

# Fishbone Tanner

## Horrorstory by Paul Pinn

I stepped outside my hotel to look for the kid. Two fat drops of liquid hit me in the face. I stepped back inside, wiped them off, not that my face would look any different after a brief acid etching. Some women find it handsomely rugged, usually the sweet poisons who fall in love with crumpled bank notes, or pimps and dealers with faces like maps of the New York subway system.

I stared out the glass doors at the street and sky, both as threatening as each other. The sky struck first, rain pounding abruptly. I hoped the gang of hustlers outside would run like rats, but in a shitwreck like Morocco they don't let little things interfere with the business of antagonizing the few foreigners staying on their patch.

I wasn't in the mood to get wet or antagonized, so I asked Mohammed the doorman to stop the first empty cab that came down the street. He was one of those unusually tall black Moroccans who look more like giant Nubians or Nigerians. In his black and grey striped djellabah he looked kind of sinister, like a guy who'd skewer your cheeks simply because his mystic sect said he had to.

Mohammed stood under a leaky awning looking cheesed off at the hustlers who looked just as cheesed off at cabs that weren't empty. No, not cheesed off - hungry. Hardly surprising: there's more money sitting in a shared cab than a street hustler'll see in a month, and that's just loose change. With my loose change I could buy a goddamn cab. That's what desertification, revolution and reversion to Islamic fundamentalism does to a country that had zip to boast about in the first place. Add 80% unemployment, a lack of foreign investment, and a blank from the European tourist corporations, and you get the picture.

And like a sucker I'm here in Tangier in December looking for a runaway kid. Well, kid ain't quite accurate. Fishbone Tanner's about forty, but at my age anyone under fifty is a spring chicken.

Mohammed waved down a battered old Merc. I slipped out, slipped him a note, and slipped in the back at the same time as a wet hustler slipped in

the opposite side. Before he could shut the door and fill my ears with bullshit about employing him as a guide or visiting his uncle's cousin's carpet shop, I landed a right on his jaw, swivelled, kicked him out with both feet and slammed the door.

"Drive!" I shouted at the driver. He sat there like he was deaf. I glanced at the hustlers. They were moving in like a pack of wolves. "Allez!" I shouted, but the driver just turned to me with glazed eyes. Just my luck to have a hash freak behind the wheel.

Mohammed barked at him through the window and the guy galvanized into action. The Merc roared off, hustlers' abuse fading in the rain. I made a mental note to slip Mohammed a few more bucks when I returned. Leaving the Chella Hotel was like escaping a besieged fort. I guess I could have shot a couple of hustlers if things had turned ugly, but that would have meant a hassle with the Moroccan, UN or British authorities. Better to let my money keep the peace.

"Where we go?" said the driver as we stopped at a crossroads.

"Dean's Bar."

The cab bounced over garbage, hit a dog, growled its way up Rue du Prince Heritier to Place de France. I slouched back and relaxed, head low. Despite the troops, fundamentalist snipers still used white heads for target practice. A last-ditch attempt by the insane to halt the will of the people, who cut off from aid, trade and investment, soon worked out that obeying half-crazed mullahs and slaughtering foreigners equalled starvation, poverty, economic isolation and infidel troops hopping over the Med and going apeshit.

The Spanish bombed the shit out of them and grabbed most of the Med coastline from Algeria to Ceuta. The Brits dropped by for tea and made do with Tangier and environs. And the French came too, diddling about along the Atlantic coastline, furious that the easier option of invading the Med coastline had been snatched from them. Oh yeah, and the Djeballa tribes took the western Riff, the Berber tribes and kif bandits the eastern Riff. The

Moroccan army found its northern front so far south it gave up. Still, that's life and we've seen it all before.

The cab jerked to a halt outside Dean's Bar in Rue Amerique Du Sud. One hundred years ago it was the haunt of Hemmingway, Bogart and Erroll Flynn. Dean croaked it in '63 - too much white line - and the place dived. A guy called Brahim took it over but despite his hopes the boozers from the Grand Socco souks filled it with the reek of dope, the stench of urine, and a thick carpet of peanut husks, shrimp shells and cigarette packets. When Islam went back to basics it shut down, like all the other bars in Morocco. Now?

I told the driver to wait. He nodded, his mouth flashing a smile like a badly worn flick-knife. I pushed open the bar's battered brown door, caught a blast of mixed gibber before I walked in to an abrupt silence and a dozen shifty dark eyes. The decor hadn't changed a bit, and nor had the smell. I scanned the no-hopers sitting at the bar, studying each face, then checked a back room where a few granite-jowled dopers were sitting at tables watching television.

My gaze was slow and heavy, my movements deliberate, designed to intimidate with measured self-assurance, like a mean cop in a bad mood itching for a bust. The strategy didn't always work, and I've got the scars to prove it, but in Dean's Bar it was cool.

I prowled about, kicked open a toilet door, ammonia frying my nose hair, and saw a rat disappear down the squat hole, but not the rat I was looking for. I checked a small room opposite the bar, saw black mould, crates of ancient beer, and a filthy little kitchen area where a boy was cutting processed cheese into small squares.

He froze in mid-movement as I stared at him in a manner that suggested chopping cheese was a major offence. He put down the knife, backed away, then picked up a green tomato and offered it to me like some kind of idiotic bribe. I pulled a photo of Fishbone Tanner out of my inside pocket and asked him in my best Arabic if he'd seen the face.

The boy's nerves fluttered a bit more. He glanced at the doorway, nodded, whispered that he'd seen Fishbone in the Medina a few times. Out the corner of my eye I saw the barman coming my way. I turned and told him I wanted a cold beer. He got the message and retreated behind the bar. I looked back at the boy, pushed him some more. Fishbone drank in the Petit Socco cafés, that's all he knew. I slipped the boy some loose change and picked up a small plate of cheese, my cover for talking to him.

Standing at the end of the bar with my snack and beer, I knew that if I questioned any of those now engrossed in silence I'd get zip-all. Shame. Lined along the bar the lean faces looked like a line-up from death row. All of them attempted to look relaxed by not smiling.

"What happened to Brahim?" I asked the bartender.

He ran a dirty finger across his throat. A weasel sitting by me chuckled and spat out a sunflower shell. It landed in my cheese. He said something in Arabic and the others laughed.

He'd called me something akin to an ugly camel with a discharge. I didn't like that, or his manners, so I laughed along with them. Then smashed him in the mouth with my bottle of beer, removing the rest of his teeth before knocking him to the floor and pulling out my old Glock automatic and loosening a shot into the King of Morocco's face hanging cock-eyed on the wall. I got out fast before Dutch courage ignited their brains.

The Merc had gone, probably because of the gunshot. I guess the driver thought I'd bought it. I walked quickly, hand on the Glock in my pocket. The rain had ceased but the air was still damp, the sky a dirty mass of clouds. I passed a mixed patrol of UN and Brit soldiers, their manner suggesting they'd not heard the shot, or if they had, it hadn't bothered them. I made for the Petit Socco.

I checked a few cafés, including the Café Centrale, once a hangout for world famous writers and artists during the fifties and sixties. Now it was a hangout for no one in particular. In fact, there was no one in there at all. Suspicious.

I spent another hour or two weaving about the Kasbah, checking with my

alley-bred contacts, but no one had seen Fishbone Tanner for days. Very suspicious.

Finally I wound up foot sore and thirsty in the Tanger Inn, beyond the Medina. It's a cute little bar once owned by two English queens. Above it is the El Muniria Hotel, where Bill Burroughs wrote 'Naked Lunch' in Room 9, lunch for him being heroin. I wouldn't be surprised if he wrote naked. Now the place is a brothel, and the Tanger Inn the brothel's bar. Being late afternoon it wasn't exactly lively.

I had a decent beer, chatted to a couple of Mauritanian hookers with faces as blank as the desert, but with eyes as cutting as a sandstorm. They'd heard a rumour Fishbone Tanner was up to something in the Eastern Malabata side of Tangiers. Didn't know what and I couldn't imagine. Ahmed the barman mentioned the tunnel.

A pair of losers swaying like galleons anchored in a rough sea mentioned black magic. An off-duty UN soldier perched on a stool at the end of the bar spat out some shit about animal parts being found in the construction site round the tunnel entrance. Bits of camel, donkey, cat, dog and chicken.

Sounded esoteric to me, so I had another beer to calm down.

Then the guy reminded me that no bodies had been dumped there for quite a while. That was significant. The construction site had been a regular dump for victims of internecine disputes between religious, political and criminal factions. So where d'they dump them now?

At the site, said a hooker. They always leave them there.

If that was the case, someone was stealing them before they were discovered. Intriguing, especially as the tunnel would be good cover for dirty deeds. No one went down there normally. It was considered unsafe. More so if what I'd just heard was true.

The tunnel was started in earnest towards the end of last century, when five million people crossed the Straits of Gibraltar every year, landing mainly at Tangier or Ceuta. It was to be 30 km long and connect Eastern Malabata to Algeciras in Spain. The cost was reckoned to be only 5,000 million bucks, construction time ten years, drive time a mere 25 minutes. Nice

idea, shame the money run out after a couple of clicks. Since then another two clicks had been added. For the last twenty years the place had been fenced off, boarded up, virtually forgotten.

Until now.

What puzzled me was what Fishbone Tanner would be doing there. I was looking for him because he'd disappeared with some gullible crook's consignment of hash oil while on a courier trip. Maybe the skunk was frying his brains in oil down the tunnel, unleashing his perverse imagination - and he had one. Used to be a porno star before he got involved with drugs. That's how he got the name Fishbone.

Rumour had his dick worn to a point from all the screwing, and apparently one day he'd lacerated a girl with it and she'd bled to death. Personally I found the guy to be a real sleaze who's very presence stuck like a bone in the throat. There was always something decidedly unhealthy about his presence, like a faint whiff of leprosy or bedding someone with smallpox. Even his breath smelled like a snuff movie.

I hadn't seen the slime for years, and now I wanted to. So had others, but they'd failed, which is why King Hash tracked me down in a health spa outside Kitzbühel, in the Alpine Tyrol region of Austria. From forests and mineral springs to grotty bars and souks and shifty eyed denizens. But the money was good. And I'd have the pleasure of killing Fishbone Tanner - a bonus not to be ignored.

I bought a round of drinks, tipped well, and left. Up the alley, up a road, and I hailed a cab. Turned out to be the same driver as before. I wasn't sure about the co-incidence, but let it ride.

Evening and light rain fell around us as we headed along the coast to Eastern Malabata, the driver driving like a prick, treating every pothole like an affront to his masculinity. Time we arrived it was raining heavily and the sky was angry. We stopped at the main entrance to the construction site. I told the driver to wait no matter how long I was, and got out, braving an acid etching looking for a way in. Sooner rather than later I found a hole in the fence.

Inside was darker than outside. Odd, because the same sky was overhead and the fence was metal net. Throwing caution aside I ventured towards the tunnel entrance across a terrain of

rubble, mud and what might have been decomposing body parts. Somewhere in the back of my mind shrieked a voice telling me I was mad. The rest of me figured it would be the most unexpected time for a visitor to drop by, assuming there was anyone at home.

The tunnel entrance was a slant in the ground, covered with boards, netting and barbed wire. It made me think of secret military bases and I wondered if I'd end up in a silo staring at a missile. I couldn't see jack shit in the dark, but managed to find a chink in the armour, a narrow corridor through the defences that only tore my coat rather than my flesh. It ended at a board that slid sideways.

Night vision has always been one of my better abilities, but not in the tunnel. I may as well have been walking through a minefield with a bag over my head. As it was I walked like a mincing fag in leg irons with my hands out in front of me, thick mud trying to suck off my \$300 Italian shoes. My eyes didn't adjust to the blackness and I felt a complete dickhead for coming without a torch. On the other hand a torch would have given away my position. Then again the slurping mud was doing just fine in that department.

I travelled mere metres in what seemed hours. The tunnel stunk of slimy green bones, wet earth that had never been ventilated, and musty centenarians who did their washing by hand and dried it on racks in underheated homes during the winter. It also began to smell of shit, sweat and urine. And something metallic, like blood.

I pulled out the Glock.

Fishbone Tanner was here, without a doubt. The smell conjured up an image of him. Gaunt. Pale with blemished skin. Roving eyes artificially lit. Tight jeans with a big bulge - permanently hard, permanently emitting his odour of cheap kinky sex. He even leaned on bars like you were supposed to have a conversation with his crotch rather than look him in the face.

I minced on, more slowly now, to reduce the noise of my movement. I covered little in what seemed a month of Muslim pork parties. Then a little more, until eventually I was cold, sick from the stench, and thoroughly pissed off. At that moment Fishbone Tanner came to the rescue, unintentionally of course. He struck a match and lit a

kerosene lamp. Very considerate of him. Unfortunately it lit me up as well.

At first he didn't see me, and I stood dead still hoping he wouldn't look down the tunnel. For a while he didn't, content to squat by the lamp staring into it. He looked wild, unclean, unshaven, inhuman. His clothes were in tatters and filthy. His hair uncombed. Face skeletal. His eyes so far back in his head you might have thought he'd been born blind. Around him was a litter of shapes I couldn't fathom - until I remembered the UN soldier and his body parts.

I glanced around me then, realized just how big the tunnel was. Wide enough for a four lane highway. Then I saw crude cave paintings in what looked like dried blood on the walls. Huge sex organs and impossible positions and mutilations of every kind. I shivered, but not from the cold.

Fishbone Tanner eventually looked up. And stared endlessly without saying a word. Finally I moved closer and asked him how he was. This disarming question seemed to confuse him, and he didn't reply. I moved closer still, asked what he was up to, as if addressing a neighbour fiddling in a tool box. Still he didn't reply. Just stared like a corpse. I moved closer, and closer, until I was on the verge of gagging.

And still he said nothing.

I soon got bored of this nonsense and kicked him in the head. He sprawled back amongst chopped chicken, donkey head, and what may have been fatty slices of camel hump. Maggots reflected light, gave the rotting meat enough life to make me puke. But I didn't. Instead I asked him what the hell he was doing down here amongst all this shit.

Much to my surprise he sat up and laughed like a demented goose. I wondered if others like him were lurking further in, beyond the arena of light. I decided to give us both some space, more to enable me to blast away if need be. I took a step back and fell on my ass.

Something resembling a waterseller's goat's bladder embraced one of my shoes, and my hand slid through mud that turned out to be fibrous. I was sitting in the remains of a great carnage, with dismembered corpses all around me. Freaked, I jumped up and shrieked unkindly at Fishbone. He

smiled and said nothing. Pissed off with this enigmatic behaviour, I promptly put a bullet in his leg. Only then did he respond by shrieking unkindly at me.

Now we seemed to have reached an understanding, I said, "What the fuck are doing down here you piece of shit?"

"Experimenting," came a quick reply. "What's it look like." He rocked back and forth on his rump, clutching his leg. "Now you've ruined it all."

"Experimenting on what?"

"In what - not on what."

"Don't get smart with me, just tell me what you're doing down here. It looks like Frankenstein's trash can in here. You turned into a cannibal?"

His eyes lit up and made me nervous. "That's right! You eat humans you transcend humanity. I want to reach the bottom of the pit and become something else. A different creature."

His voice was so manic there was no stopping him, which was fine by me. As long as he talked he wasn't up to mischief. He ranted on.

"When I was doing porn straight sex and kinky sex just got boring, and then so did real sicko sex, and then blood sex and snuff sex and getting those brainless drugged-up ugly bimbos to do anything I said, no matter how revolting. I even got one to eat her baby, you know that?"

I didn't, and I did my best not to believe him. "So what's the point you're failing to get to. I ain't got all day."

"She believed me when I said the baby would become part of her for the rest of her life. That she'd still have it but without having to worry about feeding it, changing its diaper, worrying about it getting into bad company when it grew up - all that shit. And she believed me - that's the power I had, and that's the power I'm increasing. Now do you understand?"

I had to admit I didn't. "You're sick, Fishbone. You're talking trash. You gone down the line of no return." I glanced around. "Look at all this. You're just a nut eating people. And look at you. Worse than an animal. You've probably got syphilis or a brain tumour."

"Oh no, I'm sane. I know what I'm doing. Look at this," and he yanked out his dick and shook it about.

I must confess it was an impressive length, but the colour was a little off-putting: black with veins of putrescent yellow and blotches of green. For a horrible moment I thought the thing would fly off and hit me in the eye, blinding me for life. It had more in common with a black sausage than a penis. And it was blunt.

"Looks pretty ugly to me. You got gangrene or something?"

"What you got? Why you here? What you want - sex? I got a cute little number for you," and he yelled down the other end of the tunnel, his voice echoing back like it'd been multi-tracked.

What I saw dumbfounded me. Five, six, maybe seven human-like creatures appeared on the periphery of the light, naked and yellow and covered in mud and gangrene and Christ knows what. They looked vaguely female, and as they entered the circle of light I first saw breasts, good old-fashioned breasts. Then I saw claws instead of hands; hoofs instead of feet; donkey heads and camel heads and more shit than my brain could handle. And they were for real.

They stopped when they reached Fishbone, and he rolled about having a good laugh at my expression. I noticed one of them had a donkey's penis hanging out her stomach, and another seemed to have a quiff of fingers running between her legs. Fishbone gave one of them a rub. It grew larger and I stepped back, levelling the Glock.

"Black magic?" I blurted.

"Black magic. White magic. Sex magic. Blood magic. Pain magic. We do it all down here. We're the new tribe. The new race. We spawn and soon we'll come collecting."

Collecting what? Instead I said, "What are these freaks? Specimens from a hospital's vivisection lab?" I hadn't heard of any kidnappings lately, but the transient part of the population was large enough to miss a few without noticing.

"These are my children," he replied. "Incest is our religion. Deformity our perfection. Unimagined sex our ambition. Let me show you."

I cancelled the performance and shot him in the other leg as he attempted to stand. He screamed like a vixen on a gridiron, and his wonderful children screamed with him. It was the most goddamn-awful sound I'd ever heard. So terrible I had to shoot some of them.

Fishbone Tanner shrieked and ranted in tongues until his voice broke up and he sounded like a toad with flu. He looked hatefully at me, and said, "What do you want with me?"

"King Hash sent me. You ripped him off his oil."

"Oil? That was no oil - that was hormone rooting liqueur."

I thought of hormone rooting powder for plant cuttings, and frowned.

"It's for use in grafting experiments," he continued. "Like sticking a donkey's head on a woman's body," and he clicked his fingers, but donkey Deb was on her back with a bullet in the chest. He turned when she didn't respond and looked forlornly at her body. Turning back he said: "You've deprived me of a good blow-jobber, you know that?"

I didn't, but was pleased to hear it.

He continued. "God, you're a jerk. I had a pint of the stuff - do you think King Hash would hire you to find me just because of a pint of poxy hash oil? Do you?"

"He never said how much you were carrying. Besides, it don't matter to me. I've been paid to do a job, and now I'm gonna do it, with pleasure because this freak show is - ." I couldn't think of a word to adequately describe it, so said something else instead. "You're so far off centre you're beyond sickness and insanity, and I've never liked you anyway, so finishing you off is gonna be a real pleasure."

"Pleasure?" And he laughed. "Come on, haven't you ever wondered what the ultimate blow-job would be like? The ultimate fuck? The ultimate fingering where you could virtually disappear? The ultimate everything all at once?"

"Yeah. It's called getting shot in the head," and before he spouted more bullshit I fired twice.

And that was the end of Fishbone Tanner, but not the rest of his children. One of them, a sort of cat creature, fell on all fours and licked up his blood. Next thing they were all at it, and when his blood ran out they started to feast on his flesh.

I must have been in shock, because I didn't do anything for a while. Just stood and watched them, their ripping and chewing filling the tunnel like I don't know what. Thankfully I came to my senses before they decided to feast on me, and emptied the rest of the magazine into them, the confines of the tunnel amplifying the gunfire to a cacophonous degree.

Silence would have returned had not one or two still been alive. I slipped in another magazine and cautiously checked the bodies. A couple more shots seemed to solve the problem, but then I came across another.

One of the creatures I thought had three breasts only had two. The third was something else, and once I'd prised it from its mother I wrapped it in what was left of Fishbone's old rags and stuffed it under my coat, where it snuggled comfortably in silence. Not wishing to linger I quickly retraced my steps back to the entrance, taking the kerosene lamp with me, hoping no more mutants were lurking about.

Getting out the tunnel was a natural high. The rain had stopped and the air was the purest imaginable. And much to my surprise the cab was still there, the driver asleep. I tossed the lamp away and woke him up. He grimaced as the stench clinging to my clothes rushed him. With a curt command I got in and he drove me back to the Chellah Hotel with all the windows open.

I told the management to burn my clothes immediately, which they did, soaking them in petrol and burning them at the back of the hotel garden. I watched from my room window, imagining the last vestiges of Fishbone Tanner burning with them, then spent an hour purifying myself under the shower wondering what the hell had been going on with him. Best left alone, I reckon. Too much of that weird shit and you don't know where you might end up.

I'm sitting on my bed now, dictating this for my own records. One day I'm gonna write my autobiography, but I've been saying that for twenty years now.

Beside me is the third breast. I've no idea what sex it is because babies all look the same to me. Baby birds that is. This one's got white down and cute little webbed hands instead of wings, with cute little fingers that end in claws. It's toes are cute, too. And it's got pretty little nose vents and deep blue eyes, and a mouth like a rosebud. Maybe it's a girl. In fact I got a hunch it is. Thing is, will she lay eggs, and will it be okay to eat them?