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Measure the Clouds Carefully

By *Elaine Elliott*

Preface

Guatemala is a beautiful country in Central America where half of the population is indigenous Maya, and the other half is Spanish speaking. In our time, it has been a place of conflict. I lived there from 1978-1991 and was saddened by the terrible events of the violence. But the conflict is not the end of the story. In 1992, Rigoberta Menchu, a Maya woman well-known for her autobiography, won the Nobel Peace Prize for her important work of drawing attention to injustice and urging negotiation between the guerillas and the army. On December 29, 1996 the Guatemalan Peace accords were signed that ended the 36-year civil war. In 2007 I celebrated the 11th year since peace came in Guatemala. On that trip I was particularly impressed with efforts to build a culture of peace, and to overcome anger and bitterness with healing and reconciliation.

This story, told from the point of view of a teenage girl who is from the indigenous group of Ixil Maya, tries to capture elements from the culture, the conflict, and then the beginning of reconciliation. The Ixil Maya people speak a language that existed long before the Spanish conquerors came in the early 1500s. Now, over 500 years later, they still speak their own language, and many women and children have not learned Spanish, and men may speak limited Spanish. Despite being marginalized, they have maintained strong community traditions.

This conflict in Guatemala took place in the context of the Cold War. Some saw it as a contest between communism and western ideals; others saw it as a contest between a repressive government and the need for more respect for human

rights. Others did not know how to interpret this, and simply wanted to survive and be allowed to live their lives in peace.

I heard a specific story of a young woman who survived the destruction of her village that planted the idea for this story in my mind. As I tried to write and identify with the Maya people, I began to write as though I were an Ixil Maya girl. Since I am not, it is likely that I did not get all the facts and feelings right. Since many real people lived through experiences like those I write about, they can correct me and hopefully many will tell their real stories. It is a story of one young woman's resilience and her ability to recover from tragedy, and is written out of the great respect I have for the resilience of the Guatemalan people.

For readers, it is important to know that there are many opportunities for service or educational trips for young people, and even opportunities to spend several years in the country doing community work. It is my hope that some who read this will take some of those opportunities and so be able to meet people, build relationships, and hear the true stories first hand.

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Chapter 1: The Wedding

My sister Shiv married at sixteen, a good age to marry. The wedding was held at our house, and every relative I had ever met, including my troublesome cousin Pil, was sitting around the yard eating. Pil and I were both fourteen, almost fifteen, but he was a rude boy and did not treat me with the respect I felt a girl of my age deserved. A month or two ago he dunked me in the river when I was washing clothes. So rude!

Even though our house had dirt floors, they were always swept clean, sprinkled with just a little water not to raise dust. Our front yard was dirt, and we carefully swept it. We even swept cobwebs off the brown mud bricks of my grandparents' house next to ours and the wooden pillars of their porch. We did a major cleaning for a couple of weeks before the wedding.

Our dog was so alert and quick to bark at strangers, we had to quiet him more than once as people arrived for the wedding. He finally understood that we wanted all these people to be here. Like all the other dogs in town, he had no name, but he was a useful protector for our family.

“Ma'l,” hissed my sister Shiv, “Go find little An.”

An was my three-year old sister and an even bigger nuisance than my cousin. Between my sister Shiv and me, we always knew what An was doing. Even so, we had a few unfortunate incidents. One time An nearly fell into the river, and another time a pig bit her because she was so busy pestering it.

I walked through all the people scattered over our yard. Some of them were sitting on the box stools we had brought out of the house and borrowed from my aunts. Others were on the stacks of firewood, and some others were on the ground. Everywhere I looked there were women in bright red skirts and white blouses with birds of all different colors woven on them. Pink yarn earrings hung down their necks and the little coins on the ends bobbed as they ate. I saw men in their cleanest white pants, blue shirts, and woven red belts. Their shiny black gumboots had all the workaday mud cleaned off.

But nowhere did I see little An.

“Shiv,” I hissed back at my sister who was politely thanking one of the older women for some food, “I can’t find her.”

“Go up to the Señora’s store and look,” she suggested, seeming so strange to me in the extra long woven blouse she had made for the wedding. The only Spanish-speaking family in town had the store, didn’t speak our language and know our ways, but An was fascinated by all the candy.

I was worried and went out the front of the patio fence. “The left hand and the right hand of the fence,” I thought to myself as I passed through it. I had certainly heard that phrase enough in all the formal conversations that had gone on when people came to ask if Shiv would marry Vel.

It had taken them about three trips at night and quite a bit of food and drink to convince papa that Vel was responsible enough to take care of Shiv. They bickered and haggled over clothes and household supplies and where they would

live until I thought that even I would be glad to get rid of her! For a long time I had thought she might marry Max who I knew and liked. He was the older brother of one of Pil's friends and always smiled at Shiv in the plaza on market days. But he had left town about a year ago, so that didn't happen.

Well, sure enough, An was at the store being treated like a little princess and chewing a piece of bread. We only eat bread every two weeks when the market is set up in the square, and we split one bottle of cherry soda pop among all of us. Here they were wasting a piece of bread on An and spoiling her.

"Thank you for watching her!" I said to the Señora. "With all the guests arriving we lost track of her!"

"Come on, An, Shiv wants you," I told her and picked her up in front of the long wooden counter. There were big glass jars with candy and a basket with some tomatoes on it in front of a radio covered by a piece of blue plastic. On the shelves were bottles of soda, canned juices, bags of snack food, salt, sugar, and some thread. There was a calendar on the wall with a picture of someone with yellow hair.

We left the store that was on one edge of the grassy plaza. We then passed the wooden building in which my cousin Pil had gone to school for one miserable month. He said it was horrid, and he never understood what the point of the whole thing was; I would have liked to go since I was fascinated with every book I had ever seen—perhaps three or four.

We started down the hill toward our house and the roasted corn and thick soupy smells made me want to hurry back to the wedding. When we got there papa

was introducing the old storyteller. The old man had gray hair and was wearing a red scarf on his head. He was bent over and had watery eyes. We all liked him, because his stories were good.

“Oh, God, by the sign of the holy cross,” he began. Papa had explained to me that there were four directions from the center of the earth that formed a cross. At the very center of the earth was a ceiba tree that reached from the underworld to heaven and was very holy.

He began to tell the story:

A young man asked one of the spirits to go to the spirit of the earth and ask for his daughter as a wife. The spirit went to the entryway of the house which was a cave.

“Who goes there?” asked the earth spirit, but he would not speak to the messenger.

The messenger came back and told the young man that he had failed. The young man had to think of a new plan for how to court the girl. He became a hummingbird and went to the white flowers and the red flowers among the pillars of her house.

The daughter was sitting on the patio weaving, when a hummingbird came flying around and bothering her.

“Oh, what a pretty little bird!” she exclaimed, “Father, catch it for me so I can copy it in my weaving.” The colors on the bird looked like silk.

Her father hit it with his blowgun and shot the bird down.

“Who are you?” she asked the bird, and he admitted that he was a young man who loved her.

“Oh, but I am a wealthy man’s daughter!” she told him. “I have white blouses and red blouses. You can’t afford to take care of me!”

But he persisted and told her that he would love her and care for her anyway.

“Very well,” she told him, “you will have to speak to my father.”

The hummingbird regained his human form and went to ask for the girl, but her father was rude and rough. Her father said he would only consider the marriage if the young man would build him a house.

“How can I build your father a house?” he asked the daughter.

“Don’t worry,” she told him. “Take some of my hair, and it will be timber for the house.” The young man was able to build the house as the father had demanded. But the father still wouldn’t agree to the marriage.

The young couple decided their only hope was to elope and so force her father to agree to their marriage. When they escaped, the father was angry. He called on the rain to pursue them. One of the lightening bolts hit the girl and stunned her.

The heartbroken young man picked her up and carried her back to his home.

But she was not a mortal, and she went up into the sky and became the moon. The father was sorry he had been angry and the young man missed his wife, but they both looked up every night to see the beautiful moon.

When the story was over I looked at my sister Shiv, who was beautiful. Her hair was perfectly wrapped up inside a colorful woven tie. All the women in the

village wore their hair like this. The everyday wrap was a shorter narrower length of woven pink. The fancy one was much longer and was bright red. But the method of wrapping the hair was the same...fold the long cloth tie around a ponytail at the neck, take one end of the cloth and wrap it tight around the hair, take the other end of cloth and wrap it in the other direction. The result was a perfect, neat halo.

I took baby An over to Shiv who said, “Thank you, Ma’l, you’ve been a big help to me.” That softened the blow that she was moving out. I knew that without her we were going to have some fussy days with baby An.

After the guests left, Shiv gathered up some things and prepared to leave with Ve’l and his family. She smiled at me and teased, “You’ll find out soon enough who has really been doing all the work around here!”

“Of course I know who has been doing all the work—me! I won’t miss you at all!” She laughed and they left after saying good-bye to each person. The rest of the evening I found I was already missing her since we did everything together and always had since we were small.

As the ordinary days of housework went on, I discovered she was right and there was a lot more to do now that she was gone. But as I adjusted to the work and to An’s additional demands and fussiness, I was still mildly unhappy. An and I went to visit Shiv as often as we could, but it wasn’t the same as having her at home.

I think my mother saw my unrest, and about two months after Shiv’s wedding, she asked me to help set up a new weaving. She took the long board out

from behind the bed that has holes where you can set pegs in. She was planning a belt and needed the pegs set as far apart as they would go. She took the red thread she had soaked in corn meal to thicken it and keep it from sticking, and told me to wrap it into a ball. When I was done, she started winding it around the three pegs in a figure eight. I'd seen her do it many times and had done it myself many times. But this time my main job was to keep baby An from interfering.

“Can you guess who this belt is for, Ma'l?” she asked.

“For you?” I suggested.

“No,” she said with a grin, “For you. You need a nice belt instead of that hand-me-down I gave you.”

I was surprised and pleased.

“And you can weave it,” she added.

A belt would be the hardest project I'd ever done. The pattern of little tiny squares made diamond shapes. The idea was to make the greatest contrast possible between colors, a mark of a good weaver.

I was motivated to be useful, and I shelled corn without complaint, fed the pigs, and gathered eggs. I took the plastic waterpot to the river, rolled a little cloth into a circle and put the pot on my head and carried it quickly up the hill without spilling a drop.

Our one room house had wooden walls and no porch, but my grandfather's mud brick house next to ours had posts that made a nice porch. That's where we liked to weave and my grandmother came out to chat with mama.

“I just realized I don’t have any teal colored thread,” mama said. “Can you run to the store and get some?”

As I ran up to the plaza, I suddenly stopped in astonishment. This was not a common sight. Twelve strangers, ten men and two women, were standing in the plaza. One of the women said in our Ixil language, “People, we are fighting for justice. The land the rich have once belonged to you, and it is time to get it back. Join us in this fight. We want you to be proud, free, and live well on land of your own. You know how we suffer with too little to eat and too much work. You know how many of our little babies die. These things are wrong and if you join our work, this can change and you can live the life you deserve to live.”

They started walking around trying to talk to people and encourage them to join them. They laughed, were friendly, and smiled at all of us. One man from this group who spoke only Spanish walked into the Señora’s store at about the same time I did. He asked for a soda and thanked the woman profusely for helping quench his thirst.

“You’ve got a great store, here.” He said. “We can give you a fair amount of business if you’re willing to help us get the food we need to stay supplied.”

The Señora smiled encouragingly at him until he left. She then turned to attend to me, and my small purchase of thread. “I’m afraid,” she whispered in Spanish. “I don’t really know what these people want. He’s charming, but he be trusted?”

When I got back to the house, I told my mother about this, and this became a big topic of conversation when my dad returned that evening.

A week later it was all over town that Tun, one of the teenage boys, the son of a respected elder in town, had disappeared. We all wondered if he had gone to join this group fighting the soldiers. Everyone was too polite to mention this to his parents. My parents privately were horrified and talked about this at supper.

“What must his mother think!” mama exclaimed.

“It’s going to make people think that his parents are involved in this,” said papa, “and it’s going to be uncomfortable for a while in the community.”

“He’s not only risking his life, he’s probably endangering them. There will be lots of gossip everywhere,” said mama, “And eventually they will hear some of it.”

I felt sad about this because Tun was probably my favorite of all the boys in the village. Now I started worrying where he might be and what he might be doing.

Not long afterwards mama announced that on the next market day we would buy a new skirt, because I had finished the belt.

“You’ll be the most beautiful girl in town at the fiesta,” she said.

In the morning we bought the skirt, and I rushed home to put on the new skirt, my best blouse and new belt. I hoped mama was right. I didn’t have a mirror, but mama always told me I looked like Shiv. This encouraged me, since I thought she was pretty with her smooth brown skin, black, almond shaped eyes, high straight nose, and straight black hair down to her waist. My hair was about two hands shorter.

I walked back up to the plaza, very conscious of my new elegance, and rejoined my entire family and was so pleased to see some of the other girls my age. My mother soon got tired and went back home.

Suddenly, on the far side of the plaza, soldiers started moving into the plaza. More and more kept coming and mixing into the small stalls of fruits and vegetables, clay pots, and blankets. I thought we were probably here for a meeting like the one the last group had held. The army leader had a big stomach and a big voice and yelled at his men. By now it seemed there were several dozen soldiers and they started telling people to leave the plaza and start walking down the hill.

Soldiers started walking into people's houses, pointing their guns at them, and made them follow the group. I saw one soldier with the Señora's radio under his arm.

I ran back to warn mama, but it was too late. A soldier saw me and made me walk with him. When we got close to our house another soldier went in and brought mama out. She glanced at me as though she didn't know me; I think she was not sure how best to avoid trouble. We walked out into a stream of people coming from the plaza and going toward the river. We walked down the hill past the five other houses hidden behind the trees until we reached the small river at the base of the hill.

As soon as we stood by the banks of the river, the big man began yelling.

“We know this village is supporting the guerillas, giving them food, and sending them recruits. We cannot tolerate this kind of rebellion in our country.”

My sister looked worried as she stood between her husband and mama, holding baby An's hand. Mama's face said nothing. She understood not a word of what the man was saying, since she never learned any Spanish. As usual, she was planning to hear from papa at home what this was all about.

The leader nodded his head at his men and raised his hand. His eyes glittered strangely.

The soldiers slowly raised their rifles, and I watched the one nearest me begin to squeeze the trigger and as I watched, time stopped.

Chapter 2: Scattered Corn

I heard the snap of rifle fire and plunged into the shallow river. My hands scraped against the stones on the river bottom and though my skirt protected my legs, I struggled as my clothes became waterlogged. With great strength, I swam upstream toward the pool where we washed our clothes in the warm morning sun. I hid in the deeper water and headed toward the bend in the river.

I held my breath underwater, and listened to the sputter of gunfire muffled by the water. These weren't rifle shots with pauses for reloading, but machine guns that spattered bullet after bullet.

My long skirt, a length of red material wrapped three times around me, twisted around my legs. Gasping, I pulled around the rocks where the river tumbled down the hill and the wild growth hid me. Though I strained to look back, I could see nothing through the tangle of rocks and greenery.

I slipped in the mud as I pulled myself onto the bank. I crawled through the muddy clay, and grabbed at the root of a tree and scratched a deep cut on my left hand. I rolled into the underbrush and lay panting, heart racing, trembling, and terrified. Suddenly I heard splashing and voices as soldiers rounded the bend, wading up the river.

“Someone came up here,” called out one of the soldiers.

I froze.

“No one here!” yelled one of the soldiers.

I lay face down in the brush completely still. After more splashing and

snapping and crackling of soldiers' feet along the bank, their voices faded into the distance.

Filthy and chilled, I lay on the ground in my wet clothes. I looked up, startled by a roaring sound, and watched crackling flames shoot up into the sky. I calculated that the flames blazed near my neighbor's house.

The crackling sounds faded as the sun began its afternoon descent. Silence alternated with distant birdcalls and the rustle of trees in the soft breeze, and vultures circled overhead. My stomach tightened.

I listened intently for my father or mother's voice, but no one called. I checked my hand. The blood had dried, and I studied a spot of blood on my woven belt. I crept along the river to where my family had been. As I reached a point close enough to see, my heart went numb, and my soul and my spirit nearly left my body.

My mother lay face down in the water. Papa lay on the ground, his mouth open, a bloodstain on his shirt, and blades of grass crumpled against his hand. Perhaps, a hundred people lay dead along the river. My cousin Pil lay on the edge of the river with a muddy face, unseeing eyes and mouth gaping open. My older sister lay on the ground holding my little sister. The blood on their blouses pooled together and spread out in petals like a red flower. Her husband lay just a little below them with his arms flung wide. My aunt lay beyond her basket with corn scattered and wasted.

I crawled toward them, but when I heard heavy boots coming down the path

toward the bodies, I hid and moved back toward my grandparents' place. My clammy clothing protected my legs but not my arms, so I pulled them in through the wide armholes and folded them inside my woven blouse. I moved slowly through the brush, pausing often to listen.

What would normally have been a brief walk took until dark. When I arrived, I saw the house singed but still standing. Both porch pillars were partially burned and roof tiles lay fallen in a heap on the ground. I stepped into the house, and I saw my grandparents dead on the floor. I fell down next to them, clung to them, weeping so deeply I thought my soul would escape my body through my tears. When I heard voices, I slipped out the door and ran up the hill gasping and crying. I came quickly to where charred bits of wood leaned together. Our house had completely burned. I saw the worn wooden cabinet that had held all the blue enamel dishes with white speckles and the enamel cups and the plastic water jug on its side under a fallen beam. Clay pots lay broken, the fat lime-soaked pieces of corn scattered. Three baby chicks clucked frantically at my feet. The heavy arm of the grinding stone lay on the ground below the sloping granite of the metate. My eyes settled at the stones of the hearth that had been the heart of my home ever since my birth. The heat pushed me back.

I hid in the brush and listened intently for voices and feet. Our family dog found me, and whined and wagged his tail. I clutched him and cried. "We have to go," I whispered and walked up the trail toward the mountain above our house. The dog whimpered and followed me, jumping along on three legs.

“Oh, you’re hurt!” I said and examined his wound. I did not know if a bullet had grazed him or if he had been injured some other way, but I tore off part of my skirt and wrapped up the bloody wound. “Let’s go,” I said and started up the mountain.

I climbed high up the hill until I reached a spring, drank deeply, and sank down beside it under a large and beautiful tree. The moon had risen, and I heard a dog bark in the distance and my dog bark in reply. “Hush!” I scolded him. My spirit and soul rattled around inside and my body moved slowly.

I ignored hunger pains and slept miserably, huddled up with my dog beneath the tree. When morning came I sat there, unable to move. My stomach growled, and I sucked on little pieces of sweet grass and sighed. I slept fitfully off and on through the day, kept there by sorrow and the fear that came with every noise.

With nothing to eat eat, I drank many times from the village spring and sat staring into the sky, petting my dog at times. The second day, perhaps the third of sitting and sleeping under the tree, I walked down the hill and picked oranges from the tree by our house. My dog found a few rotten avocados to eat. Then we returned to the spring to sleep. My dog whined, so I washed his wound and replaced the bandage with another piece of my skirt.

I thought about my family. My sister Shiv had not been married long, but I had missed her so much when she moved to her husband’s house. I thought about my obnoxious cousin Pil. We had been feuding ever since he dunked me in the river as I washed clothes. I had not made up with him. I felt like a hollow reed with

seeds rattling inside. Everyone looked up to my parents. They worked hard, cared well for the family, and taught us to treat others fairly. They had shown me nothing but love my whole life, but they had prepared me to live in my village. They had not prepared me for this.

“Papa,” I whispered, “Mama...”

My father’s wisdom and leadership in the village settled argument, and his opinions had always guided my decisions.

“Papa,” I whispered, “what should I do?”

The tree above me rustled in the wind.

I had heard no noises for quite some time, and I crept to the river. But when I reached the river there were no bodies. They had vanished, and I was too frightened to continue. Trembling, I returned up the path. My dog followed me, puzzled and whining as I headed toward my grandparents’ house. They were gone too. I felt sick to my stomach.

I entered the house. The corn my grandmother had soaked in lime to soften for grinding had soured. Much of the corn stored in the attic had been ruined by the fire, and most large sacks of corn were gone. I knew where all the supplies were kept and I got out some coffee. I took the thin slivers of pine pitch and set them carefully within the hearthstones. The log pile outside had burned, but I had enough kindling inside and a few logs left to make a fire. Weak from hunger and my climb from the river, I made coffee, laced liberally with sugar and chile.

After the meal, I sat on the porch even though it smelled awful and looked

even worse with so much scorched wood. I wondered if the soldiers had buried all the dead. I stared at the spot where my grandmother sat to weave and remembered so many pleasant afternoons. I had always helped her sweep the dirt floors of the house and porch, sprinkling them with a little water so as not to raise dust. I had spent hours with her here rubbing dried ears of corn against another corncob to loosen the kernels, shelling several pounds of corn a day for our tortillas. I could picture her face crinkled like a dried piece of fruit, her eyes clouded white from years of kitchen smoke, bent close to the loom, like a withered cornstalk. I remembered my grandfather standing with other old men in their black coats like stooped buzzards.

I remembered mama setting up the new weaving on the porch on a long board with three pegs. I touched my belt as I remembered distracting An from interfering. To keep An happy, I had found an old board and cut holes in it with a machete, the long knife we used to cut kindling. I put corncobs in for the pegs so she would have a way of setting up a small weaving of her own, and with this memory I began crying.

I wiped away my tears with the hem of my skirt. As my eyes cleared, I studied my belt full of tiny squares that fit together to make diamond shapes. I had done a good job, better even than the blouse I had on. Mama had taken pride in the colors and the precision with which I had made the six stylized birds across the front of my blouse, and she had complimented me even more over the belt.

I stayed in my grandparent's house, and slept and didn't eat often. I found

something to drink when I woke up hungry and would sleep some more. As the days passed, I cooked myself soup greens. I had eggs from a chicken that was surviving on its own. At one point, I checked the brown pear-shaped pod and found that I had little salt left.

After several days (I don't really know how long), I walked to Shiv's house. I passed the ashes of my house on the way to the path, and I remembered crowds gathered in our yard at the wedding. I remembered faces and smiles as I served them steaming tamales. Suddenly I could picture some of those same people crumpled in the river and once more I gasped through my tears.

Shiv's house was clear across the village. I looked sadly at the charred remains of many wooden houses with thatch roofs. The few adobe homes like that of my grandparents were badly damaged and roofless in many cases. The whole town held no human voices, only the wild sounds of trees and birds. I felt like a spirit walking alone with mountains, plants, animals, sun and sky my only companions.

When I reached Shiv's house, the blackened boards of the door, not fully burned, creaked in the wind. I shuddered and walked silently around the property. I finally had the courage to open the door and look in. I was looking for the things we had made for the baby Shiv was expecting. I found the trunk and struggled to open it, charred as it was. Inside I found the little baby clothes Shiv, my mother and I had made together.

I went to the plaza, and reached the grassy plateau where vendors had come

to sell tomatoes, onions, thread, boots, pans, and even radios every two weeks. The adobe church still stood in the center of the grassy plaza, its white plaster with blackened lines of soot and the roof caved in. The municipal building and the school had burned almost completely since they were made of wood. I looked sadly at the ruined school that my cousin Pil had quit.

I walked through what had once been the school, and noticed a piece of blackboard and twisted plastic in the ashes. The plank benches and tables had burned. I remembered how noisy the boys were, even when chanting responses to the teacher's questions, or reading aloud as a group.

The Señora's store made of adobe still stood. I hesitated, remembering the large glass jars gleaming with candy, the basket of tomatoes in front of her radio, the tidy shelves of soda, canned juices, bags of chips, salt, sugar, and large rolls of thread. As I stepped in over broken glass, I saw all the food had been taken and candy jars were smashed. The shiny silky sets of embroidery thread—purple, red, green, white, mauve, teal, orange, yellow, and blue—looked bright and out of place across the top shelf with empty white shelves below.

I hesitated, since the blond woman on a calendar stared at me from the wall. But finally I went behind the counter and took all of the embroidery thread with me. I searched for any food and found some salt, and some packages of soup. I knew where the Señora hid her money and I decided to look and see if there was anything there. I found 15 quetzales and 23 cents¹, and took them with me. I remembered when little An came here on her own. Memories of my relief at finding

her mingled with my confusion and sorrow as I left the store.

I slowly walked to the church and slipped into the cool darkness. The stone floor felt soft to my bare feet. I sat on one of the benches and tried to pray. I could see the crucifix with the wounded Christ looking sadly at me from under his crown of thorns, and he frightened me with the bloodstains on his hands and feet. I looked at the statue of Mary, his mother, and her shiny eyes and white skin welcomed me. “Oh mother,” I said, “Can you help me? I am so afraid and so alone.” Her sweet smile didn’t change, and I turned away from speaking to a piece of painted wood. I really wanted my own flesh and blood mother.

¹ Dollars and quetzals were equivalent until 1987.

Chapter 3: The Four Corners of the World

I was living in a village of ghosts. Once I had gone with my father to the municipal capital. It had taken us a long day, but I knew where the trail began, and decided I could get there, take a bus to Guatemala City and find work in someone's house. I prepared for several days.

I ground corn and made tortillas with beans baked into them. I made a jug of corn gruel, found extra clothes and a blanket and stuffed it into a string bag. I found Shiv and Vel's wedding portrait, taken at the plaza after they married. I slipped it in carefully with the money and made a hiding place inside my belt. I got Shiv's baby clothes and the thread from the Señora's store and put them in as well.

We left in the pre-dawn chill, strangely silent with no rooster calls. My heavy pack meant I walked slowly and stopped often to rest. At nightfall I had only climbed the first mountain. As I settled down to sleep, I looked up at the full moon, my dog curled beside me.

The next afternoon I found a small house in the hills and greeted the woman who knelt on her porch, weaving. The leather strap tight around her rump held the loom taut. She looked up coldly and her toddler crouched closer against her.

“Can you loan me your fire to heat my food?”

“Go ahead,” she replied. She adjusted the sleek wooden weaving stick with its pointed ends, detached the leather strap from the groove on the bottom pole, carefully rolled up the delicate unwoven threads, and unhooked the top pole from

the rope holding it to the pillar. She set the weaving on a bench against the side of the house and invited me inside. I went into the dark house, my bare feet feeling the difference between the warm earth outside and the cool earth inside. She blew and fanned the embers of the hearth with a straw fan, and I coughed in the smoky room. She took out some ground corn from a plastic tub, put it in a tin pot, added some water and set it by the fire to make corn gruel.

The toddler stared at me, a baby slept in the hammock and another little girl with a patched skirt shelled corn. I heated my tortillas hurriedly and ate them silently.

“Forgive me that I do not feed you,” said the woman. “These are dangerous times. I am able to honestly tell all soldiers that I do not have enough to feed anyone, but I’m afraid and my husband and I think we must leave.”

“Are the soldiers nearby?” I gasped.

“Very near. Just south of us.”

I think she could see that my answer made me tremble fearfully, and we both sank into silence. When her husband came home, he asked about my family, and I told him the name of my village. He already knew the soldiers had killed everyone in the village and both he and his wife looked sad.

“It may be safest to go east,” he said. “Soldiers are at the plantation to the west.”

They invited me to stay the night, and I accepted gratefully. After sleeping poorly, I left early in the morning. The woman wrapped tortillas in a cloth for my

journey. I protested that I still had food and she must keep what she had. I convinced her by showing her my food. She insisted on refilling my gourd with corn gruel, the best drink for the hiking I had ahead of me.

We left, hiking through the hills. “I wish you could help me carry this pack!” I said to my dog when I sank down to rest. The effort of carrying the pack felt as heavy as the water of the river had felt to me when I escaped.

Around midday I heard voices ahead of me, so I crept off the path and crawled down into a gully. Four soldiers patrolled slowly past me. I couldn’t decide on the safest way to go—north led to jungle, south and west to soldiers, and now I had seen soldiers in the east. No direction was safe.

Suddenly I felt a cold machine gun on the back of my neck.

“Who goes there?” said the voice behind me.

I remained motionless.

“You’re a lookout for the guerrillas aren’t you?” he said.

I tightened my lips.

“Don’t lie to me.” He pushed me back up to the path and forced me to stand with my hands behind my head. My dog barked angrily and bit his leg. The soldier whirled the gun away from me in pain, and I ran off the path. I heard a shot, loud barking, curses, and ran. I knew I would be caught if I carried my pack and I tossed it down the hill below the path.

“She’s just a girl,” said one of the men.

“She could be a look-out and get some others,” said the other man.

“I don’t think so—let her go...”

Their voices became fainter as I kept running. As I slowed down my dog caught up to me.

“You saved my life and I will never forget it.” I told him. “I thought you were dead!” He nuzzled me and we rested quietly. Hungry, and still afraid, it was very difficult to sleep, but I finally dozed off.

In the morning, after several hours of walking, we found a spring and I washed and drank. I undid the long cloth tied around my hair and used the comb made of bone to smooth the tangles. I folded the long pink cloth tie around the nape of my neck, took one end and covered the length of my hair with cloth by folding it neatly around the hair, then took the other end of the cloth and wrapped in the opposite direction to set a neat crown on my head. It felt good to do something so familiar.

I listened carefully for any sounds, and decided I would go back up the hill and see if I could find my pack. It took some time, and finally my dog found it for me, and we opened it and gratefully ate some of the food. We walked further until we found a spring to get something to eat.

I flinched and hid when I heard something. I saw a young man coming toward the spring, carrying a plastic water pot. I had never seen a man carry a water pot before. He stared at me for a moment and said, “May I help you?”

I stared at him.

“May I help you? You are far from any village.”

“I don’t know where I am.”

“My family has been living in the mountains, and you’re welcome to join us.”

I met his eyes. He looked away and filled the water jug, and said, “Are you hungry?”

I still didn’t answer.

He said, “Come with me and we can eat with my family. You will be safe there.”

“Thank you,” I said. He carried the water jug under his arm and I followed his dark head and strong back toward the northeast and came at last to a place where he headed down a ravine. An outcrop of rock made a shelter, and though not a proper cave, people rested beneath it. Some were around the fire, others were not yet asleep but rolled up in blankets out of the wind. One little boy wept as his mother held him.

“This is my father,” said my guide, introducing me to a man with kind eyes who reminded me of papa.

“I found her by the spring and asked if she wanted to eat with us.”

“Welcome,” said the father.

People shifted and made room for me around the fire. They had made a watery soup with wild greens for supper, but had no tortillas. I shyly pulled out all my tortillas with the beans mixed in them, and we split them among ourselves.

I woke in the night with my stomach in knots. Could I have saved my family? I looked at the moon and the stars. My stomach forced me to get up and I

walked away from the group and lost all the nourishment I'd been given. The young man who had found me got up and brought me a cup of water to wash out my mouth.

"Thank you," I said, quite embarrassed.

"You're welcome," he answered and looked up at the moon as I rinsed my mouth. Night birds called out and crickets chattered.

"Did you know that is called a *planeta* in Spanish?" he asked, pointing to the evening star. I could tell he was trying to distract me from my embarrassment, and I was grateful.

"No," I said. "I didn't know."

"They are much closer to us than any of the stars, and they travel in such a way that they appear and disappear in the sky. The elders say they are gods' eyes opening and closing in the sky."

"That I have heard," I told him.

"What is your name?" he asked. "My name is Lu'."

"My name is Ma'l", I said.

A little more relaxed by now, I returned to the fire and slept.

The next day the father asked me, "Were you chased from your village?"

"Yes," I said, "My whole family is dead. I think my whole village is dead. I think I'm the only one who escaped."

"I'm so sorry. Terrible times... We're the only survivors from our village, unless a few managed to get away to the north." He sat silently for a while. "By all

means you must join us. It is not safe for you to be alone in the mountains. My name is Shun and my son is Lu'. This is my daughter Kit."

"Thank you," I said, "My name is Ma'l."

Lu' and Kit had a little brother named Shun, just like their dad. Almost all families named a child after each parent, and called them their "replacement." Their mother was named Si'n. Lap, close in age to Lu', had no family. A widow with three children, a young couple, a family with five children, and a grandmother and little girl made up the group.

"What's your name, baby?" I asked the little girl.

She cooed at me.

"Is this your grandchild?" I asked the older woman.

"No," she said. "I saw the child moving next to her dead mother and picked her up. She doesn't have a name."

"Can we call her An?" I asked.

"Who is An?" she asked, looking into my eyes.

"My little sister who died," I said with a catch in my throat. She would be my little sister's replacement in some way, since my sister would never grow up and have a child of her own.

That night, my mind repeated, "If I hadn't jumped into the river, I could have saved my family," over and over. Tears rolled down my cheeks, and the older woman stroked my hair, and I rested my head on her tattered red skirt.

The group had been in the mountains several weeks, about the same time I

had been alone in the village. They had discovered some ways of managing and surviving, but had not gone back to their village since the soldiers had stationed themselves there. I suggested that perhaps we could go back to my village, but they were convinced we would be discovered there as well. I knew there was still some corn in a few of the houses and Lu' and his father agreed to go and bring it for the group. At least we would be able to survive, hidden in the mountains for a while.

Slowly I became acquainted with the young wife named Cat. She and her husband Lish grieved because both of their families had been taken captive by the army. They heard from others that all of them had been killed, including her brothers and his sister. Cat and Lish had been out in the mountains working on a distant piece of land when the army came. Rumor had it that her twelve year old brother had been spared, the brother who she had cared for since birth. She told me she dreamed of hugging him as a young man some day.

Kit told me what had happened in their village. "The first time I saw a soldier," she said, "I had gone to the store to get some salt for my mother. Until then, I thought of soldiers as dancers in masks with white faces and yellow beards, red jackets with curling black ribbon on them, and narrow wooden rifles. Do you know the Dance of the Moors?" she asked. I nodded. In the Dance of the Moors, during the fiesta, dancers in white-masks fought dancers in black masks.

"Well, the soldier wore an outfit with funny different patches of green all over it." I nodded again; I'd seen them, too. "He slung the carrying strap of his long wide rifle over his shoulder and scowled. His short hair bristled, but other than that he

looked like my brothers.” That’s true, I thought. They had brown skin, black hair, black eyes, and a short wiry frame from years of hard work and little food.

“A few days after I saw the soldier,” continued Kit, “More soldiers came to town in the night. I didn’t see them, but two neighbor ladies told mama. The soldiers went to Pap Lish’s house late at night and took him away. Pap Lish, the leader of the Acción Católica group that sang and clapped and read the Bible, talked about how God especially loved the poor and sided with them against those who were cruel and unfair.

“When I asked my dad why they took him away he told me maybe the soldiers thought he led others politically, and they would try to get him to tell them anything he knew about anyone else. My dad thought he probably really didn’t know about any revolutionary activities—they just thought he did,” explained Kit.

“Did he come back?” I asked.

“No,” Kit continued. “His wife came and told my mother that her husband didn’t have anything to do with the guerillas, but that they had looked everywhere and were thinking of going to the state capital to try to get more information and see if they could find him in jail there. About a week later the soldiers came back and took another man out of his home. A few more weeks went by and another man disappeared. When the fourth man disappeared everyone talked about it. He had fought over land for years with several men in town.”

“Everyone worried,” said Kit, “and we talked about what to do. Then,” she continued dramatically “I had gone up with Lu’ to pick some beans and the

mountainside across from us burst into flame! ‘It’s a bomb!’ yelled Lu’. “Look up! See the airplane up there? It dropped that bomb. The army must think there are guerrillas hiding out there.’ We ran home so scared!”

“Then what happened?” I prompted her.

“Not long after, I think soldiers came and we quickly got our things and ran into the mountains. When we checked back in the village, everyone had left except Grandma and the little girl. I don’t know how many escaped somewhere else or how many died.”

Her memories triggered my memories, and I started shaking a little as I could suddenly see the soldiers enter the buildings around the plaza, and pull bewildered looking people into the sunlight. The soldiers had poked them with the tip of their guns and herded them toward the path. They came up to our family and pushed us along with the crowd. I remember the nervous looks that flashed between all of us as we walked with the rest of the village down to the river. I remembered the strangely glittering eyes of the commander.

“I’m sorry, Ma’l”, Kit stopped, “I’m making you sad. Let’s talk about something else.”

My father did not help the guerillas, I thought angrily. He didn’t believe in killing others to change things. Why had the soldiers come to kill him? And my mother and Shiv and baby An! They didn’t think about these things at all. Shiv just wanted to enjoy being married and in her new home. I could see her smooth brown face. Mama often complimented both of us, saying our skin was as soft as

that of little brown does. She thought we must both have deer as our companion spirits that had been born when we were born and would die when we died.

Those who killed my family and those who told them to do this committed a terrible crime, I thought angrily. Hot tears ran down my face as I remembered. We had been enjoying a day at the plaza, I dressed in my new belt and new skirt, visiting with our neighbors. We had done nothing to deserve any of this, I thought.

Chapter 4: The Old Ways

I was becoming part of this odd family. In the evenings after supper we sat around the fires and Lu's dad told us stories. He told stories well, and could make us laugh or be a little afraid or in awe. Some of the stories I had heard from my grandfather, others were new to me. One evening he started to tell us a story about marriage. I felt surprised, since I remembered very well when I had last heard this lovely old story--at Shiv's wedding! Grandfather had sat in his chair with a red scarf on his head and watery eyes that didn't seem to look at anything, and leaned forward against his cane, and, as always, wobbled a little since he did a lot of ritual drinking. I could almost hear his voice, and I tried hard to hold onto this memory.

As Lu's father told how the young man tried to persuade the girl's father to let them marry, I remembered how older men had very properly come to the house several times at night with food and drink to convince my father to permit Shiv's marriage to Ve'l. They spoke in very formal language, almost like poetry. I asked her one night if she really wanted to marry this person she hardly knew. She gave me a funny look and didn't say anything, but it left me the impression she knew him better than I thought. She probably saw him when she went to bring water or wash the corn.

My father had not opposed her marriage or put impossible conditions on Ve'l, but as I knew would happen in the story, the girl's father did not cooperate, and rejected the young man. In the flickering light Lu's father told how the young man

magically transformed himself into a hummingbird to fly into the patio and speak with the girl. She thought the bird beautiful and loved him even more when he regained his human form. Lu's father continued through to the tragic moment when the girl died and flew into the moon.

I stared at the moon and knew this was just a story. It reminded me of Shiv and brought back my pain of missing her. I knew she had been very happy in her marriage, and I felt sad that the baby she was expecting had died with her. "Why did this happen?" I wondered again. I missed my parents and Shiv and An so much, and that feeling never went away no matter what I did. I always thought about them.

The lack of routine made it even harder not to have all my thoughts revolve around them. Our lives in the mountains had a strange dullness to them, not relieved by having proper work or the chance to go to market. I hadn't realized before how much having a fiesta or wedding to look forward to made a difference in how one felt about life! I missed salt on our food once the salt I had brought from the Señora's store ran out. At home sometimes we just had salt with our tortillas and a few chilies to make a meal. Now we had run out of the corn, and we ate greens collected from the woods. Soup without salt and without tortillas didn't fill us. The boys spent a lot of time hunting birds, rabbits and squirrels in the woods with their slingshots and their few successes added to the soup pot. We always felt hungry since nothing else fills you like corn. I worried about my dog since his ribs showed, and he didn't have much energy for hunting food on his own. None of us

had a lot of energy.

We found a prickly pear vine one day and collected enough for each of us to have one of the fleshy green fruits apiece. Tearing the prickly skin off took me back to some of the first meals I had in my grandparents' house after they died. We cooked the tender leaves another day. I wasn't the only one who thought about corn mush wrapped in leaves, boiled, and served with chili sauce.

"With a little corn mush," said the widow woman, "We could have some good boshboles!"

"Now don't get started on all the great food we could have 'if only'!" said Lu's mother.

"You have to admit," responded the woman, "there is nothing like corn." We sat around the fire and watched the stars through the smoke. I stared at the cluster of seven stars that looked like scattered seed. They came each year at the right time to remind papa to plant his corn, a reminder he would never need again to take. Shun too was looking at the night sky.

"Reminds me of the story of how food began," said Shun.

"Tell it!" said several of the children.

One day the ruler of the world asked his servants, "What are we going to give the children to eat? Let's try planting bananas." So they planted bananas. They were tasty, but made people sick because they were heavy in their stomachs. Nor did they provide enough energy for a whole day.

"No, this won't do. Bananas don't last. Let's try potatoes." They planted

potatoes. The same thing happened; they gave them a stomach ache.

“Well, that won’t work. What shall we do?” he asked. “Let’s try beans!” They planted beans. The beans worked a little better. They lasted at least half a day before people were hungry.

“Well then, how about yucca?” The same thing happened. They didn’t last all day.

“If only there was some other food.” Of course, the ruler of the world already knew about corn, but he was hiding it, and he didn’t tell about it. He hid it inside a chest, and wanted to make sure no other food would do.

“What can we do?” he asked the servants.

“You’ll have to do something,” they told him.

A mountain lion came and started digging around the chest. He got the chest partially open and some corn fell out. He left part of an ear of corn at the door of the house.

A crow came and picked up the corn and left pieces scattered here and there. The angels came and found them scattered in the street.

“Who got these out?” the ruler asked.

“It was the mountain lion,” replied the servant.

“Go find him then,” said the ruler.

They brought the animal, and he didn’t say anything. This made the ruler angry and he hit the mountain lion on the ear, which is why they say that animal can’t hear well.

The crow admitted, “Yes, I ate it, but it already lay there on the ground.”

The ruler took the animals to see the chest, but the servants couldn’t open the tightly closed chest. The servants decided to get the owners of the lightning to open it.

“Let’s see if we can do it. Let a little rain start, then we’ll send the lightning,” said the ruler. The chest was like a rock, but the lightning opened it and all the corn came out.

“Good food!” they said.

They took it and gave it to the people to plant. They gave a good measure to each person. They didn’t have to plant bananas anymore or beans or yucca, but just corn.

Everyone chuckled. It felt homey to hear one of grandfather’s old stories even though it was Shun, Kit’s father, who told it.

“What I wouldn’t give for a banana right now!” said Lu’.

“That reminds me of the story of the ants who helped feed a man,” began Lap. “Out in the hills he saw some hungry ants, and gave them part of his tortilla. As he kept on his journey he ran out of food. He sat beneath a tree, dying. Suddenly the ants came and brought him food to repay him for the good he had done.”

He laughed. “The story had more to it the way my grandmother could tell it, but that’s all I remember.”

The old grandma spoke sharply. “That’s the trouble with you young folks.

You must learn the old ways.

“I’m sure you are right, Aunty,” said Lap mildly. “We haven’t always shown the respect we should have to the old ways.”

Grandma went on, speaking even more firmly: “People used to be taught to respect all living things. Not to waste any corn, because it is sacred. To ask forgiveness of the trees when we must cut them down. The earth is alive, and when you cut it, it bleeds, and you must ask its pardon. When people became imprisoned in sickness they knew they must go to a diviner. He would use his crystals and his beans to consult the day gods who would tell him who had been offended and to whom offerings needed to be made. And this worked, I know, because I have seen it many times. So the prayermakers would take incense and candles to offer as food for the spirits at the crosses in the cemetery, the springs, the corners of the roads, and especially the sacred mountains. The clouds of incense would rise like steam wafting from soup for the spirits.

“It grieves me to see our ways changing. Young people are no longer willing to help pay for the brotherhoods to care for the saints. Nor are they as willing to dress in the costumes to have the honor of impersonating the spirits in the dance.”

Everyone nodded and agreed with her. It all sounded so familiar since my grandfather, a prayer-maker whom people in trouble consulted, often said similar things. I wondered, would it have made a difference in keeping my family alive if I had cared about these things and really believed in them?

That night I tossed miserably in bed and twisted my skirt. The new skirt I

had been so proud of the day my parents gave it to me now showed a lot of wear. I didn't have any thread to mend the rips and tears.

I had taken off my belt for the night, but it lay beside me. Each morning when I wrapped it around me it reminded me of my mother and grandmother and An and the fun we had when I wove it. I remembered the silly little corncobs I had set up for An for her pretend weaving. I always wore the belt inside out to save the colored pattern for special occasions. Since the soldiers had come, there hadn't been any special occasion to make it worth turning right side out.

Chapter 5: The Tree at the Center of the World

All of us felt weaker and weaker. We were not finding animals to hunt, the edible greens were no longer in season, and we knew we were thin and getting thinner. When alone I still cried, but I controlled my tears around the others. Although I had company, Mama and Papa and Shiv and An would never leave my thoughts. Everything reminded me of them and there were so many things I wanted to talk about with Shiv.

I would have liked to have her advice on how I should act with Lu'. I thought I had probably turned fifteen by now (we didn't keep careful track of birthdays), and Shiv had gotten married at sixteen. Sometimes I would watch him and I wondered, how did two people become a couple? It seemed mysterious and difficult to me, and though Lu' acted friendly, he showed me no special favors.

Cat and Lish, the young couple, had been expecting a child since before they came into the mountains. Cat was so weak from hunger that everyone worried she would not have strength for the birth. An had been too big for the baby things in my pack, but now they had a purpose and I gave them to Cat to encourage her that she would be fine and her baby would be warm. She seemed so afraid.

The day finally came when she began her birth pains, and Kit and I were sent away and assigned to bring water from the spring. We could still hear Cat's cries. When the birth was over, Grandma let us come see a thin, sickly little baby. They named him Mec, the name of her missing little brother, and we loved the

novelty of having a baby to admire. As he grew and started smiling, he flapped his arms and cried weakly, begging to be picked up every time he saw one of us. I had two holes in my ears with strands of long pink yarn and coins and when he would accidentally pull on my earrings, it hurt! I soon learned to be careful. Kit and I adored him, but we knew his mother had very little milk and he was weak and fussy. We overheard the adults worrying about how we could continue to survive with so little food.

One morning Kit and I were sent for firewood together and came upon a tree with an unusually large trunk. “My grandfather told me there is a tree at the center of the world,” she said. “It is an enormous ceiba tree holding up the sky. I can almost imagine it, can’t you? I sometimes wonder if we could find that tree.”

“It does sound strong,” I agreed. “My grandfather told me that the mountains were like pillars at the four corners of the earth.”

“Mine did too,” Kit said. It seemed good that even though we had come from different towns, much of what we knew was exactly the same.

“My brother thinks you’re beautiful,” said Kit calmly. “So do I. He told me that when he saw you at the spring the day he found you he thought he had come upon a spirit who steals the souls of men to the underworld, just like in the stories.”

I didn’t tell her, but I too had felt like he must have been a vision when I first saw him at the spring. How strange, I thought, but now I know that he thinks about me, and to him I am beautiful like Shiv.

“Did he really say that?” I said to Kit.

“Oh yes!” she said delightedly. “I’m quite sure that if we weren’t living in these crazy mountains that he would tell you himself. He’s probably just too exhausted and hungry!”

“Maybe we’ll survive these crazy mountains,” I said. “I’d probably be too exhausted and hungry to even hear him if he did say something.”

Kit laughed, and we rested over and over with our small loads to take the firewood back for heating yet another really awful soup made of whatever the adults had found. The soup never satisfied our hunger.

I watched Lu’ from time to time, but if Kit hadn’t said anything, I never would have guessed he noticed me. He treated me politely and as one of the group, but never looked at me directly. “Perhaps he thinks I am still too sad about my family and so is concerned not to say anything to me,” I thought. I decided to be more cheerful and not spend so much time living in past memories. At least wondering about him provided an oddly happy distraction.

Lu’ and Lap did most of the sentry duty and continued to go for water to the spring, considering it too far for Kit and me in our weakened condition. We teased them about doing women’s work and they good-naturedly joshed us about how inadequate our housekeeping skills were, how poorly we washed their clothes. Unfortunately, they were right. We obviously couldn’t buy the little packs of soap that we used to get at the store and only used the pods from the soap tree. Neither of us were as skillful as Kit’s mother in making proper suds with this and the clothes showed it. Scrubbing and wringing things out took too much of strength,

and we couldn't do it properly.

One day Lu' and Lap startled us by bringing back more than water. They walked back into our camp with several young guerrillas. It amazed me that these teenaged boys were the fearful guerrillas that the soldiers had burned villages to catch.

"Join us," suggested one of the young men. "We're trying to bring justice for the poor."

Everyone remained silent in the face of the invitation. Finally Grandma, as the oldest, must have decided she could respond.

"Humph," Grandma grumbled, "Nobody, but nobody, has ever been on the side of us who suffer and are poor. Take it from me, young man. You'd be much better off carrying a hoe than carting a gun."

"Very likely you're right," said the boy. "But since I don't have any land to farm, I'm doing what I can to get some."

"Foolishness!" responded Grandma. "Go up to the Ixcán where there is unlimited land."

"Oh, but I did," replied the boy. "I went up there with my family several years ago. In fact, it's because of what happened up there that you see me as I am now. My father was one of the settlers that the priests from Huehuetenango helped get started. But the soldiers came and killed him."

"The government on the radio is saying that you can come in to the camps, and they will not punish you," said Shun.

“Don’t believe it,” responded the boy. “We didn’t do anything except give some food to some guerrillas who came through our village, but then the soldiers came and took my father and a few other men because of it. I don’t trust them.”

“What are your leaders telling you?” asked Shun.

“That we deserve to have a better life. They have helped me and taught me how to read,” he said proudly. “My cousin found them out in the mountains and told me about how to join the revolution. And not long after that the army started bombing out where we had moved where land was empty in the north, and managed to destroy everything we had done.”

“Son,” responded Shun, “I don’t blame you for being angry. They did wrong. But fighting back, you will only lose. Better to just take your suffering and go on.”

“But we can be like wasps to sting and defeat the mighty jaguars,” the boy said.

“You mean, the landowners?” asked Shun.

“Yes,” he replied.

“Perhaps,” said Shun, shaking his head. I wondered about Shun’s ideas. It seemed to me that just “taking your suffering and going on” couldn’t change anything and might very well result in getting killed.

When the guerrillas left, we held a worried conversation. Now that the guerrillas had found us, the army could not be far behind, and they would assume that we were supporting the revolutionaries. We discussed whether we should go farther east and join the families that lived behind guerrilla lines. Some were for it,

others against it. Shun felt strongly that the guerillas did not have enough arms to protect us and that we would be putting a death sentence on our heads.

Kit asked Shun why we shouldn't become guerrillas and fight back against the army.

He responded tiredly, "I don't believe in killing to change things. I believe in caring for others."

Shun had heard that the army offered amnesty, a pardon, to people hiding in the mountains, and he proposed accepting this.

Some thought we should go north to safety in Mexico. Others argued it would be too far and we would be caught by the army. Eventually the group decided against Mexico, knowing we were far too weak to walk that far. We knew we were in danger from the army of being thought to be guerrillas. If we stayed in the mountains that's what they would think. If we went to the nearby coffee plantation where they had set up an army base, they would give us food and shelter. We discussed this for a long time, trying to decide on the wisest thing to do. It took a lot of talk, but we all came to agreement that we would go to the coffee plantation. The deciding factor was that we would have food. No one wanted to say it, but we knew that the baby and Cat and Grandma would die soon if we didn't do something before it got colder.

It seemed sad to me that after spending so much time hiding from the soldiers, now we had decided to ask them to help us. After all, they had killed my family and burned my house. Many in our group saw that this was our only chance

to survive. We would have to believe the government meant it when they said they would help us. We were so hungry and sick, we couldn't bear it any more.

We decided to leave at night to avoid both guerrillas and soldiers who might shoot first and find out who we were later. That night the full moon came up, and we started out on the muddy path and began to climb. Lu' walked in front to watch for enemies. The narrow path twisted, and my skirt rustled against the leaves that grew on either side. From time to time a branch would snap as Lu' opened up the path. My bare feet, well trained by a lifetime of walking in daylight, stumbled painfully against stones in the dark. The trees overhead enclosed us and hid us from the moonlight.

I felt like we had begun a journey into the underworld, starting from the mouth of the cave of the spirits into the heart of the mountains. Perhaps the spirits of papa, mama and my sisters could meet me there. The elders said our ancestors lived inside the mountains. Or perhaps I would meet my animal soul companion, born at my birth, and destined to die with me. I would be delighted if it were a deer as mama had thought.

By daybreak we stopped at a creek and tried to sleep. Gnats made for miserable rest and baby Mec let everyone know how unhappy he was. His exhausted mother complained to Grandma that she didn't have any milk to nurse the baby, and she didn't know what to do. Grandma helped by walking with the baby, but he screamed, making the rest of us nervous. We decided to keep walking.

Gray clouds ahead had an edge of sunlight on them. The afternoon rains

came in a sudden fierce downpour, as in the old story when a mortal in the land of the spirits clumsily poured out too much. The rain stung my cheeks as the wind whipped it into my face. We stopped and gained a little shelter under some trees.

“You’re wet,” said Lu’ mockingly.

“I’m all right,” I said crossly.

“It makes you more beautiful,” teased little Shun. Lu’ looked down and shoved his younger brother.

I blushed, secretly wishing Lu’ had slipped and said something like that, rather than his pesty little brother. I could tell Lu’ felt embarrassed as well, and I tried to pretend I hadn’t really heard little Shun.

The rain became more fierce and flashes of lightning in the sky and crashes of thunder made me nervous. We spent the rest of the day cold and wet. Late in the evening we arrived at a clapboard patrol station at the edge of the little town where the coffee plantation workers lived on the finca.

“Where you all coming from?” asked a soldier leaning against his rifle. The other soldier put out his cigarette and the two of them stared at us.

Lap, who knew more Spanish than anyone else, said, “Our villages were destroyed and we came here to find shelter.”

“I suppose you all are going to give us the usual denial that you have had anything remotely to do with helping the guerrillas, so I won’t even bother to ask. Yeah, we can get you some shelter all right. We have a place for incoming folks like you. So let’s go.”

We walked through the village where most of the houses made of planks had been whitewashed. A few plastered adobe houses were clustered at the center of town. When we entered the shelter the soldiers lined us up and gave us gray felt blankets with wisps of red and blue threads matted in them, a ration of corn, coffee, beans and sugar, and a few cooking pots and lengths of bright red, blue and orange plastic. A soldier said to use the plastic as protection from the rain and as something to sleep on.

In a grassy plaza, I drew water from the one faucet intended to supply all our needs for water. I filled a plastic jug, and carried it to Grandma who started making coffee. The damp firewood took Lu' and Lap's combined efforts to light, but supper included tortillas and black beans and coffee, a true feast.

After supper I took the bean pot, grabbed some sand and scrubbed it, rinsing the speckled blue enamel carefully. Then I carried it back to Grandma by its thin tin handle. Grandma, baby An and I settled down to sleep. We huddled uncomfortably in the cold under a roof without walls and tried to stretch the gray felt blanket fairly across the three of us. I could see the sky out of the side of the shelter and studied the patterns of the stars. The double-headed serpent of stars in the sky arched white across the darkness. I blinked up at the stars, just as they opened and closed their eyes at me.

In the middle of the night I woke in a panic, not recognizing the place. When I saw a soldier by the barracks with his gun, I remembered, and slowly settled back to sleep.

I woke early, cold and stiff. An still slept against Grandma. Suddenly, my soul melted away inside me. Two soldiers had their guns against Lu' and Lap and pushed them toward the barracks. Lu's eyes flashed at me and his look seemed to be an attempt to pull me toward him. As he disappeared into the barracks my fear for him mixed with joy and astonishment at what I had seen in his soul through his eyes.

After the first moment of shock, all of us started yelling at the soldiers and Shun ran up and grabbed one of them. The soldier knocked him down roughly, hitting him with his gun. Lu's mother was screaming and crying in rage and ran toward where Shun lay. And the soldiers pulled Lu' and Lap inside and slammed the door. Grandma and Kit and I ran up and pounded on the door.

Shun sat up, rubbing his head and Lu's mother continued to weep, holding on to Shun in tears.

"Shun, what is happening?" yelled Grandma from the door where she continued to pound.

"I don't know!" Shun said, fear in his voice.

"The soldiers called them guerrillas, papa," wailed Kit, "which is why I'm so afraid!"

Shun leaned on his wife and walked weakly over and talked to the sentry.

"You can go down and see the Commander, if you want," said the soldier.

Shun's back looked bent and old as he started toward the officer's quarters. We all followed him until we were threatened by the sentry and told at gunpoint to

go back to where we belonged.

Once back at the fire we had started, everyone talked a little hysterically and Shun said angrily, “We made a mistake.”

Grandma blew up the fire, and heated some tortillas, but none of us could eat. Our stomachs ached with anxiety, and we couldn’t eat, even though we knew we needed the food.

Shun persisted and went and talked to the sentry without the rest of us following. When he came back, I could tell by the sadness in his face that his appeal to the commander had accomplished nothing. Kit’s mother turned her head away and sobbed softly.

Soon, she turned angrily to Shun and cried, “We never should have come here! You’re so foolish to trust what the army said!”

“I know, I know,” said Shun sadly, “We shouldn’t have come. But what good would it do to go back to the mountains now?”

All of us felt miserable knowing we had made a poor decision to come to the camp, and we worried about what might happen next.

The camp felt boring even that first day. I stood in a slowly moving line to get food, and I helped with the cooking. Without chickens from which to gather eggs, corn to shell off its cobs, pigs to feed, thread for weaving, and even a decent amount of clothing to wash, there wasn’t enough work. We sat in the sun. One of the other families had a radio. It whiled away the hours to listen to the odd music and deep full voiced announcers, but their voices echoed inside asking “Where is

Lu? Where is Lap?"

Caring for Mec and An distracted me a little. An's wispy long black hair poked out as she waddled in the little blue skirt wrapped around her for a diaper. She smiled brightly when I picked her up. When she crawled across to the edge of the enclosure to eat some red flowers, I snatched her away from her, fearing they could be poisonous. "She's just like my little sister, An, used to be," I thought, "Always getting into something she shouldn't be!" I wrapped baby Mec in my shawl and carried him on my back to give his mother Cat a little break from caring for him. The dog played with An and made her laugh. I looked over at the adults—Shun, his wife Sin, grandmother, and several others, and they looked tense, unable to muster even taut smiles. We had lost two people we cared about, and I realized that Lu' felt like the most important person in the world to me, and I could see that Kit, her mother, little Shun and Shun felt the same. Life would not be right without him here suffering with us.

Chapter 6: The New Ways

Before nightfall the soldiers moved us into rooms in a large compound. Though we were crowded, we at least had walls to shelter us from the afternoon rains. The next morning I learned a new method for preparing corn for tortillas: I stood in a long line to grind the corn at the noisy molino. The machine did the work quickly and spit out dough so soft it would have taken five passes on a grinding stone by hand. The unfamiliarity of the place and anxiety for Lu' kept a shadow of sadness in everything. We had lived so long on wild greens that the tortillas upset our stomachs. As the days past and our bellies felt fuller once we readjusted to normal food, the emptiness in our hearts echoed hollowly and could be heard by the others. "Where is Lu'? Where is La'p?" seemed like an endless chant in my head.

After several weeks Shun announced, "The coffee trees are ripe enough for us to harvest tomorrow. The lieutenant said we are all to go. I have worked at the other finca up north a few times, but I've never worked at this one."

"Do I have to go?" asked Kit. "I don't want to pick coffee."

"I'm sorry child," he replied, "we all have to go, even little Shun."

In the morning, as we walked toward where the coffee was planted, Shun exclaimed in surprise: "Why, there is a lot of land here, and it's good level land, too!"

"Of course," answered the foreman leading our group, "This fallow land will eventually be planted in coffee."

I thought about the strangeness of this. In my village we didn't have enough land to plant our own corn and everyone complained about the shortage. We used to walk two hours to an extremely slanted field high on the hill.

When we came to the ripe coffee trees, the man gave me a large brown sack to fill with the red coffee beans. The trees, only a little taller than my height, held both red and green berries and I had to pick carefully. I sucked on the little fleshy fruit of a coffee bean, enjoying the sweet taste, until only the two seeds remained in my mouth. When I spit them out, I admired their whiteness.

Kit worked near me and piped up and asked, "Why so much coffee instead of corn?"

"Because they can sell it and make more money," replied Shun. "The coffee is taken to other countries far away."

I sucked on another coffee bean and looked over the tree to make sure I'd found all the red beans. My arms were sore and I'd scratched myself. The pain in my fingertips from picking beans felt the worst. We worked through the hot sun and at noon stopped in the shade to drink the corn gruel we'd brought. As we rested, Shun asked the foreman, "Who owns this finca?"

"Oh, they shot the old owner. His sons live in Guatemala City and are afraid to come here. Probably wouldn't hurt them since there is a contingent of soldiers here now, but they're still avoiding the place."

"He was shot?" asked Shun a little startled.

"Yes, about six months ago he was killed by the guerillas," answered the

man. I calculated quickly and decided that was pretty close to the time my village was destroyed. “A whole raft of soldiers came out and they sent airplanes and helicopters. All kinds of wild stories of what was going on circulated. But, really, I was here. I’ve worked on this finca all my life.”

“Was he a good patron?” asked Shun hesitantly.

“No, very bad,” replied the man. “He was a big man who liked to pack a pistol. He had started raving about how the communists were going to take over and that we all needed to be on our guard. He did seem worried.”

“Were you here when they shot him?” asked Shun.

“Yes,” he answered. “We hear some shots up at the house and found him there. The manager called in to the City on a radio and the army sent out a helicopter. The place was swarming with soldiers and hasn’t changed much since.”

We were all rather horrified by the story and Kit and I were amazed that a rich man had been unable to protect himself. Late that afternoon Shun lifted my jute bag full of coffee beans onto my back, and I adjusted the leather carrying strap on my forehead. It felt heavy, but I had carried heavier loads of firewood from time to time.

We walked for a half hour back to a whitewashed wooden building and slung down our bags. The foreman began to weigh them. The heavy strange machinery towered up two stories high. Clunky and mysterious, I wondered why they needed so much equipment for preparing coffee, something I had done many times by hand on a grinding stone. The foreman weighed my bag and marked the amount in his

book. It would be easy for him to cheat me and not give me full credit for my work, but at least they had given us a place to stay and some food.

One day, some men came and talked to Shun in Spanish. With my limited understanding of Spanish, I couldn't follow the conversation. When they left, Shun said, "Some people are giving things to those of us who lost our homes and have lived in the mountains. They are giving out clothes tomorrow. I'm going to use it as a chance to ask about Lu' and Lap and see if we can find out where they have taken them."

The next day we stood in a line and they gave blue shirts to the men and bright red skirts to the women. Grandma, Kit's mother Sin, Kit and I were completely overwhelmed. They even gave An a tiny red skirt and she looked adorable, preening in her new clothes.

An had a terrible cough most of the time, so Grandma asked if they knew what to do for the cough. They said sadly that they didn't, but that a doctor would soon come.

"It's upsetting," said Grandma, "that there are no prayermakers available here to help us." When they translated this for the man, he said he would be happy to pray for An, which he did, placing his hand on her head. But I knew this wasn't what Grandma meant. My grandfather had been a prayermaker. He had a bag of seeds and crystals that he would use to find out why someone was sick. He would spread a cloth out on the table, throw out the seeds and arrange them, count them, and calculate what day-god they added up to. This told him what people needed to

do to recover the souls of the sick.

Grandma made a special tea from an herb she had me hunt for in the hills. But baby An kept coughing and kept getting weaker.

“It may be tuberculosis or it may be pneumonia or it may be both,” suggested Kit’s mom. I offered the Q15 quetzales in money I had to go get medicine, but we were told to wait until the doctor would come out for a brief visit.

Before the doctor came, Grandma stayed up all night with An. In the morning her long gray hair was messy and wild and her eyes were exhausted. When we got to the doctor, the lines were very long. The breath left baby An while we waited. The people pushed Grandma quickly to the doctor, hoping he could revive her. He used a suction cup to remove the mucous from her nose and she gasped and started breathing again. He gave us vitamin pills and pills for the infection and wrapped her in a shawl. Grandma and I cried with relief when we were able to take her home.

Not long after An’s brush with death, the lieutenant called all of us who had lived in the mountains together. We stood by the barracks that had large words painted on the side. I puzzled over what they might say. I recognized several letter “A”s and an “L” since papa had long ago taught me to spell my name, but I couldn’t read the rest.

“I have some good news for you,” announced the lieutenant importantly. “A village near here is being rebuilt as a Model Village and we will have a school, some water projects, and a health center. You can go and build a house there for

yourself.”

I started tuning him out, but was startled into alertness when I heard the name of my village. The Model Village would be at my old home. I didn't know what to think about this! The soldiers had burned it and was now going to be rebuilt. My heart started racing in fear.

“The soldiers will take you over there day after tomorrow,” he announced.

Shun took the opportunity to go up and talk to the lieutenant about Lap and Lu', not expecting help, but always grasping at any opportunity that presented itself to try to find them. He felt very anxious about our leaving the place. “What if they get out and try to find us?” he worried.

Lu's mother suggested that he ask around to find an elder, someone reliable he could explain the situation to, and someone who might be able to continue to look for Lu' and Lap. Old Mec had already helped him more than once when he went to speak to the commander, so he went to see him again and explained that we had been told we would be moved to this Model Village. He asked for him to please persist in anything he could think of to help find them, and Old Mec assured him that he would.

I felt anxious about the move and Kit's mother sensed it and spoke to me.

“I know it will be strange and probably unhappy to go there without your family. I am not happy about going there since it is not my home village, I don't know who will be there, I don't know the countryside, and I'm not sure how we are going to make ends meet. But we have to go. And you, and Grandma, and An, have

become part of our family and we will stick together and work hard to survive,” she said.

I started crying in relief at her kind words. “You have been so good to me!” I gasped.

“I know I am not your mother and that I can never replace her,” she said, “but I care deeply for you and you are a special young woman to have survived the terror and to have not destroyed yourself with your grief. I will love you as long as we both live.”

She had been like a shadow in my life compared to Kit and Lu’ and little Shun. I realized she was right, she could never replace my mother like baby An helped replace my sister, but her words comforted me.

Grandma set to work immediately to get ready to go. She scrubbed an old holey blanket and kept it out in the sun to make sure there were no fleas or lice. She sewed five quetzal bills inside my belt, a place no thief would look, she said. With the other \$10 quetzales we bought some supplies: salt, a grinding stone, some mats, and a green plastic water jug, since they would doubtless not yet be available at the new village. We stuffed our few possession in various bags, and aired out the plastic sheets that would serve as raingear.

The morning we planned to leave I unwrapped the long red belt that I had made. I studied it for a while, trying to decide how I felt about this move to my old village. I looked at the blot of blood from the day of my escape. After much hesitation, I put the belt right side out and arranged the front of it so that the

intricate colored weaving would show.

Shun fussed and even raised his voice at us as we struggled to get ready. When he had made Kit cry by scolding her for not being ready, Kit's mother scolded him. Consequently, we were all angry as we started off.

"I know it makes you mad to have so little control over your life," said Lu's mother furiously, "but that is no reason to take it out on us!"

"Be quiet!" he commanded and stalked off.

We walked in uneasy silence for about a half an hour. Shun finally broke the silence and said, "Ma'l will be going home, but it won't really be home. We still can't go back to our home because of the fighting, and that frustrates me."

"We'll make do," said Grandma. "It's a step up from this place."

We walked slowly for Grandma's sake. I carried baby An and when I felt too tired, one of the others carried her. She was still too weak and fragile to be able to walk so far on her own.

As we walked toward my old home, the huge fern-like plants, the blackberry bushes, and the tall pines all seemed to whisper, "Your land is waiting for you in the valley below. We are the high mountains protecting your valley." We stopped to rest and pick the blackberries, and An kept asking for more.

We reached a place where immense trees grew on the mountain and the soft whistle of wind made it a place of wonder. Their ancient trunks had seen men come and go, I thought. I wondered if I might see a quetzal bird like my uncle once had. He said its bright red body flew in soft little puffs, waving its long green tail

feathers behind it like the wind. I knew I had nothing, but I felt rich, as though I owned every leaf that I could see, and every wispy cloud.

My stomach was in knots as I anticipated our arrival. I knew no valley in the world could be as beautiful as my valley. The grass is a perfect light green and the trees scattered through the hills sparkle in the sunlight. The blue river wanders through the valley. From the tall hill, the town always looks small enough to be held in my two hands. I remembered the houses hidden through the trees, a few soft red roof tiles among thatch roofs between the trees, and the sun shining high in the blue sky. We reached the place on the mountain where the valley comes suddenly and perfectly into sight. My heart leapt within me.

Although a lot of shiny new aluminum roofs glinted unpleasantly in the sun, the grass was as light green as ever, the leaves of the trees glittered like jade and the cornfields were at their early growth when they are green. Two white doves flew against the brightest blue sky my eyes had ever seen.

Kit, Little Shun, and I yelled, laughed, and ran down the hill. My dog barked and yelped and ran with us. Soon I slowed down to admire the bright butterflies lighting on the pools of water—yellow, red and black, orange and white, green, black and white striped. The bright blue ones with black and white around the edges were my favorites. How could something so thin and delicate have the intricate patterns of a carefully woven belt?

The blue birds flashed across the trail, and I heard other bird cries far away. The closer I came to the river, the louder I heard the sound of water tumbling over

the rocks.

As we reached the village the path seemed muddier than it had ever been before. The houses made of fresh yellow wood looked awkward and out of place. We went up to the plaza to the municipal building, built of the same raw wood. The adobe store of the Señora still stood as did the white church with the roof fixed. A new school, also yellow and raw, and new rooms for soldiers had changed the look of the plaza. Before settling, Shun and I went to buy bread from the ladino's store and a young man I had never seen before attended us. My throat tightened with the memories of the Señora.

We slept on the hard earth of the porch of the municipality that night. The next morning Shun, some soldiers, and other men took the boards and roofing and built a small one room house that day. Once we could enter, Kit and I ran into this strange little house. Tufts of grass still shot up inside, making it look like a strange pretend house. Little Shun ran around outside and peeked through the cracks between the boards and made faces at us. We hadn't collected many things during our time in the refugee camp, but we arranged everything we had inside with great care: woven straw mats for beds, gray felt blankets, a half of a clay comal for heating tortillas, tin pots, and our new green plastic waterpot.

"I wish Lu' were here," said his mother with a sob.

Meanwhile, Cat and her husband Lixh, and little baby Mec had a house built right next to ours. We all ran over to see their small yellow-board house when it was done and were glad they would be our neighbors.

The next day Kit, her mother, and I went down to the river to select three stones for the hearth. When we found them we called Shun to carry the rocks. Kit's mother fussed around until she had them placed to suit her. Grandma prayed over them and I brought in firewood to start the first fire.

One of the soldiers gave us some corn and we roasted the big ears in our first fire in the new house, enjoying the smell of toasted brown kernels. I burned my ear of corn a little, and it smelled wonderful.

The next day I went with Kit to look at my old house that was charred and basically ruined and I started crying. My grandparent's adobe house had survived better, and it had been repaired and someone else lived there. I felt angry that my only inheritance had been taken from me.

We then went to try to do some wash at the river, and I flashed back to the day my family died and started gasping and couldn't get my breath. Kit came and held me and said, "No, no, no, you're okay now," and comforted me and I started crying. When finally exhausted from crying, we sat by the river and talked. Soon little Shun came down and started skipping stones and Kit and he got into a splashing contest. I was too exhausted to do any washing so we went home. I wondered where my family was buried; there seemed to be no way of knowing that and it felt deeply wrong not to be able to visit their graves.

Shun had to rent some land since we could not go on getting corn from the army indefinitely and no land was provided. To pay that rent he had to go into debt to the man who was clearly becoming a powerful man in the community. He hoped

the harvest would be good enough to feed us and cover the debts. Kit's mother fussed, "Same problems! When will we ever not owe someone money!" But she quite agreed there was nothing else to be done, because he must have land to farm. The army gave us bags of corn to help get us started.

I enjoyed having more normal housekeeping to do. I washed clothes, making lots of suds with the pods from the soap tree. There was not corn to shell, since it came in loose kernels, but I still had to soak it in lime, wash it in the river, and grind it on a grindstone. I made tortillas, patted them out quickly back and forth on my hands, laid them on the hot comal, and flipped them by touching the sticky top when they had toasted on one side. I fanned the embers into flames and heated coffee in the little blackened tin can with its tin handle. I tidied up the blankets on the straw mats and swept the floor with a broom made of twigs. The tufts of grass had died, and the hard packed earth of the floor made it feel more like a real house. I fed the chickens their corn and found the eggs that they laid. I even gathered special greens from the hills for soups, and made chili sauce from what we bought.

Sitting around the hearth at night, with the fire flickering softly on each person's face, I did feel at home. I could see the sadness in each one of missing Lu', and sharing this ever-present burden helped us. The three hearth stones at the center of the house were like the heart of the home that drew us together. We chatted and told the news from town in the evening. Sometimes we lit a candle or the small tin of kerosene with a cloth wick. But often, we sat on our short little stools in the firelight. I knew from the sad look in Lu's mother's eyes at these times

that she missed Lu' as much as I did. I felt deep in my heart that he was still alive and would come back to me.

One night I had a dream. Lu' looked at me with a soft smile. He stood beside an immense tree, shaded by the leafy branches. A spring gurgled at his feet.

"I'm home," he said simply.

"Oh!" I said, eyes shining, reaching out my hands toward him.

Suddenly, I exclaimed in delight, pointing up to the top of the tree, "Oh look! How lovely, oh how lovely!"

"Come here," said Lu'.

I awakened in the morning even more convinced that he was alive and that the dream was a sign to me that he would return.

Chapter 7: The Land

The reminder that we lived in the middle of a conflict zone came almost immediately. Shun came home furious from a meeting in town.

“I’ve been told I must become part of a civil patrol to guard the village. Not only do I not believe in using a gun, the guns they are offering us are completely ridiculous old things that would probably malfunction if you tried to shoot. Furthermore, someone told me that in a nearby town they told the civil patrollers which people in town needed to be killed since they were thought to be guerilla supporters. If they didn’t do it, then they would be seen as sympathizers and killed. I told them my conscience would not allow me to participate, and I got the message loud and clear that is not an option. The man I’m in debt to has become the head of the civil patrollers and is in thick with the army. I’m furious!” He accidentally knocked over several pots he was so agitated, and that agitated him so much he kicked a pot and broke it.

“Shun!” protested his wife, Sin. He ignored her and left the house.

He persisted in periodic inquires about Lu’ and Lap and would come home with a flask of alcohol. His anger got worse and he drank more than he should which made Sin angry. The combination of having to participate in the civil patrol and his anger and fear for Lu’ kept the whole household on an emotional edge.

“They all claim to know nothing and to be able to do nothing,” he would say angrily after every attempt to find out anything about Lu’. “I do not know what to

do!”

Sin became more and more frightened and we would catch one another’s eyes as we tried to avert his angry outbursts. As months went by with the deteriorating family atmosphere, once again I felt deep despair.

I think Shun’s sense of powerlessness, his drinking, and his recognition of how miserable we all felt, made him listen to the evangelical neighbor two houses away. The neighbor persuaded him to go to the church service, and Shun agreed that we would all go.

The church, a house about twice the size of ours, had a lectern in front and benches in rows along each side. The women sat on one side and the men on the other. The scattered pine needles on the floor gave off a pleasant fragrance.

I thought the meetings were unbelievably boring and spent most of my time watching the flies walk on other women’s shawls. In spite of myself, I learned some of the songs that we sang over and over. Grandma thought it was completely ridiculous and refused to go after a few times.

The pastor sang loudly and slightly off key into the microphone. All his singing and preaching blared into the community, something that had never happened when I lived here before.

Shun stopped drinking and he talked to the other men from the church who also had become part of the civil patrol. This improvement made Sin, Kit and I willing to attend.

One thing that had not changed was the chore of carrying firewood, but what

had changed was the distance we had to go to get it. Besides the fact that everyone in town needed it, the nearby woods had been chopped down by the army to help ruin the cover for guerrillas. Since we used wood for all the cooking and needed some everyday, Shun could not bring it all, and Kit and I agreed to help.

One morning my dog, little Shun, Kit and I headed high into the hills. I carried the machete and had a carrying strap and rope inside the string bag slung over my shoulder. My shawl sheltered me from the sun.

Little Shun started to whine about how far we had gone and said he wanted to go home. As we climbed a path, I suddenly saw a snake. Before I could react, it had slithered off into the woods.

“It could have bit me!” said little Shun.

“It’s more afraid of you than you are of it,” I said. “It was just trying to get away from you and there is no creature than can get away faster than a snake.”

“I could catch it,” he boasted.

“You could not!” said Kit in exasperation.

“I could too,” said little Shun crabbily.

“Just be quiet,” snapped Kit, out of patience with him.

“Maybe I could catch it and it would give me lots of money,” he said.

“That’s just a stupid story,” said Kit.

“Well I hate getting stupid old firewood anyway,” he said.

“It’s hard work,” I agreed, “but you like to eat, don’t you?”

“Yeah. But I’m just trying to live a long life. Grandma says that if you cut

trees, you're cutting short your own life."

I didn't know how to answer that, since of course we needed the firewood to eat and I had heard Grandmother say that. It didn't seem to stop her from burning the wood.

Smoke came up in little columns from each of the houses in the clear morning air and left a gray haze against the blue. My dog walked companionably along with us, running ahead or off the trail to explore interesting smells.

"Have you ever heard the story about the boy who was terribly lazy about getting wood?" I asked, hoping to distract Shun.

"Oh, Kit's always telling me the lazy boy stories," he said.

"With good reason," she said sarcastically.

"Tell me the story."

"Only if you walk a little faster," I said, and began.

Well once there was a boy who hated to work. His poor mother struggled to put food on the table.

"I'm cooking and I need firewood," she said to him. "All right," he said, but then he just went wandering around outside.

He didn't like to cut down the wood, because the sticks would cry whenever they were cut since the world was newly created. When he came back without any firewood his mother asked, "Where is the wood?"

"Blood-like sap comes out of the wood when I cut it, and it scares me, so I couldn't bring any."

Another day when he went out he saw a man standing in the road and there was a snake in front of him. He had a stick in his hand, and he was about to kill the snake. If the boy hadn't come he would have killed it."

Little Shun interrupted me, "I remember this. He rescues the snake and the snake gives him riches. See, I told you we should have caught that snake."

"Well, at least you quit complaining while she told the story," said Kit, "and we're here where papa already cut the wood."

We sat down to rest. We were higher on the mountain than I had come before. I saw a tree with ripe orange pitchpine, sap dripping like blood, perfect for starting fires. The sweet scent drew me close to it. Stacked at the foot of the tree was the firewood we had come to carry.

Suddenly there was a flash of light and sound like thunder.

"Run!" yelled little Shun and pointed up the hill where we could see a bomb explode. As we started running through the trees down the hill we could hear the drone of an airplane in the sky above us. When we neared the bottom of the mountain we paused for breath.

"Just like in our old village," yelled Kit panting.

"Either guerillas are close by or the airplanes have terrible aim," panted Shun.

"Well, you managed to run off as fast as the snake we saw!" I said.

We rushed home to report to decide whether we needed to move once more into the mountains. The leader of the local civil patrol went to talk to the army

lieutenant and protest that this had happened so close to the village when the army had resettled people here themselves.

Meanwhile, my ordinary chores of cooking and cleaning did not stop. One afternoon, when I came back from the river with my wash, I stopped dead in my tracks. Old Tin, like a ghostly memory, walked slowly down the path. My father had respected Tin deeply. Rude as it might be, I ran up to him and said breathlessly, “Tin, sir, you are here!”

He looked blankly at me and I realized it was unlikely he would recognize me. He had only seen me infrequently and I had probably changed during this time away from the village.

“I’m Pil’s daughter. I did not know you had survived!”

“Child!” he exclaimed, his eyes widening in delight. “What a pleasure to see you! I’m so pleased that you are here.”

“And I’m so pleased to see you,” I exclaimed. “How did it happen that you survived as well?”

“I was out of town on business when it happened. I didn’t hear anything about it and came back to a terrible shock.”

“It could have killed you, uncle!” I replied.

“It could have indeed,” he agreed. “But my gray hairs are not for nothing. I accept fate.”

“I haven’t learned that,” I said regretfully.

“Come and see me.” He invited, lifting his wooden staff to point in the

direction of his home.

As soon as I returned home I bubbled my news to Kit and her mother. I felt more elated than I could explain to them by this connection to my old life. I could almost see mama and Shiv laughing together and papa picking up baby An, simply because someone who had known them was in town.

My thoughts centered on a visit to see Tin, and I did chores quickly to be able to leave. I wanted to hear him tell stories or reminisce about old times in the village.

“Oh, just go on over and don’t worry about the work!” exclaimed Kit’s mother.

“Oh, thank you,” I said. I grabbed my shawl and put it on. “I’ll be back soon,” I called out as I stepped out of the fence and started toward Tin’s house.

Once at the house I unlatched his gate and caught my breath.

“Are you there?” I called out in the traditional greeting.

“Here,” he responded. “Are you well?”

“I’m well, and you?”

“Very well. Come in and sit down,” he said and pulled up a wooden stool for me.

“So where do you live?” he asked.

“I live with Shun and his family. They are people I met in the mountains,” I replied.

“At your old home?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “There are some other people living in my grandparent’s house

and on my old plot of land.” Horrid people, I thought to myself.

“Hmmm,” he said thoughtfully. “Perhaps I can approach the municipal authorities about this. The land is clearly in your grandfather’s name in the records, and I can attest that you are his only surviving heir.”

He settled himself, leaning against his cane as he sat.

“So tell me your story,” he said and sat listening quietly, nodding, and meeting my eyes as I told him everything from the day my parents died. The late afternoon sun slipped in through the door by the time I had finished my story.

“You’ve lived through very difficult times,” he responded. “Now I think it is time to try to get your inheritance back.”

“Oh, do you think that is possible?” I asked in surprise.

“I don’t know,” he replied honestly. “Land is sacred, though, and that is your inheritance. There was a cornfield attached to the house, right?”

“Yes, but not enough to raise all we needed. We had land on the hillside, too.”

“We’ll see what we can do. When I was a small boy there was a famine in the village where I lived, so my parents and your great-grandparents and others came to settle this land. They started from nothing and made this good land for growing corn. I think it is fair that you get your land back.”

“Right,” I agreed.

“We’ll see what we can do.”

Chapter 8: The Return

My favorite long gray rock for scrubbing clothes in the river glistened as I washed. Five other girls, including Kit, gossiped and washed their hair. One pair of soapy white men's pants lay on the grass for the sun to bleach. We often spent long mornings washing clothes in the river with the other girls in town.

Suddenly, I noticed a pale face in the trees along the path and froze.

"Lu'," I whispered.

"Ma'l, Kit," he called.

We ran to him with my dog at our heels. Kit grasped on to him and he gave us both tight hugs.

"Oh Lu'," said Kit, "I thought you were dead!"

"I knew you weren't," I said.

"Pretty close to it," he laughed.

"And Lap?" she asked.

"He went home to where he thinks his parents are," he said.

"How did you know to come here?" asked Kit.

"Papa had asked Old Mec to leave messages for me all over the place, and I ran into someone in the town that send me to see him. It wasn't hard to find you once I got away from the army."

We walked slowly to the house.

"Mama is going to faint," predicted Kit. But Kit's mother didn't faint.

Instead she clasped Lu' and cried.

When Shun and little Shun came home with loads of firewood, they dropped them with a crack onto the porch, and Lu' stepped out of the house. Shun shook and cried with relief as he held Lu'.

"I'm so glad to see you, son," said Shun.

"The directions you left with Old Mec were great. Didn't have a bit of trouble finding you."

He turned to hug little Shun.

"Brother," said Lu' to little Shun, "You've grown nearly to the roof since I saw you!"

Our happiness could not be contained.

As we sat around the fire that night, Shun asked, "So where did they take you?"

"We ended up in a prison in the municipal capital fairly soon after we were taken."

"And did they feed you properly?" asked his mother.

"Not really!" he laughed.

"What about Lap?" asked Kit.

"He was released at the same time I was. Kit, would you mind getting me another bowl of soup?" and he handed her the ceramic bowl. After filling it, Kit handed it to him along with more tortillas.

"So why did they release you?" asked mama.

“I don’t really know,” he said. “I think they finally realized we were telling the truth and had been burned out of our village, had never been guerrillas, had never helped guerrillas, and had no information for them at all.”

“I think God answered all of my prayers for you and brought you back safe to us,” said Shun. Lu’ looked at him a curiously.

Later that night I overheard Lu’ and Shun talking and Lu’ said, “No, I can’t, and I won’t tell you what being a prisoner is like.”

“I can take it.”

“Maybe later.”

“Do you think it is safe for you here? There are soldiers in town.”

“Guess we’ll just have to see. If we decide it’s too dangerous I’m thinking I can go up north and work for a while in the United States.”

“Hopefully not,” responded Shun. Hopefully not, I agreed silently, not unless you take me with you.

Lu’ was frightened and stayed inside most of the days when he first returned. Shun was concerned for him and knew he needed something useful to do. He found an excellent piece of wood and insisted that Lu’ make the weaving stick we needed.

“They need to be able to weave, Lu’, so make them a proper loom,” Shun ordered him.

Lu’ struggled with the task for over a week, but the day came when he had finished a wonderfully smooth, perfectly shaped piece. I meanwhile had bought the thread and prepared it for the loom.

“It’s beautiful!” I exclaimed with real pleasure when he gave me the weaving stick.

He sat with me on the porch as I had started weaving a new blouse for An.

“I’m glad you like it!”

“I have really missed weaving!”

“Ma’l,” he said shyly, “I really missed you.”

I felt amazed that he had spoken to me so personally, but could not help but respond the same way with the truth.

“I really missed you, too,” I agreed, “I was so afraid they had killed you, but I dreamed of you and thought you must be alive.”

“I could see something in your eyes when they took me away,” he continued.

“I could see something in your eyes, too.”

“I held that memory in my mind for a long time. Did you mean what I thought you meant?”

“That depends on what you thought I meant,” I replied guardedly.

“All that time in the mountains, you had never looked at me that way,” he went on.

“Lu’, all that time in the mountains, you never looked at me like that.”

“But how could I court you,” he exclaimed, “when I couldn’t even raise an ear of corn or put a roof over my own head!”

I started laughing. “Does that mean you are courting me now?”

“No, no, no!” he exclaimed, horrified. “I need some time to get on my feet.”

He left hastily in embarrassment, but I was secretly delighted, bubbling inside with the knowledge of his love.

When Lu' finally ventured out of the house with Shun, they came back almost immediately, both very frightened.

"What happened?" Lu's mother asked in alarm.

"He saw an army officer that he knows," said Shun shortly.

"I have very good reasons to hate that man," Lu' said darkly.

"Well then," replied Shun slowly, "He doubtless will not be pleased to see you and may seek to harm you. Did he really see you?"

"I don't think so," Lu' said worriedly.

"If he saw you now or if he sees you soon, it may remind him of evil things he has done and rouse his anger."

I imagined the fury I would feel if I saw the man who shot my family, and my anger joined with Lu's. Our flashing eyes met, and our hatred of our enemies joined our spirits and our souls.

"I guess you'll have to stay in hiding," said Shun sadly, "until we can decide what to do. No going outdoors. Pretend to any neighbors that he's gone away," he instructed all of us.

Once more, Shun's solution to Lu's confinement was to bring him wood and insist that he make a trunk for our things. We already had little wooden stools. At this rate, I thought bitterly, we're going to have some very nice furniture and seeing it will make me sad since I know fear has made this home a prison after getting out

of prison.

We all went about our daily routines, pretending to the community at large that he wasn't there. We all shrank with fright, even inside the house. Our neighbors knew, but understood the need for secrecy and cooperated with our plan.

One afternoon Lap came to see us, and you could feel his fear.

"I'm glad you came," said Lu'.

"I'm on my way to the capital because I'm convinced it isn't safe for either of us here in the midst of this conflict where we've been imprisoned and are known. It's too dangerous. I want you to go with me to the U.S."

Lu' nodded and agreed, "Something has to change."

"Even if we're just imagining danger," said Lap, "the anxiety is hurting our families. Even if the army doesn't accuse you again, you might be forced to join the army to become a soldier against other poor people, or they might make you help them with something dreadful as a civil patroller."

"Couldn't I work in Guatemala City?" he suggested.

"Perhaps," said Lap. "But they don't have farm work in the city and you haven't had enough schooling to compete for jobs. You might be able to find work as a carpenter, but there's so much uncertainty I don't think there is much construction. I hear that it's difficult to find a position unless you know someone."

Kit piped up, "Well the United States is supposed to be a place where everyone is very rich and you can live like a king. You could make money for us all to live there," she suggested.

“Oh Kit,” responded her mother in horror, “What a terrible idea! You know how awful it would be to live somewhere where I couldn’t understand anyone.”

“It was just an idea,” Kit defended herself.

“Without papers I could easily be caught and sent back,” said Lu’, “and then all the effort and money would be for nothing.”

Lap continued to offer his arguments, and he and Lu’, Shun and Sin discussed this for several hours. Lu’ said he did not want to go now, perhaps later. Lap eventually left and promised he would get word to us on how things went for him once he got to the US, and Lu’ could come later if he wanted.

Lu’ continued to stay at home. The shadow on our lives lifted a little when Shun found out the lieutenant had left town. We didn’t know why he had left, but we felt some relief.

“I still don’t feel safe,” Lu’ said. “Others may come and go. I may see someone else I know.”

The man to whom Shun paid the rent came to collect and his visit was so unexpected that Lu’ happened to have stepped outside and saw him. As soon as he knew that Lu’ lived with us, he insisted that Lu’ must become part of the civil patrol or he would report him to the army immediately.

There was no real answer to that, and so Lu’ started to accompany Shun and the other men. It was a pointless waste of time, according to both of them. They walked around the perimeter of the town with sticks, “protecting the army” as all the men cynically said. Technically, they were supposed to be looking for guerillas;

in actuality it just seemed like a way the army tried to force us to support them, whether we wanted to or not. They didn't think they would do very well if there was an actual encounter with well-trained guerillas and that added a level of dread each time they went out.

During all this time one matter made us stand out, and yet we were all in agreement that it must be done. Tin had gone to the authorities on my behalf to testify that I was the rightful owner of my grandparent's house and the land around it. While we continued to work on the case, the family there agreed to move if we paid them something since they accepted the validity of my claim. We gave them what we got for selling the small house where we were. This didn't solve the issue of the cornfields that should belong to me, but it felt like an important step.

We moved in with great excitement. By now we had more possessions and lined up the ceramic bowls in excitement on my grandparents' old cupboard. Several of the old wooden beds were still intact and Shun and his wife had a proper bed for the first time since I had known them.

Baby An seemed puzzled by our new house and clung tightly to me as I cleaned and arranged things. I sympathized with her fussiness, but wanted her to be happy here.

"An," I said encouragingly, "See how there is an attic up here?" I pulled a ladder over and set it so we could climb up. "See how it has a little window here? I used to love to come up here and look down toward the river valley."

"I like it, Ma'l!" she exclaimed and waved excitedly to little Shun out the

window.

I looked down happily on the plot of land that had some oranges and bananas on it. We would have squash, chili and beans from the plot behind the house, but it was too late in the season to plant the corn on my land up on the hill.

The old sweatbath in the back still worked and we couldn't wait to heat it up and take a proper bath. The sweatbath was a little room made of stones, built so that three people could sit inside together on a dark brown plank. Kit and I took gourds and dipped water out of a jug and tossed it over the rocks that had been heated by the fire. We left a wiry plant for scrubbing and let the men go in.

When Lu' came out without his shirt on, I stared. His back and his chest were covered with raw red welts and scars, including a jagged one down his side that made me wince. I felt great sadness as I saw these marks of his imprisonment. His long straight nose and the curve of his mouth, the smooth brown skin on his face, the flare of his cheekbones, and his sleek black hair drew my attention away from the scars.

Lu' glanced up and saw that the others had left and we were alone. He gently took one of my hands and tugged me toward him to take my other hand.

"Will you talk with me a moment?" he asked. I didn't answer but nor did I move.

"I love you Ma'l," he said. My heart opened softly toward him like a delicate flower.

"I love you too," I whispered quietly, my face down.

“I have loved you ever since I first saw you by the spring. Did you know I thought you were one of those magical women who spirit men away to the underworld?”

I laughed. “Kit told me. I was so sad, and you were so kind to me when I was ill that first evening when we met.”

He pulled me closer and bent down to me. “I am yours if you will have me,” he said.

I looked up toward him and my voice caught as I said, “Oh I will!”

Gently, so gently, he bent and touched my lips with his.

We walked slowly toward the house, his arm around my back. We separated before we walked in the house, and my heart beat so fast I felt certain it could be heard by everyone. But this was private and I didn’t want the others to know.

I remembered how Lu’s face had looked in the moonlight and how his hands felt. And I thought if I should ever feel any greater happiness than this, my spirit and soul would fly into the sky and stay there.

It was harvest time, and we had arranged for help from our neighbors the next day. Kit, her mother, Grandma and I rose early to cook. I rose and combed my hair in the pre-dawn chill. Lu’ roused the fire for me, and though we caught one another’s eyes and smiled, we kept our secret inside. Kit and her mother woke up and combed out their long tangled hair. I rose to get the pre-soaked corn and used the heavy round granite “arm” to crush the corn on the grinding stone. Kit made coffee and her mother fired eggs on the comal while I prepared the breakfast

tortillas.

The men headed for the fields, and Kit and I followed with food and drink. Collecting the corn is sweaty work, so Lu' and the other young men rolled their pants legs up. Most of them had the white pants of our people, but two had red and white striped pants and one had a brown weaving wrapped around like a skirt over his pants.

All but Lu' took off their shirts and began to fill the jute bags with ears of corn. His deep blue shirt, red belt, and white pants made him a dashing figure. The young men competed over who could work most quickly and teased one another as they filled the bags.

Kit and I sat under a shady tree, ready to serve food at the break. "My, my, what big brown backs they have," said Kit and rolled her eyes wickedly. We burst out laughing. I felt I was being watched and glanced up and saw Lu' watching me. He smiled quizzically.

At break time, when I gave him his corn gruel, the pupils of his eyes looked like rich shiny black seeds.

Once the day's work was over the men carried the bags back to the house. The next day we started shucking the corn and setting it to dry in the yard. I felt a little worried comparing the amount with my memories of harvests in the past. When it was dry enough to move up into the attic, the limits of the harvest became even clearer. My memories of the mountains of corn when my grandparents lived there piled higher in my imagination and I couldn't conceal my worries from Lu'.

“Perhaps I should go and join Lap in the U.S. and send back enough money for papa to buy corn and pay off the debts.”

“It’s so expensive and difficult to get there,” I objected.

“What about the coast?” he suggested.

“I don’t know, but maybe we could just go help harvest the coffee near here.”

“I already checked,” he said sadly, “they aren’t hiring—they have enough people.”

“Your dad will probably just pray about it,” I said, and we both laughed a bit guiltily. Lu’ found Shun’s enthusiasm for church somewhat surprising and I could see that, like me, he found much to question in what he heard. But out of respect for his father, he would attend.

A few weeks later Shun said resignedly, “I guess Lu’ and I need to go to the coast to cut sugar cane to pay off my debt for renting the land.”

“No magic solution through prayer?” asked Lu’.

“Hard work and prayer can go hand in hand,” said Shun angrily.

“I want to go too,” said Kit.

“Girls can’t do the hard labor of cutting,” Shun explained patiently.

“We could cook,” I suggested.

“I’ll think about it.”

Kit’s mother and Shun quarreled about whether to let us go. But Kit and I kept pointing out to her mother that it made so much sense for us to help earn the necessary money and that next year with the corn from my land we would probably

not be in debt. We finally decided that little Shun, mama, Grandma and baby An would stay and care for the house, and Kit, Lu', Shun and I would go. I hated the idea of leaving my dog and I knew he would hate it too, but I couldn't see any way around it.

“You will feed him every day and let him walk with you in the woods?” I asked little Shun.

“Sure. I'll take great care of him. Don't worry about a thing,” he said.

Chapter 9: The Journey

When Shun calculated that the cane growers would be ready to hire harvesters, we arranged for our journey. We started out early for the town where we could catch a bus. I tied my dog to a tree in the back, stroked him and petted him, promising I would be back. He howled after me and Lu' teased me by mimicking the dog.

To reach the town where we could take a bus, we walked up a steep unending mountain that held immense trees at the top. The climb left us sitting quietly for a while to catch our breath. The sun shone through the leaves, turning them a pale green color.

In the deep darkness we arrived in town. Firelight flickered from more houses than I had ever seen together, and a tall white church gleamed in the moonlight. But most surprising to me were the lights from white soft bulbs that shone through open doors of larger buildings on the main street. Shun and Lu' tried to explain electricity to Kit and me, something our village did not have. We didn't really understand, but were quite impressed.

We slept that night on the porch of the municipal building and woke up early the next morning to ride a bus, my first time ever. We turned sideways to squeeze between the dark green vinyl covered seats, and crowded in, seven across. Lu' sat in the middle, half on the seat where Kit, Shun and I sat, and half on the seat where strangers sat.

People stowed their bags in a metal rack above the seats, and we settled down to sleep. When the driver started the bus, I felt it would shake me to pieces, but I soon felt comfortable enough to stare out the windows. The driver's assistant squeezed through the rows to collect money from each passenger and gave each of us a little paper ticket.

The trees and bushes blurred past as we twisted and turned. I studied Lu's sleeping face: his eyelids, lashes, a lock of hair falling down on his forehead that I longed to reach over and smooth back. As I looked around, I loved each face that I could see in the bus and the soft little outlines of hair and rumpled clothing. The mountains and valleys with their scattered cornfields looked like a lumpy patched blanket and I watched the changing shape of the landscape in fascination.

Several hours had passed when we saw a small lake and then came to more houses. Trees and benches filled the square in front of the church. Glass windows on some of the stores, something I'd never seen before, let me look in and see the radios and watches displayed.

"Look how much thread these women's blouses must take," exclaimed Kit, motioning with her lower lip at the bright green, red, blue, yellow, teal, mauve, and purple mixed in patterns of birds, horses, and diamonds.

"Think how much material they are wearing on their heads!" I replied, staring at the green headdresses. The principle of the hairstyle was the same as what Kit and I wore, but the result was much larger.

"I think they wrap the cloth around their heads the same way we do. There's

just so much more material that it looks different,” said Kit.

“Do you like it?” I asked.

“Not sure,” she said, “Lu’, do you like these women’s headgear?”

He laughed. “No, frankly, I like yours better.” He flashed a smile at me.

“Oh brother,” said Kit, “You just like Ma’l!”

Kit and I persuaded Shun to buy us pairs of black plastic shoes in the market. We had always gone barefoot, but knew that looked out of place here. Our excitement over our new shoes amused Lu’.

Shun found the labor contractor and arranged for us to get on the truck that would take us to the finca. In the morning we crowded in with two dozen others and settled under the stuffy tarp. The truck climbed up the mountains

“This is the tallest mountain range in the country,” Shun explained to us. “And on this side it rains more, so it’s green. On the other side you’ll see that it’s dry and brown.” When we came to the ridge I looked down and saw the thin winding line of the river and a wide expanse of dusty land. We plunged down the twisty road and when we reached the river, I calculated the width as five lengths of the truck.

Suddenly, the truck stopped and several soldiers with machine guns commanded the driver to show his papers. “Get everyone out and lined up along the side,” said the oldest of the soldiers.

Rage against the murderers of my family surged up against them. The fire in me burned hotter when they spent too much time studying Lu’s papers. If they

tried to take Lu' with them I knew that I would leap at them furiously, guns or no guns. I suddenly felt all my anger at the loss of my family, my anger for the months of Lu's imprisonment, and my fear that they were on the verge of taking him away again. Rage burned hot within me, and my face flushed and hands trembled. But they waved us back onto the truck, and Lu' and I shared a joyful look that we were still together.

That wild joy overshadowed the strangeness of the trip through the mountains to Guatemala City and the shiny flowered tablecloth at the bus terminal where we ate and the volcano we could see spitting a little smoke. I felt hazy with relief, and unable to concentrate on what we passed. We traveled slowly toward the flat land near the ocean. The air seemed heavy as though it wanted to rain, but couldn't. Palm trees with trunks like straw baskets stood next to the entrance to the sugar finca.

The mosquitoes kept me awake the first night in our shelter. Shun found an older cook and offered that Kit and I would help in exchange for all of our food. She agreed she could use the help, but was unwilling to pay more than that. We chopped vegetables, carried water, took corn to grind, and made tortillas for thirty-five men. The Señora treated Kit and I like mentally deficient children and raised her voice at us often. Kit and I endured it by mimicking her behind her back.

Lu' and Shun's work horrified me. The heat and the exertion of cutting cane drained them. And for what? This foolish white sand for sweetening coffee. The sweetness didn't seem worth the slavery.

Our miserable hot six weeks passed with little conversation. I felt disappointed by the distance between Lu' and myself. I didn't see him in the day and Lu' and Shun slept as soon as they ate in the evening. Even Kit, who never seemed anything but cheerful, would snap at me from time to time. Our days were a dull blur of work, our evenings boring and lonely. When the ordeal finally ended, we calculated the combined earnings could pay off the debt and buy some corn.

To snap us out of our cross feelings, Shun decided we should take advantage of being so close to the ocean and go see it before we went home. Our spirits lifted at the very idea and we left that horrible place of work without a glance backwards. We found a bus which took us to the ocean within an hour.

"Where does it all come from?" asked Kit in astonishment as we stood watching the waves roll in, splashing whitely on the shore.

"Don't know. That's just the way it is," replied Shun with a smile.

I hitched up my skirt and put my bare feet in the water. Before long I quit worrying about my skirt altogether and got wet. We played in the water until the sun went down. Even Shun got in for a while and enjoyed the change from weeks of backbreaking work. Kit and I splashed at one another and laughed. Lu' startled me and mischievously dunked me, which reminded me of my cousin Pil, as I sputtered indignantly. The difference was, I wanted him to do it again. I ducked under the waves, and let them toss me. The weight of my wet skirt weighed me down, and I soon went to the shore. I shivered in my wet clothes until we built a fire on the beach. As I warmed up there was something soft and pleasant about the

water rolling in, the three lines of white against the dark blue, and the lavender sky with a pale pink moon. We heated our tortillas and enjoyed our meal on the beach. The soft lapping of the waves called us to rest. The separation I had felt from Lu' had gone, and I was content.

“Ever hear the story about the man who crossed the ocean and reached heaven?” asked Lu'.

“No!,” said Kit. “Tell it.”

Lu' stirred the fire and began.

Long ago there was a poor man. He traveled a lot trying to make money. He gathered seashells and caught fish and shrimp to sell. People bought the seashells to make necklaces. The waves brought the shells to the sand, and he gathered them and washed them.

One day, as he filled a bag with shells, he saw a boat on the shore. He climbed in and it seemed seaworthy, so he set out to the open sea before he realized that the boat was damaged. Water flooded in through the hole and the boat began to sink. Suddenly, he fell into the open sea and the boat drifted away from him. A sea serpent swallowed him and plunged deep into the sea with the man inside.

It was dark inside and the beast traveled far into the darkness of the water. They say there is another land on the other side of the sea, and across the ocean one arrives in heaven. People there don't eat the corn, beans and squash that grow there since all of those things are alive. People smell the food, and the odor alone sustains them.

Well, the man was inside the sea serpent and was hungry. He could see light through the sea serpent's skin. 'It's the sun', he thought, 'the sun is shining and I'm going to see if I can get out.' He took his knife and plunged it into the serpent's skin. His head came out of the serpent, and the dying serpent twitched and pushed him out onto the sand. Who knows how long he had been inside, but he stood up and was hungry.

He walked to a cornfield and tried to bite into an ear of corn, but the ear of corn cried out. Then he tried to eat a prickly pear, but it started yelling. The banana he tried to eat started shouting, and so did the squashes when he tried to eat them.

All this noise attracted the attention of the landowners, and they came to see what was happening. They grabbed the man and said, "Where did you come from? Why are you here? Who brought you here? Who are you?" He responded, "A sea serpent swallowed me, and brought me here. But where am I? I don't know this place and I can't go back. Besides, I'm dying of hunger. When I tried to eat the ears of corn, they started screaming."

"All right," they said, "We'll help you." They took him to bathe since he stank so badly, and they gave him new clothes. They took him to the ruler of that place who listened to his story and then said, "All right, son, you can stay here and I'll give you a job. At three in the afternoon you're to take a gourd with clouds inside it. I'll show you how much to let out, and then you must close it again. This will make the rain and the thunder. Measure the clouds carefully. If you let out too much you'll destroy the people of earth."

“Fine,” agreed the man.

He felt happy that the ruler had given him the gourd and he thought, ‘Good, I’m going to destroy all the evil people. He let out more than half of the cloud.

“What is that man doing?” asked the ruler. “It looks like he’s being disobedient, so stop him.” The people asked him what happened and reminded him he’d been told only to let out a certain amount.

“Oh! But what I want is for all the evil people to disappear because they are very bad, and I’m going to destroy all of them.”

“Oh no,” they replied, “Not just the evil people would disappear, but all of the people. I’m glad we stopped you before you poured out all the cloud,” and they took him to the ruler.

“Why did you do this?” asked the ruler. “You disobeyed what I said, so you can’t continue in this job. But I want you to stay here and become wise and learn to measure the clouds carefully before you return to your people.”

“So they say,” said Lu’ smiling.

“A wise story,” said Shun. “Where did you hear it?”

“Old Mec,” said Lu’. “I think he could see how angry I was when I got out of prison and thought it might help me.”

We pulled out our blankets and settled down to sleep by the fire. As we listened to the quiet waves, I remembered the ocean that afternoon: huge and unending. I remembered the waves on the shore, so rough. The water tumbled

around, caught up sand and smashed it down again. Like our lives, I thought. Our way of life was smashed and mixed with other people's ways, and there isn't a solid place to stand. I felt the need for a rock.

I felt like the man in the story looking for a chance to destroy his enemies. My enemies had taken so much from me. Tears fell down my cheeks and I tilted my head to one side. The busy work at the finca had left me little time to think, but now the old familiar pain of missing my family came to me, softened by the sound of the ocean. The moon rose in the sky and shone pale against the black night.

"You're awake, aren't you?" whispered Lu'. "The others are asleep, but I can't seem to fall asleep."

"Nor I," I whispered back and leaned my chin on my hand, propped up on my elbow.

"It's the waves, I think," said Lu'. "I'm not used to that constant sound."

"Lu'," I said, "I'm like that man. I want to punish the soldiers and if I had more power, I would. Don't you feel like that?"

"I certainly do," he agreed. "Sometimes I wonder what I can do with all the anger I feel. I wonder why soldiers are even allowed to exist. And I wonder why I have to work so hard to feed foreigners all that sugar. It's not really fair."

"The story doesn't really answer the problem," I said. "It just points out that if you try to take revenge on one person you may actually end up hurting people you don't want to hurt. And, if you think about it, that really happened to us since I think the soldiers killed people in our village because they thought we had helped

kill that landowner.”

“I suppose that could have been part of it,” he agreed. “It isn’t a good enough reason for them to destroy a whole village.”

“Another thing, do you sometimes wonder if there really is a heaven?” I asked in a whisper.

He looked at me thoughtfully and said mildly, “Well, if the question is whether I wonder if there is a perfect place, then the answer is ‘yes’. But if the question is, do I think I know that it exists, the answer is ‘no.’”

“Shun seems to think he knows,” I said.

“Yes,” said Lu’, “I’ve noticed some differences in the way he acts and way he thinks since I came back.”

“There are such beautiful things in the world and such terrible things at the same time.”

“I wonder if there is a way of knowing,” he said. “All I know right now is how beautiful you look in the moonlight!” He reached out and touched my hair. “For both our sakes we had better try to settle back to sleep.”

I kept thinking how much I wanted to destroy all evil people, and yet I wondered if the story was right and that would end up destroying innocent people as well.

”God help me’ “I thought. “I don’t want to carry this load of bitterness with me for the rest of my life.”

Chapter 10: Home

After our long bus rides and long walk back home, I thought I had never seen anything in all of my travels that looked as good as Grandma's face. Her smile welcomed us home and let us know how pleased she was to see us. Kit's mother didn't tend to be expressive, but even her face shone and she laughed with Shun more than usual. My dog could hardly stand it. I thought his tail might fall off.

Shun laughed, "They say the creator put the dog's tongue on his rear end as a tail. Poor thing can't speak, but he's desperately trying to use that tail like a tongue!"

"He's missed you," said little Shun. Now that we were safe at home, I felt happy, and hugged my dog. Lu' teased me that I cared more about my dog than anyone else.

That night the fire burned low and a little candle flickered. The comforting soft sound of a light rain on the roof enfolded us in a quiet, cozy fire-lit world.

Grandma passed Shun a bowl of beans and chili sauce. We ate tamales: ground corn cooked inside dried corn leaves. They had been made the day before and Kit and I now toasted them on the comal. I filled a cloth-lined basket and set it between Shun and Lu'. I then poured coffee from the tin pot that was heating in the embers into two little tin mugs. It was well sweetened and had a hearty dash of chili I'd mixed in when the coffee was ground.

Little An nestled up against me and Kit animatedly told Grandma and her

mother about our trip.

“Tell me about the ocean,” asked Grandma, and we tried to describe it for her.

“No!” she kept saying. “No! If it is a lake, at least you can see mountains on the other side.”

“Yes,” we explained, “But the ocean goes on farther than the eye can see.”

“I know a story about a lake,” she said. “And about missing someone...”

“Tell it, Grandma,” said little An.

“Yes, tell it, Grandma,” agreed Kit.

“Very well,” she agreed.

The spirit of the wind ruffled the waters every afternoon. The spirit became a small ant and fell deep into the lake. At the bottom he saw a beautiful shining castle made of sparkling colored stones. This castle was the home of the spirit of the lake. The beautiful daughter combed her hair by one of the windows and the ant saw her and fell in love with her. She loved him too. But one day a fisherman caught him in his net, and he was taken out of the water. He never could get back, and he once more regained his form as the wind. So every afternoon he reaches down to the lady of the lake and the water becomes rough.

Kit’s mother laughed, “The tragedy of a lost love!”

“I think it’s lovely,” said Kit.

“I remember a more realistic story of lost love that involves the ocean,” said

Kit's mother.

"Tell it," commanded little An.

"It's very short," apologized Kit's mother, "And I don't tell stories well. A poor old fisherman had to leave his wife to make ends meet and was gone a very long time fishing in the ocean. When he got home he had to find another wife because his wife had despaired in his absence and found herself another. So they say!" she said laughing.

"Very realistic, my dear," said Shun. "Where did you hear that story?"

"Oh, one of the neighbor ladies told it to me."

"Ah but you have never found yourself another with all of my trips to the fincas, have you?"

"Count yourself lucky," she replied with a grin, "And don't take your luck for granted."

"I heard an ending to that story once," he said. "The wife went crazy and got all disheveled and full of lice when he found himself someone else."

Kit's mother laughed good naturedly. "I don't take my luck for granted either."

"Well, I guess it's about time to go to bed," said Shun.

Lu' sat looking into the fire and the light flickered across his face. He must have felt me staring at him, because though his head was down, his eyes looked up at me and he smiled softly. My heart turned over and I felt like I'd been pulled down by another ocean wave.

Little An and I climbed up to the attic and settled down together to sleep. Moonlight shone through the little window across my blanket, and the roosters crowed their late night chorus. As I lay there, a soft peace flowed through my body like healing waters, and I rested in the comfort of being home. In amazement, I realized one can suffer beyond measure and yet find peace. The moonlight shifted and broadened the shaft of light on my blanket. My spirit and soul stopped wandering and I fell into a gentle and quiet sleep.

Lu' found me in the kitchen the next afternoon and said, "Ma'l, please come walk with me. I want to talk to you. We can go up the path behind the house."

I wondered what he wanted to tell me. I found Kit to let her know she needed to watch An, got my shawl, and set out with Lu'. Not far up the path he stopped, took my hand, faced me and said, "My father has agreed that we can marry. He has hesitated since we are living in your grandparent's home and you are still trying to get your land, and since everything around is so uncertain. But he feels like things are a little better financially since we went to the coast, and he has said we can marry soon. Would you be willing?"

"Yes," I said, trembling.

"As early as next week?" he asked.

"As early as next week," I agreed.

"Oh, Ma'l, I can't believe it! Let's keep climbing because I think I can show you more or less where my village is from here."

Not far ahead, I saw the spring where I had sat for several days after my

family died. Lu' stopped and stood beside a tree that grew beside the spring. My dream from when he was a prisoner had come alive, and I gasped inside. How different this place looked to me now, I realized. For so long I had felt that God had poured more suffering on me than I could bear, but I hadn't noticed so many strange gifts: this spring when I felt weak and afraid, food from strangers, an escape from the soldiers, the encounter with Lu', a new family that loved me, the sparing of little An's life, the return to my village, Lu's return after his captivity, Tin's on-going efforts to recover my inheritance, and now a marriage full of love ahead of me. I hoped I would be as beautiful a bride as my sister Shiv had been, and I hoped my family would know that I had survived and found happiness.

Lu' took me by the hand and we walked to an outcrop of granite. He climbed up the rock and reached down to help me climb up. The cold stone felt slick on my feet and he steadied me until I reached the top. When I stood, I gasped out loud. The fruitful valleys and wooded hills stretched out before us. The clouds feathering the sky glinted in the sun, and the blue of the distant mountains and the blue of the sky faded into one another.

"Our land!" laughed Lu'.

"So beautiful!"

"Look over that way," he said. "A little down from that peak. Do you see? Beyond that is my village. I will take you there someday to my father's land. Between your land and my land we'll find prosperity."

"We'll sit inside our house and watch the rain wash the grass," I said.

“And then we’ll go admire our beautiful corn!” said Lu’.

Suddenly, I exclaimed in delight, pointing to the top of the tree below us, “Oh look! How lovely!” The tiniest most delicate hummingbird I had ever seen fluttered at the tips of the branches. We stood side by side on the rock, looking out over the valley, Lu’s arm around my back.

“It’s beautiful here and I’m not afraid,” I said.

“Neither am I.”

“We have no right to say that—it’s irrational!” I laughed.

“I agree,” said Lu’. “It’s more than we deserve.”

“I don’t know if you know why I never left for Guatemala City or Mexico or the US?” he asked.

“I have wondered, but I never wanted to bring it up, fearing that you would go!” I replied.

“I stayed here for you,” he said simply. “My dad agreed to it. If the day comes that I’m in danger, will you come with me?”

“Of course,” I said.

“Perhaps we’ll be fortunate and live in our land.” He stretched out his right arm to point at the valley and held me tightly with his other arm.

Chapter 11: Friends

I was sixteen when I got married, just like my sister Shiv. But not much else about the two weddings was the same. Shun didn't want to have a traditional fiesta that would include drinking, and we didn't really know enough of our neighbors to have a good party anyway. So Lu' and I who wanted more than anything just to be together, agreed to stand up in the evangelical church service together to be acknowledged as husband and wife. Shun said we would take care of the paperwork with the government as soon as we could.

Kit was as excited as I was, and on the day of the ceremony, Grandma, Baby An, Shun, Lu's mother exclaimed over my beautiful red blouse with the woven birds across the front that I had been weaving for so long. Cat, her husband Lixh, and baby Mec came to celebrate with us. A few others who had lived in the mountains with us all made a point of coming to the service, wishing us well, and giving us a few quetzals as a monetary gift. Though my blouse was new, my belt was the old one with the bloodstain, just turned to the right side to celebrate. Lu' had new clothing as well, and I thought we made a very handsome couple.

Shun had suggested that Lu' and I could repair and rebuild my parents' old home, salvaging as much of the wood as possible, and putting in new wood. We had spent the week before the wedding quickly repairing it with the dog curiously following every move. Little Shun had been excited to help Lu' with the construction and Kit had been excited to help me gather and arrange things inside. So, once more, as a married woman, I moved into a semblance of the house that had

been my childhood home, something I never would have expected. We had all the wonderful furniture Lu' had made, and every piece of it looked beautiful to me. By the next market day we collected all the money we had been given and bought some things to make the house more our own. I particularly loved the new lavender blanket with a beautiful pattern of birds and leaves woven into it. I could tell it was machine woven, and it pleased me as something particularly sophisticated every time I looked at it lying smoothly on the bed.

But all these expenses made me anxious since I knew Shun still owed money for the land rental, and I wished there was some way I could help. If only we could finally get all of my land back, I would have something to contribute. Lu' had gone to talk to Tin and the two of them had planned what their next steps would be in this effort, including a trip to the municipal headquarters together in town.

An, Grandma, and Kit came to visit me every day, and some days Lu's mother came as well. Lu' and my household routines weren't dramatically different than before, and we washed clothes together, or wove, or shelled corn, and had lunch together in one house or the other. Lu' meanwhile went to the hills to work in the fields with his dad, taking along the dog and little Shun, and some days he stayed home and did carpentry if someone had asked for something. The most annoying part of our routines was the requirement that Lu' and his dad must go around the perimeter of the village at least once a week when it was their turn to be on the civil patrol. The man in charge of this in the community continued to make it very clear that not participating equaled a declaration of loyalty for the

revolutionary movement. Lu' and Shun hated it, felt it wasted their time, and it served as a constant reminder that we lived in a conflict zone.

Several months into the marriage, I knew we were expecting a child. We were both delighted, a little nervous, but glad and proud, too. Kit was the first person I told, and I could soon see that she had passed the news on to everyone else in the family.

My ordinary life, quiet as it was, was made fretful only by the rumors of conflict, the fears that ebbed and surged in our village. We tried to remain as neutral as possible in a zone where we saw army patrols on street corners, and knew that in villages not too far away from us, the villages were more likely to have guerillas coming and going. My restlessness from time to time seemed logical in this ever changing community where things were not quite as they should be.

My routine was interrupted one bright morning when I had finished all the housekeeping indoors and was considering whether it was time to do the wash.

“Are you there?” I heard someone say outside.

“I'm here,” I responded and started toward the door to open it.

A woman, about my age and quite pretty, stood before me framed in the doorway.

“You don't know me,” she began, and I stepped outside.

“Old Tin told me about you and suggested you'd be an excellent member for the new women's group we're starting.”

Tin's name reassured me and I looked at her expectantly.

“My name is Nil,” she said, “and some of us who are widows, or who generally are having to try to earn a living, want to get together. The idea is that we’ll save money together for emergencies for anyone in the group. We’ll try to sell our weavings, and we’ll look into other ideas for businesses, and we’ll have classes and invite people to teach us things, and it will be great!” She stopped, a little breathless.

Her enthusiasm was infectious and I wanted to join already, just because I liked her.

“Let me ask my husband Lu’ when he gets home, and I’ll let you know. It sounds wonderful. Where can I find you?”

She explained the directions to where she was living with two other families. “I want to find a place less crowded,” she said, “but that’s where I am right now.”

“Can I invite others?” I asked, thinking of Kit and Lu’s mother.

“Certainly!” she responded enthusiastically.

“Would you like some coffee,” I pressed her.

“Would love some.”

Over that coffee, which we had to heat and then drink slowly, Nil and I started to become friends. I found out that she had lived to the north, she had lost her husband and ended up here because one of her aunts was being sent here. I liked her liveliness and thought that she and Kit would make one another laugh.

By the time Lu’ came home, I was in a fever-pitch of enthusiasm for joining the group.

“Not a problem,” he said cheerfully. “I’m sure you’ll learn useful things, make some more friends, and perhaps even earn some money.”

The following week, Kit, Lu’s mother, and I went to the meeting, and I was excited that there were twenty or more women, mostly young, a few old, and all eager to see if we could earn money. The obvious thing to do was to weave and we agreed we would each start a project for sale. Nil had a friend who had promised to take what we wove to the lake and see if he could get a good price for our things from the tourists. After consultation with Kit and Lu’, I determined that I would make a blouse.

It soon became very clear to me that it would be useful to read and to be able to do some addition so that I could take some leadership in the group. I was impressed that Nil already knew how, so I asked Lu’ to help me. He had been to school, and I was grateful that he did not think it pointless for a woman to learn to read and do sums. My parents had never seen the sense of it, even though I really was curious and wanted to go to school.

Cat, little Mec’s mother, decided to join the group as well. We felt pleased to see more of Mec as she brought him to each of the meetings, and we felt real happiness being together. Nil brought interesting people to talk to us. For example, the nurse from the clinic came to talk about nutrition and how to stay healthy by boiling water and washing our vegetables.

Lu’ and I started calling Nil my “unexpected visitor” and the coming baby our “expected visitor.” But, one afternoon, we had a visitor who replaced Nil in our

stories as the “unexpected visitor.” Lu’ and I were resting at home outside under a tree when our dog started barking ferociously. A man called out in Spanish, “Buenas tardes.” A tall blond man with rumpled clothing, a stubbly beard, and strange, heavy brown shoes came toward us.

“Buenas tardes,” responded Lu’ politely and he turned and hushed our barking dog.

“I’m looking for Lu’ and Ma’l Santiago,” he said in his slightly labored Spanish. “I was told they live down this way.”

“I’m Lu’ Santiago.”

“Could I talk to you for a moment?” he asked. He explained that he wrote for a newspaper from Europe and hoped to learn about people who had survived the destruction of their villages. Lu’ invited him to sit down and found him a stool.

While Lu’ started cautiously as he answered questions, soon he told this man his experiences, after being reassured that neither his name, nor the name of his village would be recorded or used in any printed materials. Since Lu’ replied so openly, I felt confident to reply when the conversation turned to me. My Spanish-speaking ability was so limited that Lu’ translated for me. Soon I told my story also, and I felt an enormous weight lift off of me as I did so.

Something changed for us after that conversation. We hoped our stories would be heard and that people would understand our suffering. Somehow my heart and soul felt lighter.

My days passed doing the household chores, preparing Lu's food in the morning as he left to work with his father and brother in the fields, and spending all my free time weaving for the women's group. I looked forward to our weekly meetings as a chance to see my new friends.

At one meeting, little Mec's mother Cat came in greatly agitated and asked to speak to me privately.

"Someone told me that they know where my brother is," she said with a level of anxiety in her voice I had never heard. "I don't know whether to believe him, but supposedly he is in a village not far from here. I want to find out if I can see him, but I'm not sure what to do."

I immediately remembered that she had told me her brother had gotten separated from them as they fled into the mountains and that she didn't know if he had survived. A dream she had of seeing him again as a young man made her think he still lived.

"Let me talk to Lu'," I suggested. "You talk to Lish, and perhaps they'll go out wherever it is to see if it is true. If it is, you can later go to your brother, or he can come here.

"I can't tell Lish," she said wildly, "He'll be so angry if he finds out my brother is with the guerillas."

"I don't think he'll be angry," I said calmly. "He knows how much you miss your brother. Hold on to the dream you told me that you would be reunited with him someday when he's older."

“In my dream he seemed like a young man, but he was only 12 or so when we were separated.”

“Cat,” I insisted, “you must tell your husband and let me tell Lu’.”

“Alright,” she said, still doubtful.

When I went home and told Lu’ he said that it might be a false rumor and I shouldn’t encourage her to believe this too much until we found out more. He left immediately to go talk to Lish. When he came home he said they had agreed to go to the village farther north and see what they could find out.

They left two days later and Cat came to stay with me along with little Mec so we could encourage one another as we waited anxiously.

To our astonishment, when they returned a week later, they brought her brother Mec, a strong looking young man, to the house. Cat cried out and ran to hug him, something she probably would not have done if it had not been over two years since she had seen him

While I felt joy and astonishment on her behalf, my surprise increased to see who came walking beside Lu’.

It was Tun, the young man from my village who had disappeared shortly after the first time the guerillas had come to recruit. I remembered how much I had always liked him and how I had been so concerned when he disappeared from the village after the guerillas came and held a meeting in town.

“Ma’l” he said in delight.

“Tun!” I exclaimed with equal enthusiasm.

Lu' explained that the European reporter had found Tun, talked to him, and learned that he was also a survivor of the village.

Tun said the reporter never directly said so, but he implied that a few from the village had escaped. This caused him to start asking around more and he heard about us and in the process found out that Cat lived here as well. He had looked for Cat off and on ever since someone had encountered her brother Mec in the jungle and taken him to the guerilla encampment where Tun lived and worked.

We all moved down toward my grandparent's house where the rest of Lu's family lived and brought Cat carrying her son Mec, her brother Mec, her husband Lixh, and Tun with us. The dog followed faithfully. We introduced Tun to Lu's parents as someone I had known when I was younger, but with no reference to his current career. They were ecstatic on Cat's behalf that she had been reunited with her brother.

Kit made coffee for everyone and served it as we talked about how Cat had dreamt she would see Mec again, and now her dream had come true. I noticed with a start how Kit and Tun looked into one another's eyes when she handed him the coffee, and I thought, "Oh dear, I can really see the attraction for Kit—he's a handsome, dashing man. And she is pert and lovely!"

"I've got to warn her about who he really is," I thought.

Little Shun seemed fascinated by Cat's brother Mec and sat over in a corner asking him questions.

After Cat and her family left, we went back to our house and Tun came and stayed a while longer with us. I felt freer to talk to him in the privacy of our home. We recounted some of our adventures, and he told us about living out in the jungle in hiding, moving from place to place to avoid the army while still recruiting more and more people from the villages to join them.

“So the rumors were perfectly true,” I said, “and you really did join the guerillas after they came!”

He smiled. “I had talked to some of them before, since one of my friends had already joined. I knew I wanted to go and just took advantage of the fact I knew where they were to take off with them.”

“Tun, don’t you feel somewhat responsible our village was destroyed?” I asked. “Someone must have told the army you joined the guerillas.”

“I’m not responsible for their foolish idea that one person’s decision makes everyone responsible. I’m proud of my decision to join—what they said made perfect sense, and it has continued to make perfect sense. I’ve learned a lot about politics, the world, courage, working for justice, and I do not regret it.”

“You are really proud of what you’ve done?” I asked. “But look what happened to all of us as a result!”

“Some of this has to happen,” he insisted, “We’re up against some powerful and selfish people who don’t want to stop dominating the poor.”

“But do you really think you could be militarily strong enough to win against them?” asked Lu’. “Who is supporting you?”

“We get some support from many different people,” he said vaguely.

“But the army has support too, especially from the United States,” insisted Lu’.

“This conflict started when the United States secretly helped overthrow our government. One cannot be a sovereign nation and allow other governments to run your country. It’s not the American people we oppose, it is the bad decisions of their government.”

“Well please stop talking about your differences of opinion,” I said, “and let’s tell Lu’ what our village was like when we were young.”

Tun cooperated and told stories about himself and my cousin Pil and some of their other friends, and since he was a good storyteller, we enjoyed our evening together until he said he needed to go.

Later that night I said to Lu’, “We have a serious problem. I can tell that Tun is interested in Kit. Can you imagine how horrified your parents would be if she married a guerilla? It would be awful!”

“It won’t happen,” Lu’ said angrily. “She’s not interested.”

“Pay attention the next time,” I insisted. “You’re just not paying attention.”

When I saw Kit the next day, I asked, “So what did you think of Tun?”

She laughed, “I knew you saw that we had a moment of connection! What do you think?”

“Well,” I said hesitantly, “I agree he’s very handsome, but do you know what he does?”

“I figured it out—he’s one of the guerillas, I’m pretty sure,” she said.

“And you still like him?” I asked, horrified.

“Actually, it makes me like him better. I’ve always been dismayed that my dad doesn’t believe in fighting and think it would have made more sense for us to join the people who are fighting back rather than go to that army base,” she said fiercely.

“I didn’t know you felt like that,” I said, and dropped the conversation. I didn’t want to be responsible for her and could foresee the attraction for her of going off into the mountains some day herself.

About a week later, I went to the door and in astonishment saw yet another person from my younger days. It was Max, the one from my village that I had thought might marry Shiv someday, until he had moved away. He stood there in military camouflage with his Uzi machine gun at his side.

“Max!” I exclaimed in surprise. His younger brother had been one of Pil’s good friends, and the two brothers lived with their grandparents since his parents had abandoned them.

“Ma’l,” he said smiling in delight, “May I come in?”

It seemed extraordinary for a man to ask to enter the home of a woman alone, so I hesitated. But I sensed he didn’t want to be seen by any prying neighbors, so I invited him in.

“Please sit down,” I said, and pulled out one of the low stools for him.

“Ma’l, I’m so glad to see you! What has been happening with you?”

I told him that I had fled the village and joined up with a group in the mountains that included Lu's family.

"I know that!" he said. "Do you remember when you were alone in the mountains and a soldier stopped you? Your dog bit him, and the two of you ran off."

"How did you know?"

"I was there. I was one of the other soldiers who said you weren't with the guerillas and to let you go."

"Really?" I exclaimed in astonishment. "You were really out there?"

"I really was," he said with a smile. "I didn't know about the village until later, but I recognized you and persuaded them not to follow you."

"When did you find out about the village?," I asked.

"A few days later," he said sadly. "I was heartbroken. I'd been gone for a while, but I lost friends and relatives. Including my grandparents."

"I'm so sorry."

"Yes, it made me stay alert to what was happening with people and to try to be fair. So, when I was in the departmental base, I found out about Lu' and Lap. Lu's dad Shun actually came and talked to me at one point, and I told him I didn't know anything. But, I followed up, and I found them, and I worked hard to convince the commander that they should be freed. For one thing, the conversation with Shun let me know that they had a survivor from our village—a young woman. I wondered if that was you. It convinced me he was a good man, and his son and

the friend really weren't involved in the guerilla movement and didn't know anything useful for the army."

"They were cruel to Lu' in any case," I said sadly.

"I know." He shifted uncomfortably. "But he's alive and married to you! That's great!"

Still disturbed by the cruelty I knew the army was guilty of, I asked, "And do you like working for them?"

"I joined the army because I thought it was an honorable profession. I learned a great deal from my commanders and I'm proud of my courage and skills. We cannot have a stable country if people are allowed to overthrow it. There is no question that the guerillas are allied with the Cubans, and that they want to make our country like Cuba. Their hero is Che Guevara, for pity's sake, the great hero of the Cuban revolution. It's naïve to suppose that it is something else."

"Max, do you remember Tun?" I asked.

"I do," he said, and a troubled look passed over his face. "I'm quite sure he's with the guerillas."

"Even if he is," I persisted, "Could you see him and meet with him as one of the few left from our village and forget that you're on different sides."

"Difficult," he responded. "it would not be correct. And I would very much advise you to have nothing to do with him."

"But we're the only ones left from here besides old Tin!" I exclaimed.

“Ma’l,” he said, exasperated. “Don’t you understand that that is why I’m here? Someone saw him with Lu’, and so I’m doing the investigation. I can go back and lie and say there’s nothing to it, because I understand the family and village connections that made it happen. Someone else wouldn’t understand, and it would be back to detention for Lu’, and I doubt he’d get out this time.”

I froze.

“So no more nonsense about having anything to do with Tun, do you hear me?” he said sternly.

“I hear you,” I said with a tremble in my voice.

Lu’ came home at that moment and we repeated the whole amazing story of how Max had been in the right place at the right time to both help rescue me and to help free him.

“I always wondered what on earth made them let us go,” Lu’ exclaimed in astonishment. “This is even more strange and wonderful than I can imagine, that you, who knew Ma’l as you were growing up, should have been the one to intervene to free me. I cannot thank you enough.”

When Max left, Lu’ continued to repeat his astonishment over and over.

“Ma’l,” he said. “This almost makes me believe in God. Could there be any other explanation for such a coincidence?”

“It’s truly strange,” I agreed, “How can it be that he had a hand in helping both of us?”

“Ma’l”, said Lu’, “I can forgive and be grateful to Max for helping get me released. You have good reason for appreciating him for helping you get away. It’s a lot harder to forgive the men who gave me the scars on my back. Or for you to forgive the leader of the men who killed everyone in the village.”

“Very true,” I agreed. “I don’t know how I could speak kindly to that big man who yelled and gave the order to shoot. If he was sorry, and realized he killed innocent people and asked my forgiveness, then forgiveness might be possible.”

“That is not in the least likely to happen. He probably thinks he did the right thing.”

“How can he!” I exclaimed.

“People do. They see the world a particular way and then justify their own actions.”

“Isn’t there such a thing as right and wrong that we all have to agree to?”

“Tricky to convince people of that.”

“Lu’, we have to be really, really careful. Max told me very clearly that we will endanger ourselves if we have anything at all to do with Tun.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he responded. “I’m really not interested in getting in trouble with the army again.”

Chapter 12: The Birth

Lu' and I discussed for several weeks where we would go for our child's birth. Should we invite a somewhat unknown midwife from the community to help me, have just his mother and our adopted grandmother, or should we try the nurse at the health clinic who was there a few days a week? We eventually decided on the health clinic after Lu's mother told me she lost two of her children right after they were born. We didn't want to risk something like that.

One night I awoke and sat bolt upright. A heavy oppressive weight about me made me feel certain that Lu' was in danger. He and Shun were out on Civil Patrol. Anything could have happened. They could have met up with guerillas or an unexploded grenade. One of the boys had been killed that way.

"No, no, no," I pleaded. "God, please help him. Please."

Suddenly I heard voices at the door and I leapt to undo the string.

Shun and another man were carrying Lu'. They took him and laid him down on the bed, and he winced a little when his foot had to be lifted up.

"All right, son?" asked Shun.

"Fine. Thanks," said Lu'.

"Please get him some corn gruel, Ma'l," suggested Shun, and he went back out with the other man. I went and took some of the ground corn, mixed it with water in a tin cup, fanned the embers into flames and set it on to heat.

"I knew you were hurt," I whispered to Lu'. "I woke up and couldn't sleep. I was terrified that you had met up with some guerillas."

“I’m fine. Really. I was just clumsy and tripped over something.”

He spent the next week hanging around the house, which was glorious. He helped Kit and me shell corn, and sat and whittled on the porch while we wove in the afternoon. But soon he was better and our routines resumed, with him going to work in the fields, and going out on civil patrol on behalf of the army, something that always struck him as incredibly ironic after his experiences in the hands of the army.

Lu’ and I started to excuse ourselves from regular church attendance with the explanation that I wasn’t feeling well due to the pregnancy. This wasn’t entirely true, but it made a polite fiction that kept family peace intact. When we went occasionally, the services seemed dull to me. Perhaps that was why I was willing to accept Nil’s invitation to the Catholic church. My family had very rarely gone, since we relied more on the traditional ways of Mayan prayer. It was Holy Saturday and I went with her and friends and felt fascination as the church, quite dark, was slowly lit by flame passed between each candle that we held. This held my attention and the light on each face made each person seem extraordinary. As scriptures were read the magic of those faces made me listen and hear that Christ not only died, but came to life again. I’d heard this in Shun’s church and had some skepticism about it, but the candlelight somehow made me consider the possibility.

The next morning, I continued to think about this, and my eyes saw more than usual. The brilliant purple blooms of the bougainvillea felt like a great gift from some generous giver. The whiteness of the clouds and the blueness of the sky

took my breath away. As a bluejay dashed between two trees, I felt awe at the notion that a creature can fly. Late at night the vastness of the heavens, the brightness of the moon, and the arrangement of the stars in familiar patterns all gave me a sense of surprise, as though seeing them for the first time. My whole being felt open to the gift of life.

In this pensive mood one morning after my chores, I decided to set aside other work and simply walk up the hill. I wasn't really sure where I was going, and without thinking or planning, I arrived at the spring and the tree beside it where I had slept for three days several years ago in my time of shock and fear.

I came to the tree on the hill and smiled. Never could I come here without remembering that Lu' and I had agreed to marry standing in this place. What a beautiful tree! And I looked hopefully for the hummingbird, but it wasn't there today. Rather, as I looked down, I sensed the memory of myself sitting there, frightened and forelorn, alone and waiting. The tree itself had seemed to comfort me in my fear, taking my fear into itself and out of me. Tragic, mysterious tree. Its wide-spread branches seemed like arms wanting to reach down and hold the sleeping child and the sleeping dog I could almost see at its trunk. I could see myself comforted and at peace. How I longed that the whole land, all that I knew, would find such peace.

Suddenly the silence shattered as machine gun fire erupted across the valley. Rapid fire machine guns responded to one another, and I knew a major battle must

be taking place within less than a mile. I ran home, and panting, went to see Sin, Kit, Grandma, who had huddled in the house with An and our dog.

“Where are Lu’, Shun, and little Shun?” I asked wildly. “Are they anywhere across the valley?”

“I’m afraid so,” whispered Sin in agony.

I went back outside and listened to the gunfire, trying to decide what I could do. Heading into the gunfire would be absurd and dangerous, and yet being afraid for Lu’ and the others might give me heart failure.

“I will not be afraid,” I thought with angry courage. Kit joined me outside.

“What should we do?” she asked. “We can’t just wait here.”

But wait we did. I do not know how long this waiting lasted. I wondered if Tun and Max were shooting at each other across the valley and thought it seemed logical they would be. I could picture them shooting one another with Lu’, Shun, and little Shun all caught in the crossfire.

After several hours Lu’ and the others came home and all of us who had been waiting cried in relief. They had heard the gunfire very close, but had managed to head for home with only one or two close encounters with soldiers.

Over the next few days a desire for peace grew in my heart until it felt painful, it was so fervent. I could hardly think of anything else as I went about my household chores. “Wouldn’t it be wonderful,” I thought, “If all who are fighting would talk with one another and understand one another’s points of view and

perhaps find another way to solve these disagreements? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we didn't have to worry about more shooting and more death?"

My awe began when the baby started moving, and I felt awe at my growing stomach. An was particularly entertained to feel the movements through my belly, and we tried to explain to her that she would have another child to play with very soon.

Perhaps the combination of anticipation of the child and my fervent desire for peace came together, but I started to have a very strange and reoccurring dream. Tun and Max were sitting together laughing, and Lu' sat next to me as I held my child.

After weeks of this dream, one day I timidly brought this up to Lu'.

"Lu', I keep having a very strange dream," I said. I told him the details of how he looked sitting next to me and my holding our little child, how Kit and his mother were in the background. "The strange part is that Tun and Max are sitting across from us and they are laughing together. Isn't that very odd?"

He nodded. "Not sure what it might mean."

A few days later he said, "I've been thinking about your dream, and I don't think it is something that could really happen. But, there is something we could do. We didn't have a fiesta when we got married, partly because my dad doesn't approve of drinking, and partly because we didn't really know anyone, and yet now we do have some friends. We could plan a fiesta some time after the baby is born?"

“Perhaps,” I said hesitantly. “Just food, no drinking, so your dad wouldn’t be upset?”

“Sure,” he agreed.

“How much do you think it would cost?” I asked.

“I’ll figure it out and I can save some money from carpentry,” he suggested.

“I’ll start saving money from the weavings I’m selling,” I proposed.

“I think that would be good.”

So that settled the plan that we would be able to have a party. We decided to invite his family, my friends from the women’s group, and others like Cat and Lixh. What was in my heart and what made it worth it to me to save the money was that it felt like a way of trying to bring peace and a normal life for our child.

A few days later, as I went to the river to wash clothes, I remembered the first time I had come back to do this. I remembered how Kit and little Shun had helped overcome the fearful strangeness that had come over that place. Now it was such an ordinary part of my weekly routine that I did not often think of the family when I went there. Kit came with me and yet she finished washing the clothes before I did.

“Go on,” I told her. “I’ll come in a minute.”

Alone, I looked up through the leaves of the trees that had turned pale green in the bright sunlight. The sun reflected off the water and the river twinkled at me as it flowed by. Finished with the laundry, I picked up a smooth stone from the river and held it in my hand, feeling its smoothness. Suddenly I felt something

beautiful and strange. My family—Mama, Papa, Shiv, Ve'l, An, and even Pi'l—all seemed to be standing before me in the water. I couldn't see them, but the flickering light off the water made me feel that I should be able to see them.

I noticed another Ixil man stood with them, smiling, someone I did not know. And, when I saw or felt his smile, I felt joy. I dropped the stone like a weight into the water and rose to carry my clothing, feeling light with no fear.

My dream kept reoccurring, and it began to frustrate me that Tun and Max laughed together. How could this be? Even though we grew up in the same village, they had become enemies. They were probably shooting against each other in the recent firefight.

But, fear for our child soon entered our lives. One evening, I felt weak and ill, and soon had a high fever. Rather than ending in a few days, my fever continued. Lu', very worried, went to the nurse at the clinic and came back furious that she was gone and would not be back for two weeks. He gave me the teas that his mother and grandma recommended, but the fever continued.

“I must get some help,” he said wildly.

Lu' thought it dangerous and impractical to make me travel to a health center in the municipal capital. Even borrowing a horse, the journey would be too difficult and potentially too dangerous, with the possibility of running into soldiers or guerillas.

He talked with his father debating whether it made more sense to go toward the army base and find Max or toward the guerillas to find Tun, all with the hope of

finding the medicine that would stop my fever. They decided they would both go. They would borrow the horses from one of the men of the town and Shun would go toward the army base where Max was and ask for medicine and Lu' would go out and seek Tun and ask for medicine.

Lu's mother came and gave me the herb teas and put cold cloths on my head. I slept more than not, but I heard their worried conversations,

When she thought I was asleep I heard Lu's mother ask, "do you think the fever will harm the baby?"

"I'm praying not," snapped grandmother in a voice that indicated she fully expected the worst.

I must have dozed in and out for over a day, but in the dark of night I was wakened as pills were given to me with a cup of water, and an injection as well.

"I'm quite sure it's malaria," someone said, "But keep giving her these pills."

When I wakened groggily toward dawn, I overheard a conversation. It took me a while to place the voices besides Lu's.

They had built a fire on the hearth, and smoke filled the room in the pre-dawn chill.

"Thank you both for caring enough to come," said Lu'.

Murmurs and the clank of the coffeepot as they started fixing the breakfast interrupted him.

"I'm sure it is strange for you both," said Lu'.

Someone laughed.

“What our commanders don’t know won’t hurt them.” I suddenly realized it was Max speaking.

“I think we both feel terrible about what happened to Ma’l and her family,” said another voice. “And we were both probably a little taken with her when we were young, but you beat us to it, Lu’,” said another voice.

“I liked her sister and Ma’l was my back-up plan,” laughed Max again.

“She asked me once if I felt responsible for the village being destroyed, and I said ‘no’. But I really do feel bad about it. I think about it often and I mourn.” I suddenly recognized this as Tun’s voice.

“I feel very badly, too,” said Max. “I lied to her and said I wasn’t with the army when it came to the village, but I actually was. I had run away from my grandparents when I couldn’t stand the drinking and violence any more, and I ended up at my uncle’s house. He was an officer in the army and I really looked up to him, so I joined and he helped push my career along. Nobody really knew I was from out here. I told them I was from the City, but I’d learned some of the language from a friend. So they brought me out here as an interpreter. It was awful the day we came here. I hung back, hoping no one would see me, so I didn’t go to the river, but I saw the results soon enough. The rest you know—how I saw Ma’l in the forest. Knowing she was part of your group when you came and turned yourselves in at the army base is what made me so determined to get you freed.”

I wanted them to know I was awake and listening to them, but I still didn’t have the strength to speak.

“Thank you for telling me,” said Lu’. “If Ma’l and the baby survive this, will you do something for us?”

“Yes,” they both responded at once.

Lu’ must have remembered my dream, because I was astonished to hear him say, “We want to have a fiesta to celebrate the child, and it would be good if both of you could come. Is it possible?”

“You’ll have to be careful in sending me the message. You can do it through Cat, who knows how to reach Me’c, and then we’ll just show up if we can,” said Tun. “As long as I have a guarantee of no ambush or tricks,” he added, looking at Max.

“No tricks from you either,” said Max.

“Agreed, as a friend of Ma’l,” said Tun.

“Agreed, as a friend,” nodded Max.”

“Thank you,” said Lu’, “Thank you.”

I still couldn’t speak, and both men left before it was fully light.

Lu’ came to give me more medicine and looked pleased to see my eyes open.

“Are you feeling better?” he asked. I nodded.

And, by late that afternoon, I really did feel better. Lu’, his mother, and Kit continued to do my housework and I felt such gratitude for their care, and an even deeper gratitude that Tun and Max had met and spoken in my house.

In a few days I finally felt well enough to talk and told Lu’ I had heard the conversation between him and Tun and Max. At least I thought I had and wanted to make sure it wasn’t my imagination. He assured me that it had not been a

dream, that Max had insisted on coming back with Shun and brought medicine and the army medic. Tun had insisted on coming with Lu' with his medicine as well. Between the two of them there had been enough to make me well.

The rest of the pregnancy, I continued to be in better health and when the time came for the birth, I felt very strong. We had changed our mind after my illness and decided not to try to go to the health center, but to use the help of the midwife.

It reminded me of the time in the mountains when Baby Me'c was born, yet this time I wasn't sent away. I was the center of attention.

The labor and pain of birth are known to so many in so many places, and everyone knows the joy of a new child. Our little son Lu' came into our lives, bringing the wonder of tiny fingers and feet, a tiny mouth and nose, but a very large cry! Lu's mother and Kit continued to care for me and helped me to start caring for baby Lu'.

After forty days had passed since the birth of little Lu', it was time for me to get out of the house and start doing things, like go to the market. I felt excitement when market day came and Lu' encouraged me to go with him. I walked very slowly up the trail toward the plaza, a little weak after over a month of doing so much less physical labor than usual. Lu's mother cared for little Lu' at home, so this chance to be shopping and seeing friends filled me with the energy to keep walking up the hill.

When I got to the plaza and saw all the stalls and some friends to greet, I smiled, and then I looked over to my left. Startled, I looked more carefully. Unmistakably, that was the Señora, or else her twin. I walked quickly to greet her and she greeted me in delight. I introduced her to Lu' and explained that she used to run the store in the town.

“How wonderful to see you! I just can't get over it! How is it that you are here?” she asked enthusiastically.

I stumbled over myself in explaining that I was the only one left from the family and, thankfully, she quickly started explaining her story.

“Remember the day that man came into my store?” she asked, and I could picture being there waiting to buy some thread for my belt. “I was so worried, that I decided to go and visit my sister and stay for a while in the capital. I've basically been living there ever since. And now I'm visiting because I wanted to just consider whether I might move back, and I'm thinking I will.”

“I'm planning to have a celebration for my new son Lu' in several weeks,” I said. “Would you and your family be able to come?”

“I'd be so pleased!” she said. “I have missed everyone from the village, and it will remind me of old times.”

In the next week, Lu' went through whatever mysterious procedures he had come up with to let Tun and Max know when the celebration would be held. I had invited everyone else. Shun had asked if he could bring the pastor and his wife from the church, and I had agreed. I had made a point of going to go and see Tin

whose delight that I had a son could hardly be contained—he kept exclaiming over the wonder of it.

Tun arrived late at night having left Me’c at Cat’s house. When Max arrived several hours later, he had the medic with them. We all chatted enthusiastically and I told them I had been awake overhearing them the night they were in the house.

“You’d make an excellent spy, Ma’l,” teased Max, “Perhaps one of us will have to get you to work for us.”

I was amazed at how they had crossed back from their opposition and once more become two of the boys from the village, at least temporarily, for our child. They admired little Lu’ who I held on my lap. Later, they all slept on the floor bundled up in blankets, all seeming very accustomed to the rough earth as a place to sleep.

In the morning, everyone in the family worked on final preparation of the food, and our guests started arriving in the course of the morning, each one coming to bless little Lu’.

When we sat down to eat, Tun started telling a hilarious story of one of his more dramatic fiascos trying to survive in the jungle, and everyone started laughing.

I looked around at the group in wonder. Here was Tun, and Cat’s little brother Mec. Here was Max and the medic, all laughing together. And Shun and Lu’s mother and little Shun, and their evangelical pastor friend, Nil and the other

Catholic women, Tin and Grandma who followed the Mayan traditional ways, and Kit, who had confessed she was suspicious that there was no God. I wondered what Tun and Max thought about God. Lu' and I thought there was a God, but we weren't sure of a lot more than that. And then there was the Señora and her husband joining with us, as though she didn't feel superior. She was trying very hard to be respectful and you could see the effort. She tried not to be frustrated that she couldn't converse with Lu's mother, so they smiled at one another as the Señora tried to help with serving food. The Señora spoke only Spanish, and Lu's mother spoke only Ixil.

My eyes met Lu's eyes and he smiled. I could tell he was thinking, "Your dream was right, and I'm proud of you." I was thinking, "You had the courage to ask them, and I'm proud of you." I looked at little Lu' and lifted him gently out of Kit's arms. "You are the little miracle that brought my friends together!" I thought, smiling at my child, and I sat down next to Lu' to admire each face in the party, and my dog came and lay down next to me. These faces in broad daylight filled me with the same awe that the candlelit faces in the church had awakened in me. I didn't feel my family's presence as strongly as I did that day at the river, but I knew somehow they were part of our celebration. Looking up I knew that the sky contained just the right number of clouds. I prayed in my heart, "God, please send us peace."