

Hank and Thelma visit Huatabampito

by Perry Robert Wilkes

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Hank unhitched the car and parked it at the side of the road, then he put the RV into reverse and carefully backed all 40 feet of it into the slot they'd been given for the night. He'd gotten pretty good at maneuvering the huge, bus-like vehicle since they bought it last year and this time he'd nailed it right down the center of the slot. He kind of felt he ought to get a gold star or something each time he did it perfectly, but that was childish and he knew Thelma would be quick to point that out if he ever mentioned it.

With the rig parked, it was time to explore the area a bit. This was their first visit to Huatabampito. There were only two other RVs in the place. The whole area was quieter than they'd expected. They got into the car and drove down the long sand road that led onward from the RV park, with the wide Pacific Ocean thundering onto the broad beach that lay to their right. The afternoon sun sparkled across the water like a million liquid diamonds and the November onshore breeze felt refreshing and cool after a long summer. Thelma stared at the diamond-like surface of the water while Hank drove, and wished again that she could capture it in paint. She'd tried many times but it just wasn't that easy to do. It was one of those things that separated the Masters from the beginners. She wondered if she'd ever get water right.

They passed a stand of coconut palms that swayed gracefully in the wind as only coconut palms can do. There were no more trees as far as they could see, nothing but a long sandy road stretching toward the horizon. They knew there was an estuary up ahead someplace at the end of the road, but they didn't know how far it was. Thelma had brought her sketch book, in case they found it. As in most places in Mexico, there was little signage. The local people didn't need signage to find the estuary, and they didn't think there was enough tourist interest to justify the cost. And even in places that were overrun with tourists, there seemed to be little interest in signage. It was one of the things that Hank especially liked about the country. In Mexico you had to be more self-sufficient and flexible than tourists who stayed north of the border.

Up ahead they noticed a vehicle on the road, coming in their direction. It was a white Jeep, that sped toward them and then past. It looked new, with Sonora plates. A youngish man was driving, with three girls aboard. Hank winced a little, to himself. He'd never had a new Jeep when he was that young. Especially one with three girls aboard. He'd been a working stiff who'd done things, more or less, as society had expected. He'd spent the requisite time as a rebellious young man, but he'd never had the money to be a playboy. Like that guy in the Jeep full of girls. He felt a twinge of jealousy.

The road led onward toward the estuary somewhere up ahead, and they drove toward it. Or somewhere in that direction. Hank glanced toward the ocean, broad and blue, and remembered his Navy days. For an Arizona kid, the Navy was a lifechanging

experience. He'd never seen so much water before he arrived at boot camp in San Diego. And when they shipped out to Hawaii that time, and on to the Far East, it was days and days of nothing but water. And now, every time he saw the ocean, he still remembered the overwhelming vastness of it. It's impossible to understand the ocean, he thought, unless you've crossed it by boat or ship.

They drove onward, through scattered leaves. Or something.... Wait, thought Hank absently to himself, that's a twenty dollar bill lying there on the sand. And another one, and another one. The road was covered with them. Hank braked to a halt as he and Thelma looked at each other with their mouths hanging open. What the...?

As they got out, Hank started picking up bills by the handful. He and Thelma looked at each other again, each searching the other for answers. Thelma picked up a blue zipper cloth binder containing a notebook that was lying open amongst the bills, and she thumbed through pages of carefully noted expense records. The cost for a hotel in Ciudad Obregón, a meal in Los Mochis, probably a couple of months of records, in Spanish. By now Hank had counted about \$6000 in twenties, which he arranged in piles on the back seat of the car, and he was still scooping up handfuls of them. After topping out at a bit over \$10,000, Hank stood there and looked at Thelma.

"What do we do now?" he asked, as he glanced up the deserted road.

"Whose money do you think this is?" asked Thelma.

"How would you know?" asked Hank, "Who could have lost this much money?"

Hank realized he'd never had ten thousand dollars in his hands before. Actually right there in front of him. Right there, literally, in his hands. He realized he was breathing quickly, less from the effort of scooping them up than from the sheer adventure of the discovery. It was a heady moment that Hank was completely unprepared for. And neither was Thelma. A hundred thoughts went through their heads. Probably a thousand. Was it drug money? I mean what else could it be? OK, it could be somebody's vacation money. Or construction money, if they were gringos building a house in Mexico, like Hank and Thelma had done. But the notebook was all in Spanish. What are the chances the notebook had fallen out of someone's car entirely separate from these piles of twenties lying all around it? If it's drug money, it probably has cocaine all over it. If we kept it, we'd be busted at the border by drug-sniffing dogs, if we tried to cross with any of it. Maybe they're all marked bills. And should we even keep it? Are we that kind of people? And if we were, would it put us into situations we couldn't begin to handle? Are we way over our heads here?

Thelma stuffed all the bills neatly into the notebook and zipped it shut. She put it on the back seat and threw a towel over it. They looked around. There was nothing but sand except for those palm trees in the distance. The road was deserted. Still, had someone seen them? Is there a reason why someone jettisoned the money?

They got in the car and drove on toward the estuary. They looked at each other for answers, for a plan. They drove for a while in silence.

"We really don't need this money." Hank finally said, "We don't know where it came from. We're doing fine without it. We don't need the trouble."

Thelma was relieved. That much loose money had scared her from the start. Had anyone seen them? They and that white Jeep were the only cars on the road. If it belonged to those guys, and they wanted it back, they'd have no trouble figuring out who got it.

Hank and Thelma had retired to a modest house overlooking a beach in Sonora, about half a day's drive north of Huatabampito. They had a reasonable pension and Social Security to live on. Their living costs, when they stayed in Mexico, were only about half of their income. That left enough extra to travel on, now and then. They really didn't need anything else. They had a good life. In fact, the whole experience had begun to turn a pleasant day's drive into a nightmare for Thelma. She suddenly felt the need to get rid of the money somehow. But how? If they gave it to the local Policia, it would likely disappear into a pocket or two. And worse, they'd probably end up in some kind of long-term legal hassle with the local cops. Every instance they'd heard of where a gringo had gotten involved with the Policia had turned out badly. Their Mexican friends and neighbors didn't trust the police either and avoided contact with them. It was a Pandora's Box they didn't want to open. They drove onward. Where was that damned estuary, anyway?

Hank slowed the car to a stop and stared straight out the windshield at the empty sand road ahead. "Do you want to see the estuary?" he asked.

Thelma took a breath and softly said "Not right now." Neither of them could focus on anything other than the \$10,000 sitting on the back seat in the zippered notebook under a towel.

Hank turned the car around. So far neither of them had a plan. Maybe they'd just keep the money until they could figure out what to do with it. There didn't seem to be any other possibility. Other than just pitching it out the window where they'd found it, and letting somebody else deal with it. Maybe one of the poor local fishermen would find it and start a new life. Or maybe it would ruin his life. Like those idiots who win millions in the lottery and end up bankrupt a few years later. Having all that money sitting on their back seat had suddenly seemed like a very bad idea.

They drove back in the direction they'd come. Neither of them knew what to say. Hank noticed a car far ahead, driving slowly down the road toward them. Soon he could see it was the white Jeep. The girls were walking beside the Jeep, searching for something, while the young man drove.

"Pull up next to them." said Thelma.

Hank stopped next to the Jeep. "What are you looking for?" he asked.

The driver answered in a torrent of excited spanish, and Hank heard the word "azul," and he thought he heard a word he recognized as meaning "notebook," a word that Rosa, their housekeeper had used in reference to school supplies for her kids. Then the driver looked around at the empty sandy landscape, and added reluctantly and tensely, "¡Y mucho dinero!"

Thelma needed no more translation. "Is this it?" she asked, and held up the blue notebook. Hank and the young man both looked toward her, their mouths hanging open.

"¡Oh sí, sí!" the young man answered and quickly opened it, noting with obvious relief that the money was still there. "¡Muchas gracias!" he said and paused for a moment in thought, eyeing the old retired gringos. Something about the way he looked at them made Thelma swallow hard. She wasn't sure why. She heard Hank take a deep breath. Then the young Mexican man quickly peeled off 5 twenties and handed them to Hank. "¡Muchas gracias!" he repeated. The girls climbed back into the Jeep and they drove quickly away.

Hank and Thelma sat there staring down the road at the disappearing Jeep, a thousand thoughts racing through their heads. Thoughts about what could have been. What they could have done with all that money. Whether they should have kept the money, after all. Yet recalling that steely look in the young man's eyes. But it was over now and the whole thing just needed a rest. There was still too much left to think about. They needed time to digest it. It had all just happened too quickly. Hank felt something like a chill deep in his spine. Slowly, they each breathed a sigh of resignation. Heavily mingled with relief.

Hank finally broke the silence.

"You want to go see the estuary?" he asked.

"No." said Thelma, "I think I need a drink."