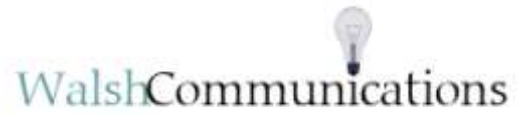


MANUSCRIPT

White Skin, Black Hearts by Tom Galvin

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‘The Indians of the provinces of Cochuah and Chetumal rose, and the Spaniards so pacified them that from being the most settled and populous it became the most wretched of the whole country. Unheard-of cruelties were inflicted; cutting off their noses, hands, arms and legs, and the breasts of their women; throwing them into deep water with gourds tied to their feet, thrusting the children with spears because they could not go as fast as their mothers. If some of those who had been put in chains fell sick or could not keep up with the rest, they would cut off their heads among with the rest rather than stop to fasten them. They also kept great numbers of women and men captive in their service, with similar treatment. It is affirmed that Don Francisco de Montejo was not guilty of any of those cruelties nor approved them, but condemned them severely, yet was unable to do more.

In their defence the Spaniards urge that being so few in numbers they could not have reduced so populous a country save through the fear of such terrible punishments. They offer the example from the history of the passage of the Hebrews to the land of promise, committing great cruelties by the command of God. On the other hand, the Indians were right in defending their liberty and trusting to the valour of their chiefs, and they thought it would so result as against the Spanish.

They tell of a Spanish cross-bowman and an Indian archer, who being both very expert sought to kill each other, but neither could take the other unawares. The Spaniard feigning to be off-guard, put one knee to the ground, whereupon the Indian shot an arrow that entered his hand and going up the arm separated the bones from each other. At the same moment the Spaniard shot his cross-bow and struck the Indian in the chest. He, feeling himself mortally wounded, cut a withe like an osier only much longer, and hung himself with it that it might not be said a Spaniard had killed him.’

Yucatan: Before and After the Conquest, Friar Diego De Landa. 1566

One

The smog looked as if it sat on stilts below. Puffed out like a large pillow, resting on the sides of a circle of mountains that trapped the city in close like a bullring. Shanty towns and fleapits made from corrugated iron, cardboard, any kind of junk that could be propped up or laid out, spread in veins from the top of the hills before being engulfed by the mist half-way down. Occasionally, the top of a modern tower block scratched a finger-hole in the fog. Otherwise, that was all that could be glimpsed of Mexico City from the air.

The plane circled, dipped a wing in the blanket of white before gliding gracefully through it. Steve sat quietly, staring out through the window, a tear of rain racing across the perspex. He followed it with his eyes until it was ripped away and replaced by another. Then another. Until finally the plane came to a heavy halt on the runway and the rain became even again on the window.

Steve stood and gathered his bits from the seat; a book, a money belt, a small black diary and a tiny pocket version of the New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs, distributed by the Gideons and acquired by Steve's mother over ten years ago. Where she had picked it up, he wasn't sure. He'd seen many like it in hotels over the years, some larger and bulkier and unread. Most of them were covered in layers of dust. Sometimes fingerprints. But rarely would you find a dog-eared copy of the Bible in a hotel room.

His mother had given this Bible to him when he was leaving home for good, the only thing that he was asked to do was to read one or two lines chosen at random every day. It was a promise that had

seemed so absurd, so simple, that it was impossible not to try and keep. But it still required the effort of forcing it into a day's schedule, at least in the beginning. Then it became habit. But it was a promise that had more to do with honouring his mother than the figures within, whom Steve regarded with no disrespect, but with no greater admiration than any other figure in history who had suffered and died for a belief.

Steve had no idea what was about to become of himself and his fellow travellers over the course of their journey. He had never paid attention to the fact that things were written down and recorded for a reason. And the line he had looked at that first day as they arrived in Mexico was from Proverbs, the section he had become most fond of. 'A gossip betrays a confidence' it read, 'so avoid a man who talks too much.'

The colonial style Hotel Isabel, a crumbling, fading beauty, leaning over like an old oak onto one of the many streets that spread out from the central Zocalo. It was the type of hotel whose walls gave off an ancient odour -- of damp, of decay and of the bodies of the people who had slept there. The carpets were thin from feet that had crossed the world and on the walls the paint laboured as if suffering from skin disease. Yet the air inside was warm and inviting, the large staircase tumbling down into the lobby, the banisters spread apart either side like open arms.

After a hectic ride out from the airport in a minibus, Steve, Marty and Jack slumped at a table in

the hotel's restaurant, their shirts crumpled like tinfoil, their hair sticking to their foreheads in strands. A cool breeze that smelled of rain raised the curtains on the window like a skirt. The air in the restaurant a mixture of strange food, cigar smoke and foreign body odour. An old Mexican waiter, stiff in a uniform, hair greased to a wave, strolled up and down between the tables, a pair of keen eyes darting from one table to the next as he went. He had a limp that dipped him to the right side and he bowed with his head slightly to the left upon delivery of an order. Minced beef and tacos arrived at the table, together with three Corona beers, frost running down the neck of the bottle, a piece of lime sticking out ceremoniously from the mouth.

The lamps spluttered on around the city and the wet streets were diced up with grubby yellow beams. Few people passed, those that did hurried and kept their heads down low against the chilly night air. With a sound like a fly ending its life in the flame of a candle, the neon sign for the restaurant suddenly spat into life outside and the waiter broke off from a table, looked at his watch, then shuffled down to the doors, closing them over with the movement of a figure you'd expect to see struggling out from a clock; top latch, bottom latch, bolt and shutters. Bang. It was all shut up, save a small door that opened at the side.

Marty began sifting through a Lonely Planet guide with pale, slightly chubby hands. He'd gained weight over the last few years and knew it all too well. He blamed the office job and the lack of time to do anything about it. He finally seemed resigned to the fact and accepted that it was all just part of growing older. Unlike rocks, people don't weather off in layers, they weather on instead. His mouth too was slightly lined, pursed up, a question or a comment poised on the outer edges of his lips. He stared

at a paragraph, went to say something, but mumbled instead, shook his head and moved on quickly to another page.

It was harder for him to make this trip than either Steve or Jack. Married over three years to a girl he'd met shortly after graduating, he got stuck in a job as an advertising manager for an online publishing company. Getting time off was difficult, obtaining permission from a wife was harder. Steve or Jack barely even knew her. Whenever Marty met up with them, it was mostly alone. Whenever she came along, she sat quietly while he chatted and drank until she could take no more and urged him to get a taxi home. The casual observer would guess that it was a marriage kept alive by habit, bonded by the simple human need for dependable company. Marty would tell people he loved her. But she never heard those words.

Steve contacted her, by phone, a few days before they were due to set off. Just to reassure her. Promised her that he would look after Marty, that it was all planned by Jack, who she trusted more, and that the country was perfectly safe to travel in, despite the high incidents of kidnappings that Steve said only happened to high profile targets. He also promised her it would be the last time they would go away together for such a long time. She seemed a little more at ease, at least.

While Marty looked through the guide, Jack leaned over and flipped open the front cover with a sharpened pencil that had been stuck in a loop in his sleeveless waistcoat. He traced the route on the small coloured map with the tip, whispering to himself, his eyes moving with the pencil until he reached the southern-most point of Mexico at the border with Guatemala. He held the point of the pencil on the spot as if he could already visualise how it looked down there. The jungle, the colours, the sounds and

all the smells that go with it.

‘I still say,’ he hesitated, blinking his eyes rapidly as he looked at the page, ‘we’ll get it all in if we move quickly enough, Steve,’ Jack said, as Marty gave a loud smirk and placed his feet on a free chair in front of him, pulling the book away from Jack.

‘Look at this,’ he said, planting two elbows heavily on the table, ‘Tijuana. Also known as ‘sin city’. A notorious place for prostitution with 1 in 3 HIV. Christ.’

‘That’s North, Marty. That’s North,’ Jack repeated, without looking up from the map. ‘We’re not going North.’

‘Well, we can go North if we want,’ Marty said, fixated by the information on the page.

‘We can’t,’ Jack said.

‘Why not?’

‘Because we didn’t plan to go North, Marty. Leave it out,’ said Steve, as he could see Jack was beginning to get flustered. ‘And if even if we were, Tijuana would be the last place we’d visit. You’d end up buried in a hole out in the desert.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Marty said, snapping the book shut with a bang and suddenly noticing the gaze of a man seated at a table near them. Unlike the few tourists and the odd local, he looked and behaved differently. He wore a suit for a start, though not a very distinguished one. Sandy colour, a series of indelible stains on the collars from greasy food and strong alcohol. He was definitely foreign, but spoke to the waiter boldly and in fluent Spanish, tipping his glasses lower on his nose as he did so. Even knew the waiter’s name. On his head was a straw coloured hat with a dark brown band, threads of greasy hair

that were once black poking out beneath, a pack of Mexican cigarettes sitting obediently at his elbow. He was all nineteen fifties and Mexico City was maybe the closest thing to it that he could find. But he belonged in Cuba. The waiter left the table and he turned and grinned;

‘The way the sand shifts out in those deserts they wouldn’t even find a body either,’ the man said with a voice that was all gravel. ‘Irish, right? So are you here to see the Memorial? You’re more Mexican than you think, you Irish,’ he said then with a smile.

Steve gave an abrupt smile in return then looked away.

‘How’s that?’ asked Marty, leaning back on his chair.

‘The Memorial to the Irish soldiers,’ Jack said quickly before the man had time to answer.

‘During the war between Mexico and the US. A brigade of Irishman, went over to fight with the Mexicans. It was in, in...’ Jack pinched his nose and concentrated, ‘1846. The San Patricios brigade.’

‘That’s right,’ the man said nodding and smiling, as Jack sat back and let out a sigh. ‘He knows.’

‘He knows everything,’ Marty said quietly. ‘Eh, Jack?’

‘Ever find yourself in trouble in Mexico,’ the man said, jabbing a finger at nobody in particular.

‘Mention that. It might help.’

Steve went to say something but the man, an Englishman, wanted to do some explaining and more besides. He introduced himself as simply Charlie, said he was a lawyer, living in Mexico City fifteen years with an office down the street. He specialised in human rights and without any invitation suddenly went on a rant. How the politics was corrupt from the top to the gutter. How there were communities of poverty-stricken street kids living underground with the rats. Why the rebellion in Chiapas failed and

what the consequences were. The kidnappings that was even putting the government under threat such was the concern from the general public. How the drug wars would leave thousands dead. And how beautiful the country was and how much he loved it. He spoke articulately, pausing when he wished to stress a point, gazing into his beer glass as he twisted it very slowly on the table. The country had stolen his heart. He did as much as he could to help whoever he could, knowing that it was but a drop in the ocean that he referred to as stinking. And it was stinking, he stressed.

‘Just wait until you lot get down to Veracruz,’ he added further, laughing and throwing back his drink which had now become a whiskey. Before the night ended he had returned drunkenly to the subject of rebellion again as if dragged back to it against his will. He left on that particular note -- stink, failed rebellion, futility -- as though he’d somehow made himself depressed just by talking about it. Then he tottered to his feet and shook hands with each of them in turn, leaving just as the waiters were stacking the chairs on top of the tables for the night. Within minutes, the light in the restaurant was snuffed out, the three boys pulling themselves up the stairs with the aid of the banisters and collapsing, exhausted, onto three single beds.

Two

Early hours of the morning. Steve awoke, staring up at the high ceiling, the red dot on the TV and the shards of light coming through the shutters from the streetlamps outside. He would always wake like this on the first night in a strange country. Sometimes it would continue for a few nights or even more. He'd just wake and stare, the scene around him freezing, he trying desperately to place himself somewhere in it.

Normally it would be a nightmare of some sort that would wake him. A horrifying notion that something was in his bed, like cockroaches, or any kind of insect for that matter. But mostly it was cockroaches. When he had that kind of nightmare he would jump out of the bed and pull the blankets with him, shaking them in a cold sweat. This time, he just woke. He looked over to the bed where Jack lay, his thin arms folded rigidly on his chest as if he had put them away like tools for the night.

'Jack!' he whispered.

Jack's eyes blinked, slowly at first, then more rapidly. Suddenly he opened them and without freeing his arms from their sleep, rolled his head over to face Steve, one eye squinting in protest at being woken, the other blinking as a lock of curly black hair fell into it.

'What's wrong, Steve?'

'Can't sleep.'

'It's just Jetlag, Steve. All the alcohol didn't help.'

He coughed slightly. Turned his head back.

'You okay?' asked Steve.

'A bit chesty. But I'm fine. That's to be expected. We're at an altitude here. I think it's about...'

'It's okay, Jack. You don't have to tell me.'

Steve stared over at the window, trying to guess the time from the grey light that tumbled on the carpet from the space beneath the curtain. It was too grey to be early but bright enough not to be too late.

'Jack?'

'Steve?'

'You know, I sacked two guys. Just before I left, Jack.'

Jack lifted his head now and looked over at Steve, who had the blankets thrown down over his waist, his hands behind his head. He was bare-chested, well-toned, his head propped up on a spare pillow, his eyes focused on a small sphere of light on the ceiling that shone through the top of the curtains from outside. A streetlight. A neon sign. A car pulled up at a kerb.

'Sacked two guys? You? For what?'

'I'd had enough. Came in the day before we left to tidy up a few things, and there was another e-mail complaining about a sloppy job, which I'll have to sort out again. So I went out to the house where the two guys were working and told them they were fired. That was just the day before we left, Jack,' Steve replied, picking at a cut on his forearm.

Jack gave a quick laugh. His laughs always coming in a burst and ending abruptly as if the cause had just vanished from his mind.

‘Well, you have to run a business, you know. It's not easy. It's only your second year, Steve.

What's it got to do with anything now, anyway?’

‘Dunno. But ... I suppose, well that's it.’

‘That's what?’

‘That's it. I'm running a business now. I just fired two men and here I am about to set off around Mexico for a month. I mean, are we not getting a bit old to be doing this again, eh? It's like, whenever we went off travelling before, the future was just a scatter of possibilities, which we never had to really worry about. Now, I've got to go back to that. It's not the same. I just don't look at things ahead of me the same way as I used to.’

Jack laughed again.

‘Steve. You're in your thirties. The future's the same as it always was. There's you, me, and Marty there, on the road again leaving everything else aside for a while. Including your business. Now try and get some sleep, Steve. We're up in less than two hours.’

Three

Steve had stopped at a wall. But it didn't look like a wall. It didn't look like anything but a line of rocks and stones scattered in the arid sand. But it was land and it belonged to someone. He stood there slightly drunk, staring up at a black sky that was scratched with lines of stars. Looking at his feet again, he aimed at a single spot on the ground and listened to the sound of the gushing grow deeper as the sand was drilled from a night's drink. A click behind him. Just one. Like the sound a Zippo makes. He turned to see a local Turkish man, a shotgun resting on his shoulder, the barrel aimed three feet from Steve's face. Steve stared into it. A black hole, just like the spaces in the sky between the stars. But this was even blacker. This was where he was going if that trigger was pulled. A black hole in the sky in between the stars. He pissed all over his jeans. Stood rooted to the spot for a full minute until he heard Marty. He was walking further behind as always and had seen the man coming out of his house with the gun.

'Wait, please.'

Steve had turned the colour of snow, visibly under the high moon. 'Please,' Marty repeated, stopping just in front of the Turk, who turned his head slightly, his eyes and the gun remaining squarely fixed on Steve. He was late sixties, a small woollen cap covering the crown of his head. The features of his face were clear, heavy lines scoured the flesh like small ravines. A simple farmer.

'Have you got anything to offer him, Steve?' Marty whispered.

'Jesus, don't do that!' hissed Steve. 'Where's Jack?'

‘He's probably at the hotel by now.’

The man suddenly said something, motioning with his gun towards an old shed, where a door barely hung on two rusty hinges. Keeping his gun upright with his right hand and elbow, he opened the door with his other arm and reached in, rooting around for something on a shelf. He pulled out a battered old torch, flicked it on with his thumb and shone the light in to where several items of junk lay scattered on the ground.

‘Get that bucket there, Marty. Pick it up.’

The man nodded a few times and mumbled as Marty went to reach for the bucket. Steve took it from Marty and followed the beam as the man shone the torch over to where a shallow well had been dug out of the hard soil.

It was a pretty paltry job, cleaning urine from a wall of rubble with just a bucket of water. But after three buckets were splashed over the area, the man put his gun down, took the bucket without any sign of anger and walked back inside to his house without a word. Steve and Marty stood where they were until he had gone inside, then they ran down the road and kept running until they reached the hotel gates, their hearts throbbing in their mouths like frogs. They promised to learn from that episode from then on. That wherever they went, they were to consider the locals first before taking any course of action. But that was many, many years ago.

The first morning in Mexico City. Uneventful but for two incidents. The alarm call came through from the reception downstairs. An irritating tinkle that rung three times, with a two second interval before ringing three times again. A polite voice with broken English informed Steve who was first to

grab the phone, that breakfast was being served in the hotel restaurant. It was a black phone, large and bulky and with a clammy grip, the receiver heavy like a dead man's hand. Steve slammed it down and went into the bathroom just as Marty and Jack were beginning to stir. He was tired and hot. Dressed in knee-length olive green shorts, his knees grazed, more small cuts on his arms, the relics of his job as a landscaper and garden designer. A job that gave him the best of both worlds – indoors and outdoors, planning in one and working the other. It was a perfect balance that kept both mind and body fit. The tiles were cool under his feet, the grout clean. White tiles in hotels are good. You can see the roaches easy. He checked the corners but none were there, so he went in further and turned the tap.

Cockroaches. Insects. Arachnids. It was a phobia that had hung over him since he could remember, and no amount of further remembering could dredge up any particular incident that might have shed some light on this dark corner of his soul. He was never trapped in a dark cellar or a room under the stairs festering with roaches. Never tangled in a tree crawling with spiders. When he come against them while working, he would quietly back away and hope no one would notice. Then he would take a moment out, get his breath and continue on with what he was doing. The way he looked at it, everyone was afraid of something, and there was little you could do about it but face it when it came to face you. And it would come. Maybe not every day. Maybe not every year. But it would come several times in your life. He looked on it as a slight defect, a bad piece of wiring, the same way that everybody was born with some physical weakness that they carried throughout their lives, differing only in degrees of severity.

He had a slight problem with his left knee too, which would get gradually worse as time wore on.

That came from years of kneeling on damp grass, without taking the precautions of getting proper kneepads to prevent the moisture seeping into his bones and cartilage. He always kneeled on his left leg, kicked with his right. None of these things explicable. Just part of the wiring. He knew Jack had asthma, asthma that was no good for a small, thin, sometimes frail guy when it got the best of him. He also had a slight shake in his hands, particularly under duress. It was barely noticeable, but Steve and Marty both knew it was there. And it could only get worse in time. But his physical failings were compensated for by his mental faculties, a bit of a quirk that caused him to be labelled a clown by some, an eccentric by others, but for Steve, Jack just hovered a little bit higher than everyone else and could see that bit further, and that bit more beneath him. He had a keen intellect, a memory that was pin sharp, grew bored and distracted when others were enthralled. This made him occasionally unpredictable, quiet and distant. An only child, every time he went away, Steve would have to sit down with Jack's mother and reassure her that nothing was going to happen and that they had been away together every year for the last ten years. And between Jack's mother and Marty's wife, Steve had to take on a lot. Jack planned the trips and drew the maps. Marty followed and snapped on Jack's heels, partly through devilment, partly through a streak of jealousy. And Steve was like the rearguard, the man at the rudder. And it worked.

And as for Marty, he had developed a weight issue, had a problem controlling his libido and was terrified of heights. That was his lot. They all knew that because he went on about it all the time, whereas – asthma apart – Jack just got on with things. Said little. We all have a crutch. It was as simple as that.

Out in the room, Marty lay sprawled on the bed like a large peach, gazing up at MTV. He had shorts on and his knees were tucked up under a plump pair of thighs. He also wore one of those slouchy, round hats that you often saw fishermen wearing. It was cotton, a beige colour with a zip either side and only seemed to accentuate the rotundity of Marty's face. Steve noticed then how much weight he had put on since last year.

'Do you know how many ads they've had on since you've been in there, Steve? It's amazing. If I worked there instead of a crappy online outfit,' Marty began, sitting up and swinging his legs onto the floor, 'I'd be a millionaire like Jack there.'

'Right,' smiled Jack, who was leaning into his rucksack from the bed, pulling out clothes for the day. 'But you can take a few noughts off the million.'

'Whatever,' replied Marty, suddenly eyeing Jack. 'What's that you're taking out there, Jack?'

'A pair of trousers, Marty.'

Marty frowned, going over and pulling back the shutters, whereupon a blaze of light burst through into the room. He lowered his hat to cover his eyes slightly. 'It's going to be a boiler, Jack. You'll roast in those.'

'They're light, Marty, made for this environment,' said Jack, holding the pair up and putting a hand down into one of the legs. 'Anyway, when we're in the city here it's probably not a good idea to wear shorts.'

'We're grand,' said Marty, heading into the bathroom. 'What are you wearing, Steve?'

'Trousers.'

‘Christ. Well, I’m not going to die on my first day.’

‘Got yourself a hat too,’ said Steve.

‘What’s wrong with my hat?’

‘Nothing’s wrong with your hat. What do you think, Jack?’

Jack stopped fidgeting with his trousers and glanced up at Marty.

‘It’s adequate.’

‘Adequate,’ snapped Marty, looking in the mirror and adjusting the hat on his head. ‘It was made for this environment, Jack,’ he said then, turning quickly and going into the bathroom.

Breakfast was brown beans and yellow eggs, served on white crockery with a faint blue border. Outside the city was coming alive in a surge of yellow on brown skin. Sun drenched the pavements like slaps of paint from a wet brush. In the air, the sound of car horns, street traders and foreign voices created a human zoo.

The Metro station was a short walk down the street, surrounded by countless stalls and kiosks selling cigarettes, papers, lottery tickets and bottled water. They each bought a bottle and went through the gates and down the stairs to where the cool, damp tunnel, tiled pale blue, sank and curled further inwards like a snake. Jack was in the lead with a map of the metro in his hand, Steve not far behind him, while Marty was walking casually a few paces behind, thumbing through the guide book. The tunnel churned people in every direction and Marty was slipping further back against the human tide.

Suddenly, a small, stocky guy in his twenties brushed past Steve with a bump of the shoulder, staring straight ahead. He was lost in the crowd before Steve had time to turn, but a shout from behind

them and Marty stood there, his face white, the guide book lying flat on the ground with the pages splayed open like legs.

‘What happened?’ asked Steve, pushing his way back.

‘Did you see that guy in the denims there? He just walked past me and grabbed my balls. He just grabbed my balls,’ Marty repeated, feeling his crotch as if the man had taken his genitals off in one clean swipe

‘Did he say anything?’ asked Steve, picking up the guide book.

Marty looked blank.

‘No. No, the bastard just stared right at me and grabbed my balls. Hard.’

A grin cracked Jack's face. It was followed by a little burst of laughter like a kookaburra. But Steve wasn't amused. He shook his head and murmured quickly to move on, looking behind him as he pushed Marty and Jack on ahead.

‘I told you not to wear your shorts,’ he said, when they'd finally reached the platform. ‘You were asking for it.’

‘I don't see how I was asking for it.’

‘Do you see anyone else in shorts, Marty?’

The three stood against the wall of the platform. Brown skin, white skin. Not a sinner wore shorts. Some people stared, benignly, the way you'd stare at a stranger anywhere. Marty gazed around him, his legs feeling exposed and naked.

Within the hour, they had caught their connecting bus and were on their way out of the centre

of Mexico City to their destination, Teotihuacan, the City of the Gods. The bus was a dilapidated vehicle, patched up with several pieces of scrap, so it took on the appearance of a battered dustbin. The seats were made from cheap plastic that stuck to the backs of Marty's legs, squeaking as the bus rode over every bump.

A short dusty road spotted with cacti led them up to the main gates and reception building. A mini-boulevard of stalls sold everything from t-shirts with crude pyramids on the front to postcards that opened out like a fan. Through a glass door in the cool reception and the heat left the ground in waves, as if the earth they stood on was a convection heater. Jack stepped forward first onto the sandy soil, the sound beneath his boots like crushed gravel. He looked around, frowned against the sun, speechless at the buildings that lay ahead, towering over them and reducing them in size to matchsticks.

Teotihuacan. City of the Gods. Fifty kilometres north-east of Mexico City. The Avenue of the Dead, the Pyramid of the Sun, the Pyramid of the Moon. The city a map of the stars. A mirror of the sky where the deities and the spirits of the dead are living.

'Well, Lord Jesus,' said Marty, the first word he had spoken since the incident in the underground. 'I'd never imagined it to be this size. That's simply amazing. Look at the size of the pyramids.'

'It's more than amazing, Marty,' said Steve quietly. 'It's frightening, is what it is. No matter what you've read and learned about it, I still don't buy it. There's no way this place was built in the simple manner described in the books. No way. This is one of the finest examples of a mystery that you're ever likely to see. And I don't know about you guys, but it makes me feel pretty bloody small. How could a

people who were supposed to have been running around with spears like savages, suddenly come up with something like this?’

‘It’s mathematics, Steve,’ said Marty. ‘It’s all very accurate. Every angle, every measurement. But where’s the knowledge gone to? We couldn’t build this today. That right, Jack?’

Jack just stared ahead of him, blinking, as if trying to match what he had read in his books with the physical things before him. He sighed, shrugged.

‘Well, they weren’t running around with spears like savages obviously,’ he replied.

‘Fuck it,’ Steve said, ‘I reckon that the great thing about a mystery is the fact that it’s a mystery. I’m heading over to that big one there to catch the view from the top. It’s supposed to be incredible.’

He then pulled out a small cap with a peak from his bag, pushed the peak down further on his forehead and began marching off quickly in the direction of the Pyramid of the Sun, standing 70 metres high in the blazing plain.

* * * * *

Back in the hotel, Marty was applying aftersun soothing lotion to his legs then to his nose and forehead. A face that was a strange and hideous shade of purple, stared back at him from the mirror. He’d ignored Jack who had taken sunblock with him and urged him to apply it liberally everywhere. He’d also ignored his own instinct and climbed the 70-metre high pyramid, struggled up it, even with the aid of the rail that led all the way to the top. But once up there he almost panicked. It was an easy

enough ascent. He didn't have to look anywhere except at his feet, his hands doing their own work on the rail. But then he turned and looked back down. It came upon him in short waves and he had to sit on the ground and close his eyes. Once that initial attack had passed he was okay. He forced himself through it like he always did. But his tolerance was running out. He knew that one day he just wouldn't be able to do push himself any further.

He'd been quiet for most of the day after that. Plus the incident in the tunnel had shaken him somewhat. There had been something very undignified and humiliating about it. There was also something unusual about the way the man had stared at him. It wasn't the look of a gay. It was a hard cold stare that implied malice. What frightened him even more was the way he had approached him, coming directly at him, making eye contact from some way off. He would have had to have forced his way through the throngs of people to get him in time.

Marty swore loudly as he applied the cream to his skin, then took the corner of the hotel towel and dipped it in a bottle of camomile lotion that Steve had given him, turning it upside down and soaking the cloth. With a grimace, he dabbed it on his legs from the top down to his knees. Jack watched and grinned. Lay on the bed with his hands propping up his head. This was a ceremonial healing of skin.

'A few beers and some time, Marty, is the only real cure for that mess. The same goes for that guy who grabbed you like that. And if you'd listened--'

'I didn't listen to you, Jack. Okay? We'll see how you are when you get burned.'

'I've different skin.'

‘Well, I can arrange a burning if you wish, Jack. Plenty of Indians where we’re going.’

‘And I’m sure there’s plenty of faggots too,’ Steve, who was in the chair over by the window, said with a grin.

Marty didn’t answer.

‘I said, I’m sure there are plenty of--’

‘I heard you the first time, Steve. Now leave it out,’ Marty said, through a gasp of air, as if wiping his skin with a bunch of nettles. ‘He wasn’t a faggot anyway. Don’t know what he was, but he wasn’t a faggot.’

He turned, threw the towel on his bed.

‘It was weird though, the way he came at me like that. I could see him, staring at me, he passed you and Jack and came right at me. I thought for a second that he had a knife or something. But you know the way things happen so quickly and you just freeze. Scared the hell out of me anyway.’

‘Ah, it was just the shorts,’ said Steve getting up and stretching. ‘They’re into their macho stuff here. Every guy has to prove something. It’s just the culture. Maybe it was the hat.’

‘Right. Well, he’d nothing to prove to me. I never met the bastard before,’ said Marty.

‘Yeah, well I wouldn’t worry about it,’ said Steve, patting Marty lightly on the shoulder and going into the bathroom.

Steve showered, Marty dozed, a wet towel over his face. Jack, who usually kept busy either reading or playing patience with his deck of cards, went out onto the rooftop, a perfect square that pushed doors to several rooms neatly back into its sides. Large flower boxes, choked with blossom,

radiated their colours in the late sun that had now become a large crimson globe hovering over the buildings.

The heat was stifling, even though the sun was on the wane. Jack pulled off his t-shirt and went over to the wall to look out over Mexico City. The smog hung in the air over the rooftops and the top of the nearby volcano smoked like an Indian, thick plumes spreading themselves out as if blown through a siphon, narrow at the bottom, wider as they reached the sky. Down below, yellow VW beetles raced around the streets frantically, all heading in the same direction towards the main plaza.

Fumes, heat and altitude didn't make things easy for Jack, having suffered from asthma since childhood. If the heat and smog here were tough on him, further down in the tropics there would be the humidity to deal with also. He'd just have to be careful. Keep his inhaler handy. Look for the signs. Fatigue, shortness of breath, dizziness, all that. He coughed loudly, held a hand to his ribcage that sounded hollow it was that thin, and spat a lump that could have been a piece of his chest into one of the flower pots that stood against the walls. A plant with a small red flower stretched its arms out wide before resting them on top of the wall which was painted ochre, a colour that sat well with the plants and the sun descending behind the city. Jack bent down and held the flower between his fingers, inhaling a deep breath to take in its scent. It smelled sweet. And if he could sense that, then he was okay. Finally, he stretched himself, his chest sticking out in front of him, and patted his stomach.

A smile cut into the sides of his face. Of them all, he was undoubtedly the happiest to be here. Unlike Marty, he had no reason to long for a break, since he rarely had occasion to be under strain back home. Unlike Steve, he didn't have a business to run. He had all the time in the world to gather interest

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in the ruins, the history and the culture that dotted this place. Then there was the beauty. That too. And Mexico had beauty in abundance. Steve was obsessed with the mystery that infused this country. That some knowledge must have got lost in the past. That a link was missing. Or that someone stepped in, then vanished. That the laws of evolution had surely been broken. That this was the birthplace of the gods. Jack just absorbed what was in front of him, took it all in without recourse to laws, morals, rights or wrongs. Steve would spend his life thinking about all that, aware, so consciously, of time passing by his window each morning and dreading it all the while. Jack didn't worry about that neither. Tomorrow, the sun would rise and set again and he would enjoy it as much then as he had done today.

Four

Later that evening the rain fell like a curtain, trapping the three back inside the main restaurant. Charlie was there, grinning and sipping a coffee. He held a hand up at the guys when they entered, as if they were all old pals, and tugged at a few chairs from under his table.

‘Do we have to talk to this guy again?’ Steve mumbled, eyeing the man with an odd contempt as Charlie pulled the chairs out.

‘Gentlemen. So, what did you get up to today then?’ he inquired, glancing over his shoulder at the waiter and getting his attention with a quick nod. ‘Lord, I see you forgot your sun cream, mate!’ he added suddenly when he noticed Marty’s face. It was followed by a loud laugh so wheezy it might have been one of his last.

‘Teotihuacan,’ Marty said glumly, pointing upwards as he took a seat. ‘Sun was like a furnace out there today.’

‘Well, it would be,’ Charlie said, pulling at the pack of strong Mexican cigarettes and putting one to his lips. ‘That’s the problem with this time of year. It can get bloody hot and uncomfortable. But it can also rain like hell. But you guys have come for the sun, surely? Why aren’t you down south?’

‘Well, we’ve come for a few things,’ said Steve. ‘The sun is one of them. The sites. Get on the road. Get a break. All that. We do it once a year.’

‘Right. So where’s your route taking you then?’ he asked, his eyes flitting around the table before settling on Jack’s, who had the guidebook in front of him on the table. Jack brushed open the

cover, to the map which was well-thumbed.

‘From here we go to Morelia, Patscuaro, Uruapan, Zihuatenejo, maybe Acapulco, over to Veracruz via Taxco,’ Jack said quickly, as if reading off a shopping list. ‘Then down all the way to the Yucatan and hope to get into the Lacandon rainforest. If we've time, we'll head into Guatemala. That's the plan.’

‘Ambitious,’ Charlie said, squinting one eye at Jack. ‘Zihuatanejo's definitely nice. Taxco is a bit restless. It can get dodgy. And you won't get far in Lacandon without an escort.’

He turned to the corner of the room. A woman, early forties, scribbling on a pad, a book beside her on the table together with a coffee and a packet of cigarettes. She had a busy appearance about her, glancing up at newcomers when they entered, staring after those that left. A pair of outdated glasses hung on the end of her nose which she twitched constantly like a squirrel every time she looked up.

‘Do you see that woman over there?’

‘I saw her the minute we got here,’ said Steve. ‘Stares at everyone. She was in the lobby this afternoon as well. Doing the same thing. Staring and writing.’

‘Right,’ snapped Charlie with a grin. ‘So you noticed. Well, steer well clear. She talks to everyone here. All the foreigners. This is one of the best places in town for foreigners to meet up. A real traveller's hotel. You get all shapes and sizes. But what she's doing is actually illegal. She claims to be a journalist from Germany. Now, if she is, she's forbidden to write about the country while she's here without a special visa. She hasn't got one. I asked her. She nabbed me the first evening she arrived but

I've managed to ignore her since. You find a lot of hacks coming here to try and visit Chiapas and other places to get a story on former rebels, kidnappers, drug lords and all the rest. Most of them won't get a thing. And you wouldn't want to run into some of the people that are still hiding in the forests – even if their numbers have diminished. Everywhere else is safe if you've enough common sense. The kidnappings are a huge problem but it's mostly rich families and rich tourists. You'll just be forced to part with your money.'

Steve glimpsed Jack out of the corner of his eye as a nervous look came over his face.

'How much risk is there?' asked Jack.

Charlie shrugged, blowing a funnel of smoke into the fans over their heads.

'The kidnappings have become so alarming that there are protests now on the main square. But the country's forces are so corrupt the government can't do much. Like I said, rich families are the prime target. But they can grab anyone if they think they can get money. As for tourists, look as scruffy as you can and stay together. And like I said, they want a quick buck out of guys like you and will likely just get you to the bank machines every day, taking the maximum each time until they clear them out. Then they might let you go.

'The Mexicans are a lovely, friendly people. Passionate, mind you, but friendly. Very into family and all that. I've been here for years and never had a problem. The only advice I'll give you is that if you suspect there's trouble, then there probably is.'

Jack went to say something but the man continued.

'There was a foreigner killed here last year mind, for messing with a girl -- but I think it was over

the land myself. He was found dead on his ranch from machete wounds. Attacked by a group of locals one night. Very tragic. Very tragic indeed. Everyone knew who did it but nothing was ever done. If you're an outsider and you mess things up...anyhow. You gentlemen look as if you can read a situation well enough, you don't need stories.'

But stories came. In abundance. Charlie churned them out like a mill. Beer replaced his coffee until eventually his tales became soaked with gin. Steve began to drift. He turned away and browsed the bar. A new waiter was on tonight, a younger man on the edge of his twenties perhaps, several beads of sweat on his brow. Other tourists came and went, some pale, some bronzed. Arriving and leaving. All shapes and sizes, just like Charlie said. Steve didn't know who to be more envious of, those at journey's end, or those about to begin. Both had their benefits.

His eyes wandered. A man seated at a table further away snapped them to a halt. Steve hadn't noticed him arriving. Like he just spilled in with the rain. Like he just looked up and he was there. The man was all distinct. His jacket to begin with. It rippled, shone like a new coat of paint. Shades of browns and greens. Snakeskin. Only a man who feels above an animal wears its skin, Steve thought. The guy was touching fifty with his fingertips but held it off well. Short blonde hair bleached from the sun and a deep tan, the one that takes years to work up. He was no tourist. Beneath the jacket a black t-shirt with a neck low enough to show a deep scar the shape of a scythe at the left side near the collar bone.

The man lit one of those hybrid cigar cigarettes, inhaled deeply, blew a cloud up into the fan that revolved over his head. Steve watched the smoke dashed apart by the blades. He blinked and suddenly

the man's eyes were on his. Emerald blue in a face that was walnut brown. Steve spun on his chair, but the man's gaze burned two holes in his back, slowly like the beam of the sun focused through glass.

Charlie finally stood, his energy exhausted. His supply of optimism drained as if the beer bottles and glasses he cradled were leeches.

'Well guys, it's been nice meeting you. And if you're passing back this way, you know where to find me,' he said, casting a quick glance at the newcomer a few tables away.

'Actually, we are,' said Marty. 'We've a room booked for a month from now.'

The man grinned and put his hand deep into the inside pocket of his suit.

'I'm going to give you my card -- which I don't often do for tourists. Most of them drive me mad. But you're a good bunch of lads. If you run into any problems, give me a holler. Any time, day or night. Give me a call. But hopefully, I'll see you all safe and sound in a month's time. And I'm buying the beer.'

He handed the card to Jack, who glanced at it quickly, blinked his eyes, read it to himself before leaving it down on the table, the details safe and sound in his mind.

'Well, boys, have a good one,' he said finally, shaking a hand in turn then bending down to whisper something to Steve.

'And watch the tour guides, mate,' he said quickly, then patted Steve on the back before walking out of the bar.

'Must take a piss,' said Marty, getting up quickly as if he had been waiting for the opportunity.

'What a poor unfortunate man,' said Jack, as he watched Charlie disappear through the doors.

'He really looks like a lonely old bastard.'

‘He fits in perfectly here, Jack,’ said Steve. ‘Look at the place. Look at him. He wouldn’t belong anywhere else. Take him out of Mexico City and he would be a lonely old bastard. And hang onto that card. Always handy to have someone in case we run into anything.’

‘That shouldn’t happen. I’ve looked at all the places we’re going to Steve. Checked them with the embassy. Double-checked. It’s all been cleared.’

Steve wasn’t listening. He followed Marty with his eyes until he went into the toilet, then sat back while Jack began talking animatedly about the next day’s plans.

‘That guy,’ whispered Steve suddenly, interrupting Jack and leaning forward on the table to grab his wrist. ‘He’s been there for about an hour. Did you notice him?’

Jack shrugged, threw a glance in the man’s direction then looked back.

‘He’s talking to Marty there now.’

Steve turned and looked. Marty had stopped on his way back from the toilet and was leaning down at the man’s table while the newcomer talked to him. The conversation went on for several minutes. Marty looked engrossed. He frowned, nodded, leaned his head down further to one side as the man spoke. Finally, he strolled back over to the table, a beam of a smile cut across his face. He pulled the chair out with one tug and sat down.

‘Who was that guy?’ asked Steve.

‘I’ll tell you upstairs,’ said Marty, finishing his beer quickly and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘I just heard of a great idea.’

Steve stood quickly, the chair beneath him scraping the tiles like nails on a blackboard. A few

heads shot up. But not the guy's. He was gone. Nowhere to be seen.

'Where the hell did he go?' asked Steve, pulling Marty by the shoulder. 'Marty, where's he gone? He just vanished,' Steve protested.

'It's okay, let's go,' said Marty, dragging Steve reluctantly out into the lobby then returning to the pa night's bill. 'Go on, I'll get a couple of bottles for the room,' he said quietly, 'you guys go on up.'

They stepped out of the lift and onto the rooftop square, a chill in the night air. Jack opened the door to the room and they both went in, tossing their wallets on the bedside dressers. Jack flicked on the TV with the remote and stood in the centre of the room, zipping through the channels. He got to number 39, 40 was blank. Then it went back to 1 again. So he repeated the process, this time a little bit slower, Steve taking the old armchair near the window.

'So it's ... Morelia tomorrow then, Jack?' he asked, rubbing his eyes. 'Looking forward to it. On the road again?'

Jack smiled, but continued flicking through the channels,

'It's been a while,' Steve said. 'Takes a few days to get back into it, doesn't it?'

Jack didn't answer.

'But that's the great thing about it all,' Steve went on. 'The fact that each time you do it, you remind yourself of how great it is.'

'Here's Marty now,' said Jack, cutting Steve off and walking quickly over to the lift to meet Marty, who had six bottles of beer in his arms.

'The bill was nothing guys. A couple of hundred pesos or something. I love this place.'

Steve grabbed a bottle and had snapped it open before he even got back to the room. He took a swig, held it in his mouth and stared over at Marty.

‘What’s the look for, Steve?’ asked Marty.

Steve pointed his bottle at Marty.

‘What’s this thing you’re so suddenly excited about?’

‘Well,’ Marty said, sitting on the edge of his bed, dangling his beer between two fingers. ‘That guy there has been all over Mexico and Central America. Down into Guatemala, Belize, you name it. And he reckoned that by far the best spot was down in Yucatan -- where you were headed anyway, Jack. And he knows a few guys who organise these adventure... safari things. He gave me a card. You know the type.’

‘No, we don’t know the type. What type?’ Steve said abruptly as Jack went into the bathroom to rinse out a glass for his beer.

‘Take it easy, Steve,’ sighed Marty. ‘For Christ’s sake.’

‘What type? I just want to know what type? Jesus, Marty, you know Jack planned all of this I don’t want to mess it up on him. You know how he gets when we start changing things.’

‘Nobody’s messing up anything, Steve,’ said Marty. ‘What the hell is wrong with you? I’m throwing out another possibility here. I’m fed up with you mollycoddling Jack, we’re a group.’

‘I just want to know what type and I want to know who the guy was, Marty. That’s not too much to ask. You heard Charlie.’

‘It’s a small group trek, Steve,’ Marty shrugged. ‘Whatever you want to do or see. They’ll put it

on for you. In the bloody jungle. Okay. Have you got it?’

‘So it’s probably unregistered?’ Steve said.

‘Well, it mightn’t be a registered tour group. But fifty per cent of them down there aren’t. I wouldn’t be worried about that.’

‘So it’s illegal,’ Steve said again just as Jack returned and poured the beer into his glass. ‘They’re not registered because you’re not supposed to be there. You heard what Charlie said.’

‘You’re starting to give me a pain in the arse, Steve,’ said Marty firmly. ‘It’s a suggestion. That’s all. This is my holiday too, you know?’

‘The same as it was in Turkey when we almost got shot.’

‘Oh, give me a break, Steve. We were students, it was years ago and it could have happened to anyone.’

‘Okay,’ said Steve calmly. ‘I’m just being cautious. But the problem is -- how many days would this thing be?’

‘I suppose around a week, five days maybe.’

‘Well, we won’t have that much time when we get there,’ said Jack suddenly, scratching behind his head. ‘I’d allowed about three days only. Three days down in Palenque where we’ll have to be if we want to see the friezes at Bonampak. That’s two days. So maybe four max. Max.’

Marty looked at him, sighed and opened a bottle of beer.

‘Well, nothing says we have to stick with the plan, Jack’ said Marty.

‘Okay,’ said Jack, clasping his hands together and concentrating on whatever it was he was

about to say. 'I spent a while planning this trip to try and suit all of us. Now, if we want to change it, we're all going to have to sacrifice something. We'll miss out on some of the itinerary. I mean, I can redesign the routes to accommodate certain changes. But, you leave yourself exposed to unforeseen circumstance.'

'Oh, for fuck's sake,' said Marty.

'Well, I say we stick to our plan,' Steve shrugged. 'Just my instinct tells me it's not a good idea. Not somewhere like this.'

'Your instinct, Steve,' said Marty 'Ignore your instinct. Think about it logically. Actually, don't think about it at all. Just go for it. This is probably my last trip, guys. After this it's beaches and fucking sandcastles for two weeks every year. Can you get that into your head?'

Jack laughed. Rocked on the side of the bed and suddenly came to a halt.

'Beaches and sandcastles, Jesus,' he said.

'Well, we'll see, Marty,' said Steve. 'I mean, I'm not even so sure I want to do something like that. A bloody jungle trek. When you're up to your knees in flies and shit in the middle of a forest in three week's time. As you said, this is still supposed to be a holiday.'

'It'll be a laugh. I'm just pointing out, Steve, that we've always taken risks. Calculated risks sometimes. Sometimes, well...

'Not so calculated,' smiled Jack.

'Right. And we can look at this one in a calculated way. We've been away together a lot. We've changed plans at the last minute when something pops up. We've had good ones and bad ones. But we

always get through.’ Marty said, going over to Steve and hugging him tightly round the shoulders.

‘Jesus, Steve. We're old pals, eh? Fuck it, let's just say 'fuck it' and do something completely different.

For old times and all that.’

‘It's not the different thing,’ said Steve, pulling Marty's arms off his shoulders but giving him a friendly slap on the back. ‘You know it's some dodgy tour group taking you into a place that's probably out of bounds, but we're not going to come out and say it. It's in a dangerous area. I say stick to the plan. When we get down there we can look into it then.’

‘By that time it'll be too late,’ Marty said.

‘Well, then it'll be too late. That's the way it goes,’ Steve replied.

Suddenly Jack intervened.

‘Okay,’ he said, standing up quickly and going over to where his luggage was stacked in the corner of the room. ‘There's only one way to solve this.’

He leaned over and picked up his small green day bag and began searching in one of the pockets, pulling out items slowly and leaving them down on the bed. Finally, he found his deck of cards and held them up in front of Marty and Steve.

‘We take a card each. Highest card wins.’

Steve and Marty stared at the cards.

‘And you, Jack?’ asked Marty. ‘What about you?’

‘Well. If I get the highest, we stick to the original plan, day by day, as it is. Fair enough?’

‘That makes it two against one,’ said Marty.

‘So it’s two against one,’ Jack shrugged, blinking. ‘They’re the odds. You’re the one that wants the change. Take it or leave it, Marty. Take it or leave it.’

‘Just give us a fucking card, Jack,’ said Steve shaking the sheets on his bed up and back to make a flat surface. ‘Give us a bloody card and we’ll get this over with.’

Jack came over and sat, shuffled and cut the deck several times then laid it down slowly like a cake on the sheets and peeled off the top card. He glanced at it quickly, nodded, and put it on the bed beside him.

‘Marty, do you want to draw?’

Marty smiled, winked at Steve, then picked up the deck slowly. He shuffled it, three or four times, then holding out the palm of his left hand, placed the deck on top. He held it aloft, looking at the edges, back and front. Then he squeezed the deck together with his right hand so it was tight as a drum all round. He then held it aloft again, gazing at it for what must have been a full minute.

‘Okay, baby, give it to me. Give it to me.’

Steve sighed loudly, cursing under his breath and looked over at Jack, who appeared intrigued at Marty's method. Finally, Marty shook his left hand very slowly until the deck began to loosen, before reaching in with the nails of his thumb and forefinger and plucking out the card that was showing most, hugging it against his chest as soon as it was free. As he left the deck back on the dresser, he stole a quick glance at his card and slapped it down on his knee, covering it with his hands. Steve looked at Marty's knee, smirked and shook his head. Then he picked up the deck, shuffled it very quickly and slammed it down on the bedside table next to Jack.

'Pass us the top card there, Jack, for Christ sake.'

'Are you sure you don't--'

'Just give us the top card. We've had enough messing.'

When Jack handed him the card, he placed it quickly face down on the bed beside him and nodded at Jack.

'Right, Jack,' he said, 'you first.'

'Are you not going to look at your card?' asked Marty.

'We'll all get a look in a minute. Now go on, Jack.'

Jack picked up his card, threw it down face up. A six of clubs.

Steve then flung his card down awkwardly on the ground, where it landed face down.

'Turn it over there, Jack.'

Jack leaned down and flipped it over carefully. Jack of Diamonds. A reliable card. Steve raised his eyebrows and sat back, looking at Marty, whose face still betrayed nothing.

'Well, Marty?' said Jack.

Marty stood quickly and held his card to his chest.

'Sorry, Steve,' he said smiling, and threw a King of Spades down on the floor before turning and heading into the bathroom.

Jack leaned over and slapped Steve lightly on the shoulder.

'He always fucking wins, Jack. Chess. Poker. I've never won a single bloody game.'

'Wouldn't dwell on it Steve,' said Jack, collecting the cards and placing them back in the pack.

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'It's just the luck of the draw. Anyway, you know the way he gets bored. He'll have forgotten all about this in about two days time. Get some sleep, Steve. We're up early.'

Steve nodded and picked up his beer, looking at it for a moment before bleeding it dry in one go. Then he peeled off his jeans and top and climbed into bed without another word. In the bathroom, Marty whistled. A whistle that had no recognisable tune. It was just a whistle.

Five

When Steve awoke, this time it was with a start. He sat up and scratched himself, switching on the bedside lamp and peeling back the blanket quickly to look underneath. He reached out for the bottle of water on the ground beside him and drank the remainder without pause, examining the bed again before lying back.

‘You’re okay, Steve,’ he heard suddenly. ‘There’s nothing in the beds.’

It was Marty, lying in an almost foetal position on the bed next to his. His voice was croaky, tired, and his eyes looked swollen from lack of sleep.

‘Yeah,’ Steve said, trying to force his eyes open further to get a look at him. ‘Are you okay, Marty?’

A head shook, followed by a long groan. He turned over onto his other side, then onto his back.

‘I’ve been up all night, Steve. On the jacks. I don’t think there’s a drop of fluid left in my body at this stage.’

Steve rubbed the bristle on his chin. It was like a doormat. Almost matching the length of the hair on his scalp, which had been cut tight for the trip. The difference being the bright, blonde colour of his hair contrasted starkly to the darker hair on his beard. It made him look rugged, slightly older than his thirty-something years and with his athletic, firm build there was almost something military about him. Which wasn’t a tag he made many efforts to cast off when someone mentioned it. He kept fit, worked outdoors in his business and was easily the more robust of the three. He looked over to see if

Jack had woken yet. He hadn't.

'I've got immodium tablets, if you want them. But you're probably as well to let it clear while you're in the hotel.'

'What time is it?'

'It's about six,' he answered, looking over at the shutters.

'Jesus,' Marty groaned, turning back over again. 'I hate this part. I'm always the first as well.'

'Better now than later. Get some more water into you, Marty. It's going to start hotting up soon.'

Marty nodded and reached down beside his bed to grab the bottle. Empty. Nor was there much in the bottle that lay between Jack and Steve's bed.

'Christ, is there any more water, Steve? I'm really thirsty.'

Steve looked around the room. A bottle of warm beer and the standard jug left each morning by the maids. That was it. Only a madman would drink from the jug. Steve's head was slightly numb, pounding dimly just behind the eyes.

'I'll go out, Marty. Hang in there.'

Marty didn't answer. He was up, in through the bathroom door before Steve had even finished his sentence. There then came a series of moans, followed by the sound of water dashed against porcelain with the force of a fire hose. Steve grimaced and cursed and climbed out of the bed, pulling on whatever clothes were nearest to him. He paused as he walked past the bathroom door and went to knock. But he thought better of it and left.

When he got back, Jack was awake and Marty was back in the toilet. Jack looked a bit tired and he was still in bed with the television on low, the remote in his hand, wading slowly through stations as if he was sure he would make a decent catch eventually.

‘You’ve seen Marty?’ he whispered.

‘What do you think I got up for?’ Steve replied.

Steve put two bottles of water and some bananas down on the bedside locker.

‘I hope he hasn't picked up something. Some form of e-coli, dysentery or something. What did he have yesterday?’ asked Jack.

Steve shrugged and sat on the bed, opening a bottle of water.

‘Dunno. Think it was chicken at dinnertime. Same breakfast as the rest of us. Give him another couple of hours then, get some salts into him. Either way, he's not getting on a bus today, Jack. He won't budge when he's like that.’

Jack stopped surfing the channels and looked at his watch.

‘Well, that's a day gone, Steve. Not that we won't catch up or anything. But it's a day all the same.’

Steve just nodded and handed a bottle of water to Marty, who came out of the bathroom and collapsed on the bed.

‘Fuck it!’ he said. ‘I hate this part.’

‘Eat a couple of bananas, Marty,’ Steve said, lobbing the bunch over to him as if annoyed at Marty's being sick. ‘I'll get some salts to dissolve in the water. You better stay in bed for the day.’

Marty took the bananas but didn't peel one from the bunch, leaving them on the pillow beside him. 'We're leaving, Steve.'

'You're in no state to go anywhere, Marty,' replied Jack, without taking his eyes off the TV. 'You look terrible. Just relax for the day until that wears off.'

'I'll be okay in a while. Just give us a few hours, that's all. We'll get a later bus,' replied Marty rolling over onto his side.

Jack continued jabbing at the remote control and Steve went downstairs alone for breakfast of brown beans, yellow eggs and dark coffee.

It was quiet down there, the older man who had been on the floor their first night, working the tables once more. He smiled at Steve and having brought his breakfast, sauntered over to the corner of the restaurant where a bookshelf held various, well-worn books in different languages. He shuffled through them quickly, pulling one out from between two hardbacks and returned to Steve, handing him a book and smiling. It was Mark Twain. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Steve laughed, nodded at the man by way of thanks and turned the book over in his hands, wondering whether he was expected to begin reading it or merely appreciate its existence in this corner of the world. And it had been well-read. The pages dog-eared, the spine half broken and the cover faded. Anyway, Steve had read it, many years ago. It belonged to his past. It belonged to every boy's past. The spirit of adventure and escape it provided. He ate his breakfast and leafed through the book, pausing and smiling at passages he recognised. Then he thanked the waiter and placed it back on the bookshelf quietly on his way out.