



Phil Treon

Bobbin

An iron wrecking-ball swings inside my skull smashing gray walls and neural girders, demolishing the old Hotel Reality with its leaky plumbing and abandoned elevator shafts.

Going down...

To Mexico where, slumped behind the steering wheel of my beige Isuzu pickup truck, I awaken to the sound of waves. Salt air wafts through the open windows. Forty feet away, the Sea of Cortez gleams in the morning sunlight. Offshore, cactus-studded isles shimmer, and in the hazy distance low-lying mountain peaks mark the spine of Baja California.

I reach for the bottle on the seat beside me.

Gargle mescal for oral hygiene.

Swallow and repeat.

A line of pelicans in Oakley shades glides by -- thirteen brown pterodactyls following the shoreline southward. The lead pelican flaps its wings to gain momentum and the others flap in turn behind it.

Aero-Adios!

Because we're all unclaimed baggage as it were, waiting for our one and only non-stop flight to nowhere. As for me -- after racing downhill last night with all my dashboard warning

lights flashing red, *red*, *RED!* – here now, mired on this remote beach I can terminate my life in peace.

But suddenly a person pops up in front of my Isuzu.

Hair tangled to his shoulders, beard uncombed, this alien wears a frayed olive drab commando sweater and tattered khakis. Gray eyes glinting in his weathered visage, warily he creeps around to my side of the truck -- all the while watching me watch him.

Who you?

Where from?

Why here?

His nicotine-stained fingers fidget along the windowsill, and then I smell him – a blend of rancid grease and puppy urine. His bright eyes appraise the mescal bottle in my hand and, more appreciatively, several full ones on the seat.

Many worms in many bottles...

He says, “I’m Bobbin. Like on a sewing machine.”

“I need to pee,” I say.

Opening the door, pushing Bobbin back, I climb out. He stands there barefoot, watching as I wobble to a mesquite bush.

He says, “I’m a double amputee, man.” I glance over my shoulder as he hoists his pants cuffs to reveal two normal human legs. “Lost ’em both in ‘Nam. Fucking landmine. One of ours.”

I return, zipping up, to my truck where Bobbin waits.

“I’ve got coffee,” he offers. “Well, actually not *coffee* coffee.”

“How about a real drink first?”

“Oh man, really?” Bobbin’s fingers flutter at his bony throat. “Morning mescal!”

He hovers while I lean into the truck and grab my bottle plus another. A toast...*to life!* Clink! And then we drink. Bobbin moves to the rear of my Isuzu and gestures at the license plate.

“New Mexico, eh? I’ve been there, man. Santa Fe-style. Land of Enchantment and all that shit. What brings you here from there?”

“My second wife just left me. Ran off to Nashville to be a country music singer. Plus, I quit my college teaching job.”

“So? Fuck’em both, man.” Bobbin sips mescal and eyes my truck. “This piece of shit still run?”

Before I can express my doubts, he gets in and turns the key. The motor cranks but doesn’t start. A minute later, he’s leaning in under the hood fondling wires and gizmos.

“Not good, man. Not good at all.”

I peer at my truck’s oily innards, a tangle of devices designed to fail at random moments on deserted roads, usually at night in rainstorms.

“See that?” He indicates a loop of shredded rubber. “Dead fan belt. Could be some electrical shit going on here, too.” He eyes me grimly. “Man, you’re gonna be here for a while.”

Maybe...maybe not. Truth be told, the writing on my wall is hard to read. The print is blurry, garbled, and mostly half-imagined.

Bottle in hand, Bobbin turns and scrambles up the face of a nearby sand dune. From its crest, long hair and scraggly beard blowing in the breeze, he beckons.

“Come on, man!”

A twist of leathery flesh dangling from an incandescent brain, he drops from sight. I plod after him, uphill through the sand. At the crest, bottle clenched against my heaving chest, I gaze down at Bobbin’s campsite on the beach below.

An old bus is parked there. California plates expired. A stovepipe juts from the roof. A rusty propane tank is bolted up top, too. The bus rests on splayed tires amid splintered crates and empty tin cans, scraps of canvas, bottles tinted purple by the sun, tangled fishing line, half a kayak and an oil drum full of rusty nuts and bolts and scavenged engine parts.

I descend. Bobbin spreads his arms amid his gypsy garden.

“Home sweet home, man!”

Nearby, trembling, a pit bull puppy gobbles from a dish.

“That’s Snoopy,” Bobbin says.

He ushers me to a chair beside his campfire. Drags a milk crate over for himself. A blackened coffee pot rests on a grate above the coals. Bobbin grabs two tin cans and blows the sand out of them. He lifts the pot and pours.

“Sorry, man. Ain’t got no cream or sugar. Ran outta all that fancy shit awhile back.”

He hands a can to me then sips from his.

I take a swallow. *Christ almighty!* Instantly my tongue swells and my eyes water.

“Maxwell House it ain’t,” says Bobbin. “A couple of Seri Indians showed me how to dig these special roots. What you do, see, is you shave ’em. Then you boil ’em. Kinda’ bitter, but it grows on you. Helps lower your cholesterol, too, man.”

I nod, weeping.

“Used to own a real coffee plantation,” he says. “Hundred acres in Hawaii. Up on Mount Hualalai, overlooking Kona. From my orchard I could see the coastline from Hapuna to Upolu. Blue Pacific! Charter boats trolling the offshore ledges for marlin and ahi. Owned a boat myself. Flying bridge, tuna tower, all that angling shit. Had me a mansion, too. Redwood with stained glass windows, five bedrooms and five baths all done up in onyx tile and gold fixtures. Had a dozen female bean pickers on the payroll. Hippy chicks, mostly. Some Filipinas. This one Japanese babe, man, she used to be a pearl diver. Only wore a loincloth and couldn’t speak a lick of English. Anyways, on Sundays we’d all lather up with coconut oil and throw ourselves a good old-fashioned orgy.”

Cackling, Bobbin gives his bottle a shake. He studies the worm tumbling in the amber turbulence then drinks.

“Bottoms up, man! Most of us only live once, right?”

My scalp prickles. Snoopy wanders over shivering.

“Vietnam messed me up, man.” Bobbin frowns. “My name is on The Wall. Only, they spelled it wrong. Can you believe that shit? How’s a man supposed to live with that?”

There are worse fates than being dead and misspelled...

Bobbin squints my way.

“Hey, man, you like music?”

He boards his bus and re-emerges with a guitar.

“I used to jam with Joplin,” he says. “Janis, not Scott.” He settles on his milk crate and strums pensively. “Man, back when I was flying Janis to gigs -- this was before they yanked my pilot’s license -- me and her, we used to groove together in the cockpit. Laid down some fine tunes. Mamas and the Papas flew with us sometimes. Hendrix, too. And Jagger. Wild times, man. Lock that bird on autopilot. Smoke some weed. We called our outfit Aero-Maybe.”

Baby, if we can get you up, we’ll get you down!

“I wrote this little number myself. Goes like this...”

“Charles Manson, he ain’t gone away,
And Charlie Whitman’s here to stay...”

Bobbin rises and shuffles around, a barefoot minstrel ducking and weaving, strumming, singing.

“Bloody California swimming pools,
Sun-baked Texas towers echoing wiiiiith
The sweet snap of sniper bullets...”

Leaning left, right, Bobbin croons.

“Ricky Speck’s still playing hide’n’sseek,
With nurses in Chicago...”

He bends down to serenade Snoopy. The puppy sneezes. Bobbin rises and warbles on.

“Robin’s got his beak on Batman’s worm,
Ma Bell’s got Clark Kent in a booth on hold.
There ain’t nothing super annnnnnnnymo-oore,
And maybe nothing ever was.”

He falls silent. Stares at me.

“Want breakfast?” He boards the bus and returns with an open can of Vienna sausage. He pops one in his mouth and chews. Extends the can toward me. “Baby wang?”

* * *

Legs spread wide to opportunity in Nashville, my runaway wife Rikki sunbathes naked on a redwood deck beside a bubbling hot tub where a porcine record mogul soaks, puffing on a Monte Cruz...

Blinking, half awake, I sit up. Afternoon waves foam in, hissing on the sand. Bobbin stands at the water's edge cradling Snoopy in his arms, gently rocking the pup and humming.

Standing, dusting sand off my butt, I notice a red rag flapping from a broomstick atop the bus.

Storm warning? Signal flag?

Bobbin wanders over holding Snoopy. The puppy snuffles, rheumy-eyed, disoriented.

"I'm worried, man." He feels the puppy's nose. "Warm and dry. Not good."

I wiggle a pinky in my ear. "What time did I pass out?"

"Couple hours ago. Man, you snore louder than a chainsaw with a cracked crankcase."

Bobbin sneezes. Wipes his nose on his commando sweater sleeve. My pants pockets, I suddenly realize, are turned inside out.

"Hope you don't mind, man," says Bobbin. "I had to borrow a little bread. Gotta make a run to town. Score some meds for Snoopers here. Plus, I ain't been laid in weeks."

Even as he speaks, a motor whines, distant but approaching. A boat, a *panga*, is speeding shoreward. Its outboard drones. Its narrow yellow hull smacks the waves and bounces.

Closer, louder.

Aboard are two Mexicans in baseball caps. The helmsman hunches in the stern, one hand on the throttle. His crewmate stands in the bow, legs flexing. Drawing nearer, the helmsman cuts the motor and they glide toward the beach.

Bobbin greets them then deposits Snoopy in my arms.

"I'm outta here, man. Don't worry if any Seri Indians come calling. Just act natural. They're not really cannibals. They haven't eaten anybody since those fishermen from Nebraska awhile back. Just don't let 'em on the bus, man, and don't act nervous. And whatever you do, don't turn your back on them. If you think they're getting restless, hand out some nuts and bolts from that barrel there. They use that stuff for fishing sinkers."

The *panga* helmsman hollers. "*Vamanós!*"

“My taxi’s waiting, man.”

Bobbin’s eyes are slightly bloodshot. He coughs and clears his throat then wades into the sea. Shoving the *panga* away from shore, he hoists himself aboard.

“Take good care of Snoopy,” he yells back. “Don’t forget to feed him, man. There’s some leftover jackrabbit stew in—“

The outboard roars to life, obliterating Bobbin’s words. He waves and off they go, skimming seaward before bearing south.

Leaving me, *man*, to man Fort Depravity, where cannibals might or might not come calling to skewer and slowly roast me while they squat around the campfire, salivating as my juices sizzle.

Just another butter-basted turkey...

Carrying Snoopy, I board Bobbin’s bus, a world reminiscent of a mobile home half-demolished by a Texas twister. Only rusty springs remain of the driver’s seat. Gaping sockets pock the dashboard, their dials and gauges long gone, wires dangling like severed nerves.

Where a fire extinguisher was once mounted a silver-plated Colt .44 revolver with ivory grips is slotted. A hand-lettered sign provides instructions.

“In Case Of Emergency Shoot Self.”

I put Snoopy down and explore Bobbin’s sanctuary, a warren of homemade cabinets with warped drawers, a sofa, a set of bunk beds and a kitchen with a sink, propane stove and fridge.

Cast off clothing lies everywhere. Flattened cardboard boxes line the floor and the walls are plastered with tourist stickers from various American states.

Dirty pots and skillets fill the kitchen sink. Open cans, empty and half full, occupy the countertop along with fast-food packets of soy sauce, mustard, catsup. The fridge contains cans with unreadable or missing labels.

In Bobbin’s spice rack I discover a Ziploc bag of marijuana and rolling papers. I fashion a joint. Torch it. Inhale and hold in the smoke until, bleary-eyed, I exhale in a rush.

Snoopy whimpers and gazes up at me. A pot half-full of something half-congealed rests on the stove.

Stew for Snoopy?

I carry pot and pup outdoors and set them down. Snoopy coughs and trembles. He sniffs the stew suspiciously while I

inhale more magic smoke.

Hold it, hold it...*exhale!*

I am potted.

I am dog meat.

* * *

Call me flotsam; call me jetsam...

On the beach that evening I resurrect the campfire. Toss on driftwood. Fan the flames. Close by, a lizard in bifocals chronicles my antics, dipping his quill pen in India ink and scratching in a ledger. Snoopy wanders over and crouches at my feet. He gags and hacks up a celery-colored dollop.

Shadows lengthen. Bobbin's seaside fiefdom darkens. The wet sand at water's edge reflects a crimson sunset. Snoopy whines. I hold him on my lap and wipe his eyes. The flames saw in the wind. Our shadows dance against the bus. Sparks blaze skyward and old age like death approaches at the speed of life, yet here I sit -- just another Jonah abandoned by another wife and swallowed by self-doubt.

Suddenly Snoopy rears up on my lap and barks. On alert, tail quivering, he peers toward the desert. Seconds later I hear gears grinding, a transmission being shifted.

I set Snoopy down and climb the dunes. A set of headlights announces some juggernaut rumbling downhill toward the sea. The lights wink off. An engine idles. A peculiar sound – *sloshing liquid?* -- gradually subsides. Someone hollers.

“Hey, man, lend a hand!”

I wade down the backside of the dune to where an enormous tank truck is parked. Bobbin stands beside the cab. Inside, a swarthy driver grips the wheel. Bobbin reaches in and retrieves a wicker-covered demijohn.

“Pulqué,” he crows. He points to a row of surplus jerry cans beneath a bush. “Haul those over here, man.”

As instructed, I convey the containers to the rear of the truck. The driver mans a spigot, and as quickly as I fetch the jerry cans he fills them with water.

The night winds gust. Clouds roll in.

The driver climbs in behind the wheel.

Bobbin yells, “*Gracias, amigo!*”

The rig turns and grinds uphill, its cargo sloshing. A single taillight shines through the dust.

Red-eyed Cyclops retreating...gone.

“Here’s your change, man.”

Coughing, Bobbin presses a wad of crumpled pesos into my hand. He hawks up a gob of phlegm and spits then lifts a black rubber loop from around his neck and places it over my head.

Aloha from Hawaii?

“It’s a fan belt, man.” Bobbin’s breath reeks. “For your truck, remember?”

Shouldering the demijohn, he starts up the dunes. I follow, lugging two full jerry cans. As we trudge downhill into camp, Snoopy stumbles forward. Bobbin lowers the demijohn and lifts the pup up, face-to-face.

“Snoopers, little buddy, you look pale.”

The wind is rising as I park the water cans and we board the bus. Bobbin installs Snoopy on a bunk, lights a lantern then pulls a medication container from his pocket. He pries Snoopy’s jaws apart and pops in a capsule. The pup squirms, but Bobbin holds his muzzle shut and rubs his throat until, shuddering, he swallows.

Almost immediately Snoopy falls asleep. Bobbin coughs and spits into the sink then uncorks the demijohn.

“Bar’s open, man!”

He fills two mugs with pulqué. Clink! The wind outside increases as Bobbin pours refills.

“I got laid in town, man. Twice! Once for me and once for you. I mean, after all, you paid for it. I told those girls it wasn’t my money, but they snatched it anyhow.” He hoists his mug.

“*Carpe diem*, man. It’s all we’ve got.”

Clink and drink.

“Say, man, that chanteuse second wife of yours...?”

“Former student, age twenty-three.”

“And you?”

“Fifty-one.”

“Classic!” Bobbin hoots and slaps his knee. “The old professor, the hot young coed -- cliché-wise, man, you’re tits on a ten-point scale!”

My mind forms words I cannot utter. Outside a cabal of cumulonimbus clouds conspires to obliterate the stars and drench everything below. The first raindrops splatter on the bus.

I look to Bobbin for a refill, but he’s curled up on the lower bunk asleep with Snoopy.

* * *

“Wake up!” Coughing, Bobbin shakes me. “Up, man!”

“Huh...what?”

“Snoopy’s worse. Got a nasty bug, man, fucking brain virus or something. That medicine ain’t helping.”

I struggle to my feet.

Outside the storm rages. Pounding downpour. Wind blasts. Birds tumble through the air and plummet earthward. Stunned, they pop open their umbrellas and stagger off like drunks on zigzag courses.

Bobbin’s lungs spasm. Gasping, he kneels beside the bunk where Snoopy lies. The pup’s head sags. His forlorn eyes are red and puffy.

“He’s dehydrated, man.”

Bobbin rummages for an eyedropper then squeezes water into Snoopy’s mouth. The pup chokes. Drifts deeper into somnolence.

“You’re gonna be okay, Snoops.” Bobbin pats the puppy then leaps up, gesticulating. “Aww, man, he’s dying here! We need a veterinarian!”

“Calm down! Let’s have a drink and think this through!”

As I fill our mugs, the storm’s fury ratchets up. Wailing wind. Hammering rain. The bus rocks and shudders like a ship at sea. Bobbin meanwhile dons a grungy leather biker’s jacket.

I offer him a mug, but he ignores it. Instead, he starts extracting tools from behind the driver’s seat – pliers, hammer, wrenches. He stuffs everything into a satchel.

“Gotta fix your truck, man! Drive Snoopy into town for help!”

Now? In this weather?”

Exiting the bus, Bobbin yells back, “fan belt!”

I drain my mug. Bobbin’s mug I also drain. Then, fan belt in hand, I lurch into the storm.

Inky combers roll in, spray lashing off the crests. They rear up then thump the beach like cannon fire. Through the rain I trail Bobbin to my stranded Isuzu.

He’s already under the hood, extracting the old fan belt. He grabs the new belt from me and sets to work again. The wind claws at the open hood, threatening to rip it from its hinges. Soaking wet, we shiver.

“I don’t know, man.” Bobbin tests the tension on the new belt. “Let’s hope it holds.”

I get in behind the wheel and turn the key. The motor cranks over and over but doesn’t start.

“Stop! You’ll drain the battery, man! Something’s outta’ whack here.”

“Probably needs gas,” I say. “The fuel gauge showed empty when I turned downhill off the coast road.”

“Naw, that ain’t it. While you were sleeping, I siphoned some gas from my bus. Your tank’s full, man.”

I climb out and join him. He stands trance-like, staring at the stormy sea. In the slashing rain he sneezes and points toward the surf.

“Right there, man. A while ago, Jacques Cousteau waded ashore in an aqualung and fins. He came over, pushed up his dive mask and whispered in my ear. He said, ‘*Merde*, my friend. The sea is full of it, and so are you.’”

Bobbin pivots back to my truck and yanks a flashlight from his satchel. “Here. Shine this on the battery, man, and hope to Jesus she ain’t cracked.”

I see many cracks in many places...

Stripping in Nashville for a nightclub owner in his private office, my wife undulates. She cups her breasts. He licks her nipples. She hip nudges him and begs him to let her sing on his stage--

“Crescent wrench!” snaps Bobbin.

I hand it over. He tightens the + and – connections.

“Okay, man, try starting her again.”

Indeed. Hope springs eternal...like an overflowing toilet.

In fact, this time the engine roars to life. Triumphant, Bobbin slams the hood and, coughing, collects his tools.

“Shut her off, man! Let’s go get Snoopy.”

Teeth chattering, I follow Bobbin back over the dunes. The wind and rain have slowed, but lightning still flashes offshore.

Halfway to his camp Bobbin doubles over, racked by dry heaves. I move to help him, but he pushes me away and staggers on.

I find him inside the bus, kneeling, weeping by the lower bunk. He looks at me with bloodshot eyes then lifts Snoopy from the bunk.

The pup is dead.

“I used to be a surgeon, man. Ain’t that ironic?” He stands up cradling Snoopy. “Trouble is I can’t recall a thing I learned in med school, much less when I interned at the Mayo. Can’t manage routine heart transplants anymore. Can’t even fix gunshot wounds like I used to when I was riding with The Angels, Oakland Chapter.”

I fill a mug with pulqué. *Down the hatch!*

Refill and repeat.

My wife Rikki meanwhile reaches over from her seat in a country music agent’s Jaguar and unzips his trousers. They’re parked just two blocks from The Grand Old Opry--

“Man, I’m talking about the original Hell’s Angels,” says Bobbin. “The real sisters. Not them fakes you see today. Back then a dude could swing a length of Harley chain from Huntington to ‘Frisco. Man, wrap that sucker like a bullwhip around some asshole’s neck and yank the sum’bitch so hard you could hear the sweet crack of vertebrae. I knew this one Angel, man, he sucked the marrow out of human bones. Dude used a straight razor for a toothpick. Tell you what, that weren’t your father’s Marlboro Country.”

He moves to the front of the bus. Shifting Snoopy’s corpse to one arm, he yanks the ivory-handled revolver from its slot.

“This was General Patton’s, man, Don’t ask me how I got it.” He shoves the gun into his waistband. “Come on!”

Bearing Snoopy’s corpse, Bobbin steps outside again.

Fortified with more pulqué, I too leave the bus and follow Bobbin’s hacking cough through the darkness. The wind and rain have died now, and Bobbin sits atop a dune with Snoopy’s body on the sand beside him.

“Oh, man—“ He wheezes and wipes sputum from his lips. “I feel worse than the passengers on that Pan Am jet I sabotaged over Scotland back when I was running with the Libyans. Loved their peanut butter, those Libyans. Not your Skippy or Jiff. Only Peter Pan! I was flying C-130s, covert ops, airdropping Peter Pan by the pallet-load, man. I raked in so much black market money, I--”

“I’M GOING TO KILL THEM!”

“What? Kill who, man...the Libyans?”

“Them, *her!* My runaway wife and all her Nashville lovers!”

“Hey, man--”

“My fucking wife is fucking everyone!”

Serenity suddenly infuses me. I have purpose. I have a mission. The storm has scudded out to sea and dawn is breaking. Behind us the rocky coastal sierra is etched against the paling sky.

Bobbin starts dredging sand from beneath himself. As he digs he breathes corrosively and hawks up rusty gobbets.

“Stop,” I tell him. “I’ll drive you into town. We’ll find a doctor—“

“Man, I’m hemorrhaging here.”

He groans and blinks his rheumy eyes then goes on scooping sand, more determined than a nesting sea turtle.

“Gotta take her down a ways, man. Coyotes...crabs, they’re awesome excavators.”

Finally, shoulder deep, he stops. Blood flecks his lips. He sucks in air and whispers.

“Put Snoopy down here.”

And so I do. I place the pup’s body on his lap. Sunlight burnishes the sea. Offshore, the desert islands glow. Bobbin’s voice is raspy.

“Here, man, take this.” He hands up his ivory-gripped .44. “Only one bullet left. One for her...one for you. Either way, man. Or maybe, maybe let her go. Check your ass into a rehab, maybe...get your job back.”

He beckons weakly. I lean in closer.

“Remember, everything you ever were or will be, man, you are right now.”

He begins dragging in handfuls of sand, covering his legs then his hips and Snoopy. Laying back he draws in more sand and more, slowly burying his torso and lastly his face, until only one hand is visible.

I grasp it. He squeezes back then we let go and I descend to my Isuzu. I turn around and pull away, slowly bumping up the sandy wash with Bobbin’s revolver on the seat beside me and his last words echoing in the black hole I call my mind.

Phil Treon has been published in Sundog, Red Rock Review, and Puerto del Sol. He is the co-author of the play Crunch Time and co-wrote the story for Refuge, an award-winning feature-length film. When not writing, he enjoys camping in New Mexico's high sierras and kayaking on the Sea of Cortez.