



*This is a book about love, longing, and lust, and all the marginalized people the author meets along the way.*

## **Harbors of the Moon**

By John Hill

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HARBORS  
OF THE  
MOON

JOHN HILL

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## 2.

Atlanta, Hartsfield airport. I've always liked this town since I stayed here years ago. I recall having fun as I endlessly rode MARTA, like a hobo, stupefied on my cocktail, and all the good food in the Atlanta Underground. And hooking up with some deluxe escorts. I'm sure I'll get around to that sooner or later. I always do.

I see an odd looking creature standing by his cab. A homunculus, I think. The pudgy dark little man with the moth-eaten beard introduces himself as Obadia. "I am SS Obadia Huq, sir, at your service, you vill have good ride vith me." He yanks on the heavy bags and stumbles over one and ends up on the ground looking up at me, smiling sheepishly. "Dey got me de better of Obadia today, I get dem right now doe, no problema, as you say in Mexico." He looks like Laurel and Hardy moving a piano as he struggles to get them in the cab. "Maybe you tink Obadia a fuckup, as you say in US, vell, he not, just a shortstack, no one to see bout that, don't vant lose tip or nothin, mister. You vill have good ride vif me."

"Indeed I will, Kemosabe, I say, you seem very dedicated and efficient. Are you here for the ugly contest, or the moron convention?"

"Say again, my English not so good, only been here two months. Are you playing joke on ol' Obadia? Or you really vant to go convention, have to say vich von, many many, all over, be serious now vif ol' Obadia. Of course, some clients vant go to wrestling contest, is dat vat you vant?"

"No, just drive around for a while so I can get my bearings, and then I'll pick a hotel. I'm still trying to orient myself. I haven't been

here for a long time. Say, with a name like that, what country are you from? Sounds like a battleship.”

“From Pakistan. Yes, ve haf many battles, vif Indians, and Afghans. Many. But we emerge victorious. Ve never let no one push us around. Don’t matter India got nukes. We still stand up to dem.”

“Indeed. Just drive around until I see a hotel I want, maybe a Doubletree.”

“Yes, sir, you da boss. I do it.”

“ Say, Obadia, what are those places lit up along the service roads, the ones that say Lingerie Shows All Night.”

“I don’t tink you vant go in dere, you go in and sit in front of glass covered with curtain. A voice asks if you want a date for the night, to show off her lingerie. You say yes, and have to slip so much money in slot just to get curtain to open. A woman dressed in lingerie comes out where you can see her and acts like your girlfriend, she wears bikini, she rubs herself and asks if you would like to see more. She could even be fatso. You say yes, but you got to slip more money in to get her naked. Den more if you want her to play vif her pussy and titties and talk dirty while she expect you to pull down you britches and play vif yourself. Dere’s a time limit. You don’t make it, tough shit, as dey say in US. Don’t bother vif dese lowlife places. Obadia set you up vif good woman, for a tip.”

“You’re a good man, Obadia, like Dith Pran from *The Killing Fields*, looking out for me. A loyal majordomo.” Obadia looks in the mirror and beams. “Dis mean good tip, no?”

“Depends on what she looks like.”

“Lady will be primo, but expensive, even de Arab shieks use her. You vait and see.”

“OK, but not right now. Find a Doubltree not too far from the Peachtree Amtrak station.”

“Vill do, boss.”

As we pass over the crest of a hill and start the long drive downward Obadia suddenly says, “Dey aint gonna rob us goin down de hill, ve aint got no money goin down the hill, morons, I got morons vorkin for me.”

“What in the hell does that mean?” I ask.

“Means we won’t get robbed goin down. Only try ven ve goin up, cause den ve got de gold in the satchels on de burros.”

“Obadia, my man, you’re nuts. You really expect some outlaws to rob us returning up the hill with some hypothetical gold on no burros or satchels I can see. Or do we change over down the hill into prospectors and have to watch for banditos while we move the gold up the hill on the burros? We gotta change our names too? Son, I believe you been smokin some kif you brought over from Pakistan.”

Obadia starts to laugh. “You see, Obadia very bored and lonely as cab driver, and he like American movies very much. So Obadia he uses lines from movies sometimes ven dey might fit situation.”

“I see. And it fits here, does it?”

“Maybe, maybe not, up to you, you get to play along, like mystery at Dave and Busters where diners get to join in de fun to solve. See?”

“Sure.”

“So last pickup, man and woman in back seat, Obadia say, ‘ First ting we get rules straight round here, dere be no grabass back dere, Obadia catches you playin grabass, you spend night in de box.’”

“And what did they say?”

“Man says to go to hell and watch what I say and how I drive, he pissed off like sourpuss and not give Obadia no tip. De woman look at Obadia like he should die. Guess some are de sourpuss but mos like it de game. You like it to break up boredom?”

“Sure, just as long as I don’t have to understand what you’re saying. Reminds me of my last job. This is a nice town. I wish I could

see it at night from a helicopter. Could you arrange a helicopter ride for me? Be a big tip in it for you.”

“Obadia is de man ven come to arrangin for customer. Anyting you vant. Best restaurants, best pussy, best hotel, I get you little piece of chicken make you so hard you dick cut diamond, I get you tranny, pregnant lady, older so look like vife, saggy titties and fat ass and all, some men like dis, I can even get you gun if vant, change fake bills for real at sixty cents on dollar, Rolex, passport, Oxycontin, Don Perignon, Cuban cigar, weed, coke, kif, BMW can’t be traced, anyting, juss ass ol’ Obadia. Dey call me da weasel back at station. Suprise you mention kif, got some in cab juss give you for bona fides, you know?” Obadia looks eagerly in the mirror to see my reaction. There isn’t anything I haven’t come across in my years of addiction to pain pills. I never even change expression at all the bizarre offers thrown my way. I learned the stone-face routine as a high schooler working for the queer that ran the athletic club. One day, stumbling into the office, very drunk, it was just he and I, everyone else had left for the day, he asked me would I lean against the desk and take down my pants so he could suck my dick. He wanted me to hold it, didn’t want to touch it. Other boys, those who let him blow them, said afterwards he went in the bathroom and spit the come in the sink. Brushed his teeth with soap. I declined his offer. He cussed me and stormed into his office and slammed the door. I left. The next day I learned I had been fired. And not to expect a paycheck. As for Obadia’s offer, though I’m an addict, I have never smoked anything, not so much as a puff. As a sickly kid, I was covered in my migraineur mother’s smoke for seventeen years. Always a snotty nose, wheezing, strep throat, tonsilitis. Can’t stand it.

“I’ll pass for right now, Kemosabe. Let’s just ride around for awhile. Find a convenince store and stop. I need to take a piss and get a few things.”

“Sure ting boss. Vat dis Kemosabe? My name Obadia, or you can call me weasel. Don’t know vat dat mean but I like it. Everone at station laugh so I like it. I use to drive an important public man around to see his mistress and wait outside while he fuck or whatever. He truss me so I shop for trinkets sometimes even de lingerie and birthday roses. Dis man, he married, but he get such good pussy all de time slippin round, I seen her ven I deliver de lingerie and roses, shitfire she some kinda good lookin bitch, I tell you that, bossman, I his right-hand man, he call me man Friday, vatever dat mean, but I like it, funny ting, he always smell like perfume and pussy ven he come out of high rise condo, I tell him, he eternal grateful, one time he patted me on cheek for all my help and I smell pussy big time all over fingers, he big on morals in public sphere, dat de term? public sphere? anyway he get caught by wife I don tell him, “groping for trout in a peculiar river,” is vat greatman Villy de Shake say, you say dat here, too, bossman? anyway, so he slip me a little somethin ever month, and he give me ol’ BMW, it got eighty-five thousand on it but it a sweet machine I tell you, it da big 750 series, gets ol’ Obadia laid a lot, I tell chicks wouldn’t look at me twice I’m in exotic car imports and oil business and dey tink I important man. But I also loyal, keep my mouth shut. I slip in and out of dangerous predicaments, Roger the dispatcher say, so he called me de weasel.”

“OK, I’ll call you weasel. Kemosabe means trusted servant. You familiar with the Lone Ranger?”

“No.”

“It doesn’t matter. Stop at the first place looks like we won’t get shot.”

“You never ever get shot ven vif Obadia... what you name, anyway?”

“William.”



“Mister William, you never in any danger ven vif Obadia. I know ever square inch of city. Places to stay away. Gang territory. Places vere dey don like whites. But I look black so don’t hassle me. Even motorcycle men dey like me, send me on errands and I get cut, see, dey truss me not to fuck up or steal, dis way dey keep low profile and get job done, no one know dey involve. See?”

“I get the picture. Stop at the Shell station over there.”

“I got piss too. I get out vif you. Dis aint somewheres vere you leave vehicle untended for very long. Ve hurry. Someone might jimmy trunk, take bags, or break vindow take radio and who know vat else.”

“Sure thing, weasel. Jesus Christ, what’s that goddamn racket?”

There is a imbecilic looking black man dressed in overalls and a Santa hat wringing the bell for the Salvation Army, singing Christmas carols in a Louie Armstrong voice, dancing around spasmodically like someone with Huntington’s disease. At any rate, he is so loud and obnoxious the customers entering the store give him a wide berth. Suddently he raises his arms towards heaven, waving them wildly, beseeching the almighty to touch the heart of would-be givers with the Holy Spirit, please, sweet Jesus, open their hearts and wallets so that the less fortunate may eat for Christmas!

“Pay dat looney no tention, mister William,” Obadia says. The black Santa’s eyes lock on Obadia, and he yells, “Ol’ friend, my ol’ friend, my brother in Christ, can you not find it in your heart to give, something, anything, so hungry children can eat? Ol’ friend, ol’ friend, I know that Christ is in your heart, somewhere, set him free!”

“Jesus Christ is right, William says. That racket is terrible. Let’s piss and get out of here.”

“Don give him nothin, mister William, I seen him downtown gettin arrested for shopliftin. A dude I know sells him PCP and weed. He nuts. He walk da check at Eden’s cafe, where da cabbies hang out, he always doin dis. Tells dem somethin wrong with food. Once when

Elmo de owner call cops to come, he tells dem dere was giant grasshopper in de cafe that grab a bite of his meal. The owner said to juss let him go on but he cain come back. So he move on. He'll start yellin dat you hit him to git you in trouble, say I won call cops if you give me so much."

"I don't plan on it, weasel. Find me a nice hotel, and call that lady you were talking about. How much does she charge?"

"Three hundred, but she primo. Arabs ask for her."

"OK, three hundred. That's about right." As I recall, really heavyweight looking escorts go for twice that. He just smiles. Wonders if she gives him something, maybe fifty bucks. Doesn't ask. Weasel would lie anyway.

As we're driving around, I remember staying at a luxury hotel here in Atlanta, years ago, it was close enough to MARTA that I could walk from my room to the stop. I forget the name. Maybe a Fairfield Inn. Weasel will know.

"Say, weasel, do you know a hotel, a nice one, that's close enough to MARTA to walk from my room. I remember staying there years ago."

"Not dere no more boss. You don wan stay dere anyvay. I take you to nice Doubletree."

"Yeah, sure, that's OK. Was it a Fairfield Inn?"

"Yeah, it vas, but it burn down. Doubletree on Magnolia bess aroun. Hookers like de place. You like it, too. Dey got indoor pool, great bar. Hookers like to hang dere. I troe so much beenis dere vay dey give ol' veasel here a freebie sometimes. Any vons I get you be vorth de money, you see."

"I'm sure they will, my man." The two Vicodin I washed down with a shot of Black Jack back at the airport lounge have started to kick in. The pain and stiffness in my back begins to fade. I feel the

start of euphoria. Sitting in the back seat of the cab, I start to hallucinate and hear voices. I'm stepping through the looking glass.

I see a dwarf shining the boots of Wild Bill Hickock, who's sitting at a poker table, holding his cards, looking at me askance. Hickock tosses the dwarf a silver dollar, tells him to fetch a bottle, no rotgut, the good stuff, and two glasses.

"Well, well, my friend, Hickock says, I've been expecting you. Have a seat. Whiskey'll be here directly. Anyone fill you in on the rules here?"

"No, I say. No one told me anything. I really don't know how I got here."

Deep whiskey laugh from Wild Bill. "Is that right? Poof, and you were here?"

"That's right." I start to laugh nervously. Strange fears again. Like being lynched by a bunch of drunk drovers, on a trumped up charge, cheating at poker, horse thieving, showin my ugly face where I'm not welcome.

"They got a great steak here, and shorty'll fetch us some fine whiskey. Rotgut's for the drovers. They'll end up upstairs anyway. You're not that same manic depressive hobo you were on the other side, my friend. Relax. Have a sit."

"Rule number one, don't peek at another mans' cards. Could get you shot. Number two, don't play poker with dead men. Same caveat applies. Four, don't go upstairs. You'll never leave."

I notice a pile of money on the table. Nobody but Wild Bill there. The dwarf brings the glasses. "Pour yourself one, shorty," Bill says to the dwarf, who eagerly complies. Wild Bill pours me one, and then himself.

"Interesting man, you are, sir. I knew you were coming. Knew all about you before you got here." He shakes his head. Disgust? Compassion? Empathy? He obviously knows my monkey all too well.

“Down the hatch!” he croaks, and we both knock it back. Just as quickly I hear a wicked gunshot, and he’s gone. Poof! Like he said. I can still smell the cordite.

A voice seems to surround me now, coming from all directions. It is stentorian, and menacing. It is very stiff and formal, monotonic, like a recording inducing me to recall a flood of disturbing, suppressed events from my past.

I have a vivid recollection of the events surrounding my obviously insane childhood friend Charlie and his abundant malevolence.

Charlie induced his little brother Brian to climb the fence where Pistol the bird dog was kept and grab the electric wire around the top his old man strung up to keep the dog from trying to jump out. Charlie howled with laughter as Brian screamed and convulsed and swang wildly back and forth, his arm caught between the wire and the fence. Pistol ran round and round the pen, barking furiously. The din was horrific. Utter chaos. When Brian broke free of the wire of his own weight, he bounced off a dog house before hitting the ground headfirst. As he came to and looked up, I saw he had a look of confused anguish on his face but couldn’t scream although his mouth opened as if he meant to. No one but me saw this. He’s in shock, I thought, and Charlie is still laughing. Brian just sat there, holding a little derringer he dropped when the first jolt hit him, staring vacuously, with his mouth open. Charlie told him if he don’t close it, he’ll put a dirt clod in it. And started to, but here comes the old man to investigate the commotion. Now we’re all gonna get it for playing around the dog pen. He tried to beat Charlie with a two-by-four but Charlie easily outmaneuvered him, taunting him, calling him old man, and the old man just ended up stepping in a big pile of dog shit which sent him on a brutal cussing jag. His chin quivered uncontrollably from the upset, a weakness his wife said that went way back in his blood line.

That's not all with this crazy Moorehead family, not by a long shot. I once saw the old man shoot an armadillo at his ranch with a twelve-gauge shotgun, and watched as the armadillo began to turn flips, over and over, and Charlie beat it with a stick while Brian cried. The old man stood there admiring the spectacle and stuffed a big wad of RedMan in his mouth, worked it around slowly, reloaded, and called the boys like he called the dogs, hyah! hyah! and walked off to find something else to shoot. I remember being afraid he would shoot me.

On the way home, in the pickup truck, I got to look at the skin cancers on the back of the old man's neck. Left unattended for years, they were by now festering, quite a grisly sight. The family didn't believe in doctors. They used the concoctions of an old hag that lived on their property, Mama Wolf, a sorceress I think they called her, they believed in black magic and spells and keeping the Anti-Christ at bay with her snake oil and trinkets. He sometimes applied one of her poultices to the sores so strong that the fumes burned one's eyes. Charlie said it burned your hands, too, if you touched it. He said if you left it on a bumper, it would take the chrome off eventually. Why on earth would anyone apply something so caustic to a sore? I wondered. Scary, these people.

Closed up in the pickup on the ride back home, with the front window cracked just a little, I also got to smell the old man's body odor which was bad enough to derange the sensibilities of a buzzard. I could have sooner stood the remnants of a skunk. On top of that, he popped open a beer, lit a cigar, and had Charlie open a jar of homeade mustard and a tin of sardines and dipped them in the mustard while he swilled the beer. Now and then he would take a jar of moonshine out from under the seat and drink this too. "Shitfire! that burns," he said. "Good though. Mama Wolf makes it." He refused to open the window more so as not to blow out the cigar. I felt as though I would wretch. Charlie was my age, fourteen, but the old man gave him a beer and

cigar and he relished them like an old hand. Talked about gettin him some pussy when they got back home. The old man spit a glob of RedMan into his cup, wiped the brown drool from his chin, and asked, “And just who is a little sawed-off shitass like you gonna get a piece of ass off of? You think you a real cocksman kid? I’ll put you to work in the oil patch and that’ll knock that bullshit out of you in a hurry. If I didn’t have emphysema, and the fuckin jake-leg off and on, I’d still take a board to your ass.” Charlie lifted to one cheek and made a fart noise. Told his old man that what he was eatin smelled like pussy. The old man shook his head and said in three years he won’t no longer be responsible for Charlie and he can’t wait. Charlie just shrugged and picked at a terrible case of impetigo on his arm. Mama Wolf had told him to put maggots on it and I was afraid to ask. I sat in narcotized silence vowing never to ride with them again. I didn’t.

Years later I reflected that the only body odor that rivaled the old man’s was a bread delivery man’s in a Homeland store. So bad it drove me from the aisle. Periodically I would slip back and give the aisle the sniff test to see if it was safe. Took a good ten minutes for the aisle to become inhabitable again. Bromhidrosis, was my amateur medical diagnosis. Perhaps an MD would write: Refractory Body Odor, or Intractable Fetor. The stench coming off some people is so foul it makes me think it is a vestige of some substance that came to Earth centuries ago from another planet.

Memories move past me like a cars on a train. When I was ten I found my father’s stash of Playboy magazines in the garage. He hid them expertly under some National Geographics in a drawer. And I recall how I felt as a young boy a primordial stirring in my loins.

How come daddy looks at these pictures? I thought. There’s was one of a Chinese lady with a bouffant. I felt I had a full-fledged boner. I took it out to look at it it, sure wasn’t very big. Jimmy Long told me that he got Shirley Evans to play with his when they looked at Playboy

together. They smoked cigarettes and drank his dad's warm Lone Star behind the junior high. And that night when he dreamed, he stuck it in Shirley and peed. He looked around furtively when he told me this. He seemed very confused and ashamed. I recall that I square-danced with her in sixth grade in Mr. Johnson's class and later that week she fell into a diabetic coma.

I wondered if my father looked at the native ladies with saggy tits in the National Geographic and if he preferred the ladies in Playboy to these ladies. I was very careful to put them back in the right order so he wouldn't know I'd been snooping.

We're both only twelve but Tommy's way ahead of me in the sex department. He told me he's already been blown by Sheryl Mason in the woods behind the junior high. I haven't a clue what that means. He says a bunch of shit I don't understand, pulls his clothes off, and runs naked through his backyard yelling like a madman. I'm afraid we're going to get caught when his big brother Andy looks out the window and sees him, goes to the back door with a pellet gun and tries to shoot Tommy in the ass. Tommy is still yelling and running like he's crazy. I get up and run out the gate. This Blankenship family has always scared me. All the men at least seem primitive and violent. Andy broke Tommy's arm with a machete last year. The oldest son Harold shot Andy with a .410 shotgun in the backyard one day while Tommy rode his mini bike round and round laughing, seemingly oblivious to, or else enjoying the fact that his brother had just been shot. I think sooner or later I'm going to end up getting shot or caught by someone and I stop hanging out with him. Which is a good thing since Sheryl got pregnant. Her parents called the principal and all hell broke loose. Every damn one of the boys she fooled with had to go up to school with his parents and give an accounting.

Later that year at his family's ranch Tommy flipped the motorcycle he got for his birthday and broke his neck. It never really healed right

and was sort of bent and scrawny like a plucked chicken's. Shortly after he graduated high school he married a fourteen year old girl, shot at one of her old boyfriends on the highway outside town and spent some time in the county jail. I remember feeling glad that I saw all this coming.

My cousin Pete had to wear his wet underwear tied around his face and head after he pissed the bed and had to stay locked in the basement with this sour mess on his head all day until he got it through his head to quit peeing the bed. His mother made him eat his meal in the other room down on the floor like a dog. Told him, "You're a dog, you can't eat with us." The ammonia from the wet diapers ulcerated the skin on his face. His father said he can't stand all this anymore, he should have been aborted, send him away. So now he's here with my family. He's covered with welts and scars, sits in the corner and won't say anything. "What's wrong with that kid?" my father yelled. I remember this sad, broken, little boy with the scars on his rump and back from the ironing cord. How my father ignored him and my mother looked away. Pete never talked, never smiled, would hardly eat, cried all night, rocking his head from side to side. He and I were the same age. I used to get up to help him change his wet sheets and wash off before my father woke up and started yelling he can't take any more of this shit. I gave Pete a rubber spider, and he sat playing with it, mesmerized, in the sand box. My mother asked, "Do you get up and help Pete, William? You don't do that. Let him learn." But he won't learn, I thought. He'll end up a homicidal maniac or suicide. And he did. He got sent to prison for beating his mother insensate with a wrench. People wondered how on earth he could do such a thing. He got out and drifted through menial jobs. Went AWOL from the army. Robbed a filling station and hanged himself in jail. And hearing this story from the folks back East, mama fingered her crucifix, took a deep drag on one of the fifty or more Kents she relished each day, looked away, and shook her head,



saying, "Why would he do such a thing? I thought he was OK back there. He was OK here. He needed to learn."

The memories are slowing down. I can barely recall the boy Larry Burkes. Larry never washed or combed his hair once in his lifetime. Wore hand-me-down rags, some of them girls' clothes. His house looked like a shack where his siblings ran bare and dirty footed outside in all manner of weather. For lunch everyday in the cafeteria Larry would eat a cinnamon roll with his mouth open chewing laboriously mixing the bolus with his braces for all to see. Sometimes after school when Larry heard the train coming, he would grab eggs and tomatoes and peaches and hunks of lettuce, leftovers and cornbobs, you name it, and hunker down behind the fence and wait for the train to pass. Pop up and hurl it all at the man on the caboose. I recall the man waving his arms shouting like a berserk ape. Larry just stood there with a malevolent grin on his face, and shouted, "Got the fucker!"

When Larry's father got drunk on the weekend at the backyard barbeque, he used to make Larry catch green bottleflies in a glass jar so he could fry them on top of the grill. When he got really soused, he would take the electric dog clippers to Larry's head, saying he don't want no hippy kid. He would shave him nearly bald. Cut big gashes into his scalp, left big festering sores and old scabs that got ripped off with every new shearing. An ambulance showed up at his house one day. His mother had been hiding under the bed all day so no one could find her. She thought the devil was coming for her. His father was drunk in the front yard, staggering, barechested, with his big belly hanging out, wearing nothing but his boxer shorts, and drinking a beer. He told the ambulance drivers he didn't care where they took her, take her to the looney bin or the graveyard for all he cared. He offered the amulance drivers a beer. They declined. The old man began to brutally cuss everyone and everything around him and wandered off down the street hollering curses at the houses.



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