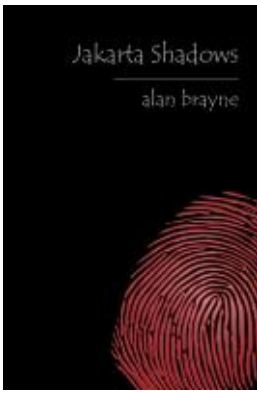


Jakarta Shadows

alan brayne





Graham Young lives a comfortable, gin-soaked existence in Jakarta, even after violent riots overthrow Soeharto's regime. But a meeting with a reptilian ex-pat hurls him into a nightmare from which there seems no escape. Hounded by the police, courted by shadowy figures of political resistance, and visited in the night by military ghouls, he sees no choice but to flee. Can he get out of the country before these forces move in for the kill?

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Alan Brayne

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First Edition

One:

I don't know much about paradise, but I am sure of one thing. It won't last. As soon as you're nice and mellow, Satan will make his entrance. My Satan took the form of a guy aged around thirty, with greasy hair, who launched himself into the seat next to mine. He wore a stained white shirt, the buttons of which bulged at the gut to reveal hairy rolls of flesh. He was formidably drunk.

Arrivederci paradise. Not that the bar at the Hotel Platinum would have been many people's vision of the Elysian fields. It was a characterless hole that might have been anywhere on the globe, the kind of dried-up space you'd find in an airport departure lounge. Drab furniture, a mix of uninspiring cuisine. Satellite TV gaped mindlessly in the corner. None of the customers seemed to be watching it. None of the customers seemed to be alive.

It suited me fine. So, the bar staff oozed resentment and the clients had eyes like dead fish, but the Platinum was just perfect that night, when all I wanted to do was drink myself to oblivion. In the Platinum bar, no one expected me to be polite or to make genteel conversation. I was a suit and tie like the rest of them, with a face like a frozen clock. Paradise enough for me.

"So, how long ya been here, pal?" Satan asked, in an accent that managed to grate even though it was colourless. A phoney, transatlantic drawl that was a parody of New York American. It could have been custom made for the Hotel Platinum.

I glanced at the heavy flesh slumped in the chair next to mine, too close for comfort. Something behind the eyes made my skin crawl.

"In Jakarta?"

“Yeah. In Jakarta.”

“A year.”

“Figures,” he said, with a sneer, and took a swig of his liquor.

“Figures?”

“You got that look. Like you’re there for the taking.”

I gave a short, edgy laugh. I wasn’t sure what signals I was giving off, nervousness or aggression, but I needn’t have concerned myself. He hadn’t the slightest interest.

“I guess you like this dump of a city?”

“It’s OK.”

He snorted. “Wait a while, pal. You just wait a while.”

I wanted to tell him to piss off. Tonight was my dose of self-pity and this slimeball seemed set to spoil it. But I’m English to the tip of my little finger and could never be less than polite. I found myself asking him how long he’d been living in Indonesia.

The question seemed to throw him off balance. “Too long, pal. Who the fuck cares?” I wasn’t sure if he was just too drunk to remember or he didn’t want to tell me.

“Jakarta is the armpit of south-east Asia,” he announced, in an exultant croak. “And believe me, south-east Asia has a hell of a lot of armpits. Bangkok, Pattaya, Manila – I smelt them all.”

I watched him lean back and laugh, delighted with himself. The story of my life. Long hours in bars. Inconsequential conversations, as often as not with people I didn’t even like.

“So, what d’ya do here in Jakarta?” he asked.

“I work for an NGO. You?”

“Oh, this and that.”

For the first time I regarded him closely. To my surprise, I was looking at someone who’d probably been handsome once. But the years hadn’t been kind to him, and I doubted if he’d been kind to himself. His body bore all the signs of a lifetime of dissipation – lank hair, sallow skin, flabby extra weight that didn’t suit him one bit. Dark good looks rapidly gone to seed.

He leant over to place a sweaty palm on my forearm. I gulped down a mouthful of gin to disguise my shiver.

“NGO, eh? Important guy.” The contempt was palpable. “So what d’ya like about this damn fine city? The culture?”

“OK, I know it’s ugly. I know it’s polluted.”

“You’re not kidding, pal. This place is the pits.”

“The people are the most important thing for me. I love the Indonesian people.”

He snorted again, more vigorously. I ran my previous sentence back through my head. It sounded patronising as hell. I deserved the snort.

“I guess you figure they’re friendly. Sure they are.” He gestured in the direction of the bar. “They just love us white guys. *Bules*.” He stretched the final diphthong in the word – *boolaaayz*. “*Bules* have fistfuls of dollars. You don’t know anything.”

I gazed absently at the bubbles clinging to the lemon in my gin and tonic. His arrogance was all the more annoying for the fact that it disturbed me.

“You come here with your guidebooks and the natives give you a grin and chime, ‘Hello mister.’ Oh, and you get so excited because they want to be your soulmate.” He fell back into his chair and scratched his gut. “They’re taking you for a ride, buddy. You’ll find out the first time one of them shits on you.”

“Sounds a pretty bad place,” I said. “Why are you here?”

He rubbed his thumb and index finger together to signal money. “Why are any of us here, pal?”

What a bind it is to be brought up English, with an etiquette manual lodged inside your skull. A little voice telling you to mind your Ps and Qs and make sure you’ve washed behind your ears. I scrabbled around for an excuse to get out of his company. Lacking inspiration, I stared up at the TV screen. Some fitness freak in a purple leotard was leaping up and down and beaming a fake-tan smile.

I’d missed my moment and Satan sprang back to life, having found his second wind. He leant across and attempted a confidential whisper. A megaphone might have helped.

“Shall I tell you about Indonesians? About what really lies underneath those phoney smiles and that religious shit? Filthy lucre, pal. You got it and they’ll lick your derrière. Lick it nice and shiny and thank you, sir, for the privilege.” He took out his wallet and flashed a wad of notes in front of my nose. “That’s what gets these guys hot and excited. Offer them enough and they’ll sell you their own children. If you don’t believe me, I’ve seen it.”

The DJ put on a recording of *Fly Me to the Moon* set to a disco beat. A portly white gent in a Hawaiian shirt dragged a waitress onto the dance floor and started gyrating.

“And you want to know the irony? We’re drawn to it, like flies to shit.”

He lifted his glass with a dramatic flourish, like a speaker about to make a toast, but forgot his pearls of wisdom once the glass hit mid-air. He cut a bizarre figure, this trash spitting venom. I guess you could say he was pathetic, slouched there, stewed in booze, scarcely able to form words. But for all that, there was something demonic about him, a hatred and a power that chilled me inside. It didn’t seem possible that a human heart could harbour such loathing; it had to stem from some malevolent force beyond him.

“You drink real slow,” he slurred, as he struggled to focus on my face.

“So what’s the hurry?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “You up for another?”

“Not yet.”

“Not yet, eh? *Belum*. Just listen to yourself, pal. You’ve gone native.”

His head nodded and his eyelids flickered, and I thought for one happy moment he was about to fall asleep on me. No such luck. He sprang back up like a demented jack-in-the-box, bawling across at a waitress with a fresh burst of energy.

“Hey, *mbak*! Bacardi! *Satu lagi, besar!* Pronto!”

The waitress approached, with tentative steps, edging over to my side of the table before leaning across to wipe the surface clean. She placed a fresh beer mat on the wood and, on top of the mat, a large, misty glass of Bacardi stuffed with ice.

“Not bad, uh?” Satan grinned, baring his upper teeth. “Face is kind of average, I guess, but a fuckable ass.” I couldn’t tell if she understood what he’d said. If she did, she hid it well. “How about it? Fancy her for the night? I’m sure it can be arranged.”

I felt my face flush. “She does her job OK,” I stammered, and hated myself for sounding like such a prig.

He flashed a sarcastic glance in my direction. “Or maybe the waiter’s more to your taste. I guess he’s cute enough, if you’re into that kind of thing.” He leant across, gripped hold of my knee, and slipped me a grin. “Go on, pal – spoil yourself. This is Jakarta, the Garden of Earthly Delights.” He leant back to luxuriate in his Wildean wit. “As sketched by Hieronymus Bosch.”

A gust of air from the door blew his smell in my direction and I caught a whiff of aftershave and body odour. His eyes were fizzing with pleasure; he was enjoying the frisson of power he felt from my obvious unease. I squeezed tighter into my chair to edge further away from him.

“You can get whatever you want here, pal,” he said, with a twist of the lip. “If you’ve got the balls to take it.”

I picked up my glass. Two cubes of half-melted ice clanked in the bottom.

Satan’s face grew serious, with the profound look that a drunkard gets when he’s trying to remember something. He held his finger in the air, poised like a conductor’s baton, as if he were about to say something highly meaningful.

“I have to piss.”

As he swayed back and forth and struggled to his feet, I thought he might pass out on me. He couldn't be far from oblivion, that was sure. As for me, it seemed I'd have to wait longer for the joys of nothingness. The pleasure of his company had sobered me up, as viciously as freezing water. The world was sharp once more and angular, the place I'd spent the evening working hard to escape. I'd lost that soft-focus feeling I loved so much.

He staggered towards the door, up the tiny flight of steps, each one tastefully dotted with a line of orange fairy lights. This time, for sure, I wouldn't need a second chance. As soon as the door swung shut behind him, I was out of there, as fast as my legs could carry me.

The face behind the wheel belonged to a true Jakarta taxi driver. Tetchy and sullen. My efforts at conversation had produced nothing but indistinct grunts and a refusal to meet my eye. I gave up and leant back in my seat. He seemed relieved, and spent the rest of the journey muttering to himself under his breath.

His foul mood didn't seem to be aimed at me in particular, but at life, Jakarta and the universe. I watched whatever was eating him inside screw up his face. It beat me completely. Sure, I could understand why taxi drivers got ratty during the day, when Jakarta congeals into gridlock and their job must be hell. But it was late at night, the road was clear, and he was about to earn a few painless *rupiah*.

All the same, he seemed determine to nurture his festering mood, as he scowled at the darkness ahead. A car lurched into the fast lane in front of us, without indicating – standard practice in Jakarta, day or night. “*Monyet!*” my driver spat, slamming his fist on the horn, before overtaking the car on the inside.

I stared out at Ciputat Raya. Except for the charred remains of burnt-out buildings, it was looking almost normal again after the riots. Sometimes I loved this city. God only knew why, since it was hot and filthy, and totally bereft of charm or culture. But whatever else it lacked, the city sure had energy. The buzz of millions of people struggling to eke out a living. In a country gripped by economic crisis, where an empty gut beckoned at the end of each day, all the world was open for business, twenty-four hours.

A gang of young men hung around a bus shelter. One of them howled like a dog and plucked a badly tuned guitar. At night, when the air smelt clean and the little lights glowed in the *warungs*, it was almost easy to wipe out Jakarta's ugliness.

I lived in a luxury complex in the south of the city, a place designed to make its residents forget they'd said farewell to western suburbia. Even the newspaper ads that the developers put out, featuring Teutonic families in Wimbledon whites, bore a clear subliminal message: brown faces need not apply. The security guards on the gate made their usual cursory glance as my taxi slipped through. They were far too busy on more important matters, such as gambling. The taxi driver stared sniffily at my tip, said nothing, and pulled away. The sticky night air enveloped me and sweat trickled down my face as I fumbled with the padlock on the gate.

My house was pretty much standard for a *bule* manager in Jakarta – a glamorous white shell built in a style which might be politely described as quasi-American. It could have provided the setting for an upmarket soap. I entered through the front door into the barren grandeur of the huge, bare living space and a yoke of depression fell upon me. It felt as if nobody lived there. I'd been in Jakarta more than a year now and still I hadn't got around to buying any stuff to make this place feel more like a home. I trudged up to the bedroom, switched on the AC, and slumped on the bed.

The guy from the Platinum loomed large in my mind. I repeated our conversation over and over, except this time I was really smart and said all the witty things I should have said in the first place. I was feeling pretty pissed off with myself – I'd acquiesced in his racist ranting and now I was trying to absolve myself when it was all too late. Even his memory made me feel dirty somehow. Something about that slimeball had really got under my skin.

The clock by the bed read 2:47. I heard a sound in the darkness, perhaps a rat in the roof above me. I sat up in silence, holding my breath, listening for where the sound came from. I tried the bedside lamp. It gave the usual click, but the room stayed pitch black. I waited for my eyes to adjust, then edged towards the door and turned on the main light.

In the sudden glare of the bulb, I stared down at my feet and the stark white tiles, which gleamed like a public toilet. Cockroaches, too many to count, scurried across the tiles in search of darkness, like creatures gone mad.

A click, and the clock advanced to 2:48. I felt something twitch on my left arm. A cockroach crouched, malignant, on my pale skin, its antennae licking the air from side to side. A moment later, it was scuttling up my arm towards my neck.

The light went out. The door edged open. In the shadows of the doorway hunched the figure from the Platinum. He'd come to get me and I couldn't escape.

I screamed and woke up with a start. Sweat poured down my face: a cold, sticky sweat that was beginning to dry and leave an oily film on my skin. I gradually became aware of rattling at the front gate. Barely awake, I struggled to discipline my mind, as the dream sucked it back down like a whirlpool. Was someone rattling the gate, or was I still dreaming? How much of last night had really happened and how much had been a dream? My bedroom had become some

place I'd never seen before. A haunted zone. The evil presence from my dream hovered in the corner, in the murky dusk between fantasy and reality, to drag me back.

The rattling at the gate grew more insistent. The clock by the bed read 3:16. I staggered to the wardrobe and wrapped a sarong around my waist. Outside the air was cool and I stared blearily into the night. A middle-aged Indonesian man, immaculately dressed in a navy blue jacket and tie, stared back at me from the darkness.

"Mr Young?"

"Yes."

"Mr Graham Young?"

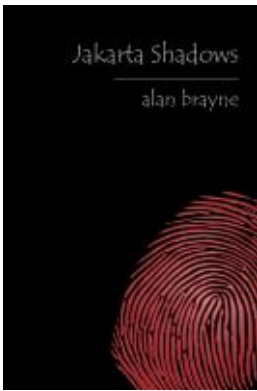
"Yes."

"Suprianto from the Jakarta police. Will you come with me, please, sir?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Will you come with me, please?"

I knew at once that the dream was over. I was wide awake.



Graham Young lives a comfortable, gin-soaked existence in Jakarta, even after violent riots overthrow Soeharto's regime. But a meeting with a reptilian ex-pat hurls him into a nightmare from which there seems no escape. Hounded by the police, courted by shadowy figures of political resistance, and visited in the night by military ghouls, he sees no choice but to flee. Can he get out of the country before these forces move in for the kill?

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