

A Huevo

Only a fool would choose the desert entrance to Real de Catorce, when they could take the 2-kilometer long wormhole through the bedrock instead. I'm talking about the one-lane tunnel that was unlit on a recent weekday, when even cell phones weren't working. Events triggered, according to superstitious locals, by up-coming tectonic clashes or political upheavals. Or both.

And so now you had to take the baton from the man at the entrance. And if, God willing, you came out the other out the other side, as most people did, you handed the baton to someone else. A rational system, and democratic like the *tope*, where even the President of the Republic has to observe the laws of physics. If not necessarily any others.

The Governor of an unspecified state arrived on that Wednesday. The poorly paid tunnel attendant greeted the first car, a bodyguard with a bull neck and expensive dark glasses, and explained that the tunnel was in use and, after that, it was the other side's turn to come through. The bodyguard checked with the Governor, a man of ample girth, who was hungry and had been looking forward to a long meal at the little Swiss-run hotel at the other end of the tunnel, renowned for its thick steaks and fine wines. And afterwards, to a nap in the usual charming, top-floor bedroom along with his adoring, young, light-skinned secretary.

"Aren't I the Governor," he asked. And gave the signal to proceed.

His security men were Mexican ex-Marines, but not all-knowing. Because, with about the same frequency, the odd narco warlord also liked to eat thick steaks in the little Swiss-run hotel—and to wash them down with 100-Euro Spanish Riojas, which he brought along in his black Ford Expedition—while his bodyguards, in their SUVs, carried equally generous supplies of lightly greased 7.62 x 39 mm rounds for their Chinese-made AK47s.

The difference was that the Governor, though married, was hungry and in love, and "Chuy," our narco warlord of the Soft Waist, was already full of steak and premium Rioja and drowsy with satisfaction—when the lead car of each party spotted approaching headlights and had to come to a stop. The guards got out. The Governor ordered that the citizens blocking his way should reverse direction and clear the tunnel. And so his Marines, holding all kinds of automatic and semi-automatic weapons, approached Chuy's group. While the latter's *sicarios* kept their AK-47s out of sight, so as not to alarm any citizens who might run out the other end and phone the Army which would then happily descend on the Chuy from both the East and West with their nopal-green HumVees and mounted Browning heavy machineguns that fired .50 rounds as long as your hand.

In the meantime, the poorly paid attendant on the Swiss hotel side, who had stood back as Chuy's group entered the tunnel, decided to seek invisibility among his goats higher on the inner canyon wall. And so he was not present when the Butane truck from the Sonigas rumbled up to the tunnel. Its driver—the father of four hungry children under the age of ten—was eager to get out of Real de Catorce and away from the *pinche* tourists and their fat wallets. With no one to warn him otherwise, he entered the tunnel, and used his powerful headlights to fill the darkness with Butane-generated brightness.

By that time, the gunmen from both caravans were brandishing their weapons, and the Governor and Chuy, from behind their over-sized SUVs, were screaming obscenities at each other, forgetting that they had cooperated with each other over the last three years and belonged to the same moño-waitressed country club. Their respective lieutenants begged for calm. A significant current of mountain air was sucking through from the Swiss hotel side, they said, and would serve as God's

own bellows, if their military-grade bullets hit any of the eight, nearly full gas tanks and ignited the white fire that would cook them to *termino medio* in the singe of an eyelash.

That was when word spread that a Butane truck had pulled up behind Chuy—upwind from all of them, with enough explosive power to blow them all out the Governor's end of the the tunnel, along with their SUVs and what remained of Chuy's 100-Euro Riojas and the Governor's unfulfilled condoms, Sico brand, Ultra Sensitive, "designed to let you feel the warmth of your partner," in a bursting grand finale to the sound of a soprano's wavering high C and an impressive short-lived roaring between the ears.

Chuy had just screamed something like "A huevo y, si no, a balazos!"

Which was something like "You'll back the fuck up, or I'll blow your heads off!" Only stronger. A getting-to-yes formula perfected during the Mexican Revolution—just as he began to understand what the Butane truck meant, and remembered that he had the Governor's number under Contacts on his new iPhone. Which he smashed against the tunnel floor, when it didn't work under the one thousand meters of *peña* above him. Instead, in the light of his headlights, and though his hands shook and affected both his syntax and spelling, he scribbled a note to the Governor—in which he apologized for being a *pendejo*. And ordered the bodyguard he trusted the least to deliver it, hoping some good might come of the attempted negotiation. But that man returned without bullet holes in him, and delivered the reply, in which the Governor also apologized and said they should have drinks at the Country Club and discuss what they could do to make sure that Andrés Manuel López Obrador, that corrupt Communist shit, didn't win the Presidential election in July and legalize drugs and grant a general amnesty to narcos everywhere.

Whereupon, both parties switched their assault weapons onto Safety and slowly backed out of the tunnel the way they had come in, bashing fenders as they went. A fifteen-minute operation, with headlight blinding everyone. Twenty minutes for Chuy's group, because the Butane truck driver was nervous—given the extra dimensions of his truck—and because one of Chuy's men, the one with half an ear missing, sat too close to him, holding a 9mm Beretta automatic up against his own perfectly in tact right ear.

Once outside, the Governor, his jowls sagging with resentment, repaired with his secretary to a modern, characterless Motel with a poolside bar on the main trucking route in Matehuala.

And Chuy, in a better mood than before, descended the lovely dirt road to the West, where it is said you can buy peyote buttons for meditative experiences and where small inns with nothing to offer still managed to get fruit to grow to maturity in clear glass wine bottles affixed to the pear trees that grow there in quiet courtyards. And where Chuy could linger a while, sip a lukewarm Coke by himself and breathe in the smoky scents of the Potosí desert and dream of the young, dark-skin beauty he would marry someday—and make as happy as he could.