

MAYAN STRAWBERRIES



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Joseph Radkin Investigations
Book 5

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Before the world was created, Calm and Silence were the great kings that ruled. Nothing existed, there was nothing. Things had not yet been drawn together, the face of the earth was unseen. There was only motionless sea, and a great emptiness of sky. There were no men anywhere, or animals. No birds or fish, no crabs. Trees, stones, caves, grass, forests - none of these existed yet. There was nothing that could roar or run. Nothing that could tremble or cry in the air. Flatness and emptiness, only the sea, alone and breathless. It was night; Silence stood in the dark.

From: **Popul Vuh** - The Great Mythological Book of the ancient Maya.

Preface

One of the reasons for the continued survival of the Mayan culture in the northern highlands of Guatemala, known as the Ixil triangle, is the severe remoteness and isolation of the area. The physical barriers dividing it from the rest of the country are formidable. A steep and harrowing ridge of mountains separates the Ixil region from the more populated areas to the south, while to the north lies the impenetrable jungles of Chiapas.

Travellers who complete the difficult journey to this plateau, nine thousand feet up from the lowlands, might easily think they have gone back in time some three or four hundred years when first sighting one of the few remaining Ixil villages from afar. They would see the same thatched-roof adobe huts that existed centuries ago. Yet once inside the village, certain incongruities would be noticed - the church, the courthouse, the private tiled compounds of the *ladinos* and the agents of the Guatemalan army.

On the outskirts of the village, the forest of pine and oak give way to fields of maize and pastures of scrub-grass before the woods take over the land again. Scattered in the forests, however, are the remains of the pyramid structures built by the ancient Maya. It is at these alters that the relics of Mayan culture are periodically interpreted by the elders, the surviving village shamen known as “daykeepers.”

Few daykeepers are left in the Ixil region of Guatemala. And those that do are barely tolerated by the missionaries and priests who have taken it upon themselves to save the Indians of Central America from damnation. The army, too, sees them as a threat to their authority. So the daykeepers who have survived must perform their rituals surreptitiously and must live in hiding.

In the early days of March, some years ago, one of these daykeepers was carrying out a secret ceremony in the woods adjacent to his town. He had just cast a handful of beans to help him divine the meaning in the complex circularity of time from one of the last hieroglyphic texts that still survived the centuries.

The daykeeper was a small man, like most of his people. Though he had already reached seventy years in white-man's time, he was just beginning to show signs of his age. His broad face possessed only the faintest of wrinkles.

As he knelt down to read the seeds cast onto the alter, a dark shadow passed over him. Perhaps he saw it in the beans.

The sharp blade of a knife cut easily into his throat. His blood ran free, quickly draining from his frail body and filling the alter with a viscous red pool, covering the book of hieroglyphs.

A terrible sound filled the surrounding woods, frightening a starling. The tiny bird was swept up in a whirlwind, sending it on a strange journey. Trapped in a merciless current, the starling soared above the "Trail of tears" which led to the forbidden lands of the North.

Chapter 1

The shrillness of the ring jangled his subconscious like a silicon Siren calling to a time-warped Odysseus. He opened his eyes and looked up from the couch. The room was a blur. Everything seemed off kilter as if the foundation had slipped during the night bending the perpendicular. For a moment he wondered where he was. Then he remembered and wondered where *she* was.

The phone rang again and he reached for it with a grunt. “Polly?” he called down the line. He waited for a response but the only thing he heard was a hollow roar, like an ocean in a sea shell. The sound of emptiness.

Maybe it was all in his head. Tympanic feedback, after all, was one sign of ageing. He was about to hang up when he heard a voice. It was a woman’s voice, but not the one he wanted.

“Joseph? Joseph Radkin?”

“Yeah. Who’s this?” he said with annoyance.

“Elizabeth Manning...”

The voice came from the blue like a born-again memory searching out its maker.

“Joseph? You do still remember, don’t you?”

“Sure I remember.”

“I’m sorry we’ve been out of touch so long. So much has happened...”

“To everyone...everywhere.”

“How are you? Are you still at the paper?” Her voice sounded like she already knew.

“No. I left soon after you and Felix. You’re still together, I assume”

“Still together.” There was a slight hesitation. “We’re living in Ecstasy now.”

“I thought you always were...”

“No. Not the emotion. The town....”

“You mean that farming place up north? What the hell are you doing up there? Milking cows?”

“Running the local newspaper.”

He heard himself chuckle. But it was like coughing with broken ribs - it hurt. To ease the pain, he lit up a cigarette. “Come on!”, he said. “Pull the other one!” He took a drag on his smoke and let the narcotic effect take over as he thought back to the days when Felix and Elizabeth were the Dick Powel and Myrna Loy of the

metropolitan newspaper set - complete with wire-haired terrier. Back then, before the coke-heads ruled the roost, they had been the epitome of three martini glamor.

“It’s true,” she said. “We’ve been there over a year already.”

He watched the coils of smoke from his cigarette evaporate in the air and thought that in a world stood on its head nothing much surprised him anymore. “Must be great for six months or so,” he said, bringing the phone over to the couch and letting his body drop into the cushions. “But after that, what do you find to write about? How many stories can you do on the sex life of the potato?”

“Actually, it’s strawberry country...”

“Strawberries ... sorry.”

“It’s very beautiful up there. Really.” She didn’t sound like she was in ecstasy.

“You OK?” he asked.

“No. That’s why I wanted to talk with you...”

“After all these years? Why me?”

“I couldn’t think of anyone else...”

“Isn’t there a village priest or something?” He took another drag on his cigarette and let the smoke curl from his mouth. “How about Felix?”

“It’s Felix I wanted to talk about.”

“Concerning what?”

She hesitated a moment. “It has something to do with a murder...”

“Felix?” His voice carried a note of extreme doubt.

“Felix and I have been covering a story - a murder case that happened up there a while ago. About a farm laborer who got stabbed in the strawberry fields...”

He stared at the receiver as if it were the middle of the night and someone had just rung up to say that a man had gotten mugged in the park. It was hard to get his juices flowing for something that had become such an everyday occurrence. In the city a simple act of violence had about as much journalistic appeal as a cat puking up a mouse.

“I know little murders aren’t big news in San Francisco, but they are in Ecstasy,” she went on. “And, really, there’s more to it ...”

“There’s always more to it, Elizabeth. You know that. The problem is where it takes you.”

“I hope it takes you to Zuni’s,” she said. “I’ll only be in the city another hour or so and I’d like a chance to talk...”

Chapter 2

If someone had asked him why he went, he couldn't have given them a straight answer. Not that he always felt the need to give straight answers, but this time he couldn't if he wanted.

Maybe it had to do with feeling claustrophobic in the house, he thought as he parked the car around the corner from Zuni's. Or maybe he remembered the scent of her perfume. But one thing was for certain, it had nothing to do with the death of a farm worker in a small California town. And if her object was to get him involved, he hadn't the slightest intention.

Of course, he often felt that way in the beginning. But this had all the makings of nothing times ten. It was the bleeding heart syndrome in spades, he thought. Everyone had a story that tugged at their emotions. Put under a magnifying glass and written with creative adjectives, a housefly with torn wings could be made to seem like Camille. He'd done it himself when he was starving for work. But, in a cynical world,

where the unimaginable was becoming more and more commonplace, few stories amounted to anything significant - really significant, that is. After all, how much blood could you dredge up before it started to seem like water? How much death before bodies became like so many carcasses hanging stiffly on a hook? How much fraud and malfeasance before it looked as if the entire world was on the take and it just didn't matter anymore?

He was thinking of all this as he rounded the corner. Then suddenly another reason dawned on him why he had consented to come. Zuni's was the new place where all the trendy people went to be seen. And, perhaps out of journalistic curiosity, he had a vague sense of wanting to know what was in fashion and why - if fashion had a reason, that is.

Joseph wasn't much into trendy hangouts. The Adler Museum Cafe in North Beach was more his style with its booze, jazz and funk. But Zuni's was different, he had to admit. It was as if someone had taken a bit of the Mojave Desert and shipped it to Frisco - lock, stock and cactus - and then hired an Indian to reconstitute it as a

restaurant. The surprising thing was, in appearance it made a damn fine oasis. But that was before he caught a look at the prices.

Even though it was off hours, the place was sizzling like only a hot spot that's still on the cooker could. Once inside, he realized that in order to find a seat you probably had to have a recognizable face or else wait a few months for the fire to cool down. He didn't have the face nor was he willing to wait till the flames were doused.

He didn't have to. The head waiter approached and looked him up and down. But instead of telling him to get lost, he said, "A lady back there claims to know you, sir."

He couldn't have missed her. Nobody could. She was wearing more dangling turquoise than Zuni's should have allowed, unless they wanted their customers to compete with the decorations. On the other hand, she probably would have competed anyway with her raving mane of bright red hair. When she stood up every head seemed to pop out of joint staring at her.

Trying to be cool, he causally sauntered over to her table, aware that all eyes were shifted on him. And those were powerful eyes, he figured.

Eyes he might have come up against in former investigations - probably having to do with fraudulent stock manipulations. Now he was the focus of their probing stares, he thought, as his stomach turned sour.

“Joseph!” She stood up, sparkling with flashes of refracted light from all her polished bangles. “It’s so nice to see you again!” She gave him a peck on the cheek. “What are you having to drink?” she asked as he thankfully manoeuvred into the chair she had reserved for him.

“Maybe a bicarbonate,” he said.

Her eyes were still a glittering emerald green specked with tiny flakes of orange, he noticed as she motioned to the waiter and ordered a bottle of mineral water. He had always wondered whether that color existed in real life or was a creation of the contact lens industry. But, whatever its origin, it was very effective in off-setting all that turquoise, he decided.

She smiled and he felt that special radiance she could so effortlessly project. Some people have it, he thought, a soft magnetic field that draws things into their orbit - like a tune played

on a magic flute. Depending on the tune, you could either end up happily on Corfu or else shipwrecked on a desert island.

“Catch me up on the last ten years,” she said, reaching out across the table and touching his hand.

“Marriage, two kids, some interesting stories, lots of boring ones, problems with money, problems with editors ... and a growing sense of malaise and discontent.” He poured himself a glass of fizzy water from the bottle the waiter had just left and said “How about you?”

“It’s as if I entered a different universe,” she replied. She said it as if the statement explained itself.

“You mean Ecstasy isn’t?” he said, half mocking, half wondering what she meant.

She shook her head and the glow seemed to melt. “When Felix was asked to resign, I was ready to leave San Francisco anyway. I was sick of the daily grind. We didn’t really know what we wanted to do. Felix, of course, wasn’t worried in the least. He always seems to land on his feet, doesn’t he?”

Joseph nodded. He knew only too well.

“Anyway, I was all in a dither. I wanted to get away, but I needed something to do. Then - well you know how opportunity just seems to fall into your lap sometimes...”

“I’ve heard about things like that happening to people forced to grow up with a mouth full of silver spoons...”

“It can happen to anyone, Joseph,” she said. “You don’t question things like that. It happened and it was as if fate held out her hand and said, ‘Here it is! Take it!’ And there it was. A little newspaper office of our very own in a small town a million miles away from anywhere. A little Eden of fertile land and clear blue skies. A town where people smiled at you and said hello when you passed them on the street...”

Joseph felt his stomach ache worse than before. He emptied his glass of seltzer and poured himself another one. “Is that what Felix was looking for, too?” he said with a trace of disbelief in his voice.

“I thought so at the time,” she said. Her eyes no longer seemed focused on him but had taken on a dreamy look. “Anyway, for a while it was marvellous. We built our house and set up the newspaper - just a broadsheet, really. We

brought it out occasionally, whenever we felt like. No real deadlines. No hassles. Our only problem was learning to set type and figuring out how to proof it without a mirror.”

“Sort of a twentieth century newspaper version of *Little House on the Prairie*, I guess?” he said, barely able to hide his sarcasm.

“It might have started out that way,” she said, fingering a bracelet of silver and jade. “But it evolved very quickly. We started taking it more seriously. There’s something enormously cathartic about going back to the basics of journalism - I mean actually getting ink on your hands ...”

He looked at her hands, so silky white, and could hardly imagine them stained with ink.

“We found ourselves suddenly tapping into the lifeblood of a community in a way we never, ever, were able to do here ...”

He noticed there were lines at the corners of her eyes - lines he hadn’t seen before. He found himself wondering how age had affected her.

“It was both extremely beautiful and very frightening...” she continued.

“Frightening? How so?” he asked.

She had a pensive look; her face was calm but there was also something curious about her expression - something he couldn't define. "There are so many layers to life, aren't there, Joseph? When you scratch one, you expose another. If you dig under that, another one appears. And soon you start to realize that it never ends."

"I always found the layers end pretty fast, myself," he said, "once you get to the bedrock which usually consists of greed, lust or fear. Sometimes all three. Occasionally you might hit integrity, but there's no story in that is there? At least that's what the publishers say." He fixed his eyes on her face, trying to figure out what she really wanted to tell him. "What about the murder?" he asked.

Reaching for her bag, which had been conspicuously placed next to her glass, she opened it and pulled out a photograph which she handed to him. It was a picture of a young man, no older than twenty he figured. He had a sunburnt face, with high cheek bones and jet black hair - it was a face that wouldn't have looked out of place in a migrant labor camp. But, at the same

time, it was different. He couldn't put his finger on what the difference was, exactly. Maybe it was the look of boyish wonder.

"His name is Salvador Garcia," she said, fixing her eyes on him. "He's been in prison for the last three years - serving a life sentence."

"Too bad. He looks like a nice kid," Joseph said, handing the photo back to her.

"The problem is that he's innocent." Her eyes studied his face for a reaction.

"Lot's of people are, Elizabeth," he said. "The prisons are full of them. Would you like me to apologize for the system? Or maybe you'd like to."

"No," she said, without a blink, "I wouldn't like to apologize. I'd like you to listen to what I have to say without feeling obliged to be sarcastic."

"I wasn't being sarcastic," he replied, "I was being honest." But even through his rawness he realized that for her this clearly was a moving subject. "Go on," he continued, as he poured himself the last of the fizzy water. "I'm listening."

“A few months ago we met a woman who lives outside of town. She told us she was a juror in a murder trial some years back and for all those years she was obsessed with the fear that she had convicted an innocent man ...”

“That’s a pretty common feeling, Elizabeth,” he said. “Any juror of conscience finds themselves racked with doubt for a long time after they send someone to prison. If you’re a sensitive person, you’re bound to feel that way - even if there was overwhelming evidence for conviction.”

“I know that, Joseph,” she replied. “It was the rest of what she had to say that got us interested. You see, the young man in question wasn’t an ordinary farm worker - not your typical Mexican bracero, that is. He’s a Central American Indian. It seems that for years now Indian refugees from El Salvador and Guatemala have been streaming over the border into Mexico. Some of them have managed to link up with the migrant labor force, the fruit and vegetable pickers who follow the harvest. Most of these refugees, however, don’t have proper documentation - they either travel with forged papers or else sneak across the Rio Grande into the US

and hire themselves out to unscrupulous farm labor agents who pay them a pittance if they pay them at all...”

“And many of them are angry and hostile,” Joseph cut in. “For good reason, of course. Unfortunately, sometimes they drink and get into fights...”

“Yes, that’s true. And, also, unfortunately, sometimes the wrong person gets arrested when the police come to sort out the mess. A town like Ecstasy, so far north, doesn’t have many Spanish speaking residents. In fact, one farm worker tends to look very much like another - at least to the people up there.”

“Maybe you could get to the point,” said Joseph, not even trying to hide his exasperation. “If you’re saying that some people, especially if they don’t have money for a decent lawyer, are caught in the net because the cops and the courts need convictions and don’t have the patience to follow the niceties of law even to the point of giving a pig’s snout if they snag the right man, I believe you.” His face took on a tired expression as he continued: “And you know what? Even with all the insanity, once in a while, maybe even fifty percent of the time, they

manage to get someone who deserves to be sent away. Sometimes people actually do commit crimes, Elizabeth - even Central American Indian boys with pretty faces!”

She was gazing at him, unblinking; her green eyes were void of anger. There was only sadness in them - at least that’s all he saw. Maybe he had overstepped the bounds, he thought.

He rubbed the side of his face and looked down at his empty glass. “Forget it, Elizabeth,” he said. “I’m in a bit of a mess. Polly took the kids and walked out on me the other day.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Joseph,” she said, reaching out and touching his hand again. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

“She just got tired of me feeling sorry for myself, I guess ... and drowning myself in liquor.” His lips had worked themselves into a tiny, contorted grin. “But she’ll be back. It isn’t the first time and it probably won’t be the last.”

“Poor, sweet Joseph,” she said, trying to look sympathetic.

“Poor, maybe. Sweet, never,” he replied, angry he exposed himself like that. As a diversion from his embarrassment, he narrowed his eyes and said, “How does Felix fit into all of this?”

“I told you, we were both involved in this story
...”

He shook his head. “When you phoned, you told me that you wanted to talk about Felix - and that it had something to do with a murder.”

“The story is far more complex than the simple murder of a farm worker, Joseph. We realized that soon after we began looking into it...”

“How so?” he asked, fixing his gaze on a soft twitch that had started under one of her amazing green eyes.

“I’m not sure. All I know is that once we started asking question about the murder, the attitude of people quickly changed. It was like probing molluscs - at the slightest touch, the shell snaps shut. But it was more than that. Strange things started happening. We suddenly found ourselves very isolated in the community...”

“That’s not surprising, is it?” Joseph said. “I mean, you’ve been there for a while, but you’re still relative strangers. It probably would take you ten years before you really gained their trust. And here you are hanging out their dirty laundry for them...”