

Alejandra Kim Bolles

Artist, Writer, Head Chef and Star Sailor

February 26, 1938 – September 22, 2011

Alejandra was born in the Mayan city of Ticul, Yucatan and died in the Yale-New Haven Hospital. She grew up in a life of poverty but in 1964 she met David Bolles and was married to him in 1968. After her marriage she moved to Massachusetts and then a couple of years later to New Hampshire. When her three children reached school age she began to attend the University of New Hampshire and graduated in 1993 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. While taking her classes she also taught Mayan cooking classes at the University and began to write her cookbook. She also worked on writing down Mayan folktales and helping her husband write a Grammar of the Yucatecan Mayan language.

One of David's avocations was sailing a Star boat. Alejandra learned to crew on it and together they participated in various regattas through the years. She formed many friendships while attending these regattas and was happy to renew them at the Centennial Regatta at Larchmont Y.C. which took place on September 13-18, 2011.

On the Tuesday two days after the Centennial Regatta she was admitted to the Yale-New Haven Hospital to run some tests due to chest pains and by Thursday she was in the operating room for by-pass surgery. She did not survive the operation.



On Impromptu, Star # 8035, at the Sunapee North American Championship, 2002

Photo by Guy Gurney

In the introduction to her cookbook Alejandra has the following account of her early life:

A Note About My Life

I was born in 1938 from a Mayan Indian mother and a Korean father in a place called Ticul which is a Mayan Indian town situated in the Yucatan peninsula.

My parents were very poor which was not strange to me because everybody I knew was the same. As a matter of fact I thought that we were well off because we had a taco stand at the railroad station nearby. There were two trains coming in everyday, one at seven in the morning and the other at four in the afternoon. The taco stand business was very hard because everything had to be ready for the arrival of the trains, and because the train only stayed at the station for twenty minutes, therefore you had to try to sell everything in this period of time. Most of the time there was a lot of food left over which I thought was great because then we could eat as much as we wanted.

The preparation of the food for the taco stand took all day. Most of the work had to be done by me and my older brother because we were the oldest. My mother was not strong enough to help because she was always pregnant. She had a new baby every other year until we got to be eleven children not counting the miscarriages.

There was a person in my life that helped in the shaping of my personality and beliefs. This was my Mayan Indian grandmother. Grandmother was a very down to earth woman. She helped me against my mother's rage when I burned the beans or when the chores were not done when my mother wanted them to be done.

There are two languages spoken in Yucatan, Spanish and Mayan. Grandmother spoke only Mayan whereas my mother would speak to us in Spanish. Therefore I grew up speaking both languages.

Grandmother taught me how to cook in a very primitive way with almost no utensils. We improvised for things that we didn't have. For example we used banana leaves for plates, flat limestone rocks to grind spices or sticks for stirring the food.

Grandmother never let the fire die out. She would bury the fattest ember in the ashes and miraculously the next morning uncovered it and start the fire all over again.

Because there was so much to do and so many babies to take care I only got to second grade which I failed because of so many absences. Then a Gringo from California married me and brought me to New Hampshire. I thought that I was going to loose my mind. There was nothing to do. All I had to do was to touch a button and the chores were done. Well, David the Gringo is very smart. He did not want an hysterical wife so he sent me to college and now I hold a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree.

Presently because the machines are still here to do my chores I continue taking art classes and go sailing with David on the weekends.

Alejandra's Memories

Over a number of years Alejandra wrote down memories of her childhood. This story, aside from following the life of Alejandra as she lived it under very trying circumstances of poverty, deprivation and parental abuse, also shows the unimaginable transformation of the people of Yucatan from the simple Mayan life style to the modern American life style which today has spread even to the people of most rural parts of Yucatan.

Historical Background

Alejandra's parents were a mixture of Korean and Mayan. In 1905 Koreans were brought to Yucatan to work as slaves on the henequen plantations. At the time henequen from Yucatan was the main source for fiber to make bailer twine, binder twine, gunny sacks and other agricultural packaging material and goods. With the mechanization of farms in the U.S. and Canada there was a steadily increasing demand for the fiber. The local Mayan slave workforce was not sufficient to keep up with the demand, and thus the need to import laborers. At this time the Japanese had recently taken over Korea and were trying to rid themselves of Korean dissidents. They readily sold and shipped the dissidents off to foreign lands.

Alejandra's father's grandparents came to Yucatan as a couple with their daughter Maria Heo who was her father's mother. Her father's father came as a single man. Her mother's father came as a single man although apparently he had left behind a wife in Korea. At the hacienda which bought him there was a recently widowed Mayan woman who was a house slave, and as was typical of slave plantations everywhere it was the policy to have the women slaves produce as many offspring as possible. The hacienda overseer decided that Alejandra's Mayan grandmother should marry the single Korean, something she was not willing to do. In punishment she was required to come every day to "the big house" and was administered 12 lashes. Also, the food rations for her and her two children were cut back. Finally she gave in and married the Korean, and had two daughters by him. The youngest daughter is Alejandra's mother. The two children from the previous marriage were Alejandra's full-blood Mayan aunt and uncle, Tia Felipa and Tio Ladis.

At the time Alejandra was born in 1938, the Maya in Yucatan still lived very much the way they had lived for millennia. The Koreans, being mostly from peasant stock, for the most part adopted the Mayan life style, although they continued to have culinary habits, family values and social customs which could be traced back to Korea.

One of these family customs was that the oldest girl was destined to be the caretaker, not only of all of her younger siblings, but as the parents got older, of the parents as well. It was her duty to always be subservient to her parent's wishes, whereas the younger girls of the family had greater freedom, and in Alejandra's family's case all of these sisters went to school and became professionals. Alejandra meanwhile was not allowed to attend school beyond the second grade.

Another custom was arranged marriages, which Alejandra managed to escape, much to the annoyance of her parents. With that Alejandra's parents gave up on any further attempts to arrange marriages, either for her or for her younger sisters.

Biographical Notes

Alejandra

Alejandra was the second child of 10 and the oldest girl. Because of this all of the household chores fell upon her once she was old enough to lift the babies, which were produced every other year, onto her hip and carry them about. She was a good and sensitive girl and a keen observer. Her upbringing was divided between three worlds: the Mayan of her maternal Grandmother, the Spanish speaking Mexican tradesmen of the downtown area with whom her parents frequently conversed, and the Korean which was her father's heritage and to some degree that of her mother's as well. Her full maiden name is Alejandra Kim Yu, but around the house she was called Ana Maria or Alejandra. Her Korean name is 서광 (Seo Gwang), meaning Aurora. The only photograph of Alejandra when she was young was taken as a group photo with her mother, three of her mother's children and some children of her mother's sister Tia Lola. Alejandra was about 2 years old when the photo was taken, because her mother is holding Wilbert, a small infant at the time the photo was taken. Wilbert is the first child after Alejandra. Perhaps significantly, only Alejandra is dressed in the native Mayan huipil whereas the rest of the children are dressed in the Spanish Mexican clothing style of the time. Alejandra, because of her closeness to her Mayan grandmother, grew up bilingual and was equally at home speaking Mayan or Spanish. It was not until she went to school that she realized that there were two languages and that she had to be careful to speak only Spanish while at school. At the time, just as in the U.S., the Mexican government was trying to eradicate native languages. There was also a smattering of Korean words mixed into her vocabulary for those items such as Korean foods for which there were not adequate Mayan or Spanish names.



The earliest photo of Alejandra

Doña Martha
Alejandra's Mother

Alejandra's mother, Doña Martha, was the last of 4 living children of Alejandra's maternal grandmother Mam Uela, and one of two children fathered by the Korean Don José Yu. Her full maiden name is Martina Yu Chan. Although she was brought up in the Mayan world, she tried to present herself as being of the Spanish Mexican world. She spoke both Mayan and Spanish with equal facility and often slipped from one language to the other while speaking with people of the same social background. She was the darling of her family, with both her father and her mother doting on her, much to the annoyance of her older full sister Lola. She also elicited the same feelings from people from outside the family. It is not clear what the cause of her treating her children so brutally might have been, but for some reason she would beat her children, the oldest two especially, frequently and often mercilessly. At times the neighbors or her mother Mam Uela, should she be at the house, had to intervene to stop the beatings. Such things as not having the tortillas ready on time, or burning the rice, or other such would set her off and she would grab whatever was at hand, a belt, twigs, branches, sticks, etc., and start whipping Alejandra and her older brother Andres. She would even go so far as to tie their wrists with rope and stretch their arms upwards by pulling the rope over the rafter so they could not move while she was beating them. Such treatment of children in Mayan households is unheard of, so where this behavior came from is a mystery. She always viewed Alejandra as a servant, and even when Alejandra went back for a visit Doña Martha would begin yelling at Alejandra to do this, bring that, as if Alejandra had always been there serving her. Sometimes not even a "Hello, how are you?" is said when Alejandra arrived to visit, just orders are barked out. Not all of the children were treated so brutally, and the younger ones, especially the daughters, have no recollection of this behavior. For one of the daughters the pattern of having a favorite upon whom both the father and mother doted was repeated, although in this instance she was not the youngest of the girls, but rather the third from the youngest and 10 years younger than Alejandra.

Mam Uela
Alejandra's Grandmother

Alejandra's maternal grandmother, Mam Uela was born on the Hacienda Santa Rosa near Muna in the early 1870's and died in Mérida in 1967. Her maiden name was Manuela Chan. She was known to her grandchildren as Chichi, Mayan for "grandmother". She was raised as an indentured servant on the hacienda, or as the Maya themselves say, as a slave. She was married twice; first to a Mayan man who had the last name of Cen, and later after he died to a Korean imported indentured servant, José Yu. She had two living children from the first marriage, Ladislao and Felipa, and two from the second marriage, Lola and Martina. She grew up in a time of uncertainty and scarcity, and her small stature was a hint at her being malnourished while she was young. Because of these privations she had knowledge of how to live off the land. Despite her hardships she was a kindly person and treated Alejandra with respect. Because Alejandra's mother was frequently out of the house down at the market, which Alejandra viewed a blessing in disguise, Mam Uela was

Alejandra's principal mentor and teacher on how to do things in the house and in general was Alejandra's friend and companion. When things were not going smoothly in the house they would plot together on how to set things right so that when Doña Martha returned from the market after a morning of gossiping everything would hopefully be back to being acceptable so that Alejandra and her older brother Andres could avoid yet another beating.

Andres Alejandra's Older Brother

Alejandra's older brother was Andres, called Oppa (Korean for older brother) in the family. Aside from being Alejandra's partner in doing all of the household chores and getting things ready for the taco stand at the train station, which for a number of years was one of the sources of the family income, Andres was also the leader in the various adventures the older children would take into their surroundings. Over the back stone wall there was a semi-abandoned fruit orchard with a variety of tropical fruits and they would go there to play such things as Tarzan of the Apes and other such, climbing into the trees and swinging from the vines which hung from them. Andres' adventurousness eventually got him and the third eldest brother José into trouble. They became fishermen and were always willing to go out to areas on the ocean where the other fishermen would not go. On one of these occasions a storm came up and they were never seen or heard from again.

Other Characters

Andres Kim Jimenez, Alejandra's father

Don José Yu, Alejandra's maternal grandfather

Alejandra's younger siblings, in order of age: Wilbert (Wili), Yolanda (Yoli), José (Chelon), Juan, Maria Guadalupe (Lupe), Ricardo (Archie), Leonor (Nochi), Martha.

Uncles, Aunts and Cousins:

Tia Lola Yu, mother of Alejandra's cousins Chula, Lupe, Manuela, Margarita (Goti), Carmen, Beto, Manuel.

Tio Manuel Kim Jimenez and wife Tia Margot, parents of another set of cousins; six girls and one boy.

Flash-Backs

Throughout this narrative there are various flash-backs, mostly because Alejandra's Chichi was telling her something which happened in the past. Most of this story-telling happened in the cave in back of Mam Uela's house where Alejandra would often go to be with her Chichi while they wove palm leaves into long strips which were sold to the hat makers. These sessions would last for hours at a time and was always a good time for telling stories and reminiscences.



Wedding photo of Don Andres Kim Jimenez and Doña Martina Yu Chan
Photo taken about 1932

A Family Portrait
of the oldest three children of Martina Yu Chan and Andres Kim Jimenez
with their cousins who are children of Lola Yu Chan
Photo taken about 1940.



Alejandra as a two year old is in the center of the photo with her mother Martina Yu Chan holding her brother Wilbert to her left, her older brother Andres further to her left in the front row and her cousins Margarita and Chula to her right. The other three boys are brothers of Chula and Margarita. The cousins also carried the family name Kim Yu because Martina Yu Chan's older sister Lola Yu Chan had married a Korean man with the last name Kim. Alejandra also had the Korean name 서광 (Seogwang) which means "Aurora".

Juan, José and Maria Guadalupe,
Younger Siblings of Andres, Alejandra and Wilbert
who are shown in the previous photo.
Photo taken about 1951



Alejandra's Memories

8 years old

Daily Routine

“Chekaan pel!¹ Despiértate!²”

It was about five in the morning. Alejandra woke up when she heard her mother's voice calling her. It was so hard to get up. Slumber was so delicious at that time in the morning she felt that she could go on sleeping for hours. Alejandra didn't move at all from her hammock. She hoped that her mother will go back to sleep and forget about her for the moment. Just then the loud cry of a new born was heard. Alejandra remembered that her mother just had a baby the day before. Her mother had a new baby every two years without fail. This one was baby number six. Alejandra was eight years old at this time.

“Ana Maria! Didn't you hear me? Get up and fix the baby bottle and hurry up!” At the voice of her mother Alejandra was quickly out of her hammock.

Alejandra took the vigil lamp which was burning all night. This lamp was made out an empty tin can with a hole on the center of the top for the wick and was filled up with kerosene every night. Alejandra went to the thatched roof kitchen to start the cooking fire. The cooking fire was set in between three stones. Alejandra arranged a bunch of twigs and dry leaves in between the three stones and lit a match to it. Then she placed a pot of water on top of the stones to get it hot for the baby's formula. The baby's formula consisted of diluted cornstarch and sugar in boiled water. Her mother's breast would produce milk on the third day after the baby was born, but even after that it was never enough and the baby had to have something supplemental to drink, or at least so her mother thought.

While Alejandra waited for the water to boil she huddled near the flames and dozed a little. She wondered if some day she could wake up all by herself and get up at any time she wanted. Alejandra took the baby bottle to her mother and went back to the kitchen to make hot chocolate for her mother and her brothers and sisters. The hot chocolate for a mother who just gave birth was made in a special way. First boiling water is poured in a wood batidor.³ Then the chocolate, sugar, and a raw egg is added. This mixture is whipped vigorously. This rich beverage is served to the mother along with sweet rolls for breakfast.

At about nine in the morning Alejandra's Chichi who lived by the railroad came with a hen for chicken soup for Alejandra's mother. The food for a woman who just gave birth has to be prepared in a special way. Alejandra's Chichi rings the neck of the chicken, submerges it in boiling water, takes even the tiniest feather off, washes it rubbing wet ashes all over it and rinses it with cold water. After cutting the chicken into

¹Mayan: “Downtrodden cunt!”, from **chekaan** = “stepped on” which by extension is applied to the sexual act of animals and **pel** = verenda mulieris

²Spanish: “Wake up!”

³A type of a deep wooden vessel with a matching pestle used for stirring liquids.

pieces Chichi rubs the pieces with sour orange juice, rinses them again and boils the meat in water with mint leaves. She adds some black pepper, a whole toasted head of garlic and salt. When the soup is ready Chichi makes big fat tortillas and ground red chili sauce and takes servings of this to the enclosed room to mother taking good care that the food is not touched by any bad winds on the way.

On the next day Chichi buried eggs in hot ashes for ten minutes. After they cooled off she peeled them and served them to mother with fat tortillas, chili sauce, and hot corn atole.⁴ For seven days Alejandra's mother would eat like this.

It is customary for the Mayan woman to stay indoors for seven days after having a baby. The reason for this is to prevent evil winds coming into the room and claim the baby's soul. Alejandra's father put adhesive tape at the edge of the windows to keep the air from coming in, but by doing this the sun light could not come either. Therefore at the end of the seven days Alejandra's mother would come out of her room pale like a ghost and weak from laying down so much.

Beware of the Xoch⁵

In Yucatan women sleep with the baby on top of them until they are two years old or until the mother is pregnant again. The reason for this custom is that there is a black owl called Xoch which flies over the thatched houses looking for new-born babies. If the Xoch sees one he just takes the soul of the baby and then the baby dies soon after that. Therefore if the baby is on top of the mother then the Xoch can not see it because all that he sees is the shape of the mother.

Alejandra's House

The house Alejandra grew up was made of sticks and palms or grass. All the materials were free. All her family had to do was to go into the woods and gather them. This took about four months. This is because they had to cut the wood and the palms they needed with a machete and then bring everything back to the plot of land on their own back little by little.

First they choose fat straight poles. Then they made deep holes in the ground for the four main poles that will hold the skeleton of the house. Secondary poles shapes as upside down V's are fastened on top of the fat poles to hold the roof.

After this long and skinny sticks are fastened on the ends of the poles to form the skeleton of the house. Next the palms are tied on with ropes made of henequen fibers making sure they are pretty tight to ensure that rain won't pass through.

Except for the doors and the windows, the sides of the house are enclosed

⁴A corn gruel drink in which the roughage has been strained out. It can be made from **huch** (ground corn ready for making **uah** (tortillas) or from **zaca** (a liquid made from grinding soaked but uncooked corn). After the roughage has been strained out then the resulting liquid is placed to cook again. **Za** is usually served hot.

⁵ An owl of evil omen. The American barn owl, *Strix fratincola* Bonaparte.

with upright long sticks. To keep the wind from going through the sides are covered with mud mixed with chopped straw and water. After the mud plaster is dry a whitewash of slaked lime makes the walls white and clean.

These houses last in good condition except for the whitewash which has to be applied every six months.

Chichi⁶

Chichi taught Alejandra how to make tortillas and cook beans and also to make chili sauce. She said that any girl who did not know how to do these things could not get married. "I don't want to get married." Alejandra protested. "Maybe not now but just in case you change your mind in the future you better learn how to cook," said Chichi.

Alejandra's Chichi was a Mayan Indian woman. She was born in Yucatan and she spoke only Mayan. She said things the way they were and her manners and customs were very simple. She believed that all a girl needed to succeed in life was to be a good cook and to tend the house. The idea of going to school was not taken seriously for girls because all that they were permitted to do in an Indian society was to be a wife and a good house keeper.

Chichi's first husband who was a Mayan died when she was still very young. Then she married for a second time to a Korean guy named José. Alejandra's mother and Aunt Lola were children of José. Chichi had another two children from her previous marriage, a boy and a girl. They were all grown up and lived outside town at the edge of the forest. Chichi lived in a grass house and had chickens and a dog named Alerta. Chichi owned only the very essential things in the house: a little round low table with three legs called *banqueta*, three low wood stools, a big clay pot to keep water in, two hammocks, an iron cauldron and gourds of all shapes and sizes.

Alejandra sometimes spent the night at her Chichi's house. Chichi liked waking very early in the morning, just when daylight was breaking. Alejandra liked waking up to the sound of Chichi making hot chocolate in her *batidor*. Breakfast was always good at Chichi's. There was always some kind of salted meat roasting in the hot coals, hot chocolate, tortillas and sweet rolls.

⁶Mayan: "Grandmother".

Alejandra's Brothers

Alejandra's brothers were always engaged in very interesting activities when they were not in school or doing their chores. One of their favorite past times was to catch lizards at the backyard of the train station. Another was to put coins on the railroad track when the train was coming and watch them get flattened out by the iron wheels but what Alejandra liked best were the kites her brother Andres made. They were bigger than him and in different shapes and colors. When Andres got a kite way up in the air he had to tie it up to a tree because he could not hold it all by himself. More than once Andres lost his kite to the wind but soon he would be making another one.

There were seasons for different children activities. Nobody knows how the children knew when to play what. They made toys out of wood, like kimbombas, tops, bows and arrows. The children also used other things to play with like Coca Cola tops, ropes, and stones. They just jumped from one season to another. And when one kid was playing marbles for instance every child in town was. This time it was the season for kites and Alejandra liked to go to the back of the railroad station to see the kites flying against the sky.

Alejandra's older brother Andres was busy all the time. He had all kinds of chores assigned to him. Alejandra's parents owned a taco stand at the railroad station. They sold tacos and corn drinks, atole and pozole, twice a day to the train passengers, at seven in the morning and at four in the afternoon. Andres and Alejandra had to make the food and get everything ready before the seven o'clock train. First thing in the morning Andres, who was ten years old at this time, made a fire and made a type of corn drink called atole. First he brings to a boil about four gallons of water, pours sugar and salt into it. He dilutes corn flower in water and adds it to the boiling mixture stirring it vigorously. When the atole is ready Andres takes it to the taco stand and prepares everything else. About an hour before the train arrives Andres' mother and father go to the taco stand to help. After the train went away Andres went to school. At twelve o'clock Andres returns home, has lunch and at two in the afternoon started to get things ready for the four o'clock train.

One of the things that Andres had to do every day was to go to the ice plant to get ice for the taco stand. At this place there were fish farms and Andres loved to spend time trying to catch some. Many times Andres' father would go to get him and bring him home after whipping him with a belt for delaying so much with the ice.

Down at the Train Station

The four o'clock train was fun. It slept in Alejandra's town of Ticul. After all the passengers got off the train it would go for a short ride outside the town where the railroad track switch was. The train had to turn around to get in position to leave towards the city of Mérida early the next morning. When the train did this Alejandra and her brothers could get on the train and go for a free ride. Then the last thing the train did before going to sleep was to let go a tremendous roaring sound along with a tremendous amount of steam. Alejandra and her brothers liked to stand right in the

middle of the steam blast thus getting soaking wet from head to toe. It was very exciting to hear the loud screams and laughter of the children inside the steam cloud. The blast only lasted about two minutes.



Fueling up at the train station

On Safari

Another favorite pastime of Alejandra's brothers was to go on safari. Going on safari was to go next door to hunt lizards and steal fruit. Alejandra and her brothers and sisters were lucky to live next door to an abandoned orchard. The orchard was so big that Alejandra didn't know where it ended. It had so many orange trees that her brothers only took fruits from the sweetest ones and brought home buckets full of them. There were different types of fruits all year round. Sometimes there were mangos, guayabas, ciruelas, guanabanas, and huayas. All these trees can live for a long time without irrigation once they were big enough. And some of them even made baby plants when the seeds dropped to the ground. Therefore even though Alejandra's family was poor at least she and her brothers and sisters had plenty of fruits to eat. The orchard had old irrigation canals going all over and the trees were so big that it really looked like a jungle. Alejandra liked the place best when the trees were in blossom. It looked to her like a magical place where supernatural creatures could live. Sometimes when nobody was home Alejandra liked to lie down on the dry leaves and listen to the noises that the wind made on the trees. The noises made Alejandra imagine how all these supernatural creatures looked like and sounded like.

The orchard belonged to an old bachelor called don Tarsilo. Don Tarsilo used to go to the cantina at about three o'clock in the afternoon everyday. Alejandra was assigned to keep watch in case he came back while her brothers were harvesting the fruits. One of the many times that Alejandra let down her guard Don Tarsilo came back unexpectedly and caught the children on the trees. All of a sudden Alejandra's brothers saw don Tarsilo under the trees just looking at them. Everybody thought that they were going to get executed and terminated before they got to the ground. But all that don Tarsilo did was to tell them to be careful and not to fall from the trees.

Quail's Eggs

One time when Alejandra's brothers were looking for insects in the orchard they found 32 small eggs all in one nest. They took them to the house and Chichi said that they were quail eggs. Quails like to have community nest. They were easy to find especially when the chicks were hatching because of the noise they made. Chichi hard-boiled the eggs and the family ate them with tortillas and chili sauce for lunch.

Alejandra's brothers made very good and effective slings. So every time they went on safari they invariably brought home lizards or birds to eat. Alejandra liked roasted quail the best. Chichi cleaned them like she did the chickens. Then she made a paste with garlic, sour orange juice, salt and lots of ground black pepper. She smeared it all over the bird and roasts it on an open fire. Alejandra's brothers and sisters liked to sit around the fire and watch the bird being roasted. It smelled good to them, especially because they were very hungry. In fact it seemed to Alejandra that her brothers especially were always hungry.

Currito

There were many types of animals and birds in the abandoned orchard like woodpeckers, turtle doves, road runners, possums, snakes, rabbits, etc. One time Andres caught a little parrot so small that it almost had no feathers. Andres named it Currito and the children taught it to talk and sing. Currito learned Alejandra's name very fast because every time that Alejandra gave him something she said "Alejandra, Alejandra" to the parrot. Currito liked to eat cooked corn kernels but he only ate the germ of the corn. Alejandra scolded him about this but he never paid any attention. He just kept on eating and looking at Alejandra from time to time and asked for more when the heap of corn was all used up. Currito also learned a military song. He used to sing this song early in the morning waking up the people next door. A teenage neighbor called Lupe didn't like to be woken by the Currito. She kept saying to Alejandra and her brothers that she was going to have roasted parrot for breakfast one of these days. But Currito was never roasted by the girl next door. Instead he caught a cold and Andres found him dead one morning. All the children were heart-broken by Currito's death, even Lupe the girl next door. The children buried Currito under a palm tree and Andres who could play the harmonica played a funeral march for him.

Guinea Pigs, Ducks, and Rats

Alejandra remembered the time when her father brought guinea pigs to the house. She was about six or seven years old. She was in awe looking at them for a long time. She wondered why it was that she never saw them before. Alejandra can answer the question now; they are not native of Yucatan but of Peru. She thought how lucky she was that her parents liked animals so much. They always had small yard animals like chickens, ducks, dogs, cats, and even white rats. They had to get rid of the rats after a while because they multiplied so fast that they started eating and stealing the food.

It was such a treat when they had baby ducks. It was amazing to Alejandra how they could swim just a couple of hours after hatching. Alejandra remembered filling up pots and pans with water and she and her brothers and sisters would watch these ducklings swim. They were so cute. They looked like mango seeds.

The Giant Iguana

Alejandra's brothers caught many animals at the orchard and kept them for pets after that. There were rabbits, squirrels, birds and lizards but the children never forgot Currito even when they caught other parrots of the same kind.

One time Andres found a big hole in the ground at the back of the train station. He thought that maybe a groundhog lived there. Andres made his usual rope loop and placed it at the edges of the hole. Then he went to tend to his chores at the taco stand. Two hours later Andres and his brothers came back to the hole to see if the animal was caught and they found that it was; only it wasn't a groundhog but a big lizard, the biggest Andres had ever seen. It had the rope around his huge belly and it was almost free when Andres caught him by giving the animal a big stick to bite. He held it up in the air while Wilbert tied its jaws and feet. They took it home and tied the animal at the entrance of the house. Alejandra and her brothers were looking at the lizard when a door-to-door vendor came to the door. As soon as he started talking the lizard charged at him with such speed that the poor man jumped so quick out of the way spilling his merchandise which consisted of packages of pumpkin seeds. The children were startled at first. Then they all started laughing. The good thing was that the man started laughing also. Alejandra's parents came to see what the matter was and the man said that he was going to ask if somebody wanted to buy pumpkin seeds to eat when he saw this reptile jumping at him with his tremendous jaws open. Alejandra's father tried not to laugh. He said that he would pay for the spoiled packages of pumpkin seeds but the children had to pay him back. The children had to agree. So the vendor got his money and he went away.

Weaving Palm Leaves

Every town in Yucatan had its own special type of product, like shoes, clay pots, Mayan embroidered clothes, iron tools, wood dishes, hammocks and so on. Alejandra's town was called Ticul and its specialty was the production of palm hats.

People went into these man-made caves to dig for sascab,⁷ a type of white dirt which was used for the construction of Mayan houses. When these caves were big enough the Indians went inside in the afternoons to weave palm straw for making hats. The reason for this is because it is cool and humid inside and it kept the straw soft and manageable to work with. Weaving the palm straw is tedious. To make one hat it is needed 30 arm lengths of woven material of only $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch wide.

Alejandra and her brothers could only weave about five arm lengths in two hours. When the weaving for one hat was done the children had to clean it by cutting off the extra straw hanging on the sides where more straw was added to make the weaving longer. Then their mother would take it to the open market and sell it for two pesos. Therefore it was a long time before the children could pay back their father for the money they owed him.

Alejandra liked going inside the cave to work. It was fun because while they worked they could tell stories and jokes or just plain talk about what happened in school that morning. The children only had to go to school from seven to eleven in the morning everyday. Very often Alejandra was kept at home on school days because her mother needed her to help with the babies. In the weekends after the work at the train station the children had to work for great part of the day at the cave. They didn't mind it too much because they could keep all the money they made with the weaving. Sometimes Alejandra's Chichi would bring pozole for them to drink and it tasted good and refreshing. People made pozole by cooking dried corn kernels with sweet lime. When the kernels are soft from cooking they are washed and ground to form a paste. This paste is diluted in water and then it is ready to drink. The grownups liked to have it with hot chili pepper and salt but Alejandra liked her pozole just with a little bit of salt.

3 years old

Alejandra Discovers Night

One story which Alejandra's Chichi told to Alejandra while they were in the cave weaving palm leaves was about the time Alejandra discovered the darkness of night. When Alejandra was about three one of her father's younger sisters got married in the big city of Mérida. The day before the marriage took place Alejandra's whole family, Chichi included, made the trip from Ticul to Mérida on the train. When they arrived in Mérida there was the usual bustle of getting everything prepared for the wedding; the cooking of mountains of food, the continuous cleaning of every little spot both inside the house and around the house, the decoration of the house and yard, etc. After a long day they turned in to sleep. The next morning again there was the hustle and bustle of getting ready for the wedding and finally the wedding itself. After the wedding the wedding guests return to the house and the celebration continued. When it finally got to Alejandra's hour of going to sleep her Chichi took her to the little shack where her family slept and put Alejandra in the hammock. Then, after Alejandra had

⁷Mayan: "white earth".

fallen asleep her Chichi went out to rejoin the party. A few hours later Alejandra awoke, needing to use the chamber pot. However, unlike her own house where there was an electric light which burned all night, in this shack there was no light, not even a vigil candle. Alejandra had never been in total darkness before and was so frightened that she began to scream. Fortunately her Chichi heard her and came running to see what the problem was. Maybe a scorpion had bitten Alejandra! But no, it was just that Alejandra was scared of the dark. When her Chichi realized what the problem was she took Alejandra out of the shack and showed her that the whole world was dark. Yes, there was light where the party was going but the sky was black with just the stars blinking. Alejandra was amazed. She had never seen night before.

9 years old

A Plague of Locust

Another story Alejandra's Chichi told the children was the story when the locusts came to Yucatan. They appeared as a strange black cloud in the sky. When they landed the masses of little creatures began munching on everything green. Chichi said that they ate all the crops and all the green leaves on the trees. And wherever they passed they left brownish green carpets of dung on the ground. Alejandra's Chichi said that the locusts were so deadly because they could eat and discard their food almost at the same time. Because of this their hunger never diminished. Therefore they didn't leave until they devastated the whole place where they landed. The locusts left some types of fruits on the trees, usually the ones that had hard shells or the ones that didn't taste good.

One day not long after Alejandra's Chichi told this story a dark moving cloud appeared in the sky. Everybody was scared. Then somebody yelled. "The locusts are coming! The locusts are coming!" Alejandra's mother said, "Everybody get in the house and close the doors." Then the whole town started beating on pots, pans, tin cans, or anything they could lay their hands on to make a loud noise, thinking this would scare away the locusts.

The big dark patches blanketed the surroundings. Then there was this awful noise like a big crackling fire everywhere. Alejandra's Chichi said that was the sound of the locust eating. They were eating everything in their path. Alejandra asked how can these little things eat so much? They are just grasshoppers. Her Chichi told her to look at the ground where the locust had been. "See that brown color on the ground? That is the locust feces. The reason why they can eat so much is because as they eat they also make waste at the same time."

Not very many people slept that night because of the noise. Some of the grasshoppers came into the house through the cracks under the door and the grownups spend all night trying to catch them.

Next day was awful. Not a bit of green was to be seen anywhere and the locusts were gone. Alejandra's uncle who had a milpa came to see her family. He said that the locusts were at his place all night and they ate all his crop of corn.

The locusts devastated most of the milpas nearby. Very soon food became scarce and it affected the cattle, pigs, chickens, and other animals.

Alejandra's Chichi found a lot of hard shell seeds from the ramon trees in the backyard.⁸ The seeds are about the size of big marbles. Some of them tasted like almonds. The ramon leaves are used to feed cows or horses. Chichi thought that if the cows eat the leaves of this tree then it would be safe for humans to eat the seeds. She told Alejandra and her brothers to gather seeds from the ground and then she cooked it, grounded it and made porridge out of it. Alejandra liked it.

The next day Chichi tried the inner soft part of palm trees. She cut the trunks of leafless palm trees in half and scrapped out the soft white pith inside. Then she grounded and boiled this and it became like coarse hominy grits. There were also tiny green seeds hanging in bunches from the palm trees. Alejandra liked these the best even though she had to spend a long time peeling the hard shell off them. These seeds were as big as a blueberry and it tasted a bit like tender coconut meat. This is the time when the people learned to eat fruits and roots from the trees which they never eaten before.

Alejandra's family ate these things until the government started to ship dried corn from Mexico City.

Alejandra's Grandmother's Childhood

If one thinks that Alejandra grew up in a time when things were very simple then the life of her Chichi was even more basic. Famines were a constant occurrence, sometimes caused by locusts but more often caused by draught. People had to learn to live off the land during the times when there was no food from the gardens because in those days there were no roads or trains to the outside world. Everything had to be brought by boat, and besides the Mexican government at that time didn't care about what happened to poor people, especially the rebellious Maya of Yucatan.

When Alejandra's Chichi was a little girl people had to grind the cooked corn for the tortillas on metates. A metate is made out of a big piece of stone. The stone is chipped away bit by bit until it has the desired shape. It has three short stumps for legs, a short one on the front and two longer ones at the back. A fat long round stone called the arm also made of stone is used for squashing the corn on the big flat surface of the metate. These metates are no longer used because now there are motorized molinos to grind the corn. The molinos or mills use to run from seven in the morning to two in the afternoon.

Sometimes Alejandra or her brother got to the molino too late and then they had to use the metate to grind the corn which made them work for at least one hour.

One time when one of her brothers was sent to the molino with the corn, on the way he stopped to play a game of marbles on the street. When he got to the molino it was already closed. This was such a distress to him that he started to cry and jump up

⁸ *Brorimum alicastrum*, Swartz, the Bread-nut.

and down as if a bee had stung him. When he got home Alejandra's mother made him grind the corn by hand. This made him really upset and he cried the whole time while he was grinding the corn.

Another thing people did when Alejandra's Chichi was young was that people did their own weaving to make the clothes they wore. The young girls learned how to use a loom called a back strap loom, the same as is still used today by the Maya of Chiapas and Guatemala. However, even before they could weave the cloth they had to first make the thread by spinning it out of balls of cotton. It was a long and slow process and Chichi was happy once cloth became available in the stores.

The Refrigerator in the Well

When Chichi had a lot of masa left over after making the tortillas she put it in a closed container and lowered it down into the bottom of the well. When Alejandra asked her why she did this she said that the bottom of the well was very cool and it would keep the masa from getting sour.

The well at Alejandra's house was so deep that it was a real chore to get water for the everyday use. Alejandra would lower a 10 inch pail and watch how the long rope waived back and forth and hit the sides of the well. Because of the flexibility of the rope and the narrow space of the well and because the pail hit the sides of the well all the way up Alejandra always got a disappointing amount of water left on the pail.

Later on in Alejandra's life when the Gringo asked her to marry him the first thing she wanted to know was how deep the wells were in the United States.

Corn

Corn is the most important and basic food in Mexico. Except for the wealthy who have the money to buy sweet buns and cereals. People have corn tortillas on the table three times a day. Corn is also fed to barnyard animals.

Also the Mayan Indians regard corn as a food for the Gods. When a new cenote is found the Mayans perform ceremonies for the gods of the cave. The ceremonies consist of chantings and offerings of foods made of corn and chicken. Chichi said that by doing this we are asking for the gods' permission to use the cave.

This event is very exciting and also a lot of fun. Friends and relatives get together to help get ready for the ceremonies. Some people help by donating chickens or money for the food offerings.

The food is prepared by a group of volunteers usually women. When the food is ready it is taken to the cave and laid out on white clean tablecloths. When everything is ready a path of white flowers is laid out for the gods to walk in and out of the cave. When the offerings and the chanting is over everybody feast on the foods for hours.

Another important use for corn is for healing. When one of Alejandra's sisters had the croup Chichi hung three little gourds of corn gruel mixed with honey at the

front of the house at night for three days. This made the bad winds that carry the sickness to stop to eat instead of coming into the house and making the person feel worse. Usually after three days the sick person starts feeling better.

Alejandra flunks Second Grade

When Alejandra was nine years old she flunked second grade for the second time. Her mother decided to keep her home for good stating that Alejandra was wasting time in school and that she could be more useful at home taking care of the babies. Alejandra didn't mind the change very much. She was tired of the boys at school making fun at her for getting to school an hour late. The reason for this was that Alejandra had to wait until her mother came home from the train station so she can take over the care of the babies and then run to school. It was embarrassing to Alejandra when she entered the classroom. All the children and the teacher would stop doing whatever they were doing and just stare at her. Then the teacher would write something in her booklet and tell Alejandra to go and sit down. Alejandra hated how the girls giggled and the boys telling her that she needed a good rooster to wake her up in the morning so she could be on time for school.

When Alejandra stopped going to school her mother left her in charged of the care of the children. She would leave in the morning to the train station to help with the taco stand, come home to have breakfast and leave again. Alejandra's parents had a booth of nick-knacks at the open market in addition to the taco stand at the train station. Alejandra's mother liked to go there and sit with Alejandra's father and chat with the costumers and friends.

Alejandra loved her little brothers and sisters and she didn't mind taking care of them specially when they were newborn. They were so cute and they smelled good. But it was so much work. Alejandra had to make a baby bottle every two hours using sticks for fire wood to cook it. The baby formula consisted on corn starch, water and sweeten condensed milk. It was difficult for Alejandra to try to balance the cooking pot on top of three stones and over the fire. Sometimes the pot would tip and spill the formula putting the fire out. Alejandra would get so frustrated. She would have to start the whole process all over again while the baby would be screaming angry for being left alone in the hammock.

Every day at about three in the afternoon Alejandra had to bathe the baby. Alejandra would heat water in a tin can pail, take it to a corner assigned to bathing in the hut and sit on a stool with the baby on her lap. Alejandra liked soaping the baby. He made funny faces when Alejandra poured warm water on him. But one time the baby who was so slippery fell from Alejandra's lap into the pail of water. Alejandra took him out in a flash and wrapped him in a piece of cloth. Nothing happened to the baby. But Alejandra was so scared that she started to cry. The next day Alejandra devised a way to bathe the baby safely. She turned a stool upside down and padded the bottom and sides of it. Then Alejandra placed the baby inside. Now Alejandra could use both hands to soap him and she didn't get wet in the process. From then on Alejandra used the stool to hold the baby while she did her other chores in the house.

10 years old

Alejandra's Father takes a Six-Month's Vacation

One day early in the morning Alejandra's father went to the city of Mérida to buy materials for mending pots, pans, pails and other household utensils made out of metal. One of his part time jobs was as a tinker in Ticul. Alejandra's mother said that he would be back home in the afternoon. But Alejandra's father did not come back that afternoon nor the next day. Her mother was worried that something bad happened to him. From that day on Alejandra and her brothers went to the train station to wait for him. They waited and waited but Alejandra's father did not return. The children kept on going to the train station to wait for their father for a whole week and still he did not return. In the meantime Alejandra's family was getting poorer and poorer until there were only tortillas to eat.

Alejandra's mother realized that her husband was not coming back and reopened the taco stand which had been closed since he went away. From that day on the children had to work extra hard. Alejandra's mother was out of the house most of the day. Therefore the children had to make the food that was going to be sold at the taco stand every day; things like panuchos (tortillas stuffed with refried beans), empanadas (refried tortillas stuffed with cheese), atole (a hot drink made with corn masa), orchata (a cold drink made with rice), tamales made with chicken and corn masa, and hot green chili sauces. Besides all this Alejandra and her older brother had to clean all the dirty dishes from the taco stand. Alejandra's chore was to make the panuchos and wash the gourds that was use to serve the atole to the costumers.

Alejandra liked the gourds. They were small and big round white things that could hold from one to four cups of liquid. After scrubbing the gourds Alejandra puts them to dry on the sun which bleached them and made them look whiter and whiter every day.

Alejandra's brother Andres who was twelve years old at this time had to make the orchata, cook the meat for the tacos, and cook the corn to make the masa. After cooking the corn Andres washes it and takes it to the mill to be grounded into masa.

Sometimes Andres would stop on his way to the mill to play marbles with other children. When Andres played marbles he would loose track of the time. Therefore he was late sometimes for grinding the corn at the mill which stopped operating at two o'clock in the afternoon everyday. Alejandra hated when this happened because they could not do anything but grind corn by hand all the rest of the afternoon.

Six months was passed since Alejandra's father left the house. Then one day Alejandra's mother decided to take the children to the neighboring town to visit relatives and to celebrate Halloween, called in Spanish "Dia de los Muertos" and also "Finados".

Halloween is a big festival in Yucatan. People made a lot of special food as offerings to their dead relatives. Alejandra liked this occasion because some of her relatives got together to cook and tell stories. Everybody seemed to be so happy. They laughed a lot while they made the food all day. The festivity lasted two days in which people made food offerings to their dead three times a day. On the second day

Alejandra was sent to the store to buy salt. She was returning to the house when she saw her father and one of her male cousins on the road. Alejandra ran to her mother and told her that her father was coming. Everybody was so surprised, especially Alejandra's mother who said to her husband, "What a good day you picked to come back." Alejandra's father responded, "I went away to the city to get a job and bring you some money." "And did you bring some?" And he said, "No. But I brought you two pieces of cloth for you to make your dresses with." Everybody started to laugh and then it was time to have supper. Next day Alejandra's family went home.

Fiesta Time in Ticul

Every town in Yucatan has a Patron Saint and the townspeople organized a fiesta every year to celebrate their own Patron saint. Some saints were celebrated for a whole week and some for only three days. In Alejandra's town it was for three days which were Friday, Saturday and Sunday in the last week in the month of March. Alejandra and her brothers had a lot of fun when the fiesta came to their town. A week before the festivities started they would go downtown to watch how people built the ring for bull fighting. Andres sometimes helped the people with the work carrying wood planks from place to place. In turn he got free passes for the bullfights when they started. Andres usually gave the free passes to Alejandra and her sisters. The boys preferred to stay outside of the ring and watch the bulls being brought one by one into the ring by caballeros mounted on beautiful horses. A lot of times the bulls would escape from the caballeros before getting into the ring, Then Alejandra could hear a big commotion outside from the people laughing, yelling, shouting, and women shrieking while the caballeros and a bunch of boys tried to catch the bulls. When this happened Alejandra always hoped that the bull would make it and safely get lost in the woods. But it never happened because there was about ten or twelve caballeros showering the poor bull with their lassos. While all this was happening outside, the band composed of three or four people was playing their parade tunes. Alejandra liked to watch how the vendors poured into the ring with a wide variety of things to eat. There were fried breads, sweet icy waters flavored with different fruits, called limonada or naranjada. There were also all kinds of homemade candies made with fruits and coconuts. What people liked a lot was sour or sweet orange halves coated with salt and ground red chili pepper. Alejandra always got a glass of ice water flavored with watermelon. It tasted so good. It refreshed her nicely after being seating under a scorching sun for hours.

While there was a lot of excitement outside the bullfighting ring, it was a rarity when somebody was hurt. The tragedy happened inside and always to the first bull brought into the arena. First the bullfighters played with the animal for a while. Then the Matador takes over. He plays and puts a couple of colorful pointed sticks on the shoulder blades of the bull. Then he would do a couple of show moves, takes a long sword and stabs and kill the bull right in front of everybody. Alejandra did not understand why this was the high point of the show. Everybody applauded and cheered so loud she had to cover her ears with her hands. After this the bull was taken outside to be skinned and sold in pieces right on the spot for beef soup.

Beside the bull fights, the fiesta also had parades in the afternoon and folk dancing at night. Alejandra liked to watch the parades which it passed in front of her house on its way to the church. They were different every day because the parades were sponsored by different guilds, like bakers, shoemakers, and hat makers. On the bakers' day the people on the parade marched holding big fat candles adorned with pastries shaped like flowers or some type of animal. Alejandra liked the shoemakers' day the best because the shoemakers gave the people on the parade little tiny shoes to adorn their candles with. The biggest and longest parade was that of the hat makers because there were so many people in the town engaged in the craft. They also gave the people little hats to adorn the candles with. The people in the parade also marched holding big banners with colorful figures of the town saint embroidered on them. The parade affair really lasted the whole day. It started early in the morning when a group of churchgoers went to the church to fetch the banners and take them to a house in the town. The house would belong to the president of one of the guilds. The president would have to throw a party which will include a band and food for whoever got involved with the parade. Alejandra and her Chichi liked to help prepare the food which started the day before and went on through the night. Pigs, chickens, and turkeys were slaughtered and tortillas were made for tacos. There was also a cold rice drink made called orchata. So when the banner bearers arrived to the house about ten in the morning the band started playing and the people started eating until the parade left the house at three in the afternoon.

Pimes⁹ for the Journey to a Fiesta

Pimes are fat little tortillas. These tortillas stay very soft and fresh for about three days. Therefore they are very good for traveling.

When Alejandra was very young her family liked to go to the nearby towns for the saints' fiestas. Some people made these trips on carts pulled by donkeys or horses but people like Alejandra's family who were too poor to have these animals did the journey on foot.

The day before of their journey Alejandra's Chichi and she made several kinds of pimes to take with them. On the next day Chichi would wake the family up when she heard the first roosters crowing. She always said, "Wake up children! It is four o'clock in the morning." Since there was no clock in the house Alejandra always believed that in fact it was the time her Chichi said it was.

While Alejandra helped the children get dressed Chichi toasted three tortillas until they were almost black and dropped them in hot water. When the tortillas dyed the water Chichi sweetened it with sugar and gave the children a gourd full of the hot liquid along with a couple of pimes for breakfast.

At about five in the morning they started walking. There already were groups of people walking along the road. At noon time the sun is too hot for everybody especially for the children. Therefore they all stopped under a tree and had pimes and water for

⁹ Mayan for "thick".

lunch. Sometime the babies took a nap under the trees before resuming the walk. They usually got to where they were going just before dark.

There were always friends or relatives that lived in the towns they went to, so Alejandra's family always had a place to stay. The fiestas usually lasted for three days.

Alejandra's Family Goes on Vacation

When Alejandra was about ten years old her father told her mother that in two months time they could all go to live and work in the port of Progreso where he had a hand operated merry-go-round. Alejandra remembered how excited and busy these two months were. To get ready for the trip her mother had to make new clothes for herself and for all the children because they had nothing presentable to wear. First she had to collect all of their savings and go to the village store to buy material. The cloth was so pretty, some had little flowers and some was plain colors or with stripes all over. Alejandra often wondered how her mother made the children's clothes without a pattern or measuring tapes. She just made them and the children were very happy to have new clothes which they usually had only twice a year, at Christmas time and for their birthdays.

Now Alejandra's mother would say, "You children have to weave more straw hats to sell so you can have money to pay for the train fare and also some spending money while I make the clothes." Then every afternoon after the house chores are done the older children would go into this man-made cave and weave straw hats for three or four hours at a time.

Alejandra liked going into these caves. The walls and the dirt are all cream-white in color because the underground in Yucatan is all lime stone and the temperature is cooler than in the outside. But the best reason why Alejandra liked these afternoons was because her Mayan Indian Chichi was also there with them and told many stories and jokes or just talked to them while they worked. Their enthusiasm to work for their money grew as the time for the trip grew nearer. They would have competitions to see who could make the most money. One time Alejandra woke up at midnight and found one of her brothers still working on his waving. At the end he still did not make that much because he was tired and grouchy in the morning because of lack of sleep.

The day before the trip was the most exiting. At about four in the morning Alejandra's mother with the help of her Chichi slaughtered two chickens and they spent the day and part of the night making tamales for the journey. After cleaning and adding all the right spices the chickens would be simmering in its juices for about two hours. It usually took that long for the meat to cook because the chickens or any other edible animals roam happily all over the yard until it is time for them to fulfill their destiny. The chickens were so healthy that even after they lost their heads they still ran around in circles before they dropped dead. Then Chichi submerged them in scalding water to make the fathers come off.

Alejandra liked pulling the feathers off the chickens and she liked looking inside the body cavity. The inside of a chicken is very colorful. The intestines have shades of green and yellow and many chicken had unfinished soft bright orange eggs with red lines all over them. Chichi said, "These eggs are in the yoke stage still. The chicken would have finished the white substance and the hard shell in another three days." Then she said that young girls should not eat unfinished eggs because they enhanced the chances of girls having premature babies when they grow up. Then Chichi showed Alejandra the heart of the chicken with all the valves sticking out of it. Then she pulled a round, greenish thing out of the lower part of the intestines and told Alejandra to watch carefully. She sliced the hard muscular thing and a lot of hard stones came out of it. Chichi said that this thing is called a gizzard and that the chicken ground its food in it.

The Trip to Progreso

On the day of the trip Alejandra's mother woke everyone up at four in the morning because the train which was the only one of the day left at five in the morning every day. This was the first time that none of the children were grumpy from being awoken too early in the morning. Eagerly and happily Alejandra helped the little ones to get dress and shortly after that they all marched toward the train station with their own home-made luggage on their backs.

The train ride to the city of Mérida in Yucatan usually took three to four hours depending on how many cows or other animals decided to take their siesta on the train tracks that day. The passenger cars in train were built in a simplest possible way. It had one long hard wood bench on either side and one more in the middle. The bench in the middle was usually full of bunches of flowers, live chickens, pigs, strange birds and animals from the forest and all types of foods that the Mayan Indians took to the city to sell. The train ride was a lot of fun. Alejandra's mother and Chichi were soon engaged in conversation with the other passengers and before the roosters could sing announcing the new day everybody would be talking and laughing and telling all kinds of jokes.

The train route to the city of Mérida was very picturesque. Every twenty minutes or so it would pass tiny towns or ranches and Alejandra's family could see the children playing in their yards while the grownups worked tending their milpas and their farm animals. Pretty soon and spite all the excitement Alejandra's family all got hungry. Then her mother gave each child a tamale and some water. The food tasted so good. After the tamale breakfast it was fun to just sit and wave to the farmers as the train passed them by. Before noon time the train arrived in Mérida where Alejandra's father was waiting for them. Then he took them to the bus station which in turn took them to the port of Progreso where he was stationed with his merry-go-round.

When they got to the beach Alejandra was astounded to see so much water. The ocean was so scary and powerful that she just stood there unable to move from the impression. Meanwhile Alejandra's mother was getting the children ready to go into the water. When everybody was ready with their beautiful swimming suits on she told them to stay together while they were in the water and only allow the water to cover them up to their knees. Alejandra's mother loved the ocean. She was the first one to get

into the water and because of her positive attitude towards the sea none of the children were too afraid to go in and start playing with the waves. The sea water was so salty, not sweet like the water at the cenotes was. Alejandra's mother took them swimming from time to time. After a few gags and coughing fits the children quickly learned not to swallow too much salty water. The midday sun was terribly hot and the ocean felt so cool that nobody wanted to get out of the water but mother said that it was time for lunch so they all gathered under a wood bridge and sat at the edge of the sea to eat our tamales.

While they were eating their father told them the story of the sea. He said. "You see, the ocean is alive and it was not always this big even at the beginning of time. At first the waters covered only a third of what it covers now, but as time passed the ocean kept growing and growing and covered entire cities and forests. When the ocean covered three quarters of the world the creator of all things was worried. If the ocean kept on growing it would cover the whole earth. Therefore the almighty took away the ocean's power to grow. The ocean got very angry and it said to the creator of people and things, 'It is not fair that I am not allowed to grow like every living thing in this universe. After all I am also alive and of equal importance than everybody else.' Then the creator said, 'It is true that you are just as important as everybody else but if you are allowed to grow you would cover the world because you are so impetuous and unpredictable and powerful.' 'Still, it is not fair all living things are allowed to grow therefore so should I.' said the ocean. Then the creator thought carefully and said. 'No, definitely you can not grow but you can shift from place to place so you can see different places on earth.' But still the ocean wasn't happy and the creator was tired of hearing all the complaints. Then one morning the almighty said, 'We can make a deal. I will let you grow if you promise to stop claiming a human being every day.' Then the ocean who was hungry for human beings all the time quickly agreed. He thought that he could go on a diet from time to time and then grow every now and then. Then the creator said, 'You now cover three quarters of the whole world. Every time you break your promise you will go back to this size.'

Then Alejandra's father said, "You see the ocean likes to claim human beings too much. Therefore he always stays this size because he breaks his promise every day."

The Merry-Go-Round

For this first summer after Alejandra's father got a merry-go-round her family spent two months living at the beach on the port of Progreso in Yucatan. In addition to the merry-go-round they also had another tent which was used for a shooting gallery. Alejandra's brother Wilbert would make little animals like ducks, rabbits, horses, roosters and many other animal figures out of tin cans. Her brother was very good at drawing and painting these figures. After the figures were dry her brother lined them on rows in the tent and they were ready for business. Alejandra was never very good at knocking down the figures with the bee-bee guns. Her brothers liked the shooting gallery a lot. She remembered them having contest to see who could shoot the most figures in ten minutes.

Even though the bee-bee guns were not powerful enough to kill they could still hurt people. Alejandra's brother José got shot on a front tooth and lost half of it and her older brother Andres got hit in one eye. Andres did not lose his eye but he could not see very well for a long time. The pupil of his eye stayed dilated for years after that.

It was very interesting living in the shooting gallery tent. In the day time it served as a multipurpose space. Alejandra's family washed their clothes in a pail of water in one corner and in another they cooked their food using a camping stove. They even used the tent for sleeping. At night after the show was over her father hung about six hammocks in it. Alejandra often wondered when was the tent going to collapse with so much weight. For some reason it never did.

11 years old

Alejandra wishes for the Wrong Thing

Every two years Alejandra's mother had a baby, almost like clockwork. When Alejandra was about 11 or 12 once again her mother was big with child. Alejandra said out loud, "Oh no! Not again! I can't take having to take care of babies any more! Why don't you learn to stop having babies?"

Oh, the whipping which took place then! Her mother whipped her until she couldn't lift her arm any more, rested, and then started whipping her again. Finally one of the neighbors heard the noise and screams and came to Alejandra's rescue. If this was not enough, when this baby was born he soon died from a heart defect. But Alejandra's mother said to Alejandra that it was all her fault her wishing that the baby should never have been born. Alejandra believed that it was her fault for years until one day her father told her why the baby really died.

14 years old

Alejandra's Cousins

Alejandra's mother's older sister, Tia Lola, had a brood of children, including several daughters. Three of these cousins, Margarita, Lupe and Carmen, were about Alejandra's age. Tia Lola also lived in Ticul, and would often come to visit at Alejandra's house. They were always beautifully dressed and Tia Lola would always make comments on how lovely they were. Then she would say to Alejandra's mother, "Look how ugly your daughter is, dirty and all dressed in rags. She will never get married! But my daughters, they are so beautiful! They are sure to be married soon." Alejandra's mother would agree with Tia Lola, and indeed Alejandra was always raggedy and dirty, mainly with the urine and feces of the latest baby which she had to care for running down her blouse and skirt.

While Alejandra would be working away in the kitchen getting the food ready and taking care of the baby and other small children she would hear the merry sounds

of her mother, aunt and cousins all talking away like chachalacas.¹⁰ Oh how Alejandra wanted to listen in on their conversation, but if she dared to try to look in on the visitors her mother would turn on her and yell, “Get back to the kitchen where you belong! You will never finish your chores while you loiter around here that way.”

Kitchen Duty
or
Tortillas of Tears

As Alejandra got older more and more it was she who had the duty of preparing the food for the family. It finally got to the point, about the time she was twelve, that she would find herself alone in the kitchen all morning long preparing the food and making the tortillas. At the time the family still lived in the Mayan village of Ticul and as is traditional in Mayan households the kitchen was a little thatched hut some ways off from the main house, this so the smoke of the wood fire wouldn't get into the house. This made Alejandra even more lonely because while she could hear the rest of the family talking and laughing she couldn't really make out what was being said.

When the meals would begin she couldn't join the rest of the family to eat because she still had not finished making the mountain of tortillas which the family consumed every day. One day it dawned on her that she really was no longer part of the family but was being treated like a servant, an unpaid servant at that. The thought was so bitter that she started to cry, and for many days after that she would cry her way through the process of making the tortillas, just thinking about the fact that there was the rest of the family in the house eating and talking while she was all alone in the kitchen making the tortillas.

Two Rolls of Cloth

Alejandra's father had a habit of disappearing from time to time. When he would return from these mysterious trips he would bring something to appease Alejandra's mother. One of these times he brought a couple of rolls of cloth. Her mother sent the cloth to the tailor's and a couple of weeks later two new dresses came back. Her mother put on one dress and then the other. Tia Lola was there to admire the new dresses, which even had fine lace around the collars. Alejandra's father was laying in the hammock and remarked with a laugh, “Yes, I meant for one of these rolls of cloth to be used for a new dress for Alejandra, but my wife liked them so much she had both rolls made into dresses for herself.” This made Alejandra very sad.

¹⁰ A bird noted for its constant chattering. Species designation: *Ortalis Vetula Pallidiventris*.

The Death of Grandfather José

When Alejandra was about fourteen her Grandfather José, her mother's father, got sick. He got a liver disease because of his heavy drinking. Alejandra called him Abuelito José. Abuelito José was nice to Alejandra. He sang Korean songs to the children and gave them fruits to eat. He had a big basket hanging from the ceiling full of vegetables and different types of fruits. Everyday Abuelito José took the morning train and went to the nearest towns to sell the contents of the basket. One day Alejandra noticed that Abuelito's skin and eyes were yellow. He stopped going to sell his vegetables and he got very sad. One day Chichi and all the grownups sat around his hammock looking at him and trying to make him comfortable. Soon after that Abuelito died. Alejandra did not understand what happened next. Abuelito died sometime after noon. The grownups cried a lot but that same night the family had a big party with a lot of food and plenty of alcoholic drinks. They were chatting and even laughing sometimes while Abuelito was in the next room dead. This went all night long. The next day everybody went to the cemetery to bury Abuelito. When Alejandra saw the casket being lowered into the grave she felt a deep pain in her chest. Alejandra cried and said goodbye to Abuelito.

Alejandra loved her Grandfather José. He came to Yucatan, Mexico, from the southern part of Korea and married a little Mayan Indian woman called Manuela, Alejandra's Chichi. Actually, Grandfather José was already married in Korea. It came about that one day while he was sitting at the docks looking at the ocean a English ship captain told him that he could make a lot of money if he went to the United States to work in California digging for gold. Grandfather accepted because he was very poor and jobs were very scarce in Korea at this time. The captain was a slave merchant. His job was to take young men to different parts of the world and sell them for money. This time his destination was the henequen plantations in Yucatan Mexico. The English ship captain delivered his passengers, which numbered some 1,000 Koreans, to the port of Salinas de Santa Cruz which is on the Pacific coast of Mexico. There they were taken by train across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and then again by boat along the Gulf coast to Yucatan. As they were getting off the boat the Koreans realized that they had been tricked and had been sold into slavery. They were put into various groups depending on which plantations they were sold to and enchained. A loud cry went up from them, but there was nothing they could do.

The Yucatan Peninsula is situated in the southeastern part of Mexico. The climate is tropical. The temperature gets up to 120 degrees Fahrenheit and the humidity is very intense. Alejandra's Grandfather was desolated for a long time. The heat was too much for him and the work he had to do, which consisted of cutting leaves from a spiny plant called henequen, was too arduous.

Grandfather must have met Alejandra's Chichi soon after he arrived at the henequen plantation in Yucatan. Alejandra's Chichi was a slave at the same plantation. She used to tell Alejandra how Grandfather followed her or just stared at her while she worked in the fields. Apparently Grandfather José fell in love with Alejandra's Chichi right away. He must of had a hard time trying to attract her attention since he was not

able to communicate because of the language barrier. At first she didn't like him at all. As a matter of fact, she was terrified of him because he went around saying "Yo como chiquito" (I eat little children). This was a misunderstanding due to his lack of knowledge of the Spanish language. What he meant to say was that he didn't eat very much. (Yo como poquito.)

Grandfather's looks did not help him at all either. He weighed at least 250 pounds, his skin was stark white which is unusual in Yucatan, and he was 5 feet 9 inches tall, quite a tall person compared to Chichi who was only 4 feet 8 inches tall. He also shaved his head. Alejandra's Chichi didn't want to have anything to do with him for a long time.

The slave master ordered her to marry Grandfather. She refused even though she knew that disobeying the master meant a severe punishment. From then on she was called to the big house every day and was given 12 lashes. Also the privilege of working in the mornings at the big house as a tortilla maker was taken away from her. This frustrated her a great deal. No longer was she given a stack of tortillas and a container of soup to take home every day to feed herself and her children before going to work at the henequen fields. This went on for a week. Chichi's will was finally broken. Shaking with pain and humiliation she agreed to marry Alejandra's Grandfather. After their marriage, Grandfather moved to Alejandra's Chichi's house. He then learned that she had been married once before and that her husband had died leaving her with two children, a girl and a boy. Alejandra's Grandfather liked the children. He was a good father to them. Alejandra's Chichi's fear of him disappeared quickly. She soon realized that he wasn't going to eat the children.

Alejandra's Chichi had a hard time learning to cook Korean food; for example, she always burned or undercooked the white rice and she never learned to make Kimchi the way he liked it. She was shocked at the amount of food that he ate: he would devour a whole roasted chicken and about a kilo and a half of tortillas in one meal. Alejandra's Chichi had two daughters by Grandfather José. The youngest one became Alejandra's mother. Being the youngest Alejandra's mother got extra privileges and was somewhat spoiled. For example, all the other children had to go to do some kind of chores at the big house when they got old enough except Alejandra's mother. She just spent hours at don Manuel's house listening to children stories. Don Manuel was Chichi's next door neighbor. He was too old to go to work at the henequen fields, so he stayed home and made handmade rope which he sold to the neighbors for a few pennies. He was a fantastic story teller.

Alejandra's Grandfather's new family did not cure his loneliness for his homeland. He used to come to Alejandra's house and spend hours talking to Alejandra's mother about the family that he had left back in Korea. He would describe to Alejandra and her brothers what the land in Korea looked like. He said that the climate was very cold in the winter, and that it snowed a lot.

He told Alejandra how his mother made Kimchi and other pickled foods, put them in big containers and bury them in the snow at the back of the house. She cooked a big pot of white rice everyday and Alejandra's Grandfather would go outside, dig out some Kimchi and bring it inside the house to eat with the steaming hot rice.

Alejandra's Grandfather got very sad when he talked about Korea. Sometimes after telling the children stories about his childhood and his parents he just sat and stared at the walls for a long time. Soon Alejandra's Grandfather started to drink alcohol. He was terrible when he was drunk. He would trash the house and break things. When he was at this state - which was mostly on the weekends - Alejandra's Chichi would come to Alejandra's house and hide from him for hours. Sometimes Grandfather José would pass out at the cantina or on the street, then Alejandra's father would go and bring him home. Alejandra's mother was worried that someday Grandfather would hurt Chichi but luckily he never did.

After Alejandra's Grandfather died Alejandra's Chichi moved to Alejandra's house. Alejandra liked having her Chichi in the house. She was always telling stories of things happening when she was a young child. Also Alejandra's Chichi helped with the house work. Therefore Alejandra's mother did not get as angry at Alejandra so much anymore for not finishing the chores on time.

At the Movies

Going to the movies was always a big occasion. However, often Alejandra would get left behind. Her mother would tell her, "We are going to the movies today. If you finish all of your chores you can go too." Alejandra would work furiously to try to get her chores done, but almost always when the time came there was still more to do. So off her mother and younger siblings would go, often with her cousins in tow.

On one of these occasions Alejandra's younger brother Wilbert saw one of her cousins and a boy making out at the movies. When he got home he told Alejandra, "I saw Manuel playing with Margarita's queso¹¹ at the movies."

Not being really old enough to understand that there was something really bad about such activities, the next time Alejandra saw Margarita she asked her if it was true that Manuel was playing with her queso at the movies. Margarita was so outraged that she ran to Alejandra's mother to tell her what Alejandra said. When Wilbert heard that Alejandra had asked Margarita about this he grabbed mother's whip and started whipping Alejandra. Her mother just stood by and watched.

¹¹ "Queso", which literally means "cheese", is used in both the Spanish and Mayan languages to mean the female private parts.

15 years old

Quinceañera

(Alejandra's Fifteenth Birthday)

For girls in Mexico the fifteenth birthday is the most important birthday. It is a "coming of age" birthday, after which she can get a boyfriend and prepare to get married. However, Alejandra's mother was sick when Alejandra became fifteen, and so her birthday came and went without any party.

In order to make up for this, when Alejandra turned sixteen Alejandra's mother bought her a ring which had some semiprecious stone in it. This made Alejandra very happy. Maybe her mother really did care about her despite all she did to her. Alejandra was so happy that she showed to ring to her cousin Lupe. "Humpf!" said Lupe. "Look at the ring your mother gave for my fifteenth birthday!" Oh, what a terrible thing! The ring was bigger and more beautiful than Alejandra's. It was always this way. Alejandra's mother doted on her nieces while at the same time treated Alejandra as a servant. Every time Alejandra looked at her ring she was reminded of how her mother treated her and how differently she treated Alejandra's cousins. Finally one time while both families were visiting the Zoo in Mérida something happened which got Alejandra so angry that she threw her ring into the sand at the playground.

17 years old

Alejandra Escapes from her Mother

When Alejandra was 17 she was invited to go to Mérida to be with her Tia Margot and Tio Manuel. Tio Manuel was Alejandra's father's younger brother. They had grown up together and worked together as teenagers on henequen plantations doing the work which was formerly done by the slave laborers in the time of slavery. While Alejandra's father did the various odd jobs of tinker, gambler and trinket salesman once he was married, Manuel became a teamster who drove teams of mules down to Belize to pick up contraband merchandise. This was at a time when roads to Belize did not exist. He had set up a shop on what was then the outskirts of Mérida to sell the contraband and once he was married he settled down and ran the shop as a local store for the neighborhood which was increasing in population. Tia Margot began to have one baby after another and needed help caring for the children. Fortunately for Alejandra, her uncle turned to his older brother for help and it was agreed upon that Alejandra should go to help with the children.

What a relief it was to live with her Tia Margot. While Tia Margot was also half Mayan / half Korean like her own mother, somehow Tia Margot got more of the Mayan family customs than the Korean ones, and treated Alejandra with great kindness. Also, Tia Margot was actually not all that much older than Alejandra, 8 years to be exact, and they developed a great friendship. Unfortunately this all came to an end when Tio Manuel found a lot for sale half a block away from the store and helped Alejandra's father buy it.

19 years old

Alejandra's Family Moves to Mérida

When Alejandra was 19 her family moved to Mérida. Now Alejandra was back living with her mother and father, and the old habits of them treating her as the servant began once again. While the rest of the daughters were sent off to school to make something of themselves Alejandra was required to run the household.

Fortunately for Alejandra, her closest younger sister Yoli shared what she was learning at school, and helped Alejandra to learn to read and write. Perhaps this experience led Yoli to become a teacher.



The second photo in Alejandra's life
taken after she moved to Mérida.

The Bottle of Lotion

The next child after Alejandra and Wilbert was José and after him came Yolanda. Yoli was Alejandra's best friend and always tried as best she could to help Alejandra with her chores. When Yoli had her fifteenth birthday Alejandra's mother put on a big party. As was customary for the fiesta of quinceañera, fifteen couples were invited to go with Yoli to the church. Matching dresses were made for all of the maids. As was typical of Alejandra's mother, it did not occur to her to ask Alejandra to be one of the quinceañera maids, and Alejandra was to be left at home to do the housework and prepare for the fiesta once the retinue returned from church. Just on the day of the fiesta one of the maids got sick. Yoli asked her mother if Alejandra could fill in for the missing quinceañera maid. Grudgingly, mother consented, so Alejandra was able to go to the church ceremony, but of course she didn't have a matching dress, and no one paid any attention to her.

At the party at home presents were given to Yoli. Among the various presents which Yoli got there were two bottles of lotion which were exactly the same. After the party Yoli told Alejandra that one of the bottles was for her, and Alejandra was very happy. But Alejandra suggested that instead of them both opening their bottles why don't they open just one which they would both use and when that bottle was used up then they would open the other.

A couple of weeks after the party Tia Lola and her brood of daughters came for a visit. Alejandra's cousin Lupe noticed the unopened bottle of lotion and Alejandra's mother told Lupe to take it. Oh! How angry Alejandra was. This was a gift from Yoli to her and now her mother gave it away without even asking Yoli or Alejandra if that would be alright.

For three weeks Alejandra could not even speak to her mother. Finally, someone must have told her mother how Alejandra felt and she bought her a bottle of lotion, but of course some cheap variety. Besides, nothing could make amends for the thoughtlessness with which her mother treated her.

20 years old

Alejandra gets a Suitor

At about this time Alejandra's parents decided that it was time for her to get married. The Korean community in Yucatan was fairly tight-knit in those days and so they knew of the various available young Korean bachelors. The one they fixed their attention on was the son of a pharmacist who lived in Campeche.

This young man began to turn up at Alejandra's home with alarming frequency, for he too was looking for a wife and his parents had agreed with Alejandra's parents that they would make a good match. Alejandra's stomach really turned at the sight of this person, so she kept a look-out, or when she couldn't, posted one of her younger siblings to keep a look-out to see who was getting off the bus at her uncle's store. Whenever there was a report of the young man showing up she would run off and escape seeing the young man. Eventually he gave up, which was a great relief to her.

This however did not go without recriminations. The worse was what Alejandra had to endure from her mother's older sister, Tia Lola. Alejandra was now 20, quite old for the marriage state in Yucatan where most girls got married at 14 or 15. In fact, most of Tia Lola's girls had gotten married at a young age. Tia Lola had also moved to Mérida, the better to be near most of her daughters who married men who had jobs or businesses in Mérida. She lived about 4 blocks away and made frequent visits to Alejandra's home. Tia Lola just could not resist making snide comments about how old Alejandra was and how slovenly she was dressed. On various occasions she wondered out loud to Alejandra's mother if Alejandra's vagina wasn't getting worm-eaten from the lack of use.¹²

22 years old

A Rumor of a Gringo

When Alejandra was about 22 her brothers brought back reports of a Gringo who was staying out in one of Mayan villages near Mérida where they had set up the merry-go-round during the town's fiesta. This Gringo was working there digging up artifacts in Mayan ruins which littered the area around the town. However, these reports were short lived, because the merry-go-round moved on to another fiesta at another town.

Alejandra goes to Work

In order to get out from under her mother and Tia Lola Alejandra decided that she should find work outside the house. She found a job making charritos which are little round pieces of dough deep-fried and covered with chili. At this job she made 4.50 pesos a day, but lunch was included. With this money she was able to buy her own clothes and save up enough to buy a combination radio and record player set which was the show-piece of the home. The woman who ran the charrito factory was kind to Alejandra, much in contrast to her mother and aunt, and she spent as much time as seemed prudent at the factory, the better to be able to relax and avoid the noise and recriminations at home.

26 years old

The Gringo Returns

Four years after the rumors of the gringo in the Mayan village Alejandra went with her mother and sister-in-law to see the family which had set up the merry-go-round at Piste, the village closest to the ruins of Chi Cheen Itza. The family decided to walk to the ruins, which in those days was essentially open to native people. In fact, the main highway ran right through the ruins, and the ruins on the south side of the road were unguarded.

¹² Polilla or book worms are common in Yucatan because of the humidity. It is not uncommon for books to be holed through and through in a short time, especially during the period of the summer rains when the humidity is high.

As they were approaching the ruins one of Alejandra's brothers noticed a couple of Gringos who were coming out of the bush from the ruins on the south side of the road. He recognized the younger Gringo as being the one who was living in the Mayan village 4 years before. He yelled out the Gringo's name, who was quite startled at having someone call his name, but at the same time had also become accustomed to people greeting him as if they were old friends whereas he didn't have the slightest idea who they might be. But after Alejandra's brother explained about the merry-go-round the Gringo did remember the family. After all, there weren't too many Korean families in Yucatan.

Since the Gringo was done for the day he was happy to show the family about the ruins, and as they walked along they became better acquainted. The news that the merry-go-round was at Piste intrigue the Gringo, so later that evening he went to visit, and while there learned the address of Alejandra's home.

A couple of weeks later when the Gringo was done at Chi Cheen and was on his way home through Mérida he went to visit Alejandra's family. Since he was not sure of which bus to take from the center of Mérida he walked out of the center of town on the street which led to the home until he could see that only one bus remained on this line, and got in the very next bus. It just happened that Alejandra was returning from the city center after doing some errands and while the Gringo was inquiring of the bus driver where he should get out to find the address of Alejandra's home the lady sitting next to Alejandra got up to get off. The Gringo sat down next to her and told her he was on his way to find her house.

The Gringo came by for a visit a couple of more times and then said he had to go back to college, but that he would try to return during the summer vacation.

Two Brothers Die

Not long after the Gringo left Alejandra's family got terrible news. Alejandra's two favorite brothers, Andres and José, were out fishing on the ocean in their open fishing boat and a big storm came up. The fishermen who were closer to shore were able to make it back to the port of Sisal, but Alejandra's brothers were never seen again. The family went out to Sisal hoping against hope that somehow the two brothers would make it back to land safely, but no sign of either them or their boat was ever found. After three weeks of searching and of trying to console Andres's widow and taking care of the orphaned son the whole family, widow and child included, went back to Mérida.

The Gringo Comes for the Summer

That summer the Gringo returned. He was on the summer break from college and instead of heading straight home made a detour to see Alejandra. He came in a pickup truck which proved to be useful to both Alejandra's family and to her Tio Manuel, who aside from the store had dairy cows and pigs and needed to make frequent trips to the center of Mérida to pick up supplies.

After a few weeks the Gringo asked Alejandra to marry him. At first she did not want to, fearing that life in the U.S. would not be to her liking. Especially disconcerting was the thought that maybe the wells were deep in the U.S. and she would have to spend hours hauling water out of deep wells like the ones she grew up with in Ticul. The Gringo assured her that the wells at his home was not deep, and that besides there was a water pump which pumped the water into the house so that all she had to do when she wanted water was to turn on a faucet. There was even a separate faucet for hot water, so she won't have to heat water for baths over a fire. At last she consented and so they went off to see Alejandra's father, who was as usual with his merry-go-round in a village, in order to ask for his consent. When they arrived Doña Martha told her husband what they were there for and after a while Alejandra's father said to the Gringo:

"Que chingado quieres?"¹³

"Es que Ana y yo queremos casarnos."¹⁴

"Porque quieres casarte con ella? No sirve para nada."¹⁵

The Gringo, very much surprised at this response and furthermore not able to speak Spanish very well, responded: "Pues, no le hace."¹⁶

And thus it was settled. However, they hadn't reckoned on the Mexican bureaucracy which can be insurmountable. They went to the City Hall in Mérida to apply for the marriage license only to find out that permission had to be granted by the Foreign Ministry in Mexico City. All one has to do is send a telegram they were told, which was promptly done. They waited and waited, but no answer came. Finally it was the Gringo's time to return to college, so he left with the hope that in the mean time the permission would finally come. Of course, it never did. One has to grease the wheels of government in Mexico for anything to get done.

Sabbatical in Huixquilucan

While the Gringo was in Yucatan two of Alejandra's sisters graduated and began their careers. Yoli graduated as a teacher and Lupe graduated as a secretary. Yoli's graduation was rather indicative of how little Doña Martha thought about Alejandra. There was to be a graduation ball after the graduation itself, and the Gringo was invited to take the entire family in the pickup truck so that they could attend Yoli's graduation. But Alejandra had nothing decent to wear. This didn't seem to bother Doña Martha, who suggested that Alejandra could stay behind to take care of Chichi who was now in her late 90's. The Gringo remonstrated and fortunately it occurred to Yoli that she had another adequate dress which would be good for the occasion.

¹³ "What the fuck do you want?"

¹⁴ "It is just that Ana and I want to get married."

¹⁵ "What do you want to get married to her for? She is good for nothing."

¹⁶ "Well, it doesn't matter."

As was typical of the Mexican school policy of the time, anyone who understood or spoke a native language was not allowed to teach in that area. So Yoli's teaching assignment was in a small Otomi village of Dos Rios Huixquilucan which is on the western outskirts of Mexico City. Of course, it would not do to have a single unmarried daughter go off by herself to such an unknown area, so Alejandra was required to be her companion, which made both Yoli and Alejandra very happy; Yoli to have the company of her dear older sister and Alejandra to be able once again to escape from her mother.



Alejandra's third photo, sent to the Gringo in 1966.

There was one catch though. In Mexico City lived three of Alejandra's father's sisters with their husbands and families. Tia Rosa, a particularly strong-willed person with very definite Korean ideas of what was right and wrong, and these reinforced by the fact that she was married to a Chinese gentleman with no less of an inclination for the Oriental view of the position and duty of women in the family, stepped in to be the girls' home away from home. At first they were required to stay at Tia Rosa's every weekend, but bit by bit Alejandra and Yoli were able to find excuses as to why they might not be able to make it back to Tia Rosa's for the following weekend.

One of the projects which Alejandra set before her while in Mexico was to learn English. This she did to such an extent that in a couple of years she found herself teaching English to the people of Huixquilucan, and being addressed as "Maestra" wherever she went.

In the meantime the Gringo graduated from college and began life as a teacher which he soon found was definitely not his calling. He was able to buy an apple farm and became an apple grower with a side line of growing replacement dairy calves for the dairy farms round about.

There was sporadic correspondence between Alejandra and the Gringo, and finally things settled down enough on the farm so he decided to go to see Alejandra. Even though he sent a letter ahead saying that he would be coming the letter never arrived, so one day Alejandra was very much surprised to see the Gringo get out of the bus from Mexico City at the school in Dos Rios Huixquilucan where Yoli taught. After a week of being in Mexico City the Gringo left for a trip to Guatemala, but a week later returned and asked Alejandra if they should not try again to get married. This time they were where the permission had to be granted, and furthermore, one of Alejandra's Mexico City cousins was a lawyer who knew what was required. After several round-and-rounds going from one office to the next and then finally returning to the office where they started they finally asked the question which should have been asked all along: "How much do you want?" The marriage license was issued shortly thereafter and off they went to Yucatan, taking Yoli along with them so she could be at the wedding.

The marriage was a simple affair at the justice of the peace in the City Hall, with just Alejandra's parents and a couple of relatives, including Tia Margot, attending. They returned back to the house and then Alejandra and the Gringo set off on their honeymoon to Chi Cheen Itza. After they left the family had a large wedding feast. It was not until a year later when Alejandra and the Gringo returned to have their first baby did Alejandra learn of the feast. Even in this, she was once again left out of the plans of her mother.



At the City Hall getting married.
The Gringo is standing behind Alejandra who is getting her thumb print affixed to the wedding document.
Martina Yu Chan is to the right of the photo.



Later at the Photography Studio.
Lupe, doña Martina Yu Chan, Alejandra and the Gringo.



The wedding photo of Alejandra and the Gringo.

Marriages . .

Society by Albert Morch

. They're Becoming Exotic

Judging from our communications yesterday, marriage appears to have gone exotic.

Straightaway, David Bolles—son of architect John S. and Mrs. Bolles — married schoolteacher Anna Maria Kim of Merida, Yucatan, in Mexico City.

The couple first met while digging in the ruins at Dzibilchaltun, near Merida, in the same general territory where father Bolles excavated Las Monjas at Chichen Itza more than 30 years ago. Young David, who spent the holidays here, worked as a Tulane-National Geographic Expedition archeologist. Now all that is behind the Marlboro College honor graduate. The couple will make their home on David's farm at Stow, Mass.

★ ★ ★



Anna Maria Kim Bolles

26 San Francisco Chronicle
Mon., Apr. 1, 1968

Dave Bolles Marries In Mexico

David Bolles and Anna Maria Kim of Merida, Yucatan, were married in Merida.

David is the son of Mr. and Mrs. John S. Bolles of San Francisco and Tiburon. Mr. Bolles is an architect.

The young couple met four years ago when David was working as an archaeologist for the Tulane-National Geographic Expedition near Merida.

Anna Maria attended schools in Mexico, and David studied at the Midland School in Los Olivos, the Avon School in Massachusetts and Schulfarm Scharfenberg in Berlin. He also attended Harvard and received his degree from Marlboro College.

They will live on David's farm in Stow, Mass.

AN UNUSUAL SHEEP NAMED BLAAB

by Alejandra Bolles

When I got married to the Gringo he had an apple farm in Stow, Massachusetts. I arrived at the farm in early Spring while there was still snow on the ground. One of the things the Gringo introduced me to was cross country skiing. What a relief it was to be out in cold fresh air! It was so unlike Yucatan where I suffered from the heat most of the time.



Alejandra skiing in the apple orchard

Aside from apples the farm had two mother cows and about 20 heifers of various ages, chickens, both Rhode Island Reds and Bantams, and a flock of geese. The Bantams especially were great fun because they would make their nests in the strangest places. I loved to go into the barns and listen to see if there were any new hatchlings. When I would hear a new brood going “pi, pi, pi” I would climb up on the hay bales or in amongst the apple boxes to find the nest and then just sit there and watch as the baby chicks would be busily pecking around for their food.

Shortly after I arrived at the farm my husband the Gringo bought a cute baby male sheep. He was named Blaab because the sheep went blaab all the time. Blaab was a Suffolk sheep. He had black short hair on his face and legs, black soft ears, dark eyes and the warmest intelligent expression I have ever seen on an animal. He weighed about 25 pounds at that time.

Blaab was a very funny sheep. He liked to compete with our cows for leadership. The cows were confused at first; maybe they were trying to figure out what kind of calf he was. They soon realized he wasn't a calf at all. The cows would get mad at him and butt him sometimes so hard that poor Blaab would be limping for a week or two. He was a very stubborn sheep. I notice that as soon as he got in good shape he would go back to bother the cows. They finally accepted him. They even slept together at night.

Blaab was unusual because he liked to attract people's attention. He just used to butt them all the time. Usually sheep just stay away or they don't care about people. It wasn't that Blaab was mad at people and wanted to hurt them. I think he just wanted to play. He loved people, and better yet for him, he loved to play "butt the runner", so when anyone would start to run away from Blaab he would think that they were playing and run after them to try to butt them. That was fun for those of us who knew what he was up to, but every once in a while someone would come to the farm who didn't know Blaab and run away for fear. For those people Blaab was not so much fun until we explained to them how Blaab's game was played and then they would not run away, which for Blaab meant that there was no game to be played. "Boy", he thought, "this person is really boring!!!"



Blaab charges the Gringo at the Stow farm

One time a man came to the farm to buy some vegetables. He didn't pay attention to Blaab who started heading towards him. The man bent down to pick some tomatoes. Suddenly he felt a bump on his back. He turned around with a surprised expression on his face. Then he started to run but Blaab got him again. David came to the rescue and quickly explained that Blaab just wanted to play. Hitting people was Blaab's way of asking them to scratch his back. I think Blaab got to be so friendly with people because David loved him and pampered him so much when he was a baby. As soon as Blaab was old enough we bought a small flock of ewes to be companions for Blaab.

As the seasons progressed and my tummy apace we made preparations to return to Yucatan during the winter so that I could have the baby with my family being near to help me. The Gringo's farm was of interest to various people who loved animals and they would come by on a regular basis for visits. One of these people we called "The Cat Woman of Carlisle" because one of the things she did was to take in stray cats, much to the consternation of her husband. (Maybe the Gringo was one of these stray cats as well, because she did look after him to some extent, and after I came she looked after me too.) When we told her of our plans to return to Yucatan for the winter to have the baby she volunteered to take care of the animals. She also volunteered the services of "The Greek Woman" Theonie Mark who lived near her in Carlisle and was on PBS with a show about Greek cooking. And indeed when we returned from Yucatan next Spring with our new baby they had done a very nice job tending to the animals.

As my second year on the Stow farm progressed we were told by the Gringo's tax advisor that we had to move out of the state of Massachusetts or we would have to pay a very large capital gains tax. We chose to move to New Hampshire and found a very run-down farm in the town of Deering which had 140 acres. So we sold the farm in Stow and also sold all of the cows and heifers except for the prize mother cow and her own calf which went to the Audubon Society Farm in Lincoln, Massachusetts, this again courtesy of the Cat Woman who was a volunteer worker at the farm. She also volunteered to take Blaab and his harem of lady-friends to her own home in Carlisle where she had about an acre which was fenced in on which the sheep could roam about.

A year later the lady called us at our new farm to come to take Blaab back because she couldn't handle him anymore. She couldn't keep him in his pen or tied up. Blaab always found a way to get out. He liked to go to visit the neighbors. Unfortunately, they didn't like this strange aggressive sheep, maybe because Blaab chased people on bicycles and made dogs bark loudly in the middle of the night.

The last straw was that Blaab butted a policeman. The policeman came by the Cat Woman's house on the request of the neighbors to see what was going on. The lady didn't think it was very funny when David burst into laughter as she was telling him how Blaab crashed into the policeman's motorcycle just as he was getting off it. (By this time Blaab was fully grown. He weighed three hundred pounds and stood about thirty inches high.) So the policeman got confused for a moment, maybe wondering what this big fluffy animal would be able to do to him. This is what saved him from being butted again. As soon as Blaab saw him standing still he just changed his attention to the motorcycle. The policeman told the lady that he didn't want to hear any more complaints about Blaab again. So we had to take Blaab with us to our new farm in New Hampshire.

On the new farm Blaab was happier than ever. He had 140 acres to run around on with his five wives. People were more tolerant with animals in this part of the state since most of them were raising their own different kinds of animals, and so when Blaab and his harem decided to visit the neighbors everyone thought that was great fun.

Blaab and his wives' favorite playground was at the cemetery which was right next to our farm. One night during the summer around 10 P.M. we heard loud screams coming from the cemetery. We went to see what was going on and found out that a bunch of boys and girls from the nearby christian youth camp had chosen the cemetery as a place for making out. They were so absorbed in their activities that they didn't hear the sheep coming towards them. Suddenly somebody got butted by these big white fluffy things. It was very dark so these poor kids couldn't figure out what were charging them from behind the tombstones.

We kept Blaab and his harem for another couple of years, but then the Cat Woman called and told us that the Audubon Farm would like very much to have a flock of sheep. Wouldn't we consider giving Blaab and his harem to the farm. Well, the fact was that every winter we would go to Yucatan and so every winter it was once again the same question: What do we do with Blaab and his harem? So the Gringo said yes and we packed Blaab and his harem into the back of the pickup truck and off we went to deliver them to the Audubon Society Farm. Whenever we had the chance to go by the farm while visiting friends in Massachusetts we would go to Blaab's playpen. We would call out "Hey Blaab!" and he would come running over, very happy to see us.

Even though Blaab was so aggressive he only butted grown-up people. He never butted any of my babies maybe because they didn't run away from him. He always was very gentle with them.



Blaab with the Gringo and my son in Deering