

The Gradual Birth of Alvaro Hickey

My friends Ron and Henry and I were all nineteen. It was August, not the best time to visit Mazatlan. We drove there in Henry's 1957 Chevy, a solid car with a reliable V-8 and a good radiator, hoping it would carry us a thousand miles and back in mostly 100 plus heat.

We didn't have much money. I took thirty dollars, Ron had about the same. Henry had twice as much, but he was a freer spender.

We camped just outside of Mazatlan, on a beach with a few cabañas, in case of rain. Daytimes we stayed in the water, body surfing and trying to keep cooler. At nights we went into town to prowl for girls and drink. Ron and I drank beer and an occasional shot of tequila. Henry drank tequila and an occasional beer.

The third night, we all drank plenty. Somehow we managed to reach our camping place. Rather than walk fifty yards to the cabañas, we bedded down next to the car, forgetting that alongside the parking lot was a marshy breeding place for mosquitoes. The nights were too hot to sleep covered. We didn't count the mosquito bites we woke up with, but they numbered many hundreds.

The heat didn't help our itching. Neither did the water. Nor did the limes we rubbed on the bites. But the more beer, the more tequila, the less we writhed and scratched. Ron and I supposed that Henry, who started the trip with twice the money we had, could afford the gas to the border, at which point we could use the credit card my mom had lent me. But Henry disappeared and when we found him staggering across the coast boulevard, he asked us to lend him money. All his was gone.

We were stuck in Mazatlan. I placed a collect call to my mom and asked her to wire twenty dollars. Between us, Ron and I had sufficient pesos to give us two mornings of scrambled egg breakfasts at a sidewalk cafe called Copa de Leche. Most of that day and the next, we sat in the cafe under the fan, chasing our breakfasts with dozens of glasses of water while we waited for twenty dollars to arrive at the Western Union affiliate.

During that time we made friends with a gregarious shoeshine boy who got laughs out of offering to shine the canvas sneakers we wore. I've forgotten his name. He was about ten years old and patient with our basic Spanish. He was an orphan who slept either on the beach or with whatever prostitute would let him flop on her floor. He claimed he had a sister in Tijuana. After many hours of

talk and commiserating over each others' lack of money, he asked if he could ride north with us. He showed us a document signed by the municipal governor of Mazatlan that granted him the right to go to "Los Estados del Norte."

When the money came, we spent a few dollars on bread and peanut butter for the trip. Then the four of us sped toward the border.

Soon we discovered that the water we'd been drinking at the Copa del Leche hadn't been bottled or purified as we had presumed. After a stop for a supply of toilet paper, we sped on, between frequent stops to run behind roadside bushes.

In our condition, scratching and suffering the other malady, all we wanted in life was to get home. Henry seemed incapable of any speed under 100 m.p.h., even though the brakes on his Chevy had been losing their grip since we left San Diego.

The highway was a raised two-lane with no shoulders. If you went off the road, you careened down a steep slope about five feet high. At any speed above a crawl, your car flipped and rolled.

We started down a grade and saw an old Chevy about a half mile ahead driving down the middle line. Ron and I said, "Slow down, Henry." But Henry was in no mood to slow

down. Instead, he honked. The old car in front of us continued down the white line. When at last Henry hit the brakes, all they accomplished was slow us to about seventy m.p.h. by the time we rammed the trunk of the old car.

The driver was a viejo of seventy-some years. He wanted to wait for the police. We didn't. Mexican law is Napoleonic. Suspects are guilty until proven innocent. The perpetrators of traffic accidents are commonly locked up until fines and restitution are paid.

The viejo was upset. He couldn't interpret our basic Spanish. So our young amigo took over. He explained our plight and cajoled. The viejo agreed that we could drive on, provided we give him all that was left of our twenty dollars except the couple dollars we needed for gas to the border.

We paid, bid the viejo adios and sped on, with frequent stops alongside the road to run behind the bushes and to refill our bashed and leaking radiator.

But now we couldn't fulfill our agreement to take our amigo to Tijuana, because we only had enough gas to make the border in Nogales. No problem, said our amigo, because his document signed by the municipal governor of Mazatlan allowed him to go to Los Estados del Norte, the northern states. We contended this didn't mean Los Estados Unidos

but the northern states of Mexico. He assured us we were mistaken.

At the Nogales border, the customs agent peered into the back seat. "Who's this?" he asked. Our amigo presented his letter, which the agent read before he called our amigo out of the car and led him away.

His partner ordered us to pull over and go into the office, where we got bawled out and notified that we could be charged with alien smuggling. When the officer tired of browbeating us, he shooed us out.

We found a Chevron station, used my mom's credit card, and took turns in the men's room. We never again saw our amigo.

Some years later, my friend Steve's son knew a boy whose mother, a housecleaner, returned to Mexico and left him on his own. He was about ten. Steve and family took him in and later adopted him. He became a star athlete, and a handsome fellow much admired by girls and women.

His name was Alvaro. In my novels, like our young amigo, an orphan named Alvaro hitches a ride from the tropics to Tijuana. He becomes one of Tijuana's legion of street kids, providing for himself in various ways until he makes dangerous enemies. Then he picks the lock on the trunk of a car with California plates and smuggles himself

across the border. The car belongs to detective Tom Hickey. Tom and Wendy Hickey adopt him.

Alvaro appears as a fugitive, wanted for murder, in *The Do-Re-Mi*, as Tom's assistant investigator in a short story "Too Sweet" in the soon-to-be-released anthology *Hollywood and Crime*, and as a private investigator in *The Vagabond Virgin*, coming in February 2008.

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Ken Kuhlken is the author of the Hickey family mystery series. www.kenkuhlken.net

Ken Kuhlken
8641 Chevy Chase Drive
La Mesa, CA 91941
619-335-0441