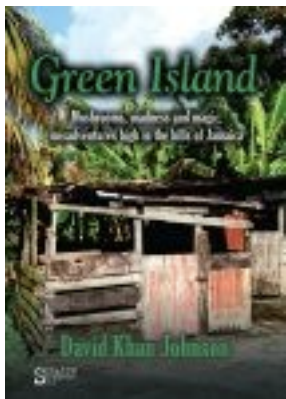




Green Island

Mushrooms, madness and magic;
misadventures high in the hills of Jamaica

David Khan Johnson



In 1978, two men and a woman traveled to the Jamaican countryside for a holiday. Instead, they are turned upside down by a heady mixture of mushrooms, magic, music, and madness. Far from a travelogue, Green Island is David Khan Johnson's story of worlds colliding on a muddy road up into the hills. Thunder crashed, smoke swirled, passions burned, bass rumbled, colors ran, and the veil was torn. Welcome to Green Island.

Green Island

by

David Khan Johnson

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David Khan Johnson

Scratch Enterprises, LTD

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David Khan Johnson

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Dedicated to the memory of Rick Fraley

David Khan Johnson

Thursday ~

It was noisy and bright when Russell woke. His finger tips were scabbed and blistered. With his left hand he pulled the door open and walked out onto the porch where Little John sat patiently.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Where’s Christina and Darren?” Russell asked.

“Gone a town fa eat,” he said, looking off. Then he turned his eye to him. “Ya want the herb?”

“Sure, but we don’t need pounds of it. How much for what you already brought?”

“Twenty dollah.”

“Fine. In a couple of days I’ll buy more,” Russell said, carefully pulling money out of his pocket while trying to protect his fingertips.

“Yeah, OK,” Little John said, taking the money. “I haf a go today but tomorrow I be around if ya wan dive and swim.”

“Can you catch fish here?”

“Meybe. We see.”

“That would be great. Thanks,” Russell said. “I’ll see you later.” Little John walked out the gate, the bell ringing behind him.

Russell washed his face and changed his clothes. He took his money, cigarettes, lighter and wallet and stuffed everything in his pockets, avoiding direct contact with his throbbing fingertips as best he could. Mrs. Walker was in the yard when Russell came out.

“Ya wan breakfast?” she asked.

“No thanks. Would you take a look at this?” Russell asked, sticking his fingers out.

“Ya burned!” she exclaimed. “Wha ‘appen?”

“I grabbed the lamp globe while it was still burning.”

Mrs. Walker looked at him as if she could not believe that anyone could be so stupid. Then she led him to her porch and sat him down on the steps. She went inside and came

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back out with a thick stalk of aloe. She took a knife and made a long slit in the thick skin. Pulling back the peel she rubbed the clear juicy gelatinous flesh of the plant generously on each fingertip.

“Blow on them ‘til they dry,” she said standing up. As Russell blew he felt a cooling, healing sensation. “Now ya good. Careful and let dem heal up.” She looked at him. “Careful.” Russell nodded.

He walked back to their house and sat at the table. Waving his fingers in the air until they were dry he fished the rest of the joint out of the ashtray with his left hand. Fumbling with his burned fingers, he lit the lighter on his pant leg and brought the flame up. After he had a good smoke, he walked out through the gate and sat on the bench waving his fingers. He felt better.

The road was lively with traffic. A young boy led a cow up the hill by a rope. A group of women had bundles of laundry on their heads. Coming down the hill, struggling with a large pail, was the mushroom boy. He held the handle high so the bucket wouldn’t drag on the muddy ground.

“Hey,” Russell called out.

The boy came over and set the bucket on the bench. Russell looked in and saw that it was full of mushrooms.

“How are you?” Russell asked.

“Fine,” he said, squinting in the bright sun.

“Thank you for the mushroom and mango yesterday. They were both great.”

“You’re welcome,” he said.

“Have a seat,” Russell offered.

“No thanks. I have to go.”

“Hey, it looks like you’ve got a lot of mushrooms. Can I have some?”

“No.”

“I’ll pay for them.”

“No. I already promised them.”

“But I want some more,” Russell said. “I’ll pay you.”

“Ya want more?” he asked, cocking his hip to the side and crossing his arms.

“Yes,” Russell said.

“If you find one mushroom, I’ll give you more. All ya want.”

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“Where are they?”

He turned and pointed up the road. “Go up where the cows are and look around. You’ll find some.”

“Where?”

“Look around. Ya find some.” He lifted his bucket and headed down the road.

Russell watched him go. Then he looked up the road. He stood and lifted one foot then the other. Soon he was walking up the hill.

The muddy road was drying and walking was much easier. Russell passed many gates and waved hello to the people who sat along the roadside. Everyone’s clothes clashed in a riot of styles and colors. One older woman wore red sox, blue shorts with white stripe trim, a blue jean shirt, an orange t-shirt, a red bandana, a necklace of bottle caps, and a khaki hat with badges and feathers. Russell stuck out as he walked the path not only because of his pinkish white skin but because his clothes almost matched. He wore white tennis shoes, blue jeans and a maroon shirt. It was nothing flashy but truly alien on that avenue.

At the top of the hill the road curved to the right away from the compounds and went west along a barbwire fence.

Beyond the fence was a large pasture dotted with mango trees that spread across several hills. The grass had been eaten down and dust flew around in the slight breeze. Russell could see a small herd of cows grazing in the next shallow valley.

He grabbed the middle barbwire between the rusty thorns and pulled up while pushing the lower wire down with his foot. Some kids across the road watched him. He tried to ease through the wire, but a barb caught his foot and tumbled down on the other side. He was happy that he made it through without cutting himself. The kids laughed.

Russell surveyed the field and decided to start looking near the cows. The morning sun was strong and there was no breeze. He walked stooped over, trying to spot an elusive mushroom and realized that the kid had the advantage of being closer to the ground. Russell ran down one hill and broke a sweat climbing the next. At the top he bent over, put his hands on his knees and gulped huge gasps of air. Key West was flat and, as much as Russell rode his bike and swam there, he was in no shape to take on the hills of Green Island. When he stopped moving, the flies attacked him. He swung his arms and trotted toward the cows.

Being unfamiliar with the disposition of the Jamaican cow, Russell didn't get too close to the herd. Although they barely

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lifted their heads to look at him, one large brown beast stopped chewing her cud when he approached. He did not go farther.

He tried squatting to get as close to the ground as possible, but his legs would not bear that pose, and he dropped to all fours. There was plenty of cow dung on the ground, mostly dried but still dotted with random fresh pies. Although this seemed like the perfect spot for the fungi to grow, Russell found nothing. The flies spurred him on as he crawled across the ground. More cows paid attention to him on all fours, so he turned away from the herd, rose up to a stooped stance, and broke into a trot. Sweat poured down his face. His eyes were crossing as he tried to focus on the brown lumps.

He continued the mutant gymnastics as long as he could. When his legs would no longer support him, he sat beneath a mango tree at the top of a small hill. The shade was instantly refreshing like a dive into a cool pool. A small breeze came up and blew most of the flies away. He could see down the hillside to the sparkling blue and silver ocean. He leaned back against the trunk and closed his eyes.

It was a beautiful nap. When a fly crawled into his nose he woke with a start and slapped his own face sharply.

He shook his head and his scrambled vision slowly regained focus. Russell looked at his feet. Between his two muddy shoes stood a cluster of mushrooms. Russell sat up straight and leaned forward for a better look. There were six small mushrooms with caps varying from tiny to middling. They looked as if they had popped up while he was nodding out.

He reached down and plucked the tallest. As it broke free, a shadow moved across the dry ground.

“Ya found some,” the boy said. He shaded his eyes with his hand. His bucket sat next to him. “See, easy. Ya want more?” he asked as he swatted at the flies landing on his legs.

“Yeah, maybe a couple,” Russell said. “There’s only a few little ones here.”

The boy sat his bucket down. While Russell chose some beautiful wide caps the boy climbed up into the tree, plucked two mangos, jumped back down, and held one out.

“What happened to ya fingers?” he asked when Russell reached for the fruit.

“I burned them on the lamp last night.”

“Ya better be careful. Ya not at home,” the boy said as he looked across the pasture.

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Russell plucked the remaining mushrooms from between his feet and gathered them up into his shirt.

“I’ll be careful. Eat one mushroom, eat one mango.” Russell popped the first mushroom that he had picked into his mouth and took a bite of fruit. He smiled and looked up. The boy had gone.

He ate two more mushrooms and the effects started coming on as he stumbled up and down the pasture hills. Small clouds floating across the sun turned the bright rays on and off. He took a last look down the hill at the ocean and then faced the barbed wire. Taking off his shirt off so he wouldn’t spill his mushrooms, he pulled at the rusty wires and eased through. When he emerged on the other side a barb caught his pant leg. He yanked his leg forward and ripped a small hole in his jeans. Better than a hole in his skin.

As he walked down the road he smiled and waved at everyone who passed. Suddenly he felt very self conscious about having no shirt, but he didn’t want to lose his treasure. He trotted the rest of the way to Mrs. Walker’s gate.

Christina and Darren were sitting on the porch puffing on the remains of the joint. The table was piled high with bananas, mangos, and guavas.

“Where did you go?” asked Russell as he took his place at the table.

“We went to town for breakfast,” said Darren. “We found out that there’s no pancake house in Green Island, so we bought a lot of fruit and brought it back here.”

“Would you like a nice warm Trixie?” asked Christina, offering up a green bottle.

“I would. Thanks,” Russell said. He opened the soda and took a long gulp. Darren passed Russell the joint and he took a deep draw. The ganja seemed to kick up the mushrooms and Russell started to laugh.

“What’s so funny?” asked Darren.

“Well, I was just crawling around on my hands and knees in cow shit for a couple of hours.”

“Why?” asked Christina.

“For these,” Russell said, dumping the mushrooms out on the table.

Darren picked up a fat cap. “Good work, captain. Can we try some?”

“Of course,” Russell said.

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They examined the fungi and split the pile up into three. “Go on,” he said, “Don’t be shy. I’ve eaten a lot of them and I feel fine. Just chew them up and swallow without breathing so you don’t taste anything. Follow each bite with a bite of mango. That’s what my man said, ‘Eat one mushroom, eat one mango.’”

Soon all the mushrooms, all the mangos and all the joint were gone. Russell felt himself retreating inside. He knew he had to move fast or he’d end up spending the whole day sitting on the porch.

“You want to walk into town?” he asked.

“We just came back from there,” Darren said. “It ain’t Vegas.”

“No shit,” said Christina dryly. They all burst into laughter.

Little shimmers ran through their bodies.

“It is pretty here,” Christina said, pulling some stray strands of hair from her face and looking around. “The higher I get, the more I like it.”

“Well, pretty soon, you’re gonna LOVE it here,” Russell said. “Fucking LOVE it.”

“Can’t wait, jungle man. Maybe we’ll crawl through some cow shit today too, right honey?” suggested Christina to Darren. “Russell havin’ all the fun.”

“Maybe we’ll stay in and have some good, healthy private fun,” Darren opted. “Special fun that will be more fun when Russell goes to town and won’t be peeking under the door.”

“Russell, please stay and peek under their door,” said Christina. She leaned over and put her hand on his arm. It felt nice. Her nipples were poking out against her white sun dress. He tried not to notice.

“Sorry, my friends, I’d like to stick around and be a tool in your ongoing science project, but I’m headin’ downtown, where the lights are bright, gonna rock all night, do it right, don’t be uptight.”

“Watch out, Green Island, here he comes,” said Darren, “Russell’s gonna teach you how they do it in F-L-A, baby. Do it, Russell, do it.”

Russell stood and walked down the steps onto the yard. Putting one hand on his hip and one in the air, spreading his legs in a kung fu stance, Russell began to sing Kool and the Gang’s seminal party anthem *Hollywood Swinging* and gyrate like Christina used to do out on the highway.

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“Oh yeah,” she cried, clapping her hands. “Do it, big daddy!”

Russell executed a particularly tricky maneuver. His foot slipped on a rock and he tumbled backward, his leg twisting in the air. He landed on his back and the wind went out of him. He couldn't focus. He grasped at handfuls of dirt and rocks.

“Jesus, are you OK?” Christina asked as she and Russell ran down the steps.

They each got on a side and lifted him up. He slowly regained his breath.

“No, I'm good. That's all a part of my thing, my bad, super bad thing. Super, super thing that chicks love, baby. The chicks love it.” His head spun as he spoke. Christina and Darren brushed the dirt off his back.

“You are super bad,” laughed Christina. “Kind of super smelly, too.”

“Cow shit,” said Darren. “Honey, we've got to get some.”

They all started laughing and couldn't stop. It was deep laughter, cleansing, resetting the clock.

Christina stepped back and surveyed him. "OK, now your super bad, super smelly bad ass self is ready to crush Green Island. Crush it, Russell!"

"And don't come back soon," said Darren, putting his arm around Russell's shoulders. "I love you, man, but don't come back soon."

"Maybe I'll stick around," Russell said. He kissed Darren and Christina on the cheek and turned to the gate. "Sayonara."

As Russell was reaching for the door, Mrs. Walker came walking in carrying a large bundle. The small girls ran past her. She stopped and looked at him, cocking her head to the side.

"Russell, ya eat the silly umbrellas?" she asked.

"Yeah, I found some up in the pasture. Would you like some?"

"No. Jamaicans na eat dem mushrooms. They make ya crazy. Ya feel crazy?" she asked, staring at Russell with her one good eye.

"Yeah, I feel crazy," he said. Her hat was squirming around on her head. He had to look away.

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“Where ya go?” she asked.

“I thought I’d walk into town.”

“Ya be careful. Watch da traffic. Stay on the grass. Keep ya money in ya pocket. Be careful,” she said, turning toward her house.

Russell looked at Darren and Christina, made a face, and opened the gate. The bell rang. He shook it a few times, listening to the crystalline sound, fascinated.

“Russell, that’s enough,” said Christina. He stopped and went out the gate

As he walked down the hill, the road started to breathe, getting wider, then longer. A horse tied to a fence stopped chewing grass and gave Russell a steady look. The highway traffic was thick and he walked far away from the pavement dragging his ankles through dry sharp scrub brush. When he stood aside to let some children and goats pass on the tiny path he could feel the hot breath of the trucks bearing down on him. Flies bit his sweaty neck. His footing felt unsure on the rocks. He was walking through hell.

Finally, thankfully, in the center of town he came upon the large concrete foundation around which the busy road

twisted. All the vehicles were forced to slow, stop, and negotiate the turn.

He stepped up onto the platform and let out a deep breath. He was in a safety zone. The angry, grizzled traffic snarled around him but he was out of its reach. He surveyed the skyline of town and watched the ocean glimmer. The sunlight flickering on the waves was hypnotic. He stared out and the stress of his travels along the highway drained away.

He sat down, took some deep breaths, and lay back on the warm slab. It felt good to lie down. He stretched out his legs and covered his eyes with his arm. Gravel and sticks peppered the concrete, but, thanks to the magic of the mushrooms, the surface felt like a soft mattress. The sound of the traffic took on a rhythm. The cycle of the slowing down, the stopping, the making of the turn and the accelerating became a symphony in his head as gentle and soothing as the waves on the beach. He loved it and he hoped that it would never stop.

In the sky over his head, seagulls flew leaving white trails that lingered in the rich blue. It was a lovely pattern that kept changing. It caressed him. He felt like a dolphin swimming through clear warm water.

Russell closed his eyes.

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He drifted in and out of consciousness, losing himself in his overloaded senses. He could hear voices. Half opening his eyes he saw children standing around him. They were laughing. One of them leaned over and spit on him. Russell tried to yell but a slurred growl was all he could muster. The children ran away howling. His feet pedaled in the air like a dog chasing a cat in his dream. He opened his eyes again. Several men were smoking, looking down at him.

“Brotha, ya dead?”

Russell moved a leg.

“He na dead.”

“He dead.”

“Na, see his leg move dere.”

Russell moved his leg again.

“See?”

“Ya, ya. He na dead.”

A foot pushed him. Russell sat up and the men jumped back.

“He na dead. Ya dead, mon?”

Russell gave them a hard stare, a fuck off stare, and lay back down.

A bold boy tried slipping his hand into Russell's pocket. Russell abruptly sat up barking and swinging his arms. The boy ran off. Russell lay back down.

A goat licked his face and he rolled over to escape the coarse tongue.

From very far away a voice called his name. "Russell?"

Russell tried to respond, but his voice had been stilled.

"Russell? Wake up!" It was Mrs. Walker calling to him down in the hole in his head. He opened an eye and could see her very far away. She grabbed his shoulder and shook him. "Russell! Stand up!" He tried to roll over again and hide from her. He could hear her children laughing at him. They were standing behind her peeking down. He was not embarrassed but was annoyed. He wanted them to leave him alone. "Leave me alone," he tried to say. "I'm not here."

Mrs. Walker grabbed him under his arms and pulled him to his feet. A small crowd had gathered. He could not focus and tried to lie back down.

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“Stand up, Russell. We goin’ home. Come!” she directed him. They started to walk away but Russell stood still.

“Russell, come now!”

He looked up at the sky.

Mrs. Walker dug around in her large bag and brought out a ball of twine. She looped it around Russell’s stomach. He watched her with amusement. “Now come,” she said, tugging on the string. Russell felt it pull against his back and he instinctively moved forward. The crowd shouted “Gwan!” Someone whistled.

Mrs. Walker kept the twine in her hand and the kids pushed Russell to the right or left, which was good when they walked alongside the busy road. Without them Russell might have easily laid down on the highway. When they reached her road Russell felt as if he needed a rest and he started to sit. Mrs. Walker yanked the cord and he jerked forward. One of the boys picked up a stick and prodded him with it when he slowed down.

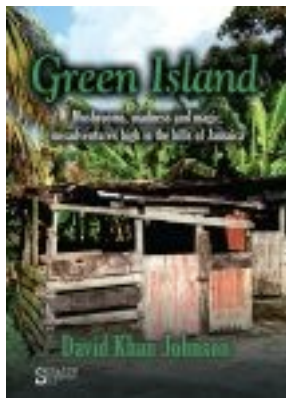
They walked through her gate and she let go. Still wearing the twine leash Russell walked up into the house, past Darren and Christina who were sitting on the porch, and into his bed. Darren came in to look at him.

“Hey, are you OK?” he asked as he peered into his half shut eyes. Russell waved and, with a major effort, smiled.

“You’re OK then?” Darren asked, not fully believing him. Russell waved him off and Darren walked back onto the porch.

“I guess he’s OK,” he said to Christina.

“I know I’m not,” Christina laughed.



In 1978, two men and a woman traveled to the Jamaican countryside for a holiday. Instead, they are turned upside down by a heady mixture of mushrooms, magic, music, and madness. Far from a travelogue, Green Island is David Khan Johnson's story of worlds colliding on a muddy road up into the hills. Thunder crashed, smoke swirled, passions burned, bass rumbled, colors ran, and the veil was torn. Welcome to Green Island.

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