

## The moon of Tulum

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Massing along both sides of the road, tourists crowded under everything which could provide shade. They could not possibly be kept waiting any longer, so, feeling restless, the Mexican got out of the car, waving quickly to his companions. He deftly seized the pegs attached firmly to the pole and began climbing up slowly. In a couple of minutes he reached the top. Up there the scorching heat seemed to soften through the strokes of a cool wind. He was soon joined by his companions and no sooner had the fifth one set foot on the circle than, after a swift exchange of glances, the other four of them jumped headlong through the air. The ropes tightened, taking the strain, as jarring music started to play. Its notes rose as the ropes parted in a radial pattern.

The *voladores*<sup>1</sup> started spinning before the tourists' astonished eyes.

<sup>1</sup> "Voladores" perform a typical Mexican propitiatory ceremony where, tied to a rope, they launch themselves headlong into space from the top of twenty-odd-metre high pole, and they then go into a spin, gliding their way down to the ground,

Head first, they soared in daring circles, slowly gliding their way down to the ground. Suddenly there was a thud, a dreadful noise, and the pole swayed.

«Benicio has fallen» a little boy shouted, running about wildly. In next to no time, a small crowd gathered around him. He was quickly freed from the harness. He was still alive but was breathing with difficulty. Lying flat on his back, he looked at those blurred shapes, unable to find an explanation.

«He's still alive!» one of his companions shouted brightly.

«The rope frayed, softening his fall» another exclaimed, jumping quickly off the pole. One by one, the voladores came up closer to their friend, who stared at them in bewilderment.

«Do you feel all right, Benicio?»

«Mhm» he replied, shaking his head.

«Stand back, stand back, give him air.»

«What am I doing on the ground?» he asked all at once, struggling to pull himself to his feet. He slowly ventured a few steps but a wave of nausea forced him to stop. He tried hard to get his breath back. The air was as cold as ice and, every time he inhaled, it splintered his lungs.

«It's a miracle that you didn't break into two» burst out a friend of his in disbelief. The Mexican looked at him, unable to utter a reply.

«Sure you're all right?» the other went on, thoughtfully.

«Yes, yes» he spluttered as he once again tried tentatively to rise to his feet. His hips buckled and an overwhelming sense of numbness accompanied his first steps. Whispers of admiration spread among the crowd, which slowly began to part. Astonishment still dwelt in the on-lookers' eyes: Benicio Ramires, son of Pedro, one of the most famous voladores of the Confederation.

«Just like his father» a companion exclaimed, patting him on the shoulder.

«Somebody up there loves you» another added. Benicio thanked

accompanied by the notes of flutes.

him, nodding. With his head still buzzing, he made his way mechanically towards the temples. The scorching heat did not seem to let up and the sweat was pouring off his cheeks. With lumbering steps, he started to move forward among the austere ruins of the Mayas, breathing in their charm. It was so strange a thing, indeed, that every time he walked past them, he always felt the same sensation, the same enthralling mystery.

He stopped to rest near a crag bordering on the shore, then climbed slowly down the path, followed by the iguanas' glassy glares. The light was intensely bright and his eyes narrowed into slits but he could still make out the sea. It was vivid and clear blue, restless on the shore, but smooth along the edges, within a space in tones of cobalt. Enraptured by its sound, he dragged himself a bit further, stopping in front of the backwash which was ebbing and flowing slowly. A strange drowsiness numbed his mind, along with the nausea relentlessly troubling him.

With the sand crumbling under his feet, he stood watching the sea. The ocean soothed his pain, opening its fresh arms wide. Heartened, he suddenly took off his shirt and plunged in. All at once the sea clasped him tightly, swamping him with foam and sound. He swam with powerful strokes to where the heart of the sea pulsed blue, and the waves became longer and longer. Guided by his instinct, little by little, unawares, he found himself in the remotest spot of the sea. The pain was gone, caressed by a cool wind and, appeased, he stopped to rest for a while. His face upwards, he expanded hugely into the blue immensity of the sky, then he suddenly turned his head and lost sight of everything. A shudder shot up his back, amplifying his loneliness. He had never gone so far out. Instinctively he flung his arms at the water, smacking it over and over again, yet to no avail. The air had grown heavy and no birds circled in the sky.

Nobody ever saw him come back again, neither did the iguanas, which, at the first reflections of sunset, had left the shore. Swallowed up by silence, he struggled back, but cramps thwarted him. Eventually,

his limbs benumbed, he let himself float on his back, relying on the sea's goodness.

«The ocean is my brother» he murmured softly, as the sky turned into a canopy studded with stars. The air had grown clearer as shivers escalated up his back. Exhausted, in an attempt to ease the tension, he turned his eyes to that shimmering cosmic sand which had enchanted him so many times. He knew the sea very well, but he also knew it could turn cruel - but now he could not possibly think about such things.

«Keep calm» he kept murmuring, trying to pluck up courage, «sooner or later someone will surely come and look for you.» Plunged into darkness, he could see the moon stretching out its arms. The ocean was ready to give it space by reflecting its face in thousands of small conceited mirrors. In that ethereal, silver trail, his body was cradled by the current.

«It may push me into the gulf or sweep me further out to sea inexorably» he thought, hoping to catch sight of a light. With his eyes whitened by the moon, he strove in vain to pierce the night. Already tired, his pupils needed a rest and exhaustion scaled his thoughts. Suddenly, thinking he heard voices, he turned round instinctively.

«Come here, Benicio, the *mariachis*<sup>2</sup> are here» his grandmother exclaimed as a gleeful piece of music filled him. «*Cielito lindo!*» he burst out in astonishment, and the sea seemed to be dancing to that recollection, then a sudden thud made him startle. Hesitating, he looked around, unable to see anything. The night breeze was combing the smooth surface of the sea, tenderly tilling its hair.

«I must keep my wits about me» he burst out, bending his body with a twist of the back.

Resolutely he clenched his swollen fingers, brandishing them at his fate. «What the hell was it?» he asked himself, thoughtfully. He scanned the sea for a long time, straining his eyes still more. The thought of not being alone any longer scared him. Seized with grow-

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<sup>2</sup> Type of musical group originally from Mexico.

ing anxiety, he began kicking out at the water but suddenly, worn out, his legs yielded.

For some minutes he could not hear any sounds, despite the fact that his hearing had amplified to a great extent. He could sense the breath of the wave slowly spreading across the surface. He fell, un-awares, into a deep fleeting sleep full of light and fragile silence. Seconds swelled into ages as his mind seemed to unwind for a moment but, abruptly, the hammock vibrated. In a reflex action, he clutched hold of the ropes, narrowly avoiding a fall.

«Wake up, dad, or you'll be late!» his son exclaimed, smiling, as he softly pushed the rings. Dazed, Benicio looked at him while a whisker of the moon appeared in the sky.

«Manolito, what time is it?» he burst out, confused.

«A quarter to three.»

«Damn it, it's very late.»

Running, he made a dart for the old wardrobe and took his clothes out. Hastily he slipped them on nervously and, determined, reached his old beetle car. He tried hard again and again to get the engine started, till it eventually began to rumble. He snapped the car door shut, and pulled out into the main road at high speed.

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fore starting to climb, he stopped and started examining the rope.

«Come on, what are you waiting for» his companion urged. The volador paid no attention. Scrupulously he scanned every single inch of the rope till he spotted a thin rent in it. Hesitantly he clasped it and suddenly slumped to the ground. The rope soon stretched, snapping abruptly. Benicio fell down, rolling on the sand repeatedly. His limbs aching, he rose to his feet slowly as a smirk crept gradually over his face.

«How the hell did you know?» his companion shouted in disbelief, looking at the frayed ends of rope. The Mexican stared at him, unable to utter a word. He stopped in silence and looked at the moon, which was timidly hiding behind the temples. He recalled the ancient myths, the stunning presages which Maya priests could read into its appearance, and everything suddenly became clear. With benevolent eyes, he continued following the thin crescent of the moon which whitened the early afternoon sky. He stood there for a while, staring, and then, smiling sweetly at the moon, he thanked it with a nod.