

**A REPORT
ON THE CITY**



I'm told there is a hypnotist here who can cure my smoking habit in under an hour. I'm told one visit is all it takes. I'm told this person, the hypnotist, is an old Chinese man, decrepit, his manner askew. I'm told he is probably a witch or a shaman or a warlock—whichever is appropriate. I'm told crack is not a problem here, as it is in the overgrown ghettos of some other countries. I'm told, however, that sniffing glue is a problem here. I'm told the glue can go in a plastic bag and the plastic bag can go to the mouth and nose. I'm told going straight to the container works, too. I'm told a small container of glue can keep a kid high for weeks. I'm told a glue high is an inferno of sound and pain cutting through the world like plane engines grinding through a flock of birds. I'm told as well that this high leads to retching and irreversible damage to the frontal lobe. I'm told I have frontal-lobe damage, but not from sniffing glue. I'm told cocaine is flavored here—strawberry, lemon, watermelon—like children's ice cream. I'm told this means addicts dreaming of cocaine are no different from children whining for ice cream. I'm told cocaine is sometimes adulterated here with a medicine used to deworm livestock. I'm told this livestock medicine is a dopamine stimulator, like cocaine, but that it also causes massive internal infections in humans, unlike cocaine. I'm told cocaine is ruining the country and that drug users should be jailed, possibly executed. I'm told this, usually, by people who smoke a pack a day and drink 'til dawn. I'm told there is an A.A. in every little shit town in this country. I'm told this, and these people who tell me this use the words *shit town*. I'm told they are open A.A. meetings, glorious and righteous. I'm told that's where the narcos and God recruit future acolytes.

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I'm told they recruit in that order: first the narcos make a selection, and then God takes the leftovers. I'm told this country consumes more Coca-Cola per capita than any other country. I'm told the Coca-Cola is made with cane sugar, not corn syrup. I'm told it tastes better, the Coca-Cola with cane sugar. I'm told some people can tell the difference between a Coca-Cola made with cane sugar and a Coca-Cola made with corn syrup. I'm told they are full of shit, these people who can tell the difference. I'm told I shouldn't leave the restaurant with my glass bottle of half-finished Coca-Cola, and if I do, a woman will run four or five blocks to catch me and ask me to give my half-finished Coca-Cola back. I'm told all this desperate and wild pursuit is because the restaurant needs to redeem the bottle. I'm told the redemption business is big business. I'm told the garbage collectors here earn their money by going through my trash and selling it to other garbage collectors. I'm told wine bottles and blue jeans and Coca-Cola bottles are the most valuable items for a garbage collector. I'm told the garbage then passes through a whole host of gleaners, middlemen, gangsters, government officials, dreamers, hookers, con men, poor children, rich nobodies, until the garbage ends up in markets in some part of the city. I wasn't told which part of the city. I'm told this is redemptive, this garbage process. I'm told there is a market, or markets, one or more, that sells this garbage, but very well-arranged garbage, garbage restored, transmogrified, with some vendors selling discarded screws arranged by the size of the thread. (I'm told I should say that again: they sell screws rescued from the trash *arranged by the size of the thread*.) I'm told this process is why I should shred, possibly burn, my papers. I'm told that without burning my papers into ashy heaps I am exposed to the world. I'm told this in these exact words: *exposed to the world*. I've invented nothing. I'm told how to take precautions. I'm told how to be safe. I'm told not to trust the man at the front door. I'm told not to

trust the man at the back door. I'm told not to trust any man at any door. I'm told to call my taxis on the phone because this, somehow, through a mysterious process I do not understand, makes the taxis safer. I'm told Elite Taxis are safer than the less-than-Elite Taxis. I'm told the kidnapper waits under the taxi, hanging there like Max Cady in *Cape Fear* (the 1991 remake, not the 1962 original, though the original was superior), knife gripped between his teeth, waiting for the kill. I'm told they are everywhere, these knife-and-car-gripping kidnappers. I'm told this, but luckily I have never met one of them. I'm told that I will, one day, meet one. I'm told this city is very similar to Cairo, Egypt; but Cairo, Egypt, has no kidnapping. None. I'm told this has to do with the Islamic religion versus the Catholic religion, i.e., the Islamic religion will not tolerate kidnapping and the Catholic religion will tolerate kidnapping. I'm told this by a Muslim, a woman born and raised in Cairo, Egypt. I'm told conversely by a non-Muslim, a Protestant, an American, a man whose family came over with the pilgrims, that this difference is simply due to better policing. I'm told policing here is very, very bad and in Cairo, Egypt, it is very, very good. I'm told that policing here is so bad that it is hard to tell the cops from the robbers. I'm told it is also hard to tell the gold from the shit here—sometimes the gold is the shit and sometimes it is the other way around. I'm told, usually right after people mention cops or police or gold, that 40 percent of airborne dust here is made up of human shit. I'm also told 60 percent of airborne dust here is made up of human shit. I'm also told 80 percent of airborne dust here is made up of human shit. I'm told that shit, human or otherwise, in more scientific terms, is called *fecal matter*. I'm told by a woman clutching antibiotics that most people here have intestinal worms. I'm told that they are mostly benign—the intestinal worms, not the people. I'm told that I, one day, will have the same such worms. I'm told currently, by my doctor, who has large

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hands and a comforting smile, that I have no such worms. I'm told this, and I wonder: if between 40 percent and 80 percent of the air is human shit and if most humans here have worms, then how much of the air is made up of crushed intestinal worms? I'm told the best way to consume orange slices with mescal is by dipping the orange slices in red worm dust. I'm told there is a part of the country where the monarch butterflies congregate once a year, and this is a pleasant thing for me to hear because I always wanted to know where the monarch butterflies went when they disappeared from my childhood home. I hope they like it there. I'm told some people here wear butterfly-shaped bandages on their noses in order to look like they have had nose jobs, and I'm told these people have had no such nose jobs. I'm told they could never afford the rhinoplasty, either. I'm told they are poor people who want to appear rich. I'm told that these people do not want perfect bodies; they want to appear to be people who want perfect bodies. I'm told these people want to appear modern, concerned with their appearances, *Californian* even. I'm told I'm not wanted here. I'm told this hard and sad fact by youths with rocks and guns and blow darts, hurling their weaponry at my exposed face and hands. I'm told these youths look just like the brutally beautiful boys in Luis Buñuel's *Los Olvidados* (1950). I'm told that I love them, these brutally beautiful boys. I'm told things are easier here, slower, *a better quality of life*. Then, sometimes, I'm told things are hard here, really hard. I'm usually told this by people with servants, multiple bank accounts, summer homes, and bulletproof Hummers. I'm told that if you invest in a national stock here, purchased through the national stock market, you pay no tax on the dividend. I'm told that the yearly property taxes on my apartment amount to about twenty bucks. I'm told this is normal. I'm told most people here pay no taxes. I'm told this by people who pay no taxes. I'm told even middle-class people here make no

money and pay no taxes. I'm told that grown adults with jobs live with their parents. I'm told this has something to do with mortgages being unavailable or salaries being low rather than some unholy national defect. I'm told there are mustachioed guerrillas in the jungle and they lie waiting, reading the great poets and studying Clausewitzian strategy. I'm told they will nationalize our property and our women, but I'm told we are prepared. I'm told women here show no skin, despite encouraging weather, because they are afraid of rape. I'm told women here show no skin, despite the aforementioned encouraging weather, because of the Catholic religion. I'm told that women here will never make the first move. I'm told, in no uncertain terms, that the man must make the first move. I'm told—by women, mind you, women who may or may not make the first move—not to believe this. I'm told there is so much public affection here because everyone lives in apartments that are too small for private affection. I'm told that to love is to be closer to God. I'm told this by men and women who learn how to love from watching television soap operas, shows where actors are fed lines through earpieces and every conflict ends in a crying-screaming-fucking match. I'm told a crying-screaming-fucking match might do me some good. I'm told you can only love one person at a time, if that. I'm told, by people I wish to love, maybe at the rate of more than one at a time, that love is hard and it resembles a bauble after being thrown from a burning airplane. I'm told this and I don't understand what it means. I'm told I'm too analytical. I'm told to live in the moment. I'm told this, your eyes brown, green, blue, gray, black, and I know that everything I've been told is true and ferocious and beautiful.