



ASYLUM FROM THE MADNESS

THE MAKING OF THE FILM  
DEAD WHEN I GOT HERE

MARK AITKEN

## Preface

*When I worked at the newspaper, if you wrote a predictable story on abortion or say gun control you got tons of mail. If you really hit the long ball with a story, there was a heavy silence because no one knew what to say but everyone read the story.*

*Your film was met with a heavy silence at first. I think I know why: it used up all the oxygen. When *Death of a Salesman* opened in New York there was dead silence for one or two minutes after the final curtain. Arthur Miller was stricken. Then the entire audience rose with a single roar. Miller had used up all the oxygen.*

*The film is like that. Afterwards no one left. That is another sign of success. People linger when things work because they know once they depart they will lose this mood that they have all too rarely experienced. The film takes people to a place they did not know and did not expect to visit, the humanity of the insane.*

*Finish it. This is going to be better than good.*

Charles Bowden\*

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I read Charles Bowden's *Murder City* in 2011. The book is about Ciudad Juárez in Mexico, a city that frequently trumps Mogadishu as the world's most violent. Juárez sits in the epicentre of global free trade, just across the border from the US. The most lucrative trade is drugs and guns, although clothes, machines and people are also sold. The trade causes the line between these two countries to be very porous. On one side there is the *developed world*. We're told the other side is yet to be developed. On both sides, people insist on this line defining *us* in relation to *them*.

In a different world I stand in a queue on the street at a cash machine in London. A man sits on the pavement asking for money. People mostly ignore him. There is a clear line between the beggar and everyone else.

I catch a taxi in Johannesburg and ask the driver to stop at a cash machine so that I may pay him. He tells me it's not safe for a white man to draw cash in this part of town. He waives the fare.

Here, my skin draws the *line*.

I stand at a cash machine outside a shopping mall in Juárez. I'm flanked by two men armed with pistols. I withdraw the money and return to the car. These men are my protection from kidnappers who would empty my bank account, hold me to ransom and not think twice about killing me. This is a hard line. In Juárez, the hard line is everywhere.

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We can ignore the line. We can protect ourselves from those on the other side. We believe we're more fortunate than them, that they should be locked up, out of sight. Occasionally our paths cross but mostly, they are over *there* and we are over *here*. *They* are different to *us*. Or so we think.

On the other side they have problems that we may or may not attempt to grasp. Attempts at understanding lead to offers of diagnosis and solutions. Money, medicine, weapons, charity, words. We even propose to make the problem history. We cling to a belief in progress. But the problem never quite goes away. Wherever you go, always *us* and *them*.

For lack of evidence of change, it seems our solutions fail. But perhaps the solutions are nothing but a reflection of ourselves and have little to do with the problem. Perhaps they are an end in themselves. A proffered sponge of care and concern, self-serving, narcissistic.

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There is a character in *Murder City* called *Miss Sinaloa*. A diva driven crazy after being gang raped in Juárez by police and dumped in a mental asylum in the desert run by its own patients. The *crazy place*, where the lunatics run the asylum.

I want to know more about these people from the city of death who look at each other and ask what they can do to help.

So I visit this asylum in the desert. I meet Pastor José Antonio Galván, an evangelical street preacher from Juárez. I don't share his religious beliefs but he is one of those believers who works with the real problems. He isn't waiting for a solution. His diagnosis is simple: these people are in trauma. The way forward is for them to help each other.

This is a beleaguered promised land populated by outcasts. An asylum from the madness.

I meet a man who had raped his grandfather. Another who lived on the streets and ate dead dogs. Two sisters found chained to the floor; their parents having never even taught them to speak.

Questions about these people steep me in darkness and I am afraid. These people persist with their lives in spite of what remains best unimagined. They are the

light that remains. I watch them churn the daily menial tasks. They welcome me and tell me their stories. No one asks me for anything because they have each other. Their bounty dissolves the line between *us* and *them*. Here, the line is dissolved. I see this quickly and realise there is much to learn.

I speak with Chuck Bowden about my visit. I show him sequences from a film I want to make there. He tells me that he has wanted to make the same film for years but could never find the money. A film about a place where,

*'... pain is distilled into 151% proof essence. The happiest and most contented people in Juárez are in the asylum and it is not because they are crazy. It is because they are secure and surrounded by love.'*

I spend the next four years making the film.

Chuck collaborates in an understanding of that essence of pain and love. We struggle and mostly fail to find money. I tell Chuck our failings result from approaching people who act only from self-interest. Chuck says, *'this is pretty dull when you can live a life where you operate from curiosity.'*

A film about a mental asylum run by Mexicans in the desert doesn't fit whatever agendas the money people have. They are generally appalled by what I show them and respond with disbelief and discomfort. I squeeze the sponge of care and concern and receive a dribble of pity. I discourage pity. My admiration for these transcendent untouchables is not shared.

I realize I'm not working with metaphors. I'm working with poetic facts. The flies and filth and deaths don't symbolise anything. They are the product of a city that's gone insane. It is all profoundly indelible.

*Dead when I got here* is the film that resulted from these visits to the asylum. The title given to me by a man describing his arrival at the place. Now he has new life with purpose. The film is an artifact seamed with one story and one character. There are many more stories and they make up this book.

A city of 1.5 million where eight people are murdered daily with impunity should not herald people of light. Yet here they are - generous, kind, loving, crazy people whose impact on my life I humbly acknowledge in the following pages.



## Asylum from the madness

*The following pages are a free sample from the forthcoming book, including 25 colour photographs. Available at [deadwhenigothere.org](http://deadwhenigothere.org)*

*All profits from sales donated to Vision & Action (the asylum).*

### 12th August 2011

Before dawn each day a fire is lit to heat up water in a forty-four gallon oil drum. Blankets and clothes soiled beyond redemption are tossed to the flames. The dogs huddle together by the fire before the sun warms their bones.

There is a hole in the metal door leading to the men's main cell. A boy named Raúl has squeezed his head through the hole and watches activity in the patio before the cell door is opened. His head is like a giant doorknob with roaming eyes. He clears his throat, rolls the ball and spits. He laughs carelessly at the new day.

I follow Lusardo once more to the cesspit. People here have got used to me filming. I've become so relaxed the camera is an extension of my arm. I'm wondering how to show my gratitude. A film that presents these people in a dignified way would go some way but their needs are far more immediate.

The men shave each other with very blunt plastic razors. Those in cells push their chins through the bars. There's lots of bloody cutting and nicking of skin but barely a flinch. Blankets are washed and suspended on wires above the patio. The spasmodic flapping echoed in the chaos below. I see Khadar out of his cell on the patio staring into space. For all his isolation, he may as well be in Shanghai.

Raúl strikes a series of poses for me as I film. These range from muscleman to ballet dancer with a range of unknowns in-between. He poses as if for photos, each position frozen until I give him the nod. I'm not exactly sure what's wrong with Raúl but I'm told he has seizures and violent tendencies.

The day lags for me. I head to the kitchen. Gemma is kneading dough with as much love as a Mexican tortilla could hope to receive. A teddy bear shivers like a furry Frankenstein on a work surface that catches vibrations from the fridge motor.

Shadows lengthen. I find myself looking at this world in negative. I spot a wall with clearly defined figures, shadows drifting in and out like a puppet theatre. I have no idea why I haven't noticed this phantasm before. I film the shadows detached from their makers.

I follow a man incessantly scratching his bald head while pacing a wide circuit around the patio. His unshakeable shadow embodies his constant torment.

Everyone is rounded up and led to the cells. I film the men being counted. They huddle together on blankets on the concrete floor. The light is turned off and the door is locked. What goes on in the darkness is anybody's guess.

I stand in the fading light of the empty patio. A business of flies congregates on a wall extracting some form of nourishment. Raúl's head is out again from the hole in the door. He sees me and smiles. I film this lonely apparition and then he starts to sing Happy Birthday in Spanish. The plaintive sound limps around the hollow patio like the saddest song in the world. Raúl finishes and smiles at me. He doesn't seem sad at all.



## 24th December

A police car. A new patient. The man greeted like a long lost brother in and out of the asylum for years. His name is *Cholo*. He features in the photograph taken by Julián Cardona that inspired me to visit the asylum. Cholo says he's happy to be back. It's not safe on the streets. He'll be fed and have somewhere to sleep.

I film Josué and Memo in the same room they shared when he arrived. Josué lay paralysed in nappies on a gurney for eleven months.

*I asked you to call someone because I couldn't see anything. Everything went dark...  
I was falling down when I was sleeping, a black abyss.  
I woke up scared.  
I did cross the line. I went to the other side.'*

Memo drifts in and out of these recollections. A rock in a storm needs no memory. Josué craves affirmation of his teetering on the edge. I allow blinding sunlight to forge the two men in silhouette. Then I switch exposure so that the outside world is blasted white and their faces are revealed. Josué stares out of the window into blank eternity. Lint satellites orbit around Memo's face. The stars are with him.

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I consider options to connect Juárez with the asylum. Wondering months ago about filming from inside a police car, driving from Juárez to the asylum. If we could pick someone up from the streets we could connect the two places.

Josué suggests driving with the actual social worker that brought him here nearly dead five years ago. He says he's still in touch with the woman. My expectations rise.

We need to write an official request on letter headed paper to the hospital. Josué isn't familiar with a keyboard and every time I try to dictate the Spanish he vanishes on some errand.

People are dying after all.

Finally we drive into town where someone types the letter for us. Then to the hospital.

It's Christmas Eve.

I doubt anyone will make any decision to help us. We wait in A & E - not much different to those in London except here whole families seem to have been camped out for weeks rather than days. We present the letter to a man in a white coat. He glances at it momentarily and says, '*no es posible*' and walks away. Discussion isn't even entertained.

I ask Josué to buy a drug testing kit. I've been nagging him about this since I arrived. Because he administrates drugs to the patents, he's tested for drug use monthly. I want to film the test. The chemist won't sell him the kit, as he's not a doctor. I'm too exhausted to consider asking if they might test him there and then.

Josué asks if I want an injection for my illness. I refuse. I don't trust an explosion of antibiotics but still, I'm not getting any better.

My threadbare patience shows. Dumbly I cling to expectations and feel my hopes fragment with each failure.







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THE MAKING OF THE FILM

DEAD WHEN I GOT HERE

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