

# *The Boy Who Waterskied To Forever*

by **JAMES TIPTREE, Jr.**

*Her depths are not all hated,  
Joyous her minions move;  
And human still may trade a soul  
For her unhuman love.  
And the one she has accepted  
May finish out his race  
Through portals unsuspected  
To another time and place.*

This happened the year the coast road finally came through.

For eight years, a trail cut by *machete* and strewn with piano-sized rocks had run behind the coco ranch and ended at the *boca*, the inlet from lagoon to sea. Now the Yucatecan government had bridged the *boca* and pushed a one-lane cut all the way south to the fishing colony at Pajaros lighthouse. It was an evil deed.

Every evening now the big refrigerator trucks ground past, going south; in the small hours before dawn they came groaning back, loaded to the axles with illegal seafood – rare and delicious fish and stone crabs, netted on the last spawning grounds of the bay for the greedy stomachs of the tourists a hundred miles north at the new resort of Cancún. Small comfort that this traffic would not last long, for its end would mean that those species had been fished to extinction. Nightfall for another wild beauty.

But there was a tiny, selfish compensation: the new road did make it possible for an elderly bicycling *gringo* to reach a hitherto-inaccessible small bay. It was a magical, untouched diving paradise that I spotted from

the air. Ferocious reefs barred it from the sea, and once-impenetrable mangrove swamps guarded it from the land. Twice this year I had cycled to the vicinity, laboriously hidden my wheel to avoid leaving tracks, and fought my way to shore, guided by the sound of the sea. But each time I had come too late to take more than a taste of Eden before I had to start my exhausting trek back to the *rancho*.

This day I started early enough. The sun stood just past noon when I stood on the rocky verge of the enchanting little cove. The water was four meters of crystal, revealing a rich undersea world. Three pink spoonbills stared incuriously from the far side as I shucked off shirt and pants, and a bananaquit investigated my shoes. There was no trace of other visitors or alien paths, and the snorkel gear I had hidden there last trip was all intact. I checked the papers and *dinero* already in their waterproof pouch on my belt and slipped off the rocks into the warm Caribbean with great delight: here was a place where snorkeling was the perfect way to go, where I could forget that age had put scuba dives forever beyond my strength.

Those first hours fled like moments; the reality was even finer than the promise. I visited first my few familiar spots: the ledge where two enormous black angelfish had set up housekeeping – and there they were, sweeping flat to the pale sand as my shadow came over, rolling their big eyes in what seemed like an imploring plea, but was doubtless considered menacing by their natural enemies. Then there were the tiny clouds of color rising from where the brilliant parrotfish munched and chewed a rock. And the white sand floor, which suddenly erupted into a four-foot stingray, sailing off to halt in frozen invisibility a few yards away. Obviously no one had ever used a spear gun here.

Then I began to explore, letting the gentle swells carry me over perfect lace-coral fields, dazzled by neon-blue angels, admiring the impossible pink of the ill-named and delectable hogfish – another proof, if one were needed, that no one had yet shot over this reef. Clouds of blue-headed wrasse were feeding in my shadow: I paused for a long inspection, hoping to catch sight of one of the juvenile females, who mate in schools, in the phase of growing into a much larger, red-and-yellow, monogamous male. Until recently these two forms had been considered separate species, and I never see them without wondering what our own social system would be like had humans evolved with this trait.

Imagine our world, if all the senior males, the O.J. Simpsons, the Walter Cronkites and Leonid Brezhnevs, had started out as little girls and young mothers? Just in time, I remembered not to chuckle and choke myself.

Never had the underwater world been more ravishing; I flippered lazily

through turquoise and liquid air, noting that the light was now tinged with faint gold. Even the evil head of a moray eel protruding from its hole in the reef was a green-gold heraldic emblem of villainy, and the enormous grouper stupidly eyeing me from a half-spear shot away was crusted with dark jewels.

The sea was so calm that I decided to cross the inner reef and have a look at the coral heads where the so-called sleeping sharks occasionally hide. I had acquired companions; three young barracudas were circling me, disappearing for moments only to rejoin me from a new angle, their mouths as usual open in toothy gapes. I had taken the normal precaution of removing all shiny gear, even to my medical-plaque chain, but one large fellow was showing so much interest in my diving watch that I debated hiding it in my suit. The local barracudas are said to be harmless – I had been instructed, when meeting one nose-to-nose under water, to shout “Boo!” But I had found this difficult, especially in a snorkel mask. My sound came out as a pallid “Urk!” I found a pass in the inner reef and flippered through, momentarily losing my carnivorous friends. The in-shore bay was an uninteresting grass-plain relieved here and there by a giant orange starfish, a flotilla of yellow-tails, or a huge live conch. It was the isolated brain-coral heads which interested me. I cruised along up-current; the old learn quickly to start their journeys upwind or uphill, so that nature will help them home. What I was looking for was a large pile with a cave at its base in which a sleeper shark might lie.

#### A NOTE ABOUT THE MAYAS OF THE QUINTANA ROO

The Quintana Roo – pronounced Keen-TAH-nah Row – is a real and very strange place: The ‘wild’ Easternmost shore of the Yucatan Peninsula, officially, but not psychologically a part of Mexico. A diary of life on its shores could often be taken for a log of life on an alien planet.

For example, few people know that the millions-strong Maya peoples quite recently rose and fought bloodily for their independence, principally against Mexico. They were not totally defeated; the Maya wars ended with a negotiated truce only in 1935. (The Secretary of the Maya Annie died the year of my first visit.) Mexico promptly divided the peninsula into the provinces of Campeche, Yucatan, and the Territory of Quintana Roo, which includes Cozumel. On that coast there are today (1980) Maya villages who still exercise their treaty rights of remaining unassimilated and ‘modernized’. They are visited only rarely, and by invitation. The governor of Cozumel, a friend of mine, last year paid such a visit; he went

alone and for the last 16 miles, along an archaic *sac bé*, on foot. It is difficult for those afflicted by Mayaphilia to shut off, but perhaps the Good Editor will allow two more points: First, Mayas, the most oriental of all native American Indians, are as different from the oft-conquered, tribally-mixed, tourist-acclimated Indians you meet in Mainland Mexico as an unreconstructed Highland Scot is from a cockney of London. And second, 99 percent of the substance of the yarns that follow is simple fact... and I could not swear that what seems fictional was not recounted to me by the four-thousand-year old voices that murmur still in the nights of the Quintana Roo.

Most were too small, so I swam out further, toward the second reef. From here I could just glimpse the shining white dot above the hazy southern coastline which was the white tower of Tuloom, high on its cliff. Tuloom is our chief local *ruina*, a mediocre remnant of greatness whose claims to fame are its glorious site and one strange carving, unique in all Yucatan, which may – or may not – concern this tale.

By the center of the second reef I spotted exactly what I was looking for: It was perfect – great rounded boulders, with a big dim cave or tunnel at the base like those where I had encountered the sleepers in younger days, before my trick ear took the deeper dives away. This one was only about five meters down. Peering, I was almost sure that the sun was lighting something rounded and amber-tan floating in the cave. Moreover, my attendant barracudas seemed to have found business elsewhere. Could I dive down and look?

Debating, I took off my mask to clean it and noticed that the sun was now definitely slanting down. There was not much time for the long return. Dilemma: I longed mightily to look at that shark, and I longed mightily not to. It was not merely the pain I would suffer in my ear – to tell the truth, it was a lonesome place and time, if this happened to be shark wake-up hour. But – that gnawing question of my life – was I needlessly afraid? Was I, er, chicken?

As I dithered, two things occurred almost at once. The first was auditory – I heard the beat of a boat's motor around the point. This drove the shark from my mind – there is no shame in taking refuge from the occasional maniac who tears full speed along the inner reef to make time, trusting to the god of machismo that he won't hit a coral head. Many of them also enjoy making swimmers dive for their lives. I paddled as fast as

I could go for the white water of the middle reef, feeling like a wheelchair driver caught on the Indianapolis raceway.

Here I met with the second, larger event: At the base of the big reef was something long and moving. The water was roiled, and at first I thought I was seeing some unearthly endless centipede, walking south. Then a clear interval showed me what it was – *langustas*, the tropic lobsters – an enormous unending file of them, all sizes and ages, following each other along the base of the reef. I was looking upon a recently discovered mystery – the Migration of the Lobsters, coming from God knew where, en route to an equally unknown destination, upon which few people have ever set eyes.

I stared, counting to the hundreds, before I came out of my trance to realize that no rooster-tailed sportscraft had appeared. In fact, now I could hear clearer, it was not a speedboat at all, but the throbbing of a much larger craft moving along the outermost reef. Correct: around the point was coming the ramshackle box-form of a *langustera* – a lobster boat – her white paint looking deceptively smart in the afternoon sun, and her old motor setting up an out of synch cacophony. She was towing a pair of dinghies.

The uproar ceased as she came opposite me by the far reef; there was a rattle of anchor-chain, and the dinghies were double-manned and cutting along side the reef with unusual speed. As the nearest anchored, a figure in bright red shorts stood up and tossed his long hair before masking up. Unmistakable.

“Lorenzo! Lorenzo Canseco! Qué tal?”

Typically, he gave me an offhand wave; he had long since spotted and identified me. Lorenzo was one of our local diving superstars, which meant that the *langustera* was the *Angélique*. I knew her captain well.

But there was less than the usual gaiety to Lorenzo’s wave, and he was in the water fast and businesslike. The other diver, whom I hadn’t seen clearly, was already in and working. The far boat was empty too. All four divers were searching the outer reef and the space between, normally a source.

I looked down at my procession of strange little beings. So long as no one crossed the middle reef in the right spot they were safe.

I swam over to Lorenzo’s dinghy, a plan forming in my mind. The other diver was just coming up to boat two undersized *langustas* and a respectable grouper. To my surprise, it was my friend the owner-captain himself, an emaciated gold-tanned figure, with white hair and a

remarkably distinguished white hairline mustache.

“*Don Manuel! Se acuerde de su viejo amigo?*”

My Spanish has been called *unicamente desastroso*; it was possibly that, rather than my appearance, which enabled him to greet me with warmth. Then he rested his elbows on the gunwales, and I saw that he was quite tired. This probably meant that he had engaged in exertions that would have hospitalized most gringos.

“How goes it?”

Captain Manuel shook his white head, baring his teeth in a combined grimace of despair, fatalism, and hate. He seemed content to chat a moment while he rested. So I asked him more.

He had, it seemed, been all the way to Punta Rosa, starting before light.

“Good catch, I hope?” (But I had already noticed that the *Angelique* was riding much too high in the water.)

Manuel made an untranslatable remark, the essence of which was that one Carlos Negron *and* his new boat could have sexual congress with the devil. It seemed that Carlos had outrun him down the entire route, preempting all the choicest spots, and at one point even side-swiping Manuel’s dinghy.

“The irony of it is, Carlos doesn’t even know where to fish. He is new. But he hired that *loco* Arturo whom I fired for drunkenness, may the devil screw them both. After all I put up with from Arturo, teaching him...”

“A bad trip. I am grieved.”

He stared somberly at the *Angélique*, his thin face a stoic mask.

“Worse than that. I have not made even the diesel bill. And I had to place so much hope on this trip.”

“There is need?”

He tossed his white hair back proudly; I could see him considering scornfully what a gringo could know of need. But our long friendship prevailed.

“There is need,” he said simply. Nodding his head. “*Muchos dificultades à la casa. Mi nina* – my little girl, and my wife, both they are sick. They require *specialistos*, you understand. *Muy pronto*. With the government nothing can be done.”

During this interchange the vision of my helpless lobsters, streaming by two hundred meters inshore, had been rising unwelcomely behind my

eyes. Marching in their thousands, on the mysterious journey that had gone on since long before the trivial race of man. A journey that was, perhaps, essential to their survival. Elsewhere they were already heavily overfished; perhaps even now they too faced their end.

But the trivial race of man was my race, and Manuel was my friend. The threat to him and his was real too. Still – had I not been there by chance, would not Manuel’s own expertise have had to suffice? Nor would I have known of Carlos Negrón, nor the illness of Manuel’s family.

While I floated there in the beauty, miserable, the other dinghy came up. A boy named Ruffino captained it. “Nada,” he said, gesturing expressively. “And the petrol begins to lack. We go?”

Captain Manuel let his eyes droop closed for a moment, an expression of despair I had not before seen on his strong face. And at that moment a thought occurred to me:

“My” lobsters were not safe – not safe at all. They were headed straight toward the nets and spears of the predatory Carlos when they rounded Punta Rosa – not to mention the depredations that would be made by casual pot-hunters for a hundred miles.

“Wait, Manuel,” I said. “Tell them to wait. I want you to follow me over there.” I pointed to the inner reef, thinking there was just enough time to take at least a few to do him some good. The feeling of Judas choked my throat; I had to clear my snorkel twice before we were looking down at the great horde of marchers, lit by the inshore sun.

Time... but I had not counted on Maya speed and endurance, nor the sharp Maya eyesight – nor the underwater *focos* Manuel and Ruffino carried to light the scene.

The *Angélique* was moved twice before it was over, deep in the water and groaning in every ancient timber when Manuel called it a day.

“How can I ever thank you, my friend?” Manuel inquired as the dinghies were hoisted and the *Angélique* prepared to depart. “You will wish Lorenzo to carry you back to the *rancho* in the skiff?”

“No. Many thanks, but I would prefer to go with you to Cozumel tonight. I have a small *negocio* to do in the morning. If you could perhaps lend me a shirt and help me get to the Maya Cozumel? I keep an old *maleta* of clothes with Senora Blaustein.”

Manuel nodded approvingly. The Maya Cozumel is not one of your tourist palaces, but a sober and inexpensive Mexican commercial traveler’s inn, run by one of the formidable Hispanic-Teutons who conduct

much of Mexico's invisible commercial life.

"It would be my pleasure," said Manuel. "But the *rancho* will be searching for you, no?"

"Ah, but *Don Pa'o* has now a short-wave radio, on which they must listen for the *Gardia Aereo* for an hour at nine every night. If you could change crystals and tell him to pick me up at the Playa del Carmen ferry tomorrow morning? You could say you fished me from the sea, to avoid trouble with the *Gardia*."

"Oh, no problem. Everybody uses that band to sell a motor and buy two ducks. This is an excellent idea, my friend. But you will not stay at the Maya. You will come home with me to celebrate."

"We will plan that later, *Don Manuel* old friend; you know I have not your strength for celebration and you will need to see to your wife."

And so it came about that *Don Manuel* and I reclined upon the bridge on the *Angélique*, while she creaked and grumbled her way across the moonlit straits towards Cozumel. The other divers, after a cold meat of snapper seasoned with what tasted like live coals, had promptly made for their hammocks. *Don Manuel* was doubtless twice as tired, but pride compelled him to take the captain's watch. The sea was quiet now, but nothing in the Quintana Roo is to be granted perfect trust.

To help him stay awake, we chatted idly in our usual mixture of tongues: of doings of mutual friends, of the iniquity of government, of all that had changed since the days when he was a young sportsboat captain and I an eager lover of the sea. His English was only somewhat better than my Spanish, but we had always understood one another well, and the tale that follows reflects that understanding as much as the literal words.

We were commenting on the skills of the various divers, notably that of Lorenzo, his head boy.

"Ah, yes. Lorenzo Canseco. He is good, very good. But the boy you should have seen was *K'o*." Manuel nodded, and repeated with special relish and the full Maya click:

"*Audomaro K'o. Mayo puro*, you understand; he was proud of it even then. *K'o, K'ou* – it means something like Lord, or young god, maybe. We were boys together, you see, in those days when the scuba was just getting started here." Manuel chuckled, shaking his head. "No one had ever heard of safety; we tied our gear on with sisal ropes. But *K'o* – he was the first to



buy a proper watch. There will never be his like again.”

“He is... gone?”

Captain Manuel hesitated and let himself make one of his few Maya mannerisms, a high-pitched sound deep in his throat. He belonged to the old school, before it became fashionable to be more Maya than Spanish. “Yes, he is gone,” he said finally. “I saw him go. But...”

“A diving accident?”

“Oh, no. You must understand that K’o never had accidents. He was strong, he was handsome, he could do anything – but he had also the *cabeza*.” Manuel tapped his forehead. “Others did foolish things – not he. I tell you: incredible – Once, below a hundred meters, his companion’s air-hose broke, and K’o brought him up safely, holding his own mask on the boy, back on himself, then back on the boy – all the time using his watch, so that they would not get the bends. It took nearly an hour like that to bring them both safely up. And the sea bad and night falling. I ask you – who could do that? And then the next week, Marco, the damn fool he saved, went down to two hundred and caught the rapture of the deeps. He untied himself before we knew. The last we saw of Marco, he was diving down, down into the Cuba current that runs off the north reef. We could see his light for a short time, going ever deeper and faster. Then it vanished. Even his body was never found.”

“God.”

“Yes. Oh, there are endless stories about K’o. He was *good*. When the *Capitan* Cousteau came through here, he chose K’o to dive with him. *De vero*. But the most funny story was about the cinema people, when K’o played the shark with the girl.”

“What?”

“Yes. Everyone was crazy then, you understand, and the cinema people were loco locissimo. In this story a beautiful young actress is pursued by a shark who catches her and –” Captain Manuel glanced at me expressively “– the shark ah, makes love to her. Can you imagine? Well, they fixed K’o up in this shark body and he pursued the girl – she was a *puta*, but a beauty, the director’s girl. K’o caught her all right – and then, by god, he actually did the business. Right there in the water. In that crazy shark outfit. He just barely kept the girl from drowning, too, she was screeching like a perriqua. And the director jumping up and down in the boat – nothing he could do except howl and scream and fire K’o, who did not give a damn. I always wanted to see that film. But I think something went wrong with the camera, everyone was laughing like lunatics.”

We were both chuckling too, while the old boat thudded on, following the rising moon. A school of porpoises was playing in the bow wave, their phosphorescent trails vying with the moonlight. Behind us the moonlit spark that was Tuloom was sinking out of sight. It was the last hour of true night, before the sky beyond Cozumel, island of sunrise, would fade to grey.

On the strength of the movie starlet's fate I decided to try a highly diluted sample of the good captain's fiery tequila, while he had his normal libation.

"Ah, yes, stories of youth," the old man said when we were settled again. "We were young, life was to spend. So many gone. I remember one that scared us all, though. We were exploring the great reef that slants down to the north – the one Marco jumped off into the deep – and something went wrong with this other boy's tank. His companion – not K'o – panicked and cut him loose, and poor Pedro shot to the surface like a bullet. K'o was in the boat. We pulled him in; he seemed all right but he was dead, you understand. He knew he only had a few minutes. He sent messages to his mother and sister, and then, just as the nitrogen was starting to work on him, he gave K'o his watch. It was a cheap little thing, I remember it well, because K'o always wore it, on his left wrist. Then of course the sickness took him, every cell in Pedro's body began to rupture and collapse, and the boy screaming, screaming; like a screaming bag of jelly toward the end... I tell you, we were all a bit more sober after that."

"Dreadful indeed... but K'o, what of him?"

"Ah..." The old man took a long pull at his tequila. "Well, by this time there were coming the tourists, you know, and all sorts of new equipment, and good boats. And the aqua skis. Well! If only you could have seen K'o perform on waterskis – dance, jump, stand on his head, ride one like a surfboard, carry girls – anything. And I remember he had the first of those *brillante* striped shorts, what they call Madras. The *touristas* – all the women – were falling over him. But it was no use. K'o was for the sea. Only the sea. Anything to do with the sea, he was interested – but beyond that," Manuel made the Maya sound again – "there were many unhappy girls, I tell you. What K'o wanted he took, and then he was off again like a god.

"It was the time when the water-skiing was the great thing. *Estiloso*. K'o liked me because I always had a boat. Sometimes I could beg or borrow even a really big one. Also, I would spend the hours he wanted to perfect each thing. And then he told me what he really planned.

“He wanted to be the first man to waterski from Cozumel to the mainland. These days, perhaps, it may not sound like much, but even now it would take great strength. And with the equipment we had then—!”

“There’s always a hell of a chop – very rough water in that strait.”

“Yes... but we were young and crazy. And, moreover, he didn’t plan to go straight across the shortest way. He wanted to go slightly south, up-current, to land at Tuloom. It was not stupid; the angle of the big swells would be better so.

“Of course there were no people at Tuloom then. That was before the Mexican *arqueologicos* and the *turistas*. Even the vandals, the *ladrones*, could find nothing more to take. Soon it would have been all gone. And yet, when Chichen and Uxmaal were already long dead, Tuloom was still a major place, with sea commerce and many towers and people. But not religious, I think... Something always a little *mysterioso* about Tuloom. Barren women still sometimes make pilgrimages there to watch the sunrise. They use the old name, Zama, the Dawn.”

“Poor old Tuloom,” I sighed. “Have you read what the *conquistador* Grijalva said of it, when he sailed by in 1518? He did not land, you know, they found the great bay of Ascension instead.”

“No. What of Tuloom?”

“ ‘We saw there a shining bourg, so large that Seville itself could not have appeared larger or finer.’ And he speaks of ‘a very high tower, and crowds of Indians bearing standards’.”

“That... I had not heard.” Captain Manuel’s gaze was on me, yet not quite focused. “White... finer than Seville.” He repeated so softly that I thought he might be yielding to sleep.

“So you tried this trip, this crossing?”

He blinked, nodded. “Ah, si!

“It was still dark when we started, just such a morning as this is going to be, with a small moon in the sunrise. I had got hold of the best boat I knew – about seven meters with two hundred-horsepower outboards – very modern for her day. And how we worked on the ropes and harnesses – I tell you, we could have dragged wild horses. Spare skis, of course, in case one cracked or he hit flotsam. Even some candy bars and water we tied around his waist. So we crept out of the marina, in the moonlight, and he waved me on impatiently and got up on the skis, and I opened the throttle and the boat began to plane. Oh god, we were young. And the strange thing is, although K’o was so determined to be the first, he told no

one but me his plans. It was all between him and the sea, I think.

“Well, for a long time it was just work, with the world turning pale around us, and me trying to pick the best path for him. He was all business, after one flourish when we took off. He just settled down determined to do it. The porpoises found us in the first light. I could see them playing around him. But that was all right; they seemed to understand the business, they never got in the way. The light was quite deceptive when we crossed the first big rough current, and I was worried that he was having a bad trip, but every time I looked back he waved me on.

“And then of course the color began to come – a beautiful dawn – look, there’s a little rosea ahead of us now – and our spirits rose. Of course we were headed away from the sun. But you know the west is beautiful in the sunrise too.”

My Spanish was not up to attempting “Not through Eastern windows when morning comes, comes in the light,” so I merely agreed.

“We crossed the second bad current then in good style and came to quite a stretch of smooth water. I decided it was time for him to eat and drink. So I steadied down the pace, gesturing to him. He didn’t want to – he got mad and made a fist, waving me on – but I was stubborn too, and he saw I wouldn’t pick up until he’d taken something. So he did, while I took the steadiest course I could. I was watching him too, to make sure he ate – I can still recall seeing the light flash off both those watches, his own good one and the poor thing the dead boy gave him on his other wrist.

“Then he threw the empty canteen away and waved me on, and I stood the boat up and we made wonderful time across that smooth sea. The sky was fantastic above us – like cities of all colors, how do you say, castles – *cuidades del cielo*, cities of the sky; and all colored flowers with the great *rayas* of light streaming onto them from behind us, out of the east. And then just as we came through the last rough current, I saw that the lowest line of color was the cocos of the mainland shore! And there above on the cliff was the shining tower of Tuloom, and I knew if I was careful we were really going to make it.

“But we were not there yet, not by much. Many bones of ships and men lie between where we were and the Castle of Tuloom.

“That rough water goes all the way to the main reef in front of Tuloom, you see, sweeping along by the harbor passes; it can be malicious. And the passes are not simple; there appear to be several, although only two are truly good. But the light was brighter every moment, and the seeing was

clear – I tell you, I ran those last kilometers with so great care, trying to put K’o just right of every wave – I was like a *borracho*, a drunkard, who is carrying the last bottle of tequila on earth. Whenever I looked back, he was waving to go faster. And in fact he was right, some speed is necessary for such water. But always I was worried because we would have to slow down for the pass, and the danger of the following waves broaching me – I was in such a state I was not even sure I could find the right pass, though I knew it like my wife’s ear. And, oh! – the beautiful colors of the dawn, and the dolphins playing – never shall I feel such an hour again. But we were going fast, so fast.

“I had to lose speed without letting any slack come in K’o’s lines, you see. But of course he understood that as well as I did. I could see him commencing to cross the wake, back and forth, always with the lines so beautifully tight, but gentle. But always waving to me to go faster, waving like mad. I thought he was for the first time a little loco. And then, my god – just as I found the start of the main pass, I saw him cut far to one side and I understood what he was planning.

“He was not going to follow me through, see? He was going to shoot along beside me through the *other* pass. That was why he wanted the speed. So I opened the throttle, not caring if I smashed the whole boat, and the lines went tight, tight, with the speed he needed. And yet, my god, how tired his arms must have been.

“So he turned and came snapping back past me in a great curve, like the end of a whip – standing up like a prince – I tell you. He even waved as he shot by into his pass, on the crest of a wave, just right – did I tell you he had learned to use the skis like a surfboard, long before the surfers ever came? I could see him as clearly as I can see you, and his lines were still tight, just right – and his dolphins tearing along with him too.

“It was that strange moment of sunrise, the instant when the sun rises falsely – Oh, yes, I know how we see it by refraction before it is truly there, while it is still really under the curve of the sea. And sometimes it is the wrong shape, misshapen – although it is the true sun, still it is for a few seconds *sinistre. A momento spectrale* – which I do not quite like. This was the sun that burst upon him just as he passed in. I remember there was a small cloud cutting it in three fat chunks, like a papaya, cold but beautiful. And at that moment K’o’s harness went weird – it was still tight, you understand, and I could see him holding it – but the part near me faded in an abnormal fashion, it became hazy like a *vapor*.

“And then so many things happened to me at once, although I never took my eyes off K’o. He was planing, or riding at tremendous speed

through the pass into Tuloom harbor. He had to be heading for a terrible spill in the coral. For a time he seemed still to hold the rope; for all I know the dolphins were pulling him. The wave cresting all around him – but he was still upright, perfectly all right in a great blaze of sun despite the crash that had to be coming. And I noticed there was no more rope. He was holding his body like a surfer, but somehow different. Superb till the end.”

*Don Manuel's* tone grew low and quieter, with a great seriousness. “My friend, I could not swear to you that he was not standing or riding on the dolphins, driving straight for shore. But the shore had become strange too. There was not only one *Castillo* above us, there were more. And I think in one glimpse I saw work going on – not the miserable scaffolds of the *arqueologicos*, but like building, fresh and new. And voices, people shouting, Mayas rushing down the cliff path now, rushing into the sea toward K’o. And all strangely dressed, or rather, ornamented – everything shining, colorful. But then I had no more time to look. Because you see both my motors had died.

“Oh, yes. Just as I saw him pass into the harbor, first one engine quit and then the other, dead as dogs, and I was being whirled ‘round and carried across the pass entrance. Luckily – maybe unluckily – the tide was running out and took me with it. I was so crazy with confusion and *contra-natura*, things turned against nature – I did not even comprehend my own danger. Only I had the sense to seize the *palo* and push away from the most dangerous rocks – all the time the current and the tide were carrying me away – away –

“I had one last look at the glory – how did the man of old say it? – towers shining, noble as Seville? As it must have appeared so many hundreds of years ago, perhaps before it was ever seen by accursed eyes.” For an instant the old Maya-mestizo, who normally called himself a Spaniard, allowed a hate I had never heard before to show. “Yes, And then when I could look again, there was nothing but our poor old Tuloom.

“Zama, the city of the dawn, was gone forever. And K’o with it.”

Here *Don Manuel* got up, poured himself another tequila, and I joined him in a weaker potion. The divers were still sleeping soundly in their *amacas*, one in every corner; from two of them came gentle snores. The sky was brightening, blooming into beauty, with a great salmon explosion ahead of us, in which lay Cozumel. I glanced back at the west; again there were the glowing cities of the sky, lavender and saffron and rose, with the faint chip of setting moon still sharply visible, and somehow alien among the softness.

“No,” said *Don Manuel*, though I had not spoken. “Nothing of him was ever found. No body, no skis, not a scrap, nothing. Although everyone looked for weeks, even from the air. And – another strange thing – even the coil of rope-end in my *lancha* was gone too. I remember in the excitement I had glimpsed it seeming faint, like a mist, but I was too busy trying to save myself from wrecking to attend to that.”

“How did you come ashore?”

“Well, I tell you, I thought I was going to Cuba. I was sure there was water or dirt in the petrol, you see, although we had strained it three times through a good *lana* hat. Oh, he overlooked nothing, that K’o! So I was sucking and blowing away, drinking petrol so I was sick, when suddenly the motor started quite normally, and then the other, which I had not even touched. So I tore right back, looking for K’o – I went into the harbor, everywhere – but there was nothing but our dead ruined old Tuloom. And one *viejo*, a sort of caretaker, who had been shooting doves. He said he had heard a motor, but he was in the *mangles* after *palomas*, he had seen nothing. Only he crossed himself–” Here *Don Manuel* made a comic gesture – “about twenty times.

“I went back to Cozumel – the motors ran perfectly. And of course I alerted the Gardia, and all K’o’s friends. But there was nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing. Nothing except one thing only, which I know. Shall I tell you a strangeness, my friend?”

“You ask me? May you never find another *langusta* if you keep silent now.”

“Very well.” He took a deep, deep draught. “This I never told. You know our poor Tuloom, how it is famous for two things. One is of course the magnificent site, the wall and the view from the *Castillo*, correct? And do you know the other, which is in every stupid guidebook?”

“What? Not the frescoes, they are gone. A few *Chacs*, rain gods – Oh! Of course. The figure over the top door, the Descending God, or whatever you will.”

“Do you know it is the only such a one in all Yucatan? In no other Maya *ruina*, even Tikal. Some fools call it the Descending God, or a setting sun, such as a few Aztec temples have up in Mexico. But this one is quite, quite different. I have made it my business to compare, you see. Even from the oldest drawings before the vandals came. You can believe me. The posture is not elegant, indeed, it is somewhat like a frog. Nevertheless, everyone except some of the *Arqueologistos*, call it not descending, but the *diving* god. The vandals have been at it, and the weather, of course. But I have

consulted the old drawings, like your Catherwoods' from Stevenson's books. Have you never examined these?"

"No, not really."

"Well. Some are very detailed. The hands are held so –" *Don Manuel* put his fingers together like a diving child. "And on the wrists he drew stiff cuffs with ruffles. But these are only drawn to fill the space, I think, it was already damaged, you see. Such cuffs are never seen elsewhere. Like Spanish court cuffs, or the cuffs the little *typistas* wear to keep their sleeves clean. The real statue that you can see today has no trace of such things. But if you look carefully you can see there was indeed something there, upon the wrists. Very *omamentados*. But not big cuffs. One perhaps a little smaller than the other, on the left wrist. And by the wrists – you know the Maya symbols for numbers, the bars and dots, not so?"

"Yes."

"Well, a few small ones can still be made out, in the space by the diving hands. Strange wrist ornaments – figures of time?... How would the ancients show a diver's watch, I ask you?"

"Oh, my god, Manuel."

"Exactly, my friend. His name too, did you forget? K'o, K'ou, a god!"

There fell then a long silence, in which I was unconscious of the uproar of the old engines, the groans, the creaks, the double snore. Only the dawn wind, broken by an osprey's scream, only the glorious sunrise over the marina pier, now visible ahead, from which came the almost imperceptible tinkle of a mariachi from some early riser's radio.

Presently I sighed. "So you really think he made it, *Don Manuel*?"

"I know what I have seen, my friend," Manuel said quietly. "And every word I have told you is the truth. I believe he was indeed the first man to waterski from Cozumel to the mainland. By several hundreds – perhaps, who knows? – even a thousand years. *Mille annos, mas o menus. Quien sabe?*"

## The End