

SACRIFICE

“Honey, there's a place in the middle of the jungle called Chicken Pizza with a big pyramid built by the Indians. Wouldn't it be fun to hop on a bus and go see it?”

“I'm not going on a damn bus with natives, chickens and snotty-nosed children.”

“What about renting a car?” Rose persisted. Then pressing her husband's soft spot, “There'll be lots of fantastic shots for your video camera at the ruins.”

A trip to the ancient ruins of Chichén Itzá had not been planned, but Rose Coburn was bored with drinking beer on the beach all day and was worried that her daughter Pretty was not enjoying the experience of a foreign country. She had asked at reception about sightseeing. The hotel travel agent had suggested the Mayan ruins.

Later that day a white Volkswagen Beetle penetrated the green depths of the Yucatán jungle heading straight for the ancient world's Mayan citadel, Chichén Itzá. The gringos locked inside the machine were the leading edge of the Greco-Roman, Euro-North-American culture. The Steins and the Coburns with their daughter Pretty had been enjoying a cheap one-week winter vacation in Mexico, soaking up the sun and drinking beer on the beach at Cancun. Now they were entering the darkness of the jungle.

“Look at this poor miserable land, nothing but bush, rock and withering corn,” the hungover John Stein observed. Jim, the driver yelled, “Hang on to your asses, it's *topes* time!” as the rented machine catapulted into the air and whomped down on the far side of a speed bump. The three women wedged into the back seat, hip to hip, spilled coke down their fronts and spluttered in unison.

“Damn you, Jim,” said Rose.

“You bastard,” said Jane Stein.

“Daddy, you're pissed,” said his daughter, Pretty.

In the front passenger seat, John Stein took a swig of beer and shouted, “High oh, Silver, away!”

The dusty native villages were strung out on the straight road at intervals, each surrounded by guardian *topes*, full of huts, turkeys, chickens, pigs and road smart dogs. Jim, showing more respect for the bumps, eased off the throttle and Pretty gazing out the window piped up from the back, “Do people live in those huts?”

“Well, yes they do, honey,” said Rose, “they don't have the same advantages we have back home.”

John reduced his answer to the common denominator, “They're short of pesos here, baby.” The car passed a grey-haired old woman bent double carrying a bundle of sticks with

a head strap taking the strain of the load and Stein yelled, “Whoohoo! We don’t work our horses that hard back home!”

The road was starting to have a hypnotic effect on the travellers as mile after mile of the same blurred jungle and little clearings planted with withering brown corn, punctuated by the villages in *topes* parentheses, flashed by. Pretty’s seventeen-year-old sensitivities were piqued at the sight of the locals.

“Why can't somebody do something for these people?”

“Honey,” John said, “the natives should give up this corn and move to Cancun where they could make money on tourists and buy things. It’s the law of supply and demand.”

Rose did not like the turn of her child’s musings. She knew Pretty was real smart in school and she had sort of planned the trip for Pretty’s history lesson. She said, “It won't be long before Chicken Pizza where the travel man says they all sacrificed for their crops.”

“I would sacrifice my school lunch to help these people and I’m sure my gang at school would give up theirs.” This was not a big gesture since they didn't eat their bag lunches anyway.

Stein, who was a walking Wikipedia said, “It would take a lot more than that to raise these people’s standard of living,” as Jim slowed for the next *topes*. “The first thing I would do is get rid of these damn bumps. Don’t they know that speed is progress?”

Pretty didn’t hear his comment as she looked at what she perceived to be a starving three-year-old sitting in the dirt in front of a stick hut. She intuitively knew that her sacrifice would have to be more than a peanut butter sandwich.

The first hint of Chichén Itzá was the pink-azure-purple-chartreuse blankets strung up alongside the road by the local merchants. It was Pretty who pointed out the citadel rising out of the green jungle. Jim, never at a loss for saying the obvious, said, “Will you look at that mother,” while Rose glowed, thinking that the trip was now worthwhile.

John gave them more of his wisdom. “Do you know how many natives it would take to build that sucker without a D8 Cat?” and answered his rhetorical question. “I would say thousands over many years.”

“Ah, you’re full of shit, Stein,” said his wife Jane who was still smarting over the spilt coke.

After three hours of hard driving without a break, the white Beetle arrived at the entrance to Chichén Itzá. The adults squeezed their bulk out of the two doors and landed on the pavement in hot sweaty confusion. But not for long. Jim took command, his video camera

in one hand, while the other motioned in a “wagon-ho” movement towards the site and Mexican beer.

Pretty’s choreographed emergence from the small car’s cocoon was not lost on the other tourists. She had perfected this movement through countless practice runs at junior high to an admiring audience of pubescent males.

Her painted toe tentatively explored the firm ground. Her ankle adorned with a love bracelet was followed by a beautifully calved leg flexed and tensed to move. Her languid wrist circled by friendship bracelets touched her blonde curls bursting into the sunshine. Having teased her audience she exited the car, her lithe body adorned in a chartreuse halter and orange short-shorts with a pink lace frill, and her pert face daubed in matching sunscreen colours that would have made a rug merchant envious.

Pretty had arrived.

The transformation from chrysalis to butterfly did not go unnoticed by the tour guides who moved in on the little group to offer their services. But the eye that Pretty smiled at was the camera held by her father as the battery-powered motor whirred to capture the scene.

Antonio Salas got the job of guiding the Steins and Coburns. He was a handsome, earnest young man. His dark, sculptured, high cheek-boned face declared his Mayan roots. He was bemused by Jim Coburn bargaining down his fee by half as if he was a blanket merchant and then telling him he would get a big tip if he did a good job. He was confused by Pretty who was fluttering around pouting for recognition. Annoyed by the father and attracted to the daughter, he led them off to discover the mysteries of the Mayan civilization of Chichén Itzá.

“*Señors* and *señoritas*, have you heard before of this place where my forefathers ruled the Yucatán?” he asked.

“No, Tony,” Rose countered, “but I thought it would be fun to see old buildings. There aren’t any back home.” From behind the video camera, Jim added, “I like their size. Now how about that beer and a coke for Pretty?”

“*Caramba!*” thought Antonio, “These *gringos* are blank pages,” while he said, “There are two distinct Mayan civilizations at Chichén. The first from 500 to 700AD and the second from 1000 to 1200AD, which was strongly influenced by the Toltecs from the north. I will take you first to the more ancient ruins where you will see the Deer House, the Church, and the Observatory. And on the way, we’ll get some beer.”

John and Jane Stein had gone quiet since their tiff in the car, so when Jane said, “You know, Tony, we’ve only got two hours before the drive back. Do we really have time for the old stuff?” John dutifully added, “Yeah, the big stuff was built later, isn’t that right, Tony?”

“*Si señor*, the Toltecs had a warrior culture not unlike some modern nations. They were much taken with conquest and big buildings. They built this magnificent citadel you see before us as well as the Ball Court and the Temple of Warriors. In times of trouble, if the rains did not come and the people suffered, then the priests would sacrifice one of the fairest maidens who would give herself to the rain god Chan after much ceremony by flinging herself into the sacred Cenote.” He said this while looking directly into the blue eyes of the plumaged Pretty which told him that she was not quite following what he was saying, rather she was flirting with him.

“Do you mean, Tony, that she gave her life to save her people?”

“*Si, señorita.*”

“Were they saved?”

“Sometimes it rained, sometimes it didn’t.”

“Hey, that’s a good story, Tony,” Jim said. “It gives me an idea. Why don’t we have a few cool ones then you can walk us through that rain ceremony with Pretty playing the maiden and I’ll get it all on film for the folks back home?”

They all fell into Jim’s excitement and Tony embellished the story about life in Mayan Chichén where the Jaguar and the Eagle were symbols of power, and told them about the god king Quetzalcoatl who ruled the ancient civilization.

The director and cameraman, stars and cast took to the field. Tony the narrator, Pretty the star and Rose, John and Jane the cast proceeded to unlock the secrets of the Cenote.

THE BALL COURT

“Under the midday sun, the citadel cast no shadow as the two teams took to the field for the right to win the favour of the rain princess.” Antonio intones into the microphone. “The losing captain will receive the unkindest cut of all, while the winner will be the princess’s escort through the day.”

The cameraman takes a long pan shot of the ball court and close-up of the captains John and Tony while Pretty, looking serious and regal, sits on a raised dais high above the field, attended by Rose and Jane.

“This game will determine the escort for the princess as she prepares herself for the rain god Chan. If the god is pleased, the day will end with the sky shedding rain on the corn

withering in the fields. After the game, the captain of the winners will accompany the princess with wreaths of glory and the losers will be dispatched.”

The camera focuses on the dais where John is wreathed while the loser Antonio is given an imperial thumbs-down by Pretty.

TEMPLE OF WARRIORS

“The Temple is where the princess is given the ceremonial respect of the Chichén nobles. The columns leading up the steps of the temple represent the noble families. Beyond the colonnade and up the steps of the temple, the princess is surrounded by the victorious team, the nobles and priests.”

The camera pans on all the tourists milling about the site and plodding up the steps while Pretty, sitting on the stomach of the statue of the fallen warrior, looks gracious and John and Jane look on.

THE CITADEL

“Only the god king Quetzlcoatl and his priests are allowed to ascend the temple at the top of the Citadel, the pinnacle of the Mayan world, its Mount Olympus. When the drought came to the Yucatán, an impressionable young maiden was plucked from the sea of fresh flowers, cleansed, anointed and raised to the heights of the known world.”

The camera shoots Pretty climbing the steps to heaven and going into the temple and later exiting, her face radiating the joy of giving while down on the plain below the antlike tourists look up in wonder.

Jim was starting to feel the effects of the sun, beer and running up and down the stairs. At the top of the world, he felt a bit dizzy and had a few pains in his chest which he disregarded. He'd had them before and attributed them to gas.

CENOTE

“The sun, the sun was setting on the citadel, as a precious petal was falling, falling from the heights, and fluttering to the edge of the Cenote while the sun on the horizon was being swallowed by the earth. So the rain princess will plunge into the well and join with the god Chan to draw the rain and refresh and anoint the earth should the god be pleased.”

This was the first time that Antonio had been called upon to give a dramatic monologue. He was moved by his own words, and looking at Pretty flushed and excited in the bloom of her youth he began thinking of himself as the god Chan. Of course, the promised tip also figured in his thinking as his story moved inevitably towards its climax.

The camera followed Pretty scampering down the almost-vertical stairs of the citadel and dancing to the Cenote through the sparse crowd that parted as she approached. Jim

filmed Pretty from the edge of the pit, dislodging some stones which fell into the water below.

Aware of the failing light he yelled out directions. "Pretty, get your ass over here by the edge. John, pick up that boulder there and heave it into the well when I tell you to. I want to record the sound of the splash."

The actors hurried to their assigned positions. Jim had the camera aimed at Pretty when a blow seemed to hit him on his chest and he cried out in pain, which was recorded. Also recorded was the shock on Pretty's face as she missed her footing and fell in a technicolour arc of orange, pink, purple and gold in the water-filled pit, landing with a splash in the waters below.

Antonio Sala was stunned. He had never lost a tourist to the Cenote. Others had, but always during the day when you could see and drop ropes and ladders to haul them up. There was little chance of rescuing Pretty for hours.

As soon as he heard Pretty's wail at the bottom of the well Antonio flung himself after her. He moved her to a ledge above the water and covered her with his poncho and his warm body while they waited for rescue.

Rose fainted when Pretty fell into the Cenote, Jim had had a stroke and John was in a panic. Jane, a nurse, determined that the two in the Cenote were alive and safe. She then arranged for the Coburns to be transferred to the first-aid station and saw them settled in. It was hours before they could begin the rescue efforts.

In the station, Rose was revived. She watched over her husband who was being attended by Jane and the station's nurse. When she was confident that Jim was going to live, Rose went outdoors to get some fresh air. She yelled at her husband from the doorway, "Jim, it's raining!"