

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Paseo de la Reforma 157-503  
Col. Cuauhtemoc, Mexico D.F.  
C.P. 06500, Mexico

Another Police Story

Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
Wheelock House  
4 West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, New Hampshire

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Dear Peter,

It was 10 P.M., a cold windy night in Mexico City, and I didn't want to go out. But I had promised to return the car I had borrowed from a friend two days earlier. Having grown up in New York City, I've never been at ease going out on city streets alone at night. As I walked the two blocks to where I had left the car, I passed only one couple. They were middle-aged, and had just left an Italian restaurant; their giggling and loud voices hinted at an evening full of wine.

The car I had borrowed was a white VW Caribe, similar to the VW Rabbit for sale in the United States. But when I reached the spot where I had parked it, a bright red VW Beetle and a burgundy Renault Mirage had taken its place. At first I doubted my memory, and walked up and down both sides of the street. No, that was where I had left it.

Mexico City's policemen are extremely efficient at towing illegally-parked cars. Where I had left it, however, was perfectly legitimate. As I paced back and forth for the fifth time, a night-watchman emerged from a nearby building.

"Excuse me senor, do you know if the police have been towing in this area?"

"Yes, in fact, at around 5 A.M. this morning, they moved all the cars on this street. The President was coming to inaugurate that new government building," he said pointing at a huge cube of cement across the street.

"And where did they take them?"

"To a car pound, surely."

"But you don't know where?"

"No senorita, I'm afraid not."

"Thank you senor."

"Good evening senorita, and good luck."

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Kim Conroy is a fellow for the Institute of Current World Affairs. She is a generalist, interested in current political, social, and economic issues in Mexico and Central America.

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I decided to leave the search until the following morning. Being nervous about the car's whereabouts, I slept poorly. By 6 A.M. I was up, and by 6:30, on the streets. Outside my apartment is the intersection of Reforma and Insurgentes. I asked the policeman directing traffic in which car pound I could find my car.

"Alta Vista, senorita, that's the pound that cars picked up in this area should be sent to."

Not knowing how far away Alta Vista was, I caught a cab and agreed to pay it the hourly rate - 270 pesos- or about U.S.\$4.00. Morning traffic was thick, making the four mile bumper-to-bumper journey a forty minute ride.

The Alta Vista car pound was no larger than two tennis courts placed side-by-side. At a glance, I could see that my car was not there.

"Excuse me senor, my car was taken from Rio Tamesis Street in the Colonia of Cuauhtemoc. I was told that it should be here, but it's not. Where else might it be?"

"There are many, many car pounds in this city. It could be in any one of them. I suggest you go to La Central. If it's not there, they should be able to tell you what pound it's in; they maintain a registry of all the cars that have been towed by the police."

Located in the very center of Mexico City, La Central is the capital's principal car pound as well as police headquarters. A long line of unshaven, poorly-dressed men waited outside one of the police station's side entrances. The morning was cold and overcast, and, trying to keep warm, some of the men shuffled from side to side. The car pound began just beyond the line, and stretched a good twenty by forty cars. It took more than twenty minutes to make a thorough check. Mine was not there.

"Excuse me, senor. My car was towed away yesterday. It was on Rio Tamesis. The President was to inaugurate a building nearby, so the police towed it. I understand you maintain a register of all the cars that have been towed and--"

"We maintain no such register, but your car should be in Alta Vista senorita," snapped the paunchy policemen who was in charge of the car

"Perhaps it should be, but it's not," I snapped back.

"It could be in any one of fifteen other pounds, but your best bets are Aculco or Troncoso. Then again, the police could have towed it, and parked it nearby."

"How nearby?"

"As close as possible to where you had parked it; that is, unless you had parked it illegally."

"I hadn't."

"I see. Well, good luck."

The third car pound had about fifty cars. Most of them were covered in a thick layer of dust; they had been there for several weeks if not months. Perhaps their owners had never been told of the existence of this particular pound.

My friend's car was neither in this lot nor the next. Having already roamed for three hours, I asked the taxi driver to take me home. Either it would be parked near where I had left it, or it had been stolen. In extremely low spirits, I arrived home, ate a late breakfast, and set out again.

As I walked down Rio Tamesis, I came upon the small bird-like man who had washed my friend's car only two days earlier. He was the porter of one of the apartment buildings on the block, and tended to be on the street at all hours of the day.

"Pardon me senor, I was wondering if--"

"Oh senorita, I'm so sorry! I tried very hard to find you yesterday morning. It was about 5 A.M. when the police came to tow the cars. They took yours too. I wanted to tell you before they took it away, but I only knew which building you lived in, and not the number of your apartment."

"So it was the police."

"Yes senorita."

"Well, thank God for that... And do you know where they took it?"

"No senorita."

"Thank you all the same. Thank you very, very much."

Well, at least it isn't stolen, I thought, so it must be around here somewhere. But a search of all the streets in a five block radius produced nothing. I decided to seek out local policemen, hoping that at least one of them would know where my friend's car had been taken.

"Good day officer, I wonder if you could help me. My car was towed yesterday morning from Rio Tamesis. It was not illegally parked. Do you know where they took the cars towed that morning?"

"Indeed, I was part of that operation. We had strict orders not to take any of the cars to the pounds unless they were illegally parked."

"Mine was not."

"Then it must be around here."

"How far is the farthest that such a vehicle would be towed?"

"Officially, there's no limit. Usually they try to park it near where they found it. But some have been left as many as twenty blocks away from where they were originally parked."

"If you see a white Caribe officer, with the license plate number DBV-976, please call me at this number. I will be more than willing to pay you a reward."

I walked on another several blocks before I came upon a second policeman. Once again, I explained my predicament.

"You say you saw the police tow your car away?"

"Not I, but a man who lives on the block where it was parked."

"And did he take down the tow truck's license plate number?"

"No officer. Why?"

"Well you know the police, they also rob cars."

He said it with a straight face. Stunned, I gave him a description of the car, my name and phone number. I also told him of the reward.

"I'll call you if I come across it."

By 11 A.M., I had covered a ten block radius, and spoken with five more policemen. It felt strange to be giving my name and phone number to so many members of an organization for which I held so little respect. I was at least twelve blocks from my home when I ran across a crew of tow-truck policemen. I had barely begun my explanation, when the policeman driving the rig interrupted.

"Well obviously it was stolen," he explained.

"No officer, a man who knows my car saw a police tow-truck take it away."

"Was he absolutely sure it was your car?" he asked suspiciously.

"Yes officer."

"Well then, tell me again from what street it was taken, the license plate number, and your phone number."

I told him.

"And there is a reward, you said?"

"That's right."

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"We'll get on the case right away. When we find it, we'll call you immediately."

By far, they were the most hopeful policemen I had come across. It was 12:30. The sun was high and I found myself perspiring beneath the heavy sweaters I had put on against the morning chill. The heat made me sleepy. I had covered a forty-block area to no avail, and decided to head home. But first, it seemed time to call my friend, to give her the bad news. If I were going to have to report the car stolen, as now looked probable, I would have to get the car registration, the insurance policy, and other documents from my friend. Even though the car was insured, I knew I'd be owing my friend at least US\$1000, if not US\$2000 to make up the difference between the policy's coverage and the cost of a new car.

In a different country, I thought, this wouldn't happen, would it? I mean, there was no doubt in my mind that the police had taken my car. I couldn't really prove it. But then again, even if I could, what difference would it make here in Mexico?

I was still lost in these thoughts when I turned the corner onto my street. There, right in front of my apartment building, stood a tow truck with my car slung up behind it. One of the policemen got out.

"Where have you been?" he asked, scoldingly. "We've been trying to call you for the last forty minutes."

"I was looking for my car."

"I told you we would find it, didn't I? You should have come home...I mean, we could get in trouble using our truck for so long in this manner. You know, returning people's cars isn't our regular line of work. Now senorita, can you prove to us that this is your car?"

"Well, it's not really mine, but a friend's car. She lent it to me. But, here are the keys."

The short, pear-shaped policeman, the same one who earlier had ensured me that my car was stolen, followed to watch me open the car. When the key slipped into the lock and the door opened, I felt like a modern-day Cinderella; the shoe had fit.

"Very good," said the policeman, "Now please check to make sure that nothing is missing."

I took a cursory look, and assured him that nothing was missing. In fact, nothing could be, as I hadn't left anything in the car.

"No officer, everything is fine. I really can't thank you enough. Thank you very much."

I reached into my pocket, and slipped him two one-thousand peso notes, worth almost US\$30.

"By the way," I asked, "where did you find the car?"

"Oh, it was at least three kilometers from here, on a small side street in the Colonia Roma. It was very difficult to find. Have a good day senorita."

There was only one way they could have known where my car was. And with my two thousand pesos, I had further fed their corrupt system.