



*The Loud Adios*, set in 1943, • a Private Eye Writers America Best First P.I. Novel

San Diego private investigator Tom Hickey, aided by his partner Leo Weiss, crosses the border to rescue a girl kidnapped by a gang of Mexican and German Nazis.

"In *The Loud Adios*, Kuhlken proves he can write in the mystery genre as well as anyone today. The scenes are expertly structured and the prose is visual and tense. This is a writer fully in control of his craft." • San Diego Union

"The novel at times takes on an almost unbearable intensity, not in its mayhem but in its human beings and concerns." • Chico News and Reviews

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*The Loud Adios*

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AS CLIFFORD ROSE CAME TO, the first thing he recognized was the stink, like a drainpipe running out of hell, Then he remembered.

"Wendy," he screamed. This time no one answered.

The big mestizo thugs dragged him through the doorway of the Club de Paris into the fog, across the dirt sidewalk and down three high steps to the muddy street. They flipped him over, threw him facedown into the mud. The biggest one kicked him with a pointed boot in the neck. The chest. The forehead. Finally the one they called Mofeto, who had sliced the gash in Clifford's cheek, sauntered out of the club. He looked like the runt of the litter, with a sharp face, pinched mouth, starved eyes. He wore a felt hat and a baggy dark suit. His hand with the switchblade swung beside him.

Through the fog you could hear invisible gringos talking and whooping, uphill toward the main boulevard. Neon from across the street red-tinted the fog.

Clifford lay curled in the mud, waiting for the next blow. When he saw the runt step closer, he heaved himself up on one arm. Slobbering blood, he croaked, "You give her up now, hear. I got friends. You'll see. "

The runt straightened his coat and gazed both ways again. From the side of his mouth, like a parrot, he squawked, "Oh, you got friends. Sure. We don't want trouble." Lazily, he pocketed his switchblade, reached beneath his baggy coat, the hand shot out, gripping a long-barreled .45 revolver. "I better kill

you now."

Clifford dropped and covered his head with his arms. He to push off with his legs, but they slipped in the mud biggest mestizo stomped and held his ankle down, while bent closer until the gun barrel touched the base of Clifford's s He let it rest there, then glanced up the hill.

The U.S. Marines came like a stampede. Their boots squished and sucked out of the mud, and one yelled, "Whee hoo!" Another tried to whoop like a mariachi. They materialized out of the fog just ten feet from where Clifford Rose lay pressing inward with all his muscles, as if he could make himself tiny as a soul.

The runt drew back to a crouch while the mestizos snatched up their guns. They turned on the wall of gringos. The Marines skidded to a halt. All white boys, straight out of boot camp with burr heads and no weapons except the bravado a gang and tequila guarantee. One of them snarled, "Move on, greasers." His pals seconded with grunts and a volley of threats.

Beneath the biggest mestizo's foot, Clifford writhed. Large drops of blood ran down his face and he felt his mind t to lift out of his body and lose itself in the fog. Holding onto he squirmed so frantically it looked like a seizure. Everybody turned to watch him.

A deep voice shouted from the door of the Club de Paris patr6n, a Latino, in his cream-colored pin-striped suit, stepped across the sidewalk and aimed a finger at the runt. "Basta, Mofeto," he commanded, and whipped his arm toward the door.

The thugs slowly packed their guns away. Glaring at the Marines, they kicked mud off their boots and disappeared into the club. The Latino folded his arms and gazed disgustedly from the writhing soldier to the Marines. Finally he said, "You better that one out of Tijuana."

Over both cities lay thick, drizzling clouds. No moon or stars shined through. Streetlamps stood dark. Old neon signs hung in disrepair. North of the line, even the headlamps of cars stayed unlit or dimmed by thin coats of paint on their lenses. The only lights flickered behind window shades.

From the border you couldn't see either city. But you could smell Tijuana. As the wind shifted, smells would change from burning rubber to gasses, to nose-biting" whiffs of chile fields, to sewage in the river, to whores' perfumes. And though San Diego lay ten miles north, if you listened closely you could hear a steady noise, the low howl of wheels cutting over wet asphalt as trucks carried supplies to another day of war. It was April 1943.

Tom Hickey stood on the border under the shelter between a lane for cars and a turnstile and passway for walkers. A sentry. His mouth was set in a scornful way. The blue of his eyes held no gleam. His blond, gray-flecked, scraggly hair inched over his ears and his uniform was a mess. No top button on the shirt. The white helmet lying on the ground beside him. The gun and holster he wore shifted around behind so it wouldn't get in the way. His sleeves were rolled up almost to the white MP band.

A carload of officers who pulled to the line reeked of French perfume and whiskey. Officers didn't come back smelling Tijuana. They carried the scents of classy whores and gambling down the coast at Playa Rosarito.

The civilian border guard, Boyle, alias Diamond Bo account of his flashy rings, two-toned sport coats, the alligator brogans he wore off duty-stood chatting with the officers. The cars stacked up behind them and horns bawled, but Boyle still commiserated with the officers while they bitched about card-cheats, gravel roads, the goddamned Japs and their bombs that made things so had to drive lights-out. Boyle never asked what they were smuggling. He just made friends, gave out favors, took money. Hickey slouched against a post and waited. Finally he stepped forward. The officers showed him their passes.

Hickey said, "Sirs, if you were approached by anyone who have ties to a foreign government, I'll take your report. If copulated with a Mexican, stop at the clinic over there."

A Marine lieutenant leaned out the window, squinting to Hickey up and down. Then the car jumped forward into darkness.

Hickey threw them a mock salute. He checked the time. 11:45. In a few minutes the next watch would show. So he could cross the border, tramp through the mud down by the river to Licores where he'd grab a short bottle of mescal, and head back to meet Lefty for the ride-fifteen miles in the open jeep with dim lights to the MP barracks near the harbor downtown. The platoon could've been stationed at Ream Field, only three from the line. But that would have made sense and saved money -- not the military way. Or maybe they had reasons. Hickey didn't ask, because he didn't care; the war had gotten squeezed out of his mind by troubles all his own. He'd drink on the ride, then lie in his and hallucinate. Maybe he'd sleep and dream of Elizabeth.

The wind blew a few drunken whoops his way as a gang of sailors started over the river bridge just beyond Coco's Licores. few minutes they came dimly into sight, holding each other up as they staggered alongside the road, splashing through puddles laughing boastfully. They wore dress whites stained with mud, fruity rum drinks, and splatters of blood. One held his arm in a sling. Water streamed from their caps and hair down their faces. Every night a few hundred military guys crossed the border. most of them Hickey could've busted or led to the dungeon shack to sleep it off, but he didn't bother. He only detained the mean ones and guys so drunk they might stumble into the dark road and get crushed.

When these sailors reached the gate, Hickey took a pass from the first in line, checked it, then stared into the boy's eyes and asked, "You screw anybody?"

"Yes, sir. "

Hickey aimed the boy toward the clinic shack and gave a little shove. Then four other sailors passed through the gate like that, except the last, a redhead with a bloody gap where his front tooth ought to be, said, "No, sit. I didn't screw anybody. I got ambushed by a Jap. He come out of this alley."

"You want a Purple Heart?"

"No, sir. I wanta make a report, 'cause there's sure a lot of Japs down there. I bet they're spies, sit. And there's this bar called 'Hell', I hear a Kraut owns it."

So Hickey led the sailor partway to the office shack and told him to go in there and wait, and went back to the line, to let through more sailors and a few civilian shipyard workers.

He didn't see Clifford Rose step up behind him. The kid slumped like any second he'd lose to gravity. When Hickey finally turned, Clifford stood gawking at him. A golden-haired, handsome kid, breathing raspily, his eyes full of the glazed, pained look Hickey knew well, since not so long ago it appeared every time he spotted a mirror. Before he squared off against his demons and drowned them in booze.

"You made it. Swell," Hickey said.

A week before, the kid had showed up mutilated, dragged by a gang of Marines. He looked like somebody had rolled him down the muddy street, then dipped him in a vat of blood. He was so bad Hickey had walked them clear across the compound to the clinic shack before he recognized the kid as a fellow from boot camp, somebody he'd liked and shot a couple games of pool with. For days, until he heard different, he figured the kid might die.

But now he stood there in a sport coat, slacks, and a rentals from a downtown locker room, his face only marred by small scabs and a Band-Aid on his cheek, an inch below the eye. Hickey asked what he was doing out of uniform.

"There's some guys in TJ might not recognize me in this stuff," Clifford muttered.

"Going back down, huh?"

"Yessir. "

"Hope you aren't going the same place as last time."

"Pop, reckon we could talk a little?" Clifford asked.

Hickey studied the kid, who looked so wretchedly sweet an innocent only a creep could've sent him on his way. Besides, Hickey was curious about what had fallen on the kid in TJ. Every night somebody tripped the switch on his curiosity. From the stories he heard, Germans were pouring into TJ -- but probably anytime a jarhead caught a word of German, a bar fight erupted and the I claimed they'd got beaten by a dozen Nazis. Anyway, Hickey might persuade the kid out of going back for more. He called over the next gate, reminded Lefty he was going south for a bottle. Five minutes later, when the next watch arrived, Hickey and the kid stepped across the border and walked through the drizzle Coco's Licores.

Hickey bought two short bottles of mescal, gave the change to a beggar woman, and they started back. Their feet plopped, sucked in and out of the red clay mud as they crossed the knoll along the river. The riverbed was a hundred yards across, a sandy plain cut by a stream full of algae, mosses, the froth of sewage poured like syrup through the narrow arroyo.

Along the riverbed, beyond the stream about Indians camped. Their fires smoldered in the drizzle. Ma them slept uncovered in the sand. Some lay beneath cardboard an scrapwood shelters. Haunted people walked like shadows near the riverbank, or squatted alone, staring at the rain.

These Indians had come from the deep south, from Zacatecas , Yucatan's jungles, the mahogany forests of Chiapas, from drought or pestilence to live on scraps that war left behind. But there weren't many scraps for Indians after the poorest refugees from Europe, waiting in Tijuana for their turn to cross the line, took their share. Most of these Indians lived off handouts and garbage. Among them were the sick, the freaks, the deformed and unclever. Their children prowled the streets and bars begging from drunken troopers, training to be whores and thieves.

Hickey motioned toward the settlement, hoping Rose might notice the misery and think less of his own, whatever it was. He screwed off the bottle cap, took a long pull of mescal, and passed the bottle to Clifford, who stared across the river, keening his eyes through the dark. Beads of rain hung on his nose and round cheeks. Wisps of golden hair lay pasted to his forehead. He took a gulp of mescal and coughed.

As they turned and started walking again, Hickey nipped from the bottle and watched the kid. Finally he asked, "You about to ship overseas?"

Clifford nodded and looked up. Tiny sparks glistened in his eyes.

"Where to?"

"Maybe the Solomons. But they ain't saying."

"You're scared." Hickey's voice was strong, rich like a general's ought to be. "Sure you're scared. Anybody who's not, he's Just looney or stuffed full of hero dreams. Or he doesn't give a damn for living anymore. Anyway you twist it, he's a loser."

Clifford stopped and squinted through the dark at the man's face. Hickey passed the bottle. The kid took it, gulped, coughed again. Finally he said, "Thanks, Pop. Sure I'm scared. But not so bad." He glanced toward the river, then turned back. "It's okay I call you Pop?"

"I don't give a damn," Hickey muttered. They'd been calling him Pop the last three months, since he was the oldest guy in boot camp, and looked at least his age, thirty-seven, especially when he frowned and the lines cut deep across his high forehead.

While they turned and walked the last fifty yards to the border, Hickey realized that nobody else had ever asked if he minded being Pop. He decided he liked this kid. No swagger or bluff about him. A rare find. An honest man.

They passed through the gate and turned toward the Jeep. Lefty was there and he shouted, "Get the

lead out, Pop. There's dames waiting on me up in Dago." Lefty, a pretty boy, had the jaunty style and slick voice to go with his dimples and slate-black hair.

Hickey climbed one step into the jeep, and got jerked bac out. His arm cinched in the fierce grip of Clifford Rose, like the kid was some brute who didn't know his strength, Hickey wheeled around and said, "Let go --" before he noticed Clifford's eyes.

They had swelled and whitened. "I wanta show you something. Okay, Pop?" His voice had cracked, and he dropped Hickey's arm. "Reckon you'll go back to TJ with me?"

"No," Hickey said. "I'm tired, going to be drunk soon as I can get there." He took a swallow of mescal. "Only a stooge shows up in Tijuana that way."

Clifford's eyes closed and the skin of his fate drew up tighter. "There's something I gotta do," he said, "and it ain't liable to be easy. But you and me could do it."

"Do what?"

"Can't tell, I gotta show you, and I mean to pay." He fumbled in his pocket, pulled out a brand new fifty, and held it between them. "See, I heard you was a detective. It can't hurt to look, ain't that right?"

"Hell it can't," Hickey muttered. But futiley. He wasn't going to leave the kid to get massacred again, at least not without knowing why. He cursed under his breath. His night was sure wrecked. No quiet. No sleep or good dreams. He grabbed the fifty and said harshly, "The thing that's got you down, is that what you want me to see?"

Clifford nodded just as Lefty fired the jeep, raced the motor, and yelled at them to get on board.

"It'll keep," Hickey said. "Tomorrow afternoon, before my watch, we can go down there."

"I'm shipping out tomorrow."

"Okay, then what's in Tijuana wont matter anymore."

"Sure will."

"Why? What's the big deal?"

The kid stared at his feet and folded his hands over his head, while Lefty roared the motor and cursed loud, Then Hickey said, "Aw Christ, c'mon." He turned and waved Lefty away.

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