

# NOWHERE, New Mexico

A Novel

**BY MICHAEL BUNKER**

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# INTRODUCTION

*Nowhere, New Mexico*

## **A trip to Nowhere.**

*The town of Nowhere popped up out of the high desert in post-war New Mexico and marred the face of imperfection forever.*

That was it. That was the hook. The line that was supposed to snare you into reading the book. First lines are critical in novel writing, the experts and gatekeepers say. I don't know. A great hook doesn't mean the book will be good. I can bang out a couple better than that right now and I'm not even drunk yet:

*"The evening sun, orange-red and glorious in its setting, painted the patio a deep, dusky amber and a wisp of a late autumn breeze ruffled his hair as Chet sat down to eat the last plate of his dad."*

You'd want to read that one. Somewhere in the book Chet eats his dad.

*“Corabeth didn’t know if her shoulder would be up to the strain, but she dug in her toes and hiked up her dress and apron before exploding forward and pushing Mr. Godsey out the third-floor window to his death.*

That last one is a Waltons television show deleted scene I just made up right now, but you get the point. Ken Halberson was planning on writing a book about Nowhere, New Mexico, and this is how Ken’s book would have started if he’d ever written it. Which he didn’t. Now I’m writing the book, so I might as well start it the same way.

\* \* \*

I found Ken Halberson’s notes a year ago stashed in a vintage 50s era Samsonite hard-sided suitcase (brown) at the Bonneville mid-century modern furniture store in Coleman, Texas. The suitcase was brown unmarred leather, and it was locked.

Wes is the guy who runs the store, and he knew the notes were in there, but the suitcase was locked, and he sold it to me anyway.

“Aren’t you even remotely curious what’s in here?” I said.

Wes, generally good natured except on the days when he’s surly, shrugged. “I *was* curious,” he said. “because I’m not an idiot. I opened it and looked at the stuff in it. It’s just a bunch of paper. Worthless stacks of typed notes from the 50s. Some on copy paper and thousands of words handwritten on bar napkins and on the backs of hamburger sacks. Some college kid’s dissertation notes maybe, I don’t know. I didn’t read it. It looked like nonsense. What do I care about it? I’m surprised no one dumped it all thirty years ago. Must have been stuck in someone’s attic somewhere.”

My eyes widened even as I tried to mask my excitement. A suitcase with a manuscript inside! Was I holding Hemingway's lost bag? And what if in the bag *was* Hemingway's manuscripts from when his wife Hadley lost everything he'd written on a train car in 1922.

Can you imagine?

In December of 1922, Hemingway was in Switzerland, still a correspondent for the Toronto Daily Star. He hadn't yet published anything, though he wrote constantly. He'd written dozens of short stories and poems, not to mention a full novel. In '22 he was in Switzerland at the Lausanne Peace Conference and while there he'd given some small tokens of his writing to the editor Lincoln Steffens. Steffens asked for more of his writing, so Hemingway sent a telegram to his wife Hadley who was at their home in Paris. She dutifully packed up all of Hemingway's writings, everything she could find—even carbon copies, which back then were laboriously maintained as the only backups to a manuscript—and placed them into a satchel to deliver them to her husband.

Hadley boarded the train in Paris and while waiting for the departure had exited the car momentarily to buy some water to drink on the trip. When she returned, the satchel containing her husband's life work as an author was gone.

If you are not a writer you probably cannot imagine what a disaster this was, but as a lover of literature you should have an inkling.

Only a few works survived. A short story had been sent to an editor and another was buried in a drawer at their apartment, so Hadley had missed it. Hemingway was wiped out, and history shows that he never fully forgave his wife who was devastated by the event.

Everything Hemingway had written up to that point was lost forever.

Was this that satchel?

Well, no, because this ain't that story. No way Hemingway had his manuscripts in a hard-sided Samsonite 1950s era suitcase.

"It's not Hemingway's lost novel, genius," Wes said, as if reading my thoughts. This was one of his surly days.

"I know. But that doesn't mean it's not valuable."

"Just a bunch of notes someone wrote on bar napkins. Probably a manifesto. Like the Unibomber. It's all free with the suitcase. You want it?"

Of course I wanted it.

\* \* \*

Wes was wrong, but he didn't know any better. The work in the bag wasn't just a pile of notes. Sure, some of it was scribbled on bar napkins and hamburger sacks like he'd said, but it wasn't nothing. Ken Halberson was planning on writing a book about a small town in New Mexico, a town I'd never heard of. In fact, it was a town that no one alive had ever heard of as far as I could tell. I couldn't find any information on the town at all. Anywhere.

But I found Ken Halberson.

Halberson was a decorated World War II vet who went to work for LIFE Magazine after the war as a special features writer. Edward Kramer Thompson, LIFE's editor-in-chief at the time, sent Halberson to Israel in 1948, Indochina in 1952, and to Nowhere, New Mexico (instead of Korea) in 1954. I have the letters on LIFE letterhead to prove it. In Indochina he had his leg nearly blown off when a soldier he was shadowing stepped on a landmine and was killed. Halberson, gravely wounded, recuperated in Japan and after 13 surgeries he flew home to a hero's welcome, a big bonus from LIFE, and the bad news that he'd be getting no more dangerous assignments from

the magazine. He was crushed when he found out he wouldn't be covering the Korean War for the magazine.

It was at this time that he began drinking heavily, and that's notable, I guess, if you're looking to study Ken's life. You see, there's a gap in Halberson's story. A huge chasm in his biographical data online that was partially explained by what I found in the suitcase and nowhere else.

Halberson wrote a few books *after* 1960, mostly about baseball and politics, and he became a New York Times Bestselling Author. He won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting from Cuba during the Bay of Pigs incident in 1961 (he went there without LIFE's permission; they paid him anyway) and according to Wikipedia he was killed in a car accident in Albuquerque in 1974. If you only look online, there is no clue in the extant information about this famous journalist that he ever made it to Nowhere, New Mexico, that he ever wrote an article or book about the town, and, like I said, even that the place ever existed.

But Ken Halberson was somewhere in 1954. He just disappears from the record from 1954 to 1960.

No, there's no evidence out in the wide world that Ken Halberson ever made it to Nowhere, yet, I have over 300,000 words and notes, many of them handwritten, from Halberson's time in Nowhere and I cannot deny by reading them that he either a.) certainly lived there for a time, or b.) was absolutely crazy for a good part of the middle 1950s, but was then sane enough to win a Pulitzer Prize for journalism in the early 1960s.

\* \* \*

Ken Halberson was tall, ruggedly handsome, erudite, inquisitive, and single. He was the old 50s version of the confirmed bachelor before that term came to hint at homosexuality.

According to the biographies of some of his famous cohorts in journalism and literature, the people who knew him, and according to his own biography sent by him at the request of the Pulitzer people in the early 1960s, he never married, and he was happily heterosexual. The Pulitzer writeup doesn't mention his sexuality, but there is strong evidence from his own writing and from mentions of him by his author friends that he was straight.

Journalism was his life and love and he moved from job to job chasing the story. Women were an occasional delightful sidelight. At least, that what I thought until I read his notes from Nowhere.

What we can gather from the suitcase writings, merging those with what I could learn from the information available online, is that sometime in early 1954 Ken Halberson left his home in Schenectady, New York and took a plane to Albuquerque, New Mexico searching for the town his editor had sent him to write about.

Nowhere.

His plan was this... find the town, live there for a while, and write about it.

Rumor had it that a town had sprouted up out of the post-war desert sands and by all accounts—that is by the only rumors he could find—it was a modern utopia. The perfect town. That's all there was. That was the seed of the story. Edward Kramer Thompson, in his telegram dispatching Halberson to New Mexico had this to say:

*Halberson,*

*They say there is a perfect town in New Mexico. Called Nowhere. Utopia. Doubt it is. Go find out. Take all the time you need. A year or more if need be. Rest, dig in. Have fun. Send us the bills. We want 10k words.*

## *Ed*

Halberson's notes from February 1954 were clear, and when he left Schenectady, this is what he knew: The rumor that the town existed, and the rumor that it was perfect. Here is what he did not know: He didn't know where Nowhere was located, and, if it even existed.

The investigation started before the journey to New Mexico, and Halberson kept notes of his inquiries. Nobody alive who'd ever published through the AP or any of the other news wires knew where the town was. A few had heard of it. Roger Claussen of the Chicago Tribune claimed to have heard of it but had never been there. A bartender Halberson asked during a layover said he'd heard of the place and that Ken's information was wrong. It was in Old MEXICO, the barman said. Not NEW Mexico. There were no other records to be found. No high school sports teams ever competed against any team from Nowhere, New Mexico. There were no birth records, no death filings, no marriage licenses, no church records, no record of auto accidents, no lawsuits, nothing. If Nowhere ever existed, it had been expunged from the public memory.

Halberson was supposed to write 10,000 words on a town he couldn't even prove existed. He wrote more than that. Way more. But he didn't write a book. At best he wrote an article that only a handful of people ever read.

I'm writing the book.

So, here's how I'm going to handle this.

You know, writing another man's book, it's not plagiarism. I'm not going to use Halberson's words verbatim. I'm writing my own book. I've studied the notes. I've spent hundreds of hours putting them in some sort of order. I know the story. I've analyzed bar napkins and hamburger sacks and the backs of receipts and reams of typing paper bound together by string or stuffed into manila envelopes. Some of the notes are extensive

and explicit as to the details and conversations. Some are almost impossible to discern. Halberson got drunk quite a lot, and when he did his writing suffered. I sometimes get drunk too, so I'm not judging the man.

I can tell you this, though. Nowhere wasn't a utopia in the literary sense. I know this because Ken Halberson was in it. Imperfect Ken Halberson. Just like our world isn't a utopia because we're all in it. Imperfect us. There is no utopia this side of heaven, so we ought not take that term too seriously. However, an investigation into a utopia seems to be a worthwhile endeavor, so I'll have to finish Ken's work, which is a confusing thing to do.

At times I'll be writing as me and you'll know it's me. Sometimes I'll write as Halberson, and you'll know that too. Sometimes, like now, I'll break the fourth wall. It's unavoidable. Sometimes I'll fill in missing stuff with my own imagination, like watching a movie that's "based on true events." What you'll get, though, is true, and probably truer than if Ken Halberson wrote it, because I'm not biased by falling in love with the town, or with Kate Laird either. Hopefully, when we get to the end, it'll all ring true enough.

—Michael Bunker  
Brownwood, TX  
2021

# CHAPTER 1

*Abe Mendoza*

## **The Legend of Nowhere.**

When Ken Halberson arrived in Albuquerque it was just after 5:00 p.m. local time and the weather was cold. An icy wind cut through from the desert valley to the west, swirling against the Sandia mountains up against which the tiny Albuquerque Municipal Airport was built.

New Mexico had been one of the secret heroes of the recent World War. It's plethora of secret bases, testing grounds, installations, and labs brought about the end of the war and, for the first five years or so after the war, had guaranteed the peace. Now the Russians had the bomb too and the race for what the scientists and politicians called "The Super"—the hydrogen bomb—was underway. In a way, New Mexico was the front-line of the new Cold War. Looking around at Albuquerque off to the northwest and the deserts and mountains surrounding it in 1954 felt to Ken like presiding atop the proving grounds of human destructive capacity. Like Adam's holy line standing upon the sacred mountain of God, looking down at the valley of sin where Cain's progeny, unrestrained from engaging in every wicked imagination, slouched inevitably toward God's wrath.

About 120 miles due south of the city, on July 16, 1945, only a week after the military had established the White Sands Missile Range just outside of Alamogordo, American scientists and military men exploded the world's first A-bomb, impacting the course of world history forever. A rainbow cloud of sand, glass, and debris had surged upward to 38,000 feet and only a half dozen minutes later the mushroom cloud was visible from Albuquerque. Residents reported feeling the shock wave and seeing the intense light before the cloud rose into the sky like an omen or a signpost of the changing times. The old world was over.

Ken had read rumors from among the military people familiar with the area that only six months before he landed in Albuquerque, in September of 1953, the radioactivity had finally diminished enough at Ground Zero that an open house had been held at the Trinity Site.

Just to the south and the east of Albuquerque was Kirtland Air Base where America's bomber squadrons, including actor Jimmy Stewart, learned to fly the bombers that would punish Germany and Japan and eventually unleash the A-bomb on the world. The bomb itself was designed and built there at Sandia National Laboratory, housed on the same airfield.

Secret bases and facilities were everywhere in New Mexico, and these were only a few of them. In the land of enchantment, it was like the sand itself concealed dark enigmas and mysteries, and to Halberson, standing pensively in the chill wind, it seemed that the state was littered with rumors and secrets, and rumors of secrets. Here among the machinations of either world peace or world domination (however you chose to interpret it,) the journalist didn't know what that frigid breeze portended. Danger? Epiphanies? Disappointment?

Whatever the case, Ken Halberson, just in from snowy New York, didn't mind the cold. What he did mind was that every bar in town was closed (It was Sunday). No liquor stores were

open either. No grocery stores had alcohol. Ken had grown increasingly dependent on alcohol since his leg had been blown to bits in Indochina. Journalists are inherently addictive personalities and Ken was no exception. He'd steadfastly refused to get addicted to heroin or other pain killers that were common and easy to attain in Asia at the time. No, he truly believed that narcotics would ruin him. Alcohol, it seemed to him, was a manageable habit. Besides, he reasoned, the greatest writers in the world were alcoholics.

The cabbie who gave him the bad news that New Mexico was dry on Sundays also told Ken he'd never heard of Nowhere, New Mexico and therefore it didn't exist. He knew because he'd lived in the state since it was still a territory. He was five years old, he said, when New Mexico became a state, and if there was a Nowhere, New Mexico he'd sure enough know about it. He was, however, willing to drive his fare to a bootlegger's house before taking him to a hotel on the east edge of town where they sat outside in the taxicab and shared the bottle.

Abe Mendoza was the cabbie's name and Abe was the kind of man who liked to listen and ask questions. And he liked to drink, too. The curious sort you might say. As a journalist, Ken liked the rare occasion of conversing with someone who didn't just talk about himself. The curious, according to Ken, were the only authentic humans. A reporter generally learns to get other people talking by a rat-a-tat barrage of relentless queries, and people almost never tire of talking about themselves. But even people who know these essential truths are easy pickings when one of their own begins to prod. Old Abe would have made a good reporter, and it didn't hurt that he oozed warmth and goodwill. Through his heavy Mexican accent, he spoke good and unbroken English, and Abe established himself as an expert on this area of New Mexico. He was also evidently well-learned on public affairs and how those affairs influenced real people.

“Do you remember New Mexico before statehood?”

“No, sir,” Abe said. “I remember life and how we lived it when I was a small child in the territory but the politics of it never impressed me as a child. I am glad we became a state. America is great, and we here are not like those Texans always looking back and pining for something else. I mean, we were part of the Republic of Texas for a while, too. Not in my lifetime, but once upon a time. The treaty signed with Mexico after Texas Independence in 1836 required the Mexican army to retreat to the other side of the Rio Grande, just west of here. We learned of that in school. So, we were Texans too and we have some of that spirit and pride and independence. But we don’t live for those days and we’re glad to be Americans.”

“You know a lot about your history,” Ken said.

“I do. My brain remembers more than my face lets on.”

Ken decided to turn the tables and ask Abe questions for a bit.

“Do you believe there is a perfect place?” Ken said.

Abe took a pull from the bottle then sat for a moment, thinking, letting the warm burn of the alcohol do its work.

“Heaven. Heaven is perfect.” Pause, then, “Yes. Heaven.”

Ken took his turn at the bottle. “This side of heaven? Is there a perfect place on earth?”

A smile played across Abe’s lips so subtle as to almost be missed. He raised the bottle and looked at its label. “If there is, I would not live there. I would visit, but I wouldn’t live there.”

“Why is that?”

“In heaven there will be no sin to mess it up. On earth, an hombre like me could break the world if I was too long surrounded by perfection.”

More silence. Then Abe turned the tables back around.

“What would you do if you visited this perfect place?” Abe asked.

“I would observe,” Ken replied, “to see what made the place tick and what made it perfect.”

“Every observer changes that which he observes.”

Ken must have smiled. Abe knew science too.

“I would try not to break it,” Ken said.

A longer silent pause.

“What do you do, Abe, when you visit the perfect?”

Abe laughed. “Oh, such a place must not exist, but if it did and if I visited it I would be something of a ferryman or a guide. Which is like what I do here. I would take people to the perfect place and then watch their faces. This is, I think, what God does when His children see the sunrise.”

\* \* \*

Halfway through the bottle, Abe had learned whatever he intended to learn from Ken Halberson, his fare and now his friend. With nary a word nor warning he put the cab in gear and started driving. Ken didn't ask where they were going. Halberson, the former Marine who had seen his leg nearly blown off outside Tonkin, was sure he was in no danger at the hands of Old Abe Mendoza the inquisitive and pleasant cabbie. There was a peace about Abe that Ken dearly liked.

The two men, now solidly drunk, still arrived in fair enough condition at Abe Mendoza's humble two-bedroom house just southeast of Albuquerque not far off Route 66. They did not stumble inside. They walked arm in arm like comrades. Despite the late hour, the two new friends ate tamales, beans, and rice served to them by Abe's happy wife Ophelia. She was happy, it seemed to Ken, when she was of service, which means that she was happy when her husband and friends were eating. Ophelia was not five foot tall, not by a stretch, but she was stocky and strong, and she held the full pan and scooped big ladles of food

like it had always been her calling in life. Ophelia kept Ken's plate full and stood and never sat, hoping that her guest would want more. After two portions, her husband pushed away from the table and went into the bedroom. The sound of a drawer opening and shutting, then he returned with a small, packed bag—like a doctor's bag—and turned to look at Ken, who was drunkenly shoveling more rice and beans into his mouth.

"Come amigo," Abe said. "We'll need to leave now if we're going to get you to Nowhere and I can still get back in time to work some tomorrow."

Ken Halberson didn't ask questions or protest. Somewhere in his whiskey-soaked thoughts was the indescribable clarity that this was where the conversation with Abe had been going all along. He couldn't say he knew it intellectually, not consciously, but somehow; he still knew.

\* \* \*

The drive was mostly southward and some degree of east, but beyond that I didn't know and at some point I gave up trying to track. The roads were dark and there were no road signs that I could see or read and we shared the bottle as we drove. The wide two-lane narrowed at one point down to a single paved lane and then the pavement disappeared altogether and the car seemed to glide over the desert like a schooner in moderate chop down by Cape Horn, in and around hills and through gaps in those hills, kicking up sand in the tail lights. On occasion Abe would swerve to miss a small animal, a tumbleweed, or a cactus illuminated by the headlights and the hours clicked by as I sometimes slipped in and out of sleep despite what should have been the evident danger of the trip. When I woke again we were still on a dirt road, but this one was wide and smooth and the grade took us upward in altitude until we were

winding on this dirt road through what seemed like mountains interminable. I knew we hadn't stopped for gas, but we'd been on the road for more than five hours and the taxicab was now dangerously running on only fumes and faith.

Somewhere near the peak of the mountains (the dark shapes were still visible only faintly against the stygian sky) the bottle was drained and Abe tossed it into the back seat where it rattled around to remind us it was empty. Then Abe pulled onto an unmarked side road, narrower and steeper in its rise and we wound upward through the last hundred yards of sage and saguaro before pulling to an abrupt stop just near the peak.

Abe darkened the headlights, then got out. I got out too, not wondering if I was going to be murdered and left for dead, but curious how this was all going to play out.

A feeling of danger would seem to be natural for this circumstance but instead I felt only love and adventure and the dull awkward spin of drunkenness.

I followed Abe through the brush and as we crested the peak I looked and there below us in the distance was a small town, ablaze with gorgeous, sprinkled lights in the pre-dawn darkness, seeming to float like a UFO or a ship floating stoically on the placid deep, or a heavenly Jerusalem, lamps kindled against the encroaching night. The town was set off from everything by the blackness of the northern Chihuahuan desert and it was February and I finally remembered in my drunken buzz that it was cold, but not as cold as it had been in Albuquerque because the wind was still and the silence imprinted itself on me like age itself. Like a blanket of time.

"That town is still a half-hour's drive more," I said, "and I'm sorry to say but I looked at the gauge and we don't have the gas to make it."

"That's by design," Abe said. "You aren't meant to make it from Albuquerque or anywhere else on a single tank of gas." He produced a small aluminum flashlight, pressed its button,

then moved through the sage and tumbleweeds until we came upon a pile, covered in mesh and canvas. Pulling back the tarp, Abe yanked a metal jerry can of gasoline from the stash before re-covering the remaining fuel cans with the tarp, kicking rocks onto the edges to hold it down from weather and winds and then tossing sage branches on top for good measure.

“No one comes up here ever,” Abe said, “and when I return on my next adventure, I will bring more gasoline.”

\* \* \*

The pavement started up again just outside of town and by the time we reached the first buildings in the city the street was wide and clean and there were concrete curbs like in any other town in America. I don't remember seeing a sign that said, “Welcome to Nowhere,” but I was still a little drunk and giddy from the mystery and excitement.

I'll describe the town later because it was dark then and I was tired, but my first impressions were that everything seemed to be new and there weren't adobe ruins or dilapidated buildings like those seen on the outskirts of towns everywhere in the American southwest.

Abe drove me to a new looking motor hotel called the Vacation in Nowhere Motor Inn and I noticed that the sign and the building looked like they had been pirated from the Holiday Inn and Howard Johnson's motor hotels that were now springing up everywhere due to America's post-war love affair with the automobile and automobile travel. Turquoise and Orange were the predominate colors of the motel and the glass windows, large and ubiquitous, were clean and shined in the glare of the streetlights.

We were now far from there but Route 66 ran north of here out of Texas westward through Tucumcari and Santa Rosa

before heading through the mountains and into Albuquerque. During the first 10 minutes of this trip, heading the opposite way from Abe Mendoza's house, eastward on 66 out of Albuquerque, I'd seen two motor hotels more-or-less just like this one.

Abe got me checked in (he insisted) and carried my only suitcase into the room, turning on the lights and checking the room as he entered.

"I can't imagine what I owe you," I said to Abe, "but it's all on the LIFE Magazine publishing company and Mr. Edward Kramer Thompson – Editor. Esquire. I can give you a check or cash if you like."

Abe shook his head. "I cannot take your money, Amigo," he said. "Mr. Copeland would never forgive me if I took any money from you at all, and I am paid well enough since I have enjoyed your company."

"But let me tip you, Abe."

"Do not insult me after such a fine adventure, Amigo" Abe said with a gleam in his eyes. He shook my hand solidly. "I will see you again. If not here than in that other perfect place in the sky."

And with that, Abe was gone and I was left alone in nowhere. I didn't ask him who Mr. Copeland was because it seemed that I would find out soon enough.

I was sleepy and the bed was comfortable and I slept like the dead or a man in a dream who wasn't in a hurry to wake from it.