

Stupid Interpreter Tricks VII ESCAPE FROM LOS FRESNOS

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The prison camp was only a few miles behind me when I hit the brakes and pulled into a moist driveway. Like a cloud fallen from the sky onto the muddy South Texas coastal plain, a thick mist had engulfed the car, fogging the windshield to near opacity. After a couple of swipes, the paper towel dropped from my hand as I made out the outline of a glistening slimy monster—a snail the size of an

Fresnos Service Processing Center. Closing the trunk on your briefcase, the cabbie tells you it's a 40-minute drive to the detention center. If pressed for details, he smiles toothily and tells you the one-way fare is only \$52—and that smile fades quickly if you point to the posted \$70 round-trip fare schedule. Their route takes you East from the airport, curving South along narrow country roads with no signs and plenty of potholes. Taking the same route twice would be a barbarous breach of Valley cabbie ethics. Unfortunately for the interpreter scheduled for a 9 a.m. hearing, Harlingen cabdrivers are ethically bound never to take less than

the Valley Brewery on the south; for the ladies, it's a big green sign that says South Padre Island. Take the next exit, under the freeway, and due east on 100. The detention center is way past Los Fresnos. You'll see a water tower off to the right, then a stop light strung over the road where you make a hairpin turn to the north.

The signs say Laguna Vista, and sure enough you'll pass a golf course and development subdivision. After several miles, a procession of green signs on the right announces BAYVIEW 13, SAN BENITO 19, US IMMIGRATION SERVICE PROCESSING CENTER. That's where you turn. It looks like a road to nowhere, but farther down the narrow side road you'll come to an Immigration Service sign someone blasted with a load of buckshot. To get back, you can follow the same route backwards—which will take you right past a concrete snail standing 9 feet tall among brightly painted cement fishes. Otherwise you can put Lewis and Clark in their place by finding the northern route back to the airport (good luck!).

Finding the main courthouse on Jackson is child's play by comparison. Take Aviation Drive south and it turns into Ed Carey Drive (Loop 499). Turn west (right) on East Harrison Ave. and follow it all the way down to 1st Street or 2nd Street (whichever lets you turn north/right). Jackson itself as a picturesque one-way street lined with palmetto palms. Next to the door of the Executive Office of Immigration Review courthouse is a tree covered in springtime with white blossoms—with no giant snails anywhere in evidence. ★



Map to detention center

elephant was oozing straight toward me!

The nightmare had started with a phone call, a run to the airport, a connecting flight in Houston, and finally the warm, nighttime air of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The poster showing taxi fare schedules to places of interest was missing from the baggage claim area. It was only a few miles to the La Quinta Inn facing Highway 83, a little south and west of downtown Harlingen—but little change came back from that \$20 bill. A Mafia, I chuckled to myself, as I rolled my bag to the room. By mid-morning it would no longer seem a joke.

Usually an interpreter shows up at the Harlingen Airport around 11 a.m. or noon—with no time to spare before a one o'clock hearing at the Los

an hour to pick up a morning fare at a hotel.

After hearing the same voices answer at several phone numbers it will dawn on you that there are only about a dozen cabs in the entire town, migrating as if by instinct to the airport every morning. In a sleepy border town, if you are on foot and have to be somewhere by nine, you're dead meat. It takes about ten minutes to sprint from the LaQuinta across the HEB parking lot to the Enterprise offices, and as long again to rent a car. Much easier to rent the car at the airport and drive straight out the main road, Ed Carey, to the highway. Head Southwest on Highway 83, give it the gas and watch for your landmarks: for the guys, that's



Main courthouse