

THE ROOM UNDER THE SWIMMING POOL

The Coburns were upset when their daughter Pretty lost her virginity to Antonio in the Cenote at Chichén Itzá. They thought Pretty should have saved herself for after the high school prom.

Pretty had found that on her return to Vancouver from Mexico that her Grade 12 studies had suffered. How could she concentrate on her classes after having experienced the spiritual and physical excitement of falling into the Cenote and being saved then seduced by their guide? She wrote to Antonio every week, and by Christmas they decided to join the Nicaraguan revolutionaries to free that country from the yoke of the Sandinistas.

Rose was devastated when she left. Jim took it well, saying that Pretty – whose given name was Desiree, and who now called herself Fidelma – was fighting for a just cause, little realizing that the rebels were being financed by the CIA.

Jim's one regret was that he would not have a video of Desiree's wedding like many of the fathers in her high school class had of their daughters. He cheered a little when Rose reminded him that he could play the video he had taken of Pretty at Chichén Itzá falling into the Cenote. He forgot all about his pique when the video proved to be a great hit amongst their friends.

Despite the setbacks in her family's life occasioned by their first trip to Mexico, Rose did not bear a grudge against that winter warm country, nor the Mexican people whom she truly loved. So the Coburns and their good friends the Steins planned another trip to Mexico for their winter vacation.

Rose and Jane became a little more adventuresome. They chose a small village away from the larger resort tourist meccas. They read the travel books and brochures and took Spanish lessons. The men couldn't tell the difference, it all looked the same to them. Jim and John were content with the Spanish words that they knew. "*Cerveza*" and "*banno*" filled all their needs for any situation.

In February the four of them found themselves in a small plane flying from Oaxaca to Puerto Escondido, a fishing village on the west coast, which still retained traces of the real Mexico. Rose was not in the best of health. She had to take nitroglycerin pills for her

angina and had little tolerance for stress. This is why she looked forward to a siesta in Mexico.

The Faulker 50 aircraft rose from the Oaxaca airport, passed over the ruins of the ancient Mayan citadel, and began a slow climb in a westerly direction toward the setting sun and the mountains surrounding the central valley. Jim was expecting the plane to bear east after gaining altitude and head for the Caribbean, where he firmly believed Puerto Escondido lay. Being a postman, he prided himself on his sense of direction. He didn't give up this fixed idea until the plane began its descent and he saw the orange yolk of the sun frying on the Pacific Ocean. It shook him to think that he had got his geography so wrong. Was this the start of middle age? Perhaps the Dos Equis that he and John enjoyed on every occasion was confusing him.

Jane had booked their rooms on the beach at the Santa Anna Hotel, which was priced right for them. Since this was not the usual packaged holiday— where they would have been directed and herded by an agent — they had to arrange their own ground transportation from the airport to the town.

In the fading light the overloaded taxi deposited them without ceremony outside the hotel. Jim and John developed a thirst carrying their bags to the rooms. They found the bar and began their Mexican holiday by speaking to their fellow patrons, most of whom were from Toronto, about the merits of the Vancouver Canucks and the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Rose was about to leave her room when there was a gentle knock on the door. She opened it to a woman of her own age, tanned by the tropical sun, who introduced herself as Mabel Christie.

“My husband and I are in the next room.” She nodded to a man standing behind her. “We were in your room for a few weeks. When the opportunity arose, we moved to the corner suite. I'm wondering if I left my sandals behind? Yes, there they are,” she said, pointing at a pair of sandals next to the bureau.

Rose asked, “Why did you move? Is there anything wrong with the room?”

“Oh no, it's perfectly all right.”

Her husband echoed, “Yes, it's perfectly all right,” then added, “but the ceiling is a

little lower than I'd like and it's a bit dark. You see, there's a swimming pool on the roof of the hotel, which is directly over your room."

Rose hadn't noticed the height of the ceiling. She looked into the Christie's spacious suite and compared it to hers. Their high-ceilinged room had double glass doors opening onto a balcony with a picture view of the beach and the ocean. Her room had no windows. "Oh well," she thought, "at least it will be cool and we'll be spending so little time in our room under the swimming pool."

The Coburns and the Steins sat down for dinner that evening in the hotel's restaurant just off the central courtyard. On their first trip to Mexico John believed that Dos Equis meant the horse in Spanish, rather than the brand name of a beer, and they now referred to all beer as horses. They had a whole squadron of cavalry on their table before they got around to ordering dinner.

They ordered fish.

At a large table close to the kitchen sat Giuseppe, the owner of the hotel, a proud, expansive man with a booming voice. Next to him was his wife Maria, clutching her purse to her bosom and directing the staff. Also at the table were their many friends and guests enjoying the couple's good fortune in having such a grand establishment.

Rose was beginning to feel good about her decision to branch out into a lesser known region of Mexico. However, she couldn't allow herself to become too relaxed, remembering the last time she really felt good was on seeing the pyramid of Chichén Itza from a distance.

Then Pretty fell into the Cenote and they lost her to Antonio and Central America.

The waiter served the whole fish. He held the plate in his hand at waist height. Rose was staring the dead fish in the eye when there was a great thump that seemed to come from the basement of the hotel. The Santa Anna shook on its foundation. Jane looked at the waiter and said, "*Quest es?*"

The waiter showed the whites of his eyes, as white as those of the dead fish.

"*Temora!*" he shouted, then turned with the plates still in his hand and ran for the door.

Nimble as the waiter was, he was not the first one out of the restaurant. Giuseppe, the owner and builder of the Hotel Santa Anna, where everything was made of concrete and

cement block, gave his guests an example of how to react to an earthquake. While they were looking puzzled and hesitant he leapt for the door and outmuscled the waiter to be the first on the street. The vacationers, seeing the builder exit his building in such haste, wasted no time in following him.

Giuseppe came by their table later and explained that of course his building was made to withstand earthquakes, but one can never be too sure. Jim asked him, “What about the swimming pool on the roof? Is it safe?”

“I made that section even stronger to support the three tons of water in the pool.” Giuseppe boasted, “That’s why there are no windows in the room under the swimming pool.”

The fish tasted good after all the excitement. Jim and John ordered more horses to wash it down. Rose was nervous and started whenever a chair scraped on the floor. A couple entered the restaurant and the woman with an American twang in her voice said, “What happened?”

“It was an earthquake,” John replied.

“You’ve got to be kidding! Those things don’t happen in Michigan.”

Rose wanted to scream. Instead she said, “Jim dear, would you mind getting my nitroglycerin pills from our room? I feel I may need them.”

Jim was happy to fetch the pills. As he mounted the stairs, he could hear the buzz of conversation in the restaurant as he circled the great palm and decorative pool in the open central courtyard.

He entered their room leaving the door open while he rummaged about. He found the pills in the bathroom, which he needed to use. He went inside the small cubicle again leaving the door open while humming the Toreador song from Carmen. He remembered it from a beer ad and now busy in front of the toilet he burst into song “Toreador, da, da, da, da, da... Toreador, Toreador.” He reached up with his free hand and grasped the flush handle above his head to activate the ceiling cistern.

The second quake measured a point higher on the Richter scale. The Hotel Santa Anna – Giuseppe’s cement monument – again trembled with the force of the *temora* and again it held firm – except for the room under the swimming pool.

In the weeks that followed, the investigators putting the pieces together said that the first quake had weakened a flaw the size of a manhole cover in the ceiling above the toilet. The second quake had dislodged the concrete, leaving a gaping hole.

Three tons of water flushed through a small opening is a powerful force. Jim had left both the bathroom door and the corridor door open, otherwise the result would have been fatal. Instead the water picked up his 205 pounds as if he were a toothpick and swept him out of the bathroom, through the room under the swimming pool, out the door, over the rail, into the open courtyard where the palm tree grew, and deposited him in the decorative pool.

Rose and Giuseppe found Jim half naked, gasping for air and floundering like a guppy out of water. In his right hand, he was holding the handle to the toilet flush. In his left hand were the nitroglycerin pills which Rose so badly needed to survive the shock of seeing her husband *in extremis*.

Jim groaned and mumbled. Giuseppe not wishing to move him knelt by his side. He placed his ear to Jim's quivering lips and heard him whisper:

"Giuseppe."

"Tell me *amigo*, what is it?"

"Giuseppe, congratulations."

"*No comprende, amigo*. I don't understand."

"Congratulations, you have built the grandest flush toilet in all of Mexico."

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