

Banging
the
Monkey

or

The Three-Legged Dog



Tod A





Banging
the
Monkey

Mr Frank No Here

EVERYTHING STARTED OFF smoothly enough, as everything usually does before going horribly wrong. Disasters typically come without warning. Sometimes volcanoes emit a puff of smoke or a low rumble, as if the earth were politely clearing its throat before burying your home in ash, or incinerating you in a pyroclastic flow. But volcanoes are an exception to the rule. Most of the time, bad things happen to perfectly nice people without the vaguest admonition.

Earthquakes toss children from their beds in the dark of night. Airplanes plummet from clear blue skies. Tsunamis level entire coastlines. Buildings collapse, banks fold, economies fail, empires crumble. Disasters strike when you least expect them. That's why they're called disasters.

My own disaster began in the taxi from Jorokotor International Airport. I'd been drinking steadily since Istanbul, knocking back all the complimentary beer I could get my hands on. I had promised myself I would go on the

wagon for my birthday—sort of a gift to my liver—but that was still almost a month away. In the meantime I held fast to my lifelong credo of never turning down a free drink. ‘Waste not, want not’, as Buster used to say.

The cabin crew had clearly dealt with my type before. The best way to prevent a harmless lush from turning into an angry drunk is to keep the libations flowing.

The plane was full of Chinese holiday-makers and Indian newlyweds, along with a few pink and sweaty solo Europeans—sex-tourist types straight out of central casting. But the flight attendants were gracious and kind. They gave you a whiff of what the early days of air travel must have been like, back when men wore hats, and everyone smoked, and stewardesses were lithe young things.

An image of Blake’s face had been hovering in my head ever since I’d left New York. Though it had been almost three years since the divorce, I still couldn’t look at myself. And when I closed my eyes I saw only her. Without Blake I was a weed violently severed from its roots, tumbling wherever the wind might blow me. For so long, I had harnessed my future to her dreams—and she to mine. But our future, our dreams, had finally shriveled and died under the cold Brooklyn sun.

For the first time in years—perhaps as a form of self-flagellation—I’d been reading a ragged review copy of *XXX*, my only published novel. It was the last copy I had left, and I planned to burn it at the earliest opportunity.

I’d attempted to drink myself unconscious and catch a few hours of sleep between Dubai and Singapore. But I didn’t

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actually pass out until shortly before we began our descent into Jorokotor.

Captain Tommy Pang woke us with a heroic attempt at English over the PA system. All I could glean from this announcement was that local time was four-thirty, and that the landing might be rough.

My arrival in Madu was a scene I'd rehearsed in my head countless times back in Bushwick. Yet I had no idea what to expect. I cracked the window shade and caught my first glimpse of the island in the afternoon light.

The sun was low on the horizon, shooting spotlights through gaps in the great curtains of black cumulus hanging over the sea. Maybe because Madu had loomed so large in my imagination, when I finally laid eyes on the place it seemed shockingly small—just a maraca-shaped dollop of green on a deep blue canvas.

The widest part of the island rose to a cone in the center, capped in pale brume. This was Kebakaran, the volcano. The bulk of Jorokotor City straddled the isthmus, with tiny sails dotting the bays on either side.

We jumped and juddered in the updrafts. I clung to the armrests and grinned like a kid at Coney Island. The plane glanced heavily onto the tarmac to a round of applause from the relieved passengers. It was hardly a landing worthy of an ovation, but at least Captain Pang had delivered us back from the heavens alive.

Sea-salt stuck to my skin as I left the ramp stairs and slogged across the tarmac through rising plumes of heat. The

air inside the terminal was thick with incense, mildew, and cigarette smoke. It smelled about as far from New York City as you could get. I liked the place immediately.

After immigration I grabbed my bags from the belt and slipped into the men's room to change from my sweat-soaked clothes into shorts and flip-flops. Then I converted my dollars into rupees and shoved the wad of notes into my front pocket. But when I went to look for Frank, there was no sign of him.

I sat down and waited on the pavement, waving away touts and taxi drivers, watching the thin Madunese and puffy tourists come and go, as the palm shadows lengthened.

At the far side of the parking lot a billboard showed a pretty brown girl with a flower in her hair, next to the headline, "Welcome to Madu—Paradise in the Tropics!" Below, in bold type, it read, "Warning: Drug Smuggling Carries Mandatory Death Sentence."

The temperature must have been close to a hundred degrees, and the brutal humidity made it feel even hotter. It had been a grueling journey—twenty-eight hours, all told. But I had made it, I had escaped. All I wanted right now was a place to drop my bags, suck down a few cold ones, and pass out.

Finally, I gave up, nodded to a driver that had been hovering over me, and slumped onto the back seat of his Ambassador.

"Where you go, Boss? You need hotel? You want girl?"

"No." I handed him Frank's address. "I'm staying with a friend."

"Friend." He winked. "Got it, Boss."

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With a great grinding of gears, the ancient machine heaved away from the airport and out into the seasick streets. I had landed and left the sky behind, but there was still a sense of floating, as if I hadn't truly touched down yet.

The driver popped in a cassette: ethereal chanting over gongs and flutes. Stacks of dried rice stalks burned in the paddies, and an acrid haze hung over the highway, obscuring details. The traffic gained mass and momentum at each confluence of roads, as we submitted to the current that pulled us away from the airport toward the center of it all: Jorokotor.

"What country you from, Boss?"

"America."

"Ah, America! George W. Bush!"

"Yeah."

The taxi pitched and rolled through potholes and clouds of dust like some decrepit schooner in a summer squall. It was a mad race with no rules. Cars, trucks, motorbikes, and moto-rickshaws all vied for space on the jammed and broken highway, each trying to pass the other.

Images materialized out of the haze, then disappeared again: half-constructed buildings, skinny cows and pariah dogs, crows bickering over trash at the roadside. The driver laughed, battling the clutch, as he swerved to avoid bullock carts and broken-down vehicles. A breath of fresh salty air filled the car as we crossed the isthmus, with colorful fishing junks on both sides.

"We're not in Kansas anymore, Toto," I mumbled.

"Sorry, Boss?"

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“I said it’s hot. Is it always this hot?”

“Yes, fucking hot, Boss!” he laughed into the rear view mirror. “Monsoon late. Monsoon coming!”

We rocked along past shanties of concrete block and corrugated steel. In one shack, a family huddled in its dim interior like a nativity scene around a Holy TV set.

When the traffic slowed, girls held out their empty palms, boys hawked newspapers or bottled water. The details accumulated as the city closed in, but didn’t compute. In my hazy state all was a blur of exhaust and incense, shouting and horns.

“This place call Kang-Kang,” the driver shouted over his shoulder. “Poor people living here.”

I got the feeling he was padding his fare by giving me the Grand Tour, but I was too tired to argue about it.

I began to pick out faces from the human tide. What I noticed first were the teeth. New Yorkers aren’t famous for their welcoming smiles. So at first I found all these grinning strangers disturbing. But I soon got used to it, and after a while I managed to smile back.

The women were slender and graceful, the men slight but fit. Even the aged looked vigorous, trundling along on their Chinese bicycles. Peoples’ skin color varied from cinnamon to coffee, with all the flavors in-between.

Hundreds of shopfronts offered everything imaginable: plastic buckets and rooster cages, crash helmets and extension cords, light bulbs and Ganeshas, coffins and cakes.

“This downtown Joro,” yelled the driver. “Build by Dutch.”

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We had entered a district of banks and crumbling colonial office buildings where roundabouts ringed strange monuments. Here were hotels, motorbike dealers, cellphone stores.

“Too much cars!” he yelled. “We go gangs, ja, Boss?”

“Gangs?”

“Gangs we call small streets. Shortcut!”

“Fine,” I said. “And you don’t need to call me Boss.”

“Sure, Boss.” He winked.

He zigzagged through a maze of back alleys until we arrived at the water and bumped along the seafront for a while. Families splashed in the waves among tethered fishing boats. Then he turned inland again on a road that ran beside a looming white wall punctuated with watchtowers.

“This Neraka Prison,” the driver announced. “Also build by Dutch.”

He turned back onto the main road and the traffic began to taper off. Silks and imported goods replaced plastic and tin in the shop windows. We passed from the city center into a fancy-looking suburb.

“Foreigner district,” the driver grinned. “Mayat living here.”

He wheeled into a secluded lane of white coral gravel. A bamboo shack on the corner sold sandals and snacks. Palm tops and the peaks of villa roofs were just visible beyond the high walls on either side.

“Your friend very rich, ja?”

Workers rested in the shady gangs between the villa compounds, their wiry bodies silhouetted against the

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iridescent green of the rice fields behind. At the end of the lane the driver stopped the car.

“Your friend house.” He pointed to a pair of intricately-carved teak doors set in a wall crowned with bougainvillea and barbed wire.

I pulled some rupees out of my pocket as he heaved my bags from the trunk.

“Welcome to Madu, Boss!” he grinned.

I paid him. The taxi disappeared up the road into a cloud of dust.

I pulled a cord next to the doors and a bell rang somewhere deep inside the compound.

I waited, listening to the dull thud of the surf not far away. No response.

A neighborhood dog sauntered up and sniffed my flip-flops, regarding me warily.

I pulled the cord again. Another ring, but still no one came.

After a few minutes a soiled, sweaty man emerged from the gang to my right, carrying a few gardening tools.

“You look Mr Frank?”

“Yeah, is he here?”

He shook his head. “No here.”

“Shit. Know when he’ll be back?”

He smiled apologetically. “Mr Frank no here.”

We looked at each other, each wondering what to do next. Suddenly his face brightened.

“You talk Mr Sanjaya, Frank assistant.”

“Where can I find Mr Sanjaya?”

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He smiled ruefully. “Mr Sanjaya also no here. Go to village. Family problem. He come back tomorrow-tomorrow, maybe.”

“Right,” I said. “Thanks.”

“No problem, Boss.”

I shuffled through the dust to the top of the lane where the corner shop leaned drunkenly against a wall. The proprietor eyed me from his hammock.

“Beer?” I asked him hopefully.

“Beer?” he repeated.

“Beer.” I confirmed.

“No have,” he said. “*Arak.*”

“Arak?”

“Arak.” he said again with conviction.

A transistor radio buzzed in the background.

“Okay, arak,” I said, conceding defeat. I had no idea what it was. But I hoped it was alcoholic and cold.

“Arak, okay!” He jumped up and fished out a dusty bottle from the shadows, placing it on the counter with a flourish. I picked it up. It wasn’t cold, but it did look alcoholic, judging from the snarling tiger on the label.

“Ice?” I asked.

“Ice?” he repeated.

“Ice,” I said, hugging my shoulders and feigning a shiver.

“Ah!” A flash of cognition. “No have,” he said sadly, pointing at his dripping refrigerator. “No electric city.”

At this moment, for some reason, I felt for my wallet. I never used my wallet for cash, only to hold my cards and passport. I always kept my cash in my front pocket—an old

habit from living in the city. But something made me check my back pocket at that moment, and my wallet wasn't there. Adrenaline rush.

“Fuck!”

The shopkeeper jumped. I started rifling through my carry-on bag: not there, not there, not there. “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” I shouted, stomping on the dirt floor.

“Very sorry, Boss!” he said, his eyes growing wide. “Very sorry! Ice no have!”

I barely heard him.

“Goddamn it!” I cursed, banging my skull with my fists. “You fucking idiot! Why are you so fucking stupid?”

The shopkeeper cried out something in Madunese and ran off up the lane.

In my desperation, I ripped open my suitcase and carry-on there in the road, spilling underwear and toiletries into the dirt. It was pointless. I already knew that I had dropped my wallet in the taxi.

I sank to my knees and groaned. I was ten-thousand miles from home, Frank was nowhere to be found, and now this: passport gone, ATM cards gone. I had the wad of rupees in my front pocket, but that was all.

Tiny birds chattered in the trees, mocking me in my misery. The waves droned on in the distance.

After a while I heard flip-flops and looked up to see the shopkeeper jogging toward me wearing a toothy smile.

“Boss! Boss!” he yelled. “Have! Have!”

He held up a plastic sack filled with ice.

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I headed toward the sound of the surf. I wasn't sure what else to do. I needed to get out of the heat, needed somewhere to sit down and think.

Where the lane ended, a dirt path continued into a tract of forgotten jungle. I followed the path, skirting rust-red stagnant pools—the suitcase on my shoulder, the liquor bottle sloshing in the sack of ice—spurred on by flashes of golden sea beyond the trees. High overhead a swift breeze swept the palms, but down here the air was still and close.

Murky water crept along a stream bed overhung by branches thick with vines. As the sun sank, scattered beams of light struggled to penetrate the shadows, illuminating patches of electric green. Someone had felled a hardwood tree on the bank leaving a jagged stump and piles of red sawdust on the dark earth.

The suitcase weighed on me like a corpse. I cursed myself for bringing so much stuff. Clearly I wasn't going to need many clothes in this heat. I imagined Buster slogging through the bush in Vietnam, bearing his wounded buddy toward the medevac. If I'd been in Buster's shoes, I would have come home a junkie or in a pine box. I was no hero.

A putrid odor filled my nostrils, the smell of death. Gagging, I tripped on a root and landed on my knee, dropping my suitcase into a puddle. I dragged my bag from the water and sat down heavily, panting and drenched in sweat. A tiny rivulet of blood trickled down my leg. I pulled out Buster's 'Nam Zippo to light a cigarette, and the snap of the lighter

breached the silence. Dead leaves on the jungle floor trembled with crimson centipedes. A lone cockerel crowed somewhere off in the bush.

I caught another whiff of rotting flesh and looked around for the source. A highway of copper-colored ants led to the bloated carcass of a dog. It lay near the tree stump, writhing with insects. Huge black butterflies, their wings daubed with sanguine eyes, flapped listlessly through the fetid air. Hoisting my muddy suitcase to my shoulder, I moved on.

Fifty feet from the beach a black basalt shrine stood on the stream bank. An old woman passed bearing a tray of offerings. Our eyes met, but she did not smile. I turned to watch her light sticks of incense and place the offerings inside the shrine. As I made for the sea, a strange cry drifted from the sand.

The sunset that night was lurid. I stumbled out onto the beach and there it was, like some tabloid disaster splattered across the sky. Massive clouds, the cumulation of vapors sucked from the sea and soil, loomed above the city, as heat lightning pulsed in an omen of the coming monsoon.

Cicadas, aroused by the imminent atmospheric violence, rattled like an angry chorus of maracas. Flying insects took to the air in their millions. Swallows and bats followed, summoned by the smell of blood. Swooping and diving in a frenzy of feeding, their flight paths scrawled erratic lines against the gory backdrop.

I opened the liquor bottle and took a tentative sip. A freezer-burn in my throat slowly warmed into a glow that

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filled my body. It wasn't beer, but the arak would likely do the trick tonight.

A fresh breeze blew in off the sea. The air finally began to cool as the cruel heat dissipated along with the sun. I sat down atop the dune with my back to a crumbling wall and tipped back the bottle again, longer this time. Lights appeared at small beach-front establishments across the bay. The city seemed to revive after the suffocating heat of the afternoon.

From the distance came the ringing of temple bells and the call of the muezzin. The lights of fishing boats hovered at the horizon line against a dark strip of land to the west, probably Java.

A delicate amber crescent emerged from behind the curtain of clouds. It was as if the moon had allowed the sun to indulge its vanity before taking center stage, cool and mysterious, to the roar of the cicadas.

I was startled again by the same unearthly cry, much nearer my ear. Now I found its source. A large, brightly-spotted lizard clung to the wall, snaring mosquitoes with quick flicks of its tongue.

I gathered some driftwood off of the beach and dug a pit in the sand. I pulled out my copy of XXX and began tearing out pages, crumpling them and throwing them into the pit. When I had ripped apart half of the book, I lit the pile, which quickly ignited. I threw on jetsam from the beach: driftwood, plastic bottles, old flip-flops. My fire quickly blossomed.

I took a deep draft of the booze and threw what was left of my book onto the fire. It sat there ponderously, a pale rectangle

framed in black smoke. Then, slowly, flames began to lick its edges. Pages curled and began to burn. Sparks spiraled up—dead words describing strange trajectories.

The crescent moon seemed to smile, blushing in the sultry atmosphere. If the moon tonight held any threats, they were threats veiled in promises. This lipstick smile seemed to hint at the answers to questions I hadn't yet the courage to ask, questions that loomed just over the horizon.

Life gave the illusion of forward motion, but my own life was as cynically cyclical as the seasons: the depression, that led to the drinking, that brought more depression, that lived in the house that Mark built. Self-pity, recrimination, regret—only drink could wash them all away, swirling like urine down some foul drain.

There was one thing I could feel good about. I had escaped America and its endless Crap. The divorce had freed me, yes. But it was the Crap that had finally driven me out—the Crap on TV, the Crap that crept through the mail slot and spewed from the radio, the Infotainment Crap that passed for news. It was relentless.

Catalogs and magazines were devoted to American Crap in all its infinite permutations. People hawked it to you on-line and down the phone. Billboards bombarded you. Americans were simply mad about the stuff.

Our education and health care systems were Crap. The president was full of it. The sky over every freeway exit glowed with corporate logos promising the dizzying array of Crap on offer there.

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Fast food chains flogged their Crap in a thousand irresistible flavors. Supermarkets, convenience stores, malls, and discount chains overflowed with it. Meanwhile the armies of the obese, grown dull and thick on a steady diet of all this stuff, spewed yet more Crap into the air from their bloated SUV's.

And just when you thought you had endured all the Crap you could possibly stand, that's when you were wrong.

Late into the night, think tanks were hard at work envisioning new Crap, better Crap, the Crap of the Future. Still in its conceptual stages, this theoretical new Crap would be developed by designers, tested on focus groups, revised and refined by engineers, marketed by PR firms, and finally unveiled—shiny, seductive and soon to be obsolete—to a country ever-hungry for more.

The ingenuity of our great nation was boundless. We'd invented the assembly line, and made a religion of convenience. Today, Crap flowed from manufacturer to distributor to consumer, passed swiftly from tongue to anus, and drained from toilet to sewer to river to sea. So much Crap had been produced that the oceans were filling up with it. Sea levels were swelling. Soon America would be awash with it, swimming in it, drowning in its own Crap. But nobody seemed to worry—as long as they could get the latest, shiniest version. In America, Crap was king. I'd had enough.

Waves pounded the beach as I sprawled under the palms, suckling at the bottle, trying to anesthetize my brain. Without a whisper, the moon was gone, swathed again in deep velvet

near the horizon. The night sky unfolded above me like a map of heaven.

I stumbled down the beach toward the surf. The stars peered down like the eyes of nocturnal animals. In this latitude the big dipper was up-ended, spilling into the sea. I did likewise, pissing into the waves. I imagined swimming out into the blackness, farther and deeper. They probably would never have found me. Back on Coney Island one bleary night I had almost done it. Instead, I discovered I didn't even have the balls to take the coward's way out.

"Yaaaaaaaaaaaah!" I screamed to sea and the wind and the stars. I was some captive primate at last released. "Yaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

I stripped off my clothes and staggered into the tide, waving the bottle, as the waves surged in around me. A big breaker knocked me on my ass, and I sat there laughing madly in the shallows.

One star now caught my eye. Burning low over the sea, it glowed with a supernatural brilliance as it wandered lazily up into the darkness. Others soon followed. I realized that these were not stars, but paper lanterns that floated on air, lit on auspicious occasions. Somebody was launching them from across the bay. I emptied the bottle and grinned.

It was a sign. These lanterns were for me. Losing my passport wasn't bad luck, it was part of the plan: no identity, no past, a clean slate. This was a baptism. I was being reborn.

Things would be different here. I'd finally finish my book and find the success I'd always deserved. No more worries.

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I'd live like Gauguin in a bamboo shack with some tropical nubile. I'd show them all.

Soon there was a long line of lanterns dancing like a luminous snake. Swaying in their gentle skyward motion, they rendered in drifting lights the currents of air that flowed, mysterious and invisible, toward the infinite.



Muhammad Fadli

About the Author

Tod A is best known as the leader of the 'world-punk' music group Firewater. He left New York City in 2003 to travel in Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. *Banging the Monkey*, Tod's first novel, was inspired by events he witnessed and stories he collected along the way. He currently lives in Istanbul with his wife and daughter.