

On the Quota



In which we make the six-day road trip to the middle of Mexico in winter, during which we lose and recover our vehicle registration just in time to cross the border, and I feud with a cat

I've been told I'm related to Wrong Way Corrigan, the famous early twentieth century airplane pilot who told everyone he was going to fly solo from New York to California but actually landed in Ireland. Historians believe Corrigan, an expert aviation mechanic, knew what he was doing and had always intended to cross the pond and land in the Old Country, against the wishes of the U.S. government, which had deemed his craft unsafe for a transatlantic flight.

I mention this because we drove from Portland, Oregon, to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, and didn't, by mistake, end up in Canada. We sallied forth, due south and east and then south again, determined to shed our winter coats and, in the words of the rock musical *Hair*, "let the sun shine in."

Like my ancestor, I had filed a plan. I told Arlene I wanted to be on the road every morning by no later than seven A.M., drive for two hours, stop for a hearty breakfast where, camel-like, we would fill up our humps and continue driving until we reached our destination in time for dinner. Most days, we'd be in transit

for ten hours and stop only for gas, twice, and to stretch our legs and let Cassie pee maybe a dozen times. It was what Arlene liked to call a “forced march,” but I preferred to think of it as a schedule. My plan’s success was predicated on getting an early start, which meant setting our cell phone alarms and the motel room alarm, if it had one, for six o’clock, and making sure everyone was up and about and ready to go, showers taken, car repacked, pets all aboard, Arlene with cup of motel coffee in hand.

Since Cassie had a bladder the size of a caper, my first action item every morning, after turning on the lights and rousing everyone, would be to take her out for a walk. (Sadie’s first action item was to run and hide; Arlene’s was to complain about getting up so early.) Cassie also had lineage issues and, although hailing from a long line of water fowl retrievers, she detested rain. Some believe the word “poodle” comes from the German *pudel*, for splashing in water. But not our dog. She had evolved beyond such nonsense, and it was absolutely essential for her to find a dry spot, out of the rain, and not near any puddles. Additionally, she was fickle and could change her mind *in media res*. All of which meant a walkie took longer than expected and usually required at least two pick-up bags. Plus, if it was raining, well, then all bets were off.

It rained on the morning of Day Two of our drive. By the time Cassie and I returned from her morning ablutions, it was approaching six-thirty. Arlene, like a good team player, had already taken her shower, dressed, and was packing our things. I’m sure I heard her muttering complaints about the hour, but she came through in the end, and that’s what really mattered. While I showered, she made coffee. By seven-oh-five, I was closing and locking the lid of our missile-launcher luggage carrier and Cassie was already inside the car, standing in her reserved rear seat behind the driver. Five minutes late was within the margin of error, and I felt elated. Our

clothes, computers, dog food and bowl, cat food and litter box, books and magazines and snacks were all loaded and ready to go. All we had to do was get Sadie into her crate and her crate into the car. And that's when the fun started.

Sadie was hiding under the bed. I crawled on the floor and stared at her. Then, I got a close-up view of the carpet under the bed.

"Don't look under here," I told Arlene. "It's disgusting."

"What's there?"

"Everything, and it's all old and dead. I don't think they've ever cleaned the carpet."

"Gross. What's Sadie doing?"

"Nothing. I think I can reach her."

Belly down on the filthy carpet, I stretched out to grab the cat. But she was outside my reach, and after several minutes of trying I gave up and resorted to Plan B. We tried sweet-talking her.

"Here, Sadie. Come on, girl," said Arlene with the crate open next to her, while I lurked ready to snatch. "Get in the crate. Kitty, kitty, kitty. Come on, Sadie. That's a good girl. Here, Sadie."

Our cat didn't buy any of it. So it was back to Plan A, but this time with a tool. Once again I was on my belly, rubbing my face in God only knew what, and stretching my right arm as far as it would go. This time I used a coat hanger, and this time I touched her. Sadie would just move from one side of the wall to another side of the same wall. After several passes with the coat hanger, I cursed aloud in pain.

"What happened?" asked Arlene.

"I may have pulled my shoulder out."

"Hmm, I doubt it," said Arlene. "I have some ibuprofen in my purse."

I took the pills and opened the motel door.

"Where you going?" asked Arlene.

“No more Mr. Nice Guy,” I said as I left the room. I returned minutes later with a long piece of wood that had been discarded in the motel dumpster.

“Get ready to grab her,” I said, more determined than ever. I swept under the bed with the lumber, and Sadie ran out, as low to the ground as she could get. Arlene grabbed her, and I held open the crate. We pushed her in backward and locked the crate. By then it was seven-thirty and well outside the margin of error.

“Thanks to that cat, we’re thirty minutes behind schedule,” I said, as we pulled out of the motel parking lot. It was less than ten minutes later when the second flaw in my morning ritual reared its ugly head.

“Did I lock the luggage carrier?” I asked Arlene.

“I’m sure you did. You lock everything.”

“I don’t remember locking it. The whole thing could pop open, our stuff would fly out and we’d cause accidents.”

“Okay, so pull over and check it.”

I pulled over to the side of the road and got out. Arlene was right, of course. It was locked.

We reached our day’s destination, Needles, California, just as night was arriving, the four of us and evening checking in at the same time. We upgraded from one queen-sized bed to two queens. The previous night all four of us had slept in the same bed and, this time, we wanted to give ourselves a shot at a good night’s rest. As it turned out, we all shared the same bed, again, and the second bed went unused.

In the morning, Day Three, I had steeled myself for what was coming. By seven A.M., everyone and everything was packed, loaded, and ready to roll, all except Sadie.

“Is she under the bed?” Arlene asked, as I crawled around on my hands and knees and looked under both beds.

“Yep. The one we didn’t sleep in,” I answered. I had a rolled up magazine in one hand and I knew how to use it.

“Is her crate open?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I started sweeping the magazine wildly at Sadie. Her head moved to follow each swing. I reached in as far as I could go and lightly slapped the cat with the magazine. She ran out, but Arlene wasn’t fast enough and Sadie sprinted under the other bed. I walked over, bent down, and started waving the rolled up magazine at her. She kept scooting away, until I tapped her lightly and she ran back under the first bed.

Arlene tried to snatch her, missed, and banged her shin on the bed frame. This back and forth went on for more minutes than I care to admit. Finally, I had a plan.

“I know what to do,” I told Arlene, as I lifted the mattress from the bed Sadie was not under and stacked it in front of its frame, blocking any entrance.

“You chase her out and I’ll grab her,” I said. And that’s how it worked. Who said I’m an idiot?

Arlene swung the rolled up magazine at Sadie, and the cat took off for the other bed, only I was waiting this time. She ran into and then up the mattress, which gave me just enough time to grab her. Seconds later, she was in her crate, while Arlene and I were still huffing and puffing, out of breath.

“I need more ibuprofen,” I told Arlene, between gasps.

“What’s wrong?”

“I hurt my back lifting the mattress.”

We both looked back at the mess we had made of the room. Sheets and pillows were everywhere, and one mattress was tipped on its end. We could have been a minor league rock band on tour.

“Better leave a big tip,” Arlene said.

Twenty miles down the road I pulled over to make sure the luggage carrier was locked. It was.

On the morning of Day Four we were leaving Benson, Arizona. Arlene gave me a cup of coffee and two ibuprofens first thing.

Now back to sleeping in a single queen-sized bed, we felt as if we had taken control of the situation. Again, our last step would be to put Sadie in her crate. Rolled up magazine in hand, I looked under the bed.

“She’s not there,” I said, confused.

“What?”

“Sadie’s not there.”

“I’ll check the bathroom,” Arlene said. “You check behind the armoire and chair.” But she wasn’t there or, as far as we could tell, anywhere in the room.

“Maybe she’s in her crate,” Arlene said.

“What? You think she turned herself in?”

She wasn’t in her crate, either. An unimaginable thought crossed both of our minds at the same time. I said, “Do you think she ran outside when the door was open?”

“She wouldn’t do that,” Arlene said.

“I wouldn’t put it past her. Does she know anyone in Arizona?”

“She’s got to be in the room someplace.”

“I’ll check outside, just in case,” I said, walking out the door. Fifteen minutes later I returned *sans* cat, having scoured the parking lot and nearby field. A distraught Arlene sat on the edge of the bed.

“I’m not leaving until we find her,” she told me. I rechecked under the bed, behind the armoire, in the bathroom. No cat. I turned on the light to the closet and there she was: Sadie was crouched inside a trough of transparent plastic that served as a tacky storage unit above the closet rod. I could see the shadow of her outline, but she couldn’t see me.

Within minutes we were back on the road, and before the first hour was out, true to form, I was on the side of the road making sure the luggage carrier was still locked. It was.

With Sadie's morning disappearing tricks fully anticipated and accounted for, you would think Day Five, beginning in Fort Stockton, Texas, would have started on a more positive note. And it would have, too, except the previous night we discovered we were missing our vehicle registration form, a key document for crossing the border if you want to take your car with you.

"I know I put it in there," said Arlene, meaning our all-important manila documents envelope that included everything from passports to proof of pet vaccinations.

We were on our way to Laredo and had stopped for a substantial breakfast in the small West Texas town of Sanderson, one of many struggling rural towns in the country.

"Maybe we won't need it," I suggested, trying to wear the ill-fitting robe of an optimist. Arlene shot me a double-take, one of her you-must-be-kidding looks. "We can look for it again once we get to Laredo. It's a short drive day, so we'll have plenty of time," I added.

"Hmm," said Arlene. "Why don't we make our own vehicle registration form?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you know what a Volkswagen Passat vehicle registration form looks like? Or one from Minnesota or Idaho, Vermont?"

"Of course not," I answered.

"Well, the border guards won't know what one from Oregon looks like, either. We have our computers with us."

"Great idea. We can make one up and print it at the library or one of those FedEx Kinko places."

I pulled the car over to the side of the road.

"What are you doing?" asked Arlene.

“I need to check on the luggage carrier. It sounds loose,” I said.

On the morning of Day Six, I had set the alarm for five A.M., to ensure we had enough time to reach our destination before nightfall. By seven, we were at the Columbia Bridge border parking lot, a small crossing twenty miles or so west of the main Laredo crossings. The office wouldn’t open until eight, so we had plenty of time to think ahead. Ours was the only car in the lot.

A half-hour later, someone tapped on our window and told us if we were planning on crossing into Mexico we needed to be in a different parking lot. I moved our car and, when their doors opened, we were the first ones in. We were ready; unfortunately, they were not. Although the office opened at eight, the woman who made photocopies of the stuff you need to enter Mexico did not arrive until almost nine. We sat inside and waited, stoically, quietly. Until Arlene broke the silence.

“I think it might be an omen,” she said.

“What could be an omen?”

“You’re early for everything and they’re late for everything. I’m guessing you’re going to have trouble adapting to life in Mexico.”

“Nonsense. I’m very flexible,” I said, slightly offended. I stood, yawned, and stretched. “I’m going out for a few minutes.”

“What for?” Arlene asked.

“I want to double-check on the pets.”

“Uh-huh,” said Arlene.

“And the luggage carrier. Make sure it’s locked.”

Shortly after nine we crossed the border. I handed an official-looking guy the vehicle registration form then set about to look innocent, which wasn’t easy as I avoided eye contact. Another official wandered over and the two went into a long pause as they viewed the document, giving our hearts pause, too. Perhaps we misspelled something and they caught it? Not possible. Or it looked

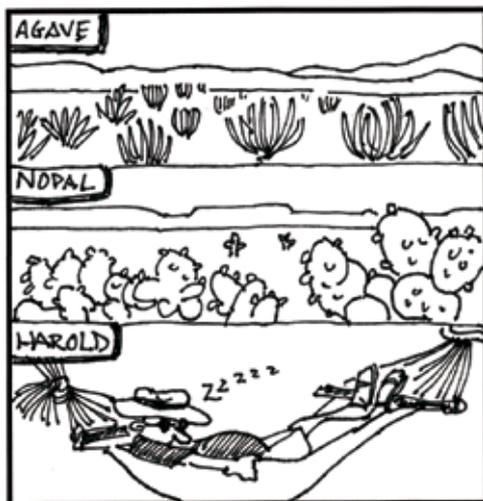
too hokey? We reduced it at the copy shop to tighten the text up and make it look professional. I'm not a master forger, but I was proud of the work we did.

Maybe we shouldn't have signed it "Vera Katz," the name of a former long-time mayor of Portland? We never found out why they spent so much time looking it over. It's more likely they were talking about the woman who makes the photocopies. But finally, with a shrug and a wave of the hand we were on our way, inside of Mexico, and headed toward our friend Celia's house in Guanajuato, where we would spend our first night. After that, we'd cruise over to San Miguel and begin our new lives in an old country.

As most travel advisories suggest, we took the toll roads, known as *cuotas*, and found them to be safe and in much better shape than your average American highway. Our trip through the heart of Mexico was a long but uneventful slog, and as darkness fell, we found ourselves walking into Celia's charming house alongside a creek, on land that was once part of a well-known hacienda. Later that night as we walked into her equally charming guest bedroom full of Mexican folk art, I spotted a piece of Nature folk art crawling up a wall. My worst fear was realized—it was a scorpion.

Mexico-savvy Celia came in, said *de nada*, and showed me how to dispatch a scorpion with a shoe. Apparently, the key point to remember when taking on a scorpion, *mano-a-mano*, is to pick up an available, unoccupied shoe and use it to whack the sucker. Never stomp on a scorpion with the shoe that's on your foot, because the scorpion has a better than fifty-fifty chance of winning. She declared our room scorpion-free and we retired for the evening, exhausted after a long day—make that, six days—on the road.

But I couldn't sleep. I waited that night, lying in bed, fully dressed, expecting a foot soldier from the Scorpiones Family to show up and put two in the back of my head.



**Indigenous plants of
Central Mexico**

Starting is Such Sweet Sorrow



Which discusses our first impressions, how clueless can we be, and why it took three days to get a set of keys made

Our rental house was so cold we nicknamed it “The Ice House.” It was a charming house and well within our budget, but it was the only place we had ever lived where we had to go outside in winter to warm up. Inside, it was perfect for chilling bottles of chardonnay. Out of doors the temperature ran to the mid-seventies. We initially consoled ourselves knowing we at least had a fireplace. But it took us two days to find wood, and even then it was mass-produced sawdust-pressed logs. Not that it mattered, since whenever we tried to burn one of the “logs,” the smoke billowed back inside the house, leaving us in a haze of coughing and the house reeking of soot or whatever glue and sawdust leave in their wake.

In many ways, we were in good company, since most houses in town lacked a heating source other than the sun. However, we apparently had rented one of the seven houses in all of San Miguel that, on average, received less than fifteen minutes of solar energy a day. We feared The Ice House wouldn’t warm up until mid-July. Our back courtyard was narrow, faced north, and was shaded by