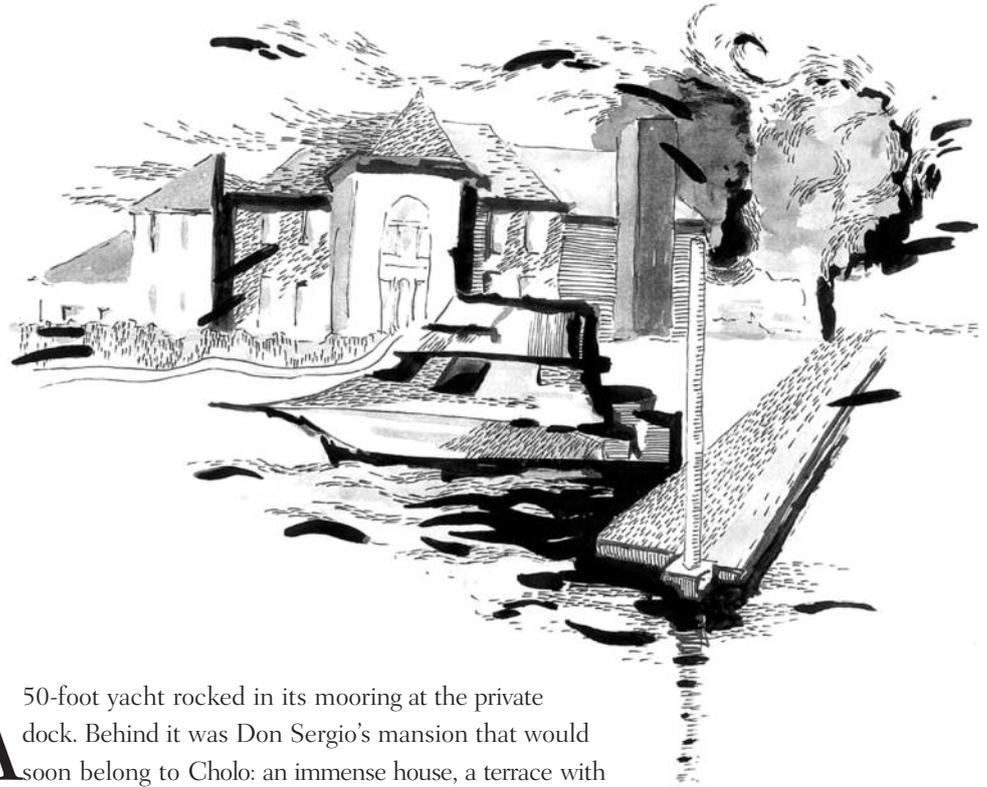


Janis Joplin's Lover*

by Élmer Mendoza



A 50-foot yacht rocked in its mooring at the private dock. Behind it was Don Sergio's mansion that would soon belong to Cholo: an immense house, a terrace with a view of the beach, a swimming pool and a pool house with a living room. Gregorio Palafox Valenzuela, alias Chato, alias Commander Fonseca, was meticulously inspecting the entryways, the patio and each room. Cholo, who was euphoric, didn't give a hoot about security, and David adapted without much fuss. They used only the left wing, three of the seven bedrooms.

From the day he signed the papers, Cholo was completely involved with the family. In just a few days, he showed Carvajal that he hadn't made a mistake: he bought, packed and sold as though he had been born for it. Soon, he won the respect of his partners and the government people he had to negotiate with. He became known as expedite: one day he was escorting a shipment and they were stopped as they entered Sonora. The dump-truck was filled to the top with Acapulco Gold; it was impossible to hide so much marijuana. Where are you coming from? asked the PGR federal narc. Just Culiacán, bro. What you carrying? Tomatoes. Got your permit? No, but we got

* Fragment of the novel by Élmer Mendoza, *El amante de Janis Joplin* (Mexico City: Tusquets, 2001), pp. 113-118. The editors of *Voices of Mexico* thank the author, his agent and his publishers for their permission to translate and reprint this text.

five hundred dollars. And they got through with no trouble. As part of his metamorphosis, Cholo wore a thick gold chain around his neck and a grotesque man-bracelet with his name on it. You, you son of a bitch. Next you're gonna put diamonds in your teeth. Chato made fun of his style but fell short of insulting him: Santos was his best friend and he owed him a lot of favors. On his way back from one of his trips to Las Vegas, he had managed to bring in the most important shipment of arms for the guerrilla movement: Smith & Wesson pistols and Kalashnikov rifles, ready for the assault.

David was determined to go back to Chacala. His friends were having a hard time convincing him not to go look for his money at the house on the hill. Cholo even had to lie to him: Look, you son of a bitch, I already went for them. The neighbors were having a party and there were a shitload of SUVs, *banda* and beer. I had to jump over the back fence and I went right to the hiding place. I found the hole next to the bougainvillea, but there wasn't nothing there: it was empty, my man Sandy. I already told you that the judicial cops searched the whole place. So, Cholo, lend me some cash for the ticket. Neither Chato nor Cholo were going to let him go to Chacala, but they couldn't tell him that directly: Look, cousin, I think you won't be able to get rid of my uncle's murderers. They're armed and probably they'd beat you to the punch. Besides, what's up, my man Sandy? Don't you want to see Janis again? In a month I'll get paid and I'll pay for your ticket to Los Angeles. Don't accept, whispered the reincarnate-able part of him that he had been listening to a lot lately. You can't postpone vengeance. Get them to loan you the money you need and that's it. Cholo, he said, buy me the ticket to Chacala. Jesus, you're stubborn, said Cholo, changing tactics. Okay, count on it. I'll also lend you some for the return trip. But just one thing: you can't take the risk with the rocks. Tell Chato that he should teach you to shoot

and that he lend you a pistol. Great idea, approved his karma. It has to be quick.

Chato took three days trying to get David to learn the different parts of the pistol. Despite his inner self's anger, he couldn't manage to memorize the necessary instructions. He often forgot to take off the safety and when he shot the gun it would jam. On the fourth day of his indoctrination, Chato gave up: You're not made for this, cousin. Go back to baseball. Every time he could, David reviewed Chato's lessons, pushed by his inner voice, which knew a lot about it. The bad thing was that his desperation was driving him nuts. Sometimes he'd go through the new house, water the plants, sweep and cook after working with Don Danilo, who thought it was great that he had two jobs. It's not a bad idea that you work as a night watchman. From the time he heard about his father's murder he hadn't even been able to rest by thinking about Janis. Whenever he took out the clipping, the reincarnate-able part of him berated him: How can you forget your father's death? Don't think about her anymore. If you fall into that woman's clutches you're not going to get revenge. He didn't know what to do. He would have liked to talk about it to someone, but who? He didn't trust Rebeca enough. He was embarrassed to talk to the old man about it. When Chato was in the house, he spent his time sleeping, and Santos Mojar-dín only showed up from time to time, with his increasingly sibylline bleary-eyed gaze, radiating that mistrust proper to criminals.

The only thing that allowed him to keep his balance was fishing and his dates with Rebeca. David continued his routine, in the daytime, he was a fisherman; in the afternoon he saw his friends; sometimes at night he went to the boat to wait for Rebeca, always taking Janis's photo. Danilo's daughter was no longer the same. Even if she didn't want to accept it, the break with Rivera had driven her over the edge. At first it was all the same: she made a date with him at the boat; she came on

strong and aggressive; she used blackmail to seduce David, but then she would stand him up or treat him like trash: My dog, don't you realize what I did for you? I left Rivera, sent him to hell. David was confused. He liked going out with Rebeca, smelling her aroma and watching her dance. But he didn't want to be unfaithful to Janis. With blind faith, David trusted that destiny would unite him with the singer, and little by little, Rebeca's animosity dwindled. The girl had no lack of people to have fun with. Actually, everybody was dying to be with her and not an afternoon went by that somebody couldn't be seen slinking over to her house behind old Manzo's back. Only David was unavailable, and that's why he interested her.

By the middle of August, everything came to a head. One day, Chato woke Cholo before dawn. I have to scram, bro. Can you take me to Navolato to the bus station? I'll take you wherever you want, bro, to hell itself if you want. Just there is fine. You need anything? Money, guns, weed? Nothing. Just take me to Navolato before it gets light. It won't be long before the rain clears up. They went in the Marquis. David felt very alone: they had killed his father; Cholo was changing; his cousin was changing. He was the only one who was still

the same, and there were the heavens that didn't change either. Were there nine planets? Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars...

His loneliness was not going to last very long. That same week it became known that the cell led by Commander Fonseca had made three hits in the state: they held up three banks and took over a toll booth for ten minutes under the nose of the police. Mascareño was a wild man. His superiors threatened to fire him or put him in jail for conspiring with the guerrillas. He was nervous and got an ulcer that didn't stop bleeding. We demand results, commander. Declare a state of siege. As a result, they increased surveillance and the number of checkpoints. They even detained two of Don Sergio Carvajal's drivers and closed the highway with no explanation. Right now we can't work. The government is negotiating certification with the United States and that complicates everything, explained Ugarte. All we can do is wait. With the highways being watched and Mascareño's team working at a fever pitch, both Cholo and Chato had to stay at Altata. Chato arrived ready to plan the assault on the military barracks. Cholo just wanted to relax. Every time he came back from fishing, David found his friends talking unconcerned. One said Chato was one of the



most wanted guerrilla fighters. What? Where? The other said that Cholo was one of the young up-and-coming drug dealers and somebody wanted to waste him. What do you mean? When? They got quietly drunk as though nothing was going on; they enjoyed the pool and laughed themselves silly under the yellow umbrella. What do you say, Sandy Koufax? Where have you been? Did you see your girlfriend? Oh, so you've got another squeeze. Janis ain't gonna like that for shit. I'm not up to anything with her. You'd better not be, you son of a bitch. You don't play around with

Janis. You want to marry her, don't you? Yes. Well, behave, then. And if it works out, I'll throw you the party.

Okay, whoever chickens out loses. When have I every chickened out, you bastard? Whatever I say when I'm drunk, I maintain when I'm straight. You just better believe that we're brothers following this son of a bitch: he wanted to go live in the middle of nowhere and there we went. He wanted a house at the beach and here we are. We shouldn't say anything more about it. No reason to, bro. I already said so. **MM**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Élmer Mendoza was born in Culiacán, Sinaloa, in 1949. He is the author of three volumes of short stories, *Mucho que reconocer* (A Lot to Recognize) (1978), *Trancapalanca* (Seesaw) (1989), *El amor es un perro sin dueño* (Love Is a Dog without an Owner) (1992); two chronicles of drug trafficking, *Cada respiro que tomas* (Every Breath You Take) (1992) and *Buenos muchachos* (Good Fellas) (1995); and the novels *Un asesino solitario* (A Lone Assassin) (1999), *El amante de Janis Joplin* (Janis Joplin's Lover) (2001), *Efecto tequila* (The Tequila Effect) (2004) and *Cóbraselo caro* (Make It Expensive) (2005). He is also a playwright. He teaches at the Autonomous University of Sinaloa and is a constant promotor of reading. He was awarded the José Fuentes Mares National Prize for Literature in 2002.

In the view of Tijuana-born writer Federico Campbell, since Mendoza's first novel, *A Lone Assassin*, he has become known not only as "the first narrator to deftly portray the effect of drug trafficking culture in our country," but also as the author of a penetrating, lively linguistic exploration of Mexico's underworld, turning it into rigorous literary material.

Mendoza was born in the Popular neighborhood, or Colonia Popular, which he mentions in his work as "Col Pop", where some scenes, for example from *A Lone Assassin* and *Janis Joplin's Lover*, take place.