

HELLO COSTA RICA (DO YOU KNOW THE WAY TO SAN JOSÉ)

**“Men are the merriest
when they are far from home.”**

—William Shakespeare

THE RAIN IN SPAIN FALLS MAINLY...

“Ah folks, we’re cruising at 20,000 feet on our way up to 37,000 feet passing over St. Louis on down to Houston and Central Mexico, then over Belize, Nicaragua on into Costa Rica. Local San José weather: Scattered clouds, light rain, 72 degrees.”

Touch down. Through customs in about three minutes. The logic, I suppose: One doesn’t smuggle shit *into* paradise. Bright new passport stamped. Cheap luggage rack imploded but a cabby helping out and who, though probably gouging, wanted ten bucks to take me in from Juan Santamaria International Airport. Honest Harry wanted five times that to get me out to O’Hare. The only serious moment, a Costa Rican Customs agent going hard through my luggage, pulled it out. “Bomb box?”

“Boom box,” I respectfully corrected him.

“*Vaya derecho!*” he waved sternly, opening the gates to Jimmy D’s paradise.

The ride in was a half-hour testament to global air-emission standards; carbon monoxide fumes from belching buses, eighteen-wheelers spewing the

stuff. Black monsters of mountains surrounding a teacup valley, lights on the horizon, the city of San José.

Here was the newly born Pauly Vegas at midnight on some pitch black Avenue Zero. Clueless as he drove into a shuttered, ramshackle, seemingly abandoned Third World city, hoping this cabby would bring him safely to his destination, was honest enough not to fork the fattest *turista* lamb he'd likely to see this year, a bit worried and more than a bit paranoid when the car stopped in a lurch. What the...? This wasn't the hotel Jimmy recommended. "*Que pasa?*" I asked. The cabby pointed to a sign:

PARK HOTEL

EXPERIENCE THE ELEGANCE

Nondescript two-story building, bar along one side, long dull white and undecorated corridor leading to the front desk and English-speaking night man. Goofy tourist feeling as I changed a hundred bucks, getting back 35,000 *colons*. "Funny money," said I. The night man forced a smile. "Bar closes at two," he shot back, obviously the eloquent conversationalist. "Check out at noon."

Onto my room. Again, nondescript. The centerpieces, a pair of double beds with caved-in centers like potato chips. This is where Wall Street hotshot Jimmy D stayed? Beat and overwhelmed, I had one immediate need: A drink.

Downstairs to the Park Hotel bar. A dozen men burned Cuban Cohibas watching the Florida-Auburn game on ESPN. Jimmy Buffet's "Why Don't We Get Drunk And Screw" dueled for attention with a mariachi strumming "La Bamba." Two more signs were posted:

**FREE BLOWJOB TUESDAYS.
TICKETS SOLD HERE!**

VIAGRA—100 MG—20 BUCKS

Then I heard the voices.

“*Problemas!* She’s got *problemas!* Penniless, then her beeper goes off!”

“My gal gives me any shit I just go down to the market for a new coconut.”

“Fuck it, I’m going to Managua! Seven buck lays.”

“\$7? They screw in Managua for toilet paper!”

Happy Boys. Too old to rock ‘n roll, too young to die. Hawaiian T-shirts over prize Idaho spud bellies, once chiseled bodies now muscleless, less the powerful right arms due to lifting the nightly dozen *cervezas*. Looking at the flesh on these men was scary enough, but the voices...

“Betty Blowjob wants 3,000. ‘No way,’ I says. ‘2,000.’ ‘Six bucks? *Vamos.*’ She grabs my dick in the hallway. Picks my pocket! Wallet falls on the floor. Nice move, baby. Rate it an A, for almost. Open the door to my place and she stops. ‘*Tienes una pistola?*’ ‘Yeah, I got a gun, right here.’ Doesn’t even close the door before she’s slurping. So I spew on her face. She doesn’t say shit, just wipes off, gives me the finger and splits. Wasn’t ‘til later I realized...bitch picked the watch right off my arm!”

Laughter all around the bar, except from my stool. The Happy Boys stopped talking, almost as one, and looked at me. One of them planted himself to my right, an introduction with no handshake.

“Stormin’ Norman, how y’doin’? Just get in?”

“Me? Yes. Just now.”

“I could tell. You look lost.”

2,000 miles from home, surrounded by twelve pathological sex-freaks, waiting on a meeting with Jimmy D’s “guy” whose name, it only just occurred to me, I knew not, without the first clue what he looked like, only hoping that, as Jimmy mysteriously put it, “He’ll find you.”

“I’m meeting someone,” I replied coolly. And then, equally casually, “This is quite a place Stormin’, ah, Norman.”

“Cowboy Bob Granger started it up. Died in ‘93. He had a good run. Had a Tica wife who didn’t mind his drinking and whoring. That’s his hat in the case.”

“Bob died only way a man should,” one of the Happy Boys chimed in, “with his boots on and his dick out!”

“Is that right?”

“That’s right!”

“Stick with the women here,” Norman informed me. “Don’t even think underage. It’s 7 to 17 if you’re caught. Seventeen years in a Costa Rican jail, that’s a death sentence for a gringo. And watch the *chupulinos*. Local gangs. They hit and run with pepper spray, leave you right in the gutter. Or kidnap you. Never hear from you again.”

I smiled. “Could you excuse me a minute.” Coolly moving for the john, I closed the door, locking it.

***What. The. Fuck?!* Rampaging pepper spray gangs? Rotting away in a Costa Rican jail? Rum-red Viagra Joes making me look like Tom Cruise?**

And the wall graffiti:

SOMEBODY, PLEASE, STOP ME

BEFORE I FUCK AGAIN.

A few deep breathes and back outside, Stormin' Norman hadn't moved.

"You're a Seal, aincha?"

"Seal?"

"Guy looked just like you. Said he was a Navy Seal. Wore medals. Some Navy guys came down, told him he had the medals on the wrong side of his uniform. A fake, dig? Thriller Willie wanted to kill him."

Thriller Willie, ex-Green Beret on the barstool to my left, tipped his beer, hazy-crazy Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in his eyes.

"I'm not a Seal," I gurgled.

"So who y'waiting on?" asked the ever-curious Norman and I, without the name, began to stammer. "Well, I...you probably won't believe this, but...I don't know." Stormin' Norman didn't believe it, distrust spreading over his face, when...

"Fucknut!"

From the back booths and darkness he came; rail-thin in assless blue jeans, hair, what was left of it, salt and pepper, a bald crescent from the base of his skull, a large pair of tattoos on the back of his hands: Robert Crumb's "Keep On Truckin," and a fading but beautifully drawn gold marijuana leaf. "Isn't it time for your *Tico* taco?"

"Go screw, Shay!" growled Stormin' Norman.

“Articulate as ever, assclown.” Norman left my side as Salt ‘n Pepper sat down. “Know what a *Tico* taco is? When the ages of the two *chicas* you’re with don’t equal your own.”

“Are you—?”

“Shay Dugan,” he said without handshake, rolling eyes that may once have been pale blue, a washed-out 360-degrees of focus, observing everyone and everything but me. Accent, South Jersey. Speed, East Coast fast.

“Jimmy D said—”

“Yeah yeah yeah, how is the big swinging dick?”

“The big swinging dick is fine.”

“Good. Listen, whatever these assholes told you, forget it. You need something, anything, you come to me. While you’re in this country, I take care of you.”

“Really? Ok. Wow.”

Shay Dugan looked me sideways, away, and again sideways. “Yeah. Wow.” Calling to the barmaid, “Hazel! *Un Imperial para el nuevo gringo!* I’ll take you around tomorrow night. Take a bite out of the Big Pineapple.”

“Big Pineapple?”

“That’s what they call this place.”

“Why do they call it the Big Pineapple?”

Again Shay looked at me sideways, like I had ravaged his mother in some previous life, like I had scraped a shank and shoved it into his brother’s excretory aperture twenty-two times, a momentous first impression had been made, a

cataclysmic conclusion, before he fired back with the enormity, weight, and weariness of the world: “Because it’s shaped like a big pineapple.”

PREPARATIONS

Morning. Hungry, off I went to the Mercado Central. What I saw was amazing. The locals, they called themselves *Ticos*, carried huge shoulders of beef through traffic. Red taxis flew around corners, buses with non-existent air emissions standards emitting in my face. Not feeling my feet walk, I gaped without gaping, I marveled without blinking.

Symphonic. It came at me in waves. The dude in cheap sunglasses playing xylophone in front of the furniture store, drowned out by disco from the fabric store. Pollo Sabrosa with the overheated strings of Jorge Jimenez and his “Salsa On Steroids” as Pio Pollo cooked with Barbra Streisand, “I Am A Woman In Love.” Twenty, count ‘em, twenty fruit stands on one block, fruit vendors hawking “*TOMATES! CHILES! DIEZ A CIEN!*” The man on accordion playing Jesus songs with calls for help came from the man with no legs in the gutter, black marketers machine-gunning “*DOLLAR! DOLLAR!*” as toothless Lotto guys sang “*CHANCES!*” the speed and magnitude of the concert pure Darwin. Adapt. Hustle. Survive, Jack. Or else.

Sidewalks crowded but the *Ticos* were *tranquilo*. Single-file bus line a hundred people long? With no Starbucks, Psychic Hotlines or Atkins diets, eighty-seven cable channels or three grams of fat per serving Cherry Jubilee frozen yogurt—How the hell did these people survive at all?

Maybe it was the Sicilian in me. The locals seemed to believe I was one of

them, until I opened my mouth. 10th grade Spanish not practiced in twenty years.

“Today I go to the beach.”

“Yesterday I go to the beach.”

“Tomorrow I go to the beach.”

Blending in, not my trademark. Yet I was a chameleon compared to others of my tribe. I’m talking about the gringo contingent of San José. They were here all right, in numbers; expatriate “lifers” with drug and alcohol problems; fishermen blasting down for the weekend with unlimited cash; Sydney Greenstreet types out of Maltese Falcon, or Dennis Hopper in Apocalypse Now.

Over-the-hill ex-entrepreneurs lounging in filthy Cubist patterns for shirts, sandals and shorts—despite the fact shorts were not worn by locals—instantly branding them as gringo. All right, yes I admit I had a photo taken drinking from a coconut, but c’mon! At least I tried speaking Spanish. It wasn’t our country, didn’t that matter at all?

And did I mention the women?

Oh.

Not an hour went by that I didn’t see it. One or six or ten that stopped me, literally, taking the breath away. Longleanlines. Flawless cocoa-butter skin. Tight jeans and cut t-shirts flashing ripped bellies. Faces proud as descendants of five-hundred year-old tribes conquered but unbowed, hair kinky if Colombian or Dominican, straight, long and silky if *Tica*, like the tails of Spanish stallions. Preparations needed to be made:

Preparation 1: Apartamentos Ferso.

The Apartamentos Ferso were located on *Calle 2, Avenidas 6 y 8*. I told the cab driver the address and he stared at me, asking what it was near. I read about this in the guidebooks. They didn't use street addresses here. It was more like, "Two-hundred yards south of Wrigley Field," or "Fifty yards west of the Empire State Building." Interesting concept but I didn't know any landmarks and now he knew I was gringo and forgot to put the meter on, asking 1,000 *colons*. Twenty minute cab ride for \$2.50, total piracy.

I rang a bell through a blue prison-style gate. The 10-by-10 image of an executioner on the wall, "El Verdugo," was from the nearby electronics store, and in no way resembled the shoeless fellow passed out fetal in a cardboard box in front of the Apartamentos Ferso. I, and the flow of people, stepped over him as the *patrona*, Anna, answered.

"I'm looking for an apartment. You have?" asked I in pidgin Spanish.

"Si, baby, you come. Come!" said she in pidgin English, opening up, leading me down a long tubular corridor.

She informed me proudly of her five years cleaning apartments in Miami. "I get good Engleesh, hah!" said she, opening a first-floor apartment.

No light bulbs, dark. Was that...yes, the famous painting of dogs playing poker. The rest of the place came into focus. Single bed, no pillows or bedding, no hot water, no toilet seat. The john worked, so long as I put the used toilet paper in a trash can. "No flush dirty paper baby, ok?"

Ooook.

Apartment 14 was better; a working toilet, a shower with hot water; a “sun room” that resembled the room in Silence Of The Lambs where the killer throws the governor’s daughter, open-roofed three stories deep with a square of sky. Ritzy, only the walls hadn’t been painted in what, ten years? I noted necessities: Cleanser, three cans of paint, new curtains and toilet seat, pots ‘n pans, and wall art.

“How much?”

“\$250 a month, baby.”

“I’ll take it.”

Rube! What kind of negotiating was that? What was the skinny?

Incredible as it sounds, the place was an upgrade on my Aurora apartment.

Thus, in the grand scheme of things toward the new image of Pauly Vegas, a check to the good.

Preparation 2: The Cyber café.

I vowed to keep more in touch, and so logged on to discover two messages. My mother, of course, telling me to be careful wash all vegetables drink bottled water don’t resist a robbery don’t get kidnapped and hey, have a terrific trip!

And Herb McMahon, aka McChicken, or here, Herb *McPollo*. He wanted me to check in frequently, would volunteer to be my “cultural observer.” He’d already done some research and recommended a dandy Argentinean steak house, also the *finca de mariposas*, the Butterfly Farm, an excellent day trip only an hour away. I thanked Herb for his research and told him I was taking it one day at a time. He told me it was 25 degrees and snowing, a record cold snap for October in Aurora. I looked outside at 80 degree sun, and logged off.

Preparation 3: Shopping.

One of the things Pauly Vegas had to do was learn how to shop at a men's store. Back home I was not often seen at the men's counter of Marshall Fields because, well, I just wasn't. No need to make myself smell good for the opposite sex, my social calendar dealing craps to degenerates in Aurora 'til 5 a.m. being what it was. Then I remembered I was meeting Shay Dugan that night for what he called the "Holy Christ Tour." Maybe I had better try some shopping.

The Tienda Simon translated to "The Simon Store" and seemed to have a nice supply of fragrances. I asked the shop girl for a recommendation. She showed me the designer lines.

The For Men series sounded interesting—Finally For Men or Hide Out For Men. More familiar was the Royal Borghini Eau De Toilet and Eau De Parfum. Sounded a bit prissy for that rugged individualist Pauly Vegas. I mean what did "eau" stand for anyway? The salesgirl showed me the Max Gordon line, including the best-selling Max For Men, Romantico, and the famous Airport Life. Tempting. I liked the idea of Airport Life, but my eyes strayed to another counter.

It was the Sicilian in me that made me opt for the Marco Gribazzi line—Gribazzi shower gel, Gribazzi scented soap, stick deodorant, gentlemen's talc and cologne. Twenty bucks was a splurge, but preparations needed to be made. I carried my Gribazzi products, a dozen blood oranges, a swollen pineapple, eight avocados and four pounds of grapes back to the Park Hotel, and waited. For health to find me.

THE HOLY CHRIST TOUR

Party night in the Big Pineapple. Downstairs to the Park bar, meeting Shay who was late, and the women, eyeing me like a fat pork chop. One of them sat next to me.

“Ho-la,” said I, flexing my linguistic muscles. *“Como esta usted?”*

“Bien,” said she, sticking her tongue in my ear.

From the other end of the bar I heard, “Treat her right, man. Marcela’s a grandmother.”

“Una abuela? Cuántos anos tiene?”

“Trenta dos.”

“Thirty-two. She’s a grandmother at thirty-two.”

“Start ‘em early down here!” the Happy Boy informed me.

“Well, my grandma doesn’t look like her.” And to Marcela, “Look, it’s my first night. *Yo no interesante.*”

She smiled and left. I turned a moment, turning back to find Michelle, white thigh-length disco boots, red lingerie top, and white micro-mini skirt. “Oh, hello to you!”

She told me I was better looking than the other gringos. Sure, so was Yogi Bear. When I told her I didn’t have a girlfriend back home she asked, “What do you do for sex?” I threw up my hands, one of which she held, making a masturbating motion. *“Manuela?”*

Huh?

“Señora Mano, si?”

“Mrs. Hand? Yes. Mrs. Hand is very tired.”

“*Ella necesita una vacación,*” she replied, working me for all she was worth.

“A vacation, yes.” How to say this in Spanish? “Look, you can’t understand this, but...I need some time. See, it never happens in the Land of Lincoln. Beautiful women in white disco boots and leather micro-minis don’t sit next to me, let alone want to—”

“*Veinte y cinco.*”

“\$25? Twenty-five dollars and we...I...I’m...waiting for someone.”

In like the cavalry came Shay. “*Michelle, luego. Regresamos en dos horas...* Gotta walk before you jump in a Lamborghini. I told her you’d be back.”

“Jesus, Shay.”

“Let’s go break your cherry.”

Hotel Del Rey, Blue Marlin bar. “Betty Davis Eyes” on the juke, sport fishing trophies on every wall, Hemingway’s ghost on the prow. Over-the-hill, marlin-mad gringos outnumbered five to one by the sexiest ladies in the land.

“*Rico!*” cackled Shay, surveying the sexual pageant, pointing to the rail. “White top, red top, white top, red!” The women liquefying the joint in flesh. Coalescing, congealing, long black hair red tube-top six inches of belly, medium black hair five inches of belly white tube.

“Coochie-coo!” gargled Shay, pointing to the women, women everywhere; Nica Veronica Lake dangling cigarette; supermodel Panamanian spitting gum; gringo in backward Cleveland Browns cap sporting gold earring and a flawless pair of Colombian blondes.

“Massive dick, no doubt,” noted Shay, somehow bored to death, as Cleveland Brownie made his way upstairs with his two trophies.

“How much?” I asked, in a state of wonderment.

“Hundred a cufflink,” Shay informed me. “Fucking idiot.”

“Idiot?”

“Pauly, in this life, have you ever paid \$100 for a plate of shrimp?”

Onto Key Largo. Gauguin’s Tahiti come alive. Lush tropical garden of palm trees, banana plants and women, one of them waving at me. “*Gordo! Venga!*”

I looked to Shay. “Fatty?”

“It’s a sign of affection.”

“Yeah. I get that a lot.”

A brown beauty sat next to me. In no Wrigleyville could this happen.

“Hi-How-Are-Ya-Ya-Look-Great-How-Much-Let’s-Go.”

“Down here we walk like kings. In the States a beautiful woman walks into a bar, every guy in the joint gives her the once over. Here, a fat pig gringo walks into Key Largo and every beautiful woman in the joint gives him the look. It’s the closest thing to heaven a pussylicker will ever taste.”

“Unbelievable,” said I, but Shay was just warming up.

We jumped in a cab and drove to VIPS. Green and purple neon, a dozen women lounging on pink couches in provocative poses as two dozen *Tico* men stood and gaped. Without the 5,000 colons (\$14) it cost for a half-hour, the men took these images home to their wives, and did with them what they would.

We skipped the high end joints Shay refused to set foot in, names like

Elite, Puro Platino, Odyssey. His reasoning? "\$200? For monkfish?"

I wasn't about to argue. In the here and now present tense Shay Dugan was The Man and I, putty in his hands.

I had never been inside a Third World casino, so when Shay led me into the Casino Tropical I thought it was for simple variety. The place was rocking as we steered by six games of tutee, a pair of roulette wheels, and craps table. Tiny. The entire casino would fit into any of the twelve pits at Trump Castle. The first-floor Sportsbook featured a Jersey Devils/New York Rangers hockey brawl on two big-screen TV's, squeals of gringos drowned out by a tape-loop of ghoulish shrieks. Strange that I only then realized it was Halloween.

Tico dealers were decked out as American cowboys, Supervisors as green-skinned ghouls and bloody vampires. The costumes were cheap, hastily put-together. Ticos didn't celebrate Halloween and one got a sense this was a put-on for the gringos, of which there were a hundred or more. The reason became clear when I saw the sign:

1999 TROPICAL TOURNAMENT OF CHAMPIONS

Then, a crazy thing happened. The lights went out. Halloween prank? Customers, dealers and supervisors were laughing, groping in the dark. One minute, two minutes. Pitch black, no security cameras. As power came back I noticed Shay catch the eye of a man at the head of the dice table, a sharp glance over and gesture to me, the man smiled and went back to his betting. I checked the game. The table was infested, flea action, low-rent nickel-and-dimers.

Shay's guy had two hundred-dollar Come bets with full-double odds across

the board. Standard fare for Aurora, but here qualifying him as the table's whale, the high-roller. The heavy-hitter picked up the dice to cheers, tossing them as the peanut gallery, cowboy dealers and ghoulish floormen groaned, the dice reading 7-Out, line away, his \$2,000 cleared and gone with one sweep.

It wasn't until he disengaged from the table that I saw him clearly; black boots trimmed in silver, black pants and deep V-plunging silver shirt, red Medieval cross centered upon a black tunic in chain link pattern 52 inches across the chest, silver gauntlet gloves and cuffs, Roman broadsword belted and yes, an axe and shield. Gringos moved toward him, seeking to press flesh as one might with true old world aristocracy. A force to his movement, 6-3, two-hundred forty pounds of Black Knight, coming right at us.

Shay did the honors. "Pauly Vegas, Tom Parker."

Magnetic. Piercing green eyes. Booming bass voice. The first to shake my hand.

"Packer fan."

"Sorry?"

Reaching into his garments, pulling out a green and gold Packer cap, handing it to me. "Loved them since '67. Super Bowl I. Spent half my childhood pretending to be Bart Starr."

"Me too," I mumbled, intimidated, Parker taller by half a foot. "How did you—"

"Jimmy D said you're fast as lightning. Best dealer he ever saw."

"Well thanks, but—"

“How about this casino? The Tropical draws gamblers from fifty States, from all over Europe and South America.”

“Not bad,” I replied, attempting to be polite.

Sensing me pull punches, Parker came closer. “You can speak plainly, Pauly. You can always speak plainly with me.”

“Security,” said I, plainly.

“What about it?” Shay wanted to know.

“Look around,” I pointed, left and right. “No cage. No barrier between house money and the public. The cashier counting money turns her back to change the music? Boxman without a floorman to oversee him? He could sleeve twenty-five dollar chips all night long. No aprons on the dealers, tapping off without clearing their hands? They could palm \$500 every hour on the hour. I could go on.”

“Do,” said Parker, obviously amused.

“The blackout could have been orchestrated. Two minute loss of power and nobody reacts? Casino supervisor’s number one responsibility is protect the bankroll. Dealer’s responsibility is to block the game with his body until the boxman brings up the lid. They need to shut down and do an accounting. Be happy it’s not your joint.”

Parker listened to every syllable, beaming as he shook his head, walking away.

Shay followed, looking at me with that incredulous sideways look. “It is his joint.”

Parker was at the door when he stopped, turning to me. “Coming?” We crossed the street to the Hotel Del Rey, taking a private elevator to the

Penthouse roof. The doors opened up...

Sure, the stars filling the sky spoke to the beginning of the Universe, but peering out from the Hotel Del Rey over the whole of San José, they spoke from a latitude I had never seen. Parker joined me at the roof's edge.

“Beautiful,” was all he said, or needed to say.

I remembered the travel books. Volcanoes on three sides, slopes dark green with coffee, though at midnight only jagged contours emerged. Even within the city parameters there was no grid of light, no skyscrapers or modern American framework. Only a patternless smattering of white light illuminated not as you'd imagine a Millennium-era Central American capital city, but some 19th Century European mill town.

“There aren't any tall buildings.”

“Fourteen stories of Holiday Inn,” said Parker, pointing to the hotel across the Parque Morazon. “Capital city whose tallest building is the Holiday Inn. What does that tell you?”

“Room for growth?”

“Room for dreams.” His smile gleamed luminescent in starlight.

Shay, plied with more than a few *Centenarios*, took a toke of what smelled like homegrown Costa Rican pot. “San José is a shithole.” Parker's smile vanished, turning with a look at Shay that lasted a second but seemed like ten, Shay quickly adding, “But it's our shithole.”

Parker flashed a politician's smile. “Shay and I see things...differently.

Off we went to IDEM, a “full-service” massage parlor. Twelve *chicas* sat in pairs at six circular tables, short-shorts and cling tops, legs crossed identically, right over left. “All for the taking,” I remember Jimmy D saying. But what would remain after the half-hour was done?

Such questions were for green and sheltered fools, not for that *bon vivant* Pauly Vegas who would lie, cheat and yes, steal, rather than admit the embarrassing little fact that he had never been with a prostitute in his life.

“Did Shay give you the golden rule?” Parker asked.

“Golden rule?”

Shay downed yet another cognac, warbling, “Do not, *ever*, fall in love with them!”

I laughed, manly. “No?”

“One *chica* I know,” burped Shay, “Last week her cell went off. It was her gringo *novio*. He was back in Cherry Hill tearing down drywall, but thinking about her, thinking about her all the time! Did she need money? Did she know he loved her? She sent him *muchos besos*, swore love and affection, never once breaking rhythm while she rode her *Tico* boyfriend into the ground.”

Parker smiled at Shay. “This man is no romantic.”

“Hey, I know a rise in my Levis!”

Parker and Shay laughed. “What Shay is trying to say,” said Parker, like a father to his just-turned thirteen year-old son, “It’s important you don’t do stupid things while you’re here. Or at least accept the consequences if you do. Bad things

happen when Americans forget common sense. Most don't think that there are rules, but there are. You remember that."

"How 'bout a nightcap?" beamed Shay. "The Park?"

Parker, the Black Knight, raised his Medieval axe. "Not like this. Anyway, it's Pauly's night."

Shay came closer, rolling his eyes at me. "What?" I asked, confused.

"What's at the Park?"

Shay just cackled.

Hotel Park bar. Windows shuttered, armed bouncers at the door. A private affair indeed. Inside, the air raucous, a dozen *Ticas* laughing and drinking, carousing with two dozen gringos each of whom clutched a bottle of baby oil.

What the hell was this about?

A music change, from Jimmy Buffet's "Cheeseburger in Paradise" to The Beach Boys' "Surfin' U.S.A.," the women leaving, together and at once. The bar cleared of all beer bottles, coconut shell ashtrays, peanuts and other breakables as Dan, the owner, pitched his Free Blowjob Tuesdays and Millennium Super Bowl pool, tossed out bottles of baby oil to the "rookies" in the crowd, the biggest roar of applause as he finished the spiel and cleared out.

Cue new music, Pat Benetar's "Love Is A Battlefield." Now the ladies, out of Deer Hunter Vietnam, strutted into place atop the bar, stripping off bikinis, dancing naked. There was Michelle without the disco boots. There, Marcela moving like nobody's grandma. Dulce laughing, spraying mother's milk two feet on the gringos below, Katia in Pocahontas braids and 3 percent body fat. A dozen of

them bending, laid out on the bar in a daisy chain. The Happy Boys of the Park Hotel taking their cue, descending upon the women, an orgy of brown flesh and gringo hands and petroleum products and...

With that first body smear you had a choice. Flee to salvage your soul. Or stay.

I stayed.