

C A B R A C A N

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

WHEN EDDIE GOT to the godhouse he still had to wait outside for the old man to notice him. Chan Ma'ax sat and mashed yellow pine gum into *pom* for the incense pots and pretended he hadn't seen. Eddie was sweating and his nerves were bad, but the old man demanded patience.

In their time the Mayans had worked out the cycles of the planets and built stone temples so graceful they made Eddie's eyes burn. And all that survived was a dozen wood poles and a thatched roof, and a wrinkled old man sitting crosslegged on a mat.

A tractor coughed in the distance, then crashed screaming into the underbrush. Behind the godhouse the logging road split the dense green of the jungle, its orange ruts filmed over with standing water. To either side the pale ovals of mahogany stumps stared back like frightened eyes.

The air was thick and smelled of cookfires and diesel. It congealed on Eddie's face and neck; if he tried to rub his hands together they would stick, just from the humidity.

"*Oken*," the old man said at last. "Come in, Eddie."

Eddie hiked up his tunic and sat on a low mahogany stool. After a couple of minutes the old man said, "Ma'ax Garcia spent two days in the forest, looking for copal to burn in the godpots. Nothing." He spread his hands, palm down, then turned them over and pretended to search them for copal. He spoke in Maya, but slowly, so Eddie could follow. Eddie smiled and nodded to show he understood.

The Ma'ax Garcia he was talking about was Eddie's age, mid-thirties. He was Chan Ma'ax's oldest son by his second wife. He loved the old man and wore himself out trying to help him.

"They took all the mahogany," Chan Ma'ax said. "So now we can't even make new canoes. I guess now we have to take that one and start using it on the lake." He pointed to the ceremonial canoe full of sugar cane pulp, white bark, and water. It had been fermenting under a covering of palm leaves since the day before. "So what then? No more *balche*? Then it will truly be the end of the world. My sons will all turn into *evangelistas*, no?"

He laughed, showing brown stubs of teeth. His name meant "little monkey" after his clan, and over the years he'd started to look like one: flat nose, hunched back, matted hair. The first time Eddie had been introduced to him as the *t'o'ohil*, the "great one," he'd assumed it was just another joke.

In his more lucid moments Eddie saw himself as a victim of a fashionable malaise, the leading edge of a fin-de-millennium craziness that would peak in another fifteen years. The rest of the time it seemed like some kind of short circuit in his talent that had made him walk out on a career that was just getting started. But it had gotten to the point where everything sounded stale, where he'd go blank on stage and play obvious shit with no energy or heart. And then late at night he'd hear things in his head that were more feeling than music, things he could never find on the neck of a guitar.

He'd bummed around Europe, but the massive, colorless buildings all seemed to crawl on top of him. He'd tried to work up the nerve for Asia or North Africa but when the time came he'd gotten on a plane for Mexico City. And it was there, pissing away the last of his money, that he'd read a book about the Lacondones and gotten on a bus the next day.

He came the last leg in an oil company pickup. The oilmen were lining up right behind the loggers to take their turn in the gang-rape of the Mexican rain forest, and Eddie saw he'd made it just in time.

That had been three years ago. He hadn't expected the Lacondones to make him a better guitarist. All he knew was acid and yoga and macrobiotics hadn't done it for him and he was running out of things to try.

And the Lacondones had opened up to let him in and then quietly closed up behind him. They helped him build a hut and gave him black beans and *balche* and their sour hand-rolled cigars and otherwise left him alone. He felt like somebody's retarded brother that they'd agreed to put up with.

In three years he'd lived a couple months with Nuk, one of Chan Ma'ax's daughters, who'd gotten more and more distant every day; he'd had a week or so with an *evangelista* girl from the Christian side of the lake who was having a crisis of faith and had put deep scratches in his back; and in the last year or so he'd had a kind of clinical sex with the English doctor who passed through every couple of months, who'd lived her whole life in Mexico and never listened to rock and roll.

And beyond the sudden widening of the doctor's eyes when she came, the quick "oh" of her indrawn breath, he'd had no effect on any of them.

"Listen," Eddie said to Chan Ma'ax in halting Maya. "Something's up. Not just the *balche*. Something's going on."

The smile died on the old man's face and his eyes went distant and glassy.

Shit, Eddie thought. He's not going to talk about it.

They were like the Japanese. They had a mental curtain they dropped over themselves that cut them off from somebody who offended them. Eddie knew it was no use to go on but couldn't help himself. "Those bags over there are full of clay. That's why you're keeping them wet. They're for new god pots, aren't they? You're going to break the old pots, aren't you? What's happening?"

Chan Ma'ax looked down at the pine sap. Eddie wasn't there anymore.

He'd been through this before. Once, pretty badly smashed on *aguardiente* he'd brought back from San Cristobal, a kid named Chan Zapata had said something about Chan Ma'ax and the Haawo', the Raccoon Clan. Eddie had read about them in Mexico City. They were supposed to be the last ones with a working knowledge of the Mayan calendar and ceremonies, could even, some said, talk to the gods.

As soon as the word was out Chan Zapata had shut up, too embarrassed even to change the subject. After that Eddie had gone to Chan Ma'ax and then to the rest of the village, but even a mention of the Haawo' turned him invisible on the spot.

Finally young Ma'ax Garcia had taken him aside and said, "It's bad luck to talk about...you know. The thing you were asking about. Okay? It's bad luck even to say the name. I'll probably get bit by a *nauyaca* for even talking to you about it, but I like you. I don't want you to get in trouble."

Eddie could take a hint.

He stood up and said, "Okay, Max. I'm sorry. *No estoy aqui por pendejo*. I'll

shut up.”

He was walking away when Chan Ma'ax said, “Eddie?”

“Yeah?”

“You will be back for the *balche* later, no?”

“I wouldn't miss it.”

“Groovy,” Chan Ma'ax said. It was his favorite English word. It meant Eddie's wrist had been slapped and it was over and now they were friends again. In Maya he said, “Bring your guitar. You can sing for us.”

For a second Eddie wanted to tell the old man who he was, that he wasn't just some clown who happened to know a lot of songs on the guitar. But the old man wouldn't care. It had no bearing on whether or not Eddie was a *hach winik*, a real person.

He walked out into the center of the clearing and let the heat wash over him. He shut his eyes and concentrated on the pores of his skin and felt his sweat break all at once, on the backs of his knees and between his shoulders. It made him feel cleaner, less poisonous.

When he opened his eyes the mountains were in front of him, pristine, sharp-edged, nearly the same color as the pale sky behind them. A few thin clouds floated over them, motionless.

Fuck it, he thought. Time to move on.

Everything snapped into focus. He tasted the dust in the air, smelled the jungle broiling in the sunlight, heard the high pitched drone of the cicadas like dueling synthesizers and, over them, the faint voices of women on the far side of the clearing.

Nepal, maybe. Why not? He thought about ragged, ice-covered mountains, impossibly green terraces set into the sides of valleys, whitewashed monasteries growing out of cliffs. For a second he saw them superimposed on the drab browns and tans of the village.

It would be complicated. He didn't know the politics anymore, didn't know if he could even get into Nepal. He would have to spend a while in the real world, long enough to get his bearings and put some money together.

He went on to his hut feeling lightheaded, precarious. The hut was the same general shape as the godhouse, longer than it was wide, rounded on the ends and thatched with sweet palm leaves. Unlike the godhouse it had walls of a sort, vertical strips of yellow bamboo, braided with string and baling wire.

He opened the door and a woman's voice from inside said, “*Tal in wilech.*” I have come to see you.

“Nuk?”

“Yes,” she said, switching to Spanish. “I need to talk to you.”

He made her out in the dimness. She was barrel chested and thick waisted, not even as tall as Eddie's shoulders, but she was a beauty by local standards. His eyes found the red of the tattered plastic anthurium she always wore in her hair.

Eddie shut the door and sat in the hammock. He smelled the dry, spicy odor of her skin and thought about the nights they'd spent together. “*Como no?*” he said.

“It's about my father.”

“I just saw him. He's getting ready to drink *balche.*”

“Yes,” she said. “They will drink *balche* and in the morning they will go on a pilgrimage to Na Chan.”

“Pilgrimage,” Eddie said, stunned. Na Chan was where Chan Ma'ax's gods

lived. It was one of maybe hundreds of Classical Maya ceremonial centers still covered by jungle, never excavated, never even seriously looted because no one had enough time or money for it. Chan Ma'ax would never talk about what went on there. It was *hach winik* stuff, for real people only.

"He must not go. He's old, almost eighty. The government has told him to stay away from there. If he goes I don't think he'll come back. You have to talk to him."

"I don't know why you're asking me," Eddie said. He didn't want it to sound bitter, but it came out that way just the same.

"He trusts you. He thinks you are a good man. He listens to you."

"He'd listen better to Ma'ax Garcia."

"Ma'ax Garcia is too much a part of the old ways. He doesn't care about the danger."

The old ways. Nuk was awed by cars and planes and portable stereos. She still talked about the TV she'd seen in San Cristobal five years ago. That's what I am to her, Eddie thought. Just one more new thing.

"If he talks to me," Eddie said. "I'll do what I can. I'll tell him I think it's dangerous. Okay?"

"Thank you, Eddie." She leaned over him, kissed him quickly and ran out the door. Her lips were soft and he felt the kiss a long time after she was gone.

Finally he got up and stood in front of his shaving mirror. He didn't like the way he looked. It made him nervous, impatient. He got out his straight razor and cut his shoulder length hair to within an inch or so of his skull. He had to do the back by feel. When he was finished he washed himself with cool water from the clay jug in the corner and the last of his hard pink shaving soap.

There was a bamboo shelf in one corner and he reached to the back of it and took down his shoulder bag. The zipper was stiff from disuse. He got out a pair of jeans and a T-shirt and put them on. The jeans were loose, but he punched a new hole in the belt.

The longest journey begins with a single step, he thought. Already he felt different, cut off from the heartbeat of the village, his genitals armored in heavy denim.

He rolled the mirror and razor up in the blue and orange strings of the hammock and put them in the bag. There wasn't anything else to pack.

He left the bag sitting in the dust of the floor and picked up his guitar. It was a gut string acoustic he'd bought for twenty dollars in the *mercado* in Mexico City. The action was brutal and the octaves were about a quarter tone off, but he'd been trying to wean himself from material objects and it had seemed like a good idea at the time. He carried it back to the godhouse where Chan Ma'ax was waiting.

Everybody else was back from the *milpa*, the corn field on the far side of the lake. Maybe fifteen men sat or squatted in a loose hierarchy on the floor of the godhouse. Eddie nodded to them and sat next to Ma'ax Garcia. Nobody said anything about his clothes. Ma'ax Garcia handed him a bowl of the deep brown *balche* and Eddie took it in both hands. It tasted a little like weak stout, a little like strong *pulque*. Eddie drank it off and Ma'ax Garcia passed it forward to be filled again. When the bowl came back Eddie set it at his feet and wrapped both hands around the neck of his guitar.

Chan Zapata served the *balche* from a big clay pot at the front of the godhouse. He was only in his twenties but they all knew he would take Chan Ma'ax's place when the time came. He had clean features and penetrating eyes

and he worked hard for Chan Ma'ax when he wasn't on a binge in San Cristobal. He made souvenir bows and arrows that he traded for *aguardiente* and whores, and every time he came home his wife had moved out. She would stay gone a week or so and then he'd convince her he'd never do it again.

He would be going to Na Chan if anyone did.

The others sat in twos and threes, drinking, complaining about the Christian converts on the north end of the lake who'd sold off the mahogany and kept all the money for themselves. One old man asked Chan Zapata if he'd saved up enough "arrows" for a trip to San Cristobal and everybody laughed.

If I painted myself purple, Eddie thought, would anybody say anything?

Chan Zapata took the pot back out to the canoe to refill it. The full pot had to weigh close to a hundred pounds and he staggered back with his knees bent and his arms all the way around it. His face was agonized. If he dropped it the gods would never forgive him. Just past the edge of the roof Eddie could see towering black clouds blowing in from the Gulf, erasing Chan Zapata's shadow and turning the jungle behind him into a wall of foggy green.

The rain started just as suddenly, falling in handfuls that cratered the dust outside and filled the air with the rusty smell of ozone. The sky cracked into a web of white lines and the thunder came after it fast and loud enough to make one of the old men jump.

"It's only lightning," Chan Ma'ax said. His monkey face wrinkled with silent laughter. "Nuxi' is afraid Cabracan is waking up." The others laughed and Chan Ma'ax said to Eddie, "Cabracan is what they call in Spanish the temblor."

"Earthquake," Eddie said in English. The old man's smile terrified him. There had been another quake in Vera Cruz just last week, the third in Central America in the last nine months, each one worse than the one before.

"Urt quack," Chan Ma'ax said. "Urtquack." He finished his *balche* and tucked his legs up under him. "You know the story of Hunahpu and Xbalanque and Cabracan?"

"No," Eddie said. The godhouse went quiet.

"Heart of Heaven sends Hunahpu and Xbalanque, the twins, to kill Cabracan. Cabracan, you know, he has been saying, 'I am greater than the sun. I shake the earth and sky and everyone bows down before me.' Heart of Heaven, of course, he can't just let this go.

"Cabracan is walking across the land, shaking the mountains flat, and the work is making him hungry. He sees Hunahpu and Xbalanque and says, 'Who are you?'

"'Nobody,' says Hunahpu. 'We are only hunters.'

"'What do you have to eat, then?' says Cabracan.

"Now Hunahpu and Xbalanque have the idea that they must bind Cabracan to the earth. They shoot quetzal birds from the branches with their blowguns and the giant thinks it is really wonderful because they only use air instead of darts. They cook the birds and they smear some of them with white lime from the lime pits and cook them until they are golden brown and dripping with juices.

"The giant eats the birds that have the lime on them and then he starts walking toward the west again, smashing the mountains. But the lime is making him heavy and it is harder and harder for him to lift his arms or his feet.

"He begins to stumble and fall. Soon he can't get up again and he falls

asleep under the mountains. Hunahpu and Xbalanque dance on the ground that covers him, but they are so noisy that they anger Heart of Heaven. Heart of Heaven wanted to see a good contest and is disappointed that the twins beat Cabracan by trickery.

“So every year, while Cabracan sleeps, Heart of Heaven lets him get stronger. You can hear him sometimes turning in his sleep, making the mountains shake the way he used to. Making the urt quack.”

Chan Ma’ax refilled his bowl, drank it all, smacked his lips. No one moved. They knew when there was more coming, like the audience at a symphony that knew when not to clap.

Finally Chan Ma’ax said, “If you go east, toward the old cities of Chichen Itza or Tulum you can see the land where Cabracan knocked the mountains down. Cabracan is very restless now and soon he will wake up and shake these mountains to pieces.”

He looked at Eddie. “Wearing the clothes of a *hach winik* will not save you.” Eddie thought there was approval in the old man’s voice and it caught him off guard. “Hunahpu and Xbalanque will not save you. They are a part of the old ways. After Cabracan wakes up there will be only new ways.”

The *balche* made another round. The old man had always told sports stories before, Hunahpu and Xbalanque playing soccer with the king of the underworld. Nothing like this.

And then Eddie remembered the book. According to the Maya calendar a five-thousand-year cycle was just now ending. It was supposed to wind up with some kind of disaster that would wipe everything out. The book figured it to be earthquakes.

Jesus Christ, Eddie thought. He’s talking about the end of the world.

“Play something, Eddie,” Chan Ma’ax said.

“Yes, for God’s sake,” Nuxi’ said. “Something cheerful.”

Eddie picked up the guitar. What they liked best were the *rancheras*, the traditional crap like “Cielito Lindo” that they could sing along with, but they liked old rock and roll too. He tried “Twist and Shout” and then “La Bamba” to the same chords but the lyrics depressed him savagely. He stopped singing and just hammered the chords, hard enough to split his cuticles and to pull the strings out of tune.

They had all been singing along, slapping their hands in the dust to keep time, but now they stopped and stared at him. The chords disintegrated into two and three string grips, and then out of it somehow came a melody line, taking Eddie by surprise.

His fingers ground into the neck, slurring and smearing the notes, the cheap strings rasping skin from his fingertips, the music pouring out of him uncontrolled. He didn’t have any idea how long it went on. Finally his hands slowed on their own and the notes trailed off into silence.

He got up. He was breathing hard, like he’d been running. He walked out into the rain and let the cool water run down his face.

After a few seconds he felt the pressure of the *balche* in his bladder. He walked a little further into the jungle and loosed a strong, clear stream into the undergrowth. He was already high, not fuzzily drunk but tight and focused as a laser. It took a long time to piss.

When he turned back he saw Chan Ma’ax with the front of his robe tucked under his chin, using a neighboring bush. He took a breath and let it go. “Listen, Max,” he said. “It’s over. It’s time for me to move on.”

“Okay,” Chan Ma’ax said, smiling.

A vague guilt nagged at him, like he’d left the water running somewhere. He wondered if he was being an idiot. Too late, he told himself. He took another step toward the godhouse.

“Eddie,” the old man said. Eddie stopped. The old man looked over his shoulder and grinned like he was brain damaged. “I have a goodbye song to sing for you.” He straightened out his tunic and faced Eddie and started to sing. The words were meaningless warbling noises but they approximated the lyrics and melody to “Whatcha Gonna Do,” the only hit Eddie ever had, peaking just under the top 40 in 1974.

Eddie’s teeth started to chatter. This isn’t happening, he thought.

“I have that little radio, you know,” Chan Ma’ax said. “I listen to it all the time. I hear crazy things on there sometimes.” He waited a few seconds and then he said, “I don’t have answers, Eddie. All I have are the old ways, and the old ways are finished. You understand?”

Eddie nodded. He didn’t seem to be able to talk.

“We go on a pilgrimage to Na Chan tomorrow. The last time. To say goodbye. You understand?”

Eddie nodded again.

“You want to come?”

“Yes,” Eddie said, shaken, scared, suddenly aware of the rain running down his back, soaking his jeans. “Yes, I want to come.”

“Groovy,” Chan Ma’ax said and walked away.

And then, so gently that afterwards he couldn’t be sure it had really happened, he felt the ground tilt and settle under him, like a boat taking a wave. Enough to turn fear to terror, just for a second. To turn the solid earth to eggshells, to betray everything he’d ever taken for granted.

He wanted to fall down and cling to the rain-soaked grass, but it wasn’t the kind of thing a *hach winik* would do. He stood and watched the rain drops cluster on a stalk of bamboo. The last time, he thought. To say goodbye.

Each drop shone with a fierce and crystalline light. For the moment it was enough.