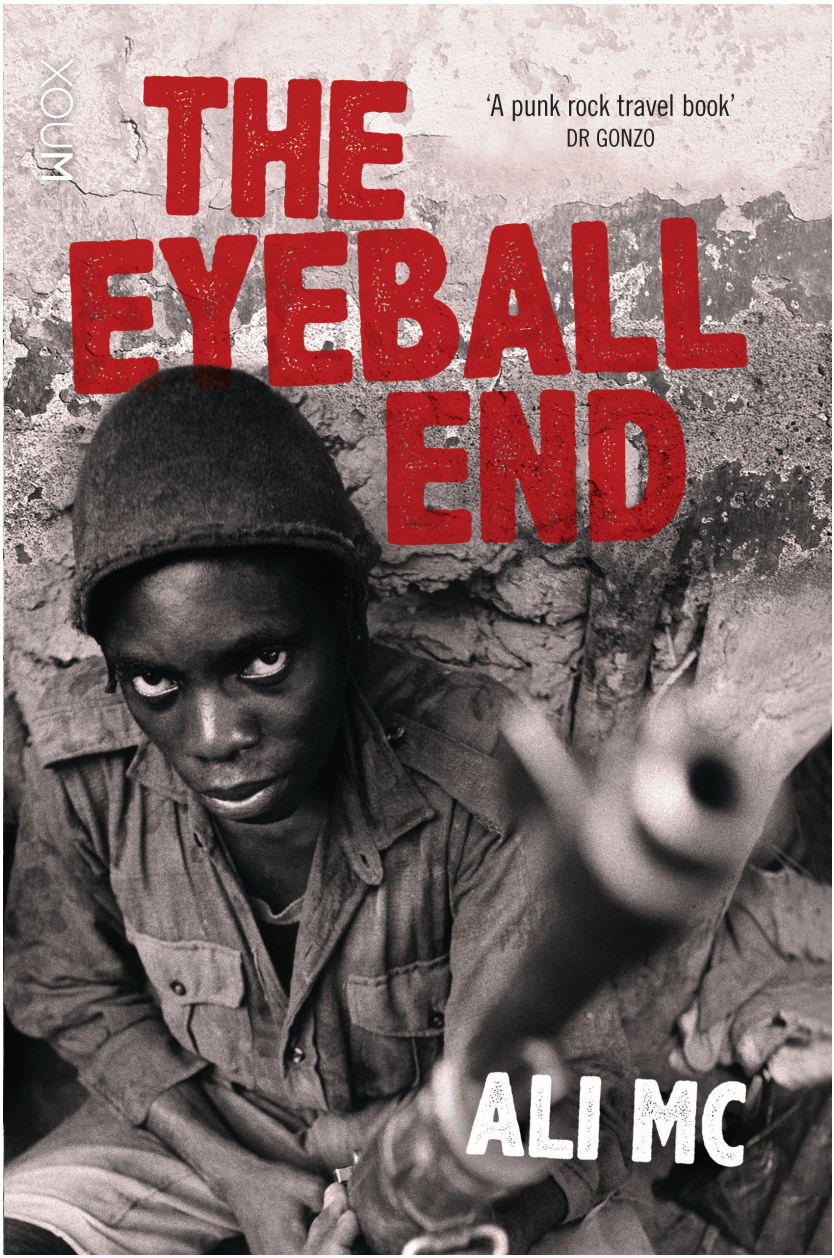
XOUM
THE EYEBALL END
'A punk rock travel book'
DR GONZO
ALI MC

THE EYEBALL END

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XOUM PUBLISHING
Sydney

Published by Xoum in 2015

Xoum Publishing
PO Box Q324, QVB Post Office,
NSW 1230, Australia
www.xoum.com.au

First published by Raspect Records in 2014

ISBN 978-1-921134-77-2 (print)
ISBN 978-1-921134-73-9 (digital)

Cataloguing-in-publication data is available from the National Library of Australia

Cover design by Xou Creative, www.xoucreative.com.au
Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

Papers used by Xoum Publishing are natural, recyclable products made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The manufacturing processes conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

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A face tells the story of what a person is thinking.
The eyes reveal the suffering.

Carol Jerrems

SUICIDE

I lit another cigarette and murmured *m'rock'm m'roll* as the ferry continued its dogged drift down the Irrawaddy River. My legs dangled over the side of the rust-worn railings, remnant of a bygone British era. I took a deep drag, the stale exhale tarnishing the homely smell of wood fires that hung low in the air.

Being the dry season the river is low, the view from the ferry the monotonous side of a sandbank. It almost feels as if the boat is standing still, the riverbank sliding past like a wind-up animation. I think back to the old Aboriginal fella I once met who described the first time he rode in a car. He actually thought the machine caused the bush to travel past, and that he was stationary. I now understand in some small way just how he must have felt.

I'd been travelling through the jungle for almost two weeks, but had yet to encounter any wildlife. Back upriver near the village of Sinbo, I'd seen a pink and grey parrot's head painted high up on the side of a cliff. It was an odd thing to see in the middle of the jungle, and made me curious – not necessarily *how* someone had painted it, but *why*. To be river-bound and not hear the comforting call of a wild bird or see the swirling shadow of a swift flock overhead made for a silent journey, the soft skim of water skirting the ferry the only sound.

Then again, Burma is a silent place. Even a few whispered words against the country's brutal regime can bring torturous repercussions. It is said that one in four people are government spies, so you don't dare open your mouth – for once you have spoken, you can be heard, and once heard, reported, and once reported, detained indefinitely. Fear chokes you like a black monk's curse, so it's easier to keep your mouth shut and share in the silent staring of the passing sandbank.

At night I've been disturbing the quiet by playing music through some portable speakers, sharing my collection of hip-hop, reggae and dub with one of the sailors. We sit on the deck and smoke cigarettes under

the warm night sky, listening to Wu Tang, Peter Tosh and Horace Andy. The sailor cuds, his mouth full of blood-red betel nut, a practice said to cause mild stimulation. Side effects, however, include extreme salivation, prodigious spitting and, over time, red-stained teeth not dissimilar in appearance to the nuts themselves.

Every so often, when the sailor hears a tune he especially likes, he nods his head knowingly and murmurs *m'rock'm m'roll*. At first I found it strange that he could relate to the reggae sounds of *sufferah downpression* and *cash-rules-everything-around-me* ghetto rap, but after a few weeks peering through the iron bars of Burmese life, little wonder he understands.

I light another cigarette and wonder what the fuck I'm doing here. My imagination tells me I have embarked on a bold Conradian voyage along a mysterious serpentine river, discovering the dark heart of humanity within a repressive police state. In reality I'm extremely bored and not a little lonely, and these foul-tasting Burmese cigarettes are making me sick. A nagging feeling of exploitation grinds away within, reminding me that I've chosen to immerse myself in a nation's

subjugation for the sake of gritty travel experience. I realise the unfairness of the transaction – after all, it's highly unlikely the betel-chewing sailor will immerse himself in *my* privileged Australian lifestyle anytime soon. I re-read George Orwell's *Burmese Days* for the third or fourth time and consider what brought me to this hushed, desolate place.

★

I was drunk when I tried to commit suicide one night. Society's expectations were suffocating, as if I were slowly asphyxiating from the dreary future on offer – numbingly mundane nine-to-five employment, a paralysing mortgage in a sterile suburb, two and a half reproductions of loathsome self, winter months cheering endless football games, lustful unfulfilled weekends at the pub, eventual, inevitable divorce, a slow-burning wick until the lights went out.

I'd spent my teenage years in New Zealand and had heard of a Maori belief that, when you died, you became a bird, a *Kuaka*. The souls of the departed would fly as one from the tip of Cape Reinga, following the setting sun over the Pacific Ocean

and beyond. I wished that were me sometimes, a *Kuaka*, free.

The insatiable lifestyles I saw every day repulsed me, and I had a sneaking suspicion that the way I lived blithely damaged the lives of others so very far away. I felt helpless knowing I could not even achieve the simple task of extracting myself from the day-to-day transactions of a one-sided society, let alone overthrow the old order and replace it with a fairer way of being, the Utopia dreamed of by Trotsky and Lenin and countless well-meaning undergraduates. I came to the realisation that the revolution wouldn't ever be televised, in fact it probably wouldn't even fucking happen, so in a lethal state of methamphetamine abuse and acute inebriation I traded in my well-read copy of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* for a useful length of towrope.

I've since experienced the hysterical screams of my next-door neighbour when she found her boyfriend hanging by the neck. The sound of her terrified shrieks and mournful sobs as she cut his body down halted any further thoughts of suicide I may have harboured. Occasionally, though, a feeling of hopelessness still sits inside me like I've

swallowed a deflated balloon. These days it comes not from substance abuse, but from having met brave and beautiful people trapped within the cruel course of history, with little in the way of life ahead.

Still, I often wonder about people who take their own lives. In their last living moments do they suffer from acute internal panic when they realise they *don't really want to die*? Are they overcome by a moment of deep regret as they remember words unspoken or love not shown? Maybe that's what they mean by *your life flashes before your eyes*. Perhaps, however, your existence was so shit that your flashing-by life reminds you why you're ending it in the first place. In that last moment, maybe you wish you'd had a kinder, less cruel life, and a sadness wells up inside you until a final tear rolls down your cheek and you

just
feel
peace.

★

On that boat in Burma, so far away from home, it was as if I were drifting in a different life. Perhaps this was the answer to that years-ago desire to escape

the stifling surrounds of society and enter into another world. People travel for all sorts of reasons – to explore new cultures and find adventure, some even to find love. Whether from the tedium of work or the crushing dissolution of a thirty-year marriage, travel provides an escape. You can forget about your past, and your present is what you make it. Travel allows you to be a different person, or perhaps even the person you really are – someone who fucks ladyboys in Khao San Road, or taunts death on a minefield. Me, I'd become the *Kuaka* I'd always wanted.

When I was a young boy – before the move to New Zealand – my father worked with a local Aboriginal community in Western Australia. Dad was pretty friendly with the mob and, as he was considered a good bloke, we would often have people knocking on our front door late at night. My bedroom was near the creaky old wooden verandah, and I would wake up and hear drunken, mumbled requests for money. My father never gave those old blackfellas money, but he always provided bread, milk and a bit of food. Money would have been spent on grog or thrown away on gambling, activities undertaken under cover of dark.

As a kid I wondered who these people were, where they had come from, and why they were roaming the streets at night. It didn't take long to figure out the world consisted of the haves – us, the white, middle-class family; and the have-nots – the poor old forgotten blackfellas. What I didn't understand was why most whitefellas despised Aboriginal people so much – surely there must be reasons why they drank so ferociously, fought so violently and were jailed so frequently.

Years later I realised the distinction I saw between my life and those of the blackfellas on our verandah resembled a microcosm of the world at large. I knew that I had been raised in a safe and privileged environment, but as I grew older I wanted to try to understand in some small way the global story of those old blackfellas so many years before.

I decided to spend the first decade of the 21st century exploring the refuse that two hundred years of history had spat out and left on the side of the road. Along the way my moral compass led me into many shades of grey, and I experienced more of the dark heart of humanity than I ever expected. I discovered that genocide, war, poverty and terror are not merely abstract words, but a harsh reality for people just

like me who held the same hopes and dreams of a peaceful life. Most importantly, though, I caught a glimpse of the beauty and forgiveness people have learned to hold on to in order to survive the ordeal that passes for life – something that impressed me even more than the grim success humanity has had in brutalising itself.

★

Footsteps break the silence and the sailor grunts as he plonks himself down on the deck, his legs dangling overboard next to mine. He lights a cigarette, pops a palm wrap of betel in his mouth and nods towards my speakers.

M'rock'm m'roll …

ACID DREAMING

The apparition finally spoke.

'Whad you want, brudda?'

Me, unthinking. 'I want sex.'

Shit. Instant regret. What did I say that for?

'Okay, brudda, you waid ere den. I come back.'

The apparition shuffled off into the warm tropical night, where fat round boab trees cast strange shadows across the flickering landscape, and the Milky Way arched over the steaming mangrove flats into the endless desert beyond. I'd heard from some local Aboriginal people that the stars were a mirror of earth's creation, that land and sky were linked eternally in past, present and future. I didn't understand what it meant at the time, but was starting to now, and I felt drawn into the night sky, imagining the stars to be flickering

fires in far-off spirit camps. They were beautiful and I couldn't stop staring, the acid causing a vein in my temple to throb rhythmically to the scuffling sound of insects in the sand.

I was sitting in the red dirt just outside Derby, an outpost perched on the edge of a great coastal mudflat in the far north of Western Australia. This was the land of the Wandjina – large, moon-eyed creation spirits of monsoon magic, bringers of lightning, terrible thunder and torrential rain and, with it, life to an ancient land. I was told the ancestral beings had painted themselves on rock formations across the Kimberley all facing east towards the rising sun. None of them had mouths – as one old lady said, they could communicate telepathically and, besides, what would they say to humans?

I had arrived in Derby after a two-day bus ride from Perth. I was eighteen years old and alone in this remote Kimberley town, with no restraints and no boundaries. At first I'd found the freedom liberating, but now things were starting to get strange as the acid I'd dropped earlier caused my imagination to race, fuelled by my surroundings.

I'd been drinking with my housemate, Ben, a tall whitefella who worked odd jobs on stations in

the area. He was older and more experienced in Kimberley life – I wasn't used to the hard-working, tough-drinking way people lived around here. We'd walked out to the mangrove swamp on the edge of town, where the crocodiles lurked and the fringe dwellers – Aboriginal people of neither the town nor the desert – made their camps.

We got comfortable under a big old boab tree and drank cheap cask wine. I imagined I was sitting in the same place where ceremonies had been performed for thousands of years, where the law of the Wandjina had been handed down for generations and initiation scars etched upon tough black bodies. These days, the elders still sat out here, but for a ceremony of another kind. A hundred years ago, the white man had arrived with a different law – one not of thunder and lightning and eternal erosion, but of immediacy and violence and chains. Dispossessed from their homelands and despised by the rest of society, there didn't seem to be much choice but to sit and drink away the pain.

The acid continued to pound in my head and the stars continued to speak, as much about the present as they did about the past.

★

Ben and I had arrived at the pub that morning, hoping it would be open. It was, so I rubbed my hands together, anticipating an early beer. The red dust I'd inhaled on the walk over clogged my nose and last night's hangover made my tongue parched – a cold beer would go down well. Outside the entrance to the pub, some whitefellas were waiting around, leaning against a row of Toyota Land Cruisers. This was strange – why were they standing around outside when they could be inside drinking? As I pushed past the miners, the cowboys and the ex-crims to enter the pub, Ben grabbed at my shirt.

'What are ya doin?'

He glanced around furtively and dragged me back. The whitefellas in their broad-brimmed hats and big belt buckles glared at me.

I looked at Ben with a hint of frustration.

'I thought we were here to drink. The bar's open – let's go get a beer.'

One of the cowboys laughed loudly and Ben pulled me out of earshot. He still hadn't released his grip on my shirt.

'You dickhead. That's the blackfellas bar!'

'What? Blackfellas bar … what the fuck are you on about?'

'The blackfellas bar! Whitefellas go round the back, you know, where they have pool tables and couches and serve booze in a glass jug. The front bar's for blackfellas – plastic chairs, plastic tables, plastic cups. Concrete walls so they can wash it all away at closing time. We ain't sittin in there, fuck that.'

'Oh, uh … I guess.'

This seemed like Apartheid, or Southern segregation, and it briefly crossed my mind to protest. I considered staging a sit-in at the front bar, but I didn't want to lose any teeth. People notice new arrivals in a small town, and already I wasn't liked. One night Ben and I had gone to watch an Aboriginal band called Silhouette play at the town hall. We'd gotten drunk and danced with the local mob and made a few friends. However, the cowboys and the crims did not approve and I was quickly labelled a nigger-lover. Besides, it was likely that the hardcore alcoholics in the front bar would resent my white intrusion and I'd lose a couple of teeth despite my good intentions. So I kept my mouth shut and followed Ben around the

back where the air-conditioning was crisp and the beers Tassie cold, and I could drown my conscience in alcohol.

I sat at the far end of the bar, away from the cowboys, repulsed by their beer guts and one-upmanship. My sense of black and white morality was being quickly eroded and I felt ashamed to be sitting in air-conditioned comfort while Aboriginal people were treated like second-class citizens out front. Deep divides had persisted for years in this town and both camps stuck to their own. Racism was flung both ways and in order to fit in you had to choose your side. I'd made friends with some of the local mob, but for all my empathy for the dispossessed, I still carried a flick knife in my pocket to ward off those young fellas who viciously whispered *you white cunt* over the back fence at night.

★

After a couple of hours drinking we met a drifter who'd just arrived in town. Barefoot and with a Hare Krishna haircut, he was more than a little annoying, but had some tabs of acid, so Ben and I bought a couple and dropped them on the spot. After

a few more beers, the walls of the pub closed in claustrophobically so we decided to walk home, shading our eyes from rainbow mirages reflected off hot black tarmac, the sound of passing trucks *chugchugchugging* in the distance. We finally made it through the front door and collapsed in our living room and packed some cones. Ben had recently made a bong out of a boab nut and some hosepipe, so we road-tested the new device with enthusiasm.

The living room was bare except for a couch and an aquarium we'd placed on a TV stand in the corner. We would find strange tropical insects and foul smelling beetles and let them loose in there, studying their escapades with stoned fascination. Out back in the toilet cistern clung four bulb-eyed green tree frogs, and one time while high from sniffing petrol we found a racehorse goanna and put it in a cupboard. It was also suspected a large snake lived in the kitchen, as occasionally we would hear slow shifting sounds emanate from under the fridge, but we were less than game to find out exactly what it was. It didn't bother us and we didn't bother it and in retrospect it was most likely our imagination.

At some point during the afternoon the sound

of yelling from across the street snapped us out of our abstraction, and we moved onto the front verandah to see what was going on. In the yard over the road a shirtless man was beating his wife with a piece of wood. It wasn't clear what the woman's transgression had been to deserve such punishment – it was possible the man was drunk and she wouldn't give him any more money for booze.

The fight must have been going on for longer than either Ben or I realised, as the police were already on their way. After a short scuffle the coppers shoved the bloke into the back of a paddy wagon while we slunk back inside, not wanting to get involved. The woman held her bloodied face in her hands and staggered after the police as they drove up the road, screaming, *Don't take him away! Don't take him away! Don't take him away!*

Eventually, night fell and Ben and I left the safety of our lounge room and the fascination of our insectoid silver screen and wandered out to the mangrove flats. This was where shadows flickered and the ancestors wandered, searching for a land they once knew.

★

She emerged from the darkness and sat silently under the arms of the boab tree, acknowledging us with a motion of her head towards our cask. We nodded our consent and she took a swig. The night was dark and it was difficult to see. I couldn't tell how old she was – perhaps thirty or forty? However, in these fringe dweller camps she could have easily been fourteen. Her red eyes focused on me. The vein in my temple began throbbing as the acid continued its deep neuronic burn.

'Whad you want, brudda?'

It was more of a statement than a question and it took me by surprise.

'I want sex.'

I have no idea why I reacted that way. Maybe the combination of booze, weed and acid had short-circuited my brain to produce an acutely honest response. I wouldn't say I wanted sex with *her*, but in all likelihood, given my inebriation, sex of some description would have been in the forefront of my mind.

The woman looked at me piercingly and stood up.

'Okay, brudda, you waid ere den. I come back.'

She slipped off her blue rubber thongs and

placed them symbolically on the ground next to me.

'See? I come back. That's why I leave dese ones ere. Dis way you know.'

The woman departed as quickly as she had arrived, her bare feet silent on the soft sand. Ben and I looked at each other – what the fuck had just happened? The blue thongs proved that what we'd witnessed was more than an acid apparition. My tongue tasted sweaty – this was some trip. I'd heard of Aboriginal people in the Kimberley experiencing trips of various kinds, astral travelling across time and space. It had always perplexed me why Aboriginal artists painted the landscape from a bird's eye view, but now it made sense.

I continued to stare at the thongs and was the first to speak.

'What was that all about?'

Ben was dismissive.

'Fuck knows. Fuckin gins.'

Gin – I hated the word. It was derogatorily used up this way to refer to Aboriginal women. Whitefellas who slept with them were called gin jockeys – I guess our visitor had thought that was us. A couple of young whitefellas hanging around a blackfellas' camp after the pub had closed. What else would we be there for?

The blue thongs fascinated me. The soles of the woman's feet had left an imprint of ingrained red dirt and I noticed the crevices, the fractals and the hollows that made her own unique stamp on the world. Out of nowhere she reappeared, making me jump.

'Okay, you fellas come wid me.'

She slipped her thongs back on and Ben and I stood up, as if in a trance. Neither of us even thought about staying put or saying no and we followed her across the mudflats, through the outskirts of town, and down a dark side street. We arrived at an asbestos house with holes smashed in the walls and were led to a backyard strewn with empty beer cans, greasy car parts and filthy mattresses.

Sitting on one of the mattresses was another Aboriginal woman. She was plump and had curly hair and smelt very drunk. The woman with the thongs sat me down next to her and led Ben away by the hand. The awkward silence was deafening, and the woman wouldn't look at me, her eyes fixed on the ground in front of her. All I could hear was the blood thumping in my temple and I began to worry about being caught out here by the owner

of the house or, even worse, the woman's husband. I remembered the beating I'd witnessed that afternoon.

A lucidity cut through the acid – there was just no way I was going to sleep with this woman. I had stumbled into a complex shade of grey but was quickly slipping towards a darker side of Kimberley life, one that I wasn't too keen to experience. Aboriginal women had been exploited on the frontiers for hundreds of years and somehow it was still considered normal. I didn't want to be a part of that.

'I'm sorry.'

I stood up to leave. I don't know why I said sorry, but I figured she must feel like shit being expected to fuck a random white guy. I didn't know if I was supposed to pay her or not, but either way, I needed to get out of there. I also wanted her to understand I meant no harm and had only found myself there by acid-induced chance, but my tongue refused to work. I could feel the chemicals seeping out of my pores, clinging to my body like a slick amphibious skin. Panic began to set in as the acid wore off and the reality of my surroundings became clear. I found my way out and, as I turned into the street, I saw Ben down the side of the house leaning up against

the fence with his eyes closed, seemingly lost in thought. On her knees in front of him was the woman with the blue thongs.

I walked quickly through the dark back streets until I found our house. The air was thick and threatening, and grey-black clouds grew tall above me. A breeze picked up, whispering like bullroarers through the grass, and soon I saw the first strike of lightning on the distant flat. Slowly, the rain began to fall. The Wandjina had returned.

THE NEW FACE OF AN OLD ENEMY

There's a whitefella across the road wearing plastic bags for shoes. His pupils are as big as a full moon on Koh Phangan and his behaviour suggests too much crystal meth. For some reason he keeps shaping up to punch a *tuk tuk* driver in the face and a cop strolls by, truncheon at the ready. Given my location, it's not hard to imagine how the man wound up on a heavy trip to spaceface wearing plastic bags on his feet, but if he's not careful he could end up on the floor of a filthy Thai jail.

My own eyes are heavy from jet lag and too much valium. I'd landed in Bangkok just hours earlier and was now standing in the tourist

epicentre of South East Asia eating a cheeseburger. Khao San Road, littered with tourist trash from across the globe, represents all that is wrong with Thai hyper-tourism, but it makes for great viewing. Wide-eyed neo-hippies wander among the knock-off sunglasses and cheap tie-dyed T-shirts while a gaggle of ultra-tanned young women stagger arm in arm towards a club. They've drunk far too many buckets and are stalked by an end-of-season football team playing 'spot the ladyboy'. White men walk hand in hand with dolled-up Thai women who masquerade as the girlfriend they couldn't possibly attract back home or a viagra invigorated post-marriage renaissance.

The incessant barking of *tuk tuk* and sly whispers of *you want pussy* add to the din, the sleazy offers accompanied by either a salivary grin or an alternate offer of suit alterations, *same same* but different. Back massage, foot massage, cock massage, three-, four- and five-way fantasies, ladyboys, little boys, anything you want, boy, is right here in Bang Cock.

★

This was my first day of a two-month lap of

Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. The acid-induced weirdness of that mangrove night in the Kimberley was a few years gone and I was about to enjoy a break from university before returning to Australia to deal with the real world. My time at uni had dragged due to poor marks and an increasing resentment towards academics content to peer at the world through a prism of dull textbooks. While I sat bored in the back of a lecture theatre, history was being made in the world around me, and I wanted in.

Besides living in New Zealand for a few years when I was a teenager, this was my first time overseas. I'd debated where to go first, but figured Thailand would be the ideal place to pop my backpacking virginity. I was also keen to visit Vietnam and Laos. The occupation of Afghanistan and the impending invasion of Iraq had dominated the news, the spectre of the Vietnam War loomed, and I'd become absorbed by the rock 'n' roll photojournalism of Tim Page, Sean Flynn and Neil Davis. I had also heard you could buy opium along the Mekong River in Laos.

Damn that cheeseburger tasted good. I bought another and returned to my spot on the side of

the road. The whitefella in the plastic bags had disappeared so I focused my attention instead on a couple of ladyboys strolling by. Stories involving ladyboys are rampant in Thailand. An American guy I met told me how he'd paid a ladyboy to give him a blowjob behind the back of a bar, claiming it to be the best head he'd ever experienced. Another fella described how he'd fucked a ladyboy thinking she was a natural woman, only to be notified of his deviation from staunch heterosexuality post-copulation. Only then had he realised why she'd used so much lubrication and, if the story is to be believed, he'd thrown up on the spot.

The ladyboys proved an ongoing mystery to tourists, and a constant source of conversation. People would openly wonder why so many young men decided to become women in Thailand – apparently every family was allowed one government-subsidised sex change. I'd heard that Buddhist culture frowns on homosexuality, so it was more acceptable to be a gay man in a woman's body – at least then you could still fuck guys. However, all of the stories, theories and rationalisations were just as likely to be truth as Thai myth and, when it came down to it, the only people who knew the hidden secrets of the ladyboy

world were the ladyboys themselves.

★

'Hey man, what are you up to?'

A Canadian – I could tell by the accent. However, this guy wasn't the usual maple-leaf-on-a-backpack Canuck. Instead, he wore a tie-dyed purple T-shirt and had dreadlocks down to his waist. The smell of unwashed hair and high-grade ganja that clung to his clothes gave me a hit a bit like a deep sniff of amyl nitrate. It was just what I needed to wake myself up.

'Hey bro, how are ya?'

'Great! My name's Vince, I'm from Canada. What are you up to?'

'Not much, just chillin, eatin my cheeseburger. What are you up to, bro?'

'Well … it's my birthday today, and I'm travelling by myself. I saw you on your own and thought you might want to hang out.'

'Sure. What do you have in mind? I'm a bit out of it … just got in this morning.'

'You want to go get a beer? We can figure things out from there.'

Minutes later, Vince and I were sitting in a nearby pub and had already cheers'd the first round of drinks to his twenty-fourth birthday. We talked the usual tourist shit about where we'd been, how long we planned to travel, scams to avoid and how cold Canada was compared to how hot Australia was. The beers kept flowing and after a while we decided to find something else to do, as we'd grown bored with our conversation. Vince stumbled on what sounded like a great idea.

'Let's go to Patpong!'

'Fuck. Patpong? Are you for real?'

'Yeah bro, it's my birthday, let's go check it out.'

Sheesh! Patpong – the sex capital of South East Asia. I was surprised Vince was so keen to go there – weren't dreadlocked hippies supposed to be all peace, love and harmony? Then again, this was Bangkok, where all previous morality got thrown out the window – especially after seven or eight beers.

'Hang on, bro, I need the bathroom. Wait here, I'll let you know if I'm up for it when I get back.'

I lurched into the toilet and unzipped my shorts but was too dehydrated to piss. Glancing into the mirror above the urinal, I first mistook myself for Vince – matted hair, scraggly beard, filthy brown

shorts and old leather sandals. All I needed was his enthusiasm for Patpong and we'd be best buddies. Why the hell not?

★

The night quickly descends into a blur. I remember being buoyed by the bright lights and technicolour sound of a Thai disco, the leering faces and loud English expletives causing my mind to whirl. I have visions of quick brown hands thrusting menus at me, slick whispered words offering a magician's bag of sexual tricks – *frog up pussy, ping pong ball up pussy, pussy set on fire, lick lick, you like?* Some claim they can provide us with *anything you want, kind sirs* and what we want is a couple of pills. Vince begins to babble about his recent travels through Cambodia, how he paid money to fuck two young girls 'for his birthday'. Just how young these girls were I can't really tell and I find his groundhog birthday celebrations somewhat odd. By this stage, though, I'm too out of it to think straight and after being tossed and jostled and dragged around, I eventually lose Vince in the throng.

A while later I sit down in a club where white

bikini girls with soft glowing skin flash sweet seducing smiles in my direction. More alcohol, whiskey straight, and two hands up my shorts, accompanied by two girls making head job motions, looking at me with well-rehearsed come-fuck-me eyes. The girls whisper *you like?* and all I can say is *yes, I do like, how much?* then *sorry, I can't afford the two of you* so I buy another whiskey and am left alone.

Then a gorgeous girl with shoulder-length black hair and long smooth legs slides in and sits on my lap, giggling anytime I say anything to her. I whisper *how much* and she giggles again and names her price and I realise I can *just* afford it. The acid-soaked night in the Kimberley flashes back but I dismiss it, the girl's smile reassuring as I'm led by the hand to a room upstairs where I exchange the heat and the noise and the lust of the club for my own private world of the same.

★

The humidity hits me like a wall and I start sweating badly. I'm standing in a deserted alley where the smell from the overflowing bins makes me double up and dry heave. The night is over, everything has closed and the streets seem morose and strangely

monochrome. A hangover begins to set in and my body feels numb and exhausted. I realise I have no fucking idea where I am.

We stand together in silence. The girl is now dressed in a pair of modest jeans and a tight-fitting top and doesn't giggle any more, looking more like a young lady who has just finished work. She begins calling her friends, seeing what's up, where the party's at. Only a couple of hours ago I had thought of her as an exotic fuck, but now she was just a regular twenty-something. My stomach heaves again and bile rises slowly into the back of my throat as a picture of the so-called gin on the mattress flashes through my mind. I feel bad as I don't even know this girl's name and she seems really nice. At one point on the way down the stairs to the alley she told me I had treated her differently from other men. Maybe I *was* nice to her – I couldn't really remember.

She asks me where I'm staying and I tell her the name of the hotel. She rings a taxi for me and as we wait, I discover I've run out of money. Fuck. I show her my empty wallet and she laughs like a friend and tells me not to worry. When the taxi pulls up she explains to the driver where to drop

me off and presses a wad of *baht* into my hand.

I give her a quick kiss on the cheek and climb into the back seat. As the taxi pulls away I count what she has given me – there's enough for the ride and more besides. I turn and watch her form recede into the steamy Bangkok night, wishing I'd met her another time, another place, instead of being just another drunk fuck. Halfway back to the hotel I realise I still don't know her name.

★

After Bangkok, I travelled north in search of opium. However, the fabled golden triangle of the Thai hill tribes failed to yield the crop I sought. One local told me the military had recently swept through the area, rounding up anyone who resembled an addict and throwing them into prison. Problem solved, Thai-style. So I caught a boat further into Laos, where I was offered opium by some kids in a village – three brothers aged from eight to fourteen. Not only did they sell the sticky brown substance, but also demonstrated how to smoke it, and I found myself in a strange situation getting high with kids in a bamboo hut. I remained stoned for the next few days while

I continued by ferry along the Mekong River, eventually flying from Vientiane to Vietnam.

Hot on the trail of war stories and grainy black-and-white glamour, I wound up on the side of a Hanoi street sitting on a child-sized plastic chair drinking beer out of a paper cup. I was with a young guy called Hong whom I'd met while reading a book beside Ho Kiem Lake. He'd approached me explaining how he wanted to practise his English and earn a few dollars showing me around his home town, and today was the tail end of a long day's sightseeing.

Hong told me he was twenty-two but he looked about fourteen. He was great company and had safely driven me around the city on the back of his scooter. That I'd survived Hanoi's hectic streets was reason enough to celebrate, so I was happy to shout Hong a few beers, fourteen years old or not. I raised two fingers in a peace sign, signalling *yes please, two more beers* to the old woman who owned the keg. She gave me a toothless grin and pumped another round of watery lager into our empty cups while I handed over a few *dong*. An old lady on the side of the road with a keg and two paper cups – this was as free market as you could find. Perhaps

the Yankee Imperialist Dogs had misunderstood Uncle Ho all along.

Hong wasn't the first young guy I'd met at the Lake. It was not uncommon for university students to introduce themselves and ask to practise their English, and one afternoon a young man shifted himself in my direction and began a conversation. He'd been reading George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and wanted to know if I was familiar with the novel. We discussed how the various themes related to Vietnam, a surprising conversation in what I thought was a tight-lipped country. The conversation turned even more surprising when the guy raised the question of sexuality.

'What is it like to be gay in Australia?'

'Um … what do you mean?'

'You know, is it okay to be gay in Australia?'

'Oh, okay, well it's not against the law if that's what you mean. Most Australians are fine with people who are gay, or at least, most of the people I know.'

'I see. It's just that here in Vietnam, it is very much frowned upon by your family.'

'And let me guess – you're gay?'

'Yes, yes I am.'

'That's too bad.'

We discussed his dilemma. His mother had already chosen a young lady for him to marry and he knew his family would ostracise him if he revealed his sexuality. It was a difficult situation and I felt sorry for him, but couldn't provide any answers. Apparently Hanoi had an underground scene for gay men that he was involved with, and he had a few friends who knew his situation, but his ultimate wish was to publicly express himself. Vietnam might have been ready for the free market, but perhaps not free sexuality. In the end, I wasn't exactly sure what the guy wanted, but he was pleasant enough to talk to and after a while he wandered off. I have since discovered Ho Kiem Lake is a gay pick-up area, which may explain why the young man looked a little dejected when he saw me handing money to young Hong the following day.

But as far as I was aware Hong wasn't gay, he just wanted to make a few bucks showing me the communist-kitsch of northern Vietnam. We rode out to the Hanoi Hilton, where plastic mannequins stood in for US soldiers in tiny cells, and passed a gold statue of Lenin, still standing proudly. We

waited in line at the Mausoleum to see the preserved corpse of Ho Chi Minh, and laughed at the painted pink tank in the National Gallery.

As I sat on my plastic seat, however, a shocking reminder of reality of the Vietnam War ended the day's enjoyment. A young man hauled himself past us in the gutter, stretched out on his stomach. He held a conical bamboo hat in front of him, begging for money, and his clothes were stained with sewage. On his elbows he wore makeshift protective pads, and he grimaced as he dragged his useless legs behind him.

Hong knew the young man and said hello. I dropped a few *dong* into his hat, a meaningless gesture given his wretched state of poverty and distress. As the young man hauled himself past us, I noticed his grossly deformed feet and understood immediately why he was debilitated this way. Agent Orange. This was the chemical used to defoliate the Vietnamese countryside by US forces during the war. In the decades since, residue had leeched into the ground and flowered in rice paddies and vegetable plots, causing tragic deformities in unborn babies.

The guy must have been of a similar age to me, and probably just wished he could play football, listen to music, go to university, drink beer and chase

girls – pastimes most guys in their early twenties were enthusiastic about. It was a horrible feeling knowing he would most likely spend the rest of his life crawling through the gutters of Hanoi begging for loose change. I suddenly didn't feel so good about drinking beer and congratulating myself on such a great day. I said goodbye to Hong and returned to my hotel. It angered me that the young man was left to lead a miserable life when he should have been paid to live like a king by the chemical companies who had made the defoliants and the government who had decided to drop them.

Later that night I switched on BBC World News. The invasion of Iraq had begun with the bombing of Baghdad. After some impressive footage of guided missiles blowing up Saddam Hussein's 'infrastructure', the newsreader cut to a clip about a twelve-year-old girl who lost both arms in a 'surgical strike' by the Americans. The newsreader referred to her as 'collateral damage'. The new face of an old enemy had shown itself once more.

★

A young man is chained to the frame of a metal bed. He shivers with fear as crocodile clips are attached to his testicles. A long wire stretches to an old car battery over which another man hovers, ready for the order to engage the electrical current. The young man was caught wandering the streets after everyone had been ordered to evacuate the city. Having just returned from visiting his family in the country, he hadn't known what was happening in Phnom Penh, and was quickly arrested. His glasses were taken along with his clothes, and after he was photographed by the military men, he was thrown into a cold concrete cell with no explanation.

The young man is no different to the other two – he does not have different coloured skin, nor does he speak another language. Like the man crouched over the battery, he has two children and both come from the same province in northwest Cambodia. Another man, formerly a peasant but now marked as an officer, stands at the head of the bed. The chained man can only see the upside-down underside of his chin and the grubby collar of his olive green uniform. The peasant in the officer's uniform does not understand why this cruelty is necessary, but has been told the young man is a threat to his way of life. As he is unable to read fluently, he recites the list of ten strict instructions in a halting voice, barking in clipped Khmer.

'You must answer my questions. Don't turn them away.

'Don't try to hide facts – you are strictly prohibited to contest me.

'Don't be a fool for you dare to oppose the revolution.

'You must immediately answer my questions – do not waste time.'

He looks up from the list, pausing to take a breath and decides to light a cigarette. The process takes some minutes after he discovers he lost his matchbook on the way over to the cell. The man at the battery saunters over and offers a light, then returns to his hovering position. The peasant in the officer's uniform takes a deep drag, exhales and starts reading again.

'Don't tell me about your immoralities.

'While getting lashes or electrification you must not cry at all.

'Do nothing, sit still and wait for my orders. If there is no order, keep quiet. When I ask you to do something, you must do it right away without protesting.

'Don't try to hide the fact you are a traitor.

'If you don't follow all the above rules, you shall get many lashes of electric wire.

'If you disobey any point of my regulations you shall get either ten lashes or five shocks of electric discharge.'

The man chained to the bed frame says nothing after hearing all of this. The officer stares at him intently then,

without warning, drops his cigarette to the ground and stubs it out with the heel of his boot. He turns to the man still hovering over the battery and gives him a quick nod. The two wires touch and horrific screams echo throughout the schoolroom followed by an unconscious silence. The men and women who sit naked in the adjoining cells shiver and lower their heads, waiting with fear for their turn to come.

None of them will survive.

★

My imagination ran wild as I read the Khmer Rouge Ten Commandments and tried to comprehend the horror of the Cambodian genocide. I was standing in Tuol Sleng – once a high school, then a torture chamber, now a gruesome museum.

In 1975, Pol Pot instituted his own brand of socialist hell when he wound the clock back to Year Zero and ordered every citizen of the newly renamed Kampuchea to evacuate the cities. His dream was to usher in an agrarian utopia by forcing everyone to work ceaselessly in the paddy fields, but by Year Four of his revised calendar nearly a third of Cambodia's population were dead from disease, starvation, torture and execution. The Vietnamese, no strangers

to these particular horsemen at the hands of the Americans, intervened.

Cambodia was a sad place. Tourists arrived in droves to see the skulls and landmines and torture rooms, yet it was difficult to make sense of it all, and hard to understand what purpose the display of so much cruelty served. At Tuol Sleng I had joined the queue to view the concrete cells, the rusty beds and the bloodstains. But what had affected me most were the photographs. The Khmer Rouge had immortalised every one of their victim's faces in a black and white portrait and now they were on show, row and after row, those piercing black eyes staring out in desolate despair. I contemplated those photographs for a long time, trying to read the minds of the people in them and imagine their final thoughts as the camera shutter clicked.

It was hard to escape evidence of the genocide while travelling through Cambodia. Outside of Siem Reap I spoke with children who lived in an orphanage run by ex-child soldier Aki Ra. The Khmer Rouge had kidnapped Aki at the age of five and forced him to lay mines in the forest and the fields. He now spent his adult years digging up and defusing the horrific devices, teaching farmers in

the area how to do this with no more sophisticated technology than a stick.

Despite Aki's extraordinary work, many people were maimed and killed each year, which is why the children lived at Aki's orphanage. One boy I spoke with saw his sister killed when she stepped on a mine in a rice field just outside their village. He had lost both legs in the explosion and told me that although life was hard, at least he was still alive.

'But you've got no legs.'

I didn't mean to sound insensitive – I just wanted to know how he *really* felt. I didn't want him to be polite and put on a brave face because I was a tourist. The boy sat and thought for a moment, then repeated his answer.

'Yes, I have no legs – but at least I am alive.'

I started to speak again, but he raised his hand to stop me.

'My sister, she is dead. I have no legs – *but at least I am alive*.'

Life was fucking tough when the better of two options was to live with no legs. I thought back to a night when I'd wanted to extinguish my own life and felt like I now understood the value of every last breath.

★

Fuck, is this guy gonna hit me again?

I lay on the floor of the hostel foyer, anticipating the next blow. My ribs, hips and thighs were aching where I'd been repeatedly beaten with a steel pole and I wasn't sure if I could face any more. The blood drained from my body and a fierce fear gripped me when the stockier of the two Vietnamese men locked the security door. I started to pick myself up, but was quickly held to the wall by my throat. I was trapped inside a hostel in downtown Saigon, drunk and in trouble over a girl, and when one of the men pulled a butcher's knife I knew the situation was not looking good.

★

I'd noticed Phuong hanging out with one of her friends, reading emails together in an internet café the day before, and deliberately sat at the computer next to them. It didn't take long before we started to talk and laugh, asking shy, smiling questions of each other. Phuong worked as a seamstress in a clothing store, sewing traditional silk dresses for

weddings and Chinese New Year. Her family lived in the country and, like many young people in the new Vietnam, she was trying to make a life for herself in the city.

We had agreed to meet the next afternoon at a café in downtown Saigon. To be honest, I had my doubts as to whether Phuong would show up. My experiences with South East Asian women were limited to that drunken, drug-addled night in Bangkok, and I didn't know whether dating a white stranger was appropriate in Vietnamese culture. I felt apprehensive about what I was getting into, but the thought of adventure and the prospect of seeing Phuong again drew me to the café the next day.

Surprisingly, she did turn up, arm in arm with the friend she had shared the computer with. Phuong looked even better than when I'd met her the day before and wore a short denim skirt, a white sleeveless top and, although she didn't need to, a touch of make-up. I ordered coffee for us all, and again we chatted about our lives. I found it difficult to tell her about Australia, not knowing whether she would understand the disparities between our upbringings, and remained content to listen to her stories about the small village she came from and her

large family who still lived there.

The late afternoon sun was starting to set when we decided to leave the café and walk to a nearby park. This time Phuong's arm was in mine, while her friend tagged along a few steps behind. As we sat on a park bench I asked her if she would give me a kiss and she blushed, making her all the more attractive. I wasn't sure if I was doing the right thing, but it felt good to be with her and she seemed to be enjoying herself as well. Phuong leaned over and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek and blushed again. It was as if I were back in high school, which was kind of a nice feeling.

It was nearly dark when Phuong and her friend said they had to leave, but we agreed to meet later that night at a club in the city. I also had to go, as I'd planned to have drinks with some English football types I'd met. Phuong gave me another quick kiss on the cheek and we said our goodbyes.

As I walked to the pub I remained curious as to why Phuong was keen on me. She didn't seem to be a prostitute – I had seen Vietnamese prostitutes in the bars and clubs and they were very aggressive. Perhaps pretty, impoverished Vietnamese girls often propositioned male tourists, assuming we

were a wealthy catch. It was hard not to feel like a walking hard-on with a wallet but I made up my mind not to worry too much about it and have some fun. It was quite possible that fun was all Phuong wanted as well – and who knew, perhaps she just liked me?

The first beer with the English football types turned into far too many and by the time I arrived at the club my romantic date had turned into a lad's night out. Phuong didn't seem to mind, though, she just wanted me to dance close to her and after a few more drinks it seemed time to take her back to the hostel. I'd initially been unsure of asking her to come home with me but alcohol had boosted my confidence, and I was both surprised and happy when she agreed to come.

We left the football types to their beers and general rowdiness and walked back to the hostel. The roller door was locked so I banged loudly to be let in. I was met by two Vietnamese night watchmen, pissed off about being woken up in such an abrupt manner. The men would not let Phuong into the hostel with me, and an argument ensued between me and the men in English, and Phuong and the men in Vietnamese. They thought that Phuong was a prostitute, and I

must admit even I was a little surprised when she pulled a student card out of her purse to prove she wasn't. But the men wouldn't budge, so I slammed the roller door shut with a loud *bang* and we began to walk back to the pub.

Seconds later, one of the night watchmen flung the door open, ran out into the street with a steel pole and pushed me to the ground. He started to hit me and crowd of people gathered under the dim yellow streetlights to watch. I was too drunk to feel much pain, but kept my hands wrapped tight around my head and squirmed as much as possible to avoid being hit in the skull. Amid the chaos, Phuong was nowhere to be seen.

The situation deteriorated when I was dragged into the foyer of the hostel and thrown into a corner. The roller door was then shut and locked and I was beaten some more, and held against the wall by my throat. Then out came the knife.

Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuck!

This was fucked up. I had a momentary flashback to a time when I'd caught a late night train in Perth and some street kids had pulled a knife on me. Back then I had been able to shake myself loose, clamber over a barbed wire fence

and run away – but this time there seemed no way out. The man with the knife started to walk over to where I was being held by the throat when I heard the rusty roller door wrench open with a loud *screech*.

There stood the English football types. I couldn't believe it, and neither could the Vietnamese. One of the English guys stepped slowly forward.

'Put down the fuckin knife, mate – *just put down the fuckin knife*.'

The English football types were a formidable sight and the Vietnamese man slowly put the knife down on the ground and stepped away. I hadn't realised that I'd been holding my breath and exhaled loudly, bent over with hands on hips, as though I'd just come up for air. I stumbled towards the entrance and was quickly surrounded in the safety of the football types. To my surprise, waiting on the footpath outside the hostel was Phuong.

It turns out she had run back to the club and told the Poms I was in trouble, and they had all run back to break open the door. With the violence diffused, they retrieved my bags and I left the hostel to check into another. My ribs were bruised purple and yellow but we all laughed about the incident, more in relief than in jest. I walked, untouchable, through dimly lit

Saigon streets to another pub to celebrate my close escape, with Phuong held tightly to my arm. It was my twenty-fifth birthday.

The next morning I awoke in a great deal of pain. Phuong had slipped out while I was asleep, and I lay on the bed alone. When I closed my eyes, flashes of the beating returned, and I realised it was only her quick thinking in running back to the pub that had saved me from severe injury, or worse. I rolled over and groaned from the ache of the bruises and the agony of a bad hangover, and spent the rest of the morning in a fitful sleep. Phuong reappeared later that afternoon, and we hung out over the next few days. Cash never changed hands nor was passage to Australia ever discussed, and I felt a twinge of sadness when I finally had to leave Saigon.

Phuong continued to write after I arrived back in Australia, even once confessing that she loved me, but the emails petered out over time as I assumed her feelings also had. Even so, whenever I find cause to celebrate life, I know that I owe it in some small way to her.

EVEN BROKEN GLASS

Fuck it was freezing. Walking downhill from the piazza made my lungs wheeze and my breath turn to fog in the cold night air. The doorbell announced my arrival and I spent a few minutes rubbing my hands in the warmth before finding a seat. I'd discovered this restaurant on my first night in town, and had become enamoured of its red and white checked tablecloths and photos of 1940s film stars, Italian kitsch.

A small, bright-eyed old man who called himself Papa cooked cheesy pepperoni pizzas and saucy mince lasagnes while his daughters, two tall, straight-backed twenty-somethings, worked as waitresses. It was obvious the restaurant was a source of Papa's pride, but the girls looked extremely bored and seemed constantly lost in

thought, perhaps dreaming of a far more exciting future than their Papa's pizza shop held.

I had no idea how to speak Amharic, so I would just point at photos of food on the menu, confident that eventually one of the daughters would deliver something delicious to my table. For some reason they reminded me of Phuong, and the quaint décor, steaming food and warm memory of lost love conspired to provide a comforting sense of the familiar.

Finally my food arrived and after I'd eaten, as he always did, Papa emerged from the kitchen. He would nod his head proudly as I commended the food, and give me a thumbs-up and a big smile. The food wasn't really *that* special, but it made Papa happy to think that I liked it. As I sat back nursing a contented belly, I reflected upon the circumstances that had brought me to this odd restaurant in a country more famous for famine than fine Italian cuisine.

It had been only a year or so since I'd backpacked through South East Asia and I had become bitten by more than just the travel bug. I'd set out hoping for some kicks and a grand adventure – both of which I'd found – but I also stumbled across some sad realities

which reminded me of those old blackfellas on the verandah all those years before. I couldn't escape the eyes I'd seen in those black and white photos in Cambodia and remained angered by the criminal use of chemicals that resulted in the state of that poor guy on the street in Hanoi.

When I returned, Australia felt bleached of all colour and I became enveloped by a deep depression, spending far too much time propped up against the local bar. I wondered about the people I'd met and the experiences I'd had. Having just visited Vietnam and seen the remnants of a futile conflict, the constant news of the Iraqi invasion infuriated me. The parallels seemed so similar and once again, civilians were bearing the brunt of brutal decisions made by men of questionable intelligence.

I began drinking heavily, started smoking crystal meth and experimented with pharmaceuticals, swallowing a large dose of Temazepam one night after a long spell at the pub. Fortunately, a friend of mine happened to call around very late that night, which woke me up from a near coma, but for weeks after that, I would lie on my bed during the day with the curtains drawn. I felt paralysed by feelings

of hopelessness and my depression compounded as I became angry with myself for seeming ungrateful for such a privileged life. The no-legged Cambodian kid kept popping into my mind, a constant reminder that I should at the very least be content to have a still-beating heart.

It was time to hit the road again.

★

Addis Ababa, 2 am – my first glimpse of Africa. The night was extremely dark and bitterly cold, the streets haunted by ghostlike shapes wrapped in white shawls. They begged at red lights with thin outstretched arms, their eyes large and round, cheeks gaunt, teeth protruding. On shop walls above the sidewalk where they slept hung huge advertisements, offering a part in the Pepsi generation, a chance to be the real thing. A few lone soldiers patrolled on foot, AK-47s slouched over their shoulders.

The thin outstretched arms of the night were few in number compared with the daytime beggars who filled the piazza where I was staying. As I stepped out to explore the city the next morning, I was confronted with a mass of humanity who crowded around me with

clawing hands; people who owned literally nothing, who slept in shelters made from cardboard and tin and were covered in dust and crawling flies. The streets swarmed with small children, while polio victims with deformed legs and mannequin heads lay vacant-eyed on a corner nearby.

I became overwhelmed by the sight of a young woman who begged from the gutter while breastfeeding twins. She seemed entirely reliant on whatever charity was shown and it struck me that as a beggar in this town, you were completely on your own – *no one gave a fuck at all*. There were no government services, little in the way of health care, and certainly no social welfare. I couldn't even begin to imagine what kind of a life the twins would have when they grew up – if they survived to grow up at all.

Among the obvious poverty, men and women in jeans and T-shirts, suits and ties walked to work or to the nearest café. What surprised me even more than the abject penury was the indifference of the other Addis residents. Perhaps, however, what I perceived as rude indifference was an acceptance that this was the way things were and there was little one could do about it. Me – I found it

difficult to walk down the sidewalk without tripping over someone or staring rudely in horrified disbelief.

At one point I handed some coins to a couple of children I'd seen sleeping in the street the night before. I thought I was committing a charitable deed, but instead the two children were attacked by some other street kids intent on stealing their coins. A few adults wandered over to see what the commotion was and word quickly spread that the whitefella was giving away money.

A throng of people surrounded me, yelling and tugging at my clothes in desperation. I heard the words *faranji!* and *David Beckham!* and desperation gripped me too. I struggled to extract myself from the mob, knowing chaos would ensue if people thought I *was* David Beckham. But it was true – I *was* sporting a mohawk similar to the one seen on Manchester United posters all over Ethiopia.

I ran into a café and shut the door behind me, and slowly the mob dispersed. One old woman with the skin of a tortoise continued to stare at me through the filthy window and I felt I should at least sign a fake autograph or give her a few *birr* – but instead I sat and ordered a macchiato, bewildered by what I'd just experienced.

★

The extreme poverty of Addis Ababa was confronting – I'd never seen anything like it before. I knew all the horror stories about Africa, and had grown up watching Live Aid, but I wanted to see some of the orphanages and charities and find some hope. So I caught a taxi to the Mission Hospital, a place of rest for men, women and children dying from AIDS.

When I arrived, however, I found a darkly depressing, cold concrete church, devoid of the apparatus one usually associates with modern medical aid – drips, clean white sheets, the smell of antiseptic, the sight of doctors. Instead, emaciated sufferers lay two to a bed. Only their eyes gave away a hint of life, those same eyes I'd seen in the photos in Tuol Sleng – deep black pools, as if I could stare through their pupils and into their souls.

An elderly Catholic nun, bent permanently at the waist, showed me around the hospital. As I weaved among the beds, I heard a faint sound echoing through the concrete halls. At first I thought I'd imagined it – such sweetness seemed

so discordant in this grave atmosphere. I followed the sound to the children's quarter, where I discovered a piercing melody floating down a staircase. Slowly I climbed with quiet footsteps as if I were approaching a beautiful bird, not wanting to disturb it mid-call. I wondered who could express such a savagely haunting song in this of all places.

When I reached the top of the staircase there she was, singing an old Amharic hymn to no one but her own imagined self. I stood and watched silently, but she must have sensed my presence, as she shifted her weight on the bed and tilted her head towards me. She was blind and disfigured, her head far too big for her malnourished body, and her eyes rolled back until only the whites showed. Her limbs protruded uselessly, crippled by polio, yet she sang such a mesmerising song that as I closed my eyes and listened, I experienced a sense of the beauty that had triumphed over the cruel circumstances that had thrown her into this crippled body.

Even broken glass can still reflect the light.

★

It's stinking hot and there are flies everywhere. After a torturous twelve-hour bus trip I finally arrive in glorious Lalibela. This is the highlands of Ethiopia, where holy Orthodox monks pray on bended knee in grandiose churches carved into the mountainside by the slaves of Ethiopian kings. I don't really care where I am – I just wanted to get off that bloody bus.

I had arrived at the station before sunrise to find a large number of Soviet-era buses parked at random, fenced in by rusty wire. It's dark and crowded and people mill about between the steel hulks, vendors yell destinations at you, children cry pitifully, goats bleat and chickens squabble and pickpockets snatch at your bags. Young men and women wearing jeans and sports jackets wait patiently alongside bearded old men in Biblical robes. Meanwhile, I'm still wiping sleep from my eyes and looking around for a stall selling coffee.

After a wake-up macchiato I try to find a booth to buy a ticket but soon figure the way the system works is to stand in one place and yell out your intended destination. Someone races over and thrusts a ticket towards you, snatches a wad of *birr* from your hand and pushes you in the direction of

a non-specific bus. Some kid tries to grab your pack and at first you think he's stealing it so you wrench it away, swearing *fuck off*. But then you realise he wants to haul it onto the roof of the bus on your behalf – for a fee. No problem – you're happy to contribute to the local economy, although you do climb onto the roof as well and make sure your pack is fastened down securely. The last thing you want is to arrive at your destination and find it has fallen off halfway between Dessie and Wurgesa.

You stumble onto the bus and another kid motions you towards a particular seat. You figure the locals know what's going on, so you sit where you're directed. The kid holds out his hand – apparently he's been 'saving' that seat for you – for a fee. You decide to contribute to the local economy again, although you're tired, stressed and really just want to tell the kid to fuck off.

You sit and wait. And wait. And wait. The sun starts to rise, its rays peeking pathetically through smog-smudged windows. The bus fills up a little, then fills up a lot. Your knees jam into the seat in front of you and your ribs are squashed by humans, chickens, children, crates of vegetables and suitcases filled to bursting. The worst part of the morning

comes as the bus drivers simultaneously start their engines. Every bus in the lot revs choking black diesel fumes so dense you could bottle it. The exhaust enters the bus and you pull a scarf around your face to protect your lungs from instant cancer. When an old couple squeeze in next to you with baskets piled up to their chins your body is bent at right angles from the seat, but they smile so you give them a thumbs-up.

If you're lucky your bus won't break down. The Amharic music blasting endlessly from small, distorted speakers might drive you insane, but you'll arrive in one piece and the scenery will be incredible. If you're unlucky, it'll be 40°C in the shade and you'll swelter and sweat in a crowded, smelly bus. Many Ethiopians in the countryside don't 'believe' in opening bus windows – to do so can apparently cause pneumonia. I don't know what ailment I'll catch sitting on an overcrowded bus full of unwashed peasants, but I'd be willing to risk pneumonia for some goddamn fresh air.

The ride might be uncomfortable, but it is never dull. Ancient ruins and burnt-out tanks animate the passing landscape. Armed rebels from long-forgotten conflicts threaten to hold up the bus.

Deranged, *quat*-eating old men stagger on board, begging for *birr* and ranting incoherently. *Quat* is a shrub that grows in the Horn of Africa and has been used as a stimulant for centuries. When its leaves are chewed for extended periods – say, a few hours – the chewer experiences a rushy, speedy effect. When chewed for extremely extended periods – say, a few years – the chewer may experience the onset of mental instability.

Despite the heat and discomfort, I arrive in Lalibela unscathed. The town is famous for its rock-hewn churches and mountain-high monasteries surrounded by deep ravines. Successive Ethiopian kings employed thousands of subjects to carve the monolithic structures out of the craggy, dry landscape in honour of the Christian Orthodox faith. Hundreds of years later, priests, monks and pilgrims continue to use the churches for prayer, fasting and religious festivals.

★

The churches proved impressive, the heat intense and the flies persistent. Lalibela was a serene place to wander about in the late afternoon, when the sun

hung low in the sky and people emerged from their homes to enjoy the cooler air. I was photographing some mud-brick houses when I ran into a group of boys practising a religion of their own – football.

'Hey *faranji*!'

'Where you from?'

'*Faranji!*'

'What your name?'

'Hey *faranji*!'

'What country you from?'

'Hey *faranji*!'

'You look like David Beckham!'

The boys ranged from around twelve to seventeen. The oldest wore a prized pair of football boots and a newish-looking Man U jersey. They kicked a ball about excitedly and rehearsed a few simple moves in a goal square outlined in the dirt. As a *faranji*, it didn't take long before I was spotted and quickly surrounded. The oldest boy – the one with the boots – settled everyone down and introduced himself as 'Coach'. He challenged me with an important question.

'Hey *faranji*, do you like football?'

'Um … it's okay, I guess.'

'We would like you to play football with us.'

'Oh …'

I shuffled my feet and made a sheepish confession.

'I've never really played football.'

It was true – I could only recall one other time I had played the game. It was back when I was a kid, and I distinctly remember playing with some older guys who forced me to be goalie. At one point someone kicked the football hard at goal, a shot I inadvertently managed to save with my testicles. I'd lain on the ground, eyes watering, feeling sick in the stomach.

I didn't want this painful incident to be an excuse not to play with these young Ethiopian guys, as I was enjoying talking to them and thought it would be a fun thing to do. I had to think fast.

'I may not have played much football, but I like David Beckham!'

'Yes, yes!'

The boys responded almost as one, laughing and pointing at me.

'Beckham is good player, yes! You have haircut like David Beckham! You can play on our team!'

Coach informed me they were warming up for a serious challenge against a crosstown rival and with that, I found myself playing my first game for St George Roha.

Football was an important part of life for these boys, as it is for boys all over Africa. I would see kids kicking around string balls or plastic bags full of rubbish in an attempt to emulate their heroes. But I only ever found one *fussball* machine – and that was set up on a street corner in football-mad Lalibela.

As we walked to the pitch Coach explained how the boys had been raised in a traditional culture steeped in religion, yet they faced very modern challenges. Famine, disease and war resulted in Ethiopia's young demographic having to face problems far outside their expertise or education – the ongoing AIDS epidemic, constant hunger and mass unemployment, compounded by alcoholism and drug use.

The boys came from isolated farms where pick-and-plant agriculture had barely changed for centuries, but lived with relatives in the town of Lalibela so they could attend school. None of them had ever travelled outside the region, yet their interest in the world was immense. Football represented relief from their troubled lives and an outlet for frustration. They had organised their own football competition to keep themselves out of

trouble and who knew – maybe one of them would be discovered by a European team some day.

The pitch was located at the bottom end of town, in a stony goat field. Two piles of rocks denoted goal posts at each end and I was told that the rocky ground often burst the balls and caused some pretty serious injuries. After every goal was scored, the ball would roll down a steep hill behind the makeshift posts and someone would have to clamber into the ravine below to fetch it. Coach was unhappy, as the local council had set aside a portion of land outside the town to build a proper field for the fledgling competition. Recently, however, the boys discovered the council had reversed the decision and sold the land to commercial developers instead.

The rival team showed up and the game began. I was directed by Coach to play out on the wing and jogged around, unsure what to do. But Ethiopians play football in a style of their own, with tough tackling and hard fought and won contests, and I soon joined in enthusiastically. The penalty for losing a challenge was not only a loss of pride, but the pain of picking yourself up, scratched and bleeding from the stony ground. Some of the boys were forced to leave the field after such rough encounters – they

were the kids who were known to have AIDS. In Ethiopia, the 'blood rule' is taken very seriously indeed.

My game improved the more I played and I managed to sneak in a few Aussie Rules-style hip-and-shoulders moves, bumping boys off the ball to gain possession. Coach thought this was a great addition and began to copy my technique. I ended up narrowly missing a shot for goal but set up a sure-fire winner, and joined the boys in their exuberant celebrations. After forty minutes of dusty huffing and puffing, the lowering sun signalled full-time. The boys of St George Roha had played their guts out – not for the glory of winning, but as a rare source of joy.

★

It was my last night in Addis Ababa and I'd returned to Papa's pizza joint for a final meal. One of Papa's daughters sat near the counter resting her chin in her hand, her eyes gazing into nothingness. I thought about Phuong again and wondered whether I'd missed the opportunity for an earthy existence with a pretty Vietnamese girl. I naïvely

dreamed of romantic village life, where children ran barefoot and corn grew in the fields and the pressures and expectations of the so-called First World did not exist; where I would be content.

The *clang* of the doorbell snapped me out of my reverie and I was surprised to see another visitor enter – generally I was the only person here. The daughter's eyes lit up and she quickly skipped over and embraced the young man. I finished my last mouthful of lasagne, gave a quick thumbs-up to Papa and slipped out past the so-in-love couple into the cold night air.

FIVE MURDERS A MINUTE

The bus twisted and turned as it drove south from Uganda. There was a reason why Rwanda had been named 'the land of a thousand hills', evident as the bus leaned dangerously around each corner. It had been a relief to leave the rugged browns and thirsty yellow of the Ethiopian landscape and I was entranced by the rich red dirt of coffee plantations and warm chlorophyll green of the jungle. I'd sat next to the guy in the red and blue bomber jacket on the bus for more than five hours, but it was only as we crossed the border that he finally spoke.

'Are you afraid to come to my country?'

It was an awkward question and I shrugged.

'Maybe. I don't know. Should I be?'

'Don't be frightened. We are no longer at war. Now we have peace.'

He tried to convince me everything was okay with a wide, white-toothed grin. I wasn't necessarily frightened, but I was a little spooked. I'd done some mental math while staring out the window – 800,000 dead divided by 100 days equalled 8000 people killed per day. This meant 333 an hour, or put simply, five murders a minute. Taking into account the method by which most of the victims were killed – machete – that was some fucking fast going. I'd seen strong, sinewy African workers hacking up firewood with machetes back in Uganda, and it looked like extremely hard work. To sustain that rate of killing required strength and stamina, something far more systematic than a spasm of blind hatred.

I glanced at the guy in the red and blue bomber jacket and managed a weak smile. He definitely looked Hutu – short in stature with broad shoulders and dark chocolate coloured skin. I'd heard that it was improper to refer to people by their ethnicity in Rwanda, but it was difficult to resist guessing. The guy told me he was going to visit some relatives who had moved to the States after the genocide and he showed me his passport, which contained an American visa. I wondered who his relatives were and why they had left the country. A moderate, Tutsi-led

party had been in government since the genocide, and although there had been some reprisals against Hutu, anyone with a clean conscience had no reason to flee.

I'd travelled to Rwanda with the intention of understanding more about the events of 1994. The international community had barely taken notice of the tiny country while its citizens had been slaughtered, and had paid scant attention to survivors since. I wanted to speak with people and try to understand how the country had recovered, how they managed to continue to live side by side and how they had coped with the massive loss of life. Given Rwanda's tiny geographical size and relatively small population, almost everyone had been involved as either perpetrator or victim.

I wondered again about the guy in the red and blue bomber jacket but figured there was no way of really knowing. Perhaps Rwanda would leave me with more questions than it would answer. He smiled at me and we laughed as the bus threw itself round yet another tight turn.

★

I met Claudine in Kigali, Rwanda's frenetic capital. Surrounded by hills and valleys, the city streets were typified by plush United Nations cars and white minibuses, market stalls and small cafés. The nights remained unlit by streetlights and the sidewalks became death traps of broken concrete and gaping holes leading straight into the sewer. The genocide had originated in the capital, yet apart from a memorial in the centre of the city, there was little to suggest that thousands had been massacred in these very streets.

Claudine owned a fashion shop and we'd begun chatting one afternoon. She was tall with light brown skin and had a gap between her front teeth. She told me she was glad that I had travelled to her country. However, she also showed concern that the only perception westerners had of Rwanda was that of the genocide. I had to confess that was me, but also explained that I wanted to dig deeper than six o'clock sensationalism. Claudine seemed happy with my explanation, and agreed to talk to me about her experiences.

That night I bought her dinner from a roadside café – lukewarm fish, oven baked chips, a fried banana and cold rice. Quality food was hard to find in Kigali.

Being a warm night, we found a park to go and sit in. Claudine quietly admitted that she was a Tutsi, something I had already suspected given her height and lighter skin. However, she also explained the new social policy of the government – there were to be no more Hutu or Tutsi, all people were now Rwandan. Whether this concept would work or not remained to be seen – after all, the genocide was still in living memory and surely there had to be repercussions. One of the catalysts for the killings was that the majority Hutu had felt disempowered – wouldn't a minority Tutsi-led government cause the same resentment to flare?

Claudine sighed. I felt bad bringing this up but it was an important question. She lowered her voice, not wanting anyone to overhear.

'It's possible. There are many Hutu who feel oppressed because there are Tutsi in government. Once again, many Tutsis hold good jobs. It's possible, very possible.'

I told Claudine about this other guy Charles I'd met in Kigali. When I'd asked him the same question, he'd shaken his head vigorously.

'Another genocide? Never again. Now we are *all* Rwandan.'

Then again, Charles had also told me he loved the Backstreet Boys, so I wasn't too sure of his judgement.

Quietly, I asked Claudine how the genocide had affected her. In school she had been taught that Tutsis were cockroaches and outsiders and snakes, and she'd cried after realising she was part of the hated race. Claudine was sixteen when the killing began and initially her family were protected, as they were known to be good people. However, as the genocide escalated, she saw her father hacked to death in a Kigali street and fled with her mother to a refugee camp in Goma, a small town in neighbouring Congo. Two years later, while still living in the camp, Claudine saw her mother shot in the head by a Hutu militiaman posing as a refugee.

After telling me her story Claudine became withdrawn and a deep sadness overcame her and, soon enough, the conversation fizzled out and we said our goodbyes with a kiss on the cheek at a dark crossroads. I turned on my torch so I could find my way home without ending up in the sewer, and as I walked down the road the light briefly illuminated a young Hutu man wearing a T-shirt that read *you're just jealous because the voices are talking to me*. I thought

again about Claudine's answer to my question and hoped the new policy would eventually wipe away the resentment, mistrust and revenge. The darkness closed in and the streets became empty as I made my way back to the guesthouse, leaving the city to the wandering souls of those who had been slain. Perhaps Claudine's father was among them.

★

Gisenyi was a beautiful but macabre town set on the banks of Lake Kivu, which borders the Democratic Republic of Congo. Prior to the genocide, the area had been a holiday destination for Rwanda's wealthy, but in 1994 it had become the headquarters of the Hutu militia, who called themselves the Interahamwe – 'those who attack together'.

A high proportion of Hutu lived in the Lakes region, and subsequently, nearly 90 per cent of Tutsis living in the area had been massacred. Because so many adults had been killed, hordes of neglected children now roamed around Gisenyi and it was hard to see what was going to happen to them all. There didn't seem to be any

aid organisations to assist them and they remained starving and homeless. Some days the children, mostly boys, would ask for money or food and a few even tried to pickpocket me. It was frightening to think that if *they* decided to all attack together I would be overrun by a pack of small children, *Lord of the Flies* with automatic weapons, a Liberia of my own.

The lake provided an escape and was a serene place to swim, the warm volcanic water relaxing. I would float out into the deep and stare across to the mysterious misty jungles of Congo, wondering what savage violence was being wrought. I'd read as much as I could about Eastern Congo but still couldn't get a grip on what was going on. In the last ten years millions of people had died in two massive wars that involved many African nations. Horrific atrocities – systemic rape, cannibalism and ethnic cleansing – were said to be commonplace. The conflicts had been likened to the First and Second World Wars, such was their magnitude, but I had struggled to find much written about them.

Every day I would walk down a dirt path to the lake, which took me through the grounds of an old brick church. Thousands of Tutsis had been

massacred here when the pastor told his own congregation they would find sanctuary inside the building. Many people had gathered, seeking safety from the Interahamwe, never dreaming their own pastor would strike a deal with the militia and lead his flock to slaughter in order to save his own life. Those trapped inside were killed when grenades were flung through the windows and young men with muscular, field-hardened bodies methodically hacked away at heads, limbs and torsos.

I peeked inside the church once as I walked past. Dust hung in the air above the empty pews, and stained glass windows were caked with dirt and soot. I backed out hurriedly when a door banged, its hinges creaking as a strange breeze blew up from nowhere.

★

'So. Where do you want to go?'

The border guard between Rwanda and Congo was tall, incredibly black and sported an early 80s Eddie Murphy moustache. I wanted to cross from Gisenyi into Goma, where Claudine had lived in the refugee camp. Through the clouds to the

northeast I could see Mount Nyiragongo, an active volcano that had erupted over the camp not long after the genocide. Thick jungle clung to one side of the road and Lake Kivu fringed the other and I probably could have swum across to Congo if I'd had the guts to do so. Instead I was heading in legit, and paying $60 for the privilege. Whether a Congolese visa cost that much or I was getting stooged by the Eddie Murphy guy, I wasn't sure. I tried to come up with an answer to his question.

'Where do I want to go? Uh, I don't know. I was just gonna have a look around.'

'Yeah, but where do you want to go?'

'Do I have to go anywhere? Can't I just wander around?'

'You have to go somewhere. Goma is too dangerous for you to wander around on your own.'

That gave me pause for thought. I wanted to see the refugee camp outside of Goma, where Claudine had witnessed her mother shot as a teenager, but realised it wasn't somewhere you just strolled into. And I didn't want to tell this guy my plans in case he thought I was a journalist and didn't let me into the country. Basically, I didn't really know what the fuck I was doing, but shit, this was *Congo* – just saying the

name conjured up images of grand adventure.

'Do you have internet here?'

Most of the internet cafés I'd been to in Africa were run by someone who spoke English, so I thought that might be a good place to start.

'Sure. There is an internet café up the road.'

'Okay, I guess I'll go there then.'

So the Heart of Darkness has internet. Neat. The border guard stamped my passport with a bang and laughed heartily.

'A souvenir from Congo!'

He waved a motorbike taxi over and told the rider where I wanted to go. I jumped on the back and we drove straight into Goma, a tropical, humid town with white stone walled buildings and muddy side streets. The driver dropped me off at the internet café, and quickly drove away. I strolled inside to be greeted by a young guy neatly dressed in a collared shirt, sitting behind the counter. His name was Tony, and my prediction was correct – Tony spoke English. I didn't bother to get online – Central African internet was extremely slow and most of the time not worth the trouble – so I thought I'd sit in front of the slow-moving fan that was cooling the store and chat to Tony.

After some simple small talk I tried to prise some information about the Congolese conflicts from him, but perhaps unsurprisingly, Tony side-stepped my questions. He told me Hutu militiamen might still live in the area, but he couldn't say for sure. Strange. This was the very town the Interahamwe had migrated to after the genocide and, alongside various other armed factions, continued to indulge in theft and ethnic cleansing. This was all happening in the jungles on the perimeter of Goma, yet Tony apparently had no idea what I was talking about. He didn't seem dodgy, but it made me wonder – did he have something to cover up? With so many people involved in the conflicts, how could you tell if the person you were talking to was just a regular guy who sold internet by the hour or someone who had taken part in a pack rape? Who was Tony, really? Or the Eddie Murphy guy – he'd seemed kinda nice and funny – had he hacked someone to bits with a machete?

While travelling around Rwanda I had seen men wearing pink uniforms working in the rice fields. These were men who had been convicted of participating in the genocide and rather than be locked up in prison, they were forced to perform community service. The pink uniforms not only

made it difficult to escape, but singled them out as being responsible for the murder of Rwanda's citizens. In Goma, however, I saw no pink uniforms – just a lot of dangerous guys who, according to the border guard, would severely fuck my shit up should I wander about alone. I asked Tony if it were possible to visit the refugee camp, which lay just outside the town.

'Impossible. You will be held up in the jungle. There are still many soldiers out there.'

So, Tony knew a bit more than he let on. I played dumb in an attempt to elicit more information.

'Soldiers? Really, are you sure? Like who?'

But Tony just glared at me contemptuously and I figured it was time to leave – perhaps rather than having something to cover up he just thought I was a prying white arsehole and wanted to be left alone to run his internet business. I paused to consider my options.

'Is this place really too dangerous for me to walk around?'

Tony sighed loudly, exasperated.

'Yes. Quite simply, you are white. It is dangerous. Many firearms.'

'Uh, okay. Maybe I could go to a bar?'

'Okay, sure, let me walk you there. Keep your head down.'

At least he was decent enough to provide an escort, but at the same time, I started to think this little excursion into Congo was a bad idea, a waste of time and money. I wasn't any closer to Claudine's story, nor had I increased my understanding of the Congolese conflicts. Tony deposited me in a bar situated back down the road near the border crossing and I took this as a hint I should get the fuck out of town.

As I sat and drank a beer, I noticed a 'No Smoking' sign behind the counter. Weird – this is Africa, you can smoke anywhere. I looked closer – that wasn't a cigarette and it didn't say 'No Smoking'. It was a shotgun, and the sign said 'No Weapons'. I snapped a photo and thought of a line in a Sex Pistols' song, *a cheap holiday in other people's misery.* No wonder Tony had looked at me with such contempt. Here I was, using my freedom to come to a place where the majority of locals probably just wanted to get the fuck out. I thought it best if I did too, so I finished my beer and headed back to the border where, instead of swimming across the lake back into Rwanda, I

fronted up to Eddie Murphy and paid another $60.

★

I jumped ankle deep into the sloshy red mud and started pushing, the squelching noise and rowdy laughter making this a fun, communal activity. The bus had departed for Kibuye early that morning in a frenzy of activity, but was now broken down halfway round a bend with another bus heading in our direction. There was no chance of a crash, as Rwandan buses barely drove above second gear, but our immobile heap was blocking the one-lane mud road, so all the passengers joined in to push it to one side.

There had been a long wait in Gisenyi for the bus to show up that morning and, when it did, a scrum of people had formed in competition to clamber aboard. Bags and possessions were hauled onto the roof and children were shoved through windows as the ticket seller attempted to create order out of the desperate chaos. I'd been told buses rarely passed through Gisenyi, and that another one might not come for days. With my Congo trip aborted there was nothing left for me to do

here, and I was as anxious as the locals to get out of town. However, being the wealthy white guy, instead of pushing and shoving through the crowd I simply bribed the driver with a dollar and was waved in through the front door with a wink. Eventually, we departed in a roar of belching black smoke, leaving many disappointed faces by the side of the road.

After much pushing and sloshing in the mud, the driver and a couple of other guys somehow revived the engine and we set off again. Having travelled around the country for a week or so, I was oblivious to the merry-go-round feeling of a hundred twists and turns and soon dozed off. After some time, however, I was woken up abruptly by a strangely out-of-place Etonian accent.

'You are snoozing.'

I opened my eyes and looked up to see a small, black, bald head beaming down at me.

'Correction. I *was* snoozing.'

'Where are you travelling to?'

'Kibuye.'

'Ah. So am I. We shall talk.'

'Sure.'

I rubbed my eyes awake and moved over so the little bald man could sit next to me. He wore a woolly

tartan vest, an odd garment in this climate, but the style matched his strangely upmarket accent. He introduced himself as Alphonse and I asked him about his pronounced English, a rarity in French-speaking Rwanda.

'Where did you learn a word like "snoozing"?'

'I went to school with missionaries in Bunia. They taught me to speak the King's English.'

'What are you doing travelling to Kibuye?'

'I live there.'

'Oh. But aren't you from Congo? Bunia is in northeast Congo, isn't it?'

'Yes, but I live in a refugee camp in Kibuye. I left my home some time ago, and now I am a refugee.'

'So let me get this straight. Congo is so bad they sent you to *Rwanda* for safety?'

'Yes. In my country there are many bad things happening.'

'Jesus. How's the refugee camp?'

'What do you think? It's terrible.'

Alphonse had been happy studying in Bunia when one of the rebel factions arrived in town intent on 'recruiting' more soldiers. They killed his parents and demanded he join them, but Alphonse

refused. The rebels then tried to kill him as well, but somehow he escaped into the jungle and found his way to Rwanda. Alphonse explained that kidnapping and violent coercion often occurred in the Lakes region of Congo, with young men and boys taken as soldiers and young girls as sex slaves. I asked him who was financing these gunmen, but he didn't seem to know.

'I don't know the causes. I just see the consequences – suffering.'

Alphonse and I talked openly for the rest of the journey. He was highly educated and could speak five languages, and was desperate to leave Africa. He asked about obtaining sponsorship as a refugee to Australia, but I had to admit I didn't know much about that. I promised to stay in touch, but when I eventually arrived home and sent him an email, I never received a reply. Besides, there were a lot of political wranglings in Australia regarding so-called boat people at the time and sadly, it seemed our society didn't have a place for a little bald guy in a woolly tartan vest who could speak five languages.

★

The sound of singing is always attractive. Whether it emanates from a pub, church or backyard I can never resist taking a look to see what's going on. This particular day, the sound of singing led me to a red-brick church where children played on the lawn out front, dressed in their Sunday best. I stood in the doorway to listen to a choir in full voice, soulful in colourful Kinyarwandan, the congregation united as one in a chorus of gospel joy.

Kibuye is a beautiful small town nestled among the countless coves of Lake Kivu, where volcanic islands seem to float above the reeds, and lush green hills are dotted with people endlessly tilling the land among the ghosts of 11,000 Tutsi souls. It was horrifying to learn that so many people had been massacred in such a serene part of the world.

After the choir had finished and the praise quietened down, a young man dressed in a grey suit and skinny black tie began strumming an acoustic guitar and singing a song. Although slightly out of tune, what the young man lacked in ability he made up for in enthusiasm, singing boisterously with a triumphant look on his face. He finished and a minister in a sombre grey suit proceeded to

deliver a grave-sounding sermon. I was welcomed to sit on a pew in the back row by an older guy who partly translated the minister's words. He spoke of truth and honesty – what stems from your heart will come from your tongue, and what comes from your tongue will either kill you or make you stronger.

As I sat there listening to the minister it was hard not to think of the church in Gisenyi, where the pastor had betrayed his people. Many had become embroiled in the genocide and committed unspeakable acts in order to avoid being accused of being a Tutsi sympathiser, and I'd heard stories of people killing their friends, next-door neighbours, even family members, in order to save themselves.

Like the Khmer Rouge, the Interahamwe had issued their own set of Ten Commandments, which included exhortations for Hutu men to stay away from Tutsi women, demands for all political positions to be occupied by Hutus, and warnings about the alleged dishonesty of Tutsi people. If Rwanda was a church-going nation, then why had so many quickly forgotten the original commandment 'thou shalt not kill'? It was a question with no easy answer.

The sermon ended and I wandered outside and sat down on the warm grass as the congregation filtered

out. The young man with the guitar and the skinny tie spotted me and walked over to shake my hand vigorously, his smile eager and his eyes alight.

'I'm so happy you are here!'

He grinned broadly as I stood up to meet him.

'My name is Safari Jean-Pierre. I played the guitar today.'

'Yes I know, I saw you. You were very good.'

'I saw you too! I saw you from the stage and knew that I was very lucky to have you listening to me! I knew that when I saw you, today would be a great day.'

I sat with Safari Jean-Pierre on the grass in front of the church and he told me how he loved writing songs and had written over a hundred. He enjoyed singing to God and looked forward to playing at the church services, something he did as often as possible. Safari Jean-Pierre also asked me a rapid string of questions – *Where are you from? What do you study? What family do you have?* I told him about my fairly mundane life in Australia, a little about my family and friends, and explained why I had come to Rwanda.

When I asked Safari Jean-Pierre about his life, his answers were far from mundane. His parents,

brothers and sisters had been hacked to death in front of his very eyes. His own life was spared, for reasons he claimed God only knew, and he had spent his childhood in an orphanage. He now lived with his uncle, and dreamed of one day studying history, geography and philosophy, to become a Minister of Justice.

It was incredible that these atrocities had occurred, and yet Safari Jean-Pierre still seemed happy and held such obvious joy in his heart. I asked him what had helped him survive the trauma.

'I write songs in my traditional language and perform them at church.'

While his answer was fair enough, it still didn't explain how he coped with the tragic magnitude of his life experience. I tried to probe deeper.

'Okay, sure. But Jean-Pierre, many people deal with their problems through music. I get depressed sometimes and find playing music helps me to be happy. But your whole family was killed in front of you – that's a very different situation.'

'I also play volleyball. Volleyball helps.'

'Volleyball. Right. But you realise, where I come from, if something terribly shocking happens to you, there's a doctor to help you and people you can talk

to … but you … you play volleyball?'

Safari Jean-Pierre shook his head.

'I understand what you are saying, but here we are poor. And the genocide happened to everyone. I'm really not that special. Sometimes I get a pain inside my head, so I pray to God.'

I told him how I saw the prisoners in pink uniforms tilling the fields in Gisenyi.

'Is this what happened to the people who killed your family?'

'It was one man who killed them. He was in prison for a while, but now he lives back in Kibuye.'

'The man who killed your family lives here, in Kibuye?'

'Yes.'

Shocked, my head began to spin. Kibuye is a small town.

'Surely you must see him now and again?'

'He attends my church.'

'The church we were at this morning? This one right here?'

'Yes, he was there, sitting near the front.'

This was getting harder to comprehend, and I wondered if I was hearing him right.

'Sorry, Jean-Pierre, I'm having trouble understanding this. The guy who killed your entire family was at the church service this morning? Where we just met? Where you played your guitar?'

Safari Jean-Pierre spoke slowly, in a low, quiet tone.

'I have sat with him, and prayed with that man – and yes, even forgiven him. You do not understand. The genocide was a terrible thing. But here in Africa, many bad things happen. People die, there are wars. One must forgive and move on.'

My mouth was dry and I was lost for words. I could only assume Safari Jean-Pierre had gone through a community justice process I'd read about called *Gacaca*, where the perpetrators and victims undergo a process of justice and reconciliation. This was a way of circumventing the lengthy judiciary system and prevent overcrowding in prisons, and also addressed the reality that people like Safari Jean-Pierre would see their loved one's murderers again and again in their tiny villages and towns.

I was still a little stunned when Safari Jean-Pierre stood up and said his uncle was waiting for him, so we said a quick goodbye. I couldn't help but feel ashamed and even embarrassed by the troubles that

had made me depressed back in Australia – they seemed so insignificant in comparison. I left the church humbled by this young man who had found the spirit and grace to forgive under the most extreme circumstances. I can only hope Safari Jean-Pierre realises his dream of become a Minister of Justice – hell, I hope he becomes head of the UN.

★

Did he just drive through the border checkpoint? Fuck. Where is he going? Is this where the monastery was supposed to be? I tapped the driver on the shoulder and he turned and smiled. We'd just crossed into no-man's land, the space between the Rwandan town of Cyangugu and a Congolese town called Bukavu. I wasn't sure what was going on, and the driver didn't speak English. All I knew was that only a few months before, Bukavu had been overrun by a militia group called 'Rally for Congolese Democracy' and, in the course of one weekend, an estimated 16,000 women had been raped. This wasn't somewhere I wanted to be.

From Kibuye, I was trying to reach Murambi,

in the south of Rwanda, but I could only travel as far as Cyangugu and would have to stay overnight. The only place to sleep was a Catholic monastery situated between the borders of Rwanda and Congo, where an old nun showed me to a bare concrete room. The sky was darkening rapidly and I dumped my bags and walked down to a nearby restaurant, hoping to order some food. However, a group of soldiers had taken over the place, playing pool and drinking beer, their rifles and machine guns propped up against the tables and chairs. I decided not to bother eating and sauntered past them back to the monastery to spend the night in my room. My stomach ached with hunger, but it seemed much safer there.

The room may have been safe, but it was crushingly depressing. I'd run out of reading material and there was no television, so I spent the night writing in my journal, reflecting on specific details of my life that I hadn't thought about in years. The sobering and ultimately saddening experiences I'd had in Ethiopia and Rwanda seemed magnified in my mind, and there was nothing to distract me. Outside was only the potential for serious trouble and there was nowhere else to go, so I tried my best to sleep on the hard thin mattress. Instead, I lay half-awake

in a dreamworld where visions of my childhood were disturbed by the drunken laughter of sadistic rapists.

★

The half-built school in Murambi was eerily quiet and low grey clouds covered the surrounding hills in a fine mist. Except for a small boy hanging around the entrance, the place was deserted; it seemed strange that he would even be here in the first place. The boy was around eleven years old, and somehow already knew what I'd come here to see. He took me by the hand and led me with only the slightest hint of reservation.

We arrived at a long concrete corridor with doors on either side leading into classrooms. The doors were all tightly locked with wire, but the boy began to open one, untwisting the wire deftly. He'd obviously done this before, perhaps for some other morbidly fascinated traveller, or for his own sad remembrance. He finally pushed open the door and motioned me to enter, and as I stepped inside the grey concrete classroom, I quickly recoiled in shock.

Around fifty corpses lay on the cold concrete floor, preserved with powdered lime, bodies frozen at the moment of death.

Nothing could have prepared me for the shock of seeing so many violently twisted bodies; once living, breathing human beings. I never realised how many small children had been brutally killed, and just how small a small child could be. Smashed skulls, visible machete wounds, arms without hands, legs without feet, bodies contorted in the unnatural posture of a hideous and painful death.

These were people who once had hopes and dreams, a mind that could love and a heart that could play tricks on you. Some of the bodies were naked, while coloured scraps of clothing clung to others. I noticed one which still had tufts of curly black hair on its head and another, a cross around its neck. All wore the same tragic, terrified expression on their lime-white faces – more of a question than an expression – the question of why?

I began taking some photographs, more as a method of distancing myself from the scene than picturing death in an artistic framework, but it became too much and I backed out of the classroom, reeling from the smell and feeling weightless with

bewilderment. The boy was still standing in the corridor, motionless. Fighting back tears I pointed to the neighbouring classroom.

'Same?'

The boy nodded his head.

'Oui.'

I pointed to the next classroom.

'Same?'

Again the boy nodded in affirmation.

I pointed to the next, then the next, then the next, then the next. There were nine more classrooms. The boy continued to nod his head, while I slowly retreated to sit on the concrete steps outside, and shakily lit a cigarette.

FAKE DRUGS AND ALBINO BODY PARTS

The beat-up white minivan I was riding in clattered to a halt when the paved road from Rwanda turned to mud at the Burundian border. Cripples, beggars and crooked traders pecked about like crows, competing for US currency, while soldiers on both sides of the border kept nervous fingers on triggers. Wearing rubber thongs and untucked T-shirts none of them looked particularly *generalissimo*, but I figured to stay on the safe side and consider anyone with a gun in charge.

After the half-built school in Murambi, I didn't want to see any more. I began to get depressed, and strange, aggressive dreams haunted my sleep. I found myself lonely and isolated by the language

barrier. Few people spoke English in Rwanda and, as I'd steered people to talk about the genocide in my attempt to understand their experiences, every conversation I'd had for two weeks revolved around the traumatic memories of mass murder. It was starting to take its toll.

I resolved to head south into Burundi in order to catch a ferry that would take me down Lake Tanganyika into Tanzania. A lazy four-day boat ride through unspoiled jungle and picturesque mountains sounded like a great way to unwind after the stress and mental strain of Rwanda. However, the ferry left from Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi where, in a situation similar to Rwanda, conflicts had been fought between Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups.

Although Burundi had not experienced genocide on the scale of its northern neighbour, acts of ethnic cleansing had been committed for decades and a civil war had raged for years. A ceasefire had been declared in the capital but the countryside was still an unstable free-fire zone. I had been told it was safe to travel through Burundi, but also knew enough by that stage to know the word 'ceasefire' didn't mean a great deal in these parts.

After being waved through the border, the van

had continued on the road to Bujumbura. Patrols sauntered up and down the roadside and wide-eyed soldiers huddled around machine-gun nests. Soldiers searched the minivan at frequent checkpoints and thankfully I was ignored. I wasn't sure why the checkpoints were necessary, but as the lady sitting next to me explained, the soldiers kept one eye open for rebels and the other open for bribes.

It was a steady downhill drive to a large basin where Bujumbura sweltered under the hot tropical sun. We drove into a sprawling city of wide, dusty streets and faded colonial façades, sidewalks cluttered with people, all eyes turned to the ground. Waves of refugees had flooded the city during the ceasefire, intent on escaping the violence in the countryside, and the desperation was palpable. Young men on street corners scraped together spare change selling single cigarettes, and small gangs clustered in the mouths of darkened alleyways, fists full of US dollars and Burundian *francs*. White armoured cars topped with bright blue helmets roared past, foreign eyes peering, heading out to where I came from, Indian country, engines revving.

The lady I'd sat next to had directed me to a guesthouse at the end of a dirt road littered with burnt-out cars. The price advertised on the chalkboard was reasonable – 7000 *francs* per night, around $7. The proprietor wore an old singlet stretched over his fat belly and smelt badly of alcoholism. He showed me to a concrete room with a wire bed, a cold-water shower and a glassless window.

I had no idea when the ferry would leave, so I simply gave the proprietor 7000 *francs* and figured if I continued to give him the same amount every day, I would have a room for the night. We returned to the guesthouse entrance where he counted my cash and, satisfied with the amount, opened his fridge and held out a beer. I shook my head *no thanks*, to which he shrugged his shoulders, and with a quick slam of his hand cracked the bottle open on the counter, happy enough to drink it himself.

Back in my room I dumped my pack on the floor and took a cold shower to wash away the grime of the trip. I sat on the side of the bed with a towel around me, contemplating what to do for the evening. A curfew restricted all movement after nightfall and, as it was already getting late, there was no way I was

going to run the risk of heading out. I resigned myself to hanging about the guesthouse slapping at mosquitoes and went back to see the fat proprietor about that beer.

★

A sliver of moonlight knifes through the open door of the mud hut. I can hear them outside, looking for me – slow footsteps and quiet, angry murmurings. I try to remain as quiet as possible, afraid that the thump thump thump *of my heart will give me away. A man has paused outside and I can see his muddy black boots and olive green trousers. I catch a glimpse of his cold, black face in the silver moonlight and immediately he spots me. Our eyes lock and, without a word, he points a handgun to my head, slowly squeezes the trigger and*

BANG!

I woke with a jump – that fucking dream again. I was sweating, but that could have been from the humidity as much as the fear, but now that I was awake I knew I wouldn't sleep for the rest of the night. Instead, I'd lie staring out the window, waiting for the sun to come up. I had a slight headache from the beers I'd drunk on the verandah

the night before and dark thoughts rushed through my head, a scramble of images and strange stories, my mind ticking overtime.

The stress of the journey was getting to me, and now that I was in Bujumbura I'd become anxious something terrible would happen. Only recently had the realisation hit – I could be beaten, stabbed, robbed or killed and no one back home would know. In Burundi, deterrents against crime did not exist. The whole fucking country was a crime scene. I figured once I made it onto the boat and out on the lake I would be fine, but for the next few days I would be plagued with anxiety. The first rays of the new morning sun finally appeared, and I dragged myself out of bed. Let's hope I can find this goddamn boat.

In order to catch the ferry I first needed a ticket, and in order to buy a ticket I needed to find the port authority office. However, the office did not appear on the map I had so I had no choice but to walk into the city and simply start asking around. By the time I arrived downtown I was sweating profusely from the humidity and could feel eyes following me like shadows down every street, a frightening sensation making me sweat all the more.

I timidly approached a group of young soldiers standing on a street corner coolly smoking cigarettes. With AK-47s slung nonchalantly over their shoulders, wearing dark sunglasses and olive green T-shirts, they were rock stars of the violent Third World, *combat chic*.

'Excuse me, which way is it to the port?'

A shrug, a drag of a cigarette, a look away. This wasn't starting well.

'The port? I need to buy a ticket for a ship.'

Not even a response. These guys were hardcore, immovable. Disconcerted, I walked around the next corner and immediately became lost. I approached another soldier, this time an officer smartly dressed, his shirt tucked in and boots brightly shined. He gripped his rifle close to his chest, its magazine locked and loaded. Three other magazines were taped to the first one for fast reloading. That this guy was so obviously prepared for a fire-fight showed how flimsy the so-called ceasefire was.

He smiled at me, his portly belly and bristled moustache making him seem kindly, and my heart caught a glimpse of hope. However, as I started to speak he shook his head, *no English*.

I thrust my map towards him.

'Le port?'

My ludicrous attempt to speak French fell flat and the soldier glared at me with incomprehension as his smile faded and his moustache began to look military and stern. It dawned on me that perhaps no one in the city knew how to speak English, fewer could read maps, and in reality, no one gave a fuck. And why should they? These guys were too busy worrying about the next bullet.

A crowd started to gather, curious about my predicament. I began to feel unsafe as people pushed towards me, their hands reaching for my bag. A guy grabbed me by the shoulder.

'What you lookin for, man?'

The guy was young and wore a baseball cap, and spoke in a Jamaican-African accent. He pulled me aside from the crowd and we walked around the corner where it was quiet. I explained how I needed to find the port authority office.

'Ha! Ah know de way.'

From the way he spoke he seemed very certain, so I made a quick decision to trust him.

'What's your name, bro?'

'Freedom.'

'Freedom, eh. How's things? Where did you learn to speak English?'

As we walked, Freedom explained that two years before he had illegally emigrated to Kenya, where he'd worked as a 'beach bum' in Mombasa, selling sex and souvenirs to European tourists. He was eventually picked up by the Kenyan police and taken to prison for being an illegal migrant, then deported back to Bujumbura.

He told me that stories such as his were not uncommon among the young men of Burundi. Only half of the country's adult population had any form of schooling, there were no jobs, and one in ten were infected with AIDS. Unsurprisingly, they sought a better life elsewhere or joined one of the fighting factions. Existence in a well-armed group was safer than life on your own on the streets, and food, drugs and sex became readily available when you had a rifle in your hands. Life is shit when you're at the eyeball end of an AK-47 so you want to make sure you're the one with the finger on the trigger.

We found our way to the office and I bought a ticket for the ferry that left in a couple of days time – the MV *Mwongoza*. I felt a huge sense of relief to

be leaving Rwanda and Burundi behind. Now that I had my ticket, Freedom asked me what I was doing for the rest of the day.

'Okay, let's consider the options. There's a curfew at 8 o'clock tonight, yeah?'

'Yah man.'

'And the zoo is closed, yeah?'

'Yah man. Starving people eat de animals.'

'Okay, well, I'm pretty much out of ideas. Any suggestions?'

'Yah man, let's go to a party!'

I wasn't too sure what kind of party Freedom had in mind, but at this point I didn't really care. There was literally nothing to do in Bujumbura. No bars, no restaurants, no bookshops, no museums, *nothing*. Any kind of party would be more interesting than sitting on the verandah back at the guesthouse listening to the fat proprietor slurp on his beer.

Freedom led me to the docks by the lakeside, where cargo boats anchored beside large warehouses. We walked around until we came to an area where some small crates had been arranged into a bar and old shipping containers were being used as bedrooms, a makeshift portside bar and brothel. Heavy dub music pumped out of a pair of worn-out speakers

and two young guys danced listlessly. They seemed pretty wrecked, bad drugs Freedom told me, low-quality heroin. Hard-faced women dressed in worn denim miniskirts and dirty T-shirts sat on faded plastic chairs drinking beer and chain-smoking cheap cigarettes – I guessed they were the girls who were paid to fuck. The guys who worked on the boats sat around drinking beer and rum, mean motherfuckers who smuggled drugs and guns alongside human body parts and stolen cars from the slums of South Africa to the frontline of Burundi.

We found ourselves a seat and Freedom waved to attract the attention of a big-bottomed woman wearing a colourful headdress.

'Hey, Mama Africa!'

Mama Africa swanned over and spoke to Freedom in French, taking our orders. Freedom translated for me.

'You want a beer, man?'

'Coke thanks.'

'No problem. Wait here. Ah go find a joint too.'

Freedom wandered off to score some pot while I sat back trying to look relaxed. A group of sailors playing pool eyed me suspiciously – I was the only

white person in the place, and quite possibly the only sober person as well. A teenage boy spied me from across the bar, sauntered over and sat down next to me. He handed me a scrap of paper on which he'd written his phone number.

'If you lonely, call me.'

His breath was quick and boozy.

'Uh, thanks.'

I looked at the scrap of paper and dropped it on the ground and wondered why Freedom had brought me here. I was glad I ordered Coke and not beer – this was not a good place to get wasted in. Freedom returned with the joint and introduced me to the pool-playing sailors. When they realised I was a friend of his, their manner changed and it was handshakes all round. Freedom lit the joint and, in between tokes, explained how he got by.

'Me and my friend are in business together.'

'Oh yeah, what do you do?'

'We sell cornflakes and cigarettes to South African soldiers working for the UN.'

Cornflakes and cigarettes? What a strange combination. I hadn't realised South African soldiers were so keen on cereal and wondered what the word 'cornflakes' meant – this was one part of the world

where United Nations soldiers had been caught sleeping with child prostitutes. Who knew what really went on?

'But doesn't the UN employ local people? Can't you get a legitimate job?'

'Yah man, there's jobs. But they all go to the big man's family.'

Freedom explained how the 'big men' in political power used international aid and NGO assistance to provide jobs and money for their own family. The sailors agreed the civil war had been a waste of time, and was the result of a power vacuum. Rival factions fought for control of the government and access to the treasury, while impoverished young men fought and died in the countryside, and young women from the ghetto were forced to fuck in filthy beds in order to make ends meet.

The joint was passed round and progressively everyone became stoned and melancholy, and the conversation tailed off. I'd been in Bujumbura for less than two days and already wanted to leave. I was appalled at the shocking way people were forced to live. But I was lucky – my Australian passport and $60 ferry ticket meant I could leave

Bujumbura anytime. I couldn't imagine what it felt like to have no escape from such a crushing reality.

★

I finally boarded the *Mwongoza* late in the afternoon, and weeks of tension drifted away in the cool evening air. After stashing my pack in my cabin, I met two young Burundian guys named Jean Claude and Jack out on the deck. They were open to conversation, and explained how they were travelling to South Africa to start a new life. I shared my impressions of Burundi, how it seemed like a tough place to live, and commended their bravery in leaving.

Jean Claude and Jack looked at each other sheepishly, and confessed they only had $100 between them and were planning to cross the border illegally – a contact in Mozambique would smuggle them to Johannesburg in the boot of a car. After being trapped in Bujumbura for a few days I could understand why they would resort to such measures but, even so, their plan sounded extremely risky. For many Burundians, countries like Kenya, Zambia and South Africa offered a rare chance of employment and education but the cost of visas and work permits

often remained far out of reach.

The *Mwongoza* set sail under cloudy weather, and a stiff breeze blew up off the water. The boys looked nervous. Jean Claude was twenty-five and a national lightweight boxing champion. He said his coach was angry as he was leaving on the eve of a big competition. Jack confirmed Jean Claude's skill, stating that he was 'famous' in Burundi and had appeared on national television. I shadow-boxed with him for a few a minutes and quickly got my shadow arse kicked. Jack was a skinny little guy who didn't say much and seemed to look up to Jean Claude. Neither of them had ever travelled outside of Burundi, and their expressions became sad as we left Bujumbura behind. Sitting on the deck, the two boys shared their frustration and anger with me.

'The war. It isn't about Hutu and Tutsi. It's not even about race. It's about money, politicians and businessmen.'

Like Freedom, Jean Claude was certain those in power stole a large portion of the foreign aid. Good jobs were handed out among the family or to those who could afford to pay a substantial bribe.

'The politicians, they do not plan for our

country's future. They only use their power for themselves, so they can have a good life for the time they are on earth.'

I had heard this before, from the stoned sailors at the cargo bar. Given the low average life expectancy of most Burundians, saving towards a comfortable retirement was hardly a priority. Street level survival says to hustle how you can and spend it while you are still alive to do so. Unfortunately, the people in power were also from the street, so the same rules applied to the country's coffers. Life at the top of the African pile can be very short-lived, so money is quickly spent. For Jean Claude and Jack, taking their chances and heading for an unknown future in South Africa was better than the endless wait for things at home to improve.

★

After sailing overnight, the *Mwongoza* docked at the Tanzanian port of Kigoma and anchored alongside another ship, the MV *Liemba*. At daybreak we transferred our luggage and signed in with officials. I already had a visa for Tanzania, but the boys had to pay $50 for theirs, sapping half of their money. They

were very angry when they boarded the *Liemba*, saying the Tanzanian officials had cheated them. South Africa seemed like a long way away for these guys with only $50 in their pockets.

I left Jean Claude and Jack to their troubles and began exploring the boat. Although I was keen to keep speaking with the boys, I also wanted to try and enjoy the journey down the lake and it was only now, with the symbolic stamping of the Tanzanian visa, that I felt safe for the first time in weeks. The clear morning sky and crystal blue water proved the perfect antidote to the anxiety I had felt and I sat on the side of the deck and smoked a cigarette, watching baskets of dried fish and fresh pineapples being loaded into the hold.

I walked among people lying on the wooden deck, sprawled on mattresses amid their few belongings, boxes of local produce, mangoes, corn and bananas. Dark-skinned women in colourful headscarves and flowing dresses quietly nursed infants while Muslim men wearing the traditional *kofia* and *kanzu* engaged in lively discussion. Young East Africans sported Nike clothing and Adidas footwear, and listened to Swahili hip-hop and American gangsta rap.

Below decks the oily engine whirred and cranked, the sound so loud and the smell so bad I was astonished workers could stand to be down there at all. The *Liemba* had started life as the *Graf von Götzen* in what was then known as German East Africa. To prevent it falling into British hands during the First World War, it had been sunk in 1916. However, in 1924 the British resurrected the boat and renamed it the *Liemba*. That the original engine was still running today was due in no small part to the efficiency and ingenuity of these African workers.

Even at night the *Liemba* did not cease to be a hive of activity. The ship stopped frequently, allowing local villagers to load and unload cargo – generally sacks of dried fish bound for Zambia or Congo. As the ship's engines ground down to a low, idle rumble, a horn would blast through the night signalling its arrival.

People living in beachside villages would paddle out of the humid darkness in simple wooden boats, and women scrambled on board to sell baskets of food. Passengers on the wooden deck woke from their slumber to accept the noisy propositions, while fishing boats lit up the distant darkness as people cast nets to catch small fish in the dead of night.

★

The next day I met up with Jean Claude and Jack again. They had made friends with another young Burundian named Mustafa, who had left a few years back and now lived in Johannesburg. He was on a return leg to South Africa, having delivered a car to Bujumbura. I suspected he was stealing cars and transporting them to Burundi's capital to be sold at an inflated price.

Mustafa had successfully entered South Africa via the route Jean Claude and Jack were attempting, and it occurred to me perhaps he was their contact to guide them through. Mustafa explained the dangers of the journey, one which countless potential border jumpers do not even complete. Many people try to swim across the Limpopo River between Zimbabwe and South Africa and drown, while others are attacked by crocodiles and hippos. Most people pay to be smuggled in the boot of a car, but tough new laws meant those caught would spend an indeterminate time in prison, only to be deported and wind up back where they began.

I asked Jean Claude and Jack if they were

prepared for what faced them and both nodded with determination. Once again, it was Jean Claude who spoke.

'My dream is to one day return to Burundi. I want to change our country so that our children have the opportunities that we don't. Then they will not have to resort to this kind of risk.'

I thought about our own so-called 'boat people' policy in Australia. It was quite likely the majority of asylum seekers who made the dangerous and expensive journey to Australia had the same vision as Jean Claude. All they wanted was the chance for education, employment and a peaceful place to raise their family. Sadly, when they arrived they would be arrested by tall white men with sharp nasal accents and placed behind razor wire.

Four days later I jumped ship in Kasanga, a small village in southern Tanzania. Jean Claude and Jack were heading further, to Zambia, then onward to South Africa. It was difficult to say goodbye and leave the last few weeks behind. Claudine, Alphonse, Safari Jean-Pierre, Freedom, Jean Claude and Jack – all had shared sad and difficult stories with me, and I felt like I was walking out on them. Guilt nagged away at me and I wondered if I could have done more

to help them. But besides offering a small amount of money, there was little I could do.

We shook hands goodbye, and I left the ferry and started walking up the hill towards the village. When I reached the top and turned to see the *Liemba* pulling away, I spotted Jean Claude and Jack waving from the slowly receding stern.

HEIGHTENED SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Tanzanite crystals are some of the most valuable stones for metaphysical healing. The natural Tanzanite stone has a high vibration.

Karen bent low over the table, offering a glimpse down her top. She took the shot and accidentally sunk the white ball. This was a bad game of pool – Karen seemed nervous and I was too tired to care. Even though I'd thrown myself under a shower to freshen up before meeting her, I still felt filthy from a long day in the red dirt.

We'd met beside the hotel swimming pool the day before. Karen had been sunning herself on a towel and I had spotted her attractive long legs and, next to her, an enticing packet of American Marlboro Lights. I figured if I introduced myself

she would hopefully offer me one, which would make a pleasant change from the cheap Tanzanian cigarettes I had been smoking. That she could speak English meant I could also have a regular conversation, something that hadn't happened in the last few weeks. That she was female meant, if I played my cards right, I could potentially get laid, something that also hadn't happened in the last few weeks.

Karen described herself as Japanese-American, and worked as a legal assistant for the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. Based in Arusha, the tribunal was an elaborate and expensive legal scheme established by the United Nations that aimed to bring perpetrators of the genocide to justice. Karen – like many people who work for the United Nations – was genuine in her desire to help, but complained that the endless red tape hindered any real progress. She explained that in the decade since the genocide, the tribunal had only convicted four people, yet had spent millions of dollars. Perhaps the *Gacaca* system I'd heard about was worthwhile, after all.

We talked fluidly together and agreed to meet up again the following night. But now, halfway through a game of pool and couple of beers, I was struggling to focus and my mind kept wandering back to the

day's events. After missing a sitter on the black I sat down and took another long scull of my beer. Karen put her hand on my arm as if to say *what's up* and I thought fuck it, why not just tell her about my day?

★

Tanzanite is named after the location in which it is found. Tanzanite crystals may be blue, purplish-blue, colourless, yellow-brown and greyish-blue. Tanzanite gemstones are quite expensive.

'And if I sell *this* stone, I will earn about US$800.'

The atmosphere was musty and insidious. The Indian man hunched over a cloth in which he clutched a small, purple stone. I didn't dare pick it up, not because I was afraid of its powers – I just didn't want the guy presuming I wanted to buy it.

'Who buys all these stones?'

He had a huge variety in his Arusha store and seemed to make a decent living from the sale of them.

'Tourists.' He licked his lips, leaving a thin residue of spittle on his upper lip. '*Rich* tourists.

And they are exported overseas, too.'

The sales pitch continued.

'The stone will change colour throughout the day. These are some of the rarest stones in the world and they are only found here, in Arusha.'

I put my hand up to stop him.

'You mean, they're found in Mererani.'

He looked up at me with a quick, suspicious eye.

'Yes. Mererani. How do you know about Mererani?'

A Canadian guy I met in a club in Dar es Salaam had told me about Mererani. I'd had a number of drinks, and over the pounding dancehall bass I bragged about my experiences in Rwanda and Burundi. I blabbed on drunkenly about how I was on a mission to explore the *dark soul* of the world, bro, the genocide was some *fucked up shit* and Burundi, Christ you never seen so many fucking *machine guns*. I didn't mean to brag, but I'd been travelling by myself for so long I think I just needed to tell someone about it. The Canadian didn't mind listening and had some stories of his own, about Haiti and other fucked up places he had worked in.

He then began to tell me about this mine site he'd heard of, up near Arusha, in northern Tanzania.

Generally tourists went to Arusha to explore the Serengeti or climb Mount Kilimanjaro. Just nearby though, was Mererani, where apparently people were killed all the time and even the police were too afraid to go. The miners dug up these stones that were incredibly valuable but it was as dangerous as *fuck* and all the badass Hutu militia guys and Congolese warlords lived there. The Canadian started getting excited and told me if I wanted to experience some mad shit, I should *definitely* go there.

So it was upon the drunken prompting of a random Canadian that I found myself in the Indian's tanzanite shop, looking to visit the mine site for myself.

'Is it possible to visit Mererani?'

The Indian's back straightened with a snap and he bent forward again, reaching into my face. He hissed at me in a low, quick breath.

'Mererani has no law. It's like the Wild West out there. You do not want to go there.'

He looked over his shoulder and leaned in close. His yellow teeth rasped and he coughed into the back of his hand.

'The police are too afraid to go out there. The

township is a haven for criminals, illegal immigrants and military men! You know all those war criminals from Rwanda and Congo? That's where they end up! People have been shot, stabbed and killed, their bodies thrown to the bottom of mine shafts. They are alcoholics and madmen!'

His shoulders shook and he placed the precious stone carefully back into the cabinet.

'If it's so dangerous …'

I sniffed and took a moment to clean my nose. Like nearly every other East African town I'd been to, Arusha was fucking dusty.

'If it's so dangerous, then how do you get the stones to make the jewellery?'

He glanced around as if there were someone in the shop who wasn't supposed to be listening.

'I wait for the master dealers to come into town.'

I'd heard enough. All this subterfuge was bullshit – master dealers, my arse. I turned to leave and was barely halfway out the door before I heard a screech.

'Don't go anywhere near the place!'

★

Tanzanite crystals are high vibration stones and stones of

transformation. These lovely violet blue stones primarily activate the heart chakra, which links with the third eye chakra via the throat chakra. This linkage of the three chakras is a powerful vibration that will open you up to a totally new way of looking at the world. It will create a link within you to the higher heart chakra and stimulate an amazing feeling of Divine Love.

Finding someone to escort me to the mine site had proved difficult. I'd spent a few days asking around the touts but had no luck. Arusha is a tourist town, and normally you can pay one of the young guys hanging around the hotels to take you anywhere – but on hearing the word Mererani I was met with blank stares. No one wanted to go out to the mine and I started to think maybe the Indian was right.

Eventually Paradise – the Savannah Man – tracked me down. He had worked on the mines a while back and his brother still did. This meant he could obtain the necessary permission to visit the site and his brother would make sure I was safe. The money Paradise demanded for the trip was high and I began to realise this wasn't just some jaunt around town. Paradise was scared, and it was his backyard – hell, he'd even worked

there before. I thought about the old Australian film *Last of the Knucklemen*, about an outback town in the 1960s where miners use their fists to solve drunken disputes.

'So who are these men who work on the mines?'

Paradise glanced up from counting the bills I had handed over.

'Come from all around. Can't get jobs nowhere else. Come from Congo, Rwanda, Kenya. Mostly criminals. Been in the wars.'

He went back to counting his money, making sure it was all there.

So the Indian *was* right. These guys were serious knucklemen. Perpetrators and survivors of some of the deadliest conflicts in recent history.

Serious
fucking
knucklemen.

★

If you continue to meditate regularly with Tanzanite crystals you may make contact with angels, ascended masters and your own spirit guide. Using this stone has the potential to awaken dormant psychic abilities.

The following day Paradise and I climbed into a *muttattu* crowded with women returning from their morning shopping. I chirped a cheerful hello and received only glares in return. As the bus coughed down the highway, we passed mud huts and dry fields, women bent over hard at work under the withering yellow sun, babies strapped to their backs and suckling at their breasts. This was some tough country.

The *muttattu* dropped us off at a deserted crossroads and the mid-morning sun dazzled as we stood and waited. I didn't even know which direction we were headed but decided not to ask too many questions. Paradise eventually flagged down a 4WD transporting miners back to Mererani. We squeezed in apologetically between broad shoulders and muscular arms. The first thing I noticed about the miners was their grey skin. Of course these guys were black, but their colour was the unhealthy tinge of old rubber. No one spoke and the silence made me nervous, and presently the 4WD stopped at a roadblock where the tarmac turned to dust.

'The police.'

Paradise was whispering.

'Last police. No more after this.'

Three Tanzanian policemen manned the roadblock. They wore khaki uniforms and had truncheons tucked into their belts and AK-47s slung over their shoulders. One of them carried a beer. We were all made to pile out and, while the police fired questions at the miners, I was pulled aside. Paradise interpreted their interrogation – *who are you, where do you think you are going, why do you want to travel to Mererani?* I tried to play the part of curious tourist but the police were not satisfied with my answers and demanded money.

This was fast becoming a difficult situation. As the chances of being robbed on the mine site were high, I had brought only minimal cash, enough to pay the boss of the mine and to hire some trail bikes, plus a bit extra for bribes. I knew if I gave the policemen the amount they were asking, I'd be caught short at the mine site. The policemen's bribe seemed inconsequential – it was far worse to face the miners with no money – so Paradise and I simply refused to hand over any cash. After a few tense minutes they lost interest, waved us on and sat under the shade of an acacia tree to continue drinking their beers.

Another hour down the potholed road and we

finally arrived at Mererani. Still the grey men said nothing. We slowed down on the outskirts of the township, and a skinny kid took the opportunity to jump on the 4WD and cling to the roof rack. He yelled through the open window in a slurred voice and I saw he had some disease which made his skin peel away, leaving splotchy white patches up and down his arms. I hoped it wasn't catching, as he was yelling through my side, spraying saliva on me.

When we finally pulled up the kid staggered round to the driver's side and threatened him with a sharpened screwdriver, which he'd pulled from his back pocket. The driver retaliated by punching him in the face and the kid fell backwards into the red mud. None of the grey men flinched but someone leaning against a nearby petrol pump shook his head and laughed. I lowered myself warily from the back of the truck, stepped over the splotchy kid and took a good look around.

Plastic bags blew through the dusty downtown strip as half-naked children played among broken beer bottles and fly-blown garbage, while the blinding midday sun shimmered off a string of razor wire surrounding the housing compounds. An oily smell filled the air as a horde of Maasai

tribesman wearing leather sandals and dark red robes zoomed past on trail bikes. Long feathers hung from their earlobes and brightly coloured beads decorated their necks, and they wore dreadlocks and Mohawks and had crazy shaved heads. With spears strapped to their backs and bikes sounding like machine saws, they were the Maasai Hell's Angels, a mechanised road-warrior squad.

I wandered over to peer into the musty darkness of one of the shops but inside there was little for sale and it was so dark I could barely see. As I stepped back outside the intense light of the sun burned white spots into my retinas. My throat rasped as I inhaled the passing dust storm and I looked at the ground to focus my eyes. A used condom lay at my feet.

★

Keep this lovely purple-blue stone within your energy field. After using it for meditation keep it on your body throughout the day, and close by while you are sleeping. This will achieve the maximum results.

Paradise's brother Swalehe lived in a mud-brick house with his wife, sister and son. He had already

paid off the 'boss' of the mine site, which meant I could explore the area without being assaulted. The miners would be given a heads-up as to who I was and would stay away – hopefully. Swalehe also instructed me to leave my backpack, passport and money with his wife at the house, as these items could provoke robbery. This was a huge game of trust I was playing – if it turned out Swalehe and Paradise were setting me up to steal my passport and credit cards, I would be well and truly f-u-c-k-e-d. I took my chances, carrying only a few Tanzanian shillings and a small camera.

I followed Swalehe and Paradise through a criss-cross of blazing hot backstreets to an outdoor bar. As it was a Sunday, many miners had come into the township to drink, play pool and look for a fight. The atmosphere was claymore tense. Hardened knuckles gripped equally well-worn pool cues and I tried to remain as inconspicuous as possible. A few men eyeballed me, but thankfully I was left alone. After careful negotiations with one of the miners, Swalehe hired a couple of trail bikes, and we revved up and rode out until we arrived at the mines.

The mine site resembled a shantytown hit by a

bombing raid. Miners lived in plastic-roofed shacks and corrugated tin sheds lined with cardboard and hessian. Scattered among the shanties were the mines, deep pits cordoned off with fences declaring name and lot number. Tags like *Soweto* and *The Pentagon* were scrawled on wooden signs to signify the various camp cliques, and graffiti covered the walls. An American flag featuring a superimposed Jim Morrison flew high above a wooden bunker, and I felt as if I had stumbled onto the set of an Oliver Stone film. Bare-chested miners covered in grey-black dirt pumped makeshift weights of iron and steel. This was a ghetto, prison and refugee camp all in one.

As we pulled up and dismounted the bikes, a troop of miners closed in around us. They mumbled angrily and started to grab at me with grey-black hands, reaching for my pockets. This wasn't getting off to a good start, and I began to panic. Paradise and his brother tried frantically to cool them out, speaking quickly in Swahili. The miners stopped grabbing me, but would not step away, and formed a threatening ring around us. They pointed at me and shouted loud aggressive questions at Swalehe who provided careful answers, and the stand-off eventually ended with

reluctant murmurs of agreement.

Paradise told me that, because I was white, the miners thought I was South African – a *karuhu*. For that, I was going to be beaten and possibly killed. However, Swalehe assured them I was from Australia, and explained how I had travelled here to find out about their lives. Most of the miners then smiled at me, and while some walked away disappointed, a couple still put out hands that turned into fists if I didn't slip a few bills into them.

★

This stone will aid you to heal karmic related problems that you may or may not be aware of. It is such a powerful stone that you should always keep grounding stones on you while working with Tanzanite crystals, as it has the propensity to make you quite spacey and light-headed. Spiritual grounding is important whenever you use high crystal energy stones like Tanzanite.

I peered through the razor wire fence. Attached to it were angry red signs written in Swahili, French and English, warning against entering the property. Armed guards patrolled the perimeter, Alsatians

held loosely on their leashes. On a hill overlooking the scene sat a newly built brick compound. This was F-Gem's headquarters.

F-Gem was a South African mining company whose guards had apparently shot at miners who strayed too close to the compound fence. Some had even been shot on sight while trespassing. There were frequent skirmishes and reports of riots between the local miners and F-Gem employees and I was told the company's owners bribed police to turn a blind eye to their heavy-handed security. F-Gem's brutal defence of their property explained why as an apparent South African I'd nearly wound up being beaten.

As I began to take a few photos, some miners working on a nearby plot yelled at me to move back – *shoot on sight!* They aimed imaginary rifles at my head and waved me away. I didn't take the grey knucklemen for people who joked around about this type of thing so quickly retreated. Perhaps the stories I heard were true.

★

Other stones that combine well with Tanzanite crystals are White Azeztulite, Natrolite, Moldavite, Danburite,

Phenacite, Pink Petalite, Tibetan Tektite, Herderite, Satyaloka Quartz, Scolecite and Herkimer Diamonds. For past life healing you may use it with Iolite and Danburite to release old patterns of karmic disease.

Fuck me – I could hardly breathe down here and the darkness almost crawled across my skin. We'd descended a wooden ladder about fifteen metres, but it could just as well have been fifty. At the bottom of the mine I switched on the cheap plastic torch Swalehe had given me. The light struggled to life and gave off a dull glow, showing me where he had been digging.

Compared to many mines, Swalehe's was shallow. Some drop vertically for more than a hundred metres before branching out for up to a kilometre. Miners often slept on plastic bags at the bottom of the shaft as it was too time consuming to climb in and out. Swalehe told me he only got paid when he found a stone – and sometimes he found nothing at all. But I'd heard stories of miners finding gems so large and valuable they were able to buy a house in Arusha, and it was this hope that drove them to such depths.

Swalehe sweated next to me, and I started to

cough from the stifling atmosphere. The mineshaft was unsupported by shoring and looked liable to collapse at any point. Swalehe showed me how he dug at the dirt with a spoon. I couldn't believe miners had no safety equipment and some used only their hands to dig for the precious stones. It was difficult not to think about the ways people had died down here – asphyxiation due to failed air compressors, drowning when sudden rains flooded the mines, blasting accidents, collapsed walls, or maybe just one drunken fight too many and you end up at the bottom of a mineshaft with a rusty screwdriver sticking out of your chest.

After ten minutes I hadn't found anything of value and felt dizzy and light-headed from the lack of oxygen. The cool air and warm light at the top of the shaft were calling me and we started our climb back up the ladder. A couple of grey knucklemen were waiting as I emerged from the shaft. I knew what they wanted, but they weren't getting any money off me now.

'Hey, *mzungu*, you give us some money.'

'No, mate, I don't fuckin think so.'

The stress and hypertension made me short tempered, but even so, it surprised me to respond that

way. The miners looked taken aback and wandered off. I thought of the atrocities these guys had perhaps committed to be in the position of exiled outlaw and I knew that the longer I lingered in this criminal wilderness the shorter my chances were of getting out safely.

I also realised that all these guys were victims of circumstance and history, and if I'd been born in a different time, a different, more fucked up place, it could have been me out there in the jungles, down in the mines, crossing borders in a car boot. I wasn't a badass at all – just one extraordinarily lucky motherfucker to live the life I did and to have made it this far without anything too fucked up happening. I hoped to Christ my passport wasn't gone and I could get back to my hotel in Arusha. Somehow I felt sorry for the grey knucklemen but glad it wasn't me. I jumped on the trail bike and revved the engine, looking forward to a few cold beers and a game of pool with Karen from the United Nations.

★

Once you choose to use Tanzanite crystals you may become aware that your spiritual growth has moved to a new level. Enjoy it, live with it and go forward with it. If you desire to experience major transformation in your life, you have to begin at some point. Using Tanzanite crystals may be where it all begins.

I drained the rest of my beer and placed the bottle gently on the bar.

'So that's it. That was my day. That shit is *fucked up*.'

Karen had tried to keep up and had asked a few quiet questions throughout the telling but by and large had sat and listened to my story. It was hard to tell what was running through her mind and she excused herself to go to the bathroom. I wasn't sure if this was a date, but if it was, it wasn't going well.

As I waited for Karen to return, the enormity of Mererani hit me. All over Africa there were mines like these, where people dug up the gems of spiritual enlightenment and the jewellery of the rich with a rusty spoon. These mines provided the materials used to manufacture mobile phones and laptops and myriad other items that contributed to our comfortable western lifestyles. It was hard to accept

the fact that every phone call I made led back to some poor bastard scratching around for coltan in the Congo. I'd heard of 'blood diamonds' and the celebrity moral counterpart 'conflict free diamonds' but figured if people didn't buy diamonds in the first fucking place the stones would lose their value and the suffering would end. Knowing what I now knew meant the longer I stayed in places like Mererani, the less chance I had of enjoying the comforts of my life back home.

Karen seemed to have been gone a while, and when she came back she told me about a party she had to attend. I hadn't known about the party previously and it was clear I wasn't invited. But in all honesty, I was relieved the night had come to a close. The realisation hit me that I wanted to go home – period. For all its sameness and sterility, Australia was at least a place that was safe, where I could continue on with my lucky country life. I drained the rest of my beer, said goodbye to Karen, and on the way back to the hotel breathed in my last deep breath of African air.

THIS IS YOUR DEMOCRACY

Rafe flung his arm out of the car window.

'This is America's democracy!'

His hands kept leaving the wheel to point out bomb damage and punctuate conversation. This time the damage was a concrete bridge and the point was obvious – America had funded this destruction. The bridge had collapsed and a huge hole filled with filthy water lay where the road used to be. Rafe fell silent for a moment, intent on navigating the big old yellow taxi around the ditch and back onto the bitumen beyond.

He took his hands off the wheel and made like he was cupping breasts.

'They want to disrupt our economy. Too many people die. It's very sad. Why does Australia support this?'

Like many Mediterranean men, Rafe used his hands conversationally. Yet I couldn't quite figure how the breast cupping motion matched his words. I just wished he'd keep his hands on the goddamn steering wheel.

We'd driven across the border earlier that afternoon, heading south from the Syrian city of Lattakia. I'd sat in the front of the taxi without saying much, chain-smoking cigarettes. Normally chain-smoking wouldn't be a problem in the Middle East, but being Ramadan, Rafe was getting edgy and tapped impatiently on the steering wheel, waiting out his cravings until sunset. I felt a twinge of guilt every time I lit one of the thick, unfiltered Syrian cigarettes, but needed to do something to kill that other bane of Ramadan, hunger pains. Besides, as Rafe sensibly said, Islam wasn't my religion, so I wasn't obliged to do what Allah willed.

It was a shock to see how porous the border between Syria and Northern Lebanon was. Semi-trailers roared through, blowing black smoke, and there seemed to be few checks or searches. Those tarpaulin-covered trucks could have been laden up with anything – in this case, most likely stocks of Iranian Katyusha rockets to replenish Hezbollah's

depleted supply. And for a country that had been at war only weeks previous, it was surprisingly easy for me to gain entry. A clean-shaven customs officer gave me a one-month visa at no charge, not even a bribe. He asked what I had been doing in Syria.

'Among other things, checking out some old ruins.'

'Oh, you are a tourist?'

I nodded.

'So you have come to see new ruins. Welcome to Lebanon.'

The customs officer spoke with bitterness and distaste, and a strange sense of bleak irony, as if the ravages of war were like an old, worn-out joke. I wasn't sure how to react, so I simply thanked him and shuffled back to where Rafe was waiting for me.

Our yellow taxi joined the line of semi-trailers en route to Beirut. I was squashed in the front between Rafe and a silent, staring young Syrian who said nothing the entire journey, and was explained away as Rafe's 'partner'. In the back seat sat three women with covered faces – only their stony cold eyes could be seen. They had glared at

me when I first climbed in but I should have realised – this was their first time back in Beirut since the bombing. They were probably concerned about what had happened to their homes and families, wondering if anything – or anyone – was left at all.

During the journey, Rafe and I discussed the recent war between Hezbollah and Israel or, as he argued, the war between America and Iran. Only a few weeks earlier Israeli F-16s had bombed a number of targets in Lebanon, including the main highway, civilian homes and the oil refinery. The southern suburbs of Beirut had been severely damaged and ground troops had fought skirmishes in the Hezbollah-held south of the country. I'd also heard that in the last seventy-two hours of the war, the Israeli Defence Force dropped close to a million cluster bombs in Southern Lebanon, mostly in civilian areas.

The catalyst for the conflict was Hezbollah's kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers from the border and subsequent refusal to return them. Thirty-four days later, when it was all over and the bodies counted, the refugees displaced and the hospitals overcrowded, Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah claimed he regretted the incident, stating he would never have

authorised the kidnapping had he known it would lead to a war of such magnitude.

Tripoli now lay behind us and as we neared Beirut, the damage began to get worse. Rafe steered the car around another water-filled crater and looked at me again. This time his hands remained gripping the wheel, his knuckles white with emotion.

'So, you have not answered me. Why does Australia support this?'

Fuck. I thought his question had been rhetorical. He wanted an answer? I shifted uncomfortably in my seat and he shot me an angry frown, his black mono-brow forming a caterpillar 'v' across his forehead.

'All your leaders are shit. George Bush – shit. Tony Blair – shit. John Howard – shit.'

While Rafe clearly had plenty to be worked up about, I wondered how much hunger pains and nicotine cravings were playing a role in his rapidly escalating rage. I tried to calm him with some conciliatory agreement.

'Uh, yeah, you're right, they *are* all shit.'

I didn't know what else to say and, in fact, agreed wholeheartedly with his opinion. I just

didn't want to start a political argument in such a volatile atmosphere.

'Then why does Australia support this? Your people voted in your Prime Minister, so they *must* support this.'

He glared at me with a flare in his eyes, but I knew it wasn't personal. John Howard, Australia's Prime Minister at the time, had been very vocal in his support of the American and Israeli stance against Hezbollah 'terrorists'. Trouble was, the bombing was not limited to Hezbollah targets and many Lebanese civilians had been affected in the attacks, regardless of their political or religious affiliation. Nor did it seem to matter that many Lebanese people both at home and in Australia considered Hezbollah to be a legitimate political party, and not terrorists at all. I stared at the bombed highways, ruined houses and destroyed lives and tried to think of an answer to Rafe's question.

★

After returning from Africa, Australia failed to hold my interest for long and soon enough I was saving for another trip. I didn't want a repeat of the depressing

post-South East Asia slump I had experienced, so I decided to enrol in a teacher training course, figuring I could spread some of my global knowledge to a classroom full of eager young students.

It was a disaster. Not only was I unable to adjust to the schedule of university life, but my head was full of the things I'd seen and the stories I'd heard. I just couldn't concentrate and everything seemed so trivial and meaningless. My mental dialogue was disturbing. *You're hassling for not handing in this assignment? Well fuck you – right now, Jean Claude and Jack are at the Mozambique border risking everything for a better life and Swalehe's at the bottom of some stinking, sweaty mine – what do you think about that? Ever seen the result of genocide? Didn't think so! Now try and tell me about fucking assignment due dates.*

On a number of occasions I simply walked out of the classroom mid-lecture. Eventually the whole experiment came to an abrupt end when the faculty Dean discovered I wasn't showing up at the school I was supposed to be teaching at. I'd been spending too much time at the local pub, waking up hung-over, playing truant from my own school.

I'd kept my eye on the headlines in Lebanon,

and it was hard to stay away. Israel had unleashed a massive bombardment and had followed it up with an aggressive ground assault. Australia was closely involved and I wanted to document a picture of what our government so vocally supported and our population so apathetically allowed them to get away with. The Dean had warned me that one day I'd have to join the *real world*. She was right. Lebanon *was* the real world – Australia, an ocker Disneyland.

★

Beirut was once a Mediterranean resort for Hollywood film stars, with beautiful beaches and expensive nightclubs. In the 1970s it became a battleground for civil war factions, the city divided by Martyrs' Square, now a car park filled with blue tarpaulins housing Lebanon's newly homeless. This urban crisis was mocked by BMWs driving past pounding trashy Eurohouse, while wealthy young people photographed the scene with flash mobile phones. In many ways, this was a city still divided.

It was dark by the time we arrived in Beirut. Rafe had broken his fast with three rapid cigarettes and seemed relieved after this, glad to be back in

his home town. It was hard to tell where we were driving, as the streets were poorly lit, and the city seemed chaotic, with sidewalks blocked off and ruined buildings patrolled by soldiers. We dropped off the stony-eyed ladies who finally came alive when greeted by family members, their shared hugs and joyous murmurings showing their relief after a tense month of the unknown.

Rafe then took me to a hostel in the city, located close to Martyrs' Square. The building wore the city's turbulent history – the balcony bore bullet holes, the façade was pock-marked by mortar fire and an anti-aircraft nest had been constructed at the end of the road. The owner was a Christian man named Zaher, who had a habit of periodically stroking a well-groomed Clark Gable moustache. It was good to see that some remnant of Hollywood glamour remained.

As I checked in, I commented on the damage to the building. Zaher, however, claimed that because of its location near the waterfront and proximity to the city, it would one day retail for around a US$1 million.

'Of course, the building will be demolished, but – ha! – hopefully this time by the council – not the Israelis!'

He smiled mischievously, leaned back and toked an apple-scented *nargileh*. Fifteen years of civil war had recently come to an end, and Beirut's waterfront and downtown area were being rebuilt to match the glory days of the 50s and 60s. Zaher was sitting on a gold mine, and he knew it – as long as the Shiites, the Israelites or the Americanites didn't covet his gold mine first.

★

Every night Zaher would sit in the small lobby of his hostel and smoke the *nargileh*. Ramadan had sucked the life out of the Beirut night, but the war had attracted all manner of oddities and it was entertainment enough to sit and smoke with Zaher and watch people checking in and out of his hostel.

Frank was a fat, red-faced Jewish New Yorker, a lawyer who claimed to be anti-Zionist and explained away his presence in Beirut as part of an unspecified United Nations project. He was deaf and spoke loudly, and was full of conspiracy theories, which kept us amused. One night he sidled over to where I was smoking on the couch. Zaher, as usual, had a slight smirk and a twinkle in his eyes, and gave his

moustache a pre-emptive stroke. Frank tried to remain inconspicuous, but sounded like a sergeant barking orders.

'You're heading down south, aren't you? To Hezbolland?'

Somehow he'd heard that I wanted to travel to Southern Lebanon, where the ground battles had been fought.

'Think so, yeah, maybe in the next few days.'

'Well, here's the number of a guy I know. Ring him and tell him Frank sent you. Get him to show you some *caches*.'

He pronounced the word semi-French, like *cash-ay*.

'Caches … caches of what?'

'Oh, you know. *Caches*.'

Frank gave me a conspiratorial wink and sidled off, looking very pleased with himself, but left me puzzled and curious. I shrugged my shoulders and looked at Zaher, who just raised his eyebrows and shrugged back.

A few days later a tall Syrian named Ahmed checked into my dorm. Ahmed travelled frequently between Damascus and Beirut 'for work' and stayed at Zaher's hostel on a regular basis. No one

knew what Ahmed's work was – except Zaher. I once leaned over and asked him precisely what work the Syrian was involved in, but predictably, he just smiled mischievously, stroked his moustache and toked the *nargileh*.

One night Ahmed took Frank and me to the Assaha Traditional Village for *iftar*, the traditional breaking of the fast during Ramadan. Assaha was a Hezbollah-run religious and political centre, which featured a restaurant, bookshop, gift shop, prayer room and meeting place. This was no cave-in-the-mountains type terrorist affair, but a slick restaurant with well-dressed waiters, the elite of Shiite celebrity dining civilly in the dimly lit atmosphere. The restaurant ostensibly raised money for Hezbollah's hospitals, schools and medical care, which helped improve the popularity of the 'Party of God'. Apparently, profits from my four-course meal were to provide for orphans whose parents had been killed during the war – or so Ahmed said.

My fledgling friendship with the Syrian eventually took a nosedive when the tensions from our crowded dorm, the hunger of Ramadan and the boredom of the curfews boiled over one night. I was watching *Seinfeld* on satellite television when Ahmed entered

the room and demanded he watch the Syrian news broadcast. However, as I'd been watching my show first, I felt it my right to continue with *Seinfeld*. Ahmed became upset and, as his English was poor, I couldn't tell if some crucial political turmoil was happening back in Syria, or whether four comedic Jewish-Americans just really pissed him off.

I tried to explain to Ahmed that the Syrian news was all propaganda anyway, but he started to yell at me in Arabic. I threw the remote at his head in retaliation, but luckily I missed. Ahmed collected the remote, changed the channel and eventually calmed down to the soothing sounds of Syrian state broadcast. I left the room in a huff – Christ almighty, so what if the Americans were threatening to bomb the country? They do that every couple of years. Besides, Jerry, George and Kramer had a loaf of bread attached to a fishing line, and I wanted to see what happened next.

One evening a Russian arrived, obese and sweating, panting up the lobby stairs. He was followed by his small son, even smaller wife and fattish teenage daughter. When he arrived in the lobby, he sat down, pulled out a bottle of vodka from his suitcase and began drinking voraciously.

His wife locked herself inside the hostel room with the children and we barely saw them for the next few days. The Russian seemed to sleep during the day, but at night he sat hunched in drunken conversation with Frank. One night he showed off three passports all in different names, and a rumour quickly spread that he was wanted by Interpol – a rumour fuelled, no doubt, by Frank.

However, the rumour could well have been true. I played chess with the fattish daughter one night, and she seemed much older than the thirteen years she told me. She hadn't been to school in years, and claimed to have lived in many countries and spoke numerous languages. It was such an odd story that I began to believe in the Russian's gross criminality, wondering what he may have been wanted for. Heroin smuggling, money laundering, bestial prostitution and Groznian massacres crossed my mind, but my eventual conclusion was that Frank, Ahmed and the Russian were all involved in an international arms deal. Zaher had orchestrated the whole thing, he was the lynch pin, the Jesus nut, and his hostel was nothing more than a portside front. My suspicions were realised one night when I overheard a hushed conversation between the three of them

– Frank's voice rose audibly above the huddle – something about *caches* …

★

Beirut. One of the few cities in the world where a casual early morning conversation with a taxi driver revolves around the loss of his house and the death of his wife in a recent Israeli air strike. Unlike Rafe, who was relatively contained in his rage, this guy seems to be in the first stages of dementia, banging his fist against the wheel and yelling at passers-by. He has a line of spittle down his chin and is understandably angry – he says he's now too old to buy a new one. I sympathise with him as best I can, although I have absolutely no idea how he must feel.

'Yeah, that must be pretty bad, being too old to buy a new house.'

He cocks his ear closer to me.

'*What?*'

I yell back in his ear.

'Your house! It must be awful, being too old to buy a new house!'

'*What?*'

I feel like Captain Haddock to the taxi driver's Professor Calculus.

'Your house! It must be terrible to be too old to buy a new house!'

'No, not house!'

He is really revved up and getting heavy on the accelerator. He is only vaguely paying attention to oncoming traffic and flips the middle finger to a young man who cut us off in a souped-up Saab.

'House? No, *wife*! My wife! I'm too old to buy a new wife!'

He slows down and stews on the thought for a moment, grinding what's left of his yellow teeth.

'Fuckin Israelis.'

I try to chill the old bloke out and avert an accident with some more conciliatory agreement. First Rafe, now this guy – I figured it might be something I'd have to get used to doing.

'Yeah, fuckin Israelis.'

★

My off-the-cuff anti-Semitism rang hollow. I'd heard enough sad stories from the Israeli side to know that suffering was felt by everyone involved in the

conflicts. One guy I'd met while travelling through Zanzibar had been discharged from the army after blowing away a photographer by accident. He'd moved down to the island, grown dreads to his waist and got stoned every night, living in a world of isolation and depressive reflection. Apparently the photographer had aimed his camera around a corner in the midst of a battle and the Jewstafarian, a tank commander at the time, had mistaken his camera lens for an RPG and fired on him.

I'd found all this out after a large number of drinks in a bar on the beach and the Israeli had become visibly upset as he told the story. I put my arm around his shoulder to console him, drunkenly philosophising that the photographer shouldn't have been there in the first fuckin place and it was his own fuckin fault, goddamn media vultures.

'The key to resolving the whole fuckin thing is themArabsandyouseIsraelis should just fuckinsiddown nsmokeafuckinjoint nlishentosome fuckinBobMarley. Thatdsorttheviolentcuntsoutdo ntchareckon?'

The Israeli then became even more upset and eventually told me to fuck off and leave him alone and I'd staggered to my room to pass out.

The taxi driver eventually dropped me off in Al Dahya, the southern suburb where the majority of Shiite Muslims lived. Beirut is a city subdivided into religious groups and the Israeli Air Force had bombed Al Dahya extensively, claiming Shiite houses were harbouring militants and housing weapons. The suburb was only ten minutes from the Christian quarter with its flashy restaurants and Virgin Megastore, but it was like heading into a different country. More beneficial would have been an air strike on the fucking Megastore – Richard Branson would notice the loss far less than the taxi driver or his wife.

Al Dahya looked like a construction site in reverse. Cranes and bulldozers were cleaning up remnants of tenements and the remains of people's lives. Beds, toys, couches, books and televisions spilled onto the sidewalk. Street signs were written in Arabic, a distinct difference from the Christian quarter where I had been staying, and it was obvious Hezbollah controlled these parts. Images of Hassan Nasrallah were plastered over ruined walls and his speeches blasted from a loudspeaker tuned to the Party's own radio station. Green and gold victory flags featuring the raised-fist-and-AK-47 motif flew high along the

rubble-blocked streets and women walked past wearing the black *burqa*.

A few people stared at me from inside crumbling concrete shop fronts, the onlooking eyes suspicious and certainly angry. I felt like the stranger who has just walked into a bar in a bad western. Everyone goes quiet, the piano stops playing, and someone spits at your feet. Soon enough, a couple of young men carrying walkie-talkies approached me. They wore polo shirts and looked like they worked out, and were threatening in a silent, too-cool kind of way. They were Hezbollah fighters, conspicuous not by their weapons but by their two-way radios, and asked me what my business was, where I was from, what I was doing in their neighbourhood. I told them I was a photographer from Australia.

'Oh yeah?'

Disbelieving.

'Got any ID?'

I showed them my student card, three years out of date and looking nothing like me. They consulted their walkie-talkies in clipped Arabic code and guardedly let me pass. I wandered around and took some photos of the damage, but the place was so silent and the people too staring that I felt

invasive and extremely uncomfortable. As I walked past an alleyway someone set off a firecracker, the sharp explosive crack causing me to flinch and duck behind a wall. Some kids nearby laughed and I got the hint, shot a couple more photos and waved down a passing taxi.

That night I sat in a local café, talking to a young guy called Joseph, who worked there with his father. Being the cheapest place in that part of Beirut I ate there every night, and Joseph was a cool kid, good conversation. All he wanted to do was study and get married and run a business. I told him how I had been to Al Dahya that day, and he seemed impressed. I asked him if he'd been down there, to see the results of the war.

'No way, man. That's Hezbollah area. I'm a Maronite, a Christian. I would get beaten up if I went down there, maybe even killed.'

'Yeah, but you're Lebanese. Surely you'd be okay?'

Joseph paused from making my sandwich and turned to face me.

'Man, you just don't get Lebanon, do you?'

★

You can't have a road trip without music so I fished around in the glovebox for cassettes and found two. One had a cover featuring a picture of Hassan Nasrallah alongside a variety of sombre martyrs, while the other depicted Hassan Nasrallah against a backdrop of masked militants. I inserted the militant one, assuming it would be more upbeat. Strident Arabic music accompanied by the sound of bombs and grenade launchers filled the car, while Nasrallah's repetitive, exhortative chants punctuated the music and the rattle of machine guns accentuated orchestral strings. It was all a bit intense for first thing in the morning so I tried the other cassette. The martyrs' music sounded similar, but worse, like a bad second album, so I switched it off. At least if we were hijacked by Hezbollah militants on our journey through Southern Lebanon we could prove our allegiances via our cassette collection.

Zaher had hired us his car for the day – a Kia hatchback. Paul was from Canada. He was skinny and had long, blondish hair and had travelled through Africa, something we had in common. His girlfriend Lisa also had long, blondish hair and a clipped accent. She was from Berlin, a keen

photographer and history student. They were one of those couples who kind of looked like each other and I'd met them at the hostel.

Zaher showed us the route on a tattered old map of Lebanon, which still had place names written in French and Israel listed as Palestine. It was surreal that we could drive from the relative safety and comfort of Christian Beirut to the battlefields of Southern Lebanon in only a few hours. We set off down the coast road early in the morning, past the empty hotels and the oil-slicked sand. Paul was driving, I was navigating and Lisa sat in the back seat. All of us were nervous. We were headed for a small village on the Lebanese–Israeli border called Aita ech Chaab, from where Hezbollah militants conducted the kidnapping that ignited the war.

★

A couple of hours later we entered what had been the war zone. To our right stretched a crescent of golden sand and the azure Mediterranean, while to our left lay orchards scarred by water-filled bomb craters. It was in these fields that Israel had scattered over a million cluster bombs, each with the potential to

maim or kill. This was a strategy to actively target Shiite livelihoods and to deny them access to one of their only sources of income. Many civilians had been injured by the explosive devices, banned by most countries except the US and Israel.

Along the way we detoured into the surrounding hills, and arrived at a village called Toura, where a United Nations team were in the process of defusing and removing an unexploded bomb. Israel had dropped three on the village – two had exploded and destroyed a shop that sold children's toys and clothes. I was told a number of women and children had been in the shop when it was hit, and the villagers needed the bomb removed so they could bury the remains of their family and friends.

After a few tense minutes, the UN team diffused the explosive and hauled it onto the back of a truck. As they drove off the village children scavenged through the wreckage of the old shop. Clothes and toys were strewn everywhere, crocheted baby boots were smothered in dirt and an Ernie from *Sesame Street* lay forlornly on his back. Two young girls scrambled in and found a stuffed toy koala and I walked over and told them

what it was and where it came from. I asked if I could take their photograph, and they smiled, happy to be distracted from their surroundings. After I took the shot, the girls' mother appeared holding some glasses of orange juice for Paul, Lisa and I. It was hard to tell where she had gotten the juice from, as none of the houses seemed to be intact, but we were grateful for her hospitality. Rafe's question hit me again – why *did* Australia support this?

★

We continued on our way but soon came to a sudden halt at a Lebanese army checkpoint where seven olive-green tanks guarded the road. A soldier leaned through the passenger window and asked to see a permit to enter the southern zone. None of us even knew a permit was required, so I tried my university card again, figuring it had gotten me out of trouble in Al Dahya and may do so again. The soldier took one look and handed it straight back, shaking his head. I then hastily fabricated a story about 'having a journalist friend' in Aita ech Chaab, but my breath was wasted – the guard didn't speak English. He waved me over to an army green tent in which an

officer with an unshaven face wearing a grubby white tank top sat behind a desk. He too claimed we required a permit, which could take up to a week to obtain.

We retreated back to our car and dug out the old map Zaher had loaned us. Unpaved roads criss-cross southern Lebanon – we hoped they would also be unguarded. Paul turned the car around and we headed north until we were out of sight of the tanks and quickly turned down one of the side roads marked on the map. We passed without hindrance into Hezbollah's stronghold and were completely on our own, on edge and unsure if we were even welcome.

There were few road signs so I would periodically jump out to ask people to direct us to Aita ech Chaab. In one village a family asked us to join them for coffee and we sat in their ruined home while the mother served up a strong black brew, their two children sitting quietly and staring at us. When we explained where we were heading, the father of the house went outside and returned with some teenaged Hezbollah fighters, telling them to show us the way.

The boys, one of whom sported a Che Guevara

T-shirt, escorted us from village to village on scooters, amusing themselves by trying to kick each other off while flying at high speed down the dirt road. Since the war ended they had obviously found life-threatening pastimes elsewhere and, far from being hostile, they smiled and welcomed us to their country. They were glad that some westerners had come to visit and wanted to show us what the war had done to their homes and families. As we passed through ruined villages, the faces of those who had been killed in battle looked down upon us from the bullet-ridden walls. They were considered martyrs, and photos of the deceased were postered up as a form of remembrance and respect.

By mid-afternoon we had reached Aita ech Chaab and we drove slowly into a scene of complete devastation. The Israeli Defence Force had specifically targeted this town to mete out punishment for the kidnapping and it had been reduced to rubble. Dust hung in the air alongside the smell of burnt rubber and women picked through the ruins searching for lost belongings while children played among the twisted concrete and seared metal.

We pulled up in front of a burnt-out station wagon. Above it, a green and gold flag read *This Is*

Your Democracy USA. A shelled mosque stood resolutely above the village, its minarets broken and shrapnel-scarred but still intact. The front of the mosque was guarded by an anti-tank gun, and a memorial to the twenty-two people who died inside had been erected. In the middle of the village an artillery cannon pointed towards the Israeli border, a hilly ridge about a kilometre away where barbed wire fencing and satellite dishes were silhouetted against the sky.

A small group gathered around us as we emerged carefully from the car. The old men warmly shook our hands and the women, both young and old, stared without speaking. No young men were to be seen and we guessed they must be in the mountains, training for the next war. A young girl in a headscarf smiled shyly as her three-year-old son waved at us and I bent down and playfully poked his tummy. I walked over to a shop front scarred with bullet holes and mortar fire and asked permission to take photographs. As I started shooting a middle-aged man grabbed my shoulder.

'See that?'

He pointed to a pile of rubble and twisted metal.

'During the civil war, I spent twenty-two years

working in Kuwait. Last year I came back to be with my family, set up a shop, and buy a house and car with the money I saved.'

His voice was choked with emotion and rage.

'Now you see. Take a photo of *that*.'

The old man turned and walked away. There was not much we could say, so we shot some more photographs and shuffled around, feeling impotent and awkward. We all agreed the trip was beginning to feel voyeuristic so we said a few brief goodbyes and pulled out in first gear. I'd also noticed the sun starting to set and we didn't want to get caught driving around in the dark in an unmarked car.

We'd only driven a few kilometres out of Aita ech Chaab before we passed through Rmaich, a Christian village. Instead of mosques, there were churches and instead of Hezbollah flags, six-pointed stars were painted on walls. Traditionally, many of the townspeople would like to see Rmaich become part of Israel and due to their loyalty, the village was neither bombed nor attacked during the war. Unlike all the other villages we'd passed through that day, this one was completely untouched and once again it proved the Israeli policy of specifically targeting Shiite Muslims.

The drive back to Beirut was quiet, all three of us more than a little shocked at seeing the on-the-ground consequences of international decision making. When we finally arrived back late that night, we bought a bottle of USSR-vintage vodka from Joseph and broke into an abandoned block of flats next door to the hostel to get drunk. The apartments had been hastily evacuated, and clothes, toys and furniture remained where they had been left. We eventually found our way to the roof of the building and sat overlooking the waterfront, drinking and reflecting on the day's events.

I still hadn't found an answer to Rafe's question and was angry that Australia had supported the US and Israel in this conflict. Before coming here, there was an endless debate going on inside my head – who was right and who was wrong, Israel or Hezbollah? But then I realised the side to take was that of the people on the ground, the ones caught in the middle of it all.

The presidents and politicians, the generals and the weapons traders would all eat warm meals and sleep soundly that night. The people of Southern Lebanon, however, would sleep in whatever shelter they could find, while just over the border, the

mothers of two kidnapped Israeli soldiers continued to sit in worried silence as, after all of this, their sons had still not been rescued.

ONE IN FOUR IS A GOVERNMENT SPY

The People's Desire –

Oppose those trying to jeopardize stability of the State and progress of the nation

Oppose foreign nations interfering in internal affairs of the State

Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy

*(*The New Light of Myanmar*, 7th Waxing of Tabodwe, 1369 ME)*

I wiped an inch of sleep from my eyes and peered into the 3 am darkness. Was that the trishaw

driver? I couldn't believe he was down there, ready to take me to the station. I trod heavily down the stairs and he smiled and waved cheerily, a bamboo cheroot clamped between his blood-red betel teeth. The cheroot was stunted and soggy with saliva and I wondered if it was the same one he'd been smoking the last time we met.

'Good morning, sir.'

He welcomed me on board his trishaw. Originally I'd tried to dissuade him from picking me up – it was just too early in the morning and the train station was well within walking distance – but he'd insisted. The night before he had taken me to a traditional Burmese dance and acrobatics show and Mr Trishaw had waited outside the theatre for my return fare. On the way back to the guesthouse, he had asked what my plans were.

'Well, tomorrow morning I'm catching an early morning train to Yangon.'

He responded quickly, enthusiastically.

'You need ride to train station? I pick you up.'

I tried to explain that the station was only a seven-minute walk from my guesthouse and as the train departed at 4.25 am, it would mean a very early start.

'It's okay, sir, I can pick you up.'

'But that means you have to be outside the guesthouse at 3 am.'

'That's okay. I will be there.'

'Okay, okay, no problem. How much?'

Mr Trishaw tilted his head and scratched his scraggly beard, contemplating silent math.

… How much for a 3 am pickup? This guy's a foreigner so he's definitely got money … Gotta make it worth my while … Let's see … I'll ride home first tonight, which is around an hour away … Then give my earnings to the missus so she can buy the family some rice. Maybe – just maybe – I can slip in a quickie with her … Then – and only then – I'll see my children and make sure they're doing their homework. It costs me 170,000 kyat *a year to send 'em to school … rent is 10,000 a month, that's due real soon … get in a couple of hours sleep, then ride an hour back into town in time for a 3 am pickup … Then ride this fella to the train station … Then ride home again, sleep another couple of hours and get up for another day's work.*

'I will charge you 700 *kyat*, sir.'

Now it was my turn to scratch *my* scraggly beard.

… This guy's gonna ride out here for 65 cents? Is that even legal? Man, I could probably even barter him down

to 50 cents. But that's just criminal … Shit, 65 cents. I wouldn't even set my alarm for that type of money …

Unsure of what else to do I agreed to the price and, at 3 am, there he was. After a few minutes we arrived at the train station and I handed him 1000 *kyat* – about a dollar – for his trouble. He took the money and bowed graciously, thanking me far too many times, and rode off with his head held high, puffing on that same soggy cheroot. At least now he can send his kids to school or, at the very least, buy himself a goddamn new cheroot. Then it hit me – fuck! I should have just given him the 1000 *kyat* during our negotiations the night before and *still* walked to the train station.

★

The station is crowded and I weave among people camped out on bamboo mats as I search the platform for my train. Children play up and down and mums cook up last night's curry in a carry-on tiffin, while the men sit and chew betel, spitting straight onto the concrete floor. It occurs to me that the twin culture of hocking red betel juice wherever you pleased and the no-shoes rule in much of Burma seemed like

very bad foresight on behalf of the early Buddhists. I yawn, try not to trip over a sleeping woman, and examine my ticket for seat and carriage details.

Seat number: 61

Carriage: 14

Class: Ordinary Class

Ordinary Class. I liked that. I knew there were first class carriages in the Burmese train system, but rather than have second or third class, they just lumped everyone together and called it ordinary. I bet it's uncomfortable and freezing as fuck, but I want to muck in with the locals.

As I walk along the platform searching for my carriage, a skinny guy in a faded blue conductor's uniform approaches me and asks to see my ticket. He glances at it quickly and strides purposefully towards a carriage to show me to my seat. The carriage we arrive at has wooden seats covered by thin pieces of foam. Shit, that's not going to be too comfortable for fourteen hours.

We walk down the aisle and find the seat that correlates with the number on my ticket. It happens to be occupied by a woman working on some crochet. The conductor looks confused, double-checks both of our tickets and realises his

mistake – this carriage is first class. He assumes I have made an error in my ticket purchase and points out that it only costs an extra dollar to sit in the comfort of first class. I tell him I *want* to sit in ordinary class and he looks baffled, but shrugs his shoulders in resignation. We apologise to the crocheting woman and find the correct carriage.

I haul my bags on board and quickly find my seat as the train starts creaking down the tracks. Ordinary class is pretty fucking ordinary – the seats are hard wooden benches and people sleep in the aisle, luggage is packed in everywhere and I'm squashed between a dwarf-like Burmese guy with square-shaped bare feet and two sacks of freshly picked garlic. I realise the conductor was probably right – I should have just spent the extra dollar. The carriage is dark and crowded and the air is dense with the odour of human bodies, but even with the large number of people packed on board, the atmosphere is still strangely silent, only the *clank clank clank* of a too-old train breaking the conversation curfew.

★

Burma intrigued me – the country existed in an Orwellian purgatory where it was illegal to speak freely about the government and every aspect of life was controlled. Child slavery still existed and the generals lived in their own self-contained city deep in the jungle. In September 2007, protests had erupted on the streets of the capital Yangon, and images of chanting monks and fist pumping students had flashed across the television. The catalyst for the demonstrations had been an abrupt rise in the price of fuel, but people soon found voice against poor living conditions and the lack of political freedom. The military junta brutally suppressed the uprising and people had been killed and imprisoned. No one in the international community intervened.

I arrived in Burma a few months after the demonstrations. Yangon was a crumbling, mouldy city of decayed concrete filled with garbage and rotting colonial buildings. My initial impression was of an old city slowly being eaten away by humidity and tropical storms, and it was obvious no investment in infrastructure had been made since the British abandoned the outpost after the Second World War. Yet there was a patience

and a pride in the people who walked the cracked sidewalks, the men wearing clean white shirts tucked into their *longyis* and the women, modest long-sleeved dresses and patterned *thanaka* make-up.

Burma appeared to be a riddle. When I'd arrived at Yangon airport and wasn't stopped by any soldiers, I was a little bewildered. I became even more curious when I failed to see any military presence on the streets. Wasn't this supposed to be a police state? If so, where were the police? If this place was so poor and oppressed, why was everyone so smiling and polite? I wanted to scratch the veneer of normality Burma projected and see what lurked underneath – which proved to be a difficult task.

★

They call them the Burmese CIA.

I'm at the cinema in the northern town of Myitkyina, queuing for a ticket. A young man with slick-backed hair and a black leather jacket sidles up next to me and says hello. We start chatting and he offers to buy me a ticket, an offer I accept graciously. He seems like a nice guy and I remark to myself how generous people in Burma are despite their

difficulties. We find our seats and just as the movie starts, I ask him what he does for a job.

'Oh, I'm with the police.'

★

They call them the Burmese CIA.

'So, not so many foreigners here this year?'

She knows I'm asking a question I already know the answer to. Everyone in Burma understands why no foreigners are here – the brutal suppression of recent unrest has repelled potential tourists and most countries have warned against travelling here. But I want to see if it's true that people are afraid to speak about such things, and my question is non-committal enough to not get either of us in trouble. I prompt again.

'So, not many foreigners, why do you think?'

The ticket seller keeps her head bowed as if she can't hear or understand me. She intently counts my change and looks up with a strained, plastic smile.

'Here is your change, sir.'

★

They call them the Burmese CIA.

During a discussion on a trishaw in downtown Mandalay, my driver hesitantly speaks under his breath in broken English.

'Government very bad, sir. No jobs, no money.'

A stranger on a bicycle appears from out of the darkness and although he can obviously travel much faster than our cumbersome three-wheeled contraption, he rides slowly beside us, within earshot. My driver says no more, puts his head down and keeps pedalling.

★

They call them the Burmese CIA.

I'm in a house in the Nepalese quarter of Myitkyina discussing the political situation with a Gurkha family whose grandfather had fought in Burma during the Second World War. He'd been abandoned when the British pulled out and now the family was a spurned minority, unable to obtain permits to work in the country or passports to travel back to Nepal. They have a picture of their grandfather on the wall, resplendent in starched olive-green uniform, *kukri* at his side and turban on

his head.

I'd met the family's young son when I was walking near their neighbourhood taking photos. He had ridden up to me on his motorcycle and invited me to visit their house. At first I'd said no, but he insisted, so I asked him how much. He asked me how much for what. *How much money to go to your house?* I was used to places like Thailand where people charged a small fortune for 'genuine experiences' such as a house visit. The boy looked confused and told me he didn't want my money, he just wanted me to come to his house. Then it was my turn to be confused. Why didn't he want any money?

But the family didn't want my money, they just wanted to quietly tell me about their lives. Their father had worked on a State-owned jade mine until a Chinese company bought it, fired everyone and employed imported labour from across the border. The three sons often travelled illegally to India to purchase aluminium kitchenware to sell at a profit in the Myitkyina market but overall, it was a struggle to get any money together.

One of the sons bursts in.

'The police!'

The father turns to me with his finger to his lips as the policeman saunters in, fat and powerful. He lowers himself uninvited into the best seat in the house and slowly scans the room for a full minute before announcing his arrival.

'I was just passing by and thought I would drop in.'

The family's house is at the end of a cul-de-sac.

★

They call them the Burmese CIA.

I'm on a horse and cart in the midst of the vast plains of Bagan, enjoying the spectacle of ancient temples scattered throughout the scrub. The driver gives the occasional grunt and croons to guide Momo the horse along the path, but other than that there is only the sound of muted *clip clopping* in the soft sand and the *click click* of bush crickets. I take the opportunity to nudge the driver.

'So c'mon. What do you really think about the government?'

He looks over both shoulders and says nothing.

★

After a while, I began to see how the system worked – societal control based on fear. Not the obvious fear of patrolling police and the constant threat of arms, but the nervous, sweating fear that *they* could be there, on your doorstep, in your living room, upturning your market stall, in a matter of moments. The stifling fear of not knowing who was who, and who was watching and when, the painful grinding of joints knowing your soul is slowly being crushed and your spirit dismembered, the suffocation of not being able to express your true thoughts, the stiffness of a forced smile and the knowledge that if you gave in to that daily, incurable desire to speak out just once, you would be imprisoned and tortured and never heard from again.

★

The carriage bounced and swayed as we slowly rattled our way towards Yangon, my arse getting numb on the hard wooden bench. I'd initially landed in Burma and had flown north to Myitkyina, with the aim of travelling by river and rail back to the capital, but now the river journey

had finished and I wished I was back on the boat in the fresh air, instead of being squashed next to the dwarf guy, feeling nauseous from the pungent smell of garlic.

While on a stopover in a village called Sinbo I'd met a monk from Yangon named A Shin. He was the one person I met during a month travelling in Burma who hadn't been afraid to openly criticise the government, and he had told me about his involvement in the protests. A Shin was in Sinbo with his mother, trying to determine what had happened to his brother, who had been a corporal in the army. His brother had died, and the military would not say where he died or even how he had died, and A Shin wanted answers.

I had dinner with him and his mother one night. She had been afraid of me, as I was the first foreigner she'd ever met. Small in stature and extremely wrinkled, A Shin's mother had the face of a hard life. When we finished dinner, A Shin asked me to visit him at his monastery in Yangon, an offer I gratefully accepted. I didn't want to miss this opportunity to speak frankly with someone about the baffling and invisible police state, so when I arrived by boat in Mandalay I quickly bought myself a one-way ticket

on ordinary class to Yangon.

It was difficult to find out what was really going on. In Burma, the movement of tourists is tightly controlled, restricted to designated 'attractions' based roughly along the confluence of the Irrawaddy and the north–south railway line. Any human rights abuses are contained in parts of the country where access is denied by a series of checkpoints. If an armed rebellion flares up in a certain area, or minerals are to be mined with the help of forced labour in a particular region, that part of the country becomes a blank part of the tourist map.

In a country of that size, however, cracks sometimes started to show. At one point the train stopped at a small village. Outside the window I saw an open cut quarry, from where women and children carried baskets of rocks on their heads over to a large machine. They would empty the rocks into the machine, which would then crush them and spit smaller pieces out the other side. A lady stood on the other side with a wicker basket collecting the fragments. The basket would fill quickly and she would place it on the head of the first child waiting in line. The next basket would fill just as quickly and

she would place it on the head of the next child in line, who would stagger under the weight over to a huge pile, where the contents would be dumped. None of the women or children wore shoes, and the most protective piece of clothing was a rag wrapped around their face and nose. A few men stood around, making sure the work ran smoothly.

This was the first visible evidence I had seen of human rights abuse in Burma, and it came as a surprise. I discreetly pointed my camera out the open train window and started filming. Shocked at such an open display of child labour, I was determined to capture this injustice and I kept the camera rolling, zooming in and out of the scene in front of me. The woman stacking the rocks looked up and caught me filming. She straightened her back and looked directly at me and surprisingly, waved and gave the camera a beautiful, broad smile. She pointed me out to the children and they also put down their baskets and waved.

I almost dropped the camera with surprise. I'm filming injustice here – they're not supposed to smile and wave! My attempt to defy a modern-day police state was being thwarted by the positivity of the Burmese people and I quashed the urge to direct

them, Cappola-like. *Look miserable, goddammit! You're supposed to look miserable! Don't look at the camera and wave, just keep breaking the goddamn rocks!* Instead, I stopped the camera and waved back, grinning and defeated.

★

This was some monastery. Small boys played marbles on the pathway between wooden huts, women washed clothes in moss-stained wells and trains roared past, bells clanging and carriages clattering. I thought monasteries were supposed to be quiet, remote places, but here was one in the middle of downtown Yangon, right next to the train station, a walled monastic village set in a jungle green garden.

Was that the sound of Jennifer Lopez? That *was* Jennifer Lopez. What the fuck? I climbed the steps of the bamboo hut, took off my sandals and stepped into the room. With shaven heads, bare feet and saffron robes, all monks look respectful – that is unless J-Lo is grinding away on a television behind them. I grinned wryly and pointed in mock-accusation.

'I didn't realise you were a fan.'

'Oh yes, she is very beautiful!'

A Shin held court with two younger monks and two female students. We shook hands warmly and sat down at a plastic dining table. One of the younger monks offered me a cigarette and A Shin poured me a glass of hot, green tea, introducing me to the other monks and to the girls, who were from A Shin's village in the country. I said hello to the girls and they stared at me shyly. I asked them whether they thought J-Lo was beautiful. A Shin translated my question and they giggled behind their hands.

'They say she is not beautiful.'

'Maybe if she was wearing a *longyi*?'

My reply was supposed to be silly, the thought of Jennifer Lopez wearing the modest traditional *longyi* ridiculous, but the girls laughed and nodded their heads.

I'd been nervous coming to the monastery, unsure of what to expect, what customs to follow and what holy procedures to observe. Yet the atmosphere in the room was casual at best, and raucous at worst. Somehow the romance of a monastery was lost when a freshly shaved young monk smoking a cigarette told you he finds Korean girls sexy while another

interjected, enthusing how Japanese girls 'fascinate' him and could easily cause him to stop being a monk. Discussing sexy girls and watching J-Lo clips didn't seem the best way to uphold a monastic vow of abstinence.

But A Shin had a serious side and wanted to tell me about the demonstrations. He replaced J-Lo with a VCD showing footage of the protests, taken by local people with mobile phones and cheap digital cameras. Scenes of monks chanting, sounds of soldiers shooting, roadblocks and checkpoints, civilians running, falling down. The VCD was highly illegal and anyone caught watching it, or possessing it, was in for a long spell in prison. The demonstrations had lasted for ten days. The catalyst, said A Shin, was the huge rise in fuel prices from 700 to 5000 *kyat* per litre. After this, everything became expensive – food, transport, electricity.

'Why electricity?'

I tried not too sound too naïve.

'Everywhere you go in Yangon, you hear generators, because there is no electricity supply.'

'Do they have electricity in the capital?'

'Of course! Twenty-four hours.'

The military government had recently built a new capital in Naypyidaw, three hours north of Yangon, which housed all the government offices and the homes of top-ranking military men and their families. Surrounding the area were army bases, a private airstrip, a military academy and many checkpoints.

I was to pass through the capital during the night after my visit with A Shin. From my bus window I saw sealed roads, brand new two-storey mansions, tree-lined suburban streets, and huge lighted statues of the Buddha atop modern office blocks. I'd fallen asleep and had woken up wondering if I was still in Burma or not, such was the contrast to Yangon. A Shin was right – it was the middle of the night and the streetlights were on, neon signs flashed and every house was well lit – electricity twenty-four hours.

However, to excuse their failure to provide the same service to the rest of the country, the military junta published this advice in their state-run newspaper, *The New Light of Myanmar*:

Use daylight as the main source of light. Use the least possible amount of electricity only if there is not enough natural light.

★

The next day I visited A Shin at the monastery again. With him was another female student, but instead of being dressed in a traditional *longyi*, she wore the clothing of modern Yangon – denim jeans and a cotton T-shirt. She had also been involved in the protests and continued to stay politically active, something that could get her expelled from the university or worse.

A Shin was reading the state-run newspaper *The New Light of Myanmar* in which, he joked, the only truth was in the obituaries. He placed the paper on the floor and stamped on it furiously.

'Why are you stamping on the paper?'

I was curious. I knew that feet were very impolite appendages in Buddhist culture – don't point your feet at people, and certainly don't touch monks with them. I'd even heard you shouldn't stand in a monk's shadow.

'Bad luck for the government. They will lose power soon.'

While I was all for invoking bad luck on the government in the form of foot stamping, I wanted to know more about the demonstrations, and why

they hadn't continued to force a change. Even with so many people voicing their frustration and anger towards the junta, the demonstrations had melted away and it seemed as though everything remained the same.

A Shin's answer was quite simple.

'The demonstrations ended because too many people were getting beaten up, shot and imprisoned.'

'So then what is your hope for Burmese people?'

A Shin took a few minutes to contemplate my question and formulate an answer. One thing I noticed about the monks was that they were patient, and took their time before speaking.

'Most people are very depressed at the moment, and they really want to change the government. But it's impossible, there are no gains. We want democracy.'

'Do you think revolution is going to happen?'

'It depends on the economic situation.'

'How bad does it have to get?'

'Most people never forget it. Most people are against the government but we have no weapons. Sixty-five per cent of the army does not agree with the government. I have many relatives in the army, but they do not agree with the government.'

'So you have the monks and the students onside, now you need the army. Maybe all it takes is one general to start a civil war?'

'Maybe. Maybe civil war.'

'What would happen if someone from the army was seen in the demonstrations?'

'They would arrest them.'

'Would it be worse for them because they were in the army?'

'Yes. They would kill them.'

It seemed that any attempt at overturning the government would be met with either death or imprisonment. This was a dictatorship that used fear and brute force to suppress its population, and there was nothing that could be done. A Shin was usually upbeat, but this conversation – and the admission of hopelessness – had silenced him. We sat and listened to the trains clatter past, staring out the window, smoking cigarettes.

★

'No, I don't think it's a good idea, put the camera down.'

'But I'll miss the shot!'

A Shin spoke firmly.

'No, it's not safe, put the camera down.'

I placed the camera in my lap and tried to look nonchalant. The taxi driver sped up and turned into an alley – he wanted to get this over with as soon as possible. The roadblock was at the next corner, a red and white wooden barrier topped with barbed wire. Heavily armed soldiers checked the identification cards of every person. Behind the roadblock was Aung San Suu Kyi's house. At this time, 'the Lady' was under strict house arrest and it was illegal to drive near her house, let alone film it.

A Shin, the student and another monk had decided we should drive out and film the roadblock. I think a feeling of powerlessness forced A Shin to find a way to subvert the government, and we'd come up with this plan. If caught, we would all be arrested, including the taxi driver, who was a friend of A Shin's and wanted to be involved. We aborted our first run, and in the alley the driver and A Shin conferred hastily, both looking at me for an opinion.

'I didn't get the shot but it's up to you. If you want it on camera, then we will have to turn around and drive past again.'

The driver threw the taxi into reverse, and turned

around. A Shin spoke to me sternly.

'Okay, but make it fast and don't let the soldiers see.'

'No, it's cool, it'll be fine.'

We swung around and the taxi driver gunned the car and I tried to look confident. Turn the corner, camera out the window, a bumpy zoom out from the roadblock, all over in a matter of seconds. We all breathed a sigh of relief and drove back to the monastery.

When we returned we viewed the footage. It was bumpy and of poor quality, and I had no idea what it could be used for, but A Shin said it didn't matter. For the monks, the student and even the taxi driver, simply the act of filming the roadblock was a really big deal and generated a collective sense of defiance. For A Shin and his friends, this was a political act. Like talking to foreigners is a political act. Like watching illegal VCDs or tuning in to BBC World News is a political act. Anything to remind yourself that *it is not power that corrupts but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it, and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it.*

★

The train rattled on south to my final destination. I wanted to visit the Thai–Burma Railway at Thanbyuzyat, where the graves of hundreds of Allied prisoners of war lay. The cemetery was well cared for, surrounded by a carpet of clipped green grass. I had not seen a garden like that anywhere else in Burma.

After walking meditatively among the gravestones, I trekked out beyond the cemetery into the jungle. I found parts of the old railway designed by the Japanese to stretch from Bangkok to Rangoon, built by Allied prisoners of war and forced civilian labour during the Second World War. While tramping through the jungle I also stumbled across a series of concrete showers and camping quarters that had belonged to the Japanese.

However, what I really wanted was to find was the eighty-something-year-old lady who had once been the lover of a Japanese soldier all those years ago.

I had been told of this woman by a local man in Moulmein and wanted to meet this living remnant of long-forgotten Burmese history. She apparently lived in one of the villages in the jungle near the cemetery, and when I finally stumbled in, I found all the

villagers drunk and dancing around in celebration of some obscure Buddhist holiday. They invited me upstairs into their communal bamboo hut and offered me two bunches of bananas, a bottle of Fanta and the best betel nuts they could find.

I tried to explain to them who it was I wanted to see and after some hand gestures and drunken smiles, the head of the village finally figured it out. With a broad grin he dragged the Japanese Lover up to the communal area where we sat. She was drunk and grinned toothlessly, surprised at her sudden fame, and her face was wrinkled and looked as soft as tissue paper. Between her betel red gums she sucked on what seemed to be a fat joint.

The head of the village told me she'd had a child to the Japanese soldier, but after the war he had left her and returned to Japan. The son had died at a young age, but that was all the Japanese Lover could really remember, as her memory was fading with old age. The soggy joint nestled between her gums probably didn't help her memory either and, in retrospect, it was possibly the effects of a bottle of rice wine and a strong spliff on some such obscure village holiday long ago which led to her

being knocked up by the horny Japanese soldier in the first place.

But just as the Japanese soldier had abandoned his lover, so did the British and Americans abandon the people of Burma after allying with them to defeat the Japanese. The different ethnic groups of Burma had hoped to form independent states after the war but, as history played out, this never happened. The British lost interest in their former colony and the country collapsed into political disarray, from which a military dictatorship emerged.

As I walked past the cemetery on the way back to the train station, I thought of A Shin, the students, the Nepalese family and all the people of Burma who had been abandoned by the international community. Meticulously manicured Allied war graves contrasted sharply against a background of impoverished villages and I shook my head sadly.

THOSE BULLETS ARE NOT FOR YOU

I should have known Haiti was a bad idea when a fist fight almost broke out at the airport. After navigating my way through customs, a polite official-service taxi driver approached me, his head slightly bowed.

'You remember me, sir, if you need a taxi. My name is Jean.'

'Okay, Jean. I'll just go to the tourist office. If I need a taxi, I'll come and find you.'

The 'tourist office' was a stiflingly small room set to one side of the airport exit. I was hoping to book a room at the Oloffson, a hotel famous for accommodating Graham Greene while he wrote the novel *The Comedians*. However, my desire

to stay there was not for the hotel's fame, but for its safety. Port-au-Prince was devoid of hostels and guesthouses – and most likely devoid of tourists as well – and the Oloffson was at least reputable. It also had the added attraction of a bloody big wall surrounding it.

The tourist officer, a bored young Haitian girl with a fuzzed-up afro and pink lipstick, called the hotel to make a reservation and offered to organise a taxi to drive me there. It was only after she left the office to find a driver that I remembered Jean's offer. I dismissed the thought, figuring he must have found another fare by now. The fuzzed-up afrogirl returned with a guy in a 1940s fedora tilted to one side who introduced himself with an outstretched hand and a high nervous laugh.

'My name is Paul. I'll be your taxi driver.'

This guy didn't seem as polite as Jean, but I was keen to get out of the airport so I shook his hand and followed him through the exit. A wall of blinding heat and a barrage of noise hit me as we stepped outside and I almost lost Paul amid the crush. It seemed at first that Haitians didn't really speak to each other, but yelled, in what sounded like the guttural rasp of French hammering out the strong

syllables of Central Africa. Any soft lilt of the original *Français* must have been beaten out of the language over the last few centuries.

Paul repeatedly offered to carry my pack for me, but I refused, preferring to lug it myself. Given Haiti's founding on slavery, I wanted to avoid having a black man carry my bag but, even more importantly, it felt risky to hand all my worldly possessions to a stranger in a poverty-stricken country I'd only just touched down in.

As Paul led the way through the crush, I spied Jean milling around the airport exit, hoping for the fare that, in his mind, I had promised him. Fuck – I *knew* this was a mistake. Apart from the UN soldiers stationed in armoured cars on the perimeter, I was the only white guy in the airport. My American dollars were of far greater value than any Haitian's pitiful *gourdes*, and it was worth Jean's time to wait around for me. I tried to remain unnoticed, which proved an impossible task, and he spotted me within seconds.

'Sir, the fare …?'

'Sorry, I uh …'

Sensing I'd been stalled, Fedora Paul weaved his way back and shoved Jean in the chest, and a

small scuffle broke out. They argued in Creole for a moment and Jean, the smaller of the two, tried to grab my arm and pull me towards his cab. Fedora Paul smashed Jean's arm away from mine and moved to punch him in the face, while the crowd seethed around us. They began to offer up opinions – some took Jean's side, viewing me as rightly 'his' passenger, while others commended Paul on his persistence. The two opposing sides in the debate began to remonstrate with each other and I started to feel a little nervous. I'd been in the country for less than half an hour and already understood how Haiti can get out of control so easily.

I grabbed Fedora Paul and motioned towards the car park.

'Where's your car? Let's get the fuck outta here.'

The noise of people pressed around me was unbearable and the agitated crowd was beginning to agree that the whole situation was my fault. I felt sorry for Jean, who looked pretty crushed, but by that stage I couldn't really care less and just wanted to leave. We eventually squeezed through the crowd and found the four-wheel drive. As we slammed the doors shut and pulled out of the car park Fedora Paul laughed in his nervous, high-pitched way.

'Poor people!'

He said this, referring to the impoverished, not just the unfortunate.

On the half-hour drive to the Oloffson we passed grubby, rag-clad kids begging on the streets with empty mouths and outstretched hands. Cité Soleil extended over the horizon – it looked as if it had grown organically from the ground, the clay-brick shacks mirroring the colour of the dirt from which they were built. Fedora Paul pointed the slum out to me and laughed again.

'Poor people!'

This guy really did seem like an arsehole and I regretted my decision to take his taxi. We continued through downtown Port-au-Prince, political graffiti scrawled across the walls, gang loyalties clear-marking territory. The lines between power, politics and outright slaughter were blurred beyond recognition in Haiti, a country where a small handful of the elite controlled the entire nation's wealth. Diesel fumes filled the cab and I struggled to breathe, stifled by the squalor I saw out the window as we drove through market streets full of humanity with nowhere to go in this small half-an-island of interdependence.

Poor people, indeed. Very poor people.

★

I wasn't sure what I was going to do in Haiti. I'd just spent a month in Cuba and needed to get back to the States, but due to a McCarthyist hangover, trade restrictions imposed by the US made it impossible to fly there direct. I decided to return via Haiti, but I'd conducted no research, spoke no Creole and had no plans. However, I figured I'd survived a few dodgy places thus far and should be able to manage.

After a restful night's sleep at the Oloffson, I decided to take a walk. The sky was grey and it looked like rain, and the humidity wrapped around me like a damp raincoat. A United Nations armoured car cruised past, beaming white and powder blue. I wandered downhill to the Champ de Mars, a large square near Parliament House, the centre of Port-au-Prince. Although I received some stares and random calls of *blanc*, there were few hassles. The traffic, however, was aggressive and unyielding, and it took a lot of concentration to cross the road or even walk on the crumbling, non-existent footpaths. Over time, I began to walk the streets *facing* the oncoming traffic. Generally speaking,

it is advised to walk *with* the traffic, to merge with the flow, but here, it made more sense to do the opposite. At least that way I could see – and avoid – what was driving towards me.

My first stop was the national museum, which housed a brief history of Haiti. The country became the first black republic when it seceded from the French in 1804, a fact woven deep into the fabric of national pride. However, independence and the abolition of slavery didn't bring the freedom people had hoped for. Since then, the population had been kept in enforced servitude by an elite few, essentially replacing the French aristocracy ousted in the name of liberty two centuries earlier.

On the museum walls hung a portrait and biography of each dictator, psychopath and kleptomaniac to try their hand at ruling the country – over fifty men had made the attempt, most having been overthrown or assassinated. A young guide had been following me as I perused the photographs, and I stopped to ask him which 'president' had been most beneficial.

'Jean-Claude Duvalier. He was a very good president. We call him "Baby Doc".'

'But wasn't he very corrupt? He stole a lot of money, didn't he? I heard he spent $7 million on his wedding.'

'Yes, but the country was much more secure back then. Even more than now.'

'But isn't that because everyone was simply too scared to say or do anything?'

'Maybe. But at least it worked.'

I'd read about 'Baby Doc' – he was the son of François 'Papa Doc' Duvalier – and between them they ruled Haiti for over twenty years. The family maintained their grip on power with a private army called the Tonton Macoutes, named after a voodoo spirit who, in folklore tales, would steal children away in a sack and eat them. Not only did the real-life Tonton Macoutes steal people's children, but money, property and the lives of many. However, Baby Doc had a reputation for being fair-minded compared to his more ruthless father, preferring to play the role of playboy as opposed to Papa's guise as Baron Samedi, the Voodoo Priest of Death. I guess the guide had a point.

I left the museum and walked past the Houses of Parliament, a building modelled on the White House, surrounded by a tall steel fence and guarded

by soldiers. It was here that the regular theft of taxes occurred, and strange and violent decisions were made. Visitors were not allowed inside the grounds – the poverty-stricken masses governed from this house of corruption were kept well away, while the 1 per cent of Haitians who owned 40 per cent of the wealth resided in opulent mansions, high in the Pétionville hills overlooking the slums.

Further downtown, I came across the markets I had driven through with Fedora Paul the day before. At first I felt relaxed and confident, but the sly stares and occasionally curious calls of *blanc* were soon replaced with rude jostling and quick glances of suspicion. This was where the 'ordinary class' of people came to do their shopping – those same people Fedora Paul had derided with his mocking, high-pitched laugh.

Market stalls lined the crumbling sidewalk, selling fruit and vegetables, old telephone parts, second-hand clothes, cigarettes, artwork, sugar cane, sacks of rice and bags of coal, all covered with a fine layer of dust from the filthy city streets. Garbage littered the gutters and raw sewage ran down the street, while a foul smell hung low in the air, clinging to my clothes.

The sky darkened as the daily rains threatened and I found myself a little too close to the docks, the wrong end of downtown. The produce for sale turned from groceries and knick-knacks to car tyres, inner tubes, fan belts and flash rims. Port-au-Prince is a staging point in the drug and arms trade between the US, Jamaica and South America, and it was obvious I wasn't welcome here. The young men who worked on the ships began to take interest in me, and someone in the crowd reached out and grabbed me with a tight fist around my upper arm. I didn't pause to see who it was and quickly shook myself free, still walking with my head down low. A couple of young guys sitting on the back of a gold-coloured ute shouted abuse at me, waving their arms as if shooing away a starving dog. I took their abuse as a warning not to hang around any longer and quickly crossed to the other side of the street and walked back the way I'd come.

Out of nowhere, three very black guys surround me. They're wearing beanies and sunglasses, and dreadlocks sprout like noxious vines around their shoulders. One of the dreads tries to shake my hand, which I tentatively ignore.

'Yo whassup man.'

His voice is all phoney-friendship and it's obvious this guy is not interested in my wellbeing. I figure someone will notice what is happening and intervene, but the crowded sidewalk continues its antlike business, ignoring what is happening.

'Yeah, what up.'

I keep looking between the guy's face and his fist, waiting for the first sign of a hand going under a shirt, into a jacket or down into the waistband of his jeans – a sure sign that a weapon is about to emerge. I'm scared, but try not to show it. I don't say anything but keep looking at him, face, fist, face, fist, face, fist, waiting for the weapon, wondering what to do when it comes.

'Give me five dollars.'

This was a new voice, from one of his buddies behind me, an urgent no-fucking-about kind of voice. I glance over my shoulder and come face to face with mean eyes semi-concealed by cheap sunglasses. Behind him I see a small group of amused Haitian men looking on, as if to see what's going to happen next. I know what's going to happen next and spot a gap opening up between the ants. I quickly sidestep into the gutter, hop back out and merge with the rest of the crowd who close

in behind me, and with sewage-soggy pant bottoms I let the surge of humanity carry me uptown towards the relative safety of the Champ de Mars.

Striding back uphill I try to catch someone's eye to salvage a smile and feel something for this place. I receive furtive glances, but no smiles. The clouds hang low in the sky and the rain opens up, so I decide to wait for the downpour to finish. I stand under a tree next to a fruit seller, who has placed a piece of clear plastic over his stall to protect his produce. The plastic is layered in dust, which soon turns to muddy rivulets flowing down the folds of the sheeting onto my boot.

An old lady shuffles up beside me. Her body is withered and hunched and she wears a faded blue dress and a 1920s style hat with a sprig of satin on it shaped like a flower. I wonder how many years has she seen, how many presidents and dictators, those who lasted decades, those who lasted days, how many children she's had, to how many men, how many people has she seen killed, how many people passed away, passed on, passed by? How many days has she spent hungry and tired, waiting for the rain to stop, so she could get back to shopping for whatever was available and whatever she could afford.

'It's raining.'

The withered old lady speaks perfect English.

'Yes, it is.'

'Isn't it lovely?'

I look down at her, and I see her properly for the first time. Her skin is so wrinkled and fragile it looks like the smallest drop of rain could burn a hole right through her.

'I guess it is.'

She says nothing more, but looks up at me and smiles. I get back to walking. Fuck the rain, it'll wash away the sweat and the dirt. I feel exhausted and count how long I am stuck in this place – nine more days. I walk back up the hill to the Oloffson, find my room, flop down on the bed and pass out.

★

A clap of thunder echoes off the surrounding mountains, jolting me out of the knife-edged semi-coma that has been passing for sleep the last few nights. Shit, I'm still in Haiti. The rain starts to pelt down, a gunshot *crack* shoots across the sky and a bolt of electric blue reaches down like a torturer's

electrode, scarring the cliffs and whipping up the cry of a hurricane wind.

I'm in Jacmel, on the southern coast, trying to sleep while the tail end of a hurricane lashes past. The town is known for its papier-mâché masks, faded colonial buildings and voodoo carnivals. The relief of leaving Port-au-Prince was tempered by the bus driver's gear-grinding logic of safety – bus outweighs car but perhaps not truck therefore horn must be pounded to ward off accident at every tight turn. We slow-churned our way over the mountain ridge that separates the city from the quiet southern coast, past mountains of bare earth and deforested valleys, where the last remaining logwood has been burnt for fire and its people migrated from rural starvation to city squalor.

I still didn't really understand what I was doing in Haiti. My previous travels had felt as if they had purpose – but this time it seemed futile, as if I were taking risks for no reason. I could have flown from Cuba to the States via Costa Rica, or Mexico, and had a nice, safe beach holiday, but some inbuilt Third World radar had directed me here. Besides the feeling of displacement and the pointless castaway nature of my journey, I was bored, lonely and a long way from

home. This shit was getting old fast.

The wind continued to hit the coast like a police baton and white lightning lit up my small, humid room. The electricity in the guesthouse was turned off every night at 4 am. Without my room fan to ward off the heat and humidity, the blessing of sleep switched off too. Now that I was awake, I knew cool comfort would not return until the power was revived at 7 am. I wrapped a towel around me and switched on a torch to find the bathroom down the hall, where I sat under a cold shower and waited out the storm. Six more days to go.

★

The storm finally passed and after a restless night's sleep I decided to stretch my legs. I had plans to meet up with a guy called Phoenix later that evening, an artist I'd met the day before. I'd stumbled into his beachside studio while wandering through the old colonial part of town, and Phoenix had been more than happy to show me his art – impressive papier-mâché masks of animals and grotesque spirits, paintings

of obscure voodoo symbols and a bizarre sculpture consisting of a real goat skull, a work which reflected some strange beliefs he held but couldn't quite explain.

Phoenix wanted to take me out on the town for the night, but that was still a few hours away, leaving me the day to float around Jacmel. Opposite the guesthouse was a shoeshine guy who had set up on the side of the street. As I walked out the front gate he banged his brush against the wooden footrest to attract my attention, tempting me over with a broad grin. There didn't seem to be much else to do, so I figured I'd find small ways to make the time pass and wandered over for a shoeshine.

While I sat on a little stool, the guy vigorously cleaning my shoes, a red-eyed young kid sauntered up beside me and made gun signs at the side of my head. I had seen him across the street, doing the same thing at some small children, and my heart sank when I saw his attention swing my way. I felt trapped but I decided to sit and wait out Red Eyes' pretend hold-up. He continued with the gun signs, this time aiming at my balls, then sat on the curb beside me and pulled out a little folded-up piece of paper. He showed me what was inside the paper – some chunky

white crack. I assumed this was his stash and, given his weird behaviour, figured he'd been sampling fairly liberally from it.

I shook my head signalling a no-sale. He nodded towards me, then nodded at the crack. Again, I shook my head. He nodded at me, nodded at his stash, then nodded at me one more time. Shoeshine still had his head down, scrubbing away madly – he'd learnt a long time ago to stay out of other people's business – and banged his brush on the footrest to signify he was moving over to the next boot. The bang of the brush seemed to snap Red Eyes out of his sales attempt and he wandered off, expressing his disappointment with a series of grunts.

My shoes finally shone to a drill sergeant's delight, I spent the next couple of hours wandering aimlessly around the small town, beginning to regret declining Red Eyes' sale. I could've gotten nicely high and, along with Phoenix's goat-art, had an interesting afternoon back at the studio. Instead, I retired to the counter of the guesthouse to drink some local Prestige beers.

★

The sun was a red orange glow hanging low over the ocean as I followed Phoenix through a palm-frond fence into a bar. We were immediately accosted by two half-naked, scab-skinned girls, who greeted me with snake-bite clutches at my crotch and wallet. Phoenix had picked me up at the guesthouse and had taken me to this beachfront bar and brothel. It was poorly lit and extremely loud Haitian pop music played to distortion through some homemade speakers. Phoenix shooed the girls away with a quick-fire burst of angry Creole and we settled into our chairs with a couple of beers. It went unsaid that I would pay for the drinks, but I really didn't mind, figuring a few beers were small price for a guided tour of Jacmel's seedy bars – and definitely worth the protection Phoenix provided from the drunken men eyeballing me.

The wooden hut that housed the bar also contained a number of small cubicles curtained off by threadbare sheets, where the main business of the night was conducted. The slimmest of the girls seemed to be receiving most of the attention, entering the dirt-floor room with fifteen-minute frequency, hand in hand with slightly staggering, half-drunk men. She wore nothing but a bikini top

and a short skirt, while the men would re-emerge with shirts untucked, belts unbuckled and a week's wages lost.

'What sort of music do you like, *blanc*?'

'Music? Oh, reggae mostly.'

'Okay. Wait here.'

Phoenix slid over to the bar and chatted to the proprietor who immediately changed the CD. The bar guy gave me a thumbs-up and I started to feel a little more relaxed as the music segued into the sounds of South Africa's Lucky Dube, his voice floating over this little island outpost of hustle and poverty.

The girls seemed to keep pretty busy and I wondered what kind of money they made trading sex for deferred starvation.

'How much does a girl cost, bro?'

Phoenix looked me up and down.

'Why? You want to get some?'

'No, not particularly, I'm just curious to know how much they charge.'

'Fifty dollars.'

'Fifty US dollars?

'No, fifty Haitian dollars.'

I spent a minute doing the Haitian currency

math. Technically, Haitian dollars do not exist – it's a figure of speech. One Haitian 'dollar' means five *gourdes*, the official currency, and while people will charge you in 'dollars', it sometimes means US dollars but is more likely to mean Haitian dollars. Once you clarify payment is due in Haitian dollars, you then need to multiply the original figure by five to arrive at the correct amount in *gourdes*. So, fifty Haitian dollars equals 250 *gourdes*. To calculate how much that is in US dollars, divide the amount of *gourdes* by forty. So, in US currency, the going rate for sex with a girl in Jacmel was –

'Shit bro, that's like, about US$6.'

'Ya man, it's a lot of money for a fuck.'

A pause.

'You ever come here for the girls?'

Phoenix looked at me incredulously.

'Of course, man. What else is there to do in Jacmel?'

The voice of Lucky Dube continued to reverberate among the cliffs and sound of crashing surf.

★

Phoenix had promised we would attend a voodoo ceremony, so we soon finished our drinks and wandered down to the beach to hire some motorbikes from a tout. We rode into the countryside, eventually arriving at a rutted dirt path, which took us to the site of the ceremony. As I cut the engine I could hear the deep bass of dub and the sounds of an outdoor party – people milling about, laughter and shouting, motorbikes revving and children running around playing tag. Stall owners pressed their wares upon us – fried fish and rice, cigarettes and matches, lollies for the kids, local rum – so we bought some fried fish and a couple of beers.

Phoenix turns to me.

'You can hear the drums.'

I stop to listen. Emanating out of a large shed, straight out of a colonial-era novel, comes the sound of beating drums and chanting voices, the rhythmic pulse of Africa rising and falling to the heartbeat of the Caribbean. We push our way through the crowd towards the drums, but are stopped by a fat guy sitting at a table. He's drinking rum and stuffing his face with fried fish, surrounded by minders in sunglasses. I remember reading that the Tonton Macoutes wore sunglasses

at night to signify their status and I wonder if these guys are related.

The fat man yells something at Phoenix and motions me to join his table. I shake my head – this guy is obviously a gangster and I don't want to get involved. He shouts at me again and points to a seat, demanding I sit next to him. I had been in Haiti long enough to know that with the exception of Phoenix and his art buddies, most people weren't interested in my friendship, so I shake my head again, motion Phoenix to merge with the milling crowd and we drift away.

'What was all that about?'

Although I knew what it was about, I want to confirm my suspicions with Phoenix.

'Ah, no worry, man, him a badman. Just ignore him and keep walking.'

A badman, a gangster, gunrunner and drug dealer, potential kidnapper – and probably the local police chief. We push into a tin-roofed shed packed with people vying for a view. On the floor are what I guess to be priestesses wearing green and white patterned dresses, crisp white shirts and green headscarves, sweaty from dancing and singing, shoulders and hips swaying, voices open to the sky, chanting. They

move in and around repetitive, intense drumming pounded out by shirtless men, their sinewy biceps and slick, strong wrists beating the skins to the rhythms of their ancestors.

A man with a bald head, tufty black beard and blue robes stands amid the scene, a sweaty wild-eyed look upon his face. He controls the congregation, and swigs liberally from a bottle of rum, directing the drummers and introducing new songs. Offerings of cake, seafood, premium beer – Heineken, I think – and other goods of value are made to the various deities and, although the ceremony initially seems to be conducted at random, over time a certain order reveals itself.

While the local people join in the joyous chants of days gone by, the modern Haitian contingent – most probably ex-pats from the US – record this centuries-old celebration with camcorders and mobile phones. One old woman becomes possessed and goes into a fit, collapsing into the shaman's arms. The shaman tilts back the old lady's head and pours a generous swig of rum down her throat, and she leaps up like a stung cat and lets out a screech, continuing her mad convulsions until she exhausts herself and simply sways to the beat.

In the corner, a girl sleeps soundly on the cold concrete, oblivious to the noise and the movement around her. A thought flashes through my head – is she asleep *or is she really dead?* I have visions of virgin sacrifice but catch myself before my literary imagination runs wild in this supposed scene of pre-colonial savagery. The reality is, this so-called voodoo ceremony is a great party, and although I'm aware of the spiritual and very serious nature of the event, it's obvious that Haitian people also see it as a damn good night out. Presently, the girl who I'd wildly imagined as dead, rolls over and yawns and I realise it's probably time for bed myself.

★

The next morning I'm woken abruptly by the amplified ranting of a Sunday-sermon minister. The guesthouse I'm staying in happens to be located next door to a church and, in typical Haitian style, the preaching is loud and aggressive. I'm hung-over and have had little sleep, so I pull the pillow over my head and try to block my ears.

My dreams have become intoxicated with beating drums, chanting shamans and beautiful semi-naked

black women, and in the depths of rapid eye movement I surmised I was dreaming about it all from the safety of my own bed back home, a dream within a dream. This time when I wake up I don't feel so bad, as my experience at the voodoo ceremony has restored my spirits and revived my enthusiasm for Haiti.

Phoenix had promised to take me to a local football match that afternoon, and although I knew a few more beer donations would be in order, it felt good to have a friend of sorts.

That afternoon Phoenix shows up at the guesthouse and we head off on a motorbike to a football field at the edge of the city. High palm-frond walls surround the field and the entrance is congested with a throng of people trying to get tickets for the game between Juventes, wearing black and white stripes, and Base Jeune Jan, in red and white checks. After a long wait and much shoving aside of other fans, we finally purchase tickets and find ourselves a spot on the sideline.

The supporters are lined up in factions on either side of the field, and I'm in with the Base Jeune Jan fans. Most have bought food and drinks from the obligatory stallholders who seem to appear

at any gathering of more than twelve people. The men are drinking heavily and a hideously loud PA blares out Haitian electro-beats, while over the top a commentator chats constantly through a distorted microphone like a race caller on coke, accompanying his non-stop appraisal of the game with trills, falsettos, shouts and deep baritone moans.

The crowd is electric and it is obvious this is a serious game. Every penalty, brilliant piece of play and display of fancy footwork is cheered by one set of supporters while simultaneously jeered by the other. The game is conducted at a frenetic pace and players have to work hard to earn a penalty. A skilful save by the Juventes goalkeeper is applauded by whistles and yells, but eventually Base Jeune Jan score – an accurate header on the end of a perfectly placed cross. The red and white supporters erupt and invade the pitch to celebrate with the players, and it takes the referee four or five minutes to restore order and re-start the match.

The halftime hooter sounds and supporters crowd around their respective teams, egging them on and providing all manner of advice. Not long after the start of the second half, another pitch invasion occurs when Juventes score brilliantly, a steaming run up the

sideline finished off with a dab past the goalie. The game is now 1-1. As it is getting dark, the referee resumes play immediately, and the players help clear the field of any remaining Juventes fans. Some of the supporters are pretty drunk and yell at all and sundry, including the referee, the opposition players and other supporters. The game can go either way, and both sides of the field become extremely vocal, the commentator blazing away even louder and faster than before, distorting his voice through the microphone to the point of incoherence.

The ref calls a penalty. I can't figure out which team is to receive the resultant shot at goal, but the crowd erupts, some protesting against the decision, some defending the ref's call. Another pitch invasion ensues and the ref is surrounded by the dispute, as opposing supporters face each other in a shouting match. The players stand around with hands on hips, waiting to see what will happen, some looking frustrated, some resigned. I'm intrigued, but also a little nervous, the commentator still screeching away, now commentating the fight on the field as opposed to the match.

The players and supporters start to run away from the melee and people who had previously been picnicking nearby quickly jump up and run past us towards the palm-frond fence. Phoenix looks at me matter-of-factly.

'I think it is time to leave.'

The crowd starts to push and shove in an attempt to escape and I'm just starting to figure out what would make these people run so frantically when Phoenix forcefully grabs my arm and *bopbopbopbop!* A collective scream emanates from the mass as gunshots ring out, and we trample down the palm-frond fence so people can flee into the bushes. Phoenix and I walk quickly towards the road, and while people push past us, the firing continues. I flinch at every shot, but Phoenix reassures me.

'Relax man. Those bullets are not for you. You can hear those ones. The bullets that kill you, you don't ever hear them. You just feel them and take it.'

I'm shaken up and scared so agree with him without really thinking, and finally we reach the safety of the road. We can still hear some gunshots back at the football field but we are much safer now, and we discuss what to do next.

'Yo Ali, you wanna go to a bar?'

'Sure. Let's get the fuck outta here.'

Phoenix and I rev our motorcycles and ride back into Jacmel. On the way, open-top jeeps and trucks full of drunken supporters pass by, waving the colours of their favourite team, each side chanting victory. I can't understand whether the cheering is about the game or the shooting. A truckload of youths spot me on the motorcycle and start to yell at me and I get a little worried – I'm a good target, up high on a motorcycle seat, with very visible white skin against the darkness of the night, but fortunately the truck overtakes us and we're left alone. We arrive at the bar safely, find a beer and sit down. After a few minutes, Phoenix breaks the silence.

'There's another football game on tomorrow. You want to go?'

I'm waiting for him to start laughing, but I find no trace of sarcasm or irony in his voice.

'Are you fuckin for real?'

'What, are you worried about tonight?'

'Just a little!'

'Man, that shit happens all the time. Just try not to get too involved. And remember what I said about hearing the bullets.'

'Thanks bro, I'll keep that in mind.'

That night I lie in my bed wide awake, jumping at any sound that passes by my window. Once again there's no way I can sleep and I count down how long I have before my flight leaves Haiti. Three more fucking days.

★

The baggage handlers are at it again and I forcefully wrench my luggage back from them, saving me a coerced tip. Christ, I hope I don't run into Jean or Fedora Paul. I'm back at the airport and feel a sense of relief to be finally leaving. The pushing and shoving in departures is much worse than it was in arrivals – people seem far more desperate to leave Haiti than they are to arrive. It feels as if there is a premonition in the air.

I eventually board the plane, find my seat and breathe a sigh of relief. Predictably, our departure is stalled by some serious arguments between the passengers and stewards over seating arrangements, but we finally make it off the ground. While on the flight I realise I didn't take a single photograph in Haiti. I've managed to document most of my

travels – however, in Haiti it felt as if people would become upset with me should I start snapping away. That was what frightened me the most – something fucked up could always happen, and invariably did. It saddens me that Haitian people are still suffering the hangover of slavery – the violence I witnessed seemed to be the result of a cut-throat way of life, a deep frustration, a harboured anger of a people thrust by history into the arms of poverty.

Once again I feel my own frustration at having met good people trapped in shitty situations, and my impotence in affecting any real change gnaws away inside. Two months later Haiti's fortunes would take another downturn when the worst earthquake in its history hit the island, sending an already-struggling country into a new nightmare of its own. For now, though, I fall into the deepest sleep I'd had in the last ten days.

HOMICIDE

The mud crabs are out again tonight and the faint sound of the ocean floats gently overhead. I take another sip of my Red Stripe and continue to stare into nothingness. I'm sitting in the garden of a guesthouse in Negril, on the west coast of Jamaica. Like that down-river journey on the Irrawaddy, this too is a silent place. Back then I was in the midst of an exciting Conradian journey, exploring the dark heart of humanity, but this time the dark heart has caught up with me. I think about what Phoenix said – I'd heard the bullets in Haiti and escaped, and was fortunate to hear the bullets in Kingston, too. But those Kingston bullets were far too close for my liking, and for the man from New Zealand – well, he didn't hear them at all.

In a nearby hammock swings the caretaker

of the guesthouse, Errol, an old Jamaican guy in a beat-up blue baseball cap. He takes the liberty of the night shift to casually smoke a joint. He has been entertaining me with stories about the ganja plantations he used to work on back in the 70s, when twin-prop Cessnas from the US would land on mountaintop runways carved out of the jungle. These days he had a far less exciting job as a night watchman, but he still liked to get nicely toasted and seemed content with his lot as a *sufferah* in his sunset years.

The guesthouse is set in a huge and beautiful garden, and I've developed a habit of sitting up late drinking Red Stripes, watching the big blue mud crabs soldier round the garden's undergrowth. Every night they emerge from their holes to fight aggressively for each other's burrows – those close to food resources such as decayed leaves and dead insects are the most desirable. There's little physical fighting, just nipper-waving showdowns, with the larger crabs psyching the smaller ones out of leaving their burrows. This pantomime continues all night, the crabs vying for a better place in the garden, a closer food supply and ultimately, dominance over the other crabs.

I stare at one who has emerged out of the darkness to feast on a morsel of dead grasshopper. The crab holds the insect in one claw and munches savagely with its alien mouth, two eyes propped up on sticks ever-twitching, alert for the threat of a bigger crab who may yet steal its jewel. I didn't come all the way to Jamaica to stare at mud crabs, but it's the best I've got at this point, and the Red Stripes keep my mind numb.

Popular culture presents Jamaica as an island paradise of sunset beaches, cool reggae vibes and stoned Rastafarians. But the country has an outlaw side, a culture of violence, best represented in the classic 1972 film *The Harder They Come*. The hero of the film, an impoverished would-be singer named Ivanhoe Martin, turns to a life of crime in an attempt to defy the authorities, the music producers and the gangsters in his pursuit of fame and fortune. But in the end our hero is killed.

This may seem a harsh fate for a film's lead character, but the story of Ivanhoe Martin reflects the reality of life for much of Jamaica's poor. In the 1970s, politicians from the Jamaican Labour Party and the opposing People's National Party paid for public support in the form of weapons. The slums

of Kingston were flooded with guns and the drug cartels gained power, a situation that worsened with the introduction of cocaine. Today, Kingston has one of the highest murder rates in the world and a corrupt police force that is barely distinguishable from the cartel dons they try to contain.

I wonder if the man from New Zealand had known all this before he decided to visit Jamaica for his honeymoon. More importantly, I wonder if his wife knew. I was aware of the history of the place and, even though I'd sworn off violent impoverished countries, still decided to visit the island that had produced so much of the music I love.

I try not to think too hard about what it all means and continue to sip on my beer, staring at the crabs in their endless nightly escapades of nipper hold-ups and burrow jacking.

★

Two days earlier I'd been sitting in the front yard of a Kingston guesthouse with some other tourists, doing what tourists in Jamaica do – drink Red Stripe and listen to reggae. I'd only just arrived and was feeling relaxed, looking forward to discovering more about

the music I grew up listening to as a teenager in New Zealand. The sun had set and the night air was filled with the usual tipsy travel chit-chat found in guesthouses and hostels on any given night all around the world. In our holiday mood, however, no one had noticed that the security gate hadn't been locked.

Tiring of the chatter, I found a seat to one side to sit on my own for a moment. I was just about to light a cigarette when a dark figure slunk into the empty seat next to me. He had a long face and wore a tattered baseball cap, a white T-shirt and a pair of dirty jeans. I could feel the presence of someone behind me but didn't take too much notice, figuring they must have been mates with the staff at the guesthouse. The guy next to me then started mumbling something about ganja.

'Nah, I don't want any ganja, thanks, mate.'

I realise these guys are dealers, unsurprising given my location, but still figure they might be friends with the staff who would probably receive a kickback from any sales. I notice the guy's eyes – a look I'd seen in parts of Africa, where the bad drugs were – bloodshot and stoned, but beyond stoned, the drugs dictating the mind's every move.

He puts his hand under the front of his T-shirt as if he's about to pull out an ounce bag so again I try to dissuade him, this time more forcefully.

'Nah bro, not interested in any ganja – thanks.'

But instead of a bag of ganja, he pulls out a white-handled revolver and points the barrel directly at my stomach.

'Nah man. I gotta gun. Now gimme all you got.'

His voice is guttural, like it's coming from somewhere deep within. Desperate. I'm unsure how to react but it doesn't matter as the transaction is cut short by two loud *bangs* in quick-fire succession *bop!bop!* Within seconds the guesthouse yard has cleared and I'm hiding behind a wooden wall, slightly drunk and unsure what the fuck just happened. I'm breathing heavily and shaking slightly. I heard those shots so I know it's not me who's been hit – but who has, who didn't hear the bullets?

Silence. The unknown. Are the gunmen still here? Where is everyone else? My breathing sounds like the loudest sound system on earth and I'm sure they're gonna find me here and shoot the fuck out of me. I decide to sit and wait. That vein in my head, the acid throb, comes back to haunt me and I can feel the blood pulsating through my temple. I hear the

sound of a woman's voice, crying and screaming.

'Where's my husband! *Where's my husband! WHERE'S MY HUSBAND!*'

Oh fuck. The two shots. Who didn't hear them?

Fuck. *Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, FUCK!*

I run to my room and find a torch and some bandages, then run back outside. With the torchlight on, we frantically search the garden and soon find a man lying on his back. He's breathing steadily and seems to be okay, but there's blood seeping from his left armpit. Somehow the police are already there – flak jackets and helmets and machine guns – and I wonder how long I'd been sitting behind that wooden wall. The police want to take the wounded man to hospital, but they have no stretcher so, using a blanket from one of the rooms, we carry him to one of the police cars and place him on the back seat. His wife follows him in and he struggles to sit up to make room for her. I ask her where they are from – New Zealand – then I'm left standing on the side of the road, watching the police car fade away into the distance.

Twenty minutes later the police are still in the yard, poking about for evidence, when a message crackles through on the radio. A collective groan

emanates from the police cordon as I walk up to one of the policeman and pull on his jacket.

'What the fuck happened?'

He turns to me with his eyes on the ground.

'He's dead.'

'Dead? What? What do you mean he's fuckin dead?'

'The New Zealand man. He is dead. We just heard on the radio.'

The cop looks directly at me. He seems tired, like he's seen this all before. Except this time, the casualty is a foreigner – harder to ignore and more paperwork. I let go of his jacket and find somewhere to sit. I'm confused, as I was sure the man's wound didn't look too bad. But fuck, two shots to the chest, that's *gotta* be bad. I can't believe the guy's dead – *motherfucker!* I wonder about his wife and feel a deep sorrow – she must be the loneliest woman in the world at this moment. I look up to the Kingston sky seeking solace, only to see a full moon looking down on me.

★

The crab is still munching on that goddamn grasshopper. I wish another crab would come and try to steal it, just to keep my mind from wandering back to the murder. Errol the caretaker has ambled off into the garden to do his nightly rounds, and me – I just want to go home. I feel as though my chances have been used up – the beating in Vietnam, the risks in Central Africa, the war in Lebanon and the shoot-out in Haiti. I thought I'd figured out life was fragile all those years ago in Vietnam, but seeing the life drain out of the New Zealand man hit home like a motherfucker.

The grief felt by his wife and family and friends will be immense and the pain of his murder will reverberate throughout the world for a long time to come. And this is the death of just one solitary human being.

I thought about those ephemeral Aboriginal people on the verandah so long ago, how much suffering they must carry after years of oppression; the mindlessness of Cambodia and the tragedy of Rwanda – one murder after another, until the weight of human history threatened to overwhelm me like a wave. I remembered the woman on the filthy mattress, the girl I'd paid to fuck, and the

beautiful, in-love Phuong. I wondered what had happened to Claudine, Alphonse, Safari Jean-Pierre, Freedom, Jean Claude and Jack.

I'd been plugged into the soul of the world for the best part of a decade and had seen the beauty, the sadness, the courage and resilience, and had done my best to understand. I thought back to the sailor on the boat in Burma. Where was he now? Probably hanging his legs over the side of the boat, listening to the water skim past, still chewing that betel nut. I bet his teeth are just bloody red stumps now. Perhaps from time to time he thinks back to our nights of Wu Tang, Peter Tosh and Horace Andy, nods to himself and murmurs *m'rock'm m'roll*.

I know I do.

★

On the northern tip of Aotearoa, near Te Reinga, a flock of Kuaka has gathered – migration time is upon them, and it is time to leave. A vast expanse of ocean lies before them – soon a majestic feeling these birds have never known will rise up within, and they will soar high above the grey-blue sea, through whisper-thin trails of vapour cloud, onwards on a flight path of forever.

The biggest Kuaka lets out a signalling cry and, one by one, the birds begin to spread their wings and launch over a towering cliff, placing themselves at the mercy of air drifts and thermal currents. Soon, the departing birds form a oneness and together guide each other into the distance, their wings at first making an almighty roar that quickly quietens into determined, peaceful flight, a shadow over the sea.

Within one of the Kuaka lies a hint of sadness. Although he feels a distant freedom, there also remains a pity, a longing, a fondness for life in the rapidly receding Aotearoa. The Kuaka briefly leaves the white wall of birds and loops around to take one final glimpse of the island he called home. He sees the craggy mountains and the crystal streams, the flowering manuka and the redwood trees, the Pacific waves that crash endlessly along the rugged coastline, home of the Tangata whenua, the people of the land. The head Kuaka calls for him to rejoin the flock, and with that, he circles back and is gone.