

OUT OF SAN DIEGO

If you drive west out of San Diego on Route 8, long after the breeze off the ocean dies and the salty smell of the water is replaced—or smothered—by the dust you inhale, you will eventually come upon a one-lane road on the left about halfway between El Centro and Yuma. There is no sign indicating the road's name; however, there is a weathered marker on a rusty metal pole which reads *Bell City—50 Miles*. Turn left and follow the arrow on the sign, and you will travel through open range interrupted by a few small, dusty towns until, after about thirty miles, you reach a smaller, dustier town named Cordoba.

They say a dry climate is beneficial to your health. If that is true, then, judging by the lack of vegetation and the abundance of dirt and dust blowing around and covering everything that wasn't moving (and a few things that *were* moving, like me), then Cordoba must be one of the healthiest places on earth. But I did not go to Cordoba for the climate. Rather, I had an urge to leave San Diego behind for a day and visit an old friend.

I became a resident of San Diego courtesy of a formal invitation from the U.S. Navy. This invitation, called a draft notice, informed me that my freedom was in peril if I declined to accept the generous offer extended by the government of the United States. Needless to say I accepted, and four years later, looking for employment after my discharge, I discovered with disbelief that my qualifications as a boatswain's mate did not translate well in the civilian marketplace. The duties of a boatswain's mate, as every sailor knows, consist of three primary functions: If it moves, salute it; if it doesn't move, move it; if you can't move it, paint it.

Having decided my qualifications were limited for any line of work, I decided to open a practice as a private investigator in a nondescript office in an undesirable neighborhood.

When I say I am a private investigator, my personality and experiences are not to be confused with private investigators you may be familiar with from books or movies. I will never be mistaken for Lew Archer or even Miles Archer. I am not much of a fighter and even less of a lover. Unlike Lew I have never been punched in the face, and unlike Sam Spade's partner, I have never ended up dead in a San Francisco alley. I cannot even favorably compare myself to the actress Anne Archer, who, in the movies, sometimes got her man.

My practice has mainly been limited to responding to wrong numbers, playing solitaire, and occasionally following a husband or wife suspected of infidelity, most of my time spent slouched down in my car with a cup of coffee, a Kodak, and a Snickers bar.

Deciding to get away for a day, I went to Cordoba to connect with an old friend from my Navy days, Ben Nye. Ben was now the mayor of Cordoba, and he had invited me for a visit to catch up on old times. Having somehow lost the six of hearts from my solitaire deck, I thought the timing was right to accept the invitation.

Beside the main road that enters Cordoba from the south—the road previously described—you notice a small, wooden sign which at one time read *Cordoba—Pop. 73*. Sometime in the past the “73” had been crossed out by a knife and replaced with the words *goes the weasel*. A street sign notifies visitors that they are now traveling on Main Street.

The commercial district of Cordoba consists of several small businesses, three of which surround the main intersection of Main and Third. The general store sits on the southwest corner of Main and Third. Across Third Street from the general store, there is a tiny gas station. On the opposite side of Main Street and a few doors down from the general store, there's one of those

old-fashioned metal diners shaped like a railroad car.

It was at the gas station that I made my first stop in Cordoba. My visit was precipitated by a small boulder disguised as a big rock that attacked the undercarriage of my car as I approached the town. The damage required me to wobble my way into the gas station with minimal haste.

No one was in sight when I pulled in. In case someone was watching from inside the station, I got out and stooped and looked at the underside of the car on the driver's side, trying to look like I knew what I was looking at, which I didn't. No one appeared, so I looked the place over. The store was a rundown wooden shack with a sign above the door that read *Hector's Gas Station and Bait Shop*. Out front was one old gas pump. When I say old, I determined this not just by its ancient appearance but by the fact that, rather than listing several octane grades, it offered only two choices—leaded or unleaded.

Still no one appeared, so I headed for the shack. I thought briefly of peering through the window to see if anyone was in, but alternate layers of dirt, grime, and dust eliminated that possibility. Instead I went straight for the door. A bell attached to the inside top of the door announced my arrival and wakened a slight man who looked to be in his twenties. He had been sleeping in a plastic and aluminum lawn chair in a corner of the shop.

After shaking the cobwebs away caused both by the sleep and the lack of sanitary maintenance applied to the room, the man said, "Hi, what can I do for you, gas or worms?"

"Neither. I ran over a rock on the way into town and damaged my car. Are you Hector?"

"Hector Suarez, that's me," he replied, followed by, "I better take a look at the car, Mr.—"

"Forbes, Milo Forbes."

Hector Suarez was a man of medium height but exceedingly thin. His appearance and speech suggested he was a Mexican American. He had a friendly grin and manner and a handsome, if thin, face marred only by the condition of his teeth (or rather, lack of teeth) exposed by his smile. Whether he lost half his teeth to poor care, disease, or fisticuffs, I have no way of knowing.

“I’ll take a look at your car and be back in a minute, Mr. Forbes.”

He stretched slowly and, just as slowly, left the shop and sauntered outside. This gave me a chance to get a better look at the room.

The shop was empty except for the lawn chair, a long, folding card table to the right which was evidently used as a countertop, a battered cardboard box to the right of the counter, and an empty cigarette machine to the left, which, in older and better times, had vended Camels, Luckys, and Chesterfields for thirty-five cents. The floorboards were crude wooden slats spread loosely across the ground with the dirt below showing between the boards.

I walked over and looked inside the cardboard box. Inside was a layer of dirt which was almost completely covered with earthworms. Having no mind to explore this further, I decided to return outside to check on Hector’s progress. However, as I turned, the bell on the door announced his return.

“Looks like you bent the front axle,” he offered.

“Can you straighten it?”

“Not me, Mr. Forbes. I’m not qualified to work on foreign cars.”

“It’s a Buick!”

“Doesn’t matter,” Hector replied. “I don’t know nothing about domestic cars either or any other kind.”

“Where do I go from here?” I asked with a sinking feeling.

“I can call over to Bell City and have the car towed. There’s a garage over there that can handle the repairs.”

“Any idea how long that will take?”

“I can get it towed this afternoon, but it will probably take a few days to fix it.”

“I guess that will have to do. Is there any place I can get a room in town, and can you tell me where I can find Ben Nye?”

“I saw Ben heading to the diner a little while ago,” Hector answered my last question first, “and there’s a boardinghouse on Fourth Street.”

“Thanks. I see you sell worms. Is there any place to fish around here?”

“Not really. There’s a reservoir northeast of here but it’s quite a drive.”

“So I guess you don’t sell many worms?” I reasoned.

“Not many. The worms just crawl up through the spaces between the floorboards. I don’t like killing them, so I figured I would sell them instead. Mrs. C—that’s Mrs. Cavendish—over on Fifth Avenue has some barn swallows living in the roof of her house and buys some worms from time to time.”

“Fifth Avenue?”

“Yeah, there’s only five streets off of Main Street. Used to be named First Street to Fifth Street, but when Mrs. C moved into a big house on Fifth Street, she made the mayor change the name to Fifth Avenue. She’s a rich lady from San Francisco and sort of runs the town.”

“The squeaky wheel gets the grease,” I replied.

“Don’t worry,” Hector came back. “They’ll probably grease your wheels when they fix the axle.”

Rather than try to explain, I moved on.

“That explains the worms, but if you don’t mind my asking, how does someone who knows nothing about cars end up owning a service station and selling bait in the middle of the desert?”

“Well, Mr. Forbes,” he replied, “I don’t have any education, so there wasn’t much else I could do. Also I had a little trouble with the immigration people, so I figured I would be better off at an out-of-the-way place like this.”

“Immigration trouble?”

“Yes, I got caught trying to sneak across the border at Mexicali and they sent me back.”

“If they sent you back, how are you still here?”

“I’m a United States citizen, born in Tucson. The Mexican police shipped me back.”

Confused, I asked, “You mean you tried to sneak *into* Mexico from the United States?”

“Sure. I wasn’t making out too well here, so I thought my luck might change down there. Besides, there’s a lot less traffic going that way, so I figured it would be easier.”

“I hope you didn’t get into too much trouble.”

“No, the police down there treated me pretty good while I was there, though the local police captain spent most of the time complaining about the lack of border security and wondering why the President of Mexico doesn’t do more to stop the flow of illegal immigrants.”

Deciding not to press my luck by asking another question, I said good-bye and, still reeling slightly from my conversation with Hector, wandered out to clear my brain and try to find Ben Nye. I grabbed my suit jacket from the car, loosened my tie, and started walking over to the diner I had passed on the way in. I needed a cup of coffee by this time. I would then search out the boardinghouse and see about a room.

As I approached the intersection, a dusty bus drove by, headed south toward Route 8. I'm not sure whether the bus came from Bell City or somewhere farther north, but I had half a notion to leave the car and hop on the next bus, hoping it was headed toward the coast. If I had known then what I know now about the events that would occur in Cordoba over the next few days, I might have left and never looked back.

But then I would not have gotten to know the residents of Cordoba, most of whom I became fond of—and one in particular I liked a lot. Some of the residents were strange and some had secrets, and each, like Hector, had a story to tell.

And if I had caught the next Greyhound out of town, I wouldn't have a story to tell.