

*The
Heart
That
Bleeds*

LATIN AMERICA NOW

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bases here, along with the two hundred million dollars in wages and the one hundred million dollars in local purchases that they represent? Teddy Roosevelt's ghost might have smiled. Once again, Panamanians were tangled in the ribbons of their relationship with the United States.

MEXICO CITY 1992



"This bleeding, burning, conquered, crunched, roasted, ground, blended, anguished heart."

MEXICANS KNOW that a party has been outstandingly successful if at the end of it there are at least a couple of clusters of longtime or first-time acquaintances leaning on each other against a wall, sobbing helplessly. The activities one normally associates with a party—flirting and conversation, and even the kind of dancing that leads to an amnesiac dawn in a strange bed—are considered here mere preludes to or distractions from the ultimate goal, which is weeping and the free, luxurious expression of pain. A true celebrant of the Mexican fiesta will typically progress along a path that leads from compulsive joking to stubborn argumentativeness to thick-tongued foolery, all in pursuit of a final, unchecked, absolving wash of tears, and a casual observer of this voluptuous ritual might conclude that the essential Mexican *fin de fiesta* cannot happen without alcohol. Not so. It cannot happen without *ranchera* music. People may cry admirably with little help from booze, but a drunk who begins to whimper without the benefit of song produces only mediocre tears. He cries out of self-pity. The man or woman who, with a few tequilas packed away, bursts into tears to the strains of a *ranchera* hymn—"Let My Bed Be Made of Stone," for example—weeps for the tragedy of the world, for a mother, for a father, for our doomed quests for happiness and love, for life. Sorrow on

such a magnificent scale is in itself redeeming, and—an added benefit—its glory leaves little room for embarrassment the morning after.

Now that Mexico is carpeted with Kentucky Fried Chicken, Denny's, and McDonald's outlets, and Coca-Cola is the national drink, now that even low-paid office workers are indentured to their credit cards and auto loans; now that the government of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari has approved a North American Free Trade Agreement, which promises to make Mexico commercially one with its neighbors to the north, there is little scope for magnificent sorrow in the average citizen's life. In the smog-darkened center of Mexico City, or in its monstrous, tacky-suburban spokes, the average citizen on an average day is more concerned with beating the traffic, making the mortgage payment, punching the clock. Progress has hit Mexico in the form of devastation, some of it ecological, much of it aesthetic. Life is rushed, the water may be poisoned, and the new industrial tortillas taste terrible. Favorite ornaments for the home include porcelain dogs and plastic roses, and for the two-thirds of the population which is confined to the cities recreation usually takes the form of a couple of hours with the latest imported sitcom or the local *telenovelas*. Hardly anyone knows anymore what it is to live on a ranch or to die of passion, and yet, when it comes to the defining moments of *mexicanidad*, *ranchera* music, with its odes to love, idyllic landscapes, and death for the sake of honor, continues to reign supreme.

It is a hybrid music. Sung most often to the accompaniment of a mariachi ensemble, *rancheras* generate tension by setting the classic formality of the trumpets and violins against the howling quality of the vocals. The lyrics of many of the best-known songs—"Cielito Lindo," say—include verses that were inherited in colonial days from Spain. Many of the rhetorical flourishes—"lips like rose petals," "eyes like stars"—are Spanish also. But when *rancheras* turn, as they do obsessively, to the topics of death and destruction, alcohol and defeat, and the singer holds up his dying heart for all to see, or calls for the stones in the field to

shout at him, he is bleeding from a wound that is uniquely Mexican.

The spiritual home of *ranchera* music is in the heart of Mexico City—in a raucous plaza surrounded by ratty night clubs and forbidding ancient churches. The plaza, which is not far from where I grew up, is named after Giuseppe Garibaldi, the nineteenth-century Italian revolutionary, but the central statue is of José Alfredo Jiménez (1926–1973), who wrote more songs about weeping, alcohol, and women than any other *ranchera* composer. José Alfredo's statue is wearing mariachi costume, because that is what he wore when he sang, and because the plaza is home to dozens, if not hundreds, of men who are themselves mariachis, and who stroll the plaza at all hours of the day and night, singing José Alfredo's songs and those of other *ranchera* composers to anyone who pays to listen.

On three of the plaza's irregular sides are vast cantinas and a food market, where vats of highly seasoned soup are sold throughout the night to ward off or cure hangovers. At the plaza's dissonant center is a constantly moving swarm of blurry-eyed revellers and costumed mariachis. The people in mufti stroll, wait at the moon, stagger into each other's arms, or gather around a group of musicians and sing along with them, striking defiant poses as they belt out the words. The mariachis tag after potential customers and negotiate prices, play checkers with bottle tops, shiver in the midnight cold, and, thirty or forty times an evening, play their hearts out for the revellers. Here and there, an electric-shock vender wanders through the crowd, offering a brightly painted box of programmable current to those who, for the equivalent of a couple of dollars, want to take hold of a pair of wires and test their endurance of electricity. A gaggle of tall, goofy-looking foreigners applauds and smiles at the mariachis who have just finished playing for them, and the mariachis smile, too, because tourists pay well. The people from Stand P-84, a wholesale outlet for guavas and mangoes in city's gigantic central produce market, think the tourists are pretty funny.

Chuy Soto and his guava-selling colleagues arrived here

around eight o'clock on this particular drizzly evening, and now, five hours later, they have reached the euphoric, sputtering stage at which the spirit invariably moves a Mexican to reach for extravagant metaphors and sing the glories of his country. There is a little pile of plastic glasses and empty bottles to mark the site where Chuy's group has been standing all this time, and the singer for the mariachi ensemble that has been accompanying them has just about lost his voice, but Chuy and his friends are full of vigor. "We come here to sing, and after a while emotions come out of us, and Mexicanness," Chuy says, blinking and pursing his lips as he struggles to focus. An adolescent tugs at my elbow, teary-eyed and anxious to share his own thoughts, but he can't get out a single coherent phrase, and he vanishes. One of Chuy's warehouse partners is trying to dance with a plump young woman whose acquaintance he has just made, but he's holding on too tight, and she pushes him away. The woman's friend is singing along with the mariachi (the name refers both to the group and to its individual members), for perhaps the fifth time, a song called "Dos Almas" ("Two Souls"), but by now she can't get anyone to listen to her and she weaves off in a huff. The amiable Chuy is still explaining Mexicanness to my companion, who is Peruvian. "A Mexican's heart is always open and full of music," he stammers, but a buddy of his, who spouts profanity and has in general a sharper-edged vision of things, butts in. "A Mexican knows that life is worthless," he declares.

The mariachi singer Ismael Gutiérrez and his group charge twenty-five thousand pesos, or about eight dollars, per song, but they offered Chuy and his friends the wholesale rate after serenading them with thirty *rancheras*. This meant that for a lucky evening of solid work each of the members of the Mariachi Real del Potosí, as the group Gutiérrez belongs to is called, got about thirty dollars. The group is small, and not first-rate. There's only one of each of the essential components of a mariachi: a violin; a guitar; a trumpet; a *guitarrón*, or fat bass guitar; a *vibuela*, or small plinking guitar; and the singer—Gutiérrez. Like many of his fellow-musicians who have land or a family trade in the provinces, Gutiérrez comes to Mexico City every fortnight or so from

his home state—San Luis Potosí, in his case—and puts up at one of the scarred buildings around the plaza, where, he says, the old-fashioned, high-ceilinged rooms are crowded with bunk beds stacked as many as five high. There, he makes sure he gets at least eight hours' sleep a day, to keep his voice going. That is also where he stores his costume, which is as essential to his occupation as any instrument.

In the old days, before the movies, mariachis used to dress like what they were: peasant musicians. But when the Mexican movie industry began producing musicals, back in the thirties, mariachis in Indian dress—big white shirts and trousers, and straw hats—came to seem too ordinary, and someone decided to outfit them in the elegant *vestido* dress of the *charro*, or horseman. Its basic elements are a broad-brimmed felt hat, a short, fitted black jacket, and tight black trousers with double seams running down the outside of the leg. For show, *charros* decorated the seams with brass or silver fittings and with fancy embroidery. Mexico's Hollywood kept the ornaments and the embroidery and added color. The majority of Garibaldi's mariachis wear silver-trimmed black, but now they do this to signify that they are free-lancers, which means that if a customer approaches a *guitarrón* player, say, requesting a song, the musician has to pull an ensemble together from the other black-clad free-lancers standing around. Ismael Gutiérrez is a significant step up in the hierarchy: he belongs to a formally constituted group, and all the members of his Mariachi Real wear sober Prussian blue. Gutiérrez—stout, cheerful, courtly, and equipped with a remarkable handlebar mustache—looks reassuring in his outfit, like a character out of an old-time movie.

Because Gutiérrez belongs to an established mariachi, he has been able to weather a disaster that has affected Garibaldi since the beginning of the year: construction of a new subway line began then, shutting off the main access road to the plaza and cutting down the number of potential customers so drastically that on any given Friday night the ratio of mariachis to revellers appears to be almost one to one. Gutiérrez and his mates have discovered the advantages of business cards, and by handing them

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out (printed with a more prosperous relative's phone number) around local office buildings and to friendly customers, they have been able to make up for the loss of walk-by trade. Not so the free-lancer Jesús Rosas. Although he plays what his colleagues describe as "a very pretty trumpet," all he can do now is dream of joining a group or landing a permanent job with the mariachis who play inside one of the huge cantinas, such as the famous Tenampa, that face on the plaza. Rosas is only twenty-five, but he has been playing Garibaldi since he left home, more than a decade ago. He used to be in demand, because he plays well, knows a lot of songs, and has a particular affability, at once alert and courteous, friendly and firmly reserved, that is much prized by Mexicans. Now times are bad, but he is stubborn. While dozens of lesser mariachis are coping with the subway crisis by heading for the Reforma, a few blocks away, to flag down cars and hustle for customers, Rosas, who finds such a procedure completely undignified, remains in Garibaldi. "The plaza is here," he says, but that means that by noon on most days he is already cruising it, his trumpet protectively cradled in a beat-up vinyl carrying case, trying to make up in long hours for the clients he has lost.

Mexico's subway is a tremendous achievement: it is now one of the longest urban railroads in the world; it allows millions of people to crisscross the sprawling city to get to work on time every day; it did not collapse, or even buckle, during the earthquake that shattered much of the city seven years ago; it is clean; it runs smoothly. Its expansion has forced dozens of shop owners along the path of its construction into bankruptcy and brought the Garibaldi mariachis to the brink of despair, but if everything goes according to the official plan, once the station opens in 1993 Garibaldi will be overrun by *ranchera* devotees, and mariachi income will soar. Gutiérrez doesn't think this will happen, because people who can afford mariachis travel by car. Nevertheless, this is the kind of promise that Mexico's rulers are constantly making to their subjects these days: severe sacrifices are being asked, and times are hard, but the country is being modernized, and when modernity arrives it will bring great rewards.

"MODERNITY" IS THE BUZZWORD, and, although hardly anyone knows how to define it, even the people in Garibaldi can recognize its presence in their lives. Modernity is what makes the mariachi Guadalupe González—a man who boasts that he beats his woman regularly, out of a traditional sense of duty ("She misses it if I don't," he explains)—welcome the subway that Jesús Rosas dislikes. "Hay que modernizarse," he admonishes Rosas, citing the contemporary imperative. Modernity is what makes Rosas look uncomfortable at the mention of wife-beating by his elders, and it is also what makes his young fellow-mariachis finish their *ranchera* practice and immediately tune in a rock station on the radio, to Rosas's distress. Modernity is the guiding impulse behind the latest gambit by the travel agencies, which consists of bringing tourists to Garibaldi by the busload to be serenaded by musicians permanently under agency contract, instead of letting the tourists wander about in time-honored fashion until they find a mariachi who strikes them as *simpático*. It used to be, Guadalupe González says, that first-rate mariachis like him could deliver the traditional *ranchera* serenade outside the window of a house where a party was going on, and then prove their versatility by playing boleros, polkas, and even cha-cha-chas for the partygoers to dance to. Now, thanks to modernity, mariachis deliver their serenade and are waved away, and the party continues to the sound of a rock band, a *cumbia* group, or, worst of all, one of those tooting electronic organs with programmable rhythms and sound effects. Modernity, as it is understood here, means speed and high productivity and the kind of cost analysis that leads to one electronic organ rather than half a dozen friendly but expensively thirsty mariachis. Now that a finished text of the proposed North American Free Trade Agreement has been initialled by the trade ministers of Canada, the United States, and Mexico, the arrival of full-scale modernity is assumed to be imminent. The terms of the treaty state that fifteen years after its final approval all tariffs and barriers to trade between the three countries will disappear. In effect, this means that the continent will become a single, gigantic market, and government officials are already trumpeting the

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estimated benefits: great tonic shots of foreign investment that will make the economy roar. Less powerful people worry that they, like the mariachis, will lose their jobs to electronic substitutes. But a more common undercurrent of worry and doubt, in the endless private jokes, offhand conversational references, editorial cartoons, and television chat-show allusions to the free-trade treaty, is more abstract, and strikes deeper. What people want to know about the coming onslaught of modernity is: How Mexican is it to be modern? Or, rather, since everything modern comes from a large, powerful country to the north, how Mexican is it to be like the United States?

There is nothing new about such fears of cultural takeover, of course: Mexico has been under invasion from the United States in one form or another since the war in 1847 that cost the country half its territory, and since then the arrival of each new fad or technological improvement has been used by pessimists to herald the death of Mexican tradition. Rosas's worry that the *ranchera* is a dying form is hardly original, but it is not paranoid. Rock-music stations are increasingly numerous. Mariachi serenades are far less frequent. This doesn't mean that Rosas's rock-humming contemporaries are less Mexican than he is; it simply means that their culture is more fragmented. The remarkable psychic sturdiness shared by the inhabitants of a city that often looks like the morning after the apocalypse may or may not owe something to cultural coherence, but, as every Latino teen-ager in Los Angeles knows, the combination of cultural fragmentation and social disadvantage can be poisonous. To the whiz kids from Harvard and the Sorbonne who are currently running the Mexican government, though, the diversification of Mexican culture is also rich with promise. Nationalism and tradition are *retardatorios*, cosmopolitanism is creative, and what used to be called cultural imperialism is now known as "the inevitable future."

THE OBSESSION WITH MODERNITY springs directly from President Salinas de Gortari. Now only forty-four, he was in his mid-thirties when, as Secretary of Planning and the Budget, he masterminded the plan that pulled Mexico out from under its

foreign-debt crisis and into full-tilt privatization and liberalization of the economy. He is a "son of the Party"—a second-generation hierarch in the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI, which has been in power for most of this century. The revolution the Party's name refers to occurred from 1910 to—depending on how one counts—about 1929, and in it Indian peasants, an angry and modernizing northern bourgeoisie, and an urban intelligentsia fought against the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz and then against each other. Over the decades, the survivors of this bloody game have evolved into what some consider the wildest guardians of the status quo since the time of the Pharaohs. The system the PRI perfected has been particularly successful in dealing with a problem that the former Soviet Union, for one, never solved: every six years, there is an orderly transition of power, in which the ruling President designates a meticulously trained successor to run in what has been a largely uncontested election. The virtues of the resulting *estabilidad monolítica* have long been a favorite topic of the system's bards, and, in truth, during all the decades that the rest of Latin America was convulsed with insurgency, stability was the keynote for the country ruled by the Institutional Revolutionary Party. A sly newspaper columnist has taken to printing the Party's name "PRIJ" whenever it appears, but actually that is unfair, because if any government in the past sixty years has shaken things up to a degree that could nearly be described as revolutionary it is the government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

Like *glasnost*, Salinas de Gortari's quasi revolution has had as much to do with making changes as with opening up the country to the possibility of even greater—almost inconceivable—change. He has opened up the electoral process to serious contenders from what were once token opposition parties, despite the fact that he barely won his own Presidential election—or perhaps even lost it, if the opposition is to be believed. He has, despite charges of fraud regarding this election and others, opened up the government itself, forcing an increasingly irate PRI to recognize the electoral victories of three opposition gubernatorial candidates. He has opened up the traditional, PRI-

controlled union structure to what some see as ruthless predation by transnational corporations and others see as full capitalist relations. And, even before the treaty, he opened up the country to greatly increased commercial exchange with the United States. The political *apertura* is based on the premise that the PRI can face a limited electoral challenge without putting its ultimate power at risk, and the economic *apertura* on the belief that Mexico can face barrier-free trade with an economy twenty-five times its own size and survive. A big, mustachioed truck driver I fell into conversation with one evening at the Tenampa, in Garibaldi, reminded me that this is not an unreasonable hope. "I'm from the north, from the state of Chihuahua!" he shouted over the din of competing mariachis. "And, unlike those of you from farther south, I know what it is to be intimate with the United States." He pointed to his cowboy boots, his ten-gallon hat, his jeans. "All my clothes are from the United States, but does that mean that I don't look Mexican? As for trading with the gringos, I can tell you that that's nothing new. Remember *jayuca*?" He meant contraband. "There's always been trade between Mexico and the United States. The only difference is that, before, it wasn't free." He rubbed thumb and forefinger together to indicate the bribes that were paid as a matter of course to bring in anything from nail polish to cars. "I'm for the free-trade treaty," he declared, and then, to make it clear that he did not suffer from any lack of patriotism, he called a mariachi over and sang "México Lindo" with them for me.

As everyone knows, though, the north is not *el México profundo*, and that is so precisely because of its dangerous proximity to the source of all cultural contamination. The white-skinned north is industrialized, optimistic, open to foreign influence, and vastly more prosperous than the Indian south. Though *norteros* sing *rancheras*, they also have music of their own, which is not at all tormented but, rather, cheery and literally upbeat, being based on the polka. The essayist Carlos Monsiváis calls *nortero* music "the soundtrack for modernity," and it may be that its booming nationwide acceptance is a sign that non-*nortero* Mexicans are becoming willing to see life as something other than one long train-

ing session in pain. Perhaps it is also true that neither *norteros* nor any other Mexicans have anything to fear from a treaty that allows foreign manufacturers to come pouring over the border, but whether economic *apertura* will lead to a final drowning of Mexican culture in United States sauce is not an entirely idle question—at least, not when one is sitting in a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet and eating some of the first fast-food tacos that Taco Bell is hoping to find a mass market for in Mexico City.

BOTH KENTUCKY FRIED CHICKEN and Taco Bell are subsidiaries of PepsiCo, and five months ago, when PepsiCo decided that Mexico was ready for a gringo taco, it chose one of its more successful Kentucky Fried Chicken fast-food outlets to test-market the idea. Fast food is a privilege of the middle class here: it's something hygienic and slightly exotic to eat on a weekend with the family before heading out to the country, say, or at lunchtime on those weekdays when the fare at the local *fonda*—vegetable soup, rice à la mexicana, veal birds, and flan, for example—seems too commonplace, or when a better restaurant is too slow and pricey for the occasion. The Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet now offering a sampling of the Taco Bell menu stands at a busy intersection of an upwardly mobile middle-class neighborhood and boasts Rufino Tamayo reproductions on its walls. About half of the well-dressed customers sitting at *típico*-style wooden tables were having the Colonel's batter-fried special, and the rest were having tacos and nachos, that dubious Tex-Mex contribution to the world of food. I asked a pretty, densely made-up young woman and her date what I should have, and they recommended the shredded-beef taco and, less warmly, the pork carnitas, which turned out to taste precisely like ground-up, very salty paper sautéed in chicken fat. The shredded-beef taco had better seasoning, and the tortillas were surprisingly good, but the nachos—over which I had been instructed to pump a chrome-yellow substance that had the consistency of toothpaste—were inedible.

When spokesmen for the company are asked to explain why residents of one of the great culinary capitals of the world might

be interested in Mexican fast food, they have replied that the one thing Mexico lacks is somewhere to get a clean, cheap, fast taco. This is patently untrue, and shows surprisingly flabby work on the part of the market researchers, for, while it is true that no Mexican taco stand looks like a NASA food-preparation station, many such stands are clean, all of them are cheap and fast, and even the chain-food taco stands (there are several, including one down the street from Kentucky Fried Chicken) feature a variety of selections far beyond the scope of the Taco Bell menu: chorizo tacos, squash-flower quesadillas, fresh-mushroom-and-poblano-chili soft tacos, and chicken hard tacos served with heavy cream, chopped onions, and lettuce are all standard. At the Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet, I asked a well-dressed couple who had come in from the suburbs why they had decided to have a Taco Bell lunch, and they replied, in effect, that it was because the place was cheap, clean, and fast. "But I'm a little disappointed," the woman added. "This doesn't taste like the real thing, does it? What I wanted was those big taco shells stuffed with salad and Kraft cheese and all kinds of stuff, like what you get in Texas. But I asked the manager, and he says they're going to start making them soon." In other words, Taco Bell tacos sell because they're American, and, to judge from the size and enthusiasm of the clientele, they sell very well indeed.

I WENT TO SEE the postmodern *ranchera* singer Astrid Hadad's show a few days after my Taco Bell lunch, and as she worked her way to a tiny stage through the crowded bar where she was performing she peddled tacos from a basket. "What kind would you like?" she asked her customers. "Now that we have the free-trade treaty, I can offer you hamburger tacos, hot-dog tacos, chili-con-carne tacos. . . ." For her presentations, Hadad likes to wear red lipstick with carnival glitter in it—on her eyelids—and a Jean Paul Gaultier-like cone-shaped bra, which she later rips off and replaces with a big, anatomically accurate foam-rubber heart. Her show, which has been attracting ever more loyal audiences over the last four years, relies heavily on the nostalgia value of *ranchera* music and on its inherent campiness, but it would not be

so energetically appealing if her powerful voice were not a perfect vehicle for *rancheras* or if her understanding of a *ranchera* prototype—the brassy, hard-drinking, love-wounded dame—were not intuitive. Hadad belted out, "As if I were a sock, you step on me all day," and her audience howled with laughter and the acid pleasure of recognition. When, in a frenzy of Mexican passion, she asked what would become of her heart—"this bleeding, burning, conquered, crunched, roasted, ground, blended, anguished heart"—a couple of people in the audience rose to give her a standing ovation. Hadad had come onstage with peasant-style braids and wearing a typical *china poblana* embroidered skirt. Now she loosened the braids, tore off the skirt to reveal a slinky black dress underneath, removed the heart from the dress's strapless bodice, added long gloves, checked her image in an empty mirror frame, and retold the well-known myth of Quetzalcoatl, the god-king of Tula, and his rival Tezcatlipoca, or Smoking Mirror. "Tezcatlipoca is jealous because Quetzalcoatl is blond, so he gives him some pulque. Quetzalcoatl gets drunk, screws his own sister, wakes up with a terrible hangover, and sees his image in Tezcatlipoca's mirror. He heads for the beach and sets sail, and as he leaves he promises to return. So he does, the blond, blue-eyed god, and that's how we discovered the joys of"—here Hadad licked her lips lasciviously—"cultural penetration."

Offstage, Hadad turned out to be a tiny woman with a sharp Lebanese profile (it is a curious fact of cultural life here that many of the most devoted *mexicanistas* are themselves—like Hadad and like Frida Kahlo—first- or second-generation Mexicans) and an intellectual manner. Not surprisingly, she declared that what first attracted her to *rancheras* was that they are so essentially Mexican. "I think it has to do with the attitude toward suffering that we inherited from the Aztecs," she said. "It's not that we have an extraordinary capacity for suffering—everyone does. It's the way we *relish* it. I think only Russians compare with us in that. And then there's the element of machismo. Again, it's not that men here beat their wives more, because I'm sure that Germans do it just as much; it's that here they boast about it. Obviously, I'm very critical of that, but what keeps me coming back to the music

is the passion. Now that we're all becoming so rational and sensible, it's getting harder and harder to find passion in our lives, I think that's what we all seek in the *ranchera*."

I asked Hadad why she cracked so many jokes about the Free Trade Agreement in her show, and why she thought her audience was so responsive to them, and she said it was because of the enormous apprehension that people are feeling about it. She pointed out that even the great Mexican movie goddess María Félix had taken the unusual step of speaking out publicly against the treaty, warning that it might cause Mexican values—not to mention factories—to collapse. Like nearly everyone else who is fearful of the treaty, Hadad confessed that she had no idea what was in it. "But it seems obvious to me that the little guys—we are not going to be the ones calling the shots," she said. "The government gets all excited describing the wonderful things that will result from the treaty, but I say 'What wonders?' As far as I can make out, all it means is that in the future we're going to be more like South Korea and less like us."

THIS IS, IN FACT, precisely what one of Salinas de Gortari's bright young intellectuals described to me some time ago as his best hope: that if Mexico's debt situation remains stable, if its workers can be persuaded to let wage increases remain just below the rate of inflation, if monetary policy and inflation itself continue under tight government control, enough foreign investment will land here "to turn this country into South Korea, or maybe Taiwan."

It won't be easy to make that happen. Over the last decade, Mexico's financial planners have brought the economy back from the brink, but that doesn't mean that the country is in marvellous shape. Ten years ago, the world learned that Mexico was on the verge of collapse when the Secretary of Finance announced that his country would not be able to meet the commercial banks' schedule of payments. Today, the public-sector debt is down from its 1987 high, eighty-one billion dollars, to seventy-four billion, and combined private- and public-sector debt represents only twenty-nine per cent of the gross domestic product. (It rep-

resented seventy-eight per cent of the G.D.P. as recently as 1986.) On the home front, though, things are shakier. Workers would have to receive at least a thirty-per-cent wage increase to recover even the ascetic standard of living they enjoyed when the crisis began, but such increases are out of the question, partly because the government wants to keep wages attractive for foreign investors, and partly because so many businesses and industries, large and small, are either heading straight for bankruptcy or barely making ends meet. Whatever the real causes of the business collapse may be, several trade associations are laying the blame for their woes on the huge wave of United States imports that a liberalized tariff policy has made possible, and they are fearful that the treaty will bring in foreign competition at unbearable levels. In any event, a punishing wage policy, severe budget cutbacks, and tight money appear to be the only measures capable of preventing the kind of three-digit inflation that plagues so much of Latin America. The government always promises lower levels, but so far it has been unable to keep inflation below fifteen per cent.

For Salinas de Gortari and his economic advisers, there is just one way out of this economic gridlock, and that is the Free Trade Agreement. I talked about the treaty with the novelist, historian, and magazine editor Héctor Aguilar Camín, who is perhaps the most outstanding of the pro-Salinas intellectuals. The last Mexican President to have a respectable set of house intellectuals was Lázaro Cárdenas, who nationalized the petroleum industry in 1938 and practiced a fervent leftist nationalism, which subsequent Presidents paid skillful lip service to. Salinas de Gortari's thinkers are remarkable not only for high I.Q.s and fancy educations but also for a self-proclaimed freedom from the bonds of nationalist thought. Aguilar Camín, for example, is completely unconcerned about the fact that the treaty will open the doors to investment capital from abroad. The point is, he told me, that Mexicans' standard of living will not improve unless at least twenty million new sources of income are created, and that will not happen with the country's available investment capital. The treaty, which is seen across the border as a potential threat to

United States jobs, is seen by people like Aguilar Camín as a crucial guarantee of economic, and thus political, stability in a country that could well export twice as many illegal aliens (and illegal drugs) if things don't improve.

"If the treaty isn't signed, economic expectations will fall, and so will investment," Aguilar Camín said. "This could lead to a very high budget deficit and a consequent devaluation of the peso. There's not much more that can be trimmed from the budget without causing enormous social pain. But if there were a devaluation, even if it were only a moderate one of, say, twenty per cent, the political impact would be devastating; once again, we'd be seeing capital flight abroad, and a completely destabilized business climate." Indeed, the treaty's eventual ratification is so important for the business climate that the Mexican Bolsa, or stock exchange, which only last year was one of the fastest-growing stock exchanges in the world, has been losing points steadily since June, largely as a result of jitteriness over the possible election of Bill Clinton to the White House and a possible rejection of the treaty by his administration. After Clinton spoke out in favor of the treaty, the Bolsa soared.

The highly technical trade and tariff treaty that Aguilar Camín was describing was an entirely different kind of beast from the culturally ominous one that frightens Astrid Hadad and María Félix, and I found him to be sharply impatient with any discussion of cultural imperialism. "The more Americanized we become, the more the idea scares us," he said. "But the fact is that United States culture is already part of our landscape and our way of being. The élite is bilingual, ten per cent of our population lives in the United States, and the tribulations of Woody Allen and Mia Farrow are like a family affair to us. Our greatest writers were weaned on United States authors. Perhaps the United States is the enemy, but it is also our big opportunity, and, while I think that with the free-trade treaty we will have more fights than ever with the United States, these will be about things like tomato and broom quotas, and not about the twisted rhetoric that for years had us saying fantasizing, idiotic things on the order of 'They have the know-how, but we have civilization.'

A fundamental rhetorical change has taken place: in the nineteen-seventies, Mexico was supposed to be 'proudly Third World,' but today, we want to belong to the First World."

AGUILAR CAMÍN, bright and urbane and at ease with power as he is, doesn't seem to be the type who gravitates toward controversy. Yet his role as a supervisor and co-author of a newly revised official history textbook for Mexico's grade schools has people in the greatest uproar about the Salinas de Gortari government and its modernizing intentions that his Presidency has seen. The scandal began percolating in the back pages of the local press about a week before I met with Aguilar Camín, and rapidly moved to the front pages.

The new textbook project was announced at the beginning of the year as part of an educational reform package that was given the full, glorifying treatment accorded to major Presidential initiatives: there were decrees, signing ceremonies, adulatory press stories, and a succession of what are known as adhesion speeches (in which the speaker, by means of flattery, attaches himself firmly to the initiative and its foreseeable rewards). Aguilar Camín and a flotilla of top-of-the-line intellectuals got to work. Then, in August, teachers, parents, and education reporters opened the brightly colored new textbooks and discovered a history that was both subtly and radically different from the one they themselves had learned in school. The priest Miguel Hidalgo, whose fiery call to arms in 1810 for independence from Spain became the touchstone of all nationalist sentiment, is described cursorily. The account of the traumatic war with the United States is rendered in reassuring understatement. Emiliano Zapata, the southern leader of Mexico's agrarian revolutionary tide, who was finally betrayed and assassinated in 1919 by the *horrífico* revolutionaries, is portrayed not as a pure and heroic peasant but as merely one leader among several warring factions. Earlier generations learned that the dictator Porfirio Díaz, who first came to power in 1877, was guilty of genocide against the untamable Yaqui Indian nation, and that he ruled tyrannically and unswervingly in favor of a small white-skinned percentage of the

population who lived off the sweat of an impoverished Indian majority. In the new textbooks the reviled dictator—whose stubborn hold on power led directly to the revolution that the PRI honors in its name—turns out not to have been such a bad guy after all. "Porfirio Díaz's long rule created a climate of peace and encouraged the country's economic development," the section on him concludes. "His government diminished individual liberties, concentrated power in a few hands, and put a brake on the development of democracy."

Aguilar Camín is not the only modernizing academic to see the PRI's favorite villain as a progressive dictator who created the infrastructure that made a twentieth-century Mexico possible. But he is the only one who is on such friendly personal terms with a President whose own rule invites so many comparisons to Díaz: "Don Porfirio" started out in politics as a supporter of the ultraliberal Benito Juárez, then ruled in favor of a tiny, conservative élite. Salinas de Gortari, for his part, has turned his back on the party that brought him to power. He is currently "refounding" it with policies that are often anathema to the Old Guard and very pleasing to the PRI's most threatening opposition, the conservative Partido Acción Nacional, which also welcomes the refurbishing of Díaz's image. Banks have been reprivatized, a decade after President José López Portillo, in a fit of pique, appropriated them for the state. The Revolution's keystone, the Agrarian Reform Law, which assigned inalienable communal lands to millions of peasants (and kept most of them desperately poor), has been modified to permit private sales. Legislative restrictions have been loosened to allow foreign investment greater leeway than at any other time since the dictatorship. Even though they are patently sensible, these moves have the left and the traditional PRI in an uproar, because of the larger ideological issues that are perceived to underlie them. But the textbook rehabilitation of Porfirio Díaz rubs the wrong way even for people who don't care much about politics. This is not primarily because Díaz was a dictator—there is nothing particularly democratic about the PRI people live with and often support. Nor is it just because Díaz presided over a society even more contemptuous of its great un-

washed than the present one. It is, rather, because, even though Porfirio Díaz started out in life as an impoverished, Mixtec-speaking *mestizo*, he has always been perceived as profoundly unmexican in his impact on society. He modernized the country, but did it by bringing in foreign capital. He turned Mexico City into one of the loveliest in the world, but Frenchified it. He presided, as the textbook says, over thirty years of stability, but did so wearing a tricorn hat and a ridiculous tin-pot-general's uniform. It may seem foolish—or suggest a pathetic insecurity—for a whole nation to go around worrying that reading good things about such a man or eating lunch at Taco Bell will somehow diminish its Mexican essence. The point is, though, that nationalism is still the great common meeting ground of a society that might otherwise be as tragically riven as any in Latin America. It is not in the voting booth but in the Zócalo on Independence Night, surrounded by mariachis and showered in confetti, that the vast mass of the *pueblo* feels like citizenry. It is in the kitchen, where lowly cooks prepare glorious food for the children of the middle class, that Mexicans forge a common heritage. It is in Garibaldi, bellowing out *ranchera* songs, that rich papa's boys out on a spree and truck drivers in from the road can be equal.

I FLEW FROM MEXICO CITY to Tijuana, a scorching-hot border town that can be seen either as the hideous, seedy product of more than a century of cultural penetration or as the defiant, lively result of a hundred years of cultural resistance. Just a few miles south of San Diego, Tijuana reigns as the world capital of Spanglish, shantytowns, and revolting souvenirs, yet, despite it all, remains completely Mexican. The United States may be just an imaginary line away, but on this side of the line driving becomes more creative, street life improves, bribes are taken, and hairdos are more astonishing. I thought Tijuana would be a good place to catch a show by Juan Gabriel, a singer and prolific composer who is the most unlikely heir to the mantle of *ranchera* greatness that could ever be imagined.

Juan Gabriel likes to perform at *palenques*, or cockfight arenas, which are a traditional element of state fairs. When I arrived at

the Tijuana *paleñque*, around midnight, several hundred people were watching the last fight, perched on chairs in a coliseumlike arrangement of concrete tiers surrounding a small circular arena. Those in the know say that hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of bets are placed in the course of a fight, but all I saw was half a dozen men with little notebooks standing in the arena, catching mysterious silent signals from the audience and scribbling down figures, while the two fighting cocks were displayed by their handlers. After a few minutes, the men with notebooks left, and the cocks, outfitted with razorlike spurs, were set on the ground. The cocks flew at each other, spurs first, while the audience watched in tense, breathless silence. In a matter of minutes, one of the animals lay trembling on the ground, its guts spilling out, and the other was proclaimed the victor, to a brief, dull cheer. Instantly, Juan Gabriel's roadies moved in.

The instruments they set up—electric organ and piano, two sets of drums—are not the ones normally associated with *ranchera* music, but then Juan Gabriel is not what one would think of as a typical mariachi singer. For starters, he is from the border himself—from Ciudad Juárez, where he was born, and where he was raised in an orphanage. When he burst on the pop-music scene, in the early seventies, radio audiences often mistook his high-pitched voice for a woman's. His fey mannerisms became the subject of crude jokes. He has been press-shy ever since a scurrilous book by a purported confidant fed hungry speculations about his sexual preferences. Yet, in this nation of self-proclaimed machos, Juan Gabriel has been able to perform before a standing-room-only crowd in the Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico's Carnegie Hall. He lives in Los Angeles, uses electronic backups and percussion, and writes songs that never mention drunkenness or two- or three-timing women, but when men in Garibaldi drink and fall into the confessional mode these days their musical inspiration invariably includes songs composed by Juan Gabriel.

As the first, wailing *ranchera* chords tore through the din and Juan Gabriel emerged from the bullpen, there was a roar from the *paleñque*, and in the roar there was a call for blood. The composition of the audience had changed: a majority of women, mostly

middle-aged and in girls'-night-out groups, had filled the stands, along with a large minority of romantic couples and a dense sprinkling of men in groups. A lot of the men were wearing big *mortero* hats, and in the front row a group of couples and male buddies in big hats and heavy gold chains had set up beer cans and bottles of tequila along the concrete ledge that defined the arena space. The women in the audience were shouting their love for Juan Gabriel hysterically, but a couple of men behind me were shouting something quite different, and so were a lot of the men in big hats. "*Marica!*" and "*Jotón!*" they yelled, meaning "Fag!" or "Queer!" They yelled this over and over, and, because the cherub-faced Juan Gabriel in his graying middle age has put on something of a paunch, someone improvised an insult that was quickly copied: "You're pregnant, you faggot! Go home!" The men had paid between forty and sixty dollars a head to indulge in this pleasure, and Juan Gabriel, circling the arena slowly to acknowledge the majority's applause, also acknowledged this generosity with a small, graceful curtsy before he began to sing.

His music is proof of the fact that the *ranchera* has changed as much as Mexico has, and that in doing so it has survived. His backup singers at the *paleñque* were two skinny, curvy black women in tight dresses: they chimed in on the chorus as required, but with distinctly gringo accents. Standing between them and his electronic band, Juan Gabriel sang and twirled to music from his pop repertoire, punctuating some of the jazzier songs with belly rolls and shimmies that drove the women and the machos wild in opposite ways. There was rather a lot of this cheerful music, and then he slowed down and began to sing a real *ranchera*, a song of bad love, loss, and pain, in which the composer makes abject offers to his departed love. In case the fugitive should ever decide to return, Juan Gabriel sang, "You'll find me here, in my usual spot, in the same city, with the same crowd, so you can find everything just as you left it." By the second verse, there was no need for him to sing at all, because the members of the audience were chanting the words for themselves with the rapt reverence accorded an anthem. "I just forgot again," the audience sang, "that you never loved me." I glanced at a couple of the big guys sitting

in the front row, armed with their bottles of tequila, who had earlier folded their arms protectively across their chests and smirked whenever Juan Gabriel wiggled in their direction. Now they were singing.

A dozen fawn-colored *charro* hats wobbled at the entrance to the bullpen, and the audience, seeing the mariachis arrive, roared itself hoarse with welcome. Gold decorations along the musicians' trousers caught the light. The men lined up facing Juan Gabriel's band, adjusted their hats, took up their instruments, and filled the *patenque* with the ripe, aching, heart-torn sound of the mariachi. Juan Gabriel, singing this time about how hard it is to forget, was now not queening at all. The big guys sitting across from me leaned into each other, swaying companionably to the music, like everyone else in the audience. Behind me, the last heckler had finally shut up. Juan Gabriel sang a lilting *huapango* and a couple of *sones*, without pausing once for chatter. He segued from one song to the next or went through long medleys, the doo-wop girls bursting in occasionally with a trill or two. Then the girls left the stage, and so did the band. Juan Gabriel, alone with the mariachis, slowed down for the introductory chords of a song that begins, "Podría volver," and, recognizing these, the audience squealed in ecstatic pain. "I could return, but out of sheer pridefulness I won't," the lyrics say, in what is perhaps the most perfect of a hundred *ranchera* hymns to the unbending pride of the loser. "If you want me to come back, you should have thought of that before you left me." Here and there, his listeners yelped as if some very tasty salt had just been rubbed into their national wound. Life hurts. I hurt. The hell with you: I'll survive, Juan Gabriel sang. In the front row, the two big guys looked immensely happy, and just about ready to weep.

LIMA

1993



"How difficult it is to be God."

A JOURNALIST I KNOW in Ayacucho, where the ultra-Maoist revolutionary group Sendero Luminoso, or Shining Path, got its start, tells a story about the guerrillas that he heard from a friend of his, a local military officer. The officer had captured three members of the Communist Party of Peru, which is the official name of Sendero, and proceeded to torture them in what is, in this country, routine fashion. Eventually, one of the three captives died. As a second captive seemed to be struggling for his life, the third intervened. "I will cooperate," he said. "But if you let my compañero live he will let the word out that I talked, and I'll be a dead man. Kill him first, and then I'll talk." The officer accepted the deal and murdered the second man, but at that point the prisoner who had promised to talk in exchange for the killing began insulting his captors more fiercely than ever, kicking out at them and provoking even worse treatment. The officer, astonished, reminded him that he had promised to cooperate. "I'll never talk," the man said. "I'm a member of the Communist Party of Peru. The other man was just a collaborator, and I saw he was beginning to crack and would have put our compañeros in danger. Now he won't talk, and you can kill me."

In its harshness, horror, and unyielding fanaticism in the face of brutality, this possibly apocryphal story reflects perfectly what