

THREE SMALL BOOKS

By Ron Baird



THE ZOMBIE FUNGUS

By Ron Baird



Table of Contents

Introduction	7
Tangled Trees	8
Morning View	10
Emerson	10
Glorianna	12
Shower of Power	14
Alarm Clock Bird	14
Another Earthquake	14
Sinking Lizard	16
Black Powder Wife	18
Tick Pick	20
One Man, Two Fish	22
Eating Cicada	24
Zombie Fungus	26
Leaf Trick	28
Dead Guy in the Tub	30
Sketching at Gringo Curt's	32
Rambo	34
Fine Vine	36
Bolas are Balls	38
Flying Bulldogs	40
Vampyrum	42
Stoner Sloth	44
Net-casting Spider	46
Smokey Jungle Frog	48

The Zombie Fungus

Introduction

THE UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER, the discovery of the unanticipated, is what I enjoy. These surprises fill me with wonder and I am grateful for the gift of them.

Here is a trick you can do in the jungle at night. Turn on your Mag-Lite and hold it against the side of your head in the same position as the arm of your glasses, then slowly scan your surrounds. You will see many pairs of bright dots, white, blue, pink, yellow, and green or red in the trees and underbrush.

The eyes of many animals, but not humans, contain a reflective layer called the “tapetum lucidum”. It’s an iridescent layer that helps their eyes gather more light, improving night vision. Their pupils appear to glow when your light strikes them.

This simple technique lets you quickly locate the frogs, lizards, bats, snakes, spiders and crocodiles within a half a dozen steps from where you stand. You can be certain that they are all looking directly at you. You have their attention because you are shining your bright light in their eyes. They are all pissed off.



The Zombie Fungus

Introduction

THE UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER, the discovery of the unanticipated, is what I enjoy. These surprises fill me with wonder and I am grateful for the gift of them.

Here is a trick you can do in the jungle at night. Turn on your Mag-Lite and hold it against the side of your head in the same position as the arm of your glasses, then slowly scan your surrounds. You will see many pairs of bright dots, white, blue, pink, yellow, and green or red in the trees and underbrush.

The eyes of many animals, but not humans, contain a reflective layer called the “tapetum lucidum”. It’s an iridescent layer that helps their eyes gather more light, improving night vision. Their pupils appear to glow when your light strikes them.

This simple technique lets you quickly locate the frogs, lizards, bats, snakes, spiders and crocodiles within a half a dozen steps from where you stand. You can be certain that they are all looking directly at you. You have their attention because you are shining your bright light in their eyes. They are all pissed off.



Tangled Trees

THIS JOURNEY BEGAN WHEN we left La Gioconda at first sliver of light, driving south on the pot hole road, passing over the dark bodies under the crocodile bridge without even noticing their suitcase bellies and yellow teeth sneaking in the river, flying past the flesh pots of Jaco Beach, searching the passing trees for toucans, speeding to Sierpe where Pura Vida begins.

In Sierpe we easily found Alexandro and his boat before noon. He wound us through the tangled mangrove swamp, an alien place where no one can walk or ride, sail or swim. Herein lie demons.

Then, open sea, riding up steep green waves and slamming down their backsides. WHAM! . . . WHAM! . . . WHAM! . . . and the white sun is focused. I feel like an ant under a magnifying glass, my extremities smoking.

Drake Bay is picture perfect palms and sloping hermit crab sand. We disembark into the roiling surf holding our baggage over our heads, soaking our wallets, asses and passports with brine.

Smiling, snaggle-toothed Pedro, with toothbrush moustache, is on the beach eagerly welcoming us. We are going to stay in his casa, not far, just up the hill, just up the hill, just up the hill.

It's a pretty house with stilty legs propping the downhill side, butterfly garden, cobalt sky and galvanized steel roof.

My shirt is stuck to my back, chest heaving like a draft horse, and I'm grinning.

Pura Vida! 🍷



Morning View

MY TRANSLATION OF CASA HORIZONTES is: *Place to lie down*. To the Ticos it means: *Home with a view of the horizon*. Both are correct descriptions of Yami and Pedro's B&B.

We rock our white plastic chairs onto their back legs and rest our feet up on the railing while we sip our morning coffee and watch the show.

The skin of the sky is the clearest and brightest cerulean. The thump of the ceiling fan keeps the rhythm in the Tinnitus Orchestra of cicadas, crickets, geckos, frogs and birds. Silly little circus ants parade along the handrail in time to the music, their pointed abdomens raised and bent up over their heads as if they are walking on their hands.

Squadrons of migrating pelicans drift along the coast in military formations catching the thermal of rising air in front of our dwelling, wheeling in the kettle for a couple of swirls, then continuing their graceful passage from a loftier perspective with a lower horizon line, aiming for the vanishing point. ~

Emerson

YAMI'S OLD MOTHER HURRIES up the steep pathway, grunting from root to root as she climbs. Startled by her haste, a dazzling pair of scarlet Macaws scratch a rainbow streak across this mural of wonders.

She is here to help with the emergency.

Yami and Pedro have an eleven year old son whose name is Emerson. Epileptic Emerson has the mind of a baby and he lives in a baby carriage. This morning the feeding tube dislodged from his stomach and he must be evacuated by aircraft to San José for repairs. We will not see Yami, Emerson or Pedro for a week. ~



Glorianna

GLORIANNA, their six year old daughter, stays behind with *Gramma* and paints watercolours with us. She will start school next week and her proud Grandma sends her to us to model her freshly pressed, special occasion, Drake Public School uniform. 🍷



Shower of Power

WE CALL IT THE SHOWER OF POWER. It has shockingly lethal potential. A pale grey tree frog dares to share the shower with me this morning. I inadvertently splash shampoo on him, spoiling his grip on the plastic curtain and causing him to slide slowly down. He laboriously progresses back up the slippery curtain again only to slide backwards whenever he pauses. It's like paddling a canoe into the wind, I tell him. "Screw this!" I hear him mutter as he closes his big red eyes and skies back to the floor. 🍷

Alarm Clock Bird

WE SLEEP NESTLED TOGETHER like spoons in a drawer, Sarah curled against my back. "Ron! Wake up! Turn off the alarm!" She shakes me out of my dream. "Turn off the alarm!"

Focusing on the task, I slowly realize that the surprising source of this urgent and annoying song is the Alarm Clock Bird calling from the branch outside our window. I don't know if it has always sung this song or if it was tutored by our clock. Is it unrequited love or a territorial thing? Who knows? The dawn strikes the mosquito netting, making a cone of warm light over the spoons in the drawer. It's almost a perfect place. 🍷

Another Earthquake

Shakin', tremblin', quakin', quiverin', shudderin', wobblin' rockin' bed in the night. "WAKE UP RON!! WAKE UP!! EARTHQUAKE!! WE HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE! WAKE UP!!" Slowly surfacing from my dream, I hold her tight and reassure her . . . "Relax, there's nothing to be alarmed about." TEETER, SHIMMY, SHUDDER. "It's just an iguana crossing the road."

Wrong. I was very wrong. 🍷



Sinking Lizard

FEEDIN' AN' FORNICATIN' is all they do, until they wander into an unnatural trap. We stare at the finger-sized lizard digging at the sides of the bathroom sink, trapped in a polished porcelain jail. Like a god, I tenderly scoop it out, intending to send it safely home, when to my utter astonishment its red tail detaches from its body to thrash and squirm in my palm. I drop it like a hot rivet.

Horrified, we watch the disembodied tail dance and wiggle on the tile, flipping like a freshly caught trout.

"It's dead! It's dead!" cries Sarah. "Quick! Put it in the toilet!"

Cautiously, I tweezer the wriggling horror between my thumb and index, drop it into the bowl and press the chrome. Still flailing, the zombie tail dances into the roaring vortex as it is sucked like a helpless thing into the wormhole leading to the lower universe.

There, it grows a new head that determines, "Whoever did this to me made a big mistake". 🍯



Black Powder Wife

BECAUSE THERE ARE NO ROADS from Drake to Parque Nacional Corcovado on the south coast of the peninsula, we leave by boat at first light. Well actually, we don't leave at first light. We are ready on the beach before dawn, but the boat picks us up when it gets into the mood. Sharp-eyed Sarah is the first passenger to spot the whales and dolphins who arch gracefully in our bow wave.

About 20 red-skinned tourists spill out onto the rocky shore for a guided tour. We are separated into two groups. The young and healthy set off first to scare away the creatures we hope to see, as I am tossed in with the wrinklies who bumble behind.

As we limp along, I overhear a conversation between an American and an Austrian gentleman walking behind me. "Ah hayve three houses, one in West Virginy, one in Tennessee, and one in Costa Rica," the American proudly announces. "Oh! I'm so sorry!" exclaims the Austrian. "That must be a big pain in the ass for you!"

The American moves up the line and engages me. "Ah'm from West Virginy and Ah'm a black powder man," he declares. "Ah fire black powder pistols, that's mah game, it's fun. We shoot all over the south." (Which, I'm thinking, is far north of here.)

"How accurate is a black powder pistol?" I inquire. "People will say that this is pure bullshit, but, Gawd's only truth, mah wife, (indicating the tank rolling along the path in a flowered dress) kin put twenty holes in a fourteen inch disk in ten minutes from a hundirt yards, with one hand, without the word of a lie. Forty-five caliber." 



Tick Pick

BRUSH AGAINST THE BULLHORN ACACIA and hundreds of tiny ants will come boiling out of the hollow thorns with their bladders bursting. If you get pissed on by just one ant, your skin will burn for a week. If this ant's urine is such a powerful irritant, does it suffer from irritable bladder syndrome? How do they cope?

The acid in a python's stomach will digest a goat, its hair and hooves in a week. Why doesn't the python fall apart?

Dry season is Tick Pick season on the Osa. We remove them after every walk in the bush. Ticks love to make themselves at home in your hair or sweaty cracks and flaps. Once they drill for blood and start pumping it into their ballooning stomachs, they are very difficult to remove without leaving their filthy mouth parts imbedded.

People try to burn them off, or soak them with gasoline, or paint them with nail polish.

It's good to have a frog in the shower. 🐸



One Man, Two Fish

THEY SAY HE CAN HOLD HIS BREATH FOR SIX MINUTES.

They say he beat Kasparov in Central Park.

They say he worked in a bank.

They say he speaks seven languages.

They say he is a fugitive. 🍷



Eating Cicada

AT NOON I WATCH A CICADA 'SHUFFLE OFF HIS MORTAL COIL'.

Cicadas don't live very long. Well, they do, but they spend most of their years as troglodytes, grubbing in the dark soil, sucking on roots and ignoring each other. Then, one glorious day, the Cicada Rapture takes them all up to the light. They creep up tree trunks by the thousands, all brown and crawly from a decade of dirt. The dry air splits them open and they are born again, iridescent, trembling, transparent thumb-sized angels singing, "We can fly! We can fly! We can do it in the sky, before we die!"

Within just fifteen minutes, I see a troop of very tiny ants stake out the prize and begin to hollow the dead cicada's shell. By four o'clock the task is completed and they each punch out, end of shift, another day. Another cicada looking like he sang himself empty.

Consider this ant tribe: each member is only 1/16" long. I don't know how tall. When they are excited they move 5 inches per second. That is 90 times their body length. If you were as fast as these racy little ants you could cover 182 yards each second. If each of their scrunty legs is only 2 thousands of an inch long and their stride the same, then each little leg must be galloping along at 2500 steps per second.

Can you imagine a fundraiser to save the ants?
Hummingbirds have a larger market draw. 🍷



Zombie Fungus

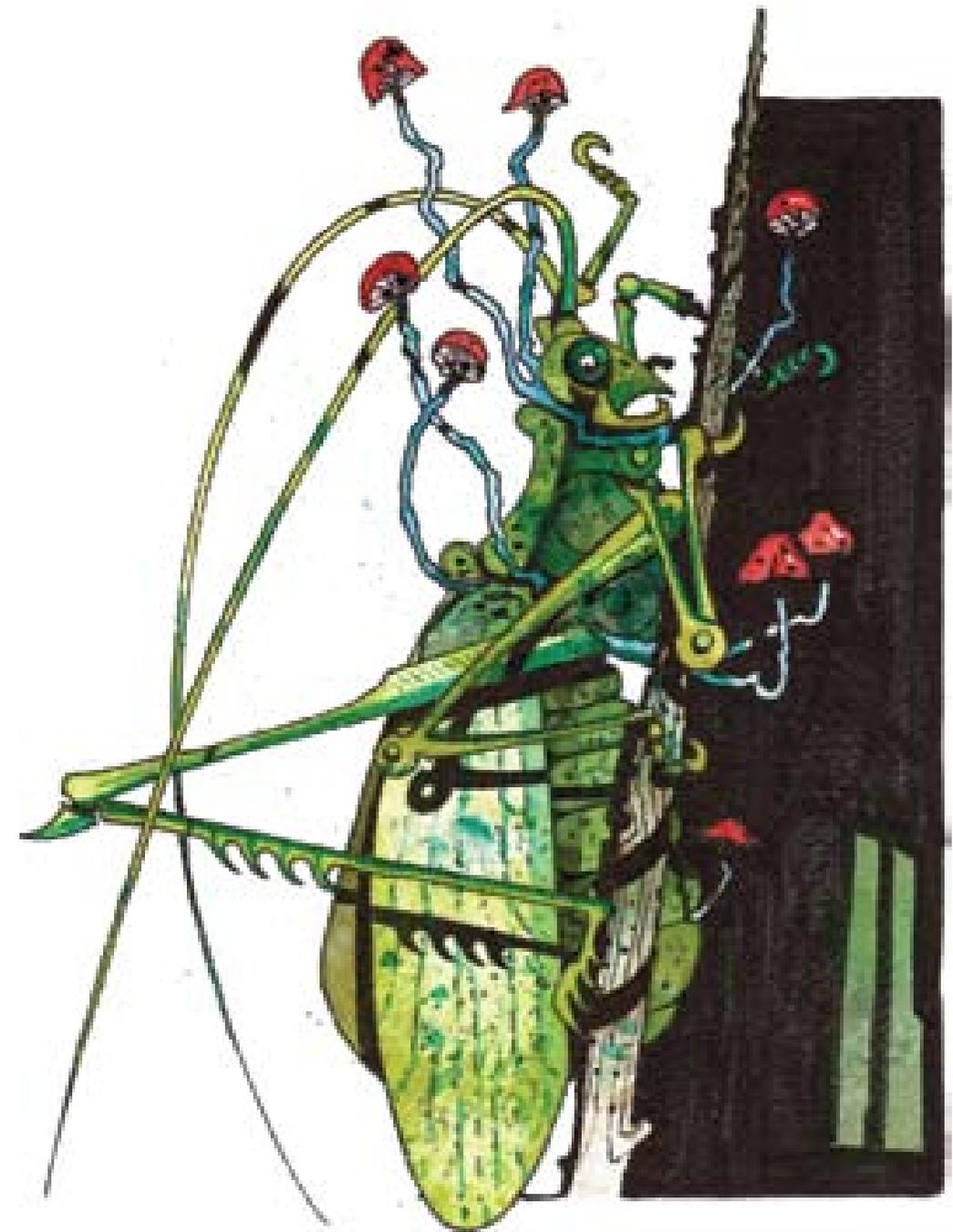
IF YOU ARE REINCARNATED AS a bright green Katydid with a half a dozen strong legs, able to hop 20 times your body length without even opening your wings, and no plans beyond singing in the treetops for sex, it wouldn't be so bad.

But, if you're a Katydid that brushes up against the Zombie Fungus, your plans will change.

A single acidic spore will surely eat its way through your exoskeleton and grow threads of mycelia to infect you from the inside. At first it feels like pins and needles, but this sensation soon passes as the Zombie Fungus manufactures antibiotics to ameliorate the devastation. She leaves your soft organs to the last, with the exception of your brain. Taking control your behaviour, she drives you upward, seeking light. Upon reaching the uttermost perch, she devours your brain while you dance with a trembling death-rigor clutch. Then, after a leisurely snack of your remaining innards, she thrusts her nasty red-capped cardinals through your connecting tissue. You have become a vase for blue-stemmed mushrooms.

In turn, the Zombie Fungus has long been harvested by the Chinese as a vigorish. And the antibiotic? It cures bed sores.

Your next incarnation may be better if you come back as *Polysphincta Gutfreundi*, a parasitic wasp. Poly glues her egg to the soft and pretty belly of the Golden Orb Spider. Your cunning little larva will emerge and release mind-bending chemicals which cause the golden one to abandon weaving her spiral web. This irresistible perfume forces the spider to crochet a specific geometric camouflaged hammock to safely cradle your baby's cocoon. 🍷



Leaf Trick

LOOKING UP TONIGHT, you might think that Black Powder Man and his shotgun buddies fired a fusillade into the sky peppering, the dome of darkness with holes that let the light in. The pattern is chaotic, no familiar critters here. Where did the bear go and what's up with Orion? Even the Big Dipper is hiding over the horizon.

We are in bed, knees up, sipping and reading our books under a bare, dangling incandescent bulb, when a bright green leaf sails through the open window, crashing into the light and spiraling to the floor. Confused, it begins executing a series of figure eights which capture my attention.

The leaf is perfect and pretty with all its veins and anatomy exact, but it dances on its shadow like a possessed thing, tracing the infinity symbol on the planks.

Using my outermost extremity of caution, I flip it over and discover six leafy legs! It is a Leaf Mantis - a bug so perfectly dressed as a veiny leaf that it can fool any other bug, bird or person, anytime.

Of course, we all know the vectors which drove its miraculous evolution. The early bird ignores the leaf; the Leafy Mantis lives to catch more bugs. Breed on and on, leafy green freaks.

Here on the Osa Peninsula, birds look like sticks and bugs look like birds, fish look like rocks and moths look like bird shit. This makes sense: if you see bird shit, you leave it alone. Every creature does. That is why there are many insects today evolving to look exactly like discarded condoms, bottle caps, broken ballpoint pens and bubble gum.

Humans are galloping along the evolutionary trail; a lot has been accomplished since upright walking. We are growing tracheas in test tubes and installing them. We are doing smart drugs and manipulating our own genes. We are building bionic appendages and nanobots creep through our interiors. The Leaf Mantis isn't the only one engineering its evolution. 🍷



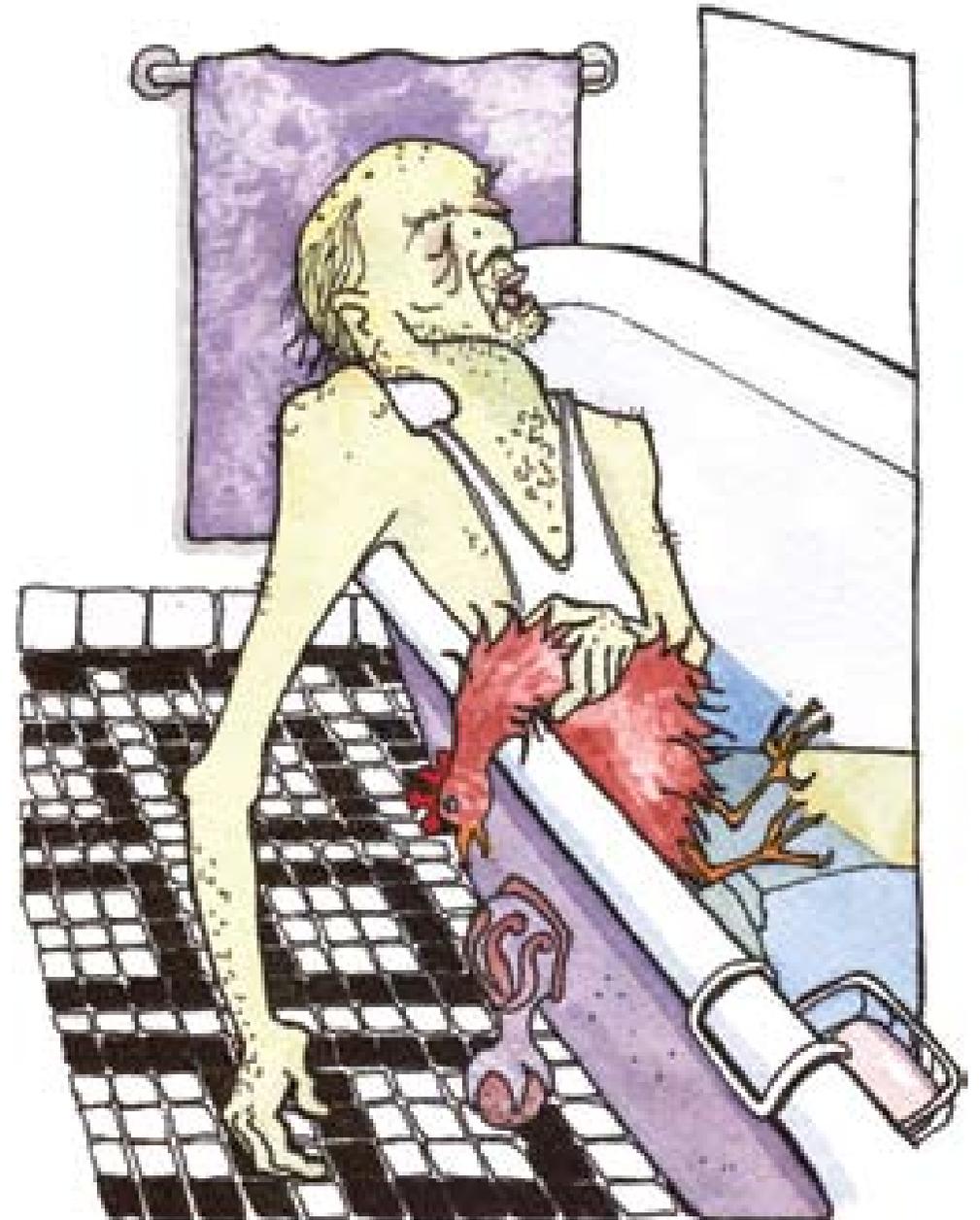
Dead Guy in the Tub

THE RICKETY BACK PORCH of Gringo Curt's Bar hangs over a jungley deep ravine. We are surprised that this afternoon's 6.2 magnitude earthquake didn't deliver it to the bottom. The chickens scratching at the hillside are regularly interrupted by a capricious black puppy who charges out, then retreats at first flap.

The roadside of this dusty town is lined with unpettable short-legged dogs lying in sandy depressions. It's too hot to snap at flies.

There is a customer in the bar who works for Emergency Services. He tells us a story about being called to a death scene. Code Five. They found the body of an old man in his bathtub clutching a chicken. Jokes about fowl play were inserted into this tragic mystery.

The investigating officers smirked about the chicken, imagining some absurd fetish, anxious to get back to the station to tell the story, which is exactly what the murderer intended when she placed it there to distract the police and cloud their judgment.



Sketching at Gringo Curt's

SIPPING AND SKETCHING is what we are doing one thick afternoon on Gringo Kurt's back porch, our subject a hillside house, when a woman steps out onto its balcony to gather in her colourful hanging laundry. Looking up and noticing us at work she calls out, "Are you drawing a picture of my house?"

"Yes, we are."

"Then I'll leave my laundry up until you have finished," she kindly offers.

This is thoughtfulness that can only spring from someone who has been frustrated when a subject changed mid-sketch.



Rambo

SARAH IS RIDING NIRVANA, while Rambo is my jungle-ready horse. True to his name, he charges boldly through the snaky jungle and splashes fearlessly through rivers of invisible, squirming crocodiles.

Arriving at a beautiful waterfall in a deep ravine that is dancing with butterflies, we dare to dip into a paradisaal silver swimmin' hole. Filling my hat with water and clamping it on my head produced a funny fountain as water squirts through the islets.

A crayfish investigating my toes nearly causes a cardiac incident. Sensing crocodile, I scramble for shore, heedless of the sharp stones under my tender feet. I will be called 'Dances With Crocodiles'.

Rambo, normally confident and sure footed, is understandably uncomfortable crossing bridges with missing planks, catching glimpses of the river below and premonitions of a spectacular, premature, horsey death.

And so rises my singular complaint about that noble steed - his habit of farting like a JATO booster whenever dashing along a high and narrow ridge with sheer sides. I feel jet assisted as we fly across these hold-your-breath-and-fart situations.

The day ends with my body gratefully intact, dreaming of knee replacements. 🍷



Fine Vine

UBIQUITOUS, SNAKY, WOODY LIANAS can grow as thick as a fat lady's thigh. These vines aren't exactly parasitic, but they are not exactly fair either, taking advantage of the efforts of hard growing trees.

They are the hitchhikers who never intend to buy their own car or even a bus ticket. They curl and snake their way up a tall tree until they summit in the bright canopy where they leaf and spread.

Should the supporting tree die and crash, dragging the springy vine to the floor, with no regrets or "thanks for the ride," it picks another tall tree and creeps like a toad to the sky again.

Continuing in this manner, an ancient vine can grow to be three thousand feet long. Imagine this enormous plant sucking water out of the soil and sending it a kilometer up its winding stem to nourish its leaves and pipe the sunshine's goodness back down to its roots. If the plant is three thousand feet long, how long are its roots? How many years has it been hanging out?

Lianas don't seem to try very hard in the way of flowers or fruit but they do make good highways for snakes and sloths. Tarzan depended on them.

I wonder why this particular *Banisteriopsis* vine bothers to produce a chemical gift that can transport humans to a world of fantastic visions. I doubt that we are part of the plant's evolutionary plan. 🍷



Bolas are Balls

A SOLDIER STRAIGHT LINE OF TREES crosses the Osa Peninsula. These 200 foot tall giants with buttress roots and thorny trunks were planted at 3 km intervals by the Diquis people hundreds of years ago. No one remembers why, but everyone knows to never, ever, cut one down.

The Diquis placed spiky plants around the tree bases. Pedro says they are ritual and burial sites. An aphrodisiac can be made from the bark of the Ceiba and when it is mixed with Ayahuasca, a powerful hallucinogenic, it becomes a turbo-charged party cocktail.

Experts in the lost wax process for casting the gold found in the rivers, these people were also manufacturers of hundreds of perfect granite spheres or Bolas, ranging from grapefruit size to a very impressive 16 tons - an astonishing feat as the Diquis had no metal tools.

No one remembers how the Bolas were used. You may have to drink a Ceiba cocktail to envision their purpose. But note that the concoction is often used as an enema to avoid nausea.

Eight hundred and eight years ago, a Diquis hunter came home to his wife complaining about having to spend the whole damn day dabbing his darts with tree frog juice. "Quit bitching! Have a cuppa tea, Diqui. It's something special I brewed from Ceiba bark with a dash of Ayahuasca." Diqui gulped it down and immediately started retching and puking, finally collapsing face first on the muddy floor, which is what she intended.

Shaking off his torpor the next day he snarled, "That was wicked tea, Bitch, I thought I was going to die! But, when I stopped puking and heaving, God all-sparkly came to me and showed me all things and they were wondrous to behold, and he told me to carve a granite sphere and he would grant me the manly gift of irresistibility!"

"Blow it up your chubby brown ass, dude!" she sneered. "HmMMM, that just might work to stop the nausea," he figured.

A couple of weeks later, all the Diquis men were blowing tea up each other's asses and carving granite spheres. 🍷



Flying Bulldogs

A KILOMETER OR SO from Casa Horizontes, the coastal pathway swings over the Rio Agujitas on a suspension bridge. Rio Agujitas means: River of Needles, so called because needle fish swim there.

If you stand on this bridge in the dusk you will soon see the gigantic Bulldog Bats fishing the dark water using their sensitive echo locators to hone in on surface disturbances that may indicate fishy goings-on.

Also known as *Noctilio Leporinus*, or Night Rabbit bat, a large male may have a wingspan of one metre, which is scarier than your average bat in the closet. If he gets knocked into the water he can paddle with his powerful leathery wings until he reaches take-off velocity.

The flapping bulldog's accordion cheeks can expand to hold enough chewed fish to take home to feed his singular baby. And, he has a pocket near his scrotum where he carries his stinky musk which he rubs onto other bats' heads while they sleep. He is quite the joker. 🐈



Vampyrum

THERE IS AN EVEN LARGER PREDATORY BAT in these woods that snatches sleeping birds and lizards from their lofty perches in the night while they dream of eating big bugs or starting a family.

Her first name is Vampyrum. This leathery phantom lives in a tall hollow tree which is circled with cast off bones, beaks and feathers. She likes to eat alone upside down and doesn't hang out with the rest of her tribe.

The Vampyrum has a strange organ that looks like a rat crawling in its ear.

Her second name is Spectrum, but is commonly referred to as the Huge Fuckin' Bat, the False Vampire Bat, or the Spectral Bat, Spectral because her eyes burn like fire in the dark. If you are lucky enough to see one, there is nothing you can do. 🍷



Stoner Sloth

IT'S OBVIOUS THAT THEY ARE STONED. The silly grin, the vacant stare, the slow, deliberate, ass-scratching and lack of concern for personal hygiene, have earned them the name *Peresosos* or *Lazies*.

The sloth slowly and laboriously climbs down from the canopy for its weekly shit. It pokes a hole in the ground with its stubby tail and carefully buries the little turd.

There are moths that make their home in its mossy fur and when the sloth drops his weekly pellet in the hole, these moths leap off and fight for place to lay their eggs on it before it is covered. Luckily, the sloth takes his time and everybody gets a turn. 🍷

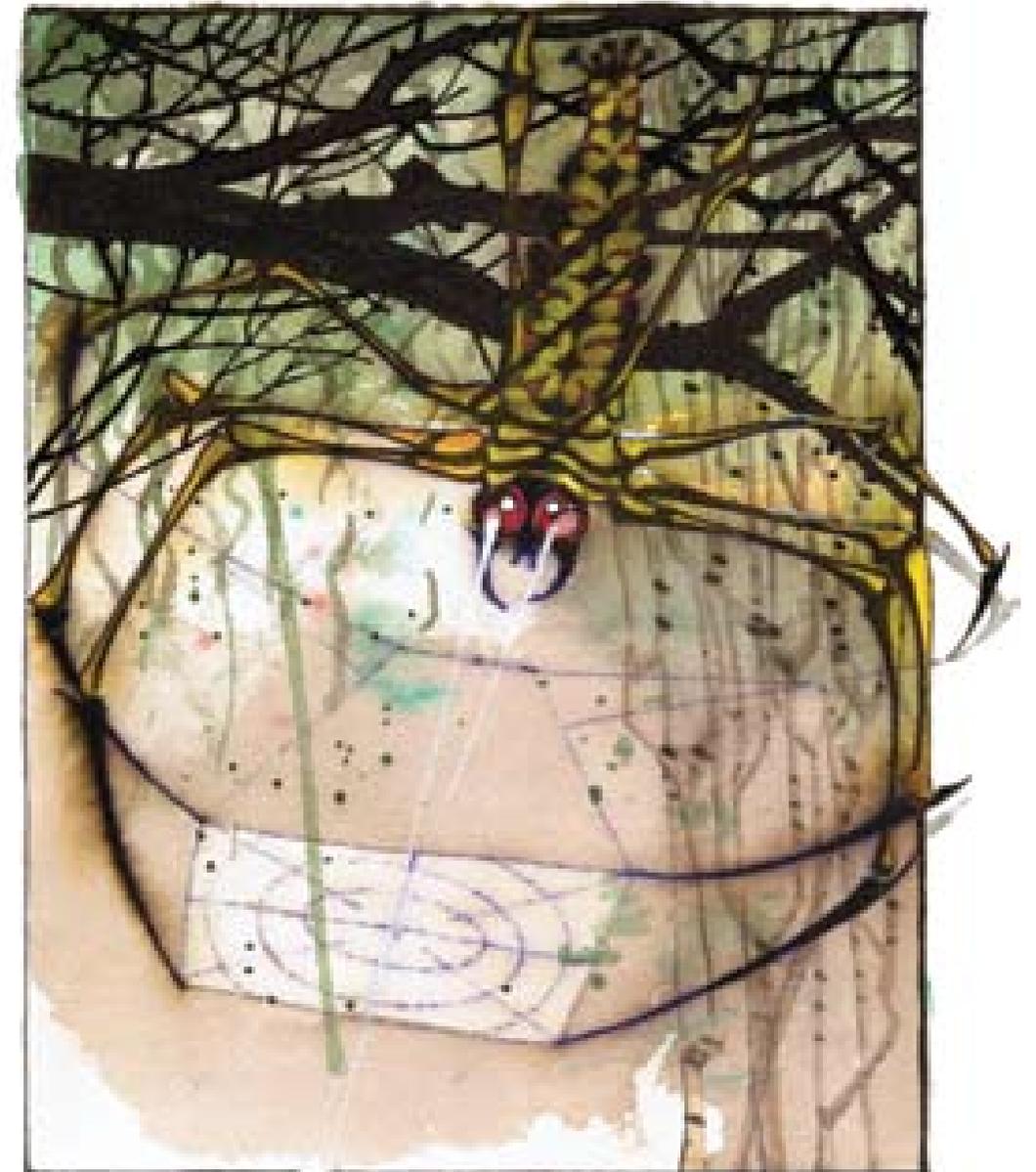


Net-casting Spider

MY NICK-NAME IS 'THE STICK'. It's because of a special trick I do to disguise myself as a stick, and I do it very well. I can clamp my front and back legs together and extend them from my thin body and you cannot tell me from a stick. It's my default position. I have distinctive eyes, enormously large and forward-facing, spellbinding, like glistening dew drops. I'm special in other ways, too. Some spiders can jump or dick around with trap doors or macramé, but only a spider from my family, the Deinopidae clan, can weave a rectangular cat's cradle from woolly, bluish cribellate silk. First, I spray my target area with white faeces (can you do that? I think not) to silhouette my target. I'm an ambush hunter. I can hang motionless upside down all night and fling my sticky purse-net onto any bug that wanders into my zone. I never miss.

With me, sex is indirect. Privately, I'm carefully ejaculating two droplets of sperm and transferring them to my pedipalps beside my head, because I have all eight eyes on a slender female who hangs nearby. I confess, it's my first time. All systems ready - I'm vibrating. It's a slow dance, I'm taking my time, easing into it. I transfix her with my headlight eyes and suggestive gestures. I tease and coax, I have my moves, tease and coax. She is open now and unguarded and I slap my sperm packet into her pussy. Ha!

Call it a knee-jerk reaction. All eight knees contract, she spins and rips off my other palp and eats it. Now she is eating me. This relationship ain't goin' nowhere.



Smokey Jungle Frog

I SAW A FROG AS BIG AS a chicken last night. The Smokey Jungle Frog is enormous. It is gigantic and evil, too. His skin has the texture of a plastic bag full of liver and the colour of unmined copper.

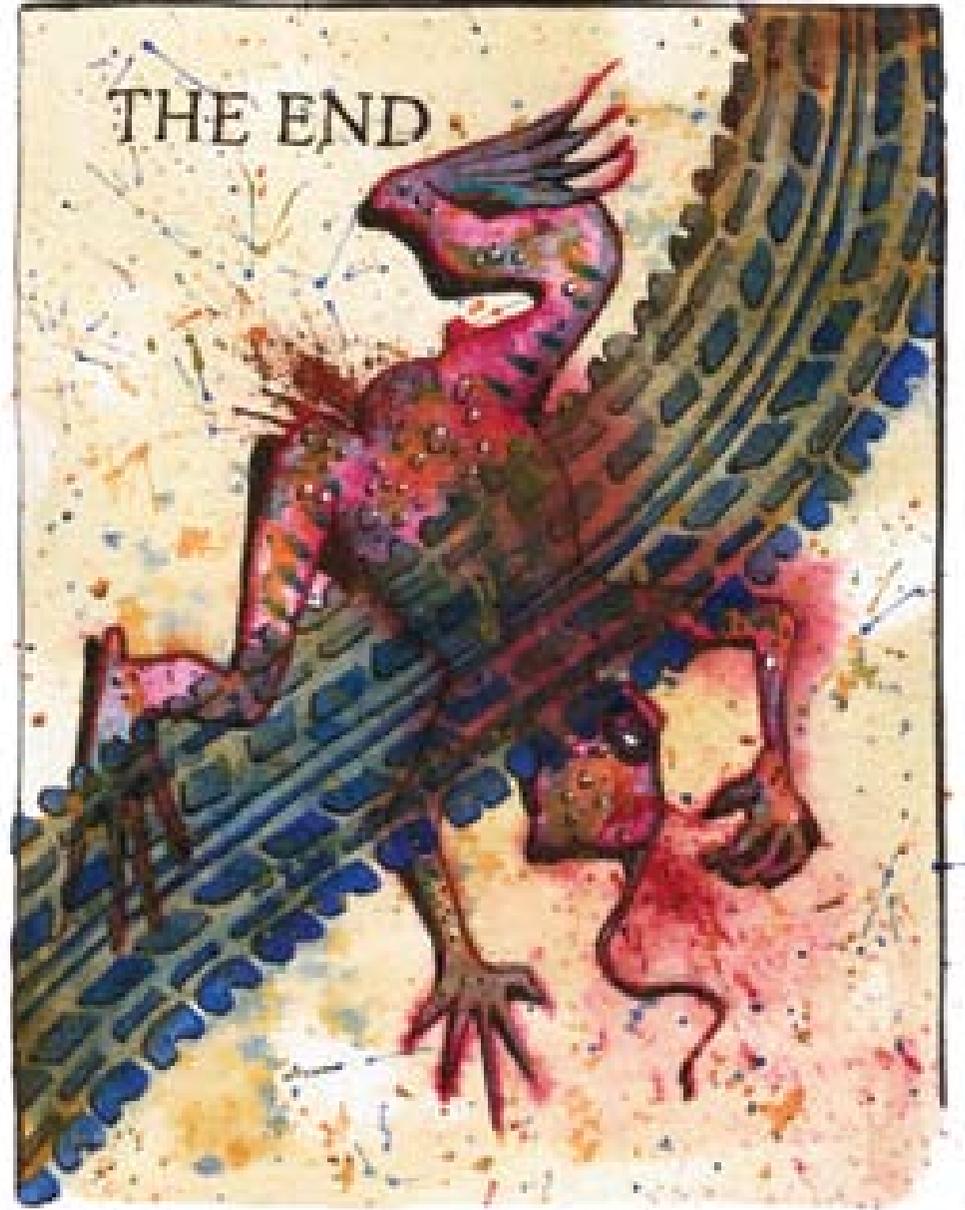
If you pick this frog up, it will scream like a banshee, a loud and piercing cry that is irresistible to crocodiles. When they hear the distress call of fat old bird-eating Smokey, they come a runnin'. Looking for crocs? Squeeze a frog.

I was told of a park ranger who successfully demonstrated this phenomenon and didn't bother to wash his hands before he smoked a cigarette. He died, of course. I don't know if the crocs got him.

The elegant Anteater, so beautiful and graceful in life, is shunned by vultures when dead. They will not touch a road-kill because its diet makes the flesh toxic. Everything here is poisonous or prickly. 🍷



THE END



AMBULANCE TO EL SALVADOR

By Ron Baird



Table of Contents

Padre Hernan	56
Departure of the Caravan of Hope	58
In the Morning	60
Welcome to Ohio	62
Texas	64
X-Rays	66
Kevin	68
Pissin' Pedro	70
The Serpentine Belt	72
Graveyard	74
Olmec Warrior	76
Tampico Bay	78
Divorced Eggs	80
Mountain Fire	82
Damn Shame	84
Big Fat Doctor Lardo	86
Bullshit Nari	88
Border Crossing	90
Crash, Bam, Fuck	92
Border Submarine	94
The Last Supper	96
Estudio de Escultura	98
Presentation Ceremony	100
In Conclusion	102

Padre Hernan

SARAH DISCOVERED THE CARAVAN OF HOPE. It's a charity bound to donate decommissioned Ontario ambulances and school buses to needy communities in Central America. We have volunteered to drive an ambulance to San Salvador.

Padre Hernan Astudillo is the force behind this project.

The Padre is a communist zealot when it comes to economics. Half Christ, half guerrilla fighter, he is fervent in his mission to help the poor. Being a flexible Anglican of the practical sort, he embraces folks of all religions who share his purpose and their purses.

The altar in San Lorenzo, his parish church in North Toronto, is a stump on wheels which rolls out under a curious mural depicting the immigrant Christ bursting through borders, snipping barbed wire, scattering American dollars and leading his flock out of a nuclear war zone.

I like the Padre, the Padre likes artists. His enthusiasm comes wrapped in a cloak of righteous weariness and he is slightly embarrassed by my name. Ron means rum in Spanish and robs the team of drivers of some Christian dignity, so I have become Ronaldo or Donron, and Sarah is called Sarita in this loose chain of seven ambulances, one school bus and fifteen people all bound for El Salvador.



Departure of the Caravan of Hope

WE ARE SEVEN WELL-USED AMBULANCES, one school bus, and 15 people - drivers and documentarians who are bound to deliver this equipment from Toronto, Canada to Central America's smallest and most populous country, El Salvador. Excitement and anticipation of the adventure about to unroll infuses the travelers and well wishers. Even when the oldest ambulance, Number Seven, scores an F minus on the safety exam and is ejected from the mission before we get out of the parking lot, the mood remains positive.

Cornflake snow settles on the Padre's curly black head and beard as he blesses us all and sprinkles holy water insurance on the six remaining ambulances and one small school bus. It's a noisy fanfare departure with whooping sirens and flashing lights. As we drive away, the Canadian flags which have been loosely attached to the vehicles begin to abandon us, fleeing like rats from a sinking ship to live in the gutters of Downsview.

We travel in line like cars on a train coupled together by our \$80/pair walkie talkies which have an imaginary range of four kilometers. Barely 20 minutes into the journey, Ambulance Number Three swallows its own piston and collapses at the side of Highway 401, choking in a spectacular cloud of oily blue smoke. Number Three's next destination is the scrap yard.

The Caravana de Esperanza, reduced now to five plus a bus, presses on to Niagara College to pick up some gas money generated by a local radio station's fundraising marathon. Our departure is delayed because the keys to Number 5 are locked inside. This is pretty funny.

We slip past homeland security and into the United States with very little fuss. The full moon's reflected light glances off the ambulances' white roofs; the convoy brings to mind a pod of Belugas moving steadily southwest.

We come to rest at the Motel 6 in Mansfield, Ohio. 🍷



In the Morning

IT IS BARELY DAWN in the parking lot of Motel 6 and Rasputin is blowing his red plastic whistle, urging us to assemble, but it is cold and we are searching for caffeine. The Holy Father blows his whistle at fueling stops, and pee breaks, urging us forward. One thing that we all agree on, is that we hate his whistle. The Latinos have formed a pool, each of them contributing five dollars, and the person who steals the hated whistle wins the pot.

Suddenly, the good Father has stopped using the whistle, so now the Latinos know that there is a spy amongst them. By deduction it is Alexandro, the sponsored documentarian, who has ratted them out. Alexandro is now referred to as the Padre's spy. There are dark jokes. He must be killed; we have no choice.

Today, one ambulance runs out of gas, the battery cable vibrates loose on the bus, a replacement alternator is found and installed. Ambulance 4 is lost and its lights no longer function.

Tonight we rest in Bowling Green. 🍷



WELCOME TO OHIO



Texas

HIGHWAY EXIT SIGNS to Beaverlick and Bucksnot alert us; we have slipped into the deep south. Spring has suddenly arrived with flowers, an eagle and an offering of Big Bubba Blackstrap's deeply fried torpedoes. Pass the gravy, please.

We view the rainy scenery through slapping windshield wipers, the maple leaf air freshener dances on a noose from the mirror. People here say that it's unlucky to plant a cedar tree because when it's tall enough to cast a shadow the length of a coffin, a member of your family will surely die.

Last week's tornado, a real belly washer, has raised the muddy rivers and flooded the woods, making a spooky southern swamp of wounded trees where whistling wampuses and pinkletinks sing their sad songs.

The most common sighting of wildlife in Texas is roadkill. 🍷

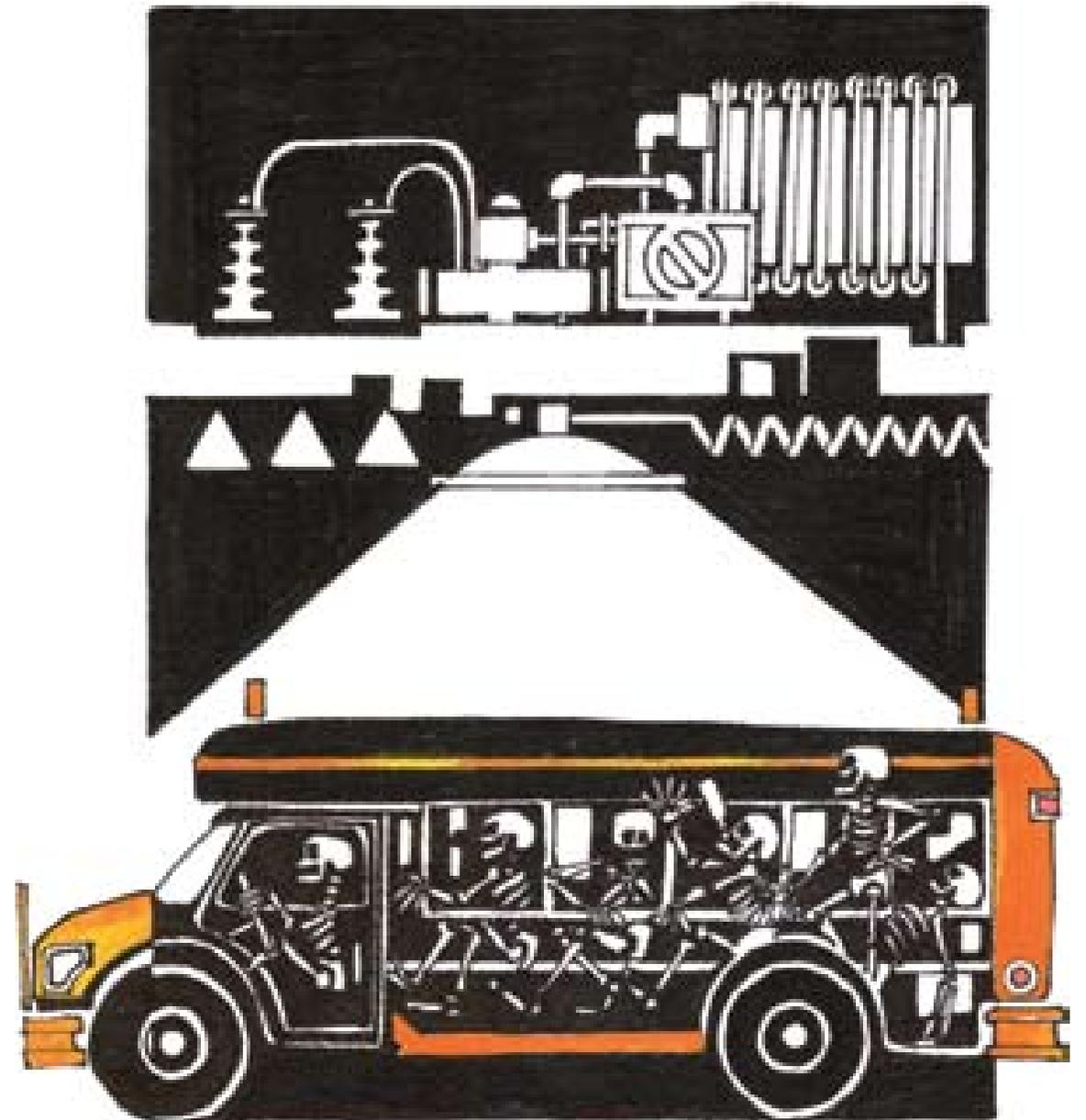


X-Rays

“OH NO! OH SHIT!” We pull into the Mexican Border Commercial Vehicle Inspection Module and are greeted by a frantic young officer who is certainly assigned the midnight shift because of his youth and inexperience. He is in extreme distress, head in hands, moaning.

“Oh fuck! I can’t believe what I just did! Oh Shitfuck. I pounded them with gamma! I just blasted that school bus with everyone inside! Oh shit! I’m not supposed to do that. Jesus! I fried them, hard penetrating x-rays. They are supposed to get off the bus, but I hit the big button. I was supposed to wait. Oh shit shit shit shit! That’s not right, made a little mistake, oh fuck.”

Wasn’t it an extreme burst of gamma rays that created The Incredible Hulk? 🍷



Kevin

THEY SAY THAT NOTHING ever grew again on the ground Attila the Hun stepped upon. He was an angry Mongol terrorist with a short man complex who skewered babies on his sword for the fun of it.

It might be because of hitting the off-ramp curb that the door fell off the bus, although Kevin who was driving accepts no responsibility. The temporary repair is quickly accomplished by the ever resourceful Steve and Rob team who have a trick they do with a coat hanger.

Kevin reminds me of a cartoon version of Attila. He grips the two way radio like a grenade, presses it to his lips and screams orders with so much energy he must do it on tip toes. Since the message is unintelligible anyway, Pedro always gives him the walkie talkie with the dead battery.

Everyone knows that we must bribe our way through the border but, no one knows how much we should pay or to whom. For this, we must hire a slippery agent to oil our way through the Los Indios gateway into Mexico.

After crossing the border, we employ a 'coyote' from one of the criminal gangs who will guide us around the police road blocks avoiding more extortion. Thank goodness we have the Latinos with us who thrive in this environment and are energized by the intrigue and drama. In this place, Gringos are viewed as pigeons, fat and stupid, heads bobbing as we stroll, staring down at the sidewalk. 🍷



Pissin' Pedro

IF HE HADN'T TAKEN a gulp of his urine, they probably wouldn't have escaped.

When Pedro is not working as an undercover cop, 31 Division, he is our *compañero* for the Caravan of Hope. Everyone likes Pedro. Late at night, as we rattle through moonlit Mexico, he tells me a funny story.

Twelve tedious hours on a stake-out in Toronto, waiting for something to happen and, of course, he has to pee, which he does in the empty Tim Hortons cup which he replaces in the holder.

When the bad guys jump into their car and speed off, Pedro drops it into drive and reaches for his coffee.

They got away, of course. 🍻



The Serpentine Belt

RINGS OF MIST HALO the howling tires of the heavy trucks as they spin past on the wet road while we wait beside the highway for a replacement belt. Father Hernan has been praying for help, but God is currently preoccupied and so, the good Father is leaving him a message: “Por favor Señor, send us a mecánico to fix it the belt”.

This has put the Lord in an awkward position because the local population is counter-petitioning Him to abandon Number Two where she lies.

They have a plan and their logic is difficult to refute. Here in Vera Cruz, it is unsafe to travel after dark, but the Mexican bandits’ code of honour demands that they respect ambulances. So, if they have their own ambulance, they could travel safely after nightfall.

It must be God’s will, otherwise how can you explain His breaking of the serpentine belt precisely in this place, at this time of need? How Father? How? Give us the ambulance, for surely it is God’s will. 🍷



Graveyard

YESTERDAY, LIFE SUPPORT was snapped from Ambulance Number Two when her serpentine belt came apart. This twelve foot long snake brings life to the ambulance as it races through the pulleys which drive the power brakes, the power steering, the air conditioning, the water pump and the dual alternators.

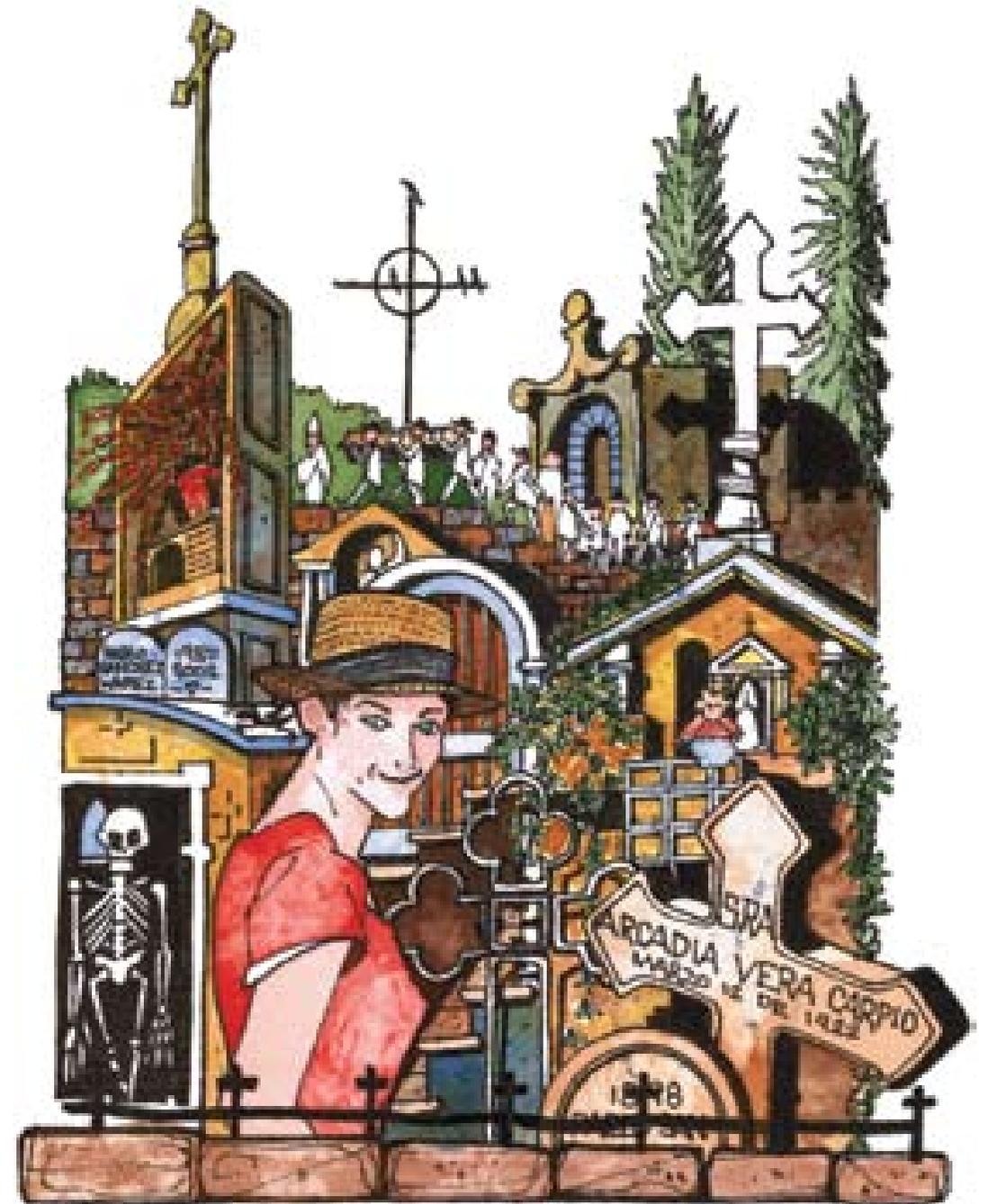
Sarah and I slip away from the group, realizing that it will take time to restore Number Two's Achilles' tendon.

It's hot enough to melt your underpants as we hike down into the pueblo in the valley and open the creaky gate to the City of the Dead. How can a place be so deathly still and so chaotic? It is over crowded; there is not enough room to lie down. This miniature barrio is crammed with tiny concrete churches, crosses of pipe and flowers of plastic bleaching in the sun, domed ovens baking bones, lizards rushing into cracks.

It's not a place where one would expect to see a magnificent pair of Bengal tigers but, there they are, caged in the back of a pickup on the highway, heading north.

The handbrake is mistakenly engaged on the bus when we depart, so now, its back brakes are smoked and the mountains of Guatemala will destroy the fronts.

~



Olmec Warrior

THERE ARE PROBABLY THIRTY Special Ops Cops at our fuel stop. Sarah makes friends and photos with the machine gun men, while I dart into the washroom.

There should have been a NO SMOKING WITHIN 20 METRES sign on the policeman who parked his clanking body at the urinal next to mine. He is carrying more explosives than Kaczynski the Unabomber.

His head is classic Olmec warrior, as round as Mars and as hard as granite. It is impossible not to stare at his necklace of metal birds' feet, which look like chicken to me.

Why, I wonder, does this uber-armed man finish off his ensemble with a chicken-foot necklace? Are they trophy scalps, one for each chicken killed, or are they apotropaics from his hoodoo bag to deflect evil?

Could it be that he is afraid?

Four and five miss the turn. Our radios' batteries are as flat as tortillas, the charger is missing in action. So, we wait for a convergence of vehicles while broiling under our brightest star. The roadside flowers are filthy, and Mario, the gentleman, picks a dusty bouquet for Sarah. There is nothing else he can offer her in this bleak place. He does his best. 🍷



Tampico Bay

WE RIDE THE BAD ROADS through dirty, oily Tampico's cracking towers, all sparkling festively with white lights at two bloody a.m., searching for Hernan's friends. If you have cataracts in your eyes, it is a spectacular light show. If you squint at bright lights in the night, your eyelashes make splendiferous super novas in your brain. Well, it's something like that. *Feliz Navidad.*

Without exception, each one of us is tired and grumpy at the end of this twenty driving hour day, which is the end of a series of brutally long days. So, of course, not one of us goes to bed.

Wired, we all stay up and drink cervezas, bitch, laugh and stare through bleary eyes at the growing crowd of empties on the table. The colours are saturated blues, greens and yellows and it feels like we are drinking on a Julie Taymor stage set. Pura Vida!

Breakfast is fried cornflakes with crumbly cheese. 



Divorced Eggs

EVERYONE ELSE IS SNORING in bright green concrete box rooms watched over by bubblegum pink geckos, but not us. It's dark and shivering at five in the morning. Our teeth are brushed, bags loaded and we are ready to go because I mistakenly set the alarm an hour too early.

The only building on the street with a light in the window is El Casa Blanca. It's a concrete block restaurant where two ancient men sit staring at a flickering television mounted high in the corner.

One struggles out of his chair and smilingly offers us a tattered menu. Huevos Divorciados, divorced eggs, are featured. When eggs divorce, does one egg get to keep both shells? Probably.

The raised highway takes us through freshwater marshes upholstered in verdant, sprinkled with white lilies and generously dusted with purple and yellow flowers. Cattle graze knee deep in this bright tapestry. I wonder if their milk tastes like honey . . . and the cheese, OMG!

Heron, ibis, crane and egret families are gathered in astonishing numbers at this convention and a bright butterfly hitches a ride on Sarah's lap. 🐣



Mountain Fire

ON THE NINTH DAY the mountains are on fire. The continents are pinched at the waist and so today it's possible to drive from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific shore, over its bony and protruding spine moving with the sun.

The mountain air is choked with the smoke of pitiless wildfires racing up steep slopes, hungry tongues in the ditches eager for the taste of ambulance and bus. We see a horse lying in a black and smoking field of roasted grasshoppers and scorpions. A vortex of vultures stirs in the sky, waiting for things to cool down. Not every creature's eye views this as a disaster.

We passed through a half-dozen military check points this morning without difficulty. Perhaps it's the enormity of the tragic fires that stirs their compassion but they make no demands from us.

The cable comes loose on the secondary battery of the bus. We don't bother to repair things anymore. It is removed and tossed into the garbage and we descend into the spectacular valley of ten thousand windmills, all spinning white against the smoky sky.



Damn Shame

WHEN A GUATEMALAN CUSTOMS OFFICIAL scratches the palm of his hand, the gesture is understood by all and dealt with by our Latino friends who are wise in these matters.

It's a damn shame. We have gently nursed this ambulance to the Guatemalan border, and have been refused entry there. We find accommodations on the Mexican side while things get paid out. A covered narrow lane leads to the secure night lock-up compound. Three people are there to guide me through. I ask, "Is there enough head room?" I inch the cab into the tunnel of doom. "Are you sure there is enough headroom?" Six eager hands urge me forward and three heads bob in confidence.

CRUNCH!! SON OF A BITCH!

So we move the wounded ambulance next door, play basketball with the children. Later, I try to tease the pretty peacock perched on our balcony, showing him his reflection in the mirror that I've removed from the wall in our room. He has no interest in my mischief.

A flag the size of a tennis court flies over the town. Our visas have been taken, exit stamps stamped and now we can go - but the vehicles must stay. However, this is merely a Gordian knot easily, untangled by paying a fine to Señor Itchy Palm. 🍷



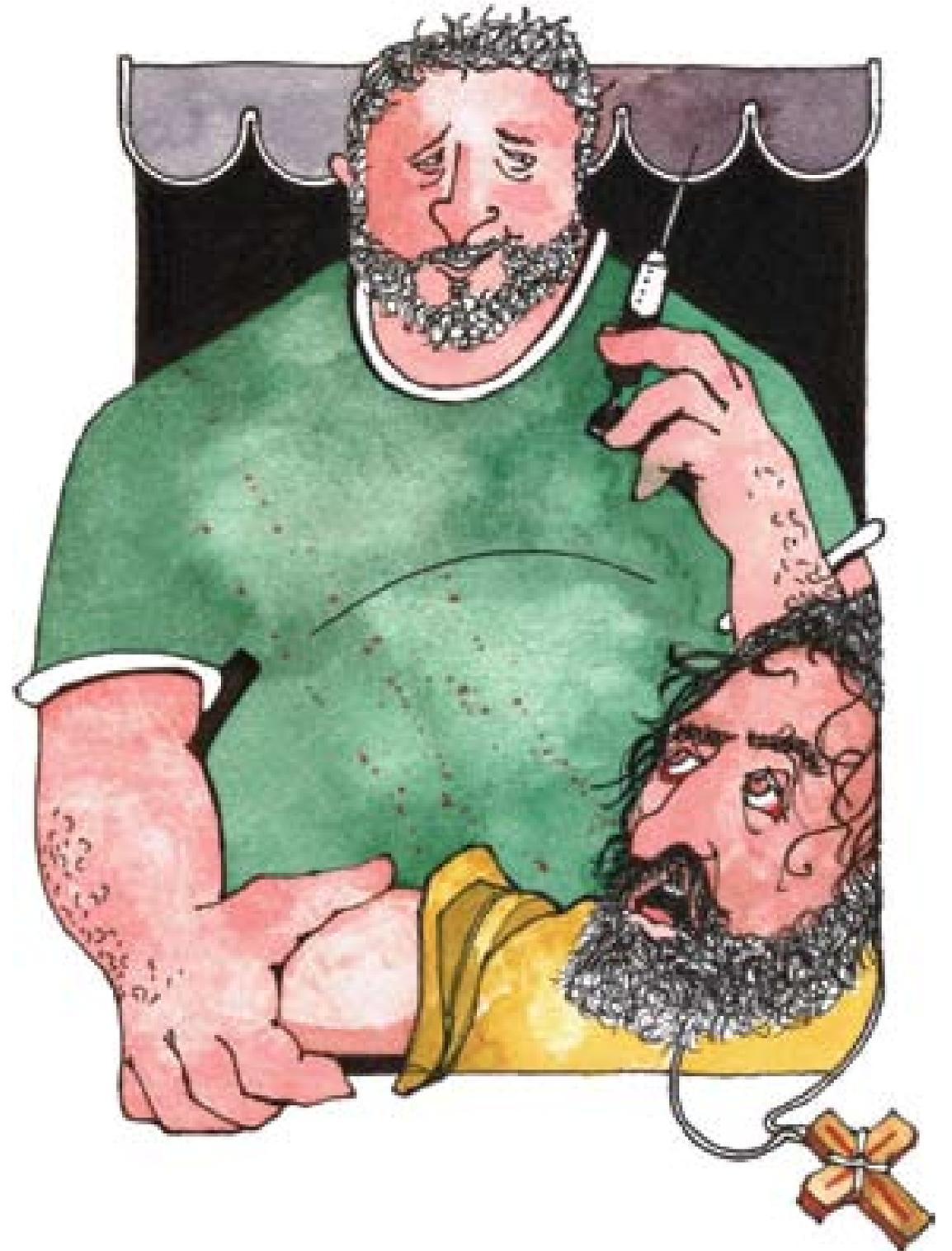
Big Fat Doctor Lardo

DR. LARDO, Julio, Nari and Marcia take their ambulance to the carwash this evening to freshen it up after its long and grimy ride. They want it to look its very best when they present it to the Guatemalans. Fortunately, there is only slight damage to the big diesel ambulance and Julio's fistful of dollars calms the driver and avoids police problems when they smash into the Mexican's car.

The repulsive Dr. Lardo from Guatemala is bragging during breakfast about how many of his servant girls he has screwed.

The red eyed Father Hernan complains that he is exhausted and his nerves are on edge. With a wide smile, Dr. Lardo whips out a hypodermic and prepares to administer it saying, "Trust me Father, this will calm you down!"

Firmly refusing the injection was probably the wisest decision Father Hernan has made on this trip. 🍷

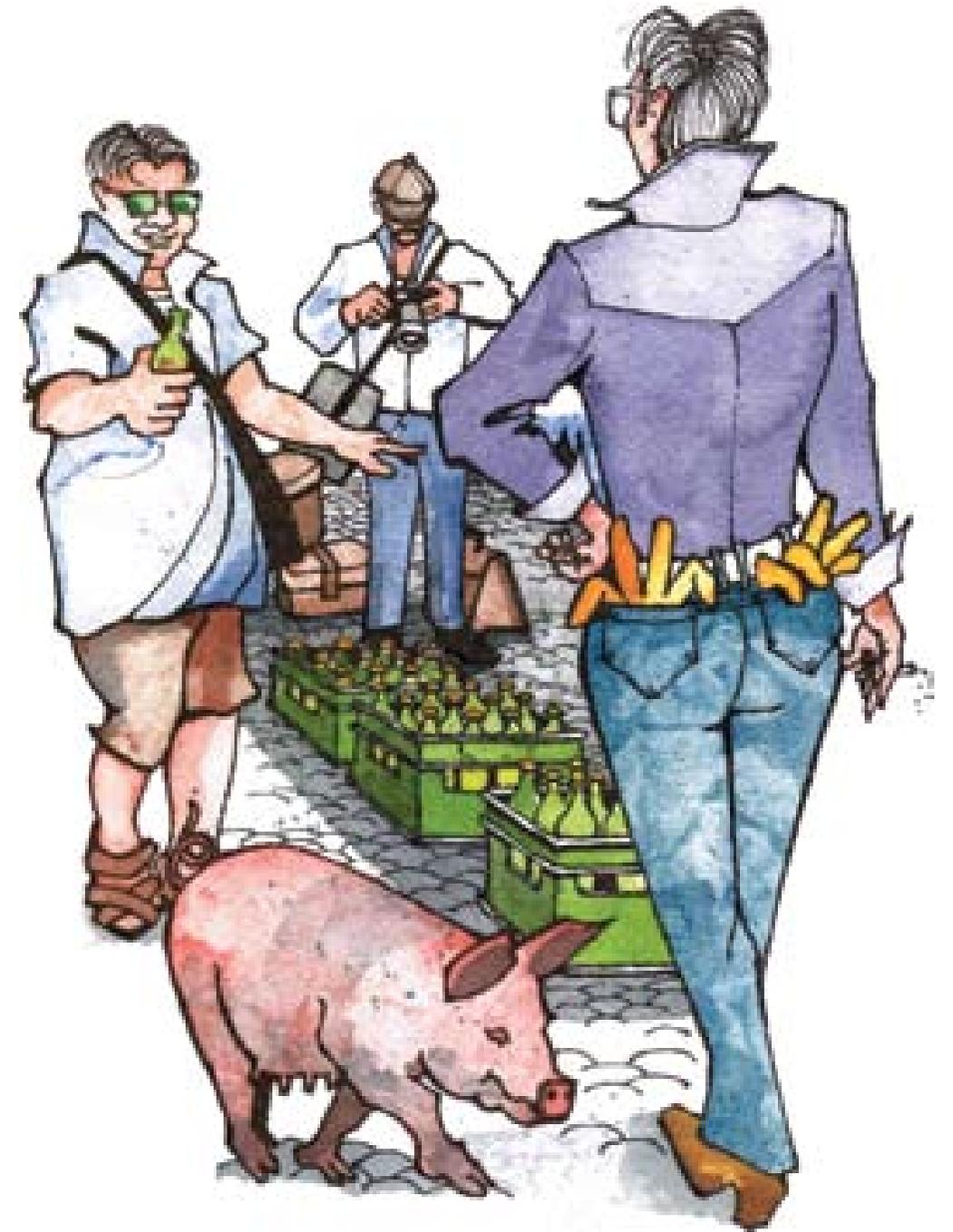


Bullshit Nari

BULLSHIT NARI HAS ANOTHER NICKNAME, the compañeros have christened him Suauvé, this on account of his splendid Chilean style and highly burnished charm. Suauvé wears bright yellow gloves when he drives. He carries these driving gloves in his back pockets where they look like strange yellow creatures trying to escape from his pants.

Undercover Pedro, being Guatemalan, is unprepared for being spoken to firmly by a woman and so blames Sarah for his lapse back into smoking.

Ever-present Alexandro, lurks on the periphery, making his record for the Padre. 🍷



Border Crossing

THIS IS *LA FRONTERA OVIDADA*, the forgotten border between Chiapas and Guatemala, named 'Talisman' to bring good fortune to those who pass under and over the dotted line. Here, there is a free flowing underground river of cocaine and migrants sailing north to the noses and farms in California.

Someone has stolen the toilet seat, the shower head and the TV from our motel room, a minor annoyance when we learn that Bob and Josephine's TV caught fire, their light bulbs flared out like a super-nova and water abruptly stopped flowing. The water is probably a hazard anyway.

Up at 6 a.m. and into no-man's-land, a filthy compound of trucks lined up like loaves in the oven. We bake until all palms are crossed, visas purchased and vehicles searched for contraband.

Julio, Nari and Pedro break from the convoy to deliver their ambulance to a village in Guatemala. Now the Caravan of Hope has been reduced to three ambulances and one school bus with cremated back brakes.

1:00 p.m: On our way.

3:00 p.m: Our ambulance's transmission begins to whine and complain and slip on the steep mountain grades.

3:30 p.m: The front brakes on the bus are smoking like a Guatemalan machine gun, overheated by the driver who dreams he is driving a Porsche down the mountain. The bus can't go downhill and we can't go uphill.

6:30 p.m: Twilight, and the Caravan of Hope has been pulled over by the police who are wondering where the fuck we idiota think we are going, heading into the night on the most dangerous bandit-infested, shoot you for your spare tire stretch of highway?! We are the Caravan of Hope, the untouchables, the inocencia, sprinkled by holy waters in the parking lot in Toronto, can't you see?

Our ambulance has been loaded onto a tow-truck; the police have sort of agreed to accompany us part way through the dark place on the map. Now we are two ambulances, one brake-challenged school bus, a tow truck and a police car bristling with guns pressing on for the border of El Salvador. 🍻



Crash, Bam, Fuck

AROUND MIDNIGHT, the sleep deprived ambulance ahead of us wanders off the road and clips a bridge abutment, destroying its dual tires on the curb side.

Now we are one ambulance, one tow truck, one brake challenged school bus, huddled by the roadside at midnight with police escorts who refuse to get out of their car. What? You afraid?!

Sarah needs to pee. I offer to accompany her up the highway, over the bridge, out of the headlights and into the ditch. Mission completed and with grateful bladders we stumble back up the steep embankment and onto the coal black highway, emerging to startle . . . that is to say, scare the shit out of the bad guy who is creeping towards the disaster scene. With pounding hearts and faked casualness we hurry south as the oily stranger scurries northward. Who knew that some highwaymen are chicken-shits like me? I hope they have a support group.

Rob and Steve, the ever cheerful, ever optimistic TTC guys, are able to do first aid to save the ambulance and at the sliver of dawn we limp to the border crossing. Needless to say, we are first in line. This long day and night have been a gruel and we are as cranky as sleep deprived scorpions. 



Border Submarine

ALL DAY LONG THE SUBMARINE cart drives back and forth through the border river. The driver shovels it full of Guatemalan sand and then the team of oxen hauls it to the El Salvadoran side. The river is deep and at points we can see only heads and horns snorkeling across, their daily passage ignored by the border guards. It might be the most effective smuggling operation in Central America going on directly under their noses.

There are vehicles paralyzed by bureaucracy in the parking lot here in No-Man's-Land that are completely upholstered in a thick crust of bird shit that must have taken years to accumulate. Opening their glued doors or trunks would be impossible. We stand beside them waiting for our passports to return, hoping we can escape the same crusty fate.

Red and swollen tits and testicles dangle from the mangy dogs that listlessly patrol for gutter snacks. Nothing funny can happen here, we are too tired.

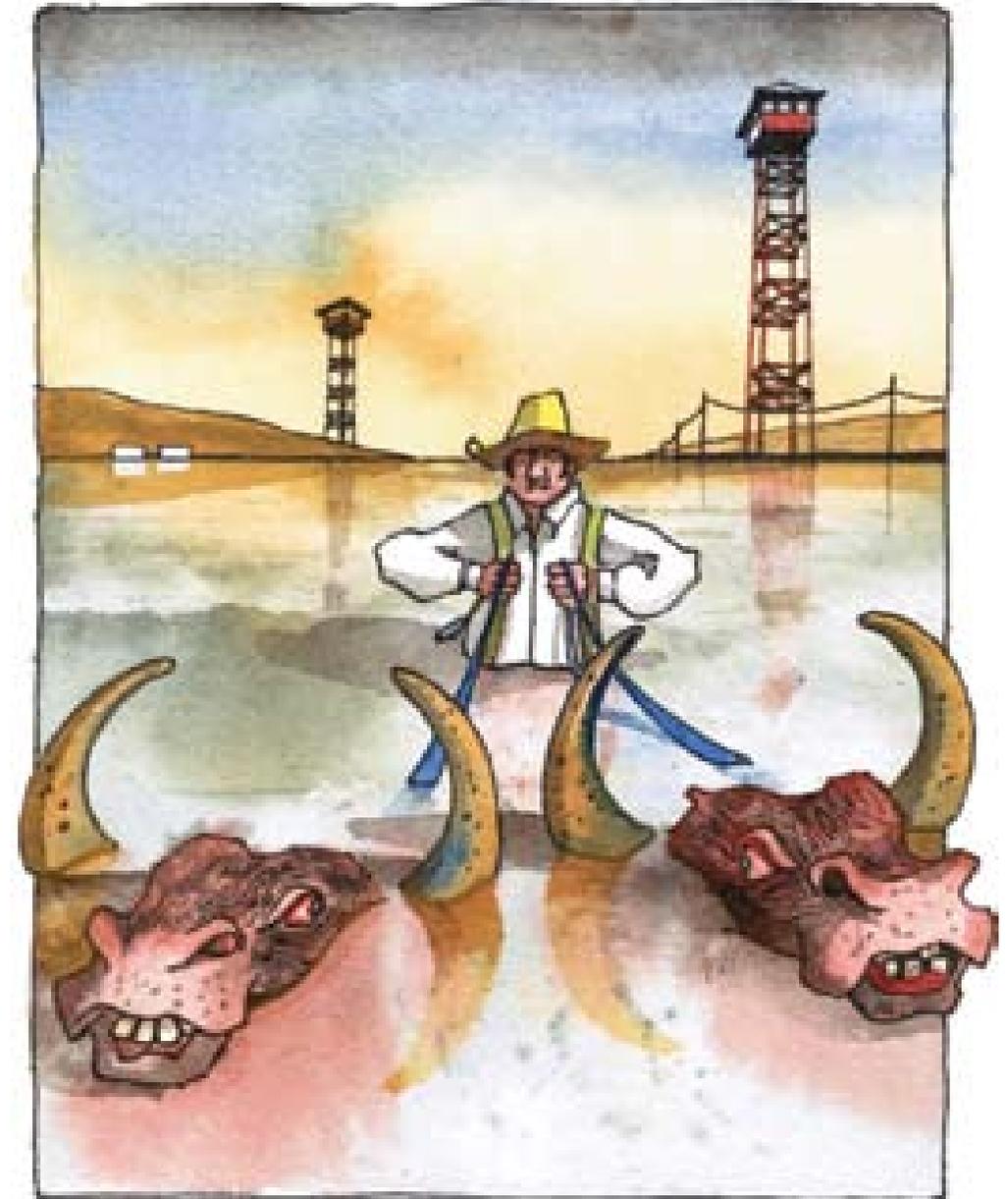
Our injured ambulances and school bus are lined up and their ownerships transfers, money changes, visas are granted. We are here, our task complete I guess, our mission accomplished . . . in a half-assed sort of way.

"I feel like I just got off a flight to Australia," says Sarah as we climb into the bus which will take us to The Hotel Happy House, directly across from The Hotel Smiles in the capital city, San Salvador.

Extreme crime rates here are a direct result of the deportation of thousands of Salvadorians from the United States, the majority of whom were members of the notorious Mara Salvatrucha gang. The government program used to combat this is called Super Mano Dura. In spite of the super firm hand of the law, the violence increases. We are 81 times more likely to be murdered here than in Toronto.

During the Cold War, the CIA trained and equipped death squads that killed 21 people each day. Now that the peace accord has been signed only 14 lives are daily exterminated, mostly for gang and robbery violence.

I detect only a slight hatred of Gringos, and the USA remains El Salvador's most important trading partner. Have a cuppa coffee. ☘



The Last Supper

THE LEADER OF THE DISCIPLES will not be attending. “He already ate.” And so, on our first night in the city of San Salvador, the drivers, documentarians and daughters, cluster for dinner at a nearby restaurant whose entrance is prominently defended by men with large guns; we will not be disturbed. It is laughingly referred to as ‘The Last Supper’. The supper is sauced with lots of laughter and peppered with joking complaints, and the mood is surprisingly up-beat for a group who has not slept for 30 hours.

Waffle ass is what you get when you sit on the chair in your room in the Hotel Happy House. I look like I have been spanked with a snow shoe. I bought a nice ripe papaya at the market last night and scraped its round brown seeds into the toilet. It looks like a rabbit has been crapping there. I may leave them because we are checking out this morning. Father Hernan is furious with us for separating from the tribe and has warned us that we are no longer permitted to say that we are part of the Caravan of Hope.

We have booked a room at the magnificent Sheridan. George Dubya stayed here and the framed thank you letter in the lobby proudly announces that this is the home of the CIA when they are in town. And the CIA are as mad as hornets this morning because the Russians, who recently opened a huge new embassy in town, have just announced that they will provide special training to the El Salvadoran army.

Sarah has an orgasm in the courtyard of the National Archeological Museum and I have a beer. An orgasm has equal parts of tequila blanco, amaretto, kahlua, leche condensada and Baileys, served in a flute with a swollen red cherry. 🍷



Estudio de Escultura

IASK IF WE CAN SEE HIS WORK. The swing of the estudio door is impeded by dark and dirty detritus, no light bulbs in this little hole, and no evidence of creative activity.

He gingerly takes out a package 30 inches long, wrapped in a canvas grain sack, tied with a half dozen shoe laces and proceeds to slowly undress the seventeenth century Madonna.

Her rosy face, Her feet, Her hands are delicate and beautiful. This fragile Madonna, with a missing toe, is sweet and vulnerable and one of us.

The first time you get to see the Virgin Mary naked, it's a surprise. She has the body of a puppet with hand carved ball joints in the shoulders, perfect wooden hinges in the knees, wrists and elbows.

She lies on her back, completely exposed, while the man gracefully dances her arms in a pas de deux, dispensing blessings and demonstrating her smooth articulations.

Two hundred dollars is what he asks for her; that's less than seven dollars an inch! But, I have no desire to own this puppet.

The village of Concepción de Ataco clasps a pretty public park in its heart with old and twisted white-painted tree trunks, a band shell where children snap the whip and the fountain drips globs of gold as the sun sinks. Not bad. 🍷



Presentation Ceremony

THE CEREMONY IS SURREAL. We are handing over the surviving equipment to the community: two sorry ambulances and a bus with burnt brakes and a broken door. Josephina's ambulance clipped a public bus coming down the hill this morning and her mirror is dangling. We are towed in because our transmission is toast.

In anticipation of our great generosity, the El Salvadoran Military Band is waiting to welcome us with the heroic march from Star Wars. A huge crowd smothers us with smiles and applause. Even in the searing sunshine, cameras flash and the speeches go on and on. No one faints.

In the evening, we are guests of Salvador Sanchez Ceren, the Vice President of El Salvador and former revolutionary. He greets us warmly and we are all decorated with lapel pins claiming us for the FMLN, (the Socialist party) and given a personally autographed copy of his latest book, *FMLN en el Gobierno*. Now I understand why Hernan addresses us as 'Compañeros,' it is the same as 'Comrades'.

The fabulous restaurant is high on the mountainside where we nibble on smoked oysters and sip champagne on the terrace under bright stars. The valley below sparkles with city lights where the ordinary compañeros grub for food. We turn our backs and go inside where a feast awaits us. 🍷



In Conclusion

HAVING COMPLETED OUR PART of this charitable project, I was curious to learn how it was viewed by the people of El Salvador and I was very fortunate to meet a man who was honest and direct.

No stranger to Canada, having been attached to the embassy in Vancouver for four years, the attaché to the vice president looked me in the eye and answered my questions.

What happens to the ambulances we donate to you?

A big show is made of you donating the ambulances to a local community, but in fact, they are now the property of the El Salvadoran Government who will transfer them to locations which are more appropriate after you leave.

Did we bring equipment that is valuable to you?

These ambulances will be useful, but only for transferring patients from hospital to hospital. For emergencies, we require smaller, diesel powered vehicles that can navigate our rural roads.

Would it be more efficient to donate funds and let you purchase the appropriate equipment?

Yes, but, and I assure you this is not just rhetoric. The citizens of El Salvador feel abandoned by the world. For decades they have been helpless victims of outside powers who have brought violence, corruption and exploitation to the land. They believe that no one outside the country cares what happens to them or notices their suffering. So the fact that you made this demonstration of caring is what matters. The effectiveness of your project is secondary to the gift of caring about us.

For that we are very grateful. ~



POPE ON A ROPE

By Ron Baird



Table of Contents

Building Bagnoregio	108
Bagnoregio	110
Crawling Wheelbarrow	112
Bombing the Bridge	114
Cruising	116
Plague Doctors	118
The Red Priest	120
Please Pass the Sponge	122
Caligula	124
Ponte Vecchio's Secrets	126
Coffee	128
Labia	130
Dressed to Kill	132
Silver Hammer	134
Carbonari	136
Sweat Equity	138
Nikki and Lenny Make a Plan	140
John Cabot	142
Curse of the Truffle Hogs	144
The Heretic's Afterlife	146
Catnip	148
My Lucky Charm	150

Building Bagnoregio

NO ONE KNOWS WHO STARTED IT or when they began, so we say it was the 'ancient pagans', a vague and redundant title. We can guess why they chose such a lofty site for their temple and town in the Valley of the Badlands. It is shaped like an incisor with near vertical sides so it can't properly be referred to as a hill. Standing on the tip of this volcanic tooth gave them a three hundred and sixty degree observatory so that they could prepare for visitors, friendly or otherwise. In the days before men could fly there was only one approach. You would have had to cross a long and high blade of land by walking on its cutting edge.

It seemed a good idea to build the town from the soft stone which they were standing on, and so they began to quarry by making tunnels and cavities in the tooth. These shafts and rooms were designed as workshops and wells for water and oil, storage for prisoners, food and the dead bodies they wished to keep close by. The excavated stones were carried topside and stacked into homes and shops or carved into the pair of lions clutching human heads that guard the Porta Santa Maria.

The town's singular problem is stability, or really, lack of. 'Landslips' often deliver buildings at high speed to the valley floor; an earthquake in 1695 noisily destroyed the high and narrow strip of land leading to the town's gate, and the pretty stone church tobogganed to the bottom that night. Imagine watching that wreckage roll and tumble across the valley floor in the dust and moonlight! Continuing landslides and erosion have discouraged permanent residency. Some say there are six dwellers left, some say nine, some say eleven - enough for dominos or bocce in the San Donato square.

A foot bridge built to replace the pathway was bombed to bits in the Second World War, it has been replaced and that's how I got there. 🍷



Bagnoregio

LONG LONG AGO, in the time of the Goths, there lived a king named Desiderio. He was called Desiderio because he had a powerful desire to rid himself of a wicked disease which he claimed to have picked up from an Etruscan toilet seat. His quest brought him up the steep hill, seeking the cure by poaching his parts in the local thermal waters. Miraculously, he was restored and ever after the place has been called Bagnoregio. 'Bagno' means bath and 'regio' royal. The King's Bath is a good place to go, if you so desire.

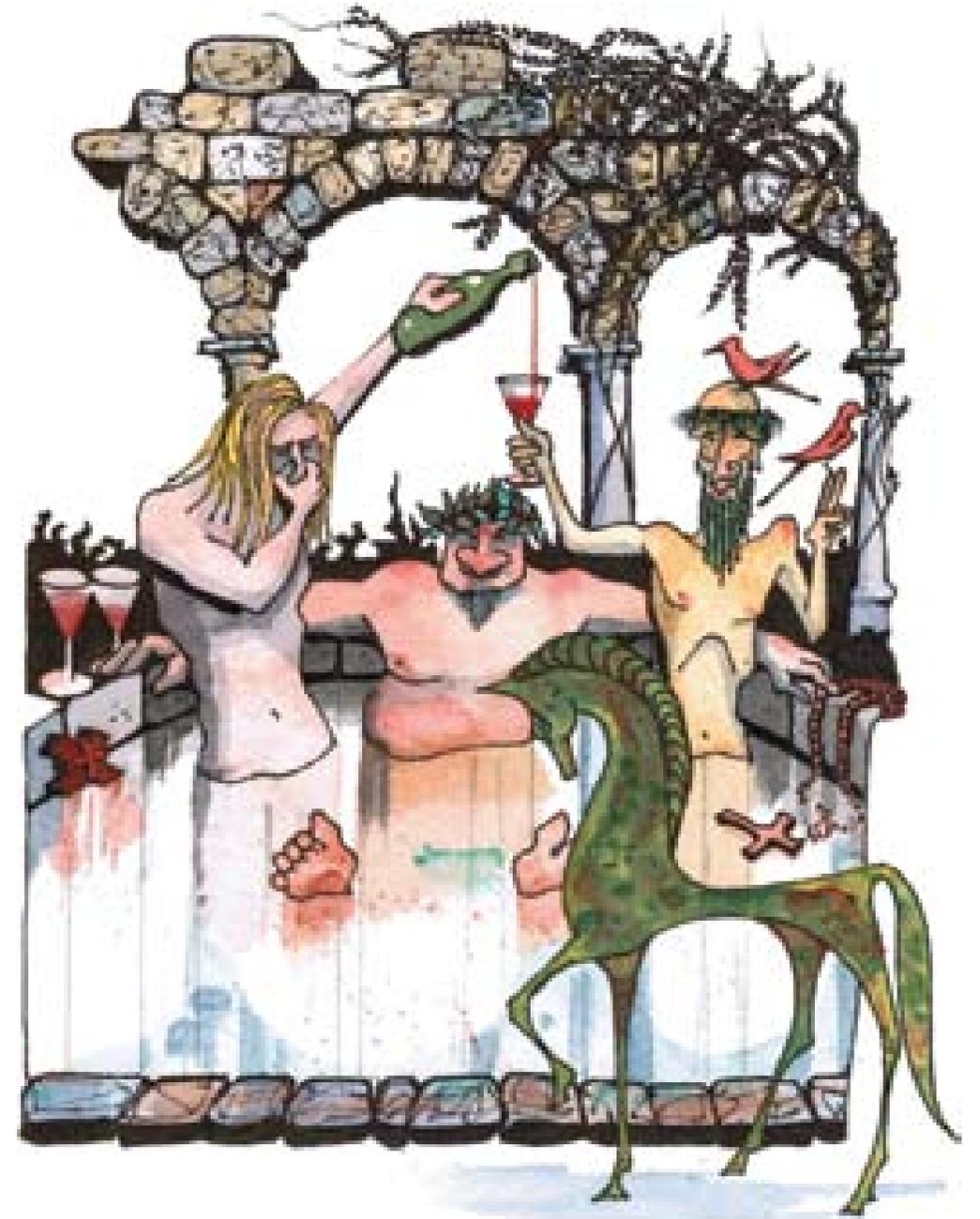
Francis from Assisi was paddling around in this pool one day when he was joined by Giovanni Fidenza who had a condition of his own which was cured that day in the warm spring's waters. He attributed this miracle to the ministrations of his bath-buddy Francis, and so, Pope Gregory, busy ripping out tongues and burning heretics, took the time from his schedule to recognize this achievement and declared Francis a saint. It's neither easy nor cheap to burn 55,000 heretics. He was striving for balance.

Then Gio joined the Franciscan order in 1243 and studied at the University Paris where he played soccer with both Tom Aquinas and Roger Bacon. He wrote his dissertation on the *Four Books of Sentences*, squeezing out a master's degree.

The trouble started when he was appointed to the position of Archbishop of York, but it's unclear why he was never consecrated. He blamed it on the Anti-mendicant Party's slander and resigned. Bitterly, he ordered Roger interdicted from lecturing at Oxford and put him under the surveillance of the Order of Paris, perhaps because Roger was inventing gunpowder.

Giovanni was, shall we say, 'instrumental' in procuring the election of Pope Gregory the Tenth who then lavished him with the title, 'Cardinal Bishop of Albania' and jokingly anointed him 'Saint Bonaventure', an unsuitable name, since he was quickly poisoned.

Today, in the church in Bagnoregio you can visit some of the saint's withered and enshrined body parts, and light a candle for your health. Today, the royal bath is as dry as Saint Bonaventure. 🍷



Crawling Wheelbarrow

I'VE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE IT. It's a cross between a tank and a wheelbarrow. The Italians who invented it call it the 'Cariola Cingolata', which means, The Crawlin' Wheelbarrow. It can creep up stairs. It can plunge to the bottom of the tunnels and caves under Bagnoregio and trundle up the heavy stuff. 🍷



Bombing the Bridge

IN 1512, HE WAS CHRISTENED Antonio Da Ponte or, Tony da Bridge. It was his mother's Idea. So, he grew up to design the perfectly beautiful Rialto Bridge in Venice which joins San Marco to San Polo . . . think about that. Even the glorious Michelangelo was considered for this sweet job, but he didn't make the short-list. He didn't have the name. Long, long toes of timber are the secret of the bridge's longevity, driven deep into the Venetian muck to hold her steady.

Earlier, on this same site, madmen were cured through a relic of the holy cross . . . where in hell did we put that thing?

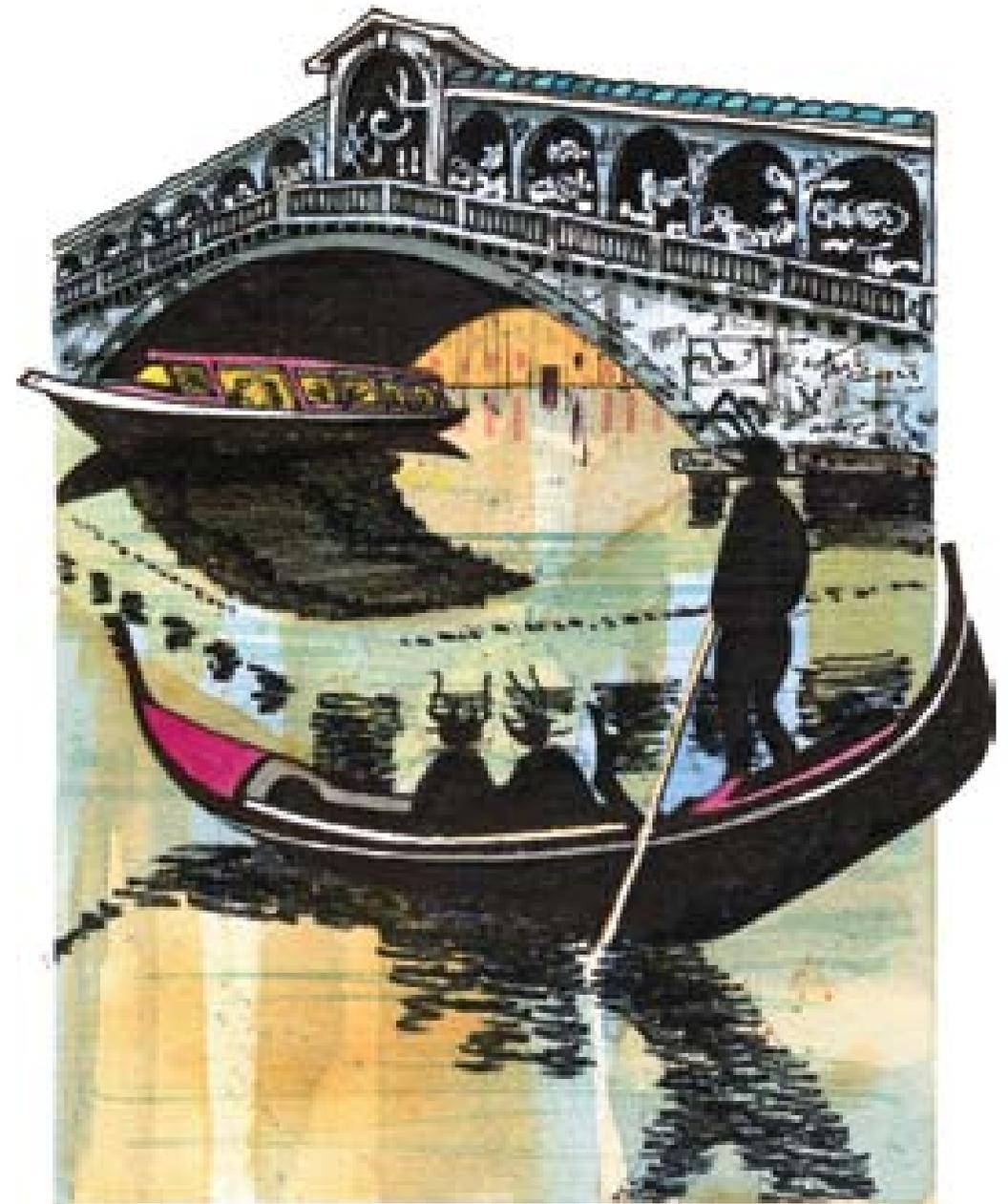
The gorge rises to the tonsils when you see it for the first time from the deck of a vaporetto on the Grand Canal. The exquisite, the precious, 425 year old Rialto Bridge, is wavelingly reflected in the water, and her marble body is tattooed from canal to keystone with graffiti. Thoughtful graffiti? No. Protest graffiti? No. Just ugly, self proclaiming tags, territorial, I suppose, sprayed like dogs' piss on fire hydrants. You expect it on the washroom walls - but on the Rialto? I don't understand.

I believe that humanity has a termite tribe, indiscriminating in their chewing habits and unaware of the magnitude of their vandalism.

They were around here when Leonardo Da Vinci's monumental equestrian statue, still in the clay stage in his studio, was used for target practice. I wish we could see it today, but the termites got to it.

This sin-stained bridge has a saviour named 'Diesel Jeans'. Saint Diesel has offered a few million euros to restore the old girl, if only he is allowed to put some graffiti of his own design across her pretty cheeks for millions of tourists' eyes to gaze upon.

Where in hell did we put that relic? 🍷



Cruising

IN ONE WEEK A CRUISE SHIP generates 210,000 gallons of sewage. In one week a cruise ship generates 25,000 gallons of oily bilge water. In one week a cruise ship generates the air pollution equivalent of 42,000 cars.

Metals, ammonia, pharmaceutical waste, chemical cleaners, and detergents are incinerated on board. Strict restrictions force the cruisers to hold their incinerator ash and sewage sludge inside until they are 3 miles off shore. They only shit in the deep end.

One cruise line reported 173 sexual assaults or rapes in five years, but most go unreported. Of the 173 complaints, there have been no prosecutions.

There are legal firms who specialise in cruise ship rape, currently acting against 14 major lines, including Disney; you can't even trust the mouse. Call 1(888) 400-9721 toll free to discuss your rape on a cruise liner now!

165 people have gone missing from cruise ships in 5 years . . . not including suicides. Cruise companies do not report these disappearances.

There is an International Cruise Ship Victims' Association. Donate now. 🍻



Plague Doctors

IF YOU HAPPENED TO BE living in a hill town in Italy in medieval times and you got stabbed in a duel or picked up a touch of the plague, your friends would send for an ambulance.

In this stony place of narrow, twisty, cobblestone lanes, steep dark ramps and crumblestairs, there was only one vehicle designed to speed you to the hospital.

Hand-powered, with large wooden wheels and leaf-spring suspension, this hooded cart would get you there.

The costume worn by Black Plague doctors of old and Ebola Plague doctors of today are almost identical except for the colour. The Ebola outfits are a more cheerful white, but don't smell as nice as the perfumed Black Plague ones.

Early plague doctors encased themselves in bird-like masks. The beaks, stuffed with lavender and vinegar-soaked sponges were their respirators. They peeped at their patients through glass eyeholes and lifted the garments of the sick with a pointed stick to examine the sores. The masks, leather gloves, the black hats and outer clothing, are also part of the doctors' bizarre ensemble, which turned out to be a very effective prophylactic against the plague's virus. 🐣



The Red Priest

THERE WAS A VICIOUS EARTHQUAKE on the day Antonio Vivaldi was born in Venice, the City of Laundry. He was a supernova musical talent whose brilliance has not diminished in 300 years.

The red headed priest wasn't all that good at priestly duties, sometimes pausing while saying mass to jot down the musical notes that were dancing in his head. He was relieved of his priestly obligations. They blamed his distraction on asthma.

The Board of Directors of the Ospedale orphanage where he worked refused to renew his contract in 1709, sighting eccentricity and frivolity as the reasons. By his own measure, he wrote 94 operas and over 500 concertos. How frivolous can he have been? More likely, it was his relationship with Little Orphan Anna which got him fired and nearly excommunicated.

There are only 3 known portraits of Vivaldi. This is one of the unknown ones.

He spent extravagantly and died ducat-less at 63. The saddest thing is there was not a single note of music strummed or plucked at his pauper's funeral. Maybe it was celebrated by John Cage's 4'43". 🍷



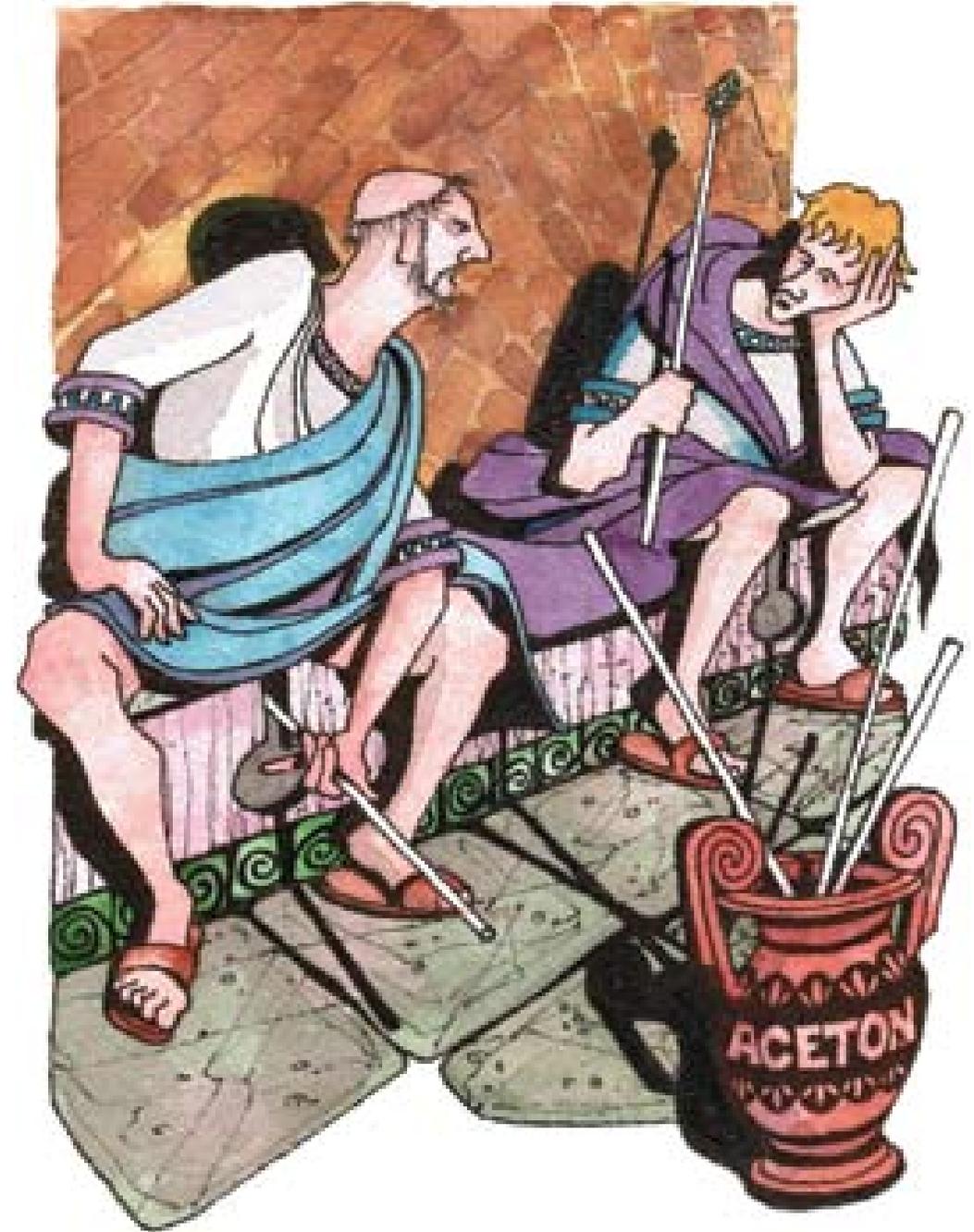
Please Pass the Sponge

IN ROME IN THE FIRST CENTURY you could find over a hundred public toilets. The city has grown and the toilets have shrunk.

When the Romans said “Public Toilet,” they really meant it: long marble benches seating up to 80 at a time. The protocol was simple and elegant. Stroll in, pick your neighbour, hike up your toga and settle yourself over a hole and chat. When you have had a good chat, you reach for the `spongia`, a sea sponge on a long reed, dip it into the vinegar jar to disinfect it, insert it through a keyhole in the front of the bench, scrub up your extruder, remove the reed, rinse off the sponge with water and set it in the holder for the next citizen. Off you go.

Gospel of Matthew

And straight away one of them ran and took a sponge and filled it with vinegar and put it on a reed and gave him to drink. 🍷



Caligula

TAKING THE SHORTCUT to the throne, Caligula slithered to the bed where Tiberius lay adoze and snuffed him out like a candle. Godlike, the new emperor stepped onto the balcony.

“CA-LIG-U-LA! CAL-LIG-U-LA! CAL-LIG-U-LA! CALIGULA!”
160,000 animals were sacrificed in the rejoicing.

A pro-active leader, he executed his adopted son and his cousin; when grandma objected, he poisoned her. Then he executed his father-in-law and his brother-in-law, too. He flaunted his sexual relations with his sisters and not surprisingly, no one objected . . . out loud. He urged the King of Mauretania to visit, then slit his royal throat.

Killing on a whim and seizing the estates of his victims, raised him to serial status, his personal body count 400 in round numbers.

Dressing like a god, Caligula, which means ‘Little Boot’, declared war on Neptune, ordering the army to attack the ocean with swords and spears. Judging Himself the clear victor in this embarrassing battle, he then forced everyone to gather seashells, His rightful spoils.

Enough! They stabbed him 30 times just to make sure, then they stabbed his poor wife and daughter.

Enter Claudius, limping, hard of hearing, next up on the emperor’s balcony. Only this isn’t a stage. Crazy Caligula walked the same streets of Rome as you, shopped for his groceries, visited the coliseum and squatted in the public toilets.



Ponte Vecchio's Secrets

YOURSELF MIGHT WONDER why building a marketplace on a bridge never caught on. This splendid idea is still a success here on the Ponte Vecchio after nearly 700 years. And, obviously, this ancient covered market has its secrets to whisper.

Dante loved Beatrice all his long life. He caught a glimpse of her on the bridge one afternoon in January. She knew him from a birthday party nine years earlier when she was eight and he nine. She may have said “Ciao!”, probably smiled in her witchy-way, did that thing they do. He was enchanted, unbuttoned, jelly jointed, said his eyes quivered. Rushing home he collapsed in his bed and dreamt that God appeared with Bea in his hands. Then she ate his flaming heart. That pretty much did it to the poor bugger. Black cat bone.

He went to hell and back for that girl, although he never kissed her neck, or smelled her hair. He was devoted to her for forty years after she died, although he never once heard her sing or sneeze. She took him to heaven in the end. We are unsure if he was the only one she slapped the spell on.

One of the Italian Medici gang called at the time, ‘Cosmos I’, wanted a secret passage built to connect the Uffizi where he lived, with the Palazzo Pitti on the other side of the river where he screwed. He hired Giorgio Vasari (you will probably remember him from Art History 101: *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*). Vasari masterminded the cunning design, and it has been part of the bridge’s bones since 1565.

More recently, this secret passage over the Arno was the clandestine scheming place of Benito and Adolph where they hatched their unrestrained plans for complete control of the human race.

The Ponte Vecchio was spared during the Nazis’ retreat when plans weren’t working out, and the dark side was being forced back into its hole. Adolph Hitler willfully destroyed each of the other pretty stone bridges in Florence. Why was he kindly to the Ponte Vecchio? Was it his love of the Bridge, of Benito, of Beatrice? 



Coffee

MAYBE HE WAS RELATED to Antonio de Ponte, but why he was called Luigi de Ponte, or as we say, Louie da Bridge, I do not really know but, we do know that in 1933 Louie da Bridge designed the perfect coffee pot, surpassing even Galileo's impressive accomplishments. Every single Italian home has several Mokas of different sizes waiting on the kitchen counter.

There are only two choices if you wake up craving a cuppa in the morning in Italy. The coffee houses spit out tiny expensive cups of thickblack/highoctane espresso from giant sputtering chrome steam engines. If you choose a cafe Americano, they sneeringly drop a shot of pure crack caffeine into a large cup, duck down behind the counter and top it up with warm water: "Molto gusto Americana!"

But, if you want to DIY, you will automatically turn to Luigi's iconic cast aluminum Moka pot. Moka coffee is served to you today by a Venetian in a Harlequin mask. The mask, of course, always bestows the dark gift of unidentifiability and so absolves the fucker of responsibility for his lusty actions in the bleary eyes of the lesser gods, 'cuz they are not positive who indeed performed the deed. And the fuckees aren't exactly sure who dun it either.

Much of the symbolism of the Comedia Dell'Arte is lost to us now, but we are certain that Harlequin's true love, when he wasn't making love to the servants, was Columbina; and she was a looker, so beautiful that she only covered half of her face when she was messing around with the servants. 



Labia

THERE'S MORE TO LABIA than meets the eye. Quoting *Proverbs 8:7*:
“My lips will detest the impious man,” she flirtatiously rejected Charley De Drosses’ spurious offer to zip her and her plump chests of jewels off to France.

Instead, she hosted an immoderate party in the Palazzo Labia for forty guests. People still remark on her impressive gold dinnerware. The drunken invitees scandalously tossed that dinnerware off the balcony into the Grand Canal.

Close-lipped Labia, anticipating this, had lined the bottom of the canal with nets and her servants quietly recovered the rinsed plates at dawn. There’s more to Labia than meets the eye.

One of the smartest things Milady did was to commission the great Tiepolo to paint a couple of large frescoes in her palace; some say they’re his best work. I don’t.

The lively sketch he tossed off, of Marcus Antonius welcoming Cleopatra, is seething with passion. Take a look at the finished painting and you are guessing if Antony is saying “Hello” or “Goodbye” to his lover. Actually he is saying “Ciao!” which works either way. One of the dumbest things Labia did was to instruct Tiepolo to alter the original design. “I don’t approve of Antony sucking Cleopatra’s fingers. Lift his handsome face so I can admire it, and, by the way, you should hire Girolamo Colonna to fix up your perspective.” Between the two of them they screwed it up; but, I do like all the dogs and dwarves. 🍷



Dressed to Kill

IT IS A MATTER OF BALANCE. A skilled hunter knows how to maximize his chances for success. The inner layer of his costume is an elaborate cloak of invisibility for stealth; the outer layer, a fluorescent lifesaving vest of the highest visibility for survival.

Thirteen shot dead and thirty-three injured in September, and that's just the people. They call it Massacre Month.

All accidental, of course. It's easy to mistake a person on a bike, a sheep in the meadow, or a pensioner in his garden for a porcupine, squirrel, boar, bobolink or bluebird, especially if you are between the ages of sixty-five and seventy-eight years, as the majority of these Italian sharpshooters are.

"Scusi, I thought she was an oriole." 



Silver Hammer

WHEN POPE JOHN DIED in 2005, the Chamberlain hit him on the head with a silver hammer and in his outdoor voice asked, “ARE YOU DEAD?” Just to be sure, he did it a couple of more times. It was not unusual. They have been beheading dead popes for a thousand years. It’s something they always do. No one remembers why this ancient tradition was established, but it’s sort of fun for the Cardinals.

They hammered Pope Stephen VII after they strangled him in the basement of the Vatican. That was deemed the most expeditious way to dispose of a pope who had clearly overstepped the bounds of propriety at a time when popes could screw their young nieces with impunity. He was acting peculiarly.

Pope Stephen VII ordered the body of the previous Pope Formosus to be exhumed, dressed in robes and propped up in the throne. Steven raged and screamed his accusations throughout the trial which lasted 3 smelly weeks. Formosus had nothing to say for himself. He was found guilty of ‘Wanting to be a Pope’ and other vicious charges. The 9 month old corpse was sentenced to being stripped of his garments and having his three blessing fingers cut off. He was then hurled from the balcony and tossed into the Tiber. This is called the Cadaver Synod.

Clearly, Stephen VII had to be stopped before he aimed his righteous infallibility towards the living. 🍷



Carbonari

A WEIRD HANDSHAKE IN ITALY can reveal a lot about how a person spends his time after the moon goes down. Italians have always been passionate about their secret societies. Members of the illusive Carbonari themselves were not clear about their goals, their philosophy, or their interests and alliances, because it was a secret.

This much they did know: that they refer to each other as 'Good Cousin' and non-members as 'Pagani' or heathens. This was confusing because they sternly opposed the church, and the mention of religion was absolutely forbidden. The confusion was compounded by the initiation ceremony which involved a blasphemous imitation of the Passion of Christ, which is probably why the Church issued an edict in 1814 ordering dire punishments to any person attending, consorting or aiding Carbonari. Nevertheless, the secret society venerated St. Theobald as its patron.

Carbonari means charcoal maker; the reason they named themselves after charcoal makers is unknown because those good cousins in the know slid into their graves and the secret was buried with them.

The Carbonari were drenched in symbols of the charcoal maker's craft. The masters carried small hatchets and their apprentices were indicated by little fagots worn in their button holes. Which button hole and which little fagot was a secret.

Although they lacked a clear political agenda, an American cell of the Carbonari headed by good cousin Ferrandini, mounted an unsuccessful attempt to murder President Lincoln on his way to his inauguration. The plot was discovered when Ferrandini spilled the secret in a bar in Baltimore to a drinks-are-on-me detective. The detective's name was Allan Pinkerton. His agency preceded the CIA.

Spaghetti puttanesca is the delicious dish invented by Italian prostitutes to attract customers to their offices. Spaghetti carbonara is the delicious dish created in the kitchens of the women of the Carbonari. It tastes differently wherever you go, because the original recipe is a secret. 🍷



Sweat Equity

IN THE LATE FIFTEEN HUNDREDS, at the great University of Padua near Venice, there were two teachers competing for the grant money. Professor Galileo was working on a radical theory based on his astronomical observations that was not popular with the earth-centred Church. His peer, Professor Sanctorius, carried on his experiment for thirty unhindered years.

PURPOSE: To determine if the weight of the food we eat and drink is equal to the weight of our waste products and body weight gain.

EXPERIMENT: Make a daily record of the weight of all the ins and outs of the body and the variations in total body weight.

APPARATUS: Construct a weighing chair which can be suspended from a beam scale in front of the dining table with a commode to collect feces and urine.

OBSERVATIONS: The weight of the waste products is considerably smaller than the food intake.

CONCLUSION: The difference in weight can be accounted for by 'insensible perspiration', (something like dark matter, I presume).

His findings had no scientific value but he did do some fun experiments with an early waterbed in his spare time when he wasn't getting weighed. 🍷



Nikki and Lenny Make a Plan

IN THE SUMMER OF 1502, Leonardo da Vinci, the great engineering genius, and Niccolo Machiavelli, the great political genius, found themselves strapped for ducats. One bright morning in the Piazza del Duomo, fueled by espresso forte, they came up with a bold plan to get the son of Pope Alexander VI to employ them. The plan to get hired worked, but their dream scheme to divert the stream, turn Florence into a sea port and desiccate the citizens of Pisa, was washed away in the torrents of the next spring's flood.

The plan was risky from the start, given the nature of their boss, Cesare Borgia, lover of his own sister Lucrezia and killer of her third husband, murderer of his brother Gio. The team was aware of his habits and alert to the fact that Cesare sometimes preferred to strangle, rather than pay, his employees. But, these were tumultuous times and these were not timid men.

After the flood, Niccolo slipped over the border into Spain, and Leonardo retreated to France and there they died. But, before Leonardo passed on, he painted a portrait of the Arno River with Mona Lisa in the foreground. 🍷



John Cabot

If you were properly schooled in Canada, you learned in grade five from Miss Glendenning or her spinster sister, that our British hero, John Cabot, bravely sailed across the unexplored ocean in 1498, discovering North America, patriotically claiming it for the British crown - one more proud pink patch on the world map rolled down in front of the blackboard. She lied to us.

Giovanni Caboto, or 'Zuan' as his friends called him, was a citizen of Venice. Son of spice traders and eager to expand the family business, he appealed first to Spain and then to Portugal, seeking venture capital for a voyage to discover a northern route to Asia. No takers, so he sailed on to England and laid the proposition before beady-eyed King Henry the Rapacious, who generously contracted him to investigate whatsoever islands, countries, regions or provinces of heathens and infidels, in whatsoever part of the world placed, which were before this time unknown to Christians to extend his dominion over them claiming them all for Himself. But, first change your name to John Cabot to avoid confusing Canadian school children. On second thought, never mind, we will look after that.

Giovanni Caboto christened his ship Mattea, naming it after his good wife. That name sounded foreign and British historians inserted a typo altering it forever to 'Matthew'. Everyone knows that you can't rewrite history, and so it stuck.

John, upon returning victorious from this brief summer voyage, having, some say honestly, mistaken Newfoundland for Asia, picked up his fat finder's fee and ducked into obscurity, but his legend heaps on. Have you ever travelled the Cabot Trail or walked the Cabot Beach, sketched in Cabot Cove or played the Cabot Links? He certainly didn't.

Inspired by Miss Glendenning, I once submitted a cunning design for a Canadian coin commemorating the five hundredth anniversary of this bold British voyage. It featured Caboto's caravel 'Matthew' in full sail, reflected in the water so that there was no proper upside-down to the coin. 🍷



Curse of the Truffle Hogs

ONE BRIGHT DAY, long, long ago, a clutch of children were out picking truffles when an old woman begged them for food. In retrospect, the children should not have refused her because she was actually a temperamental fairy in disguise. With a snap of her bony fingers she buried all the truffles in the ground. She snapped again and turned the ill mannered little scrunts into pigs. “Go root for them!” she snapped, and that was their fate until the spell was broken in 1985 when the Italian parliament banned the use of truffle hogs.

Truffle hogs were employed by the Ancient Romans. Bartolomeo Platina thoroughly documented their use in 1465; although, he is more remembered for authoring *Lives of the Popes* which contains a vengeful attack on his former boss, Pope Paul II, who ironically had jailed him for immorality. Father Bart's Vito Pontificam records how Pope Callixtus III excommunicated Halley's Comet and successfully diverted its evil forces against the heathen Turks.

In 2007, a dog named Rocco discovered a huge truffle, which sold at auction for over \$300,000! Why would anyone pay that much for a smelly lump of fungus that tastes vaguely of benzina? The answer seems to be in its rumoured effect on women. It makes them enthusiastic about sex.

If you are not getting the bang for the buck that you expected, ponder this: thirty tonnes of useless Chinese ‘pig snout fungi’ are imported by unscrupulous dealers each year, dipped in truffle oil for aroma and passed off as treasure.

And a word about that little bottle of truffle oil that you paid \$19.00 for. It has never been touch by a truffle. The molecule that gives the truffle its distinctive aroma has been synthesized. 🐷



The Heretic's Afterlife

NOT SURPRISINGLY, given the Catholic Church's persistent threats to his life, the great Galileo suffered from gastric reflux, and he ground his teeth in his sleep while in prison. How do we know this? Well, in a bizarre Masonic ritual conducted a hundred or so years after he died, Giovanni Tozzetti and his lodge brothers, dug him up one night, knocked out a molar, sliced off his fingers and removed a vertebra as souvenirs before they reburied him in Florence's Santa Croce Church beside Michelangelo and Machiavelli, where he belonged.

The famous heretic's body parts became holy relics, Holy Mackerel! And his precious back tooth showed up in an auction sale in Florence last October. DNA tests confirmed that it was the great mathematician's, and a dentist diagnosed reflux and grinding.

The director of the Vatican's Pontifical Council, Monsignor Gianfranco Ravasi, recently announced that, "It's clear that Galileo was rightly arrested for preaching Copernicanism, but, there may have been errors committed on both sides, generously indicating the Church and Galileo."

The Catholic Church has yet to accept Galileo's heliocentric theory, and Bellarmine, the Cardinal who busted him, was made a saint in 1930. But, this doesn't mean that they haven't become more compassionate; after all, I'm allowed to express my views.

Inflammatory views are what nearly inflamed him at the stake. "The Lord of the Universe did not send his only begotten to be tortured and killed on a small, inconsequential planet spinning around a minor sun, did He!" "DID HE?"

The sun with all those planets revolving around it and dependent upon it, can still ripen a bunch of grapes as if it had nothing else in the world to do, he thought as he signed the denial that fireproofed him.

Galileo and Shakespeare were both born in 1564 and Galileo was born on the day that Michelangelo died. Although, the legend makers may have cooked the books by a week to make it magical. They do that with saints. 🍷



Catnip

VENICE IS CATNIP FOR THE SOUL. You can't help yourself, you want to revisit. You want to taste her again as soon as you can get your time and money sorted.

On our last night, Sarah and I were wandering the magical warehouse district. Unsurprisingly, there was an orchestra rehearsing in a factory space. When they paused to rest, a young cello player carried his chair out to the canal-side to polish his confidence in the sunset. 🍷



The End

My Lucky Charm

SHE CAN FIND A FOUR LEAF CLOVER any day, anywhere in the world . . . whenever you need one, and every night she dreams that she's flying.

Dante tripped through hell and we have all been on that voyage. But hell for him was a fascinating place of discovery for a singular reason, Virgil was his perfect traveling partner. Well that, and the fact that he had a return ticket in his pocket made him cheerful. Not everyone is so lucky.

Oh, but I am. On these adventures I traveled with Sarah Cowley.

Once, in the garden, I heard her apologize. "Who are you speaking to?" I inquired. "A spider." she answered, matter-of-factly. She has a gift for languages. 

