

## 7. PSYCHOSPHERE

The dawn rose in tainted blood, etching scenes of vague yet mounting dread: the Federal District, the far outskirts of outskirts. Welcome to Mexico City. This was where the rough road of roads ended. He stared bleakly out the bus window. Dantesque flames spurted from distant, cathedraled derricks as the early penumbral light broke across a wide extent of dense construction, circled in smog—enclosed, as it were, in a sort of hellish snow dome. Had he been gang-pressed into someone else's nightmare? Yet it was all too real. He registered a fatigued orgy of cement-distressed factories and slums, poisoned patches of landscape, and the lingering shadows of his own dream-fevered sleep. Jonah felt himself being drawn into an immense Everycity, an unholy merging of all the cities he'd been to, spent time in, or even merely passed through, those measurelessly alien conurbations: the interchangeable variables of known knowns, known unknowns and unknown unknowns—all their inconceivable secrets and smirking *Keep Out* signs. People build their cities and make these mysteries. They craft their unfair games; only they understand the ways of their own private labyrinth. You are the outsider—on an earthbound mission to space. You're not invited to play here, but you may try to learn our ways. We'll keep laughing at you. We may rape or kill you. You must gamble on our inscrutability: we are the city.

Now La Capital. El Distrito Federal. *De Efe*. This was the original old time carny Bearded Lady—a winking horror of infinite girth; the city of dreadful night lying forlorn and belching at the silted mouth of the Styx. Could he find some coins for his eyes? I must pay Charon—but to steer me where? He should not want to drown in this underworld constructed upon dead lakes, drawn and quartered on the dream of an Aztec Empire erected in its turn with the bones and blood of human sacrifice. Or was he already one with the newly dead? He must seek his place. The sprawling megapolis, already drenched in early morning heat, danced before his strained vision like a fat Lynchian whore juggling starving marmosets. Her white-powdered cheeks puffed and grey faded, coalesced in haloes of Congo reds and murky peat, became cracked mirrors of smoke and blasted volcanic ash. Billboards exhorted brandy, cigarettes, Coca Cola and Quaker State. A mongrel architecture of slate roofs and concrete lines chopped at each other in painterly smog like a Whistler sketch on peyote. *Grinning at him*. The bus soon ground to a halt in a broth of traffic contending progress on one of a thousand asphalt veins networking in frustrated rivulets across the incalculable city. The road was packed with more buses along with trucks, vans, minibuses, taxis, ambulances, Volkswagens, U.S. beasts and divers imports of every make and condition. Drivers executed impossible moves and blasted their horns like hysterical children. The emissions of a foul behemoth set off detonating reports. Sirens wailed through the stultified air.

Jonah had arrived. The trip was over. Now it must start.

The bus crawled into Terminal Norte. Jonah grabbed his pack, hauled it on his back and hit the street. The city breathed all over him, hot and rancid. He made his way to the Metro, bought a ticket and pushed through the turnstile. He followed the fastest-moving crowd, spirited along by the throng through a labyrinthine network of tunnels, passing illuminated galaxy displays. Onto the train. Carriages expelled and filled up again at each stop. The crowds vacillated between fevered animation and monstrous passivity. Some commuters wore white breathing masks in preparation to surface to the world above (he later noted that street vendors enjoyed a lively trade peddling this accessory to city dwellers—a number of whom seemed poised to collapse from inhaling the concentrated pollutants sweeping in from the Valley on winds that conveyed the remains of soil-blown, deforested ranges).

He finally ascended to a lopsided moshpit of derangement otherwise known as El Centro: butt center of La Capital. No longer the rush hour, the rush day was in full swing. Having arrived where the action was, his sense of insignificance hit home. He was an anonymous addition to the millions of souls eking out a living here, and he wasn't even eking out a living yet. A brigade of indigenous almsmen sullenly banded together in the fellowship of poverty panhandled Jonah across a noisy three-laner. They ignored his withering gaze as he grimly traipsed towards a cheap hotel, crying for baksheesh in a musical lilt. He dug out some coins and placed them in several hands. Their woeful expressions slackened as they examined the change and turned away.

He found a room at a concrete dive on Republica de Cuba called Hotel Mozambique. It was a whorehouse not just figuratively but literally speaking. Prostitutes lived there, serviced clientele. It also served as a discreet twat rendezvous for low-level bureaucrats who took their mistresses there for a quick afternoon

bang or overnights if domestic circumstances allowed. Jonah's room wasn't much but he didn't need much. By bottom-end hotel standards it was a good room. It contained a shower, a comfortable bed and ceiling fan. There weren't any windows, however, and the lighting consisted of one dim, 40-watt globe set in a lamp on a bureau. He went out and bought a 100-watt job. It was very bright and cast wild Gothic shadows across the walls whenever he pitched drunkenly about the room, clutching a half-empty bottle of Barbincourt rum and doing the Martin Sheen thing out of *Apocalypse Now*.

The Mozambique was located a few blocks west of a famously overrated drinking square called Garibaldi—a urine-reeking, chunder-thundering beer, mariachi and tequila plaza. The surrounding streets materialized each day into boisterous smugglers' markets; at night they regressed into an anonymous no-man's land of both formless and vigorously suggestive threat. Beyond this lay an atrophied, garbage-strewn neighborhood of high-rise apartments. The Mozambique was thus situated in the heart of a tawdry domain that Jonah briefly came to call home.

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Bazza made the rounds from cantina to cantina alone. He threw down a shot of tequila following every second beer. He was up to three tequilas. There weren't many foreigners about; a few Scandinavian tourists. Typical Aryan rubbernecks, Viking monkeys gone to heaven on the cheap piss. He did not desire company. He could have called a few stooges from work. He was searching for a solution to a looming crisis: he needed a new roommate. The pittance he'd squirreled away was not to be subsumed by so fundamental a right as a roof over his head. So it happened: the gods served it up to him like room service. A sucker. Just his sort of meat. Put on the world-weary act. He'd have him eating out of his hands. Need a job? Place to live? Don't rush your mark—not yet. He was alone, for starters. No, he was not alone. Who was that chick that joined him at his table? She was gorgeous. A whore? Had to be. This was too much luck for one night. He had to have her. Meeting people was a cinch for Bazza. He was gregarious. He was worldly. He nodded at the guy and smirked, raised his glass in a magnanimous gesture.

All it took.

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Jonah headed to Garibaldi to drink down the night with a call girl neighbor from the Mozambique. Her name was América Cordero. She'd made a move on him in the lobby the moment he'd checked in. He'd passed on the offer, but she spoke a little English and was friendly. He kept bumping into her. She lived next door. He'd sometimes listen to her histrionic howling through his paper-thin wall. She was a busy beaver. He didn't care to play footsies with a potential dose of clap. When times were tough he had his hand—it was the safest deal going. She didn't know that her efforts next door were of assistance in that department—she really knew how to lay it on. They settled in at a boisterous bar to survey the scene. He cast a baleful eye over the quasi-inebriated tourist crews that kept carefully to themselves. He felt his solitude as oppressively as the heat, despite América's company. She was still a working girl; she was always on the job. He cast around. He could recognize the quiet desperation sweating off the mug of a fellow Odysseus. It's also about knowing how to respond when Lady Fortune leads on the dance floor. Go with the flow. Just add beer. That's how he met Bazza Torsvan.

—I'm a Sydney boy and this ain't Kansas. In three drinks time we'll be firm friends if you're half-interesting. Judging by the company you keep—he indicated América, who'd moved to a distant table for a few minutes' prospecting—you're at least half-interesting.

América finished trying to tee up an assignation with a very drunken trick and came over to Jonah's table to give Bazza the once over. She smiled like an angel. She gave Jonah's arm an affectionate squeeze. She was alluring when she put on her act. She invited seduction while she simultaneously seduced. Jonah introduced them. Bazza feigned boyish charm, bowing his head as he shook hands with her. He began lewdly assessing her while trying to act refined—failing in the latter affectation. He gave off an air of pronounced decay. His hair was an unsightly mess. The bags under his eyes came accessorized with their own bags. His breath reeked of cheap tequila.

—It's not easy to earn a living here, he said, tapping the table. I should know. It's not easy for anyone. Never is.

In this unprovoked allusion, and in his shabbily formal mode of dress—leather boots, black slacks and beer-stained business shirt—Bazza did not impress Jonah as a tourist or (in the pretentious demarcation) a traveler. He was neither, comporting himself in the casual reserve of an expat or resident. Jonah figured it might make dollar sense to milk this guy for all he was worth. Bazza called over some mariachi players. They played their guitars as they sidled over to the table, wide-brimmed hats and silver studded charro outfits, halting before them like cavalry preparing to dismount. They rattled off their repertoire; Bazza haggled over the price. He finally chose a ballad, for América's benefit, a song that presaged the night's mechanical seduction: *La Negra*. The drinks sang and the music flowed. Bazza made a suggestion before walking out with América through the cantina's doors, placing his own piece in the existential jigsaw puzzle of Jonah's future—another lost stranger in the city of night had stepped in to exert the void.

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One more sucker sucked helplessly into the maw of this city, this taco and tequila Leviathan. Bazza experienced a strange sensation. Something in the guy's manner—escaping something? Still, with that little babe by your side you could forget about the life you abandoned to embrace a barren deception!

She was on the make.

—It's not easy to earn a living here.

She gave him the eye. He laid on the charm, thick. He felt a little rough. Too many drinks. The sweat ran in beads down his chest. He could smell himself. The cheap cologne never did it. The eyes would have it. There was no drama. This guy didn't give a shit. What she did, she did.

—I should know...not easy for anyone...never is.

The guy stared at him. He grinned back. He'd have a carrot for him very soon. A job, if he wanted it. Sure, he was up for it. He needed to detach and plant—drum up some cash, forget about that old girlfriend or the hit-and-run accident or any one of a dozen B-grade clichés—the world of streaming shadows behind his eyes. Bazza was not his brother's keeper, but it was rather admirable of him to let a new Jack in on the ground floor of a paying gig. He was a good fellow, a fine fellow. Plans. He had his plans, and he wasn't in the habit of telling them to God.

A troupe of mariachis entered the cantina.

Bazza felt like a song.