

## *Aperitivo*

I'm so glad you could make it down to Tecate today. Let's take a shady bench here in the plaza and watch a live show as good as any musical you'll see on Broadway. Our plaza is the stage where the everyday drama of life in Tecate unfolds. Mariachis, wandering musicians, singing pushcart vendors, and the steam whistle at the brewery provide the music. Costume and choreography are improvised. I have a lot of new people I want you to meet and I'll tell you their stories—stories of love, and faith, and witchcraft. You'll laugh, you'll cry, you'll make new friends, but, fair warning, you might leave behind a piece of your heart. Of course, some of your old friends are back. Look! There's Peter Lorre. Well, okay, it's really Trinidad Contreras, our Peter Lorre look-alike. Treenie is a certified state-licensed matchmaker. In adherence to Truth, I should add that Treenie is a certified state-licensed anything you need him to be for a fee. That frightful little gnome walking toward the kiosk is La Cucha. It's said that she lives under the bridge near the Padre Kino School and snatches away little children. I hope it's a joke. La Cucha is Tecate's news satellite. She sees everything, hears everything, assumes everything, then disseminates it all over town. If she comes by our bench we'll be on the evening edition. There's the Sno-Cone man. The whole town knows his deep dark secret. But nobody's telling! Glance over at the man with a guitar in his lap getting his shoes shined. That's Antonio, Tecate's favorite balladeer. I'll make sure he sings a couple of songs for you while you're here. The dark man buffing his shoes is Cepillos. Now, Cepillos is

not your ordinary shoeshine man because nothing in Tecate is ordinary—he's a forensic scientist. In Tecate what you see is not necessarily what you see.

Pay no attention to that huge cloud of black smoke. It's not a terrorist. That's Father Ruben's pickup pulling into the church parking lot. The Padre is always running a little late. You'll meet him later and you'll like him immediately. That pretty girl in the backless turquoise dress? That's Señorita X. No, she's not a story, but you'll meet her later. Of course, we'll stop in for coffee with Los Cafeteros, Tecate's Chamber of Deputies that convenes every morning at La Fonda over a pot of coffee and drafts legislation for Vicente Fox, and El Boosh. By their second pot they turn profound and deal with heavy questions like, can we love too much?

I've often been accused by critics of being careless with the truth. But the charge is an injustice. Tecate lives in its own reality. Those of you who have read my previous chronicles of Tecate are not likely to arc an eyebrow in an expression of disbelief when El Shorty comes riding into town on a big black and white Holstein cow that backfires. I can solemnly swear on my margarita that I write only what I see and what I hear.

The people you're about to meet on the following pages are not digitally enhanced characters invented just to make them entertaining. Their reality may not be your reality, but they're all real Mexicanos, people I see and talk to every day, people you would meet yourself if you took a shady bench in the plaza, sipped a margarita at the Diana, or strolled into the marketplace and ordered a love potion or boy-repellent from the *curandera* or sought the services of one of our local witches, purveyors of spells and curses. That's Tecate. As to witches, when I first arrived in Tecate I questioned everything. Twenty-five years later I still question everything but I doubt nothing. There must be a reason why the *botanicas* always sell out of *ojo de venado*, a powerful amulet that immunizes against *brujeria*. Do I have one? Yes! Do I wear it around my neck? No. It hangs on the computer!

Like any responsible author, I believe in full disclosure. The author is not responsible for convulsions of laughter, pernicious yawning or soggy handkerchiefs. If you suffer from nervousness, dyspepsia or hives, consult your medical professional before you continue reading. If you are pregnant or presently nursing limit your dosage to one story in a twenty-four-hour period.

Let me begin with "Rain," the novela of seventeen-year-old Consuelo and thirty-nine-year-old Doña Socorro brought together by Fate, disguised as circumstance and coincidence. All Tecate is still talking about Consuelo and Doña Socorro. It's a story that proves what the ancients left written on papyrus over a thousand years ago: Love is without limits, the full power of Love has never been measured. And it's a good thing for us they did it on papyrus. If the wise men of the ancient world had saved their knowledge in the C-drive the whole file on Love would be lost to us today. Come, finish your mango Popsicle, and join me at my corner table at La Fonda for a margarita, mariachis, and a little bit of magic.

—Your Servidor.  
Tecate, B.C.N., Mexico

