

Use Hostel

By Samuel Alexander

In the year 2014 A.D., that is, 0 B.U.H., mankind was faced with extinction by ebola. The governments of the world decided to sponsor one last epic novel, to burn everything else so that this one novel would be mankind's only legacy, so it had better be fucking good. That one novel was called Use Hostel.

“Is it evil to pretend to be evil for an evil purpose?”

Chapter 1

Welcome to Use Hostel

If you like to travel for luck, there once was a perfect place for it. Traveling for luck means putting yourself through hells where only luck will save you, and doing it in a far off land. The perfect place was called Use Hostel. You pronounce it like “Youth Hostel” with a lisp. Don’t worry, they won’t notice your lisp, it’s full of exotic folks, every cusp of the earth. By the laws of probability, every author should risk death to improve his writing, I fancied that’s what I was doing there, ‘cept the truth is I’d never write shit.

Use Hostel was a tall thin skyscraper in the middle of downtown. The view was like a desert, if that desert was painted like a city. Use Hostel was a tower in that desert, with nothing for miles around. Tall doesn’t mean it was big. It was so thin, its total volume wasn’t much more than a spinster’s cottage, and that’s not even counting her cats. Instead of stairs or ‘vators, you’d climb up a ladder through everyone’s rooms. Instead of a toilet, you’d piss out the window, I hope you’re not scared of heights. If you took two thousand capsule hotel caps, stacked one on top of the next, it would be a fancy version of Use Hostel.

Tallman was standing on the Use Hostel roof. He was balancing on the heels of his feet, long leather shoes draping over the edge. He was smoking an over-long cigarette, laboring to suck the smoke so far. Shortman and I were beside him, down on our haunches, we were not as fearless as he was. We were spitting at the city below, it was a typical evening. Inventing dirty jokes and passing a bottle ‘round. God I miss Use Hostel.

The room right below us, highest room in the ‘stel, belonged to the fat woman. She’d got fat by staying in her room all the time, and now she was too big to leave. She depended now on roofcrawlers like us. Tallman, for example, would toss her the butts of his cigarettes, and she’d gobble them up like fries. As we stood there that evening, we could hear her a-singing. See, that’s how exotic the Use Hostel was, all its customs so backwards the fat lady sang at the start.

Beneath the fat lady was a mexican named Jesus. He’d sit in his room all day singing and jerking off, a smile on his innocent face. We didn’t really like

him all that much, but we liked his car. We'd take wild joyrides in it, banging up the city, taking advantage of our diplomatic immunity. Jesus was desperate to make us like him, he'd always be buying us food, bringing us babes, turning our water to wine. We tolerated him cuz of this, but we always made him sit backseat.

We were actually just about to take the car on the night this whole thing started. Not for a joyride but work. At Use Hostel, as part of your rent, you gotta do work. Not hard work, mind you, and it was well worth it as you'll hear very soon. Our job that night was to go pick up a res'. We always jumped at the chance to do pickups, we could put in impressions before the management got their chance. With Tallman in charge, we had our own little youth hostel mafia going. We'd hook people up with forbidden books, get our hooks in them before they could make any other connections, then jack up the prices once they were hooked. Jesus would say we were fishers of men. Our businesscards said: "You ban it, you buy it." We were making enough cash that the city was ours, but that ain't saying much, the city was everyone's as long as they're foreign.

Tallman flipped down his fly and squeezed out a piss. Then with a grunt we were off. We'd perfected a technique where we'd go down in freefall, grabbing the ladder at intervals to stay below terminal 'locity. We waved to our friends on the way down, Tallman tossed someone a book. We called our little operation "The Library", Shortman could never say that without face going crooked with childish laughter, haha. "Be sure you don't let your books overdue," Tallman would say, crackling his knuckles through his mirth. No-one had actually done it, but the implied threat was enough for us to assert dominance. We were dictators crushing the opposition.

"Amigos, let me come with you," said Jesus, he was smoking a shit-joint, no I mean that literally, it's what people do here. We couldn't refuse, cuz he had the keys. "I am the way, the truth, and the light," he would say, jangling those keys in Tallman's face. Tallman would lunge for them with his teeth, snarling and clenching his fists. Jesus thought it was funny, I think he was autistic myself. We piled in the car with its busted-out windows. Held our breaths as the engine sputtered poisonous gas, then with a blast we were off. The wind in our hair, Tallman grinning, holding his long cigarette in his teeth, Shortman and I rough-housing in the front seats. Jesus sat in the back jerking off like usual.

We took a shortcut to 'Arrivals,' crashing through the runways. Some flights were delayed as we mooned 'em. We drove through the terminal honk-honk-honking the horn, everyone assumed we were janitors. Imagine the resident's surprise when we pulled up behind him, screeching to a stop so close the bumper knocked his briefcase from his hands. He was decked in suit and tie, we howled with glee, I quickly made Shortman a bet, \$20 says no rent for a month. You'll see what I mean shortly.

No sooner was Tallman out of the car, he was shaking the businessman's hands, introducing himself in Queen's English and opening his trenchcoat to reveal hidden bookshelves. The businessman's eyes lit up all excite-O, we could tell he was very naive. Before we even got back in the buggy, he swiped his card

through Tallman's illegal reader, buying three banned books on credit. "Hold your breath," I said, as the engine's poisons gasped. He was so engrossed in his reading he barely more than nodded to Jesus.

Once we got to the 'ostel, the manager's son came out, the living image of Kim Jung Un. He looked at our friend with disgust, he made no secret he didn't like capitalists. "Welcome to Use Hostel, mang," said the kid. "Your first job is to clean up the walls."

"What? You're mistaken," said the man, "I've come here to stay."

"Yeah, of course, man. You stay in Use Hostel, we gotta use you. That's what the name means. 'Less you're here to 'subsidize,' that is."

And that's the way Use Hostel works, dear reader. We reel 'em in blind, these shakers and movers, they think they'll have an adventure, a romp with hostel sluts. Then we rake 'em over the grill. They've never done a day of work in their life, and they won't be ready to start at Use Hostel. So we extort a hefty fee from 'em, 'subsidizing' is what we call it. A great cheer went up the whole length of the hostel, and Shortman passed me a twenty. Then came the chanting, 'Subsidize! Subsidize!,' followed by the rain of rotten eggshells and grease, young hearts hazing our new sugar daddy, making him feel properly welcome.

God I miss Use Hostel!

Chapter 2

Background on Jesus

Let me tell you what brought Jesus to stay at Use Hostel, it's a funny story. All his life he'd been known as "The Healer". He healed people, not with a magical power, neither with medicine, but with good sense and intervention. To give you an example, imagine you're an old man living alone in a big house full of memories, and one day Jesus comes knocking on your door asking to show you a sales catalog. You let him in and, while giving his sales pitch, he happens to see the jigsaw puzzles and electric train sets that belonged to your poor dead son. He takes the entire day off and sits with you playing with those old toys, rekindling feelings you never knew you'd lost. That's the kind of healing Jesus did.

Well, one day he went to visit his father, and on the way there he got to thinking how he could help him. Jesus' father was very short and weak, had been all his life, and bald to boot. When you met him he'd point at you with one weak outstretched finger. You'd never imagine him in a dance club. And it occurred to Jesus that that was probably where his father needed healing most, to remember days of glory.

So Jesus gently guided Dad away from Mom for awhile, and walking together by the river in the park he said: "Dad, tell me about the women you loved before Mom."

But then Jesus' dad wept. "Oh, son, how can I keep this from you any more? I never loved any woman. I could never even get a first kiss."

After admitting that to his son, Jesus's dad actually got weaker. He limped around with shame ever after. It was the end of Jesus's good luck streak. Since shortly after that, Jesus couldn't show his face at any of his relations', without a warning about his 'healing'.

Jesus went through a hard patch. He wasn't welcome on peoples' roofs, so he would lurk around spying for anyone patching up leaks, then he'd gather the throw-away roof-tiles, spend the night under those.

He took up binge drinking, and turned it into bungee drinking. He ended up in rehab. But there's a happy ending, he made one great friend at each of his twelve step programs. And each of these friends all told him the same: "Seek

out the Use Hostel. You are needed there.”

Chapter 3

They break a banned author out of jail

You may have heard of jailbreaks where the prisoners dig their way out. We helped with one of those, but not in the usual way. Tallman insisted on doing it in style, so we tapped in to some of that Use Hostel labor, and we tunneled a way for the car.

The prisoner was a certain author of banned books. He'd been locked away for subversive literature and subliteral verses. You can imagine why we were interested in having him. In the cutthroat competitive black market for books, it was like having a nuclear bomb. Imagine his surprise when the car pulled up outside his toilet, the bumper knocking the lantern off his table. (We would later find out that it burned down the whole jail.) We kicked through what was left of the wall and we napped him.

"What the fuck took you so long?" he said to Tallman. "I've got half a mind to sue you."

Tallman playfully ruffled his hair. "I'd be worried if I thought you had half a brain, Doc." We waited to hear the prison sirens blaring before taking off, it was the genius of our plan, use the alarms to muffle the sound of the engine.

"Hey Yu, I don't think you've met Doc before," Tallman laughed, tossing his tie back over his shoulders to blow like a cape as we burst into the daylight. (That's how tall Tallman was, he bought his neckties at novelty costume shoppes, filling the Use Hostel dumpsters with mutilated vampire gear.) "Shortman! Introductions!"

"Oh man, Doc's the meanest," Shortman looked up from his vidya. "Tell 'im about the time you killed all those dudes, Doc."

"Bastards called me a Philistine," said our doctor wiping his specs, they'd gotten dirty during the jailbreak.

"Ahh, an attack on your literary credentials," I said, trying to sound wise.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" He peered at me through the dirty spectacles. "No, I'm a real Philistine. Nothing pisses me off more than when

you insinuate things about my people.”

“Where is Philistine, anyway? One of those Middle Eastern countries?” Jesus piped up. We’d all forgotten he was there, he’d been smoking his painkillers through the entire operation.

“You ever seen one of those pictures of Israel, and it has, like, this littler, fragmented country scattered inside it?” Doc said.

“Oh, Philistine is Palestine,” I said.

“No, ya moron,” he gave me a quizzical look like he was checking whether we were on the right side of the road. “If you look at the tiniest little piece of Palestine, you’ll see it’s a perfect copy of Israel, only smaller. And inside that little Israel, there’s a tiny copy of Palestine, and that’s Philistine. Those are my people.”

“Tell ‘im about the novel you’re workin’ on,” said Shortman.

“I’m travelling the world, visiting its diverse indiginous populations and pissing ‘em off,” said Doc. “Pissing on their elephant graveyards and shitting in their elephant cans. Putting their ancestors on cinnamon toast. See, my goal is to write a novel where every single line has been cursed. I didn’t think of a title yet, I’ll have to come up with something particularly cursed.”

“You should name it after our youth hostel,” said Tallman with a laugh.

“Your hostel’s too weird, man,” said Doc with a laugh. “If Alice saw it, she’d look down at Toto and say, ‘We’re not in Wonderland any more!’”

“Hey, you ever write anything about nihilism?” Jesus asked.

“I’ll tell you a story about that,” said Doc, realizing he had his specs on backwards he quickly fixed them. “I was at an airport once when I got one of my bursts of inspiration, and right at that very moment, my pen ran out of ink. There I was, in a foreign land, flight in fifteen minutes, both sides of the self-walking platform going the wrong way, and nothing to write down all these brilliant thoughts pouring into my head. I’d’ve shouted them aloud, but they’d have got me blown up by the TSA. The three kings themselves couldn’t get past security these days, you know. To add insult, when they finally did give me a pen, it was to fill out one of those landing cards. Imagine this long-bearded Philistine, maniacal gleam in his eye, scimitar in his belt, feverishly scratching divine revelations about nihilism on the back of a landing card. The TSA took the card away, who knows where it’s at now, they probably burned it. But here’s the thing, if the whole ordeal didn’t happen, I wouldn’t have this story to tell you now. So that’s kind of my philosophy: you win some, you lose some, it all evens out in the end.”

“Far out, man,” Jesus blew a pair of smokerings, one for each lens of the doctor’s eyeglasses.

“Why didn’t you use your cellphone, dumbass?” said Shortman.

“Shit man, they got a road block ahead,” Tallman spat, he could spit further than the length of his cigarette, but just barely.

“Eye of the needle man, eye of the needle,” said Jesus.

“It’s cool, I came prepared,” Doc said. He rolled up his shirt to reveal suicide bomber gear. Shortman and I quickly untied the dynamite, Jesus lit the fuse with his vaper. “The ice did shit with a thunder-fit, and Tallman steered us

through!,” said Doc in a ridiculous falsetto-poetic voice, as we blasted our way past, “That’s Poe, by the way.”

“No it ain’t, ya boob!” Tallman kicked him playfully in the shin, the car started weeving all over the road. The force of the whiplash sent Doc’s glasses flying into the night. “That’s T.S. Eliot!”

“You can’t even spell T.S. Eliot!”

The air was filled with half-burned pages, swirling around like a tornado. Doc snatched at one of them and went ballistic. “Fuck man, shit!” “What is it?” I said. “They filled the roadblock with my papers!” He stood up and shook his fists furiously, I was glad he’d lost his suicide bombs. Jesus absently grabbed one of the pages, crumpled it up into a tiny little ball, and smoked it.

Chapter 4

The Doctor is Received

The first thing Doc wanted with his newfound freedom was to visit his father's grave. His father was buried in the Flying Graveyard. Never heard of it? It's the most convenient option around. When your loved one dies, you don't need to worry about hearses, the Flying Graveyard comes to you. When you want to pay a visit, you call 'em up and make an appointment. They'll hover over your roof, you can grapple aboard. Where is the Flying Graveyard when it's not flying, you ask? You really aren't from here! The Flying Graveyard is always flying, it was retrofitted from an old Soviet bomber. Bitch is nuclear powered. Rumors say the graves hide old warheads, hammer and sickle and all. You can rest in peace knowing the statue of Lenin is watching your dearly departed. You can book a ticket on the Graveyard, it's the cheapest flight around. Better bring a jacket, it's cold in a graveyard at 30,000 feet. We launched the passenger option to make travel more affordable. Oh, I didn't mention that? Yes, the Flying Graveyard is a Use Hostel subsidiary. Tallman says if anyone mentions the conflict of interests, he'll make 'em wind up dead.

"Don't be fooled," said Doc as we looked at the tombstone. The solemn letters said 'Here lies Doc Sr.' "Just one of the aces up my shirt. Watch." He rolled up his shirt and produced a combat spade (he hadn't changed out of his prison scrubs). Jesus grabbed his arm. "You can't dig up graves," he said. "You gonna stop me?" said Doc. The two got in a scuffle until Tallman pulled Jesus away. Jesus kept swinging as Tallman held him above reach. The Philistine dug open the sarcophagus, and instead of a body, it was full of papers. "Government would never look here," he said with a wink, packing the papers under the straps where the dynamite had been. "See, J.? No need to fret!" But Jesus was still pissed, he would hold a grudge against Doc a long time.

With no vacancy at Use Hostel, we decided Doc would share my room. Then one by one his seventy-two brides started arriving. I'm sure you've heard of women falling in love with imprisoned serial killers. Well it's worse with imprisoned writers. We were strapped for space, so each bride had to room with a Use Hostel regular. Tallman and Shortman pulled strings to get the prettiest two. Every night, one of Doc's brides would visit, and I'd be obliged

to face my chair at the wall. Then in the morning he'd howl about how she'd deceived him, promised virginity, how he was cheated, all that. When the bride staying with Tallman came, Doc said: "Virgin! She's slept with every animal in the African safari! Not only that, every inch tastes like cigarettes." The only bride he was remotely happy with was Shortman's. "She's no virgin," said Doc the next morning, rubbing his knees, "but she's pretty damn close."

Shortly after Doc moved in, we got an interesting visitor. We were sweeping the sidewalk when a real uptight character showed.

"Can we help you?" Shortman said with a voice you wouldn't want help from.

"GAFMAS," he said, flapping a badge at us. "Government Agency For Making Authors Suffer." He had some sort of cage with a blanket. As he spoke, the cage shook and we heard a sound simultaneously sinister and adorable. "I'm looking for this man," he said, and sure enough, where you'd expect to see his own face, the badge showed Doc's face instead.

"Man, get out of our jello," said Shortman. "You ain't got authority here! Why the hell you think we 'spatriated? You got a warrant? You probably don't even have a warranty. Go home, leave us to the local authorities. That's what they're paid for!"

"The doctor's not in," Tallman said. "If this is a medical emergency, please dial F-U-C-K-Y-O-U. Doc's too important for plastic surgery. If you're here for lipo, you better check the exchange rate on fat. You're in the wrong neighborhood, this ain't Kaiser Permanente. You can still call us Kaiser though." Then Shortman tugged on a bell, and a crowd of Hostellers chased the agent away, sent him crawling and crying to the nearest bus stop. Burnt like a book.

One evening Doc and Tallman were out on the town and I was guarding the fort. In came Tallman's girl, dressed like a concubine. She sat on my lap and asked if I'd share her sleeping bag tonight. I got real excited to snuggle up tight with such a crunchy mama. But the sleeping bag was so loose it was more like sharing a tent. In fact it was so loose I tossed and turned fitfully. At one point I woke up soaking, afraid the hostel was burning, it was the cigarette smell. The girl had an unamused look on her face. "When is Tallman getting back," she said boredly. A few weeks later she missed her period. Doc was furious, he's particular about grammar. Fortunately Tallman had a novel method of fixing missed periods. Picture a stork flying along, and someone sticks a long cigarette through a tube into its beak. This stork, it inhales the smoke, and this happens day after day, month after month. Eventually the stork delivers a sickly baby, weak and blinking with lung cancer. The surgeons spare no expense, but who can cure cancer? As for the umbilical cord, Shortman keeps that. Shortman has a saying: "Life is nothing but a drug called *umbilical cord*."

To ensure the doctor's productivity, we set him up with a kind of hamster wheel. Instead of revolving it with your feet, you revolve it with your fingers. The faster you type, the faster it spins. The Doc would sit in there for hours, typing furiously. It was so cute the way he thought if he could just go fast enough he'd get somewhere. Tallman was thrilled with the output it generated. Me, I wasn't so Happy Meal, the squeaking kept me up late. One day when Doc

was out clubbing with Tallman, I gave the wheel a try. I was such a wretched writer, the thing went backwards!

Chapter 5

The Amateur Church

Management was worried about hostel morals, so they asked us to build ‘em a church. We rounded up the best-traveled men staying with us, sorted ‘em by length of the beard. Tallman passed a spiral around, “Everyone write down what you know about churches.”

“Does anyone have a Bible?” asked Shortman.

“I’ve got The Brothers Karamozov,” offered Old Ivan. Old Ivan was a sad specimen, always wanted to barb, but no-one would hire an old Russian barber, so he had to work at noodle shops, abusing his hair-cutting tools to cut ramen and spaghetti.

“Good enough,” said Tallman. “Anyone else?”

Doc supplemented the Brothers with a copy of “Before the Law” torn from the novel around it. The author would leapfrog in his grave if he knew the way we were using it.

“Man, has any of us even pushed foot in a church?” said Old Ivan.

“I broke up a wedding once,” Shortman said. He showed us his rings.

We didn’t have any holy ground for a church, so we built it sideways, jutting out from the hostel. An engineer would have taken one look and burned up his license. Then we got in an argument. If the church was sideways, which way should we put the cross? A right angle would make it too phallic. But if it was parallel to the hostel, it would be perpendicular to the church. In the end we struck a compromise, hang it upside down. Tallman liked it, he would go there on calm days, hang inverted from the cross-arms like monkey-bars. Smoking a longass cigarette, it was hard to say which was longer, the cross or the cigarette. With his nose below his mouth he would inhale the smoke right back in where it came from. It was a smoke ouroboros.

How did we get the cross there, you ask? We asked Jesus, of course. Crafty bastard found this dis-assemblable IKEA cross. He carried it up at his leisure. Some screws went missing, we had to shorten the right arm of the cross, make it a bit asymmetric.

It was too awkward for plumbing, so when you wanted baptism, you had to lug the water up yourself. Fourty gruesome floors up the ladder, with Shortman

and Tallman whipping your back. After you were done we'd throw out the bathwater, one time we accidentally threw a baby out with it. To cover up the incident, we made it a regular ceremony. We hadn't planned on child sacrifice at the start, but it's better than murder. "A good writer kills his babies," as Doc would say.

Doc's virgins were especially excited about the church. It was somewhere they could sleep aside from the cramped rooms. As soon as word got around, the church would be packed with Use Hostel men, bothering the brides to no end. They would all lie around amid the carpentry tools, bras and panties draped over the cross's arms, we had to chase them out to get any building done, Tallman and I did the chasing while Doc stood there shouting, "Get out, you wretched crowns of thorns!"

In the later stages of construction, Doc misplaced one of his explosives, blew up part of the wall. There in the rumble we saw a pair of ancient scrolls. They'd been hid in the Use Hostel wall since before antiquity. "The original scriptures!" Doc exclaimed, fingers in his mouth with disbelief. Tallman picked up the scrolls and opened 'em. "No such luck Doc," he said, "It's the Brothers and the Law."

When we were done with it, the management didn't like the color. In the end we had to build an identical copy on the opposite wall. On the plus side, if you looked at the hostel from afar, it looked like a cross by itself.

Chapter 6

A job at Use Hotel

The manager of Use Hostel had a brother in the next city over. The brother ran a joint called the Use Hotel, a resort for the wealthy. Always bustling with Smiths keeping up with each other. One day this brother needed manual labor, so Tallman volunteered us. The Use Hotel manager promised a week's board and room.

Disembarking at Use Station, we couldn't see the end of Use Hotel to either the left or the right. On the contrary, the hotel was shortest in the middle, growing taller at either pole. You know how airports have those self-walking platforms? Use Hotel had those for cars. "Would've been nice to have one of those in our prison break," said Doc. "For seven's sake, there's no pleasing some people," said Tallman. There were car escalators too, some of the tenants insisted on parking their cars in their room. Rambunctious kids would drive the car up the down escalator and down the up escalator, driving their parents bonkers.

The receptionist was a professional Ronald Reagan actor. "Who the what's it?" he said, looking at us with confusion. "It's okay, Ronny," said his nurse, "remember, you're a receptionist at Use Hotel now." He twisted his mouth, struggling for memory. "Are you the gunrunners?" he said.

"We're from Use Hostel," said Tallman, "we volunteered for day labor."

"You don't look Mexican to me," said Ronny, leafing through the ledger. "Where's Nancy? I've got a state of the union in ten minutes, where the hell is that cunt?"

"Looks like it's Ronny's naptime," said the nurse, leading him away. She came back with a heavy adult diaper, we all held our nose. She looked at the trashcan on one side, she looked at us on the other. A moment of indecision. Then she walked to us, setting the diaper on the counter and daintily covering it with a page from the ledger. "Sorry about that," she said, "Alright, we were expecting you, here are your nametags."

It was more like wearing a barrel than wearing a nametag. At Use Hotel, nametags were very important, let people know who you are. The lower your lot in life, the bigger the tag. We were such no-ones, the space was all ads, I guess

they ‘subsidies’ differently here. If you were an oil sheik from Serbia, they’d give you a nametag smaller than a miniature postage stamp. You’d stand around gloating while awe-struck people craned their necks trying to read it.

“There’s a mixup with your room,” said the nurse. “We’re out of bedpans, so we upgraded you to an executive suite.”

When we opened the door to the room, it was like opening the door to a city, if that city was spaced out like a desert. The room had its own lobby, with doormen and receptionists, bellboys and liftboys, accountants to take care of their paychecks, economists to take care of the accountants, professors to take care of the economists, in short it really was a city, but it was so spacious it would take you an hour to walk from the baker to his bread-boy.

A stretch limo pulled up to take us through the living room to the bedroom. The limo itself was spacious and luxurious, not a city per se, more like a hamlet. “To be or to be not,” said Doc with a chuckle. Complimentary escort girls lounged in the limousine hot-tub. They were naked except for their nametags, just big enough to cover the important parts. Doc wasted no time burying his face in a big pair of titties, “A writer needs his muse.” Soon milk was running down his chin, he was a happy cat. Jesus helped himself to the limo’s complimentary hookah. “Can’t be a fisher of men without a hookah,” he said.

The driver was a Harvard professor of driving. He’d authored a PhD on conveying East Indian princesses. The dissertation won awards and was cited, eventually led to a paper in *Nature*. Lesser professors had even written dissertations on the art of transporting this driver around.

“Hey guys, I’ve got an idea,” said Shortman. Then to the driver: “We’ve got this job we’ve gotta do here. Manual labor and stuff. Think you can take care of it?”

“I anticipated you would ask that,” said the driver, a perfect British accent. “I have already taken care of it.”

We all high-fived Shortman (Tallman under-handed). The limo stopped as it arrived at the destination, the door to the bedroom itself. It was protected by a moat, the driver pushed a button to lower the drawbridge. Beyond the moat, the bedroom wall was a replica of the Great Wall of China, I guess they gave us the oriental room. We piled out of the car, tipsy from the car-bar. Tallman slipped the driver a coin to show our appreciation. The girls waved from the hot-tub, exhorting us to come back soon. We watched as the car drove off to the crusher, it was policy here that no limo be re-used.

The bedroom itself was an indoor beach. It had pristine white sand and stretched as far as the eye could see. Tallman crouched, wetted his finger, tentatively licked a pinch of the sand. “This is no sand,” he said, “it’s coke.” Instead of sofas there were beach-chairs. A giant screen looked like it would fit in a drive-in theatre, if the IMAX had drive-ins.

As for the beds, they were aboard a luxury cruiser. We went aboard and promptly passed out on the soft bedding, we were pooped from our ride on the Use Train. That idiot Jesus tripped over the anchor chain, and while we were sleeping, the ship went adrift. We woke up to no land in sight. We were lost at sea.

There wasn't much food aboard. The larder was taken up with long cigarettes. Tallman made good use of them, climbing the crow's nest to send out smoke signals. Fortunately the seawater was potable, it had a chlorine taste. It was disgusting to drink, they kept it heated to room temperature.

Day after day, we paced the decks, stomachs roaring with hunger. "As idle as a painted shit upon a painted ocean," said Doc in despair. Our big huge nametags are all that saved us, we were able to gnaw at them for nourishment, if we'd been fatcats we'd've starved.

By day, the heat of the tanning-bed sun beat down on us. By night we navigated by artificial stars. Doc did the calculations. "If that over there's Venus," he said, "we're somewhere in Antarctica."

The last day of our reservation, when all hope was lost, Tallman spotted an island. We lowered the lifeboats and pedalled ashore. The ship sank behind us, hotel policy just like the limo. It was a tiny desert island, not even a palmtree, but sitting on a pedestal there was a white hotel phone. "Front desk. Again?! Do you know how many guests get lost in there? Hang on, we're sending help."

In a few minutes, a private jet came to our rescue.

Chapter 7

They burn a city library

The contents of this chapter are important, and I wanted to get every detail right. So I'm transcribing it all straight from Shortman's journal, to make sure none of the facts are embellished by the decay of memory.

The time had come to take a bite out of our competition. The city library was poaching customers from us with their shitty unbanned books. How anyone could stand that boring tripe is beyond me, but fools make the best customers, so a good businessman can never really understand his own customers.

"Isn't burning a library a bit extreme?" asked Jesus.

"If the books were important, they would've been banned," Tallman said.

The city library was shaped like a ship. It was ripped off the Library of London. The lower floors were long like a hull, and the higher floors were narrower, so that part of the roof of the lower floors served as ship'sdeck. The highest floors formed a tower, painted to look like a smokestack. Three great sails, with three crow's nests, were purely for decoration. By chance, the library was in the middle of a grand exhibition. In the discovery of the century, archaeologists had uncovered a treasure trove of books, a perfect duplicate of the original Library of Alexandria. All these priceless works were on display at the city library, for one week only. We smiled looking at the packed crowds, a perfect screen for our plan.

We figured it would be best to start the fire from the inside out. So Doc penned some books with his patent pending exploding ink. In the interest of time, these books were the trashiest, most formulaic of romance novels. He wrote a dozen of them in one sitting. Books like "Wolfshoulders of Cambridge", about a wealthy muscle-bound scholar with ravenous wolves for shoulders, and how he was tamed by Madame Lindsey of the Sigma Lambda Tau sorority. We had no trouble sneaking them into the library, the patrons love garbage like that so the library lapped 'em right up. In fact the library put them on display beside ancient Alexandrian works like Euclid's "Conics".

Our major concern was that people would haul books out of the library before they could ignite. So Tallman, Doc, and I, we covered the three exits to the library with our trojan horses. Three giant trojan horses, with us hidden

inside. The library was happy to have ‘em parked by the exits, they thought they were part of the whole theme. Little did they know we were waiting inside with bullhorns, to yell at anyone taking out books. Doc, immature guy that he was, couldn’t help but giggle every time anyone said the word “trojan”, then he’d whip out some juvenile condom joke. It was completely inappropriate given the grave nature of our work that day.

As for Shortman, his job was to sew chaos. The main lightsource was the adjacent lighthouse. This, too, had been dug up by archaeologists, it was a previously unknown identical twin and contemporary of the Lighthouse at Alexandria. Shortman scaled the walls (we were all very good at this from Use Hostel) and, with the help of Old Ivan, absconded with the lighthouse lamp! Later we would plant it on the roof of Use Hostel, making the ‘stel a shining beacon visible for hundreds of miles.

As soon as the light blinked out, Doc pushed a button and his trashy romances burst into fireballs. The ancient scrolls beside them were dry and flammable, and in no time at all, we had a glorious bonfire going. Patrons and tourists rushed out in droves, we didn’t care about them. But as soon as we saw someone holding a book, we’d give ‘em a roar through the trojan megaphones. “You in the bluejeans! Drop the Plato!” “You with the trenchcoat! Yes, you! Open it up! Hah, thought so! Throw those scrolls back in the flames, and no funny stuff!”

A Spanish soldier made a mad dash for it. I cursed into the walkie talkie, “We’ve got a live one! Cover me, I’m going after him!” I dropped through the trapdoor in the bottom of my horse, dashed after the man. Jesus opened fire from a nearby high-rise, his machine gun making sure no-one would try to go out my exit while I was away.

The spaniard was faster than me, but no-one knows the streets around Use Hostel as well as I do. Soon he ran into a dead end. “Alright, nice try, fork over the book. What is it, anyway, you sure seem hellbent on saving it!” I grabbed the stack of books from him. “What the hell? What language is this even?”

“Aztec, sir,” he said, “please don’t shoot me! I have a family! This one here’s Mayan.”

“I didn’t know there were New World books in the library,” I said.

“We were trying to keep them hidden from the public until scholars could photograph them properly,” said the soldier. “A whole floor of ‘em burst into flames, I grabbed these to save what I could.”

“If people want books, tell ‘em to visit Use Hostel,” I barked, ran back to my horse. I tossed the American literature through a window into the inferno inside.

Inside the library, Head Librarian Smith was holed up on the bridge, holding an emergency meeting with his officers.

“This library’s going to sink in less than two hours,” said the chief architect.

“Man the lifeboats,” said the head librarian.

“Sir, we don’t have enough boats.”

“May god have mercy on our souls. Women and children first.”

Then began the frantic lowering of lifeboats from the deck of the library. Boats were so packed that the flames came up to the very rims. A couple of the collapsible boats, launched right as the great library was splitting in two, flipped upside down in the flames. I saw a mass of men frantically clinging to these, flames all around 'em.

The last thing we saw of the library before it vanished under the sea of fire was the three lookouts, standing in the crows nests faithfully until the very end.

Chapter 8

An unexpected twist

Add this one to the list of tragic deaths. One shivery December, the doctor went out for a smoke and forgot where he left his keys. The hostel door was locked behind him, his cigarette soon ran out. By the time we found him next morning he was stiff and blue like a sickle. He died pointing at something dramatic, but some damn city kids'd run off with his finger.

"I'll kill every kid in this city if I have to," Tallman shook his fists toward heaven, taking out his frustration. But shake as he might, no-one would so much as give back the finger.

We all absolutely agreed we couldn't stand Doc rolling in his grave. So we assented to cremation instead. There was a mixup because of the weather, and instead of burning him they smashed him into powder. We were just in time to buy him wholesale before they shipped him out to the ice cream stores.

We had just buried the last of the powder, it was impossible to separate it from cookies and cream. Suddenly there was a "Yip!" A cute little dog ran up, with Doc's finger in its mouth. It plopped the finger down at our feet, sat there wagging its tail.

"Is that you, Doc?" said Shortman.

"It's me!" said the dog. "I came back to remain by your side!"

But just then a bus hit the dog, flattened him good and dead.

"Shit man, now we gotta dig him back up," Shortman said.

And dig him up we did, scraping as much of the finger as we could into the gravehole. We were about to scrape the dog in as well, when a family of orphans ran up around us.

"Dada!" they all cried, mourning their puppy. See, they missed their parents so much, they'd adopted these mongrels and named them "Dada" and "Ma". And "Dada" was dead at our hands. "Dada, oh Dada! Don't bury him," they grabbed the corpse away from us. They ran off, Tallman shaking his fist at them. Then Tallman screamed. In all the commotion, one of them had snatched up the finger and run off with that too!

I guess under the circumstances I should tell you about the last story Doc was working on. It's what he would want, I guess.

There's this old hand, see? It's old and weak and as big as a house. Soldiers and policemen surround it, forcing it to keep working. With a pen clenched in its fingers, it slowly writes down stories while the armed men shout at it. They won't give it a break. This hand, it just wants to sleep, you know? Why do they work it so hard? They torment it so relentlessly. The hand puts up with it all patiently—"The patience of God!," Doc would say, pacing back and forth—but deep down the hand harbors a grudge. "One of these days," it thinks to itself, "I'm gonna change everything! I'm gonna write a new law code, one that doesn't involve people abusing poor sickly old hands."

We would constantly harass Doc. "Writer characters are so cliché," Tallman would say, a playful ruffle but a hint of the truth. Doc would tear up his manuscripts, run around the room. "Just leave me alone!" he would cry. Late at night when he thought I was sleeping, he would mutter his innermost thoughts to himself. "All I ever wanted," he would whisper, "is for people to tell me I'm smart." But then the very next day, Tallman and Shortman would be at him again, teasing his tropes like a kid who just found his first crush.

Back to the giant hand. Here's what it was writing before Doc wound up dead.

An author is negotiating with a doctor for a life-saving operation. He doesn't have enough money, but, "This here novel's worth at least \$50K if I sell it." So the doctor takes the book, he accepts it as payment, "You know," he says, "this is a conflict of interests, if I'd let you die, the book would be worth so much more!" But then the joke turns tragic when the patient doesn't survive the operation. Suddenly the doctor regrets ever saying it, cuz now he can't sell the book without raising suspicions. So in anger he sticks it in his wood chipper, saying, "If I can't enjoy it nobody will!" He mixes the bits up in his mulcher, uses them to fertilize his garden. But then the police show up, "Sir, do you have the copyright on these tomatoes?" To make a cornstalk a turnip (that's a play on 'to make a long story short'), the poor doctor ends up owing his entire life savings on royalties. In the end it puts him in the poor house (and that's only one step better than the Use Hostel). He's so poor that he has to negotiate for healthcare. But he has no novels to sell, so instead he sticks up a bank. "Your money or your lives," he says, Hippocrates is rolling in his grave. The police circle the building, it turns into a hostage situation. To make a felony a misdemeanor, they let him off light. The state even paid for his operation. "But you've really used your last dollar," says the judge from the pulpit. He'd used up all his good will. (Here the author identifies himself with the judge.) They let him live, but only as punishment. They grind him down to the very marrow of his bone. They don't even let him have electricity at night. He sits there grinning to himself in the dark and the cold. Remembering that silly author that started it all. Thinking, with a certain malice: "See, now! I've been through a lot more than any stupid character of yours ever could!"