

Arrecife

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Tony is the former bassist for The Extraditables, a band from Mexico City; after years of drug addiction he is washed up. Mario Muller, the band's former lead singer and Tony's childhood friend, rescues him from drug addiction and gets him a job at a swanky resort hotel in the Yucatan as a sound engineer for the hotel aquarium. As the novel opens, one of the hotel divers, Ginger Oldenville, lies dead on the aquarium floor, a harpoon in his back. Unfortunately for the hotel PR, the diver is an American, and Tony is slowly drawn in to the mystery of why Ginger has been murdered. Tony is an unlikely hero, with a limp from a childhood accident and a missing finger, but perhaps because of his unthreatening appearance, people confide in him. Sandra, the hotel yogi trained in "rocket yoga"

and martial arts, takes him to bed and gives him a piece of hammock that was in Ginger's hand when he died, the only physical clue to the crime. When another gringo--a diver who was reportedly a friend and lover of Ginger's--is found dead with a knot from the same hammock in what appears to be an act of auto-erotic asphyxiation, the heat is on to find the culprit. Mike "Gringo" Peterson, the main owner of El Piramide Hotel, arrives from the States, and James Mallet, a representative of Atrium, the hotel's London-based investor, arrives from the UK.

An inspector from the Mexican police (who also happens to be an evangelist) is on the case as well.

It's an engaging and unusual cast of characters. Take Mario Muller, who runs the hotel. The former front-man of The Extraditables, who opened for the Velvet Underground on their Mexican tour, says, "Those were great years. We were so full of optimism that we had fun destroying ourselves. And when we finally sobered up, it wasn't worth being sober. The country had gone to hell." The youngest of a family of six, he attended the Swiss school in DF and has turned El Piramide into the only successful hotel in the fictional city of Kukulcan (Tzotzil for "feathered serpent") by offering a peculiar brand of danger-tourism; hotel guests may be "kidnapped" by actors in army fatigues and those who choose to make excursions to the Mayan pyramids may be ambushed by "guerillas" on their outings. Tony calls it "Disneyland with kidnappings." While all the other hotels in town are empty, El Piramide is full--every guest gets a wristband that provides them access to areas of the property and the coveted purple wristband (access all areas) is the most popular. But behind the scenes drugs are being trafficked to Miami via the underground rivers that surround the hotel; Ginger and his friend accidentally stumbled upon the smugglers, members of the Mexican navy, on one of their diving excursions. When Ginger reports the drug-smuggling activities to the police, who were themselves involved in the smuggling ring, someone must get rid of them, but who? Both Ginger and his friend are members of a strange club of thrill-seekers called "Cruci/Ficcion," who get a high from risking their lives, and their murders are portrayed as a gay suicide pact using techniques from the thrillseekers club. Mario, who is terminally ill with cancer, is losing his grip on the hotel and was unable to talk Ginger out of going to the authorities.

Meanwhile, James Mallet, the Brit, and Mike Peterson, the American, are at odds about the fate of the hotel. Mike wants to put the hotel into bankruptcy and use it as a money-laundering operation for drug profits. Tony confronts Mike, who makes a long, hypothetical confession to Ginger's murder over the course of a boozy afternoon. Mike says to Tony, "I like your stories, your hallucinations of multicolored lizards, your drug-induced deliria. My friends had to go to Vietnam to experience that. You fucked yourself up in your own country. This country never ceases to amaze me. Mexicans have to fuck themselves up to do well; that's why your country is so good in the paralympics." He pauses to reflect. "What does a gringo do when he fucks up his life? He destroys himself, he comes to Mexico."

Mallet, on the other hand, wants to convert El Piramide to an eco-tourist resort. He illustrates his vision by explaining to Tony, "You know how much money Al Gore had when he was Vice President of the USA and he opposed the Kyoto Accords? Two million dollars, not much in the big leagues. You know how much he's made in a decade as an ecologist? One hundred million!" He continues, "Every species has its own recourse to desperation: a horse leaps into a gorge, a whale beaches itself, human beings pack their suitcases." He's got backing from the British Council for cultural programs and he sees big profits.

Mario, however, disagrees. He tells Tony, "Europe and the US polluted up the planet while they developed their economies, but they don't want to let us do the same thing. They want to conserve plants and species in far-away places. Our lack of development is their ecology."

Mario has many secrets, and among them is the fact that he has a daughter in a local shelter for battered women, a place that impresses Tony for its "absence of sordidness and its discipline; an overwhelming sense of self-control. To stand up to horror required a different kind of suffering that was necessary, that was right, that was beyond me." The girl's mother, one of the local drug lord's girlfriends, was murdered when her affair with Mario came to light, and the little girl is now an orphan. When Mario tells Tony he is going to die, he asks him to adopt the little girl, whose name is Irene. Mario has arranged his own death, through the "Cruci/Ficcion" club that Ginger and his friend belonged too; he will be drugged and pushed out of a helicopter over the ocean. The last time Tony sees him, he is being injected with a sedative by a "doctor" Tony has never seen before.

Tony is left with no choice but to take custody of the little girl, who is escorted by a woman from the shelter whose boyfriend tried to slice her up; she is covered with scars. As they pass the signs to the military base where they will take their plane to

Mexico City, Tony reflects on a sign with the Mexican Army's motto: "Precaucion, Reaccion, Desconfianza." He thinks, "The first two words could describe any army. The third made me feel at home." When they're checked into the base by a shivering guard, Tony observes, "He must have had a fever. In another country he would have been in a hospital being treated for malaria. In the Mayan era he would have been sacrificed. In my country he was a soldier."

THE REEF is as much a novel about the decline of modern Mexico as it is a well-built literary thriller with fast-paced action; there are no loose ends. In his heart-to-heart with Tony about Ginger's murder, Mike Peterson says, "If you ask around you'll see that the governor, the opposition leader, the secretary of tourism, the whores and the holy bishop all wanted it to happen." The murder has become a metaphor for the destruction of the country. The inclusion of major characters from the US and the UK provides Villoro the opportunity to comment on the relationships between Mexico and the western powers; having spent time teaching at Princeton, Villoro knows what he is writing about and does not strike a false note. The inclusion of these characters will also make the book easy for foreign readers to relate to.

Villoro won the Herralde prize for his novel EL TESTIGO in 2004. Now in his fifties, he has written over thirty books of fiction and non-fiction; he was a DJ in the seventies in Mexico and Tony, the rock-n-roll survivor who narrates the novel, is every bit as authentic as the other characters in THE REEF. Could Villoro be Mexico's answer to Stieg Larsson? Hopefully the novel will be picked up for translation and he'll have his opportunity to win over the UK and US audience; I think English language readers will love it.

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