

The Last Years of a Mayan Princess

People sometimes returned to Nine as memories do in dreams, so vivid they were alive, right there in her room. When she awoke, they'd break apart and mostly disappear, but shards remained to litter her mind—parts of a face, words someone spoke, an emotion that lingered. She clung to these bits as you might to a friend, fitting the pieces into a mosaic she'd started years before. It began as a simple story with a modest plot, but years of confinement and thousands of dreams added enough body and soul that it gained life of its own, one with greater color and texture than the world around her. Over countless solitary hours, months and years its fiction became her truth, and its truth became her refuge, and when moonlight arrived to light up her friend, she'd tell it, and her friend would listen.

Last night the dream was of the captain and one of their first times together. God, how long ago was that? Had to be well before the trial. He was at his table, reading a paper when she was brought in. When she woke after she remembered the smell—a fragrance so different from that in her room, so fresh and clean, with barely a touch of spilt wine. In the dream the captain had ignored her at first, so she'd stayed by the door, watching as he reached out to something—what was that? Then the dream regained more memory, and she remembered he'd been eating. He went on, oblivious to her. The dream went into the wonder of that moment, the Why am I here when he hasn't yet finished? He picked up a knife, hacked a chunk of dark bread, then he cut a slice of soft cheese, folded the bread around the cheese and dipped the wrap in his wine glass. With the meal in one hand he returned to the newspaper.

Her eyes went to the knife. It was silver and glittered, and small, but in the dream it grew until she saw its serrations clogged with bits of cheese. Then the dream changed and it shrank back to the table where it waited with everything else in the cold of that room. She kept her breathing quiet, drawing in air softly, letting it out slowly, hoping she might somehow disappear into thin air. But then he finished.

He stood, wiped his hands on his pants and looked her over.

"Let's get you started," he said.

And in the dream she remembered that other instant of brief wonder, whether the words meant some small relief or some great anxiety, but then he took a rope from the chair and came towards her, and the dream answered itself.

He led her through a maze of doors and corridors, and finally outside. The sun was blinding. She stumbled and fell before they got to the hose. That day it happened once, but in the dream she fell over and over again. Each time he pulled her up, but then she'd fall again, and he'd pull again, and it kept happening until the dream collided with reality of the wall. He'd pushed her against it, and in the dream she felt the hard heat of the new, cheap concrete.

He let out enough rope to be out of the spray, then turned on the hose and disappeared in the stunning water. The stream came hard and cold, but so delicious. She rubbed her hands through her hair, trying to separate its matted strands, but her fingers caught, and in the dream she couldn't get them loose.

The captain tossed her a bar of soap and began to yell. "Your face!" he shouted. Her hands came free, and she began with her forehead and cheeks, her nose and chin, then moved lower, between her neck and the top of her gown. In the dream she remembered how the rest began, how water cascaded farther down and wet the gown against her body, how she tried to stop it by

bending forward to let the gown hang loose, and how the water's spray defeated her. That struggle filled the dream, and losing it took every bit of the gown's comfort.

The captain changed with the effect. He became distracted by it, then intent on spreading it, until he finally shouted for her to remove the gown. She shook her head mutely but he focused the spray so it came sharply as an icy sword. She held up her hand to surrender. From there the dream was all memory, and filled her mind with the feeling of that day, until she woke. Then the dream broke apart and its pieces drifted away—all but one fragment, the memory of her gown, dirty and rumpled and wet, tossed to a well of sandy ground.

This dream wasn't finished with her. They sometimes stayed for weeks, and the very next night this one brought back every detail of how the captain looked later, how the pale stripe of his uniform widened along his thigh and narrowed along his calf, how his undershirt was stained and bunched above a pale fold of belly, and how his half-opened trousers showed a dirty triangle of underwear below his belt. There was even that other smell, that warmer mixture of sweat and wine. And then, of course, the realization that despite the matting of her hair and her sores, those years later he still found her attractive. And finally, there was that foolish wonder, her naïve and hopeful confusion of attraction with affection.

"You want something to eat?" he offered, his words crowded with food. He motioned to the broken wedge of cheese and the tear of Pueblo bread. She shook her head towards the concrete floor, then gave him a nervous glance. The sight stuck with her all these years, how the tangled glow of dirty hair caught sunlight from the window behind him, how it made him appear angelic. She had only just learned it didn't fit.

"You aren't hungry?" he mumbled.

She shook her head again, and her eyes strayed along the limestone floor to the bed. And the dream was fully memory now, wishing for her room and the friend in her wall. And then it became that other memory, of how since the fire there'd been a little recklessness inside her, and how that day it came out as resentment.

"What's the matter?" he'd demanded.

She didn't answer.

He poured more wine but was watching her as he did it; his glass filled too quickly and red spilled over the rim. He fumbled the bottle upright, and then frowned back at her as though she'd done it.

"Oh, Christ, tell me."

She fought for control, but her eyes welled. He took a long drink while watching her. He put down the glass and began to talk. But it was different that day. He was drunk, and the Viceroy was gone. He went on, slurring his words, but forcing them at her. They stung, until she brushed at her face.

"Why are you crying?" he demanded.

She shook her head at the floor.

"Tell me!" he shouted dully, and he threw a piece of the bread. It bounced off her shoulder.

She struggled against saying anything, but anger took hold and she spoke. The sounds came out, acrid noises that loosened more tears.

His jaw began to shift irritably, even before she finished.

"You bitch," he interrupted. He shoved himself to his feet. "Ungrateful bitch." She shrank to the door, but he came after her.

When she woke the dream broke apart and began to slip away, leaving only pieces of what happened next, and the soreness. But every part would go into her story, those fragments of what he did, and what she felt, and how there, in the background, there behind the halo, she'd seen another glimpse of the knife.

The dream returned for three days, until it finally touched parts of the trial. She was weaker now, but that memory was a scar. It came back as if it were yesterday. She'd distracted herself during the day by working on the story, and at night telling its unfinished parts to her friend, but though much could be forced off by distractions of the wall, and her tellings, there were sharp bits of the trial and what came after that sometimes raised themselves in pauses. So, while awake she worked or spoke, and while sleeping, the more painful details had come back. The memory of the prosecutor, and the priest, and the magistrate, and all the anger in the courtroom.

"Didn't you encourage the captain?" the prosecutor had asked, looking at her from across the table. Then he waited for the older woman to interpret.

She remembered hearing the translation and turning to stare back at his dark eyes, and remembered even how in the periphery of that moment she sensed the interpreter and court reporter exchange glances. And she remembered how she answered, without speaking, by shaking her head.

"Really?" the prosecutor asked, and there was that mocking tone. He let its wake linger, and she remembered how in the quiet she'd felt certain she was losing, and the relief in knowing it didn't matter.

This trial was a new thing, strange, something they said was arranged by the priest and some far-away ruler, but how it worked and what they intended made no difference to her anymore. Neither did anything they said or heard her say, and what they decided and did with her—none of it mattered. She'd already survived longer than most, with a long life lasting almost forty years, and it was coming to an end. She remembered that inner peace of battles ending, and how she turned to the translator and spoke with surprising calm.

"I had fought him before," she said. "And I'd hurt him, because he was older. But the orderly was a large man, much stronger than me, and the captain brought him in to hit me until I couldn't breathe. So, I didn't resist after that. I did what he wanted, and told the others to do the same, and taught them, so they could live, and weren't beaten. The captain had the orderly bring me to him two or three times a week after that, until some younger women were brought in, and he didn't have me come as often, until after the fire."

The interpreter translated. When she finished there was another quiet, and in the dream it went on and on, until the priest stood and tried to cut it off.

"Would you tell the Court what else they did to you—to all of you?" he said, with a strange tone. Almost as if he understood.

That stage was confusing, but didn't matter. The prosecutor objected, but the magistrate let her answer. She stared at the old priest, wondering why they were wasting time. Everything else was such a routine part of life, but letting the end linger like this seemed cruel. She remembered hating the priest, and how her mouth had tightened, and how her words came bitterly.

"There were more women that began to come there, and more men."

"What other women?"

"There were mostly girls, Mayan girls they knew would follow me, and do what I said."

“How many?”

“Nine or ten.”

“And why were the men there?” the magistrate asked.

She shrugged, and spoke simply.

The interpreter hesitated, then translated.

“To fuck us.”

The magistrate frowned at the priest, as if he’d done it, but then let him go on.

“How long did things go on this way? I mean ... with men coming in to do such things?”

She’d followed the translation before looking up at the heavy-beamed ceiling, calculating. Then she turned to the interpreter and answered two syllables. The interpreter stared at her a moment, then turned to the judge:

“For me, it lasted twelve years.”

The magistrate stared incredulously, and despite himself murmured, “Twelve ... years?”

“For me. For others it was less?”

“Why less?”

“They died, or aged. They aged quickly there, and whenever they got old, they disappeared.”

“And the fire was two years ago?” the magistrate asked.

“Yes.”

“So, it happened, in 1637 or 38?”

She nodded.

The judge turned to the prosecutor and motioned him to continue.

He drew himself up and folded his arms, as if to emphasize the subject.

“How many people died from the fire?”

Her gaze drifted past the interpreter, to the court reporter, then down at the dark wood floor. She bent out two reluctant syllables.

“Three died,” the interpreter said.

“And it was arson, was it not?” the prosecutor demanded. “You burned the ‘ospital ... with purpose?”

“That was an accident,” she’d replied. “They—we meant only to burn the men.”

That quiet again. And once again people exchanged looks. Without being asked she’d gone on with a lengthy answer. The prosecutor tried to interrupt, but the priest insisted and the magistrate let it continue. The interpreter took notes. When her answer was finished the interpreter stared at her quietly, took a deep breath, then went from her notes:

“One of the men from the night before wanted more. We called him the Swimming Man, because of how he did it. He was fat, but small down there, and his mounting was difficult, strange. And Waxak—Eight—they gave us numbers. She was a young girl from my village, my friend. She was a beautiful young girl, really just a child, and the one he wanted. He had trouble mounting, and tried and tried, but couldn’t, despite all the thrashing, as if he was swimming across a river. And she was young, and hadn’t learned, and she laughed. She didn’t mean anything, but couldn’t help it. So he beat her—”

“How old was she?” the priest interrupted.

“I haven’t finished,” the interpreter said.

“Ask her how old this girl she called Eight was,” the magistrate ordered. “Then you can go on.”

So she asked, and Nine answered.

“Perhaps eleven or twelve.”

And in the dream she remembered the magistrate drawing in his breath.

It was another quiet moment that drew itself out, but the magistrate finally waved his hand, and said, “finish what she was saying.”

The interpreter went back to her notes. “So Swimming Man beat Eight, but he hadn’t finished, and he wanted someone else the next day. He came and went with the orderly to wash us. He was waiting for us to be washed before he chose another. Eight—they gave us numbers—was the one he’d beaten, and the first to be washed. She was at the start of the line. After she was washed and they turned to others, they weren’t paying attention to her; so she took the rope and wrapped it around his neck. The orderly stopped her, and he and Swimming Man began to beat her again, but then I and the other girls ...” The interpreter hesitated, took a deep breath and went on. “We took stones and hit their heads. They became quiet with the stones. We took them inside, into two of our rooms, and tied their arms and legs to the beds, and began the fires, and then we ran away.”

The prosecutor stared at the translator, then turned to her and spoke deliberately, loudly, and with a pause after each word. “How many ware you then?”

“Bolon,” she’d begun.

The interpreter translated: “Nine of them.”

“Nine against two?”

She nodded.

“How ware the fires started?” he asked, and the interpreter translated.

“Before the fire our beds were made of straw.”

“You started the beds?”

“Just the ones they were in.”

“With them on them ... lying there?” he asked, and even he seemed startled. The interpreter also seemed surprised, but translated.

She’d nodded.

“Ware’ they awake?”

She nodded again, and went on more matter of factly. When she was finished the interpreter stared at her again before beginning. Then she turned to the prosecutor.

“Not at first, so we took damp cloths and woke them. Then we did it.”

“You woke them, and while they were tied there, and awake, you started the fires?”

And the dream was all memory now, and she remembered staring at him for several seconds, and how then she’d nodded, and for the first time since they’d begun, the only time it had happened in several hours of testimony, how she’d smiled tightly.

The prosecutor’s eyes had narrowed over that, and anger came into the room. He started back up hotly. “You ran away after you started the fire?”

“Yes.”

“All of you?”

“Yes.”

“But most of you were recaptured?”

She grimaced. “All of us.”

“But one escaped, and later died in the wild.”

“No one escaped.”

“The records say one did. Eight, in fact.”

“The records are lying.”

“Well then, what happened to Eight?”

“They killed Eight, and buried her.”

“Come now! The grounds were searched, but no one was found.”

“She’s still there, with me at night. She came after the walls were rebuilt.”

“Such nonsense!” he said, shaking his head. “Didn’t anyone tell you that her remains were discovered weeks after, and that she was determined to have been killed by wolves?”

The priest jumped up again, insisting there were no wolves in that part of the Yucatan, but the prosecutor objected, and there was yelling until the magistrate stopped it. He let the priest continue.

“Tell us what happened after, in the incident that led to the last of these charges?”

It was her longest answer that day, and the interpreter took more notes. When she finished the interpreter nodded quietly, then turned and began.

“When they rebuilt after the fire we were in separate rooms. Some of the others disappeared, but they kept me, because they knew whoever they brought would do whatever I said. And the captain brought me back into his room one day, and he was different ... from before, I mean. He hadn’t been like the orderly we burned, or Swimming Man. He’d sometimes been less...cruel. After I tried to teach the other women not to fight and to do what the men liked he’d given me extra food, even let me stay with him. And when the Viceroy came about the fire and the deaths, the captain had asked me to help him, and said if I did he’d forgive me and the others, and he said it was Eight who was to blame, anyway, not me, and that no one had ever been as good for him as I was. He was never kind, but after the fire there were times he said some nice things, and I thought...he liked me.”

“But that day he wasn’t like that. He was drunk. He wanted what ... what...I could give him, but said there were other younger women coming, and that my time there was ending. Then he mentioned Eight again, and began to talk about how she’d deserved what she got. Eight was from my village, and she and I became friends right away. I told her stories at night, and she told me stories.”

“And the way the captain spoke about her that day, and about my ending, made me sad. I missed her, and I cried. I don’t cry. In twelve years there I never cried, except that day. He told me to stop, but I couldn’t. He became angry and began yelling at me. He said the only reason I was still around was because of what I taught the others, and what I could do for him. And he said the nice things he’d told me before weren’t true, that I was just a stupid savage, like Eight was, he said. And I couldn’t stop. And I cried more. So he hit me. I didn’t fight back because there were other orderlies there then, other large men, and he was small, and old, so I let him. But still I couldn’t stop crying, so he hit me again and again—”

“He slapped you?” the prosecutor broke in, waving his arm as if it were no matter.

“No. He hit me.”

“With what?” the magistrate asked. “What did he use to hit you?”

“His fists,” The interpreter said, holding up her own fists.

“Go on,” the priest insisted, to the interpreter. “He interrupted.”

The interpreter went back to her notes. “He...he hit me over and over. But he was old then, and drunk. Hitting me didn’t hurt, but it made me stop crying. So he stopped and undressed and made me do the things ...” The interpreter paused, motioning to let her go on, but at first she

didn't. She remembered staring at the magistrate, and how he'd begun to shift under her gaze. The magistrate then turned to the prosecutor, as if wanting help. The prosecutor nodded.

"Tell us what happened next," he said, resignedly.

She'd nodded at that, and her expression had relaxed. She began another brief response with a tone of satisfaction. The interpreter paled, took a deep breath, then translated.

"As soon as he finished he fell asleep, and I took the knife from the table, and used it to ..."
The interpreter had stopped, and paused again.

"Did she finish?" the magistrate asked.

The interpreter nodded grimly. "Yes, but..."

"What did she say?"

The interpreter took another long breath and raised her hands helplessly. "She said ... she cut his privates."

The prosecutor had stared, then turned to her. "Did you ... Did the mutilare really occur? Did you castra' him?"

She'd looked at him blankly, not understanding. The interpreter tried, but couldn't find the right words.

"Castra! Castra!" the magistrate finally repeated, with small circular motions of his pen. When that brought no understanding, he motioned towards his lap, "Did you stab 'im ... in the yoke ... in the area between ..."

"In the groin?" the clerk offered quietly.

The interpreter shut her eyes as she explained.

And she'd nodded out a few syllables.

The interpreter bit her lip, but nodded another smile, "He screamed over and over." And a coldness came into the room.

"Why did you do thes?" the magistrate cried. "The captain ... he was an old man by then. 'E had given you food, ease-ed your sufferin' somewhat, had 'e not?"

With the translation complete she'd turned and stared at the magistrate for several seconds, as if she hadn't understood. He began to repeat the question but she grunted curtly to interrupt. The interpreter began to speak but she'd twisted out angry words on top of the interpreter. The interpreter stopped. When she was finished the interpreter shook her head and turned to the magistrate.

"You better ask another question, Signore."

The magistrate hesitated, looking back and forth between the two women. Then he drew new words together. "Why ... ded you do this to 'im?"

When the interpreter translated she turned and showed the magistrate the same cold stare, then shrugged and bean a longer answer. The interpreter took more notes, and when she was finished turned to the others.

"The priest asked us once why the Mayan killed so many Spanish families, not just soldiers but settlers. Why they killed women. Why they killed children. We told him it wasn't just because of all the Mayan families killed by the Spanish, all the women and children they killed. It was because of what Mayans have always said about war, and that among all those who travel to the after world in times of battle there are some who go not from loyalty or courage, but from compassion. They are mostly young, and known in the afterworld as fools."

After the trial she got further beatings, worse than before, but they kept her alive. The

priest came each night, but said little that mattered and did nothing to help. But the dreams kept at her, and she tried to keep at her story. And day she was weaker, but each night she'd tell it to Eight. When finally one night the dream was finished with her, her story was nearly complete. The ascendant moon would be full that night, and her friend would appear in the stone, and despite all the new injuries and weakness, and how much more difficult it was to breathe, she'd tell it.

That night the moon was out, full and strong, and its light crept towards the wall. Without the light it was just a wall, glittering and translucent. No friend, no face, nothing at all. But the moonlight would move, and gradually reach the spot.

She tried to turn her head slightly, and blinked weakly.

There.

It was faint, just a very slight outline, but nothing more. Her eyes had suffered these last days, but there was something. But then the edge of a cloud drifted across the moon, weakening the outline. She brushed at what seemed a cheek, and began to speak, but her words came only in broken whispers. Then the cloud thickened and now everything was gone.

She brushed weakly at the concrete. It was cheap and lined, but didn't budge. She used her fingernail to catch a small imperfection. It dislodged a tiny crumb. She worked for several minutes, but then her arm weakened and her hand dropped to the bed.

When she woke the next time her breathing was worse. The cloud was gone, but the moon had shifted and there was only part of the outline. But it was there. She was there. Eight. She started the story, feebly, while brushing Eight's cheek. Her hand weakened, but her fingers found a crack that wouldn't give, and rested there. She raised it higher up to another slight edge. Her fingers rested a moment, then tugged. Another small piece fell to the bed, and the ledge was wider. She tugged at it, but it tired her. Her hand fell to the bed, and she slept again.

When she opened her eyes for the last time there was no outline. Nothing like that. But beyond the one edge was a small space, and in the space a tiny curve that hadn't been there before. She moved her hand there. Its sharp edge cut her finger, but she didn't feel it. The strength left her hand, and the hand slipped back down onto the bed.

Her eyes shifted weakly to try again, but now the hand wouldn't move. She began to lose focus, and tried to look up. Her eyes went slowly, up one last time, to the part of wall where her hand had been. She saw only a small, faint blur of bone, then even that faded. She lay still, hoping for strength, but what little remnant she still had left her.
