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## Ruination

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# RUINATION

A Thesis

Presented in

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Master of Fine Arts

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BY

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1.

On New Year's Day, 1923—Adelita's 14<sup>th</sup> birthday—two bombs exploded not long after the ringing of the cathedral bells woke her. She had slept poorly, rehearsing both in a restive wakefulness and a shallow slumber the words she would say to Mother that she expected to change both of their lives forever. She at last fell into a deep sleep at the hour when the rest of the household would have been rising, and she didn't wake from it until the church bells announced the 10 a.m. Mass.

Adelita and Mother had been living in Grandmother's house in Motul since Father was killed, nearly eight years before. At first, the house had been a refuge, where Adelita felt safe from the violence that had taken Father. Later, as the violent spasms of the Revolution became less random and fell into a less threatening and more predictable cycle, the house had become a home, somewhere Adelita felt she belonged.

Motul had changed, too. The town was still anchored by its 17<sup>th</sup> century church on the main square, and the streets were still unpaved, and the most common means of transportation of goods was by mule or on the back of a Maya bent horizontal by its weight. But the influx of money from the surrounding henequen plantations over the last several years, at least until last year's sisal price collapse—Motuleños talked of little else besides sisal prices—had spurred the construction of new homes, the opening of new shops and restaurants, and the appearance of automobiles on the dusty roads alongside the horse-drawn carriages. There was an excitement to the town now, a provincial outpost that felt increasingly important, especially when its native son, Felipe Carrillo Puerto, was elected governor of the state last year. Adelita, after years of not understanding where she might fit in, had begun to sense that there was something for her in Motul, a path to a life she might enjoy.

But in recent months—and especially the last seven days—the walls of Grandmother’s house had come to feel like a prison, where she was serving a sentence of indeterminate length. And Mother was her jailer.

“I’m 14 now,” she coached herself as she stood before her bedroom door, hand on the knob, “a grown woman.” And that was true. By 14, many women her age—possibly most—in this part of the world were married and out of their parents’ houses and were already mothers themselves. But rather than encouraging her daughter to follow that path—instead of finding opportunities for her daughter to meet eligible young men—Mother had decided that she should be the one to get married, a conceit that Adelita found ridiculous. The woman would be 30 this year: who would want a woman that age?

Mother would never listen to reason. She had to be shocked into understanding all that she was risking by indulging this romantic fantasy of hers. And the truth would deliver that shock, the truth that Adelita tasted every day, a lingering bile that Adelita could no longer swallow. Adelita would overcome her customary meekness today—this very morning!—and tell Mother that she hated her. She would twist the knife by telling Mother that she was embarrassed by her—first by dressing in widow’s black and mourning Father for years, and then by forgetting Father altogether and sporting those bright colorful dresses that Aunt Elvia and Grandmother made for her, like she was some lower-tier debutante from the Divine Caste at Mass. And the final, devastating blow would be telling her that she wished it had been Mother who was shot that day eight years ago instead of Father.

Adelita imagined that this message would knock Mother to her knees, where she would sob at the thought of losing her only child and beg forgiveness, asking what she could do to atone for her many and repeated sins. “To start with,” Adelita would begin, “you can forget all

this nonsense about me becoming a nun.” Mother had suggested at Christmas dinner that Adelita consider entering a convent, which had made both Grandmother and Aunt Elvia laugh. Mother had stormed off from the table and hadn’t returned. The following day, she presented Adelita with a wrapped Christmas gift, something that would have normally occurred days later on Epiphany. Adelita unwrapped the package to find two books: *The Lives of the Saints* and *The Autobiography of St. Teresa of Ávila*. “These are better than that trash Felipe brings you to read,” Mother said.

The convent nonsense sorted, Adelita would then tell Mother, “you can love me or reject me, but I am going to marry Enrique Palma.” Or someone like him. It wouldn’t have to be Enrique, but he was handsome and seemed kind. He had surprised her with a gift at Christmas Mass. Adelita hadn’t dared to dream that Enrique knew she existed. But his gift had set Mother off on her week of terror. “You’ve had your chance already—it’s not my fault Father was killed,” Adelita planned to say. “It’s my time now, not yours. I will make a place for you in my life if you apologize for how you’ve treated me, but I will no longer live by your rules.” Adelita felt the rage surge in her and the taste of the bile was sharper than on previous days. “I am a grown woman, and I intended to live like one, not like some little girl taking orders from her mommy.”

Adelita realized she had said this last out loud, and she quietly cracked the door open to peek into the courtyard to see if anyone had heard her. Grandmother’s house was organized around a central courtyard: the dining room, the kitchen and six bedrooms opened onto it, arranged in a U-shape. A door in the fourth wall of the courtyard led to an outdoor kitchen where the housekeeper, Rosario, did most of the cooking on a griddle set over a charcoal fire. Beyond the outdoor kitchen, made invisible by another wall, was the privy. In the front of the house, on

the far side of the dining room from the courtyard, was a salon where the family received visitors. Grandmother and Grandfather had raised 14 children in a two-bedroom home directly behind the cathedral. Later when the children were gone and Grandfather's store had become successful from the wealth from green gold—the henequen plants grown in the region—that had poured into Motul, he had built this large home with a surfeit of bedrooms and a large dining room with a dining table that could seat 20.

The house was both solid—its mamposteria walls of stones and concrete were a half-meter thick—and beautiful, each room laid with colorful and ornate pasta tiles common to Yucatán. But the family generally saw the house as folly. “Everyone always fights the last war,” Uncle Felipe had said to Grandfather when he saw what his father had done. “And what war are you fighting, Son?” Grandfather asked him. “Pretending you're Maya and taking up their cause? They will turn on you one day, because you are not one of them. I will enjoy this house, I'm afraid, long after you've met your demise.” Grandfather, however, died just over two months after the house was completed, and Uncle Felipe had praised his father's house in a eulogy he delivered at the funeral.

The courtyard was empty, and Adelita crept across it to peer into the dining room. Grandmother was not at the enormous table, as she usually would have been, taking her morning coffee and reading the local paper and the papers that came in daily on the morning train from the state capital, Mérida.

Adelita tiptoed to the kitchen, where Rosario was washing the floor. “Don't step on my clean floor,” Rosario said to her in Mayan. Rosario always spoke much more harshly to her in Mayan than in Spanish, because neither Mother nor Grandmother understood the language. “Where's Akna?” Adelita asked. Akna was Rosario's daughter, the same age as Adelita, and was

the person in Adelita's life most closely resembling a friend, although, Adelita would admit, Akna was more Mayan teacher than friend. Rosario told her that Grandmother had left early with Uncle Benjamin to deliver Akna to relatives in Rosario's home village near Telchac Puerto on the coast. Grandmother would return in a few days, but Akna would be gone for some time. Grandmother, Rosario explained, had suggested that the "sea air" would help Akna. This sounded very unscientific and unmedical to Adelita—Akna had been suffering a flu for the last month or so, and what good would the salt air of the coast do for a flu?

"Did you ask Aunt Elvia about Akna's flu?" Adelita asked. Aunt Elvia wasn't a doctor, but she had opened two clinics for women in the last two months, one in the state capital, Mérida, and one here in Motul. At this Rosario became very angry and instructed Adelita to go find Mother.

The mention of the coast caused Adelita to think of Enrique and the gift he had given her: a photograph he taken of a green heron in Río Lagartos, a brackish, mangrove-lined lagoon along the north coast of Yucatán, where flamingos ate tiny shrimp by the thousands, which gave their feathers a pink hue, and crocodiles ate flamingos, without experiencing any change in color at all. "That's a green heron," Enrique said. "I know the photograph has no colors, just white and black and shades of gray, but the bird's color made me think of your eyes. Just amazing." He face flushed. "The bird I mean. Although your eyes, too. Because of the color." Enrique's father, Don Bartolomeo, had cleared his throat in a signal to move on. "It's an amazing creature, that one," Enrique had said then. "The bird." Mother had been enraged by the exchange and threatened to burn the photograph when they returned home. Only Grandmother's intervention had prevented it.



“Are you finished in your room?” Rosario asked. Adelita nodded and Rosario padded across the courtyard to Adelita’s room. The train bound for Mérida whistled its approach to the station a few blocks away. Adelita drifted toward the front room, where she thought she might read a book until Mother returned from church and Adelita could drop her bombshell. Today might be a Monday, but it was also a holy day of obligation, meaning that Mother would be at Mass. Adelita wondered if she would be reprimanded for not attending Mass with her, and then realized that concern was one more reason to deliver her ultimatum and being living as a grown woman.

She pulled up short in the doorway when she saw that Mother was seated on the sofa, having coffee with Uncle Edesio, Mother’s brother, who had become the mayor of Motul shortly after Uncle Felipe was elected governor last February. “Good morning, Adelita,” he boomed as Adelita entered.

Mother turned. “Oh, look who has awakened, just in time.”

Adelita smiled at her uncle and ignored Mother. “Thank you for stopping in on my birthday, Uncle.” She felt relief that she would have to wait until Uncle Edesio left to speak frankly to Mother. She wasn’t quite ready.

He frowned. “It’s your birthday?” He looked at Mother, who shrugged in reply. He also shrugged and then asked, “are you ready?”

“Yes,” said Rosario, who had entered the room. She dropped a large, heavy carpetbag, which landed on one of Adelita’s feet. “She’s all packed.”

“Ow, Rosario, watch it.” Adelita looked at the bag. “Packed? Packed for what?”

“Edesio is traveling to Mérida shortly,” Mother said. “You’re going with him.” She paused. “To live with Felipe.” The story was coming out in short bursts. Mother nodded at the

telephone. There were many telephones in surrounding area in the luxurious hacienda manors of the henequen growers, but there were only six telephones in town: one at the train station, one at the police commissary, one in the mayoralty, one at Aunt Elvia's clinic, one at Siqueff—a Lebanese restaurant in town that was Uncle Felipe's favorite—and one at home of the Governor's mother. "I've spoken with Felipe. It's done." Mother crossed her arms.

"But I haven't eaten." This was a silly thing to say, she knew, but Adelita was too stunned to articulate any other problem with her intentions.

Mother stood, approached her daughter, and, when Adelita moved to hug her, Mother instead squeezed a few coins into her hand. "Buy some panuchos at the station from the Indian ladies." She picked up a book from the sofa and sat. The book was, Adelita knew, a Russian novel—translated into Spanish—that Uncle Felipe had brought Mother last summer. Mother had made a show of reading it ever since, but Adelita could see by the slow advance of the bookmark wedged in its pages over the last several months that Mother talked about reading it more than she read it.

"Goodbye, Edesio, thank you for taking her. Oh, and goodbye, Adelita. Don't dawdle—you'll miss the train."

"Why are you doing this?" Adelita asked.

"Because I can't wait for you to see that a convent is your true calling. You might not come to that realization for some time, and in the meanwhile, the rest of us would suffer terribly. Felipe seems more suited to both chaos and sin, so it makes sense that you live with him." She flipped open her book to the bookmarked page and began to read.

"Wait!"

Mother looked up from the book at Adelita, but even though there was so much wrong with what was happening, she couldn't think of what to say. Adelita instead focused on the book. "May I take that book with me?" she asked, and added, nodding, "to read, I mean."

Mother was affronted. "I haven't finished it." She clutched it to her chest and stood as though she were about to leave the room. "You won't be without—Rosario has packed the books I gave you for Christmas." She added, "and that disgusting photograph."

The telephone rang with an angry sound then, causing Rosario to yelp. Neither Rosario nor Grandmother had adjusted to the presence of the telephone in the house. It stood on a small table near the front door and was of the candlestick variety, with a mouthpiece at the top of its narrow body, and a U-shaped cradle in which the earpiece rested. The first time it had rung, on the same day it was installed, Grandmother had retrieved Father's shotgun from under the sofa, the same gun he was holding when the men on horseback murdered him in the street. Grandmother threatened to shoot the telephone if it made that sound again. Uncle Felipe had laughed and gently taken the gun from her. She began to laugh, also, and told him the telephone could stay but she would not agree to install electric lights, which would surely electrocute them all.

On New Year's Day, 1923, however, no one was laughing.

"Answer that, Brother," Mother said, in an even voice.

Uncle Edesio answered. He began to speak but was cut off by the caller. He listened and started to ask a question but was again interrupted. "I understand," he said at last. "It's madness, and I don't understand why, but I understand what happened." He placed the earpiece in the cradle and set the telephone back on the table.

Uncle Edsio told the others that there'd been a bombing at the train station in Mérida a few minutes before, just moments before Felipe arrived to catch the electric tram to Progreso to engage in secret negotiations with the stevedores syndicate, which had threatened to strike in the coming weeks. No one knew outside of the governor's office and the stevedore leadership that he would be there.

"There were several casualties, but Felipe was not injured," Uncle Edesio said. "Do you still want to send Adelita to Mérida? It seems our brother is under threat. It might not be safe to be near him."

"Oh, I expect she'll be fine," Mother said. "Adelita has a way of turning everything to her advantage. I expect a little civil unrest won't present an insurmountable challenge." She slid her feet out of her slippers and tucked her legs underneath her on the sofa, returning to her novel. While she read, she motioned with one hand for Rosario to mop the floor around the sofa. Rosario moved past Adelita to do so.

"Who would want to hurt Uncle Felipe?" Adelita asked.

"Who wouldn't," Mother answered, without looking up from her book. "He spits in the eye of God, he wants to take land away from observant people of faith—" she broke off, sputtering. "It's not a mystery—every decent person wants him dead." She shuddered in anger and began to speak to her book in a mocking tone. "The great Felipe Carrillo. Our Savior, Felipe Carrillo. The Red Jesus, Felipe Carrillo." She glared at Adelita. "The day will come when they will crucify Felipe Carrillo, too, but he won't rise from the dead like our Lord. He'll burn in the Hell of his own making."

Uncle Edesio scraped together some courage and reprimanded his youngest sibling. “Conchis—hush yourself. You are fortunate that our mother isn’t here to hear you wish harm to him.”

That quieted Mother, but Adelita viewed her as you might a wild animal that has escaped its cage in a zoo. Just because it’s not attacking you at the moment doesn’t mean that it can’t or won’t. Uncle Edesio sensed this, too, and he did not follow up his admonishment with further comment.

He picked up Adelita’s bag. “Come, Adelita. Mérida and its worries await us.”

“What worries? Besides the bomb, I mean.” Adelita didn’t care what the answer might be. She was spinning with her own worries. She had never told Mother how much she hated her, and if she did that now, everyone would think she was just reacting to her expulsion, when she needed everyone—not just Mother—to understand that her hate stemmed from something earlier, deeper, and more primal.

Uncle Edesio shrugged again. “Money. Worries always come down to money, don’t they?” He paused and added, “and now bombs, too.” He went out the front door and Adelita followed. The train whistle blew again, a signal of someone’s impatience. But the train would wait, because it was waiting for Carrillos and the Carrillos ran the government now.

2.

Another Carrillo was waiting impatiently at the train station. Uncle Felipe's oldest daughter, Queenie, stood with her arms crossed, tapping one foot on the platform as Adelita and Uncle Edesio approached.

"I was about to order the engineer to leave without you," she said. "I can't bear another minute here. I will never understand why I return here."

Grandmother, whose name was Adelaida, gave birth to 14 children who survived infancy, who in turn had given her 96 grandchildren (so far), 14 of whom were named Adelaida in her honor (so far), and those grandchildren had gifted her (so far) a further 27 great-grandchildren, including another dozen Adelaidas. That made 29 Adelaidas to date, including Grandmother (who went by Adela), Mother (who went by her middle name, Concepción, in a pointless effort to avoid confusion), Queenie, and Adelita.

Uncle Felipe referred to the entire population of female granddaughters and great-granddaughters in the Carrillo clan as "the Adelaidas," even though the majority of them were named something else. Queenie acquired her nickname when at a very young age she acted like the queen of the Adelaidas, and while the older Adelaidas viewed her imperiousness with differing levels of scorn, the younger Adelaidas trembled in her presence. Now 25 years old, Queenie was married but childless, a condition not easily understood in the family, and she alternated between treating her younger female cousins and nieces as her children and as her servants.

Adelita encountered other members of the Adelaidas everywhere in Motul: in the town square; at the market; in the cathedral; at Siqueff, the Lebanese restaurant; at the cenote where the people who could not afford their own well drew their water; at the Mayan ruins, the only

site in town other than the bell tower of the church where a person could climb and look down upon the Earth. Northwest Yucatán is flat and Motul, some 25 kilometers inland, rises a mere six meters above level of the sea—with nothing in between it and the coast, a decent tidal wave might wipe the town from the map. The other Adelaidas would scramble up the steps of the ruins—said to be an ancient temple to the Mayan gods—and see where Motul and its people fit into the larger picture. But Mother forbade Adelita from participating in the fun at a “pagan house of worship,” and when her cousins would call down from heights for her to join them, she would shake her head and slink away in shame and sadness, bound by Mother’s faith to lower elevations.

“Is that how it is, Uncle?” Adelita had asked once. “That religious people never experience heights?”

He had laughed at her question. “I love your perspective on things, Adelita, the way you question the world. The Catholic priests can climb the bell tower and see what the people cannot. But they don’t share this perspective. Now, the Maya, on the other hand, had many structures of great height.”

“But did the Maya priests allow the people to climb them? Or were their tall buildings just for their priests?”

Uncle Felipe had poked Adelita lightly on the tip of her nose. “See? Your questions that show that you are the brightest of the Adelaidas.

Adelita slid partly behind Uncle Edesio as they approached Queenie on the platform, because if Queenie was going to explode—and that would make the third detonation of the morning, after Mother’s bombshell and Uncle Felipe’s actual bomb—she hoped her uncle’s body would absorb most of the blast.

“Don’t hide from me,” Queenie snapped. “I see you back there.” Adelita slid further behind her uncle’s back.

“There’s been an explosion in Mérida,” Uncle Edesio said as they reached Queenie. “An attempt on your father’s life at the train station.” Adelita peeked over his shoulder and saw Queenie’s face register alarm. The news dissolved her body’s customary tension. She always looked to Adelita like a sentinel in the night, guarding something precious and highly coveted, alert to any signal in the dark that an attack was imminent: the snap of a twig, the click of a bootheel on a brick path, the muffled grunt of an invader. What Queenie was guarding, Adelita couldn’t imagine.

But she softened at the news of the assassination attempt and her body relaxed into a form that better suited her. Uncle Felipe was tall and wide-shouldered—“like my mother’s Basque forebears,” he would say—and he gave an impression of great strength. He had jade eyes that dazzled even his most bitter and dedicated enemies. Queenie looked nothing like her father—she was short and curvy in a way that suggested an assortment of comfortable pillows secreted under her clothing. Adelita was tall like Queenie’s father and had the same jade eyes. And when both Adelita and Queenie were in Uncle Felipe’s presence, Adelita could feel Queenie’s hostility toward her, driven by Queenie’s recognition that her cousin looked more like her father than she did, a hostility that was heightened when strangers would incorrectly assume which of the two was Felipe’s daughter. Adelita couldn’t believe that Queenie could be jealous of her—Queenie was the one who had the body that men liked. Could she not see that?

“He’s all right, though?” Queenie asked.

Uncle Edesio nodded. “Yes, Queenie. There were several deaths, but the bomb went off inside the station before he had entered.”



“Was any one we know killed?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so. The report I received said there several dead, all of them Indians.” He set Adelita’s carpetbag and his valise on the platform and moved to hug Queenie.

But she made a wave with her hand and turned away. “We have plenty of Indians. We’ll never run out of those.” She strode toward the back of the train and climbed the steps to the door into the first class coach. She paused before entering to yell instructions to the conductors to “get those damn Indians aboard.”

“I guess we’re traveling first class today, Adelita,” Uncle Edesio said, and followed Queenie into the first-class coach, toting both Adelita’s carpetbag and his valise. Adelita held back, uncertain, not feeling that she should sit in first class. The trains in Yucatán—like the society itself—had three classes. The Maya crowded into third class, the burgher class sat in second, and the rich—known as the Divine Caste in the Yucatecan press—relaxed in first. Only third-class tickets were purchased—if you looked like you belonged in first or second class, the conductors allowed you to sit there and did not ask you to show any proof you’d paid your fare. If you looked Maya, you were seated in third and directed to display your ticket.

“Every society makes its own rules,” Uncle Felipe would tell Adelita, “but even though they make them separately, almost every society’s rules end up looking the same.”

“Even the Mayan society’s rules?” she had asked once.

“Wise guy,” he had said, but he had been smiling.

3.

By the time Adelita made her way into the first-class coach, her cousin and her uncle were seated across the aisle from one other. She made to sit next to her uncle, but her cousin patted the seat next her. Adelita understood it to be a command, and she nodded in obeisance as she sat next to Queenie, who looked away, as if Adelita might just be worthy of sitting next to her, but not yet worthy of looking her in the eye.

“Why are you coming to Mérida?” Queenie asked idly, while looking out the window on the opposite side of the aisle.

Adelita shrugged. “Apparently I’m moving there.”

“Apparently?”

Adelita nodded and swallowed. “Mother has evicted me.” The words sounded strange, but that is exactly what happened, she thought. On a morning that Adelita was supposed to forge her own path by confronting Mother, she found herself on a path that Mother had forged for her. Adelita struggled to process the turn of events, which still made no sense.

Queenie turned her head sharply and pulled back from Adelita to allow herself a fuller view. “To live with whom?”

Adelita swallowed. “With your father. Uncle Fel—”

“I know who my father is, thank you.” Queenie crossed her arms.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Nothing.”

“You’d better be.”

“I’d better be what?”

“Sorry.”

Despite Queenie’s anger, Adelita felt on safer and familiar ground. Better to be frightened of Queenie than confront the terror of being kicked out of the nest. “Oh, I am.”

Queenie seemed to relax. “Why has Concepción kicked you out?”

“Honestly, I think she’s jealous.”

Queenie snorted. “Of you?”

Adelita nodded. “Yes, she wants to get married again, I think. To Don Bartolomeo.”

“Palma? Bartolomeo Palma? He’s a rich widower—why would he settle for your mother?”

Adelita shrugged and looked down at her lap.

“Why does she need you out of the way?”

“There was an incident. At Christmas Mass. Don Bartolomeo and his sons were there. And Mother tried to make conversation with him—honestly, she was flirting, if you can believe that—but one of his sons had brought me a gift. And Mother was furious and has hardly spoken to me since, well, not until this morning, when she had a lot to say, and now I’m heading to Mérida.”

“Which son? The good looking one or the weirdo?”

“Enrique.”

Queenie smiled and patted my hand. “Well done, Cousin, he’s quite handsome.” She laughed. “Your mother doesn’t know, does she?”

“Know what?”

“That Enrique has moved to Mérida, just in the last few days.” Adelita didn’t know this either, but she kept her face from registering surprise.” Queenie kept talking. “Well, Concepción

just might get what's coming to her. I know she's your mother, but that woman has been awful to all of us since your father died. Especially to my father."

Mother blamed Uncle Felipe for Father's death, Adelita knew. It would have been impossible not to know. She brought it up each time Uncle Felipe visited, and often in between visits. And yet, no matter how unpleasant she made it, Uncle Felipe continued to come, except when he was in jail or in exile or at war. Or, like now, in Mérida, governing.

"If you need any advice, ask me," Queenie said as she squeezed Adelita's hand. "Javier was uncertain for a time, but we got to the altar." Javier was Queenie's husband, who now worked in Uncle Felipe's administration as the state Minister of Finance. Queenie's mother, Isabel, came from the wealthy and landed Palma family—Isabel's brother was the same Bartolomeo Palma that Mother now sought to marry, and Isabel therefore was Enrique's aunt. Adelita realized that meant both she and Enrique called Queenie's father "Uncle."

Isabel told everyone she had "married down" when she wed Felipe Carrillo, blinded, she would explain, by his beauty and raw power. That was a mistake, she would also explain, that she would not allow her eldest daughter to repeat. Queenie, by her mother's arrangement, was introduced in Havana to Javier, the scion of a landed Mexican family who lived in Cuba. It was never clear whether Javier's family's holdings translated into the kind of wealth that you could spend without worry that you would run out of money, but their wealth afforded Javier an American university degree, which in turn brought Javier his father-in-law's trust and respect, and that in turn allowed Javier to become the Minister of Finance.

The train jerked to a halt just then. Yucatecan train engines burned wood as fuel. Trains would make periodic stops to restock the wood car behind the engine from large wood piles spaced out along the tracks. It was a serious offense to steal from those wood piles, but the

Maya, desperate for wood, occasionally did so, especially during the summer rainy season, which could leave a train stranded out in the countryside. In winter, though, there was typically plenty of wood.

Representatives of American, British and German firms would periodically visit Yucatán to attempt to convince Uncle Felipe that he needed to invest the state funds in new technology: telegraph or telephone wires or exchanges, electric power plants, water pumping stations, or coal-burning train engines, which would eliminate the need for the wood piles along the tracks. Uncle Felipe would make the salesmen take the morning train from Mérida to Motul, where he would meet them at Siqueff's for breakfast. He would ride in his private rail car on the same train, and while the salesmen walked the single block to the restaurant, Uncle Felipe would wait for his big red Packard to be unloaded from a flat bed car and drive that same block. He would enter the restaurant, say hello to George and Mary Siqueff in Arabic (it was the only Arabic word he knew), and pretend to be surprised to find the salesmen had beaten him there. One time—

Queenie interrupted Adelita's thoughts. "You're not going to say thank you?"

"Thank you, your help would be welcome," Adelita said, as she listened to rail workers yelling as they tossed splintered logs that landed with dull clunks in wood tender a few cars ahead. "That's the only gift I received today."

"Is it your birthday?"

"Yes, I'm 14."

"Your mother sent you away on your birthday? With no celebration?"

"We celebrated my saint's day two weeks ago. Mother doesn't believe in celebrating birthdays. She says it's pagan."

Queenie shook her head. “So backward. In the United States, you know, they only celebrate birthdays. That’s how it should be: a special day just for you. Half of Motul celebrates St. Adelaida’s Day, for goodness’ sake. Nothing special about that.” She seemed angry, but Adelita couldn’t tell whether it was on her own behalf or Adelita’s. Or on behalf of every woman named Adelaida.

The shouting died down and a few minutes later the train jerked back into motion. Queenie fell silent, so Adelita stared out the window as the train screeched its way slowly through the henequen fields, the rows of agave plants looking like a photo of a military cemetery she had seen in a book Uncle Felipe had brought. The crosses had been laid out \ in perfect geometric fashion, so that no matter what angle you at them from, there were endless rows of them in perfect alignment, in a path to infinity.

The harvested agave wouldn’t go to infinity—it would be pulled apart into sisal fibers, which would be shipped to a twining factory in New Orleans or Chicago, where it would be spun into cord that farmers across the American plains would use to bale their wheat that they harvested using threshers manufactured by the company that owned the twining factories and bought the sisal. Anyone from Motul over the age of six understood the process.

Adelita sensed that Queenie expected conversation from her. “Who would want to hurt your father, Queenie?” she asked. “It’s such a mystery to me.”

“My mother, for one,” Queenie responded. “The way he’s hurt her, and so publicly.”

Adelita couldn’t imagine it. “He’s hit her? And in public?” That didn’t seem like Uncle Felipe at all.

Queenie shook her head. “It might have been better if he had. No, he’s humiliated her, so many times, and last week, he—never mind.” She gave Adelita weak smile. “You’re so naïve,

you know. He's kind to you, and you think he's generous because he spends time with you and brings you books and asks for your opinion, but he is very selfish. And his family pays the price." She stared hard at Adelita. "And when I say 'family,' I mean just that—I don't mean our clan. There's a difference." She crossed her arms again. "Family," she repeated.

Adelita was going to protest and point out that Uncle Felipe was generous. He had given Javier a job, and, well, so many of the clan had moved from Motul to Mérida, where they now worked for the state, and even those still in Motul had government jobs, like Uncle Edesio, who was mayor, and Uncle Benjamin, who was chief of police. But Adelita thought better of it and stayed silent. Arguing seemed to be Queenie's job, and it was probably best not to take on a professional.

"How's that Indian friend of yours?" Queenie asked. Everyone's business was Queenie's business, too.

"Akna? She's not really my friend," Adelita said, uncomfortable.

"Well, you two run around together all the time. People would think that you were twins if you weren't tall and skinny and she weren't short and wide. And if you weren't different shades, of course." Adelita could think of nothing to say to that. Being friends with Akna was Uncle Felipe's idea. But Adelita could hardly tell Queenie to ask her father about it.

"Why don't you spend more time with the Adelaidas?" Queenie pressed. The truth was that Adelita felt ill at ease with both the Adelaidas and Akna—with the Adelaidas because they all felt at home in a large group and couldn't understand how awful it was to be the only child of a religious mother, and with Akna because, well, because. They had been friends at a younger age, and, at Uncle Felipe's urging, Adelita had learned to speak Mayan with Akna, but their lives were never going to be on the same path, or parallel paths, or even intersect once Adelita reached

a certain age. That was how Yucatán worked. And now Adelita had reached that age, but she didn't feel ready to consort with the Adelaidas now either.

“She's gone away, to the coast, to get better. She's had some kind of flu for a few weeks. Grandmother and Uncle Benjamin took her there to stay with family until she gets better.”

Queenie stared at Adelita for several seconds, started to say something, stopped, looked away, and when she looked back, patted Adelita on the knee. “Oh, my,” she said. Then she nodded and looked away again, out the window. She was quiet for several minutes. Adelita didn't know what to think.

Adelita turned to say something to Uncle Edesio, but he had dozed off, eased by the rocking of the train into a slumber where, she hoped, there were no money worries. She opened the carpet bag and removed one of the books Rosario had slipped into her bag. It was, indeed, about the lives of the saints. She was amused to learn that, true to form, there were several St. Adelaidas, although the principal one had been widowed and served as the patron saint of second marriages. Dammit, muttered Adelita, Mother has someone to pray to. But then Adelita laughed aloud: St. Adelaida herself never remarried. Instead, she retired to a convent to pray for the rest of us. If I ever deign to speak to Mother again, Adelita pledged, that will be the first thing I will say to her.



4.

At the Mérida station, all three platforms were filled with uniformed soldiers.

“Ugh,” Queenie said as the train pulled up alongside the main platform, “these idiots.”

“You must feel safer with them here,” Adelita offered.

Uncle Edesio laughed. “Queenie isn’t wrong. They’re morons by design.” As they waited for the conductors to open the door, he explained that President Obregón, who had come to power backed by the Army, feared the Army more than any other force in the country. The history of our Revolution,” he explained, “is that each leader comes to power by overthrowing the man before him the assistance of the Army. Each time, the overthrower acts on behalf of democracy, but later decides democracy is overrated, so he, too, must be overthrown. Obregón vows this has happened for the last time, that he will peacefully hand over the reins next year when his successor is elected.” Uncle Edesio considered this. “We shall see. In the meantime, Obregón is determined to reach the end of his term without interference from the Army. He’s cut the size of the Army by 60%, cashiered most of the officers, and slashed the pay of the foot soldiers, so that only the most miserable remain.”

Adelita looked at the troops on the platform. “Aren’t there any Maya in the Army?”

Uncle Edesio laughed. “Of course not. The only action the Army sees in Yucatán is the occasional flare up of the Caste War. Maya recruits and conscripts would never fight the Maya. So we’re left with white drunks and simpletons.”

The conductors wouldn’t let the second- and third-class passengers disembark until the first-class passengers had exited the train shed. Adelita followed Queenie up the platform, Uncle Edesio lagging behind them, chatting to a porter who was transporting Queenie’s luggage on a handcart. Adelita slowed as she passed a dirty, tattered tarp stretched across a lumpy pile of

oblong shapes at the end of the platform. The porter, no longer invested in the events of a few hours before, was so distracted by his conversation with Uncle Edesio that he nearly ran into Adelita from behind. “Watch it,” Uncle Edesio reprimanded him, but Adelita didn’t turn to see what was the matter. She focused on the tarp, which must have been white once, but was now streaked with what might have been mud and showed stains of various colors. Both at the top of the mound and where the tarp met the floor, it was tinged with a creeping, brownish red.

Uncle Edesio approached a disheveled man in a filthy officer’s uniform. Adelita could smell the man from two meters away—it was a distasteful odor, but she couldn’t identify it. Rum, perhaps, but she couldn’t understand how. By order of the Governor, hard liquor was available only to visiting foreigners, pulque was banned completely, and beer sales were tightly restricted.

“How many dead, Captain?” Uncle Edesio asked.

The smelly officer answered. “Eight died here. They took away another dozen who were injured, but I doubt any of them will survive.” He pointed to one of the concrete pillars extending from the end of the platform to the train shed roof. It was pockmarked. “We think the bomb was in a box with a lot of shrapnel. Ball bearings maybe. Or nails. There was quite a lot of damage.” He didn’t seem troubled to any degree by the report he was delivering.

“Where is the Governor?”

“In his office, surrounded by his security detail.”

Queenie waved impatiently from main entrance to the station. Adelita and Uncle Edesio moved to her, but she exited to the street without waiting for them.

A large, black automobile was waiting out front. “Have you ever ridden in one of these?” Queenie asked.

“Yes,” Adelita answered. “Your father brings his Packard to Motul. He’s driven me around there.”

Queenie sniffed. “Of course, he has. What else would he do?” She sighed. “Javier and I got the same model he did. This will be better than riding through Motul though, because there is actually something to see in Mérida.” She pointed down the street. “Uncle, you walk to the Liga headquarters. I’m going to give Adelita a tour—I’ll drop her there when we’re done.” She pointed to the carpetbag. “You can carry that.” Uncle Edesio sighed and picked up the bag while Queenie and Adelita climbed into the back seat of the Packard.

“Go to the Paseo,” Queenie ordered the driver. “You must see the Paseo de Montejo,” she said to Adelita. “It’s the rival of any street in the world: the Champs Elysee, Park Avenue, St. Charles Avenue, Picadilly Circus—none of them is as beautiful as the Montejo.”

Adelita recognized a name or two. “Have you been to all those places?”

Queenie frowned. “Well, St. Charles, yes, when Javier and I went to New Orleans. The others not yet, but I’ve seen photographs of them in magazines.”

The streets of Mérida were paved, and the Packard purred smoothly past a few horse-drawn carriages and pulled even with another touring car. A well-dressed couple rode in the back. Queenie nodded and gave a little wave by fluttering the fingers of one her gloved hands. The woman in the touring car replied with an identical flutter.

“They’re of the Condado family. You know the Condados, don’t you? Very wealthy, very important—they have the only plantation in Yucatán larger than the Palmas’ holdings. You would do well to get to know them. They can ease your way here.”

“How do you know them?”

“Oh, we see them at the opera and at plays and society events. I must say, some of the couples in the Condado clan were a little icy after the *Revista de Yucatán* named Javier and me Mérida’s best dressed.”

Adelita pondered that. “Don’t you all buy your clothes in the same stores?”

Queenie snorted. “I would never buy clothes in this cow town. Javier and I shop in Havana and New Orleans.”

Adelita puzzled over the idea of a cow town with the most beautiful avenue in the world.

The Packard turned onto a wide boulevard. Adelita gasped. Up to this point, the streets of Mérida resembled the streets of Motul: houses were nearly flush with the street and shared side walls, so that the only windows opened onto the street or onto the back garden. But this boulevard, she could see, was lined with gleaming white mansions that were set back from the roadway and had large gaps between them, so that the houses had front gardens and received light from all four sides. This street looked like photographs she had seen of streets in the United States, except this was grander. The brilliant whiteness of the homes gave it a celestial quality. Mexico, which compared itself unfavorably to the United States in so many contexts, had nothing to apologize for here.

“Stop here,” Queenie ordered, and the Packard lurched to a halt. Adelita heard the Condados’ touring car honk as it screeched to stop behind them. That car must have stalled because she heard its driver curse and attempt to restart it. The engine caught at last, and its driver steered it around the Packard. As it passed, the two chauffeurs shouted profanities at each other while their well-dressed passengers pretended not to notice.

When the cursing had died down, Queenie pointed across the boulevard to a pair of mansions, the height of which struck Adelita dumb. “The Twin Sisters,” Queenie said. The

mansions stood side by side, not identical, but similar enough that you'd think them related. Fraternal twins perhaps. Built in French style, they looked like palaces, each three stories in height, but their high ceilings on each story made them seem much taller. "Only the bell towers of the cathedral, San Ildefonso, are taller," Queenie said. What must it be like, Adelita wondered, to lie down at night so far above the Earth like that? No doubt Mother would think she was sleeping closer to God if her chamber were in such a home.

Queenie slapped the back of the driver's seat and the car moved forward again. They had traveled another block, Adelita marveling at the uninterrupted beauty of the homes, when Queenie ordered the driver to stop again.

"My father lives here," she said. Adelita shook her head at the majesty of the home. It was a single story, but it could have been a castle, gleaming white like every other structure on the street. Two soldiers sat by the curb, resting their backs against a ceiba tree, the lowest meter of its trunk painted white with lime to protect it from ants. Queenie shouted at the soldiers, directing them to stand. One scrambled to his feet, but the other, who wore a black eye patch, lazily opened his remaining eye to see who was giving him orders. "Stand, damn you," Queenie barked again. The soldier with the eye patch belched and went back to sleep. His colleague, gauging from the other man's behavior that no harm would come to him, leaned against the tree and slid down the slick lime until he was again seated on the ground. He crossed his legs and closed his eyes.

"Your mother must love living on this street," Adelita said, hoping to distract Queenie.

"Ha. My mother left for Havana the day after Christmas. She says she's not returning until my father learns to keep his pants on." Adelita frowned at that, and Queenie laughed. "Oh, come now. Even one as naïve as you must know what Daddy is like. Women can't help

themselves—they just throw themselves at him, and he can't resist helping himself to what's on offer." She shook her head at Adelita's innocence, while Adelita's face burned, feeling a fool before her cousin's sophistication.

The Packard continued up the Paseo. A motorbike noisily surged past them just as Queenie once again directed the driver to stop. The driver, not hearing his mistress, kept going until Queenie slapped his shoulder. "Are you deaf, man? Back up." The driver reversed the Packard until they were in front of an elegant mansion.

"This is the home Javier and I are renting. If this year goes well, and we decide to stay in Mérida, we plan to buy it and raise our family there." Adelita felt uncomfortable when the childless Queenie spoke about raising a family.

"It's so beautiful," Adelita said. "You must be happy here."

"Take us to the main square," Queenie ordered the driver, not acknowledging what Adelita said.

The main square featured a gazebo in the center, and was bounded on the east side by the cathedral, which was much larger and prettier than the one in Motul; on the south by the Casa Montejo, a one-story structure in the colonial style, named for the city's founder, that was a city block wide and housed the mayoral offices; on the west, by a two-story building with an arched arcade on the first floor that housed a number of restaurants and shops; and on the north by mint-green, two-story structure, with its own arched arcade at street level. "And that," Queenie said, "is the Governor's Palace."

"Oh," Adelita gushed. "Your father's office is in there? It is a true palace."

"Ha. My father refuses to work there—he's too pure, too holy to soil himself with opulence. No, he works at the Resistance League headquarters, in a dumpy old house two blocks away. I have no idea what the Palace is used for now." Queenie slapped the driver's seat. "To the Liga," she said.

The Packard left the square and turned onto a nearby street on which the houses were all painted a bright, militant, Communist red. The car pulled up in front of the largest one, where Uncle Edesio was waiting on the curb. After Adelita stepped from the car, it pulled away with a squeal.

Adelita and her uncle entered the headquarters of the Central Resistance League—or simply the Liga—where Uncle Felipe had his office. The Resistance Leagues were a group of organizations that Uncle Felipe had founded a few years before. His idea was to establish a system of associations in which people—and by "people," he meant the Maya and the poorer mestizos—would organize to help each other through, as the case might be, collective bargaining, pooling of resources, cooperatives, and so on. The leagues could serve the function

of a labor union, a farmer's collective, a political club, a literary club, an educational association, an adult education center, or whatever need a particular group or community might have. There were dozens of leagues established throughout Yucatán, some local, some covering a broader area. All reported, and remitted a portion of their dues, to the Central Resistance League, of which Uncle Felipe was president. He stressed that the Resistance Leagues were separate from, and served a different function than, the Socialist Party of the Southeast—of which he was also president.

As she walked through the offices, Adelita passed posters on the wall with the Socialist Commandments—it seemed that Uncle Felipe, while an opponent of organized religion, was trying to recast Socialism itself as an organized religion.

The Governor was meeting with several men when Adelita and Uncle Edesio entered. “Gentlemen,” Uncle Felipe said as he stood, “have I ever mentioned my niece Adelita to you?”

“Have you ever not?” muttered one man. He immediately leapt to his feet. “I’m sorry,” he said as he offered Adelita his hand, “your uncle boasts about you so often—‘the brightest girl in all of Yucatán!’—that I forgot you are a real person with feelings. It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Manuel, your uncle’s private secretary.” He bowed and stepped back.

Uncle Felipe introduced the others. The smelly officer from the train station was Captain Trelawny. A more fastidious officer was his superior, Colonel Robinson. And the head of the Governor’s security detail, Carlos, who was dressed in plain clothes.

Trelawny began to hum a tune that Adelita simply referred to as “that song.” It was called “Adelita,” and was a corrido from the Revolution, written almost a decade before, about a young woman named Adelita who served on the battlefield as a nurse. A sergeant falls in love with her and wants her to marry him because he cannot imagine life without her. Both the song and the



image of the woman bravely fighting the dictatorship became so popular that “adelita” had become a term for a female warrior. And despite this popularity, every man introduced to Adelita, no matter his age, thought he was so original and clever that no one before him could have possibly thought to sing her that song.

“Adelita, we were just discussing this morning’s unfortunate events and who might be responsible for this and other attempts,” Uncle Felipe said.

Uncle Edesio spoke. “There have been others?”

“Two that we know of,” answered Carlos. “A shot was fired at the Governor in Kanasín during a recent appearance, and we discovered a bullet lodged in one side of the Governor’s personal rail car.”

“Just as long as they don’t shoot my Packard, everything will be fine.” Uncle Felipe laughed at his own joke. No one else did.

“This is no laughing matter, Brother,” said Uncle Edesio. “Do we know anything about the bomber?”

Carlos answered. “Witnesses saw a tall man—well, they think it was a man—wrapped in a Mayan blanket and wearing some sort of head wrap to conceal his face, place a box on the platform. He ran off, past Mejorada Park toward the Chinese Quarter.”

Captain Trelawny spoke, slurring his words. “We must consider the possibility that it was the stevedores or the rail workers. Both would have known you were coming, Governor: the stevedores because you were heading to Progreso to meet with them, the rail workers because your security detail arrived ahead of time to secure the location.”

Uncle Felipe nodded. “Or it could have been my private secretary, who knows my schedule better than I do.” Manuel, the private secretary, blanched at this. “Or anyone on my

security detail. Or one of my brothers because they are jealous of me. Or even my niece here, because I haven't been to visit her." He sat back. "Gentlemen, we don't have enough information to suspect anyone right now. And I wouldn't be concerned except that they killed and maimed my Maya bretheren." Some two decades before, according to Mother, Uncle Felipe had announced he was part Maya. This was news to his family, and for a time, the family resisted his claim, especially Grandfather, as evidenced by the argument they when the new house was built. But after the Maya vote elected him to the governorship last year—the Maya were 90% of the population—more of the family felt Maya themselves and assumed positions in his Mayan administration.

"Or maybe it was an angry husband," Captain Trelawny said. Uncle Felipe ignored him.

"For the time being, I think regular Army troops should support your security detail," Colonel Robinson said. Uncle Felipe nodded. "So be it. Carlos, work it out with the Colonel. But now I must ask you all to leave so I can greet my niece."

After the men left, Uncle Felipe wrapped Adelita in a hug. He apologized that he didn't have much time to talk, but he offered a quick introduction to what she would be doing at the Central Resistance League: translating government missives into Mayan and typing them. It sounded dreadfully dull, but at least she would be living with him in that castle on the Paseo, that grand avenue.

That's when Uncle Felipe dropped his own bombshell: she wouldn't be living with him afeter all. "I have to think of your reputation, Adelita. A single woman can't live in a home without another woman present. People will talk and you might never wash the stain away."

"When have you worried about what people think?" Adelita wondered, but she said nothing. She was still weighing what Queenie had told her during their journey.

“Come, I will show you your temporary home, until you return to Motul.”

He took Adelita to a small house, squeezed between two other houses up the street from the Liga headquarters, painted red like all the Liga buildings. He walked her through the home, which was very narrow and somber, with shadowy green walls nearly untouched by the little light that came in through the single small window in front. The only other window was in the back. There were just three rooms: a front room, a kitchen, and a single bedroom with two hammocks. The carpet bag with her clothing was already there. “Two hammocks?” Adelita asked when they entered the bedroom.

He laughed. “You walked right by her,” he said, and he led Adelita back to the front room, where she saw a Maya woman in a dark green smock almost the same color of the walls standing motionless next to the front door. She was short—she didn’t come up to Adelita’s shoulders—and she was nearly as wide as she was tall. Her arms were meaty and crossed. Her hair was pitch black and pulled back, and she smelled of charcoal burning beneath a comal. Her face was worn, sun-cracked, and utterly without expression. She could have been 35 or 55 or 85. It was impossible to tell.

“Doña Gracia,” Uncle said, “this is my niece.”

Adelita could not believe she was going to share a home and a bedroom with this figure.

“Uncle, why?”

“To improve your Mayan. To watch over you. To assure you are not lonely. And, as I told you, to protect your reputation—you already suffer because of your association with me. I’m trying to save you from further damage.”

Adelita nodded, grimly. “You might smile,” Uncle said. She nodded again, and she smiled at this Doña Gracia, who Adelita thought looked something like the gargoyles she had seen in a drawing of a cathedral in a French novel Uncle had given her once.

The warmth of Adelita’s smile did not change the woman’s expression.

“Uncle,” Adelita began, but he cut her off. “Don’t judge a book by its cover,” he said, and he left them.

Of all the things adults will tell you, of all the lazy, misguided sayings they fall back on, “don’t judge a book by its cover” might be the laziest and most misguided of all. Doña Garcia was a book you could read completely by her cover. By 14, Adelita had learned that some stern, even grumpy-looking, people turn out to have warm, gooey insides. Some taciturn, withdrawn people who don’t seem to have a thought for anyone but show themselves in times of crisis to be people of great empathy and insight who can help you unlock life’s mysteries. Doña Gracia, on the other hand, Adelita was sure, was exactly what she seemed: an emotionless, dull automaton who moved stiffly through her days without even an accidental moment of contemplation or introspection.

In the weeks that followed, Doña Gracia followed Adelita everywhere, due either to express instructions from Adelita’s uncle or from an overenthusiastic interpretation of those instructions. Because Doña Gracia rarely spoke, at first Adelita felt no need to walk beside her, and she would quicken my pace, her long legs covering ground much more rapidly than the short woman’s, but Adelita could never shake her. She would catch up eventually, and the inevitability of her overtaking Adelita became so apparent that the younger woman gave up trying to lose her and surrendered to her constant presence.

She was, Adelita thought, one more reason to hate Mother.

On those walks, with Doña Gracia tagging along like her Mayan conscience, Adelita got to know the city, while hoping to run into Enrique. She walked up and down the Paseo, past the theater, through the main market. One day, leaving the market through the back entrance, she saw a busy street jammed with vendors' stalls and heard people who both looked Maya and didn't speaking in a strange language.

"What's this?" she asked Doña Gracia.

"The Chinese Quarter," the woman answered in Mayan. "We don't go there." She tugged on Adelita's dress and pulled her away, spinning her until she faced the opposite direction.

"Let's go home," Doña Gracia said. "I'd need a train ride for that," Adelita responded, but she looked back over her shoulder, searching for any sign of the tall man who tried to hurt Uncle Felipe. Maybe, she thought, there's a reason I was meant to be here.

6.

Enrique found Adelita before she found him.

One Sunday morning, a few weeks after arriving in Mérida, there was a knock on the door. Doña Gracia, who had just returned from Mass at the cathedral, answered.

“I’d like to speak with Adelita,” a man’s voice announced. Doña Gracia closed the door without answering him. Adelita forced her way past the woman and swung the door open. She pulled back to focus because she didn’t trust her eyes at first.

“Enrique? What are you doing here?”

He flashed a smile. “I heard you were in town, and I’ve come to ask you to walk with me. Are you free now? I promise not to sing that song.” Enrique had sung it to her outside of the cathedral after Christmas Mass. And Adelita hadn’t minded.

“I don’t mind if you sing it again,” she said.

Enrique took up the song somewhere in the middle, singing, only slightly off-key:

*If Adelita were to leave with another*

*I’d follow her by land and sea*

*If by sea, in a battleship*

*If by land, in a military train*

As he sang, her heart fluttered, just like in a love story. Her knees went soft and shaky, and she felt a little faint. “Whenever I hear that song, I think of your jade eyes.” He shook his head emphatically. “

“I will be right out,” she said. “I have to get something.” Adelita closed the door and cursed her uncle once again. “Now you behave yourself,” she scolded Doña Gracia. “Come on—we’re going out.

When Adelita opened the door again, she and Doña Gracia stepped out onto the sidewalk. Enrique froze, uncertain what to say.

“Doña Gracia, this is Enrique Palma,” Adelita said. The older woman gave no sign that she had heard.

Enrique gave her a deep, ironic bow. “Good lady, it is nice to make your acquaintance.” He smiled broadly and cocked his head slightly in that mock-flirtatious way young men do when they’re trying to charm an older woman.

Doña Gracia gave no reaction.

“Does she speak Spanish?” Enrique asked. “Is she deaf?”

“Sometimes I think she’s a statue.”

He considered this. “I’m wondering—is it even alive?” Doña Gracia didn’t flinch at this.

Adelita shrugged. “It’s hard to say, but she comes with me now.” She added for emphasis, “everywhere.”

He nodded. “I thought we might sit in a you-and-me chair.” Adelita had seen these benches along the Paseo and in the main plaza. They were love seats but constructed so that two people would sit looking at one another. A you-and-me chair was made up of two connected, pedestal chairs facing each other, but offset, so that their rounded backs formed a figure S, the right armrest of one flowing into the right armrest of the other. The folk story surrounding their design was that a Mérida man was concerned that his daughter was meeting with a young suitor in a park, where they would sit side by side on a bench and their legs would touch. He constructed the first you-and-me chair so that only their hands might touch. The effect was quite the opposite from what the father-designer intended. Adelita had seen lovers sitting in these chairs, staring into one another’s eyes, which she doubted did anything to cool their ardor.

Enrique led them to a chair in the main plaza, directly across from the Governor's Palace. Adelita a step behind him, Doña Gracia two steps behind her, a Yucatecan parade of the classes. Enrique stood while Adelita sat on one side, but before he could move to the other, Doña Gracia scrambled into it, with some effort. She was so short she had to half-climb, half crawl into the seat. If she felt any sense of triumph at having thwarted Enrique's plan, she didn't show it. She swung her legs back forth—they didn't reach the ground—as she looked everywhere except at either one of the two young people, as impassively as ever.

Adelita laughed—fairly insincerely—and after a few seconds so did Enrique, but legitimately so. Doña Gracia gave no indication that she heard either one of them.

“Well,” Enrique said, “I'd bet this is exactly how the designer of these chairs intended it to work.” Adelita appreciated his good humor, while she herself fumed at her chaperone.

Standing by Adelita's side, Enrique explained that he was staying at the family's home on the Paseo because he had begun taking classes at the University of the Southeast, which Uncle Felipe had established the previous autumn. Enrique had been educated by a succession of private tutors over the years, but his father wanted him to study at business at the “University of Tulane” in New Orleans—Enrique pronounced it “too-LAH-nay”—and he needed a degree to be admitted there. His father had worked out an arrangement with the new university in Mérida: if Enrique took a semester of classes and did sufficiently well, he would be granted the degree Tulane required for admission, even if he hadn't technically met the requirements for the degree. The rules differed by caste, even in academia.

Adelita asked him if he would have to give up photography.

Enrique pointed to the sky. “Look at the clouds, Adelita. What do you see?”



Adelita looked and saw nothing. Maybe the storm coming. She waited, to make it seem like she was composing her words.

“It looks like there is a storm coming.”

He chuckled. “Well, yes. But look—even in the storm clouds, there is variation, with differing levels of darkness. Not every cloud, not even every section of a particular cloud, gives the same sense of foreboding. The intensity, the imminence of the threat differs, and if you look deeply into the areas of transition between the shades, I think you will find meaning. You know? A statement of dilemmas and possibly some answers. I photograph the sky before a storm and I can spend hours with each print, exploring the difference between light and dark in each one.”

She nodded quickly. She didn’t know what he meant and she accepted that she never would. He’s an artist, she thought, blessed with an insight the rest of us lack. Of course, Uncle Felipe said that about lovers: only one who appreciates why it is worth sacrificing everything for love has insight into the human condition. But Adelita dismissed Uncle Felipe as merely dramatic—Enrique, on the other hand, seemed to possess a connection to the struggle at the core of human existence that even he could not articulate. Only images could express what he grasped.

“I wish I understood more about photography.”

He looked at her earnestly. “Music is the closest thing to photography,” he said.

“Surely you must think that painting is similar to photography.”

He sniffed. “Bah. Painting is like writing a novel, see: in a novel, the author manufactures a representation of the world to make whatever his point is, and he can—”

“Or she,” Adelita interjected.

He rolled his eyes. “Not many writers are women, but, yes, sure, she can mold the world as she likes to support her argument. But photography is more like poetry, which exposes the world as it is, which presents a view of the real world that few are capable of. Poetry is beauty, while a novel is mere time-killing. So, too, photography is true beauty, while painting is mere decoration.”

Adelita touched her hand to her heart. She still had no idea what he meant, but his words sounded important. “Will I see you again?” she asked.

“I hope I can see a lot of you in the coming months. Perhaps we can walk together on Sundays, or attend the theater together, if you have any interest.” He tilted his head forward as if he were sharing a secret. “This isn’t Motul. There is very good theater here, and movies will return soon.” Mexico’s film industry had interrupted production during the most recent spasms of the Revolution but had since returned to the studios. “And there are very good restaurants.” He gave Adelita a smile, and before he strode off, he nodded to Doña Gracia.

For days afterward, Adelita studied couples walking together. She wanted to be one half of a couple, with a lover or a husband, and not with Doña Gracia. During the week, the couples she saw were mostly Americans, divorce tourists probably, waiting out their 30 days at the Hotel Excelsior so they could end their marriages. Yucatán allowed foreign couples to get divorced if they were both present and had been resident for a month. They seemed quite happy, and as Adelita walked, she wondered why people who looked that happy together were getting divorced, and willing to live in a hotel in a foreign country for a full month to make it happen.

7.

On a Saturday morning in mid-January, in the wee hours long before the sun would come up, Uncle Felipe shook the foot of Adelita's hammock to wake her.

"Adelita, get up."

"What?"

"Come, girl, we have to go."

"What's wrong, Uncle?"

"Nothing is wrong, except that we are going to miss it if you don't get moving. Get dressed and meet me outside as quick as you can." Adelita complied, and when she tumbled out onto the street, he was standing with Carlos, the head security man. Manuel was standing several paces away, his arms crossed and a look of contempt on his face. Several soldiers with rifles slung over their shoulders stood in the street. Uncle Felipe was walking backward when he saw her. "At last, she is here. Let's go!" He wheeled and strode off, past his automobile, which was parked outside the Resistance League door, leaving the others to catch up to him. "Bring the car," he shouted over his shoulder.

He led them to the main plaza, which was unsurprisingly deserted. "What time is it?" Adelita mumbled to Carlos. "About four, I think," was his curt answer. He did not seem happy. He kept looking in the shadows: to one side, behind them, to the other side. Adelita saw a flicker of something and realized it was the beams of the Packard's headlamps, reflecting off the barrel of Carlos' pistol, which was now in his hand.

Uncle Felipe stopped near the gazebo in the center of the square. "The people should be here," he said. "They should witness this."

"Witness what?" Adelita wanted to know.

“That,” he said, and he pointed up at the moon.

The sky seemed strange; the moon seemed to be blurry, not sharply defined, even though the sky was cloudless and the moon was fairly full.

“What’s happening?”

He grinned in the moonlight. “It is the occultation of Venus.”

“And when I’m awake that will mean . . .?”

“That the moon is obscuring Venus. It doesn’t happen very often—maybe once every, er, 50 years or so.” He said this in a way that caused Adelita to suspect that he was making it up.

“Doesn’t it look amazing?” He stared into the sky.

“You could have just told me about it later. Over breakfast. At ten o’clock or so. When decent city-dwellers arise. We’re not campesinos, you know.”

He sighed. “Venus is very important to our people. The Maya tracked the movements of Venus for centuries, long before European astronomers ever did. The Maya knew, for example, that transits of Venus—when Venus’s path crosses the Sun—occur in pairs, about 8 years apart, and that pattern repeats every 243 years. Isn’t that amazing? Our people have known that longer than Christianity has existed.”

He looked back at the sky. “And I was born during a transit of Venus, which was interpreted to mean I would be a leader.” Uncle Felipe was then 48 years old. “Yes. This means something, Adelaida.”

“Does it mean that I can go back to sleep? I mean, you were born when Venus was doing something with the Sun. This is the Moon. They are different things. Maybe this means the opposite. Or nothing at all.”

He shook his head and held his gaze into the heavens. “No, this is a sign of something. I tell you I can feel it in my soul, in my soul.”

Her neck began to hurt from staring at the sky. “All right, Uncle. If you say so.”

“Oh, my soul says so, Adelita.” He placed his hands on his hips. “My soul says so.”

A shot rang out from the southeast corner of the square followed by a tinkling sound. Adelita made a dull oof sound as a large weight collided with her and knocked her to the ground. As she fell, she glimpsed a tall figure--body wrapped in a blanket, head covered with a cloth—loping toward the southeast corner, where the figure stopped. She gave two more oofs as the weight on top of her shook once and then again.

Two more shots echoed in the plaza, much closer this time. That must have been Carlos returning fire she thought, but she could focus only on the weight that was crushing her—she couldn’t breathe.

“Are you all right?” her uncle whispered in her ear.

“Can’t breathe,” she managed, at last realizing what was happening. “Get them off me.”

He stood up easily, tossing aside the soldiers who’d leapt on him. He looked behind them to the north side of the square.

“He shot my headlamp,” Uncle Felipe said. He reached down and pulled Adelita to her feet.

“Get down,” Carlos yelled.

Uncle Felipe shook his head. “He won’t shoot us. It’s not us he’s interested in.”

Across the square, the figure took aim again and a flash came from his weapon, just as the light from the remaining headlamp disappeared. Adelita heard a man scream and fall. The light from the headlamp again lit up part of the plaza.

“Get down,” Carlos yelled again. “He shot a soldier.”

Uncle Felipe shook his head. “Only because he walked in front of the headlamp. Everyone get away from the car.” Adelita heard scurrying.

A bang came a split second after, and another moment brought a second tinkling.

“The other headlamp,” her uncle said.

The figure disappeared, heading east on 66<sup>th</sup> Street. Carlos ran after him.

“He was never going to hit us, Adelita,” her uncle said.

“How do you know?”

“He was too good a shot. An amazing shot, actually. He hit both headlights from across the square with a pistol. Most men couldn’t hit the headlight from a distance of three meters. He must have been 50 meters away.” He looked back and forth between the damaged automobile and the façade of the Casa Montejo, on the south side of the plaza, where the shooter had been standing. He shook his head.

“This was just another message.”

Carlos returned, jogging slowly. “I lost him,” he said. He disappeared into the Chinese Quarter.

“Do you think he’s Chinese?” Adelita asked.

“Too tall.” All the men answered as one.

Adelita shrugged. “Well, you’re tall for a Maya, Uncle. Not everyone is the same.”

Carlos and Manuel snickered until Uncle Felipe quieted them with a disapproving look. “Walk her home, Manuel. Carlos and I have some thinking to do. And get that man some medical attention,” he said as the soldier writhed and whimpered. “And Manuel.”

“Yes, Governor,” Manuel said, ready to offer assistance.

“Cable the Packard dealer in New Orleans in the morning. Have them ship two new headlamps. No, better make it four. I don’t think we’re done with this fellow.”

Manuel began to object, but another hard look from Uncle Felipe stilled him. He walked Adelita back toward the red house. Adelita turned back and saw the moonlight flicker off of Carlos’s revolver, which was still in his hand. The air smelled faintly of cordite.

Doña Gracia was standing by the Packard. She surprised Adelita by speaking. “Did you see his boots?” she asked in Mayan.

Adelita had. “They were shiny,” she answered. “Like a soldier’s.”

Doña Gracia shook her head. “No, not like a soldier’s. Like an officer’s.”

Two weeks after dragging Adelita out of bed to stare at the sky, Uncle Felipe summoned her to the Governor's Palace. Manuel had prevailed on the governor to use the office he had sworn never to enter because the American consul was making a call to introduce an American archeologist, a Dr. Morley, who represented an important American philanthropic organization interested in investing in Yucatán. Uncle Felipe was anxious to spur "ruins tourism"—wealthy Americans and Canadians coming to Yucatán to see the Mayan sites.

Manuel argued that Dr. Morley would expect to be received in an official government office. When Uncle Felipe started to say that his office at the Resistance League was the official government office, Manuel had cut him off. "One that looks like an official office, one that befits you, Governor, not one that looks and smells like a flophouse for unbathed anarchists and Communists," Manuel said. He always called Uncle Felipe "Governor" when he was appealing to the man's ego. And the Resistance League facilities did smell terrible.

Dr. Morley was an advance man for a team from the Carnegie Institute, which was bidding for a concession from the federal government in Mexico City to excavate the Mayan ruins at Chichén Itzá, a Mayan site Uncle Felipe had taken Adelita to see the previous October. From what little she saw at the time, the "ruins" consisted of a rough, overgrown series of mounds at the end of a 30 kilometer strip of mud her uncle dared to call a road extending south from the Valladolid railway line. The mud strip was the responsibility of a handful of Maya workers, who were standing around waiting for someone to tell them what to do. Uncle Felipe had gamely referred to it as a construction project. In a little over two weeks, the full Carnegie group was arriving by steamship at Progreso, and over the course of the following 16 days, they would be flattered, entertained and shown the state capital, various Mayan sites to the south at



the edge of the hill country, and, ultimately, Chichén Itzá, traveling first by train and then over what was supposed to by now be a completed 30 kilometer road of crushed stone. “The finest road in Yucatán,” Uncle had claimed several times over the last few weeks, even though he couldn’t know that because he hadn’t been back to the site since that October weekend.

Doña Gracia walked Adelita to the Palace. They saw Trelawny striding down 60<sup>th</sup> Street, approaching the plaza. He paused beside a bush just before the corner and removed a silver flask from his pants pocket. Adelita watched as he took a swig and then tilted his head back as though gargling. He spat out the liquid into the palm of his other hand. He rubbed his hand on his face and neck before screwing the top back on the flask and slipping it back into his pocket. He turned the corner onto the square and entered the Governor’s Palace.

Adelita looked at Doña Gracia, who was furrowing her brow, her customary indifference disrupted by Trelawny’s strange actions. Adelita patted her on the shoulder and made her way to the Palace. She looked back at the entrance to see Doña Gracia still staring at the bush where Trelawny had performed his ablutions with the flask.

“He’s got a steady hand for a drunk,” Doña Gracia called out in Mayan. “And shiny boots.” Adelita thought Doña Gracia was becoming absolutely chatty.

Adelita was perturbed by what she had seen but nonetheless laughed as she climbed the stairs inside the Governor’s Palace on her way up to the meeting, amused at a little joke she made in her head: I am ascendant. She lingered on each step. The thrill didn’t end when she reached the last step. She passed through an archway that opened onto a gallery ringing an interior courtyard. The mint green of the walls was softer and paler here than on the façade fronting the plaza. The pasta tiles of the gallery floor glistened. She looked down at the paving stones of the courtyard, a central fountain that gently gurgled, a few round tables and chairs. That

must be where the mortals eat, she joked to herself, and she imagined she was a goddess on Olympus, confused by the behavior of the humans she saw beneath her.

She was leaning on the railing when Manuel found her. “Adelita,” he said. “The gringos are waiting.” He went into the Governor’s office. Adelita stayed looking at the courtyard for another minute.

“Americans are just like everybody else,” a man was saying in heavily accented Spanish as Adelita entered. He was dressed like he was at a dig: khaki shirt, khaki shorts, green knee socks, dark brown work boots. He was short—his feet didn’t reach the floor. “They like to get rich and put their names on buildings.” He waited for his hosts to laugh, and when they stared back at him, their blank looks turning to confusion, he explained that he had been joking.

“How American,” Uncle Felipe replied. “This is my niece, Adelita.”

Morley nodded to her and stood up. There was another American man in the room, taller, and more distinguished looking, dressed in a charcoal gray suit with a red tie. He paid Adelita no attention.

Colonel Robinson and Captain Trelawny entered then. Adelita wondered where the captain had gone, if he hadn’t come to the Governor’s Office immediately. Robinson was meticulously put together, as he was every time Adelita had encountered him over the last month: uniform clean and neatly pressed with sharp creases in his trousers, freshly shaved, silver hair trimmed short.

Trelawny, on the other hand, was a mess: unshaven, hair unkempt, streaks of dirt on face, fingernails dirty, brittle and yellowed, the elbows of his dark green uniform shirt worn through, his uniform trousers were of a different vintage entirely with patches on both knees. And the smell of rum that had come off him at the train station on the day Adelita arrived in town was

even more intense in the confines of the office. But Doña Gracia was right: his boots were shiny, as though no matter how low a man in the armed forces had fallen, he would care for his boots in a vain hope that it would save him from the perdition manifest in every other aspect of his appearance.

“We need to talk about security, Governor,” Mr. Marsh began. “We are very concerned for your well being, of course—”

“Yes, I’m sure the American government worries about nothing more than the fate of a Communist governor across the water from its southern border.”

Mr. Marsh smiled but Adelita understood that the smile was Marsh’s excuse to pause rather than replying in a manner he might regret. “We are—have you not noticed my red tie?” Uncle Felipe did not react to this. Marsh continued, “and we are, as you might imagine, very concerned about the wellbeing of the prominent American citizens who are scheduled to arrive in two weeks’ time. Do you have any specific plans to assure their safety?”

Uncle Felipe nodded at the military men. “This is Colonel Robinson and this is Captain Trelawny.”

Morley stood up. “Amazing,” he sputtered. “Robinson and Trelawny. An Englishman and a Welshman to guard us in Yucatán.”

Uncle Felipe shook his head. “Robinson here is from Mexico City and is a trusted confidant of President Obregón. Trelawny is from—” he paused.

“San Luís Potosí,” Trelawny supplied.

“But their names,” Morley protested.

“Do you not have immigrants from England and Wales in your own country?” Uncle Felipe asked.

“Why, yes, but, well, America is a place where they would fit in. Not Mexico.”

Uncle Felipe turned to Captain Trelawny. “And why did your ancestors come here?”

The officer shrugged. “All they knew was mining, and when the mines in Wales tapped out, they came to where there were working mines: San Luís Potosí.”

Morley sat back down, his face a deep red.

Uncle turned to the consul. “Mr. Marsh, I trust Colonel Robinson with my life, and he trusts Captain Trelawny with his.”

“That’s all well and good,” Marsh replied, “but Mexican politicians have a habit of dying at regular intervals.”

“To be precise, the deaths may occur at regular intervals, but each politician only dies once.”

Marsh chuckled. “I’m laughing at your joke, Governor, but none of this is funny, I’m afraid. The Carnegie Institute has asked for my personal assurance that its people will be safe here. Might I make a suggestion—and I hope you aren’t offended by it—but could you pledge never to stand too close to the Carnegie people? I mean you can stand with Morley here, and I understand that there is a journalist coming who wants to interview you, but if you could keep your distance from the senior Carnegie team members, I will cable them with my assurances that security measures will be adequate, with one other caveat.”

Morley appeared stung by a suggestion that he was not indispensable. Uncle Felipe laughed. “Keep the Mexican Communist away from the God-fearing Americans?” He turned to Morley. “Well, Dr. Morley, it looks like you and I will have a grand time together.” And to Marsh, he posed a question. “What is the caveat?”

“It would also be helpful if there were a significant, visible troop presence. That would be reassuring to the members of the delegation.”

“Wouldn’t that make them more nervous?”

“Governor, in my country we were deathly afraid of anarchists for decades. We have only overcome our fear of anarchists by becoming deathly afraid of Communists. Trust me: our people are reassured when they are surrounded by men with guns, as long as those men are in uniform and not cheap suits.”

“What about cheap uniforms?” Captain Trelawny asked. He burped as soon as he finished his question, which squelched any possibility of getting an answer.

“A troop presence can be arranged,” Colonel Robinson said. He glared at Captain Trelawny.

Uncle Felipe spoke to the officers. “Robinson, Trelawny—you can go.” He turned to the rest of the group. “We can address the specifics of the visit now.”

Marsh rose. “In that case, I leave you to it. Archeology is not my *métier*, I’m afraid. I’m not even an amateur. Pyramids and pharaohs and ancient Indian tribes and all that hold no interest for me.”

“That’s just the point, isn’t it?” said Morley, animated now. “Amateurs. Everyone loves archeology now. With this discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb last November, public interest has simply exploded. The British have had to shift an entire battalion to Egypt to keep the tourists—well, and the thieves—away from the dig site, but the tourists keep coming in droves, even though there is nothing to display yet.”

“Why am I here?” Adelita asked Uncle Felipe in Mayan.

Uncle ignored her.

“Tell us about yourself,” he said to Morley in Spanish.

Morley was an excitable sort and launched into a long recitation of his background. He got a degree in engineering from a military institution to fulfill a promise to his father, and then started over at Harvard, where he received undergraduate and master’s degrees in archeology. He digressed with a story about his cousin, who had the same name.

“We are both named Sylvanus Griswold Morley—I go by ‘Vay,’ while he goes by ‘Griswold.’ Now here is the strange part: we are related through our mothers, who are sisters. He was born Sylvanus Griswold Small, but shortly before he began university, his father changed his last name to Morley, hoping his sons would do the same. Apparently, he had been teased his whole life about being ‘Small,’ and wanted to spare his sons. Why he thought it appropriate to take the same name as his wife’s brother-in-law is something none of us could understand, but Griswold changed his surname to Morley, as well, and thus there were two Sylvanus Griswold Morleys at Harvard at the same time, one in Archeology, one in Romance Languages. We used to get each other’s mail, and one time he complained that he had received several love notes intended for me, from various women. ‘I expect,’ he said, ‘that you’ve received some intended for me.’ I shook my head at that. ‘Not a one,’ I told him. That was a lie, of course.” Morley laughed. His Mexican hosts did not. They were trying to unravel the tale and make sense of it, uncertain whether it had been mangled by Morley’s Spanish or a lack of storytelling ability.

“Another joke?” Uncle asked.

“Yes,” Morley said, appearing quite sad at his inability to entertain the others.

“Why am I here?” Uncle asked Adelita in Mayan. In Spanish, he said to Morley, “I think we know quite enough about your cousin now, thank you.” Morley looked chastened.

Manuel tried to rescue Morley. “I went to Harvard. I received a degree in economics.”

“Always nice to meet a fellow Harvard man. Are you the Governor’s economic adviser?”

“I advise him on economic matters,” Manuel said, not entirely untruthfully.

“But do I listen?” Uncle asked.

Adelita tried to play peacemaker. “Have you been to Yucatán before?” she asked Morley. She was mystified by his claim of love letters. He was a slight fellow—he was barely taller than the Maya he was here to study, and he couldn’t have weighed 50 kilos. When they shook hands earlier, the top of his head barely reached Adelita’s chin.

“Three times,” he said, excited again. “Once I was with an expedition in Guatemala and British Honduras. We accidentally crossed into Yucatán and nearly paid for it with our lives. In fact, our leader was shot off the horse he was riding by some rubber plantation workers. Rough sorts. We barely got away with his corpse.”

“It’s rough country down there,” Uncle said. “It’s where I learned to speak Mayan, working on a rubber plantation.”

Morley nodded. “Indeed, Governor, very rough indeed. A second time, a dozen years or so back, I came to the ruins at Uxmal, and then went to Chichén Itza, where I did some early sketches. Sadly, I became quite ill with malaria and had to leave too soon. The Revolution broke out shortly afterward and I couldn’t return.” He became pensive at that, as though the Mexicans weren’t in the room with him any longer. “Oh,” he said, suddenly remembering them. “And the third time was during the Great War, when I sailed around the coast from Guatemala up to Progreso with an archeological expedition.”

“With the spying expedition, you mean,” Uncle said.

“You know about that?”

Uncle laughed. “You Americans.” He laughed some more. “We knew all about it. The Germans told us.”

“Yes, well, we were charged with examining the coast to see if the Germans were building a secret naval base there. They were not and we reported back that the entire coast is unnavigable—between the reefs and the mangroves, there will never be a single use for it, not from Chetumal in the south to Cancún in the north.”

Manuel was puzzled. “If you were spying for the American government, shouldn’t you keep that a secret?”

Morley shrugged. “I was supposed to get a Navy commission. I never did, so I think I’m free to say whatever I want to about it.” He wanted to go over the list of the members of the visiting delegation. They were listed, Morley explained, in order of importance (to Morley, it would turn out) from most important—a Dr. Merriman, head of the Carnegie Institute, and Morley’s ultimate boss—to the least important, a Mrs. Alma Reed. Virtually all of the men on the list would be accompanied by their wives.

“And who is Mrs. Reed?”

“Well, in truth, she’s the reason that most of the wives have decided to come.”

Uncle was intrigued. “Because the other women admire her?”

“Er, no, not exactly. She’s a journalist from the *New York Times* accompanying the mission. The *Times*’ readers are very interested in America’s Egypt.”

“Is that what they’re calling it?” Uncle sounded angry.

Morley frowned. “Yes, um, you know the English are always crowing about the treasures they uncover in Egypt and all they’re learning about an ancient, advanced civilization, and rather



than compete with them in Egypt, we Americans have decided to focus on the ruins of an ancient civilization in our own backyard.”

“Your backyard? Yucatán is your backyard? Not Mexico’s or the Yucatecans’?”

Manuel stepped in. “I believe it’s a figure of speech, Governor, not an assertion of dominion.”

Uncle sniffed at that, and Morley took the opportunity to return to Mrs. Reed. “She’s an American, but already very famous here in Mexico, you know. She was involved in that matter in California last year when she was working for the *Call*, a newspaper in San Francisco.”

“The death penalty case? I thought the journalist was a Mrs.—” He began snapping his fingers as he tried to recall the name.

“Goodfellow,” Manuel offered.

“Yes, thank you, Manuel. Mrs. Goodfellow.”

“That was Mrs. Reed’s pen name, Governor,” Morley said. “The *Times* has hired her away from the *Call* to cover the archeological endeavors here, likely because she is both respected here in Mexico and very interested in archeology. I’m told her goal is to travel to Egypt to cover the explorations there.”

“That’s it? We’re just a steppingstone?” Uncle seemed quite angry again.

Morley put his hands. “You’ll have to ask her, sir.”

Uncle studied the list again. “Where is Mr. Reed? Why isn’t he coming?”

Morley shook his head. “I expect he’s in San Francisco with the current Mrs. Reed. He and the first Mrs. Reed are divorced, I understand.”

Adelita winced. Manuel let out a groan.

Uncle laughed at their groans. “Why is she still called Mrs. Reed if she’s divorced?”

Morley shrugged. “Again, you’ll have to ask her.”

“Do you have a photo?”

“A photo?” Morley seemed flummoxed. “Of a woman I’ve never met? No, sir.”

“Is she beautiful?”

“I haven’t met her, Governor.” Morley looked concerned as he answered. “But she’s an attractive enough divorcee that when her participation was announced, a number of wives who had previously declined to come on the trip reconsidered.” He looked hesitant to continue.

“And.

“And what?”

“Yes, I have heard that she is attractive.”

“From whom?” Uncle Felipe demanded.

Morley hesitated again. “I’m afraid to say this, given your earlier reaction, but from my cousin, the other Sylvanus Griswold Morley. You see, he has a doctorate in Romance languages and teaches at Stanford University, very near San Francisco, where Mrs. Reed worked for several years as a journalist. And when she needed to learn Spanish to help that prisoner on death row, the Mexican boy, she contacted my cousin, and he arranged for her tutoring. He reports that she is quite attractive and that she speaks excellent Spanish. Well, she did speak, but now she speaks—” He broke off.

“Now she speaks what?”

“Well, my cousin believes that while Spain is down at the moment, she will reemerge as a world power, and he speaks and teaches an elegant Castillian Spanish, which is what he taught Mrs. Reed, but she was invited by the Obregóns to visit the Mexican capital last summer, after the boy’s death sentence was commuted, and she stayed in Mexico City a whole month, and

when she returned to California, my cousin was distraught to hear speak like a, well, a Mexican.” Morley visibly braced himself for the reaction to this statement.

Uncle Felipe roared. “Like a Mexican,” he repeated. “And beautiful. And divorced. And intelligent and scholarly and—”

“You might want to wait until you meet her to actually fall in love,” Manuel said in an unkind tone.

“No need to wait,” Uncle Felipe said, rolling his chair away from his desk to give him room to tilt back and stare at the ceiling. “No need at all.”

“Oh, dear,” Morley murmured, in what seemed to Adelita to be a belated recognition of what he had invited.

Uncle sat back and smiled as he nodded his head. “This could be very interesting,” he said, and he handed the list of visitors to his niece. “Work it all out with Adelita.” He turned his chair and looked out the window at the plaza in front of the cathedral.

Adelita held the papers in her hand, not knowing what to do. She looked at Manuel, who shook his head and inhaled deeply in response.

Morley said, “you’ll find me at the Hotel Excelsior, Adelita. Oh, and you can call me Vay.” He put up his fists and then mimed firing a rifle. “Are you a fighter like the girl in the song?” He began to sing the corrido. Adelita had to admit that he had a better voice than Enrique.

After Morley left, Uncle Felipe told Manuel to find out everything he could about Alma Reed. Manuel murmured to Adelita, “civilization is always at risk because men fall in love with women and make bad decisions—your uncle can fall in love with the mere suggestion of a woman. Imagine the peril that puts us in.”

On February 16, 1923, the Ward Line's steamship *S.S. Mexico* dropped anchor three miles offshore from the wharf at Progreso. Uncle Felipe answered the telephone in his office at the Resistance League and spoke briefly with the caller. He hung up and said to Adelita, "the ship has arrived. You and Manuel should go."

Manuel had tried to persuade Uncle to use the Governor's Palace for the duration of the Americans' stay. But Uncle refused, and he refused greet the delegation at the wharf. "You two meet them. They can come here and see what a working public servant looks like." There was no need for Adelita and Manuel to hurry. The disembarkation process would take longer than the electric trolley trip to the coast because the harbor was so shallow that passengers and luggage had to ferried to shore in tenders

"I'm surprised Uncle isn't coming."

Manuel harrumphed at this. "I'm not surprised at all. The stevedores and the rail workers hate him, ever since his 'Resistance Leagues' took over their unions." Manuel did not hide his contempt for the Resistance Leagues when Uncle Felipe wasn't present. He shook his head. "Madness. It's like having a guild take over a syndicate, if you know what I mean."

Adelita did not know what he meant.

Morley was already at the wharf when Adelita and Manuel arrived. Morley was dressed in his safari outfit and pith helmet, as though they were headed to a dig straight from the dock. "Always best to look the part," he said. He had been frightened that no one would be there to greet Dr. Merriman—the head of the Carnegie Institute and "a very important man"—and the rest of the Carnegie team, which included various scholars, of whom surprisingly few were

archeologists or anthropologists. In fact, the team was populated heavily by paleontologists and their wives, apparently looking at this trip as some sort of vacation.

Adelita watched, amazed, as a woman stood amidst the passengers on the tender: tall, dressed in a form-fitting dress, a stylish hat cocked to one side atop hair cut to a short, boyish length, like in the magazine photos of French women that Mother was always prattling on about, the ‘free love’ set. Could she really be a journalist? She looked more like a dancer in street clothes.

“Oh, there’s Mrs. Reed,” Morley said, although he couldn’t have been entirely sure. He was so short that he struggled to see past the small clutch of American expats on the wharf, excited to see their compatriots arrive. Adelita couldn’t understand why the other Americans, completely unrelated to the delegation or its purposes, had turned out. “You could do worse than fall in with the Carnegie’s money,” Morley explained.

Manuel stared sullenly at the dock and braced himself for the flurry of translating to come.

A pushcart operator slammed the lid closed on his container and began to run it to the Progreso train station. The welds on the containers were failing, and the melting ice dripped out of one corner as the man hurried. A group of cats swarmed about him, trying to catch a droplet or two of the fish flavored runoff as they moved.

Manuel put his hand on Adelita’s shoulder as he leaned forward and pointed. “There,” he said. “That’s your uncle’s doing. The breweries developed a lot of ice making capacity as the Great War ended and investment started to flow in again. Felipe wants more ice, but he restricted the consumption of beer, so the ice factories reduced production. He thinks we can use the ice anyway, so he pays them to stay open and we struggle to find new uses for the ice. Now we’re

moving fish from the coast to the city, which sounds great, but it doesn't increase the size of our economy. We're just subsidizing transport of fish, which reduces the consumption of chicken and turkey. It's unsustainable. The state can't keep this up, and the chicken and turkey producers are furious and going broke." He shook his head.

Adelita wondered what Uncle would say. Probably that the people are the cats. The Divine Ones get the fish and the rest of us get the runoff, and the Divine Ones hire people to help them to figure out how to reduce the runoff.

"Maybe we should greet the delegation," Adelita said.

"As if it matters," he answered. "Divorce tourism hasn't saved us, and ruins tourism won't either. We're doomed."

A phalanx of troops unloaded the luggage from the tenders—the stevedores refused to touch it—and accompanied the American visitors and their Mexican escorts to the electric trolley, which carried them to the Mérida city center. A handful of the visitors, including Morley, were staying at the city’s finest hotel, the Excelsior, but most, including Alma Reed, were staying at the homes of wealthy families in town. When the Americans’ visit was announced, many prominent businessmen announced their longstanding, but theretofore little noticed, interest in archeology, and they offered to house the visitors. After the Americans were dispatched to their accommodations, the troops returned to their barracks, and Adelita and Manuel and returned to the Liga headquarters, where Manuel kicked off an argument with Uncle Felipe.

“Governor, we need to talk about the fiscal status of the State. It’s not too late to save it, but we need to act now.”

Uncle frowned as he shuffled through some documents. “Even if what you say is true, why must I talk to you about it? Is it in English? Does it require translation?”

“The situation is dire.” Manuel chopped at the air with his hand while he spoke. “The banks will not continue to lend us money.”

Uncle shook his head, but he didn’t look up from his documents. “Javier is in charge of that. Talk to him, if you feel a need to talk about it

Manuel persisted. “Javier tells you what you want to hear. I tell you what you need to hear—the truth. This endless, reckless spending must stop. Your government will collapse if the State defaults, and where will your reforms be then? How will you compensate the henequeneros

for the land you take? How will you build your roads and schools and clinics and everything else you plan to name for yourself?”

Uncle stood. He was much taller and broader than Manuel. “Go back to your people in San Luís if you can’t abide what is happening here. This is the future, Manolo: the people getting what they deserve, at last.”

“They don’t deserve a State bankruptcy, Governor.”

Uncle clenched his fist, and Adelita believed in that moment that he would punch Manuel on the jaw, but instead he left the room, his fist still primed for fighting. Manuel shook a clutch of papers in my face.

“Talk to him—he listens to you, though God knows why. Do you know what these are?” He handed Adelita the papers. They were typed in English, with columns of numbers, too. Each one had a word handwritten on it in capital letters: BASEBALL.

“They’re invoices, for his baseball initiative. He has decided that the future sport of Yucatán will be baseball, God help us, and he’s agreed to pay 50,000 pesos for equipment and the construction of fields. Do you know why? Because he tried to play once in New Orleans and decided that he was no good because he was too tall to bend over to field the ball. ‘The Maya are short,’ he reasons now, ‘so they will be good at baseball.’ And he spends 50,000 pesos we do not have.” Manuel’s nostrils flared. “‘BASEBALL’ is now our internal code for ‘invoices to be paid last.’”

He wagged his finger at Adelita. “And that’s not the worst of it: it’s his car and his home and the mistresses and everything else he spends money on. And having every damn relative on the state payroll—is there anyone in your family not dipping into the State’s purse?” Adelita said



nothing, because Uncle—well, the State—was now paying her a small amount for appearing up at the Liga and sitting at a desk every day.

Manuel wasn't done. "And now this delegation from America and all the banquets and receptions—the federal government should be paying for that, but no, Felipe tries to impress President Obregón by insisting that the State of Yucatán can pay its own way." Manuel put on Uncle Felipe's Stetson, which was much too large for his head, so he had to hold it with one hand so it didn't slide down over his eyes. "Mr. President," Manuel said in an imitation of Uncle Felipe's Yucatecan accent, "we can pay our own way, as long as you do not present our check for payment until next year. Or maybe the year after that."

Manuel tossed the hat on the desk and slumped into a chair. He let the baseball invoices fall the floor. "We are doomed, Adelita. If we tax the haciendas any more they will rise against us. If we don't, we won't be able to pay our bills, which will crush the businesses that supply us and we will have to dismiss state employees: clerks, teachers, doctors, nurses, security forces." He shook his head.

"Can't we just make more money? Print our own or something?"

"I would say that's the stupidest idea yet, but Javier says stupider things every single day." He exhaled dramatically and spoke to the ceiling. "Last week he actually proposed that the State pay its employees with scrip—with IOUs, basically—that the employees could then spend. 'Like money,' Javier said. 'Our scrip will be like money.' I said to him, 'well, that's what money is, you imbecile—it's a promise to pay by the government, and it's only worth as much as—'" He broke off. "Never mind," he said.

"Worth as much as what?"

He sighed. “Its value depends on the confidence of the people that the government can pay. Have you ever witnessed a man puff out his chest and say that someone doesn’t need him to sign a contract because his word is his bond? With governments, that’s actually true—all you have is their naked word for it.” He put his face in his hands, but he flapped them open like doors so he could continue speaking. “A man who won’t sign a contract inspires no confidence and only an idiot would do business with him. And issuing your own pretend money because you don’t have enough actual money will do the opposite of inspiring confidence. Your uncle can inspire anything and everything but financial confidence. And Javier is a part of the problem, not the solution.”

Uncle returned, followed by Alma Reed. “Look who I found at our door—Mrs. Reed.” Uncle’s jade eyes were aflame. He shook slightly as he spoke. His eyes bore into Adelita’s. “Venus,” he said, and then, in Mayan, “I told you so.”

Adelita looked uncomfortably between him and Alma, who at that moment was holding a small notebook and a pencil in her hands while attempting to scrape a baseball invoice from the bottom of one shoe with the other as unobtrusively as she could.

“Governor,” she asked in shaky Spanish, “would you give me an interview now?”

He smiled. “No, of course not.”

She frowned. “Why not?”

“Because if I did, you wouldn’t need me anymore.”

She looked puzzled, so Uncle motioned for Manuel to translate. She blushed at the translation.

“Where are you staying?” Uncle asked.

“With the Condado family.”

“Ah, on the Paseo. A very fine family, I suppose—we are neighbors. But they just let you walk over here by yourself?”

“Actually, I left without saying where I was going.”

“And you found the Liga headquarters on your own?”

She nodded.

Uncle Felipe nodded back at her with exaggerated surprise. “Most impressive, but this will never do. You must be here, in the city center. We must move you to the Hotel Excelsior.”

Manuel groaned.

Uncle gave him a sharp look, but he spoke to Adelita. “Accompany Mrs. Reed to the Hotel Excelsior and get her a room on the State’s account. She is our guest. If I remember correctly, there’s a nice one at the far end with a little balcony that overlooks the park across the street. Manuel, do you know about that?”

Manuel stared at the floor. “I think I’ve heard that, too,” he said, in a deliberately unconvincing manner.

“Well, insist on that one, Adelita,” Uncle said. Adelita looked to Manuel for help, but he just waved his hands. There seemed to be nothing to do but follow Uncle’s orders. She walked out of Uncle’s office and Alma followed her, two paces behind. Adelita did not let her catch up.

As they approached the hotel, Adelita saw in a window’s reflection that Doña Gracia had joined the short parade, some three or four paces behind Alma.

Adelita had never been in a hotel before in her life, and she pulled up in the lobby, stunned by its grandeur. If the Governor's Palace had been a wonder, what was this? The center of the lobby was a three-story atrium, open to the sky. The pasta tile floors gleamed in the sunlight, as bright in the lobby as out on the street.

A second reason she had pulled up was that she was unsure how to proceed. Alma paused beside her, briefly, and crossed the atrium to the front desk. Adelita followed her, resentful that this visitor knew what to do and she, the Mérida resident, did not. Doña Gracia stopped in the open atrium and looked up directly into the sun.

Behind the desk, a man with a badge that said "Manager" was shuffling some papers and looking every bit as officious and persnickety as hotel managers are supposed to look.

"Good afternoon," Alma began. "I would like a room."

The manager didn't look up. He pulled back his jacket and fished a pocketwatch on a chain out of a small slit in his vest. He flicked open the watch's lid with his thumbnail and lifted his eyeglasses as he peered at it. He snapped the watch closed and returned it to his vest. He still had not looked at Alma. He closed his eyes and breathed slowly, as though to calm himself. "It is not yet one p.m., Madam—it is still morning in Mexico." He opened a book with ruled pages and slid it across the counter to her and extended a pen with his other hand. "I will need your name, your husband's name, and the expected date of your divorce. Just one room?"

It was Alma's turn to freeze. She was, Adelita expected, fumbling for the right words in Spanish. Adelita spoke up, not so much to save her as to put this annoying man in his place and to show Alma that she wasn't a big deal in this town. "She's not here for a divorce, sir. She is a

guest of the State, and her room should be billed to the State's account." Adelita hoped she had said this correctly. She blushed deeply even as Alma patted her shoulder in appreciation.

"'Account'? The State's 'account'? Having an 'account' would suggest that the State intends to ultimately pay its bills. There's no evidence of that. Who is directing this—" he moved his hand in a repeated circular motion—"arrangement?"

Arrangement? What did that mean? "The Governor himself," Adelita said, trying to stand taller. The heat of her face would have turned water to steam.

The manager sneered. "Of course. The corner room on the third floor, with the balcony overlooking the park, perhaps?" Adelita blushed even more deeply, embarrassed not only because she had fallen for her uncle's ruse about not knowing the room, but also because the manager knew her uncle's "arrangements" better than she did. Outsiders are not supposed to know your family better than you do.

The manager pulled himself up straight and he shook his head. "No. Absolutely not. I do not run a bordello. Tell the Governor he will have to find some other place for his trysts."

Adelita was taken aback by the manager's open contempt for her uncle. As far as she knew, everyone who was not a plantation owner or who did not don a cassock for Mass—or who was not an assassin—loved Uncle Felipe. And yet, the list of exceptions seemed to be growing by the day. Also, she was flustered because she didn't know what a bordello was. She managed a shaky reply. "She is a journalist, not a woman in a bordello." Her response would have landed better had the unfamiliar word not come out as "berdollo."

The manager chuckled in an unfriendly way. "Yes, well, she isn't staying here unless she is with a husband or with a reputable local lady." He slapped the registry book closed and slid it back to his side of the counter. "Is there anything else I can do for you ladies?"

They had been speaking too quickly for Alma to follow, but the length and intensity of the exchange was making her uncomfortable. Adelita felt Alma move beside her. She didn't really care how Alma felt, but she was furious at her uncle for putting her in this position. There seemed to be nothing to do but tell Alma a lie—perhaps that there were no rooms—and return to the Liga offices. She was deciding on which lie would be most convincing when she saw Doña Gracia standing in lobby, still staring up into the sun. She had to get away from that woman.

She turned back to the manager. She breathed deeply and felt her face cool. “I will be staying with her,” she declared, with some force, “and I am a most reputable local lady.” She reached across the counter and snatched the registry. She opened it—the proper page was marked with a ribbon—and wrote her name on the first open line with the manager's pen, which she handed to Alma. And then Adelita spoke sharply. “I need Mrs. Reed's belongings collected from the Condado's residence. She has been their guest and she is relocating to the hotel so she can be nearer the government facilities that pertain to her—.” She had to pause. Pertain to her what? “To her journalism.” She nodded to signal that any and all discussion was over.

The manager blanched. “Yes, Miss. I will have it done right away.” Adelita felt both triumphant and—this was new to her—important as she watched Alma scrawl her name in the book.

The manager leaned forward and whispered, “there won't be any need to mention this to the Condados, will there?” In an instant, Adelita was crushed. He had robbed her of her triumph—and her importance. He is afraid of the Condados, not me, thought Adelia.

Adelita leaned forward and reassured him in a conspiratorial whisper of her own. “Oh, of course not. And just so there is no problem with the bill,” she added, “be sure to write ‘baseball’ on the invoice.”

“Beisbol?” the manager whispered back.

She took the pen and wrote “BASEBALL” next to Alma’s name in the registry. “Like this,” she said softly, “in large, capital letters. If you do that, the invoice will be routed to the proper department for payment.”

He nodded, looking relieved and grateful. “Beisbol,” he repeated. He had nothing to fear from this young lady, he must have thought—they were allies now.

The Americans' whirlwind was to begin that evening. A large reception was set for the lobby of the Peón Contreras theater in the city center, considered to be the most elegant building in town. Adelita wondered what the event would be like. She had seen Enrique's name on the guest list, and looked for her own, but she knew it wouldn't be there. She was on none of the guest lists for any of the events to be held over the next two weeks.

She reported back to her uncle. "Mrs. Reed is registered at the hotel—the room overlooking the park that you've . . . heard about." She omitted her own registration at the hotel.

"Excellent," he said, ignoring any and all undertones to Adelita's report. "Are you ready for this evening?"

"To spend it with Doña Gracia?"

"For the reception."

"I'm not on the list."

"You're on every list—where it says, 'gubernatorial delegation.' That's you. And Manuel and Carlos and the others."

"But I have nothing to wear."

He sighed. He picked up the telephone, put the cone to his ear and barked into the mouthpiece on the stem. "Get me Queenie." Such was the stature of Queenie and Javier by then that the operator did not need to ask who he meant. When he was connected, Uncle told Queenie that she needed to mobilize the Adelaidas.

"Your cousin needs something to wear to the reception," Adelita heard him say to his daughter. "Adelita, of course." Queenie's words were unintelligible to Adelita, but she heard her



voice, made scratchy by the telephone. Uncle Felipe cut her off. "Just do it. Please." A short squawk from the telephone followed. "Thank you." He disconnected.

"Return to the hotel within the hour," he said. "The Adelaida cavalry rides to the rescue."

"How did you know I was staying at the hotel?"

He smirked but said nothing.

A bellman escorted Adelita up the marble staircase to the room on the third floor. He unlocked the door with a brass mortise key and handed it to her. One end of the key was filigree in a floral design. The other end had the geometric protuberance that worked the lock. She held the key between her thumb and forefinger, turning it back and forth as she contemplated the simple brilliance and beauty of a lock and key combination for the first time. A perfect match, she realized: two things that could not look less alike that are meant for each other and work in harmony to—.

“Miss?” The bellman, an older gentleman wearing a circus monkey’s uniform, had opened the door and was waiting for her. She wrapped her hand around the key and passed through the doorway into a different world. There was light—so much light—passing through sheer curtains covering the three windows that she had to squint. The effect made the room seem like heaven. There was a four-poster bed, a dresser with a basin and a jug, both of blue and white ceramic. Next to the dresser was a polished mahogany armoire. A small writing desk was tucked in one corner.

As her eyes adjusted, she could see that one of the windows was actually a pair of French doors that opened to a Juliet balcony. She fumbled with the knob until the bellman came to her rescue and unlocked the doors. He pulled them open and the sheers flapped in a breeze from the park just across the street. She edged out into the shallow space—it was only deep enough for a shoe—and had a sense of height that surpassed what she’d experienced at the Governor’s Palace. She stood even with the top of some of the trees—only a few palms reached above me. She grasped the iron-work railing and gave it a tiny shake to see if it was trustworthy. It held and she leaned over to look below.

Doña Gracia stared back up at her.

Adelita gasped and stepped back from the balcony. The bellman tipped his cap and left, leaving her to explore her temporary kingdom in the sky. Alma's luggage was stacked in a corner, next to a door she hadn't seen at first. She opened it and discovered a small room with a single tiny window and a cot. She supposed this was to be her bed. She closed the door so the sight of her servant's lodgings wouldn't spoil the experience.

Adelita pulled open the top drawer of the dresser and discovered Alma's underthings. She closed the drawer quickly. She opened the armoire and found her hanging clothes: dresses, blouses—and pants! She ran her fingers along the items, which seemed less private than those in the drawer. Most were cotton, clean and smooth. There was one wool jacket and skirt set—Adelita supposed she had worn that on the ship, which had left New York in winter. There was a long silk dress in a vibrant green, a color Adelita thought didn't really suit Alma.

She closed the armoire just as there was a knock at the door. Before she could answer, the door opened, and Queenie strode in at the head of a pack of trailing Adelaidas, maybe dozen or more, who quickly filled up the room.

Adelita would have to remember to lock the door.

Queenie strutted past her and opened the French doors to the balcony. The other cousins pulled up and watched her pace back and forth on the shallow balcony, taking in park across the street. “Hmm,” she said and reentered the room, closing the doors behind her. “Honestly, I don't know what the hullabaloo is about this room, but I've been hearing about it for years now.” Probably from her mother, Adelita thought.

“So,” she began, ‘what were you planning to wear?’”

Adelita hadn't planned to wear anything because she didn't know she was invited, but she pretended to have had a plan. "I planned to wear a long mestiza, but I don't have one here." A mestiza was a loose white, cotton dress, decorated with colorful embroidery, frequently in a floral pattern. The Maya called it a *huipil*.

Queenie's eyes bulged. "A mestiza? Like some Indian from the country? Are you mad?" She put her hands on her hips. "Daddy asked Javier and me to organize tonight's affair so that the Americans don't think we're a bunch of bumpkins. If you wear a mestiza, you will feel very out of place." She tilted her head to one side. "Maybe you shouldn't go."

Adelita dared a reply. "I thought the purpose of all the events was to introduce the gringos to Yucatecan culture."

"We have more than one culture, you know. Or maybe in Motul you don't know." She snapped her fingers, and the youngest Adelaida in her entourage struggled forward with a parcel wrapped in brown paper. "I've brought an evening gown that might fit." She tore the paper off and revealed a long, shiny gold dress. "Here," she said as she thrust it at Adelita. "I expect it's a little short and might be a little big in the seat and the waist and the boobs, but we will have a couple girls come over and take care of it." She ordered the youngest to go fetch two seamstresses from a nearby tailor's shop.

"Well, put it on," she ordered. Adelita obeyed, with the other cousins watching her. Queenie dragged over a footstool with her foot, not bothering to bend over and pick it up. "Stand on this." Again, Adelita obeyed and the Adelaidas murmured what she took to be approval. "Spin around," Queenie directed, and as Adelita did so, the murmuring grew a little louder, which she took to be a good thing. She relaxed a little and gave Queenie a weak smile. She hated that she wanted Queenie's approval.

“What dances do you know?” Queenie asked suddenly.

“Um, the jarana, of course,” Adelita said. The jarana was a traditional Yucatecan dance. Adelita pretended to be thinking of others, but that was the only dance she knew.

“Not the foxtrot? I mean, can you even waltz?” Adelita had read the word “waltz” somewhere, but she’d never seen it done. And she’d never heard or read the word “foxtrot.” And there were other dances? She became too nervous to answer aloud. She pursed her lips and shook her head no.

Queenie sighed heavily. “The Americans will know all the latest dances, even the old people. Javier and I have learned them in Havana, from actual blacks from America who play real jazz in the clubs. And respectable people like the Palmas will know them, too—they’ll have learned them in Cuba or from instructors here. And I assure you that no one will be dancing the jarana. There will also be some danzón, of course, because the band is from Cuba.”

“That was fortunate to find a Cuban band in Mérida.”

“Fortunate? It wasn’t luck. We hired them to come and play. There isn’t a local band good enough for an event like this. But they’re worth every peso we’re paying them.” You’re not paying them, Adelita thought, the State is. She wondered if there were an invoice status below “baseball.”

“What should I do if someone asks me to dance?” Adelita asked.

“Well, just lie or something. Say you’re injured.” There were limits to her sense of generosity, because she continued, “honestly, how has your mother sent you to Mérida when you’re so ignorant? You’ll stick out like a sore thumb.” She looked Adelita up and down. “At least you won’t be dressed like a country rube. I’m not sure our family could live down the embarrassment if you were.”

The seamstresses arrived, two young Maya women equipped with a basket filled with scissors and pins and needles and thread. “Let the hem down some at the bottom,” Queenie scolded, as if it was their fault that a dress that originally had been fitted for her did not fit Adelita. “And see what you can do about bringing it in at the waist and through the behind. She hasn’t filled out yet, and it will look borrowed if we can’t fit it to her form.” The Maya women nodded and dropped to their knees to start on the hem.

Alma entered the room just then, surprised to find that her hotel room was the scene of a well-attended dress-fitting. Queenie looked Alma up and down and turned to her cousin.

“Is this the new one?” Queenie asked, although she unquestionably knew who Alma was. The story of Alma being relocated to the hotel room with the balcony had spread through the Adelaida network within minutes. The new affluence of many of the network’s members meant they had telephones.

“She speaks Spanish,” Adelita warned.

“I don’t care. The others spoke Spanish natively and I didn’t bother to whisper—I yelled in their faces.” One recent episode, Adelita had learned during her several weeks in Mérida, involved Queenie confronting one of Uncle Felipe’s mistresses on the Paseo and dominated the gossip columns of the local newspapers for weeks.

“She hasn’t done anything yet.” Adelita felt strange defending Alma.

Queenie turned her back to Alma. The others, who’d been staring at the American, took their cue and turned their backs as well.

“This is the Governor’s daughter,” Adelita said to Alma.

Alma extended her hand to Queenie’s back. “It’s a pleasure to meet you,” she said.

Queenie ignored Alma and spoke to the seamstresses. “Fix that up and come to my house. I need to get myself ready for my reception this evening.” She walked past Alma and out the door into the hall. The various Adelaidas looked at each other, uncertain, until they, too, left, streaming past Alma and shouting messages of good luck over their shoulders. Alma turned her back while Adelita changed out of the gown. The Maya women set to work on it.

Alma smiled wanly. “Family? Friends?” she asked.

“Cousins,” I answered.

“All of them?”

Adelita nodded. “I have almost 100. And many of them have children, so we are a full battalion.”

“My, you have such big families. But then I was the oldest of 10 myself.”

“And you have no children?” Adelita regretted this as soon as she asked it, both because it was rude to pry and because there was no reason for her to get to know this woman.

Alma shook her head and didn’t look the slightest bit sad about it. “I feel as though I’ve already raised children. I acted as a mother for so many of my siblings: I fed them and bathed them and cleaned up after them. We had no money to employ a nanny or a housekeeper, so my parents relied on me.”

Adelita wondered what that would be like.

The Maya women told Adelita to try the dress on again. Alma turned her back while Adelita slipped into the garment and stood on the footstool. Alma and the Maya agreed that it was perfect. The Maya women left.

Alma giggled. “Come down off that footstool and join me,” she said. “You can change out of that lovely dress and we can talk.”

“It’s a very pretty dress,” Alma said over her shoulder as she lifted a small case onto the desk. She flicked two latches and flipped the top open to reveal a small typewriter. “I’m sorry—I have to type up some notes. I hope I don’t disturb you.” Adelita watched her as the typewriter keys clacked and she pulled the carriage return lever, sending the platen back to the other side and shifting the paper up. What an amazing machine. Adelita used one at the Liga headquarters, but it had to be three times the size of Alma’s portable unit.

And what must it be like, Adelita wondered, to be in control of not only the machine, but the words you were typing. When she typed documents at the Liga—translations of sheafs of government edicts into Mayan—she was a mere technician, a scrivener. She couldn’t rewrite the papers she was typing. But Alma could shape the perception of events she witnessed. She controlled how people viewed the things she saw. And that mattered. Her words saved a Mexican boy from Death Row—when he was arrested, he was 16, just two years older than Adelita. Morley, who had been constantly seeking out companions to talk to while waiting for the Americans to arrive, had told her the full story the other day when he arrived uninvited at the Liga headquarters.

As Alma typed, she looked like she hadn’t a doubt in her head, whereas that seemed to be all Adelita had. She must have felt Adelita staring at her, because she turned to give her a smile. She cranked the platen knob to move the paper up a few inches. With a pencil, she made a note and then cranked the knob the other direction to move the paper back into place.

“So many mistakes.” She shook her head, as though doubting herself, and began to type again.



That, Adelita understood, was not actual self-doubt. A mis-hit key was not a mistake that caused you to doubt yourself. And strangely, Adelita found herself wanting to be like this American, this outsider.

“You look stunning,” Alma said as they walked the two blocks to the theater, arm in arm. She was dressed for a more modest event, and Adelita felt she should have warned her about what Queenie had planned. I should have told her to wear the green gown, Adelita thought. “You do, too,” she lied. Alma stopped and Adelita was worried that the trailing Doña Gracia would run into us from behind. “My dear girl,” she said, “I am dressed smartly, but not elegantly. I need to be taken seriously by men who are not inclined to take a woman seriously, and I would very much like to not be hated by their wives.” She thought about that for a moment. “But if I had to choose between getting the job done and being hated by their wives, I will always choose the job.” She touched Adelita’s cheek. “You look upset.”

“I’m nervous,” Adelita said. She looked down at the sidewalk.

“Why? Look at you—in that dress, with those green eyes.”

“Jade,” Adelita corrected, before she could stop herself.

“Yes, jade. Every young man is going to want to dance with you.”

“That’s one of the problems.” She explained that she wouldn’t know any of the dances. “And the other problem is that a particular young man is going to be there.” She told Alma about Enrique. As she did, she heard Doña Gracia shuffle her feet impatiently. Adelita gave her an exasperated look and snapped at her. “Do you have an evening Mass to get to?” Doña Gracia didn’t respond.

Alma gave Adelita a sad look. “What are you going to do?” she asked. “About the dancing, I mean.”

“My cousin says I should invent a lie.”

Alma shook her head. “No. Don’t do that. Tell him the truth. If he doesn’t accept it, maybe he isn’t so special.” Adelita nodded as though she agreed, but Alma’s approach struck her as madness.

The theater was ringed with uniformed soldiers, doing their best to imitate uniform soldiers who could stand at attention.

Adelita gasped when they entered the theater. She had passed by outside a few times, with Doña Gracia, but she couldn’t have imagined anything like this. Chandeliers hung from a ceiling that had to be 15 meters high. The floor was marble, topped with plush red rugs. There was gold everywhere—or at least polished metal that looked like gold. Long red velvet curtains hung over tall windows that must have looked into the theater itself.

Queenie and Javier were greeting arriving guests at the door. “You look lovely,” Queenie said to Adelita, and excused herself before acknowledging Alma, leaving that task to an uncomfortable Javier.

There were at least a hundred people in the lobby, some standing, some gathered around tables covered with velvet. The guests were dressed elegantly, many of the men in tuxedos purchased in New York or Washington or Havana. Queenie, Adelita admitted, was right. The women wore evening gowns, except for Alma and Aunt Elvia, but where Alma wore her “smart dress,” Aunt Elvia was wearing a *mestiza*.

A band was playing softly at one end of the lobby. A bar had been set up at the other end. There were large buckets of ice on the bar, likely intended as a show of Yucatán’s modernity and technological capabilities. Instead, the display must have served as a cruel tease to the Americans, who probably thought they were taking a vacation from Prohibition in the U.S. It would never have crossed their minds that the Communist governor of Yucatán, who was

portrayed in the American press as an unrestrained hedonist attacking the moral core of Western civilization, might be a teetotaling prohibitionist himself.

Lemonade was the only beverage on offer. Adelita saw Captain Trelawny at the bar, in a dress uniform rather than his usual tatters, but he was making a show of pouring from his flask into his lemonade.

Consul Marsh approach Alma and Adelita. He nodded to the latter and spoke to Alma in English. “Let’s switch to Spanish,” she said, “so my friend understands. This is Adelita, the Governor’s niece.”

The man introduced himself. “I met you two weeks ago, in my uncle’s office,” Adelita said. Alma snickered.

To Alma, he said, “Reed and Marsh go together, right?”

Alma gave him a wan smile.

He persisted. “Is Mr. Reed here?”

“There is no Mr. Reed,” she answered. Sometimes people struggle to accurately convey their emotions in another language. Alma wasn’t having any trouble. Her exasperation came through in Spanish.

“Ah, pity that. As it happens, Mrs. Marsh happens to be in the United States this month. Perhaps we can dance this evening.” He smiled.

Alma gave him an insincere smile. “Perhaps you can show my companion a step or two—but remember who her uncle is. Adelita, I’m going to speak to some of the delegation now. Will you entertain Mr. Marsh?” And she left them.

Mr. Marsh looked very uncomfortable at this proposal. Fortunately, the band took a break just then, and Uncle Felipe opened the event with a short welcome in Spanish. Vay Morley gave

a much longer talk, also purportedly in Spanish. He offered to repeat his remarks in English, but the Americans demurred. Adelita noticed several American men periodically take swigs from flasks stowed in the inside pockets of their jackets. Trelawny was not alone.

After the speeches, the band played, louder than before. Couples began to dance. Vay Morley was especially busy, dancing with one Mexican woman after another. He seemed attracted to the taller ones, so his face was fairly planted in their chests. For all his flaws, he appeared to be a very good dancer.

Enrique tapped her on the shoulder. “I would ask you to dance, but our cousin has already informed me that you have an injured ankle. A pity.”

“She lied,” Adelita found herself saying. “She was just trying to protect me—she’s so sweet.” She forced a smile, looking exactly like she was forcing a smile. Enrique chuckled. “I expect she doesn’t get called ‘sweet’ too often.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know any of the foreign dances.” And Adelita waited for him—to what? What did she expect him to do? To walk away from her?

He smiled. “No matter—that’s nothing to be ashamed of. You can always learn to dance, Adelita.” He offered her his arm and he led her to the bar for a lemonade. They talked for some time, about what Adelita wouldn’t be able to remember. A bell sounded.

“What’s that?”

“It’s the signal for us to be seated for dinner. You’ve never been to one of these before have you?”

Adelita looked him in the eye. “No, I haven’t.”

He shrugged. “You haven’t missed much.” He took her arm to walk her to the table where she would be seated with Alma. “Do you enjoy the theater?” he asked.

She looked up and around at the structure. “It is magnificent. It’s the most beautiful building I have ever seen.”

He laughed. “No, not the building. I mean do you enjoy seeing the productions in the theater? You know, the dramas, the comedies. And opera.”

She blushed. “I’m sorry, I’ve never been.”

“Wonderful,” he said. “I would love to introduce you. Would you be free to attend in two nights time?” She started to answer, but she paused, thinking how suddenly complicated this seemed. He added, “I can get a ticket for your companion, Doña Garcia, if I must.”

Adelita shook her head. “Let me confirm my availability with my Uncle Felipe, but I would love to.”

“Perhaps I should ask my Uncle Felipe if you can go,” he said. Adelita laughed, and he added, “I know our families have different, well, outlooks, Adelita, but we’re not exactly the Montagues and the Capulets. I don’t need to call you Juliet and sneak around beneath your balcony.”

“As it happens, I do have a balcony,” she said with what she hoped sounded like a tone of mystery.

There were no more speeches or dances after dinner, in deference to the Americans' travel fatigue. Uncle Felipe, a glass of lemonade in his hand, made a great show of saying good night to Alma before bending to kiss her hand.

“What?” he asked as he stood. Alma had a very perplexed look on her face. “Did I offend you?”

She shook her head. “What’s that? In your glass.” She pointed at the lemonade.

He examined the glass and tilted it. Now he wore a perplexed look and took up a spoon from the table, with which he fished something out of his drink. He held the spoon out for Alma and Adelita to see.

A bullet lay in the spoon.

Someone behind Adelita gasped.

Uncle Felipe made a joke. “No need to react like that, Madam, just because you didn’t get one in your lemonade. I will have a waiter bring you one right away.” He signaled for Carlos, who came running over to take the spoon and the bullet away.

“I’m afraid I must leave you now,” he said, and he walked off after Carlos, the good cheer on his face melting into ire the instant he turned his head from Alma.

Doña Garcia, who’d been sitting on the steps outside the theater, escorted them back to the hotel. In the hotel lobby, Vay Morley invited them to join a group getting drinks in the bar, one of the few spots where liquor sales were legal in Yucatán. They declined and went up to their room, where they discovered that a vase of roses had been delivered and placed on the desk next to Alma’s typewriter.

There was a card with the flowers: “to Pixán Halal, from your Governor.” Alma puzzled over the card. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know what he intends, but those are Mayan words,” Adelita answered. “‘Pixán’ means ‘soul’ and ‘halal’ means a type of plant that grows in water.”

She giggled. “It’s my name,” she said. “In Mayan. Say the first one again.” I did and she repeated it. “Pee-SHAHN. Did I get that right?” Adelita nodded and she looked pleased.

They stood side by side on the Juliet balcony, where the breeze over the top of the trees was lovely. There was a single light in the park across the street, at our end of the building. Adelita told Alma about her exchange with Enrique. “That’s lovely, dear. He sounds like a wonderful young man. Ask your uncle first thing tomorrow.” Then she added, “I had an embarrassing moment this evening. Manuel, who seems like such a nice man, asked me in English what I thought of the Governor, and I answered, only half in jest, that he was my idea of a Greek god, and we were standing with some Mexicans—your cousin was there, Queenie, is that her name?—and Manuel, without thinking, translated the remark. Oh, my, if looks could kill.”

Adelita made a fist and put it part way into her mouth. She wanted to laugh at the thought of Queenie’s rage. “Your advice about telling the truth to Enrique was very good. I don’t really have anyone to talk to about these things. Could I ask you a question? About men.”

She sighed. “Well, I don’t really know the customs here and I don’t want to step where I shouldn’t, so if you’re asking about relations between men and women, I think that it would be better if—”



“About sex, you mean? No, no, I’m not asking about sex. My Aunt Elvia never stops talking to me about it and she gives me pamphlets to read. She’s just opened the first two birth control clinics in the country here.”

Alma laughed. “And here I assumed Mexico would be even more puritanical than America.”

“I’m just trying to understand how men think.”

Alma laughed again. “If there’s one thing you need to understand about men, it’s what I call ‘the grand gesture.’”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s the one thing that truly sets men apart from women. What we want, I think, is for them to cherish us from moment to moment. We want to feel important to them all of the time. But it’s not what we get—instead we get long periods of indifference, even cruelty, interrupted by spectacle. A man wants to woo a woman, and he employs the grand gesture—he hires a fancy carriage or proposes to her in a public setting. He yells at a woman, or worse, slaps her when he’s drunk—does he then get sober and make her feel valuable every day? No, his apology is not sobriety. Instead, he shows her the grand gesture—he buys her a new bracelet. And if he cheats on a woman? He resorts to the grand gesture to set things right. He might buy her a new house. Or flowers, if he doesn’t have the money for a new house. A man thinks he can atone for a thousand instances of disinterest or disrespect with a single moment of excess.” She placed her elbows on the rail and rested her chin on her hands.

And in that moment, Adelita understood why this room was different from all the others with a balcony. A small musical group—two guitars, a guitarrón and a singer—gathered under

the single light in the park and began to play. Other balconies could hear them but not see them, blocked by the trees. They took up a Yucatecan song, and a man began to sing.

“Who is that? His voice is beautiful?” Alma gushed.

“His name is Alfonso Something-or-other—he is my uncle’s favorite singer.”

Alma leaned on the railing and fairly swooned. Adelita would have thought her, like Mother, too old for romance. After a handful of songs, Alfonso called up. “One more song, lady.”

Alma turned to Adelita. “Would you repeat the words he sings slowly, so that I might understand them?”

Adelita shrugged. Why not?

*The profound silence rends with nameless sorrow  
My song of love  
Listen, Alma mía, hear my guitar  
That with me sings and weeps my song*

With that, Alfonso bowed. Alma began to applaud and Adelita joined her. “Tell them to wait,” she said, and she disappeared from the view of those below. She returned with a rose from the vase, which she flung toward the park with a backhanded motion. The rose landed in the street. “Bravo, bravo,” she cried.

The band took another bow and backed out of the circle of light and into the darkness.

“A grand gesture?” Adelita asked her. She nodded, so Adelita added, “yet, you seem pleased with it, no?”

She smiled. “Oh, what you do at a certain point—maybe I mean at a certain age—is lower your expectations.”

Below them, a solitary figure crept out of the darkness that had swallowed the musicians and made its way in the shadows to the flower on the paving stones of the road. Adelita

recognized the shape of a Stetson in silhouette. The figure bent over to retrieve the rose and slipped back into the black of the street beyond the square.

Beside her, Alma exhaled—it was almost a whimper—and placed a hand on her heart.

“Some small gestures truly are grand,” she breathed.