

Beyond the Volcano

It was some time before the Consul realised he was no longer in the Farolito, time which had stretched and shrunk like wet leather drying on a horse's girth, the horse so dramatically freed by himself in some time ago, mescal time in all probability yet beyond doubt some other time. A dead dog lay still beside him, quite sure of it's future on this propitious slow ledge some way below the barranca's rim and despite the mescal's glib assertions, on it's very own remarkable day, a day yet being celebrated with torch and candle, Death had overlooked the Consul.

Of course there was pain: not the excited anticipating pain of Yvonne's departure, a pain exquisite enough to cultivate sparingly, to set aside as a reserve against enjoyment, like the bottle of tequila cached deep inside the bougainvillea's labyrinthine roots, roots abstractly penetrating Mr Quincey's bizarrely coiffeured, manicured, set aside and distressingly precise garden, nor the disembodied ephemera of Hugh's presence with it's overtone's of brotherly hate, but a solid pain, the honest life giving pain of a bullet wound. It wasn't serious; for in the Farolito mescal had taken it's toll on marksman and target alike, unsteady aim like a pricking conscience at the front, a front now returning to Western Europe heavy with the hopes of a world tiring of slaughter, as he himself had tired so quickly, on a boat, some time ago. Vermilion lake advanced darkly across the soiled linen of his clothes from the flesh wound in his side and he lay for a while longer, bleeding gently into this auspicious night.

And as he lay, more time flowed through the barranca, patient and undemanding as above the sky darkened and then became lighter, hurrying scattered diamond stars away to morning and the Consul forced himself erect with an effort that recalled frequent Taskerson episodes, indeed he remembered a similar occasion when one of the boys had got in the way of some pellets at a duck shoot, and how there had been no time for the indulgence of pain, only the dismissive bravery of manliness.

' I will,' the Consul spoke firmly in the direction of the Pleiades, ' no, I *must* find Hugh.'

Beside him the dead dog bled in mute affirmation of the Consul's recently announced crusade, or was it jihad, a search and quest certainly and one of great importance perhaps even religious significance to the Consul; but holy or wholesome? Clearly the dog was unsure and it mattered not for the Consul was leaving that last slow ledge on the barranca's rim, leaving albeit inadvertently as his rash attempt to stand initiated a slow inexorable slide down through the mud and vegetation lining the ravine. It was an unpleasant descent, characterized by a loss of dignity rather than by further injury, and in due course beneath wheeling stars far already from the Farolito's garden of delights and alive, the Consul came to rest on the floor of the barranca.

' Well, my pleasure, no no I can't stop you see...you see,' the Consul spoke casually eyes averted like a shy lover, to a tortured vine writhing along the bed of the ravine, it's obscene dark dark green leaves, glossy with decay, spread outwards in entreaty, dead fingered roots sank desperately into the barranca's sodden floor, ' and forgive my appearance, a short fall you see, last night...was it last night, so very perfectamente borascimento...I am going to see Hugh, you know of him naturally, and has he been this way? A cantina perhaps...nearby, why mescal por favor...you would say wouldn't you.'

Overhead in lightening skies invisible beneath the ravine's canopy, huge birds began their daily ascent, circling and soaring immaculately upwards in noble elevation through early clouds gossamer against a pale blue dome. Down in the barranca, the Consul shrugged, hands raised...

' Of course, oh of course yes I most certainly understand and do forgive me, mea culpe excusing my unforgiveable shabbiness, for I must go...it's Hugh you see, damn him, for I must find Hugh.'

A slight stagger as Quahnahuac's morning bell's plangent tone echoed faintly down the ravine, muted through wreaths of mist rising out of the dark and unwholesomely fecund ravine bed and the Consul, tentatively balancing resignation and the forbidden siren delights of anticipation, having consigned guilt at his own improbable survival to some more propitious occasion, the

finding of a temporarily forgotten bottle in some dark corner of the garden would surely be one such, turned uphill to began his final ascent.

" Good day, yes yes...is Hugh here...I must find him you know, good day...and why, Yvonne of course...I have something for her...whilst Hugh is...mescal por favor..."

The Consul wavered slightly before the bar...though in any real sense it was scarcely that, more splintered trestle than the dark, bas relief carved, polished mahogany, Brazilian naturally, and burnished here and there on it's lubricious curves by the lambent glow from generously trimmed oil lamps, that fronted the cocktail lounge of that pub they once used, the Consul forced a slow and difficult recall from some distant time, yes that was it, scent of malt and hops from the brewery, and smoke, not the rounded expansive flavours of a fine post prandial cigar, but the bitter-thin acrid reek of cheap cigarettes, the Victoria Hotel, close by that local brewers in Leeds, and a place oft visited by the Taskersons on their sporadic yet always eventful forays into town...the barranca an elusive and not unpleasant memory, a relief from some by now vague sense of unease, and forced himself erect; it was quiet, and in dark corners rheumy eyes observed the crimson lake stains spreading ambitiously across his distressed linen shirt and jacket; around the edges blood was already beginning to dry, dark, burnt almost black in the cantina's inadequate guttering, smoky light. Silence had fallen, sharp and brittle, as the Consul rattled erratically through the thinning beaded curtain cutting off the bar from an aching actinic brightness flaying the dusted streets outside; a curling poster, lost in time and bold and blocky in revolutionary drab, emotive in it's formulaic desperation, ragged here and there, hung loosely behind the bar, waiting for a sympathetic draught to bring it to life, beneath it two desiccated fowl scratched and pecked hopelessly in the dust at the foot of the wall; it was the only sound.

One-eye manning the trestle deftly produced mescal, house mescal, the bottle garishly decorated with a fading label reluctantly proclaiming in florid red letters 'Mescal de la Casa' the house spirit, haunted and efficacious brew, the Consul's faithless and unforgiving consort, and blew a miasmal cloud of acrid

smoke across the tortured knotted boards towards the Consul, who smiled once more repeating his daily mantra, staff and when the occasion required his perennial opening gambit, a timeless echo howling down the cloistered halls of desperation...

" Indeed yes, I see you have mescal...you haven't seen Hugh you say, not today of course...and *cerveza* also I think, good for you as I'm sure you know, I am, of course practically on the wagon now. I was only saying to Hugh...mescal, yes...mescal."

The Consul reached with great deliberation for the glass of mescal, pushing aside more ectoplasmic skeins of one-eye's smoke, and time passed, accompanied by papery rustling from beneath the trestle, as the Consul's hand moved ever closer to the patient spirit; to the Consul, his swift and rapid dispatch of the wormwood only served to confirm his relative sobriety, and he spilled very little, although almost five minutes had inched by on the cantina's only clock before he finally grasped the nettle.

One-eye replaced the mescal before the Consul had finished his challenge; thus presenting him with a fresh dilemma, and with glorious prestidigitation palmed the empty glass and behold, the Consul was left unsure, poised on the edge of a beckoning drop, as indeed he had been a short time before, gazing at compulsive soaring dark specks in an azure dome, from the relative comfort of his propitious ledge, shared with a lifeless dog, on the barranca's clinging sides; he felt vines tugging around his legs and looked down, focussing with intent on the undulating floor of the cantina, and saw one of the chickens pecking at his linen trousers.

"Mescal Senor?"

A simple request and in the cantina's sharp and gamey air, silence ebbed and flowed, seeking attention, whilst from dark corners, across faded red plastic table tops and brittle, chipped ashtrays, dark eyes had followed the last voyage of the Consul's mescal, a passage as fraught as any on the White Sea in storm or calm, and now waited disinterestedly for the next turn of the screw, timeless and patient as the Consul's time ebbed and flowed once more, as indeed it had done earlier in the barranca and it seemed to the rapidly sobering Consul, that in his careful balancing of mescal and beer, not

forgetting of course the less palatable, but none the less efficacious, strychnine, an equilibrium had been reached, with satisfying results...a dog barked once, a pitiful bitter snap, by the door...which would enable the day to progress and in the end, why who knows, certainly not the Consul himself, even at this moment having decided...to find Hugh...

“Si, mescal por favor, and cerveza, yes a beer I think...have you seen Hugh, by the way?”

2

'All buses will carry the dead'

The Consul was absolutely certain that this was so, but equally certain that he had no idea at all what the foundation for this certainty was; one thing was abundantly clear, he was no longer in the cantina. He found himself momentarily at a loss for words; 'one eyes' brief if labyrinthine farewell, goodbye, God be with you, adieu drop in time hovered on the edge of recall and his mind clutched erratically, with little effect at the remnants, a phantasmagorical lexicon of meaningless misshapes, constantly elusive and well beyond the Consul's current grasp. Fortuitously and no less erratically the bus hit an abyssal pothole on the stricken road, and it's very fabric rubbed shoulders briefly with extinction; it proved the stimulus the Consul had unknowingly been seeking...

“ all buses will carry the dead” One-eye's cheroot smoked breath seared the Consul's blank eyes, bleak fish on the slab, end of life gaze, and he pried the finally empty mescal glass from the Consul's firm, desperate, rigor grip, “ you must take the bus Senor, he did, Hugh did, you must.”

... as the ageing charabanc righted itself, twitching it's rear coquettishly, straightened, hesitated, shimmied again, cascading dust and more solid fragments of it's fragile interior and awakening the captive soon to be slaughtered scrawny chicken in it's cage on the rear seats...which turned a black and glinting beady eye, uncomfortably reptilian, towards the Consul, who, suddenly pricked, answered the mute inquiry with the eternal question,

unsolved with Time's implacable transit, echoing down sentient centuries, unappetising and unpalatable...

"...where are these dead, my dead...excuse me, por favor, our dead...and..." the Consul deflated, sinking to his knees, hands clutching fiercely at the blackened blood stain on his linen jacket, and in the corner of one eye a tear waited patiently...

"...and..." the word stuck like ground glass in his throat, tearing, lacerating like broken ice, and still he tried to speak it, hands blindly clutching at this ephemera, bright daylight under Mexico's relentless sun phantasmagoria, finally it broke free...

"...Yvonne...is she here, I do so love her you know and of course she...a coffin hers perhaps, and naturally I will accompany it and her...my quite dearest Yvonne, whilst Hugh...have you seen Hugh by the way..."

In a fleeting moment of aching lucidity, the Consul raised his head and caught the chicken's eye; whilst outside in a blistering high noon, the bus swayed by cornfields, fringing dust devils that nodded, acknowledging the Consul's plaintiff request; it returned his gaze with a gimlet glare, pecking disinterestedly amongst the detritus on the floor of the cage.

And in the dry and stricken heat of the buses floor, amidst and ignored by five peons and the chicken, unseeing eyes glazed wide open and right hand resting a few inches from the coffin lying along the tortured floor behind the back seat, a plain simple wooden box, dovetails springing in the midday heat, being transported, by bus of course, and in complete and total accord with current Government protocol, the Consul addressed his company once more...

"I love her, oh yes and the letters you understand...still love her...despite Hugh...have you seen him...Yvonne, dearest Yvonne..."

...and fell deeply asleep.

3

Hugh stopped in the doorway; brightness pressing from the cluttered streets behind, dust whirled in the gutters and a dry faecal stench rose on the breeze;

eyes stretching into the cantina's spectral gloom, despite himself a name flared, incongruous, unbidden, unwelcome and irresistibly attractive, would it ever fade, brazen hues melting from delirium's sunset, a chicken pecked irritably along the base of a grey and shrunken trestle; Farolito.

It was dark, draining, succubus shadow decked with bright eyes here and there, as Hugh stepped beyond the threshold, right hand dropping down, lightly caressing the revolver's stock, nestling in the blackened holster, a trophy from that momentous storming of the prison ship SS Uruguay in Barcelona harbour, amidst a thousand beating hearts with empty hands desperate for weapons, on that wild July night in '36, when innocence and a cause passionel walked hand in hand. Eyes dipped. Amid silence only split by the dry pecking of the fowl's beak, dipping arhythmically amongst the cantina's warped and fissured floor, Hugh stood to the bar, trestle, counter and final destination.

" Buenos Dias Senior, mescal?"

Hugh smiled;

" Cerveza por favor. Small beer."

Gimlet eyes sparked in the shadows and it was not well received, whilst silence clamoured for attention, a pale foreigner flaccid amidst this brash lubricity, Hugh wondered...

"Letters. My brother left some letters here. The Consul. You know him. Perhaps you took the letters..." Hugh paused, "...for safe keeping. He could be, if occasionally *borascimento*, forgetful. No mescal, cerveza por favor, cerveza..." as if somehow repeating the one word could erase the other, knowing the Consul's wretched, unholy and entirely inescapable relationship, like so many others destructively symbiotic and hellbound, with the house spirit, "...poco cerveza."

He looked away from the bar and dark unwholesome pleasure opened it's arms on the edge of cloying, tumescent shadows fringing the cantina; voices, soft sirens from the Second Circle, offered release or damnation and conscious of his own enduring weakness, Hugh returned his gaze to the bar.

Two glasses had appeared, whilst Hugh had been resisting one temptation.

" Cerveza Senior...and for him you say was your Brother...mescal."

