

On The Wall

In every developing country there are boys on the wall with no regular jobs, getting stoned and drunk and playing dominos. Shugah is now one of these boys on the wall. He completed high school in the tiny cramped building at the bottom of the hill, where you could hear the incessant noise of children screaming at each other, even when classes were in session. This noise was like a record that became stuck and went up and down, as the sound knob was turned by an invisible hand.

After midday it would cease completely during lunch break, and Shuggah would go with the other kids to buy the hot, doughy, rotis filled with spiced curry, from the lunch lady's stall on the corner. After hastily eating his lunch, he would play football with his friends, all of them in their black pants and starched white shirts. They would joyfully discard their striped schoolboy ties, pale remnants of British public school and their country's colonial pasts onto the burnt out ground of the small soccer field in the middle of town. Then they would kick the ball across the hard, baked ground, occasionally stirring up small clumps of gritty, red, dust, which would fly around their moving bodies as they turned sharply and spun the ball with their toes in the midday heat.

It was these same football friends that Shugah now shared the wall with, the one that overlooked the small town where they had all gone to high school. There had been no opportunities for any of them to go to college or trade schools. No matter how well they had done in school, and some of them had, the reality of attending a trade school or college was something that boys like themselves were only able to pull off if they lived in developed countries where rich governments subsidized such programs. These boys all came from poor families who barely scraped together a living. Families that could not even afford to buy the medications most of them needed for blood pressure or diabetes, which was rampant among the older generation in their small, tight-knit community.

Shugah's friends were part of a multi-colored palette that stretched from white with eyes so blue they mirrored the color of the sea, to ones with skin that was a dark, eggplant, black and eyes the color of shining seeds. Eyes that looked just like the nutmegs that grew so plentifully in the hills behind the small town where they all lived.

There were a few boys in their town who had done well, the ones from families who had benefitted from the country's colonial past. Their families owned land or businesses and had firmly established themselves as part of an elite class that now drove around in Mercedes SUV's. These boys were the ones who had been sent off to the UK, Canada or the United States for their educations. They were the ones who came back as lawyers, accountants, and other professionals, and used their families contacts and resources, to further entrench themselves in the upper levels of a small, but tightly knit group of expats and locals. A group that was all caught up now in a giddy frisson of catering to the rich tourists that had recently come flocking to their town to escape the northern winters.

These boys occasionally got small jobs mixing concrete, carrying wood or stones, cleaning driveways and yards and other such itinerant work. At the end of the day they would all assemble on the wall and smoke the massive joints made from marijuana that was also grown on the hills behind their town. This bumper crop of herbs had escaped the notice of the American DEA, since it was so well hidden in the

cracks and gulleys of the mountains that rose in front of the volcano, whose mighty shadow dwarfed them where they all sat smoking.

Shuggah was a handsome boy. He had beautiful brown skin and green eyes. His hair was curly, somewhat negroid, and in contrast to black, it was a golden, blond color. He was tall, well-built, muscled but thin. The reason for his build was that he ate very little meat or dairy. His diet over his short lifetime had consisted of occasional fish and chicken, grapefruit, papaya and mango, and a lot of rice and peas. His main meal was eaten at midday, and before he went to bed he had a single slice of bread without butter and a cup of hot chocolate.

Once the influx of tourists came in, like a too full river that has burst its banks, the boys on the wall had a new game they began to play, besides dominos. They played this game with the silly, white Americano and other European girls that came to the town with their super rich parents; that is they began to see in these girls the possibility of winning exit visas. Even better than the young ones, some of these boys targeted the slightly older women who had missed the marriage boat, and who came to visit this beautiful spot, lonely, slightly jaded and looking for something different; they didn't quite know what.

Shuggah was not one of those boys that dreamed of foreign women as his exit visa. He dreamed of a motorbike. He wanted a shiny, new motorbike and he wanted to ride it out of the tiny country in which his town was situated and across the vast continent that he vaguely knew existed somewhere beyond its borders.

He had a part-time job as a Gardner for some rich German that had come to his country and built a massive stone house. It was in one of the enclaves and gated communities that were rapidly being developed by foreigners. These foreigners had changed the local economy and now it was impossible for him and his friends to own or purchase land. The land that they had all dreamed of buying one day, up in the green valleys behind the small concrete houses that their parents had put together many years before, was now prohibitively expensive and completely out of their reach. That was why Shuggah wanted to get on his bike and ride away, his curly blond hair tucked under a helmet, and never look back until he had found something of his own. Something that these gringos could not touch with their dollars, francs and pounds.

Shuggah remembered that when he first saw the girl come to the wall he didn't know who she was. No one there knew who she was. They didn't know that she was famous in America, that she was slowly gaining a reputation in movies. She was small and light skinned with short curly hair and lips the color of beige sand.

She had come to their town to shoot some scenes for a movie which was in the process of being written by a young, up-and-coming director. The boys learnt from her that this movie told the story of a middle-aged gringo marijuana grower. The guy had escaped the DEA and come to their town with a trunk load of dirty money, to disappear and chill out with his girlfriend behind one of the walled, gated communities. In the script, she ended up leaving him for a local boy, and then her lover killed the boy with a pistol he kept for self-defense in his house. The ending of the movie was still vague and in

process, but it seemed as if the young writer and director had decided that the guy would bribe some local officials and get away with murder.

The petit, pretty, young woman came to the wall a lot to hang out with the boys there. She'd take a few hits off their joints and have a rum and coke. This consisted of a swig of rum and a swig of coke out of a giant plastic bottle that was passed around amongst them.

From the beginning it became clear that she liked Shuggah. She would sit next to him on the wall and laugh loudly and flirtatiously up at him. His friends started to tease him and to tell him that if he didn't screw her soon, they would.

Shuggah was a dreamer, he didn't dream of girls, what he dreamed of was a shining, silver and black motorbike, one that would take him away and help him establish his freedom. He saw girls as an iron collar around his neck and he, unlike many of the other boys on the wall, had not become embroiled in sexual relationships that ended up, as often as not, with an illegitimate child which these boys had to first acknowledge and then support for the rest of their lives.

After the girl had been to the wall several times, she brought the movie director to join her. He was a good-natured Americano who had gone to NYU Film School and was now in the process of making his second movie.

He decided that he liked the looks of some of the boys, and thought they would add just the right touch of local color to his movie. In particular he liked the look of Shuggah, and he offered him and some of the others small parts as extras in his movie. He offered to pay them ten local dollars a day and they jumped at the offer. Some of them became convinced that they might even be discovered by a big-time Hollywood director.

After a couple of weeks shooting was finished and the director and his crew packed up their equipment and left for the States. The girl stayed on for several days, hanging out with the boys on the wall and flirting with Shuggah. Before she left she invited him to come and stay with her in Hollywood. She offered to send him his fare.

Shuggah didn't think too much about her offer and went on with his life as an itinerant laborer and being just another boy on the wall, one who did not dream of getting laid by pretty girls, but rather dreamed of owning a sleek, silver motorcycle. One that would take him away so that he could at last see the world.

After a few months had passed since the girl had left town, he received an offer from her of a return ticket to Los Angeles, California in the mail. He let several months pass before he decided to accept it.

He had never left the small town where he had been born, and he had no real idea when he boarded the local plane that was to take him to the capital of his country, what would happen to him once he left the security of his home, and everything he had known during his short lifetime.

Once in the capital which was chaotic and noisier than he had ever imagined, he took another larger plane to Los Angeles where the girl met him at the airport in her BMW coupe. He put his small bag into the back of her car and set out with her on the Ventura Freeway to her house in Malibu. She had told him that it overlooked the Pacific Ocean.

On the way there he looked with envy at several large motorbikes that passed them as they drove with the top down along the freeway, and he thought that rather than being with the girl, he would have liked to be riding them completely on his own. He could almost feel the leather seat in between his legs and the sensation in his groin as the wheels spun and slid across the hot tarmac, while he sat next to her immobile and quiet in the car.

He was amazed when he got to her house at the size of it, and especially by the large swimming pool that was in the back yard. The girl took him inside and showed him his room. It was near hers and it looked out across a lawn that was lush with plantings that made him think of home. Especially the large purple and orange bougainvillea bushes.

Later in the afternoon on the day he arrived, they both swam together in the pool, and she offered him rum and cokes out of tall opaque glasses filled with ice, to make him feel more at home. After they got quite drunk and silly, they ate dinner together on her large patio under the stars, a meal he was completely unused to eating, since he found that he only wanted a slice of bread and a cup of cocoa before bed.

The girl let him sleep on his own on the first night. However after several nights had passed, he joined her in her pink and gold bedroom and made love to her on the 400 ply Egyptian cotton sheets that covered her king-size bed. Most days he hung out by the pool or watched television or played video games while she went to work on her latest movie.

As the months passed, he found himself thinking more and more about a motorbike, about escape, about riding back to his small town and sitting once again with his friends on the wall. He did not like the food in this new country, he did not understand the culture, and he had even less to do all day than he had at home, where at least he had been able to work. The girl's friends were nice to him, but he did not understand their jokes, or their easy, self-indulgent, life-style.

Finally one night he told the girl that he was not happy. He told her about his dream of having a motorcycle and of riding the motorcycle until he found something that would make him happy, something of his own, something that she had not been able to give him, or his parents, or his town, or his friends.

So one day, soon after this conversation, the girl came home and took his hand and showed him a beautiful, shiny, black motorcycle that she had bought him standing in the driveway. She said that she was sad that he wanted to leave, but that she understood.

The next day he took his small bag and fastened it to the back of the bike. He also took the several hundred dollars that she had given him. He kissed her goodbye and he promised that he would call her

from the road and let her know how he was making out. Then he mounted the bike, turned on the engine and with a sixth sense fully in operation, he rode at full speed out of the driveway, making the stones fly out from beneath the tires, like cascades of water from a fountain.

Several years after he had left her and never returned, the girl married a famous movie star and had a child with him. She found sadly that she could not travel incognito anymore. She spent her life behind the locked gates of her Malibu home, and avoided the paparazzi that surrounded her house day and night, trying to get candid shots of her.

As for the boy from the wall, he was still riding, like the old fashioned guacharo that he was at heart, going from small town to small town picking up odd jobs here and there. He had found freedom of a kind, and still he knew in his heart that he had not yet found something that was his and his alone.

As he lay in one motel room or the other in towns with strange abbreviated names, and before he drifted off to sleep, he would sometimes hear his friends talking on the wall, as if they were in the room with him, and he wondered if perhaps that was where he might eventually find the something that he was looking for after all.