



DRAWN TO THE DARK

Explorations in
Scare Tourism
Around the
World

CHRIS KULLSTROEM

“A delightfully dire catalogue of horrors.”

— Lisa Morton, author of *Ghosts: A Haunted History*

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Around the World**

CHRIS KULLSTROEM



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To the monster fans around the world.

Rock on.

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Introduction

Monsters seem strange to some, or gruesome, or terrifying. But not to everyone—to some, their company is preferred.

Such has been my case for as long as I can remember. Since my days of falling asleep to the Cryptkeeper's maniacal laugh from *Tales from the Crypt* and Pennywise the Clown peeping out of storm drains in Stephen King's *It!*, monsters have been my passion. There's something engrossing about creatures that are only partially human or have come back from the dead to terrorize the living with almost godlike power. Years later, I would discover that there are many others—millions, in fact—equally drawn to skeletons and killer clowns, demons and devils. Some even create entire shows around them. There's a name for these wonderfully twisted, likeminded enthusiasts: haunters. Haunters use their love for the dark not for money or fame but for the simple pleasure of running unique performances for others who enjoy them.

This book is a story of haunter explorations. It's a journey in which I dedicated a year to looking at dark-themed characters and shows in eleven countries. We can think of such shows as a theatrical representation of what is commonly perceived to be scary, with all the characters, scenes, and interactions that entails. For those brave enough to inspect the draw, performance, and experience of scare tourism around the world, the depths of the human imagination await.

Up until now, I had focused my writing on American Halloween. As a New Englander, I grew up in a region that embraces the holiday. From cabins in the woods to the museums of Salem, Massachusetts, witches, vampires, and virtually every type of creature crawl out of the grave in October to celebrate. But after finishing graduate school in 2013 with a degree in social science, I wanted to broaden my knowledge of scare tourism. I wanted my next book to be about how other countries

envisioned and portrayed their own dark characters, how their monsters and demons interacted with patrons, and how those patrons responded. Unlike those in the United States, most international shows, I knew, weren't associated with Halloween. Looking at them in a different context might reveal more about our own cultural fascination with that enchanting time of year, as well as the draw to dark characters overall. Not only would the travels be an exciting journey into the unknown, but they could lead to viewing scare tourism in a completely new light.

I already knew about some things that were going on. There were Krampus *laufs* (processions) based on a Christmas demon in Austria and Walpurgisnacht shows about witches and devils in Germany. There were vampire-based tourism in Transylvania and zombie camps in England. Allowing for additional shows to be determined en route, I planned for a full year of travels. It would mean leaving my job and apartment behind: something I had always wanted to do as a true monster explorer.

As I wrapped up my final months at work—a Connecticut nonprofit where my coworkers were as excited for me as they were terrified—some friends and I made a Kickstarter video. I set a goal of \$10,000 for the book project and launched the video on Friday the thirteenth in September of 2013. When the project closed six weeks later on Halloween night, it had barely reached a third of the goal. It financially failed. That may have deterred some people, but let's face it: they don't call us "enthusiasts" for nothing. I had no problem using my own savings for the trip, even if it meant spending my last dollar. After all, people have been willing to die for their passions since the dawn of man, so what's going broke compared to that? And although I expected to doubt myself at any moment and run off screaming into the night like a camper from a chainsaw massacre, it never happened. I was as sure about doing the project as anything I had ever done.

I also had one source of support. Since 2009, the Couchsurfing organization had allowed me to conduct other monster-based travels across the United States, Europe, and Australia. Many of the hosts had been excited about the nature of my travels and eager to share the

adventure with me. With their help, I knew that I could explore the universal draw of the dark.

On October 25, my life changed. I left the United States, with my Kickstarter campaign still under way, in the height of the Halloween season. I became officially homeless and unemployed. I knew that I might not be able to find free places to stay through Couchsurfing. I knew that I might run out of money and have to look for food in a dumpster. And I knew that when the travels were over and the book was finished, I might not even find a publisher who wanted it. But I also knew that those risks were nothing compared to the possibility that the completed work *would* reach people, would *teach* people, and just might change the way that I saw the monster culture I'd always known.

And with that, I flew off to discover whatever awaited me out there in the dark.

Bring it on.



Chapter 1

Oaxaca's Day of the Dead

"Life is short—let's party!"

The Boardinghouse

I woke up in the boardinghouse at the ungodly hour of 7:00 A.M. Barely distinguishable voices came from downstairs. Looking at the glowing alarm clock by my bedside, I let out a groan. Who could get up this early?

As my mind defogged, I remembered my arrival in Mexico the previous night. I had flown in with everything that I would need for a year of travels, in a single backpack and duffel bag: a pair of shorts; two pairs of long pants; long-sleeve, short-sleeve, and sleeveless shirts (two each); bathroom supplies; camera; notebook; and laptop. Unable to find an English-speaking Couchsurfing host in town, back in Connecticut I had contacted the organizer of Oaxaca's English-speaking library for recommendations on a place to stay. Michelle, an American who'd been living in Oaxaca for twenty years, had replied to my e-mail and referred me to a boardinghouse run by a friend. Michelle even picked me up at the airport, then drove me through crammed and chaotic traffic filled with more old VW Beetles than I'd seen since elementary school. We arrived at a large, yellow boardinghouse at 10:00 P.M., where the owner, Yolanda, welcomed me with a polite smile. Her ignorance of English perfectly matched my own of Spanish. She showed me to my upstairs bedroom, where a full-sized bed and private bath awaited. Both were

neat and clean and a welcome relief after the rundown storefronts I'd seen along the drive. After a long shower, I passed out as soon as my head hit the pillow, excited about seeing both the living and the dead the next day.

I had heard stories about the Day of the Dead holiday, *Día de los Muertos*, since I was a kid. Celebrated long before the sixteenth-century Spanish conquest of Mexico, the Day of the Dead is a time when the spirits of those who have died are believed to return. Families visit gravesites and make altars out of food and flowers to welcome them. The spirits of adults are said to return on November 1 and those of children on the following night. People dance in the streets as skeletons and bake breads into the shapes of corpses. The holiday's icon is Catrina. An elegantly dressed female skeleton, she represents joy in the face of death and mocks mankind's mortality. Her grinning skull demonstrates that death comes to us all, whatever our station in life. But unlike what I'd grown up with in the United States, neither Catrina nor any other deathly image around at this time is intended to be gruesome or scary. Rather, the traditions are based on remembering and honoring the dead, who are still acknowledged as being a part of the family. I had long dreamed of experiencing the holiday firsthand; the idea of celebrating death seemed nothing short of remarkable.

I had also read that Oaxaca was the place to go for the biggest Day of the Dead celebrations in Mexico. Parades, open-air theater, and sand-art competitions ran all week throughout the town. And what's more, Oaxaca would have something that made me feel particularly safe anywhere in Mexico: *tourists*.

After dragging myself out of bed, I staggered downstairs towards what sounded like a dozen women excitedly talking over each other. I came to a small dining area and saw four Caucasian women sitting at a large breakfast table. All from the United States, they spoke and gestured as energetically as teenagers, though they were clearly past retirement age. They turned to me with immediate interest.

"Good morning!" they said enthusiastically.

"Good morning," I mumbled with a sleepy smile.



“Come sit with us!” one said, waving towards them.

“Sit here, next to me!” cried another, patting an empty chair beside her.

They introduced themselves as Martha, Julie, Robin, and Gale. Through their eager overlapping, I learned that the four were friends from California, all in their seventies and spending a month in Oaxaca to study Spanish. While Yolanda quietly served fruit, toast, and eggs around us, the energetic crew asked about my own reasons for traveling. I told them about incorporating Day of the Dead traditions in a book about dark- and death-themed characters, expecting them to look at me as though I was completely nuts.

Instead, they seemed fascinated.

“Oh, that’s wonderful!” Julie beamed beside me. “The Day of the Dead is a beautiful tradition. You’ll love it....”

“More people should know about things they do here at this time,” Robin said before Julie could continue.

“And you came here alone? How exciting!”

“*We* came here alone! Well, separately.”

“But she’s *all* alone—good for you!”

“How old did you say you were? Thirty-four? So young!”

“And you don’t speak *any* Spanish? That’s funny!”

“We’ve been here almost a week,” Gale said from the head of the table. “Our Spanish classes run eight hours every day, then we have to do a few hours of homework each night.”

“Oh my God,” I said with a mouth full of toast. “You’re all so ambitious.”

“Of course!” Julie gave an enthusiastic shrug. “Why not? We did the same thing last year. We’ve never let our age stop us!”

Robin nodded. “We’ve never let *anything* stop us. Life’s too short for that!”

I watched the four clear their plates with healthy appetites. They took turns practicing their Spanish with Yolanda, pronouncing each word with thick, American accents. Our host was patient with her elderly students and no doubt saw me as a complete slacker for not even attempting a word. I soon waved goodbye to my new friends as they rushed off to catch a shuttle for school. I secretly dubbed them the Fabulous Four and felt any preconceived notion I’d had of life slowing down after retirement fly out the window.

Death Portrayed in Beauty and Wonder

In town, the dead were everywhere. Plastic skeletons danced in shop windows. They waved from black-iron balconies, their flowered dresses and sombreros matching the yellow, green, or orange apartment buildings behind them. Life-sized paper-mâché skeletons stood in tuxedos or black dresses and flowing veils outside the shop entrances. Rouge-painted cheekbones emphasized dignified smiles. Death, it seemed, was nothing to mourn—whether you were dead or alive.

On the pedestrian street Alcalá, flocks of tourists gazed at the dead. They practiced their Spanish in American, British, and German accents while buying painted porcelain skulls set out on blankets lining the

sidewalks. I followed the example of the crowd and kept to the shady side of the street. It must have been about eighty degrees in the shade and at least ten degrees hotter in the sun; I got the feeling that my shorts and tank top would be my daily outfit throughout my stay.

Inside the shops, altars produced beautiful explosions of yellow, orange, and red. Strands of marigolds arched over tables filled with breads, nuts, and fruits. Candles flickered beside framed portraits. Flower petals encircled pictures of the Virgin Mary. I knew that each display symbolized stages of life: birth, death, and the passage into heaven. Candy and bottles of mescal—the traditional drink of Oaxaca—had been laid out for spirits of the deceased to enjoy upon their return. In shop after shop I admired each display. I saw creativity in elaborate pieces of personal remembrance. I could only imagine what it would be like to grow up in a culture where the dead were honored in such a way. Almost half of my own family had died years earlier, including my mother, an uncle, and grandparents on both sides. As an atheist, I held no beliefs about spirits or an afterlife, but keeping a family's memories alive through beautiful works of art struck me as a wonderful tradition.

Beyond Alcalá, the dead also celebrated in the sand. Skeletons played guitar and danced beside their coffins in sand art surrounding the Basilica de la Soledad and Iglesia de Santo Domingo. They smiled in frames of vibrant marigolds and blooming corn: life surrounding death. From behind a rope barrier, I watched an artist work on a sand painting roughly thirty feet wide. Black sand rained from what resembled a small flour sifter as he colored hair falling across a skeletal woman's massive rib cage. I stared, completely engrossed, at the corpse's jet-black eyes and peaceful smile. Her deathly grace was no less beautiful than anything I'd seen among the living. I had never seen death portrayed in such a way—in beauty and wonder and almost admiration. This wasn't the image of corpses that I had grown up with. These weren't monsters maniacally laughing on late-night TV or crawling out of graves in horror films.

There was deeper meaning here.

“Life Is Short—Let’s Party!”

On October 31, the Fabulous Four and I joined a bus tour to San Antonino Castillo Cemetery. As we sat in one of three coaches heading to the grounds before sundown, the women talked as energetically as ever. I chuckled while listening, eating a small loaf of bread shaped like a shrouded body. The *pan de muertos* tasted so good that I immediately wished I had bought at least a dozen more at the market.

“I can’t believe how beautiful everything is in town,” I said to Robin and Gale beside me. “The way the dead are portrayed is so moving.”

“Isn’t it incredible?” Gale agreed, nodding. “What a wonderful custom.”

“They certainly don’t do anything like that where we’re from,” Robin said. “Death isn’t even discussed....”

Gale nodded before Robin could finish. “And here we are with a big bus of tourists going to a cemetery at night. Can you imagine something like that back home?”

“People would think it was morbid.”

“Or depressing.”

“But look around.” Robin waved an arm, gesturing to the back of the bus. Every seat was filled. I also couldn’t help but notice that I was the only one there younger than fifty. “You don’t see anyone depressed. They’re *enjoying* themselves. This is what life should be about!”

“That’s why we come here,” Gale said, her eyes wide with emotion. “That’s probably why *everyone* comes here!”

As the coach pulled away from the curb, a man hopped onboard and steadied himself beside the driver. I stared at him as if star struck; he looked almost exactly like Christopher Walken. The only differences were his slightly shorter stature and darker skin and hair.

“Welcome, everyone, to our trip to San Antonino Castillo,” he said into a handheld microphone. His thick, Mexican accent reverberated throughout the bus. He kept a firm grip on the safety rail while scanning the crowd, his tour-guide badge swaying from his neck with each bounce

along the road. “Many of you have probably never been to a cemetery for *Día de los Muertos*. There are some things you should know before we arrive.”

Beside me, Robin and Gale grew quiet, turning their attention to our new guide. Martha and Julie did the same behind us, and the bus fell into a hush.

“The cemetery will quickly become very dark.” Our nameless guide held up a finger as if in warning. “So you must be very careful when walking around the stones.” He stared blankly for a moment, his finger frozen in front of him.

I tried to determine if he was serious or drunk.

I had a feeling it was both.

“You should take lots of pictures.” As the bus took a sharp turn, the man stumbled and fell onto a woman in the front row. He quickly stood up and put a hand on her shoulder. “The families will not mind,” he continued, looking back at his audience without missing a beat.

I turned and smiled between the seats at Martha and Julie. They responded with wry, questioning looks. The guide was nothing if not entertaining.

“They will be eating and drinking and celebrating,” I heard him continue over the speakers, “because in Oaxaca, *Día de los Muertos* is not a sad time. It is a good time.”

I turned around and saw him leaning against the driver, ignoring the startled look that he got in response.

“In Oaxaca,” he went on, “we have a saying.” The guide threw up a hand with a wistful smile: “Life is short—let’s party! And if we’re broke, we do not get sad. We say: ‘I’m broke... but let’s party!’”

I covered my mouth to hide my quiet, hysterical laughter. Beside me, Gale and Robin did the same. I glanced back to see several others look at the guide with only confusion.

We arrived at our destination as the sun was beginning to set. Over a hundred tourists clasped their cameras while walking towards the massive graveyard. My eyes grew wide as I joined them; what stretched before us looked more like an extensive floral garden than any cemetery

I'd ever seen. Red, orange, and pink marigolds adorned almost every grave. White-marble crosses; long, flat table stones; and those resembling stone coffins were topped with additional pots of roses, carnations, and daisies. Some arrangements were so large that they obscured the stones completely. Orange candlelight flickered from small, glass jars, giving the appearance of lightning bugs hovering over the grounds. I admired it all in quiet fascination while the Fabulous Four and I separated down different walkways. I had been to cemeteries all over the United States and Europe but had never seen anything like this. An otherwise barren city of stone had been made into something as beautiful and lively as a nature preserve. Everything smelled invigorating yet soothing. I had flashbacks of giving bouquets of flowers to family and friends at birthday parties and anniversaries. I could barely believe that I was in a place of death at all.

Several families sat in lawn chairs encircling the graves. They clasped their hands peacefully on blankets over their laps. Children sat beside elderly grandparents; young couples held hands over their armrests. From a distance, I saw Martha and Julie speak to an older couple seated before a statue of Jesus. His outstretched arms were surrounded by white tulips.

"Puedo tomar una foto?" they asked. "May I take a photo?" It was what Señor Walken had suggested we ask, between his swaying and stumbling on the bus. The couple responded with a small smile and nod, then watched the tourists take a picture of the grave.

I continued walking the paths, watching others request permission to take photos. But despite everything I'd seen and learned, I just couldn't speak to someone visiting a family member at their graveside. I couldn't get over the feeling that it would be viewed as a sign of disrespect. It was as if the idea that had been engrained in me since childhood locked me into some kind of forced silence. Whenever I came upon anyone sitting beside a stone, I only greeted them, then bashfully walked on.

But despite the awkwardness, I looked at each family in admiration. It was a wonderful tradition they shared. Any differences in our beliefs didn't matter; I saw families coming together and celebrating their loved ones through beautiful acts of remembrance.

In Oaxaca's town square, the Zocalo, vendors abounded. Carts were heaped with balloons and toys, candy skulls and other sweets. Small children dressed as skeletons and devils held out pumpkin pails, begging for pesos. People sat outside restaurants lining the square, drinking, laughing, and watching the masses before them.

As I wandered amongst the crowd, my attention veered to a cart selling chili-flavored lollipops. A fan of anything involving sugar, I couldn't help but look at them in disgust. Why would anyone do such a hideous thing to candy?

I immediately bought one.

After one lick, my grimace of revulsion caught the attention of someone nearby.

"You don't like it?" I heard a male voice say.

I turned to find a tall, dark man beside me, appearing to be in his late thirties. He smiled and stood casually with his hands in his corduroy-pants pockets. His English contained only a trace of a Mexican accent.

"Ugh." I tossed the candy into an overflowing trashcan. "It's disgusting!"

"They're very popular here. But I've never liked them, either. I'm Ruben," he said, extending a hand.

"I'm Chris," I replied. "Nice to meet you."

"You, too. Are you here for the *comparsa*?"

"The *comparsa*?" I blankly repeated the word. "What's that?"

"It's kind of like a parade in America. But with lots of music and dancing."

"Oh!" My face lit up. "That sounds awesome."

Ruben, I learned, was originally from a small village in northern Mexico. After living in Arizona for several years, he had recently moved to Oaxaca. We exchanged stories and I told him about my cemetery excursion with the Fabulous Four.

"Lots of cemeteries around here are beautiful at this time," Ruben said. "And they're not all quiet like the one you went to. Some of them have music and parties."

“Really?” I tried picturing it. The idea of a loud spectacle didn’t quite fit the peaceful remembrance that I’d seen. “That sounds different.”

“Yes.” Ruben nodded. “Oaxaca is very different from the United States. *Very.*”

As the sun began to set, an eruption of trumpets and drumming came from off in the distance. All around us, people gravitated towards the music. I smiled at the masses. It looked as though an unseen force had turned random wanderers into a single unit drawn to its power. Within moments, a half-dozen Mariachi players appeared. Dressed in red and black suits, they played trumpets and horns, drums and guitar with bonelike smiles painted to match their black, hollow eyes. The crowd quickly gathered around them, smiling at the upbeat sound and the dead who created it. Additional living corpses appeared from behind them. A skeletal bride danced beside an equally dead pope. Catrinas in colorful dresses swung their arms to the rhythm. Some appeared to be only partially dead, with half of their faces painted bone white and the other left as healthy, brown skin. Male skeletons danced in black suits and colorful shirts. I marveled at the entire troop moving to the loud beat of the Mariachi players. Death had arrived in Oaxaca with vibrant music and dance.

“Wow,” I said to Ruben, “this is great!”

“Come on, we can dance, too.” He wasted not a moment and took my hand to lead me into the celebration. “People don’t just watch *comparsas*; they *join* them. That’s what they’re all about.”

I followed his lead, laughing and boogying down. Above us, skeleton puppets cast deadly grins above a living Grim Reaper figure dancing in his long, black cloak. A vampire smiled sharp fangs and held out a hand to a woman watching from the crowd. In her shy eyes I saw the same trepidation that I had felt in the cemetery. She wanted to join the fun but didn’t dare step out of her comfort zone. But after a moment she took the offered, bony-gloved hand. She immersed herself and let loose like the rest of us, laughing away in the dance of death.

“This is the *best*,” I said to Ruben over the music. “Now *this* is a party!”



On November 2, Ruben and I met up in the Zocalo once again. If I liked parties and cemeteries, he told me, he knew just the place to go for the official Day of the Dead.

“I haven’t been to Oaxaca Cemetery before,” he said. “It’s called *Panteon General*. But I know it’s very popular.”

I didn’t have to ask why. A thick cluster of people lined the road 5 de Febrero after sundown. Barely visible through the crowds, vendor tables on either side of the street sold *pan de muertos* and grilled meats, colorful candy and toys. Ruben and I walked shoulder to shoulder through the masses, and I pointed to a Ferris wheel off in the distance.

“Oh my God,” I said in disbelief.

He looked towards the ride and smiled. “Oh, yeah. This is *Dia de los Muertos*. Of course there are rides and games.”

“Beside a *cemetery*?”

He laughed. “Of course!”

Farther down the road, kids screamed in excitement as they ran to bumper cars and motorized plane rides. I could barely believe it when a

tall, stone wall finally appeared beside the chaos. Beyond the entrance, rows of gravestones lay in peaceful darkness compared to the explosion of noise, color, and lights on the other side.

“I’ve never seen anything like this around a cemetery,” I said. The two of us slowly followed the crowd into the burial grounds. “This definitely wouldn’t fly back home.”

Ruben chuckled, keeping his arms pressed tightly in front of him to avoid being crushed. “That’s for sure.”

“It’d be pretty cool, though,” I said with a smile.

Beyond the stone wall, soft, orange lights glowed throughout the darkness. Candlelight danced in small glass jars and paper bags, extending for what seemed like miles beside large gravestones. The sounds of commotion slowly died away as we walked a wide, paved path. Moving silhouettes of people wrapped in blankets looked like floating specters on the graves. Just like at San Antonino Castillo, I saw that no one seemed to mind tourists taking pictures. Still, I lowered my camera at the sight of anyone beside a stone, while Ruben stood back and watched. After a while, a Mariachi band caught my eye. A family of six sat beside them, enjoying the guitar, trumpet, and violin played to a tall, cross monument adorned with flowers. After a few moments I felt a hand on my back and Ruben gently push me towards the players.

“It’s okay to take pictures,” he said. “They really won’t mind.”

“Are you sure?” I whispered. “I don’t want to be rude.” I glanced nervously at the family. But rather than the glares of bafflement or shock that I expected, they only continued to watch the band.

“They don’t consider it rude.”

I held up my camera for a few moments, keeping my attention on the seated listeners. Eventually an elderly woman glanced at me with mild interest. I took a picture of the band then quickly backed away. After we’d continued farther down the path, Ruben admitted that it was actually his first time being in a cemetery on November 2.

“What?!” I turned to him in the darkness. “But you grew up in Mexico. Wasn’t it a tradition in your village?”

“For some people. But my mother never wanted to go to the cemeteries,” he said with a shrug, “so I never went. But I knew you’d like it.”

“So this is your first time in a cemetery for Day of the Dead?”

He smiled and nodded.

“Wow, then it’s a new experience for both of us. I’m so glad we met!”

“Me, too,” he said. “I probably never would have done this otherwise.”

In an enclosed area of wall vaults, paper skulls hung above tables of breads, apples, pears, and nuts. Miniature Catrina dolls grinned beside sombrero-topped skeletons and plastic coffins. I stopped in surprise at the sight of someone wearing a Grim Reaper robe on a stone bench. I looked at him—or her—for several moments, immediately drawn to their quiet, foreboding presence. I remembered wearing a similar costume at Halloween parties, approaching people without saying a word just to creep them out. It had worked every time. But this person obviously had no such motive in mind. Instead, their sole intention seemed to be simply sitting in silence. The effect was tangible; just standing beside them I felt an encompassing sense of peace.

“You know, being here has given me a completely new perspective on death,” I said once we were back out among the graves.

Ruben nodded. “Oaxacans base death traditions on celebration, not sadness or fear. That makes a big difference.”

I smiled at the sentiment. Suddenly, something caught my eye in the distance. High above the grounds’ shadowy outlines, two ghostly faces appeared. Dark, hollow eyes seemed to glow against pure-white skulls. Small sockets took the place of where noses should have been. Long, thin lines formed only traces of mouths. A black top hat slowly came into view above one of them, then a red bowtie and black tuxedo. I stared, awestruck, at a figure standing about ten feet tall. Stilts were certainly hidden beneath his pants legs, though they didn’t hinder his movements as he glided down the walkway in long strides. Beside him, a red, broad-brimmed hat topped a female image of death. Black lace fell to her brow and her dress shimmered a captivating, deep red. A second pair of identical characters followed them, then a third. I gazed at each

in wonder. The couples walked through the dark grounds, looking massive and beautiful. They turned their attention towards me as they passed, and I smiled up at intense vitality burning in their eyes through otherwise lifeless expressions. These weren't the smiling skeletons from the *comparsa*, dancing and mocking the fate of man. These were larger-than-life manifestations of death itself, and they had returned to where the living now awaited them.

Screamville Haunted House

The next evening, Ruben and I met up to walk around town. Down 20 de Noviembre, I held my breath through the smell of dead insects being sold for consumption at the open-air markets. Once free to breathe normally again, I told my friend about some children's plays I'd seen in a local park. I was particularly interested in the vampire and Hollywood-monster costumes that some of the kids had worn. I couldn't help but express joy at the combination of Halloween with Day of the Dead. As much as I loved the meaning behind the Mexican holiday, I was sure that Halloween could bring an equal amount of happiness to anyone who celebrated it.

"Halloween and Day of the Dead are slowly starting to blend," Ruben said. "That's okay with some people, but they don't want to lose their traditions. So the schools make sure to teach kids about the differences in the holidays."

I smiled at the thought. "That's good that they let kids celebrate both."

Since Ruben had spent several years in the States, he knew the history of Halloween as well as I did. It all goes back to the Celts of ancient Ireland. The Celts believed that in late October, a veil separating the world of the living from that of the dead becomes thin. Spirits were believed to be able to enter through it and, should they choose, cause harm to the living. To protect themselves, the Celts dressed in disguises to resemble walking spirits. They led parades out of town to drive the spirits away and left

offerings outside their doors in hopes of being left in peace. The rituals took place on a night known as Samhain (pronounced *Sow-in*), meaning “summer’s end,” on October 31.

But the rise of Christianity changed those traditions. In the year 835, Pope Gregory IV moved the Catholic holiday All Saints’ Day from May to the first of November. Pagan Samhain traditions were suddenly accepted as those meant for celebrating All Saints’ Eve—or All *Hallows’* Eve. The poor began going from door to door and offered to say prayers for the homeowners in exchange for food, using lanterns made out of carved turnips to light their way. When the rituals came to America, they evolved into Halloween parades and trick or treating, with large, carved pumpkins replacing the smaller turnips of Europe.

And even now, centuries later, the customs continue to be handed down.

“I remember when I was a kid,” I said, reflecting on the traditions, “the whole neighborhood came alive for Halloween. Everyone decorated their yards with jack-o-lanterns and put ghosts in the windows. And when I went trick or treating with my parents, people came to their doors dressed as witches and monsters. It was actually one of the rare times that we even *saw* our neighbors.” I chuckled with a nostalgic smile.

Before I could continue, I stopped in my tracks. A large billboard in front of us made my eyes grow wide. A huge, hockey-masked figure was portrayed emerging from a dark, foggy wood. A bleeding red font beside him read: *Ven a sentir MIEDO, Screamville.*

“Look!” I said, frozen at the image. “What does that say?”

“That says, ‘Come to get SCARED,’” Ruben translated, looking up at it.

I gasped loud enough to wake the dead.

“Oh my God—it’s a haunted attraction!” I turned to him in astonishment. “We gotta go!”

Ruben smiled, studying the billboard as if trying to determine what made it so remarkable. “Okay. It gives the address; I know the area. It’s actually not far from here.”

We found Screenville on Gabino Garcia about fifteen minutes by foot from Oaxaca's city center. It was all I could do not to skip the entire way. It was one of those rare moments that I lived for: discovering a scare show in the least likely location. Ruben and I approached a large, black banner stretching across a wall of concrete, then stared through its opening in surprise.

"Is this what I think it is?" I asked. Before us, towering storage units overflowed with rusting car parts. Doors and fenders lined the ground. Tires, wires, and random pieces of metal created a dilapidated chaos around an expansive, dark lot.

"Yep," Ruben said. "It's a junkyard."

We purchased tickets for thirty pesos, just over two American dollars, at a cafeteria table decorated with flags and electric lights. Sparks shot out from cut, metal barrels while we wound through a roped queue line. Before reaching the entrance, I learned why Ruben hadn't been sure just what to expect based on Screenville's billboard: he had never been to a haunted attraction before.

"Really?" I asked him in amazement. "The whole time you were in the States, you never went to one?"

"Nope." He gave a sheepish smile, eyeing the dark surroundings that reeked of oil. Random pieces of car stretched in every direction; it looked as though an automobile mass murderer had gone on a rampage, then stacked his mutilations into separate piles.

"You'll love it," I said. "They're totally different from the Day of the Dead shows." I opened my eyes wide. "They're *scary!*"

"I know..." he said, playfully flinching. "That's pretty much why I never went to one. I don't even like scary movies."

We handed our tickets to a worker dressed in a reflector vest, then entered a massive, steel storage unit.

"Yeah, I know what you mean," I said. "I couldn't even watch previews for them when I was a kid. I thought that my older brother was the bravest guy in the world for being able to watch them all night. Then one day I realized that he liked them because they were *cool*, not scary. And I've loved them ever since."

Before us, old tires formed a crude path along a cement wall. Orange flames flickered in glass jars, providing the only source of light and casting tall shelves of metal into shadow. Low, eerie music permeated the grounds. I felt as though Ruben and I had become the stars of a new horror film, one in which deranged killers chase an American tourist and her local friend into a Oaxaca junkyard. The ending, of course, would be bloodshed.

“This place is awesome,” I said, scanning it all. “And what a great spot for a haunt!”

“It’s definitely spooky...” Ruben whispered. He nervously peered down the narrow paths separating the towering shelves. After turning his attention forward once again, he paused before taking another step. I followed his gaze. Ahead, a girl slowly emerged from the darkness. She looked ghastly pale with dirty, matted hair falling over a white bathrobe. A dull scraping sound came from her slippers as she dragged her feet towards us. Ruben and I stared at her, moving not a muscle and holding her undivided attention.

“She’s creepy,” Ruben finally uttered.

“She *is*.” I looked at her in fascination. As she continued inching our way, I envisioned a young woman who had once been preparing a peaceful, Sunday-morning bath. Within moments, everything had gone horribly wrong; she had obviously fallen prey to some widespread virus mutation. She had collapsed on the bathroom floor, only to revive hours later as a decayed, animated corpse craving human flesh. I pictured it all while admiring her vacant eyes and eerie stagger. In them I saw the perfect portrayal of the undead. *This* was the type of character that I had grown up with. This was a star from late-night horror films and Halloween haunt shows. This was no smiling image of death, dancing in a *comparsa*.

This was a *monster*.

I turned to Ruben and was taken aback by his frozen stare at the creature.

“She’s great, huh?” I asked, nudging him.

As if suddenly remembering to blink, Ruben regained himself. He began to crack a smile. I led him past the decaying virus victim, who continued to stare at us after we had shuffled away.

“She was freaky looking!” Ruben finally said with a shudder.

“Yeah.” I nodded with approval. “Very well done.”

Farther along the corridor, long, transparent bags glimmered in the sparse light. They hung from the rafters with red smearing the inside of the plastic. I peered in one and saw thick rope binding together the cuffs of blue jeans and upside-down, black boots. Dark hoods were pressed against the bottom of each bag, concealing the identity of their wearers.

“They’re body bags,” I said ominously. “Murder victims suspended in the vaults of the junkyard.”

Ruben traced the outline of the fake blood with his finger. “Ewww...”

I stepped back, smiling at the display. “Very nice.”

We continued through the dark cell until strange spots dotted the cement. Blood-soiled sheets appeared along the ground, concealing large, man-shaped forms beneath. Ahead, a figure slowly materialized. I watched a distorted, male face come into view. A deep cut ran along his forehead, nose, and chin. Rotting, discolored flesh covered one eye, while the other glared at us in disgust. Additional scars along his mangled face matched stains on his faded jumpsuit. I could only presume that the vile creature had worked on as many people as he did cars—the hanging bodies and sheeted victims being among them.

Ruben gripped my arm, recoiling from the mechanic as we stepped his way. “Whoa...”

“Cool, huh?” I asked, stifling a chuckle.

“Yeah,” Ruben said as if in a trance. He released his grip, then smiled at the vision of horror. “He *is* cool.”

The path brought us through additional, disorientingly dark compounds. Gutted and crushed cars were complemented with whining organ music and smells of paint and oil. Creatures stepped out of the darkness, blood-stained and mangled, some wielding butcher knives threateningly by their side. They leered and crept towards us, then eerily stalked as we passed. I loved it all. It was the haunt experience that I had

grown up with: one built around living, syndicated nightmares. It was a far cry from Celtic Samhain rituals based on protection from spirits. Rather, I knew that these types of haunts had developed from the popularity of horror films and small, charity-run haunted houses in the 1970s. During this time, small haunt shows were run as fundraisers for Halloween. People walked through spook houses bearing the same level of scares as dark carnival rides or Disneyland's Haunted Mansion. But when the hit movie *Halloween* connected the American holiday to serial killers on the rampage, haunt owners saw an opportunity. They could make moviegoers enjoy the same excitement as the characters in the slasher films, running for their lives from psychopaths ready to hack them to pieces. The walk-through shows changed from playful skeletons and ghosts to murderers with axes and chainsaws. It was quite the transition—and one I'd always felt grateful to be able to enjoy.

As the trail wound outside, Ruben backed away from a set of deep, red eyes emerging from behind a tree. Yellow, razor-sharp teeth curled into a twisted smile and a plush, red nose looked almost comical in comparison with a shiny costume glistening in the night.

Ruben instinctively jumped back as the demented clown came fully into view. It smiled in delight at his reaction.

"That's messed up," Ruben said, clasping his hands to his chest.

I couldn't help but giggle, then gestured to the star of our dark theater.

"But he's cool, right?"

The clown's smile widened as if to confirm the sentiment. Ruben's hands relaxed as he took a step towards me once again, then nodded.

"Oh yeah," he said. "He's cool."