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SINALOA SHOOTOUT

When we got back to Ryan Airfield Ike would say, “Made it again.” It all seemed so matter of fact, spotting plants out the window, flying around mountains, landing just about anywhere. Going to see whales, meeting interesting people.

Eelgrass grows in protected seas along temperate coasts around the world. It is well known from Sonora but factors affecting the southern limit and the situation in Sinaloa were still a mystery. A 1910 report mentions a specimen from Altata, due west from Culiacán in Sinaloa, and I want to go there. It is mid-March 1977, and at this time of year there should be detached eelgrass forming rafts at the sea surface. As usual Ike is eager to go—I just have to pay for gas. I ask Kim Clifton, who works with me on sea turtles (they eat eelgrass), and Tom Backman, who did his graduate work in California on eelgrass, to come along. Four of us, a full plane.

We get to the Russell’s early in the morning. Ike is rummaging through metal ammo boxes of nuts and bolts, spare parts, tools, and his medications. He spends a lot of time shuffling and packing. I don’t question it, he is in charge of airplane matters. Sometimes he also spends a lot of time disguising things hard to get across the border to take to friends in Mexico. Finally we drive out to Ryan Airfield in the Avra Valley west of Tucson, about 30 minutes from where Ike and Jean live, all jammed in his dull gray 1941 Ford pickup.

Ike has a hankering for old pickups. Once on the way to Ryan, he made a U-turn on the Ajo Highway, opened the door, stuck out his long arm and scooped up a hubcap. “This is a good one.” Like any old rancher he keeps a lot of spare parts. Once an attorney and I tried to run a rasty little ranch. An old Chevy pickup came with the ranch and I said the pickup is mine but the attorney would not give me the title. So I traded that rattletrap to Ike for a trip to Mexico and he took the truck to Mexico.

We're at Ryan and Tom probably thinks we are just going to climb into the plane and take off, and Kim has the patience of a turtle. More tinkering. Checking the engine and different parts of the plane. Ike gets into a deep conversation with Fred Grissom who takes care of the planes in this World War II hangar—wide tongue-and-groove weathered 1940s wood outside walls, and cool and drafty inside like an open cathedral. Fred wears overalls and fusses over the planes like a mother hen—Ike once said he was alive because of Fred. Airplane parts all over the place, his office boxed off inside the hangar, smelling of cigarettes and stale cups of coffee, and girlie calendars advertising tools and engines.

Fred teases Ike with intense concern about not bringing the plane back again with a green propeller—it turned green the time we went through the tall amaranth at the mining claim. Fred once said, "Ike would fly in weather that would drown a duck." And there was the time Ike landed silently, got out and had his passengers help push the plane to the hangar. Fred said, "Cutting it a little close on gas, aren't you Ikey?"

Tinkering is a big deal for Ike. He loves to tinker the way I like fieldwork and studying plants in the herbarium. Ike put a 1918 Dodge engine in the *Ofelia*—the ungainly little boat he had built in Guaymas modeled after a fisherman's *panga*—says it can cruise the whole Gulf of California on one tank of gas. It's loud, stinky, hot, and disgustingly slow but provides lots of tinker-time. He tinkers with his pickup. He tinkers with his airplane. I always carry a paperback book in my back pocket.

Finally when it's time to load gear into the plane he scrutinizes everything I bring. He picks up each item and dangles it up and down for weight. Everything is always too heavy. "Do you really need so many plant presses?" and, "Do you have to bring that thing?" There was the time Jean tried to put a sea-worn egg-shaped boulder in the plane—we picked up the rock on San Esteban Island and brought it to Kino Bay in the *Ofelia*. Then one day I saw that the egg rock had made it to Tucson and sat in a place of honor by the front door. Sometimes, especially in summer, I have terrible arguments with Ike about water. You can't win an argument with Ike for the simple maddening reason that he is always right—except about summertime drinking water. I won't give in on that one—you never forget close calls with water. I learn to bring twice as much water and twice the plant presses I really need so Ike can make me leave half. It's always half.

As I said, you never forget close calls with water. Once on Tiburón Island we flew around the east side of the big mountain—the Sierra Kunkaak—until we

located the Sopc Hax waterhole, marked by bright green giant cane grass, tucked into a canyon recess at the toe of the mountain. We land at Palo Fierro and it seems like an easy few miles walk, but what's easy to spot from the air can be hard to find on the ground and we climb up the wrong canyon. Ike doesn't stop when I stop to collect plants and we get separated. I see smoke off in the distance. He's burned an old packrat nest for a smoke signal and next to it left a note stuck on a creosotebush stick: "I'll meet you at the big rock fig that blocks the canyon." I take a short cut straight over the ridge to the next canyon and down to the big rock fig blocking the canyon, but no Ike. He must be behind me, coming up the canyon bottom. I wait . . . and wait. Yikes, its late in the afternoon so I hightail it out of the canyon and head for the plane. I have very little water—we expected to fill canteens at the waterhole.

Night falls fast. Pitch dark and no flashlight since this is only a day trip. I keep bumping into impenetrable mangroves and try going around but too many cactus and spiny shrubs. I fall asleep on top of sharp rocks and scratchy cryptanthas and wake up with coyote breath in my face. I move and the coyote runs off but now it's cold and me with only a thin T-shirt. Dawn is way too slow. I am out of water. My tongue is huge and I can't swallow. I misjudged and have to go several more miles out of my way around the mangroves to get to the landing field. The sun is high, hot and swirling in a Cézanne sky only it does not look pretty. The silver sea beckons but I keep forcing myself to realize it's not drinking water. I know the plane has to be way off to the left of the sea shine and keep forcing myself in that direction. I must be close but can't find the long low flat ridge with the landing strip. I pop a few bursera fruits in my mouth—the Seris say it helps make saliva run when you are out of water. The first time it almost helps. I climb up into a huge cardón cactus and don't see the plane. It has to be there . . . it has to . . . he wouldn't have left. I keep forcing the steps and just as I start to walk right through the plane without seeing it Ike hands me the last tiny bit of water in the half-gallon green glass bottle that's always in the plane. It's not enough but he is not much better off and has been saving this for me. We climb in and fly wordless across to Kino Bay, land at the edge of town and taxi up to Doña Gavina's little home-restaurant next to the beach. We walk in, pick up water pitchers sitting on the tables and drink, spilling water down us and all over the place. Don't get me wrong, it's not always like that. It's usually fun and easy.

So here we are at Ryan in this huge old hangar crammed full of airplanes. Fred has great talent for fitting the wing of one over the wing of the next one, and so

forth. We move a few planes out of the way and roll out Ike's Cessna 185 that has a STOL kit (Short Take Off and Landing) and other modifications. I take out my book and sit on an expensive airplane tire.

Finally we climb in the plane and take off, first for Nogales, Sonora. Always have to land in Mexico and get permits and clearance. I expect delay. If Ike would just give a standard little donation we would be on our way promptly, but he never does. Says if he does it once he would have to do it every time. More to the point Ike is just plain stingy, stubborn, and likes winning.

The officials know he brings "extra" stuff. They accuse him of flying into Mexico on business, being a commercial pilot paid to fly in Mexico. For such purposes one needs a commercial visa, which means lots of red tape and expense. He comes through too often, in and out, with too many different people. Nobody spends so much time and effort just for fun. The places we go cannot be for pleasure. He has to be up to something. Well, it's not a truce, but there seems to be an understanding and somehow we always get through. In addition, this being Mexico, the airport *comandante* is responsible if anything happens to a plane that leaves under unsafe conditions. So there is real authority and concern.

The green propeller incident I mentioned a little while ago involves a trip to Ike's mining claim in the Sierra Madre Occidental in western Chihuahua. This time we are clearing Mexican customs in Hermosillo. Ike files the required flight plan from Nogales, Arizona. But before arriving in Hermosillo he makes an unannounced westward detour and lands way out in the desert. I nearly wreck my back helping him unload an unbelievably heavy wooden box we stash under an ironwood tree. I ask what's in it and he just says, "Dynamite for the mine." We arrive in Hermosillo flight-plan-late and things do not go smoothly. Ike won't pay an eight dollar special fee. The day wears on. I say I will pay it. This is not my idea of fun.

Ike goes to talk to El Comandante for the fourth or fifth time but El Comandante has "gone home for lunch." We get a taxi and go to his home. A woman answers the door and says El Comandante isn't in, although his car is in the carport. Back to the airport. Wait for El Comandante. Pretty soon it's too late in the day to leave. Taxi to a downtown hotel. Ike is a cheapskate unless it involves the airplane. He always picks cheap places. Mercifully this one is not absolutely the cheapest.

Ike worries that some cowboy might find his dynamite—about the only time I notice him being perturbed. This is costing more than eight dollars. Next morning

after breakfast a taxi to the airport. Ike is having a long conversation with El Comandante without me being present. We leave and pick up the box in the desert and head straight across the desert for the Sierra Madre.

We've been at the mining claim for two days and it's time to leave. But it's 4,000 feet elevation and over 100 degrees this afternoon so we have to wait until morning for cooler (denser) air to take off. Okay with me, I get more time to explore for plants, but Ike has a different plan. We chop amaranth and other weeds that have grown up with the summer rains at each end of the landing field. Ever chop fresh green amaranth as high as your head? Yellow pollen-rain mixes in sweat and runny nose and eyes. The landing field is not much more than several rows of corn Ike pays the owner not to plant. I don't like landing here. There are worse places but I only go to them once.

We leave soon after sunrise but it's still hot. The plane lifts off too slowly and the prop chops through amaranth just beyond the part we cleared. Barely clearing some scrubby boat-spine acacias and *mauto* trees we sort of sink into a vast canyon before the plane can lift up above the mountains.

I will never forget the way Fred shook his head when we got back to Tucson with a green propeller. I don't say anything to Jean and I doubt if Ike does. Ike and Bill Swan bought the mining claim from Bill's brother-in-law Pat Jenks who is notorious for treasure-hunting escapades in Sonora. I don't see how they expect to make money on the mining claim, but maybe that's not the issue.

Let me tell you about another dicey summertime event. We arrive in Nogales, Sonora, before midday. Plenty of time to get to Guaymas by early afternoon. It is clear and very hot in the middle of the monsoon season. Long conversations with El Comandante and a long delay. Billowing white cumulus clouds close in and turn to dark nimbus lightening, thunder, and torrential rain, and refreshingly cool. El Comandante declares it is unsafe to leave. We wait. I finish my book. The clouds clear and El Comandante almost lets us go but before another long conversation ends the clouds roll in again.

Finally a break in the clouds and Ike manages a breakthrough with El Comandante. Ike says, "Let's get out of here." I seldom see him move so quickly. Almost as soon as we are up in the sky the clouds close off the intended route. Ike says, "There's a hole over there, let's head for it." That route closes and we chase more holes in the clouds. Finally after chasing lots of sky holes, here we are again smack dab over the Nogales airport. Ike does not want to go back there again. The clouds are high enough so we fly under them. Ike follows the highway.

There is bright sunlight not too far off at the end of the valley. I look down at Emory oaks on overgrazed hills and when I look up the sunlight is gone, the ceiling sinks and it's dark and stormy. The plane tosses in wind and torrential rain. Ike says we have to land and manages a clear stretch of highway. Right away he gets the plane down off the blacktop onto a little dirt turnoff at a roadside ranchito. I hop out, open the flimsy wire and pole ranch gate, Ike drives the plane through. I close the gate and run up to the house for shelter but am already drenched. Ike stops the plane in front of the family gathered under the broad, low porch. They offer handshakes and "Mucho gusto en conocerle" (Very pleased to meet you). Homemade wooden chairs with crisscross leather strapping are placed at the table for us. Dark hot coffee and lots of sugar and pleasant conversation. The storm clears as fast as it came.

We are saying goodbye and thanking our hosts when The Head of Customs charges into the muddy yard in a chauffeured Thunderbird surrounded in a roar of police motorcycles. He announces, "We got you this time," and threatens to confiscate the plane. Ike and The Head of Customs are just beginning their conversation when two more motorcycle police roar up. They whisper something to The Head of Customs and without another word they all leave, sirens blasting down the highway.

We thank our hosts again, shake hands all around, promise to come back and see them, drive up to the highway, wait for the traffic to pass and take off. In just a few minutes we fly over a twin-engine Beechcraft and the Thunderbird next to the highway surrounded by the motorcycle swarm. Later we learn that they also made a forced landing and quickly paid a \$2,500 fine.

Back to the Sinaloa eelgrass trip. This time we clear Nogales without incident. We head for the coast at Desemboque and hope to find Becky Moser at home. Ed Moser died suddenly last summer and Becky is carrying on her husband's work.

It is just a few years since Becky and I published our paper on Seri use of eelgrass—the first report of a grain from the sea as a human food resource. *Science* published it and put Helga Teiwes's haunting photograph of a Seri eelgrass doll on the cover. That paper made quite a splash. It was also a turning point for me. I had recently left a generous position at the Natural History Museum in Los Angeles. I had to be back in the desert, out of the smog and off the freeways, but the financial part of quitting was not realistic. The *Science* paper helped in getting sporadic grant support for the fieldwork including airplane gas

and launched me into the emerging halophyte-science crowd. Hazel Fontana made the first loaf of bread from the sea using eelgrass flour we bought from the Seris. It was bright green inside.

That *Science* article—as well as a few others—encouraged Becky and me to keep working on our Seri ethnobotany book. This book was still “almost finished” and I felt guilty not having it completed in time for Ed to see. It only took another eight years to finish. Without Ike and Jean Russell it would never have been finished, let alone started.

Ike Russell first brought me to Desemboque. We had been on Tiburón Island and I had a plastic bag full of plants that needed pressing. According to Becky, the first thing I said when I walked into their Shangri-La home was, “Where can I press my plants?” I was quite single-minded. Soon I discovered the Seris living in my study area and realized they knew more than I did about the plants. Those were wonderful times. I was finishing my Ph.D. Then some academic appointments. We were all so purposeful. Ike had to have a reason to go flying. My reason was that I had my work to do. It made a big difference to have Ike take me in his airplane. It was fun to go places with him, airplane or not. Everybody loved Ike, at least after the waiting. It was even more fun when Jean went along. We landed and camped just about anywhere. And John Dog often went with us.

The first time at Russell’s for dinner, John Dog joined us at the table. Ike and Jean’s son Luke taught him to gingerly take food off a fork and eat politely from a plate—seemed like he had the best manners of anyone at the table. John’s tail stuck out behind the chair. When John got too old to jump into the plane we lifted him up. He was a big Aussie weighing over 90 pounds. Then after John was gone Weni would go, especially if Jean went. Ike inspired Weni to growl, and Weni inspired Ike to growl, although Weni got along with everyone else. Then my dog would go along; her father was one of the Russell’s big white dogs.

As I said, those were wonderful times. We could land just about anywhere. Ike seemed to know every rancher in Sonora, or knew someone who knew someone where we would go. We were always welcome and they were always welcome at the Russell’s. I don’t know how Jean did it—there was always room for another friend or friend of a friend. Their tree-shaded ranch along Cottonwood Lane was an international institution, like a grand hotel.

There was still no big drug trouble in Sonora. At least we didn’t have to know about it or pay attention to it. Once in a while we would see a fast fancy plane on a dry lake bed and some city boys standing around waiting for someone. And only

once were we clearly not welcome, when we landed at a forlorn ranch way out in the desert between Nogales and Desemboque.

Back to the Sinaloa eelgrass trip. We buzz the house, and Becky and some other gringos wave, and her daughter Cathy's lazy brown dog Slab is wagging his tail. Seri kids are running for the landing field and everyone is looking up. We land at the long, sandy smooth field near the shore north of Desemboque. Ike pays a Seri, José Astorga, to help keep it clear and had a sign made in Spanish and English that says anyone landing here should pay Astorga a certain nominal fee for his labors. Becky and her guests drive out to pick us up. The Seris press around us. They are not at all meek, always laughing and making fun of everyone, the women all at once trying to sell necklaces, baskets, and ironwood sculpture.

The Seris call Ike *Mericaana Cacösxaj* "Tall American." I am *Ctam Hehe Iyat Ctaamtim* "Guy Who Cuts Off the Tops of Plants." Ed Moser was *Moósní Ilit* "Turtle Head". We liked our names. Some people did not fare as well with their Seri-given names.

During those years when we sat down to eat in the cement floor dining room - kitchen-everything room in the Moser's beach-damp house, the Seris pressed around the windows staring at us, watching us eat. We were the best and only show in town. After the sun went down the kerosene Aladdin lamps were lit and it was the most peaceful place I have ever known. Sometimes Ed performed magic tricks. Becky and I worked on the ethnobotany manuscript. There were the day's notes to write up, plants for me to identify, revisions in the text, more questions to be answered. The action centered around the heavy wooden table in the kitchen.

The shower is behind the big silent gas refrigerator. Water is heated on the stove, poured into a bucket with a twist-turn sprinkler at the bottom and the bucket carried around behind the fridge and hoisted up on a pulley. You close the curtain and can keep on talking to the people in the kitchen. Ike all too often passes on the shower.

The next few days are occupied with fieldwork along the Infiernillo Channel opposite Tiburón Island, botanizing and going places in the desert and along the coast with Seris, recording information on ethnobotany and sea turtles. After dinner, we spread out maps and look at the Sinaloa coast to Altata. The map shows some sandy barrier islands and huge complicated lagoons.

At bedtime we open up aluminum folding cots on the back porch. It is dark with only stars and the wet sound of the waves and dogs and sometimes donkeys and coyotes. Everyone else is asleep but just as I drift off another bunch of mangy Desemboque dogs starts barking and yowling from yet another direction . . . then silent torture waiting for it to start up again, over and over. When Cathy Moser was in college Ed sent her a double-sided tape of “Desemboque Sounds at Night.” She thought the dogs and donkeys were wonderful.

Ike is in the little room off the kitchen—the dampness outside bothers him tonight. He is always coughing a bit. He has chronic health problems, which is why he ended up in Tucson in the first place, and self-medicates to keep going. With big parts of diseased lungs removed he has the choice of sitting in a chair or taking life-shortening drugs that enable him to live a heroic life. Like Franklin Roosevelt he is basically an invalid but nobody knows it. One day toward the long ending I walked into the house in Tucson and he calmly said, “I’ve got myeloma and I don’t like that.”

Sometimes I slept in that back room—unpainted cement floor and walls, plain thick wood shelves stocked with supplies and canned goods, bags of beans and potatoes, blankets, Seri crafts and artifacts on the walls, medications, paintings by John Houser and some by Cathy Moser. Flashlight always by the bed.

I am up well before sunrise and as always go for a long walk along the shore before breakfast. The beach drift is piled high with a fantasia of seashells and marine life. Paper-thin bleached piddocks, sea urchin testa, and coralline algae, bubble shells, pectens, tiny perfect sand dollars, coffeebean cowries—the whole list is longer than this chapter. There is no way to avoid crunching them but their life is gone. (The beach in southern California where I grew up was also once like this.) At this time of year lots of eelgrass and winter seaweeds make up most of the beach drift, and I notice the first plastitrash.

I used to also go out for a long walk right after breakfast, when Ed would read from the New Testament. One day he informed me that I was the only visitor who did not stay for the Bible readings. So I put off my walks until after his reading. There was a clarity and calmness to his readings that I later learned were a mark of deep spirituality. Ike was truly interested and would engage Ed in Bible discussion, although he would admit to no organized religion.

Ed and Becky of course were passionate about the New Testament—their purpose for being at Desemboque was to translate the Bible into Seri. Along the way they published scholarly works on Seri culture—often but not always coauthored with

specialists—made Seri a written language, taught Seris to read and write in their own language as well as Spanish. They were forever on call to take someone in need to the hospital in Hermosillo, fix the water pump, etc. There was never-ending action, and Ike constantly brought things people needed and flew them to Desemboque, especially medicines. Ike's friend Dr. Bob Thomas provided medical help, and long after the good doctor was dead, mail-order discount medications bought on his name continued to go to the Seris in Ike's plane.

I don't know how Becky put up with all the commotion or got so much accomplished. Everyone going through stopped in on them, including of course us. The Mosers were the most tolerant people I ever knew. Over the years we maintained a close friendship although the Russells and I sharply disagreed with many of their political views. My life has been vastly enriched by Becky, Ed, Jean, and Ike. They influenced my whole career. Ike and Jean contributed so much to my work, and to just about everybody else I knew doing research in Sonora and even Baja California and sometimes Africa, South America, and Madagascar.

Ike knows the desert. He knows the sea. He knows the Sierra Madre. He knows ranching. He has vast practical knowledge of the Sonoran Desert and people and places. He can fix anything. But you better be prepared for Ike Russell time and you better like plain Ry Krisp crackers because that's often all we have to eat.

But I learn to be wary of landing too late in the day, too close to darkness or even in the dark, and try to devise ways to avoid such events. There is the time we are coming into Kino Bay a bit late in the day. We are just going from Desemboque to Kino to deliver some guinea pigs Jean is sending to Doña Gavina. We are coming in for a landing in a strong wind when I spot utility poles and wires strung all over the place. They weren't here last time. Ike pulls up fast and we search for another landing place. The wind really picks up and dust nearly obliterates the view. Landing into the wind means landing into low-angle blinding sunlight albeit through murky dust. We can't be sure where the wires are and keep searching for a place to land to no avail in increasingly poor visibility as darkness descends. Now its too dark so Ike keeps circling—a message to meet the plane. Finally someone savvy to the ways of small planes drives out to the paved highway and shines headlights in the right direction. We land and taxi in front of the headlights the half mile or so to Doña Gavina's little home and restaurant by the beach. As we get ready to leave in the morning a cop drives up and hassles Ike for improper

landing behavior.

Another time we fly out of Kino Bay after a week-long trip to San Esteban Island in the *Ofelia*. It's the old story—it is a bit late but we can always stop in Desemboque or find somewhere to camp. Now it's getting dark so we land on a convenient dry lakebed. Oh well, a nice campfire and plenty of food. But the place is barren and not a scrap of firewood in a cold biting wind. We didn't think to tell each other, but I left what food I had with Doña Gavina, Jean did the same and so did Ike. To make matters worse our sleeping bags are way too thin. While we shiver Ike says, "This qualifies as an emergency." He finds a small Phillips screwdriver in one of his metal ammo boxes and methodically starts taking apart the backs of the front seats. Tough little plastic lab bottles full of tequila are securely duct-taped end to end to the tubular framework.

It's time to leave Desemboque and head for Altata. Becky and her guests drive us out to the airfield over the sandy road. In the usual bright clear sky we finally take off for Altata. You might wonder why I use the word "finally" so many times. When you travel with Ike it is on his time. He is methodical. He is not like the rest of us. Nothing makes him hurry. You accept his pace or you better stay home, which is no fun compared to going on a trip with Ike.

We fly down the coast south of Guaymas. Hours and hours of wide green ribbons of mangroves clog long lagoons. I don't see the anticipated floating eelgrass rafts but in northern Sinaloa I see long rows of big beach houses on sandy shores. Like a Fellini movie most of them are silently falling into ruin. Maybe it was a hurricane. The scene keeps repeating between more mangroves and then we land at Altata. It is near dusk as we set down on coastal salt flat dampened bare ground in a wide place in the road at the edge of town. We climb out and stretch. Coconut palms lean over dilapidated houses strung along the strand above a broad waveless beach on an inlet bay. There is no breeze and everything smells moist and tropical. Nobody greets us. Tom and I walk down to the beach and look for eelgrass in the drift but only find *Ruppia*, another kind of seagrass. A nice botanical record but not what we are looking for.

Ike stops at a few houses and asks about a place to stay and buy meals. Nobody offers information. That's strange—even in the smallest place in Sonora there is always an older woman, often a widow in black, who fixes meals and lets travelers use an extra room or the porch for a modest donation. It's getting dark.

I walk over to some fishermen hanging out next to beached *pangas* and ask about eelgrass “*zacate del mar*” describing it in detail. They act like they don’t know what I am talking about. They’re not like fishermen in Sonora. They don’t laugh, not even at me. This place is creepy. Too late to go anywhere else. A bunch of gun-toting teenage soldiers announce they are guarding the airplane, which means we will have to pay them.

Finally a gringo I will call “Joe” materializes and offers us meals and a place to stay. He lives here with no visible means of support. Like the rest of the house, the unpainted wooden floor sags and the view is obscured by grime-clogged rusting screens. The old woman who serves us doesn’t speak. I go out to the beach again and talk to fishermen still hanging around their *pangas*. We talk about sea turtles and again I ask about *zacate del mar*. They remain reserved and only slightly more friendly than before.

It has been a long day and I am thankful for a safe place to put a sleeping bag. The place is unbelievably dark and quiet. It seems like a different country from Sonora. In the first light I search the beach drift and skirt a mangrove lagoon but there is only *Ruppia*. While I was at the beach Kim and Ike have been talking to Joe. I don’t want to stay here. There is no eelgrass and we would make better use of our time going back to Desemboque.

Joe didn’t know jack about eelgrass last night, and now says he knows where it is and can take us there in his pickup. I think he is lying, but what for? I get out our maps and ask him to show me where the eelgrass is. He looks at the map of the Altata region for a long time. Maybe he doesn’t know how to read maps. He’s a strange duck but then I suppose we are too. Why would anyone come here looking for something called eelgrass? Joe shows us a place way back in an *estero* (lagoon) where he says eelgrass grows. I know eelgrass does not grow in stagnant backwater. The place he points to consists mostly of barren, dry salt flats we saw flying in yesterday. I ask how long it takes to get there. An hour or so. Well, I am sure that means at least two hours and there goes the whole day for nothing.

I tell Ike and Kim I don’t want to waste the time and expense. Tom does not say much. Both Ike and Kim are on my case. “What makes you think you know so much? this guy lives here and knows the place. You don’t know everything.” Something has happened and I won’t go. Since I am paying for this trip I insist we go back to Desemboque. Ike and Kim put up quite an argument for going and seeing what Joe has to show us. This is one time I won’t give in. I know about eelgrass and it can’t grow there. I prevail and we put our things together. Still

rather early and time to get to Desemboque at a reasonable hour.

Joe is really trying to persuade us. What the hell does it matter to him if we find eelgrass or not? Why does he care about it now? Oh well, maybe he is just lonely for American company or wants to earn a bit of money. We pick up our gear and head for the plane. Just past a muddy little alley one of the fishermen I was talking to last night darts out from behind a house and says, “You guys better get out of here as fast as you can” and runs off before I can say anything. I catch up with Ike—he’s taller and always walks faster.

I tell Ike and Kim says, “What for? Didn’t you ask him why?” I repeat we should get going, but Ike won’t rush.

Ike checks the oil and fiddles with things under the cowl. The plane sits on a wide place in the road, next to a schoolyard full of kids. The soldiers guarding the plane have evaporated. “Well, at least we don’t have to pay them,” says Ike. Tom, Kim, and I climb in. Kim has a pilot’s license so he gets to sit in front with Ike. Out of nowhere a single-engine plane swoops down—pow . . . pow . . . pooff . . . pooff . . . pooff—the place is sprayed with bullets. I yell to Ike we need to get the hell out of here—that fisherman knew something for sure. Ike closes the cowl, climbs in and starts up the plane, sticks his head out and yells the usual “Clear!” He radios to the other plane making another pass at us. No answer. More strafing. Dirt blows up in little puffs at the same time we hear the “pooff . . . pooff . . .”

The schoolyard is empty. Ike taxis out, keeps trying to radio, and we are off fast and short. Now I remember Ike and Joe talking about the plane last night.

Whew . . . we’ve left Altata none too soon. From my cramped seat I look down at endless coastal plain of thornscrub and mangroves fringing the sea and look up to see the other plane coming at us. There he is right next to us. I am almost fascinated as the window gradually opens upward and in dreamy slow motion a steel cylinder slips out and spits fire. Shit! I am looking into a gun barrel firing at my eyeballs. I yell, “He’s shooting at us!”

“What makes you think he’s shooting at us?” says Kim in his ex-heavyweight-boxer studied macho manner. Bullets whiz in front of the windshield and Kim is a believer.

Ike calmly says, “I don’t know what I can do about his shooting at us but I know what I can do.” He plunges the plane down red-lining the tach to just above the water, wheels almost in the sea and slowly outdistances our adversary.

We keep going north, stop for fuel in Guaymas, and head home. We find out Altata is the drug center for the whole west coast.

Ten years later: Sandy Lanham, who has a flying service out of Tucson for environmental scientists, takes a Mexican biologist working on Brant—the little goose that feeds on eelgrass—to the Sinaloa coast near Altata. He collects a big bunch of eelgrass and has Sandy bring it to me to verify.