

# In 'Midnight in Mexico' excerpt, News journalist recounts phone call that altered landscape

May 25, 2013

*Midnight in Mexico*, by *The Dallas Morning News*' Mexico Bureau Chief Alfredo Corchado, is the story of one journalist's quest to report the truth of his country as he races to save his own life. Here is an excerpt from the first chapter of Corchado's memoir, which will be published this week.

*When summer rains fall on Mexico, all is forgiven. The raindrops cleanse the metropolitan Mexico City sky, sweeping away the smog that traps twenty million people in its suffocating embrace, bringing everything into sharp focus over the southern edge of the city. Two hulking volcanoes stand guard: According to ancient legend, they are Popocatepetl, "Smoking Mountain," lying next to his lover, Iztaccíhuatl, "Woman in White." Washing away the smog, the rain reveals them on rare occasion, the same way it swept the desert sky of Durango decades ago.*

*The cleansing is una limpia, the ancient rite, healing a scarred, misunderstood land always on the cusp of greatness, a country writhing to free itself from the curse of history and geography, for better or for worse tucked in the indifferent shadow of my adopted homeland, the United States.*

*The moment of forgiveness is fleeting. The hole in heaven closes.*

I walked onto the balcony of my sixth-floor apartment in my neighborhood of La Condesa and fixated on the thin sheets of rain falling on a late summer afternoon. In the center of a roundabout on the street below, theater students rehearsed their lines. A young *valet* parking cars for tips, dressed in a gray hooded pullover and tan jeans, struggled to light his cigarette. In the center, the actors moved gracefully around a pale blue fountain that, usually dry, was now filling with rainwater. Somewhere in the distance the sound of the steam whistle of *el camotero*, the man selling roasted sugared sweet potatoes, pierced the wet air.

Inside my apartment the Eagles sang through the speakers, welcoming me to the Hotel California. My girlfriend of more than a decade, Angela, and a friend were chatting over Malbec and tequila before we were to head out for dinner with some journalist colleagues. A tall vase of

calla lilies sitting on a table between them reminded me of Diego Rivera's timeless frescoes of indigenous women gathering flowers into their arms.

My cell phone vibrated in my jeans pocket.

I hesitated. It was bound to be work. I didn't want to miss a tip. I set my tequila down and flipped the phone open.

It was July 2007. The last time I felt safe in Mexico.

I recognized the low-pitched voice on the other end: a longtime trusted source, a U.S. investigator with informants inside some of the most brutal drug cartels in Mexico. I grabbed a pen and notepad and slipped into my bedroom. I closed the door. The skyline was still visible through the windows. It was dusk.

I spoke his secret code name and joked, "Hey . . . ¿*Qué onda?* What's up?"

He got to the point: "Where are you?"

"In Mexico."

"Where exactly?"

"In my apartment. Why?"

"They plan to kill an American journalist within twenty-four hours," he said. "Three names came up. I think it's you. I'd get out."

"What? Who are they?"

"I can't tell you more because I don't know more. But this may be serious — Zetas business."

The Zetas, a Mexican paramilitary group on the payroll of a powerful drug cartel, had gained unprecedented control of key drug routes to the United States by terrorizing Mexico's bloodstained northeastern region. They tortured enemies, cut them into pieces, dropped bodies in barrels of acid, and captured the horrors on video to be sent to TV stations or posted on YouTube. The killings spread at rapid pace. They were terrorists without a political agenda. Now they were apparently after me.

"Who are the other two reporters?" I asked in disbelief.

"Could be anyone, but I'd put my money on you. Just hide out."

"What? ¿*Dónde?* ¿*Por qué?*" I was speaking in Spanglish, my natural language, furiously scribbling down his every word.

“Let’s talk tomorrow. Don’t know enough yet.”

“Wait, wait — tomorrow may be too late.”

“Bro — ” he scolded me. “Stop pissing them off. Lay off.”

He hung up. As usual, his calls were too brief; he was always afraid his phone could be tapped. My own cell phone almost dropped from my hand. The floor-to-ceiling windows that gave me a beautiful view of the Mexico City skyline now left me feeling exposed. I looked out at the new fifty-five-story Torre Mayor building beaming in the distance. Down below, six narrow streets converged at the roundabout Popocatépetl. Two stray dogs joined the actors near the fountain and splashed in the falling rain. I had a fleeting urge to jump into the nearest closet or hide in the bathtub. But my feet wouldn’t move.

Had I been betrayed?

As a journalist in Mexico, I’d been threatened on three previous occasions: A source once had to hide me in the back compartment of his SUV after receiving a menacing phone call; a mysterious man once walked up to me at a bar and threatened to chop my head off on behalf of the Zetas; and Angela and I once had reason to fear that either a top government official or the military, or both, were after us because of a story we’d reported on the first video that surfaced showing criminals spilling confessions and then being executed. Each instance had left me terrified.

But there was something about that finite deadline — twenty-four hours — that felt more real, more imminent. The clock had begun ticking already.

I scanned my recent work, a stack of notepads with “Ciudad Juárez,” “La Línea,” “Nuevo Laredo” and “Zetas” scrawled in my chicken-scratch, looking for the story that could have pissed them off — whoever *they* were. Some of my stories had glimpsed the spreading influence of the Zetas in cities across the southwest of the United States. There were stories about the massacre of young women in Juárez, of an informant gone rogue, of Americans missing in the border towns of Laredo and Nuevo Laredo.

It could be any one of them, really, or all of them.

One thing lingered in my mind. The tip for my latest story had come from the same U.S. investigator.

My report had outlined a peace pact between Mexican government officials and drug cartels. A few days earlier the investigator and I had been at a bar along the border. We had developed a rapport over the past three years. I’d fly to meet him somewhere in Mexico or the United States so he could give me information to break stories. He was handsome, with a sharp nose and a full head of hair combed back, and he always dressed casually in slacks and loafers. He had a penetrating look, framed by deep circles under his eyes. No matter the occasion, he wore his poker face.

We cut into juicy pepper steaks sprinkled with *chiles toreados* while an eager waiter poured more and more tequila. Suspecting the waiter was a cartel mole, or *halcón*, the investigator stopped talking every time the server approached, and he kept his back to the wall, eyeing everyone and everything. He finally loosened up, thanks to the tequila.

“The violence is about to stop,” he said, observing me intently.

I looked up from my plate.

“Yeah, right,” I said, and teased him, “No more tequila for you.”

He paused and his fingers began tapping on the table. The waiter turned away.

“Go ahead,” I said.

Since 2000, the dynamic of drug trafficking had changed. Mexico’s two strongest cartels — the Sinaloa organization and the Gulf organization — had gone to war. There were some personal feuds, but the fight was still about business. Sinaloa wanted a bigger piece of the profitable cocaine trade, whose route led from Colombia up through the Gulf coast states to the southern Texas border. To fight the encroaching Sinaloans, the Gulf cartel dispatched its newly formed paramilitary arm, the Zetas. Heavily equipped and well trained for urban warfare, the Zetas were established to protect territory, known as *plazas*, personnel and drug trafficking operations.

The government had long, historic ties to the cartels, especially Sinaloa, he said, and it knew the cartels well, particularly the Zetas. After all, the Zetas had belonged to the Army before they deserted. Plus, officials had records of them, knew their families, histories, addresses and even nicknames. Someone inside had to be covering for the Zetas in exchange for tens of thousands of dollars a month. How else could they move drugs and migrants and kidnap victims with such ease?

“This [expletive] has never worked without the government in on the take,” the investigator said defensively. “The two coexist, side by side. They have to. Trust me — the killings will stop any day now. You watch.”

“And start again, like that,” he added, snapping his fingers.

The investigator finished his dinner, wiped his mouth, stood up and threw his napkin on the table.

“Be careful out there,” he said. “And remember my advice.”

I nodded. Of course I remembered. U.S. citizenship wasn’t enough to protect me. Don’t get too comfortable. To the cartels, I looked as Mexican, and as disposable, as anyone.

*The above is excerpted from Midnight in Mexico (Penguin Press 2013), copyright Alfredo Corchado.*