

THE HOTTEST LITTLE BOOK
FROM MEXICO

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to The Indio Date Festival has been held for decades, celebrating the date industry of the west Coachella Valley in southern California. I played hooky from Palm Springs High School for a day to attend with other felonious friends, one of the few times my mother actually agreed to let me miss school. She promised stretch her morality far enough to write an excuse saying that I was sick. How could I resist?

Thousands of people were milling around on the Riverside County Fairgrounds south of the Sheriff's Department in the small town of Indio, so it was easy to get lost in the crowd. I particularly liked the carnival set up on the western extremity of the block dedicated to the event. A huge Ferris Wheel became a metaphor for the passing of time. It rolled and rolled, its seats empty, its colored lights vainly vying for attention under the huge desert sun. The immense merry-go-round whipped its poled horses in parade, banners flying, mirrors flashing, music contributing to the mounting cacophony. The "flying-jenny" is always the centerpiece.

Everything about a carnival is garish, even in daylight. People leer or squint, voices attack in stereo.

Canes poke out at the crowd from booths as badly dressed carnies try every embarrassing verbal weapon in their arsenals to entice a dime into a sea of plates, or a quarter changed for three shots with a .22 at a wall festooned with balloons. "Win the giant Teddy Bear for your sweetheart!" one cries. "You look like you could do it, son! Nothing but hand and eye coordination."

From another side, "Three balls for two-bits! Knock down the bottles, take home a prize!"

I survey the prizes, three shelves deep. The top shelf is a porcupine quilled with 200 of the most beautiful pocketknives I've ever seen standing poised on their sharp points. Framed poster of movies stars, spaceships, stuffed tigers, lions, mud flaps with chrome naked ladies.

"Make three baskets! Be a winner! Hey, kid. You look like you're a basketball player. Come show us how it's done! I'll give you three practice shots gratis! Our games are straight, buddy! No flats, no alibis! You gotta chance here!"

The lights and dueling music fight for a place in your life. Huge hand-painted canvas banners waft in a gentle desert breeze a barker throws his spiel designed to entice people into a tent inhabited by the Human Alligator, and the Fat Boy. Another advertises the Half-Man-Half-Woman, the Human Pretzel.

The Fat Boy looks gargantuan in his painted glory. By the billowing canvass I estimate he must weigh in excess of one thousand pounds. A disheveled man in a dirty ragged T-shirt is doing a bally next to the barker's podium, consisting of a free magic show. I watch for a while as he turns dimes into quarters, makes red balls appear and disappear between his fingers, lights his nose on fire. His face is like stone, his eyes dead. He has been doing this same act for way too long.

"Step right up, ladies and gentlemen. For the price of one dollar, one buck, one-tenth of a sawbuck," he holds up a crisp dollar bill between his hands and snaps it for emphasis, "you get three shows for one, my friends. You will see the amazing Human Alligator, a unique person in his own right. His entire body is covered with scales like those found on reptiles in the Louisiana Bayous. Don't believe it? Come see it with your own eyes! You will go away saying you have never seen anything like it in the world."

He tips straw his hat to a pretty young woman in an acrobat outfit who is walking by. He rolls up his shirtsleeves. "Yes, my friends, The Human Alligator joined our show when he was 14. Medical science has not yet found a cure to the unnamed condition that has provided him with these most interesting scales. The Human Alligator has to apply lotion twice each day to keep them from painful cracking. When you have caught your breath from taking in the amazing sight what this courageous boy has to endure, you will then witness the incredible corpulence Billy Croton, the famous Fat Boy! At only 20 years old he has attained a weight of over 470 pounds! That's very nearly a quarter of a ton, ladies and gentlemen. At four-foot-six inches tall, his girth is nearly 87 inches! You will get to hear from his own mouth about his young life and how he came to be with our show. When you've heard him talk I think you all agree he's a great kid and will gain a great affection for him."

The barker coughed twice, took a drink of what looked like water from a small glass and continued to harangue his potential customers.

"Thirdly you will be delighted to attend a performance of magic the likes of which you have never seen and will never see again. And, I'm feeling very generous today. You are such a nice crowd that we will be blessed by a visit from Madame Zarnia who will read many of your minds. If that is not enough, you will then be offered the rare privilege of being able to purchase at an additional dollar, that's right, only a dollar, a grab-bag of carnival souvenirs including The Hottest Little Book From Mexico!"

He looked right at me and winked. "You know what I mean, kid?" as if he had read my dirty mind. I cheeks bloomed with roses and began to closely study my scuffed shoes. Yeh, I knew what he meant.

Some of my friends at school had furtively passed around ersatz copies of what was then popularly known as "Tijuana Bibles" (though we all mispronounced it as *tee-a-wanna*). The badly printed little books on pulp paper were some of the first underground comics, secretly printed by nasty workmen after hours, and distributed to people with base and disgusting proclivities, like teenagers, by traveling salesmen and insurance agents. I only had one, a deeply buried treasure in the bottom of a sock drawer. It was a Mutt and Jeff cartoon booklet, where Jeff was finally larger than Mutt in a very depraved and filthy way. I had read Bud Fisher's 'Mutt and Jeff' strip for years. It was very funny to see these familiar Sunday Comix characters misbehaving in such sordid ways. They were as had my dad. These 'Bibles' were wonderfully wicked and very hard to come by. I immediately pushed forward and my dollar for a ticket to the show, and an opportunity to add another to my feeble collection of one.

About ten customers followed me into the straw-strewn tent. Two canvas partitions on the far side of this thirty-foot tent held the main attractions. The first flap was pulled aside by the same guy in the torn T-shirt we had seen doing card tricks. As we assembled into the inner the T-shirt guy with the dead eyes raised his nasal voice.

"Welcome to our show, ladies and gentlemen. Let me introduce you to Robert Buckner, originally from Austin, Texas. This unique individual is known as The Alligator Boy. He has a rare condition that medical science has not been able to diagnose."

Reclined before us on a long couch, clad only in a tiger-skin loin clothes, lay a man of about 35. He was certainly no boy. His entire surface was covered with scales, leathery patches of dry skin, anywhere from an inch or two to several inches, separated by cracks that appeared to be a quarter of an inch or so deep. He looked up and around at

all of the faces staring back at him. He smiles and I could see his teeth had been chisels to points! My face must have shown some hint of horror, for when his eyes met mine he seemed to wince. I was embarrassed to look at him, sorry to have intruded on his privacy. I had to look down and away to the canvas wall.

“Folks, there but for the grace of God could go any of us. Robert has no way to make a living but this. If you feel you can, you may show Robert compassion and respect by placing a tip in the jar as you go out. Do any of your have any questions for Bob? Bob’s been with us for 21 years.”

One little lady with tears in her eyes said, “Mr. Buckner, does your affliction hurt?” He looked up and said, “No ma’am. Thank you for asking. As long as I keep them moist they do not. I have to bath several times a day and soak my entire body before bed. Thank you, again.”

I looked around. The general demeanor of the people I noticed was reserved and introspective. No one else spoke. I made a nervous “ahem” and filed out with the rest, dropping a quarter in the Mason Jar with his pictured on it and felt guilty for not giving more.

We were escorted by T-shirt Man through the flap into the next compartment where a huge boy was troubling a massive couch with his mass. The couch itself was barely visible beneath his bulk and it sagged all the way to the straw covered floor in the middle.

“My friends,” the dead-eyed guide said with no detectable emotion, “This is James Stout.” Someone chuckled almost inaudibly at the irony of his name. The host didn’t miss it. “Yes, that is his real name. Jimmy has been with us two years now and I’m gonna let Jimmy himself talk to you for a while.”

With some difficulty Jimmy Stout rolled his huge frame off the couch and rather nimbly right himself on his two bandy legs, and locked them buckling at the knees. He wore an immense T-shirt and incredibly wide shorts. His arms bowed out around his concave sides and didn’t seem to reach even to his waist, if he had had one. I was feeling guilty again. I wondered how he could go the bathroom, since he couldn’t reach either his rear or his crotch.

“Ma name,” he began in a deep southern drawl, “is James Stout. I weight 470 poun’s and I’ll be 23 years old this May. I am from Tupelo, Miss-sippy, the same town Elvis Presley was borned in. My fam’ly knew his’n. He went on to b’come a sanger, I got to do this. Let that be a less’n to y’all.” He was smiling broadly and I could see by people’s faces we had all began to like him.

“I’m 87 inches around the equator,” he said chuckling to himself. “For you unmarried gals out there, ‘specially you,” he said, pointing at one girl who had turned the color of rust, “I’m avail’ble for marryin’ up. I gots nuthin’ to offer ‘cept’n a lotta shade in the summ’r and a lotta warmth in the wint’r.”

That got a few chuckles.

“For those among you’d like to know how’d I done got this way, well sir, I eat a lot. I’m guessin’ you’d already figgered that ‘un out. I usta say I had a gland’lar condishun, and I guess thet ain’t quite wrong, but I ain’t one for makin’ es’cuses neither.”

He looked down and then up again, as if he was thinking about what to say next, moved a piece of straw with the toe of his immense tennis shoe.

“I like eatin’ steady, y’all, so’s I do this for a livin’, but the travelin’ show bid’ness id’nt what it usta be. Television, don’cha know? Took all the mystry outa everthang? So people don’t get no pers’nal contac’ with performers no more. It’s been nice meetin’ you folks. If you’ve a mind to, you might put a bit in the jar as you walk out. Thank you very much.” (I almost heard Elvis’s echo.)

He kind of half bowed, as far as his girth would allow and we all applauded loudly.

Our guide assembled us into a half-circle and announced, “I would now like to introduce you to the amazing and incomparable Psychic, Madame Zarnia! She has read the minds of many of the greatest men and women in the world. In Vienna many years ago she performed for a royalty and Einstein hisself was in the audience.”

An elderly woman with a surfeit of bright makeup, kind of pranced out from a little area curtained apart in another corner I hadn’t noticed. She was moving her arms in very strange ways as if gathering spirits from the ether, dressed in a flowing gown of black, studded with golden suns, moons, stars, and comets. Her conical hat sported a huge golden eye centered above her brow. There was general and polite applause at this flamboyant entrance.

“If Bill will assist me,” she said in an asking tone of voice as the dead-eyed guy with ripped T-shirt gave out tiny stub pencils and slips of paper. “Write something, anything that comes to mind, on this scrap of paper. Fold it twice so I cannot read it. I will consult the spirits among you.

“We are, as you all may know, not alone. Each of us has a guardian angel and I have established a relationship with these spirits who watch over us all. They have assented to make their presence known by telling me what you have written on these slips. I will now gather your thoughts.”

She walked in an exaggerated way, swinging her hips throughout the crowd, making dramatic, sudden, darting, angular moves, retrieving the slips of paper. I did not give her mine, as I had not written on it, but she pretended like I had anyway, and said, as she threaded past me, “Thank you. Donka. Gracias. So kind.”

Bill’s eyes, still dull as stones, gazed down into the fishbowl as if it were a crystal ball in his hands as she placed the folded slips within. With a wild and very baroque gesture, the old woman reached in and picked out one.

She held the folded paper at arm’s length and closed her purple-lidded and kohl-laden eyes. Someone here has written, “My Brother John is in Viet Nam.”

A woman yelled, “Yes. That is amazing. Could you ask if he is alright?”

“I am assured,” the psychic said with her eyes closed. Thank you, my darling, but this is all the angels will allow.” She unfolded the paper and looked like she was reading. said, “Yes. That is what it says here. The spirits never lie,” then picked another.

“I hope my sports car is all right in the parking lot,” she said in a high voice. “It is fine, my friend,” she added.

Everyone laughed and a very genuinely perplexed gentleman cried out, “How the hell did she do that?”

She opened the scrap and again said, “Yes, that is what it says.”

This continued for about seven of these little notes with people amazed that she had been able to read them without seeing what was on them. Each time she opened it and said, “Yes, that is what it says.”

I could not think of how she did that, and years later when I found out that the first note was always answered by a confederate and the psychic just read the first note as the second one, and so on, that I was wiser and maybe less inclined to believe. But my mind was not so much then on questioning the extra sensory powers of Madame Zarnia. We all applauded as the torn T-shirt model took his place in our focus by placing a small table, the top of which was about 2 feet by 2 feet and about three and a half feet tall before him on the ground.

I wondered what he was going to do but, to be truthful, I thought he was an imbecile. His lackluster demeanor seemed to be all there was man. He seemed one-side, a loser working for a carnival, not because he wanted to, but it was all he knew.

He probably, I thought, left school in the fourth grade and ran off with the carnival, never to learn another thing. I began to regret the classes I was missing. This was a foreign mindset to me, but there I was, thinking that way.

“I will now do a magic trick for you,” he said, rather lethargically. “If you will all gather round, I will show you a trick I learned in the mysterious Orient.

“The Egyptians have been performing this marvel since the days the Israelites escaped across the Red Sea. Madame Zarnia will assist me?”

The elderly psychic emerged from her hiding place in the shadows, this time holding a large white Canada Goose. The animal was quite upset at the indignity of being carried under the old lady’s arm and was giving her quite a thrashing with its wings.

Dead-eyes took the bird and placed it on top of the black lacquered table top and reached down and swung up one of the sides, then another, and twice more, until the top of the table had become a box a foot deep. He latched it with little metal hooks and eyes and was handed a black wooden top by Madame Zarnia. She bowed, then back away into the shadows.

One of the great, white, wing feathers, was sticking out. The ill-garbed carnie turned guide, turned magician, opened the top and the goose pushed its honking head and orange beak out. He pushed it down again and latched the lid closed. A final honk from within and then silence.

Zarnia again materialized to provide him a magic wand, black with a shiny gold tip, and a large square of silk. He handily draped the silk over the entire box, traced several circles above and whispered, this time with surprising effect, “Abracadabra!”

His hand swept the silk from the box, threw it aside to flutter to the dust, then lifted the lid, dropped the sides and the goose was gone!

I was three feet from the man! I was aghast! Everyone was aghast! How had he done this? I had prided myself on being able to figure out most magic tricks. I felt superior until that very moment. I could see no way the huge goose had dropped disappeared. We were on dirt for God’s sake. No trapdoors. No curtains.

The applause was loud and long. How had this dirty little moron outsmarted me? I felt like a great fool.

My personal embarrassment was cut by his words.

“And now, for those of you who have been waiting. I have in this box,” he placed a plain cardboard box on the little table, again from the gnarled hands of queen Zarnia of the psychic miracles, “several grab-bags that can be yours for the small sum of one American dollar. Inside you will find two magic tricks, and The Hottest Little Book From Mexico!”

I ponied up my dollar into his calloused hand, the nails of which were broken and caked with dirt. I hurried out of the tent with my depraved treasure. With much speed and panting I repaired to a grassy area behind a carnival tent and beneath a huge Deglet Noor palm tree. Sticky brown dates peppered the green and blue-bottle flies hummed, but I didn't care. I sat and opened the brown paper sack.

Inside I there was a plastic disappearing ball trick on a small stand. When the top was taken off there was a ball. Replace the top and remove it again, and 'Viola!' the ball was gone. Big deal, as Holden Caulfield would have said.

The next trick was a little box with three other boxes inside of one another, like Russian dolls, in a purple velvet sack with a drawstring. One could place the entire assembling in one's pocket, take a coin and put it in there too, and pull it out with the coin securely centered in the most interior box. Good one, but I lay them aside for the real prize. I was impatient. Where was my Tijuana Bible? Where was my little pornographic treasure?

I reached in and found the last item and quickly pulled it out.

What the hell was this? I was angry. They had left out my TJ Bible!

And then I got the joke.

I the palm of my feverish hand lay a regular book of matches.

I flipped it open. All of the matches were there. The cover read:

Hussongs Cantina

"Birthplace of the Margarita, 1941"

Ensenada, Mexico

Dead-eyes had sold me exactly what I had been promised. I was the proud possessor of 'The Hottest Little Book From Mexico'.

Honesty is important to me now that I'm older. Lessons can be learned in many ways. Maybe angels are looking over us, but I wouldn't bet on it.

The next day I stood in line with many others to turn in our excuse notes for absence the day before. The woman at the window said, "Did your mother write this note?"

"Yes," I said.

"So you were home sick yesterday?"

"Yes," I repeated.

"Didn't I see you at the Indio Date Festival about 2:00 o'clock yesterday afternoon?"

I gulped. "Maybe."

"To the principal's office," she said with a frown, handing me back my mother's note.

There's a sucker born every minute.

Reader's note: Hussong's Cantina was established in 1892 by Johann Hussong, who first changed his name to John and then to Juan, born in Germany in 1863. The Margarita was invented by Hussong's bartender, Don Carlos Orozco, who mixed equal parts tequila, Damaniana (now Controy), lime, served over ice in a salt-rimmed glass. Named after Margarita Henkel, daughter of the German Ambassador to Mexico. There are a number of other claimants to inventing the drink in various years.