

Whenever I get sleepy at the wheel, I always stop for coffee. This time, I was going along in western Texas and I got sleepy. I saw a sign that said **GAS/EAT**, so I pulled off. It was long after midnight. What I expected was a place where the coffee tastes like copper and the flies never sleep. What I found was something else. The tables were painted wood, the counter was spick-and-span. Even the smell was O.K. Nobody was there, as far as customers. There was just this one old boy - really only about forty, getting grey above the ears - behind the counter. I sat down at the counter and ordered coffee and apple pie. Right away he got me started feeling sad. I have a habit: I divide people up. Winners and losers. **This old boy behind the counter was the kind that can't do enough for you, but they can't win. You know? With their clean shirt and their little bow tie?** It makes you feel sad just to look at them. Only take my tip: Don't feel too sad.

He brought the coffee. It was hot, and tasted like coffee. „Want cream and sugar?“ he asked. I said, „Please,“ and the cream was fresh and cold and thick. The pie was good, too.

A car stopped outside. The old boy looked out to see if they wanted gas, but they didn't. They came right in. The tall one said, „Two coffees. Do you have a road map we could look at?“ „I think so,“ the old boy said. He got their coffee first, and then started going through a pile of papers by the telephone, looking for a map. It was easy to see he was the type nothing's too much trouble for. I'm the same type myself, if you want to know. I watched the old boy hunting for his map, and I felt like I was looking in a mirror. After a minute or two, he found the map.

„This one's not quite up to date, but...“ He put it on the counter, next to their coffee.

The two men spread out the map and leaned over it.

The tall one ran his finger along the Rio Grande and shook his head. „I guess there's no place to get across, this side of El Paso.“

He said it to his pal, but the old boy behind the counter heard him and lit up.

„You trying to find the best way south? I might be able to help you with that.“

„How?“

„Just a minute.“ He spent a lot of time going through the papers by the telephone again. „Thought I might have a newer map,“ he said. It would show the Hackett Bridge. Anyway, I can tell you how to find it.“

„Here's a town called Hackett,“ the tall one said, still looking at the map. „It's on the river, just at the end of a road. Looks like a small place.“

„Not any more. It's just about doubled since they built the bridge.“

"What happens on the other side?" The short one asked the question, but both of them were listening carefully.

„Road is O.K. It joins up there with the highway out of El Paso and Juarez.“

The tall man finished his coffee, folded the map, put it in his pocket, and stood up. "We'll take your map with us," he said.

The old boy seemed startled, like a new kid at school when somebody hits him on the nose to show him who's boss. However, he just said, „Glad to let you have it.“ **The two men talked in**

copper: Kupfer
spick-and-span: blitzsauber
blitzsauber
customer: Kunde
counter: Theke
apple pie: Apfelkuchen
habit: Gewohnheit
divide up: aufteilen
bow tie: Fliege
pal: Kumpel
pile: Stapel

whispers on the way out. Then they stopped in the middle of the floor, turned around, reached inside their jackets, and pulled guns on us.

„You sit where you are and don't move,“ the tall one said to me. „And you, get against the wall.“

Both of us did exactly what they wanted. I told you we were a lot alike. **The short man walked over and opened the cash register.**

„Every little bit helps,“ he said. The tall man set the telephone on the floor, put his foot on it, and pulled the wires out. Then they ran to their car and got in. **The short man leaned out the window and shot out one of my tires. Then they took off fast.**

I looked at the old boy behind the counter. He seemed a little pale, but he didn't waste any time. He took out a screwdriver.

I said, „It doesn't always pay to be nice to people.“ He laughed and said, „Well, it doesn't usually cost anything,“ and went on taking the bottom off the telephone. He was a fast worker. In about five minutes he had a dial tone coming out of the receiver. He dialed a number and told the Rangers about the men and their car. "They did?" he said. "Well, well, well... No, not El Paso. They took the Hackett turnoff."

After he hung up, he said, "**Those guys robbed a supermarket in Wichita Falls**“

I shook my head. „They sure had me fooled. I thought they looked perfectly all right.“

The old boy got me another cup of coffee, and opened himself a bottle of pop. „They fooled me, too, at first.“ He wiped his mouth. „Then I saw their shoulder holsters when they leaned on the counter to look at the map. **Anyway, they had mean eyes, I thought. Didn't you?**“ „Well, I didn't at the time.“ We drank without talking for a while.

A pair of patrol cars went roaring by outside and around the Hackett turnoff.

I started thinking, and I thought of the saddest thing. **„You knew there was something wrong with those guys, but you still helped them on their way!“**

He laughed. „Well, the world's a tough sort of place at best, isn't it?“ „I can understand showing them the map,“ I said, „but I wouldn't have told about the bridge. Now there's not a snowball's chance in hell of catching them. **If you'd kept your mouth shut, there'd at least be some hope.**“

„There isn't any —, „Not with a car as fast as they've got,“ I went on.

The old boy smiled, „I don't mean there isn't any hope,“ he said. **„I mean there isn't any bridge.“**