

STEVEN POPKES

The Birds of Isla Mujeres

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AFTERWARD, IT WAS NEVER the people she remembered, never faces or bodies or voices --even Alfredo's. It was always the wind, blowing from the west side of the island, and the frigate birds, balanced on their wingtips against the sky. They flew high above her, so black and stark they seemed made of leather or scales, too finely drawn to be feathered.

It was March, the beginning of the rainy season, and she had come to Isla Mujeres to leave her husband. That she had done this some half a dozen times before did not escape her and she had a kind of despairing fatalism about it.

Probably this time, too, she would return. Her name was Jean Summat. Her husband, Marc, lived the professor's life in Boston. She, it was supposed, was to live the role of professor's wife. This was something she had never quite accepted. Isla Mujeres. Island of Women.

She sat in a small pier cafe that jutted out into the water, waiting for her first meal on the island. In a few minutes it came. A whole fish stared glassily up at her from the plate. Delicately, she began to carve small pieces from it, and ate. She glanced up and a Mexican man in a Panama hat smiled at her. She looked back to her food, embarrassed.

Boston was cold right now and

covered with a wet snow as raw as butcher's blood. But here in Mexico, it was warm. More importantly, it was cheap and people's lives here were still enmeshed in basics, not intricately curved in academic diplomacy.

She left the restaurant and stood on the pier watching the birds, feeling the warm heavy wind, sour with the hot smell of the sea. The late afternoon sun was masked with low clouds and in the distance was a dark blue rain. She had a room, money, and time.

THE AVENIDA RUEDA was clotted with vendors selling Mayan trinkets, blankets, pots, T-shirts, and ice cream. Several vendors tried to attract her attention with an "Amiga!" but she

ignored them. A Mexican dressed in a crisp suit and Panama hat sat in an outdoor cafe and sipped his drink as he watched her. Just watched her.

Lots of Mexicans wear such hats, she told herself. Still, he made her nervous and she left the street to return to her room. On the balcony she watched the frigate birds and the people on the beach. Jean swam in the warm water of Playa de Cocoa. When she came from the water she saw the man watching her from one of the cabañas as he sipped a Coke. She walked up to him. "Why are you following me?"

The man sipped his Coke and looked back at her. "No entiende." She looked at him carefully. "That's a lie."

There was a long moment of tension. He threw back his head and laughed. "Es verdad."

"Why --what the hell are you doing?"

"You are very beautiful, Señora."

"Jesus!"

"You need a man."

"I have a man." Or half a man. Or maybe more than a man. Do I still have him? Do I want him? Did I ever?

"With specifications?"

She stared at him.

Hector led her through the rubble at the end of the Avenida Hidalgo to a small concrete house nearly identical to all the other concrete houses on the island. It was surrounded by a wall. Set into the top of the wall were the jagged

spikes of broken soda bottles. She looked down the street. The other houses were built the same. There was a burnt-out car leaning against one wall, and a thin dog stared at her, his eyes both hungry and protective.

Inside, it smelled damp. It was dark for a moment, then he turned on a blue fluorescent light that lit the room like a chained lightning bolt. Leaning against the wall was a tall, long-haired and heavily built man with Mayan features. He did not move.

What am I doing here?

"This is Alfredo." Hector was looking at her with a considering expression. She shook her head. The air in the room seemed thick, lifeless, cut off from the

world. "Alfredo?"

"Alfredo. I show you." Hector opened a suitcase and took out a box with a complex control panel. He flipped two switches and turned a dial and the box hummed. Alfredo pushed himself away from the wall and looked around.

"Good God." She stared at him. Alfredo was beautiful, with a high forehead and strong lips. His body was wide and taut, the muscles rippling as he moved. Hector touched a button and he became absolutely still. "You like him?"

She turned to Hector startled. She'd forgotten he was there. "What is this?"

"Ah! An explanation." He spoke in a deep conspiratorial whisper.

"Deep in the mountains north of

Mexico City is a great research laboratory. They have built many of these --andros? Synthetics?"

"Androids."

"Of course. They are stronger and more beautiful than mortal men. But the church discovered it and forced them to close it down. The church is important here --"

"That's a lie."

Hector shrugged. "The Señora is correct. Alfredo was a prisoner in the Yucatan. Condemned to die for despicable crimes. They did not kill him, however. Instead, they removed his mind and inlaid his body with electrical circuits. He is now more than a man --"

"That's another lie."

"The Señora sees most clearly." He paused a moment. "You have heard of the Haitian zombie? The Mayans had a similar process. My country has only recently perfected it, coupling it with the most advanced of scientific --"

Jean only stared at him.

He stopped, then shrugged. "What does it matter, Señora? He is empty. His mind does not exist. He will --imprint? Is that the correct word? --on anyone I choose."

"This is a trick."

"You are so difficult to convince. Let me show you his abilities." Hector manipulated the controls and Alfredo leaped forward and caught himself on one hand, holding himself high in the air

with the strength of one arm. He flipped forward onto his feet. Alfredo picked up a branch from a pile of kindling and twisted it in both hands. There was no expression on his face but the muscles in his forearms twisted like snakes, the tendons like dark wires. The branch broke with a sudden gunshot report. Hector stopped Alfredo at attention before them. "You see? He is more than man." She shook her head. "What kind of act is this?"

"No act. I control him from this panel. The --master? maestro? --would not need this." Control. Such control.

Hector seemed uncertain for a moment. "You wish to see still more? You are unsure of how he is

controlled?" He thought for a moment. "Let me show you a feature." In the stark light and shadows, she had not noticed Alfredo was nude. The Mayan turned into the light.

"There are several choices one could make when using Alfredo." Hector manipulated the box.

"Pequeño."

Alfredo had a normal sized erection.

She wanted to look away and could not. The Mayan face was before her, dark, strong, and blank.

"Medio," said Hector softly.

She looked again and the erection was twice as large, pulsing to Alfredo's breathing.

"Y monstruoso!" cried Hector.

Alfredo looked fit to be a bull, a goat, or some other animal. There was never any expression in Alfredo's eyes.

"Y nada," said Hector. And Alfredo's erection wilted and disappeared. She couldn't breathe. She wanted to run, to hide from Alfredo, but she didn't want to be anywhere else.

"You are pleased, Señora?" Hector stood beside her.

Jean tried to clear her head. She looked away from both of them. No man could fake this. It was real, a marvelous control, a total subjugation. Was this what she had wanted all this time?

"A very nice show." She took a deep breath. "How much do I owe you ? "

"You owe me nothing, Señora."

Hector bowed to her. "But Alfredo is for sale." When she did not answer immediately, he continued. "He imprints on the owner, Señora. Then voice commands are sufficient. He will show initiative if you desire it, or not. He is intelligent, but only in your service."

"But you have the controls."

"They do not operate once imprinting occurs."

Crazy. Ridiculous.

"How much?" she heard herself asking.

Alfredo followed her home, mute, below the birds and the sky. She could smell him on the evening wind, a clean, strong smell.

"Do you speak?" she asked as he

followed her up the steps to her room. Alfredo did not answer for a moment. "Yes."

She asked him no more questions that night.

His mind was like a thunderstorm: thick, murky, dark, shot through intermittently by lightning. These were not blasts of intelligence or insight but the brightness of activity, the heat of flesh, the electricity of impulse. He was no more conscious of what happened or what caused his actions than lightning was conscious of the friction between clouds. Occasionally, very occasionally, a light came through him, like the sun through the distant rain, and things stilled within him. He was a chained

thunderbolt, unaware of his chains.

She copulated with Alfredo almost continuously the first three days. It was as if a beast had been loosed within her. If she wanted him to stroke her thus, he did so. If she wanted him to bite her there, it was done. Something broke within her and she tried to devour him. It was only when she fully realized she owned him, that he would be there as long as she wanted him, that this abated. Then it was like coming up from underwater, and she looked around her. Alfredo had cost her almost everything she had, nearly all the money she would have used to start a new life. She could not go back to Marc now. Perhaps buying Alfredo had been an act ensuring

that. She didn't know. There were jobs on the island for Americans, but they were tricky and illegal to get. At the end of the first day of a waitress job, she came to their room tired and angry. Alfredo was sitting on the edge of the bed staring out the window. It was suddenly too much for her.

"You! I do this to feed you." She stared at him. He stared back with his dark eyes.

"I can't go home because of you." She slapped him. There was no response. She turned away from him and looked out at the sea and the birds. This wasn't going to work. Wait.

Jean turned to him. "Can you work?"

He ponderously turned his head

toward her. "Yes."

"You do speak Spanish?"

"Sí."

"Come with me."

She looked through her toilet bag and found a pair of scissors. They were almost too long for what she wanted but they would do. The fluorescent light in the bathroom glittered off the steel as she cut his hair, a sharp, pointed light. After a few moments, she turned his head up toward her. The hair was nearly right. His cheek was smooth against her hand. Impulsively, she kissed him and he moved toward her but she pushed him back down in the chair. "All right," she said finally. "Take a shower." He started the water and she watched him for a long

minute. After that, she thought, after that, we'll see.

ALFREDO FOUND a job almost immediately and made enough to keep them both alive. Now, Jean lay on the beach and tanned. Alfredo worked hard and his strength was such that he could work through the siesta.

He had only to watch a thing done and then could do it. The workers on Isla Mujeres grumbled. Jean shrewdly noticed this and sent him across the bay into Cancún where the wages were higher. Two weeks after this they had enough to move into the El Presidente Hotel. That night she looked at him. "Ever the sophisticate," she murmured. "Go get clothes fit to wear here."

Alfredo did and she went to dinner in the Caribe on his arm. He looked so strong and dignified the other women in the room looked at him, then away. Jean felt a thrill go through her. Over dinner she murmured instructions which he executed flawlessly. She felt quite fond of him. Over coffee, the waiter brought them a message from a Lydia Conklin and friend, inviting them for cocktails.

She read it. Alfredo did not --yet --read and stared away toward the open doorway of the bar.

"What are you looking at?" she asked.

He turned to her. "Nothing."

"Look around the room regularly like a normal person."

He did not answer but instead

watched the room as if bored or waiting for the check. Jean read the note again.

She shrugged and signed the check. The two of them went to the bar for a drink.

"Excuse me." A woman stood up in front of them. "I am Lydia Conklin." Jean looked first at her, then at Alfredo. "I'm Jean Summat. I got your note--"

"I was dying for American speech." As she spoke she only glanced at Jean. Her eyes were full of Alfredo. "You don't know what it's like." Now, she turned to Jean. "Or perhaps you do."

"I've been here a few weeks."

"Señora Summat."

That voice Jean knew. Behind and to her left was Hector. "Good evening,

Hector."

"You know Hector too?" Lydia said idly. "How wonderful."

"Sit with us, Señora. Please." Hector pulled out a chair for her. Jean looked at Alfredo. Alfredo paused a moment, watched her closely, then sat across from her at the table. Hector sat next to Jean. He leaned toward Lydia. "Señora Summat, Alfredo, and myself were business partners."

"'Were'? "Lydia raised her eyebrows.

"The business is accomplished. It is of no matter."

Jean interrupted. "Are you down for a vacation, Lydia?"

Lydia shrugged. "In a way. I'm down for my health. This last year I went

mad." Hector laughed. Jean smiled uneasily. Lydia shrugged again.

"Señora Conklin makes a good joke."

"It was, I suppose." Lydia sipped her drink. "I came down here two years ago and fell in love with a Mayan. I'm back to see if lightning can strike twice."

Something in her face was hard to look at for more than a moment. Jean looked away. "What was the Mayan's name?"

"Alberto. Hector is helping me find another."

Hector seemed nervous. He turned to Jean. "I introduce Señora Conklin to eligible men --"

"He pimps for me." Lydia lit a cigarette. "Your Mayan reminds me of

Alberto."

"Alfredo. His name is Alfredo." Jean looked at Alfredo. His face was impassive.

"The names are almost the same." Lydia blew smoke in the air above the table.

"Did Alberto care for you?"

"He--" Lydia paused a moment " --he adored me. He was my slave."

"Señoras? Would you care for more drinks?" Hector was perspiring now. Jean and Lydia stared at one another.

Jean turned to Alfredo. "What do you think of this?"

Alfredo did not speak for a long minute, watching the two women. Then he smiled at Jean. "A Mayan is no

woman's slave." And he laughed.

Lydia stared at him with an open mouth. Hector frowned.

Jean looked at them both in triumph. "I suspect that may be the definitive Mayan answer. Alfredo, would you take me to my room?"

Alfredo stood quickly and led her away.

Jean was thinking: What is in him? What is in there?

It was June now and the island was somewhat hotter and much more humid. The frigate birds flew low over the buildings as if the wet air could not support them. The Mexican fishermen brought in great nets of snapper and bonita. The American sport fishermen

disappeared in search of marlin and sailfish.

Lydia Conklin stayed. She always seemed to be watching Alfredo. Hector seemed to leave the island regularly but he always returned. Jean fancied she could tell when either was around just by the feeling of eyes on Alfredo.

Often Lydia would invite them to dinner, or cards, or for drinks. Usually Jean turned her down. Sometimes, though, they would go and Jean never could figure out why. There was a dance here, a dangerous ballet that attracted her.

One evening, they were drinking in Lydia's apartment in the Presidente.

"You know," Lydia began, swirling

tequila in a brandy snifter. "I've been seeing you both for a couple of months now. I don't know what Alfredo does. What do you do, Alfredo?" Alfredo sat back in his chair and looked at Jean, then back to Lydia. "Do?"

"How do you support yourself?" For a moment, Alfredo did not seem to understand. "I do contract work."

Jean glanced at him over the rim of her glass. Good God. What have I got here?

"Contract work?" Lydia came over to him. "Did you build these great strong arms at a desk job?" Alfredo shook his head. "I do nothing with a desk. I work with bricklayers. Tilers. Those who build walls and houses."

"Ah!" Lydia leaned back. "You are a contractor."

"That's what I said."

"This is how you support her? This is what she left her husband for?" Lydia stiffened and swayed, looked down at him. "Christ, you have sunk low."

Jean didn't know which of them Lydia was speaking to.

Alfredo looked at Jean and suddenly there was pleading in his eyes.

"I think it's time we left, Lydia." Jean carefully put down her drink. "Thanks and all." Lydia threw her glass against the wall shattering it. "I'm sick of this! I owned him before you --then, I left him. Hector sold him to me first! Do you understand? To me!" She knelt before

him. "Alberto. Tell me you remember me. Tell me I didn't come back for nothing."

Jean couldn't move.

Alfredo put out his hand and touched her cheek. He traced the line of her jaw, then held her head in both hands. He tilted her face toward his. Her tears were clearly visible now, hot and pouring. He looked at her closely, staring, searching her face with his eyes.

"I don't know you," he said softly and let her go.

She fell at his feet and started sobbing.

Alfredo took Jean's arm and led her out. "It's been a lovely evening," Jean said as they left. Later: in bed.

It took her a long time to catch her breath afterward. She was covered in a light sheen of sweat that made her cold in the air conditioning. "What are you?" she asked quietly. He did not answer.

She drew the tip of her finger down his chest. "Answer me. What are you?" He looked at her in the dark and she could see a glow in his eyes. "I don't know." YOU COULD NOT call it consciousness, for consciousness determines its own needs and he could not do that. He was predetermined. He was programmed. Neither could you call him a person, for a person has a complex assortment of drives that come from many sources. His drives were simple and their source was singular.

He was a tool: intelligent, willful, resourceful. A tool aimed at a specific purpose. Jean followed him to Cancún.

She sat in the far back section of the crowded ferry, away from him. There had been a storm the day before and though the air was clear, the resulting seas kept the big automobile ferry at dock. But the little ferry that carried only people plowed through the sea. It was close and hot aboard the boat and it stank of animals, sweat, rotten fish, diesel fumes. The sea pitched them back and forth until Jean was sure she was about to be sick. A large rip in the fabric covering the deck rails showed the bobbing horizon and she stared at it until she had the nausea under control.

Alfredo did not seem to notice. He sat on one of the benches leaning on his elbows. When the boat docked he hailed one of the cabs and left. Jean was barely able to hail one in time to follow him.

His cab stopped just outside the Plaza Hidalgo next to the site of a new library. Alfredo stepped out of the cab and Jean didn't recognize him at first. He'd changed in the cab. His workman's dungarees and loose shirt were gone. Now, he was wearing a tie and short-sleeved white shirt and slacks. He walked over to the contractor's office, never noticing her following him. She saw him talking with the architect in rapid-fire Spanish. He seemed to be in charge of the construction. She withdrew

before he could see her.

As Jean left the construction site she saw a woman sitting on the park bench across the street from the office. The woman smoked a cigarette and watched Alfredo through the office window. It was Lydia Conklin.

Jean moved into the shade behind her to watch.

After an hour or so, Alfredo came out with a soda and sat down with the foreman to discuss some detail of the construction. Lydia put out the cigarette and crossed the street to him. He stood to meet her. They spoke for several minutes. Suddenly, Lydia raked his face with her nails --Jean could see the blood --and left him, walking hurriedly.

Jean left hurriedly, too. She had no desire to see Lydia. Jean returned to the ferry and stood on the open deck this time, smiling, watching nothing but the open sea and the frigate birds flying in the wind.

She checked her bank account in Isla Mujeres. There were several thousand dollars more than there should have been. Alfredo must have been in this position for some time. It made her laugh softly. He is mine, Lydia. He is mine to touch, make, and mold.

The storm in him gradually calmed. The needs that drove him called out other needs, other traits. A sluggish thought blew through him, an inarticulate gale across the continents of what should

have been a mind. It shook him. It broke the back of the incoherent storm that raged in him and let in the light. He stood blind and trembling in that light, trying to speak. Jean awoke and he was not there.

She sat up suddenly and looked around the room. He stood, nude, on the balcony staring at the sea. The sliding door was open. She could smell the ocean through the air conditioning.

"Alfredo?"

He croaked something unintelligible.

She followed him out into the air. "Alfredo?" He was dripping with sweat. The moonlight made him glow. "Did you have a nightmare?" Ridiculous. Why would he have nightmares?

He turned to her and his face was wet with tears, the long scabs from Lydia's fingernails dark on his silver face. He shook his head, buried his face in his hands.

"What's going on?" She started toward him.

He looked at her in such pain she stepped back. "I am " Suddenly, Jean did not want to know. She left him and reentered the apartment. Alfredo followed her, reached out to her. She backed away. He was huge. He filled the room --she remembered the night in Hector's house, how strong he was. He was dark in the shadows of the room, looming over her.

"I am...", he repeated. "I am a man."

He reached for her again. Jean dodged him and ran to the other edge of the table. "Stay there."

"Jean...I have become a man for you."

"Stay there! That's an order!"

He followed her. They circled the table. Jean grabbed the scissors from the table and held them in front of her. "Stay away from me."

"Jean. I love you."

The moonlight struck his face and it was all shadows and silver. His eyes glowed for her, his face was transfigured by some secret knowledge. He leaped the table toward her and she fell back and he took her shoulders. She screamed and drove the scissors deep into his chest. His hands fell away from

her and she stumbled against the wall, staring at him. Alfredo touched the handles of the scissors, looked at her and began to sway, caught himself, fell down to his knees. He looked at her again and full realization of what had happened seemed to touch him. He fell on his back, twitched twice, and was still.

Jean crumpled into a chair and watched the body. Finally, she pulled the scissors from his chest and washed them in the bathroom until they were clean. She drew her finger down the blades. Not sharp. Not sharp at all. But sharp enough. She smiled. She felt filled somehow. Satisfied. Jean packed carefully and when she was done, she

kissed Alfredo good-bye on his cold lips and walked down to the ferry dock. She reached the Cancún airport in time for the early morning flight to New Orleans. From there, she took a flight to Boston.

As she lay back in her seat watching the clouds move beneath her, she thought about Marc: if he had waited for her, if he had divorced her. She would like to start again with him if she could, but she would survive if she couldn't. She felt alive with possibility.

Jean fell asleep and dreamed of frigate birds circling endlessly above her. Hector found him an hour after dawn. "Mierda," he said when he saw the blood. "That she could" He shook his head as he opened the suitcase he

had with him. With tools he had brought with him, he cut open Alfredo's chest and sewed the heart and lungs back together, then closed the chest cavity. From the suitcase he brought two broad plates connected to thick electrical cables and attached them to either side of Alfredo's chest. Alfredo convulsed as Hector adjusted the controls inside the suitcase. Alfredo moaned and opened his eyes.

"Good," said Hector. He detached the plates and returned them to the suitcase.

"Hector...." Alfredo shook his head from side to side. "She hurt me." Hector watched him carefully but did not listen. He flicked two switches and watched the meters. Alfredo sat up. "I am a man,

Hector."

Hector nodded absently and adjusted his controls. "Certainly, she thought you were. Or she would never have tried to kill you. Stand, por favor."

Alfredo stood. "I am still a man."

Hector shrugged. "For the moment."

"You can't take something like that away." Alfredo clutched his hands together and looked out the window. "I must follow her."

"She doesn't want you. She's gotten what she needed."

Alfredo turned and noticed the suitcase. He watched Hector adjusting the controls. Alfredo pleaded with him. "I love her. She needs me. You can't take something like that away."

"No?" Two needles appeared on either side of one dial. Carefully, Hector brought them together.

"Hector! Don't. Please." Alfredo's hands clutched the air and his face twisted. "Please," he whispered.

"You can't --"

Hector flicked a switch and Alfredo stiffened. A blank look descended on Alfredo's face.

"Of course I can," said Hector and stood up himself. "Señora Conklin? He is ready." Lydia entered the room. "He is? Wonderful." She turned to the Mayan. "Alberto." The blank eyes turned toward the sound of her voice. "I am so glad to see you again."