

# DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS

A NOVEL

"Take this ride."

— George Pelecanos, author of *Soul Circus*



**KENT HARRINGTON**  
FOREWORD BY JAMES CRUMLEY

"Kent Harrington writes with the ghost of Jim Thompson looking over his shoulder. *Día de los Muertos* is a brutal punch-in-the-mouth story set in a moral no-man's land. Harrington is one writer who can walk that line. Too bad Sam Peckinpah isn't around anymore to put this one on film."

– Michael Connelly, author of *Lost Light*

# Día De Los Muertos

Kent Harrington

**Foreword by James Crumley**

*Día De Los Muertos* is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used to further same. Any resemblance to actual events or to persons alive or dead is coincidental.

Copyright 2003 by Kent Harrington

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

Previously released in hardcover by Dennis McMillan Publications, 1997

Previously released by Capra Press in trade paperback, 2003

First E-Book Edition © 2010 by Kent Harrington

Cover by Frank Goad

Illustrations by Keith Puccinelli

Author photograph by Stephen Finerty

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Harrington, Kent A., 1952-

Día De Los Muertos / by Kent Harrington.

p. cm

ISBN 1-59266-035-5(trade pbk.) 1. United States Drug Enforcement Administration—Fiction. 2.

Tijuana (Baja California, Mexico)—Fiction. 3.

Americans—Mexico—Fiction 1. Title

PS355b.A62944D53 2003

813'.54—dc21

2003009150

Edition: 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



# Día De Los Muertos

And whoever walks a mile full of false sympathy walks to the funeral of the human race.

- D.H. Lawrence

Volver Volver (Mexican folk song)

Éste amor apasionado  
anda todo alborotado  
por volver

Voy camino a la locura  
y aunque todo me tortura  
sé querer

Nos dejamos hace tiempo  
pero se llegó el momento de perder

Tú tenías mucho razón  
me hago caso al corazón  
y me muero por volver

# One

## Tijuana, Mexico / November 1—2:00 P.M.

**It was Tijuana's knack at getting back at you** that worried Calhoun. Looking like a sun-savvy reptile in his chic, wraparound dark glasses, Vincent Calhoun stepped off the curb into the traffic that circled the central plaza; immediately, car horns began to blare and brakes slammed. Calhoun shot his hands up, signaling halt. The drivers saw a big American in a foreign legion-style hat and white summer suit. Calhoun crossed in front of them, ignoring the barrage of ugly looks from the drivers. Somehow, the drivers knew they didn't want to fuck with him. There were people in Tijuana you just didn't want to fool with. The ones who looked like Calhoun—the players, the reptiles from the desert—you stayed away from.

Once inside the cool ring of shade that bordered the plaza, Calhoun heard the offers for the city's most popular products from its front line businessmen. "Pussy, pot or pills... Got some young pussy, brother... She'll suck your dick till you think you're dead," a kid sitting on a bench, the shade darkening his face, said to him. Calhoun left the offer behind him, crossing into the open stretch of plaza, the no-man's land of pavers and sunlight. The heat was penetrating, alive, walking next to him like a madman. It radiated off the stark white concrete. He could feel it through his shoes, as if he were barefoot on a beach. He realized for the first time that there was something absolutely cruel and quintessentially Ind'an about the plaza, the sheer enormity of the space cut from the heart of the city, ceremonial. It conjured up human sacrifice. Maybe the city was really still Toltec, he thought. Workmen were hanging bunting and lights on the plaza's bandstand in preparation for the upcoming holiday.

At the other side of the plaza Calhoun stopped at a kiosk on the corner and bought the *Diario de la Sierra*, which gave race schedules and odds at Caliente. The paper's front page shouted **Police Search City For Frank Guzman** in a

banner headline.

"When were you born?" Calhoun asked the newspaper vendor, peering at him inside the messy interior of the kiosk. The man looked at him from his shell of clapboard, the only bit of shade on the noisy street. The vendor saw the big white man looking at him. A spotless white cotton suit. The ball of sun caught in the yellow tint of his dark glasses.

"¿Como...?" The man's face was framed by girlie magazines, girls in short shorts with big asses. A municipal bus roared by the kiosk, leaving the street behind it showered with black exhaust.

"Amigo... what day were you born?" Calhoun repeated the question over the grinding of the bus engine. He tried to smile but it was hard. "I need a lucky number," he explained. "For the races."

"On the day they ripped Jesus Christ down from his cross to get at his wallet," the man said and laughed. He pounded the counter for emphasis, thinking it was funny.

Calhoun made his way down the sidewalk toward the Playa Azul. He knew suddenly that Tijuana had won. That nothing he could do would restore his luck. He'd exhausted his *suerte*—his good fortune. It was obvious. It was over. Everyone gets so much *suerte* and that's it. His was finished, used up. In the restaurant Playa Azul he took a clean handkerchief out of his suit pocket and wiped down his face. Today the heavy canvas havelock he wore hadn't been enough protection from the heat. Even through the clean starched handkerchief his face felt wet and dirty. He pulled it away. It was soaked and he was worried. *Nothing wrong*, he told himself. *Nothing wrong at all. No past, only future.*



**"It's time to pay up."** Slaughter smiled at him in a friendly way. The young Englishman had a Stars and Bars do-rag tied around his head like an

already-dated grunge band singer. He pushed his hair off his unctuous face. There was something in the Englishman's countenance that was evil, the cold, psychotic variety of evil that is shockingly pedestrian in Tijuana.

The restaurant was crowded. The air conditioning made it almost cold. Brightly colored *gallardetes*, paper pennants, hung in rows from the ceiling. You could hear them rustling, blown by the air conditioning. Calhoun had chosen the Playa Azul because it was the only restaurant that he could stand to be in during the heat. It was like a refrigerator. Calhoun kept his sunglasses on and everything was tinted yellow by his Vuarnets—the Englishman's face, the blue linoleum floor, the murals of idyllic *jalapas* on a beach painted on the wall. The restaurant was full of tradespeople, no tourists, just businessmen, talking against the white, clean walls.

"I want a steak and French-fried potatoes. Can you do that for me, dear? No cilantro," Slaughter told the waitress. The rich golden tones of his middle class English voice were commanding and superior. He'd been to Oxford.

"It's a fish place," Calhoun said. He didn't know why he'd said it. Slaughter turned to look at him, pushed the do-rag higher on his forehead. He wore a soiled yellow *guayabera* shirt. Without realizing it, Slaughter had gone to seed. All the money he was making in the rackets didn't seem to matter—it was as if Tijuana was infecting him and he couldn't stop it. He'd gone completely native in that peculiar English way.

"Is it really?" Slaughter said. "There's no such thing in Mexico. It's either frijoles and meat or frijoles and chicken." He laughed at his own joke. Like most of the foreigners in the city who had gone native, he relished hating things Mexican.

"And for you, *Señor*?" the waitress asked. Calhoun looked at the assorted bottles of condiments on the table. He saw there was a fly in the sugar container. For a moment, with the fever, he seemed to see every conceivable detail: the thickness of the glass, the particles of sugar, the colors of the dead fly. He wondered how the fly could have possibly managed to get inside the jar. He picked it up and handed it to the girl.

"A mineral water," Calhoun said.

"How much money?" Calhoun asked. Slaughter dragged out his Day Planner, lifted the cover and thumbed through its well-worn pages. Calhoun picked up the glass of ice water and put it to his forehead. There was the sweet smell of tortillas and hot grease in the air. Slaughter stopped, found the page he was

looking for and stabbed it with his index finger.

"Two hundred twenty-eight thousand pesos. I want it by tomorrow," Slaughter said. He closed the book.

"How about next week?" Calhoun touched the sweating glass to his cheeks, first one, then the other. It felt wonderful. The waitress came back with his mineral water. She put it down and, with it, a fresh sugar dispenser.

"I don't know how they get in the bottles," the girl said in Spanish apologetically.

"We do everything we can and they still get in." Calhoun nodded.

"Forget it," Calhoun said. "*Olvidalo.*"

"I have an offer... a job offer," Slaughter said when she left. "Do it and I will cancel your debt. The whole thing."

Calhoun lifted the mineral water and drank, emptying it in several swallows. Some of it ran down his chin. With the fever, no amount of liquid seemed to be enough. Calhoun put down the empty bottle and wiped his face with a paper napkin. He tried to act like there was nothing wrong. That he wasn't sick.

"What did you say...?" Calhoun looked at the Englishman. He was suddenly seeing two faces, two do-rags, two sets of blue eyes, two sets of girlish Jagger-style lips. Someone fed the jukebox behind them. *Volver, Volver* came on loud, adding another layer to the cacophony and hubbub in the room. Calhoun glanced at the street outside. The world looked cockeyed, as if it were bent.

"Say that again," Calhoun said. He tried to get control of himself.

"I said I will forgive your debt, old boy," Slaughter said. Calhoun put one of his big hands on the table and forced himself to focus.

"Why would you do that? You're an asshole."

"Because there's something I want you to do for me." Slaughter ignored the insult.

"What? Tell your mother what an asshole you are?"

"I want you to cross Frank Guzman. He's in Tijuana and he needs to get across the wire. I think you are the only coyote that can do it," Slaughter said. Calhoun was gaining on the spinning world, it was slowing. He laid another palm on the table and it all suddenly stopped.

"Frank Guzman? You want me to kill Frank Guzman?" Calhoun said.

"No...*cross* Guzman."

"*Cross* Frank Guzman? You *are* an asshole."

"If you do that, you can forget what you owe me," Slaughter said. Calhoun smiled. "I thought you would like that." Slaughter reached over and slapped Calhoun on the shoulder. He hit the forty-five under Calhoun's jacket.

"That's suicide," Calhoun said. "Only a prick would ask someone to do that."

"That's the deal. As you Yanks put it, take it or leave it."

"That's like the deal you guys gave the Fuzzy-Wuzzies."

"What?"

"The Fuzzy-Wuzzies, you stupid prick," Calhoun said. He saluted in the English manner palm out. "The battle of Omdurman?... Kitchener?... Suicide, asshole!" He was in control again. That was the way the fever attacked, suddenly, and then left you just as suddenly.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Slaughter asked. "Are you out of your fucking mind?" Calhoun ignored him.

"Anyway...no problem about the money. I'll have it all for you tomorrow," Calhoun said. It was a bald-faced lie and he enjoyed it. *If you're going to lie, tell big ones*, he thought. Calhoun stood up. "Enjoy the steak. But you should have ordered fish here."

"Just get me the bloody money by tomorrow then," Slaughter said.

Calhoun walked to the back of the restaurant and closed the thin door to the men's room. He looked at himself in the mirror. It was warmer here. He took his havelock off and wet his face in the dirty sink, then the back of his neck. He let the water drip down under his collar. When he looked up there was a bathroom attendant, a man his age, sitting on a bench in the back staring at him. Calhoun smiled. It was something about Mexico he never got used to: bathroom attendants.

"He thinks I'm a fucking Zulu," Calhoun said looking into the mirror, his face dripping wet. The attendant stared back at him and then smiled, thinking Calhoun was drunk. Calhoun dropped ten pesos in the box and left.

On the way out Calhoun heard his name called. He looked across the restaurant. A Mexican was waving to him from one of the tables, Miguel Cienfuegos, a dog trainer he knew from Caliente. Calhoun went to his table and sat down.

Cienfuegos was a short brown bullet of a man, very dark. He always seemed to be hiding from someone, or at least looked that way. Even when he was eating. "I have something for you," Miguel said. "I told you I'd have something for you

one day. I've been looking for you." Calhoun nodded. "Today is your lucky day, amigo," the trainer said. He leaned forward conspiratorially. "Tomorrow at Caliente. Everything you can get your hands on. I want you to put it on 99 in the second race. Vincente—*99 cannot lose, I promise you.*"

"You're sure?"

"Vincente. I owe you a favor. I wouldn't fuck with you." Calhoun started to laugh. In part it was the fever that had him a little off and in part it was the sudden rush of excitement. "What's so funny?" Miguel said. He looked closely at the big white man with the havelock and dark sunglasses, his spotless white Tommy Hilfiger suit, just a white T-shirt underneath. He didn't seem well. The way he was laughing, there was something wrong with it. Calhoun's handsome face glistened with sweat and water.

"I thought I'd run out of luck," Calhoun said, trying to explain. He stopped laughing and leaned in across the table, pushing beer bottles out of his way. Cienfuegos thought how big he was then. Huge. "But you see, every time I think that...*every goddamn time*—I'm always wrong. Now that's good fucking *suerte*," Calhoun said.



**The theater's new marquee advertised Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility.** Calhoun thought it was a good joke because both were so lacking in Tijuana. The truth was it didn't matter to Calhoun what was lacking in Tijuana. The truth was it didn't matter to Calhoun what was playing. (He'd told the taxi driver to find the closest movie theater with air conditioning.) In fact, the most banal Mexican movies were sometimes the best, the most relaxing. Calhoun simply hated the city's endless stifling afternoons. Once he was seated in the dark of the theater, things became oddly quiet despite the noise of "entertainment." It was a perfect place to hide. The perfect place for surcease.

The perfect place to be still and let darkness rescue him. He could hear his heartbeat, or at least feel it. Feel the ignorant life in him—beat after beat. *I'm alive...I'm alive...I'm alive.*

Calhoun watched the English countryside unfold on the screen, watched Emma Thompson's huge pleasing face and bosomy décolletage. His uncomfortable sense of being too alive was gradually forgotten and finally swept away by the well-metered voices of the actors who had never smelled Mexico or broken the law or fired a shot in anger.

An hour into the movie Calhoun's cell phone rang and, reluctantly, he took the call in the dark. He listened to the voice on the other end. He agreed to meet the caller later at the Escondido and hung up. For a few minutes he was actually happy and emotionally empty. Happy because he knew that, outside, what he dreaded the most, the raw afternoon, was being killed off, its energy drained. He knew that when he returned to the streets it would be safe. It was as if the afternoon was a Titan monster walking the streets looking just for him.

At 5 P.M. Calhoun left the theater. He was pleased with the movie's unreal ending. The familiar Austen claptrap went down well. Like everyone else, he wanted to believe in miracles and beautiful endings. The air in the new shopping mall was cold and artificially clean. It smelled slightly of Lysol and popcorn. Middle class Mexican families seemed happy with their Kmart purchases and their frozen yogurts, their brief vacation from the grim streets. Calhoun pushed open the double doors of the ersatz America and joined the countless people on the sidewalk.

On the Avenida Dolores, the air was dirty and warm, and Calhoun felt as if a filthy rag had been thrown in his face. An ugly crepuscular light turned everyone on the street into either a devil or moron. The red light seemed to capture everything miserable and missed the human. Disappointed, Calhoun realized that the afternoon wasn't dead. It hung on. Like an old man, it kept breathing, grasping at the corners of buildings, on roof tops, afraid to let go and die. The peso had crashed two months before. Money and wealth had been vaporized. All the cities along the border were hysterical and on the verge of bankruptcy. It was that very male hysteria that nations and middle managers get in crisis. They get very quiet and brutish just before they explode with testosterone and blood, and mindless things happen, none of them good. But that afternoon it was still quiet on the eve of the holiday, *Día de los Muertos*,

Mexico's second biggest and the most celebrated of its pagan holidays. A day when everything Spanish and everything Indian fight for control one more time. At the corner of Benito Juarez and Revolucion, Calhoun stopped in front of a shop window. There was a Frida Kahlo print he'd admired for days, a cheap reproduction of *Henry Ford Hospital*. Even behind warm dirty glass it was startling, no matter how many times he'd seen it; a self-portrait with medical tubes. Like the woman in the painting, Calhoun felt as if he, too, had tubes and rubber hoses coming out of him. Tubes taking his humanity and exchanging it for something else, pumping diesel exhaust and cold blood back into him. Inside the shop tourists glided by the painting, pausing for a moment on the verge of trying to understand Kahlo, then giving up and moving on. His shorts-wearing countrymen, Calhoun knew, had a taste for simpler mementos: the awful German helmets made of plaster, black with "cool" little hand-painted white swastikas. (What was it they liked *exactly*—the Nazis or their regalia?) The helmets were popular. On the spur of the moment, Calhoun went into the shop and bought the poster. He had no proper place to hang it. No one to send it to. He had had no wife or children, no real friends. (Perhaps they could have cured his fear of afternoons. But he knew without consciously thinking it, that his days for that kind of friendship were over. He was in too much trouble, after all.) Once it was wrapped and tied, Calhoun took the poster back out onto the busy street.

Calhoun walked on toward the plaza Tijuana, the light changing every moment, a dismantling of daylight. He reached inside his jacket and checked his shoulder harness, lifting it for a moment off his shoulders as he walked, feeling the weight of the forty-five, and the wetness it made on his T-shirt. His illness was making him sweat and the harness felt uncomfortable and tight-fitting. He stopped and tried to adjust it. Music poured out from a bar. *You wanted it all, You wanted it all... And there's nothing at all... Nothing at all.* He looked at himself caught in the reflection of the window for a moment—*we aren't what we tell ourselves*, he thought, looking, then went on.

*After going to the moon and producing Adolph Hitler and the drive-in liquor store, the Smart Bomb, Infomercials and the Hollywood Freeway, the Working Poor, Infibulation, and her final masterpiece, the Folksy Billionaire, the Twentieth Century was tired. She found a city that was equally exhausted,*

*equally worn out and tired of promises of any kind. Home of the desperate and the weak. This was it: the end of the line. The US-Mexican border. The great scrabble of progress was ending here, Calhoun thought, despite himself. He caught a glimpse of the plaza below: Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité, my ass. It was finally getting dark. He was thankful for that at least.*



## **FORWARD AND BACKWARD**

**BY JAMES CRUMLEY**

Like many a south Texas boy, when I turned fourteen, I went in front of a judge to swear that I lived in the country, some nine miles from town. Then I was allowed to take my driver's license test. I had one thing on my mind as I knocked over the front and back poles of the parking test - to this day, I can't parallel park with a damn - then I did my turns and all the other stuff I could do, but when I did my emergency stop test, because my father's '51 Ford had a set of earliest power brakes, I dumped the highway patrolman to the floorboard under the dash. I always suspected that he gave me my driver's license just to get rid of me.

And he probably knew exactly what was on my mind: Mexico, the border town whorehouses.

That night, I disconnected the odometer of my mother's '50 Chevy, then headed directly toward Nuevo Laredo. I wasn't exactly looking for a commercial

transaction with a woman. That had happened a couple of summers before on a dirty cotton sack, brief sex with a sixteen-year-old Mexican girl cotton picker in exchange for a can of Vienna sausages. And I wasn't looking for a beer. I'd been buying beer in a Mexican joint in Orange Grove since I was twelve. I was looking for freedom, freedom from the prejudice, hypocrisy, and false religion.

Something about crossing that steel bridge over the Rio Grande made me free of all the crap they tried to use to stifle my youth, to make me behave as if I were going to be some white-shoe, tie-wearing snot. Whatever I was going to be, and believe me it still a terrible question, I wasn't going to be one of those people. Even after I stopped border town whoring when I got married the first time, I would still drive down to Nuevo Laredo from college at Kingsville to have a drink or two and watch the girls come to work at Papagayo's or The Rumba Casino, where they looked like high school girls until they came out in their night clothes. I'd buy drinks for the girls, practice my playground Spanish, and imagine different lives for all of us. Quite frankly, sometimes my imagination got away from me- too much tequila and too large a sense of freedom- so I had the occasional conversation with various police officers in several border towns. Nothing serious, nothing the little bite, la mordida, couldn't fix. And nothing but fond memories.

But what's the point of being young if you can't give way to romantic fancies? The hard and terrible truths of border-town life, shorn of romance, are much more exactly revealed in Kent Harrington's novel, *Día de los Muertos*. That is what it's really like.

A young man, Vincent Calhoun, while practicing his student teaching, makes the mistake of falling in love with one of his students. Caught en flagrante delicto con plumas by his love's chicken-farmer father, Vincent's life is ruined. His father's job is forfeit, and Vincent is given the choice of jail or the Marine Corps at a time when Vietnam was a given for young Marines. Whatever hopes, dreams, and sense of morality he might have developed are destroyed by the mean-spirited hypocrisy of the anti-sex middle class.

He ends up as a DEA agent mired in the amazingly murky world of corruption in the worst of the border towns, Tijuana, a city that mirrors the most horrid elements of the American corruption just across the border. The images in the mirrors are grotesque, twisted versions of capitalism, corrupt notions of loyalty,

filled with heartbreak as crooked and deep as the barrancas filled with the helpless poor who surround the city. Only the rich and corrupt live in peace, semi-secure behind razor wire and hired gunmen.

For his part, Vincent has fallen into the world of degenerate gambler, where hope is a whore's lick in your ear, luck as worthless as her affection, and none of the races go to the swift. They go to the wicked. To support his addiction, he smuggles Chinese girls, Mexican gangsters, and anybody else with the price of a ticket into the glorious US of A. Even his body has betrayed him. He's picked up a case of hemorrhagic fever. He's about to start leaking blood from every orifice. His life couldn't be in worse shape. Until he runs into the love of his early life, recently released from prison. The real trouble starts.

It seems that every thug, criminal, and gambler in Tijuana is after Vincent's life, and all he wants is to get his love safely across the border and out of the clutches of the toughest lesbian in all of literature. Then, of course, there's a fat gangster who has to be moved to his jeep on a dolly through the insane Day of the Dead celebrants. It weren't so sad, it would be funny.

Or perhaps it is a comedy that goes on and on, something like life. Only laughter has meaning, and only love lasts, if you're willing to suffer for it.

The novel is rich with the details of life in Tijuana, full of the moments of despair that always accompany corruption like warts on a toad, and rife with a cast of characters you'll never forget. It's a terrific read from sentence to sentence, from paragraph to paragraph, from scene to scene. And it ends with a moment of sacrifice that wipes Vincent Calhoun's slate clean.

Día de los Muertos is unforgettable and prophetic. If the world isn't careful and continues to refuse to share its wealth among all its people, we're all going to be living in some version of Tijuana.

*-- James Crumley*

## **Greenback Fever**

## By Kent Harrington

Dear Reader,

It's unlikely we'll ever meet; unfortunately that's the way it is between the novelist and his readers. We do have a marvelous and profound connection, though, however distant. You might be reading this even a hundred years from now, but we'll connect on these pages for a moment, and time and place won't really matter. I like to think of all the places I'll travel in spirit, if not in the flesh. The novel you are holding is set in Tijuana, Mexico. I first passed through that city in the late 1960s, as a child of seven. I was traveling by car with my mother's Guatemalan family—an aunt and two uncles—on our way to Central America. That morning, it seemed to me a sleepy town.

The Tijuana I saw as a child had come, by the 1960s, to personify (for Americans) not only a corrupt and Godless Mexico, but a corrupt Latin America. No small feat for a down-at-the-heels border town. The city's blighted reputation was based on the fact that it was where Californians went to indulge themselves in ways they couldn't back home, at least not legally. Both gambling and prostitution were legal enterprises in the city, and prostitution still is. (Remember, this started before Las Vegas.)

Illicit sex, I think, was the real meat of Tijuana's mythology. The legendary sex shows were probably apocryphal. Real or not, they existed in the salivating imagination of sexually repressed American males in the pre-Playboy world. Where did the Latin Lover idea spring from? Was it that Catholics were viewed as more licentious? Why not a German lover? But for a lot of young American men in pre-World War II California, the word was out: Sodom and Gomorrah existed, buddy, and you could drive there.

It turns out that all this weekend sin was on offer to these bright-eyed, well-scrubbed boys and girls by—lo and behold—their fellow Americans! "The Jockey Club, Tivoli Bar, the Foreign Club, the Sunset Inn and Agua Caliente Casino were all owned by Anglo-Americans and employed mostly American workers." <sup>1</sup>. In fact, the Yankees had arrived as early as 1885 and stayed to control the tourist

industry until the Mexican government ran them out in the 1940s.

So it was not those Mexicans—the Mexicans who had treated Davy Crockett so shabbily at the Alamo, the Hollywood Mexicans who so memorably didn't "need no stinking badges"—but Americans who created the myth of Tijuana, City of Sin. On the contrary, the Mexican government put an end to all that good old fun. I've heard that the Cardenas administration actually turned some American-owned casinos into schools. This transformation should have put an end to the town's sinful reputation. When I saw it, unfortunately, the city was only resting up for a bigger show.

Tijuana finally surpassed its own colossal reputation by the 1990s, when it was arguably one of the most violent and corrupt cities on the planet. Both the country and the city had by the nineties changed profoundly, and not for the better. The Mexican government formed in the Revolution of 1917, which had once been responsible for cleaning up Tijuana and building a modern, relatively prosperous Mexico, was finally undone by the illegal drugs trade. Political corruption was the order of the day, and hell was visited on Tijuana, now a border megalopolis. Like so much in our modern world, even crime had industrialized. This is the city I write about here. It's a frightening place.

When you first cross the border from the United States into Tijuana, you'll see a heavy, old-fashioned metal turnstile used by pedestrians to enter the city. If you ever go, you should enter that way, on foot. Someday they will turn that old-fashioned gate into something modern, something slick, that marks nothing. But I hope you see that turnstile-cage. It probably dates from the 1930s or 1940s. There is something final about pushing through that gate, hearing it creak, feeling its weight, and seeing a foreign world waiting behind those gray bars. Beyond that turnstile is the fascinating, surreal, shocking welcoming committee of the city's begging children and mean-looking taxi drivers. No computer-turnstile could ever give you that moment.

I started going to Tijuana as an adult because I liked to go to the bullfights. All the big-time matadors come to Tijuana in the summer. I love the music they play at the bullfight. A small band sits way above the arena in the sun, trumpets glaring. The musicians are usually older men who look like they could use a meal. When they start to play, it's to punctuate some drama below: perhaps the bull, confused, bloody, is standing in the shade waiting for that last assault. Or the sweating young matador, his black slippers in the gold sand, finally exposes

the killing sword before he rushes toward the bull. Something dramatic, anyway, spurs the musicians to play.

The bullring in the old downtown was the best one. (There's a new one, by the sea.) The old ring is beautiful and intimate, and for some reason I think of it as Baroque, although it really isn't.

I used to go alone to Tijuana in those days because most people I knew then found the place a bore, or hated the bullfights, or both. At that time I was working in Oakland, where feuding gangsters shot at me almost every day. So the idea of sudden death was very real to me. I could relate completely to the bull and to the bullfighter. Now I can't watch the end of a bullfight, because it's cruel and I know it's cruel. (Is an anonymous death in some dark porcelain slaughterhouse any better? I know what I'd choose.)

Sometimes I'd take the girl who would become my wife. I remember her looking so sexy, with her tight white pants and her long black hair. I remember the way the fights both repelled and fascinated her. I remember her buying French perfume at the fancy shop on Avenida Revolution after the bullfights. I will always remember her surrounded by other young Mexican women at the counter, all of them so intent on the shopping and all of them looking so beautiful and perfect in the late afternoon light, which in summer hits the disheveled and raucous Tijuana streets and makes them oddly sorrowful, golden and dirty-beautiful.

Sometimes I would drive down from the Bay Area with very little money, as I was trying to become a novelist and was living hand to mouth, which sounds romantic but isn't. I would have just enough money for a bullfight and a decent hotel (the Hotel Arizona), and gas money home, and that was it. Sometimes I went when I really shouldn't have, as I didn't have any money at all to spare. I've never regretted that. To be any kind of artist, I suppose, is to be madly myopic. I was alone in Tijuana when I first started *Día De Los Muertos*. I'd like to think that I saw Vincent Calhoun, the protagonist, in the restaurant of the Hotel Arizona, near the bullring. The Hotel Arizona had a good lunch, and served it by the pool. All kinds of people came to eat lunch there before the bullfights: gangsters, movie people from LA, young Marines, and just ordinary day trippers like me. I'm sure I saw someone like Vincent there because that's where the book starts for me, by the pool, with the lunch being served by waiters in

starched white coats, and everyone looking forward to the bullfight. What about the novel? For me, it's about this man Vincent Calhoun, who stands suddenly at the entrance to a very dark alley—which, if you want, we'll call human consciousness—and, hearing the band strike up, walks on toward something both important and frightening. In this battle between his humanity and his past, he hopes to prevail. Don't we all? I always found his story hopeful, but I'll let you be the judge of that.

**-- Kent Harrington**

**April 2003, San Rafael**

<sup>1</sup> San Diego State University web site:

**[azatlan.sdsu.edu](http://azatlan.sdsu.edu)** (San Diego Mexican & Chicano history.)

### ***Dia De Los Muertos* by Kent Harrington**

Kent Harrington is a fourth-generation San Franciscan. He is a graduate of San Francisco State University. Kent recently returned from an extended trip to Central America and is currently working on a novel about Guatemala. He lives in Northern California with his wife. For more information, visit

**[www.kentharrington.com](http://www.kentharrington.com)**



**Other books by Kent Harrington:**

Dark Ride

The American Boys

Red Jungle  
The Good Physician  
Lola Knows Best  
Satellite Circus