

ESCAPE FROM MICTLÁN

WILL LORIMER

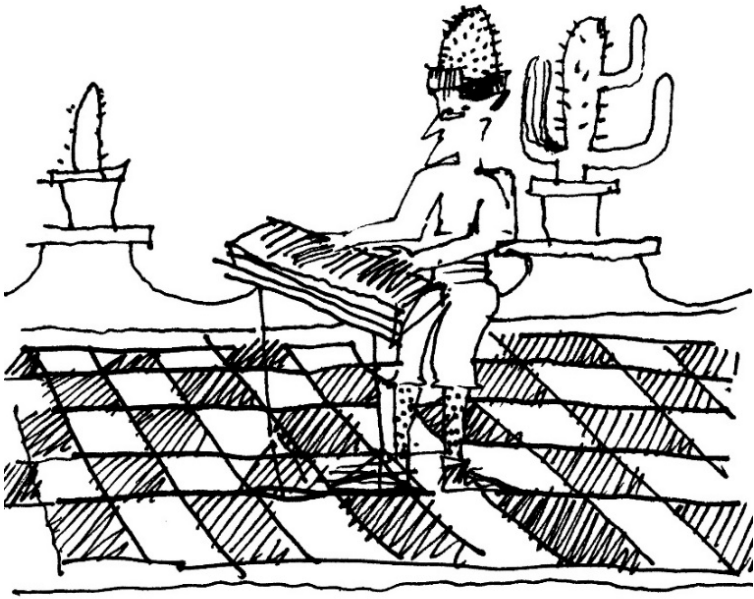
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1
WALPURGIS NIGHT
AT THE CANTINA

Thirteen o'clock, and everything had changed in the Town with no name. Come again? Since my departure certain facts had altered. Take that sign above the hotel door, repainted with a double-headed hawk and the legend, '*la Houff del Halcon*' - an unhappy marriage of Gothic and Spanish - and below that, '*Prop. R. Von Hapsburg*'. A familiar name, though I couldn't quite place it. The new owner, I supposed, standing in the open door, absurd as only aristos ever can be, clad in lederhosen britches and poncho, matching houndstooth tweed, a surfeit of pork pies in a florid face framed by bugger-lug sideburns almost but not quite meeting in a beard; native lads jumping to his barked commands, porting tottering stacks of boxes into the lit-up hotel.

At the street corner, where a steep lane ran down one side of the old stone building, tethered to the wall, nine or ten *burros* contentedly munching hay, their comingled breaths steaming in the cold night air. Looked like the party had just arrived. Not a good moment, I thought gloomily, not a good moment at all.

Mañana? And so soon? 'Hey, *gringo*¹, plenty room at this

¹ Gringo, sometimes used derogatively, derived either from *Grigo*, the Greek word for stranger, or from the Scottish song 'Green Grow the Rushes O', which was a favourite of the Texas Rangers, during the Mexican-US war 1846-1868, when Mexico lost a third of its territory to the U.S.

inn!' At least someone hadn't changed while I was away. Across the street, Cantina Joe, all polished smiles and practised bonhomie, waving us over. His hole-in-the-wall bar heaving this Walpurgis Night.

'Not a good idea,' I whispered, grabbing Jaime's arm as he started forwards.

'Is my risk,' Jaime replied, taking the opportunity to freshen up his lipstick. 'I do not need protecting in this town, my *generalismo*,' he said, hitching up his suspenders, and smoothing out the wrinkles of his lurex mini skirt.

An ambush of wolf whistles as he pushed through half doors, reminding me of Jaime's recent change of sex. That was my friend the *borracho* fuckers' slime-balls were ogling! Ten sombreros camped around a mariachi wearing cactus headgear, playing a *narcocorida polka* on a yamaha keyboard in the far corner. Rotating chairs, raising glasses, smacking lips like they already had the taste of her. Cherry kissers pouting back as Jaime returned the compliment to thunderous approval. This was a men-only *cantina*. Dangerous territory for a *muchacha* on the run - more so if that *muchacha* was Mexico's most notorious narco-trafficante with a five million peso reward on his head.

'Easy *hombres*!' Joe boomed over the heel stamping din. 'Enough!' he yelled, manoeuvring his great belly behind the narrow bar, pushing up denim shirt sleeves up his hairy arms, grinning like a busted honky-tonk, leaning on the counter. 'My friend, you look like hell,' he rasped. 'What you been doing?' He tilted his chin, 'Climbing the skirts of *las tres hermanitas*?'

'No. I mean, yes,' I muttered, slumping with exhaustion from our long climb up the mountain to the town.

‘What you do then? Rescue this *muchacha* from a *barrancha*?’ he grinned, rolling his ‘r’s like balls in a bowling alley.

‘A ravine is right!’ I snapped out of my slump. ‘Are you going to serve us or what? We’re bloody freezing.’

‘*Mezcal!*’

‘*Cómo no?*’ Jaime leant an arm on my shoulder. ‘I see you have my favourite.’ She pointed a red varnished finger nail. ‘Up there, on the top shelf, *el gusano del diablo*.’

‘So, you are *not* a total stranger,’ Joe said, reaching for an unlabelled brown bottle.

‘My friend,’ Jaime said, ‘I am born in these mountains.’

‘Where exactly?’ Joe replied, sliding two brimming glasses, sans worm, along the polished bar.

‘What’s with all the questions, Joe?’ I demanded, slopping *mezcal* in my haste to drink up and get the fuck out.

‘Is ok,’ Jaime murmured in my ear. ‘I can look after myself.’

‘I am only being friendly,’ Joe shrugged, reaching under the bar, for a cloth rather than the sawn-off shotgun I knew he kept there.

‘I tell you anyway, for I am feeling generous tonight,’ Jaime said, as Joe refilled my empty glass, ‘A little village, higher in the mountains. Maybe you even know it, Santa Domingo del Flores? I never forget, though it is a long time.’

‘Si, I know it well. I have a brother in that village,’ Joe nodded, mock serious. ‘But never there do I see there such a *bonita muchacha*.’

‘That is because I am wearing *pantalónés* the last time you visit.’ Jaime leaned closer. ‘Do not you recognise me *oncle*?’

‘Jaime!’ Joe gasped. ‘*¿Qué pasa?* Why you dressed like this?’

‘Not so loud,’ Jaime hissed, eyeing the angle-on *sombreros*.

'Is this real?' I growled, turning to look at both in turn. 'Joe, are you everyone's uncle round here?'

'You are in Mexico, my friend,' Joe grinned, hand on heart. 'Here big families *es* normal. I can count on a hundred and thirty-two in mine, brothers to second cousins. And all can count on me.' He hesitated. '*Es* why I have to talk with Jaime,' he shrugged, apologetically, '*En privado*.'

'Yea, sure,' I said, downing my second mezcal, breaking out in a sweat as I stood up. 'Plenty of room at the inn, huh?'

'Sit down, my foolish young friend.' Joe flapped a hand at my vacated barstool, 'I read the reports in newspapers las Malinchés bring me,' 'But only after *she* reads them first.' He thumbed to the lit-up hotel, outside. 'So, you can count on it, she knows about the reward. That bruja and Gomez,' he pincer thumb and forefinger, 'They are *this* close.' He chuckled. 'I tell you, cross the street and you lead my nephew straight into a trap.' Glancing round, he nodded at the sombreros in the corner, whispering amongst themselves. 'All Jaime's cousins,' he grinned, 'Even if he does not recognise them!' Drawing himself up, he thumped a fist on the counter. 'In my family *es* the same as brother. Blood so thick, *es* better than any superglue.'



2

A LIKELY TALE

So Jaime had a team. I was glad for him. A posse of cousins, good as brothers ... better even, since superglue had entered the equation. So where did that leave his generalísimo? Out in the cold, lingering by the Cantina's half doors watching the handshakes and backslapping within – turning to face my mother, the only family I had. All she had to offer, by way of affection, a one-way ticket on the long slide. No return? How many times had I told myself that? But I was returning. Not so much because I didn't have anywhere else to go; more like living the life preordained. My every moment already entered in a book. Hell? I was half way there already, hurtling hot rails. Way to go! But, perversely, maybe knowing I was foredoomed freed me? For then I was also ...

'Free, to do what the fuck I want.' Singing that to the narcocorrida polka playing in the cantina at my back, I stepped jauntily across the street, heading for the bruja's lair.

But wasn't I forgetting someone? Herr Fucking Hapsburg, occupying the doorway. That was my light he was blocking. A palm upraised, a pork pie so presented. 'I'm afraid the hotel is closed.'

Same old song, same old story. I was about to shoulder the porcine fuck aside, when Helga loomed at his back.

'Not to worry,' she breathed, nuzzling her chin on his shoulder, her great hands clasped over his barrel chest, rocking him back and forth. 'Quinton, this is my old pal Rudy from Brussels, he buys the hotel for me, is not that wunderba?'

'Wonderbra!' I recycled, realising my trip to the plain had all along, been a ploy. 'So,' I glared at him, 'Why'd you arrive by burro train,' I nodded at the donkeys, 'When it's so much easier to come by bus?'

'Excellent question,' Herr Rudy Fucking Hapsburg smiled patronisingly. 'That is because tomorrow, or rather later this morning, if all goes to plan,' ostentatiously, he glanced down at the luminous face of his soup plate sized Patek Philippe five-dials gold chronometer on his wrist, 'At five o'clock sharp, we set off on an expedition into uncharted territory.'

'Better we continue this inside,' Helga whispered, glancing to either side. 'The street it is so naked.'

Following the gross, disproportionately sized – her height and his girth – arm-in-arm lovers into the hotel lobby, I hung back as they turned the corridor towards the salon, reassured to find the old retainer was still propped against the wall. Maybe the shrivelled mummy in the rusting suit of Conquistador armour really was the corpse of my father, I reflected, pausing to adjust the helmet, oddly comforted by the empty sockets staring blindly back. His continued presence a good sign, I considered, suggesting that, even this Walpurgis Night, some things were not subject to change.

Then, when I got back to my room, the basket of peyote buttons was still on the bedside table where I left it, back in my room. Yes, with the altitude my toothache had returned with a vengeance, but not for long I reassured myself, packing a double dose of buttons between my gums and my teeth – for good measure pocketing a handful, so as not to be caught short later.

The salon was now decorated with bunting, as if for a homecoming. A blazing fire in the grate, and pride of place

above the mantelpiece, a gold-framed daguerreotype of a certain Maximillian. Even I knew of the last emperor of Mexico, archduke of Austria and dupe of Napoleon III, but there was something familiar about the face, those absurd sideburns, almost but not quite meeting in a beard. And then I made the connection – of course he was a Hapsburg, just like the Baron of Bacon, before me.

‘Excellent,’ Rudy snorted, turning to smile at Helga, sitting pretty on the sofa beside him. ‘What do I tell you?’ He patted her broad hand resting on his fat knee. ‘Never I am wrong with first impressions.’ Pink piggy eyes swivelled my way. ‘Quinton, you must join our quest.’

‘Quest?’ I grinned, standing with my back to the fire, ‘That implies a prize.’

‘You will share the spoils, that I promise.’ Rudy boomed.

‘So what’s it all about, this, um ... expedition?’

Rudy waved at the portrait. ‘The same purpose that brought my great-great uncle here,’ he faltered, ‘To his tragic death.’

‘Really?’ I said. ‘If you don’t mind me saying, I thought Maximillian was the dupe of Napoleon III and his ambitions for French global domination.’

‘The historians have it wrong.’ Rudy shook his head, ‘True, Napoleon ultimately put Maximillian on the eagle throne, but that was down to the plotting of Carlota and it gave Napoleon the excuse he needed to get rid of her. She hated sea voyages, you must understand, and wouldn’t have come otherwise.’

‘So,’ I said, taking the seat opposite, ‘What was your great uncle’s true reason?’

‘Ah!’ Rudy let out a splendid sigh. ‘Thereby hangs a tale. It all started when Maximillian opened the crypt of my ancestor

Rudolph, the holy Roman emperor, and discovered a very strange cache of bones sharing his tomb.’ He paused, for effect, ‘Rudolph was the first Hapsburg to win the purple robe, an honour, incidentally, that he shared with Julius Caesar. Hapsburg means “houff of the hawk”.’ His beady eyes twinkled. ‘You may have noticed the little sign outside I put above the door?’

‘Two heads are better than one eh?’ I smiled. ‘Beats having eyes at the back of your head.’

‘Yes, of course,’ Rudy muttered, distractedly.

‘When one sleeps, the other wakes.’ I went on. ‘As a logo for a hotel, I would have thought it’s a bit schizo. But perhaps that’s the point?’

Rudy turned again to Helga, impassive at his side. ‘Your friend may be perceptive.’ He waggled a finger. ‘But not perceptive enough.’

‘So what then am I missing?’ I held up a hand, ‘Let me guess, the hawk isn’t really a hawk. Yes, I can see it now,’ I said, staring at a point above Rudy’s left shoulder, ‘flapping leathery wings over las tres hermanitas, coming closer now, those two heads by a trick of distance, merging into one great ugly head with a cranial bump of cartilage at the back, giving the impression it is looking both ways. It’s a pterodactyl! Yes, beyond doubt, not just a large zopilote. That’s a vulture, you understand,’ I added, folding my arms.

I wasn’t prepared for the stunned silence as they exchanged glances; denial in hers.

‘Oh my friend,’ at last Rudy said. ‘You are my friend, you know. Until my monogram on the subject was privately circulated,’ he raised a fat finger, ‘But only, you understand, to the members of my club, no one else but Maximillian and

myself fits the pieces of the puzzle together.’ He sighed. ‘With your insight, I probably don’t have to tell you these the unmapped mountains are the last hiding place of the ancient pterodactyl.’

‘Indubitably,’ I nodded, keeping my face straight with an effort.

‘Of course, in their ignorance, the local Indians call the flying dinosaur the tzitzimime. Why?’

I shook my head to clear it, but I needn’t have bothered straining for an answer, for the Baron’s question was merely rhetorical.

‘Yes,’ he continued, ‘It most often seen in storms when lightning strikes the peaks. The Indians believe it is the double of thunder. And because it higher than any other bird, they also believe that the tzitzimime is the nagual of the highest god.’ He paused ponderously. ‘It is this aspect that for me makes the death of Maximilian more bearable.’

‘Pardon me, Baron,’ I interjected slyly, ‘Surely Maximilian was executed by firing squad at Quertaro?’

‘No,’ Rudy shook his flaccid jowls, ‘That was the story Presidenté Juarez put out to please Yankee public opinion.’

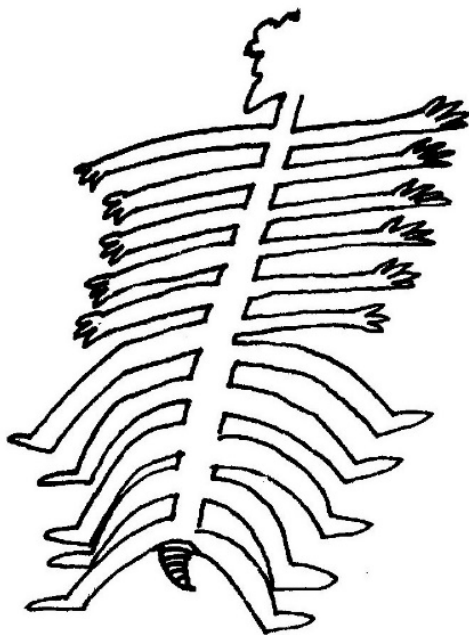
‘Really?’ I frowned, reaching into my hip pocket for a top-up of peyote, to better cogitate on this.

‘Yes,’ he nodded, ‘Juarez was an Indian and so understood the concept of honour, though as a Republican, obviously he fought on the wrong side. Maximilian was accorded the same rights as the ancient Toluca kings, who, by their custom, ruled for a year and a day. He was offered up to the sun with his many medals and staked out on a mountain ledge to wait for the nagual of Amomati, the highest god. Despite the drugs they gave him, it was a terrible death. That is the reason for

my quest. To rescue his precious bones.'

Rudy lofted that finger heavenwards. 'I have seen for myself the eyrie on the mountain they call la Tercer Hija de la Noché - the third daughter of night - on an inaccessible crag, close to the summit. He is there, I swear, along with all the lesser kings and their Indian treasure, gold enough to attract the nagual of the highest god, who, in the burning light of midday, confuses the gilded sacrifice for the glare of the sun. Enough, I promise to keep you in luxury for the rest of your life, if that is what you desire. For myself,' he sighed, laying a hand on his chest, 'The bones will be enough. Like Maximilian, I have no need for worldly wealth.'

Is that so, I thought, Herr Fucksburg, all right for you, with your ancestral crypt, and hedge funds bordering rolling hectares of your country pile, and your hereditary membership of an elite Brussels club, slurping golden shit till the cows come home. Some of us have to work for a living. Of course, I wasn't including myself, I'd never pay off the loans accrued in my student days, not without a degree or the inclination. But, before I flunked out, at least I had researched this shit about nagualism, naguals and doubles, and that was one subject in which the Baron of Bacon couldn't pull a blind on me.



3

THE MATING DANCE OF THE GIANT MILLIPEDE

*I*t was time – by the luminous dial of my fake Rolex – five in the morning, but still no sign of Herr Hapsburg. I'd awoken with a throbbing hard-on, perhaps brought about by all the bumping below my bed. When I looked down, two boys bolted for the door, giggling as they ran. Fully roused now, I wondered if somehow I had turned the wrong page and woken up in a Jean Austin novel, but no; this was no sassy Western, about lariats and lynching, this was seamy-side Mexico, those boys had been 'nekked', as Ms. Austin might have said, one hard on the heels of the other, not to mention two pairs of reddened buttocks. Rum goings-on obviously. I wondered what Herr Hapsburg's real purpose was for mounting his expedition? Those boys were barely into their teens. So why did he want me along? Perhaps he was afraid of the mountain Indians and discovery. Certainly a lot of cacti to hang his *cojones* on, out in purple sage badlands. And the worst of it was, even though I'd also come up with it myself, I'd almost believed the story about the pterodactyl. Though my annoyance was chiefly at myself, I resolved to tell the Belgian shite-eater where to stuff it, but only after I had caught up on some sleep.

I hadn't counted on a Malinché sister – which one? I didn't know – disturbing my repose, slipping into the bedroom when my back was turned. No lock on the door you see, so easy to come and go in that renamed hotel.