

## PART 4

### The Great Shark Hunt

*Four-thirty in Cozumel now; dawn is coming up on these gentle white beaches looking west at the Yucatan Channel. Thirty yards from my patio here at Cabañas del Caribe, the surf is rolling up, very softly, on the beach out there in the darkness beyond the palm trees.*

*Many vicious mosquitoes and sand fleas out here tonight. There are 60 units in this rambling beach-front hotel, but my room -- number 129 -- is the only one full of light and music and movement.*

*I have both my doors and all four windows propped open -- a huge bright magnet for every bug on the island. . . But I am not being bitten. Every inch of my body -- from the soles of my bleeding bandaged feet to the top of my sun-scorched head -- is covered with 6-12 Insect Repellent, a cheap foul-smelling oil with no redeeming social or aesthetic characteristics except that it works.*

*These goddamn bugs are all around -- settling on the notebook, my wrist, my arms, circling the rim of my tall glass of Bacardi Añejo and ice. . . but no bites. It has taken about six days to solve this hellish bug problem. . . which is excellent news on the one level, but, as always, the solution to one problem just peels back another layer and exposes some new and more sensitive area.*

*At this stage of the gig, things like mosquitoes and sand fleas are the least of our worries. . . because in about two hours and 22 minutes I have to get out of this hotel without paying an unnaturally massive bill, drive about three miles down the coast in a rented VW Safari that can't be paid for, either, and which may not even make it into town, due to serious mechanical problems -- and then get my technical advisor Yail Bloor out of the Mesón San Miguel without paying his bill, either, and then drive us both out to the airport in that goddamn junk Safari to catch the 7:50 Aeromexico flight to Mérida and Monterrey, where we'll change planes for San Antonio and Denver.*

*So we are looking at a very heavy day. . . 2000 miles between here and home, no cash at all, ten brutally expensive days in three hotels on the Striker Aluminum Yachts credit tab, which just got jerked out from under us when the local PR team decided we were acting too weird to be what we claim to be -- and so now we are down to about \$44 extra between us -- with my bill at the Cabañas hovering around \$650 and Bloor's at the San Miguel not much less -- plus 11 days for that wretched car from the local Avis dealer who already hit me for \$40 cash for a broken windshield, and God only knows how much he'll demand when he sees what condition his car is in now. . . plus about \$400 worth of black coral that we ordered up from China: doubled-thumbed fist, coke spoons, sharks' teeth, etc. . . and that \$120 18-kt.-gold chain at the market. . . also Sandy's black-coral necklace. We will need all available cash for the black-coral deal -- so things like hotel bills and car rentals will have to be put off and paid by check, if anybody will take one. . . or charged to Striker Aluminum Yachts, which got me into this goddamn twisted scene in*

*the first place. But the Striker people are no longer with us; extreme out-front hostility. Bruce, Joyce -- even the bogus lecher Eduardo. How did we blow the image?*

"Dear Mr. Thompson. . . Here's some background information on the Cozumel cruise and international fishing tournament. . . Regarding the cruise schedule, about 14 Strikers will leave Fort Lauderdale on April 23, arriving in Key West that night, leaving Key West midday on the 25th, to assure skirting the Cuban coast in the daytime, and arriving in Cozumel midafternoon on the 27th or 28th. In addition to the proven sailfishing, there will be a Marlin Only Day on Saturday May sixth, in the initial attempt on any volume basis to determine how good the blue-marlin fishing is. . . Each night during the tournament, there are cocktail parties with over 250 people attending, mariachi and island music, etc. . . We are happy you can make the trip. . . Flights leave Miami daily for Cozumel at 2:45 P.M. You will need a Mexican tourist card, which you can pick up at the Mexican Tourism Department, 100 Biscayne Boulevard, Room 612 Miami. There are no shots required.

Sincerely,  
Terence J. Byrne  
Public Relations Representative  
Striker Aluminum Yachts  
Fort Lauderdale, Florida

Indeed. . . no shots: just a tourist card, plenty of Coppertone, a new pair of Top-siders and a fine gringo smile for the customs officers. The letter called up visions of heavy sport on the high seas, *mono a mono* with giant sailfish and world-record marlin. . . Reeling the bastards in, fighting off sharks with big gaffs, strapped into a soft white-Naugahyde fighting chair in the cockpit of a big power cruiser. . . then back to the harbor at dusk for a brace of gin and tonics, tall drinks in the sunset, lounging around in cool deck chairs while the crew chops up bait and a strolling mariachi band roams on the pier, wailing mournful Olmec love songs. . .

Ah, yes, I was definitely ready for it. Sixteen months of straight politics had left me reeling around on the brink of a nervous breakdown. I needed a change, something totally different from my normal line of work. Covering politics is a vicious, health-ripping ordeal that often requires eight or nine shots at once -- twice or three times a week in the peak season -- so this unexpected assignment to "cover" a deep-sea-fishing tournament off the Yucatán coast of Mexico was a welcome relief from the horrors of the campaign trail in 1972.

Right. Things would be different now: hot sun, salt air, early to bed and early to rise. . . This one had all the signs of a high-style bag job: Fly off to the Caribbean as a guest of the idle rich, hang around on their boats for a week or so, then crank out a left-handed story to cover expenses and pay for a new motorcycle back in the Rockies. The story itself was a bit on the hazy side, but the editor at *PLAYBOY* said not to worry. Almost everybody unfortunate enough to have had any dealings with me since the campaign ended seemed convinced that I was in serious need of a vacation -- a cooling-out period, a chance to back off -- and this fishing tournament in Cozumel looked just about perfect. It would pry my head out of politics, they said, and force me off in a new direction -- out of the valley of death and back toward the land of the living.

There was, however, a kink: I had just come *back* from "vacation." It was the first one I'd ever attempted, or at least the first one I'd tried since I was fired from my last regular job on Christmas Day in 1958, when the production manager at *Time* magazine ripped up my punch card in a stuttering rage and told me to get the fuck out of the building. Since then I had been unemployed -- in the formal sense of that word -- and when you've been out of work for 14 years, it's almost impossible to relate to a word like vacation.

So I was extremely nervous when circumstances compelled me, in the late winter of '72, to fly to Cozumel with my wife, Sandy, in order to do nothing at all.

Three days later I ran out of air in a rip tide, 90 feet down on Palancar Reef, and I came so close to drowning that they said, later, I was lucky to get off with a serious case of the bends. The nearest decompression chamber was in Miami, so they chartered a plane and flew me there that same night.

I spent the next 19 days in a pressurized sphere somewhere in downtown Miami, and when I finally came out, the bill was \$3000. My wife finally located my attorney in a drug commune on the outskirts of Mazatlan. He flew immediately to Florida and had the courts declare me a pauper so I was able to leave without legal problems.

I went back to Colorado with the idea of resting for at least six months. But three days after I got home, this assignment came in to cover the fishing tournament. It was a natural, they said, because I was already familiar with the island. And besides, I needed a change from politics.

Which was true, in a way -- but I had my own reasons for wanting to go back to Cozumel. On the evening before my near-fatal scuba dive on Palancar Reef, I had stashed 50 units of pure MDA in the adobe wall of the shark pool at the local aquarium next to the Hotel Barracuda -- and this stash had been much on my mind while I was recovering from the bends in the Miami hospital.

So when the Cozumel assignment came through, I drove immediately into town to consult with my old friend and drug crony Yail Bloor. I explained the circumstances in detail, then asked his advice.

"It's clear as a fucking bell," he snapped. "We'll have to go down there at once. You'll handle the fishermen while I get the drugs."

These were the circumstances that sent me back to Cozumel in late April. Neither the editor nor the high-powered sport-fishing crowd we'd be dealing with had any notion of my real reason for making the trip. Bloor knew, but he had a vested interest in maintaining the cover because I was passing him off, on the tab, as my "technical advisor." It made perfect sense, I felt: In order to cover a highly competitive situation, you need plenty of trustworthy help.

When I got to Cozumel, on Monday afternoon, everybody on the island with any clout in the tourism business was half-mad with excitement at the idea of having a genuwine, real-life "*PLAYBOY* writer" in their midst for a week or ten days. When I slumped off the plane from Miami, I was greeted like Buffalo Bill on his first trip to Chicago -- a whole gaggle of public-relations specialists met the plane, and at least three of them were waiting for *me*: What could they do for me? What did I *want*? How could they make my life pleasant?

Carry my bags?

Well. . . why not?

To where

Well. . . I paused, sensing an unexpected opening that could lead almost anywhere. . . "I think I'm supposed to go to the Cabañas," I said. "But --"

"No," said one of the handlers, "you have a press suite at Cozumeleno."

I shrugged. "Whatever's right," I muttered. "Let's roll."

I'd asked the travel agent in Colorado to get me one of those VW Safari jeeps -- the same kind I'd had on my last trip to Cozumel -- but the PR crowd at the airport insisted on taking me straight to the hotel. My jeep they said, would be delivered within the hour, and in the meantime, I was treated like some kind of high-style dignitary: A few people actually addressed me as "Mr. Playboy" and the others kept calling me "sir." I was hustled into a waiting car and whisked off along the two-lane blacktop highway through the palm jungle and out in the general direction of the American Strip, a cluster of beach-front hotels on the northeast end of the island.

Despite my lame protests, they took me to the newest, biggest and most expensive hotel on the island -- a huge, stark-white concrete hulk that reminded me of the Oakland city jail. We were met at the desk by the manager, the owner and several hired heavies who explained that the terrible hammering noise I heard was merely the workmen putting the finishing touches on the third floor of what would eventually be a five-story colossus. "We have just ninety rooms now," the manager explained, "but by Christmas we will have three hundred."

"Jesus God!" I muttered.

"What?"

"Never mind," I said. "This is a hell of a thing you're building here: No doubt about that -- it's extremely impressive in every way -- but the odd fact is that I thought I had reservations down the beach at the Cabañas." I flashed a nice shrug and a smile, ignoring the awkward chill that was already settling on us.

The manager coughed up a brittle laugh. "The Cabañas? No, *Señor Playboy*. The Cozumeleno is very *different* from the Cabañas."

"Yeah," I said. "I can see that right off." The Mayan bellboy had already disappeared with my bags.

"We saved a Junior suite for you," said the manager. "I think you'll be satisfied." His English was very precise, his smile was unnaturally thick. . . and it was clear, from a glance at my high-powered welcoming committee, that I was going to be their guest for at least one night. . . And as soon as they forgot about me, I would flee this huge concrete morgue and sneak off to the comfortable run-down palm-shaded peace of the Cabañas, where I felt more at home.

On the drive out from the airport, the PR man, who was wearing a blue baseball cap and a stylish blue-and-white T-shirt, both emblazoned with the lightning-flash STRIKER logo, had told me that the owner of this new, huge Cozumeleno hotel was a member of the island's ruling family. "They own about half of it," he said with a grin, "and what they don't own they control absolutely, with their fuel license."

"Fuel license?"

"Yeah," said the PR man. "They control every gallon of fuel that's sold here -- from the gasoline we're driving on right now in this jeep to the gas in every stove in all the hotel restaurants and even the goddamn jet fuel at the airport."

I didn't pay much attention to that talk, at the time. It seemed like the same kind of sleazy, power-worshipping bullshit you'd expect to hear from *any* PR man, anywhere, on any subject in any situation. . .

My problem was clear from the start. I had come down to Cozumel -- officially, at least -- to cover not just a fishing tournament but a *scene*: I'd explained to the editor that big-time sport fishing attracts a certain kind of people and it was the behavior of these people -- not the fishing -- that interested me. On my first visit to Cozumel, I'd discovered the fishing harbor completely by accident one night when Sandy and I were driving around the island more or less naked, finely twisted on MDA, and the only reason we located the yacht basin was that I took a wrong turn around midnight and tried -- without realizing where I was going -- to run a roadblock manned by three Mexican soldiers with submachine guns at the entrance to the island's only airport.

It was a hard scene to cope with, as I recall, and now that I look back on it, I suspect that moldy white powder we'd eaten was probably some kind of animal tranquilizer instead of true MDA. There is a lot of PCP on the drug market these days; anybody who wants to put a horse into a coma can buy it pretty easily from. . . well. . . why blow that, eh?

In any case, we were bent -- and after being driven away from the airport by armed guards, I took the next available open road and we wound up in the yacht basin, where there was a party going on. I could hear it about a half mile off, so I homed in on the music and drove across the highway and about 200 yards down a steep grassy embankment to get to the dock. Sandy refused to get out of the jeep, saying that these weren't the kind of people she felt ready to mix with, under the circumstances. . . so I left her huddled under a blanket on the front seat and walked out onto the dock by myself. It was exactly the kind of scene I'd been looking for -- about 35 stone-drunk rich honkies from places like Jacksonville and Pompano Beach, reeling around in this midnight Mexican port on their \$200,000 power cruisers and cursing the natives for not providing enough teenage whores to go with the mariachi music. It was a scene of total decadence and I felt right at home in it. I began mixing with the crowd and trying to hire a boat for the next morning -- which proved to be very difficult, because nobody could understand what I was saying.

What's wrong here? I wondered. Is there speed in this drug? Why can't these people understand me?

One of the people I was talking to was the owner of a 60-foot Chris-Craft from Milwaukee. He'd just arrived from Key West that afternoon, he said, and all he seemed to have any real interest in at the moment was the "Argentine maid" he was grappling with in the cockpit of his boat. She was about 15 years old, had dark-blonde hair and red eyes, but it was hard to get a good look at her, because "Cap'n Tom" -- as he introduced himself -- was bending her over a Styrofoam bait box full of dolphin heads and trying to suck on her collarbone while he talked to me.

Finally I gave up on him and found a local fishing merchant called Fernando Murphy, whose drunkenness was so crude and extreme that we were able to communicate perfectly, even though he spoke little English. "No fishing at night," he said. "Come to my shop downtown by the plaza tomorrow and I rent you a nice boat."

"Wonderful," I said. "How much?"

He laughed and fell against a pasty blonde woman from New Orleans who was too drunk to talk. "For you," he said, "a hundred and forty dollars a day -- and I *guarantee* fish."

"Why not?" I said. "I'll be there at dawn. Have the boat ready."

"¡*Chingado!*" he screamed. He dropped his drink on the dock and began grappling with his own shoulder blades. I was taken aback at his outburst, not understanding for a moment. . . until I saw that a laughing 300-pound man wearing Levis and a red baseball hat in the cockpit of a nearby boat called Black Snapper had hooked the back of Murphy's shirt with a 30-pound marlin rod and was trying to reel him in.

Murphy staggered backward, screaming "¡*Chingado!*" once again as he fell sideways on the dock and ripped his shirt open. Well, I thought, no point trying to do business with this crowd tonight and, in fact, I never fished on that trip. But the general low tone of that party had stayed with me -- a living caricature of white trash run amuck on foreign shores; an appalling kind of story, but not without a certain human-interest quotient.

On the first day of the tournament, I spent eight hours at sea aboard the eventual winner -- a 54-foot Striker called Sun Dancer, owned by a wealthy middle-aged industrialist named Frank Oliver from Palatka, Florida.

Oliver ran a fleet of barges on the Inland Waterway out of Jacksonville, he said, and Sun Dancer was the only boat in the Cozumel Harbor flying a Confederate flag. He had "about three hundred and twenty-five thousand in it" -- including a network of built-in vacuum-cleaner wall plugs for the deep-pile carpets -- and although he said he spent "maybe five weeks out of the year" on the boat, he was a very serious angler and he meant to win this tournament.

To this end, he had hired one of the world's top fishing captains -- a speedy little cracker named Cliff North -- and turned Sun Dancer over to him on a year-round basis. North is a living legend in the sport-fishing world and the idea that Oliver would hire him as his personal captain was not entirely acceptable to the other anglers. One of them explained that it was like some rich weekend duffer hiring Arnold Palmer to shoot the final round of the Greater Cleveland Elks golf tourney for him. North lives on the boat, with his wife and two young "mates," who do all the menial work, and during the ten months of the year when Oliver's not around, he charts Sun Dancer out to anybody who can pay the rate. All Cuff has to do -- in return for this sinecure -- is make sure Oliver wins the three or four fishing tournaments he finds time to enter each year.

Thanks to North and his expert boat handling, Frank Oliver is now listed in the sport-fishing record books as one of the world's top anglers. Whether or not Oliver would win any tournaments without North and Sun Dancer is a subject of widespread disagreement and occasional rude opinion among sport-fishing pros. Not even the most egotistical anglers will deny that a good boat and a hot-rod captain to handle it are crucial factors in ocean fishing -- but there is a definite division of opinion between anglers (who are mainly rich amateurs) and pros (the boat captain and the crews) about the relative value of skills.

Most of the pros I talked to in Cozumel were reluctant, at first, to speak on this subject -- at least for the record -- but after the third or fourth drink, they would invariably come around to suggesting that anglers were more of a hazard than a help and,

as a general rule of thumb, you could catch more fish by just jamming the rod into a holder on the rear end of the boat and letting the fish do the work. After two or three days on the boats, the most generous consensus I could get from the pros was that even the best angler is worth about a ten percent advantage in a tournament, and that most are seen as handicaps.

"Jesus God Almighty," said a veteran captain from Fort Lauderdale one night in a local hotel bar, "you wouldn't believe the things I've seen these fools do!" He laughed, but the sound was nervous and his body seemed to shudder as the memories came back on him. "One of the people I work for," he said, "has a wife who's just flat-out crazy." He shook his head wearily. "I don't want you to get me wrong, now -- I love her dearly, as a person -- but when it comes to fishing, goddamn it, I'd like to chop her up and toss her out for the sharks." He took a long hit on his rum and Coke. "Yeah, I hate to say it, but that's all she's good for -- shark bait and nothin else. Jesus, the other day she almost killed herself! We hooked a big sailfish, and when that happens, you have to move pretty fast, you know -- but all of a sudden, I heard her screaming like crazy, and when I looked down from the bridge, she had her hair all tangled up in the reel!" He laughed. "Goddamn! Can you believe that? She almost got scalped! I had to *jump* down, about fifteen feet onto a wet deck in a bad sea, we were wallowing all around -- and cut the whole line loose with my knife. She came within about ten seconds of having all her hair pulled out!"

Few anglers -- and especially winners like Frank Oliver -- agree with the pros' 90-10 split. "It's basically a *teamwork* situation," says Oliver, "like a chain with no weak links. The angler, the captain, the mates, the boat -- they're all critical, they work like gears with each other."

Well. . . maybe so. Oliver won the tournament with 28 sailfish in the three days that counted. But he was fishing *alone* on Sun Dancer -- a boat so lavishly outfitted it could have passed for the nautical den in Nelson Rockefeller's Fifth Avenue apartment -- and with the Arnold Palmer of sport fishing up on the bridge. Most of his competition was fishing in twos and threes on charter boats they were assigned to at random, with wild-tempered, contemptuous captains they'd never even met before yesterday morning.

"Fishing against Cliff North is bad enough," said Jerry Haugen, captain of a stripped-down hulk of a boat called Lucky Striker, "but when you have to go against North and only *one* angler, with everything set up exactly the way *he* wants it, that's just about impossible."

Which is neither here nor there, in the rules of big-time sport fishing. If Bebe Rebozo decided to borrow a half-million dollars from the Pentagon at no interest and enter the Cozumel tournament with the best boat he could buy and a crew of specially trained U.S. Marines, he would compete on the same basis with *me*, if I entered the thing with a 110 year-old Colorado Riverboat and a crew of drug-crazed politicians from the Meat Possum Athletic Club. According to the rules, we'd be equal. . . And while Bebe could fish alone on his boat, the tournament directors could assign me a nightmarish trio of anglers like Sam Brown, John Mitchell and Baby Huey.

Could we win? Never in hell. But nobody connected with that tournament would ever forget the experience. . . which is almost what happened anyway, for different reasons. By the third day of the tournament, or maybe it was the fourth, I had lost all

control of my coverage. At one point, when Bloor ran amuck and disappeared for 30 hours, I was forced to jerk a dope addict out of the island's only night club and press him into service as a "special observer" for *PLAYBOY*. He spent the final day of the tournament aboard Sun Dancer, snorting coke in the head and jabbering wildly at North while poor Oliver struggled desperately to maintain his one-fish lead over Haugen's manic crew on Lucky Striker.

Thursday night was definitely the turning point. Whatever rapport Bloor and I had developed with the Striker people was wearing very thin after three days of increasingly strange behavior and the antisocial attitude we apparently manifested at the big Striker cocktail party at the Punta Morena beach bar was clearly unacceptable. Almost everybody there was staggering drunk by nightfall and the ugliness threshold was low. Here were all these heavy anglers -- prosperous Florida businessmen, for the most part -- snarling and snapping at one another like East Harlem street fighters on the eve of a long-awaited rumble:

"You potbellied asshole! You couldn't catch a fish in a goddamn barrel!"

"Watch your stupid lip, fella: That's my *wife* you just stepped on!"

"*Whose* wife, fatface? Keep your fuckin' hands to yourself."

"Where's the goddamn waiter? Boy! *Boy!* Over here! Get me another drink, will ya?"

"Let me just put it to you this way, my friend. How 'bout a goddamn *fish-off*? Just *you* and *me* -- for a thousand bucks, eh? Yeah, how 'bout it?"

People were lurching around in the sand with plates full of cold macaroni and shrimp sauce. Every now and then, somebody would jerk one of the giant turtles out of the tank on the patio and thrust it in the face of some bleary-eyed bystander, laughing wildly and struggling to hang on to the thing, big green flippers clawing frantically at the air and lashing a spray of stale turtle water on everybody within a radius of ten feet. . .  
"Here: I wantcha to meet my friend! She'll do a real job on yer pecker. How horny are ya?"

It was not a good scene to confront with a head full of acid. We drank heavily, trying to act natural, but the drug set us clearly apart. Bloor became obsessed with the notion that we'd stumbled into a gathering of drunken greedheads who were planning to turn Cozumel into "a Mexican Miami Beach" -- which was true, to a certain extent, but he pursued it with a zeal that churned up angry resentment in every conversation he wandered into. At one point, I found him shouting at the manager of the hotel he was staying in: "You're just a bunch of goddamn moneygrubbing creeps! All this bullshit about *tourism* and *development* -- what the hell do you want here, another Aspen?"

The hotel man was baffled. "What *is* Aspen?" he asked. "What are you talking about?"

"You know goddamn well what I'm talking about, you sleazy bastard!" Bloor shouted. "These dirty concrete hotels you're building all over the beach, these dirty little hot-dog stands and --"

I hurried across the patio and grabbed him by the shoulder. "Never mind Yail," I said, trying to focus at least one of my eyes on whoever he was talking to. "He's still not adjusted to this altitude." I tried to smile at them, but I could sense it wasn't working. . . a drugged grimace, wild eyes and very jerky movements. I could hear myself talking, but the words made no sense: "These goddamned iguanas all over the road. . . we did a one-



eighty back there at the U turn. . . Yail grabbed the emergency brake when he saw all those lizards, jerked it right out by the root. . . Thank Christ we had those snow tires. We live at five thousand feet, you know, damn little air pressure up there, but down here at sea level you feel it squeezing your brain like a vise. . . No way to escape it, you can't even think straight. . ."

Nobody smiled; I was babbling out of control and Bloor was still yelling about "land rapers." I left him and went to the bar. "We're leaving," I said, "but I want some ice for the road."

The bartender gave me a Pepsi-Cola cup full of melting shavings. "We'll need more than that," I said -- so he filled up another cup. He spoke no English, but I could grasp what he was trying to tell me: There was no container available for the amount of ice I wanted and they were almost out of ice anyway.

My head was beginning to pulsate violently at this point I could barely keep a focus on his face. Rather than argue, I went out to the parking lot and drove the Safari through a screen of small beach trees and up onto the patio, parking it right in front of the bar and indicating to the stunned bartender that I wanted the back seat filled with ice.

The Striker crowd was appalled. "You crazy son of a bitch!" someone yelled. "You mashed about fifteen trees!" I nodded, but the words didn't register. All I could think about was ice -- throwing one cupload after another into the back seat. The acid, by this time, had fucked up my vision to the point where I was seeing square out of one eye and round out of the other. It was impossible to focus on anything; I seemed to have four hands. . .

The bartender had not been lying: The Punta Moreña ice vat was virtually empty. I scraped a few more cuploads out of the bottom -- hearing Bloor's angry cursing somewhere above and behind me -- then I jumped over the counter and into the front seat of the jeep.

Nobody seemed to notice, so I gunned the engine violently and leaned on the horn as I crept very slowly in first gear through the mashed trees and shrubbery. Loud voices seemed to be looming down on me from the rear and suddenly Bloor was climbing over the back, yelling, "Get moving, goddamn it, get moving!" I stomped on the accelerator and we fish-tailed out of the deep-sand parking lot.

Thirty minutes later, after a top-speed, bug-spattered run all the way to the other side of the island, we rolled into the parking lot of what appeared to be a night club. Bloor had calmed down a bit, but he was still in a high, wild condition as we lurched to a stop about five feet from the front door. I could hear loud music inside.

"We need a few drinks," I muttered. "My tongue feels like an iguana's been chewing on it."

Bloor stepped out, "Keep the engine running," he said. "I'll check the place out."

He disappeared inside and I leaned back on the seat to stare straight up at the star-crazed sky. It seemed about six feet above my eyes. Or maybe 60 feet, or 600. I couldn't be sure, and it didn't matter, anyway, because by that time I was convinced I was in the cockpit of a 727 coming into L.A. at midnight. Jesus, I thought, I am ripped right straight to the tits. Where am I? Are we going up or down? Somewhere in the back of my brain, I knew I was sitting in a jeep in the parking lot of a night club on an island off the Mexican coast -- but how could I really be sure, with another part of my brain apparently convinced that I was looking down on the huge glittering bowl of Los Angeles from the

cockpit of a 727? Was that the Milky Way? Or Sunset Boulevard? Orion, or the Beverly Hills Hotel?

Who gives a fuck? I thought. It's a fine thing to just lie back and stare up or down at. My eyeballs felt cool, my body felt rested. . .

Then Bloor was yelling at me again. "Wake up, goddamn it! Park the car and let's go inside. I've met some wonderful people."

The rest of that night is very hazy in my memory. The inside of the club was loud and almost empty -- except for the people Bloor had met, who turned out to be two half-mad coke runners with a big silver can full of white powder. When I sat down at the table, one of them introduced himself as Frank and said, "Here, I think you need something for your nose."

"Why not?" I said, accepting the can he tossed into my lap, "and I also need some rum." I yelled at the waiter and then opened the can, despite a rustle of protests around the table.

I looked down at my lap, ignoring Frank's nervous behavior, and thought, Zang! This is definitely *not* Los Angeles. We must be somewhere else.

I was staring down at what looked like a whole ounce of pure, glittering white cocaine. My first instinct was to jerk a 100-peso note out of my pocket and quickly roll it up for snorting purposes, but by this time Frank had his hand on my arm. "For Christ's sake," he was whispering, "don't do that shit *here*. Take it into the bathroom."

Which I did. It was a difficult trip, through all those chairs and tables, but I finally managed to lock myself in the toilet stall and start lashing the stuff up my nose with no thought at all of the ominous noise I was making. It was like kneeling down on a beach and sticking a straw into the sand; after five minutes or so, both my nostrils were locked up like epoxy and I hadn't even made a visible depression in the dune right in front of my eyes.

Good God, I thought. This can't be true. I must be hallucinating!

By the time I staggered back to the table, the other had calmed down. It was obvious that Bloor had already been into the can, so I handed it back to Frank with a twisted smile. "Be careful with this stuff," I mumbled. "It'll turn your brain to jelly."

He smiled. "What are you people doing here?"

"You'd never believe it," I replied, accepting a tall glass of rum from the waiter. The band was taking a break now and two of the musicians had wandered over to our table. Frank was saying something about a party later on. I shrugged, still fighting to clear my nasal passages with quick sniffs of rum. I sensed that this latest development might have serious consequences for the future of my story, but I was no longer especially concerned about that. . .

From somewhere down deep in my memory, I heard a snatch of some half-remembered conversation between a construction worker and a bartender at a bar in Colorado. The construction man was explaining why he shouldn't have another drink: "You can't wallow with the pigs at night and then soar with the eagles in the morning," he said.

I thought briefly on this, then shrugged it off. My own situation was totally different, I felt. In about three hours, I was supposed to be down on the docks with my

camera and tape recorder to spend another day on one of those goddamn boats.

No, I thought, that geek in Colorado had it all wrong. The real problem is how to wallow with the eagles at night and then soar with the pigs in the morning.

In any case, it made no difference. For a variety of good reasons, I missed my boat the next morning and spent the afternoon passed out in the sand on an empty beach about ten miles out of town.

By Friday night, it was clear that the story was not only a dry hole but maybe even a dry socket. Our most serious problem had to do with the rat-bastard tedium of spending eight hours a day out at sea in the boiling sun, being tossed around on the bridge of a high-powered motorboat and watching middle-aged businessmen reeling sailfish up to the side of the boat every once in a while. Both Bloor and I had spent a full day at sea - on the only boats in the tournament getting any real action, Sun Dancer and Lucky Striker -- and by dusk on Friday, we had pretty well come to the conclusion that deep-sea fishing is not one of your king-hell spectator sports. I have watched a lot of bad acts in my time, from tag-team pro wrestling in Flomaton, Alabama, to the Roller Derby on Oakland TV and intramural softball tournaments at Scott Air Force Base in Illinois -- but I'm damned if I can remember anything as insanely fucking dull as that Third Annual International Cozumel Fishing Tournament. The only thing that comes close to it, in recent memory, is an afternoon I spent last March in a traffic jam on the San Diego freeway. . . but even *that* had a certain adrenaline factor; by the end of the second hour, I was so crazy with rage that I cracked the top half of the steering wheel off my rented Mustang, then exploded the water pump by racing the engine at top speed and finally abandoned the mess altogether in the outside lane about two miles north of the Newport Beach exit.

It was Saturday afternoon, I think, when the brain fog had cleared enough for a long, clean focus on our situation -- which had been drastically altered, at that point, by three nights of no sleep and a handful of spastic confrontations with the Striker crowd. I had been thrown out of one hotel and moved to another and Bloor had been threatened with jail or deportation by the manager of his hotel on the midtown square.

I had managed another zombielike day at sea, with massive aid from Frank's can, but our relationship with the Striker people was apparently beyond redemption. Nobody connected with the tournament would have anything to do with us. We were treated like lepers. The only people we felt easy with, at that point, were a motley collection of local freaks, boozers, hustlers and black-coral divers who seemed to collect each afternoon on the porch of the Bal-Hai, the town's main bar.

They quickly befriended us -- a sudden shift in old relationships with the island that caused me to begin signing all the tabs, splitting them about half and half between Striker and *PLAYBOY*. Nobody seemed to care, especially the ever-growing crowd of new friends who came to drink with us. These people understood and were vaguely amused at the idea that we'd fallen into serious disfavor with the Strikers and the local power structure. For the past three sleepless days, we'd been gathering at the Bal-Hai to brood publicly on the likelihood of massive retaliation by local *jefes*, incensed by our rotten behavior.

It was sometime around dusk on Saturday, hunkered down at a big round table on

the Bal-Hai porch, that I noticed the pea-green Mustang making its second pass in less than ten minutes. There is only one pea-green Mustang on the island, and one of the divers had told me it belonged to the "mayor" -- a heavy-set young pol and an appointed, not elected, official who looked like a beer-bellied lifeguard on some beach at Acapulco. We had seen him often in the past few days, usually in the late afternoon and always cruising up and down the seaside *frontera*.

"That son of a bitch is beginning to make me nervous," Bloor muttered.

"Don't worry," I said. "They won't shoot -- not as long as we're here in a crowd."

"What?" A gray-haired woman from Miami sitting next to us had caught the word shoot.

"It's the Striker crowd," I explained. "We hear they've decided to get heavy with us."

"Jesus Christ!" said a retired airline pilot who'd been living off his boat and the Bal-Hai porch for the past few months. "You don't think they'll start *shooting*, do you? Not on a peaceful island like this!"

I shrugged. "Not here. They wouldn't shoot into a crowd. But we can't let them catch us alone."

The woman from Miami started to say something, but Bloor cut her off with an outburst that spun heads the length of the porch:

"They're in for the shock of their goddamn lives, tomorrow," he snarled. "Wait till they see what gets off that goddamn ferry from Playa del Carmen in the morning."

"What the hell are you talking about?" the ex-pilot asked.

Bloor said nothing, staring blankly out to sea. I hesitated a moment, then instinctively picked up the thread: "Heavies," I said. "We made some calls last night. Tomorrow morning they'll come off that boat like a pack of goddamn wolverines."

Our friends at the table were glancing nervously at one another. Violent crime is almost unheard of on Cozumel; the native oligarchy is into far more subtle varieties. . . and the idea that the Bal-Hai might be the scene of a Chicago-style shoot-out was a hard thing to grasp, even for me.

Bloor cut in again, still staring off toward the mainland. "You can hire just about anything you want in Mérida," he said. "We got these thugs for ten bucks a head, plus expenses. They'll crack every skull on the island if they have to -- then burn every one of those goddamn red-neck boats right down to the waterline."

Nobody spoke for a moment, then the woman from Miami and the retired airline pilot got up to leave. "See you later," the man said stiffly. "We have to get back to the boat and check things out."

Moments later, the two divers who'd been sitting with us also left, saying they'd probably see us tomorrow at the Striker party.

"Don't count on it," Bloor muttered. They grinned nervously and sped off down the *frontera* on their tiny Hondas. We were left alone at the big round table, sipping margaritas and staring out at the sunset over the Yucatan Peninsula, 12 miles across the channel. After a few long moments of silence, Bloor reached into his pocket and came up with a hollowed-out glass eye he had bought from one of the street peddlers. There was a silver cap on the back and he flipped it up, then jammed the straw from his margarita into the hole and snorted heavily before handing it over to me. "Here," he said. "Try some of Frank's best."

The waiter was hovering over us, but I ignored him -- until I realized I was having problems, then I looked up from the eyeball in my hand and asked for two more drinks and a dry straw. "*¿Como no?*" he hissed, moving quickly away from the table.

"This thing's all jammed up from the moisture," I said to Bloor, showing him the powder-packed straw. "We'll have to slice it open."

"Never mind," he said. "There's plenty more where that came from."

I nodded, accepting a fresh drink and about six dry straws from the waiter. "You notice how fast our friends left," I said, bearing down on the eyeball again. "I suspect they believed all that gibberish."

He sipped his own new drink and stared at the glass eye in my hand. "Why shouldn't they?" he mumbled. "I'm beginning to believe it myself."

I felt a great numbness in the back of my mouth and my throat as I snapped the cap shut and handed the eyeball back to him. "Don't worry," I said. "We're professionals - keep that in mind."

"I am," he said. "But I'm afraid they might figure that out."

It was late Saturday night, as I recall, when we learned that Frank Oliver had officially won the tournament -- by one fish, ahead of the balls-out poor-boy crew on Lucky Striker. I wrote this down in my notebook as we roamed round the dock where the boats were tied up. Nobody urged us to come aboard for "a friendly drink" -- as I heard some of the anglers put it to others on the dock -- and, in fact, there were only a few people who spoke to us at all. Frank and his friend were sipping beers at the open-air bar nearby, but his kind of hospitality was not in tune with this scene. Jack Daniels and heavy petting on the foredeck is about as heavy as the Striker crowd gets. . . and after a week of mounting isolation from this scene I was supposed to be "covering," I was hung on the dark and ugly truth that "my story" was fucked. Not only did the boat people view me with gross disapproval but most of them no longer even believed I was working for *PLAYBOY*. All they knew, for sure, was that there was something very strange and off-center, to say the least, about me and all my "assistants."

Which was true, in a sense, and this feeling of alienation on both sides was compounded, on ours, by a galloping drug-induced paranoia that honed each small incident, with every passing day, to a grim and fearful edge. The paranoid sense of isolation was bad enough -- along with trying to live in two entirely different worlds at the same time -- but the worst problem of all was the fact that I'd spent a week on this goddamn wretched story and I still didn't have the flimsiest notion of what deepsea fishing *felt like*. I had no idea what it was like to actually catch a big fish. All I'd seen was a gang of frantic red-neck businessmen occasionally hauling dark shadows up to the side of various boats, just close enough to where some dollar-an-hour mate could cut the leader and score a point for "the angler." During the whole week, I'd never seen a fish out of the water -- except on the rare occasions when a hooked sailfish had jumped for an instant, 100 or so yards from the boat, before going under again for the long reeling-in trip that usually took ten or fifteen minutes of silent struggle and always ended with the fish either slipping the hook or being dragged close enough to the boat to be "tagged" and then cut loose.

The anglers assured me it was all a great thrill, but on the evidence, I couldn't believe it. The whole idea of fishing, it seemed to me, was to hook a thrashing sea

monster of some kind and actually *boat* the bastard. And then eat it.

All the rest seemed like dilettante bullshit -- like hunting wild boar with a can of spray paint, from the safety of a pickup truck. . . and it was this half-crazed sense of frustration that led me finally to start wandering around the docks and trying to hire somebody to take me and Bloor out at night to fish for man-eating sharks. It seemed like the only way to get a real feel for this sport -- to fish (or hunt) for something genuinely dangerous, a beast that would tear your leg off in an instant if you made the slightest mistake.

This concept was not widely understood on the dock in Cozumel. The businessmen-anglers saw no point in getting the cockpits of their expensive tubs messed up with real blood, and especially not theirs. . . but I finally found two takers: Jerry Haugen on Lucky Striker and a local Mayan captain who worked for Fernando Murphy.

Both of these efforts ended in disaster -- for entirely different reasons and also at different times; but for the record, I feel a powerful obligation to record at least a brief observation about our shark-hunting expeditions off the coast of Cozumel: The first is that I saw more sharks by accident while scuba-diving during the daylight hours than I did during either of our elaborate, big-money nighttime "hunts" off the fishing boats; and the second is that anybody who buys anything more complex or expensive than a bottle of beer on the waterfront of Cozumel is opting for serious trouble.

Cerveza Superior, at 75 cents a bottle on the porch of the Bal-Hai, is a genuine bargain -- if only because you know what you're getting -- compared with the insanely and even fatally inept "deep-sea-fishing and scuba-diving tours" offered at dockside shacks like El Timon or Fernando Murphy's. These people rent boats to dumb gringos for \$140 a day (or night) and then take you out to sea and dump you over the side with faulty diving gear in shark-filled waters during the day, or run you around in circles during the night -- a Fernando Murphy specialty -- while allegedly trolling for sharks about 500 yards offshore. There are plenty of bologna sandwiches while you wait for a strike, unable to communicate verbally with the guilt-stricken Mayan mate or the Mayan captain up top, who both understand what kind of a shuck they are running but who are only following Fernando Murphy's orders. Meanwhile Murphy is back in town playing maître d' at his Tijuana-style night club, La Piñata.

We found Murphy at his night club after spending six useless hours "at sea" on one of his boats, and came close to getting beaten and jailed when we noisily ruined the atmosphere of the place by accusing him of "outright thievery" on the grounds of what his hired fisherman had already admitted he'd done to us -- and the only thing that kept us from getting stomped by Murphy's heavies was the timely popping-off of flashbulbs by an American photographer. There is nothing quite like the sudden white flash of a professional gringo camera to paralyze the brain of a Mexican punk long enough for the potential victims to make a quick, nonviolent exit.

We were counting on this, and it worked; a sorry end to the only attempt we ever made to hire *local* fishermen for a shark hunt. Murphy had his \$140 cash in advance, we had our harsh object lesson in commercial dealings on the Cozumel dock -- and with the photos in the can, we understood the wisdom of leaving the island at once.

Our other nighttime shark hunt -- with Jerry Haugen on Lucky Striker -- was a totally different kind of experience. It was at least an honest value. Haugen and his two-

man crew were the "hippies" of the Striker fleet, and they took me and Bloor out one night for a *serious* shark hunt -- a strange adventure that nearly sunk their boat when they hooked a reef in pitch-darkness about a mile out at sea and which ended with all of us up on the bridge while a four-foot nurse shark flopped crazily around in the cockpit, even after Haugen had shot it four times in the head with a .45 automatic.

Looking back on all that, my only feeling for deep-sea fishing is one of absolute and visceral aversion. Hemingway had the right idea when he decided that a .45-caliber submachine gun was the proper tool for shark fishing, but he was wrong about his targets. Why shoot innocent fish, when the guilty walk free along the docks, renting boats for \$140 a day to drunken dupes who call themselves "sport fishermen"?

Our departure from the island was not placid. The rough skeleton of the plan -- as I conceived it with a head full of MDA on the night before -- was to wait until about an hour before the first early-morning flight to Mérida on Aeromexico, then jump both our hotel bills by checking out in a raving frenzy at dawn, at the end of the night clerk's shift -- and signing "*PLAYBOY*/Striker Aluminum Yachts" on both bills. I felt this bogus dual imprimatur would be heavy enough to confuse both desk clerks long enough for us to reach the airport and make the escape.

Our only other problem -- except for connecting with the black-coral wizard who was expecting at least \$300 *cash* for the work we'd assigned him -- was dumping the Avis rental jeep at the airport no more than three minutes before boarding time. I knew that the local Avis people would have me under observation by the same shadowy observer who'd nailed me on the broken-windshield charge, but I also knew he'd been watching us long enough to know we were both late risers. He would set his psychic work clock, I felt, to coincide with our traditional noon-to-dawn working hours. I also knew that the hours he'd been keeping for the past week were so far off his normal wake-sleep schedule that by now he was probably a nervous, jabbering mess from trying to keep up with a gang of wild gringos fueled from an apparently bottomless satchel full of speed, acid, MDA and cocaine.

It boiled down to a question of armaments -- or lack of them -- and their long-term effects in the crunch. Looking back on my experience over the years, I was confident of being able to function at peak-performance level, at least briefly, after 80 or 90 hours without sleep. There were negative factors, of course: 80 or 90 hours of continuous boozing, along with sporadic energy/adrenaline sappers like frantic, rock-dodging swims in the high surf at night and sudden, potentially disastrous confrontations with hotel managers -- but on balance, I felt, the drug factor gave us a clear-cut advantage. In any 24-hour period, a determined private eye can muster the energy to keep pace with veteran drug users. . . but after 48 straight hours, and especially after 72, fatigue symptoms begin manifesting drastically -- hallucinations, hysteria, massive nerve failure. After 72 hours, both the body and the brain are so badly depleted that only sleep will make the nut. . . while your habitual drag user, long accustomed to this weird and frenzied pace, is still hoarding at least three hours of high-speed reserve.

There was no question in my mind -- once the plane was finally airborne out of Cozumel -- about what to do with the drugs. I had eaten three of the remaining five caps of MDA during the night and Bloor had given our hash and all but six of his purple pills to the black-coral wizard as a bonus for his all-night efforts. As we zoomed over the Yucatan Channel at 8000 feet, we took stock of what he had left:

Two hits of MDA, six tabs of acid, about a gram and a half of raw cocaine, four reds and a random handful of speed. That -- plus \$44 and a desperate hope that Sandy had made and paid for our reservations beyond Monterrey, Mexico -- was all we had between Cozumel and our refuge/destination at Sam Brown's house in Denver. We were airborne out of Cozumel at 8:13 A.M., Mountain Daylight Time -- and if everything went right, we would arrive at Denver's Stapleton International Airport before seven.

We'd been airborne for about eight minutes when I looked over at Bloor and told him what I'd been thinking: "We don't have enough drugs here to risk carrying them through Customs," I said.

He nodded thoughtfully: "Well. . . we're pretty well fixed, for poor boys."

"Yeah," I replied. "But I have my professional reputation to uphold. And there's only two things I've never done with drugs: sell them or take them through Customs -- especially when we can replace everything we're holding for about ninety-nine dollars just as soon as we get off the plane."

He hunkered down in his seat, saying nothing. Then he stared across at me. "What are you saying? That we should just throw all this shit away?"

I thought for a moment. "No. I think we should eat it."

"What?"

"Yeah, why not? They can't bust you for what's already dissolved in your belly -- no matter *how* weird you're acting."

"Jesus Christ!" he muttered. "We'll go stark raving nuts if we eat all this shit!"

I shrugged. "Keep in mind where we'll be when we hit Customs," I said. "San Antonio, *Texas*. Are you ready to get busted in Texas?"

He stared down at his fingernails.

"Remember Tim Leary?" I said. "Ten years for three ounces of grass in his daughter's panties. . ."

He nodded. "Jesus. . . Texas! I'd forgotten about that."

"Not me," I said. "When Sandy went through Customs in San Antonio about three weeks ago, they tore everything she was carrying apart. It took her two hours to put it back together."

I could see him thinking. "Well. . ." he said finally, "what if we eat this stuff and go crazy -- and they nail us?"

"Nothing," I said. "We'll drink heavily. If we're seized, the stewardesses will testify we were drunk."

He thought for a moment, then laughed. "Yeah. . . just a couple of good ole boys O.D.'d on booze. Nasty drunks, staggering back into the country after a shameful vacation in Mexico -- totally fucked up."

"Right," I said. "They can strip us down to the skin. It's no crime to enter the country helplessly drunk."

He laughed. "You're right. What do we start with? We shouldn't eat it all at once - - that's too heavy."

I nodded, reaching into my pocket for the MDA and offering him one as I tossed the other into my mouth. "Let's eat some of the acid now, too," I said. "That way, we'll be adjusted to it by the time we have to eat the rest -- and we can save the coke for emergencies."

"Along with the speed," he said. "How much do you have left?"



"Ten hits," I said. "Pure-white amphetamine powder. It'll straighten us right out, if things get tense."

"You should save that for the end," he said. "We can use this coke if we start getting messy."

I swallowed the purple pill, ignoring the Mexican stewardess with her tray of *sangria*.

"I'll have two," said Bloor, reaching across me.

"Same here," I said, lifting two more off the tray.

Bloor grinned at her. "Pay no attention. Were just tourists -- down here making fools of ourselves."

Moments later we hit down on the runway at Mérida. But it was a quick and painless stop. By nine A.M., we were cruising over central Mexico at 20,000 feet, headed for Monterrey. The plane was half empty and we could have moved around if we'd wanted to -- but I glanced across at Bloor, trying to use him as a mirror for my own condition, and decided that wandering around in the aisles would not be wise. Making yourself noticeable is one thing -- but causing innocent passengers to shrink off with feelings of shock and repugnance is a different game entirely. One of the few things that can't be controlled about acid is the glitter it puts in the eyes. No amount of booze will cause the same kind of laughing, that fine predatory glow that comes with the first rush of acid up the spine.

But Bloor felt like moving. "Where's the goddman head?" he muttered.

"Never mind," I said. "We're almost to Monterrey. Don't attract attention. We have to check through Immigration there."

He straightened up in his seat. "Immigration?"

"Nothing serious," I said. "Just turn in our tourist cards and see about the tickets to Denver. . . But we'll have to act straight. . ."

"Why?" he asked.

I gave it some thought. Why, indeed? We were clean. Or *almost* clean, anyway. About an hour out of Mérida we'd eaten another round of acid -- which left us with two more of those, plus four reds and the coke and the speed. The luck of the split had left me with the speed and the acid; Bloor had the coke and the reds. . . and by the time the ABROCHE SU CINTURON (FASTEN SEAT BELTS) sign flashed on above Monterrey, we'd agreed, more or less, that anything we hadn't eaten by the time we got to Texas would have to be flushed down the stainless-steel John in the plane's lavatory.

It had taken about 45 tortured minutes to reach this agreement, because by that time, neither one of us could speak clearly. I tried to whisper, through gritted teeth, but each time I succeeded in uttering a coherent sentence my voice seemed to echo around the cabin like I was mumbling into a bullhorn. At one point, I leaned over as close as possible to Bloor's ear and hissed: "Reds. . . how many?" But the sound of my own voice was such a shock that I recoiled in horror and tried to pretend I'd said nothing.

Was the stewardess staring? I couldn't be sure. Bloor had seemed not to notice -- but suddenly he was thrashing around in his seat and clawing frantically underneath himself with both hands. "What the fuck?" he was screaming.

"Quiet!" I snapped. "What's *wrong* with you?"

He was jerking at his seat belt, still shouting. The stewardess ran down the aisle and unbuckled it for him. There was fear in her face as she backed off and watched him

spring out of his seat. "Goddamn you clumsy bastard!" he yelled.

I stared straight ahead. Jesus, I thought, he's blowing it, he can't handle the acid, I should have abandoned this crazy bastard in Cozumel. I felt my teeth grinding as I tried to ignore his noise. . . then I glanced across and saw him groping between the seats and coming up with a smoldering cigarette butt. "Look at this!" he shouted at me. He was holding the butt in one hand and fondling the back of his thigh with the other. . .

"Burned a big hole in my pants," he was saying. "He just spit this dirty thing right down in my seat!"

"What?" I said, feeling in front of my mouth for the cigarette in my filter. . . but the filter was empty, and I suddenly understood. The fog in my brain suddenly cleared and I heard myself laughing. "I warned you about these goddamn Bonanzas!" I said. "They'll never stick in the filter!"

The stewardess was pushing him back down into his seat. "Fasten belts," she kept saying, "fasten belts."

I grabbed his arm and jerked downward, pulling him off balance and causing him to fall heavily onto the back of the seat. It gave way and collapsed on the legs of whoever was sitting behind us. The stewardess jerked it quickly back to the upright position, then reached down to fasten Bloor's seat belt. I saw his left arm snake out and settle affectionately around her shoulders.

Good God! I thought. This is it. I could see the headlines in tomorrow's *News*: "DRUG FRACAS ON AIRLINER NEAR MONTERREY: GRINGOS JAILED ON ARSON, ASSAULT CHARGES."

But the stewardess only smiled and backed off a few steps, dismissing Bloor's crude advance with a slap at his arm and an icy professional smile. I tried to return it, but my face was not working properly. Her eyes narrowed. She was clearly more insulted by the demented grin I was trying now to fix on her than she was by Bloor's attempt to push her head down into his lap.

He smiled happily as she stalked away. "That'll teach you," he said. "You're a goddamn nightmare to travel with."

The acid was leveling out now. I could tell by the tone of his voice that he was into the manic stage. No more of that jerky, paranoid whispering. He was feeling confident now; his face had settled into that glaze of brittle serenity you invariably see on the face of a veteran acid eater who knows that the first rush is past and now he can settle down for about six hours of real fun.

I was not quite there myself, but I knew it was coming -- and we still had about seven more hours and two plane changes between now and Denver. I knew the Immigration scene at Monterrey was only a formality -- just stand in line for a while with all the other gringos and not get hysterical when the cop at the gate asks for your tourist card.

We could ease through that one, I felt -- on the strength of long experience. Anybody who's still on the street after seven or eight years of public acid eating has learned to trust his adrenaline gland for getting through routine confrontations with officialdom -- traffic citations, bridge tolls, airline ticket counters. . .

And we had one of these coming up: getting our baggage off this plane and not losing it in the airport until we found out which flight would take us to San Antonio and Denver. Bloor was traveling light, with only two bags. But I had my normal heavy load:

two huge leather suitcases, a canvas sea-bag and tape recorder with two portable speakers. If we were going to lose anything, I wanted to lose it *north* of the border.

The Monterrey airport is a cool, bright little building, so immaculately clean and efficient that we were almost immediately lulled into a condition of grinning euphoria. Everything seemed to be working perfectly. No lost baggage, no sudden outbursts of wild jabbering at the Immigration desk, no cause for panic or fits of despair at the ticket counter. . . Our first-class reservations had already been made and confirmed all the way to Denver. Bloor had been reluctant to blow 32 extra dollars "just to sit up front with the businessmen," but I felt it was necessary. "There's a lot more latitude for weird behavior in first class." I told him. "The stewardesses back in the tourist section don't have as much experience, so they're more likely to freak out if they think they have a dangerous nut on their hands."

He glared at me. "Do I look like a dangerous nut?"

I shrugged. It was hard to focus on his face. We were standing in a corridor outside the souvenir shop. "You look like a serious dope addict," I said, finally. "Your hair's all wild, your eyes are glittering, your nose is all red and --" I suddenly noticed white powder on the top edge of his mustache. "You swine! You've been into the coke!"

He grinned blankly. "Why not? Just a little pick-me-up."

I nodded. "Yeah. Just wait till you start explaining yourself to the Customs agent in San Antonio with white powder drooling out of your nose." I laughed. "Have you ever seen those big bullet-nosed flashlights they use for rectal searches?" He was rubbing his nostrils vigorously. "Where's the drugstore? I'll get some of that Dristan nasal spray." He reached into his back pocket and I saw his face turn gray. "Jesus," he hissed. "I've lost my wallet!" He kept fumbling in his pockets but no wallet turned up. "Good God!" he moaned. "It's still on the plane!" His eyes flashed wildly around the airport. "Where's the gate?" he snapped. "The wallet must be under the seat."

I shook my head. "No, it's too late."

"What?"

"The plane. I saw it take off while you were in the rest room, snorting up the coke."

He thought for a moment, then uttered a loud, wavering howl. "My passport! All my money! I have *nothing*! They'll never let me back into the country, with no I.D."

I smiled. "Ridiculous. I'll vouch for you."

"Shit!" he said. "You're crazy! You *look* crazy!"

"Let's go find the bar," I said. "We have forty-five minutes."

"What?"

"The drunker you get, the less it'll bother you," I said. "The best thing, right now, is for you to get weeping, falling-down drunk. I'll swear you staggered in front of a moving plane on the runway in Mérida and a jet engine sucked the coat right off your back and into its turbine." The whole thing seemed absurd. "Your wallet was in the coat, right? I was a witness. It was all I could do to keep your *whole body* from being sucked into the turbine."

I was laughing wildly now; the scene was very vivid. I could almost *feel* the terrible drag of the suction as we struggled to dig our heels into the hot asphalt runway. Somewhere in the distance, I could hear the wail of a mariachi band above the roar of the

engines, sucking us ever closer to the whirling blades. I could hear the wild screech of a stewardess as she watched helplessly. A Mexican soldier with a machine gun was trying to help us, but suddenly he was sucked away like a leaf in the wind. . . wild screams all around us, then a sickening *thump* as he disappeared feetfirst into the black maw of the turbine. . . The engine seemed to stall momentarily, then spit a nasty shower of hamburger and bone splinters all over the runway. . . more screaming from behind us as Bloor's coat ripped away; I was holding him by one arm when another soldier with a machine gun began firing at the plane, first at the cockpit and then at the murderous engine. . . which suddenly exploded, like a bomb going off right in front of us; the blast hurled us 200 feet across the tarmac and through a wire-mesh fence. . .

Jesus! What a scene! A fantastic tale to lay on the Customs agent in San Antonio: "And then, officer, while we were lying there on the grass, too stunned to move, *another* engine exploded! And then another! Huge balls of fire! It was a miracle that we escaped with our lives. . . Yes, so you'll have to make some allowance for Mr. Bloor's unsteady condition right now. He was badly shaken, half-hysterical most of the afternoon. . . I want to get him back to Denver and put him under sedation. . ."

I was so caught up in this terrible vision that I'd failed to notice Bloor down on his knees until I heard him shout. He'd spread the contents of his kit bag all over the floor of the corridor rummaging through the mess, and now he was smiling happily at the wallet in his hand.

"You found it." I said.

He nodded -- clutching it with both hands, as if it might leap out of his grip with the strength of a half-captured lizard and disappear across the crowded lobby. I looked around and saw that people were stopping to watch us. My mind was still whirling from the fiery hallucination that had seized me, but I was able to kneel down and help Bloor stuff his belongings back into the kit bag. "We're attracting a crowd." I muttered. "Let's get to the bar, where it's safe."

Moments later we were sitting at a table overlooking the runway, sipping margaritas and watching the ground crew load the 727 that would take us to San Antonio. My plan was to stay hunkered down in the bar until the last moment, then dash for the plane. Our luck had been excellent, so far, but that scene in the lobby had triggered a wave of paranoia in my head. I felt very conspicuous. Bloor's mannerisms were becoming more and more psychotic. He took one sip of his drink, then whacked it down onto the table and stared at me. "What *is* this?" he snarled.

"A double margarita," I said, glancing over at the waitress to see if she had her eye on us.

She did, and Bloor waved at her.

"What do you want?" I whispered.

"Glaucoma," he said.

The waitress was on us before I could argue. Glaucoma is an extremely complicated mix of about nine unlikely ingredients that Bloor had learned from some randy old woman he met on the porch of the Bal-Hai. She'd taught the bartender there how to make it: very precise measurements of gin, tequila, Kahlua, crushed ice, fruit juices, lime rinds, spices -- all mixed to perfection in a tall frosted glass.

It is not the kind of drink you want to order in an airport bar with a head full of

acid and a noticeable speech impediment; especially when you can't speak the local language and you just spilled the first drink you ordered all over the table.

But Bloor persisted. When the waitress abandoned all hope, he walked over to speak with the bartender. I slumped in my chair, keeping an eye on the plane and hoping it was almost ready to go. But they hadn't even loaded the baggage yet: departure time was still 20 minutes away -- plenty of time for some minor incident to mushroom into serious trouble. I watched Bloor talking to the bartender, pointing to various bottles behind the bar and occasionally using his fingers to indicate measurements. The bartender was nodding his head patiently.

Finally, Bloor came back to the table. "He's making it," he said. "I'll be back in a minute. I have business."

I ignored him. My mind was drifting again. Two days and nights without sleep plus a steady diet of mind-altering drugs and double margaritas were beginning to affect my alertness. I ordered another drink and stared out at the hot brown hills beyond the runway. The bar was comfortably air conditioned, but I could feel the warm sun through the window.

Why worry? I thought. We've survived the worst. All we have to do now is not miss that plane out there. Once we're across the border, the worst that can happen is a nightmarish fuck-around at Customs in San Antonio. Maybe even a night in jail, but what the hell? A few misdemeanor charges -- public drunkenness, disturbing the peace, resisting arrest -- but nothing serious, no felony. All the evidence for *that* would be eaten by the time we landed in Texas.

My only real worry was the chance that there might already be grand-larceny charges filed against us in Cozumel. We had, after all, jumped two hotel bills totaling about 15,000 pesos, in addition to leaving that half-destroyed Avis jeep in the airport parking lot -- another 15,000 pesos -- and we had spent the past four or five days in the constant company of a flagrant, big-volume drug runner whose every movement and contact, for all we knew, might have been watched or even photographed by Interpol agents.

Where was Frank now? Safe at home in California? Or jailed in Mexico City, swearing desperate ignorance about how all those cans of white powder got into his luggage? I could almost hear it: "You've *got* to believe me, Captain! I went down to Cozumel to check on a land investment. I was sitting in a bar one night, minding my own business, when all of a sudden these two drunken acid freaks sat down next to me and said they worked for *PLAYBOY*. One of them had a handful of purple pills and I was stupid enough to eat one. The next thing I knew, they were using my hotel room as their headquarters. They never slept. I tried to keep an eye on them, but there were plenty of times while I was sleeping when they could have put almost anything in my luggage. . . What? Where are they now? Well. . . I can't say for sure, but I can give you the names of the hotels they were using."

Jesus! These terrible hallucinations! I tried to put them out of my mind as I finished my drink and called for another. A paranoid shudder jerked me out of my slump in the chair. I sat up and looked around. Where was that bastard Bloor? How long had he been gone? I glanced out at the plane and saw the fuel truck still parked under the wing. But they were loading the baggage now. Ten more minutes.

I relaxed again, shoving a handful of pesos at the waitress to pay for our drinks, trying to smile at her. . . when suddenly the whole airport seemed to echo with the sound of my name being shouted over a thousand loud-speakers. . . then I heard Bloor's name. . . a harsh, heavily accented voice, bellowing along the corridors like the scream of a banshee. . . "PASSENGERS HUNTER THOMPSON AND YAIL BLOOR. REPORT IMMEDIATELY TO THE IMMIGRATION DESK. . ."

I was too stunned to move. "Mother of twelve bastards!" I whispered. "Did I actually *hear* that?" I gripped both arms of my chair and tried to concentrate. Was I hallucinating again? There was no way to be sure. . .

Then I heard the voice again, booming all over the airport: "WILL PASSENGERS HUNTER THOMPSON AND YAIL BLOOR REPORT IMMEDIATELY TO THE IMMIGRATION DESK. . ."

No! I thought. This is impossible! It had to be paranoid dementia. My fear of being nailed at the last moment had become so intense that I was hearing voices! The sun through the window had caused the acid to boil in my brain; a huge bubble of drugs had burst a weak vein in my frontal lobes.

Then I saw Bloor rushing into the bar. His eyes were wild, his hands were flapping crazily. "Did you hear *that*?" he shouted.

I stared at him. Well. . . I thought, we're fucked. He heard it, too. . . or even if he hadn't, even if we're *both* hallucinating, it means we've O.D.'d. . . totally out of control for the next six hours, crazed with fear and confusion, feeling our bodies disappear and our heads swell up like balloons, unable to even recognize each other. . .

"Wake up! Goddamn it!" he yelled. "We have to make a run for the plane!"

I shrugged. "It's no use. They'll grab us at the gate."

He was frantically trying to zip up his kit bag. "Are you sure those were *our* names they called? Are you *positive*?"

I nodded, still not moving. Somewhere in the middle of my half-numb brain, the truth was beginning to stir. I was *not* hallucinating; the nightmare was real. . . and I suddenly remembered the Striker PR man's talk about that all-powerful *jefe* in Cozumel who had the fuel license.

Of course. A man with that kind of leverage would have connections all over Mexico: police, airlines, Immigration. It was madness to think we could cross him and get away with it. No doubt he controlled the Avis franchise, too. . . and he'd gone into action the minute his henchmen found that crippled jeep in the airport parking lot, with its windshield shattered and an 11-day bill unpaid. The phone lines had been humming 20,000 feet beneath us all the way to Monterrey. And now, with less than ten minutes to spare, they had ambushed us.

I stood up and slung the seabag over my shoulder just as the waitress brought Bloor's glaucoma. He looked at her, then lifted it off the tray and drank the whole thing in one gulp. "*Gracias, gracias,*" he mumbled, handing her a 50-peso note. She started to make change, but he shook his head. "*Nada, nada,* keep the goddamn change." Then he pointed toward the kitchen. "Back door?" he said eagerly. "*¿Exito?*" He nodded at the plane about 50 feet below us on the runway. I could see a few passengers beginning to board. "Big hurry!" Bloor told her. "*¡Importante!*"

She looked puzzled, then pointed to the main entrance to the bar.

He stuttered helplessly for a moment, then began shouting:

"Where's the goddamn *back door* to this place? We have to catch that plane *now!*"

A long-delayed rush of adrenaline was beginning to clear my head. I grabbed his arm and lurched toward the main door. "Let's go," I said. "We'll run right past the bastards." My brain was still foggy, but the adrenaline had triggered a basic survival instinct. Our only hope was to run like doomed rats for the only available opening and hope for a miracle.

As we hurried down the corridor, I jerked one of the PRESS tags off my seabag and gave it to Bloor. "Start waving this at them when we hit the gate," I said, leaping sideways to avoid a covey of nuns in our way "*¡Pardonnez!*" I shouted. "*¡Prensa! ¡Prensa! ¡Mucho importante!*"

Bloor picked up the cry as we approached the gate, running at full speed and shouting incoherently in garbled Spanish. The Immigration booth was just beyond the glass doors leading out to the runway. The stairway up to the plane was still full of passengers, but the clock above the gate said exactly 11:20 -- departure time. Our only hope was to burst past the cops at the desk and dash aboard the plane just as the stewardess pulled the big silver door closed. . .

We had to slow down as we approached the glass doors, waving our tickets at the cops and yelling "*¡Prensa! ¡Prensa!*" at everybody in front of us. I was pouring sweat by this time and we were both gasping for breath.

A small, muscular-looking cop in a white shirt and dark glasses moved out to head us off as we stumbled through the doors. "*Señor Bloor? Señor Thompson?*" he asked sharply.

The voice of doom.

I staggered to a halt and sagged against the desk, but Bloor's leather-soled Mod boots wouldn't hold on the marble floor and he skidded past me at full speed and crashed into a ten-foot potted palm, dropping his kit bag and mangling several branches that he grabbed to keep from falling.

"*Señor Thompson? Señor Bloor?*" Our accuser had a one-track mind. One of his assistants had run over to help Bloor keep his feet. Another cop picked his kit bag off the floor and handed it to him.

I was too exhausted to do anything but nod my head meekly. The cop who'd called our names took the ticket out of my hand and glanced at it -- then quickly handed it back to me. "Ah-ha!" he said with a grin. "*Señor Thompson!*" Then he looked at Bloor. "You are *Señor Bloor?*"

"You're goddamn right I am!" Bloor snapped. "What the hell's going on here? This is a goddamn outrage -- all this wax on these floors! I almost got killed!"

The little cop grinned again. Was there something sadistic in his smile? I couldn't be sure. But it didn't matter now. They had us on the gaff. I flashed on all the people I knew who'd been busted in Mexico; dopers who'd pushed their luck too far, gotten careless. No doubt we would find friends in prison; I could almost hear them hooting their cheerful greetings as we were led into the yard and turned loose.

This scene passed through my head in milliseconds. Bloor's wild yells were still floating in the air as the cop began pushing me out the door toward the plane. "Hurry! Hurry!" he was saying. . . and behind me I heard his assistant prodding Bloor. "We were afraid you would miss the plane," he was saying. "We called on the P.A. system." He was grinning broadly now. "You almost missed the plane."

We were almost to San Antonio before I got a grip on myself. The adrenaline was still pumping violently through my head; the acid and booze and fatigue had been totally neutralized by that scene at the gate. My nerves were so jangled as the plane took off that I had to beg the stewardess for two Scotch and waters, which I used to down two of our four reds.

Bloor ate the other two, with the help of two bloody marys. His hands were trembling badly, his eyes were filled with blood. . . but as he came back to life, he began cursing "those dirty bastards on the P.A. system" who had caused him to panic and get rid of all the coke.

"Jesus!" he said quietly, "you can imagine what a horror that was! I was standing there at the urinal, with my joint in one hand and a coke spoon in the other -- jamming the stuff up my nose and trying to piss at the same time -- when all of a fucking sudden it just exploded all around me! They have a speaker up there in the corner of that bathroom, and the whole place is *tile*!" He took a long hit on the drink. "Shit, I almost went crazy! It was like somebody had snuck up behind me and dropped a cherry bomb down the back of my shirt. All I could think of was getting rid of the coke. I threw it into one of the urinals and ran like a bastard for the bar." He laughed nervously. "Hell, I didn't even zip up my pants; I was running down the hall with my joint hanging out."

I smiled, remembering the sense of almost apocalyptic despair that seized me when I heard the first announcement.

"That's odd," I said. "It never even occurred to me to get rid of the drugs. I was thinking about all those hotel bills and that goddamn jeep. If they'd nailed us for that stuff, a few pills wouldn't make much difference."

He seemed to brood for a while. . . then he spoke, staring fixedly at the seat in front of him. "Well. . . I don't know about you. . . but I don't think I could *stand* another shock like that one. I had about 90 seconds of pure terror. I felt like my whole life had ended. Jesus! Standing at that urinal with a coke spoon up my nose and suddenly hearing my name on the speaker. . ." He moaned softly. "Now I know how Liddy must have felt when he saw those cops running into the Watergate. . . seeing his whole life fall apart, from a hot rod in the White House to a twenty-year jailbird in sixty seconds."

"Fuck Liddy," I said. "It couldn't have happened to a nicer guy." I laughed out loud. "Liddy was the bastard who ran Operation Intercept -- remember that?"

Bloor nodded.

"What do you think would have happened if Gordon Liddy had been standing at the gate when we came crashing through?"

He smiled, sipping his drink.

"We'd be sitting in a Mexican jail right now," I said. "Just *one* of these pills" -- I held up a purple acid tab -- "would have been enough to drive Liddy into a hate frenzy. He'd have had us locked up on suspicion of everything from hijacking to dope smuggling."

He looked at the pill I was holding, then reached for it. "Let's finish these off," he said. "I can't stand this nervousness."

"You're right," I said, reaching into my pocket for the other one. "We're almost to San Antonio." I tossed the pill down my throat and called the stewardess for another drink.



"Is that it?" he asked. "Are we clean?"

I nodded. "Except for the speed."

"Get rid of it," he said. "We're almost there."

"Don't worry," I replied. "This acid will take hold just about the time we land. We should order more drinks." I unbuckled my seat belt and walked up the aisle to the lavatory, fully intending to flush the speed down the toilet. . . but when I got inside, with the door locked behind me, I stared down at the little buggers resting so peacefully there in my palm. . . ten caps of pure-white amphetamine powder. . . and I thought: No, we might *need* these, in case of another emergency. I remembered the dangerous lethargy that had gripped me in Monterrey. . . Then I looked down at my white-canvas basketball shoes and noticed how snugly the tongues fit under the laces. . . plenty of pressure down there, I thought, and plenty of room for ten pills. . . so I put all the speed in my shoes and went back to the seat. No point mentioning it to Bloor, I thought. *He's* clean, and therefore totally innocent. It would only inhibit his capacity for righteous anger, I felt, if I told him about the speed I was still carrying. . . until we were safely through Customs and reeling blindly around the San Antonio airport; then he would thank me for it.

San Antonio was a cakewalk; no trouble at all -- despite the fact that we virtually fell off the plane, badly twisted again, and by the time we got our bags onto the conveyor belt leading up to the tall black Customs agent, we were both laughing like fools at the trail of orange amphetamine pills strung out behind us on the floor of the tin-roofed Customs shed. I was arguing with the agent about how much import tax I would have to pay on the two bottles of *prima* tequila I was carrying when I noticed Bloor was almost doubled over with laughter right beside me. He had just paid a tax of \$5.88 on his own tequila, and now he was cracking up while the agent fussed over *my* tax.

"What's the hell's wrong with you?" I snapped, glancing back at him. . . Then I noticed he was looking down at my feet, fighting so hard to control his laughter that he was having trouble keeping his balance.

I looked down. . . and there, about six inches from my right shoe, was a bright-orange Spansule. Another one was sitting on the black-rubber floor mat about two feet behind me. . . and two feet farther back was another. They looked as big as footballs.

Insane, I thought. I've left a trail of speed all the way from the plane to this beetle-browed Customs agent -- who was now handing me the official receipt for my liquor tax. I accepted it with a smile that was already disintegrating into hysteria as I took it out of his hand. He was staring grimly at Bloor, who was out of control now, still laughing at the floor. The Customs man couldn't see what Yail was laughing at because of the conveyor belt between us. . . but *I* could: It was another one of those goddamn orange balls, resting on the white-canvas toe of my shoe. I reached down as casually as I could and put the thing in my pocket. The Customs man watched us with a look of total disgust on his face and we hauled our bags through the swinging wooden doors and into the lobby of the San Antonio airport.

"Can you believe that?" Bloor said. "He never even looked inside these damn things! For all he knows, we just came across the border with two hundred pounds of pure scag!"

I stopped laughing. It was true. My big suitcase -- the elephantskin Abercrombie & Fitch job with brass corners -- was still securely locked. Not one of our bags had been

opened for even the laziest inspection. We had listed the five quarts of tequila on our declaration forms -- and that was all that seemed to interest him.

"Jesus Christ!" Bloor was saying. "If we'd only *known*."

I smiled, but I was still feeling nervous about it. There was something almost eerie about two laughing, staggering dopers checking through one of the heaviest drug check points on the Customs map without even opening their bags. It was almost insulting. The more I thought about it, the angrier I felt. . . because that cold-eyed nigger had been absolutely *right*. He had sized us up perfectly with one glance. I could almost hear him thinking: "*Goddamn!* Look at these two slobbering honkies. Anybody this fucked up can't be serious."

Which was true. The only thing we slipped past him was a single cap of speed, and even that was an accident. So, in truth, he had saved himself a lot of unnecessary work by ignoring our baggage. I would have preferred not to understand this embarrassment so keenly, because it plunged me into a fit of depression -- despite the acid, or maybe because of it.

The rest of that trip was a nightmare of paranoid blunders and the kind of small humiliations that haunt you for many weeks afterward. About halfway between San Antonio and Denver, Bloor reached out into the aisle and grabbed a stewardess by the leg, causing her to drop a tray of 21 wineglasses, which crashed in a heap at her feet and ignited rumblings of bad discontent from the other first-class passengers who had ordered wine with their lunch.

"You stinking, dope-addict bastard!" I muttered, trying to ignore him in the burst of ugliness that surrounded us.

He grinned stupidly, ignoring the howls of the stewardess and fixing me with a dazed, uncomprehending stare that confirmed, forever, my convictions that nobody with even latent inclinations to *use* drugs should ever try to smuggle them. We were virtually shoved off the plane in Denver, laughing and staggering in such a rotten condition that we were barely able to claim our luggage.

Months later, I received a letter from a friend in Cozumel, asking if I were still interested in buying an interest in some beach acres on the Caribbean shores. It arrived just as I was preparing to leave for Washington to cover "The Impeachment of Richard Nixon," the final act in a drama that began, for me, almost exactly a year earlier when I had bought a *News* from a newsboy hustling the porch of the Bal-Hai in Cozumel and read John Dean's original outcry about refusing to be the "scapegoat"

Well. . . a lot of madness has flowed under our various bridges since then, and we have all presumably learned a lot of things. John Dean is in prison, Richard Nixon has quit and been pardoned by his hand-picked successor, and my feeling for national politics is about the same as my feeling for deep-sea fishing, buying land in Cozumel or anything else where the losers end up thrashing around in the water on a barbed hook.

*Playboy Magazine*, December 1974