

SAUCE

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Excerpt from Chapter 16: *Xmabén*

CAMPECHE BUS STATION. Chaos. Confusion. Noise. Nobody knew which counter sold what to where. After ten minutes of asking around, I found the right one and bought a ticket to Tony's village. Xmabén – pronounced "Shma-ben." Sounded like a nickname the weird kid at school might cop.

Bus left in 45 minutes.

I sat there, sweating, watching. Farmers, nuns, kids, families, chickens. No tourists, though one guy stood out. Pink-faced, black dungarees, boots, checked shirt, and a Stetson, like he'd wandered out of some weird Western.

Time to kill, I spun a story about why he was here.

Dwight, farmhand from Texas. Simple. Met a Mexican girl online. She promised to marry him if he came down. He arrived. They checked into a cheap hotel. Spent the night together, but no sex – not before the big day.

He woke up alone.

Everything gone: wallet, suitcase, phone, even grandma's wedding ring.

I saw Dwight wander off, looking confused.

A cop was standing nearby scrolling on his phone. I asked where the bus left from.

"Xmabén? Allá."

He pointed in the direction of a motley bunch of people.

A knackered bus rolled up and dropped its load. A scrap broke out as the next mob piled in. I pushed my way on board.

"How long to Xmabén?" I asked the driver.

"Tres horas. Última parada." Three hours. Last stop.

I squeezed into a seat near the back next to an old man with a face like a raisin. Inside it was hot, thick with stale air. As we left the city limits, the countryside opened up, flat and green.

The driver gunned it, tossing us over craters and speed bumps. An endless techno mix hammered on – loud enough to scramble my thoughts, not to drown out the squealing school children. The bus stopped every two or three miles, dropping kids off and picking up tired-looking farm workers.

At one stop, three more Dwights got on.

My wizen-faced neighbour turned to me and said solemnly, *"Menonitas."*

Mennonites. I'd heard of them but never bothered to picture one. My brain must've filed them next to the Amish – quiet people, horse-drawn shit, God.

He gave me the rundown: Protestants, originally from Europe, who arrived in the '20s via Canada – good farmers, decent people, but kept to themselves. That didn't explain the identical dungarees, plaid shirts, and cowboy hats – but at least Dwight wasn't who I thought.

Whatever brought them to Mexico, mixing with the locals wasn't part of the plan. Whiter than me, decked out in traditional garb – a people from another place and time, stumbled into a land that didn't quite fit.

One of the things I loved about Mexico was how Mexican it still was – raw, uncut, unfiltered. My own country had started to feel like a hodgepodge of imported cultures

that never quite meshed. Old Raisin said you only saw the Mennonites when they came to town to sell cheese.

The journey dragged.

By sunset it hit me.

I had no plan. An invite from a random Cancún taxi driver. A card with a dead number. No address. Just blind faith and the sense the Spice Gods were behind it. Worst case? A good story.

At last, the bus pulled into a little parking area and the engine cut out. The five of us left on board got off. Seven p.m. Already pitch-black. No streetlights, no shops, just a cluster of traditional Mayan houses.

Only one option: knock on the first door I found.

A tiny woman with a round face answered, startled.

"Hola. Estoy buscando a Tony... Tony Montoya," I said.

She paused, said Tony was her neighbour – but he wasn't home. Cancún, maybe.

Ruddy cabbie.

When I explained why I was there, a shy smile flashed across her face.

"Pues yo soy una de las mujeres que producen las salsas."

She was one of the women who made the sauce. OK, maybe I didn't need Montoya after all. Then she added:

"Pero ahora estamos en la temporada de miel, no de las salsas."

Honey season, not sauce season. She looked at me for a moment, then disappeared.

A minute later she came back with her sister, offering to show me where they made the sauce. We walked up a dark, quiet lane, her torch lighting the way, until we

reached a small building. She unlocked the door, swung it open, and switched on the lights. Whitewashed walls, stainless steel worktops, shelves stacked with jars of sauce and honey.

She took a jar from the shelf and handed it to me. I opened it. More of a paste than a sauce; I scooped some out with my finger. Green habanero. Tony was right – it packed a punch.

I asked what was in it.

“Es puro habanero, sal y limón.” Standard.

“Está rica,” I said.

Silence.

We posed for a few awkward photos. I thanked them, then we closed up and walked back.

Outside her house I asked when the next bus to Campeche left. She pointed to the one I'd arrived on, parked up with its inside light on. “Tomorrow morning. Five a.m.”

Hotels? Both heads shook.

Nowhere to stay – and no bus until morning.

After a hushed conversation in Mayan, something was decided. They motioned for me to follow – her brother-in-law might have a room. We walked up a narrow lane and reached a house. She knocked. A moustached man with a big smile answered. After more Mayan chatter, he offered me a spot in the outbuilding next to his carport. Said I could bunk in with his sons.

We crossed the lane. He opened the door and flicked on the light – two teenage boys in hammocks scrambled to cover themselves. Looked like we'd interrupted a bedtime wank-off. Sorry, lads. My host told one of his sons to sleep on the floor, but I didn't want to turf the kid out of his hammock. Be weird anyway.

I asked if I could kip outside in the carport.

"Como quieras." He shrugged.

The sisters said goodnight. I thanked them again.

Big Smile lit a cigarette and asked where I was from.

"Inglaterra."

He laughed – they'd assumed I was gringo.

"Estás lejos de casa, wey." Yeh, I did feel far from home.

We had a chat. He'd done a stint across the border – worked illegally, saved up, came home, built something. Those off-the-books dollars had paid for the new garage and all-terrain pickup parked outside – a slice of the American Dream here in the Mayan wilderness.

He said goodnight and went back into his house.

Must've been about nine pm, latest. The night sky was ablaze with stars. I'd never felt so tiny.

The trip was a dead end.

But it didn't matter.

Lying on the ground in the middle of nowhere in Mexico, under that vast night sky, I felt twenty again – wide open, like anything could happen.

I pulled the little jar of sauce from my pocket and had another poke. It was like a bottled version of all the fresh habanero salsas I'd tried. The sauce I wanted to make would be different, more commercial – but all these handmade ones had opened me to flavours I'd never tasted before.

The ground was hard. I popped a pill, but sleep didn't come. I decided not to plug my ears – seemed safer – and lay there listening to the soothing chirp of crickets.

Then came the din of feral dogs – howling, barking, thrashing it out.

A pack found me. Two mangy curs broke from the others to sniff me out. They edged closer, teeth bared.

“Fuck off!” I shouted.

All dogs know English.

Flashback to the doctors in Lancaster, declining a rabies jab. Idiot.

The mongrels held their ground. I gave it another “FUCK OFF” and chucked a bottle of water at them. The plastic thud on the tarmac was enough to make them reconsider. One by one they skulked off, but my nerves were shot.

I lay back on my pack and tried to sleep. But then it was the mosquitoes’ turn.

What a night.

Passed out around 2:00 a.m. A couple of hours later my alarm jolted me awake. I stood, stretched, gave the carport a nod, and walked back down the lane to the bus stop.

Everything was silent again – just crickets and the full moon lighting the way.

At the parking spot I heard the bus driver rattling around inside. Normally I’d feel bad for a guy sleeping in a bus – but after the night I’d had, it looked like the Ritz. A waft of cigarette smoke floated from a window, then boom, boom, boom, boom – the techno kicked in.

Just then, a combi pulled up with “Mérida” on the windscreen. A direct ride – no need to change in Campeche.

And no hardcore breakfast rave.

Score.