

Rough Living: Tips and Tales of a Vagabond

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The characters and events in this book are not fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is not coincidental and is intended by the author.

Dedication

This book was originally dedicated to my father, John Albert Damitio, Jr. He didn't understand it and called it crap. So, I revoke the dedication and re-dedicate it to my Uncles Larry, Morris, and Murray. They are three men who I am certain do understand and I am thankful to them all for the lessons which they taught me.

Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank my brother for suggesting I stop living in a van in Seattle and find some way to go to China. I also need to thank the retired postal worker I met on the way to the North American Anarchist Conference who went by the handle 'The Old Reptile' - it was he who suggested I write what I was learning by being homeless as a book. I'd like to thank my sister for sending me a book called 'Hobo' by Eddie Joe Cotton for Christmas in 2002. I'd like to thank Eddie Joe Cotton for getting published and thus showing there was actually a market for a book like Rough Living, even though the legitimate publishers never chose to publish it. I'd like to thank my friend Izak Holden for doing the interview with Aquillo Mallot which originally appeared in my Anarchist Zine, Conchsense. I'd like to thank Aquillo Mallot (aka Two Dog Tom) and Hopalong Tom for being the type of crazy but generally harmless hobos who will accept all kinds of people at their fires. I'd like to thank my friend Stephan Boudreoux for always being a good buddy, wingman, and buying drinks for me when I was down and out because he knew it would eventually come around. I'd like to thank Kevin and Candida Alvis for letting me park my VW in their backyard in Seattle and allowing me to use their kitchen and toilet at will. I'd like to thank a lot of other people, but for the moment, that will have to do.

Authors Note for 2012 Kindle Edition

It's hard to believe it's been almost ten years since the original Rough Living: Tips and Tales of a Vagabond was published by Booklocker. When I see those paperback books with Vagabond misspelled 'Vegebond' on the spine, I can't help but laugh. The fact the book was never proofread or edited by anyone other than myself accounts for the numerous typos, mis-spellings, bad grammar, and horrible layout of the original. It might also account for the fact every publisher I spoke with told me my book was unpublishable, though the reason they gave was the same across the board - I'd written a book for people who don't have money and people without money don't buy books.

The funny thing is lots of people have bought this book. While I've only sold a few thousand copies, the book has been downloaded and shared with upwards of 30,000 people! Certainly, there was and always will be a market for a book like this, whether the publishers choose to see it or not. I'm simply thankful I live in a time when I could self publish and share my work on the internet. There have been times when I've felt bitter about all those free copies that were distributed in direct violation of the copyright, but ultimately - it's actually pretty cool, even if I didn't profit from it. Consider it payment for any films, TV shows, or music I've used or enjoyed without buying.

I'm going to leave this version, essentially unchanged. I am going through and finally spell checking, fixing some grammatical errors, and hopefully fixing any and all of the formatting issues the book has suffered from in the past. Later this year, I am (hopefully) going to publish an updated version of Rough Living with new material, photos and more. I am also in the process of putting the final edits on Smooth Living: More Tips and Tales of a Vagabond. I hope you will enjoy all three of them!

Vagabond Tips

Introduction

What is rough living? Rough living is making do without. Without whatever you might need or want at any given moment. Without food, without money, without shelter, without whatever it is you want - immediately at hand. Rough living is spending your last dollar without knowing where the next one will come from. Rough living is also about the rewards which come from making it anyway.

The following is some of what I've learned and seen in my career as a vagabond. The book is broken up into two sections. The first section is made up of tips for living the rough life. In the second section are some of the tales of my adventures in 2000 and 2001. I hope the advice is useful and the stories are inspiring and enjoyable to both travelers and armchair adventurers alike.

The Call of the Road

Chances are you've felt the call of the road at some point in your existence. It's called me for as long as I can recall. The call of the road is irresistible and though I've tried to fight it, I'm eventually powerless to hold it at bay. I am seduced by the desire to see what lies beyond the bend or over the next ridge.

Rough living requires little, but a few things make your life a whole lot better. The first thing you absolutely have to have is a will to live. The sheer desire to survive. The will to live comes in many forms. Curiosity has kept this cat alive through some desperate times. For me, there is a need to know what is going to happen next. I have friends who have made it because they love their families. Still others live to fulfill some religious devotion. The important thing is you refuse to die. Even when it seems like it would be the easiest course. Absolute refusal.

If you want to die, you won't survive a week of rough living. There are far too many ways to end up dead. So, first of all, if you want to learn some of the lessons and experience some of the joys of rough living, you need to want to live. If you have that, the rest is a matter of personal preference. I'm almost never without a pocketknife, a lighter or matches, and my boots. Add a blanket, a tarp, and a jacket, and I've got just about everything I need. One more essential is proper ID. Unfortunately, we live in a security conscious world and if you want to avoid hassles with the law having a passport, driver's license, and birth certificate helps keep you from their grasp. These three pieces of ID will help you in other ways too. Another thing I like to have is what fur trappers in the Pacific Northwest called the possibles bag.

The Knife: Everyone has his or her preferred blade. For me it is a medium sized Swiss army knife. Something which fits in my pocket but gives me a can opener, a couple of blades, a leather punch, tweezers, scissors and a screw driver. I have friends who prefer a good utility knife with a serrated edge, locking blade, and thumb lever. For anyone involved in commercial fishing this is the knife of choice. I've known a couple of guys who would be dead if they hadn't of had a one handed opening serrated edge to cut themselves out of tangled lines when they were dragged under while fishing in Alaska and the Arctic.

Lighter and/or matches: There's a few ways to light a fire. The easiest is to use matches or a lighter. You can also use your lighter to smoke cigarettes, smoke pot, cut rope, melt plastic, and much more. Fire is too precious not to have available.

Boots: I've probably put 10,000 miles on my boots. They've gone through three sets of soles, a dozen sets of laces, I've had them patched, replaced the insoles repeatedly, and will continue to do so. Once you find a good pair of boots...keep them forever.

Jacket: Even if it's not cold where you are a lightweight jacket is worth carrying. I use a simple waterproof shell with a hood. It blocks the wind and keeps me dry. I can wear layers underneath if it's cold.

Blanket: A wool blanket will keep you warm even if it is wet. You can use it as a pillow, a poncho, roll it into a pack, and use it for a cushion, whatever. A good blanket has a thousand functions.

Tarp: A six-foot by six-foot tarp will keep you dry anywhere, it will keep your gear dry, it's light, it folds up small, and if you combine it with the tarps of friends it can become part of a communal tarpitecture structure. More on tarpitecture later.

Possibles Bag: The possibles bag is a small bag you can carry on your belt, in your pack, or

somewhere on your person. Basically it is a bag that has gear in it to help you in any situation possible. My possibles bag typically has an extra pair of eyeglasses, some fishhooks and line, a flint and steel striker, some basic first aid gear, and a pen and paper. Depending on where I am, the contents of my 'possibles' changes.

Four ways to get what you need

Buying

The easy way to get what you want is to buy it. Whether you are looking for food, shelter, love, or excitement; cash can get you most of what you need. I'm not knocking it, but buying is not my favorite way to get what I need and not just because I don't have a big wad of jack.

Making

This is probably my favorite method of getting the essentials. It involves looking around at what you already have and then figuring out a way to make it into what you need. A monk I met in Thailand had this down to an art. He said, "First I look at what I have, then I figure out why it is exactly what I need." I'm not so enlightened as he is but I am pretty good at what the Marines call "adapt and overcome".

Asking

This method is almost scary in it's effectiveness. You simply figure out exactly what it is you want, who has it or can provide it, and then you ask for it. There's no guarantee it will work, but I've found it invaluable to get over my shyness or sense of the ridiculous and simply ask, "Can I have this coat?" or whatever...you won't know until you try it.

Taking

I'm not proud of it, but I've done my share of taking. I try to restrict my theft to what I truly need or things that hurt individuals little while stinging the big corporations. Sure, it's justification, but it feels better to know the bank, the airlines, or the credit card company will reimburse someone. If you truly want to learn how to take things, I recommend Abbie Hoffman's "*Steal This Book*."

Specific Examples- Tobacco

Buying- you walk into a store, give a clerk your money, and walk out with a smoke.

Making- you pick up cigarette butts on your stroll around the neighborhood and then smoke the tobacco from them in a cigarette you roll using a cigarette paper or a piece of newspaper.

Asking- you ask smokers you see "Can I bum a smoke?" until someone gives you one.

Taking- you steal the tobacco from a person or a store.

Shelter: From Couch Surfing to Tarpitecture

You've gotta sleep somewhere. Vagabonds develop a knack for having a secure place to sleep. There are a few key things to look for when you're seeking shelter. A good shelter protects you from the elements. It keeps your gear dry. It keeps your gear from going into some other hobo's hands. Most importantly, it protects you from the human predators are definitely out there.

Shelters and Missions

I've never stayed in a homeless shelter or mission. I've talked with enough people who have to know it's not for me. Four things make me say that. The first is the underlying edge of violence and theft which seems to pervade such places. The second is I'm not interested in hearing about God in exchange for a bed. The third is shelters seem to be places devoid of hope. The fourth is I have too many options which are much more appealing.

Couch Surfing

Ben Franklin said, "House guests are like fish, they start smelling in three days." My friends are usually more tolerant. The key to staying at other people's pads is to remember they are working to pay for their space. As a couch surfer you need to make sure you give your hosts their space. Some definite no's are hogging the TV, not cleaning up after yourself, and basically occupying space without giving anything in return. Doing light chores will usually win the gratitude of your hosts. Things like washing the dirty dishes, vacuuming the floor, and cleaning the bathroom don't take you long but make you look good. Personally, I like to cook meals for my hosts. I'm a good cook with a knack for taking whatever is available and making it into something tasty. If you don't have the same gift you can never go wrong cooking eggs and toast in the morning. Breakfast is cheap and most people enjoy having it served in their home. Some of my favorite cheapskate gourmet recipes are included in the book.

Urban Camping and Squatting

In a pinch you can do what I like to call urban camping. There are different variations depending on your circumstances. In a city like Portland, Oregon there are a lot of couches on a lot of covered porches. If you arrive late enough and leave early enough, these hospitable sites can be the perfect place to crash out. Once I was caught in a small Colorado town during a snowstorm and managed to stay warm by crawling under a 4x4 which pulled into a driveway at about 10 PM. The heat from the engine lasted long enough to get me through the worst of the storm.

Urban camping can also be more traditional. I once camped on a park bench in Regent's Park across from Buckingham Palace in London, England for three nights in a row. As I lay there wrapped in my blanket, I had a recurring fantasy where the Queen was going to invite me to morning tea. She didn't. On that same trip to England, I set up a tent in some bushes in Epping Forest for a week. No one discovered me except a few dogs who came galloping in to see what was in the bushes and left in terror when they found me cooking sausages and beans.

The key to being successful in this kind of urban camping is to find a spot which is invisible from roads or paths, has an inconspicuous entrance and/or exit, and that you are discreet in how you behave there. For example, fires are probably not a good idea in most cities but Sterno is probably fine if you need to cook something.

Squatting is a very different situation. In most American places they can bust you for breaking and entering if you take up residence in an abandoned building. My European friends tell me the laws are different there. One technique I have used while hitching in the Southwest is to scout out houses which are for sale as I walk along an hour or so before sunset. If you can find one you are pretty sure is not occupied it's usually pretty easy to return after dark and jimmy open a back door or window. I prefer older, run down houses, as they usually don't have security. If breaking in to the house is too risky, you can usually find a porch, shed, or garage to get you out of sight and the elements.

Living in Vehicles

If you plan on living in your vehicle there are a few things to take into consideration. First, make sure you can sleep comfortably in it. Pickups with camper shells, vans, and station wagons are your best bet. Second, make sure the vehicle is legal so you don't get your home put in an impound yard. Third, pick your parking spaces carefully. I've found parking in secluded areas is almost always a mistake.

The best places to park are places where there are people around and plenty of vehicles moving in and out all the time. I've parked in dead ends and had people report me to the police because it was "suspicious" to see a car parked there. Oddly, I've parked in residential neighborhoods where I didn't know a soul for weeks on end and no one thought anything of it. I suppose they all thought I knew someone they didn't know.

Of course, the best places to park are where you have friends. My friends in Seattle allowed me to park behind their house for months. It made them feel secure because my being there discouraged the local druggies from congregating and doing deals in the alley. I did yard work and helped out around the house to keep things nice for them and me.

I've lived in three Volkswagen Buses in Alaska, Washington, Oregon, and Hawaii. In every case, not having to pay rent allowed me to live a life I otherwise wouldn't have been able to. With the money I saved on rent I was able to purchase airline tickets, train tickets, or just go out on good benders now and then.

Tarpitecture: The many uses of Tarps

My friend Kalalau Larry introduced me to the term tarpitecture. Larry is a modern day Viking. He paddles kayaks, makes mead from honey and water, bakes bread in the jungle, and spends about half of his time living in one of the remotest places on the planet. The Kalalau Valley on the island of Kauai.

I was living in a VW bus on Kauai and Larry had built an incredible little shelter with tarps on the same vacant lot where I parked. You see when Larry isn't in Kalalau he works in the real world and stays comfortably invisible under his brown tarps. When he is in Kalalau, he lives under the brown tarps too.

So tarpitecture is using a variety of tarps strung between trees, bushes, rocks, or frames to shelter you from the weather. Ideally, a good tarpitecture structure has geometric implications which are pleasant to the eye in addition to being functional.

Tarpitecture can be as simple as a lean-to or as complex as a bamboo dome. The key is using your tarp in the most effective way in the particular environment you find yourself in. I've seen tarps on sheds and even in giant trees.

Aquillo Mallot's Camps

(Thank you to Izak Holden for writing this very vivid description of our friend)

Aquillo Mallot is a homeless man of alternative housing. An occupational non-profit mercenary, Gypsy Moth Farmer, comfrey and mullen rancher, pie rat, and purveyor of exotic substances. He currently holds the position of Bishop of the Holy Primeval Coyote Church in his spare time. He is master of the Sacred Marriage bar none. He lives souilly on food handouts, dead carrion along Interstate 5, and visions of extraterrestrial guidance.

Aquillo Mallot is also a master of creating cozy and comfortable camps in the Pacific Northwest. I've seen him build huts from driftwood on the beach. I've seen him dig pits and cover them with fallen logs and tarps. He usually has a wood burning stove in his camps complete with flashing glued to the tarps the stove pipe goes through.

Everything Aquillo gets is abandoned as garbage. He's used tarpitecture to make derelict fishing boats into comfy homes after he uses scavenged ropes and pulleys to drag the wrecks on shore during low tide and patch them up. The only limit to what you can do is your own imagination. Aquillo is proof of that.

Trolls Under Bridges

If you spend any time traveling among the house-less you will definitely encounter some of the derelicts who live under various bridges all over the country. In my experience, they are a sorry lot who can't figure out how to keep the rain off their heads any other way. Bridges are noisy, dirty, and uncomfortable. The one bridge I would recommend visiting is in the Fremont District of Seattle. There is a real troll there, made of cement, and about to eat a VW bug. Other than that I would suggest you find someplace else to keep dry.

Beach Bumming

If you are in a tropical climate it's easy to live on the beach. Simply cover yourself with a tarp if it seems like it might rain and you are good as gold. If you are in the a little colder climate make sure you know how to build a fire. I'll give you a few hints later in the book.

Hostels and Guesthouses

A friend told me he no longer hangs out in bars because he has discovered if you drink at a hostel it is cheaper, more fun, and you meet more interesting people. I agree completely.

Hostels and guesthouses are also the poor traveler's means of staying in exotic destinations the world over. A guesthouse in Laos can cost as little as \$1 US per night for a private room with a king size bed.

A hostel in England will cost you about \$20 US as opposed to spending a minimum of \$50 at a fleabag hotel. Hostels and guesthouses exist just about everywhere. The people who stay at hostels are usually more approachable than the people who stay at hotels. They don't whine about inconveniences and you can usually find someone heading in your direction or willing to accompany you on whatever adventure you hanker. Hostels are great places to hook up with cheap tours, exciting adventures, cheap transport, and information about where you are heading next.

Most hostels provide communal kitchens you can store and cook your food in, activities, internet access, and more. In addition to that, if you come across as a somewhat normal person who is willing to work hard, you can usually find a bed at a hostel in exchange for your labor. The key to this is to be persistent and honest. Tell them what you want and offer your services in exchange.

Food: How to get the grinds

There are plenty of ways to get food if you need it. This is especially true in the United States and other 'Western' countries. The following are a few ways to fill your belly.

Food banks

The food bank is a free service who is privately funded in most communities to provide food to those who need it. Most of the food comes from grocery stores which would throw it away if the food bank didn't take it or farms who have damaged produce they can't sell. Produce which isn't beautiful enough to buy, dented canned goods, dairy products which reach their expiration date but are still good for a week or so, and also stuff donated by local people and business.

The corporate stores rarely participate. Once a month the government provides "commodities," usually sub-par, unhealthy foods like powdered milk, canned beef, and surplus applesauce. Food banks are a great way to eat if you don't have money. The best thing about them is if people don't use them, the food goes to waste, so you're doing a good thing by taking free food. On most trips I've taken to the food bank, people are bitching about the wait for free food. I can never understand that. Don't be one of those people.

Food Not Bombs

Food Not Bombs is a group which was born at the height of the Nuclear Protest Movement in 1980. It is organized collectively and relies on consensus decision-making. Food which is donated or saved from dumpsters is prepared into healthy vegan (no animal products) meals.

Howard Zinn, the noted historian and author, gave this description in the forward to the *Food Not Bombs Handbook* by C.T. Lawrence Butler and Keith McHenry.

The message of Food Not Bombs is simple and powerful: no one should be without food in a world so richly provided with land, sun, and human ingenuity. No consideration of money, no demand for profit, should stand in the way of any hungry or malnourished child or any adult in need. Here are people who will not be bamboozled by "the laws of the market" which say only people who can afford to buy something can have it.

Zinn goes on...They point unerringly to the double challenge: to feed immediately people who are without adequate food, and to replace a system whose priorities are power and profit with one meeting the needs of all human beings.

I remember a plate of food at one of the Food Not Bombs events I went to in Seattle. It was served in a white plastic tofu container. I had salad and vegetable soup. There was also guacamole and sourdough bread from a local bakery. Forty or fifty people were fed. Lots of hands helped the FNB folks unload and then pack it back up. A couple of bags of clothing were handed around and shared throughout the meal. It was inspiring. Most of the people who were eating were the homeless people you don't really notice when you're downtown during business hours. There were also crackheads, bag ladies, and spare changers. They picked through the clothing occasionally making an exclamation of delight as

they found something which would keep them warm or appealed to them.

Everyone sat around having discussions with the people they knew, meeting new people, and overall behaving exactly as anyone behaves as they get food at a picnic or barbecue. It was an atmosphere of respect and human dignity.

Churches

Many churches and missions have regularly scheduled free meals. People who volunteer their time to make the world a better place cook most of these meals. Most meals I've had at churches or missions were cooked and served with love. If you have one of these meals, please take the time to thank the people who serve you.

Food Stamps

Food stamps are as simple to get as having valid identification and an address and phone number in most states. All you have to do to get food stamps is go to the office, jump through some administrative hoops, and claim to be homeless (whether you are or not). I've heard numerous stories of people taking advantage of the generosity of food stamp programs. I'm all for it. I would rather see the money go there than to building new prisons or supporting the wars on drugs or terror (or anything else we've had a war against in my lifetime.)

Dumpster Diving

I've read reports which claim Americans throw away enough material goods every day to feed, clothe, house, and educate everyone in this country. I believe it. Most grocery stores throw away produce which is perfectly edible but not visibly appealing enough. Dairy products are usually good well beyond the 'sell by' date on them but are thrown away anyway.

If you get to know the restaurants in a certain area you can pull unsold hamburgers, donuts, or fried chicken out of the trash with the wrappers still on. I've had burgers from the dumpster which were completely wrapped and still hot. It's all about knowing your dumpsters.

Successful dumpster divers usually have rounds and sometimes if you hit a dumpster which is on someone's established rounds they can react as if you are robbing them. If this happens to you, my advice is to simply apologize and offer to give back what you've taken from that dumpster.

You never know, that diver might end up a friend that can show you where the best dumpsters for clothes, food, and other things are.

Cafeteria Grazing

I've only done this a few times, but it works if you're hungry and have no other option. If you go to a self-cleanup kind of restaurant, the kind of place where you put your dishes in a bin before you leave, you can usually find large uneaten portions sitting on plates. It's unsavory, to say the least, but if you hang out for a bit and watch you can usually find someone who eats nearly nothing from their plate and looks clean enough to alleviate any fears of catching a rare disease.

Shoplifting

As a youngster I did a lot of shoplifting. I don't recommend it. The risks are too high. If you're going to shoplift there are a few ways to minimize the risk involved. One method is to have a baggy coat with big pockets and to slyly slip a few items in while you shop. I used to buy something trivial with my pockets loaded to alleviate any suspicion. The problem with shoplifting goes beyond morality to the fact that in all likelihood, you will get caught.

My good friend George Hush was an expert shoplifter for years. He had taken literally thousands of dollars in food and clothing without ever coming close to getting caught. One day he was in the grocery store and saw a 99-cent package of fresh herbs that he thought would go well with some pasta he was going to cook. With a casualness born from years of lifting he dropped them in his pocket.

Seconds later a hand clamped down on his shoulder and he was quickly escorted to the managers office where he was made to wait until a police officer arrived before being told anything. He was charged with theft, banned from that store for a year, (it was the store with the best deals on beer too!) and had to pay a hefty fine. All in all, it would have been a lot better for George if he had bought those herbs.

Natural Resources

If you are at all familiar with the plants that grow in your area, you can probably survive. In the Pacific Northwest you can get by eating dandelions, nettles, and blackberries. In Hawaii you can live on coconuts, guavas, mangoes, and taro. In other places you can go to the library or a bookstore (you don't have to buy the book!) and usually find books on what grows wild and is edible. It's amazing how many 'weeds' are actually nutritious and delicious.

Rough Recipes

Rough Living Scramble

This is my favorite breakfast recipe. Like all of the recipes in this section, most of the ingredients can be whatever you find or have handy. Use your imagination or your host's pantry to fill in the blanks.

Ingredients

4 eggs
2 large potatoes
3 tbsp cooking oil
garlic
small onion
various vegetables and herbs (whatever you can find)
shredded cheese
spices

Directions

Cut the potatoes into small cubes (1/4 inch) while you allow the oil (or butter) to melt in a skillet. Drop the potatoes in and cook on high heat for 5-10 minutes allowing them to brown and or burn slightly. Mince garlic, onion, vegetables, and herbs. Pour off the excess oil. Drop in your minced goods and cook 3-5 minutes adding spices (like a pinch of cinnamon, salt, pepper, and cayenne). Beat the eggs in a small dish. Pour eggs over the top and cook 1-2 minutes before flipping the entire thing. If you fail to flip it in one piece, just scramble the whole thing until all the egg is cooked. Put shredded cheese on top, cover for 1 minute, and serve it up.

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Vagabond Sandwiches

Ingredients

1/2 lb. cooked meat, cubed
1/2 lb. cheese, cubed
2 hard boiled eggs, chopped
1/2 c. olives, chopped
1/2 c. mayo
3 Tbsp. chilli or BBQ sauce
1/3 c. onion, chopped
12 hotdog buns or folded pieces of bread

Directions

Mix all together and fill hotdog buns with mixture, wrap in foil, and heat 10-15 minutes.

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George Hush's Hobo Supper

Ingredients

3 pounds ground beef
4 medium potatoes, quartered
3 carrots, sliced
1 medium onion, sliced
salt and pepper to taste
1 can cream of mushroom soup

Directions

Form ground beef into patties and place each on a square of aluminum foil. Divide potatoes, carrots, and onions equally and arrange on top of patties. Add salt and pepper to taste. Place a spoonful of mushroom soup on top of vegetables. Seal foil tightly and place on grill or directly on coals for about 45 minutes to an hour. Can also be cooked in the oven at 350 degrees F. for 45 minutes. Delicious and easy

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Adventurer's Onion

Ingredients

Large onion
1/4 C. (1/2 stick) butter Salt
Pepper

Directions

Score onion across the top several times and place in aluminum foil. Put butter, salt and pepper on top of onion and close the foil securely. Set directly in the fire and cook approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Unwrap and enjoy!

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Scallywag Potatoes

Ingredients

2 cups potatoes, peeled & cubed
1 cup chopped onions
1/2 cup thinly sliced carrots
1/2 cup diagonally sliced celery
2 T. water
1/2 tsp. salt
1/8 tsp. pepper
8 slices bacon, crisply cooked and cut into 2" pieces
1 T. or butter or margarine

Directions

Combine potatoes, onions, carrots, celery and water. Boil until vegetables are hot and just beginning to soften, stir once or twice during cooking time. Drain, then stir in salt and pepper. Place potato mixture on a large sheet of heavy duty aluminum foil. Top with crumbled bacon and dot with butter or margarine. Bring up ends of foil to wrap securely and fold top of foil to seal. Place on grill, 4" to 6" above medium coals. Cook for 25 to 30 minutes or until vegetables are tender.

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Hopalongs Cattail Salad

Cattails grow along the road in ditches and standing water throughout the United States. They are those tall weeds with the bulbous brown tops that grow in thick patches.

Ingredients

As many Cattail stalks as possible (peeled down to the soft white centers)
Bacon (minced)
Fine Mustard
Vinegar

Directions

Boil the hearts of cattail for 30 seconds. Heat the bacon in a skillet. Add the mustard and vinegar. Add the cattail hearts.

#####

Aquillo's Favorite Cheese Steak

Ingredients

Cheap sandwich meat
Onions
Cheese
Rolls
Pickled Peppers

Directions

Mince onion. Cut baloney into long strips. Saute onions till slightly browned add meat. Cook till the meat is slightly brown. Stuff the rolls with your "steak". Top with peppers cheese. Wrap in newspaper and enjoy.

#####

Cash: Coming up with Jack

For most of my life, I've had jobs. I've had lots of jobs. When I was in 4th grade I had a paper route, when I was in middle and high schools, my parents paid me for chores, when I was 14 I got my first job at a restaurant.

Since then I've washed dishes, bussed tables, waited, tended bar, cooked, and hosted in dozens of restaurants. I've dug ditches, built houses, painted houses, and cleaned all the stuff money can buy out of people's garages. I've filed papers, ran meetings, cold called, door knocked, and answered phones. I've been a DJ and done craft services on a movie set. I've been a stand in, a radio producer, a band manager, and an air traffic controller. I've managed buildings, served as a Marine, and shoveled shit. I've tried to find "my calling" in so many different career paths that I've nearly run out of choices.

The problem with all of them is that I like my time. I was born with all of it, and I don't see why I should give it to someone else unless it's really what I want to be doing. I've found jobs that were based around things I like doing. Things like skiing, kayaking, and hanging out in bars. The problem is that if somebody is paying me, my time quits being mine and becomes his or hers. Employment is slavery. As soon as someone starts paying me for my time, I realize how much it's worth to me. And the problem is, my time is worth a lot more than \$20,000 dollars a year let alone \$6.50 an hour.

Don't get me wrong; I've had "good" jobs. Job's where I was treated right, the pay was decent, and the "benefits" were comprehensive. I just knew that my time belonged to someone else. Since I don't know when I will die, that was still unacceptable. I've never had a wage slave mentality. I refuse to get a minimum wage job at Wal-Mart. I'd rather eat cat food from dumpsters.

The guys at the top aren't working. They just encourage us to fill our garages and our stomachs with things we never would have thought of were it not for their non-stop television, radio, and print campaigns. The advertising companies work for the factories that churn out more and more useless 'necessities' every day. They encourage us to consume, consume, consume and spend, spend, spend.

The bottom line is you gotta do what you gotta do to get the money to survive. I've broken up concrete driveways for Irish Gypsies in England, moved tons of rocks in Hawaii, and taught conversational English to schoolchildren in Indonesia. Working while you are on the road is generally more fun than having a real job because you know that you are going to be leaving. If having a career works for you, more power to you, but so far it hasn't worked for me.

Communications: Getting a Phone, Physical Address, and E-Mail Address

If you want to get employment it is always helpful to have a phone number and address. Not only do they give potential employers a way to contact you, they also give your family and friends a way to contact you. Same goes for e-mail. If you don't have e-mail yet, you're missing out on a great way to keep in contact with the people you know and the people you meet. Most libraries offer free internet access, internet café's are plentiful and cheap, and there are plenty of free e-mail options available.

These things are necessary if you are applying for any type of government benefits too. Sometimes you can use a friend's, but there are other ways to get a physical address. When I moved from North Carolina to Washington State, I used some of my limited resources to get a post office box at a shipping supply store. The advantage of this over the Post Office is that you can use the physical address of the place on resumes and job applications. For a phone, I paid \$30 to get a number at a message service.

Prepaid cell phones have made things even more cheap and convenient, so you can not only get messages but also have a phone. My cell phone and 200 minutes of prepaid anytime use cost \$138 at K-Mart. This includes voicemail. If I want to buy additional minutes I can buy 150 for about \$40.

(Note: I wrote this in 2002, today you can get a prepaid phone and minutes for as little as \$10)

Daily Labor

Daily labor is a way to get some money in your pocket. The problem is that you need to get there early, the pay isn't necessarily good, and the work usually sucks. I've used services like Labor Ready only twice in my life because I can usually find a better way to spend my time and get what I need.

Under the Table (Risks and Benefits)

Working for anyone under the table is always a risky venture. You are putting trust in someone that you probably don't know very well. The truth is that if they choose not to pay you or to short your pay there isn't much you can do about it.

On the positive side, if you are getting paid under the table you aren't paying taxes and your boss isn't paying taxes so you are both making more than if you were legitimate. Personally, I like that none of the money goes to supporting programs I don't agree with. (We can always anonymously donate to causes we do agree with.)

Farms

If you arrive at the right part of the year, you can almost always find farm work in exchange for food, shelter, or sometimes even cold, hard cash. Farm work isn't easy though. The hours are long, the work is usually dirty and labor intensive, and the pay is usually minimum wage or less. However, I have known people that had wonderful times picking apples in Washington State or Australia, pulling potatoes in Idaho, or working on organic farms in the Cascades and Kauai.

Gambling

Gambling is a risky venture. There is a reason why the casinos are so fancy. The reason is that most people lose. I have a simple system that has actually left me a bit ahead. I decide how much I can afford to lose, I stick to that, and every time I win anything in excess of my original amount I put it in my pocket. Once I lose the amount I planned on, I leave...usually.

The People of the Fire

A Quick Guide to Making a Fire

- 1) Start by gathering all the materials you will need before you light the fire.
- 2) The base is something small and dry (known as tinder) such as shredded tree bark, shredded cardboard, paper, or steel wool. Have a good supply of twigs. A good place to get dry ones is right off of trees or bushes. If they make a distinct snap when you break them and they break clean they will probably work.
- 3) Place a few twigs on your tinder and light it. As the flame grows feed it more twigs and gradually work your way up to sticks, branches, and logs. The true key is to hold yourself back from piling everything on. Use patience. That's it.

Code of Conduct

There is a code of conduct among people who are living rough. It is simple and clear. Treat people with respect and dignity but don't take anyone's shit. If you let people walk all over you, they will usually do it again and again. Either look them in the eye and tell them what your beef is or put enough distance between you and them that you don't have to deal with it.

If you have a fire and someone calls from outside saying they are *TH and C* (tired hungry and cold), invite them to sit down and eat if you have food to share. If it's your fire you can always tell them to move along. If it's you coming on a fire, calling from outside the fire's light is a way to keep from getting shot. It also gives you a chance to see if these are people you want to interact with.

The rest of the code is pretty simple. If you got extra and somebody else needs it; share.

People to Avoid

There are millions of people out there that are worth meeting and talking to, if only to hear their perspectives. There are also people it is worth going out of your way to avoid or avoid spending any significant time with.

Rednecks and Redneck Tramps

There are a lot of definitions to the term redneck. There are a lot of jokes about rednecks. There is really nothing funny about them though. I consider rednecks to be the most dangerous hazard out there.

Rednecks are clannish. My definition of a redneck doesn't have anything to do with race, country music, or where they come from. The bottom line is that a redneck is someone who hates you because you are different than they are. If you don't share their beliefs and values, your life is worth less than a dog's.

Really. Rednecks generally love their dogs.

Let's say a redneck picks you up to give you a ride after you've been standing in the freezing rain somewhere for five hours. You really want the ride. A typical redneck will start right off by saying outrageous things to see how you react. Things like "I only picked you up cause you don't look like one of them faggot environmentalists." Maybe you are one of those faggot environmentalists, but don't fall into the redneck's trap. You don't have to lie, just say something like "I'm glad I don't look like those guys."

If you let the redneck draw a distinction between their belief system and yours there is no telling what will happen. Rednecks make themselves obvious by pointing out who they hate and who they think deserves to die. Hitler was a redneck, so is George W. Bush.

When you recognize a redneck, it is best to put as much distance between them and yourselves as possible. Even if they seem to think you are okay, they might change their tune when they get drunk and decide to come shoot you.

Redneck tramps are similar to the traditional rednecks except they seem at first to be travelers or hobos and so earn a measure of compassion from you. Redneck tramps usually hang out in groups and are very closed to new people. If you come upon a fire built by redneck tramps there is a good chance that they will beat you and rob you because you are not a part of their group. Redneck tramps usually give away their true nature a little slower than the traditional rednecks but the hate always reveals itself.

Crazies

Crazies are usually harmless, but they are unpredictable. The crazies can be entertaining but unless someone I know can vouch for them I usually prefer to watch them interact with someone else.

Giving a Crazy a Lift

I was driving to Seattle and stopped to pick up a hitchhiker. I usually stop for hitchhikers if they look somewhat normal and like they don't smell too bad. A glance showed me that he looked like a kid with a guitar.

When he got in the car, I immediately caught the stale smell of sweat and urine. He looked psychotic. He wasn't a kid at all, but a very small 45-50 year old man. I decided to give him a ride anyway. I introduced myself and offered a handshake. He put his glove on before shaking my hand and introduced himself as Robert. His voice had a peculiar nasal quality and the words were carefully enunciated in a somewhat aristocratic manner.

"I am go-ing to move to Alaska because I graduated from college... with hon-ors." He said it like that with a glottal stop. The same way other people say uh-oh, which is what I was saying at that point.

"Oh yeah, what did you study?"

"Music theory with hon-ors, astronomy with hon-ors, and you know I plan on working at the University in Fairbanks as a librarian since I have so much hon-ors. I plan on, you know performing and studying and working with the Alaskan artists and natives and since I took so many classes, with

hon-ors, I would like to perform some of my concertos, for you know I am a composer. Very much like a skilled beginner with honors just doing a tremendous job...with hon-ors..." and on and on and on. There was something about the guy that freaked me out. I made sure my knife was handy and kept my eyes on his hands while I drove. It really felt like he was one second from flipping. I kept talking to him. Listening to the same babble about hon-ors and Fairbanks and going to Nashville because "with hon-ors" meant you could do 'tremendous' and 'exquisite' building and if you worked in a Library you could perform with the natives with hon-ors. I finally dropped him off at the 405 onramp just north of Seattle glad to be alive.

Gang Bangers

Gang bangers are similar to rednecks in their clannishness but usually aren't as overtly hateful towards entire groups of people. What makes gang bangers dangerous is that they are usually are trying to earn 'respect' from the people around them.

'Respect' basically means that no one messes with them. I believe that most gang bangers become part of a gang because they are essentially powerless by themselves. Gang bangers can be any race and anywhere. They can flip at a moments notice when an outsider violates their ambiguous code of 'respect.'

Wannabees

Wannabees are even more dangerous than gang bangers because they are usually loose cannons looking for a way to prove that they deserve respect. None of them do, because of the base worthlessness of their character. As a result their actions become more and more outrageous and violent as they attempt to prove they deserve to be a gang banger. I've known friendly bums who have been beaten and killed by stupid kids with low self esteem. Fucking wannabees.

Energy Vampires

Energy vampires are everywhere. The best way to spot them is when they first approach you (they always approach you) and for some reasons you can't understand, they decide that they want you to be their best friend. If someone wants to be your friend for no apparent reason, they probably are an energy vampire.

Energy vampires like to be the center of conversation. They can draw the life out of any conversation with constant interruptions and meaningless stories that no one wants to hear. If an energy vampire is in your midst, you might notice that the people you want to talk with no longer hang out when you show up with your new best friend who follows you wherever you go.

A lot of energy vampires pose as hippies because real hippies are probably the most likely to let an energy vampire suck off them for an extended period of time. What an energy vampire does is feed off the positive vibes you create in order to get attention that they don't deserve. Along with that they usually hit anyone and everyone up for smokes, food, cash, a place to crash, and whatever else they can get. Learn to recognize them and tell them bluntly that you don't want to be their friend because there is no cure I've seen for an energy vampire except to make them find another victim.

Drugs, Alcohol, and Trippers

I've had great experiences abusing substances. Not everyone can hang with it though. The best advice I

can give is to be moderate in all things including a little excess. When you do decide to indulge, three things will help you come through it.

- 1) Know what you are taking and where it came from.
- 2) Have someone with you that you trust.
- 3) Pre-program a voice in your head to remind you that whatever you are experiencing is only temporary.

Travel: Getting from there to here

There are plenty of ways to get where you need to go. If you have a car, there's probably no need to explain how to drive somewhere. The important thing is that you need to get somewhere. What are your options?

Hitchhiking

Hitchhiking is risky. You should know that before you even consider it. Personally, I think it is a lot less risky than most people think, but there are plenty of horror stories about what happens to hitchhikers, particularly women by themselves. I don't recommend hitchhiking to anyone, but I've had some great experiences thumbing it in twenty states and five countries. There are a few things that can minimize your risk if you choose to stick out your thumb.

- (1) Trust your instincts...ask where someone is going when they stop, before you get in their car. If anything (like crushed beer cans on the floor, a smell, the way they talk, or just a feeling) makes you nervous about the person then come up with a reason to tell them why you don't want the ride. Don't get in the car if anything tells you not to. Run away screaming down the road if you have to.
- (2) If at all possible keep your bag where you are riding until you trust the person.
- (3) Tell the person that you are expected someplace up the road and that you have recently talked to someone from where they picked you up (even if you haven't.)
- (4) If during the course of the ride you begin to feel nervous, ask to be let off. Insist on being let off.
- (5) I rarely accept invitations to stay at someone's house, shower, or have a meal unless I feel positive that the person has no ulterior motive. Why put yourself in a wolf's den unnecessarily? All I want is a ride.
- (6) I don't know how much good it would do in any circumstance, as I've never had to use it, but I like to have my knife accessible and close by.
- (7) Get to know the person, ask questions, and talk to them about them rather than about you. Even psychos feel more kindly about someone who takes an interest in them and doesn't tell them that they are wrong. A ride is not the time to get on your soapbox, so even if you disagree with a person, don't tell them they are wrong about anything. If you disagree so much about something that you can't contain yourself, ask them to pull over and get out of the car.

I like hitchhiking, but it's not for everyone. There are a few things that can increase your chances of getting a ride.

- 1) Dress nice and look clean. Nobody wants to pick up someone who smells bad or looks like they don't take care of themselves.

2) Pick the spot you hitch from with care. Make sure there is an area that drivers can pull safely off the road past you.

3) If you have a choice, hitch where there are more poor people on the road. People from all walks of life have picked me up, but by and large poor people understand what it means to need a ride better than the rich do. Poor people are also much less suspicious that you are going to try to rob them or take their car. After all, who would want to steal a 1977 Pinto?

4) Flying a piece of cardboard with a well known destination shows motorists that you are a legitimate traveler trying to get to a legitimate destination, even if you are not.

Bus and Train

Traveling by bus is relatively cheap. The drawbacks are that you never know who you are going to be on the bus with, who's going to sit next to you, it takes forever, and the ride is generally uncomfortable. Sometimes you get lucky, sometimes you don't. Greyhound stations are always in the seedy part of town.

Traveling by train, on the other hand, is romantic. Someday I will hop a freight train but I haven't yet.

For now, I'll talk strictly about passenger trains. I've rode on passenger trains in England, Scotland, Thailand, China, Canada, and America. Trains are by far my favorite way to travel. You can move around. They are comfortable. You can consume alcohol. Trains cost nearly as much as flying and take far longer, but the trip is always worth it.

Travel by Plane

I'd have loved to live in the days when people dressed up to fly. Unfortunately, flying is not too much different from riding on a Greyhound in the sky. The exception to that is when you fly on the airlines of second or third world countries, there is still a feeling of luxury like when the passengers applaud the flight attendants in Taipei or when you are served a truly gourmet meal aboard a flight in Laos. Flying takes you from one place to another quickly and sometimes that results in culture shock.

Travel by Boat

Traveling on the water is always fun. The worst time I've ever had on a boat was when my brother and I took a cruise from Fort Lauderdale to Grand Bahama on a cheap cruise ship. The ship was nice; it was the passengers that sucked. Fat, old, white tourists. From that, I know that I will never willingly take a cruise liner anywhere. Other than that I love to travel on boats.

Sunset cruises in Hawaii, riding the ferry between Malaysia and Sumatra, riding the ferry to the San Juan Islands, catching a lift on a fishing boat in Juneau, Alaska. Boats are cool. The only problem with boats is the people you sometimes end up trapped with.

By Hook or By Crook

The bottom line to all of this is that there are ways to get and do what you want even if you are a person of limited means. Sure, you might have to bend the rules a little to make a situation more favorable.

You might even do something illegal once in a while. But, by and large, I've found that if you don't hurt anyone your life is generally better for it.

A Note on Cops

It's funny; the police can't stop someone from committing a crime against you. They can't stop the mugger, rapist, murderer, robber, or vandal. Sometimes they can catch them after the fact. Sometimes they can punish them. The police have never kept me from getting beat up, robbed, or shot at.

In fact, all law enforcement has ever done for me is to make me paranoid. Well, that's not exactly true. They've also written me tickets for not having a license, speeding, not having insurance, headlights being out, and some other stupid stuff. They've given local and state governments the ability to charge me large sums of money creating a class system based on the ability to pay for your crime. They've taken money I might have done something good with and put it toward more of the government I don't want in the first place. I hate that.

People are usually able to commit the crime first. I've created graffiti in public places with spray paint more times than I can count. The police are useless to stop people from committing crimes. Sure, they might catch me, but the deed would be done.

Does it make me nervous to write this? Sure. The police are constantly trying to catch you in the act of committing a crime. They are constantly trying to pin a crime on someone who may or may not have committed the crime. The police are an intimidation force. They exist to scare us into subservience. To scare us into following the rules.

The truth is we are all criminals. We all break the law every day. I don't know anyone who doesn't speed, jaywalk, or commit some infraction of the law on a daily basis. Even Presidents lie under oath. Politicians commit crimes while they are in office. So does every prison warden, cop, politician, and businessperson. We are all criminals waiting to be caught. Some of us are just a little more realistic (and honest) about it than others.

Your Kit: Garbage to Gear

There is no limit to what you can make from the garbage of other people except your own ability to figure it out. Here are a few suggestions to get you started.

- Old curtains or material can easily be made into a blanket. The ideal size is at least 60" wide by 2 yards.
 - There is no shortage of old shoes in the trash and shoestrings can be used to make all kinds of rope and cordage simply by tying them together and spooling them on a stick.
 - Beat up sandals usually have useful leather straps attached to them.
 - Old mesh orange sacks work well as a carryall bag or a pot scrubber.
 - Empty soda bottles work great as canteens. I usually wash them out with a little bleach first.
 - A camp oven can be made by cutting the flaps off a small box (9" x 6" x 6") and lining it with tinfoil. Find a box that is a little bigger and place the small box inside (a box with a lid works well. Line it with foil too.) Line the empty space inside with newspaper or sawdust. When you are ready to cook something, simply put it in the small box, place the lid on the larger box and put it in the coals.
 - Filling egg carton cups with sawdust or lint and pouring old wax over the top can make fire starters.
 - Use tin cans for cooking by layering your food in the following order in the can. Meat, vegetables, and seasoning. Cover with foil and put it in the fire for 30 to 45 minutes.
 - Heavy-duty 33-gallon garbage bags can be used to make a ground cloth, a poncho, or a small tent.
 - Large zip lock bags filled with air make good pillows. A bunch of them makes a decent air mattress.
- The list goes on and on. Use your imagination and you will find that you rarely need to buy anything. Especially expensive gear.

Vagabond Tales

No Baba, No Bobo

My mom was working as a waitress and my dad was painting houses, playing music. I was almost two and my brother was about seven. One evening Dad was watching us because Mom was working and he had no gig that evening. Mom and the baby sitter followed a similar routine in making me a bottle (ba-ba), ensuring that I had a pacifier (bo-bo), and then tucking me in my crib (night-night) before helping my brother with his homework. Dad threw all of that out the window and propped me on the couch watching TV while he helped my brother with his homework at the kitchen table.

It was at this point that I first heard the haunting melody of what might lie beyond. Obviously, I recognized that something lay outside better than what the talking heads on the magic box were babbling about. Dad's first clue was a whoosh of cold winter air blowing my brothers papers from the table.

He looked up and realized that I was gone as the screen door slammed in the wind. He ran outside and was terrified to see that I was running down the road next to two busy lanes of nighttime traffic. He sprinted after me and though I ran as fast as my tiny legs would carry me he caught me as I attempted to dart between fast moving cars.

He picked me up and shook me asking, "Chris, what are you doing?"

It was only then that I spoke my first sentence as I tried to explain it to him. "No ba-ba, no bo-bo, no night-night, bye-bye." If I had been a bit more articulate I might have explained the call of the road like this "I'm pretty sure there's a better life out there for me somewhere because sitting around watching TV sucks."

\$100 Volkswagen Bus

The bus I live in as I write this, was broken down on the side of the road in Seattle with a 'For Sale' sign listing \$400 as the price. As I was wistfully looking at her, her owner came running out of his house explaining that he would give her to me for \$100 right that instant.

I was in my friend Kevin's car and between the two of us we were able to come up with exactly \$100 when we found some change under the back seat. We towed her to the house I was going to be moving out of a week later.

The bus wouldn't start. A next door neighbor who was a VW enthusiast came over to have a look and within ten minutes had diagnosed and fixed the problem. All he did was tweak a few wires. I named her Turtle, since she would be my home and didn't move too fast.

The next day, I paid \$30 to get a temporary registration for the bus. That left me nearly broke. I was unemployed and a week from homeless, but I was starting to live smarter by far. I had a home.

I needed to drive to South Center (about a 60 mile round trip) to get her inspected by the State Patrol to make sure she wasn't stolen before I could get her registered and licensed. She drove like a charm on the way there. I'd already fixed the stereo, so I was pretty happy about the trip down. I was nervous that the bus would be stolen because I'd only paid \$100 for it and it had no title, but she passed the State Patrol's inspection with flying colors.

I was driving on a three-day trip permit, which allows unlicensed cars to be driven for three consecutive days. I was jubilant on the way back and that's when Turtle broke down. First she stopped in a busy intersection and finally restarted only to die alongside Highway 99, I coasted to the small shoulder wedged between the highway and the railroad tracks just South of Seattle.

A busy shipping yard was on the other side of the tracks. Shipping containers stacked four high. I tried to get her started for fifteen or twenty minutes and then knew that I would have to call a tow truck. I hopped over the tracks. I ran through the yard and looked for an exit, a payphone, or an office.

Finally three rednecks in a company pickup pulled up next to me, I asked politely, but they said I couldn't use their phone. A crane driver pulled up and yelled at me "This is private property, you've gotta leave." He seemed to have a little more of an idea of what was going on than the boys in the pickup who had begun muttering things like 'stupid fucking hippie.'

"My car broke down on Highway 99 and I need to find a phone to call a tow truck."

"Take him to the office and let him use the phone" he bellowed at the pickup boys and then sped away in his crane.

The ladies in the office were nice if not comforting.

"Sure, use the phone, you're not the first to break down out there. It happens all the time. Most of the time the cars get hit by other cars while they sit on that road."

I used my mom's AAA card to call a tow truck (Thanks Mom! By the way, other people's AAA cards

are great because AAA never seems to check and never charges for limited distance towing.)

Now I had to get back to the car, they wouldn't let me go through the yard again. I tried walking to an on ramp, but there wasn't one. I walked north hoping for an off ramp...no luck. In an alley an old man was wiping bird shit off of his Honda Civic with a dirty handkerchief. I said hello as I ran past, then I stopped.

"Hey could you do a stranger a huge favor?" I asked. German accent as he wiped at his windshield then ran to a puddle to dip his handkerchief in. "What do you want?" He eyed me suspiciously.

"My car broke down right over there on 99 and I need a ride to it."

"Why don't you walk?"

"They won't let me through the yard." I told him.

"You'll have to ride in the backseat. I've got a bunch of stuff in the front."

I was grateful. He drove me to my car while telling me about how he hitchhiked 30 years before when he first came from Germany. He still picked up hitchhikers, but there were fewer of them in recent years. He dropped me off and I waited for the truck to tow Turtle back to the house.

It took me a day and half to figure out that my ignition points had closed. It took 15 minutes to replace them. My future home was running strong again. I drove to register the bus at the Licensing Department. I told them it wouldn't be driven so that I wouldn't have to get a smog check. They didn't ask what I'd driven to the licensing department.

Once I had the plates, it was time to do some maintenance. I replaced the plugs, rotor, air filter, and cleaned her up a little. I started her up. Perfect.

I took a trip to the junkyard. It was incredible. Dozens of VW buses lined up and ready to give up whatever I needed. I felt like a kid in Candyland taking things apart and digging through the waste. I love junkyards. Infinite possibilities within a budget. I bought a table, a latch for the engine, a glove box, and a few odds and ends that the bus needed like taillight covers and door handles.

Later that day I adjusted the valves, put in the table and christened my bus with some sage since, after all, I was a stupid fucking hippie.

Suddenly the bus felt like home. Visions of the nomadic life lit up my brain. I became aware of the possibilities. I could go to Mexico. I could go to the Southwest. I could go anywhere. By the end of the month I would be free. The New Year, 2001, would begin for me without chains. I started dreaming of the things I could do in the next year.

Inside she was warm with the rugs, pillows, and quilts. I made a pot of coffee and rustled up some pretty good grub then lay down for a nap and more dreaming about my coming adventures.

Tarps in the trees

I drove out dirt roads and hiked up a well-worn trail. It was raining, a mist drifting through the giant trees. Suddenly, like Mirkwood, the far off tinkling of laughter came from up high. I took a wrong turn down a trail, backtracked, and finally wandered into the encampment. High above three log and tarp forts hung in the mist. Connected by ropes and pulleys. Banners hung between them proclaiming, “This Land is Our Land” and “Save our Forest.” There was no one on the ground.

There were signs of people all around. Rain gear, buckets (used to haul shit and piss), tarps, and even a mysterious tent with a smoking fire still going nearby. The people vanished into the wood.

I gave a halloo up to the nearest tree fort. A male voice called down. “Who is it?”

“It’s Chris, you don’t know me, but I’ve got food for Lucky.” While I was eating breakfast in Eugene, my friend, The Ole’ Reptile, had asked if I would bring a bag of dog food out to the Fall River tree sit for a dog he knew. I, of course, agreed.

“I’ll just leave the bag down here.”

“Great. Thank you.”

I continued to look around and examine the curious tarpitecture of the feral folk who live in and among the ancient Douglas Fir that were threatened by imminent logging. Random stick, shit bucket, and rope creations blocked the roads to keep trucks and vehicles from approaching. A large compost bin and what would probably become a garden occupied parts of the road. The tinkling of laughter came from everywhere. Lightly. From nowhere. The tree sitters have their own culture. It was spooky how nobody came out to meet me. I was relieved to return to Eugene.

Unemployment

Filing for unemployment was one of the hardest decisions of my life. I'd always taken pride in not receiving any 'handouts' from the government. One of my roommates decided for me when he pointed out that it was me who had paid for the benefits I would collect. I decided to take back my 'donations' to this government institution.

I filed by phone, answering the questions the computer on the other end asked. It struck me as funny that the computer's elimination could have provided at least one job to a person who was unemployed. The mechanical voice told me I had to apply for three jobs a week in order to collect my benefits and gave me an appointment so that I could attend 'orientation.' The state required that I attend "unemployment orientation" before the benefits of joblessness began.

I woke up late for unemployment. I got there 45 minutes late. It felt nice letting my body sleep as long as it wanted and the receptionist told me I could attend the next session.

The first thing I noticed in the classroom was a sign that said "Please turn off your cell phones." I suppose it is a problem keeping the unemployed off their cell phones in Seattle. The facility was called 'Work Source.' It was a typical institutionalized place with white and yellow walls. Classrooms.

It had lots of literature encouraging the poor to quit breeding. There were people with disabilities, older folks, and people of color. Nobody looked really down and out. Nobody seemed like they were going to die if they didn't find employment soon.

People seemed to be pretending they wanted to find a job. That's the difference between the homeless and the unemployed, the homeless don't bother pretending they want a job; they just don't have one. Both groups share a degree of dirtiness though. It's just a little more obvious on those without houses and showers.

I was nervous but it was a cakewalk. Three people had been selected to turn in their search logs, showing where they had applied for work so far. The telephone computer voice had told us about this requirement. I was not one of them. The woman looked to be sure my logs reflected applying for at least three jobs this week. They did even though I hadn't. I just wrote down some big corporation names and addresses.

The workshop group was made up of older housewives, dropouts, and freaks. One guy in his forties was wearing a leather jacket covered with rainbow colored beads. He had matching beads in his hair that hung down a little past his shoulders. He was distinctly birdlike and kept pecking the instructor with questions about job services on the internet and the waiting period to hear back from Boeing.

The instructor went to great pains to describe the ways we could avoid applying for work and still meet the required three job applications per week. Things like coming to 'work source' and working on our resumes, learning how to use the computers, or taking a typing course. Bedtime material. Pure Sominex. It was all about how to make your resume dynamic and answer interview questions the best way.

There were several interesting programs where the state would pay for a college education, I thought about doing that, but already had a useless Associates Degree and didn't really want more. The whole 'orientation' lasted a few hours.

As I walked out of the Unemployment Department, I felt happy to know that the orientation counted for the three jobs I was supposed to apply for that week. My check arrived a few days later. All I had to do for the next eighteen weeks was to call in every Sunday to the phone computer and answer a serious

of questions using '1' for yes and '9' for no. It took six minutes the first time but got quicker as I memorized the sequence of answers. 1, 1, 9, 9, 9, 9, 9, 9, 9, 9, 9, #.

Recycling and Garage Sales

I helped Aquillo Mallot do his rounds at Western Washington University when it was time for the students to go home. We hit every dumpster on the campus twice a day for two weeks. You see, the students had bought things to make their dorms more comfortable. Things like microwaves, stereos, posters, books, artwork, clothes, and computers. Tons of stuff. They had to leave the dorms empty and most of them were driving home and didn't want to rent a U-Haul to take along all their possessions. So, in the true American way, they just threw everything out.

In two weeks we filled a friend's garage to capacity with just about everything you could think of. I was wondering what we were going to do with it all, but Aquillo had a plan. Every weekend throughout the summer we would box everything up and have garage sales in the yards of people we knew.

For the first four or five weeks Aquillo and I were pulling \$300-\$400. Towards the end of summer it was between \$10 and \$100, but then a funny thing happened. The college kids returned and in two weekends bought back almost everything that was left (plus the things we had found during the summer) and gave us both close to \$500. You see? Recycling can be profitable.

Another guy I know used to buy rejected textbooks from schools in Texas and sell them to other school districts that were still using them. That was giving him enough dough to support his family. But then, one day he was driving his pickup past an oil refinery and saw stacks of tools and equipment being carried out by the workers. Having an eye for value, he stopped and asked if they were throwing the stuff away. They said yes and when he asked if he could take it they said yes again. So, he loaded everything up in his truck and took it to a drilling supplier in Houston where he sold all of it for close to \$90,000. True story.

You see, what was happening is that the big corporations work just like the government does. They operate on a concept called a fiscal year. All budgets run for one fiscal year (usually October to October.) At the end of the fiscal year, the Chief Financial Officer and his accountants figure out where they can slash budgets so they can put money elsewhere.

So, if individual departments have not maxed out their budgets, their budget gets smaller. To prevent this, departments will review their own budgets before the end of the fiscal year and figure out how to spend all the money they saved over the course of the year (and usually a little more.) A good for instance would be throwing away \$90,000 worth of perfectly good tools.

Another 'recycling' tale that is worth the telling is the story of my friend Sam. Sam is a rug dealer from Chechnya who moved to America about forty years ago. He moved into a cheap tenement apartment in Los Angeles and got a labor job. The building he was living in was condemned not long after he moved in but because so many poor people were living there the city allowed that those there could stay for a period of five years but no new tenants would be accepted. This left a lot of apartments empty over time.

Sam had noticed that people in America threw out all kinds of useful things and began picking stuff up on the way home from work each morning. Soon his apartment was full and he asked the manager if he could store things in some of the empty ones. The manager didn't seem to mind and so over the next few years Sam filled up most of the empty apartments with just about everything you can imagine.

At the end of the five years, the city took action to evict the last 15 residents, giving them one month to leave. Sam ran his own publicity campaign with the newspapers and television stations saying that he and the rest of the evicted had lived there for years and had no place to put all of their 'valuable antiques' and 'ancient family heirlooms.' He further complained about a city ordinance that forbids garage sales on the street in front of the building. He really worked the angle of evicted senior citizens and immigrants.

After lots of pressure from the public who read of the problem in their newspapers and saw stories about it on their local news, the city granted a special permit allowing the citizens of the building to have a special garage sale to sell off their valuables.

Sam tells me that for two days he and the other residents nearly continuously carried his accumulated trash downstairs and for ridiculously high prices sold it to the predators that were hoping to prey on the misfortune of these poor people.

It was a three-day permit and at the end of the second day Sam had nearly \$200,000 in cash. He got spooked and left the rest of everything to the other residents.

He flew to the Caucus Mountains and bought a huge inventory of beautiful rugs and then returned to America where he sold the rugs and bought a small ranch and an RV with his legitimate profits. He still sells the rugs and he still picks through the garbage despite being a millionaire.

Conversations with Unremarkable Men

My good buddy George and I got on his bikes (George always keeps a couple of extra bikes around for his guests) and rode down to the industrial beach where I had parked my bus. This is where Aquillo Mallot and the other bums we like hang out.

He was sitting in a tent with a couple of other bums. Aquillo introduced me to Jeff, the older guy whose little tent we sat around as we smoked more ganja. Jeff, it turns out, is the heir apparent to the throne of Wales. True or not, none of us knew, but on the sand or in the streets, you don't question anyone's story. For all we knew he could be the King of Sweden.

Aquillo put it another way when he, George, and I moved down the beach. "Everybody is entitled to their fantasy, and what the hell, he could be a fucking alien from the Dog Star."

George started a fire. It was starting to rain and we set up Aquillo's dingy as a wind/rain break. Then we just chilled out. Talking.

"The fundamentalist Christian's told me that peace in Israel would mean the end of the world in 3 ½ years," I told them.

"It'll end sooner than that if they keep spraying this chemical shit from these high altitude jets," Aquillo said, "They're trying to immunize us, or poison us, or something, but I've seen the chem.-trails for three days running now."

"I hear that Maitreya has been having secret meetings with the United Nations and letting the world leaders know what they need to do to fix the planet, but they won't listen." George told us in a conspiratorial whisper about the future Buddha and his hidden agenda. "Maitreya is gonna fuck up the leaders man. He's the fighting Buddha."

It's funny how enjoyable the free things in life are. Sitting on a beach in the rain, having a fire, riding bikes, and talking about anything and everything.

Hopalong Tom, another crusty old hobo, hushed us all and outlined how he was going to get good credit and fix up his sailboat.

"The system is all about credit," he said, "and anyone can get it."

He was going to get a great credit rating and buy a half million-dollar cabin catamaran and sail it to the Amazon River. Then he was going to sink it and have a separate corporation he would own salvage it.

"I'm gonna live my days sailing up and down the river, giving people rides in exchange for food, gas, and water. I might stop in a village once in a while to visit a chief and his daughter. People like the guys who play water taxi. It's a good life."

"I'm even gonna start watching TV," he said. "I always spent my money on airplanes and short wave radios but it's treated me just fine."

It suited me to sit on the beach. The house-less guys don't make you talk if you don't want to. It's one of the few places in the world where a person can be quiet and still be around people. No pressure to talk or do anything else. You're free to just sit and think drifting in your own thoughts. It's nice. You

can listen to others or you can get up and move on to a separate little spot.

George's cell phone rang as I recovered in the silence. It was our friend Ursula. Sort of a surreal moment when she found out we were with Aquillo and asked to speak to him. George and me looked at each other with huge shit eating grins as Aquillo Mallot sat on the beach, next to a fire, dog leash in hand, talking to a pretty girl on a cell phone.

Aquillo had never used a cell phone before. George kept whispering and giggling, "Look, Aquillo's on the cell phone." She tried to talk him into coming over but Aquillo doesn't like sitting indoors. We sat on the beach drinking whiskey instead until sleep called us away one by one. I woke up in the morning and was going to leave when I looked in my rear view mirror and saw Aquillo and his dogs coming down the hill. I shut off the bus and waited.

"It's a good thing you waited," he told me with a grin "We're about to smoke a joint."

Shannon and Hopalong weren't far behind him. We smoked and fell into our usual patois.

"Here we are, " I said. "2001. We all survived the bigY2K...no problems."

They laughed. Shannon shook his head. " The country is heading into a recession but why should that bother warriors of alternative means?" We all laughed louder.

"2001," Aquillo roared, " A homeless oddity." We all roared with him.

We sat by the fire drinking whiskey, smoking pot, and listening as Hopalong Tom as he told us about the night his boat sank.

"...I decided to stay in the water this time. Last time when the skiff sank, I got out and got hypothermia real bad. So this time I stayed in the water for a while. I saw Aquillo on his boat and decided to float on over there. I don't care how many times the safety people say to kick your boots off when you're in the water but that's all fine and good if you got another pair of boots or a warm dry pair waiting for ya, it's a little harder when they're the only boots you got."

"So I floated on over to Aquillo's boat thinking I'd grab a hold of it. It wasn't easy getting there with fifteen-foot seas crashing all over. Aquillo saw me and threw me a life ring and just as he does his boat stands up straight in the air on a swell. It kinda sucked me over that way.... Then it started coming down so I sort of shoved and kicked off of it to get out from under it. Then it starts to stand up again and I thought the hell with this. So I catch the ring and then it becomes real calm for a minute or two."

"The storm God letting me and Aquillo have a moment to talk. We agreed that we was both scared shitless and he says he's gonna stay on the boat and I'm gonna head to shore....then his boat gets lifted up again and I'm trying to get to the shore and out of the way. I looked back and saw Aquillo standing near twenty feet above the water in his vertical boat. Cursing the weather and the Gods."

"Somehow I got to shore and thought I'd run to Gordon's about a half mile away. Well there was no way I could make it there. I was shaking so bad I could barely stand and I went to the nearest apartment house I saw."

I took a look at Hopalong in his new coat from the rescue mission. Gimp arm tucked up. Bearded face

and something weird about the eyes. They were squinty. Hopalong had a knowing way about him at the same time that he gave up something like you get from bikers.... just the feel of a pirate I guess.

“So I go and I’m pounding on the door and no one’s answering and they were kind enough to call 911 for me. I just kept pounding their door then the window telling myself ‘I am not gonna die’ I saw the glass just curving in. I must of scared the hell out of em’ I never saw a person though...so finally I said to hell with this and I went wondering around the corner and find a laundry room. It was adjacent to the apartment I’d been pounding on, so I pounded on the wall so they would know where I was. Then I’m looking in my pockets for quarters so I can put my clothes in the dryer and right then the firemen show up in their big coats. It was a stormy crazy night so they were ready ”

”What’s the matter?’ He asks me. “My boat sank and I’m freezing”, ‘Ain't you the guy I picked up two weeks ago when that skiff sank?’ ‘Yeah,’ I said ‘We gotta quit meeting like this.’ So I let 911 pay for it instead of spending my quarters on that dryer. You know, you never know what the hell it’s all about until that moment when you know you might die and that’s the truth.”

Hopalong’s story made me glad I lived on wheels instead of the water.

A Further Conversation with Aquillo Mallot

(This conversation was recorded and transcribed by my good friend Izak Holden and originally published in Conchsense Magazine which was an anarchist zine I published in the late 90's in Bellingham, Washington)

"The Secret Chiefs told me to do it," he once told me when I asked why he was trying to revive the Old Goddess Worship down on this beach.

"I want these kids to worship the Sumerian Goddess of the underworld, Eris Kegal, at 4:20 in the afternoon and morning."

He lit up a joint and dirt covered it from his soiled brown fingers. He took a puff and passed it to me. I hit it. Shit weed. Rescued from a dumpster outside the dorms.

"How do you feel about being called homeless?" I asked, trying to figure out how I should feel about being "homeless."

Aquillo laughed. "I think it's a fine and outstanding name. I think everybody should refer to me as homeless. That way there's definition. I think we should wear orange armbands so we can be identified by the populace and get picked up with the daily trash by the police. I think we should be branded with a "V" for vagrant on the forehead like in old time England and if caught inside the gates be beheaded. That's what I think about homelessness."

I passed the joint back. "Yeah, but what about the people who refer to people like you and me as lazy bums?"

Aquillo took a deep hit and replied in a hold it in voice. "I am the king of laziness! I am laziness himself! The God basking in the fuckin' sunshine, that is I. Laziness! Sloth! Indolence! It all comes down to dirt level." He exhaled.

Aquillo is a prophet of the dumpster. "Dirt level?"

"Dirt level. How much dirt you have on you and how much dirt you don't. It's the general fear. Cultural fear. The thing about homelessness is that it's the right for children growing up in America to grow up killing homeless people. It's the new rite of passage in America as well to let children go into high schools and mow down their classmates. This is what I feel is happening. You know? I don't even look at it as homelessness though, that's the main thing. You got the wrong guy as far as the homeless dude. You picked the wrong fuckin dude."

"I'm just a low down clown. You know? The homeless guy, he's another dude, cause I carry my home in my heart. That's the amazing thing, all those other people are homeless out there...not me. I'm just adequately shelter deprived."

"Unable to build my sacrificial fires whenever I need to. I'm a holy man. I have a gift. I'm bringing it to the people without a roof over my head. That's the same thing Jesus said, go into the wilderness and fornicate....rapidly."

He stood up and started gathering the dry brush that grew along the beach. He left the joint with me.

"Class war. It's all so the evil masters of the earth, the WTO, can have their UN goon squad bop down

in the back yard and start gathering up “homeless” people and shipping them off to the concentration camps to fuel the new Soylent Green factory dog food conspiracy. What do you think will happen when we sell a billion cars to China? Everyone will be homeless then. “

He looked up and smiled as he came back to where I was listening.

"Everybody is going to be living off of dirt and sticks. It just changes hands. The water is rising. Better get ready. My people in the end times will eat the people with homes. They'll be food and slaves. Their world ends and mine begins."

“But what motivates you to continue with this lifestyle?” I asked as Aquillo built a small teepee and struck match to the fine tinder.

“Love. Love of Life. The story of Riley. The guy in Ireland who went around like a Roman God. He got drunk and whored and laid around in the countryside. Not working. Just kicking back. The love of life or I have no reason to be doing what I’m doing. I’m leading the life of Riley. People should elect me. I’ll be the mayor! I’m here because I have to be here. Other people are here because they have drug or mental problems. I have no mental problems except for this fetish of digging through dumpsters.”

"I do have a mental problem though, megalomania. I believe in what I do. Since other people are taught not to believe anything unless it comes from the TV or some authority. I say usurp that authority, get naked, throw off your fucking...light sabers. Come live in the wilderness with me."

"I’m like Til Ubinspiegel. He’s the German naturalist who lived like Robin Hood in 1840’s Germany. Stagecoaches would go by and he’d ride out and take all of their money. He did it so humorously that everybody laughed while he was taking it. And he would say ‘Come with me! Come live with me! You don’t need this!’ This was in the 1840’s.” He laughed again. “And he robbed the rich for thirty years and then of course, they had him up on the gallows. Everybody in the country knew him, so maybe a thousand people from all over showed up to see him hanged. And on the gallows, he was laughing, and everybody watching was laughing. And they kept laughing even after no more sound came from his swinging, smiling face.”

“Do you choose to stay adequate shelter deprived?” I asked as the fire started to warm up and the weed made things different.

“No, not by choice. My choice would be to be burning down houses and using them for ceremonial fires to stay warm with in the winter. A house a day. The basic thing about the whole lifestyle is that if the police leave you alone, then you’re going to have a good winter. It’s the police that are the problem, nothing else.”

"Homeless people aren't tough enough. You know a few get murdered here and there out on the tracks because they don't protect themselves. They get preyed on. The basic thing is arm yourself to the teeth and build many fires and do many sacrifices to the great Gods. The great old ones. How can I answer these questions with a straight face?"

"I just am. One in ten thousand is I. One of the ten thousand. I live here; I’m a natural person. I’m an aboriginal. I’ve gone native and I fucking live here.”

Aquillo pulled a pint of cheap whiskey from his pocket. “Have a slug of this and let me explain

something. It's us against them. Either you overthrow your masters or else you just walk away and ignore them. That's why I think work is part of the prison system. You know? Make something for somebody to do so they can stay warm and eat. Make them do that to get here. It's something they want to do.

"Am I lazy? No, I just don't want to be a dumb shit workman and get paid shit. I'd rather be scrounging through trash and picking exotic mushrooms and being the barter system. I'd rather be pirating all the goods I can get my hands on. Life was simple a hundred years ago. Kick back. People are recently homeless."

"In the old days they were just pilgrims and holy men and raving monks. Spiritual warriors that live outside and brave the weather. That's why I don't call it homeless. A lot of people have houses, but very few have homes. You could have the biggest house and be just rotting inside your soul. What I'm saying is a home is not a house. And having all your reality around you and its all wealth and opulence but that doesn't mean you have anything. Your soul might be rotten. So its spiritual health inside the body which keeps me the way I am."

"Natural. People weren't meant to work or do for anybody else unless they felt like it, you know? Like 'that's a good thing to do' not 'I gotta get up and go dig this ditch for this fucker who I don't even like' I'd rather feast on his flesh for breakfast. That's the lie they told you and that's the lie they sold you. Go to school, go to work, and then die!"

The Duck

I stopped and talked with the bum who was lying in the grass listening to country music on headphones and complaining about the rain as he smoked a cigarette. He told me a lot of the tramps had been getting their gear stolen. We talked about life on the road and he told me he was going to Phoenix. "Get where it was still warm and didn't rain."

I walked all the way through Vancouver to reach the on ramp and this tramp named Duck walked with me part of the way. He complained about the rain and bum's gear getting ripped off. Curiously, he had a huge bag of stuff he complained about too.

He asked "You drunk?"

It was about 10 AM. "No," I replied.

"I am. Been tramping a long time. You got any cardboard?" "Just my sign." I showed him the sign I'd made which simply said "Bellingham."

"Well I gotta get me some so I can fly some cardboard and get me some spending money." He was dressed all in camouflage.

"I gotta piss...I wouldn't be a tramp if I couldn't piss and walk at the same time."

I started walking a bit faster as he slowed down. Suddenly I heard the additional splash of urine on the sidewalk. The Duck didn't seem to mind that it was daylight or think that the couple walking behind him would mind a little extra precipitation.

I walked about 20 feet ahead of him and tried not to burst out laughing. He kept cussing about the rain and pissing. I turned around once and saw him pissing all over himself. That was the last I saw of The Duck.

A Random Bender in Seattle

I was bored, not knowing what to do with my time, so I settled down in Turtle and read Oscar Zeta Costa's *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*. It's a great book by the Chicano lawyer who gained fame through representing and carousing with Hunter S. Thompson. The overall effect of the book on me was to create an overwhelming urge to drink.

I bought a cheap jug of red wine and sat across the street from the high school in my friend's back yard having a fire. It wasn't that it didn't feel good sitting next to that fire and being wine drunk at 1:30 in the afternoon, it was just that I wanted something more from life.

Dan, a guy I knew from down the alley wandered along and stopped for a pull or two on the bottle. Dan was schizophrenic and seemed apologetic when he told me that he was living with his parents. I told him not to worry about it and we fell into discussing the societal urge to separate ourselves from our families. It is a recent occurrence, and uniquely western/American/European.

We are encouraged to become bigger consumers than our parents and to provide for ourselves so that our parents have more "disposable income" to throw to the capitalists. Family has been destroyed by business. Asians still have large extended families that offer support to one another East Indian college students think their friends are crazy to move out of the family home when the parents are completely willing to provide a roof until marriage. I'd never thought of it like that, but we both agreed that an extended family is like an umbrella to protect you from the elements. It's about give and take. Dan took another swig and got up to go mow his folks yard. I didn't have an umbrella.

A school bus drove by with the non-driving teens looking out at me.... what could I do? I lifted the bottle and drank. That, after all, was plenty legal in the confines of my friend's yard.

My fire burned steadily and I sat in solitude with the bottle of Gallo wine. The smoke started blurring my vision and I chanted what I knew would drive it away. "I hate White Rabbits" over and over in a loud voice.

After a few hours, my fire died, and my jug was empty. I decided to head to downtown Seattle and see what I could see. I thought bus fare was a buck and a quarter and asked a woman at a Pony Express Postal Service if she could give me change for a dollar, to my surprise, she refused in a very nasty way.

She nearly spit at me as she belched out "I don't give change!" The old cow acted like I'd asked her to give me a blow job. The cab driver at the counter looked as shocked as I felt at her reaction. She must have thought I was going to go play some demented video games or visit the peepshows.

I walked down the block and got change at a Mexican restaurant. The cabbie came out of Pony Express and asked me if I still needed change. I assured him I was all right and we both sort of laughed. Turns out I didn't need the quarters until later when I visited the Peep Shows on First Avenue and played some demented video games at Wizards of the Coast.

I caught a bus to the U-district and made sure to get a transfer. Bus transfers are such fantastic things. Useful for an all day trip around the city and all for a measly dollar! I was good and drunk when I got on the bus. The guy who sat next to me introduced himself as Tim.

He was a tall black man in a short white coat. Tim told me he had started going to Christian churches to pick up pussy.

“It worked too!” he said. “I used to come to my place with these nervous, prudish girls, and just fuck em. But then I got sucked into religion. I became a Christian and later I joined some freaky cult. I got out of that and moved to California where I became involved in another cult with an acting teacher named Christopher. Christopher would make all the girls screw him. I don’t know about the other boys but he sure fucked me too!”

I was too drunk to be shocked at Tim’s weird confession, but I thought it was ironic that he had joined a church to get fucked and later on it was him who got fucked. I made a mental note to stay away from Christian girls. As Tim got off the bus, I heard a young girl at the bus stop saying to another “If I find that Shorty motherfucker I’m going to kick his ass!”

I started talking with a crack hoe girl and we joked around and flirted a bit. Then two black men, a young short white guy, and a large fat Indian woman got on the bus and began insulting each other. “Shorty, your momma smoke so much crack she uses a cheerio for a hula-hoop,” the fatter of the two men, told Shorty, the short white man in the long black coat.

The Seattle bus culture seems pretty small. My new friend, Mary Jane the crack whore, got off the bus with me and we wandered into Earl’s on the Avenue for a drink. It was a sports bar. A drunk next to a priest sitting at the bar was having an animated conversation with the padre and kept saying “God damn” and “Dammit to hell.” It wasn’t obvious if he was doing it on purpose or on accident. Mary Jane and I cracked up. No pun intended.

Mary Jane had a wine spritzer and I had a Pabst Blue Ribbon. After several drinks I was piss drunk and decided it was a good idea to pee in the bar. I thought I could do it without getting up, so I just unzipped and pissed on the bar floor in the middle of the table.

The sound of my stream of piss hitting the brass table legs made a musical sound that caused the priest and his drunken friend to turn around. Mary Jane started singing a song to cover up the sound as we both giggled about my sly move.

“Good one,” she said. The priest’s foul-mouthed friend decided to come over and join us. “Why don’t we move to another table,” Mary Jane suggested to us.

He was on the bottom end of a thirty-day bender. He kept eating queludes and putting them back with full glasses of red wine. The guy was a 36-year-old trustafarian. He told us how he had worked the system by lobbying for two weeks of intense relapse prevention instead of two years of treatment after his third DUI.

He said each time he got a beer it made him laugh all the harder admitting “I’m an alcoholic, what the hell else am I supposed to do with my time.”

Mary Jane suddenly and without warning, let us know that sex had never lasted more than 10 minutes for her. She didn’t seem to mind and followed that confession with “That’s what a man gets when he fucks a pussy lined with gold!” I was both shocked and impressed by her confidence. We all three laughed as Nate, the newcomer at our table, went to buy us another round. That gold pussy was already working.

Mary Jane kept bringing up our president, George W. Bush, and how he should be shot. Everywhere I went I heard people jokingly talking about him getting shot. Sometimes it didn't seem like they were joking. Two 15-year-old schoolboys sent a death threat to the White house from London. The British didn't even suspend them. A middle-aged gunman fired shots at the White house and wounded a security guard.

Nate decided to test the golden pussy and the two of them wandered off to his place. I didn't mind. I stepped outside and caught a bus to 1st Avenue. When I got to Pike Place I heard two little English boys talking with their babysitter "Rose, it must be nice to not have to go to school and be able to sit around and do whatever you want all day" the smaller of the two said to her, to which the other replied "Not me, I want an education, I don't want to have to sit on the street and beg people for money saying "Please give me money because I need a prostitute."

Sometimes the world lines up when you're drunk. I stopped long enough to put a dollar into a bum's guitar case as he played some old time bluegrass. It made me feel good. I spent 50 cents in a peep show, but couldn't really focus on the girl. I don't remember exactly how it happened but I ended up in a Bingo Hall.

I thought I had Bingo once and screamed out "Bingo!" during a "speedball" play. The oldsters seemed like they might lynch me. I hadn't realized it was a "blackout" play. All the numbers on the card had to be covered, not just a row. Then they had a play called "railroad tracks". They blew a train whistle and I said "This one's mine. No doubt about it."

Every number the guy called out filled in another space on my card. My last number came up on the screen but the caller hadn't called it yet. I screamed out "Bingo!!" again and the woman next to me quickly told them it wasn't. "But all my numbers are covered," I said. "Yeah, but he's got to call the number before you can say Bingo."

More dirty looks from the serious Bingo players. The paymaster grudgingly laid \$40 in front of me after checking my card very carefully.

I stepped outside, undid my fly, spread my legs a bit, and peed right where I was with no one the wiser. No one even noticed the yellow stream running down the gutter. I'd like to see The Duck pull one off like that.

It was dark now. Suddenly, as if from out of my mind, a beautiful Nigerian and Russian woman I knew appeared and chased me down the sidewalk on her motorcycle. Natasha only shows up when I'm seriously blasted. I think she gave me a ride back to my bus.

When I woke up my guts turned as I looked at the puddle of wine and Chinese food vomit outside my door. I'd forgotten about puking. I'd forgotten about Chinese food. It came back to me suddenly. I started to wish I'd never read anything by Oscar Zeta Acosta.

Shroomin at the Hot Springs

My friend Sean asked if I was interested in heading up to Scenic Hot Springs with him.

I was. It sounded like the perfect thing to take my mind off my hangover. We hiked two miles vertically and finally reached the hot springs where about a dozen people were nudely soaking and reveling despite the snow, the icy slick trail, and the difficult hike.

By the time we got there, it was dark.

Sean had some psychedelic mushrooms that we ate before we settled into the natural hot spring tubs.

He had been going to the hot springs for about fourteen years and introduced me to another longtime visitor, Robert, the naked gourmet. Robert, a Puerto Rican man in his 40's, reached fame through traveling to different hot springs and cooking incredible gourmet treats for those lucky enough to be there. He was, of course, naked, as were we.

The shrooms started kicking in as he explained the hierarchy of the hot springs.

“There is a class system here” he said, “It goes like this. This place and this energy is a result of Goddess. So first in the hierarchy are the goddesses who come here. Whatever they want, they get. Here they are not girls or women, they are Goddesses and I exist to serve.” The beautiful girls in the tub with us murmured in delight.

“Next come those who serve Goddess and the Goddess's who visit. So this young man” He indicated a dark youth with a secure energy about him who was happily massaging a Goddesses shoulders. “He is next because he helped me carry my gear up the mountain and he is really pleasing this Goddess. After that come the rest of the guys.”

The shrooms started reshaping my reality and the snow-capped peak directly across from us began sort of bowing and kow-towing to me while the trees began to twitter. Faces and words began to blend into each other and I thought of Shariff Baba, a Sufi I had once known, and how he explained that the whirling dervish spins so reality blurs together and God can be seen in totality.

My reality was blurring into the steam rising into the clouds and the stars that were not there dancing among those that were. One of the boys brought out a pipe and propane lighter. We shared his weed. I was intensely reflecting inward while I sat in the corner. The Goddesses were lovely and the water was divine at just the right heat. A light snow began to fall.

I wanted to have a holy experience though I was worried about tripping out too far. I tried to follow conversations, but couldn't. Sean was a real chatterbox, just jacking his jaw about motors and basketball and trails. He and Robert moved to the next pool, called The Lobster Pot and I settled into a comfortable corner of The Bear's Den.

The dark boy and his Goddess were next to me; they were very comforting and real. The Naked Gourmet served up a delicious treat with orange slices that I tasted with my ears and felt with my nose.

Goddesses' first, then helpers, and then the guys.

Strange things still blurred the corners of my vision.

Two very drunk underage Goddesses came and got in the Bear's Den with us. They both had huge bottles of beer and huge tits. I saw temptation and struggled to hold on to the center. I visualized my inner energy and remained quiet, knowing that my silence meant more than anything I might spit out to these new friends I was enjoying a bath with.

I felt an urge to speak but each time I tried, I realized, I fit in better being quiet. The Goddess and her dark servant moved to the Lobster Pot and the drunk young Goddesses squealed in delight at the extra room. Their older white trash boyfriends then came and got in the tub. It was too much for me. The energy was chaos. I followed to the Lobster Pot and into the warmer waters.

I appreciated Robert's constant patter about the adventures of the Naked Gourmet as it allowed me to simply listen and exist in my own world. Each time someone got out of the pool, we all shifted to a more comfortable spot.

Slowly faces became distinguishable and words took on meaning. The visual died away and I returned to the somewhat Valhallalike world of Scenic Hot Springs. Though I felt a bit like a perve, I couldn't help staring at the beautiful breasts of a heavily pierced girl from Lake Stevens or the wonderful little Yani on the Goddess with servant. The Naked Gourmet turned from his makeshift kitchen with quesildilla's and more orange slices.

Shortly afterward he began packing his enormous load of gear into a sled and set off yelling "For those of you here tomorrow, I'll be back for brunch!"

I stayed in the Lobster Pot for the next 6 hours or so, only getting out once to take an enormous pee in a downhill snowdrift. It's bad form to piss in the hot springs, by the way.

About 3:00 AM, Sean and I agreed it was time to go. We got dressed as needle like snowflakes flogged our mineral bathed skins. The hike down the mountain was a slick ride on one foot while crouched in the easy parts, and treacherous ice in the flatter areas.

I thought my trip was still going on as a loud buzzing got near deafening and I looked up to see the purplish blue wires coursing up and down the mountain with an eerie ionic glow. Sean saw me looking and said "Isn't that a trip?"

"You mean it's real?" I asked.

"Yeah, freaky huh?"

I thought about the strange effects all of that electromagnetic energy must be having on my brain, nervous system, and body...no worse than standing under the same power lines in a city...the thought made me shudder.

I tried valiantly to stay awake on the trip home, but sleep kept catching my eyes. I would wake up apologizing for not being a good late night passenger. Sean didn't care.

He dropped me off and I crawled into my bus and promptly fell asleep.

Hunted in Acme: Real or Memorex?

Shortly after George Hush got busted for stealing parsley, a friend of mine gave me some LSD soaked sugar cubes.

I figured it would be good to get away from everything for the weekend and knowing the trauma George was enduring after his bust, I asked if he'd like to come along. Part of the reason George had been caught shoplifting was because he had blown his knee out jumping around on a pogo stick. So he hadn't been able to run when that hand clamped down on his shoulder.

We loaded our gear into my bus and drove out to the boondocks. A small town called Acme, Washington. There was a free campground with a nice little creek running through it. As we pulled in we noticed that there was a large number of what looked like permanent residents.

Most of them giving us dirty looks as we drive up in a VW. From this, we surmised that we just might have wandered into a camp full of rednecks. We ignored them and set up our camp a good distance from anyone else. We were up on a hill, having a good view of the rest of the camp with a thick-forested hill behind us.

We started a fire and consumed our sugar cubes as the sun disappeared. For about an hour or so, things went as they usually do with LSD. I had a conversation with a slug, George was tripping on his ex-girlfriend, and the fire held our interest. The trip was pretty intense and so I brought out some white sage to mellow things out. Many people believe white sage brings about a change and acts as a cleanser of negative energies.

The sage helped and as we both began to mellow out the first gunshot rang out.

I looked at George and asked, "What was that?"

"An unnatural pause," he replied.

Suddenly we heard a woman screaming and a baby crying. It sounded to me as if she were yelling at someone for shooting in the camp and waking her child. She was interrupted by seven or eight more gunshots. She and the child were completely silent. I looked to the right of our camp and saw a head in the bushes, watching us. I motioned to George who looked over and saw it to.

"What the hell? Who was that?" he asked. I didn't know. The person disappeared.

A few moments later the guns began ringing out again. The sound was somehow different than before. I looked over the hill and saw four men, including the one who had been spying on us, firing their guns in our direction. George stood up and yelled at them.

"Hey, we're up here, there are people up here!" The firing increased in intensity.

"We got to get out of here man," I said to him. We zigzagged our way slowly with George's bum knee. Not far into the hills we found a fallen log surrounded by thick ferns that we lay underneath.

We covered ourselves with ferns and waited as gunfire continued and voices called out

“We’re gonna get you!” and humans bayed like hound dogs. The rednecks were searching through the woods for us.

We had left camp suddenly and had no weapons of any sort. Just a nail George was using as a button to hold up his pants. We decided if one of them came upon us, I would take them down and George would stab the nail into their throat. We would then have a gun. This madness continued for about an hour and then we heard more trucks arrive, bottles began to break, and drunken fights broke out.

Finally we heard the trucks all depart and we snuck down to our camp, five hours after leaving it. We quickly packed up and drove back to Bellingham.

I called the police to report the incident and they told me it was out of their jurisdiction referring me to the county sheriff, the county sheriff referred me to the State Parks Service, who in turn referred me to the Forest Service, who in turn told me they would look into it. The same night four campers were shot in a campground about 35 miles north of us in Canada.

To this day, George and I aren’t sure exactly what happened in Acme. We’ve been back there and found bullet holes in trees and both of us agree that everything we remember was real despite the acid trip we set out on.

Queer Eye for the Fisherman

My pack was nearly a hundred pounds because of my drenched gear. I'd imprudently set up my tent the night before in a slight hollow in my friend's backyard. It seemed like a good idea until a sudden downpour covered the ground with two inches of water.

As I walked I picked up a stick, some wires, a piece of cardboard, and a bungee cord from the side of the road. I pulled out my black marker and scribbled Seattle onto it. I wired the cardboard to the stick, jammed the stick into a hole in my pack, and continued to thumb my way north.

My first ride got me to the on ramp In Oregon you can hitchhike on the Interstate. I walked to a good spot, set my pack down, held up my sign, and waited. I was surprised that so many VW buses passed me by. It was about thirty minutes before someone stopped. The bearded man opened the pickup's passenger door and Grateful Dead music streamed out.

"Get in, I'm going to Beaverton but have to make a quick stop in Salem. My names Jerry."

He had to clear a ton of garbage from the seat in order for me to fit in.

"I barely saw your sign; I'm going at least to Portland. I can use the company."

He looked at me said "What the hell, I'll never see you again" and started his tale.

His wife was sleeping with one of his buddies. He said he really didn't mind too much because he hadn't slept with her for five years because he wasn't attracted to her. He hadn't cheated on her, but they had a 1-year-old daughter by in utero pregnancy.

He had started shooting dope with the guy who was sleeping with her, then she got into it, and now she was sleeping with the other guy. He kept saying how he felt bad about it all but he was mad about it too.

He asked me what a good business would be to get into. Internet Porn was what I suggested to him. He drove me into Portland where I took the bus to The Triple Nickel, a favorite pub, and wondered where I would end up sleeping.

I put back a couple of Pabst Blue Ribbons and engaged in some idle shit talking at the bar.

The guy next to me asked me to buy him a beer. I bought him a PBR. The bartender brought me one too. She had been taking good care of me all night and I'd been tipping her accordingly. Now she was tipping me back.

I winked and thanked her. The guy next to me, Jimmy, was a muscle bound fisherman just out of jail. He told me about all his different women. Told me about his buddy's gambling habits. Thanked me for the beer and said "What can I do for you?"

"Got a place to stay?" I asked.

“No, sorry man, I’m crashing at someone’s place.”

“Does it have a porch?”

“Yeah, you could crash on the couch on the porch.”

After I ran out of money, we cruised back to Jimmy’s friends house. The friend was named Tony and he wasn't there when we arrived. Tony it seemed was very particular about his stuff. He might let me stay, they told me. I was drunk and exhausted and laid down pulling my hat over my eyes.

A younger guy who was there was upset at me being there. “Tony’s gonna freak man, he’s gonna freak when he sees this hobo laying here.” I opened my eyes and put my boots on and was about to leave when suddenly Jimmy said, “ Ah bullshit, you can stay, it’s Tony’s house, but I call the shots. Come inside.”

Inside, I lay down on the living room floor watching professional wrestlers on Tony’s TV with my head on my pack and started to doze. The beer and the road can wear you out. I heard Tony come in. He was Filipino. He was suspicious as I was introduced. He was queer as a three dollar bill.

Tony asked me a lot of questions about where I was going and what I was doing. None of them seemed to get that I was hitchhiking for fun. Tony seemed concerned and worried!

Tony was very mother hennish. He asked me to go to the store to get beer with him. We got a twelve pack and he asked me in the car “Are you gay?”

“No.”

“Well I am. And Jimmy, my boyfriend, he’s bisexual. Is that okay with you?”

“Sure, I think everyone should sleep with who they want to. I do...”

We went back to the house and then it was obvious. Tony and Jimmy were slapping each others asses and massaging each others heads. They kissed and flirted. It was funny because Jimmy would continue to try to be this tough fisherman jailbird while he was playing bitch to Tony. They went to bed and the rest of us crashed out on the couches in the living room.

The next day, Tony gave me cereal for breakfast, insisted that I take some vitamins, bought me a pack of smokes and dropped me off at the interstate. He gave me his phone number and said to stop in the next time I was in Portland and we’d all go bowling. He was an incredible sweetheart of a guy.

I walked over the Columbia River, also crossing the imaginary line that separates Washington and Oregon. The Columbia felt more impressive than the state line.

Jesus Loves Selectively

I sat with my sign at the ramp. No one stopped. A man began to walk up to me.

I smelt Jesus all over him. Big smile. “Hi. How are you today?”

I thought to myself, I don’t want to be preached to but I want a ride, so I said, “Another Glorious day in God’s Creation, Brother.”

“I was hoping to talk to you about Jesus “

“Oh Jesus is a good friend of mine. I was hoping to talk with you about him.”

“Well can I ask you, what would you say if you died and appeared at the gates of salvation?”

“I guess I’d ask God to let me in because I’ve always tried my best to live according to he and his son’s works. I’d say I sure want to be with Jesus cause I love him so much.” (Would this bullshit work?)

“Great can I pray with you?”

“Can you give me a ride?”

“We’re packed full, but can we pray together?” Crap. It wasn't going to work.

“Sure, but lets be quick, I don’t want to miss any cars going by.” I almost told him to go fuck himself, but instead, joined him in a quick prayer to Jesus asking him grant me a quick ride. To my surprise, that prayer worked, because he, his wife, and his five-year-old daughter made room for me to get in.

Thank you Jesus.

I kept throwing a “The Lord” or some Jesus stuff in and it seemed like he went out of his way to stay off the subject of religion. He was a 'planter' for some Baptist church in Texas. They apparently felt that we don’t get enough of a chance to know Jesus in the Northwest so they’re sending colonists to plant churches in the godless Northwest. The whole concept of religious Christian settlers made me think of Jerusalem and Palestine. Dear Jesus please save us from your followers!

The planter knew a ton about nuclear power generators, fiber optic cable, and handed me one of the sweetest apples I’ve ever eaten and I couldn’t help but think about poor old Adam and Eve doing the same thing.

They dropped me off just North of Tacoma at another rest area. My next ride was a middle class white guy driving a nice car. He was pretty normal except that he identified himself as working for the state government in Olympia.

He was a State Representative. He asked me if I minded if he drank while he drove. I said, “No, as long as we don’t crash.” He explained about the radical protests going on in Olympia to me. The takeover of Democratic Headquarters by Anarchists. He explained the whole thing real accurately. That people

were upset that Al Gore's stock included shares in an oil company that is running the native U'Wa people off their land in South America and people took over the office because of it.

He dropped me off in downtown Seattle near Westlake Center. I heard chanting and shouting down the street and walked to see what was up. Anti- Israeli protestors were demanding that the violence stop in the Palestine.

Banners reading "Stop killing our Children" and "Stop Israeli Violence" flew high. About thirty police and maybe fifty protestors were present. Lots of bystanders looked on. I briefly considered letting them know that the world would end in 3 ½ years if peace came, but they didn't seem to want to listen to anybody so I walked on.

Spaced Out on a Train from Redding to Seattle

Brian had smashed his thumb with a hammer and to relieve the pressure from the blood vessel he had crushed he took a soldering iron and tried to burn a hole through his thumbnail. He was in more pain than ever, having stopped short of his goal. Finally his friend John's badgering had Brian in the kitchen holding his hand on the counter while John heated up a needle with an acetylene torch to red hot while holding it in a vice grips.

We gathered around like hungry kids at a feast and watched hoping for blood to squirt out in a stream of gruesomeness. John was quick, putting out the torch, setting it down, sipping his beer, and poking the needle with precision into and through Brian's thumbnail. There was no squirting blood though.

John showed us the scabbed up scar from where he and Brian had branded him with hot steel in an attempt to create a raised cube of scar tissue to build upon with tattoo ink. They had a jar full of morphine tablets that they handed around to everyone. A few people declined but I thought "What the hell" and popped a few in my mouth. I put a couple more in my pocket for the train trip. They dropped me off at the station about fifteen minutes before the train arrived.

I paid my fare to the geezer conductor, took another morphine tablet, and waited for the sun to rise through the snow capped landscape. As the world became gray the details emerged. A 77 Ford truck buried halfway up its orange and white stripes, a rickety shed, weather beaten and leaning heavily to one side against a backdrop of the black waters of the Sacramento river and the pine trees springing up from the snow along its banks.

A wooden bridge stretching across the river with a three-inch blanket of white covering it evenly. I sat on the train spaced out of my gourd with no sleep and twenty hours of rail trip ahead of me. I thought how nice it would be to get a blow job in one of the larger than usual handicapped bathrooms on the train.

The snow had that sulfur gray color in the predawn light that stood in stark contrast to the rocks, boulders, and trees while the water added motion in black and white rapids and swirling eddies. The sky, a semitransparent gray wanting to be blue and maintaining a somber watch for a time at least.

At times the tracks curved ahead of us and I would see the engine and cars chasing each other like so many silver bullets from a giant machine gun. The light was refracted from everything to my retina and cornea and then translated into these beautiful gray pictures full of nothing but the absence of color.

The red light on the front of the train would sometimes appear on a new outside curve or we would pass a snowed in green cabin with a ladder propped crookedly so that children could climb onto the single story roof and leap into the drifts around the sides.

A white horse in a whiter field and an endless stretching of split rail fences that only end for one-way bridges and then a myriad of tracks being switched. Freights lining up. I always searched for bums but figured it would be real cold for anyone in a box or tanker car.

I needed sleep, but instead I decided to take two more morphine tablets. The picture of snow surrounded boxcars dampened my determination to freight hop, at least for now. I abandoned my seat and claimed the corner chair in the sightseeing car, hoping a pretty girl would find her way to me.

A grey haired professor in Russian history and literature at SFSU sat next to me. We started talking about Chekov, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and Gorky. Her intellect, insight, and manner charmed me into a joyful acceptance of the too long ride ahead and the sleep I had managed to completely miss.

I started feeling much better as the ecosystem changed around us and the pines emerged from the snow that littered the shores of the many lakes the train took us past. Catherine, my new Russian friend, was excited about the snow. Like a schoolgirl. I thought to myself that perhaps she was my guardian angel, come to help me figure things out. A woman with silvery hair. Regardless, my confusion disappeared and I began to feel whole again.

The train had stopped for several hours outside the town of Klamath. It's brick and old facade buildings looked as inviting as the tiny tavern with three snow covered pickups in its lonely parking lot. People on the train began to wake up as I wandered back to my seat and I couldn't help seeing the beautiful girl lying across from me sit up and look over at me. I needed sleep.

My lungs were paying severely for the past four days of heavy and extended smoking. Each deep breath resulted in a lunge cough that allowed a deeper deep breath than the last. Finally, I made it to the handicapped bathroom below to pee and continue coughing. I decided to increase my dosage taking three more of the tiny morphine tablets. I let them dissolve in my mouth and then took a swallow of coffee.

I ate the last four morphine pills a few minutes later. I was enjoying an ethereal feeling from them. My real hope was to find a rabble-rousing ass kicker to take pills with me and buy me drinks. I read the girl's palm and enjoyed the half hour or so we spent together before she said good-bye and went to join her boyfriend. She had responded easily to my touch and I fought the urge to reach out and stroke her hair and face as she stood up to go. I liked that her nose was a little too big and her smile a little too perfect. But then, I'd already seen that her future was not to be mine in her palm.

I drank a beer and felt my stomach begin doing flip flops. I was worried because of all the mixing and matching of substance that I had been doing for the past twenty-four hours. Sleep came despite my worries. I considered how tired I felt. It was only thirty-four hours of being awake and alert but I was beat. I curled up into the fetal position on my seat in the coach car and fell asleep as we made our way to Portland.

A beautiful young girl stopped me as I passed her seat and asked if I wanted a flyer. Then she held up a Chai Tea bag and rushed to the dining car. Her name was Brook and she was 18 and fabulous. I went to the dining car, bought a whiskey, and joined her.

She noticed that the attendant didn't lock the supply cupboards and told me that if he left we could steal something. He did, moments later. She jumped up, opened the cupboard, and tossed me a couple of bottles of tonic water. She then closed the cupboard and sat down telling me "It's not what you take, it's how you do it." This girl was terrific, but she was 18 and I was almost 30.

She said "You're totally older than me, but we should get together and do something." I got off the train in Seattle and crossed the street to the bus station where a fellow vagrant offered me some of his beer for a cigarette. I got on the bus and watched momentarily as a bitter old woman tore into some working guy who had holes in the knees of his jeans. She asked him if he had an excuse for being in his mid 30's and such a loser at which point I was forced to ask her if she had a reason for being mean and

bitter to a man she didn't know.

When she got off the bus, the guy looked to me like he wanted to thank me so I said, "Some people want to punish every man for the injustices some men have done against them." He nodded gratefully and I continued to look out the window at the snow covered Seattle landscape.

The Dogcatcher Cometh

“Where’s your leash?” the dog catcher asked me in a belligerent tone.

I never bothered paying the \$50 to license my dog with the city of Seattle. She had all of her shots. She was spayed. She minded well and didn’t run away. Besides, she had a tag with her name and my phone number on it in case.

I held up the Frisbee smiling. “She’s never more than a foot away from this,” I told him. I tossed it so he could see how good a dog she was.

“Is that dog licensed?” he asked, again belligerent.

“Of course she is,” I replied. “See, I have doggie bags too!” I’d brought a pocket full of plastic grocery bags to pick up her shit.

“I’m going to have to write you a ticket for not having her on the leash,” he told me with a smile on his face. “And if she’s not wearing a license, I’ll need to take her in until you can come with the proof of it.”

“Oh, give me a break...are you serious? You’re going to expose my dog to all those diseases and write me a ticket? Come on, have a heart.”

“Are you going to interfere with a Seattle Law Enforcement Officers duties? Should I call the police?” He loved the fact that he was an officer of the Law.

“Yeah, you better call em you fat old fuck ‘cause there’s no way YOU are gonna catch either me or my dog. Get over yourself TJ Hooker.” I couldn’t believe it as the words came out of my mouth. This guy would probably kill my dog now. We had to run.

I bolted into the woods and through the park. I saw him driving his truck around and intentionally ran the opposite direction from the safety of my bus. Shakra was beside me, loving this new game. We jumped over hedges, cut through alleyways, and still the dogcatcher’s truck was behind us. He knew these streets all right.

I saw two garbage trucks blocking both lanes of the road ahead. Here was my chance. The drivers were having a little joke. I ran between them and cut left once I was out of sight of the dogcatcher. A short run up a hill and through a rhododendron put me in my friend Bill’s yard. I knocked on his door, out of breath.

Bill answered the door and I barged in with the dog.

“What’s going on? Oh, hi Shakra.” I’d woke him up. “You gotta let us hang out for a while man, we just ditched the dogcatcher and he’s combing the streets for us.”

“You ditched the dogcatcher?” He was laughing.

I told him the whole story while he brewed a pot of coffee. He loved it. He put disguises on both Shakra and me and made us hang out an hour before he drove us back to my bus. We were fugitives from the law, my dog and me.

It got dark and I started a fire. The cold was coming on. I took the dog for a long walk through the neighborhood hoping the dogcatcher wouldn't be out after dark.

Airport Crime

I had to pick George Hush up from the airport at 11:58. I took a shower and got dressed. I wore a black suit so I would look corporate but ruined the effect by wearing my old hat. I looked like a petty thief or a conman. I set out to Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

When I got to the airport I checked out the baggage claim area then took a walk up to the lost and found. I wanted a black parka. I told the lady that I had left my coat in the Delta section a couple of days before and described the coat I wanted. She went back and looked. "All I found is this black fleece," she said.

"That's the one!" I lied and then joked about being forgetful while putting on my new coat.

George got off the plane. He was one of the few people who weren't already talking on their cell phones. Most of them seemed to be attempting to find the perfect pose for a sophisticated television commercial. Trying to impress the crowd with their importance. George looked like a mobster in his shiny black leather coat. We shook hands.

"Hey, I met these real kind folks on the plane and they're going to Anchorage and have a long layover can we take em to a mall or something?"

"Yeah, no problem. You got bags?"

He introduced me to his new friends. They lived deep in the interior of Alaska. They sort of messed up my plan, but I always give a ride to folks if they need it and I can. We all went to baggage claim where George got his bag and I got a suitably corporate bag of my own. The girl sort of freaked out when she noticed.

"My god, you're stealing someone's bag. Put it back"

"What? We just met, what are you implying?"

"Put it back." She whispered.

"I can't believe you'd even imply that" I said. "Are we ready?" I pulled out the handle and wheeled my bag behind me.

George walked next to me. "That's crazy."

"Yeah, pretty crazy" I said.

"You," he laughed, "You're crazy."

Once we got in the car, the girl was the first one to unzip the bag. Her boyfriend let out a yell.

"All right! You got a video camera."

They inventoried everything out loud. Lots of tooth whitening products, skin products, a few porn mags, and the video camera. The girl started feeling guilty and started to make light like we could go

back and get lots of stuff and take it to the pawnshop. She gave me a karmic warning with a story about how she stole and it came back to her. I laughed and told her that I fully expected to lose all of my possessions. We dropped them off at a mall so they could see a movie and then George and I went to breakfast. We sat at a table where the sun was keeping us warm. The waiter kept asking us if we wanted him to close the blind, we kept saying no, and finally he closed it halfway and said “otherwise its in my face.”

It was near Halloween and George needed to go to the fabric store to get material for his costume. He was going to be Mr. Hanky, the Christmas Poo, a giant turd that spreads Christmas cheer. George even had fart spray. Leave it to George to spray fart spray in his own bedroom. About 10:00 PM the whole gang showed up. Tom, the spaceman, Mike, the leprechaun, Evelyn the peacock, Andie as old topless Bo-Peep, George as Mr. Hanky, and me as a Zombie Detective.

The zombie detective was out of money and wanted to avoid going to a bar, after all there were free drinks waiting at the party, but the girls were insistent on stopping by Le Chat Noir for a couple of drinks. My friends don't live like millionaires, but they like to live it up by going to their favorite semi-fancy bar once in a while. It was always the same and always a little bit of a shame on my empty wallet and on George's this time. George covered my three whiskeys. I loved that place.

Little Joe finished washing dishes in the kitchen and the whole staff joined us at the bar. We were regulars.

“Hey, guess what?” Little Joe came up and put his arms around George and me. “ I finally told my family I'm gay...by e-mail. I sent it to my mom and she forwarded it to my dad and brother.” The girls had to keep telling him to leave us straight boys alone.

We all got in cars and set off for the party where we parked on the street and smoked cocaine. Suddenly things were kicking up.

“Hey, didn't we party in a hot tub a while back?” the bartender recognized me.

“You know we did. Did you catch any heat for that?”

A bunch of us had drank and smoked out in a hot tub at a house he had been watching. The owners of the house were away on vacation. A very drunken hot tub party. We made use of their gourmet kitchen, their hot tub, their wine cellar, and their liquor cabinet.

“Nah, it turns out they came back two days late and the owners brother had a party after I vacated...he got the heat...how do you like that?” We both laughed.

I tried to let the social lubricant work its magic. It just didn't happen. I kept drinking the huge drinks Andy kept pouring for me. A little later I looked up from my stupor and a cop walked in. He was looking around with a flashlight. I was beyond realizing I was at a costume party. I just saw this cop drinking and dancing with pretty girls and then suddenly pulling his gun out. The horror of a drunken cop waving his gun around really freaked me out. Suddenly I felt the cold steel of the 45 on my forehead, my temple, and under my jaw. I'd had lots of bad experiences with cops. I'd had lots of bad experiences with guns. This just sort of brought everything together. To me, he was a real cop who really wanted to kill me. I simply stood and looked at him as the gun got ready to blast. Then I threw up and walked back to George's.

China Luck

I called my brother about a week into 2001. He was disappointed that I was living in my car.

"It may seem cute at 29," he said, "But it won't be so cute when you're 50." I thought about Aquillo... no he wasn't cute, but he was definitely better than some lonely and jaded stockbroker living in a mansion. At least to me.

"I just don't like the culture we have here." I told him.

He thought for a minute and then said, "You should go to Asia. It would do you good to see how other people live."

I agreed with him, it would be good for me to go to Asia. I'd always had a fantasy to climb Mt. Taishan, a holy Taoist mountain in China. Sure, Asia would be great. Neither of us bothered thinking about how a homeless, unemployed guy manages to travel halfway around the world.

He said it and I agreed with the result being a decision on my part to go to China. If I saved my unemployment checks, I figured I could be in Beijing in early March. I wasn't doing a real good job of saving so far, but I figured once I had my traffic fines paid off, it would be easy.

As I drove to Bellingham the moon was rising over a mountain and being reflected onto a lake. It was a huge oblong yellow disk like a Chinese painting of Tao. I knew it was a good omen and knew I would stop at the casino and win enough to pay off all my fines and give me a head start on the travel money.

"Ah ha! That's how I'll get to China." I inherited an addiction to slot machines from my grandfather. It's easy to rationalize a reason to gamble. I thought about the foolishness of spending half my \$38, but I figured I would only spend \$18 on the dollar slots and then I would leave.

I was doing okay, up to \$39 from my starting \$18 and then I started losing. I stopped at \$23 and figured I should walk out a winner. There was something about the slot machine that told me to get another \$18 and go for it. I lost for three pulls in a row, then hit the double diamond gold and won \$800! Grandpa spent a lot of time in Asia too and I figured he was helping me out.

The first thing I did was to pay off the remainder of my fines. Next I bought breakfast and a Lonely Planet guidebook to China, and started to visit travel agents. It looked like I would need about \$1500 total to make the trip work.

I drove down to the beach and got a little fire going and one of Jesus's reformed heroin addicts came and filled up all the quiet with so much Jesus mumbo jumbo. It seems like Jesus saves a lot of addicts by replacing heroin with himself.

I'd rather see a Jesus freak than a heroin addict any day of the week.

I could hardly believe all my fines were paid off and I still had money towards my ticket. I left the beach with the intention of going to the casino again, telling myself, "I'm gonna win a \$1000 this time." I prepared myself mentally on the ride down. I knew I would win. I played another \$20 in the same dollar slot and about 15 minutes into it, I hit the \$1000 jackpot. The luck of Jesus must have

rubbed off that junkie and on to me. Really, I hit it. It felt so surreal...I knew it was because I'd decided to go to China. I got back to Seattle and called a discount travel agency. Crazy. I had enough to get my ticket the next day and put away \$500 towards the trip. I bought a 6-month round trip open ended ticket to Beijing and a cassette and textbook to help me learn Mandarin Chinese.

I went to the library and used the internet to apply for jobs teaching English in China. I found four and applied to them all. Wednesday I had a response from the New Bridge Language School in Beijing. I was hired. I studied up on China and felt completely whacked on the side of the head. Was this really happening?

Books were beginning to pile in every corner of the bus. I knew that I was leaving for China in three weeks, but five or ten dollars for books seemed much cheaper than thirty or forty dollars in a bar or casino. I had woke up that morning with nearly a ¼" of ice on top of the blankets I'd put over my sleeping bag. The coldest morning of the 2001 so far. Jammed into my shoulder blades was a book I'd picked up the day before *Yankee Hobo in the Orient*.

Something intrigued me about John Patric, the author of the book. I thought he might even be the elusive J.R. Bob Dobbs who founded the farcical Church of the SubGenius. I needed to take my bus to my mothers house in Redding and figured I would drive through Florence, Oregon where Patric had made his home. The combination of the cold and the book prodded me into action.

I was worried that I wouldn't be able to get my visa in time to go to China. Weird ideas of having brownish babies and starting my own race of bums, tramps, and hobos had been going through my head for days. Why not? I had to think of the fact that I might fuck up in China and get executed...so what...?

In my mind, I was a super hero waiting for the right moment to spring upon the unsuspecting world. I was stressed out like a crackhead in a squad car and I had virtually no time to look for Bob Dobbs and Frying Pan Creek. I quested after a warm dry place to keep my books.

I wanted to be a Hobo Joe with a place to go when the road grew too weary. I wanted to be a Vagabond Errant with a space that wasn't invading the space of someone else. I wanted to gain some control over my existence again rather than letting letters, visa's, and money determine my course of action.

Hopalong Tom kept saying he was glad to know me cause when the Chinese cut my head off he'd have a great story to tell.

It was strange to suddenly look at my backpack and realize that that would be hold all of my possessions for the next who knew how long. I laughed when I realized I had timed my departure perfectly to coincide with the end of my unemployment compensation in Washington State.

I got a hold of the Chinese Consulate in San Francisco. The woman and I had big communication problems from the get go. Finally I found out my visa had been sent out to me the day before. All it took was her hanging up on me three times, spelling my name slowly fifteen times, giving her the same information over and over and persistence.

As my grandfather used to say so charmingly "Sweet oil and persistence will get you in a snakes ass." I don't know why you'd want to go there...but if you did...

The drive down the coast was great. I stopped at my Aunt and Uncle's for a day. . My Uncle was proud of his latest achievement. He had been getting liver spots on his head but didn't want to go to a dermatologist. Instead he used sandpaper to sand the spots right off his noggin. His wife told me he appeared at the top of the stairs near the kitchen asking her to help him with one more spot, meanwhile blood was pouring from his head. His eyes swelled in reaction to the cuts or the Neosporin he had smeared on his head. By the time I got there, he had the smooth bald skull I remembered as a child. He was talking about opening a clinic in Mexico.

Breakfast was a weird hodgepodge of dirty jokes, banter, and huevos rancheros. My aunt gave me a sweater before I realized it was my uncles and she hadn't asked. I was putting it on when I saw the look on his face. "Is this your sweater?" I asked.

"Is that your sweater?" He asked back.

Neither of us wanted to answer so we nodded sadly. We knew from experience there was no going back. She always did this. He told me about a picture my cousin once painted for him. He treasured it and a neighbor came by and admired it. As he got home from work, the neighbor was walking out with it and thanked him.

I spent one day in Florence looking for John Patric or his place on Frying Pan Creek, but no one had heard of either of them. A woman in a bar suggested I go to the museum, but it didn't open until the day after the next. I didn't have time to wait. I would have to find out more about Florence, Oregon when and if I returned.

After that it was onward to Redding and back to Seattle. As my plane took off from Seattle, a 7.3 magnitude quake struck the Puget Sound. It shut down the airport for days. I found out about it as I ran past a television to catch my connecting flight from Vancouver, B.C to Beijing, China. I had left just in time and had no idea what the future held in store for me.

Culture Shock Upon Arriving in Peking

Eight weeks before I'd had no money, been living in my car, and had no idea what the future held. Now here I was, Beijing or Peking, as the middle-aged travel agent had informed me it was called within China.

I stepped off the plane and nervously went through customs where I expected to be strip-searched, pulled aside, and cross examined as to my motives for coming here in the first place. It never happened, I was a bit disappointed but I couldn't really explain why I was here anyway. It just sort of happened.

I walked through the airport noting that it wasn't that different from the airport in Seattle and then stepped outside to light up a smoke. It hit me then. An overwhelming feeling that I was lost. A feeling that everything was different. The cars, the money, the people, the language. Everything was so incredibly different.

I remained outwardly calm as I powered through the internal hurricane that swelled within me. I nonchalantly took drags from my cigarette and then walked back inside to the exchange booth where I changed \$200 US for about 2000 Yuan.

The taxi drivers were bee lining for me. They sensed my confusion and like hungry wolves circled the exit closest to wherever I stood. I could feel them watching me. Waiting to charge me too much to go someplace I didn't want to go. Maybe that was the problem.

I'd won nearly \$2000 in the casino eight weeks before. I'd been riding a cloud and the jackpot hit, triple double diamond on a two-dollar slot machine. I found a round trip, 6-month, open-ended ticket for \$575. I bought it on the spot.

Over the time before my plane left I arranged a visa, located a job teaching English that I wasn't sure I wanted, and wrapped up all my possessions and personal affairs. I'd never really bothered thinking about what to do once I arrived. I had a Lonely Planet guidebook I'd meant to look at on the plane, but the earthquake that rocked Seattle two minutes after my plane left had sort of shocked me as I ran to my connecting flight in Vancouver, BC. I'd only had long enough to see massive damage on the television screen as I ran to catch the plane.

I stepped back outside trying to look like I knew where I was going. I saw a number of white college students getting into a van and decided to see where they were going.

"Hey, you guys part of a tour?" I could feel how pale my face was and sense my own quivering voice.

"We're studying at the University." It was a skinny blond American kid who replied. The rest were loading their bags in the van. "What about you?"

"Well, I'm not real sure. I just sort of got on the plane and am not sure what to do now. How far is Beijing from here?"

"I don't know, let me ask the teacher...hey, what do you mean you just got on the plane...didn't you know what you'd be doing here?" The kid had a weird expression on his face. I swallowed and shifted my fedora to the back of my head.

“It was sort of a sudden decision and now I feel...well, I feel sort of lost. It’s a real weird feeling. I guess this is what they call culture shock.” I swallowed and tried to look carefree.

Several of the other students were gathered around now. They listened and one pretty hippie girl turned to a Chinese man who was helping them load their bags.

“This is our teacher,” she told me “Maybe he can help you.”

I began to feel very uncomfortable, too much attention. “All I really need to know is where to catch the bus that takes me to Beijing, I mean Peking.”

The girl laughed “Everybody calls it Beijing now. You catch the bus right over there. It should be about 15 yuan.”

“Uh, thanks,” I said. I started to walk away but the blond boy stopped him.

“Hey, you can take this guidebook and map I brought with me, I don’t think I’ll need it as much as you.” He held out one of the fancy Berlitz City packs. I took it and said thanks and then attempted a halfheartedly brave “See you in the city sometime,” and walked back inside the airport to look at the map.

It looked like the airport was a good distance from the city. I waited hoping the strange tight feeling in my guts would disappear, but when it didn’t I grabbed my pack, walked outside, and got on the bus handing the 15 yuan to the Chinese girl who was taking fares.

I was still lost but it felt better to be heading somewhere, anywhere. I didn’t know where to stop and look for a hotel, I didn’t want to pull out the map and announce how lost I was to everyone, so I looked out the window at the ox pulled carts and giant fields of rice. It was like I’d stepped into some movie, except I was here.

I decided to get off at the third stop once the bus reached the city. Beijing has more than 15 million people and there was just as much chance I’d find a hotel at the third stop as the first or the thirtieth. The third stop came and I stepped off. The light was bright to my eyes. The buildings were so tall. It was bright, but the February day was cold. I bought a pair of sunglasses for 10 yuan and looked at myself in giant windowpane reflections for nearly a quarter hour before I realized I’d bought bright purple glasses with huge rims.

I took them off and braved the light. Fancy hotels loomed several blocks ahead and I made my way towards them trying to figure out where Tienanmen Square was. I stopped in a small public space and pulled out a map.

Two of the millions of Chinese men in suits noticed me and came to assist. They spoke no English and my Chinese was limited to “Ni hao” so not much was accomplished except I had my first encounter with the typically messy haired, dark suited, cigarette smoking, Chinese worker and lost some of my fear of being mugged or kidnapped.

The two guys were great. They looked at the map, they pointed, they laughed, but finally I had to just pretend I got it and walk away towards the big hotels.

I checked the price on the first two and they were about \$100 US per night. Way beyond my budget. I figured I would spend \$50 the first night. I finally found a room at the Jinghua Gardens Hotel for 400 yuan (exchange at the time was about eight yuan for one US dollar), exactly my price. It was a plush place. I quickly locked myself in my room and dug out the Lonely Planet and the Berlitz City pack to determine where I was and what I would do next.

I looked out the window for landmarks but only saw tarp covered ruins right below my room. A moment's looking showed that the ruins were fully inhabited. I took off my coat and then searched the desk drawers for stationary with the address on it. Having found that I used the Berlitz map to determine that I'd found a hotel just a half mile east of Tienanmen Square and the Forbidden City. I had arrived, but what was I going to do now?

Climbing the Great Wall

The sun had yet to rise, but the pre dawn light was bright enough to show thousands of people doing Tai Chi exercises in an eerie slow motion. I wanted to join them, to practice the Tai Chi with them.

Instead I watched while a small fear inside me told me again and again that I needed a private space to concentrate. I recognized the fear for what it was. I just didn't do anything about it. And so, more and more days went by without me doing my exercises because I couldn't find a place where no one was watching me. After all, this was China, and I was a white foreigner. Everyone watched me.

The line of reasoning made me laugh as I looked out at people of all ages moving slowly. Some had swords, some had brooms, and some simply walked backwards with careful precision in an attempt to shed some of the negative karma they had gathered by walking forward in life each day. This was the last place that I should feel shy about doing Tai Chi, but I didn't want to be a spectacle. The Chinese stared at me enough without giving them any special reason.

It was disconcerting those first few days. The way people had simply stared at me as if I were some sort of ghost. After the first score of encounters I recognized a word that seemed to indicate me "Lao-wai." The Chinese would stare, one in the group would sing song "Lao-wai" and the rest would laugh, while continuing to stare at me. The word seemed to hold a certain contempt. Most of the actions of the Chinese towards me, in fact, seemed to hold that same contempt.

As the sky lightened, the benevolent face of Chairman Mao looked down upon the people from where it was painted on the outer wall of the Forbidden City. A soldier appeared next to me and indicated that I should move to an area a good distance away. I didn't ask any questions, taking the order from the tall youth in a perfect uniform.

I had heard that the soldiers in Beijing had to be six foot or taller. I'd wondered where they found so many tall Chinese, but it seemed they grew em big in the north. The regulation seemed to accomplish its purpose, because as a visitor, I was impressed and intimidated by the physical size of the military. I'd thought I might be tall in China, or at least average height. Not in Beijing.

A flag platoon marched out with perfect timing and precision. Other soldiers pushed and prodded a select group of lucky civilians into a platoon position of their own. The civilians squirmed and wiggled in undisciplined contrast to the soldiers as the Chinese national anthem began and the flag was slowly raised. It was easy to believe that China was the master of the world as the ceremony unfolded in the city of giants.

A giant flag, on a giant pole, raised by giant soldiers in a square of nearly a mile, surrounded by giant gates, temples, buildings, and more than 15 million people. The thousands of people doing their exercises stood at attention while the flag was raised. A final burst of martial majesty ended the daily proclamation of Chinese greatness and the daily business of making money began.

As I walked through the square to the bus terminal, I was approached by dozens of vendors selling everything from postcards to the gaudy Chairman Mao lighters that lit up and played Chinese music. I turned them all down with a firm "Bu yao, xia xia." No, thank you. The vendors and merchants almost never called me lao-wai until I had passed them. I wanted to find out what it meant. Lao-wai.

I walked through the pedestrian tunnel that led from the square to the other side of the gigantic streets that circled it. Circled the square. Everything was so god damn big here, even the geometry.

“Badaling, Badaling...Hey, you go Badaling?” The street hawkers were savvy to why a white person shows up at the bus station so early. The reason could only be to take a tour of the Great Wall. I didn't really want to go to the Badaling section though, I had heard that Badaling had been completely rebuilt by the Chinese government. Simatai was the area that had been recommended to me. It was there that people got the experience of “walking the wild wall.”

“Bu yao, xia xia,” I told them “Simatai?” at which point they would generally walk away calling me lao-wai. Nobody at the bus station seemed to be going to Simatai. All the special tourist buses were going to Badaling. I might have guessed it would be like this. I'd asked one of the many English speaking art students where I should go to get a bus to the Great Wall. She brought me there and told me to come back in the early morning. I should of known she would point me to the section most tourists went to.

The buses left at 8 AM and I waited until 7:45 before resigning myself to seeing the “new” section of the wall. The important thing was to get to the wall and climb it. I had to do that if I wanted to be a hero. That was what the art student had told me. She explained that Chairman Mao had proclaimed that any person who wanted to be a hero, must climb the great wall. Every Chinese Emperor, Sun Yat Sen, and Chairman Mao himself had all climbed the wall.

And now, as soon as the tourist bus got me there, I would climb the wall too. I felt silly and serious thinking it. I would be a hero.

The bus finally filled up. Everyone on board was Chinese except for me and a European looking couple in stylish jackets with wolf fur lined hoods. I had on a beat up army coat...not very stylish at all.

I stared out the window as the bus took us from the city. It was an extremely quick transition from masses of humanity to rolling countryside hills and water filled fields. I was mesmerized looking to see how different everything was from the Pacific Northwest of the United States.

I heard the whispered exclamations of the Europeans several seats behind me. “Mon Dieu, C'est Fantastique...C'est tres belle!” The woman had a lovely voice made more so by the Parisian accent. I snuck a peek back at her. She was beautiful. I noticed the large diamond wedding ring on her hand wondering if I could have such a beautiful wife if I could afford such a giant gem.

An hour later, the bus made it's first stop, Juyong Pass. One moment we were winding through green hills looking at farms and villages and the next we were pulling into a huge parking lot and seeing the serpentine architecture of the wall winding up and away in two directions. It was breathtaking. It seemed to go straight up and just kept going on and on as far as the eye could see.

The bus came to a stop and the woman who was conducting the Chinese tour showed me her watch. It was 9:15. Then she wrote on her hand 11:00 AM. “Ni dong?” You understand? She asked me. “Wo dong.” I felt like I had learned the right thirty or so words of Chinese...I just wanted to know the meaning of lao-wai.

I heard her going through the same routine with the French couple but decided to avoid the tourist

formalities of introducing myself, finding out who they were, and exchanging the 'where ya been, what ya dones?.' It was a sort of expected thing that white people should meet each other in China because there weren't too many of us. Overall it was an annoying custom to me, who hadn't come to China to meet white people.

So I bounded out of the bus, bought the ticket that allowed me to climb the wall, and started up the huge stone steps. I had less than two hours to climb and come back down the wall and I didn't want to waste any time. Ours had been the first bus of the day to get there so there was no one on the wall. I looked up and could see empty stairs all the way to the top. It was a long way.

Top was sort of a subjective term anyway because the wall went on for miles and depending upon which section you were on, the elevation varied quite a bit. I picked out the highest guard tower and made it my goal.

I would have to pass three other tower sections in order to reach it and I wondered if I would have the time. I figured an hour going up and that left forty-five minutes to get back down. Five minutes into the climb my leg muscles began to burn. The steps too were giant. Each one a minimum eighteen inches tall. Some of them were more than two feet tall and less than six inches wide. I developed a sidewise stepping action and began to zig-zag up the wall using a crablike motion.

Fifteen minutes after I began I reached the first guardhouse. It was only then I looked back down the immense number of stairs I had climbed. Others were climbing the wall now, they were far below me, but I could recognize the coats of the French couple steadily climbing. A fierce competitive streak burned in me and despite my already aching leg muscles I pushed on, focusing on the next landing, and then the next, and then the next...seeing the second tower getting closer with each series of steps completed. Refusing to look behind me for fear that someone was going to catch up with me and pass me.

Slightly more than thirty minutes had gone by when I reached the second tower. An armed guard boredly looked at me as I huffed and puffed past. I chanced a look down and saw that the Europeans and most of the Chinese had stopped at the first tower. They were sitting, taking pictures, and admiring the only man made artifact that can be seen with the naked eye from outer space, but from the ground.

A few figures trudged further up though; getting closer to me each moment I rested. I cut my break short and set off again.

The distance was shorter to the third tower, but the steps were steeper. My lungs gasped for air as my hands on my legs attempted to ease the frightful burning that occurred each time I lifted them for another huge step. I took frequent breaks during this section and noticed that some of the Chinese were catching up to me and the Europeans had started to climb again.

I pushed myself harder. For some reason I felt that I had to be the first to the top. It was as if I thought the wall would only allow the first person to climb it each day to achieve the hero status I so desired. I would be a hero. I would be the hero.

At the third tower I checked the time. Fifty minutes had gone by. I had fifty-five minutes to climb back down and make it to the bus. My tired body told me it was a good point to turn around. The view was stunning. The Great Wall of China stretching serpentine along hilltops for scores of miles. I snapped a photo of himself with the wall in the background.

I looked down the steps where two young Chinese men had nearly reached my resting point. They would keep going past me. They would pass me up. I had to keep going. The climb to the fourth tower seemed less steep than the last section had been but a little longer. The fourth tower was the highest I could see. If I reached that tower, I would be able to claim hero status. I had to go on. I looked down the steps again and saw the Frenchman nearing the third tower and his wife watching from the second.

I didn't understand this competition I had placed myself in with the Frenchman, but I had to win. The other guy didn't even know he was competing. Well, maybe he did. It felt like he was trying to get as far as me. I didn't mind that, I just needed to be first.

So I set off again. My mind and body wanted to turn back each moment. I checked my watch over and over again realizing I had passed the one-hour mark and should turn back. It wasn't much further though. An hour and five minutes. Almost there. An hour and ten minutes. Just a few more steps...and suddenly I was there.

I was at the top of the Great Wall looking down at the massiveness that is China. Wondering which side of the wall was meant to keep the Mongol hordes out and how many men had stood in this spot before me. From here I could see the dozen buses that now filled the parking lot and the hundreds of tourists who trudged up the mighty steps like ants far below me.

I was the first. I was the hero. And as such I felt magnanimous towards the Frenchman who had reached and passed the third tower and was midway to the fourth. I wanted to share this moment with someone who could understand. I wanted to keep it forever and I realized that by my being at the top when the Frenchman arrived, I would be keeping the feeling from the man who now carried his coat and had a scant thirty-five steps to go before reaching hero status. I decided to share and even though I would have liked to rest a moment more, I began to vault down the stairs two at a time so that the other man could enjoy the feeling I had just been reveling in.

"How was eet?" the Frenchman asked in English.

"C'est fantastique mon ami. C'est fantastique. Au revoir." I leapt down the mountain hoping I would be in time to catch the bus. I passed the man's wife who after a brief rest was continuing on. Not far behind her a Chinese man with a video camera nodded at me and said rather breathlessly "You very fast"

"Thanks..." I continued on. It only took me twenty minutes to reach the bottom. Fifteen minutes after that, the Europeans came down and wandered up to where I was smoking a cigarette.

They stood nearby drinking water and catching their breath as the man with the video camera reached the bottom of the steps. He came up to me and turned on the camera. "Why you climb so fast?" he asked in pretty good English.

I grinned. "Laowai fast. Laowai first."

The man laughed and shut off the camera. "You know meaning of laowai? You speak Chinese?" I shook my head no. "Just a little...what's it mean? Laowai?"

"It mean like old white ghost. You say old white ghost first. Fast old ghost." The man continued

laughing as he walked to the placard describing how the Chinese government had invested such a large amount of money into rebuilding this section of the wall and filmed it so his friends could read it too.

As the rest of the Chinese from the bus reached the bottom, they would speak to each other and point at me. The words they were saying sounded complimentary. They pointed to me, smiled, and said serious sounding words. The way they looked at me, I felt a little like a hero.

The American

(This story had to be told from Genghis Kane's perspective, he related the bulk of it to me over the several days I stayed in Xi'an)

Genghis Kane's Café was small but clean. Kane himself was Mongolian and spoke English with a slight Chinese accent. He had put up pictures on the walls of all the places in the world he wanted to go. The walls were starting to run out of room. So many places, and Kane wanted to see them all.

He carried a couple of Singhas across the room to where the group of six travelers had pushed two of his small tables together. He put one beer in front of a blond girl and the other in front of a slightly fat man with sandy brown hair.

"Cheers," the man said, giving himself away as an Englishman. "Cheers," the girl was English too.

"You are all from England?" He asked, hoping that this wasn't so boring a group as that.

"No," this came from the short dark haired man at the end of the table. He was either American or Canadian.

"But most of us are from England," from the second girl with the large breasts and straight black hair.

"So who is from where?" Kane asked with the engaging smile of the perfect host. He loved running a traveler café. It was like going someplace new everyday, meeting the inhabitants of far off lands. Becoming a bigger person as the world became more understandable.

"The four of us are from England," the blond girl indicated herself, the girl with large breasts, the fat man, and a tall man who kept himself slightly separated from the rest of the group. "Chris is from America and Sasha is German." Sasha had a slight frown on his effeminate face; he was distracted by his own thoughts and looked up at the mention of his name.

"And all of you are traveling together?" Kane knew it wasn't true. It was rare that a group of more than one nationality went anyplace. "No, Kay and I are together. Chris is in the same dorm as us."

"Johnny," she indicated the tall Englishman, "is traveling by himself and Keith and Sasha are also traveling together."

It was about like he expected except for the fat man and the German being traveling companions. Maybe they were a homosexual couple. Kane looked at them with more interest, noting with disappointment that their chairs were further apart than intimacy would indicate.

"We met in Beijing and have been going the same direction. It's convenient but I travel by myself," Sasha explained.

"How long have you been on holiday?" He asked. He could almost guess. No more than two weeks except for Sasha who had a sort vacant look about him that those who are far from home for extended periods tend to share.

"Susan and I have been in China for a week and a half," Kay said in a wonderfully deep voice.

“Just about 2 weeks,” from Chris, the American.

“The same,” from Johnny, the Englishman.

“Two months,” from the fat man, Keith.

“18 months,” Sasha said it in a burst, “18 fucking months. Hey can I get another beer?” He held up his empty bottle. “Wo xiang yao yi ge pieju.”

Kane was surprised. Sasha’s Mandarin was almost perfect. His accent betraying the fact that he had either spent a lot of time in the North or learned Chinese from a northerner.

“Sure. Be right back.” Kane always spoke English in his café regardless of the nationality or language of his patrons. Even if they spoke perfect Mandarin. He stepped through the swinging kitchen door and noticed he was out of Singha. No problem. He walked outside and across the narrow alley to a tiny store where he bought a dozen beers with the money he’d just collected for two.

A minute later when he brought Sasha’s beer from the kitchen, he was surprised to see another ten white people pulling tables together across the room from the first group. The new people were dressed very differently from the first. Their clothes were new, fashionable, and made with very bright colors whereas the first group wore sturdy, dull, utilitarian garments.

“Hey, you got a menu? You speak English? You got some menu’s for us?” He wore a dark blue fleece jacket, expensive looking eyeglasses, and a sneering expression.

“Sure, you want something to drink?” Kane hid his irritation.

“What we want is to look at your menu,” the other people with him seemed uncomfortable with his rudeness.

“Sure, I’ll be right back.” Kane wondered how the two groups would interact. He gathered up his menus and watched as everyone but the guy in the fleece sat down. The fleece man wanted to know the other people. “I’m American.” He said to them. “My name’s Carl. Where are you from?”

“What do you know Chris? It’s one of your countrymen,” Sasha’s tone was mocking.

“Hey you’re American?” Carl focused in on Chris who uncomfortably sipped his beer.

“Yeah, I’m American, but I’m not a big fan, that’s why I left.” It was getting more and more interesting all the time. Kane handed the menus to the group at the second table. Nodding as a few of them asked for beers. “Not a big fan? What do you mean, you don’t like America?” Carl sounded offended and accusing.

“What I mean is I don’t much care for American culture, government, or attitudes and before you tell me to leave it if I don’t like it, I want you to think about where we are,” Kane was as surprised as Carl looked.

“Yeah, well I think it’s the greatest country in the world. I’m an MBA on spring break and me and my

classmates here are visiting China for the next two weeks. It's great to be an American in China. What about you, where are you from?" Carl asked Sasha.

"I'm from Germany and the rest of these folks are from England."

Sasha didn't bother looking at the MBA and moved straight to a different conversation without any sort of segue. "Keith, how did you like Egypt?"

Carl either ignored or didn't understand the snub. "Egypt. Wow. So how do you guys come here? Don't you have jobs? Don't you have responsibilities?" He looked at Chris and then quickly at the others.

"Susan and I both quit our jobs." Kay said.

"I quit my job and sold my house," from Keith.

"I quit my job, too" from Johnny.

"I was a homeless guy who hit the jackpot on a slot machine" from Chris.

Kane looked at him again. There was a stark contrast between Chris's worn wool coat and the bright blue fleece. The attitudes of the two men were even more different. Kane was used to seeing Americans like Carl, Chris seemed less puffed up, less full of himself or his country.

"Come on...gimme a break," Carl said. "You must have had a job. What did you do? How do you get the money to be here? What are you going to do when you get back?"

Carl apparently felt like he had been accepted into the new group. He didn't seem to notice the subtle turning and sliding of chairs as he tried to squeeze in. All six were subtly blocking him out of conversation. He chose a spot directly between Sasha and Chris, who seemed surprised that their thinly veiled insults went unnoticed.

"So how much are you guys paying for a room? We've got these great 5-star rooms at the Hilton for only \$45 a night. Can you believe that? I mean 5-star for \$45! You can't get that in New York."

"Ohhh." Sasha said it in a slightly mocking tone, "You're from New York. Where are you from in the states Chris?"

"The Pacific Northwest," Chris said, "It might as well be another country it's so different from New York."

"Yeah, America is huge," again Carl seemed oblivious to the snub. "So you guys are staying here? How much is it?"

"Well, Keith and I are staying in another place down by the train station. It's 40 yuan a night. Chris and the girls are sharing the dorms here and that's what 30 yuan?" Sasha looked at Chris who nodded.

"And Johnny has a room here by himself for...how much Johnny?" "80 yuan a night." Johnny said it slowly and carefully.

“You three are sharing a room. Wow, kinky. Hey how much is that in dollars? I don’t know how much this monopoly money is worth.” Carl pulled a huge stack of Chinese currency out of the pocket of his fleece.

“It’s about \$5.” Chris said it coldly. “Excuse me.” He got up and left the table. Kane figured he was going to the toilet outside.

“Are the rooms nice? I mean you could get a room for just \$45 at the Hilton. That’s where we’re staying...it’s so cheap.”

“How long are you here for?” Sasha asked him. “Two weeks?” The sneer was obvious in his words. “We’re all staying a little longer so we’re sort of...being careful about how much we spend”

“So here’s what I don’t understand...” Carl ignored his unanswered questions. “I mean, my visa is only good for a month. I don’t understand why the Chinese don’t let Americans and other westerners stay as long as they want. I mean it’s not like some Chinese peasant coming to America. I mean we’ve got money. The Chinese don’t have to figure out what to do with some stupid peasant. They should just let us stay as long as we want.”

“Maybe they don’t want you here.” Sasha indicated the rest of the group sitting around the table but Carl again ignored or didn’t catch the insult.

“Yeah, but why not? I mean, I’m spending a lot of money here. I’m making the economy better. I’ve spent about a thousand dollars and it’s only been a week. Everything is so cheap here. Not like New York where I have to pay \$1800 a month for a studio apartment.”

Chris came back in and sat down, pulling his chair a bit further from Carl’s. Kane brought drinks for the second table and took their food orders. “Do you want anything?” he asked Carl.

“Yeah, do you have any Heineken?” Kane nodded yes and went back across the street to the tiny store.

“80 yuan.” He said when he got back. Carl gave him 100. “Keep the change.” The guy was an idiot, the beer only cost 20 across the street and the Singha were only 10 yuan in the café.

“Did you buy that North Face fleece here?” Kay asked him. “How much was it.”

“Oh no, this is the real deal. I got this at the outlet store in Berkeley. It was \$250 but it’s the real deal, not a rip off like you find here.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty hard to tell the difference with the pirate stuff here,”Sasha said, “Seeing how they’re made in the same factory by the same workers. Good move getting the real thing.”

“Thanks, It’s worth it to pay more for the real deal. I took a special trip to Berkeley just to get this jacket. Why not? I’m going to be making \$100,000 a year after I graduate. Hey what’s the story with all these books?” He got up, much to the obvious relief of Sasha and Chris. “Are they free?”

“No,” Kay explained. “Travelers trade the books they finish for the books here. It’s a straight trade. A book for a book. It’s good because sometimes it’s hard to find a good book when you’re on the road.”

“So all of these are available?” he was looking at a *2001 Let's Go, China* guidebook.

“Everything but the guidebooks,” Kane said, “Those are for my guests to use while they’re here.”

“Great. Hey, I’m going to join my friends now.” Carl moved away from the pleased looking travelers and towards the frowning group of BAs who were now eating the food Kane had just put on the table.

No Chinese food. Hamburgers, french fries, burritos, and soup. Very different from the rice dishes the first group had eaten earlier. None of the MBA’s needed chopsticks for their food; they probably didn’t even know how to use them.

Kane listened to bits and pieces of the conversations going around the two tables. Sasha was telling a story about teaching English in Northern China, Keith talked about fishing in Russia, Johnny and Chris were discussing the mountains they’d climbed the week before, and the two English women were discussing their proposed itinerary for their trip around the world.

At the second table a girl was telling the others how much she missed her parents and her dog. A second was describing the horror of Kane’s bathrooms. “And it was just this horrible pit on the floor, there was no toilet paper, no way to flush it, I mean it was filled with poo. It was horrible. I turned right around and left. No way I’m going to use a disgusting toilet like that.” Kane laughed.

Most of his guests complimented him on the cleanliness of his toilets as compared with others they had seen in China.

“Well, I’m not going to use a bathroom like that.” Carl said. “Why don’t we get a taxi back to the Hilton and have some more drinks there.”

The group seemed to agree and while they finished their drinks Carl pulled a thin book from his pack and walked up to the bookshelves. Kane couldn’t see what book he took but noted that the book he left was a free guide to tourist attractions in Xi’an that was available at most of the upscale hotels.

They paid the bill without question even though Kane had doubled the prices from those on the menu. He’d figured they wouldn’t notice.

They got up and left the room saying pointless goodbyes to the first group who brightened up as they left.

“What a fucking jerk.” Chris was the first to speak. “That’s why I hate my country. People like him. My country is full of people like him. Maybe the reason the Chinese limit visa’s to 30 days is because they don’t like assholes sticking around too long,” the whole group broke up in laughter.

Kane opened a beer and sat down in the seat Carl had left at their table. “I see a lot of people like them in here.”

“Too bad for you,” Johnny told him. “Did you guys catch that bit about America having to deal with Chinese peasants? What fucking arrogance. It’s American pricks like that who come to Europe thinking they can see the whole culture in two weeks. No offense mate,” he motioned to Chris, “but I hate bloody Americans.”

“Me, too,” Chris seemed gloomier than before. “Did you hear him? Asking questions just so he could tell us about his \$100 grand a year job, his high rent, and his \$45 5-star hotel room.”

Keith laughed. “Stupid ass. He could get an even better room for half that if he stayed in a Chinese hotel instead of the Hilton. Hey Kane, how much is a Heineken normally here?”

It was Kane’s turn to laugh. He hadn’t known they had noticed his price gouging. “25 yuan. I’d like to buy you guys a round of Singhas for not giving me away.” They all laughed in appreciation, accepted the beers, and then drifted out by themselves and in pairs.

It was only then that Kane looked to see what book Carl had taken. The *Let’s Go* was gone. That was a \$20 book. The son of a bitch had left a free tourist guide and taken Kane’s only current customer reference book.

Kane was going to get it back. He put the free book in his pocket, locked up the café and hailed a cab, directing the driver to take him to the Hilton.

He looked in the lounge first. A couple of the MBA’s were sitting at the bar, but Carl had already left.

“Excuse me,” he asked the girl who missed her parents. “Do you know what room Carl is in? He left something in my restaurant.”

“Oh, you’re the guy from earlier...yeah, Carl is in room 425. It’s so nice of you to come down here to give him what he forgot. Chinese people are so sweet.” She was drunk, her eyes glazed over in that ‘I’m either going to pass out or throw up’ way.

Kane used the house phone to call Carl’s room. “Hello?” He sounded as if he was already sleeping.

“Hi, this is Kane from the café earlier. You left something at my place earlier and I’ve brought it back to you.”

“What are you talking about?” Carl’s voice sounded nervous. “I have everything. It must belong to someone else.”

“Yes, but you also took something of mine and I want it back.”

“What are you talking about? I didn’t take anything from you.” Anger was starting to mix with the nervousness. “That sign said one book for another book. I only traded books.”

“You took a book that wasn’t there to be traded and left me a free tourist guide. I want my book back.” Kane didn’t have to be the polite host anymore. “If you don’t want to bring it to me, I will be up to your room with the police in a few minutes.”

“You can’t do that. I’m American, that sign said one book for one book. You made the deal. I know my rights.”

Kane laughed, “Your rights? Your American rights? You’re in China, you have no rights except the right to bring my book down to the lounge or the right to go to jail for being a thief. It’s a crime to steal here. I’m pretty sure it’s a crime to steal in your country too. Bring my book to me.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “I’m going to call the American Embassy tomorrow and report this. Now go home before you get in trouble.”

“You don’t seem to understand,” Kane said, “America has no authority here. This is China. I am Chinese. You have my book and I want you to return it...now.”

Another pause. “I’ll bring it down in a minute...just hold on. It’s just a book.”

Kane hung up the phone. The girl next to him tapped his shoulder.

“I’m sure he didn’t mean to steal it, I mean he’s a jerk, but he’s not a thief. He’s rich, why should he steal anything from you? I’m sure it was an accident. “She hiccuped and reached for a Marlboro from her pack on the bar. “You want a cigarette?”

“No, I don’t smoke.” He did, but he wasn’t in the mood to accept anything from these people. It was only a few minutes before Carl came down. His North Face fleece over his bare white chest.

“Here’s your book...” he slammed it on the counter and turned to leave.

“Wait..” Kane picked up his book and held out the tourist guide.

“Maybe the reason us third world peasants limit you to a 30 day visa is because you rich Americans are a bunch of assholes.”

He didn’t wait for a reply but turned and walked outside where a taxi was waiting to take him back to his café.

A Walk in the Park

“Chris...economically, the world has to work on separate monetary systems. If England becomes a part of the Euro, it will lead to an eventual one world currency which will definitely be worth less than either the pound or the dollar are today...”

“I agree Johnny, the one thing that will lock the world into disaster is to have all the economies tied so tightly together that when one has a problem, they all suffer decline...”

It's no easy thing solving the problems of the world, but that's what Johnny and I were doing...at least in our own minds. We were sitting at a table in a Chinese tea house tossing high-minded ideas back and forth.

Occasionally, the ear cleaning man would come close to us and strike his ear pick with a tiny hammer making a high pitched vibrating sound, then catching our attention he would indicate that he would like to clean our ears. Perhaps he was aware that we were not listening to each other, just waiting for a new pause to pontificate.

The ear cleaner had a proud manner that denied the scruffiness of his shoes and clothing. The blooming plum and cherry blossoms which carpeted the peoples park made his office an elegant place. The two of us were polite in our refusals to have our ears cleaned at first, but as the cleaner became more insistent, we became more and more rude.

Perhaps his command of English was strong enough to understand the boorishness of our conversation and he could not understand how two men with good hearing could engage in such snobbery- or maybe he simply saw us as rich potential clients. Either way his golden tools came more and more frequently and finally his dark hands grabbed Johnny's shoulders and began to massage even as the Englishman was beginning a diatribe against the economics of Adam Smith and the fallacy of a free market economy.

By the time Johnny had chased him off, the conversation had shifted to a monologue from me on the value of pornography in a technological society, the need for less morality, and the ultimate good that came from a sexually open worldview.

The waitress brought a second pot of tea and sighed as she heard Johnny begin a long winded appraisal of the need for the Chinese people to be led and how the return of a monarchy or emperorship was the proper method of curing the countries humanitarian record, she moved away quickly.

I agreed and used my agreement to launch a completely new topic on the legalization of narcotic substances and several programs I had heard of which seemed to offer a more enlightened view of addiction...and so it went for two and a half hours. The Chinese people around us were thankful that they didn't understand English if only to avoid the American discussing the need for more privacy and less morality and the Englishman lecturing on the superiority of the parliamentary system.

Dogma chased catma and even though language was the fundamental barrier, the Chinese looked on the two of us with distaste easily picturing a British officer in India and an American aristocrat in Africa despite our casual dress and unshaven faces.

Our assumed Lordly manner was offensive to the Chinese who preferred modesty, decorum, cunning, and ritual to puffed up airs. Finally, much to the relief of the ear picker, who was becoming frantic over our constant refusals to have him vibrate the wax from our ears, we got up and strolled through the park with our hands put behind our backs and our noses high in the air, satisfied that the world would laud us for the great solutions we had worked out for solving its problems.

We continued to talk as we passed the old men playing mah jong in their blue Chairman Mao suits. We paused for a moment as the middle aged women practiced their middle-aged dance moves in the public square. We laughed lightly as we saw Chinese teenagers riding in rusty Ferris wheel cars and having a great time doing it. We felt nervous and edgy when those same teens came down and began to practice their karate moves. But still the discussion carried the same weighty language and high-minded priggishness.

It carried us through the bonsai garden where neither Johnny nor I felt superior enough to take an educational tone and so we admired the ancient tiny trees in silence missing out on what information we might have shared. The light began to fade as we came to a fork in the path. One fork led upward and along a ridge-top while the other skirted the bottom edge, rimming the small lake shore. We chose the bottom path and had only walked a few meters when we heard a noise that made us stop.

“Oh, arrha, ohhh...” the moans sounded as if they were close by... I looked up and recognized the sound as coming from the top of the ridge, the bright sky behind obscuring the figure on the bench in shadow while my eyes readjusted to pick out the details. My mind conjured up images of saving a woman who had been stabbed, helping a sick child, or discouraging a crime. High-minded stuff indeed.

Instead, what I saw when my eyes adjusted was a 15 or 16-year-old Chinese boy lying on the bench doing something... what was he doing? It took a few moments more before I combined the hand motion with the moans and recognized the teenager for the masturbator he was.

“Oh my God...” I turned away but not before I had a moment of sympathy for the Chinese lad’s tiny cock....

Johnny’s eyes were slower to adjust...”What is he doing? Hey..mate...,” he called up to the boy and apparently at that moment saw the masturbation...the boy’s head turned and his eyes met Johnny’s for a moment, but he was too close to orgasm to see the big pale Englishman. He was locked inside the fantasy that had brought him this far. “Good God man! He’s wanking!” The moment of eye contact took away every bit of dignity from Johnny and I couldn’t help feeling low-minded at the filthy image that was imprinted on my brain. Never mind what I’d been saying before.

“Let’s go.....” I said and began walking away.

“Right...” Johnny looked back at the boy who was now sitting up from the bench, “Oh my God, Chris, he’s following us...he’s coming from the bench, “Oh my God, Chris, he’s following us...he’s coming after us!”

A teenage masturbator was coming after us. Neither of us took the time to consider that teenagers in China have nowhere to go to relieve the new sexual urges that grip them. Privacy to masturbate was a thing we overlooked in cultural blindness. With all our high minded ideals and talk, neither the American nor the Englishman considered that the youth was embarrassed at being caught and making a

hasty exit which happened to lie in our general direction but further to the right.

No instead both of us were gripped by a terrible fear and we ran from the park certain that the terrible 15-year-old wanker was after us and by the time we reached the guesthouse we'd already forgotten all the solutions to the worlds problems. Instead we told everyone about what we'd seen in the park.

The Tiger Hunters

I looked through the candlelight and saw the hand reaching out from under mosquito netting. The half bottle of Jack Daniels it held was causing strange amber shadows to flicker in the room. Lightly, I lifted my own netting, captured the proffered bottle, and lifted it to my lips.

“Thanks Mate.” The whiskey was better than good. It was magnificent. The first decent drink we’d had in more than a month. It’s hard to find good whiskey in China and when we saw the dusty bottle in the duty free shop as we crossed into Laos, \$12 American didn’t seem too much to pay for a fifth.

Lao whiskey was about a tenth of the cost, but it tasted like rubbing alcohol with a couple of cigarette butts.

“Chris, do you think there are tigers in Laos?” Johnny asked me in a low whisper.

The room was stiflingly hot. We hid under our mosquito netting, passing the bottle back and forth as the single candle lit the tiny room. The village of Maung Singh was deep in slumber five hours after the mandatory blackout that occurred each evening at 6 PM. The swampy rice paddies surrounding the guesthouse were alive with splashings and croakings however, and sometimes the startlingly loud voice of a gecko lizard would come from within the room itself in a sort of birdsong “gehhhhh-kooooo”.

“Tigers? Sure, I bet there are some tigers here still. They probably come out at night and eat anything foolish enough to go outside the city limits. They probably are out there waiting right now.” I couldn’t tell whether the Englishman across the room was making a joke or whether he were actually as concerned about tigers as he sounded. I really had no idea if there were tigers in Laos, but I doubted it.

“Yeah, seems like I read about some villager getting eaten around here not too long ago... maybe we should shut the window.”

“Can tigers climb to the second floor?” It sounded like a joke, but English blokes are so damn weird to Americans with their high sounding accents and strange cultural traditions, it wouldn’t surprise me if Johnny were actually concerned about a tiger coming through the window. “Shhhh, mate did you hear that? I think I heard a tiger outside?”

“Here,” I handed the bottle under the netting, “You better drink this... it’ll help keep em away.”

“Right! Good Show!” Johnny gulped from the bottle “Hey...did you hear it that time?”

I actually had heard the noise that time...it sounded near and it sounded like...a bullfrog. Maybe it was a tiger though...

“Come on. Let’s go see if we can spot the tiger.” I stepped out of the netting in my boxer shorts and slipped my feet into my boots.” If there’s no tiger we can always catch us a frog.” Funny how a bit of the Southern accent came out when I was pretending to be doing something stupid. Or when I was doing something stupid.

“Frogs? What are you talking about frogs? Those noises are from a tiger...or maybe a few of them... Right! Let’s go check it out.” Johnny donned his tiger hunting uniform of boxers and boots and we

unlocked the door with the tiny skeleton key.
Johnny carried the protective bottle of JD and I carried the thin candle.

An uncontrollable giggle escaped from Johnny and we were trying to keep from waking the other people sleeping in the guesthouse. We tiptoed down the corridor and struggled to keep from laughing as the wooden staircase made noises like some exaggerated Alfred Hitchcock movie set.

Stepping outside we looked to the left and the right. Both directions showed dark fields covered with water and loud tigers huffing and puffing into the humid night.

“Which way?” I decided to leave it to Johnny.

“This way. Follow me.” Johnny stepped into the six-inch mud to the left, then stopped to remove his boots and put them on the guesthouse doorstep. “These boots are too loud, they’ll scare off all the tigers.” I pulled my boots off too. “

Hey, I just remembered something..wait here” Barefoot the stairs made less noise. I stepped back into the room and grabbed one of the half dozen joints I’d rolled earlier after buying about an ounce of Lao weed from a 90-year-old Yao tribeswoman who was selling hand made bracelets, opium, and giant bags of weed. It cost an amazing 70 cents and had us both stoned enough to be drunkenly hunting tigers in our underwear.

Back down the steps and bringing the light to the doorway I found that Johnny had stepped off into the muck a good twenty feet and was creeping further despite the immense dark. “Come on mate...blow out that candle and the stars soon light the way.” I lit the joint and blew out the candle.

“Here...trade me that bottle for this” I handed the joint to my partner and received the quarter full bottle in return. Hitting and swigging we continued further into the ooze with the stars gradually lighting the way.

The noise nearly always stopped as we neared it.

“Tigers are smart,” I said, “They want to lure us away from civilization.”

“Crap...that’s the end of the whiskey,” Johnny hurled the empty bottle out into the dark. It made the expected splash in the expected direction and seconds later a second splash, much closer accompanied by a deep grunt in the opposite direction.

We turned, seeing the large four-legged shape approaching us. It’s large body moving with grace through the mud. We stepped towards the guesthouse and broke into a run, side by side, feeling the pulse pound in our heads, hoping that the beast would allow us to make it back to the safety of our room. Leaving our boots at the front door and tracking mud up the stairs and through the corridor until, finally, we were behind the closed door, locking it, and breathing heavily.

Lighting another joint, Johnny also lit a candle. We were covered in filthy mud with our boxers simply another gray brown patch on our bodies. We looked at each other and began to laugh. We shared stories about the terrible tiger until the false dawn when looking out the window; we realized the horrible truth of our situation.

“It seems that it wasn’t a tiger”, Johnny said blandly.

“Nor a bullfrog,” I replied.

Neither of us felt a need to say more as we looked at the footprints leading into the pigpen outside the window.

Homecoming

(This story was both told and witnessed by me as I stayed at a guesthouse near the hilltribe villages)

Star looked at the tiny girls around her. They were doing their best to look fashionable and appealing. It made her smile at first, before she realized why they went to so much trouble. The tiny ripped t-shirts held with colorful handmade ropes wrapped around the body creating a sort of Paris in the village look. A little girl with a sweet face in a purple t-shirt carrying her baby brother who was nearly the same size as her stopped to readjust him on her side.

“Sabadee” she said when she saw Star standing at the edge of the village. “Sabadee Mai.” You Good. You good, right?

“Sabadee” Star said, hearing the difference between the 6-year-old Lao villager and the 26 year old Bangkok bar girl. “Sabadee Mai.” “Sab-ah-deee.” The girl replied. Her inflection was so high and birdlike. So beautiful. Her tiny brother slept through the whole exchange even as he was shifted on her side.

“Do you know I used to live around here?” Star asked in English.

“You and me are probably related but I look like some exotic foreigner to you. I probably represent everything you dream of..or at least you think I do..” she shuddered again, remembering the day she left her village 17 years before.

The Thai man had driven to the village in a large black Mercedes. It was rare to see any sort of motorized vehicle besides the occasional Chinese tractor. Most of the people in the village came to stand behind the protective gate of the village as the stranger got out of his car, surrounded by three large men in dark suits. Star’s mother had called her inside the hut and done a quick combing of her hair. She took a glass necklace on twisted rope from her own neck and put it around her little girls.

“La korn, kong koi.” Star remembered her confusion as her mother said goodbye. “Where am I going?” she thought. Maybe her mother was going to take a trip. She’d run outside to where the villagers were now surrounding the four Thai men. The important man noticed her immediately as she pushed through the crowd.

“Well, hello little Star. Where did you come from?” She had recognized some of the Thai words but they had been so much harsher than she was used to hearing, even though the tone was gentle. She stopped and looked at the ground. “Sabadee!” She had said softly.

“Five hundred baht for her.” He told the crowd. “Who is selling this child?” She remembered the low murmur that swept through the crowd as he named such an extravagant price for just one child. The other girls he had already bought looked jealously on the new one, their friend, who commanded such a high price. Her value exceeded theirs combined.

She remembered the secret feeling of pride when they told her that on the way to their new home in Bangkok. Her mother had stepped forward and collected the money. Suddenly, the rich woman in the village. And now, here was Star, the rich foreigner visiting the village.

She looked at the girl and tried to remember her mother's name. She tried to remember her own name, her family name, anything besides the name Star which had stuck with her since she left, but all she could pull up was the memory of that last day in her village. Somewhere around here. Somewhere in the Golden Triangle.

A crowd of children was now standing around her. Mostly girls with pretty sarongs wrapped around their waists. The boys stood a bit in the distance...shy of this exotic stranger in jeans and a lace tank top. She smiled and joked with them aware of the harshness of her Thai accent as compared with the low bird sounds they answered in.

"Are you a Thai?" a young boy asked "Are you looking for girls to take to Bangkok? Hey, I'll go get my sisters..wait..." he ran off even as she began to explain.

"I'm Lao. I used to live around here and now I am here to visit and to see if I can find my mom. I don't want to buy anyone. Okay?" When had her voice changed so much? Why did they look at her like she was so strange?

An old woman in a tiny hut looked out over trays of homemade sticky sweets wrapped in pastel colored plastic. Star walked over and bought two handfuls and began to hand them out to grubby little hands frantically reaching for them.

An elder of the village walked up to her. He did not smile. "What do you want?" he asked. "If you are not here to take the children...why are you here?" They were rejecting her. She'd been foolish to think she could walk into a village and be accepted. The past seventeen years had changed her too much to enter this idyllic paradise.

She had changed enough to recognize the squalid conditions that soiled her imaginary Garden of Eden. She saw the untreated cuts on feet and legs and bodies. The ripped clothing was far from traditional, more likely cast offs from backpackers who considered it garbage. There was little beautiful beyond the children who stood around her looking up with wistful eyes. "Will you take me to your city?" a little girl asked her. "My father will let me go cheap. I want to go to the city."

Star closed her eyes. She too had wanted to go, she'd been excited to go, but she had not known the life that awaited her. A brutal life of sex, drugs, and leering old men staring at her through plexiglass and then leading her to dimly lit hotel rooms.

The money she received from the Thai's had been barely enough to feed herself. Locked up like an animal most of the day and only allowed to leave once she was so hooked on heroin that they knew she would return. Finally being moved from the brothel to the bar when her "young" appeal had dried up at age 15.

It was the bar that had given her the opportunity to free herself. Two years of selling herself for next to nothing. Two years of loveless love before she saw her opportunity, and took it. She allowed the Dutch man to fall in love with her. He was old and ugly, but he took her to Holland with him.

They spent two weeks in courtship before he proposed marriage to her. She accepted and after they were married, he flew her to Amsterdam. His house was huge. He was only there on the weekends. He spent most of his time in Rotterdam, managing his many business affairs while Star occupied herself

bringing hundreds of Johns to his mansion, making more money than she had ever thought existed. The Dutch guilders multiplied in her small bag until she had to arrange a suitcase for the money and finally to get the cleaning lady to help her open a bank account.

When her husband died she inherited the Amsterdam house. Seven girls had moved in. She ran a respectable house. Madame Star's House.

She walked to the village gate and reached out to touch an ornament, knowing that the touch of a woman on the sacred objects was forbidden. Knowing that it was expensive to coax the spirits into forgiving the touch of a woman. The Lao people behind her got excited and she could hear them asking her to step back. Her fingers wrapped around the palm ornament.

"I am very sorry," she apologized, "It is just so beautiful." She knew what had to happen now. She walked back to the elder's hut and opened her bag. The small gold coins felt heavy in the knit bag. She pulled out a handful.

"I'm sorry," she said as she began to drop the coins in hands reaching towards her. "You must accept this gift to ward off the spirits I have angered." She continued handing the coins to the hands that reached towards her again and again until only a small number were left.

She knew that even with this new found wealth, the villagers would continue to sell their daughters to the men from Bangkok, but she hoped that it might save just one of them from the life she had been forced to lead. She walked to the headman.

"Use these to buy a pig for a sacrifice," he looked in her eyes with a confused expression. "And give me a bottle of Lao-Lao."

He turned and went to his hut bringing back a bottle of clear whiskey and handing it to her without a word.

Star put the bottle in her now empty bag and walked from the village careful to detour around the gate that would keep evil spirits from bothering the inhabitants.

Eric the Exploiter

“You go lay down in the hammock and I will come over to fuck you,” Eric, the fat Belgian told the Thai woman. She looked at him for a moment, then at the ten other white people at the table.

“You go fuck yourself,” she replied. Her response caused ripples of laughter, but several of the other guests were looking anything but amused. She grabbed the bottle of lao-lao and took a quick swig.

“Give me some lao-lao, or I will come take it.” Eric started to get up from his chair.

I stood up too, violently shoving Eric back down in his seat. “That’s not your whiskey, she’s not your woman, and you seem to be under the misunderstanding that you can talk to these ladies any way you want. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Eric looked down at the table, “I’m sorry.”

I'd been expecting a fight. His meekness surprised me.

“You should be apologizing to Star and the other ladies here, not to me. You’re acting like an asshole.” I pointed to the ladies in our group. There was Star, a mysterious Thai beauty, Debbie, the mousy Australian woman, Laila, the big Dutch girl who looked like Cindy Crawford. And finally there was Evie, another Belgian, though twenty years younger than Eric and not connected with him in any way whatsoever.

Eric began to mumble as he stared at the tabletop. It was as if he had become a fat child who was trying to explain why he’d eaten too much chocolate to his German nanny.

“I don’t know what happened, I went from one village to another, and drank so much lao-lao. Each village would have me sit down. They would pour me two, three, or four drinks and I would drink them.”

His voice lifted with a hint of pride and his eyes were off the table top. “I am a real man, I drank 10 or 15 shots of lao-lao.” He was roaring now. “I smoke opium in every village. I have many women take me in their huts. I am a real man.”

He pushed his fat black rimmed eyeglasses up his nose and looked as if he were going to stand up again. “Which woman here will I fuck tonight? Debbie, you go to my hut and I will come to fuck you. Go, you go now. Give me the lao-lao you Thai bitch.”

“Oh my goodness, he’s horrible. He’s so horrible,” Debbie ran from the restaurant to her hut and slammed the door.

The other guests either moved from the table we all shared with Eric to a separate table across the restaurant or left. Soon, it was only Star, Eric, and me.

“You are messed up man. Completely fucked up. What are you here for anyway? You’re a real fucking prick.” I still stood near Eric’s chair hoping the Belgian would stand up.

“Yeah, big fucking asshole. Fuck you Eric. Fuck you. Cocksucker.” Star had a real way with words

“I’m sorry.” He looked at Star, then at me. “Can I have lao-lao now?”

“Fuck you cocksucker. Lao-lao is mine.” Star got up and left the table going towards her bungalow. “Bitch, I will take it,” he went to stand up again and I shoved him down on the ground. It felt like I was abusing a small child. Still, I wanted to kick this Belgian’s fat face into a bloody pulp.

“It’s time for you to go to bed. If I hear you giving any of these girls a hard time, I’m going beat you bloody. Good-night.”

I went to the bungalow I was sharing with Johnny. Johnny was busily rolling a huge three paper spliff using half a Marlboro light and about an eighth of an ounce of Lao weed. The room was lit by two candles and the shadows danced on the mosquito netting that hung over the two beds.

“What do you say we pay Laila and Evie a visit and smoke this spliff?” Johnny asked me as I came in the door.

“Sounds good to me, I need to relax a little.”

Johnny suddenly blew out the two candles. “Shhhh! It’s that fat, drunk Belgian. If he sees us we’ll have to get rid of him.”

We watched Eric stagger past in the moonlight. He turned where he should of gone straight to reach his bungalow. Instead heading for Evie and Laila’s room.

“Great, let’s wait a minute and they’ll send him packing.” Pound, pound, pound. We heard him beating on the door. “Johnny is that you?” Johnny gave me a quick wink.

“No, it’s Eric. Evie, you are Belgian and I am Belgian and you must let me fuck you tonight. Open the door.”

“Let’s go get him,” Johnny and I bolted out the door and around the corner in time to see Eric stagger off the porch and along the edge of the cliff that the girl’s bungalow overlooked.

“Go to bed, Jerk.” Evie called after him.

He was 25 or 30 feet from us when he disappeared. One moment we could see him lurching along the ledge. The next he was gone. His shadow replaced with a loud thud and a splash seconds later as his body landed on the hard clay at the bottom and rolled into the stream.

“Holy shit, “ Johnny ran towards the spot Eric had disappeared from. “Evie, do you have a flashlight.”

Evie screamed. “Oh my god. Do you think he’s dead? He fell off the cliff. Oh my God. I hope he’s not dead.”

“I hope he is.” Laila came outside. “Serves him right. He’s been treating every woman here like we’re whores. I hope he’s dead.”

“We’ve got to go get him.” Evie handed Johnny the flashlight she’d retrieved from inside.

“Yes we must go get him.” Johnny shined the light down the bottom of the cliff. We could see the Belgian lying face down in the tiny stream. He’d apparently landed on the barbed wire fence before hitting the ground and one arm and a leg were twisted into unnatural positions and held upright by the sagging strands.

“Leave him, let him die. Rude prick.” Laila was serious.

Johnny was already starting over the ledge, using the flashlight to find hand and footholds. “Someone go get a rope. I saw one under the restaurant earlier. We’ll need it to pull him up. Chris would you hold the torch for me?”

I reached down and grabbed the proffered flashlight. Someone else went to get the rope.

The whole process took about an hour. Five people were needed to drag the fat, unconscious man up the cliff. Each tug dragging him against the face of the cliff, and adding to the bruises on his face and arms.

“Tie it around his neck,” Laila had called down to Johnny as he cinched the rope around the man’s waist and up over his shoulders in an improvised harness. When we got him to the top, Debbie, gave him a quick examination. She worked as a nurse in Brisbane. She popped an ammonia capsule under his nose. He woke with a start.

“Oh my god. Where am I?” he began to cry like a fat 10 year old. “What has happened to me?”

“You got what you deserved,” I couldn’t help myself.

“I want you to move your fingers for me, can you do that? Good. Now what about your feet? Can you lift your legs? Good. What about your neck, does it feel alright? Can you sit up? Good, I think you’re okay. Some cuts and bruises, but you’re really lucky. You should go get yourself some bandages, go to bed, and think about how lucky you are to be here with good people who save your life even though you’ve been a complete jerk. I want you to remember that. You’re really very lucky.” Debbie got up and left the Belgian sitting on the ground.

“Has anyone seen my glasses? Do you know where my glasses are? I can’t see anything without them. I have no extras.”

“Guess you’ll have to find them yourself, pal.” I fought the urge to kick him. I wanted to throw the blubbering old man back down the hill. “Good luck.”

I walked to Evie’s porch where Johnny had lit the big doobie. Evie, Laila, Johnny, and I watched as Eric stood up and lumbered down the trail back to his room.

“We should of left him down there,” this time it was me who said it.

“No, it’s good that we brought him up. Maybe he had to learn a lesson. I feel sort of bad for him now,” Laila had softened after seeing him crying.

“I wonder what he will say to us tomorrow?”

But when morning came the Belgian was gone. The owner of the bungalows was angry because Eric had not paid his bill and had stolen several bottles of Mekong whiskey from the restaurant. He wanted to know when was the last time anyone had seen him, but no one could remember anything past seeing him drinking in the restaurant. It was just too hard to explain the whole thing.

I walked to the cliff. Daylight revealed it to be 35 or 40 feet with a slight slope towards the bottom. I could see where the Belgian had landed and finally come to rest in the creek. The barbed wire fence was midway between up and down. The large glasses lay just under the water, the sun reflecting them underneath the ripples of the creek.

Tourist Trap

The hill tribes were howling in the villages as the lightning crashed and the thunder boomed over the humid subtropical night in Northern Laos. I stood on the bamboo porch of my tiny bungalow listening as the rain began to fall and the musky smell of the newly wet earth permeated some ancient memory locked in the recesses of my brain.

The monkey mind is a funny thing, especially trapped within a human being that denies its monkeyness a thought. Hidden away beneath the veneer of a civilized human being the beast still lingers and it's not entirely inconceivable that sometimes the beast escapes and takes over the host completely abolishing all thoughts of work, clothing, and human society.

I felt the beast rising within me. I felt that curious feeling of fear mixed with anticipation, an unknown longing for something simpler, more savage, and less safe.

Not so strange really. I'd come to Laos in search of the same thing, though I hadn't realized it until a few days before when I found myself crawling up into an 80-year old Akha tribesman's hut to smoke opium.

The man had beckoned to me with betel stained teeth from the trapdoor in the floor of his jungle den. The house itself stood on six foot stilts and was about twenty by thirty feet. It was made of an unidentifiable hardwood that was so weathered it matched the grey brown color of the dirt along the village paths. It was covered in disturbingly twisted brambles woven into magical symbols to ward off hexes from angry demons or jealous neighbors.

My host was as weathered as the house he presided over. His hair had that bowl cut look of the Yanomami when they pose for pictures in National Geographic. His eyes were small and black. He looked more like a Mexican than an Asian Tribesman. He wore a roughly woven sarong in bright reds and greens that contrasted oddly to his withered and dusky skin. Besides this festive garment his only ornamentation was the necklaces and bracelets made of jagged shells, teeth, and sinister red and black beads.

I had felt pensive climbing the ladder through the small door, wondering if the swift strike of a machete would separate my body from my head. I continued climbing, seeing, and smelling the sour and fecal smell that got stronger as I pulled myself into the opium den. There were no windows, a half dozen candles were lit throughout the room and I could see shadowy figures lying on straw mats with triangular pillows under their arms as other shadowy figures held pipes to their heads and brief flares of fire turned the tarry substance to an orange ember.

I was led thorough a maze of bodies resting while their mental occupants visited various levels of Euphoria. They were all Lao; I was the only foreigner that I could see.

Reaching an empty mat, I assumed the position of the forms around me, lying on my left side with the pillow under my arm and body propping me into an upright position. The old man muttered in the strange Acka opium speak. His words a hissing and guttural whisper. He lifted the water pipe to my mouth and lit a phosphorous match.

I inhaled and felt as if I were lifting just slightly from the cushion I rested on. My body didn't seem so heavy as I rolled my eyes back in my head and imagined a smoke dragon filling up my lungs and spreading throughout the rest of my cellular fiber.

I wasn't sure how much time passed while I drifted in and out of incredible worlds of color, but when I emerged it was to a very different landscape than the one I had been mentally criticizing since I arrived in Asia from Seattle two months before.

I stopped noticing the lack of sanitary facilities, I quit being embarrassed when I came upon old women washing themselves in the river, and I lost all interest in sitting in the guesthouse restaurant with fellow travelers and playing cards while the Lao people served beers and banana pancakes. I had gone bamboo.

And now I stood on my porch wanting to escape the giggling French couple in the next bungalow, wanting to howl with the tribes as lightning flashed age old fears across the visor of my humanity.

Fear of a different sort held me in stasis. My civilized mind told me of the impossibility of becoming anything other than a civilized American from Seattle. It told me everything I couldn't do, but offered no positive alternatives.

I was in a dilemma, the monkey brain tying the human consciousness up in knots so that I didn't even notice as the beast removed my clothing, wrapped the sarong around my waste and walked me into the chaos of my senses where the people howled with fearful joy.

The Dread Pirate Saechao

A half million kip to take us from Xiangkok to Huey Xai on the Mekong River.

“Song hoi hasib phanh kip,” the one eyed man said pointing at me and then at Johnny as he said it again. Two hundred and fifty thousand kip...each.

“No,” Johnny said in his perfect Oxford English, “ I refuse to give this...pirate...so much. He won’t even bargain with us.” He tried one last time, however. “Si Hoi Pan Kip.” He consulted his phrasebook and then said it again pointing at us both.

It was only a savings of one hundred thousand kip, or \$10 US, but it was the principle. We couldn’t maintain face if we paid the full fare the speedboat man had asked for to begin with. By refusing to bargain with us he was sneering in our faces, showing his contempt for our skin, our race, and our attempts at bargaining.

Saechao smiled broadly and shook his head. “Ha hoi pan kip.” Half million, firm. He reached under his eye patch and turned away from the Englishman and me to go back to the table where he had been eating his lunch.

“Hey, it’s no problem,” I said in my bright American way. “We’ll find another boatman, somebody who will haggle with us, hell, maybe we could even take a slow boat all the way to Luang Prabang. Let’s go get something to eat and then we’ll find another boat.”

“I don’t see many other boatmen around here,” Johnny surveyed the dusty streets of the village.

The Mekong River flowed brownly through the deep gorge below. Twisted rock formations lay like shipwrecks scattered through the water. The village was made up of a half dozen open sided restaurants built on bamboo platforms leaning over the cliffs. The restaurants were little more than a wood barrel stove, bamboo mats, low tables, and a roof. We picked up our backpacks and trudged up the dusty street in search of a cool resting spot from the blistering Lao sun.

We'd arrived an hour earlier after a bumpy ride from Muang Singh by a combination of truck and bus on the semi developed dirt roads which connect one tiny Northern Lao town with another one. Just holding on to the truck itself had been an incredible physical feat that left us both exhausted and dirty.

The feeling of elation at finally seeing the Mekong was quickly replaced with exasperation when Saechao was the only one who would talk with us about transport to Huey Xai. Negotiations had led nowhere despite our attempts at bargaining, pleading, and finally humorous exasperation. Which left us in our present circumstances.

Walking across a swaying bamboo floor it felt like the weight of our packs would bring us tumbling down the cliffs and into the filthy Mekong.

We'd read that morning about the “speedboat mafia” in Xiangkok. The corrupt river men who extorted money from travelers and intimidated all competition into sending foreign business to them. We'd taken the warnings in Lonely Planet lightly, figuring that two seasoned travelers such as ourselves would be able to skirt any potential price gouging.

The restaurant too was overpriced and the villagers had none of the friendly looks other Lao people had seemed defined by.

“Chicken fried rice, please” Johnny pointed at the menu.

“No chicken,” the woman told him.

“Pork fried rice then,” he feeling slightly offended that the menu was inaccurate.

“No pork,” she told him.

“What do you have then?” he asked.

“Chicken and vegetables,” she said.

“I thought you had no chicken, I’ll have the chicken fried rice, please.” Johnny was beginning to feel slightly persecuted.

“No chicken,” she said again, “Chicken and vegetables.”

He started to argue, realized the futility and nodded his head. “Okay, chicken and vegetables.” She stepped three feet away to prepare the food.

“What do we do now mate?”

I held back the laugh I felt inside me. “Well, I figure we eat, then we go back and offer him 200,000 kip each. Give him time to think he lost us. Hey, all I’ve got is travelers checks, do you have enough to loan me 200,000.” It felt ridiculous to ask for such a huge amount of money.

Johnny pulled a paper sack out of his side bag and dumped it on the table. Three two inch thick piles of 5000 kip notes. “Here’s 250,000. Pull fifty thousand from the pile and put it in your other pocket. If he won’t take 400,000, we can offer him 450.” The food arrived. The portions were small and the taste was bland. “It might be worth getting ripped off just to get out of here.” I looked at the small table on the other side of the restaurant where three old men were glaring at us. “This doesn’t feel like a very friendly place.”

We finished up our food and walked back down the street. We put our packs down and when Saechao looked like he was going to get up we motioned to him and he sat back down with a grin.

“Now, you stay here with the packs, and I’m going to go down to the water and see if those other boatmen will give us a ride,” I said, “It’ll be good to let him know we’ve got other options.”

I scrambled down the rocky cliff to the waterline where three slow boats and a half dozen cigar shaped yellow speedboats were tied up. I stopped when I got to the waters edge and watched as a man stripped down to his underpants, waded into the river, and began moving the speedboats so that his slow boat could push out to the water.

“Hey, um, excuse me...” the swimmer looked up at me “You go Huey Xai? Huey Xai? Rakkha thao

dai?" How much? The man frowned and looked at the water.

"No. No Huey Xai. Saechao. You..Saechao Huey Xai." He refused to say anything more, just gesturing up the hill where I could see the pirate eating his noodles and looking down at me. I could see Johnny talking to two other river men in the street. Maybe he was having more luck. I tried to talk to three more boatmen with the same result. Each time they frowned and pointed up to the now laughing Saechao. Nobody would deal with us. Nobody but the pirate.

Finally, disappointed and frustrated, I climbed the hill to find Johnny attempting to negotiate a price with the two men. They refused to budge from the initial price.

"I checked on a bus, mate, and it seems there is only one each day. We're stuck here until tomorrow unless we pay these scoundrels. They won't budge. I refuse to pay that much."

"Oh, come on Johnny, let's see if he'll negotiate now." I started towards Saechao.

"Hey, what did you find out? What did the other boats say?" Johnny didn't sound very hopeful, probably because I was already walking towards the restaurant.

"They pretty much refused to talk to me. They all told me to talk with him. He seems to be the godfather of the local speedboat mafia. We don't have much choice here."

I walked up to Saechao who now had a huge grin across his face.

"Song hoi hasib pahn kip," he held out his hand with the air of one who knows he will get what he wants. He pointed at each of us and said slowly in turn "Song hoi hasib pahn kip." His grin threatened to spread beyond his narrow face.

I pulled the wad of cash out of his pocket. "Song hoi pahn kip" I said as I handed it over. Saechao was all business as he counted the stack of notes.

"Okay," he said and motioned to Johnny that he should pay next. Johnny handed him another stack of notes.

"Hey, wait a minute," I said pulling my camera from my bag "I gotta get a picture of this." The pirate kept his big grin for the camera and held my notes while Johnny aped a pleading posture and held out the second stack.

Snap, the picture alone was worth the \$40 he was asking.

Saechao counted Johnny's wad. He motioned, irritated, "Hasib pahn kip." He held out his hand for more money.

"No," Johnny said, "Same, same." He motioned to the two piles. I started to get an uneasy feeling. I'd only counted off fifty thousand from the top, not bothering to count the big pile.

"Wait a minute," I reached for the first stack of bills, "Let me count that." In a minutes time I no longer felt like smiling. "I apparently gave him 250,000. Fuck, I only counted fifty from the top...fuck it man, lets just pay him. We lose. It's only \$5 each."

“Right,” Johnny said taking his 200,000 back, “But it’s the principle, I refuse to give this scoundrel my money. I’ll find someone else and pay them instead.” He walked out back to the street and stood by the packs with an offended look on his face.

“I’m gonna pay him Johnny. Fuck it. He’s the only game in town. C’mon it’s not worth it to get pissed off.” I handed the pile of cash back to Saechao who was still grinning. He motioned a dismissive gesture at Johnny and took the money, walking up the street to a rickety cantina where he changed the whole stack for a relatively small amount of Thai baht with an old Lao woman who drank whiskey from a dirty mason jar. He motioned to me and two old women inside the canteen and started down towards the boats.

“C’mon Johnny, just pay him,” I grabbed my pack and followed Saechao and the other passengers. Johnny’s face was set in an expression of English resolve. I was torn between staying with my stubborn friend or taking what I now realized was the only way out of this tourist hell. I figured Johnny might change his mind as he saw me get on the boat.

Saechao stowed the pack and the women’s colorful tarp bags in the front and indicated where we should sit. I stood on top of the sand dune and gestured to the irresolute Johnny who still stood on the hilltop like a statue, his body language indicating that he was thoroughly pissed off.

“C’mon Johnny...Fuck it...just c’mon!” I yelled it up the hill and saw my friend's resolve crumble as he grabbed his pack and trotted down the hill to where Saechao was getting ready to cast off. Johnny held the money towards him but now the pirate simply shook his head. He wouldn’t let Johnny on the boat now.

“Oh, c’mon, give me a break!” I stepped out of the boat, grabbed Johnny’s pack and put it in the front with the other baggage. At this point, Saechao started to protest but then decided to take the Englishman’s money and made room for him in the narrow vessel.

It was about 15 feet long, painted bright yellow, and just wide enough to allow one person to sit in it. We four passengers sat in a line with our legs pulled tightly in front of us. Me first, then a middle aged woman, then the older woman, then Johnny, and in the back, the pirate, directly in front of the huge motor which extended the prop another 15 feet beyond the end of the craft on a metal pole. The engine made a high pitched, ultra loud mosquito sound as he started it.

The boat pulled back from the Lao shore and edged to the center of the Mekong, midway between Laos on one side and Burma on the other. I looked closely to see if there was any difference in the noticeable landscape or architecture but saw two sides of the same river. Both equally victim to massive slash and burn agriculture, both nestling equally impoverished villages, both victims of the poverty that gripped the entirety of the Golden Triangle, the area of the world where the majority of heroin is produced.

The only visible difference was the Burmese flag that flew on one side and the lack of any flag at all on the Lao side. The invisible difference was that Burmese rebels were extremely thick along this part of the river and atrocities, gunmen, and rebellion might be happening anywhere in the dense jungle that lay along the banks. Suddenly I realized a bullet could easily find it’s way into my head. I kept the thought to myself but hoped Saechao would drive quickly.

My hopes were quickly realized as Saechao brought the boat up to what seemed an extremely unsafe

speed. The shallow keel of the boat kept us seemingly hovering on top of the water and the slightest wave or rapid threatened to send us careening out of control into one of the gigantic rock forms that Saechao jetted us through. The spray soaked me and the baggage riding in the front of the boat. It occurred to me that perhaps I should be scared, but the ride was too thrilling. To be zipping between river carved formations in a pirate speedboat down the Mekong. It sounded too fantastic to be real, but it was, and that made it thrilling.

The boat stopped first at a small Burmese village. Saechao pulled the boat close to the shore where some rocks blocked out the illegal landing from any authorities who might be watching. I reached out and touched the ground, excited to be momentarily making contact with a foreign country without any sort of official permission. No visa, no customs, just my hand grabbing Burmese rock. The middle aged woman grabbed her rainbow colored tarp bag and stepped onto the rocks. Saechao pushed the boat back out to the center of the river and resumed the high-speed journey.

The next woman was dropped off a short distance further at a Lao village where naked children dove from rotting dugout canoes and the villagers lined up on the ridge top to see who was coming. The woman's family came down and waited for her and her many bags and boxes. I stepped out of the boat and helped the woman ashore while Johnny started to haul her bags to her waiting friends and family.

"Kop jai lai lai," she sang to us as the boat pulled out, "'La kwarn." Thank you, goodbye.

Local passengers gone, the pirate began to pilot his boat like a daredevil. Zipping past slow freighters, zig zagging in and out of hulking boulders, and splashing through massive rapids that filled the compartment housing Johnny and my bags with river water. We were soaked too. The pirate laughed as each new wave of water crashed into us over the bow.

He zoomed by a freighter heading up river and I lifted my hand in a wave to the man sitting on the boat's bow. The man started to wave, saw whose boat it was, and lifted his fist in the air, shaking it and spitting what sounded like curses after me. He seemed to know the dread pirate Saechao, he seemed to know him and to hate him.

For the first time, I began to seriously worry. This guy was bad news. His laughter as the packs were slung around the front of the boat was menacing. In my worried state I scarcely noted when the Burmese riverbank disappeared and the Thai riverbank began. There were no markers for the invisible political boundary. One moment it was a landscape of desolation and smoking hillsides and the next it was giant golden temples, double decker tourist buses, and newly paved roads. The change was immediate and strangely surreal.

The sun glinted from the golden towers on the Thai side of the river as it made its way to the horizon. Sunset was not far off. Saechao maneuvered the boat to a large dock.

"Is this it?" Johnny asked "Huey Xai?"

"No," Saechao gestured down the river. "Huey Xai...one more hour." He smiled hugely. "We stop for night. Sleep. Tomorrow Huey Xai." He pulled the boat to the dock and began to secure it. "You find guesthouse now." He stepped from the boat and walked to a table on the dock where three Lao men sat playing cards. He pulled up a chair and sat down.

"Wait a minute," I said from the front of the boat where I still sat. "Is this guy ripping us off just taking

us halfway and then stopping?" It was unbelievable. I got out of the boat and walked up to the four men. "No. You take us now. We pay you to take us. Go now."

"Tomorrow" the pirate laughed in my face. "You wait til tomorrow." He pulled his cap down over his eyes.

Johnny stood up from the boat now. "Listen...Mate," he laid his big hands on Saechao's shoulder, "You're going to take us now... understand?"

I figured a fight was coming...soon.

"How much you pay him?" a man in a blue baseball cap asked.

"Five hundred thousand," Johnny said. "He said he would get us to Huey Xai...today. This is going to be a problem."

"Wait.." the man said, "Just wait a moment."

He started to speak Lao rapidly to the pirate and his two companions. The pirate answered and laughed loudly looking at us. His three companions looked unhappy. They kept gesturing back and forth between the boats. It seemed the other three were not too pleased with the pirate's methods. A problem was coming soon. I decided to lighten the mood a little.

I stepped back into the cigar boat and sat in Saechao's seat. I made as if I would start the engine. "Hey," I yelled at the men on the dock "No problem, I'll drive." I took a look at how I could start the engine hoping they wouldn't kill me.

The guy in the cap laughed and motioned me out of the seat. "No, you load bags in this boat. I take you to Huey Xai. Him," he motioned to Saechao, "No good. I take you. No cost."

Saechao laughed and pulled his cap over his eyes sitting back on two legs of his chair. Johnny navigated himself back to the boat and began transferring our soaked bags to the new guys boat.

"What's your name?" Johnny asked him.

"Sok," he said. "Let's go."

The rest of the journey was tame compared with the earlier speed and frequency of obstacles. The sun got lower and lower until finally he brought the boat into a small dock in a village where a young boy tied us off and Sok told us to wait for him.

"Here we go again," I said.

"No, I think Sok is a good guy," Johnny said. "Let's wait."

A few minutes later Sok came back and motioned for us to get our bags. "Too dark for river. I pay for taxi to Huey Xai for you. You take."

He led us to the large transport truck with the tarps rolled up the sides. He put our bags inside, paid the

driver, and turned to walk away.

“Hey...Sok...” I called out to him. “Kop jai lai lai.” Thank you.

“No problem,” Sok called back over his shoulder. “Lao people good people, not like Pirate Saechao. Him no good.” He walked back to the river and sat down with the boy who was sitting on the dock. The sun glinted on the Mekong as the truck pulled away down the bumpy dirt road.

Bar Girls in Ko Samui

The three girls got up from their bar stools as I stumbled past the Macho Lounge.

“Hey, you...come have drink.”

“Handsome man, come inside, say hello.”

“Hello, handsome man, have drink inside.”

They were three variations on the same theme. The young plump bar girl The slightly older and skinnier bar girl And the worn down, missing a tooth, speaks better English but doesn't look any good at all anymore bar girl.

The three muses turned to Thai prostitutes. Sirens beckoning the old and the drunk into a bar that must have been named in the 80's but probably was only a year or two old.

Thailand was the sex change capital of the world and had more transvestites and transsexuals than anywhere. It was also the capitol of AIDS in Asia. Anybody foolish enough to sleep with a prostitute in Thailand deserved what he got...and there was no telling what he was going to get...boy, girl, lady boy, or a cornucopia of venereal diseases which could debilitate or kill you.

Star, a Thai woman I'd met in Laos had explained to me how parents sold their daughters to pimps in Bangkok and the young innocent girls from the villages were thrown into a life of sordid sex and exploitation. She knew the story from experience.

Since then I'd met dozens of young men who either wanted to or already had invested in the sex stock exchange. I'd heard the stories about the beautiful girl who pulled a big dick out of her pants, broken condoms in a Bangkok brothel, and of course all the stories about the sex bars in Puttaya.

All the backpackers went to Puttaya whether they were men or women...just to see it, was the way they put it. To see the snakes, coins, bananas, and who knew what else emerging from the vaginae of Thai women. To see hundreds of prostitutes strutting their stuff in the sex capitol of the sex capitol of the world. I'd turned down at least 10 offers to join different groups who were going to Puttaya...just to check it out. I had no desire to see exploitation and degrading use of the female body first hand. The second and third hand accounts were enough. I'd passed a wide circle around Puttaya.

It was why I was here, in Ko Samui. I'd heard so many people complain about the 'tameness' and the 'family atmosphere' that had taken over on Samui in the past few years. It sounded like a cleaner, safer, less tempting version of Thailand to me. But now that I was here, I couldn't really understand how anyone had found it tame or suitable for a family.

Walking down the main street I passed dozens of small bars where three, four, or five girls sat calling out to men as they walked by. The bars all had huge speakers and no walls resulting in a contest of decibels as each place attempted to prove it was the best spot. Thai people apparently measure fun with volume so unless you had a guesthouse a decent distance from the beach, you got to listen to throbbing techno beat all night long.

It was like a carnival here with bungee jumping, tailoring, food stalls, and prostitutes side by side and huge white people walking down the center of the streets ignoring the cars which honked at them while trying to drive from point A to point B.

It was overwhelming. I'd looked for nearly an hour before I found a bar I could sip a whiskey in without being propositioned. I didn't want to stay there either but ended up meeting an Englishman who bought me a few rounds while explaining how the Chinese owned the whole island and simply rented it to the Thais who actually lived and worked here.

Four whiskeys on an empty stomach and here I was. Stumbling past the Macho Bar.

"Hello, handsome man, you come in, please."

Why not? I could get to know the girls, find out why they were here, what made them tick. I stepped into the bar and only then noticed it was empty except for the three bar girls and the bartender.

The girls clustered around me and I felt like some sort of sinning pervert for even being in such close proximity to them. "I wonder if any of these three are men?" I thought to myself as I searched for Adams apples, man hands, and hairy upper lips. None of them exhibited the characteristics of a transvestite I'd learned from a young Irishman the day before. They seemed to be the real deal.

Were they prostitutes?

"What will you have?" the girl behind the bar spoke pretty good English. I noticed how pretty she was and found myself wishing she were a prostitute... just for a moment though until I caught myself and attributed it to the whiskey.

"Mekong whisky on ice," I had gotten to where I liked Thai whiskey. It was sweet and didn't have the same bite as Canadian or American blends. Actually, it was crap, but it was so cheap it was almost free.

She smiled and poured it. "You play darts?" She pointed to where the plump young bar girl had begun throwing darts at an ancient dartboard and mostly missing. "You should play her."

It sounded like a good idea. I got up and moved over to where she was playing. "Hey, can I play?" It felt foolish asking her.

"She doesn't speak English. She love you play." The bartender spoke rapidly in Thai and the girl smiled at me and handed the darts my way. The two older girls were standing nearby watching the whole exchange. I shot my darts, hitting a bulls eye and two twenties. All three women clapped and cheered for me. It felt good. I retrieved the darts and handed them to the bar girl She shot and stuck one in the board and the other two in the bamboo paneling.

"That last one was a good shot," I told her. Each time I shot the whole bar got excited and cheered making me feel incredibly...well...macho. Even though the whole bar consisted of me, the bartender, and the three bar girls I was having an incredible time. I played darts, rolled dice against the bartender for drinks, bought rounds of sodas for the girls, danced, and had nonsense conversations with the girl who spoke no English. I liked the way she looked at me. I lost track of how many whiskeys I drank. I lost track of everything.

“Hey, Joe, you take her home now, okay?” The bartender, my good friend, gave me a conspiratorial wink. “She like you, so you take her back to guesthouse...okay?”

“Okay,” it came out of my mouth before I realized what I was saying. “Good, now you pay me 500 baht. Bar fee.” I was too ashamed to back out now, it was only \$30 or \$40. I didn't want to back out. I put the money on the bar. Maybe I would walk the girl home and then send her back. I was kidding myself and I knew it. This was what I'd wanted all along, my secret wish. The girl looked like a younger version of Star. My feelings against the sex trade were all designed to keep me away from this, what I really wanted. Guilt free, responsibility free, sex.

We got back to my room and she indicated I should take a shower. I didn't know if we should shower together so I went in the bathroom by myself and dumped dippers full of water over myself, lathered up, and rinsed with more dippers. When I left, she entered and I heard the same process repeated.

She was strangely shy. Staying wrapped in a towel until the lights were off. I was still nervous she might be a man and lifted the towel from her vagina. It was a real one.

I put on one of the condoms I carried in my medical kit. The sex act itself was simple and a one time deal. I'd drank too much Mekong whiskey to be a stallion. She didn't seem to mind just cuddling and holding each other. I started to fall asleep and she got up....”I come back...okay?” Apparently she did speak a little English.

“Okay,” I said and fell back asleep.

In the morning she was there. Lying next to me. She watched me as I woke up, ran her hands over my chest, my body, and looked deeply into my eyes.

“500 baht,” she said, “You pay now, okay?”

My head was aching. I reached for my wallet, wondering if she had already cleaned it out. I opened it and everything was still there. She could have taken everything if she wanted, instead she came back and spent the night cuddling with me.

I pulled out a five hundred note, paused and pulled out a second 500 note. I handed them both to her, realizing I didn't even know her name. She smiled, a sleepy, affectionate smile. Then looking extremely self conscious she leaned down over me and kissed my chest. “I see you tonight. Bye bye.” I wondered if I should tell her I was leaving today, decided not to, and rolled over feeling anything but guilty at realizing I was a hypocrite.

The Guitar Player

If you were white and someone could see you...then you were a target to the Thai people. They knew you had money, even if you didn't.

I had to wait for the bus to Bangkok. I'd walked all over the tiny city of Krabi on the western coast of Thailand for the past 7 hours. It was a nice city, but there was only so much to see. What I really wanted was to find a quiet and secluded place to play my guitar....a near impossibility given the aggressiveness of the taxi drivers, boatmen, guesthouse hawkers, and food vendors.

But, I had my blue guitar. A guitar is a great way to meet friends. It goes beyond language. It didn't matter where I went, if I had my guitar, other musicians found me, found a way to speak to me, and found a way to share the gift of the muse.

I carried my pack and guitar to the bus station beside the docks. An empty bench was looking out on the islands that littered the Indian Ocean. I was stopped seven or eight times by men of all ages who noticed my skin or the guitar or both.

"Hey, guitar...take boat tour? See Islands? Come on..." a young Thai man with a sparse mustache.

"Mei kapkun krap," no thanks "I leave in one hour to Bangkok."

"Mai pen rai, no problem, take short tour with me, okay?" Thai people believed in the ultra hard sell and then got upset when you became rude.

"No, I just want to play my guitar while I wait for the bus, okay? Kapkun krap." The guy decided I was a hopeless cause and bee lined towards a white couple that had rounded the corner.

"Hey," strumming air guitar "Me play..me play...okay?" the guy was a bit older than the last, usually I would have handed him the guitar but now I could see an empty park bench that offered me a place to turn the anger gurgling within me to harmless notes on the wind.

"No, I'm going to play now...I want to play my guitar...okay? I play" The man continued talking and air strumming but I ignored him and walked to the bench shucking off my pack and sitting down.

If I could start playing, I hoped it would build a sort of invisible wall around me so I wouldn't have to talk to anyone else before my bus arrived. I started playing a new progression of chords and a couple of guys in their mid-twenties stood near by looking at me.

Finally they decided to breach my musical armor with the standard question among Asians that violates most western rules of privacy etiquette.

"Hey, where you go now? Where you go?" the thin kid in the yellow T-shirt sort of hurled the question at me. I tried to continue playing and ignore it, but knew my own sense of politeness would necessitate an answer. "Huh, hey where you go?"

I saw the way their eyes shifted from me to the guitar and knew the question was only an attempt to wrestle the guitar from my hands and into the most likely talented fingers of one of the young men. I was careful to keep playing as I answered “Bangkok in one hour, so I’m just passing the time playing guitar for a while.”

I put on a smile I didn’t feel and began to sing a song I’d been practicing thus building up my musical fortifications. It did little to repel the yellow shirted invader. He sat on the bench next to me and then much to my surprise reached out and attempted to pull the guitar from my hands.

“Here, you let me play..” he said as he grabbed the neck and tugged gently.

I pulled the guitar back towards me and tried to remain calm as a rage started to burn in my chest.

“Hey man, what the hell do you think you’re doing? I’m playing a song and you try to grab MY guitar from me in the middle. That’s just rude man. It’s really fucking rude, do you have any idea? Huh?”

The Thai guy was nonplussed. “Here let me play, I play now, give.” His thin hands reached again for the guitar.

“No way, if you want to play, you wait until I’m done and then you ask, not just grabbing and demanding,” I looked in the man’s eyes, “Otherwise you’re a rude fucking man, just a rude man, you understand?” My temper was starting to slip out of control.

The Thai man’s eyes narrowed and he said again “Give me, I play.”

I felt a confrontation coming on, a scared voice in me told me to just give the guy the guitar, I ignored it and stayed on the dangerous ground my self righteous anger demanded.

“No, you’re a rude fucking man. Why should I give you my guitar? It’s mine and I’m playing a song, or I was until you tried to grab it. That’s just fucking rude man.” My voice was starting to show a little of the anger I felt.

The Thai man saw it and recognized the word fuck. He may not of understood the whole content of my sentence, but he understood the meaning. His own sense of 'face' in danger now, he stood up.

“You..me...Thai box now.” He made a kick towards my head pulling it back before it was in a real threatening position. There are three facets of Thai life that define it. First is a sense of fun, second is maintaining face, and third is respecting the position of those above you. This situation had quickly escalated to a contest to see who would lose face.

“You, kickbox with me, now, come on.”

I started to play my guitar again. “No, I don’t want to kickbox. I want to play my guitar. Don’t you get that?” I felt a little fear in my gut but refused to acknowledge it. I’d heard plenty of stories about foreigners who were stupid enough to get in fights with Thai people. As soon as a single blow was exchanged every Thai within seeing distance jumped into the fray, usually killing the stupid tourist. You don’t fight with the Thai’s, not if you have any kind of a brain.

I was in a bit of a tough spot. I refused to lose face myself. I saw the attention of the fifteen or twenty Thai's around the bus station shifting towards the bench I sat on.

"I'm not going to fight you. I'm going to play my guitar." It was the only way I could see out, I didn't know how to resolve anything without one of us losing face which could inspire an attack on me. The Thai's look down on public displays of anger and I hoped the guitar and the music my plucking fingers were again producing would keep the attack from happening.

"Yeah, okay," yellow shirt said, "We see what happen, hey, you watch out."

He walked away and joined a group of seven or eight of his friends and stood in a circle with them. Speaking and gesturing towards the bench, the group walked away. Every once in a while one of the guys would turn their heads to look at me. I tried to give them a carefree sort of grin unless it was yellow shirt, in which case we would glare at each other for a moment.

'These guys are gonna jump me and take the guitar' I thought, 'I'll either get beat up or killed in the next 45 minutes.' I considered whether to get up and leave or to let the tourist police around the corner know about the guy. Both alternatives involved losing face myself and I'd already been stupid enough to allow myself to get angry and show it.

Instead I sat on the bench playing the guitar and waiting for the attack I felt was imminent. It was a nervous game. My guitar playing went on automatic and my concentration went to tracking the movements of the gang of young men using my peripheral vision. After 20 minutes or so, yellow shirt, moved within range of the bench, the two of us continued to exchange hostile glances. He moved closer. I set the guitar down, adrenaline pumping through me. Here it comes.

Yellow shirt stepped within a foot of me. Both of us had our faces set in resolve and our eyes locked on one another's.

"Can I play guitar now?" The intensity was still there, my first reaction was to say "fuck no!" but I remembered my own words. "... if you want to play, you wait until I'm done and then you ask."

Feeling trepidation I said, "Sure, here you go. You okay?" Surprise was quickly replaced with mistrust on yellow shirts face.

"Yeah, me okay...okay you?" He took the guitar and sat down next to me on the bench.

"Yeah, I'm okay."

Yellow shirt sat down and began to play. His hands were much more nimble than my own. He played a sort of classic rock meets flamenco and started to sing a song. His voice wasn't terrific, but he carried a tune better than most Americans. The song he was singing was a Thai song, which coincidentally I had been taught the week before when I was camping on the island of Ko Lipe. I actually knew the words, it was a song about a traveler who finds himself far from home and misses the people who love him. It was a song about hope and never giving up. It was a sad and beautiful song.

I began to sing counterpoint to Yellowshirt on the chorus. "O hi no hi, chang tom te hi, nam the lo de lai...long lim"

Yellow shirt's eyes flickered with surprise. He smiled as he played the rest of the song, our voices finally complementing each other as we found the correct range to sing in. A small crowd had gathered around and listened as we finished the song together.

“...Yang mei liang lao, e mach mai, hai....kun ha.”

A smattering of applause filled the open-air bus station. Yellow shirt turned to me.

“How you know Thai song?” the hostility was gone.

“I like Thai people and Thai music,” I told him, “My name is Chris.” I held out my hand.

Yellow shirt took my hand firmly.” My name is Pi...very nice meet you...Creese.”

For the next half hour Pi and I serenaded the two girls working inside the ticket window. The other men around laughed as Pi made suggestive comments to the girls and the entire atmosphere of the place was light. Suddenly though, Pi, got serious “Creese, when you leave?” “Four” I suddenly realized what time it must be.

“Come....” Pi took off running with the guitar, I followed after grabbing my pack. On the backside of the station a double decker bus was pulling out. I hadn't even known there was a secondary station; you couldn't see it from the bench. I looked at the clock, ten minutes to four. The bus was leaving early.

Pi jumped in front of the bus, waving the guitar. The bus stopped and the driver came down, checked my ticket and loaded my pack in the lower compartments. Pi handed me the guitar and walked me to the door.

I climbed up the steps and looked back to see a half dozen Thai people waving at me. I waved and called goodbye out the still open door.

“Goodbye Creese,” Pi called out to me “Nice meet you.”

Dagooze and The Bataks

The ship landed about 30 miles from Medan. I was a bit worried about coming to Indonesia in the midst of economic and political turmoil. Malaysians, Europeans, and even the American Embassy in Chengdu, China had warned me against coming here. I'd read up on the problems in Aceh to the North and Java, Sulawesi, and Ambon in the South. I had heard about the graft, greed, and corruption that were rampant throughout the country. I expected to run into problems with customs just like the Canadian I met in Thailand told me he had.

It was a breeze. I was through customs in seconds and every officer along the way had asked to play my guitar. The Steward from the ship instructed each passenger to go through customs and get on the blue bus that would take us straight to Medan. It was part of the fare we'd paid coming from Penang, Malaysia.

Dozens of poorly clad men offered rides to Penang, Bukit Luwang, and other destinations on motorbikes, minibuses and tuk-tuks, the three-wheeled motorbikes. I listened to the Steward and got on the bus despite my hesitations as to whether he was the guy on our ship or not.

As the bus drove the poor roads from the port to Medan I saw dozens of rough looking young men walking down the streets. Most of them had guitars. The bus finally arrived at the Medan bus station. Getting off the bus all of the passengers were accosted by scores of men on bicycles, motorcycles, and tuk tuks. Being white, I was an immediate object of attention.

"Where you go now? Where you go now? Hey where you from? What you do?" No time to answer between the barrages of the inquiries. I tried to get a little distance between myself and the bus station, knowing that the other passengers would cause more distraction. It didn't work, there were just too many of the taxi men as compared with passengers. The Indonesian problems had destroyed the tourist economy and left the Indonesians with little or no work. They saw me as an opportunity to make some money. I saw them as a threat to the little bit of money I had left in the world.

I had less than \$300 dollars and no way to get back to the United States. It was foolish of me to have come to Indonesia in the first place with so little, but there was no way I was going to miss an opportunity to visit Sumatra when I was so close. It wasn't like I had a great job at home, I had no job, I had no home. I had about \$275 dollars. That was all. It translated to roughly three million rupiah... a huge sum in Indonesia... but I was terrified of what might happen to me if I lost it.

I had picked out a guest house from the newspaper a Malaysian friend had given me. It advertised dorm rooms for 6000 rupiah a night. About fifty cents. The taxi men followed me and continued demanding to take me somewhere. I stopped.

"No" I said firmly "I will walk to the Lucy guesthouse." "Oh," they all said at once, "Lucy, very far from here... very far... too far to walk.. take taxi.. motorbike.." etc etc.

Suddenly a young Indonesian in Sunglasses stepped from the crowd. "Come with me. I will take you there on my motorcycle." There was something about him I trusted immediately and I followed him through the crowd as he spoke rapidly to them and they dispersed. Some of them laughed and taunted him good-naturedly.

I became suspicious “How much? Barapa hagrís?”

“I don’t care” he said “You pay me and if its good for you, its good for me. You play guitar?” He motioned to my blue Thai guitar.

“Yeah, a little” I said. “You?”

“Of course, I’m Batak. Batak man and guitar are one.”

I got on his small motorbike wearing my big traveling rucksack and holding my guitar in one hand while I held onto the seat post with the other. He rode down either side of the street, on the sidewalk, and dodged traffic like a daredevil. It wasn’t too far to Lucy, maybe a couple of kilometers, but it was terrifying and exhilarating as I tried to keep my guitar from scraping the ground or the large trucks we whizzed between.

When we got there, I checked in. At first they refused to give me one of the cheap rooms, but Dagooze, my guide, communicated with the house girl and soon they were okay with the fact that I would sleep in the cheap dorms. The price remained at 6000 rupiah even though another guest I met later had paid the “new” rate of 15,000 rupiah.

I asked Dagooze if he wanted a coke and paid him 5000 rupiah for the ride. He told me it was twice what the ride was worth but I insisted he take it for pulling me out of the confusing situation and getting me to the guesthouse.

“Can I play your guitar?” He asked, picking it up. I nodded yes and sat down. He began to play and in moments six or seven men came from outside, inside, and who knows where and suddenly I was introduced to Batak culture.

The melodies were strangely classical and the voices of the men rose in the most hauntingly beautiful harmonies I had ever heard. The guitar was passed from man to man and each played as well as the one before. I was astounded by the way their voices blended together.

Someone lit up a joint. Someone else passed a number of beers around the room. An old man I recognized from the bus station said to me “You buy beers...one round..and we provide mary jane... okay?” I agreed quickly.

We sat and played and sang until the early hours of the morning. “We are Batak” someone would occasionally explain to me. “Batak man and guitar they are one. Batak and music they are one.”

The Batak men played guitars until the sun was rising and my head was feeling like a million butterflies were fluttering somewhere behind my eyelids. The house girls Flora and Hotma had joined us and sang the traditional songs from Lake Toba, the homeland of the Batak people. Flora’s voice was raspy but her English was good. She carried an English/ Indonesian dictionary.

The men seemed uncomfortable with the women singing, but welcomed them. This after all was the city and not Lake Toba where the men would go to beach side bars and sing while drinking the coconut whiskey, *tuak*, until dawn or their wives came to lead them away.

Hotma and Flora expressed their undying love to me despite our new friendship and lack of actually knowing each other at all. It was the end of the first day I'd spent in Indonesia. It had been a wild day and though I was in a sort of musical heaven. I had to go to sleep. I stood up and everyone groaned their disappointment at my heading into the cot reserved for me in the dormitory.

Hotma called out "But Chris, I love you. Wait for me, I love you." I was a bit drunk and naive and called back I love you too, at which point she gave the universal symbol of fellatio with her hand motioning toward her mouth and tongue pushing on her cheek. I hadn't expected that and chose to take it naively. "I love you too...but am very tired."

She was a beautiful girl and I rushed into the dorms to hide the erection that popped up instantly upon understanding her less than subtle insinuation. I went to bed elated and regretful. The paper-thin walls allowed me to go to sleep hearing the same wonderful songs I'd been so lucky to participate in.

In the morning I made preparations to go to Lake Toba, the home of the Bataks. Flora, a pretty girl with extremely large teeth flirted with me and kept Hotma at bay as the younger girl made more and more offers of sexual union to me.

At one point she said "Chris, I love you very good... very good" as she washed some of the other guests laundry in a large tub in the open courtyard behind the guesthouse. Flora quickly pushed her out of the way and said "She's young, I'll love you much better." I laughed and Hotma quickly got up and left. I sat and talked with Flora for a minute asking her about her dictionary.

We spoke for a few minutes before I left for Toba.

"Chris," she called, "Remember me and bring back mangoes."

From Aceh to Medan

(A woman told me this tale minutes after she got off a bus in Medan, she walked up and sat next to me in a noodle shop and began to talk. Introductions came after she had found a small bit of relief telling her tale to another Westerner.)

Jan got on the bus, pleased to be leaving Aceh. It wasn't that she'd had any bad experiences there; it was the sense that something bad could happen at any moment. The strife torn province of Indonesia was virtually paralyzed as rebel forces clashed with government troops on a daily basis. Casualties on both sides were mounting as gunfights occurred with more and more frequency.

People had questioned her sanity in wanting to come here in the first place, but it was a dream. A dream like the one I'd had since I was a little boy as my grandfather told stories of clearing paths through the jungle, examining rocks and soil for telltale signs, and finally marking a particular spot with 'x'. His 'x' had turned into a gushing oil well and one of the biggest wildcat fields of the 1950's. It was the same field that Exxon was still pulling thousands of barrels a day out of.

But it wasn't the oil that had brought Jan to Sumatra. It was the way her Dutch grandfather, like my American grandfather, had described the people, the orangutans, and the jungle itself. It was a vision of a wild Eden imprinted on her that she had needed to see for herself.

The people on the bus with her were mostly Indonesian. Ethnic Indonesian. Acehese Muslims with boxes of fruit, chickens, or bundles of clothing stuffed into the utility bags made from tarps too worn to be useful as anything larger. Some Christian Batak people on their way to the city of Medan. The Christians looked nervous. They had every reason to. Aceh was a mostly Muslim province. Throughout Indonesia battles between ethnic Christians and Muslims turned into deadly scenes rarely seen on Western TV.

The bus passed half dozen Mosques under construction in the first ten minutes. At each one women in full veils stood holding baskets on long handles and severe looking men with long beards and black headgear sat in covered shelters watching as passing motorists paid tribute to Allah and contributed much needed funds toward the construction of the Mosques.

Each time a Mosque appeared, Jan got nervous. The road was split up by makeshift roadblocks and orange highway cones. The bus had to stop and occasionally men with guns would come on the bus asking for additional contributions. The driver refused each time. Each time Jan expected a confrontation to erupt.

The bus hit the countryside and began picking up speed on the rough road. Jan began dozing. The bus hit a particularly rough spot and she bounced in her seat. She woke up with a start. She looked out the window and saw the orange cones. It didn't occur to her sleepy brain that there was no Mosque in sight. Then she was too distracted by the men in camouflage carrying automatic weapons. She saw the military vehicles as the bus came to a stop.

The soldier motioned for the driver to open the door. This time he could not say no. The door opened and three men came on the bus. They were small and looked hungry. They wore regimental patches identifying them as Indonesian Regular Army. A Javanese unit.

The oldest of the three, who looked no older than 17, spoke rapidly in Indonesian. Her command of the language wasn't terrific but she understood the part about rebel activity in the area and this being a routine check. She got her passport ready. Each of the soldiers would stop and speak with the people on the bus. Sometimes taking their packages or bundles and passing them out the windows to other soldiers who were waiting outside. She presumed that it was so they could search them for weapons.

The oldest one got to her. "Oh, Hello Miss...you Dutch, okay?" His smile didn't comfort her. "Very nice bag...here...let me see." Suddenly she was very glad she had put the bulk of her cash in the money belt she wore. The little bit of cash she carried was pulled from the bag and put in the boys pockets. "You very good to help Indonesian Soldiers fight hoodlums and rebels, you have more bags here?" "No," she swallowed and tried to look brave. "This is all I have."

"Maybe you like to stay with soldiers for a while..." he laughed and said something to the other two soldiers who also laughed. The three finished their examination of the bus and its passengers without having looked at anyone's paperwork. Jan saw them take a few pieces of Jewelry from other passengers. They didn't return the parcels they had unloaded. They left the bus and motioned the driver to drive on. The soldiers on the side of the road laughed and tossed things back and forth to each other as the bus rolled away.

The bus had gone perhaps five miles when it again slowed down. This time the men holding guns were dirtier. There were fewer of them than there had been soldiers. They didn't look nearly as happy as the soldiers of a few minutes before. In fact they looked miserable and bedraggled. Some of them wore dirty bandages on their arms, faces, heads, or legs.

They didn't speak Indonesian. They didn't bother with asking the driver to open the door. They screamed out commands in Acehnese and fired their weapons in the air. The driver opened the door and everyone hurriedly got off the bus.

"What's happening?" Jan asked the man who was next to her, "What did they say?"

"They say we get off the bus quickly or they kill us all. Quickly, get off the bus."

Jan stood up with the others and got off the bus. Several of the rebels outside were separating the men from the women and children. Men on the left, everyone else on the right. The rest of the men, boys really, were rifling through all of the contents of the bus. Tossing the remainder of the bags and packages out the door and windows into a pile that was pitifully small.

A man a little older than the rest of his comrades approached Jan. "Where you put your things? You tell me now? Where is money and things?" Trying to control her fear, Jan looked at the man "The soldiers took nearly everything just five miles back...they took it all..we have nothing left."

"Foreign slut, you lie...no soldiers this close," he was panicking. He screamed out orders to the rest of the rebels who threw their haul into a battered taxi truck then pointed their guns at the men and motioned them into the jungle on the other side of the road.

Jan couldn't understand what it was they were saying, but she understood the tragic cries of the women and children around her. She understood the menacing motions of the gunmen as the men moved into the dense jungle. She understood the sound of sustained automatic weapons that came from the jungle.

“Why? Why?” She tried to get one of the women around her to explain.

“They say we helped the soldiers and so have hurt them. We must pay with the lives of our men.” It was a stoic young woman who explained. Jan suddenly wished she had given the rebels her money belt, maybe they would have let them go then. This was so unthinkable, so unbelievable. So unreal.

After about a minute of silence there came a rustling from the jungle. The men, all of the men, both rebels and those from the bus emerged from the brush. The passengers looked grim, scared, and humiliated, but alive.

The older rebel began to laugh when he saw the confusion on her face. “You tell people that Aceh must be free, you tell them we show mercy on you people, even though you help the soldiers. Next time, maybe we be not so nice.”

He spoke to the rest of the people, most likely translating what he had just said to Jan. The rebels around him began to laugh. They motioned with their guns that everyone should get back on the bus and then they melted into the jungle.

Everyone loaded back on the bus. It was silent for the rest of the trip. They passed several mosques when they approached the outskirts of Medan, but no one had anything left to give.

The Polynesian Hostel Beach Club Waikiki, Hawaii

(After four months in Asia I returned to the Pacific Northwest and lived in my Volkswagen until shortly after September 11th, 2001 when I bought a ticket to Hawaii and somehow became the manager of the coolest hostel in Hawaii.)

”Hey girls, wanna drink some beer, don’t worry, I’ve got condoms.”

It made everyone laugh except the Japanese girls walking by, who walked a little faster in their high platform sneakers and frayed denim skirts, fanny packs accentuating their perfectly shaped asses as they moved in that shuffling pigeon toe walk they all seemed to share. They didn’t really understand what had been said but correctly assumed by the raunchy laughter that followed it that it was inappropriate.

”Keep trying Nick, it’s bound to work someday...” Andrew, the bald Englishman slapped Nick on the back. The fog of cigarette and marijuana smoke in the air brought a stale cloying scent that somehow conveyed the feeling of a party in the works.

Nick sat down, slightly embarrassed by his own sudden outburst. After a moment of examining the half empty bud light bottle in his hand he lifted his shaggy head and laughed with everyone else. Sipping his beer with his right hand and pushing his bangs back with his left, he revealed his slightly acne scarred face. Early twenties, not too tall, he wasn’t a bad looking kid. He just had bad lines.

An assortment of odd characters sat around him on the ramshackle furniture in the parking garage. They weren’t any odder than him, but then he wasn’t any odder than them either and who would ever believe that this group would even exist. There was Andrew, a 28-year-old real estate broker from London. His girlfriend, Kirsten, a Georgia peach who still looked good but must of been pushing 40. Locky, an Australian mining engineer seeking a better life in America. Ludwig, the German importer. Tokyo Joe, a retired Japanese schoolteacher from Osaka. And the cast kept going in a never ending stream of new faces, names, careers and countries.

It wasn’t just an ordinary parking garage they were in. It held a coke machine, picnic tables, payphones, and laundry facilities. Above it were the fifteen split units that made up the studios, dorms, and semi private rooms of the Polynesian Hostel Beach Club in Waikiki, Hawaii. A constant maelstrom in perpetual flux housing a hundred people that were almost certainly going to be a different group the next night. A place where strangers become friends, friends become lovers, and exotic destinations got exchanged like laundry gossip.

Hostels are usually interesting places, but the Polynesian was something different. It brought the people it wanted, forced them to interact, and brought significant change into the lives of nearly everyone fortunate enough to be touched by it.

It was born when the manager of another hostel, Tina, was accused of stealing. She was a Vietnamese refugee who had landed there after several years of voyaging with the poverty jet set. She landed there with nothing, saved, and planned on staying forever...then she was accused out of the blue. She quit and started the Polynesian Hostel Beach Club. She got the ball rolling and tried handing it off unsuccessfully to a series of managers who maintained the status quo until the right person was ready.

When I was ready, whatever spirit was in charge brought me to Hawai'i. Right on time. I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing until I was handed the keys to the Polynesian. What were the odds of a homeless anarchist being given an opportunity like this..miniscule unless something else were at play. Something else was definitely at play.

"You must say Kunbanwa..." this came from one of the tiny Japanese girls sitting with everyone else. "It mean good evening." Everyone laughed again.

A young Japanese-American with a Texas drawl came around the corner laughing to himself. " Oh maaan, y'all ain't gonna believe what just happened in the staff room." His laughter was uncontrollable. "Grant just took a sleepwalk and pissed all over Jason and Allison while they were laying in bed. Fuck man, I can't believe I just saw that shit." Again, laughter filled the garage and echoed down the block to Waikiki beach.

"He peesed on theem?" Daniel, the 20-year-old Polish guy stood up.

"Hey man, those are my shorts you're wearing!" Nick stood up too pointing at the blue surf shorts Daniel wore. "Why are you wearing my clothes?"

"I think it's okay because all my clothes dirty and I have no money. ..okay?"

"What?" Nick's voice got higher in pitch. "You can't just wear my clothes man...those are my clothes. Aw fuck it, just make sure you give em back."

Glossary

Armchair Adventurer someone who lives vicariously through the writing of others; i.e anyone who enjoys a good book while leading a “normal” life

Astro-Fascist usually hippies, these people refuse to believe that anything can be determined without the proper astrological reading i.e. “Of course you don’t get along, I’m sure he’s a Leo”

Bum (v) to borrow something i.e. bum a smoke (n.) someone who doesn't go anywhere without visible means of support

Crazies the people who live on the streets with mental difficulties, usually there because of the discontinuation of a government program or funding

Drifter 1) one who wanders with no tangible home 2) someone who wanders into town and everyone says “uh-oh”

Gang Bangers usually young men obsessed with the idea of earning ‘respect’

Hippie a person who tuned in, turned on, and dropped out in the late 1960’s or early 1970’s or a person who is attempting to live like the original hippies did. Too often today, the self proclaimed hippie can be identified by astro-fascist ideas, militant veganism, or too many opinions on the bumper of their welfare wagon. Often energy vampires.

Hobo someone who travels about from place to place, usually by train, without visible means of income

Homeless someone who has no home usually conjures up images of street people

House-less someone without a house, usually meaning someone who carries their home in their heart i.e. home is where you hang your heart

Jack (n) 1) knave, a playing card bearing a picture of a soldier 2)(*informal*)a fellow, buddy, or man 3) (*slang*) money 4) to lift or move something; to steal or rob

Ramble 1) to wander around in a leisurely manner 2) to take a course with many turns or windings 3) to grow or write in a random unsystematic fashion 4) a walk without a definite route taken merely for pleasure

Redneck a person who hates you because you are different than they are

Slack (v)to relieve tension or pressure (n.) the goal of a subgenius

Tramp (v.) to go on a walking excursion or hike (n.) a person who travels about, usually on foot without visible means of income

Traveler someone on a journey from one place to a series of other places, generally a lifetime occupation involving learning about other cultures and experiencing them, travelers are usually on a tight budget that has to last a significant length of time and are not to be confused with tourists

Trustafarian Usually a rich white kid advocating all sorts of protest while living on the income of their parents.

Tourist someone who has paid too much for their tickets, accommodations, and attractions and so feels that everyone they come into contact with is somehow responsible for their having a good time before they return to their home and career. The tourist is to be pitied for their useless attempts to see all of Europe in two weeks or see Alaska, the Caribbean, or the South Pacific from a luxury cruise ship

Vagabond Someone who moves around freely from place to place sometimes having visible means of income, sometimes existing without income, and sometimes bending the law to provide what they need.

Wannabee very dangerous person with low self esteem that has the potential to kill with little or no provocation, usually seeking approval from whoever they 'wannabe'

About the Author

Vago Chris Damitio is a Social Media Geek, Itinerant Novelist, Bumbling Father, Grumbling Husband and Amateur Anthropologist in addition to being an obsessive writer and journalist. You can find more about him, all of his books, and maybe even a pony at <http://www.vagodamitio.com>

Nearly ten years after first publishing this he is living in Morocco with his wife and daughter. You can find out more about his adventures at <http://www.vagobond.com> or email him at vago@vagobond.com

He will almost certainly email you back.