

*Houlihan's Wake*

*and other fragments of Mexico*

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## Introduction

In Houlihan's Wake, a young Irishman goes to Playa Chisme, on the Pacific coast of Mexico, determined to die, and determined to do so in a beautiful setting. But can Houlihan's death-wish do its worst in such a life-affirming place, where the lifeguards are adamant that nobody shall turn their massive party to celebrate a whole year without anyone drowning in Playa Chisme's lethal rip-tides into someone else's pitiful wake?

Houlihan's Wake is accompanied by further stories and poems set in "Playa Chisme" and elsewhere in the country to provide a rich array of Fragments of Mexico.

## *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 clambers 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.

[end]

## *Phoenix, Mexico*

Ghostlike invaders razed Tenochtitlán  
but not the southern cities:  
Teotihuacán, Monte Alban, Chichén Itzá,  
each fell under the weight  
of its own firmament as the Gods,  
the Kings, the warriors tumesced on blood  
drawn from children, women, men,  
leeches the blood-soaked, rain-starved land  
beyond all hope of balance.

The Gods re-trenched, Kings downsized,  
cities and temples accrued dust.  
No longer were warriors' greatest massacres  
celebrated in stone; village life and death  
became again the single option.

That sacrificial stone,  
interred in the pyramid's heart,  
dried in a sudden thirst that stretched  
through centuries of dark, damp air.  
In the heat outside, new Kings,  
new Gods, new horrors raged.

There were survivors; their day draws near.  
The stones they heaved or cut  
elicit reverence from strangers.  
The endurance of such people:  
Mixtec, Zapotec, Locandon, Maya,  
globalises into common knowledge.

Their demands for dignity reverberate  
in Turin, Tokyo, Cape Town,  
gather momentum on the longest continent,  
where kings and gods are learning, slowly,  
to look, listen, think and share.

## Murals

José Clemente Orozco sucks out my brain,  
those remnant cells not addled  
by ten hours' flight sou' west from winter,  
splatters them over the orphanage ceiling,  
fills their essence with colour and meaning.

My body lies flat on its back directly below,  
dislocated by jet-lag and head-cold,  
transfixed by the nightmare knowledge  
on the multi-hued human-stained walls:

credulity, cruelty, refusal to learn;  
readiness to follow, proclivity to stab;  
hatred, arrogance, tragedy;  
religion, exclusion, despair;  
surrender to any higher power  
that grants the right to kill.

Blood sweats from the heavy wooden cross  
King Philip hugs to his groin,  
anointing with red tears  
a troop of guided tourists  
who notice only each other.

I rise like an unburied Lazarus,  
stagger into a quiet cloister courtyard,  
marvel at an unperturbed sky,  
reach for the light on your skin.

## *Leaking Grail*

Early jacaranda colours the scented air,  
wrought-iron benches massage our jet-lag  
in a round village square centred  
on a bunting-bedecked bandstand.

Lakewards, a man above a shop strikes  
hammer blows to the façade below his feet;  
its bright brick and stucco crumble. Roadwards,  
work-gangs sweat to inch the grey innards  
of a foetus hotel higher. Southwards,  
the silver water that lures us ageing gringos  
recedes to ease the thirst of Megalopolis,  
while invasive hyacinth stakes out more metres  
for its final resting place.

## Missionary

### I.

Elke sets out her limbs  
over Playa Chisme's sand;  
fitters and joiners intuit the call  
to her expert assembly line.

Dark shoulders stoop to conquer;  
firm hands do as they're told;  
lifeguards inspect her for danger, close-up:  
beached Venus, pale as an overturned turtle.

Chismera housewives spit full and loud  
at husbands' empty shadows;  
girlfriends hone nails to talons;  
Elke flirts, blameless as afterbirth.

### II.

Wheelchairs resound on red-earth paths,  
overlaying laughter from within;  
paradise's emissary, surf-soaked mist,  
welcomes them with joy.

Age has yet to set much mark  
on pushing volunteers from ends of earth,  
nor on their charges, who imbibe the universe  
in a different light, if they see at all.

From the cool crisp edge of another world,  
Elke has come to bestow her skills,  
flex for them her full firm figure  
in servitude, as therapy.

### III.

The wheel-chaired children are loud at play;  
nearby Elke flips a page.  
The Maya men will soon be back  
to test her concentration.

The nightclub toilet stinks. Lupita  
swings it open, meets Elke's gaze,  
sees Lucy's dark locks locked tight  
between light-tanned thighs.

A pacific blue moon dazzles  
Playa Chisme's early risers, not Elke:  
she's gone on to the next hidden port;  
the job was not for her.

## *Mazunte Jazz Hurts*

The guitar awakens to Hamish's tuning touch.  
Hamish the outsider: youngster, beanpole, foreigner.  
Mazunte's air is heavy with coastal flowers and Dolores.  
He knows she is there.

#1

Hamish disburses his allotted notes,  
thrills to the skill of the tenor sax beside him,  
follows his bandleader's instructions to stick to the score.

#2

Hamish glimpses Dolores. Has she changed?  
Hair bleached to a lighter charcoal,  
self-composed, at ease in town clothes,  
she slips beyond his vision.

#3.

Hamish's notes slide into urgency,  
playing for Dolores,  
calling her to his orbit.

#4

Hamish has become technique,  
Dolores forgotten.  
Now the drummer plays off him,  
indulging in riffs unheard.  
Band members swap expectant looks,  
Hamish oblivious.

#5,6,7.

The players urge each other on  
with twists of improvisation.  
Tenor sax dives deeper into the music and leads it  
to places new. Hamish follows him,  
and then is following no-one,  
rearranging the tropes of the genre to outline new possibilities and then  
explore them: no longer technique  
but raw feeling.

Their music stops rather than ends. Applause takes its place.  
The musicians stare  
at each other,  
exhausted,  
elated,  
astonished.

Hamish threads his way to Dolores. She is not alone.  
He takes her aside, implores her.  
She snaps.  
*Sorry. Just not my type.*  
The world stops turning.

His blood has frozen in his veins.  
His liver has turned to lead.  
His head hurts.

The bandleader approaches Hamish  
like a business-touting Charon.  
Hell to pay for disobedience.

*We have to talk.*  
Hell's gondolier beams.  
*Let's get us some beer,*  
*fix you some solo time*  
*for our Oaxaca gig.*  
Hamish is back, in a world that turns  
towards light.

## *Dolores*

He knows she is there.

The air is heavy with the aroma of coastal flowers and the Pacific humidity he associates with Dolores. The guitar awakes to Hamish's touch as he tunes it. The audience looks bigger than those he is used to.

Hamish felt very lucky when the leader told the band they would be playing the Jazz Festival at Zuntema, just along the coast from Playa Chisme, where he had met Dolores. He was sure she would come, for the rare treat of live jazz, if not for him. She had captivated Hamish by her easy sociability, by her height, which matched his, by her being at home in her own skin even amongst the lost souls of Playa Chisme.

Hamish, though, failed to prise Dolores away from the surfer. Four long months have passed since then: plenty of time for Dolores to have grown out of him, or tired of him.

The act before the Oaxaca Jazz Ensemble is playing. Its music barely creeps into Hamish's awareness. He thinks of the music the Ensemble is to play, and suffuses it into his mind with the essence and the allure of Dolores.

Now it is they who are playing. Hamish produces his allotted notes. He would love to follow the tenor sax beside him into the heights and beyond them, but his instructions are to stick to the score and not try to show off his technical skills. Those skills had brought him invitations first to jam with the Ensemble and then to join them, an honour for a musician barely out of his teens that recognised his Oaxaqueno status despite frozen-north birth and features. Hamish is happy to do what they tell him.

At the end of their second number, he catches sight of Dolores. Has she changed? Her hair has bleached to a lighter brown. She is as self-composed as ever, at ease in town clothes. She slips out of his vision amongst the families replenishing plates and glasses.

Into their third number; his playing takes on an urgency. He is playing for Dolores, of course, calling to her, urging her into his orbit. By the fourth number, he is not showcasing his technique, he is his technique. Dolores is forgotten. The drummer starts to play off him, echoing Hamish's chords in new riffs. Expectant looks are exchanged amongst the band, though Hamish is oblivious to them. They urge each other on with flickers of improvisation. The tenor sax dives deeper into the music and leads it in a new direction.

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