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B'AB'EL TUQAN

PART ONE

EXODUS FROM YICHKAN

I come from over there.

From a faraway place with no name. I have no name either: no last name, no papers, no identity, no country, no people, no family, no parents, brothers or sisters. They were all left behind on the road at different places and times, as I struggled ahead, when I left here, this place called Yichkan, where everything began.

Destiny's path was laid out for me, from long before my birth. I could not resist the current dragging me from my earliest years toward life's dark tunnel. I have lost everything; everything has been taken away from me. I left my childhood and so-called adolescence buried far from here, buried under the ruins of my life, as weeds are buried between rows of corn. They made sure to blur and erase my image from the face of the earth and from under the face of the sky.

I walk along, dragging the petrified tracks of my ancestors, the Maya, following once more their trail of sorrows, discovering their footprints in the dust of time, on the face of the rock, on the surface of the clay, in the faces of people trying to find again the paths they had trod.

In this account of my memories I would like to tell you of pleasant and beautiful things. I would like to tell you adventure stories of heroes and gods of the mythical and legendary world that still endures from this ancient people. I would like to tell you about the building of fantastic cities, of temples and pyramids with enormous staircases that reach the sky, about imposing monuments and stelae erected in the midst of the green jungle where the *Ajmaya*, my ancestors, lived. I would like to take up the subject of the natural beauty of this part of the world where I was born, and show you pieces of the green landscape among the gourd trees and jade-colored lakes that mirror the volcanos, which for centuries have been belching smoke up into the sky like timeless sentinels. My friends, I

would like to invite you to enjoy the colors of eternal spring, the enigma of beautiful towns encrusted like colored rocks on the mountain slopes, the multicolored flowers and birds, and deer herded by the Lords of the Hills in the bowels of the earth, the towns like Nativity scenes, and the flavor of my traditions like saint's day festivals, marimba music, everything that is typical of my people. Of course I would like to tell you some of our legends, fables, and myths of my world filed away on the tips of the tongues of our oral traditions and spend hours talking to you about them, about the spiritual world that I inherited from the parents of my parents, the grandparents of my grandparents, the Maya people. Of course I would like to tell you about their writing, their art, about their world view and their philosophy, what they thought, and what they were. But this time I cannot.

I must speak of what I have seen, what I have heard and what they have done to me, so that a record will be left behind and its memory continue. I must testify to the attempts of some to exterminate a race, a culture and a people—my people. And my testimony is the truth, a truth denied by others, a truth engraved on my martyred skin, where you can observe the still fresh scars of what they have done to me.

This time I want to speak for myself. I am tired of others, the charlatans, speaking for me. I am tired of others using my name to falsify my image, to distort my true history, to profit from my misfortune and my pain.

"There are no more Maya!" they shout. "They have gone away. They returned to other planets a long time ago." My name has been exploited for the benefit of many.

This time, please allow me to speak, even though this language isn't mine. Nonetheless, I will take it and use it. One day I'll say it in my own Mayan words, when they are valued in this country. But that will be at some later date,

when they have learned my language, when they have learned to listen to me, when human language prevails over the language of weapons that have deafened me during this last *k'atun*. I know they will do it some day, when they understand that we are equal and have the same hopes and dreams.

Ever since the door of my existence opened, I have been fleeing. I have never known rest or tranquillity; I have not known what it is to have a safe and permanent place on the face of the earth.

So much suffering made me insensitive to deprivation. Calluses grew on the soles of my feet like bark on a tree. My sensitive spirit also hardened with the passing of time.

Now I am a product produced for more than thirty years, reflecting a whole history of cruelty. I became an orphan when I was barely beginning to feel the need for a mother, a father and a family. I don't know how old I was then or exactly how old I am now. Now, one *k'atun* later, more than twenty *hab'il*, years, have gone by. The *Iqom Hab'il*, the Year Bearers, carried on their backs this long, heavy stretch of time that has transpired since the time I left that place called Yichkan when I was just a child. These twenty years have been a heavy burden for me also. I have had to carry them with a tumpine of raw leather that left furrows on the forehead of my childhood. It oppressed my intelligence under the darkness of ignorance and left me blind for the rest of my gray days.

Yichkan (Ixcan in Spanish) is a place of profound contrasts, a place where many people come as if to a promised land. Yichkan is where two dimensions of nature converge: *yich*, 'base, root, at the foot of'; *kan*, 'heaven, sky, firmament, infinite space'. It is a compound Q'anjob'al word that means 'where the sky begins' or 'the root of heaven'.

From up there in the highlands, in the land of the Q'anjob'al Maya, one can perceive a long horizon forming a line

stretching between heaven and earth. In the background an immense blue curtain rises, the *kan*, the firmament at whose base lies a green carpet of vegetation. Yichkan, scene of pain and blood. If these lands could talk, if they had a tongue, if they had a voice; they hold so many things in their memory, in their bosoms.

That's where my sad story begins. *Yich syelal* is the way we say it in our language, that is, the origin of pain. In Yichkan are buried the stories of thousands of men and women, of children like me and of the elderly whose voices will never reach the world, because they were silenced and buried by the machine guns and the bombs. Yichkan is scarcely a fragment of this great Maya land that suffered the flagellation and war of ethnocide.

Now, one *k'atun* later, a giant wave of fate has decided to toss me once more, after shipwrecking me on the sea of life, onto the shores, small and large, of Yichkan. I begin to put together the pieces of my life's puzzle, fragments I am picking up here and there like pieces of rags, caught on the thorns along the paths I had trod, or like small pieces of skin scraped off on the sharp rocks along the way. Now, as an adult I have come back to rediscover my first abode, where I left scattered my earliest sufferings, which I am now going to gather in baskets, like a late harvest of my wasted existence.

Twenty years later my life is being repeated in the place where my roots, my seeds, my history and my umbilical cord were planted. A part of me is buried here, the rest is spread over other worlds where fate took me at an early age. The story of my life is not fiction. It is the testimony of a reality, of a living truth like that of thousands of other brothers and sisters of mine, who are now multiplying in the garbage dumps of my fatherland, a fatherland that is not ours. A fatherland is where one feels free and can grow up dreaming of progress,

rather than witnessing that brutal, primitive selfishness where a few hoard the goods of the world for themselves.

Now that I am trying to review the past, many memories come pouring into my brain, like a flood of bad dreams, unfinished fascicles of a big black book, interrupted episodes of a nightmare, patches upon patches of my sad life.

Many of these fragments are blurred, imprecise and unclear because I was so young and they happened so fast. Sometimes they are like surrealistic paintings dimmed in the perspective of a distant nightmare. They are like abstract facts which are difficult to decipher in a recently-acquired alien language, like films behind the rumbling of the far-off roads in my memory.

I can't recall the places or the names exactly, but here are the scars on the skin of my feelings and on my reality. They are like the cattle brands that were burned into my ancestors in a colonial period that still isn't over for me. They are still reflected in the living mirrors of thousands of orphans like me.

I could never dream in color; I always dreamed in black and white. Sometimes this contrast of light and shadow turns shadowy, reflecting the intensity of the experiences I had as a child. My constant companion was fear. It stuck to me and went everywhere with me. In the first years of being conscious of life, when my terror was at its highest, my mind could not take any more. The result was a deep fatigue, and then sleep would come, and I would close my eyes, sometimes still on my mother's back, other times in the solitude of the thatched hut where I was overcome by drowsiness, forced on me by the fear that covered me like a black cloak. My resistance as a human being put this psychological defense mechanism between my consciousness and the horrors of life.

I don't know how long I was away from the scene of

violence in which those first experiences occurred. Sometimes when I awakened, I was in a different place, perhaps after a day or a night away. Darkness is something that has always caused a deep loneliness in my life. It is like a meaningless emptiness in which one is abandoned. It is like a bottomless pit into which people are cast. It is like being lost in thick vegetation, fleeing the specters of the gloomy night. Wait a minute! I think I just heard sounds exactly like those of the time of persecution.

Now I can barely retain the fleeting images in my memory, given my mind's resistance to recreating and reviving these confused passages of my life. Now when I try to recall them, it becomes a most painful effort, not because I've forgotten, but because of an internal unconscious resistance. My whole being is opposed to having to go down that old road again. If I recite my testimony, I am doing it so future generations will not allow this ever to happen again, so that the world of civilized human beings will prevent it from ever being repeated. I do this because I am part of the human race, battered and sacrificed in many parts of the world, victims of the ambitions of a few.

I don't know how old I was, maybe about five, which is before most children have any memory of their past. My mother kept track of the *hab'il*, years, I had lived, but ours are different kinds of years. It was the Maya way of ordering time, the *txolq'in*. They were *hab'il* accompanied by the smoke of the *pom*, or copal, by sacred places, by our counting of time. A series of injustices unfolded before I reached the age of reason. From a very early age, all I knew was the dark side of life. I've seen only one side of life, the dark side.

One of my earliest memories is of an occasion when my mother was carrying me on her back wrapped in a blanket, colored like a rainbow, an *iqb'alej*. There were many people

from the community there. My father had not yet been murdered; he was walking along with us. The adults said we were going on a protest march. It seems we were protesting the abuses and arbitrary actions of the authorities and other powerful people who were against us.

We left at dawn. My father was carrying me because I could not walk as fast as the others. Later we rode in the back of a truck. It is my first memory of riding in a vehicle. I slept for a while on the road, until we came to a large town where many people from other communities had gathered. They were shouting in Spanish and all walking in the same direction. It was a sunny morning. What a way to go to the capital for the first time! I enjoyed it because later on I was riding on my mother's back, wrapped in the blanket and I loved it. At least I had the pleasure of having grown up in contact with her, feeling her warmth, her movements rocking me, and her love, the love that so many children don't get from their mothers. Now I know that many children are abandoned at a very early age and never have the opportunity to get from their mothers what I got from mine. My heart beat next to hers, as she transmitted her warmth to me. Whenever she took a short break from her many chores, she would squat in a corner to give me the food I needed, her very life. As I suckled, she would caress my head. How good it felt! She talked and sang to me in the language I learned from her, tunes like this that remain engraved on my memory:

*Kitzini, tzinini, tzinini, tzinin,
Kitzini, tzinini, tzinini, tzinin.*

She repeated it over and over in different tonalities along little musical paths with their ups and downs, that would make me drowsy until I fell asleep on her lap. It was a language full of a love that of course has no translation. It is just kept in the heart to be pondered in lonely moments. Now that she is no

longer by my side, I feel a double loneliness, that one endures with the tears of the soul.

That morning she and I went out into the streets of the city under the scorching rays of the great sun that made our surroundings gleam and burned me through the rags I was wrapped in. Something happened then that left one of the first scars on my existence. Perhaps that is the early experience I remember most clearly.

My mother was barefoot, poor thing, and was jumping all around to avoid the stones and holes in the road over which we had to travel. We never had enough money to buy sandals. We were always poor, according to what I heard, sitting around the hearth in our hut.

So many people! Never had I seen so many people. Where were we going? I overheard that the people were marching to protest abuses against us peasants. They were taking advantage of a right they believed was guaranteed by something called a law. We kept walking through the streets of the city, until we reached a great square surrounded by large buildings, one of which appeared to be the seat of government. The people wanted to express their dissatisfaction with the representatives of the people, whom the people themselves had put in power. But at that moment we saw a large number of men descending upon us. They wore uniforms and were armed with guns, night sticks and riot shields. Their faces manifested hate and fury. They were the forces of violence coming at us. They were the feet, the hands and the faces of that government turned against us, its own people. They immediately attacked the people, people with bare hands, simple hands like those of my mother, that knew only how to work and make tortillas so we could eat. All the people carried was their words and their voices to protest those abuses. In a moment everyone was running away, crying and

moaning under the blows the uniformed men were unleashing against them. I was on my mother's back as she ran carrying me; I closed my eyes. I cling to my mother's *guipil* and start to shout as loudly as I can so they would stop hitting us, but to no avail. My mother struggled to keep running, but got tangled up in her *corte*, her wraparound skirt, and stumbled against a loose brick and fell onto the burning pavement, which I could feel on my face. That was when they caught up with us and began to club us from all sides. One of the blows landed on my head and knocked off my little red cap. Then the sun went out and I knew nothing more.

I don't know how much time went by, nor was I aware of how we managed to get back to our village and our little house. That little red cap was the work of her hands; she had woven it and it was still new. She had just put it on for me to go to town. Some of the men of our community were jailed, as a result of accusations by the authorities.

A little later (I don't know whether it was days or weeks, because back then I didn't know how to count the *xajaw* (the moons), some men came to our home. There were five of them and they were armed.

"Does that Communist so-and-so live here?"

"Yes, sir, he lives here."

"Where's the son of a bitch? We've come to kill him."

"He went to town."

"When's he coming back?"

"We don't know; sometimes he doesn't come back until late."

"Tell him we gotta find him."

"Hey, guys, this is one seed we can't let grow. He's yours, Mulato."

Bang! bang! bang!

"Oh, my God! My baby, my baby!"



My mother was bent over my twelve-year old brother's body, which was bathed in blood, stretched out in the corner next to the wattle-and-daub wall in a sort of hallway. I let out some more hefty screams, as strongly as my lungs would allow me, but my mother came to quiet me, fearing I might suffer the same fate. It was the only resource I had: my voice, my throat; but sometimes I wasn't allowed to use it. I wished I were an adult so I could defend my brother or have the power of God to cover the mouths of the guns that were spitting out the evil that was snuffing out the lives of defenseless people. It was the first time I saw death, the messengers of death, the *Ajkanom*, the Lords of Death, whose activity is death.

We were left alone, and others kept to themselves, for all were afraid of visiting the bereaved survivors, lest they be denounced to the military base commander. Nobody dared console the family members publicly for fear of being considered accomplices. The neighbors visited us at night, under cover of darkness, to boost my mother's spirits, for she was the only one who was still with us.

The rivers of pain in all of us emptied out upon her. I don't know how she endured such suffering, how she patiently absorbed our fears and pain. She feigned a sense of security so we would not suspect all the disastrous effects of those dangers.

It was late that night when my father came home. He had learned of my brother's death and was afraid to approach the hut because he thought the men might be waiting there for him. One of my uncles went to get him, and he came home. He didn't talk; he just cried over the corpse of my brother. I was standing there trembling, whether from cold or fear, I don't know. We had a wake but few people came. They were afraid. A rustic coffin made of four pine boards had been prepared. They didn't paint it as was the custom, as there was

no paint in town.

They put two arches of cypress branches over the body, and pine needles and some wild flowers on the ground; on top of them was a peeling pewter plate where people could put their offerings, according to custom. That same night four wakes were being held in the community, all for the same reason. In one of the houses they had killed a brother and sister.

Everyone was in despair. Four candles were burning around my brother's lifeless body. I saw the flames flicker in the part that was burning. I don't know why that fire was there, why it existed and gave off light. I drew near to touch the flame, which had no body and no substance, but there it was, burning and giving off light. Someone had lit it and someone can put it out. But it was light, it was what was lighting up the surroundings; it was good. All at once I began to think that must be what life was like. A short while ago, my brother had played with me; he had given me an orange that he had brought down from the hills where he was working, and we had talked. Now he was a corpse, lying there. He didn't hear me, he didn't talk to me, nor could he move, because others had snuffed out his life. They had left me without my brother, in an instant they had taken him away from me. I saw how he fell and couldn't move of his own free will. Blood flowed from the wounds they had inflicted on him, little rivers that ebbed out taking with them his very life.

The next day four people picked him up and took him away forever. At the door of our little hut I told him "*Chil hab'a*," "take care". They walked toward the setting sun, and we were left alone with my mother. She sat grieving, huddled down in a dark corner, clutching the memory of my brother to her heart with her two powerless hands.

After what had happened, my father no longer slept at



home. Almost every night he would go sleep in a different place, so that he would not be captured by the men. Sometimes he would go to a little lean-to that we had up in the hills, where we could take shelter from the rain when we were working up there. Sometimes he would take a blanket, and crawl in among some rocks under the trees, where he said he spent sleepless nights because the wild animals would not leave him alone; they tried to attack him, and he had to defend himself with his machete.

Finally one morning they came to wait for him in front of our house. They came before dawn and shut us all in, not allowing us to leave. Then they made my mother feed them; there were several of them. When the sun came up, my dad came home with his blanket over his shoulder. I was looking at him through a crack in the wattle-and-daub wall, or *b'itz'ab*. When he realized they were there waiting for him, he ran out into the corn field, but they caught him. They tied him up and brought him back to the house.

"So you're coming back from working all night, you bastard!" Wham!

"Where are your friends, your comrades? Speak up!" Wham!

"I was running away from you; that's why I sleep way up there."

"You're teaching Communism, because you catechists are Communists, you wretched bunch." Wham, bang, whack!

I covered my ears and closed my eyes so I wouldn't hear or see how many times they struck my father with the butts of their rifles or their bayonets. I drew back from the crack from where I could see, because it hurt me too much. I felt as if each blow was an electric shock flowing to the tips of my fingers and toes. My body recoiled with each blow as I saw blood flowing down my father's face. His clothes were all

splattered with red. They kicked him as he thrashed around on the ground, his hair matted with blood, dirt and mud. He screamed, crying for help, but nobody dared to help him. When the men of the community found out what was happening they went and hid far away.

I saw his sad silhouette disappearing at the end of the path that led into the corn field. It was a straight path, a long one, that became smaller and smaller. Again and again he would disappear over the little hills. The blurred figure of my father was getting smaller and smaller as it faded in the mist of the gray morning. In the distance the smoke from the village formed a bluish screen. No matter how much I rubbed my eyes, I had more and more difficulty seeing him as he got farther away, until he was gone forever, disappearing like a memory, like a sad dream. The last thing I remember is when they were dragging him like a tree trunk up into the mountains. I run out into the yard and pick up his straw hat that had fallen to the ground. My mother took it and pressed it against her chest as if it were part of him. Then we went in and put it away, our only remembrance of him.

What I found out later from my mother, the last thing she told me before she died, was that they found my father's body hanging from a tree branch in the mountains. It was no longer whole; it was a skeleton picked over by the vultures. That was several days after they had taken him away.

So many of these black stories could be written about that painful time. Every corner of Yichkan, every turn of the roads of Yichkan, every corner of the bleeding fatherland, every spot was a silent witness to massacres and tortures. The land, the face of the earth was splattered with the blood of her children. The rivers became the veins of the community in which the blood of the people flowed toward the sea of the unknown. It was like cutting down trees in a great forest. The

mountains echoed with the cries and the moans of the victims. Only God knows how much cruelty, how much inhuman creativity to devise tortures, how much brutality, lurks in the hearts of men. The communities were being killed off, their ashes strewn over the gloomy countryside. According to the statistics available to us today, more than four hundred villages were wiped off the face of the earth, turned into ashes carried along by the wind. People were attacked by both sides; if the army came to our villages, one or two days later the *ajxolagte*, those who live in the forest, or guerrillas, would show up and kill, or ask for food and take the men away forcibly. When the army found out the guerrillas had been in a village, they would come back and exterminate entire towns. We just lifted our prayers to God, to the Lord of the Hill, to the spirits of our dear departed and to the deities to help and protect us against our persecutors. There was nothing else to be done.

The few of us left in the community, especially the adults, arrived at a consensus of last resort. They held a meeting of the elders, as is our custom. The only alternative was risky, but we had to play our last card. We had to flee, to get out of there and leave everything behind: our homes, our lands, our animals, and above all contact with the earth, Mother Earth where we had been born. What difference did it make, if we were losing our very lives? That is hard, for it is like pulling out a corn plant and replanting it in a different climate, in some faraway place. The adults knew that a lot of people were starting to cross over to the Other Country, to exile, but we had no idea where that was. We children did not participate in the arrangements; the adults decided all that in secret. I overheard the adults say they were being careful so the commissioner would not find out and report them. Almost the entire community prepared to leave, but by this time there were few people left, and they were mostly women and

children. They discussed the date of departure. People were asked not to carry heavy loads or to take along sick or very old people. They asked that they be left in the care of relatives or neighbors in nearby communities. My mother told me this later when we were on the road.

We really didn't need all that much time to prepare. What was there to get ready, if we lacked the most indispensable things? The violence had reduced us to the most abject poverty: no money, no work, no harvest, no health, and no freedom of movement to go and work in other places as we used to do. We lacked the right to spend our time as we pleased, since we had to serve in the so-called "voluntary" Civil Defense Patrols, in each village, in each neighborhood and municipality, with no peace and in constant anxiety.

That afternoon we spent in the utmost secrecy. My mother seemed more tired than ever. It seemed to me that her worries had drained the last of her remaining strength.

I knew my mother. I could judge her state of mind by looking into her eyes, even though all afternoon she was avoiding my questions.

"Mother, do you have another headache?"

"No, my son."

"Mother, shall I help you bring in some firewood?"

"Later, my son."

"Mother, aren't you going to eat? The rooster already crowed."

"No, my son, I'm not hungry."

I should make it clear that all verbal communication I carried on with my people was in my native language, Q'anjob'al Maya. That's why you will find words and constructions reflecting the style and thought patterns of my language in this narrative.

I decided not to ask my mother any more questions. She

wasn't talking and didn't want to talk. Now things were getting worse, because my mother's attitude revealed a critical situation. How strange, because the more wood there was, the better it was for her. She had never before told me that there was enough wood, and now she was telling me "later." That was very significant. Why not now? That afternoon she asked me to go with her on an errand.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw her go to a corner of the hut, or *chi'olan* as we call it in our language. She got out some old coins that she had hidden in the bottom of her smoke-blackened shoulder bag. Then she walked to different parts of the house looking up as if she had lost something. It was as if she was studying the parts of the house: the crossbeam, the rafters, the poles, the uprights, the walls. Sometimes she would speak to the various parts of the house, saying a *txaj*, a prayer, and filling the whole place with copal smoke with her censer, transforming them into animate beings that heard her prayer, but this time it was different. It was like a silent inspection. Her glance was fleeing through the clarity of the little door into the infinite blue of the evening. Then she breathed deeply and put her hand to her chest. I was worried, as there was no other adult at home, and maybe she was sick or suffering from some pain she didn't want to tell me about. And if something happened to her, what would I do? I was all alone with her. My head was full of all sorts of ideas.

"Mother, why don't we go visit Aunt Antil?"

"No, my son. We're going to visit some other people, maybe for the last time. We'll ask them to help us. I would like you to go say good-bye to your *k'exel*, your namesake, so that he may bless you."

My *k'exel*, how strange! She must have meant my grandfather, who is buried in the cemetery. I knew something about having the same name as he, that he was my *k'exel*,

and I was very happy about that. I don't think I ever knew him when he was alive; I don't remember his face. Maybe he's one of those ancestors who appear in dreams and pat my head when I greet them. There were some old white-haired men who visited me in dreams and took me to wonderful places.

We stopped at a store on the way to the cemetery. I was going to ask where we were going, but my suspicions were being confirmed. I liked to anticipate what was going to happen, and guess the thoughts of adults, especially my mother's. That's why many times she told me that when I became an adult I might become a diviner or *ajixum*. It seems that this time there wasn't enough money for candy. I always got at least one piece of candy when we visited a store.

"*Jun kantela lajuneb', chikay.*"

"Hinye."

"*Chil hab'a.*"

(A ten-cent candle, ma'am. All right. Take care.)

There definitely wasn't going to be any candy for me. In such cases it does no good to ask because one doesn't know if there is any money or not. Adults know what they're doing. Your parents are never going to deny you something for no good reason. Sometimes it just can't be done, and you have to accept it. When she looked for her money, all my mother had found was a few old rusty coins. What can you do? I realized that for some weeks now my mother hadn't had any money to spend and so she hadn't gone shopping on market day. Ever since the deaths of my father and brother, there was no one to give her money. She ended up selling all her chickens, her pigs and some of her personal belongings like some of her remaining wraparound skirts and blouses in order to buy corn, the main staple of our diet.

"Mother, today there's no *Komam Ora*, Day Lord," I tell

her.

"Every day has its *Komam*, its Lord," she replies.

In the cemetery there was a heavy silence, like on a moonless night. Maybe it was the silence of the dead. She lit the candle, made a few motions and signs over her face with it, then bent over to kiss the ground. She motioned to me to kneel beside her. I did this with a respectful attitude. A cold wind was blowing, moving the branches of the tall cypresses that surrounded the place. She began to cry, which frightened me very much. She began to speak to my grandparents, for both of them were buried in the same place, under some mounds.

"*Ti chi hul walkan hintoj ayex*, I have come to say goodbye to you."

But this formula for leave-taking is rarely used. That's what you say when you are going away forever, when there will be no return. She went on:

Mamin, I'm taking your *k'exel* away (she continued in Q'anjob'al, indicating she was taking away his namesake). I have come to ask for your protection so that you will watch over us on the way, and will perform your miracles so there will be no injuries, fractures, or pain going up and down the paths. May our enemy, our persecutor, become confused and lost among the different paths, be set upon the wrong paths, so he won't catch up with us and harm us. We're going to leave our little hut, the sacred place where you came to rest, to live in this *yib'an q'inal* world, that same place where you used to spend time, where your eyes saw the brightness of the world, your ears heard the sounds of the world, where maybe you enjoyed yourself, maybe you suffered, we don't know. We are leaving our homestead, which you left us as a foundation, as our root

so that we would flourish with our sprouts, with our branches, which are our children. You know the reasons, you see the causes, you hear the roar of death that lies in wait for us day after day, night after night. And so now please forgive us for leaving you in the most absolute solitude of this cemetery where we used to bring you your little candles, your little flowers, your joys on the sacred days of our parents.

So please forgive us, make your heart big for us; your eyes can see, your ears can hear. If we're going, it's not because we want to; it's not to disobey our fathers, the Lords of the Days. It is to save our lives and those of our defenseless little children. Some day we will be together with you again in the other *kamb'al*, beyond death, some day we will see each other again, with your *pixan* there in the other *yib'an q'inal* where you reside today. We don't know by what paths or in what directions, through what places we will have to go in order to ask for shelter like *meb'ich*, poor orphans without father or mother. We do not know whether we will get there or be left behind on the roads of *Tioxh*, God, on the paths where we will fight to save our lives. Only the Ajaw, only you can exercise your power and give us your blessing that we might find good people in some part of the world, compassionate people that will take us in, that will allow us to live, to exist upon Mother Earth.

We ask this of you who are already over there: Katal Anton, Lukaxh Pelhan, Torol Wisen, Main Elhan, Ewul Kuin, Xhepel Ixhtup, Tumaxh Mekel, Lotaxh Kaxhin ... She recited the list of our dead ancestors.

You, our fathers, our mothers, our roots from which we have come, please come together now in counsel, to deliberate about our lives, our destiny on Mother Earth

under the *yib'an q'inal*. May this journey, this *b'e kalab'* that we are about to undertake, have a happy ending, a less painful ending for our souls, for our bodies. We have had enough suffering, enough pain. You must realize how much we poor people have suffered ever since childhood. Why should our little children have to witness all kinds of atrocities at such a tender age?

Perform your miracle, you who are close to the Heart of Heaven and the Heart of Earth, pray for us. As you know, it's not like other times, now all I can bring you is this *k'itan kametela*, this liquid candle. But it's not on account of stinginess or unwillingness, you well know that we have nothing; we lack everything.

At the end of her prayer my mother tearfully asked our ancestors, our whole family tree, all of them, to give us their blessing:

"*Txajoneqtaq*, bless us," she said. "Bless this poor child who knows nothing but suffering. It is not fair for him to suffer a life of pain," she said on my behalf.

The sun disappeared once more behind the mountains of Yichkan. Who knows if tomorrow will dawn for us? Who knows how many people in this community or others will not see the light of a new day on that uncertain tomorrow. At her insistence, I intoned "*Txajineqteg*, bless me."

They were left alone, as we went back to our little home that we would leave that very night. Night was falling like a soft rain over the village.

UP IN FLAMES

The night we went to bid farewell to the grandparents was the night of the planned exodus. The people knew what time they had to gather in the big ditches just outside the village. My mother knew too. We had to arrive one by one so as not to arouse any suspicion on the part of the few who were remaining behind, among them the commissioner who watched the movements of the community. Our little hut was a simple shelter against the elements—wind, water, sun—but it was our home, the place where I had spent the first years of my life. I slept there, I played there, I ate there. There the root of my existence had been planted. I had become very fond of that part of the world, my world. I didn't want to leave it. I resisted the idea that I had to go far away from it; I could not imagine living in any other place. The walls were made of cane and mud, with a thatched roof and a dirt floor; that's all it was. I knew every nook and cranny where my life as a child had unfolded: a corner to sleep, the place I kept my toys, our eating area, the yard where I spent hours playing in the dirt. And now I had to leave it all behind. My mother, my sister and I closed up the house, tying a rope to a big nail on the board that served as a door. That's what we did whenever we went out to do errands or when we went to town. The dog was curled up near the door in a hole in the ground, guarding the house. This time he was being left alone for good. Who knows what was going to happen to him? His name was *B'alam*, Jaguar. We left him some tortillas in a dish and some water to drink.

We took a few things: a sack on my mother's head, my sister on her back and a bag in one hand. I carried my shoulder bag, my straw hat and a stick to guide my way down the little path that was disappearing in the darkness. We had to throw

stones at the dog so he wouldn't follow us. We quickly joined the rest of the people on the outskirts of the community, beyond the last houses.

But somebody must have betrayed us, for some men soon arrived at the village. The dogs that had stayed behind as faithful guardians soon began a war of barking in their own language at the strangers, something the people did not dare to do. Later on, huddled down in the ditches, we observed the first light in that scene with the black night as a background. Little by little the intensity increased, and spread until the fire lit up the whole area as far as we could see. The silhouettes of the actors became giants before our very eyes. They were silhouettes with helmets and boots moving against the backdrop of the night dyed red like blood. These are memories that cannot be erased from our young minds. They were the figures of actors that carried those death-spitting sticks. They were thirsty for blood, like those gigantic tongues of fire that rose up into the heights, hungry for more fuel so they could devour everything.

Never in my short life had I seen such huge flames; their color ranged from a light, almost white orange, to a reddish purple that was diluted in the blue and brown that merged into the blackness of the night. The fire was making a great crackling sound as it consumed the wood and dry palm. The odor of the smoke carried by the wind reached our nostrils; it was strong and heavy on account of the *sib'ag*, the soot from the burning houses. We were sickened by the smell of burning flesh. My eyes bulged out of their sockets witnessing such a spectacle. The hut! My toys that I left in the old basket in the corner, my only piece of furniture! I suddenly felt the impulse to run back and rescue my toys that were being consumed by the fire. Like all children, I had become very fond of them. If it were not for the fact that my mother, guessing my intentions,

grabbed me, I would certainly have gone back.

We stayed quite a while in that hiding place while the fire gradually died down, though it still illuminated the area. But then we saw that they were coming out looking for us in all directions. We could see their flashlights moving all around. The group decided to take off in a direction different from that originally planned, where there was hardly a path.

As I found out later, under the normal conditions we were expecting, we would have begun to walk at nightfall, because at that time nobody would have noticed our absence. Usually when it began to get dark, people would bolt their flimsy doors, and nobody left on errands or to go visiting. In those far away corners of our country, there was a virtual state of siege. But that wasn't why our departure didn't go as planned; it was on account of that other incident that we were delayed. It is indeed true that we peasants have a certain ability to walk in the darkness of night, but under these conditions it was much more difficult, especially for us children. It was a moonless night; it was a journey without paths, among twisted tree roots and vines hanging from the trees, through underbrush that scratched our faces, with thistle and nettle where our blind hands groped their way along in the darkness, through the mud and among sharp rocks. It was flight with our enemies stepping on our very heels.

Well, we left at the time set by our guides. The group was made up of perhaps sixty or more people. I heard them say there were about *oxk'al*, that is, three score of us, or three bundles of twenty. That's how our system of counting works, by twenties. This is the way our parents' parents used to count. There were more women and children than men; there were not many men left in the community.

Among those who were leading the way and providing advice were the older men and women. I remember one

couple, Xhuxhep the wife and Kuin the husband, their heads crowned with white like the clouds that come down over the mountains. Their words were regarded as very important by the people. He was one of our oracles, that is, an *ajixum*, and the people believed in his guidance and predictions. At our most critical moments they always walked quietly among the people giving advice as to what to do in any given circumstance. We had a great deal of respect for them. On account of their age they had great difficulty walking; they grasped their walking sticks, especially in the dark of night, which was when we had to travel in order to avoid being seen. Their guidance was based on the counting of the days according to our grandfathers and grandmothers. They kept count with great care to transmit it to the younger generations, and this count was used in all of life's activities.

So although the day for our departure had been set in a hurried fashion, it came under the protection of the sacred days we call *Heb' Komam Ora*, that is, our Fathers the Sacred Days. From an early age I was instructed in this system of spiritual life, which is now one of the great losses I feel I have suffered as a result of the problems I had to face during those years of my life. How I regret having lost the practice of something that was taught to me in the bosom of the family and the community. *Heb' Komam Ora* are the group of spiritual beings that have always controlled the system of life of humans and other beings in the Maya world throughout time, from a single day to eternity, always in the cyclical form of life and death, day and night, past and present, inside and out, up and down, in a system where each element complements the other, all under the watchful eye of the Ajaw, the Creators and Formers, that is *Heb' Yib'an Q'inal*, the Heart of Heaven and the Heart of Earth.

Whenever my grandparents mentioned the name of the

Supreme Ajaw, they would trace a circle in the air with their right hands, embracing the totality of the universe. This constitutes the greatest concept in the life of the Maya. We kneel before Him, our heads bowed down to the ground; we lift up the smoke of our offerings and our words to Him, because He is the Ajaw, the essence of the world, the one who supports the pillars upon which the world and the universe rest, and from whom the other deities who control the flow of time and the days branch off. They are the *Mam Ora*, the intermediaries between the Great Spirit, humans and things. They carry the names of the elements which exist in nature like *Iq' air*, *Imox Earth*, *Tz'ikin birds*, *Chej deer* and *Kixkab' earthquakes*, all of them deified. I no longer remember the meanings of all of them, because once in exile, in school, they taught me a different calendar for counting the days, a calendar that lacks any meaning for us: a simple and sterile counting of days, months and years.

As a child I learned that the Great Spirit, that is, the Heart of Heaven and the Heart of Earth is the nucleus of the universe, just like the heart is the central organ that gives life to humans. And since the Ajaw is also the one who grants existence to everything, especially to *winaq*, humans, which are particles of Him, that's why we call Him *Komam*, Our Father. The prefix *ko* opens for us the doors to possession of Father Ajaw, that is, to integrate part of His nature. Deep inside I don't feel so much like an orphan, that is, completely without parents, since *Komam* lets me feel that I am the son of the greatest Father that exists in all of the *yib'an q'inal*, or universe. Not only does He make us participants in His very nature, but also owners of His wealth and users of the values which come from Him. And so the actions of *winaq*, people, are controlled by Ajaw's plan. Their actions are predetermined upon the table of *q'inal*, time, which is manifest in the basic unit of time, the

k'u or day. Each *k'u* has its name in the totality of time, which is well identified throughout all eternity by means of the numbers which give it different levels of importance. These numerals run from one to thirteen, sacred numbers within the culture. They originate from the thirteen scores of days of the gestation of a human being. In the calendar they taught me in school later on, instead of the Lords there appear names of saints. But the saints do not represent the Maya. There are no Maya saints, because we poor and indigenous people, as we are identified, cannot have saints or martyrs, although our lives are a constant martyrdom.

The saints arrived along with the invaders of our lands and the murderers of our ancestors. Those saints were the symbols of the battle and the victory which accompanied the soldiers who took everything from us. There are many images of saints adorning colonial churches in all the invaded countries, portrayed on horseback with swords in their hands. They are saints of violence and pillaging that paved the way for the colonial system, because the reverend fathers taught our fathers to venerate them as very important divine beings who came in the name of God, just like those invaders who also carried swords to kill our ancestors. They had to accept the will of God with resignation and humility. Thus the invasion of our lands and plundering of our wealth was accepted in the name of God and those saints that made possible the miracle of the "Conquest."

I was born on the day *Lajun K'ixkab'*, 10 Earthquake. According to tradition, this should be my name. But because of the process we have suffered, the Spanish brought new saints' names; this is just a part of what they imposed on us. So our names are as in a void. They do not fulfill our need for identity because we do not know their origins, nor the history or meaning of our names. What's more, it is like betraying

our authenticity and cultural heritage, because we carry a seal, showing that we were invaded, that is, the symbols which were utilized to assure our defeat. That's what the elders of the community tell me. They don't stop speaking our language, nor do they abandon their traditional dress, and above all they preserve the values of our ancestors, which is what makes us different from other people.

During my childhood I also learned that the chronological order of the sacred days predetermines the fate of every individual on the face of the earth. From the time I was a child, I learned the names of the twenty Lords. Their complicated functioning is not within the grasp of ordinary people like me; rather it is destined to be managed by the *manin*, the *ajixum* or oracles. They control the life of the community and offer guidance as to what should be done in different events and situations.

The grandparents, and I am referring to our ancestors in general, set the day and time that the group should leave Yichkan for exile. It had to be soon, for there was a lot of danger for the people. But we were under the protection of one of the favorable Lords; there are other Lords who by their very nature exercise negative influences. This cultural inheritance was left to us by the grandparents of our grandparents, which is how we refer to our Maya ancestors.

From this point on, in order to record our calvary during the days that we walked into exile, I shall mention the name of each day in chronological order, from the time we left until the day we arrive at our destination. I don't know how many days it will take, I don't know if we will reach our goal or die along the way. When I write now a long time afterwards, I frequently do so in the present tense, because it is as if I were seeing everything all over again. That's the way we talk in Q'anjob'al.



WAXAQ LAMB'AT
8 LAMB'AT

The day we had to leave was the day we witnessed the burning of our village. It was also the day on which the old people we had left behind died. It was night time, and we had foreseen that misfortune could affect us at any moment, and it did that very night. People were coming and telling and foretelling: today they burned such and such a village, today they massacred such and such a community; today they took away so many people from such and such a village; that's what we were hearing. We were like little chicks just waiting for the moment the hawk would swoop down on us. According to what I found out later, the day of departure had been decided by those old people who calculated the *Oras*. Because *Lamb'at* is one of the Year Bearers, and is good for helping those who are in any kind of danger; he is also hostile to his adversaries, and has the power to protect those who seek refuge in him.

The eighth degree in the ascending order makes his influence favorable, because the numbers four, eight and twelve are associated with the cabalistic numbers on the Maya scale, which bring a high level of benefits. The achievement of the objectives before the Lords of the *txolq'in* depended greatly on the date of departure, because from here on, the rest of the trip would continue without the possibility of modifying it. It would be a question of persevering in the prayers and offerings so they, the Lords, would see us through the danger. But one of the values one learns as a child is to

trust in the word of Ajaw as the Supreme Being who controls the destiny of every human being, moves the order of the universe as a great thought, grants, maintains, and feeds the life of all beings. Ajaw is a good and powerful being, and His will is always for good.

In other Mayan linguistic communities He is known by different names, such as *Tz'uulq'a* among the Q'eqchi'. The period of one *k'u*, or day included under the protection of a Lord is a complete day which begins and ends at dawn, around the second or third crowing of the rooster. Our ancestors probably had much more exact control over this time. So when we started on the journey around ten o'clock that night, it still corresponded to the time under the control of Eight *Lamb'at*. The *k'u* is the basic unit of Maya time.

That first night was not all that difficult. The guides knew some paths through the underbrush where we could walk fairly easily. We were still within our area and not far from our community. At first our strength held up under the weight of our small burdens. They were bags of pitiful belongings carried on our backs. There was nothing of value: old rags, corn in various forms, old ponchos, diapers for the babies, gourds full of water.

Now when I look at an endless row of ants that one cannot tell whether they are coming or going, under their enormous burdens: dry leaves, food, their eggs and larvae and other things they carry on their backs, I remember going down narrow paths through the thickets of the mountains. We looked like ghosts carrying our burdens in the dead of night. Many of us had no sense of where we were going. Each guide carried an unsheathed machete in his right hand, and in the other a long pole which served as a walking stick. In the middle were women, children and those elderly people who were able to come with us, or at least were trying to come with us, for

some of them no longer had the strength to walk. Some preferred to stay behind and wait for death in the shelter of their little huts, like frail shadows of isolated weakness in the mountain. Our mothers were quieting us constantly, especially those smaller than I. We were not allowed to make any noise at all, and if a child started to cry or cough, they would say to them: "*Hog el pum!* It's going to go boom!", meaning that if we made any noise, exploding bombs would come, which from our earliest years was a horrible terror. Another method was gagging the children securely with rags. Nursing infants usually were put to the breast, more to keep them quiet than to nurse them. In those first few hours we had to take every precaution, because our persecutors well knew that those who had been incinerated under the straw roofs in the center of the village were not all the people who lived there. They were looking for those of us who had escaped. They didn't like that. They would be looking for us in neighboring areas where they had also put defenseless villagers to the torch, as we could tell from the reflection of the flames that we could see up in the clouds as well as from the sounds of bombing that could be heard from afar.

The little children like me could not keep up with the adults, and so the parents soon took charge of their children's little bags. Since I didn't have a father to help me, I continued carrying my shoulder bag containing my little sister's diapers and some food. I was carrying a change of clothes more ragged than the ones I was wearing. My mother couldn't help me with that; the poor woman had all she could do to cope with the big bag of old things on her head and my little sister hanging onto her neck. At times I felt I couldn't go on, for my burden kept getting heavier and heavier. Sometimes I put the handle of the shoulder bag on my head, other times over my shoulder. The guides were constantly telling us "*Yelk'ulal*,

hurry up, hurry up! If they find us, it will be your fault."

By now we were crying; we felt that what was being asked of us was completely beyond our capabilities. But we had to go on because we could not go back; that would certainly mean our premature death. I began to lag farther and farther behind the group, with an elderly woman who couldn't walk because of her advanced age and a persistent cough. The rest kept walking in the darkness, holding hands or clinging to a rope held by the group to maintain contact in the midst of that darkness. The woman was telling me, "*Asi', chwal*, go on, my child, follow the people; otherwise, you're going to get lost in the woods; you don't know the way. I really can't go on, and besides, I'm an old woman. I've already lived many *xajaw*, moons. Why should I want more life like this? I'm just in the way. Go on, leave me, I'll rest here. Some wild animal will take care of me. But you're a child who is just beginning to live. You must fight to the end and get to the other side and save your life," she said to me.

"*jK'amaq!*, no!" I answered her, "let's walk; hold on to my shoulder bag, we have to catch up with the others."

"*Asi'*, go on" she insisted.

I was crying but the tears stuck in my throat, and made no sound; we had already learned to cry silently. The darkness of the night and the danger were hands that cut off our hearing, seeing, feeling, hands that came from the depths of our sorrow.

As I got farther and farther away from her, I felt the loneliness of that gloomy world more and more, as if I were in a hermetically sealed blackened pot. I was asphyxiated by the compactness of the darkness. At one point I refused to go on, and I returned to the old woman's side, surprised by abandonment in that floating world of blackness, but she scolded me in no uncertain terms and ordered me to go on and follow the same direction as the others. Before I could

obey her, as I should an authority figure, she called to me. She gave me something she was carrying tightly in her hand. It was a "deer's eye", a seed she had kept for a long time, an amulet, and she said to me:

"Kneel down, *chwal*!"

And I knelt down on the rocks. She put her two veiny hands on my head; then I kissed her hands as is our custom with the elderly. She gave me her blessing in our language, and I responded:

"*Tiwal chach kan xin, chikay*," that is, "So you'll stay behind, grandmother; take care and may Ajaw protect you," I then went back toward the unknown as she remained seated next to a rock wrapped in the *aq'b'al*, the night.

In the meantime my mother had noticed that I was not with the group and began to seek help from the men, begging them with clasped hands to stop so she could go back and look for me. They ignored her, arguing that any waste of time would mean danger for the rest of the group. When she realized they were paying no attention to her, she threatened to scream, not caring about the danger that represented, because her mother's love was greater than any danger, even at the cost of her own life. The men agreed to stop the march so that two young men could go looking for me. They finally found me all tangled in some thorny branches at the edge of the ravine where my shoulder bag had fallen with all my belongings. I begged them to go back for the old woman. One of the young men went off in that direction, while I went ahead with the other one, who was pulling me by the arm. We never found out what happened to those two, though we waited for them for a long time. Some people think the young man deserted and possibly went back to the village.

We had been walking all night. Most of us children could not stay awake. Some parents carried their sleeping children

in their arms or on their shoulders. I walked along, now carrying nothing, my eyes closed like a sleepwalker, holding on to the rope, unwittingly carried along by the people. In the wee hours the elderly and some women argued, on behalf of those of us who could no longer walk, for stopping a few hours while we regained some of our strength. There was a big argument about this, because some wanted to continue on, but some of us could no longer go on. Finally it was decided that we would look for a safer place in the brush to await the dawn, so people could rest. That was one of the most intelligent and satisfactory agreements I remember witnessing; otherwise I don't know what we would have done that night. Those who were familiar with the place recommended going down into a ravine where there was a suitable hiding place. Sentinels were selected from among the adult men, to be on duty in shifts for the rest of the night. They would sound the alarm if there was any danger, and we also agreed on what to do in such cases.

Several people hurt themselves sliding down the steep sides of the ravine, and some people lost their belongings. Once we were settled there, each family found a place to rest under the trees, under that dome of the firmament with its infinity of lights shining in the sky. It was a black sky blanketing all the fearful people. As I was beginning to close my eyes, I saw those thousands of white points, stars that peered between the leaves. I felt so many other points on my body that throbbed with pain and fatigue. And so I lay stretched out on the ground, looking up at the sky. My head rested on my mother's knees as she nursed my little sister, who pulled at the milkless breasts.



B'ALON MULU'
9 MULU'

The old *ajixaj*, or spiritual leader, was a distant relative of my late father. I believe that his influence within the group helped me to survive the conditions of the journey. Whenever this man, named Kuin, considered it safe to do so, he would tell us about, or rather would instruct us in, our traditions, especially the children and young people who did not know much about such things. This activity also served as a distraction, so we did not feel the fatigue as much. He made our spirits joyful, because he would tell us a series of anecdotes, legends and stories of our past as a people. But there were also things he told us that were related to our suffering, about the sad history we Maya have been dragging along for more than twenty-five *k'atun*. It began when the first foreigners came to these lands of our ancestors. These traditions have been transmitted from generation to generation. Listening to him, the road did not seem so painful, or perhaps our imagination made us see the things that the *ajixaj* was telling us about, like the creation of our grandfathers and grandmothers; the appearance of Mother Corn; the changing of men into monkeys; the creation of the Lords of the Days that we now worship, and who guide us in all we do. He told us about when humans were created from clay, then a generation of wooden humans and finally the people of corn, as well as hope for a new era of peace and light in the future according to the prophecies of our elders. They were lessons



about our true history.

Once the guides scolded us when, without intending to, we laughed out loud at a racy anecdote the old man was telling us. At that very moment we heard some noises near where we were walking. The *ajixaj* continued to instruct us in a low voice, telling us about the fate of the *nawal* or *pixan*, that is, the souls of people who die, which go to a place down below where there is no suffering like on earth. They cannot leave there, because they are reunited with the Heart of Heaven. But they don't need to leave there, for they are happy. From that place they can see their loved ones left on earth, and can intercede from down below before the Heart of Heaven on behalf of their relatives, to prevent dangers or offer assistance. They come up only once a year, on the Day of the Dead, when foods are prepared for them, and the houses are fixed up so they can be with their relatives and visit those places on that day. It is good to ask for help from the deceased, from their spirits. That's why we go to the cemeteries to light candles for them and take them flowers to gladden their senses. They do not ordinarily allow themselves to be seen, but they hear our prayers. Sometimes they appear in dreams, and give us some message or warning when they want to help us. That reminded me very much of the image of my late father, because I keep his face in my memory the way valuables are kept in the bottom of a chest. I would like to see him some night, even if only in a dream, so I can know if he is looking at me from where he is. Don Kuin's stories at times took me back to other places and events that had occurred in my short lifetime.

On account of the fatigue that was always with me and the limited strength I had for walking, I missed many of the teachings of the *ajixaj*. One thing I will never forget is when he would tell us about the *stxolil ora*, the ordering of the days.

He usually did this in the morning when he would have us gather in a circle, which symbolized community. He would usually say his prayers without making a fire, because these were not normal times. In ordinary times, fire is essential to the ceremony, because the smoke from the *pom* or incense is an indispensable element in these spiritual tasks. (This is the way it was done the day we arrived on the Other Side without our *ajixum*, Don Kuin, who had already died by the time we celebrated a great ceremony of thanksgiving to the Great Spirit.) Nevertheless, when he considered it appropriate, Don Kuin lit the only candle he had left, which lasted until shortly before we reached our destination.

As we started out the morning of the second day, Don Kuin explained that Lord *Mulu'* was not a favorable influence, for his very name meant something like *awas*, that is sin. Under this sign there is a tendency to be exposed to danger, he told us, and therefore it was necessary to take every precaution. This Lord *Mulu'*, together with three others, constituted a quarter of a negative unity which could be used for evil against us, if we were predisposed or if we allowed ourselves to be carried away by our weaknesses, he said. And so it was that on that second day of the journey we took seriously the warnings of our spiritual guide, first so as not to fall into that which we call *awas*, but above all to avoid falling into the enemy's traps.

Besides it not being a favorable day, we woke up with pain, fatigue and some of us with illness from having spent the first night exposed to the elements. As on other occasions, before we started out, one of the men climbed a tall tree to reconnoiter, to see if there was any danger or anything suspicious. This routine of climbing a tree to check the surrounding area was generally done each morning, or during the day whenever it was considered necessary, to be sure that

no one was looking for us, for there were no high hills in that area. Several times we had to hide because of an emergency, such as the proximity of some group of people or sounds we heard.

After eating some cold tortillas and water that we got from a stream that flowed slowly through the bottom of the ravine, and refilling our gourds with water, we continued our journey through the brush, always under the shadow of the trees, like a permanent curse.

There were many aspects of the journey which my child's limited vision did not allow me to see, the full gambit of the problems we faced. I walked as if in the middle of a stream; I could not see the context of our situation clearly. I was only a participant in a collective terror; I didn't comprehend the motives of our persecutors, or who our enemies were, or why they were our enemies, or what crimes we had committed. Probably it was the price of being "Indian", we who call ourselves Maya. In my mind somber music played constantly like a sad drum in those lonely places lush with vegetation. Despite my not understanding the causes, my mother's face was the mirror in which the entire depth of the anguish was reflected; it increased or decreased according to the extent or type of danger. That face was my thermometer for measuring the ups and downs of our *Via Crucis*. This was in spite of the fact that many times she tried to hide her feelings so as not to worry me any more than necessary. Her face was like a book in which I could read the different states of mind provoked by her awareness of what was happening.

During the most critical moments, I perceived black clouds that suddenly darkened her face; then she turned pale; the blood left her face; her breathing became deeper and more agitated. Her hands, which usually were clasping mine, would begin to sweat without her being aware of it. Then they would

go cold and begin to tremble. She would stop talking, except for an almost unintelligible whisper I could barely hear and which was . From her pale lips came dry, sharp, disjointed words:

"Mamin, mamin; ikolon, kolon!"

"Lord, Lord help us, help us!"

"O God, O Blessed Mother..." and that prayer was like an S. O. S. call, mixed with the characteristics of our syncretistic religion. After a big scare my mother usually ended up with a bad headache that lasted all day.

There were all sorts of dangers: bombings; people chasing us, mine fields we had to pass through; traps; fly-overs of airplanes and helicopters; groups of men along the paths; even the real scares caused by wild animals, like the time a band of howler monkeys came out suddenly from among the thick branches of the trees. We were similarly attacked by a band of peccaries, when they saw us invading their territory, a cave. Some people were wounded by the bites of the animals. But it turned out to be a good hunt, for we were in most dire need of food. Three of the animals were killed by the men, and so we had food for a couple of days.

We continued on, always toward the north where the Other Side was, perhaps intuitively attracted by the magnet of our ancestral roots to the region where the roots of our first fathers lie, and those of our first mothers, where we originate, from Tulán, according to current knowledge. I managed to proceed by sheer inertia among that mass of wanderers, pursued, without a country, without stability, or our own place in the world. We were a social body in movement, a people that was being scattered across a swamp, on quicksand, with nothing solid to hold on to, pushed along perhaps by the hope of finding a more peaceful place, a place where they would let us live without fear, a place different from our beloved

and bleeding place on this side where we were still treading on Guatemalan soil.

It was painful to leave that which was ours, but it was necessary for survival. That encouraged me to take one step, then another, and another, despite my fatigue. We walked along in a line, our eyes focused on the ground. I followed in the footsteps of an adult; I don't know whether it was a man or a woman. All I could see, looking down, was a heel that kept going up and down, and which was pulling away from me, leaving me behind. I struggled to keep up the pace, to advance the same distance, but unfortunately, as a child I was at a disadvantage, and with each step I was getting farther and farther behind and that made me angry. I would have liked to accelerate my growth and be the same age as the adults so I could do the things they did.

I wondered why adults had advantages we children didn't. It wasn't fair: I was counting the steps. I had to take *oxeb'*, three, while the person in front of me only had to take *kab'*, two. At that time I could only count in Q'anjob'al Maya. How many more thousands of steps would I have to take; how many times would I have to lift those heavy feet I was dragging along? But later I thought, in order to console myself, that each of those little steps of mine were taking me farther and farther from the danger, from the deafening noise of the weapons, which was driving me crazy. My nerves were electrified and my body became one huge shudder whenever the noise began. Each one of the hundreds of thousands of steps of mine was a little measurement which shortened the distance, which brought me closer to the Other Side, where we were going, an unreal place, an imaginary place, until we actually crossed over; then we would see that it was different from this side. I could not imagine it at my tender age. Maybe it would be better, compared to the present terror and the fear

which were my points of reference for assessing life. At least, those were our hopes which we had to purchase at such a high price.

That was the price I had to pay: to suffer and take thousands and thousands of tiny steps with which I trace an infinite line across the face of the earth, leaving behind my childhood, my life as a peasant smeared with blood, tears, pain and sadness, without knowing the motives and reasons. Those steps were like the old coins I had seen my mother carry in her fist to pay for the candle. They were like piles of small coins falling to the bottom of a bank called injustice, but they were the price of my salvation. It was a calvary paid for with blood, sweat, tears, and coins, minimal units linked one with another. It was not a pompous and resounding martyrdom that deserved canonization or the erection of a statue or a monument. No, it was martyrdom one drop at a time, in the silence of the mountains, under the shadow of the vegetation, far from a world where heroes and champions are honored, for ours was an anonymous exodus.

I encouraged myself to go on by thinking of the good things that could happen there, like those that had been left behind. Maybe I would again make myself toys like the ones in times past I used to make in our little house that was getting farther and farther away; rather it didn't exist at all. Little by little it was being buried under the fog of oblivion: that simple little house that had been a part of me, a part of my unhappy, short childhood. It was a little thatched hut that we called a house, but it was our home. *Te na* for us is the real symbol of existence at a point in the universe.

It wasn't really the little house they wanted to wipe out; they wanted to wipe *me* off the face of Mother Earth. But when I returned to reality, to my reality, I would start to reflect on what use my toys would be to me now. How could I play

with them now, if I no longer felt like a child, if I had forcibly matured from so much suffering? The innocence children have at my age allows them to play, imagine, create and give wings to their creativity, give life to their toys whether they were purchased or homemade. That stage of existence in which the imaginary takes on life by means of toys in one's hands was over for me, or maybe it never existed. What I would imagine would be the recreation of those paths I am walking, the infernal beings I dream about at night that are chasing me under the trees, macabre figures and mysterious silhouettes that startle me during the brief periods of rest that life allows me. And I would have to recreate the phantasma-goric groups, the exodus of a constant walking forward, and I prefer not to do that because it would hurt me a great deal to remember the things I am experiencing.

Games are a joy. I remember that when I would go out to play with the children in the village, we would spend hours sitting in the yard, bringing to life our toys made out of corn cobs, pieces of wood, old rags, seeds, roots, rocks. We turned them into flocks of sheep in the meadows of our imagination, in the flowered fields of our wild gardens nourished by our child's creativity.

We created our own ceremonial centers, our own *ajixum*, who foretold for us the days and the happy times of the harvest and the abundance of livestock, our *ajdal* or cooperative work group, ceremonies for asking for the bride's hand, and weddings. That's how we brought our market days to life, as we took our products to exchange, with the customary haggle, and the voice intonations that gave emphasis and reality to our market. And our women, little girls making hot tortillas on the clay griddle, clay utensils, the little toys of dreaming children, washing clothes with lard soap in the little streams at the bottoms of the ravines, and places to which we

assigned place names in our language like Yichwitz, Mimanha, Nank'ulag, Sjolomwitz, Yulcheq'an, or perhaps taking care of the children of both with tenderness and songs in our mother tongue, or earnest dialogues like:

"¿Ayachmi, chikay?"

"Ayin txux, okan."

(Are you home, ma'am? Yes, dear, come in.)

"Why have you come?"

"To tell you what's happening to me; my little son is sick."

"So what does your little child have?"

"His stomach is all swollen."

"Oh, you poor thing!"

But all this no longer has any importance for me. Make-believe games and childhood happiness can no longer exist for me, a persecuted child of the Maya. I realize at this early age what lies in store for me as a member of my people, a marginalized and excluded society, but I have to go on. So many toys were left behind in the old basket, in that corner of the burned out house. Everything I owned must be there in the ashes, and here I am, human ashes that the wind wafts leeward, a wind of fate that has no north, that is taking me in twisting, concentric whirlwinds of daily suffering. So many memories! So many dreams cut short!

"Let's go on," I told myself, in a dialogue with my inner self, "Let's go on, we'll rebuild anew far from here. You will have to work like an adult from now on, you will have to take on the responsibility of supporting your family, your mother and your little sister. You will have to rebuild the little hut you are imagining; you will have to work the land and struggle just like men everywhere. You have to cultivate corn so your mother will have something for her grinding stone to chew on, so that you can once again enjoy those hot tortillas your hunger is dreaming of, that clay bowl with freshly cooked

beans, steaming with good chile, and the bowl of coffee that satisfies your hunger. But now I'm not even hungry, and even my desire to live has disappeared. At that precise moment, as if in response to my hungry imagination, my stomach answered: *ch'olololl, ch'olololl*. I could hear the grumbling of my hunger, the air that flowed through my innards filling their emptiness. I don't remember the last time we tasted any hot food.

"How long until we get there?" I asked a person walking beside me.

"Do you see that hill up there at the back of the sky?" he answered.

"Yes!" I said happily, thinking that those hills were our goal at last.

"Behind those hills are many more hills. That's the way we're going," was the disappointing answer.

I was accelerating my pace without realizing it and trying to close the gap between myself and those ahead of me, but my feet could endure no more. I feel as if I have been walking barefoot on miles of sandpaper that are wearing away my skin. Two days of rubbing my feet on that sharp sand has made me bleed; the rocks and thorns constantly torture my bare feet.

At noon the rays of the sun fell vertically on our bodies like torrents of light. The skin of our shoulders that showed through the holes in our rags was already sunburnt, with blisters rising like stiff rinds. Our guides tried to lead us through the vegetation so we wouldn't be seen and also in order to avoid the burning sun. The mosquitoes and gnats would not leave me alone; they kept buzzing, *nuuuut*, in my ears. I scratched myself so much that my left eye became infected, as the mosquitoes stubbornly swarmed there. I couldn't see the path ahead because of my constantly watering

eyes, which made me fall several times. It was probably the odor of sweat that attracted these pests, because I noticed that with the passing of the days, they pursued us more insistently. This suffering during the last days of our journey was more acute because we had no clean clothes, and no soap to bathe with in the river. We splashed ourselves with water, but our clothes were completely saturated with sweat and filth. We gave off a most unpleasant odor, especially the small children who could not be changed adequately. There was a general lack of sanitation. I tried to drive the mosquitoes away from my body with a handful of weeds. I was getting desperate from the itching, and the more I scratched the more the itching on my body increased. I often ended up crying.

I was glad when they ordered a halt. My mother took advantage of the opportunity to look among the things she had brought along, to find some old rags to wrap around my feet. They were bleeding in some places, like my heels and the tips of my toes. I had a loose toenail as a result of tripping over a rock.

After drinking water from our gourds, we lay down on the ground. A deep sleep soon took hold of me. I don't know how long I was asleep. I was very tired. All of a sudden I was shaken insistently. It was my mother who was virtually dragging me to a better hiding place in the underbrush. There wasn't anybody around; everyone else had hidden. I managed to grab the gourd so as not to leave any trace of our presence.

In such cases we had agreed, and the mothers had been warned, to cover the mouths of the small children as long as the danger lasted. They should restrain them forcibly if they started to cry. They could leave the nostrils uncovered so as not to smother them. It was preferable to have them suffer a bit, lest their crying or coughing allow our enemies to find us, so that's what was done. My mother put down the things

she was carrying in her hands in order to hold my little sister. I noticed that she put her nipple into the girl's mouth and began to caress her head, while other children kicked in their mothers' arms.

A while later we heard some people approach, a group of men speaking Spanish. I couldn't understand what they were saying, nor could I see them, for they were on the trail about twenty-five yards up from where we were hidden. There was a stretch of silence, but we remained motionless. We thought the danger had passed, but suddenly we heard another group of men who were coming from the same direction and talking. They were guerrillas, because they were carrying weapons, according to the reports of our lookouts. They were walking like they were drunk; by their tone of voice it sounded like the men were drinking *kuxha* or *chicha*, the local moonshine. One of them threw a stone which landed very close to where we were. Our leaders motioned to us to keep quiet.

We never knew for sure who they were. Some people thought that they were probably guerrillas or smugglers who brought in contraband merchandise from Mexico. They were Maya smugglers, because Ladino smugglers use trucks and have the help of high government officials. They don't walk. We stayed hidden all afternoon. We didn't begin to walk again until after nightfall. That was what worried me the most, having to walk at night.

The rags wrapped around my feet were soon torn to shreds and got caught on the rocks on the path. They turned out to be one more impediment to my being able to walk freely. I decided to take them off even though that meant I would go on bleeding and wearing away my skin on the sandpaper of the path. It was preferable. We walked all that night, rather slowly, advancing very little, for there were women with children, who could no longer walk, like my mother, as well

as elderly people who suggested that it would be better for them to be left behind to their fate. By the wee hours of the morning we children began to cry because we could no longer endure it. That made most of the men angry, but they finally reluctantly agreed to halt the march at that time.



LAJUN ELAB'
10 ELAB'

Don Kuin, the *ajixum*, hid a burning candle under his straw hat, so it could not be seen at a distance.

Ay, Mamin! O Lord of the four corners of the world, of the four sides of the earth, of the four angles of the *yib'an q'inal*: Lord of the heights, of the depths. Lord Ten Elab', here is our word, our feeling. Here we are with our sisters and brothers under your sky, under your wings like the hen who protects her chicks. We have nothing with which to feed you, to offer you as our hearts desire, but you know that we are wandering on the *witz ak'al*, the mountains and valleys, like flocks scattered by the wolf who pursues us. We don't have anything for *pom*, not even for a candle to send up our prayers to you. Please don't turn your eyes away from us on that account, or push aside the faces of your children. Please don't take away your hand or abandon us to the dangers along the way, lest we fall going down the slopes of the hills, or when we climb up the canyon walls. Keep the venomous snakes from our path, push aside

the predators, the *b'alam*, or jaguars, the *og*, or coyotes, which thirst for blood. But above all, confound and destroy the vision of the man pursuing us, who is worse than the wild animals, because he feeds his heart with the blood of his brothers and sisters. He builds his life upon the destruction of other lives. His way is not Your way. O, Ajaw, deliver us from him!

We began to walk again at daybreak. In the sky, there in Yichkan, the root of the firmament, one could see the shining of the morning star, *Puj*, which indicated the beginning of a new day. The dark sky was streaked by falling stars. In another place in the sky one could see *Motz*, the Pleiades, a constellation of stars all bunched together. We could also see a whitish constellation that was passing over our heads like a gray path across the thickness of the sky. My heart contracted as once more an intense fear took hold of me: the fear of living a new day full of danger. If I had been able to go far away, as far as those stars, and not be in my world of danger, maybe in those far-off worlds there are no coyotes, no jaguars or other dangers, I thought.

Don Kuin advises us that it is not a favorable day, that the negative influences of *Elab'* can generate bad weather, that there may be bad winds, and that we must begin the day with a spirit of struggle and sacrifice. There was no greater struggle than that which I am carrying on beyond my strength, I thought to myself. That morning we had consumed the last remnants of our tortillas. We don't know what is going to happen from here on out. Corn is our main food, and so from earliest childhood we are taught to respect it. We have many stories about its first appearance. Without our Mother Corn we are like abandoned souls in an abyss, heading for death. From the time we are small children, we learn that this element of

our culture is one of the most indispensable for our existence. We learn many legends about corn. We spend our whole lives working to cultivate it, and we conduct ceremonies for its planting, its weeding, its harvest. Its extinction equals our death. From our elders we receive instructions like the following:

My children, whenever you find a kernel of corn on the path, you must pick it up with respect, kiss it and keep it. You must not allow corn to be burned. When you take a tortilla from the basket, you should blow on your hands to ask permission to touch it. You must never step on it, throw it away or waste it.

That morning we all gathered everything we had left and ate a bite with respect and nostalgia, beginning with us children. There were some cold and stiff tortillas that we managed to get down with cold water at that early morning hour; it was like a farewell. The previous day our guides had begun to get us used to the first morsels of wild plants, roots and some new alternative edible plants. We had to get used to this new diet, because our survival depended on it. Severe punishment would be meted out to those who made no effort to eat wild plants and roots. It was important that nobody get sick from hunger, for there was no time to wait for them or treat them. Some people volunteered to try the different wild vegetables when there was doubt as to whether they were poisonous. I remember well the first time I ate some tender palm leaves, which I ended up regurgitating, because it's not the same eating them raw as eating them cooked. My mother encouraged me to try a second time and in this way we began to get accustomed to different products of the earth. We found some plants we were already used to eating back home, but

cooked and with salt, like *k'ixtan*, *mu*, *sq'ab' tzitzil*, *q'antzu*, *loroco*, *pacaya*, *malanga* and *tz'ikin itaj* that we found along the edges of the ravines. But now we had to try other new plants when we couldn't find the familiar ones.

With a burden on our backs, a walking stick in one hand and the other hand free to grab hold of the plants and rocks to forge ahead: one after the other, side by side, we were making our way, building a stairway of salvation, constituting a compact and solidary unit in that situation, walking toward a common goal. One never experiences so much solidarity as in situations like the difficult one in which we found ourselves.

We were prepared to break the invisible wire, to nullify the effects of the imaginary line that the new nation-states had created within the regions of the Mesoamerican peoples, to take back the invaded lands of the Maya. We were on a pilgrimage to the temples and sanctuaries of our ancestors, where the cradle of our race, of Maya society, was buried. We were in trouble; we were going to ask for shelter from our relatives, the other Maya of today, who share our misfortune of discrimination and marginalization. We had high hopes of finding them. The blood they carry in their veins is our common blood. They recognize us because blood cannot be denied. They will help us because the traditional heritage of brotherhood has not yet been lost. It is carried in the fabric of life and is latent in social consciousness. We are children of the same kings, of the same priests and scientists, and we are proud to be descended from the same dynasty. We stem from the same trunk, from the same lineage. Our relatives the Tzotzils, the Chamulas, the Ch'ols, the Tzeltals and all those brothers and sisters of ours will reach out their hands to us to help us as our ancestors advised us: "Let all arise; let all be called; let there not be one group or two that remains behind the others." We were in a predicament, so we were looking



for them. We were heading for the home of our grandparents, toward the north.

The day was starting to come alive in the forest; the sounds and songs of the birds that perched on the branches were so varied. The colors of their plumage was something I had never seen close up in my village. Their song was a collective paean to Father Sun, who was coming up in the east and peeking out from among the leaves of that green world, that network of vines. It was like a prayer of nature. Lucky animals, I thought to myself, lucky because one only sings when the soul is tranquil, free and joyful. You can't sing when you have fear sticking to your soul, when you are fleeing, when all paths lead to the same beginning point: in an endless vicious circle of persecution.

In that silence, without human words, or human actions, far from the sudden sound of gun fire, I could appreciate the sweetness of creation, the pleasantness of nature, the tranquility of living creatures in the environment that Ajaw left them. Only humans provoke disorder; only humans complicate life and only where there are humans do problems exist. The rest of the world is harmony; it is beauty. My child's heart would have liked to merge into that world of beautiful and free beings, would have liked to be a bird, a *q'uj* or quetzal, or grass, or the invisible wind that blows through the trees. To be a rock insensitive to mistreatment, sighless, without hearing, without touch or reason. To be water flowing always toward the infinite. To share the nature of the other kingdoms of the universe that produce harmony and order in Creation. But no, I cannot break the chain, the law that binds me to my own human nature. I have to go on; I cannot withdraw, remove myself or hide from my fate.

Again the heat, the mosquitoes and the gnats, again the fatigue and the annoyances. I am reminded once more that I



am a fugitive, I am persecuted, the prey of this human hunt; they pursue me and smell me out because I carry the mark of original sin of being "Indian", of being Maya, and of interfering with the plans of those who do not want me.

The sounds were very clear. They came from helicopters that were approaching from the east. I recognized them; they were the same ones that had flown over the village on many occasions, the ones that drained the blood from people's faces. Their presence always made our bodies tremble, bringing fear and pain. They were like birds of prey that swoop down to attack defenseless chicks scrambling in turmoil from fear. After they flew over our village, our parents would give us little cups of water with charcoal to drink to calm our fears. They sprinkled our faces with rue water and called upon our *nawal* so we would not get sick.

And now also, our hearts contract, our pulses accelerate, we hold our breath and our steps become hesitant, except without charcoal water, without rue. Our *nawals* are already lost in the mountains. At any time those awful birds could drop their eggs, their hatched offspring thundering death among the people.

We already knew what to do: as quickly as possible look for rocks, for the most leafy trees, for the thickets, and hide, disappear rapidly, and not wear any clothes that would attract attention. That's what we did. The first one flew by, so low that we could feel the wind shaking the leaves and branches of the trees. We remained crouched in the underbrush without moving. The aircraft flew away with its *pap pap pap pap p a p...* but the echo remains in our memory, our thoughts, our ears like a bad taste, like an annoying humming that beats with the heart. After a long while, its sound began again, assaulting our ears from the direction in which it had disappeared. As it drew closer the blood rose to my head and



at the exact moment it flew over us, I felt the veins at my temples bursting with accelerated pounding. My whole body swooned from my weakness. The faces of the others were pale from fear. Their teeth were chattering, and their eyes were popping out. The whole group felt faint and ill.

There was no more water in my last gourd; the other one had broken against a rock when I fell down in the mud. My little sister was crying, asking for food and drink. We offered her some roots similar to potatoes. Their taste cut the tongue like the taste of lime, *laj* in my language, but they were less unpleasant than the raw leaves of the wild plants. My mother and I chewed on them one at a time. My mother would chew them for a while and then give a piece to my little sister, but she didn't want to swallow it. Hunger forced me to get used to eating part of those roots, but only when my hunger was very great.



USLUK' B'ATZ', LAIKAW IYUB', OXLAIJUN B'EN
11 B'ATZ', 12 IYUB', 13 B'EN

In the late afternoon of the last day we found a cave, after being at the mercy of a storm with winds of hurricane strength. Our clothes were soaked by the time we reached the mouth of the cave in the side of the mountain. The path had quickly become a swamp in the flat fields where the water pooled, creating a muddy mess where we sank in up to our knees. The women had to roll their long skirts up above their knees

in order to walk, which they did with great difficulty. We didn't have a dry spot on our entire bodies. We couldn't use our colored plastic sheets to protect us from the rain, lest we be seen by the enemy, but it was not possible anyway, on account of the wind that would have blown them right off our shoulders. Some tried to use green or brown sheets that blended in with our surroundings. Nevertheless, the water streamed down our bodies, faces and clothing. The babies, bundled securely against their mothers' backs, were soaked. Some were crying, and others were frightened by the thunder and lightning that resounded in our ears, like the noise of the guns and bombs in our villages.

In the midst of the storm we saw a fawn that had become separated from its herd. Some of the men caught up with it easily, picked it up and carried it off alive as if it were a baby goat.

By this time people were no longer carrying very much, mainly just the ragged clothing they slept in and some receptacles they filled with water whenever they found a stream or spring. The men helped us a little bit more with the different chores, especially trying to find food, for many of them were familiar with the different edible wild vegetables, roots and fruits.

When the strong gusts began, the tops of the trees were bending over, and some thick trunks snapped from the force of the wind. I felt that the wind was suffocating me, blowing so strongly in my face, forcing itself into my mouth and nose. Its chill flooded my lungs until they could stand it no longer.

"Put this rag over your mouth," my mother shouted at me desperately, because my little sister was thrashing around as if she were suffocating too. Lightning struck very close, deafening us with the force of its noise. We pushed our way slowly through the brush, but we knew that we were very