

Sample from *Smoke Ghosts & Other Outré Tales*
by Anthony Wright

BANANO'S BAR

He is a different person, a person who lives outside the
circle of his own people but does not belong to the circle
of the other people. He goes between. He is an outsider...
He is a changeling who goes by night.

—JIM SHUTZ

The agent is a point that shifts position. No choice but to run, hide, drift: bus after bus, one last run and goodbye to this country for good—but never the nightmare that encapsulates it.

J2191948...J2191948...

I'd slurped down some tacos of dubious origin in Magdalena, flipped a coin and called it for Guerrero state. The bus took off, climbing the chain of mountains and valleys—mise-en-scenes from the minds of Sergio Leone and Sam Peckinpah. Or my own mind, implanted with Hollywood constructs of reality. I smoked at lonely bus stations on the outskirts of large cities. All I saw of them were the concrete lineaments of freeways, industrial smoke stacks and traffic heading into the boisterous life these urban centers contained. I was finding a way to the coast.

I'd heard of a place called Pie de la Cuesta, north of Acapulco. It comprised a large inland lake, dotted with islands. *Rambo II* was filmed there because it evidently resembled South Vietnam. I envisioned lazy days on a hammock and violet, meteor-tinged nights...Air brakes whined on a merciless curve into Acateco Canyon...slow, curvy driving. Clusters of tiny crosses and dead flowers marked forgotten accidents. The bus began a long descent. Beyond this horizon of rock lay the coast.

It was drawing nearer.

We reached Acatlan at sunset. Church spires gleamed in the waning minutes of light; languid palm trees dotted the square. The bus left the town bathing in its colors and began a new ascent. The mountain landscape resumed its hard, Biblical aspect; a dominion of ribbed valleys bled away to the coast.

Wheezing gears, stinking fuel in my nostrils—abrupt cessation of movement: the journey was over. Pie de la Cuesta comprised a grouping of simple dwellings, the one general store and only cantina I could see, closed. Nobody on the main strip, covered in darkness. The roar of breakers from the distant beach crushed imaginary shipwrecks to splinters. Welcome to the last stop. Several passengers collected their belongings and melted away. I grabbed my backpack, fished out my Marlboros and went looking for a hotel. I found a strip of establishments abutting the beach along a palm-lined strip of peninsula while strong surf dashed the night. Hotels awash in moon shades resembled haunted summer castles at Lesbos, conveying vibrations of once and future margarita honeymoons: le petit mort staining dozens of grimy beds. Now they were empty, abandoned, in fact: dark foyers, vacant rooms, closed restaurants, drained swimming pools and gated tennis courts. I entered each one, tentatively patting dusty bells. No one came; what the hell, I went out again.

Hunger gnawed in my stomach. I also wanted a drink and I wanted one fast. What was the deal here? I'd been aiming for somewhere quiet but not utterly erased. So it was off-season, but I still needed victuals and a roof of some description over my head. I wasn't seeking the Club Med stuff, only a palapa and a drunken fisherman strumming a guitar: el cheapo. I came across a track leading from the beach into some bushes. Sand scrunched underneath my sandals as the offshore breeze

died off and mosquitoes became thicker than flies. They made a meal of my ankles as I negotiated the path, which opened onto the shores of a freshwater lake I surmised to be Laguna de Coyuca. It portrayed an inky expanse of moon-stenciled radiance. To the right shore I made out a lantern's pinprick of light. I walked towards it and came to a crudely hand-painted sign. It read in a simple flourish of script:

BANANO'S BAR—Club del Sol

A short distance ahead I saw a string of faint, gaudy colored lights laced around a pontoon—upon which the 'bar' was constructed via a set of stilts, forming part of a jetty extending over the water. The lights gave off as much illumination as a party of fireflies but a strong lantern—centered on an open-air deck—exposed a schema of garish Mesoamerican totemic designs on wooden plank walls supporting a thatched roof. Sort of a Tiki deal, I surmised. The lantern threw relief across two seated figures, one with legs up on a table. No music or activity of any kind emanated from the bar. Perhaps the figures were asleep or simply too enervated—or drunk—to move.

I heard a rustling and saw a pelican, ashen white and ethereal. It padded over, stopped and stared at me with an implacable eye. I considered my next move when I heard an angry cry.

—Pinche pájaro!

A man came running—actually weaving and stumbling—towards me. A fluttering of wings from other nesting creatures lightly erupted up and down the shore. A strobe flicker of shadows ascended into the night. The pelican wasted no time, jiggling a bit before executing a flightless gallop to the bank, whereupon it splashed into the water, raised its great white wings and flew away to settle further up the lake, a safe distance from the noisy blue streak—which continued in the bird's absence and, in fact, became worse.

—Chinga tu madre, pendejo pelicano! CHINGATE!

The emphatic 'fuck you' en Español echoed off the watery tract. The man who shouted it stopped in front of me and scanned the ground, mumbling. I contemplated the curser: a bedraggled, half naked Mexican probably in his early forties, and drunk out of his brain. Ringlets of grimy hair tumbled into his half-lidded eyes; a trail of dribble oozed from his mouth. He looked like a castaway and stank to 80 proof heaven. He was fixated by the sandy patch of earth right before me—and stared at it intently as if detecting the onset of an earth tremor.

He slowly lifted his head and glowered threateningly at me.

Suddenly he lunged and grabbed my throat.

I took hold of his arms, trying to loosen his grip. We held onto each other, locked in a grim dance across the sand. I swiftly brought my knee up into his crotch. He howled in pain, immediately let go, coughed and staggered away several paces. The old, hot rage I'd spent years trying to control swelled in my gut like a black embrace, and while he was still standing—holding his vitals and half bent in pain—I let him have it: a fast left cross, all my weight behind it.

He hit the ground hard.

I hadn't done anything like that for a long time. It felt good. It felt almost as good as the drink I was seeking. The drunkenness I sought...

The filthy shorts he wore began staining dark with liquid. He groaned upon sensing the wetness, felt in his pocket and brought out a broken hip flask of Barcardi rum. He cursed and threw the remains of the bottle at me. I sidestepped the projectile and strode past the prostrate form—buzzards above—needing that drink now, damn it, and beat a path to my destination—biplane in the sky of my mind etching the letters in dark night puffs of starry exhaust trails:

S-L-A-K-E I-T

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—Hey, friend, you look thirsty. The bar's open.

The voice was friendly; it sounded American.

—I'm your man. Not counting the crazy coot I just encountered.

—That would be Banano, our best customer.

He was a young guy in his early 20s, tall, lanky, long blond hair and a good month's tan. He strolled across the deck and extended his hand. The name's Prescott Brossard, formerly of Thunder Bay, Ontario, now of Pie de la Cuesta, paradise on earth. Welcome to Club del Sol. We have Coronas, a little mezcal and enough rum to sink the Good Ship Lollipop. I'd like to introduce my partner-in-crime here, Jarvis Perry. He's from the old country.

—Hullo, guv, pull up a pew. The man with his legs on the table shifted his weight and rose to greet me with a pudgy, outstretched hand.

He was British, a regular Pommy bulldog: short and stocky, spiky blond hair, with a sunburn red complexion. I wondered if I was the first customer these guys had seen in a while, and how it came to be that a couple of foreigners were managing such a concern, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, in the first place.

—Tell ya wot, you're a sight for sore eyes, Jarvis said. We ain't catered to a soul for two bloody weeks. Not one blighter in 14 bleedin' days.

—What's the deal with that lunatic?

—Ah! He's the exception, ain't he? Jarvis snorted.

—Banano has a little tent by the ways over there, Prescott said.

—A sheet of tarp, more like it, Jarvis sneered.

I came clean.

—Look, I hit him just now. It was self-defense. He attacked me no reason, so I whacked him one. He should be OK, though.

Jarvis stared uncertainly at Prescott.

—Tough guy, eh? Well, we try to avoid antagonizing Banano, guv.

—He's a little protective of his turf, Prescott said. No harm done, I'm sure. He'll sleep where he's lying, wake up in the morning and won't remember a thing.

—You name the bar after him?

—He's a construction worker on the rigs in the Gulf of Mexico, Prescott said. He told us his life story and it's no great shakes. His wife left him for another man. He's nursing a broken heart, I guess. Anyways, he's got a packet of cash and aims to spend it here—we aim to be the recipients of it. That's just business. You call a bar something's as good as anything else...Banano is the dude.

—How long you guys been here?

—Six weeks. I met Jarvis on the ferry from La Paz to Mazatlan. He was riding a Suzuki GS850 and headed to Belize. We hooked up and—

—made a day tripper to here from Acapulco, didn't we? Jarvis slid into the commentary as if being interviewed for a magazine article. It was all right, it was. We got walkin' and saw a 'For Rent' sign. Found this old heap. Derelict, it was.

—We talked things over, Prescott tag-teamed. The area seemed like paradise to us, so we pooled our funds and decided to go into business. The owner rents us the place cheap. Hell, if you want to crash here you're more than welcome; there's plenty of floor. You get a slight breeze on the deck, keeps the mosquitoes away a little.

—Thanks. Rack me up for a Corona.

Prescott strode over to an icebox that had seen better days and pulled out three Coronas. We cracked them open. The beer wasn't too cold.

—Warm cerveza. Got ice?

—Mate, it's so bleedin' hot our ice melts, so we forgo it. Ice costs pesos. We can ill afford to shell out when all it does is bleedin' melt. You get used to warm beer, rum and coke, the lot. Bleedin' ice!

—Cheers, I swallowed a draft. Make my next one rum. I'll run up a tab.

—We'll do it all official, too, so no one forgets what anyone drank. Long thirsts have short memories, from my experience.

—Never mind Jarvis, Prescott said. He's going slightly stir-crazy. Business has been a little...uh slower than we anticipated.

—Got that bleedin' right. I'm a Soho boy. *Londin*. Center of the universe, mate. Now don't get me wrong, eh. It's peaceful here. Prescott's a great bloke to hang with. But Banano's our only regular customer. We 'ad three Swiss girls for lunch when we got started; they told some Germans about us. Word a' mouth an' that. We'd a few travelers' through 'ere in the first week, thought we'd be laffin' know wot I mean. Then it all dried up. Completely, like.

—So you're left with Banano.

—We do have Banano,' Prescott said.

—What does he get up to apart from suck piss?

—He sucks *our* piss, mate. We sell 'im it, he drinks it, chases after his pelican. Thanks to the rate he gets through it, we can weather the lean times.

—So he's on some kind of holiday bender, or what?

—It's a little more than that.

Prescott stared briefly at Jarvis.

—Banano is, ah—how shall I put it?

—It's no secret around here, Jarvis said. He's drinking himself to death.

—Come again? I wasn't sure I'd heard the young publican right.

—That's his stated intention, Prescott said. He told us that. When he arrived three weeks ago, he intimated in no uncertain terms to keep the alcohol flowing. He's arrived at this personal decision to off himself. He wants to go out doing what he likes that will, with application, kill him in the process—which is to consume punishing quantities of alcohol. It's a free world.

—It must feel strange selling him the juice.

—It don't make us feel too wonderful, no, it don't, Jarvis said. But it pays the rent and we need the cash, mate. If it weren't for Banano we'd be out of business. A wise man once said money is always useful, no matter how you make it. The point is to have it.

—It's Banano's bar, Prescott said.

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In the four days that followed not a single person turned up to Banano's, except Banano. He'd glare at me, not precisely with any sense of recognition, but with a generalized distaste and mistrust. He was often muttering darkly in my general direction. Once he made a gun with his forefinger and thumb, pointed it at his head and pulled a middle trigger finger. I did it back at him with a menacing sneer, and he laughed hysterically and walked slowly away into the bushes. He had achieved a permanent state of *non compos* being yet kept producing fresh folds of dinero from his tattered shorts every time he had to replenish supplies. It was a magical stash that Jarvis and Prescott eyed begrudgingly, since it could only be transferred to their own pockets through the exchange of equally costly goods, which they had to travel to Acapulco to procure. Banano, meanwhile, refused to die, to their relief—although on that score I'd have been quite happy for him to disappear altogether. There seemed little chance of it happening. Jarvis and Prescott were buzzards and they

knew it, but Banano had become such a part of the scenery they probably didn't factor in his demise anytime soon. He had an awesome capacity for booze; the guy was almost invincible. He was the birds, lake, sea and sun. He was sweating visions under a full moon. In the midst of this howling, staggering metaphor for life, the cycle of my hours unfolded.

If the going was cheap I still racked up a sizeable bill, and anxiety inevitably set in. I'd swat mosquitoes and toss in sun-drenched daydreams during the day, and swat mosquitoes and toss in star-drenched nightmares at night. I decided to move on. Banano's increasingly aggressive postures helped seal the resolve.

On the last night—and after suitable libations to celebrate the fact—I was startled awake at 3 a.m. by the apparition of Banano shaking and breathing all over me, stinking to high booze heaven, sweat and pelican crap. He cackled maniacally as he got in my face and repeated, over and over in a guttural squawk: You...die. You, *die*.

—Si. Go to sleep. Dormir. Sleep.

—Ron,' he said. *RON!* Mas *RON*, cabrónes!

—The Bacardi, Prescott! Jarvis snapped from his corner of the deck.

—All right, all right, Prescott drearily called back. You're up next.

—He *DIEEEE!* Banano had sprung back on his feet and was pointing at me, roaring at the top of his lungs.

—DIE! DIE! DIE!

He stopped and wheezed, it sounded like a death rattle. He burst into heinous laughter and pronounced with twitching solemnity: *Se va a morir en mi país.*

—What did he say?

—I wouldn't know, Jarvis said. Spanish ain't my strong suit. Something about death, his country. What's up, me old mate?

Banano grunted and returned his focus to me.

—*Se va a morir en mi país.*

—We can't follow his ravings, Prescott said. But he seemed to mention *your* death, Jim. The stuff in English, 'you die, you die.' That's what I heard.

—Oi, Banano. You wouldn't 'ave a problem with our esteemed guest 'ere, would you? Wot's 'e done to you?

—Damned straight, I said.

—Apart from hit him, Jarvis said.

—Banano is like, totally out of his mind, Prescott said. He sees you and maybe he sees somebody else.

—Maybe he sees the guy who hit him, Jarvis said.

—OK, Jarvis, Prescott said.

—How could he even remember it? I said, doubtfully.

Banano lapsed into a brooding silence. Three hours to go before dawn. We decided to break out a bottle of rum. I felt like cracking it over Banano's head.

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Ninety minutes in and the first bottle gone; Jarvis rummaged around and produced a bottle of Scorpion mezcal. This was a very dangerous drop, but the nature of the night seemed to demand a sacrificial disarray of the senses. I choked it down; we all did. Banano drank it like water. He hung around us like a lingering curse, a pointed bone, haunted house squatting on the deck, sneering, cackling. We carried on a stilted, dreamlike conversation. I tilted my elbow, and the bitter liquor forced its way down my throat. The world began to lurch and glow.

What happened next...*what happened next?* One minute I was sitting on the deck gunning the shots, the next emerging from the head-busting fog of a blackout. It was fierce daylight, the heat antagonizing; it felt like a personal attack. I was covered in mud, lying on the opposite shore of the lake to the vicinity of the pontoon. Banano's Bar wavered in a shimmering haze in the distance. There was no movement on the deck that I could espy. The boys were obviously sleeping it off.

How drunk must I have been to wander all this way and crash on the lake's muddy banks? I trudged back along the arc of the shore in a wretched agony of hangover, beating down the bushes and scaring off pelicans, until I reached the bar.

A carnival of horrors confronted me.

It was all I could do to simply stand there and take it in without fainting. Tears welled up in my eyes, and I started to retch. My erstwhile hosts lay dead in sticky, fly-crowded pools of blood. Prescott's head resembled a crushed pumpkin. It looked as if a whole clip of bullets had been emptied into it: blue eyes shattered, teeth pulverized. Blood everywhere—dried gouts like swollen tributaries crisscrossing the landscape of his face. A machete protruded from Jarvis' stomach; a glut of intestines bubbled up from the cavernous wound in the morning heat. The grotesque emanation was black and sinewy, covered in flies. A trio of severed fingers bore witness to the struggle he must have engaged in with the killer who'd wielded the blade. I bent over and vomited; it gushed out my mouth and nostrils, spraying the corpse.

I saw the shattered planks of the deck, two legs twisted around it: Banano's body halfway into the water of the lake—his upper half submerged beneath its indifferent depths. A handgun lay near him. I made a swift 360-degree sweep of the scene, gasping with bile and paranoia. There was no one around. There was never anyone around. For days on end we'd seen no one but our bored selves morning, noon and night until a kind of unspoken cabin fever had set in over these wide open spaces, serene nature, and the distant sea: three Robinson Crusoes and a Friday gone troppo? Nothing to do, no restraints: something happened. Banano snapped. That's all I could surmise. He must have been packing heat the whole time, kept it stashed at his little camp. Why he'd chosen to run amok with it and a machete would remain a matter of conjecture to haunt me the rest of my days, to suffer through the guilt, heavier than a black hole, that I must have had something to do with it. He'd initially threatened my doom, after all. Klee once said: the agent is a point that shifts position. Had I been that agent of change?

It was evident that at the onset of the attack, lurking in the weird clarity of my derangement, self-preservation had won out: I'd escaped the suicidal psychotic's clutches. Suicidal? Of course! Hadn't Jarvis and Prescott said so? *It's no secret, he's drinking himself to death*—Jarvis stared in lifeless horror at the sky. *That's his stated intention*—a halo of flies boiled over Prescott's shattered face. I dared not check the dead drunk's corpse for the bullet hole that would confirm my theory, but the pattern of destruction in which my companions so tragically figured suggested a murder-suicide scenario. Only I, conceivably the primary target, had escaped it.

I fled that nightmare to which I return each night. No one had seen me arrive; no one saw me leave. I live with that flight: there was no way I was going to get involved with the Law in this country. By the time I reached Antigua news of the killings was a hot button topic among backpackers haunting the bars nightly like a coven of out-of-work vampires. Speculation pointed to a foreigner leaving the area around the time the murders were assumed to have taken place. The bodies had been rotting undetected on that pontoon for an entire month.

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As the corpses of three men decayed in the sun—their entrails gnawed at by pelicans and other remains carried off by organized armies of ants, a man traveled south on cheap buses hugging the

ragged contours of the Pacific coast. He laid low among African slave-descended communities occupying the coastal forests outside Pinotepa Nacional, stayed a week in a cheap hotel room at Tehuantepec, bought the newspapers each day and read nothing about a gruesome discovery at Pie de la Cuesta. He crossed the border into Guatemala. The past was another country. Yet he kept fretting over an unpaid tab, meticulously kept, bearing his name and passport number—forgotten at the scene of the horrible crime, awaiting certain discovery.

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