

The smugglers essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Spring break of 2007 was long in coming and Cecil Lefowitz tried wishing the days away to no avail.

At last the long anticipated holiday for the well-heeled under-achievers of his small private college came and they were released from their bondage for the span of two glorious weeks. He and Cedrick, his huge, offensive offensive lineman dorm-mate climbed into his Beamer and headed out in search of the very tip of the Lone Star state, where, so reliable information ran, they would find a small sandy, weed and mosquito infested dune some two miles off the Texas coast from the town of Port Isabel. They sought the legendary South Padre Island. Cecil came from old money but he was a slacker in the extreme.

He had gotten kicked out of some of the finer New England prep schools and was diligently at work on being kicked out of his third college. He was a babe magnet and his Beamer drew a lot of attention so he was popular with guys like Ceddy who liked to hang around and get his rejects. Ceddy was a hulking troglodyte mouth breather who was at his best while intimidating lesser-endowed men. Cecil took him along everywhere he went. The city of South Padre is host to the grand celebration held annually on the small narrow island, which is a hundred yards from Mexico if one should chose to swim, and 40 miles of two lane blacktop if one chooses to drive.

Given the sharks in the narrow strait and the ' coyotes' on the Mexican shore, driving is the preferred mode of travel. South Padre Island is an eighth of a mile wide and 400 miles long. The town takes up less than two miles of the length and the remainder is a no-man's land of lean-to shacks and

packing crate cities thrown together by beachcombers cum bums who live off what they can scavenge from the Gulf of Mexico and any hapless tourists who happen to be dumb enough to wander into their milieu. Cecil and Cedly, as the hulking behemoth liked to be called, checked into their suite at the South Padre Sheraton, put down their Gucci luggage and asked the bellman for directions to the women. They were told that the main crowd had not yet arrived but rumor had it that women had been observed at Joe Buck's Dolphin Cove Oyster Bar in Isla Blanca Park, located at the back end of the sandy beach on the very south-most piece of land still Texas.

They paid their one-dollar entry fee into the park and found Joe Buck's place with little effort since there was no other structure visible on the flat dunes south of the park entrance. Joe Buck is an affable man, full bearded and gregarious as a river pirate. He had a crowd of regulars, his local boys, who drank with him daily, but he welcomed the newcomers warmly. Rounds of tequila were downed and come evening Joe Buck gave the two students directions to some of the fun places to be found in Matamoros, across the river from Brownsville, Texas.

Joe Buck had cautioned them to leave their Beamer on the American side and walk across the bridge but Cecil was full of beer and didn't like to walk anywhere. Besides that, his car was an extension of his ego and perhaps subconsciously his private parts as well. The car went where he went. Still he was confident of the prowess of Cedly and thought he would be able to keep them out of any serious confrontations by virtue of his size alone, so for the first time he left his Beamer and walked the bridge.

They crossed the Big River at the new international bridge and were waved through on the Mexican side beneath a huge arcing span of a sign saying ' Bienvenidos' or Welcome. It was just good and dark when they stopped outside of the first club Joe Buck had recommended. It was Blanca White's Matamoros and there was a table available. The mariachi band was blaring salsa and sombrero-wearing waiters worked the crowd. Cecil ordered beer by the bucketful, iced and ready to drink without having to wait on service. The club slowly filled and lines formed out the door.

" Looks like this is the place to be," Cecil said to Cedly. Cedly grunted and smiled. He was a man of few words when occupied and virtually everything occupied him. Two Mexican girls joined their table about ten o'clock. They said they would like champagne and Cecil nodded to the waiter to bring it without asking the price. " If you have to ask the price," he said to Cedly, winking knowingly, ' then obviously your daddy can't afford it.

" He and Cedly both laughed even though Cedly had heard the line many times. The Mexican girls were clueless. The music got louder and the crowd got noisier as the night progressed. Girls danced topless on the bar and the two girls at Cecil and Cedly's table chose their preferred male and scooted their chair close to the one they had selected.

Cecil thought he had chosen. He was rapidly becoming as clueless as the girls. From time to time the band would play the Bunny Hop and the entire room would rise as one, forming a line, hands on hips of the person in front of them and they would dance single file around the room. " I love this place," Cecil yelled out to anyone close enough to hear him and danced on.

Ceddy picked up his girl and put her on his shoulders, then danced with her for a couple of times around the room.

After more tequila all of the boys' good judgment was gone. The atmosphere and the lure of easy booze and easier love enchanted them both, for they knew the girls were as taken with the rich Yankee boys as the boys were taken with themselves. Near midnight Blanca White made an appearance. She was a beauty of near 35 years and her appearance in her cantina was preceded by a trumpet flourish from the band.

Everyone was smitten with the charms of the Mexican maiden. She came through the club talking to regulars and sitting briefly with single men. Everyone loved Blanca White. Blanca White's Matamoros did not have a closing time.

The doors were locked when the bartender decided there was not enough customers left drinking to be profitable and that time was near. It was almost one in the morning and there was a fog settling over the river when Cecil, Ceddy and the two lovely señoritas departed to the strains of "The Lonely Bull," as performed by the solo trumpet player. Out on the street in the cool of the night Cecil asked the girls if they would come to the Sheraton with them. The girls said they wanted to do that very much but there were problems with that scenario.

The girls kissed and rubbed the boys and told them sadly that they could not get across the river into the United States for they had no papers. They pouted and postured and kissed some more until the boys were racking their brains in an attempt to come up with a way to get the girls back to their

room. Cecil said they could simply rent another hotel room in Matamoros. The girls said that good Mexican girls could not take such a chance as to spend the night with boy in Mexico. If they were caught they would be humiliated and driven from their home to live a life of utter destitution in the calles of the city.

No amount of begging and pleading, and Cecil and Cedly both did ample amounts of begging and pleading, could sway them. Finally Maria looked at Angel and suggested they might use the old girl in a trash can ploy to get across the river. Cecil and Cedly had no idea what the old girl in a trash can ploy might be, but if it got the two girls across the river for the night they were willing to give it the old college try. As they drove south away from the bridge in the girls' volkswagen Cecil and Cedly sang for them. They drove to the home of Angel's cousin, a compassionate man who understood the needs of young love and would be a willing participant in their plan. Luckily he was still awake and came out to the car as they pulled into his driveway and parked in front of his detached garage.

In rapid fire Spanish the girls told Cousin Hugo their problem and he was more than willing to do all he could to further the cause of young love, being such a romantic himself. Then Maria outlined the plan to the boys, who were steadily being fortified with gracious sufficiencies of Hugo's finest pulgue, an unrefined and potent drink made of agave juice. It was like the evil twin of Mescal liquor. The plan was simple. The two girls would get inside one of Hugo's new 55 gallon plastic drums and he would secure the lid and load it into the back of his van.

He would then drive down to river with the plastic container and the girls inside. He said he knew a place on the river that was never watched by the federales or the Americans lurking on the north bank of the Big River. At that point he would unload the container and the boys would float it across. He would then drive across the international bridge and meet them on the north side for he had a work permit and could freely cross the bridge. He would load up the empty barrels and return to Mexico. They could then drive back to South Padre and party like it was 2006 for the entire spring break.

It is a tribute to the powers of tequila and Mexican salesmanship that the two worldly American boys were sold on the idea. It seemed like a plan that was likely to become legendary on campus and they were both eager to set it in motion. They put the girls in the barrel and loosely fitted the lid on. When the boys got back from a trip to the back side of the garage to relieve their bladders they saw that Cousin Hugo had the drum on a dolly and had wheeled it to the back of his van.

Cecil and Cedly rode in the front near Hugo. From time to time they would hear the girls inside the barrel making a soft murmuring noise like a dove at sundown, settling into its nest. It was a vaguely comforting sound, similar to a cat's purr, contented and at peace with the world. They came to el centro and turned off of Paseo de la Reforma onto a side street that roughly followed the Big River southeastward toward the Gulf of Mexico. Cedly noticed they passed by the Federal Army Depot and he saw several soldiers standing around near the street. The fog was getting heavier and Cedly was getting drunker, if that was possible.

What little good sense he and Cecil had was long vanished into a morass of tequila vapors and female pheromones. Ahead, on the north side of the street was a high grass covered bank. The time was near to two o'clock in the morning. There was no traffic and no people around. The fog was causing near zero visibility and seemed to be rising off the river itself, coming up beyond the topmost area of the grassy sloping bank.

Hugo was a big man and he didn't need Cedly's help as he manhandled the barrel out of the back of his van and set it down on the side of the street. "Do you little gringos think you can manage to carry two girls all the way to the river?" he asked, his smile bright in the dim and fuzzy light of the street lamp halfway down the block. Cedly didn't think any remarks questioning his strength were funny, but he kept his mouth shut. "So, ok that is about all there is to it. You guys carry the girls over the bank and into the river, float the barrel to the other side. You will be on the golf course of the Fort Brown hotel.

I will be waiting for you there and cut the seal off to free the girls. Now, give me your wallets." Cecil eyed him suspiciously. "Our wallets? What do you need our wallets for?" he asked somewhat indignantly.

"Keep them, then, gringos...if you don't mind soaking them in the waters of the Rio Grande and ruining the leather and the pictures of your dear sweet mammas that I know you keep inside them. Go...swim now." Both boys reached for their wallets at the same time and handed them silently over to the big Mexican. "Yeah," Cecil said then, "I'm glad you thought of that. I would have gone right in with my billfold in my pocket.

Here," he said, ' keep this gold chain for me, too, and my watch. Come on, Cedly, give ' em up. We don't want to soak them in the river.'" " Nice boots,' Hugo said, looking down.

" Alligator?" " Ostrich...full quill...twelve hundred smackers," Cecil said, then nodded knowingly and hopped around on one foot pulling them off to give into Hugo's safekeeping. Cedly slipped out of his topsiders and pulled off his Tommy Hilfiger hoodie. Cecil gave up his Ralph Lauren and his Dockers. Then with embarrassed grins they gingerly hoisted the barrel of girls and headed up the embankment. Hugo whispered loudly to them, " Keep quiet. No talking.

Silencio." Drunk boys seem to get deaf, and think everyone around them is equally deaf. As Cecil and Cedly tried to whisper it was like they had used a bullhorn and their voices carried down then river. It was no secret that there were gringos on the south bank.

The only question was what they were meaning to smuggle across the river. The Mexicans who were there to do their own business believed pretty much in live and let live. The Mexicans who were there to prey on the ones who were there to do their business were pretty certain that no gringo would be crazy enough to smuggle what ever was in their barrel without being in possession of more than adequate fire power to defend the shipment. By this reasoning, and the fact that God looks out for drunks and fools, the two inebriated spring breakers, who wanted only to be alone with the two girls, managed to get a free pass on a very dangerous spot on the Big River that foggy night.

Meanwhile Hugo had tried on his new ostrich skin boots and liked the fit. He then got back in his van and sped off down the lonely street to the new bridge. The Hispanic-American Border Inspector, his cousin, Julio Salazar, waved him through the checkpoint. He made a right turn, driving fast, for he knew it wouldn't take long for the boys to get across the river and up the north bank and walk the short distance to the parking lot where he had agreed to meet them.

He was only mildly concerned about the size of one of the gringos. Nearly every time that he and the girls had pulled this particular scam he had been intimidatingly larger than the young victims. In this case he was not only outnumbered, he was out-weighted and most likely out-muscled. Still, the gringos were young and very drunk. Hopefully they could be intimidated as well.

He drove past the Fort Brown motor hotel and past the bend in the river road, approaching the golf course. He turned into the parking lot on the east side of the club house and there he saw what may have been the largest assembly of peace officers he had yet to witness. The city of Brownsville was represented, the county of Cameron was there, the Texas Department of Public Safety was in attendance and the feds were there in the form of homeland security, FBI, DEA and possibly the CIA. His two American pigeons were spread-eagled face down on the damp parking lot in their wet bikini underwear, bare of foot and bare of chest.

The 55 gallon plastic drum sat in a prominent place, spot lights illuminating it and giving it the other-worldly glow of an alien life-form space pod. Guns

were drawn and assault rifles were out, flak jackets were worn and riot gear was on riot ready bodies. Hugo was not amused. He drove up and was immediately waved away by one of the officers who did not know him, but his brother-in-law, the commander of the Brownsville Police Tactical Squad told them that Hugo was a special operations officer assigned to the otra lada, meaning he was a wet-back who knew the river and the river rats and coyotes that haunted the Rio Grande valley. He was a police snitch par excellence.

He knew that he had inadvertently stumbled into something big. There were way too many police types in attendance for this to be a small time drug bust, which is not what it was going to be anyway, though Hugo realized the police didn't know that as yet. They were still photographing and fingerprinting his 55-gallon drum, which the two drunk gringos lying face down on the Fort Brown golf course clubhouse parking lot had begun to suspect did not contain to Mexican beauties. Cecil was even beginning to think that he and Cedly had been cheated. He considered that they might have even lost their wallets and he might have even lost his shirt.

He didn't even want to think about his boots. They hurt his feet anyway and they were just for the trip to Texas anyway. He realized he should have gone with the Mexican look and bought a serape and huaraches for \$39.95 at The Gap. It was nearly time for the barrel to be opened and the perps told exactly what the charges against them would be. Someone had alerted the Brownsville Gazette to something going down on the parking lot of the Fort Brown golf course.

Channel Four got their film crew out of bed and on the road. The mayor was alerted. It was an election year and the mayor was tough on crime, particularly crime committed by gringos from outside his constituency. The DEA was hoping for several hundred pounds of heroin. Homeland security was hoping for laser-guided bombs, the FBI was thinking perhaps the barrel would contain the body of a long dead labor boss.

The Sheriff's Department thought it would be nice to confiscate some smuggled Napoleon brandy and the Police Department would settle for a few cases of fake Rolex watches which made very nice Christmas presents for family and close friends. The snitches had been right all along, and there was indeed a large shipment crossing the river that night, and the real smugglers stopped among the palm trees to watch the scene being played out on the parking lot only briefly before carrying their load of laser-guided Napoleon brandy bombs in the fake Rolex cases right past the very busy law enforcement officials who were preoccupied with the two gringos. Someone made a speech as the cameras rolled and the lawmen postured and posed and jockeyed for position in their territorial game of jurisdiction and credit taken for the arrest of the Spring Breakers cum terrorist drug smuggling miscreants. At last the lid came off the barrel and the suction of the removal caused an updraft from the interior and out on a gentle breeze of air came a brilliant red, yellow and orange parrot tail feather. From inside the barrel came the gentle cooing of the tranquilized birds, covered by plastic sieves, taped down, making compartments that were stacked from the floor of the barrel to the top. There were over a hundred birds in all colors and many various breeds.

There were red lored amazons and yellow lored amazons. There were yellow napes and double yellow heads, and these birds retailed for up to a thousand dollars each in the north. Hugo watched his profits disappear. His plan to have the ignorant drunk gringos bring his birds to the United States had misfired badly.

The ignorant drunk gringos' plan to bring Mexican chicks to the United States had misfired equally badly. But Hugo did not face jail and most of the birds in the barrel were on consignment so he was not hurt as badly as it might have seemed. He remembered the old adage he had learned at his father's knee. Before you make a gringo your friend you should walk a mile in his shoes. It is in this way that a man finds out if he does or does not like the gringo.

If he does not, he is a mile away from him...and he has his shoes... or in this case his ostrich skin boots.. There were audible sighs of disappointment from the assembled lawmen and film was taken though it was more of a human-interest story. Now the gringos had broken the law, of course, and they were to be punished, of course, but all the men in the parking lot, with the exception of the ignorant drunk gringos, understood that this was a penny ante bust and the boys would be fined and released and there would no promotions for the arrest and no careers would be made on the backs of the two gringos who were about to be tagged as the Bird Boys of Brownsville. Cecil called his father with his one jailhouse phone call and the wheels of justice began to rapidly turn.

Lawyers were summoned from their beds and judges were awakened and favors were called in. The two boys were out of jail, still in their undies sans

ostrich skin boots and topsiders, and sitting in the Beamer before the ink had dried on their paper work. It was nearly dawn when they finally made it to their beds in their gulf side suite in the South Padre Island Sheraton. The phone began ringing by noon.

Time Magazine wanted to do a story. 20/20 was interested in an on-camera interview. The boys thought it was a joke and hung up on the callers. Sometime late in the afternoon they went down to the lobby looking for the hotel restaurant.

The lobby was crowded with dozens of college kids checking in and trying to get rooms, but someone spotted them as they stepped off the elevator. The chant of Bird Boys, Bird Boys began to ring out around the lobby, softly at first then swelling as more and more voices joined in. Soon it was a full-blown ear-deafening chant. They were famous, or at least notorious, or perhaps getting their fifteen minutes of fame early.

They ducked into the bar and there the cry went up. The two televisions in the bar had been showing the arrest most of the morning. Their faces were well known. Drinks began to be bought for them and women began asking them for autographs.

Some of them handed over indelible markers and bared their breasts. Cecil and Cedly were in hog heaven. The Brownsville Bird Boys were mobbed wherever they went as more and more students arrived to rest and recover from the ardors of exhausting college schedules and came to soak up the sun and suds on the tiny island on the tip of Texas. Many of them asked about the Bird Boys when they checked in, hoping that they might get a

glimpse of anyone who claimed to be a student of an American university while being as stupid as the boys must be. They went to Joe Buck's Dolphin Cover Oyster Bar, thinking they could blend with the regulars there, hoping that not many college students would find the out-of-the-way bar, hidden in the palm trees and not advertising any drink specials.

Unfortunately this was not the case. There were spring breakers hanging from the rafters there. Joe Buck bought them a round of beer and tequila shots and after that the crowd picked up the tab for them. They drank for free all day. Women came and asked them if perhaps they would be willing to smuggle them into Mexico in a barrel for they thought that must be a lovely way to travel.

River crossings in barrels captured the imagination of the students and the idea of river smugglers whose contraband was love somehow captured the imagination of the party-going crowd of students. Instead of hiding in shame at being accused of smuggling, the Bird Boys of Brownsville reveled in their new celebrity. Film crews that came to the tourist island to film the wild shenanigans of the spring breakers knew a story when they saw one and they jumped all over the two celebs with a passion. The night they made their first return to Matamoros there were crews filming their triumphant entry into Mexico.

A crowd of breakers met them at the bridge and carried them on their shoulders through the streets of Matamoros to the very front door of Blanca White's Matamoros. There Blanca, never one to turn down any free publicity and knowing a good thing when she saw it, personally welcomed the boys

and sat at their table, picking up the tab for them and smiling into the cameras as the music blared and the bunny-hop lines snaked past her. A local tourist shop owner came in and made a production of dressing the boys in serapes and presenting them with new huaraches to wear in place of their Nikes. A couple of sombreros appeared. All the boys lacked were six-guns and they would have looked like Mexican pistoleros.

The Bird Boys of Brownville were now honored internationally. They were Mexican smugglers, no matter that they were unwitting dupes. The truth would only have ruined a good story. Late in the evening they sat holding court and pontificating on the moral issues of smuggling both homo sapiens and avian. As the guests at their table filtered in and out and came and went as the tequila ebbed and flowed, Caddy saw Angel and Maria quietly sit down beside them and order champagne.

He signaled to Cecil across the table, busy with some fair-haired maiden from far north of the Big River. Slowly Cecil's eyes focused and he recognized the two girls, who by now were snuggled close and had placed their hands on the two boys they meant to reclaim. They launched into a rapid fractured English/Spanglish explanation of how they were the unwitting dupes of an evil man and they were stuck in the barrel for hours until their father and uncles had come looking for them. They begged forgiveness and were forgiven. They then ran off the other women who were circling the table like remora looking for a likely spot to attach themselves for an easy meal.

Cecil was in a magnanimous mood and the girls were very pretty and very remorseful, so in short order all was forgiven and forgotten and soon the boys were teaching the girls the words to their college fight song. They were so cute, standing on the table singing at the top of their lungs and not having a clue what the lyrics actually meant, not unlike the student athletes at the boys' college. The boys, full of tequila once more, looking up at the short skirts and long legs of the Mexican beauties, not only believed them and forgave them but began to think of how sweet it would be to have them ensconced securely in their suite on South Padre. All good things must come to an end, and at last Blanca's bartender obeyed the law of diminishing returns and decided that he was only paying the light bill with the liquor sales and gave last call.

Cecil and Caddy were blind drunk and the girls were not far behind. They staggered onto the sidewalk where they saw the other clubs emptying of spring breakers and the flowing crowds beginning to merge into one stream of American students and then into a river of kids all headed for the international bridge. Caddy put his sombrero on Angel's head, draped his Nikes around her neck and put her on his shoulder. Cecil held Maria's hand and they joined the migration toward Texas. The breakers were singing fight songs from various colleges and good times were still being had by all.

From time to time some group of breakers would recognize Cecil and Caddy and a cry would go up from the crowd. "Bird Boys, Bird Boys," they would chant for a while and Cecil and Caddy would nod and wave and smile and the girls were basking in the reflected glow of their celebrity. Cecil believed that he could get the girls past the border by sheer force of his magnetic

personality, and the payment of a slight amount of mordida, in the form of a brand new crisp Ben Franklin. At the end of the bridge there stood a customs official watching them approach.

He stepped forward toward the four youths and put out his hand. " You boys can come on across. But put down the Mexicans. What do u think they are, birds?" he bellowed, obviously a line he had rehearsed for the occasion.

" You boys know if you want to bring birds in you have to swim the river with them." The crowd began to snicker. Caddy reach and put his hands on Maria's waist and lifted her to his right shoulder, so he was carrying both girls. He turned and began slowly walking back toward Mexico. At the center of the international bridge he stopped, walked close to the guard rail and unceremoniously tossed the two women over the side. The crowd all rushed to the rail and looked down.

There they saw the Big River. Where it passed under the international bridge it was about ten yards across and about four feet deep. Standing in the water were the two girls, screaming what may have been insults up to the people on the bridge. Caddy walked back to the customs official. He rubbed imaginary dirt as if washing his hands and said, " I reckon they ain't birds.

They don't fly very good, do they? But then they ain't showed me they can swim either." The crowd laughed and the river of kids began to move forward once more..