

By Wayne Halm

## Introduction

Sixteen miles down the thirty two mile long road from Marrero to Lafitte is the Halfway Bar. The road itself, LA 45, is two lane blacktop with plenty of curves, dips, bridges, patches, and pot holes; but no hills, there aren't any hills in the South of Louisiana.

Sometimes the road runs through pastures guarded by rusty strands of barbed wire. Other times it travels under Oak and Hackberry trees; a scene straight out of a painting, the gray Spanish Moss hanging down and shafts of sunlight blazing through. But most of the time it passes through Ragweed fields. On this unused land the Ragweed grows 10 to 12 feet tall, and would do so right up to the edge of the blacktop if not for the monthly efforts of the mowing crews.

Occasionally wayward breezes wander over the Ragweed and through the tree tops. Few if any find their way down to the road. But the midday sun does, it beats mercilessly on the asphalt and those who travel it. Each stretch under the trees in the 90 degree shade is a cool oasis travelers are reluctant to leave.

The 45 mile per hour speed limit signs are for the most part unnecessary, few venture faster. Few venture down the road at all anymore, most use the more modern and straighter Lafitte Highway. The opening of the new road almost killed the business of the Halfway Bar. Precious few still seek out it's relatively cool interior and only rarely do road travelers stop in. But for habit it would have closed.

## Chapter 1

Mark Anthony Case drove the Jeep down LA 45 at 40 miles per hour. He was having second thoughts about his choice of rental vehicle. The strong springs on the Jeep were not only capable of carrying the vehicle "off road", they were also capable of carrying every bump, jolt, and twist from the tires to the driver. The rough ride was somewhat expected, but Mark had not anticipated the heat of the sun beating down on his head. He thought that the breeze generated by the motion would keep him cool enough, he had not considered the sun pounding down on his scalp. The discomfort surprised him. "The Hawaiian sun likes white meat," he remembered

the phrase from the islands and decided that the Louisiana sun must be related.

Still, he thought, this is better than being inside one of those sealed air conditioned capsules. From inside one of those you could only see some of a place, the part along the road. But for a reporter that isn't enough, a reporter needs to touch and smell a place to get the feel and flavor of it. "Get some mud between your toes," he liked to say.

No, this is better, he concluded. I'm getting the feel of the place, and it feels hot. Now I know why not much happens during the middle of August days in the South of Louisiana.

## Chapter 2

Paul Higgens was dripping with sweat. Three hours of walking through the Louisiana woods does that to a man, even a 21 year old college student. The jeans and long sleeve denim shirt that he wore provided some protection against the bugs and briars but compounded the heat. He was walking under the trees on the bank of a small bayou, the undergrowth was thick but nothing compared to the solid wall of green Ragweeds just a few feet away.

He paused to wipe sweat from his eyes with his shirt sleeve. He looked from the impenetrable green wall of Ragweed to the equally concealing black water of the bayou. The realization that anything could be lurking in either only a few feet away sent a shiver down his back in spite of the heat.

Paul was definitely nervous, just short of scared, and wondering why he was out in this green steamy hell. Then his gaze shifted to Julie walking ahead. Each ankle high brown boot was carefully placed with each step. The short gray socks rolled down onto the tops of the boots were wet with sweat but held their shape perfectly. Protruding from the rolls her slim pale legs literally glistened with sweat and insect repellent. Her tight upper thighs disappeared into close fitting khaki shorts now wet. Inside the shorts her buttocks, first one then the other, would grow round then fall slack as she walked. The khaki shirt, so crisp in the early morning, was limp and wet clinging to her back. Her bra straps showed in relief. Through the hole in the back of her baseball cap struck a 6 inch ponytail.

**Lunch Novel:**

## The Halfway Bar

Paul remembered why he had come, what he was supposed to be doing took a bit longer.

"Julie," he called, "Do you still think we are going to find anything?"

"Yeah, they're here, I know they are," Julie replied. She stopped, wiped sweat from her brow, looked back at Paul and continued, "The birds are the long haul carriers in this cycle. Someone has the virus, a mosquito bites them getting the virus, the mosquito bites a bird giving it the virus, the bird flies away to somewhere else. There another mosquito bites the bird before it dies, the mosquito picks up the virus, the mosquito bites another person giving them the virus. That's how the virus travels."

"You know at school people are calling Dr. Johnson 'Cleopatra' because of her fixation on this," Paul said, "And they are beginning to call you 'Little Cleo'."

"I know," Julie admitted, "But one dead bird could prove that we are right. One dead bird could prove that the virus is here - and I want to be the one that proves it."

"Okay," Paul replied, "But these dead birds, should I be looking for them in the trees or on the ground?"

"On the ground I think. We probably wouldn't be able to get them out of the trees anyway," Julie answered and began walking again.

"Makes sense," Paul said watching her buttocks again. He wondered why she had worn such an inappropriate outfit, but was glad that she did.

After four steps Julie stopped. Without turning she said, "But Paul, there aren't any birds of any kind crawling around on my butt."

Paul hung his head with embarrassment. Julie walked on with an amused smile.

### Chapter 3

It was 10:30am when Billy came through the door of the Halfway Bar. With the door still open behind him he stopped and looked around sneering. He always did that and it amused Tom the proprietor. Billy tried so hard to put his bluff on everyone - he didn't know that the place was empty, and after "looking around sneering" he still didn't know, it takes a while of eyes to adjust to the dark interior. But Tom went along with the game, Billy's money spent like everyone else's.

"Morning Billy," Tom called.

"Give me a beer Tom," Billy answered in his direction and gave another look around.

Tom sat a longneck on the bar and Billy came over. "Hear you had some trouble with the law," Tom began.

"The stupid shits," Billy replied after downing a third of the beer.

"That all worked out now?" Tom asked.

"Yeah, they took my license. But I just went over in Florida and got another one, Cops ain't so smart," Billy answered.

"You're a slick one Billy. Florida. I always liked Florida. Took the family over to Destin for a week one time," Tom stated.

"Yeah, Destin's a good place," Billy picked up taking the bait, "But its getting ruined, all those condos and fancy subdivisions. Ain't like it used to be. But I got a chick over there who was begging me to come stay with her. That was all right for a while but I got tired of it, you know how women get. Give me another beer."

"They got work over in Destin?" Tom asked not moving.

"Yeah, plenty," Billy replied. He ceremoniously peeled a twenty off of a sizable roll and put it on the bar. "I did all right," he added holding up the roll.

Tom got him another beer.

### Chapter 4

The Blue Jay was dying. It sat still with talons wrapped around a branch - the grip growing more tentative by the minute. It's wings, never to be used again, drooped against the branch, but it's proud head was held high until the end.

The mosquito neither knew nor cared about the birds condition. Her only interest was the easy blood the docile bird was providing. Rarely does a single animal provide all of the blood required, mostly they brush the mosquito away before she is full. But this bird held promise.

However the promise was not fulfilled. Before the mosquito got her fill the bird died. With no more ceremony than a falling leaf the bird simply stopped breathing and tumbled from the branch. The mosquito buzzed away in search of more blood.

### Chapter 5

## The Halfway Bar

The top of Mark's head burned and he hated it. He considered himself to be in good shape for a 50 year old. He still ran three miles most every morning and did his 50 situps and 50 pushups every morning. The routine didn't make his 6 foot 200 pound frame look athletic, just solid.

"Hell, I'm in good shape, period," he thought.

"Then why is a little sunshine melting your ass right into the seat?" his alter ego chimed in. "Sure you were tough once," it continued, "Back when you covered Africa. Nigeria, Ethiopia, Somalia, it was hotter there, and a lot more dangerous. Sure you were tough, but that was then and this is now. Now your getting old and whining about a drive down a country lane."

"It's Washington," he mentally countered, "It sucks the vitality out of you. The situation... it's totally ridiculous to try to cover a war from there. Everyone just tells you what they want you to hear - true or not. It's like ... like being a typist for the military."

"Oh, so it's the old truth thing," the other side needed, "Forget it, it's dead three times over, they won't tell it, you can't print it, and nobody would read it anyway. Look around you! No body cares!! The war train is rolling! It will run until it's out of steam. It could take years. Get in it's way and you'll be crushed, there's nothing you can do about it."

"I've got to try," he objected.

"Get out of the way, get a life, get a woman, get someplace where you can make a difference, get another story," it went on.

"But people have to know," he protested.

"People don't want to know," it replied, "Get another story."

"It's the heat. I've got to get out of the heat," Mark thought angrily. Then he saw the Halfway Bar.

### Chapter 6

The dead bird hit the ground between Paul and Julie. Paul tried not to but he was once again watching her buttocks. The bird fell right through his line of sight, so he noticed it.

Paul closely watched the dead bird from where he was, looking for any movement. Satisfied that it was dead he stepped closer and called to Julie, "Is this what we're looking for?"

Julie rushed up and looked, her excitement began to grow immediately. "Yeah, that's it," she said. Quickly she hugged a stunned and stiff Paul and kissed him on the cheek - then pulled away before he could respond.

Paul watched, consciously commanding himself to breath. Julie opened a zip lock bag and pushed the bird in with a stick. As she bent to the job her thick pony tail stuck straight up, it completely filled the hole in the cap, held it's round rigid shape for a while, then spread open in graceful curves to land again on her head. "Fantastic," Paul thought.

She sealed the bag and examined the bird through the clear plastic. "Oh yeah, this is West Nile for sure," she announced confidently.

Paul's thoughts were in fragments, none of which concerned a dead Blue Jay. But he did manage to ask, "How can you be sure?"

"I can't be certain yet, but I just know it is," she answered, then added, "Right here, how could I have walked right past it?"

Paul just shrugged and asked, "So we can stop looking now?"

"Yeah, let's get back to the car," Julie answered. She looked around, pointed, and added, "The road is that way."

"We're not going back the way we came?" Paul asked.

"This way will be quicker, on the road maybe we can get a ride back to the car," Julie explained. She started walking in the direction she had indicated. Without looking back she continued, "If we get this in the lab by tonight we can have the results back the day after tomorrow. Then I can announce the results to Dr. Johnson when she's over for dinner Friday. Of course you will have to be there to verify the site of the find."

Paul was again watching her buttocks, "Love to," he agreed.

### Chapter 7

Mark was briefly silhouetted in the door way of the Halfway Bar as he entered. He quickly closed the door, stepped to one side, and let his eyes begin to adjust to the dim interior.

"Over this way," Tom called from behind the bar.

Mark looked in the direction of the voice and could dimly see the bar and two men. He carefully walked in that direction.

**Lunch Novel:**

## The Halfway Bar

"It happens to everybody," Tom said as Mark approached the bar, "Nobody can see a thing when they first walk in."

"I see just fine," Billy interrupted.

"Yeah Billy, you ready for another beer?" Tom replied.

"Yeah, give me another," Billy grunted and emptied his current bottle.

"What can I get for you?" Tom asked Mark before moving.

"Just a coke and a little of this coolness," Mark said, "It's a little early for me to be drinking."

"You're a god damned whimp, but I know what you mean. I don't do any serious drinking before three in the afternoon," Billy put in as he took his third beer from Tom.

"Good thinking," Mark replied flatly.

Tom dried his hands on a bar towel then held his right out to Mark and said, "Tom Leblanc, proprietor, that's Billy Brown, more or less regular customer."

Mark shook his hand and said, "Mark Case, reporter."

"You're that guy that works for the Picayune and writes about old buildings ain't you? You gonna write about Tom's place?" Billy asked.

Mark looked around the room, then said, "Probably make a good story. But no, I work in Washington and write about the fighting in Afghanistan."

"We're kicking some Raghead ass," Billy announced proudly.

"So some say, but I'm trying to uncover how the US military decided that it was all right to shoot up a roof top full of women and children with aerial cannon fire," Mark replied.

"The stupid Ragheads shouldn't a been there," Billy stated flatly.

"It's my understanding that they lived there. But, yeah, that's what I keep hearing," Mark said dryly.

"That's what the ignorant stupid shitheads get for 9-11," Billy challenged.

"I couldn't find much of a link between this group and any of the attacks of September eleventh," Mark said meeting the challenge.

"They're Ragheads, that's enough," Billy sneered menacingly.

"What brings you down this way?" Tom asked loudly to change the direction of the conversation.

"Vacation, I guess. My boss told me to take some time off and get my head straight," Mark replied.

"Kill 'em all and let God sort it out, that's what I say," Billy yelled and headed for the men's room.

"Don't bait him Mark," Tom advised after Billy left, "He didn't get all of the brains due a cockroach, but he got more than his share of mean. 'Bad Billy' he likes to call himself. Most folks call him 'Billy the Bully', and some of us just call him fool. But he's mean Mark, real mean."

"Good advice Tom, I'm sorry," Mark admitted, "This story just has me so worked up that I'm not thinking straight. And that sun out there baked out whatever good sense I had left. Thanks, I'll be more agreeable when he gets back." Then he added under his breath, "I need another story."

### Chapter 8

A transient summer breeze flowed through the tree tops. Mosquito's don't build nests so the half full mosquito was content to be carried along. One place was as good as another to her as long as she could get the blood needed for her eggs.

Earlier in the day she had been mated over twenty times during one brief but frantic dive through a swarm of hundreds of males. Now her life centered around finding blood and laying her eggs.

The warm breeze made keeping her semi swollen abdomen aloft easier so the mosquito drifted along toward the Halfway Bar, ever searching for more blood.

### Chapter 9

Billy was returning from the men's room in a foul mood when the front door of the Halfway Bar opened. Julie and Paul were frozen silhouettes in the bright rectangle of light. Billy noticed Julie's legs and moved to her. He didn't bother to see Paul at all.

"Let me help you sweetheart," Billy said and took her hand to lead her to the bar.

Julie instinctively took a step but then stopped.

“Close the door son,” Tom said to Paul, “Billy, leave that lady alone.”

“I ain’t hurtin’ her, just want to git to know her a little better that’s all,” Billy said and patted her on the behind.

Julie screamed, “Stop that,” and jerked away from Billy.

Paul still couldn’t see but he stepped forward and yelled, “Get away from her.”

Paul wasn’t really facing Billy and was staring into the room. Billy made use of his sight advantage and hit Paul square in the face knocking him to the floor. “Don’t yell at me you stupid piece of shit,” Billy yelled at Paul.

Billy stepped in to kick Paul before he could get up but Mark moved between them. “Back off,” he told Billy coldly.

Billy froze and sneered, “I’ve had just about enough of your shit. You Yankee fag.”

“Good, but if you want some more, I’m right here,” Mark challenged.

Paul got to his feet and started toward Billy. Mark held out his left arm and blocked his path. “I think we should go back outside,” he said to Julie and Paul.

Julie eagerly and Paul reluctantly went out the door. Mark stared coldly at Billy until they were out. Then he waved to Tom and followed them.

### **Chapter 10**

The breeze died. Left to carry her own weight the mosquito descended. She came to rest in the grass near the door of the Halfway Bar.

The mosquito had only been resting on the blade of grass for a few second when Julie came out the door. Julie walked to within a six inches of the mosquito and stopped. Her bare legs were too inviting for even a tired mosquito to resist. She buzzed over.

The mosquito landed on the back of Julie’s thigh with but one intent, get blood. However, once on the skin she began to lose focus, something was not right here. But the mosquito wanted blood and pressed on. Blood, she wanted blood, her eggs needed blood, and there was plenty of it, only a fraction of an inch away, just through this soft easy skin. She could feel the blood, she knew it was there, yet, she was hesitant to insert her palpus and get it. She just couldn’t focus on

the act. Finally the insect repellent won. The mosquito buzzed away unnoticed without biting.

She landed in the grass again, next to a white Camero, and waited for the blood focus to return.

### **Chapter 11**

Mark firmly closed the door behind him and looked out into the grass parking lot. Paul stood facing the door, the rush produced by physical conflict put a wide eyed determined look on his face. Julie stood next to Paul, she trembled slightly and held on to his arm with both hands. “He’s recovered and ready to defend what’s his,” Mark thought, “Probably could too.” He watched for a few more seconds memorizing the scene.

“He’s not coming out,” Mark said to Paul and walked over to them.

“How do you know?” Julie asked.

“They rarely do, and he’s scared of you,” Mark replied indicating Paul.

“He didn’t act scared,” Paul said still looking at the door.

“In there he could see and you couldn’t, things are different out here. He didn’t beat you in there, so he’s not coming out here,” Mark explained.

“Feels like he beat me,” Paul said touching his face but still watching the door.

“Oh, he knocked you down all right,” Mark chuckled, “But then his surprise was gone, and you got back up. He had lost, he was just too dumb to know it.”

“Thanks for the help anyway,” Paul said glancing at Mark.

“All I did was save some wear and tear on your knuckles,” Mark answered, “Come on, sit down in the Jeep and let the lady look at your face.”

At the Jeep they exchanged introductions and Julie carefully dabbed a towel over Paul’s face.

“Why did he attack us?” Julie asked.

“I’m afraid that’s partly my fault,” Mark admitted, “Billy, that his name, is a not so bright bully. Before you got there he was verbally pushing on me, and I was pushing back. He was getting mad, then you walked in. At that moment you were simply an easier target. I’m sure Billy would just say ‘you shouldn’t a been there.’”

“But all we wanted was a ride to our car?” Julie continued.

## The Halfway Bar

"Then you got it. Hop in," Mark laughed.

### Chapter 12

Billy stared at the door as if daring anyone to come back in until he heard the Jeep start up. Then he swaggered back toward the bar.

"I showed those assholes," Billy bragged, "and that skinny bag of bones probably don't know how to ..."

"Shut up Billy," Tom roared, "Shut up and get out."

Billy's head jerked up and he stopped mid stride. Shock and rage bounced between his eyes as he saw Tom leaning on the bar, one hand on the bar the other behind it.

"Don't strain your brain boy, you know I've got a pistol in my hand," Tom said in a flat cold voice, "And you know that you wouldn't be the first to be buried out back. There weren't any need for that shit you just pulled. So get out and don't come back."

"They aggravated me," Billy puffed up and yelled.

"Yeah, well now you've aggravated me," Tom said, "So are you going out the front door - or the back door?"

Billy moved slowly to the door always watching Tom. He opened the door gently but once outside slammed it behind him.

### Chapter 13

The mood was easy and Mark drove the Jeep slowly so they could talk. He told them a little about being a reporter and Julie told him a lot about viruses. When they stopped at Paul's car Mark was surprised to notice that the heat wasn't bothering him.

"Will you still be in town this weekend?", Paul asked.

"Yeah, I'll be here for a few weeks," Mark answered, "I'm staying at The Colonnade on St. Charles."

"I know the place, we have drinks on the porch sometimes," Paul said.

"I did that last night, real nice," Mark said.

"Would you like to come over for dinner with us Friday night?" Paul asked.

"That sounds fine, Yes, I'd like to," Mark replied.

Paul wrote down Julie's address for Mark. "It's pretty close," he said handing it to Mark.

Julie gave Paul a questioning look, but said nothing. Mark waited until Paul had the car started before putting the Jeep in gear.

"Well boy, you wanted the feel and flavor - looks like your getting it," Mark thought as he drove away.

### Chapter 14

Billy leaned against the Camero deciding what to do next. He faced the car, both hands on the hood, feet apart, and mumbled, "Assholes, I should chase them down and kick the shit out of them."

The mosquito sensed blood and buzzed up. She settled on the back of Billy's neck and didn't hesitate - she began to draw blood. Billy slapped his neck, but was too late. She was already full of blood and buzzing away.

"God damned skeeters. To hell with this place, I don't need this shit," Billy cursed.

He got in the Camero and started back toward town at over 70 miles per hour.

### Chapter 15

Paul glanced over at Julie as he drove the Toyota, she was leaning back in the seat, eyes closed and a trace of a smile on her face. His gaze lingered for more than an instant on her breasts before he pulled it back to the road. They hadn't talked much since getting in the car - the air conditioning just felt too good.

Paul slowed to pass two Sheriff's Deputies who had a white Camero pulled over. Julie sat up and looked - neither she nor Paul recognized Billy.

"I don't mind, but why did you ask Mark to come over for dinner?" Julie asked.

"I guess I should have asked you first, but it seemed like the right thing to do," Paul replied.

"Yes you should have, and yes it was," Julie responded with a smile.

"And he wasn't wearing a wedding ring," Paul said.

"So?" Julie questioned.

"So, Dr. Barbara Johnson doesn't wear one either," Paul answered. "Besides," he added.

"Besides what? Go on," Julie pressed.

**Lunch Novel:**

## **The Halfway Bar**

---

"Well, he is a reporter - and you are going to have some news to announce," Paul answered.

Julie brightened as said, "Now I see that there is more to you than just a pretty face."

Paul smiled.

"And if it doesn't swell up too much, let's go celebrate tonight," Julie offered.

"Love to," Paul replied and mentally checked for swelling.

###