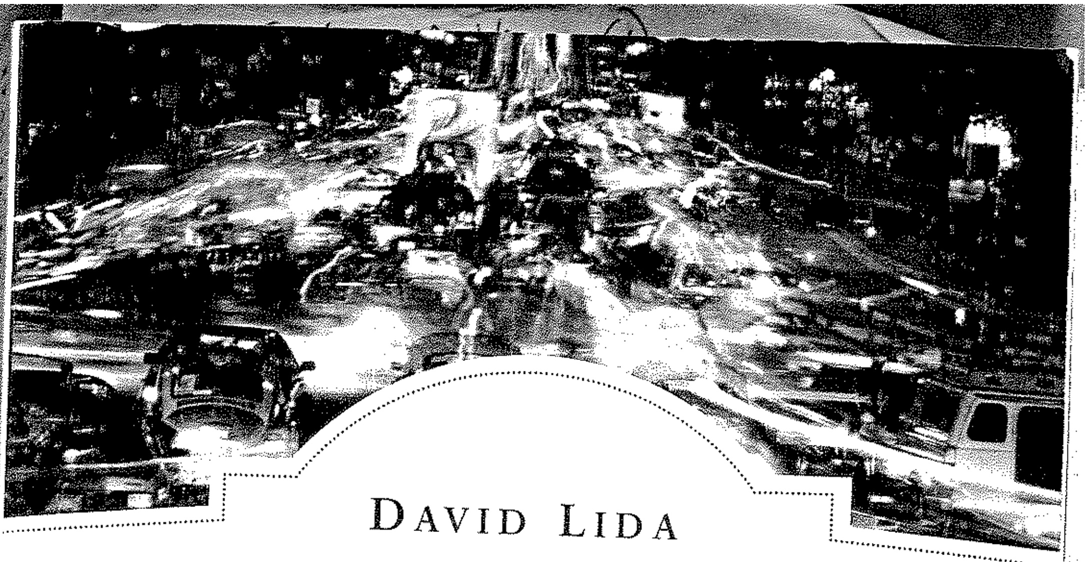

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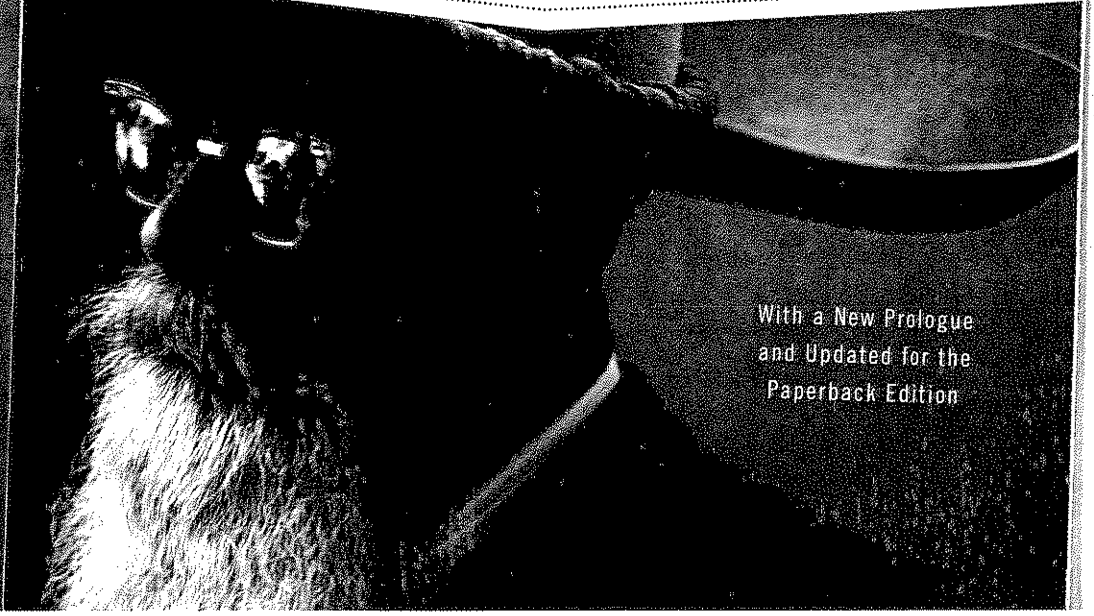

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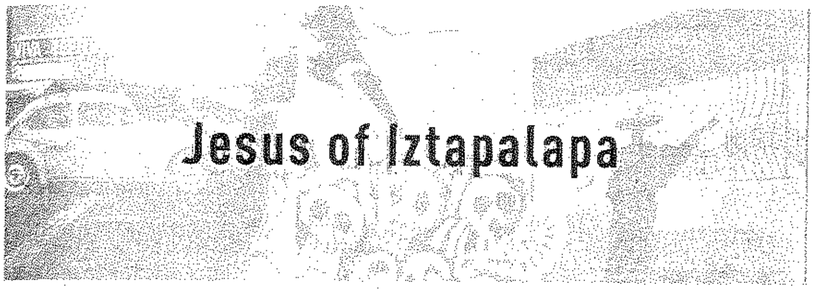

Jesus of Iztapalapa

In a glass-encased altar stands a life-size skeleton in a purple velvet robe. Its skull, ornamented with a pageboy wig, gazes eyelessly. Each finger of its hands is adorned with rings, its neck with gold chains. Surrounding its figure are skeleton statuettes and bills and coins of various currencies. Outside, at its feet, the skeleton's worshippers have left a miscellany of offerings: cognac glasses filled with tequila, flowers, candles, bottles of soda, packs of cigarettes, lollipops, plates full of eggplant. The offerings are meant to cure illness, attract abundance, improve sales in business, or bring back a straying lover.

People pass by constantly to pray to this figure, known as Santa Muerte (Saint Death)—alone, in twos and threes, sometimes entire families. There are altars to Santa Muerte throughout Mexico, particularly along the border and in the northern states. But this shrine—on Calle Alfarería around the corner from the Tepito market—is the most important in Mexico City. Its worshippers are said to include prostitutes hoping for protection against disease, children praying their fathers will be released from jail, and all manner of miscreants angling to escape arrest or eager for the death of their enemies. Cops on the take are also said to be regulars here.

On the first day of each month the believers arrive en masse, setting plaster statues of Santa Muerte on tables or atop squares of fabric on the sidewalk. Hundreds of visitors walk around and leave treats for the saint at these makeshift altars—chocolate coins, fake currency, cigars, shots of rum, Barbie dolls. Others walk around with spray cans of cheap perfume, with which they liberally douse the figurines. As the afternoon passes, the street becomes increasingly crowded. By nightfall when the prayers are chanted—"I come toward you prostrate, so that you will meet my needs; thank you for the favors I've received"—there will be about five thousand people, blocking traffic on the surrounding streets.

Officially disdained by the Catholic Church, Santa Muerte is the newest saint in Mexico, having been taken up by thousands, if not millions, since the beginning of the millennium. A woman named Enriqueta Romero founded the Tepito altar in September 2001, although she claims to have venerated Santa Muerte since 1964.

There is only legend about the saint's initial apparitions in Mexico. One story has it that the image of Santa Muerte first appeared in the early 1960s on the walls of someone's shack in Catemaco, a town in Veracruz known for its adherence to witchcraft. Others claim that there were Aztec acolytes of Santa Muerte in Tenochtitlán, the pre-Hispanic version of Mexico City.

According to the 2000 census, slightly more than 86 percent of Mexico City residents identify themselves as Catholic. But as the devotion to Santa Muerte indicates, for many *chilangos,* it is a sui generis, syncretic form of Catholicism—the imperfect melding of indigenous rite with Catholic ritual that began in the 1520s when the Spaniards toppled the Aztec temples and built their churches over the ruins. People all over Mexico City pray to saints. They'll attach their likenesses to chains around their necks or carry little cards with the saint's picture in their purses or wallets. This form of idol worship is a hybrid of Mexican popular culture with official Catholic dogma.

The Church has no problem with the cult veneration of saints, except for those, like Santa Muerte, that it does not recognize. The adoration of a saint who represents death is not surprising in a country that acknowledges mortality on a friendly, familiar basis each November 1. (The tradition of the Day of the Dead, in which families honor and remember their departed, has existed in Mexico since the Olmecs, the country's oldest pre-Columbian civilization. There are few places where one can get as clear an idea of what the holiday is about as the graveyard next to the church known as La Cuevita, the oldest and most important in the Iztapalapa section of Mexico City. During the day and throughout the night, families gather at each grave site, remembering the dead as they picnic and drink among incense and candles, extravagant bouquets of flowers and festoons of brightly colored balloons. Mariachis hire themselves out to play the favored songs of the deceased.)

At Tepito's shrine to Santa Muerte, on a typical first of the month, some of the congregants cultivate a rough look. Numerous young men have adopted the appearance of Los Angeles gangbangers, openly smoke marijuana, display hairstyles dyed and pointy with gel, and wear T-shirts with the sleeves removed, the better to show off their skeleton tattoos. The day I observed, at one moment one began to cheerlead the crowd in the following chant: *Te ve, te siente, la santa está presente* (She sees you, she feels you, the saint is among us).

But most of the faithful—including a teenage girl who hobbled along Calle Alfarería on her knees—appeared to be among the ordinary hard-luck hordes of Mexico City, without any of the evident flash of criminals. Regardless of the Church's official rejection of Santa Muerte, all of her followers to whom I spoke said they were Catholic, although they differed about whether or not their favored saint was actually a part of, or independent from, their professed religion.

All of them referred to their experience with Santa Muerte—who is also known as La Flaca (Skinny) and La Güerita (Little Whitey)—as if she were any other garden-variety saint of the church. They explained that they'd had a problem—drug abuse, family squabbles, or discreetly undefined "emotional" troubles—and that a friend or family member had suggested they pray to Santa Muerte to rescue them. "She's gotten me out of a lot of jams," said a middle-aged lady with curly hair and a black stretch top. "But you can't just think about what she gives you. You have to bring things back to her—tequila, flowers, maybe a cake."

One of the largest statues was commandeered by a young woman with light brown hair, smooth olive skin, and sad, heavy-lidded eyes. She reflected on death worship. "It's part of life," she said. "To venerate death means that you adore life, because death is the only thing that can take life away from you."

Santa Muerte is revered not only by those who congregate at her altar. After I left the Tepito shrine, I got into a conversation about the saint with the cabbie who drove me to a safer neighborhood. Soon after we began to talk, he opened the second button of his shirt to display medallions not only for La Flaca, but also the Virgin of Guadalupe and Saint Jude.

The latter—known as San Judas Tadeo here—has been Mexico City's unofficial saint since the mid-1970s. In a metropolis called home by so many desperate poor, it is hardly surprising that "the patron saint of lost causes"—or, as he is known here, the saint of "difficult and desperate cases"—is so popular. (Indeed, some of Santa Muerte's followers have indicated that they switched to her from Saint Jude. At a march in support of La Flaca in 2005, a reporter from the Associated Press asked one of the congregants why she prayed to Death instead of Saint Jude. "He's got his hands full already," she said.)

Saint Jude's Day is celebrated on October 28. Yet on the twenty-eighth of each month, an enormous throng gathers in his honor outside the Temple of San Hipólito, an eighteenth-century Baroque church on the border of the Colonia Guerrero, a neighborhood known for its high crime rate. So many thousands arrive that platoons of patrol cops are needed to prevent people from spilling onto Paseo de la Reforma and stopping traffic. On the twenty-eighth, the pews are removed from the church, which can only hold fifteen hundred people, and the masses are broadcast onto the street through enormous speakers.

The congregants—like Santa Muerte's followers—are evidently from the economically strapped sectors of the city. The night I observed, a few young men wore caps that identified them, in English, as the Tepito Kings, but most of the rest of those gathered seemed like ordinary citizens, the majority having arrived in family units. Offerings are exchanged: I was given a rose, a ribbon with the saint's name meant to be tied around my wrist, a tiny bag of chips that included a prayer to Jude and a ten-centavo coin. I was also handed a portrait of Jude by a man in clown makeup, and a lollipop with a piece of paper attached, suggesting that I return the following twenty-eighth with twenty-eight shirts to give away to the flock.

Saint Jude is also purported to be the patron of both the city's criminal element and its judicial police (who in many cases overlap). The *judiciales* have been photographed by the press observing masses in his honor, and for a magazine where I worked, a young writer named Sergio Tellez-Pon wrote about his encounter there with an observant thief one twenty-eighth of the month. The robber told Sergio that it is good luck to find an image of the saint while robbing a house, and that he comes to the church every month to pray that the cops don't take him to jail (which he referred to as "Reino Aventura," an amusement park outside of the city).

"You're not going to rob me, are you?" asked Sergio.

"You don't have anything worth robbing," said the thief.

Another Mexico City saint that has become hugely popular in recent years is San Charbel, a Lebanese Maronite who was enshrined in 1977 by Pope Paul VI. Born Youssef Antoun Makhlouf in 1828, he adopted the name of Charbel when he became a monk at twenty-three, and spent the last twenty-three of his seventy years as a hermit on a hill near the Saint Maron's Monastery in Annaya. Charbel is depicted as a white-bearded figure in a black hooded robe with his eyes perpetually downcast; according to one of his biographers, he never looked up, except for the occasional heavenward glance. Legend has it that he was once among a group of monks that suddenly found a poisonous snake in its path. Charbel politely asked the viper if it would be so kind as to wend its way elsewhere, and the animal followed his suggestion.

There are about four hundred thousand Mexicans of Lebanese

descent and their largest concentration is in Mexico City. They were the first to embrace San Charbel and include masses in his name in their churches, but his fame soon spread among other Catholics. Despite the saint's life of abnegation, he is meant to be especially good at fulfilling favors. One writes one's wish on a ribbon, hangs it in one of the churches of Charbel's followers, and the results are supposedly swift and sweet.

Even people who aren't particularly observant—or don't practice in the traditional manner—are among Charbel's Mexico City flock. I first found out about the saint from Miguel Ángel Zamora López, a balding man with a wry smile in his early fifties, who spends his afternoons roaming from cantina to cantina, selling pirated DVDs out of a satchel at twenty pesos apiece. One afternoon, he left me with a small card—called *una estampita*—that on one side bore Charbel's image and on the other a "prayer to obtain favors."

I wanted to find out more about San Charbel, so I invited Miguel Ángel for a drink. He told me he hadn't touched alcohol in seventeen years, so we settled on coffee. He offered me a roundabout version of how he had found the saint. When he was a small child, Miguel Ángel was placed in the care of a couple, supposedly friends of his parents, who subsequently moved without informing his mother and father of their progeny's whereabouts. At eight years of age, he began to drink vodka with pineapple juice and smoke marijuana. He went on his own after primary school, and worked handing out flyers for street photographers.

At seventeen, he found a job as a handyman at the city's railroad yards. "On the night shift we all worked with a bottle in our pockets," he said. Ten years later, he married a nurse, among whose clients were influential politicians, who helped find Miguel Ángel a job in the mailroom of a government ministry. He continued to drink on the job, but somehow managed to survive a decade before he was fired.

"I left home after that," Miguel Ángel said. "I didn't care anymore." He worked as a *viene-viene*, assisting drivers while they parked their cars and watching over them for a voluntary tip. For two years, he spent whatever he earned on drink and slept on the street. Finally he found his way into an AA halfway house. Once he was sober, his wife allowed him to move back with her and their son, and he began to sell movies in cantinas.

At a certain point, sales were particularly bad and Miguel Ángel found himself struggling with debt. In one of the cantinas, he saw a companion from his street days, a man who had survived by collecting empty bottles and selling them by the kilo. Except now the fellow was cleaned up, dressed in an expensive suit, sitting next to a stunning blonde, a bottle of champagne chilling in a bucket at their side. He told Miguel Ángel that he had achieved his success thanks to San Charbel.

At first dismissive, Miguel Ángel ultimately concluded that writing a wish on a ribbon and going to a church couldn't do him any harm. He went to one of the Charbel churches, in Polanco, a prosperous area of the city. "That night, I slept as if I were blessed," he remembered. "The next morning, I felt healthy. The sun seemed more radiant than ever before." Sales improved immediately. Now Miguel Ángel gives out San Charbel *estampitas* and pamphlets to his favored clients. He hasn't returned to the church, although he is considering another visit because sales have lately been slow.

"You go, you give it a try, maybe it works and maybe it doesn't," he said. "The worst you can do is not do anything."

Popular and beloved as Charbel, Jude, and La Flaca may be, the Virgin of Guadalupe attracts by far the greatest devotion and loyalty among *chilangos*. She is not only Mexico's patron saint, but was declared Patron of the Americas by Pope John Paul II in 1999. On her feast day, December 12, she attracts about seven million worshippers from around the world to her shrine in the north of the city.

There is no tangible evidence that she was ever more than an image painted on a cloak, conceived to persuade the Aztecs to convert to Catholicism. Legend has it that in December of 1531, in the hills in Tepeyac outside the city, her apparition was spotted by a humble native called Juan Diego (who likely never existed either, but was nonetheless declared a saint by the crowd-pleasing John Paul II in 2002). Prostrating himself at her feet, she declared herself the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe. She asked Juan Diego to tell the local bishop, a Franciscan friar named Juan de Zumárraga, to build a temple for her on that very spot.

No records left by de Zumárraga mention Juan Diego. According to the myth, the cleric was not inclined to believe the peasant and asked him to return with a tangible sign of the Virgin's existence. Juan Diego went back to the hill, where Guadalupe appeared again and pointed to some flowers, their existence miraculous due to seasonal frost. She suggested he present them to the priest as evidence. The peasant wrapped the flowers in his cloak and when he unfolded it before the friar, her image was imprinted on the garment. The cloak still hangs in the basilica, and is viewed by thousands each day.

Many have speculated that her face was painted an olive tone (unlike the ivory skin prevalent in Spain's sacred art of the era) to help convince the indigenous Mexicans that she was one of them. Other followers have come up with wilder conjectures—that her left foot is moving under her cloak (the indigenous traditionally worshipped through dance); that the face of Juan Diego can be seen in the folds of her garment, and so forth.

On any given day there are between two and eight peregrinations to the shrine. In most cases special masses—which cost between one hundred twenty and four hundred dollars, depending on how many singers and organists are involved—are given in the names of the pilgrims. Among the followers during a recent month were bicyclists from the town of San Isidro el Tanque; employees of the Le-Roy Laboratories; a group of podiatrists with the last name Hernández; the inhabitants of the Crisantemo 13 Housing Project; the most faithful dwellers of the hamlet of Tlalixtaquilla in Guerrero State, and an extended family called Estrada.

The last time I stopped by, the merchants of the Mancha Uno market in the Naucalpan district had arrived for an official visit, and before their mass had gathered at the huge plaza outside the shrine. They had set up their own altar and announced their presence with a thirteen-piece marching band that sounded more fitting for a bullfight ring than a sacred temple.

The shrine, which holds ten thousand, was packed. People from various social classes and age groups—crying babies, napping ancients, the impeccably dressed, and those wearing fraying T-shirts that had been handed out free during political campaigns—sat in pews or stood near the entrance.

Many in Mexico City consider themselves *guadalupanos*—followers of Guadalupe—whether or not they are observant Catholics. For instance, it isn't uncommon to see a tableful of drunks declaring themselves *guadalupanos* in the sort of cantina where Miguel Ángel hands out *estampitas* of San Charbel. (It is often said here that "not all Mexicans are Catholics, but we're all *guadalupanos*.") In fact, there is a cantina in the Coyoacán section of the city called La Guadalupana. The image of the saint is omnipresent in the city: on bath towels, coffee mugs, the label of a popular cooking oil, and so forth.

A Mexican's declaration of his *guadalupanismo* can be a form of nationalism, a symbol of his pride in his country as much as an affirmation of his faith. Unsurprising in a country with a matriarchal family structure, being attached to the Virgin also triggers feelings of the maternal caress, of blissfully leaving responsibility in the hands of a nurturing, forgiving mother.

Among Mexico's Reform laws of the mid-nineteenth century were the separation of church and state, the nationalization of church property, and the secularization of such functions as education, marriage, birth, and burial. In 1992, laws were passed to soften the perceived hostility between the government and the Church, but according to the Constitution, priests and religious organizations are still prohibited from intervening in political issues or supporting political parties, candidates, or associations.

Nevertheless, Mexico City Cardinal Norberto Rivera is a staple in the newspapers and on television, offering his opinions on nearly any subject to reporters. In the spring of 2007, the city's Legislative Assembly voted on a bill that would legalize first-trimester abortions. Never was the supposed separation between church and state so publicly violated. Mexican bishops threatened that Marcelo Ebrard, the mayor of Mexico City, and any legislator who voted in favor of the initiative would be excommunicated. Even Pope Benedict XVI offered his two cents, saying that excommunication of the lawmakers "seemed" to be within Catholic rules.

After the law was passed on April 25 of that year, Cardinal Rivera called it unjust and suggested that doctors, as a matter of conscience, refuse to perform the surgery. At the time of this writing, an association of Catholic attorneys continue to fight the legislation and Congress has threatened to prosecute some priests for defying the Constitution. Jose Luis Soberanes, the ombudsman of the National Human Rights Commission, took the issue to the Supreme Court, with the explanation that allowing abortion is unconstitutional. While the issue is in the courts, however, legal abortions are taking place.

Meanwhile, at the Basilica of Guadalupe, they began to distribute *estampitas* to anyone who contributes to the collection baskets. On one side is a depiction of the Virgin, and on the other, the following "prayer for the defense of life":

> *Beloved mother of the Mexicans, Santa María of Guadalupe, pray to the Lord that we understand that all existence is special. From its conception to its natural end it's an undeserved gift of your love and never an inconvenience, and there is no right or reason to justify its premature interruption. You who in your bosom bring the creation of life, we plead that you help us to value, love, and defend it, so that we will never dare to return without opening your extraordinary gift, your invitation to life, Amen.*

During Holy Week, there are various manifestations of the Passion in and around Mexico City, notably in the plaza of the Basilica de Guadalupe, in the Cuajimalpa and Naucalpan districts, and in the Reclusorio Oriente, the men's prison on the east side of town. None of these representations is as well known or well attended as that of the Iztapalapa district, which has reenacted Christ's crucifixion annually since 1843.

Throughout the week, scenes from the Bible are staged in the

district's central plaza and oldest church; in 2007 it was reported that Iztapalapa attracted three million visitors. On Good Friday, when the crucifixion was re-created, a million people flocked to the area.

The body of José Emmanuel Guillén, who stood in for Jesus, doused in stage blood and mounted to its cruficix, made the front page of the tabloid *La Prensa* on Resurrection Day. Nearly every day of the year, *La Prensa* has a bloody corpse on its cover, usually due to a nasty car accident, gang violence, or drug-related revenge. These photographs are frequently taken in Iztapalapa, which has the distinction of being the district with the highest crime rate in the city. Residents of the area are quick to point out that the central section of Itzapalapa, known as the Ocho Barrios, is quite safe, and that most of the misdeeds are committed in the peripheral zones. Nonetheless, the mere mention of Iztapalapa is enough to cause anxiety in many a cabdriver, and some refuse to go there at all, particularly after dark.

Guillén, a twenty-two-year-old accounting student, gave the impression of reticence, aloofness, and an almost overwhelming seriousness, perhaps appropriate for Jesus. Tall, slender, olive-skinned, and handsome, with heavy lids and bags under his eyes, he seemed distant, as if it were irritating to share the earth with mere mortals.

We spoke at the home he shares with his parents and a sister. His father is a doll manufacturer whose factory makes about thirty thousand dolls a month. The Guilléns live in a large house, which also includes a patio, a workshop, and even a donkey. Their living room is dominated by a 52-inch television set and an even larger rendering of the Last Supper, while shelves are loaded with dolphin, ballerina, and angel figurines in glass, plaster, and plastic.

Guillén claimed that from childhood everyone from the Ocho

Barrios dreams of participating in the Passion, regardless of what role he or she may be designated. Whether or not this is an overstatement, evidently Guillén nurtured that desire, having impersonated a leper, a "Hebrew," and the apostle Thomas during three different years before he was selected to play Jesus by the Holy Week organizing committee. Guillén competed against fifteen other men for the role.

To qualify to portray Jesus, you have to be a churchgoing native of the Ocho Barrios, over eighteen, devoid of piercings, tattoos, a wife, or even a sweetheart, and must assure the committee that you have no vices. To train for the nearly three miles he would have to walk while bearing a two-hundred-pound cross on Good Friday, Guillén worked out with weights in a gym, ran in Iztapalapa's green areas, and walked under the blazing spring sun in the afternoons. However, he emphasized that most of his groundwork was spiritual. He prayed every morning that his faith and love for Jesus would instruct him how to impersonate Christ. "Before rehearsals I deliver myself to God and try to act according to His will," he said.

Another reporter, accompanied by a photographer, was in the Guillén house at the same time. After the interview, there was a photo session, in which Guillén stood with a crucifix in his hand and looked heavenward. The cross was tiny and silver; although Guillén's father produced a substantially larger one that would have made a more impressive photo, the young man refused to hold it because he said it wasn't his.

Dressed in black pants and a white shirt, Guillén looked like a café waiter. His Jesus costume wasn't ready, so the photographer asked whether he would be willing to remove his shirt. Reticent, the young man telephoned the organizer of Holy Week. According to the photographer, after their conversation, Guillén said that if he wanted shirtless photos, "*tenemos que arreglarlo*"—it would have to be arranged—which is virtually synonymous in Mexico City for "you'll have to pay for it." This might have been his way of postponing, and hence refusing, to strip to the waist.

Guillén's otherworldly qualities served him impressively as Jesus. Dressed in a wig, a fake beard, and a white tunic, he seemed in a different league from his colleagues, who mostly spoke their lines in a listless monotone and were reminiscent of teenage students obliged to participate in a high school play.

Some of the extras—Nazarenes in purple robes, Hebrews in short tunics and sandals, Roman soldiers with fake swords—exposed basketball shorts underneath their robes, took photos with their cell phones, or munched on *tortas* during the events. Indeed there was a carnival aspect to the whole affair; the people who came to Iztapalapa seemed more interested in gawking, eating, and drinking than making any sort of show of spirituality. During the week, there seemed to be a lot more action around the food stalls (stewed corn with chicken feet is a singular Iztapalapa delicacy) and the kiddie fair, with its carousel and cotton candy, than in the staged pageantry mounted on two platforms. One rostrum was painted in red and gold and the other in purple and white; they looked like gaudy wedding cakes.

On Good Friday it took an awfully long time for the scene of Caiphas's judgment of Jesus to get started, with endless sounding of the trumpets. Yet when the scene began, the crowd, many sucking on lime and raspberry ices, seemed mesmerized. It was as if they were watching a movie of something familiar, a story their parents had told them about distant relatives. There was also the excitement of being in the vicinity of a famous person.

Jesus, of course, hardly speaks as he is interrogated by Caiphas and the false witnesses testify against him. Yet Guillén projected an incredible solidity and dignity as, in chains, he was pilloried and pushed around by the Roman soldiers.

As he was beaten, there was much stage blood (imported from Los Angeles, according to Guillén). You could feel a sadistic thrill among the throng as his back was whipped to a pulp and his face dripped red from the crown of thorns. Guillén, now carrying the cross, began his three-mile walk through the sweltering streets of Iztapalapa, accompanied by throngs of extras, most on foot, a few on horseback. The crowds were so dense on the side streets that one could hardly breathe, let alone move. But there was no doubt that the Holy Week proceedings elevated Iztapalapa's normally sordid reputation, however temporarily.

I caught up with Guillén about two months later. The experience had been joyous. "I wanted to play Jesus since I was a child," he said. "I remember telling my father. He said, 'Go for it, be a good boy, behave. You might have a problem with height.'" Guillén's father is only five foot six, but Guillén is five foot ten. He is the only reasonably tall member of his family. "Maybe Jesus intervened so I could do this."

There seemed to be a world of difference between the severe, tense-shouldered young man with whom I had spoken while he was rehearsing and the relaxed youth with the ready smile who later greeted me in the plaza of Iztapalapa. It was as if a battleship had been lifted from his shoulders. I couldn't help commenting that he seemed much more tranquil and easygoing than he had at the earlier date. "A lot of people have been telling me that," he said.

His fame was minor and short-lived. After Holy Week, he felt a

certain sense of nostalgia, comparing the experience to what girls must feel after their *fiestas de quinceañeras*—the Latino equivalent of the sweet sixteen party. "You've prepared for a really long time and then it happens and in one day it's over. What are you going to do on Sundays? We rehearsed for three months." He had been briefly depressed. "You don't know what you are going to do with yourself after all that emotion and elation."

Playing Jesus changed Guillén's conception of Christ. "I stopped thinking of him as this God with powers. It strengthened my vision of him as a man, as a human being, and all the suffering he went through."

In any case, he must have done something right. While I was in the process of correcting the galleys of this book, I read in the newspaper that Guillén had been chosen to repeat his performance as Jesus in Holy Week of 2008. Playing the role twice is almost unheard of in the annals of the Passion of Iztapalapa.

A well-worn joke here:

Q: How do we know that Jesus was Mexican?

A: Because he lived at home until he was thirty-three, he never had a job, his mother believed he was God, and he believed that she was a virgin.