

The Flight of the Lost One

by Guy Tiphane

AN ALMOND FELL OFF THE SPOON, bounced on his right shoe, and landed on the dusty pavement near his customer's foot. Diego plunged the spoon in his bucket again, hoping to remain steady if another explosion startled him.

Every year, the firecrackers of December penetrated Diego's mind to haunt him. Signs of celebration for those who lit them, preparing for Christmas and New Year, they awoke in Diego the feelings he had tried to put to rest for many years already. The peddler of nuts – cashews, almonds, macadamia, etc. – not normally affected by the noises of everyday life in Guatemala, the passing of trucks, tuk-tuks, and buses, could not blend the explosions into his soundscape.

So many years had passed since the end of the war and his daily nightmare, that he had managed to forget most of it. He could now make a modest living from the sales of nuts to passersby, mostly tourists with little else to do than considering the flow of good deals coming to their eyes. Over time he had learned a few key words in English –

the names of the nuts, their prices, how good they were in flavor and health benefits. He had also learned to classify his prospects, between those who wanted to taste but would never buy, those who made small purchases to get rid of him, and those who bought and wanted to talk, happy to find someone to exercise their Spanish with. He had difficulty recognizing someone he had met before, and sometimes they remembered him, even calling him by name, telling him how they enjoyed the almonds or the macadamia, volunteering new information about themselves, and asking more about him and his life.

"Where do you get them?" the Canadian woman asked him.

"Chichicastenango," he'd tell her, "on the other side of that mountain."

"Is that where you're from?"

"Yes," he'd say, mechanically.

That being established, he could easily answer the simple questions – did he commute from there (sometimes, but he'd found lodging here in San Pedro because the buses didn't run at night), did he have family there (no),

had he ever traveled outside of Guatemala (no). He couldn't quite understand how the woman could feel more sympathetic towards him because of his answers, but she seemed to enjoy hearing about how difficult life could be here. He wanted to tell her not to worry about him. There were plenty of really poor people around, some to whom he gave a coin occasionally, or half a bag of nuts that he couldn't sell that day for unknown reasons, better than the bag of chips he'd seen kids buying. He had learned that from a young American man who lauded the nutritional benefits of nuts, compared to "empty calories in bright attractive bags."

"Like the bright hook that the fisherman uses to catch a fish," the young man had said. Diego could remember his name, Dan, because it was short and meant "they give" in Spanish, and Dan seemed to be a giver, not wanting anything in return.

In the morning, when business was really slow, he left his livelihood inside his host's place and went to the lake to bathe and appreciate the good life as the tourists did. He could watch the young boys on holidays playing. They jumped off rocks into the lake, making new records in height or splashing

effect, calling each other to watch them, or startling them as a joke. Diego had forgotten how to play.

He had forgotten everything about the earlier years of his life, even his original Mayan name, receiving the name Diego from a restless army officer who needed to write it on his register, after he and his fellow villagers had been rounded up to join. It didn't help that his village of origin no longer existed, one of the many he had helped destroy and erase from the map. Of course, the officers had been careful not to assign the soldiers from the same region to raid villages suspected of supporting the guerilla. Diego and his fellows were convinced that should they, one day, be ordered to kill and destroy their own villages, they would turn their guns against the officers. Some in Diego's regiment had suggested they do that regardless, to rebel because, after all, they were killing innocent people. But these same men had mysteriously disappeared a few days later, so Diego and those who remained decided to see and hear nothing but what guaranteed them to see food and drink at the end of the day. It all made their time in hell more bearable, and who knew if it would end, soon?

It ended, and one day Diego found himself with enough money to buy new clothes and the bus fare back to his village. He had to catch several rickety buses, one after another full of the everyday life he had been taken away from. People went about their business, not minding him as he sat at the back and observed how the conductor could make himself ubiquitous, on the roof handling luggage, at the door calling would be passengers from the side streets, or inside collecting money from those he had seen entering since his last round. Conductors never asked Diego where he went or where he had come from. He didn't talk to the thin men who came to sit at the back and squeeze his healthy body, springing up and down with the amplified swing of the seats once designed for American schoolchildren and smoother roads.

After what may have been eight hours, he was dropped at the junction from where he could walk or catch a passing vehicle. Surprised to see how deserted the dirt road was, he gradually understood, as he progressed towards his village, that it no longer existed. He found himself in the middle of nothingness, realizing that what he had done to other villages had been done to

his by men wearing the same uniform, who had been, like him, rounded up to serve. He had destroyed their villages and their people, as they had destroyed his. Struck by the emptiness around him, he imagined someone had come to clean up and remove all possible evidence of the raid and of the village's existence. Only the trees and the rocks left behind could give him a point of reference to tell him he had come to the right place, and to let him imagine one last time the sights and sounds of the daily life that could be found there, once.

There were no elders to tell him what to do, to tell him about his *nabual*, his protector, or even to give him a name. He sat there through the night, and feeling hungry in the morning, walked back to the junction to undo part of his journey, to return to a point where life could be tolerable again. He roamed the streets of Chichicastenango in search of a survival plan, for he knew very well that the quetzals in his pocket would run out. At the market he heard about the possibility of becoming a nut vendor, if he could acquire the buckets to hang around his neck, the portable scale and the spoon, and of course the supply of nuts. Then he could roam the towns around the

lake where tourists, mostly backpackers and adventure seekers, also roamed. The encounter could generate revenue to eventually pay for his supplies and his own sustenance.

That was how he established himself on the narrow streets of San Pedro, where he also found an amiable family who let him sleep on the side of their house. As if they knew already, perhaps from his dialect, they never asked him anything about his past, nor did they ever talk about the past. Only the tourists seemed curious to know.

He developed an eye for the tourists who asked more questions and wanted to become his friends, because they seemed to buy more nuts from him. They came off the boat from Panajachel with their neat bags, but he knew they couldn't be bothered with buying nuts at that time. He observed carefully where they went, so that he could be there when they came out to explore the town. He'd catch them sooner or later as there was not much for them to do in San Pedro.

Nobody knew where he'd come from. He was just like a bird that'd lost its way and found a branch to rest on.

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THAT NIGHT IN DECEMBER, before the tourists went to the bars where he could peddle, he stopped and sat at an alley-side charcoal grill to eat a small piece of chicken. The woman who grilled the chicken never inquired about his life, as she probably knew he was one of the lost ones, one of the disappeared who had nobody looking for him.

"Not too many tourists," she said that night. She meant to say that once in a while an adventurous, usually young, tourist would ask to buy a piece of chicken, but not tonight.

"The nuts are selling alright," he told her. "So I could get a piece of chicken tonight."

He had practically no desire to be with a woman any more, almost as if the war had taken the life out of him. It was better that way, he thought, as there would be no children made by his own actions to trouble the government and give them new ideas of starting a war.

"Hi Diego," said the woman who'd asked a lot of questions before, as she walked by.

"Hi," he said. "Have a nice day," he added, a phrase he had learned from another talkative tourist.

“Popular guy,” said the chicken vendor. “You go get yourself a wife like that and move to the U.S.”

“She’s from Canada,” he said, trying to look like he found her joke funny. “Very cold there.”

They both laughed, not quite sure what “very cold” meant. Was it as cold as the lake, or even colder, like the early winter mornings before sunrise? The woman had heard about it from another woman whose son was in Canada and had sent pictures of himself in the snow, wearing clothes that made him look like a balloon. She said he couldn’t be outside very much, but inside the homes and the restaurant where he worked, electric heaters reminded him of the Guatemalan sun. That was why people came down south, so they could shed those clothes and expose their bodies to the warm sun for a while.

Diego pictured himself marrying the Canadian woman and moving with her where they wore balloon clothing. Perhaps the balloon clothing would be so warm that it would take him up in the air, like the hot air balloons that Austrian woman built in her shop in the lower part of town. She said it was from a Mayan tradition, most likely a long time ago, for he had never seen

one in his forgotten village. The Austrian woman, who seemed to know more about Mayan traditions than the Mayans themselves, said you made a wish as you saw your lighted balloon going up in the air and disappearing in the night. He had seen the remains of one near a pile of junk by the lake, having fallen there after its flame had run out. Some kids had picked it up and said they could light it again. At the time, he had tried to think of a wish he could make, something like getting a motorcycle or even a bicycle, but all he could think of was to bring back his childhood and his village, as if magically you could bring back the past and know when to change your destiny.

Another firecracker exploded behind him, startling him into a vision of a chapel bursting in flames after they had thrown a grenade inside. The officer had ordered them to round up the villagers inside, then to throw the grenade. The firecrackers of December prevented him to forget, and the images were fresh and clear in his mind as if they were just happening.

He thanked the chicken vendor and walked with his buckets of nuts hanging on each side of the rod he wore on his neck. Perhaps he could find that Canadian woman and talk to

her, but he couldn't think of a way to tell her what he really wanted, which was to forget the past. He needed to make her fall in love with him, which meant he needed to desire a woman again. Those other men who'd never experienced the war were such experts at it, compared to him. They managed to smile and tell stories that the women liked. They drank beer with them, and even managed not to pay for it.

Instead of making his rounds of the bars, Diego turned himself and his load back up on the hill leading to his shelter. They would have a fire inside, and he would feel some of its heat against the wall where he slept, contrasting with the cold night on the other side of his body. He climbed the steep hill with his load, feeling even more tired than when he'd worked the entire evening and made good sales. He heard another explosion up the hill, followed by the ringing of church bells calling the faithful.

He imagined the balloon clothing, and how it would make him feel lighter, how it would help him climb this hill, freeing him of his load. In his mind now he saw himself in multi-colored balloon clothing like that of a Mayan hot air balloon, surrounded by fluffy cotton snow, and starting to rise up in

the air. But the snow blew off and he found himself sitting on top of the tiny chapel of his defunct village, seeing it so clearly that he could almost touch it. Holding on to the iron cross on the roof, he felt it becoming so burning hot that he had to let it go. The smoke and the flames started to permeate through the thin roof, lending an odor of charred meat, and as the heat rose he started to fly away in the night. The dense smoke became unbearable, as when the wind blew the smoke from nearby chimneys onto the street, irritating his eyes.

His body rose higher as it burned, lighting and lifting his balloon into the sky. Soon he could no longer distinguish the flames of the chapel below him from the surrounding darkness. In the silent sky he heard his voice say that he had forgotten to make a wish, but that perhaps someone, down on earth, had seen hope in his passing star.

Nobody knew how, or even why he'd walked into the fireworks. Nobody knew why he had not run away. Some knew him as Diego, the nut vendor who had come from nowhere.

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