

where the blood goes

MEXICO HAS ONE OF THE HIGHEST MURDER RATES IN THE WORLD, BUT ONLY ONE PERSON QUALIFIED TO CLEAN UP AFTER THEM. HIS NAME IS DONOVAN TAVERA.

*Writer Tim MacGabhann
Photographer Bénédicte Desrus*



*This page
Tavera inspects the scene before carrying out a forensic cleaning in Mexico City. The body of a man in his 50s was found on the floor of his mother's bedroom, days after he had died of an intestinal obstruction.*

THE ALLEY IS LOUD FOR 1AM ON A MONDAY. A STEREO BLASTS RAUCOUS BANDA MUSIC, MACHINE-SHOP WORKERS SWAP GAGS OVER THE BONNET OF A CAMRY, AND A COUPLE OF SLEEP-DEPRIVED DOGS EXPRESS THEIR UNHAPPINESS AT BEING KEPT AWAKE. PARKED ACROSS THE ROAD IS A BATTERED VOLKSWAGEN JETTA.

.....

Donovan Tavera is stooped over its open boot. Forty-five and with the hefty build of a boxer gone to seed, he is Mexico’s first – and so far only – government-recognised forensic cleaner.

He removes a metal case containing four coloured vials – just a fraction of the 370 chemical formulas he has invented at his Texcoco home-lab over the last 17 years. Each formula, whose chemical compositions Tavera guards zealously, is calibrated to eradicate the trace of a particular tragedy, from house fires and compulsive hoarding to murder and suicide.

He lifts a vial and tinks a clean a fingernail against the glass. “Blood is dangerous,” he says. “Most cleaners – unofficial cleaners – just deal with the stain. But even when that stain’s gone, you’ll find HIV, tuberculosis, hepatitis still live at a scene. And when the heart is damaged you’ll find pericardial fluid.” He stops for a moment, nodding towards the upstairs window behind us. “The man upstairs died sometime before he was found, so we will need this bottle.”

THE AIR IS THICK WITH CARBON MONOXIDE, WHICH IS RELEASED WHEN BACTERIA FEED ON DRIED BLOOD.

He props another vial on its end. “Shootings and stabbings cut through multiple tissues: blood, bone, viscera. You need a different formula for each.” He shrugs. “The police didn’t say what happened to this man, so we can’t take chances.”

A lot of the mess Tavera has to clean up tonight has been left by the police: boot prints scuff the floor, and fingerprint dust coats the plate of stale tortillas on the kitchen table. The victim’s son, a lawyer in his mid-30s, seems as shaken by his dealings with the officer as he is by the experience of finding his father’s body in a pool of blood in his bedroom. “We have no idea what happened,” he says. “The police told us so little, and hinted they might arrest us as suspects if we didn’t pay them off.”

Tavera paces the upper floors, taking notes on the affected areas. The air is thick with carbon monoxide, which is released when bacteria feed on dried blood. He has his hazmat suit on, and blue booties cover his dress shoes. A ventilator mask hangs around his neck.

“You can stay, if you like,” he says to the client. “Watching the cleaning can be cathartic. It helps with the mourning process.” The son’s eyes track over the black lake of dried blood stretching from the corner of the bedroom past the steel legs of his father’s bed. He shakes his head.

Alone in the room, Tavera sets to work, slitting open the stained mattress with a box-cutter and wrapping the contaminated

fabric in a bag of its own. “The worst job I ever had,” he says, “was in La Del Valle. A robbery went wrong, and a whole family was murdered. I could imagine everything that had happened from the stains the victims left, like it was a film in my head.”

He bends to the bloodstain, spraying formula. When the dried blood begins to soften, Tavera gets to his feet and scrapes at the stain using a squeegee screwed onto a broom-handle.

“On the job, my emotions freeze,” he says, stooping to the edge of the stain to scoop up a handful of dead cockroaches. “I don’t notice the time pass: there is too much to do. Once the contaminants are gone, my job becomes that of a normal cleaner – making the room look as though nothing tragic happened there.” He stands up. “‘Liberating the scene’, police call it, when the investigation’s closed and I’m allowed in to clean. But what I do is the real liberation: not a smell, not a trace, not an atom left; the crime blown away, like a strange dream.”

The rim of his ventilator mask fogs over with sweat, and the hazmat soon clings to his body. The tinny roar of Black Sabbath rings from a pair of earphones that hop against his torso with every motion of his shoulders. At the end, when he pops off his mask and sucks in a lungful of air, the music on his headphones is Bach, and the room smells like new.

>>

This page, from top Tavera’s forensic cleaning kit includes around 370 formulas he has devised to carry out his work. The chemical bases for some of his formulas can cost up to \$8,000.

Cleaning the scene of an unsolved homicide in Cuernavaca, Morelos, one of Mexico’s most dangerous cities. The victim was a retired economics lecturer from the local university. The clean-up began eight months after the death.





Above
Tavera prepares one of his secret formulas in the utility room behind his kitchen of his home in Texcoco, Mexico.

<<

Outside the house, the victim’s son shakes Tavera’s hand, his shoulders out of their slump, his posture open. “My clients look worn out when I meet them,” Tavera says. “You need a good bedside manner in this business. I read a lot of sociology and psychoanalysis – Durkheim on suicide, Freud on mourning – to be sure that I treat them right.”

Back in the car, driving west towards the city centre, he lights a cigarette. “Night drives relax me,” he says. “If there’s an emotional toll, these drives solve it. Daytime, I stay home with my daughter. She’s too young to be upset by this work: she tells her classmates, ‘My Daddy cleans up dead people.’ I like helping her with the homework. We’ll play with the dog before she goes to school, and then I pick her up in the evenings. Texcoco is becoming dangerous, so it puts my mind at ease to collect her myself.”

Before he was a forensic cleaner, Tavera was a bodyguard. When the work became too demanding, his wife pushed him to

follow his dream of being a forensic cleaner. “And so I did,” he says with a matter-of-fact shrug. Almost 20 years later, his work has taken him from low-rent neighbourhoods in neighbouring states to sleazy motels in Tijuana and high-class areas of the country’s capital.

“There’s very little awareness of forensics in Mexico,” Tavera explains. “To get clients, I have to travel to police precincts and drop off cards. At first the officers look at me like I have two heads. But once I explain they get a finder’s fee, they tend to grasp it.” He shrugs. “I could go to the U.S. and charge \$400 an hour rather than \$400 per job, but Mexico needs this work. One day, when enough word is out there, my wife wants me to start a forensic cleaning school. We have the expertise. We just don’t have the exposure.”

For now, the company Tavera founded, Limpieza Forense Mexico, is a family affair: Tavera’s mother is the firm’s accountant, his father and his uncle are his assistants, and his younger sister is employed as a specialist

in cleaning up after home fires. “I never had trouble explaining my work to them,” Tavera says. ‘I’ve wanted to do this since I was 12.’ He remembers the moment the idea took hold. “One day, I looked down from our apartment and saw a man’s body, his shirt off, blood pouring out of him into the gutter beside a taco stand. When I asked my mother, ‘Where does the blood go?’ she couldn’t answer. So I decided to find out.”

With no formal training available, Tavera began to teach himself, poring over old books, obscure manuals and the Sherlock Holmes novels he could get at his local library. “I spent my adolescence in the library and in our garage,” he explains. “When my first formula worked in dissolving some cow’s blood I bought at the butcher, I knew that I had a future. I wrote to coroners and doctors with all sorts of questions. The ones who replied became my mentors.”

Since he launched his business back in 2001, Mexico has started to take the task of forensic cleaning more seriously: private universities now enjoy a roaring trade in forensic enrolments. Still, the application of these sciences is behind the pace of the violence sweeping Mexico: last year, government figures recorded an average of 70 murders per day.

Forensics bear the brunt of this systemic failing, with mortuary freezers in Ecatepec and Acapulco – two of the country’s most violent cities – sometimes packed with four or five bodies per tray. For Edgar Elías Azar, president of the Mexico City Court Service, Tavera’s work is a pioneering effort “in a field that leaves a lot to be desired.” If the state employed enough cleaners, that would signal it was taking the issue of law and order seriously. “But for the moment, Tavera’s example is all we have.”

His coffee finished, and the morning traffic beginning to thicken, Tavera climbs into his car and heads home, in time for his daughter’s school run and a breakfast debrief with his wife. “My family keeps me going,” he says. “The nights where I don’t have work, I love to put my daughter to bed and fall asleep in front of the news beside my wife. I hear so many horrible stories at work. I’m lucky I can forget them at home.”

He checks his phone at every traffic light, hungry for the adrenaline high of his next job. “It could be anything,” he says, cruising through the half-dark, eyes flicking between his phone and the windscreen. “Anything can happen in this country.” •

TOOLS OF THE TRADE



3M 6800 VENTILATOR MASK

“The same kind used by industrial cleaners, these are important because blood-borne diseases are often alive at a scene, and you don’t want to breathe these in. One of the formulas I apply to dried blood is particularly harmful to the eyes and lungs, too.”



GRAINGER KLEVER XCHANGE BOX-CUTTER

“These have a slightly tougher blade than the cheaper ones, and I don’t know whether I’ll need to cut through a bloodstained couch, some fungus that’s grown at the scene, or a mattress cover, so it’s best to have a strong one.”



HOME DEPOT FLO-MASTER SPRAYER

“Half a litre of formula is enough to shift even the biggest stains. Because this is polyethylene terephthalate, the plastic doesn’t corrode, so I can reuse it, and the adjustable pressure means I can blast off crusts of matter.”



2” AND 24” WALMART SQUEEGEE BLADE

“Once the residues have been softened and dissolved by the formula, I’ll scrape them from the floor – as if they were any other stain – then disinfect them with another formula. After that, I clean the entire floor with the larger squeegee.”