

Down and In and Out

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Of course, all my regular cut straight-laced friends told me I should never hitch-hike in Mexico; but what do they know? Actually, hitch-hiking was a doddle. I'd been on the road for about three weeks when I reached Cancun. The ride dropped me in a crumbling section of town, several miles from what they unpoetically call the "Hotel Zone." Sitting on a wall, flicking through my now grubby copy of *The Lonely Planet*, finding the cheap hotel section and all along aware of some peripheral movement that turned invisible when I looked up. *Pension Ricardo*, clean, situated on quite *Avenue Nos Heros*, rooms ascetically furnished, 30 pesos a night. Sounded like every other place I'd stayed at, a bit pricey, but this was, after all, package holiday central, where wheeled suitcases rather than back-packs descended from the skies, bringing along long armed people to empty them out, to relieve their burden and afford them a lovely holiday, sitting languid in a cool and gentle shadowy corner, or lounging about perhaps under the bed. I found the map of down town Cancun, travelled down streets with my finger until I finally arrived at the Hero place.

I threw on my pack and marched down the still hot and humid early evening, the sun dangling close to horizon, unaware I had made a major wrong turning, a rough and dirty nameless street, inhabited by night people perhaps, who were just now stretching and yawning themselves into life. Again there was some flicker

of movement, like scratch marks on an old black and white film that projected my own life outwards and onwards, high contrast indeed. An arm came over my shoulder, a hand grabbed my neck, from the other side someone else appeared, a grotty foul-faced Mexican shoving a knife at me, the tip against my stomach.

"Take off you bag, quick gringo, quick." The hand released its grip on my neck and pulled the straps off my shoulders. All along, with fear screaming and frantic inside, Oh god, oh god, oh god, over and over again, hoping that the rhythmic repetition would silence his screaming, trying to calm him down.

"Empty your pockets, gringo." Pointless, really: the decapitated arm delved into first one pocket, then another, brushed against my hidden money belt.

"Take of the belt, gringo." I suppose "gringo" is like a verbal exclamation mark, without the dot, of course. It was the decapitated voice from behind this time, and as I fumbled with the belt, oh god, oh god, the whole thing came around, no decapitation after all, just another grubby Mexican exchanging a quick happy glance with his partner. I handed over the belt with no thought of the money nor the passport, only the idea of the knife stabbing into me and that still constant oh goding. And then they were gone, running away back the way they had come. I was still alive, but they had everything I owned.

I was stunned by the silence. The rhythm stopped, replaced by the drum of my racing heart. What the hell could I do?

Well, actually, it was all done for me. Standing in all that dusty stunnedness, that hot and humid silence, that pumping thumping heart, a voice, this time in English, this time

friendly.

"Are you okay?"

I turned around and there she was. It was as if, in the cheesiest sort of way you can possibly imagine, it was as if that black and white suddenly turned colour, the scratchy stock restored, but the contrast, well it seemed even more contrasty, actually. Actually, there you were—I confess, the only reason I write all of this down is for you to read, in some distant improbable dream; read and remember and who knows what. Infinite hope, I guess, in a finite universe.

"I think so," I answered, still stunned—still in shock, as they say.

"They robbed you." I don't think you were asking a question, in think you were just setting things straight for me. Well, you'd seen the whole thing from a dusty distance, and I was, as they say, still in shock.

"They've got everything. Shit." I shook my head—you remember, I shook my head, as the reality sunk in like a leaking ship going down to a sea bottom grave.

"What about your passport?" There you were, practical from the outset.

"Yeah, shit." I shook my head again. Well, what else could I do. I had no idea at the time, but it was all up to you.

"You should go to the police."

"Yeah." I knew it was pointless, but you were always one for following procedure.

"Come on, I'll go with you—"

"No, no that's okay. There's no need."

"I was a witness."

So that was that. We walked out of the wrong turning, back onto the main thoroughfare and I asked directions from a boy in grubby jeans and an out of date T-shirt.

"Your Spanish is good."

"Thanks," I answered, knowing how bad it really was, duly noting that you were impressed by my ambidextrous tongue. I think it was at that point that I first started checking you out—as they say. How did she look? She looked fine. Yep, you looked fine, my dear. Well, conservative, no doubt about that, well covered in unspectacular *Marks and Spencer's* summer wear, with no sign of a protruding nipple or even much of a suggestion of the body underneath the togs. Still, those big brown puppy dog eyes, that lovely smile. "My French is better," I added, realising at once how pretentious and vain it sounded.

"Je suis sure de ça," you said. That was the first clue. Still, I had no idea at that moment how funny you really were. Not that this reads particularly funny; but you had to be there, as they say.

"So where is it then?"

"What?"

"The police station."

"Oh, I have no idea. I couldn't understand a bloody word he said." Touché.

Of course, the police were useless. In fact, I had a feeling they were measuring you up as the next victim of rampant Cancun crime. In any case, I'm sure you'd appreciate the increased efficiency, the cost-effectiveness, the potential for

productivity with the investigators of crime functioning as the instigators of crime. In any case, we left the musty police station and returned to the humid world, where tropical night was falling with predictable hurry.

"So what will you do?" You sat on a near-by bench.

"I have no idea. I suppose I'll call my parents and get them to send money over. And I'll have to phone the embassy. I don't know."

"Where's your hotel?"

"I don't have one. I just got here. Actually. that's where I was going when—"

"So where will you stay?"

I know it wasn't really in your nature, I know it was just one of those instinctive things that you try so hard to ignore, I know it wasn't sanctioned by some well thought out plan that, in any case, would surely go wrong; but, in any case, you made the offer and I accepted. I had no idea—though I suppose I should have guessed—that your idea of a hotel was far flung from my own: several blocks away—actually, way on the other side of town. So there we were, walking for some reason—though I know you usually took a taxi—all the way to that famous "Hotel Zone," with new and hideous buildings strung along the miles of beech like layered cakes covered in icing sugar, staggered levels and jutting verandas, insane incongruous absurdly vainglorious pools that vied for attention with the brilliant sparkling azul Caribbean sea, and the racket of drunken holiday makers slobbering over-priced drinks and gobbling over-priced grub and generally acting like complete idiots. Never mind all that

though, Hotel Cancun—such inspiration!—for all its architectural gaudiness, well, let's face it: absolute luxury. Bed bugs? They wouldn't dare!

So we sat out on the veranda. The moon sparkling on the sea was robbed of all potential romance by the hurly-burly in the street bellow, by the electric lights and neon of hectic hotels and restaurants and bars selling American beer along side exotic umbrella drinks festooned with fruit, served with an aspect of innocence yet mixed to kill. Any way, there we were in those wicker chairs oblivious to everything.

"Did I ever tell you about the hamster bomb?"

"How could you?" I asked, "we only just met."

"Well," you continued, playing the part of a story teller, "I was in Paris last year staying with a friend—"

"What was he called?" The gender test was obvious.

"Robert, as it happens. So, we'd just been out to this café and when we reached his apartment there was a shoebox on the door step. He lived in an Arab neighbourhood and it was during all that trouble, you remember, so we both thought for some strange reason that it was a bomb."

"You didn't think it might be shoes?"

"No. So, we kind of kicked it—you know, it's always good to kick bombs—and we heard some kind of scuffling inside. Robert told me to open it and I told him to open it."

"So who opened it?"

"The janitor. By chance he came down the passage. He was an Arab and had no fear of bombs." For some reason this sounded like the funniest thing we had ever heard and the wicker chairs

creaked about as we rocked in exaggerated mirth. Oh, what a lovely night it was—despite the fear of the sleeping arrangements. Just the thought of kissing you turned me inside out with abject fear and object anticipation.

“Any way, he opened the box and it was a hamster.”

“Is that the story?” It seemed something of a let down.

“Actually it’s not, though I never claimed to be a story teller or to be telling a story. So we took the box and the hamster inside. There was a note that said something like: ‘I remember you saying you like hamsters so here’s a gift. Love, Susanne.’ Robert claimed he’d never liked hamsters. In fact, he said he always thought they were hideous rodents or something. Anyway, he figured that this Susanne must be just playing a joke on him; so the next morning he wrote a note saying that he’d named the hamster Rodent and that he was now returning it to its rightful owner. Only he wasn’t. He asked me to take it to this woman’s office.”

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t know. Well, he had to go to work, but still, I thought the whole thing was a bit crazy. So there I was, walking fifty blocks to the centre of town, holding this boxed up rodent out in front of me, afraid I’d drop it or it would jump out; and everyone was looking at me strange and giving me plenty of room, crossing the street to avoid me even.

“They all thought it was a bomb.”

“That’s it. A damn hamster. So, I finally get to this office building and asked for this woman. She was one of those types that gets dressed up like a fashion model to work in an office,

you know, all nail varnish and legs. I told her I had something from Robert. 'Qui? C'est qui ces Robert?' she scowled and waved her arms about, looking from me to the box and taking a step back. 'All I know,' I said, 'is that he asked me to bring it to you.' Now this wasn't the best thing to say, I admit. She took another step back and glanced at the receptionist. 'It's your hamster,' I told her. She heard my accent and switched to something she obviously thought was English. 'Me himster? What himster? Who ees zis Robert? Are you crazee?' She was still waving her arms about, only now she seemed to be trying to shoo me away."

"You and your bomb."

"Exactly. Me and my hamster bomb! So she says, 'You must go. I know no Robert. I know no himster. Zis ees impossible. *Sacre blue*. Take away your box, wiv ze, ze . . .' 'Hamster,' I said. 'Listen, I have no idea what's going on, but Robert told me to give this damn hamster back to you.' 'Back? Back? What ees zis back?' 'You left it on his door step and he doesn't want it.' Any way, this went on a bit longer, and really started to feel on shakey ground. Maybe the hamster had nothing to do with her. Or maybe I was really carrying around a bomb. So I left and sat down on a bench, trying to think of what I should do. All of a sudden, this woman comes out and starts going on again about who this Robert is and what's this hamster story? So now I'm *really* feeling on shakey ground."

"So what did you do?"

"What could I do? I took the bloody hamster bomb back home. Any way, Robert comes home from work and I told him what had

happened. So he picks up the phone, calls Susanne and gives her a mouth full."

"What was going on?"

"Well, it turns out it was her hamster. She's bought it for her kid and the kid hated it so she tried to pass it off on Robert."

"So she was faking all along?"

"Exactly."

Of course, when you told me that, sitting on the veranda on that first night, sipping our wine, it was just a strange story. A good story, with all kinds of quips that I've forgotten, and that wicked French accent you put on—you were always good at accents—but still, just a strange story.

2

It seemed to me like one of those magical nights that comes around once in a Caribbean moon. It seemed to me like there was a certain intensity, an electric attraction, a sexual attraction. It seemed to me that all heaven was let loose. Still, I slept on the couch. Well, when I say slept . . .

It all seemed so very reasonable, as she gave me one of her pillows and a sheet from her bed, as she asked if I would be okay. Of course, in the back of my virgin mind there was a feeble sense of disappointment and a tremendous sense of relief; but then, with the lights out and the hullabaloo outside just almost a lullaby, with, well, what was her name—to be honest we had both forgotten the name thing—with the she in a her bed and me on the couch and only the strains of moonlight separating

her, with the sound of her every twist and turn almost, only almost, an open arms invitation, well most of the relief disappeared into the hot humid night and was replaced by an almighty desire, so sexual and yet, at the same time, so much a desire just to feel some human contact and comfort. I lay on my stomach, penis standing to attention, listening to every tiny twist, expecting at every moment that invitation. Of course, there was no possibility of actual sleep. The hours ticked by.

What unearthly hour was it when you whispered that uncertain query?

"Are you asleep?"

Of course not.

"Do you want to get in the bed?" Nicely phrased, as if it were merely a matter of comfort.

Sure.

Oh my god, the getting in bed knowing that you were there. Still, to begin with, there was a chasm between us. Small talk as you moved, making yourself more comfortable, of course. More small talk, you moved again. The pattern was there and I actually made a move myself, making myself more comfortable, of course. Electricity? The sparks were flying in my head. And then, with one almighty jolt, I could feel your skin. Well, was it really your skin, or just that we were so close I could feel your gravitational pull? It was one hell of a pull. Of course, I knew what you were wearing. What else could I do but spy on you as you climbed into bed? Only your underwear, I knew everything, had imagined myself peeling them off for the last hundred hours. And then you turned my way, real contact now, knees and arms,

and I opened my eyes and saw you looking into mine, those great brown pools, liquid, bottomless—to catch a cliché—in the half light. Suddenly the small talk stopped, as if the real way of getting to know someone was not by conversation but by gazing into the silence of their eyes. And then you smiled and all sense of apprehension was gone and I moved and kissed your soft, full—no cliché this time—lips. There was a certain gentleness at first; but then the tongues and the grasping fingers and the pushing and pulling and everything seemed pure animal.

Was I good, my dear? Probably not. I was a novitiate, after all. Still, there was the intensity and that must count for something. Afterwards, all the animal was run away and only some tremendous sense of well being remained, as if finally I had found my way home. More small talk, gentle, mostly from you, of course; I mean, you were, after all, the talker. And then the animal again, and again, until it was light out side and light was like night and we both finally drifted off to sleep, wrapped up in each other.

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It was just after noon when we woke. There was no awkwardness, though certainly there was the hard light of day. Off I went, trying to take care of business, down to the bank, the police station again, phoning my parents and the embassy. It was a surprise how soon everything was set in motion, and there I was with nothing else to do. So, of course, taking my time—that was the worst of it, because I really wanted to go as quickly as possible—off I went, back towards the hotel and then down onto

the beech. And there you were, in a way indistinguishable from all the other tourists, bound to your rack baking in the sun, glistening with lotion; and yet, at the same time, completely different. There you were, a package of a package holiday, and there was I, certainly no seasoned traveller, but, at the very least, a traveller—and a penniless one at that. I dug a hole and sat in the sand next to that lounging plastic chaise long—for the use of hotel guests only—and the difference between us was right there, written in the sand. Actually, etched in concrete, cast in iron, engraved in life after death.

“I’m a mining engineer,” you said.

“Oh. ” Well, what else could I reply?