

The Underwater Dancers

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“Señor, you’ve overslept,” Martín shouted, standing at the open door of the single-wide house trailer, parked under palm trees at Holbox Beach. Dawn was breaking over the shoreline of the small Yucatán Island, awash in the September ocean. Inside the stuffy trailer Jebb Ralston rolled over in his sleeping bag, rubbed two fists against his tightly shut eyes, and tried to ignore the middle-age Mayan at his door. Their agreement to meet on the beach had proved useless.

“I need to talk with you now, Señor Ralston. Please wake up,” Martín called again. He held four small stainless steel devices resembling cell phones with twisted, stubby loop antennas in his left hand, staring at them in consternation. “Four more. We have lost eighteen in all,” Martín continued, hoping to communicate his urgency with the boss. “The sharks have learned to destroy the transmitters.”

Martín, a stocky Guatemalan shared the quiet efficiency of most Maya Indians, combined with a fierce determination of confronting practical jobs as he discovered them, often before others noticed any problem. He worked as the master mechanic keeping Ralston’s aquatic team afloat and out of major dangers from navigating the channels, to purifying water stores and to avoiding sunburn.

The face of a sleepy, unshaved man in his late 50’s appeared at the door, wearing cut-off pajama bottoms. Ralston was deeply tanned from working out on the open ocean daily, but he was not as dark as Martín, who had the classic Mayan profile of a dominant forehead, well-formed lips, and a deep bronze natural cast to his whole body. Martín hailed from a remote Guatemalan village high in the Chiapas Mountains.

Without a word, Ralston turned back into the trailer, leaving the door open behind to let in the cooler morning shore breeze, if not Martín also. Ralston acted as if Martín were not there, and instead occupied himself in making coffee, without any offer of sharing the results. When he looked up from his sullen task at the stove, Ralston seemed surprised to find Martín was still standing behind him, scruffy hat crumpled in his hands.

“The whale sharks have learned to use ultrasound. That’s what Lisa thinks.” Martín said.

“That’s absurd. Those transmitters are not being properly attached under the dorsal fins in the first place,” Ralston answered, concentrating on the water in the pan on the stove that refused to boil. “You divers are failing to do the job in the first place.”

Ralston was the research coordinator of Proyecto Dominó, a Mexican conservation group organized to protect the huge assembly of whale sharks that flocked off the Holbox shoreline from early spring into late summer. This massing of the enormous sharks occurred here where the turbid waters of the open equatorial Atlantic met and tried to overwhelm the more placid, tropical waters of the Caribbean.

The 45-plus-foot-long sharks were fondly referred to by the Yucatecos as dominós for the constellation of spots covering their entire backs and sides. Above the deep, inky blue ocean waters the enormous sharks glided slowly and silently, well camouflaged, sifting microscopic plankton from the summer algal blooms that clouded the ocean surface in an eerie green-yellow floating mat extending vast distances.

“Señor Ralston, I was working with the laptop you loaned me. I brought up the media player to see some aerial shots of yesterday’s whale shark sightings. I pulled up a video file,

something you must have put on the computer earlier and forgot to clean off. I'm sorry, but I opened the video before I realized what it was."

"That's so urgent you had to drag me out of bed?" Ralston snarled.

"You were showing the tracking views of the shark school. It was a pitch to some group of American businessmen for their commercial use. You were saying they could send their charter boat outfitters with several hundred tourists each day to visit the sharks off shore here," Martín continued, slow paced with a native cadence to his speech pattern.

Up to now, the visits to grazing sharks had been limited to two divers at a time with simple snorkels. That was about to change, prompted by Ralston's tireless work with the Yucatán commercial interests to build up the island's young tourist trade.

"Why not? The sharks couldn't care less," Ralston responded. "Nobody's getting to touch any of them."

Martín glared at Ralston in disbelief. Since Martín had arrived on Isla Holbox, his hold on daily life had been altered. As a native Guatemalan, Martín knew almost nothing about the primal views of his ancestors. He was an auto mechanic, working long hours in a local garage to feed his family of six back in Guatemala.

But Martín had undergone a profound change. He had waged a fifty-dollar bar room bet from a friend, Al Kixwuuch, staked on the assumption that Martín couldn't survive a week on his own in the dry savanna of the interior Yucatán, with no contact with the swarming tourists, Yucatecos, Mexican nationals, and travel company marketing agents typical of the mainland. On returning to Holbox a week after isolation on the inland flats and collecting his bet, he began to sense anew the pulse of the island, the sharpness to its shadows, the rippling speech of its

turbulent waters, an overwhelming energy washing over Holbox Beach at dawn. At this moment each morning the ancient Mayan prayer words sounded for him in the back of his mind, *Utzláj bey. Utzlaj caló* -- Honey in the heart. Thirteen thank you's."

A vast upsurge of cold and warm waters, the seashore at Holbox teemed with life from April through October each year, luring from great distances many unknowable creatures, especially the mysterious whale sharks. They convened here in what naturalists called "shark cafés" unlike anywhere else on Earth, slowly harvesting the liquid fields of plankton. And perhaps they were also coming for sex. Actual mating habits were unknown to current scientists.

The sharks, docile to the extreme, contributed to the singular magic of the place, establishing for a short time the more-than-human presence of the undersea wilderness, amplifying the circular enigma of the open ocean horizon.

"Ralston, I can't go on tagging these sharks if all you're trying to do is set up an army of tourists to come and harass them. They are peaceful surface grazers. They don't need or want hundreds of people paddling around them with snorkels and rafts."

"How do you know what they really need, Martín? Are you the resident marine biologist now, or the boat mechanic? Your job is just to take the crew out on the research vessels on runs to check the sharks."

"But you're supposed to be here under contract to the Mexican government to save the shark schools and get them to reproduce, which they seem reluctant to do in our waters. Ever wonder why?" Martín insided.

"No, and I don't intend to wonder why either," Ralston said. "I think you've become a bit too emotionally involved with the sharks. Maybe it's time for you to back off. Take a break.

And while we're talking about your job as a boat mechanic, I don't want to hear about your spending your underwater time with that alpha whale shark you think you've identified."

"Alfonso? He is the school leader. That's a fact. If you ever came out with us on a tagging run, you would see for yourself."

"You need to tag all the other sharks arriving daily. I understand you don't get the job done because you're preoccupied with 'training' that alpha," Ralston said, scowling at Martín.

"We have the chance of a life-time to communicate with another voice in nature. One that's willing to participate and wait for us to catch up in our understanding," Martín said, dumping the useless transmitters out onto the table.

"That's ridiculous. You're projecting your feelings onto a dumb creature that's just hanging around waiting for the females to become available."

"We talk to the sharks and they listen."

"Actually, something else is going on. I think you've been sabotaging the placement of the satellite tags on the sharks. Lisa tells me we've lost track of over half the school. I don't see why we keep you on here. It's time for a shake up," Ralston stated, banging his coffee cup down onto the kitchen table.

"Are you telling me I have to leave the project?" Martín asked, backing off abruptly.

"You don't fit in with our current needs anymore, Martín. It's time for you to find other work."

"And who will keep the fleet of boats running? Half of them break down each week."

"We'll figure that out without you, thanks."

“So I’m fired?”

“Let’s say we both agree to part ways ,” Ralston said.

“There’s no other work around here. That means I’m off the island.”

“Probably so,” Ralston snapped back, standing up at the same time, towering over Martín, who was a short man. Martín was forced to back his way out of the cramped space in the trailer.

The full glare of the sun off the beach engulfed him. Walking away, he never looked back, but he turned instead to face the burst of morning sunlight that bounced off the wide-horizon ocean. He moved proudly, as if he had another mission to accomplish.

Mid-Morning

Martín walked slowly back to the cluster of palmetto thatched huts scattered along the shoreline, half-hidden in the groves of palms, letting the sand sift through his sandals. He entered the lead villager’s *paapa’x* through a low door which he had to crouch under, and he met his mentor’s wife and three children busy with the morning meal of tortillas, shrimp, red pepper, ginger, and parsley. Before he could seat himself on the fireside mats, Ah Suut, the elder Mayan and highly respected chief fisherman in the village, cleared his throat to announce his presence in the interior gloom.

“You will not be with us much longer, Martín, if you do not hide your feelings towards Ah Ral-Ta better.” Ah Suut, typical of the Mayan, could not pronounce ‘Ralston’.

“I know. He brings out the dark fighter in me. I must learn to control that side of myself. I can’t just blame the gods. One of them has stepped in to guide my spirit,” Martín responded quietly, not seeking approval.

Ah Suut Ha regarded Martín with blue-grey eyes half closed, as if divining what needed to be given as advice to the younger man.

“Let my daughter, Chiála, continue to work with you as you learn to become a soul dancer. Be more gentle in your moves. Breath deeper,” Ah Suut advised. “There are many others in the village trying to sway the project workers onto a more reasonable path. The sharks have gathered here for generations before us. They will continue to gather here if we honor their spirits.”

“How do we do that?” Martín asked.

“We sing to them during the feast of the Flowering Earth, sharing our ancestral blessings and hopes,” Ah Suut answered. “And you,” he continued almost under his breath so softly Martín had to lean forward to hear, “could dance with them. Their chief has invited you.”

Martín stared at him, certain that he had not fully understood the old man. “Who are you talking about?”

“Jolomil Xb’een, the one you call Alfonso.”

“The sharks are following a song line laid out by Alfonso, the largest male,” Lisa stated simply, looking up from her laptop in the project lab. “Your idea that Alfonso leads the school here is correct. Wherever he seeks plankton blooms, later the rest of the pod follows. We trace

their satellite tags.” She pushed back strands of blond hair that had escaped from the bandanna she wore when working with the delicate equipment of the marine lab.

Lisa, absorbed in her work took no interest in how she appeared. In fact, she treated Martín like her younger brother, although he was a decade older. Isolated in the lab she had come to enjoy his stories about swimming daily with the sharks.

“How does Alfonso know where he’s going?” Martín asked.

“Alfonso leads the foraging activities for the other sharks by sensing lines of magnetic force” Lisa explained. “Deep-water sharks have magnetic sensors in their skin that let them detect earth lines of magnetism. They congregate in ‘shark cafés’ such as this one where the Atlantic and Caribbean waters meet and mix. The magnetic flux is extremely strong.

“Juveniles also assemble here, so the café is more than just a mating ground. Something else is going on to lure them to us each spring.”

“So once Alfonso arrives, he calls to the rest of the pod. How far can he be heard?” Martín asked. He pulled out a lab stool and straddled it, watching Lisa intently, as if she were about to emit a subsonic sound herself.

“Sharks don’t use any songs. No sounds. The sharks we track to come from diverse areas along the African and South American coast. They take up to 100 days to arrive. While here, they will dive to depths of 1,000 feet as often as once every ten minutes. We don’t understand the purpose of these dives; they’re only top-feeders.”

“So our research here, is it useless?” Martín asked, pushing back on the stool and gesturing broadly to signify his disgust.

“We have many questions yet to answer: where do they birth their young, what is the purpose of the star patterns they are covered with since they need no camouflage and have no larger predators, and why do they come to Isla Holbox? But enough of our problems, Martín. I’m sorry you won’t be here as we answer some of these questions,” she said.

“You already know that I’m set to leave?” he asked.

“Yes. Meanwhile, can you help me with one last experiment?” Lisa asked in her most charming voice.

“Why not. I have all day before the bus comes tomorrow morning back to Guatemala,” he answered.

“I have some software up and running for you to try,” Lisa explained, leaning over the laptop panoramic screen and selecting an icon to activate. The screen blanked out and a blue liquid vista appeared, with dim watery shapes and shadows lurking in the simulated distance.

“I don’t know why but I sense a presence. Some unseen creature in no hurry to approach or depart,” Martín said.

He recognized the setup for an alpha-state induction application in the slow flickering environment that now floated across the screen. Lisa handed him a set of headphones and nodded to him to put them on. The blues swirled and flickered with alterations of purple and black. She pushed him down into a soft swivel office chair and moved around the lab, dimming lights over the work tables and in the hall, till only one desk lamp remained, casting a pool of light in a small circle behind him. Many more indefinable shapes glided left to right, left to right, reminding him of past to future transitions, suggesting events not yet seen but still comprehensible. He found himself sinking into a deep meditative trance.

With a few simple commands typed into the computer, Lisa enabled the headgear to send a low-level magnetic field through Martín's temporal lobes, rebalancing the left and right sides, abruptly switching Martín's brainwaves to heighten into an almost ecstatic, transcendent experience of his "here and now."

The darkened room surrounding Martín faded away. He sensed a total change in the atmosphere. He became aware of another presence in the new openness of the lab, an enormous gliding mass of energy, not his, not Lisa's. His mind blanked out for the moment and he experienced a waking dream -- in which a Mayan voice intoned the sacred text, the Popul-Vuh in barely audible whispers:

Now it still ripples, now it still murmurs, ripples, it still sighs,

still hums, and it is empty under the sky.

Here follow the first words, the first eloquence:

'There is not yet one person, one animal, bird, fish, crab, tree, rock,

hollow, canyon, meadow, forest.

Only the sky alone is there;

the face of the earth is not clear.

Only the sea alone is pooled under all the sky;

there is nothing whatever gathered together.

It is at rest; not a single thing stirs. It is held back,

kept at rest under the sky.

Whatever there is that might be is simply not there'

*Only the pooled water, only the calm sea,
only it alone is pooled.*

I am no longer me, Martín silently acknowledged. This 'I' is enormous, swimming, and abundantly free in a vast expanse of night water. The familiar stars of Tsab-ek are rising from the southeast. I have swum away from these Pleiades in avoidance, seeking those older western stars fleeing the night as I do. The ocean is calm as glass. The last quarter moon is setting. To there I must go, to the western rim of the world. The butterfly constellation followed by the star fall into the sea beyond.. There I must go. My family will surely follow. All of them.

Martín began to remember himself without waking up. His inner voice instructed someone else in the dark to remember the song of this star-determined setting for future navigation. This one directional was to be frozen into memory for the balance of the days to come, swimming, swimming, tirelessly swimming. Martín suddenly recognized himself: **he** was Alfonso.

He wondered for the moment if his lack of sleep the last several nights, plus the medication he was taking for the gastric distress he suffered, had not combined to cancel out his grasp of the here and now. He yanked off the earphones and sat with his head in his hands in the darkened room, panting.

Lisa looked alarmed. "What does that mean? You said some strange things just then."

"There's some sort of higher intelligence involved. I don't understand it but I got it in a flash, not a sequence," Martín managed to say. "Now I know the sharks are disturbed by our presence, with no respect."

“The technical word for what we induced in you just then is ‘noesis’ – a result of perception and learning and reasoning arriving all at once. It’s a sort of a second sight,” Lisa said. “That’s the clinical explanation, at least. What do you think happened, Martín?”

“I really don’t know,” he answered, standing up stiffly and moving disjointedly towards the door. “Change is coming. Maybe I’ll be able to see it before I go.”

Noon

At midday a small group of villagers, that were not out fishing, gathered on the beach, including Martín. Chiála, a slender adolescent girl with honey colored skin, faced the assembled fishermen who lined up in loose ranks with their backs towards the ocean on dazzling white sand.

She addressed her students with a slight nod of the head, and then began an extremely slow skyward stretching motion with both arms overhead, palms skyward. Then she brought both arms outward and down, exhaling and smiling. They followed her dance motions, falling into a hypnotic rhythm, heedless of the increasing noonday heat.

“Watch the shadows springing from your backs and arms,” she intoned in a low voice hardly heard above the onshore breeze. “They are embracing the beach, the palms, the clouds, entering even the sky. Breathe, breathe.”

Martín followed, entranced. The sunlight intensified so much that the outline of his own form took on depth with razor-sharp edges. He was blinded by the dazzling contrast between shadow and sand.

“Breathe in the universe,” Chiála intoned, again raising both arm overhead slowly. “And then let the universe breathe you,” she continued, letting her arms settle again at her sides.

“Allow the energy from your surroundings to be absorbed into your body.”

The dancer nodded towards the tier of sea grape shrubs massed on the edge of the beach. “Think simultaneously of five building blocks: body, breath, mind, energy, and essence.”

Martín groaned inwardly as the stiffness of his back and neck offered a constant mocking reminder of his age. To the word “essence” he found his mind leaping to thoughts of a contrary repelling force that permeates the whole of space and counteracts the force of gravity. “Now we are in tune, and given the chance, we dance.”

The group continued in slow motion, arcing and swaying in synchronization to Chiála’s subtle moves. Later, they walked across the burning hot beach following Chiála into the deep shade of the palm grove flanking the village huts. Martin followed her into her uncle’s house.

“I want to actually communicate with the sharks, not just shoot them with tracking radios and dye markers,” Martín confided to the young girl, surprised at himself for asking her advice. It was too dark in the hut to make out her expression. His eyes had not yet adjusted to the gloom. Yet he was urged to ask for her ideas by an intuition that had to do with her easy communication with the sun and the shadows of the island.

“Then you’ll have to enter into their world directly, not just swim by,” Chiála stated simply, apparently not taken aback by his abrupt question. She gazed at him with an open childlike smile on her face which now he could discern. “You need to dance with them, just like we do on the beach.”

“How could I do that?”

“You start with breathing in the universe.”

“I’m under water.”

“No, no,” she giggled, turning away from him in a graceful flow of motion, expanding both arms as a swimmer might, and throwing her head back she took in a deep breath. “You use your scuba gear, silly. But you make these motions. Don’t stand there. Try it,” she said repeating the expansive motion with both arms and gliding over the floor mats of the hut like a sea bird. “Follow me.”

Martín began to follow her around the darkened interior, which suddenly seemed far larger than logic would allow, flinging back his arms and lifting his head high. They chased each other around the central fire pit for several minutes, until he became truly winded.

“What else might work if they don’t notice me or accept this as a good will gesture?” he asked staring into the smoldering embers.

“They will teach you. You must let yourself receive their good will and interest. They want to know you and befriend you. Let them take charge for a little while.”

When Martín remained silent as a definite response, she added quietly “You are standing on the brink at the creation of the universe. Wait. Let your breath settle. Then watch.”

Martín longed to reach out to the sharks in some way, perhaps to say good-bye. He said nothing.

Afternoon

“Thank you for joining us. We will all miss you from the team,” Lisa said to Martin as he entered under a blue plastic tarpaulin stretched between palm trees, He carried his hat in hand,

trying to go unnoticed as he sank to a squatting position at the back of the circle of folding chairs that formed the only amenities of the makeshift classroom at the edge of the village.

“We need to reestablish a zero-point field in which the sharks are comfortable and interested in returning to periodically,” Lisa said, returning her attention to the rest of the staff seated around her. She never referred to the behemoths as “whales”, only as “sharks.” She looked around to be sure that the group was fully attentive. “Our intent within that field is to communicate with the sharks.”

“And if they don’t want to talk with us?” one of the researchers asked innocently.

“Why wouldn’t they?”

“They might be too busy with their own affairs,” he suggested slyly.

“Then we need some way to draw their attention to us,” Lisa continued. “We know they are more active at night, and there may be some response to phases of the moon. Full moon was three nights ago. It will be rising just before midnight. We are going to take the hurricane boat out deep sea to try to relocate the school and isolate Alfonso. He remains the most responsive to our presence. If Ralston gets his way, the entire school will be overrun with well-meaning tourists starting next week.

“And that’s the end of the natural, non-invasive tagging of the shark school. Our study of their natural migration pattern is over for any practical purposes,” she concluded solemnly.

An uneasy silence gripped the usually noisy team. From the back of the tent, almost unnoticed, Martin began muttering an ancient Mayan prayer under his breath – a prayer to Ix Numxik, the goddess able to reach sailors lost at sea.

Night

A waning full moon rose between massive, silver cumulus clouds that towered above the ocean horizon, off the peninsula of the Yucatán to the south. Martín clung to the side of the twenty-two foot fishing skiff with scuba gear slung onto his back, the snorkel air tube and mouth piece firmly gripped between his teeth. He silently surrendered himself into the black water, falling backward into the peaceful waves rising mysteriously above the Holbox deep.

Martín with his swim fins and a snorkel become fishlike, displaying a limberness of his strokes that let him glide apparently without effort through the water dolphin-like. The sea was diffused with a strange silver moon light that penetrated far deeper into the water than he would have expected. Below him the dark edge of the reef teemed with silver swarms of fish. Above him streaking through the gentle swells were flashes of bioluminescence, foaming around his head and shoulders, leaving a comet tail of light behind him.

Unexpectedly, Martín also saw lights burning deep underwater below him, leading downward into the Holbox rift. As he watched these fires grouped and regrouped, running through a whole universe of constellations. Then suddenly they all went out.

To his side at a distance of fifty feet Alfonso appeared, gliding with massive assurance parallel to Martín's line of aquatic flight, the enormous side flipper suspended, tail flukes rigid, in a silent arc of momentum. Alfonso's right eye targeted Martín, unblinking, focused, yet mischievous in intent. Amid a low throated thrumming sound, Martín was entranced, holding his breath so as to link up with the enormous whale shark in a silent glide path toward an unknown destination. A second set of constellations appeared in the deep water, which Martín suddenly recognized as the myriad spots of light on the shark's flank.

“We leave you now,” came unspoken yet clear words from the shark out of the dark water. It was a humorous, warm voice echoing directly in Martín’s ears. Two other voices joined in, “Our energies are elsewhere.”

“Who are you?” Martín thought to ask of the voices from nowhere, everywhere.

“Our sharing has now become a sorrow. We will assemble elsewhere to dance.”

“When will you leave? Will be back next year?”

“We do not ask or know. This time cycle has broken. Some other year we may come again.”

The shark veered away from Martín and two others appeared behind him, passing rapidly, vanishing after the lead shark who Martín understood could only be Alfonso.

Fires below burst into light again, shifting from pattern to pattern. Caught up in the shark’s passing wake, Martín was pulled forward effortlessly into a new glide path. Glancing over his shoulder in the intense silver light of the moon, he saw a dozen enormous shark forms following behind them, veering east trailing Alfonso.

Majestically, silently without explanation they all swam together arcing first left to the north and then right to the south – a slow deliberate dance with Martín caught up in the flow, able to ride their enormous energy waves. The three approached a forth shark up ahead, surrounded it, and something small fell away into the deep. Another sensor lost, Martín know with certainty. They had learned a form of sonic sabotage.

He lacked ability to analyze stimuli of this order. He had lost the ability to think or provide an appropriate response. He needed a kind of organic innocence, to remember the receptiveness of childhood. He surrendered. Without thinking he began an extremely slow

stretching motion with both arms overhead, palms upward toward the calm surface of the night ocean. Then he brought both arms outward and down, exhaling a stream of silver bubbles through his snorkel and smiling to himself, despite the mouth grip between his teeth. Alfonso turned back, ever so slightly and seemed to pause as he followed Martín's dance motions, exhaling in rhythm that suddenly seemed to become the breathing of the universe.

Martín was alone again in gently pulsing undercurrents of the open ocean. He felt like weeping. Slowly he let himself drift upward toward the surface to the waiting skiff.

Sunrise

“Señor, you've overslept,” Chiála whispered softly into Martín's ear. She shook him gently by the shoulder till he stirred from the sand where he had collapsed the night before. She moved back a respectful distance and sat down on the beach to give Martín time to compose himself against the challenges of the coming day.

Standing slowly, Martín turned to face the new morning, arms extended.

“*Kül utziil. Majun louló. Utláj bey. Utláj caló* -- Long life. No evil. Honey in the heart. Thirteen thank you's,” Martín chanted the Mayan blessing for greetings and departures, facing out over the absolute calm of the ocean.

Author's Notes:

1. *The incantation forming the opening of Martín's waking dream is from the sacred text of the Popul Vuh: the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life:*

Tedlock, Dennis (May 17, 2011). Popol Vuh (Locations 979-982), Kindle Edition.

2. *The Mayan blessing for arrivals and departures is thanks to Martín Prechtel, Stealing Benefacio's Roses -- An Ancient Mayan Story Relived in Modern Times: Leaving Home to Come Home, HarperCollins Publishers, 2002.*