

SuperOldie

Bryan Murphy

Dark Future Books

Cover by Mao Qing

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SuperOldie

St. Joshua's Nursing Home, Frascati, Italy, March 2040.

Franco Tira stared into the cup of coffee his Persian visitor had set in front of him before leaving. "A thimbleful of black slime" Samantha would have called it, back in Franco's halcyon days.

He sniffed: notes of lemon and almond tickled his nostrils. Franco could not tell whether the aroma wafted there from the cup or from trees in the garden of the nursing home. Or just his mind. He imagined poison in the bottom of the cup calling to him, offering him a quick fix for his cancer.

Samantha: another of his failures. On a personal level.

On a professional level, she had not stopped him from 'suiciding' the computer nerd who blew the gaff on the Service's exemplary kidnapping of a Persian dissident on the streets of some provincial seaside resort in England. Just the opposite: his lust for Samantha had made it easier to terminate the rivalry from her boyfriend. It was just unfortunate that she had not taken up Franco's offer of an immediate, superior replacement.

Franco wondered if she was still alive, if she still had that pale English complexion he used to go for. The Persian poetess, on the other hand, must be long dead, the Islamic Republic having been lavish in its gifts to Italy in return for her rendition. But now that régime was no more, and its secret files must have fallen into hands eager to settle old scores. Hence, he assumed, his recent, oh so rare, visitor from the outside world. Well, maybe it was time.

Franco lifted the cup to his mouth. His hand shook. A little of the coffee splashed onto his lower lip. Franco jerked his head back: the coffee was cold. Franco set the cup down and used a sleeve to wipe the disgusting liquid from his mouth. A figure shuffled past him, picked up the cup, smiled.

"If you don't want it, I'll have it."

Franco leapt to his feet. His hand flew out, slapped the cup out of the other man's shaking hand and sent it flying into a once-white wall, where it broke into smithereens and its contents left a dark brown mark.

The man opposite Franco burst into tears.

"What did you ... did you do that for?"

"There was poison in it. It was meant for me, not you."

"You won't let me have your coffee, even if you don't want it?"

“Damned right I won’t. Get your own bloody poison. Find your own enemies.”

The man’s wet eyes stared at Franco. Franco lurched over. He felt fire in his belly, but this time it was burning his intestines. He lunged towards the lavatories, but did not make it. He went down in a heap. He retched for a while, and then was still. The other man looked at Franco serenely, gave a vague smile and hobbled out of the room, leaving it empty except for the body on the floor.

Franco opened his eyes. He had been put to bed in a single room. His tongue was furry, but he felt cool. He reached a hand under the clean sheets and placed it on his abdomen. As far as he could tell, his intestines were undisturbed. He let out a long sigh.

“Thank you, Mr. Tira, actually. I do thank you.”

Franco started. Was he hearing voices now? Then he saw that there was someone in the chair next to his bed: the man who had tried to drink his coffee.

“I understand you saved my life.”

“Yeah, the Lone Ranger, that’s me. Look, just call me Franco. Who the hell are you?”

“Dunby. Hard done by, I used to say. The new English Patient. Charles, I think. Yes, Charlie. You see, I didn’t realise at first.”

“You don’t know your own name?”

“Oh, I do. It is Charlie. Sometimes I’m not sure, though. I didn’t realise you saved my life.”

“Didn’t realise? What are you, demented?”

“Yes, I am. It isn’t fun.”

“OK, Charlie. The Lone Ranger here needs to get some sleep.”

“You’ve *been* sleeping. And calling out ‘Sam! Sam!’ Is he your enemy, Mr. Franco?”

“Sam? Samantha. No, she’s not my enemy. Just one of my failures.”

“What? You have failures, too?”

“On a personal level. On a professional level, she actually helped me.”

“What do you mean? Tell me what you mean.”

“Well, once I had to serve my Country by kidnapping a Persian poet, a lady, who was living free as a bird in England, of all places, saying bad things about her government.”

“Everybody does that, Franco.”

“Yeah, well, we sent her home and they shut her up pretty damned quick. Very grateful they were, too. Italy got a lot of good business in return for that little number.”

“Good business. So that was Samantha?”

“No. Sam was pretty. One of those pale English types, willowy, ethereal, beautiful I thought. I met her when we had to deal with her boyfriend. The idiot was a computer nerd. Picked up our electronic trail and tried to blow the gaff on our operation. Naturally, once we’d hushed it up, thanks to our British friends, we had to take care of him. Lusting after his girlfriend gave me an extra incentive to do a good job. Which I did.”

“What? You didn’t!”

“I did. I did my duty. With relish.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“After we’d got rid of him, I offered her an immediate, superior replacement. Unfortunately, she declined.”

“Why isn’t she your enemy?”

“She’s dead. Killed herself.”

“All your enemies are dead.”

“No, they’re not. The new Persia has a long memory. I think they want vengeance for their national poet. That’s what the new regime calls her. They’ll feel cheated if God does His work before they can. Not that I care, much.”

“You saved my life.”

“That’ll spare me a few Hail Marys. Now eff off and let me sleep.”

Franco turned on his side, away from Charlie’s stare, closed his eyes and tried to calm his thoughts.

Franco slept, and woke refreshed. He got up, washed and dressed. He felt as well as he ever did these days. Dying could wait. He phoned his former employers to report the attempt on his life. They were not sympathetic. Someone with a Persian surname had paid him a visit; they had left him a cup of coffee, which he had not drunk; neither cup nor contents were available for analysis. The government wanted to build good relations with the new Persia. The Service had full confidence in Franco’s ability to look after himself: once a spook, always a spook.

Franco monitored his intestines for burning sensations, but all he could feel were stirrings of hunger. He realised that he had not eaten since the previous day, and that he wanted to. He avoided the canteen, where the massed presence of his fellow terminal patients oppressed him. Instead, he went to the vending machine in the corridor outside it. He found Charlie staring blankly at it.

“What’s up, Charlie, don’t you know how it works? Do you want me to show you?”

“I want strawberries.”

“The machine doesn’t sell strawberries.”

“Strawberries.”

“Only in the market.”

“Can’t go there.”

“Well, I can, and I’ll take you.”

“They won’t let me. I would have to be accompanied by one of them. For reasons of – something.”

“Do you want strawberries?”

“Yes.”

“So do I. Now, go and sit on the garden bench nearest the gate. I’ll join you there in ten minutes. Do you think you can manage that?”

“Of course I can. I’m demented, not stupid.”

Ten minutes later, Charlie was sitting on a bench in the nursing home garden, staring into the distance. Franco winked as he walked past him to the gate, but Charlie did not respond. Franco keyed in the code he had hacked, and the gate clicked open. Charlie was at his shoulder, and shuffled through. Franco checked that they were unobserved, then followed him. He kept close to the older man as they ambled down the leafy lane towards the centre of the small town.

“Good to be out, eh, Charlie?”

“I’ve been here before.”

The market was winding down for the day, but there was no lack of stalls selling strawberries. Franco chose one of the few Italian traders, and asked for a kilo. Charlie scrabbled in his pocket.

“Put your money away, Charlie. These are on me.”

Franco handed over a twenty-neuro note and got some coins back. He handed the open bag of fruit to Charlie as they walked away.

“Dig in, Charlie. You be the guinea pig.”

Charlie was gazing at Franco’s hand that held the coins.

“He cheated you, Franco. The bugger short-changed you.”

A yelp from behind them made them both start. They turned to see the man who had sold them the fruit holding one hand in the other and blowing on it, cursing and whimpering. Other traders and customers crowded round him. The trader pushed his way through the crowd, ran to the nearest fountain and plunged his hand under the stream of cool water, while his face reddened and his words became bluer.

Franco thought it wise to move Charlie as fast as practicable in the opposite direction. Once they were out of sight of the market, Franco pulled Charlie off the street into a small park and sat him on one of its wooden benches.

“Here, Charlie, did you do that?”

“I don’t know.”

For the next twenty minutes, the nannies, office workers and healthy pensioners strolling in the park were treated to the sight of two rather decrepit old men trying not to choke as they laughed themselves silly while stuffing their faces with strawberries. The laughter proved infectious.

Franco and Charlie waited outside the gate to the nursing home garden until the coast was clear.

“Can’t you open this Charlie? Just with will-power or something.”

“I can have a go. Let me concentrate.”

Charlie closed his eyes and lowered his head.

“Has that done it?”

“No. The damned thing’s still locked.”

Franco keyed in the code. The gate opened and they crept in.

“That was a lark, Franco. Thank you.”

“Any time, my friend. Just let me know what I can do for you.”

Franco’s mind was already buzzing with ideas about what Charlie might do for him. Protection from a Persian vendetta was top of his list.

Franco and Charlie were sitting together in the day room over a slow game of noughts and crosses when a carer came to tell Franco he had a visitor. As he gave Franco the news, he squeezed Charlie’s shoulder affectionately.

“Santa Madonna! What’s his name?”

“Orsini. The Honourable Doctor Solipso Orsini. He insisted on the Doctor. I think I’ve seen him on the telly. Shall I bring him in?”

“Oh, yes, thanks. Just check his identity first, would you?”

A robust man with cold eyes and a salt-and-pepper beard strode beaming towards Franco. He was about to grab Charlie’s seat when Franco pointed to an empty chair next to it.

“Our mutual friends –” The newcomer dropped his voice. “No-one can hear us, right?” He looked around at the room filled with patients and carers. “Our mutual friends asked me to come and see how you were doing.”

Franco snorted.

“They thought you might be getting paranoid. It often happens to our retirees. They are not all as level-headed as you are. Anyway, since I’m on the House Committee – are you playing noughts and crosses with yourself? You know you are like a brother to me, Franco, when they asked me to do a quick check, I carried out an in-depth investigation.”

“And?”

“And it turns out there are indeed some Persians with dubious pasts currently abusing the hospitality of our country.”

Orsini reached into a pocket of his waistcoat and pulled out a Padipad. He wiped his thumb on his jacket and turned it on. Nothing happened. Charlie flicked his eyes over it and the surface sprang to life.

“It’s a bit slow today. Here we are. Have a look at these.”

Images of shapely women in unlikely postures appeared on the screen.

“Er, not those.”

Orsini jabbed frantically at the screen. Eventually he was satisfied.

“Here, these. Anybody you recognise?”

He passed the Padipad to Franco. Franco flicked through five mugshots. Only the fourth one was familiar. He flicked back to it and laid it in front of Charlie.

“That’s the man who came to see me last week.”

Orsini snatched the pad from the table and brought it close to his eyes.

“I think he wanted to interfere with God’s plans for me, such as they are.”

“Yes, well, he’s not alone. There is a team of five, but don’t worry. I’m going to have them all expelled. Or incapacitated.”

“If you can find them.”

“Don’t fret, we will. Just relax, my dear fellow.”

“I’d like you to move me somewhere safer, Solipso. A country villa would suit me.”

“Too expensive, dear chap. But don’t fret. God will protect you. As will I, your brother-in-arms. Now, let me hug you before I go.”

Orsini and Franco both rose. Orsini moved to Franco. His thick legs banged Charlie’s thin knees as he brushed past. Charlie winced. Franco opened his mouth to admonish Orsini, but the man’s frame disappeared before his eyes. Nonetheless, Franco found himself gripped in a crushing embrace.

“My dear friend, everything will be all right. Why that shocked face? I will see you again soon!”

“It’s more that –”

Orsini had released him and turned away. He waved a thick arm to summon a carer to escort him out. Orsini gestured to every carer he could distinguish from a patient. None acknowledged him. Red in the face, he began to shout.

“Hey! One of you lazy good-for-nothings come and escort me to my car, or do I have to find my own way out of this dump?”

Nobody moved in his direction. Orsini felt sweat rise on his brow and trickle down his face. Franco came to his rescue.

“I’ll accompany you. I know all the codes.” He moved towards the door but banged into a wall of trembling flesh.

“Here, stand next to me and take my arm. I’ll see you out. It’s OK, Solipso, just hold on to me.”

Franco led Orsini to his car. His bulky figure became clear in the sunlight. His face was white and there were damp patches on his suit. The chauffeur tried to look nonchalant as he opened the door for his boss and helped him into the car.

“What did you think of Charlie?”

Orsini wound down the window and stared at Franco. His eyes flickered to the wing mirror.

“The man who was sitting next to me.”

“Who? What? Don’t play mind games with me, Tira! I’ve had enough paranoid shit for one day.”

“A mansion in the country would be nice.”

The car drove off, spitting gravel against Franco’s trousers.

Franco kept an eye on Charlie. He made sure that none of the patients took advantage of the foreigner, and he alerted carers to Charlie’s needs when he had trouble articulating them for himself. Franco looked on it as an investment.

Because Charlie had so enjoyed their market escapade, Franco got permission first to accompany Charlie into the town and back, and then for Charlie to come with him when Franco went into Rome for some tests at the

Polyclinic. The two of them sat together in the back of the nursing home's vehicle, each staring out of a window.

"Blimey, London's changed!" said Charlie.

On the way back, as they pulled off the main road on the edge of Frascati into the approach road to the nursing home, the driver slowed down as he passed and noticed the fine legs on a woman with her head under the bonnet of a car. He pulled over and got out.

"Anything I can help you with, Signorina?"

"Yes." The woman closed the bonnet and turned to face the driver. She had a revolver in her hand. "I'll have your car keys."

Franco saw this through the back window.

"Make me invisible!" he hissed at Charlie. Charlie nodded and closed his eyes.

"Right away, Signora." The driver walked back to the car, wiped his forehead, reached in, took the key from the ignition and handed it over to the woman.

"Thank you. Now get in."

The driver complied. The woman looked behind him.

"I'll have you out, Mr Tira." She opened the rear door for him. Franco clambered out. Before he could make a move to disarm her, she hit him on the temple with the gun. Franco smelt the familiar odour of warm blood as it oozed down his face. Dizziness made his legs buckle, and he went down on all fours.

"Good. This is how scum like you should die: on their knees."

The woman brought the revolver to Franco's other, clean temple.

"Can I just say a prayer before – ?"

"Be my guest."

Franco started muttering in Church Latin. His mind took him back to his days as an altar boy and put words he had learned then into his mouth.

I still don't know what most of this stuff means, he thought, but the more I manage to regurgitate now, the longer I might keep living.

The words he churned out did not interfere with his thoughts.

I've done many bad things in my life, things that only the Almighty could forgive, and even He might prefer not to. But my idea of penance is not getting

my brains blown out beside a country road, especially not by a woman seeking revenge for what I did in the line of duty. No, I'm not ready to meet my Maker.

The words kept flowing. The part of Franco's brain that was supposed to flash his life before him was stuck in the Church vestry, on an image of shame and pain. Franco hesitated, sent the torrent of ritual Latin flowing again, inventing where memory failed him.

If the woman really is Persian, she won't spot the difference.

Franco's knees ached. The gun stayed in the same position against his temple. It seemed that no-one and nothing moved. Franco commended his soul to God and inadvertently bowed his head. The gun did not follow its movement. From the corner of his eye, still babbling in Church Latin, Franco looked at his executioner. The woman had an ecstatic expression on her face, but it, like the rest of her, was entirely static. Franco threw all his weight against her legs and the woman keeled over. The gun flew from her hand. Franco pushed himself off her rigid legs and went for her throat, but realised that she was inert, as though her body were frozen. He got to his feet, brushed himself down, ascertained that the would-be assassin was still breathing and, keeping her in his sight, retrieved the gun. He trained it on the woman as he moved to the car and spoke to the driver.

"Call the police."

"I already have."

"You got a tow rope?"

"No."

"Anything else we can tie her up with?"

"I'm afraid not."

Franco walked back to the woman. A bullet in the leg would keep her from running away, if her paralysis wore off. His aim was disturbed by the sound of garbled Latin, words like those he had been reciting minutes before. He turned and located the source. Charlie had wound down the passenger window of the car and was leaning out, echoing Franco's earlier words and gesturing "No!" with a shaking hand. Franco walked over to him.

"I'm sorry, Franco. I'm sorry I couldn't make you invisible."

"It's all right Charlie. You did the next best thing."

"You aren't going to, are you? You aren't?"

“You keep her like that until the police arrive, and I won’t shoot her, I promise. Do you think you can?”

“I can, Franco. I can try. I can.”

“It’s all right, Charlie. You just try.”

The woman’s muscles gradually relaxed and her body took up a more natural position on the ground. Franco asked himself whether she was conscious enough to warrant a bullet, in breach of his promise to Charlie. The sound of sirens stayed his trigger finger. Two police squad cars came into view. Before they screeched to a halt in front of him, Franco dropped the gun onto the ground, beyond the woman’s reach, and stepped back from it. The squad cars discharged four officers, each of whom trained a gun on one person in the human tableau in front of them. One of the policemen picked up the revolver Franco had dropped.

“Hers,” said Franco, nodding at the woman, who now, groggily, sat up and stared blankly ahead of her.

Once they had checked and verified Franco’s, Charlie’s and the driver’s identities, the policemen were happy to accept their story. When they discovered that neither the woman nor her car held a licence to carry a gun, or indeed any other document, they arrested her, and two of the officers and drove her, dazed and silent, in handcuffs away for interrogation. Another followed them in the woman’s car, which had no mechanical defect, and the fourth officer accompanied Franco, Charlie and the driver the short distance to the nursing home.

Franco helped Charlie out of the car. The old man clutched at his sleeve. Franco read anxiety in his friend’s face.

“Did I done good, Franco? Did I?”

“You did very well, Charlie. You saved my life.”

“Snap! I win! Snap, snap, snap!”

“You’re a winner all right, Charlie.”

As he guided Charlie through the entrance of the nursing home into the familiar surroundings, Franco finally felt relief at having another day of life ahead of him.

Franco had enough contacts left to get the incident hushed up. However, details of it soon reached Solipso Orsini and brought him rushing to

St. Joshua's. This time he came with two bodyguards. They sat on either side of him in the room he commandeered, with Franco and a listless Charlie opposite. Franco noticed the intensity in Orsini's voice as he spoke to Charlie, who dabbed his eyes but did not bother to focus them.

"You can do so many things for us, Mr Dunpy. You can protect the Nation from the bad people, its enemies."

Charlie did not respond.

"At this time of great national danger, Italy needs you."

Charlie's face remained without expression, but a chuckle emerged from his mouth.

"I'm British, old chap, aren't I? I think so. I know for a fact I'm not Italian."

Orsini's face darkened.

"You've lived here half your life. Who's looking after you here? The Italian State!"

"Yes. Thank you. I wish you well, I really do. Lovely country, lovely people."

Franco suppressed a laugh of his own, at Orsini's incompetence rather than Charlie's words. He listened to the cicadas outside as Orsini changed tack.

"Look, Charlie, we'll reward you. We'll give you whatever you want. You can name your price."

Charlie dabbed his eyes until he was satisfied they were dry. He moved the handkerchief to his mouth and cleared it of dribble. He blinked and focused on Orsini. Franco noticed the cicadas fall silent. Charlie struggled to form words, but, once formed, they came out clearly.

"Drop dead."

The politician jumped from his chair and moved towards the old man. His bodyguards leapt to him, restrained him and led him away, silent but implacable even as he showered them with profanities he deemed it unwise to direct at Charlie. Franco called after him.

"Hey, Solipso, what about me? My life is in danger in this place!"

As the bodyguards paused to open the door, Orsini turned back to Franco.

"You? You're out of here. You have two hours to pack your stuff. Then you'll be taken to a safe house, where you can rot for all I care!"

The bodyguards pushed Orsini through the doorway, clutching their charge's arms tight, as though he might otherwise vanish before their eyes.

When the door closed, Franco and Charlie looked at each other. They began to laugh. Their laughter rose until they doubled up with it. Then it diminished and petered out. Charlie slid back in his chair; his arms fell to its sides. His eyes lost first their sparkle, then their focus.

"What about me, Franco?"

The manager of the nursing home saw Franco in his office before he left, and wished him well.

"No, I'm sorry, you cannot take Mr. Dunpy with you. He is in our care, not yours or anyone else's. What is more, we have strict orders not to let him out of our sight ever again."

Franco smiled at the irony of that.

"However, I can assure you that Mr. Dunpy will get special attention and enhanced privileges as of today."

The staff who helped Franco pack were deferential but silent.

Glad to see the back of me, no doubt.

A team of four men came to collect Franco in a white van with no windows. They agreed to wait while he said goodbye to Charlie.

Franco found the old man in the day room. A nurse finished pouring him tea from a pot, and left. Charlie looked at Franco as if he did not see him, then tears dropped from his gummy eyelids.

"Goodbye, Tira, thanks for the larks. You're going, but you know what? I'm going to come and see you."

"Make sure you do."

Franco tousled Charlie's hair, turned on his heel and left, feeling like death barely warmed up.

Franco sat on the porch of his new home. It was not a mansion, just a country cottage, but it suited him fine. He had two live-in carers; an oncologist and a cook visited daily; remote surveillance and continuous patrols guaranteed his security; ultra-fast broadband kept him in touch with the world, when he had a mind for it.

The whiskey gave his stomach a satisfying burn as he gazed at the twilight darkening above the trees. He replenished the tumbler on the table and also poured a finger into the glass he had set out next to it, “for Charlie”, not that he remembered the older man imbibing alcohol. Franco felt no surprise when a thin, trembling hand reached out and lifted the glass. He heard a slurp, looked at the chair opposite him and made out Charlie’s form occupying it. A weak voice reached him.

“Told you.”

The two men sat in companionable silence. Franco’s thoughts turned to the death that was advancing on each of them. Eventually, he broke the silence.

“Here, Charlie, you know, cancer and stuff. Could you - ?”

Charlie’s chuckle was like the tide ebbing from a pebble beach.

“Don’t be daft, Franco. Course I can’t. No-one can.”

Charlie’s chuckle gained in strength. As it crossed the border from ebb to flow, it rose into laughter. Soon both men were once again laughing themselves silly as starlight flickered above them.

###

[About the author:](#)

Bryan Murphy travelled extensively as a teacher of English as a foreign language before settling in Italy, where he worked as a translator for a United Nations agency. He now concentrates on his own words.

Murphy’s stories have gained an international following, and his poetry has appeared in places ranging from the Venice Biennale to the Brighton Evening Argus, as well as a multitude of literary magazines. His first novel, *Revolution Number One*, set in Portugal in the 1970s, will be released in 2016.

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Thanks a million!

Bryan Murphy

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Now read the title story of *Houlihan's Wake and Other Fragments of Mexico* by Bryan Murphy. You can find the full e-book here: <http://bit.ly/181pc0r>

Houlihan's Wake

Houlihan wakes.

When the taxi goes over the second speed bump, it jolts him into full consciousness. "Playa Chisme," the driver announces as he pulls up. There is no sign of beach or sea, only a street of assorted shop-fronts swimming in the heat. Houlihan clammers out of the taxi into it. He revels in his disorientation for a moment, then he pulls his light backpack out of the taxi, pays the driver and thanks him. The driver gets out, ducks into the nearest roadside shop, emerges with cigarettes and a cold Sol, then sits in his car and gulps the beer as he watches Houlihan stagger along the short street.

Houlihan cannot see Ivaylo. Ivaylo was not at the airport, and he is not here to meet Houlihan, either. Although the sea is not visible, Houlihan can hear the surf dumping itself on the beach and then slithering back with full force. Houlihan looks out for their back-up meeting place, a restaurant known as "Poison". At the end of the street, he finds a green and white eating place called "Le Poisson". He thinks that must be it, walks in through a wrought iron doorway, arranges his pack and himself at a plastic table, and orders his second beer of the morning. On the table is a flyer, kept in place by an ashtray. The ink smudges as Houlihan picks it up. Its message in Spanish, illustrated with line drawings, is summarised in English: "Big Lifeguards Party! One Year Without Deaths! Posada Curandero Dusk Till Dawn". Houlihan suspects the organisers may be counting chickens that have yet to hatch.

A commotion outside distracts him from his third beer of the morning. Three young men, wearing rumpled T-shirts and dirty cotton trousers emerge, barefoot, from a path beside "Le Poisson" and run full tilt down the main street in the direction from which Houlihan has come. They are followed by four young men in heavy boots and uniforms. These men carry truncheons. The distance between the two groups widens. Behind them all trails Ivaylo, his face soaked in sweat, his breathing short and hard. As he passes "Le Poisson", he notices Houlihan, swerves into the restaurant, throws his bulk into the chair next to Houlihan, picks up his bottle of beer and swigs down what is left inside it. Ivaylo looks at his friend.

"You should eat something with that," he says.

"I was thinking about it," Houlihan answers, "if this is Poison."

“Don’t worry,” says Ivaylo, “they only feed it to their neighbours’ cats, not to their own customers. As far as I know.”

“I wasn’t worried,” Houlihan replies, “just the opposite. Tell me what is going on here.”

Ivaylo explains that the State of Acaxao has imposed a four-fold increase in licence fees on beach traders all along the coast. This has sparked a series of riots, which have now reached Playa Chisme. Heavy-duty police have been sent in to quell them.

“We had better keep out of the way,” he adds. “Those boys can get violent.”

That sounds good to Houlihan. He tells Ivaylo he wants to see for himself what is happening on the beach, and leaves his friend sitting at the table trying to squeeze a last drop out of the beer bottle. He has already paid.

Houlihan hurries along the path Ivaylo had appeared from. Guided by a cacophony of surf and raised voices, he takes the first turning, which leads him past a series of palm-thatched huts flanking inner courtyards, set back a little way from the ocean.

The fine sand of the beach is littered with overturned restaurant furniture. Shoes and sandals lie scattered among it. Knots of uniformed men are chasing, or laying into, civilians, some of whom wield sticks. One person sits clutching his head with a bloody hand; another lies twitching.

Houlihan sees a trio of police surround a bikini-clad woman and knock her to the ground with no fuss. This is his chance. He runs at the trio, attempting to insult them in his broken Spanish. He pushes his way into the circle, his voice raucous, and stands over the woman, arms out, waiting for the police clubs to rain down on him. It does not happen. The police move off to torment someone else. Houlihan wants to run after them, to offer them another chance to smash his head.

“Hey!”

The woman’s cry stops Houlihan. He looks back at her.

“Get me away from here. Please!”

Houlihan moves to the woman and, with care, lifts her to her feet. He likes the look of her, despite her distressed state. He supports her as the two of them stumble together along the sand, away from the aftermath of the riot. She has him lead her around the curve of the bay to the eastern end of Playa Chisme, to the guest house where she is staying: Posada Tempesta. Houlihan notices that it is next door but one to Palapas Paulina, where Ivaylo is supposed to have booked him a beach hut.

The woman has a bruised shoulder, but nothing worse that is visible.

“You know,” she says to Houlihan, “I think you saved my life. I’m really grateful to you.”

Houlihan likes her voice, though he cannot place the accent to anywhere more precise than North America.

“If I can do anything, anything at all, to thank you, I will. You just have to ask.”

She leans into him. Bad associations flood into Houlihan’s brain: promises, betrayals. He holds the woman at arm’s length. He looks into her eyes for several seconds.

“Just remember that I like white lilies,” Houlihan tells her, then turns on his heel and leaves.

Ivaylo *has* booked him into Palapas Paulina. The establishment is run down, but it has a bar that is open. Houlihan buys a couple of Boemias from it and takes the bottles into his hut. He pours the cold beer down his throat, then arranges himself in the hammock. He is soon asleep.

The dream recurs. Houlihan is living abroad. He wants to return to Ireland but he cannot, because he has done something terrible there. He does not know what it is, but he knows that if he goes home, he will have to pay for whatever it was with the loss of his freedom.

Ivaylo wakes Houlihan when he barges into his hut, bangs down the backpack which Houlihan had left at Le Poisson, and stomps out, slamming the door as best he can. After that, Houlihan sleeps only fitfully.

He thinks about home. Can he go home? No. Yes! He knows what he has done. His profession was creative accounting. He was caught overdoing it, but got hush money from the company instead of prosecution, as well as the sack. So he has already paid for what he did wrong. Now he is jobless and broke. Yet there is something more, something deeper and darker that torments him. Houlihan cannot bring it into his conscious mind, but he feels sure his guilt is absolute.

The heat at the middle of afternoon oppresses Houlihan when he comes out of his hut onto the beach. He trudges down to the water’s edge and into the shallows. The cold refreshes him. The waves break far before they reach him, but he feels the strength of their undertow as it sucks at his legs. Houlihan looks past the white surf at the dark blue Pacific as it stretches to meet the light blue sky. He thinks that now is not the time to turn it all off.

Houlihan leaves the water and traipses back to Palapas Paulina. He spends the remainder of the afternoon there, drinking Boemia, passing the time of day with the few people who happen by, and watching the sun slip toward White Rock Island at the west end of the bay. At dusk, music reverberates eastward along the strand.

Houlihan showers and puts on clean clothes. He sets out to find Ivaylo, thinking that he will take his friend to the best Bulgarian-Mexican restaurant in the village, which he has heard is full of them. The first person he encounters looks Bulgarian, so Houlihan stops her and asks if she knows Ivaylo. She does, and she tells Houlihan where he is likely to find him. As Houlihan follows the dark road, his thoughts switch from Ivaylo, not such a false friend after all, to the woman who thought he had saved her, full of northern promise. He does not see the face until it is right in front of him. It is a pale face; it has freckles. It speaks to Houlihan with an Irish cadence: "Here now, aren't you the one who ... ? How on earth did you get away? What are you doing here? Do you imagine you can just ... ?"

Houlihan feels panic rise inside him, soak into his brain and sweep back down throughout his body. He breaks into a run. He sees a line of dark human shapes at the end of the road. As he nears them, he understands that it is a phalanx of riot police. They are moving towards him, banging their clubs on their shields and chanting. Houlihan realises his guilt has been exposed and they are coming for him, to carry out the sentence. But now he does not wish to die at the hands of policemen. He veers off the road and sprints down paths between dark houses and back onto the beach. He kicks off his sandals and plunges his body into the sea. His clothes do not hold him back.

Houlihan flails at the water and succeeds in propelling himself beyond the breakers to where cross-currents and rip tides can welcome him with their induction into a short journey of no return.

Two people on the beach have seen him: a Mexican veterinarian and his Swiss wife, who are out walking their dogs in the cool evening. They surge into the water – they have done this before, when alone – but this time the dogs leap in after them, determined not to be excluded from the game, and the two people turn back, unwilling to make a sacrifice of their animals.

Houlihan is cold in the Pacific water. His body chokes and freezes, but his mind is lucid. As the sea drags him under for the last time, no biopic of his brief life flashes before his inner eye. He focuses his senses only on the touch of faithless Carmen, the taste of unforgiving Claire.

A description of the dubious proclivities of Houlihan's closest family flows from the mouth of the lifeguard. He kicks Houlihan hard in the chest he has spent so much effort getting to work once again.

"You try to ruin our party! No way. Tonight we celebrate: one year, no drowning. You just stay away – stay away from the water, and stay away from our party!"

He kicks Houlihan on the side of the head and stomps off west.

Houlihan lies still. He hurts everywhere. He shivers. Minutes later, he sits up. He sees blurry lights at the far end of the bay. The sound of music coming from that direction is louder than the sound of the surf in his ears. He feels gratitude. He remembers the lifeguard's words.

Houlihan begins to feel less cold. He looks at the lights, which gradually clear, and again thinks of what the lifeguard said to him. He begins to laugh. Soon his laughter is beyond his control. This is one party he is not going to miss, not for the life of him.

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You can find the full collection of Houlihan's Wake and Other Fragments of Mexico here:
<http://bit.ly/181pc0r>

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