

# **SOUTH OF THE BORDER WITH CHUCHO VILLA**

©  
Lester de Adorján

**“When I was a kid, I used to pray every night for a new bike. Then I realized, the Lord doesn’t work that way. So I just stole one and asked him to forgive me.”**

-Emo Philips

*For Sarah and Coco, who lived these and many other ‘adventures’ with me, with a humble apology for having to endure the numerous hardships along the way.*

\*(All photos except for the cover, the one of my grandfather, and of the author, by the author).



My grandfather, Laszlo Megay (née Pesovnic), crossing the Atlantic to play soccer in the Americas, circa 1919.

**Of the many wonderful tales my grandfather told me as a little boy**, his Mexican bandit story was among the most compelling, a beacon illuminating the path of my life's own adventurers. It happened during the early 1900's when he played world-class club soccer, going on to play for his country, Hungary. One year his club toured the Americas, north to south and were undefeated by any side. Between games they visited Aztec pyramids near Mexico City and their train was held up by bandits who stripped the passengers of their valuables. Upon realising that they had robbed these soccer champions they returned their possessions and the cameraman who accompanied 'the stars' was ordered to take photos of the bandits, posing for my grandfather and his team mates. I found these pictures after my grandfather passed away, like the one on the front cover of this series of 'long stories'.

What follows are some of *my* story, the journal partly fictionalised to protect the guilty, of the years I lived in Mexico in the early 1990s, but only put to pen from memory years later while incarcerated at Long Bay gaol for allegedly being a smuggler.

# THE DANCING BOAR

*For Kurt Stader, who gave the name Chucho Villa - an oblique reference to the legendary national hero Pancho Villa whenever he got arrested in Mexico and generally got a good 'slap' for his impudence.*

It all started when Michael - who had always been a sucker for big tits turned to chat up the busty blonde on the next barstool. Chucho just reached over the countertop grabbing the long thin bladed knife they cut limes with 'sticking him' four or five times. The chrome blade pierced his pink flesh like a hot knife through butter - the handle bouncing back and forth reflecting shards of trembling candlelight after he let it go. It stopped the joint dead, a stunned silence falling over the bar room with everyone staring in shock. Best of all Michael didn't even flinch, didn't react at all. Just carried on working on the blond. Nobody could believe it.

It was a long time coming though - they'd been at it all day butting heads about everything. Then once they got into the Mescal it was a lay down misère. And Michael being the contrary son of a bitch he was, well... at one point I even said to him, "Leave it alone will you! If Chucho said something was white you'd say it was black just for the hell of it!"

"No I wouldn't!" He snapped.

"I rest my case," I shrugged smiling, for despite himself Michael had made my point for me. But if the truth were known it should have become evident long before that the day was going to take a strange turn, as far back as sunrise when I stopped in San Bartolo for tamales.

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San Bartolo was on Highway One between Cabo San Lucas and La Paz in a steep rocky arroyo <sup>1</sup> covered in cactus and low lying scrub, the highway cut high up along one side of the canyon wall with a row of brightly coloured houses on both sides for half a mile. Below the Pueblo a colourful patchwork of irrigated crops covered the canyon floor ... corn, chilies, tomatoes, avocados and orange groves. A picturesque little village, San Bartolo was a favourite stop for the 'Tres Estrellas D'Oro' <sup>2</sup> bus line, the main company between Tijuana and 'Cabo', and a few stalls had been set up on the southern end of town where the buses stopped selling produce, souvenirs, toffee, food and beverages.

The restaurant was no more than a small shop really with an outdoor eating area where seven or eight tables and chairs were laid out under a lush canopy of purple and orange Bougainvillea. In its cool shade you would always find people sitting about eating, drinking or just taking in the visual entertainment and gossip. And in the middle there was a large stone fireplace where they barbecued seafood, carne asada and where the speciality of the house was cooked, tamales. An enormous dented, blackened pot heated water all day full of them - works of art that came wrapped in cornhusks, small envelopes neatly tied with pieces of straw. It was a ritual untying those little packages to remove the maize dumplings filled with Señora Rosa's special mixture of vegetables and meat, sometimes beef, sometimes chicken. Not to mention her salsa that was hot enough to peel paint off your car, a sensational red sauce with yellow seeds that left you gasping, drinking Pacificos, wiping your eyes and nose and ordering more.

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<sup>1</sup> Wadi, canyon created by flash-floods

<sup>2</sup> Three Golden Stars

Coming around the last bend that morning I could already taste those little suckers as I hit the brakes in front of the tamalera<sup>1</sup> spraying gravel and sending chickens scurrying.

“Buenos dias Señor 2,” Señora Rosa greeted me peeking over my shoulder as I hastened towards the eating area. She was keen to see my daughter Coco... Mexicans loved blond children. They regarded them as angels in a biblical sense. “Donde esta mi poquita Cocquita 3?” She chirped enthusiastically.

“Ella viene 4,” I told her as my wife strolled up carrying Coco. Then barely concealing my impatience I enquired - “Que clase de carne tiene hoy en los tamales Señora 5?”

Behind her the pot was steaming over dancing red and yellow flames backlit by the early morning light that cast long shards through flower covered lattice, the rising steam shimmering up and down the sunbeams.

“No esta listo 6,” she replied apologetically.

“What?!!!” My eyes darted disbelievingly to the large pot with the lid lifting and bouncing, bubbles escaping from beneath. “Not ready!!

I’d been dreaming of her tamales since the night before. I’d even put off breakfast and now... Mexico may not have been a place where things were very regular but Señora Rosa’s tamales were about as regular as they got. Trying to placate me she waved me towards a seat saying - “Calmate, vingte minutos, no mas 7.”

But I didn’t have twenty minutes. We were on our way across the cape to catch the ‘early morning glass’ and if I hung about we’d miss the best surf of the day. Besides, twenty minutes Mexican time could mean anything. I almost weakened when Sarah shot me a piercing look and I had to console myself with freshly squeezed orange juice from the local citrus groves instead.

Bidding Señora Rosa hasta luego Sarah eased Coco from her ample arms. Señora Rosa had given our baby a yellow candy on a stick and was pinching her chubby cheek affectionately as we smiled cordially on our way out. But I was secretly *dark* about the tamales. That’s when I should have realised the day was not going to turn out well.

“Can you believe it?” I fumed throwing myself into the driver’s seat.

“Yes,” Sarah said matter of factly. But she quickly nipped my mood in the bud saying, “How about I roll you a ‘hot one?’

“Yeah, okay,” I sulked driving away.

Just down the road old Hernando waved from the Dulceria<sup>8</sup> and we returned his wave. The Dulceria was San Bartolo’s only industry but hardly an elaborate enterprise. Four crooked posts supporting an almost level tin roof sheltered a number of shiny copper vats and foot long ingots of toffee wrapped in grease paper elevated on slats off the dirt floor by stumps. To one side Hernando slowly pumped a large bellows onto a bed of glowing coals that flared every time he leaned on the handle, sending black plumes of smoke upwards. Outside a donkey walked listlessly around a well-trodden circle with a pole secured to its back turning a set of gears into which another shirtless old man fed lengths of raw sugar cane. As we drove by the early morning air was redolent with the Dulceria’s sweetness, making me even hungrier.

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1 Place that makes Tamales.

2 Good day sir

3 Where’s my little Coco?

4 She’s coming.

5 What kind of meat is in the tamales today, Madame?

6 Not ready!

7 Relax, they’ll be ready in no more than twenty minutes.

8 The Sweet Shop.



The road to La Paz was winding and mountainous with the odd ranch standing out against the barren desert. Alongside palapa<sup>1</sup> roofed stucco houses with log ends protruding beneath their roof lines stood stock pens constructed from gnarly branches, wells with wind up buckets and manual water pumps sticking out of the ground with extended S shaped handles. At one point I braked to avoid a herd of cattle spread over the highway with vaqueros<sup>2</sup> branding by the side of the road. Held up by the slow-moving herd I stole glimpses of the cowhands working in their buckskin chaps and Cuban heeled boots with savage spurs tinkling like miniature bells. The cowboy's faces were as brown as roasted coffee beans and they wore high domed straw cowboy hats with the brims furled down low against the fierce desert sun. A fat trail boss with his snakeskin boot pinning the neck of a hog-tied yearling to the ground chatted rapidly, his speech punctuated by frequent grins and flashes of pearly white teeth. The animal's nostrils flared and its eyes were round, white rimmed and bulging as another vaquero applied the brand with a *hissss!* The calf bellowed, a long drawn out complaint and they laughed- not cruelly but at its spirit then let it up quickly to run free. You could smell its singed fur, which reminded me of woolen furniture burning.



The mountaintops were flat, so flat they looked like they'd been neatly sawn off and in between arroyos ran as far as the eye could see, miles of pale yellow sand with green dots of cactus. The winter rains had just passed and in places brightly coloured flowers carpeted the desert floor -around one pass a sea of orange stretched into the distance, around the next mauve, then yellow...

Looking out the side window Sarah remarked philosophically- "Anybody who tells you the desert isn't beautiful has never been here at this time of year."

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1 Roof constructed of overlapping palm fronds

2 Cowboys



San Antonio was an old gold mining town but the mines had long ceased production. Smooth adobe buildings faded by age and neglect to the colour of the surrounding desert gave an impression of being intentionally run down, allowed to decay to their primordial origins.

Nowadays the only industry was spread out along the dusty roadside where vendors waved woven cane products at the odd passing car - baskets, furniture, old-fashion rug beaters. But on this day none of the vendors were out and the only signs of life were two uniformed school children walking by the side of the road. They had old leather satchels strapped to their backs and one of them, a small girl wearing a round straw hat was dragging a string behind her tied tightly around the pinched neck of a dead rattlesnake, which slid along bouncing over the occasional rock, its tail flicking back and forth throwing up fine tendrils of dust.

“Where is everybody?” I wondered aloud as we came up over a rise straight into a roadblock. It was so sudden I had to jump on the brakes to avoid running over a *Federales* 1 standing in the middle of the road. Behind him a portable barrier with a sign, ALTO - POLICIA FEDERAL 2 blocked our lane. Cursing I pressed the buttons for the electric windows to air the car - which seemed to be going down extra slowly as if powered by portable batteries losing their ‘juice’.

Beside the barrier stood a black Dodge pickup truck with two more *Federales* sitting in the cab. Another three sat in the back astride the sideboards - two with heavy caliber semi automatic rifles, one with a twelve-gauge pump resting across his thighs. The only thing uniform about them was their straw cowboy hats, mirrored sunglasses and moustaches. Worst of all not one was smiling.

*Too late...* I thought with a disturbing flash. The last time the *Federales* put up a roadblock that far south in Baja it was outside San Jose below Gringo Hill, just after Reagan pressured Mexico to stem the flow of drugs north. The Mexicans had demonstrated their enthusiasm by targeting areas where mainly American tourists flocked and sent the message to the back to the US by personally detaining American retirees in mobile homes. But the only official ‘drug detection’ had been a roach found in the ashtray of a Californian van covered in a floral design belonging to two hapless hippies who were hauled up to La Paz and hung by their handcuffed wrists from running showers at the Police headquarters change rooms, where electric cattle prods were applied to their genitals for twelve hours to extract confessions.

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1 Federal Police

2 Stop – Federal Police

The cop standing in front of us on the road scrutinised us as he approached and asked matter of factly- “Nacionalidad 1?”

“Canadiense Senior 2”, I said as calmly as I could. “Mi esposa y nina son Australineses 3”.

He looked in the back at our daughter fastened in her booster seat but his expression remained unchanging. That made me nervous. The fact that he hadn’t softened at a child was distinctly un-Mexican. To make matters worse I couldn’t read his eyes through his mirrored Ray Bans. No ... he was definitely different. Better dressed than the others too he had neatly pressed black slacks, polished boots, a white shirt with pearl snap buttons and a black Resistol XXX hat. And the whole time his hand rested on the butt of a large .45 slung from the hip. It had a worn look with blue missing from the parts that got handled frequently. That was the unnerving thing about Mexican service weapons; you could see they were well used.

“Papeles 4!” He demanded with the skin on his face creasing into a series of sharp lines.

Sarah rummaged frantically through the mass of papers and accumulated road trip paraphernalia in the glove box but couldn’t find them. As foreigners were obliged to carry their travel documents I was beginning to feel distinctly uneasy. All I wanted was to get out of there. The Federale bent to my window to see what the delay was and right then a bag of Michoacan ‘bud’ slipped from the wad in her hands. Gasping audibly she fumbled and tried to stop it but it was already out. A momentary paralysis seemed to grip her as she looked down in dismay. Then she scooped up the lot and threw it into the glove box cursing - “I can’t bloody find them!”

Get the showers ready I thought turning back to face the Federale. But he merely returned my gaze without his expression changing. Miraculously he’d missed the whole thing.

Now I attacked the glove box with the frenzy of a man possessed by a renewed lease of freedom careful to work around the dope. But my luck was no better. “This can’t be happening!” I muttered breaking into an instant sweat. We’d made it through the break only to find ourselves back in the same predicament. Then it dawned on me, I’d hidden our documents under my floor mat in case we pulled up somewhere and left the car unattended. So much for smoking joints and getting spaced out on the scenery.

The cop examined our passports and brought his face up to my window to compare the photos with our faces. “Where you come from now?” He asked giving me an extra long hard look.

He caught me off guard; the fact that he spoke English and it took a moment to reply- “Los Barilles, señor.”

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1 Nationality?

2 Canadian Sir.

3 My wife and daughter are Australians.

4 Papers?



After another official 'once over' he muttered, "Pasa 1!" Dismissing me with a wave of his gun hand. I carefully negotiated around the barrier conscious of the heavy scrutiny from the pick up truck and exhaled. "What did you make of that?"

Sarah shook her head, "Don't know. But I didn't like it."

"Me neither. Did it bring to mind Gringo hill?"

"Uh huh. Especially when the dope fell out."

"Yeah. I envisaged being dragged up to La Paz for a shower..."

Reaching for the half-smoked joint in the ashtray she lit it- "Well I can take that risk," she said between puffs. "I don't have testicles."

"Funny thing is," I mused, "no matter how scary these guys are at least their corruption is up front - not like the shit bags at home."

"That's because it's openly acknowledged. Back home - despite 200 years of dirty history dating back to the rum rebellion the general public are still 'willfully' ignorant. Juries adopt police versions even when they are patently false, as do judges. The unquestioned logic is: because they represent authority they must be telling the truth. It's the same with things in print - they have to be true. Love the land ... can't say the same for the culture".

"Judges ... fuck me ..." I cursed. "An even lower bread if that's possible. A bunch of 'nonces' and 'shirt lifters'. They invented 'contempt of court' to gag anyone from exposing their corrupt practices. And they only get away with it because most of the public never has anything to do with them. Ask anybody with an IQ above room temperature who's experienced our court system. And I don't mean 'the accused'. I mean 'straight' people who've observed one of their family members or a friend go through the judicial grinder. If 'the beak' doesn't fall of the bench from being drunk ..."

"Maybe Mexicans are smarter," Sarah said.

"Nah ... they've just got more balls. Not whipped by middle-class morality and 'authority'. Australia's entire history has been 'stamped' by it ... cultural devolution from England. 'Baggage' containing a whole class exiled by another ... to have the same class values crop up among the exiled to fuck those at the bottom of the heap all over again. Fuck, ask any kid over three years old when I grew up - 'How do you know if a cops lying? And they'd answer - 'His lips move!'"

"Don't get yourself all worked up," Sarah said passing the joint.

"Your right ... I already did that over the tamales" I said letting out a long drawn out breath. "But at least they were worth it. Australians deserve what they get... if nothing else for their apathetic ignorance. Typically uneducated and think themselves the better for it".

At that point I glanced at the rear-view mirror and caught sight of our baby smiling out the window. Touched by her happy innocence I made a silent, humble apology promising myself never to drive anywhere in Mexico with dope in the car again.

The turn off to Todos Santos some twenty minutes later wasn't a regular T intersection but a triangle - the road in being two hundred meters south of the road out - the two joining a half a kilometer away. We pulled onto the shoulder to wait for Chucho when noticed three hitchhikers on the northern exit. *Their clothes are too dark to be standing out in the middle of nowhere in this heat...* I thought absent-mindedly. *But that's Mexicans for you ...* and with that I proceeded to roll another bungler.

From time to time I'd glance at the rear view mirror to see if Chucho was in sight and on the third check I noticed one of the hitchhikers coming through the triangle towards us. *Can't get a ride so now they want a lift back to wherever they came from...* I thought. It wasn't till the next glance that I noticed a short-barrel riot gun dangling from his hand and a dark baseball cap with the letters P.J.F.<sup>1</sup> in yellow on his head. "Hello," I said nodding towards the rear view mirror. "What's this?"

Sarah adjusted her door mirror to study the approaching figure and said apprehensively, "Don't know but he's awfully big for a Mexican."

He was too - a good six foot four and dressed in an all navy blue jump suit tucked into jack-boots. Stepping up to the door just as I'd stuffed the weed down the front of my shorts he asked in a deep voice- "Que passa señor 2," scrutinising our car with the shotgun perched over the crook of his arm now. I couldn't remember the word for wait and struggled to explain in broken phrases, sign language and tourist stupidity that we were waiting for friends... making sure they didn't miss the turn to Todos Santos.

Seeing Coco in the back seemed to satisfy him with my explanation and he was about to walk off when a vehicle appeared in the distance, its music booming across the desert. Their timing couldn't have been better - or worse as it turned out. I could tell it was Chucho's black pick-up with surfboards hanging over the back and as it came along side I went to raise my hand to point ... when it cruised straight on by. My hand dropped abruptly.

"Tu amigos 3?" The cop asked stopping in mid-step, giving the truck a disdainful nod.

"No señor, " I lied happy to disclaim any connection to the noisy beat up rig. He gave me another appraising look then without as much as another word he walked off in the direction he'd come from.

"This is punishing!" Sarah said. "What the hell's going on?"

"Don't know. I thought the cops were hitchhikers when I first spotted them standing there without a car. Guess they were dropped off to check the traffic passing through these crossroads."

Sarah was right though this kind of police activity was common on mainland Mexico but highly irregular in normally sleepy southern Baja. "What do I do now?" I asked rhetorically. "Drive off to follow Chucho and prove I'm a liar? Or sit here and pretend to wait?" I was concerned the cops might have portable transmitters and radio ahead to have me 'ramped' if I did something suspicious.

"Finish rolling the joint, wait till the cop's back up with the other two then drive off after the first car that comes around the bend."

"Good thinking," I said smiling inwardly at her frank common sense.

When we finally caught up with Chucho some five kilometers on his pick-up was parked on the shoulder with Chucho standing by the tailgate alongside Michael and Robbie, all three in animated conversation.

"Thanks for stopping to back up my story!" I said sarcastically.

Sarah remained in the car to feed Coco.

"Don't mention it mate!" Chucho laughed and raised his hand to wave a pathetically skinny joint back and forth in front of me. "But I didn't want to have to ditch this."

I scoffed at his offer of a drag - detesting those American 'greyhounds' that made your arse pucker from trying to get a decent hit and Chucho just shrugged, his shirt lifting to expose his rotund stomach like Winnie the Pooh. I'd been reading Coco Winnie the Pooh lately and the image was strong in my mind.

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1 Federal Judicial Police

2 What's happening Sir?

3 Your friends?

“Typical Chucho! Michael complained to no one in particular. “Smoking joints and drinking Pacificos all morning between roadblocks. We’re lucky we haven’t been nailed!”

“Yeah well ... if you’re skating on thin ice you may as well dance,” Chucho replied glibly.

“We’re in the tropics Chucho!” Michael redressed him. “There is no ice!”

“Michael there’s ‘ice’ everywhere! You’ve just got to find it or create your own.”

Looking at them quizzically I asked -“What do you mean roadblock - s?”

“That was the fourth,” Robbie explained. “The first was down by Buena Vista when we made our phone calls earlier this morning. The second at San Bartolo -”

“San Bartolo?”

“Yeah.”

“They must have put that one up after we passed through.”

“Then the one in San Antonio. And last the feller that had you bailed up when we passed by.”

“Did you stop for tamales?” I asked anxiously.

“Do bears shit in the woods?” Chucho grinned.

I noticed some chili sauce hadn’t made it past his protruding stomach and mumbled, “What an appropriate analogy,” chuckling to myself about his Winnie the Pooh look.

“What?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Gordo<sup>1</sup> almost emptied the pot,” Michael delighted in informing me.

Looking at them ruefully I said, “Yeah?! Well they weren’t ready when we passed through.”

Chucho patted his fat stomach, “What can I tell you? They were extra good today.”

“Leave him alone about the tamales,” Sarah said joining us from the car. “It’s taken him all this time just to get over them. It even got him ranting about politics.” Then she took the joint from Chucho and asked - “Did you guys find out what all these roadblocks are about?”

“No.” Robbie answered. “The telephonista <sup>2</sup> in Buena Vista didn’t know-”

“That’s saying something!” Sarah scoffed. “You know what a sticky-beak she is. If she doesn’t know it must be a national secret.” And she handed back the joint back grinning.

Just as she did two cars whipped by - a black Suburban four-wheel drive with blacked out windows followed closely by a black Dodge Dart. They were travelling so fast the long-range flexible antennae on the trunk of the Dart was lashing the road and throwing up intermittent sparks. A blast of wind hit us so suddenly we all took a step back, Chucho dropping his hand to his side, cupping the joint inconspicuously. But they were gone.

“More cops!” He observed apprehensively.

“Yeah,” Robbie shrugged. “This ain’t the day to be smoking joints by the roadside.”

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<sup>1</sup> Fatty

<sup>2</sup> Telephone lady at the public phone cabinets.

**On the outskirts of Todos Santos** the vegetation of the desert, the hundred and fifty-eight varieties of cactus gave way to tall dusty eucalypts, cream with grey streaks and long drooping olive green leaves. The road undulated over a series of small hills, *lomititas* they were called, and entered town with a long line of pink and white flowering oleander alongside. An expatriate set of artists, surfers and jet set flotsam had adopted the quaint pueblo and their injected capital had restored many of the beautiful buildings to their former stature. But Todos Santos was perhaps best known for its surf with the local beach 'La Pastora' pumping out swells of up to twenty feet during the winter months. Other than that the name of the place itself was special, meaning "All Saints".

Near the centre of town Chucho pointed to the Hotel California, made famous by The Eagles, a two-story clapboard building painted in tropical colours with crisscrossed verandah railings. He signaled for me to pull in but knowing his priorities generally focused on his numerous appetites I shook my head, overtook and kept going. La Pastora was within reach now, only ten minutes out the back of town.

We drove along a dusty track that meandered through a number of ranches towards the coast and before long we saw the beach. I had to slow at a narrow rickety bridge for a group of smiling kids jumping into a storm water drain below, the girls swimming fully clothed as Mexicans often did. Not more than a hundred meters behind them the sapphire blue Pacific boomed onto the crystal white sand of the west coast.



By now the wind had swung onshore and the waves were four feet and choppy, the early morning glass no more than a fading memory for a few smiling surfers on their way home. We sat for a bit watching the bright sun skip across the waters ruffled surface when a line of brown pelicans glided down low over the waves.

"The Mexican air force" I said coming out of my reverie.

Sarah smiled and asked, "Do you want to jump in the water? It doesn't look all that inviting now."

"Guess not," I answered somewhat dejected. "But then I didn't come all this way just to blow it off."

The ocean's salty freshness soon changed my attitude though, making it easy to understand why prior to psychopharmacology the only treatment available to people like Van Gogh in the asylum at Saint Paul de Mausole was cold water baths.

We arrived back in Todos Santos just in time to see the boys being ejected from the Hotel California and as we pulled up in front all we could hear was Michael's berating voice- "Of all the chicks Chucho, why'd you have to hit on that one?!"

Chucho walked ahead ignoring him.

Enjoying their continuous banter as usual Robbie smiled to himself sagely and filled me in- "Chucho put some work in on the owner's seventeen year old daughter. You know how Latinos get about shit like that."

"Uh huh... no mediation sessions or group therapy here, just flee for the border. But I'd expect nothing less from Chucho. By the way did you get the scoop on the roadblocks?"

"Yes," Michael joined in. "There was a bank robbery in San Jose yesterday afternoon."

Chucho interrupted enthusiastically- "And they killed half a dozen cops!"

"Three Chucho," Michael corrected him.

"Three, four, five ... what's the difference?" Chucho snapped. "They shot cops." He was clearly tired of Michael always taking the edge off his narratives.

"Only that you never let the truth get in the way of a good story," Michael shot back.

Chucho looked at him with deliberation. "Whatever! The point is there was a dramatic shoot out right on the main drag outside the Banca Promex and they shot some cops. THREE!"

Changing the subject Sarah asked - "Did you guys have breakfast?" "Yeah," Chucho grinned. "Five Cuba libres 1 with Herrundura 2 chasers!"

"Good. Let's go eat," she said. "I'm starved."

One good thing about Mexico they didn't start the day with baby food, soft mushy stuff and dairy products. In places like Aguas Calientes on the mainland men strolled casually down the streets early in the morning gnawing on barbecued goats' leg and raw Habanera chilies, with a pistol tucked down the front of their pants. Todos Santos wasn't quite that 'colourful' but being coastal you could be sure there'd be somewhere to get a red-hot Sopa da Marsicos 3 any time of day.

By-passing the trendy tourist restaurants resembling a thousand in Hawaii or Florida with blackboard menus advertising smoothies, BLTs, burgers and decorated by colourful chalk designs of tropical flowers we opted for a quiet Mexican place at the far end of town with no blackboard menu and real flowers. Off the side of the pink adobe building a jasmine-covered pergola shaded the eating area and the strongly perfumed little white flowers were richly sweet in the tropical heat. A painting over the door of a seagull had the words La Gaviota 4 beneath it.

Chucho ordered three campechanas for himself - a diced raw seafood cocktail of octopus, shrimp, oysters, crab, scallops and sea slugs that arrived in a glass reminding me of something from an American soda fountain in the fifties. My Sopa de Mariscos had virtually the same ingredients in a spicy red chili broth with a mound of seafood poking out of the broth in a little pyramid. We both added plenty of salsa fresca - tomato, onion, Serrano chili and coriander and squeezed two or three wedges of lime into our orders. The piece de la resistance though was the dangerously hot chili sauce found on every restaurant table in Mexico that came in a small orange bottle with the picture of a man dressed in calico, a sombrero and Huaraches on the label. More paint remover.

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1 Rum and coke with a wedge of lime

2 The finest tequila

3 Seafood soup

4 Seagull



The others had more 'civilized' orders of Huevos Rancheros - fried eggs on tortillas covered in a tomato and onion sauce with avocado slices and refried beans on the side. They also ordered freshly squeezed orange juice while Chucho and I had a couple of Cuba Libres each. Once she'd finished preparing our food the small dumpy Mexican owner stood watching happily from the kitchen door with her hands tucked into a long pocket in the front of her apron while her two young children ferried food, beverages and plates back and forth.

"Algo mas <sup>1</sup>?" She called over to us when we had finished.

"No gracias", we replied contentedly like a Greek chorus. "Nothing more," then sat back to discuss our options for the rest of the day.

"What do you want to do?" Michael began. "Go back the way we came or down through Cabo and up the Sea of Cortez side?"

"Fuck going back!" Chucho snapped. "Let's go down to Cabo and hit a few bars." He was clearly on a roll and didn't want to take a backward step.

"Yeah," Robbie agreed. "We haven't been to Cabo for ages."

"There'll be plenty of roadblocks up the inside of the cape," I reminded them.

"And they'll get worse," Sarah added. "Don't forget we'll have to go through San Jose where they hit that bank. That's where they'll be heaviest."

"So!" Chucho said defiantly. "We'll get roadblocks whichever way we go. It'll be six of one or half a dozen of the other."

Sometimes Chucho's passage through life reminded me of a wild boar crashing through the underbrush ... but we eventually agreed. We'd been in Los Barillos for over a month now and had a dose of cabin fever so an airing was in order. Besides we could do a big shop-up in the Supermercados <sup>2</sup> of Cabo.

It didn't turn out to be exactly six of one and half a dozen of the other though, with the odds against us increasing dramatically going south. The roadblocks intensified and the first one a half a kilometer down the road on the edge of town was nothing like the ones we'd come across so far. There was traffic lined up for hundreds of meters either side with cops checking thoroughly in both directions. Slick cops from the city and not so slick ones from the local pueblo. The city cops were obviously in charge and they were dressed in Lacoste style shirts, tight tailored slacks, reptile skin cowboy boots and matching belts. Their hair was neatly trimmed and I was beginning to wonder if gold Ray Ban Aviators, slim gold watches with integrated mesh bands and pinky finger rings with brilliant cut stones were standard Police issue. Behind them a small army of village police stood dressed in loose calico pants and shirts with about as much style as potato sacks, and Huaraccha sandals. Their hair was untrimmed and unruly and they had large crisscrossed gun belts loaded with bullets across their chests. They looked like they'd ridden out of a Pancho Villa movie but they were nowhere near as scary as the slick ones, the ones who obviously couldn't have bought their accessories on a Mexican civil servant's salary.

The worst thing about this roadblock was they were actually searching. As we sat waiting our turn a mule drawn cart hauling a large stack of sugar cane rolled up to the barricade driven by two veteran campesinos <sup>3</sup> wearing large sombreros, calico and rough hand-made sandals. A bunch of tools hanging from the sides clinked back and forth as the cart jolted along with its leather harnesses creaking under the burden. When they reached the barrier the Federales made them unload the whole lot by the side of the road to check it thoroughly, then made them restack it before letting them continue.

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1 Anything else?

2 Supermarkets

3 Farmers

“This is *quiet*,” Sarah said watching the two aging farmers struggling in the intense midday sun.

I stuck my head out the window and yelled back to Chucho - “If either of us get delayed see you at ‘Squid Row’.” Squid Row was the last bar on the way out of Cabo towards home.

Chucho nodded.

When our turn finally came we were made to get out with Coco s while they checked under the seats, the luggage compartment and even the baby’s bag. They were very thorough with one of the Federales asking a bunch of questions: Where did we live? What were we doing in Mexico? How long had we been there? How long did we intend staying?... his manner polite and urbane. The local police just stood in the background looking serious with their guns at the ready.

Finally they got to our glove box. Taking everything out they started to go through our paperwork and studied our documents in detail. I was feeling increasingly uneasy and then the inevitable happened. Because they had their backs to us and were clustered around the door I couldn’t see clearly but their body language and muffled vigorous talking said it all. Coco started to whine right on cue, frustrated at having to stand about in the sun... all she wanted to do was run off and play. Sarah picked her up and began rubbing her back soothingly.

After an excited conversation one of the Federales stepped over to me briskly - “Why you have two passports señor?!” He demanded waving my Australian and Canadian passports agitatedly. I almost burst out laughing - with relief - but quickly composed myself. I thought we must have left something else illegal in there. Even so it took some explaining that the Commonwealth permitted dual citizenship - allowing you to carry two travel documents - then a commotion behind us got his attention and they rushed off. Breathing a sigh of relief I was glad I’d hidden our dope in the heat resistant insulation under the bonnet after lunch.

Getting back into our vehicle I looked casually over my shoulder to see what all the fuss was about and what I saw made me feel sick all over again. Cops were swarming all over Chucho’s pick up with Robbie and Michael standing by the passengers’ door looking grim, their hands behind their heads and they were surrounded by a dozen cops with rifles trained on them. Chucho was being pushed along by one of the slick ones with his arms bent up behind his back towards the black Suburban ... his bag of dope in the cop’s hand.

“Oh shit,” I groaned.

“What’s up?” Sarah asked glancing back in alarm.

“They found their dope! That slack-arse Chucho!”

“What do we do now?” She asked with concern.

“Let Chucho *skate*.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Drive away.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. If we stick our bibles in they might tear the Subaru apart and find ours. Or rope us in.”

“I just hate to leave them,” she groaned.

“Me too,” I said driving off down the road.

The next fifty minutes to Cabo were featureless and without conversation. Although a bag of weed wasn’t that big a deal it could be if the cops wanted and I couldn’t help thinking of Gringo Hill.



**Cabo was once a barren sandy fishing village**, the tail end of a thousand-mile long peninsula covered in sagebrush, cactus, mesquite and tumbleweed. Originally inhabited by a few laid back Indians, the first foreigners to hang out there were a bunch of skulking Pirates waiting to sack the Manila Galleons on their way to the mainland. Then Zane Grey came along in 1926 and put Cabo on the map with magnificent tales of 300lb Algonquian Tuna <sup>1</sup>, three types of Marlin, Dorado, Wahoo, Sierra and Rooster Fish.

Twenty years on it became a haunt of Hemingway then later Lee Marvin and before you knew it people who owned luggage with four and five digit price tags were taking high-speed jets there because ‘the word’ said it was happening. Nowadays Van Halen had a nightclub in Cabo, a bunch of trendy movie stars owned property there and once radical surfers were selling million dollar beachfront lots for Californian empire builders. But it was still ‘cool’ - it hadn’t been overdeveloped yet. There were plenty of cobblestone streets, rows of introduced palm trees and a luxurious boat harbour. Best of all there were no fast-food chains, nor high-rise. Besides being a favourite stop on the IGFA <sup>2</sup> circuit it had become a playground for trendy Californians. It was new with a lot of good energy.

Yet it was amazing how you couldn’t see the good side of even paradise through a problem like ours. Sitting at an outside table on the Malecon <sup>3</sup> with the afternoon sun in our faces, the balmy trade wind in our hair and nursing some serious Margaritas the only happy one among us was Coco, who was innocently licking an icy fruit ‘Helado <sup>4</sup>’.

“I wonder how Chucho’s going?” Sarah kept asking.

“He’ll be fine,” I’d answer confidently, hiding my concern. “He’s an old hand he’ll handle it.”

“The worst part is not knowing,” she’d say. “No-one’s got mobile phones down here.”

“Don’t worry. They’ll eventually get in touch.”

But despite the pleasant surroundings our vision was clouded by a dark anxiety while we shopped for groceries, gazed through windows and went through the motions of doing things that we normally found pleasant. When we were done we didn’t hang about like we normally would but packed our shopping into the car and headed for home.

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<sup>1</sup> Called Yellowfin Tuna today.

<sup>2</sup> International Game Fishing Association

<sup>3</sup> Promenade along the harbour

<sup>4</sup> Icecream

We passed the harbour where large yachts bobbed gently about with their stays tinkling against aluminium masts like little tin orchestras and all the game boats had already come in with smiling tourists posing for pictures next to once magnificent Marlin hanging on the dock. Around the corner out of their view, Mexicans were butchering these pictorial souvenirs for food, with carnage strewn all over the launching ramp. A bit further the amplified beat of disco music reverberated through the end of town, Squid Row. Squid Row was on the way out or way in to Cabo- depending on which direction you were travelling. You couldn't miss it just follow Highway One a thousand miles from San Diego and there it was at the end of the road. Three stories high, it was the largest, noisiest, busiest bar in town with SQUID ROW painted in ten feet high white letters on a bright red corrugated iron roof. And in case you were blind the music thumped out of there twenty-four hours a day with enough amps to knock a cow over of its feet at a hundred yards. All of which made it a favourite with young surfers and vacationing Californian college kids. Normally I hated everything about the place but we happened to be passing by at the one time of day when the music was turned low enough to hear yourself think, just before the peak evening period. Besides, we had an hour and a half drive and I felt like another drink to take off 'the edge'.



“Let’s stop and have one for the boys,” I suggested.

“That’s not like you,” Sarah mused. “You normally wouldn’t go in there for anything.”

“Yeah... but I’m prepared make an exception in a crisis.”

We stepped up to the bar to order cocktails and while we waited watched an employee dressed like a Zapatista<sup>1</sup> in calico and crossed gun belts over his chest loaded with shot glasses march around the bar room blowing a whistle frenetically. Every once in a while he’d target some hapless tourist and make them drink as much free shot glasses of Cuervo as it took to blow them off their bar stool. *FUN*. I was already regretting my decision.

“Here’s luck,” I said raising my drink to the boys, our glasses about to clink when a voice boomed across the bar room-“CACQUATTE<sup>2</sup> !”

It stopped us dead in our tracks and we spun around at the sound of Coco’s nickname - it was Chucho, all three of them bouncing into the bar smiling.

<sup>1</sup> Followers of the national hero, Emilio Zapate.

<sup>2</sup> Peanut (The nickname Chucho gave Coco)

“Holy shit! What the hell happened?” We asked excitedly.

“Fucking Chucho!” Michael frowned throwing himself onto a barstool, a complaint that was half-hearted because you could tell he was happy to be there.

Robbie was shaking his head from side to side but smiling, “Chucho left the pot in the centre console.”

“We thought the feds were just going to put us up against a concrete wall and shoot us,” Michael said melodramatically. “Save the paperwork.”

“Now who’s not letting the truth get in the way of a good story?” Chucho chided him.

Robbie shrugged philosophically- “It *was* touch and go for a minute.”

“Tell us what happened,” Sarah asked unable to contain her curiosity. “How in hell did you get out of it?”

“With the best legal defense in Mexico,” Chucho answered smugly.

“And what’s that?” Sarah asked.

“A little *mordida* <sup>1</sup>.”

“I’ll drink to that!” I laughed and yelled for a round of Herradura.

Then we sat back and let Chucho recount his story.

“I figured I was toast,” he started. “Especially when that slick dude with the matching Crocodile boots and belt hauled me off to the Suburban.”

“We caught that,” I said.

“They were cussing real good - lots of chingas <sup>2</sup> and pinchi carbons <sup>3</sup> pushing, pulling me and all that shit.”

“We thought he was going to get a beating for sure,” Robbie threw in. “You know how cops get in a frenzy when they’ve corned their quarry.”

“Pity!” Michael smirked.

“Anyway... he tried to cuff me in the back of the Suburban,” Chucho went on. “Had trouble fitting the cuffs though - ”

Michael interrupted him- “I’ve been telling you to diet for years Chucho.”

Chucho gave him a deadpan look, one that said more than if he’d said something. “As I was saying,” he continued, “...he couldn’t get the cuff on the wrist with my watch - ”

The mention of it made me look down and I immediately noticed the watch was missing. “NO! Not your Gold President,” I gasped.

“Hang on,” Chucho said. “I’m getting to that. When I caught him eying the watch I casually said, Señor, this is a grave mistake. I lent my truck to someone only this morning.

I have no idea how that bag got there ... isn’t there something that can be done?

“You should have seen Chucho,” Robbie said. “It was worth an Academy Award.”

“Is this going to be the world’s longest story?!” Sarah asked impatiently.

“Yeah!” Michael agreed. “We may as well get another round. Looks like this ones going to take at least three doubles and he shouted down the bar - Oyee! Mas tequila amigo <sup>4</sup>.”

“The Fed’s eyes glanced furtively back to my Rolex,” Chucho went on. “He looked like

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1 Bribe

2 Unspecified swear word

3 Little goat fucker

4 More Tequila friend.



Zeke Wolf drooling over a pork chop. He hesitated for what seemed like ages then said, “Possiblemente <sup>1</sup>, tapping the sapphire crystal face on the watch with the manicured nail on his pinky finger. No señor! I wailed. Not that. It was a graduation present from my father. Mi pobrecito papa <sup>2</sup>.”

At that point I interrupted him - “Hang on a minute I thought you told us that Kombi Van was your graduation present?”

“Nah ... that was from my mum. My old man gave me the Rolex.”

Although I was suspicious you could never tell with Chucho ... whether it was bullshit or not. His personal style may not have reflected it but he did come from a very wealthy family in La Jolla.

“The cop’s eyes darted back to the watch and I could tell it was that or nothing,” Chucho continued. “I tried to resist - whining a bit more. I even took it off to show him the personal inscription on the back: ‘TO KURT, GRADUATION, JULY 1975, LOVE DAD’.

“But he didn’t buy your story, right?” I concluded.

“Well after a few more chingas, fitting the cuff so tight around the right wrist that it cut the circulation off and me whimpering some more I finally gave in.”

“You whaaa..?” I said stunned. “Just like that?! You handed over the precious watch your dad gave you?! It was worth heaps! I thought this story was going to have a light- hearted ending? And what about the principle?”

“Principle doesn’t go far in a Mexican jail,” Chucho replied adopting a matter of fact tone. “Better give up a watch than see the inside of *the slot* down here. Have you ever seen one?”

“No...”

“Well I have,” he said cutting me off. “A few in my time in fact. And they’re no fun. They can hold you for as long as they like, find out how much dough your family’s got ... milk them. The horror stories are endless. They don’t even have to feed you.”

For a moment we were all stunned. Then one by one we all nodded our heads in agreement.

“You’re right of course,” I admitted. “Here’s to seeing you back.” And I raised my glass.

“The truth is if you hadn’t left that pot lying about none of this bullshit would have happened.” Michael commented self-righteously.

Robbie cut him off - “Assigning blame gets you nowhere Michael!”

Chucho raised his eyes to the ceiling as if to ask - what the fuck have I done to deserve this? Michael never gave him a break even though they were best friends and had grown up together since childhood. They argued about everything as best friends often do. And that’s when it happened. Chucho obviously couldn’t take it anymore and when Michael turned absent-mindedly to check out the blonde next to him Chucho stabbed him viciously with the paring knife through the calf. The Mexicans couldn’t believe it. Nobody could. A quite murmur went around the bar as someone exclaimed Ayee!!! Then silence. Here was a bloke who’d been stabbed repeatedly and didn’t even flinch, didn’t scream ... for that matter he didn’t even bleed! Que hombre <sup>3</sup>!

Of course what no one knew but us was that Michael had prosthetic legs below the knees, he was a double amputee who’d lost his legs in a Hobbie Cat accident up on Magic Reservoir in Idaho. One year the water level was up and he sailed right into some high voltage wires carrying 7800 volts - *ZAPPP!* But Michael being his indomitable self, bounced straight back and started a prosthetic company that manufactured bogie legs. They were so real some even had fake hair ... his personal party pair giving him a three-inch lift to match his ego. He’d also developed a system where a simple latex sleeve held them on through suction, no calipers, no nothing. The sleeves just looked like knee supports and the end result was he could walk, ski and dance better than just about any man I knew. The girls would literally line up to Swing Dance with him at the Belly-Up Club at Solano beach ... but that’s another story.

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1 Possibly

2 My poor dad

3 That man

“On that note,” I said, “I’ve had enough. You guys are too much ... I can see this night’s going to end dramatically. See you back at Los Barilles.”

“Good to see you back in one piece,” Sarah said giving them each a hug, an extra big one last of all for Chucho. “Even if you did lose that expensive watch!”

“Yeah well ...it’s more the sentimental value,” Chucho said looking down philosophically scratching at the wooden floor with a toe.

We looked away uncomfortably and busied ourselves gathering our stuff to leave when a shit- eating grin crept over Chucho’s face. Reaching into his shirt pocket he took out the gold Rolex and dangled it in front of us, turning it around for us to see the inscription on the back.

“What the...?!?” We gasped in unison.

“I saw you give it to him!” Robbie cried adamantly.

Michael stared incredulously “Me too!”

“You’re something else!” I smiled. “How the hell did you do it? Get it back?”

“I didn’t,” Chucho beamed. “But hell I never come down here without at least a couple of these good fakes. And appropriately inscribed for just such an occasion!”

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# THE TATTOOED HAND



*Tattoo design by Angelique Houtkamp, Amsterdam, Netherlands*

The early morning light filtered through the tall village palms across the corrugated sandy road in a shimmering Zebra pattern created by the gently swaying trees. In the rear view mirror a cloud of sand floated up behind us capturing this light show. Coming out of the tortillera 1 two round women with plaited shiny black hair, light shapeless cotton dresses cinched by aprons and wearing plastic sandals carried stacks of steaming tortillas covered by white linen cloth. I swerved around them and passed by the memorial near the middle of the pueblo, turned right at the haphazard row of taco stalls that were now shut and accelerated up the hill towards the highway. Near the top two Guardia Civil on duty from the night before stood by the road in their beige uniforms and railway conductor style hats with shiny black plastic peaks. Noticing a blue tarpaulin on the ground between them, I slowed and spotted a pair of cowboy boots sticking out the end facing us. The right boot had a hole worn through the sole beneath the ball of the foot.

“That’s strange,” I said to Chucho. “ You don’t usually see cops about town till afternoon. Not till after siesta hour.”

Chucho lifted in his seat for a better look and replied distantly, “No ... no you don’t.”

The Guardia studied us silently as we drove on past.

I pulled over at a set of petrol pumps near the highway in front of an ordinary house where the only thing beside the pumps indicating it was a service station was an oval sign with GASOLINA hand painted on it. Getting out I reset the meter on the antique bowser and started pumping fuel but within minutes a ten-year-old kid, barefoot and shirtless emerged from a dark corridor in the house. He took the pump gently from my hand and asked politely, “Quanto señor?”<sup>2</sup>

“Leno,”<sup>3</sup> I answered and nodded in the direction of the Guardia- “Que passa 4 down there?”

“No se<sup>5</sup>,”he answered mumbling something about them finding a body by the roadside earlier that morning. A bar owner down the highway had told the kid’s dad that the dead guy had been drinking in his bar all night before, stumbling out blind drunk around nine thirty ... last to be seen staggering down the highway in the dark.

Chucho and I exchanged glances.

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1 Place where they make tortillas.

2 How much sir?

3 Full

4 What’s happening?

5 Don’t know

“Where’d you say you had that crash?” I asked Chucho.

“Just up the highway a bit,” He replied quietly.

“What time did you say it happened?”

He didn’t answer.

I paid the kid thirty three-thousand pesos for the fuel and asked, “How come they haven’t hauled it away?”

He shook his head - “Don’t know señor. Maybe dey waiting por some real cops...”

He meant the Federales.

Pulling up at the corner I looked both ways before turning left towards San Jose del Cabo and had just selected second gear when Chucho grabbed my arm firmly- “STOP!” he cried urgently. “There!”

He was pointing at a fresh set of black tire marks in the other lane that curved off the road and ended abruptly at an embankment. A patch of scattered glass fragments marked where the skid started and I did a U turn pulling over where the tracks left the road. As usual there was no shoulder between the tar and dirt and the car was half on half off the road - tilted at a dramatic angle with the orange hazard lights blinking.

We sat quietly surveying the fresh orange scar through the scrub – a good thirty meters long with every plant flattened, even the fifteen feet high Cardonal cacti stubble across the desert. Finally Chucho got out, struggled on the loose gravel incline of the ten-foot embankment and once he’d secured his footing, gazed down the road to where the skid started.

“Hey mate!’ He said suddenly with a long drawn out breath, “Take a look at this.”

But before I could get out and join him he’d scrambled up the embankment and was moving purposefully towards the glass fragments. I followed him and when I caught up I noticed the colour had drained from his face. “What up?” I asked but in the same instant I spotted it too – drawing in a sharp breath.

Lying in the dust beside the road as real as life, with shock and pain expressed in half-curved fingers was a severed hand. Where it was torn away at the wrist, two pieces of shattered white bone protruded from the ripped crimson flesh and leading to it from the embankment in single file a trail of butcher ants moved frenetically between the grasping fingers. As grotesque as it was there was a poetic contradiction in an image halfway between the thumb and index finger, the most beautiful tattoo of a diving swallow with outstretched wings, a diffused navy outline and mantle with a sky blue underside.

Chucho and I stared at the gruesome amputation in silence. A minute passed - a minute that seemed like an hour and finally I cleared my throat, “Well this throws a different complexion on the issue...”

Chucho nodded dumbly.

A car zoomed by making us both jump - we hadn’t seen or heard it coming.

After it disappeared around a distant corner I bent over to pick up the hand and said under my breath, “Better get out of here.”

Chucho cringed at the sight of me handling the grizzly object but followed me back to the car mutely.

We exited the highway towards Los Barilles and cruised down the hill towards the ‘Guardia’ where a small crowd was now congregating around the tarp, deep in conversation. When we drew alongside many looked up and followed us with their eyes all the way down the hill. Chucho didn’t say a word he just looked ahead deep in thought, or numbed by the absence of it, it was hard to tell.

When we pulled into our yard Oscar the village mechanic stood up suddenly from behind Chucho’s damaged truck and made us flinch again. We hadn’t noticed him on the way in, bent over inspecting the damage. He was shaking his head gravely.

“Que passa?” Chucho asked matter of factly.

“Que cabron! La puta who do this to your trocke! 1”

Chucho’s shoulders sagged. “Yeah...”

Taking Chucho’s sullenness for being upset about the damage Oscar tried to reassure him, “No worry amigo. I feex dis no problema.”

“Gracias amigo,” Chucho replied flatly.

“And I find cabron who did dis tambien 2.”

“How are you going to do that?” I asked.

“Already I know eez a green caro.”

Chucho’s eyebrows knitted, “Oh yeah? How do you know that?”

Oscar pointed at an indentation down the centre of the driver’s door, “Aqui amigo!” He said pointing and he scratched a bit of green paint out with his fingernail like Hercule Poirot. “Eberybody aroun here know ebery caro. I fine out bery rapido.”

“Gracias,” Chucho said but the doleful look on his face showed he didn’t want to find out anything. He just wanted it all to go away.

Oscar slapped him on the back laughing, “Relax amigo too many shooters last night, eh? Jou bien nerviso 3!”

“Si,” I answered for Chucho. “Horrita mucho dolor 4.”

With that Oscar said he had to get going.

After he left I peered around furtively before taking the severed hand from the floor of my car and threw it disdainfully into the back of Chucho’s beat up truck. I covered it with an old hessian sack we used for fishing and we walked on up the hill. Halfway up I said casually, “Maybe you should ice that thing up. You never know ... they might be able to sew it back on? Who knows ... it was in the desert on a cold night for not that long.”

Chucho just looked ahead dolefully.

Everyone was awake when we got home but they were moving about gingerly. Even my baby daughter Coco was sitting on the couch motionless, engrossed in Bananas in Pajamas on TV.

“Where’ve you been?” Sarah asked curiously as we came through the front door.

“Getting petrol,” I threw off nonchalantly.

Chucho gave me a thankful look.

“Chucho!” Michael called enthusiastically from the kitchen. “You don’t look quite as chipper as you did last night. A few too many shooters perhaps?”

“Guess so,” Chucho mumbled without looking back.

“Poor Chucho!” Robbie chuckled on his way to the kitchen.

For once I really felt sorry for Chucho, although I usually enjoyed tormenting him more than anyone his abnormally thick skin was obviously too tender for jibes that day. He just trudged over to the couch and dropped down next to Coco, absorbing himself instantly in the TV screen.

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1 What a goat fucker! The whore who did this to your truck!

2 And I find the goat fucker who did this as well

3 You are very nervous

4 He’s feeling very sick now



Sarah was cutting up a red papaya beside which lay a skinned pineapple, oranges, pale green and purple mangos, bananas and shiny green limes. She was reducing the fruit to wedges, cubes and ovals ... forms that would have made Cezanne's eyes water. Robbie was helping her and Michael stood by the gas burners behind them brewing coffee. Bubbling into the top of a shiny aluminium Espresso machine, its rich aroma mingled with the fruit smells being directed at us by a rapidly spinning overhead fan.

"Guess there's nothing left for me to do but twist one up," I said to no one in particular and plonked down next to Chucho on the couch.

Suddenly Oscar appeared at the door.

"Entrada!" I beckoned him.

"Good news," he said. "The trocke dat smash wid jou eez from Buena Vista."

Buena Vista was the next little fishing pueblo just along the bay

"How do you know that?" Chucho said sitting up.

"Jus like I tole jou before, aroun here eberybody know eberyting. I hear from Ernesto Gomez who get it from Paco Ruiz who hear from Gustavo Sanchez, who was tole by hees wife apter she talking weeth Rosa Alarca and Guadeloupe Gonzales seester at the tortillera in La Riverra dis morning. Rosa eez a fren of auntie of guy from Buena who crash wid jou".

"Fuck ... how many people know about this", I said in disbelief.

Ebery one aroun here know but jou!"

"Got it," I said shaking my head impressed.

Chucho shook his head too. All he could do was repeat the words, "No kidding" as each link in the chain of gossip throughout the pueblos revealed a new vital development.

Looking pleased with himself Oscar asked coyly, "Jou wan we go talk wid heem?"

Chucho jumped up from the couch - "Fuck yeah! ... I mean ... Claro que si !"

"And what about breakfast?!" Sarah frowned squeezing the final touch of limejuice over the large glass bowl of fruit salad.

"What about it!" Chucho quipped. He needed breakfast about as much as an ashtray on motorbike.

"Fuck you Chucho!" Michael threw in. He wasn't about to charge off hung-over on an empty stomach... especially not on a Chucho whim.

In the end everyone ate breakfast, Chucho picking at his reluctantly and then the boys left saying they'd see us within the hour. We told them we'd be down at the Buena Vista resort giving Coco a swimming lesson.

The crowd had grown around the corpse by the time we drove through town a second time, many drinking beer with slabs of Tecate beer piled up by the roadside. The midday sun was beating down on the desert reflecting back up in heat waves that made the whole scene shimmer. A buzz of voices from the gathering hit us as we passed, the locals clearly pleased with having an occasion to stand about and get drunk. Most were men dressed in jeans, pale shirts with pearl snap buttons, cowboy boots and cream straw hats furred at the brim. Being a pastoral culture even the humblest fisherman aspired to be a ranch patron, if nothing else in his dress. *The Mexican Dream.*

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1 Clearly yes (of course).

Occasionally a wife passing from the mercardito 1 would stop briefly to talk with her man.

“What’s going on?” Sarah asked checking the crowd out.

“A Mexican wake,” I answered. “The body’s under that tarp.”

“What?” She exclaimed craning her neck for a better look.

“Don’t know why,” I added, “but I think the hole in the sole of that protruding boot is particularly poignant.”

She studied it for a moment, “No... it’s just that last burger you smoked!”

Snatching a glance in the rear view mirror I added, “They’d want to get that stiff out of this heat before it gets too ripe.”

Like most Pueblo’s along the coast Buena Vista was a small oasis of lush palm trees, Bougainvillea and flat-roofed white adobe buildings. The resort was spread among the vegetation, a cluster of bungalows around a reception building, two tennis courts and a swimming pool. Off to one side a long white dock surrounded by a good size flotilla of game boats stretched into the smooth turquoise sea.

We’d barely put our stuff on some banana chairs and launched Coco into the pool with her floaties when Chucho, Michael and Robbie arrived. “What’s up?” I asked noticing the furrow creasing Chucho’s brow.

“The fella that hit us was blind all right,” he said. “He’s now up in the military hospital in La Paz. We dropped by his place and talked to his kid brother.”

“What’d the kid have to say?”

“Not much. Except that the drunk’s auntie ran him up to La Paz late last night in bad shape.”

“Took him up to have his arm seen to huh?”

“The kid never said anything about that. Mentioned internal injuries ...said his older brother had hit the steering wheel.”

“Nothing about a hand?”

Chucho shook his head, “Nothing.”

“Did you ask him?”

“Uh huh...”

“That’s a worry,” I said scratching my head. “What about that body on the roadside ... did anybody check it out? And where the hell did that hand come from then?”

“Good question,” Chucho grimaced.

“So what are you going to do?”

“Go talk to the guy in hospital.”

“Did you see that body by the roadside in Los Barillos?” Sarah asked returning from the bar. She’d used the change rooms to put on a pink and black Lycra bikini and had a waiter in tow carrying a large glass pitcher of fresh limejuice.

Chucho shot her a nervous look, his upper lip glistening. “Yeah. Did you find out what happened?”

“No,” she answered. “We never bothered stopping.”

His shoulder’s sagged again. No one said anything for a while as we sat in the withering sun, then Mark, the owner of the resort bumped down the cobblestone drive on his three-wheeler all terrain buggy. As soon as he spotted us he waved enthusiastically.

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1 Little market (shop).

“Hey Mark, “ I greeted him. “How ya doin?”

“Good,” he said flashing a toothy Californian smile. He was shirtless, his body lean and tanned and he was wearing baggy blue shorts with little pink geckos all over them.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Not much...” he said. “Just returned from Los Barillos. Stopped to chat with some Federales near the turn off.”

“Don’t see them down this way too often,” I offered casually.

“Nah... they usually don’t bother. They were passing on their way to Cabo when they noticed a corpse by the road. When I stopped they were examining some fresh skid marks up the highway a bit.”

Being a major hotel owner Mark knew all the cops in the district personally so I knew he’d have ‘the mail’. “Oh yeah? What happened?” I asked.

“Don’t know. Neither did they yet. They’d only just arrived.”

Chucho cut in nervously, “We’ll be heading off now - got to get up to La Paz.”

“Nice seeing you,” Mark said patting him on the back and calling after him, “Stop by for some ping pong next time... I need a fresh victim!” There was a certain sarcasm belying his tone as they were old adversaries and played regularly.

“No problem,” Chucho said forcing a smile.

Mark chattered for a bit then left us to relax by the pool. The sun was so ferocious we couldn’t take it for too long and had to throw ourselves into the water regularly. As relaxing as it was I was inwardly restless and couldn’t help but wonder what Chucho would discover in La Paz. Agitated by these thoughts for several hours in the debilitating heat was about all I could handle and around three o’clock we packed up to leave, seriously hoping the boys would be back with some answers.

The crowd in Los Barillos had grown even more and after a solid day of drinking there was a general atmosphere of fiesta with people ‘lit up’ from alcohol, laughing, chatting, staggering about and lots of backslapping every time someone new arrived. Empty beer cans littered the road and a crunched up Tecate tin lay ceremoniously in the middle of the blue tarp covering the body as an inglorious tribute.

“You’d think they would have moved the bloody thing,” Sarah commented on our way past.

“They probably will...” I chuckled. “In true Mexican style, mañana.”

She grinned, “Yeah ...by then there’ll be a heap more casualties.”

As we passed I overcame a strong urge to stop and lift the tarp to check the hands but knew it was an instant ‘give up’ so I kept going.

The afternoon sun silhouetted the dust billowing around us as we raced up the hill towards home, half-expectant, hoping deep down that Chucho would be there.

He wasn’t.

The heat was still unbearable even more enervating away from the pool and I feared I’d made an error in judgment ... perhaps I shouldn’t have been so hasty to leave. Throwing myself into a multicoloured hammock under the palm frond veranda I swung myself back and forth restlessly, tormenting myself with plenty more second-guessing about the drama that was unfolding when suddenly I caught sight of a black and white vehicle cruising along the main drag. It stopped to check Chucho’s smashed white pick up by the side of the road, stopped further on and the Federales driving spoke with two fishermen struggling up the sandy road with a big Marlin undulating between their sagging shoulders. It was the first time I’d ever seen the Federales in the pueblo and it alarmed me. Oscar had mentioned that everyone in the area knew about Chucho’s wreck so it wouldn’t have taken them long to find out.

Where was Chucho anyway?!” Maybe he wasn’t coming back. Maybe he’d learned something in La Paz and kept going ... a high speed run for the border. Then again the Feds might have picked him up on his way to La Paz and had him dangling by his handcuffed wrists in some shower block, meticulously applying cattle prods to his genitals.

Hell ... Chucho had plenty of time to drive to La Paz and back ... even spend three or four hours there. What could be keeping him?

By six o’clock I was too agitated to lie about and announced that I was going for a walk. Heading down the hill deep in thought I was totally oblivious to the things that usually gave me pleasure ... the chickens and goats wandering the dusty lanes, the perfumed flowers and tropical vegetation... and as I stepped absent-mindedly onto the main road I jumped back startled.

Simultaneously the black and white Federale vehicle locked its brakes and skidded on the loose sand to avoid running into me. It had obviously turned around at the northern end of its run at La Rivera or somewhere further along the vast bay and was now on its way back. I leapt back apologetically but the two tough looking Feds insisted I cross - watching me self-consciously pass in front of them. Hastening my pace the last fifty meters to the beach I cursed... *How could our idyllic little hide away have been bubbled by this bullshit?*



On the beach it was cooler now with a gentle breeze coming off the water, dampening the inferno off the land. I made my way towards the Pyramids <sup>1</sup> with my hands dug deep in my shorts, head down, mesmerised by the shore break swirling around my ankles after each footfall made an impression in the soft yellow sand to the northern end of the pueblo when a voice snapped me out of it. It was Wayne, another expat Californian who’d escaped big beat America for a less complicated existence in laid back Baja and now sold pieces of paradise to like-minded soul brothers between riding waves. Always shirtless with a deep golden tan and sun-bleached hair, he had the classic look of a surfer from ‘southern Cal’ and the easy smile of someone happy with the choices they’d made in life.

“What’s doin man?” he beamed as he caught up to me and extended a hand.

“Not much,” I replied shaking it. “Just come to check the tide.”

“Check it from my place,” he insisted. “Come on up and I’ll fix us a cocktail.”

Happy for a diversion I surrendered to his offer and turned to follow him up the sand saying- “You’ve got me!”

“I know,” he chuckled. “And you’re so hard to get!”

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<sup>1</sup> Three hills side by side that looked like they had their fronts neatly shaved off, looking like three pyramids along the shoreline. It was our reference point to find our way home when fishing far out at sea.

Wayne's land was right on the beach with a million-dollar view. He was in the process of building and had completed a granite wall around the perimeter as well as foundations for a house. In the meantime he was living out of a round-edged aluminium Air Stream caravan with a sunshade annex off the side. Beneath the annex there were three red canvas studio chairs and two blue reclining banana chairs arranged neatly around a white plastic coffee table.

The tide was up and the shore break was pounding the beach with a thunderous boom with two donkeys strolling indifferently close to the water's edge. Moored outside the waves the local fishing fleet of pangas <sup>1</sup> rolled rhythmically on the swell with colourful pennants flapping from their masts, displaying silhouettes of marlin, tuna, sail fish and Dorado. Although I tried to enjoy it my mind kept going back to Chucho, the hand, the corpse... the Federales.

I had just eased back into a banana chair and was gazing absently at the surf when a myriad of silver bullets flashed through a translucent wave. Suddenly they leapt clear of a wave in panic as a dark shadow sped up behind. With mouth agape- barring rows of ugly teeth and a series of foot long erect antennae along its dorsal edge- it was one of the fiercest looking fish I'd ever seen.

"What the...?" I began when Wayne caught my gaze. "Pez Gallo!" He exclaimed answering my question before I'd asked it. "Rooster Fish."

I'd heard about 'Roosters', knew they were found off coastal Mexico and Guatemala but had never seen one. My adrenalin was pumping at the thought of coming back with my fly rod when I noticed Pancho Aguillar leaning over the fence. I'd been distracted and hadn't seen him appear or notice him deep in conversation with Wayne. His beat up red Chevy truck was parked alongside with his brindle mongrel barking enthusiastically at Wayne's dog Spike on our side, both their tails wagging excitedly.

Pancho was uncharacteristically soft spoken for a Mexican but one of the strongest men I'd ever met anywhere. No more than five foot ten he had a large beer gut and a neck like a short length of telegraph pole with muscles bulging from its sides, like thick cords of rope. He shared a house in the pueblo with two pretty sisters and it was rumoured that his sexual tastes ranged to the exotic, with both of them. It was behaviour I thought would be regarded as scandalous in such an isolated Catholic backwater but with Pancho, being who he was, no one took issue with it. At least not openly.

"Necesito una pala <sup>2</sup> he was saying demurely as I strolled up, his massive forearms resting on the fence like Christmas hams covered in a matt of curly black hair.

"Que passa Pancho?" I greeted him. "Your chilies listo <sup>3</sup> or what?" He was always borrowing tools from Wayne but as he did a lot of stonework for him, Wayne didn't mind. What I couldn't understand though, was why someone with such a productive vegetable patch didn't have a full range of his own gardening tools.

"No, no amigo,' Pancho deferred softly to my question without elaborating.

"Mucho pescado hoy <sup>4</sup>?" Wayne asked him observing the salt crusted on his hairy arms.

Pancho worked on a game boat on weekends and a large ice cooler in the tray of his truck told us that he'd been out that day. It was for his share of the catch, the understanding being that when anyone chartered a game boat the bounty was divided among the Mexican crew.

"Si amigo mucho atun <sup>5</sup>."

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1 Mexican fishing boat

2 Need a shovel

3 Are your chilies ready or what?

4 Many fish today?

5 Yes my friend, lots of tuna

Wayne got Pancho a shovel from a small tin lock up shed beside his caravan as they continued their conversation, Pancho leaning on the shovel speaking in his soft measured way, Wayne leaning over the fence gesticulating with his arms, his voice louder than necessary in his energetic Californian manner. After a while the sound of a car's suspension squeaking and rattling loosely over the corrugated sand road drew our attention as the approach of vehicles' do in small out of the way places and then from a cloud of sand my black Peugeot emerged with Chucho behind the wheel. He's driven it up to La Paz because he was afraid some one would identify his truck and report him to the cops.

"Hola Pancho,"<sup>1</sup> Chucho called enthusiastically as he pulled up. He nodded curtly in Wayne's direction. Chucho had befriended just about all the Mexicans in the pueblo, preferring their company to his own kind. "Why the shovel" he asked." Para ti verduras 2?"

Pancho shook his head gravely - "No amigo. Para mi hermano Angel 3."

"Que?" Chucho asked puzzled.

"Mi pauvrecito hermano 4 he dead."

"No!" Chucho exclaimed not sure whether to take Pancho seriously. "Wasn't he only young?"

"Si, si, jus twenty seven jears."

"What a tragedy," I remarked astonished at Pancho's stoicism. He'd been with us for over half an hour and had said nothing nor had his demeanour indicated any personal grief. From his casualness you would have thought that he needed the shovel for some trivial chore.

"How'd it happen?" Wayne asked equally perplexed.

"He die near Las Bombas Gasolinas in Los Barilles. Muy boracho 5"

Chucho shot me an alarmed look and the next question seemed to get caught in his throat, "What happened amigo?"

"He die on road walking home apter drinking por tree days with amigos."

Here it comes I thought and before I could stop myself it slipped out - "Don't tell me he got hit by a car! An accident?"

Pancho looked at me quizzically, making me blush deep crimson. I assumed he was wondering how I knew and his deadpan stare made me more uncomfortable. "No accident. He die from demaciado tequila 6," he said flatly.

"Bullshit!" I exclaimed – not meaning to challenge him but out of total disbelief. "What are you saying? That he drank himself to death?"

"Si." Pancho confirmed." Ciento por ciento 7."

"That's it?! ... There's nothing more to it?" That at the ripe young age of twenty-seven he drank tequila for three days until he dropped dead!"

"Exactamente 8" Pancho smiled ruefully. Then added, "He hab weak how jou say?" And placed his hand on his chest, resting it there.

"Heart" Wayne confirmed reiterating it in Spanish, "*Corazon.*"

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1 Hi Pancho

2 For your vegetables?

3 For my brother Angel

4 My poor brother

5 Very drunk

6 Too much tequila

7 100%

8 Exactly

“Si,” Pancho stated simply.

“That’s incredible,” Wayne said shaking his head.

“No ... no really,” Pancho said. “Dey drinking bery much.”

It was clear from the way he told it Pancho felt his younger brother Angel had gone out in style ... no half measures.

“Well, if that don’t beat all” I exclaimed. “So that’s him up where the fiesta is?”

“Si,” Pancho smiled melancholically.

But I still needed convincing. “Say your brother didn’t have any tattoos did he?”

Chucho caught my eye and subtly shook his head as if to say leave it alone.

“Si, uno. A how jou say bird.”

I knew it, knew there had to be more. “Where?”

Chucho was paying extremely close attention now.

With his right hand Pancho touched his left bicep, “Aqui. Un aquillar <sup>1</sup> like our name.”

“What? I exclaimed. “No other?! Are you sure it was an eagle not a swallow?”

Pancho looked me up and down questioningly, obviously wondering how anyone could confuse an eagle with a swallow.

But I let it go, letting out a deep sigh and pausing before continuing, “Why’d they leave him out in the sun all day?”

“Dey waiting me come back fron feeshing.”

“Doesn’t there have to be an autopsy, a coroner’s report or some kind of paperwork?”

Pancho studied me for a moment quizzically before replying, “Porque?”

“Well - because it’s a death!”

“Que?” Pancho now looked totally baffled.

“Where we come from,” I explained, “There’d have to be a report.”

Pancho looked us over, wondering whether we were having ‘a lend’ of him.

“No - es verdad <sup>2</sup>!” I assured him so he wouldn’t think we were being disrespectful.

“Crazy gringos” he muttered. “Why inbestigation or report? Eez claro que he dreenk himself to death. Nada mas <sup>3</sup>. No necesario ask if I can bury.”

Clearly the bureaucracy worked differently in Mexico, especially in remote areas. In our world everything was subject to suspicion and our lives had become vastly over regulated.

Changing the subject, Wayne asked, “Why did you say they waited all day and leave the body out in the heat?”

“Waiting for me finish work feeshing,” Pancho repeated. “I family ... mi responsibilidad.”

“Gotcha,” Wayne nodded.

“Gracias,” Pancho concluded and threw the shovel casually into the back of his truck where it bounced and clattered, making Spike jump into a corner with lowered ears and tail.

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1 An eagle

2 No – it’s true

3 Nothing more?



After Pancho left you wouldn't have been able to wipe the smile of Chucho's face with a slice of lemon. Not being disrespectful or anything but from the sheer weight that had been lifted from him. Yet I was still puzzled and asked, "O.K... but what I still can't figure out is where the hell that hand came from?"

"That's easy," Chucho grinned. "Why do you think I was shaking my head behind Pancho when you were asking about tattoos? It came from the bloke who rammed us."

"What?! Now I'm totally fucking confused. I thought you said that kid in Buena Vista said the bloke only had internal injuries...?!"

"The kid didn't know shit. Hell ... he's just little, mate."

"Unbelievable," I shrugged incredulously. "How could anyone not notice something like that? All this drama over nothing."

"Yeah," Chucho agreed. "The beaner who hit us had his hand hanging down the side of his door"

"OUCH! How'd he keep going?"

Chucho shrugged, "Either he was too drunk to feel it -"

"I find that hard to believe!" I said interrupting him. "Then again ... it is Mexico."

"Or ... he rammed us, shit himself and figured it was better to keep going."

"That's more like it."

"In any case he somehow made it home without bleeding to death. It was only a couple of 'clicks' to Buena Vista. Luckily his auntie was on the ball because she immediately applied a tourniquet and rushed him up to La Paz."

"Did you return the hand for micro surgery?" I inquired.

Chucho frowned, "Mate - you're supposed to ice body parts down immediately and rush them to a hospital. Not pick them out of the dirt a day later after they've been savaged by vermin and insects and the tissue's sun fried like prosciutto..."

"Ah now you're an expert ... how the hell would I know," I protested. "I'm no surgeon."

"No ... no ... you're not." Chucho chuckled. "Definitely no brain surgeon!" And he slapped me on the back amicably.

"Of course this leaves you with a new dilemma Chucho," I concluded.

"What's that?" he asked curiously.

"You're now wheel-less. You're going to have to get yourself another car."

"Yeah but I can deal with that. Give me a minute to get creative."

"This'll be fucking good," I groaned.

But he just shrugged it off saying, "What are you going to do now? Coming home?"

"No I just saw my first Rooster Fish in the surf. I'm going to get a rod give it a go."

"What! You're going to fish off the shore?" Michael asked in astonishment. "That's not your style!"

"Yeah but I've got to get my tackle first."

"We're going home to make cocktails," Chucho announced. "We were planning on catching the sunset on the beach. Do you want us to get your rod and drop it back?"

Wayne answered for me, "Why don't you do that. That way he can stay and finish the drink I just made him."

"OK," I shrugged. "Get my Sage rod, the medium size one with the Billy Pate Bone Fish reel. And the red tackle box with my saltwater flies."

"Got it," Chucho nodded. "See you shortly."

After they left Wayne and I reclined in his banana chairs with our drinks to watch the day wind down. The sky was a pretty pastel green blue with pink wisps and beyond the break three Frigate birds glided high up, their black arched wings carving the sky like scythes. Below them a flock of gulls circled frenetically dive bombing the water, their shrill cries reaching even us as they chopped into a boil of baitfish.

Into our third cocktail the light began to change to a warm gold, highlighting the horizon. It was prime time for fishing, what I use to call 'the golden hour', just before the vibrant colours fade from the sky and the light becomes dull, monochromatic. The time when the day fish launch their last attacks and retreat before the night stalkers take over.

The best fishing of the afternoon was slipping away and I was getting edgy. "Where the fuck's Chucho..." I began just as my Peugeot bounced around the corner. "About bloody time!" I grumbled.

"Sorry mate..." He apologised. "But I got caught up recounting the day's developments to Sarah."

Smelling booze on him I said, "Over a few thousand cocktails no doubt!"

Chucho looked at me coyly, "What can I tell you...?"

"Obviously not much," I said tersely. "Where's my tackle?"

"Mate ... that's another story," he said casting me a sheepish grin.

"What!!! I don't want to hear it Chucho ... don't even joke!"

The look on Chucho's face became defensive, "Chill out buddy," he said. "We couldn't find it... it wasn't where it normally is in your cupboard."

"Chucho, it was right by the front door ready to bite you on the arse!"

"Well we weren't looking there," he protested.

I fixed him with a cynical look. "The operative phrase is ... you weren't looking!"

"Not to worry, I've got some of my equipment," he said in an effort to placate me. Then he reached into the back of his pick up and retrieved two cheap fiberglass rods he'd bought at some discount fishing warehouse on the industrial outskirts of San Diego. They were rigged with ganged hooks and large torpedo sinkers.

"You're kidding Chucho!" I scowled. "Even if I were into redneck fishing where's the bait?!"

"Relax," he said. "We'll get some mullet or mackerel from one of the bait guys along the beach."

"What guys along the beach?! You mean the ones who went home an hour ago!"

He surveyed the foreshore and realised I was right the beach was deserted. "Well... uh," he stammered.

"That's exactly what I thought you'd say," I snapped and turned my back in disgust to walk off. But before I had gone three steps he reached into the back of his truck and yelled after me- "Hang on mate! I've got some bait here," and threw it at my feet. *The amputated hand.*

A day in the sun certainly hadn't improved it in either in smell or appearance and the sight of it stopped me dead in my tracks.

But without saying a word I walked over and opened his tackle box, rummaged through it until I found a pair of wire snips he used for making traces for Barracuda and as casual as could be picked up the gruesome object, snipping off the index finger through the knuckle.

It came off easily with a crisp SNAP!

Making sure not to look at Chucho I nonetheless caught him flinch out the corner of my eye as I proceeded to thread two of his ganged hooks through the piece of finger. Quite frankly, I was surprised at how tough the flesh was as I called out to Wayne through the caravan window for some alfoil. Wrapping a piece around the line end as an attractor I then walked off purposefully towards the water's edge.

Chucho hadn't said a word the whole time but as I made my way down to the beach he called after me. "Mate, mate ... I always knew you were loco but now I'm convinced you're mad!"

Of course I'd done it all as a ruse - one of those impulses where, when someone does something crazy instead of reacting with shock you take it a step further with reverse psychology. But then I got carried away and found it hard to stop. Chucho's reaction probably fuelled me more than anything as I enjoyed watching his normally impassive demeanor crumble.

I arrived at the water's edge and watched the waves for a bit timing their lift, then cast hard into the face of the next rising wall of water. By then Chucho had caught up muttering, "OK OK you've made your point", a comment that satisfied me enough to stop my charade and I began to retrieve the line. Impressed by the movement my makeshift silver foil flashing through the arching wave I went to jerk it out - when to my total dismay a dark shadow torpedoed up behind and bared a ferocious display of deadly teeth enclosing my hook.

Chucho spotted it just as I did.

"Holy Shit!!!" We muttered in unison, staring with wide-eyed disbelief.

The monster chomped down hard making me instinctively lift the rod tip and strike the hook home. It caused an instant explosion of water as the Rooster leapt in a magnificent arc through the now crimson sky, a fan of black barbs electrically erect off its shoulders like those on a fighting bull. All we could do was stare with our mouths agape while the fish fought, tearing out line, the ratchet a noisy clatter on the short bursts, a long *whirrrrrrrrr* as it bulldogged the line in high speed runs up and down the shoreline.

Although it took some time to finally wear itself out it seemed like the fight was over before I knew it, a magnificent fish of some thirty pounds lying at my feet in the sand. All we could do was stare in awe, Chucho shaking his head and muttering, "Well ... if this ain't the fishing story to beat all!"

I stared at it for quite some time before facing him and replying with deliberation, "No mate. This is one story we can never tell anybody. Ever!"

He studied me pensively for a moment before muttering, "You're right. They'd never understand. We'll have to keep this one *dark*."

\*

# THE SHRINE AT PUNTA GORDA

The car was bouncing and chattering over the washboard track throwing up a cloud of sand in its wake. There were plenty of potholes and the trick was to dodge the big ones and keep our speed up to avoid the shake rattle and roll. Only tourists drove slowly, making it even worse. The trick was to drive with your foot flat to the boards to glide over corrugations but the occasional roadrunner would dart across the road and make us hit the brakes to a bone-rattling crawl. “Beep, Beep!” Chucho would chortle as it disappeared at high speed into the pale green sage and cactus stubble across the yellow desert. A joke that got old quickly.

Coming up to a Vado<sup>1</sup> we slowed and down the bottom maneuvered between a herd of cattle cooling their hooves in a shallow motionless stream. A burro among them stared dumbly as we inched past, its large furry ears pointed forward, tail swiping rhythmically at the insects trying to land on its grey flanks. Every time its tail lifted they’d disperse, advancing again only when it dropped and was safe to do so, reassembling tirelessly in a repetitive drama.

Up the other side the track went through a narrow opening in a thick stand of bamboo along the ridge - a lush green line beneath a clear blue sky. Beyond that stood the unnamed pueblo at Punta Gorda overlooking the Sea of Cortez.

We were early getting to Antonio’s and were about to drive on when we spotted the old woman out back. She was reaching into a dirty apron throwing seed onto the sun-baked dirt to chickens running frenetically here and there. When she turned to check us out her mirrored Aviators threw off a glint of brilliant sunshine, the funky sunglasses a bizarre contrast to the traditional black shawl wrapped around her hair.

“La Bruja<sup>2</sup>!” Chucho cursed apprehensively as she leveled us with a deadpan look. “The old bitch doesn’t like me,” he confessed. “Never did.”

“How come?”

“Who knows...?”

“It’s like that, huh?”

“Yeah la bruja doesn’t need a reason. But now that I’m here for the car she’ll have one. That’ll give her original *beef* some weight.”

“Fuck her!” I said flatly.

“Ex – actly,” Chucho said smiling. But he hastened to add, “Let’s wait here for Antonio.”

To pass the time I began rolling one up from a Ziploc full of rusty coloured Sinaloa dirt weed, looking up occasionally to keep an eye on La Bruja who kept feeding the chickens but would also check us out from time to time. The early morning heat began to bake us as it crept into the high eighties and I pressed the buttons on the console to open the windows and electronic sunroof. A couple of goats trotted past stopping nearby to chew on the pink and white Oleander sticking through Antonio’s fence. La Bruja cursed and began throwing pebbles at them.

“Do you reckon they get poisoned from the Oleander?” I said nodding at the goats.

“Doubt it,” Chucho said. “They’re tough fuckers.”

The burble of Chucho’s old blue VW Kombi creeping down the dirt track turned our heads and Chucho adjusted

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1 Gully

2 The Witch

the rear view mirror to watch it as it meandered down the road avoiding the pot holes and braking for bumps. “Still got the sports pack exhaust,” Chucho remarked with a trace of nostalgic pride. “My folks bought me that car for a high school graduation present.”

“You’re shitting me!” I said surprised, surprised Chucho had gone to school let alone graduated. “It doesn’t look more than ten years old.”

“It’s not. It’s an eighty-three. Exactly ten years old.”

“What! You mean to tell me you finished high school when you were twenty-five?!”

“Uh huh. Did the last ninety credits in ‘the slot’. The Kombi was the carrot.”

He made me chuckle, making it hard to hang on to a lung full of smoke and I spluttered with laughter with words coming out intermittently. “Figures.... I never picked you... for the academic type.”

“You got that right,” Chucho conceded. “But I want the Kombi for the sentimental value.”

“Give me a break!” I groaned. “You want it because you fucked your truck and you’re tired of paying for the renta.”

“That’s not entirely true mate,” he said emphasising the word mate. He always called me mate with that broad American accent and fixed me with a stubborn gaze when he didn’t want to concede a point.

“Don’t get too carried away,” I chuckled. “And stop trying to con a con... especially one who’s conned a cast of thousands!”

“Yeah well if I knew I was going to like it this much back here ... that I was going to stay a month or two.”

**Antonio interrupted us** as he pulled up alongside smiling. He was in his fifties with black well-oiled, swept back hair and sported a neat pencil line moustache that divided his upper lip horizontally into half, ending exactly in line with the ends of his mouth.

“Chucho!” He exclaimed enthusiastically. “Mucho tiempo amigo <sup>1</sup>.”

“Antonio!” Chucho said with equal fervour. “It has been a long time. Mucho gusto amigo <sup>2</sup>.” Then he mumbled to me under his breath- “The poor fucker... look at the shape that baby’s in. He thought I was toast. Never to be seen again!”

Looking the car over I was impressed by the impeccable condition it had been maintained in. “Well you can hardly blame him,” I remarked. “It’s been what ... three, four years?” Then I added somewhat sarcastically, “Bet that car didn’t look that good when you had it!”

“Only for the first five minutes. Shit... and he’s just transferred the registration!”

“So? That’s a minor consideration. It couldn’t have been too hard. Not with a little mordida.”

“Don’t bet. Registration’s the one thing that is hard down here.”

“Why’s that?” I asked curiously. After all a sling seemed to take care of just about everything in Mexico.

“The Mexicans have to protect their auto industry somehow,” he explained. “If it was too easy every ‘beaner’ who went to the States on a work stint would bring a car back and register it. That’d screw up the more expensive locally made vehicle market. It’s also why foreign cars can only stay six months.”

“I gotcha.”

“To make matter worse Antonio’s probably been waiting all this time for an amnesty. They have them once in a while to legitimise long-term holdouts... now I show up.”

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1 It’s been a long time

2 Much pleasure my friend

“Nice one pal,” I said beginning to feel distinctly uncomfortable. “This is getting better by the minute!”

Chucho handed me the joint with a cheeky grin, smoke pouring out of his mouth thick and blue, his large Buddha like stomach rising and falling with his chuckling. “And he’s kept it in such good shape for me too!”

I looked at him squarely and shook my head, “You low life!”

He let me suffer before adding, “Don’t worry - I told him there’d be a regalo <sup>1</sup> in it”.

“This’ll be good,” I scoffed. “What regalo?”

“A microwave.”

“Microwave?” ...But the moment I uttered it I intuitively craned my neck and spotted it secreted in the luggage section of my station wagon, a corner poking out from beneath a bright pink, blue and black striped Mexican blanket. Recognising it instantly I snapped - “Isn’t that the one you gave Sarah for staying with us?”

“Uh huh.”

“And the story gets uglier by the minute,” I groaned. To tell the truth I was surprised I hadn’t noticed it earlier. Chucho must have snuck it out while I was saying my goodbyes to my wife and Coco before leaving Los Barriles that morning.

“Relax,” Chucho said. “I’ll make it up to her.”

“Yeah? When? ...Tomorrow morning when she goes to heat Coco’s milk?”

The thought of that made him cringe.

“I can already hear the shrill pitch of her voice - INDIAN GIVER!!!”

As thick-skinned as Chucho was he respected Sarah’s temper, knowing only too well how even her voice could shred like piano wire. “You’re right,” he muttered. “I’ll have to get her something in San Jose Del Cabo before we head home.”

“You bet!” I chuckled. “A new microwave!”

Antonio dragged open the rough gate of timber scraps and irregular tree branches tied together by fencing wire. With the shortage of timber in this part of the desert people made their fences from anything they could lay their hands on. As we followed the Kombi into the yard I remarked, “Looks like he’s done nothing but polish that van for the past four years.” Then I added gruffly, “How the fuck do you rope me into this kind of shit anyway?!!!”

Chucho fixed me with one of his matter of fact looks, his flattened nose glistening in the searing heat. Taking a red bandana from the glove box he wiped fine beads of sweat from his brow and attempted to tie it around his neck, a neck that could have fitted my Subaru’s spare tire snugly. Like many athletes who give away training he’d put on a ton of weight and his body was now about as sharp as a bowling ball. But the old wrestler’s frame was still there and if the truth be told he was as strong as an ox.

“Come on buddy,” he said after a bit. “Don’t be a chicken shit. Once Antonio sees that microwave it’ll be sweet.”

“Yeah – right!” I groaned catching one of La Bruja’s dirty looks as we rounded the corner of their tropical pink house.

The back yard was quite large, probably a good hectare with two rough sheds in one corner and an open walled shelter in the middle made from coconut trunk supports and a palapa roof. Palapas of overlapping palm fronds kept the rain off while letting heat rise through them and were common throughout Mexico, especially in southern Baja.

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<sup>1</sup> A gift.



To one side of the shelter stood a stone fireplace with red coals of mesquite heating a large blackened urn, the golden dried palm fronds above it blackened also Antonio pushed two chairs back for us and went towards the house to get his daughter Lupe<sup>1</sup>.

“Loo-pay!” he called a number of times from the back door.

Chucho hadn’t seen Lupe since she was a shy schoolgirl and when she appeared his eyes almost popped out. She had grown tall in his absence, especially so for a Mexican and now she had a shapely brown body and her face was oval rather than typically round with a cute button nose and pearl white teeth.

“Aye! Que guapa<sup>2</sup> !” Chucho exclaimed looking her up and down with deliberate exaggeration, shaking his hand and snapping his fingers like he’d just burned them on the glowing coals. It was one of those macho Latino mannerisms he’d adopted that made me laugh.

But Lupe enjoyed it. She was no longer shy and took his reference to her cuteness as a compliment to her womanhood, the last one Chucho had paid her was to pull her pigtails at fourteen. Throwing her arms around him she gave him an affectionate hug before stepping back and looking him up and down, giving his rotund stomach a cheeky pat. “My how we’ve both grown...” she observed endearingly.

“Guess you were a little slimmer back then,” I threw in.

Chucho shot me a dark look that was unnecessary. Lupe adored him none-the-less, you could tell. He’d been her idol as a schoolgirl as he had been for most of the girls in the pueblo ... the golden Californian surfer living the life in a simple Mexican village. And even though the jail years had changed him - with tell tale scars on his face, darker, thinner hair and a corpulent body... none of it had diminished the myth.

La Bruja made her way around the back but maintained her distance, the chickens still scurrying about her pecking at the seed she scattered. She muttered something subtly intended to curtail Lupe’s open affection but her remonstrations were ignored. Lupe was her own woman perfectly in tune with the twentieth century, right down to the faded cut offs, Doc Martins and fifties style shirt tied beneath full, upstanding breasts. Ombliqueras they called those shirts down there. Even her hair was short - a coconut cut with graduating shaved back and sides. It gave me some satisfaction to think her looks would’ve made La Bruja cringe; who probably said a dozen ‘Hail Mary’s’ every time Lupe left for town.

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1 An abbreviation for the name Guadeloupe

2 Oh! What a cutie!



The reunion between Lupe and Chucho had definitely lightened the moment . . . and then I remembered Chucho's mission. The more I thought about it the more the situation was making me squirm. Then just as I was wondering how Chucho was going to make his play Antonio beat him to it- "Jou know amigo, " he began, "when no-one hear nada <sup>1</sup> fron jou and den Scotty buy jour land he say jou neber coming back... entonces <sup>2</sup> dey steal eberiting fron jour place. Once we hear it not jours no more ob course!"

"Of course," Chucho repeated.

"Anyway, I take Kombi and bring here for jou. I tinkin to look apter it for jou for when jou coming back."

"Antonio you're a gem," Chucho said indifferently.

"And den when we no hear nada por two, tree jears - I figuring Scotty no bullsheet. Dat jou neber coming back-"

"Hey man", Chucho said cutting him short. "I was in a spin ... had to drop everything for peanuts just to pay the attorneys, 'los advocatos'. You know what they're like amigo ... tiburones <sup>3</sup> ! You know the difference between a lawyer and a sperm buddy?"

Antonio looked perplexed.

"A sperm's got one in ten million chances of becoming a human being, ha! ha!."

But it all just went straight over Antonio's head.

"Entiendo amigo 4... but four jears!"

"I know I know ...I should have got in touch. But you know me buddy... never wrote a letter in my life. And it was the last thing on my mind in the can."

"Que malo 5 !" Antonio said dropping his eyes and shaking his head. You could tell he didn't know where to take if from there as Chucho's misfortunes began to take the edge off his claim. Deep down he was a simple, honest and principled man.

La Bruja spat and threw some seed extra hard at the rock hard ground punctuating the moment by giving us all a start. The old witch seemed to have antennae even though she couldn't understand a word of English.

"How about a drink?" Lupe asked to lighten things up again.

"Si gracias," Chucho replied in the gravelly baritone he adopted when he broke into Spanish. He had this theory that it was the commanding tone they related to - even if they couldn't understand a word you were saying. Another one of those macho Latino things.

A slight breeze came up as it generally did around midmorning and the tall slender date palms scattered about the yard began to sway, the bright green clusters of dates hanging beneath their fronds clattering as they rubbed against each other. The breeze passed through the dried fronds of the palapa and rustled them with a soft shhhhhh...

Lupe cracked open three Pacificos and handed Chucho and I one then one to her father.

"Salud!" Antonio said raising his glass. "It is berry good to see jou back amigo." And you could tell he meant it.

"Likewise buddy," Chucho said clicking bottles with him extra hard and locking eyes with him.

Now they both meant it.

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1 Nothing

2 And then

3 Sharks!

4 I understand my friend

5 How bad!

The breeze stirred again and passed through the shelter bringing with it the salty smell of the ocean, warm and soft. Red and yellow fingers of flame flared above the bed of Mesquite in the fireplace in an upwards-reaching dance, emitting a black plume of aromatic smoke. From somewhere in a neighbouring yard a donkey brayed its nasally hee! haw! And from behind La Bruja a rooster responded with an untimely cock a doodle doo! I sat back gulping the icy Pacifico - the lime I'd squeezed into it taking the edge off its bitterness. It was a rich moment absorbing the unmistakable sounds and smells of Mexico, as unique as any individual human beings.

"By the way," Chucho asked out of idle curiosity. "Who ended up with my old Ford truck?"

As it had never been brought up he assumed it was long gone along with everything else.

"Eez still aroun," Antonio answered.

"Really?!" Chucho said looking at him with redoubled interest.

"But eez finito. Too many tings taken from it."

"Oh yeah? Where's it at then?" Chucho enquired.

"Ober der," Antonio motioned with his head in the direction of the old sheds. "...At jour old place where jou leeb it."

"You're shitting me?!" Chucho exclaimed. "Let's go take a look."

Chucho's old place turned out to be a derelict mobile home on the block directly behind Antonio's. Everything was over-grown with bamboo, Lantana and a variety of cactus and other weeds ... all the land along this particular Vado being unusually lush. As near as one hundred meters away it was arid desert. We walked over to the old sheds and there behind them on the other side of a half-fallen fence lay Chucho's old white Ford pick-up truck. Lantana had crept over the tray, the wheels were gone, the windshield was cracked and the bonnet was up. There was even a broken egg with pieces of shell sun baked onto the bonnet. Antonio's chickens had been roosting on the bench seat and as we approached one flew out from the driver's window with an alarmed squawk.

"Nice ride buddy," I remarked tongue in cheek.

"Hey you're looking at what was once the ultimate Mexico machine." Chucho said defensively. "Big block 490, air con - everything's power assisted and electric."

"Sure mate ... looks real plush."

"No ... really... ideal for towing boats, the mobile home - anything. And the extra cab'll take as many passengers as a sedan."

We leaned over the front guards and peered under the bonnet, surprised that most of it seemed intact with the exception of the battery, air filter, radiator cap and a few perished hoses. Chucho's eyes roved around the engine bay and suddenly he got all excited. "Antonio!" He shouted, "Have you got a spare battery and some gasoline?"

"Gasolina si, batteria no. But my neighbour hab Cheby trock ... big batteria. No problem we juse."

Upon hearing that Chucho turned to me and said, "Let's see if we can get this sucker to kick."

I was sceptical but decided to play along for Antonio's sake. Poor Antonio had been bitten by Chucho's enthusiasm and wanted to believe in anything that would put the Kombi back in his grasp. He beamed hopefully at the engine bay for a minute before jogging away.

After he left I turned to Chucho and said, "Mate! Are you kidding? You'd have to rebuild this whole bloody thing to get it going. You'd be better off paying for the rental car for a year than wasting your dough on this bomb."

"You're such a pessimist," Chucho chided me. "All this baby needs is wheels. When I left here there was nothing wrong with it. It's not like it was thrashed or anything. It's just been sitting here for four years."

"Yeah, sure," I grunted sceptically. Then added for good measure, "You forget I know you Chucho. You love an impossible mission and the way you fix everything is with a band aid and some masking tape."

Chucho didn't bother replying; he just fixed me with a critical grin.

A short while later we spotted Antonio down by the Kombi with a length of hose running from the petrol tank into a bucket. He was bent over wiping his mouth and spitting profusely. On the ground beside him stood a battery and some chrome tools, shiny in the bright sun. I fixed Chucho with a hard look saying, "You're such a prick! Look at that poor bastard. He'd do anything to hang onto that Kombi. Even swallow petrol.... Go give him a hand!"

"He's okay," Chucho shrugged indifferently, obviously reluctant to get involved in the petrol siphoning.

But I couldn't stand watching Antonio struggle so I ran down to help. Taking the battery and tools from him we made our way back up to the truck and when we reached it Antonio placed the bucket down to wipe his brow. He looked a little disheveled now with dirt and grease stains down the front of his shirt.

We'd barely got our breath when Chucho asked, "Hey Antonio you wouldn't have another beer would you?" He was still seated behind the steering wheel keeping out of the sun.

"Claro que si <sup>1</sup>!" Antonio replied and hastened off again in the direction of his house.

"How are you off for socks and undies?" I muttered sarcastically after Antonio had gone.

"What's that?" Chucho asked distantly, toying with the steering wheel as though he was driving.

"Don't worry about it."

We hooked up the battery and poured some petrol into the top of the carburetor and were about to give it a shot when I remembered to check the oil. Surprisingly it was almost to the top of the level on the dipstick and it wasn't at all cloudy. The miracle though was that the key to the ignition was still in the fuse box where Chucho had hidden it four years earlier. When he found it Chucho held it up beaming then inserted it and gave it a turn just as Antonio returned with the beers. But despite our desperate thirst none of us could drink... all we could do was hold our breaths collectively while the starter chugged, groaned and whined.

Chucho paused, tried again but the Ford just grunted and wheezed painfully like an asthmatic. He let it rest for minute before trying again impatiently - persisting for a long time, pumping the accelerator, turning it off, turning it on - with the starter beginning to grind from fatigue. Still nothing happened.

After repeating the process several times the starter began to slow and sound tenuous as the battery lost its punch.

Chucho stopped to give it a longer rest and we gulped our beers thirstily ... the madness of the situation captured by him sitting in the cabin of that old wreck strangled by the jungle like he was about to go somewhere. The truth was Chucho loved a long shot but even he eventually resigned himself to the obvious and sighed, "Oh well, it was worth a try." And pulled his fat body out of the cab with a grunt.

Our enthusiasm crushed, everyone's shoulders sagged with none of us daring to look at each other, Chucho stabbing absently at the dirt with his toe while Antonio busied himself tucking his shirt in and I looked off into the distance. After a long moment Chucho went to hurl the key into the scrub when suddenly I remembered something, "Hang on a minute," I said grabbing his arm.

Now both Antonio and Chucho looked at each other as I placed my hand over the throat of carburetor and told Chucho to give it one last go. He shook his head skeptically as he reached in to turn the key while I kept my palm tight over the opening. Holding it there for a few seconds - I let him crank it, raised two fingers slightly to admit some oxygen, clamped them down firmly again and told him to repeat the procedure one last time.

The starter just struggled listlessly. After that I gave up too and removed my hand.

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<sup>1</sup> Clearly yes!

But as I did there was a sudden splutter, a loud explosion and a startling backfire followed by a large cloud of black smoke belching from the exhaust. We all looked at each other startled - then burst out laughing.

“Do it again,” I said enthusiastically and placed the palm of my hand back over the carburettor. Chucho turned the key and the starter grunted momentarily, there was another splutter, a burble, and the engine burst into life with a roar then died again just as abruptly.

“Holy shit!” Chucho exclaimed.

Antonio raised his eyes to the sky thankfully and crossed himself.

Turning to him Chucho said, “Amigo, if I leave you some money can you get four wheels from the Llantera <sup>1</sup> ?”

“Como no <sup>2</sup> !” Antonio beamed.

“And a battery, air filter and the hoses that need replacing?”

Antonio replied with another enthusiastic, “Como no!”

The one thing every Mexican pueblo had no matter how small was a Llantera, a wheel and tire place. The roads were generally so bad that there were plenty of blow outs and damaged rims so there were Llantera’s everywhere, even in the most remote parts of the desert. You’d see them amongst millions of Cardonal cactus on particularly bad stretches of road... cyclone wired yards with stacks of used wheels and tyres, hub caps hanging from fences like Christmas decorations, and mangy dogs lying about listlessly in the dust. Sometimes they stocked other parts as well - fenders, batteries, carburettors - whatever they could scavenge from the abundant wrecks strewn along the motorways of Mexico.

The more I thought about it Chucho was right, there mightn’t be much problem getting the parts needed. And for next to nothing.

He must have read my thoughts because he shot me a knowing look saying, “...a band aid and some masking tape huh?!”

Then he closed the bonnet - as if it would make a difference after four years, pressed the buttons to put the windows up and we strolled back towards the Palapa chatting amiably, each of us quietly pleased for his own reasons.

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1 A wheel and tire yard

2 Of course!

In our absence Lupe had placed a bright red and white checked cloth over the table and laid out an impressive spread. Freshly chopped Salsa Fresca with tomato, onions, Serano chilli and coriander glistened in the strong sunlight- the coriander strongly aromatic from the heat. Beside it stood a large terracotta bowl filled with freshly cooked totopos - corn chips made from yesterday's tortillas deep fried in olive oil and broken up, still glistening and warm. La Bruja had also been busy at the fireplace and came over with a platter of grilled seafood which she placed down in front of us, the smell of mesquite wafting off large pieces of grilled octopus, shrimp, scallops and fillets of Dorado. And of course there were also the customary bowls of steaming rice and frijoles that accompanied every Mexican meal.

Sprinkling salt liberally over the totopos we dug voraciously into the salsa while Antonio cracked open three more Pacificos. Then we helped ourselves to the other delicacies, Chucho grunting with a fat man's delight after almost every mouthful. When he had his fill he wiped a shiny bit of oil from his chin with the back of his hand belching, "Oye, Antonio! Where's the closest electrical outlet amigo?"

"En la casa, por que <sup>1</sup>?"

"I want to demonstrate how this regalo works. Should we go to the house or what?"

"No necesario my fren... we comfortable here," he said. "I bring electricidad from my neighbour house." And with that Antonio tilted his bottle of Pacifico high in the air and drained the last of it before walking to the far side of the yard and disappearing through a hedge of pink and white Oleander again. A short time later he reappeared through the same break in the hedge dragging an extension cord - or rather a number of them joined together over a hundred metres in length. He also had an old man accompanying him, a small hunchback with dark creased skin and white stubble on his chin. The top button of the old man's dress shirt was done up and a '40's style felt hat sat rakishly on the back of his head. But what stood out the most about him were brown plastic sandals beneath his formal black trousers and some heavy black-framed glasses half way down his nose. The lenses were as thick as the bottom of coca cola bottles distorting his eyes and making them appear comically small.

Antonio introduced his neighbour as Juancito and after many "mucho gustos" all around, Juancito sat down with us, politely declining the food and beer and seemingly contented to absorb our company quietly with folded arms.

By now Chucho had lugged the microwave over from the car and was placing it delicately on the table. "You know what this is amigo?" he said to Antonio.

"No..." Antonio replied looking at it. "Que es <sup>2</sup>?"

"The future buddy ... the future," Chucho beamed with his best sales pitch.

In the background Juancito watched Chucho plug it in and murmured quietly - "Que es?"

Antonio just shrugged.

La Bruja moved in a little closer feigning disinterest as she attended to clearing away the table but gave herself away by snatching glances at the microwave.

"How the hell do you explain microwave?" Chucho asked scratching his temple.

"Poquito holas!" I said flippantly giving him a literal translation for 'small waves'.

"Que dices?" Juancito said to Antonio, asking for a translation.

Antonio shrugged his shoulders again.

"Chico holas." I said keeping it up, offering the parochial term for small.

"Antonio this will change your life forever," Chucho said ignoring me. "No more getting up early to light the fire, gathering mesquite, waiting for things to cook..."

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1 In the house, why?

2 What is it?

“But my seester Angelina does these things,” Antonio replied politely nodding at La Bruja.

La Bruja threw Chucho a piercing look that made him squirm. Perhaps her antenna was up again sensing she was about to become redundant.

“No more waiting for things to cook buddy,” Chucho continued like Willy Lowman from Arthur Miller’s ‘Death of a Salesman’. “It does it all in minutes.”

The Mexicans stared uncomprehendingly, polite and uncontrary as they tended to be.

“For example you can cook chicken in 15 minutes, rice in 20... but it’s especially good for reheating.”

Their impassive expressions still didn’t change.

“You know like reheating coffee ... or frijoles. Yeah, frijoles!” He exclaimed excitedly. He obviously thought he’d cracked the case with the frijoles. “It’ll put a whole new meaning on refried beans buddy. Look I’ll show you ...”

“Looks like they’re really blown away by your regalo,” I commented *sotto voce*, enjoying the moment of Chucho’s impending doom.

“Can I get a glass of water?” Chucho asked Antonio somewhat flustered now.

“Como no,” Antonio answered.

He probably figured it was one of those gringo customs, a glass of water to wash away the flavour of a meal.

Taking two clean glasses from the table Antonio filled them from one of those old hand pumps sticking out of ground beside the Palapa and offered them to us. I declined mine with a “no gracias” but Chucho took his and placed it inside the microwave, setting the timer to two minutes. Then he pressed the start button and stepped back to wait ... a long two minutes with everyone sitting in cordial silence. But when the timer finally stopped with a resonant PING! It got their attention... A little.

“There”, Chucho announced triumphantly. “It’s done.”

Yet still no one moved. Only I moved uncomfortably in my seat, as though witnessing a failing magician’s act. Which wasn’t far from the truth. In fact if Chucho’s neck wasn’t so god damned thick I would have attempted to strangle him right then and there. At least the sweat breaking out on the fat man’s brow gave me some minor consolation in that it was obviously becoming evident even to him that his lame act wasn’t going to cinch the Kombi deal. Not even worth an interim loan.

“Here,” Chucho said handing the glass of water to Antonio without much conviction.

Antonio reached for it unceremoniously and when his fingers made contact with the hot glass he cried out in shock- “Ayeeee!!!” Almost dropping it.

“Que paso <sup>1</sup> ?!” Juancito enquired taken aback.

“Es muy caliente <sup>2</sup> !” Antonio informed him astonished.

“Como <sup>3</sup> ?” Juancito asked perplexed. Even La Bruja was paying attention now. She stopped clearing the table and crossed herself uttering holy oaths.

Juancito got up slowly and approached the table a little apprehensively. Staring at the glass he extended a hand cautiously and when it made contact his eyes became round and large- “Es magico <sup>4</sup> !” He murmured in a hushed, reverent tone.

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1 What happened?

2 It’s very hot

3 How?

4 It’s magic!

“How dis possible?!” Antonio asked with a look of incomprehension. It was obviously difficult for them to comprehend how time could be so circumvented to perform this simple task. They were barely comfortable with the electric hot plate, now this. This was incredible. Truly a miracle- ‘Uno milagro’.

La Bruja crossed herself once more.

“Like I said amigo,” Chucho beamed triumphantly. “This will change your life.... ZAP you into the twentieth century.”

Then just as Chucho was really starting to wind up Lupe returned from the house. Seeing everyone staring at the table she remarked matter of factly, “Oh, a microwave. How cool!”

At that point it was difficult to tell whether the clunk we heard was a coconut dropping into the neighbour’s yard or Chucho’s jaw bouncing off the ground ... “Yu - yu - you know what this is?” He stammered incredulously.

“Of course! Everyone does. They sell them at the Electricity Commission in San Jose del Cabo where my friend works.”

“You’re shitting me?!!!”

Lupe looked him up and down wondering what all the fuss was about. “No they’re about six hundred and fifty thousand pesos <sup>1</sup>.”

Chucho stared at her with a stunned look before waving a hand in the direction of the others- “Well, how come they’ve never heard of them?”

“Pffff!” She exclaimed nodding in her family’s direction. “For the same reason they still gather wood every day to cook out here rather than simply turn on the gas burners in our kitchen, listen to Ranchero music and think I should dress like Tia Angelina <sup>2</sup>. How many reasons do you need?”

“Got it,” Chucho said shaking his head with mounting disbelief. And while he was still riding the crest of the moment he capitalised on his glory - “Listen Antonio how about I use the Kombi until we get that truck going? It shouldn’t take too long...”

“Bu...eno,” Antonio agreed half-heartedly, obviously still reeling from microwave magic.

“I’m telling you man this thing will change your life...” Chucho repeated unnecessarily, not letting up until he was inside the Kombi securely.

“Come on mate,” he said turning to me, “let’s bolt. I’ll show you some really interesting shit on the way home.”

As for me I felt like an accomplice as I thanked them for their hospitality and bid them farewell. Slinking off to my car I drove off down the bumpy track glancing at the rear view mirror at them waving with their post card innocence, a look of slight apprehension on Antonio’s face as Chucho bounced recklessly over every bump and pothole. They were good simple people and I promised myself I’d make Chucho return that Kombi, soon. I also secretly wondered how much improvement the microwave would make on their lives, it certainly wouldn’t produce the tastes and smells we’d savoured that day, that’s for sure.

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1 Approximately \$185.

2 Aunt Angelina - La Bruja



Three weeks later I was enjoying breakfast on the white stucco balcony of the luxurious Hotel Palmilla when Scotty, the guy who'd bought Chucho's land behind Antonio's strolled in and joined me for a biscocho and café con leche. As we sat enjoying the Sea of Cortez roll gently below us in the brilliant sunshine our conversation eventually got around to Antonio.

"By the way," I enquired, "...how's that microwave going? The one Chucho gave them."

"That thing," Scotty laughed. "They've never even used it once!"

"You're shitting me..." I tittered.

"Nope. In fact it's been sitting in a glass cabinet in their lounge room ever since Chucho left it with them."

"No!" I gasped.

"Yep. Right between an old sepia photo of Pancho Villa and his wife, Ostreberta Rentaria, a cheap hand painted plate commemorating the inauguration of some long forgotten President now living in Liechtenstein with half the Mexican GNP in his bank account, and a pair of pink hand knitted baby shoes."

"I don't believe it," I said trying not to laugh too hard.

"Well you better. Every Sunday they sit around after church with whoever happens to drop by for café and pastels<sup>1</sup> and pay homage to it, Antonio recounting Chucho's glass of water miracle. They're something else aren't they?"

Smiling, I shook my head from side to side exhaling, "Mexicans!"

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1 Coffee and pastries

# EL PROFESSOR DE HYPNOTISMO

*Another one for Chucho. Had Shakespeare discovered him first he would have called him Falstaff.*

“Bet you’ve never seen a donkey with a horn...” Chucho sniggered on the way home as we sped past the large ball in the middle of the desert marking the Tropic of Cancer.

“Well there was this one show up in Tijuana...” I began but he cut me short, “No Mate! I mean a single swirly horn coming out of its forehead!”

“What? ...A Mexican unicorn?!”

“Uh huh.”

“Can’t say I have?”

“ ...Or a monkey with two heads?”

“Bullshit!”

“You’ve obviously never been to a zoo down here then?”

“No ... can’t say I have.”

“Then you’re in for a treat. They’re real different to the ones at home ... got all kinds of weird shit.”

“Like what?”

“Freaks... half cat/half dog.”

“Give me a break,” I groaned. “Now I know you’re full of ...”

“You wait.”

“Mutants maybe,” I conceded. “But genetic crossbreeding ... no! It just doesn’t happen. Except in ancient Greek mythology.”

“Greek what?”

“Old fairytales.”

“You’ll see,” he said as though he was the keeper of some private secret.

“Sounds more like Tijuana by the minute,” I mused. “Like the Zebras they photograph tourists next to up on Avenida Revolucion ... those white donkeys with painted on stripes!”

I had to admit though he had me going for a minute, his self-assuredness. A weak moment when I thought ... perhaps he’s onto something in this backwater ... something that’s escaped the rest of the world’s notice. But then I snapped out of it. Hell... what was I thinking?! I’d studied rudimentary biology, what Chucho was suggesting just wasn’t possible. Nevertheless he’d set the hook, got the better of my curiosity the way hokey side shows do when you know something isn’t possible yet you’re prepared to suspend reality for the sake of wanting to believe in the paranormal. If nothing else I figured I was in for some kind of cruel joke ... a south of the border backyard freak show.

What was even stranger though was why they’d put a zoo out in the middle of nowhere? Where even the monument to the 23 rd parallel wasn’t much ... an unpainted concrete sphere the height of a man with white stains of seeping lime and TROPICO de CANCER painted across the front in plain box letters. It wasn’t even distinguished by a kerbed recess off Highway One, just a curve worn into the baked dirt from vehicles pulling over. Even the tribute of a few discarded beer cans, a dirty nappy and paper littered among the surrounding cactuses was fitting. What’s more there weren’t any signs for a Jardin Zoologico, just a tiny illustration of an elephant with an arrow pointing to Santiago. Blink and you’d miss it.

After we turned off Highway One it didn't get any more reassuring. Coming over a rise we descended into a vast arroyo dotted with cactuses covered in a film of dust. The arroyo was a good ten kilometers across without a ranch in sight; no man made buildings ... nothing. The desert glare made it even more harsh, bleaching the sandy landscape silvery white without shadow. Here and there a few small clouds drifted lazily in a pale sky where a large eagle soared effortlessly on hot thermals thrown up by the desert floor.



“Do we have any spare water or survival gear?” I asked sarcastically as I took in the hostile terrain.

“Relax,” Chucho answered furrowing his brow, “... You sure you're not related to Woody Allen?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

“I mean ... where does all this anxiety come from?”

“From knowing you and understanding only too well what you could be leading me into!”

Across the arroyo we ascended again and over the next rise looked down on another arroyo equally vast. Except this one had an enormous wedge of lush green covering the entire right half - an awesome oasis of corn abruptly circumscribed by more arid landscape. To the left orange tracks meandered off to distant ranches and straight ahead, resting on a flat plateau, you could just see a small pueblo discernible by the light scars created from its grid of roadways. I raced along almost a believer now, and when we reached the incline to the plateau the tar ended. From there we had two kilometers up a steep climb over a bumpy track of rock hard corrugated sand and at the top we were immediately greeted by the welcome sight of Santiago.

Santiago was an old established pueblo that much was evident from the town square. Nestled right on the edge of the plateau the square commanded a magnificent view of the valley below and the pastoral concerns it serviced. All the streets, shops and domestic residences were laid out behind it where they didn't interfere with the view. The square itself was elevated a meter above ground level and retained by huge rectangular, mortised, granite blocks, its upper surface covered in faded black and white tiles laid diagonally. Around its perimeter there were dramatically twisted acacia trees, oxidized lampposts decorated around their tops with gargoyles and dragons and crowned by opaque teardrop globe covers dating from a period when their soft, warm illumination was created by coal gas. Beneath the gnarled acacia branches a few old men were sitting on ornate wrought iron benches taking in the day.

Flanking the square on the three sides framing the view there were interconnected flat roofed shops, a small bank, a couple of pharmacies, several hardware and produce stores as well as a number of mercarditos<sup>1</sup>. Wide boardwalks raised from the dusty road where there were post and rail hitches and water troughs for mules and horses skirted the shop fronts.

In a corner of the square against a concrete wall mottled by flaking paint of various colours and layers we spotted the diminutive logo of the elephant again with an arrow pointing down a side street. Following its direction down a sandy grey track we immediately got an impression of the rest of the pueblo, its small intimate dwellings surrounded by verdant shade foliage, goats tied up in yards, mangy dogs lying in the middle of dusty streets and free ranging chickens that scattered before us. Down each side street the view was the same and on almost every corner stood a small cinder block Mercadito with red and yellow plastic crates piled up out front full of empty soft drink bottles with small children hanging about sucking on shiny round candy on a stick.

The elephant sign appeared again nailed to a tree this time and as we followed the arrow down a hill with huge dusty oleander alongside we spotted our first glimpse of the Professor Dahreg show. A crackling announcement coming from an ancient H.M.V. style microphone was broadcasting the Professor's smooth, mesmerising voice, the lines we would get to know so well...MIRA EL PENDULO... SUENO...RESPIRE PROFUNDO ... UNA ... DOS ... TRES!<sup>2</sup>

"What the ...?!" Chucho chuckled and craned his neck with a dropped jaw. "The professor, huh! He grunted, beaming up at the banner as we rolled past slowly.

Looking up and down the empty street I tee-hee'd cynically. "Doesn't look like he's attracting an overwhelming crowd, does it?"

"I told you there's all kinds of weird shit down here," Chucho said with an air of authority.

"Pull up Chucho! A sideshow hardly counts as weird shit mate.

There on an empty lot between the houses was a large yellow and white striped marquis with a pennant drooping listlessly from its central pole in the still afternoon heat. And crammed into the narrow space between a neighbouring fence stood an old colour coordinated Mack truck, the legendary chrome bulldog arching off its bonnet. Its trailer section had been converted into living quarters, a box like mobile home having been fitted to the tray with a set of detachable steps leading to a screen door at the back. Stretched between two candy-striped poles out front, a banner displaying a handsome portrait of the slick Professor's angular features, black swept back hair and little Richard moustache announced boldly - EL PROFESSOR de HYPNOTISMO!<sup>3</sup>

"Bet the ranchers eat this up..." he added ignoring my redress.

They probably did too. Travelling entertainment would have been big out there, its old world quaintness certainly had us gawking over our shoulders all the way down the hill right up to where the houses ended... and there was the zoo.

"Holy shit Chucho! Who would have thought there'd be anything like this..."

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1 Grocery stores.

2 Look at the pendulum...you are growing tired...breath deeply...one...two, three!

3 The professor of hypnotism

Surrounded by high, pale yellow adobe walls with tall leafy trees set out intermittently around the perimeter El Jardin Zoologico de Santiago would have done credit to a good sized city let alone a small out of the way village in the Mexican desert. The entrance was an impressive archway adorned by tiles with animals hand painted on them and beyond it were tidily bordered quartz gravel walkways around grounds of neatly raked sand where peacocks and other flightless birds strutted freely. Although the animal cages weren't overly large they were clean and well maintained with lions, bears, deer, coyotes, ostriches, eagles, iguana, rattle snakes, ocelot, zebras...

"Everything but an elephant, huh," I remarked. "Typical! The zoo's logo is an elephant and they don't have one."

But my complaint was contrived. After our banter on the drive out I couldn't make any concessions, it would have gone against the fabric of our friendship, the common thread being ... *take no prisoners*.

Chucho grinned, "I love it ... a classic Mexican touch."

"Well Chucho you got me again."

"What are you talking about?!"

"The wind up mate, the wind up..."

"Why? What's wrong with this joint? I think its pretty slick myself."

"That's the point. It is slick. Where are the two headed monkeys, unicorns, mythological mutations?"

"What can I tell you...? Exception strengthens the rule."

"Chucho that's the lamest bullshit I've ever heard! And I've never understood that dumb cliché anyway. As far as I'm concerned exceptions weaken rules they don't strengthen them!"

But secretly I was pleased. I really wasn't into freak shows and got to spend a pleasant afternoon strolling around neatly tended grounds observing an interesting variety of normal exotic animals without crowds. Not to mention the zoo restaurant across the road. Set in an old established orchard around a picturesque pond covered in water lilies they served the most tender beef steaks from local ranches grilled over mesquite coals complimented by fresh produce of corn, avocado, tomatoes and chilies.

"Well Chucho, I can't believe you sucked me in ... again."

"Yeah it's hard to take isn't it!?" He said draining the last of his Cuba Libre noisily.

\*

**The fading light of dusk** was turning purple on the drive up the hill and the hypnotist's show had now taken on a carnival atmosphere. Rows of naked light bulbs dangling from overhead cables strung about the yard illuminated the marquis brilliantly from the surrounding dark row of houses along the street and microphones atop the striped barbershop poles were transmitting the Professor's hypnotic commands. Out front a sturdy busker with a fierce handle bar moustache was pacing up and down fervently, drumming up business from a gathering crowd. People coming out of the woodwork were smiling and exchanging pleasantries, women in their weekend fineries, young copper coloured girls holding onto their mother's hands shyly, dressed in pink or white frilly dresses, matching socks folded neatly at the ankle and white patent leather shoes. Their suntanned fathers sported ranchero gear, pearl snap button shirts, blue jeans, thick belts clasped by silver buckles with broncos on them, Cuban healed boots and straw cowboy hats furled at the brim.

A crowd of people had lined up in front of a red timber and glass ticket booth, the queue spilling onto the street. A chubby woman with a turban on her head, eyebrows painted onto plucked skin and a mascara beauty spot above her lip was handing out tickets from the booth with a handful of pesos in the other. She looked like Madam Zenda the palm reader.

"Unbelievable!" I said swerving around the crowd. "Who would have thought so many people from this pinchi <sup>1</sup> pueblo would show up for this!"

Scrutinising the houses along the street I noticed people sitting in the half dark of their verandahs, old women rocking back and forth in cane chairs, the dull glow of cigarettes flaring up as men leaning against balcony poles drew on them, children chasing each other onto the street playing tug of war with a toy. A little further on more children came out of nowhere to whizz by on bicycles, making me stamp on the brakes. A roadside taco stand had opened since we'd passed earlier and a few people were standing about, the smell of grilling beef wafting into our car as we passed. I swerved again for a young couple walking hand in hand, the girl smiling bashfully as her guy whispered in her ear.

"The difference between Mexico and the modern world..." Chucho began in a rare philosophical lapse, "...is that people down here are out at night. Where we come from they go out, go somewhere specific. Here they are outside but not necessarily going anywhere."

"That's because at home these kids would get pinched for riding their bicycles after dark without lights, the taco stand would get busted for not having a vendors permit, the young lovers would get hassled for lewd behaviour in public and the rest would get pulled up for loitering or some other bullshit to reassure the middle class's insecurity in the dark. Historically that's when most crimes have been perpetuated. Mugging, highway robbery, theft, sexual assault ... all that kind of shit."

Chucho grunted agreeably, "Uh huh. In Mexico they don't come down on people for the little shit. Guess they figure life's hard enough."

"And they reckoned George Orwell was over the top!"

"George who?"

"You know, 1984."

"What are you talking about?"

"The book..."

"Never heard of it."

"That's because you've never read anything."

"That's not true mate! I didn't miss one edition of Uncle Scrooge and the Beagle Boys," he feigned indignantly as though citing Dostoevsky or Turgenev.

"Yeah right! Comics don't count mate."

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<sup>1</sup> Small, nothing, insignificant.

“So what’s George - what’s his name - got to do with Mexicans hanging about on the street after dark?”

“Nothing. Orwell predicted how the modern world would turn out - McCarthyism, Cold War paranoia, police states, Big Brother looking over your shoulder... the kind of climate that makes moneyed people fear the night... and every fucking thing else!”

“Yeah? When’d he write that?”

“In 1948.”

“How did the public handle it back then?”

“Dismissed it as ridiculously depressing science fiction.”

“No shit?!”

“No shit. In ‘48 people felt Orwell’s futuristic society where citizens would be encouraged to inform on each other for the benefit of the system was alarmist paranoia.”

“What’d he have ... a crystal ball?”

“What can I say? Here we are fifty years on and being an informant has become a primary industry in my country, same as yours. Yours because it’s values are so pathetically dominated by material things. Ours because we’ve never had any imagination or guts to decide for ourselves, we just play ‘follow the leader’. Always have. At first it was the poms ... now it’s you seppos. There’s a program for dobbing in a dope dealer, dobbing in a tax cheat, dobbing in a speeder, dobbing in an annoying truck driver ... ‘Neighbourhood Watch’ to dob in anybody else you don’t like the look of!”

“A generation of snitches...” Chucho grunted.

“TV’s even got in on it with those Most Wanted shows,” I continued. “Interactive media - inform from the comfort of your arm chair by telephone. And look at the technology they’ve developed. Helicopters with cameras to look into your living room, thermal imaging to see through concrete walls, phone tapping, security systems that spy on employees in the workplace ... there’s even a program at schools that encourages kids to inform on their parents for smoking dope! The scary part is no one seems to have ‘tumbled’. 1984’s come and gone and Orwell’s predictions are our unacknowledged reality.”

“That’s because of all the bullshit our governments feed ‘em to justify it,” Chucho said. “At least down here the family comes first...the system second.”

“Progress, Chucho, progress. It used to at home in the fifties when I was a kid. We were raised with the idea that only the enemy, dictatorships like the Nazis and Communists brainwashed their kids to tell on their parents. That that’s how low they were.”

“Ahhh!” Chucho sighed sarcastically, “... there’s nothing like the flexible principles of government!”

He wasn’t much into philosophical discussions and this one was clearly taxing his attention span. Craning his neck to check out two good looking teenage girls walking towards the hypnotists he put his pinky fingers into the corners of his mouth and let go an ear piercing wolf whistle. They looked back smiling, their brilliant white teeth in sharp contrast to their deep copper coloured skin.

“Ay! Que guapa <sup>1</sup>!” He called after them doing his Latino finger-snapping thing. “I bet the Professor gets up to all kinds of shit out here...”

He couldn’t take his eyes off the girls, one in skintight jeans, red pumps, a sleeveless shirt tied in a knot beneath her breasts revealing a band of smooth dark skin, the other in a body clinging mini dress made from black Lycra and black snakeskin pumps.

Behind them the microphones were blaring, “Respire profundo ... sueno ... una, dos, tres!”

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<sup>1</sup> Oh - what a doll!



“Yeah right,” Chucho chuckled. “Breathe deeply ... you are tired ... one, two, three - now undo the knot in the front of your blouse! Ha! Ha!”

We were back in the town square again and the period lights were on giving off an old-fashioned glow. Beneath one illuminating the dirt road, a group of old men were playing a game with metal balls that gave a dull clunk each time they bounced together and sent up puffs of dust. After each pitch there were murmurs of approval and good-natured swearing. It made me think of home and lawn bowls, of neatly manicured lawns, club members in clinical whites, rules and reserved behaviour ... a sterile contrast to these laughing men with their bottles of beer resting in the dirt.

Chucho studied them also before continuing his train of thought - “Yeah ... you can bet the hypnotist gets more arse out here than the toilet seats at Grand Central!”

“Imagine the possibilities,” I ventured. “Widowers relieved of their inheritances, bank managers their vaults...”

“The best part is,” he added, “When he’s done with them they snap out of it with amnesia.” He mimicked the Professor’s voice, “You will forget everything that’s happened and have only fond memories of me...”

That was the last we heard of Professor Dahreg, for three weeks anyway. Then one afternoon on our way home from surfing down on the tip he suddenly appeared. In the time we’d spent out on the water his yellow semi trailer had pulled up and dumped the lot on the corner of our dirt road, the marquis, lights, ticket stand ... like it had been there forever, belonging there.

“Holy shit!” Chucho exclaimed. “Look who it is ... lock up your daughters, bury your loot, send Granny on vacation!” He mimicked the professor’s voice, “Respire profundo ... sueno ... UNA! DOS! TRES!” Snapping his fingers like he was putting someone under a spell.

We shared a laugh.

To tell the truth it was kind of exciting the arrival of entertainment in our pueblo, as though we had suddenly become privileged by some small importance. And although it was only early afternoon there were already people hanging about, a half a dozen barefoot children gawking, plump housewives with string shopping bags stopping strategically on their way home for a chat, casting casual glances at the marquis. By nightfall the number had grown to a small crowd, probably a good many of them from neighbouring pueblos along the coast. The microphones were booming statically overhead and from where I lay in my hammock on the verandah I could see the burly busker pacing up and down. The hypnotist’s show was like a Christmas decoration crowning our sleepy little pueblo, bright and cheery with its rows of carnival lights strung between the surrounding palm trees and the marquis illuminated from within, glowing like a florescent yellow cake against the ink blue night. The rest of the pueblo was dark and still except for the scattered star shaped lights winking back at us from houses between the palms, giving it a sparkling definition.

Back inside Chucho had a game of Gin Rummy going on the cane pedestal - oval glass dinning table and he was slapping his cards down with gusto. Looking up as I entered he asked, “How’s the professor going? Ha! Ha! Is the pueblo bankrupt yet?”

“Chucho not everyone’s a crook like you...” Michael replied without taking his eyes from his hand. He threw me a knowing smile, “But while we’re on the topic you don’t happen to have a table cloth, do you?”

“What for?” I asked.

“Because I’ve been quietly wondering how Chucho’s been winning all our dough. And it’s only just occurred to me that he’s probably reading our hands off this reflective surface.”

“I wouldn’t do that to you boys...” Chucho said tsk tsking with a poker face, his brow throwing off a slight sheen from the humid night.

It was like an oven in the house and everyone had their shirts off.

“Not at all!” Robbie sniggered. “That’s why you let us win the first three hands before asking if we’d brought our wallets along!”

“Yeah, uncanny isn’t it,” Michael added with his Clark Gable smile. “The minute we acknowledged that we had we never took another trick!”

Taking a swig from his Cuba Libre Chucho smiled slyly, “If only I had the Professor’s talents, “Mira el pendulo...una ...dos...tres! Now show me your hands! Ha! Ha!” And he snapped his fingers to punctuate the command.

“Exactly!” Michael agreed making a point of Chucho’s shiftiness.

“Has anyone laid eyes on the guy?” I asked sitting down with them.

“I have,” Sarah called over from the colourful Yucatan couch in front of the television. She had our three-year-old daughter Coco asleep on her lap, rocking her back and forth gently. Bonanza was on and a bunch of fierce Indians had Hoss and Little Joe surrounded, making brusque demands in baritone Spanish.

“What’s the professor like?” I asked.

“Brylcream, pointed shoes and suave in a Mexican way...”

“You’re kidding?! For some reason you don’t think of professors as that slick.”

“Professor just means teacher in Spanish,” Chucho explained. “Anyone can call themselves professor ...even an instructor in hernia bandaging!” With that he slapped down another winning hand.

“Already?!!!” I exclaimed. “I haven’t even studied my cards properly.”

Getting up immediately I went over to the lounge area where I took a striped Mexican blanket off the coffee table in front of the T.V. “Maybe he is the Snidely Whiplash Chucho’s been making him out to be after all,” I grumbled, displeased at having been snipped so quickly.

“Hardly,” Sarah replied. “He just looks like 90% of the rest of the population.”

“Well that shoots down Chucho’s intrigue,” I commented, spreading the rug over the table.

“Clean as a whistle huh?” Chucho said.

“So it seems. Isabel told me all about him.” Isabel was our teenage baby sitter.

“What did she say?” I asked.

“She didn’t have much to say except that most of the girls in the village were throwing themselves at him.”

“I knew it!” Chucho declared triumphantly, mimicking the Professor’s voice, “Respire profundo ...una ...dos...tres!”

“Well to them he’s mysterious and handsome...” she continued. “But so far he’s indifferent to their advances...”

“What? Not even one bit of smut?!” Chucho queried.

“Apparently not. Isabel said there was some sort of rumour years ago but she couldn’t remember what. Probably nothing.”

Chucho beamed, “I told you. Where there’s smoke there’s fire.”

“Only when you’re around!” Michael said dryly.

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**Falling asleep that night** to raucous laughter, the kind that is totally unrestrained and infectious I couldn't help but wonder what it was the professor had to illicit such a response from his audience. After all, it was 12:30 a.m. ... normally these people would have been fast asleep and the pueblo dead quiet except for the usual night sounds, the soft lapping shore break, roving cattle chewing on someone's garden - the dull clump of their dung landing in the dirt.

At first I was annoyed at being kept awake and the prospect of another month of it didn't improve my disposition any. But the laughter eventually helped me drift off with a smile on my face in the dark. Night after night it was the same, we got to know the professor's routine so well we would pre-empt his lines, competing to get in first. We'd be just sitting down to dinner and Chucho would raise an index finger vertically to get our attention, imitating the professor's voice "...Respire profundo ... Sueno..." only moments before the microphones boomed out the very same commands. Or I'd be over the sink washing dishes by the open kitchen windows and exclaim - "Mira el pendulo!" ...to no one in particular. Even Coco got in on it repeating after the professor in her little baby voice, "Oona ...Doth ...Treth!" Making us crack up. We had his act down pat or so we thought but in fact we only had an oral impression of it. It was inevitable that we would eventually go along and see the show; the quality of the audience's laughter ensured that.

Then one afternoon it happened. Sarah came home and announced, "We've got to go see Professor Dahreg tonight. Isabel says he's hilarious."

"You know..." I mused, "I'm convinced I hear Isabel's laughter in the crowd night after night."

Her laughter was unique, the kind that would stand out distinctly in any audience.

"You're probably right." Sarah replied. "She does go all the time."

"What?! To catch the same show more than once?!" Chucho exclaimed through a mouth full of shrimp taco as he walked in on the tail end of our conversation.

"Uh huh."

"What could be so interesting?" He snorted derisively. "I mean ... I can understand checking it out once, but.....?!"

"She says it's well worth it. A class act."

"Yeah, right!" he scoffed. "I'm sure a Mexican's idea of a class act is slightly different to mine."

"No, really. He gets people to do all these mad things..."

"Like what?" Chucho asked trying to low key his interest.

"You'll see..."

Lining up with the rest of them that night in front of the portable ticket booth felt strange. Here we were among the same people we'd been observing every night from the distance of our verandah as we swayed back and forth in hammocks with a cocktail in hand, feeling apart from it, not a part of it. Not to mention that we were the only gringos in the crowd. All the rest were locals bustling to secure their places, oblivious to our presence and differences - Coco, Chucho and I with fair hair, all of us in loud Islander gear that next to the Mexicans in their subdued day-to-day clothing looked like holidays. Only Sarah could have passed for a native with her olive skin, long dark hair and thick eyebrows ...but then she was taken for a local in lots of places. She'd get asked directions on the Athenian subway, the time on a Venice street corner ... the price of a bullfight ticket in Tijuana.

Madam Zenda was taking her time toying with a bunch of cheeky teenage boys in the queue in front of us, throwing them winks and lascivious looks. Seating our selves amid the sea of dark haired people I was acutely conscious of being the only foreigners ... until the lights dimmed and our differences with them. In the darkened tent our attention was automatically drawn to a small illuminated stage up front where a half dozen black vinyl chairs had

been assembled. Gradually the audience settled down and a hush of anticipation fell over the marquis when the professor stepped from behind a red velvet curtained area at the back of the stage. Even though Sarah had informed us what he looked like I was still taken by surprise. No Sigfried and Roy costumery, just plain black pants, an ordinary white shirt with the top button undone and nondescript black lace up shoes. He looked like a waiter after a night shift having removed his bow tie. Only his slicked back hair and pencil line moustache - a throw back to a bygone era dominated by operatic Ranchero singers like Jorge Negrete and Javier Solis - were theatrical. Otherwise, he looked fairly average in most respects. And when he spoke his voice was quite soft, unlike the commanding baritone that gave us our impression night after night from the Tannoy.

Near the front rows the group of lively teenage boys were growing restless and began hurling rude remarks to disrupt the professor's introductory speech but almost immediately the burly busker appeared and had a quite word with them. Although he wasn't particularly tall he had a short thick neck, sloping shoulders and massive hairy forearms protruding from rolled up sleeves... no gym work just genuine muscle from a life of hard work in some enduring profession in his past. He had a very capable air or one of quiet menace ... depending on your point of view. Whatever it was it did the trick and they shut up instantly while the professor explained a little about hypnotism, informing the audience that he'd need a few volunteers for a simple demonstration. Then he stepped off the stage and walked down the aisles amongst the audience to carefully study the rows of people, most of who cringed and tried to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible. Some tried to resist but once the powerful studio lights were directed onto them their resolve melted.

I waved my hand vigorously and pointed down at Sarah, who punched me savagely in the arm at the horror of being selected. Much to her relief the professor passed her by and found a half a dozen victims whom he led forlornly to the stage. The louts resumed their heckling, one of them calling to a pretty girl following the professor - "Rosa! ..." Then something unintelligible that cracked the rest of the tent up. Rosa blushed crimson, raising her hand to cover her mouth as she tittered bashfully.

Once the professor had his select group on the stage he directed them to take a seat and proceeded to walk up and down studying their eyes. All of them looked even more uncomfortable once they were facing the crowd and the louts capitalised on it by resuming their tirade of embarrassing remarks ... until the busker reappeared threateningly from the dark. Meanwhile the professor instructed those seated on the stage to pay careful attention to what they were about to hear, then disappeared behind the curtained area briefly, reappearing with a small table which he placed in front of them. He also had a box from which he took a metronome and placed it on the table. Setting the arm to swing back and forth with a metered rhythm ... Tick! Tick! Tick! Tick! Tick! He stepped off the stage and walked down the aisle amongst the audience to the entrance of the tent. Everyone waited in silent anticipation and the tent was quiet except for the tick ticking and then a crackling sound started. When I turned to see what was going on I snorted with laughter.

Sarah gave me another savage dig in the ribs.

"What's up?" Chucho asked looking at me with a bemused smile.

Leaning across Sarah to keep my voice low I said - "You wouldn't believe this! The guys going to do it with a record."

Chucho turned casually and when he spotted the professor standing over an old turntable, adjusting the arm, he guffawed openly. "This is something else huh?!"

Sarah dug us both in the ribs and told us to shut up.

"I told you there's all kind of weird shit down here..." Chucho said but I cut him off-

"Don't start that again!"

Suddenly a deep voice filled the tent with the spiel we knew by heart - "Mira el pendulo ... Sueno... Una! Dos! Tres!"

"Can you believe this?!" I exclaimed. "All this time we've been listening to a record... the professor's going to hypnotize them with a scratchy old 33!"

"This'll be good," Chucho sniggered.

Turning around again I noticed the professor had taken a seat by his antique H.M.V. style turntable with a large fluted speaker and his head tilted back with his eyes shut.

"If this works, I'll eat my hat!" I muttered.

"The sweat stained crusty Yankees' cap you wear fishing?" Chucho asked.

"Whatever..." I replied disbelievingly.

I'd only ever seen a hypnotist at work once, years before at the Fourty Thieves... a fashionable nightclub in Bermuda, a real class act but this was something else. Sitting inside a tent in a remote coastal village of Mexico with a guy trying to pull it off using a dodgy record that may well have come from a kit ordered off the back of a Phantom comic ... I'd done some silly things in my time but this was up there. Moving my head from side to side to see around the person in front of me I tried to see if the professor had a skull ring on that glowed in the dark.

The speaker on the record had a very measured voice that droned on - repeating instructions for the stunned ones to concentrate on the pendulum. To breathe deeply ... feeling tired now ... One! Two! Three!

Leaning towards me, Chucho whispered- "This guys going to put them under from boredom!"

When it finally ended there was silence again except for the crackling of the record at the end of its run and the Tick! Tick of the metronome. The professor carefully removed the turntable arm and walked back to the stage.

At first I thought his chosen group were faking it, the way they were staring dramatically at the swinging metronome ... Tick! Tick! Tick! That's what it was! They'd been planted in the audience to carry out this ruse. Any minute now they'd look up and not be hypnotized - the laugh being on us - or they'd carry out some pre-planned hoax. But then I noticed the busker making his way through the audience snapping people out of it who were just watching and listening from a distance.

"Now I've seen everything!" Chucho exclaimed voicing my thoughts.

One or two people even had to be walked outside into the fresh night air.

Selecting one of the dazed volunteers the professor instructed him to bring his chair forward, a middle-aged man dressed in grey trousers, black polished loafers, a white shirt, shiny black Vitalis'd hair parted on the side, with a combed over wave at the brow.

"Señor," Professor Dahreg began, "What is your profession?"

"Gerente de Banco Promex en San Jose <sup>1</sup>," he replied robotically.

"And may I be so bold as to ask if that is your wife who accompanied you here tonight?"

"Si señor."

The professor addressed the next question to the wife who was still sitting in the audience - "Señora, would you say your husband is generally an aggressive person? ...Lacking control?"

An overhead light swung to her, "No señor to the contrary. He is extremely placid and controlled by nature."

"A jealous man perhaps?"

She tittered, "Not at all. In thirty years of marriage he's never once raised his voice."

"Never violent?"

Placing a hand to her mouth at the absurdity of it she answered - "Never! He He He..."

"Gracias señora," he concluded. Then he added, "For the sake of this demonstration I am going to ask you to bear with us and not take offence to anything that takes place here tonight. Just play along, O.K.?"

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<sup>1</sup> Bank manager of the Banca Promex in San Jose

She blushed a little self consciously, adjusting her cardigan and patting down her dress at the knee, “Si.”

“Señor!” professor Dahreg now pointed to the person sitting alongside the bank manager’s wife. The overhead light rotated once more, focusing on a man who put his hand to his chest. “Me?”

“Si señor,” Professor Dahreg confirmed. “I’m going to ask you to assist us with a little demonstration if you wouldn’t mind?”

“Si ...?” The man agreed unsure. He had the look of a simple fisherman in a worn checked black and blue flannel shirt folded to the elbows and he was wearing faded blue jeans.

“Would you place your arm across the back of the Señora’s chair? Around her...”

The fisherman complied awkwardly to the woman’s increasing Catholic discomfort and equally to the delight of the audience, which responded with sporadic guffawing. One of the boisterous teenagers let go an ear piercing wolf whistle that cracked everyone up.

Looking increasingly uncomfortable the fisherman squirmed in his chair while the wife flushed.

Addressing the Bank manager, Professor Dahreg said, “Did you know that throughout all these years of blissful marriage your wife has had a secret lover?”

The man’s face creased uncomfortably and he looked perplexed.

“Now!” Professor Dahreg pressed on relentlessly, “Her lover followed her here tonight...”

The bank manager was obviously struggling with this disturbing disclosure and wailed - “Nooo!”

“Si Señor!” The hypnotist persisted. “They have been lovers for some twenty years. Why, every day when you go to work...”

The manager’s face clouded, his poor wife blushed deep crimson and the fisherman looked increasingly agitated and guilty. All to the increasing delight of the crowd.

“What would you like to do to this man who has so disrespected you all these years Señor? He’s sitting over by your wife now...please feel free -”

But before Professor Dahreg had even completed his sentence the normally placid bank manager sprang from the stage making his chair crash behind him with a loud bang that made the audience jump and plunged ferociously among them. With outstretched arms he lunged towards the fisherman’s throat. There were audible gasps ... everyone staring with wide-eyed anticipation as the mad man’s hands reached but just as they got there there was an abrupt cry- “STOP!!!”

The would-be strangler froze mid step responding immediately to the professor’s command. He had a manic look in his eye and his hands were still purposefully reaching, about to encircle, to close inches from the fisherman’s throat. The fisherman nervously removed his arm from the woman’s chair and his Adams apple made an involuntary up and down movement.

Making his way over to the frozen figure, Professor Dahreg gave some quiet instructions that brought him out of his dazed state, leaving him standing there bewildered, a lick of unruly hair flopping down his brow. The manager looked around wondering what he was doing standing there with all eyes on him, the object of such uproarious laughter. His wife got up and hugged him comfortingly and the crowd clapped enthusiastically. Then he excused himself politely in front of the nervous fisherman who he was about to strangle moments earlier and resumed his seat.

Another person was then selected from the group assembled on the stage ... a huge lump of a man with hands the size of dinner plates, a square head covered in a mat of curly black hair, Roger Ramjet jaw, barrel chest and brash manner.

“Did you know señor,” Professor Dahreg addressed him, “That a lion is stalking you?”

The words had barely left his mouth when the oaf’s head spun around in alarm.

“I can hear it coming,” Professor Dahreg announced, “There behind that red curtain... it’s about to tear you to shreds!”

The victim made a short burst from the stage stopping apprehensively to look over his shoulder, ready to flee instantly.

“Here it comes,” Professor Dahreg continued as the busker pushed the smallest Chihuahua I’d ever seen from behind the red curtain. No bigger than a rat with a scratchy annoying bark it reduced the audience to a fit of laughter. But the oaf was terrified as the dog made a little run at him and forced him to leap onto the Marquis’ centre pole where he began hoisting himself up frantically.

“The lion is about to climb after you -” the professor went on inciting the man to make another desperate scramble up the pole. By now the dog was below him - looking up and yapping annoyingly. The pole swayed under the burden of his weight adding to the drama.

Once again Professor Dahreg clapped his hands and ordered the man down. Speaking to him quietly, checking his eyes to make sure he was back to normal he patted him on the back and dismissed him. The oaf looked around bedazzled, oblivious to the dog yapping at his heal.

To give him credit Professor Dahreg did have an eye for picking his mark and creating a situation most incongruous to a subjects’ personality. One after another he went through his select group on the platform and transformed them into hilarious counterpoints to their daily personalities... the reserved spinstress into a woman of loose morals, the meek bookworm into an aggressive drill sergeant, the village bully into a blubbing baby sucking on his thumb.

But none was funnier than the final act. The pimply faced boy of around fourteen who was the most bashful person in the pueblo. You’d see him walking around every day with a downcast face avoiding everyone’s gaze and in a permanent state of insecure embarrassment. Professor Dahreg got the young teenager onto his feet and asked him his name.

“A-n-g-e-l...” the pimply faced youth stuttered, pronouncing the ‘g’ like an ‘h’. To add to his woes he’d been lumbered with such an unfortunate name. Which was common enough in Mexico but all the ones I’d ever known or heard of were gangsters.

“Well Angel,” Professor Dahreg said, “I want you to imagine you are the world famous pop star Ritchie Valens. Are you familiar with his song La Bamba?”

“Si Señor,” Angel replied. Of course he was everyone knew La Bamba.

“Strap on your guitar and sing it for your fans out there, all those adoring Señoritas.”

And he did. Angel strapped on his imaginary guitar and with the most remarkable stage presence and melodious voice one could imagine he gave a near-perfect rendition of La Bamba. Halfway through the professor encouraged him even more telling him to give it everything... that his fans demanded it, that the girls out there were panting ...he was a star!

That did it - Angel became transformed into a professional rocker gyrating his hips suggestively like Mick Jagger, flicking his head back arrogantly - his grand finale being a dramatic slide across the stage on his knees plucking phallically at his guitar and bellowing at the top of his lungs “Da na Na na Na na Na na NAAAAAAA!!!”

No one could believe it. It was as though the professor had dug deep into this shy, withdrawing individuals’ soul and extracted the most secretive aspiration from some locked away recess ... a quality that would never see the light of day through the conditioning factors of his normal life. It was nothing short of miraculous ... the whole episode underscored by Angel’s demeanor when he was snapped out of it, his sagging shoulders, downcast look and embarrassed red face.

Poor Angel. Chucho never let him live it down after that. The next morning when we were driving along the main drag near the mercardito and he spotted Angel skulking along the roadside with a popsicle in his mouth, Chucho hit the button for his electric window and let him have it - "Oye <sup>1</sup> Ritchie! Ritchie Valens! ... Da na Na na Na na Na na NAAAAA!!!

Angel withered, his chin tucking even deeper into his chest than usual, his complexion exploding into a shade of beetroot. From then on he couldn't go anywhere safely if Chucho was about without copping one of those Da na Na na Na na Na na Naaaaaaa's!

\*

After we saw the Professor in action we were convinced more than ever that he could exert a dangerous control over people and do with them as he pleased. So it came as a great shock a week later when Isabel announced she had a date with him after his show that night.

"Nooo! Isabel," I protested clutching Coco to my side defensively. "Don't do it, anything can happen..."

"Why?" She asked with innocent curiosity. "He's harmless."

"Don't bet," Chucho sniggered. "You'll probably wake up tomorrow with a pillow in your mouth, twenty cents in your hand and a sore ..."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Sarah snapped. "Isabel's a grown woman."

"She's only seventeen!" I pleaded.

"Your mother was married at seventeen," Sarah reminded me. "Nineteen when you were born."

"That's different..."

"Why is it different?"

"Well ... well... those were different times. Besides my father wasn't a mind control freak!"

Sarah raised an eyebrow.

"I give up," I said retreating. But I brooded for the rest of the day. Isabel was like my own daughter, she was so young, so pure ... there was even a boulevard up in La Paz glorifying the virtue of her namesake - *Isabella La Catolica*.

Increasing my torment even more Chucho dogged me about the place for the rest of the day speculating on what the Professor would do to Isabel, going into graphic detail about each debauched scenario.

"Chucho!" I finally rebuked him. "It's a great pity your only formal education came off the back of toilet doors."

"That's not entirely true mate," he replied. "I learned to read and write."

"Yeah right!" I scoffed. "Prove it! Write down the name of your school on a piece of paper- if you can!"

He did with a labourious scrawl and handed it to me. It read, *In prisone ... assewhole!*

"I rest my case!" I said raising my eyes to the sky cynically and crunched the piece of paper up in disgust.

By nightfall I was beside myself ... maybe the professor wouldn't be able to make the date ... maybe he'd be too tired ... or her mother would need emergency bypass surgery ... or there'd be a tidal wave...

"Why do you have to go out so late?" I pressed Isabel.

"Because the show doesn't finish till one, remember?" Sarah said in her defense. "Besides, everyone goes out late

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<sup>1</sup> Hey!



here. It's not like at home."

"Would you like me to drop you off?" I asked with feigned casualness.

Sarah shot me a piercing look.

"How about some condoms?" Chucho threw in.

Sarah shook her head, "God, I can't wait to see what you guys are going to be like when Coco has her first date!"

"Well you'll be waiting a long time," I replied. "She won't be getting out of the convent till she's forty-five!"

"...What convent?"

\*

When Midnight Finally came around and it was time for her to go I said, "Don't forget to be here bright and early in the morning to babysit Coco."

Sarah shot me a caustic look and patted Isabel on the back reassuringly, "You have fun dear and show up tomorrow whenever you're good and ready."

"Is this the Cinderella story in reverse or what?" I muttered. "...Heading out at midnight!"

"Not even the professor can perform miracles like that," Chucho mused.

"Like what?" I snapped.

"Like a reversal of the perfect Cinderella story ... the chic who fucks and sucks you like crazy all night then turns into a six pack and pizza at midnight."

Sarah and I both groaned.

"I guess the flip side would be the six pack and pizza snack at midnight turning into a beautiful..."

"Chucho you're disgusting," Sarah interrupted him. Then she said to me - "What's the address of that convent?"

I was resurrected from a troubled sleep by the vague torment of my eyelids being stretched to their painful limits, first one then the other, both released simultaneously - their elasticity snapping them back onto my eyeballs. Swatting groggily at the agitation as though shooing away an annoying fly ... I'd get a moments respite and start drifting off again when the torment would resume.

With my increasing discomfort and wilder swipes came ecstatic giggling, the torture at its zenith when my mind switched on - "Coco!" I cried sitting up with a start. "What are you doing here? Where's Isabel?"

Sarah stirred, "...What's wrong?"

"The kid's all by herself!"

"Don't be ridiculous. We're here."

"But she's unsupervised. Where the hell's Isabel? Coco could have hurt herself ... burnt her hand on the gas cooker... fallen into the toilet ... wandered off down the road!"

Sarah propped an elbow in her pillow to support her head in her hand and looked at me humorously, "Will you stop! Nothing's happened. All the potential tragedies have passed and Coco's perfectly fine."

"But it's already nine o'clock ... where is she?"

"You need help," Sarah said with a bemused smile and buried her head in her pillow.

At that moment Chucho passed our bedroom doorway and stuck his head in.

“What are you doing up so early?” I asked him. “Did you piss your bed? Are you sick or something?”

“No ... I just went for an early morning walk along the beach ... found an abandoned pillow on the sand with a twenty-cent coin on it...”

He ducked the pillow I threw at him and chuckled - “After I taught Coco how to turn on the gas range and left her here alone to play with the kitchen knives.”

“The drive down Isabella La Catolica will never be the same,” I exhaled.

Sarah rebuked me gently, “You’re sick ... sick ... sick!”

Prompting Coco to jump up and down on my stomach and cry gleefully - “Thick ... thick ... thick ... Papi’s thick!”

“And that’s no infantile mispronunciation either,” Chucho sniggered. “I told you that kid’s smart beyond her years.”

But by eleven o’clock when Isabel hadn’t shown up even Sarah remarked - “She’s never done this before...”

“Let’s take a walk down by the Professor’s,” Chucho suggested.

I agreed eagerly.

“Don’t forget the crucifix, garlic and sharpened stake!” Sarah called after us sarcastically from the kitchen as we walked out the front door.

Making our way purposefully down the sandy track we bid Juan, our acne faced neighbour good morning on the way past and approached the professor’s Mack truck. No one seemed to be around so I climbed the back stairs and rapped vigorously on the door. After a few minutes I pressed my face up to the glass in the top half of the door and cupped my hands around my eyes to peer inside ... a gauze drape obscured my view as I strained to see but I caught a movement, a muffled sound that was like giggling when a loud voice behind me demanded - “Que quieres <sup>1</sup>?”

Spinning around in alarm I was confronted by the burly busker emerging from the marquis.

“Uh ... um ... I’m looking for professor Dahreg,” I stammered guiltily.

“He no here!” The man said.

“What?!” I replied puzzled and glanced back at the window, “But I heard ...”

“He no here!” The man reiterated.

“Do you know where he is then?”

“No.”

I distinctly heard a squeal and some hushed singing and said - “You sure?” Gesturing at the mobile home door with an upturned palm.

“Si! I sure.”

“Don’t happen to know where he is then?” I asked not knowing what else to say.

“No!”

Turning to Chucho I said, “Did you hear those noises from inside?”

“Uh huh.”

“What do you want to do?”

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1 What do you want?

“There’s not much we can do...” he said scratching his head. “It’s not like we’ve got a reason to make an issue here. After all she is old enough to make her own decisions and it’s not like there are any screams for help.”

“Doesn’t look like this guy’s going to assist us either,” I muttered.

“You got that right,” Chucho agreed looking the tough busker up and down apprehensively.

“I wonder if he can really understand us?”

“Doubt it! Chucho replied. Then he addressed the busker - “How’s your mother?”

The simple Mexican looked at him puzzled answering, “No.”

“I think that’s his standard response,” I chuckled. “A regular font of information...”

“Yeah,” Chucho grunted back. “Say hullo to him and he’d probably be stuck for an answer.”

Sarah was watching us from the front lawn as we trudged back up the hill and when we were in earshot she called out - “I don’t see a hoard of pitchfork waving villagers down there around a bonfire with a flaming corpse!”

Chucho and I exchanged painful looks but refused to bite.

“Guess that means he wasn’t home, huh?” She persisted.

“The busker reckons he isn’t but I don’t believe him,” I called back up to her. “I reckon he’s practicing tonight’s show on Isabel ... I distinctly caught him singing a line from La Bamba!”

“How about some brunch?” Chucho said changing the subject. He hated being gigged.

“Good idea,” I replied glad to take my mind off Professor Dahreg... the dirty skirt lifter.

Brunch Turned Into a joint enterprise with me pressing juice for everybody, large tumblers full from oranges out of a fifty-pound Hessian sack we bought up in La Paz for \$7. Slicing two red papayas in half I removed the black seeds and squeezed fresh lime juice into the halves while Chucho took Coco out to our vegetable patch off the side of the house and picked a handful of Serrano chilies. After slicing them up he put them into a lime- juice and garlic marinade and inserted 15 large shrimp he got off the shrimp trawlers on their way to Guyamas. Any time they pulled into our bay to sort their catch Chucho would run out in our tinny and trade porno videos and gallons of Tequila for buckets full.

While we ate our papaya he went down to the corner and bought a fresh stack of steaming arina y maiz<sup>1</sup> tortillas from the old ladies at the tortillera. He was back in five minutes and threw the shrimp onto the hot plate to sizzle and dropped the tortillas onto the naked gas flames of the gas range browning them in spots like crêpes.

“Why don’t you use a pan like everyone else for the tortillas?” I chipped him.

“Because they taste better this way. Hell - when I was up in Ketchum working construction I’d even heat them on the manifold of my old Dodge truck ... gave ‘em a special flavour!”

“Yeah? Leaded or unleaded?” I reponded facetiously.

But he was right. They did taste better when thrown onto the naked flames and his shrimp tacos were sensational. Not to mention the special effort he made for Coco by preparing her a Quesadilla, a grilled taco stuffed with local goat cheese.

Finishing off with freshly expresso’d coffee we retired to the balcony and threw ourselves into hammocks where we rocked back and forth groaning from satisfaction. But still Isabel didn’t show...

“Maybe the professor’s going to keep her in a permanent trance until he gets tired of throwing her up in the air...” Chucho remarked torturously.

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<sup>1</sup> Flour and corn.

Sarah and I threw him piercing looks.

Each time a vehicle bumped and bounced along the washboard road through town all our eyes would follow - our hopes rising with its approach, sinking as it passed our corner. In the meantime we'd watch the professor's layout intently for the slightest movement but the only thing we saw from time to time was the busker going about his chores.

By early evening when the carnival lights were finally switched on I sighed with resignation, "I just knew Isabel's date was a mistake..."

"Let's go take another look at the professor's," Chucho suggested.

He didn't have to convince me and we scampered back down the hill to the Professor's mobile home and looked around shiftily before climbing the back steps. Chucho was so close behind he kept bumping into me and stepping on my thongs. Barely halfway up we were stopped by a wail coming from inside followed by tortured female cries of No! No! No! We exchanged anxious looks and dashed up the last few stairs where I put my shoulder into the door like a battering ram. It refused to budge. All it did was buckle a little. It was one of those crisscrossed aluminum security doors. Bridging up to give it one more go I bent into it when a yell from behind stopped me -

"Que passa?!!!" The busker called angrily from the entrance to Marquis. Charging towards us he grabbed Chucho from behind and pulled him down so vigorously he landed on his back in the dirt. Then he was on me grabbing the collar of my T-shirt and yanking me backwards as well - the two of us grappling, tumbling down the stairs backwards and falling onto Chucho who grunted from the impact.

I was on my feet quickly, the busker following suit but I got the jump on him and fired a savage right smack into the middle of his face -CLUNK! bouncing his head back a fraction but barely budging him.

Shaking my hand up and down in pain I cursed - "Shit!" It felt like I'd punched an old gum tree. All it did beside hurt my hand was make him even madder and he let out a terrifying roar -Aaahhh! as he charged. I couldn't believe it - the punch I landed on him would have felled an elephant.

He returned a punch straight onto the tip of my nose that felt like being hit by an XPT - shooting sparks into my brain and sending an instant shower from my eyes with stars circling and flashing through my vision. It was a miracle I didn't get a speeding ticket up in La Paz 80 kilometers away. It rung my bell that good it took a moment to recover and by then he'd nailed me with a half a dozen more that felt like being donged by a wrecking ball. By then Chucho was on his feet and into him too - the three of us intertwined in a dynamic ball of dust with emerging fists, curses, grunts and whacks.

But before we knew it the sound of piercing whistles and running feet bore down on us and the local Guardia pounced on us with their truncheons - cracking them mercilessly against our bones. It didn't take long to subdue us and we ended up sitting there in a pile, panting and smarting from our welts and bruises. Frowning angrily at us in turn the senior Guardia demanded - "Que passa hombres<sup>1</sup>?"

No one piped up too quickly, the three of us maintaining a conspiratorial silence, surrounded by a gathering crowd of people who had come out of the neighbouring houses. Finally the busker claimed we had been acting suspiciously and he suspected we were going to rob the professor's truck.

"No señor!" I complained explaining that we were only there to reclaim our teenage baby sitter who the professor had kidnapped the day before. Adding that we were convinced he had her under a hypnotic spell and was taking advantage of her. The two Guardia looked at each other bewildered as though we were all crazy and it would probably be a good idea to lock the lot of us up when a startling cry turned everyone's heads towards the mobile home.

"I told you!" I exclaimed getting to my feet and pointing -

"Well?" The ranking officer demanded of the busker.

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1 What's happening gentlemen?

He merely shrugged his shoulders and looked equally perplexed. Both he and Chucho got to their feet now and we all made our way over to the steps leading to the mobile home - the cops in the lead - when another piercing cry "YEEEHAAAAA!!! accompanied by the sound of a cracking whip made us hesitate.

Mounting the stairs with caution the Guardia tested the lock, even the busker was on the bottom rung looking up with anticipation. Another series of painful grunts came from inside and the Guardia launched themselves against the door making it spring from its hinges with them toppling inwards and ending in a heap on the carpeted floor.

Rushing up behind them we were about to charge in but were stopped dead in our tracks at the sight before us. Everyone's jaws dropped in unison. We looked like those stunned clown heads at the Easter show where you pitch balls into their rotating circular mouths. Even the cops were astonished, one of them crossing himself involuntarily and mumbling incoherently but unable to take his eyes from the spectacle. From behind us the busker uttered - "Madre de Dios!"<sup>1</sup> And Chucho gawked exclaiming his version of the same exclamation, "Holy shit!"

There among overturned Tequila bottles on the carpet which reeked of it in those close quarters, between the wreckage on all fours, naked except for a garter belt and black fish net stockings, her large cellulitic thighs quivering in our faces as she transported him around the room on her back

- also naked except for a pair of rawhide chaps, her turban pitched back on his head at a rakish angle with a stock whip in his hand ... was Madam Zenda with Ritchie Valens on her back!

We walked through the open living room doors to the sound of Sarah and Isabel laughing and

when they looked up and saw our black eyes and bruises they stopped. They both had a cocktail in hand and Sarah tried to adopt a serious face when she observed our injuries but couldn't help herself and burst out laughing - "What happened to you two?"

"Don't ask," I snapped rubbing the bridge of my nose gingerly, "I'm not in the mood." And then I said to Isabel, "Where the hell have you been? We've been worried sick about you."

"I have de bes night," she beamed. "Een de night clubs of San Jose."

"What?! With that creep Professor Dahreg..." Chucho said derisively.

"No senor," she giggled. "Wiid my girlfriends. Jou right about heem... he a deadbeat. Last night when I go meet heem after show he too tired, say he have to go La Paz today to feex his gramophone."

Chucho and I looked at each other incredulously.

"So we forget heem -" she continued. "We feenish dancing aroun five dis morning. It too late to come back so we stay weeth my auntie in San Jose. Today we go to beach there..."

"Guess he's not into young chics after all," Chucho said astonished.

"Where's the rum?" I fumed.

"Well, come on tell us," Sarah persisted annoyingly. "What happened? Look! You've even ripped your favourite T shirt." And they exploded with another round of laughter.

After that we never thought of Professor Dahreg the same. In fact we never gave him another thought really until a week later when we came in from fishing and he was gone. The corner lot where his Marquis had been was vacant again leaving an erased gap in our lives as though he'd never been there. A few times on our way up to La Paz we'd think of him in some out of the way pueblo and Chucho would chortle - "Respire profundo!" And carry on a bit but it didn't take long for that to wear out and he dropped it altogether. One day we passed his tent somewhere and didn't even notice it. It had just become a standard feature of the landscape ... like the cactus.

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<sup>1</sup> Mother of God!

Then one afternoon Chucho burst through the door out of breath and announced excitedly “Professor Dahreg’s hit the headlines!!!”

“What’d he do? Put an audience in a coma from boredom!”

“No mate, get this. Someone tried to shoot him up in Ciudad Insurgentes<sup>1</sup>!”

“What... you’re kidding,” I said looking up with renewed interest.

“Nope,” he said shaking his head. “A guy pulled a .45 during one of his shows and opened up on him.”

“No shit!” I said putting the newspaper down.

“Yep. People were ducking and screaming with bullets flying everywhere ... he was lucky to get away with his life!”

“Why?” Sarah asked, entering from the balcony from where she couldn’t help but overhear our conversation.

“You’ll like this,” Chucho beamed. “He hypnotized a twelve-year-old girl the other afternoon back in his mobile home and ...”

“No!!!” We gasped.

“Oh yeah! Her father found out about it ... and you know what Latinos are like. Like we’d always say... flee for the border. No counseling or mediation down here. Dahreg instantly fled town leaving the busker and Madam Zenda to pack up.”

“Well I’ll be...” I smiled shaking my head. “And we thought he wasn’t into young chicks after Isabelle’s date with him!”

“Obviously she wasn’t young enough,” Chucho said chuckling.

“Well that’s the last we’ll see of him then,” Sarah mused. “He wouldn’t dare show his face anywhere around here after that.”

But We Were Wrong. Next week when we had come in from our new fishing business we got another report that someone had seen his outfit back down the other side of the Cape somewhere around Todos Santos. Apparently he was re-starting his run north from there through the remote hinterland pueblos of the thousand-mile long Baja peninsula.

“Can’t believe he’s got the nerve,” Sarah laughed when we heard the news. “Bet no one turns up for his shows now.”

“Don’t bet!” Chucho said. “By all accounts after the Insurgentes drama they’re lining up thicker than ever.”

“No!” we gasped.

“Yep. You forget mate, this is Mexico after all. I told you there’s all kinds of weird shit down here...”

“Don’t start that again...” I groaned.

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<sup>1</sup> City of the Insurgents.

# THE WOOD DUCK and THE SEA



**He'd been told** not to bring a banana along, that it was bad luck. Yet there it was on the blue tile counter top next to the sandwiches he was preparing - neat triangular white bread with the crust cut off, and cheese, if you could call it that, unnaturally orange, square slices, each one packaged in its own cellophane packet. The cheese looked like rubber but was probably less tasty, yet it was what he liked. There was ham too, sandwich sized cuts off a rectangular block and a thick smear of electric yellow pickle relish to compensate for the lack of taste in the rest of the ingredients. He piled three of those sandwiches on top of each other and cut through the mound diagonally - creating six identical triangles which he bundled into Glad wrap... probably the way his mother had done for him since he was a little boy at school.

I glanced impatiently at my old stainless steel Rolex Submariner; it was six fifteen. The light over the palm trees had changed from deep orange to lilac and gold. By the time we got the boat together and cruised out to Punto Colorado it would be well past eight and we would have missed the best hours of the morning. He'd already put a jinx on the day by wasting time and now despite my explicit instruction he was jinxing us even more with the banana.

"Come on James!" I urged him. "We're going to miss the fish..."

"Relax," he said with a boyish giggle. "We'll be gone for hours and I'll get hungry. I wanna catch something big, something to impress my buddies with back in Aspen. Hell it's not every day you get to fish the Sea of Cortez!"

"That's great," I said. "But I've already told you no bananas!" And I grabbed the one next to his neat little lunch pile and threw it back into the woven cane fruit basket.

"You're kidding?!" He said studying me with disbelief.

"No I explained it last night but you were full of cheap Tequila. They're bad luck on a fishing boat."

He tried to disarm me with one of his goofy giggles- "He He He He He - I can't believe you're so superstitious!"

"Yeah well believe what you want but NO BANANAS!" I said stepping over to the glass water dispenser by the fridge where I filled an empty plastic container with five litres of purified water. Grabbing a couple of limes from the fruit basket I shoved them into the back pocket of my board shorts and without looking back walked out through the double glass doors onto the veranda.

Shady was lying in a hammock rocking back and forth with a cord attached to one of the supporting columns. He'd obviously been listening to our conversation with amusement and he looked up smiling. Boogie his blue healer was laying on the terracotta tiles below him and looked up sympathetically too. Boogie had watched Shady load the truck earlier and his ears were cocked in anticipation, he knew we were going out on the boat.

"The gears in the truck," Shady said. "We've got three spare Gerry cans of fuel."

"We won't need more than one for this wood duck," I answered gruffly.

Shady grinned, "But he reckons he wants to stay out all day."

"Yeah well it's his dough," I snapped. "But I bet you he won't last more than a twenty-five-litre container."

I was already regretting taking this guy out but needed the money; five hundred went a long way in Mexico. Besides it would make Sarah happy. Not so much the money as convince her that I could survive doing something I liked that wasn't illegal. She knew I wasn't your solid nine to five type and had never put any pressure on me to be anything other than myself. So I owed it to her, to reassure her that I was going to be responsible ... now that we had a baby.

If only I'd followed my gut feeling.

Shady's grin changed to a smile. It was obvious that I wasn't impressed no matter how much this guy was paying.

"What about your hand brace?" He reminded me.

"...Knew I'd forgotten something," I grumbled and went back to the house. "It's all this guys fault."

I'd broken my hand in a brawl with a couple of drunken cowboys up in Idaho a month earlier. Hooked one with a left and followed up with an angry right - straight into the door arch of the truck behind him after he'd already dropped, what they called 'a bad boxer's break'; shattering two metacarpals. Anyway, I'd cut the fiberglass cast off two weeks later and replaced it in San Diego on the drive down with one I bought in a drug store made from Teflon. A simple U shaped brace with a Velcro strap. One you could at least take off to bathe properly.

I found it on the dining room table and strapped it on.

Our client was nowhere in sight and I was about to blow up when the toilet flushed and he came out tying the waist cord on his shorts. "Ready!" He announced chirpily like a little kid.

"Are you sure?" I asked finding it hard to conceal my sarcasm "...Sure you've remembered everything?"

"Say, you don't have any cookies do you?" He asked.

For a moment I thought he was kidding... trying to rev me up some more and I almost made a concession for a latent sense of humour when I realised he wasn't kidding at all. Shaking my head with disbelief I walked off.

**Down on the beach** we drove through soft sand and parked well above the high tide line. The rest of the pueblo's fishing boats had set off long before and you could see them across the mirror smooth sea, white specks heading across the cornflower blue towards a pink horizon. Beyond the small waves lolling lazily onto the shore and creeping up the white sand with a drawn out *sshhhh*... the fleets' buoys bobbed back and forth deserted, except for the odd resting seagull. The only buoy with a boat tied to it was ours, the *COCO* bobbing gently over the slow moving swell.

"How do we get the boat?" James asked cupping a hand to his brow to measure the distance visually.

Standing there he looked exactly what he was - a tourist in sky blue Ralph Lauren Polo shorts, sparkling white Moose Head beer Tee shirt, tube socks pulled high, running shoes and pale skin. There was no hiding the fact that he came from somewhere with snowbound winters. And he obviously spent too much time reclining on a couch, his body having become its legacy with narrow sloping shoulders and thick hips giving him the shape of a milk



bottle. To tell the truth I'd never seen a head that so resembled Frankenstein's either... the only thing missing was the bolt sticking out of his neck.

"We swim," I said in response to his question. "I do, that is. You'll have to take your shoes and socks off though...for when I pull up to the shore."

Shady turned his back to hide a smile and started unloading the truck.

The water was pleasant, not cool like the southern ocean I'd grown up in, or bathtub warm like Hawaiian waters but a comfortable in between. Boogie dogpaddled in my wake chomping at the white splash coming off my feet, his tail swishing back and forth like a rudder. When I reached the Coco I hauled myself over the back and reached down for him, grabbing him by the collar and yanking him up as well. As soon as I put him down he shook himself.

"Thanks mate!" I exhaled picking wet dog hair off me.

Cocking his head on an angle he looked up smiling.

**The Coco rode effortlessly** over the long glassy swell rolling in from the south, the mid morning breeze that normally funnelled down from the Arizona basin hadn't arrived yet to furrow the water's surface. Looking over the side was like looking into a vast mirror with massive white cumulus clouds as perfect on the blue sea as they were in the sky. Off the starboard bow a pair of rainbow coloured Dorado shot out of a cloud on the water in a long arc against the same cloud in the sky. Here and there schools of nervous flying fish leapt before us beating their small wings awkwardly until they would tire and swerve off to one side, crashing back into the safety of the sea.

Shady was on the foredeck in a low slung beach chair applying TURTLE OIL to his trim, muscular fifty-five year old body. These days the main ingredient of Turtle Oil was a coconut extract and its sweet scent mixed with the salty air, blowing back at me in the stern. The oil made Shady's faded tattoos glisten like new - the windblown galleon on one forearm, Popeye carrying a mop and bucket on the other, a hula girl dancing beneath a palm tree, the bleeding heart pierced by a dagger on his deltoid with the epigraph - Death Before Dishonour... legacies of an apprenticeship with the Canadian Navy at fifteen. After he'd escaped from reform school to go to war in Korea, that is.

Boogie lay beside Shady with his fur clustered into wet peaks that sparkled in the brilliant sunshine. With his nose lifted to the air excitedly he sifted through the exotic scents of the sea. Richard sat in the middle of the boat beneath the royal blue canvas Bimini gazing absently off to a side while applying 30+ sun protectant cream to his luminescent white feet. Feet that were narrow, the toes having endured a lifetime of cramping in shoes.

I maintained a course close to the coast following its expansive curve from a half a mile off to provide James with a view of the land, the pastel yellow desert with its pale green stubble of cactus and backdrop of rolling hills. From time to time we'd pass a small fishing village, usually no more than a cluster of white houses with flat roofs and log ends protruding from stucco, with palm frond verandas out front and fishing nets strung off a side where the fishermen could work on them.

A pod of small porpoise, dark blue with cream undersides speared out of the water and gamboled about us for a kilometer or so, leaping like greyhounds until on some tacit signal they disappeared back into the sea. A large turtle stuck its ancient yellow head out of the water like a periscope, surveying the sea ahead with its flippers propelling its ungainly shell forward with surprising grace.

"When do we get there?" James asked from boredom.

"Where's there?" Shady replied glancing over his shoulder, throwing me a cynical look. His eyes darted away before James caught it but I knew what he was thinking. Four years in Mac Neil Island nic off Washington State recently had renewed his appreciation of wide-open space, the abundant sea life in these waters providing a rich counterpoint to the sensory deprivation he'd endured. Before his lagging he was a bank robber - not your common hoister - but a professional on the international circuit. There were stories of Shady touring the French Riviera in a

chauffeur driven Rolls sporting expensive three-piece suits with a glamour hanging off each arm. Kind of an Al Mundy figure ... before he ended up a pathetic alcoholic. Now he was a vegetarian who neither fished nor ate fish but came along just for the ride. Richard on the other hand spent most of his life in the fast lane of his couch and got bored easily, a glutton for instant gratification.

Nearing Punto Colorado, the flat sandy headland to the south of the vast bay I cut our speed to a slow cruise while Shady made his way back and put two short stokers into 'rocket launchers'. Both of them were state of the art custom made stand up game rods, a 15 kg. with a gold Penn 50 reel and the other a 24kg. with a Penn 80T made for me by Ian Miller at Freshwater back home.

"Put the green and yellow door knob on the lighter rig for Dorado and a bullet head blue, white and pink skirt on the other for Marlin..." I told him.

"Got it!" He said lowering the jigs over either side, letting the Marlin rig run out sixty yards just past our wake, the other thirty-five yards where it played in the whitewash. Studying them I cut back the throttle until they started working properly, the short one riding up and down below the surface and erupting every fifth rise with a splash and fine rooster tail, the longer line doing the same every seventh rise.

"How come we waited till we got all the way out here before putting the lines in?" James asked looking back at Los Barilles in the distance. "Aren't there fish where we came from?"

"Maybe..." I answered. "But this is where the 'real' fish are. The big ones that follow established feeding channels."

We settled into a good rhythm and cruised for a while with everything working right and I had just checked the lines again when James announced, "I need to go to the toilet."

"The toilet?" Shady repeated waving an arm about him expansively, "Is out there!"

"What? While we're moving?"

"Exactly!" Shady answered. "Hang it over the side."

A moment lapsed before James mumbled self-consciously, "But it's not that kind of toilet... it's more serious."

"Nothing's that serious," Shady replied. "Just hang it over the side."

"I don't think I'd be able to ... not while we're moving."

Shady and I exchanged another look of commiseration as I cut our speed. Then he made his way to the stern while I killed the engine so he could wind in the lines. The impulse to head back strongly overcame me as I thought about how people like James ruined something I loved so much. But I remembered Sarah and the money and how we had to survive because I had to flee the US after ending up on the 'Top Forty'. And it wasn't for my musical talent either; the closest I'd ever come to creating a note was cracking my knuckles. It was the FBI's top forty. And not for anything I'd done, it was probably the first time in my life I hadn't even J walked. But I had kept 'bad company' and a 'dog' in Sun Valley had shelved me for money, not letting the truth get in the way of a good story. The cops did the rest, pounding their laptops vigorously, as they do, composing reports to vilify me in order to make it look like they actually did something beside eat doughnuts and drink cheap instant coffee.

After struggling with the cord in his shorts - pulling it into a knot in his anxiety - James dropped them to his ankles. He grabbed the chrome support bar of the Bimini anxiously and squatted eagerly over the side while Shady and I moved forward and faced out to sea.

I had just started admiring the beauty of the calm early morning water when James started to complain again, "This is no good. I can't do anything in this position."

My ears flushed and I swung around but was stopped dead by the absurd sight of him gripping the chrome bar with a tired trembling arm, shorts in a puddle about his feet ... a concerned look on his face.

"Well jump in the water then!" Shady urged suppressing another grin.

James took his shoes and socks off and discarded the rest of his clothes in a disorderly pile on the deck. Sliding over the back clumsily he clung to the gunwale with one hand, stroking the water's surface vigorously with the other. "Say! This is better ... ", he announced happily. "I can do it and have a douche at the same time," punctuating his remark with another staccato ha ha ha ha ha ha!

"I'm very pleased for you," I remarked. "But that's a bit more information than we require."

Shady and I gazed at the water sharing a pregnant silence. A silence Shady couldn't contain for long as he cursed under his breath- "Drugs!!! They've ruined everything. Nowadays any imbecile can make 'an earn' off them and play the gangster. Even a fool like this! He's probably just an errand boy, 'a grocer's assistant' ... A knows B... he picks up a package and delivers it to a bunch of jerk-offs. The worst part is he struts around all pumped up like he's some kind of hero because of the money he's made. But it all comes unstuck the minute one of them gets nailed. Then it's a race to see who can give the other up first!"

"The new school..." I agreed under my breath.

"That's the understatement of the century," Shady spat. "Shit... I remember when I was his age and the cops tried to put the bounce on me in Toronto. They bashed me down the front steps of the Cabbage Town Police station in mid-winter and when I hit the sidewalk it was that cold the blood froze my face to the pavement." The thought of it made him chuckle. "They had to go back inside and heat a kettle to pour warm water on the red ice and unstick it! Ha! Ha!"

I studied Shady's face and smiled. He smiled back displaying a mouth full of expensive dental work in a collapsed mouth surrounded by a series of radiating lines. "Nah ... I can't see this imbecile standing up to a '*Chinese burn!*'" I chuckled.

"Hurry up James!" Shady barked impatiently. "The sharks'll get you soon!"

"You're joking, right?" James giggled uncertainly.

"Not at all. Shark's can smell excrement from five miles away."

Shady made me grin ... his uncharacteristic formality with the word excrement.

James's head snapped about as he peered over a shoulder then the other, his nervousness encouraging Shady even more. "And the Hammerheads in these waters are monsters. Why just the other day one cruised up behind us and trailed along for a good hour... its ugly snout as wide as the beam of the boat."

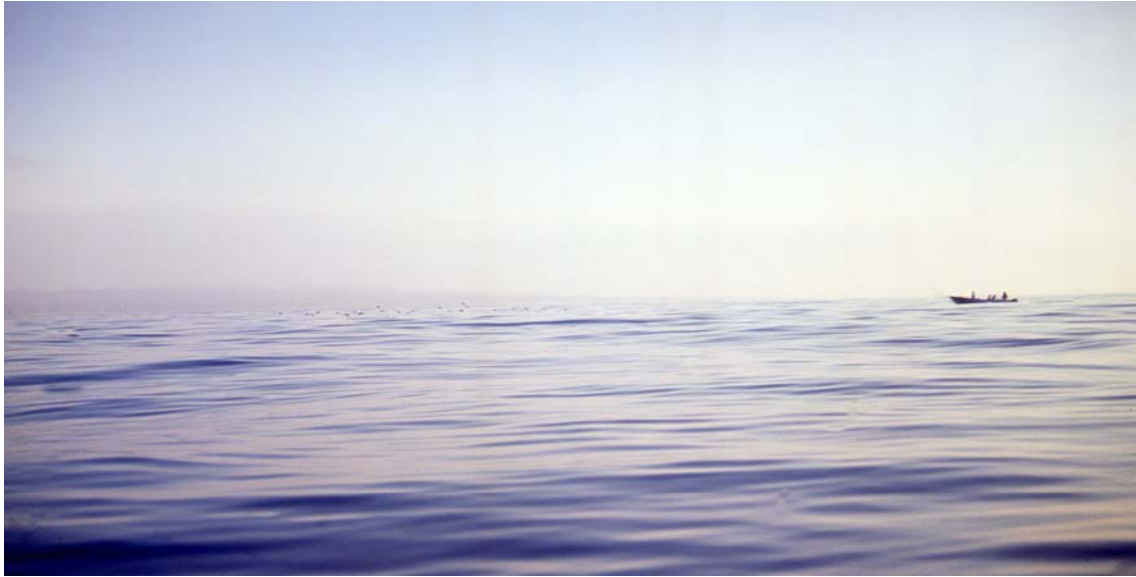
James went silent before beckoning - "Do you think you guys could give me a hand?" He was struggling to pull himself over the back and his fat white stomach was jiggling on the gunwale.

Grabbing him under his arms we lugged him aboard and dumped him unceremoniously on the deck leaving him to flop there like a beached whale.

I pull started the Johnson while Shady reset the lines and we had barely got under way when something got my attention in the distance. Squinting against the bright sun I could just make out a cluster of boats with seagulls circling overhead. They were dive-bombing the water that was erupting with white splashes. I cranked the throttle on full and the panga lifted and surged ahead, bouncing along and slapping down hard with our jigs flying out behind, dancing over the water's surface like shiny marionettes.

"What is it?" James asked attempting to get to his knees, having trouble on the bucking deck.

"A boil of bait fish!" I informed him.



Shady rode the lurching boat with bent knees, his feet spread for balance, one hand gripping a taught bowline and the other with a pair of rubber coated Zeiss binoculars to his eyes. "Tuna!" He yelled excitedly. "And a good size too!"

"How big?" I yelled back over the wind.

"Fifty ... sixty pounders!"

One thing about tuna they travelled in schools of uniform size ... a few that big would provide plenty of food as well as good sport.

"Get a couple of white jigs ready," I hollered as we closed in. "Feathers preferably."

By now we were near enough to see them clearly leaping from the water like large fat footballs, black on top with chrome underbellies and the vivid yellow outline of their sleek tail fins. They were chomping ferociously into a boiling school of Mackerel - flying through the air like acrobats and crashing down onto the water's surface with the finesse of Scud missiles.

Three or four cruisers motored around the boil with taught lines out back, their deck hands leaning over the sides staring eagerly at the sea. Another two boats were stationary with smiling anglers bent to the task of winding in their catches.

James picked up on our enthusiasm and asked, "Are tuna good sport? ...I know they're good eating."

At least he'd sprayed enough money around après-ski Sushi bars in expensive resorts to know that much.

"Put it this way," I replied, "I'd rather catch a two hundred-pound tuna than an eight hundred pound marlin!"

"You're kidding?" He exclaimed.

"No mate. They're the Mike Tysons of the sea."

Turning back to the action with his mouth agape he reflected pensively, "Is that right...?"

I cut our speed to give Shady a chance to get our lines in while he selected a pink and white rubber squid for the large rod and a chrome bullet head with white feathers for the other. Without wasting time he threw them over the back and in a matter of minutes we were back under way. By then the rest of the charter boats were stationary and their crews were pumping and winding in line with fish leaping in the air bulldogging back and forth, trying to escape the hook.

I closed in on the boil and started to circle its perimeter slowly, dragging our lines through the baitfish in anticipation of that first inevitable tug. We completed a pass but nothing happened. Passed again ... still nothing.

Then one of the other boats started up and had to come to a stop almost immediately with a double hook up, the two fishermen in the stern laughing at their repeated good fortune.

Taking the Coco out wide I angled back in on the boil and recommenced our troll when another of the boats behind us got underway and almost immediately got a strike.

"I can't believe this..." I grumbled. "Did you happen to see any of the jigs those other boats were using?" I asked Shady.

With the binoculars to his eyes he answered, "White feathers same as ours..."

And then it was over, just like that. The water stopped shimmering, the tuna stopped jumping and the gulls began to drift off one and two at a time. In no time the seas returned to dead calm, the patch of water that only minutes before was on the boil was now like the miles of water surrounding us ... motionless except for the receding parallel lines of our wake.

I looked back fuming and watched the last of the anglers wind in. "Hell! I can't believe every one of those boats hooked up except us. Same tackle, same tactics ... we must be jinxed!"

Shady retrieved our lines to check the jigs and asked - "Do you wanna keep the same ones on or change 'em?"

"Leave the white feathers on the small rig in case there's a lazy tuna hanging about. Put the 'Disco' on the other for Marlin."

The Disco had a variety of colour full of sparkle, made by a local identity called Baja Ben. Ben undoubtedly made the best jigs along this side of the Sea of Cortez, his jigs being my secret weapon.

By now the sun was high overhead with plenty of bite and the breeze was picking up ever so little, just enough to take the glass off the sea. Pointing the Coco away from land I made for open water with the intention of trolling for five to ten miles before swinging north towards Las Islas Margaritas, up the other end of the bay. Once there I'd move closer in and hug the coast from a half a mile off where we'd be sure to pick up some Dorado. Near home there were three pale cliffs known as The Pyramids, in front of which there was a small reef that was a magnet for them.

Heading due east towards the mainland of Mexico with the sun overhead so bright it bleached everything from the sky to the water a monochromatic silver we began the long haul. From now on it would simply be a matter of putting in the hours ...but barely an hour into it James started to complain, "Say this is about as interesting as staring at a test pattern on T.V."

"Yeah ... bet you've done that a few times," I muttered.

Then off the port bow I spotted another boat about a mile away cruising along on a parallel course and every so often I'd glance over to check its progress. After a while it looked like it had stopped and I called to Shady, "Do you see that boat?"

"Uh huh..."

"Check it out and see what they're doing."

Without moving from his chair he took the binoculars from their waterproof case beneath him and studied the white speck.

"Well..?" I asked.

"Can't tell for sure but it looks like they might be onto something."

"That's what I thought," I said veering towards them and increasing our speed.

Sure enough they'd hooked into a Marlin and by the time we got there it was by the transom. A stocky Mexican had a gaff in it just behind the gills and a steady stream of deep crimson was coursing down its chrome side into the deep blue sea. Another Mexican had it by the tail and between them they were struggling with it's flailing body trying to club it. For that time of year it was a good size around two hundred pounds with spectacular colours-royal blue on top, silver underneath with bands of purple radiating around its back from the adrenalin pumping through its body.

We motored by and I waved to the skipper on the flying deck, who waved back smiling. By now I was beginning to seriously wonder whether we had the right jigs on.

"Do you reckon we're using the right lures?" James asked echoing my thoughts annoyingly.

We pulled in the lines to check.

"Why don't you pick one," I said unrolling a clear plastic quiver with individual compartments full of brightly coloured jigs.

"Which ones are good for Marlin?" He asked with a puzzled look.

I pointed to three and left him to it while I went to check the fuel.

"How about this one?" He said pulling out a blue, green and white skirt. But he had barely raised it when he cried-"OUCH!" having pierced his finger with the razor sharp four-inch hook.

"Yeah perfect ... " I said.

He shoved his finger into his mouth and sucked on it to stop the bleeding.

An hour passed with no sign of fish and James stifled a yawn mumbling, "I'm hungry ... "and he reached into his teal green back pack to take out a brown paper lunch bag. Laying the contents on the bench beside him he asked, "You guys want one?"

Shady and I shook our heads simultaneously with disdain. I was inwardly preoccupied with having missed out on the tuna and reached for my cordial bottle to drink some fresh water. Then I pulled my Yankee's cap down firmly over my eyes against the sun, which was now high overhead and bouncing off the small dancing waves in dazzling star shaped sparkles.

Richard finished all three of his sandwiches and took a can of Coca Cola from his pack - when suddenly I did a double take. I couldn't believe it! After all I'd said he'd brought that banana along!!! Casually taking it off the bench he started peeling it when I released the tiller and was on him. Three quick steps and my hand cut the air to seize it from him flinging it out to sea. "I TOLD YOU JAMES!" I barked. "NO FUCKING BANANAS!!!"

He flinched beneath my anger and stammered, "I- I- I th- thought you w- were k- k- kidding..."

"No you didn't!" I said angrily. "You just wanted to have your way. You're used to having your way aren't you?!!!"

"Come on buddy," he said sheepishly. "You can't be serious."

"YOU'RE DAMN RIGHT I'M SERIOUS! It's my boat and there are certain things I'm superstitious about."

"Your house you're rules, huh?" He shrugged meekly.

"Exactly."

Shady smiled but kept out of it.

"Well I thought that seeing as I was chartering the boat you'd cut me some slack," Richard protested.

"Richard I've already cut you far too much slack just bringing you along."

"But this banana thing is absurd."

"Maybe to you. But it's old fishing lore. No bananas on fishing boats. A tradition. Something you probably wouldn't relate to with your hip common sense."

Nursing a wounded look he just stared sullenly out at the sea, to where I'd thrown the banana as if there might be some chance of retrieving it.

But the tension between us was cut by an abrupt GRRRRRRRowl ... I wasn't sure whether I'd heard right and looked to Shady questioningly who was half askew in his chair focusing intently on the rods.

"Did you hear something?" He asked jumping up.

"I thought I did..." I said checking the rods too. They displayed no telltale clues only a slight bowing from the resistance of the jigs and an intermittent twitch created by their up and down travel through our wash. The lines weren't running off the spools - neither fast nor slow - which they would have had they been touched. They had been adjusted so that the slightest increase in drag would strip them out.

Looking back at our wake I scrutinised the sea but saw nothing ... returned my gaze and in that instant caught it ever so quickly. A dark shadow torpedoing through the blue towards our whitewash. And before I even managed to move my head a fraction more there was a BANG - SPLASH, the smaller rod flexing dramatically as the reel starting its guttural high speed clatter RRRRRRR ... RRRRRRR ... RRRRRRR ... the solid gears and ratchets pressed into action.

My hand closed hard on the throttle to give it some squirt and the panga lifted up lunging forward- "Get the harness and gimble belt on him!" I yelled excitedly to Shady. We accelerated for thirty meters before I shut the throttle down and threw it into neutral. Only when the boat subsided and eased to a slow drift did I hit the kill switch.

In the silence that followed the only sound was the running line, a steady WWWRRRRRRR... WWWRRRRRRR... WWWRRRRRRR as the fish made a strong run, giving us time to hitch the fighting gear onto Richard. I glanced back but couldn't see anything other than the line cutting steadily through the water, no Marlin like leaps, no Tuna bulldogging back and forward - just a strong, fast run which had taken a good three hundred meters of fluorescent yellow monofilament line.

"How's that harness going?" I demanded anxiously. The smaller rig only carried six hundred meters of backing and I was concerned that if the fish kept running before James was fitted up, it would strip the lot and be gone.

"Ready!" Shady confirmed.

Taking the short black rod from its stainless steel housing I beckoned James towards me and he edged forward like an unsure gladiator in unfamiliar fighting gear. When he reached me I slipped the butt end of the Short Stroker into his gimble belt and after it was firmly fitted, I hooked the chrome metal stays off the harness around his mid section to the reel, securing the tackle in case he inadvertently let it go or it was yanked from his grasp.

"James - keep your knee's bent, about shoulder width, one a bit further back for maximum balance to brace against unexpected jerks," I instructed him.

The fish started to slow now and gradually came to a stop. An eerie silence followed and James looked up quizzically. "Do you think it's still there?"

"It's there all right..." I assured him. "Adjust your drag to increase resistance. Your fish has just temporarily run out of steam. Lower your rod tip and then pull the fish gently towards you. GENTLY now. Test it ... if it doesn't run, repeat the motion and try to get as much line back before it takes off again."

"O.K.," He answered eagerly and started to wind.

"Now if the fish takes off, let it. Whatever you do - don't try to stop it."

"All right," he acknowledged and pumped the rod four or five times, taking in line simultaneously, then on the sixth lift the fish ran again, a high speed sprint taking another hundred meters - WWWWRRRRRRRRR...

“Take back as much line as you can!” I urged James when it stopped. “That line doesn’t hold a lot of backing and if it keeps running you’ll be in trouble.”

We still couldn’t work out what he had on but the next time it came to a stop, I tenuously took hold of the line at the rod tip to test it for weight. It felt like a sixty to seventy-pounder. Releasing the line gently, I urged James to keep winding.

“Maybe an adolescent striped Marlin,” I ventured. “Hasn’t jumped or left the water yet but that doesn’t mean anything.”

James pumped the rod - pulling it towards him then dropped the tip and wound furiously, managing to retrieve a fair bit this time. I refused to back a boat up on a fish as was common practice these days, didn’t believe in it.

A bead of a sweat had cropped up on James’s upper lip and a shiny film appeared on his forehead. “This is hard work,” he said stopping to rest.

“No time for resting,” I barked. “Not while the fish is...keep that line coming in.”

He must have retrieved around two hundred meters of line before it took off again, another hundred-meter WWWRRRRRRRRR...

It wasn’t behaving like anything we’d caught in those waters - making extremely fast, relatively short, straight, high speed runs without showing itself. Then stopping abruptly.

To tell the truth it had me baffled.

“What do you think?” Shady asked.

“Dunno ...it’s got me beat?”

Shady had come back and was staring at the taught line, at the point where it pierced the water. “Different... isn’t it,” he remarked.

Then it ran again and took a further hundred meters, all of James’s last gain.

“Shit! This is tough ...” James breathed heavily. “My arms are killing me!”

“Don’t worry about that,” I said as soon as the fish stopped. “Get that line back.”

There was very little backing on his reel now.

“No ... I can’t,” James whimpered and stopped again.

“Whaaa ... !?” I couldn’t believe my ears. The fight had barely been underway twenty minutes and James was falling apart. I looked at the sea and in that instant the fish leapt - long, sleek and silver, with a pointed head and prominent bottom jaw.

“Barracuda!” I yelled excitedly.

“I’ll be...” Shady said staring with an open mouth.

“And a beauty too!” I added.

“I’m beat,” James repeated with his arms hanging loosely off the reel with only the stays off his harness supporting it now.

“Come on James!” I urged him trying to muster some enthusiasm. “This is what you came two thousand miles for.”

“Nah, I’m done,” he said with resignation as the fish started to run again.

By now there was so little backing on his reel - the gold spool was starting to show.



“Damned if I’m going to let you lose that rig!” I snapped and began to unbolt the stays from his harness frantically. Grabbing the rod - I stuck the butt end in my crotch - where it sat uncomfortably - and started to ease the rod tip back gently, trying to break the fish’s stride. This was something you never did, the danger being that the line could snap. But if I was going to lose it by being stripped off I had to take a shot.

The line went as taught as piano wire, bowing the rod dramatically, and making me wince in anticipation... then just when I thought it could take no more, the fish gave a series of quick jerks, bouncing beads of water off the straining line.

I had all but resigned myself to the inevitable when the fish paused. I held my breath and prayed ... please come back towards me, please, please, please...

I could feel the true weight of it now that it had stopped. Pushing my luck even further, I started easing it towards me ... winding slowly at first, then faster, and when there was no objection, winding it steadily all the way in without a struggle. It came so easily I was confused at first; it almost felt like there was nothing there. I couldn’t figure out whether James had worn it out during those few half-hearted bouts, or if this fish just didn’t have much in it.

It came to the side of the boat passively, long and sleek, wavering silver under water, a large round black eye, like a button, staring at me.

“Shady get the gaff,” I said impatiently. Not that I’d lost patience with Shady - but James’s pathetic performance had put me out of sorts. Glad he didn’t hook into a three, four hundred pound blue marlin ... I thought crankily.

“That’s a strange looking Barracuda,” Shady said peering over the side. I snatched a look too - briefly catching a glimpse of some dark grey tiger striping along its dorsal edge. Then Shady sank the sharp hook of the gaff behind its gills and the fish exploded with a fresh charge of energy. Its tail flapped wildly- threshing back and forth showering us with water that ran down my face and into my mouth, warm with a salty tang. Thrusting the rod at James I grabbed the writhing fish’s tail to help Shady who was having difficulty getting it over the side.

We wrestled it onto the deck and stood back, James stepping towards it excitedly. But I grabbed him firmly by the arm - “Stay away from it!” I warned him. “Those teeth are miniature razor blades. They’ll take a finger or a toe in a New York heartbeat!”

I studied it for a moment before turning to Shady - “You’re right. That’s no Barracuda. It’s a Wahoo!”

It was the first Wahoo we’d ever caught in those waters and I was elated, then deflated ... a bitter sweet chagrin at James having botched our first encounter with such a splendid fish. Wahoo was said to be the fastest pelagic fish in the sea, a claim I’d heard made for many species but I was prepared to believe it on this occasion. You were always prepared to believe superlative claims in the excitement of a first.

Reaching behind me for a belaying pin I gave it a good thump on the forehead and it gave an electric jerk then shuddered to a stop. I gave it another two hard thumps for good measure.

“Go get your camera James,” I said. “And I’ll capture this moment so you can impress your buddies back home.”

He rushed over to his rucksack and rummaged through it excitedly, producing a small instamatic.

“Kneel down behind it,” I said rearranging the Wahoo - laying it on its stomach length wise at his feet. But as he went to place a hand on its head I cautioned - “Don’t put your hand near its mouth!”

“Why not? It’s dead ... I wanna expose its teeth.”

“I’ll do it James! You seem to have a bad habit of drawing blood, usually your own. And you never know even though it’s dead it might have a nervous spasm... take your finger off or something.”

“Relax!” He said giving me one of his disarming giggles.

“James ...” I sighed. “I could tell you all sorts of horror stories about these fish. They’re part of the Barracuda family. About guys trailing a hand lazily in the water as they troll along, the wind in their hair, the sun on their face

...throwing a glint off their wedding bands and... BANG! One of these suckers catching the flash and taking their finger clean off!"

He withdrew his hand snappily. "But this one isn't moving..." he protested, his eyes betraying caution.

I didn't bother with a reply. Taking my diving knife from its holster I pried open the Wahoo's jaws and carefully embedded the point into the roof of its mouth, balancing the butt end in the bed of the bottom jaw to expose its deadly teeth. There were multiple rows crammed into those long jaws, glinting in the strong sunshine from a centimeter to a centimeter and a half long. They weren't pyramidal but long and translucent like miniature glass Masai spearheads.

As I framed my images I wondered how James would recount this catch... would he tell the truth about how he gave up or leave it to the pictures to tell it? Odds on he wouldn't let the truth get in the way of a good story either. A train of thought that led me to wonder how many other 'trophy hunters' held such secrets.

When we were done I carefully extracted my knife and cut a chunk of flesh from around its tail section, peeling off the skin. Then taking a lime from my back pocket I cut a wedge and squeezed a few drops onto the firm white flesh while James was watching me with morbid fascination.

"Here, try this," I said sticking the point of my knife into it, offering him the piece. "...You'll never get sashimi as fresh anywhere!"

"You're not serious?" He recoiled. "It's still pulsating!"

"Exactly..." I chuckled popping it in my mouth. But his claim of it pulsating was an exaggeration. Seeing where his food came from was obviously just a bit too much for his urbane sensibilities.

"That's gross!" He grimaced uncomfortably.

"Hey ... we eat what we catch," I replied. "Unless it's Marlin or Sailfish. We put them back. Besides - I didn't claw my way to the top of the food chain to eat tofu!" I added theatrically. Which was a 'throw off' because I loved tofu but just wanted to gee him up some more.

But if the truth be told, it was the nicest raw fish I'd ever tasted. Clean white flesh, firm and delicate in flavour, reminding me of Nova Scotia scallops.

By now James's face had taken on the pallor of a shitty nappy. I bet he'd eat it if it were on a Styrofoam punnet wrapped in glad wrap I thought cynically. A thought I kept to myself as I smacked my lips enthusiastically and said, "Lets go get some more..."

To which James yawned indifferently and asked. "What time is it?"

"Eleven fifteen," Shady answered.

"How long would it take to get back?"

"Oh, about an hour," I said. "Why?" Although I knew where the conversation was heading, I decided to kick along.

"Perfect," he said. "We'll make it back right on time to catch my buddies for eighteen holes at La Paz."

You beauty, I thought. Forty-five minutes to get back, an hours drive up to La Paz and I'd be rid of him. Back in under two hours to cop a lazy five hundred to return a hero "...see I told you luv, nothing to it."

No, the look on James's face when I swallowed that raw fish said it all. He was no fisherman ... just a tourist chalking up an experience more for others to hear about than his own soul defining. He had his instamatic proof and a good yarn... the upshot being my hors d'oeuvre of 'wriggling' fish. By the time he got home the story would probably have stretched to him biting a chunk out of fleeing Tiger Shark in the sea while he took a crap.

"How's the fuel?" I asked Shady throwing him a wink.

He screwed the black rubber cap off the fuel tank and cupped a hand around the opening to peer into the dark hole. "Enough to get back," he answered.

"Well we won't need that other twenty five-liter container then," I remarked.

"No, looks like you called it right..."

Studying the beautiful coast as we made our way back it was becoming patently clear that my career on the straight and narrow was going to be extremely brief. If I was going to survive until we made it back to our world without losing the plot I had better get back to what I knew best.

\*

### **R.I.P**

For my old friend Shady Lane, 1938-2008, [born Parry Thompson], rescued from an orphanage in Toronto, Canada by a Jewish loan shark, raised in the slums of 'Cabbage Town', educated in numerous reform schools, went to war with the Royal Canadian navy at 15, international jewel thief extraordinaire, graduating from numerous 'correctional' facilities on three continents and earning a 'high distinction' from The School of Hard Knocks.



*May he rest in peace with the many good stories he didn't tell.*

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# Z BOY

Lying flat on the yellow desert hilltop, elbows perched in the sand I adjusted my Zeiss binoculars for a better look while high overhead a wisp of cloud moved lazily through a bleached Mexican sky. The land sloped gently where I lay but it became steeper with green cactus all the way down to the gleaming white stucco subdivision below. Adjusting the focus I strained to see through the heat shimmering off the hillside and the moment I laid eyes on Z Boy I knew he was no good...there was something about that privileged mouth, the pouting bottom lip giving orders to the team of Mexican labourers ferrying back and forth with bags of cement on their shoulders.

“What do you see?” Chucho asked crouching quietly beside me.

“Not much...” I answered distantly.

Five dome cupolas<sup>1</sup> along the roof line inlaid with stunning hand painted tiles, silhouetted by the sparkling Sea of Cortez beyond where testament to the magnitude of the project.



“Not bad for someone who claims he’s got nothin’ I muttered.

“What’s that?” Chucho asked leaning closer.

“Some beach-house this *low life’s* building. Looks like six, seven hundred grand to me.”

Chucho spat to clear the dryness from his mouth. “Let’s see,” he said grabbing impatiently at the binoculars.

I handed them over and got up, brushing dirt from my bare chest and shorts.

“I see what you mean,” Chucho murmured. “And to think he swiped it from some chick down on her luck.”

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<sup>1</sup> Domed Moorish skylights common in Mexico.

“What can I tell you? The guy’s got class.”

“Didn’t she say that he came from money?” Chucho asked.

“Uh huh. Never needed for anything. Took all the short cuts to get more by risking others and snipped his buddies’ along the way.”

“A class act,” Chucho reiterated. “Humph...even his nickname bothers me now. One of those smug rich kids from the South Bay no doubt.”

“Laguna,” I replied. “The kind that knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. That’s where she’s from too. Where they’re all from. Trendy surfers born with silver spoons in their mouths which they later transferred to their noses.”

“Figures!” Chucho scoffed.

“Z Boy was partners with her old man,” I continued pronouncing the Z, ZEE the way Americans do. “When the old man got pinched with a load and copped a brick<sup>1</sup> in Leavenworth the government confiscated all his assets. That’s when Z Boy bolted with the readies. Now she’s struggling to pay rent and raise three kids.”

A sinister smile crept over Chucho’s face - “This’ll be fun.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I’m tempted to do this one for free.” Chucho lowered the binoculars and looked up, “Mate... don’t get too carried away!”

Hobbling back to the Dodge Ram I put my weight on the ball of my foot careful not to step on any more cactus spikes. I’d stepped on one when we first went over to the bluff and couldn’t get it out. It was in real good.



Pancho watched us approach from the back seat and when he spotted the inch and a half long cream spike that had gone through my rubber thong into my heal he remarked with feigned innocence, “Una barba Cardinal, no<sup>2</sup>?” The blank look on his face saying ...only a gringo could be so dumb.

Ignoring him I said to Chucho, “Hand me the pliers from the glove box, would you?” And I clamped them onto the tail end of the spike, drew in my breath and yanked... “Aaaaaaggh!” It refused to budge. I couldn’t believe it

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1 Street jargon for ten years.

2 A Cardinal cactus spike, no?

...the amount of exertion I'd put into it would have won gold at the Olympics.

Pancho smiled sagely, explaining that the shiny spike wasn't as smooth as it appeared but had a multitude of microscopic barbs covering its surface, making extraction extremely difficult.

"Great!" I snapped. "Why the hell didn't you tell me this before?"

"I wan to see de... how jou say? Agua <sup>1</sup> fron jour eyes!" He said with a little chuckle.

"Tears Pancho... tears," Chucho corrected him trying to suppress a grin. Looking back to me he added, "He's a weird fucker isn't he?"

I shot Pancho a deadpan look before handing the pliers to Chucho, "Go on ... you have a go."

Chucho couldn't believe it, couldn't believe I would trust him. I didn't want to but the spike had to come out. In that climate it wouldn't take long for my foot to turn septic and that was the last thing I needed.

"Well if you insist," he said with thinly veiled glee and without a moment's hesitation he took a good hold of the spike and gave it a savage yank. The skin around it bulged dramatically, clinging to the barb with the tenacity of an octopus - shooting sparks through my foot and up my calf but it still refused to budge.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRGH!" I bellowed through clenched teeth again.

Chucho just shrugged, "Sorry mate but it's a tough little sucker," he said, his flippant manner making me so cranky I could have knocked him out. He quickly handed back the pliers.

This time I clamped on with all my strength and fuelled by pain gave it everything - tearing the spike out and shredding the surrounding skin in the process. Pursing my lips I threw the pliers down refusing to utter a sound.

Both Chucho and Pancho studied me in silence trying to keep straight faces. Finally Chucho couldn't help himself and smiled - "Well... at least that's put you in the right mood for the job." Then added, "No situation's devoid of its positive aspect right?"

"Fuck you Chucho," I spat back nursing my foot that was in excruciating pain.

He knew better than to reply.

My heal was both numb and sore and when I tried putting weight on it I winced. It felt like the barb was still in there even through it wasn't. Chucho watched me for a good while as I squeezed my foot to counter the pain before adopting a more serious tone. "How do you want to handle Z Boy?"

After a few moments I mumbled, "Maybe a chat first. There are too many witnesses down there for anything else. I figure the guys a cream puff so we'll run some theatre by him. Who knows, with sufficient muscle and polite menace..."

"Got it," Chucho said. "Either way no one is going 'to make us'. Not without plates on the Dodge. The beaners will just take us for gringo tourists".

"Yeah... play it by ear," I agreed limping back to the Dodge. Opening the tailgate I grabbed a Louisville Slugger and took it to the driver's side door, placing it on the floor between the seat and the door arch. Feeling under the seat my hand found my .357 Colt Python, embraced its cool reassurance, patting it for good measure.

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<sup>1</sup> Water.



The road wound down the hillside through scattered cactus and mesquite and a mile later came to a fork where a side road branched off to a guardhouse with a set of boom gates on either side. Fixed to the top of the building was a beautiful hand painted sign with a Mexican rendition of the Garden of Eden. Above it the name El Dorado stood out in brilliant gold. Two Mexican guards with peaked caps and mirrored sunglasses checked us out as we approached, one of them stepping out and bending towards my window. "Si Senor?" he asked as we pulled up, scrutinising the three of us in turn.

"Amigos de Senor Taglia <sup>1</sup>," I informed him.

"Momentito por favor <sup>2</sup>," he replied and stepped back inside. The hut was glass from waist up and we watched him pick up a phone and punch in some numbers then he leaned back out through the doorway and asked - "Como es su nombre Senor <sup>3</sup>?"

"Mr. Nightmare," I said quickly.

He raised his eyebrows - "Como <sup>4</sup>?"

I repeated it faster the second time and he tried to catch it but obviously had trouble. Not wanting to lose face by asking again he attempted to get his tongue around what he'd heard repeating to himself "Meester Nyme... Meester Nyme" over and over while the phone rang.

"Shit!" Chucho murmured under his breath. "We're not even going to make it past the gate..."

The phone rang for some time before the guard finally gave up. He wouldn't have if we were Mexicans but because we were gringos he assumed we were sweet. Raising the boom gate without ceremony he waved us through. I took my foot off the brake letting the truck roll and Chucho exhaled but I braked again abruptly making him catch his breath- "De donde es <sup>5</sup>?" I called back.

"La ultima calle a dereche Senor. Calle Vista del Mar <sup>6</sup>."

"Gracias," I replied with a friendly wave. Then to no one in particular I mumbled, "That's what I like... Mexican efficiency."

**The road through the development** was brand new unscuffed black tar with fresh concrete curbs and gutters bordering beautifully manicured lawns that extended to tall white adobe walls. Behind them stood million dollar villas set well back, and all the way up the hill cul de sacs branched off on either side lined by more opulent dwellings - white with terracotta tiled roofs. There were freshly planted adolescent palm trees everywhere - pale green and yellow, and flowering tropical shrubs - splashes of purple, red and pink. Coffee coloured workmen dressed in loose fitting calico, large straw sombreros and sandals attended to the gardens. When we reached the top and turned right into Calle Vista del Mar, it wasn't hard to find Z Boy's place, and it was the only one on the block commanding a view that took in everything below. You could see all the way to the Sea of Cortez and San Jose del Cabo.

We pulled up to his drive, which was blocked by a long trestle work bench with a workman cutting tile with a high pitched circular masonry saw. And standing beside him was Z Boy, I recognized him instantly from Judy's description. He was studying a set of architectural plans with his hands holding them down on either side to stop them from curling up. The noise prevented him from hearing our approach and gave me a moment to study him. He was around forty with a bronzed, athletic surfers build, tall with broad shoulders and black hair beginning to

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1 Friends of Mr. Taglia

2 One moment please

3 What's your name Sir?

4 What?

5 Where is it?

6 The last road to the right. Ocean View Road

show some silver fleck. Wearing a pair of faded red board shorts with NO FEAR in white letters down the seams and a pair of thongs he had the look of a groovy Stockbroker dressed down for the weekend.

“You guys wait here,” I told Chucho and Pancho. I didn’t want to overdo it at first, which would have been the case if the three of us fronted him. The boys looked like a pair of mini sumo wrestlers, both a shade under six feet - Pancho weighing in around 250 lbs and Chucho 225, both with shattered noses and necks the diameter of wheel rims. They had an air of trouble and that’s just the way I wanted to play it... leave them sitting in the truck as visual props. An inch taller than the both of them I was slighter at 200 lbs. with a frame similar to Z Boys.

Walking over smiling I extended my hand- “Z Boy?”

“Yeah...?” he replied returning my smile with obvious curiosity. The hand he reached out had the index finger missing below the middle knuckle.

“Judy sent me.”

“Judy?” He asked puzzled.

His Mexican workmen checked us out but when they saw we were smiling they carried on.

“Judy Locke,” I said pumping his hand firmly, conscious of the missing finger.

For a moment he looked confused and his eye darted to the truck, taking in Chucho and Pancho. Then he tumbled. His body language gave him away, his shoulders sagged and the easy confidence sapping out of his grip, his eyes fluttering wildly back to me then to the truck. But he composed himself quickly and forced the smile back to his face - “Judy ... how is she? Shit it’s been ages.”

“That’s what she said!” I replied matter of factly. “Too long.”

Z Boy didn’t say anything but appraised us alternately.

“In fact she’s a little disappointed in you not having kept in touch,” I continued.

“Well I don’t know what your interest in all this is, ...” he said arrogantly before I stopped him- “My interest is her interest. And from what she tells me it’s considerable!”

He flushed a little, understanding clearly now where I was coming from.

Looking past him I let my eyes wander over his mansion and continued, “This is quite some place you’re building.”

“L-L-Listen Bud” he stuttered following my drift, “I don’t know what she’s told you but we lost contact when the shit hit the fan...”

I returned my gaze to fix him evenly with a cold stare- “She’s still in Laguna pal. It’s not that big a place. All you’ve got to do is call information.”

“I figured her phone would be off after Bill went down,” he explained lamely. “Thought I’d let things cool down.”

“What? For five years? How cool did you want them to get?”

Z Boy thought about it for a minute and changed tack- “Look, just give me her number and address and I’ll fly up to San Diego tomorrow. I’d love to see her.”

*That’s more like it* I thought but added for good measure- “Z Boy, if we have to come back a second time there won’t be a third. Understand?”

“You won’t have to come back.”

“I hope not... this heat makes me extremely irritable.” My throbbing foot making me even grumpier.

At ease again he patted me on the shoulder patronisingly - “Don’t worry, I’ll sort this out. I’m not going to run away. After all, this is my home,” he said waving expansively at the mansion behind him.



"I'm not worried in the least," I grinned and turned, walking back to the truck without another word.

Chucho quizzed me straight away - "Well?"

"He's going to sort it out."

"Whaa....?!" He exclaimed skeptically. "That easy, huh?"

"So he says. I'll give her a call in a couple of days to see if he makes good. He said he'd fly up tomorrow."

"Can't help but feel suspicious when things are that simple," Chucho said sucking on a tooth pensively.

Facing him I replied - "It's not settled yet. But like he said, this is his home. Even if he bolts he'll come back eventually."

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A couple of days later I called Laguna and her voice came on as smooth as silk, "Hi hon, good to hear from you. What a coincidence...that old friend of mine dropped by yesterday. The one I asked you to look up, down there."

I could picture her sitting on a deck chair by the ocean, her soft golden shoulder length ringlets, the Marilyn Monroe beauty spot on her cheek enhancing rather than detracting from her beauty.

"How was he? I asked, thinking she looked particularly good in bright red lipstick.

"Really good..." She purred.

"Glad to hear it," I said cutting her short, not wanting her to go into detail over the phone. Her voice purred on lulling me with its sweet southern cadences, most of it small talk that went straight over my head. I was wondering what colour body stocking she was wearing, she was a personal trainer at an exclusive gym and always wore one over knee length tights - the overall effect making her shapely body look like it had been spray painted.

"I can't imagine," she was saying, "What it was you said that convinced him to come and see me after so long? But whatever it was certainly did the trick."

"All I said was - you missed him and could use the three hundred and twenty he skipped out on for the electricity bill." The three hundred and twenty being a reference to three hundred and twenty thousand Z Boy owed her old man. Although it had been a long time since the authorities had been on her case you could never be too careful over the phones despite what I'd said to Z Boy about calling her earlier. When it came to chasing down money the US Justice Department was like a Tiger shark on a chum slick.

"Did he sort it out?" I asked casually.

"Well... sort of. He gave me a deposit."

"A deposit?" I said raising my voice.

"Five dollars down... weekly installments to follow."

I grunted my disapproval but she was quick to placate me - "Can't tell you how good it was to get something. Anything at all, it's been tough on wages."

"Well...I guess if you're satisfied, I am too," I said taking the edge out of my voice after a pause and dropped it. Like I said, the phone wasn't the place to go into detail.

"Give me an address and I'll send you a postcard," she added. "I can't thank you enough." The postcard was a cryptic reference to my fifty per cent.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "You can thank me when it's all sorted out. I really didn't do anything."

"That's not the impression he gave me. All he could say was - Is that guy for real? Either Z Boy was trying to pump me on how serious you are or your Aussie tough buy act rattled him."

"Wouldn't be hard," I chuckled.

"I assured him you were the full quid... Isn't that what you Aussies call it?"

I laughed; surprised she had remembered the expression, "Yeah well... he got one part right. The reference to the part I played. Because that's all it's been so far... acting."

"Whatever it was it worked," she said. Then added, "How about I call you in a couple of months?"

"Good as gold. Or call me straight away if his amnesia returns!"

"I promise ..."

With that I hung up. I didn't usually get caught up in small talk but she gave such good phone.

"Well?" Chucho asked anxiously when I stepped from the booth. "When do we get our cut?"

"Soon..."

His eyebrows shot up instantly- "Uh oh ...I knew it! I knew that guy was winding us up. It just sounded too easy. And what about the chic? Did she get anything?"

"Yeah. Five grand. Installments to follow."

"Well at least that's something. When's she sending our half?"

"I told her not to bother."

"You what?!!!"

"There's not enough in it yet -"

"Buddy - we're broke! Even a couple of grand would be good now. Something to carry us for a bit."

"Relax," I said nonchalantly. "We'll get by somehow, we always do. And she'll sort us out when she get's a lump."

"... And the cheque's in the mail and I promise not to come in your mouth!" Chucho grunted cynically. Shaking his head with disbelief he added, "You crack me up. You really do. You'd put your hand in a cage full of crocodiles for a nickel but you're a soft touch for a skirt or a sob story!"

"What can I tell you?" I shrugged.

"Not much!" He answered still shaking his head. "Now I've heard it all. And what's the meaning of letting a chic get the drop on you anyway? You've already got the best one going..."

"Just because I'm on a diet Chucho, doesn't mean I can't check out the menu!"

He grunted, "By the way, since we're still broke who'se paying for the next round?"

"I'll flip you for it."

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That was the last thought I gave Z Boy for a while, I knew Judy would come good when he eventually settled and assumed he was taking care of her on the drip. Which was O.K. by me. As long as she was satisfied with the deal. Besides it wasn't really my line of work. Sure I'd done a bit in my time, but usually chasing my own.

Then one sunny afternoon six months later Chucho and I were walking along the Marina in Cabo on our way to Latitude 22<sup>1</sup> when a brand new twelve meter Riviera caught my attention, it's twin turbo Diesel Caterpillar V.8.'s an ear pleasing growl on reverse thrust as it pulled in to the jetty. Chucho noticed it too and let out a low whistle.

"Yeah..." I agreed. "Check out the leather." Two bucket seats in the elevated cockpit were padded in rich white leather, as was a curved bench seat around the back. You could smell the new leather over the salt air. The hull was gleaming white too, everything was... except for the Rosewood steering wheel that looked like something out of a Ferrari and the odd bit of Chrome and a dramatically angled turquoise tint wrap around windshield.

Chucho shook his head in admiration as he took in the long, sleek ocean racer. "Check it out!" He sighed. "If you hung two pink balloons off its arse end you'd get arrested for indecent exposure." Then he grabbed my arm abruptly, "Don't worry about all that – check out the owner!"

While we stood admiring the boat the guy at the helm turned towards us - stopping us dead in our tracks. It was Z Boy. And beside him his companion looked like something out of a body building magazine with pumped up muscles and exploding veins, blond flat top hair cut on a square head narrower than the neck - torso like an upside down coat hanger.

Shielding his eyes against the bright sun, Chucho exclaimed - "Well... look who it is. If it isn't our old buddy Z Boy!"

"Yeah... And it looks like things have picked up too," I said appraising the boat.

Z Boy hadn't noticed us yet; he was too caught up posturing as he maneuvered the Riviera up to the dock. The gorilla jumped out to tie off.

"Shall we say hullo?" Chucho asked enthusiastically.

"Fuck No!" I replied grabbing Chucho by the arm and turning him around to walk back towards the centre of town. When we reached the public phone offices I stepped inside.

"Hullo..." came the dulcet voice from the other end of the line.

"Judy - it's Les. How ya doin?"

"Good hon, I'm surviving."

That wasn't the answer I wanted and the flatness in her voice betrayed the answer to the next question before I even asked it- "Has that friend of yours being taking care of things or what?"

"He did originally... remember the down payment? After that he made two or three instalments, \$5 at a time. Sent them with some guy who could barely fit through the door."

"Square head ... flat top?"

"That's him."

"Then what?"

"Boof head told me Z Boy wasn't doing too well. That he couldn't send any more for a while."

"And that was the last you heard?"

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<sup>1</sup> Our favorite bar in Cabo, owned by a friend from California

“Uh huh.”

“How long ago was that?”

“About five months. Oh...and by the way, the guy he sent?”

“Yeah?”

“He told me to give you a message.”

“What?”

“To tell you he’d be taking the debt over.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes.” That’s why I never did contact you. I got his drift and...”

“Well you should have,” I redressed her gently.

“No hon, I’m happy for what you did and for what I got. It pulled me out of a jam at the time and the last thing I want is for you to get any agro over my grief.”

“Don’t be silly,” I said.” You should have contacted me straight away.”

“No! I mean it,” she said sweetly. “Promise me you’ll leave it alone now.”

The silence from my end made her repeat it - “Promise me!”

“Promise,” I answered with my fingers crossed.

“Well? Chucho asked keenly, trying to read my face as I stepped from the varnished timber and glass cabinet.

Looking down deep in thought, I took a moment before answering, “...Should have guessed that low life was throwing off<sup>1</sup>.”

Chucho’s face clouded instantly - “Let’s get back down there before that piece of shit leaves!”

“No!” I said. “Leave it for the minute.”

“What?” You’re not going to just forget it are you?”

I shot him a sinister smile.

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<sup>1</sup> Misleading us.

# SHARK BAIT

The night was hot and sultry, dark with barely a moon. A steady breeze coming off the sea rustled some palm fronds, scraping them back and forth against the side of the building and rattling a few dry leaves along the path in front of Chucho as he moved purposefully towards the warm glow of lights. Mounting the stairs two at a time to the pink three story Villa he rapped on the door - three vigorous thumps muffled by his gloved hand then he stepped back. He'd intentionally avoided using the oxidised copper sea dragon doorknocker, knowing the echo would travel on the wind.

A moment later a voice from inside called out - "Si?!"

Chucho waited a minute without answering, banged again then turned and descended the dozen stairs in three energetic leaps, returning quickly back up the path towards the road. He'd almost made it when the door behind him swung open, emitting a flood of soft yellow light that illuminated the pathway. Silhouetted by it Z Boy stood in the middle of the doorway barefoot, dressed in a royal blue and white vertical striped cotton bathrobe with a crest of an anchor at his heart. "Oye!" He beckoned. But Chucho didn't turn. He kept walking as though he hadn't heard. Strolling onto the terracotta-tiled veranda, Z Boy cupped a hand to his mouth to call again, louder this time... and that's when I hit him.

Stepping swiftly from the shadow beside the door I swung the long tube sock full of sand in an overhead arc, bringing it down with a dull thud behind his ear. His knees bounced together and he buckled instantly. I had to reach out and catch him, to stop him tumbling down the stairs.

By then Chucho was already on his way back and bounded up the stairs quickly. We each hitched an arm through Z Boy's and I reached back with my spare hand to close the front door, easing it so its latch caught with a soft click. Then we were in the dark again, dragging his limp body along the path, his feet trailing along behind all the way to the Dodge waiting by the curb, its engine idling silently and its lights out. When we got there, the back door swung open and we threw an unconscious Z Boy onto the back seat. Chucho got in quickly behind him and without delay I moved around to the driver's side door and got in too, eased the auto floor shift into drive and pulled away gently.

The big four-wheel drive rolled up the road without a sound and only when I had rounded a corner some two hundred meters on did I switch on the lights.

In the back Pancho and Chucho sat Z Boy up between them so that his chin sagged against his chest, as though he were drunk or sleeping. I drove through the exclusive suburb of San Jose del Cabo along the broad boulevard that skirted the lush golf course in a long looping arc and up to the turn off at the highway where I negotiated a roundabout and headed north towards the Airport. Breathing easier once we were out of town we headed up Highway One and Chucho exhaled "...Sweet!"

Neither Pancho nor I replied.

My eyes shot to the rear view mirror to check no one was following and a little later I said, "Yeah. Lucky Shady told us the goon goes to the gym every afternoon until seven otherwise he might have answered instead of scumbag here!"

That was the last any of us spoke for a while. We drove in silence past the airport and on for about another twenty minutes when Z Boy started to come around. Putting his hand to the back of his head he rubbed the spot where I'd nailed him and groaned, "What the..?"

No one said anything. We drove in silence with Z Boy sitting between the two large men in the back who looked ahead as though he didn't exist. But it wasn't long before our silence began to unnerve him and he started - "Listen guys, there was nothing I could do. I paid her what I could but I've poured all my spare cash into that house of mine at El Dorado... I'll sort it out as soon as I can sell something."

We ignored him.

“I swear,” he continued. “I’ll put it right as soon as I get my act together. I’m working on something right now...” Our silence was getting to him even more than if we’d tried to terrorise him through threats and yelling and then urgency began to creep into his voice, “I promise...”

It was darker away from the inhabited part of the coast; the night so black it was difficult to see along the winding unlit highway with no centre line or reflector posts alongside. It was tiring enough trying to negotiate the road and by the time we got to the turn off at La Rivera some forty minutes on Z Boy’s whining was seriously getting to me. Turning onto the dirt track towards the small fishing village I pulled over. After I killed the engine and turned out the lights we were immediately engulfed by an overwhelming silence, except for Z Boy’s mouth. It was in overdrive telling us how Lenny, his square head sidekick was an ex FBI agent ... how he’d track us down and what he was going to do to us.

In the distance you could just see the pueblo, a handful of winking lights.

Opening the glove compartment I rummaged through the contents till I found what I wanted and turned to face him. Holding his eyes for a minute without saying anything I glanced at Pancho and said - “La Mano<sup>1</sup>!”

Pancho grabbed Z Boy’s right wrist and forced it forward until it rested on top of the bench seat between us. Chucho held him firmly by the other arm.

“Now wait a goddamn minute...,” Z Boy protested, his voice betraying panic.

Securing the pliers onto the middle knuckle of his index finger I squeezed hard until it popped. Z Boy’s mouth opened but no sound came out - it was as if it got trapped deep down within him then an ear splitting howl bellowed out of him which the breeze carried off and cast into the night. Throwing the pliers back into the glove box I started the engine and continued to La Rivera with all of us maintaining our silence as we bounced along the rough sandy track, the suspension squealing alternately to Z Boys moans.



**There wasn’t much to La Rivera**, a fleet of blue and white fishing boats on the beach, a square concrete shop, a few sandy roads with the odd mongrel lying in the middle and plenty of dusty Chipolote cactuses. It was just a sleepy little fishing village with no sign of life except for the odd flickering TV light coming from inside a dark house. Close to Punto Colorado on the southern end of a thirty-mile long bay it was the last place on the dirt road connected to the highway and civilisation. The other Pueblos further around the bay were accessible only by boat. What also distinguished La Rivera was a long white jetty reaching fifty meters out into the dark white-capped sea with a slick white ocean racer moored off the end of it.

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1 His hand

Z Boy cradled his hand, the crushed finger standing out straight from the rest of the balled fist, and groaned-  
“What’s going on?”

“Nice tucked away spot...” I commented distantly, pulling up to the jetty and parking the car. As soon as I cut the engine the sound of briskly lapping waves was thrown up at us by the wind, the only other sound being the tinkling of hot metal from the engine. Looking at the sleek boat I admired the way it rode the waves smoothly that passed beneath it, the other boats tied to buoys were bobbing up and down busily like corks over the chop. I got out and motioned for the boys to get Z Boy out too then strolled down the wooden dock with an occasional loose board springing up with a squeak after I passed. Pancho and Chucho trailed along behind on either side of a solemn Z Boy and when we reached the end I turned to him and demanded in an even voice- “Where are the keys?”

“What?”

“Don’t fuck with me Z Boy... the keys!”

“What are you talking about?” he responded with wounded indignation.

He obviously didn’t realise we knew about the boat but after I’d first spotted it in Cabo I had done a thorough check - right down to what dealership he’d bought it from in San Diego and how much he’d paid. Not that it was hard, like most boat dealerships they had put a sticker on the back with their name and location. A simple phone call posing as a potential buyer and dropping Z Boy’s name as the friend who had recommended them had paid off well. Not only had they told me that he’d purchased the boat two months earlier but how much it was worth, that he’d fitted twin after market turbo’s to the V.8’s for an additional ten thousand... the dealer even intimated that as I was a friend of Z Boy’s calling from Mexico, he’d welcome a ‘brown paper bag’ deal. Undeclared cash. No, no matter how you looked at it Z Boy’s shopping behaviour could hardly pass for someone doing it tough. In view of which, treating me like a mug was seriously starting to irritate me. “Go get the pliers would you?” I said to Pancho.

But quick as a whip Z Boy responded - “The keys are in the centre of the steering wheel. Take out the horn button...”.

At the centre of three long aluminium spokes of the Rosewood wheel was a round black button with Riviera written in silver running writing surrounded by a silver Laurel wreath. Prying my fingernails under the edge I worked it loose from the hollow cylinder it was fitted to, which was about four inches deep. I reached in with my index and middle fingers to feel around and found the key, easing it out.

The cockpit and dashboard looked like they were out of a Concord with enough gauges and toggle switches to keep Mario Andretti happy. All state of the art - the gauges even changed from white faces in daylight to black at night with fluoro indicators. I primed the engines and Chucho untied us while Pancho kept Z Boy ‘company’ in the back. Keeping the revs low to avoid arousing attention I eased the sleek vessel around in a wide arc and burbled into the black night.

The warm ocean air caressed my skin, blowing my hair back as the off shore racer cut through the waves like a stiletto, the deep grunt of its throbbing V8s inviting my hand to pull back on the throttle. But I resisted, I wanted to slip away from the coast without being noticed so I settled on a controlled cruise and entertained myself with the luxurious fittings around me instead. It made me think of how I’d been rich and how I’d been poor but rich was better because even though happiness was a frame of mind there was nothing like putting a smile on your face with a new toy. And, after all, the ultimate plug in life was to put a permanent smile on your face.

When we were a good three miles out I pulled back on the throttle - two chrome arms with a T top and the boat seemed to hesitate momentarily before lifting and taking off like a dragster making Chucho's arms flail for the windscreen while his feet shuffled desperately to gain purchase. But the G force was too great and sent him sprawling backwards. I had been mistaken about being far enough away from the coast because the deep growl of the V8s boomed across the bay like thunder claps and in no time we were doing forty-five knots - the turbos yet to cut in. Chucho struggled back to his knees and crept forward, reaching for a chrome-recessed bar within the dashboard. When he managed to get a hold, he pulled himself up grinning. "Holy shit!" He yelled over the wind. "This baby's got some grunt!"

I smiled but concentrated on keeping the boat safe as it slapped down hard on the waves, never feeling uncomfortable or dangerous... not yet.

"This boat's a fix for my adrenalin habit!" I called back to him and gave it the last of the throttle. It was like punching the accelerator all over again with the big Garrett turbos whining and making us surge ahead as though we'd been fired from a catapult. We were barely skimming the water's surface and flipping at that speed would have meant the end of us because there was so little control - the heavy boat's lack of contact with the water cancelling all maneuverability.

I kept it up taking it to the edge and beyond, enjoying the danger ... then gradually eased off the throttle until the hull touched back down and that solid, weighty feeling returned. Easing the throttle back some more all I could feel now was the adrenalin pumping through my chest.

Catching Chucho's eye I beamed, "Ain't that something else!"

"You bet!" he replied. "But a Gold card wouldn't feed this beast's fossil fuel appetite... Platinum at least!"

By then we were a good way out and in the darkness of the night the lights of La Rivera had been all but swallowed. The only illumination now was the glowing green and red starboard and port lights on either side of the long curved bow and a multitude of gauges before me throwing up a yellow technical glow. I eased the throttle back to a slow deep burble and put it into neutral then shut her down.

For a moment it seemed deadly quiet until the small sounds crept back, waves tapping against the hull with alternate thuds and slaps ... a soft breeze humming off the windscreen. I studied the dashboard pensively trying to work out how to play Z Boy, to come up with the right strategy. Threats wouldn't work - I'd already made enough of those and that was something I'd learned long before, if one didn't work you were generally wasting your time making more. No... I had to make good on my first promise of not returning a third time or we'd lose credibility. While I thought it over I studied the instrumentation absent-mindedly and I was casually toying with the GPS - when an idea struck me. "Well pal -" I said addressing Z Boy, "Are you going to keep treating me like a mug or what?"

"Just give me some time," he pleaded, "I promise I'll sort this out..."

I cut him short, "After your last promises your credibility's fresh out. I'm going to ask you one last time and if I don't like what comes out of your mouth our conversation is over."

He barely got any words out when that desperation started to creep into his voice and I knew I was wasting my breath. It was convincing assurances I wanted not pleas.



Getting out of the contoured leather seat I walked purposefully back to him and yanked him to his feet. "Pancho give me a hand would you?" I asked and between us we dragged Z Boy over to the gunwale, Pancho pushing him from behind while I pulled him by the collar. When we got him there I said - "I never liked you from the start," and without any further preamble propelled him straight over the side.

His cry was drowned by a loud splash that made Chucho come over and look into the water curiously, then questioningly at me.

"Don't look at me like that," I said. "I did warn him!"

Pancho walked off indifferently.

"Hey! Look at the bright side," I added patting Chucho on the back. "We've got a nice boat for our trouble."

We both looked back to the water, at Z Boy bobbing and spluttering on the surface with his dressing gown floating around him and when he recovered a little he made a beeline for the side to reach up. It was too high and he couldn't get a hold so he started swimming for the stern.

I returned instantly to the cockpit and started the engines- kicking it into forward, giving the throttle a nudge just as Z Boy reached the transom. The large boat lurched forward effortlessly through a dozen small waves pulling away from his grasp.

His splashes could be heard over the low rumble of the V8s and when he caught up I gave it another touch of throttle to pull away again. He gave another muffled curse and I pulled the throttle back hard watching until he became a mere speck behind us. Chucho looked at me with concern and when I didn't slow down he asked - "You're not really going to leave him out there are you?"

"Why not?"

"Well ... for a start the sharks'll get him before too long at this time of night."

"So?"

I gave it more throttle and Chucho looked back nervously staring at the pitch-black sea.

Beneath a waterproof flap on the dashboard I found a recessed stereo and turned it on, tuning into the first station I came upon. The reception was excellent over the water and I immediately had a San Diego station from a thousand miles away, Lyal Lovett's 'Pontiac' filling the night as clear as crystal. "This is me," I said easing back into my chair as we glided easily through the swell and I put my feet up on the dash and said, "Pancho, go below and see if there's anything to drink?"

Pancho grinned and opened two louvered half doors leading down into the sleek hull and descended. A few moments later his head popped back up and he produced a bottle of Bacardi Añejo - superlative rum manufactured only in Mexico. It was nothing like the ordinary perfumed lolly water Bacardi that flooded the rest of the world, I wouldn't even consider drinking that but something truly special.

"Der is eberyting here amigo," Pancho informed me in his quiet baritone. "Eben a fridge con hielo<sup>1</sup>, limas<sup>2</sup>, Coca Cola - todo<sup>3</sup>!"

"Beautiful," I beamed. "Cuba libres all around buddy."

"Bueno," he acknowledged and disappeared again.

"This is the life, huh?" I said waving an arm about the boat and looking pleased with myself.

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1 With ice

2 Limes

3 The lot

Chucho looked unsettled.” You’re not seriously going to leave that guy out there are you?” He asked. Although Chucho didn’t mind a bit of violence he clearly did have his limits.

“Why not?”

“Hey... I don’t like him too much either... but not over money! That’d go against everything we’ve ever believed in.”

“Fuck him,” I said abruptly.

We sat quietly with the warm soft air rushing against our faces and the deep growl of the engines reverberating beneath us when Pancho emerged with our Cuba Libres. He handed us one each.

“Not even plastic safety glass!” I remarked impressed by the weight of the heavy crystal tumblers.

Pancho maintained his grin, his black eyes shiny in the dark as impenetrable as Obsidian. Beside him Chucho was edgy and he threw his drink back hastily. My first mouthful went down like honey, the style of rum referred to as spiced with a distinct character but not at all like the cheap perfume kind. Like all things of quality it had a distinct flavour yet subtle with the emphasis on smooth.

Heading back towards La Rivera I decided to take the long route via Punto Colorado, to cut across the bay and hug the shore so we could check out the small palm studded pueblos along the coast. At cruising speed I figured it would take us an hour to get back, enough for a few drinks and a pleasant cruise. Chucho looked over his shoulder nonchalantly and tried to stifle a few forced yawns. The drinks went down in three gulps and Pancho went back to freshen them up.

“Well this is a new side to you,” Chucho ventured when we were alone.

“Like an iceberg-” I replied. “Nine tenths below the surface.”

“Don’t know about the nine tenths,” he said, “But the way you threw that sucker in the drink without a second thought ... yes I’ll agree with the iceberg part!”

“Relax Chucho,” I said. “This budding conscience is a whole new dimension to your personality.”

He pondered what I said but kept his thoughts to himself.

When we pulled up to the dock at La Rivera I cut the engine and pulled the knob to illuminate the cockpit from a long tube light recessed modernistically into the chrome frame of the windshield. “Now let’s see how good this works,” I said switching on the G.P.S. then I restarted the boat and swung it back out to sea. I didn’t wait long to give it throttle this time but didn’t floor it either, just took it to a good thirty-five knots, my eyes glancing intermittently to the G.P.S..

“What are you doing?” Chucho shouted over the wind.

“You’ll see ...”

“If you’re doing what I think - how do expect to find him in this dark?”

“With the wonders of modern technology,” I informed him but didn’t elaborate. Before long the bearings came up on the G.P.S. and I eased the throttle back, cut the engines and listened.

Nothing...

Just the tap tap of waves slapping against the hull. Rechecking the G.P.S I tapped it with my finger... I had the correct bearing all right but no Z Boy! I scanned the black sea with mounting unease.

“What is that thing you keep looking at?” Chucho asked observing me studying the G.P.S.

“A Global Positioning System,” I said. “Works off satellites. It can pinpoint anything on this planet down to a margin of error of a meter.”

“No shit?” Chucho exclaimed with awe.

“No shit,” I replied matter of factly. “The system was developed for the Iraqi war. Now you can pick one up at any marine supply outlet for around \$200.”

“Amazing, huh?”

Not that it was tough to impress Chucho in such matters. Despite his superlative street smarts he’d barely mastered the pencil and paper let alone graduated to the computer age. He gawked at the unit open mouthed.

Pancho didn’t bother to think about it he just smiled silently and went below to fix another round of drinks.

“That’s very impressive,” Chucho remarked surveying the darkness around us. “But where’s Z Boy?”

“Don’t know...” I replied double-checking the G.P.S. “He should be right here.”

“He’s probably shark shit by now,” Chucho said.

My palms were starting to sweat, “Thank’s mate ... that’s all I needed to hear!”

Chucho studied the water beside the boat- “Which way’s the current going? He’s probably drifted...”

“You’re right,” I agreed anxiously.

Restarting the engines I eased the throttle forward, moving slowly with the rolling whitecaps.

“What I can’t understand,” Chucho said. “Is why you left it so long?”

“I wanted to make a point, he’s obviously more stubborn than we originally thought.”

“Well you’ve made your point...”

A loud splash off the starboard bow spun our heads as the sea churned and swirled with sparkling phosphorescence.

“What the fuck was that?!” Chucho exclaimed.

I studied the water but could see nothing. Whatever it was had descended back into the black bowels of the sea. Softly I whispered, “Probably something big and nasty ... pinching off bits of Z Boy out its arse.”

We stared blankly at the spot mesmerised by the impenetrable darkness and Chucho said, “Do you think Pancho knew what you were up to?”

I flashed him a strained smile, “Do you think he cared?”

Neither of us spoke for a bit and the situation started to weigh heavily ...don’t do this to me...I groaned inwardly and started the engines; easing the throttle forward when I heard what sounded like a muffled wail.

I cut them instantly.

“What is it?” Chucho asked looking at me.

“Did you hear that?”

Chucho cupped a hand around his ear and closed his eyes, “...Nuh!”

“Over there,” I said nodding in the direction I thought the sound came from.

We both listened - all you could hear was the wind against the windshield, a fluttering breeze of sighs and whistles.

My hopes sank again. Obviously my heightened sensitization was playing tricks on my ears.

I went to restart the engines but stopped. There it was again...a sound like a faint moan in the distance.

Chucho grabbed my arm- “Yeah. I think I caught it that time.”

“Where’d it come from?” I asked hopefully.

“That way,” he pointed straight ahead.

Cruising slowly I kept the engine noise to a subdued burble while we strained to see and hear through the dark. Then two hundred meters further on I cut the engines again and we sat silently.

After a while Chucho exhaled, “Just when I thought we were in luck.”

Then we heard it again, still faint but clearer than the last time.

“Que passa <sup>1</sup>?” Pancho asked sticking his head out of the hold, looking around questioningly.

“We’re going to find the pinchi carbon <sup>2</sup> I informed him.

“Porque <sup>3</sup>?”

“To unburden my conscience,” I sighed, more for Chucho’s benefit because Pancho wouldn’t have understood the English word conscience let alone the concept.

His black Indian eyes stared back at me impassively.

“Guess Pancho’s kind of getting used to this rig,” Chucho grinned “...can’t figure out why you’d want to give it back when it would be plain easier to keep it.”

“A tale of two cultures,” I mused. “When we were kids our folks gave us pet Labradors ... Pancho’s fed him his from a pot. And you can be sure his wasn’t some pedigree labrador!”

A pale dot up ahead drew our attention and I gave the throttle a squirt, the engines responding with a hungry growl that punched us through the dark and in an instant we pulled up beside a motionless body. Almost motionless, he was floating on his back, exerting only the bare minimum of effort through feebly stroking arms. Smothering a deep breath I cut the engines.

Pancho extended an arm to help him as he struggled onto the transom, yanking him up roughly. Z Boy didn’t try to get into the boat immediately but rested on the wooden slatted platform with his legs still in the water. Wrapping his arms around his torso he was trembling uncontrollably, choking down gulps between chattering teeth. Pancho walked off indifferently to reclaim his drink but I couldn’t help feel a pang of something. Not guilt but fleeting empathy that you’d feel at the sight of any human trauma, even your enemies.

You could feel bad about doing what I’d done or you could say- *Hey, this guy didn’t give a shit about the chic he robbed while she was being ground by the U.S. judicial blender ... losing a husband and struggling to raise a bunch of kids*. No, a guy like Z Boy wouldn’t have lost any sleep over her hardships ... her kids missing sports competitions because she couldn’t afford the budget motel in the neighbouring town ... or dinner out at Denny’s family restaurant while he agonized over the choice in the tiles for his latest domed skylight.

Z Boy was nothing but a greedy thief who needed prodding to hand back what he’d nicked. For that I didn’t have a problem with the way I’d handled him. If anything he’d gotten off light. Besides... what had we really done other than give him a sore finger and a swim? It was really very lightweight for Mexico.

All this went through my head as we drove back to San Jose without anybody saying much in the dark but what was there to say? To ask Z Boy why he was a worm? Give him a lecture? No. You tended not to say much after an episode like that, especially with an ‘alien’ in your midst. Pancho never said much at the best of times, Chucho was off on some frequency of his own and I’d save my comments till all the dough was in the bank.

Tuning in to Radio Sinaloa on the mainland I sat back and enjoyed some Ranchero music; a heartbroken lament ... and quietly wondered if Roy Orbison had any Mexican in him.

“Which way?” I said when we came up on the roundabout in San Jose with an illuminated crucifix in the middle.

“Up to El Dorado where I’m building my house,” Z Boy answered sullenly.

*That’s good*, I thought. Going back to the place where we’d snatched him might have proved a bit sticky... especially if that lump of a sidekick of his was home.

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1 What’s happening?

2 Literally - little goat, but more like dirty little rat.

3 Why?

Veering right, up the hill we came to the security gates where the same guard from the last time stepped half way out before noticing Z Boy in the back seat and he waved, stepping aside to press the button for the security gate. We all smiled and waved back, proceeding up through the development along a long boulevard illuminated from an island up the middle by modern lampposts that reflected light down onto the cultivated tropical vegetation below. I reached the top and went to turn into Calle Vista del Mare when Z Boy stopped me - "No!" He said. "Keep going."

"What? Onto that dirt track?"

"Uh huh."

The truck bounced onto a rough track that was no more than a set of tire tracks etched into the ground and before long the landscaped terrain gave way to the desert, our headlights bouncing over countryside dotted by Cardinal Cactus and low lying scrub. Twenty minutes on we came to the rounded hilltop where we first spotted Z Boy that day through the binoculars and approached a large cluster of boulders with the largest Cardinal Cactus I'd ever seen sticking straight out of the middle.

"Stop here," Z Boy said.

The truck skidded to a halt and a cloud of pale orange dust trailing us overtook, filling our headlights. I turned off the engine and waited for the dust to settle before lowering my window to the hot smell of the sage scented desert.

"Leave the lights on O.K.?" Z Boy said.

He got out and started towards the cluster of boulders and I went to follow when Pancho grabbed my arm - "What is it?" I asked turning back.

"Cuidado para los barbas <sup>1</sup>!" He said trying to keep a straight face.

Glancing at Chucho I said - "It's not that Pancho's got a twisted sense of humour ... but he comes out with jokes at the most unusual times."

"Yeah ... one taco short of a plato combinado <sup>2</sup>!" Chucho grinned.

Shrugging free of Pancho's grip I retorted - "And cut the jokes would you ...stick to what you know best."

When Z Boy reached the large cluster of boulders he went down on his knees to reach between a crevice and feel around then dragged out a shovel. Getting back up he turned away from us and started off in the direction of our headlights, pacing out some measured distance but before he made it to the end of the light beams he stopped. Studying the ground for a moment he seemed satisfied that he had the right spot and scraped a few rocks and broken brush aside then drove his shovel into the dirt. We caught up to him as he stepped onto it with his weight and stood around in a semi circle, watching him turn the soil over, peering intently at the hole he was digging. The soil was soft and mainly sand so it didn't take long for him to get down two feet when there was a dull clunk. He stopped and lay the shovel aside, scooping the rest of the loose soil out with his hands then felt around till he found what he was looking for and pulled it free. Grunting onto his knees he dumped a large olive green military issue munitions container next to the opening and got up. He clapped his hands together a number of times and brushed the dirt from his knees saying, "There! It's all yours."

I picked it up, surprised at how heavy it felt and lugged it back to the Dodge where I placed it on the hood. Flicking back two metal catches I went to open it while Chucho and Pancho stepped in closer.

"Phhhuuuwwwww..." Chucho whistled softly when the lid lifted.

Staring back up at us was Benjamin Franklin's face; rows of stacked hundreds secured by First Interstate Bank wrappers. It reminded me of the Andy Warhol collage with the Campbell's Soup labels.

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1 Watch out for the cactus spikes.

2 A combination platter.

Looking back at Z Boy, I said - "That's more than \$320,000."

"Consider the balance interest," he replied bitterly. "It was well earned."

At a glance I estimated it to be double what was owed and after what he'd put us through it seemed too good to be true. What was the catch...? Then I chuckled to myself ...Shit! We must have scared him good. But then again he'd probably turned their money over a bunch of times so it would have been due. That was the thing about guys at his end of the drug business, they earned plenty. There was obviously more to Z Boy than I'd given him credit for.

I started pulling out stacks of \$10,000 and placed them on the hood until there were thirty-two of them side by side, then I reclosed the container. "Chucho, put this in the truck would you," I said pointing at the loose stacks then I addressed Z Boy- "What do you take me for anyway, a thief? I'm only here for what's owed not to stamp you for any extra."

He shrugged, "Well what do you call this exercise?"

Suddenly I wished I'd left him out in the drink. There was nothing this guy could say or do that didn't grate on me. Even when I was giving him a break he couldn't help himself with some smartarse comment. Spinning around I gave him two short rips under the floating ribs that knocked him back, making him sag to the ground and clutch at his sides... his eyes bulging and the colour draining from his face while he tried to work his puckered mouth. It seemed to take forever to get his breathing going and when he did he struggled to suck it in with groans like a drowner coming up for air. After he had the first bit in he doubled up with a strange gurgling sound coming from deep within him, with his eyes squeezed tight.

Looking down at him with amusement Chucho smirked - "Guess he pissed you off, huh?"

Pancho went to give him a solid kick in the face but I put my arm across his chest to hold him back.

"The guys pissed me off from the minute I laid eyes on him!" I answered testily. And I took the metal container off the hood and threw it through the truck window as well.

Chucho smiled at my change of heart to keep all the money and nodded at Z Boy- "What about him?"

"What about him..." I said and got into the truck without looking back.

We bumped along the dusty track and back onto the new tar road, down past the security gate where I touched the horn and threw a wave at the security guard then headed for Los Barilles. No one said anything until we'd passed the guardhouse and were back on the highway when Pancho was the first to pipe up. At first I couldn't understand what he was saying and turned the volume down on the radio to realize he wasn't saying anything at all - he was making a guttural moan. Chucho caught it about the same time I did and we looked at each other and burst out laughing. Pancho was imitating the sound Z Boy had made when I wacked him.

"I told you his elevator doesn't go to the top floor!" Chucho said nodding at Pancho.

It went on all the way home, every time there was an extended silence one of us would imitate that groan and follow up by sucking air desperately - making the other two crack up afresh. Even as we spilled into Casa Cecilia I can't remember who it was - either Pancho or Chucho made a low groan, a theatrical gurgle and we laughed as hard as we had the first time.

Sarah raised an eyebrow and remarked, "What's this? Some sort of new male bonding signal?"

She studied us in turn sensing a tacit conspiracy but knew better than to ask.

Giving her a hug I said - "How'd you like to take a trip up to L.A.?"

"When?" She asked.

"Tomorrow ..."

“Just like that? A bit sudden, isn't it?”

“Yeah, well something's come up.”

“How are we going to get there?”

“Drive to Mulege<sup>1</sup> and get Michael to fly down and pick us up.”

“And you think he'll just drop everything to do that....?”

“When there's an earn involved Michael'll jump under water and fuck fish!” I grinned. “You just tell him who's paying!”

“Especially if you stick a garter belt and a silk stocking on it,” Chucho threw in smirking.

While Sarah thought about it I said, “Come on... what's to think about? A night at the Serenidad<sup>2</sup>, a day shopping on Revolucion<sup>3</sup>, a couple of days in Leucadia ... catch a couple of good bands at the Belly Up<sup>4</sup>...” And with that I took one of the loose bundles of \$10,000 from the plastic bag and threw it on the table in front of her. “That should cover Revolucion.”

She looked up grinning in recognition of our mischief then put the bundle in her Longchamp handbag casually. “I thought you said you were going fishing tonight?”

“We did,” I answered innocently.

“Yeah,” Chucho said tapping the munitions case by his side, “For Square Grouper<sup>5</sup>...”

“O.K.” She agreed keen for a bit of adventure too. “When do we leave?”

“First thing in the morning.”

Dumping the money out of the plastic bag onto the glass dining table I counted out three bundles of fifty thousand and pushed one at Chucho and one at Pancho.

“That O.K by you guys?”

The chic in Laguna said to keep 50% but I was originally going to take only 25 thousand a piece. Now that there's considerably more we'll take her up on the 50% of the original amount. The rest is her's as far as I'm concerned.”

“Claro que si<sup>6</sup>!” Chucho replied without hesitation and Pancho patted me on the shoulder in tacit agreement then threw his into a plastic bag he got from a kitchen drawer.

“O.K. Now how about a drink?” I suggested.

No one said no.

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1 Mulege - a coastal fishing village half-way up the inside of the Baja peninsula.

2 Our favorite motel in Mulege.

3 Avenida de La Revolucion - Tijuana's famous shopping strip.

4 The Belly Up club at Solana Beach, north of San Diego

5 An expression for bails of contraband - drugs or money - jettisoned overboard off Florida in coast guard pursuits

6 Of course!

# 'SKATING' IN TIJUANA



**It was a days drive through the desert** to Mulege and as planned Michael picked us up, flying us in to Tijuana a couple of days later where we checked into our old favourite the Hacienda hotel. The Hacienda was low profile, three star, clean with security guards and well positioned - two streets back from the main shopping street Avenida Revolucion. We checked into our rooms, Sarah, Coco and I into a double, Chucho in a double of his own. Pancho had stayed back in Los Barillos with his two wives. After dropping us at T.J. airport, Michael had flown home to Leucadia in southern California. Sarah was tired from the long trip but I was still keyed up and the flashing lights and action of Tijuana did nothing to slow me down. Other than that, deep down I had a secret concern. Now that we'd got the money to the border, we still had one major obstacle, getting it over. Coming out of Mexico with eight hundred and forty large and getting pinched would be a serious headache. They'd instantly assume it was drug money and we'd have the Justice Department, the I.R.S., F.B.I. and the D.E.A. all over our arses. Of course we could always declare it, which was totally legal but you could imagine the grilling and the flags they'd put up next to our names for any future entries into the U.S. Declaring it was a suckers move. No doubt about it, we'd have to smuggle it in.

On the way over to the Palacio de Jai Alai on Avenida Revolucion with Chucho in tow I mulled over my problem but as soon as I stepped through the front doors it all went on the back burner. Hopefully something would come to me.

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Going to El Palacio de Jai Alai was a ritual with us every time we were in Tijuana, just like the bullfights were every Sunday during summer. The Palacio featured Jai Alai games around the clock that you could watch in style from elevated scalloped terraces with linen covered tables where you were taken care of by a phalanx of ever-attendant waiters in cr me tuxedo jackets. On the side walls there were also giant flat screens that ran all the hottest sports events from the U.S. - the football, basketball, baseball, boxing ... they even had a direct link up with TJ's Caliente race track and betting booths. No first world egalitarianism sitting in rows like sardines eating hot dogs ... just plenty of old world style.

Julio Caesar Chavez was fighting live in Mexico City that night and we were already snapping our fingers for Cuba Libres before throwing ourselves into plush seats. Quickly ordering a couple of the finest grain fed beef steaks from



Guadalajara we kicked back and watched the best boxer in the world - pound for pound - pound some ginzo into oblivion. The last big one on the chin drove the American boxer so hard ... he got a speeding ticket back in Alabama! But the best part was in between rounds when we got to check out the 'glamours' hanging off the local gangsters who were giving them a late night airing. I happened to be staring at one particular stunner when the guy with her caught my eye ... and it suddenly came to me! The following morning I'd drive down to Rosarito Beach and look up my old mate Ricky. If anybody could sort my problem out Ricky could.

Ricardo, or Ricky as we affectionately called him after the main star in the I love Lucy show, could take care of just any problem you had. And I mean any. Despite his polite, self-effacing manner he was one of the most 'handy' people around. And one of the most dangerous. We quietly tipped him to be EME - Mexican mafia, which was substantiated when a rival gang from Mexicali kidnapped his son a few years earlier. He had to pay three million US - which was an enormous ransom down there but which he did without blinking, as he would for any family or friend. But that's not where it ended. There were eleven in the gang that took his son and we spent the next year being entertained by the newspapers' accounts of how they each died. One had a mysterious car accident, another a boating mishap, the third a drug overdose (coincidentally it was the first time he'd ever taken drugs), the fourth a heart attack ... at only thirty-five years of age and in such perfect health too!

The following day was a Sunday, which meant the bullfights were on but they didn't start until afternoon. That would give me just enough time to zip down to Rosarito and back. Tomorrow's bullfight was at the large Corrida overlooking the sea, which was right by the exit from the Ensenada tollway that I'd be taking. At ease now I stumbled back to the Hacienda and passed out from the pleasant glow of an entertaining evening and a dozen Cuba Libres.

**The thing about Ricky's chic**, although she looked a million dollars she was a tart at heart. As we sat under grape vine covered pergola in the extensive grounds of the multi-story villa perched on a cliff top overlooking the Pacific Ocean she kept casting those bedroom eyes at us which, if you were silly enough to tumble could get you into serious trouble. No ... her flirting had a purpose that had nothing to do with a healthy libido or cheek but rather a feminine cunning designed to keep Ricky on his toes. She knew about his wife over in Mazatlan and like any woman the existence of a second woman in her man's life piqued her. Especially her. By continually 'working' him through passion and jealousy she kept Ricky wriggling on the hook ... at least that was the play.

But Ricky was no fool. Of course he'd humour her with cultivated attentiveness but deep down I suspected he didn't give much of a shit. Safe women probably didn't get him off any more so he kept this one in Rosarito as the powder keg in his life. Like those nitro glycerine tablets ailing heart patients take to jump-start themselves when their beat is a bit weak.

With this in mind every time Ricky got up to go inside or take a leak I'd jump up and go with him. I was that keen not to be left with her I would even have held it for him. I wasn't taking any chances on him returning to find her playing footsies with me under the table or something and become a piece of cannon fodder in their guerrilla war of love.

It was bad enough her sticking her 12 out of ten buns in your face all the time, with those knee length Lycra bicycle tights that made her arse look like it was permanently hungry because it wouldn't stop eating them. And she had this way of walking with these short steps as though she was shackled by her expensive high-heeled, snakeskin pumps. She also wore one of those sleeveless numbers tied under her boobs exposing a bulging crevice tight enough to rack your cue. Her shirt exposed a band of deep brown skin around her mid section and her red hair was tied up like Pebbles in the Flintstones, the colour complimented by immaculately painted fingernails and toes that were fire engine red. No women's lib here ... just a red hot Latino with fuck me written all over her.

“No problema Victor!” Ricky was saying enthusiastically, pronouncing the V in Victor like a B the way Latins do. “I feex dat easy for jou...” Clinking glasses with me with gusto, while in the background the ocean rolled lazily against the barren desert cliffs. “I see you tonight after the corrida<sup>1</sup> at the Piano Bar in the Fiesta Americana<sup>2</sup>.”

His eyes sparkled, a detail that didn't escape her notice as she eyed him studiously throughout our conversation. At the end of it she shot me a dark look. She knew it was an excuse for Ricardo to get away for a night up in T.J. and the daggers she shot me made me look away nervously. The way she hurled her passions around was dangerous and I thought there'd be a good chance she'd feel like shooting the messenger.

I got up to leave and walked through the luxurious villa that Ricky had bought for her and when we got to the front door a guy automatically appeared from a room beside it, a big guy in a white singlet and a shoulder holster packing a chrome Saturday Night Special. Ricky waved him back with a subtle gesture of his hand saying- “Todo esta bien Angel<sup>3</sup> it's only Bic leaving.”

The pistolero shot us an impassive up and down before returning through the half-open doorway where I could see an unmade bed and a scattered pile of comics on the floor beside it.

I gave Ricky an embrazo as I left saying “Adios tio...”<sup>4</sup> And on the way to the car Chucho remarked sarcastically, “Tell me Bic? Is that Bic as in ballpoint pen?”

I used my second name Victor with Mexicans because they could never relate to Lesley.

“Don't know,” I said with a wry smile. “I'll ask Ricardo for you when we see him tonight.”

“Don't bother,” Chucho replied with feigned nervousness.

Coco was playing chasings with another of Ricky's minders out front and when he bent to kiss her goodbye his loose Pachuco shirt rode up exposing a roscoe stuck down the back of his pants.

“Gracias Chubba,” I thanked him for babysitting and he said with polite respect - “Por nada Bictor,” giving her a farewell pinch on the cheek.

\*

I always loved the drive up the coast road along the cliff tops overlooking the Pacific, with the sun reflecting off the water like a vast shimmering mirror, the Coronada islands in the distance crowning the horizon with their jagged peaks. When we exited on the outskirts of Tijuana I let Chucho out and waited till he waved down a Taxi then said to him, “Change three or four grand of the dough I gave Sarah so she doesn't walk around with that fat roll of fresh hundreds would you? And stick with her so she doesn't get robbed.”

“You got it!” he said. “Have a good day at the corrida with the kid.”

“Yeah,” I grinned. “It's my big chance to let her take it in with an open mind. Before she takes on any feminine cues from mum and Dolly magazine. Ha! Ha!”

That was the first day I ever saw Glison fight. He was to become my favourite Mexican matador after that. When I first laid eyes on him I didn't like him one bit - an unabashed braggart at first sight. A certain degree of proud showmanship was expected from any Matador but Glison took his to an irritating level. Even his personal style was punishing, the way he wore his cue for example, like a ponytail rather than the traditional inconspicuous tuft concealed by an old fashioned macho haircut. The colours of his elaborate costume were over the top too,

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1 The bullfight

2 The most exclusive hotel in Tijuana.

3 Everything's O.K. Angel.

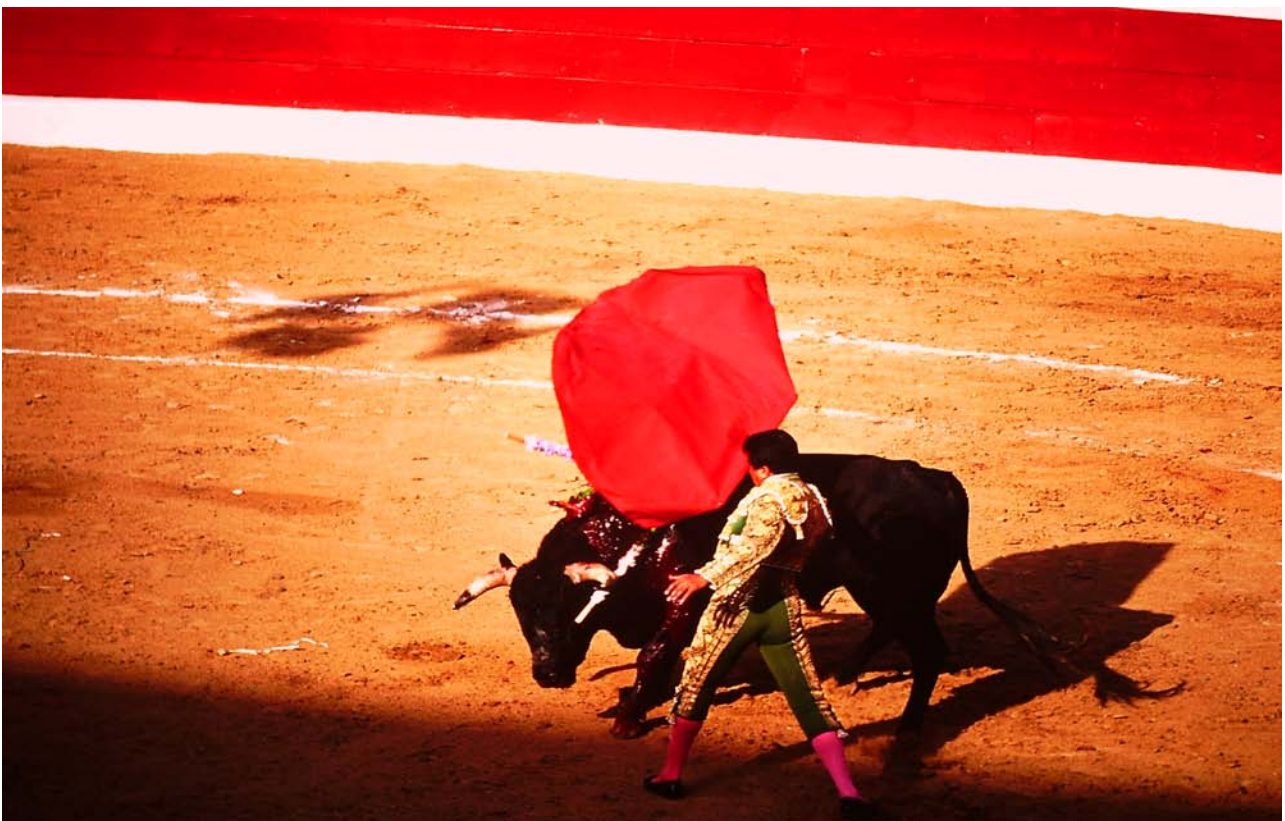
4 Goodbye uncle.

outrageous shades you'd never see any other bullfighter wear. And that brazen swagger and self assured grin that misled you into believing that he'd never been 'served up in life. But in the end I had to admit my dislike of him was founded on a certain degree of envy... but that was soon to change.

It was Coco's first bullfight and my American friends would undoubtedly redress me for it later as being politically incorrect. But what was the concept of political correctness anyway? Nothing more than intellectual imperialism... another form of middle-class conformity taking the moral high ground. Plenty of Mexicans took their children to bullfights from an early age - in fact there was a young couple sitting next to us with identical five year-old twin girls all dolled up in their finest frilly pink dresses. Coco spent most of the time playing with them and was largely indifferent to the ritual blood letting below. Her biggest reaction to it was when I took her down stairs to the toilet and we had to stop for a team of mules dragging out a dead bull. On the ends of the chains there were large ugly hooks piercing its black fur into its flesh with blood and dust smeared all down its side. To which Coco simply remarked, "Look Papi... it's got poo all over its bottom!"

Most of the bulls that day were lame, literally, and you could be sure the Mexicans had pulled every trick in the book to get rid of their edge; dropping concrete blocks on their hindquarters while they were in the chutes and shaving their horns to reduce their striking distance and throw off the bull's accuracy. It was a dud bunch in general except for one that seemed to have slipped through the break. A black beast that was awesome in every respect. It had the acceleration of a torpedo and extremely aggressive with deadly accurate horns. So much so that it quickly dispatched two Matadors with nasty cornadas to the infirmary and that left it to Glison to deal with.

There was an extra little twist in that the longer a bull fights the wiser it gets and the more dangerous it becomes, the reason they only let them fight once. Which meant that by the time Glison stepped into the ring he was dealing with a half-ton keg of dynamite propelling a four-foot rack of bayonet sharp horns. It was a tough call.



But Glison's disdain for his own safety gradually won me over and on one occasion when he drew it in too close with a Veronica and caught one in the thigh I was convinced.

They tried to drag him out of course with blood pumping from the nasty deep gash, a shiny red stain in the afternoon sun smeared over his sequined iridescent knee length tights. But he wouldn't have any of it. Not just because of his Matador's due to exhibit bravado - I'd seen many return in such situations with terror in their eyes but because Glison had more interest in the fight than in his personal injury. He returned with a complimentary respect for the bull and a mocking sneer at his own slip for letting it get the drop on him.

When the big bull caught him a second time in the chest, its horn slipping neatly between two ribs he didn't instinctively pull away as you'd expect but he clamped his arm down hard over the horn to hold it in him - preventing the bull from throwing him in the air and lining him up for a peppering of jabs. The crowd drew in its breath collectively. But he totally kept his cool, smiling all the while with that horn inside him and when the timing was right and the bull dropped his head and pulled it back he let the horn slip out simultaneously then moved quickly from its striking distance to recompose. That's when I knew he had cojones<sup>1</sup>. More than cojones. He displayed the maximum a man can in life, style ... not when it's safe or convenient but grace under pressure.

After that he came back with fire in his eyes and did it with no mistakes, dangerously and without any affected moves. He knew this bull was too great to toy with or underestimate with disrespect. By then I was more than a convert and remembered what an old friend had once said, *Modesty is the worst form of conceit ... there's nothing worse than a braggart who fails to back it up, and nothing more impressive than one who can.*

In the latter stages of the fight it was so tense you could have heard a pin drop at the corrida. It was as though the audience was now holding its breath collectively and at the climactic moment when Glison finally put the bull down it was stunned and emotionally spent, remaining silent. The quiet before the storm. As the big bull rolled over stiff with its tongue hanging out and its eyes large and white from the shock of death the place erupted. They threw everything into the ring, the red cushions that were rented out to make the concrete tiers bearable, wine skins, cowboy hats, flowers, bras ... showering him as he paraded around the ring amid a deafening roar of whistles and shouts of BRAVO!

Then as he drew next to the reserved V.I.P. booths below where the President and the Lord Mayor of Tijuana sat, a stunning woman even threw an expensive crocodile skin high heel shoe, which Glison caught with finesse before stepping gallantly up to her booth to return it. From the darkness of the shaded booth an elegant hand emerged with a bottle of Dom Perignon - which Glison accepted - filled the expensive pump drinking from it with his head thrown back aristocratically to the delight of the crowd. By then they had thrown everything that wasn't bolted down and preceded to tear the place apart and throw everything that was. It was the stuff that legends are made of, and fairytales too.

As a spectacle it was rich, an old world display of courage and pride with an element of romance, without any intellectualising confusion needing a psychotherapist to agonizingly bring one to terms with one's primal appetites.

When we left the crowd were running with Glison above them, his body undulating horizontally along a mass of up-stretched arms and it took us almost an hour to get to the car park with Coco on my shoulders to stop her from getting trampled. I joined the mass exodus of taillights and beeping horns, the musical ones were big down there, especially La Cucaracha, as I headed back towards the centre of town in the barely moving traffic. We eventually got there but when I went to turn left off Revolucion towards the Hacienda we were stopped again by the congestion. At first I couldn't understand why it was still so slow all that way from the Plaza de Toros Monumental then I couldn't believe it. The crowd was still running through the streets of T.J. with Glison on their shoulders - they had caught up to us on the other side of town at a joggers pace and all the shop owners who had watched it on T.V. were throwing flowers at him from the footpaths. He had literally brought the place to a standstill. Though I was keen to go home to Australia after our long absence it was a great memory of the passion of Mexico. What a day!

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<sup>1</sup> Balls.

Caught up in it all I hadn't given a thought to the pressing issues in our lives and when I burst through the door of our hotel room enthusiastically it was like walking into wet concrete. You could have cut the air with a chain saw. Sarah was lying on the bed with a magazine in front of her with a sour look on her face. She didn't even bother to look up. Hating to be brought down off my high by someone who was obviously down and trying to take me with them I snapped - "What's wrong? Wear your feet out spraying money on perfume and clothes in all those high end stores today?"

Looking up she held my eyes evenly, "No ... as a matter of fact we didn't get that far. Chucho got busted changing counterfeit hundreds."

Her words hit me like a clap of thunder and for a moment I was dumbfounded. Then I slowly looked up and said, "Fuck me ... I hope he took his skates with him!"

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## (Post Script)



*“Best of all he loved the fall  
The leaves yellow on the cottonwoods  
Leaves floating on the trout streams  
And above the hills  
The high blue windless skies  
Now he will be a part of them forever.”*

- Ernest Hemingway's Eulogy

**But of course we couldn't keep it 'dark'** ... our tattooed hand, fishing story. Six months later we were up in Idaho and buckled, right in the middle of peak ski season when the rich and famous flock to Sun Valley for the end of year parties. The tables at Barsottis were booked by Kennedy's, 'Arnold' was throwing his new-year party and we were bumping shoulders at Atkinson's supermarket with Bruce Willis, Demi Moor, Scott Glen and the other stars with holiday places there. One day I was stepping into a hot tub at the Athletic Club next to Jamie Lee Curtis, the next onto a ski lift with a beautiful Hemingway.

Anyway, an oil baron was throwing a party, a guy whose income was three million *a month* and we were in one of those houses catalogued in the glossy 'Log Houses of America' (that everyone has on their coffee tables) where we'd been invited along as a splash of colour. There we were in our un-ironed Hawaiian shirts, looking like the hired help, like guys who should have been outside parking cars for these people in \$3,000 Bogner jackets - guys dressing down in 'Polo' shirts, pressed corduroy slacks and regularly polished yachting loafers. It was just after the fifth course, the Alaskan Snow crab, Washington State oysters and British Columbian smoked salmon flown in that morning from the Seattle fish markets on the hosts private Lear jet and we were breaking into the third crate of Diamond Valley Ranch Chardonnay. Chucho and I had gorged ourselves and were striving for the horizontal in the resulting stupor on a three inch deep Bokhara rug in front of a crackling fire when the stories began. A month of 'Champagne Powder' will bore even the most diehard billionaire and that's when dreams of exotic escapes are born. There was talk of Mariachi music... hot sand sifting through toes that had been cramped in \$1,000 ski boots for three months and alcoholic fruit cocktails with little paper umbrellas as a counterpoint to orange peel floating in hot wine.

Being known as old Mexico hands we were summoned to recount an anecdote or two of our own when somehow that one slipped out. Perhaps it was the bloated combination of a head full of wine so close to a debilitating fire

short-circuiting our judgment or possibly some subliminal perversity, I don't recall. Whatever it was - it didn't go down well. We'd gotten as far as the wire snips crunching through the knuckle when the animated ambience in those posh surroundings came to an abrupt halt. It was like someone had turned the volume off on the hum of contented voices and all you could hear was the crackle of blazing logs punctuated by an occasional explosion of igniting sap. All of a sudden I became acutely aware of the four foot high black Raven andirons looming over us; their cut out eyes flickering red from the fire behind and an uncomfortable silence descending over the room. Surveying the normally satisfied faces, the women's caked in so much white powder they reminded me of Japanese NŌ actresses with their privileged mouths O-ing, my eyes were arrested by one whose shoulders looked like the neck on a Resches DA bottle from all the gold it was supporting. She summed up the general reaction with the succinct exclamation, "HOW OFF!"

It brought to mind something from Hemingway's 'A Moveable Feast', when he recounted his early days as a fledgling writer in Paris at Gertrude Stein's feet during one of her regaled tea parties. She had used an unusual word to criticise one of his stories ('Up in Michigan'), a word I'd never even heard of let alone been able to find in an English dictionary since.

"Inacproachable, she said. "That means it is like a picture that a painter paints and then he cannot hang it when he has a show and nobody will buy it because they cannot hang it either <sup>1</sup>."

Now don't get me wrong, I wasn't under any illusions about our fishing story representing any from of high art ...but *fuck'em if they can't take a joke*, I thought. These are the kind of people who eat meat as long as it s packaging conceals its processing. I wasn't generally irreverent but hey, we'd tried to do the right thing, tried to return the body part to its rightful owner, these shitheads wouldn't have even picked it up off the desert floor. Thankfully Chucho and I didn't buckle or anything, our chemical mix was sufficiently adjusted to deflect any implied judiciousness. In fact when our eyes met and I put my hand up to my mouth exclaiming, "OOPS!" we simultaneously burst out laughing ... clearly the only two to share the moment.

"Think its time we blew this gig," Chucho said with a smirk.

**We stepped out into the crisp mountain evening** pausing to pull our collars up and take in the star-studded sky when Chucho summed up the situation: "That was a bit of an eye opener," he said, his hot breath forming small clouds as it hit the chilly air.

"How's that?" I smiled, rounding my mouth and blowing out a few clouds of my own.

"Well I learned something here tonight."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"Humour and adventure are a bit like wine ... they don't always travel well. Or at least they don't necessarily cross borders well."

Without replying I reflected on his new found wisdom as we descended the three flights to the parked cars, the only sound being the CRUNCH CRUNCH CRUNCH of our foot fall compressing fluffy powder snow covering the hand carved, wooden stairs. When we reached our vehicle I faced Chucho and adopted a more serious tone, "Well what did you expect? People like that are generally infatuated by the idea of adventure but not necessarily its less salient detail. The part they like best is taking their cues from glossy brochures off travel agents' shelves and running off to Banana Republic to get appropriately outfitted. For them it's theatre. The minute they encounter that first delay at the business class counter in the airport, get jostled by the crowd or lose their baggage their adventure degenerates into a Roy Orbison song."

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<sup>1</sup> Earnest Hemingway, 2010, *A Moveable Feast*, Jonathan Cape, London.



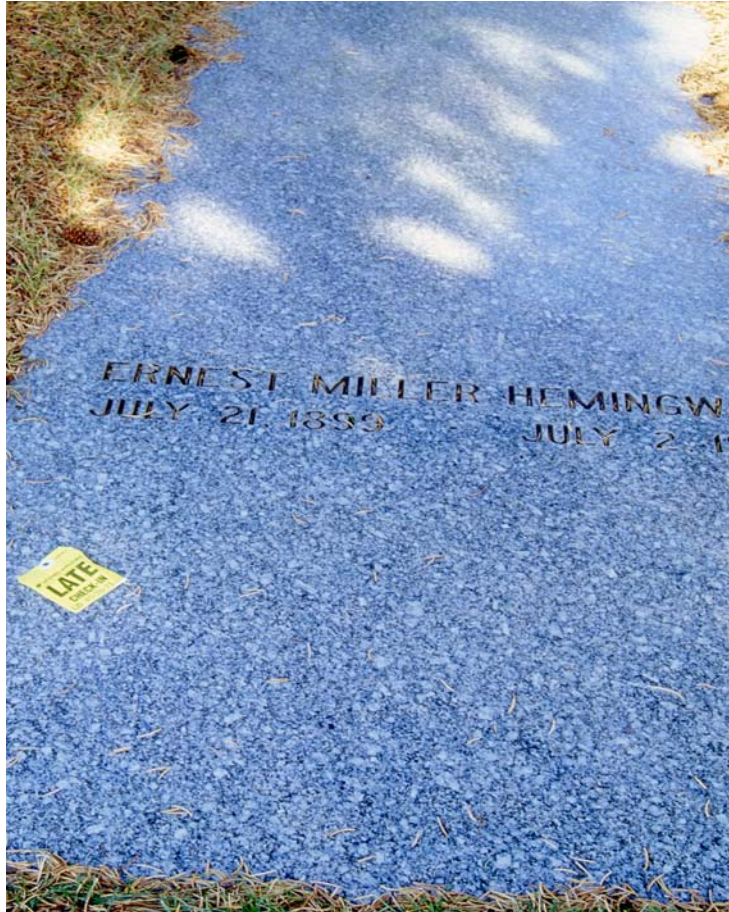
Chucho grinned, “Oh yeah ... which one?”

“The one that goes “...Someone just fucked my girl and cheated me at cards!”

“Ha! Ha! Chucho laughed, “You’ve got such a fine way with words!”

“No mate...” I mused. “The Tattooed Hand was too rich for that crowd ... Inacproachable.”

He turned to face me and his eyebrows shot up, “In a what ....?!”



Hemingway's grave in Ketchum, Idaho, with an airline's 'Late Check In' tag someone had left.

- THE END -



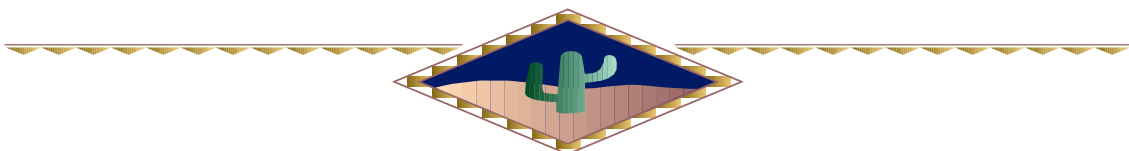
## About the Author



Lester de Adorján started life in Herne Bay refugee camp (now Villawood Detention Centre) Australia in 1951, the first of his family born outside of Transylvania in 1600 years, since his forbearers occupied it as swordsman of Attila the Hun. Educated in various schools around Sydney starting at Saint Vincent's Convent in Kings Cross, then St Ives Primary School, Newington College for a year before being expelled, Vaucluse Boys High School, he finished his secondary education at York Mills Collegiate in Toronto, Canada. Beginning his tertiary education in Lausanne, Switzerland he entered a Bachelor of Arts program through the Harvard Business School at the University of Western Ontario in London, and finally graduated in English Drama at York University. Financing his first degree as a 'stevedore of the airways', he drove heavy machinery and worked as a 'baggage handler' at Toronto Airport.

Returning to Australia in 1974, he completed an MA in English Language and Literature at the University of Sydney while working briefly as a doorman in Kings Cross and later operating ski lifts, washing dishes, working again as a doorman in the nightclub at Thredbo, garbage man and construction labourer in the Snowy Mountains. After a five year stint as a ski bum he became a freelance journalist and photojournalist working for mainly 'alternative' magazines such as Nation Review, Tracks, Simply Living, Undercurrents and also Rigs and Roads, Camera and Cine to name a few. Followed by a four-year stint as an airline steward for Qantas Airways he embarked on a number of business ventures including importer, company director, and property developer. He married in 1990 and had a daughter that same year before moving his family to Whistler, BC in Canada, then on to Sun Valley Idaho, Los Barillos, in Baja, and finally Puerto Vallarta on the mainland of Mexico where he bought a Villa, 'Vista Hermosa'. Along the way he worked as a fly fishing guide in Canada, hunting and fishing guide along the Snake River in Idaho and started a saltwater fly-fishing business on the Sea of Cortez.

Returning to Australia in 1994 to farm sheep on his farm in the Snowy Mountains he was charged with assisting the escape of Ian Saxon (convicted of importing ten tons of hashish) from Long Bay Correctional Facility, a charge that was dismissed due the case being fabricated by members of the National Crime Authority and Australian Federal Police. Heading the case was Mark Standen (later Assistant Director of The NSW Crime Commission), now serving a lengthy prison sentence for the attempted importation of a large commercial quantity of pseudoephedrine. Two years later the author was himself sentenced to ten years for possession of 27 grams of cocaine handed to him by an agent provocateur of the Australian Federal Police as part of 'a controlled delivery' of an alleged large commercial importation from the Medellin Cartel in Colombia. While incarcerated at Long Bay Correctional Centre the author undertook a PhD candidature in sociology and anthropology and has since worked at a number of universities as a tutor, researcher, writing assistant and casual lecturer. He now lives between the northern beaches of Sydney and his farm in the Snowy Mountains with his wife Sarah and daughter Coco.



**While** working as a hunting and fishing guide along the Snake River in Idaho, between snowboarding and partying in Hemingway's hometown of Ketchum, the author inadvertently ended up on the FBI's 'top forty'. Fleeing like many before him over the border into Mexico, he spent a year in Baja where he started the first saltwater fly-fishing business on the Sea of Cortez, living in Los Barillos (named after barrels of treasure buried there by buccaneers who sacked the Manila Galleons carrying gold looted by Spanish Conquistadors), surfing along the cape, enjoying numerous adventures and a generally laid back but adventurous life in Mexico. Accompanied by a handful of 'colourful' characters that regularly flew in from California and other parts of the US in their private planes, this series of 'long stories' describes life along the cape of a part of a generation who spoke the 'truth' and dared to live it. From surfing waves, to catching marlin, smoking pot, collecting underworld debts and hanging out with Mexican gangsters, this (sometimes fictionalised) journal describes Baja from the perspective of 'outsiders'.



The author's daughter Coco beside Baja's tallest Cardonal cactus

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