

# A WALLOW IN THE SHALLOWS

by  
**Max Blagg**



All last year, I'd been distracting myself from the endless indignities of the American administration by consuming great quantities of bread and olive oil, buckets of pasta with that red meat sauce on Carmine Street, lying about on couches reading books. *Now, in winter, I am discontent and plump as a eunuch in a harem.* "Portly" is my tailor's designation, "fat bastard" is my own. *And then, things begin to change.*

*Obama's in, elegance and intelligence return to American politics and I want to begin again, be thin again.* A free trip to a desert spa is offered, accepted, Trans Love Airways to California. I will forget the horrors of the past eight years, concentrate on the more pressing problem of my belly straining against my belt. *Shallow, moi?*

► The plane swoops in over the mountains and down into Palm Springs, ghosts of Sinatra and Sammy Davis dancing in the overheated air. A convertible awaits us, but it's too hot to put the top down. The 256-acre compound comprising Two Bunch Palms is set on a hill above the undistinguished town of Desert Hot Springs, a half-hour drive from the airport. Check in to a very comfortable room a few steps from the grotto at the centre of the complex. Each guest is issued a cotton bathrobe that he or she can then wear in any part of the campus for the remainder of their stay. At first, going to lunch and dinner in one's robe seems a mite too casual, but after a few days, the white piqué-cotton shorty (more elegant than the beige one also on offer) is my full-time garment, worn over Comfort-Waist® swim trunks. Shuffling around in a bathrobe and slippers is rather alarming at first (am I ill?), but this place is more a sexy sanatorium than a nursing home. In my mind, perfectly healthy but secretly tubercular patients wander the grounds and wallow in the pool between expensive "treatments" at the hands of the highly trained staff. The sex orgies at pre-war sanatoria are well documented (see Buddenbrooks by Thomas Mann and the hard-to-find Sodomites of Baden-Baden by Olaf Kirschwasser). Will history repeat itself?

The grotto has two pools, warmed by spring water flowing up from beneath the earth, the smaller one almost uncomfortably hot on first plunge, but quickly becoming a luscious liquid blanket. The soothing lithium flavours seep into your bones and begin to calm the pulsating urban mind. After half an hour I am positively amphibian, lying fully immersed, except for my snout, on a shallow ledge that drops off into 5ft depths. The fat helps me float like an inner tube. The tall palms provide excellent shade from the California sun. Thoughts turn from 21st-century fear to a reptilian tranquillity – a plump blimp floating in this warm lagoon, devoid of all thought, personal history temporarily erased.

In the movie *The Player* the principals escaped from LA and came to Two Bunch to unwind. Tim Robbins sat in an old-fashioned wooden mud-bath in the pool-house, looking extremely butch while sporting a lovely green-clay face mask. It was a look I wanted to recreate. But now, the twin mud-baths, like blue-tiled coffins, are located in a far corner of the grounds, presumably for privacy, but also perhaps for the odour that pervades the mud itself. The facial clay mask has been discontinued. What happened to that "vein of green clay soaked for millennia by mineral waters" promised in the press kit? Presumably they've stopped mining it or the vein ran out. So, it's just the mud. The texture of lumpy mud resembles what? Say it. What comes to mind? Melted chocolate? No. Cake mix? No. Cow manure? Yes, it has the texture of something dark green and gassy that you might step into in an unown meadow. The actual smell of the mud is not earthy, but rather an olfactory odour that teeters on the brink of faecal. It brings to mind a kaleidoscope of remembered scenes – the toilet dive in *Trainspotting*, the narrator's harrowing submersion in Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*. But I'm in it now, so try to relax, while sinking down into the gaseous mire. A very discreet assistant hovers around the doors of the chamber, in case of claustrophobia. I wiggle my feet and hands through the wet clinging matter, up to my neck in what is allegedly some kind of local peat excavated just down the hill somewhere. There are pockets of extreme heat, the piped-in water that is boiling any bacteria out of the mud before it can burrow up my tail-pipe. I have to believe the heat treatment works, because this scrofulous mixture would seem like a natural harbour for some bum-crawling parasite. I dial my arsehole to maximum closure and sink down, down, down, in a burning ring of slime. It's hard to meditate on higher things and after about 10

minutes I clamber out, looking like a New Guinea tribesman. Instead of a harsh hose down by a nubile assistant, I'm left to bake in the desert sun, while my muddy shell hardens. After broiling for 10 minutes I retreat to an insipid shower, removing hunks of dried peat from my body hair. That vegetal smell lingers, a leafy stink like a hippo's breath. Nothing for it but to soak until wrinkled in the grotto's pools, let those minerals wash out the muddy reek.

The pool is an amazing restorative and my prolonged soak is followed by an extraordinary massage by Elia, a woman renowned for her healing hands. Her magical touch restores my faith in the Two Bunch regime. All the masseuses on staff have this earth mother quality to them, buxom beautiful women radiating energy and health, ready to crush the toxins out of you, to nurse and caress you, change your grubby mental diaper. Recently pitched from my bicycle by an invisible pothole on the lumpy, bumpy streets of Greenwich Village, I had sustained a shoulder injury that was still tweaking me weeks later. Elia works on that and on my knotted neck. The tension of years, wadded up in there in toxic layers, dissolves under her powerful Mexican hands, the eyes in her fingertips finding every knot and spasm. I rise from her couch renewed, humming with an inner contentment, still girdled but quite unworried by material things such as 10lb of blubber.

The California sky is eternity blue, the surroundings serene. Roadrunners, those comical birds, roam the grounds, spearing lizards and insects with their powerful beaks, while the ravens who roost in the tall palms make the occasional sarcastic avian comment. Beneath the shady trees, the grotto and the humans lying in there, reading.

In a plastic Ziploc bag, I am carrying two books that have lain too long unread on my shelves: the *Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* and a marvellous collection of poems by an old Pole named Tadeusz Rosewicz (*New Poems*, Archipelago Books). The Ziploc keeps my literary powder dry and my choice of reading material might hopefully attract other pseudo-intellectuals. Alas, the selection I see others reading is most discouraging, with the exception of the tall blonde reading Sam Shepard stories. But she's with me. All around us, those fat paperbacks with the embossed lettering that you buy when you are trapped inside the gates of an airport and you've forgotten your Joe Conrad. There was Grisham's name in gold, and Harlan Coben's, and other word churners who make millions from hackneyed tales spread over 300 pages – alas, not a single slender tome of poetry or philosophy, not one louche producer poring over a hot script.

Then I snapped out of this desert reverie. My alarming pretentiousness swam into view, a bloated little floating lawn jockey like something out of a Ken Russell movie, judging others by their book covers. Is this lithium infusion washing my brain as well as my body? I need to swim this fat off. Yes, I'll swim off this fat. There's no mirth in girth. For the rest of our stay, I manage a few violent laps in the always-empty swimming pool each morning before heading to the free breakfast buffet. A croissant with that bacon and egg? Yes, I think I will; yes, I've had my morning swim, after all. Overall, I lose about 2lb. But, by the last day, the curve from man-tit to belt buckle is less steep, my pasty English skin is lightly covered by a golden California tan, the staff no longer whispers "Falstaff coming through!" as I wander the leafy pathways that lead to the grotto. I promise myself I will continue this harsh regime at my abandoned gym back in New York, pedalling furiously as Denton Welch as the snow falls on Manhattan, surrounded by slender geighs and milfy moms, exuding their own delightfully scented sweat as they tread the endless mills. Here endeth. ◀