

Introduction

The air is crisp atop the Tikal Temple, high above the humidity of the rain forest in what is now modern day Guatemala. Standing on the peak of the limestone pyramid, one hundred and fifty feet above the ancient Mayan city of Yum Tax, all you see is the canopy of trees below.

Despite centuries of war and rivalry, including with the mighty Teotihuacán of far off Mexico, Mayan civilization flourished in the years 250 to 900 AD, creating advances in architecture, art, and astronomy, including the Mayan Calendar, which rivaled that of any in the civilized world.

And then suddenly it collapsed.

The Mayans did not disappear, they just abandoned their great cities and moved to the countryside to pursue an agrarian lifestyle. Historians believe the dispersal was due to a combination of drought, deforestation, and tribal war, but by the end of the ninth century, the mighty Mayan cities were deserted.

They lived the next few centuries in the highlands and fertile valleys of Central America, and fragmented into many smaller tribes including the K'iche', the Ixil, and the Mam. Although rivalries between the tribes occasionally resulted in conflict, the Mayans lived simple, quiet lives, for the most part.

Then came the Conquistadors.

The Spanish, led by Hernán Cortés, invaded Mexico and conquered the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán in 1519. Two years later, Cortés dispatched the cruel and brutal Pedro de Alvarado to Guatemala. Armed with a mixture of Spanish and Mexican soldiers, Alvarado exploited local tribal rivalries and conquered the remaining resistance, establishing Spanish Colonial Rule in Guatemala. Following the conquest, European diseases including plague, smallpox and measles ravaged the local population, which had no resistance, killing off almost three quarters of Guatemala's two million people.

Colonial rule was cruel and exploitative of the Maya, and continued into the early 1800's. Eleven years into the Mexican War of Independence, Spain accepted Mexican independence in 1821. Shortly afterwards, Guatemala declared itself independent. The next century saw endless cycles of political strife and violence, as well as continued oppression of the indigenous people by the descendants of the Spanish settlers as well as the United Fruit Company (who would later become Chiquita Banana), whose influence and power in Guatemala and neighboring

Costa Rica gave rise to the term *Banana Republics*.

After World War II, a succession of Guatemalan Presidents pursued liberal reform, attempting to provide health care and education to a wider share of the population. These reforms threatened the interests of the aristocracy, as well as the United Fruit Company. In 1951, four Communist party members gained election to the Guatemalan parliament, alarming the US government. In an effort to halt the spread of Communism and protect the profits of United Fruit, the CIA, with the support of United Fruit, armed and trained a militia of mercenaries and Guatemalan exiles, and overthrew the popularly elected Guatemalan government.

Civil War followed.

A series of progressively more brutal CIA backed leaders fought to suppress leftist resistance groups, culminating with CIA trained government death squads under the control of the crooked and merciless General Efraín Ríos Montt. Montt's death squads destroyed entire villages, often killing innocent peasants or placing them in forced labor patrols. Overall, two hundred thousand Guatemalans were killed in the Civil War, and another hundred thousand fled to Mexico or the United States.

This is the story of one of those who fled. One mute peasant, who would soon, and forever, change the world as we know it.

Chapter 1 - San Mateo, Guatemala. Spring 1996.

Hana owned the silence. Had wrapped herself inside it like a warm blanket on a chilly fall evening, when the mountain winds blew through the cracks in the palm thatching of her childhood home, the one her father had built for the three of them.

Hiding in the hall closet, below the week's laundry, her silence was never more urgent. It had been twelve years since she had fled her home, and since she'd uttered a single word, or even made more than an occasional grunting sound. There were times when she wished she could be like the other young women, times she prayed that words would flow from her mouth the way the beautiful embroidery flowed from her hands. But try as she might, no sounds ever came. She had been brought to the tribal leaders for healing rituals, and had even seen a United Nations doctor who had visited their village, but neither were able to offer help or advice. And so she learned to embrace her muteness, and live a simple life of sewing and silence.

"Quiet, everyone," whispered Imelda, leader of the craft women. "They're almost here. Nobody move an inch or make a sound."

Hana burrowed deep below the blouses and sheets, and pulled the corners over her sandaled feet until not a single inch of her brown skin was exposed against the white backdrop of the laundry. Fully covered, there was nothing else she could do but wait. Wait, and pray to Yum Kaax, the Mayan God of Nature and the Woods, her personal deity.

Moments later, she was startled by the unmistakable sounds of the government death squads searching the village for suspected rebel fighters. The smack of large rubber boots crossing the moist soil road leading to the village. The crack of branches breaking and the bustle of animals scurrying from the advancing warriors. The shouting and the laughter, always the laughter.

It would not be she who made the sound that alerted the soldiers. The sound that brought the guns, the explosions, the blood and death.

Not this time.

Not again.