

Mexican Hitchhiker, 1988

by

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July, 1996

"You need to take the Bronco and go someplace. I don't want you sitting around for three days saying, 'Gee, I wish I had gone somewhere'." After almost sixteen years of marriage, Karoline recognized the restlessness in my soul hated staying home on three-day weekends. The Memorial Day weekend was approaching. Why not go visit my friend Dave Honea and his wife Jean in Austin? "Matt, we are going to Nuevo Laredo. Why don't you join us for dinner on Saturday at 7 PM at the Cadillac Bar and Grill?"

Sounded good to me. With a couple of oranges, some graham crackers, some drinking water, beef jerky, I headed West in my nine-month old Bronco. The Houston area is too humid, too coastal, too much of East Texas. My Western heritage needed to be revitalized. Wide open spaces. Mesquite trees (or bushes). No cars for miles, on a two-lane highway. Laredo is about six hours from my house. I found a place to park the Bronco, and walked across the International Bridge, because I didn't feel comfortable about driving into Mexico.

Old women and dirty children and crippled men and others tugged at the heartstrings with their begging on the bridge street. I always have mixed emotions about beggars. I know that I am better off, but I wonder how many of them use the heartstrings to make a substantial living. If you give one coin, then all of a sudden you are the Pied Piper. I feel guilty when I don't give, but I sometimes feel conned when I do. I wandered the streets of Nuevo Laredo for an hour before going to the Cadillac Bar and Grill. It is a few blocks away from the bridge, so the beggars had thinned, and I was long forgotten as the vendors of leather goods, cheap booze and cigarettes, and black velvet paintings were hustling the latest people who had just walked over the bridge.

I met Dave on my first trip to the South Pole. We have shared meals at the galleys of the South Pole and McMurdo, Antarctica, at the Auckland, New Zealand airport, in Austin, and with this meal, in Mexico. His wife is an expert on Arctic archeology. They have Wintered-over in McMurdo, and have spent a few years in Alaska. Dave has travelled to Mexico several times to explore caves. He sent me a photograph himself on a salmon fishing trip in Alaska that could be on the cover of Field and Stream. After our meal, we listened to a Mexican Band in a park, watching young men trying to impress their girlfriends. I left Dave and Jean there about 9 PM, walked across the Bridge back to the Bronco, thinking about where to go for the next two days.

As I recall, I headed West, but without a particular destination in mind. I drove for about three hours, until I found some cheap motel to spend the night. I almost slept in the Bronco. It wouldn't be the first, nor will it be the last time, but when I do sleep overnight in a vehicle, I always wake up feeling grungy, and hate my own smell the rest of the day. So, I tend to find cheap motels where I can take a shower. Of course, there have been some motels that I would have been better off sleeping in the Bronco.

Sunday at Noon, I tied the Bronco to the hitching post at Judge Roy Bean's saloon in Langtry, half expecting the Hanging Judge to wander through with a bottle of whiskey in one hand and a hanging rope in the other, as he administered justice with his Law West of the Pecos. The Western artifacts looked like those in the Ft. Caspar, Wyoming museum. One six-shooter pretty much looks the same as another. Horseshoes don't vary in shape. Imagination takes over. Forget the Made in Taiwan genuine whatever as the cash registers ring. Close your eyes. That's where the Judge sat. Maybe his ghost is living its eternity in West Texas with the souls of the men he hung just a few miles West of the Pecos.

Time to hit the trail. Buy some liquid hay for the Bronco, enough to keep it going for another five hundred miles. Ought to make Big Bend by early evening. No sleeping bags nor camping equipment, just some oranges and graham crackers and beef jerky and some water. Who knows? Maybe tonight the Bronco will be my campground, but that's several hours away. I won't have many hours to spend in Big Bend, but at least will have an idea what it looks like, and I always can come back later when I have more time. Eight years later, as I write this, guess I just haven't found the time. Big Bend is still on my Gonna List.

In West Texas, one can drive for miles without seeing anyone. I might have been out of radio range, or just wanted to serenade my horse, my faithful Bronco. Sometimes, when I am driving alone, I sing. Nobody criticizes my voice nor tells me about buckets nor tells me I don't have the words right. I guess when I say I sing, I am using the wrong choice of words. Beller is a better choice of words. Sometimes I beller the same words and the same tune over and over. Sometimes I make up words. I am not sure that I have the correct spelling of beller, but I like the way it looks on the computer machine, so I am going to leave it that way. In West Texas, nobody cares how you spell beller. You can beller and nobody complains. You can almost drive as fast as you want if you don't have somebody indicating to you that it would have been to your financial advantage to have slowed down before he caught you with the radar gun that operates at the speed of light. When one is bellerin' at ninety miles an hour on an empty and lonely stretch of West Texas highway, one doesn't expect to see a hitchhiker sneak out of the mesquite trees and wave him down. So I put the Bronco in Whoa gear, stopped the bellerin', and decided to give the man a ride who has forever influenced my attitude of picking up hitchhikers.

The two piles of grass and alfalfa that fell out of his shoes indicated he had been sleeping in other places than Broncos or in cheap motels. My keen sense of smell detected other signs that cheap motels with working showers were out of his price range. His tour package of West Texas is not printed in the brochures found in travel offices; had it been printed, it would have said, "Meals not included". When I asked him if he was hungry, he gave me one of his few smiles, and it was adios for most of the oranges and crackers.

We spoke very few words. I tried to converse with him, but he spoke very little English. He was a Mexican, heading back to Mexico. That in itself is unusual, because in that part of Texas, that close to the Border, the Mexicans are travelling North. During the course of the day, I did learn that he had three children, and it had been eight months since he had seen them. As we drove along, he opened up one of those envelopes banks give out from drive-up windows that I had on the front seat, and gave a look of disgust upon finding it empty. His clothes were the typical white pullover shirt and baggy pants that Mexicans are often stereotyped as wearing. Only he wasn't the typical Mexican just trying to make a living to feed his family.

I have the impression that he had just been released, or had just escaped from jail. His dark eyes were cold, hard, suspicious. The tattoos on his arms and hands were homemade. On his right inside forearm a two-inch beetle had eight legs. Across the top of his right hand was a name that I couldn't read. In the soft area of skin between his left thumb and index finger was an upside-down cross, with two dots on either side of the crossbar. If the cross had been right side up, the dots would have been above the crossbar. We were about two hundred miles from Big Ben, the only people on the highway. When I saw the upside-down cross, I had cold shivers, but I didn't know why.

We drove in silence. My few attempts at conversation were met with hostile resistance. I didn't know where to leave him. Along the way, I saw some signs for some colorful rocks, or a waterfall. I don't remember what it was. I turned in there, because I thought other people might be there. It was deserted. I took a couple of photographs of something, while he waited in the Bronco. I made a futile attempt to conceal my anguish. In hindsight, he probably would have asked me to stop and let him out if I had started belling

again. At that point I was concerned about my safety. But nothing happened. We drove to Big Bend without incident.

He seemed agitated when I drove to the park headquarters. I paid five dollars for the entrance fee, while he waited outside. Since I planned on staying at Big Bend, I thought I would drop him off at Terlingua, the next town. But it was a desolate town, and I didn't want to leave him in the middle of nowhere. The next town was Lajitas, which is a town right on the Rio Grande River. It is a small resort town. I knew the guy didn't have any money, but I was hungry by that time, and figured he was too. As uncomfortable as I felt around him, I just couldn't drop him off and then go and enjoy a good dinner. I asked him if he was hungry, and he said in broken English, "A little bit". After three or four hours with this guy, I figured another half an hour wouldn't make much difference.

This was Memorial Day weekend, time for the RV crowd to visit Big Bend. The town has an old Western flavor, with only one restaurant. The hostess seated us in back, where we had to walk in front of the RV crowd. Everybody stared. In perfect English, he ordered a chicken-fried steak. I had fajitas in the town of Lajitas, which I thought sounded poetic. While we were waiting for the food to be served, he did something I shall never forget. He took a fork off the table and started combing his black bushy hair. He jerked the fork hard several times to untangle his matted hair. Everybody stared. Then very deliberately, he slithered the fork into his pants pocket. I made the most classic statement: "Put the fork back on the table. I will buy you a comb." His eyes twisted into something dark and evil. "No." "Put the fork back." "No." Shortly after that, the food came. We ate in silence.

That really angered me. Earlier in the day, I had even thought of driving him further down the road. All of a sudden, that fork became a weapon. I could almost feel it in my ribs. We walked out to the cash register, where I wanted to pay a dollar extra for the fork, but he was right by my side. I fully expected to be arrested for being an accomplice to this guy stealing a fork. Once outside, I walked to the right side of the Bronco, grabbed the rest of the oranges and the crackers, and gave them to him. He said, again in very good English, "Where are you going?" I said, "I am going to Big Bend. I don't care where you go." He whined, "Look man, I don't have no money." So I gave him five or ten dollars. I just wanted to be rid of him.

Once I left there, I kept on going. I did not stop at Big Bend. I kept checking my rear view mirror to see if some sheriff was going to arrest me for this guy stealing a fork. I drove to Alpine, passing through an Immigration checkpoint without any problems. But I just knew they had radioed ahead to the sheriff in Alpine. In Alpine, I found another cheap motel. The next day, I drove back home, without belling, contemplating the previous day.

At work the next day, I was laughing about it. Especially about him combing his hair with a fork. Israel Vincens, one of the guys I worked with, had been born in Mexico, and told me that I really didn't want to know about his tattoos. When I convinced him to tell me, he said, "Matthew, there is a gang of people who go up and down the Mexican border who are devil worshippers. That is why they have the upside-down cross tattooed on their left hand. The two dots are snake eyes. They find innocent people, kill them, and mutilate their bodies. If you had driven him further, they may never have found your body. He probably all ready figured out where to sell your Bronco."

For a long time, the people at work teased me about this guy combing his hair with a fork. Nine months later, the local TV news told a story of a college kid on Spring Break whose mutilated body was found along the Mexican border, killed by devil worshippers who had upside-down crosses and two dots tattooed on their left hands. My blood ran cold. My Guardian Angel had protected me on Memorial Day weekend, from a man that I now realize had every intention of killing me.