

Chac Mool
by Carlos Fuentes
Translated by Jonah Katz

Not too long ago, Filbert died by drowning in Acapulco. It happened during All Saints' week. Although he'd been dismissed from his job in the Ministry, Filbert couldn't resist the bureaucratic temptation to go, same as every year, to the German *pensión*, to eat sauerkraut sweetened by the sweat of the tropical kitchen, to dance on the Saturday of glory in La Quebrada, and to feel himself a "regular" in the dark anonymity of evening on the beach of Hornos. Clearly, we know that in his youth he had swum well, but now, at forty, and in as bad shape as he seemed to be; to try to cover, and at midnight, such a distance! Frau Müller wouldn't permit his vigil –such an old client– to be held in the *pensión*. On the contrary, that night she organized a dance on the little suffocated terrace, while Filbert waited, very pallid in his box, for the morning truck to depart the terminal, and passed the first night of his new life accompanied by baskets and bundles. When I arrived, early, to watch over the shipment of the coffin, Filbert was under a mountain of coconuts; the driver said we should arrange him quickly on the awning and cover him with tarps, so that the passengers wouldn't get frightened, and to make sure we wouldn't bring a curse on the voyage.

We left Acapulco, still in the breeze. Toward Tierra Colorada the heat and light came to life. Over a breakfast of eggs and sausage, I opened Filbert's briefcase, retrieved the day before, along with his other belongings, from the Müllers' *pensión*. Two hundred pesos. An old newspaper; lottery stubs; a one-way ticket –only one way?–, and the cheap notebook, with pages divided into squares and covers of marble paper.

I ventured to read it, in spite of the curves, the stench of vomit, and a certain natural sentiment of respect for the private life of my deceased friend. It would record – yes, I started with that– our everyday work in the office; maybe I would find out why he'd been in decline, neglecting his duties, why he was dictating official documents without feeling, or number, or "effective suffrage."* Why, in the end, he had run away, forsaking a pension, with no regard for the payrolls.

"Today I went to fix up all that business about my pension. The lawyer was very friendly. I left there so happy that I decided to spend five pesos in a café. It's the same one we went to when we were young and that nowadays I never enter, because it reminds me that I could afford more luxuries at twenty than I can at forty. In those days, we'd all been on the same plane, we would have rejected with energy any negative opinions about our comrades; in fact we waged war on those in the house who even mentioned bad breeding or lack of elegance. I knew that many (perhaps the most humble) would go very far, and here, in school, they would forge the lasting friendships in whose company we would cross the wild seas. No, it wasn't like that. There were no rules. Many of the humble ones stayed there, many went further than we could have predicted at those lively, friendly gatherings. Others, we who seemed to have all the promise, we remained

* "Effective suffrage, not reelection!" was the slogan with which Francisco Madero and the Mexican revolutionaries opposed the reelection of General Porfirio Díaz. The allusion is ironic, now that the revolutionary slogan has been transformed, according to the text, into a phrase devoid of meaning, which is ritually appended to official documents.

in the middle of the road, disembowelled in an extracurricular test, isolated by an invisible trench from those who triumphed and from those who never accomplished anything. Finally, today I came back to sit in the seats, modernized –also, like the barricade of an invasion, a soda-fountain— and pretended to read briefs. I saw many of them, changed, amnesiac, retouched by neon light, prosperous. With the café that I almost didn't recognize, with the city itself, they had been chiselling themselves out to a rhythm different than mine. No, they no longer recognized me, or didn't want to. At the most –one or two— a fat, quick hand on the shoulder. *Bye, old man, take it easy.* Between them and me intervened the eighteen holes of the Country Club. I hid myself in the briefs. There paraded past me all the years of big dreams, of happy predictions, and also, all the omissions that impeded their realization. I felt the anguish of not being able to put my fingers in the past and fit together the pieces of some abandoned puzzle; but the toy chest is being forgotten, and in the long run, who knows where they've come to rest, all the tin soldiers, the helmets, the wooden swords. Such cherished disguises, they were nothing more than that. And, nonetheless, there had been constancy, discipline, devotion to duty. Had that not been enough, or did it suffice? I was struck, on occasion, by the memory of Rilke. The great payback for the adventure of youth must be death; young people, we should do away with all our secrets. Today, I wouldn't have to return my gaze to the cities of salt. Five pesos? Two for the tip."

"Pepe, apart from his passion for commercial law, enjoys theorizing. He saw me leave the cathedral and together we walked to the Palace. He's a non-believer, but that's not enough for him: in half a block he had to fabricate a theory. That if I weren't a Mexican, I wouldn't worship Christ, and –no, look, it seems evident. Here come the Spanish and they propose that you worship a God, killed by a coagulation, with a wounded flank, nailed on a cross. Sacrificed. An offering. What could be more natural than accepting a sentiment so close to your whole ceremonial, to your whole life...? Imagine, instead, that Mexico had been conquered by Buddhists or Mohammedans. It's not conceivable that our Indians would venerate an individual who died of indigestion. But a God who, it's not enough that they sacrifice themselves for him, but also that they tear his heart out; caramba! Check-mate to Huitzilopochtli!* Christianity, in its warm, bloody feeling, of sacrifice and liturgy, turns into a natural and novel prolongation of the indigenous religion. The aspects of charity, love, and the other cheek, in turn, are rejected. And everything in Mexico is that: you have to kill men to be able to believe in them.

"Pepe knew my affinity, since my youth, for certain forms of indigenous Mexican art. I collect statuettes, idols, pottery. My weekends are spent in Tlaxcala, in Teotihuacán. Perhaps for this reason, he likes to relate all the theories he elaborates for my consumption back to these themes. It's certain that I've been looking for a reasonable replica of Chac Mool** for some time, and today Pepe tells me about a place in La Lagunilla where they're selling one of stone, and cheap, it seems. I'm going to go on Sunday.

"Some joker dyed the cooler-water in the office red, with the consequent disruption of work. I've had to bring it to the attention of the director, who just laughed a

* God of war, the main god in the Aztec pantheon.

** Mayan god of rain, especially important in the arid Yucatan region.

lot. The guilty party took advantage of this circumstance to make sarcastic comments to me all day, all having to do with water. Ch...!”

“Today, Sunday, I took the opportunity to go to la Lagunilla. I found the Chac Mool in the junk shop to which Pepe directed me. It’s a precious piece, of natural dimension, and although the merchant insists on its originality, I doubt it. The stone is common, but that doesn’t lessen the elegance of the posture or the solidity of the block. The disloyal vendor has smeared tomato sauce on its belly to convince tourists of the sculpture’s bloody authenticity.

“The move to my house cost me more than the acquisition. But it’s here now, for the moment in the basement while I reorganize my trophy room to make space for it. These figures need sun, vertical and fiery; that was their element and condition. He loses a lot in the darkness of the basement, like a simple mass of agony, and his grimace seems to reproach me for denying him light. The shop-owner had a light bulb directly above the sculpture, which clipped all the sharp edges, and gave a more friendly expression to my Chac Mool. I’ll have to follow his example.”

“I woke up this morning and the plumbing was broken. Carelessly, I left the water running in the kitchen and it overflowed, ran across the floor and went into the basement, without my noticing. The Chac Mool resists the humidity, but my suitcases suffered; and all this, on a work day, made me late to the office.

“They came, at last, to fix the pipes. The suitcases, twisted. And the Chac Mool, with moss on the base.”

“I woke up at one in the morning: I had heard a terrible moan. I thought maybe thieves. Pure imagination.”

“The nocturnal laments have continued. I don’t know what to attribute it to, but I’m nervous. Just to make matters worse, the plumbing is broken once again, and the rains have dripped inside, inundating the basement.”

“The plumber isn’t coming, I’m desperate. As for the Department of the Federal District, it’s better not to talk about it. This is the first time that the rainwater refuses to obey the drain-pipes and has drained into the basement. The moans have stopped; if it’s not one thing, it’s another.”

“They dried the basement out, and the Chac mool is covered in moss. It lends him a grotesque aspect, because the whole mass of the sculpture looks like it’s suffering from a green rash, save the eyes, which have remained of stone. I’ll set aside Sunday to scrape the moss. Pepe recommended that I switch to an apartment, and one on the top floor, in order to avoid these aquatic tragedies. But I can’t leave this big old house, certainly too big for me alone, a bit mournful in its Porfirian architecture, but it’s the only inheritance and memory of my parents. I don’t think I could stand to see a soda-fountain with a jukebox in the basement and a house of decorations on the ground floor.”

“I went to scrape the moss off of the Chac Mool with a spatula. The moss seemed to have become part of the stone already; the work took more than an hour, and only at six in the afternoon could I finish. It wasn’t possible to see in the half-light, and upon finishing the job, with my hand I followed the contours of the stone. Every time I scraped the block it seemed to grow softer. I didn’t want to believe it: it was almost a paste. That shopkeeper from la Lagunilla has taken me for a ride. His pre-Columbian sculpture is pure plaster, and the humidity will end up ruining it. I’ve put some rags over it, and tomorrow I’ll transfer it to the room upstairs, before it suffers a complete deterioration.”

“The rags are on the floor. Incredible. Once again I touched the Chac Mool. It’s hardened, but not turned back to stone. I don’t even want to write it: there is, in the torso, something of the texture of flesh, I squeeze it like rubber, feel that something is running through that reclining figure... I went back down in the night. No doubt remains: the Chac Mool has hair on his arms.”

“This had never happened to me before. Messing official matters up in the office: I issued a purchase order that hadn’t been authorized, and the director had to call it to my attention. I almost let myself be rude to my co-workers. I’ll have to go see a doctor, to find out if it’s imagination, or delirium, or what, and rid myself of that damned Chac Mool.”

Up to here, the handwriting of Filbert was the old version, the one that so many times I saw on memoranda and forms, wide and oval-shaped. The entry from August 25th seemed to be written by another person. At some times like a child, laboriously separating each letter; at others, nervous, to the point of declining into unintelligibility. There are three missing days, and the story continues:

“Everything is so natural; and later, what’s real is believed in..., but real it is, more than what’s believed in by me. A water-cooler is real, and more, because we take more notice of its existence, or presence, if a prankster dyes the water red... Real drag from an ephemeral cigarette, real monstrous image in a funhouse mirror, real, aren’t they, all of the dead, present and forgotten...? If a man walked around Heaven in a dream, and they gave him a flower as proof that he’d been there, and if upon waking up he found that flower in his hand..., then what...? Reality: one day they broke it in a thousand pieces, the head came to rest over there, the tail here, and we don’t know about more than one of the severed parts of its great body. Free and fictitious ocean, only real when it imprisons a snail. Up until three days ago, my reality only was one to the degree of having been erased today: it was a reflex movement, routine, memory, briefcase. And later, like the earth that one day trembles so that we remember its power, or death that will arrive, reprimanding the forgetfulness of all my life, another reality presents itself that we knew was there, homeless, that must shake us to make itself alive and present. I thought, anew, that it was imagination: the Chac Mool, smooth and elegant, had changed color in a night; yellow, almost gold, he seemed to indicate to me that he was a God, lax for the moment, with the knees less tensed than before, with the smile more benevolent. And yesterday, at last, a startled awakening, with that frightening certainty that there are two breaths in the night, that in the darkness there beat more pulses than one’s own. Yes, steps are heard on the staircase. Nightmare. Go back to sleep... I don’t know how long I

pretended to sleep. When I opened my eyes again, dawn still hadn't come. The room smelled of horror, of incense and blood. With a black gaze, I scanned the bedroom, coming to rest on two orifices of blinking light, on two flickers, cruel and yellow.

Almost breathless I turned on the light.

There was Chac Mool, upright, smiling, ocher, with his belly flesh-colored. Two eyes paralyzed me, almost cross-eyed, very close to the triangular nose. The bottom teeth, biting the upper lip, unmoving; only the luster of the square headpiece on the abnormally voluminous head suggested life. Chac Mool advanced toward the bed; then it started to rain.”

I remember that at the end of August, Filbert was dismissed from the Ministry, with a public reprimand from the director, and rumors of madness and even theft. This I didn't believe. Yes, I'd seen some pretty whacked-out memos, asking the Senior Official if water could be smelled, offering his services to the Secretary of Hydraulic Resources to make it rain in the desert. I didn't know how to explain it to myself; I thought that the exceptionally strong rains, from that summer, had enervated him. Or that some moral depression must have been produced by life in that big, ancient house, with half the rooms under lock and key and covered in dust, without servants or family life. The following notes are from the end of September:

“Chac Mool can be nice when he wants to..., a glug-glug of delightful water... He knows fantastic stories about monsoons, equatorial rains, the punishment of the deserts; every plant derives from his mythic paternity: the willow, his long-lost son; the lotuses, his spoiled ones; his mother-in-law: the cactus. What I can't stand is the smell, inhuman, that emanates from that flesh that isn't flesh, from the ragged flaming shoes of antiquity. With a strident laugh, the Chac Mool reveals how he was discovered by Le Plongeon, and put, physically, in contact with men of other symbols. His spirit has lived in pitcher and storm, naturally; his stone is something else, and to have taken it from its hiding place is artificial and cruel. I think that Chac Mool will never forgive it. He knows about the imminence of the aesthetic deed.

“I've had to get him scouring soap so he can wash his stomach, which the merchant put ketchup on, thinking he was Aztec. He didn't seem to like my question about his relation to Tláloc,* and, when he gets mad, his teeth, in and of themselves repulsive, grow sharp and glint. The first few days, he went down to sleep in the basement; since yesterday, in my bed.”

“The dry season has begun. Yesterday, from the hall where I sleep now, I started to hear the same hoarse wails from the beginning, followed by terrible noises. I went up and cracked open the door of the bedroom: the Chac Mool was breaking the lamps, the furniture; he lunged toward the door with his hands spread, and I barely had time to close it and go hide in the bathroom... Later, he came down panting and asked for water; all day he has the faucets running, there isn't a dry centimeter left in the house. I have to sleep all bundled up, and I've asked him not to drench the hall any more.¹”

* Aztec god of rain.

¹ Filbert doesn't explain in what language he converses with the Chac Mool [author's note].

“The Chac Mool inundated the hall today. Exasperated, I said that I was going to bring him back to La Lagunilla. As terrible as his laugh –horrendously distinct from any laugh of man or animal— was the smack he gave me, with that arm loaded with heavy bracelets. I must admit it: I’m his prisoner. My original idea was different: I would dominate the Chac Mool, like one dominates a toy; it was perhaps, a prolongation of my infantile security; but childhood –who said it?— is a fruit eaten by the years, and I hadn’t realized... He’s taken my clothes, and he puts on the nightgowns when he starts to shed green moss. The Chac Mool is accustomed to being obeyed, always; I, who have never needed to command, can only submit. As long as it doesn’t rain –and his magical power?— he will live angrily or irritably.”

“Today I discovered that at night the Chac Mool leaves the house. Always, at dusk, he sings a song, out of tune and ancient, older than singing itself. Later, it stops. I knocked several times at his door, and when he didn’t answer me, I dared to enter. The bedroom, which I hadn’t seen again since the day the statue tried to attack me, is in ruins, and that smell of incense and blood that has permeated the house is concentrated there. But, behind the door, there are bones: dog bones, rats and cats. This is what the Chac Mool steals in the night to sustain himself. This explains all the frightening barking at dawn.”

“February, dry. Chac Mool watches every step of mine; he’s made me telephone a restaurant so that they’ll bring me daily rice with chicken. But the severance pay from the office is going to run out soon. The inevitable happened: since the 1st, they cut the water and the light for lack of payment. But Chac has discovered a public fountain two blocks from here; every day I make ten or twelve trips for water, and he watches me from the roof. He says if I try to flee he’ll strike me down; he’s also the god of lightning. What he doesn’t know is that I’m on to his nocturnal movements... Seeing as there’s no light, I must go to bed at eight. I already should be accustomed to the Chac Mool, but a little while ago, in the darkness, I ran into him on the stairs, I felt his icy arms, the scales of his renewed skin, and I wanted to scream.

“If it doesn’t rain soon, the Chac Mool is going to change into stone again. I’ve noticed his difficulty recently in moving; sometimes he reclines for hours, paralyzed, and seems to be, once again, an idol. But these rests only give him new strength to torment me, to scratch me as if he could draw some kind of liquid from my flesh. Those friendly intervals in which he would relate old stories no longer take place; I think I notice a concentrated resentment. There have been other indications that have made me think: he’s almost finished off my wine cellar; he caresses the silk of the nightgowns; he wants me to bring a maid into the house; he’s made me teach him to use soap and lotions. I think that the Chac Mool is falling into human temptations; there’s even something old in the face that before seemed eternal. There may lie my salvation: if the Chac Mool is being humanized, maybe all his centuries of life will accumulate in an instant and he’ll be struck down. But also, here, could lie my own death: the Chac Mool won’t want me to be there for his downfall, it’s possible that he’ll want to kill me.

“Today I’ll take advantage of Chac’s nocturnal excursion in order to flee. I’ll go to Acapulco; we’ll see what can be done about acquiring a job, and await the death of the Chac Mool: yes, it’s settled; he’s gray, swollen. I need to sun myself, swim, recover my

strength. I have four hundred pesos left. I'll go to the Pensión Müller, which is cheap and comfortable. Let Chac Mool keep everything: we'll see how long he lasts without my buckets of water."

Here ends the diary of Filbert. I didn't want to think about his tale; I slept until Cuernavaca. From there to México I tried to give coherence to the screed, relate it to an excess of work, to some psychological motive. When at nine in the morning we arrived in the terminal, I couldn't even conceive of the madness of my friend. I hired a truck to carry the coffin to Filbert's house and from there to arrange his burial.

Before I could fit the key in the lock, the door was opened. A yellow Indian appeared, in a house robe, with a scarf. His appearance couldn't have been more repulsive; he gave forth an odor of cheap lotion; his face, powdered, trying to cover the wrinkles; he had his lips smeared with badly-applied lipstick, and his hair gave the impression of being dyed.

"Pardon..., did you know that Filbert had..."

"It doesn't matter; I know everything. Tell the men to bring the cadaver to the basement."