

The Long, Dark, Dead End Alley

4 January, 2008

Have you ever been in a new city, in a new country and done something that broke every safe traveling rule you've ever been told or learned?

Have you ever been in a new city, a gritty port city, a city renowned for danger around every corner, a city every native of the country you meet warns you about?

Have you ever been in a new city, a gritty port city, after dark, when all the storefronts were locked down, and the streets were empty except for the hunters and the prey?

Have you ever been in a new city, a gritty port city, after dark, and walked down a long, dark, dead end alley?

We have.

The Mercedes box straight truck was tucked up against the left curb, the back door rolled up. The cargo inside was not stacked, it was tumbled. The cargo looked like what in the U.S. would be euphemistically described as "fell off the back of a truck." Here in Valparaiso, it undoubtedly fell out of one of the tens of thousands of shipping containers stacked on the docks.

The crew unloading it didn't even glance at us as we pulled up behind. They were running laps across the street to the Liquidación store. From the way they carved through the traffic like Schumacher lapping backmarkers, this wasn't their first time running goods into this location.

We secured all the valuables in Jorge's Land Rover and slipped out into the night. The street was dark, the blast doors down, and the watchers on station. The only walkers were those who belonged there and those who would soon learn they didn't.



Photo by Stephanie Hackney

Jorge muttered, "I'm almost certain this is it."

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Steph and I glanced at each other. Not the most comforting words we could have heard at that moment, in that place.

Jorge took a few steps and exchanged some rapid fire Chilean Spanish with the crew wrangler. Like every conversation here it was so laced with local idioms and dialect it barely resembled the mother tongue. I sheltered Steph, close enough to react, but far enough away to prevent us both being an easy one-hit target.

Jorge turned back to us and nodded. We had the right place.

He led us across the street. It was not difficult. The traffic was getting thinner by the moment as the night closed in and the wet, bone penetrating chill of the Pacific rose from the docks and flowed down the gutters of this low lying neighborhood.

We turned right and moved down the sidewalk. We kept out along the curb, away from the dark recesses and the surprises they might hold.

Before we could absorb the plot of this night's sidewalk drama, who was the lead, what damsel would feel tonight's distress, where the story arc began and ended, we came to the gap.

It was a narrow opening, barely recognizable between the storefronts and you'd never know it was there if you weren't looking for it.

It was a long, dark, dead end alley.



Photo by Douglas Hackney

"It's just down here," Jorge said cheerfully, and led the way.

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These are the moments of world travel when you listen very carefully to your gut. If you feel anything, hear anything, even the slightest tingle, the softest murmur, you leave. You don't stop to ponder. You don't stop to discuss. You don't play out unresolved marital issues on the proxy of if or not if, you just go, right now.

We both felt and heard nothing.

We followed Jorge down the long, dark, dead end alley.

Why do you do things like this? Why do you walk down a long, dark, dead end alley off a murky, locked-down street in a gritty port city in an unfamiliar country?

Because that's the only place you find a little neighborhood café named J. Cruz.

And only in J. Cruz do you find an interior lined with kitsch and tagged with the name of every customer for the last 60 years.



Photo by Stephanie Hackney

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And only in J. Cruz do the old men still play the accordion.



Photo by Stephanie Hackney

And the Marracas.



Photo by Stephanie Hackney

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While they sing old love songs for tips.



Photo by Stephanie Hackney

And only at J. Cruz do they serve the world's very best Chorrillana.



Photo by Stephanie Hackney

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Sometimes life's best rewards take some courage to achieve.

Sometimes you must listen to your gut, swallow hard and press on.

Sometimes you must overcome stereotypes, bias, conventional wisdom and common fears to discover the best that life has to offer.

Sometimes you must go where others fear to tread.

Sometimes you must walk down the long, dark, dead end alley.

Chorrillana

A bed of French fries

A layer of fried onions with scrambled eggs

And on top is diced, sliced beef

With a side of red pepper sauce and sliced bread to sop up the juices

No tourists were harmed in the making of this story.

Kids, listen to your parents and don't try this at home.