

The First Two Pages of “Incommunicado” by Bruce Robert Coffin

From *The Great Filling Station Holdup: Stories Inspired by the Songs of Jimmy Buffett*

Edited by Josh Pachter (Down & Out Books)

An Essay by Bruce Robert Coffin

Last year I was asked by renowned raconteur Josh Pachter if I was interested in contributing a short story to his Jimmy Buffett-themed crime fiction anthology. Of course I jumped at the chance, then scoured my closet for my Aloha shirt and sandals.

In addition to the feel-good vibe that accompanies Jimmy Buffett tunes, I have always appreciated the storytelling quality of his “gulf and western” style song lyrics. Encompassing three or four verses, a chorus, and a coda, Buffett music is the ultimate flash fiction. And with nearly thirty studio albums, the Buffett canon is formidable. One might say: a buffet of Buffett.

The rules were simple enough. Each contributing author had to select an album, and one song from that album from which to draw their story, no duplicates allowed. And the song had to have been written, or co-written, by Mr. Buffett. Being a mystery author, I knew precisely which song lyrics I wanted as the basis for my story. My pick was “Incommunicado” from the album *Coconut Telegraph*. Why? Let’s just say the references to John D. MacDonald, Travis McGee, Cedar Key, and John Wayne were irresistible.

I have been a fan of the short story for as long as I can remember. In fact, my very first publication was a short piece of fiction titled “Fool Proof,” which was republished in *Best American Mystery Stories*. From a reader’s perspective, one of the great things about the short story is that it can be read in a relatively brief span of time. But for the writer, this condensed telling presents many challenges. The entire tale must be told and resolved in a space equivalent to the opening chapter of a novel. As writers, we must draw the reader in and whisk them along to a gratifying ending, cutting every extraneous detail. A challenge to be sure.

I set about writing “Incommunicado” by reaching deep into my toolbox for those tried-and-true methods used to create the stories that I enjoy reading. I chose third person close in order to provide a glimpse inside my protagonist’s head. Next, I grounded the reader in the present where we find my main character, Jake, hitchhiking through a desolate section of Arizona desert. Jake is thirsty, tired, and in desperate need of a ride. Finally, I sprinkled in a bit of danger. Jake also happens to be a dangerous ex-con in search of a mark. And it doesn’t take long until one happens by...

Jake had been trudging along on the burning asphalt for the better part of three hours when the Cadillac first came into view. The soles of his boots felt like they were melting, and a blister was forming on his right foot. Having polished off the only water he carried over an hour before, his mouth was too dry to spit. He had figured that someone traveling along the godforsaken Arizona two-

lane would have picked him up long before now, but he had figured wrong. He really needed this ride.

As it drew nearer, the Caddy's aqua blue lacquer and chrome shimmered in the waves of heat rising from the pavement. Jake adjusted the straps on his knapsack, painted on his most disarming smile, and stuck out a thumb.

The ragtop rolled to a stop beside him. Its only occupant was a paunchy middle-aged man with a cleft chin and a wispy gray mustache. He wore a tan Stetson, cargo shorts, and an obnoxiously loud Hawaiian shirt covered in red and green parrots. A pair of reflective sunglasses and an open bottle of Dos Equis balanced on the seat between his legs completed this rolling mid-life crisis.

If there was one thing prison had taught Jake, it was how to select a mark, and the oaf seated behind the wheel of the Caddy fit the bill nicely.

"Howdy, amigo," the driver said, his words basted in a southern drawl as thick as chicken gravy. "Where ya headed?"

"Anywhere but here," Jake croaked, his eyes settling on the large diamond-and-gold ring adorning one of the man's fingers.

"Hop in," the driver said. "Toss your load in the back."

Happy to be rid of his burden, Jake dropped his satchel onto the rear seat beside a large plastic cooler, then reached for the door handle, his smile widening. His ship, as they say, had finally come in.

Jake plopped down onto a mile of ivory-colored cowhide as his host thrust out a meaty paw. "Friends call me the Duke."

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes at the lame nickname, Jake played along. "As in John Wayne?"

"You're darn tootin', Pilgrim," the Duke said, drawing out the words in a mediocre imitation of Marion Michael Morrison. "What can I say? I'm a fan."

"Nice to meet you, Duke," Jake said, gripping the clammy offering while eyeing the shiny ring again and wondering how much he might be able to get for it.

"You must be parched," the Duke said, cocking a thumb over his shoulder. "Help yourself to a cold one. Might as well grab me a fresh one, too."

Jake reached into the back and pulled two ice-cold bottles from the cooler. He handed one to the Duke, then twisted the cap off his own and drank. It was heavenly. He took another long swig, relishing the feel of the carbonation soothing his dry throat, as his mind raced

for an answer to what would undoubtedly be the Duke's next question.

“What do they call you?” the Duke asked, sure enough.

“Travis,” Jake said, appropriating the name from the dog-eared John D. MacDonald paperback stuffed inside his knapsack. “Travis McGee.”

“Welcome aboard, Mr. McGee.”

And, just like that, they were on their way.

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Bruce Robert Coffin is the author of the Detective Byron Mysteries, including *Beyond the Truth*, winner of the Silver Falchion for Best Procedural. His work has been nominated for the Agatha and Maine Literary Award. Coffin's short fiction was selected for *Best American Mystery Stories 2016*. For more information go to: brucerobertcoffin.com