

My Kind Of Town

By Alec Cizak

Jenna rested on Tom's chest. Both of them worked to catch their breath. Tom closed his eyes and allowed the different scents coming from his young lover to massage his senses. He grinned and realized, for the moment, just how happy he was.

"What are you smiling about?" Jenna bit Tom lightly and then smacked his chest hard enough to snap his eyes open.

He brought her head up and kissed her. "Don't do that. I can get that at home."

Jenna sighed, rolled off of him. "Speaking of the devil," she said, "how soon?"

Tom put his hand on his forehead, scrunched up his face, as though he suddenly had a massive headache. He looked out the only window in Jenna's tiny bedroom. Past the smog from Gary and East Chicago, the setting sun bled orange over the majestic Chicago skyline. The path there would be anything but easy. "Even if I can get her to agree to the split," he explained, "we'll still have to wait."

"Why?"

Tom assumed Jenna's inability to see through the entire plan in a logical manner was a casualty of her youth. He didn't begrudge her. She'd had a tough life. Her mother was murdered by a serial killer from Illinois and her father died in an explosion at the tire factory he worked for in East Chicago. His generic life insurance left her just enough to maintain a small house on the edge of town. She was only twenty-two and she had no family to call her own.

"Let's say I file in the morning. How soon do you think it'd be right to pack up and ship out?"

"Tomorrow night?" Jenna smiled, made the light twinkle off her eyes. It was a subtle trick she had learned could make any man turn completely stupid.

"Believe me, cookie," Tom remained composed, "ain't a thing I'd like more than to scoop you up and carry you off to fancy old Chicago. We got to be smart."

"Why?" Jenna pushed her bimbo routine as far as she could without laughing at herself.

"Because," Tom kissed her, continued, "Maggie's sure to get a hell of a good lawyer to take a run at the stash."

"The stash?"

"Stop playing dumb."

Jenna frowned, brought her arms over her chest and pouted.

"I'm serious, we got to be very careful."

"I hate this town, Pops."

"Haggard ain't the problem. Life is just mostly misery. Might even be true in Chicago."

Jenna frowned at the very idea. Tom took her into his arms and nibbled on her neck until she moaned her secret code for 'one more round, please.'

Maggie was waiting for Tom when he got home. She was seated at the dinner table, one leg hoisted over the other, bobbing up and down impatiently.

Tom fixed himself a can of ravioli and took his seat on the opposite side.

“Is this the way it ends?” Maggie finally said.

“What are you talking about?”

“You know damn well.”

Tom took a drink of milk and sighed. “I’m the only one working at the station. How many times I gotta’ tell you..?”

Maggie stood up, threw the crossword puzzle she was working on at him. “That dump ain’t had any business since you bought it!” Her face turned red, the shade that shows when someone feels like they have to share every ounce of pain with the rest of the world.

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

She walked around and smacked him in the back of his head. “Who are you stickin’ it to?”

Tom shrugged, did his best to pretend he had no idea what she was talking about.

“Who the hell are you stickin’ it to!?!” She hit him, over and over, with open but effective palms.

Tom caught her hands and twisted them just enough to stop her. He waited for her to calm down. “When was the last time you and I had us a close encounter of the tender kind?”

She said nothing.

“I can’t remember either.”

Maggie picked her crossword puzzle up, sat back down, and tried to pretend the argument was over.

Tom finished his ravioli, stood and walked by Maggie to wash his dishes in the sink. As he passed her, a light wind carried the smell of another woman’s perfume right across her face.

“Oh, Jesus...”

“What now?”

“You bastard,” Maggie put her head down on the table, slammed it a few times until Tom grabbed her by the hair and stopped her.

“Quit being so damn showy.”

“I can smell her,” she said, then repeated it, again and again.

Tom let go of her hair and walked away. “I’m going to bed.”

The alarm clock shrieked at six in the morning. Tom leaned over and hit the snooze button. His hand brushed across an envelope left on the top of the radio. He sat up, turned on the light on his side of the bed. Before opening the letter, he noticed that his wife was not next to him.

“Maggie!”

He opened the letter and read it.

“Oh Lord,” he said quietly. Grabbing the phone, he dialed and waited.

The confused and obviously hung-over voice of Sheriff Dale Hopper picked up the other end. “This better be good.”

“Dale, I think she’s gone and done something stupid.”

“Tom?”

“That’s right. Maggie. Looks like she’s killed herself.”

“You sure?”

“Well, she wrote me a letter saying as much.”

“She hang herself, or something?”

Tom realized he hadn't even looked around the house. He put his hand over the phone and shouted, “Answer me now, woman!” He went back to the phone:

“Ain't making a sound, wherever she is.”

“Maybe she's moping somewhere in town.”

“Could be.”

“Let's not panic until we know exactly what she's up to. I see her, I'll let you know.”

“Thank you much, Sheriff.”

Tom got up and walked into the living room. He looked out the front window. The station wagon he had given Maggie once he had bought himself a truck was not in the driveway.

“Well, shoot,” he sighed. After deciding to let things reveal themselves on their own, he went about his normal routine of getting ready for a long day of doing nothing at his gas station.

Tom's father had been killed by one, or many, of the thousands of chemicals floating around the old steel mill between Haggard and Gary. Something had gotten into his lungs and ripped them up nice and fierce. A civil action landed Ted Bolan a small fortune. Then he died and passed the money on to his only remaining family, his son Tom. Good thing, too.

Tom Bolan was a lousy student in high school. More interested in beer and girls, he was kicked out for having a ridiculously low grade-point average his senior year. He spent some years in the military, fought in the original Gulf conflict, and came home just in time to see his father pass.

The war had made him paranoid and stupid, so he turned what remained of his father's fortune into cash and locked it in a safe in his house. Eventually he got bored and purchased a gas station hidden just off of I-65. The Shell right next to the exit-ramp saw to it that Tom's business never made a cent.

He spent his days watching television shows on a small black and white set until five in the evening. Then he usually went to Jenna's, took care of her, and then home to hear his wife complain. His life had become a boring routine. Again.

He realized he wanted out of Haggard just as much as Jenna.

Halfway through one talk show or another, the phone rang.

Tom got into his truck and drove to the East Chicago River, near the southern edge of Haggard. As he pulled onto the bridge, he saw Maggie's station wagon, parked by the side. Dale Hopper's squad car was next to it.

The sheriff was staring over the side of the bridge. Tom joined him, strained to figure out what he was looking at.

“That your wife's, or what?”

Shredded, white cloth swayed in the wind, caught on several sharp branches of a tree jutting out over the water.

“Lord,” Tom quietly said, putting his hand over his mouth. A dizzying rush of guilt passed through him. *I killed my wife*, he thought to himself, *my inability to say no to*

a younger, prettier gal, my shallow, selfish... He stopped, remembered the way things really were:

She started it, he reminded himself. She was the one who didn't know how to be tender with another human being.

"Well?" Dale Hopper interrupted him.

Tom sighed. "We both know it's hers." He turned back around and walked over to Maggie's car. He put his hands on it, doing his best to remain composed. Calm. Rational.

"Gonna need a statement from you." The sheriff worked on a lip full of chew as he spoke.

Tom looked at him as though he had just been stabbed. "You surely don't think..."

Dale put his hands up, waved off the thought. "Course not, Tom. It's all about procedure, paperwork, you know. I'll need you to reiterate how you was at home and such."

They walked back to the side of the bridge. Tom looked at Haggard's drunken lawman. Even though they were the same age, Dale's face showed at least ten years more. Both had competed for the same girl in the twelfth-grade, a homecoming queen named Lorraine. Once Tom was booted from Haggard High, Dale landed Lorraine and moved to Chicago with her. They were married for all of a year before a car hit Lorraine and killed her. Dale came back to Haggard, worked as deputy until Ron Quinn died and left the sheriff's job vacant.

Dale's marriage to Jack Daniels was sealed by that point. Word around town was that he generally passed out before the sun went down every single night. If he seemed cold and unsympathetic about Maggie, maybe he deserved to.

Tom finally spoke, "What next?"

"She left a letter, right?"

Tom nodded.

"We put her on the books as a suicide."

"You gonna look for the body?"

Dale Hopper laughed. "This is Haggard, Indiana – not Chicago."

"So?"

The sheriff leaned back, away from the bridge. "Well, Tom, just how do you propose we go about looking for her body?"

"Don't you have a dog, a police dog, like on television?"

Dale shook his head.

"Ah, what's the stuff you use to swim underwater for a long time?"

"Scuba gear?" When Dale stopped laughing, he explained, "Maggie's probably floating down the middle of Chicago right now, headed straight for Lake Michigan. If they pull her out, great, we go get her and put her in the ground here in Haggard."

Tom covered his mouth, the full weight of the situation sinking in with the sheriff's words. "And," he could barely speak, "what if she washes up here?"

"Same thing. Have old Bob Kulak take a look at her, pretty her up for the burial, and then plant 'er at Haggard Memorial Point."

They looked back down at the white fabric.

“Dale,” Tom said, composed once again, “I can’t say I feel a whole lot of sadness.”

“Makes sense to me. You been complaining about your marriage for damn near five years.”

“Should I feel guilty?”

“Over what?”

Tom thought about it. He couldn’t figure out what he was supposed to feel.

Dale Hopper gave him a hefty sympathy slap on his shoulder and walked to his squad car. He radioed for a tow truck for Maggie’s car and then drove back into town.

Around eight in the evening, Tom woke up from a nap. He looked at the empty spot where Maggie had once slept, sometimes happy, usually angry. Loneliness lurked all around like a ghost. Then he remembered, even when she had been there, her spirit always seemed far away.

He had met Margaret Buell in the service. She was attractive but tough enough to hang with the guys. In Iraq they watched the Bears together. Maggie knew more about football than even Tom, who had briefly played for the Haggard Steelers in high school. Tom came to consider Maggie his best friend and they got married. Almost immediately, though, the tender moments all but vanished. Maggie doled out sex once or twice a month, the way a mother gives a child a piece of candy during potty training.

“No wonder I went looking elsewhere,” Tom said out loud. Eventually he found Jenna Hunt. She was hurt, seeking a father figure, and Tom was still trying to win the beauty queen from high school he had lost to Dale Hopper and, ultimately, a drunk driver in Chicago.

Tom rolled over, sat up with his feet on the floor. A headache threatened the sides of his skull. He massaged his temples.

The phone rang.

“I heard the news!” Jenna sounded like a child who had just been told she would be spending the rest of her life in Disneyland.

“Yeah, it’s terrible.”

“It’s great.” She affected the voice everyone did when they were convinced Tom was a small child who needed to be sternly lectured. “That woman has abused you, physically, emotionally, shoot, financially, for just about as long as I’ve been alive. She deserved unhappiness. You, the opposite. Now come over and see me so we can mourn her passing properly.”

“We gotta be careful.”

“It’s after dark, Pops. No one will see you.”

Tom held his forehead with one hand. “I don’t know...”

Jenna shifted to a coy tone. “I’m cold.”

“Trust me, nothing’s creepier than being here all alone.”

“Then get in your car and drive over.”

“What if the sheriff’s creeping around?”

“Dale hits the whiskey at six on the dot. If he ain’t passed out yet, he’s on his way.”

“How do you know?”

After a pause, she stuttered and then said, “‘Cause I was arrested my senior year and I spent the night in lock-up and I watched him. Just a dreamin’ away ‘till the sun showed up.”

Tom sighed. “Look, cookie...”

“Enough!” Jenna shouted into the phone, “Take the road behind the Wojowski farm, through the woods, no one will see you. I’m warmin’ up right now, you don’t get here within the next hour I’m a buy a machine and forget all about you.”

She hung up.

“Damn women,” Tom grumbled. The last thing he wanted was to lose his wife and his girlfriend in the same day. He put on his pants, draped a button-down shirt over his shoulders and headed out.

The stores were already closed. Even the Dairy Queen, the only national franchise in town. Nobody was on the streets. Tom considered whether it really was Maggie who was boring or just the place they lived. The more he thought about it, the happier he was that he would soon be in Chicago with Jenna. Taking a new stab at life, as it were.

He turned onto 7th, the street running alongside highway 65. The major and minor roads were separated by a massive clump of forest. Once he was past the Wojowski farm the trees took over. The only light came from his car. The stars above couldn’t compete with the glare of pollution from Chicago.

In the distance, Tom saw something oddly illuminated in the middle of the road. Knocking the horn a few times, he assumed the object, probably an animal, would move by the time he got closer.

As he approached, he saw that it was a person. A woman. There was a light shining on her, from behind. She wore a white gown that flowed in the night wind.

And she wasn’t moving.

Tom smashed his hand into the horn. “Get the hell out of the way!” he shouted.

His foot inched over to the brake. Then he saw who it was:

Maggie, dressed in a gown similar to the one she had left dangling by the bridge, waving her arms for him to stop.

Tom hit the brakes and made the mistake of turning the wheel at the same time. His car screeched around and then flipped three times into the forest before a tree slammed it to a stop. He opened and closed his eyes quickly to make sure he was still conscious. Feeling his body, craning his head as much as possible to look himself over, he gauged how safe it would be to try to wiggle out of the scrunched up vehicle.

Then he saw two sets of feet. Turning his head to face his possible saviors, he realized major damage had been done to his insides. Movement of his neck caused sharp stabs of pain all over his body.

The glass in the driver’s side window had broken out. Maggie leaned in, careful not to scrape herself on any shards remaining along the border. “You’re hurt very bad,” she said, “you need an ambulance.”

Tom couldn’t take his eyes off of Jenna, standing right behind Maggie with a large flashlight. Then he looked at Maggie, his eyes wide with confusion.

“You didn’t think I’d kill myself over you, did you?” She chuckled quietly.

“I’m, I’m sorry,” Jenna looked at her feet.

Maggie spoke again, "Give me the combination to the safe. I'll send Jenna back to try it out. If you tell me the right numbers, she'll call me on my cell phone and I'll fetch you an ambulance."

Tom looked past Maggie. He could vaguely feel the pain it caused his body. Endorphins worked overtime to keep him from sensing how silly arguing would be.

"Come on, Pops," Jenna said.

"Hush, girl," Maggie said, then swatted her young lover on her thigh. She leaned in closer to Tom. "Give me the numbers. All we want is the stash."

Tom worked not to laugh at her. Out of shock, disbelief.

Jenna stepped forward, leaned in next to Maggie. She had a small pad of paper and a pen in her hands. She held them up for Tom to see. The look on her face suggested she actually believed he would be enthusiastic about giving up his money.

"Just get me to a hospital." His breath came in quick rushes, as though he had climbed twelve flights of stairs.

"I can't do that." Maggie put her arm around Jenna's waist. "We're leaving this town. You can die here, alone, in the forest, or do as I tell you."

At that moment, Tom resented having been born an exceptionally stupid human being. He wondered how he could have failed to figure out that his wife was in love with another woman. Maggie had never been very responsive in bed. She always made excuses for it. The truth, apparently, was too darned complicated for an idiot like Tom Bolan.

"You have no choice."

It sounded as if one of the women had said it, though Tom was certain the voice came from his own mind. He gave them the numbers.

Jenna backed up, suddenly looking very fearful.

"Go get it." Maggie snapped her fingers in her face.

Tom wanted to tell her to hurry up as well. He was under the impression that they were speaking of the money he had left in his safe.

"He's going to die anyway," Jenna whimpered, looking as though she might break into tears.

"We can't take any risks. Now get the stuff."

'The stuff,' Tom learned within a few minutes, consisted of two large canisters of gasoline and some matches.

The women quickly doused his car and him. They struck a few matches before finally getting the vehicle to catch fire.

Tom screamed once or twice before his punctured lungs collapsed. As the fire consumed him, he watched Maggie kiss Jenna's forehead to comfort her, and then they walked off into the darkness.

The car exploded and Tom Bolan died.

Maggie entered the house first. Jenna still held the combination in her hand. Tom had hidden the safe under the floorboards in the living room. After sweeping away a cheap rug covering the altered area, Maggie knelt down and began removing the planks of wood concealing the stash.

"I'm going to need some help getting this above ground," she said, then snapped her fingers at Jenna. She realized something had gone wrong with her plan. Looking up, she saw that someone had been waiting for them.

Sheriff Hopper stood behind Jenna with an arm around her shoulders.

"Whore," Maggie whispered.

The sheriff motioned for her to stand up. "Let's go to the dining room to discuss business."

Realizing she had no choice, Maggie followed them.

Dale Hopper pulled out a chair at the end of the table, the one Tom normally occupied, and gestured for Maggie to sit down. Maggie waited a second for a generic show of defiance, and then did what she was told.

"How long has this been going on?" she asked Jenna.

Before any further conversation between the women could take place, the sheriff produced a .22, forced it between Maggie's teeth and pulled the trigger.

Jenna screamed and jumped back.

Dale wiped the gun clean and placed it in Maggie's right hand. "Now let's see to that money," he said, nodding Jenna back to the living room.

They hoisted the heavy safe up from the ground. Jenna did her best not to cry. Noticing her demeanor, Dale grabbed her chin and forced her to face him.

"Just what part of this did you think was going to be pleasant?"

"I know," Jenna quietly said.

"Now give me the numbers."

She didn't move.

Dale grabbed her and forced his hand into her pockets until he found the pad she had written them down on.

"What if Tom lied?" she asked.

"We'll crack this sonofabitch. One way or another."

The safe opened without any hassle.

Jenna's mouth dropped.

Dale Hopper laughed. He laughed loud and hearty, shaking his head. "That idiot." He picked up the few bills remaining in the safe. A quick count brought him to the conclusion that there wasn't any more than four or five thousand dollars. "That idiot," he said again, "I knew his damn station was bleeding money, but, sweet Mother Mary..."

"You told me he landed a fortune from his daddy's lawsuit."

"He did, numbskull. And he sunk it all into that worthless gas station. Just to get away from his wife." Dale laughed some more, stood up.

"That won't last us a month in Chicago," Jenna complained.

Shaking his head, still chuckling, Dale said, "Ain't nobody going to Chicago." He walked back into the dining room and took the gun from Maggie's hand.

Jenna realized what was about to happen one moment too late. Dale pointed the .22 at her and pulled the trigger. He shot her three times in the head and once in the heart. Her body collapsed, convulsed, and then came still the way a tire losing air lets out its last gasp.

Dale wiped down the gun once more and returned it to Maggie's hand. He put the money back in the safe and the safe back in the ground and covered it up.

“Looks like we’re all stuck here,” he said to his dead audience.

He drove to the police station to drink and sleep and wait for the dead bodies in Haggard to attract someone else’s attention. Then he would be able to come along and do his job and nobody would be the wiser.

“Can’t get peace of mind like that in Chicago,” he assured himself.

Alec Cizak is a published writer currently trying to figure out how to get the hell out of Los Angeles.

Mexican Standoff

By Jonathan Woods

Mistah Kurtz—he dead.

Neiderbaum is the bane of my existence.

I pull aside the tent flap. Rain whips down in acid sheets, making the night as black as the inside of my stomach. The area around my tent is a quagmire of mud not unlike the winter trenches of the Great War.

Ten yards away, secure on a stone platform, Neiderbaum's tent glows like an alien spaceship. It's made of some new high-tech translucent cloth. Backlit by a gas lantern, two silhouettes, one on top of the other, hump wildly, the old *el dick-a-roo* slamming away at *la pussy* with utter disregard for anything but its own pleasure.

I'll kill the bitch! is what comes to mind as I watch this shadow play. At the same time I've got a hard on.

Correction. I'm going to kill Theodore Neiderbaum.

It all began six weeks ago in Cal Western State's Archaeology Department, the last day of the spring semester. I'm the junior lecturer. Neiderbaum is Vice-Chairman. I'm standing in the departmental office making small talk with the new typist Brenda, a buxom little thing with a cherry blossom complexion and myopic eyes. A chest-high counter divides the room in half. On one side sits Brenda and the departmental files. I'm on the other side leaning over the counter.

"You're sure you won't come for a drink?"

"Gee, Alex...I mean, Professor Silverman, my boyfriend would be pissed," says Brenda. "I don't want to get a black eye."

"If he threatens you, you can always sleep at my place. On the couch."

"He killed a man once in a bar fight."

"Frankly, I don't understand why you would take up with someone who's clearly a psychopath."

"Who can explain my trailer trash urges?" she says blithely.

At that moment Neiderbaum in garish tweeds walks by. His thick, hairy fingers pluck from my hand resting on the countertop the printout of my trip reservation. His eyes scan the page. His tanned brow wrinkles like a plowed field.

"Where is it you're digging this summer?" he asks.

"Zetehux, down in the Puuc Hills. A four-hour drive south of Merida. The last two on dirt roads.

"A third tier site, isn't it?"

"We're the first team to dig there. We're hoping to find a bunch of shit the grave robbers missed."

Neiderbaum refolds the itinerary and slaps it back and forth across my nose. Brenda giggles. My face goes Tabasco red.

"Maybe I'll see you down there," he says.

Like hell! I think.

The itinerary leaves his hand. I grab for it. But it swooshes away through the air, grazes the counter top, slips over the edge and nosedives into the crack between Brenda's desk and the half-wall supporting the counter.

"I'll print you another one," Brenda says, still laughing.

Neiderbaum is now walking away.

"See you later Teddy," Brenda calls after him.

My team for the dig at Zetehux consists of three graduate students, Mary Beth, Chip and Fawn, and four 'locals'.

Mary Beth is pudgy and enthusiastic. Chip is thinking about dropping out of the program and applying to business school. Fawn is trouble.

Five six-ish, jet black hair swept back from the an unsullied brow and tied with a rubber band, neon blue eyes set a tad too close together on opposite sides of a petite upturned nose, lush lips cast in a pout, small but assertive chin and a raging pair of knockers designed by God himself. She favors tight T-shirts and baggy cargo pants. A space exists between her front ivories through which she periodically spits globs of tobacco juice with daunting accuracy.

The locals are the usual swarthy, malnourished lot. Extras from *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*.

We've been in Zetehux a month and Mary Beth's legs and arms are covered in throbbing infected mosquito bites. She's running a fever.

I stand looking down at her flushed, distorted face, wondering whether I should send her to the hospital back in Merida.

Fawn and Chip are over at the dig: a mound of stones that were once a towering Mayan edifice, lying broken and hidden for centuries under a camouflage of ravenous trees and vines.

Mary Beth looks like dog crap. Pale with a tinge of yellow. Dark lemur-like circles around her eyes. Lips parched and cracked. Slow shallow breathing.

I take a stained and greasy washrag from her forehead. Finding it bone dry, I soak it with water from a jug, fold it like a blindfold and lay it across her eyebrows. Her cheek twitches. Not quite dead yet.

I think: you really need to send her up to the hospital in Merida. Chip can drive her. Except Chip does a lot of the heavy digging, as well as managing the Mexican spade crew. He's fluent in Spanish. On the other hand, with him gone, Fawn will have no choice but to capitulate.

Because of Mary Beth's illness, Fawn and Chip share a tent. As far as I can tell they aren't fucking yet. But Fawn uses him as an excuse every time I suggest a walk in the jungle or some other nonsense. My tawny eyes follow her like albino bats. She is a goddess. At Cal Western State we have a bylaw that prohibits faculty/student rutting. But this is Mexico.

My random thoughts are interrupted when one of the Mexican crew bursts into the tent. His pupils are dilated. He's nervous, jittery. Is he stoned on some hallucinogen?

"What is it, Miguel?" I ask.

"Come see," he says, "*Muchos dioses antiguos!*"

Miguel stinks. I hand him a cigarette and fire it up with my Marine Corps issue Zippo, before lighting my own. The Corps' emblem rises from the chrome plain of the lighter's surface like an anthill on the Serengeti. I bought the lighter in a pawnshop in Fresno. The acrid smoke of cheap Mexican *cigarillos* drowns Miguel's stench.

Ancient gods? What is he talking about? Is it possible they've made the astonishing, career-making find I dream about? A chill scuttles up and down my spine like the little pink feet of a white mouse.

I glance down at Mary Beth one more time. What the fuck am I supposed to do? Then I motion to Miguel.

"*Vayamo.*"

We exit the tent, cross the slash-and-burn clearing, and start up the path that slices through the jungle. On the left is the latrine. It and Miguel smell about the same.

As a matter of personal hygiene, I can't go for more than two days without a shower. We rigged one up outdoors just to the right of our three tents. Fawn, sipping a *mescal* in the early twilight, often watches me soap down my tanned and seasoned physique, then rinse off. But when I come back from dressing in my tent, she's sitting on Chip's lap.

Around the next bend in the trail, a sudden tree-covered hill blocks out the sky. The Mayan temple we're excavating. At a propitious spot we've sunk a trench into the side of the ruin. So far the only results are a few worthless shards of pottery.

At the moment, Chip and two more of the Mex crew – Juan A and Juan B – squat in a half circle at the mouth of the trench. As Miguel and I come up to them, I realize they're passing a jay. Chip hands me the reefer without looking up. I take a long pull, closing my eyes and letting the smoke slither deep into my lungs.

But pot doesn't really do it for me. Just a slight veering off track, a dazzle of light in the corner of my eye.

"What's going on? You're taking a lunch break already?"

"Go take a look," Chip says, nodding in the direction of the trench.

"Where's Fawn?"

"In there."

The overcast day steepens the trench in heavy shadow. Fifteen feet into the hillside it becomes a tunnel penetrating into the depths of the pyramid, a wormhole into a long-hidden, undead past.

I grab the flashlight lying at Chip's feet and head in. I have to duck my head to enter the cave-like portion of the excavation. To prevent cave-ins, a veneer of rough boards covers the walls and ceiling of the tunnel. Ahead I detect a faint glow. Scrambling over a landslide of dirt and stone, suddenly I'm standing at the threshold of an oblong room two thousand years old.

Gripped by sudden vertigo, as though standing at the brink of a bell tower, I reach out and steady myself against the wall. The only light in the room comes from a white gas lantern set in the middle of the floor. Fawn stands next to it, furiously scribbling into her notebook. I am overcome by lust.

She turns and sees me.

"Alex! We fuckin' found it, Alex." She waves her hands in the air and twirls like a dervish into my arms. "Look at this place."

We're hugging. I nuzzle her neck. She throws her head back, laughing. I go for a breast. Nibbling the nipple through her T-shirt.

Suddenly, she breaks away; strides back to the center of the room.

"Not here!" she says. "It'd be like doing it church."

"I'd like to do it in a church."

She ignores me, gazing around the ancient room. "So Alex, what do you think the twisted fucks were like who painted this place?"

But I'm already staring at the mural-covered walls. Kings, and queens and high priests, warriors and their prisoners, sacred animal totems, gods and goddesses. Many of the images are familiar from other sites. Except they're all engaged in wild fornication of one form or another. Each panel is a Mesoamerican version of a Paul Avril etching. The tongue of a squat toad-creature laps a princess' nether regions. Choc, lord of storms, rains semen down upon a dozen maidens. The aged fertility god Itzamnaj, toothless and gnarled as the bark of a cottonwood, spryly partakes of plump poontang. We've discovered the fucking Mayan Kama Sutra! The Pompeii of the Yucatan!

I'll be rich is the first thought out of the gate. Followed by *and famous*. The Fawns of this world will be lining up outside my door.

Three hours later my mind has had enough of Mayan porn. Too many whips and chains and beheadings. Snuff porn.

"We need to go back to camp and think about all this," I say. "Besides, I could use a drink."

"Me too!"

"Whatever," says Chip, who gave the Mexican crew the afternoon off. "I think we should lock this place up."

"There isn't a door, dingbat," Fawn says.

"We should make one," Chip says. "I'm concerned about how the peasants in the nearby villages may react if they see this stuff. It's creepy."

"Relax, Chip," I say, "this discovery is going to make us millionaires."

"Take me to your *mescal*," Fawn says, pushing me toward the tunnel. I hope she'll grab my *cojones* from behind, but she doesn't.

Back at the camp, I take a quick check on Mary Beth. She's awake and smiles weakly up at me. Petrified that I'll catch whatever it is that's devouring her alive, I place my hand on her forehead. It's burning up.

"How do you feel?"

"Like dog shit."

"Interesting..."

"Oh my God!"

Mary Beth leaps out of the cot, dives through the door and makes a beeline for the latrine.

I turn and walk to our makeshift clubhouse, a rough-hewn table and four aluminum and canvas camp chairs under a canvas fly. Chip hands me my first *mescal* of the day.

"Bad news," I say, tossing my thumb in the direction of *el latrino*, or whatever they call it down here. I drink the *mescal* in one gulp, wince at the burn, then continue: "Chip, you'll have to drive Mary Beth up to Merida. To the hospital. I'll give you a list of things to bring back."

Chip purses his lips and nods sagely. “Lots of bad news comin’ down. I stopped by the kitchen to get a fresh bottle of hooch. Looks like the spade crew have given us the finger. Disappeared without a trace, as they say.”

“You’re kidding. Why would they do that?”

Chip shrugs. “Fuck if I know.” He taps the mescal bottle on the lip of my empty glass; then pours in a double, while I hold it steady. “Drink up,” he says.

By five o’clock, Chip and Mary Beth are in the Mitsubishi, ready to go. Mary Beth, in the passenger seat, has the shakes now. She’s wrapped in an old hand-stitched quilt, her eyes shimmering pools of fever, her teeth chattering.

“I envy the fresh sheets you’ll be sleeping in tonight,” I say to Chip.

“I’m not sure who’s getting the better deal out of this,” Chip says, gazing at Fawn where she sits in the clubhouse.

“We’ll see you in a couple of days,” I say.

“You hope.”

Even when Chip screeches his wheels, Fawn doesn’t look up from the novel she’s reading. Her hand automatically reaches out to her fourth *mescal* cocktail resting on the tabletop and draws it to her lips. As I long to be drawn.

A cloud of dust erupts as the Mitsubishi jolts and farts up the laterite streambed that pretends to be a road in these parts.

I sit down opposite Fawn. As I pour another drink, my eyes rake from her nose to her toes and back again. She squirms in her seat. But she knows she can’t postpone the inevitable.

I flash back into consciousness like a bat diving from its perch. The squeals and hee-haws of a four-wheel drive vehicle thumping and sliding its way down the rough roadbed disrupt the undertow of the jungle. It can’t be Chip, I think, unless I’ve been asleep for two days.

As I scoot from bed and slide into jeans and a T-shirt, I realize Fawn isn’t next to me in my doublewide canvas cot. On the wood crate next to the bed sit two half-full glasses of Mexican rotgut, a torn foil condom wrapper and the Chester Himes thriller I’m reading.

I poke my head through the mosquito netting, then the tent flap.

Coming down the hillside is a very expensive Mercedes all-terrain vehicle. And gripping the wildly lurching wheel is none other than Teddy Neiderbaum.

FUUUUUCK!

When he sees me, an array of white teeth glint from ear to ear. I know I’m about to be screwed twelve ways to Sunday. I should have listened to the alarms ringing in my subconscious, retrieved the .38 pistol from under my pillow and put the asswipe out of business. Instead, as Neiderbaum climbs out of the still rocking vehicle, I say:

“What the hell are you doing here?”

We circle each other like strutting fighting cocks looking for an opening.

“I told you I might show up. My other plans for the summer went to hell in a hand basket. Anyway, I haven’t been on a dig in years. Need to get back in shape.”

Suddenly the door of the latrine bangs open. Fern walks toward us, looking fresh as a daisy.

“Professor Neiderbaum. What a surprise.”

“Teddy. It’s Teddy. Came down to give Alex a hand. Beneficiary of my years of experience. Brought a case of 10-year-old Canadian whiskey too. Box of Cohibas. Do you smoke cigars Miss...?”

“Fawn.”

“Miss Fawn?”

“Just Fawn.” She spits a bullet of tobacco juice into the dirt half an inch in front of Neiderbaum’s ostrich skin cowboy boots.

Neiderbaum is a big man, a fact I never fully appreciated before. 6-foot-3. Face like a bulldog on steroids. Barrel chest. Arms thick as smoked Virginia hams. Eyes seething with quicksilver emotions.

For the rest of the morning he works like seven devils hauling wheelbarrows full of rock and gravel from the dry streambed to a slight rise opposite our campsite, constructing a stone platform on which he pitches his tent.

I’m sitting in my canvas chair drinking *mescal* sunrises and wondering what the hell Neiderbaum’s really doing here.

I throw Fawn an ironic glance, but she remains distant and unresponsive as she goes about her camp chores. She looks sumptuous in short shorts and a fitted linen safari shirt.

After lunch we take Neiderbaum to the excavation. He is appropriately dazzled by our discovery, teetering like a drunk from painted panel to painted panel, gaping at the panoply of Mayan perversions revealed by the beam of his flashlight.

Then Neiderbaum makes his own discovery: in one corner a low, narrow doorway obscured by a cave-in of stone and sand. Grabbing shovels we clear away the debris.

On the other side is a small airless room with rows of shallow niches running down two sides. Each niche contains its own special accoutrements. Ceremonial rattles, obsidian knives, incense burners, weed pipes, stone animal totems and fired-clay figurines, and a hundred and one other pieces of Mayan ceremonial tsatske. It’s the storage closet of the high priests of Zetehux.

Unbelievably a giant phallus, five feet long, eighteen inches in girth, leans nonchalantly against the room’s back wall. Its details are spare, the work of some avant-garde minimalist who lived a thousand years ago. Yet it’s unmistakably a dick, painted a lurid red color.

Close up it turns out to be carved out of wood, with a hollow interior. Easy to move. At Neiderbaum’s insistence he and I lug it into the main room. Fawn goes into hysterics, slapping her knees, falling to the floor where she rolls from side to side gasping for breath. Finally she recovers from her giggle fit, only to catch sight of the twelve-inch marble dildo Neiderbaum found in the storeroom and thrust into the pocket of his cargo shorts.

“Is that a banana in your pocket?” Fawn asks, breaking into fresh howls of laughter.

We carry the big wooden dick out into the open air. Dark, rain-heavy clouds torment the heavens. Neiderbaum’s pupils have shrunk to shimmering black currents behind which madness dances. His lips are caked with dried spittle. When he thinks I’m not looking, he mutters gibberish to himself. Is he on drugs? Suffering from sunstroke? Going insane? But he is Vice Chair of the Department, so I don’t make a fuss.

“What are we doing with this?” I ask, indicating the gargantuan prick.

“Taking it over by my tent, so I can examine it later.”

I flip my head skyward.

“Better put it under the clubhouse fly. You don’t want the paint to wash off when it rains.”

We end up putting it in Neiderbaum’s tent.

Exhausted by all this activity, I collapse to the ground. My shirt is completely sweated-through. Fresh blisters on each hand throb and ooze. My head is pounding from the pressure of the incoming tropical depression.

Neiderbaum pours Crown Royal into a pair of glasses. But I can’t drink it. Next moment I’m on my knees retching bile into the dirt. I hope I’m not coming down with the same bug ravaging Mary Beth’s interiors.

“I need to lie down,” I say. “Take a nap.”

“Up all night tomcatting?” asks Neiderbaum.

I don’t bother to reply. Neiderbaum heads back to the excavation. I take four aspirin and a sleeping tablet and sack out.

The waterfall of Fawn’s laughter draws me awake. She and Neiderbaum are having drinks in the clubhouse. Her safari blouse is nonchalantly disheveled. One of her legs rests sideways across the arm of her camp chair. Neiderbaum’s fingers trip the light fantastic across the bare stage of her thigh.

Rage and jealousy savage my brain like ravenous wild dogs gnawing a corpse. Have they been getting it on down at the excavation? How could Fawn betray me like this? I’ll castrate Neiderbaum and mail his balls to the Smithsonian!

Tamping down my chaotic emotions, I stroll nonchalantly over to the clubhouse.

“Anyone for dinner?” I ask.

A month-old sports section from the Caribbean edition of the Miami Herald and an open can of peanuts form two-thirds of an odd tableau on the tabletop. My Marine Corps ashtray, in which two fat Cohibas smolder like burning turds, constitutes the final element of this inanimate melodrama.

“There’s some baked beans sitting in a saucepan on my Coleman stove,” Neiderbaum says. “Add a can of cocktail franks, reheat and you’re golden.”

“Golden?”

“Oh, please,” Fawn says. “Don’t start.”

I jerk her to her feet; pull her against me.

“What about last night? Doesn’t that mean anything?”

“Get a life, Alex.”

Neiderbaum leaps up, and with a baroque flourish, presses the barrel of a pistol to my head. My brain spins like flushed water in a toilet bowl. The situation is completely and irrevocably out of control.

“About those beans and franks,” Neiderbaum says.

I release Fawn. She picks up the limp sports section of the Miami Herald and slaps it back and forth across my face. Then she turns and walks toward Neiderbaum’s tent. Jumbo drops of rain plummet from the sky. Moments later it becomes a raging downpour.

“Night,” Teddy says. His testosterone bulk, an evil troll from a Grimm’s fairy tale, splashes across the clearing.

I'm left with the peanuts and a half empty bottle of Crown Royal. I feel an inescapable need to kill someone.

Watching them fuck behind the veil of the tent wall is both a turn-on and a hugely deflating bummer. I remain transfixed until Fawn screams for the third time and kicks over the white gas lantern. With a tinkle of broken glass, Neiderbaum's tent turns pitch black.

The pouring rain of the storm despoils the night. My forehead throbs with fever, sweat dripping like 3-in-1 oil down my neck and chest. It feels as if someone's red-hot fingertips are searing into my shoulders.

I need to go back to sleep. Knit up the raveled sleeve of care. There'll be plenty of time to shoot Neiderbaum in the morning.

The sound of drums roots around in my head like a pig searching for truffles and at last nudges me awake.

Drums?! You must be shitting me. It's the fever.

But it is indeed drums. Two to be exact, calling and answering each other in deep somnambulistic tones.

When I poke my head outside the tent, the sun is burning the edges of some feathery clouds, the remnants of last night's storm. The effect is like grilled cheese sandwiches sliced open with a filleting knife. The beat of the drums intensifies.

A crowd of straw-hatted and shawled peasants stands in front of Neiderbaum's tent on its raised platform of stone and gravel. The crowd sways left and right to the rhythm of the drums. Among the gathered flock I see at least two men from our excavation crew.

As the light thickens, the wooden cock becomes apparent, rising like a giant's middle finger in front of Neiderbaum's tent.

In the next instant, Neiderbaum, entirely nude, steps from the tent just as the sun breaks like a burning wave over the jungle canopy and sweeps across the shadowy slash and burn clearing where we're camped. Neiderbaum's tanned flesh turns to burnished gold. Half his face is painted a sickly green color, the other half bleached flour white. His eyes burn as brightly as blood diamonds caught in the white-hot glare of an arc lamp.

A leather harness encircles Neiderbaum's buttocks like a spider its prey. This contraption holds in full erectile display the marble dildo that had sent Fawn into hysterics the day before.

My mind reels. What is going on here? It's as if I've stumbled onto the set for a Tarzan remake directed by Larry Flint.

Then Fawn appears, draped in a blood-orange robe that glints in the sunlight. A pair of loin-clothed acolytes draw her toward a wooden bench in front of Neiderbaum. She stumbles, sways, rolls her eyes. She must be drugged to the gills.

Her robe falls away. Stark naked she is guided to the bench, where she sits, then rolls onto her back. A patchwork of black and red Mayan glyphs have been painted on her body, defiling the perfection of her flesh.

Neiderbaum and the whole bunch of them are totally bonkers! Seduced by a dark spell emanating from the room beneath the ruined pyramid. Caught in some Mayan black juju. And Fawn is their sacrificial victim.

No fuckin' way, pal!

I wave my .38 revolver in the air.

"Stop!" I shout.

The drums cease. All eyes turn toward me.

"Alex," Neiderbaum says. "What a surprise."

"Let her go."

I walk through the crowd, which separates in front of me like flesh beneath a surgeon's blade, and step up onto the stone and gravel platform. I look out upon the faces of the surly peasants.

"The show's over," I say. "Everybody go home."

Neiderbaum pushes me roughly sideways. We stand facing each other.

"You don't understand," he says. "What you've discovered here at Zetehux is the doorway to a new world order in which there are no limits, no boundaries."

I'm holding the revolver; Neiderbaum grips an obsidian sacrificial knife. Our eyes are locked in cold fury but neither of us is prepared to make the fateful first move.

With a Herculean effort of will, I break out of the Mexican standoff.

Die, asshole!

My finger curls around the trigger and pulls it back. But the firing pin clicks on an empty chamber. I've forgotten to load the fucking weapon.

Neiderbaum lunges with the knife.

We struggle, teetering wildly back and forth, a ganglia of intertwined arms and legs. Somehow my hand encircles the marble dildo. Its harness gives way and the phallus comes free. Even as his teeth sink into the muscle of my shoulder, I bring the striated stone schlong crashing down again and again on Neiderbaum's skull. Bone and brains transmogrify into pulp. Neiderbaum's teeth release their grip. He groans; crumples to the ground. Rivulets of blood cover my hand and forearm.

A cry of dismay rises from the crowd of peasants. Then a great stillness descends, as though a Victorian bell jar has been lowered over the clearing.

But the sharp scent of danger snakes up my nose like ammonia arising from a broken ampule. This is no time to take a break and consider the existential dilemma of my sorry-assed existence.

Fawn stands; stumbles toward me, hands outstretched like a sleepwalker. For a moment I think I see Mary Beth and Chip among the crowd of peasants. Then I realize it's their heads alone, impaled on wooden spikes, bobbing up and down as the crowd equivocates. Am I hallucinating?

A swarm of peasants bent on revenge rush toward the dais, their faces distorted by rage.

"Don't leave me behind," Fawn begs.

But like a spent lightning strike, my lust for Fawn has drained into the earth.

"Sorry, baby. You should have thought twice before you betrayed me for Neiderbaum. You're on your own."

I turn and sprint toward Neiderbaum's Mercedes parked a dozen feet away behind his tent. As I reach the vehicle, the forefront of the crowd pours over the stone and gravel platform. Fawn is swept away.

As I clamber into the driver's seat, a stone strikes me behind the ear. My fingers touch the wound, feel the warm rush of blood. A larger stone slams into the back window, a web of cracks spreading from its epicenter.

When I yank down the sun visor, Neiderbaum's keys tumble into my hand. The gods are with me!

The engine turns over on the first try. I blast out of there with a spray of sand and mud. The air conditioning flips on automatically, chilling me to the bone.

Five miles down the road I arrive at a four corners. A hand-painted sign in front of a tumbledown shack offers beer and *tacos al carbon*. On the front veranda a woman lolls in a hammock nursing a sickly baby.

An ancient and dilapidated *autobus* has pulled to a stop while the driver takes a piss or a snort of coke. Two boys offer an iguana for sale to the passengers. They walk back and forth beside the bus, holding their prize aloft to the array of open or missing windows. Desperate Indian women, dressed in black, hawk slices of pineapple and mango dusted with chili powder. A soldier armed with a machinegun gazes at the passing scene with a worried expression.

Sitting in the stationary SUV taking all this in, I realize my hands are shaking uncontrollably, overcome by palsy. Swirls and droplets of dried blood cover them. Neiderbaum is dead. Fawn too. And Mary Beth and Chip. All dead. The beat of the drums pounds relentlessly in my head like the undecipherable thoughts of an idiot savant. But I know one thing for sure. One thing.

There is no going back.

I run down my side window. The sudden intake of warm moist air fogs the windshield. I motion to the two boys holding the prehistoric iguana.

"Que direccion es Guatemala?"

One of the youths points.

Even as I toss out an assortment of *peso* coins, I steer the Mercedes down the rutted byway designated by the iguana seller.

I'm heading south into uncharted territory.

In seconds the fecund wall of the jungle closes in on either side, shutting out the sky.

Jonathan Woods is a writer living in Dallas, Texas. His stories have appeared in Dogmatika, 3:AM Magazine, Plots with Guns, Noir Originals and Sein und Werden. His reviews have appeared in Dogmatika and 3:AM. He is working on a novel: a noir sequel to Jean Rhys' After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie. When not writing he works part time in a small art gallery in Dallas (www.dahliawoodsgallery.com) or travels, most frequently to Mexico & Italy. Links to his published work are at: www.southernnoir.com