A trip to DHL in Villa Hermosa Mexico August 1998.

While I was working in Mexico in August 1998, our Russian boat DSV Umka was ordered into the port of Dos Bochas for urgent upgrades of conditions, from awful to acceptable.

Things on board since the beginning of the job had been appalling. Chronic overcrowding because the Russian crew Capt down to AB insisted on single man cabins for them, whilst subcontractors were crammed four into two-man cabins, all sweltering below decks. Barely working toilets, never working TV (during the World Cup) hardly ever working air-conditioning and permanently working (round the clock) rodents, cockroaches and flies were among the many defects affecting that benighted hulk.

The crew remained on board during the works, but all subcontractors were taken off and housed in hotels in the nearby and pretty little town of Paraiso.

To take advantage of the cessation of work, for reasons other than our defective equipment, my Italian boss decided to send a damaged electronic component back to the manufacturer in Italy. So he asked me to take it in a hire car to the nearest DHL depot in Villa Hermosa, a small city about 70 km away.

Hertz delivered a white Toyota Camry to my hotel on the evening before I planned to go, and at sunrise on the following day I collected the package from the boat.

The boss was already there and he had wrapped the coil in cardboard and Impresub tape. He had also typed out the details, weight, measurements, consignor consignee, and full contact details. On a separate sheet, there was a map and directions to Villahermosa. The directions stopped at the outskirts of the city, so I guessed that it was up to me to find the DHL office.

My car was a sedan, something about the same size as a Ford Escort.

The coil was in the boot, I had my paper work, I had a full tank of gas, a full pack of cigarettes, the sun was up and I was wearing sunglasses. There was only one thing to do; so I hit it!

I didn’t know if there was a highway in that direction, the only thing I knew for sure was that Villahermosa was south of Paraiso, in the direction of a small city called Comalcalco.

I very quickly picked up signs for highway 186 heading in that direction, so I opened the window turned up the radio and cruised, that is until I hit my first ‘Topes’ speed bump.

Driving in Ireland, one is used to encountering speed bumps on residential roads, and we are also used to seeing signs warning us to slow down.

I discovered that day in Mexico that, sometimes there are signed warnings, mostly not, and the authorities are quite happy to have these speed ramps, on what we would consider major roads, but not motorways.

I had less than a second to react once I had seen it, so I did slam on the brakes, but way too late to avoid an uncomfortable jolt amidst the smoke and the squeal of tyres.

My equilibrium was upset for a few moments, but I quickly recovered and resumed my journey a little more tentatively.

Highway186 bypassed Comalcalco, but as I drew near to the town, I saw touristy type billboards by the roadside, advertising Mayan ruins, quite close by.

There was a photograph on the signs of ‘a partially reclaimed from’ the jungle, stepped pyramid and buildings surrounding it.

How very exciting I thought, something to visit on the way back perhaps?

On I drove through the lush verdant countryside, with jungle very close by on both sides..

The large green fronds of the tropics dominated, impenetrable, and I wondered what treasures lay waiting to be discovered behind that thick green curtain.

Some way further on from Comalcalco, similar roadside billboards appeared advertising those amazing Basalt Heads, encouraging tourists to visit the museum and La Venta Park

OMGosh would it be possible to see some of those incredible artefacts that I first heard of through the books of Erich von Daniken, in which he erroneously claimed that the sculptures represented extra terrestrial beings, who visited Mesoamerica to instruct the natives on how to build their stepped pyramids and temples, and to ‘tractor beam’ heavy bits of rock around as necessary, refusing to allow that the incredible architectural monuments of the Olmec, Mayan and the Mexica were built by humans, humans with vision and expertise.

My package would be dropped off first, but I thought to myself, as soon as I make my delivery I will find that Park and the museum.

I drove into the centre of Villahermosa; it was indeed a picturesque town, as the name implied.

I drove around the parque twice. It had the typical raised square, with seats, shade trees and the Iglesia dominating one side.

It was a busier town centre than Paraiso; also it was a bigger square and church.

In those days before GPS, one had to ask for directions, so after my double circuit of the centre, I stopped on one of the corners, intending to ask a shopkeeper for directions to the DHL office.

I went through the Spanish of it in my head, because I was unlikely to find an English speaker, so   
“Disculpe, ¿podría decirme la dirección de la oficina de DHL por favor?” I figured that even if I got it arseways, I would sound lost and polite,.

There were three roads leading off from where I was parked, and on one of the corners there was a music shop, selling all the latest CDs. This was just one of the many thousands of small music emporiums, trying to assuage the seemingly insatiable musical appetite of Mexico.

I had witnessed this phenomenon in Carmen during my stay at the Acuario.

Each store plays music a from speakers outside, and I fully expected as I turned my radio off and swung the driver’s door open, to hear Juan Gabrielle singing Asi Fui , his latest runaway musical success.

But, what do think I heard? Only the Corrs ‘Give me a Reason’.

Well I couldn’t help having a little smile to myself, so I sat with the door open listening, waiting for the ubiquitous diddly idly di bit.

I saw it as an omen of good fortune, a blessing on my little trip of exploration.

I just had to seek directions from the pretty little girl, almost lost behind the CDs, hanging on the walls and ceiling in prodigious profusion, and piled high on the counter of the tiny record store.

The shop was more like a big stall, which I imagined would be folded up at night, thrown in the back of a pickup and driven off somewhere.

I had to bend almost double to go in, and even so, the see-through cellophane packages old CDs and tapes, trailed along the back of my head and neck as I was ‘tractor beamed’ in almost by the most beautiful dark eyes imaginable, which locked on to mine before I even crossed the threshold.

She drew me in, her olive skin, her deep dark eyes, her black shiny hair, a bare smooth be-bangled arm outstretched towards me.

One of the most beautiful and tiny things I had ever seen.

As I took her hand and blurted out my prearranged question, she held me with those incredible eyes and intoned “buenos dias alto, cómo estás?”

She held my hand and then brought her left hand up, to begin stroking it gently.

As she stroked, she held my eyes and smiled up at me.

“Ah si, La oficina de DHL está a Dos cuadras arriba a la izquierda,  
she broke off momentarily to gesture in the direction the “dos cuadras” (two blocks up, on the left) lay.

She then resumed, in what was the most delicious and sensual manner, even if it was completely innocent and not meant as such.

I was utterly captivated, and it was she who eventually broke the ice.

Continuing to stroke my hand gently, stare into my eyes and smile, she asked me

“Gringo?” “¿Eres Americano? When she spoke, the tips of her front teeth appeared briefly, pearly white against the ruby red of her lips.

“No, soy Irlandés, de Irlanda.”

She looked at me quizzically, “Irlanda? Inglaterra?”

“Proxima Inglaterra” I answered.

“Ah, bueno” she said.

I was feeling a little bit awkward, not really sure what the hand stroking was about, so I gently and reluctantly withdrew mine, smiling as I did so, and asked her for a CD of Juan Gabrielle.

She produced from behind her counter, a double album, which cost me eighty peso’s, about eight dollars.

The huge hit, Asi Fui, was on it along with a collection of his music, some live, mostly studio, all of which were to become dearly loved by me over the intervening years.

The actual double case with discs is somewhere in a box, but I have its ghost in my I tunes music collection and in the cloud.

Songs from it come around every so often on my ever playing shuffled playlist, and when I hear one, in my mind I can I see the sleeve art with the now dead singer, flamboyantly swirling across the stage, mic in hand, thrilling the crowd at the Opera House in Mexico City.

I recall instantly buying the album, and that beautiful girl in the record store on the Parque in Villahermosa Mexico, her stroking my hand gently allowing me to fall into her beautiful dark eyes. I remember the Corrs, and as I backed out with a “muchas gracias hermosa mujer, adios” her farewell “Mi nombre es Lourdes Igualde, adios mi Irlandés” (goodbye *my* Irish.)

It was only when I reached the car that I realised that she had told me her name, it was Lourdes Igualde.

The DHL office was indeed two blocks up and on the left, so I delivered my parcel, got a copy of the waybill and made straight for La Venta Park.

It had crossed my mind to swing by the music shop and renew acquaintances with Lourdes Igualde, but my life was complicated enough at that time, so I resisted the temptation and headed off to see the giant basalt heads.

The end.