

Where the Geckos Laugh
wild and free in Yucatan

By Kevin R. Hill

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A special thank you is offered to Starbucks for allowing me to write these
Stories for the price of a tall coffee. God bless.
Of Course I say thank you to Katherine, with all my heart.

Although much of this is memoir, circumstances and names have been changed to
Protect my friends. The stories Memory, Windows, and Parent's Cherry Tree are 100%
fiction.

Any resemblance to persons living or dead is coincidental and unintentional.

I MOVED TO THE CARIBBEAN



All night long I heard the Caribbean gently surging onto the sand, a primal sound that whispered to a part of me beyond this world. As that sound carried my thoughts away, a breeze danced with the mosquito net around me and made it appear as though I was floating in a cloud. Often I awoke and realized I was sleeping with my eyes open. And what a way to wake up, singing without thinking about a song, carrying it from a dream into the new day.

When I climbed from the hammock there was no rush to find warm cloths. No, I would stand there in my underwear, smiling at the tropical light filling my house like a warm candle glow, listening to tropical birds sounding as though calling the name 'Richard', the papaya tree

scraping on the mosquito netting that covered the window, feeling the warm trade winds touching my skin, feeling free and alive and content, a man with so little; but rich with love and life.

There at my warped table made of drift wood, a few barnacles stuck to a leg, I would take a piece of bread, lift the coca-cola bottle filled with raw jungle honey, a piece of corncob stuffed into the opening, and gently tap it on the concrete counter. The ants surrounding the cob would then run down the side of the bottle, onto the counter, and I'd pull out the stopper and pour honey onto the bread.

Then I'd open the front door so Slinky, my feral cat friend, could visit and search for food. She didn't enter like a house cat with a meow. She was all business, sneaking in low to the ground, cunning, hunting. And while she hunted for lizards, I sat at my little manual typewriter and traveled in my mind to Germany, my experiences there having sifted through the filters of time. How strange it was to sit there in cut offs, spraying mosquitoes at my ankles with Bug and Tar Remover while writing about such a highly organized society on the other side of the world.

The days were magical, long and filled with adventure. Every time I walked into town, I could not be certain I would end up there, so full of possibility was each day. Maybe a friend would drive by with the jeep loaded for a *cenote* trip, or crazy Mike would need help building a fish-smoker in the jungle, or a lost tourist *gringa* would pull up needing directions, and I'd be pulled into the Caribbean flow of life again, the slow and gentle stream of adventure of the day, being eaten by mosquitoes while shoveling concrete with Mike and cussing, or jumping through the ceiling or an egg-shaped cenote hidden in the jungle, bursting to the surface of water untouched for a hundred years, feeling so alive that energy and joy poured from me like trickles of water as I climbed into the sun.

When I finished writing each day, and the house was too hot to stay in, I would tap my sandals on the floor to make sure no creepy scorpion was hiding out in there, brush the sand from my feet and slip them on. With a few pesos stuffed into the pocket of my salty cut-offs, I'd carry my 20 liter plastic container to the tap on the street, fill it and struggle up the path to the house, feet sinking into the warm sand. Back in the house I'd set it in the sun to soak up the heat and be ready for a nice warm afternoon shower.

It was not until I returned to California did I understand how much my time beside the Caribbean, in my precious village, had changed me. One day I was speaking to a Mexican man about his country. As he told stories about his village, I saw an odd look come over his face, as though he were watching a loved child drive away for the summer. "You know," he said, staring into memories. "The days are longer in Mexico."

"Yes," I agreed without hesitation, my heart answering before my logical reasoning American intellect could speak.

SON OF A SAILOR



When you live in Mexico you soon become aware that there are a lot of Americans hiding there. So you learn not to ask too many questions, who not to visit, and who not to let visit you. But in such a tiny village I would get hungry for a social life and would seek out the company of any new person in town. I remember there was one guy who called himself Lucky.

One morning his big white trimaran was anchored in front of town. Lucky's grandfather had died in Norway and he had inherited a fortune. Soon after notice of the inheritance arrived, he received a letter from the Norwegian tax authority notifying him that he owned 110% of the money in taxes. So good old Lucky decided it would be a good time to take his money and see a bit of the world.

And if I'm talking about sailors, I have to tell you about Phillip. He's a legend among the gringos of Puerto, the John Wayne of the ocean.

When he sailed into town his two crew members did not even tie the bow lines before they jumped onto the dock and kissed the planks on hands and knees. Forty-foot seas had made them religious, and seeing mountainous black waves surrounding them was not something they ever wanted to experience again.

But you had to like Phil. He had this laid-back, Cajun way of seeing the funny side of everything that made you like him. He was bigger than life with his stories of being boarded in Cuba, or sailing up Rio Dolce in Guatemala, monkeys swinging through the trees overhead. Sometimes, after a couple of shots he'd slap the bar, and with that 'coon-ass accent, he'd say, "steel is real," referring to his boat's steel hull.

Right away he loved Puerto and started running snorkeling tours with his dingy. We'd take the tourists out to the reef and I'd guide them around the coral, point out lobster and barracuda and such, while he sat in the dingy and everyone was happy.

Soon he was part of our lives, a member of the Gringo community in Puerto. I'd see him at my truck stop restaurant by the port, where no other gringo ever went, and in the tortillaria, buying fresh, warm tortillas. It was like he had always been there. He stayed in Puerto so long that the Port Captain invited him to moor on the dock. For a boat owner that was a huge deal. If

you're anchored on a sandy bottom, like he was, you are constantly afraid a wind might blow the boat and drag your anchor. You were constantly jumping up from sleep at the slightest noise, afraid you might drift ashore. So Phillip took the Port Captain up on his offer.

But let me be clear: The Port Captain offered the pier to tie up to, but a *mordita* (little bite) was expected to pass from Phil's wallet to the Port Captain's pocket once a month. And everything went fine for some months, until the tourists stopped showing up for snorkeling trips and Phil got behind on payments.

I remember one time we were taking his boat out with a couple of young women, and had just raised the main when we heard someone shouting through a bullhorn. I thought the entire Mexican navy was coming after us. There behind the boat came a speed boat with a couple of soldiers and a port official. Phillip was told to turn around and that he could not leave until his business with the Port Captain was finished.

Nothing pisses off a sailor like taking away his right to sail, his freedom, that part of him that can only feel love when surrounded by ocean and fighting to live. But we came about and headed back. From that day on he plotted escape. He just couldn't afford to pay off the debt. The Port Captain even came to his boat one night and told him how he needed money.

"I have a wife and two children in school, and a mistress. You have a fine boat, and I would hate to confiscate because you don't have your ... papers in order." Yep, the Port Captain had him by the short-and-curlies.

He had to find a way out of Puerto, but the reef kept him fenced in with the only channel into the open ocean right in front of the Port Captain's office. There was another channel, the fisherman's channel, but it was only about ten feet wide, and maybe the same depth at high tide. Phillip's keel drew eight feet alone. But he was a Cajun, and a little thing like shredding his boat

on the reef was not going to bother him. “Steel is real!” He would rather risk losing his boat than pay the fat Port Captain another peso.

We met at 4 am. I came up beside his boat in an open launch I had borrowed. Phil stood on deck unwrapping the main sail. I grabbed onto to the deck and peered up at him. “Listen, you have to stay exactly behind me or you’ll hit coral. Exactly! You got it?”

“I’m right on your ass, bro’.”

“When you see me throw up my arms, you pop the main and don’t look back.”

I crept along inside the reef in the darkness and searched for the little channel to freedom. Our engines sounded so lonesome just idling along like that in the night. When I turned toward the open ocean I could see the water white and foamy around the coral on either side. Fifty yards past the reef I threw up my arms, holding the tiller between my knees, and laughed when I saw that sail pop open, the boat lurching into the wind as it glided past like an athlete born to run, a horse jumping out of the starting gate, leaping into the wind, fetching the next port, shaking the dust from her sail and not looking back.

I’ll always remember that look on his face, a sailor free again, his sail filled with life, with the power of nature, that smile filling his whole face as he bowed hat in hand, and was gone into the rising sun.

DRUNKEN PARROT



My girlfriend purchased Bogart from some Mayas in Cancun. They had knocked the mother's nest from a tree with rocks, and one of the chicks, Bogart, had been injured with a crooked back. He didn't have feathers when I got him, and I wasn't real sure what to do with

him. But if I wasn't writing or snorkeling for dinner, I was holding the little guy, and he bonded with me quickly. Parrots aren't like cats or dogs. They adopt one person and will barely tolerate others, making their disapproval known with skin-breaking bites. Bogart was no exception. Soon he was speaking words, calling the cat by name, repeating my name when I entered the room. I remember once, after an eight month drought, when the crocodiles started leaving the dry swamp and walking through town, Bogart started imitating croaking frogs. It was when the first rain fell. Thunder sounded like the sky broke open, and an angry rain pounded the town. Within a minute I could hear frogs croaking everywhere, and I heard it in the kitchen too. I ran into the room to see if some of the animals had gotten under the door, and there was Bogart, imitating the frogs.

Once at dinner when friends were over, Bogart imitated the moans of my girlfriend during an intimate moment. That was when we decided to move his cage further from the bedroom.

One morning when I got out of bed I knew something was wrong. Usually Bogart was going through his routine squawks, but on that day there was an ominous silence. Immediately I rushed into the kitchen and pulled the pillow case from his cage. The poor little guy's legs were curled up beneath him, and he was holding himself up by clamping his beak onto the bars.

Well, I never did find out what had happened to him, but I took him to everyone I thought could help. The drunken veterinarian thought it was a calcium deficiency, and when I was leaving his house his Mayan house keeper snuck around through the gate and called me over in secret. With whispers she explained that the 'evil eye' had come to the parrot in the night, and that I had to get a bundle of basil and tap him over the head with it eight times.

I did it. Yep. I tried everything. I was grinding up egg shells and covering them with lime juice. That dissolved the calcium. With that mixture I added vitamins and garlic, and everything

else I thought might help a parrot. Every day I would take Vick Vapor Rub and massage the little guys legs after I'd force feed him with an eye dropper. This went on for two weeks.

Then one day my friend came over with a bottle of anejo Cuban rum. "Come on, man, we're going fishing. I got bait, gas, and the boat is waiting. We're going to anchor on the back side of the reef and shoot some bugs too." ('Bugs' was our code word for lobster.)

"I can't go because of Bogart," I explained as I mixed up the parrot's food.

"Man, that parrot has been sick for two weeks. You have to get out and live. Either that bird is going to live or die." He pulled the stopper out of the bottle and poured a generous amount into the parrot food.

I knew he was right, and injected the rum-laden mixture down Bogart's throat, put him in the cage, his legs still curled up and locked beneath him. Then I grabbed my equipment, fishing pole, snorkeling gear, spear gun.

I had a terrible feeling when I got home. As I came through the gate I strained my ears for Bogart's calls as I cautiously approached. Then I heard him, squawking and singing like a sailor, happy as could be, going through one sound after another. When I looked through the mosquito netting over the window opening, I could see Bird Brain lying on his back with his wings spread wide, singing away while chewing on a foot as the other waved about. His ailment vanished with his hangover.

MEMORY

"For six months I was in a room with all women, and you know what happens there, Lance." Her voice was soft and sensitive, and only now do I realize the pain she tried to conceal. I watched Johanna roll another cigarette, push the packet of tobacco aside and pour herself more wine. Her movements were slowed by alcohol and sorrow. Her eyes never met mine.

"They give you only so much money a week for cigarettes and other things." She sipped the wine and stared at some memory across the tiny student apartment. "So many doctors ... with questions into all my life." Her lips pressed tightly upon each other as she shook her head, refusing to unleash any emotions. For a few minutes she was silent, but as I leaned forward to pat her arm, Johanna began to speak. "What you see ... what you live ... dees things all become part of you. Memories form the person." Her eyes widened with understanding. "Did you know that, Lance? Oh, the things I saw," she whispered. "Mein Gott!"

"Johanna," I said, wanting to hurry around the table and hold her, to console her with words and caresses, to be the friend she so needed, but I was becoming aware of another desire.

"Yes, Lance, I received one of your letters when I was... there." Tapping out the cigarette, she drank the remaining wine, and refilled the glass. As she leaned back in the chair and folded her legs beneath her, Johanna began rolling a cigarette. "But how could I read it? Written words

mean nothing there. It was all for the moment, the now. I fought for every second. I could not let go of the fight, even to read.

“But tell me; were there feelings and beautiful things in the letter? Where did your words take me, Lance? Ja, you always write such wonderful letters ... for how many years now?”

Her hands shook so that the ash fell from the cigarette onto her pants, but she did not brush it away. Nor, I remember, did she ever face me, but addressed her soft words and stare toward the vacant chair at our table, as if in her reality, that was where I sat.

I know I tried to comfort Johanna with words, but I can't remember them. All I remember is her sitting there, smoking cigarettes and drinking Mosel wine, and the desire I tried to suppress. And now, two years later, as I sit in the park across from her apartment building, I search through her words and try to forgive myself. It was when the neighbor woman came to borrow the telephone that the atmosphere changed. I remember how Johanna introduced me as her boy friend from America, then sat on my lap. Feeling her warmth, smelling her faint perfume, I had to kiss her, had to lead her to the little mattress on the floor.

And yes, still I remember what she whispered as I stared down into her frightened, tear-filled eyes. Yes, Johanna, memories do form the person. When we finished I sat up and smoked a cigarette, my first in four years. And as I sat there I could feel the tension, and knew she was watching.

"I have to go, Johanna," I said, as I stood up and searched for my clothes.

"Oh Lance, not like dis ... not you and I. You make my bed wet, then smoke a cigarette and go?" She lay in the fetal position and didn't acknowledge me as I kissed her good-bye.

I never saw Johanna again. When I returned two days later, her name plate had been removed from the front porch directory.

I can smell pastries and coffee from the bakery up the street. Children shout and chase a soccer ball through the park in which I sit. I never bothered to really look at Johanna's old building. The stone blocks are surrounded by straight mortar seams. The tall, old window frames have been recently varnished and their brass hinges shine. There are ugly little gargoyles under the eaves, and decorative stone work borders the windows and doors. The walls are pock-mocked from the war. Here and there chunks of stone have been broken loose. At chest height I see smaller holes, one after the other, forming a line from some long ago machine gun blast. No attempt has been made to fill in these holes. They have merely been brushed over with the same pink paint that covers the entire building. In Germany, so many things are kept unrepaired.

FIRE CORAL BUMP

Summer nights were so hot that even having a sheet over me was too much. Often I'd have a new fire coral rash on my stomach or shoulders and the itching would get so terrible every few hours that I'd have to wake up, pull the mosquito net from under the mattress, and splash balsamic vinegar onto the rash, all the while doing the mosquito dance to keep them off me. The vinegar was the only thing that stopped the itching. And then I'd notice my girlfriend laying there partially clothed, and the game would be in motion, her pushing me away, saying how I smelled like a salad, and me laughing.

With the ceiling fan whirling above us, movements confined by the netting around us, sweat running off us, we'd play a game so familiar and so thrilling, the fight of life, the moments spent in the dark that make the rest of the day worth living, whispers that touched my soul and often returned in memory, gentle, passionate nails in my back....

I'm sure the population of my village increases steadily due to fire coral. Yes, of course I learned to identify fire coral underwater, but if I looked into a cave, and could see several lobster, even though it was guarded by the itchy coral, I wouldn't hesitate to swim inside, the current pushing me into the coral, pushing, releasing, the rhythm of the sea, the rhythm of creation. Does it surprise me to learn that sea water has the exact same salt content as embryonic fluid? Not at all.

Did some part of me know at those moments of decision, that I would be kept up at night, that I'd spend hours reliving the rhythm of the sea? I laugh as I realize that I probably did know.

Oh, to feel so alive again, to be alone on the reef, that underwater jungle, feeling the thrill of survival, of risk, the sun on my back, light playing in the water, the spear gun pointing out in front of me, free of words and all the shit that fills my mind each day, to have life stripped bare, filleted to the bone, senses strained to feel everything around me, knowing that at any second I might not be the only predator in the water.

And now, years later, would I enter that cave? Would I shout so loud to hurt my lungs and plunge into the Caribbean with a spear gun, and venture into that cave, that rhythm, and dare life to carry me on the current once more? I'd like to think I would.

CARIBBEAN SPEAR FISHING



I was very good at spear fishing when I met Jacques. I used to swim out to the reef with my net fish bag and spear gun, and let the current carry me until I ended up at the ferry channel. Often I forgot about time. It was another world, a thriving under water jungle of vivid color. Often I would relax and just 'hang' in the water when a ray approached and watch them swim right up to me with that little human like face, as if to ask, 'who are you?'

Anyways, I was hanging around one of the hotels in town because four sisters ran the place. Jacques was staying there, and we started talking about spear fishing and decided to swim out together. When I met him on the beach he was putting on a wet suit. I tried not to laugh, and convinced him it wasn't needed. I felt embarrassed because all his equipment was so shiny and

new, from the trick knife strapped to his leg, to the high dollar watch and mask. But I just ignored it and walked into the water.

I guess spear fishing is like combat. What I mean is that you may think you know the person beside you, but until a bull shark swims past, or 100 angry looking barracuda decide to surround you, you really don't know what that person is going to do. And that is the way it was with Jacques. We had been on the reef for about an hour, drifting along, climbing into caves after lobster, when I noticed he wasn't close.

The reef is only about a meter deep where we were, and when I looked around, I could see that Jacques was standing up about 25 feet away. So I swam over and raised my head beside him, pulling up my mask. But as soon as I looked at him I could see by the look on his face that something was terribly wrong. "What's going on?" I asked, following his gaze.

It was low tide and in the distance coral heads were poking out of the water, and the current rushing past created the illusion of movement. And then that stinking Jacques said the forbidden word: Shark!

"No," I answered. "It's coral!" I explained about low tide, but he wasn't having it. The look of terror on his face became a horrible thing to look at. I was staring where he was starting, thinking maybe he was seeing something I wasn't. Then, to my surprise, he started climbing up on the coral as though to save himself from some rabid dog. I could see his knees bleeding as he frantically climbed.

Well, that was it. I just pulled on my mask and slowly started swimming for shore. Now, you have to understand. Anyone who spear fishes knows that when you're under water you move in a certain way. Quick, thrashing movements make you look like a wounded fish, and that is the one thing you do not want to look like. So, I was just swimming along, laying flat on

the surface, spear gun in one hand and bag of fish in the other, kicking my fins with slow easy movements. I made it about half way to shore when I heard this loud splashing, and saw Jacques come flying past me, arms and legs swinging like mad, as though trying to break a swimming record. I think he left his spear gun out on the coral.

When I got to the beach he was no where to be seen. He was so embarrassed he didn't even wait for me!

AFRICAN JAIL



Even now I am afraid to write about it, afraid to revisit that place, to see that little boy reaching out for my help. Something inside me winces when I try to remember. Mentally I have to tear off the scab and open the wound to look inside. Thirty years later I still shake when I go through customs and immigration. But writing is therapy, right, and a process by which we regurgitate our troubling past and come to terms with it? Well, if that is true, then let the healing begin.

I can feel the concrete floor warm against my cheek, smoothed over with the sweat of prisoners before me. Sweaty black bodies surround me. In that darkness I can see the teeth and eyes African's around me. I know that many of them have tribal scars, rows of welts above their eyes, following the contour of their eyebrows. Another tribe folds their elongated ear lobes over the top of their ears to be less conspicuous. As I lay there the darkness pressed upon me, a humid

heat without a breeze. Mercifully, the panic that surged through me prevented thought. All the meaningless little thoughts we play with in our heads had vanished in order for the body to take control and survive. Survival was the only thought.

I had started this trip like a twenty-four-year-old on some noble quest. Cross a continent and work in South Africa. Why not. But Africa had so much to teach me. As we traveled South Africa had changed me as if my world perceptions were a bone being boiled for soup. When so much of what I thought I knew had evaporated, I would leave as a different person.

With so much life to live, my friend Hamish and I had taken the train to Mombasa and along the way met a couple of English blokes who lightened the mood. Albert and Dan lightened the mood with wry jokes just when you needed them. Once we found a cheap hotel, we started visiting a bar that served ice cold Tusker beer to the dancing crowd. Of course the local working girls found us and would rub up on you under the table until you pushed them away. It wasn't that we wanted to pay for sex. We just wanted to be close to women, to laugh with them and have a few beers. Once the girls understood that we got along great. A few times during the night we'd take the girls outside and have a smoke with them, and we'd just laugh and dance and drink for hours in that bar.

But I was in love with a blond Dutch girl, and being around the women hurt. I longed to be with that special woman, to spend hours in bed doing all the tender things lovers do. So, the second night I did not go with them. Instead I stayed in the hotel feeling nostalgic, staring out into a light rain, and decided to smoke a little. As you can guess, that was the wrong choice.

The streets were magic, the buildings reflecting in puddles, rain drops shaking the reflections. The world was beautiful until four tall African men stepped off the wooden sidewalk and grabbed me. They were police and took me to the station. While I was sitting in a little room in

handcuffs, a big fat detective brought in a boy of about eight years. They were speaking Swahili so I could not understand, but I could see the fear and horror in the boy's eyes as he looked over at me, silently begging for help.

The fat man took the boy's handcuffs and held the child's arm out. Each time he asked the boy something, he slapped the child hard across the face.

With the first strike I jumped up and shouted. I don't know what I said. I didn't think about attacking but my body had acted on its own. And of course the big fat detective just bounced me against the wall with his gut and shouted back.

I can not tell you how it hurt to sit and watch that child cry and bleed. I don't know how long it went on, but that once precious face turned puffy, and his lips and nose bled. My life meant nothing at that moment. A precious part of me hid in a dark place within my heart. All the B.S. action hero movies were wasted spit. I was barefoot and handcuffed and trying not to vomit. I could not speak. And I know that part of me, my childhood, died that night.

Finally someone came in and lifted the boy from the floor and carried him out. That fat fucker of a cop hoisted up his pants and strutted around the room as I glared at him. I don't know if he was going to start on me next, but a couple of men entered the room and took me to the cell.

There was no toilet or furniture, just a barred window and concrete walls and floor. My cell was one of six, three on each side of the jail, separated by a large room between there. Some time during the night I heard shouting and a commotion, doors banging and the sound of men fighting. The the little window in the door I could see five or six African policemen fighting with a white guy as they struggled to throw him in a cell. He hit and kicked and knocked one or

two of them down before they managed to get him into the cell. All the while the shouted in German about them being Nazis!

Once in the cell the crazy man climbed up the wall and stood on the window like he was Tarzan, screaming insults through the bars in German. And that was when the laughing policemen turned the high pressure hose on him.

My brain had seen enough. I could not tolerate more. In the corner of the cell I slowly slid down until sitting and there I tried to hide my tears.

When the sun came through the window the guards opened our door and we all walked out to the communal area. At the rear of the area was a five foot high block wall that blocked the toilet area from view. Against the wall was a fifty gallon drum of water for washing. Several sticks sat on the ground beside the drum. One end of each was chewed flat and looked like a crude brush on that end. With the sticks the Africans brushed their teeth.

After using the squatter toilet I went over to the pile of shoes against one wall in the communal room. The police had removed all the laces. I found my shoes, but someone had thrown up in one of my kibbutz boots, and of course I thought it had been the fat detective.

Several times a day the fat detective would come to the door and shout about how I was never getting out, that I was going to spend the rest of my life in prison for a little pot.

When I was feeling the lowest, with my world pressing against me so hard that I could barely breathe, I heard the voice of an angel that pulled me out of the darkness.

“Hey, where is your friend, Albert? He owes me twenty schillings.” The happy hooker nodded and stuck her hands on her hips and wiggled them in a way that made me laugh. That was just what I needed. Betsy was a gift. She was going to get out soon, and I told her that if

she took a message to Hamish, I'd give her another twenty shillings, plus she'd get her other twenty from Albert. My message was simple: Get word to the American consulate or embassy.

After a couple of days a man from the consulate showed up and spoke to me. That caused the fat detective to back off, and I got out soon after that.

Africa was more than a place. It was an education. Sometimes I dream about that boy I could not save, and I hope that he found forgiveness, and did not further hatred and pain with his actions. Let there be peace in his life and mine.

CUBAN RUM AND LUST



The little abandoned house I was living in was making me lonely. Not the geckos running about the walls nor visiting feral cat could satisfy my need for companionship. Cancun was always there with partying *touristas* ready to play, but I had grown tired of the pick up lines, of

saying the same things over and over and feigning emotion when all I wanted was some touch. That's the thing about being a playboy: When you start faking emotions just to get some woman's panties off, you've crossed a sacred line and women are merely a sport, a game. The memory of every woman you ever scammed comes back to bite you every time you want to approach a new one.

But isn't it funny how moral decisions tend to go in cycles? If I decided not to chase any more tourist women in Cancun, I always felt really proud of myself for about two weeks. And then will power began to falter as it got reacquainted with that old friend lust.

My village of limestone roads and leaning Mayan palapas with palm leaf roofs, where you heard the same song on the one radio station, coming from one house after another as I walked along the street, had become too small for me, too routine. The Mexican women were locked up tight in the church and religion. I mean, I used to walk along the beach and stare at the Mayan women playing in the Caribe, laughing and splashing in cut off jeans and tea shirts, and I'd dream about how that scene would be different if the country had been settled by Holland, or better yet, wonderful France. And I'd imagine those same women playing topless, free and liberated of rosary and the chains of Catholicism. Yep, it was time for some female company. If a new tourist woman arrived in town I'd be on her quicker than the mosquitoes.

A few nights later I was really happy to hear the thumping beat of music on the town square. Traveling bands drive from town to town in Mexico and set up stages on the square. Their huge speaker towers rattle the few window panes in town, the impossibility of sleep forcing the residents near the square to join the party. And I have to say that the parties in my village were magical. The basketball court became a dance floor, and around the perimeter sat tables and food

carts, and huge tubs of ice-covered beer. So many nights I remember dancing into the night with the Caribbean breeze flowing by, everything softened with the taste of rum.

The music was thumping and the dancing couples filled the dance floor by the time I got there. It was a beautiful thing to see so many attractive women dancing. I drank a couple of Cuba Libres while I watched. And then I saw her! In a flash I was at her table and speaking with her friends who she was with. After some small talk I pulled her to the dance floor and started the old routine.

First came the small talk. A laugh was critical, and when she laughed at something I said, I went to the next phase, spinning her and letting her see me checking her out very discretely. And when I saw that look of recognition come over her face, telling me that she knew, then I just leaned in and whispered a few words of magic. She tried to pull away, but a gentle pull on her wrist brought her back for more whispers, and then I passionately kissed her.

That was it. I just remember being tangled up as we hurried along dark streets. It was on! And we couldn't wait to get into her room. I remember panting and groping and scraping the white washed walls of some corridor as she struggled with her keys. Once we got inside it was an Olympic wrestling match, pounding and laughing and raising a bottle of Havana Club as we drank. Everything blurred together as moral boundaries vanished and that head board pounded the wall. I can still hear her moans and screams, mixed with the squawks of her parrot beside the bed. The sweat poured off us and we slid about on each other as though covered with oil. I was a bronc' buster, slapping mosquitoes on my white Irish back side, my other hand wrapped up her hair like the reins of a wild horse.

Through the rum haze I remember the mirror head board crashed to the floor and burst, covering the concrete floor with glass. But did we care? Heck no! We just laughed and kept

going, that bird flapping and squawking, and half the time I didn't know if it was her or the parrot talking or shouting. The rum released all my longing and physical needs in a tidal wave of passion. That night was the Landing of Cortez in the history book of my sex life!

I don't know how long the bird had been squawking when I woke up alone the next morning. The mattress was half off the bed and I could feel mosquito bites covering my back. My mouth felt like a sand pit and I wanted to kill the parrot because every time it squawked my head expanded and I thought it would burst. When I dared open my eyes I stared at a hundred little reflections of myself, of Dorian Gray, in pieces on the floor.

Of course I cut my feet while searching for my cloths, but I didn't care. All I wanted to do was to get out of there before she returned. I couldn't speak to her. I didn't even want to look at her. How could I? We had gotten past the entire pretense and social B.S., right to the core of our base needs, something that usually takes couples years to reach if ever they do. With my feet bleeding in my sandals, and the nail scratches on my back stinging wonderfully as I pulled on my shirt, I hobbled out of that room and headed to my little truck stop restaurant.

As I sat in that little hut trying to make myself eat, I told myself I couldn't do that again. But I knew the cycle was just starting again.

When it came time to pay the young waiter looked at me and laughed with pity on his face. "What a night, ah?" he said in Spanish, and brought a shot of rum out of the back room for me. "You go home and sleep. You can pay me later. Everyone saw you dancing with the gringa last night. You drink and get crazy for the women, ah? I think you're a Mexican." He laughed again and walked away.

WINDOWS

Sometimes my mother makes me speak French and says I'm really good at it. I'm better than my little brother, Bobby. He's a snot nose. But when we're down here in Puerto Caribe we have to learn Spanish, and already I can say a lot of things like hello, good morning, and how are you. It's a really easy language and I think I'll always smell sun tan lotion when I speak it because my mom is always rubbing it on me while teaching me new words. It's my lotion language. I'm so quick my mom calls me her special girl.

Mexico is so much better than Canada because we can run everywhere in bare feet and shorts and the ocean is no farther than a spit from our house, if you call it a house. My dad calls it a hut and swears there's a rat living in our palm leaf roof, so Bobby stayed up all night with a big stick just waiting for that rat to come out so he could whack it all the way back to the jungle.

I think my dad is right. There isn't even glass in the windows to keep out the wind, just a green mosquito net that he tried to cover with some plastic, but my mom got angry because it kept the air out and made the house feel like a furnace. I think that's why my dad went back to Canada. He just didn't like the geckos running around the walls and screaming at night. Nope, he said they sounded like an old woman laughing and he just couldn't get used to eating tortillas either. He wanted good old Canadian bread from his favorite bakery. Bobby and me hid inside the bathroom one night and listened to them talking about going back to Canada. He talked a lot about my mother's new friend too. He just hates Maria and doesn't want her around. I had to

explain a lot of what they said to Bob because I'm his big sister and mom and dad both told me to watch out for him.

After my dad left Bobby and ran all over town. The streets are really rough here so sometimes we run along the beach all the way into town to buy ice creams or cokes from the market. The sand doesn't hurt our feet. And when we're out we always keep some rocks in our pockets because Mexican dogs sneak up on you and you have to have some rocks to throw because if you try to run they're way faster and bite you on the ankles, and that makes you cry and cry all the way to the doctor.

One day after my dad went back to Canada, Bobby and me we go tired of scrambling ants with our sticks, and Bobby broke his sandal too, so we went in through the gate and walked across the hot concrete walkway up to the house and looked in the window for mom.

I didn't know a woman could kiss another woman, and I knew that my mom was putting lotion on Maria because Maria didn't have her top on. Bobby and me watched like it was a movie, and then I pulled Bobby away and took him to the beach. He wanted to dig for crabs, but I made him sit next to me and listen to a story of mom and dad and how they met in that tiny little restaurant back in Canada. Somehow it just didn't seem right telling about Canada with the log cabins and forests and snow when we were sitting there in the sand and the Caribbean just a jump in front of us, but I made him listen to that whole story that I loved so much, and about how dad was going to come back and take us all away again. He's my little brother and mom and Dad told me to take care of him, so that's what I do.

DEATH OF A TOURIST



Back then my village was sweet and innocent as a four-year-old child. The tin roof market was the hub of life. Children would play in the sea and ride to the market to buy a soda. The little Mayan girl behind the counter would pour the contents into a plastic bag and add a straw to avoid charging a bottle deposit.

On Wednesdays every dog in town would be carried to the market by the scent of fresh meat, for it was on that day a quarter cow was delivered from Cancun and butchered. And beside the

market door I found a wonderful vantage point to watch the world pass. It was just a widow covered with a shutter, but the market owner would open it during the day for ventilation, and right inside the window stood the old coca-cola cooler filled with ice cold beers. So I would spend the mornings writing Child's Play, my mind creating scenes in Germany. And then I'd amble toward town to stand and drink a cold beer, staring out at the sparkling Caribbean, waiting for the fishermen to return with the days' catch. It was the strategic spot to see any new tourist woman who might arrive.

But this post concerns a death, so let me get to that. One of the hotels in town used to get groups of tourists from Montreal. I used to spend time at the hotel because I was dating one of the daughters. Often the tourists like to sun bathe nude. So it wouldn't cause havoc in town, the hotel would drive the nudists to a remote beach. Although no locals stood gawking, in that area the reef did not block the current so sometimes the surf was rather strong.

One of the French Canadians was rather fat, and had been drinking that day. And, of course, he was unable to stay afloat. Now the hotel driver took off and drove as fast as possible down the dirt trail to the local police station. Those local police were so happy to have something to do. Usually they stood about outside, looking so important with their safety-pinned insignia, trying to determine where the smell of marijuana was coming from. (The young woman who worked in the restaurant across the street would go up on the roof and hide as she laughed and blew smoke towards the police below.)

Well, the locals took off in their new shiny truck, got the body, and drove it back to the hotel where they called the Federal Police. And that is when I entered the picture! Wrong place, wrong time. I had just finished a beer at my favorite market window and was feeling amorous, so I walked around the back of the hotel, hoping to find my girlfriend alone, but instead my

worst nightmare happened! I walked right into the middle of a circle of machine gun toting
Federalies!

I felt bad for the local police. The Federal guys were really letting them have it for moving the body. They actually made them drive the body back to where they found it so they could properly investigate the scene.

THE CROCODILE AND THE POODLE

Our house was like one of those big screened in tents you buy for camping where the family can eat and keep the mosquitoes out, but let in maximum air. There was no glass in the windows, just mosquito netting, and the roof was a thick layer of decaying palm leaves. The old screen door was attached to a spring that made it slam. The sound of that door slamming was the sound of home.

When I remember it I can hear the hum of the ceiling fan and the squawking of ‘Bogart,’ my little hunchback parrot. It was life in sandals and tank tops, wearing shorts all day long without underwear so the dudes could hang free and be cool. For nine months of the year the trade winds blew gently off the Caribe and cooled my Puerto, pushing the little vampires into the jungle where they belonged. But come summer, the trades died out and the mosquitoes took over. Every evening at dusk I ran for my long pants and shoes because it was under tables where the little blood suckers waited to prey on unprotected tourist ankles.

By nine in the morning the concrete outside my bedroom door was too hot to walk on barefoot, so I’d tap my sandals to make sure some scorpion had not made it his home, and I’d shuffle down to the corner and look at the ocean. And that was always a mistake because every morning when my girlfriend left for work, she’s leave to good old ‘honey do’ list, and I had another chapter of the book to rewrite, but there was the Caribe, my baby, calling to me like a mistress that I wanted to bite into, begging me to come and play. See, what most tourists don’t

realize is that yes, summers are like opening the oven door and leaning close, but summer is also when the Caribbean lays down like a good girl, just flattens out like a lake, a lake full of the migratory species that make my spear gun finger itch. But more than that, the light in the water is magic, illuminating the coral in way not seen the rest of the year, and sparkling in the water like liquid diamonds.

Often I would play hooky from the writing and with spear gun and gear in hand I'd walk to the beach and away I'd go. First I'd run water through the snorkel and spit into my mask, and then I'd lay down into the shallow water, warm like a bath, and gently slide on top, feeling it change in temperature, watching little fish dart along the bottom. By the time I'd reach the reef I'd be in lobster mode, searching every nook and cave, scrapping my shoulders and stomach on the occasional fire coral that I'd have to wipe with balsamic vinegar several times a day so I would rip my own skin off because of the itching.

With the current I'd drift for six hours, filling my net bag with wish and lobster, fighting with spotted moray eels who tried to take catch. By the time I'd reach the ferry channel I'd turn toward the beach and swim in. That meant I had about an hour to rush through the 'honey do' list.

By mid-summer Puerto had not seen rain in eight months. The army had started driving around with tanker trucks and was pumping water into everyone's tank. I heard from an ex who owned a restaurant that one of her Mayan workers was riding home late at night, down the three kilometer road through the swap, when she almost ran over a huge crocodile crossing the road. The woman was so scared that she didn't come to work for three days. As the days went by I heard about other crocodile sightings.

But we didn't think much about the talk. And in the evening it was often too hot to stay home, so Francesca and I would sometimes walk into town and eat at the little *palapa* restaurant past the handicrafts market.

The little place was built of poles from the jungle and run by Don Julio and his son who often carried around a little white poodle. There we could be alone and just feel the night, laugh with Don Julio, and simply enjoy. Above each table hung plastic bags filled with water that 'kept away the mosquitoes,' he said. That night father and son were talking about all the crocodiles that people had seen in the early morning. I didn't think much of it though. I mean, we did live beside a swamp.

The following morning I was driving through town in Francesca's bug when I saw a friend with a three foot crocodile in his arms, one hand clamped around its jaws. John said he caught it in his front yard, and asked if I could drive him to the crocodile farm on the highway so he could release it. I took him and the one of the workers took it and explained that the crocodiles around Puerto were salt water crocodiles, and during drought they migrated to the ocean swam along the coast to the next inland water way. That freaked me out. I was just getting used to the bloody schools of barracuda that would sometimes surround me. If I ever saw a crocodile while I was snorkeling, I'd have a break down and the Caribe and I would part ways.

With that news I postponed further spear fishing adventures for a while.

About a week later we walked back to our little restaurant and were very surprised to find Tito, the son, hunched over a table, a bottle of tequila beside him, crying like a child. Francesca went over and touched his shoulder and asked what was wrong.

"Tin tin," he said. "My little friend is gone. I think one of those *pinche* crocodiles ate him. My little Tin Tin!"

I didn't want to laugh. It was horrible. That guy loved his dog. But I couldn't help it and had to quickly turn and leave so I wouldn't crack up and make the Tito feel worse.

After a while Francesca came out and said I was terrible. I hugged her and tried not to laugh. I waited as long as I could before I said: "Crocodiles one, poodles zero."

She pounded on my shoulder in a playful way, and then we laughed and walked to another restaurant.

THE PARENT'S CHERRY TREE

It was high-stress time. I work in the corporate offices of a large bank downtown. For five months I've been asking for help with a multi-million dollar project while juggling five smaller ones as well, and working fourteen hour days. My wife would often laugh and tell me how I fell asleep on the sofa in mid-sentence, or how I'd switch from one topic to commercial property value as I drifted off. But I was managing to keep my head above the corporate waves of schedules and meetings and risk management by cutting loose details of lesser importance, like the captain of a sail boat might cut loose a broken mast so it doesn't capsize the ship. Yeah, I may have been spitting out a bit of sea water, but somehow I was treading water. And then the phone rang.

Every parent has nightmares about such a call. The principal of my son's high school was on the line and telling me my son had been caught climbing over the chain link fence that surrounded the school and kept all the students in, and his hands smelled of marijuana. No, none had been found on him. Of course I went into panic mode. Yep, somewhere down inside myself there was another gear, a reserve of energy and love we hide away, a secret battery pack only tapped into when when all our energy and mind is wrapped up on something else, and for the survival of family we absolutely need an alternate boost of energy. That is what I shifted into.

I immediately scheduled a meeting with the principal before police or medical tests could be spoken of. As soon as I hung up the phone was on another line with a lawyer, and by the time I ran out of the elevator, I knew my rights, my son's rights, and how I would handle it.

All the way down I was on the headset postponing meetings and soothing corporate egos, arranging conference calls, but on another level I was going over my meeting with the principal. He wasn't going to know what hit him! I was a Project Manager alright. And I was going to manage this project too. While I was multi-tasking on a level that should have qualified for the Olympics, a strange thought came to me: In my youth I'd been a hell-raiser. Fist fights, concerts with free love on my mind during the Hippie days was what made my world go around back then. But to succeed I had to stuff that part of me away beneath the tie and suit I now wore. Now I was respectable. That older part of me, however, was calling. What if I used a bit of the Hell-raiser from my wild days, allowed him to come out a little in order to get my son out of this mess? Could I pull it off?

Wow, that principal never knew what hit him. I marched in there with my head set on and slapped my attorney's card on his desk and shouted a few key points about violating the rights of a minor, and that caused the principal to jump up as though he was going to jump bad and bully me. Hell no, that wasn't going to happen! I got right up in his face and went nose to nose with him. And I enjoyed it. It was an act, or was it? Wasn't that the real me, the hell-raiser, and not this office-dwelling, tie-wearing corporate dude? The truth was I was a blend of the two and stronger to be real, to allow them both into my being. My son's troubles changed me at that moment and allowed me to be who I was.

I could hear in Dylan's voice that he was shocked by his father's behavior. He was even more surprised when I called his mom and told her that we wouldn't be coming home that night.

It was time for me to get real with my son. He was turning into a man and needed some real answers. Like every father I had a choice: Should I alter the truth of my past, let him know who his father really is, or give him the ‘George Washington and the Cherry Tree tale’, how his dad had never lied or stepped on a crack or drank beer or smoked pot? This was a young man being confronted with real choices, hard choices every day at school, and I knew he deserved the truth.

So I got us a room at a beach front motel, and I bought us a few beers too. That’s right; it was the boys being real. I told him the stories of my wild days, and I told him of the person I had to become to make it in the world. I told him about smoking pot and what I learned from it. I told him about drugs, and I cried when I remembered losing a friend to them. I told him how I had seen drugs destroy lives.

And he asked a lot of questions. I think he really trusted me now, really knew me. He had the real information to make good choices. It was a change in our relationship. Something shifted at a primal level. There was a new respect that went both ways. And after all the stories and telling him what I had learned from them, we had pizza delivered and watched some stupid sports comedy and laughed. I was pleased to see that after one beer he shifted over to juice.

Without mom there all the rules went right out the window. We ate lying in bed, and threw our napkins on the dresser. Our trash stayed on the table, and the toilet seat stayed up.

About a week later Dylan asked me about university.

And me? Well, the old hell-raiser in me was tempered with age and education, a perfect balance for attacking corporate America. I started pacing at meetings and that allowed me to speak freer and allowed my mind to grasp all the different perspectives of clients and bosses and not be afraid to instantly address concerns and questions. I don’t know if it was the right

approach, but it was mine that had been suppressed too long. I was real, and for the first time in years I really looked forward to going to work. I loved it.

MY KIBBUTZ AND EGYPT



I need to go back to that dark cell where the concrete floor felt warm and oily against my skin, smoothed over with prisoners sweat. I need to return because even now, thirty-one years later, still I shake when I go through customs and immigration, thinking about that little boy I saw being beaten. Yeah, that memory festers inside me like a wound that needs to be opened and drained. Not during a seven-year marriage, nor a year of therapy, or drunken nights with life-long friends, could I mention what happened in that African jail.

Sometimes I look at my son and think how innocent he is, his eyes vibrant with youth and love, and I ask myself: Was I that young in Africa? And who was I so many years ago?

I was a kid, wild and free, traveling the world and sex was a game that I thought I invented. If I hadn't invented it, at least no one had ever been as good at it as I was. I wasn't a tourist, but a traveler and proud of it, a member of the freedom corps, the people off the grid, part of an underground network of back packers on the move, not the kids you find around Europe with bright new packs traveling on Euro Passes. No, I was a hard core traveler, like the ones you find in Greece returning from a year in India, or working the grape harvest in France or Switzerland, learning and gathering stories and experiences to replay during old age. Europe was my playground. I used to open my map on the floor and lay beside it, dreaming of adventures in distant lands.

After working the apple harvest in Switzerland, chopping row after row of trees with a machete as it snowed, I sought the sun. I longed for palm trees, for the open smiles of sunny lands, sunglasses and the things of my culture, all pieces of me. And that longing took me to Israel, to a kibbutz called the bridge of light. And there I grew.

I took over an old pottery shack and turned it into a bar. I was Rick in 'Casablanca.' If you needed a visa renewed, I had connections. If your toilet broke, for a small fee I'd get the boys to change it for a working one, taken from some volunteer's room while they were in Eilat. Yeah, I had a finger in every pie on the kibbutz, and it was natural to me. There were volunteers from around the world and I was visiting a girl from each country, working on international relations. Or, to put a Jewish spin on it, I was Moses in the land of milk and honey, and my seed was flowing.

Every evening when my work in the kitchen or the banana fields, or the little factory was finished, I'd open up the bar and sweep the floor, fill the two refrigerators with bottles of beer, and get ready for the night. I was selling cases and cases of beer, and after a few weeks I moved

along to mixed drinks. The place rocked every night and was packed wall to wall with volunteers dancing to The Police. If it hadn't been on a foundation, I know the entire shack would have hopped around the kibbutz during our parties!

Life was good and I was hording away the money. But then came Christmas and I started looking around for a tree. I figured a tree would make my volunteer customers happy and I'd sell more beer...Christmas Eve party, Christmas party, New Year's party. Oh, yeah!

One foggy morning I was riding on a flatbed trailer with the rest of the citrus workers, being towed by a tractor and heading to the Clementine orchard, when I saw the perfect tree. It stood alone in an over-grown field and was the perfect shape. Well, as soon as I could get a saw I went and cut it down. Man, I'll tell you, it really lifted everyone's mood. The Danes got together and put bits of toilet paper in the branches to simulate snow, and sang and danced around it. Some German girls got together and pinched beer caps onto a wire and wrapped it around the tree, and it looked pretty good. That night I sold more beer than ever! And an Australian woman came behind the bar and thanked me proper when the party ended. What a night! Rick was rocking.

But then morning came and sunlight revealed an empty field.

The whole kibbutz was eating breakfast in the dinning hall, about 400 people, most of the volunteers staring at their breakfast and feeling terrible from the cheap Israeli vodka I passed out the night before, when the gardener burst into the hall. And I mean he entered like the Incredible Hulk, slamming the door against the wall and stomping into the center of the room. His face was beet red and he was panting, particles of saliva shooting out of his mouth as he spoke.

"Who cut down my tree?" he shouted, shaking the world with his anger.

I was fighting to keep my oatmeal down, fighting with a hangover from the alcohol and a moral hangover because of getting naughty with the Aussie on top of the bar, thinking everyone

in the world had seen it. Now here was the Hulk himself calling me out, and I just wanted to melt and seep down through a crack in the floor where I could sleep for five more hours. But no.

I shyly raised my head to see 200 volunteers turn toward me in unison.

Well, the tree turned out to have been a diplomatic gift from the Australian government, and one of only three in Israel. It took the kibbutz two weeks to ask me to leave. During that time I had fallen in love with a beautiful Danish woman, her hair blonde as spun silver.

But I had to leave. So again I opened the map.

With my kibbutz issue shoes and shirts, my socks burned from drying on a kerosene heater, I left with that Danish woman now a part of me, her scent and taste flowing through my veins.

Along the way I met Hamish, a Scotsman who loved to tell stories about starting fights with the bouncers in Glasgow night clubs. Now usually I just let people talk over their beer and assume most of what they're saying is fabrication. If the story is good why spoil it by bringing in the truth or calling them a liar? But with Hamish I believed his stories as soon as I saw his hands. Fighter's hands are different. The pounding causes calcium to build up the bones there, strengthening and enlarging. And Hamish had fists like canned hams. He was perfect for a trip into Africa.

Our plan was to get to South Africa, work, and save some money. So we crossed into Egypt on a bus from Tel Aviv, one of the few times the border was open. I remember dozing on the bus as we drove through the Egyptian desert. I felt something tickling my feet around the sandals, and I was dreaming of snow. But shouts woke me and I looked up to see that our windshield was now in a thousand pieces rolling across the floor like marbles. On the side of the road stood a few Egyptians in robes, who must have thrown a rock. But was our Israeli driver

going to stop? Hell no! He must have been trained for something like this, because rather than expose his passengers to who knows what, he just squinted and stomped on the gas pedal.

And then there was Cairo! What a city. For hours I would walk around in awe, never knowing where I was or caring, just amazed at all the wild, crazy sights: three men walking through a crowd with half a cow on their heads, a bicyclist balancing a casket on his handlebars, a family of six riding atop a fence post on a moped. Every second was like being in a packed theatre and someone shouts, "Fire." There was that kind of panic and rush around me every moment, and I was always trying to stop and look at some crazy sight.

I loved The Arabian Nights as a kid, and here I was surrounded by it. I mean there was the Cairo museum, The Valley of the Kings, and Luxor all close by. There was no reason not to like the place. And our hotel cost fifty cents a night. Not to mention that three people could eat at a restaurant for less than half a dollar. Nope, this was my kind of city.

At that time tourists had two days from their entry into the country to register with the tourist office. In Cairo you needed those two days because it takes you that long to summon the courage to leave your hotel. It is that over-whelming. Everywhere are crowds that press around you, turbans and robed figures carrying chickens and bamboo and cages of doves on their heads and bicycles piled with cages four high and horse-drawn carriages pushing through it all. Any one of the sights would take time to process and appreciate, but you never can process before another slew of sights over takes your brain, never giving you a moment rest to absorb, never showing you something familiar to latch onto so you can mentally breathe a sigh of relief and think, oh, I know what that is, or remember sometime in your life when you had something to do with what you're seeing.

The tourist office in Cairo was in a huge brown government building of about ten floors that encircled a courtyard filled with rubbish. Inside that building was no different than the pandemonium found on the streets. For two days we waited and got sent from one office to another, from one clerk to another, never understanding the procedure or seeing any progress. All we needed was a stamp in our passports, and of course we were too green to know all we had to do was offer the sacred bribe, a few dollars--baksheesh-- to grease the gears of bureaucracy and all would have been right in the land of the pharaohs. But instead we spent two miserable days in that hot, noisy building, being the lepers no one wanted to free.

And then we were saved. The second night we found the hashish market in the bazaar and our whole experience of Cairo changed. A dollar a gram! We had found hippie Mecca, and suddenly Cairo became an 'A' ride in Disneyland. Yes, we smoked. We smoked long and hard. I'm not going to be like a certain pussy politician and say I never inhaled. Hell no. I was young and wanted to experience life, so I jumped on the chance and rode that wave like a body surfer, thrilled as I bounced along, caught in the surf of the moment, turning and kicking and spitting out the salt water of life. And if the bottom of the wave dropped out in a beach break, hurling me onto bare wet sand, then I was going to crash and roll, knowing it had been my choice. If that happened I would jump up spitting out the sand with bleeding scrapes to show for the experience, knowing the disappointment was special because it was mine. No, I wanted to live with all burners blazing away, not get old and wonder how it could have been, but instead to sit on the porch of old age in my rocker laughing with memories of adventure, of opening to life and shouting "Yes!" to fast, nasty women in exotic lands.

We even smoked a little doobie before we went back to the tourist office. If I was going to go through that torture again, then I'd do it with a sly smile on my face. But I'll tell ya: When

we got high we realized the whole country must be smoking up, because once we were on their wave length the process went like clockwork, a stoned version of Swiss efficiency that blew us away. We went from one office to another, got the proper forms, laughing with the clerks, got our stamps, and we were on our way!

During the process I was standing at a window looking out into the courtyard. I watched as workers cleaned offices and emptied waste bins of paper out the window. It was beautiful. The colored papers floated toward the ground in the sunlight and I had to get a photo. I grabbed the camera in my back pack and hung out the window as I adjusted for the light. I thought it was going to make the cover of National Geographic, but the workers didn't think so. I snapped a few photos, and when I glanced up toward them again, I saw three men aiming rifles at me!

Yeps, it was Africa.

At that second I was pulled back into the corridor. "Have you gone daft?" shouted Hamish, pointing at the 'no photos' sign on the wall. "You're going to get us bloody shot, mate."

I remember when we tried to leave Cairo. We had a little smoke before our train arrived and strapped on our packs and headed off. Since we were trying to stretch our travelers' checks, we had bought third class tickets the night before. I thought the ticket clerk had looked at us strange when we insisted on third class tickets, but didn't know why.

As I stood on the platform I watched the train arrive and it looked okay. Neither of us spoke as hordes of Egyptians arrived, stuffing bundles of sugar cane into the cars through windows, goats, pigs, huge sacks of grain bigger than me. And I mean it was a riot! I couldn't move because the platform was packed with every kind of cart and trolley, all piled high with food and water and vegetables and men climbing on top of the cars and through the windows. I was in a scene from Justine. It was so outside of anything I knew I was frozen in place as though

watching a stunning sports match. With my pack still on my back, I watched it fill and then strain as it chugged out of the station. I don't know how long I stood there in disbelief, but when I did move I just turned without speaking and walked back to the fifty -cent-a-night hotel and stayed another day. When I bought our new tickets they were first class.

I think I was stoned all the way through Egypt. When I boarded the boat into Sudan, at Aswan High Dam, I had enough sense to hide out when I saw the authorities lining people up for yellow fever injections, going right down the line with the same needle. Yeah, stoned or straight, I dodged that bullet. And as the robed figures sat in little circles about the deck, and I watched Abu Simbel seem to float by, I thought of the glory of Egypt, the history, the culture, and the adventure and intrigue I had felt sitting in a crowded sidewalk café, sipping hot sweet tea in a little glass, while smoking a four foot high hookah and slyly watching the turbaned man behind Hamish maneuver in an attempt to pick his pocket. That was life in a nut shell, raw and unhomogenized. That was Egypt.