienic First World to the slightly chaotic, ebullient Third World. Maybe because I grew up in a country kind of like Mexico, I do not find the "shocking level of poverty" of which I had been warned by the denizens of Los Angeles' Westside. Instead, I feel at home, recognizing all the signs of life in a Third World country – unsupervised children dashing around, beggars begging, women bearing bowls from which they sell one sweet at a time, people buying one cigarette at a time because they can't afford the whole pack, nobody has any change so they give you hard candy instead, informal public transport i.e. a minivan will depart once all the seats are filled, not according to a set time etc. etc.

When we arrive in downtown Tijuana, just a few minutes from la linea, I discover that seeing the dentist in Mexico is also much easier than seeing the dentist in the litigious paradise next door where every medical professional is so fearful of being sued that you have to fill out reams of paperwork on every medication you have taken since the age of three and your grandmother's diabetes and better sign a waiver too, just in case you unexpectedly suffer a stroke during this routine check-up.

The dental visit is so quick and painless that we go for lunch afterward in a restaurant that opens out on to the street. An elderly man appears on the sidewalk, playing his guitar and singing a haunting melody full of longing and pathos. When we give him a couple US dollars for his song, he explains that he lost everything when he paid the coyote to take him across the border and "they" caught him and sent him back. Yes, despite the relaxed tempo of the city, so much less rushed than the anxious Americans next door dashing to and fro, there is a "they" which polices

the imaginary line to make it real, to make sure it keeps dividing the rich from the poor, the wealthy from the wanting, greater San Diego from Tijuana. The anthropologist, James Ferguson, reflects in *Global Shadows* that one can't understand Mexican penury in isolation from American prosperity. There is a dialectical relationship but la linea which I will later hear described as a "scar" in a whimsical documentary called "Tijuaneados Anonimos" is precisely there to separate and divide with walls and wire, dogs and violence, prejudice and xenophobia.

That's why when we head back to the land of overwork and opportunity, there is a long, long queue of nervous people who are worried that "they" will find a problem with their documents. It is a long wait because the officials on the American side of the border peer carefully at your passport, question your motives, squint at your explanations. Another case of good fences making horrible neighbors.

But now we're through and coming back, the twilight sky is on fire, trying to set the sea alight too. Now the thirsty earth is on the right and the ocean on our left. I just sit, transfixed by the sun's vermilion streaks, pondering the day's most ironic moment.

The charming Mexican dentist, knowing full well that I crossed over from el otro lado with pockets full of dollars, didn't even charge me a single peso to examine my teeth. I felt bad after we left so we went back to try and pay again but he insisted that I was a referral...On this side of the "border of inequality" (as one book title refers to it), here in the United States of Anxiety, I can't imagine a doctor ever waiving the consultation fee. Ever!

What should I, hailing from the land of plenty, make of this generous act full of grace and graciousness in a land where too many have too little? Is it a small gesture towards crossing lines and breaking down borders which escapes the hierarchies imposed by the money economy by transacting in kindness not cash? I don't know but this thought makes me smile in the gathering darkness. As the sign in the dentist's office says, "Everyone smiles in the same language."

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