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## A Maya Migrant: A Journey of No Return

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# THE MAYA MIGRANT: A JOURNEY OF NO RETURN.

by Gaspar Pedro González

Translated from the original Spanish by Hana Muzika Kahn

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## Biography

Gaspar Pedro González is Maya Q'anjob'al, and was born in San Pedro Soloma, Guatemala. He has a Masters degree in Public Policy and Intercultural Relations; a B.A. in Educational Planning; graduate degrees in Public Management from BID-PNUD-INAP and Cultural Economy from the Ministry of Culture of Spain. He has worked as a university professor; Director of Arts and Culture in the Guatemalan Ministry of Culture; Cultural Advisor; Administrative Director of Indigenous Development, among other positions. He has been a guest professor at more than twenty foreign universities.

He works in three literary genres: fiction, poetry, and scientific essays. He has presented numerous papers and articles at international events, and contributed to journals and anthologies. His works have been sources of research for more than fifty different authors for their academic projects, doctoral dissertations, and research studies in various parts of the world.

His works include the following: *Sbeyb'al Jun Naq Maya Q'anjob'al / La Otra Cara / A Mayan Life*; *El Retorno de los Mayas / the Return of the Mayas*; *Palabras Mayas / Maya Words*; *Nuestra Literatura Maya / Our Maya Literature*; *El Trece B'aktun / The Thirteenth B'aktun*; *Cultura e Identidad / Culture and Identity*; *Pérdida del Idioma Materno en la Educación Escolar / The Loss of Mother Tongue in School Education*; *Xumakil / Xumakil*; *La Mezcla de los Colores / The Mixture of Colors*; and *Los Mayas Migrantes / Maya Migrants*.

## The Maya Migrant: A Journey of No Return

### **Introduction**

The world-wide phenomenon of migration is a current topic in nearly all the continents and countries. It is one of the human problems which has grown in recent times from different causes: wars triggered by political conflicts, climate change, ethnic problems in many parts of the planet, religious conflicts, persecutions for various reasons among governments of the countries, all of which has pushed millions of human beings into extreme poverty and terror because of the dangers threatening their lives. These reasons have motivated groups of people to leave their respective countries in search of other places in order to overcome their serious safety problems. The large movements of men, women, children and older people, carrying on their backs the few belongings they were able to save, leave for unknown destinations, beginning long days walking towards a voluntary exile, pushed by their financial needs or escaping persecution.

One of the peoples who have suffered most cruelly from this phenomenon of migration are the Mayas, located in the center of the American continent, in Mesoamerica. Currently there are about thirty Maya ethnic groups living in that region, twenty-two of which live in Guatemala. The Maya are sixty percent of the country's population, subject to extreme poverty due to the politics of exclusion, racism and extermination carried out against them by those who control the destiny of the nation. These approximately eight million indigenous people do not participate in the life of the nation, they are marginalized from all the benefits of the riches of Guatemala, and they are pursued or expelled out of the country in order to convert them into sources of currency income by means of the remittances. There is no statistical data on how many Maya live in different countries in the world, but there are many, especially in the United States of America.

The current novel, *The Migrant Maya*, is an attempt to collect and spread information about some characteristics, life styles, difficult experiences and regrettable consequences of migrations on the lives of these human beings in this part of the world—especially the changes which affect their cultural traditions, their personal and community identity, their values and the way they see the world and life, as well as the way they communicate with the deities, and especially their personal, family and community relationships. Each group of people, in different communities in the world, experiences migration in a different way depending on these cultural traditions. The Maya way of life is based on family and community unity, and their attachment to mother earth, along with the practice of their community customs and traditions. These characteristics are the most vulnerable and are damaged by the departure from family and homeland. Often, those values that people acquire in the heart of the family, such as respect, solidarity, work, and cooperation are destroyed when they come in contact with other worlds controlled by egoism, ambition, and other negative values which lead societies to a self-centered egomania and competitiveness for personal achievement by any means.

The style that the reader will find in this novella, and which Maya literature uses for narratives, is based on the techniques of orality, following those of the ancestral speeches where one can find parallelism, puns, repetition, alternation, complementarity... all typical of the hieratic discourse of the ancient Maya, characteristics which can be found in cognitive anthropological studies of the significance of semantic, symbolic and linear juxtapositions in this contemporary Maya literature; the semiology of Maya discourse reflects life, and tries to put together the life experiences of people and communities affected by the problem, in their space and original environments.

This work is the product of many years of communication with many individuals located in different states in the United States during my many visits as a writer and also in conversations and observations with many people in Guatemala who had returned from their migration abroad. The focus, the methodology and the characteristics of this literature are different from Western literature, since the canons vary and are based on ancestral discourse which is preserved in a flowery orality. Its roots are based in writings which, according to specialists, are more than five thousand years old in the Mesoamerican region.

Maya writing has passed through three long periods: the Prehispanic, during which the Protomaya was based on its own authentic characteristics: symbolism, phonology, graphology, techniques and materials. During this first period the primary form of writing was hieroglyphic, the logographic, and finally syllabic. The only remaining works of this period are four documents in different parts of the world: the Trocortesian, Paris, Dresden and Grolier codices. A library of this literature was burned by the Spanish missionaries when they arrived in America, because they believed that everything written in these documents was the work of the devil.

The second period, the Colonial, when speech and writing suffered from the influence and cultural control of colonization, and the last books written by the Maya were now in Spanish, using European techniques and materials. Fortunately, the contents continued to express authentic Maya concepts, which we can see in their works: Popol Vuh, Chilam Balam, Annals of the Kaqchikels, Rabinal Achi, and some chants.

After this historical period, the voice of the Maya grew silent and passed through a period of obscurity for more than four hundred years, until the mid-1900's when the first works in Maya languages by poets, story-tellers and in the field of education began cautiously to appear.

Finally, the Contemporary Period, during which today's Maya, despite being fewer in numbers, make great efforts to publish their works, with their own styles, their own content, and very often in their mother tongues and using their own styles, as in the current work about Maya Migrants. Palas Yakin and his wife Malkal, the protagonists in this novella, are fictional characters, but their stories truthfully reflect the experiences of many Maya migrants.

## Historical Perspectives on Maya Migration

The protagonist of our narrative is Palas, one of the estimated million Guatemalan Maya people who have migrated to the United States. Before we begin the story of Palas and Malkal, let us look at the world from the perspective of the Maya, in the context of their experiences at different periods of their history.

Migration always means dynamism, movement, displacement, permanent movement, like rivers flowing along; leaving or escaping to the unknown. Perhaps all human beings have always been wanderers in the universe. They say that we, the beings who live on earth, are the residue of the dust of distant stars. To this day we have not found answers to certain questions we have asked ourselves passionately throughout our history, for example: “Who are we really, where do we come from, where are we going, where did the other end of our umbilical cord as a species and society remain? Are we perhaps nature’s orphans, lost in this corner of the universe, standing on this grain of sand called earth, or do we have relatives in distant places within this infinitude of spaces?”

And so, throughout our history as a species, we ask ourselves endless questions about our presence and existence here. Birds migrate through the air in the sky, whales migrate in the wide ocean, the wind and the rain migrate, and humans migrate on earth. From the beginning, man has migrated, as Jorge Drexler reflects in his song “Movement.”

### Movement

Jorge Drexler

*As soon as we stood upright  
We began to migrate across the savanna  
Following the herds of bison  
Beyond the horizon  
To new lands, far away  
Children on our backs, excited  
Eyes wide open, all ears  
Smelling that strange new landscape, unknown,*

*We are a species on a journey  
We have no belongings, only baggage  
We move with the pollen in the wind  
We are alive because we keep moving  
We are never still, we are nomads  
We are parents, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of  
immigrants  
What I dream of is more mine than what I touch*

*I am not from here  
But neither are you  
I am not from here  
But neither are you  
From nowhere at all  
But a little from everywhere*

In a broader sense and in general we could say that nothing is static; the whole universe is constantly moving and expanding. According to science, our great home, the earth, is experiencing different movements by which it is displaced at different speeds. For example, rotation and orbit; the first kind of movement is relative, depending on where we are on the earth: if we are at the equator, we would be at a speed of about 1,600 km an hour, and if we are talking about the orbit around the sun, approximately 108,000 kilometers an hour, according to the experts. But there are other incredibly much faster movements if one considers the connection we have with a galaxy or with other bigger systems in the universe... so there are different movements which we cannot even imagine, at who knows what vertiginous speeds, which are dragging us towards unknown spaces.

It would seem, then, that this is a general law which applies to all beings in the universe. That is how the ancient Maya, our ancestors who were observers of the sky, understood it; the cyclical time of their calendars demonstrates it, there is no linear time, it is a rotation which begins and ends by giving place to a new beginning; it is a funnel which keeps growing wider with each longer time period; that is why there are *tunes, katunes, baktunes, alautunes...* and on to infinity. Apart from those movements governed by the laws of nature, many humans in all parts of the planet practice another kind of migration for various reasons, and generally are forced to leave because of different political, economic, religious, or ethno-cultural laws, or because of wars, threats, hunger or different dangers threatening their lives... and consequently, human groups in this world are prone to constant and permanent movements, always moving on, often leaving footprints of blood and suffering as they travel, in search of other places to give them comfort and meet their needs.

In this part of the planet, after the invasion known as the conquest according to official history, the Mayas fled, under fire, scattered towards distant places like the so-called *Tierras Frías* (Cold Lands), arriving to make their homes in those high, icy, inhospitable regions, known by those who study them as the highlands of Guatemala. There, isolated behind their mountains, several ethnic groups put down their roots: Chujes, Q'anjob'ales, Mams... twenty-two groups descended from the ancient Mayas who populated the region of Mesoamerica. During the most recent 36-year war (1960-96), there were numerous massacres of Maya people by the army, which was working for the oligarchy with the support of the United States of North America. This war left these human communities in the most abject poverty. It is not only the Mayas of Guatemala



who have been impacted, but all the indigenous and poor peoples of Central America, and now, North American politicians are harvesting the consequences, as waves of migrants are pushing to enter the United States and cannot be held back.

When the 36-year war began, under the pretext of avoiding the infiltration of communism into the region, the Central American politicians went to ask for Uncle Sam's blessing, and appealed for weapons in order to massacre their peoples, and dollars in order to enrich themselves. And the communities provided the deaths.

Since then, there has been no peace or relief for these groups of humans who live in the center of the continent; over and over again they are persecuted by the ambition and plundering in their countries, whether it is institutionalized or carried out by the people who believe they own the lands that belong to the Maya. That is how different waves of persecution and death have gone against the Maya. State terrorism is used in order to annihilate people, and to take over resources: lands, mining riches, water, minerals, flora and fauna. In the region known as the Northern Triangle of Central America, there is social upheaval and chaos, and as a result of these sad and painful periods of their history, both in the past and in the present, the citizens are overwhelmed by many different problems, including drug trafficking, extortions, gangs, organized crimes, kidnapping, social cleansing, child labor, femicide, lack of work opportunities, extreme poverty... unbearable problems which have pushed them into absolute poverty.

This chaos in their respective countries is created by, and to the advantage of, an official organization composed of politicians, oligarchs, and the military, for destruction and to foment immunity and impunity. This explains why in Guatemala this organization, known as the Pact of the Corrupt, headed by an evil former president, decided to expel from Guatemala the CICIG, (Comisión Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala / International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala) an international organization of the United Nations, in order to function freely in the rule of corruption, without anyone to interfere. These are the main reasons for and causes of migration, which push human masses into exile, often ending up making the greatest sacrifice of their own lives, so as to achieve that dream of realizing the illusion of leaving their misery behind; but at the same time this migration is a betrayal resulting in other kinds of problems, which are reflected here in the case of The Maya Migrant.

When all the doors to opportunities are closed for these people in their respective countries, as a last resort, and in order not to die of starvation, they try to begin a via crucis of more than three thousand kilometers, to find food and drink... just like elephants in Africa who migrate to distant lands at certain times of year, to satisfy that thirst and hunger. Or like birds from the north of the continent, which migrate to southern climates which are warmer and more welcoming in winter. Once this mass of humanity, coming from the center and south of the continent since the middle of the twentieth century, reaches the United States, the people become homogenized as "illegal" immigrants under the common denominator of "Latinos," which grew into a label to

designate and stigmatize people as illegal: there go Indians, Blacks, Mestizos, drug traffickers, all migrants, coming from other towns and other countries... forming that moving mass of poor people seeking the north.

Once they are there, the migrants yearn for their original name, but not under the umbrella of Hispanic identity, which has nothing more to do with Spain. Many of them do not even speak Spanish. Only their original name that they cling to has stayed with them, because Latino sounds bad to them, confuses them, denigrates them and means more to people who came from Europe, but the gringo authorities continue to look down on them and to categorize them as illegals, migrants, narcos, invaders, undesirables... In other words, people from their back yard whom they pursue and expel back to where they come from, tossing them around nauseatingly, as if they were balls to play with.

It takes them more than two or three months to arrive, in the face of countless vicissitudes; when they are caught, they are put in a plane and sent back to their countries in a matter of hours. They keep making several attempts until they succeed, until they are exhausted, or until they die in those attempts. In Guatemala, throughout history, ever since the invasion which almost led to the extinction of the authentic owners of the lands, there has also been a series of subjugation and pillaging of the Mayas. The peoples were massacred by the Spanish, crushed into slavery so that they would grow crops on their lands for the Spanish. Since then, they have been carrying the heavy burden of forced labor, slavery, diseases, ignorance, tributes... which place them at the lowest level of the social and economic hierarchy in the Third World. At the beginning of 1800, the country gained independence from Spain, but life was no better for the indigenous people, who instead remained at the mercy of the descendants of the Spanish, continuing as slaves in the country and growing crops on the lands which were once theirs.

Within this historical and social framework, both in Guatemala and in those countries known as the Northern Triangle of Central America, the last decades of the twentieth century, from 1960 to 1996, gave rise to another of the massive persecutions of the people; it was the beginning, origin and cause of the exodus of those people to other parts of the world, principally to the United States of North America, as a result of their extreme poverty, and their lack of land, education and work. This helps us understand the context and the justification for the departure of these thousands of migrants, who had just escaped from that dark tunnel of the thirty-six year war in Guatemala, with persecution, destruction and death oppressing them—a phenomenon denominated euphemistically as the internal armed conflict. A long list of massacres and ethnocidal attacks was carried out by the Guatemalan government during that time, supported particularly by the governments of the United States under the pretext of preventing the infiltration of Communism in the region. The statistics accounted for more than 200 thousand deaths, millions of internal and external displacements, orphans, wounded, widows, mental health problems, resulting from the debacle which took place most intensely in the indigenous region of the country, both in Guatemala and in the other Central American countries.

One of the methods used by the Guatemalan military in the service of the oligarchy and the politicians at that time, even though it was against the country's Constitutional Laws, was the disruption of family and community unity by means of the massacres. They—the oligarchy, the politicians, and the military—had studied the make-up of the indigenous communities, based on that structure of unity and solidarity inherited from the ancestral system of well-being. Those who had hopes of continuing to expropriate their property from the Mayas had already observed and studied their life-style: especially the unity of the communities, within that community structure which the Maya had used as a political, social and cultural system throughout their ancient history. The unity of the family and community are the basis of their peaceful and harmonious existence on earth, a system within which their ancestors had lived for thousands of years in the region of Mesoamerica.

Therefore, the first thing that the military broke apart and disconnected by means of the use of weapons and violence, was that social and communal structure, eliminating and leaving without leaders the traditional organizations like the fraternities, the councils of the elders, the ancestral authorities, the traditional hierarchy based in the theocratic way of life they practiced, which can be summarized in the so-called *Popb'ales*, like the *Popb'al Wuj*, the cooperatives, the spiritual guides, and the traditional cultural system which is the library which preserves and protects the wisdom of the peoples, systems which manage, organize, process, transmit and preserve the values, the knowledge and the practices by means of an oral tradition rich in the content of their culture.

That is why they were divided, split up, decapitated, disarticulated, scattered, eliminated... and in their place new, improvised elements and western cultural practices were imposed, like the pseudo leaders who came from the military academies, inexperienced youths under the authority of the heavy boots of the military, trained with the help of foreign support to repress their peoples. These were the men who constituted the Self-Defense Patrols (PAC) created under the orders of the genocidal Efraín Ríos Montt. These paramilitary patrols, suddenly empowered with weapons in their hands, and mentally and physically manipulated through their training and indoctrination, turned against their own people and families, overcome with a new mentality. They would be used like arrows shot against their own people, with the goal of supporting the sacking and expropriation of the riches the communities still possessed, their personal and collective patrimony.

All this was the ultimate and principal motive behind the systematic violence which they initiated. They were easy to manipulate by those who sought to eliminate the ethnic groups in order to keep their property. This method had already been successful in the world wars of Hitler and other genocides in different parts of the world. Of course these political ideologies were not issues grasped by indigenous peoples, illiterate individuals and communities who did not speak the official language and who understood nothing of politics or financial ideologies in the world; all that they know is how to fight so as to survive extreme poverty. Ideologies are for academics and professionals capable of analytical and critical thinking.

The oligarchy used the ridiculous pretext of communism so as to take advantage of the historical timing of the contemporary period and to take over the natural resources located in the indigenous regions. And on the other hand, the United States (its leaders) in their geopolitical passion to extend their hegemonic power over Latin American countries, spread its protective shadow over the servile and corrupt leaders who were seeking justifications for oppressing the citizens of each country. These racists who had taken over the Guatemalan government ever since the time of independence, had taken advantage of the mixed political conflicts in the Central American region: Capitalist – Communist ideology, East-West, North-South. Together the military, politicians and the oligarchy from here grew submissive in the face of the orders from the north, since they were both implementing and profiting from this conflict. They were the ones who received the dollars and the weapons, and above all, received the blessing of their superior in order to carry out genocide against their people; a blessing which was realized later in impunity and immunity in court for the atrocities which were carried out.

It was time to take advantage of the opportunity to carry out a racist plot, generally fomented and hoped for as the continuation of the colonial regime, and which was carried out in the extermination of the indigenous people in these Central American countries. For that purpose they had already mapped out the wealth and natural resources which existed in regions inhabited by Maya communities in the country: the underground resources rich in minerals, the sources of water and rainwater, the rivers where they could install dams, the fertile lands maintained by the Maya people as part of their collaborative relationship with the environment and Mother Earth, where there still remained forestry zones and water sources protected from exploitation. One example was the zone of the Northern Transversal Strip which was still completely uninhabited at that time, but where the usurpers had moved ahead with the construction of highways that would pass through the lands of the military leaders and politicians who had distributed these lands among themselves.

It was assumed that burning houses and crops in whole towns and villages in the indigenous regions of the highlands met the goal of the strategy of leaving fish without water, to force people to settle the areas of the Northern Transversal Strip, and to offer their labor free to grow crops on those lands. The new owners of those fincas had access to the workforce of groups of people who arrived to find refuge in the regions in the north of the country, and so the finca owners could rely on workers who were paid almost nothing.

This is going on now (in 2020) as emigration is becoming more acute and becoming a serious problem for the United States, where waves of migrants are arriving not only from Central America but from all parts of the world, forcing the government there to install border walls to stop the arrival of the masses. The communities continue completely abandoned by their respective governments: with no land, no work, no health, no roof over their head, and with the loss of a member of each family. With no peace or calm in their communities, they still tremble with fear under the weight of state terrorism, disseminated by the military who have their eyes and ears in

all the communities, through the Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil (PAC – Civil Defense Patrols), who are no more than paramilitary troops monitoring them and committing abuses against civilians in their own Maya communities, through extortionists, gang members, drug traffickers, coyotes and other predators who profit from the misery of the people. Since that time, the Guatemalan government has been criminalizing the indigenous in order to justify the plan of extermination within the goals of what is known as the Scorched Earth policy, so that there would be no indigenous people in the country, and thus they could expropriate their resources and their lands; it was the government itself which was on the lookout for those riches.

In Guatemala there is no education to train people for decent employment, even less so for the indigenous population. No studies have been carried out by the institutions responsible for creating public policies for the common good, nor has the education system adapted to the culture and reality of the rural and indigenous population which composes those socially diverse communities which cohabit the national territory. The institutions responsible for this include the Ministries of Education, Labor, Development, Agriculture... In other words, almost all the state ministries and decentralized organizations. Instead, planning is aimed at restricting access to anything better, so as to maintain the status quo of the people's dependency and their workforce exploitation; the business owners, who select most of the government administrators every four years, prefer not to have qualified employees, because they would have to pay them; the peasants, including the Mayas, cannot hope for well-paid work because they have not received work training; this constitutes part of the system of exploitation, marginalization, exclusion and racism practiced in the country.

Faced with this, the indigenous people, desperately trying to survive with their large families, with less and less arable land, illiterate, monolingual and in extreme poverty, look for a way out of their despair, and even though they know that their attempt puts their lives at risk, most of them leave for "the North" (the U.S.A.) in search of the American dream. This brings them face to face with different problems of different abuses by "coyotes," money lenders, usurers, human trafficking—who suck their blood, taking away the little they possess and leading them into debt, family disintegration, loss of values, and other issues.

There are two main forms and options in the practice of migration, which is nothing more than an escape from destruction: internal and external migration. But the motives are the same: the burden of fear, threats, internal violence in each country, extortions, hunger and misery, all with a common denominator: extreme poverty and death. Internal migration generally consists of abandoning one's land, one's home, one's town, cultures and the places of one's rural ancestors, in order to seek help in towns in the same country, such as the capital of Guatemala or department and municipal capitals, where they are drawn by false delusions of solutions for their problems. They are generally uprooted from everything and their large family, and so when they come to these towns they look for a relative, fellow-countryman or a friend who is already settled in suburbs and settlements surrounding the cities of Latin America, to ask for shelter or lodging. But soon,

the new arrivals face reality, that in those places life gets more miserable and there is no work: they do anything they can, like polishing shoes, selling candy or gum in the streets, guarding cars, washing cars, and begging for charity on street corners and at traffic lights; and for women, there is work in homes in the city, washing clothes and doing housework, working in *tortillerías*, or as a last resort, prostitution. The young women in particular end up in low-class brothels, such as those by the train line in Guatemala City, in bars, or illegally on the streets, because it's the last resort for indigenous young women who come expectantly to the city and end up with their illusions and their hopes destroyed.

As for boys, sometimes they get work as helpers on buses, or they improvise a small stall for selling vegetables in local markets; they are day laborers, construction work assistants, garbage collectors, picking up trash or plastic in garbage dumps—and that is how they earn different nicknames: *Guajeros* (garbage dump pickers), *Brochas* (bus helpers), *Voceadores* (street vendors), *Lustradores* (shoeshine boys), *Charamileros* (alcoholics), *Mareros* (gangsters), *Pegamenteros* (glue/drug inhalers), *Chatarreros* (recyclables sellers). When they cannot meet their needs with a better-paid job, they end up wandering around the streets and soon they end up in the gangs, as extortionists, pickpockets, drug addicts and in other activities. Often they end up joining those criminal groups to meet their most basic needs.

Instead of solving the problems of extreme poverty in their home communities, these kinds of migrations nearly always make their situation worse because the migrants are not prepared to carry out well-paid work. In order to meet their food and other needs, they end up eating whatever they can find, they eat something once or twice a day, and they live relying on relatives or people they know in the suburbs around the cities, without running water, electric power, adequate bathroom facilities, and as a result of this lifestyle lacking in health and hygiene they end up in large numbers lining up every day at hospitals, social service agencies, shelters and places which give out free food; sometimes they are co-opted by NGOs to march in protests by unions and groups demanding services from the state and given a free lunch in exchange. Or, worst-case scenario, they populate jails and cemeteries at an early age.

The internal migrants visit their hometowns and their relatives for the holidays, like Easter, Christmas, patron saint days. Generally many get drunk—men and women get drunk mainly on these holidays—and they often experience family problems, incest, rape, crowded gatherings, poor hygiene, population explosion, child labor, prostitution; they wander around the markets, town squares, garbage cans, bars, brothels... so migration does not solve their problems, but rather makes them worse.

One of the apparent strategies that this migrant population adopts, especially the young people, is to deny their indigenous identity, mainly so as not to experience discrimination in the cities. They refuse to speak their mother tongue, they change out of their traditional clothes, they copy behavior patterns of the city youth, they consume copies of brand-name foods so as to appear

cultured; they buy quantities of imported second-hand clothes, and when they go to their villages in the middle of the country they bring city behavior with them, and they use the same racist expressions to their people that were used against them in the cities. Often, they cannot read or write, so they have never learned about western culture at a basic level, nor have they maintained their own original culture. They suffer from a lack of material goods as much as from that intangible feeling of not being able to identify with any cultural group, and they do not practice any of the basic values needed for a happy lifestyle. And so their lives end far from where they were born, and their heritage stays diluted in a vague, floating society with no identity or connection to any cultural roots, with no future or presence. This is all the product and consequence of their expulsion by political, ideological, financial and social systems in these so-called third-world countries.

External migration is another big nightmare with its own burdens and suffering which people bear on their shoulders, by people on much longer pilgrimages, distant and unknown, along scorching routes and towards cloudy horizons. It is a calvary, like braving a journey towards an ocean on a fragile boat with no compass, no map, on a dark night with everything against you. So many greedy predators who lie in wait to take advantage of the vulnerability of these disoriented people. There are the drug traffickers who force them to enter their world, taking advantage of their urgent needs, either by carrying baggage or by working for them and so increasing their numbers; human traffickers see easy merchandise in them: they kidnap them to sell them or to blackmail their relatives by demanding large sums of money in exchange for not assassinating them on their journey; and especially when they kidnap women, they put them to work in the sex trade; there is the business of organ extraction and sale, the gangs try to take advantage of them, and if they don't have money with them, they kidnap them and bargain with their relatives in order to demand money in exchange for their freedom. The police in the different places they pass through also ask for their share of the profit. And then there are those who are transported in crowded trucks in which many stop living from a lack of oxygen and excessive heat.

From the beginning, when people know that someone is preparing a journey into exile, everyone tries to see how they can take advantage of it, knowing that the person is a victim who will give up anything in exchange for having some light in the tunnel he is going into, as in the case in our story.

## Chapter One

### Palas, a Maya Migrant

Palas Yakin was a Maya peasant who lived in Miman Ak'al (Great Plain) with his wife Malkal Nolaxh and their small children. Palas didn't know exactly how old he was, his identity swung somewhere between the Maya calendar and the Gregorian calendar – the Guatemalan official calendar. He only knew that he was born on the *Huqeb' Lamb'at* (the 7<sup>th</sup> Lamb'at) of his ancestral calendar, according to what his parents told him when he grew up. In those traditionally isolated cultures inherited from the ancient Maya, people aren't used to celebrating birthdays, so life begins and runs its course without worrying about age, money or time. People have always lived like birds, wolves and wildflowers, surrounded by nature.

Contact with western culture was very sporadic, and only the men spoke a little Spanish, the official language of the country. Women, like men and children, were born, grew, multiplied and died in their rural villages as part of this pure nature.

The village of Miman Ak'al was a wide strip of land situated in a valley which spread out to where the sun rises, between two tall mountains which rise on each side like walls to protect this isolated piece of land from the rest of the great chain of mountains, the Cuchumatanes. The color of this small lowland was green for most of the year because a wide river wound through it, flowing towards the ocean on a never-ending pilgrimage with a never-changing murmur. In the mornings when the wind was calm, a blanket of smoke stayed over the village, like a blue lake rising from the homes where they were burning wood in the huts, watered on the edges of that river.

On each side, the lush growth and greenery spread further, nourishing the plots of corn, wheat, broad beans, black beans, and fruit trees and other agricultural products that the peasants grew for their food. Here and there a cow mooed and grazed alongside the sheep in that landscape. Roosters were the timekeepers who told the time at different moments of the day, when the villagers could see the sun from the corner of their eyes, looking sideways at the sky, and realized: it's mid-morning, it's midday, four more furrows before the sun goes down... or it's time now to leave in the early morning, because the rooster already crowed twice or three times... that's the way that people lived according to the laws of nature.

During the winter months (the rainy season) nature unleashed her fury, the mountains boomed, echoing the thunder, the flash of lightning spread until it lit up the whole region, and that was when the hearts of the children froze, lying beneath the straw roof of the huts. Often there were landslides on the hilly slopes and they swept away the crops which ended up in the great river.



“Don’t go down to the Minana’ banks,” the elders would advise, “because the river has risen.” “Give the children some epazote tea so they don’t get worms in their stomachs, because winter is already here,” recommended the grandmothers. “Pray to the mountain spirits and the spirits of our forefathers so that there are no disasters,” the prayer leaders would say.

And then the typical diseases of the season would appear: worms, diarrhea, indigestion, panic attacks—there was more work for the healers and the spiritual guides who healed sick people by combining medicines with magical spells and vapors. The *temascal* (steam bath) were used most often, because both the children and the old people had chills in their joints and their arthritis would swell up. As the winter season, with its grey damp days so full of rain, started to end, finally days full of sunshine began to appear, and the fields sparkled, smiling among all the different flowers, and the villagers smiled happily, showing their teeth like rows of white corn. That was the right season for building homes, sowing corn, repairing the roads—all together as a community.

In the same way, the seasons of the year determined the occupations of these people: crafts, agricultural work, sowing corn, weeding, harvesting... and other activities. That valley looked like a four-sided chess board, evidence of the small properties of the dispossessed. Each generation divided up the small parcels of land among their numerous descendants, and so multiplied their growing poverty. The sun shone its light on patches of golden wheat fields which waved like the ocean in the wind; green colors of the vegetables, wildflowers, or woods with a variety of different trees, and fields of yellow corn ready to harvest.

Thick woods of oaks, *madrone*, *k’olol* (variety of oak), cypress and red pines filled the hills where populations of different birds nested, flying and singing to welcome the day each morning, and to say goodnight to the incandescent dusk. Time passed like a calm and peaceful river with no noise; in the village no one was concerned or in a hurry to have more or to know more; you were born, you grew... and you died, with no great ambition or concerns—except when there were shocks because of problems that arrived from outside:

“The politicians have come!” —that was bad news. And the politicians contaminated the innocence of the village, putting up posters of their candidates’ faces and propaganda everywhere.

“The soldiers have come!” And people fled in all directions. And the soldiers went in all directions to loot, rob, assassinate.

“The international companies have sent their representatives!” They had taken a look at the Mimaná, in order to build a hydroelectric plant there. The residents protested, and so the people were labeled communists! It was like a death sentence, which put an end to the peace and happiness of those regions.

The houses in the village, all the same, mainly made of straw, adobe and rustic wood, had been burnt down some time ago, in front of the wide open eyes of the children, on that fateful night when the sky lit up in the middle of the dark. The scene never faded in the collective memory. That is why in the community of those years most of the adult men had fled to distant places; most of the inhabitants were women, children and old people. After that, few men remained in the community because of the violence that had been unleashed.

The *Coyote*—outwardly like a sheep, but with the behavior of a wolf who is always on the lookout for potential victims, except that he was a human being who had built his life around the exploitation of the needs to travel in search of the *American dream*, and who charged no less than fifty thousand *Quetzales* to perform the miracle of reaching that dream, taking the clients on their journey to the north, *el norte*, in other words, to the United States, where they say and believe that your dreams of leaving dire poverty behind you will come true.

Many, especially the young men, saw that as the only way to escape extreme poverty. Because spending your whole life chipping away at the surface of the few pieces of land of your community gave you no choice of anything better. If that meant leaving everything behind, even those you love more than anything in the world, then so be it. It was a case of either dying of starvation on your land or dying looking for a solution to the problem, there were no other choices.

A few days before, Palas Yakin had gone to visit one of these coyotes to talk about the requirements he had to meet in order to make the journey with the next group of people who were leaving.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Aluxh.”

“Good afternoon, Palas, come in and sit down.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Aluxh, I came to see you to find out what I should do to join the group you are organizing. I really have to go and find work up north,” he explained to him in his language, *Q’anjob’al*.

“Here, as you know,” continued Palas, “there is no way to escape our poverty, however much you work and work, from sunrise to sunset, we never get out from under the weight of our debts and needs; that’s why I want to try my luck, they say that up north they give good pay for work, that’s why so many people from here have left.”

“Well, yes, many of them have managed to solve their financial problems, that’s why so many people have been struggling to leave in the last few years, especially young people, since there are no jobs here. But I will tell you, it’s not easy to get there, there are a lot of problems along the way. A lot of the people who set out on the journey don’t reach their goal, for different reasons. The first thing you should know is that I don’t guarantee that you will reach the United States,

especially now that there are so many restrictions by the gringos as well as the Mexicans; it's not the way it was before when it was easier to do the journey; what I do commit to is to guarantee that you will get to the border, and from there on you have to have a contact who comes to meet you from the other side to get you into the American territory, or pay a Mexican who will get you to the other side. There are a lot of them who know the routes and the places from which they can get you in once you are on the border. What I charge for getting you as far as the USA border, is twenty-five thousand dollars, which you pay in one payment before the journey. That is nothing if you manage to get in, and by the end of a week you're already working to make up the money. There are people who get out of debt in one year, depending on how successful each one is."

"Excuse me sir!" said Palas. "Can one make the payment in two installments? Half now and the rest once I'm working there; you know that we're very poor and we don't have cash; besides which, the lenders ask for very high interest on what they lend you."

"Definitely not! Do you know why? Because I have to pay a lot of bastards who are involved in this business, that money is not just for me: the guides, bribes for the police in Mexico, the Beast, the Coyotes, the drug traffickers, the truck drivers, the lodging, and other people along the way, it's full of people who take advantage and ask you for money for every little thing. You end up with next to nothing, because they all want their share. And I'm charging you the least because I'm responsible, because other jerks charge twice as much, and sometimes they leave you lost on the way and they wash their hands of it, and you can't make any claims against them because they threaten to report you to Immigration. And if you demand your money back, they go crazy and turn against you, they've got the power.

"When does the trip start?"

"We leave in ten days, and there's only room for three more people, I can't take many because it becomes a problem. It's better if it's just men, because it's harder with women and children. So if you feel up to it, get a move on, because there are other people who are also interested. If you don't have all the cash, Mr. Tumaxh Yalpatix, Tomás ( his nickname is boozier, because he likes to drink) has helped a lot of people, and if you tell him that I sent you, he'll be sure to help you with no problem."

"Well, thank you very much, Mr. Aluxh, so put me down on the list and I'll come and give you the money in two or three days, I just have to work things out a bit more."

"Good, I'll be waiting for you."

Palas Yakin had a big family: for the Mayas the idea of family extends to both near and distant relatives, both blood relatives and relatives by marriage: grandparents, parents, in-laws, godparents, godchildren, cousins... etc. This emotional relationship is affected and falls apart

when a member goes away or finds himself in danger; that's why everyone participates when they find out that someone is leaving, in order to say goodbye.

For these very reasons, it is necessary to inform the majority of the members of these extended family relationships, and to say goodbye to them. That is why Palas visited the in-laws, cousins, uncles, and other relatives in order to ask them for their blessing and to recommend that the family members remaining in the community maintain their unity and solidarity and look after his children and his wife while he was away. He did this in the company of his wife Malkal.

There was an abundance of advice and directions from all those relatives, as well as a profusion of tears knowing that it could be a journey without a return, knowing the dangers and the difficulties, especially when crossing through towns and countries where the traveler will have to travel for who knows how many days or weeks. By the same token, they carried out some religious activities according to the Maya tradition of finding sacred places called *Troj* to burn candles, incense and *copal* in order to pray to the gods for a safe journey and success in finding work in order to solve the financial problems.

The indigenous people's commitment to their culture and their land is another very important issue to take into account when they are about to emigrate. That is why a Maya's sense of alienation becomes very complex, because people rarely leave their place of birth. There are people who spend their whole life in the village, don't know the rest of the country or even its capital, and don't even speak Spanish, the official language.

From the time of his birth the peasant is tied to mother earth through his cultural practices, just as the ceremony of the burial of the umbilical cord corresponds to this intimate relationship to the land, by means of a rite in which from the time a person is born, the umbilical cord is buried in the ashes under the fireplace, in order to root the person in his small world, the community and establish him for the first time. He only abandons his land when he faces serious financial or life-threatening problems.

This relationship is not the same as the concept of national belonging, because these are towns without a national identity, it's not the large territory, but a small area, the house, the community, the village, the region which comprises the work and the life of the group. It's mother earth seen from a sacred point of view, like a mother who protects and feeds her children on her lap, it's that relationship of respect and an inseparable link of origin and final destiny with the earth which lasts beyond death. They are men of maize, but sons of the earth, without a fatherland. Those many places which are given their own names in a local linguistic toponymy and those thousands of geographical features: roads, hills, valleys, mountains, rivers, lakes, waterfalls, bridges, ravines, caves... which correspond to a topographical and ecological system, are the elements of the small world with which they build the world view which gives a sense of identity and settlement to the individual and the community. It's the individual's worldview, from his relationship with time, space and gods to his social identity. It is everything which gives meaning to his existence in the

space of the universe, linked to the sun, the moon and the stars, with the elements with which he builds his world and establishes his own world where he plants his roots in relation to his gods. This is what gives meaning and an explanation for what is known as communal life and identity. Outside this environment, he ends up feeling like a fish out of water.

The man of maize, aware of a wider world where other beings live, both humans or living beings like plants and animals, all in harmony and equality, where the human is not the ruler of the world or of the earth in this context, he is just one more being in the order of beings living in the universe. From this point of view, no one is superior from the perspective of existence on the face of the earth according to the book *Popol Vuh: Four colors*, at the beginning of the Thirteen B'aktun, the colors of the four corners of the universe: red, where father sun rises; black, where it hides and night is born; white, for the origin of the wind and the oxygen which supports life, and yellow for the sunset.

Those were the colors from which the humans of the third cosmic era were created, according to Maya belief. This is how the grains of corn from the four colored ears of corn were ground up together to make one dough, the foundation of the human race, on all four quarters of the earth. This cosmic concept is reflected in the Tzolkin calendar of the Maya, a great time-space expanse in which the existence of each human being's existence is precisely fixed, including his destiny. In this way, the thousands of millions of human beings on the face of the earth have a precise beginning in time and space where they are destined to be born, like a unique destiny for each one in the macro organization of the creators and shapers *Ajawes/Gods*. Thus nothing is by chance, nothing is by luck, nothing happens by fate in the life of human beings, everything is controlled by this mysterious destiny determined by invisible threads which are woven around each individual from the time of his birth, influenced by the four elements, earth, water, fire and air, which are the arms and legs of life, and which contribute to the genetic structure of each human being.

The sacred days, which create each person from his conception to his birth, unite on this Cartesian plane to establish the exact place and destiny of each human being on the face of the earth. According to this tradition, the human being is immersed between two dimensions: above, the firmament which moves the earth in space, and below his feet, the face of the earths or the underworld. Thus the relationship is established between the two variables of time and space, in order to reveal the destinies of each person's life; a task held by the spiritual guides (*Ajtxum*) who dedicate themselves to guiding people about what they should do to balance the material and spiritual in their life in this world. Part of a Maya education in the heart of the family involves this knowledge and these practices.

Following the leadership of Palas and the elders, they carried out the religious ceremonies according to their customs in the places considered sacred for Maya culture. Palas Yakin and his wife, together with the elders, went out one morning to go to some of these sacred places, carrying

candles, incense and *copal* to burn in those places and say prayers to ask for protection from the Sacred World, which is no more than the universe and the deities of their ancestors, for a successful journey. They visited various places and sites, they went past the places where their antecedents were buried in the cemetery, they visited the *Popb'al*, which is the sacred place of the Q'anjob'al community; it's the ceremonial center where there is a large trunk in which the secret histories of their culture are preserved. This *Popb'al* is situated in a building, a sort of temple in the care of some priests who pray day and night for the people.

Between the prayers of the visitors, mingled with the appeals and cries, you could hear these words: "Oh Sacred World, Oh God and lord of all that exists, Father of all that lies beneath the face of the sky and on the face of mother earth. We come before you to offer you this incense and these candles and to offer you this copal, to praise you and bless your name. To give you thanks for life and for all that you have created for our benefit. Although we are humble and we are simple, you will not turn your face away from our troubles, our poverty. We come, as your children and your creatures, to ask you for support and protection at all times and in all places, especially for our people who will fly high like the birds which fly to other horizons in search of food, peace and tranquility, now that our hearts are pining and trembling beneath the threats that face us here. We are orphans, we are helpless, we are weak before the enemies who are pursuing us and seek to exterminate us. You who are powerful, who have strong arms and weapons of iron, we ask that you protect us, guard us, hide us beneath your wings like the birds protect their chicks in danger. Shelter us, guide us, light our ways, especially our son Palas who has decided to find other towns, other places to ease his suffering and his poverty. You who are the lord of everything in the world, You who can see and observe everything in the future and the past, every thought and every intention of people, save him from the dangers, from the enemies on his way, so he can reach his destination without problems, with no harm to his body or his soul. Grant him a job, grant him peace and calm both on his journey and in his future life. We also ask you for his family which is staying behind fatherless, abandoned, may their lives continue without problems or fear."

Palas spoke like this. "Oh Holy World! sacred land where my ancestors laid down their roots to live and exist beneath the face of the sky and on the face of mother earth, I come to say goodbye to you, perhaps not forever, but for a period of time. "Oh valleys! Oh mountains! I ask you to safeguard my comings and goings; my ups and downs; may there be no attacks or setbacks; may there be no death or destruction. I entrust my farm and my family to you, so that your sacred power can take care of them. You know, Oh Sacred Earth, that I am not abandoning you on a whim or out of neglect, but because of the extreme need to go to another land to find food and support for myself and my family... It may be that in other places I will not be able to burn incense, candles and *pom*... but I will carry you in my heart and I will speak to you wherever I may be at dawn or nightfall in other lands. Tomorrow I will leave, blind, deaf, dumb, to distant lands without knowing in which direction, only you, Lord God, will be able to guide me and help me in your vast territory. Drive the enemy from my path, and the evil one who tries to set traps for my feet and seek my destruction; but You are my rod and my staff on which I lean, I ask you that I may find the work

and the job I seek to be able to support you and support my family... I do not ask much, I don't ask for great wealth, just that You grant me what I need in order to escape the poverty in which I am submerged now; You are the lord of gold and silver, you are the lord of the riches of the world, you govern everything that happens in the universe with your power, I trust in your compassion, in your love for us, your sons."

The grandfather interjected, "You, Oh *Txab'in!* are the great lord who reigns on this day of the calendar of our grandfathers and our fathers, we ask for your help, your protection that he may not trip or fall on his way, going up and down. Free him from the cheat and the usurper and the murderers who wander around him when day and night go by; help him under the burning sun, between the dangerous climbs in his life and his projects... Lord. Here is this candle, this incense, this pom, which sends up its smoke to please you, to offer you our humble presence, you know that we have nothing, that we are very poor, we don't possess anything, we don't have any eloquent prayers towards you, we are humble, poor and needy; you are our only hope, our comfort, that is why we come to ask for your help, Lord!"

The group returned to the ranch as night was already falling that day, after going to the sacred places where they spoke with the hills, the spirits of the dead in the cemeteries, and the Ordinance of the elders.

On the last mornings and afternoons, Palas went around looking at the hills, walking around the roads, murmuring a goodbye by talking alone with the things and places because he would be taking them in his heart and his soul. Leaving all this creates pain, sorrow and anxiety, like the expected costs of a voluntary exile... to set sail for unknown lands and destinations.

"What shall I prepare for you for the trip?" his wife asked him.

"Just a change of clothes," he said. Pants, a shirt, some underwear and my hat."

"You should buy a pair of strong and comfortable shoes, they say you have to walk a long way. The ones you have are already falling apart."

"I'd rather you bought shoes for the children, I'll see how I can manage."

"I'll lend you my backpack, Father," his son told him. Palas didn't reply, he stood up and went out with a heart full of anguish.

On the day after the visit to the coyote, he went to the house of Yalpatix with the paperwork for his house to hand it in as a mortgage, to cover his guarantee to pay his debt.

"Good morning Mr. Tumaxh, I hope you don't mind, I'm bringing you a drink to lighten your spirit and relax your body when you rest at the end of your day." He gave him the bottle of liquor which made the moneylender secretly happy.

“Thank you, Palas. What brings you here?”

“Excuse me, Mr. Tumaxh, you know that because of the poverty we suffer, we have to go far to find a life, and you know that to travel up north, we have to go into debt so that those who know the way can guide us there. Yesterday I spoke with Mr. Aluxh Kwin, who is preparing a group of people who are going to travel. He told me to come and explain my problem to you, to see if you would do me the great favor of lending me the money I need for the journey.”

“About how much do you need? I don’t have much money and anyway you know that no one gives a loan without any guarantee. It’s the fault of some jerks who after you make a sacrifice to give them a loan, they go crazy and when they’re half-way out of their problem, they forget to pay their debt. So that’s why I need a document as a guarantee and we prepare a paper with the lawyer Xwach Pelnan so everything is legal. The interest on the money is ten per cent a month, for a maximum of ten months, and after that we expropriate the property if we see no good intention to pay. In general, after two months people already have work in the States and start to pay off their debt, and that avoids any problems both for you and for those of us back here. I make it clear, so there are no misunderstandings and then no-one complains that you’re a bad person for doing them a favor.”

“OK, Mr. Tumaxh, I need about thirty five thousand (dollars), twenty five to pay for the journey, about five for my expenses and the rest so that my family has some for their food for the first few months. This is the document for my house, you know that the properties are worth much more than this amount, so I want to pay off my debt as soon as possible so there is no need to get to the point of expropriating it.”

“Give me your signature, and this afternoon I’ll go and talk to the notary so he can review the case, and if everything is in order, come in tomorrow morning to sign the document and pick up the cash. Don’t go around telling anyone that you’re going to get money because you know that those cheats seem to have a way of sniffing out where there is some so they can steal it from you; I only help people I know, and you shouldn’t tell anyone that I give this kind of help. I gave one *hijue (jerk) cuarentamil* (forty thousand) cash one time, and when I wanted my money back, he turned on me, the sonovabitch even shot me, so now I don’t like doing anyone a favor.”

“That’s OK, I’ll be back, Sir Tumaxh, thank you very much.”

Three days later, Palas Yakin was already putting his fingerprints on the paper prepared by the shyster who closed the deal, always in favor of the loan shark hand in hand with the lawyer jerk and to the disadvantage of their victim. On the same day, the twenty-five thousand dollars were handed over to the coyote who was already getting the group ready with a one day training session in his house, so that the migrants could learn some of the basic aspects of the potential interviews and interrogations they might have in case they fell into the hand of the famous *Migra*, like the colors of the regional flag, some Mexican slang, names of public figures and politicians,



current exchange rate, names of places on the way, and other basic information both from their homeland and from the places they'll be traveling through. Also, ways of escaping being caught, not saying the names of the people leading them, the coyotes, the money lenders, and so on.

## **Chapter Two**

### **The Crossing**

The day came to leave. It was Wednesday morning, and Palas Yakin said goodbye to his family. There were people gathered in the house to say goodbye to the one who was leaving. Hardly anyone was talking, they looked serious, full of sorrow, and the atmosphere was as heavy as the moments before a disaster; the children who were closest to their father intuited that he was going for a long time and that they would stay behind alone with their mother. The oldest of the three children, about five years old, was called Matin, and was very attached to his father, since he usually went everywhere with him.

“Don’t go, Daddy, stay here with me! I promise I’ll be good. Who will I sleep with, who will look after me at night when it gets dark?”

“Daddy! Don’t go, don’t leave us,” repeated the little girls, crying..

This departure was the first time the children were suffering the pain and sorrow caused by the absence of the person who gave them strength, security and love. They got up very early that day, worried that they wouldn’t see their father again, or be able to hug him for the last time. The little boy ate his breakfast sitting on his father’s lap and hardly said a word.

At about ten in the morning, a metal pickup truck appeared, the kind that takes people to town on Sundays. There were about ten people on the truck, all men, all part of the group that would travel with the coyote. They had hired this truck to take them near the border with Mexico, through a place known as La Mesilla, in Guatemala, adjacent to the state of Chiapas. That is where they would cross into another country for their journey. This crossing was not well known by Central American migrants, most of them used the border of Tecún Umán, in the region of San Marcos.

Palas hugged each member of his family, and Matin, his little arms wrapped around his father’s neck, struggled against letting him go. The two little girls cried bitterly, hugging Palas’ legs. It was a pitiful scene. The mother, shaking with anxiety, tried to calm the children, but she was crying too, hiding her tears inside her shawl; the truck honked its horn for the third time, they had to hurry to get to the border by the end of the day. The grandfather had to pull off the boy,

who was clutching his father's clothes. The boy screamed and did not want to let go. The last goodbye, the shouts, the sobs... A few minutes later, the image of the truck grew smaller and smaller as it drove, carrying Palas away, until in the distance it was blurred in the mist of that sunny day which still seemed grey in the eyes of the people who remained standing in the same place.

They kept that farewell in their memories, it would perhaps be the last time they saw their loved one, and perhaps would be a journey with no return. That small black dot of the truck was swallowed in the distance until it disappeared, and it stayed recorded like a dream in the memories of those who were still waving their hands in a wordless gesture of farewell.

The truck took them to a place known as Gracias a Dios (Thank God), in the state of Huehuetenango, and this would be their last contact with Guatemala before entering Mexican territory to start their adventure, whether by road or walking across the whole territory of another country.

At night, there were altogether about twenty people when the others arrived, mostly middle-aged men, apart from two girls about twenty years old, and two men over fifty; everyone in the group was ethnic Maya Q'anjob'al.

That night the rest of the group of migrants had arrived to travel in the caravan under the leadership of the coyote Alux Kwin. He only led them for one day and then he handed them over to another guide for the rest of the journey. This annoyed the travelers, who claimed that that was not part of the deal, but he argued that it made no difference, it was the same roads, and the other guide knew the roads better. They spent that night in the house of the other coyote from there. Early the next day they set out on the journey along a trail in La Mesilla that was not closely guarded, and entered Chiapas.

The first town they passed was one called Comalapa; they were a human chain sliding like a snake between the hills, along pathways where there were fewer people and border police. They followed each other, carrying only one small backpack on their backs, and another invisible one, where they stored their hopes, their dreams and their illusions, and carrying a gallon of water in one hand. They crossed rivers, mountains, small clearings in the woods... When they were crossing those clearings they went in small groups, running to avoid being seen just in case there were any vigilantes around. Subconsciously the fact that they were *illegals* was stamped in their minds, and so they did everything in secret, fleeing, hiding, seeking places far away, walking in the dark so they would not be seen, talking quietly, treading lightly so they could sneak past... Escape, escape, escape.

There are various routes to travel across Mexico; you can go on the Atlantic Ocean side, Pacific side, or through the center of the country... depending on each guide or the current situation

of the immigration authorities—the coyotes themselves keep in touch with each other about these issues in order to choose between the different options.

On this occasion, the coyote who was taking them chose the route near the Pacific Ocean, since he judged that at that time there was not much control in that direction, and besides there were more options for traveling faster, by trains, trucks and other means of transport in the towns where there was not so much surveillance.

The first day they walked more than twelve hours on foot, between the mountains of the Chiapas jungle, passing along one side of the Palenque archeological site, the ancient Maya city of their ancestors that had such great historical and cultural value; of course they had never heard about it, since in the Guatemalan education system no one teaches about Maya history, due to the government leaders' attitude of discrimination and racism towards indigenous people, their history and all that their culture signifies.

On the contrary, the government leaders deny it all, and assert that the Maya existed but left this planet long ago. All that they appreciate are the objects and features which benefit tourism and attract people, which enable them to make a profit in big business, exploiting Maya areas through tourism. But the living Maya are rejected, invisible, ignored.

An analysis of the education system reveals everything that represents and justifies the plunder and pillage that Maya ancestors suffered during the invasion. And today, the system hides them, denies them, and does not recognize their rights, which is why they are forced out to other countries and become a source of foreign exchange income for the governments. For the governments, that cheap workforce provides the second largest annual income, and that is why the government does not provide education or health care for the Maya population; on the contrary, the government marginalizes them, keeping them in extreme poverty so as to force them to emigrate and then send back dollars which sooner or later will end up in national banks, so as to reap the benefits of the remissions that an army of migrants send from outside the country. In other words, in Guatemala, a country which produces migrants, the policy is carefully designed, from the lack of education in childhood and youth, to the lack of job training, so that from an early age they become migrant workers abroad, in other words, a source of cash. The politicians smile at them when they send remissions in large amounts; but when they are deported, they turn their backs on them with disdain, and call them returnees.

The group walked silently through the woods, any sound, any movement stopped them momentarily, like nervous deer ready to escape in case any strange people appeared. From the beginning, people are overcome by what they call the migration syndrome: psychosis, fear, terror, anxiety, depression... a mixture of ideas and feelings that crushes and weakens them, especially the women and the older ones.

Knowing that there were still more than three thousand kilometers to reach the goal they dreamed of, a challenge that rose like a gigantic mountain before their capability and their strength, some were beginning to despair, suddenly they would think about giving up, turning around and going back, give it all up and forget about it, since if the beginning was like this, what might happen further along...? But the perseverance and the tenacity of the others gave them the courage to keep going, following in their imagination the arrow pointing north. An arrow which became real in those thousands of steps resonating in the brain like drops of falling water or like echoes of hammer blows which were slowly depleting their strength.

They were moving along silently one after the other, looking for the route to a town called Ixtepec, near Oaxaca, crossing a small river in the middle of a forest, when one day, at about eight in the morning they suddenly found themselves surrounded by a group of men in olive green clothes, with assault weapons in their hands, about ten of them, their heads covered with ski masks. As they had been warned earlier, there was nowhere to escape, because they were surrounded; they paled, their legs shaking with fear, they knew what this was, they were escaping from their country to escape the massacres of the military, it was as if they were facing the guns of soldiers, like the moments before an execution against a wall. One of the women fainted when she felt the man holding the weapon behind her.

*“Halt, everyone, get down on the ground or you bastards will all die! Put all your backpacks over here, take off your shoes and belts.”*

One man tried to run, and right away the machine gun went *“Rapapapapap!”* The body of the fellow lay there on the ground covered in blood. It was a boy of about twenty.

*“We’re not joking, you bastards! Does anyone else want to run, jerks?”* they heard.

Right away they tied up the guide to interrogate him: *“Where are you from, how many of you are there, what are you carrying, where are you going?”* and more questions like that. Next they checked the backpacks and opened the zippers on their belts. Alux Kwin, the coyote, had suggested to them it was a good idea to hide cash in your belts to mislead thieves on the way. But these thieves already knew about this technique and it was the first thing they checked; in the same way, they pulled out the money wrapped in plastic bags from inside some of the travelers’ boots.

The two girls who were with the group were dragged against their will between the bushes; one of them struggled, fighting against the attackers. *“Fucking whore, keep walking or we’ll shoot you!”* Kicking her, they made her walk between two armed men. Screaming and bleeding heavily, the girls disappeared among the bushes, it was the last time the group saw them. Next, the one in charge ordered the others to stand up and get in line. Five young men were picked out to stand apart from the group, the rest were told to take their belongings and to keep walking at full speed, warning them that if they came across the police or soldiers, they were not to say anything about

this incident or else these companions would die. “*Move it, you sons of bitches!*” and another round of bullets to intimidate them.

Running as fast as they could, they abandoned that place, grieving for the companions who had stayed behind, who were probably going to be used to transport drugs to the border with the United States, according to what the coyote said. These men, who are used to transport packets of cocaine or any other narcotics on their shoulders, are known as *back-packers* or *drug mules*.

Now they had no more money, and with eight of their companions missing, they continued on their way along paths full of stones and mud, like a mutilated body, wounded, sad and crestfallen, they continued on their way beneath the burning sun, one behind the other like a procession, to the beat of a funeral march in their minds.

Shortly after midday the following day, hungry and thirsty, they arrived with aching feet at a station where the train known as the Beast used to pass through. Yes, they’re long, rusty brown trains, looking like a huge animal that drags itself along with a monotonous noise. These trains are designed just for transporting merchandise, not people.

But these trains nearly always look like *Tacuazines* (*zarigüeyas* / *opossums*) carrying their babies on their backs, carrying hundreds of migrants crowded up on top, a dangerously precarious location, because they don’t have any safe places for transporting people, on the contrary their backs are curved, and that is where crowds of people squeeze on, without anything to grip on to for safety on the journey. If they get distracted, fall asleep from exhaustion, or they lose their balance, they can easily fall off those trains; many people have died that way. They always transport hundreds of people up to the United States, which arouses the anger of that country’s authorities, who threaten to impose sanctions on their neighboring countries.

Apparently, the gang members who kidnapped the migrants were narcotraffickers who needed to recruit more members to transport drugs in small quantities, so the kidnapped migrants would travel together on a different route and under narco orders. This was one of the tactics of the cartels to get the drugs to the border and supervise the delivery by means of the GPS, without exposing themselves to risks. The heat and humidity were unbearable, and so were the mosquitos and insects that were everywhere in the area.

They found out that in one of those towns there was a shelter called “*Brothers on the Way*” and they made their way there because they found out that the train would go through two days later. At least in this place they received some food, water and a roof to spend the night, before the Beast arrived and they could try out their luck to see if they could make some progress on its rough, curved back.

It was in Arriaga that travel on the Beast began to be used by migrants some time ago, and at present it continues to be useful for many people who seek to shorten the time on their journey.

After two days of waiting, having filled their bottles with water in the streams, they presented themselves in Arriaga, the place from which the train would leave. At exactly midday that long crawling animal appeared with its peculiar signal; there was a movement among people, some women and children pursuing the same goal of reaching the north in any possible way. Many were already very tired and ill, especially the children who were being carried in the arms of their parents, the older people who had trouble walking, carrying their gallon bottles of water.

The guide brought them together and told them that they should not split up, that from now on, they should stay together, because if they split up there was a lot of danger in every way; either they should all go on the Beast or they should look for another means of transport, either trucks, or smugglers who offered their services on improvised rafts with tire tubes to which they fixed a motor. When it came to the moment to decide, they discovered that when the Beast arrived, a contingent of immigration patrols appeared who dispersed all the people who wanted to travel. If they were caught, they were sent back by bus to their homeland. The guide asked them if there was anyone who was giving up on continuing the journey, this was the chance to hand yourself over so they would send you back without paying for the transportation. No-one accepted the offer, and this encouraged the group to stay together and keep going.

After the stampede of everyone when they saw the guards, no-one could go on the Beast, and many of them were caught, especially those who were not strong enough to escape. They decided to continue on foot and always stay close to the coastline. They had walked about five kilometers towards a town called Tonalá, when suddenly they met a group of migrants who were running to escape the gangsters, robbers who always take advantage of the migrants and steal everything they are carrying; if they don't find anything of value, they strike them with sticks and sometimes they beat them to death. It was about ten people who came running, and apparently two of their companions were beaten up by those gangsters, and a few others were bleeding on different parts of their bodies.

That whole organized crime structure—the narcos, *garroteros*, smugglers, coyotes, kidnappers, robbers... has an internal communication network, so well organized that each group has its territory and its quota to make money at the expense of the numerous migrants who cross through Mexico every year; it's a very profitable business, since hundreds of thousands of human beings pass through on their way north. It means a fortune for that organized crime system. You just have to see the statistics to realize that huge numbers of people have died, been kidnapped, disappeared, suffocated in the back of trucks... all the way along the route of the migrants going into exile. Apart from the hundreds of tons of drugs which reach the border, because the backpackers are forced to carry those loads under threat to themselves and their families.

After the *garroteros* incident, they left the road where they could, looking for a town near the ocean, and went to talk with a smuggler, and between them they put together the money that the men they confronted on the journey had not managed to take, and bargaining as much as

possible, they climbed on to a fragile raft and followed the Pacific coast, going past *Mazatlan*, *Acapetahua*, *Tonalá*, *Tehuantepec*, until they disembarked in the port of Salina Cruz. For several days they continued on their way, leaving Salina Cruz to go to Unión de Hidalgo, Puerto Escondido, Santiago Tapextla, and, after several days, exhausted, hungry and thirsty, they reached a place known as Lázaro Cárdenas, after passing through Zihuatanejo.

From this place, with not a cent left, they chose to hitch a ride in trucks to go towards the center of the country, in the direction of Mexico City. The guide paid the driver of a truck that he knew in that area to take them a good way in that direction, they drove nearly two hours in that truck, by which time two of the group were suffocating from the heat and lack of oxygen. When the truck stopped, they got down with bad headaches and some of them had nearly passed out. Once they had recovered, they continued on their way on foot.

They had already been on their way for about two weeks, they were exhausted, had no energy and were weak from exhaustion and hunger. They looked for places where they could spend the night and where people would give them food. Once they were in Mexico City, after regaining some energy, they decided to give it another try on the Beast which goes north towards Jalisco. Someone told them about a shelter in the rural community of *La Patrona*, but it was very far in the other direction, they would have to travel across to Veracruz, which wasn't on the route they had chosen—unless they decided to cross to the Atlantic Ocean coast, and continue on the route which ends up in Texas or Arizona.

So they stayed on in Mexico City waiting for the train traveling towards Guadalajara, which was their next goal right now. Fortunately, they were lucky, because the next day the cargo train would be leaving for the state of Jalisco, so from early in the morning they were ready to look for a place. Some kind local women distributed bread and coffee very early in the morning, to alleviate the hunger of the travelers, they gave them gallon water bottles, and some of the men who had no shoes were helped by the people, for example, Palas, who was wearing shoes with the soles tied on with strips of rubber tires, because they had already come apart.

One of the young men who was very sociable, made friends easily with people wherever they traveled, because of his cheerful, joker personality. The night before, he went off with some migrants from another country that he had made friends with, and went to have some pulque. That did not please the guide, and so he was reprimanded when he came back late to the shelter. He was carrying a bottle of alcohol, and offered some to his fellow-travelers, but no one accepted his offer.

The next day he was carrying the bottle in his backpack, and once he was on the train, he started to drink his pulque; but unfortunately he got drunk again, and at one point where there were a lot of trees, he tried to stand up, didn't realize how close he was to a branch of one of the trees which was growing over the tracks, and it knocked him over and threw him far away. He fell on some rocks, drunk—and that was how his dream finished.

Shortly before reaching the city of Guadalajara, the guide advised them to get off at a station in the town of *Ocotlán*, where he knew of a shelter and diner called “*San Francisco de Asis*,” where they could even spend a couple of days with board and lodging; in general the situation in Guadalajara was not as risky as other parts of the country, because there was some support for migrants by some NGO’s; for example one known as FM4, which has become known for supporting and making this odyssey easier for thousands of migrants who pass that way every year.

Once in Guadalajara, Jalisco, which, by the way, is the second largest city in Mexico, on your way north you meet people of different nationalities wandering through the streets: people who are skinny, pale, haggard, dirty... like sleepwalkers walking aimlessly, on the street corners or continuing further north along the train tracks. Some of them, carrying their only belongings, a plastic bag, with nothing in their stomachs, with no money, with no-one they know, and with no hope.

In that town in general there was not so much danger of assaults or violence against the migrants. The immigration authorities do not pursue them, unless they have committed a crime or been accused of something. They spent three days here in a hostel, where they received some care, especially those who were sick, barefoot, starving, exhausted... where they could regain their strength before starting the third and final part of the journey, which was the most dangerous and difficult.

Three days later they resumed the journey towards the states of Querétaro, Irapuato, Nuevo León. The goal was to reach Aguas Calientes, which is the most traveled route going north. On the outskirts of the town a truck driver gave them a ride for a couple of hours, then the driver went in a different direction and gave them advice about which way to go.

They continued through remote places, since in those regions there was more intense surveillance by the federal, state and municipal police as they advanced further north, especially at the train stations and on the roads. Many migrants prefer to go on foot on the less travelled routes through the desert to avoid being caught, because of the less frequent presence of the patrols. They did not want to waste all the efforts they had made until then, and so they preferred to go on foot through less risky places.

In this area the heat starts to be more intense, the northern desert regions become unbearable; they preferred to walk in the hours when there was no sun, either in the early morning or to make headway once it was nightfall, but this meant more danger from the wild animals and snakes which are everywhere in those areas.

In the Sonora desert they were lost for more than two days and they ran out of their few food supplies and the water that they were carrying; most of them started to feel ill: the weather was unforgiving under the burning sun. They had no compass, they were thirsty, and soon they



began feeling buzzing in their ears, nausea, clouded vision, headaches, and when they looked up at the sky, the sun blasted them with its rays. People who know the area say that at that time of day the temperature is usually 104 degrees; heart rate goes up and leads to fainting, people fall into a coma and many have died from heat stroke. They were breathing hot air which was burning their lungs, and there was not one tree, or a rock, or some shade where they could cool down.

On top of all this, the guide was trying to ask for help from other coyotes who were traveling in that area, but there was no connection for his cell phone, they were completely isolated from everything in this inhospitable world. Only loose burning sand beneath their feet, and overhead and on the horizon there was a vibrating fire of light and heat that disoriented their senses. Some of them were staggering, they couldn't concentrate or go in the right direction, others collapsed on the way, falling on the hot sand, they would take two steps forward and one step back.

They looked pitiful, ashen, their faces distorted, covered with sweat and salt that the sun had already dried on their faces. They broke off their journey, and looked for some shade under some cacti that grew in that area, but they found themselves among nests of snakes which had also taken advantage of the rare shade. A vast expanse of arid land around them, all the distant horizons vibrating in a mirage which destroyed all the senses, it was like an oven which was throwing out heat all around.

After resting for a long time, they went on, and further on they found a small mound at the top of a small hill. The mound was made of stones on top of posts, which were apparently over the corpses of three people, because there were three crosses made of branches of shrubs tied together with string. Wild animals, like coyotes and others, had dug up the bodies, there were bones scattered all around. When he turned back, one of the travelers heard the rattle of a snake which was poking its head out from inside a skull under a nopal. He just threw a few stones at the creature and continued walking on.

Another young man of about twenty couldn't bear the heat, since he wasn't wearing a hat or cap to cover his head, his face was burnt by the sun and blistered; there was so much heat both underfoot and on his back, he felt as if he was stuck inside a *temascal* (a sweat lodge), he couldn't keep up with the pace for long, he began to lag behind and slow down, then he tripped on his own feet, staggering, he gradually lost his balance until he collapsed on the hot sand. Stammering, he told the rest to keep going, to leave him there because he couldn't bear to take one more step. He didn't want to hold up the progress of the group. Someone was still carrying a sip of water at the bottom of his water bottle, they gave it to him and rested for a while near him, putting him in the shade of a blanket spread over some branches.

After about an hour, he felt better, they helped him with his backpack, then he stood up and they continued a good stretch further during the day. About five kilometers from where they had left the mound, they saw something which was a signal: a sort of white flag at the top of a branch of a tree was moving in the light wind, where altruistic people used to leave water for

migrants in the desert; they went over to the place, and inside a tunnel they found some gallon bottles of water. Although the water was as hot as the air around them, it was what they needed, for without it they would all have perished, because all around them you could not see a single hut, or a shrub, a mountain, or any kind of shelter.

They spent another two days walking in that desert, heading north, making little progress because they were all worn out. Leaning up to a rock that emerged from the sand there were some corpses, two skeletons still covered in shreds of the mens' clothes, one of them already headless; there was a rosary hanging on his chest, and next to him, a faded backpack; some of the group took their hats off as they passed the corpses, and others made the sign of the cross, thinking that they were not far from suffering the same fate.

When they passed through Culiacán, the capital of Sinaloa state, which was also the territory of narcotrafficking and organized crime, they were told that they still had many kilometers to travel to reach the border. Since they had no money, they chose to stay there for a few days in order to beg for money in the streets, as they didn't even have enough to buy water for the rest of the journey. When they went out in the streets to beg for help, one of the young men who went into a store was approached by a stranger who was drinking a beer. He offered one to him and gave him a good amount of cash support. The young man accepted just a soda, and then the stranger asked him how many they were in the group. He told him that there were only two of them. The man offered them a job for a couple of weeks, with very good pay of about one thousand five hundred dollars each, and gave him a telephone number to call if they were interested.

When he got back and told his fellow travelers about this, they realized that the amount of money that the stranger had given them was enough to get hold of everything they needed for the journey, but the general opinion about the offer of work was that it was not a good idea to accept it, because the work was probably with some organized crime group connected with drugs.

Some of the local people that they talked with told them that when they started walking again, they would soon enter a region known as Death Valley, an area where you need to be in good condition, both mentally and physically, in order to cross through it, because otherwise it would be your graveyard. Three days later, they figured that with the money they had collected, they could get hold of the food supplies they needed most in order to continue on their way, first to get through Death Valley and then go on to the place known as "Altar." Crossing each one of these regions demands great self-sacrifice, they are very wide and very hot, and they had decided to travel on foot.

The extreme contrasts between the harsh cold and hot weather were more severe every day in this region: during the day the heat was unbearable; at night, the intense cold dropped from zero to a point which was life-threatening from hypothermia. Most of them only had a blanket for spending the night under the vault of the sky, they were not carrying thick ponchos because they tried not to carry heavy objects.

They spent several days crossing this desert, having met up with other migrants, some originally from Ecuador who had no guide and who attached themselves to them in order to follow them, but since they included women and children they couldn't keep up with their pace, and soon they were lagging behind and stopped.

While they were in the desert they came across a group of doctors and paramedics who were riding in all-terrain vehicles: two men and two women, who spent their time rescuing people with health problems; apparently they belonged to the organization Doctors Without Borders, which was providing first aid to people who were sick or lost so as to save them from death. After giving them water and some medicine, they left them to go on their way.

Similarly, as they went on to other shelters they managed to get support from the NGO "Brother Traveler" which helped them to revive one of their companions who had collapsed from the heat and exhaustion on the way to Altar. Most of them were overcome with weakness, partly because of the lack of food the whole time they were walking, and partly exhaustion, the sleepless nights and the sickness they were starting to feel. Even though they were peasants used to a harsh life, nonetheless there was no comparison to the extremes they were undergoing.

In their journey through the desert, they could see for themselves that a great many people had succumbed, dying in their effort to reach that dream; especially in that Death Valley, where they could observe the skeletons of groups of migrants who stayed resting forever in the shade of the bushes, in caves, beside the rocks... some still wearing scraps of clothing, which covered the bones dried out in the heat and almost covered by the sand. It was pitiful to see the remains of children and adults scattered on the land, some next to plastic water bottles, like mute witnesses near those who died of thirst, heat, exhaustion, hypothermia and many other causes, which took away the last breath of those anonymous pilgrims. The sad roaring of the wind and the grim howling of the wolves continue talking with their spirits throughout the dark nights and keep the dead company in their solitude in that world of God, far from their hometowns and their homelands.

Once they reached "Altar" they went to the shelter CCAMYN (Community Care Center for Needy Migrants) managed by a Catholic priest, where they were given first aid care, especially for three of them who were at risk of having their feet amputated because of the wounds where gangrene was already setting in—they were taken to the organization's clinic to give them urgent care. They were all emaciated, out of breath, and some did not care any more about going on with their plans. The boy who was sick and had collapsed, asked the local police for help to hand himself in and get deported to his country, he did not want to go on suffering from the journey.

At this point in the journey the most challenging problem for migrants is their feet, since this is the part of their body which suffers most from the long days of walking; the heat of the sand during the days when they take thousands of steps in uncomfortable shoes, and then during the freezing nights with no shelter for resting. It starts with legs shaking, feet burning, and then the

loss of feeling, blisters appear, and later they become excruciating sores, until it is impossible to keep walking, and finally, gangrene, which if it is not treated in time, ends up with amputation of the legs or death, as is the case of many who have stayed behind, because there was no-one to help them.

In one place there is a small temple dedicated to the statue of person called Jesús Malverde, who is a saint for the local people and the migrants and especially the drug traffickers, and there are always people who take candles to ask him for miracles, especially in order to make their dream come true and be able to enter the United States. People would do anything in order to reach their goal, regardless of whether in their homeland they had been Protestants, Catholics or in some other religion; if those other religious customs would help them achieve their purpose, they did not hesitate to practice them.

Once they were in Hermosillo, in the state of Sonora, the guide said goodbye to them, explaining that he had family problems and so he had to return by plane to Guatemala, and then he told them that he had fulfilled his commitment and that now they were close enough to keep going alone. He gave them some final directions, dividing the group in half: those who were going via Nogales, and those who were going towards Tijuana. Of the approximately twenty who started the journey, only ten were still going, and no one knew anything about the other half of the group, since they stayed behind on the way under different circumstances, and this in itself made them anxious and full of grief.

Now that they were at this point, those who had some kind of contact in the United States began making plans to find their way and finally meet with the people who were going to accept them. Those who didn't have friends or relatives who would come to pick them up felt completely abandoned. Without someone to contact all hope was lost, there was no way to enter the country and they were left to their fate for who knows how long in those border towns, where they would become beggars for an indeterminate period.

Some of them begged those who were already communicating with friends about their meeting, to take them with them, telling them that they would pay them once they were there, that they should take pity on them... but it wasn't so easy and it was not up to them either. There certainly were people who spent their time crossing people to the other side of the border, but the amount that those so-called *Wajadores* charged was never less than \$4,000 cash, and since they didn't have a cent, they had lost all hope.

That is why so many people try to cross the border undetected every day, putting at risk their lives and the lives of their family: some of them jump into the famous Rio Bravo which divides the two countries, others climb the iron wall to jump over it, others look for hidden places to avoid the surveillance of the border police. If they do not have the money to pay people who could get them in, and cannot depend on relatives who can pick them up either, they choose these more extreme ways in order to try to achieve their goal.

When Palas was in Hermosillo he looked inside the seams of his pants for a piece of paper where he had written the telephone numbers of his contact, asked someone to lend him a phone to make a call, and communicated with the friend he had in California. Then they gave him advice on crossing the Gulf of Baja California, so that a guide would pick him up in Tijuana as planned; he got ready to go there the next day, with two companions. The rest would go on to Nogales, towards Arizona.

The separation was rather sad for that group of migrants, even though at the beginning of the journey the majority didn't know each other, but as time passed on their journey together, a certain fellowship developed between them, all trapped in the same situation, they shared the same luck on the journey, and so, after a month of living together in the same conditions, when they separated they felt sad and a sense of loss with no sense of security about what the future was holding for each one of them. How many would reach their goal? How many would be caught and deported? Who would get ahead and fulfill their dreams?...

That last night that they spent together, they bought themselves a bottle of tequila, some of them drank and they talked for a long time about their respective plans. Those who had contacts could rely on a better chance of reaching their destination; but those who were risking going without any contacts felt lost, since the border control on the American side had grown stricter the whole length of the border. Now they had no money, they knew nobody, they were worn out, some of them were drowning in despair.

One of the group told the others that the guide who had already left them was "two-faced," as he ran one of the drug cartels; that was why he pretended to be surprised when the drug traffickers attacked them, but the truth was that he was in league with those criminals, and so he was well paid for his help. He had told them of the time and place for the attack so as to hand over the youths they kidnapped, as well as cause the death of one of them and the rape of the two young women. "I heard him talking when I was going to the bathroom in the bushes and he came up close to where I was to get in touch with them by phone; I didn't dare warn the group before, because they would have killed me," said the speaker.

"He informed them about how many of us there were, he mentioned the two girls, he told them they could take five at most, and that on his next trip in two weeks there would be more youths because there would be a bigger number of migrants coming. Finally, he told them how much he should get for this deal."

They were appalled, since their caravan had included that enemy and traitor. The worst of it was that now they could not complain to the man who recruited them for the journey. Neither did anyone want to have problems with organized crime, because those people are fearsome and capable of anything.

Early in the morning Palas set off by sea in a boat with two fellow-travelers, to land at Playa Grande, then they went up by Ensenada, and from there they reached Tijuana before dawn, at about four in the morning the following day, hungry and tired after a sleepless night.

“Here we are,” said Palas Yakin to himself. It was like letting his wife and his loved ones know that he had reached his goal. Palas had remained quiet and kept apart from the rest of the group for most of the journey. Now, finally they had arrived in Tijuana, through Playas de Rosarito. Tijuana! That name that he had heard spoken about in his village hundreds of times; now he was looking at it with his own two eyes.

When he was talking later with some local people, they told him that the name Tijuana comes from *Tia Juana*, or *Ticuan*, in the language of the old tribe of the *Kumiai*, and it means Tortoise Mountain.

When he woke up, it was a warm, rosy morning, the sun was shining over the summits of the distant mountains; the travelers, dragging their blistered feet, with shoes that were in shreds, sweaty, their filthy faces like ghosts, they managed to reach that place, the center of many things, of many people, of much pain and death. A place where the life of human beings was almost worthless, it's the scene of shady dealings, human trafficking, sexual abuse, vices, arms, drugs and many tears... a place of contrasts: there is an abundance of easy money, happiness tied to the thread of fiction, swarms of half-naked women calling out with a pretense of joy. But not far from there, there were other realities, like dark tunnels of misery and drug addiction.

Paradoxically, now that they are so close to making their dreams come true, now that they see with their own eyes and touch with their hands that other side known as North, for which they left everything, now that they feel more than ever that they are *illegals*... nobody bothers them, they breathe the air of freedom, there are no police or soldiers asking them about their status, in fact they were just more *illegals*, swarming in that town.

In the afternoon, after resting a little outside the town, in the shade of some bushes, and eating some food that they were given there, they left to get to know the place, a sort of planned tour in order to make their plans for the final attack, to hear some recommendations and comments about going to the other side. Because of their pathetic appearance, they decided not to go into the center of that exuberant and ostentatious town, they felt embarrassed, and so they preferred walking around the outskirts.

One of the young men, pretending to play a game, hugged one of the wooden fence posts and declared that he was already in the USA: “My body is here in Mexico, but my arm is already in the States,” he said. The others thought it was funny.

“Tijuana!” thought Palas, finally they were in Tijuana. People from all over, different languages, different places of origin, but with one and the same purpose. Suddenly they reached

the beach, you cannot tell where that rusty stain of the wall begins or ends, built of tall wide metal bars which made a barrier which went down two hundred meters into the water.

The wall is the symbol of the infinite length and breadth of the rejection of immigration, the power, the xenophobia, the discrimination: some people pushing to get in, others controlling entry with tooth and nail, man fighting man to take over the world. In that self-contradictory delusion of each side, there is the denial of the primordial rights of mankind, to whom the earth was first handed down by its only ruler, with the words “Go forth and multiply on the earth.” And thus encroaching on the freedom of choice which is proclaimed but not always practiced in what they call a democracy, that life-style, which is proclaimed far and wide, is imposed on people in other countries, regardless of their own system of government. And then, despite the promise of no intervention, rulers draw borders, impose limits, establish private properties, and society ends up with the opposite of so-called democracy.

That night, the last they would spend together, they went to light a fire with some cardboard, trash and things they found in a place called El Bordo, a sort of garbage dump, located in a dry canal outside Tijuana, populated by deportees living in miserable shacks made of cardboard and plastic, all waiting for another opportunity to cross the border. Others had already set up their lives there, accepting their fate, surviving on whatever they could get as beggars in the town or they went to find something to eat at the charity places so they wouldn't die. But more than *our daily bread*, their main concern was getting their *daily doses of drugs*; you could see them injecting their arms, their thighs or the veins in their necks, with needles used by others, and which they shared in the mutual support of their misery. They lived in caves, shelters they carved out underground, or fragile shacks made of cardboard and plastic which they shared with rodents and other animals, in places where there are no basic amenities.

The three migrants, in the pale light of the moon, around the small fire, made plans, said goodbye to each other, exchanged information so they could communicate with each other in the future, they prayed thanking God for being there, and asking for help for those who did not have the same luck. They cried and shed tears, remembering their distant land of the Mayas there in the highlands of *Guatemala*. Oddly enough, deep in their hearts, they felt a certain reluctance to locate themselves on the other side of the border wall, as if it was an invisible jail where they were voluntarily intending to go; part of them wanted to keep going, but another part of them turned their eyes to where their homeland was, their family, their country.

The odyssey had temporarily reached its end, they had burned through one more lap, like athletes and sportsmen; it had been a very painful experience, part of their *via crucis*, like the ones they used to commemorate in their home town for Holy Week, a bleeding pilgrimage which gave them some peace and tranquility, like a momentary catharsis, finally they were there.

The friend of *Palas* in the United States told him that he should wait in a particular place near the boardwalk for the arrival of the contact who was in Tijuana, and that this man would look

for him at the end of the afternoon to give him the final instructions, and that he should not leave the place until the man arrived.

In effect, at about five in the afternoon a fellow of about thirty appeared, dressed like a cowboy, and asked for Francisco *Yaquin*, and when he identified him, he explained to him that early the next day he would pick him up in his boat to go a few kilometers out to sea, and would take him to the other side, where his friend would be waiting for him to take him to San Diego. Without another word, the Mexican left and told him to be on time, because if he didn't show up, they would lose a great deal of money.

And that's how it went. Early the next day at two in the morning, he said goodbye to the other two, and took flight for new horizons, following his destiny and blending with the seagulls.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **In the Diaspora**

Once he is in a foreign country, the migrant faces new problems. The illusion which attracted him from far away is not what he had imagined it to be. Suddenly he realizes that the reality is different, that things are not the way they were described to him back at home where he came from, that the work, the dollars, the benefits are not so easily within reach, none of those illusions exist, they are not available right away for everyone. The triumph and the successes are not there for everyone who comes, unless a wide range of different conditions are in place.

Among those conditions, we can find the following examples: language, which is necessary for communication with people whenever anyone goes anywhere in the world; without the intellectual and linguistic tool of language, the migrant ends up as if he were deaf, dumb and blind in the middle of a society. Generally, the Mayas, who remain isolated from the modern world within their mountains, only speak their native language. They do not even speak correct Spanish, the official language of their country, let alone other languages of the world. This is not because they lack the intellectual capacity, but because they were always denied opportunities and education.

Another very important aspect of the life of a well-traveled individual is the knowledge and practice of western culture, or at least the fundamental characteristics of that culture, in order to understand the codes of behavior for different times and places; equally important are some knowledge and skills related to the responsibilities and different kinds of work in the modern life of the cities and societies. In general, what the Maya migrant knows how to do best is how to farm his land with the tools that help him survive, and with basic techniques and equipment; apart from



farming, some Maya do artisanal work related to the rural culture where they live, such as weaving cloth, making their furniture and other equipment from clay, baskets, leather tools, or their hats.

When Palas arrived in the United States, with no knowledge or skills in any other kinds of work than the traditional Maya farming and artisanal work, he could observe those undocumented people who were located in Mexico on the other side of the border. Most of that army of displaced poor people had been in the United States at some point, having breached that forbidden border, but not all of them were able to stay there and work. Once they were thrown out, they worked out another kind of life for themselves in deplorable conditions, like *the wretched of the earth*.

Moreover, there are other realities which haunt people due to their migrant status, for the entire time they remain there: when you are a migrant you will always feel like a foreigner, that you do not belong here, that you are an alien, people keep telling you that you are illegal, the people follow you, and all that affects you psychologically, it affects your self-esteem. In the North American movies, a *Foreigner* is what they call anyone who comes from somewhere else, from outside. If you are a migrant, what belongs to you stayed there at home, thousands of miles away, where your root, your umbilical cord, is buried, and your loved ones stayed behind along with everything tangible that belongs to you, that network of social relationships and culture... and the part one cannot see, the spiritual part. Is it perhaps that man is only material, a machine, workforce, manual labor for earning money? If people are only seen as numbers, nameless faces who sell their labor, then what happens to the spiritual, the cultural part of them, their values and relationships with the community and the ancestors, love, solidarity, harmony with others, and the spirits?

As long as people have been on earth, they have forged their own history, their own relationship with the world and with life, and they have accumulated the characteristics which constitute their culture. The combination of the thousands of tangible and intangible elements, socio-cultural practices, and the objective and subjective aspects of man in society, make his personal and collective identity possible. Your history, your society, your family circle, and your homeland—are these not perhaps the essential elements which create the networks surrounding the individual, especially in certain cultures, in order to explain his existence? Without all of that, the person stays empty, like an island in the middle of the ocean or the desert. This is how the Maya experiences his migrant experience.

Meanwhile here and now, in the diaspora, in this other part of the world, your generic label of *latino* becomes the stigma that is used to discriminate against you, in which your image and identity are diluted amid a mass of human beings and an amorphous, gelatinous and poorly defined group, which is kicked out to the margins of the *national society*. You lack an official identity in the country where you are living, because you are illegal, a migrant, *latino*... and consequently you have no rights.

“Hey man, what does it mean to be *latino*?” one immigrant asks another at work.

“I don’t know, I think it means you belong to all those people like us that come from one of those countries south of the United States, called Latin America,” replies the other.

“And if I come from a particular country, what should I call myself here?”

“From what I understand, here you’re just latino.”

Here, you’re not a Maya, or a Guatemalan, or *Palas*—you don’t have any of those different identities... you’re just floating, they assign you a number, a code, and they delete you as a person (your personal, collective, cultural, national identity). You go on facing discrimination for the color of your skin, the way you speak, your ignorance about certain things, your place of origin, your physical characteristics, your customs, your culture, and your ignorance of the language and about many other things... what’s more, the latinos themselves turn against you, they become your superiors, your bosses, and they give you orders you have to obey. In those small labor forces there are big power struggles, about who gives orders and controls whom. Maybe those who arrived before you feel they have the right to have that control. That is human nature, taking control and building power at different levels.

You turn into a permanent fugitive, you spend your life in hiding, you are criminalized, you have no rights, you do everything without identifying yourself, they pay you whatever they feel like, and if you object they threaten to report you to the police, you don’t dare to go out in public places, because you’re afraid of being caught by ICE, you have no peace and quiet in your life, your hands are tied. The dream which led you to leave and expose your life finally becomes a huge nightmare in your existence. Those are the invisible costs of being an illegal immigrant which will always be with you and which you cannot escape.

There are some people who talk about immigrants from anywhere in Central America as if they were all the same and in the same bag and call them *Mexicans*. People like that state that migrants are *bad people, invaders, criminals, drug traffickers*... throwing fuel on the fire of discord, racism and xenophobia, applauded and cheered by white supremacists. But they forget that the first invaders who came to sack, rob and murder the legitimate owners of these lands... were their own European ancestors who came from the other side of the ocean. That is a truth which cannot be denied, the same has happened throughout the continent.

*“When Mexico sends people here, they don’t send us the best people. They send us people with a ton of problems, who bring us drugs, crimes, rapists...”*

*“The biggest traffickers of heroin, cocaine and other illegal drugs are the Mexican cartels, which hire Mexican immigrants to cross the border trafficking drugs.”*

Feeling that you don’t identify with the land and country where you are living is one of the prices you pay for that escape with no return, going to something unknown for who knows how

long, where, how, who with... Leaving all your family and community connections cut off from you far away.

And what about your promises to come back soon, and the people who stayed there standing, and waiting for you to come back ever since they said goodbye to you, and the tears frozen on the cheeks of children and adults...? All questions with no answers. Everything becomes an almost voluntary abstraction, an artificial image from the unknown world of your intimate thoughts. An inconsistency that you have to endure, but without wanting to, you are forced, pushed, or rather obliged to be there, expelled from your country, pursued, fleeing to save your skin, here as much as there. This leads to consequences in the deepest part of your personality.

But Palas had no time to think about himself or his loved ones, instead he had to learn how to survive. Much later, in the middle of the daily grind of his exhausting work, whether it was under the burning rays of the sun, or in the middle of the snow, with bones frozen to the marrow; there had been no time to remember, to fly away in his imagination. Only when he was resting, usually at night, scraps of memories of what he left behind would appear, like jigsaw puzzles, like rustic collages which reflected painful pictures of the people, the places, the past events in the life of Palas.

One after another on the virtual screen of his mind appeared the people he loved, objects from routine pastimes, regular events from work, from parties and from traditions. The rhythm of community life is continuing back home, the community is dynamic, as far as cultural practices are concerned, but one individual on his own does not make a culture. Being far away makes you an exception, a new paragraph, some words between brackets, tasting social and psychological isolation in solitude. Culture develops and is practiced in the heart of the community, and among its characteristics are the collective, functional and dynamic character of the community; its roots are linked to the historic past, which is a cohesive element of the group, strongly present and valid in the here and now... All of that forms a network of links connecting each of the components.

The community tree trunk is firmly attached to its historical roots and in one specific place; but beyond it only dead branches exist, and fallen leaves that the wind has carried to other horizons. That is why among those who are far away there is such eagerness to celebrate the holidays, the traditions, the gastronomy and other cultural practices, so as to reproduce them, and make a painful effort to stay connected with what was theirs. For those who are celebrating at home, there is no need to pretend, things happen naturally, automatically, as time passes, according to their own calendar or on others.

One of the times which Maya migrants remember with deep sorrow when they are far away in a foreign country is Holy Week with all its solemn traditions. Remembering it nostalgically, the group of fellow countrymen in the apartment were making comments.

“Today is Maundy Thursday,” one of them reminded them.

“Yes!” answered another. “In my village we always buy a whole lot of breads of different sizes, and invite relatives and close neighbors to come and share the breads and honey with us, and if they don’t eat everything, they take it home. The neighbors do the same, they invite us, we share with everyone.”

“When I was a child,” interrupted another, “in Holy Week we used to go to town with a group of friends. And there we would play games called *Tipaches y Tabas* with beeswax (*throwing a bone to see where and on which side it lands*). It was fun for many kids and adults in the streets of the town at that time.”

“But the most spectacular thing that I remember were the processions,” interrupted another. “For nearly the whole week there were processions with statues of different saints: Christ of Forgiveness, Christ on the Calvary, Our Lord of Mercy... ending with the Holy Burial on Good Friday, and finally on Sunday early in the morning the statue of the Resurrected Christ comes out.”

“I used to carry the Lord of the Three Falls,” interrupted the older man, known as Don Chus. “A fifty-meter-long walk with one hundred and twenty bearers swaying to the beat of the drums and carrying the Holy Christ on their shoulders for Good Friday. The band resounded through the streets playing the most mournful funeral marches, and we wore *cucuruchos* with long purple tunics and turbans, the streets were filled with the clouds of incense, the smell of incense and palm oil which the incense burner carriers were spreading, all you could hear was the music of the bugles. The drums marked the heavy steps of the penitent bearers and the slow-moving march.”

“And the Lord, a majestic figure in a purple robe, with a piercing, sorrowful look, his head crowned with thorns, bearing the wooden cross on his shoulders, with the weight of the sins of the world, without complaining, without protesting, just fulfilling his mission, going to sacrifice himself to save the world.”

“Behind the procession of the Lord came Our Lady of Sorrows, carried by many devout women all dressed in black. On both sides the crowds were murmuring their prayers and beating their breasts as they saw the Nazarene on his way to Golgotha.”

“In my town,” interrupted Palas, “we have a tradition where we commemorate the crucifixion at about three in the afternoon on Good Friday, everything is done live, I mean, with real people: we have a Jesus, a Mary, a Mary Magdalene... the eleven apostles and each of the Biblical characters. After the Lord dies on the cross, they start the persecution of the apostles, who are eleven men who have already been chosen and are hiding among the tombs of the dead in the cemetery on a sloping hill that you could see in the distance. The people in the town gather at the foot of the cemetery and from there they can watch the scene. The Jews are in charge of pursuing and imprisoning these apostles who use all their skills to avoid being caught by them; after a certain time, if they don’t succeed in catching the eleven disciples, the Jews have to pay a fine.”

The migrants, coming back to reality, lamented about how all that was happening so far away in their country for Holy Week, and the same for other special moments in their lives, like those that Palas remembered, and made him feel sad. If you were there, wouldn't your heart break from those scenes where the little ones appear, begging and clutching on to their father; creatures whose eyes are blurry with tears, their little arms wrapped around the neck of the one who is leaving, powerless to hold him back for any longer; the children don't understand socio-economic problems, political persecutions, extreme poverty... they just live according to their momentary sentimental impulses, fortunately? Or the memories of that last kiss from the trembling wife when she sees her beloved leave; those older parents with their hands outstretched in the air, trying to memorize the image of the son who they might be looking at for the last time... and then in the midst of that solitude comes the empty space, the nostalgia and the tears.

Far away in exile, Palas went over it again and again, either at nightfall, or even at midnight, or in the early morning when his sleep suddenly broke off to give way to the vision, the images, the pictures from the past. Sometimes he went out to look at the stars in the sky and talk with them, and he imagined that those same stars would be sheltering his family under the same vault of the sky, and he would ask it from far away to look after them and protect them, since he couldn't be with them; like the convict who looks out at the light of the moon through the bars of his cell so that he can mentally fly away.

When he first arrived in Los Angeles in California, he met up with some Q'anjob'al countrymen who were renting a small apartment among fifteen of them, because rents are very expensive there, and asked if he could stay with them. Palas knew one of the men who had come several years before, and so that man was the one who had gone to meet Palas at the border. Language was not a problem, since Palas could speak his native language with the group, but he could not find work for several months which was a problem. One of the reasons for forming small ethnic communities over there in exile, is precisely to be able to share their cultural identity, especially their language: the Kaqchikels, the Mams, the Mestizos...

There was little space in the apartment; they had no furniture, they slept on the floor on small mattresses thrown on the floor; they had one bathroom which they took turns to use; in one corner of one of the rooms, there was a stove on a small table where they took turns preparing their food. Most of them ate prepared food or canned food, sodas and products they found in the supermarkets. That house was more for spending the night. Most of them worked most of the time, so they did not spend any time there during the day.

Palas' situation was really dismal. The small amount of money he had borrowed was not enough for the expenses of the journey, and then it was stolen from him on the way, so he was very short of money. His only chance was that his compatriot would lend him some money from time to time, but his friend was starting to get tired of this.

One afternoon when all the men came back from their jobs, Palas went to them in order to plead with them for two reasons: first, to ask them to recommend him to the places where they were working to see if they would hire him. And also, to explain his desperate need of a loan, since as someone who had just arrived he had no money to live on.

“Please,” he said to them, “Lend me some money for food, and when I have work I will pay you back. Only Mr. Chus is doing me this favor, but he is getting tired of it and I feel very ashamed, and so I’m begging you to lend me some money for my food.”

“Don’t worry, Palas” said one of the older men, “most of us came like that, with no money, with nobody we knew, with no work... what I suggest is that you should not go without food, because all of us have suffered, and we are all willing to share the little we have with you, so when we eat, join us and share what there is, don’t worry, it’s not just you that this happens to. Since you are our countryman, you need our support, and we hope that you will soon find some work.”

“Thank you very much, I feel very embarrassed, but I hope that one day I can pay you back for the help you’re giving me.”

One of the men gave him fifty dollars, and another gentleman lent him a hundred, and that is how they all helped out. The first few days, after eating something in the morning, he went out collecting things from garbage cans: empty cans, plastic things, any objects in good condition that he found... and he took them to drop-off places where they gave him some money. And that was how he spent several weeks. Other times, he went to stand in certain places where he joined other migrants to wait until some employer came to find workers, whether to do garden work, fix something in his house, or carry packages... one day he met a man who was driving his pick-up to look for people who would work for two weeks in his orchard. That helped him a lot, because finally there was a break in his poverty.

As time went by, he tried different kinds of work: harvesting onions, oranges, or other agricultural products, after many failed attempts and wandering around, running away like a criminal, like a felon, so that he wouldn’t be deported by the immigration authorities. There were also many days when he had to suffer hunger, thirst, heat, cold, a lack of everything, such as money, food, appropriate clothes, housing, resting in one place for a few days, and then in another, feeling ashamed that people he knew were supporting him, already some of them were telling him indirectly that he should look for work because they were getting tired of supporting him... remembering that saying “The freeloader is like a dead body, and starts to stink after three days.” He was aware of his situation, that was when his memories of the village came back to him, the hut where even if it was only corn and beans there was always enough to go around. Whereas here, the food is junk, it doesn’t fill you up like corn, it’s bad for your system, it doesn’t have the same taste as the food he was used to...

The indigenous suffer more than the mestizos, or *ladinos* as they are called in Guatemala, from a shortage of work when they are abroad, because most of them only know how to do the agricultural work that was done in their hometowns; whereas the mestizos or *ladinos*, have more opportunities to find other jobs like restaurant service, mechanics, construction work, business... since from their knowledge of western culture, or speaking some English, more opportunities open up for them.

Several months later, one of the young men came with the news that on the vegetable farm where he worked, there were three job openings. The following morning Palas went with him to apply for one of the jobs. Fortunately, they hired him for three months to test his performance, and that would determine whether they would hire him for longer. It was different work, different tools, different methods that always depended on agility, speed and skill at doing things fast; different from the field work that Palas was used to in his home community.

That was how he began to learn about the work, and to be able to pay off his debts, both to his room-mates and those he had incurred in his hometown.

As time passed, and the rough waters of his financial needs began to calm down, memories surfaced in his mind in the midst of his solitude, bringing sadness and longing, just as he was adjusting to the circumstances of his new life. Reviving and returning to his memory were images of that love, the loving words in his own language, Maya Q'anjob'al, which was like a charm for him, like something sweet to enjoy during moments of idleness, especially at night... memories appeared, converted into another kind of suffering which tortured him during the first months and years, when counting the rosary beads of time began to fall apart: the days, the months, and the years, with their events in the distant town.

He was constantly remembering the activities which were taking place at the different times of year there in his homeland, where the life cycle was based on the tasks related to sowing corn, to the community fiestas, to the traditions at different times of year, to the life-cycle customs, like childbirth, engagements, weddings, patron saints' days, Holy Week, Christmas Eve... but in the new place where he was now living, there was none of all that, only work. He would ask himself, "What would be going on there? What was happening with his children, who stayed there in the village in the care of his wife? His children were at the mercy of an alienating school education, an education which deformed them, and an education which obliterated Maya identities?" Palas would ask himself these questions in his solitude. What would be happening with his corn, his land, the construction of community homes, the maize harvest...? Over and over again he would look at the photos of his wife and his children, the pictures were already worn from being handled so much, and each time he looked at them, his eyes would fill with tears and his heart with anguish, like a soldier in the trenches, looking at photos for encouragement.

Then, in his imagination he would hear music like a funeral march which would stay with him all the time, especially when the distant memories of his family would lead him into grief-

filled dreams. These feelings were what thousands of migrants spread throughout the different states suffered, no one talks about it because it is part of their very personal experience, except when there are moments of dialogues among the men or when the memories were awakened under the influence of alcohol.

After that first job, where he stayed for more than two years until he paid off his debt in his town, he moved on to others in the same type of agricultural work. Sometimes growing lettuce, carrots, potatoes, or harvesting fruit like apples, peaches, papayas... as the months and years passed. When he was feeling more at peace with himself, thanks to his relative economic stability, he could communicate more often with his family, especially his wife and his children. Sometimes he sent them cassettes with recordings of himself, where he talked from his heart and with his feelings. Other times, he sent them letters, with the aid of his countrymen who helped him, but he only wrote the most essential. In any case, these letters were very emotional, to the children, the wife and the parents. They always included promises to come back soon, as soon as he could put together the money he needed for his plans.

“Study, kids, study, so you don’t suffer in your life. If I had been able to study for a few years, I would be with you now in our home, but it’s not too late, you should make a big effort so you can work in something different.

“And you, Malkal, my love, watch over the children so they study, it’s a pity that you don’t know how to read and write, the same as me, because you could help them in their homework in the afternoon, so they could get ahead in their education. They must be big already, I can see them in the photos you send me, and as for my parents, I hope they don’t need anything, look after them for me, buy them their medication with the money I send you, and for yourself, buy some new *cortes*, new *huipiles*, sandals... fix yourself up, get dressed, go out to town with the children.

“I love you with all my heart, I think of you every day and every night; I wish I could shorten the distance, I wish I could be a bird flying like an arrow, I wish I could be a *nawal*, a spirit, air, to transform myself into someone who could be there in a moment... to fly and be with you in a short time”...he would say in his language. “But the time will come, I’m making plans to give you a surprise one month, one week, or one day... Don’t worry about me, I’m fine now, I certainly did suffer a little at first, but now I have a stable job and I eat better...”

And this was how those letters which carried the most affectionate messages from both sides, the most eloquent letters from that family, lasted for several years, feeding the hopes of a return which was never coming. And with time those feelings began to cool and stretch longer and longer and fade away.

As for Malkal, she was recording tapes, sighing, sobbing and moaning... “I hope you are well, and eat your tortillas, and your sodas, your hot coffee, your chile that you like so much, there must be some in the stores there, don’t go hungry. It makes me very sad, who knows if there is



someone to wash your clothes, mend and sew your shirts, make your tortillas and cook your beans... You have some medications for flu, stomachache, headaches, and other sicknesses. Maybe they have *alawen*, *palitario*, *werwena*... the herbs we use here.

“I love you too, Palas, I’m embarrassed to say this to you on this machine, maybe someone is listening to the recording, I would like to say so much to you, but it upsets me; I’d rather keep everything in my heart so I can tell you when you come back and are here close to me. In the evenings, when the sun goes down with that red color burning the clouds over the hills, and when the birds are singing their last songs before they go to sleep in their nests in the leafy trees, I start to feel nostalgic and I think of you, and the cold air at nightfall makes me want to hug you and give you some warmth which I send up to the stars so they carry it to you where you are.

“I count the suns and the moons waiting for you to come back, every afternoon, when the long-distance bus comes through, your Mom now has the habit of going out to see if you are coming from somewhere. But when she sees there is no-one, she comes back looking at the ground, which means that she feels very sad.

“Don’t forget me, as I don’t forget you, I keep waiting for you; sometimes I feel a bit jealous and I give up, I need your warmth in the middle of the cold of the nights, and I think about how many women there must be there, and very pretty ones from what they say.

“Your Mom and your Dad send you lots of love, they are quite ill, even though we are getting treatment for them, but at the Health Center they say that they have several health problems, they have given us prescriptions to buy medications, but the illnesses don’t go away. Take good care of yourself, don’t get hurt at work, don’t go drinking, here they just brought the body of a kid from another village, they say he tried to cross a highway where the cars drive very fast there, he was drunk and they hit him, and that’s how he died, they say.”

One day when Malkal went to pay off some of the last dues of the debt, the moneylender who was having some beer came up to her to offer her one in a friendly way, with the idea of trying to seduce her.

“What a pleasure to see you, Malkal, you’re prettier every day. How is Palas, when is he coming?”

“He’s fine, he says he’ll come soon, that’s why we’re in a hurry to pay off our debt to you. There’s only one more payment left.”

“Don’t worry, if you need money for a little longer, you can spend it without paying interest. Have a beer with me, I’m happy to see you, let’s celebrate that you’re getting out of your debt.”

“Thank you very much. Mr. Tumaxk, but I don’t have time. I have to go home, I left my children alone, my mother might scold me, she just let me go out for a little while to give you the money.”

“Sit down for a minute, there is more time in life, I don’t have the pleasure of admiring your beauty every day. You should forget about that man, he’ll already be living with some other woman there.”

“Thank you, maybe some other day, but now I’m going,” she told him in her *Q’anjob’al*, language, and she left.

Palas, after paying off the debt he had incurred, was able to send them more money so they did not lack anything they needed at home. Then, at that time, four or five years after leaving, he sent money to build a big concrete block house from a plan that he found, as did the majority of migrants. He ordered that once it was finished, it should be painted blue and green and that they should paint a flag of the United States on one of the walls, with a sign saying CALIFORNIA. His wife and family fulfilled all his requests, but the rooms of that building stayed empty, no one lived in them. Palas’ mother said that you could not move into a house without an inauguration, that they should inaugurate it with a big party for when he came back, and in the meantime they went on living in the little hut with its stove and *tapexcós* (mats).

At this stage in his life abroad, all the different images of his native culture were growing in Palas’ mind. One day his friends, who were already more adjusted than him in those places, invited him to a party organized by their countrymen in the States, to celebrate the feast of Saint Peter, a copy of the feast of the patron saint of the town they had left behind. It was June 29<sup>th</sup>, there was traditional food, there was marimba music, and many of the people who came were wearing their traditional clothes, like the women’s *huipiles* and *cortes* (blouses and skirts) and the men’s *capixayes* (ponchos) and hats.

On the day of the fiesta, Palas dressed in the cowboy style of the men he worked with: Texas sombrero, pointed leather boots, cowboy pants and shirt, that many of his countrymen had adopted, since they noticed that that was the way other immigrants dressed. They also imitated the speech, the food choices and other cultural characteristics of the people that they spent time with at work during the day wherever they went. Most of the Guatemalan country people do not imitate aspects of American culture, because they do not usually have any contact with it back in their home country.

He had a great time that night, finally he could have a little joy in his life, participating in some of the aspects of his culture: he danced the *son* to the rhythm of the marimba, a *son* with a slow beat, monotonous and unchanging: *Tontonton, Tontonton, Tontonton...* with a sharp, sad and melancholy melody which felt like a cold rain on all of them moving to the music; it transported them to their homeland, imagining the effusion of the real, different joy far away in the town,

replicating it even though it was an imitation, at least some of it here, but after all they were sharing it; all of them dancing, men and women, moving in circles over and over again for hours without talking, just dancing the *son* in the traditional way, with their arms hanging down at their sides, swaying like lifeless objects.

This is how, within four walls, they were practicing their own culture in the diaspora, a country belonging to others, and far from their own. It was a cultural oasis in the middle of the desert of other worlds, other people. It is not only the Mayas who continue to practise their customs in foreign cultures, other cultural groups do so as well: the Irish, the Asians, the Italians... the human being as a social being, part of a community, and a multicultural being on the face of the earth.

In a wooden bowl he ate the *pinol* or *k'aj* in a sauce made with turkey with plenty of chile, which he liked so much, accompanied by corn tamales wrapped somehow in aluminum foil, in place of tender corn leaves, *q'anaq'* or *tusa* leaves; but you cannot always get those authentic ingredients; he took a couple of drinks of *cuxa*, which warmed up his feelings; finally he could speak his language with fellow countrymen who still remembered it and weren't ashamed to speak it. He felt he was transported to a small part of his world, his culture, and his people.

The person who was running the party announced a song in the traditional language, everyone paid attention and the singer began the song like this in *Q'anjob'al*:

*Najat ta max waq' kan hin tx'otx'al, heb' hin mam, hin konobal',*

I left my land, my parents and my country far away,

*Wochwanil, max kankan maqan yul spixan ix Malkal.*

My love stayed locked in the heart of Margarita.

*Ka max hintoj k'ayek' haxka kusil oq, b'aylaq yib'anq' inal*

I became a lonely wolf in the wide world,

*Mimantaq bay max hin hek' hinsay low hinb'a.*

And I traveled to many places searching for life.

*Ti najatta ayin hak'atan, Malkal, manchaq hinhab'eq k'aytoq,*

You have me here, far from you, Margarita, don't forget me

*Taynewal kopat, toxa hoqhin meltzojtoq, chi kamwalon ayach.*

Look after our home, I'll soon come back, I promise.

*Taynewal haxka swatx' ilal, wochwan max waq' kan ayach,*

Guard the love I left with you like a treasure

*K'apax hayin chach woche msanta hoqhin kamoq, jMalkal!*

I too will love you until I die, Margarita!

Warmed by the drinks, the tears of the countrymen fell in silence, like their sighs; they went on dancing around, until they left when they faced the dawn of another day, when each one, after ending the break of the comfort and momentary relaxation, went back to work, which had become their routine there in exile.

But as years went by, with the inexorable passage of time, he had become used to the working life and had adapted to the local climate, both social and natural. A certain insensitivity began to grow in Palas' heart; he was getting used to the hard life, and moving into his heart and his mind was the shadow of forgetfulness of all the events of the past and what he had left far behind. Little by little he started to lose interest in communicating with his family in his hometown. Months went by without any communication, except when his wife called, making every effort to keep alive the little flame of love that was going out in the dark, but from his perspective, he had already lost all interest.

Finally, after several more months had gone by since Palas had last communicated with his wife, one Sunday Malkal went to town, and went to a house where you could pay to make a telephone call. She made a short call to her husband, in spite of the years that had passed.

“Hello, how are you? When are you going to come back? Your mother is very ill, she wants to see you even if it's for the last time, she thinks she is going to die soon.”

“Hello my love, I'm fine, I think of you a lot, I think of you, and the children. How are you? Buy medicine for my mother, don't let her die, I'm going to send you some money so you can buy her medications. I haven't called you because I lost the job I had, and I can't find another one.”

“More than money, your family wants to see you; your Mom and your Dad are sick with grief, they don't want money, they just want you. Or have you already forgotten about us?”

“No. How can you think that? Every day I spend the whole time thinking about you. I want to work a while longer, save some more money, and then come back to you, my love.”

“The house is ready the way you wanted, they believe that you will come back soon, because that is what you promised. They want to do the inauguration. But as far as I can see, you aren’t planning to come back soon, you must have someone over there. If you do, please tell me the truth, don’t deceive us. I’m not going to call you any more, I don’t have any money; this is the last time I’ll do it. Goodbye! *Chil hab’a!* (Take care)”

That goodbye had definitively ended the communication with his loved ones, with the village of Miman Ak’al, with the culture, the history and his people. From then on, every link was broken, every channel of communication was closed, now Palas was left completely alone, he was definitively disconnected from every relationship with his people. From then on he could no longer depend on a wife, children, parents, family, community... all the doors were closing to what he used to think of as his own until then. He had turned a page in his life, he had put a full stop in his story.

After that conversation, which was more of a complaint and farewell than anything happy, because it confirmed the doubts, the suspicions, the insecurities both on the part of the wife who was starting to get tired of waiting so long, and on his part, he had exhausted all his excuses to justify his delay.

Finally, the communication was cut off, silence came, Palas didn’t reply any more, and Makal received no more news from him.

A few years later, on a typical day, Palas received news which awoke memories of many years before, of the child desperately clinging to his neck on the day of his departure, who wouldn’t let go and begged him not to leave... that child was now an adolescent who hadn’t wanted to go on studying, and who had left his home community more than a year before. Some fellow countrymen who came to where Palas was working told him that one day his son Matin had asked his mother for some money so he could go and try his luck with some relatives he knew in the capital. Some months had gone by, and finally at the end of a year, the relatives found out that Matin was in juvenile prison for committing some crime in the capital. From what the relatives told Palas there was no money to go and find his son, and the relatives were leaving it in Palas’ hands to do whatever he thought he could for his son, as his mother was no longer living in the village at that time.

The years passed like this, without any more communication between the migrant and his family. Palas had done nothing to help his son, and after a year in jail, his uncles went to get him out. The grandparents had already died by that time.

After his stay in jail, the boy went to live with his uncles for a few months. He was an adult by now, he made his own decisions, always living on the margins because neither his father nor his mother had given him or his sisters a good upbringing when they were young.

As a result of the break-up of the family, one day Palas' son Matin took a backpack with a change of clothes and set off on the same path to follow in the steps of his father, who had been gone for more than twenty years. Together with two other youths of his age, he set out with them to try their luck going north, not to look for his father, as he never wanted to communicate with his father because of the long-term resentment he felt, but in fact to look for work like any other migrant, since in their town and in the country there was no work to be found. When Matin arrived in Guatemala City, he noticed that many people who had different levels of education graduated as teachers, or experts in some specialty. But he and his friends just went around the streets washing cars, painting houses, or selling any cheap things.

Four months had passed since Matin had left when his relatives found out that his belongings had been found in the Sonora desert in Mexico, where the drug traffickers had massacred more than fifty people. One of the names which was later released by the immigration authorities in a list of the deceased was the name of Matin Palas. Much later the bad news reached his father, and the only thing that he did was to drink for weeks in grief for the death of his son.

As for the two little sisters of Matin, the older one, who was called Anihx, learned how to read and write in her first years at school. It took her four years, since she did not speak Spanish, only Q'anjob'al, her Maya language. After that they took her out of school because the family needed someone to look after her brother and sister and focus on housework, as was the custom in the community. When Anihx grew to about the age of twelve, she was married to a local man who was much older than her. She soon followed in the footsteps of her family, started having babies, and continued with the Q'anjob'al traditions. With her fifth daughter there were complications with the delivery, and so she died, after giving birth to a daughter who was motherless from the day she was born.

As for Torol, as the other daughter was called, she was the youngest, and they didn't put her in school because from an early age she showed no interest in learning. She always liked money, having her own money as she said; and so from an early age she raised chickens, pigs, cooked corn and *güisquiles* which she sold going from door to door... she learned how to do housework, but when she was old enough to work, she had enough money from her savings to set up her own store in the village; starting with the most basic products that were needed there: salt, *panela* (dried sugar block), car wash, lime, corn and beans... with time her sales increased until her business was big enough.

When she was a little girl, she had gone to live for a while with her maternal grandparents, in a family which had a lot of boys; given that situation, she followed male role models and developed habits and skills doing the kind of work they were doing: loading bags, chopping down tall trees with axes, loading pack animals, working the land... she had a strong build, and looked like a man, so she earned the nickname of *marimacho* (butch) in the neighborhood.

One day she went to the woods with one of her cousins to cut firewood and put it on the pack animals. But once they were in the woods, the cousin, who for some time had had sexual fantasies about Torol and was stalking her, tried to attack her by throwing himself against her to try to knock her down on the dead leaves in the wood; but her quick reaction made him powerless, tying him up next to a big tree with thick strips of leather, but not before she gave him a holy thrashing with his whip, also made of leather. Next she went to get some neighbors to go and untie him from the tree and take him to the community court.

As a result of his shameless action, the community elders, as was the custom, had to exile the unfortunate cousin from that village. After that it never occurred to anyone to try to abuse Torol, an uncommon situation which was soon known everywhere in the region.

Torol never wanted to get engaged to be married, even though she had some offers, because she said that men only got in the way of women's achievements. Her main ambition was to grow her business. Then she adopted two children from the village: a girl and a boy. She taught them how to work in her style, gave them some education, and then she made the most of her life, since when her adopted children grew up they took over the business. Since there is no one formula for humans to be happy, one can state that Torol was happy in her own way. When her mother no longer received support from Palas and was left alone with her other children, Torol would help her out from time to time by bringing her food supplies and giving Malkal other support when she was ill.

Meanwhile over there abroad, from the beginning Palas had been treated badly and mocked by his fellow workers. Everyone had fun at his expense, because he couldn't always express himself properly in his weak Spanish, he didn't have a good vocabulary or correct grammar, the right syntax structure in this second language that he used besides his mother tongue. Most of those workers, whether it was in agriculture, or in construction work, or in meat processing, where he worked for many years, were Latin-American: Mexicans, Central Americans, South Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans... and they had other speaking styles. He preferred to keep quiet, so as not to give them a chance to make jokes; but the others teased him, asking him questions about topics he wasn't aware of or about aspects of his culture or lifestyles in his community.

Palas changed jobs often because of the pressure and the hard times his fellow workers were giving him. For example, one day one of them rushed over and told Palas that the boss was calling him urgently to his office. He went in and took off his hat in front of the boss and presented himself respectfully. The boss told him he hadn't called him and that he should get back to work. When he arrived back to his fellow workers they burst out laughing and asked him what the boss had said, to which he replied that the boss had promised him a raise and was going to cut the salary of those who were creating a disturbance in the group. That calmed down the way they kept annoying and mocking him. One of his reasons for changing jobs was precisely because he was

starting to feel worn out from the pressure of all the bad times his fellow workers were putting him through.

He was thinking of going further north, where he heard there were good jobs, and so he decided to try his luck in the state of Virginia. One Saturday afternoon he came back to the apartment with lots of beer and offered it to his friends. He brought a roast chicken for them to eat and some other things to thank them for their hospitality and to say goodbye to his countrymen, because he was going to another place, where other fellow countrymen told him there was good pay for work in a pork meat processing plant.

As the beer mellowed them, they started to analyze their situation and their work experiences and to discuss various topics that drunk people talk about, and that was when Palas began to talk about how he had recently had a disagreement with a Mexican who was one of the workers at the vegetable harvest. From what he said, his companions guessed that he had picked up a lot of Mexican slang, as the saying goes: “if you touch honey, it sticks to you.”

“Not long ago I met a *pinche wey* who was working with the gang, and *me chingaba* every day. I told the *cabrón* that he shouldn’t *pura mierda* get me in trouble with the guy in charge. If you keep *chingando* with me *te voy a partir la madre*, you *pendejo*, I told him in front of all the other guys. That surprised them.”

“Hey, you!” he answered. “*Quiubole?* Don’t get uptight, you must be *teporocho*, I was just kidding, just let it go.”

“But I was ready to screw the *pendejo*, I challenged him to a fight if he was a man. Right then a guy I knew who had just arrived in his truck came up and said to me:

“Hey *pedo guey*, how’s *la chamba* going?”

“So right there I told him, “I’m *encabronao con este bizcochon* who’s getting me in trouble with the boss, and I want to settle this with him if he’s macho enough.” “Maybe now you’re scared,” I said to the other guy.””

“*Ha chinj eso sta cabrón*, it’s not a good idea to fight, you should read the work regulations, because they could punish you” said my friend.

“That *wey es muy alebrestao*” said the other guy, “I already told him to let it go; but he kept it up, he doesn’t listen. He can’t take a joke.”

“But I went on until I let my anger out. And I threw the first punch *la mera jeta del cabrón*” He was at this point in his story when...

Bang! Bang! Bang! they heard from the door.



“Police! Open up!”

Everyone rushed out whichever way they could.

It was the immigration police who had come because someone called them to notify them that there were migrants making a disturbance in the house. Several of them were arrested and taken to the police station.

And that was the last that was heard of Palas.

## **Chapter Four**

### **The Two Faces of Exile**

At first, Malkal kept the recent memories in her heart and in her mind with great affection, and she enjoyed getting messages from the husband she loved and who had recently gone away. Photos, recordings, or letters arrived from her husband, and helped them to keep in touch; she had a special place where she kept all these reminders, and when she felt sad, she took them out, like toys for her inner child to play with. The last conversations before the journey, the words and the caresses, the occasional thrilling long-distance telephone call full of tears and sweet words and promises to come back soon—which became a return postponed longer and longer as time passed and suddenly several years had gone by. The children were growing up; she took care of them diligently, managing to give them what they needed, to eat, study and stay healthy. For the first few years, she devoted herself enthusiastically to working on the plot of land which was left in her care; raising animals, like pigs, chickens and her flock of sheep that grazed in the picturesque meadows of the mountain. Thinking about the sacrifices he was making, she felt sorry for her husband working in order to send them money; and so she also did her share so that one day, she thought, the family would have a happy reunion and enjoy the results of all their efforts and sacrifices.

Before Palas left, they had planned that he would only go for five years at the most, after which he would come back to build their house and work on the land, which was the work he knew how to do best. That was why Malkal spent those first years waiting for his return; but after five years, the two of them did not talk about it anymore. When people asked Palas about his original plans, his replies became evasive; he tried to find other explanations and suggested other plans. Malkal sometimes felt anxious and insecure, thinking that the sacrifice they had both made would risk a permanent separation, in view of the distance and the passing time; that would undermine their original plans and so would be worse for the family. She definitely did not want that to happen, but it was a concern that kept her awake at night.

On Sundays she would go with her in-laws to buy food for her children to eat during the week; she never went out alone; she always took one of her children with her or she went with one of her relatives. She shared the things she bought in the market with her in-laws, and she bought them some clothes when they needed them. She always managed the money very responsibly.

Malkal was very enthusiastic about doing everything necessary to keep up with her husband's responsibilities and her own, looking after the family and the farm work, and then the building of the house where they were all hoping to live after his planned return, which she was looking forward to with great hopes. But the inexorable passing of time, which destroys everything and buries it in the past, was accelerating and there was no way to stop it. This was the real danger which was looming over this family. The lunar months (*Xajaw*), by which people in their region count the passing of time, the working days and the years, continued ever faster. The children were growing up, the grandparents were aging, and Malkal herself also began to notice changes in everything around her, those natural and inexorable effects that the passage of time has on everything.

For a time, things were going well; she was full of illusions and enthusiasm, and when some extra money was sent with the remittances, the family was happy and had fewer limits on their basic expenses. During the first few years they continued to have high hopes and warm affection for each other. She managed to save some of the money that she received; she spent only what was strictly necessary and saved the rest for the future, she said.

But after about ten years, with the passing of time, both of them found that their hearts and their feelings were adapting to the routine, and the warmth of their love began to fade for both of them, maybe first on his side or maybe on hers; neither of them had any control over the way their feelings weakened and grew detached from each other. All this happened in a straightforward, natural way without either of them noticing at first; thoughts, feelings, words and pictures... are forgotten, disappear, everything naturally fades as time passes. And so it was all erased—the words, the caresses, the reminders of everything they promised each other before his departure.

Because of that human need to have a partner, to have someone with whom to share ideals, hopes, with whom to share dreams, sorrows, joys, and the bed, people have difficulty remaining attached to a distant illusion, distant in both time and place; for Palas and Malkal, everything began to fade away—the warmth of their affection which had been cut off, and which their separation buried under the falling leaves of oblivion. The initial enthusiasm of everything they said to each other, the promises they made when he left... in the face of his prolonged absence, the silence and tedium began to take over their hearts. They were young; they had not been married long; they had human needs for company, affection and sex like anyone else; and each of them chose to feed their souls and fill this empty space with something new.

She remembered how during the nights before his departure they said things like:

“Kiss me now while we are together, because tomorrow who knows if you will remember me?”

“Look at me, this is how I can remember your face for the last time because I’m afraid of losing you forever.”

“I’ll be with you every day, never mind how far away. When you love someone, no distance can keep you apart.”

“We will meet every night in our little nest.”

“I’m leaving this love in your heart, give it some water every day...”

This is how they had talked to each other with flowery conversations.

After ten, fifteen... and even more years, no migrant, no wife left alone has the patience to keep on waiting for her partner. Also, since their father was not around in the family, the children could not study at school. Since the mother could not read or write, and the relatives did not think these things were important, the children followed the lifestyle of their elders. The boy was in school for three years, repeating the same grades. When they saw that he was not making any progress, they took him out of school and he stayed at home with nothing to do. He did not learn how to work on the farm either. There was no need to work on the farm because of the remittances which came regularly. All he learned was to depend on the support coming from the north. This happens with many families in different countries. The young people learn nothing except to spend what little the migrants sacrifice themselves to send. This financial dependence ends up changing the values that children and youth have for certain ideas, activities and behavior, values that had never before been common in the communities. The new generations become consumers of certain products which were not around previously; the behavior of young people changes; they are no longer accustomed to working or to studying or to maintaining any values.

Many of the people receiving remittances do not know of the sacrifices made by the people who send the remittances. They think the money is easy to earn and do not appreciate all the workers’ efforts. The remittances made it possible to have access to technology that was not possible before in the community: televisions, radios, telephones, and since there was no control over how to put this technology to good use, young people lost the habit of working, and developed new lifestyles. The young people were more demanding and susceptible to marketing and consumerism.

One example of this was a mother who was enthusiastically planning an elaborate fifteenth birthday party for her daughter. She had ordered everything: the special clothes, the dinner, the music, the religious ceremony... but all of that depended on whether her brothers, the girl’s uncles, who were abroad, sent her the money; the mother responsible for all the plans had no back-up or

other financial support. In the end, the money did not come, because those who were supposed to send it did not think it was a necessary expense. They thought it was a waste of money, leaving the mother embarrassed and indebted to all the guests who had received the elegantly printed invitations. And the daughter, disappointed, went off with the first boy who crossed her path, to show how angry she was about what had happened.

Years later, when Malkal's son grew up, since there was no more money from remittances and he had grown used to spending freely without learning a trade, he went to the city as an internal migrant, looking for something to do. He ended up committing various crimes, which is common for people like him who never learn how to deal with life, as a result of their parents' neglect.

Malkal was tired of waiting for her husband to return, and so new romances began: while the remittances were still coming, she had the best *cortes* (skirts) in brilliant colors, *huipiles* (blouses), shiny hair pins, new *fajas* (belts), new sandals. She dressed with great elegance and with these new outfits she looked so beautiful that she cast a spell on the hearts of the young men when she went to town for the Sunday market; and from time to time young men approached her, and would boldly invite her to have a "drink." They would have a beer together, and then move on to hard liquor, listen to music, go dancing and for walks nearby and far away. She would often be away and leave the children in the care of the grandparents. Malkal felt young again; she felt the same as she did during the best years when she was single; and she regretted waiting so long for her husband to come back. Life gained a new rose-colored glow; she felt the taste of youth, the smell of perfumes of an idyllic beauty, adolescent energy. It felt like a new world she had never experienced. The situation was different, she had more freedom to make decisions; she saw the world in a different way and she felt independent and free.

Soon people began to wonder about where all these changes were coming from, such elegance, flirting and frequent absences. The relatives and neighbors gossiped in secret, that this woman was going about here and there, and wondered if the rumors were true that she had been seen with some man who had a wife and children—"How disgusting!" "How awful for the children!" "Do you think her husband knows? Poor man, he's killing himself in order to send her money and she's wasting it with other men"...and so a lot of comments went around, some people supporting her and others disapproving of her behavior.

The in-laws, grandparents, and relatives wondered why she was out so much, why she came home late, why their daughter-in-law suddenly looked so well put together and enthusiastic and expressed such youthful excitement through her behavior... They did not dare say anything about it to her, because it was not their responsibility, and maybe she was doing it all with their son's approval; after all, one day they came across a message in which Palas himself suggested to his wife that she should buy herself some new clothes, take care of herself, go out for walks... and so they decided not to interfere in all that.

The new changes in the behavior of that honest, hard-working, self-sacrificing, home-loving, thrifty, respectful woman were inexplicable in the eyes of the neighborhood... they couldn't understand where all this was coming from. But deep inside her Malkal had always unconsciously repressed an emotional bombshell, which finally reclaimed a space in her life. Only she knew the deep, hidden motives, only she felt the loss of so much wasted time in her life; and now that she was alone she took her revenge for having waited so long, by demanding the right to catch up on time and reclaim the happiness she had lost. She felt that she had already had her share of hardship and sacrifices and giving up things for the sake of the family. But who had ever been concerned about her life, her happiness, and personal concerns?

People make plans based on their own needs and do not consider the wives, the mothers of their children, the daughters-in-law, the daughters... except to give them more work and responsibilities. Now, other people think they have the right to accuse her, to consider her a criminal and to judge and denigrate her. But they themselves had never been willing to give her any advice or moral or material support during her times of crisis and her bitter days of solitude and unhappiness. She too had the right to live, to rest, to have fun and be happy. Now, even though it was a belated rebellion, she sought her own escape, her own exile, she looked for her accomplices to have her final revenge and show the world, scream to the world, that she too was a human being with rights.

The relatives continued to complain that she was not only coming home late, but sometimes she was drunk and could not walk straight. She was neglecting the children, and keeping company with strange people who did not have a good reputation; at first, she was away for one day, and then, for several days, leaving the children alone... And the various excuses she made to explain it all were less and less believable: visits to the healer, invitations from friends, business, doctor visits to distant places and relatives... none of them were convincing. Someone wanted to contact her husband, they wanted to find out his address or telephone number, but since most people in the village could not read, they could not pass on the information to Palas.

One of her admirers wanted to get closer to her through one of Malkal's cousins. When one of the community fiestas took place, he took the opportunity to invite them both to have lunch in a local cafeteria where there was beer and music; people were joking and having fun. Afterwards he drove them in his pickup to a place with a beautiful view of some waterfalls outside the town, where they went on with the fiesta. This relationship did not last long. She had the luxury of being able to choose among several admirers who were interested in taking her out. She was often seen arriving home in different vehicles with friends, both men and women. Malkal ignored people's criticism and gossip; she had stopped caring about the cultural values which were always practiced in the community; it was as if she had acquired a certain taste for the type of relationships and lifestyle of which the majority of the community disapproved. She rebelled against every community norm, against all authority, and purposefully rebelled against local conventions.

Very often families would discuss this type of behavior at home, and talk about how to teach their daughters about this behavior and the bad examples. People made suggestions to the elders of the community about considering some kind of penalties to impose on this woman who was breaking community norms, or expelling her from the village, because according to them she was setting a bad example for the young people.

At first some of the friends and neighbors would ask her, “What’s the news from our friend, my god-son, my relative...?” But her silence was clear evidence that there was not much news, and soon there were not many dollars either. She invented any sort of answer, any excuse. One day a man who had recently returned came to her, under the pretext of asking about Palas Yakin.

“How is your guy up there, how is it going for him, does he still remember you...?”

“Yes, fine, he’s got a job, he sends money for the children and the house expenses, but it’s so sad without him!”

“Don’t worry, don’t cry. He’ll come back one day, but don’t give up too much for him, there are so many women over there, and he’s probably fine...or he’s already hooked up with someone...”

“Don’t tell me that, I don’t even want to think about it, I’d be ready to kill myself if I knew he was with another woman.”

“No, Malkal, don’t take it like that! You’re young, you’re very pretty, you shouldn’t think of negative things. Enjoy yourself, eat, get dressed and enjoy life the way he certainly is over there. Do you think a man can be without a companion for so long? And especially in those places where there are so many women from all over. During the years that I was living there, I could see that there were women who came from all over: white, blond, black ...and they’re looking for men. It’s not like here where women are more shy, and it’s the men who look for them. There you can find everything, so your dear husband must be not just with one, but with several women; what they look for is money, dollars. Wouldn’t you like to go with me on a trip I’m going to take to the capital? I’ll be leaving soon. Ask your mother or a neighbor to look after the children, we’ll be gone a few days. I’m going to visit a relative who is in hospital in the capital, and we could go and visit some place you would like to get to know... don’t lock yourself up, it can make you ill. Go out and enjoy yourself, life is soon over and when we die we can’t take anything with us. It’s not worth sacrificing yourself for someone who doesn’t appreciate you.”

“Oh no! How could we do that? What will people say? What will your wife say if she finds out? Although I would like to visit my sister who works in the capital, but it would have to be some other time. “

That was how things were at their first meeting; she just accepted a couple of beers, and then they said goodbye. But something unsettled stayed in her thoughts and feelings. They met a few days later; she warmed up with some beer; and then the sobs and the tears began. There was a chance to get closer and give hugs, as an excuse to comfort her. They asked for some romantic music on the jukebox, to set the right atmosphere in the place where they were: they started dancing, eating, and then they started kissing and caressing, and the sorrows began to lift from that heart which had been so lonely.

After that, coming home late happened more often, until the lucky trip to the capital for a week took place... and one thing led to another. And led, about nine months later, to the arrival of a beautiful baby sister for the children, who were dumbfounded at the news, and even more so, disconcerted. By that time, her lover's wife had already made accusations against her, and one day she came to Malkal's house, carrying a shiny, well-sharpened machete she was prepared to use on her. Fortunately, things did not get beyond words, because Malkal locked herself in the house and did not dare leave, until the assistant mayor of the village intervened to avoid any bloodshed.

Everyone was gossiping about it, some in support of what had happened and others against it. Many wives praised the brave action of the woman with the machete who in their opinion had gone to claim her legitimate rights; while others justified Malkal's actions, because according to them, Malkal was just a victim, and the only true person responsible was the husband who had abandoned his wife... In the light of all this, the causes and their consequences, everyone was wondering about the arrival of the newborn baby. News traveled from one villager to another... as well as to Malkal's close relatives, who were too embarrassed to leave home. As they say around there, "their faces hung with shame."

Following the report which the assistant mayor submitted to the municipal authorities, they immediately summoned Malkal's lover, and after the necessary deliberations, he was sentenced to a month in jail and given a fine of a certain amount. After that he was rejected by his wife, who placed conditions on his continuing to live in the house.

Meanwhile, the other side of the problem, the voice of their Palas in the United States, was growing increasingly faint and distant; there were no more calls, and no messages or packages came with the countrymen who were returning, no tape-recordings, and nothing online... Palas changed jobs, changed his telephone number, changed his feelings...finally, like a beaten dog, defeated, he went to a different state to find some peace and comfort, but the sorrows multiplied, until finally the communications shut down and his voice grew silent; his past eloquent words were lost in the distant silence. First, it was because a Mexican peasant woman crossed his path, and she, like Palas, needed human warmth; they had a relationship similar to the one that was going on with Palas' wife in the Maya homeland. Then, another migrant, who arrived where Palas was working at that time, spread the gossip about what was going on in his village and about Palas' wife and children. He was told in great detail about everything that was happening, and given

answers to his questions about “who, how, when, where, why, how often?” Palas’ mind was boiling over with the news, which crushed his feelings so much that he even considered suicide in the middle of his intoxication. He could find no way out from his problems, his sorrows, and especially his jealousy... looking for who was really responsible for his misfortunes. But all the answers pointed back to himself, an invisible sign that marked him as the only one responsible for his actions, and now there was nothing left but to face them. Listening to the voice of his conscience, hanging his head, defeated, he saw no option but to continue downhill, carrying the load of the long-term results on his back like the harvest of an errant life.

Breathless and exhausted from mental stress and emotional pain, faced with this far-reaching and profound situation which he would not let himself believe, he made some personal calculations and came to the conclusion that on one hand, the miserly wages he received after all his sacrifices, would not be enough to share between two families—the one here and the one there; on the other hand, that love he had grown and abandoned was now like a distant corpse, and had been cold and lifeless for a long time; he adopted the popular saying “long-distance love is for assholes,” he decided to accept the idea that it was better to leave things as they were. In the end, if the rumors which had reached him were true, then let other men look after her and since he himself was no saint, “we’re even,” he thought.

As time passed, he changed jobs again in the United States, he had more children, and then bad habits began to take over like ivy clinging to the walls of old houses, partly because he was lonely and partly because the bad habits were dominating him. Liquor and beer were no longer enough to put out the burning fire that his suffering had ignited inside him. Looking for a way to overcome so much suffering, he was caught using drugs and was in jail for some months, and on the verge of being deported. After that, he became more caught up in bad habits and irresponsible behavior, which led him down a path to a cloudy world with no escape. He joined up with people from the underworld in different towns where he was drifting around whenever he had no work.

He was old by now, sick and too weak to work. He stayed with his three children (two boys and one girl) for the time being, as the Mexican woman had left him because of his disorderly life.

In Miman Ak’al, a long time had passed since Palas emigrated, no one mentioned his name anymore. The community members had erased all memories of him. There were only a few photographs, faded with time, like the bitter taste of an old wine, hanging from the bare walls where time stood still; now no-one remembered what Palas Yakin was like. Their memory of him had been swept aside among his family members, and his friends and neighbors had trouble remembering him, because they had also grown old, and the same was true of his own children who were lost in their own worlds. Nobody thought about him, they didn’t know if he was still alive, or if he had already died somewhere far away. It was as if a shadow had passed over the place, like an elusive *nawal* in the semi-darkness of the night, like a sad memory which leaves no traces or remains.



More than twenty years later, people had distant memories of a story from Miman Ak'al, where they had built that small house with a straw roof, adobe walls and dirt floor... but at that time, with the human warmth of the family, sitting around the fireplace in the center, there was the noise of children running around, laughing and playing happily—there was certainly poverty and a shortage of material things, but there was joy in their hearts. Whereas now, that little house had been converted into a cold concrete mansion where all you could see was a lonely sick old woman with white hair walking around, dragging her feet in the shadow of the darkness and solitude, with no more children or husband or love. She could only hear her own voice in a sad, permanent, distant soliloquy, in pursuit of a few old memories which fled each time further into the past.

And so ended the days of Malkal Nolaxh, completely abandoned, in extreme poverty; one more stage in that eternal drama of the people who one day left and never returned, and those who stayed behind with their hopes destroyed like the curse of a dream which suddenly vanished and broke into pieces—a broken mirror called migration. In many parts of the worlds the lives of migrants are torn to shreds, caught between the thorns and the stones of the roads; in different places, like the shreds of clothes ripped among the thistles and lying on the way, and which they cannot come back to pick up in order to go back to their homeland, because after all those years they remain illegal migrants, and once they leave they cannot return.

All this is the result of actions of politicians, oligarchs, the military, corrupt government leaders, in other word, robbers in the different countries, who never took on their responsibility to work for their country and their people; they preferred the easy way to get rich, rather than provide education, health care, employment... because these countries have great riches, but they stay in the hands of that sector full of ambition and greed. And the belated harvest of this whirlwind and painful experience is the disintegration of many families, children scattered around the world, parents who saw their children for the last time when they left at an early age, wives who gained nothing from waiting for many years, communities abandoned and collective plans left in the void... all that... all that like a moral, emotional, cultural fracture... with wounds which bleed inwardly, deep in the heart of people, like the Maya migrants.

## GLOSSARY

**Ajaw:** God in Maya languages.

**Ajawes:** The gods or deities.

**Ajtxum:** A person who has the power to predict the future. Also is a healer based on the calendar.

**Alawen:** A medicinal plant which grows in a cold climate, used to cure stomach-ache.

**Arrimado:** A person who lives in a separate house at the expense of the owner.

**B'aktun:** A unit of Maya time: 8000 years.

**Brochas:** People who earn a living announcing stops on public transport.

**Cabrón, pinche wey:** Mexican slang insults (bastard, jerk).

**Capixayes:** woven wool jackets or ponchos worn by Q'anjob'al men.

**Charamileros:** alcoholics

**Chatarreros:** people who collect trash or used items to resell for recycling.

**Chispa:** ability, skill to do something.

**Chil hab'a:** Take care – a Q'anjob'al expresión when saying “goodbye”

**Chucho:** Local Guatemalan word for dog.

**Chujes, Q'anjob'ales, Mames:**...Maya ethnic groups in Guatemala, the “Heart of the Maya World”

**Cortes:** The typical long wrap-around skirts worn by Maya women, which go from the waist to the ankles. They are handwoven in different colors.

**Coyote:** A person who is asked by illegal immigrants for help to cross the border between Mexico and the United States.

**Cucuruchos:** Guatemalan idiomatic name for men wearing a purple or black tunic who carry the statues in the Easter processions.

**Cuxa:** Home-made alcoholic spirits made in Maya communities.

**El Pom:** A product made from pine resin, used for Maya religious ceremonies.

**Estamos tablas:** we're tied, equal.

**Faja:** A woven wrap-around belt used with the traditional Maya corte (skirt) and huipil (blouse)

**Gringo:** In general gringo refers to people from Anglo-Saxon, Italian, English, French and United

States regions. In Latin America, countries like Mexico, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela and Puerto Rico use it to refer to Anglo-Saxons.

**Guajeros:** A disparaging word referring to people who collect objects in garbage dumps in order to sell them for money.

**Güisquiles:** A variety of squash

**Hijecuarentamil mula:** A disparaging personal insult in Q'anjob'al

**Hijuelachingada:** A disparaging personal insult in Q'anjob'al and in Mexico.

**Hombres de maíz:** Men of maize; according to Maya creation belief that humans were created from four colors of maize.

**Huipiles:** Typical blouses, usually hand-woven, worn by Maya women, with different designs and colors according to each of the 22 ethnic groups in Guatemala.

**Huq'eb' Lamb'at:** (7 Lamb'at) A day in the Maya calendar, known as tzolkin. I am not sure, but I believe Lamb'at means earth.

**K'aj:** Q'anjob'al word for pinol – mixed toasted corn and spices used for cooking turkey or chicken.

**K'olol:** A variety of tree in the Guatemalan highlands.

**La Bestia:** The Beast, common name for a cargo train which crosses Mexico, used by migrants on their journey north.

**Lustradores:** Shoe-shine people who work in the streets.

**Madrone:** A variety of tree which grows in the region.

**Mandrón:** Variety of trees in the Guatemalan highlands.

**Mareros:** Gang members.

**Marimacho:** A woman who looks, behaves and expresses herself in ways considered typically masculine in her community.

**Me chingaba:** He ruined, destroyed me (slang, equivalent to “he screwed me”)

**Mierda, pura mierda:** Shit, pure shit.

**Migra:** Abbreviation of “migración” – migration. A common expression for immigration agents, in both Mexico and the U.S.A.

**Miman Ak'al:** Great plain.

**Nawal:** A Maya concept meaning the *alter ego*, either an animal or spirit. The meaning differs according to the different Maya ethnic groups. In this context, Nawal refers to a spirit which comes out at night and is considered evil. In other groups it may refer to days in the Maya calendar.

**Palas Yakin:** (Main protagonist of novel) The first names in Maya Q'anjob'al are usually chosen to honor special family members, parents, grandparents, parents-in-law. The last names are the names of the fathers. Some communities have Maya last names, and in ancient times names reflected the person's date of birth in the Maya calendar.

**Palitario:** Medicinal plant used to treat fever and headaches.

**Pegamenteros:** Drug (glue) inhalers.

**Pendejo:** Idiot. stupid

**Pinol :** A traditional dish made with a mixture of toasted corn kernels and other spices used to cook turkey or chicken.

**Pisto:** Cash (Guatemalan slang).

**Plomazos el hijuelachingada:** Gun shots (the jerk tried to shoot me)

**Pom:** Incense

**Popb'al:** A place where the deity is based and sacred events are held. The Aj Pop are people charged with taking care of sacred matters. Popb'al Wuj – the place where the Popol Wuj, sacred book, was kept, read and analyzed.

**Popb'ales:** Council of Elders in the Maya community system.

**Popol Vuh:** The sacred book of the Maya, an epic, written in the K'iche' language of Chichicastenango.

**Q'anaq':** A tree, the leaf of which has a very pleasant aroma and is used to wrap corn tamales.

**Q'anjob'al:** the Maya ethnic group and the language spoken in the region of the protagonist of this book. It is one of the 22 Maya ethnic groups and languages spoken in Guatemala.

**Quetzales:** Guatemalan currency, and also the name for the national bird of Guatemala.

**Quiubole:** What happened? What's up?

**Tabas:** The knee-cap bone of cattle, which is four-sided and is used in a betting game where it is thrown to see how far and on which side it lands.

**Tacuazines:** Opossums

**Tapexco:** A bed frame made of tree branches.

**Temascal:** Traditional Maya steam bath – a kind of sauna used in the mountains.

**Teporocho:** Heavy drinker – someone who lives to drink and drinks to live. In Guatemala “charamilero”

**Tipache:** Pieces of black beeswax which are molded for playing a game.

**Tortillerías:** Local stands or stores where tortillas are made and sold.

**Trece B’aktun:** The thirteenth b’aktun is a symbolic date in the Maya Calendar which refers to the final creation of the human being, the Man of Maize, according to the belief of the Maya.

**Troj, Txoj:** Sacred places (e.g. hills, caves, mountains where ceremonies are held.)

**Tunes, katunes, baktunes, alautunes:** Periods of time in the vigesimal system of the Maya calendar.

**Tusa:** Corn husk, which is used to wrap tamales, in the same way as corn leaves,

**Txab’in:** The name of a deity and one of the twenty days of the Tzolk’in = Maya ceremonial calendar.

**Txoj:** A sacred place for holding religious ceremonies in Maya culture.

**Tzolk’in:** The name of the ritual or sacred Maya calendar, which has 13 months of 20 days each. It is also known as a lunar calendar, because it calculates the approximate time for the moon to travel around the earth.

**Uqeb’ Lamb’at:** 7 Lambat, a day in the Maya calendar.

**Voceadores:** Newspaper street vendors.

**Werwena:** Vervain, a medicinal plant used to treat flu symptoms.

**Wisache:** A person who works as a notary but without credentials.